

Jeremiah (pt. 1)

Uprooting “God’s organization”?

“See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.”

JEREMIAH 1:10.

The “poached-egg” Prophet

Many readers will be familiar with CS Lewis’s “trilemma”, laid out so memorably in “Mere Christianity”. That is, there are really only 3 choices when it comes to Jesus. Here is how Lewis sets it out:

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God. *Mere Christianity*, Bk. II, Ch. 3, “The Shocking Alternative.”

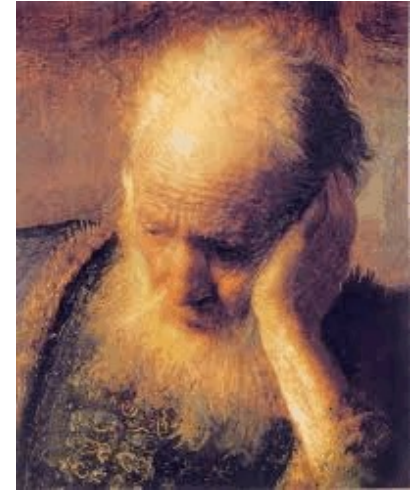
Whether one agrees or not with Lewis and orthodox Christianity that Jesus DID claim to be God on earth, the force of the argument survives: NOBODY says the things Christ said without risking being regarded as a liar or a lunatic — a “poached egg”.

Jeremiah was just such a “poached-egg” himself. His claim to be a TRUE prophet of Yahweh seemed folly to his fellow Jews. Jeremiah consistently proclaimed the end of Judah and Jerusalem for 40 years, even from the days of good King Josiah. After the first stages of the exile, which took Daniel and Ezekiel to Babylon, the priests, the princes and the general populace STILL regarded Jeremiah — now apparently quite alone in combatting the false prophets — as a madman, even a traitor. How, they reasoned, could God NOT have a King of David’s house sitting on the throne in

Jerusalem. They regarded Jeremiah as simply out of his head in suggesting that even the Temple of Yahweh, planned and built by David and Solomon, even THAT space itself was NOT sacrosanct to the God who dwelt within it. And Jeremiah’s message that pagan King Nebuchadnezzar was now the “servant of Yahweh”, well, that was plainly a theological absurdity.

There is one more remarkable “poached-egg” proclamation which is preserved in the text of Jeremiah. Daniel has 6 chapters in Hebrew, 6 in Aramaic (the lingua franca, that is, international language of the time, as Greek was in the days of Christ). The text of Jeremiah, however, has but ONE verse in the international language of those days. Apparently Yahweh — and Jeremiah — were very interested that this single sentence got out where the maximum number could hear and digest it. Here is that verse, Jeremiah 10:11:

Thus you shall say to them [the house of Israel], “The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and under the heavens”



REMBRANDT
“Jeremiah weeping”

Certainly Israel would need to hear this reassurance after the destruction of the Temple, the city, and the termination of the Davidic dynasty — when finally they would realize that Jeremiah was no lunatic after all. To the superficial observer, it would indeed look as if the God of Israel had been defeated by the gods of Assyria and Babylon, who, after all, were the first great empires rampaging throughout “the Holy Land”. However, those Jews who, perhaps for the first time, gave serious consideration to the collected writings of the prophets during the exile in Babylon, would not be fooled by the “success is the gods’ blessing” popular theology which prevailed in the ancient world. They knew that the exile actually proved the OPPOSITE of the popular theology — that the God of Israel demonstrated himself superior to ALL other “gods” by this very revelation of judgment IN ADVANCE, the infallible test of a God who claims omniscience and omnipotence.

The non-Israelite, of course, would be even more prone to misread the judgments of the Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. The ancient gods, if we may make a wide but justified generalization, were viewed as “powers” and insurance policies more than moral guides. NONE of them displayed long range prophetic powers. They kept their devotees by at least the promise of temporal blessings. NONE of them left behind extensive literary remains, by which their promises and (usually) short-range “oracles” could be tested by later generations. But HERE, in the person of Jeremiah, among the tiny remnant of survivors in the Promised Land, the polytheistic Babylonians would

hear the OFFICIAL “theology of judgment”. Jeremiah was greatly favoured by Nebuchadnezzar, particularly because of his advocating submission to the Babylonian King, “Yahweh’s servant” (Jer. 27:1-7). Thus it is very likely that many of Jeremiah’s post-586 BC audience, which included numerous representatives of the Babylonian court and military, would have heard his single pronouncement in THEIR official language, Aramaic:

“The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and under the heavens”

It is a matter of record that many pagans came to respect the Jews and their Scriptures when suddenly hundreds of synagogues began popping up throughout the Babylonian, Persian and Grecian empire periods. This was ONE of the ways that Jeremiah’s “poached-egg” prediction began to be fulfilled: the pagan mind was impressed by the obvious difference between their religions and the Jewish faith. The rise of Christianity accelerated the extinction of the gods and cults of polytheism, which seemed so invincible even into the later Roman Empire. God, in his infinite wisdom, by the discipline of the exile, the rise of the synagogue throughout the diaspora, the consequent preservation and regular reading and preaching of the Old Testament, and especially by the rapid spread of Christianity which the diaspora made possible, God in his wisdom had guaranteed the death of the pagan gods and the spread of the faith of Abraham across the entire planet. What was, during the Babylonian exile, the faith of the tiny remnant of Jerusalem survivors like Jeremiah, has become the biggest religion in the world. Indeed, if we factor in Islam, which also claims spiritual connection to Abraham, virtually one half of the planet’s population exalt the one God, the maker of heaven and earth. Thus, even before the return and rule of Christ, Jeremiah has been vindicated:

“The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and under the heavens”

Overview

If Isaiah is the prophet where we most clearly see the majesty of God, the humility of Messiah, surely Jeremiah is where we most catch a glimpse of ourselves. If Isaiah shows us a mountaintop vision of Yahweh, Jeremiah finds God in the darkest shadows of man’s life on earth.

Chapters 1-6 – Doom despite Josiah

1:1-19 Jeremiah is an outsider to the Jerusalem establishment. But he is to become the quintessential “outside the box” prophet. But was Jeremiah an advocate of “positive thinking”?

Jeremiah is a priest from Anathoth, a descendant of the Aaronic priesthood, yes, but likely from the “blacksheep” branch of the family, banished from Jerusalem

during the early years of Solomon. Yahweh had raised up a tender shoot, Josiah, from most unpromising ground – Josiah’s grandfather and father were two of Israel’s worst kings. Now Yahweh was going to send an unrecognized, outsider priest to reprove a priesthood and people who showed no regard for the essentials of Hebrew faith.

2:1-22 Compared to Jeremiah’s generation, even the 40-year wilderness wanderings seemed like a golden age

2:23-3:5 Irrational Canaanite religion has replaced worship of YHWH with whole mind, soul, strength

I remember the troth of thy youth,

Thy love as a bride,

Thy following Me through the desert,

The land unsown.

Upon the unsown land there were no rival gods. But in fertile Canaan the nation encountered innumerable local deities, the Baalim, husbands of the land, begetters of its fruits and lords of its waters. We conceive how tempting these Baalim were both to the superstitious prudence of tribes strange to agriculture and anxious to conciliate the traditional powers thereof; and to the people’s passions through the sensuous rites and feasts of the rural shrines. Among such distractions Israel lost her innocence, forgot what her own God was or had done for her, and ceased to enquire of Him. Hence her present vices and misery in contrast with her early troth and safety. Hence the twin evils of the time-on the one hand the nation’s trust in heathen powers and silly oscillation between Egypt and Assyria; on the other the gross immoralities to which the Baals had seduced its sons. There was a double prostitution, to gods and to men, so foul that the young prophet uses the rankest facts in the rural life which he is addressing in order to describe it.

The cardinal sin of the people, the source of all their woes is religious,

Is not this being done thee For thy leaving of Me?

This was so, not only because He was their ancestral God – though such an apostasy was unheard of among the nations – but because He was such a God and had done so much for them; because from the first He had wrought both with grace and with might, while the gods they went after had neither character nor efficiency – mere breaths, mere bubbles! [George Adam Smith, *Jeremiah*, Baird Lectures of 1922, published 1923, 4th edition 1929, pp 104-105]

3:6-4:18 Though superficially “religious”, the people of Judah and Jerusalem are called “faithless” no fewer than 7 times, “treacherous” 5 times, all within the first 17 verses of this section (ESV); yet Yahweh still promises (v 22), “Return, O faithless sons; I will heal your faithlessness.”

4:19-5:6 Hundreds of thousands still meeting regularly at a Temple which is one

of the wonders of the world – yet Yahweh challenges Jeremiah to find a single faithful man!

5:7-31 The people love to have their ears tickled by false prophets, whose counsel somehow always supports the princes & priests of the established order

It is Jeremiah ... who furnished us with tests, not very satisfactory, however, by modern standards, by which the true messengers of Jehovah may be distinguished from the false. The first characteristic of genuine prophecy was that it was like 'fire' or 'a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces (23:29); in other words the genuine prophet will be obviously full of the divine energy. But the energy exhibited by Zedekiah, the son of Chenaanah (1 Kings 22:24), or by Jeremiah's opponent, Hananiah, must have been hard to distinguish from that of real inspiration; even Jeremiah himself seems on one occasion to have been silenced (28:11). The second test was that of fulfilment (28:9; cf Deut. 18:21f.). But this was a test which demanded the lapse of time and might almost rank as an appeal to posterity; certainly it could not always be used by the living generation among whom the prophet dwelt. The third test was really a begging of the whole question, for it stated that the true prophet must have been sent by Jehovah (23:22); a claim which the 'false' prophets were always ready to maintain. One point of great interest. There is no mention of the power to work signs and wonders; such phenomena are, indeed, almost unknown in the writings of the canonical prophets. [L.E. Elliott-Binns, *Jeremiah: A Prophet for a Time of War* 93ff]

6:1-30 Impending disaster for Jerusalem

Chapters 7-20 – During the reign of Jehoiakim

7:1-8:3 Jeremiah's Temple sermon and the Valley of Hinnom

8:4-9:26 Just as the people placed mistaken faith in their Temple, so they took false comfort from their possession of Scripture (8:8,9). Yet Jeremiah grieves over his brethren, whom he still considers "my people"

10:1-25 One day the Gentiles will learn the truth that Israel only learned through exile – "'The gods who did not make the heavens and the earth shall perish from the earth and under the heavens" This realization, however, will not be by gradual conversion, but by the wrath of God being revealed

11:1-12:17 Judah called back to the Covenant. Now even prayer is wasted, as Jeremiah faces attempted assassination by his townsmen. He becomes deeply discouraged, even questioning – but Yahweh answers

13:1-27 A ruined loincloth is good for nothing – so Judah has been ruined from the east, and will be shamed and punished by her eastern enemies

14:1-22 Drought is just the prelude to a greater disaster. Despite this, the false prophets go on proclaiming "a false vision, divination, a worthless thing and the deceit of their heart". Nevertheless, Jeremiah still prays for his people, his "eyes stream with tears night and day"

15:1-21 A frightening reality: even if Moses and Samuel were alive to intercede for God's people, judgment is inescapable and pending. The threats of Leviticus 26 & Deuteronomy 28 are about to be completely fulfilled – plague, sword, famine, exile. Jeremiah sounds like Job in his loneliness and self-pity – he lurches perilously close to blasphemy!

16:1-21 So sure and near is judgment that Jeremiah is commanded NOT to take a wife, even to participate in normal social life, either celebration or funeral. His social self-excommunication is a prophetic parable to Jerusalem and Judah. No parent nor child will be spared the coming famine, sword, death, exile. Even burial will become difficult for many – rich as well as poor. Yet beyond these horrors, Jeremiah is told of an ultimate restoration of Israel, a salvation even greater than the escape from Egypt. Not only will scattered Israel be restored to its land, but the Gentiles too will come from the ends of the earth, casting down their gods, acknowledging the one God, Yahweh – fulfilling that single verse in Aramaic, Jeremiah 10:11

17:1-27 Jeremiah's inner struggles – the heart is deceitful and desperate, who can know it? Continued Sabbath violation guarantees Jerusalem's fate – neither Temple nor Davidic dynasty will save it

18:1-19:15 The potter and the clay. The reply of the religious establishment – shoot the messenger! Surely Jeremiah cannot think that his word supersedes that of priest, prophet and wise men (the 3 'official' voices of counsel in pre-exile Judah)!

20:1-18 Jeremiah beaten, placed in stocks. His despair descends to cursing the day he was born

21:1-14 Jerusalem cannot be saved from Nebuchadnezzar. But those who surrender can save their lives