



TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

Jeremiah and Lamentations

J. Daniel Hays

Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton

GENERAL EDITORS

ILLUSTRATING THE TEXT

Kevin and Sherry Harney

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Dann Stouten

CONTRIBUTING WRITER



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To my dad, Jim Hays (1925–2013),
who passed down to me his love for the Prophets

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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; the Teach the Text Commentary Series (TTCS) is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of

the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
 - a. *The Text in Context*. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.
 - b. *Outline/Structure*. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.
 - c. *Historical and Cultural Background*. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.

- d. *Interpretive Insights*. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
 - e. *Theological Insights*. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.
4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
 5. *Illustrating the Text*. At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to provide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

Abbreviations

Old Testament

Gen.	Genesis	2 Chron.	2 Chronicles	Dan.	Daniel
Exod.	Exodus	Ezra	Ezra	Hosea	Hosea
Lev.	Leviticus	Neh.	Nehemiah	Joel	Joel
Num.	Numbers	Esther	Esther	Amos	Amos
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Job	Job	Obad.	Obadiah
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalms(s)	Jon.	Jonah
Judg.	Judges	Prov.	Proverbs	Mic.	Micah
Ruth	Ruth	Eccles.	Ecclesiastes	Nah.	Nahum
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Song	Song of Songs	Hab.	Habakkuk
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Isa.	Isaiah	Zeph.	Zephaniah
1 Kings	1 Kings	Jer.	Jeremiah	Hag.	Haggai
2 Kings	2 Kings	Lam.	Lamentations	Zech.	Zechariah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Mal.	Malachi

New Testament

Matt.	Matthew	Eph.	Ephesians	Heb.	Hebrews
Mark	Mark	Phil.	Philippians	James	James
Luke	Luke	Col.	Colossians	1 Pet.	1 Peter
John	John	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians	2 Pet.	2 Peter
Acts	Acts	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians	1 John	1 John
Rom.	Romans	1 Tim.	1 Timothy	2 John	2 John
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	2 Tim.	2 Timothy	3 John	3 John
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Titus	Titus	Jude	Jude
Gal.	Galatians	Philem.	Philemon	Rev.	Revelation

General

//	parallel text(s)	etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and the rest
ca.	<i>circa</i> , around, approximately	ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare	i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example	lit.	literally
esp.	especially		

Ancient Versions

LXX	Septuagint (ancient Greek version of the Old Testament)
MT	Masoretic Text (majority Hebrew text tradition)

Modern Versions

ESV	English Standard Version
HCSB	Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version

Secondary Sources

ANET	James B. Pritchard, ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969.
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BIBD	Tremper Longman III, Peter Enns, and Mark Strauss, eds. <i>The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary</i> . Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013.
DBI	Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. <i>Dictionary of Biblical Imagery</i> . Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998.
GBPET	J. Daniel Hays, J. Scott Duvall, and C. Marvin Pate. <i>An A-to-Z Guide to Biblical Prophecy and the End Times</i> . Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007.
NIDOTTE	Willem A. VanGemeren, ed. <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997.
ZIBBCOT	John H. Walton, ed. <i>Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Old Testament</i> . 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009.

Introduction to Jeremiah

Author

The prophet Jeremiah is from a priestly family that resides in the town of Anathoth, not far from Jerusalem (1:1). God appoints Jeremiah to be a prophet while in his youth, and Jeremiah serves in this capacity for over forty years, most of which were very difficult. Snippets and representative events portraying the serious challenges that Jeremiah faces in his prophetic ministry are woven into the book, providing us with more insight into Jeremiah as a person than for any other prophet. In fact, Jeremiah expresses many of his fears and struggles in a series of passages often referred to as his “laments” or “confessions.” Because these “laments” are associated with weeping, Jeremiah has frequently been labeled as “the weeping prophet.” This title, however, misses the point of the personal information about Jeremiah presented in this book. The “laments” of Jeremiah are provided to underscore the emotional and physical burden that he carries as a persecuted prophet. The hostility from the powers in Jerusalem (the king, nobles, priests, etc.) toward Jeremiah and his message is a central theme throughout much of the book. Within the Old Testament Jeremiah serves as the paradigmatic persecuted prophet whose story illustrates how thoroughly Judah and Jerusalem reject the message of God and his messenger.¹ So the title “the persecuted prophet” is more accurate.²

Also, although Jeremiah is the one who received the visions and oracles from God and is the one who delivered the word of God orally to the leaders and people of Jerusalem, it is his friend and scribe Baruch who actually converts much of Jeremiah’s message and narrative into written text, at least that portion that took place before 605 BC, the date connected with Baruch’s

composition in Jeremiah 36 (see esp. 36:1–4, 28, 32; 45:1). Although the book of Jeremiah is clear and frequent in identifying the message as being the word of God mediated through the prophet Jeremiah, and although Baruch is identified as the one who wrote down large portions of it, the text is silent about who finalized it into the form we have now. Note that Jeremiah 51 ends with “The words of Jeremiah end here” (51:64), indicating that Jeremiah 52 was added by someone else, perhaps a scribe who took the work of Baruch and finalized it into the form we have today.

Historical Setting

Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry began in 627 BC, during the reign of Josiah, the last “good” king of Judah, and continued through Josiah’s reign (640–609 BC) and across the reigns of the four kings who followed: Jehoahaz (609 BC), Jehoiakim (609–598 BC), Jehoiachin (598–597 BC), and Zedekiah (597–586 BC).

Several important historical events during this time had huge impacts on Jeremiah and his audience in Jerusalem. In 612 BC the Babylonians captured Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, thus challenging the Assyrians as the major power in the region. The Egyptians, who had aligned themselves with the Assyrians, marched north through Judah in 609 BC to help fight the Babylonians. King Josiah apparently tried to stop the Egyptians and was killed. Judah then fell under Egyptian control, and the Egyptians appointed Jehoahaz as the new king. Within a year they changed their minds and replaced him with Jehoiakim. At the Battle of Carchemish (605 BC), however, the Babylonians soundly defeated the Assyrian-Egyptian alliance, ending the era of Assyrian domination and sending the remains of the Egyptian army retreating back into Egypt. The Babylonians then controlled the region, and King Jehoiakim in Judah quickly submitted to them as a vassal. Yet before long the foolish Jehoiakim formed an alliance with neighboring countries and rebelled against the Babylonians. In 598 BC the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar marched his army to Judah to punish Jehoiakim and the Judahites. As the Babylonian army approached, Jehoiakim died (he was probably murdered), and the eighteen-year-old Jehoiachin became king. Wisely, he quickly surrendered to Nebuchadnezzar and was taken into exile, along with many of the leading citizens and artisans of Jerusalem. The Babylonians replaced him with a new puppet king, Zedekiah, the brother of Jehoiakim. Before long, however, Zedekiah also rebelled against the Babylonians, resulting in another, and more devastating, invasion by the Babylonians. This time the Babylonians plundered and destroyed Jerusalem, executing many of the inhabitants and taking many others into exile. They then replaced Zedekiah with the governor Gedaliah.

Jeremiah lived and preached throughout this tumultuous time. Indeed, most of the misfortune that fell on Judah and Jerusalem was a result of their

rejection of his message. Most of the book of Jeremiah is focused during the reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, the two kings with whom the prophet and his message most frequently collide. Likewise, two major events dominate the story. The surrender of Jerusalem leading to the exile of many of its inhabitants in 597 BC and the fall and destruction of Jerusalem leading to the execution of many of its leaders and the exile of others in 586 BC are the two central events that form the major historical background for the book of Jeremiah.

Central Message and Purpose

The book of Jeremiah is also tied into the central story of the Old Testament. After God saves the Israelites from Egypt, as recounted in the book of Exodus, he leads them into the promised land. He gives them the book of Deuteronomy to define the covenant terms by which they can live in the promised land with God in their midst and be wonderfully blessed by him. But Deuteronomy also delineates the terrible consequences that they would face if they chose to reject God and serve pagan idols instead. The sad story of Joshua through 2 Kings narrates how the kingdom of Israel (falling to the Assyrians in 722 BC) and the kingdom of Judah (falling to the Babylonians in 586 BC) chose to ignore Deuteronomy and worship idols instead of the true God of Israel.

Jeremiah proclaims God's message in this context. King Josiah had valiantly tried to reverse the slide into idolatry that had taken place in Judah and Jerusalem, but once he dies, the nation embraces the pagan worship of its neighbors. Therefore, acting like God's prosecuting attorney, and with Deuteronomy in one hand, Jeremiah confronts the leaders and people of Jerusalem, calling on them to repent and warning them of the terrible consequences of continuing on their present disobedient path. The central themes of Jeremiah's message can be condensed into three main points:

1. *You (people of Judah) have broken the covenant by your repeated sin; you must repent immediately!* Throughout much of the book, and especially in the first twenty-nine chapters, Jeremiah focuses on three major sins that indicate how seriously the people have broken their covenant relationship with God: idolatry, social injustice, and reliance on hypocritical religious ritualism.

2. *No repentance? Then terrible judgment will fall upon you.* The lack of repentance in Jerusalem and among its leaders is not just a passive indifference; it is a hostile and direct rejection of both God's word and God's messenger, played out through the persecution of Jeremiah and the attempt to replace God's word with the deceitful message of the false prophets. Jeremiah proclaims that because of this failure to repent, along with the persecution

of God’s messenger, a horrific judgment will fall on Jerusalem. He proclaims that such judgment will also fall on the surrounding pagan nations.

3. *Yet beyond the judgment, there is hope for a glorious future restoration both for Israel/Judah and for the nations.* At the heart of this future restoration is the promise of a “new covenant” that will replace the old covenant (as defined in Deuteronomy).³

Also keep in mind that during the story within the book of Jeremiah, the prophet is speaking most of the time to the leaders and inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. They are his target audience, and he is calling on them to repent and turn back to God. The written book of Jeremiah, however, probably reaches its final form as the written word of God sometime shortly after the events of the book, early in the exile. Thus the initial target audience for the written book of Jeremiah is probably primarily those who were in exile in Babylon, and perhaps also those Judahites who remained behind in the land. At that point the message is reflecting back on what has already happened, reminding those in exile that this terrible event occurred because they and their forebears had rejected God and sinned against him. The primary purpose is to vindicate the message of Jeremiah and to encourage those in exile to trust in God and to look forward to the future restoration.

Literary Features

The book of Jeremiah is a mixture of narrative stories, oracles (prophecies and proclamations) from God, and “conversations” between Jeremiah and God. Most of the oracles and conversations are in verse, characterized by terse lines of poetry, colorful figures of speech, numerous wordplays, and other poetic features.

Also, even though the book refers frequently to kings and historical events, only Jeremiah 37–44 is in chronological order. The rest of the book moves back and forth throughout the various reigns of the kings whom Jeremiah confronts. While the overall message of Jeremiah is redundantly clear, and while large central themes emerge that connect multiple chapters, tight organizational strategies fitting the smaller sections together are not always easily discernible. In many cases the smaller sections are connected thematically or through word repetition using “catchwords.”

The broad major themes that provide continuity across multiple chapter units are the following:

Jeremiah 1–29	The broken covenant and the consequent judgment
1:1–19	The call of Jeremiah
2:1–37	The formal lawsuit against Judah

3:1–4:4	The call to repentance
4:5–6:30	The coming Babylonian invasion
7:1–10:25	False religion and its punishment
11:1–29:32	The prophet in conflict
Jeremiah 30–33	The Book of Restoration
Jeremiah 34–35	Covenant faithfulness
Jeremiah 36–45	The fall of Jerusalem and the aftermath
Jeremiah 46–51	Judgment on the Nations
Jeremiah 52	Recapping the fall of Jerusalem

Another interesting literary feature of the book of Jeremiah is the stark difference in the text between its two major textual traditions. Most English Bibles are primarily translations of the Hebrew manuscript tradition known as the Masoretic Text (MT). Since Jeremiah was written in Hebrew, this makes good sense. Yet, although Jeremiah was written in the sixth century BC, the earliest complete Hebrew manuscript of Jeremiah that we have extant today dates to around AD 900. On the other hand, around 200–150 BC the Hebrew Old Testament, including Jeremiah, was translated into Greek. This Greek translation is known as the Septuagint (LXX). We have copies of Jeremiah from the Septuagint that date to the fourth century AD. Among the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) discovered at Qumran there are six Hebrew scrolls of Jeremiah. The date of these scrolls ranges from 200 BC to about 50 BC. Unfortunately, all of these six scrolls have suffered extensive damage and are only fragmentary. In fact, due to this damage there are over twenty-one chapters of Jeremiah (including 1:1–4:4) that are not present at all in any of the six DSS manuscripts. In Jeremiah, the Masoretic Text (Hebrew text tradition) and the Septuagint (the Greek text tradition) vary in several significant ways. First of all, the Greek text (LXX) is one-eighth shorter than the Hebrew text (MT). There are numerous words, verses, and even some paragraphs in the Masoretic Text that are not in the Septuagint (e.g., 33:14–26; 39:4–13; 51:44b–49a; 52:27b–30). Also, the placement of Jeremiah 46–51 (Judgment on the Nations) is different; in the Septuagint these chapters follow Jeremiah 25:13 and precede Jeremiah 26. Complicating the situation is the fact that two of the Dead Sea Scrolls Hebrew manuscripts of Jeremiah discovered at Qumran seem to follow the shorter Septuagint reading while the other Jeremiah manuscripts seem to follow the longer Masoretic Text reading (although the fragmentary nature of all six of these manuscripts raises some doubt about this identification).

Scholars disagree over what to make of these differences. Does the shorter Septuagint version reflect a Greek translation of an ancient Hebrew text that was indeed shorter than the Masoretic Text but expanded over time to develop

into the Masoretic Text as it is today? If so, which text tradition should be viewed as the “original” one? Or should both text traditions be treated as equally valid and authoritative? Since the Reformation, most Protestant traditions have favored the Masoretic Text, using it as the primary source for Bible translation. The early church, on the other hand, favored the Greek Septuagint for the first several centuries. Because of the extremely complicated nature of this problem, and because most English translations being used in churches today reflect the Masoretic Text, this commentary follows the Hebrew tradition of the Masoretic Text in its discussion of Jeremiah.⁴

The Call of Jeremiah

Big Idea

God appoints his servants to difficult tasks but empowers them with his presence.

Key Themes

- The word of God plays a critical role in Jeremiah's call.
- God selected Jeremiah to be his prophet even before he was born.
- God reassures Jeremiah by promising the power of his presence.
- The word of God that Jeremiah is to proclaim will bring both destruction and restoration.
- God's presence will deliver Jeremiah from those who will oppose him and his message.

Understanding the Text

The Text in Context

The opening verses in Jeremiah summarize the entire book. While many of the sections within the book of Jeremiah are not in chronological order, the opening and closing of the book follow the format laid out in 1:1–3. That is, the book starts with the word of God coming to the young Jeremiah (1:4–19) and ends with the fall and exile of Jerusalem (52:1–34). From the beginning, there is no mystery about how this story will end: the exile of the people of Jerusalem.

Ominously, this introductory passage notes that the “fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah” was the time when “the people of Jerusalem went into exile,” thus removing all mystery or question in the reader’s mind about whether the people of Jerusalem might respond to Jeremiah’s message. The fact of the exile is stated unequivocally here at the beginning of the book, thus providing a clear point of reference. Jeremiah delivers his spoken prophecies in the present tense, warning and rebuking the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah and calling on them to repent. The written prophetic collection that is the book of Jeremiah, however, reflects a theological explanation of the fall of Jerusalem and the exile, events that vindicate the word of God as proclaimed by Jeremiah.

The rest of Jeremiah 1 recounts how God calls him to be a prophet and then gives him a specific commission, describing what he is called to do. The chapter's structure follows a chiastic arrangement (A B B A) as follows:¹

- A The articulation of the call (1:4–10)
- B The vision illustrating the call (1:11–12)
- B The vision illustrating the commission (1:13–14)
- A The articulation of the commission (1:15–19)

Jeremiah 1 is a mix of prose (narrative) and poetry. The story moves along in prose with God's divine words appearing in poetry interspersed in several locations.²

Historical and Cultural Background

The opening verses in Jeremiah place the events of the book and the prophet's proclamation into a very specific historical setting. The word of God first comes to him in "the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah" (627 BC) and continues through the reign of Jehoiakim and down to the "fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah" (587 BC). Thus the work of Jeremiah as a prophet covers a period of forty years (627–587 BC).

Jeremiah's call came at a momentous time in history. In 628 BC Josiah, the last good king of Judah, began his valiant but futile attempt to reform Judah's religious practice and belief (cf. 2 Chron. 34:3–7). In the very year in which Jeremiah was called (627 BC), Ashurbanipal died. He was the last of several powerful Assyrian kings, and his death facilitated the rapid decline of the Assyrian Empire. Indeed, in the following year (626 BC) an independent Babylonian state was established.³ The rise of the Babylonian Empire had a profound impact on the life and times of Jeremiah.

Interpretive Insights

1:1 *The words of Jeremiah . . . one of the priests at Anathoth.* Jeremiah is a priest, but surprisingly he is not from Jerusalem. He is from Anathoth, a small town near Jerusalem. Years earlier Solomon had banished the priest Abiathar to Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26), and it is probable that Abiathar's descendants still lived in the town. Anathoth plays an important role in Jeremiah and will show up again several times (11:21, 23; 29:27; 32:7–9). It is precisely from those in his hometown of Anathoth that Jeremiah will receive some of his harshest persecution (11:18–23).

1:4 *The word of the LORD came to me.* The noun translated as "word" (*d'bar*) in "word of the LORD" occurs seven times in this passage (1:1, 2, 4,

9, 11, 12, 13), while the verb form of this word occurs three more times as well (1:6, 16, 17). The “word of the LORD” is central to Jeremiah’s call and his work as a prophet. It is not the plans or ideas of Jeremiah that drive his tumultuous ministry, but rather the plans of God—indeed, the very words of God. As God’s prophet, Jeremiah will serve as God’s spokesman, speaking the very words of God to the nation.

1:5 *Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart.* In this construction and context the verb “knew” (*yada’*) implies an intimate, personal knowledge. “Set apart” (*qadash*) implies the concept of “consecration” or “setting apart for a special use by God.” It is the same Hebrew term often translated as “holy.”

I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Most of Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry focuses on Judah. A significant portion of his prophecies, however, are directed at foreign nations (chaps. 46–51), and in 27:1–7 he proclaims the word of God directly to the foreign emissaries who have gathered in Jerusalem. God is sovereign over all the nations, and the word of God that Jeremiah proclaims will impact all the nations throughout the entire region.

1:6 *I do not know how to speak; I am too young.* The Hebrew behind “I am too young” is *na’ar* (“child, youth”), which can be used of boys of any age up until marriage. Jeremiah probably is a young man at this time, perhaps even a teenager. In Exodus 4:10 Moses too objects to God’s calling, but whereas Moses claims an inability to speak eloquently, Jeremiah simply pleads that he is too young to be able to speak well enough to be a prophet.

1:7 *You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you.* As in the case of Moses in Exodus 3–4, God waves aside Jeremiah’s objection and focuses on the task. This verse has two parallel clauses and literally reads, “To everyone I send you to, you will go; and everything I command you, you will say.” This echoes the description of the true prophet in Deuteronomy 18:18: “He will tell them everything I command him.”

1:8 *Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you.* This verse is repeated and expanded at the end of this passage (1:17–19). Thus, like bookends, this promise frames the basic description of the task that God gives Jeremiah (1:9–16). From the very beginning of his call Jeremiah is told to “fear not,” strongly implying that if he obeys God and answers his call, there will be something quite tangible to fear. The strong, hostile opposition to Jeremiah’s words by the king and other powerful officials in Jerusalem is a major theme throughout the book. As with Moses (Exod. 3:12), so God declares to Jeremiah what is probably the most important element of his calling: God’s presence will be with him. Translated literally, this phrase reads, “I will be with you to deliver you.” Not only does God protect Jeremiah from the persecution that he experiences throughout the book, but also, toward

the end of the story, as Jerusalem falls and all of Jeremiah's opponents are executed or exiled by the Babylonians, Jeremiah is safely delivered (39:1–40:6), just as God promises here at the beginning.

1:9 *I have put my words in your mouth.* As with 1:7, this phrase alludes to the true prophet of Deuteronomy 18:18 (“I will put my words in his mouth”), thus identifying Jeremiah as a true prophet of God and a legitimate successor to Moses.

1:10 *I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.* This describes the twofold nature of Jeremiah's prophetic message. He proclaims the coming judgment (chaps. 2–29) and then the restoration after the judgment (chaps. 30–33). Note the reverse parallel structure (called “chiasm”) of the opposite verbs that God uses:

- A “uproot”
- B “tear down”
- C “destroy and overthrow”
- B “build”
- A “plant”

These terms will continue to appear throughout the book. It is also perhaps helpful to note what is not included in Jeremiah's job description. He is not appointed specifically just to predict the future. Such a notion is a modern misunderstanding and does not describe the biblical role of God's prophets.

1:11 *almond tree.* God gives Jeremiah a visual image that communicates through a clever wordplay. The word for “almond tree” (*shaqed*) sounds very much like the word for “watching” (*shoqed*) in 1:12. Furthermore, almond trees were also the first to blossom in the spring, and as such they served as signs or signals of the changing season.⁴

1:13 *a pot that is boiling.* God explains that the invaders who will bring his judgment will come from the north, like boiling water spilled out on the ground. At this point the reference to the enemy coming from the north is ambiguous, for with the sea to the west and the desert to the east, Judah could be approached only from the north and the south. That is, any invading nation other than Egypt (to the south) would have to attack Judah from the north. We learn later in the book, however, that the reference is to the Babylonians.

1:15 *set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates.* In the ancient world, kings and rulers “sat at the city gates” to hold court and pass judgment. To “sit at the gates” is to rule the city. Jeremiah 39:3 describes the fulfillment of this prophecy as the Babylonian lords come and take their seats at the gates of Jerusalem.

1:16 *because of their wickedness in forsaking me.* Jeremiah will speak a lot about the various sins of the people in Judah, but their most serious sin was the “forsaking” or “abandonment” of God, usually in conjunction with turning to idolatry. The concept of forsaking also has emotional connotations, and God will often express his pain and sorrow over the fact that his people have abandoned their relationship with him in favor of something or someone else.

Theological Insights

This opening chapter indicates that Jeremiah’s ministry will be a proclamation of the word of God that will destroy the disobedient in judgment and yet will also afterward build up and restore. Throughout the Bible we often see both of these aspects of God revealed simultaneously, as if two sides of the same coin. God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice demand that he judge sin and disobedience. Thus we frequently see passages describing how the wrath of God will be poured out on rebellious and unrepentant sinners. On the other hand, God is regularly portrayed throughout the Bible, including the Old Testament, as one whose very essence is characterized by love and grace. It is his great desire that people turn to him in trust, repenting and turning away from sin so that he can deliver and restore them rather than judge them. Thus in the midst of proclaiming judgment on Judah, a judgment that is certainly well earned, God also reveals a spectacular future plan to deliver and restore his people, a plan characterized by his love and his grace.

Teaching the Text

As in the life of Jeremiah, it is certainly still true for us that the word of God should define who we are, what we are to do, and how we are to do it. It is the word of God that gives us the direction for engaging the world around us and the strength to endure the difficulties that we might encounter as we obey that word.

There is no “health and wealth gospel” in Jeremiah, and the implications for us are important to note. Being in the will of God and doing the work that he has called us to do not automatically equate to a comfortable life or a “successful” ministry, as far as numbers go. In fact, as with Jeremiah, it is quite possible that the opposite will be true. We may undergo severe difficulty, even persecution, precisely because we are following God in obedience. The call to follow Christ is never a call to an easy life with promises of health and wealth; rather, it is a call to “take up your cross” and follow him.

We all have our objections when God calls us to a certain task: “I am not trained well enough,” “I am too busy with other critical activities,” “I do not

have adequate resources,” or “I do not have the talent or skill.” As he did with Jeremiah, God sweeps our lame excuses away and reminds us that he gives us the power and skill needed to accomplish the tasks that he calls us to through his powerful presence manifested in us through the Holy Spirit. It is the powerful presence of God that dispels our fear and anxiety and enables us to do the work of God, no matter how difficult it is and no matter how insurmountable the opposition may seem.

Like Jeremiah, we live in a world where people have blatantly rejected God and embraced a life of sin and rebellion. Thus, while it is essential to stress the “good news” of the salvation offered through faith in Jesus Christ, both aspects of God’s word, his salvation and his judgment, must be proclaimed.

Illustrating the Text

When God calls us, he will empower us.

Film: *The Matrix*. In this 1999 movie the hero, Neo, has a gradual awakening that he has been called to be the leader of a revolution that would result in the destruction of the Matrix and the freedom of the human race from its bondage. His coming has been prophesied for some time, and those in the know have been anticipating his arrival. They even have a special name for this coming messiah. They refer to him as “The One.” Morpheus and The Oracle help Neo to discover that he is in fact The One and that he is capable of much more than he could ever imagine. The problem is that he must choose to accept the role for which he was born.

This same thing is true for Jeremiah and for all of us. God has a plan and a purpose for our lives, but we must be willing to accept the mission that he has for us and believe that he will equip us to accomplish the task. As with Jeremiah, there is often a momentum to God’s call on our lives. It gradually builds and grows inside us until one day we realize that God’s call on our lives defines who we are and how we interact with the world around us. At times, particularly early in the call process, this feels daunting, but we can take our inspiration from those who have gone before us. For example, at the first Russian Prayer Breakfast in Moscow in 1992, when he was asked about the qualities of leadership needed in our world today, Billy Graham said, “I often think of Dr. Martin Luther King, who was my friend. He said many times that one plus God is a majority.”

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

Television: In the television show *The Newlywed Game*, which premiered in 1966 and ran for over thirty years, husbands were asked three questions about their wives. The wives were asked the same questions offstage, and then their

answers were revealed. This game often revealed how little married couples knew about each other. God, however, knew before Jeremiah was even born that he would be a prophetic voice in this troubled world.

Technology: Speech recognition software is designed to turn your talk into text. With many of these programs, the more you use it, the more accurate it becomes because it learns to recognize your speech patterns and inflections. In essence, the software gets to know you. God has no need to learn about us; he knows us before we utter our first sound.