CHAPTER 1

Critical Access to the Book of Jeremiah

The Book of Jeremiah, who was the second of the three major prophets, is situated between Isaiah and Ezekiel and is an immensely complex book. Indeed, it is so complex that some informed readers have concluded that it is impossible to read the book as a coherent whole and have declared it "unreadable." Although it is possible to see how different subsections of the book function and what they mean, it is not readily apparent how the subsections meaningfully fit together. This is but the first of several critical issues confronting any interpretation of the theology of the Book of Jeremiah.

COMPLEXITY AND CONTEXT

I identify two reasons for the book's complexity. First, the Book of Jeremiah consists of the swirling of several interpretive voices, each of which offers a strong reading of the historical–theological crisis that preoccupies the book. These several voices, moreover, are in some contestation with each other about the meaning and significance of the crisis of Jerusalem and about an appropriate response to that crisis. The traditioning process that produced the final form of the text, moreover, has made no noticeable efforts to adjudicate between or to bring together in a coherent manner

those several contesting voices. Rather, the final form of the text has permitted the several contesting voices to stand alongside one another without noticeable harmonization.

In addition to the multiplicity of interpretive voices in the book, it is clear that the Book of Jeremiah is problematic because it stretches over several generations, certainly beyond the credible extent of the lifetime of the person of Jeremiah. Thus we see that the traditions of Jeremiah – no doubt rooted in *the person of Jeremiah* and eventuating in the final form of *the Book of Jeremiah* – are immensely generative; as a result, the dynamism of the tradition kept producing more words and eventually more texts, so that the book grew with "many similar words" (see Jer 36:32).

Thus the Book of Jeremiah evidences *many voices over time* that *do not readily cohere*. These several voices represent those who are in quite different historical circumstances, variously prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, in the wake of destruction, or at the cusp of restoration. They differ, however, not only because of different circumstances but also because they are rooted in different interpretive traditions, each of which perceived events differently.

The conventional critical resolution of the complexity of the Book of Jeremiah, attributed to Sigmund Mowinckel and Bernhard Duhm, is to posit three "sources," each of which has a share in the book.[1] The primary source, dubbed by these scholars source "A," consists of the assumed *words of Jeremiah*, characteristically

[1] This era of scholarship is given a brief review in Otto Eissfeldt, "The Prophetic Literature," in *The Old Testament and Modern Study: A Generation of Discovery and Research*, ed. H. H. Rowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), 151–53. For Mowinckel and Duhm's works, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (Kristiania: J. Dybwad, 1914); and Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia*, KHC 11 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [P. Siebeck], 1901).

articulated in *poetic form*. The second source, dubbed "B," consists of texts – *mostly prose* – that are assigned to *Baruch*, Jeremiah's faithful secretary. Although this source of late has received little attention and has perhaps been explained away in more recent criticism, it was earlier thought at the outset to concern especially the narrative report of chapters 37–44, culminating in a prophetic oracle addressed to Baruch in chapter 45. Aside from the personal citation of Baruch, we may take "Baruch" as a metaphor for the emerging influence of "scribes."[2] The scribes were "book men" who produced scrolls that preserved earlier traditions and who thereby transposed prophetic utterances into a written form that eventually would become "Scripture."

The third source, "C," refers to *prose materials* – often *speeches* – that seem reminiscent of the cadences and theological perspective of the Book of Deuteronomy and so are termed *Deuteronomic* or *Deuteronomistic*. Whereas the poetry (in source A) seems to be poignantly addressed to a quite particular moment, the prose that is Deuteronomic takes a larger, nearly systemic view of matters and understands an occasion of prophetic utterance in a larger interpretive context. There can be no doubt of these distinctions in the Book of Jeremiah, even if we are not sure about their relationship to one another. Although contemporary scholars would prefer not to speak of "sources" as did our predecessors, there is no doubt that the "source analysis" did address the issue of coherence in a most complex text. The most acute critical question of the book is how to understand the relationships of these several voices with each other. We may notice three operative hypotheses.

[2] See Richard Elliot Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 146–49, for a suggestive and somewhat quixotic judgment about the scribal process of making the Bible.

First, William L. Holladay, who has published the most extensive and detailed commentary on Jeremiah in recent times, takes a critically conservative view and understands the poetry and the prose to be intimately connected to each other, with all of it bearing the stamp of the personality of the prophet.[3] Thus, as scholars have sorted out what is "authentic" for the prophet, Holladay judges most of the material as "genuine." At the present time, Holladay represents a view that is out of fashion among interpreters.

Second, at the other extreme from Holladay is Robert P. Carroll, a most generative scholar in Jeremiah studies. Carroll tends to discount what we may know or recover of the prophet himself.[4] He judges that the Deuteronomic material is a weighty interpretive imposition on whatever there was initially of poetry, so that the prose material is now decisive and dominant and is to be understood as the primary intentionality of the final form of the book. The consequence of Carroll's approach is to minimize interest in the person of the prophet, to see the function of the book somewhat later, and to recognize that the book is a powerful ideological statement that makes ready use of the legacy of the prophet, to which we no longer have any direct access.

A third approach, by Louis Stulman, proposes that the prose materials, mostly offered in large blocks of text, are strategically placed in the editorial process to produce the canonical book.[5] Those blocks are intended to function as interpretive reference

[3] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), and *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26–52*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989).

[4] Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

[5] Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry*, BS 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

points and clues for how the poetic materials around are to be read. Thus Stulman's approach is resonant with Carroll's accent on the prose. Unlike Carroll, however, Stulman does not believe that the prose passages constitute a distorting imposition on the poetry but rather function as a way to guide the reader through its complexity.

In any case, we may observe that interpreters now are not as inclined as in earlier generations to conjure distinctive "literary sources." Rather, we may think of these several distinct perspectives within the book as *crucial interpretive voices* in the community that insisted on a hearing and that, for whatever reason, were given a hearing in the final form of the text.[6] A move from "source" to "voice" permits us to understand the variety and tension in the book as a part of its organic coherence, albeit a quite complex coherence. Thus the book is not a scissors-and-paste job but rather an ongoing conversation among zealous advocates concerning the crisis faced by the community of Israel at the demise of Jerusalem.

The material that constitutes the Book of Jeremiah, with its several voices bespeaking different interpretive angles and vested interests, is completely geared toward the crisis of 587 BCE and the demise of Jerusalem.[7] The Book of Jeremiah arises from and reflects on the termination of the Davidic dynasty after four hundred years and on the destruction of the Temple of Solomon after its long run of dominance and legitimacy. The state of Israel, long presided over by the House of David, was a remarkable experiment in the ancient Near East, for not only was it a state committed to a single

[6] See Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah*, BZAW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

[7] See Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Bloomington, IN: Meyer-Stone, 1989).

God, YHWH, but, more importantly, the state claimed continuity with an older remembered tradition of covenant that antedated the state and that stood in some tension with the state. Because of that antecedent tradition of covenant, the monarchy and its capital city of Jerusalem were by definition at some odds with the geopolitical reality of the ancient Near East.[8] Consequently, this small, vulnerable state with its peculiar self-understanding had to exist amid the great powers of the region, Egypt to the south and several successive kingdoms to the north.

But the Book of Jeremiah emerges not only in the face of the crisis in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem crisis turned out to be an epitome of a larger upheaval in ancient Near Eastern geopolitics. Just prior to the destruction of the city of Jerusalem, the expansionist state of Assyria – long-standing and brutal – had disappeared from the map and had been promptly displaced by one of its established colonies, Babylon. The latter immediately became as expansionist as Assyria and so extended its political–military reach toward Jerusalem. After repeated incursions, the city of Jerusalem was finally taken by the Babylonians (see 2 Kings 24:10–25:21). It was, moreover, the policy of Babylon, as it had been of Assyria before, to deport the leading members of captured societies in order to minimize ongoing trouble among the conquered peoples (see 2 Kings 17:24–28). Thus, after the destruction of 587 BCE, the leading voices of Jerusalemite society, the ones who finally produced the Book of Jeremiah, were deported from Judah.

All of this political–military development is completely understandable in terms of conventional military operations and imperial treatment of conquered states. In Judah, however, in the

[8] See the theological exposition of the theme and the ensuing tensions in Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, 3rd ed. (London: Humanities Press International, 1967).

environment of Jeremiah, the great crisis could not be adequately understood simply as a geopolitical event. The reason it could not be so treated is because Judah was, at least in principle, completely committed to the rule of the one God, YHWH.[9] This one God, YHWH, moreover, was known and said to be the God of covenant, who issued commandments and who enacted sanctions (blessings and curses) on those who did or did not keep those commandments. Because of this remarkable theological conviction about the rule of YHWH, which extended into the public domain, it was inescapable that the crisis of Jerusalem would be interpreted in theological–covenantal categories. It is this that evokes the material that became the Book of Jeremiah, a multivoiced effort to make *theological sense* out of a *geopolitical crisis*. The effect of this interface of theological and military–political categories is the awareness that the crisis is to be understood in covenantal–moral categories and not just as the Realpolitik; it was instead a working out of the will of YHWH, who is said to be, in the end, the ruler and arbiter of the entire public process of international politics.

Thus the "rise and fall" of the great powers is to be placed in the purview of YHWH's rule.[10] Judah is not only the interpreter of that

[9] See Klaus Koch, *The Prophets I: The Assyrian Period* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 5 and passim, for his thesis of "metahistory" as a modern way of expressing what the prophets present as the rule of YHWH.

[10] Elsewhere (Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, 2nd ed., OBT [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002], xvii and n. 18), I have suggested that a contemporary, secular form of the same argument about the rule of YHWH in the public process is offered by Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict From 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987). Kennedy's precise analysis, without reference to the rule of God, manifests that there are inexorable limits to the power of a nation-state that cannot be transgressed with impunity. The same argument is made by the prophets, only with explicit reference to the rule of YHWH.

interface of YHWH and the public process but also a participant (perpetrator and/or victim) of this odd rule that defies conventional categories. This interface of the theological and the political constitutes the primal challenge of the Book of Jeremiah. It is surely a challenge to the modern reader who does not easily imagine such a defining theological agency in world affairs. In a different way, the same resistance to this interface must have been a challenge in the generic religious culture of the ancient Near East, for the insistence on the singular rule of YHWH over the nations was no less problematic in an ancient environment of religious pluralism than it is in a contemporary environment of secularism.

The stretch of the Book of Jeremiah over several generations emerges because this literature is devoted to a meditation on and interpretation of the crisis of Jerusalem, which was razed at the hands of the Babylonians.[11] It is conventional to assume that the tradition begins with the call of the prophet Jeremiah, perhaps in 621 BCE, at the time of the Reform of Josiah (see Jer 11; 2 Kings 22–23). But even if that date is a beginning point, it is the death of King Josiah in 609 BCE that seems to be a primary reference point in the book. Either way, the Book of Jeremiah contains much reflection that is situated before the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and offers anticipatory reflection on that pending loss. The tradition of Jeremiah is clearly familiar with the unimpressive kings who came after Josiah in Jerusalem, his three sons, and his grandson (see 2 Kings 23:31–25:7).

The Book of Jeremiah does not, however, end with the report on the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE. It continues reflection on

[11] To this end, William McKane, in his *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986–1996), 1:1, has usefully termed the process a "rolling corpus."

the circumstances and faith of those who, after 587, were deported by the Babylonians into alien lands.[12] Thus, a second wave of reflection seems to arise from the community of the deported (see Jer 24), even though the text is well versed on the future Babylonian governor of the province, Gedaliah, after the catastrophe of 587 (Jer 40:7–41:18).[13] The Jeremian tradition offers reflection concerning both the sorry circumstances of those left in the land and the lives of those who were deported. For this period, then, the tradition offers quite a wide-angle view of the lives of those who suffered the loss of Jerusalem. It is clear, however, that the loss and dismay of deportation and demise is not the final word of the Book of Jeremiah. The tradition continues to be generative into the sixth century BCE, long enough that it may hope for and point to signs of recovery and restoration after the disaster.[14] Thus, the book offers a powerful statement of hope that would have been impossible for the person of Jeremiah himself. In the end, the book anticipates the destruction of "the Destroyer," Babylon, as the vindication of YHWH and as an expectation of restoration for the Jews (Jer 50–51; cf. Ps 137).[15] How much of that hope is singularly grounded in confidence in YHWH's

[12] See Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, OBT (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

[13] While the voice of those who remained in the land is thought to be heard in the Book of Lamentations, on the whole, the ideology of the exiles has crowded out such voices. See Norman K. Gottwald, "Social Class and Ideology in Isaiah 40–55: An Eagletonian Reading," in *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics*, ed. Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 329–42.

[14] See Walter Brueggemann, "An Ending that Does Not End: The Book of Jeremiah," in *Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible: A Reader*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2001), 117–28.

[15] On this text, see Martin Kessler, *Battle of the Gods: The God of Israel Versus Marduk of Babylon – A Literary/Theological Interpretation of Jeremiah 50–51*, SSN 42 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003).

coming rule and how much of it is a comment on emerging geopolitical reality is difficult to determine. Either way, the dynamism of the tradition makes possible a ringing affirmation, even in the face of debilitating historical circumstances.

ROOTAGE

Neither the Book of Jeremiah nor the person of Jeremiah appeared amid Jerusalem's climactic crisis de novo. Behind the person and the book is a long tradition of faith that goes back to the very origins of Israel as the people of YHWH. We may identify three defining moments in the tradition that are antecedent to the formation of the Jeremian tradition.

First, at its deepest level the tradition of Jeremiah is rooted in the memory and authority of the covenant at Sinai. There are immense unsolvable problems connected with the Sinai tradition concerning its date, provenance, and character. Frank Crüsemann is perhaps most helpful in his judgment that, as a theological claim in Israel, the covenant at Sinai stands outside time as an unqualified, unconditioned absolute, whatever may be the historical matters connected with it:

> Sinai is, however, a utopian place. It is temporally and physically outside state authority. The association of divine law with this place is completed by steps, which the catastrophe of Israel both enabled and compelled. Sinai became the fulcrum of a legal system not connected with the power of a state and therefore not a mere expression of tradition and custom. . . . The very real survival of Israel, in spite of the kind of conquest that had destroyed other nations, depends on a fictional place in an invented past. They escaped every earthly power and therefore are put ahead of those kingdoms.[16]

[16] Frank Crüsemann, *The Torah: Theology and Social History of Old Testament Law* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1996), 57.