

HEBREW BIBLE

TRANSLATION

THE HISTORICAL OUTLOOK OF JEREMIAH

by

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In this paper I shall try to show that Jeremiah's fluctuating historical outlook and his changing attitudes as prophet and preacher were shaped by the dialectic between the magic and mantic legacy which still reached him from earlier prophecy and his aim to rationalise this tradition following his own appreciation, which slowly crystallised by the impact of events.¹ This inner struggle lasted in fact for about forty years, from his consecration in the year 626 until the destruction of the Temple in 586. The starting point of our discussion will be chapters 1 and 25 of the book of Jeremiah, which mark critical turning points in his inner life-story. As to chapter 1 – there is no editorial addition beyond the three introductory verses. I am inclined to the opinion that this chapter contains three visions which he saw at different periods of time. The first: the vision of the consecration (vv. 4-10); the second: the vision of the almond rod (vv. 11-12); and the third: the vision of the boiling cauldron (vv. 13-19).

Presumably verses 11-19 were originally an independent literary unit, as may be gained from the introductory formula of the *third* vision, saying: "The word of God came to me a *second* time" (v. 13); only at a certain stage in the development of the book was this literary unit transferred to chapter 1 and combined in this way with the vision of the consecration.

The central question which engages us regarding the vision of the consecration turns on the sentence, "I have appointed you a prophet of the nations", which appears in v. 5 and in an expanded form in v. 10: "I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms" etc. What is the concrete meaning of this mission? Is it intended to say that Jeremiah was sent to the nations in the same way as the prophetic legend sent Jonah to Nineveh?

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¹ It is Yehezkel Kaufmann's privilege to have made the first comprehensive attempt in this direction. See: *The Religion of Israel* (translated and abridged by Moshe Greenberg), Schocken paperback, New York, 1972, pp. 409-422.

What about Israel and Judah? Why is there no mention at all of Israel and Judah in the vision? What does he have to do in actual practice? Why does it not say that he has to go out, preach and reprove?

For a proper understanding of this strange mission to the nations it is essential to stress the affinity of the prophecy with ancient cursing formulas. Jeremiah was not sent in order to reprove the nations and bring them back in repentance, but in order "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" by the power of the word of God which had been put in his mouth. The word of God is conceived as a physical force by which it is possible to demolish and destroy kingdoms. Indeed, by the word of God he put to death Hananiah son of Azzur, as is related in chapter 28. Similarly, he charged Seraiah son of Neriah to curse Babylon on his arrival there and to drown the scroll of curses in the Euphrates - in order to bring its magic influence upon the bloodstained city, as is related in chapter 51:61-64.

It is no accident that the book of Jeremiah contains a large collection of prophecies on the nations, the purpose of which is to make known God's word, similar to what is said to him here, "For to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak. Be not afraid of them" (1:6). He had to decree the word of God, not to rebuke and reprove the nations, but to set in motion the destructive influence of the word of God. This seems to be the meaning of his appointment. The vision of the consecration teaches that the starting point of his historical meditations was his somewhat deterministic approach to world history, which in his eyes is exclusively dominated by the potentialities and forces inherent in the word of God. The principles of reward and punishment, repentance and forgiveness are here applied in a much more limited form than in the domain of Jewish history. In most of the prophecies on the nations, the announcement of punishment is not explained. In other incidents it is related to actual or archaic crimes against Israel.

In ch. 27 Jeremiah develops the deterministic outlook when he says that God had appointed the Babylonian dynasty to rule for a certain period over all the inhabitants of the earth. All peoples are obliged to submit to Nebuchadnezzar and to serve him (27:6-8). In this way he seeks to justify his demand that Judah and the rest of the peoples of the area should submit to the king of Babylon, who is styled in his mouth by the name "My servant". But when his time comes, this king will fall, and his dynasty with him, his son and his son's son, and another dynasty will succeed him. This deterministic outlook contains *in nuce* the doctrine of historical cycles, which was developed generations later in the book of Daniel.

The magic element in Jeremiah's approach to world history is also strikingly conspicuous in the vision of the cup (25:15 ff.). In the Septuagint edition of the book, the scroll of the nations (chs. 46-51) precedes

this vision, being inserted after v. 13. When was this vision composed?

Before answering this question, let us correct some errors which have crept into the traditional text. It seems to me that with the help of the LXX translation it is possible to restore a more reasonable text. In line with LXX, the words, "And after them the king of Sheshak shall drink" (v. 25) should be deleted. This clause contains the name Babylon in the *Atbash* form (this is a method of interchanging the first letter of the alphabet with the last, the second with the last but one, and so on), which is found only once again in Jeremiah (51:41). There also the word Sheshak is missing in the LXX translation. We know that the origin of *Atbash* is late; the first evidence for this method is found only in the Talmudic tractate *Shabbat*. In any event, in all other instances Jeremiah explicitly mentions the name Nebuchadnezzar, without making use of cryptic name Sheshak. I therefore permit myself to doubt whether the word was in the original text. It seems that these words were added much later by a copyist.

The prophet mentions Jerusalem, the cities of Judah, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the kings of the Philistine cities, Ashkelon, Gaza, Ekron, the remnant of Ashdod, Edom, Moab, the Ammonites, the kings of Tyre, Sidon, Dedan, Tema, Buz, all who roam the fringes of the desert, and all the kings of Arabia living in the wilderness, the kings of Elam, the kings of the north – a long list. It seems to me that a comparison with the list of the envoys of foreign kings mentioned in ch. 27 enables us to fix more closely the time of this vision: it is obvious that ch. 27 reflects the events of Zedekiah's reign. This is the only explanation for the fact that solely envoys of the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre and Sidon arrived then at Jerusalem in order to consult about the planned rebellion against Babylon. The coastal cities of Ashkelon, Gaza and Ekron, which were then enslaved to Babylon, were not represented at all. Therefore we may conclude that this vision of the cup (25:15-31), which mentions these cities, precedes the year 604, when Ashkelon was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar, as we learn from "The Babylonian Chronicles" (D. J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings*, 1956, p. 68, 1:15-20). Moreover, it probably precedes the battle of Carchemish (605), for Jeremiah speaks in it solely about the "kings of the north", as in his earliest prophecies. Kaufmann proved, in a persuasive manner, that Jeremiah reflected for twenty years over the identity of the mysterious "enemy from the north", about whom he was informed in the prophecy of consecration. In chapters 4, 5, 6, 10 and 13 there are prophecies in which mention is made of some anonymous savage people from a north land or from "the sides of the north" who will eventually lay Judah waste. It is not before 604, the year after the battle of Carchemish in which Nebuchadnezzar defeated the armies of Egypt and Assyria and thereby tore away the dominion in the area from the hands of Assyria, that Jeremiah began to speak about the king of Babylon, as about one who would even-

tually lay Judah waste. The explanation is that only in that year does he begin to identify the king of Babylon with the enemy from the north about whom he was told at the very beginning of his prophetic career. From here onwards, when mentioning the enemy who would eventually come and lay Judah waste, he no longer spoke about an anonymous nation from a north land but explicitly mentions Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. Were the vision of the cup later than the battle of Carchemish he would certainly have mentioned Babylon at the head of the nations who had to drink the cup of wrath. The absence of Babylon from the list of peoples is, in my opinion, a proof that this vision precedes the battle of Carchemish; that is to say, it belongs to the first period of the prophet's activity. This implies that it was before the prophecy in 25:1-13, which is apparently the introduction to the prophecies about the nations. Here the prophet mentions for the first time "Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon" (v. 9) – though this verse is not in the LXX translation – and "the king of Babylon" (v. 12) together with all the families of the north. Consequently, the king of Babylon and the families of the north would eventually bring ruin to Judah.

In order to evaluate properly the incident related in the vision of the cup, it must be remembered that vv. 27-29 are out of place. Most scholars believe that these three verses were added by the editor of the book. The truth is that they are a continuation of v. 16. The structure of the vision should be as follows: vv. 15-19 – the charge to the prophet; vv. 27-29 – the adjuration of the nations; vv. 17-26 – making them drink; vv. 30-38 – the prophecy of the curse on them. In vv. 15-16 it says, "Thus the Lord, the God of Israel said to me: 'Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and be crazed because of the sword which I am sending among them.'" After that come verses 27-29: "Then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Drink, be drunk and vomit, fall and rise no more, because of the sword which I am sending among you.' And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: You must drink! For behold, I begin to work evil at the city which is called by my name, and shall you go unpunished? You shall not go unpunished, for I am summoning a sword against all the inhabitants of the earth, says the Lord of hosts.'" This is the charge of God to the prophet; verses 17-26 speak of its execution: "So I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it: Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and princes, to make them a desolation and a waste, a hissing and a curse, as at this day". After this follows the list of the nations; the chapter closes with a prophecy of curse (vv. 30 ff.). It consequently appears that vv. 27-29 were inserted in the wrong place.

This structure is similar to other descriptions of magic incidents, as for example the ceremony of the *Sotah* (the woman suspected of adultery)². In the two incidents the magic act is bound up with an adjuration. In 51:59-64 a short prayer comes before the action, and the action itself is accompanied by a short cursing formula, "Thus shall Babylon sink, to rise no more" etc. The ceremony described here concludes with a prophetic curse which gives additional strength to the action itself. From a literary point of view this is a new genre, one which Kaufmann calls "the dramatic vision"; it reaches its full development only in the book of Ezekiel. In the visions of the other prophets who preceded Jeremiah, the seer is a passive observer, whereas here he is an active participant in the prophetic scene.

This new literary genre in prophetic literature was born out of the discrepancy between the concrete aim of the prophet's mission and its real possibilities and limitations. In the vision of the consecration, Jeremiah was appointed over nations and kingdoms to uproot and pull down, to destroy and to demolish, to rebuild and to plant by the word of God which was put into his mouth. His reflections taught him of a preordained Divine plan that rules world history (ch. 27); in the course of his activity, however, he became aware that it is beyond man's power to materialise, to activate or to accelerate this plan by any magic formula or by political action. One must wait patiently for the previsited downfall of Babylon, be it seventy years or three generations, as he says in various places. So he had to content himself with giving vent to his suppressed desire to influence the destiny of Judah and the course of world history by resorting to visionary magic actions which were directed towards an undefined future (cf. 25:13ff.). This retreat from the field of concrete political activity into the realm of vision may be explained by his growing desire to neutralise and overcome the magic heritage which was handed down to him from ancient prophecy. The word of God was experienced by him as charged with physical potentialities parallel to concepts like the "cup of wrath" or "the wrath of God" (Jer. 6:11ff.; *ibid.* 23:19-20; 30:24-25). So the only way to evade its shortcomings in the field of history without renouncing its physical concreteness was its interiorisation by removing it into the realm of vision and by referring its fulfilment to an undefined future. Gone is the naive optimism of the folk tales about Elijah and Elisha, whose writers could relate how men succeeded in creating miraculous facts by the word of God. The recognition that man is not free to set in motion the word of God as he wishes, and how much less to rule over it, but that he is only qualified to proclaim it in history, adds to the word of God a psychological dimension which bursts out with terrific force from Jeremiah's complaints in chapters 15:16-18; 20:7-10. In them the word of God is pictured as a spiritual force, moreover

² Numbers 5:11ff.; *Sotah* 2, 2.

as a psychological strain, over which man has no control. An additional way to overcome the shortcoming and limitation of the word of God was the combination of prayer with magic activity, and a cursing formula conceived as the word of God. This is the case in the incident related in ch. 51:60-64 where the drowning of the scroll is combined with prayer (v. 62) and with a magic formula of curse (v. 64).

This is the transitory stage from expounding the word of God as a concrete magic curse to its being conceived as a Divine promise or threat, the fulfilment of which is conditioned by the behaviour of men. This problem, which will be dealt with immediately, brings us back to the vision of consecration.

The big question that arises when studying that vision turns on Judah: will the predicted evil reach even her, or will she perhaps be delivered from it? And another question: is the historic disaster hinted at in the consecration vision imminent, or is it perhaps aimed at a distant future? In the vision of the almond rod Jeremiah was told that the punishment was near: "I am watching over my word to perform it" (1:12). In the vision of the boiling cauldron he learns for the first time that the cup will pass over Judah too: "Out of the north evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land" (v. 14). He is even told the reason: "I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have burned incense to other gods" (v. 16). Only now is he explicitly told that he is sent also to the people of Judah: "But you, gird up your loins; arise and say to them everything that I command you" etc. (v. 17). He is commanded to turn to the whole people with words of rebuke in which he is obliged to explain that the cause of the impending calamity is their idolatry. This argument indicates that this vision preceded the eighteenth year of Josiah, in which the book of the Law was found and in which the campaign against idolatry reached its peak. Subsequently, a short span of time separates the consecration, which was in the thirteenth year of this king, from the vision of the boiling cauldron. The expression, "out of the north evil shall break forth" is not aimed at any real enemy, but is taken from the traditional store, principally from the descriptions in the book of Deuteronomy, as becomes clear also from chapters 4-6, where the anonymous enemy from the north is described in colours borrowed from that book. According to chapters 2 and 3, the principal sin is idolatry. In the Temple sermon (26:1-11), which happened at the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim (609/8), that is to say a considerable time after the great purification in the time of Josiah, Jeremiah denounces the popular magic view of the Temple and its worship. Mentioning explicitly the destruction of Shiloh, he refutes the false trust put in the Temple - a trust nourished by the popular prophets - and demands the doing of righteousness and justice as the only way to avert the punishment against the people. The Temple has been profaned, it has become "a

den of robbers" because of the many crimes of the pilgrims. The date at the head of the sermon is, "In the beginning of the reign of Jehoiakim" (26:1); probably the events happened some years before the battle of Carchemish.

From here it may be gained that Jeremiah's prophecies of punishment against Judah at the beginning of his activity were not born out of political-historical considerations, but flow from his criticism of society (5:1-9). This criticism is firstly marked by his struggle against idolatry, and after the great purification its arrows are directed against the mantic or magic view of worship, a fact which brings him into conflict with priests and popular prophets. However, the prophetic acts related in this connection have no mantic tinge. The first is the incident of the girdle (13:1-11), which was not witnessed by anybody else. Consequently it cannot be urged that it had any social or social-educational aim; it was rather intended to demonstrate to him the nature of the people, which was compared to this spoilt, useless girdle (v. 10). The second incident, or non-incident, is the story of chapter 16 v. 1ff. "You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons and daughters in this place." His spiritual inability to strike roots among the people and to raise a family is clothed here in the form of a prohibition. Here is evidence of the depression caused by his tragic mission, which completely dominated his life. The third incident, the shattering of the jar in the valley of Ben-hinnom (ch. 19), comes to give concrete form to and reinforce the prophecy of horrors which he spoke before this when he turned to the passers-by. This is a dramatic prophetic action which accompanies the words of rebuke. The same applies to the wearing of the yoke, a symbol of servitude, on his neck, and to the sending of these symbols to the foreign kings who gathered in Jerusalem in the time of Zedekiah (ch. 27).

Most of these incidents are dramatic allegories, which aim at crystallising his prophecy in concrete visible symbols. The incident of the girdle comes to demonstrate to him the nature of the people, while the prohibition against marrying a wife reflects his inability to strike roots in a community which, according to his belief, was doomed to destruction; here is embodied in a most concrete manner the presentiment of doom by which he was haunted. In short, in all the prophetic acts which he performed in public, the mantic and magic colouring of ancient prophetic tradition disappears.

At the beginning of his prophetic career, that is from the time of his consecration in the year 626 until the battle of Carchemish in 605, his social criticism is blended with a dim historical perception of an impending destruction of nations and kingdoms, in the course of which an enemy will come and lay Judah waste. The horrors which haunted him during this period were expressed in the vision of the cup in a magic-prophetic action the aim of which was to bring destruction on Jerusalem, Judah and the

nations. Here he enumerates "Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, its kings and nobles" with all the nations on whom punishment will come, similar to what he said in his dispute with the popular prophets: "I am making my words in your mouth a fire, and this people wood, and the fire shall devour them" (5:14). Once he has reached the moment of despair, there is nothing left to him except to point out the destructive power of the word of God.

With the battle of Carchemish, the historic situation becomes clear, and the rational moralising explanation of the situation is applied to additional areas: first (25:1 ff.) the king of Babylon is depicted as a kind of staff of wrath that comes to punish Judah and to lay it waste. In Jeremiah's activity in the time of Zedekiah, described in chs. 27-29, the motive of sin disappears as an explanation for Babylon taking control. In his words to the envoys of the nations he describes the Babylonian empire from a new perspective. His thoughts are no longer exclusively focussed on the fate of Israel, but on the fate of the world. God, the Creator, who cares for his world, demands of mankind to submit to the king of Babylon who has been appointed over the world for the duration of seventy years or three generations; that is to say, for the duration of a fixed period. His requirement that Judah submit to the yoke of Babylon means co-operation with the Divine universal plan in history.

In his dispute with the "false" prophets, and principally with Haniah the son of Azzur (ch. 28), Jeremiah gives two reasons for his call to accept Babylon's overlordship — a pragmatic-political one and a religious one. The first one says: Babylon is strong enough to quell any rebellion; so any revolt against its rule will bring only disaster and destruction on the people concerned. The second one says: As the king of Babylon is God's servant and envoy, who has been given sovereignty over mankind, so any rebellion against him is a sinful, punishable protest against Divine counsel. It is no accident that precisely in this chapter his rational explanation coincides with political pragmatism. He frees himself and the rest of the prophets of woe from the obligation to prove his mission by fulfilment of his words, which was the ancient mantic corroboration mark of prophecy according to Deuteronomic law. In his dispute with Hananiah son of Azzur he deepens his new conception uttered in the vision of the potter's house (18:1-12), about the nature of the word of God. Here it is no longer expounded as entailing mantic prediction of the future or as a magic spell but as an announcement of threatening or promising nature depending on the reaction and the conduct of the people. Here the word of God is stripped of any mantic, magic or psychological force and turns out to be a promise or threat spoken by the prophet, who hopes in the secret of his heart that the people will repent and thereby avert the fulfilment of the threat.

It is not my wish to say that his outlook expressed in chs. 27, 28 is the last word in his historic thoughts. On the contrary, chs. 30, 31 prove that his eschatological approach continued to be based on the assumption that the fate of Judah and Israel is the only meaningful focus and centre of world history; the universal catastrophe described at the beginning of ch. 30 in the traditional terminology of the prophecies of "the Day of the Lord" is conceived as the prelude to the redemption of Israel and Judah. Again, the image of Babylon as a peaceful kingdom, which seems to emerge from ch. 27, vanishes in chs. 50, 51, spoken after the exile of Jehoiachin, or after the destruction of Jerusalem. Here the kingdom of Babylon comes up again as the classic representative of wickedness which will eventually fall into the hands of the kingdoms of the north.

We have seen that in the course of Jeremiah's activity the mantic and magic elements which were inherent in the ancient prophetic and Torah traditions, in the stories of Elijah and Elisha, and in the prophecies about the nations, gradually lost their weight. From his appreciation of historical and social reality emerges a dual approach by which world history is explained by the deterministic assumption that it is ruled by a preordained unalterable Divine plan, while the fate of Judah is decided and will be decided solely by the principles of reward and punishment, i. e. by the moral freedom of the people. In his prophecies in the time of Zedekiah he seeks to justify the demand for submission to the Babylonian yoke by the proclaimed Divine decision to entrust the fate of mankind for a certain period to the rule of Nebuchadnezzar. The word of God, which in his vision of consecration is proclaimed to be a power possessed of magic force, loses its magic weight at the moment of its application to world history (ch. 25:15ff.); finally in the realm of Israel it is completely stripped of any magic or mantic essence, and changes into the speech of the educator and preacher who threatens or promises, who makes the fulfilment of his words always conditional on the conduct of man and nation.

I think that this in short is the intellectual aspect of Jeremiah's much troubled and tortuous struggle, which focussed on a new religious evaluation of the tragic plight of Judah which he witnessed during his lifetime.

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