

EMPIRES FALL, YHWH REIGNS

Concluding Performance
Readings in Jeremiah



Valerie M. Billingham

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Hebrew Bible Monographs, 120

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ANET</i>	Pritchard, James B. (ed.), <i>The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures</i> (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958).
BA	Biblical Archaeologist
BBB	Bonner Biblische Beiträge
BDB	Brown, F., S. Driver and C. Briggs, <i>The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon</i> (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996).
<i>BHS</i>	Elliger, K. and W. Rudolf (eds.), <i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i> (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967–77).
BIS	Biblical Interpretation Series
BM	The Babylonian Chronicle
<i>CBQ</i>	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CEV	Contemporary English Version
EB	The Earth Bible; Norman C. Habel, <i>Readings from the Perspective of Earth</i> (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).
EBT	The Earth Bible Team; Norman C. Habel, <i>Readings from the Perspective of Earth</i> (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GNB	<i>Good New Bible: Australian Edition</i> (Canberra: The Bible Society in Australia Inc., 1988).
HB	Hebrew Bible
HBS	Harvard School of Business
HC	Holiness Code
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IDB</i>	Butterick, G.A., ed., <i>Interpreter's Bible Dictionary</i> (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990).
IVF	Inter Varsity Fellowship
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of American Oriental Study</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
OBO	Orbis Biblicus Orientalis
OT	Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTS</i>	<i>Old Testament Studies</i>
PTSD	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
REB	The Revised English Bible

S	Syriac
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBT	Studies in Biblical Theology
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
<i>TDOT</i>	Johannes G. Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (eds.), <i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> (8 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).
V	Vulgate
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
Yhwh	The transliteration of יהוה, one of the names of God, often translated as “LORD”.
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

A PERFORMANCE READING OF JEREMIAH

The Oral World of the Hebrew Bible

In the predominantly oral world of the Hebrew Bible, the prophets sometimes proclaimed Yhwh's messages through the medium of performance.¹ Yhwh's oracles, whether spoken and/or acted, were powerful, and once proclaimed, were eventually fulfilled.² With the prophet's task including persuading the people to reform their attitudes and actions, dramatic presentations of Yhwh's words often impacted their audiences more forcefully than verbal communication alone.³

1. For a more comprehensive discussion on performance readings of Jeremiah see Valerie M. Billingham, *The Great Drama of Jeremiah: A Performance Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2021), 7-25. See also David M. Carr, "Writing on the Tablet of the Heart," *Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 285-300; Peter S. Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 1-46; Ehud Ben Zvi, "Introduction: Writings, Speeches, and the Prophetic Books – Setting an Agenda," in Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd (eds.), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (Symposium; Atlanta: SBL, 2000), 5; Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 1-100; William Doan and Terry Giles, *Prophets, Performance, and Power: Performance Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (New York, London: T&T Clark, 2005), 21-23; David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1990), 232; David Rhoads, "Performance Criticism: An Emerging Methodology in Second Testament Studies – Part 1," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 36 (2006), 123.

2. Richard S. Briggs, "The Use of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation," *Currents in Research* 9, 2001, 229-79.

3. See Jeanette Mathews, *Prophets as Performers: Biblical Performance Criticism and Israel's Prophets* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2020), 7-31.

Rhetorical Readings

Though issues of historicity and textual transmission provide important backgrounds for understanding the text, I undertake a synchronic reading of several scenes that accept the text as a relatively coherent whole.⁴ Nevertheless, the Babylonian invasion of Judah and exile of many of her inhabitants are acknowledged as the historical setting of the performances. Employing a range of rhetorical critical tools, including choice and arrangement of words, repetitions, alliteration and assonance, I work from my own translations of the MT, endeavouring to follow the Hebrew word order as much as practicable. Though these readings are sometimes awkward, they facilitate the identification of various rhetorical aspects of the texts.⁵ Though non-gendered words for God/Yhwh are predominantly employed, in an effort to be consistent with the Hebrew text, the male pronoun is sometimes used. The tetragrammaton יהוה is read as “Yhwh.”

Jeremiah as Trauma Literature

In the aftermath of Babylonian threat, invasion and exile, the Judean survivors experienced trauma as individuals and communities, suffering Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Though I acknowledge that the exilic communities existed in ancient times and cultures, I argue that contemporary trauma studies inform our understanding of their suffering.⁶ Jeremiah’s performances provide vignettes representing their

4. James Barr, “The Synchronic, the Diachronic and the Historical: A Triangular Relationship?” in Johannes C. de Moor (ed.), *Synchronic or Diachronic? A Debate on Method in Old Testament Exegesis* (OTS, 34; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1-14.

5. Roland Meynet, *Rhetorical Analysis: An Introduction to Biblical Rhetoric* (JSOTSup, 256; Sheffield Academic Press, 1998); Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981), 3; David Rhoads, “The Art of Translating for Oral Performance,” in James A. Maxey and Ernst R. Wendland (eds.), *Translating Scripture for Sound and Performance* (New Directions in Biblical Studies. Vol. 6. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012), 38; Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 68-69; Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 82-83.

6. For arguments of applicability of trauma studies across cultures see David M. Carr, “Appendix: Contemporary Study of Trauma and Ancient Trauma,” in David M. Carr (ed.), *Holy Resilience: The Bible’s Traumatic Origins* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 253-70; Marten W. de Vries, “Trauma in Cultural Perspective,” in Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander McFarlane and Lars Weisaeth (eds.), *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience in Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: Guilford, 2007), 398-413.

experiences that prompt memory, facilitate interpretation, and enable positive expressions of grief. They construct a trauma narrative that facilitates meaning-making, identity, solidarity and healing, all of which support and encourage the survivors.⁷ Scenes that portray Yhwh's violence may reflect the suffering experienced by the survivors, with causality "transferred from human agency to the divine realm."⁸

A Performance Reading: Scripts, Actors, Audience, Settings, Improvisation

In this study I examine several passages according to the categories of script, actors, audience, settings and improvisation of scripts.⁹ I understand the texts to be scripts in their own right, rather than material for performance. Various traditions, formulae, conventional literary and/or verbal patterns, customs, ecological images, proverbial sayings and ideologies are deemed to be scripts that Jeremiah employs.

I focus upon the actors featured within the various performances, rather than their historical identities or those who will enact the scene at some future point.¹⁰ I understand the narrator, usually Jeremiah, to be an actor as he performs the strategic function of reporting the words and actions of the actors, presents background information, and interprets various scenes. Jeremiah sometimes proclaims Yhwh's messages through his life experiences, comments and prayers. At times his words merge with those of Yhwh and of the exilic community, and it is difficult to differentiate them. Sometimes various actors represent opposing ideological stances,

7. Christopher G. Frechette and Elizabeth Boase, "Defining 'Trauma' as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation," in Elizabeth Boase and Christopher G. Frechette (eds.), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma* (Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 6-26.

8. Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 16-17. See also Louis Stulman, "Reflections on the Prose Sermons in the Book of Jeremiah: Duhm's and Mowinckel's Contributions to Contemporary Trauma Readings," in Boase et al (eds.), *Bible Through the Lens of Trauma*, 126.

9. In my analyses I employ the broad categories presented by Jeanette Mathews, *Performing Habakkuk: Faithful Re-enactment in the Midst of Crisis* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2012), 97-142, however, I improvise them. See Billingham, *The Great Drama of Jeremiah*, 7-25.

10. A synchronic approach enables a focus upon the actors existing within the text. See Amy Kalmanofsky, *Terror all Around: Horror, Monsters, and Theology in the Book of Jeremiah* (LHBOTS, 390; New York: T&T Clark, 2008), 4.

thus embodying their political and/or theological positions.¹¹ Absences and/or silences of actors whose presence is expected in specific settings are noted, as silence sometimes speaks volumes.¹²

Throughout Jeremiah, Yhwh is variously presented as loving, caring, forgiving, angry, judging and violent. Sometimes Yhwh acts as “a monster” in order to horrify the audience to change their attitudes and behaviour.¹³ Yhwh is a free agent who works outside traditional role models and expectations. Furthermore, Yhwh is not confined by territorial boundaries, including the physical space of the temple.

Employing the eco-justice principles of The Earth Bible Team, I understand Earth and members of the Earth Community to be independent actors. Earth speaks in its earthy language of fertility, drought, wind and storm as it is impacted by the actions of human characters, as well as political and theological forces.¹⁴ The symbiotic relationship between the land, the people and Yhwh is held together by the covenantal relationship, and the actions of one party affect the others. Evoking Deuteronomic perspectives, Jeremiah presents the notion that the land flourishes as a result of human obedience to the covenant, and suffers drought because of disobedience.¹⁵

Though the audience is a crucial element of any performance, Jeremiah does not always acknowledge or describe one. If no audience is designated, I assume that the Babylonian exiles eventually receive the

11. Rhoads, “Performance Criticism – Part 1,” 128; Andrew G. Shead, *A Mouth Full of Fire: The Word of God in the Words of Jeremiah* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 29; Downers Grove, Illinois: Apollos; IVP, 2012), 138.

12. Shimon Levy, *The Bible as Theatre* (Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2000), 45.

13. Kalmanofsky, *Terror all Around*, 4; Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York & London: Routledge, 2002), 195. Frechette et al., “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens,” 16

14. The Earth Bible Team, “Guiding Ecojustice Principles,” in Norman C. Habel (ed.), *Readings from the Perspective of Earth* (EB, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), 38-53. See also Mark G. Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 12; Katherine M. Hayes, *The Earth Mourns: Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic* (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 15-18; Valerie M. Billingham, “The Earth Mourns/Dries Up in Jeremiah 4:23-28: A Literary Analysis Viewed through the Heuristic Lens of an Ecologically Oriented Symbiotic Relationship,” PhD Thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, 2010.

15. Norman C. Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Bernard W. Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 76.

message.¹⁶ However, I acknowledge that the terms “Babylonian exiles” and “exilic community” are misnomers due to the series of deportations that occurred (e.g., 598, 587, 582 BCE).¹⁷ Furthermore, Judean refugees also settled in neighbouring areas, e.g., Moab, Ammon, Edom and Egypt (e.g., 40:11), thus, “exiles” and “exilic community” are broad and elastic terms. Jeremiah sometimes employs the genre of horror to shock his audiences into changing their actions.¹⁸ Thus, images of oozing wounds, women in labour, cannibalistic monsters, and unburied corpses abound within the book. By various means, Jeremiah provides the audience of the traumatized exilic community with the tools with which they can process their experiences and work towards healing.¹⁹

Various settings enhance the words and actions of actors and speakers.²⁰ The geographical context of a scene evokes traditions associated with that place, shedding historical, political and theological light upon the

16. Rhoads, “Performance Criticism – Part 1,” 128; Roland J. Pelias, *Performance Studies: The Interpretation of Aesthetic Texts* (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt, 1992), 144-45; Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 70; Perry, *Insights from Performance Criticism*, 31.

17. Jill Middlemas, *The Trouble with Templeless Judah* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Oxford University, 2005), 4.

18. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 18; Kalmanofsky, *Terror all Around*, 5, 9; Yvonne Sherwood, “Editorial to Prophetic Performance Art,” *The Bible and Critical Theory* 2 (2006): 1.1; Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 70.

19. Glenn R. Schiraldi, *Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: A Guide to Healing, Recovery, and Growth* (London: McGraw Hill, 2nd edn, 2009), 3; Frechette et al (eds.), “Defining ‘Trauma’ as a Useful Lens for Biblical Interpretation,” 1-26; Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*; Kai Erikson, *A New Species of Trouble: The Human Experience of Modern Disasters* (New York: W.W. Norton: 1995); Jeffrey Alexander, *Trauma: A Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Ron Eyerman, *Memory, Trauma and Identity* (Cultural Sociology; London: Palgrave, 2019); Todd Madigan, *Theories of Cultural Trauma: The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2020); Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 19-27.

20. Richard Shusterman, “Art as Dramatization,” in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59 (2001), 368-69; Rosemary Canavan, “Visual Exegesis: Interpreting Text in Dialogue with its Visual Context,” *Colloquim* 47/1 (2015), 141-51; Davina C. Lopez, “Looking for an Argument: On Visual Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation,” *Biblical Interpretation: A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 25/3 (2017): 271-92; Vernon K. Robbins, Walter S. Melion and Roy R. Jeal (eds.), *The Art of Visual Exegesis: Rhetoric, Texts, Images* (Atlanta: SBL, 2017).

performance.²¹ The reigns of various kings of Judah and Babylon indicate certain socio-political contexts that inform the audience, and thereby create an atmosphere of comfort, complacency, tension or fear.

Jeremiah improvises scripts including traditions, narratives, ideologies, local knowledge and social customs.²² Often his reinterpretations work to undermine colonizing influences, and provide the exilic community with a means of empowerment and resistance.

Ten Performances

This final volume presenting a performance reading of selected passages in Jeremiah follows two earlier works: Valerie M. Billingham, *The Great Drama of Jeremiah: A Performance Reading* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 95; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2021) and Valerie M. Billingham, *A Distraught Prophet and Other Performance Readings in Jeremiah* (Hebrew Bible Monographs, 108; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2024). In this current work I discuss ten scenes from Jeremiah 34–52.

Proclaiming the news that Jerusalem will be destroyed, Jeremiah appeals to historical examples of fidelity and infidelity (Performance 1; 34:1–35:19). Echoing scripts of the Exodus tradition, sabbatical debt cancellation, and Jubilee release, Yhwh commands the people of Jerusalem to release their Hebrew slaves.²³ When they refuse to do so and/or re-enslave them, the people are cursed by the traditional trilogy of sword, famine and plague, and the burning of Jerusalem.²⁴ In a contrasting scene, the faithful Rechabites refuse to drink wine in the temple, demonstrating their obedience to the covenant, and ensuring them a perpetual role in Yhwh's service.²⁵

With the actions of proclamation, reading, listening/obeying, and repentance introducing a Deuteronomic focus upon Yhwh's word, Performance 2 presents a contest between the king and the scroll that escalates

21. Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 69.

22. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University, 1980), 36; Ben Zvi et al (eds.), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, 18; Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 81–87; Keith R. Sawyer, "Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 152–58; Conquergood, "Of Caravans and Carnivals, 145; Mathews, *Prophets as Performers*, 87; Ian Mackenzie, "Improvisation, Creativity, and Formulaic Language," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (2000): 173.

23. Exod 13:3, 14; Deut 15:1–11, 12–18.

24. 14:12; 21:7, 9; 24:10; 27:8, 13; 29:17–18; 32:24, 36; 38:2; 42:17, 22; 44:13.

25. 2 Sam 4:5–12; 2 Kgs 10:15.

into a fight to death (36:1-32). At Yhwh's instruction and Jeremiah's dictation, the scroll containing Yhwh's word is written by Baruch, and read to the people assembled at the entrance to the temple. The scroll is then read to King Jehoiakim who slices it with a knife, and throws the sections into the fire. However, exuding great power, the word of Yhwh cannot be destroyed, and Jeremiah dictates to Baruch a new enlarged version of the scroll. Thus, Yhwh's word wins the contest, and the king is condemned to an ignoble death. Through the king's actions, the performance personifies the destruction of the monarchy, Jerusalem and Judah.

Settings of a prison, dungeon, cells, "a house of confinement," and the court of the guard house dominate the scene of Jeremiah's incarceration during the siege of Jerusalem (Performance 3; 37:1-38:13). He is transferred from prison to a dungeon, and abandoned to sink into the mud, awaiting death by starvation. However, in a graphic demonstration of Yhwh's care, the Ethiopian eunuch Ebed Melech orchestrates Jeremiah's rescue. In doing so, he enacts divine kindness, care and compassion. As Jeremiah is protected, so the exilic community is encouraged to trust Yhwh for their wellbeing.

The options of life and death are enacted in the lives King Zedekiah, the eunuch Ebed Melech, and Jeremiah (Performance 4; 39:1-18). As the Babylonian army breaks down Jerusalem's walls, King Zedekiah is forced to view the execution of his sons and officials, after which he is blinded and taken into exile. Ebed Melech is granted his life as a prize of war. Jeremiah is offered the choice of travelling to Babylon or staying in Judah. With the world as his oyster and in an act of dedication, he chooses to stay in Judah and live with his people.

The appointment of Gedaliah as governor of Judah provides hope for the remaining community as the members of the diaspora return to assist with the abundant harvest which represents Deuteronomic blessing (Performance 5; 40:7-41:18). However, in a graphic reversal, the ray of hope is extinguished with the assassination of the governor, and the slaughter of eighty pilgrims.

Though the people had previously asked for Yhwh's guidance regarding their actions and destination in the event of Babylonian invasion, they refuse to heed Yhwh's advice, and thus provoke Yhwh's judgment (Performance 6; 42:7-44:30). Though Yhwh has expressly forbidden it, in obstinate determination, they choose to relocate to Egypt. However, in an improvisation, though Egypt has traditionally been a refuge for Israel, now it is a place of death. Jeremiah and Baruch are among those who are evacuated to Egypt. Enacting judgment and domination, King Nebuchadrezzar erects his throne and royal canopy there. With echoes of the plagues that struck during the Exodus delivery, Nebuchadrezzar strikes

Egypt, reducing her to an accursed evil land. Though destruction engulfs Judah, Baruch is granted his life as a prize of war, and he receives the promise of survival wherever he goes (Performance 7; 45:1-5).

The OAN commence with Egypt and move eastwards through Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Arabia and Elam (Scene 8; 46:1–49:39). Fulfilling Jeremiah's call to be a prophet to the nations (1:5, 10), Yhwh embarks upon Holy War against the nations, dismantling their power structures, holding them accountable for their actions, and re-establishing moral order for Judah. Egypt has been the superpower throughout the ancient Near Eastern region for several centuries, and is the first nation to experience judgment. Yhwh's power over the nations provides a sense of hope and a future for the surviving Judeans, reinforcing the notion that Yhwh reigns.

In a dramatic climax to the OAN, Babylon is the last to receive Yhwh's word of judgment (Performance 9; 50:1–51:64). Her fall is identified as a theological issue as her gods are shamed, and her idols are destroyed. In a reversal, while Babylon was the foe from the north that threatened Judah, now a greater northern foe advances upon her. Her offences include hubris towards Yhwh and violence against Judah. Once the most powerful of nations, Yhwh embarks upon Holy War against her, and she is reduced to a dry desolate desert which is an embarrassment to travellers. Once a destroyer of nations, now a sword cuts down her people, officials, wise men, horses, chariots and treasures. Her warriors become as vulnerable as women in labour. Heaven and Earth are involved in her fall as she becomes a heap of ruins, and her people sleep the "eternal sleep" of death. In graphic imagery, Yhwh's oracle against Babylon is tied to a stone and flung into the middle of the Euphrates River as a dramatic symbol of her defeat.

The demise of the royal-priestly support structures of Judah is graphically portrayed through the tales of two kings and the toppling of the temple (Performance 10; 52:1-34). The facts of the fall of Jerusalem are presented with a notable absence of emotion. Having processed their trauma with the assistance of Jeremiah's images of destruction and suffering, the survivors are enabled to recall the events of the Babylonian invasion and exile. Jeremiah's prophetic mandate to destroy and rebuild is fulfilled in this final drama. King Zedekiah is captured as he escapes from Jerusalem, and his sons and officials are executed in front of him, after which he is blinded and taken into exile where he remains until his death. In meticulous detail, the structures, furnishings and artefacts of the temple are destroyed and/or transported to Babylon, representing the disempowerment of the religious system of Judah. However, in a contrast,

King Jehoiachin is treated kindly by the Babylonian king Evil Merodach. He is elevated above other captive kings, afforded dignity and respect, and provided with food, clothing and daily allowances for his remaining life. Thus, one king's narrative ends in death, while another king's story enables life. The destruction of the temple is placed between the fates of the two kings, providing a focus upon it. Though the final performance does not provide a firm conclusion to the book, its open-endedness allows for the possibilities of life, return to Judah, and faith in Yhwh. Thus, while empires fall, Yhwh reigns.

PERFORMANCE 1:
SLAVEDRIVERS AND TEETOTALLERS (34:1–35:19)

Scene 1: Judgment: Jerusalem will Burn

Setting: Jerusalem

Babylon's immanent attack on Jerusalem

Actors: Yhwh, Jeremiah, Zedekiah, Nebuchadrezzar

“The word of Yhwh came to Jeremiah from Yhwh while Nebuchadrezzar (was) the king of Babylon, and all his army and all the kingdoms of Earth (were) ruled by his hand, and all the peoples (were) fighting against Jerusalem and against all her cities, saying:

Thus says Yhwh the God of Israel:

‘Go and speak to Zedekiah the king of Judah and say to him:

Thus says Yhwh: Behold I have given this city into the hand of the king of Babylon and he will burn it with fire.

And you will escape from his hand because surely you will be seized and given into his hand, and your eyes will see the eyes of the king of Babylon, and his mouth will speak with your mouth, and you will go to Babylon.

Yet hear the word of Yhwh, O Zedekiah king of Judah,

Thus says Yhwh concerning you:

You will not die by the sword.

You will die in peace, and as your fathers the first kings that were before you (had) burning spices, so they will burn for you, saying:

Woe lord

They will lament for you because of the word I have spoken’, says Yhwh.

And Jeremiah the prophet spoke all these words to Zedekiah the king of Judah in Jerusalem.

And the army of the king of Babylon fought against Jerusalem and against the free cities of Judah, against Lachish and against Azekah, because they remained as fortified cities among the cities of Judah.”

Scene 2: Case Study 1: Liberty for Jerusalem’s Slaves

Setting: Jerusalem

Babylon’s imminent attack on Jerusalem

Actors: Yhwh, Jeremiah, Zedekiah, Israelite people

“The word that came to Jeremiah from Yhwh after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were in Jerusalem to proclaim liberty to them.

That each man should send forth his male slave and each man his female slave, a Hebrew man and a Hebrew woman free, a man should not enslave his Jewish brother.

And all the officials and all the people who had made the covenant obeyed, each man to send forth his male slave and each man to free his female slave, not to enslave them again, and they obeyed and they sent (them) forth.

But afterward they turned and returned the male slaves and the female slaves whom they had sent away free, and they subdued them for male and female slaves.

And the word of Yhwh came to Jeremiah from Yhwh saying:

Thus says Yhwh the God of Israel:

‘I made a covenant with your fathers in the day I brought them out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves, saying:

At the end of seven years each man should send forth his Hebrew brother who has been sold to him; when he serves you six years, then you shall send him forth free from you; but your fathers did not listen to me and they did not incline their ear.

And today you turned and did right in my eyes to proclaim liberty each man to his neighbour, and you made a covenant before me in the house that has been called by my name.

But you turned and profaned my name and made each man return his male slave and each man his female slave whom you sent forth free according to their desire, and you subdued them to be for you male slaves and female slaves.

Therefore', thus says Yhwh, 'You have not listened to me to proclaim liberty each man to his brother and each man to his neighbour;

Behold I proclaim liberty to you,' says Yhwh, 'to the sword, to the plague and to the famine, and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the Earth.

And I will give the men who have passed over my covenant, who have not raised up the words of the covenant that they made before me, the bull calf that they cut into two and passed between its pieces.

The officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs and the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the pieces of the bull calf.

And I will give them into the hand of their enemies, those who seek their life; and their corpses will be food for the birds of the sky and for the beasts of the Earth.

And Zedekiah the king of Judah and his officials I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life and into the hand of the army of that king of Babylon that has hidden from you.

Behold I will command', says Yhwh, 'And make them return to this city, and they will fight against it and capture it and burn it with fire, and I will give the cities of Judah a desolation without habitation.'

Scene 3: Case Study 2: The Faithful Rechabites

Setting: Jerusalem

Babylon's imminent attack on Jerusalem

Actors: Yhwh, Jeremiah, the Rechabites, officials

“The word which came to Jeremiah from Yhwh in the days of Jehoiakim the son of Josiah king of Judah saying:

‘Go to the house of the Rechabites and speak to them, and bring them to the house of Yhwh into one of the rooms, and give them wine to drink.’

And I took Jazaniah the son of Jeremiah the son of Habaziah and his brothers and all his sons and all the house of the Rechabites.

And I brought them into the house of Yhwh into the room of the sons of Hanan the son of Igdaiah, a man of God, which was near the room of the rulers which was above the room of Maaseiah the son of Shallum the doorkeeper.

Then I put before the sons of the house of the Rechabites bowls full of wine and cups, and I said to them: ‘Drink wine.’

But they said: ‘We will not drink wine, because Jonadab the son of Rechab our father commanded us saying: You shall not drink wine, you and your sons forever.

And you shall not build a house, and you shall not sow seed, and you shall not plant a vineyard, and you shall not have (anything), but you shall live in tents all your days so that you may be many days on the face of the land where you have been staying there.

And we obeyed the voice of Jonadab the son of Rechab our father regarding all that he commanded us not to drink wine all our days, we, our wives, our sons and our daughters.

And not to build houses for our rest, and a vineyard and a field, and we have no seed.

And we lived in tents and we obeyed according to all that Jonadab commanded our fathers.

But when Nebucharezzar the king of Babylon came against the land, we said: Come and let us go to Jerusalem because of the army of the Chaldeans and because of the army of Aram, so we can live in Jerusalem.’”

Scene 4: Unfaithful Judeans cf. Faithful Rechabites

Setting: Jerusalem

Babylon's immanent attack on Jerusalem

Actors: Yhwh, Jeremiah, the people of Judah and Jerusalem, the Rechabites

“And the word of Yhwh came to Jeremiah saying:

Thus says Yhwh of hosts the God of Israel:

‘Go and say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem:

You will not take a lesson to listen to my words,’ says Yhwh.

‘The words of Jonadab the son of Rachab which he commanded his sons not to drink wine are fulfilled, so they do not drink to this day, because they obeyed their father’s command. But I have spoken to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not listen to me.

And I sent to you all my servants the prophets, rising up early and sending, saying:

Return now each man from his evil way and make good your actions, and do not go after other gods to serve them, and live in the land which I have given to you and to your fathers. But you have not inclined your ear, and you have not listened to me.

Because I have raised up the sons of Jonadab the son of Rechab, the command which their father instructed them, but these people did not listen to me.’

Therefore, thus says Yhwh the God of hosts the God of Israel:

‘Behold I will bring on Judah and on all the inhabitants of Jerusalem all the evil that I have spoken against them because I spoke to them but they did not listen, and I called out to them but they did not answer.’

And Jeremiah said to the house of the Rechabites:

Thus says Yhwh of hosts the God of Israel:

‘Because you have obeyed the command of Jonabad your father and have kept all his commands and have done according to all he has commanded you.’

Therefore, thus says Yhwh of hosts the God of Israel:

‘No one from Jonabad the son of Rachab will be cut off from standing before me forever.’”

Scripts

Scene 1: Judgment: Jerusalem will Burn

Yhwh’s oracle is introduced with the familiar prophetic formula: “The word that came to Jeremiah from Yhwh....” Its divine origin is laboured by six acknowledgments: “The word...from Yhwh,” “thus says Yhwh the God of Israel,” “thus says Yhwh,” “hear the word of Yhwh,” “thus says Yhwh concerning you,” and “says Yhwh.” Yhwh’s action of handing Jerusalem and her cities over to Babylon is emphasized as Jeremiah is tasked with delivering the message to King Zedekiah that Jerusalem and other cities will be destroyed. This news reflects and negates the Zionist tradition of Jerusalem’s inviolability (Ps 122). Nevertheless, while Zedekiah will be given to the king of Babylon, he will die in peace like previous monarchs, echoing the royal-priestly tradition of protection of Israelite kings (Pss 2; 72; 110).

With the scene commencing and concluding with the Babylonian army attacking Jerusalem and other Judean cities, the military invasion forms an envelope around the peaceful death of Zedekiah, providing a focus on God’s compassion for the king.

Scene 2: Case Study 1: Liberty for Jerusalem’s Slaves

Though there is no formal link with Scene 1, examples of fidelity and infidelity are now presented in order to provide justification for the preceding message of judgment.¹ The divine origin of the oracle is stressed as the word comes from Yhwh to Jeremiah twice, and a further four times “Yhwh says.” However, before Yhwh declares the oracle, the issue of slave liberty is introduced. Furthermore, though the oracle comes to Jeremiah, he is not expressly commanded to proclaim it, nevertheless, Yhwh’s speech to the king, officials and people of Judah infer that the prophet has delivered it to them.² Previously Zedekiah had covenanted with the people to liberate their Jewish slaves. This reflects the traditional

1. Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 325, suggests that the “case study” highlights Israel’s unfaithfulness.

2. Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary; Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 487; Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 325.