

## Lesson 1 – Introduction

### The Book of Jeremiah

**Goal:** To introduce students to the characteristics of the book as a whole as well as to the question of authorship.

**1. Discussion.** Ask students to share what they already know about the prophet Jeremiah and the book named after him. The purpose is not to quiz students, but rather to get them thinking about Jeremiah in broad terms. Regarding the book, what is its location within Tanakh? How are *nevi'im aharonim* different from *nevi'im rishonim*? What are some key characteristics of this particular book? What is it about? Regarding the man, when did he live? Where did he prophesy and for how long? To whom? What was his message? You may also have students look up the word “jeremiad” in the dictionary. Why did this word enter the English language with this particular meaning?

**2. Obstacles to comprehension.** Several factors make Jeremiah a very difficult book to comprehend. Alert students to some of the problems they will encounter as they begin to confront the text:

- A.** The language can be difficult. Jeremiah contains many long poetic sections with challenging Hebrew words and phrases.
- B.** The text refers to numerous people, situations, and events that may be unfamiliar to the student.
- C.** Unlike more familiar biblical books, such as Genesis or Kings, Jeremiah is not ordered chronologically. The same events are sometimes dealt with in different places in the book. For example, chapters 39 and 52 both deal with the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. Illustrate this point further by drawing the student’s attention to the dates connected to the prophecies and stories found in chapters 24, 25, 26, 28, and 36. Have them complete the following worksheet.

### The Last Kings of Judah

■ 640-609	יאשיהו
■ 609-598	יהויקים
■ 597	יהויכין\כוניה\כוניה
■ 597-586	צדקיהו

**Instructions.** On the basis of the above list of kings and their regnal years, determine the dates implied by the following verses. For each answer, first list the regnal year and then list the absolute year.

1) א:כד

2) א:כה

3) א:כו

4) א:כח

5) א:לו

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Jer. 24:1 dates to 597 or later.

Jer. 25:1 dates to 605.

Jer. 26:1 dates to around 609.

Jer. 28:1 dates to 594.

Jer. 36:1 dates to 605.

What does this indicate about the organization of the book? Note that this list confirms that the book is not organized chronologically. (It also sheds light on how the book was composed, which will be discussed below). If the book is not ordered chronologically, what other options are there with respect to organizational principle? One option that

should be suggested is thematic organization. In other words, prophecies were grouped together according to their common subject matter, regardless of when they were originally delivered. Thus, chapters 1-25 mostly contain prophecies of judgment. Chapters 30-31 contain oracles of consolation and chapters 35-39 tell the story of the fall of Jerusalem. Another possibility is organization according to audience. In other words, prophecies were grouped together according to the identity of those addressed. For example, chapters 21-23 are addressed to the corrupt leadership (kings, priests, and prophets) of Jerusalem. Chapters 46-51, known as “the Oracles to the Nations,” are addressed to a series of foreign countries, including Egypt, Moab, Babylonia, and others. While such principles may be applied to several groups of chapters, today there is still no consensus with regard to the logic of the organization of the book as a whole. The realization that Jeremiah is not a “book” in the sense that we normally understand the term, but rather a compilation of prophetic oracles, sermons, prayers, personal dialogues, and historical and biographical material spanning the forty year career of Jeremiah is a necessary first step to understanding the work as a whole.

**3. Authorship.** Ask: Who wrote this book? Students will assume that the author is Jeremiah. But there are numerous indications that the situation is more complicated.

**A.** Turn to the first pasuk of the book and have a student read aloud and translate. This introduction to the book indicates that what follows are דברי ירמיהו, the words of Jeremiah. Now have them read Jer. 51:64. Focus on the phrase עד הנה דברי ירמיהו. What does it mean? It seems to indicate that these are the end of the words of Jeremiah, i.e., that this is the end of the book. In support of this, the appearance of the same words, דברי ירמיהו, in each verse forms an “inclusio,” or literary envelope, a common technique used by biblical authors to demarcate the beginning and end of a literary unit. (For another good example of “inclusio,” see the appearance of the word אשרי in the first verse of Psalm 1 and the last verse of Psalm 2 [v. 12]. The Talmud [Bavli Berakhot 9b-10a] considers this arrangement to be evidence that Psalms 1 and 2 together actually constitute a single chapter.) But is this chapter the end of the book? No! There is an additional one (chapter 52), which recounts the story of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. As *Metsudat David* and other commentators suggest, Jer. 51:64 indicates that chapter 52 is not the “words of Jeremiah.” This conclusion is further supported when Jeremiah 52 is viewed side by side with 2 Kings 24:18ff. See the chart below. Note that these chapters are almost exactly identical. Can students explain how this happened? The most likely explanation is that someone appended the story from Kings to the end of Jeremiah in order to emphasize the truth of his prophecies, which are largely focused on the doom and destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians.

**א** בן-עֲשָׂרִים נֹאחַת שָׁנָה, צִדְקָיָהוּ בְּמִלְכוֹ, נֹאחַת עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם; וְשֵׁם אָמוֹ, חִמְיִטַל (חִמּוּטַל) בֵּת-יִרְמְיָהוּ מִלְבָּנָה. **ב** וַיַּעַשׂ הָרַע, בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, כִּכְלֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה, יְהוֹנָתָן. **ג** כִּי עַל-אֶף יְהוָה, הִיָּתָה בִירוּשָׁלַם. **וַיְהוּדָה**, עַד-הַשְּׁלִיכּוּ אוֹתָם, מֵעַל פְּנֵיו; וַיִּמְרֹד צִדְקָיָהוּ, בְּמֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל. **ד** וַיְהִי בִשְׁנֵי הַחֲשִׁיעִית לְמִלְכוֹ, בַּח דָּשׁ הַעֲשִׂירִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵת לַח דָּשׁ, בָּא גְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל הוּא וְכָל-חֵילוֹ עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם, וַיִּחַנּוּ עָלָיָהּ; וַיִּבְנוּ עָלֶיהָ דָּיִק, סָבִיב. **ה** וַתָּבֹא הָעִיר, בְּמַצּוֹר, עַד עֲשָׂתֵי עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, לְמֶלֶךְ צִדְקָיָהוּ. **ו** **בַּח דָּשׁ הַרְבִּיעִי בַתְּשַׁעָה לַח דָּשׁ**, וַיִּחַזַּק הָרָעִב בְּעִיר; וְלֹא-הָיָה לָחֶם, לְעַם הָאָרֶץ, לְעַם הָאָרֶץ. **ז** וַתִּבְקַע הָעִיר, וְכָל-אֲנָשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה יִבְרָחוּ וַיִּצְאוּ מִהָעִיר לִילָה דֶרֶךְ שַׁעַר עַל-הָעִיר, סָבִיב; וַיִּלְכוּ, דֶּרֶךְ הָעֲרָבָה. **ח** וַיִּרְדְּפוּ חֵיל-כְּשָׂדִים אַחֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, וַיִּשְׁיֶגּוּ אֶת-צִדְקָיָהוּ בְּעָרֵב תִּרְחוֹ; וְכָל-חֵילוֹ--נִפְצוּ, מֵעַלְיוֹ. **ט** וַיִּתְּפוּשׂוּ, אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ, וַיַּעֲלוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל-מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל רְבִלְתָּה, בָּאָרֶץ חֲמָת; **וַיִּדְבַר אֹתוֹ, מִשְׁפָּטִים. י** וַיִּשְׁחַט מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל אֶת-בְּנֵי צִדְקָיָהוּ, לְעֵינָיו; וְגַם אֶת-כָּל-שָׂרֵי יְהוּדָה, שָׁחַט בְּרְבִלְתָּה. **יא** וְאֶת-עֵינֵי צִדְקָיָהוּ, עוֹר; וַיֹּאסְרֵהוּ בַנְּחָשְׁתִּים, וַיִּבְאֵהוּ בָבֶל, {ס} **וַיִּתְּנֵהוּ בַבֵּית- (בֵּית-) הַפְּקֻדֹת, עַד-יוֹם מוֹתוֹ. יב** וּבַח דָּשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי, **בְּעֶשְׂרֵת לַח דָּשׁ**, הָיָה שְׁנַת תְּשַׁע-עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, לְמֶלֶךְ גְּבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל--בָּא, גְּבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב-טַבָּחִים, **עֲמַד לִפְנֵי מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל, בִּירוּשָׁלַם.**

**יח** בן-עֲשָׂרִים נֹאחַת שָׁנָה, צִדְקָיָהוּ בְּמִלְכוֹ, נֹאחַת עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, מֶלֶךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם; וְשֵׁם אָמוֹ, חִמְיִטַל (חִמּוּטַל) בֵּת-יִרְמְיָהוּ מִלְבָּנָה. **יט** וַיַּעַשׂ הָרַע, בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה, כִּכְלֹ אֲשֶׁר-עָשָׂה, יְהוֹנָתָן. **כ** כִּי עַל-אֶף יְהוָה, הִיָּתָה בִירוּשָׁלַם. **וַיְהוּדָה**, עַד-הַשְּׁלִיכּוּ אוֹתָם, מֵעַל פְּנֵיו; וַיִּמְרֹד צִדְקָיָהוּ, בְּמֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל. **א** וַיְהִי בִשְׁנַת הַחֲשִׁיעִית לְמִלְכוֹ, בַּח דָּשׁ הַעֲשִׂירִי בְּעֶשְׂרֵת לַח דָּשׁ, בָּא גְבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל הוּא וְכָל-חֵילוֹ עַל-יְרוּשָׁלַם, וַיִּחַנּוּ עָלָיָהּ; וַיִּבְנוּ עָלֶיהָ דָּיִק, סָבִיב. **ב** וַתָּבֹא הָעִיר, בְּמַצּוֹר, עַד עֲשָׂתֵי עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, לְמֶלֶךְ צִדְקָיָהוּ. **ג** **בַּתְּשַׁעָה לַח דָּשׁ**, וַיִּחַזַּק הָרָעִב בְּעִיר; וְלֹא-הָיָה לָחֶם, לְעַם הָאָרֶץ. **ד** וַתִּבְקַע הָעִיר, וְכָל-אֲנָשֵׁי הַמִּלְחָמָה **הַלִּילָה דֶרֶךְ שַׁעַר** בֵּין הַחֲמִישִׁים אֲשֶׁר עַל-גֹּן הַמֶּלֶךְ, וְכְשָׂדִים עַל-הָעִיר, סָבִיב; וַיִּלְךְ, דֶּרֶךְ הָעֲרָבָה. **ה** וַיִּרְדְּפוּ חֵיל-כְּשָׂדִים אַחֲרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, וַיִּשְׁיֶגּוּ אֹתוֹ בְּעָרֵבוֹת יִרְחוֹ; וְכָל-חֵילוֹ--נִפְצוּ, מֵעַלְיוֹ. **ו** וַיִּתְּפוּשׂוּ, אֶת-הַמֶּלֶךְ, וַיַּעֲלוּ אֹתוֹ אֶל-מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל, רְבִלְתָּה; **וַיִּדְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ, מִשְׁפָּט. ז** וְאֶת-בְּנֵי צִדְקָיָהוּ, שָׁחַטוּ, לְעֵינָיו; וְאֶת-עֵינֵי צִדְקָיָהוּ, עוֹר, וַיֹּאסְרֵהוּ בַנְּחָשְׁתִּים, וַיִּבְאֵהוּ בָבֶל. {ס} **ח** וּבַח דָּשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי, **בְּשַׁבְּעָה לַח דָּשׁ--**הָיָה שְׁנַת תְּשַׁע-עֲשָׂרָה שָׁנָה, לְמֶלֶךְ גְּבוּכַדְרֶאצַּר מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל: **בָּא גְבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב-טַבָּחִים, עֲמַד מֶלֶךְ-בָּבֶל--**וַיְרוּשָׁלַם.

**יג** וַיִּשְׂרֹף אֶת-בֵּית-יְהוָה, וְאֶת-בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ; וְאֶת כָּל-בְּתֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאֶת-כָּל-בֵּית הַגְּדוֹל, שָׂרָף בְּאֵשׁ. **יד** וְאֶת-כָּל-חַמּוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם, סָבִיב, נִתְּצוּ כָל-חֵיל כְּשָׂדִים, אֲשֶׁר אֶת-רַב-טַבָּחִים. **טו** וּמִדְּלוֹת הָעָם וְאֶת-יְתֵר הָעָם הַנִּשְׁאָרִים בְּעִיר, וְאֶת-הַנְּפִלִים אֲשֶׁר נָפְלוּ אֶל-מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל, וְאֶת יְתֵר הָאֲמוֹן--הַגְּלָה, גְּבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב-טַבָּחִים. **טז** וּמִדְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ--הַשְּׂאִיר,

**טז** וַיִּשְׂרֹף אֶת-בֵּית-יְהוָה, וְאֶת-בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ; וְאֶת כָּל-בְּתֵי יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאֶת-כָּל-בֵּית הַגְּדוֹל, שָׂרָף בְּאֵשׁ. **יז** וְאֶת-חַמּוֹת יְרוּשָׁלַם, סָבִיב--נִתְּצוּ כָל-חֵיל כְּשָׂדִים, אֲשֶׁר רַב-טַבָּחִים. **יח** וְאֶת יְתֵר הָעָם הַנִּשְׁאָרִים בְּעִיר, וְאֶת-הַנְּפִלִים אֲשֶׁר נָפְלוּ עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ בָּבֶל, וְאֶת יְתֵר הָאֲמוֹן--הַגְּלָה, גְּבוּזַרְאֲדָן רַב-טַבָּחִים. **יט** וּמִדְּלוֹת הָאָרֶץ, הַשְּׂאִיר רַב-

**B.** Even the “words of Jeremiah” (chapters 1-51) were likely not originally penned by Jeremiah himself. Chapter 36 provides several essential clues to understanding how the book of Jeremiah came to be. Study the first four verses of this chapter with the class. Note that according to this passage, “in the fourth year of King Yehoyakim” (605 BCE), God orders Jeremiah to “take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you...from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now.” Jeremiah had been prophesying since the thirteenth year of King Josiah (627 BCE; see Jer. 1:2; 25:3), so this command amounts to a call to record in writing some twenty-three years of prophetic activity. Note that according to 36:4 it is Baruch son of Neriah who ends up doing the actual writing. Specifically, Jeremiah is said to dictate God’s message to Baruch, who then wrote the words upon the scroll (see also, e.g., 45:1). Who was Baruch? A man of letters from an aristocratic Jerusalemite family who served as Jeremiah’s scribe and faithful companion. His existence has been confirmed in a spectacular way by the archaeological discovery of a bulla (or clay seal impression) written in old Hebrew script (כתב עברי) that reads לברכיהו בן נריהו הספר, “belonging to Baruch son of Neriah the scribe.” See the accompanying slideshow for an image. Interestingly, this particular bulla is marked in its upper right section by an ancient fingerprint (invisible in the photograph). Some have suggested that this fingerprint belongs to Baruch himself, but this of course cannot be proven.

Later on in chapter 36, we are told that King Yehoyakim burned this scroll because he found its content threatening and disagreeable. How is this scroll of 605 BCE related to our book of Jeremiah? Since Jeremiah continued to prophesy for another twenty years after this and the prophecies and events of this later period are also recorded in our present book, this scroll could not have contained the entire book as we have it today. It may in fact represent a “first edition” of our book, comprised of Jeremiah’s early prophecies against the kingdoms of Judah and Israel up until 605 BCE (It has been suggested by some scholars that this scroll relates approximately to the first twenty chapters of the book).

In the last verse of chapter 36, Jeremiah takes another scroll, and dictates the same words to Baruch, who writes them down once again. Further, we are told that ועוד נוסף עליהם דברים רבים כהמה, “many similar words were added to them (the original words).” This last phrase gives the impression of a slowly growing collection of prophecies, most likely contained in multiple scrolls, rather than a book written all at once with a defined beginning, middle, and end. It is therefore reasonable to imagine a growing corpus of prophetic material recorded and preserved over the span of Jeremiah’s career. Ultimately these writings, in addition to related biographical material and historical reports, were assembled into the book we possess today. This theory of composition is supported by the observations regarding the nature of chapter 52 as an addendum noted above, and also by the report in Jer. 51:60 that “Jeremiah wrote down in *one scroll* all the disaster that would come upon Babylon.” This single scroll presumably contained only Jeremiah’s famous “Oracle against Babylon.” Only after the editorial arrangement process did this separate piece achieve its current canonical position as Jer. 50:1-51:58.

**4. Advanced/optional discussion.** In connection with the above, students may be interested to know that two different versions of the book of Jeremiah have survived from antiquity, the traditional Hebrew version known as the Masoretic Text (MT), and the Greek translation of the ancient Jewish community of Egypt known as the Septuagint (LXX). These versions contain striking discrepancies. The MT version of Jeremiah is approximately 13% longer than that of the LXX, and the ordering of material is strikingly different. For example, the “Oracles against the Nations” that appear in chapters 46-51 in the MT are positioned in the middle of the LXX version, just after 25:13. Ancient Hebrew manuscripts reflecting both of these versions (the MT and the Hebrew text from which the LXX was translated) have been discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The differences between these two versions can be understood as the results of differing editorial selections and processes among separate Jewish groups, perhaps one abiding in Egypt (where Jeremiah and Baruch spent their last days) and the other in the land of Israel or in the Babylonian Exile.