Chapter 1
Introduction

The book of Jeremiah is not an easy book. Its first impressions are overwhelming; unlike many of the other books of the Hebrew Bible, in which a reasonable degree of textual integrity, a relatively consistent canonical order, and a semblance of thematic coherence provide their readers with a relatively stable interpretive ground from which to work, the book of Jeremiah has persistently defied attempts to draw a neat line around or under its contents, its development, or its meaning. It contains a bewildering array of poetry and prose, its Hebrew and Greek versions reflect unabashedly distinct trajectories in the development of the book, and its theological intentions are difficult to sum up in any straightforward way. This complexity has rendered the book of Jeremiah the focus of intense interpretive scrutiny, as scholars and lay readers alike have tried to make sense of the book's origins, intentions, and interpretation.

The variety of different kinds of material in the book of Jeremiah means that a major focus of interpretation has been the attempt to understand how all these different materials ended up in this one, admittedly large, book—and then what they were meant to be doing once it got there. Unlike Ezekiel, for example, which progresses in a reasonably neat, dated order, or Isaiah, which preserves material from at least two and perhaps three or more different major authors but keeps each of their contributions reasonably self-contained (hence we can talk about First Isaiah and Second Isaiah, and perhaps Third Isaiah), the book of Jeremiah hops around chronologically, switches from poetry to prose and back again in the space of a few verses, includes extensive narrative material focused on the prophet, of a genre which has little if any parallel elsewhere, and—to make matters even more interesting—is preserved for us in two quite different versions: a Hebrew version, which is underneath the translations in NRSV and most other English Bibles, and a Greek version, which is about one-seventh shorter and has the oracles against the nations (OANs) in a different place. As a result of this, the questions "How did we get this?" and "What is it doing?" have been especially prominent in the minds of Jeremiah's interpreters.

At first sight, attempts to answer these questions may appear—like the book itself—to be a chaotic agglomeration of diverse scholarly endeavors. These are dominated by an unruly collection of methods, approaches, and interests, sometimes seeming to work at cross-purposes and resulting in apparent disarray in their disparate assemblage of results. Rather than a reflection of failure or interpretive futility, however, the many voices chiming into the discussion of the book of Jeremiah should be understood to reflect its rich interpretive possibilities. Recognition of these possibilities has put the book of Jeremiah at the forefront of recent biblical scholarship. Indeed, though the situation in Jeremiah may be somewhat extreme, interpretation of the book over the course of the last thirty years or so has closely mirrored changes across the wider discipline. This is especially the case with respect to historiographical concerns, as well as in an expansion of the range of approaches through which the biblical texts are engaged.

The study of the book of Jeremiah, therefore, represents in microcosm many of the challenges and opportunities of recent work in biblical studies. To master the twists and turns of recent research on the book of Jeremiah is to gain not only an appreciation of this one book, but an appreciation of and a facility with the trajectories of contemporary biblical scholarship more widely.

Historical Setting

The relationship of the book of Jeremiah to historical events in the seventh and sixth centuries BCE (and beyond) has been a central question of much of the last century of scholarship. The book presents itself as relating to the final years of Judah's existence and to the immediate aftermath of its fall and destruction. Whether this setting derives from the actual historical location of its author(s) or is merely a literary device, it is useful to have some sense of the events of this period, in order to better understand the way that the book engages with and is shaped by these events.

The grand stage on which Judah's demise was to play out in the latter part of the seventh and early part of the sixth centuries was one dominated by struggles for power among the major ancient

Near Eastern empires.[1] For much of the previous century, the southern Levant had been overshadowed by the Neo-Assyrian empire, whose imperial ambitions had brought its armies to the west in the middle of the eighth century, under Tiglath-pileser III. Though the latter part of the century was marked by various Levantine efforts to repulse or throw off Assyrian dominance, the advent of the seventh century saw the widespread realization that political and military resistance to the Assyrian behemoth was largely futile. The phrase *pax Assyriaca* is often applied to this period, intended as a description of the relative stabilization in the relationships between Assyria and its western vassals and the overall reduction in the political and military tumult of the region. Biblical writers turn this period of calm to their theological and ideological advantage: the chronicles of this period in 2 Kings maintain a nearly complete silence concerning the presence of foreign powers in the region, bolstering an illusion of an autonomous and isolated Judah.

In the last third of the seventh century, however, the hitherto unshakeable Assyrian its empire started to wobble. Although the exact reasons for its collapse remain opaque, it is widely suspected that it was a result of two main factors. On the one hand, the empire was plagued in its last years by a succession of ineffective kings, whose personal weaknesses were exacerbated by their relatively brief tenure (the accession of any new king was widely seen an opportunity for the empire's subordinate territories to rebel). On the other hand, the empire over which these kings were meant to wield their authority had probably finally overstretched itself, not least in its determination to exert control over Egypt. In theory, the mighty Assyrian empire sprawled outward from its Mesopotamian heartland—around Nineveh, Assur, and Kalhu—in all directions: eastward to Media, southward to Elam and Babylonia, northward to Urartu, westward to the Levant, and to Egypt in the far southwest. In reality, Assyria's grip on the outer reaches of this empire had always been tenuous. Egypt's submission to Assyria, for example, lasted less than two decades in the middle of the seventh century. This renewed autonomy was accompanied by renewed interest and involvement in the affairs of the southern Levant; Egypt had been Judah's intermittent ally in the preceding century and, relieved of Assyrian authority, it would it become a regular player in Judahite affairs at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries. The temptation to an Egyptian alliance would ultimately play a fatal role in Judah's downfall.

Nearer to home, Babylonia constituted a long-standing thorn in Assyria's southern flank.[2] With the empire overstretched and lacking in leadership, it became increasingly vulnerable to Babylonian efforts to resist its authority. In contrast to previous Babylonian rebellions, which had been emphatically quashed, the late seventh century ultimately saw the resurgence of an autonomous Babylonia—the fledgling Neo-Babylonian empire. In the face of this challenge to its authority Assyria was forced to consolidate its defenses in Mesopotamia, abandoning its western ambitions and withdrawing from the southern Levant.

The traditional narrative of this period has portrayed the Assyrians' departure as resulting in a power vacuum, into which the Judahite king Josiah stepped boldly, purging the temple of Assyrian elements and campaigning into the former northern kingdom in an attempt to reestablish a grand, Davidic kingdom. More recent analysis, however, has suggested a more or less seamless handover of regional control from the Assyrians to the Egyptians, with whom they had allied against the Babylonians.[3] Although the details remain vague, it appears that the Egyptians had established a successor state—collecting tithes and tributes and dictating regional policy—by at least 610.

Somewhere in the midst of this transition Josiah lost his life. Traditionally, this has been attributed to a failed attempt on Josiah's part to prevent the Egyptians from supporting the Assyrians against the Babylonians, with the meeting between Josiah and Pharaoh Necho II at Megiddo

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[1] All dates are BCE unless noted otherwise. Accessible overviews of ancient Near Eastern history which include this period are Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East: ca. 3000–323 BC* (2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), and Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East: c.3000–330 B.C., Volume 2* (2nd ed., Routledge History of the Ancient World; London: Routledge, 1997). For a guide to the kings of Judah, Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt, see Appendix B.

[2] The situation was further complicated by Esarhaddon's decision to put his two sons on the thrones of Assyria and Babylonia, respectively; the middle part of the seventh century was marked by an ugly war between the two brothers. The ambiguity of Assyria's attitude to Babylonia is reflected in its extensive assimilation of Babylonian culture, such as the acquisition and pride of place given to major literary works—most notably, Enuma elish—in the royal libraries. For more on this relationship, see Grant Frame, *Babylonia 689–627 B.C.: A Political History* (Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut te İstanbul, 1992).

[3] Bernd U. Schipper, "Egypt and the Kingdom of Judah under Josiah and Jehoiakim," *Tel Aviv* 37 (2010): 200–26.

(recounted, very briefly, in 2 Kgs 23:29) interpreted as a military confrontation. More recently, it has been suggested that Josiah was at Megiddo to register the transfer of his allegiance from Assyria to Egypt, but that he was suspected of disloyalty and executed.[4] Whatever the reason for Josiah's death, the degree of Egypt's involvement in Judahite politics at this turbulent time is clear from its subsequent interference in the succession of Judah's kingship. Though one of Josiah's sons, Jehoahaz, succeeded Josiah on the throne, he was almost immediately deposed by Necho in favor of his brother Eliakim, who took Jehoiakim as his throne name.

As for the Assyrians, their retrenchment would be to no avail. Nineveh fell to Babylonian troops in 612 and by 609 the Babylonian army had defeated the remaining coalition of Assyrians and Egyptians. In due course the Babylonian empire would assume control of all of Assyria's territories, claiming for itself the riches and rewards of its far-flung provinces and vassal kingdoms and using them as stepping stones to even wider powers. From a Judahite perspective, however, the eventual success of the Babylonians in gaining control over the whole of the ancient Near East was by no means obvious. Indeed, the chaos of the final decades of the kingdom of Judah and its ultimate demise at the hands of the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, may be understood as the result of a series of ill-fated decisions by Judah's leaders concerning the strengths and objectives of the three major ancient Near Eastern powers on the scene: Assyria, Babylonia, and Egypt.

After successfully taking the Mesopotamian heartland, the Babylonians sought to gain control of all of Assyria's former territories, including the southern Levant. As the southern Levant had passed into Egyptian hands upon the Assyrians' withdrawal from the area, it became a point of conflict between Egypt and Babylonia. This began in the last decade of the seventh century—once the Babylonians had firmly established their base in Mesopotamia—and continued into the first decade of the sixth century. Evidence about who had control over the southern Levant (and in what sense) at any given moment during this period is not very clear. However, this uncertainty is probably a fair reflection of the era's atmosphere of upheaval and confusion. With Egypt and Babylonia fighting for dominance, the small states of the southern Levant would have found themselves between a rock and a hard place; Judah, along with its neighbors, would have been trying to guess which side would eventually triumph so that it might throw in its lot with the winning side.

In hindsight, the turning point was a major battle at Carchemish, which took place in 605. In this battle the Babylonian army, led by Nebuchadnezzar II, defeated the Egyptian army under the leadership of Necho. As a result, the Levant came under Babylonian control for the first time. In practice, this meant that all of the kings of the area—including the king of Judah, Jehoiakim—paid tribute and swore loyalty to the Babylonian king. In Jehoiakim's case, this entailed a shift of allegiance away from the very Egyptians who had put him on the throne in the first place.

At the time, however, the battle at Carchemish hardly appeared so decisive; just a few years later, the failure of a Babylonian campaign to Egypt prompted Jehoiakim and several others of these new vassals to throw in their lots with the Egyptians, effectively rebelling against their Babylonian overlord by ceasing to pay tribute. In 598/7, the Babylonian army invaded Judah. Prior to their arrival Jehoiakim died, leaving his throne to son Jehoiachin. Almost immediately Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The novice king was deposed and he and his family were deported to Babylonia, along with other members of the royal court. This group constituted the first group of deportees from Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's chronicles report:

> The seventh year (598/7): In the month Kislev (November/December) the king of Akkad mustered his army and marched to Hattu (Syria). He encamped against the city of Judah and on the second day of the month Adar (16 March 597) he captured the city and seized (its) king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city (and) taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon.[5]

The next decade, between 597 and 587, would be the last of Judah's independent existence. At the time, however, Judah and Jerusalem's ultimate fate was unknown. Parts of the books of Jeremiah and

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[4] Richard D. Nelson, "Realpolitik in Judah (687–609 BCE)," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method*, ed. William W. Hallo, James C. Moyer, and Leo G. Perdue (Winona Lake, IN, Eisenbrauns, 1983), 177–89; Nadav Na'aman, "The Kingdom of Judah," in *Ancient Israel and Its Neighbors: Interaction and Counteraction*, vol. 1 of *Collected Essays* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 329–98.

[5] A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), no. 5 11'–13'.

Ezekiel reflect an intense argument over whether 597 already represented Yhwh's final judgment, or if there was more destruction still to come.

Because this was Judah's first rebellion, the Babylonians elected not to completely destroy either Judah or Jerusalem. Nor did they take it under direct control; rather they allowed it to continue as a vassal state. To ensure a more compliant local monarchy, however, they chose to install another member of the royal family as a puppet king: Jehoiachin's uncle, Mattaniah, who took the throne name Zedekiah.[6] In either case, the expectation that Zedekiah, as a Babylonian appointee, would remain loyal to the Babylonians turned out to be ill-founded. In 589 he too rebelled. Though the reasons for this are unclear, they are probably related to perceived changes in the balance between Babylonia and Egypt; though there was no direct confrontation between the two armies during this period, the balance appears to have shifted enough that the latest pharaoh, Psammetichus, was able to undertake a royal procession through the region in 590, unopposed by the Babylonians. The next year Zedekiah rebelled, and the Babylonians responded by again laying siege to Jerusalem. Finally, in 587, Jerusalem fell for a second time. This time the Babylonians meted out their punishment unreservedly: the city was sacked, the temple was burnt, and Zedekiah was deported to Babylon with the rest of the city's remaining leadership.

From this point onward, Judah was no longer an independent, semiautonomous state but a province of foreign empires: first the Babylonian, then later the Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. This is also the point from which historical details become hazy—in no small part because the Babylonian sources have broken off by this point, leaving the book of Jeremiah, with all its complexity, as one of the only sources of information about what happened.

According to Jeremiah (mostly in chs. 40–44), the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah ben Ahikam ben Shaphan to a gubernatorial role of some kind. This government was not based in Jerusalem but in the town of Mizpah in the region of Benjamin. After some unknown length of time, however, Gedaliah was assassinated by Ishmael ben Nethaniah. Fearing Babylonian reprisals for the death of their appointee, the remaining inhabitants fled to Egypt. Perhaps connected to these events was a third deportation in 582, which is reported only in the book of Jeremiah (52:30).

After this there is almost complete silence. Apart from the claim that the exiled king Jehoiachin found favor in the Babylonian court (2 Kgs 25:27-30 // Jer. 52:31-34), there is no biblical material concerning the fate of the inhabitants of Judah between 582 and the prophetic material in Isaiah 40–55, usually dated to the late 540s. Outside the biblical texts, there is some significant archival material from the Mesopotamian town of Al-Yahudu ("the City of Judah") and from the region of Nippur (the Murashu archive), recording aspects of everyday life among some of the descendants of Judah's deportees. The Babylonian chronicles break off after 594 and the other surviving Babylonian inscriptions are primarily building inscriptions, rather than campaign accounts of the kind that provide scholars with extensive information about the Assyrian period.

Whether the book of Jeremiah's information about life in Judah after 586 may be considered historically reliable is part of a wider debate over the nature and purpose of the biblical texts. In the immediate context, it is important to observe that the events recounted by the book create the appearance of a land devoid of inhabitants, insofar as everyone is either deported to Babylonia or flees to Egypt. Archaeological evidence, however, indicates that the area continued to be inhabited; this would have been consistent with Assyrian and Babylonian deportation policies, which focused on the ruling classes who might foment further rebellions, rather than the general population.[7] The books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel both suggest that there were significant disputes about the interpretation of the destruction of the Judahite state and the desecration of the Jerusalem temple in the aftermath of the deportations of 597 and 586 (and perhaps also 582, if that report is reliable). What was the purpose of this destruction and the consequent division of the population of Judah? Both those left in exile and those in the land saw themselves as the preferred of Yhwh—those left in the land because they had been spared deportation and those in Babylonia because they had been extracted from Jerusalem prior to its complete destruction. These arguments resurface in the accounts of the early Persian period,

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[6] A dispute over whether Zedekiah should be considered the legitimate king of Judah is especially apparent in the book of Ezekiel.

[7] Hans M. Barstad, *The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the "Exilic" Period* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1996); Oded Lipschits and Joseph Blenkinsopp (eds.), *Judah and the Judeans in the Neo-Babylonian Period* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

especially in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles. The biblical texts indicate that it was the community in Babylon—those who had been deported and their descendants, who viewed the destruction and subsequent exile as a form of purifying judgment—who ultimately prevailed, successfully laying claim to the land, its traditions, and its god while rejecting the legitimacy of those in the land and their later descendants. An important part of this argument, however, was to deny that there had been any ongoing Judahite existence in the land during the deportees' absence in Babylonia; like the deportees, the land was also undergoing a period of purification (sometimes articulated in terms of sabbatical rest, as in Lev. 26:34-35). The theological, political, and practical exigencies of this mean that the book of Jeremiah's account of the complete desertion of the land—especially the (purportedly) voluntary flight of Judah's remaining inhabitants to Egypt—may be viewed as a means of clearing the land, so that it will be empty and waiting when the time comes for the deportees to return. It is therefore difficult to know just how seriously to take this material as an historical source. As we shall see, this has been one of the most vexed questions in the study of the book of Jeremiah.