

The Book of Jeremiah is a Montage

Description

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My last post dealt with Jeremiah 3:6-7. There is something important we can learn from verse 6 that I didn't comment on. Hence, this post. Here is the verse:

3:6 And Yahweh said to me in the days of Josiah the king, "Do you? see what she did? Turncoat – Israel – she went upon every high hill and beneath every spreading tree, and she prostituted there. – Jeremiah 3:6 (my translation)

If you read starting at chapter 2 verse 1, this verse seems to somewhat awkwardly pop out. You're reading along, and things generally flow. You think, "Yeah, mmhmm so Israel and Judah turned on Yahweh, Yahweh points out that he was nothing but good to them but they departed from his ways and did wickedness anyway. The priests and rulers were corrupt, mmhmm... yeah... judgment is coming on the land... The people claim to be blameless and think Yahweh's anger will turn from them but, in actuality, they just keep on sinning so, of course, Yahweh isn't going to act like everything is okay." Then, suddenly it says, "And Yahweh said to me in the days of Josiah the king..." and then it goes on to say what Yahweh said to Jeremiah.

What is this line about? Well, obviously, if everything leading up to this was also what Yahweh had said to Jeremiah in the days of Josiah, presumably, this line would have come before all of it. But the fact that this line shows up here lets us know the preceding material probably did not come from the days of Josiah. So, it marks a division between two sections, even though it is in the middle of a chapter. One lesson of this is that natural divisions in the text are not always marked by chapter divisions, which isn't surprising given that chapter divisions were added many centuries later. But it also lets us know that Jeremiah is composed of different sections of originally separate material. The material preceding verse 6 was originally separate from the material in and following verse 6. There is actually a whole lot of evidence for this; what I'm pointing out here in verse 6 is just an obvious example of a literary seam between two parts.

If you start reading Jeremiah from the beginning, it is also apparent that there is a literary seam between chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 is all about Jeremiah's calling – his installment into prophetic office, while chapter 2 totally drops that subject and is quite clearly the beginning of some other composition that is largely a rebuke directed toward Jerusalem. Furthermore, there are actually two primary versions of the book of Jeremiah. I'm not talking about different translations, but two very different ancient versions. One is found in the Masoretic text and is the version found in most English Bibles. The other is preserved in the Greek Septuagint ([you can read the NETS translation of it here](#)). There are Hebrew manuscripts corresponding to both versions that were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These two versions are very different from each other. The Masoretic Version is about one eighth longer than the Septuagint Version and the material that is shared between the two versions is arranged in different orders. What this indicates is that both

versions are compilations of smaller chunks of originally separate source material. And when you read either version on its own, the internal evidence also supports this. You have stuff like the first phrase of Jeremiah 3:6 that I've already pointed out. But there is also the fact that there is a mix of material that is written in first person, claiming to be written by Jeremiah (like what we have in Jeremiah 1:4-19) alongside other material that tells stories about Jeremiah in third person, like what we find in Jeremiah 26, for example.

There is a whole lot more that could be said about this and why it's important. Maybe we'll get to that in future blog posts. For now, though, it is important to simply be aware that this is the case. Knowing that what we currently have in the book of Jeremiah is not all one thing, and not all by one author, is really important and it can help us to view each originally separate work within "Jeremiah" on its own merits and we can then try to understand and evaluate each author individually, without assuming that each author is saying precisely the same thing as the others. I'm sure that when you write something, you want people to understand it for what it is rather than combining it with what someone else wrote and assume that you must agree with that other author.

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