



A historical chronology of Jeremiah's era

A guide for family and private study, John F. Jones
Faith Presbyterian Church :: Anchorage, Ak

Jeremiah 1.1-3 tells us that Jeremiah ministered during the reigns of three kings of Judah: Josiah and two of his sons, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah.¹ We might amend two 'quasi-kings' to this list, Jehoahaz (another son) and Jehoiachin (a grandson), who reigned for a combined six months. As such, Jeremiah ministered during a period of 40 years that encompassed not only several kings, but also extraordinary international upheaval (the Babylonian Empire arises from the rubble of the Assyrian Empire) and national upheaval (the nation of Israel is no more).

This chronology may help to unravel some confusion and help us better understand Jeremiah's ministry. Those unused to reading ancient history should note that the dates are only *generally* reliable. Overall, however, the events *are* chronological, which helps us to understand the *story* of the ancient world surrounding Jeremiah's life.

The reign of Josiah (639-609 BC, 31 yrs.)

Josiah began to reign at age 8 and reigned for 31 years (2 Kings 22). Jeremiah was likely born around the same time as Josiah (though perhaps he was a few years younger). Note that, at the beginning of Josiah's reign, the Northern Kingdom of Israel (i.e. ten tribes of Israel) had been decimated for some 83 years! This was obviously on the mind of the population of Judah; the people's hatred of Assyria would lead them to favor the Babylonian upstarts from the very beginning, not knowing that Babylon would lay waste to even Judah.

The political tensions during Josiah's reign were singularly intense: Egypt and Assyria squeezed Israel from both sides. Assyria's some 200-year stronghold (founded at the Battle of Qarqar in 853) centered at Nineveh was beginning to feel pressure from the North (Scythian invaders), South (Arabian tribes entering Edom and Moab), East (Elamites and the Medes), and finally internally (the rise Nabopolassar's popularity in Babylon). The words of Jeremiah in 1.1-19 and 3.6-6.30 are most certainly uttered during Josiah's reign.

Josiah's reign is summarized in 2 Kings 22.2 as follows: "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and walked in all the way of David his father, and he did not turn aside to the right or the left." Most notable among his accomplishments as king was using Temple funds to make repairs to the Temple structure. It was through this construction project that the discovery of a copy of the Mosaic Book of the Law (i.e. the first five books of the Bible) was made.

¹ Note that dates are imprecise and vary according to various schemes of calculation; tools used for this document include Barry J. Beitzel, *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands* (Chicago: Moody, 1985); William Sanford LaSor et al., *Old Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 3 (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2006); and various commentaries on Jeremiah including W. Brueggemann, P. Craigies et al., D. Kidner, and J. A. Thompson.

Deuteronomy 31.26 insisted that a copy of the Book of the Law be kept near the ark of the covenant; this may be what was discovered during the repairs. When it was read before the king, it is very likely that he had never before heard the Book of the Law.

628 (12th year). This is likely the year in which Josiah, now age 20, begins to destroy the idols of Judah. He likely began to seek the Lord in his teens.

627 (13th year). At age 21, Josiah having settled into his reign these 13 years, his younger contemporary of some 19 or 20 years, Jeremiah, is called by God into ministry (Jeremiah 1). This is also the year in which the last king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, died, hastening the unraveling of the entire Empire. First, Scythian and Cimmerian attackers to the North promptly increased their pressure. Second, and more importantly, Ashurbanipal's death precipitated the successful revolt of the Chaldeans in the city of Babylon, led by the Chaldean prince, Nabopolassar. Babylon declared independency, and this was the beginning of the end for Assyria. Some suspect that Ashurbanipal's focus on cultural endeavors like the building of libraries and schools distracted him from providing for the Empire's defense. Regardless, Assyria's end was near, and Jeremiah's call weighed heavily upon him as a prophet "to the nations," "over nations," and "over kingdoms (Jeremiah 1.5, 10)."

626 (14th year). Nabopolassar, in a sweeping advance, takes advantage of a weakened Assyria, establishing a new, smaller, "empire" headquartered at Babylon (generally called the neo-Babylonian empire or the Confederation of Babylonia). This period represents several skirmishes with Assyrian governors who are all trying to resist Nabopolassar's control and keep the Assyrian government afloat.

622 (17th year). Nabopolassar has, by this time, established control over Babylonia. It is interesting to note that Josiah must have been capitalizing on Assyria's waning strength over the old land of Israel as he begins to carry religious reforms farther northward into "Manasseh, Ephraim, and Simeon, and as far as Naphtali (2 Chronicles 34.6-7)."

621 (18th year). During the project of refurbishing the Temple, the high priest Hilkiyah says to Josiah's secretary, Shaphan, "I have found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord (2 Kings 22.8)." You find in 2 Kings 22-23 the complete story. It was on the heels of this discovery that Jeremiah was called by God to embark upon a preaching ministry: God says, "hear the words of this covenant, and speak to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. You shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: cursed be the man who does not hear the words of this covenant . . . (Jeremiah 11.3-4).'" And it was this preaching ministry that brought Jeremiah the first threats against his life. The reforms of Josiah anticipated the livelihood of powerful priests being crushed, for many were deposed (2 Kings 23.5) and executed (2 Kings 23.20), but most refused to worship God (2 Kings 23.9). These agitated priests were the people to whom Jeremiah was called to preach.

614 (25th year). Nabopolassar begins his attack on the capital of Assyria. While his first attempt was unsuccessful, his second attack later in the year was aided by a confederation with the Median Kingdom. It appears that this confederation came about by Nabopolassar marrying his

son, Nebuchadnezzar,² to Princess Amytis, the daughter of King Cyaxares, the second king of Media.³ Nebuchadnezzar had already served his father dutifully as an accomplished general,⁴ but his career was only beginning.

612 (27th year). The city of Nineveh is finally destroyed and the Babylonian Empire is established. Indeed, by 610, General Nebuchadnezzar had driven his Assyrian foes, a loose organization of nobles and governors, as far as Haran. There, Assyria tried to regroup under the leadership of their newly-appointed general, Ashur-uballit II.

609 (31st year). Pharaoh Neco II, utilizing his ships on the Mediterranean, constructed makeshift harbors and brought armies north to assist the retreating Assyrians, likely because he was interested in the re-conquest of Syria, formerly accomplished by the great Thutmose III. Regardless, given the choice of a weakened Assyria or a vital Babylon, Neco chose the former and hoped to stifle Babylonian advances. Josiah sensed that this might be an opportune moment to surprise Neco by pouncing on him during his advance to Harran; Neco, after all, had to pass through Megiddo, which Josiah controlled. Were Josiah to succeed, the benefit to Judah would be an Assyrian Empire left to perish completely without needed aid from Egypt. This was not to be. Completely outclassed, Josiah is killed by Neco at Megiddo (2 Kings 23.28ff, 2 Chronicles 35.20ff). Josiah was only 40 years old and, when his chariot returned to Jerusalem with his dead body, the inhabitants would have been utterly stunned, finding God an untrustworthy protector. Neco, meanwhile, joins with the Assyrians at Haran, being the first Pharaoh in nearly 900 years to cross the Euphrates River. His efforts were wasted; failing to capture Harran, Assyrian leaders establish a last-stand at Carchemish while Neco repositions his armies at Riblah, in Syria.

Reign of Jehoahaz (609 BC, 3 months)

After Josiah's death, in Jeremiah's 18th year of ministry, the people of Jerusalem placed his third⁵ son, Jehoahaz, on the throne at age 23 (2 Kings 23.30). He was likely favored over his older brother because he would continue the policy of favoring Babylon and opposing Egypt, again, the rationale being that Judah favors whoever is most likely to rid the world of Assyrians. He ruled for only three months. During the three month reign of Jehoahaz, Neco remains in Riblah.

609. While fighting against Nebuchadnezzar's forces near Harran, Neco sent for Jehoahaz from Riblah. Amidst an intense battle, he likely wishes to curtail any aspirations Judah might have of avenging the death of Josiah. Jehoahaz is taken to Riblah and held captive while Neco's army

² Jeremiah and Ezekiel spell his name, "Nebuchadnezzar," which is closer to the Akkadian spelling; in other biblical instances (e.g. Daniel and, strangely, Jer. 27-29), his name is spelled, "Nebuchadnezzar;" Kidner, 15.

³ Nebuchadnezzar constructed the hanging gardens of Babylon as a gift for Amytis, who missed the gardens in the foothills of Media.

⁴ Nebuchadnezzar's official title was Rabtabbachim, "chief of slaughterers."

⁵ In 1 Chron. 3.15, he is called the fourth son of Josiah, but it would seem from 2 Kings 23.31 and 2 Chron. 36.11 that Zedekiah was the younger, fourth son, and that Jehoahaz is the third.

continues their campaign against Nebuchadnezzar. Indeed, Jeremiah does not even bother mentioning directly the reign of Jehoahaz.⁶

Reign of Jehoiakim (609-597 BC, 11 years)

In Jeremiah's 18th year of ministry, Pharaoh Neco II takes Jehoahaz into captivity and places an older son of Josiah, Eliakim (renamed, Jehoiakim), on the throne (2 Kings 23.33-34). The 25 year old Jehoiakim is undoubtedly preferred by Neco because there was something about his political involvements that made him think Jehoiakim would break Judah's habit of favoring the Babylonian insurgents and be a good pro-Egyptian appointment. This was a difficult balancing-act for Jehoiakim; he had to show some deference to his people's pro-Babylonian sentiments yet, at the same time, had to be a loyal subject of Egypt. It would seem that his sleight of hand had to do with appealing to the people's pro-Babylonian stance and, at the same time, encouraging the people to pay their inordinate tax to Babylon's foe, Egypt.⁷ Not an easy feat.

607 (2nd year). In Jeremiah's 21st year of ministry, Nabopolassar puts his son, general Nebuchadnezzar, in charge of defeating the Assyrian Empire's last stand at Carchemish (just west of Harran). The two-year Battle of Carchemish proved to be one of the most dramatic turning-points of the ancient world.

605 (4th year). In Jeremiah's 23rd year of ministry (Jeremiah 25.3), the Battle of Carchemish reaches a crescendo in a grand final confrontation. Nebuchadnezzar, defeating every effort of Assyria and Neco to form confederations with Mesopotamian neighbors, becomes the first king of the Babylonian Empire (see Jeremiah 46.2). Pharaoh Neco II and his army did not have the luxury of returning to Egypt in comfort; they were chased back to Egypt by Nebuchadnezzar, along with their pitiful captive, the former King Jehoahaz, in tow (who would die in Egypt years later). In the same year as the last confrontation of the Battle of Carchemish, Jeremiah, aided by Baruch, devotes a year and half to write a message as commanded by God (Jeremiah 36; cf. 45.1-4). Shortly after the defeat of Egypt, Jehoiakim and the people stop paying the tribute to Egypt and turn their allegiance strongly to Babylon; it would seem that everyone in Judah was happy to see the Assyrians finally routed. To be sure, many in Jerusalem saw this as divine justice. Nobody imagined that Nebuchadnezzar would ultimately be used by God, as His "servant," to rout Judah (Jeremiah 25.1-14)!

604 (5th year). Nebuchadnezzar pursued Neco II to the Egyptian border and had planned to cross the border. However, he was surprisingly held at the border and, before he is able to launch a deliberate attack, he receives word that his father, Nabopolassar, has died in Babylon. Rather than pursue Egyptian conquest, Nebuchadnezzar returns home. In the ninth month (of the 5th year of Jehoiakim's reign), Baruch reads the words of Jeremiah in the upper court of the Temple (Jeremiah had been forbidden to enter the Temple). The message is reported to the king's staff and Baruch is commanded to come and read the scroll before them, even the king's

⁶ Though, it may be that the small poetic lament in Jeremiah 22.10 is an oblique reference to Jehoahaz (cf. Ezekiel 19.1).

⁷ Neco imposed a tribute of 100 talents of silver and one talent of gold, nearly \$1m in today's currency.

personal secretary, Elishama, is present. Upon hearing the scroll, they offer one piece of advice to Baruch and Jeremiah: run and hide! The message of Jeremiah is brought to King Jehoiakim himself who, against the advice of his officials, slowly burns the scroll as it is being read, one column at a time (Jeremiah 36). He sends men to seize Jeremiah and Baruch, but they are hidden by God. Jeremiah is told by God to rewrite the scroll (another year and a half?!), with the addition of indictments against Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 36.32).

601 (8th year). The year after Jehoiakim burns the prophecy of God marks a pronounced turning point in the religious setting of Judah. Jeremiah begins to suffer under the weight of false priests who feel that they have the advocacy of the king in defying Jeremiah's words. Jeremiah is flogged and imprisoned (Jeremiah 20.2) and receives threats of execution (Jeremiah 26.10ff). Other prophets of the Lord also suffered during this time, including Uriah who was hunted by Jehoiakim and murdered (Jeremiah 26.20-23; cf. 22.17). In this year, Nebuchadnezzar again brings an army to attack Egypt, but is unable to breach the Egyptian border as easily as he had thought. Instead, he remains at the border, cutting Egypt from land routes to Syria; the king of Egypt "did not come again out of his land, for the king of Babylon had taken all that belonged to the king of Egypt (2 Kings 24.7)." This failure to defeat Egypt has profound implications for the reputation of Babylon. Many eyes were watching this new Empire and any weakness led former vassal nations to rebel. A close observer of current events, Jehoiakim notes Nebuchadnezzar's withdrawal and failed attempt to enter Egypt and, against Jeremiah's stern advice, confidently switches his allegiance to Egypt.⁸

598 (11th year). In December of Jeremiah's 30th year of ministry, Nebuchadnezzar employs Chaldeans, Syrians, Moabites, and Ammonites to lay siege to Jerusalem, enter the city, and bring to him Jehoiakim. According to the prophets, such misfortune was because of the "sins of Manasseh, according to all that he had done, and also for the innocent blood that he had shed (2 Kings 24.3-4)." Jehoiakim survives the attack, but is taken away in fetters to Babylon, but never making his destination because he dies on *en route*.

Reign of Jehoiachin (597 BC, 3 months)

The 18 year old son of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, is placed on the throne right after the deportation of his father by bands of foreign fighters. For three months he defends the city against the later siege of Nebuchadnezzar but, in March, Nebuchadnezzar himself personally enters Jerusalem along with a multinational army and Jehoiachin readily surrenders. This all took place during Nebuchadnezzar's 8th year (or 7th according to Jeremiah 52.28).⁹ Jehoiachin is taken to Babylon (for 37 years), along with some 18,000 prominent people (or 3,023 according to Jeremiah 52.28), including the prophet Ezekiel, whose public ministry is to begin a few years later in Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar completely ransacks the Temple, but does not destroy it. This event is historically known as the **First Deportation**.

⁸ It may be that 2 Kings 24.1 hints that Jehoiakim reconsiders this shift in allegiance some three years later, but this would be too late.

⁹ See 2 Kings 2.10-17.

Reign of Zedekiah (597-586 BC, 11 years)

In Jeremiah's 31st year of ministry, around age 50, the 21 year old Mattaniah, one of the sons of Josiah (and an uncle to Jehoiachin), is appointed king of Judah. He is renamed, Zedekiah, sworn to Babylonian loyalty, and appointed king by Nebuchadnezzar himself (2 Kings 24.17). Officially, it should have been Jehoiakim's son, Coniah, to be placed on the throne (Jer. 37.1), but Nebuchadnezzar deliberately sought a puppet, one who would willingly pay the huge tribute, without talk of rebellion. Zedekiah proved to be a sufficient puppet (to everybody), but not a very loyal one; from very early in his reign, he plotted revolt against Babylon (Jeremiah 27-29).

593 (4th year). It would seem that Zedekiah travels to Babylon to assure Nebuchadnezzar of his fealty (Jeremiah 51.59). It would seem that the meeting did not go well for, shortly after his return to Jerusalem, Zedekiah apparently takes a lead with his neighbors to contemplate national politics. Ambassadors from Tyre, Sidon, Edom, and Moab converge upon Jerusalem to discuss the kind of alliance that might be necessary in order to stand up against the new Babylonian Empire.

589 (8th year). Although the exact year is very imprecise, it would seem that Zedekiah signs a formal alliance with Egypt which, if it were discovered, would be treated by Nebuchadnezzar as an open act of treason. Unfortunately for Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar does discover the alliance and speedily attacks cities of Judah as a warning (Jeremiah 37.5-11; 34.21; Ezekiel 17.15-20): not Jerusalem, but Lachish and Azekah (Jeremiah 34.7).

At the arrival of soldiers from Egypt, Babylon retreats to fight on another front. Jeremiah, in his 39th year of ministry, tells Zedekiah that this retreat is temporary, warning him that Pharaoh's men are about to retreat to Egypt, and that Babylon will return to destroy the city of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 37.5-10). After Pharaoh's soldiers did retreat as Jeremiah prophesied, Jeremiah departs Jerusalem to Benjamin, but was captured by Zedekiah's men, beaten, and imprisoned, though not executed; Jeremiah is ultimately placed under "the court of the guard (Jeremiah 37.11-21)." At this point, the city is filled with fear and panic to such a degree that recently manumitted (i.e. freed) slaves are re-enslaved by the state (Jeremiah 34).

A governor-initiated uprising against Jeremiah (for damaging the morale of the soldiers) leads to Jeremiah being abandoned in a cistern. After a rescue, Zedekiah again sends for him and asks to hear Jeremiah's prophecy. Upon the promise that Zedekiah will preserve his life, Jeremiah tells the prophecy of Jerusalem's demise yet a *third* time (Jeremiah 38.14-23). Zedekiah tells Jeremiah to keep this prophecy a secret (even though it is obvious that the public knows), and Jeremiah remains in "the court of the guard" until the siege of Babylon (Jeremiah 24-28).

588 (9th year) 10th month, 10th day. Nebuchadnezzar returns to Judah and promptly sets up siege against Jerusalem in Jeremiah's 40th year of ministry (2 Kings 25.1; Jeremiah 52.4). The siege lasts for a year and a half. During this time, Jeremiah is absolutely hated by the religious authorities and governors of the day, and would have been murdered were it not for Zedekiah 'protection (Jeremiah 38.7-13).'

586 (11th year) 4th month, 9th day. This marks the 18th or 19th year of Nebuchadnezzar's unstoppable reign, and the people of Jerusalem begin to starve to death (Jeremiah 38.9) in their

own torched city. In addition, pestilence and disease begins to claim more and more lives. One evening, soldiers make a breach in the wall and Babylon's army descends upon the center of the city. King Zedekiah and some soldiers escape, but Jews in the city desert him, revealing his location (2 Kings 25.4; Jeremiah 52.7). Zedekiah and his soldiers are found, the soldiers being killed, while King Zedekiah and his sons are taken directly to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. Nebuchadnezzar slaughters Zedekiah's sons in his presence, then gouges out the eyes of the king and prepares to deport him to Babylon.

One month and one day later, Nebuchadnezzar's captain of the guard, Nebuzaradan, orders the destruction of Jerusalem's walls and the king's houses, as well as the destruction of Solomon's Temple (2 Kings 25.8ff; Jeremiah 39; 52.12-23). Nebuzaradan also gathered the chief priest, Seraiah, and the second priest, Zephaniah, and had them killed at Riblah (Jeremiah 52.24-27). Nebuzaradan also led many others to Babylon (832 according to Jeremiah 52.29, cf. 39.9-10). Zedekiah died in Babylon, never seeing Jerusalem again. This is the **Second Deportation**.

Both Nebuchadnezzar and his captain of the guard, Nebuzaradan, know about Jeremiah and treat him differently than the rest of Jerusalem. Nebuzaradan gives Jeremiah, after 42 years of ministry, the option of staying in Judah or going to Babylon. Jeremiah chooses the former (Jeremiah 39.11-40.6).

Governorship of Gedaliah (586 BC, 7 months)

Gedaliah, an appointee of Nebuchadnezzar, came from a family of important administrative officials in Jerusalem (he is the grandson of Shaphan).¹⁰ Nebuchadnezzar located Gedaliah at Mizpah, rather than in the city of Jerusalem. Men who had escaped the soldiers of Nebuchadnezzar during the siege, came out of hiding and organized themselves before Gedaliah. Because of the dilapidated state of the nation, these men urged him to relocate the people to Egypt. Gedaliah, however, listening to Jeremiah, who insisted that they remain loyal to Babylon. The people seemed to unite under Gedaliah's wise administration, tending to the land and bringing in the harvest (see Jeremiah 40).

During his brief rule, there were mounting pressures: jealousy from those who worshiped Baal, Ammonite peoples greedy for new territory, and dangerous plots from the old royal family. Regarding the latter, Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, organized men who murdered Gedaliah (Jeremiah 40.7-41.3). An honest advisor to Gedaliah, Johanan, tried to warn him of the plotted assassination, but Gedaliah refused to listen and paid for it with his life (Jeremiah 40.13-16).

No Rule (26 years, 5 months)

Johanan pursued the Gedaliah's assassins to Gibeon, but Ishmael escaped to Ammon along with eight others. Johanan however, was able to unite the people as one at Mizpah. They all took residence near Bethlehem for fear of returning to Mizpah; they knew that when Nebuchadnezzar discovered that his appointed governor had been killed, repercussion would be sure to follow (Jeremiah 41.11-18).

¹⁰ Gedaliah's father, Ahikam, used his political authority in Jerusalem to protect Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26.24).

585 (4th year of 'no rule' period). Johanan and the others sought God's will from Jeremiah, vowing to follow whatever God tells Jeremiah (Jeremiah 42.1-6). At this point, Jeremiah is in his 43rd year of ministry and around 62 years old. After ten days, Jeremiah summons Johanan and the others to instruct them not to trust Egypt for protection, but to trust God, who will 'build them up' in the land of Judah and not 'tear them down.' Indeed, should they go to Egypt, then "the sword that you fear shall overtake you there" (Jeremiah 42.7-22). The people call Jeremiah a liar (and Baruch a manipulator), and make plans to relocate to Egypt (Jeremiah 43.1-7).

Taking Jeremiah and Baruch by force, they arrive in Tahpanhes, Egypt. Jeremiah prophesies against the people for leaving no remnant in Judah (Jeremiah 44.7), worshipping Egyptian idols (Jeremiah 44.8), and having no remorse for the evil of their fathers (Jeremiah 44.9), telling them that "the Lord [will] no longer bear your evil deeds and the abomination that you committed (Jeremiah 44.22)." As such, God says, "all the men of Judah who are in the land of Egypt shall be consumed by the sword and by famine, until there is an end of them (Jeremiah 44.27)." Jeremiah says that this will come about by Pharaoh Hophra being given over to his enemies, just as Zedekiah was given to Babylon (Jeremiah 44.30).

It would seem from historical record that, shortly after arriving in Tahpanhes, Jeremiah dies. One church tradition says that Jeremiah was stoned to death by Jews at Tahpanhes. Another tradition adds that Jeremiah's bones were ultimately interned in Alexandria (northern Egypt). Yet another tradition says that, during Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Egypt, Jeremiah and Baruch escaped to Babylon, where they both died.

582 (7th year of 'no rule' period). It is approximately during this time that there appears to have been a **Third Deportation** of some 745 Judeans by Nebuzaradan, in the 23rd year of Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 52.30). It may also be during this time that Jeremiah's prophecy against Pharaoh Hophra came to fulfillment.¹¹

562 (27th year). Marking the end of a period of little to no official rule in Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar dies after a some 45 years as king. His son, Evil-merodach takes over as king of Babylon. Evil-merodach releases the former king Jehoiachin from prison in the 37th year of his exile, and places him in a seat of authority in his kingdom until his death (Jeremiah 52.31-34), a common respect paid to defeated rulers in their elder years.

¹¹ It is difficult to tell how Pharaoh Hophra dies; he was embroiled in a civil war during this period and some historians maintain that he was killed by his opponent, Pharaoh Amasis II. Additionally, Nebuchadnezzar's control of Egypt was always very tenuous.