Exploring the Book of Jeremiah

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JEREMIAH #1

JEREMIAH'S EARLY CAREER (627-609 B.C.E.)

By Rabbi Hayyim Angel

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

> The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the Lord came to him in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign, and throughout the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, when Jerusalem went into exile in the fifth month. (Jer. 1:1-3)

The superscription dates the prophet's career from the thirteenth year of Josiah (627 B.C.E.) until the eleventh year of Zedekiah (586 B.C.E.). In reality, Jeremiah's career actually continued after the destruction of the Temple (chapters 40-44). Shadal explains that the superscription selectively presents Jeremiah's career to convey the message that Jeremiah's prophecies of the destruction were fulfilled. It also defines him as the prophet of the destruction.

The insertion and placement of chapter 52, which narrates the destruction of the Temple, also supports this conclusion. The "real" Book of Jeremiah had ended in the previous chapter:

> And say, "Thus shall Babylon sink and never rise again, because of the disaster that I will bring upon it. And [nations] shall have wearied themselves [for fire]." Thus far the words of Jeremiah. (51:64)

In his introduction to his commentary on Jeremiah, Abarbanel suggests that the Men of the Great Assembly copied the last chapter from the Book of Kings and appended it to what became the final chapter of the Book of Jeremiah. The positioning of this appendix in the book's climactic conclusion illustrates how the editor defines Jeremiah as the prophet of the destruction.

The Book of Jeremiah is presented out of chronological order, and to this day scholars debate how to structure the book. We present the central prophecies of the Book of Jeremiah in chronological order so that readers can appreciate how the prophet spoke to people in different historical periods.[1]

The first time period in which Jeremiah prophesied was that of Josiah, a righteous king whose works are described in II Kings chapters 22-23. The finding of the Torah in 622 B.C.E. was the main catalyst in the king's reformation. Jeremiah received his prophetic initiation five years earlier, in 627 B.C.E. Based on comparative chronologies of the period, Assurbanipal,

the last great ruler of the Assyria Empire, died in 627 B.C.E. as well. Both Josiah and Jeremiah viewed these political changes as a spiritual window of opportunity.

In 625 B.C.E., King Nabopolassar of Babylonia broke free from Assyria and began to capture Assyrian holdings. By 620 B.C.E., Assyria had retreated from Israel, and their collapse was sudden and total. In 612 B.C.E., their capital Nineveh fell to Babylonia. By now, nations no longer worried about Assyria, but instead became concerned about the rising power of Babylonia.

A decisive moment in Israel's history came in 609 B.C.E. Egyptian forces marched northward through Israel to help Assyria make a last stand against Babylonia. Josiah tried to stop the Egyptians, so the Egyptians killed the righteous king. The abrupt death of Josiah dealt a traumatic blow to the religious factions in Judah, as Josiah's successors were unfaithful to God. Egypt immediately deposed Jehoahaz, probably because he was pro-Babylonian. Egypt's appointing Jehoiakim was the first time that a foreign power had installed a king of Israel.

In 605 B.C.E., the Babylonian army crushed the Egyptian-Assyrian forces in Carchemish (see Jer. 46:1-12), leaving Babylonia as the unchallenged power in the region. Nabopolassar died and his son Nebuchadnezzar assumed the throne of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

In Israel, the idolatrous factions that had gone into hiding during Josiah's Reformation came back out into the open. The wicked King Jehoiakim adopted an anti-Babylonian stance. In contrast, Jeremiah preached repentance and submission to Babylonia as means to survival (e.g., chapters 25, 27). Meanwhile, Egypt encouraged the surrounding nations to ally against Babylonia. Judah was divided over how to respond politically to the Babylonian menace, with her very existence at stake.

In 597 B.C.E., Jehoiakim died and his son Jehoiachin took over. Nebuchadnezzar exiled the new king after three months along with 10,000 of Judah's best and brightest. Many false prophets arose during this period, who contended that that the exile of Jehoiachin was temporary and that Babylonia would soon fall miraculously (chapters 23, 28-29). Their essential message was that Judah should revolt against Babylonia.

The last king of Judah, Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.E.), came under enormous pressure from Egypt and his own nobility to revolt against Babylonia (chapters 21, 34, 37-39). Jeremiah pleaded for him to surrender but to no avail. Zedekiah revolted, Jerusalem fell, and the Temple went up in flames in 586 B.C.E.

Soon after the destruction, the pro-Babylonian governor Gedaliah was assassinated and many surviving Jews fled to Egypt against Jeremiah's prophecy, dragging him along (chapters 40-43). The last chronological chapter in the book has Jeremiah rebuking the Jews in Egypt for their idol worship. They ignored him since they believed their sufferings had come because they had served God (chapter 44).

Jeremiah's mission was to justify the destruction of the Temple and teach that the God-Israel relationship is eternal even though the Temple is not. He prophesies that Babylonia would fall in seventy years and Israel would be redeemed (chapters 29-33). His inspiring prophetic message of hope during biblical Israel's bleakest moment is one of the reasons Israel has endured as a people.

We now turn to some of the central prophecies of Jeremiah in chronological sequence.

CHAPTER 1

Before I created you in the womb, I selected you; before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet concerning the

> nations…Have no fear of them, for I am with you to deliver you—declares the Lord…So you, gird up your loins, arise and speak to them all that I command you. Do not break down before them, lest I break you before them. I make you this day a fortified city, and an iron pillar, and bronze walls against the whole land—against Judah's kings and officers, and against its priests and citizens. They will attack you, but they shall not overcome you; for I am with you—declares the Lord —to save you. (1:5-19)

Radak and Abarbanel observe that God encourages Jeremiah during his initiation. He is the only prophet told that he was chosen before birth. Aside from the encouragement, God with this same phrase signals to the prophet that he has no choice but to prophesy (Menahem Boleh[2]).

After Jeremiah's initiation, he offers a prophecy reminiscing about God's beautiful relationship with Israel at the time of the exodus before Israel became unfaithful:

> Go proclaim to Jerusalem: Thus said the Lord: I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown. Israel was holy to the Lord, the first fruits of His harvest. All who ate of it were held guilty; disaster befell them—declares the Lord. (2:2-3)

That this prophecy is placed first does not demonstrate that it was Jeremiah's first prophecy chronologically delivered to the people. However, its literary placement sets the tone for the book. The roots of love and hope existed at a time when it was remarkable to have any hope at all.

Rashi interprets God's words as a plea for a restoration of the original relationship. Were Israel to repent, God happily would reaccept them. Abarbanel adds a personal dimension to Rashi's reading. God was concerned that Jeremiah still was reluctant to prophesy, therefore, God

opened with a positive prophecy. Not only would that encourage Israel, but it would give Jeremiah the strength to embark on a difficult career.

CHAPTERS 7, 26[3]

God's encouragement to Jeremiah was certainly necessary. Although his initiation occurred during Josiah's reign, Jeremiah's rise to national fame began at the outset of the wicked Jekoiakim's reign. Jeremiah 26 relates that the prophet entered the Temple precincts at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (c. 609 B.C.E.) to threaten the destruction of the Temple if the people refused to repent. The people were outraged by Jeremiah's message and tried him as a false prophet:

> And when Jeremiah finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, shouting, "You shall die! How dare you prophesy in the name of the Lord that this House shall become like Shiloh and this city be made desolate, without inhabitants?" (Jer. 26:8-9)

It is interesting that the people were immediately convinced that Jeremiah should be executed as a false prophet. Superficially, one might conclude that they were wicked people who did not want to change their ways. While this explanation may account for some of their motivation, other factors also may have been involved. In chapter 7—likely the parallel prophecy to the narrative in Jeremiah 26—Jeremiah censured the people for claiming that the Temple would never be destroyed:

> Don't put your trust in illusions and say, "The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these [buildings]." No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another… (Jer. 7:4-5)

Jeremiah accused the people—who served God albeit in an inappropriate manner—of maintaining the pagan belief that no deity ever would destroy his own temple. They served God as pagans would serve their deities by offering sacrifices to appease God while persisting in their immoral behavior (Jer. 7:9-11). Additionally, even a fully righteous individual might have suspected that Jeremiah was a false prophet. Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of the Temple shortly

after Josiah met his abrupt death (609 B.C.E.). This critique of Judean society, then, came in the wake of Josiah's reformation (622 B.C.E.)! How could Jeremiah presume to say that the people were so wicked that the Temple would be destroyed?

Though this critique is valid based on the account of Josiah's reformation in the Book of Kings, Jeremiah offers a different perspective concerning the sincerity of the ostensibly penitent Judeans:

> The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what Rebel Israel did, going to every high mountain and under every leafy tree, and whoring there? ... And after all that, her sister, Faithless Judah, did not return to Me wholeheartedly, but insincerely—declares the Lord. (Jer. 3:6, 10)

The Talmud suggests that Josiah also overestimated the positive spiritual state of the people:

> ?R. Samuel b. Nahmani said in the name of R. Jonathan: Josiah was punished because he should have consulted Jeremiah and he did not. On what did Josiah rely? On the divine promise contained in the words, Neither shall the sword go through your land (Lev. 26:6)…. Josiah, however, did not know that his generation found but little favor [in the eyes of God]. (*Ta'anit* 22b)[4]

Furthermore, Jeremiah stated this prophecy of destruction less than a century after the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem in Isaiah's time (701 B.C.E.):

> "I will protect and save this city for My sake and for the sake of My servant David." [That night] an angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp, and the following morning they were all dead corpses. (Isa. 37:35-36)

In principle, the religious establishment might have cited this prophecy against Jeremiah.[5] Jeremiah could respond that Isaiah's prophecy was intended for that generation, but times had changed and Jeremiah's new prophetic revelation called for the destruction of Jerusalem. However, such a claim from an unproven prophet would be difficult to accept, even for the most righteous of the priests and scribes. While the religious establishment who opposed Jeremiah might have appealed to Isaiah's prophecy of Jerusalem's salvation, several elders cited a different prophetic precedent from Isaiah's contemporary Micah in Jeremiah's support:

> And some of the elders of the land arose and said to the entire assemblage of the people, "Micah the Morashtite, who prophesied in the days of King Hezekiah of

Judah, said to all the people of Judah: 'Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins and the Temple Mount a shrine in the woods.' Did King Hezekiah of Judah, and all Judah, put him to death? Did he not rather fear the Lord and implore the Lord, so that the Lord renounced the punishment He had decreed against them? We are about to do great injury to ourselves!" (Jer. 26:17-19 [quoting Mic. 3:12[6]])

Jeremiah employed yet a third precedent, namely, the capture of the Ark and destruction of Shiloh in Eli's time (I Sam. 4-7[7]). Just as the Ark did not save Israel when they had religious failings then; so Jerusalem and the Temple would not save Israel now unless the people repent (Jer. 7:12-15; 26:6).
Jeremiah's argument could be framed as follows: *only* a prophet can know how and when to apply earlier prophecies and historical precedents to new circumstances. While the religious establishment could cite chapter and verse to support assertions for or against Jeremiah, only Jeremiah could know which precedent applied because he was a prophet.

This trial almost cost Jeremiah his life. How could he prove that he was not a false prophet? We have the Book of Jeremiah and therefore our tradition affirms that he was a true prophet. However, even a well-intentioned God-fearer in Jeremiah's time would not necessarily have been sure. We explore this issue in the following chapter.

[1] See also recently Binyamin Lau, *Yirmiyahu: Goralo shel Hozeh* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot, 2010). See also my review essay on his book, "Bringing the Prophets to Life: Rabbi Binyamin Lau's Study of the Book of Jeremiah," *Tradition* 41:1 (Spring 2011), pp. 53-64.

[2] Menahem Boleh, *Da'at Mikra: Jeremiah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1983), p. 3.

[3] This section is adapted from Hayyim Angel, "Jeremiah's Confrontation with the Religious Establishment: A Man of Truth in a World of Falsehood," in *Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings : Finding the Religious Significance in Tanakh* (Jersey City, NJ: Ktav-Sephardic Publication Foundation, 2009), pp. 127-138.

[4] Cf. *Lam. Rabbah* 1:53.

[5] Cf. Lam. 4:12, “The kings of the earth did not believe, nor any of the inhabitants of the world, that foe or adversary could enter the gates of Jerusalem.”

[6] This is the only place in prophetic literature where an earlier prophet is quoted by name (Boleh, *Da’at Mikra: Jeremiah*, p. 337).

[7] Cf. Ps. 78:58-60. The Book of Samuel does not mention the actual destruction of Shiloh. However, the Ark was not brought there after the Philistines returned it to Israel.

JEREMIAH #2

JEREMIAH’S LATER CAREER (605-586 B.C.E.)

CHAPTERS 36, 25

In 605 B.C.E., the Egyptian-Assyrian forces fell to the Babylonians in Carchemish. The once mighty Assyrian Empire was eliminated and Nebuchadnezzar assumed the throne of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, poised to conquer the world.

After twenty-three years of Jeremiah’s unsuccessfully warning the people, Judah’s moment of truth had arrived. Unfortunately, the wicked King Jehoiakim reigned during this critical period.

> In the fourth year of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: Get a scroll and write upon it all the words that I have spoken to you—concerning Israel and Judah and all the nations—from the time I first spoke to you in the days of Josiah to this day. Perhaps when the House of Judah hear of all the disasters I

> intend to bring upon them, they will turn back from their wicked ways, and I will pardon their iniquity and their sin. So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah; and Baruch wrote down in the scroll, at Jeremiah's dictation, all the words which the Lord had spoken to him. (36:1-4)

This scroll was read three times on one day (36:10, 15, 21). Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Menahem Boleh therefore explain that the scroll likely contained Jeremiah's essential teachings.

Following midrashic readings, Rashi writes that Jeremiah's scroll contained Lamentations chapters 1, 2, and 4. After the king burned this scroll in Jeremiah 36, the prophet rewrote those chapters and added chapters 3 and 5 to Lamentations. From this midrashic perspective, the Book of Lamentations was composed nineteen years prior to the destruction of the Temple.

At the level of *peshat*, Ibn Ezra objects since Lamentations appears to have been written after the destruction. Additionally, Ibn Ezra notes that the narrative in Jeremiah 36 relates that the scroll contained the prophecies of Jeremiah received during the first twenty-three years of his career (627-605 B.C.E.).

At the conceptual level of *derash*, however, Rashi's point has merit. Jeremiah prophetically offered Jehoiakim one last window of opportunity for repentance to save Jerusalem. When Jehoiakim burned the scroll, he was in essence burning the Temple with it as the decree was sealed. Rashi interprets Jeremiah's prophecy of doom in chapter 25 in this vein:

> "In the fourth year": the year when their decree was sealed that they would be exiled and drink from the "cup of wrath"…Before the decree God told the prophet to rebuke them since perhaps they would repent and their decree would not be sealed. (Rashi on 25:1, following *Seder Olam Rabbah* 24)

Chapter 25, also dated to 605 B.C.E. (the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign) proclaims the decree that all nations will serve Babylonia for seventy years.

Rashi's conceptual analysis points to an important textual divide within Jeremiah's prophetic career. There are no explicit calls for repentance dated after chapter 36 in the Book of Jeremiah. From this moment onward, Jeremiah preached submission to Babylonia, with the hopes that Israel could at least physically survive.

This progression is similar to Isaiah's calls for repentance in his early career (Isaiah chapters 1-5), God's proclamation of a sealed decree (Isaiah chapter 6), and then Isaiah's shift to the political arena with the hopes of ensuring survival (Isaiah chapters 7-33).

THE EXILE OF JEHOIACHIN

After the traumatic exile of Jehoiachin and 10,000 other leading Judeans in 597 B.C.E., there was widespread concern. Had Jeremiah been right all along? Most Judeans refused to believe this. Instead, false prophets arose who predicted a miraculous downfall of Babylonia followed by the return of Jehoiachin and the other exiles.

On the political front, Egypt fanned the flames of revolt against Babylonia. This led King Zedekiah to host an international summit in 593 B.C.E. to discuss the formation of an anti-Babylonian coalition. The religious and political establishments opposed Jeremiah's message of submission.

Jeremiah arrived at Zedekiah's summit wearing a yoke, symbolizing that all the nations should submit to the yoke of Babylonia:

> Thus said the Lord to me: Make for yourself thongs and bars of a yoke, and put them on your neck. And send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon, by envoys who have come to King Zedekiah of Judah in Jerusalem…The nation or kingdom that does not serve him—King

> Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and does not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will visit—declares the Lord—with sword, famine, and pestilence, until I have destroyed it by his hands. As for you, give no heed to your prophets, augurs, dreamers, diviners, and sorcerers, who say to you, “Do not serve the king of Babylon.” For they prophesy falsely to you—with the result that you shall be banished from your land; I will drive you out and you shall perish. But the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serves him, will be left by Me on its own soil—declares the Lord—to till it and dwell on it. (27:2-11)

After Jeremiah’s presentation, the false prophet Hananiah son of Azzur publicly confronted Jeremiah, breaking his yoke and announcing that Babylonia would fall in two years (chapter 28). How were the people—even the most sincerely religious ones—to distinguish between true and false prophets? This question was not merely a matter of academic interest. Jeremiah’s forecast of seventy years of Babylonian rule (Jer. 25:10-11; 29:10) came with political ramifications: remain faithful to Babylonia or else they will destroy the country. By predicting the miraculous demise of Babylonia, the false prophets supported revolt against Babylonia. These debates were a matter of national policy and survival.

Some false prophets were easier to detect than others. Their flagrant disregard for the Torah discredited them as true prophets—at least for God-fearing individuals who were confused as to whom they should follow. However, Hananiah son of Azzur and Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jer. 29:24-32) both sounded righteous. Neither preached idolatry or laxity in Torah observance, and both spoke in the name of God. After each prophet made his case, Jeremiah “went on his way” (Jer. 28:11). There was no way for the people to know who was right, and therefore the nation would have to wait to see whose prediction would be fulfilled. Waiting, however, was not a helpful option. The false prophets were calling for revolt now, and Jeremiah was calling for loyalty to Babylonia now.

Elsewhere, Jeremiah bemoaned the mockery he endured for the non-fulfillment of his own predictions: “See, they say to me: ‘Where is the prediction of the Lord? Let it come to pass!’” (Jer. 17:15). Though Jeremiah ultimately was vindicated by the destruction, the prediction test of prophetic veracity was difficult to apply.

To address these difficulties, Jeremiah presented alternative criteria by which to ascertain false prophets. He staked his argument in the Torah’s assertion that a wonder worker who preaches idolatry is a false prophet regardless of successful predictions or signs:

> As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death; for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*)—who freed you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of bondage—to make you stray from the path that the Lord your God commanded you to follow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst. (Deut. 13:6)

Jeremiah extended the Torah’s example of idolatry to include anyone who did not actively promote repentance. Since the false prophets predicted the unconditional downfall of Babylonia irrespective of any repentance on Israel’s part, they must be fraudulent:

> In the prophets of Samaria I saw a repulsive thing (*tiflah*): They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray. But what I see in the prophets of Jerusalem is something horrifying (*sha’arurah*): adultery and false dealing. They encourage evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. To Me they are all like Sodom, and [all] its inhabitants like Gomorrah. (Jer. 23:13-14)

More subtly, the Torah uses the expression, “for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God” (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*). This phraseology is used to refer to specific prophets only twice in Tanakh—when Jeremiah censured Hananiah and Shemaiah, the two false prophets who appeared the most

righteous:

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to banish you from off the earth. This year you shall die, for you have urged disloyalty to the Lord (*ki sarah dibbarta el A-donai*). (Jer. 28:16)

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his offspring. There shall be no man of his line dwelling among this people or seeing the good things I am going to do for My people—declares the Lord—for he has urged disloyalty toward the Lord (*ki sarah dibber al A-donai*). (Jer. 29:32)

Thus Jeremiah singled out the most undetectable false prophets so that those who genuinely wanted to follow God's word would understand that they were as good as idolaters as they led the nation away from God by predicting unconditional salvation for undeserving people.

Hananiah and Shemaiah may have been sincere dreamers who loved Israel. However, they were not driven to improve their society, and therefore necessarily were false prophets. In the end, their feel-good predictions contributed directly to the nation's doom. Zedekiah capitulated to his nobles' demands and revolted against the Babylonians, bringing about the destruction of the Temple and exile of the nation. During the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah scolded Zedekiah for having ignored his counsel:

> And Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What wrong have I done to you, to your courtiers, and to this people, that you have put me in jail? And where are those prophets of yours who prophesied to you that the king of Babylon would never move against you and against this land?" (Jer. 37:18-19)

Though some false prophets may have been sincere, there possibly also was some deficiency in that sincerity. While condemning false prophets, Jeremiah urged the Jews not to listen to them:

> For thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Let not the prophets and diviners in your midst deceive you, and pay no heed to the dreams they [Heb. “you”] dream (*ve-al tishme’u el halomotekhem asher attem mahlemim*). (Jer. 29:8)

The expression at the end of the verse is difficult to interpret, as is evidenced in the NJPS translation above. Radak submits the following:

> *Mahlemim*: this means that they cause them to dream … i.e., you [the people] cause [the false prophets] to dream, for if you did not listen to their dreams, they would not dream these things. (Radak on Jer. 29:8)

Following Radak’s interpretation, Jeremiah’s critique of the false prophets includes an accusation of their being at least partially driven by a desire to please the people. A vicious cycle was created between the false prophets, the political leadership, and the masses. In contrast, Jeremiah was committed to God’s word no matter how unpopular that made him.

CHAPTER 31: REDEMPTION

> Thus said the Lord: The people escaped from the sword, found favor in the wilderness; when Israel was marching homeward the Lord revealed Himself to me of old. Eternal love I conceived for you then; Therefore I continue My grace to you…Thus said the Lord: A cry is heard in Ramah—wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus said the Lord: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is a reward for your labor—declares the Lord: They shall return from the enemy’s land. And there is hope for your future—declares the Lord: Your children shall return to their country… (31:2-17)

Jeremiah's imagery of the redemption from Egypt connects back to the loving prophecy in 2:1-3 where God reminisces about the original pristine relationship with Israel. The goal of the Book of Jeremiah is to revert back to that bridal state. Jeremiah calls Israel "Maiden Israel" (31:4), reflecting a newly restored relationship. This imagery can be contrasted with chapter 30, where Israel is referred to as a sick, old, abandoned wife (30:12-15).

Jeremiah envisioned the return of the Northern exiles as well so that future Israel would be restored and complete. Though Israel considered herself hopeless after the destruction, Jeremiah assured them that the God-Israel relationship is eternal:

> Thus said the Lord, Who established the sun for light by day, the laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is Lord of Hosts: If these laws should ever be annulled by Me—declares the Lord—only then would the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time. Thus said the Lord: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares the Lord. (31:35-37)

How successful was Jeremiah? In his lifetime, he lived a miserable existence and failed in nearly every regard. 2,600 years later, however, we can be thankful to him for keeping Israel's hopes alive through the bitterness of destruction and exile.

Israel's indebtedness to Jeremiah's vision already was recognized at the beginning of the Second Temple period. When the Babylonian Empire suddenly came crashing down and was replaced by Persia, Cyrus the Great allowed the Jews to return to their land and rebuild the Temple. The Book of Ezra notes that Jeremiah's vision miraculously was being fulfilled:

> In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, when the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah was fulfilled, the Lord roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his realm by word

of mouth and in writing as follows: “Thus said King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord God of Heaven has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has charged me with building Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.” (Ezra 1:1-2)