

Author and Date of Jeremiah's Prophecy

This is the second in a series of five essays on Jeremiah's prophecy of Israel's seventy-year servitude in Babylon. The first one gave a description of the prophecy, the reason for the prophecy, its date and fulfillment. This essay provides further discussion of the authenticity of the author and date of the prophecy.

The Identity of the Prophet

The identity of the prophet is given in the first verses of the book of Jeremiah:

The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah the son of Amon, king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah the son of Josiah, king of Judah, until the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month. (Jeremiah 1:1-3).

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, a prominent priest who lived in the territory of Benjamin. His prophetic ministry began in the thirteenth year of the reign of King Josiah. Josiah's reign began in 639 B.C., so Jeremiah's ministry began in 627 B.C. and extended beyond the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., covering a span of over forty years.

Some radical skeptics have asserted that no evidence exists outside of Israel that Jeremiah was a real historical person, so this prophecy cannot be regarded as a real historical event. However, that same charge could be made about many ancient historical personages: there is no historical record outside their homeland. There is nothing extraordinary about the existence of prophets among ancient people, so why should extraordinary evidence be needed to verify the historicity of Jeremiah? No reputable scholar, critic, or historian doubts the existence of the Biblical Jeremiah. The Interpreter's Bible, which often sides with skepticism states: "We are in the fortunate position of having more authentic information about Jeremiah than about any other Hebrew prophet, perhaps than any other character in the Old Testament."¹ Again it states: "Yet the book contains a large amount of authentic material from and concerning the prophet himself than some of the others, such as Isaiah."² There is no valid reason to doubt that the prophet Jeremiah actually existed.

Authorship of the Book

Some skeptics claim that the prophet Jeremiah did not write the book attributed to him, or at least some portions of the book. In a court of law and the canons of historical research the authorship of an ancient document is determined by the internal claims of authorship and by internal and external witnesses to that authorship. According to the laws of evidence, such claims to authorship are authentic unless proven otherwise by valid evidence. In this regard, the Book of Jeremiah fairs as well or better than most secular historical documents. The prophet Jeremiah is

¹ Vol. 5, p. 778.

² Vol. 5, p. 787.

mentioned 117 times in his book; the expression "the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah" (or its equivalent) occurs 29 times;³ in addition, the expression "The LORD said to Jeremiah (or its equivalent) occurs another 16 times.⁴ Often Jeremiah referred to himself with first person pronouns that indicate he was the narrator or writer. Four times the book records that God commanded Jeremiah to write portions of the book (22:30; 30:2; 36:2, 28); three times it records that Baruch wrote portions of the book at the dictation of Jeremiah (36:4, 18, 32); and once it records that Jeremiah himself wrote a portion (51:60). Finally, the entire collection, from chapter one through fifty-one, is attributed to Jeremiah: "Thus far are the words of Jeremiah" (51:64). Other forms of internal evidence also point to Jeremiah as the narrator or writer.

Thus the internal evidence is strong, and is supported by three independent witnesses: the author of the book of Chronicles (2 Chronicles 36:12, 21, 22), the author of Ezra-Nehemiah (Ezra 1:1), and the author of Daniel (9:2). True, these witnesses are in the Bible, but they are indeed external to and independent of the Book of Jeremiah. This does not include references to the authorship of Jeremiah in Josephus, in the New Testament, and in the Jewish Mishnah and Talmud, all of which are external to the book. All ancient witnesses agree that the prophet Jeremiah wrote the book; and there are no dissenting witnesses. In other words, as compared with the evidence for ancient secular documents, the objective evidence for the authorship of Jeremiah is strong. There is no reason to question that the prophet Jeremiah was the author of the book. In spite of this strong evidence, skeptics still deny Jeremiah's authorship based on literary arguments. These arguments are discussed later.

The Date of the Prophecy

The date of the prophecy is given as the fourth year of King Jehoiachim (605 B.C.). But some skeptic may respond that the book of Jeremiah does not claim that the prophecy in question was written in the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign but only that the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah at that time. However, not only is the date recorded for when God gave the prophecy (25:1), but Jeremiah devoted a whole chapter to tell when and how he actually wrote the early chapters of the book (36:1-32). In the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.), the Lord commanded Jeremiah to write all the words that He had given him up to that time (36:1-2). Jeremiah immediately obeyed. He acquired a parchment scroll and dictated all the words to his secretary, Baruch, who accurately wrote them down. The scroll was read to King Jehoiakim who then proceeded to burn the scroll leaf by leaf. That the scroll contained the prophecy under debate is indicated by the king's complaint to Jeremiah: "Why have you written in it that the king of Babylon will certainly come and destroy this land, and cause man and beast to cease from here?" (36:29).

Shortly after King Jehoiakim burned the first edition of the book, the Lord commanded Jeremiah to rewrite the scroll, which Jeremiah did with expansions (36:27-32). Thus the date of the actual writing of the prophecy is clearly stated as the fourth year of King Jehoiakim (605 B.C.). All Hebrew manuscripts and ancient translations validate that date, so no objective evidence exists that gives reason to doubt when the prophecy was written.

³ 1:1, 4, 11, 13; 2:1; 13:3, 8; 14:1; 16:1; 18:5; 24:4; 25:3; 28:12; 29:30; 32:6, 26; 33:1, 19, 23; 34:12; 35:12; 36:27; 37:6; 39:15; 42:7; 43:8; 46:1; 47:1; 49:4.

⁴ 1:7, 9, 12, 14; 3:6, 11; 11:6, 9; 13:1, 6; 14:11, 14; 15:1; 17:19; 24:3; 32:25.

The evidence indicates that Jeremiah wrote an initial edition of his book in 605 B.C. (including the prophecy under discussion) which was destroyed and immediately rewritten; this was followed by one or more additions of Jeremiah's oracles and historical essays which were completed shortly after the destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.). This latter edition of the book, which included chapters one through fifty-one, Jeremiah took to Egypt when Jonathan forced him to go there. It is likely that Jeremiah edited and expanded the book before he died in Egypt, and that his secretary, Baruch, took the expanded edition to Babylon after Jeremiah's death. Finally, Baruch, or another scribe who inherited Jeremiah's manuscripts, wrote a historical essay that was appended to the text as chapter 52. The shorter edition (including chapter 52) became the tradition used in Egypt and used for translating the Greek Septuagint. The longer edition became the tradition used by the Jews in Babylon which became the proto-Masoretic text.

Apart from a difference in the order of the chapters, the two editions are in essential agreement. Their differences are much like what one would find in comparing two different editions of a text book, one an expanded revision of the other. No textual differences exist that indicate that the author of the historical appendix made any significant changes to Jeremiah's portion of the text. This is certainly true of the prophecy under discussion. The text of the prophecy is valid for all the important details; all the textual evidence supports the date that the prophecy was given and written, and the seventy year duration of the captivity. The validity of the text is discussed later.

This date is contained in all the existing manuscripts of the book, some of which are very ancient; and it is contained in all the ancient translations of the book. So there is no reason to doubt the validity of the date on textual grounds. Those who question the date do so by claiming that the book, at least the part containing the date of the prophecy, is fraudulent, being altered by some later hand, in spite of the overwhelming textual evidence. Such claim of fraud is done on the basis of subjective theories of literary style and on the basis of an anti-supernatural theological presupposition. These theories are discussed later.

The Claim of Fraud

In an attempt to refute a claim of fulfilled prophecy, some radical skeptics claim that the book of Jeremiah is a fraud, especially his prophecies. However, such a claim must be proved, not merely alleged. An alternative possibility remains merely a possibility without proof. Simon Greenleaf, who held the seat of the Royall Professorship of Law in Harvard Law School, and who was a recognized authority on jurisprudence, cited the municipal law regarding ancient documents:

Every document, apparently ancient, coming from the proper repository or custody, and bearing on its face no evident marks of forgery, the law presumes to be genuine, and devolves on the opposing party the burden of proving it to be otherwise.⁵

Now the book of Jeremiah is known to be ancient, and its text comes from the proper custody of succeeding generations of ancient authorities. These authorities regarded the book to be genuine as opposed to other books that they dismissed as noncanonical. The book is regarded as a

⁵ *The Testimony of the Evangelists* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 7.

generally reliable historical resource by both ancient and modern historians. Therefore, anyone who claims that the book is a forgery has the burden to prove that claim.

In an effort to support the claim of forgery, some skeptics have made the following additional claims that need proof: (1) the text of the book of Jeremiah is very unreliable; (2) the manuscript evidence does not support a sixth century origin of the book; (3) the book was not written by Jeremiah in the sixth century B.C., but by a sequence of unknown authors, editors, and redactors in post-captivity times; (4) the text was altered in the era of the second temple to give the appearance of a fulfilled prophecy. Each of these alternative claims requires proof, but skeptics have failed to produce any convincing objective evidence for any of these claims, only unverifiable subjective theories. Those claims are discussed in the next essay.

James D. Price