I. Jeremiah in Prison, 37:1-21 — the beginning of Jeremiah’s sufferings that are recorded all the way down to chapter 44; these chapters (37-38) involve the imprisonment of Jeremiah, and other events during the siege of Jerusalem in 587

A. 37-38: is the longest continuous prose section of the Book of Jeremiah

1. Briefly describes the destruction of the city, and then continues into the stories of Jeremiah’s final years in Judea and Egypt.

2. The themes suggest these were composed with the fugitive Jewish population of Egypt in mind. King Zedekiah serves as the “bad example” which the leaders of those fugitives are encouraged not to follow.

3. Unfortunately, they do follow his example, and the narrative closes with Jeremiah predicting that Zedekiah’s fate will eventually befall the Egyptian pharaoh.

4. The narrative can be divided into three major parts.

   a. 37:1-40:6: record Jeremiah’s interactions with King Zedekiah and other leaders in Jerusalem as that city is being conquered by the Babylonians; divided two parts

   b. 2nd part (40:7-43:7): briefly describes how Jeremiah was forced to move with some Judean refugees from Judea to Egypt.

      (1) In this part, Johanan son of Kareah emerges as a potentially positive leader.

      (2) Unfortunately, he turns out to be just like Zedekiah.

   c. 3rd part (43:8-44:30): repeatedly warns the refugees in Egypt that they are no safer there than Zedekiah had been in Jerusalem.

B. 37:1-2: Begins with events and oracles from the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem (588-586 B.C.)

1. 37:1-2: is an introduction similar to those in the book of Kings; it presents a temporal shift from the preceding chapter.
a. That story took place in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (605 B.C.), while those beginning here occur during the reign of Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.).

b. Zedekiah's position is precarious at best — **Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon made king in the land of Judah**

c. Zedekiah seems to have concluded that those left in the land were a sort of remnant, that the LORD had spared them from punishment just as he had spared Hezekiah from the Assyrians a century earlier.

d. Jeremiah strongly disagreed with this view.

e. **Verse 2** sets the tone all the way to 44:30 by imposing a general sense of foreboding — no one *listened to the words of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah*.

f. This refusal to “hear,” a recurring theme throughout the book, takes on a rather specific application — the king and those close to him who refuse to “hear” have a calamitous fate awaits them.

C. **37:3-16:** is the 1st of 3 times that Zedekiah “sends” for Jeremiah (37:17; 38:14). Each statement introduces a discernible scene of the story.

1. This particular scene continues down to verse 16, where we are told that Jeremiah remained a long time in a dungeon.

2. We know little of **Jehucal** and **Zephaniah** (not the prophet), but Zephaniah requests of Jeremiah, "**Please pray for us to the LORD our God.**"

3. **4-5:** is a parenthetical notation explaining that Jeremiah had not yet been put into prison and that the Babylonians retreated from Jerusalem when Judah's Egyptian allies arrived. Such an event would seem similar to many as in Hezekiah's day (701 B.C.; 2 Kgs 18:17-19:37)

4. **7-10:** Jeremiah responds that the Egyptians will return, יָשָׁב, to their land, and the Babylonians will return, יָשָׁב, to attack and burn Jerusalem.
a. This message contrasts with Isaiah's to Hezekiah over 100 years earlier

b. Isaiah prophesied that Sennacherib "return," אָבְּגֵה, to his homeland in shame (Isa 37:7)

c. Jeremiah says that the king of Babylon will "return," בַּשָּׂעָה, in triumph over Jerusalem.

d. Evidently there was a false sense of hope emerging that the Babylonians will "leave" for good, as the Assyrians had, in defeat after the Lord killed 185,000 Assyrian troops.

e. Jeremiah tried to dispel such hopes by declaring that even if the Babylonians had only wounded soldiers left, they would come out and burn this city down, 9-10

5. **11-12**: Jeremiah's attempt to receive some personal property

a. Perhaps the land he redeemed in chapter 32, but there Jeremiah was already incarcerated in the courtyard of the guard (see 37:21)

b. The text is not specific enough about Jeremiah’s purpose here to draw any firm conclusion.

6. **13-16**: Though the Babylonian army has withdrawn, guards stop Jeremiah and charge him with desertion (vv. 13-15).

a. His message of doom is well known.

b. There is no waiting to see if Jeremiah’s prophecy will be fulfilled or not.

c. Irijah accuses Jeremiah of deserting to the Babylonians, a charge which Jeremiah adamantly denies.

d. Irijah does not listen, but takes Jeremiah to certain officials.

e. This reaction is easily understood since Jeremiah has been warning people that Jerusalem would soon fall to the Babylonians, and he
had been urging people to surrender to avoid “the sword, famine and plague.”

f. The officials were enraged at Jeremiah and . . . beat him and imprisoned him, v. 15.

g. The official reaction to Jeremiah’s attempt to warn his audience is to punish Jeremiah (v. 16), by placing him in the cistern house, in the cells, and remained there many days.

D. 37:17-21: In a secret interview, which was one of many that Jeremiah evidently had with the king (indicating the intrigue as the various parties struggled to influence the position to be taken), Zedekiah in vain sought reassurance for his ill-advised revolt. He modified Jeremiah’s imprisonment to house arrest and guaranteed him a food ration as long as supplies lasted.

1. This represents the 2nd time that Zedekiah sent for Jeremiah.

2. Zedekiah acts with stealth, knowing that his officials have incarcerated Jeremiah for his prophecies, yet he still believes in Jeremiah’s prophetic gift.

3. Probably the king’s actions are indicative of his fear of his officials.

4. Zedekiah's question does not necessarily imply he wants to know what the Lord has in store for him personally, although the private audience might suggest that.

5. In any case, Zedekiah is the object of Jeremiah’s answer.

6. 18-20: In spite of the bad news Jeremiah has just delivered to the king, he asks two questions of the king which spotlight his character.

a. What wrong have I done to you or your servants or this people, that you have put me in prison? (18) — Will the king do what he knows is just, or will he act unjustly because he fears the wrath of his misguided advisors?

b. Where are your prophets who prophesied to you, saying, 'The king of Babylon will not come against you and against this
lamentations, Lecture 10—Jeremiah 37-38: "Jeremiah Imprisoned"; Professor: Randall C. Bailey, Ph.D.; Faulkner University; 2010

land'—Jeremiah is the only prophet whose predictions have come true, but he is the only one who is imprisoned.

c. The “lie” of the false prophets is exposed—They have said that the Babylonians would not even come to Jerusalem, much less conquer it, something that has been proven false, yet their inability to predict the future results in their being honored while Jeremiah is punished.

d. The king responds favorably to his petition without any hint of hesitation, indicating his actual concern and respect for Jeremiah is demonstrated in his actions in verse 21. He leaves Jeremiah in confinement, but lessons the discomfort of this ordeal.

II. Jeremiah Thrown into a Cistern, 38:1-13

A. Jeremiah’s continued insistence on surrender to Nebuchadnezzar was dangerous, for these pro-Egyptian counselors persuaded the vacillating Zedekiah that Jeremiah was subverting the war effort.

1. The cistern was nearly dry, indicating a time shortly before Nebuchadnezzar’s final assault in August 587 (52:5-7).

2. Ironically, Jeremiah was rescued by a foreign court official, who may not have been a physical eunuch.

3. The word translated “eunuch,” סָרִיס sāris, may also mean “official.”

4. A letter written 18 months earlier found in the excavations at Lachish reads similarly:

   To my Lord Yaosh: May Yahweh cause my lord to see this season in good health! Who is thy servant (but) a dog that my lord hat sent the [let]ter of the king and the letters of the prince[s, saying]ing, “pray, read them!” And behold the words of the pr[inces] are not good, (but) to weaken our hands [and to sla]cken [. . . And now] my lord, wilt thou not write to them, saying, “Why do ye thus [even] are ye doing this thing!”
[And,] as Yahweh thy God liveth, truly since they servant read the letters there hath been no [peace] for [thy servant]...  

B. 1: The officials heard the words that Jeremiah was saying to all the people indicates that, though they heard, they did not truly “hear.” They “hear” it but do not accept it as true.

C. 2-3: The officials quote Jeremiah's attempts to dispel any false hopes of the people that the city would be miraculously saved as in the days of Hezekiah.

D. 4: Jeremiah was accused of discouraging the soldiers who are left in this city — They see these soldiers as a “remnant” who ought to be encouraged by Jeremiah.

1. The false prophets called upon the people to trust in God's protection against enemy attack.

2. The message in Hezekiah's day was to trust in the Lord to protect the city, while the message in Jeremiah's day to trust the Lord to use their attackers to take care of them.

E. 5: Zedekiah reveals his major weakness is that, while he does not share the officials' opinion of Jeremiah, he still gives in to them here. He is responding out of a stance of fear, rather than from a stance of faith. He relies more on the officials than on the Lord for his well-being.

F. 6-13: We do not know why one cistern rather than another was used

1. Excavations indicate that such cisterns were fairly common in Israelite homes, being carved out of the soft limestone which one finds throughout much of the region.

2. They were used to catch and store rainwater for the long dry months of summer. It is not surprising to find one with a silt-covered bottom.

3. Ebed-melech, “servant of the king,” who, we are informed later, “trusted in the Lord” (39:16-18), indicates he believed the Lord was working through the Babylonians to fulfill his purpose.

\footnote{ANET, 322, Lachish Ostracon VI.}
a. He approaches the king on Jeremiah’s behalf, accusing the other officials of wrongdoing.

b. He does not call for any action against them, probably understanding one cannot expect action to be taken against those officials. Instead, he petitions the king to correct the wrong that has been done before it is too late.

4. Zedekiah’s answer is swift and favorable.

a. He sends a number of men with Ebed-melech, suggesting that he was concerned about protecting Jeremiah.

b. So Zedekiah must have imprisoned Jeremiah out of fear, rather than from a personal denial of Jeremiah’s prophetic office.

G. 38:14-28: His faith once again shaken (37:17-20), Zedekiah summons Jeremiah for another a private interview.

1. Jeremiah, suspicious, extracts an oath from Zedekiah that he will be safe.

2. Jeremiah repeats the counsel of “surrender and live” (20:1-16; 21:4-10; 27:1-11) and emphasized it by relating a vision depicting the capture of the royal household and the burning of Jerusalem.

3. Zedekiah again hesitates and extracts a promise of secrecy.

a. This promise that Jeremiah gives makes this section one of the most fascinating passages in Jeremiah to me.

b. Jeremiah had much to say about false (lying) prophets.

(1) Yet when Zedekiah said to him, “If the officials should hear that I have spoken with you. . . Then you shall say ‘I was presenting my plea to the king not to send me back to the house of Jonathan to die there,’” (26-27), Jeremiah did just that (v. 27)! “And he answered them in the very words the king had commanded.”

(2) The point is they had not talked about this at all!
Could it be that Jeremiah, for all his talk about lying prophets, felt a huge guilt trip when he found himself lying when faced with the choice of lying and stopping the persecution, or telling the truth and facing death?