

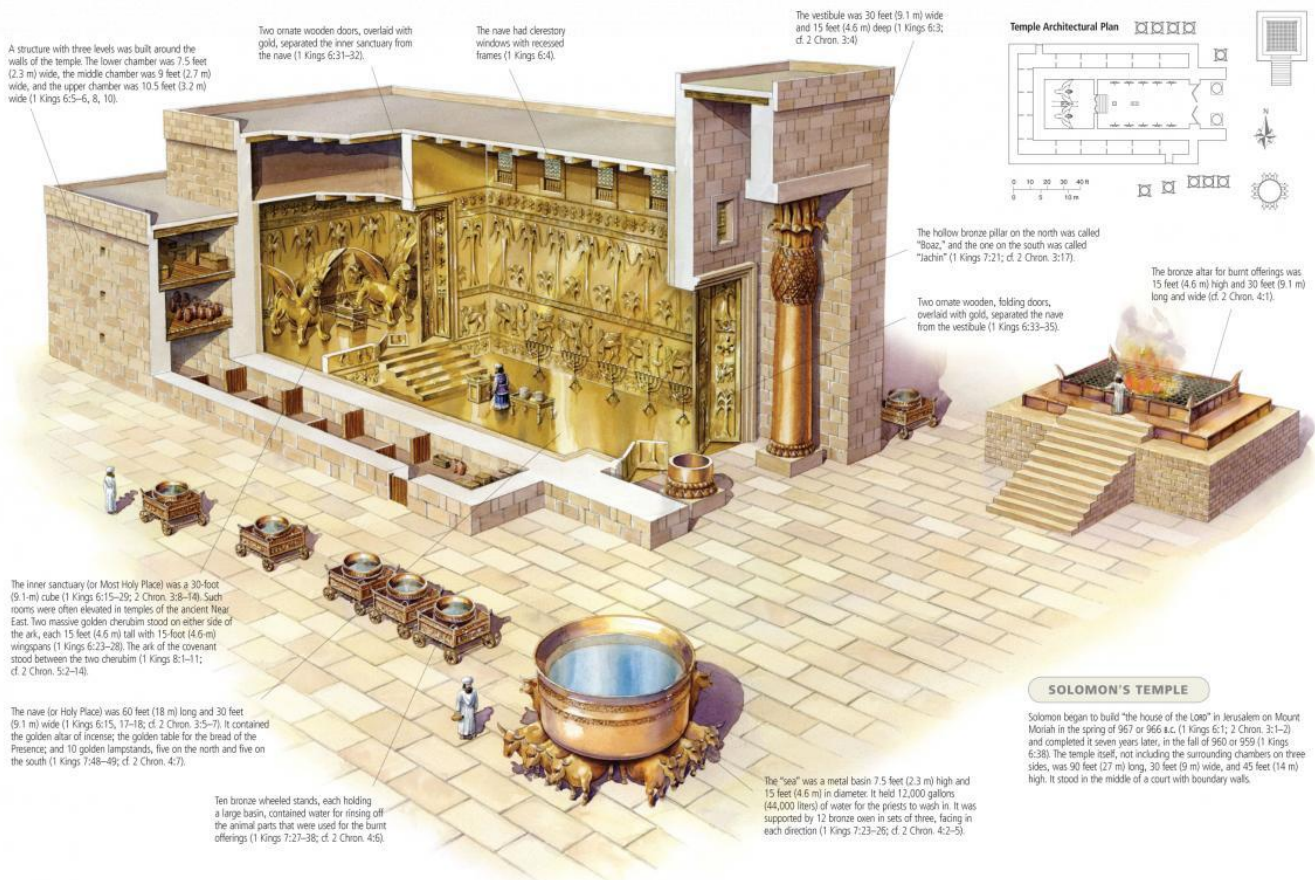
# PROPHET JEREMIAH

One of the most difficult experiences in the history of the Jewish people around this time was the near total destruction of Jerusalem and with that the end of the Temple and the nation (587 BC). It was the prophet Jeremiah who helped the people to interpret their own history. In those difficult times, seeing in the destruction of Jerusalem the hand of God who was inviting the people to conversion of heart and nurturing a hope that at least a small number of people would survive this ordeal.

Jeremiah, the son of Hilkiah, a Levitical priest, was likely born between 650 and 645 B.C. He was from the small village of Anathoth, about three miles northeast of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin (Jeremiah 1:1). It was through Jeremiah's childhood training for holy service in the priesthood that God began grooming him for his future role. God gave Jeremiah the overview of his prophetic ministry: "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out and to pull down, to destroy and to throw down, to build and to plant" (verses 9-10).

## The Temple in Jerusalem

The temple of Jerusalem was built by King Solomon, was of tremendous significance to the Jews. Their love for it and their confidence that God would protect it at all costs because it was His house. Whenever the prophets warned the people to change their sinful ways, they would swear by the Temple and say that God would save them because of their Temple and because of the sacrifices they offered in it.



## **Jeremiah's warnings**

God told Jeremiah to announce Jerusalem's coming destruction by invaders from the north (Jeremiah 1:14-15; 4:6; 6:22-23). God's people had broken their covenant with God (Jeremiah 11:10). They had forsaken God by worshipping the false gods called Baals (Jeremiah 2:8; 7:9; 11:13) and even went as far as building altars to Baal in order to burn their children as offerings (Jeremiah 19:4-5).

Jeremiah exposed some of the persistent sins of the people, including pride and ingratitude toward God's loving kindness. Jeremiah announced that the effects of sin would be that God would withdraw His blessings (Jeremiah 16:5-10). The nation would now be faced with famine and starvation. Invaders would plunder them; and finally they would be taken captive into a foreign land (Jeremiah 14:12; 15:1-4; 16:4; 19:8-9; 25:8-9).

When King Josiah died, Jeremiah's hardships as a prophet of God increased. His message aroused great hostility and death threats, especially in his native city, Anathoth (Jeremiah 11:21). Even his own relatives conspired against him and betrayed him (Jeremiah 12:6).

His persecution increased in Jerusalem when a priest named Pashhur sought out Jeremiah to have him beaten and put in the stocks at the Upper Gate of Benjamin for a day (Jeremiah 20:1-2). After this, Jeremiah lamented the hardship that had come to him for speaking God's words. It was difficult to have become a laughingstock to the people and a target of mockery (verse 7).

When everyone deserted him, he was not alone. God was with him. He had a personal friend in God who never failed him. God knew him as an individual. The people used to think that God dealt only with the whole tribe and not with the individual. They had a false confidence that as long as the temple stood, no harm would come to Jerusalem. So Jeremiah spoke to the people about the New Covenant that God would make with his people. "It will not be like the old covenant which Moses made" he said. "This new covenant will be written on men's hearts, not on tablets of stone. It will be between God and each person." (Jeremiah 31:31-33).

## **The first capture of Jerusalem (597 BC)**

Jeremiah advised King Jehoiakim not to make alliance with Egypt to rebel against Babylon; but rather to submit to God's will that Babylon should rule over Judah. But the people considered that Jeremiah had spoken treason against Judah. King Jehoiakim and his successor went on plotting with Egypt. In 597 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon stormed through Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. The city surrendered. The king, nobles and all the leading citizens were taken away to exile in Babylon. This time the temple was spared. Nebuchadnezzar installed Zedekiah as a puppet king in Judah.

Jeremiah thought that this first exile would bring the people to their senses. But nothing changed and they boasted that God had saved their Temple. So they persuaded Zedekiah to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar once again. Jeremiah advised the king to surrender. The leaders of the city hated the prophet for his treason. They imprisoned him right through the siege. But Jeremiah kept on giving the Lord's message to the people. Besides warning them, he also told them that God's punishment would last only a few years. After that God will restore to at least some of the people, their homes and fields and vineyards.

## The final fall of Jerusalem (587 BC)

In 587 BC the Babylonians increased their siege force and they reduced the population of Jerusalem to famine conditions. Finally, they breached the walls and entered Jerusalem. Zedekiah and his closest advisors were captured and carried off by Nebuchadnezzar to Syria and there they were tortured horribly.



Jerusalem was sacked and almost completely destroyed. The golden furnishings and trimmings of the Temple were carried off, so were its bronze columns and basin. The temple, the royal palace and the city walls were razed to the ground and burnt. All military, civil and religious leaders were either executed or carried away into captivity. Only the poorest of the peasants of Judah were allowed to remain in the land which was by now a place of complete desolation.

### Reflection:

1. For how many years will the people of Judah stay in exile? What plans does Yaweh have for them?
2. Do we feel abandoned and desolate in time of stress and storm? Does God seem far, far away from us in times of difficulty?
3. Have you felt a greater closeness to God after a difficulty or a failure? Did a message of hope and joy ring in your heart after difficulties? Praise God for his continual presence with us during these times, with his messages of hope and promise.

**For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. (Jeremiah 29:11)**