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PART ONE

TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE BIBLE ITSELF

A STORY OF THREE PROPHETS:
SYNCHRONIC AND DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS
OF JEREMIAH 26

Joep Dubbink

Within Old Testament scholarship there had been a long debate between the advocates of a synchronic approach and those of a diachronic approach. Diachronic approaches, known as a variety of *Geschichte*, predominated the field for a long time. In recent years, more attention has been given to synchronic approaches, and gradually the assumption that this method is naive and unscholarly has paled. At the height of the debate, often with religious zeal, each method claimed exclusive right to the explanation of the Hebrew Bible, without allowing for the validity of the other approach even in the most obvious cases. For this reason, the debate has often been tedious and unfruitful for actual exegetical work.

Eep Talstra offers a simple and convincing solution to this dilemma: take the text as it is, do all possible synchronic analysis, and then add a diachronic dimension to deal with whatever problems remain.¹ In this article I apply this double method to Jeremiah 26 and hope to show that using it is far more fruitful than laboriously working with only one of the two approaches. In this way, a new perspective on Jeremiah 26 emerges.

1 A FIRST GLANCE

Jeremiah 26 is the opening chapter of Jeremiah 26–45, the extensive prose sections that offer a third person account of the work of the prophet Jeremiah—formerly called the ‘Baruchschrift’, more recently the ‘second book of Jeremiah’.² In particular, Jeremiah 26 describes

¹ Eep Talstra, *Oude en Nieuwe Lezers. Een Inleiding in de methoden van uitleg van het Oude Testament* (Ontwerpen 2; Kampen, 2002), pp. 97–117, esp. 115: ‘*Compositie gaat vóór de reconstructie van de tekst*’ (‘composition has priority over the reconstruction of the text’). Talstra offers an important theological argumentation for this double approach, which unfortunately cannot be treated here.

² Ernest Wilson Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah*. (Oxford, 1970), p. 137, regards the Jeremiah prose as a ‘second stage in the formation of the Jeremiah tradition’; likewise Kathleen M. O’Connor, ‘“Do not Trim a Word”: The Contributions of Chapter 26 to the Book of Jeremiah’, *CBQ* 51 (1989), pp. 617–630, esp. 617; Else Kragelund Holt, ‘Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon

the reactions to a speech or sermon the prophet delivers in the temple precinct.³ The speech, found in vv. 4–6, appears to be a short version of the so-called Temple Sermon (Jer 7:1–15). A resemblance between the two texts is to be expected since they share a number of words and expressions (see below), in particular a reference to the former sanctuary in Shiloh (Jer 26:6; 7:12–15). The remark of Else Kragelund Holt, however, ‘[t]hat these two chapters recount the same event in the life of the prophet Jeremiah is a fact that is universally accepted among Old Testament Scholars’, is too optimistic, as the character of the resemblance is disputed. As Kathleen O’Connor puts it, ‘(the exegete) may appeal to the existence of two independent traditions arising from the same event, propose literary dependence of one account upon the other, or posit the occurrence of two different events’.⁴ Even the term ‘event’ is not undisputed, and the choice between the alternatives depends largely on one’s opinion on the historical character of this ‘biography’, while positions vary strongly between the commentators.⁵ If we take the relation between both texts to be literary, the question remains concerning which text is dependent on the other, or whether both are dependent on an older source, now lost.

and the Deuteronomists: An Investigation of the Redactional Relationship between Jeremiah 7 and 26’, *JSOT* 36 (1986), pp. 73–87, esp. 73.

³ An overview of the classic positions regarding the chapter can be found in: F.L. Hossfeld and I. Meyer, ‘Der Prophet vor dem Tribunal’, *ZAW* 86 (1974), pp. 30–50, esp. 30–31. The questions raised by the narrative are summarized by Klaas A.D. Smeelik, ‘Jeremia 26 als literarische Komposition’, *DBAT* 26 (1989–1990), pp. 102–124, esp. 102.

⁴ O’Connor, “Do not Trim a Word”, p. 620.

⁵ William L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 2. Chapters 26–52* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 1989), p. 103, is most outspoken in dating the event: ‘...most likely at the feast of Booths in September/October 609’. On the opposite side we find Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah. A Commentary* (SCM Press, Old Testament Library; London, 1986), p. 515, who sees a number of redactional layers that have completely obscured the meaning of the text. In general Carroll does not accept the historicity of any event told in the book: ‘...the only Jeremiah we have is the textual or literary Jeremiah’ (Robert P. Carroll, ‘Radical Clashes of Will and Style: Recent Commentary Writing on the Book of Jeremiah’, *JSOT* 45 (1989), pp. 99–114, esp. 102). Behind this clash of opinions lies a more fundamental issue: is the prose of Jeremiah to be attributed to the historical prophet, or is it mainly the work of one or more Deuteronomistic redactors? The classical debate on this issue between Winfried Thiel and Helga Weippert in the 1980s ended, as far as I can see, with most commentators deciding in favour of Thiel. In my opinion a more precise distinction is necessary between Deuteronomistic *language*—which is to be found everywhere in the book of Jeremiah—and Deuteronomistic *theologies*, of which there seem to be more than one. This issue is, however, beyond the scope of this article.

Besides these introductory questions, the story confronts us with a number of issues regarding the narrative structure of the story:

- Jeremiah's sermon in vv. 4–6 offers a *conditional* prophecy of doom, which is rather unusual in classical prophecy. When the listeners give their version of what they heard, they leave out this conditional aspect. In their summary of Jeremiah's preaching in v. 9, they accuse the prophet of having uttered an *unconditional* prophecy of doom.
- In v. 9, the people are radically opposed to Jeremiah, while later on they seem to be neutral or even positive (vv. 11, 16).
- In Jeremiah's own words in v. 13, the conditional aspect returns. Is literary-historical analysis needed here, or can rhetorical analysis arrive at a convincing explanation for this apparent tension in the text?
- In vv. 17–19 a verse from the book of Micah is quoted by the elders in support of Jeremiah's position. This quotation, however, is placed after the verdict 'not guilty' has been delivered (v. 16). The same question arises: can this order of verses be explained from the composition of the text, or do we see here the remnants of a redaction process?
- What is the connection between vv. 20–23—the story of the prophet Uriah being arrested and executed—and the rest of the chapter? Is there a connection at all, apart from the theme of the opposition a prophet encounters when uttering words that are unfavourable to the authorities?
- Finally, what is the intention of the story, and who is the implied audience? Many solutions have been proposed: it is simply a report of a crucial event at the beginning of Jeremiah's career;⁶ it serves to legitimate Jeremiah as a prophet;⁷ it is an admonition to the Judeans in exile to be obedient to the Torah, their only hope for the future;⁸ it is a meditation about God who is always willing to suspend his decision to punish the people when they repent.⁹

⁶ Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, p. 110.

⁷ See, e.g., Gunther Wanke, *Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchsschrift* (BZAW 122; Berlin, 1971), p. 80; Holt, 'Jeremiah's Temple Sermon', p. 82.

⁸ Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles*, p. 133; Holt, 'Jeremiah's Temple Sermon', p. 85.

⁹ Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 26–52* (HThK; Freiburg etc., 2005), p. 41.

2 JEREMIAH 26 STEP BY STEP

2.1 *The Setting (26:1–3)*

The story is dated at the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim (609–597 BCE). While the dating is more recent than that of Jeremiah 7, the location is virtually identical. The expression ‘(you) that enter these gates to worship YHWH’ links both passages closely,¹⁰ a link the reader of the Masoretic Text cannot overlook.

The Masoretic Text, however, offers neither the only nor the earliest form of this story, and for the reader of other versions the reference is much less clear. Most of Jer 7:1–2 is not found in the Septuagint, which is to be regarded as a witness to a textual tradition rather different from the one the Masoretic Text represents.¹¹ Instead of these two verses, the Septuagint only has: ‘Hear the word of YHWH, all Judah’. Apparently the sermon itself predates the current historical framing.

¹⁰ This only occurs twice, apart from Jer 7:2 and 26:2, according to the *Stuttgarter Elektronische Studienbibel (SESB)* 3.0 (Stuttgart, 2009), used for all searches in this article. Of the other citations, Ezek 46:9 also refers to the temple, 2 Sam 15:32 to a different place of worship.

¹¹ The matter of the two editions of the Book of Jeremiah seemed to be settled by the work of, amongst others, Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis–Maastricht, 1992), pp. 319–321. The theory that the LXX is a witness to an older Hebrew text has been widely acknowledged. There is no other satisfying explanation for the fact that the LXX is about 1/6 shorter than the MT. Janzen long ago concluded that the hypothesis of abridgment by the LXX translators ‘ought to be abandoned once and for all’ (J. Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the text of Jeremiah* [HSM 6; Cambridge, Mass., 1973], pp. 114–115). Recently, however, this view has been challenged by Fischer, who argues that the LXX is ‘eine stark verändernde Übersetzung’ (a strongly invasive translation), and rejects the possibility that the LXX is based on a different Hebrew text: Georg Fischer, ‘Die Diskussion um den Jeremiatext’, in Martin Karrer and Wolfgang Kraus (eds.), *Die Septuaginta: Texte, Kontexte, Lebenswelten* (WUNT 219; Tübingen, 2008), pp. 612–629, esp. 615, 620 (quotation). In my opinion, his argumentation does not take into account the fact that two of the Qumran manuscripts (4QJer^b and 4QJer^d; cf. Tov, *Textual Criticism*, pp. 178, 225–227; Ernst Würthwein, *Der Text des alten Testaments* [Stuttgart, 1973], pp. 54–55) support LXX readings. Although my observations fit in with the LXX version as the ‘First Edition’, it is perhaps better to stay on the safe side and follow the extensive research of Shead. He confirms that there must have been two different Hebrew textual traditions, the LXXV (the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the LXX) and the MT, but refuses to choose which text is older: ‘...each recension adds secondary readings to a common text base.... LXXV has revised this text less extensively than M. There is no saying on textual grounds which text came first’ (Andrew G. Shead, *The Open Book and the Sealed Book: Jeremiah 32 in its Hebrew and Greek Recensions* [Sheffield 2002], esp. 255–263 [quotation], p. 260).

This does not have to mean that Jer 7:1–15 originally was not related to the temple. In fact, it probably was, if only for the famous words in 7:4: ‘The temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH, the temple of YHWH are these!’¹² This sentence quite clearly identifies the setting as being in the temple, where the prophet points to the buildings around him. His prophecy is closely related to Psalm 15 and Ps 24:3–6, both to be identified as ‘songs of entrance’, sung to the pilgrims entering the temple to warn them concerning their moral conduct. The prophet, or rather the prophetic writer, varies the theme of these songs, radicalizes the demands made of the pilgrims, and transforms them into an accusation to the people as a whole. Just as the Psalms without a frame still have a recognizable *Sitz im Leben*, so does the prophecy in Jer 7:3–15. However, in a more narrative setting, the ‘staging’, including direct references to the temple, was added, as we now find in the Masoretic Text.

In Jer 26:2 the prophet receives the instruction not to omit a word. The word גרע, ‘cut off, trim’, is used as almost a technical term for leaving out parts of the word of YHWH. Both other occurrences of the combination of גרע and דבר in the Hebrew Bible are found in Deuteronomy, and it is important to note that in both texts, not taking away anything from the words of God (or adding anything to them) is a condition for living in the promised land.¹³

Many commentators observe that the opening verses of the chapter closely resemble the opening verses of Jeremiah 36. Both chapters have the same theme: the reaction of the hearers, and more specifically of the king, to prophetic criticism. The third verses of both chapters are almost identical. The poignant אולי, ‘perhaps’, gives voice to the divine hope that the words of the prophets will receive due attention.

¹² The LXX has ναός κυρίου only *twice*, but this does not imply anything concerning the Hebrew original of the LXX: it is quite possible that a triple repetition, rare even in Hebrew, was simply too much for a Greek translator.

¹³ Deut 4:2, cf. v. 1, ‘when you enter the land’; Deut 13:1 (transl. 12:32), cf. 12:30–32 (transl. 12:29–31): Israel is admonished to listen to the unabridged commandments of God, lest they should be expelled from the land like the foreign people who were removed from the land before them.

2.2 *The Sermon (26:4–6)*

The sermon Jeremiah delivers in this chapter is much shorter than the version in Jeremiah 7. The content is quite straightforward. The speech consists of a single complex sentence, ranging over three verses¹⁴ (words in italics have parallels in Jeremiah 7):

4	... <i>if you do not listen to me</i>
and <i>walk</i> according to the law I gave you	7:5; 7:13
[negative: 7:9, 12]
5	and do not listen to the <i>words</i>
of my servants the prophets
that I sent to you, <i>early and late</i>
without you listening to them— | [negative: 7:4, 8]

7:13 |
| 6 | then I will make this <i>house similar to Shiloh</i>
and this city I will make into a curse
for all peoples of the earth. | 7:12, 14 |

While the occurrence of Shiloh and some specific expressions like *השכם ושלח*, ‘rising early and sending (diligently, persistently)’, can hardly be accidental, the actual number of words in common is surprisingly low. It is clear that Jer 26:4–6 covers only a part of 7:1–15. Essential to the shared part is the conditional message, which is formulated negatively in Jeremiah 26, whereas Jeremiah 7 offers a positive version: ‘If you [do justice, etc.] I will let you dwell in this place forever and ever’ (7:5–7). But Jer 7:1–15 also discusses the matter of false trust in the temple, with the keyword *שקר*, ‘lie’ (7:4, 8, 9), and the verb *בטח*, ‘to trust’ (7:4, 8, 14). Rather surprisingly, the example of Shiloh in Jeremiah 26 is used in Jeremiah 7 for a completely different purpose.

Some commentators suppose that the version of the sermon in chapter 26 is the original one, mainly because it is shorter. Redactors tend more often to expand their material than to abridge it.¹⁵ In this case,

¹⁴ Fischer, *Jeremia* 26–52, p. 26. Rather rare in Biblical Hebrew, but cf. Jer 7:5–7, 7:9–10.

¹⁵ On the other hand, some commentators explicitly try to save Jer 7:1–15 for the historical prophet, so they *have* to regard it as the primary source: A. van Selms, *Jeremia 2* (De Prediking van het Oude Testament; Nijkerk, 1974), p. 29: Jeremiah dictated a prose version of his sermon to Baruch (7:1–15), while Baruch wrote Jeremiah 26 himself; William L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah 1. Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis, 1986), pp. 239–240; Helga Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches* (BZAW 132; Berlin, 1973), pp. 29–30. Holt, ‘Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon’, p. 77, calls Jeremiah 26 ‘an abbreviated summary of the oracle which exists in its complete form in ch. 7’, but at the same time regards them as ‘two mutually independent versions’.

however, there are various reasons to assume a different relationship between the two. Jeremiah 7, as shown above, has a history of its own. Not only is the setting in 7:1–2 a later addition, but vv. 12–15, about the destruction of the sanctuary in Shiloh, are also disputed because they have a rather loose connection to the first part of the sermon. Even William Holladay, who attributes the entire sermon Jer 7:1–15 to the historical prophet, regards 7:12–15 as a later addition.¹⁶ In Jeremiah 7 these verses constitute an extra, repeated warning to those who fear no harm to Jerusalem because of the presence of the temple, a theme already present in 7:1–11. This theme is, however, apparently not the main issue in Jeremiah 26. The fate of Shiloh forms the core of the shorter version of the sermon in Jer 26:4–6: if you go on like you are doing, then temple and city will be destroyed like what happened to Shiloh. If Jeremiah 7 were an elaboration of Jer 26:4–6, it is hard to explain how this fits in with the later addition of 7:12–15, when that is the core of Jeremiah's speech in 26.

Another procedure is more likely. Jeremiah 26 can be regarded as a *midrash*,¹⁷ answering the obvious questions the story evokes: where and when did the prophet utter this speech, and how did the hearers react? The addition of 7:1–2a in the Masoretic Text answers the question 'where', and Jeremiah 26 fills in the hearers' reaction.

2.3 *The First Reaction (26:7–9)*

The words of the prophet are greeted with massive opposition. V. 7 focuses on the combination of hearing and speaking, and mentions again the setting: 'in the house of YHWH'. V. 8 reminds us that Jeremiah's words were not his own, but spoken in obedience to the commandment of YHWH. In the second half of that verse the counter-reaction begins: Jeremiah is seized by all those present in the temple. Three groups are mentioned: the priests, the prophets and בְּלִיָּהֶם, 'all the people'. The first two, the 'religious professionals', form an undistinguishable group throughout the story.¹⁸ For the moment, the

¹⁶ Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, p. 240: 7:1–12 was, in his opinion, part of the 'first scroll' (Jer 36:2–4), while 13–15 was added when Jeremiah dictated the 'second scroll' to Baruch (Jer 36:32).

¹⁷ O'Connor, 'Do not Trim a Word', p. 618: 'midrashic elaboration'.

¹⁸ The expression 'prophets and priests' is typical of Jeremiah's prose: eight out of eleven occurrences, and one in Jeremiah's poetry (2:26).

people join this group and there seems to be unanimous opposition to Jeremiah. The situation can be graphically shown like this:

The misquotation of Jeremiah's sermon was mentioned above. Some commentators presume that for this reason v. 9 (together with v. 11, where unconditional doom is implied as well) belongs to another source than vv. 4–6 and 13; they consist of an 'Alternativ-Predigt' so typical to the Jeremiah prose (e.g., Jer 18:7–10). In this way Carolyn Sharp perceives two 'strands' within this chapter: a tradition with a 'full-doom view' and one with a conditional perspective. She attempts to divide the text into these strands, and proposes an implied audience for both versions, to which I will return later.¹⁹

As always, this kind of literary analysis has one major problem: it supposes a redactor of the book who combined both strands into one story without bothering to retouch the differences. The implication is that this redactor, although much closer to the situation of the text than we are, did not care about the inconsistencies we perceive in the final text. Sharp is aware of this problem and addresses it in this way: 'It appears that...variant traditionists' perspectives have been allowed to stand side by side, in varying degrees of tension, in the final form of the text'.²⁰ This remark may be true in certain cases, but it is hardly enough to explain that within a few generations first a writer, or group of writers, goes through the trouble of completely rephrasing the story for a specific purpose, while shortly afterwards another writer, or group of writers, decides that both versions are compatible enough to be combined into one text. A synchronic solution seems more appropriate here.

¹⁹ Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose* (London, 2003), pp. 54–62. Her attempt is apparently not the first: Gunther Wanke, *Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchsschrift* (BZAW 122; Berlin, 1971), pp. 82–91, describes a division into two 'Quellen' by F. Horst, 'Die Anfänge des Propheten Jeremia', ZAW 41 (1923), pp. 94–153. Neither Wanke nor Horst are quoted by Sharp.

²⁰ Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology*, p. 61.

2.4 *The Trial (26:10–16)*

In v. 10, a new episode is marked by the arrival of new players on stage: the שָׂרִים, princes or officials.²¹ While already in v. 8 priests, prophets, and the people used a technical term from apodictic law, מוֹת תָּמוּת, ‘you shall surely be put to death’, the setting is now far more formal. The scene is one of the rare examples of a fairly complete judicial trial found in the Hebrew Bible, and forms the climax of the story.

In my opinion, the narrator stresses the different positions these officials take. While some commentators dwell on questions like whether the uproar in the temple could be heard in the palace, this seems hardly relevant compared to the theo-political implications: by letting the officials descend directly from palace to temple, from ‘the house of the king’ to ‘the house of God’, both ‘houses’ are placed in opposition to one another. Of course, we should not assume anything close to the modern separation of religion and state, but it is remarkable that there is, at least in these verses, a different approach. Together with the people, the religious leaders scream: ‘Death!’, while the officials remain silent: they merely set themselves down in the gate, which functions as a courtroom.²² A fair trial is expected, although in the end this turns out to be only a theoretical possibility.

The trial begins with an accusation. The priest and prophets, who in v. 8 formed one group together with the people, now direct themselves to the officials *and* to the people. With a subtle technique, the narrator demonstrates how the people have shifted to a ‘neutral’ position. Together with the officials they form a kind of jury that is ready to hear both parties.²³

²¹ Throughout the whole story, new players keep coming onto the stage, cf. Smelik, ‘Jeremia 26 als literarische Komposition’, p. 106.

²² Cf. *HALOT* s.v. שָׂרִים, 4.c. Examples: Isa 29:21; Amos 5:10, 12, 15; Ruth 4:1, 10, etc.

²³ O’Connor, ‘Do not Trim a Word’, p. 622, may be right when she supposes that the narrator considers the priests and prophets beyond a possible conversion, so there is no need for Jeremiah to address them. On the other hand, directing his defence only to the officials and the people is already given by the court setting.

The indictment in v. 11 is formulated concisely. In fact, no evidence or argument is presented. In a court situation, a short speech usually signifies a confident party: the matter is self-evident, no argumentation is needed.²⁴ The simple fact that words of doom are spoken against the city is enough for a **משפט מות**, ‘a death warrant’.

Jeremiah’s defence, on the other hand, is extensive and clever, and the importance of this speech is stressed by the *setumot* surrounding it. In the first place, he confronts judges and jury with his commission from YHWH Himself, and repeats his prophecy (v. 13). The repetition of the prophecy is not without significance: by doing so he confirms that he is a real prophet. Who could have doubts about a prophet who sticks to his message, even when in grave danger during a capital trial? In the meantime, Jeremiah has the opportunity to correct the way his opponents summarized his words. He does not make the misquotation—leaving out the conditional aspect—into an explicit theme, but corrects it without further comment. In this way he fulfills the command of YHWH ‘not to hold back a word’ (v. 2).²⁵ The implication is, of course, that there cannot be anything wrong with a conditional message of doom: the prophet is not an opponent of the temple and the city, on the contrary, he tries to save them!

In v. 14, Jeremiah seems to submit to the judges and the jury: ‘I’m in your hands, do with me as seems good and right to you’. The expression may be a formula for closing a plea,²⁶ but note that Jeremiah’s speech does not end here: the sting is in the tail. Before ending as he started, by stipulating his commission by YHWH, the prophet adds a final remark, introduced with an emphatic **אך**, ‘but’. The consequences of a ‘guilty’ verdict will be serious, because Jeremiah *is* innocent. The expression **דם נקי**, ‘innocent blood’, is also found in Jer 7:6, where it forms the climax of a series of transgressions committed against fellow human beings, only surpassed in gravity by idolatry.²⁷ Putting an end

²⁴ To understand the intricacies of this part of the narrative, some acquaintance with TV courtroom dramas is helpful.

²⁵ Surprisingly, O’Connor, in spite of her scrutinous reading of the text, paying much attention to this command (it is in the title of her article), does not seem to notice that the conditional aspect of the prophecy is left out by Jeremiah’s opponents and reinserted by the prophet. O’Connor, ‘Do not Trim a Word’, p. 622.

²⁶ Fischer, *Jeremia* 26–52, p. 31, sees a direct quote from Josh 9:25, where the Gibeonites ask Joshua for mercy with the very same words.

²⁷ This supports the order Jeremiah 7 → Jeremiah 26; the author seems to expect that his readers are familiar with the Temple Sermon in Jeremiah 7.

to all these transgressions is in Jeremiah 7 an absolute requirement for saving the city and the temple. So the trial seems to be a matter of life and death for Jeremiah, but in this final statement he turns the tables on his opponents: their lives or at least their future is at stake!

Immediately after Jeremiah's closing statement, the officials and the jury give what seems to be their verdict. For the unsuspecting reader, the trial apparently ends here: the *אין-לאיש הזה משפט-מות*, 'no death sentence for this man', echoes the same expression the priests and prophets used in their indictment in v. 11. The matter seems settled, and the position of the people has changed again, this time together with that of the officials:

We observe that Jeremiah is taken out of the equation: he is no longer speaking or spoken to. His role as an active player in this chapter is finished; he is now just the recipient of a verdict: 'not guilty'. Some commentators are bothered by the apparent inconsistency of the people's changing sides during the process.²⁸ Rather than being left with a problem that has to be solved, for example, by splitting up the text, we are faced here with one of the important purposes of the story: showing how easily reactions to prophecy can vary, even among the same group: here *כל-העם*, 'all the people'.

3 PROVISIONAL CONCLUSIONS

The story could have ended with v. 16, which would then be regarded as a 'not guilty' verdict. In fact, that would have made things much easier for the exegete, for Jer 26:1–16 can be understood as a unity. I can see no reason to divide the story so far into different 'strands', a conditional and an unconditional one. Doing so would mean tearing apart a perfectly understandable story. The fact that the conditional aspect is left out by Jeremiah's opponents is a matter of story-telling: it

²⁸ Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology*, p. 56.

illustrates that they are listening selectively to the prophecy, not grasping its meaning as a whole, but only reacting to certain catchwords, ‘this house shall be like Shiloh’. The people are easily aroused, officials are needed to calm them down, and just as easily they are convinced of the legitimacy of Jeremiah’s prophecy. The matter seems to be settled, but in the text as we have it, we have arrived at a *Trugschluss*, a fake ending.

3.1 *The Precedent of Micah (26:17–19)*

Again new players appear on the scene: we meet ‘some of the elders of the land’. Indicating that they are ‘elders’ is not without reason: as older people they form a natural bridge to the past. It is impossible that they witnessed in person an event that is said to have occurred about a century before, but they are presented as the guardians of tradition. What they do is unique in prophetic literature: they quote a verse from the prophet Micah of Moresheth (Mic 3:12) in support of Jeremiah.²⁹

Now the strange thing here is that the argument from history could have helped convince the officials to decide in favour of Jeremiah. Indeed the end of their speech in v. 19 suggests that this was their purpose: **וְאֵנַחְנוּ עֹשִׂים רָעָה גְדוֹלָה עַל־נַפְשׁוֹתֵינוּ** forms a nominal sentence, to be understood as ‘we are about to commit (right now—participle) a great evil against ourselves’, with the implication that one should refrain from taking action against Jeremiah. For the purpose of influencing the trial, however, the verses seem to be in the wrong place: we would have expected the elders, as witnesses for the defendant, between vv. 15 and 16. There are several possibilities. First, the conclusion could be that we have arrived at the end of the synchronic approach to the text, and that we have to regard vv. 17–19 as a later addition to the story. The second option is to conclude that apparently we have to try harder to understand vv. 17–19, for example, by translating v. 17 as ‘Some of the elders...*had said*...’.³⁰ This solution is rather strained and goes against the grammar of the text: for such an

²⁹ The quotation is almost literally in the MT; the LXX has a small difference (ἄβυτος, ‘deserted place’, instead of ὀπωροφυλάκιον, ‘shed’); apparently the MT redaction has adapted the quotation to the Micah text.

³⁰ Thus Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia* (HAT 12; Tübingen, 1947), pp. 144–145.

explanation to be valid, we would have expected *qatal* forms instead of the present *wayyiqtol* forms.

There is, however, a third option: acknowledging that vv. 17–19 are a later addition, but still trying to explain the *Letztgestalt* of the chapter as a sensible text. This means that in the final redaction of the text, the trial is not over in v. 16; the reaction of the officials and the people towards priests and prophets is reinterpreted as an argument in favour of Jeremiah, not as the final decision.³¹ Smelik stresses the fact that v. 16 can be read as just a new phase in the trial: Jeremiah's release is not told, neither is there any sign that the people or the officials are really convinced by the prophet to change their attitude.³²

3.2 *The Death of Uriah (26:20–23)*

The next episode, the tragic death of yet another prophet, also seems to disturb the flow of the narrative. This episode has a double effect.

On the one hand, the king is introduced suddenly into the story. Thus far he was almost absent from the narrative, being mentioned only twice: the story is situated at the beginning of his reign (v. 1) and it is from his house that the officials come to preside over the trial (v. 10). Though the rather neutral or even positive attitude of the officials towards Jeremiah might give us reason to think that the king himself is also open to Jeremiah's prophecy, these hopes are shattered in the next four verses. Uriah is known only from these verses, and his function is clear: he is a copy of Jeremiah. His preaching is identical, ככל דברי ירמיהו, 'like all the words of Jeremiah', and his fate is what easily could have been Jeremiah's. The king is not amused by Uriah's words, the prophet flees to Egypt but is arrested there by Jehoiakim's secret service agents.

Some authors regard Uriah's flight as a sin, as a lack of trust in God, for which the prophet suffers the consequences.³³ This leads to a completely different interpretation of the text, because if this were true, Uriah's death could have been avoided, which would mark a contrast between the brave Jeremiah and the cowardly Uriah. However, in the

³¹ A possibility already mentioned by Hossfeldt and Meyer, 'Der Prophet vor dem Tribunal', p. 38. They reject this explanation on valid grounds, yet this is how the author of the final text must have understood the verse.

³² Smelik, 'Jeremia 26 als literarische Komposition', p. 110.

³³ Fischer, *Jeremia 26–52*, p. 139.

text I see no indication for this point of view. Jeremiah himself is in chapters 26–45 not always described as the hero we would want him to be. He avoids dangerous situations, for example, when, instead of going himself, he sends Baruch to the temple with the scroll he dictated (Jer 36:5), when he is afraid to tell the truth to King Zedekiah (38:14–15), and when he follows Zedekiah's instructions to lie about their conversation (38:24–28). In Jer 36:19 Baruch is told to hide, and again there is no hint that there is anything wrong with avoiding imminent danger. Blaming Uriah for his flight amounts to blaming the victim and obscures who is really responsible. Rather, the text stresses the fact that Uriah is not killed in Egypt but is brought back to Jehoiakim to be killed; this leaves no doubt about the king's responsibility for his death, and the premeditated character of the murder.

In this way, Jehoiakim is depicted as the opposite of Hezekiah, the king who gave heed to the words of Micah long ago.³⁴ Yet it is surprising to read that 'the officials' (השרים) again as well are on the side of the king in his action against Uriah. Of course, historically speaking, these could have been other officials than those presiding at the trial of Jeremiah, but just like on a literary level 'the people' are one entity who change sides, so also the שרים must be regarded as one group, unless the narrator makes an explicit difference. The conclusion must be that the שרים are just as whimsical and two-faced as the people: you never know on which side they are, and you can expect them to lean towards the most powerful human actor in the story, the king. In his absence, they can be convinced by a well-phrased prophetic speech and decide in favour of Jeremiah, but in the king's presence the officials support a brutal action against Jeremiah's counterpart.

The name of the leader of the officials being sent to Egypt is quite interesting: Elnathan, son of Achbor. Achbor is mentioned as a member of a small group of officials sent to the prophetess Hulda by King Josiah to confirm the authenticity of the Torah scroll found in the temple (2 Kgs 22:12, 14). The implication is clear: only one generation ago the king sent his men to consult a prophetess and urged the people to hear to the Torah, but now the king sends his men to arrest and

³⁴ O'Connor, 'Do not Trim a Word', p. 623; Smelik, 'Jeremia 26 als literarische Komposition', pp. 123–124.

kill a prophet and does not listen to the prophet's reminder to heed to the Torah.

3.3 *Narrow Escape (26:24)*

The last verse of the chapter is again surprising, but consistent with the conclusion about the two-facedness of the people and the officials. In v. 16 we were left with the impression that the officials and the people had chosen the side of the defendant. Vv. 20–23 leave us disappointed about the officials, but maybe we could still be hopeful that Jeremiah would at least be supported by the public. V. 24 destroys this last hope: the words 'in the hands of the people' and 'kill' are directly connected, the chaos of vv. 8–9 returns, the people turn into a violent mob and Jeremiah is in grave danger.

The good news is that there is someone to save him: Ahikam ben Shaphan, a member of the family who often played a positive role in stories like this. Ahikam and his father, Shaphan, were involved in finding the Torah scroll during Josiah's reign (2 Kings 22–23), and Ahikam was also a member of the group sent to consult Hulda.³⁵ The purpose of the author must be to show that Judah develops in two directions: the new king uses his power to assure that there is no longer room for critical prophecy, and the vast majority of the officials and the people go along with this, but there are some, like Ahikam, who remain true to the prophetic word and protect the prophet. The picture changes again, and becomes more complicated:

³⁵ See Fischer, *Jeremia* 26–52, p. 39. Ahikam also plays a role in favour of Jeremiah in Jer 36:10–12; 39:14, and his son, Gedeliah, is appointed governor after the fall of Jerusalem, but was soon murdered (Jeremiah 40–41).

4 CONCLUSIONS

4.1 *Literary Aspects*

There is, in my opinion, a remarkable difference between the complicated exegetical questions the chapter raises and the compelling impression the story leaves on the reader. Jeremiah 26 serves well as an introduction to Jeremiah 26–45: the theme of the perilous existence of the prophetic word is expanded in detail in this chapter. The only explanation for that tension I can find is that the chapter does show clear signs of different stages of production, but is, on the other hand, skillfully told, and forms a strong thematic unity.³⁶

Jer 26:1–16 is best understood as narrative elaboration of the famous speech held by Jeremiah in the temple, apparently familiar to the audience. It seems clear to me that the shortened version of the sermon itself in vv. 4–6 is hardly understandable without knowledge of Jer 7:1–15. The conditional aspect of both chapters is inherent. The midrashic expansion we have in Jeremiah 26 cannot be dependent on a presumed ‘original version’ of Jeremiah 7, reconstructed by various authors, as the conditional aspect was always excluded from this ‘original version’.³⁷ Jer 26:17–24 can be considered as a later addition, but an addition that makes sense.

4.2 *Audience*

For whom was this story written? In its present form, it has all the marks of a story that relates events that happened some time previously, and that had their impact on the Judean society, in other words, the audience knows the outcome. It seems plausible to locate these readers in the Babylonian exile.³⁸

Carolyn Sharp tries to establish ‘two competing Deutero-Jeremianic traditions’, of which one is specifically meant to promote the interests of the ‘*gôlâ* group’. For example, the destruction of the Shilo sanctuary fits in with their idea that YHWH is not bound to the temple in

³⁶ Contra Wanke, *Untersuchungen*, pp. 82–83, who is very negative about the composition of the chapter.

³⁷ Reconstruction by Wilfred Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25* (WMANT 41; Neukirchen 1973), pp. 105–115, followed by Holt, ‘Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon’, p. 74.

³⁸ Cf. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles*, pp. 133–134.

Jerusalem.³⁹ In the same way, Stulman sees in Achikam and the other supporters of Jeremiah a model of the core group of the society after the exile.⁴⁰ All this appears to me to be a little too speculative.

4.3 Purpose

The question remains: why did the author write this story? Many commentators try to establish one single issue as the aim of the text. When they perceive different aims in various portions of the text, they conclude that the authors of these parts must have had different theological intentions. It seems to me that many exegetes work with a concept of the meaning of a story that is too simple. The author(s) of this book are certainly capable of writing a text with a complex meaning.

The story as we have it now is a story about three prophets. One lived in the past: Micah, who prophesied like Jeremiah against city and temple, but—at least in the tradition offered here—*he was heard*. His words were even sharper than Jeremiah's: the quotation speaks about unconditional doom. Nevertheless this doom was averted by the repentance of the people, an indication that the difference between conditional and unconditional prophecy is not absolute. If *unconditional* prophecy of doom can be averted, *conditional* prophecy certainly can as well.

The second prophet, Uriah, lives and dies during the story. He shows the negative attitude of the leaders, the people, and the king towards critical prophecy.

The third prophet and main character of the story is Jeremiah. This chapter is the first account of the reactions to his prophetic work (apart from his 'psalms of lament' in Jeremiah 11–20), and the signs are ominous. The readers of the story know the outcome: they know what the fate of Jerusalem was. The aim of the story can hardly be to legitimize the prophetic calling of Jeremiah—that matter had been settled by the fall of Jerusalem when all Jeremiah's prophecies of doom came true. Apart from that, the story has many aspects, but not one single aim. It explains how not listening to the prophecy contributed to the fate of Jerusalem. It shows how vulnerable a prophet is when leaders and the people are not willing to listen to a critical message. It

³⁹ Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology*, 50.

⁴⁰ Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville, 2005), p. 236.

shows how feeble in fact the word of YHWH is: it is powerless, when people decide not to obey. The theological aspect of the story is not made explicit, but it is clearly there: YHWH runs out of options. One of his prophets is brutally murdered, another is almost lynched. He does not have many other possibilities left except the most dramatic one, the destruction of the temple and the city.

Of course, this story is meant not only as an explanation of ‘how and why this happened’, but also as an invitation to act wiser than the generation of Jehoiakim did, with the implicit promise that this will make a difference. The keyword נחם, ‘regret, be sorry’, with YHWH as the subject, occurring three times in this chapter, is theologically relevant here.⁴¹ Right at the beginning of the account of the decline of Judah and the fall of Jerusalem, this story gives a glimmer of hope to the exiles:⁴² there are role models, there is the possibility of repentance, YHWH will eventually change his mind, and there will be an end to the supremacy of the Babylonians (cf. 27:22; 29:14). For that to happen, a radical change of attitude is necessary. In an unobtrusive way, by all rhetorical means a story can offer, this complex message is conveyed to the audience.

⁴¹ See also Jer 26:3, 13, 19; cf. Jer 18:8, 10; 42:10; Exod 32:14; Judg 2:18; 1 Sam 15:11, 29, 35; 2 Sam 24:16; Am 7:3, 6; Jona 3:9, 10; 4:2.

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge etc., 2007), p. 140.