

5.0 The Book of the [Prophet Jeremiah](#)¹

5.1 Historical Background

5.1.1 The Ancient Near East

We have seen already that the period of [Amos](#), [Hosea](#) and [Proto-Isaiah](#) was dominated by the rise of Assyria, which remained a super-power for nearly 200 years only to be replaced as such by the Babylonians. In the seventh century BCE, Babylon first gained independence from Assyria and then began a series of attacks on the Assyrian Empire. Under the crown prince [Nabopolassar](#) (626-605 BCE), the father of [Nebuchadnezzar](#) (605-561 BCE), the first of many revolts against the Assyrians took place. Once Babylon broke free, it began a series of assaults on Assyria with the help of the Medes. Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, was destroyed in 612 BCE. The last king of Assyria [Ashurballit II](#) (612-609 BCE) fled to the Egyptians for help. Under Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon engaged in a long war against Egypt. By 568 BCE, after a long conflict with Babylon, Egypt was overpowered and assimilated into the Babylonian Empire.

5.1.2 [Judah](#)

With the destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE, Israel became an Assyrian Province and Judah a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire. In this situation Canaanite and Mesopotamian religious practice flourished and was considered idolatry by pious Jews. [Josiah](#) (640-609 BCE) led a thorough reform in Judah, which was based on a renewal of the Mosaic covenant and the re-dedication of the people to YHWH. Josiah died in 609 BCE trying to stop the Egyptian pharaoh, [Necho](#) (610-595 BCE), joining forces with [Ashurballit II](#) (612-609 BCE). Judah therefore came under Egyptian control. Necho made Josiah's son [Jehoiakim](#) (609-598 BCE) king of Judah. Under Jehoiakim Judah reverted back to idolatrous practice. Inevitably Babylon's struggle with Egypt involved Judah. Babylonian intervention led to three deportations of the upper classes from Judah and the destruction of Jerusalem. To avoid deportation to Babylon, a number of Judeans fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah with them. Soon afterwards Jeremiah died (sometime after 586 BCE).

1 Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The End of National Independence," in *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 129-147; John W. Miller, *Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987) 149-77.

5.2 A Portrait of Jeremiah the Prophet

The following points can be made about Jeremiah:

- Jeremiah was YHWH's agent.
- He was a speaker with poetic passion and imagination.
- He was involved in the public events of his time.
- He was a man of intense conflict.

5.2.1 YHWH's Agent

Jeremiah was the one to whom YHWH's word was directed.² His whole life and ministry was an attempt to come to terms with YHWH's word, to communicate it to his contemporaries and to live its consequences. As one who had received YHWH's word, he was often in conflict with the people of his time. Very often his involvement with YHWH's word left him anguished and depressed as well as sometimes hope-filled. The call narrative³ stresses his role as YHWH's agent. As such he was very vulnerable to YHWH⁴ and even suffered because of divine "ruthlessness."⁵ The conflict-ridden way of life assumed by Jeremiah as YHWH's agent is reflected in the famous "lamentations."⁶

5.2.2 A Man of Poetic Passion and Imagination

Jeremiah was highly poetic. He spoke YHWH's word to a particular people in particular contexts. He used prophetic speech to shatter old worlds and form new ones. To achieve this he used speech that was not conventional, reasonable or predictable. Rather his prophetic speech shocked people, broke routine, and forced people to re-describe things that seemed to be fixed and settled.

² Jer 1:1-3.

³ Jer 1:4-10.

⁴ Jer 15:17-18; 17:17-18.

⁵ Jer 12:5-6.

⁶ Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18.

5.2.3 A Man in the Public Sphere

Jeremiah lived at a time of upheaval in the ANE. He understood all the political and historical changes as the means whereby YHWH was present to his people. In this context Jeremiah directed oracles against: public leadership.⁷ He condemned the Temple as a false vehicle of YHWH's presence in the world.⁸ Similarly he condemned the leadership of Judah for using public religion to block YHWH's presence.⁹ One of his most shattering assertions was that YHWH would use [Babylon](#) as his instrument to fulfil his plan.¹⁰ Yet he went even further in shocking his contemporaries by claiming that [Nebuchadnezzar](#) (605-562 BCE) was YHWH's servant¹¹ and by implication that Judah's king was not!

5.2.4 A Man in Conflict

Jeremiah's ministry and mission sent him on a course of conflict. This conflict was not accidental or even incidental, but intrinsic to his call as a prophet. The conflict arose because Jeremiah proclaimed a vision of reality that was at odds with the vision of reality held by the Judean politico-religious establishment. Jeremiah stood in conflict with: the royal establishment,¹² other prophets,¹³ and the entire people.¹⁴ As YHWH's agent he was also in conflict with God.¹⁵ In Jeremiah we see that no one, not even the chosen prophet, can draw close to YHWH in his sovereignty.

5.3 Jeremiah's Mission

Jeremiah's ministry took place in the context of political upheaval. His ministry lasted about forty years.¹⁶ [Jeremiah's prophetic activity](#) can be divided into three periods.

7 Jer 36:1-32; 37:16-21.

8 Jer 7:1-15.

9 Jer 8:8-13.

10 Jer 20:4; 21:7; 22:24-25; 25:9; 27:6; 34:2, 37:17; 38.3.

11 Jer 43:10.

12 Jer 22:13-20, 36:1-32.

13 Jer 27-28.

14 Jer 2:13.20; 18:12.

15 Jer 20:11.

16 Jer 1:1-3.

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- **The period of the reform of Josiah (627-621 BCE):** The central theme of his message was that unless the people were ready to convert from idolatry, YHWH would seek revenge against them. At this stage Jeremiah was uncertain of who exactly would be YHWH's instrument in this.
- **The period of the reign of Jehoiakim (609-598 BCE):** This period is characterized by a return to idolatry and the rise of Egyptian influence in Judah. After a decisive Babylonian defeat of Egypt in 605 BCE (the battle of Charcemish), it was clear to Jeremiah who YHWH's instrument of revenge would be: the Babylonians.
- **The period of Babylonian destruction (598-587):** Jeremiah foresaw a new relationship between YHWH and his people in a unified Israel and Judah. But this could only be possible after the Exile had purified the stubbornness of the people.

This division of Jeremiah's prophetic activity is not universally agreed among scholars.¹⁷

5.4 Theories of Composition and Redaction

The history of the composition and redaction of the Book of Jeremiah is very difficult to trace. Various theories have been proposed to explain its composition and redaction.

5.4.1 Duhm's Theory

B. Duhm claimed in *Das Buch Jeremia* (1901 CE) that there were three major tracts in the Book of Jeremiah:

- The poems of Jeremiah.
- The book of Baruch containing Jeremiah's biography.
- A supplement added by persons unknown.

¹⁷ Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: Volume 2 - The Babylonian Period* (London: SCM, 1980), 16-17. Koch proposes *four* periods in Jeremiah's ministry: i) 626-622 BCE: The material of this period is Jer 1-6.30-31; ii) 609-605 BCE: Jer 7-26.35-36; iii) 593-587/6: BCE Jer 27-29.32-34.37-39; iv) After 586 BCE: Jer 40-44.

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For Duhm the dominant elements are the poetry and Jeremiah's biography. Modern scholarship has been influenced somewhat by Duhm, particularly by his division of the book into poetry and prose.

5.4.2 Mowinckel's Theory

Sigmund Mowinckel criticized Duhm on the grounds that he assigned too much material to non-historical sources and that he limited Jeremiah to the role of poet. In his work *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (1914 BCE) Mowinckel claimed to have isolated four sources (A, B, C, D) with a redactor for each source (R^A, R^B, R^C, R^D). Source "A" (sixth-fifth century BCE) was made up of poetic oracles; "B" (later than the fifth century BCE) of historical material, "C" (fifth century BCE) of speeches not belonging to "A" or "B" while "D" (not datable) consisted of oracles of hope. He maintained that Jer 1-45 was the work of various editors (R^{ABCD}), while Jer 46-52 was a later appendix. The completed work is that of R^J (the Yahwist redactor of the Pentateuch). In *Prophecy and Tradition: The Prophetic Books in the Light of the Study of the Growth and History of the Tradition* (1946 CE), Mowinckel talks of "tradition complexes" rather than sources. These he claims are close in language and content to the Deuteronomist Source of the Pentateuch.

Most subsequent theories are modifications of either Duhm's Theory or Mowinckel's Theory. A comprehensive overview of such theories is to be found in the commentaries.¹⁸

5.5 The Structure of the Book

1. The Title (1:1-3)
2. Oracles against Judah and Jerusalem (1:4 – 25:38)
3. The Restoration of Israel (26:1 – 35:19)
4. The Martyrdom of Jeremiah (36:1 – 45:5)
5. Oracles against the Nations (46:1 – 51:64)
6. Historical Appendix (52:1-34).

¹⁸ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1986) 38-50; *idem*, *Jeremiah* (OTG; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1989) 32-38.

This course will study the following texts:

- The Title (Jer 1:1-3)
- The Commissioning of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-19)
- The Linen Loincloth (Jer 13:1-11)
- Jeremiah's Lament (Jer 20:7-18)
- The Restoration of Israel (Jer 31:1-20)

5.6 Text #16: The Title (Jer 1:1-3)

Jeremiah 1:1 The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, to whom the word of YHWH came in the days of King [Josiah](#) son of [Amon](#) of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. 3 It came also in the days of King [Jehoiakim](#) son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King [Zedekiah](#) son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

This is the longest and most complicated of the titles to any of the prophetic works. The closest parallel is with Amos 1:1. Jer 1:1-3 identifies the prophet by *name* (Jeremiah), by *home* (Anathoth), by *vocation* (priest) and by *time* (the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign – 627 BCE). The meaning of the prophet's name, *yirměyāhû* (יְרֵמְיָהוּ) - Hebrew: *YHWH exalts, YHWH hurls, or YHWH justifies*), is not clear.

Of the priests ... (v.1): Much of the Book of Jeremiah presents the prophet as a priest active in the Temple of Jerusalem.

Anathoth (v.1): A small village six km NE of Jerusalem. King [Solomon](#) banished [Abiathar](#) the priest to Anathoth because of his disloyalty in supporting [Adonijah](#) against Solomon.¹⁹ There is irony that from the place to which Abiathar was banished by Solomon in the days before the Temple, comes one who will preside over the destruction of that Temple.

[Josiah](#) ... in the thirteenth year of his reign (v.2): The thirteenth year of Josiah's reign fell in 627 BCE. The editor of the book wished to portray Jeremiah's mission in the period 627-587 BCE. Josiah's reign marks the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry and the fall of Jerusalem its end. One has to be careful however not to read this title simply as biography. Rather the editor uses such conventional titles to present prophecy and monarchy as institutions. It is important to note that the date given here is that of the period

¹⁹ 1 Kgs 2:26-27.

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of Jeremiah's *ministry*. It is not the date of *writing* or *composition* of the book, which is disputed among scholars.

5.7 Text #17: The Commissioning of Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-19)

This text can be subdivided as follows:

- The First Dialogue (Jer 1:4-10).
- The Visions (Jer 1:11-16).
- The Second Dialogue (Jer 1:17-19).

5.7.1 The First Dialogue (Jer 1:4-10)

Jeremiah 1:4 Now the word of YHWH came to me saying, 5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." 6 Then I said, "Ah, YHWH God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." 7 But YHWH said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. 8 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says YHWH." 9 Then YHWH put out his hand and touched my mouth; and YHWH said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. 10 See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

... **I formed you in the womb ... (v.5)**: The verb *to form* has the sense of *to create*.²⁰ The reference to "womb" means that YHWH is the one who forms a person in the womb and from the first moment of existence he knows each person.

Consecrated you (v.5): The idea is that of separating or setting apart someone for divine service. In Jeremiah's context this means being set apart for prophetic ministry. There is no reference here to original sin. This text has nothing to do with such a concept.

To the nations (v.5): At the time of Jeremiah's commissioning Judah was under the domination of the nations round about it. The text is claiming that it is YHWH's prophet who will have real power over the nations that are the apparent dominant forces. V.5 states that

²⁰ Amos 4:13; Isa 45:18; 49:5; Jer 51:19; Ps 95:5.

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this particular priest's task is to be a prophet. He will be sent and commanded by YHWH to speak as ordered.

Ah, YHWH God! ... for I am only a boy (v.6): Jeremiah objects to his commission. Such formal objections are typical of the pattern of the commissioning narratives found in the Hebrew Scriptures.²¹ The suitability of the person commissioned is indicated by the formal reluctance to take the commission. We must remember that the objection is *conventional* not literal. The reference to “boy” is a reference to conventional humility. Any exegesis of this text that uses the reference to childhood in an attempt to determine Jeremiah's age, fails to understand the formal protest as characteristic of the commission narrative.

Touched my mouth (v.9): In vv.7-8 YHWH rejects Jeremiah's formal protest and offers a promise. The symbolic action of v.9 realizes the promise just made. The ritual of touching the mouth is found also in Isaiah and Ezekiel.²² By touching the prophet's mouth, YHWH transfers his words from himself to Jeremiah.

To pluck ... to break ... to destroy ... to overthrow ... to build ... to plant (v.10): These verbs stress the double aspect of Jeremiah's mission: to shatter old worlds and to form new ones. The dialogue of Jer 1:4-10 functions in two basic ways:

- It is a public proclamation that Jeremiah is YHWH's agent.
- It is a commissioning of Jeremiah as a prophet to the nations.

The narrative emphasizes that Jeremiah was called for a particular task. He is presented as one to whom the word of YHWH comes and who may legitimately proclaim that word to the nations round about.

5.7.2 The Visions (Jer 1:11-16)

There are two separate visions in the text. The first centres on the *rod of almond* (vv.11-12) and the second on the *boiling pot* (vv.13-16). These visions are part of the conversation between YHWH and Jeremiah. They are not so much a continuation of the dialogue but a supplement to it.

²¹ Exod 3:11.13 4:1.10.13; Judg 6:15; 1 Sam 10:20-24.

²² Isa 6:7; Ezek 2:8 – 3:3.

(a) The Rod of Almond (Jer 1:11-12)

Jeremiah 1:11 The word of YHWH came to me, saying, "Jeremiah, what do you see?" And I said, "I see a branch of an almond tree." 12 Then YHWH said to me, "You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it."

In the first vision YHWH ask Jeremiah what he sees. When Jeremiah replies that he sees a rod of almond, YHWH explains the significance by using a pun ([paronomasia](#)). *Šāqēd* (שָׂקֵד) is the Hebrew for *almond tree* (v.11) and *śoqēd* (שֹׁקֵד) for *one who watches over* (v.12). But what does “watching over my word to perform it” mean? The context suggests that it is an assurance to Jeremiah that the divine word spoken by the prophet will achieve its purpose as stated in v.10.

(b) The Boiling Pot (Jer 1:13-16)

Jeremiah 1:13 The word of YHWH came to me a second time, saying, "What do you see?" And I said, "I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north." 14 Then YHWH said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. 15 For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says YHWH; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. 16 And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands.

The meaning of this vision is very difficult to understand. Three possible interpretations suggest themselves:

- The object of the vision is not the pot, but its support, which is on the northern side.
- Jeremiah saw a pot moving.
- The pot was leaning to the north.

The meaning of the vision is also based on paronomasia. The verbs to boil and to blow are based on the same root *nfh* (נִפַּח). In the manner that Jeremiah sees a pot that “boils,” so too will an invasion blow over Judah like a wind. This vision is introduced by the phrase “a second time” (v.13). It is an attempt then to clarify the first vision. Taken together the vision means that YHWH is watching over his word to perform it and that word will be disaster looming out of the north against all the inhabitants of Judah. The destruction will come against Jerusalem and Judah (v.15) because of the people’s idolatry (v.16).

5.7.3 The Second Dialogue (Jer 1:17-19)

Jeremiah 1:17 But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. 18 And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. 19 They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says YHWH, to deliver you.

This section is the logical sequel to vv.4-10. Again YHWH addresses Jeremiah.

Gird up your loins (v.17): is an order demanding promptness²³ and an immediate preparation for combat.²⁴

A fortified city ... (v.18): Jeremiah is described as an obdurate figure that stands like a fortified city against the people. Jeremiah is not commissioned to be a pastor but a passive fighter. The people will do the fighting against him, but he will resist. The traditional way of understanding the term “the people of the land” (v.18) is as a reference to the people’s (Judah) opposition to Jeremiah.²⁵

I am with you ... to deliver you (v.19): The dialogue ends on a note of deliverance. Jeremiah will enjoy divine protection.

23 1 Kgs 18:46.

24 Job 38:3; 40:7.

25 See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 110, who holds a different theory that the reference is to the struggle within the Jewish community in the period of restoration after the Exile.

5.7.4 Conclusions

In this commissioning narrative three important elements are to be noted:

- In YHWH's plan for salvation an all-important role is given to Jeremiah as prophet to the nations.
- YHWH and Jeremiah, as seen in the dialogues, shared an intimacy that was to grow, but also to be a source of conflict and pain for Jeremiah. Jeremiah is the only prophet who permits a glimpse into the inner struggle that his mission caused him.
- As YHWH's agent Jeremiah will be persecuted. This is a theme that runs throughout the whole book.

5.8 Text #18: The Linen Loincloth (Jer 13:1-11)

5.8.1 The Prophets and Symbolic Action²⁶

When one thinks of the biblical prophets, one is tempted to think exclusively in terms of all that these prophets *said* in their many oracles, utterances and warnings. But there was another aspect to prophetic activity. As well as uttering the word of YHWH, the prophets acted it out in signs and symbols. According to tradition, the early prophets acted in unusual ways in order to drive home the oracles they uttered. To understand prophetic activity, we must also have a clear understanding of symbolic action. **Dāvār** (דָּבָר) is the Hebrew for both *word* and *deed/thing*. The prophetic action is **dāvār** - a happening, a word in motion. These actions are symbolic in that they are signs of another reality. Such actions were never directed to occasional and personal ends, but always served the main end of the activity of the prophets, the fulfilment of YHWH's plans and purposes concerning Israel. One final aspect of symbolic action to be noted is that the realization of their meaning lies entirely within YHWH's power. Prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah engaged in symbolic action.²⁷

26 J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 165-73.

27 The main symbolic actions of *Isaiah* were: the naming of his sons (Isa 7:3; 8:1) and Isaiah's nakedness (Isa 20:1-6). The main symbolic actions of *Jeremiah* were: the linen loincloth (Jer 13:1-11); his celibacy (Jer 16:1-13); the broken pot (Jer 19:1-15); Jeremiah's yoke (Jer 27:1-22); Jeremiah's land speculation (Jer 32:1-44); the example of the Rechabites (Jer 35:1-19).

5.8.2 The Text of Jer 13:1-13

Jeremiah 13:1 Thus said YHWH to me, "Go and buy yourself a linen loincloth, and put it on your loins, but do not dip it in water." 2 So I bought a loincloth according to the word of YHWH, and put it on my loins. 3 And the word of YHWH came to me a second time, saying, 4 "Take the loincloth that you bought and are wearing, and go now to the Euphrates, and hide it there in a cleft of the rock." 5 So I went, and hid it by the Euphrates, as YHWH commanded me. 6 And after many days YHWH said to me, "Go now to the Euphrates, and take from there the loincloth that I commanded you to hide there." 7 Then I went to the Euphrates, and dug, and I took the loincloth from the place where I had hidden it. But now the loincloth was ruined; it was good for nothing. 8 Then the word of YHWH came to me: 9 Thus says YHWH: Just so I will ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem. 10 This evil people, who refuse to hear my words, who stubbornly follow their own will and have gone after other gods to serve them and worship them, shall be like this loincloth, which is good for nothing. 11 For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me, says YHWH, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory. But they would not listen.

Thus said YHWH to me (v.1): The word that comes to Jeremiah is not a message for the nation - but an *action* to be performed.

Go and buy ... loincloth ... water (v.1): Jeremiah has to go and buy a loincloth of linen (hence an expensive one) and wear it in its unwashed state. Jeremiah does as he is commanded (v.2). A second time YHWH's word comes to him (v.3).

... Euphrates ... (v.4): Now YHWH commands Jeremiah to hide the loincloth near the Euphrates. Again Jeremiah is obedient (v.5). Much later ("many days" - v.6) he is commanded to return to the river and retrieve the loincloth. Once again Jeremiah is obedient. Jeremiah obeys and the loincloth is spoilt (v.7).

An explanation of Jeremiah's action is given in YHWH's speech (vv.9-11). Yet this explanation is not as clear as we would like. Essentially it is a Deuteronomistic explanation that links the spoiling of the loincloth with idolatry. Israel and Judah were meant to be YHWH's possession emphasizing his reputation, praise and glory.²⁸ By idolatry they are ruined as his possession and utterly useless. But this explanation reflects more the concern of the Deuteronomistic editor than clarifies what the actions of Jeremiah mean.

28 Deut 26:18-19.

5.8.3 Problematic Explanations

Two basic problems must be faced when explaining this text: the problem of meaning and the problem of genre.

- **The Problem of Meaning:** This text has the reputation of being one of the most disputed in the Book of Jeremiah because scholars disagree on what the actions of Jeremiah actually mean. The traditional explanations are that Judah will be destroyed by the Babylonians or by idolatrous activity. The difficulty with these explanations is that the text does not represent either motif in Jeremiah's actions.
- **The Problem of Genre:** Another problem with the interpretation of the text has to do with the kind of text (literary genre) it is. Is the story meant to be factual or something else? The distance between Jerusalem and the Euphrates is about 640 km. A series of journeys between the two places would take about one year! The lack of witnesses also poses a difficulty. Some scholars have interpreted the Hebrew word for *Euphrates* (*pěrat* - פְּרָת) as referring to Parah, a Benjaminite town near Anathoth. Yet both these approaches understand the story as a literal account of Jeremiah's wanderings. The text gives no clue as how it should be read. Scholars have proposed many possibilities: an imaginary journey, a dream, a vision, a spoken parable, a proclamation of divine judgement or an enacted parable.

Whatever its genre and meaning, the story falls into the category of symbolic action. These actions are not merely illustrative of the prophetic word - but causative in that they make things happen.

5.8.4 Possible Explanations

The meaning of the text remains open to question. Scholars have taken up three basic positions:

- The invading Babylonians will destroy Judah and Jerusalem. This is based on reading the Hebrew word *pěrat* - פְּרָת as *Euphrates*.

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- The Deuteronomistic explanation: Judah and Jerusalem will be destroyed by their idolatrous practices.
- Carroll's position²⁹ Jeremiah performed this action before a mystified audience as a dramatic enactment of the exile in Babylon. The reader is left wondering if Jeremiah contributed by his actions to Judah's exile. In other symbolic actions Jeremiah was beaten up because of his action³⁰ because the people understood that the action brought about what was symbolized. The actor who performed the action caused what was threatened to occur. Jer 13:1-7 offers insignificant information to pursue any analysis along these lines.

5.9 Text #19: Jeremiah's Lament (Jer 20:7-18)

Jeremiah was a prophet who spoke out against the state and against the religious view that YHWH had eternally chosen Zion. He declared that YHWH would abandon his house in Jerusalem and hand it over to destruction.³¹ Such words earned Jeremiah persecution. He was beaten, jeered at, and ostracized.³² He was continually harassed and on more than one occasion almost killed.³³ In the eyes of the *status quo*, Jeremiah had committed treason and blasphemy. Jeremiah's spirit almost broke under this. He gave way to fits of recrimination, depression and despair.³⁴ He hated his role and longed to abandon it.³⁵ Yet he always found strength to go.³⁶ Jer 20:1-6 tells of an altercation between Jeremiah and Pashur the priest in which Jeremiah, beaten and put in the stocks, curses Pashur. The text of *Jeremiah's Lament* follows immediately. This text can be divided as follows:

- The Lament Proper (Jer 20:7-10).
- The Editorial Response to the Lament (Jer 20:11-13).
- The Outcry of Despair (Jer 20:14-18).

29 Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 297.

30 Jer 19:10-11.14-15; 20:1-2.

31 Jer 7:1-15; 26:1-6.

32 Jer 15:10; 17; 18:18; 20:10.

33 Jer 11:18 – 12:6; 26; 36.

34 Jer 15:15-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18.

35 Jer 9:2-6; 17:14-18.

36 Jer 15:19-21.

5.9.1 The Lament Proper (Jer 20:7-10)

Jeremiah 20:7 O YHWH, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me. 8 For whenever I speak, I must cry out, I must shout, "Violence and destruction!" For the word of YHWH has become for me a reproach and derision all day long. 9 If I say, "I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name," then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. 10 For I hear many whispering: "Terror is all around! Denounce him! Let us denounce him!" All my close friends are watching for me to stumble. "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we can prevail against him, and take our revenge on him."

This poem is a cry of outrage and suffering directed against YHWH who is the problem here. He has deceived the speaker, overpowered him and made him a laughing-stock (v.7).

You have enticed me (v.7): The Hebrew root for the verb *to entice*, *pātâ*, (פָּתָה / *pth*) has a range of meanings: deception, seduction, enticement and persuasion. Its linkage with the verb *to prevail over*, *hāšaq*, (חָשַׁק / *hšq*) has led some exegetes to claim that the speaker accuses YHWH of rape. If the speaker is Jeremiah, then some exegetes claim that this is a case of the celibate prophet accusing YHWH of rape. This is a possible interpretation, but a bit forced. Jer 20:8-9 present the evidence as to how YHWH has deceived the speaker.

Violence and destruction (v.8): YHWH is identified as the enemy. The speaker is faithful to the divine word, but because of his faithfulness he is persecuted.

I will not mention him ... (v.9): The speaker resolves not to mention YHWH's name again. If Jeremiah is indeed the speaker, then a possible interpretation is that the prophet proposes to give up his prophetic ministry and become silent. A second possible interpretation is that the speaker is not Jeremiah and the lament fits the pattern of the complaints of pious people against the persecution of the wicked. Although the speaker wants to abandon his ministry, he cannot for YHWH is presented as a consuming and irresistible fire.

Whispering ... terror ... on every side (v.10): "Whispering" denotes a conspiracy against the speaker while the reference to "terror" is believed to be a gloss fitting the lament here more closely to the pattern of the psalms of lament (Ps 31:12 - Hebrew version or 31:13 - NRSV version). The image in v.10 is that of a crowd conspiring against the speaker, watching for his fall, seeking the moment in which to take revenge. This motif of persecution runs through all Jeremiah's laments and may be literary convention rather than literal fact.

5.9.2 The Editorial Response (Jer 20:11-13)

Jeremiah 20:11 But YHWH is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my persecutors will stumble, and they will not prevail. They will be greatly shamed, for they will not succeed. Their eternal dishonour will never be forgotten. 12 O YHWH of hosts, you test the righteous, you see the heart and the mind; let me see your retribution upon them, for to you I have committed my cause. 13 Sing to YHWH; praise YHWH! For he has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers.

Vv.11-13 belong with vv.7-10 although they may have been placed here much later than the period of composition of vv.7-10.

YHWH is ... a dread warrior (v.11): The resolution of the speaker's lament is that YHWH is with him and that his persecutors will be defeated, shamed and dishonoured. Vv.12-13 form an appendix to the note of confidence which ends the lament and identifies the conflict between the righteous person and his opponents.

The traditional interpretation is that the lament is an utterance of Jeremiah. The redactor of the Book of Jeremiah may have decided to follow the Pashur affair with this lament to indicate the event as Jeremiah's most dramatic inner crisis. This traditional view runs into some difficulties however:

- There is no formula introducing the lament as Jeremiah's, and it may be inferred then that the redactor(s) did not intend the poem to be read as an utterance of Jeremiah.
- The lament is very close in its formal aspect to the psalms of lament that, because of their formal literary nature do not reflect the real events and experiences of the author. This may be true also for the laments of the Book of Jeremiah.
- The note of confidence in vv.11-13 also creates difficulties. Divine vindication in the form of the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation to Babylon did not spare Jeremiah or his opponents. Unfortunately there is no agreement among scholars about the meaning and interpretation of this text. It is a text that creates more problems than it solves!

5.9.3 The Outcry of Despair (Jer 20:14-18)

Jeremiah 20:14 Cursed be the day on which I was born! The day when my mother bore me, let it not be blessed! 15 Cursed be the man who brought the news to my father, saying, "A child is born to you, a son," making him very glad. 16 Let that man be like the cities that YHWH overthrew without pity; let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon, 17 because he did not kill me in the womb; so my mother would have been my grave, and her womb forever great. 18 Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow, and spend my days in shame?

The text ends with a cry of despair in which the speaker wishes he was never born, curses his birthday (v.14) and the one who announced his birth (v.15). Rather it would have been better if he had never been born (v.16) and that his mother's womb had been his grave (v.17). All his days pass in shame (v.18). The question must be asked: what does the curse mean? There are various interpretations:

- The curse is similar to that of Job's against the day of his birth.³⁷ This parallel suggests a lament over a terrible disaster. It could be a cry of despair, born of depression at the thought of the fate of the people of Judah and the fate of Jerusalem.
- It could be the traditional response to the bringer of bad news. In the Hebrew Scriptures a bringer of good news is always blessed while the bringer of bad news is cursed.³⁸ If the context is that of bad news relating to Jerusalem, then v.16 contains an allusion to Sodom and Gomorrah. The normal use of such a motif in prophetic literature is as metaphor for the wickedness of the people of Jerusalem and its leaders.³⁹
- Jer 20:14-18 could be a self-curse. But this raises the difficulties already seen in trying to identify the speaker with Jeremiah. Again the difficulties with the text allow no clear interpretation.

³⁷ Job 3:3-19.

³⁸ Jer 30:5-6; 49:23; 50:43.

³⁹ Jer 23:14; Isa 1:10; 3:9; Ezek 16:45-46.

5.9.4 Conclusions

Jer 20:7-18 is one in the series of texts known as *Jeremiah's Lamentations*.⁴⁰ If we adopt the traditional position and identify the speaker as Jeremiah, as Jews and Christians at the time of Jesus would have done, then these texts show Jeremiah in deep conflict with YHWH. While Jeremiah publicly proclaimed YHWH's will, texts such as Jer 20:7-18 show that Jeremiah did not find YHWH to be his best friend or special supporter. Two motifs in our text point to this:

- Jeremiah hopes for retaliation and vengeance (Jer 20:11).⁴¹ He dares to presume that YHWH's enemies are his. He longs to see such enemies done in. He counts on YHWH to be his ally. His experience is one of not having YHWH as an ally.
- Jeremiah senses that he has been betrayed (Jer 20:7-8). YHWH who has promised to be with him does not seem to be of much help. This sense of estrangement is typical of Jeremiah's character.

In these two ways Jer 20:7-18 underlines how deep the prophet's inner conflict is. Jeremiah was pre-eminently the prophet who suffered persecution because of his prophetic activity. His fate influenced the development of the late Jewish view that rejection, persecution and martyrdom were inseparable to the prophetic vocation. To be a bearer of the word of YHWH means to suffer because that word inevitably encounters hostility or rejection. It is very interesting that Jesus regarded his own fate as the culmination of the rejection of the prophets and their message.⁴² Clearly the persecuted early Christian church saw in Jeremiah's unhappy experience an example of what happened to Jesus and to all who identified with his cause.

5.10 Text #20: The Restoration of Israel (Jer 31:1-20)

The theme of restoration that we saw hinted at in the Book of Amos and more developed in the Books of Hosea and Proto-Isaiah is highly developed in the Book of Jeremiah. Jer 30:1 – 31:40 is said to be the climax both of the Book of Jeremiah and of all biblical prophecy. It is not a single unique work, but a collection of poems based around the

40 Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18.

41 Jer 11:20; 12:3; 15:5; 17:18; 18:21.

42 See Mark 12:1-12 and parallel texts.

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one theme of restoration. Most scholars claim that the texts are post-exilic, but some date them to the period of the prophet's early ministry. The text can be divided as follows:

1. Northern Israel Will be Restored (30:1 – 31:22)
 - a. Introduction (30:1-4)
 - b. Jacob's Distress at an End (30:5-11)
 - c. The Healing of Israel's Wounds (30:12-17)
 - d. The Restoration (30:18-24)
 - e. The Good News of the Return (31:1-6)
 - f. The New Exodus (31:7-14)
 - g. The End of Rachel's Mourning (31:15-20)
 - h. En Route (31:21-22)

2. Additional Fragments (31:23-40)
 - a. The Restoration of Judah (31,23-26)
 - b. Israel and Judah (31:27-28)
 - c. Personal Responsibility (31:29-30)
 - d. The New Covenant (31:31-34)
 - e. The Stability of Israel (31:35-37)
 - f. The Rebuilding of Jerusalem (31:38-40).

This course will study three texts:

- The Good News of the Return (Jer 31:1-6).
- The New Exodus (Jer 31:7-14).
- The End of Rachel's Mourning (Jer 31:15-20).

The material found in Jer 31:1-20 is very different to what has gone before:

- The territory is called *Ephraim* (Jer 31:6.9.18.20) - a word that is very rarely used in the Jeremian tradition.⁴³
- The *language* is erotic (v.3), emotional and full of images from pastoral life.

⁴³ Jer 4:15; 7:15.

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- The *theme of rejoicing* runs through the poems (vv.4.7.12-13). Such features are not characteristic of the prophet's temperament, which was more given to haranguing and cursing!

The only argument that relates these poems to the prophet Jeremiah is the editor's note at Jer 30:1. Such notes are of themselves highly artificial. Even if Jeremiah did not write such poems, this does not take from their importance. The fact of their incorporation into the Book of Jeremiah suggests how important the redactors considered them to be.

5.10.1 The Good News of the Return (Jer 31:1-6)

Jeremiah 31:1 At that time, says YHWH, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. 2 Thus says YHWH: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, 3 YHWH appeared to him from far away. I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. 4 Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel! Again you shall take your tambourines, and go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. 5 Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit. 6 For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to YHWH our God."

At that time ... all the families ... (v.1): The phrase "at that time" links the poem to what has gone before.⁴⁴ The phrase, "all the families," reflects the communities of the Jewish Diaspora who will ultimately be reunited as the people of YHWH. V.1 is a preface to all that follows and suggests how the editor(s) understood the following poems.

People who survived the sword (v.2): Israel is represented as one who escaped the sword or like one who finds nourishment in the desert. The prophetic tradition (especially Deutero-Isaiah) saw the return from exile as a second Exodus, but a far more glorious one.⁴⁵

I have loved you ... everlasting love (v.3): Israel is now compared to a woman to whom YHWH makes a declaration of love. This declaration is outlined in vv.4-6. The virgin Israel will be rebuilt and she will dance in rejoicing with the merrymakers (v.4). Vineyards will be replanted and their fruit will be enjoyed (v.5). The old ways will return. Note how the restoration of the old ways is emphasized by the triple use of "again" [v.4 (x2). v.5]. Jer

⁴⁴ Jer 30:24.

⁴⁵ Isa 41:17-20; 43:16-21; 48:20-22.

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31:1-6 is more than a romantic reconstruction of the past. The nation living in its own land, agriculturally sufficient, with Zion as its centre is a romantic idea which had no past, although it could have had a future.

5.10.2 The New Exodus (Jer 31:7-14)

This text contains two poems: vv.7-9 and vv.10-14.

(a) The First Poem (Jer 31:7-9)

Jeremiah 31:7 For thus says YHWH: Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and raise shouts for the chief of the nations; proclaim, give praise, and say, "Save, O YHWH, your people, the remnant of Israel." 8 See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return here. 9 With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back, I will let them walk by brooks of water, in a straight path in which they shall not stumble; for I have become a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.

This poem celebrates the return of the exiles as it mimics the terrible invasion that had led the people into exile. In this way it reverses the fate of the nation. The poem achieves this in two ways:

- The Babylonian army that swept down from the north and destroyed Judah and Jerusalem was very powerful. The army of people that now returns is full of the blind, the lame and the pregnant. The first army was like an open grave. It brought death with it and left Judah and Jerusalem for dead. The second army is a procession of the weak that bears the promise of new life for the nation.
- Note the use of feminine images that are characteristic of the restoration theme (v.8). The texts that deal with the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem use the image of a woman raped.⁴⁶ The image of the restoration is that of a woman giving birth and drawing forth love.

⁴⁶ Jer 4:30-31.

The return is celebrated in v.7 as a procession for the chief of the nations. YHWH is the father of the nation and Ephraim is his first-born (v.9). The use of the name “Ephraim” suggests an allusion to the Genesis story of Ephraim, who was not the first-born, but became so.⁴⁷ The nation’s fruitfulness and good fortune are due to YHWH as its father. Note how the writer shifts in his use of metaphors between the masculine and feminine. Israel is both YHWH’s mistress/wife (v.3) and son (v.9). Finally the idea of the great assembly which comes in triumph from the corners of the world and which travels with ease along straight paths is a theme we will encounter again in Deutero-Isaiah.⁴⁸

(b) The Second Poem (Jer 31:10-14)

Jeremiah 31:10 Hear the word of YHWH, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock." 11 For YHWH has ransomed Jacob, and has redeemed him from hands too strong for him. 12 They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion, and they shall be radiant over the goodness of YHWH, over the grain, the wine, and the oil, and over the young of the flock and the herd; their life shall become like a watered garden, and they shall never languish again. 13 Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. 14 I will give the priests their fill of fatness, and my people shall be satisfied with my bounty, says YHWH.

The second poem is linked to the first by the use of similar language: “proclaim ... give praise ... say” (v.7) and “hear ... declare ... say” (v.10); “nations” (v.7 and v.10). The central theme is also similar: the return of the exiles. The texts differ in that vv.10-14 uses more pastoral language [“shepherd” (v.10); “flock” (v.10. v.12); “grain,” “wine,” “oil” (v.12); “herd” (v.12); “garden” (v.12); dancing and merrymaking (v.13)]. YHWH is presented as the shepherd who scattered the flock and who tends it anew (v.10). All the insecurity of the past has disappeared. The evil that has been executed by YHWH is overturned by him, as he shepherds his flock back to a land of prosperity.

⁴⁷ Gen 48:8-20.

⁴⁸ Isa 49:8-23; 51:17-20.

5.10.3 The End of Rachel's Mourning (Jer 31:15-20)

Jeremiah 31:15 Thus says YHWH: A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more. 16 Thus says YHWH: Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears; for there is a reward for your work, says YHWH: they shall come back from the land of the enemy; 17 there is hope for your future, says YHWH: your children shall come back to their own country. 18 Indeed I heard Ephraim pleading: "You disciplined me, and I took the discipline; I was like a calf untrained. Bring me back, let me come back, for you are YHWH my God. 19 For after I had turned away I repented; and after I was discovered, I struck my thigh; I was ashamed, and I was dismayed because I bore the disgrace of my youth." 20 Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he the child I delight in? As often as I speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore I am deeply moved for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says YHWH.

This poem is made up of a number of elements that the redactor has joined together with phrases like "thus says YHWH" (vv.15.16) and "says YHWH" (vv.16.17.20). In this way the following independent elements have been forged together: *the death of a mother's children* (v.15); *the return of exiled children* (vv.16-17); *a man complaining about his youth* (vv.18-19); *YHWH's speech* which uses maternal loving terms (v.20). The completed redactional unit produces a number of images in which the image of the community as mother (vv.15-17) is balanced by the image of YHWH as mother (v.20). Between these sets of images lies that of the community as a son who appeals to YHWH to bring him back (vv.18-19). This gives rise to the following effects:

- As a *woman* the community is shattered by the loss of her people.
- As a *man* the community bemoans his sinful past.
- As a *mother* YHWH is filled with compassionate feelings for her son.

Rachel (v.15): The Hebrew word used here is *rāhēl* (רַחֵל) and may be understood as a reference to the biblical Rachel, wife of Jacob or as *mother-ewe*.

Ramah (v.15): This term could be a reference to Rachel's **burial ground**⁴⁹ or as the Hebrew for *high ground*. The metaphor could be that of Rachel weeping for her children or of a mother-ewe lamenting on the highlands the loss (annihilation) of her lambs. Whichever metaphor is used the message is the same: the community bitterly laments the loss of its children. YHWH's response is given in vv.16-17.

⁴⁹ Gen 35:19; 48:7; 1 Sam 10:2-3.

They shall come back (v.16): YHWH tells the woman not to weep because her children will return. This is repeated in v.17 “and there is hope for your future.” The Hebrew term used here is *'ahăritēk* (אַחֲרַיִתֶּךָ) which literally means *after you*. Thus it could refer to the *future* or to what will happen *afterwards*, after the mother’s death. The second possibility links v.17 with v.15 more smoothly. If *rāhēl* (רַחֵל) refers to Jacob’s wife, who died in childbirth,⁵⁰ then in v.17 she is given the comforting news that her child will be cared for after her death. The mother’s children will return, and the despair of v.15 will be reversed. The message is obscured by the fact that v.15 and vv.16-17 refer to different things and have been brought together by the redactor.

Calf Untrained (v.18): The subject matter of vv.18-19 is quite different. Here there is no talk of return, but Ephraim bemoans his youth and confesses to have been like an untrained calf. The image is of a domestic animal that wandered away, and has to be flogged in order to return. Ephraim wishes to return. He accepts that he has gone astray and confesses his faults. The element of confession (v.19) is quite unusual. Generally in prophetic oracles of salvation it is YHWH who takes the initiative irrespective of human response. Repentance is not a general pre-requisite for salvation in such texts.

Is Ephraim my dear son ... (v.20): V.20 expresses Mother YHWH’s feelings for her son. Ephraim is described as a *bēn yaqqîr* (בֶּן יַקִּיר - Hebrew: *precious son*) and a *yeled ša'ăšû'im* (יֶלֶד שַׁאֲשׁוּיִם - Hebrew: *child of absolute delight*). YHWH will remember him. She is so moved that her heart yearns for him (הָמוּ מַעַי לוֹ - Hebrew: *hāmû m 'ay lô - my womb trembles for him*). She will most certainly have mercy on him. The image of YHWH’s love for the community is that of overwhelming feminine love. YHWH’s love is so strong that the community will encounter mercy in spite of what has been done. In short, the weeping of the community (v.15) is transformed by YHWH’s uterine love. This is yet another example of how the Bible uses masculine and feminine terminology is describing the human-divine relationship.

50 Gen 35:18.

5.11 Jeremiah: Some Concluding Remarks

- Jeremiah's prophetic ministry announced the end of a world presided over by kings and priests who thought themselves secure, stable and safe. He proclaimed the Babylonians as the instrument of YHWH's salvation.
- Jeremiah proclaimed to Judah's exiles the possibility of a new world brought about by YHWH's mercy and freedom.
- Jeremiah loved and hated his people deeply. He spoke the truth to his time and suffered for it. He is the one who both suffers and hopes most in the Hebrew Scriptures. He is also a very important figure for the NT. His suffering, the end of Israel, and the hope of Judah, and the New Israel he articulated, became modes for understanding Jesus as the one who was destroyed and ultimately raised up.

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