



# Jeremiah the Suffering Prophet - his Communication of Judgment and Promise of Blessings

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## Abstract

The Book of Jeremiah is the second of the Prophets in the Christian Old Testament. The prophet Jeremiah witnessed first-hand, a nation struggling to survive. Jeremiah comes through plainly as a person contemplating his role as a servant of Yahweh with scant good news for his people. Jeremiah's heart-rending message is communicated by both his prophecies and account of Jerusalem's destruction. Jeremiah's prophecies are unambiguous and pessimistic and aimed at rebuking people who had become idolatrous and debauched. Yahweh appointed Jeremiah to proclaim the destruction and building of a nation that would ultimately lead to His Kingdom. He thus also offers his people hope and his prophetic warnings are also promises that returning to Yahweh will lead the people to divine blessings and he states that Yahweh will eventually honour his pledge with the Jews. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11). For forty years Jeremiah preached to the unrepented Judah and Israel. Jeremiah used verbal communication to challenge the religious hypocrisy, economic dishonesty, and oppressive practice of Judah leaders and those who followed them. The article concludes that Jeremiah's experiences prepared him and put him in good state to comprehend resources which Yahweh provides. He fought throughout his life and he attained lofty spiritual levels demonstrating his piety. His prophetic career coincided with the last years of Judah's independence before it was overrun by the Babylonians. Jeremiah prophesied that Yahweh would make a covenant with Israel, superseding the old Mosaic Covenant; Yahweh would then write his law on the hearts of men rather than on stone tablets and they would all come to know Him directly and receive his compassion and forgiveness. Jeremiah was an effective prophet who could clearly communicate his vision based on Yahweh's wishes, and he provided constructive feedback to people, and strongly stated what people needed to do. This brief study primarily employs a literature study, and a biblical-theological approach to interpreting the book of Jeremiah is also integrated. His communication strategy is also unpacked as it ensured that the people had suitable information about Yahweh's wishes, towards maintaining close steadiness in their lives and preventing any ambiguity as to the outcome of iniquity and also Yahweh's promises to a faithful people.

**Keywords:** Prophecy, Mosaic law, atonement, punishment, judgment, hope, communication strategy,



## Clarification of terms

In the Old Testament we find three Hebrew terms relating to a prophet. These are *ro'eh* (seer or one who perceives), its synonym, *hozeh* (seer/advisor/one with insight) and *nabi* (prophet). The latter is the most frequent use term to designate a prophet. It is used over 300 times. The exact etymology is uncertain, but "to call" at present seems the best option. Jeremiah was a prophet who spoke for Yahweh to His people (Jeremiah 1:7). The first two terms thus relate more specifically to nuances bearing on a vision's regular or temporary nature. While the third relates to one who testifies or witnesses something as part of a prophetic mission and is used 300 times in the Bible. A prophet is thus one who speaks for Yahweh to others, a representative who conveys a message, a presenter of Yahweh's word. Jeremiah the prophet was a נביא (*nabi*) man inspired by Yahweh and was called by Him to do so (Jeremiah 20:7). Often, prophets are also termed צופאים (*tsophiim*), i. e. those who spy for the people, and serve as a "watchman" (Jeremiah 6:17). The word *nabi* is uniformly translated in the Septuagint by the Greek term, προφήτης. Etymologically, neither prescience nor prediction is implicit in the term used in the Hebrew language. Prophets taught by both their words and acts.

## Introduction

### Enter Jeremiah

Jeremiah was born in the little town of Anathoth and he began his prophesying during the 13th year of the reign of king Josiah. We are told that the book is: "The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin" (Jeremiah 1:1). Jeremiah featured in the history of Judah at a very difficult time in its history and played a critical role from a spiritual perspective prior to, during and after its fall to Babylon in 586 BCE. Jeremiah spoke to Jews who had been living under the domination of the Egyptian and later Babylonian Empires before eventually being carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. Jeremiah was very aware of his own limitations and realised the magnitude of the immense task which lay before him which involved speaking out against corruption in a society where the inhabitants had no wish to change their malevolent ways. Jeremiah was Yahweh's messenger but equally a representative of the people. Jeremiah was a radical teacher whose profound messages to people revealed a strong experience of Yahweh. He was disliked by many but equally "feared and held in superstitious awe" and he may have been a part of a guild in the pre-exilic Temple and he may have also played an official part in the worship of the Temple (Heaton, 1968).

His fervent pleas involve a number of similarities drawn from the world of Nature and human life and are bolstered with symbolic actions towards his hearts fervent desire that the people be saved. Jeremiah was to deal with the infidelity towards Yahweh of almost all the people. Kings, priests and prophets, were all disloyal to Yahweh in some or other manner. They went to the temple regularly and made their offerings and seemingly called on the name of the Lord, nonetheless they did not truly accept Yahweh as evidenced by the manner in which they went about their daily lives (Jeremiah 7:1-11). Jeremiah was a relatively complex individual and he no doubt had many doubts, concerns and apprehensions since he lived in uneasy times and was reviled by many in Judah. A sense of justice permeated his being in all his social dealings.

While the kings Hezekiah and Josiah did much to reform Judah, it is clear from reading the book of Jeremiah that there was much evil including dishonesty adultery, murder, licentiousness and corruption. Jeremiah thus appeared in extremely tumultuous times. The Babylonian empire sought the destruction of the Kingdom of Judah and this is what ultimately promoted Jeremiah to make his prophetic utterances (Allen, 2008). Yahweh ordered Jeremiah to write his prophecies (Jeremiah 36:2; 36:27-28, 32). His book is the largest written by any of the prophets of the and is longer than the 12 minor prophets combined (Knox, 1936; Holladay,



1989). Within the social fabric of Israelite society in the days of Jeremiah there were many rules of law derived from the *Tôrāh* (*dāt*), pertaining to the expected social and moral behaviour of individuals, that were generally basic to life that needed to be adhered to in order for harmony to prevail in society and for them to adhere to Yahweh's laws (Nicolaidis & Van der Bank, 2011). His prophetic book is sub-divided into fifty-one chapters, and his book of Lamentation into five. Jeremiah is ranked second among the greater Prophets and his name means "Yahweh is exalted". In the "confessions" of Jeremiah, we read group of individual dirges reflecting his many personal struggles in his prophetic role (Barker et al., 1995).

From Jeremiah 1:4-5 it is clear that prophets were called and set apart by Yahweh even prior to their birth: "Then the word of the Lord came unto me, saying, before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations". Jeremiah's book is a tirade against the people for their unfaithfulness and a solemn warning of the destruction which will afflict them unless they seek redemption from Yahweh (Diamond, 2003). While taking a walk Jeremiah saw an almond tree in blossom and heard the voice of Yahweh which instructed him that just as when branches appeared to be dead there is still new life in them, and so while Yahweh appears to be asleep he is always awake and will make His power known (Ryken, 2001).

### **Jeremiah as a prophet and the context of his work**

Just like the apostles, the prophet Jeremiah was not selected from people in the upper echelon of society but from the family of a lowly priest living in a relatively obscure village. He was a timid person who was cognisant of his inability to do certain things and he was called to serve from his youth fully understanding the huge challenges laying before him. He would have to speak out against a corrupt society and had to put up with the maledictions of people who were quite happy to live the way they did, in iniquity (Biddle, 2007). Jeremiah prophesied through the rule of five kings of Judah namely, Josiah, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, and he continued to state what the Lord required from Judah during the time of the devastating Babylonian destruction in 586 BCE (Jeremiah 1:3; 52:7-11).

Jeremiah believed that the nation had a very special status as Yahweh's people and demonstrates this using numerous imageries. In Jeremiah 2:3, he speaks of Israel as God's "first-fruits" and also as a "choice vine" (Jeremiah 2:21). He further calls them His beloved bride (Jeremiah 2:2; 3:14); His "flock" (13:17); His "vineyard" (12:10); and His own inheritance (12:7-9) (Carroll, 1986; Fretheim, 2002).

Jeremiah did not wish to attract attention by ostentatious display and neither did he seek worldly wealth. The utter degeneration of the congregation of Yahweh deeply displeased him. Jeremiah ends the description of his agonies in the 20th chapter by cursing the day of his birth. He made utterances in the name of the true God Yahweh (Jeremiah 37:15-21). Jeremiah was strictly duty-bound to the Mosaic law and never sought to add to it or detract from it (Fretheim, 2002). His prophecy was thus grounded on the Mosaic law and derived its sanction from it. It was his inherent duty to state needed reforms, and in Jeremiah 3:16 he foretold days when the ark of the covenant would be no more, and in Jeremiah 31:31 he spoke of days when a new covenant would be made with the houses of both Israel and Judah. He faithfully followed his divine call to the office of prophet and possessed the divine illumination to enlighten his listeners. Jeremiah referred to both direct and indirect history and promoted the desired morals for a spiritual religion and served as an instrument of Yahweh's revelation. Jeremiah firmly asserted his firm conviction that he acted and also spoke by divine authority, and did not utter things on his own accord (Jeremiah 26:12). Jeremiah's claims were validated by the realisation of his prediction that Shallum, the son of Josiah, the king of Judah, would perish in prison, and not see his motherland again (Jeremiah 22:11-12). He explained who false prophets were, "who speak a vision of their own heart, and not out of the mouth of the



Lord" (Jeremiah 23:16). It was revealed to him at times when disaster would befall sinful nations (Jeremiah 2:10).

"Jeremiah depicts his audience as a wayward son to whom God was the father, and a faithless wife to whom God was the husband (3:19-20). Despite their status as a covenant people dedicated to God, the nation is under threat of being driven into exile, away from the Promised Land. Just as the first generation didn't see it, they would on the other hand lose it. Hence Jeremiah served to call the people back to "the devotion of [their] youth" and their "love as a bride" in the days when the nation was devoted to God (2:2), without which they would be judged. In light of the spiritual condition of the people...". (Odede, 2019).

Longman and Dillard (2007:336-7) argue that:

"Judah in Jeremiah's day was not the devoted bride. From the time of the conquest onward, she became a harlot (3:1-20). She followed the Baals, pursued her lovers, and became a she-camel in heat, a wild donkey sniffing the wind in her lust (3:23-24). She refused correction (2:30; 5:3; 17:23; 32:33; 35:13), so the curses of the covenant sanctions would come upon the nation" (Deuteronomy 28:49-68).

In the book we see the heart of Jeremiah before us as he faces numerous conflicts, challenges and tensions. We see his personality manifest and the real intention of a spiritual persona. It is not surprising that when people tried to explain the personality of Jesus Christ that they immediately thought of Jeremiah (Matthew 16:14). We cannot say the same for any other prophet since Jeremiah reminds us of Jesus while also being more unlike in many ways. His divine revelation came directly through his human experiences, and he acknowledged that his heart pause desperately corrupt (Jeremiah 17:9). His writings are based on the words of God, which Jeremiah recorded. In his youth he states: "Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying" (verse 4). Jeremiah calls out, "I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy" (Jeremiah 1:6). Nonetheless Yahweh is faithful and true and vows to help Jeremiah to overcome his shortcomings and all his adversaries (Jeremiah 1:7-9).

Jeremiah was the epitome of Old Testament piety and his spiritual vision was supreme which enabled him to become strong out of weakness (Bogaert, 1981). He started his prophesying with a vision of seething pot: "I see a seething pot; and the face thereof towards the north" (Jeremiah 1:13). This reference alludes to a conflict that was happening in the north which ultimately resulted in the Babylonian captivity. he saw impending calamity and recognised that judgement was to fall upon Judah because it had forsaken God. In Jeremiah 2:12-13) We read: "Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the Lord. For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out of cistern's, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."

Judah's rebellion against Yahweh was severe and worst of all was the breaking the Mosaic Covenant. Consequently, Jeremiah warns Judah that Yahweh allow disaster to befall them since the people have defied Him by worshipping other gods that are false, and by following policies that were aggressive towards Babylon, whose dominance Yahweh had decreed, and by permitting social injustices to exist in society (Jeremiah 22:8-9). Jeremiah continually juxtaposed the true God and his false rivals and stated that the pagan gods were not true gods (Jeremiah 2:1) and were unable to assist anyone who believed in them (Jeremiah 3:23) and they were in fact the cracked cisterns that cannot hold water. Many had deserted Yahweh and adopted the pagan gods of their neighbours including Baal, Ashtaroth and Molech as well as a range of other deities (Jones, 1992). They asserted that it was advantageous for them to



serve these entities and forsake Yahweh. The god called Baal required the sacrifice of children, and usually the first-born male child, by sacrifice in fire. Ashtaroth was the deity who was associated with sexuality and fertility, and he was linked to the Mesopotamian cult of Ishtar, which was perhaps derived from the ancient Sumerian mother goddess Inanna (Elder, 2007). The Hebrew Bible also refers to the same goddess as Astarte. Molech was the most popular deity of the Ammonites peoples who sacrificed children to him (Elder, 2007). Jeremiah states: "They built high places to Baal in the Valley of Beth-Hinnom and immolated their sons and daughters to Molech bringing sin upon Judah; this I never commanded them, nor did it enter my mind that they should practice such abominations" (Jeremiah 32:35).

Yahweh labels Jeremiah as a "prophet to the nations" (Jeremiah 46-51) and directs him to pronounce judgement against Judah as well as other nations: "See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jeremiah 1:10). Just as Assyria had done before (Isaiah 10), now Babylon would drive Judah, into judgment (Jeremiah 25). Jeremiah was ordered not to intercede for sinful people of Judah anymore, and Yahweh's wrath would "burn and not be quenched," and would strike the temple, people, the animals, on the fields and also agricultural produce (Jeremiah 7:12-20). The order of creation would be reversed by the extent of the punishment meted out (Jeremiah 4:20, 23-26). Jeremiah lamented that his many years of preaching were in vain and vehemently restated that judgment would befall Judah via the armies of Nebuchadnezzar, and so in essence Babylon became Yahweh's instrument of judgment upon sinful nations.

The book of Jeremiah takes place in the last stages up the demise of Judah or the southern Kingdom (626 – 587 BCE). It was clear that whatever reforms king Hezekiah had brought about concerning religion, his successor Manasseh did away with during his long reign. He permitted pagan practises such as human sacrifice, astrology, Worship of Pagan gods' and necromancy (II Kings 21:1-17). During the reign of his grandson king Josiah (639-609 BCE), the book of the law was discovered which encouraged Josiah to bring about an important reformation in religious practise (Thompson, 1980; Kugler & Hartin, 2009). All foreign cults such as those from Assyria, were driven out of the temple, however, the religious shrines in Judah with the exception of the great temple in Jerusalem were suppressed (Perdue, 2006). In this disarray, Jeremiah stressed the prominence to the righteousness of Yahweh and calls Him "Yahweh of hosts, who judgest righteously" (Jeremiah 11: 2). Josiah was not able to relinquish aspects of Syrian cultic life which Manasseh had allowed to creep into national religion and Babylon turned its attention to Judah (Thompson, 1980; Neil, 1980). Eventually Jerusalem capitulated to Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE.

Jeremiah was faced with a two-pronged challenge of trying to reform religion while facing the certainty of massive invasion by the Babylonians and the imminent exile to Babylon (Neil, 1980). Numerous other prophets with opposing messages alleged that they spoke for Yahweh (Jeremiah 28). Despite their presence, he continued to proclaim the truth of all of his denunciatory prophecies against the forecasts of other prophets, whom he accused of prophesying deceptions (Jeremiah 23:9-40). Miller states that: "One of the tests of whether the community is acting faithfully is whether it pays attention to the prophetic words inscribed in Scripture and to their echoes in contemporary life." Jeremiah's task was to get the people to listen to his message for salvation and he fully dedicated himself to it.

Jeremiah realised that there are inherent weaknesses of formalism in religion and that it is ultimately up to individuals to be committed as believers (Neil, 1980). He distinguished between husks and corn and between shells and kernels and stressed that people need to have a personal relationship with Yahweh. This task is not easy and in order for people to do the needful they require discipline and must be shown the error of their ways "...before repentance opens the way to God's forgiveness and his offer of a fresh start" (Neil, 1980). Davidson (1964) asserts: "the book of Jeremiah does not so much sit before as religious truth



as present a religious personality. Prophecy had taught its truths: its last effort was to reveal itself in a life”.

### **The clash with the ‘prophet’ Hananiah and other intricacies**

In Jeremiah 28 Jeremiah and Hananiah one of his rival prophets have a serious confrontation. Jeremiah places a wooden yoke around his neck tells the people at the temple in Jerusalem that Judah must submit to Babylon if they wish to endure as a state. Hananiah furiously appropriates the yoke and breaks it. He then utters that Yahweh has smashed the yoke which is symbolic of the oppressive power of Babylon and will surely reinstate Judah to greatness in two years (Holladay, 1989). The wooden yoke he himself wears stresses point for Israel in very dramatic symbolism. He also admonishes “the priests and all the people” (27:16-22) warning them not to believe some false prophets who stated that they foresee that the temple accessories that were carried away by Nebuchadnezzar will be returned (Knox, 1936; Rom-Shiloni, 2019). This incident demonstrates Jeremiah’s use of symbolism through props used in public in order to convey the divine word (Jeremiah 19). This was however a strategy fraught with risky challenges for Jeremiah (Thompson, 1980).

It was Jeremiah's task to inform the people of the horrific catastrophe which would befall them and such a message would certainly not endear him to the masses since he warns them their lands will be destroyed and there will be nothing left to till the ground. He states:

“Set-up the standard towards Zion: retire, stay not: for I will bring evil from the north and a great destruction. The lion is come up from his thicket, and the destroyer of the gentiles is on his way; he's gone forth from his place to make thy land desolate; and the cities shall be laid waste, without an inhabitant... I beheld the earth, and lo, it was without form and void; and the heavens, and they had no light. I beheld the mountains, and lo, they trembled, and all the hills moved lightly. I beheld, and lo, there was no man, and all the birds of the heavens were fled. I beheld, and lo, the fruitful place was a wilderness, and all the cities there of were broken down at the presence of the Lord and by his fierce anger” (Jeremiah 4:6-7, 23-26).

There was a belief the gods judgement could be averted if his people repented and sought him. Consequently, the army of Sennacherib was defeated when it attempted to capture Jerusalem. In Jeremiah's time disaster could not be averted and he was instructed to cease praying for the people or make any intercession for them since God would not listen to him (Jeremiah 7:16). The prophet subsequently lamented that: “the harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved” (Jeremiah 8:20). This statement made even his parents upset (Jeremiah 11:9) and the town folk plotted against him and warned him not to prophecy in the name of the Lord since if he did, they would surely kill him (Jeremiah 11:21).

At this juncture, Jeremiah was instructed by Yahweh to perform a highly symbolic act. His task was to take a linen girdle and bury near a rock at the Euphrates river. Then after a few days had passed he was to return and dig up the girdle. He did as requested and determined that the girdle was marred and utterly useless (Jeremiah 13:7). This symbolic act was used by God to demonstrate that he would ultimately: “...also mar the pride of Judah, and the great pride of Jerusalem” (Jeremiah 13:9). The prophet urged them to repent:

“Hear ye, and give ear; be not proud: for the Lord hath spoken. give glory to the Lord you God, before he causes darkness, and before your feet stumble upon the dark mountains, and, while you look for the light, he turns it into the shadow of death, and make it gross darkness” (Jeremiah 13:15-16)



In Jeremiah 27:1, the prophet speaks to foreign luminaries directly, He constructs some yokes and send each one of them a yoke to take to their countries and strap these onto their respective rulers. He then directs the nations to concede that Nebuchadnezzar's "yoke" is indeed based on Yahweh's will for each of them. They thus need to submit to it if they wish to survive. Only later does he send his own king a yoke.

Hananiah verbally attacks Jeremiah and quotes "I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 28:2). This implies that the royal exiles and temple items would be restored. Jeremiah replies "When the word of a prophet comes true, then it will be known that the Lord has truly sent the prophet" (Jeremiah 28:9). Hananiah then removes the yoke around Jeremiah's neck and breaks it. This act serves the purpose of exaggerating the impending destruction of Babylon's authority. Jeremiah clearly enunciates his warning to Hananiah that the true word of Yahweh is the word that will come to pass (Jeremiah 28:9). His tone carries an air of authority in the decisions that will be made concerning the future, but he is of course though not an unerring expert authority. (Crouther, 1932).

Jeremiah departs to receive new instructions from Yahweh (Knox, 1936). Hananiah had rebelled against Yahweh and dies. This must surely have made people think carefully but sinning prevailed (Witsius, 1692). Jeremiah believed in prosperity returning and urged exiles in Babylon to spend their time their wisely and "Seek the welfare of the city where I [Yahweh] have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jeremiah 29:7) and in 70 years they would return (Jeremiah 29:14). Jeremiah is at times alluded to as "the weeping prophet" based on his deep concern that his people will be severely punished. He declares "My soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the Lord's flock has been taken captive" (Jeremiah 13:17). Ultimately Judah did not repent and suffered the consequences of exile and servitude in Babylon. In 2 Chronicles we read "Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah" (35:25) and even his family rejected his prophecy based on Yahweh's call (Jeremiah 12:6). He was indeed a sad character and states "I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me" (Jeremiah 20:7). This reminds us of the mocking and scourging of Jesus Christ and His crucifixion on Golgotha.

### **Parallels between Jeremiah and Jesus Christ**

There are parallels between the life of Jeremiah and Jesus. Both spoke of impending upcoming destruction because of the disobedience of people but at the same time, both also shared a promise of hope and life which can be found in atoning to God. Both used verbal communication to make known this to those around them.

Whitters (2006:230) states:

In the first century C.E., Jeremiah represented the stereotypical "rejected prophet," ostracized and persecuted by his own people. Further, Jeremiah was a prophet of doom and disaster because of his association with the Babylonian captivity. These characterizations of Jeremiah resemble what the reader finds in the Gospel of Matthew, for Jesus is simultaneously one who was rejected and persecuted by his own people even to the point of death and one who predicted the doom of his people

Both Jeremiah and Jesus make mention of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem (2006:232) and both were despised for this statement. Both propagated a prophecy that came to pass. Just like Jesus Jeremiah also hoped for a day when humanity would atone for its many sins and return to enjoy full communion with Yahweh. What Jeremiah was hoping for manifested in the persona of Jesus Christ. Importantly, at the Last Supper, Jesus offered his disciples a cup as the sacrament of the new covenant. He stressed that through him there would be a new personal relationship with God - which is what Jeremiah spoke about as



something that would happen in the future. Thus, the prophecy became a reality (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). In the book of Hebrews, Saint Paul also quotes Jeremiah when he states that today what the prophet looked forward too had now arrived in Jesus (Hebrews 8:8-13).

### **Contribution to prophecy**

Loubser (2002:34) states the books of the Prophets must have been written and adopted as authoritative before 164 BCE. From the time they were first uttered, the words of the prophets were considered to have authority. Jeremiah made many prophecies. “Jeremiah predicted the 70-year Babylonian captivity (Jeremiah 25:11). Jeremiah encouraged the people to submit to their new life in Babylon (Jeremiah 29) and was guided and focused on telling them of God’s promised restoration and a coming new king and covenant (Jeremiah 33). Jeremiah was instructed to go to the nations in order “to destroy and to overthrow...to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). Israel would prosper in the land (Jeremiah 3:16). Furthermore, Jerusalem would be called the “...throne of the Lord, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the Lord” (Jeremiah 3:17) in fact “...then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory” (Jeremiah 4:2).

According to Davidson, “The Book of Jeremiah does not so much teach religious truths as present a religious personality. Prophecy had already taught its truths; its last effort was to reveal itself in a life.” Just like the prophet Amos, Jeremiah stressed that God requires his people to conduct themselves according to his word and seek redemption for their shortcomings and evil doings. He abhors their rebellious nature and states that those who have uncircumcised ears cannot hear (Jeremiah 6:10). Furthermore, he says that no cleaning can wash away guilt (Jeremiah 2:22). He asserts that people are enslaved to their base instincts (Jeremiah 2:24) which make them recalcitrant. They are like intractable common harlots who legally (Deuteronomy 24:1-4) cannot, and wellnigh will not, return to their husbands (Jeremiah 3:1-3) (Job, 2016). He argued that the prophets of Jerusalem committed adultery and walked in lies and stole oracles (Jeremiah 23:14, 30). The utterances of many were simply fallacious and they deceived people with their messages (Jeremiah 6:13-14; 14:13-16; 23:6). Jeremiah was an independent prophet as opposed to an institutional one, a representative of Yahweh and thus also an ardent specialist in prayer. He attacked the institutional prophets as being prophets of salvation whereas he was a prophet of judgment (Heaton, 1968).

He also stresses what the prophet Hosea stated concerning God’s love as well as the moral holiness that the prophet Isaiah said that God requires of humanity. Essentially, his primary contribution may be found in “...the witness of his own life. He is the incarnation of the prophetic message, and it is this that makes him at once the most human and sympathetic figure in the Old Testament” (Neil, 1980). His book contains a large amount of material which is of great biographical and historical value in addition to his own utterances (Rom-Shiloni, 2019). This is important as it exposes his personality far better than any of the other prophetic book writers. His life and persona also take intriguing turns which stimulate thought on many moral and religious challenges faced in the world (Knox, 1936). Ironically Jeremiah may have considered himself to be the prophetic inheritor of Moses role, (Jeremiah 1:4-10; 15:16). We must however note that he was told not to pray for the nation (Jeremiah 7:16; 11:14; 14:11) as it was not his place to do so as Moses did, he actually prayed for judgment (Jeremiah 18:21).

Jeremiah takes the reader into the finer details of his life like no other does. He was historically a contemporary of four of the minor prophets, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Ezekiel and Daniel. Jeremiah asserted that all was to be undone because of sin and the prophecy of salvation was overturned (Jeremiah 12:5; 4:23-28). The promise of the patriarch Abraham was reversed (Jeremiah 15:8) but Jeremiah hoped for a 'new covenant' (Jeremiah 31:31) and Christ's death



and glorious resurrection were the fulfilment of this promise. Truth, a sense of justice and spotlessness, and especially love of Yahweh God and fellow human beings needed to become common practice. This would lead to a model state, in which the iniquities of all people would be exonerated. Jeremiah's book also has a significant amount of biographical and historical material, and the work is also treasured because it reveals his disposition far more clearly than any of the other prophets in their writings. His numerous confessions and his laments reflect his individual struggles which were occasioned by his role as the presenter of a message people simply did not wish to hear. Jeremiah's nonetheless prophecy echoes the theme of Yahweh as a God who keeps promises. Yahweh states: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people" and this is the persistent promise of Yahweh to the recalcitrant people Israel (Jeremiah 7:23; 11:4; 30:22). Jeremiah hopes for the coming of Jesus Christ as the heir of David, and additionally to the extension of Yahweh's grace through Jesus Christ for all of humanity.

### **Communication of prophetic utterances**

For forty years Jeremiah preached to the unrepented Judah and Israel. Jeremiah used verbal communication to challenge the religious hypocrisy, economic dishonesty, and oppressive practice of Judah leaders and those who followed them (Theology of Work, 2014: Para 1).

### **Writers of Ancient writings**

During ancient times writings ascribed to authors were not written by themselves. Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy (1993:238) highlight how letters were written during ancient times which was as follows:

- Individuals write by themselves.
- When word to word and syllable for syllable were dictated.
- When the sense was dictated but the formulation was left to the secretary.
- Having someone else write in their name without giving them the content.

### **Jeremiah's approach and communication style**

Jeremiah used a scribe to collect and put his writings together. This is generally known as writing communication. "Baruch was Jeremiah's assistant and secretary. The prophet had Baruch do the actual writing of the words that Yahweh had spoken to him. The prophet himself did not essentially need to write the words himself for them to be God's word" (Enduring Word 2021:np). Prophets generally promulgated their visions and declarations in public areas before masses of people. While in prison, Jeremiah called upon Baruch "to write from his mouth his predictions, and to read them in the ears of the people" (Jeremiah 38:28).

Schaff (1996:212) defines a scribe as follows, "in Old Testament times, he was a person that was employed in correspondence and keeping accounts. Sheva, the scribe of King David, is mentioned in 2 Sam. 20:25. His duty was to record proclamations. In the New Testament times, the scribe was a copyist of the law and one who prided himself on his knowledge of it and of the traditions of the elders. Matthew 2:4; Mark 1:22)." Reddy (2017:3) states that it was the scribe's responsibility when it came to studying and expounding the law. Ludlow (1975) states that Jewish scribes were individuals who were well grounded regarding the Laws of Moses and thus well versed in the Mosaic Covenant. There were diverse modes of delivering messages. The later prophets judiciously read the writings of the earlier prophets, and that in most cases a prophetic canon already existed before the present was crafted. The predictions made by Jeremiah throughout his book clearly rest on the writings of earlier prophets, and are reinforcements thereof. This was established by Kiiper in his *feremias Librorum Sacrorum Interpres atque Vindex*, Berlin, (1837). Prophets were viewed as mouthpieces of God, and great care was taken to preserve their writings. In Jeremiah 26:1-19 there is clear proof of the



precise knowledge which some people had a century before, what happened to a prophet — of his comments, hardships, and catastrophes.

Communication takes place in different forms and ways and is seen as a vehicle through which people maintain, develop, and improve human communication (Reddy 2002:11). Communication is when one individual can convey a thought to another that ascribes meaning to thought. The first instance of communication took place when God spoke into existence everything as recorded in the creation as mentioned in Genesis 1. Communication took place between Adam and God (Genesis 2:15). Even though man sinned and was removed from the Garden of Eden, God still had a plan for salvation and redemption. Though everything about man has been marred due to sin, even man's communication. God still used their communication to interact with them. When Moses brought forth the law, he mentions the blessing of following God and there were curses when they disobeyed God. Moses documented this and it became written communication for the generation to communicate (Deuteronomy.28). Despite the later generation knowing this at times they chose to disobey God.

In the book of Jeremiah, the arrangement of the material is not chronologically correct, but we may however divide the book into three major parts. The first section relates to chapters 1 to 38 and covers the period prior to the fall of Jerusalem. the key challenges in the early days of Jeremiah's ministry revolved around a possible invasion by the Scythians as well as the religious reforms that were instituted by Josiah based on the newly found book of law. Jeremiah was very active from the period of the reign of Jehoiakim who did not pay tribute to Babylonia.

Consequently, the Babylonians invaded Judah during the reign of his son Jehoiachin who was carried into exile in Babylonia in 597 BCE after which Zedekiah reigned. despite warnings from Jeremiah, Zedekiah rebelled and the result was the destruction of Jerusalem and it's temple in 586 BCE. In the second section of the book we find a narrative of events that transpired after the fall of Jerusalem. In this period Zedekiah was deported to Babylon. Later, when Gedaliah the governor installed by the Babylonians was assassinated, Jeremiah flight to Egypt. In the third section of the book we find inter-alia, a number of prophecies being directed against foreign nations.

The medium used by Jeremiah was verbal and nonverbal communication. He also used intrapersonal communication which is communication within oneself. "Jeremiah used verbal and non-verbal language in proclaiming the message he received from God" (Mariottini, 2017:np). There is also evidence in the book of small group communication and large group communication.

The communication barriers came from the priest because he was propagating a different message from them. He was warning them about what was going to happen to them because of their disobedience while they were teaching that God will protect them despite anything else (Carroll, 1986). Within this writing, those priests who spoke about God protecting them from the nations of the north were using deception communication and they were not hearing from God but wanted to preach a message to the nation which was pleasing to their ears.

Even though Jeremiah spoke about the destruction that was before them, he made known that should they turn from the wicked ways God would protect them. It was a message of a two-sided coin on one side was soon coming destruction and on the other side of the same coin, we have hope in Yahweh. Jeremiah at times, used symbolic acts to stress his arguments. For example, he was commanded to go to a city gate of Jerusalem and intentionally smash a bottles- this sign was to demonstrate that an idolatrous city would be irreparably smashed (Jeremiah 19:1-5). He also wore an ox-yoke around his neck to show that Judah would need to bear the yoke that Babylon would impose on her (Jeremiah 27:1-28; 13:1-11; 43:8-13; 51:59-64). These acts could have been magic making so as to bring about a situation that was depicted by them (Heaton, 1968). They were also always enacted in public and intended to



achieve some response (Jeremiah 5:1-12). In his communication Jeremiah thus utilised much emotion in very rich phraseology. It is also evident that his communication style tended to dramatize his messages and he at times used symbolic actions as described earlier to enhance the messages. The tone of his writing is indeed gloomy and wrathful. One symbolic action of Jeremiah foreshadows the destruction of the people when he utters in Jeremiah 8:1-10 that he was directed by Yahweh to obtain a linen girdle and put it on his loins, to then embark on a trip to the Euphrates, and once there, to hide the girdle in a crevice in a rock. He does as commanded and returns. Later, Yahweh orders him to take the girdle from the place where it was concealed, however "the girdle was marred and good for nothing."

He also predicted the destruction of Babylon and war in Jeremiah 25:12-38 in symbolic terms. Yahweh gave him a wine-cup, and it was to be used by various kings of neighbouring nations who would drink from it until they were defeated. Jeremiah then goes with the cup to the kings of Egypt, Persia, Arabia, Media, and other countries. Jeremiah thus evidently used significant fact as the foundation of the spiritual symbolism he portrayed. Jeremiah's work is replete with prophetic style an enunciation (Jones, 1992; Holladay, 1989).

Jeremiah understood that he was obliged to give the message God had given him. Yahweh's words were simply uncontainable and had to be shared out to those who need to hear them (Jeremiah 20:9). Yahweh would fortify him for his task ahead as Jesus was later strengthened to face his ordeal for humanity's salvation: "I will make you to this people a fortified bronze wall; and they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you; for I am with you to save you and deliver you" (Jeremiah 15:20-21).

His communication was aimed at the religious instruction of the Jewish people. They were required to stick to specified rites, institutions, and the Mosaic Law as they prepared themselves to receive a new covenant that was imminent. The prophetic language used was informed by the political context Jeremiah encountered and the audience who would receive his message of punishment and hope. In the communication style he employed, Jeremiah adopted a poetical element in his prophecy. In Jeremiah 31:15, we read of Rachel weeping for her children and yet rejecting comfort (Weiser, 1969).

An array of metaphors is used by Jeremiah because they are true (Mariottini, 2017). Mariottini (2017:np) states "Jeremiah used many metaphors to speak about Judah's unfaithfulness and of the coming judgment upon the nation. His use of symbolic language was offensive to some people and unpleasant to others. These metaphors were used to describe the relationship between God and Israel, especially the people's infidelity to their relationship with God."

Mariottini (2017) also states the following:

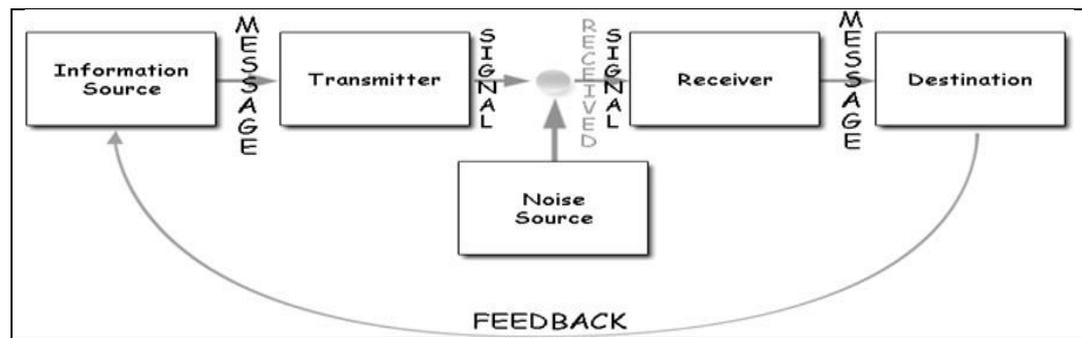
One example of the use of metaphors in the book of Jeremiah is found in the narrative announcing Jeremiah's call (Jer. 1:4-10). In 1:10 the text uses six metaphors to describe the content of Jeremiah's message. Four metaphors refer to the results the words of judgment will have on the nations: "to pluck up and to break down and to destroy and to overthrow." Two metaphors refer to the hope of salvation in Jeremiah's message: "to build and to plant." These six metaphors are taken from three spheres of life: agriculture (pluck, plant), construction (pull down, build) and military (destroy, overthrow).

Jeremiah had a secretary to whom he dictated his many oracles, however, was never seen in the company of any disciples he may have had. He did nonetheless have a support base of a family of educated citizens who protected him where possible (Heaton, 1968).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Shannon-Weaver Model of communication demonstrates for us an approach in communication with an audience that aligns with Jeremiah's style.

Figure 1: The Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication (Adapted from Mishra, 2017)



Mishra (2017) unpacks the concepts as follows:

- Sender (Information source) – The person who develops the message and ultimately chooses the channel and sends the message.
- Encoder (Transmitter) – The sender converts a message into signals or binary data. It might also directly refer to the machine.
- Channel – The medium used to send the message through. During Old Testament, in prophetic times, verbal, nonverbal and written communication was most often used.
- Decoder (Receiver) – The machine used to convert signals or binary data into messages or the receiver who translates the message from signals.
- Receiver (Destination) – The person who gets the message or the place where the message can be reached. The receiver provides feedback according to the message.
- Noise – Also known as barriers. These are the physical disturbances like environment, people, etc. These barriers prevent the message from reaching the receiver as it was sent.

In looking at the above model in line with the Communication style of Jeremiah, we can conclude that the sender of the message was ultimately Yahweh who shared a message with his servant the prophet Jeremiah. Yahweh uses Jeremiah to propagate his word in Judah and Israel as nations in need of revival and atonement. The populations of Judah and Israel are the receivers of the prophetic message of destruction followed by hope. The book of Jeremiah was written for maintenance and propagation and not just for Judah but also Israel and for the Judaism and Christianity today. Jeremiah shows us that God has a plan and purpose for our lives. Jeremiah communicates a twofold purpose; firstly, God's judgment due to the peoples' sin, and secondly it also offers hope of restoration after the people repent and observe Yahweh's covenant with them. Jeremiah clearly had a technique for getting guidance in answering questions posed and his dreams informed him of answers and in foretelling future events that would unfold (Jeremiah 23: 25-32). He may also have been a member of a guild of prophets (Jeremiah 35:4).

Jeremiah's struggle revolved around the interpretation of Deuteronomy - the 'Book of the Law' found during the overhaul of the Temple (2 Chronicles 34:14). It was Moses message to the Israelites on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Jeremiah's hopeful audience regarded the book of Deuteronomy as something that could be recreated as they got their independence from their Babylonian overlords. Jeremiah clearly considered it to be a warning of interwoven facets of iniquity that had impelled Yahweh to punish the people. In Chapter 11:1-17, Jeremiah is particularly satirical of the nationalistic hopes based on Deuteronomy (Job, 2016). The Israelites believed that the Torah spoke of liberation from Babylonian rule but Jeremiah knew it was speaking of judgment. Jeremiah's accusations towards them were based on failure to



love God shown by idolatry, failure to love others as being immoral and failure to change was simply rebellion against Yahweh (Job, 2016).

Jeremiah was ultimately disparaged by the people and King Zedekiah, the last ruler of Judah imprisoned him for daring to alert the people to the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 32:6–25; 37:15–18; 38:6) and he was arrested, beaten and left lying in a cistern and then imprisoned and his writings were destroyed (Jeremiah 20:1-6; 36:20-26; 37:11-16). The intent was to kill Jeremiah by starvation, while permitting the guilty officials to claim to be innocent of his blood (Barker et al., 1995). An Ethiopian named Ebed-Melech rescued Jeremiah by pulling him out of the cistern, but Jeremiah remained captive until Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 587 BCE (Jeremiah 38: 7-13). The Babylonians ultimately released Jeremiah, and displayed kindness, by permitting him to select the place of his residence, according to a Babylonian edict. Jeremiah accordingly went to Mizpah in Benjamin with Gedaliah, who had been made governor of Judea (Jeremiah 40:5-6). He was subsequently exiled to Egypt, where he died.

Yahweh promised through his messenger Jeremiah's communicated utterances and actions that he would restore the remnant back to Judah and then rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (Jeremiah 29:10-14; 30:2-3). Furthermore, a descendant of David (Jesus Christ) would serve God and direct His people (Jeremiah 23:5-6; 33:14-17). Nicolaides (2010) states that the incarnate logos of God created a new and unique relationship with God's people that allows humanity to enter into the Covenant and to become part of the 'people of God' (*Laos tou Theou*) thus fulfilling a prophecy of Jeremiah and Yahweh's promise. Yahweh also heals the spiritual wounds of His people, and He restores His covenant with them and then build up and plant His people Israel once more (Jeremiah 30:12-17; 31:27-28, 31-34; 32:38-41). The remnant returned to Israel a second time (Jeremiah 3:18; 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 30:18-22; 32:36-44; 33:23-26). "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:11-13). "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11).

Jesus clearly represented the "new covenant" as stated in Jeremiah 31:31–34. In addition, the depiction of Jesus as a persecuted prophet relates also to the account of Jeremiah's sufferings in chapters 37– 44 (Blenkinsopp, 1996). "Heal me, O Lord, and I shall be healed; Save me, and I shall be saved; For thou art my praise." (Jeremiah 17:14) – here he prays for help against his adversaries as did Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

## Conclusion

Jeremiah was to all intents and purposes an archetypal of God's love. However, while he loved he was despised by the people of Judah who pursued his destruction. He was rejected, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3). Jeremiah's message was intimately linked with the history of Israel. He first addressed the North, with an appeal for unity with the Southern Kingdom. His utterances to his own people were rejected with the burning of the first scroll (Jeremiah 36), and he then proceeded to discuss the judgment that awaited the people and finally he offered them message of hope pending their atonement. The prophecies of Jeremiah provide us with good insight into both his heart and mind. He is shown to be as one of Yahweh's faithful servants. He was a prophet brought in to deliver God's message but was also a human being with immense feelings and hopes that evildoers would see the errors of their ways and repent after which they would be blessed by Yahweh. His book offers us a glimpse of the new covenant God intended to make with His *Laos* once Christ came to earth. Only in this way would restoration be possible for atoning sinners. Jeremiah taught that



Yahweh's people would come to know Him directly through Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 31:31–34).

The doctrine of sin which Jeremiah enunciated prophetically for 40 years (627-587 BCE), demonstrates a clear and direct knowledge of God and additionally indicates that he clearly understood the hearts of people which he considered to be desperately corrupt (Jeremiah 17:9). His life experiences prepared him and put him in good state to comprehend resources which Yahweh provides. He fought throughout his life and he attained lofty spiritual levels demonstrating his piety. His prophetic career coincided with the last years of Judah's independence before it was overrun by the Babylonians. Jeremiah prophesied that Yahweh would make a covenant with Israel, superseding the old Mosaic Covenant; Yahweh would then write his law on the hearts of men rather than on stone tablets and they would all come to know Him directly and receive his compassion and forgiveness. Jeremiah was an effective prophet who could clearly communicate his vision based on Yahweh's wishes, and he provided constructive feedback to people, and strongly stated what people needed to do. His message was also to the Jews in exile in Babylon, and he explained their predicament of being in exile as Yahweh's response to Israel's pagan worship. He had very high emotional intelligence. The message Yahweh sent to the people via Jeremiah was that the people needed to have expiation of their many sins and offences and return to God. His other critical message was Yahweh's impending judgment upon Judah.

Jeremiah equally asserts that Yahweh will “pull down” and “pluck up,” but also “build” and “plant” as He forgives His repentant people. Jeremiah argued that without action, there is no change and he had humility in his role. His values and prophecies were life-giving to society and he displayed a great passion for the cause in his communication with people. He focused on the ends and did not see himself always as the conduit or creator of the strategy Judah needed to follow to get to the desired end of Yahweh's grace. He most likely used the services of Baruch as his scribe and he was probably responsible for recording much of the book. A range of communication devices were used by Jeremiah to repeatedly warn Judah of its impending judgement. Jeremiah additionally used substantial facts as the foundation of the spiritual symbolism he portrayed and his work is replete with prophetic style an enunciation. He offered a conciliatory message in chapters 30-33 which has been termed ‘the Book of Comfort’. Despite God's punishment of the people he will never abandon them. Once they reconcile with him their lives will be blessed and they will have a happy future.

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