

### **Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet**

As with most prophets, Jeremiah tried to refuse God's call. He was young, maybe in early teens, when God called him and his response was that he was too young. He would have the hard job of prophesying to those older, wiser and more powerful than himself. But God told him "Before you were born I set you apart and anointed you as my prophet to the nations."

Josiah was king of Judah during this time. He had found a text of Deuteronomy and had it read to the people because he knew the people needed to change the way they related to God. The people had not been faithful to the covenants and had been worshipping false gods. Josiah ordered the temples to the false gods destroyed and passed laws requiring the people to live by the covenants. This did not change the way the Jews acted.

Jeremiah began telling the people that they had abandoned God by putting their trust in something as useless as a cracked pot. They had rejected God and traded Him in for false idols. He taught that the faithless of the lost Northern Kingdom were less guilty than the treacherous people of Judah who persisted in their idolatry. They would be punished by having their country removed from the map. God would no longer listen to their prayers. He used the example of a potter who when not pleased with his work would destroy it and start over again. The people of Judah were not happy with Jeremiah's message and he suffered much. He was beaten, thrown into a cistern and left to die (the king finally rescued him from the cistern), and was thrown in jail for 10 years. But he continued to preach that the people needed to change.

The people refused to listen to him because they believed that Jerusalem could be conquered. They continued to ignore the poor and the needy. They were giving lip service to God and would not change in their hearts.

Finally, in 605BC the Jeremiah dictated his prophesy to Baruch, a scribe. It was read to the people and a copy was given to the king's advisors to read. As the book was read, the king would cut off pieces and burn them because he refused to believe them. This did not stop Jeremiah who was told by God to re-write the book. Shortly after that, the king died and his son was made king. He ruled for only three months because the Babylonians attacked and took the first round of exiles to Babylon. As previously stated, Daniel was among this first wave of exiles. They returned in 597BC and took a second wave of exiles. Ezekiel, our next prophet, was taken in this wave.

A new king, Zedekiah, was appointed and ruled for about 8 years. He made the decision to stop paying the taxes to Babylon and in 587BC was overrun by the Babylonians. This time they destroyed the city and dismantled the Temple. During this time Jeremiah remained in Jerusalem with the few who were allowed to remain and continued to preach. His prophesies at this point became more hopeful.

### **Ezekiel**

Ezekiel was a young priest when he was taken into exile in the second wave in 597BC. He had two messages for the exiles. First, God would allow Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and to exile Jews who survived. And Second, God will eventually allow them to return and rebuild to a greater glory. He was a priest and with no Temple he had no job. He became a prophet while in exile. He saw God's throne in a

chariot pulled by four faced creatures. Each creature had on its head the face of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle. These four animals later became the symbols of the Evangelists who wrote the four Gospels. God told Ezekiel to be a prophet and gave him a scroll to eat. The scroll tasted sweet as honey which let all who heard him know that it was God's works not his. He helped them to learn to worship and preached about hope and the return to Jerusalem, even though the Temple would be destroyed. Ten years later when the Temple was destroyed in 587BC, Ezekiel changed his message. He told the people that God still loved them and would bring them back to Jerusalem.

He also had a vision. He saw a valley covered with disjointed bones. Gradually the bones joined together to form a skeleton. Then the skeleton was gradually covered with flesh. This symbolized the fact that God would restore the people to Jerusalem. A wind swept through the valley and it symbolized God breathing life into them.

In 587 BC when the temple was destroyed, the people were devastated. They felt that they could only pray in the temple. At this time they were told that they did not need the Temple to pray. They could gather together and pray and read the scriptures. They began to do this and this is the beginning of the Synagogues. They were being taught to see things in a new way and to repent for their lack of following the covenants.

### **The Return**

At this time the Persians were the world power. When Cyrus conquered Babylon he promised to free the political prisoners and let the exiles return to Jerusalem. Just as they were sent into exile in 3 waves, they return to Jerusalem in 3 waves.

The first was in 537BC; more than 40,000 exiles began the return. King Cyrus gave the Jews over 5,000 articles of gold and silver previously stolen from them by the Babylonians. This included the furnishings of the temples. He also ordered the Babylonians to send them off with gold, silver and livestock to help on their way. When they returned home, they began building the temple. It was smaller than the one which was destroyed. The non-Jews who had settled in Jerusalem were against the building of the temple and convinced the new king to stop the work. After several years, the Jews convinced the succeeding King Darius to search the records to prove their claim that Cyrus wanted the temple built. When they did, they were allowed to complete the temple.

Much later in about 458BC, a priest named Ezra, a Jew living and working in Babylon, came to Jerusalem as part of the second wave of exiles. His job was teaching the Jews and reviving the practice of their religion.

Later still, in the third wave of exiles in 444BC, Nehemiah came back to Jerusalem. His job was to complete the building of the wall around the Temple. The Jews worked very hard and were able to complete the wall, about 1 ½ miles in length, in just 52 days. When the work was over, the Jews gathered and thanked God. Ezra read the "Law of Moses" which summarizes the agreement God made with the Jewish people and the laws they were to obey. They promise to follow all the laws especially not marrying outside the Jewish faith, not doing business on the Sabbath and not neglect caring for the temple. They were no longer nomads, but the new people of God.