

Some thoughts on the structure of the book of Jeremiah

The book of Jeremiah can be divided in four major parts:

- I. Jeremiah 1-20,
- II. Jeremiah 21-35,
- III. Jeremiah 36-45 and
- IV. Jeremiah 46-52.

The first part is recognizable by the inclusion of Jeremiah's calling in Jer 1:1-19 and Jeremiah's complaint about his calling in Jer 19:14-20:18. There is an enormous tension between God's election of Jeremiah even before his being created in his mother's womb on the one side (Jer 1:5) and Jeremiah's own struggle with his calling as a prophet on the other (Jer 20:14-18). The first part of Jeremiah ends with his cry in 20:18 (NIV):

"Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?"

This cry is a question which finds an answer in part II. Jer 21-35 and III. Jer 36-45.

I. Jeremiah 1 to 20

A 1,1-19 The book contains the prophecies of Jeremiah from Josiah to Zedekiah (1-3). Jeremiah's calling (4-10). The branch of an almond tree: God will fulfill his word (11-12). A boiling pot: judgment coming from the north (13-16). Kings, priests and the people will fight against Jeremiah, but God will protect him (17-19).

B 2,1-3,5 After the honeymoon in the desert Israel committed adultery. She has forsaken the spring of living water.

C 3,6-25 The sisters Israel and Judah have committed adultery with idols (6-11). Return, then I will give you good shepherds and let you come home from the north (12-20). Yes, we come to you ... shameful gods have consumed everything. We have sinned against the Lord (21-25).

D 4,1-31 O Israel, return to me, then the nations will be blessed in me. Circumcise your heart (1-4). Flee because of the disaster from the north (5-6). The peace prophecy is a lie (10). O Israel, repent (14).

E 5,1-31 No one in Jerusalem leads a just life. Should I not punish them for this (9+29)? They are blind and deaf.

D' 6,1-30 Flee because of the disaster from the north (1)! Their ear is uncircumcised (10). False prophecy (14). I have made you a tester of metals and my people the ore, but the refining goes in vain (27-30).

— F 7,1-8,3 The temple sermon: Reform your ways, and I will let you live in this place (1-15). Do not pray for this people. After I had liberated them from Egypt, they have become disobedient (7,16-8,1).

D" 8,4-22 The people in Jerusalem love to go astray (4-7), the wise handle the law of the Lord falsely (8-13). We will perish, because we have sinned against the Lord. The enemies will come from the north and devour the land and everything in it (14-17). Since my people are crushed, I am crushed (18-22).

E' 9,1-11 All are totally depraved by sin and godless. Should I not punish them for this (9)?

D" 9,12-26 What man is wise enough to understand that the land has been ruined because of the wickedness of the people? Let him who boasts boast of knowing the Lord, not of his own wisdom, strength or riches. God will punish all uncircumcised nations, including Israel which is uncircumcised in heart (25-26).

C' 10,1-25 Do not fear and do not serve the dead idols (1-5 God speaks, 6-16 Jeremiah speaks). The shepherds are senseless, therefore disaster and exile is coming from the north (17-22). Jeremiah prays: Correct me, Lord, but only with justice - not in your anger... Pour out your wrath on the nations... For they have devoured Jacob (23-25).

B' 11,1-17 After her liberation from Egypt Israel was always disobedient. God punishes them, do not pray for them.

A' 11,18-12,17 The plot of the men of Anathoth against Jeremiah (11,18-23). Jeremiah complains that the faithless live at ease, and God answers (12,1-6). The sword devours in the whole land. No one has peace. God uproots the wicked neighbors of Israel, but later he will rebuild them within a renewed Israel (12,7-17).

B 13,1-11 The ruined linen belt near the Euphrates: God will ruin the pride of Judah and Jerusalem in his judgment.

C 13,12-17 The filled wine jars: All will be punished, kings and priests, prophets and all inhabitants. Everybody should humble himself before God and give God the glory.

D 13,18-27 The king and the queen should come down from their thrones and sit on the the ground. The disaster approaching from the north is Jerusalem's punishment for adultery.

E 14,1-15,21 During the drought: Do not pray for this people. False prophecy of peace. God destroys them with the sword, famine and plague (14,1-15,9). But there is also Jeremiah's intercession: 14,7-9 and 13 and 19-22. God would not even accept the intercession of Moses and Samuel. Jeremiah's confessions (15,10-21): Woe is me, my mother, that you gave me birth (10). God will leave a remnant in captivity (11-14). Protect me, I am yours. Will you be to me like a deceptive brook (15-18)? God promises to protect Jeremiah, if he is faithful (19-21).

— F 16,1-21 Jeremiah shall not marry, neither enter into the house of mourning nor into the house of feasting (1-13). There will be a new exodus from the land of the north and all the countries of their captivity back home (14-21). Jeremiah confesses: "Oh Lord, my strength, to you the nations will come" (19).

E' 17,1-18 Judah's sin is written on the tablets of their hearts. Cursed is the man, who turns away from the Lord. Blessed is the man, who trusts him (1-13). Jeremiah confesses: Heal me, O Lord, and I will be healed (14-18).

D' 17,19-27 If you keep the Sabbath day holy, then kings will sit on David's throne and people will worship in the temple. But if not, then I will kindle a fire that will consume Jerusalem's fortresses.

C' 18,1-23 The parable of the potter: The prophecies of peace or doom depend on the life of the nations. So turn from your evil ways (1-17)! Jeremiah's confessions: His prayer for protection from his enemies (18-23).

B" 19,1-13 The breaking of the clay jar in the Valley of Ben Hinnom is a sign of Jerusalem's punishment.

A" 19,14-20,18 God will punish Pashhur, the chief officer in the temple, because he preaches lies and mistreats Jeremiah. Pashhur's new name is "Terror on every side" (19,14-20,6). Jeremiah's confessions: Jeremiah suffers from being a prophet. "Terror on every side". Cursed be the day I was born! Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow? (20,7-18).

II. Jeremiah 21 to 35

- A 21:1-14 Zedekiah asks for a prophecy.
- B 22:1-30 God's judgment of king Shallum, Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin.
- C 23:1-8 The good shepherd comes, the righteous Branch from David.
- D 23:9-40 Against the false prophets.
- E 24:1-10 The Parable of good and bad figs: A new heart for Jews in Babylon.
- F 25:1-14 70 years are ordained for Babylon in the book of Jeremiah's prophecy.
- G 25:15-38 The cup of God's wrath for all nations.
- H 26:1-24 Jerusalem will be destroyed like Shiloh. Danger for the prophet.
- G' 27:1-22 The yoke of the king of Babylon for all nations.
- H' 28:1-17 Jeremiah and the false prophet Hananiah: The change of the yoke.
- F' 29:1-32 70 years are ordained for Babylon. The prophet's Letter (= Book).
- E' 30:1-31:40 God grants Israel a new heart and covenant and coming home.
- D' 32:1-44 Jeremiah's buying of a field confirms his salvation prophecy.
- C' 33:1-25 The righteous Branch from David comes, salvation for Judah.
- A' 34:1-7 A prophecy for Zedekiah.
- A" 34:8-22 Zedekiah and the leaders break the covenant not freeing the slaves.
- B' 35:1-19 There will always be a man for Jonadab son of Recab to serve God.

The second part Jer 21-35 is recognizable by the contrast between all the four unfaithful kings of Jeremiah's time in Jer 21-22 on the one hand and the faithful Jonadab the son of Recab in Jer 35 on the other. While we learn about king Jehoiachin, that he will be recorded "as if childless", because none of his offspring will sit on David's throne (22:30 in contrast to 2 Sam 7:14-16), Jonadab is given the great promise: "Jonadab son of Recab will never fail to have a man to serve me" (35:19). At the same time Jer 21 and Jer 34 build an inclusion through the figure of the weak last king Zedekiah, who would receive Jeremiah's word as a word of God but would not put it into obedient practice.

Some keys helped me to unlock the chiasmic structure of Jer 21-35: The twin sections of the righteous Branch of Davidic descent (Jer 23:5-6 and 33:15-16), of the new heart for the Israelites (Jer 24:7 and 31:31-34), of the 70 years for Babylon (Jer 25:11 and 29:10), of the parable sections of the cup of God's wrath and the yoke of the Babylonians for all nations (Jer 25:15-38 and 27:1-22).

The second part Jer 21-35 answers the question of Jeremiah why he was born to be such a suffering prophet with the perspective of a changed nation and a changed world: God will guide Israel and the nations through the time of judgment to the times of the Messiah who will bring Israel righteousness and a new heart and a new covenant. The 70 years of Jeremiah build a bridge from the times of judgment and destruction to the time when God will build his nation up again (Jer 1:9-10), to the time of salvation culminating in the advent of the Messiah. Without this bridge Israel might have vanished in the abyss of the exile. In other words: I believe that God saved Israel from being extinguished as a nation through the prophecy of Jeremiah. If that is not a profound answer to the question: Why have I been born?

III. Jeremiah 36 to 45

A 36:1-32 The scroll of Baruch

B 37:1-10 Zedekiah asks Jeremiah to pray to God for them.

C 37:11-16 Jeremiah is taken captive.

B' 37:17-21 Zedekiah asks Jeremiah for a word from God.

D 38:1-13 Ebed-Melech saves the life of Jeremiah (out of the cistern).

E 38:14-28 Zedekiah asks Jeremiah for God's word but is disobedient.

E' 39:1-14 Zedekiah is taken captive. Jeremiah is freed.

D' 39:15-18 Because of his trust in God Ebed-Melech will be saved.

B'' 40:1-43:7 Judah asks Jeremiah for God's word but is disobedient.

C' 43:8-13 Jeremiah's prophecy in Tahpanhes in Egypt.

B''' 44:1-30 Jeremiah warns the Jews in Egypt because of their idolatry.

A' 45:1-5 The life of Baruch will be saved.

The third part Jer 36-45 goes into a similar direction of giving Jeremiah an answer to his question why he was born to be such a prophet, but the answer is more near his own time, it is not far away but fulfilled in his lifetime. It is a fulfillment of God's promise of protection given at the time of his calling in Jer 1:18-19: They will fight him but he will be unconquerable and survive them all!

Some keys helped me to unlock the chiastic structure of Jer 36-45: The inclusion is formed by the important role of Baruch in the fourth year of king Jehoiakim in Jer 36 and 45. Baruch is on Jeremiah's side in Jer 36 being faithful and crucial to his mission. He is granted the protection of his life in Jer 45. The same is true for Ebed-Melech in Jer 38:1-13 and 39:15-18. In the center of this chiastic structure are the two persons of Zedekiah and Jeremiah: One going down because of his unfaithfulness, the other being freed through the Babylonians when his drastic prophecies had come true. The message of this third part is that God is able to protect the few faithful even amongst the greatest disasters.

Jeremiah 46 to 52

1. 46:1-28 The word of the Lord concerning the nations (1):
Concerning Egypt (26: hope)
2. 47:1-7 Concerning the Philistines (6-7: unlimited punishment?)
3. 48:1-47 Concerning Moab (27: hope)
4. 49:1-6 Concerning the Ammonites (6: hope)
5. 49:7-22 Concerning Edom (18: punishment)
6. 49:23-27 Concerning Damascus
7. 49:28-33 Concerning Kedar and Hazor
8. 49:34-39 Concerning Elam (39: hope)
9. 50:1-51:64 Concerning Babylon (51:37-43: punishment)
51:64: The words of Jeremiah end here.
10. 52:1-34 History as confirmation of Jeremiah's prophecy:
The fall of Jerusalem in Zedekiah's reign (1-30).
The released Jehoiachin is a sign of hope for God's
mercy in the future (31-34).

The fourth part Jer 46-52 is clearly recognizable as a list of 9 sections concerning gentile nations. The tenth section being the climax deals with the people of God. First some nations which God is about to punish through the Babylonian armies, most of them Judah's neighbors. Then a prophecy that the Babylonians will be punished as well for their sins, their sins against the Jews, Jerusalem and the Temple.

The last chapter presents the reason why God will punish the Babylonians: It presents the catastrophe of Jerusalem's fall and the destruction of the Temple. At the same time it is a confirmation of Jeremiah's judgment prophecies making his book canonical (see Jer 51:64). Could it be the case that the 10 punishments here not only start with Egypt (Jer 46:2) but remind us of the famous ten plagues of Egypt? There the 10th plague meant the liberation of the people of God out of the slavery in Egypt. They were freed to go and take possession of the promised land. But here the tenth punishment hits the people of God hard destroying the promised land and leading them away into captivity.

But the final note is not one of judgment, but of mercy for the king of Judah in Babylon. On the background of the salvation prophecies of Jeremiah this points to the fact that God has not forsaken his people but will have mercy on them again.