

The Book of Jeremiah

From a Jewish Perspective

*To Cesar, a good friend and faithful servant to the Word of God.
The glue behind the scenes.*

The **exodus** and the **exile** of the southern kingdom of **Judah** are, in one respect, the twin poles around which the **TaNaKh** revolves. The **exodus** and the **exile** are frequent themes in the prophetic writings. In the **exodus** the **people** were freed from slavery; in the **exile** they became enslaved once again. There is something symbolic about the fact that one of the last acts of the people of **Judah** in Tziyon was to re-enslave the slaves that **they** had freed just prior to the destruction of **their** City (34:11).

Jeremiah (Hebrew: **Yirmeyahu**) was the primary prophet of **Judah** during the dark days leading to **her** destruction. Though the light of other prophets, such as **Habakkuk** and **Zephaniah**, flickered in **Judah** at the time, **Jeremiah** was the blazing torch that, along with **Ezekiel** in Babylon, exposed the darkness of **Judah's** sin with the piercing brightness of **God's** Word. **He** was a **weeping prophet** to a wayward **people**.¹

The Use of the New International Version

Because I am writing this commentary on **Jeremiah** from a Jewish perspective, I will be using *the New International Version* unless otherwise indicated. There will be times when I substitute Hebrew for English names using the Complete Jewish Bible by David Stern. But generally I will be using the NIV translation for the Jewish perspective.

The use of ADONAI

Long before **Yeshua's** day, the word **ADONAI** had, out of respect, been substituted in speaking and in reading aloud for **God's** personal name, the four Hebrew letters *yud-heh-vav-heh*, variously written in English as **YHVH**. **The Talmud (Pesachim 50a) made it a requirement not to pronounce Tetragrammaton**, meaning the four-letter name of **God**, and this remains the rule in most modern Jewish settings. In deference to this tradition, which is unnecessary but harmless, I will usually be using **ADONAI** where **YHVH** is meant.² In ancient times when the scribes were translating the Hebrew Scriptures, they revered the name of **YHVH** so much that they would use a quill to make one stroke of the name and then throw it away. Then they would make another stroke and throw that quill away until the name was completed. **His** name became so sacred to them that they started to substitute the phrase *the Name*, instead of writing or pronouncing **His Name**.

Over centuries of doing this, the actual letters and pronunciation of **His Name** have been lost. Today, the name of **G-d** is treated with honor and respect. In the Jewish tradition, in order to show respect, the name of **the L-rd** or **G-d** is written without the vowel. The idea is that if a document with **His Name** on it is destroyed or deleted, **His Name** will be spared because it was not written out fully. As a result, today the closest we can come to the original is **YHVH**, with no vowels. The pronunciation has been totally lost. Therefore, the names Yahweh or Jehovah are only guesses of what the original name actually sounded like. Both **ADONAI** and **Ha'Shem** are substitute names for **YHVH**. **ADONAI** is more of an affectionate name like *daddy*, while **Ha'Shem** is a more formal name like *sir*. **Therefore, God does not have many names, He has only one name - YHVH (Yud Hay Vav Hay). All the other names in the Bible describe His characteristics and His attributes. Hear, O Isra'el! ADONAI our God, ADONAI is One (Deuteronomy 6:4).** The Jewish tradition, then, forbids the pronunciation of **the Divine Name**, and many choose to use **ADONAI** in its place.

The use of TaNaKh

The Hebrew word **TaNaKh** is an acronym, based on the letters **T** (for "Torah"), **N** (for "Nevi'im," or the Prophets), and **K** (for "Ketuv'im," or the Sacred Writings). It is the collection of the teachings of **God** to human beings in document form. The term "Old Covenant" implies that it is no longer valid, or at the very least outdated. Something old, to be either ignored or discarded. But **Jesus Himself** said: **Don't think I have come to abolish the Torah and the Prophets, I have not come to abolish but to complete (Matthew 5:17 CJB).** I will be using the Hebrew acronym **TaNaKh** instead of the phrase, the Old Testament throughout this devotional commentary.

The Use of the Terms Judah and Isra'el

Jeremiah does not use these terms consistently because by this time the northern kingdom of **Isra'el** had gone into captivity in 722 BC. Sometimes he uses the terms interchangeably and sometimes he uses them distinctly. There is no pattern.

Jeremiah the Man

We receive a greater glimpse into the life of **Jeremiah** than we do any other prophet. The book contains quite a bit of biographical material. This is unusual for the writing prophets. Only **Jonah** contains biographical material. **God** told him **he** was not to marry, and **his** obedience was amazing because if anyone ever needed a wife it was **Yirmeyahu**. **He** was very introspective and a lonely man. **He** could have profited by the companionship of a wife. But it wasn't **his** choice. Unlike some of the other prophets, **he** tells us how **he** feels and **his** internal spiritual struggles.

Yirmeyahu was a very emotional man, at least when **he** was writing. **His** writing style is flexible, very lyrical. It is a very strong and powerful style, but at the same time there is a certain delicacy about it. **Jeremiah** is very bold in terms of style and content. The book as a whole has a certain majestic beauty about it.

Jeremiah lived in a period of storm and stress. He is the most pathetic prophet in the Bible. **He** was a prophet of doom against **himself**. **Yirmeyahu** knew that there was no chance that the kingdom of **Judah** was going to repent. And yet, **he** had to keep prophesying. There was nothing **he** could do to avoid the catastrophe **he** knew was coming. Amid the brightest stars of the TaNaKh there is not a name that shines brighter than that of **Yirmeyahu**.

The Authorship and Date

The author of the book is **Jeremiah son of Hilkiah (1:1)**. His ministry extended from **the thirteen years of the reign of Josiah (1:2)** until the Judeans captured **him** and took **him** to Egypt. As a result, **he** prophesied from 627 BC to probably at least 582 BC.

Jeremiah in the Scriptures

Jeremiah occurs in **Second Chronicles 36:21**, **Matthew 2:17** (quotes from **Jeremiah 31:15**), **Matthew 16:14** (a man of sorrows), and **Matthew 27:9** (potters field). There are 41 direct quotations or references in the New Testament, 26 of them in **Revelation**.

Key word: shuwb

The key word in **Jeremiah** is *shuwb*, meaning *to repent* (from evil), *to return*, or *to turn back* (to something or someone good). This is a significant Hebrew verb and embodies the essence of **Yirmeyahu's** message. This verb occurs 1,059 times in the **TaNaKh** and some 48 times in **Jeremiah** alone. No other book has this concentration of that verb. I will be inserting the word (**shuwb**) in the text when it is used. Sometimes there will be a word like *faithless* or *apostasy* where the Hebrew word is actually *mshuwabh*, a feminine noun that actually comes from *shuwb*, when it is used I will insert (from **shuwb**).

The Theology of Jeremiah

There are a number of theological issues that **the priest from Anathoth** deals with: (1) **the word of ADONAI** is indestructible. There are two ways that people will try to destroy it: by changing the wording or by changing the meaning to fit what they already believe (**Second Timothy 4:3**); (2) **God** is sovereign; (3) **the LORD** is both omniscient (all knowing) and omnipresent (present everywhere at the same time). **He** is well aware of **Judah's** sins, both public and private; (4) **Elohim** demands obedience. No obedience, no blessing - only judgment; (5) messianic prophecies, the **God-Man** concept; (6) the sinfulness of mankind; (7) that

Judah and **Isra'el** will be punished because of specific disobedience to the Torah; (8) **Yirmeyahu** announces the coming of the New Covenant (**31-31-34**) that will displace the Mosaic Covenant, which will lead to **Isra'el's** final restoration; (9) eschatology - **Jeremiah** does not mention the Second Coming as such, but **he** does mention the restoration and reestablishment of the throne of David, the messianic Kingdom and the Great Tribulation.

The Use of Different Terms for the People of God

Yisra'el is but one of several terms used to signify **the people of God**. It is used several times (**31:1-2, 4, 10, 21, 23, 27, 31, 36-37**) as are the terms **virgin (31:4,21)**, **Judah (31:23, 27, 31)**, **Jacob (31:7-11)**, **Ephraim (31:6, 18, 20)** and **Rachel (31:15)**. **Zion (31:6, 12 and Chapters 38-40)** and even **Samaria (31:5)** are also employed to refer to the people in their various political and geographical forms.³ There is no pattern.

The Debt of Jeremiah to Hosea

A succession of commentators over the years has recognized the close relationship between **Jeremiah** and **Hosea**. The resemblance between the two prophets appears not only in the use of language and figures but extends to fundamental ideas on **ADONAI** and **His** relationship with **Isra'el**. We may speculate how this came about. **Hosea** was a prophet of the northern kingdom of **Isra'el**. **Anathoth**, the birthplace of **Yirmeyahu**, lay north of Tziyon and not very from the southern border of **Isra'el**. Moreover, **Jeremiah's** family was probably descended from Eli, the priest of Shiloh. So there were both family and geographical links to the north, and **Hosea**, a shining example of the North Israelite piety, may well have played a significant role in **his** early development and training. Either **Jeremiah's** father or some godly teachers conveyed to **Yirmeyahu** the great traditions of **Israel's** faith and **her** unique relationship to **YHVH** in the covenant, **her** election, and the profound obligation laid on **her** as a result of this. That tradition shines through **the prophets'** preaching.

One of **Hosea's** great words was *hesed*, meaning *loyalty* or *faithfulness*. It was **the LORD's** complaint against **Yisra'el** that there was no *faithfulness (hesed)* in the land (**Hosea 4:1**). **He** desired *steadfast love (hesed)* more than sacrifice (**Hosea 6:6**), but sadly, **Israel's love (hesed)** was like the morning mist, like the early dew that disappears (**Hosea 6:4**). **She** needed to sow righteousness and reap the fruit of unfailing love (**Hosea 10:12**) and maintain love and justice (**Hosea 12:6**). In the **far eschatological future** **Isra'el** would be **His** bride again in *faithfulness (hesed)* (**Hosea 2:21**). **Yirmeyahu** had spoken of the happy days when **Isra'el** first followed **ADONAI** into the wilderness, through a land not sown, recalling **the devotion (hesed)** of her youth, and her love for Him as a bride (**Jer 2:2**).

Jeremiah used the metaphor of a son for **Isra'el**. It was in the mind of **God** to treat **Isra'el** as a son and having redeemed him from Egypt to give him a pleasant land and a

beautiful heritage. This figure has a parallel in **Hosea 11:1**. When **Isra'el** was a **child** (*na'ar*) **YHVH** loved **him**, called **him** from Egypt, and nurtured **him** despite **his** rebellious ways. **Jeremiah's** development of the theme is essentially the same. **The LORD** had hoped that **Isra'el** would call **Him**, "**My Father**," but a faithless wife deserts her husband so **Isra'el** proved faithless. **Yirmeyahu** combined the metaphors of a son and a wife in **Jer 3:19-20**.

Another idea that **Yirmeyahu** held in common with **Hosea** was the **knowledge of God** (Hebrew: *da'at Elohim*) in the Land (**Hosea 4:1**), and it was **ADONAI's** people were destroyed because of their **lack of knowledge** (**Hosea 4:6**). **Jeremiah** likewise complained on **God's** behalf: **Those who deal with the Torah did not know** (Hebrew: *yada*) **Me** (**Jeremiah 2:8 CJB**). Again: **My people are foolish - they do not know Me, they are stupid children without understanding** (**Jeremiah 4:22 CJB**). To know **YHVH** was to be committed to **Him** with a profound personal commitment that totally touched the person's life. In the days of the New Covenant **all will know Me from the least to the greatest** (**Jeremiah 31:34**). **Hosea** likewise envisioned a day in the **far eschatological future** when the **LORD** would be **betrothed** to **His people**, returning to the days' of courtship . . . and in *faithfulness* they would **know Him** (**Hosea 2:20**).

The picture of **Ha'Shem's** lawsuit (Hebrew verb: *rub*) against **Isra'el** appears in **Hosea 4:1-3**. The covenant lawsuit is a well-known feature in the TaNaKh. **Hosea** pictured **Isra'el** as being called upon to answer **ADONAI** in the matter of certain failures on **her** part to show knowledge of **God** (*da'at Elohim*). **Jeremiah** also uses the term (*rub*) in a slightly different sense. **The LORD** had a lawsuit (*rub*) against the nations (**Jeremiah 25:31**). **The priest from Anathoth** was under great pressure from his foes (**Yirmeyahu 11:20, 20:12, 50:34, 51:36**) because **the prophet was committed to God's cause** (*rub*). Even if the word lawsuit was not used it was clear that **Yirmeyahu** was laying a charge against **Isra'el** throughout his ministry (**Jeremiah 15:10**), and issuing a threat of judgment against them in which the land itself would share (**Hosea 4:1-3**). **Hosea** specifically spoke against **YHVH's** lawsuit (*sub*) against the priests (**Hosea 4:4-10**). **Jeremiah** also had strong things to say against **the priests** (**Yirmeyahu 2:8 and 26-27, 4:9, 5:31, 13:13, and so on**).

Both **Hosea** and **Jeremiah** express wonderment that **Isra'el** could have turned (**shuwb**) **her** back on **YHVH** in the face of all **He** had done for **them**. According to **Hosea**, no sooner had **Isra'el** reached the Promised Land, the home **ADONAI** had prepared for **His** bride, and there discovered that love meant loyalty, than **she** rebelled (**Hosea 2:5-8, 9:10**). Not that it surprised **Him**, but **God** had to **face** the disheartening fact that **the love of His people** would last no longer than **the morning mist** (**Hosea 6:4**). **Yirmeyahu** took up the same question but took it one step further. To **him**, **Isra'el's** disloyalty required an explanation, and all the more so because the Gentiles to the west and to the east were not guilty of changing loyalty to their gods as **Isra'el** had done. **Judah** had substituted a helpless idol in

the place of **her God (Jeremiah 2:10-22)**. The remarkable thing was that *the goyim* really weren't losing anything because their idols were already powerless. But **Yisra'el had forsaken the LORD, a spring of running water, for dry cisterns that could not hold water (Yirmeyahu 2:12-13)**.

Both **Yirmeyahu** and **Hosea** idealized the wilderness period as a time when **Isra'el's** faith was uncontaminated by the corrupting influence of the Canaanite worship of Ba'al (**Jeremiah 2:1-3; Hosea 11:1**). But **her** fall was staggering. Such apostasy devastated the very foundations of family morality (**Hosea 4:4**). Both prophets emphasized the relationship between the inherent sensuousness of this false worship and the ethical motives of love, trust, and gratitude that a true relationship with **God** demanded and produced. **They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served the created thing rather than the Creator (Romans 1:25; Jeremiah 2:5, 11 and 13; Hosea 9:10)**.

Both **Hosea** and **Jeremiah** struck a strong note of repentance. Three passages in **Jeremiah, 3:22-25, 14:7-10 and 14:19-22**, represent "confession of sin" of the type **Yirmeyahu** believed the people should make. **Isra'el** is pictured as confessing to **YHVH**; that **their** wickedness testified against **them** and that **ADONAI** alone was **her** hope and savior in a time of trouble; and asking why **Ha'Shem** had rejected **them**. They acknowledged **their** sins and asked **Him** not to break **His** covenant with **them**. Such confessions remind us of **Hosea 6:1-3 and 14:2-3** where **Isra'el** is pictured as saying: **Come, let us return to the LORD**, confessing that **Assyria would not save us**, and asking **God** to take away **their** iniquity.⁴

Seven Complaints

More than any other prophet of the TaNaKh **Yirmeyahu** saw **his** relationship with **ADONAI** to be a problem to be grappled with, more than simply an obligation to be taken for granted. There had been other prophets who spoke for **God**, great ones, in past times - **Elijah** and **Amos, Hosea** and **Micah** and **Isaiah**. But one finds, in reading through the pages that record their words and deeds, that once **they** became convinced that **the LORD** was calling **them** to speak, **they** spoke, and that was that; so far as our record goes, no question crossed **their** minds regarding the nature of **their** calling.

Jeremiah, however, while **he** went ahead and spoke, nonetheless hesitated before accepting the task and continued to question and complain about the way **YHVH** was treating **him**. The term complaint is maybe not the ideal one since the passages consist of prayers, laments, confessions, disputes and objections. In **his** capacity and willingness to dispute and doubt, **he** stands out from most of the people in the pages of the Bible; and this capacity and willingness brings **him** close to us. For while there are many people in our day who are willing to undertake a life of faith lived under **Ha'Shem's** guidance and care, there are few who do not at some point question or complain about **His** ways . . . or wanted to.⁵

1. Ax - Oh, Adonai ELOHIM, Surely You Have Deceived This People
2. Bj - The Plot Against Jeremiah
3. Bk - Why Does the Way of the Wicked Prosper? Why Do All the Faithless Live at Ease?
4. Cm - Woe to Me, Mother, That You Gave Me Birth
5. Cs - Heal Me ADONAI, and I Will Be Healed, Save Me and I Will Be Saved
6. Cx - Jeremiah's Response to a Threat Against His Life
7. Db - You Deceived Me, LORD, and I Have Been Deceived

Ten Symbolic Actions

Jeremiah made a good deal of use of the symbolic action. But there are examples in the **TaNaKh** of such symbolic actions before and after **Yirmeyahu's** day. In the ninth century in the days of King Ahab a prophet Zedekiah ben Chenaanah made **horns of iron** for himself and declared to Ahab of **Yisra'el** and Jehoshaphat of Judah: **With these [iron horns] you will gore the Arameans until they are destroyed (First Kings 22:11)**. In Elisha's day, the prophet told Jehoash king of **Isra'el** to shoot arrows in the direction of Syria to symbolize **Isra'el's** forthcoming victory over the Arameans (**Second Kings 13:14-19**).

In the eighth century BC, symbolic actions were associated with both **Isaiah** and **Hosea**. Thus, **Isaiah** went **stripped and barefoot for three years, as a sign and warning against Egypt and Cush, so the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles, young and old, with buttocks bared - to Egypt's shame (20:3-4)**. Even the naming of his children with symbolic names was a symbolic act (see the commentary on **Isaiah Cf - The Sign of Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz**).

Hosea's marriage to **Gomer** was a symbolic enactment of the relationship of **Isra'el** to **YHVH**. **Hosea** the faithful husband symbolizes **Ha'Shem**, and **Gomer** the unfaithful wife symbolizes **Yisra'el**. The names of **Hosea's** children are likewise symbolic of the judgment of **ADONAI** on **Isra'el**: **Jezeel (God sows)** indicated that **the LORD** would soon demand from the house of Jehu **the blood of Jezeel** and the massacre of the royal family (**Second Kings 9-10**); Lo Ruhamah (she who is not pitied) symbolized that **God** would have no pity on **the house of Isra'el**; and Lo 'Ammi (not-My-people) symbolized **YHVH's** rejection of **His** people.

Ezekiel also employed symbolic actions on several occasions. **He** sketched the siege of Jerusalem on a large mud brick (**Ezekiel 4:1-2**). **He** lay on **his** side like one paralyzed for a long period of time to symbolize the guilt of **Judah** and **her** punishment. The lack of

provisions in Tziyon during the siege of Nebuchadnezzar was symbolized by **Ezekiel** taking only small quantities of bread and water (**Ezekiel 4:9-11**). And the life in exile was symbolized by **his** eating unclean food (**Ezekiel 4:12-17**). **Ezekiel** shaved off **his** hair and beard, then burned, smote and scattered it to the winds to symbolize the fate of the inhabitants of the City of David (**Ezekiel 5:1-17**). **Ezekiel** used other symbolic actions to symbolize the advance of the Babylonian army (**Ezekiel 12:1-20**), the distress of the people of the Holy City during the Babylonian siege (**Ezekiel 21:19-23**), the paralyzing grief of the Jews in Babylonia at the fall of Yerushalayim (**Ezekiel 24:1-14**), the second deportation of **the people of Judah** (**Ezekiel 24:15-27**), and the reunion of the two kingdoms into one in the **far eschatological future** (**Ezekiel 37:15-28**).⁶

When we come to **Jeremiah** specifically and find that **he** too performed **ten symbolic actions**, what might be called **parables in action**. It is clear that **he** was in a long tradition of making good use of these symbolic actions that carried on long after **his** death. As in the case with all parables it is wrong to search for meaning in every detail. This only leads the reader to allegorize the text that is a hindrance to sound biblical interpretation.

1. Co - You Must Not Marry and Have Sons and Daughters in This Place
2. Cw - At the Potter's House
3. Cz - Judah is Like a Broken Jar
4. Dt - The Rechabites
5. Dx - A Linen Loincloth
6. Eq - Judah to Serve Nebuchadnezzar
7. Et - The False Prophet Hananiah
8. Fi - In This Same Way Babylon Will Sink, Never to Rise Again
9. Fs - Jeremiah Buys a Field
10. Gi - Nebuchadnezzar Will Burn Down the Temples of the gods of Egypt