

# Jeremiah

## Covenant of the Heart

To this day the stories, writings, and wisdom of these Old Testament prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah) compare with the authors of the Upanishads, the Buddha, Lao Tzu, Confucius, Zoroaster, and other luminaries living in this same basic time period—a period named by Karl Jaspers the Axial Period (roughly 800–322 BCE if we include Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). These centuries are a time of spirit deepening and Reality expanding—a revolution in inwardness as well as a wider perspective that transformed earlier civilizations all across much of the planet.

These earlier civilizations underwent a deep critique by a very fresh perspective. We can generalize the essence of this widespread social shift—“a deeper consciousness” about profound solitude and about the faced Profound Reality that stretched the rather harsh limits being conducted by the pre-Axial style of civilization. The early civilizations were uniform, closed systems of narrowly permitted thought and action. These Old Testament prophets accomplished for the people of Moses the kind of deepening that Lao Tzu did for China and the Buddha did for India. Such deepening had historical ramifications in many directions and for hundreds of years following. To these spirited explorers, we owe a debt of gratitude for our understanding of the autonomous power of the individual person and for our capacities for ongoing critique of our cultural configurations based on our own deep experiences rather than our older traditions. These luminaries also revealed a Profound Reality that is more than the contents of our human-made cultural canopy.

Jeremiah is a vivid example all this. He is living at the time of the conquest of Judea by the Babylonian Empire and the complete destruction of Jeremiah’s home nation. The elite population was being carried off into exile in Babylon. Jeremiah, facing these grim events, spoke of a new covenant with Profound Reality—one “written on our hearts.” That message included the deep awareness that losing the nation as the historical manifestation of Mosaic peoplehood was not the end of being “the People of God”—the ones devoted to the One Profound Reality. The role of this people in history could be carried on as exiles in Babylon. Jeremiah, in spite of being an interpreter of an extremely grim social situation, was an incredibly optimistic voice—in addition to facing up to the obvious grimness that few wanted to take in, Jeremiah proclaimed a deep quality of hope. This hope had an Axial Period quality that was lived on in Babylon captivity with help from Ezekiel and others. When the Persian conquests allowed exiles to return to their homelands, these exodus people in exile were inspired by Second Isaiah to return to Palestine as rebuilders of a fresh Israeli nationhood and its ancient mission to the world.

The Babylonian exile was not a period of religious vacuum for these exiles. Perhaps the first chapter of the Bible was written there. Certainly many of the psalms express that “covenant of the heart”—the personally deep impulse given by Jeremiah and others. Following is some of that new-covenant-style Old-Testament poetry from Psalm 139:13–18. I am using the New English Bible, reworded a bit by me. This psalm is also an exploration of how to use the symbol “Thou” or “You” as a devotional word for our relationship with Profound Reality.

Where can I escape from *Your Awe*?  
Where can I go to flee from *Your Awesomeness*?  
If I climb to the Moon or journey to Mars, *You* are there.  
If I lower my body into my Earthly grave.  
*You* are there as well.  
If I take flight to the edge of the morning,  
or make my home at the far edge of the western ocean,  
even there *Your* handwork grabs me.  
If I say, “Certainly darkness will cover me up,  
night will conceal me,”  
yet darkness is not dark to *You*.  
Night is as luminous as day  
dark and light are the same for *You*.

It was *You* who fashioned my inward parts;  
*You* knitted me together in my mother’s womb.  
I praise *You*, because *You* fill me with Awe.  
*You* are wonder-full, and so are *Your* works.  
*You* know me, through and through;  
my body is no mystery to *You*,  
or how I was secretly kneaded into shape  
and patterned in the depths of the Earth.  
*You* saw my limbs yet unformed in the womb  
and in *Your* records they were all recorded,  
day-by-day they were fashioned,  
not one limb was late in growing.  
How deep I find *Your* thoughtfulness, O my God!  
How inexhaustible are *Your* topics!  
Can I count them?  
They outnumber the grains of sand!  
To finish the count my years would have to equal *Yours*!

Clearly, this psalmist is expressing an emotionally intense, personal relationship with the Eternal Source of every detail of our temporality. Not only our infancy, childhood, and adulthood, but also our life in the womb has been lived within the loving care for us by this Profound “Thou” of our personal God-devotion. Such personal intimacy with Yahweh reflects what Jeremiah was pointing to with a “new covenant written upon our hearts.”

The prophets of the Old Testament lived that revolution in humanness that characterized those particular pre-Jesus centuries. Jesus was remembered as having to do with another “new covenant with Yahweh.”

Jeremiah dealing deeply with his own time became for early Christians a predictor of Jesus. We do not have to believe in such historical prediction to see Jeremiah as an archetype that Jesus also fulfilled.