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# YHWH's mouthpiece to the exiles: a Jeremianic turn of hope

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**Abstract**

This article seeks to make a contribution to the discourse on how the difference between the two versions of the book of Jeremiah as it pertains to two bracketed texts, e.g. Jer. 25:11–12 – Jer. 46:27–28 illustrate a regard of hope on the end of the Exile. Does the Masoretic Text (MT) have a different perspective on the idea of hope, or do both the MT and Septuagint (LXX) share a similar position on this? Moreover, this article attempts to characterise the claim of the MT versus the LXX and tries to understand these texts in light of the above-mentioned text-corpus in its earliest development, but also to foreground this idea of hope within a theological analysis of Jeremiah 29:1–32.

**Keywords**

*Jeremiah; LXX; MT, YHWH; exile; Jeremianic turn; hope*

## 1. Introduction

The problem of whether the Masoretic Text (MT) version of the book of Jeremiah[1] came prior to the shorter Septuagint (LXX) version or the other

1 The books of Deuteronomy and Jeremiah can be read together when it comes to the silent suffering of Yahweh. This will lay a foundation upon which we can study the theme of prophecy in both books. Some scholars argue that Deuteronomy and Jeremiah are independent, and therefore cannot be studied together. However, others believe that the similarities in them imply that they influenced each other and can therefore be read together. Hyatt and Cazelles are chosen to represent these two opposing positions.

way round[2], chronologically speaking, remains an intriguing question in Old Testament research, which has yet to be solved. This debate can be summarised as follows: scholars such as Emanuel Tov consider the LXX to be a version that already existed before the MT of Jeremiah, having received its final redaction and expansion. It is sometimes argued that this latter redaction[3] contains a number of apparent post-exilic, Deuteronomistic-like expansions, which are absent in the LXX. On the other hand, scholars such as Jack R. Lundbom are on the other side of the spectrum, where it is suggested to adhere to the priority of the MT and assume that the LXX was

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2 It is clear from the nature of our question that we are pursuing a literary-comparative study, and it requires us to consider the canonical form of the book of Jeremiah (Childs 1984:345–347). The Jeremiah text is composed of two authoritative manuscripts, the Septuagint (LXX) and Masoretic Text (MT), from textually different traditions (Egyptian and Babylon exilic community).

3 Mowinckel is believed to have influenced the conversation concerning editorial and reductionistic work in the book of Jeremiah (Thompson 1980:35). However, his work is also believed to have built on Duhm's foundation (Holladay 1984:213). These were both attempting to offer a solution to the problematic composition of Jeremiah (Holladay 1984:213). Mowinckel categorised the different passages in Jeremiah in three types, namely: "A" – Jeremiah's oracles; type "B" – Biographies on Jeremiah by Baruch, and type "C" – prose discourses or sermons (Thompson 1980:35–36). Mowinckel attributed type "C" to Deuteronomic editors and also said that these passages were influenced by the theological emphasis of Deuteronomy (Thompson 1980:35, 37). The resemblances in language between the books fuelled this suggestion (Thompson 1980:37). As already noted, Hyatt (1984:120) accrued the resemblances to the similarities in the historical circumstances for the two books. Hyatt's position was also held by Holladay (1984:228), who said that when a scribe was being trained into his duty, it was required that this be done in a way that exemplified the prose of his period. Therefore, "Jeremiah's dictation to Baruch... would inevitably conform to some degree at least to the conventions of seventh sixth-century scribal style" (Holladay 1984:228). This is quite a persuasive argument and hard to discard. What makes it unconvincing, though, is Hyatt's (1984:120) conclusion that this means that the two books are opposed to each other. The fact that Jeremiah was more focused on preaching against the deteriorating ethics of his time (Jer. 4.22), yet the reformers were on the temple cult does not seem like opposition. However, just as Holladay (1966:26) suggests, I also believe that Jeremiah's attitude towards the Deuteronomic scroll was to be understood through his emphasis upon the words of God. Even though the reform had already run its course by the time Jeremiah began to preach, his focus was not on the reform as a political-religious movement but rather on the words of God and whether the people were obedient to them (Holladay 1966:26). In other words, Jeremiah's ministry should "be understood as a faithful living out in his day of God's word" (Holladay 1966:27). This is what was expected of Israel as a covenantal people. Childs' understanding is also appealing to this. He (1979:346) says that "the events of Israel's history – the hardness, of the people, the wickedness of the king, the rise of Nebuchadnezzar – led to the prophet's reshaping of his message in the light of scripture". Therefore, I doubt whether a change in the message amounted to a difference in theological focus.

shortened due to haplography and other mistakes, or that the translator of the LXX might have deliberately shortened it, as argued by Arie van der Kooij and Georg Fisher.

Given this brief background, it becomes necessary that the issues of the *contemporary historical-rhetorical and theological approaches*. I will, of course, make my best attempt to step into the shoes of the historical Jeremiah and discern his message, as contained in his letter to the exiles, to be explored. These approaches are primary concerns of this article in terms of its comparative analysis.

## 2. MT and the LXX in the Corpus of Jer. 25:11–12 – Jer. 46:27–28

According to Becking (1994:145–196), the immediate significant result of difference pertaining to these two texts will give no result in searching for theological differences between the MT and LXX of Jeremiah, as affirmed. In other words, real theological differences or different perspectives on the Exile are not found since a number of specific themes do occur in the MT as well as the LXX. Take, for example, the duration of the exile, which is promised to last for seventy years – this is repeated three times in Jeremiah (25:11, 12; 29:10), in both versions. Many scholars make much of this. However, Lundbom argues that this is simply a reference to a full number of years (1999:249–250). More recently, it has been argued interestingly by Leuchter (2004:503–22), who is of the opinion that the use of "seventy years" refers to an inscription of Esarhaddon in which he legitimised his building policy in Babylon as Marduk's will. Directing the audience's attention to this inscription should make it clear to them that the Babylonian hegemony was a matter of divine will. If this theory by Leuchter were to be correct in its assertions, then it would highlight that the "seventy years" are actually not a reference to a literal number of years, but rather, it proves Lundbom's argument that it is just a full number of years.

### 2.1 MT vs. LLX: Jer. 25:11–12 – Jer. 46:27–28

To consider the discourse of Jeremiah 29, it is helpful to consider first the MT text of Jer. 25:11–12 that reads as follows, as transliterated from the Hebrew:

> Verses: [11]This whole land shall be a desolate ruin, and those nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. 12When the seventy years are over; I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation and the land of the Chaldeans for their sins – declares YHWH – and I will make it a desolation for all time.

The "seventy years", if compared, is relatively easy to track in both the LXX and the MT. However, if the comparison is carried right through this verse then "seventy years" may not be the only element that becomes apparent. This can be illustrated by the same verses now transliterated from Greek, as it appears in the LXX; it reads:

> Verses: [11]And the whole land shall be a waste. And they shall serve among the nations seventy years. 12 And when seventy years are completed, I will punish that nation and I will make them a waste for all time".

Upon closer study of both versions of these two verses, it becomes quite clear that the same perspectives of a fixed period of seventy years in Exile are being highlighted here. That the LXX immediately portrays a lack of detail in many ways in comparison to the MT. For example, the latter is very specific when it refers to detail such as "the land of the Chaldeans" and then it also mentions very specifically the "king of Babylon". If you take this passage, two verses prior (MT–Jer. 25:9), one will discover that the king is mentioned by name as Nebuchadnezzar, "my servant" in Hebrew, which is clearly not observed in the LXX. These kinds of differences do appear to have meaning at first glance; however, a closer scrutiny of these characteristics actually contributes significantly to a theological discourse that would not have initially been in question.

I now turn to a second subject, namely that the expectation of a new king after the exile is not a farfetched idea. Jeremiah talks of the kings of Judah being the ones that will rightfully inherit "the throne of David" (13:13; 17:25; 22:2, 30; 29:16 [this is missing in the LXX]; 36:30). Sometimes, these kings are addressed as "house of David" (21:12), because the promised king to come will be a true branch of David's line (22:4; 23:5; 33:15 [also missing in the LXX]). Therefore, largely both the MT and the LXX give credence to this theme even though the LXX differs slightly in what it omits, but it does not detract from the theme. Furthermore, when one carefully observes,

in this respect, the remarkable difference between the references to David as "my servant" (in Jer. 33:21, 22, 26) found in the MT as it reflects in the large section of MT–Jer. 33:14–26, it is also noteworthy to see at the same time that this does not reflect in the LXX "David my servant". More so, when the MT makes references to "Nebuchadnezzar my servant" (in Jer. 25:9; 27:6; 43:10), the LXX again does not give us this perspective. This proves problematic, however, because I would like to believe that the MT is providing critical insights into the references to both kings – David and Nebuchadnezzar – as servants of YHWH, which might be neglected at first glance as an important element in the prophecies found in (MT) Jeremiah.

MT–Jer. 33:14–26 is also important because we encounter a long promise of salvation and restoration here, which is utterly absent in LXX. On the other hand, the preceding MT–Jer. 33:1–13 (LXX–Jer. 40:1–13), which contains similar words of salvation and restoration, are found in both versions, for instance the closing words of this passage in MT (Jer. 33:12–13 [LXX: 40:12–13]):

> Verse: [12]Thus says YHWH of hosts: It will be in this place, which is waste, without humans or animals, and in all its towns there shall again be pasture for shepherds resting their flocks. 13 In the towns of the hills, of the Shephelah, and of the Negeb, in the land of Benjamin, surrounding Jerusalem, and of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands".

The same applies to the explicit promise of return in MT–Jer. 31:8 (LXX–Jer. 38:8), in which the return to the land is foretold, similarly in Jer. 31:16–18, 21 (LXX 38:16–18, 21):

> Verse: [13]See, I am going to bring them from the land of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth, among them the blind and the lame, those with child and those in labour, together; a great company, they shall return here.

Since we find nearly the same text in the LXX as in the MT, it seems that the translator did not feel obliged to adapt the text. Apparently, it fits his theology or perspective to render it that way. The same appears to apply to the promise of restoration as found in MT–Jer. 30:10–11, with the possible unfavourable words to other nations:

> Verse: [11]For I am with you, says YHWH, to save you; I will make an end of all the nations among which I scattered you, but of you I will not make an end".

Even though the corresponding verse in the LXX is faithfully rendered, it would seem to suggest again that the translator had no problems with the views expressed in the book of Jeremiah (Watson 1994:183).

### 2.2 Is there a difference, and why it is significant for comparison?

There is no real theological difference between the MT and LXX with regard to the aforementioned texts within the framework of the Jeremiah 29 corpus. Although the LXX seems to present a more modest view regarding the guilt of people, both assume the exile to be a punishment of God and both expect the return of the exiled or their children as an act of God's help and restoration. Thus, my research question has a negative answer in this respect. Yet, some interesting features can be highlighted in the discussion above, showing that the title "my servant" refers to two important kings, Nebuchadnezzar before and David after the exile, as found exclusively in the MT, which is at least remarkable.

In the first part of this article, it was argued that there are no theological axioms within both the context of Jeremiah 29 body to create disagreement – therefore, it undergirds the themes of suffering, enthronement, and authority that appear in the narrative of Jeremiah, and in this article. The abovementioned finding is necessary to foreground the following categories: Jeremiah's message, suffering, investiture, authority, and hope reflected in these two bodies of literature. So that it forms a way of assessing and interpreting YHWH's gift of hope considering the exiles suffering.

## 3. Behind the hope – Jeremiah 29:1–32

The previous analysis brings Jeremiah 29 as a primary text into perspective. This chapter will provide further insights for discussion as I endeavour to do a theological-exegetical analysis of Jeremiah 29:1–32, and this section will follow a particular order. It will first provide a brief summary of this chapter from the mouth of McConville. A historical-exegetical analysis will follow, with sub-headings such as textual transmission, literary structure

and meaning. Then, a brief theological reflection will be performed through the means of final remarks on the chapter. Finally, a conclusion will ultimately bring the discussion of this chapter to an end.

### 3.1 Summary of Jeremiah 29

According to McConville (1993:25), "the book of Jeremiah is a redaction. That is to say, what we may take to have been early statements of Jeremiah have been given new meanings, both in the light of experience, and by the activity of collecting and shaping various sayings and records of the prophet's actions into the literary creation we now possess. We may suppose that Baruch, or even others, played some role alongside Jeremiah in this. It may be also that the work was not done all at once, and that his partly explains why two rather different textual traditions (MT and LXX) appear to have existed independently from a relatively early period".

### 3.2 Textual transmission

Concerning how the book came into its final form, Dearman (2002:21) fairly argues that "it remains difficult, however, to reconstruct the stages through with the book of Jeremiah passed to reach its final Hebrew and Greek forms or to determine the dates of the final forms. Cleary in this case the text of the Hebrew date was not before the reference to Jehoiachin's release (52:31–34), which can be dated to 561 B.C. By this time both Jeremiah and Baruch were likely dead."

For this analysis, I have chosen to go with the MT rather than the LXX. The reason for this is that it seems to me that Dearman has a point when he contends for the MT, that "the vantage point of the final compilers of the book was similar to that of the historical Jeremiah and Baruch in one very important respect: They too lived after the tragic fall of Judah" (2002:21).

### 3.3 Jeremiah's message wrapped in text

The text itself in verse 2 gives us a hint as to the dating of this material. "This was after King Jehoiachin and the queen mother, the court officials and the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the skilled workers and the artisans had gone into exile from Jerusalem" (Jer. 29:2), reads the text. Having Jehoiachin and both his deportation and that of the people who

went together with him to Babylon as clues, we can now trace the historical background against which this text must be understood.

Brueggemann (1998:2) helps us to know that "Jehoiachin (609–598 BC), son of Josiah played a daring game of "international roulette" between Egypt and Babylon, eventually evoking Babylon's first incursion into Jerusalem in 598 BC. One outcome of the event of 598 was the exile of Jehoiakim's son Jehoiachin to Babylon where he remained for many years as a titular head of dynasty. Many prominent citizens of Judah were deported with him. For the period of 598–587 BC yet another son of Josiah, Zedekiah presided over the affairs of Jerusalem but in the end, he had no chance for independent action in the face of Babylon". Zedekiah son of Josiah must therefore be the one being referred to as the king who sits on David's throne in verse 16 of our text. He is the one who succeeded Jehoiachin. The words recorded in verse 2 are enough to fit the piece of scripture in its historical setting. The date may not be easy to ascertain, but as far as the meaning and theological message of this passage is concerned the precise date is not necessary. Hence, this latter date fits anytime between 598–587 BC.

Brueggemann (1998:2) reminds us that "during these years there was an intense rivalry between the community in Jerusalem (over which Zedekiah presided) and the exilic community in Babylon (in which Jehoiachin was understood as the legitimate leader). Indeed, a lot happened during this period. Just for the sake of what is relevant to our text, it will be necessary to highlight some of the key events. It is necessary to know that "the deportation of 597 BC, though not large, was significant, for it removed many of Judah's key personnel" (Thompson 1980:24). As noted earlier, during this time many regarded Jehoiachin as king and hoped for his speedy return cf. Ch. 27 (Thompson 1980:24). To shed light on the content of the letter sent to the exiles by the historical Jeremiah, it is crucial to note that "plots were the order of the day" (Thompson 1980:24) during this period. "In 595/4 B.C. there had been an uprising in Babylon in which some of the exiles may have been implicated (29:20:23). Then in 594/3 B.C., in Zedekiah's fourth year, plans for revolt were discussed among the small state in the west, Edom. Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon, and Judah (27:3). Prophets in both places were encouraging revolts (29:20–23; 28:2–4). The plans for rebellion in the west were abandoned and it seems possible that Zedekiah sent envoys to Babylon (29:3) or even went himself (51:59) to

assure Nebuchadnezzar of his loyalty. But this was not the end of plans for rebellion" (Thompson 1980: 25).

Since the approach of the article is considering Jeremiah as a book more than Jeremiah as a person, it is important to consider that "it is possible to read the book of Jeremiah from the perspective of two distinct audiences" (Jones 2004:174). I will focus less on the audience of Jeremiah the prophet but more on the audience of the book. In this case, the circumstances of the audience of the book become crucial. Jones (2004:178) highlights that "the readers of the book of Jeremiah were subjects of a large, pluralistic empire that promoted its own official religion and that gave no recognition, status, or privilege to the exiles or to their religious faith or national identity".

### 3.4 Cycle of the text

These thirty-two verses belong to the second cycle of the book which begins from chapter twenty-five and runs through to chapter thirty-four. The cycle deals with the triumph of the words of the Lord (from Jeremiah's mouth) against the people of Judah. The whole section revolves around a conflict of words. On one hand, we see the words of Jeremiah and the words of the false prophets on the other. This cycle can be broken up into two major divisions which of course belong together: Chapters 25–29 and 30–34. The latter is the so-called book of consolation, excluding chapter 34. A careful reading of the whole section (cycle) reveals that, from this section, one can see that there is hope for the Judean exiles. That hope is however not "now" but "later" when seventy years are completed for Babylon. In this cycle and particularly in chapter 29, it is easy to dismiss the idea that labels Jeremiah as merely a prophet of doom. The cycle shows that the historical Jeremiah is also a prophet of peace.

Chapter 29 as a whole plays an important role, especially in the first half of the cycle. It is more like a conclusion or the apex which closes the first half of the cycle on the theme of false prophecy and gives space or introduces the second half (30–34) containing the book of consolation on the theme of hope. Chapter 29 is somewhat different from the way in which the first four chapters of this cycle are structured. Chapter 25 is coupled with 26 and are the two chapters dated during the time of Jehoiakim's reign. Chapter 25 deals with Jeremiah's words of prophecy, whereas chapter 26 highlights the antagonist response that came from the priests, the prophets, and

the people (v. 8). A conflict arose as a result of Jeremiah's preaching that threatened his life. Chapter 27 is also coupled with 28 and they are all dated to during Zedekiah's reign. Like chapter 25, chapter 26 displays the controversial words of Jeremiah against his people, but seemingly in favour of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Again, like chapter 26, chapter 28 focuses more on the conflict and the antagonistic response against Jeremiah. This time it is a false prophet who strongly opposes Jeremiah's sermons. Therefore, based on the above information, I argue for the developing parallelism of the first half of the cycle. It is for this same reason that chapter 29 stands as a unit which develops, summarises, and climaxes the four first chapters of the cycle. Just to open a parenthesis, I can argue that this cycle is certain evidence proving a careful and purposeful structure of the book of Jeremiah. Coming to our text, the following structure can be discerned on the basis of the content:

1. **29: 1–3** Introductory formula
2. **29: 4–9** Present conditions of the exiles
3. **29: 10–14** Gracious future of the exiles
4. **29: 15–19** Divine judgment on people in the Land
5. **29: 20–23** Divine judgement on false prophets in exile
6. **29: 24–32** Divine judgment on the false prophet in exile

Based on the literary context, chapter 29 is crucial as it stands as a bridge between the first half of the cycle and the second, containing what is known as the book of consolation (30–34). It is in this chapter 29 where the theme of hope for the Judean exiles is *explicitly explained and in a more detailed way* than in all the previous chapters (25–28) of the cycle. Jeremiah is specific on the duration of the exile in Ch. 25:12. He also shows that Babylon, which happens to be a threat to everyone, will eventually be the climax of Yahweh's suffering at the end of the seventy-year period of exile. By so doing, Jeremiah *implicitly* offers a message of hope to the Judeans. Hope for Judean exiles becomes *explicit but not with much detail* for the first time in this cycle in Ch. 27:22, "they will be taken to Babylon and there they will remain until the day I come for them," declares the LORD. "Then I will bring them back and restore them to this place". It is in this same

chapter that the theme of false versus true prophecies is also introduced (Ch. 27:9ff.).

The predominant theme of the first half of the cycle is suffering with some hope to God's people. In Ch. 25, God's judgment is depicted as universal or broad in the sense that it focuses not only on Judah, but also on the surrounding nations and eventually on Babylon (cf. 25:8ff). Babylon is both the agent and the subject of God's wrath in chapter 25. According to Hill, in Jeremiah 25 (MT), Babylon is both the agent of YHWH's silent suffering and the subject of it. While enjoying a special status via the figure of Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon is still completely subordinate to the God who has power over all the nations (Hill 2004: 154). The focus of God's judgment is however shifted from being broad to the house of the Lord and the city particularly in Ch. 26 (cf. vv. 6, 12ff.). The themes of false prophecy and of Babylon as agent of God's wrath are not dealt with in this chapter. The judgment motif as it was introduced in Ch. 25 having a broad focus on Judah, the nations around and eventually on Babylon, resumes in Ch. 27. As noted earlier, it is this chapter which brings in the features of false prophecy. There are strong warnings for the people not to listen to false prophets (cf. 27:9ff.). Hope for God's people is obvious in this chapter (v. 22), even though it is just a glimpse. Confrontation between the true and false prophecies is the main focus of chapter 28. In chapter 28, God's silent suffering is not brought on the Judeans, nor even on the house of the Lord, but rather on one individual, the false prophet Hananiah (cf. v. 15).

Based on the evidence outlined above, I continue to argue for the unity of chapter 29. The chapter summarises most of the themes of this cycle which have been already introduced. However, the major contribution of this text is to clearly display and expand on the *hope motif* for the exiles (29:10–14) which was neither explicit (cf. the downfall of Babylon) nor detailed (cf. 27:22) in the previous chapters. From this chapter through to the end of the cycle, hope becomes a predominant theme. The book of consolation (30–33) picks up this motif and unpacks it with much emphasis and amazing detail. The stereotype that labels Jeremiah as the prophet of doom can never be substantiated from this cycle and particularly from Ch. 29 onwards. The downfall or the judgment on Babylon, which was explicitly stated in chapters 25 and 27, is implied in the text (cf. v 10. "When the seventy years are completed for Babylon …").

The skills of Jeremiah as book in poetry can be discerned even in the way the chapters are juxtaposed. The theology of life through death seems to me to be the obvious structure of this cycle. For Jeremiah, the theological life can only become possible through and after the theological death (exile). Those who "die" in exile (vv. 10–14) will be resurrected. Those who "live" in the Land (vv. 15–19) will die forever. This sounds like the paradoxical words of Christ in the Gospels, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it and whoever loses their life will find it say Jesus" (Luke 17:33). In this passage, we see the promise to plant and build (cf. v. 5) when the word of God comes.

### 3.5 Objects of hope in a time of suffering

**vv. 1–3:** Now in the land and in exile

**vv. 4–9:** Now in exile

**vv. 10–14:** Later after exile hope to exiles

**vv. 15–19:** Later in the land judgement to people in the land

**vv. 20–23:** Later in the land judgment to prophets in exile

**vv. 24–32:** Later in the land judgment to *the prophet in exile*

The first three verses of this chapter offer some clues as to the background of the letter. They introduce to us *the author* of this correspondence – Jeremiah the person is responsible for this letter. It does not matter whether it was written by his own hand or by someone else like Baruch who wrote it on his behalf. What matters is that the letter originated from the historical Jeremiah. In addition, *the place of writing* is Jerusalem. The next thing these introductory verses inform us of is *the original recipients* of the letter. It is clear that the exiles from different classes who survived the historic events of 597 BC, are the recipients. *The destination* of the letter is therefore Babylon. After that, we are told about *the date of writing* of this letter, which was after the deportation of the Davidic king Jehoiachin to Babylon. This means that it was after 597 and before 587 BC, which marks the fall and destruction of Jerusalem. Having said so, it is important to note that the meaning of the letter will be somewhat different if taken from a literary perspective than from a historical standpoint. This is true because when we consider the literary context, this letter must be understood as part of a

book that came to its final form over a long period; hence, the letter takes on a further meaning. Having the readers of the whole book of Jeremiah in perspective, one should keep in mind that "this audience preserved, interpreted, and reapplied the message of Jeremiah as prophetic instruction on how to live in their precarious new circumstance as aliens in a strange and hostile society" (Jones 2004:178). In the final form of Jeremiah as a book, this letter would be addressing the post-exilic Jews living after the demise of the Babylonian empire (Hill 2004:151, 2).

It is interesting to note in these introductory verses that *the means* through which the courier was sent are two people whom Zedekiah sent to Nebuchadnezzar. As indicated in the historical context, it seems that the main mission for which these two people were sent to Babylon was not the delivery of Jeremiah's courier to the exiles. These two people were primarily Zedekiah's envoys to Nebuchadnezzar, probably to assure him of his loyalty. Zedekiah thought that sending a diplomatic letter was a good idea, especially in the midst of plans for rebellion in the west against Babylon (cf. historical context). Carrying Jeremiah's letter was therefore secondary. Including this hard copy of his letter in this political and diplomatic trip of Elasah son of Shaphan to Gemariah son of Hilkiah shows how Jeremiah was somewhat influential and politically well connected.

Jeremiah's letter begins by emphasising the duration of exile – the exile would be long. The interesting thing is the way the letter conveys this idea. The previous chapters and particularly Hananiah's prophecy, as recorded in chapter 28, may possibly serve as context for this section. According to the minds of people who were influenced by their Zion theology and the lives of their own prophets, the exile was not going to be long. For Hananiah, it was impossible for the Judean exiles and especially for Jehoiachin, the Davidic king, to stay in Babylon for more than two years. This shows that "Jeremiah's prophetic opponents believed that the exile will be short" (Hill 2004:149). The present condition of the exiles, as directed by the Jeremiah's letter, is characterised by taking life in Babylon as normal in every aspect because their exile will be long. This is conveyed in the idea that it takes a long time between the planting of trees and the eating of their fruits. One has to wait a very long time for people to marry, have children and give their children in marriage so that they too can have children. Dearman (2002:264) argues that Jeremiah "urges prayers for the welfare of Babylon

and effort towards the care for families because there will be no quick return from exile". Therefore, I would argue that whether taken literally or not, these directives (vv. 5–7) simply convey the idea that exile will be very long. They also help the reader to have a different perspective of Babylon, especially when people are instructed to seek the welfare of Babylon. Hence, Hill (2004:150) would suggest that "an initial reading reveals a positive view of Babylon. A closer reading of the text makes us realise how startling and radical such a view is. The prophet's directives about life in exile contain direct reference or allusion to text in the Old Testament that speaks about life in the promise Land". Nowhere have people been told to settle down in Babylon and pray for the city in Jeremiah's prophecies except here.

Dearman (2002:262) contends that this is what is new in chapter 29. Perhaps this can be seen as an example of real politics as some scholars have pointed out (Hill 2004:151). This can be somewhat true if the letter is taken into its historical context. However, since the approach of this article is more on the literary and theological contexts of the text than the historical, Jeremiah's letter is not an example of real politics (Hill 2004:151, 2). If based on the historical context, these directives would convey the message of not believing prophecies, which suggest a short stay in exile. Literarily and theologically speaking, the message goes even beyond that. Theologically speaking, and according to Gowan's thesis of the death and the resurrection of Israel, the exile which is a theological death of God's people is viewed from a positive angle. Only through the exile life will spring emerge for God's people (cf. Lk 9:24). Exile becomes a positive thing in the sense that it is expectant of the restoration concept of God's people. Hence, it makes sense to me to take Dumbrell's (2002:142) suggestion that "the command to seek the welfare of Babylon arises from and supports the teaching that there is no future for Judah apart from exile, and certainly no hope of an early return to a now forsaken land (vv. 16–19)." I think this is also one of the reasons Hill (2004:152) contends that "the book of Jeremiah contains the second and much more positive picture of Babylon, represented especially by its interests in the metonymic figure of King Nebuchadnezzar." He goes on to state that "in Jeremiah 29:5–7 activities usually associated with life in the Promised Land are now mandated to the community in exile. The effect of the letter's directive is to change the perspective of Babylon" (Hill 2004: 150). Is this not the same way the New

Testament views the death of Christ and our identification in his death and resurrection?

From this passage, we can see that the exile will be long, but not unending. The Zion theology which seemed not to be part of Jeremiah's preaching, is now a strong emphasis of this letter. Yahweh will never abandon David.

There are approximately five crucial questions that are answered in these verses. Firstly, what is it that the Lord will specifically do for the exiles? In my view, the text supplies one thing: Yahweh will come to the exiles and will fulfil his good promise. The good promise in v. 11 is pregnant with the good things in v. 32, which the Lord will do for his people. Some will see these good things and some, like the false prophet, will not (v. 32). Secondly, when will that be? Only when the years for Babylon are complete. Babylon will be the climax of God's judgment. The word "when" in v. 10 shows that the fate of Babylon was certain. Thirdly, what does this good promise of Yahweh consist of? The quick answer is that the promise consists of the *good things* (v. 32). The Lord will deprive some from partaking in the promises and then bestow them on his people. To be specific, now the text gives us two important *good* things. It consists, first, of the *gathering* of his people in all the places where he has banished them and, secondly, it consists of Yahweh *bringing them back* to their Land. These two things together entail *the restoration* of Israel. Fourthly, why would the Lord do such a thing or on what basis will the Lord come to his people and fulfil his good promise? The surprising answer is that it was in his *gracious plan* to give them hope and future and not to harm them. This promise of Israel's restoration is sourced in God. It is in this sense unconditional. God's character of love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness is the reason behind this work. This promise is connected to David. The spiritual condition of those to whom the Lord wishes to do well and those to whom God wishes to punish is the same. Both the exiles and the remnant community in the land did not listen to God's words. This is clearly stated in v. 19, "for they have not listened to my words", declares the LORD, "words that I sent to them again and again by my servants the prophets. *And you exile have not listened either*, declares the LORD."

Last, but not least, the question is: what will be the result of the fulfilment of the good promise of Yahweh? The text gives us two important things

which will naturally flow as result of God fulfilling his promise. First, they will call on the Lord and pray to Yahweh and he will listen to them. I think v. 12 is an allusion to the turning point in human civilisation where people began to call on the name of the Lord (Gen. 4:26). The contrast between Cain's line and Seth's line in Genesis is presented fairly in Genesis 4. The birth of Seth is once again the beginning of the godly line. *At that time people began to call on the name of the LORD*. Mathews (1996:291) argues that here Enoch and his decedents contrast with Cain's decedents, who are remembered for urbanisation of society and the vices introduced by Lamech". He goes on to argue that "Cain's firstborn and successors pioneer cities and the civilised arts, but Seth's firstborn and successors pioneer worship". Hughes (2004:115) also makes an important point that, "in Seth's earliest ages, a special people began to develop, and they proclaimed the name of the Lord". If in Genesis the contrast is between Cain's line and Seth's line, in Jeremiah 29, the contrast is basically between the exilic community and the remnant community in the Land. Calling on the Lord is a sign that a remarkable thing has occurred in them. Secondly, they will be seeking the Lord with *whole their hearts* and will find him. In Jeremiah, the hearts of the people are described as stubborn and rebellious (5:23), stubbornness of evil heart (11:8), sin engraved on the tablet of their heart (17:1), deceitful and desperately sick (17:9). Therefore, unless a radical change has happened, with such a sick heart, it is impossible to seek the Lord wholeheartedly. Therefore, seeking the Lord with one's whole heart is a radical thing that Yahweh himself will do in his people. In Jeremiah, transformation of heart was one of the good things of his good promise (3:7) and 24:7 confirms this by saying, "I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with *all their heart*."

In the prayer of Daniel, Wilson (1990:90) reflects on Jeremiah 29 and understands verses 12–14 as the conditions for restoration. For this reason, in Daniel 9, he argues that "the prayer is best understood as an attempt to have Daniel fulfil the conditions for restoration set out in Jer. 29.12–14." Even Yates (2006:21) perceives these verses as conditions, for he contends that "YHWH promises to "bring back" the exiles (29:10), but their return will only come when they "seek" YHWH with all their heart (29:12–14). When they turn to YHWH in prayer, then YHWH will respond to their

cries for help (29:12)". On the contrary, I do not see these verses as conditions for restoration but rather as the natural by-product of the restoration. The logical flow of this text does not suggest the calling and seeking of Yahweh by the people as conditions. The restoration is unconditional and based on God's gracious promise. Having said so, I do not dispute the idea that sometimes scripture presents a tension between the conditionality and unconditionality of God's covenantal dealings with his people. However, I do not see that in this text. How could a sick and depraved heart be able to seek Yahweh without a radical change within? If those were conditions, then the promise for restoration was a mere farce because no one could meet those conditions in any way, based on their spiritual condition.

The sections that follow are all similar in the way they have been structured. Two elements are frameworks on which the texts are built. The verdict or pronouncement of judgment is provided first and the reason for judgment or the charge follows afterwards. The remnant community of the Land is here contrasted with the exile community of the previous section. Is this section supplying the answer to a curious anonymous person concerning the prophet's attitude to those who had been deported to Babylon in 597 BC as Erbt (McKane 1996: 736) suggests? I think that could be a possibility. However, this does not mean that it is that anonymous person who is other than the historical Jeremiah who supplied this section to answer his question. This section is not an invention but rather Jeremiah's own words.

The juxtaposition of this section to the previous one highlights a surprising and fascinating contrast between those in the Land and those in exile. Before we get into that interesting contrast, let us consider what the people of the Land have been charged with, and the sanction that follows. The charge is the malfunction of one of their sensory organs, i.e. their spiritual ears. They were deaf to the words of the Lord. The reason behind the judgment is clearly stated in v. 19: "'for they have not listened to my words,' declares the LORD, 'words that I sent to them *again and again* by my servants the prophets'". As to the charge, there is no difference between these two categories of people. Like the people in the Land, the exiles are also charged with spiritual deafness (cf. v. 19d): "'And you exiles have not listened either', declares the LORD". Spiritual deafness is a serious charge because it is always a result of idol worship. "For if we worship idols we will become like the idols, and that likeness will ruin us", argues Beale

(2008:46). One of the characteristics of idols is that "they have got ears but they cannot hear" (Ps. 115:6). Those who make them will become like them, and everyone who trusts in them (Ps. 115:8). The literary approach presupposes that the "audience survived the collapse of the nation of Judah; many were exiles relocated to Babylon" (Jones 2004:178). It is this presupposition that helps me to make the connection between the charges of the people to idol worship. Moreover, when commenting on Jeremiah 5:18–19, Jones (2004:186) argues that "verse 19 anticipates the question that survivors of Judah's demise would ask. "Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?" The response explains exile as a direct consequence of violations of the first commandment".

It is from the description of the judgment that one can see the contrasting aspect of these two sections. The exile, ironically, is described as a place of shalom and the Land (Jerusalem) that was supposed to be a peaceful Land is the one that will be pursued by the Lord with sword, famine and plague. Who could naturally have thought that the people of God are the ones in exile? Who could, with the natural interpretation of the event, possibly have concluded that the people on the safe and favoured side are the ones in exile? Based on the Zion theology, no one could think that way. However, the paradox is that the people in the Land are the ones who will be turned into the bad figs that no one prefers even to test (v. 17). What a metaphorical image of judgment!

The same pattern as in the previous section is observed here, i.e. the charge and the judgment. I prefer to look into the charge first and thereafter the verdict or the pronouncement of judgment. However, the order as it is in the text is pronouncing the judgment first and thereafter laying the charge behind that verdict. The false prophets have done things which exceed the limits of what is usual – things which are not conventional, which in this case are twofold. One has to do with words and the other with ethics. The charges are: committing adultery with their neighbours' wives and uttering lies in the name of Yahweh (v. 23). Now, for their judgment, Yahweh will use the Babylonian king to put them to death. Though the content of the message of these prophets is not given, it is likely based on both the occasion of the letter and the literary context that they were inspiring people with a false hope. Like Hananiah, they were preaching that exile was going to be short and Babylon would not prevail.

The focus moves from many false prophets to one who has been singled out. Shemaiah seems to be very influential, both in exile and in Jerusalem. His authority, whether self-given or delegated, is shown in the sense that he could try to influence even the high priest in Jerusalem to oppose Jeremiah's ministry. He did this by sending letters from exile to Jerusalem. His charge is that he has exercised the prophetic ministry to the exiles in his own name and, moreover, that he has persuaded the exiles to trust in lies (v. 31). It is this enticing spirit that, I assume, contributes to him being singled out in false prophetic ministry.

Why are the prophets in the previous section and Shemaiah designated as "false" prophets? Hoverholt (1967:244) makes an important point that "the designation of these prophetic opponents as "false" rests solely upon the specific content of their message". Though the morality of these prophets is also put into question, the major problem was more on the content of their messages than anything else. On judgment, Shemaiah's is somewhat different and more severe than that of the prophets in the previous section. He will be cut off completely, to the roots. The good promise of Yahweh to the exiles will pass him by.

## 4. Conclusion

The words of Jeremiah were indeed the words of Yahweh. The prophet's words were vindicated by the fact that his words came true. The fact of the duration of the exile was the undeniable proof that Jeremiah was indeed correct. For this reason, Jeremiah was speaking with the authority of Yahweh himself. Shemaiah and the other prophets, including Hananiah, were wrong. They were not sent by Yahweh; therefore, they were not speaking with Yahweh's authority. This is true especially considering the standard test of a prophet's legitimacy and the veracity of their message, which was to see if what they prophesied actually came to pass (28:9, cf. Deut. 18:21–22).

Besides the so-called "standard test", one has to note that Jeremiah did not have to wait for his message to come true for him to charge his opponents with speaking lies or "false" prophecy. Reflecting, for instance, on Hananiah, interestingly Hoverholt (1967:244) contends that "the curious thing is that considered apart from its historical context, there

is nothing particularly "false" about Hananiah's message". Hoverholt (1967:245) continues to argue that "since for Israel history was the place in which Yahweh's rule was recognisable," this becomes the crucial issue in the matter of false prophecy. It is the historical context alone that makes an otherwise unobjectionable message "false." Hananiah was guilty of misreading Israel's election faith. Therefore, besides the so-called standard test (Deut. 18:19 – 20) and the moral life of the prophet, Hoverholt's argument on the consideration of reading history appropriately is very crucial. Hoverholt (1967:245) further argues that "It is certainly true that Yahweh has chosen this people and wills their salvation (cf. Deut. 7:6 ff., 20:4), but Hananiah had apparently forgotten that the covenant also carries with it definite obligations which the people must fulfil. He apparently failed to interpret the political events of his day as a punishment levelled by Yahweh against a sinful people. Instead, he applied an *old* message in a *new* situation, and thus demonstrated an "*inability to orient himself in the new historical situation*, viz. to perceive the will of God for a specific situation and at a specific place".

Having the readers of the book as audience, this means that Jeremiah's prophetic letter was proved true. The message of Jeremiah 29 must serve as the message of both encouragement and warning. Concerning the encouragement, the readers had all the reasons to trust in Yahweh who never gives up on Zion – there is still hope to come. Their return and future were solely based on the gracious promise of Yahweh. There was literally nothing in them that could attract God to save them. If the audience of the book

> were subjects of a large, pluralistic empire that promoted its own official religion and that gave no recognition, status, or privilege to the exiles or to their religious faith or national identity (Jones 2004:178).

Then this chapter was indeed a pastoral letter to them. In this letter, we see how God is promoting among the exiles all that the Pluralistic Empire could not. One of the obvious things in chapter 29 is Yahweh assuring the exiles a status, their religious faith and national identity. They are warned to be careful about the messages they hear. Being involved in "false" prophetic ministry and trusting in them have serious repercussions (1 Th. 5:20–22).

Based on the spiritual condition after the demise of 587 BC, the readers of the book could rightly see that their return was not the end of exile. This is true especially based on the good promise of Yahweh to the community in exile. Through the lens of the message of hope, particularly from the second cycle of the book, against the reality on the ground after the 586 BC the return was not the end of exile. However, surviving the destruction of Jerusalem has proved how merciful the Lord has been to his people. This clarifies the question of who the people of God indeed are. The remnant Jerusalem community after the 597 BC events were not God's people, neither the refugee community in Egypt after 586 BC. On the one hand, the exile reached its climax with the death of death in the death of Christ. The death of death in the death of Christ is the way Owen (1852) chose to speak of the atoning work of the Lord Jesus. In the context of this article, I see that appropriate to explain the end of Babylon.

> Babylon comes to an end when it is eventually destroyed by the Lord. The Book of Jeremiah provides instruction for disciplined spiritual practices as an appropriate response to exiles ancient and modern (Jones 2004:195).

Babylon as a symbol of suffering and death has been theologically dealt with in the death and resurrection of Christ. On the other hand, Peter (1:1; 2:11) urges believers to think of themselves as exiles and aliens in this world.

Therefore, Brueggemann makes sense in arguing that "exiles in any age need an assurance of the presence and power of God to endure the emotional and spiritual toll of despair" (Jones 2004:192). With this meaning in mind, Jeremiah's letter becomes more alive and pastoral to the contemporary believers living in this "foreign" world.

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