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# Introduction

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## Historical Context

The book of Jeremiah is reflective of and responsive to the historical crisis of the last days of Judah, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 587 B.C.E. This crisis is the dominant and shaping event of the entire OT. The destruction evoked an extensive theological literature of which the book of Jeremiah is one major component.<sup>1</sup>

The last days of the 7th cent., the time of Jeremiah, witnessed the abrupt collapse of the Assyrian Empire and its prompt displacement by the Babylonians under the governance of Nebuchadnezzar. The Judean crisis must therefore be understood in the context of Babylonian imperial ambitions and expansionism. The power of Babylon to the north of Judah, however, was not the only foreign power with which Judah had to deal. Judah had to attend also to the Egyptians to the south, whose policy was to maintain Judah as a buffer against Babylonian pressure. Thus Judah was placed precisely and precariously between Babylon and Egypt. The Judahite kings in the years after Josiah (639-609) vacillated between Babylonian and Egyptian alliances. Finally Babylonian policy would no longer

1. See Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1968), and Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* 6 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979).

tolerate such political double-mindedness and moved against Jerusalem to end its political independence.<sup>2</sup>

Jehoiakim (609-598), son of Josiah, played a daring game of "international roulette" between Egypt and Babylon, eventually evoking Babylon's first incursion into Jerusalem in 598. One outcome of the events of 598 was the exile of Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin to Babylon, where he remained for many years as titular head of the dynasty. Many prominent citizens of Judah were deported with him. For the period of 598-587, yet another son of Josiah, Zedekiah, presided over the affairs of Jerusalem but in the end had no chance for independent action in the face of Babylon. During these years, there was an intense rivalry between the community in Jerusalem (over which Zedekiah presided), and the exilic community in Babylon (in which Jehoiachin was understood as the legitimate leader).

Babylon's final decisive blow against Judah came in 587. The Babylonian Empire terminated Judah's existence as an independent political entity. Jerusalem and its environs were made part of a governorship accountable to the empire. A second and even more extensive deportation of Jerusalem's citizens occurred, as part of a general strategy for consolidating the Babylonian Empire and maintaining power. This radical displacement raised in Judah and Jerusalem a range of critical questions, moral and religious as well as political.

It is therefore possible to understand and explain the events around 587 in terms of *Realpolitik*, that is, in terms of political tensions between states and the overriding military and imperial power of Babylon. The realities of the political, military, and historical process provide convincing proof of Judah's helplessness in the face of Babylonian power, a helplessness exacerbated by the unwise and weak leadership it received from its monarchy. The Jeremiah literature is familiar with the realities of imperial politics and is conversant with those modes of thinking. However, Jeremiah does not pursue a *Realpolitik* interpretation of Judah's crisis of termination and displacement, but offers a different, alternative reading of those events. As an alternative to a political analysis, the tradition of Jeremiah proceeds on the basis of a theological perspective.

2. For a general review of the period, see Bustenay Oded, "Judah and the Exile," in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1977), 435-488; and Miller and Hayes, *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1986), 381-429.

## Theological Tradition

The literature of Jeremiah engages in anguished poetic reflection and didactic prose explanation about the cause of Israel's end and the destiny of those deported to Babylon. Jeremiah's reading is not shaped by power politics but by the categories of Israel's covenantal traditions of faith, which concern the holy purpose and power of Yahweh and the aches and hopes of the faithful community. As the categories of analysis and understanding shift from matters of international power to concerns of covenantal faithfulness, so also the modes of speech change. The odd result is that the great political event of 587 is discerned through passionate poetry and uncompromising theological analysis. Out of that poetry and analysis emerges a poetic anticipation of a new historical possibility for Judah — an anticipation that pushes powerfully beyond imperial permits and transcends the seeming prohibitions of the empire.

When the events of 587 are read from a theological perspective, Judah's destiny will be shaped finally not by power as the world judges power, but by the covenantal realities of Yahweh's sovereignty and power. We may identify three elements that are constitutive of this covenantal understanding of historical reality.

1. The governing paradigm for the tradition of Jeremiah is *Israel's covenant with Yahweh, rooted in the memories and mandates of the Sinai tradition*. That covenant taught that the sovereign God of Israel required obedience to covenant stipulations about social practice and power. Disobedience to those covenant stipulations would result in heavy sanctions (curses) that would be experienced as death or displacement.

When the events of 587 are read in the light of the claims of covenant, the Babylonian invasion and deportation are understood as the means of implementation of the harsh sanctions (covenant curses) already known and articulated in the Sinai tradition. The reality of Babylonian power is not denied, but is firmly subordinated to and incorporated into the intention of Yahweh. The book of Jeremiah thus mediates the reality of imperial politics through the theological claims of covenant.<sup>3</sup>

The mediation of political reality and covenantal faith is offered with

3. See John Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 140-170.

amazing daring, in order to insist that there is a moral dimension to the termination and deportation. The destruction of Jerusalem wrought by Babylon is presented as a covenantal response of the God of Israel to Judah's refusal to adhere to covenantal requirements. Such a conclusion follows from the categories of Israel's faith, but to link the historical crisis to those categories is a bold interpretive act. Indeed, that Jeremiah's contemporaries could not discern the relation between imperial politics and covenantal theology is a central issue of the book.

This governing paradigm of covenant indicates that Jeremiah is in important ways related to and derived from the traditions of Deuteronomy.<sup>4</sup> This connection (generally affirmed in a scholarly consensus) is important because the book of Deuteronomy gives a clear and uncompromising presentation of the covenant relation in Israel's faith. Deuteronomy makes clear that Israel's life begins in Yahweh's act of mercy and fidelity, and that Israel's proper response is obedient listening. Moreover, Deuteronomy asserts that every dimension of Israel's common life is to be brought under the rubric of covenant obedience. Indeed, it articulates a strategy for making public life fully covenantal.<sup>5</sup> Finally, Deuteronomy most clearly presents the potential curses that will come upon Israel for disobedience. The convergence of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah is clear not only in terms of theological substance, but also in matters of style and forms of articulation. Jeremiah's proclamation and the entire book of Jeremiah operate on theological assumptions that are most clearly presented in Deuteronomy. The tradition of Jeremiah is not closed and reductionistic, but it is clear about the claims of covenant.

2. The book of Jeremiah, however, cannot be completely understood by simple reference to a notion of covenant violation and covenant curse,

4. For summary statements from the older criticism, see John Bright, "The Date of the Prose Sermons of Jeremiah," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 193-212; and J. Philip Hyatt, "The Deuteronomistic Edition of Jeremiah," *ibid.*, 247-267. The Deuteronomistic dimension of Jeremiah has been most programmatically argued by Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant* (New York: Crossroad; London: SCM, 1981).

5. Norbert Lohfink ("Distribution of the Functions of Power," *Great Themes from the Old Testament* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1982], 55-75) has argued that in Deut. 16-18, one can discern a proposed "constitution" for organizing and authorizing a particular mode of public life.

the central assumptions of Deuteronomistic theology.<sup>6</sup> Along with the paradigm of covenant, the book of Jeremiah affirms another theological claim, *the pathos of Yahweh*. In spite of Israel's obduracy and recalcitrance, Yahweh nonetheless wills a continuing relation with Israel. This will is rooted in nothing other than God's inexplicable yearning, which is articulated in Jeremiah as God's pathos, presented in turn through the pathos of the poet.<sup>7</sup>

Thus the severity of covenant sanctions and the power of God's yearning pathos are set in deep tension. This deep tension forms the central interest, theological significance, and literary power of the book of Jeremiah. This yearning pathos that is presented as God's fundamental inclination toward Judah is a departure from and critique of the primary inclination of Deuteronomistic theology.<sup>8</sup>

The juxtaposition of covenant claim and pathos makes clear that God is, in the life of Judah, more complex, free, and less controllable than a simple scheme of retribution would suggest. It is this greater complexity in the character of God that the rich rhetoric of the book of Jeremiah seeks to articulate. The theological richness of Yahweh's character evokes and requires a subtle rhetoric that is full of ambiguity, passion, and incongruity. The book of Jeremiah is so powerful and compelling because it has a mode of expression appropriate to its astonishing subject.

The mediation of the claims of covenant through the surprising power of Yahweh's pathos permits the book of Jeremiah to move beyond

6. The simple structure of violation and curse is also central to the "prophetic lawsuit" of indictment and sentence; see Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: Lutterworth, 1967). But the language of Jeremiah is closer to that of Deuteronomy (e.g., Deut. 28).

7. See Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1962), 103-139, 221-278.

8. It is worth noting that in Deut. 7:7, a classic text on the election, the verb *hashaq* is used: "The LORD set his love upon you." The RSV translation, "set his love on," is an anemic one. The verb suggests a passionate, craving physical grasping of another in powerful embrace. It is this dimension of passionate craving that is articulated in Jeremiah's vivid imagery, and that gives his poetry such power and poignancy. In this, the poetry of Jeremiah runs well beyond the restrained articulations of Deuteronomy. While the tradition of Jeremiah may be informed in this regard by Deuteronomy, the theme is much more fully utilized, so much more so that it amounts to an important departure from the tradition of Deuteronomy.

the crisis of exile and death in the 7th and 6th cents. to envision a newness that is wrought out of God's gracious resolve and powerful will. The move beyond covenantal sanction is unwarranted, but that move is possible because of God's magisterial freedom, through which God can and does act beyond warrants. Jeremiah's discernment and articulation of the freedom and pathos of Yahweh enables the poet to break out of the tight categories of covenantal sanctions and move to an articulation of hope.

3. The third constituent element necessary to understand the theology of the book of Jeremiah is the *royal-temple ideology of Jerusalem*. This ideology articulated in the Jerusalem establishment, fostered by the king and articulated by temple priests, claimed that the God of Israel had made irrevocable promises to the temple and the monarchy, had taken up permanent residence in Jerusalem, and was for all time a patron and guarantor of the Jerusalem establishment. Jeremiah's work only makes sense as an antithetical response to that ideology.

The royal-temple ideology, embodied in temple liturgy and royal claims of legitimacy, asserted and imagined that it was an indispensable vehicle for God's way and blessing in the world. It was therefore assumed that the royal-temple apparatus was immune to covenant sanctions and to God's judgment. This ideology was the official religion of Jerusalem and no doubt was popularly embraced. The tradition of Jeremiah articulates a sustained challenge to the royal-temple ideology, insisting on the centrality of covenant commandment and dismissing the notion of immunity from judgment. The counterclaim of the tradition of Jeremiah is rooted in the old radical theological tradition of Sinai and was, as events materialized, vindicated by the actual end of Jerusalem. History showed that, indeed, Jerusalem was not immune to judgment.

The painful experiences around 587 made clear the inadequacy of both the old covenant theology and the royal-temple theology. While the sympathies of the Jeremiah literature are clearly with the former, neither tradition had the resources to provide the way out of the despair of exile. The new circumstances around 587 required a new theological assertion.<sup>9</sup> In his rereading of the events around Jerusalem in his moment of proclamation, Jeremiah therefore used various elements of already existing interpretation models. These models, however, are handled in ways that are

9. See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 (New York: Harper & Row; Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1965), 263-277.

freshly discerning and astonishingly imaginative. The outcome is that Jeremiah's rendering of Jerusalem's experience and destiny is a wholly new one that belongs peculiarly to this literature.

In arriving at this imaginative, subtle, and bold rereading, the book of Jeremiah:

- (1) reinterprets the events of *Realpolitik* through the categories of covenantal obligation and covenantal sanctions,
- (2) disrupts the claims of the covenantal (Deuteronomic) pattern of obligation and sanction by a disclosure of the pathos of God that will not be contained in the tradition of covenant, and
- (3) utilizes the combination of covenantal motifs and divine pathos to critique and reject the claims of the royal-temple ideology.

By such creative transformation of the available traditions, Jeremiah asserts that the city will be dismantled by the will and power of Yahweh (and not by the decision of Babylon), and that a new community of covenantal possibility will emerge after the dismantling, as a free gift of Yahweh.

## The Book

The book of Jeremiah is a complicated literary composition that has evoked much scholarly attention. During the last century, an approximate consensus has been reached among critical scholars that the book contains three layers of literature reflecting three layers of redactional activity: (1) the poetic utterances of the prophet Jeremiah, (2) the narrative accounts of Baruch, and (3) the theological overlay of Deuteronomic theologians.<sup>10</sup> This consensus reflects a scholarly view that the literature has emerged through identifiable stages of editorial activity. There is not agreement, however, among scholars about the precise extent of each of these layers of literature, nor the process by which they came to be a part of the book.

That three-source critical consensus, however, is now open to serious doubts because scholars are no longer agreed that the character of the book can be understood according to such a mechanical literary process. The

10. For a review of scholarship, see Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1979), 342-344.

literary formation of the book is much more dynamic and processive than such a three-document proposal would allow. Moreover, the new stress on the canonical shape of the literature may diminish the pertinence of these older historical-critical questions. Nonetheless, the residue of the old scholarly consensus includes two important points to which scholars give general and broad assent.

First, there is a core of material that originated with the historical person of Jeremiah. Second, an extended process of editorial work has transformed and perhaps made beyond recovery the original work of the prophet. What we now have is a literature decisively shaped by a later traditioning process. Beyond the general conclusion that the book contains *material from Jeremiah* and *subsequent editorial activity*, there is no discernible agreement among scholars.

Attempts to refine or advance beyond the "three-source critical consensus" may be grouped in three scholarly positions.

1. The more conservative critical position, perhaps standing in closest continuity to the older critical scholarship, is represented by William L. Holladay<sup>11</sup> and by the well established commentary of John Bright.<sup>12</sup> This approach seeks to determine the date and exact historical setting of each textual unit. It asks specific historical questions of each passage. Moreover, this approach is inclined to maximize the role of the actual person Jeremiah by assigning as much material as possible to the prophet. The work of Holladay and Bright, therefore, is inclined to accept whenever possible the claim of the book of Jeremiah itself, that the materials do indeed stem from the work of the prophet.

2. In sharp contrast to this first approach is the dominant tendency of recent British scholarship, articulated especially by Robert P. Carroll,<sup>13</sup> but also by Peter R. Ackroyd<sup>14</sup> and Ernest W. Nicholson.<sup>15</sup> This scholarly

11. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah: Spokesman Out of Time* (Philadelphia: United Church, 1974), and now *Jeremiah 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SCM, 1986).

12. John Bright, *Jeremiah*, 2nd ed., Anchor Bible 21 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1978).

13. *From Chaos to Covenant*.

14. "The Book of Jeremiah — Some Recent Studies," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (1984): 47-59.

15. Ernest W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970).

position focuses on the Deuteronomic editing of the book of Jeremiah in the Exile, a generation or two after the person of Jeremiah. The canonical text of Jeremiah is understood to be the work of exilic editors and redactors who have recast and transformed the older material for the sake of the community in exile, under the influence of the tradition of Deuteronomy. This approach focuses on the constructive pastoral and theological intention of the community in exile that construed the tradition of Jeremiah in fresh directions in order to meet fresh religious needs. As a result of the exilic community's theological mediation of the Jeremiah tradition, we cannot recover with any certitude any of the actual words of Jeremiah. Indeed, we have no access to the person of Jeremiah or his words, except as mediated by the community, and to pose such an historical question is both futile and irrelevant. From this scholarly perspective, the book of Jeremiah is seen to have no interest in the person of Jeremiah, and thus neither should we. Pursuit of such historical questions about the person or the words of the prophet should be abandoned.

We are at an especially fortuitous time in Jeremiah studies, because in 1986, both Holladay and Carroll published commentaries that provide a sustained presentation of their quite contrasting arguments.<sup>16</sup> These two commentaries represent the major literary-critical developments in Jeremiah studies since the older three-source critical consensus. They are likely to determine the shape and parameters of scholarly conversation for a long time to come.

The two perspectives of Holladay and Carroll stand in sharp contrast to each other. Holladay is inclined to assign to the prophet Jeremiah as much as possible, whereas Carroll believes that the work of the original prophet is beyond identification or recovery, so weighty is the exilic recasting of the corpus. Despite the sharp contrasts of their literary assumptions, however, it is important to note that Holladay and Carroll proceed with quite parallel concerns. Both ask primarily historical questions, and

16. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, Hermeneia; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1986). Also published in this remarkable year in Jeremiah studies was William McKane, *Jeremiah*, 1, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark). The commentaries of Holladay and Carroll likely represent the extreme parameters of current discussion. McKane's is a close and technical study filling the long lamentable void in the ICC series. None of these commentaries was available in time for me to benefit in my work on chs. 1-25.

both are singularly concerned to identify the historical location of the text. Whereas Holladay is concerned in some way with "the quest for the historical Jeremiah," Carroll, so to speak, is engaged in a "quest for the Deuteronomic Jeremiah." Much is to be learned from both enterprises, but both leave matters of interpretation incomplete. There is a tendency to focus so much on questions of historicity and redaction that literary and theological questions of the text as it stands do not receive as much attention as might be desired.

3. A third perspective has been adumbrated by Brevard S. Childs, who proposes to subordinate historical questions to the canonical shape of the literature.<sup>17</sup> Childs recognizes and seeks to value both the "original Jeremiah" and the "Deuteronomic editor." He has taken the uncontested literary judgment that the "original Jeremiah" has been recast by Deuteronomists in exile and has shown how that editorial/canonical combination of "original" and "exilic" materials articulates the theological claim of God's judgment against recalcitrant Jerusalem and God's promissory act of newness.<sup>18</sup> The canonical shape of the book thus makes clear that God "watches over" the sovereign word of God, first to pluck up and tear down, then to plant and to build (Jer. 1:10; 31:27-30). The initial word of Jeremiah was a word of judgment, of plucking up and tearing down. A quite distinct second word of hope has been imposed upon the judgment of planting and building. The dual theme of judgment and promise is reflected in the editorial shaping of the canonical text.<sup>19</sup> The intent and effect of Childs's work is to free the double theological assertion and function of the text from its particular historical locus in the 7th and 6th centuries. Childs does not seek a Jeremiah dating with Holladay, nor an exilic placement with Carroll. He brackets out such historical questions for the sake of the text's twofold theological intention. A study of Childs' proposal shows the extent to which Holladay and Carroll, while drawing

17. *Old Testament as Scripture*, 345-354.

18. In a general way the "original work" of Jeremiah presents a statement of God's judgment and the "exilic material" articulates God's promissory work. Childs, however, is interested in the double theological intention, not in the historical placement of the various texts.

19. On the general structure of judgment and promise in the prophets, see Ronald E. Clements, "Patterns in the Prophetic Canon," in *Canon and Authority*, ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 42-55. The structure of the book of Jeremiah provides evidence for Clements's general notion.

opposite conclusions, are in fact addressing very similar questions, the very questions Childs critiques.

There is at present no scholarly consensus about these three quite different perspectives. It is not the interest of the present commentary to advance this critical conversation, nor to adjudicate between these several alternatives. It is perhaps enough to conclude that the theological tradition of the book of Jeremiah continues to be lively and energizing long after the end of the work of the prophet Jeremiah.

### The Person of Jeremiah

In light of the preceding statement concerning the work of Holladay and Carroll, it is not surprising that the question of the "person of Jeremiah" is exceedingly difficult.<sup>20</sup> A more conservative view (Holladay and Bright) assumes that one can in some way reach close to the person of Jeremiah and reconstruct that historical person from the data. At the other extreme, Carroll concludes that the materials have been so completely reshaped that they provide no clues to the historical person and that there is no access. It may well be, however, that these alternatives put the question wrongly.

Every historical presentation of a personality is a mediation and a construction.<sup>21</sup> What we have of the person of Jeremiah in the book of Jeremiah is more like a "portrait" that reflects the taste and interest of the artist, rather than an objective report that is factually precise. At the same time, as Timothy Polk has argued, it can hardly be denied that in the midst of this complicated Jeremiah literature there is an anchoring reference to a powerful personality about which the editors had some knowl-

20. See David Jobling, "The Quest of the Historical Jeremiah: Hermeneutical Implications of Recent Literature," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, ed. Perdue and Kovacs, 285-297; and Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona*, JSOT Supplement 32 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984).

21. Roy Shafer, *Language and Insight* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 8-18, argues that every personal presentation of a historical self is a "construction." He concludes that this is so even when a person presents himself or herself. That being so in our self-presentation, it is obviously so when any literary effort is made to "present" an historical person. Thus there can be little doubt that Jeremiah as given us in the book of Jeremiah is a "construction." See Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Jeremiah: Portrait of the Prophet," *Interpretation*, 37 (1983): 130-145.

edge and some conviction.<sup>22</sup> That knowledge and conviction of the historical person, however, are given to us in ways that reflect the interests and faith of those who give us the data.

Thus I have no difficulty in speaking of the person of Jeremiah, while being aware that the only "person" of Jeremiah about which we can know anything is given us through an intentional construction. I have characteristically spoken in my exposition of "the poet," "the prophet," or "Jeremiah" as the agent behind and within the text. Such a reference is not naively historical. To speak of "Jeremiah" is to refer to the constructed *persona* of the prophet that is no doubt rooted in the actual reality, and that equally without doubt is mediated and constructed for us in a particular way. Such a reference is in part an expository convenience, for clearly there is an agent who is evoker and actor in the text. But such a reference to "Jeremiah" is also a recognition that there is a coherence in the text in some way reflective of and witness to concrete historical experience and faith. The determination whether such evidences point to a discernible historical figure or an imaginative literary construct is not required for this exposition, and finally adjudication of the matter is impossible. We know enough about tradition, context, and style to recognize "the voice" at work in the text, even if we name that voice with full recognition of the ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty surrounding that portrayed person.<sup>23</sup>

### An Interpretive Perspective

In my interpretation I have paid special attention to two emerging methods in Scripture study.

22. Polk has argued well the delicate interaction between the constructive tradition and the person of the prophet. Finally he comes down on the side of the "persona" as a purposed paradigm for the reading community: "In my opinion, it violates the integrity of the text, *qua* poetry, to replace the given literary context with the conjectured historical occasion of the writing process and so to construe the text as referring to authorial circumstances rather than to the subject as it is literarily defined" (*The Prophetic Persona*, 165).

23. Robert M. Polzin, *Moses and the Deuteronomist* (New York: Seabury, 1980), has utilized the notice of conflicting "voices" in the text to good advantage. His work is informed by the critical theory of V. N. Voloshinov.

1. *Sociological analysis* has recently become important in Scripture study.<sup>24</sup> In this method, one pays attention to the interests, ideologies, and constructions of reality that are operative in the formation and transmission of the text.<sup>25</sup> The biblical text is understood as neither neutral nor objective, but as located in, reflective of, and concerned for a particular social context that is determinative of its shape and focus. This approach is distinct from the older historical-critical approach because it does not seek specific historical placement but, rather, a placement within various social voices or dynamic forces. Interpretation requires attention both to the particular voice in the text and to the other voices in the situation with which this voice may be in dispute, tension, or agreement.

The use of sociological analysis in the reading of Jeremiah is complicated because the world of the text permits the sounding of many voices. We may surmise voices present in the situation of the text representing the old covenant tradition, the memory of hurt from Hosea, the legitimacy of the monarchy, the high temple theology of the priesthood, pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian political preferences, and the powerful families of nobility that are in tension with the royal family and may represent the old claims of rural elders. In reading Jeremiah one asks how these various voices interact with each other, which ones are allied against what other ones, and how they are variously presented as reflective of or resistant to the will of Yahweh. In a later generation of the Jeremiah tradition, we likely contend with pastoral voices among exiles, with the claims of the community that remained in Judah, and again with pro-Egyptian voices. It is not nearly so important to date passages as it is to attend to the interaction of these several forces that vied for influence and legitimacy.

The interaction of these different voices in Jeremiah tend to coalesce around one central issue. The text of Jeremiah articulates a dispute (re-

24. See Robert R. Wilson, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament*, Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). While Wilson well articulates the method, a much more substantive and influential use of the method is by Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1979). Gottwald's sociological analysis has been instructive for me in understanding Jeremiah's radical critique of the urban establishment of Jerusalem.

25. On such social construction, see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966).

flective of a conversation in Jerusalem) about who rightly understands historical events and who rightly discerns the relation between faith, morality, and political power. The tradition of Jeremiah articulates a covenant-torah view of reality that stands in deep tension with the royal-priestly ideology of the Jerusalem establishment. The Jeremiah tradition insists that covenant fidelity is the clue to public well-being, and a violation of such fidelity will bring death to the community. The tradition of Jeremiah assumes and argues that the historical process in Judah is rightly perceived not by those in the temple establishment, but by the voice of covenant fidelity that is clearly marginal. The book of Jeremiah is nearly unambiguous in its conviction that the Jerusalem ideology is a mistaken, fraudulent notion of public life that can only lead to death. This central tension between perceptions of reality, reflective of a deep social conflict, is present in many — if not all — parts of the book of Jeremiah.

The use of sociological analysis enables the interpreter to place the dispute between covenantal and noncovenantal notions of life and community into the particular social life setting of the divided Jerusalem community. The articulation of the social forces at work in this dispute permits the ongoing power and pertinence of the Jeremiah tradition in subsequent generations and new social settings. The claims of the royal-priestly ideology repeatedly are embodied, generation after generation, in monopolistic centers of domination in every sphere of human life. These centers imagine they are immune from the risks and responsibilities of the historical process. Conversely, a passionate commitment to covenant stands in every generation and every circumstance as a critical alternative to such domination.

The text requires very little explicit "application" to see that centers of domination still lead to exile and death, and that covenantal alternatives, mediated by God's sovereign graciousness, continue to be a fragile offer of life. The text continues its authoritative claim in new situations because the same social realities recur, and because the same witness to the same sovereign God is pertinent in new situations.

## 2. *Literary analysis* (which does not refer to the old source analysis)

26. Among the better representatives of this approach in an expanding literature are the books of Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books; London: Allen & Unwin, 1981), and *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana

is equally important in present Scripture study.<sup>26</sup> In this method, one pays attention to the power of language to propose an imaginative world that is an alternative to the one that seems to be at hand — alternative to the one in which the reader or listener thinks herself or himself enmeshed. Literature then is not regarded as descriptive of what is, but as evocative and constructive of another life world.<sup>27</sup> In this method, one takes the "world" offered in the text as a possible alternative world without excessive reference to external historical factors and without excessive interest in questions of authorship. This approach permits literature to be enormously daring and bold, and often abrasive and subversive in the face of the presumed world of the listener. It places the listener in crisis, but also presents the listener with a new zone for fresh hope, changed conduct, and fresh historical possibility.

The conviction that literature is evocative and not merely descriptive has significance only as that conviction receives specific implementation. This requires a careful "close reading" of the text in which one pays attention to the use, repetition, and arrangement of words, shifts in voices, deliberate verbal strategies that cause breaks, surprises, contrasts, comparisons, ambiguities, and open-ended wonderment in the text. The interpreter focuses on the action and voice of the text itself and is not led away from the actual work of the text by any external reference or hypothesis.

This method of literary analysis is useful in the study of Jeremiah in three ways. First, one notices the powerful and provocative use of metaphor

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University Press, 1985); Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), and *Texts of Terror*, Overtures to Biblical Theology 13 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and David M. Gunn, *The Story of King David*, JSOT Supplement 6 (1978), and *The Fate of King Saul*, JSOT Supplement 14 (1980). For the delicate relation between literary theory and literary method, see John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster; London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1984).

27. This perspective on biblical literature is especially derived from the work of Paul Ricoeur, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress; London: SPCK, 1980). See the helpful introductory article by Lewis S. Mudge in that volume ("Paul Ricoeur on Biblical Interpretation," 1-40). More directly, the work of Amos N. Wilder has best considered the cruciality of language for its evocative, imaginative power. See Wilder, "The Word as Address and the Word as Meaning," in *The New Hermeneutic*, ed. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr. (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1964), 198-218.

and image. One must follow the daring use of the specific language of the text if one is to sense the intention of the text.<sup>28</sup> One becomes aware that the language is carefully and artistically crafted so that the text can never be summarized but only "followed" in its portrayal of a fresh reality that takes its life from the powerful, passionate speech of the concrete text.<sup>29</sup> It becomes clear then that *what is said* is congruous with and dependent upon *how it is said*.<sup>30</sup> Through its concrete language the text of Jeremiah can variously evoke a sense of creation that has massively regressed to chaos (4:23-26), an awareness of God's grief and sickness at Judah's obduracy (8:18-9:3), or the resumption of wedding parties in a land where all such social rejoicing had stopped (33:11; cf. 7:34; 16:9; 25:10). The boldness of the metaphors witnesses to and evokes radical endings and astonishing beginnings in the social process.

The concreteness and imaginative power of such speech invites a different discernment and experience of the world of Jerusalem and Babylon. In turn, it summons the listener to reject the ideological discernment of the world by the royal-temple establishment, which is shown to be false and which will only lead to death. The language of the text means to penetrate and expose the counterinterpretations of the "establishment" for what they are: misleading, misinformed notions that lead away from the power and possibilities of historical reality as an arena of God's rule and

28. James Muilenburg, "The Terminology of Adversity in Jeremiah," in *Translating & Understanding the Old Testament*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed (New York: Abingdon, 1970), 42-63, has made an important beginning on these matters in the book of Jeremiah. Unfortunately, Muilenburg's acute and discerning analysis of the rhetoric of Jeremiah remains unpublished. For an appreciative assessment of his work that centered in Jeremiah, see Bernhard W. Anderson, "Introduction: The New Frontier of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. Jared J. Jackson and Martin Kessler, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph 1 (Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1974), ix-xviii; repr. in *Hearing and Speaking the Word*, ed. Thomas F. Best (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1984), 14-23.

29. On the notion of "following" the text, see W. B. Gallie, "The Historical Understanding," in *History and Theory*, ed. George H. Nadel (1965; repr. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1977), 149-202. Gallie's treatment concerns narrative, but the same posture applies to all texts that have such passionate concrete historical intentionality.

30. On the profound connection between what is said and how it is said, see the careful analysis of Gail R. O'Day, *Revelation in the Fourth Gospel: Narrative Mode and Theological Claim* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

purpose. The "establishment" assumed a kind of political, moral, intellectual autonomy that the Jeremiah tradition critiques as false and deathly.

Second, it is crucial to our interpretation that Jeremiah's proposal of the world is indeed an imaginative construct, not a description of what is nor a prediction of what will be. Jeremiah is attentive to the data all around him, but the text itself is not intended as descriptive account, nor can it be assessed as such. It invites the listener to participate in the proposed world so that one can imagine a terminated royal world while that world still exists, and one can receive in imaginative prospect a new community of covenant faith where none has yet emerged. The text leads the listener out beyond presently discerned reality to new reality formed in the moment of speaking and hearing.<sup>31</sup>

Third, if the context of Jeremiah's work is the royal-priestly ideology of the Jerusalem establishment (as my sociological presentation above suggests), then the alternative imaginative portrayal of a covenant community is juxtaposed to that royal-priestly ideology. The text offers imaginative alternatives to established ideology in the conviction that God is at work to *create a new alternative community* ("to plant and to build"; 31:27-30). The freedom of liberated, faithful speech anticipates and evokes new public reality.

Thus the two methods of sociological and literary analysis, when utilized in Jeremiah, yield respectively *a critique of ideology* and a *practice of liberated imagination*. These two methods enable us to take a fresh look at critical theological issues in the Jeremiah tradition. A sociological analysis helps us see how the covenantal perspectives of the prophetic tradition stand over against royal ideology. A literary analysis helps us see how Judah is invited to act faithfully, even if that faithfulness is against the presumed interest and "truth" of the Jerusalem establishment.

When the text is read and heard as a critique of ideology and as a practice of alternative imagination, the text continues to have power and pertinence in many subsequent contexts, including our own.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the

31. See for example Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Lord Has Created Something New: A Stylistic Study of Jer. 31:15-22," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, ed. Perdue and Kovacs, 367-380.

32. James A. Sanders ("Hermeneutics," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplement, ed. Keith R. Crim [Nashville: Abingdon, 1976], 406), has rightly suggested that "dynamic analogy" is a helpful way to interpret the text. He stresses

text has the powerful capacity to cause us to rediscern our own situation, to experience our situation in quite new ways, and to participate in our own historical situation with new liberty and fresh passion — liberty and passion that arise in and with faithfulness. Such a text, when read critically, characteristically assaults every “structure of domination” with its self-serving and misrepresenting propaganda, including our own military, technological, consumer-oriented establishment. Such a text, when read imaginatively, issues a forceful invitation to an alternative community of covenant, including a risky invitation in our own time to practices of justice, risks of compassion, and sufferings for peace.

This text does not require “interpretation” or “application” so that it can be brought near our experience and circumstance. Rather, the text is so powerful and compelling, so passionate and uncompromising in its anguish and hope, that it requires we submit our experience to it and thereby reenter our experience on new terms, namely the terms of the text. The text does not need to be *applied* to our situation. Rather, our situation needs to be *submitted* to the text for a fresh discernment. It is our situation, not the text, that requires a new interpretation. In every generation, this text subverts all our old readings of reality and forces us to a new, dangerous, obedient reading.<sup>33</sup> If such a subversive reading of reality appears to us unreal, too dangerous, and too costly, we must recognize that for most in the 7th and 6th cents. it was rejected for exactly the same reasons.

Indeed, everything depends on our reading and hearing this text. If we fail to hear this text, we may succumb to a fraudulent discernment of our situation. Like ancient Jerusalem, we shall imagine that the present is decided by the policies of the empire and not by the pathos of the holy, faithful God. Like ancient exiles, we may imagine that our situation is occupied only by despair and alienation, that God’s arm is shortened and there is none to comfort. We shall miss the summons home, the faint beginnings of new laughter in Jerusalem, and shall still be submitting to

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that the analogy must be “dynamic,” that is, one that emerges out of one’s own interpretation and experience. Thus I have not pressed analogies in my interpretation, but invite the reader to make those connections out of experience and interpretation.

33. David Tracy (*The Analogical Imagination* [New York: Crossroad; London: SCM, 1981], chs. 3 and 4), has shown how a “classic” must have continued, ongoing, and developing interpretation in order to be timely as well as timeless. Jeremiah is just such a tradition that is both timely and timeless, kept timely by repeated interpretation.

the empire when we could be on our way rejoicing. Everything depends on the text, for without this transformative, critical, liberating, subversive speech, we shall live in a speechless, textless world that is always misunderstood. Without the text we are at the mercy of powerful ideology, of misrepresenting propaganda, of anxieties that make us conformist, and despair that drives us to brutality. It is precisely the text in its odd offer of holiness and pathos, of rending and healing, that dismisses ideology, exposes propaganda, overrides anxiety, and offers forgiveness in the place of brutality.

A commentary as this one must focus on what the text of Jeremiah meant in its ancient speaking and hearing. But that ancient speaking and hearing keeps pushing into our present. What it “meant” has incredible power to “mean” now.<sup>34</sup> It meant then that Yahweh would work a powerful, savage, pathos-filled purpose with that people, and it still means that that purpose is at work among us. It meant that Yahweh could grieve a terrible ending, and it still means we face terrible endings over which Yahweh grieves. It meant that Yahweh had the resilient power to work a newness among the displaced, and it still means that Yahweh’s resilient power is at work in such displacements. It meant and means that the prideful empire, the pitiful royal leadership, the self-serving religionists, the cynical forces in society, cannot have their way, for history with Yahweh is about another intention. To be sure, the meaning we receive from the text is nuanced very differently from its early “meant.” Our meaning is transmitted through our Enlightenment modes of scientific and rational autonomy. We cannot so easily ascribe the shape of the historical process to a single agent. My comments intend not to be reductionist or blindly supernaturalist. We can only interpret in our own situation when we know the historical process admits of no easy interpretation. Nonetheless, this textual tradition in its anguish and in its buoyancy witnesses to an inescapable hovering of God that is oddly sovereign in ways that outdistance

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34. The split of “what it meant” and “what it means” has been championed by Krister Stendahl (“Biblical Theology, Contemporary,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick [Nashville: Abingdon, 1962] 1:418–420), but in retrospect seems clearly to have been a misperception. See the criticism of Stendahl by James Barr, “Biblical Theology,” in *IDB, Supplement*, 106. In this commentary it is assumed that what “meant” inescapably “means,” and both the writer and the reader are engaged in that interpretive transaction.

### *Introduction*

our desperate modernity. Poetic anguish, lyrical expectation, metaphorical openness, and imaginative ambiguity are ways in which sovereign hurt and fidelity are mediated to us. This powerful mediating shocks our intellectual self-confidence and invites us to reengage life with courage, awe, and submissiveness. This commentary is about that other holy, passionate, powerful intention that plucks up and tears down, that plants and builds, that subverts and amazes.