


Spring 2010

# Jeremiah's Message of Judgment and Hope for God's Unfaithful "Wife"

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## Recommended Citation

Yates, Gary E., "Jeremiah's Message of Judgment and Hope for God's Unfaithful "Wife"" (2010). *Faculty Publications and Presentations*. Paper 370.

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# JEREMIAH'S MESSAGE OF JUDGMENT AND HOPE FOR GOD'S UNFAITHFUL "WIFE"

Gary E. Yates

ALTHOUGH JEREMIAH'S MINISTRY was to warn of the coming Babylonian Exile and the end of Judah as a nation, Allen is correct in observing that hope is the "overruling message" of the Book of Jeremiah and that there is "the purposeful trajectory of overriding grace that stretches over the book like a rainbow."<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah's message is that Yahweh will replant His people in the land after uprooting them in judgment (1:10; 12:14–17; 18:7, 9; 24:6; 31:28, 40; 42:10; 45:4), and the two halves of the book reflect the movement from judgment (chaps. 1–25) to salvation (chaps. 26–52). The promise of Israel's return to the land and a new covenant between Yahweh and Israel occupies a place of central prominence in the "Book of Consolation" (chaps. 30–33). The final section of Jeremiah (chaps. 46–51) promises the judgment of the enemy nations that have inflicted abuse and suffering on Israel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 17–18.

<sup>2</sup> This study focuses on the Book of Jeremiah as found in the traditional Masoretic text of the Hebrew canon. Comparison of the Hebrew Masoretic text with the Septuagintal version of Jeremiah in Greek suggests that two canonical editions of Jeremiah existed from an early time in its transmission. For discussion of textual issues in Jeremiah see Emmanuel Tov, "The Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Its Textual History," in *Empirical Models for Biblical Criticism*, ed. J. Tigay (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 211–39. The differences between these two texts do not have a major bearing on this study. William M. Schniedwind notes that similarities between Jeremiah in the Masoretic text and in the Septuagint in chapters 1–25 indicate that these chapters had reached their essential form in the early stages of the book's formation (*How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 147–57). This evidence supports the argument of this study

This study explores how the message in Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 contributes to this trajectory of hope. These verses introduce two themes that shape the message of the book as a whole.<sup>3</sup> In his opening sermon the prophet charged that Israel/Judah had become Yahweh's unfaithful "wife" and must return to Him, her "husband." The remainder of the book substantiates this accusation, describes the punishment of the unfaithful wife, calls for the wife to change her ways, and promises restoration of her relationship with Yahweh. Jeremiah's accusation of Israel's infidelity also introduces a vigorous debate between the people and the prophet. In response to Jeremiah's charges of unfaithfulness the people wrongly protested, "I am not defiled" (2:23) and "I am innocent" (v. 35). This dispute continues throughout the book, but it ultimately is resolved in the "Book of Consolation" in chapters 30–33, where the prophet envisioned the people saying the right things as a result of spiritual transformation through the New Covenant.<sup>4</sup>

## THE MESSAGE AND LOGIC OF JEREMIAH 2:1–4:4

### THE UNFAITHFUL WIFE AS A CONTROLLING METAPHOR

The portrayal of Israel/Judah as a promiscuous wife who had turned away from Yahweh, her husband, is certainly an appropriate opening message for a book that speaks with intensity about Yahweh's wrath against His sinful people.<sup>5</sup> And yet the purpose of

that Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 had a formative influence on the literary design of the Book of Jeremiah as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> Though taking a more redactional approach to the book, Mark E. Biddle also views this section as a "theological prologue" to the book (*A Redaction History of Jeremiah 2:1–4:2* [Zürich: Theologischer, 1990], 220–28).

<sup>4</sup> Recognition of these types of overarching themes for the book is in accord with the recent movement to a more holistic and book-oriented approach to Jeremiah. See Martin Kessler, *Reading Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004); and Louis Stulman, *Order amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998).

The dissolution and restoration of the marriage (covenant relationship) between Yahweh and Israel provides a plot-theme and narrative-like structure for Jeremiah, which has a mixture of genres. For a similar narrative approach to the Book of Isaiah see Robin L. Routledge, "Is There a Narrative Substructure Underlying the Book of Isaiah?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 55 (2004): 183–204.

<sup>5</sup> Feminist scholars have often critiqued the metaphor of husband and wife for Yahweh and Israel as promoting male domination and placing a disproportionate amount of blame on women for the ills of Israelite society. For a recent discussion and extensive bibliography see Julia M. O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008). While feminist studies have raised legitimate concerns about graphic sexual and violent imagery directed against women in the Old Testament prophets, evangeli-

this language was not merely to condemn, but more importantly to bring about restoration. In their original setting the words in 2:1–4:4 were a warning for Israel and Judah to return to Yahweh or face the judgment of Babylonian Exile. In its later literary context in the book this passage is a call to return to Yahweh in the aftermath of the Exile. The prophet employed the graphic imagery of the promiscuous wife for emotive effect, attempting to waken the people out of their spiritual stupor so that they might see the extent of their sinfulness and change their ways.

The controlling or “root metaphor” in Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 is the image of Israel as the unfaithful wife of Yahweh.<sup>6</sup> In 2:20 the prophet charged that Israel had shamelessly prostituted herself. In 3:1–4:4, he called for the unfaithful wife to return to her husband. The “love” (אָהַבָהּ) of Israel’s youth for Yahweh (2:2) had turned into a “love” (אָהַבָהּ) for foreign gods (vv. 25, 33) so that Israel was guilty of both “prostitution” (זָנָה, 2:20; 3:1–3, 6, 8–9) and “adultery” (אָדוּלְטֵרָה, 3:8–9).<sup>7</sup> Israel’s marriage or allegiance to Yahweh or other gods is conveyed by the expression “to follow after.”<sup>8</sup> Israel “followed after” Yahweh in her youth (2:5), but then turned to “following after” other gods (vv. 5, 8). Because of her gross infidelity toward Yahweh, Israel faced judgment that threatened her national existence. The shocking imagery of Israel as an unfaithful wife demonstrates

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cals resist the hermeneutic of suspicion or outright rejection of biblical authority that has characterized many of these studies. For the range of feminist perspectives on biblical authority from “Rejectionist” to “Loyalist” see Carolyn Osiek, “The Feminist and the Bible: Hermeneutical Alternatives,” in *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, ed. A. Y. Collins (Atlanta: Scholars, 1985), 96–109.

As a metaphor the dominant role of the husband in the marriage relationship accurately portrays the sovereign prerogative of Yahweh in His covenant relationship with Israel. Evangelicals agree with feminist critics that modern ideas of romanticized love should not be read into this prophetic metaphor. However, the marriage metaphor as an example of the deepest level of love and intimacy should also not be ignored. For a balancing perspective on the shared understanding of marital and family love in the ancient and modern context see Joel F. Drinkard, “An Understanding of Family in the Old Testament: Maybe Not as Different from Us as We Usually Think,” *Review and Expositor* 98 (2001): 485–501.

<sup>6</sup> A. R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2–3 (4:2),” in *Troubling Jeremiah*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement*, ed. A. R. P. Diamond, K. M. O’Connor, and L. Stulman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 124.

<sup>7</sup> Their infidelity is also described as “rebellion” (מַרְדָּו) against Yahweh (2:8, 29; 3:13).

<sup>8</sup> R. Abma, *Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery (Isaiah 50:1–3 and 54:1–10, Hosea 1–3, Jeremiah 2–3)* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1999), 239. The expression “to follow” or “to go after” is used with reference to marriage in Genesis 24:5 and 1 Samuel 25:42. See also Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 35.

that ‘Yahweh’s response to the sin of His people was “absolutely just.”<sup>9</sup> As Frymer-Kensky notes, there is a sense of talionic justice in that just as “Israel’s sin is sexual” (v. 20) so also “her punishment will be equally sexual” (13:25–27).<sup>10</sup>

The marriage metaphor also relates to the prophetic message of hope, stressing the enduring quality of Yahweh’s commitment to His people. In the future restoration Israel will no longer “follow after” her stubborn ways, but instead a unified Israel and Judah will “walk” together in devotion to Yahweh (3:17–18). Even though Yahweh severely punished Israel, He wanted to heal and restore the relationship (cf. Isa. 50:1; 54:1–8). The prophetic message of hope anticipates a future union in which Israel’s fidelity is guaranteed, so that Yahweh will never again have cause to think of divorcing or punishing His “spouse” (Hos. 2:20; cf. Jer. 31:30–33; Ezek. 36:26–27).<sup>11</sup>

The “root metaphor” of Israel’s marriage assembles “a cascade of other metaphors . . . into itself.”<sup>12</sup> The image of Israel as Yahweh’s bride in Jeremiah 2:2 is closely joined with the agricultural figure of Israel as the “first of His harvest” (v. 3). The Mosaic Law stipulated that the “first fruits” belonged to Yahweh (cf. Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Lev. 2:12; 23:10, 17, 20; Num. 18:12–13; 28:26; Deut. 18:4). The marriage and first fruit metaphors are linked by the idea that Israel belongs exclusively to Yahweh. As Bauer explains, “The connection between the marriage metaphor in 2:2 and the first fruits in 2:3 lies in the notion of property.”<sup>13</sup> Israel as the bride is “God’s special possession.”<sup>14</sup> These images also share the notion of “purity, of being yet untouched,” thereby making the defection and defilement that follow all the more tragic.<sup>15</sup>

Comparing Israel’s idolatry to drinking water from “broken cisterns” in 2:13 has marital and sexual overtones. In Proverbs 5:15–18 the wise man instructs his son to avoid the adulteress and

<sup>9</sup> Abma, *Bonds of Love*, 369.

<sup>10</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free, 1992), 150.

<sup>11</sup> Ehud Ben Zvi, “Observations on the Marital Metaphor of YHWH and Israel in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context: General Considerations and Particular Images in Hosea 1:2,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28 (2004): 368.

<sup>12</sup> Diamond and O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions,” 126.

<sup>13</sup> Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 22.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

to "drink water from your own cistern."<sup>16</sup> The portrayal of Israel's appeals to Egypt and Assyria for military assistance as "drinking" (הָרָץ) the waters of those lands (Jer. 2:18) also reflects the idea that Israel's alliances with other nations constituted adultery just as much as idolatry (cf. Hos. 7:8–11; 8:8–10). Turning to other nations for security involved trusting in their gods and renouncing Yahweh's sovereign prerogative to protect and defend His people.

Israel's turning from Yahweh reduces them from "choice vine" to "foreign vine" (Jer. 2:21). Israel is portrayed as a vine elsewhere in the Bible (Ps. 80:8–16; Isa. 3:14; 5:1–7; Hos. 10:1), and the imagery is especially appropriate in Jeremiah 2–4 because of the emphasis on the land and its fertility and defilement. The use of "vine" or "vineyard" imagery in the love poetry of the Song of Songs (2:13; 6:11; 7:12) and in Isaiah's song concerning Yahweh's unrequited love for Israel (Isa. 5:1–7) also demonstrates its association with marriage and sexuality.<sup>17</sup> The vineyard and the wine that comes from it connote the fruitfulness and joy of marital love. The imagery here suggests that Yahweh has wasted His investment of effort and expense in this "choice vine."

Perhaps the most graphic sexual imagery in this section occurs in the prophet's portrayal of Israel as a "swift young camel" and a female donkey in heat (Jer. 2:23–24). The donkey "sniffs for the scent of the male that is left behind in his urine. When she gets the scent, she rubs her nose in the dust, straightens up, and with head held high in the air begins sniffing the wind. Then off she goes in search of the male."<sup>18</sup> The use of this ribald imagery in Jeremiah 2 reflects the fact that Israel's desire for other gods is like "raw, animal lust" and shows the extent to which Israel had degraded herself in pursuing other gods (cf. Ezek. 16; 23).<sup>19</sup>

#### ARGUMENT AND APPEAL IN JEREMIAH 2:1–4:4

*The dispute in Jeremiah 2.* This chapter includes a dialogue between Yahweh and Israel that serves to indict Israel for covenantal

infidelity. Yahweh stated His intention to "bring charges" (רִיב) against Israel (2:9) and to refute Israel's attempt to "bring charges" (רִיב) of covenant unfaithfulness against Him (v. 29).<sup>20</sup> The prophet then charged Israel with being an unfaithful wife who had repeatedly prostituted herself and chased after other lovers (vv. 20, 23–25, 33–36). The structure of the chapter shows that Israel's adultery against Yahweh specifically took the form of idolatry and alliances with foreign nations.

A. Israel's worship of foreign gods (vv. 4–13)

B. Israel's involvement in foreign alliances (vv. 14–19)

A. Israel's worship of foreign gods (vv. 20–32)

B. Israel's involvement in foreign alliances (vv. 33–37)<sup>21</sup>

One of the striking rhetorical features of the dispute between Yahweh and Israel in Jeremiah 2 is the strong element of self-indictment, in which Israel essentially proved her own guilt by the things she said in response to the charges against her. "One characteristic of Jeremiah, more generally, is its fundamentally dialogical character."<sup>22</sup> The prophet made effective use of audience-reaction quotations as a means of condemning Israel with her own words.<sup>23</sup> Overholt notes that there are nearly one hundred such

<sup>20</sup> Michael de Roche has rightly surmised that Jeremiah 2 represents a disputation more than some type of legal proceeding or covenant lawsuit ("YHWH's *Rib* against Israel: A Reassessment of the So-Called Prophetic Lawsuit," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 [1983]: 563–74).

<sup>21</sup> Mary E. Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute: The Rhetorics of Intertextuality, Metaphor, and Gender in Jeremiah 3.1–4.4*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement* (New York: Clark, 2004), 11. Israel's idolatry often took the form of Baal worship. Though Baal is mentioned only twice in Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 (see 2:8, 23), several wordplays in this section call attention to Baal. In the initial charge of idolatry the prophet asserted that Israel had followed after "emptiness" (הֶבֶל, lit., "worthlessness") and as a result they themselves "became empty" (הֶבֶל, lit., "worthless") to Yahweh (2:5). Following the mention of Baal in verse 8 the prophet again employed a verb that stressed the idea of worthlessness—"And walked after things that did not profit [וַיִּשְׁלַח]." The prophet repeated the root עָל in verse 11 in contrasting worthless idols to Yahweh, the true and living God. In 3:14 Yahweh appealed to His relationship with Israel as "master/husband" (בָּרַחְתִּי בְּכַחֵם, "I am a master [husband] to you") as the reason they should return. Other explicit references to Baal are in 7:9; 9:14; 11:13, 17; 12:16; 19:5; 23:13, 27; 32:29, 35).

<sup>22</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, *Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2002), 74.

<sup>23</sup> See Thomas Overholt, "Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of 'Audience Reaction,'" *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 262–73; R. E. Manahan, "An Interpretive Survey: Audience Reaction Quotations in Jeremiah," *Grace Theological Journal* 1 (1980): 163–83; John T. Willis, "Dialogue between Prophet and Audience as a Rhe-

<sup>16</sup> Moshe A. Zipor objects to the connection of the "cistern" with marriage in Jeremiah 2 by noting that the image of drinking from the cistern applies to the husband in Proverbs 5 ("Scenes from a Marriage—According to Jeremiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 65 [1995]: 87). However, the contextual focus on marriage and the alternation of male and female forms of address and the blending of wife and son imagery in Jeremiah 2–4 decreases the force of his argument.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>18</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 281–82.

<sup>19</sup> Diamond and O'Connor, "Unfaithful Passions," 141.

quotations in Jeremiah, quotations that are spread fairly evenly throughout the entire book.<sup>24</sup> Rather than giving actual quotations from the people, the prophet used these statements for rhetorical impact, frequently casting his opponents as saying what was shocking, illogical, or absurd.<sup>25</sup> "The quotations are chosen and used in such a way as to place the audience in an even more damning position."<sup>26</sup>

In the unfolding dispute of Jeremiah 2 Israel openly asserted rebellion against Yahweh ("I will not serve," v. 20; "We are free to roam; we will no longer come to You," v. 31). They expressed love for and loyalty to other gods ("I have loved strangers," v. 25; they "say to a tree, 'You are my father,' and to a stone, 'You gave me birth,'" v. 27). They claimed to be innocent of infidelity ("I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals," v. 23; "I am innocent," v. 35), while at the same time they confessed their addiction to pursuing false gods ("It is hopeless! No! For I have loved strangers, and after them I will walk," v. 25). Their words show that their relationship with Yahweh was a sham. They called themselves the children of idols, but when in trouble they cried out to Yahweh, "Arise and save us" (v. 27). They could not believe that Yahweh could possibly be angry with them (v. 35).

The prophet anticipated in 3:1–4:4 that Israel would say the right things to Yahweh when she was restored to a proper relationship with Him. Returning to Yahweh would involve Israel's confession of her sinful past. Just as in the past the people had protested, "I am innocent," so they will confess the futility of their pursuit of false gods and will acknowledge their root problem of "not obeying" the word of Yahweh (3:22–25).<sup>27</sup> Israel moved from saying, "I have not sinned" (לֹא עָשָׂה אֲנִי, 2:35) to acknowledging, "We have sinned" (עָשָׂנוּ, 3:25). In line with the dialogical nature of this section the

torical Device in the Book of Jeremiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 33 (1985): 3–25; and W. J. Horwitz, "Audience Reaction to Jeremiah," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 32 (1970): 555–64.

<sup>24</sup> Overholt, "Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of 'Audience Reaction,'" 262.

<sup>25</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 47. In Isaiah 28:15 the prophet had the leaders of Judah admit that they had made a "covenant with death" as a way of providing security in the Assyrian crisis. By putting this extreme quotation in the mouth of his opponents, the prophet seemed to be saying, "So you have chosen your partner, and I hope that the two of you will be very happy together."

<sup>26</sup> Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> Failure to "obey" or "listen to" the prophetic word is the recurring charge that Jeremiah leveled against the people (cf. 6:19; 9:13; 16:11; 25:3–4, 7–8). And this is the special theme of chapters 26–45 (26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 34:14, 17; 35:14–17; 36:31; 37:14; 40:3; 42:13, 21; 43:7; 44:16, 23).

prophet repeatedly used rhetorical questions in chapter 2 as a means of bringing the people to their senses regarding the foolishness of their abandonment of Yahweh.<sup>28</sup>

*The call for the unfaithful wife to return (3:1–4:4).* In this section the focus changes from accusation and indictment to appeal for Israel to "return" to Yahweh. Various forms of the root שָׁב highlight the centrality of the call to "return" to Yahweh or to the land following the Exile.<sup>29</sup> In 3:1–11 the prophet argued that Israel (and particularly Judah) had forfeited the opportunity to return to Yahweh, but then he closed in 3:12–4:14 with repeated calls for the people to return. By appearing to shut them off from the opportunity to repent, the prophet motivated his audience to respond to the gracious offer of a restored relationship with Yahweh.

Reference to the divorce law in Deuteronomy 24:1–4 is central to the poetic oracle in Jeremiah 3:1–5 and the prose message in 3:6–11.<sup>30</sup> The divorce law in Deuteronomy 24 stated that if a man divorced his wife, he was not allowed to take her back if she married another man and was later divorced or widowed. Remarrying the first husband after the woman had married another man would bring defilement on the land. The rhetorical questions in Jeremiah 3:1–5 seek to bring the prophet's audience to an understanding of

<sup>28</sup> See 2:5, 11, 14, 17–18, 23–24, 28, 31–32, 36. For the use of rhetorical questions in 2:1–4:4 see Sharon Moughtin-Mumby, *Sexual and Marital Metaphors in Hosea, Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 84–89. For the use of rhetorical questions in Jeremiah as a whole see Walter Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973): 358–74.

<sup>29</sup> Apparently Jeremiah called for the northern exiles to return to Yahweh and for repentance on the part of Judah in the early days of his ministry, but this call went unheeded. The language of promise inserted in the middle of the calls to repentance (3:14–18) assumed the fall of both Israel and Judah. Fretheim writes, "And so the call to repentance, whatever its force as an earlier message of Jeremiah is now represented as a word to exiles, for whom repentance is possible" (*Jeremiah*, 81). This focus on the final exilic (or postexilic) audience in Jeremiah may explain the use of prose to relay the prophet's message in 3:6–11, 14–18. Stulman has noted that prose passages like those in Jeremiah 7, 25, and 26 play a key role as signposts and interpretive summaries for the reading of the prophet's poetic oracles in the book as a whole, and one can imagine a similar role for these prose passages within the smaller unit of 2:1–4:4 (*Order amid Chaos*, 57–58). In their prose form the messages provide a historical object lesson that invites Israel to learn from the mistakes of the past and to begin the process of restoration. Allen stresses the importance of being attentive to both the "now" of Jeremiah's message for the intended reader and the "then" of Jeremiah's message in its original historical setting (*Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 14–16).

<sup>30</sup> For further discussion of this intertextual connection and the specific lexical parallels see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 307–12.

their precarious position as Yahweh's wife. The questions in verse 1—"Will he still return [שׁוּב] to her?" and "Will not that land be completely polluted?"—call for no and yes answers. The following וְשׁוּב אֵלַי in verse 1c is more ambiguous both in construction and intent. The infinitive absolute could be translated as an imperative ("return to Me"), but this understanding seems doubtful in light of the previous questions. More likely the construction should be read as another question, "Would you return to Me?" As Fretheim explains, the question suggests that "no renewal of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is possible."<sup>31</sup> In fact Israel's flagrant and repeated infidelity went beyond the circumstances set forth in Deuteronomy 24, making the possibility of return even less likely (Jer. 3:2–3).<sup>32</sup>

The standing of the marriage becomes more precarious in the prose message in verses 6–11. Yahweh is portrayed as the husband of sisters "Faithless or apostate [נִשְׁכַּחַהּ, v. 6] Israel" and "Traacherous [בְּגַדְתָּהּ, v. 7] Judah." When Israel refused to "turn" (שׁוּב) to Yahweh, He divorced Israel and sent her away into exile (v. 7). Despite observing what happened to her sister Israel, Judah also refused to "return" (שׁוּב) to Yahweh genuinely ("with all her heart," v. 10), making her more culpable than Israel.<sup>33</sup> If Yahweh had already divorced Israel, and Judah was even worse than Israel, the only logical expectation is that Yahweh would also divorce Judah and send her away into exile.

After seeming to argue quite emphatically that a return was not possible, it is all the more surprising that Yahweh repeatedly called for the return of His people in 3:12–4:4. After the negative uses of the root שׁוּב in 3:1–11 and the appearance that the covenant was irrevocably broken, several imperatives calling for Israel's return dominate this section.

3:12, "Return" [שׁוּבָה], directed to the exiles from northern Israel

<sup>31</sup> Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 73.

<sup>32</sup> On the other hand J. A. Thompson argues that the fact that Judah had not "married a particular lover" provided a "loophole" to the deuteronomic provision (*Jeremiah*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 191). However, Jeremiah's rhetoric here made the opposite point, namely, that Judah's behavior was worse than anything envisioned in Deuteronomy 24. Moughtin-Mumby comments, "According to 3:1, Judah has already done worse than the hypothetical wife" (*Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 99).

<sup>33</sup> The repeated root בָּגַד ("treacherous") stresses the refusal of Judah to turn from her sinful ways (3:7–8, 10–11; cf. בְּגַדְתָּהּ, "treacherously" in v. 20).

3:13, "Acknowledge" [feminine singular imperative of יָדַע]

3:14, 22, "Return" [שׁוּבָה]

4:3, "Break up [נִירְוּ] your fallow ground" (cf. v. 3c, "do not sow among thorns")

4:4, "Circumcise [הַמְלִיל] yourselves to the Lord"

4:4, "Remove [הִסְרֵה] the foreskins of your heart"

The prophet's call for Israel to return to Yahweh in 3:14–4:14 reflects a significant shift from the prevailing husband-wife metaphor in 2:1–3:3 to the portrayal of Yahweh's relationship with Israel as that of father-child (son). Yahweh called for the "sons" to return (3:14) and longed for the time when He could reward them as faithful sons rather than punish them as an unfaithful wife (vv. 19–20). This overlapping of family metaphors may seem strange to modern-day readers, but the portrayal of Israel's relationship to Yahweh as both spouse and child stresses the closeness of their bond and the fact that Yahweh had been intimately associated with His people from their inception (cf. Ezek. 16:1–14).

In the portrayal of Israel as a child the prophet first employed female imagery in Jeremiah 3:19–20 as Yahweh expressed the desire to give His daughters an inheritance.<sup>34</sup> As Lundbom observes, the passage reflects an honored status for the female in that daughters normally did not receive an inheritance (cf. Num. 27:1–8; 36:1–12; Job 42:15).<sup>35</sup> The honored status Yahweh wished to confer on Israel made her betrayal of Him all the more deplorable. After the final reference to Israel as unfaithful wife in Jeremiah 3:20, Israel is addressed or described only as the male "son(s)" of Yahweh in 3:21–4:4. The anticipated confession when Israel returns to Yahweh in 3:22–25 is that of rebellious sons (בָּנִים) returning to their father in verses 21–22. The image of male circumcision symbolically represents Israel's repentance in 4:4. The call for the people of Israel to "circumcise" themselves to Yahweh results in the unusual image of a circumcised prostitute.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>34</sup> A reference to daughters is understood here because the pronominal suffixes used with the verbs "I would set you" (אֲשִׁיחֶךָ) and "I would give you" (אֲתִּן לְךָ) in v. 19 are second-person feminine singular. There is a Kethiv-Qere problem regarding the gender of the verbs in the second half of the verse. The Kethiv reads second-person masculine plural for the verbs "you would call me" and "you would not turn from me"; but the Qere reading (preferred because of the suffixes in the first half of the verse) reads these verbs as second-person feminine singular.

<sup>35</sup> Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 318.

<sup>36</sup> Some feminist studies object that the female is marginalized in the promises of

## THE JUDGMENT OF THE UNFAITHFUL “WIFE”

The motifs in Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 are developed in specific ways in the remainder of the book. Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 includes the repeated call for Israel to “return” to Yahweh with the possibility that the nation might avoid the judgment that was to befall her. Beyond 2:1–4:4 the calls for return or statements that judgment might be averted appear in 4:14; 5:1; 6:8; and 7:3–7, but after that these calls for return become less frequent (13:15–17; 17:19–27; 18:11).<sup>37</sup> Yahweh ultimately instructed Jeremiah not to intercede for the people because their judgment was inevitable (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Yahweh had offered a legitimate opportunity for His people to change their ways and be spared from judgment (18:7–9), but their obstinate refusal to change necessitated judgment (vv. 11–12). Yahweh called for the people to “circumcise their hearts” (4:4), for they were circumcised only physically (9:25–26).<sup>38</sup>

Rather than turning to Yahweh, Israel persisted in her behavior as the unfaithful “wife.” The placement of the metaphor of Israel as unfaithful wife in Jeremiah 2–3 means that the entire book is stamped by this understanding of Israel’s relationship to Yahweh.<sup>39</sup> Israel needed to “wash” (וָדַחְתְּ) herself (4:14; cf. 2:22) from her wicked thoughts and ways. The threat of the invading “lion” loomed large (2:15; 4:7), because she would not turn away from being “faithless” (5:11; cf. 3:8, 11, 20).<sup>40</sup> In 4:30–31 Israel elaborately

salvation. Moughtin-Mumby comments, “While this passage has a positive impulse, the female, Judah, is excluded from such ‘redemption’” (*Sexual and Marital Metaphors*, 111). J. Cheryl Exum notes the incongruity of the circumcision of the male as a symbol of covenant fidelity, while the female body and womb is associated with uncleanness, defilement, and death (*Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* [Valley Forge, PA: Trinity, 1993], 24–28). The shift from female to male imagery in this passage is the prophet’s attempt to deliver the “punch line” of his controlling metaphor. Israel as a woman is a literary metaphor, whereas the “sons of Israel” represent the actual people and leaders in the prophet’s predominantly male audience who are called to repent of their sinful ways. Jeremiah must move beyond the metaphor of the unfaithful wife in order to address the need for his male audience to change their sinful ways.

<sup>37</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Do Not Trim a Word: The Contributions of Chapter 26 to the Book of Jeremiah,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 51 (1989): 628.

<sup>38</sup> Disputing the claim that the covenantal sign conferred special status on them as the people of the covenant (cf. Gen. 17), the prophet asserted in Jeremiah 9:25–26 that Israel was no different from others who practiced physical circumcision.

<sup>39</sup> Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003), 105.

<sup>40</sup> The persistence of Israel and Judah in their sinful ways is highlighted in Jeremiah by the repetition of terms and phrases from 2:1–4:4 later in the book.

adorned and beautified herself in an attempt to seduce her lovers, not realizing that her lovers were the ones who wanted her dead. Ironically Israel was dressing up to die.<sup>41</sup> The graphic images of animal sexuality from 2:23–24 return in 5:7–8. Israel could not resist the animalistic impulse to pursue other gods (5:7; cf. 9:2 [Heb., v. 1]). The prophet also condemned the practice of human adultery in marital relationships that filled the land and heightened Judah’s guilt (cf. 7:9; 13:27; 23:10, 14; 29:23).

In Israel’s opening dialogue with Yahweh, she confessed to being an incorrigible nymphomaniac, and Yahweh concurred with this assessment (13:20–27). Yahweh is left with no alternative other than to punish His wife for her infidelities severely. Her “skirts” (רִנְיָהּ) were stained with blood (2:34); so it is fitting justice that her “skirts” (שָׂרָיִל) be “removed” as she is publicly exposed and humiliated (13:22, 26–27). The image of a husband exposing his wife, with the degradation that would accompany such an act (cf. Hos. 2:10–13), is disturbing and shocking, but the reader must keep in mind the metaphorical nature of this imagery.<sup>42</sup>

Biddle, for example, notes the following literary ties between chapters 2–3 and 4–6: “If/you struck them . . . , they [did not] take correction” (2:30; 5:3); “they refused to be ashamed/to take correction” (3:3; 5:3); “my people/they have forgotten me/Yahweh” (2:32; 3:21); the people have “forsaken” Yahweh (2:13, 17, 19; 4:29; 5:19); “the land [made] a waste” (2:15; 4:7; 5:30); “its cities destroyed/in ruins” (2:15; 4:7); “without inhabitant” (2:15; 4:7, 29); “His anger is turned away from me/us” (2:35; 4:8); the leadership list of “kings, rulers, princes, priests, prophets” (2:8, 26; 4:9; 6:13) (*A Redaction History of Jeremiah 2:1–4:2, 219–20*). Also passages relating to the guilt and/or punishment of Israel and Judah appear as doublets elsewhere in the book: (1) 2:26b = 32:32b; (2) 2:27b = 32:33a; (3) 2:28b = 11:13; (4) 4:4 = 21:12b. For the use of doublets in Jeremiah see Geoffrey H. Parker-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doublets and Recurring Phrases* (Atlanta: SBL, 2000).

<sup>41</sup> Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah*, 69–71. Jezebel painted her eyes in anticipation of the arrival of Jehu and her impending death (2 Kings 9:30–37).

<sup>42</sup> Studies that view the God of the prophets as a rapist, a sexual predator, or an abusive husband misrepresent the intent of the imagery (e.g., O’Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, 63–75, 101–24; Gerlinde Baumann, “Das Buch Nahum: Der gerechte Gott als sexueller Gewalttäter,” in *Kompendium feministische Bibel-auslegung*, ed. L. Schottroff and M. Wacker (Gütersloh: Kaiser-Gütersloh, 1998), 347–53; idem, *Love and Violence*; Judith Sanderson, “Nahum,” in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, ed. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 217–21; and T. Drorah Setel, “Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. L. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 86–95).

The metaphor of degraded women does not legitimize the practices of spousal abuse and/or atrocities against women in warfare. The prophets used this imagery for theological and rhetorical impact, not as a guide for the treatment of women or a model for human relationships. The God who punishes His wayward “wife” is also the God who will forgive and restore her (Isa. 50:1; 54:1–8; Ezek. 16:60–63; Hos. 2:14–15). The Old Testament reveals Yahweh as a God who has a special concern for oppressed and needy women (cf. Gen. 21:14–19; Deut. 10:18; Ps. 146:9).

Reading Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 in light of the book's later message of judgment helps clarify the rhetorical intent of the unfaithful wife metaphor. The use of female imagery when portraying Israel's judgment motivates repentance by placing the people in the vulnerable position of women facing the realities of ancient Near Eastern warfare. If the people of Judah (especially the male leaders), in light of their understanding of these realities, could see themselves as vulnerable women about to suffer siege, rape, public exposure, and the loss of husband and children, then perhaps they would be motivated to change. The "daughter of My people" (4:11; 6:26; 8:11, 19, 21–22; 9:1, 7) and "daughter of Zion" (6:2, 23) were about to be attacked.<sup>43</sup> As O'Brien notes, the metaphor of Zion as daughter "underscores just how helpless the land is when Yahweh withholds protection."<sup>44</sup> Rather than denigrating the female, the image of Zion as daughter, wife, and mother portrays the city as "fragile and gentle" (6:2), something beautiful and precious.<sup>45</sup>

The Babylonian invasion of Judah did inflict great female suffering. Women mourned over the loss of their family members and the piling up of corpses (6:11, 26–27; 9:17–21; 15:8–9; 18:21). Women and daughters died along with men and sons (7:20; 11:22; 14:16–17) and experienced the horrible practice of cannibalism (19:9). The prophet employed the image of pain in childbearing to describe the reality of the military defeat, exile, and death that

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Deuteronomic law limited Israel in its normal practice of warfare from acts of violence against noncombatants (Deut. 20:13–15). A captive woman taken in battle was to be treated with dignity (21:10–14). In judgment oracles against the nations surrounding Israel, Amos condemns the nations for their atrocities against each other (not just Israel) in battle, particularly their abuse of women (cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9–10, 13; 2:1). Nations who practice brutality will receive just recompense for their actions (cf. Nah. 2:7–13; Hab. 2:6–20). The lament and protest language of the Old Testament recognizes the injustices of warfare, and it reflects the fact that the brutality of warfare is evidence of a world broken by sin (cf. Pss. 44; 83; Lam. 2:1–22; Jer. 8:5; 9:7). The Old Testament anticipates the future day of God's kingdom on earth when warfare will no longer exist (cf. Isa. 2:1–4).

<sup>43</sup> Also "daughter" or "daughters" are referred to in 4:31; 5:17; 7:31; 9:20; 11:22; 14:16–17; 16:3; and 19:9.

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, 136.

<sup>45</sup> For the personification of Zion as female in both its Old Testament and ancient Near Eastern context see *ibid.*, 125–51; Mark E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective: Scripture in Context IV*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies, ed. K. Lawson Younger, W. H. Hallo; and B. F. Batto (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellin, 1991), 173–94; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993); Julie Galambusch, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1992); and J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," *Revue biblique* 92 (1985): 557–69.

awaited the people (4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23). Childbearing as an image for doom presents an arresting reversal in that the giving of life (childbearing) is here associated with death. The prophet intended the men and leaders of Judah to identify themselves as helpless females. This idea is explicit in 30:6 where warriors in battle put their hands on their stomach as they went into labor.

The judgment that Jeremiah warned of is especially terrifying because it involved the loss of the covenant blessings that were important to the normal experience of life—family, marriage, and childbearing (cf. Lev. 26:9; Deut. 28:4). The corruption of the marriage between Israel and Yahweh brought about the disruption of marriage at the human level. Marriages would no longer occur (7:34; 25:10, 16), and families would be torn apart by war. Jeremiah's own birth would become a curse (15:10; 20:14–18), and Yahweh forbade him to marry or have children (16:2). Ironically the blessing of marriage and family was reserved for those who were taken away to Babylon as exiles (29:6).

#### THE ONGOING DISPUTE BETWEEN ISRAEL AND YAHWEH

The dialogue between Israel, Yahweh, and Jeremiah that begins in 2:1–4:4 carries over into the rest of the book. Yahweh would restore Israel so that she would move from empty expressions of covenant fidelity to the proper confession of past sin and true loyalty (envisioned in 3:22–25; 4:2). But to the very end of this book Israel continued to say the wrong things and to defy Yahweh or to profess loyalty to Him with empty words. Hearing these quotations the reader can almost visualize the entire book as a debate between Yahweh and His people with Jeremiah as the intermediary.

In chapters 1–25 the prophet frequently offered quotations from the people and leaders that reflect their beliefs and/or responses to Jeremiah's words. The quotations can be grouped in the following categories.

1. Assertions of false security (5:12 is typical—"Misfortune will not come on us"; cf. 6:14; 7:4, 10; 8:8, 11; 14:13–15; 21:13; 22:14). The oracles of the false prophets in 23:17, 25, 31, 33–38 belong in this category.
2. Questions concerning why Yahweh was bringing judgment (5:19 is typical—"Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?"; cf. 8:19; 13:22; 16:10; 17:15).
3. Expressions of despair over their situation in light of God's judgment (8:20 is typical—"Harvest is past, summer is ended, and we are not saved"; cf. vv. 14–15).



4. Statements of intent to persist in sinful behavior (18:12—“Each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart”; cf. 22:21).
5. Expressions of derision or intent to harm Jeremiah for proclaiming an unpopular message (11:19 is typical—“Let us cut him off from the land of the living”; cf. 13:22; 11:21; 12:4; 18:18).
6. The speaking of “falsehood” (5:2—They swear “as the LORD lives,” but “swear falsely” [רָשָׁע]; cf. 9:3 [Heb., v. 4], where the people are accused of speaking falsely [רָשָׁע]).
7. The proper things that Judah had failed to say (5:24—“Let us now fear the LORD our God,” who provides agricultural bounty).

Fretheim comments that Israel’s speech in the opening dialogue with Yahweh in 2:1–4:4 is “confusing . . . illusory, self-serving, and self-condemning,” and this same type of speech characterizes the dialogue between Israel and Yahweh (and Jeremiah) throughout the book.<sup>46</sup> Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 anticipates a future time when Israel will confess the sinfulness she had refused to acknowledge (3:22–25). The people will put away their idols and swear truthfully in the name of Yahweh (4:2, “As the LORD lives”). The Book of Consolation (chaps. 30–33) also looks forward to the transformation of Israel’s speech. Israel will respond to Yahweh’s discipline by acknowledging even the sins of its youth (31:18–19). Instead of prostituting themselves to other gods, the people will exhort one another, “Let us go up to Zion to the LORD our God” (31:6), and they will bring thank offerings to Yahweh as they make confession of His enduring loyal love (רַחֲמֵי, 33:11). These words of blessing and joy will replace the past words of lament and mourning (cf. 4:31; 14:1; 30:5–7; 31:15–16). The people will no longer charge Yahweh with unfairness or claim that they were not responsible for the judgment that had befallen them (31:29). The fact that the people will no longer need to say to each other the words “Know the LORD” (31:34) demonstrates that they will all truly know Him in a way that has not characterized them in the past (cf. 5:4–5; 8:7; 9:24; 22:15–16).<sup>47</sup>

While the “days to come” will bring a time when Israel’s speech and relationship to Yahweh will be transformed, the words of the

people continued to reflect their rebellious posture toward Yahweh. They continued to speak “deceit” (lit., “falsehood”; 8:5). Jeremiah 5:2 condemns the Israel of Jeremiah’s day for continuing to swear falsely by saying, “As the LORD lives” (cf. 38:16). Israel’s words of outright defiance resurface in 18:12 when the people were presented with the need to change their ways through the sign act of Jeremiah’s first visit to the potter.

This defiance is reflected in varying degrees among the people with whom Jeremiah interacted in the narrative portions of chapters 26–45. When Jeremiah announced the impending destruction of Jerusalem, everyone said, “You must die!” (26:8). False prophets like Hananiah countered Jeremiah’s message of judgment with their own words of hope and blessing (28:10–11). Even after the fall of Jerusalem the leaders of Judah continued to accuse Jeremiah of being a liar and traitor to his country (43:2–3; cf. 37:13; 38:4). In Egypt the refugees remained defiant by openly stating that they would not “obey” (עָבַד) Yahweh and that they would instead continue their sacrifices, offerings, and oaths to the queen of heaven (44:16–17, 25). Jeremiah 4:2 looks forward to Israel swearing honest oaths in the name of Yahweh, but Jeremiah’s ministry concluded with the people of Israel swearing false oaths to another deity. Jeremiah 3:22–25 looks forward to Israel acknowledging that it was their worship of Baal that took away their blessing and prosperity. But in 44:17–20 the remnant in Egypt suggested the very opposite, arguing that disaster fell on them when they ceased their offerings to the queen of heaven.

The narrative of Jeremiah’s interaction with the Judean refugees in Egypt (chap. 44) brings the reader full circle to the dialogue introduced in 2:1–4:4. The indictment of Israel in chapter 2 warned of a time when Israel would regret its reliance on Egypt and would cover their faces in shame (2:37). While the warning in chapter 2 relates to the Exile that was coming, it also is a portent of what happened to Israel at the end of the book as the people continued in their defiance of Yahweh after the Exile had already occurred.

#### THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE UNFAITHFUL WIFE

The Old Testament prophetic books are generally “variations on a tripartite structure” of punishment for Israel, punishment for the nations, and salvation for Israel (or Israel and the nations).<sup>48</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 74.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

<sup>48</sup> Ehud Ben Zvi, “The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic Literature,” in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. M. A.

Words of judgment ultimately give way to words of hope.<sup>49</sup> The message of hope in Jeremiah is most prominent in the "Book of Consolation" (chaps. 30–33). A number of conceptual and lexical parallels may be seen between the message of judgment and the call to repentance in 2:1–4:4 and the poetic oracles of salvation in chapters 30–31. These parallels help demonstrate that the transformation of Yahweh's unfaithful "wife" is central to Jeremiah's message.

The recurring promise in the Book of Consolation is that Yahweh will "restore the fortunes" (וְשִׁבְרֵי אֶת־שְׁבוּרָה) of His people (30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26). Israel's broken relationship with Yahweh as both "wife" and "son" will be restored. Because of Yahweh's grace and covenant fidelity, Israel will become the son Yahweh has always wanted, and the unfaithful wife will once again become "virgin" Israel (31:4). At the beginning of the book Yahweh called for His people to "return" (שׁוּב), but they were unwilling and unable. So Jeremiah promised that Yahweh would act in a redemptive way to bring about Israel's "return."

The restoration in Jeremiah 30–31 repairs the covenantal dissolution in 2:1–4:4. Despite Israel's infidelity and lack of lasting אֱהָבָה ("loyal love") toward Yahweh, Yahweh remains faithful to His covenantal commitments and will act in the future on Israel's behalf on the basis of these commitments. In the promissory passages in 3:14–18 and 4:1–4 emphasis is placed on the Abrahamic Covenant. In 3:14–18 Yahweh promised to increase Israel's numbers greatly when they return to the land that was promised to their fathers. Also the nations will join the people of Israel in worshipping Yahweh at Jerusalem. Thus Israel's hope for the future is the realization of the trifold blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant—descendants, land, and blessing to all peoples.<sup>50</sup> The call to "circumcise the heart" in 4:4 recalls the physical sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham (Gen. 17:10–14).

Jeremiah 30–33 promises that Yahweh will restore His covenant relationship with Israel by performing a second exodus even greater than the first (31:2–6) and will establish a New Covenant

in which He will forgive the sins of the past and will ensure Israel's future fidelity (31:31–34; 32:38–41).<sup>51</sup> The foundation for this hope of restoration is Yahweh's perpetual love and אֱהָבָה toward Israel (31:3), and Yahweh's commitment to Israel, which is as lasting as the established order of Creation itself (31:35–37; 33:23–26). The special relationship of Yahweh as Israel's God and Israel as His people will permanently endure (cf. 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38).

A closer examination of the individual oracles in chapters 30–31 reveals more direct connections to the language and imagery found in 2:1–4:4. In 30:8 Yahweh promised to "break Israel's yoke" and "tear off" the "bonds" of Israel's servitude to the nations, directly reversing Israel's defiant breaking of the yoke and tearing off of the bonds of loyalty to Yahweh in 2:20. Israel had become a "slave" (עֶבֶד) to the nations (2:14), but Yahweh promised that His people would no longer be "enslaved" (עֶבְרָה) by foreigners. Instead they will once again become His "servants" (verbal and nominal forms of עָבַד occur in 30:9–10). Yahweh will "save" Israel (hiphil of יָשַׁע in 30:10–11), the very thing He refused to do when Israel gave allegiance to other gods (hiphil of יָשַׁע in 2:27).

The oracle in 30:12–17 also promises a reversal of Israel's subjugation to the nations that recalls Jeremiah 2 in particular. The statement that Israel has been disappointed by her foreign allies (lit., "lovers") is in line with the warnings in chapter 2 that Israel would receive no benefit from "drinking the waters" (figurative for lovemaking) of Egypt and Assyria (2:16–18, 36–37). Yahweh had done what He warned of in "striking" Israel and inflicting "discipline" on His people (cf. 30:14 and 2:30), but now He is ready to deliver. When Israel was faithful to Yahweh, trouble came to any nation that dared to "devour" (אָכַל) His first-fruit people (2:3), but Israel's defection had caused her to be "devoured" (אָכַל; 2:30; 3:24). Yet Yahweh promised that He would "devour" (אָכַל) Israel's enemies (30:16) and that the nations, rather than Israel, would become "plunder" (בָּזָז; contrast 2:14 and 30:16).

The promise of Israel's restoration because of Yahweh's abiding love and fidelity to Israel in 31:2–6 recalls the indictment of Israel's fickleness and covenant infidelity in the prophet's opening words in chapter 2. Israel will become the beneficiary of Yahweh's grace in the "desert," the very place where she had once been loyal to Yahweh (cf. 31:2 and 2:2). Israel's "love" for Yahweh quickly faded (2:2), but Yahweh has "loved" (אָהַב) Israel "with an everlast-

Sweeney and E. B. Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 285.

<sup>49</sup> Even the Book of Amos, which pictures the remnant of Israel as the ear or legs of a sheep torn from the mouth of a lion (Amos 3:12), concludes with a word of hope about the rebuilding of the house of David and Israel's future prosperity (9:11–15).

<sup>50</sup> Fretheim observes the specific connection between the inclusion of the nations and the language of the Abrahamic promises (cf. Gen. 12:3; 22:8; 26:4; Pss. 47:9; 72:17) (*Jeremiah*, 88). See also Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 241.

<sup>51</sup> For development of this theme in Jeremiah see Gary E. Yates, "New Exodus and No Exodus in Jeremiah 26–45: Promise and Warning to the Exiles in Babylon," *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006): 1–22.

ing love” (31:3). Yahweh’s דָּוָר is of a different quality than the דָּוָר of Israel’s youth. The people will “find” (מָצָא) Yahweh’s grace, even though they have lived in the past as if they had “found” (מָצָא) Yahweh to be an unfaithful partner (2:5). Yahweh’s abiding commitment to His covenant promises will transform His unfaithful wife into a “virgin” (31:4, 21–22), and He will once again enable Israel to enjoy the benefits of the fertile land that had become a barren wasteland because of her sin (contrast 31:4–6 with 2:7, 15).

Jeremiah 31:15–22 includes three stanzas that focus on Rachel (vv. 15–17), Ephraim (vv. 18–20), and “virgin” Israel (vv. 21–22). “The three stanzas are linked by the common theme of change of heart and fortunes.”<sup>52</sup> The oracle relates back to Jeremiah 2–4 because of its repetition of שָׁיב and its emphasis on the restoration of Israel to Yahweh as both wife and son. The passage begins with Rachel (Israel) grieving over the loss of her children, but Yahweh promises that the children will “return” (שָׁיב) from the land of the enemy to their homeland (31:16–17). The image then shifts to Ephraim (Israel) as the repentant son. Ephraim expresses the confession of wrongdoing and remorse for sin that is anticipated in 3:19–21. Israel as Yahweh’s son has been unresponsive to His “discipline” (מוֹסֵר) in the past (2:30), but is now willing to admit that he has “received correction” (forms using the root סָר appear twice in 31:18). In the past “the voice of weeping has been heard” as Israel cried out to her pagan gods (3:21), and the “voice of weeping has been heard” as Rachel mourned over her disastrous judgment (31:15). Now Israel is finally weeping over her sins. Ephraim has come to recognize the “shame” (בוֹשׁ) of his past actions (cf. the root בּוֹשׁ in 2:26, 36; 3:24–25). Because of this confession Yahweh will have compassion on Ephraim and restore His “son” (3:20).

The call for the “virgin” Israel to “return” in 31:21–22 joins the image of male and female, as in 2:1–4:4, in order to highlight the completeness of Israel’s restoration. The twofold command to “return” in 31:21 focuses on Israel’s return to the land from exile, but this “return” can occur only when Israel ceases to be a “faithless daughter” (v. 22). This adjective “faithless” (שׁוֹבֵבָה) with reference to Israel parallels the use of the same adjective to describe Israel as “faithless” sons in 3:14, 22 and the noun מְשֻׁבָּה (“turning back” or “apostasy”) with reference to Israel in 3:12.<sup>53</sup> This transformation

<sup>52</sup> Barbara A. Bozak, *“Life Anew”: A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30–31* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991), 24.

<sup>53</sup> The synonymous root בָּגַד (“treacherous”) is used of Israel and/or Judah in 3:8, 11, 20.

of Israel from unfaithful prostitute to pure virgin will be miraculous, something only Yahweh has the power to “create.”

Yahweh’s promise to establish a New Covenant with Israel in 31:29–37 provides the climax to the portrayal of Israel’s future restoration in chapters 30–31, and this passage clearly reflects a reversal of the warnings of covenant dissolution in 2:1–4:4.

In this New Covenant Yahweh will restore the two unfaithful sisters, Israel and Judah, as one people (3:6–11; 31:31). The relationship between Yahweh and Israel will not be like the failed marriage of the past when Yahweh brought His people out of Egypt (cf. 2:6; 31:32) and Israel had reciprocated by worshipping “Baal” (בַּעַל) rather than acknowledging Yahweh as her “husband” (בַּעַל) (cf. 2:8, 23; 31:32). Israel had become a wild vine when Yahweh had “planted” her in the land, but Yahweh will “plant” His people in the land once again (cf. 2:21; 31:33). Yahweh will write His law on the hearts of the people, thus bringing about the “return” and circumcision of the heart that Yahweh had commanded of Israel but that Israel had refused to carry out (cf. 4:4; 31:33). The “sin” and “iniquity” of the past that fractured the relationship between Yahweh and Israel will be forgiven (cf. 2:22, 25; 3:13; 31:34).

The picture of Israel as a woman restored to her husband and children in Jeremiah 30–33 provides reversal and resolution of what is found at the beginning of the book. The dancing for joy in 31:4 contrasts sharply with the images of women weeping and mourning found elsewhere in the book. Yahweh will act to restore the blessings of family, marriage, and childbearing. Pregnant women will join the exiles returning to the land (31:8–9), and marriage celebrations will occur throughout the land (33:11). In the days of Jeremiah Judah had been a “faithless daughter,” but Israel’s restoration will be a time when “a woman surrounds a man” (31:22).<sup>54</sup> Allen explains that Israel as the woman “would be empowered to show initiative as covenant partner.”<sup>55</sup> Israel will again be able to love and embrace Yahweh, her “husband.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>54</sup> The Jewish Publication Society translation reads, “A woman shall court a man.” The verb הִסִּיבָה (polel stem) may also convey the arresting image of the woman protecting the man from harm or danger (cf. Deut. 32:10).

<sup>55</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 350.

<sup>56</sup> Feminist studies have tended to critique even the image of Israel as a restored wife as reflecting primarily male priorities. Athalya Brenner argues that the images of a restored Israel “constitute an additional transference of male concern about legitimate, properly allocated gender roles to religious discourse” (“On Prophetic Propaganda and the Politics of ‘Love’: The Case of Jeremiah,” in *A Feminist Com-*

## ENEMY NATIONS AS THE DISGRACED WOMAN IN JEREMIAH 46–51

The concluding oracles of judgment against the nations in chapters 46–51 present a reversal in that the judgment that has befallen Israel will ultimately fall on her enemies. In these oracles against the nations the image of “daughter” used elsewhere in the book to refer to Israel is now applied to the foreign nations that stand under Yahweh’s judgment. The oracles begin with Egypt, Israel’s first oppressor, and conclude with a lengthy message (nearly half the section) against Babylon, Israel’s present oppressor. As with reference to Judah, the application of female imagery to the enemy nations conveys the idea of helplessness and vulnerability in the context of military attack.<sup>57</sup> Like the armies of Israel the warriors in these foreign armies will become like women (48:41; 49:22, 24; 50:37, 43; 51:30). The families and children of these foreign nations will bear the brunt of war just like the families of Israel and Judah (47:3; 48:4–6; 49:10, 20; 50:45–46).

The image of a humiliated daughter is applied to Babylon, the ultimate reversal of fortunes in the Book of Jeremiah. The first reference to the “daughter of Babylon” appears in 50:41–43, which duplicates the message against the “daughter of Zion” in 6:22–24. Babylon, the enemy from the north that had attacked Zion, will now herself be attacked by an enemy “from the north” (cf. 50:3, 9). An oracle describing the impending defeat of Babylon in 51:27–33 also recalls earlier warnings of military attack against Judah and Jerusalem. The blowing of the “trumpet” (שֹׁפָר, 4:6, 19, 21; 6:1), raising of the “standard” (סֵל, 4:6), and the call for the troops to “consecrate/prepare” (שָׁקַדְוּ, 6:4) themselves for war against Babylon have previously sounded the call for an attack on Judah. The land will “quake” (רָעַע, 51:29; cf. 4:24; 8:16; 10:10, 22) and “tremble” (רָדַד, 51:29; cf. 23:19; 30:23) at the siege of Babylon as it did when Yahweh led His armies against Judah (51:29).<sup>58</sup>

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*panion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995], 98). Like a good mother, Rachel is concerned primarily with her sons, and the “virgin” Israel “is a better spouse for a male than a tainted wife.” Bozak stresses the more positive message conveyed by the image of Israel as a restored wife. “The portrayal of Israel according to feminine categories is an effective means of alluding to the desired relationship with Yhwh. Israel is not a ‘possession’ of Yhwh any more than a woman is the property of her father or her husband. There is obvious dependence on the male, yet this dependence is not absolute. Love and intimacy determine the husband’s deeds for his wife while at the same time she acts with responsibility and even a certain autonomy” (“*Life Anew*,” 164).

<sup>57</sup> O’Brien, *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor*, 150.

<sup>58</sup> Here Jeremiah’s message parallels the second half of Isaiah, in which the “daughter of Babylon” and the “daughter of Zion” also experience a reversal of for-

Remarkably the term “daughter” and female imagery applied to the foreign nations in Jeremiah 46–51 reflects Yahweh’s love and concern for these foreign nations. Despite the stereotypical language of destruction and defeat, Yahweh promised that defeat will not be final for Egypt (46:26) and that He will “restore the fortunes” of Moab (48:47), Ammon (49:6), and Elam (49:39), just as He had done for His people Israel. Ultimately the Book of Jeremiah also holds forth the hope that the nations will share in the covenantal intimacy that exists between Yahweh and Israel, His bride.

## CONCLUSION

As would be expected of any ancient document presenting the message of a prophet who ministered for more than forty years at the time of the collapse of Judah as a nation, the Book of Jeremiah is a complex and mysterious work for the modern reader. Its compositional history is largely unrecoverable, but the book’s overriding themes and message are not. Hopefully, critical portrayals of Jeremiah’s disarray and incoherence will continue to diminish through more careful literary and rhetorical study of the book. Befitting a text that originated through divine revelation and inspiration, the evidences of order and literary coherence prevail over the apparent disorder.

Jeremiah’s ministry was one of “tearing down” and “building up” (1:10), announcing Yahweh’s judgment against Israel as an unfaithful covenant partner and then promising the nation’s transformation out of her destruction. The opening message in Jeremiah 2:1–4:4 portrays Israel as an unfaithful wife, and the remainder of the book explores how Yahweh will ultimately restore that broken relationship.

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tunes. Babylon will come down from her exalted throne to sit in the dust as she is shamed and exposed in defeat (Isa. 47:1–11), and Zion will be restored as Yahweh’s bride following a time of divorce and will have her barrenness removed as she is filled with sons and daughters returning from exile (49:14–22; 54:1–17; 62:1–12; 66:8–14).