

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

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The structure of the book of Jeremiah has been a conundrum for scholars through the centuries. In his commentary J. A. Thomson wrote, "When we come to inquire whether any principles of arrangement can be observed in the book of Jeremiah, we have to admit that any consistent principles escape us" (J. A. Thompson, [Jeremiah](#), pp. 30-31).

That is pretty much where I have left this discussion during more than thirty years of teaching Jeremiah. Having given up any hope of seeing an orderly, literary arrangement of the material, I chopped up the materials of Jeremiah into sections and put them in chronological order. I needed a chronological ordering of the material to see where the messages and events fit into Jeremiah's life.

Then I discovered an article written by S. Jonathan Murphy in [Bibliotheca Sacra](#) (July-September, 2009, pp. 306-18). After surveying the problems involved in trying to understand the structure of Jeremiah, Murphy has provided us with a well reasoned proposal. Murphy suggests that Jeremiah is a "carefully compiled anthology of the prophet's sermons and of incidents in his life" (p. 314).

According to Murphy, the *individual units* of Jeremiah were originally addressed to the people to whom Jeremiah ministered at different stages throughout his ministry. The *final form* of the work, compiled after Jehoiachin's release in 561 B.C., was a message to the exiles in Babylon providing encouragement and hope through promises of restoration. Since the judgments which Jeremiah announced had been fulfilled, the exiles in Babylon could be confident that the restoration would also come about.

Murphy believes that Jeremiah has been carefully constructed to a recurring theological message of judgment and hope for God's exiled people (p. 315). Because they have broken the Mosaic Covenant, they experienced judgment (Lev. 26, Deut. 28). But because of God's unconditional promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:2-3), God would deliver His people from exile and rebuild them as a nation. So Jeremiah repeatedly presents Yahweh's judgment and promised hope, destruction and restoration, and cursing and blessing.

The entry and exit points of the anthology, according to Murphy, are chapters 1 and 52. These chapters serve as "bookends" to hold the work together as an anthology. Chapter one verse 10 sets forth the agenda of the book. Here we see "in seed form" the themes of judgment and restoration which make up the rest of the book. The final chapter (52) highlights these same themes by recounting two incidents. Chapter 52 tells of the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, emphasizing the theme of judgment. But the book concludes with a message of hope. Jehoiachin is released from prison, anticipating the future restoration and return of the people of Judah.

Murphy offers the following outline of the final form of Jeremiah:

- I. Introduction: The ministry and message of the prophet 1
- II. Recurring declarations of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem 2-25
- III. Recurring declarations of restoration for Judah and Jerusalem 26-35
- IV. Realization of judgment on Judah and Jerusalem 36-45
- V. Declarations of judgment against foreign nations 46-51
- VI. Conclusion: The ministry and message of Jeremiah vindicated 52

He summarizes the message of Jeremiah in this way:

“The declared *and* realized judgment of Yahweh on His covenant people Judah and the nations because of sin encourages the exiles to hope, amid their misery, in the fulfillment of His promises of restoration” (p. 317).

Murphy has convinced me that the difficulties in understanding the structure of the Book of Jeremiah can be significantly reduced by respecting the text as it stands and not trying to de-construct, edit or rearrange the material of the book. At last the structure of Jeremiah is beginning to make sense to me! I have incorporated Murphy’s outline into my lectures on Jeremiah.