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Jeremiah, Defender of Covenant Faithfulness

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

JEREMIAH, DEFENDER OF COVENANT FAITHFULNESS

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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BY
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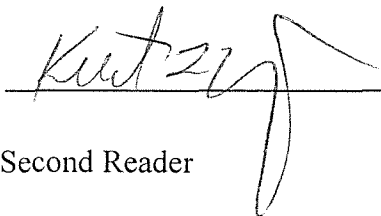
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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Master of Arts in Theological Studies.



Research Advisor



Second Reader

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ABSTRACT

In this study of the topic of true/false prophecy, the author has chosen to review the writings of Jeremiah to determine what criteria were used by Jeremiah, and perhaps the later redactors of the book we call Jeremiah, to determine the truthfulness of Jeremiah's prophecies and the falsity of the prophecies of the temple prophets in Jerusalem. The author pays particular attention to the quotations which Jeremiah says are spoken by his opponents. An attempt is made to determine if these quotations of the opponents give us any clues to Jeremiah's fervent opposition to their statements.

The author's analysis shows that the most consistently quoted group is that comprising the priests and prophets of the Jerusalem temple. The most common quotation by that group is that there will be well-being, or lack of destruction, in the country. Jeremiah is just as adamant that destruction is the country's fate. The author determines that this difference in point of view stems from the different covenant traditions supported by the two groups: Jeremiah was nurtured in the Moses/Sinai covenant tradition, the Jerusalem group supports a covenant tradition based on promises made to David. Jeremiah feels that he is right because God would never make a promise that wasn't contingent on the faithfulness of the people, and there is too much visible unfaithfulness to support continued well-being. The later redactors seem to have accepted this viewpoint and indicate further that Jeremiah's prophecies did in fact come true. The author then extends the influence of the Mosaic covenant tradition to the New Testament and beyond.

CHAPTER 1.

THESIS STATEMENT

It is this author's contention that the reports of conflict in the book of Jeremiah can be better understood as a dispute between two different covenant traditions: the Mosaic covenant tradition which Jeremiah supported, and the David/Zion covenant tradition supported by the temple priests and prophets of Jerusalem. Jeremiah feels that his opponents' promises of peace, or well-being, are misguided because they are non-conditional and fail to address serious ethical and theological shortcomings which Jeremiah sees as a widespread condition throughout all levels of Judah's society. Jeremiah's understanding of the Mosaic covenant tradition tells him that God's covenant was conditional on a faithful response from the people of Israel, and since religious and ethical abuses were widely evident, God was free to punish his people and all other nations which abused the spirit of his covenant. These issues were not being addressed by the religious leaders of Jerusalem, and therefore their support of the David/Zion covenant promise of well-being was false.

In order to support this thesis, I will first look at the quotations which Jeremiah ascribes to his opponents. From these quotations I will ascertain the issues to which Jeremiah says he is responding. Of particular interest will be the issues which Jeremiah responds to most often and which he therefore seems to feel are the core of his difference with the temple priests and prophets. The central theme which characterizes their differences, I contend, is that of well-being. Jeremiah and the temple group are diametrically opposed on this issue. Key-words and phrases will be assessed to see if

they tell us anything about the covenantal differences which Jeremiah feels are important. In particular, the phrase “sword, famine and pestilence” will be shown to be characteristic of Jeremiah’s response to the temple group’s assertion of well-being. It is, in effect, his denial of the truth of their covenantal claims.

The next step will be to show that there were separate and identifiable covenant traditions which separated Jeremiah from the temple group in Jerusalem. Specifically, I will describe the David/Zion covenant tradition which prevailed in Jerusalem at the time of Jeremiah, and I will briefly trace the “northern” or Mosaic tradition which I believe was the focus of Jeremiah’s theology. Chapter 6 will develop the theological tenets of each of these covenant traditions and explain why Jeremiah felt the David/Zion tradition was incomplete. The prophecies of the temple group could not be right, in the eyes of Jeremiah, because they supported an incomplete ethic.

In chapter 7 I will address a general application issue by asking whether the Mosaic covenant is an adequate ethic. I contend that Jeremiah saw the Sinai covenant as a complete ethic, and Jesus, the apostle Paul and John Calvin built upon this same ethic while pointing in new directions for the future. Even though the decalogue is seen as a problematic example of rule deontology in the field of ethics today, it is my suggestion that Jeremiah’s understanding of the requirements of the Sinai covenant, which includes the decalogue within its boundaries, is broad enough to be fully relevant in our current society. This section is not the focus of the paper, however, and will not be as fully developed as the previous covenant tradition argument of Jeremiah. My primary intention is not to “prove” the validity of the Sinai covenant, but rather to show its influence in the prophetic work of Jeremiah, and secondarily to show its further influence on later generations.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The difficulty in approaching research in the area of True-False prophecy is determining which perspective one should take among those currently being pursued. Since Gerhard Quell's 1952 publication of *Wahre und falsche Propheten*¹ the stigma of labeling a prophet true or false based on accusations of moral impropriety or on the canonical judgement on their character has been removed. Various methods have since been pursued to determine the criteria for true and false prophecy. Initially, historical and text-critical tools were applied to the text to ferret out reasons for the charges of truth and falsity. More recently, sociological and archaeological tools have been applied.

In his forward to Leo Perdue's *The Collapse of History*, Walter Brueggemann states that history as a primary tool of biblical interpretation has been replaced by "a variety of perspectives and methods that are focused variously on creation, canon, liberation, narrative, and imagination."² Perdue, himself, calls these approaches "diversity" rather than "fragmentation"³ in order to put a more positive slant on them, and in his text develops the history of liberation, creation, canon, feminism, story, and imagination as approaches to Old Testament theology.

Perdue's own model for pursuing Old Testament theology begins with the historical and cultural context; moves to the accommodation of newer trends by looking

¹ Gerhard Quell, *Wahre und falsche Propheten* (Gutersloh: Bertelmann, 1952).

² Walter Brueggemann in Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), viii.

³ A reference to James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community: A Guide to Canonical Criticism*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship, ed. Gene Tucker (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 15.

at the images, ideas and themes involved in the text; considers the history of biblical interpretation; and attempts to correlate all of the above with current theological issues.⁴

Olson challenges Perdue's model as being too non-specific: "is there a unified culture even in the United States from which one could hope to derive unified norms? . . . Is there really a unified age, an era, a time when a set of consensual norms function?"⁵

Olson goes on to suggest his own model, "a web or network of localized interpretative communities" rather than "an authoritative pronouncement from one individual or one community of experts."⁶ This proposal is as unsatisfactory as that of Perdue since, rather than trying to accommodate multiple research results under an agreeable hermeneutic, it promotes multiple hermeneutical theories with only a thread of communication between them. This does little to clarify the biblical message for the non-professional theologian or lay reader.

In the more specific area of prophetic studies, Wilson points out that up until 1980, scholars had avoided dealing with many of the social dimensions of Israelite prophecy, focusing instead on the behavior of the prophets (ecstasy, in particular) and on the structure of their speech (form-critical issues).⁷ Diest argued a few years later that historical-critical issues couldn't answer the new questions then being asked and felt that those methods would be replaced by archaeological, sociological and anthropological data.⁸ Gordon admitted that the historical-critical approach, based on the text, couldn't

⁴ Perdue, 306-307.

⁵ Dennis T. Olson, "Between the Tower of Unity and the Babel of Pluralism: Biblical Theology and Leo Perdue's 'The Collapse of History,'" in *Troubling Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, Louis Stuhlman, JSOT Supplement Series 260 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 355.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 357.

⁷ Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 13.

⁸ Ferdinand E. Diest, "The Prophets: Are We Heading for a Paradigm Switch?" in *The Place is Too Small for Us*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 582-599. Reprinted from 1989.

answer the historical questions that Diest and others were asking, but he argued for a balance between older and newer theological perspectives and methods.⁹

The current trend, then, seems to be towards multiple perspectives on the prophetic literature and therefore multiple hermeneutics, each of which has its own validity depending on the approach used. Childs acknowledges that there are multiple layers of composition in the prophetic literature, but he assigns the decisive semantic role to the final form of the canon.¹⁰ He proposes that the final form was construed to provide a connection to Israel's past for a present and future audience. This eschatological focus is destroyed if one ignores the final form in favor of some of its parts. Childs doesn't suggest that there is a single hermeneutical focus in that final form, but the implication is that the hermeneutical options are more limited and focused than what are proposed by many other scholars.

Sanders has supported Childs' notion of a canonical hermeneutic, but has given more weight than Childs to historical and critical tools.¹¹ In his model of canonical criticism, he uses a triangle of interrelationship which includes "ancient traditions (texts), situations (contexts), and hermeneutics."¹² A balance between these three can provide the means whereby Israel, Judaism, and the church [can span] the gaps between inherited faith and new cultural settings."¹³

⁹ Robert P. Gordon, "Present Trends and Future Directions," in *The Place is Too Small for Us*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 600-605.

¹⁰ Brevard S. Childs, "Retrospective Reading of the Old Testament Prophets," *ZAW* 108 (1996), 362-377.

¹¹ James A. Sanders, "Canonical Context and Canonical Criticism," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 2 (1980), 173-197.

¹² James A. Sanders, "Canonical Hermeneutics: True and False Prophecy," in *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 89.

¹³ James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics," in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume, ed. Keith Crim, Lloyd Richard Bailey, Sr., Victor Paul Furnish, Emory Stevens Bucke (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 403.

In order to have a starting point for developing a thesis, I found Sanders' hermeneutic of God as creator and redeemer useful.¹⁴ The message of the "false" prophets that there will be peace, or no evil will fall upon them, suggested a one-sided view of God which could be tested. I did not set out to prove this hermeneutic; it was simply an understandable and focused beginning point for understanding the conflict between Jeremiah and the Jerusalem prophets. I ended up focusing on the covenantal differences between the two groups of opponents, but God's creative power is at the heart of the Sinai covenant, and the Jerusalem prophets weren't allowing for that perspective in their covenantal emphases. Therefore, my research ended up lending support to Sanders' hermeneutic.

In addition to determining a viewpoint from which to begin a look at the prophetic message of Jeremiah, there was the problem of how to understand Jeremiah himself. The literature is equally diverse on the substance and reality of the person of Jeremiah. Most of the authors I read seemed to assume that there was an historical person named Jeremiah who was a prophet during the time listed in the beginning of the book by that name (Jer 1:1-3). No psychological development of Jeremiah's character is attempted; the authors are rather developing a rationale for his theological pronouncements and assume an ancestry or a theological tradition which this historical person inherited and which served as the basis for his prophetic announcements.¹⁵

¹⁴ Sanders, *Canon and Community*, chapters 2 and 3, pp. 21-60.

¹⁵ For example, see R. R. Wilson, "Interpreting Israel's Religion: An Anthropological Perspective on the Problem of False Prophecy," in *The Place is Too Small for Us*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 333-334; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 72; and, Henri Cazelles, "Jeremiah and Deuteronomy," in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 89-111.

Brueggemann describes Jeremiah as a “constructed ‘persona’”¹⁶ given the redactional layers apparent in the book of Jeremiah and the span of history that separates us from the original prophet. It is impossible to discern what the original Jeremiah was like. Polk feels, however, that “in the midst of this complicated Jeremiah literature there is an anchoring reference to a powerful personality about which the editors had some knowledge and some conviction.”¹⁷ The identification of the actual Jeremiah is not crucial to the argument of this thesis, but it is useful to believe that there was an historical Jeremiah who confronted the prophets in Jerusalem from a particular perspective so that there is a credible disputation which can be analyzed.

The development of the covenant traditions of Israel and Judah are of somewhat greater importance to my argument and a variety of authors have been consulted. Those who were most instructive in giving an overview of the development of the covenant tradition are von Rad¹⁸ and Gottwald.¹⁹ Gottwald faults von Rad for separating the “exodus-settlement (history) traditions from the theophany-covenant-law (Sinai) traditions,” arguing that all four elements are included in a single matrix which he explains.²⁰ However, both authors are in agreement that the Mosaic tradition was maintained by a Levitical group primarily in the northern tribes of Israel and only later introduced into Judah where it became the foundation for the reforms of Josiah. In chapter 5 I will deal in more detail with the transmission of the Sinai covenant tradition.

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 11.

¹⁷ Quoted in Brueggemann, *ibid.*, 11; from Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self*, JSOT Supplement 32 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984), 165.

¹⁸ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology. Vol. I. The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

¹⁹ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979). Third printing, 1985.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 90-95.

Based on the literature reviewed, I am therefore assuming an historical person of strong, insightful knowledge of the Sinai covenant tradition who was probably named Jeremiah, and who had a confrontation with the Jerusalem prophets over the likelihood of continuing well-being in the land of Judah. Any later redactors had some knowledge of this Jeremiah and found his prophetic message to have relevancy for their own historical situation, so much so that they adapted his message for their own time and only modified or rearranged the material dealing with his tradition to prove to their audience that he had been a true prophet. I don't believe that Jeremiah's core dispute with the temple prophets was so disfigured by this rearrangement that the core message can't be delineated; it is still intact within the preserved text. The first step then will be to assess the text of the canonical Jeremiah and determine what kind of issues Jeremiah is crediting to his opponents by looking at the quotations which he assigns to their mouths.

CHAPTER 3

WHAT ARE THE OPPONENTS SAYING?

In this chapter I will be looking specifically at the quotations which Jeremiah ascribes to his opponents. The purpose is to show that well-being, or the lack of it, is the key issue between Jeremiah and the temple group. If Jeremiah bothered to quote someone else, then it most likely reflects an issue or theme which he felt was important to address. What I will be looking for in evaluating these quotations is any phrase or theme which seems to show up repeatedly. These commonly repeated phrases and themes are presumed to indicate something theologically important to Jeremiah, important enough that he would take the time to address them and forcefully prophesy against them.

The opponents of Jeremiah fall into two groups: the priests, prophets and rulers of Jerusalem; and, more broadly, the people of Jerusalem and Judah. In some places these groups overlap and both of them are guilty of the same shortcomings.

The People

The comments of the people at large, as Jeremiah reports them, are more differentiated and less specific than those of the prophets, priests and rulers. The comments of the people may be summarized in the following fashion:

1. The people have forgotten the God who brought them out of Egypt (Jer 2:6 NRSV).
2. The people have rejected God outright (2:20; 2:31; 6:16; 12:4; 18:12; 22:21).
3. They have actively pursued Baal/idol worship (2:25, 27; 44:16-18, 19, 25).

4. They claim they are innocent of wrongdoing (2:23, 35; 3:4-5; 5:19; 16:10; 31:29).
5. They admit their guilt (3:22b-25; 14:19-22).
6. They have used religious phrases carelessly or wrongly, leading to false worship (3:16; 5:2, 24; 23:34, 38; 44:26).
7. They question why they haven't been saved (8:19, 20).
8. They complain about the destruction which has come (32:36, 43; 33:10).
9. The remnant says it will obey the word of the Lord (42:5-6, 20).
10. The remnant says it will not stay in Judah (42:13; 43:2).

These comments of the people at large, reported by Jeremiah, appear to reflect Jeremiah's perception that the people lack spiritual depth and constancy. Many of the quotes appear to be a narrative device which Jeremiah uses to bring attention to his perception of the people.²¹ For example, in 2:6 Jeremiah puts words in the people's mouths about the Exodus story which they *didn't* say. And it is unlikely that the people would have been blatant enough to say that they would *not* serve the Lord (e.g., 2:20, 31), though that could have been the case for some of the people. The people are undoubtedly fickle and opportunistic in their worship practices and deserve a reprimand by God, and Jeremiah puts words in their mouths which reflect what he sees.

What is missing from these comments is any direct attack on Jeremiah himself. Jeremiah is attacking the people's religious habits in his proclamations of God's word, but the people are ignoring Jeremiah. He can't report any criticism or rebuttal of himself

²¹ James L. Crenshaw states, for example: "The sentiments attributed by Israelite prophets to the populace in general [indicate] concepts that an Amos or an Isaiah wished to eradicate." "The Missing Voice," in *A Biblical Itinerary. In Search of Method, Form and Content: Essays in Honor of George W. Coats*, ed. Eugene E. Carpenter, JSOT Supplement Series 240 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 143.

except the refusal of the remnant to stay in Judah (42:13; 43:2). The people either dislike Jeremiah's attacks on their character, or they are unapologetic, but in either case they give him little credence. In other words, he is not having a dispute with them, he is only critical of what he sees as their shortcomings.

These quotations which Jeremiah uses against the people indicate only that Jeremiah is accusing them of religious infidelity. They say nothing about Jeremiah's dispute with the temple prophets and priests except, perhaps, that the temple group is not regulating the worship of God in an effective manner.

The Priests, Prophets and Rulers

The sayings, or quotations, attributed to this group of leaders is far more focused in its criticism of the specific attitudes and behaviors which Jeremiah finds objectionable. They give us a better picture of the criteria Jeremiah has in mind for true prophecy and will help in focusing on the covenantal dispute which I believe Jeremiah is having with the temple prophets and priests.

Grouping the Complaints

The quotations of the false prophets, as reported by Jeremiah, might be grouped in the following categories:

1. The priests, prophets and rulers have forgotten all about God in their deliberations (2:8; 8:8).
2. The priests and prophets discuss the "burden" of the Lord without knowledge (23:33).
3. Jeremiah believes the priests and prophets haven't been in touch with the court of God (23:25; 23:31).
4. The opponents taunt Jeremiah (17:15).

5. They threaten to kill him (11:19; 11:21; 18:18).
6. The false prophets are prophesying “peace” and “no evil,” when God has said otherwise (4:10; 5:12; 6:14; 8:11; 14:13, 15; 21:13; 23:17; 27:9, 14, 16; 28:3-4, 11; 37:9).

As can be seen, category 6, which focuses on the prophecy of peace and no evil, is by far the largest category. I believe it is here that we find the crux of Jeremiah’s complaint against the false prophets. In the summary of Jeremiah’s complaints against the false prophets in chapter 23, both the positive and negative comments are brought together in 23:17: “It shall be well with you . . . no calamity shall come upon you” (also 14:13). Jeremiah refutes both statements as the unfortunate babbling of the uninformed to the ears of the recalcitrant.

It should be clear, then, that the chief complaint of Jeremiah, based on quotations of the opponents whom he refutes, is that the leaders of Jerusalem are proclaiming “peace” or “well-being” when Jeremiah understands that destruction will precede any future restoration and well-being of the people.²² The following sections will take a closer look at all of these quotations to see what they might reveal about the dispute between Jeremiah and the temple group of Jerusalem. Indications of issues which might be at the heart of a covenantal dispute will be of major focus.

Complaints And Threats

The first step will be to take a look at the first five categories of complaints listed above which Jeremiah makes against the priests and prophets of Jerusalem. The last

²² I am going to follow standard convention here and assume that *shalom* refers to *well-being* rather than to *the absence of war*. See *The Meaning of Peace: Biblical Studies*, ed. Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley, trans. Walter Sawatsky (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), particularly the essay by Claus Westermann, “Peace (Shalom) in the Old Testament,” 16-48.

group dealing with well-being will receive a more detailed analysis in the following section.

In 2:8, the priests, specifically, are guilty of not seeking after Yahweh.²³ In the second cola, “Those who handle the law,” whether priests or a separate group which focuses on the interpretation and application of the law, are likewise guilty of not listening to God’s intentions. The shepherds (third cola), or rulers, have actively transgressed against God, and the prophets (fourth cola) have ignored God in favor of “the Baal” (definite article included).

Verse 8 is contained within the larger pericope of 8:4-13 in which the whole nation is addressed. However, Holladay points out that the “law of Yahweh” and the “lie of the scribes” are both “two-unit construct chains.”²⁴ This would tie the phrases together, indicating that the scribes, like the priests in 2:8, do not know God.

In 23:33, God asks Jeremiah a question which could hypothetically be asked of him by the people, a prophet or a priest: “What is the burden of the Lord?” It is not clear whether Jeremiah has actually been asked this question or not, but the implication is that this question is in frequent use, probably by the people when addressed to a priest or prophet. In any case, God indicates that the “burdens” being discussed are the products of the human mind and are therefore a perversion of God’s word.

The reason for discounting the word of the false prophets and priests is that they haven’t gotten their prophecies from the court of God. The false prophets claim to have gotten their words from a dream (23:25), but it is clear to Jeremiah from the content of

²³ Holladay subscribes to the thesis (following Holz and Grossberg) that v 8 refers to four different groups of people; therefore, the first cola refers specifically only to the priestly class. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 281

their prophecies that they are using their own deceitful words (23:31) and shouldn't be saying, "Says the Lord," to confirm their own opinions.

Jeremiah is taunted by his skeptics and opponents, saying, "Where is the word of the Lord? Let it come!" (17:15) Their accusation is likely tied to the notion that the prophecies of a true prophet should come true (Deut 18:22), and so far, Jeremiah's prophecies have only blown an ill wind. The accusers are not specifically identified.

Jeremiah's opponents are pursuing more serious ends in 18:18. Going well beyond the taunt of 17:15, they are now plotting to use Jeremiah's words against him. Ultimately, they are plotting his death (18:23). The plotters include prophets, priests, and "the wise." Each of these groups is clearly trying to protect its franchise, therefore Holladay suggests that these opponents be categorized as "optimistic prophets."²⁵ That is, they are optimistic that peace will continue to prevail.

More serious threats against Jeremiah's life are made by a group of opponents in 11:19, 21. The passage as it currently stands indicates that the opponents are people from Anathoth. Holladay subscribes to the proposal of Hubman that the opponents are once again the optimistic prophets.²⁶

The quotations of the priests, prophets, and rulers, thus far, have been used by Jeremiah to question their integrity. Jeremiah indicates through the quotes that the false representatives of God have usurped God's authority and replaced it with their own opinions. In angry response to Jeremiah's accusations, they taunt him and threaten him with death, apparently to preserve their own status.

²⁵ Ibid., 528.

²⁶ Ibid., 366.

The Theme of Well-Being

As indicated earlier, most of the quotations attributed to Jeremiah's religious opponents support the notion that Jerusalem, and apparently Judah as well, will be spared from the destruction which befell Israel. The opponents of Jeremiah are quoted both positively and negatively.

The positive affirmation that peace or well-being will be their continued state of affairs is offered by the false prophets in 4:10, 6:14, 8:11, 14:13, and 23:17. The imminent restoration of well-being, after the first deportation, is also promised in 27:16, 28:3-4, and 28:11; the king, deportees and temple vessels will soon be returned to Jerusalem as an assurance that all is well. Each of the quotations in these passages centers on the concept of *shalom*. Therefore, the assurance of the false prophets in these passages is that the present well-being of Jerusalem is, or will be, secure.

Security is also assured by the false prophets in a negative fashion by stating that Jerusalem, and Judah in general, will *not* see sword, famine or pestilence (5:12; 14:13, 15), the three most common characteristics of a siege; or, they will not be attacked by an outsider (21:13; 27:9, 14; 28:11; 37:9); or, finally and more generally, that no evil will come upon them (23:17). Though the second group of verses does not mention sword, famine and pestilence directly, all of them are in conjunction with verses which do mention these disasters. Thus, eight of these nine negatively-phrased assurances by the false prophets are used by Jeremiah to infer that the three resultant disasters of war – sword, famine and pestilence – are going to be the state of the near future, not well-being. I will look at these connections after summarizing all of the above quotations briefly.

Summary of Opponents' Quotations

In this section, my goal was to look at the quotations of all of Jeremiah's opponents to see what they were saying. My assumption was that if Jeremiah bothered to quote his opponents, or possibly to put words in their mouth, he was indicating an issue that he felt was worth responding to. The people of Jerusalem and Judah at large were apparently guilty of indifference toward the worship of God as witnessed by their frequent worship of false gods. God was not the sole focus of their worship.

Jeremiah's chief opponents - the priests, prophets and rulers - were guilty of speaking their own mind, not the word of God. This was most apparent in their promulgation of the notion of "peace," or "no destruction." This last grouping of quotations is by far the largest and most specific of those that have been identified. Are there, then, any further clues within these quotations which might confirm that well-being is the key confrontational issue? The next chapter will look more closely at the negative sayings – there will be no destruction – to try to confirm that Jeremiah feels this is the key difference between himself and the false prophets. Later chapters will deal with the covenantal and theological implications in this contest between well-being and destruction which was important to Jeremiah and to the redactors who followed him.

CHAPTER 4

SWORD, FAMINE AND PESTILENCE: A CLOSER LOOK

The purpose of this chapter is to look at the passages in which the false prophets speak of well-being in negative terms - there will be no evil – and confirm by Jeremiah's usage of the phrase "sword, famine and pestilence" that well-being is the key to Jeremiah's disagreement with those prophets. So far, we only have the evidence of the sheer number of quotations which mention this issue. I would like to show that well-being is most likely the central issue in the prophetic dispute before looking at the covenantal and theological reasons for its holding such a position.

When the false prophets are assuring the people of well-being in negative terms, they state that there will be an absence of sword, famine and pestilence. These three words show up individually in many places in the Old Testament,²⁷ but the three terms in conjunction – that is, appearing together in the same verse - are monopolized by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Of the twenty-six occurrences of these three terms in conjunction in the canonical Old Testament, seventeen are in Jeremiah and seven are in Ezekiel; the other two occurrences are in Chronicles.

The next most common combination of these words is "sword" and "famine." Of the thirty-nine verses in the canonical Old Testament in which this combination occurs, twenty-eight are in Jeremiah, seven are in Ezekiel. "Famine" and "pestilence" show up

²⁷ See Helga Weippert, "Die Prosareden des Jeremiahbuches," *BZAW* 132 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973), 79-80; and, John W. Miller, *Das Verhältnis Jeremias und Hesekiels sprachlich und theologisch untersucht* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1955), 86.

together only twice: once in Jeremiah and once in 2 Samuel. “War,” “famine” and “pestilence” appear three times, all in Jeremiah.

Famine and pestilence were recurring catastrophes in the ancient world and taken by themselves were indications of God’s displeasure. Elijah’s confrontation with the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18) is one of the more dramatic stories which confirmed that God is in control of the natural world. But when the sword is added to either or both of these elements, there is the further implication that God not only controls the natural world but can use even alien peoples to punish the people of Israel and get their attention. This is adding serious injury to insult, for in famine and pestilence one might still manage to eke out a living or move temporarily to another place. But the sword brings death to one’s doorstep and there is little chance of escape. Violation of God’s covenant will not go unpunished, and there is no escape.

Eight of the nine negative phrasings of the continued state of well-being, “there will be no evil,” are associated with sword, famine and/or pestilence. Following is a closer look at how these verses make use of the sword, famine and pestilence theme.

Jeremiah 5:12

This is the first verse in which the false prophets are accused of promising shalom in a negative fashion: no evil will come upon us. Chapter five begins with a search for any person who “does justice and seeks truth.” The reason for this search, and the controlling theme of the passage, is pardon (*salah*); God is looking for a chance to withhold punishment. Pardon is reiterated in verse seven, but this time the search has shown that there is no one who can be pardoned. A brief review of the sins of the people is followed by the only logical conclusion, phrased as a rhetorical question: Shall I not punish (*paqad*) them for these things (v9)?

Verse 10 seems to be a second thought of Jeremiah indicating that the branches ought to be cut back but the stems and roots are to be left behind as a remnant. This heavy pruning would be consistent with routine viniculture. Verse 11 confirms once again the reason for the punishment: Israel and Judah have been utterly faithless.

Verses 12-17 indicate what the punishment will look like. The false prophets have said that God would do nothing to them. Jeremiah indicates what that “nothing” is: “no evil will come upon us” (12a). And then, to further explain what “evil” is being talked about, Jeremiah specifies that it is “sword or famine” (12b). The sword (*kereb*) is the nation which God is sending (v15), and the famine (*ra’ab*) will result from the enemy’s eating up (*akal*) the harvest, the sons and daughters, the flocks and herds, and the vines and fig trees (all in v17). God will take vengeance by using the very disasters the false prophets said wouldn’t happen.

Jeremiah 14:13, 15

Chapter fourteen begins by listing the signs of a terrible drought which apparently is in progress. Verses 7-9 are Jeremiah’s request for help on behalf of the people, beginning with the admission of their iniquity (*awon*). In verse 10, God affirms their iniquity and indicates once again that the response will be punishment (*paqad*). With only a brief injunction by God to Jeremiah to not try to intervene on behalf of the people, the punishment is specified: sword, famine and pestilence (*deber*).

In a response to God which is at least ironic, and undoubtedly sarcastic if the false prophets are listening, Jeremiah states both the negative and positive affirmations of those prophets as if there could be some truth in what they are saying: there will be no sword or famine; there will be well-being (v13). The false incredulity in Jeremiah’s response is followed immediately by a condemnation of the false prophets for their lying

in God's name (v14). Jeremiah identifies the false prophets again as the ones who are saying, "sword and famine shall not come on this land" (v15), and God immediately responds that "by sword and famine those prophets shall be consumed" (also v15). As in 5:12, God is turning the false prophecies back on the bearers.

Jeremiah 21:13

Brueggemann suggests that verses 13-14 are a separate fragment which appears to have nothing to do with verses 11-12 since the former are so non-specific, and they probably have nothing to do with the inquiry in verse 2.²⁸ The message is familiar – no one shall destroy us – but the subject of God's wrath is undisclosed.

If Jeremiah did not place the passage here originally, then this leaves us wondering what the redactors, had in mind. Let me suggest one possible scenario which would have made sense to a later group of writers sympathetic with Jeremiah's theology. Jeremiah has stated unequivocally that Zedekiah and the people of Jerusalem will be subject to "pestilence, sword, and famine" (v7). Surrender will bring life, but resistance will bring only sword, famine and pestilence (in that order) in verse 9. The punishment for breaking God's covenant makes the alternative of surrender a more tenable option. Regardless of their choice, the city will be burned (*sarap*) with fire (*esh*), v10. Verses 11-12 then serve as a reminder of the monarch's covenantal obligation: to do justice.²⁹ Because it is addressed generally, it could apply to any monarch of the house of David in any time. This bridge from the Jeremiah response to Zedekiah (vv3-10) leads to vv13-14, an even more generalized warning to anyone who

²⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 193.

²⁹ Brueggemann suggests that the structure of vv11-12 is indicative of the Mosaic covenantal tradition. *Ibid.*, 192-193.

thinks they are exempt from covenantal obligation to God. They will suffer by fire (cf. v10). The specific message of warning from Jeremiah to Zedekiah has thus been supplemented by a reminder to a later audience of rulers, possibly of the Davidic line, of their covenantal obligation – the same as that of the former kings – and the consequence of their failure to be faithful: destruction. In case there is any misunderstanding, the message is repeated once more for the benefit of the whole audience of readers or listeners.

Jeremiah 27:9

Chapter twenty-seven begins with a group of envoys from neighboring countries visiting Zedekiah, who has been recently installed as king, presumably to discuss the situation with Babylon. Jeremiah doesn't waste an opportunity to push his message of surrender and survival to envoys who can reach a wider audience than he has had in Jerusalem. The failure to surrender to God's chosen messenger, Babylon, is once again punishment (*paqad*), described immediately as sword, famine and pestilence (v8). In verse 9, the connection with the previous verse is assumed as Jeremiah tells the envoys that they should not believe the prophets who are saying that they will not have to submit to Babylon. Verses 10-11 reiterate that destruction will accrue to anyone who does not surrender.

Jeremiah 27:14

The next section of chapter twenty-seven shifts Jeremiah's message of surrender from the envoys to Zedekiah himself. As he has done with the envoys, Jeremiah warns of destruction by sword, famine and pestilence (v13), and then warns Zedekiah not to listen to the prophets who are prophesying that they shall not serve the king of Babylon (v14). The implication in this chapter is that the false prophets are only saying that Jerusalem

will not have to serve Babylon. Zedekiah and the envoys may have been construing that message as a sign that they could actively resist Babylon since the local prophets had been assuring their well-being. Jeremiah is careful not to offend Zedekiah and the envoys by accusing them of plotting against Nebuchadrezzar, but he is willing to take on the false prophets and warn that their message is untrue and could lead to false presumptions.

Jeremiah next makes the same presentation to the priests and the people at large (vv16-22), specifying that any talk of the temple vessels being returned soon (restoration of well-being) is erroneous. This sets the stage for the confrontation with Hananiah in chapter twenty-eight.

Jeremiah 28:11

After Hananiah states to Jeremiah's face the message that well-being would soon be restored (vv3-4), a message which chapter twenty-seven implies has been given before (cf. 27:16), Jeremiah responds that the traditional message of true prophets is that of war, famine and pestilence (v8). After breaking Jeremiah's yoke (v10), Hananiah reiterates his message that well-being will be restored (v11). After thinking over what his response ought to be, and perhaps after further input from God, Jeremiah returns and calls Hananiah a liar to his face (v15). The use of an iron yoke and the reinforcement of servitude to King Nebuchadrezzar (v14) implies destruction from warfare once again, not well-being or a passive submission through annual taxes.

Jeremiah 37:9

The siege of Jerusalem has begun, interrupted temporarily by the appearance of the Egyptians. Jeremiah states to Zedekiah's representatives that Jerusalem will definitely be burned with fire (*esh*, v8), and the Chaldeans will not be going away (v9).

In other words, the false prophets are still prophesying well-being and Jeremiah is insisting that punishment will ensue shortly. Even if only a few wounded Chaldeans were to survive the siege, they would be enough to complete God's plan for the city.

Summary: Sword, Famine and Pestilence

In looking at the quotations which are attributed to the priests, prophets and rulers, the majority of the quotations have to do with the continued well-being of Jerusalem and its environs. The false prophets are continually saying that Jerusalem's safety is ensured, or, conversely, that no evil will happen to it. Jeremiah is equally adamant that the city is not safe and Babylon will be the instrument of its destruction. "Sword, famine and pestilence" is the most commonly used metaphor by Jeremiah for describing Jerusalem's future. It is his way of denying emphatically that there will be continued well-being for Judah. The reasons for Jeremiah's denial of well-being and his insistence on coming destruction derive, I believe, from his differing covenantal background. There are competing covenant traditions involved in this prophetic dispute, one proclaiming continued well-being and the other proclaiming that well-being is not at all assured. The next chapter will address these covenantal differences.

CHAPTER 5

THE COVENANT QUARREL: HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Introduction

Study of the verbal conflict between Jeremiah and the “false” prophets of Jerusalem suggests that the two groups have divergent opinions on the future based on their theological understandings of God’s promises to, and requirements of, them. It is always possible that the dispute was largely political: both groups were trying to curry favor with Zedekiah, for example. But Jeremiah seems to have failed miserably at the task and makes no accommodation for what Zedekiah wants to hear. Therefore, I am ruling out political motivations as a primary factor in the dispute. Likewise, Jeremiah could have been competing for the support of the general population, but the comments he is reported to have made to them and the less than enthusiastic responses he got from the populace seem to make that an improbability.

The greatest likelihood is that Jeremiah and the false prophets have divergent viewpoints on the relationship of God to Jerusalem and the people of Judah, and the basis for those differing viewpoints is what I would like to explore next. I would like to make the case that the differences in outlook between Jeremiah and the Jerusalem prophets is based on their support of different covenantal traditions. These traditions shaped their expectations of what God would, or would not, provide for them, and this led in turn to differing outlooks on the future of Jerusalem.

The evidence of scholars is that there were two primary cultic traditions in ancient Palestine, the Northern tradition and the Jerusalem tradition. In the prophetic dispute,

Jeremiah is the representative of the Northern tradition. Von Rad speaks for the majority in believing that the Northern tradition was focused on preserving the Mosaic covenant tradition.³⁰ The Jerusalem prophets were the representatives of the tradition variously called the royal cult, the David cult, the Zion cult, etc. This cult was focused on the tradition of the promises to David and of Zion as the mountain of God.³¹

Irwin suggests that though the concept of covenant was undoubtedly implicit from early in Israel's history, the first mention of a covenant between Israel and Yahweh is in Hosea (6:7; 8:1).³² "The notion of a covenant between God and Israel was introduced by these 'prophetic histories' (J and E); it was endorsed by Hosea, adapted by Jeremiah, and in Deuteronomy became an essential element of Israel's theology."³³ Though Irwin goes on to suggest that a covenant between a nation and its god was a normal feature in the ancient world and not unique to Israel, it is more important here to establish that Israel had its own unique covenant traditions which were in place and separate from the later David/Zion covenant. The Jerusalem cult undoubtedly adopted and adapted these earlier traditions, but they were submersed under new practices and understandings of God's expectations.

Since we are allowing for the opinions of the redactors who gave final shape to the book of Jeremiah, we must consider whether they also shared a covenantal bias which affected the shape of the prophetic conflict. Burke Long suggests that the

³⁰ Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 1, 47.

³¹ Walter Brueggemann footnotes a number of resources which indicate that there has been scholarly support for many years for the Moses and David traditions as the primary covenant formulations. See Walter Brueggemann, "Trajectories in Old Testament Literature and the Sociology of Ancient Israel," *JBL* 98/2 (1979): 161.

³² William A. Irwin, "Nation, Society and Politics," in *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man: An Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, ed. H. and H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, Thorkild Jacobsen, and William A. Irwin (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1946), 329.

³³ *Ibid.*, 329.

Deuteronomic editors, whom he assumes compiled or modified the book, were undergoing cognitive dissonance because of the destruction of their religious underpinnings.³⁴ In an effort to reaffirm their thinking on monarchy, Yahwism, and prophecy, they brought together materials which recalled “true” prophecy, such as that of Hosea and Jeremiah, and “right” rule such as that of Josiah. The present circumstances of the Deuteronomists were caused, in their thinking, by inappropriate responses to these signs of what God had expected them to do.

Sweeney confirms the notion that the redactors shaped the sequence of the prophetic material to emphasize the issues they felt were important.³⁵ Olson is more specific in suggesting that the redactors attached the account of the Babylonian exile from 2 Kings 25 to show that Jeremiah’s predictions had come true, supporting the Deuteronomic notion that true prophecy is that which actually takes place (Deut 18:21,22).³⁶ Though Olson’s suggestion is plausible, it still doesn’t answer the nature of the conflict between Jeremiah himself and the Jerusalem prophets. So we might assume for the present that the redactors had a reason for shaping the material as they did, and they liked what Jeremiah was saying and saw that his prophecies had actually come true, but we still are left guessing about the theological reasons for choosing Jeremiah over the Jerusalem prophets. The following sections will take a closer look at the Northern and David/Zion traditions to determine how they might differ from each other.

³⁴ Burke O. Long, “Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict,” in *The Place is Too Small for Us*, ed. Robert P. Gordon (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 319.

³⁵ Marvin A. Sweeney, “Formation and Form in Prophetic Literature,” in *Old Testament Interpretation: Past, Present, and Future: Essays in honor of Gene M. Tucker*, ed. J. L. Mays, D. L. Petersen, K. H. Richards (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 116.

³⁶ Olson, 358.

The David/Zion Tradition

The beginning of the David/Zion tradition is with King David himself and his efforts to unite the twelve tribes into a confederacy. In order to harness the support of the tribal groups David took limited steps to centralize power without limiting the autonomy of those groups and risking their alienation. When David fled the northern territories to escape Saul, Newman posits that David found in southern Palestine a covenant tradition, the J legend, which supported his goals.³⁷ It was a covenant theology which was “dynastic, unconditional, and perpetual.” By this Newman means that Yahweh’s covenant was mediated to the people through the priestly dynasty, and was meant to last forever (Ex 19:9a). David suggests that God’s covenant with him was of the same nature (2 Sam 23:2-5); that is, his rule had been a benevolent application of God’s commandments and deserved to be perpetuated.

The focus of David’s program to gain the loyalty of the tribes was to centralize the worship of God in Jerusalem and to prohibit the worship practices of the Canaanites.³⁸ The tribes were allowed to maintain their high places for the worship of God, but the presence of the Ark began the focus on Jerusalem as the central place of worship, a process which Solomon completed with the building of the temple and the “encasing” of the Ark. “The ark of Yahweh, symbol of the intertribal faith, was swallowed up in an opulent royal chapel.”³⁹ Gottwald adds further that the nationalization of the tribes for which David strove led, under Solomon, to “a private royal celebration of the dynastic deity.”⁴⁰

³⁷ Murray Lee Newman, Jr., *The People of the Covenant: A Study of Israel from Moses to the Monarchy* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 149.

³⁸ Gottwald, 140.

³⁹ Ibid., 371.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 371. Cross concurs that the temple cult was largely, if not entirely, the creation of Solomon; F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1973), 231.

David still had to contend with the tribal system of mustering troops in addition to the private army of supporters he had formed, but Solomon appropriated the systems of army muster and taxation. This effectively made the twelve-tribe system which David had fostered an irrelevant institution. Gottwald suggests that the twelve-tribe scheme was maintained as a symbol of national unity⁴¹ much as we still use the original thirteen colonies of the United States to symbolize the core unity and strength of our country.

The core tenets of this new David/Zion cult seem to be two-fold: God made promises to David which were to be kept eternally; and, God was now resident in Jerusalem to guarantee these promises.⁴² Both of these tenets, while focused on religious issues, indicate that God was the way to the hearts and minds of the tribal confederacy, much as food is said to be the way to a man's heart. I will explore the theological implications of this connection in a later section.

Solomon had a strong and viable tradition of strength and unity in his father which the people well remembered, and by carefully appropriating those things which would help him centralize control of religion and the military, he gained effective control of the economy as well. The priests of the central temple had a vested interest in building their own power base over the greater number of priests and prophets who still resided in smaller towns and in the countryside, so the temple priests could be counted upon by Solomon to institutionalize the promises made to David as if they were irrevocable.

The tradition of the perpetual covenant with David seems to stem from the Noah/Abraham set of stories. The priests of Jerusalem, or all those involved in establishing an authority which would reinforce God's covenant with David, used the covenant stories of Noah and Abraham as a reference point for David. David, on his

⁴¹ Ibid., 371.

⁴² Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up*, 4-5.

deathbed, describes his covenant with God as an “everlasting covenant” (2 Sam 23:5, *berit olam*). This same phrase is used exclusively in the canonical Old Testament in reference to Noah, Abraham, David and Zion.

The first use of “everlasting covenant” is in Genesis 9:16, and is in reference to God’s covenant with Noah. The covenant stipulates that Noah, his family, and all the creatures, were to be abundant (8:16), and the ground would never again be destroyed (8:21). Again in Genesis, the phrase is used in connection with God’s covenant to Abraham (17:7, 13, 19): Abraham will be fruitful (17:6); Canaan will become his “everlasting possession” (17:8); circumcision is the physical sign of the everlasting covenant (17:13); Isaac will receive and pass on the everlasting covenant (17:19).

As part of the installation ceremony of the ark in Jerusalem, tradition says that a hymn was sung confirming God’s covenant to Abraham which was passed on to Jacob as an “everlasting covenant to Israel” (1 Chron 16:16-17). The next verse confirms the connection of the covenant to the land.

Isaiah, familiar with and apparently a subscriber to the David covenant tradition, uses “everlasting covenant” in 24:5 in a scene reminiscent of the Noah story; in 55:3 with direct reference to David; and in 61:8 as part of the renewal promise to Zion (61:1-11). Jeremiah uses the phrase twice: once in 32:40 with reference to “this city” (v36, meaning Jerusalem), and in 50:5 as the returning exiles re-commit themselves to God at Zion. Ezekiel uses “everlasting covenant” twice: God will once again offer this covenant to the people of Jerusalem; and, 37:26 where a Davidic king (v24) shall rule over the people in the land of their ancestors (v25), the temple will be re-established (v26), and God will dwell among them (v27).

The common themes among these passages – fruitfulness of the people, and protection of the land – are precisely what is meant by the Jerusalem prophets in the book of Jeremiah. An “everlasting covenant” has been established since ancient times in which God has promised to protect the people and the land, and, since David at least, to establish God’s presence in Zion to protect the covenant. The well-being promised by the prophets of the temple, or the lack of evil, seems to have a direct connection to this Noah-Abraham-David covenant tradition.

If the Deuteronomic historians were the redactors behind Jeremiah, then it is legitimate to wonder whether they also accepted this David/Zion tradition. Von Rad seems to feel that the Deuteronomic historians were only concerned about whether the monarchs were faithful “to the one legitimate place of worship in Jerusalem. They were ‘wholly’ devoted to Jahweh if they regarded themselves as solely committed in worship to the altar in Jerusalem.”⁴³

This could explain why neither Jeremiah nor his redactors attack the king for spiritual deficiency or failure to worship properly. Nor do they suggest that the temple itself is deficient or ought to be replaced. The religious leaders of Jerusalem, with Hananiah at their head, firmly believe that since they are worshipping God at the temple in the way that has been common since the time of Solomon, the covenant of protection for the land and the people will be honored. Jeremiah certainly feels that their behavior is such that worshipping at the temple will not maintain the covenant; in other words, the land will not be protected and God will not remain on Zion. And the redactors, whether Deuteronomistic or not, seem to understand with Jeremiah that there is something beyond the David/Zion covenant which is of import here. My suggestion is that Jeremiah, and

⁴³ Rad, *O. T. Theology* I, 57.

probably the redactors, see the Mosaic covenant as that relevant factor which outweighs the David/Zion covenant tradition which is prevalent in Jerusalem.

The Mosaic Covenant Tradition

It has been suggested already that the so-called northern tradition, meaning the religious tradition of the northern ten tribes, reflected a basis in the Sinai/Moses covenant tradition. This tradition, in turn, shared a somewhat common perspective with the Deuteronomistic history, the Elohist layer of the Pentateuch,⁴⁴ and the writings of Hosea and Jeremiah.⁴⁵ How these sources influenced each other is the source of much debate in the scholarly community. For the purpose of this thesis, it is deemed adequate to show that there was a northern tradition based on the Mosaic covenant and that Jeremiah had reason to know of this tradition and, further, that it was the basis of his conflict with the Jerusalem prophets.

Levitical Transmitters

Brueggemann posits the Levites as the most probable transmitters of the Mosaic tradition, post-Moses.⁴⁶ Based on his studies of Max Weber, and in spite of the inconclusive historical data, he also suggests that the Levites were the most likely reservoir of the Mosaic tradition in Israel.⁴⁷

Gottwald follows his own creative trail in suggesting how the Mosaic tradition became established in Israel. He theorizes a group of proto-Israelites “for whom Moses was one, although not necessarily the only, leader . . . It is at least possible, conceivably probable, that notions of covenanting between God and people and of divine law-giving

⁴⁴ Wilson, *Prophecy*, 17.

⁴⁵ Wilson shares this view as do other scholars, such as von Rad and Brueggemann; see notes following.

⁴⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 584 ff.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 585. Gottwald follows a similar train of thinking; 490, 496.

were introduced in some form among that same group of proto-Israelites in which Moses was a leader.”⁴⁸ He further suggests that this Moses group was responsible for instituting the Yahweh cult in Israel, and believes that the unique covenant and law traditions of the Israelites came from them as well.

This Moses or Levitical group did not represent all of Israel. They were a sub-group whose notions came to predominate, or at least to be very influential, in Israel’s history. Gottwald supposes that these Mosaic/Levitical notions were foundational to the confederacy by the end of the inter-tribal period (1250-1000 B.C.E.). Olson refutes the notion that there is ever a unified culture with unified norms.⁴⁹ Rather than a predominant group within a society, he proposes a “web or network of localized interpretative communities.”⁵⁰ While it is likely that the proponents of the Mosaic tradition are only one of many sub-groups, including those with varying affinity for the Canaanite religions, Olson doesn’t explain how the Mosaic tradition came to represent the general consensus of opinion between the confederation of tribes, at least in the north, from which the “northern tradition” derives.

Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah and Ezekiel are contemporaries who, in the opinion of von Rad, “have their roots in the basic sacral traditions of the early period.”⁵¹ By this he presumably means the pre-Davidic traditions of Shiloh and of the northern kingdom. Bright traces Jeremiah’s interest in the northern traditions to his ancestor Eli, the priest of Shiloh (1 Sam 14:3).⁵² When Saul got angry with David for escaping, he took out his wrath on the priests of Nob, one of whom, Abiathar, managed to escape to

⁴⁸ Gottwald, 36.

⁴⁹ Olson, 350-358.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 357.

⁵¹ Rad, *O. T. Theology* I, 66.

⁵² John Bright, *Jeremiah*. The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), lxxxviii.

David (22:20). Bright assumes that this grandson of Ahitub refers to the same Ahitub in 14:3 who is in turn a grandson of Eli. Abiathar is banished by Solomon to Anathoth, rather than being killed, because Solomon recognizes that Abiathar was loyal to his father, David (I Kings 2:26-27). But Solomon recognizes that Abiathar favors Solomon's older brother, Adonijah, as king. The implication is that Abiathar is not opposed to kingship but to the person on the throne. An additional reference to "the house of Eli in Shiloh" is made (v27). Anathoth is the home town of Jeremiah (Jer 1:1) where he is part of a priestly family. A few years later, Jereboam apparently drives the rest of the Levites who were loyal to David out of the northern kingdom as he replaced them with volunteers from the local populace (I Kings 12:31).

It is possible, then, that a perhaps considerable number of the Levitical priests were living in Judah shortly after 1050 B.C.E. and were looking for an opportunity to re-establish their Mosaic covenant tradition over all of Israel and Judah. Because of the rift with Solomon, at least some of the Levites had no particular interest in supporting the royal cult which had developed in Jerusalem. They possibly would have favored a central location for worship and had accommodated to the notion of a king as long as that king was faithful to the worship of Yahweh. But they wouldn't have melded easily with the Jerusalem crowd because of some of the changes in the focus of worship which Solomon had instituted. It is plausible that Jeremiah is descended from this Levitical group in Anathoth who favored the older Mosaic tradition and had no use for the royal cult traditions of Solomon.

The Hosea Connection

A number of scholars point out the similarities in the message of Hosea and Jeremiah and presume some sort of connection between them. Von Rad proposes that

Jeremiah may have had contact with Hosea's disciples, and possibly through them had access to Hosea's writings.⁵³ Brueggemann is less certain of a historical connection between the two prophets but points out Hosea's Levitical tradition and the similarity of the categories which both prophets use in their criticisms.⁵⁴

The sum of the scholarly comments supports the notion that there was a northern Levitical tradition based in the covenant tradition of Moses, which worked its way into Judah, perhaps through David and Abiathar, and was supplemented later by the Levitical priests forced out of the northern kingdom by Jereboam. These Levitical priests may have had some connection with the Deuteronomic writings, and may even have absorbed some of the notions of the David/Zion cult in Jerusalem, but because of Solomon's banning of Abiathar they had personal as well as theological reasons for not giving full support to the temple priests and prophets. An exploration of the Deuteronomic writings to show the influence of Mosaic covenant thought is beyond the scope of this paper. It is my judgment, however, that Jeremiah was separate from the Deuteronomic tradition, though perhaps influenced by it, and was more fully in line with the older Mosaic tradition which had been transmitted to him by his Levitical ancestors. He may also have been heavily influenced by Hosea, a prophet who also stood in the older Mosaic tradition.

The Deuteronomic Connection

The Levites seem to be a reasonable source for the Deuteronomic writings because they share a pure Jahwistic tradition which is characteristic of the northern cultic tradition.⁵⁵ But we have seen that some of the Levites, those associated with Abiathar,

⁵³ Gerhard von Rad, *O. T. Theology* II (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 192.

⁵⁴ Brueggemann, *Theology*, 589.

⁵⁵ Rad, *O. T. Theology* I, 71.

had reason to differ with the David/Zion cult. To what extent did the Jerusalem temple accommodate the Deuteronomic writings, and were the Levites involved in the writing?

Nicholson supposes that Deuteronomy was put together by a “northern circle who fled south to Judah after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721 B.C.E. and there formulated their old traditions into a programme of reform and revival which they intended to be carried on by the Judean authorities with whom they believed the future of Israel to lie.”⁵⁶ Nicholson follows the tradition that these writings were installed in the temple during the seventh century B.C.E. and re-discovered in 621 B.C.E. when they became the basis of Josiah’s reform.

Whether these people who left Israel in 721 B.C.E. shared the same beliefs as the Levites who came earlier with David is problematic. Was their “northern tradition” (presumably the Mosaic covenant) tainted by the theology and practices of the northern kings?⁵⁷ Did they have any connection or contact with the Levites who had followed Abiathar several hundred years earlier? Were there any Levitical priests left in the temple after Solomon removed Abiathar, or did Abiathar represent a more conservative element which would not accommodate to Solomon’s “reforms”? How did either the earlier or later Levitical group, if that is what they were, relate to the cult in Jerusalem?

Josiah saw the value in the old traditions which were re-discovered and he tried to institute them. But even after destroying the places of worship in the countryside and insisting that the rural priests (Levites?) were to worship in Jerusalem, they refused to obey (2 Kings 23:9). The author of Kings praises Josiah for his efforts to reinstate

⁵⁶ E. W. Nicholson, *Deuteronomy and Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), 94.

⁵⁷ Rad suggests that these escapees from the north brought the archives of the northern kings with them; *O. T. Theology* I, 71.

Mosaic law (2 Kings 23:25), but his efforts were short-lived since he was soon killed and his son reverted to practices which were “evil in the sight of the Lord” (23:32).

Perhaps part of the reason for the failure of Josiah’s reforms was that there was a conflict between the Levites and the Zion/David priests in Jerusalem. The former group focused on faithfulness to God, and the latter group made it clear that faithfulness to the king as God’s representative was the focus of worship. Sanders believes that the Levites also supported a “divine expectation of obedience,”⁵⁸ whereas the royal cult focused on God’s promises to David. There is a fundamental conflict here between the ethic of God and the promise to David of longevity. The Zion/David cult was entrenched in Jerusalem and continued to support the monarchy. The Levites supported a Mosaic ethic and could readily see that after Josiah the monarchy did not maintain that ethic. The Jerusalem priests gave no objections, and therefore gave tacit approval to the king’s actions.

The Redactors

A number of scholars posit a second edition of the Deuteronomic writings which took place during or shortly after the Babylonian captivity. There are differences of opinion, however, in whether this later group of redactors was really Deuteronomic or not. Clements proposes that this later group of editors were related to, but not wholly in tune with, the Deuteronomic school.

“By this ‘school’ we refer to a body of thoughtful and intensely loyal Israelites who strove energetically to promote the true worship of Yahweh and to eradicate traces of the old Canaanite Baal religion in the period between 650 and 550 B.C.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Sanders, “Canonical Hermeneutics,” 99. Also see Bruggemann, *To Pluck Up*, 13.

⁵⁹ R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 12.

Hyatt likewise feels that the redactors were “Deuteronomic,” by which I infer that they had inclinations similar to the original Deuteronomists, and he claims that this group of redactors adopted Jeremiah, in part, to claim his sanction for their writings.⁶⁰ Hyatt does not believe that Jeremiah ever expressed any particular approval of the Deuteronomic reforms, citing Jeremiah 11:15, 6:20, 8:8-9, 13 and 2:8.⁶¹ Hyatt may be right, but it would appear that Jeremiah’s complaint in these passages is against the prophets of the temple, and not against the reforms themselves. If the temple prophets do not know the Lord (2:8), in Jeremiah’s opinion, it is because their worship practices are alien to those which Jeremiah feels are correct.

In short, nothing in the literature convinced me that the later redactors, looking back on their history and trying to discern where they had gone wrong and which of their theological ancestors had gotten it “right,” were necessarily of the Deuteronomic school. What they shared with the authors of the earlier Deuteronomic writings was a focus on the torah-covenant tradition, which was still alive (perhaps due to a Levitical remnant). Having seen the destruction of Jerusalem and of the monarchy, they discerned that the one thing which successful leaders had always done was to be faithful to the Sinai covenant tradition. This Mosaic covenant stressed right worship of God and ethical treatment of humanity. Anything counter to that was false. The next chapter will delve into the theological differences between these differing covenant traditions.

Summary

This brief review of the history of the covenant tradition in Judah has tried to show that there were two active covenant traditions in Judah at the time of Jeremiah and

⁶⁰ J. Philip Hyatt, “Jeremiah and Deuteronomy,” in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue, Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 114.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

his temple opponents. The temple prophets relied primarily on the David/Zion covenant tradition which had been formalized by Solomon. Jeremiah, coming from Anathoth, was thoroughly imbued with the Moses/Sinai covenant tradition which had been preserved by Levitical priests and brought into Judah at the time of David, or perhaps at the time of the fall of Israel. These covenant traditions had been preserved in places like Anathoth and were in tension with the David/Zion tradition for a number of political and theological reasons. The later redactors were undoubtedly aware of both traditions and adopted from both, but were primarily influenced by the Sinai tradition because its supporters had been “right” most of the time. The theological reasons for the redactors’ support of Jeremiah, and the likely source of Jeremiah’s contention with the Jerusalem prophets, lies I believe in these theological differences. The next chapter will elucidate those differences.

CHAPTER 6

THE COVENANT QUARREL: THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The argument between Jeremiah and the temple prophets of Jerusalem is characterized by a dispute over whether God will continue the well-being of the people of Judah. The temple prophets believe that the country's well-being is assured, and Jeremiah is just as certain that their well-being is in jeopardy. Both sides seem to be relying on their understanding of their different covenant traditions, and both sides believe they are right. In this chapter I would like to look at the basic tenets of the two covenant traditions and try to determine why Jeremiah felt that the David/Zion covenant was inadequate, and therefore the prophecies of the Jerusalem prophets, which were based on that covenant, were necessarily false.

The David/Zion Argument

The David/Zion covenant tradition which the temple priests and prophets are relying on was based on a promise by God to David that David's ancestors would be assured continuity. In order to have continuity on the throne, the logical implication is that there would have to be peace in the land and a freedom from intrusion by other countries. Kremer believes that this covenant tradition is perfectly in line with the understandings of other ancient Oriental cultures.⁶² The king is their god's earthly representative who establishes order and through whom the well-being of the people is assured.

⁶² Jacob Kremer, "Peace – God's Gift: Biblical-Theological Considerations," in *The Meaning of Peace*, ed. Perry B. Yoder and Willard M. Swartley (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 135.

When the elders of Israel saw that Samuel's sons were not going to provide the safety and well-being which Samuel had assured (I Sam 8:4-5), they asked for a king. Samuel was opposed to the idea for he easily saw the price the Israelites would have to pay for their well-being (8:10-18). God saw the underlying motivation of the people of Israel (8:7) which was a rejection of God as the sovereign of the people, but permitted Samuel to go ahead and anoint a king. During Samuel's farewell address (12:1-17), he warns the people again that God has always been their king (v12), but if they and the king will remember to serve the Lord, all will be well (v14). Saul was a disappointment, but David was able to bring about the protection the people desired, and the tribes had to give up little of their autonomy.

Solomon further solidified the confederation of the tribes using principles of organization which they were already familiar with in their neighboring countries. Having the ark in Jerusalem, and a temple like the other nations, gave the impression that God was now in one place and the king was God's representative. The transfer of power, and therefore of well-being, was now in the hands of the king. The creative force of the Levitical priests and prophets was transferred to the Jerusalem temple and the royal cult which developed.⁶³ After the expulsion of Abiathar, the Levites probably had little impact on the Jerusalem cult and had to content themselves with preserving their traditions in places like Anathoth.

The Mosaic Argument

While quietly preserving the Mosaic covenant tradition in rural Judah, the Levites, or Deuteronomists, or both, recalled the warning of Samuel: all would be well if the people and the king remembered to serve the Lord. But the Sinai covenant had a two-

⁶³ Gottwald, 144.

fold ethic: worship of God as the only god, and respect for one another. Ritual was not going to bring well-being if one's neighbor was being mistreated. The country's well-being could not be guaranteed by a king if the people of the country were misbehaving according to the Mosaic covenant tradition.

Therefore, both Jeremiah and the temple prophets and priests were speaking the truth according to their separate traditions. Well-being had been assured to both groups, but Jeremiah saw that there were additional requirements which the temple group was not acknowledging. What is it that Jeremiah infers is missing from the David/Zion tradition which makes it an incomplete ethic?

What Did the David/Zion Covenant Forget?

Cultic Integrity

In his summary of the ills of the priests, prophets and rulers of Judah, Jeremiah makes a reference to the wickedness (*ra'a*) which he sees in the house of the Lord (23:11). But his temple sermon (7:1-15) is perhaps Jeremiah's best indicator of what he feels is wrong with the temple cult. The peace which the temple prophets have been declaring is connected with their covenant tradition, and Jeremiah denies the validity of their claim by repeating it three times: "This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord (v4)." Verse nine refers specifically to burning incense to Baal and worshipping unknown gods, followed by the hypocrisy of the priests' standing in the temple and declaring, "We are safe (*natzal*)!" Jeremiah responds by calling the temple a "den of robbers" (v11). Jesus understood what this analogy meant and applied it to similar temple abuses which were extant in his own time (Mt 21:13). Jerusalem shall be destroyed as surely as Shiloh was, a place which God had also given to their Hebrew ancestors (v14).

Verses 16-20 may not be from the same speech to the temple priests and prophets, but imply that these temple leaders have not been faithful in keeping the people of Jerusalem and Judah from the worship of false gods. Jeremiah is not permitted to intercede on behalf of the ignorance of the people; the temple leaders are directly responsible for this religious irresponsibility, and there will be no peace.

Just Behavior

Though the faithful worship of God is at the heart of the Mosaic covenant and of the majority of the criticisms which Jeremiah levels at the rulers and people of Judah, it is clear that he has in mind the other injunctions of the covenant as well: the correct treatment of one's neighbor. References to the people's sexual immorality abound, such as 5:7-8. But Jeremiah is also concerned about the intentional and apparently very visible injustice committed by some of the very wealthy citizens of the country. Their iniquities have made folly out of their public religiosity (5:25). Their treachery has enabled them to be fat and sleek at the expense of other humans (vv26-28a). Specifically, they have been unjust to the widows and orphans and have failed to help the needy (v28).

But the failure to take seriously the commandments of God is apparent in more than just the wealthy. All the people of Judah are going to be refined because of their deceitfulness (9:7-8).⁶⁴ They are putting on pleasant appearances with their neighbors while harboring greed and self-interest in their hearts. Jeremiah confesses the root of the problem: humans are incapable of correctly directing their own footsteps (10:23). The

⁶⁴ 9:6-7 in MT.

implication is clearly that in following the ways of God, one will also learn how to treat others justly. This is the only true righteousness.

Moral Sensitivity

Brueggemann argues forcefully that when the word of God is not taken seriously, “the result is destructive social policy . . . The official claims [of Judah’s rulers] are plain lies, because social reality does not correspond to its ideology . . . It is precisely the royal ideology that precludes moral sensitivity and covenantal anguish over failure.”⁶⁵ The people of Judah have bought into the lie and have believed their religious leaders. The people are not blind to what is going on around them; they are part of the corruption. But when they have ignored or intentionally acted in defiance of the word of the Lord, their leaders have told them, “It shall be well with you.” And those who stubbornly insist on satisfying the desires of their heart with no consideration of others have been reassured that “No calamity shall come upon you” (23:17).

Unless one is able to admit, like Jeremiah, that one is unable to direct one’s own footsteps, then one will not be able to seek out a better alternative. The people have become so jaded in their defensiveness that they appear to Jeremiah like a people with uncircumcised hearts.

It is time to stop plowing among thorns; there is fallow ground available (God’s commandments) which will be more productive (4:3). Jeremiah calls for a new circumcision: not one which will serve as a physical sign of connection with God’s chosen people, but a removal of the self-centeredness which is covering the heart and separating oneself from God and others in a covenantal fashion (v4). Many other nearby nations are circumcised like the Hebrews (9:25-26). Will that physical fact separate them

⁶⁵ Brueggemann, *Commentary*, 72-73. Brueggemann further posits that the citizens of Jerusalem share in this anguish but, like their leaders, are unable to figure out how to correct the situation.

from their neighbors, or prevent their joint punishment? Rather, all of them are uncircumcised in heart and will suffer together (v26).

Whether Jeremiah initially supported Josiah's reforms or not, he saw clearly that they had been ineffective. He seems to have supported the reforms at first (3:7). Based on the results of Israel's faithless behavior, how could Judah not see clearly what it needed to do. But Judah did not perceive or act on those faults which could have been so easily avoided. The reforms were followed in pretense, but not with the heart (v10). Having failed to learn from Israel's example makes Judah all the more guilty (v11).

Suffering

There is nothing in the prophetic tradition which specifies that personal suffering of a prophet is required, but it seems to go with the territory. Moses certainly felt free to complain to God about his own inability to complete what was asked of him (Ex 3:11; 4:1, 10; 5:22). And the people of Israel had to suffer before being released by the Egyptians (5:22-23; 6:9). Suffering of the people seems to have been a minimum result whenever there was a prophetic announcement, at least according to Jeremiah. In his confrontation with Hananiah, Jeremiah challenges the prophecy of peace and restoration which he has heard by indicating that there is no precedent for that kind of prophecy (Jer 28:8-9). There cannot be restoration to God's covenant until some sort of punishment and reconciliation on God's terms has occurred. It is understood that Hananiah and the temple priests and prophets have not yet had to suffer more than a few anxiety attacks, so restoration could not be imminent. Neither have the people been willing to repent of their backsliding; therefore, they must also suffer.

From the time Jeremiah was a youth, he faced the anxiety of having to present a hard message to a hard people. But his worst fears were realized as his message was

rejected and plots were fomented against his life. In his six personal laments, Jeremiah first describes the source of his anguish, and then reaffirms that he will remain faithful to the calling he has received. “The word of the Lord has become for me a reproach and derision all day long” (20:8), he complains. When it is revealed to him that there is a plot against his life (11:19), he is appalled. He has eaten God’s words and found joy in them (15:16). Rather than rejoicing with merrymakers, he sat alone in his indignation (15:17). He dares to complain, “Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?” (v18) God’s answer is that if, and only if, he returns to faithfulness will he be restored (v19). This is a lightly veiled message to the people of Judah that they must do the same. Unlike the messages they are hearing from the religious leaders, suffering is a prerequisite to restoration.⁶⁶

Creation

The message of the false prophets, following the promises supposedly made to King David, was focused on redemption and preservation. Sanders sees this emphasis following logically from the David tradition, and he cites God’s support of David at Mt. Perizim (2 Sam 5:17-20 and 1 Chron 14:10-17).⁶⁷ Sanders goes on to stress, however, that true prophecy must also emphasize God’s role as creator. God is free to create or re-create at will, and promises of redemption and providence are contingent on humanity’s faithfulness to the covenant God established with them.

⁶⁶ Wolff has suggested that in the eyes of Jeremiah’s audience, the people of Jerusalem, suffering is one of the criteria used to determine the truthfulness of a prophet along with whether any self-interest is involved on the part of the prophet; Haus Walter Wolff, “Prophecy from the Eighth Century through the Fifth Century” *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 29.

⁶⁷ Sanders, “Canonical Hermeneutics,” 100.

The true prophets recognize that God is the God of all peoples and cannot be credited with only desired qualities. This is part of what Sanders calls a “monotheizing tendency” in the Old Testament.

“It is at one with those struggles elsewhere in the Bible to monotheize in the face of evil, to affirm the oneness or (ontological and ethical) integrity of God in the face of an almost irresistible temptation to polytheize or particularize, and attribute evil to some other god or gods.”⁶⁸

God is creator and manager of all creation and cannot be constrained by a covenant which part of creation chooses not to honor.

Jeremiah makes this clear in the call which he received: God determines when “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant (1:10).” God’s word is dynamic, not static. After considering Hananiah’s challenge, Jeremiah returns and says, directly, “the Lord has not sent you (28:15).” In other words, Hananiah couldn’t have gotten his message from the court of God (23:18) because God would never make an unconditional promise of well-being, according to the Mosaic covenant. God was bound only so far as the people kept up their part of the covenant promise. Destruction would come before redemption just as chaos had come before creation.

Summary

I would suggest that these issues were uppermost in Jeremiah’s mind as he negated the prophecies of the royal court tradition. Without negating the position of king or questioning the desirability of centralized worship, something his Levitical ancestors like Samuel would have done, Jeremiah did call into question the assumptions to which the David/Zion tradition had led.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 103. Brueggemann is more emphatic in stating that monotheizing is not a tendency but a premise of the Mosaic/Sinai covenant tradition (e.g., Ex 19:5); *Theology*, 580.

As Samuel had predicted, the desire of the people to have “a king to govern us, like other nations” (I Sam 8:5) had led to centralized military subscription (“he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots – 8:11), control of God’s providence (8:12, 14-17), and limited access to God in a centralized shrine focused on the promises made to David. The kingdom of God had been replaced by the kingdom of David and Solomon. The promises which had been made to David became enshrined by Solomon and preserved by the Davidic dynasty as proof of its continuing redemption. Brueggemann is surely correct in saying, “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.”⁶⁹

The only way a monopoly can maintain itself is to assure itself that it has control over its resources. Monopolies fail when they find that there are historical circumstances beyond their control. The wake-up call usually comes too late, and the result is a crushing defeat for the monopoly and a redistribution of its assets.

In its myopic focus on David’s promise of continuity (well-being), Jeremiah saw that the temple priests and prophets had lost sight of the tenets of the Mosaic covenant which they had also inherited but subverted to their own interests. They had especially forgotten that God has the power to create as well as redeem. They had deceived themselves about the present well-being of their resources. In order to be redeemed from their self-centered abuse of the resources, they were going to have to first suffer. They had lost the moral sensitivity required to act justly in the use and distribution of the resources available to them. Particularly, they had abused the most helpless of society to

⁶⁹ Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up*, 13-14.

whom God had promised his providence if they were faithful. Whether or not the temple priests and prophets were personally guilty of abusing the poor, they had certainly abetted the wealthy in their appropriation of the available resources, and were therefore guilty by complicity.

In Jeremiah's mind and speech, "the deification of productivity and power were rejected in favor of an ethic, and economic prosperity and security were presented as byproducts of ethical obedience rather than as evidences of divine authority and proof of divine favor... The rejection of ethic, then, is the rejection of peace."⁷⁰ The ethic which Jeremiah chose was that of the Moses/Sinai covenant. Since Judah had rejected that ethic most visibly, there could be no well-being.

I find this suggestion of Mendenhall a most telling criticism of the David/Zion covenant, an otherwise well-known and much repeated covenant tradition. I will therefore next explore how this Sinai ethic was used after the time of Jeremiah as a confirmation that the Sinai covenant tradition was a powerful base upon which to build a teleological ethic that could even have eschatological implications.

⁷⁰ George E. Mendenhall, *The Tenth Generation: The Origins of the Biblical Tradition* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1973), 224.

CHAPTER 7

IS THE MOSES/SINAI COVENANT AN ADEQUATE ETHIC?

Having taken a look at the theological reasons for Jeremiah's words and actions, I would like to conclude by taking a look at the Moses/Sinai ethic in light of the teachings/writings of Jesus, the apostle Paul, and John Calvin. By ethic, as I indicated earlier, I am referring to a point of view or a set of guidelines which determine our approach to life. The Ten Commandments, in particular, are often demeaned as being too deontological, too rule-based, to be of any relevance in the teleological, results-oriented, thinking of Jesus and Paul. They are phrased negatively and are too limited and too specific to adequately cover all the facets of life. In fact, they don't even begin to approach some of the ethical issues we now face like cloning.

I find that Jeremiah's support of the Sinai covenant came from a larger understanding of that covenant tradition than our current society is willing to give to any rule-based system of ethics. Jeremiah's ethic, the ethic of the Sinai *covenant*, was more than adequate to justify criticism of the society he saw before him in Judah. It had less to do with the breaking of rules than it did with breaking the *spirit* of the covenant which God had established. The commandments were only a pointer to a larger principle. The Sinai ethic was a solid building block for the later ethical re-orientation of Jesus, Paul and Calvin.

Jeremiah's Sinai Ethic

I have deliberately avoided saying much about the Sinai commandments because they don't appear to be the focus of Jeremiah's criticisms of the priests, prophets and

people of Judah. It is true that Jeremiah refers regularly to the worship of false gods, reflecting the first four commandments of the decalogue, and there is the occasional reference to adultery. But this latter reference is generally used metaphorically to refer to the people's "lusting" after false gods. In sections like Jeremiah 9:2-9, general faults such as deceiving one's neighbor and committing iniquity are listed, but not specific commandments like bearing false witness in a lawsuit or honoring one's parents. Verse three seems to sum up the section: "they proceed from evil to evil, and they do not know me," says the Lord."

Jeremiah focuses on the broken relationship between Judah and God because this is the source of the faulty ethic of Judah. What is broken is the covenant relationship which God instituted at Sinai, not merely the rules themselves. This covenant required the sole worship of God and the just treatment of one's neighbors. After announcing that the temple would not protect them – "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord' "(7:4) – Jeremiah instructs the people on how to achieve well-being: act justly one with another (v5). The next verse elucidates what justice looks like: no oppression of the aliens in your midst, nor the orphans and widows; no shedding of innocent blood; no worship of false gods. If these general injunctions are followed, then God will restore the covenant and allow the people to remain in the land (v7).

These injunctions are phrased negatively like the Ten Commandments but cover much more ethical territory in personal relations than the commandments do. Nothing is said in the Sinai commandments about orphans, widows or aliens. Jeremiah seems to understand that the Sinai covenant, though limited in commands, is pointing to a larger, unspoken principle which is far more encompassing of the human ethic.

I believe that the unspoken principle is the creation story itself. Though it is rarely referred to directly in the canonical Old Testament, it is an understood underpinning for the Sinai covenant.⁷¹ Specifically, Genesis 1:27 states that all of humanity was created in God's image. To be unjust towards another human, whether neighbor or alien, is to attack God through God's image or likeness. To be in a right relationship with God requires being in a right relationship with the creation of God. One cannot accept the creator and reject the creation.

Jesus later affirms this principle about caring for the stranger and the needy in his pronouncement of judgement on the nations, Matthew 25:31-46. Using the negatively phrased injunctions, which are characteristic of those who will be condemned, Jesus quotes God as saying, "I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me" (vv42-43). God's condemnation is caused by the evildoers' abuse of the likenesses of God. That these evildoers are really guilty of abusing God personally is confirmed by Jesus' conclusion: "Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me" (v45). Whether the sin is one of commission (e.g., bearing false witness) or of omission (failing to care for the alien or neighbor), one has acted unjustly towards God, and no amount of worship or sacrifice will atone for that.

While lamenting the corruption of the people of Judah, the Lord says, "Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit! They refuse to know me" (Jer 9:6). Were the people to know God through the covenant relationship of Sinai, they would understand that there cannot be well-being as long as there is oppression. Well-being is

⁷¹ See Richard J. Clifford, S. J., "The Hebrew Scriptures and the Theology of Creation," *Theological Studies* 46 (1985): 507-523.

conditional on humanity's respect for God and God's creation. God would never make a promise such as the temple prophets were promulgating which would tie God's hands, as it were, and leave unrighteousness unpunished.

Jesus' Kingdom Ethic

Jesus saw that righteousness would not be achieved by simply trying to follow a list of rules, as the Pharisees seemed to be doing. "Inward piety and not outward conformity to the law marks true obedience to God, because God's intent focused on establishing right relationships."⁷² Jesus' acknowledgement that he had come to fulfill the law (Mt 5:17) is a warning that no one had yet fulfilled the spirit of the law even though many had followed its rules.

When tested by a lawyer (Mt 22:35), Jesus summarized the law as the love of God and of neighbor. He then concluded by saying, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (v40). There could be no well-being if these fundamental principles were ignored. He warned the temple rulers about their covenant shortcomings by indicating that they "tithed mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith" (23:23). The Sinai covenant was alive and well, but it was more than the commandments. Faith in God was expressed through justice and righteousness at all levels of society.

But Jesus changes the focus of the ethic. Grenz indicates that most scholars see Jesus' message as focused on the kingdom of God.⁷³ This kingdom is present but not fully realized. Humanity is to strive for the kingdom of God, not for a fulfilling career on earth. If one focuses on the kingdom, righteousness will result (6:33). As with the

⁷² Stanley M. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 109. I was largely instructed by Grenz in the material which follows on Jesus and Paul.

⁷³ Ibid., 110-112.

prophets, it begins with the heart, not the hands. One's grateful response to God for the gift of the kingdom will result in doing the acts of righteousness which are required. One does not act righteously in order to show gratitude.

The focus of the ethic is thus teleological, in a sense. Rather than being focused on results, however, it is focused on a kingdom gift which leads inexorably to a life of righteousness. There is no calculation on our part about how to achieve righteous ends; the righteous life comes as we focus on God's gift.

Paul's Salvation Ethic

The death and resurrection of Jesus is the pivotal point in history from which we count our salvation. Salvation has already begun and our task is to accept it in faith.

Having once received salvation, we are now governed by a new ethic. We are not passive recipients of God's grace; we must be "crucified with Christ" (Gal 2:19-20). It is now Christ, through the Holy Spirit, who lives within us. We live by faith, and this faith directs our spiritual and ethical life. The moral aspect of this new life is governed by an effort to achieve "Christlikeness."⁷⁴ It is therefore a dynamic ethic. The fruits of the spirit (5:22-23) are an indication of what God through Christ has shown us to be a righteous ethic.

But this ethic is applicable primarily to "this age." We shall soon be in a new eschatological age, governed by the Spirit. Because there is such a battle between this age and the next, we must "put off" the things of this age and "put on" the things of the new age (e.g., Rom 13:11-14). Paul's guideline, as with Jesus, was the principle of love. The Sinai commandments had marked the boundaries of the playing field in this life; love was the guiding principle for conduct on the field. As with the Sinai covenant, the focus

⁷⁴ Ibid., 119.

was to be on the right worship of God, and right treatment of one's neighbor would follow. The Holy Spirit would guide us into the ethic of the new kingdom.

Calvin's Ethic of the Law

John Calvin sees the Old Testament law as one of the primary tools for effecting humanity's search for perfection. Rather than an outmoded group of confining rules, the law of Moses stands as one model of instruction for our righteousness. It informs us of the ethic which God had in mind for all humanity, and Christ is the supreme and only complete example of how the law is to be practiced in this worldly life.

When Calvin refers to the Mosaic law, he is including more than just the decalogue: "I intend, not only the decalogue, which prescribes the rule of a pious and righteous life, but the form of religion delivered from God by the hands of Moses."⁷⁵ This "form" of religion is what we might call the "intent" of the law, or, in philosophical terms, the underlying form which guides our ethical life. While restrictive in its actual words, the decalogue is not to be restrictive in its meaning. "The commands and prohibitions always imply more than the words express."⁷⁶ The decalogue is a form of synecdoche, inferring a larger ethic from a short-list of ethical requirements.

To humanity, the law seems to have been proposed in vain since blessedness is conditioned on perfect obedience.⁷⁷ Calvin readily admits that no saint, by his reckoning, had ever achieved such perfect obedience as to love with all their heart, soul, and mind.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I*, trans. John Allen (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936), 2.7.1.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.8.1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2.7.4.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.7.5.

However, to the person in earnest search of a righteous life, the law offers hope to those who are lost in the conflicting demands of a corrupt world.

There are three uses of the law, or ways in which the law can be helpful to us:

- 1) The law is intended to warn humanity of its unrighteousness; it is a tool of conviction.⁷⁹
- 2) To those who are not normally moved by the requirements of justice and righteousness, the law serves to restrain their actions out of fear of the penalties from disobedience.⁸⁰
- 3) The law serves as a tool for sanctification by instructing us daily in the Divine will.⁸¹

Though the law can seem to defeat us by the impossibility of perfect completion of all its requirements, yet we are to see it positively as a guide to the righteous life.

“Let us neither be deterred, therefore, nor fly from its instructions, because it prescribes a holiness far more complete than we shall attain, as long as we remain in the prison of the body. For it no longer exercises towards us the part of a rigorous exactor, only to be satisfied by the perfect performance of every injunction; but in this perfection, to which it exhorts us, it shows us a goal, to aim at which, during the whole of our lives, would be equally conducive to our interest and consistent with our duty; in which attempt it is happy for us if we fail not.”⁸²

Calvin believed that the existence of God is known to the human mind by natural instinct.⁸³ Likewise, the ethic of God is readily apparent by careful attention to the working of God in our daily lives and in the government of society.⁸⁴ Though viewed and confirmed externally, it is engraved on the hearts of humanity and is therefore a

⁷⁹ Ibid., 2.7.6.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.7.10.

⁸¹ Ibid., 2.7.12.

⁸² Ibid., 2.7.13.

⁸³ Ibid., 1.3.1.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 1.5.7.

natural law.⁸⁵ How then do we rectify this natural law with the written law of the Mosaic covenant?

Calvin believes that the written law was given to us by God to clarify those parts of the natural law which were too obscure for us to understand otherwise, or which we, through our indolence, refused to obey. The written law makes “a deeper impression on our understanding and memory.”⁸⁶ Besides clarifying and adding impetus to natural law, the Mosaic law is a spiritual law; it deals with not only external righteousness but internal righteousness, not only the facts of the law but also the intent of the law.⁸⁷

Since God gave us both the natural law and the written law, they are mutually supportive and both cover much the same material. Each confirms the other. We have no excuse for not knowing God’s law, and simply avoiding disobedience to the written law, as the Pharisees were accused of doing, does not make one righteous.⁸⁸ In this way, Calvin believes he is following the words and example of Christ.

What, then, is our responsibility to the written injunctions of Scripture? Calvin states what should be obvious to any Christian: there ought to be a symmetry between the life of the believer and the righteousness of God. But since we are so slow to understand what righteousness consists of, or are too recalcitrant, “it will be useful to collect from various places of Scripture a rule for the reformation of the life, that they who cordially repent may not be bewildered in their pursuits.”⁸⁹ His intention is excellent: collect the best injunctions from all of Scripture to serve as a guideline for the serious Christian.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 2.8.1.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 2.8.1.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 2.8.6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 2.8.7.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 3.6.1.

Calvin's purpose in systematizing the biblical injunctions is twofold. The first is to instill these guidelines in our hearts, which are otherwise inclined. The second is to curb us from wandering off into unproductive behaviors.⁹⁰ Our goal as Christians is to achieve a holy life, meaning to strive for Christ-like character. Calvin insists that we cannot insist on perfection in Christian living for then none of us would be acceptable, but it is none the less to be striven for.⁹¹

The philosophical problems associated with this type of rule deontology are familiar and won't be repeated here since it is only my purpose to point out Calvin's thinking, not to defend it.⁹² Calvin is not pretending that following these biblical injunctions, or rules, will make one righteous. Rather, they lead to a holy life which will point one to the righteousness of God. I support the notion, therefore, that the Mosaic ethic, which goes well beyond the rules of the decalogue, is the basis for Calvin's social ethic for the Christian life. He supports the salvation promoted by Paul but, perhaps because of his legalistic training, feels the need to have a pragmatic, easy-to-follow guideline for ethics, much like the simple, straightforward guidelines he used with his students in Geneva.

Since this chapter does not support the main argument about the covenant differences between Jeremiah and the temple prophets directly, I have not given it the depth of argument which it might deserve. Having established earlier that Jeremiah's conflict was based on differing covenant traditions, and the Sinai tradition which he supported was seen by him as a more complete ethic than the rather simple promises of protection offered by the David/Zion covenant, I felt it would be useful to show that

⁹⁰ Ibid., 3.6.2.

⁹¹ Ibid., 3.6.4.

⁹² Grenz, 30-33, 243.

Jeremiah wasn't alone in understanding the value of the Sinai covenant. In particular, Jesus, the apostle Paul, and John Calvin were well aware of the ethical implications of the Sinai covenant, and Calvin states clearly that this covenant was the basis for his ethical understanding. Rather than being an outmoded covenant which was superseded by the "new" covenant of the Christ event, the Sinai covenant was a building block for the Christian tradition and supported the eschatological premises of the kingdom of God.

Jeremiah's interest in the Sinai covenant was more pragmatic and immediate; the present danger had resulted from the past failure to support the covenant in spirit.

Following the Babylonian captivity, the compilers of the canon had a more futuristic, apocalyptic interest in trying to establish and preserve a tradition which would free them from the travails of the world, particularly political intervention. Jesus presented himself as the son of God with the final solution to the questions humanity had been asking. The Sinai covenant had been right: worship of God and respect for God's creation were the keys in this life for assuring the completion of the kingdom of God. Belief in Jesus as the messiah would enable one to participate in the kingdom now and throughout eternity.

The apostle Paul and John Calvin picked up on the connection between the right living Jesus required of us now and the right faith which would guide us to the kingdom. Others have followed suit but there isn't space here to detail their efforts. This brief review is enough to point to the notion that the Sinai ethic has not lost its efficacy despite the centuries which have intervened and the dramatic changes in historical situation which have occurred. The Sinai ethic is still the key to our right relationship with God, and the Christ event builds on that ethic by pointing to the ultimate eschatological reality, the kingdom of God. The ethic is interwoven with the reality and cannot be separated from it. Any attempt to do so results in false prophecy.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The compilers of the Old Testament canon were making an important point about God by starting at the beginning of the creation: God existed before the creation and was the cause of all things created. God did not usurp the creation, nor was it received as a gift. God was the primal cause of all that we know.

Next, God attempted to establish a covenant with humanity. But it was a conditional offer, initiated and controlled by God. Humanity would receive God's providence – indeed, even have control over much of it – if only people would respond in a fashion which reflected the fact that they were created in God's image. Abusing God's image - themselves or others - was the same thing as abusing God. Abuse of God, directly or indirectly, would bring a halt to God's providence. Not only would providence stop, but God as creator had the option of re-creating part or all of creation. The flood story testified to God's ability to re-create the earth, determine who the remnant might be, and establish the conditions under which humans might prosper.

The rulers of Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah had been lulled into a false sense of security by the promises made to David. They had good reason for wanting God's providence to continue. And in spite of the ominous growth of the Babylonian powerhouse, they remembered having been saved once before from political trauma. Surely God would not let his name be sullied among the neighboring countries by not supporting the inhabitants of Judah during their hour of need. God's dwelling place was in jeopardy along with God's name. Generations of Davidic rulers had been able to

retain control of the country in spite of the vicissitudes of international politics. God had blessed the land.

Onto the scene stepped Jeremiah, a Levitical prophet from a small town with an old tradition of supporting the Sinai covenant. Rather than attacking the viability of the covenant traditions of Jerusalem, Jeremiah focused on the traditional signs of covenant violation: abuse of God and of God's image. There were enough signs of each, even without exaggeration, that the people and their rulers took umbrage at Jeremiah's accusations and stubbornly clung to their habits while trying to outmaneuver God on the political battlefield. The people's refusal to break the cycle of covenant violation forced the end of God's providence.

In time, God would re-establish the covenant with a remnant of God's choosing, as God had done before. The post-Babylon generation realized they had been chosen but were uncertain how to proceed. They looked back at the prophets who had predicted correctly the future of Judah and Israel, and some of them understood that the covenant had to be written on the heart. But they went ahead and re-built the temple. And the next generation forgot, and once again focused on the ritual as though that were the way to retain the covenant blessing.

This thesis has tried to show that Jeremiah was among those throughout the history of Israel who understood God to be in covenant with his creation. It was not a covenant that could be enforced with laws nor could the existence of the covenant be demonstrated through ritual. Only by an inner understanding, a commitment written on the heart, that God was the creator of the world and the initiator of the covenant, and by showing due respect to God as one would to a father, would one be able to retain God's favorable providence. When God or other members of God's family are treated

disrespectfully, God is free to withdraw his blessing. Restoring the covenant comes through redemption and re-creation.

Having this understanding of the covenant, Jeremiah looked around at what was happening in Judah, and particularly in Jerusalem where the leadership, political and religious, was setting the tone of the country. What Jeremiah saw was rampant disrespect of the *hoi polloi* by the leaders, an attitude towards the aliens which reflected only self-preservation, and an attempt to manipulate God through temple ritual. None of this rang true with his understanding of what was required by the covenant tradition. The prophecies of the temple prophets that well-being would continue had to be false because it was apparent that the covenant conditions were not being kept by these same leaders.

Jeremiah apparently determined that the temple group had gotten only part of the covenant tradition right. David had been promised an everlasting covenant (2 Sam 23:5) but there was an additional requirement that they were overlooking: the favored ruler is one who “rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God” (23:3). To show that the religious leaders are not ruling justly or in the fear of God, Jeremiah points out at considerable length the injustices which are rampant in society and the lack of proper worship of God through abominable ritual practices which are still being allowed to take place, whether the religious leaders are participating or not. The leaders have been given responsibility for assuring that justice is done and worship is conducted properly, and they have failed on both accounts.

If the leaders have failed in their responsibility to the minimum requirements of the David/Zion tradition, requirements which are made even more clear by the Sinai covenant with which they are familiar, then how could the leaders continue to suggest that well-being would continue? They were clearly not paying attention to the

requirements of the covenant traditions they already knew, so they couldn't be getting their prophecies from the court of God. They were listening to their own minds, not God who should be speaking through their hearts. Their prophecies had to be false, and well-being was not assured.

In fact, quite the opposite must be true. As long as the leaders were recalcitrant about changing their habits and showed no repentance, destruction was assured.

Jeremiah felt there would have to be "sword, famine and pestilence" because the leaders were acting like thorns (2 Sam 23:6) who would of necessity be burned. It was not a pretty picture, and the populace resisted the grim assessment which Jeremiah leveled at them for supporting the corrupt practices of their leaders. The result was verbal persecution of Jeremiah and attempts at his life.

The compilers of the Jeremiah record probably did not all understand what Jeremiah was trying to accomplish. They saw that his prophecies had been correct, along with those of other prophets like Isaiah, Hosea and Ezekiel, so they collected the writings together and edited them in a way which made sense to them, much as the earlier Deuteronomic scroll had been pasted together to provide a teaching tool for the people. But there is enough of Jeremiah's record to show what he had in mind, and the compilers had the wisdom to recognize that the covenant issue was of central import; it did not get buried in the editing. The canon was a teaching tool for future generations so they wouldn't forget what the covenant was about. God's desire for justice and right worship comes through clearly in the prophets and is the core message the editors wanted to preserve. It is the forest we often overlook because we are confused about the placement of the trees. Jeremiah used the crookedness of the trees to prove the need for the forest.

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