

Prophetic Background

Just as the eighth century B.C. saw a galaxy of prophets in Israel, so did the end of the seventh and the first half of the sixth centuries. The contemporary prophets were Zephaniah (Zeph. 1.1), Obadiah (Obad. 11-14, if one holds, as this writer does, that the prophet was speaking of the destruction of 586 B.C.), and the prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22.14; 2 Chronicles 34.22), all in Judah; and Ezekiel (Ezek. 1.1-3) and Daniel (Dan 1.1) in Babylon. Especially close is the relationship between Jeremiah and Ezekiel; some eighteen clear points of contact between them have been demonstrated. It is probable that Nahum and Habakkuk were also contemporaries of Jeremiah. It is of interest that three of the four major prophets in the English canon were related to captivities: (1) Daniel to that in Jehoiakim's time (Dan 1.1), (2) Ezekiel to that in Jehoiachin's time (Ezek 1.1-3), and (3) Jeremiah to that in Zedekiah's time (1.1-3).

Most commentators feel that Jeremiah was greatly influenced by the prophecies of those who preceded him especially those of Hosea. Some have also suggested that Jeremiah had a strong influence on the psalmists, and parallel concepts and expressions have been pointed out to substantiate this. This could be true, but only of the psalmists who wrote in the exilic and early postexilic periods.

Events

To understand Jeremiah's prophecy requires close scrutiny of his times because of (1) the critical events in the political world of his day—events in which Judah was directly affected—and (2) the number of kings in Judah who reigned during his career and with whom he had close contact. Jeremiah was a national and international figure. A general chronological table will help us visualize the historical background of his book.

639-609 B.C. – the reign of Josiah
 609 B.C. (3 months) – the reign of Jehoahaz
 609-597 B.C. – the reign of Jehoiakim
 597 B.C. (3 months) – the reign of Jehoiachin
 597-586 B.C. – the reign of Zedekiah
 586 B.C. – the fall of Jerusalem
 586 (?) B.C. – the assassination of Gedaliah

626 B.C. – the call of Jeremiah
 612 B.C. – the fall of Nineveh
 609 B.C. – the death of Josiah at Megiddo
 605 B.C. – the Battle of Carchemish and the fall of the Assyrian Empire
 605 B.C. – the first siege of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel exiled to Babylon)
 597 B.C. – the second siege of Jerusalem
 588-586 B.C. – the final siege of Jerusalem, beginning the Babylonian captivity

Nabopolassar, the father of Nebuchadnezzar and conqueror of Assyria, came from Chaldea, a province in the southern part of Babylonia and reigned from 625 to 605 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar (more properly Nebuchadrezzar), the most famous of the Babylonian monarchs, ruled from 605 to 562 B.C.

The times of Jeremiah are among the most important in OT history; thus, details are essential. Because of their great significance, they are the best-documented times in all Israel's history. The Book of Jeremiah is so filled with historical, biographical, and autobiographical material that his life can be synchronized with dates and known events to a degree unparalleled in the writings of other prophets.

The world in Jeremiah's day was in commotion and revolution.

During Jeremiah's ministry, Judah was under the domination of Assyria, Egypt, and then Babylonia. During the more than four decades of his service, five epochal events occurred:

- (1) The dissolution of the Assyrian Empire after the death of Ashurbanipal (669 - c.630 B.C.);
- (2) The fall of the empire (612 B.C.);
- (3) The emergence of the Babylonian Empire under the Chaldeans;
- (4) The defeat of Egypt, Assyria's confederate, by the Chaldeans and Medes at Carchemish (605 B.C.);
and
- (5) The Fall of Jerusalem with the destruction of the Solomonic temple (586 B.C.).

Geographically and politically, Judah was in a vulnerable position in the power politics of Egypt and Assyria. In the eighth century B.C., Isaiah had warned against trusting Egypt (Isa 30.1-7) and had keenly evaluated the threat of Assyria (Isa. 37). By God's protection, the kingdom of Judah had escaped Sennacherib's forces. But from the godly reign of Hezekiah, the nation declined to the lowest spiritual depths under the godless rule of Manasseh (2 Kings 21.9-15; 24.3-4). If Jeremiah was called in his early twenties, he lived in the reigns of Manasseh and Amon. Under Manasseh's long, apostate reign of fifty-five years, the reforms of his godly father, Hezekiah, were forgotten. Judah was then under Assyrian power; so to please his overlords, Manasseh introduced syncretistic elements into the temple worship at Jerusalem. The northern kingdom (Israel) already exiled (722 B.C.) the remnant residing there had embraced mixed elements in their faith (2 Kings 17.28). During the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, the Assyrian power conquered Egypt; but the latter regained strength under Psammetik I (664-609 B.C.), so that Judah found herself balancing one great power against the other.