

Over the past few weeks we've had sermons on several Old Testament characters. I thought it would be helpful firstly to show these on a historical timeline.

It starts in 950BC, 20 years after the death of King David, and runs to 400BC



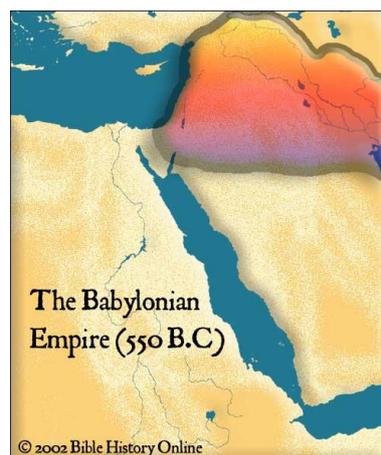
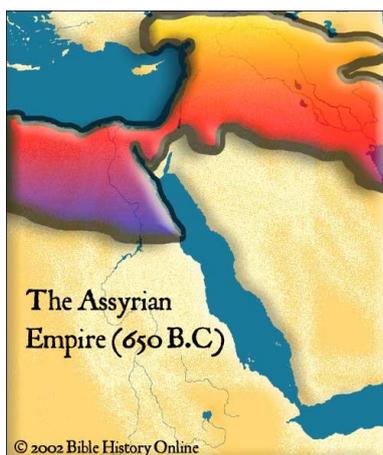
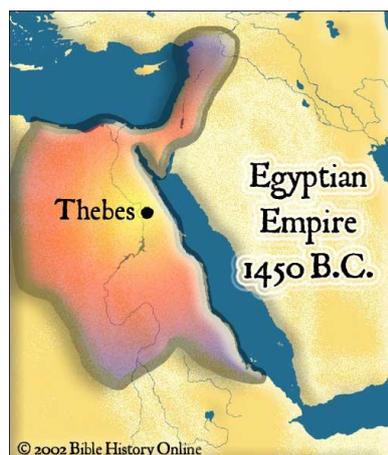
Last week Audrey talked about Ruth. She was the great grandmother of King David so she's off the timeline to the left.

Before that Kath talked about the prophet Isaiah. He lived before the northern kingdom of Israel fell to the Assyrians.

And Kath talked about Cyrus, the Persian king who allowed the return of the Jews from exile in Babylon.

Below the dates are the names of the super-powers of their day - Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persia

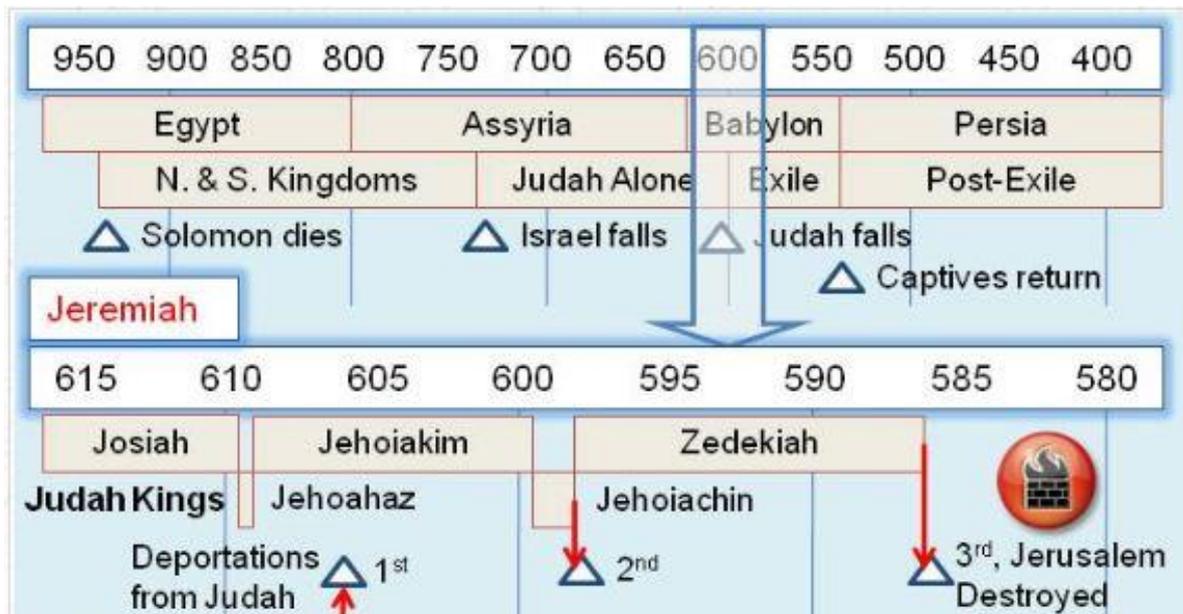
The extent of their empires are shown on these maps



I've shown you those three because the struggle between them is the background to the life of the prophet Jeremiah.

And it's Jeremiah who we're thinking about today.

So, a second row of dates on the timeline zooms in on the 35 years of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry – 615 to 580BC



Below that are the last 5 kings of Judah
 The 3 main ones being Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah

None of these was a truly independent king

Josiah had most independence but was really a vassal of Assyria

Jehoiakim was a puppet king put in place by the Egyptians but later forced to pay tribute to Babylon

And Zedekiah was put in power by the Babylonians

The last two provoke the wrath of the Babylonians by making alliances with Egypt.

When Jehoiakim does that, Nebuchadnezzar invades and conquers Judah¹.

Jehoiakim suddenly dies and is succeeded by his son Jehoiachin,

But three months later Nebuchadnezzar lays siege to Jerusalem,

obtains the city's surrender,

and takes the king and the skilled workers of Jerusalem as captives to Babylon.

Nebuchadnezzar then installs Zedekiah as king over Judah.

But under pressure from his people Zedekiah also sides with Egypt against Babylon.

Jeremiah warns against this alliance and is thrown in prison for opposing the majority opinion.

Eventually Nebuchadnezzar sends his army to put an end to this irritating little nation.

He lays siege to Jerusalem again

After 18 months the people of Jerusalem are dying of hunger.

Finally, the city wall is breached².

King Zedekiah tries to escape but is caught and brought before Nebuchadnezzar

He's forced to watch the killing of his sons,

¹ 598 B.C.

² 586 B.C.

He's then blinded and taken to Babylon along with most of the people.
Only the poorest are left

The Babylonians destroy Jerusalem.
The temple, the royal palace, and many homes are burned
and the city walls are demolished.

Against this background of political upheaval what was Jeremiah's message?
What was the word of the Lord for the people?

We had a summary of it in our first reading:

'I am about to summon all the peoples of the northern kingdoms,' declares the Lord.
'Their kings will come and set up their thrones in the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem;
they will come against all her surrounding walls and against all the towns of Judah. I will
pronounce my judgments on my people because of their wickedness in **forsaking me**, in
burning incense to other gods and in **worshipping what their hands have made**'.³

So the core of the problem was playing false with God in favour of gods of their own
making
And the gods of the surrounding nations

A few chapters on we see that playing false with God produced bitter fruit in all aspects of
their life.

Jeremiah is told to proclaim this in the gates of the temple:

"Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to
worship the LORD.: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this
place. If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if
you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent
blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you
live in this place, in the land I gave your ancestors for ever and ever. But look, you are
trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

"Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow
other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which
bears my Name, and say, "We are safe"—safe to do all these detestable things?"⁴

So while they kept the outward form of worship, and trusted in the temple for protection,
their lives told an opposite story.

In this early chapter Jeremiah still hopes that the people will heed his message and repent.
And that the disaster of invasion can be averted

But as his message is continually ignored and rejected that hope fades
And his message becomes more definite
You **will** be engulfed in horror
It will be **soon**
Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, will **destroy Jerusalem**
And you will be **exiled**

³ Jeremiah 1:16

⁴ Jeremiah 7:2-10

And the litany of their sins becomes more ghastly

In Chapter 32, we read:

They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molek, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing.⁵

So most of Jeremiah is very dark
But there are some bright shafts of light

The brightest is the passage I chose as our second reading

“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will bring my people... back from captivity and restore them to the land I gave to their ancestors to possess,”

I will bring them from the land of the north and gather them from the ends of the earth. Among them will be the blind and the lame, expectant mothers and women in labour; a great throng will return.

I will lead them beside streams of water on a level path where they will not stumble, because I am Israel’s father⁶

And there’s the wonderful promise of a New Covenant that God will make with his people.

‘This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’⁷

What impression can we form from all this of Jeremiah as a person?

I can only offer my personal reflection.

No preaching is easy!

But preaching a popular message is certainly the **easiest**

A message which you know will go down well

Bringing positive feedback and affirmation

But Jeremiah spent his whole career preaching an unpopular message

I can’t imagine how he had the strength to carry on.

Even that promise of hope didn’t contradict his message of impending disaster

It was the promise that the apparent disaster would not be the end

That after they had been punished, God would restore a remnant of his people

Not only did Jeremiah have to cope with constant refusal to heed his message

He also had to cope with other prophets telling the people that he’s got it all wrong

To carry on in those circumstances was truly amazing

He had to cope with threats against his life

⁵ Jeremiah 32:35

⁶ Jeremiah 30:3-9

⁷ Jeremiah 31:33

With actual attempts to do away with him

No wonder he complained to God about the message he'd been given,
about the hardness of heart of his hearers
and about the misery of his situation

In each case, the answer he got from God was the same

I will be with you.
They will not kill you.
But there was no promise of an easy life.

So Jeremiah **as a person** reminds me of the words of Jesus
That whoever would be his disciple must take up the cross and follow him.

Finally, what can we learn from Jeremiah's **message** that's relevant to us today?

It's got to be what he says about the New Covenant

From bitter experience Jeremiah knows that the people are incapable of obeying God
They're incapable of fulfilling their side of the old covenant –
So even after they return from exile the pattern of disobedience will set in again

Simply renewing their commitment to the old covenant won't work
Something new is needed

And Jeremiah knows that it's something that God himself is going to have to do because
the people can't do it for themselves.

So he says there will come a time when God will take the initiative
By making a New Covenant with his people
When God will change people by writing his law on their hearts –
When he'll transform them by giving them the inward desire to love and obey God.

This act of God that solves the problem of human sin is fulfilled only in the New Testament
Where the New Covenant is made possible by the perfect obedience of Jesus –
in his life and death.
And the benefits of His perfect obedience are extended to those who are 'in Christ' by the
work of the Holy Spirit.

So at that last supper with his friends Jesus announced the signing and sealing seal of the
New Covenant

"Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink
from it, all of you. ²⁸This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the
forgiveness of sins."⁸

Amen

1598 words

⁸ Matthew 26:27