

COMMENTARY

SUPERSSCRIPTION (1:1-3)

Chapter 1 serves as the prologue to the book of Jeremiah. This chapter consists of the title (vv 1-3) and the call and commissioning of Jeremiah (vv 4-19). There are no prophetic speeches in this chapter. The title statement provides insight into the family background of Jeremiah prior to his call and the historical context of his ministry. The call and commission narrative establishes Jeremiah as an authentic and authorized voice of Yahweh. The commission narrative also provides in a nutshell the message of the book that Yahweh's impending actions in history would result in the dismantling of all the existing conditions and the establishment of new realities for Israel.

BEHIND THE TEXT

The introductory verses (vv 1-3) constitute the title statement of the book or its superscription (see similar title statements in Isa 1:1; Hos 1:1; Amos 1:1; Mic 1:1; Zeph 1:1). The title provides in a brief statement the identity of the prophet behind the book and the historical, geographical, and theological context of the book. It is likely that this heading was attached to the book by those who gave the book its final form during the exile of Judah in Babylon.

IN THE TEXT

■ **1-3** The heading (v 1) associates the content of the book with Jeremiah, who belonged to a priestly family in the village of Anathoth. **The words of Jeremiah** refer to the content of the entire book, which includes not only the spoken words but also the actions of the prophet. Verse 2 indicates the divine origin of the words of Jeremiah (*to whom the word of Yahweh came*). Jeremiah's words and actions echo the **word of the LORD** (*dēbar yhw̄h*) that **came** (*hāyā*, lit. happened) to him (v 2). Jeremiah is simply the messenger who communicates through words and actions Yahweh's words that came to him. The introduction also presents the coming of God's word to Jeremiah (revelation) as a historical reality, an event located within the framework of Judah's history. Yahweh's word came to Jeremiah for a period of forty years, from **the thirteenth year** (v 2; 627 B.C.) of Josiah's kingship *until the captivity of Jerusalem* (v 3; 587 B.C.).

Anathoth

Anathoth was part of the inheritance of the tribe of Benjamin, but it was also a designated Levitical town for the priestly families (Josh 21:18). It was located about three miles north of Jerusalem in the tribal land of Benjamin. The modern Arab village of Anata preserves the ancient biblical name. Archaeologists think that the ancient village was located at a site very close to the modern village of Anata.

Though Jeremiah's call took place in 627 B.C., historical references in the book indicate a more active period of the prophet's ministry during the reign of **Jehoiakim** (609-598 B.C.) and **Zedekiah** (597-587 B.C.). **The eleventh year of Zedekiah** (587 B.C.) is a powerful reminder of the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of Judah's captivity in Babylon (see Historical Setting for details). The introduction places Jeremiah as a witness of Jerusalem's destruction and Judah's exile to Babylon. The special reference to the captivity of Jerusalem may have been intentional; it seems to direct the exilic audience to discover in the words of Jeremiah the answer to their "how" and "why" and "what next" questions about their captivity in Babylon. This community would have been the first recipients of the book of Jeremiah in its present shape.

FROM THE TEXT

The book of Jeremiah begins with the claim of the divine origin of the content of the book and the authenticity and legitimacy of the prophet. Words that originate with God invite our attention and faithful hearing. Such words are powerful and authoritative; they cannot be subverted, controlled, or manipulated. No social, political, or religious power can override the authentic voice of God. The exilic community had to come to accept and come to terms with the powerful reality of God's word that came to them through the words of Jeremiah.

The book provided a fresh hearing of the words of Jeremiah to the community in exile. Previous generations have failed to give heed to the prophet, but the present generation in exile has the opportunity to find their hope in the rejected and despised words of the prophet. For the readers of scripture the challenge then and now is to hear in new and refreshing ways the word of God. This word, when faithfully obeyed, remains as the source of hope for all who live through difficult and uncertain days.

The text suggests a powerful contrast between Anathoth and Jerusalem. Anathoth is a quiet village; Jerusalem is the capital city. Anathoth is a metaphor of the rejected and the banished. Jerusalem is where power resides. But from Anathoth comes a lonely voice that questions, challenges, and confronts with courage the Jerusalem establishment. This voice from Anathoth is the voice of the banished, the powerless, and the marginal that is speaking against the powerful and oppressive voices of the Jerusalem establishment. At the outset the book thus anticipates a conflict between "Jeremiah of Anathoth," the authentic voice of God, and the power brokers in Jerusalem. Seldom do voices of justice, liberty, and truth originate in the world capitals where power resides. The liberating power of the gospel was first heard not in the streets of Jerusalem but in the insignificant villages on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. The voice of Jeremiah of Anathoth is not unlike the voice of Jesus of Nazareth. Both voices critique, challenge, and confront the powerful religious and political establishment. Both Jeremiah and Jesus challenge us to be authentic and fearless voices of God in our world.

The phrases "the words of Jeremiah . . . the word of the LORD . . . captivity of Jerusalem" (vv 1-3 NRSV) all at the outset point to the message of the book that the exile was not the outcome of some unfortunate turn of political events but was a tragedy brought about by God's powerful words. The exiled people of God must come to terms with this reality, so that they can share in the hopes and dreams of this book. The reference to captivity is a challenge not to forget the past, while holding on to the hope for a better future. It is also a reminder of the truth that the God whom they experienced in judgment is also the God who will come with his power to heal and save them. Here we find hope for all who live in captivity because of sin and judgment.