Jeremiah: the formulation of criteria for discernment

In our world, the truth seldom goes uncontested. We have seen it before. Let a Jeremiah appear; on the moment there springs up a coven of opposition, peddling other versions of God, of community, or moral behavior. The Jeremiahs are rare, that strong unmistakeable presence, a veritable field of force. Then the opposition proliferates and bears down implacable, over and against the truth-teller.

— DANIEL BERRIGAN, SJ (BERRIGAN 1999:96)

Introduction

This quest for criteria for critical discernment of prophetic authenticity will start in what is arguably the only book in the Old Testament to engage with the issue in a focussed and explicit rather than *ad hoc* way – Jeremiah. The general reason for the presence of such criteria within the book would appear to be the particular context within which Jeremiah's prophetic ministry was situated. The final years of the kingdom of Judah (late seventh and early sixth centuries) raised in an unprecedentedly disputed way the question of what kind of future, if any, the kingdom was to have, especially in relation to the growing power of Babylon. Jeremiah's witness[1] in this context was contested by other prophets in a

---

1. My focus will be on the received portrait of Jeremiah in the MT, without prejudice to questions of possible sources, tradition history, and redaction (though I am not unaware of likely historical depth in the received portrait). Differences between MT and LXX will only be noted where significant. The principle underlying this is that the book itself is the fruit of a process of discernment designed to present a portrait of Jeremiah in such a way as to make his significance accessible to subsequent generations (see Moberly 2004b); its heuristic value will also, I hope, be justified by its fruitfulness for moral-theological understanding and appropriation. Since recent monographs on prophetic conflict in Jeremiah (Meyer 1977, Sharp 2003; largely, Lange 2002), analyse and utilize the text in stratified, diachronically constructed categories, and also tend to pose issues in a way rather different from mine

way that is not evidenced in the books associated with Hosea, Amos, Isaiah, or Micah, or the post-exilic prophets. It is not that the words of these other prophets do not encounter their own opposition, but such opposition is predominantly expressed in terms of a reluctance to take their challenge seriously rather than in terms of alternative Yahwistic prophetic messages. There is also nothing comparable within the narrative accounts of Elijah and Elisha, where the opposition is famously depicted as arising from an alternative allegiance, i.e. to Baal (1 Kgs. 18, 2 Kgs. 10:18–27), rather than from within a shared acknowledgement of YHWH.[2]

Because Jeremiah's context was in certain ways shared with Ezekiel, the problems of conflicting Yahwistic prophecies arise within the book of Ezekiel also (13:1–14:11). There, however, they play a smaller role, probably because Ezekiel's ministry only begins when exile in Babylon is no longer a disputed possibility but rather a given. For reasons of space, the focus of this chapter will be restricted to Jeremiah.

My approach will be cumulatively to build up an understanding of Jeremiah's construal of the nature of prophecy, within the context of his moral theology as a whole. The explicit discussion of criteria for critical discernment of prophetic authenticity is Jer. 23:9–32, a section with a special heading 'Concerning the prophets' (23:9). However, this section is, in my judgment, easily misunderstood; so I wish to place it within the wider context of Jeremiah's moral and theological concerns so that one may be better able to see what Jeremiah is, and is not, saying – for the pattern of thought in 23:9–32 is foundational for the thesis of this book as a whole. A discussion of 23:9–32 will therefore be the climax of this chapter, for which the exegesis of other passages is the necessary preparation. I should also mention that the encounter between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28), which many take to be the key to what Jeremiah has to say about discernment, does not, in my judgment, fulfil this role; consideration of this episode will therefore be postponed until the following chapter.

Prophecy and moral theology in Jeremiah: an outline

Jer. 1:1–10. YHWH's word in Jeremiah's words

[1] The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin, [2] to whom the word of the LORD came in the days of King Josiah son of Amon of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. [3] It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

The book begins with an editorial superscription (1:1–3) which sets out the general historical context and chronology for Jeremiah's ministry. It also states as clearly as could be the theological issue which is our concern: human words, those of Jeremiah, which constitute the book that follows,[3] also convey a divine word, the word of YHWH.[4]

The singular form, 'word of YHWH', is noteworthy.[5] A plural reference to divine speech, i.e. 'words', not infrequently occurs within Jeremiah, and would seem a natural, perhaps prima facie more obvious, form to use; and such usage probably means that the singular had not yet come to have the significance it acquired in classic Jewish and Christian parlance, and so it is difficult to know how much weight it is right to ascribe to it within the context of Jeremiah.[6] Nonetheless, the singular 'word of YHWH' is already the predominant form, and the exclusive form as active

---

3. This is clearly a general introduction, whose point should not be lost to the perfectly proper qualifications both that portions of the book are narratives about Jeremiah (with a concluding chapter that does not mention him at all) and that some of the content ascribed to Jeremiah has been (in all likelihood) developed by others whose names, apart from that of Baruch, have not been preserved.

4. The LXX keeps the point but lacks the pattern of MT in that it begins 'The word of God which came to Jeremiah'. Since in verse 2 LXX corresponds to MT, the LXX reads awkwardly and repetitively, and its wording in verse 1 is most probably a secondary accommodation to the superscriptions of other prophetic books.

5. I am not unmindful of a general difficulty, articulated by von Rad 1965:80: 'A critical account of the prophetic concept is needed all the more urgently to-day in that we simply cannot assume that our conception of "the word of God" or of the function of words in general is identical with that held by the prophets.' The problem is heightened by the fact that von Rad's own account (1965:80–98) is in important ways rendered invalid by more recent work on the nature of language, e.g. Thiselton 1974; for a suggestive possible way ahead, see Schneiders 1999:27–63.

6. Commentators tend to deny significance here. So, e.g., Rendtorff, 'there is no coherent theory of the "word of God" . . . no fundamental distinction is made between statements about the "word" and "the words" of God' (2005:205).

subject of a verb,[7] and it creates an implicit contrast with the plural 'words of Jeremiah', in a way that suggests that the 'word of YHWH' is not the same sort of thing as Jeremiah's words. YHWH does not speak to Jeremiah in the way that Jeremiah speaks to others; where human words are many and varied, the active divine word is singular. Such singularity encourages the reader to understand 'word' in relation to YHWH as in some way metaphorical, in that YHWH does not endlessly utter one particular sound or group of syllables. Rather the prophet responds to an active divine reality which is such that the fruit of the encounter is appropriately conceived in terms of something meaningful and communicable. The singularity of the divine word may also suggest a communication that is intrinsically simple, in the sense of being a wholistic reality of a kind that involves the total range of human awareness in the task of comprehension.

At this point our text shows no interest in offering any account of how the divine word and the human words should be understood to interrelate. A simple juxtaposition, with its correlative implication of the fundamental significance of the human words that follow, suffices to set the stage. We should also note, however, that the divine word is encountered in a specific historical context. On the one hand, Jeremiah comes from a family with a long and religiously involved history.[8] On the other hand, what he says arises within a period of time, labelled conveniently by its Judahite kings (1:2–3), which led up to the exile of Jerusalem (i.e. its destruction and the deportation of many of its inhabitants by the Babylonians).[9] In an obvious sense what Jeremiah says is not

---

7. When the text does speak of 'the words of YHWH', *divre yhwh* (or with suffixes, 'my words/your words', 1:9, 5:14, 15:16, 18:2, 23:22), it is always as object, never as subject, and the phrase is mainly used to depict the written content of the scroll that was read to Jehoiakim (36:4, 6, 11; but also the general 37:2). This suggests that passing or general reference to what YHWH says can readily be expressed in the plural, but that a formal introduction, when what YHWH says is active subject, is appropriately expressed in the singular.

8. The priests resident at Anathoth are most likely to be seen as descendants of Abiathar, who had served King David but who was rusticated by Solomon for having supported Adonijah's claims to the throne (1 Kgs. 2:26); and Abiathar is descended from an ancient priestly family known as the house of Eli (1 Kgs. 2:27, 1 Sam. 2:27–36, 3:11–14), which was based in the temple at Shiloh (cf. below on Jeremiah 7). This priestly family's possible involvements in the religious politics of Jerusalem, and the possible impact of such involvements upon Jeremiah, are a potentially fascinating issue – though almost entirely of a speculative kind, given the lack of evidence.

9. This is another general point, which should not be obscured either by the unarguable fact that the book itself contains material that extends beyond the fall of Jerusalem (esp. Jeremiah 40–4) or by modern puzzling as to whether Jeremiah's ministry could really have begun as early as the thirteenth year of Josiah (627/6 BC) when most of his dated oracles are dated to the reigns of Jehoiakim (609–598) and Zedekiah (597–587).

'timeless' but rather embedded in a particular time; and even if Jeremiah's words have an enduring significance beyond that of their originating context – which is already the tacit implication of this editorial superscription, quite apart from the implications of the recognition and reception of the book of Jeremiah within the collection of Israel's scriptures – the particularities of Jeremiah's own context have been preserved as integral to the comprehension of his message.

The narrative now gets underway with a first-person account of YHWH's speaking to Jeremiah and commissioning him:

> [4] Now the word of the LORD came to me saying,
>> [5] 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
>> and before you were born I consecrated you;
>> I appointed you a prophet to the nations.'
> [6] Then I said, 'Ah Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.'
> [7] But the LORD said to me,
>> 'Do not say, "I am only a boy";
>> for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
>> and you shall speak whatever I command you.
>> [8] Do not be afraid of them,
>> for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD."[10]
> [9] Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,
>> 'Now I have put my words[11] in your mouth.
>> [10] See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
>> to pluck up and to pull down,
>> to destroy and to overthrow,
>> to build and to plant.'

YHWH's initial words are astonishing in their scope (verse 5b): Jeremiah is to be 'prophet to the nations'. One might have expected a narrower scope, since Jeremiah's own people, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and Judah, are the specified addressees of most of what he says. To be sure, Jeremiah does also address other peoples – Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom,

---

10. Although this rendering of the common idiom *ne'ūm yhwh* is not incorrect, McKane 1986:6 freshly renders the idiom with 'you have my word'.

11. Rudolph 1968:4 notes, though does not follow, Budde's proposal to conform this usage to the norm by repointing as a singular. The emendation would make good sense, but is unsupported in the ancient versions and is unnecessary (cf. the singular object 'my word' in verse 12b).

Damascus, Kedar, Elam, and Babylon all receive oracles from him (Jeremiah 46–51; cf. 25:15–38); but one would not expect this group of oracles to characterize Jeremiah's ministry as a whole, since most of the time he is not addressing these recipients. Nonetheless, the point would appear to be that what Jeremiah will say applies not only to Israel and Judah but to other nations as well, in that the dynamics of yhwh's message through Jeremiah do not solely apply to God's chosen people but rather characterize the relationship of the Creator with created humanity generally.[12] Perhaps this also implicitly envisages the preservation of Jeremiah's words in written form, so that their scope can best be realized.

Because of the demanding nature of such a commission, it is prefaced with words of both challenge and reassurance (verse 5a): Jeremiah's identity as a human is to be understood in terms of God's purposes as articulated in this commission. On the one hand, it means that if being a prophet to the nations is the *raison d'être* of Jeremiah's existence, then this is not a vocation that could be declined or evaded without doing violence to his very being. On the other hand, if Jeremiah's vocation is an out-working of God's purposes, then what he says and does will necessarily have meaning and value – even if that meaning and value is not readily apparent in terms of Jeremiah's immediate reception.

Jeremiah's sense of inadequacy for so demanding a task (verse 6) is overruled by God (verses 7–8) with a classic articulation of what prophecy is. yhwh *sends* (*shālah*) Jeremiah, to underline that the initiative lies with God rather than human choice; and likewise what Jeremiah *speaks* on God's behalf is to accord with divine directing (verse 7b). Further, Jeremiah is not to fear, for God will be present to deliver (*nātsal*) him from his enemies. This is not a promise that Jeremiah will not encounter opposition, but that the opposition will not be permitted by God to silence or destroy him. This is tacitly demonstrated in two narratives of acute, life-threatening conflict: first, in the temple precincts, where Ahikam successfully protects Jeremiah from murderous temple officials (26:24), and secondly, when Jeremiah's hiding from an irate Jehoiakim is made successful by God (36:19, 26).

yhwh's words are now reinforced by an action, whose symbolic meaning is spelled out so that there can be no doubt about the divine

---

12. See further below on Jer. 18:7–10.

origin of Jeremiah's words (verse 9).[13] YHWH's commission in verse 5b is now, in characteristic Hebrew idiom, repeated with expansion (verse 10). Jeremiah's appointment to/for (*le*) the nations now becomes a position of authority over (*'al*) nations and kingdoms. This authority will be evidenced by the searching purpose of his prophecy: extensive demolition and destruction of what is presently in place, but also a building and planting which indicates a new start and fresh hope. The nature of Jeremiah's authority as 'moral' and 'spiritual' is made clear. His destruction and building could not be further from the kind of destruction of property regularly visited by the militarily powerful on those weaker than, or defeated by, them,[14] for Jeremiah's instrument is explicitly words, not sledgehammers; and yet the word of YHWH faithfully transmitted may be exactly like a sledgehammer in terms of its impact upon human life ('Is not my word ... like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?', 23:29). It is particularly ironic that such extensive and devastating authority is given to someone who as a person is vulnerable emotionally, socially, and militarily. The kind of reconstrual of authority and power that is deeply characteristic of the Jewish and Christian faiths (a reconfiguring of human priorities as a whole in terms that Jeremiah will spell out to do with public justice and integrity before God) is already clear within this text.

Jeremiah's commissioning thus sets out in paradigmatic form the phenomenon of the word of God in human words: the initiative for, and the content of, the human words lies with God.[15] It is important to see that at this stage, when as yet there is no contesting of Jeremiah's credentials, there is no concern to validate the testimony beyond presenting it as an authentic commissioning by YHWH. We are given a depiction fraught with implication. Criteria of authenticity will only emerge in due course.

13. The language of the text is almost identical to that of Deut. 18:19, tacitly portraying Jeremiah as one of those successors to Moses envisaged by Deut. 18:9–22, esp. 15.

14. In modern times, the 'cultural revolution' inflicted by Mao upon China stands out as a prime example of fundamental misunderstanding of the kind of clearing away necessary to enable a fresh start.

15. A strange misreading of this passage, which indicates how deeply rooted in some interpreters is the conception of God as an alien 'other' whose presence might diminish rather than enhance the prophet's humanity, is Berquist 1989:131: 'Jeremiah claims that the source of his prophecy is not himself but Yahweh. This validates his message by grounding its origins in the divine realm, and it removes Jeremiah from criticism by denying his responsibility for the content of his messages.'

Jer. 18:1–12. The nature and purpose of Jeremiah's prophetic speech

[1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: [2] 'Come, go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words.' [3] So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.
[4] The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him.

The scene within the potter's house is swiftly set. YHWH implictly requires an appropriate particular context for the message that is to be communicated; his word[16] will be an extended exploration of the analogical implications of a potter at work. Jeremiah obediently complies (verse 3a) and depicts what he sees there,[17] initially in general terms (verse 3b), but then with a specific instance of the potter's actions (verse 4).

It is not quite clear how much significance one should find in the details of what the potter does, for more than one detail is suggestive, but not all details are picked up in the interpretations that will follow. The fact that (a) the vessel is *spoiled* could be probed, as could the fact that (b) the potter *remakes* it, as could the fact that (c) *the new vessel appears to be a remaking of the original vessel which is not discarded as it might have been*, as could the fact that (d) the potter does what he does *as seems good to him*. But whatever the potential of the picture for fuller exploration of its details, it is points (b) and (d) that are developed in the word of YHWH that follows:

[5] Then the word of the LORD came to me: [6] Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the LORD. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.

Although Jeremiah is (presumably) in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, God's address is to the people of God in general, 'house of Israel'; the address relates to God's dealings with his chosen people as a whole. The prime emphasis appears to be YHWH's power, to do as he likes just as a

---

16. As in 1:9 YHWH speaks of 'my words' (verse 2), but this is contextualized by the narrator's use of the singular 'the word' (verse 1) and the comparable subsequent use of 'the word of YHWH' in verse 5.
17. The Hebrew introduces verse 3b with *hinneh* (with an unusual form in the *ketib* replaced by a more common form in the *qere*), a common narrative device, with analogies to the modern use of the camera within films, to shift the point of view from the narrator's overview to the particular viewpoint of the character within the text.

potter does. Here it is worth pausing to reflect on the symbolic logic of the imagery of potter and clay as an analogy for God.[18]

The logic of the imagery is not that of interpersonal relationships, which are the characteristic and predominant mode of depicting God and His dealings within Israel's scripture: king and subjects, master and slave, husband and wife, father and son are perhaps the most common images. However unequal all such relationships were, they were always nonetheless in principle mutual; they engage the stronger party no less than, although differently from, the weaker party. Moreover, sheer pity and compassion might renew the relationship at times when it was in danger of breaking down – as, famously, God cannot restrain compassion towards his errant son Israel (Hos. 11:1–9, esp. 8–9). But with a lump of clay a potter has no relationship, no responsibilities, no feelings (other than the aesthetic, which is significant on a different plane) – the clay is an object to be used. When applied to God, therefore, the imagery of potter (*yōtser*) does not evoke mutuality, but rather unilateral power. Thus it is an idiom which is readily used in the context of God's work of creation (Gen. 2:7, 19, *ytsr*), as in God's creation of Jeremiah himself (Jer. 1:5a, *ytsr*). It is in keeping with such a sense of the intrinsic meaning of the imagery that it is used elsewhere in Scripture in two contexts: either to emphasize divine strength in contrast to human weakness,[19] or to discourage, indeed disallow, dissent from a divine decision that appears problematic and open to objection.[20] So when Jeremiah hears the word of YHWH at the potter's house saying that Israel in God's hand is like clay in the potter's hand, the primary thrust would appear to be that God can shape Israel in whatever way he will; power, not accountability or mercy, is the point of the imagery.

The sequel is therefore unexpected, not least because it does not develop the image of the potter (*yōtser*) other than in a rather general sense that change and alteration is implied in the potter's reworking of his vessel:

> [7] At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, [8] but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns (*shūv*) from its evil, I will change

18. I draw here on my earlier discussion, Moberly 1998.   19. Isa. 64:8–9, 2 Cor. 4:7.
20. Isa. 45:9–13 in relation to the depiction of Cyrus the Gentile as YHWH's 'anointed' in the mode of the Davidic king (45:1–7); Rom. 9:19–21 in relation to God's not only having mercy but also hardening whom He wills (9:16–18).

my mind (*niham*)[21] about the disaster that I intended to bring on it.
⁹ And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a
kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ but if it does evil in my sight,
not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind (*niham*) about
the good that I had intended to do to it.

Several combined factors give this passage its force. First is its clear
reference to the terms of Jeremiah's commissioning in 1:10.

> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
> to pluck up and to pull down,
> to destroy and to overthrow,
> to build and to plant.

There is the same concern as in 1:10 with nations and kingdoms, to pluck
up and break down and destroy (18:7),[22] as well as to build and to plant
(18:9). Also we see that while Jeremiah 1 specified what Jeremiah was to
say and do, Jeremiah 18 speaks of what God will say and do. Thus the
pattern of God's word in the human words of Jeremiah is fully presup-
posed. This suggests that Jer. 18:7–10, and by extension the whole episode
at the potter's house, functions as a kind of commentary on the purpose
of Jeremiah's commissioning.

Secondly, there is the transition from the clear address to the 'house of
Israel' (verse 6), indicating the totality of God's people, to a concern for
nations and kingdoms generally. This gives a clue to understanding
Jeremiah's overall commission to 'the nations' (1:5, 10). The underlying
implication is that God's dealings with his chosen people are not differ-
ent in kind, in their moral and spiritual dynamics, from his dealings with
any and every people – as indeed is appropriate for the God who has
formed (*ytsr*) all creatures.[23] The principles of prophetic speech apply not
just to the people of God, but everywhere.

---

21. There is no difficulty-free translation of *niham*, but preferable is 'rescind' or perhaps
'repeal' or 'revoke'; the point is not y h w h's psychology, but rather his responsiveness
whereby he will authoritatively reverse a previous equally authoritative pronouncement
(I am indebted to Rob Barrett for discussion and suggestions here).
22. The fourth term in 1:10, 'overthrow' (*harōs*), is omitted in 18:7, but this makes no
substantive difference. Both here and in 1:10 the LXX has one less verb than MT, but again
this does not alter the sense of the text, though its idiom becomes a little less emphatic.
23. The evenhandedness of God is also a major concern in the analogous presentation of
God's dealings with the world in general and with Israel in particular in the stories of the
flood (Genesis 6–9) and of the golden calf (Exodus 32–4). See Moberly 1983:91–3 for the prime
textual indicators, though the list could be extended. A Christian naturally thinks also of
Paul's 'there is no partiality with God' (Rom. 2:11) and Luke's portrayal of Peter, 'I truly

Thirdly, the content of these words is remarkable, so striking that some commentators have found fault with it; for how could God allow His freedom to be in some way dependent upon His creatures?[24] Yet there is a simple, and surely deliberate, paradoxical logic. In a context whose imagery and explicit statement strongly emphasize divine power (verses 1–6), we have a strong statement of divine responsiveness to human attitude and action (verses 7–10).[25] The point of verses 7–10 is not to deny God's freedom, but rather to specify the moral and responsive nature of that freedom. Where God is free to act ('most' free, in terms of the text's potter imagery), God binds Himself ('strongly', in terms of the text's language) in that acting. YHWH's sovereignty is not exercised arbitrarily, but responsibly and responsively, taking into account the moral, or immoral, actions of human beings. This episode of the potter's house becomes a striking formulation of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

The theological principle thus enunciated is regularly exemplified elsewhere in Israel's scriptures. While Jeremiah formulates the principle with regard to nations, Ezekiel expresses much the same conceptuality in different terminology in terms of particular people (Ezek. 33:10–16, esp. 12–16),[26] which further underlines the wide applicability of the principle; though the OT tends to use Jeremiah's terminology. So, for example, God's responsiveness (*niham*) to human turning from evil (*shūv*, in classic terminology, 'repentance') is most famously displayed in the story of Jonah (Jonah 3:1–10), but is also appealed to in the narrative of Jeremiah's temple address (Jer. 26, esp. 26:16–19). Conversely, and no

understand that God shows no partiality' (Acts 10:34; related nominal forms of *prosōpolēmpteō* are used in each passage), and comparable sentiments elsewhere in the NT. It should be noted that neither in OT nor in NT does such lack of partiality deny a doctrine of election; rather it constitutes one of the crucial factors for understanding what election does, and does not, mean.

24. Von Rad 1965:198–9, for example, comments on 18:7–10 that it 'is meant to indicate Jahweh's freedom as he directs history, but it does this in an oddly theoretical way by giving imaginary examples which are quite contrary to the sense of the passage, for they almost make Jahweh's power dependent on law rather than on freedom', and he concludes, in a time-honoured way of dealing with a difficult biblical passage, that it 'should probably be regarded as a theological expansion'. When a Lutheran theologian speaks of a depiction of divine power as 'almost dependent on law', this evidences a high level of unease with the text.

25. This point may be missed if one puts all the interpretative weight on verse 6. Thus Stulman 1999:55 comments on verses 5–11: 'Like the potter, Yahweh is utterly at liberty to shape or remold the clay at his discretion . . . Yahweh enjoys the utter freedom to reverse the good fortune of a nation . . . on account of its "evil".'

26. Interestingly, Ezekiel's account of divine responsiveness in relation to the righteous and the wicked follows on immediately from the portrayal of Ezekiel's prophetic ministry as that of a watchman/sentinel (33:1–9). It thus interprets Ezekiel's prophetic ministry in a way analogous to the interpretation of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry in the potter episode.

less importantly,[27] God's responsiveness (*niham*) to human complacency and corruption in terms of withdrawing promised good is equally illustrated, both for the world in general (Gen. 6:5–8) and for particular people, the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:27–30)[28] and Saul (1 Sam. 15:11, 35).[29]

We are thus presented with a fundamental axiom about prophecy.[30] On the one hand, what a prophet says on behalf of God with reference to the future of those addressed will not be realized in isolation from the response that is given. This means that whatever the precise words of the prophet, that which will take place cannot be predicted *tout court*; human attitude and action are integral to the divine unfolding of history. On the other hand, what a prophet says on behalf of God seeks a particular kind of response – turning from sin, or avoiding a turn to sin, as the case may be. Admittedly the text of Jer. 18:7–10 speaks in terms of consequence ('X then Y then Z') rather than purpose ('X in order that Y in order that Z'), yet in the wider context of Jeremiah, and much other prophetic literature, it is difficult not to conclude that purpose is indeed the sense of the words.[31] For elsewhere the appeal to turn (*shūv*) is the explicit point of what the prophet says (e.g. Jer. 3:7–10, 12, 14, 22), so that turning cannot be seen as a 'mere' consequence which is not integral to the intentionality, or purpose, of the prophetic address.[32] Prophetic speech is response-seeking speech – in the first instance the purpose of pronouncing impending disaster is that the sinful respond by turning to God,[33]

27. Elias Bickerman (1967:39) once sharply observed, 'Few among us care to remember, however, the other part of Jeremiah's startling theory: that God's promises no less than His threats are conditioned on man's conduct. We like to believe ... that every favorable word issued from the mouth of God, even if it was given conditionally, was never withdrawn.'

28. This example displays the conceptuality without using *niham*.

29. For the construal of God's relenting in 1 Sam. 15:11, 35 in relation to the story's categorical assertion that 'God does not relent [*niham*]' (15:29), see Moberly 1998.

30. There is a difficult debate as to how far Jeremiah is innovating in relation to his prophetic predecessors, who may not have understood their message as intrinsically conditional; Bickerman (1967:38), typical of many, says that Jeremiah at this point 'offered a new perspective in theology'.

31. This view of prophecy is sometimes depicted in terms of the prophet as a 'preacher of repentance'. So, for example, McKane 1979:177 characterizes Buber's understanding of the prophets (1997:19–21), even though Buber himself prefers to speak of 'turning' rather than 'repentance'. But whatever the merits of such a characterization for depicting the primary thrust of most of the content of, say, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, it is incapable of capturing the dynamic of the warning that promised good may be forfeited through complacency and corruption.

32. See further Excursus 1 on Jer. 23:22.

33. Similarly, promised good ('to build and to plant') seeks a response of enhanced faithfulness and hope (somewhat as declarations of love between lovers seek to enhance mutual responsiveness).

but there is also the further prospect that God may then respond by withholding the disaster.

The word of YHWH to Jeremiah at the potter's house continues, however, somewhat unexpectedly:

> [11] Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look, I am a potter shaping evil[34] against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

Jeremiah is now given a specific message for those who hear him speak, the people of Judah in and around Jerusalem. This has the striking effect of strongly implying that what has been said to Jeremiah so far is *not* what he is to proclaim.[35] Rather it is for his own understanding,[36] and through him – presumably especially in his written presentation – for the understanding of Israel and other nations: they are to be able to know how the sovereign God is morally bound and responsive and how his pronouncements through his prophet are to be construed.

What Jeremiah *is* to say to his contemporaries goes back to the original image of the potter (verse 4), which is now developed in a way different from, and perhaps less intuitive than, that of verse 6. This new interpretation fixes on the specific word 'potter' (*yōtser*) which is now reinterpreted as an active participle (*yōtser*). As in the first interpretation YHWH is still the potter, but the clay is no longer Israel. Rather it is now taken to be YHWH's plan for his people, which is being fashioned and refashioned so as to bring disaster. The point would be that just as a potter can rework a vessel until it is to his liking, so YHWH can rework his impending judgment so that it will most surely come upon his people in the most appropriate and inescapable way. Yet if this use of the potter image implies the inescapable nature of impending disaster, the second part of the verse opens a way of escape (for it presupposes the understanding

---

34. A better translation of *ra'ah* is 'disaster' as in verse 8, and as regularly in prophetic announcements of impending judgment (e.g. Gen. 19:19, Amos 3:6b, Jonah 3:10). What is envisaged is not 'evil' in a moral sense – and it is difficult to use 'evil' in contemporary English without a moral sense – but rather trouble or hardship, the affliction or overthrow of a city, usually through an assault by its enemies.

35. Lundbom 1999:817 comments: 'We are not told that Jeremiah delivered this oracle [sc. 18:6–10], but it can be assumed that he did.' It is not just that we are not told of Jeremiah's delivering the oracle, but we are not even told of his being required to deliver it in his public ministry.

36. Perhaps it is analogous to the interplay between Jeremiah and YHWH in Jeremiah's 'confessions'.

of prophetic speech articulated in verses 7–10): the people must turn (*shūv*), they must reform; when the prophet announces impending disaster, what he seeks is a response of turning to God. Interestingly, the possibility of divine relenting (*niham*) is not included in what Jeremiah is to say. This is not because it is not integral to an understanding of prophecy, but because it may not be necessary or appropriate on the practical level: the moral and spiritual challenge to turn requires response on its own terms.

> [12] But they say, 'It is no use![37] We will follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.'

This appears to be a kind of comment upon what has preceded, though it is also an introduction to what follows (verse 13 begins with 'therefore . . .'). The identity of the initial speaker who cites what Judah says is not entirely clear. The words could be ascribed to YHWH as a continuation of verses 6–11, or to the voice of the narrator who introduced the section (verse 1a), or to Jeremiah himself. Whichever way, the thrust of the words is clear: Jeremiah's prophetic warning and challenge is not going to elicit the kind of response that it seeks, i.e. turning (*shūv*). Rather, instead of attending to YHWH's plan (*mahashāvāh*), the people are fully resolved to pursue their own plans (*mahashāvāh*) and go their own way.[38]

Contextually this signifies a refusal to engage with the implications of the potter and clay imagery. Although the preceding explication has predominantly emphasized the possibilities of change – in effect, YHWH can reshape the vessel into something better (stronger, more beautiful, more serviceable) if the people are responsive to the prophetic message – the people will have none of it. They wish only to be the kind of vessel

---

37. The Heb. *no'ash* appears to be an expressive one-word response, whose idiomatic equivalent in English would be a comparable single word, e.g. 'Hopeless', 'Useless'. Its sense is indicated by its use in 2:25b, where, as in 18:12, it introduces a statement of determination to resist Jeremiah's appeal and to persist in a course already chosen.

38. The people are here imagined to speak about themselves in the kind of pejorative terminology that is elsewhere used by YHWH when speaking about them (Jer. 3:17, 7:24, 9:13 (ET 14), 11:8, 13:10, 16:12, 23:17); and there is a comparable occurrence in Deut. 29:18 (ET 19). It is imaginatively suggestive if one thinks of the people as taking to themselves these pejorative terms and being willing to use them contemptuously ('You call us stubborn and evil? Fine, that's how we'll be'). Against this it can be argued that one should not press the significance of the people's sentiment being transposed into a Jeremianic idiom, because it may simply be the way in which the author thinks. But even if one cannot press the point in authorial terms, it may nonetheless be a legitimate point in terms of the narrative dynamics within the text.

they are already are, with no fresh possibilities opened up. They are not malleable, but unchanging, rigid. It thus comes as no surprise when the narrative resumes in ch. 19 that Jeremiah is told to take a jug, which is explicitly said to be a 'potter's jug' (*baqbūq yōtser*, 19:1),[39] and to smash it with the accompanying interpretation: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts: So will I break this people and this city, as one breaks a potter's vessel (*keli hayyōtser*), so that it can never be mended' (19:11). Jeremiah's words enunciate what the context of ch. 18 has already established: the earthenware jug represents the people of Judah and Jerusalem. If the pot will not allow itself to be the kind of vessel that its maker requires, then the potter will do away with it by smashing it to pieces; and the final irony of the refusal to change is that the smashing will be one that is beyond change through mending. Even if this will not represent the ultimate decision on the part of the potter, who will not be as inflexible as the clay (Jeremiah 30–3),[40] it represents a real decision whose dire outworking is narrated elsewhere within the book of Jeremiah.

Jer. 3:6–11, 4:3–4. The difficulty of repentance

It is one thing to recognize that prophetic warnings seek a response of turning to God. It is another thing to be able to discern when that response of turning is genuinely being made. Many writers in the OT are well aware that it is all too easy to make a claim of engaging with God while in fact lacking the reality.[41] So also within Jeremiah there is a recurrent awareness that claims to turn to God may in reality be less than they appear to be. Thus I move now from passages which explicitly speak of Jeremiah as prophet to the first of a number of passages which illuminate aspects of wider prophetic conceptuality.

One of the dominant concerns in an early section of the book, 3:1–4:4, is 'turning'. The section is structured around the verb 'turn' (*shūv*), with numerous plays upon this verbal root. A good example is 3:6–11:

> [6] The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she did, that faithless one ['turning away', from *shūv*], Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the

---

39. *BHS* ad loc. notes the linkage with 18:2ff., and suggests that this may be a reason for deleting *yōtser*. Quite apart from the fact that this is not a text-critical judgment, and so does not belong in a text-critical apparatus, it illustrates rather well how the quest for a putative original form of the tradition can impede rather than assist an understanding of the text in its received form.

40. See further Excursus 3.   41. Two famous examples are Isa. 29:13 and Josh. 24:16–24.

whore there? [7] And I thought, 'After she has done all this she will return [*shūv*] to me'; but she did not return [*shūv*], and her false sister Judah saw it. [8] She saw that for all her adulteries of that faithless one [*shūv*], Israel, I had sent her away with a decree of divorce; yet her false sister Judah did not fear, but she too went and played the whore. [9] Because she took her whoredom so lightly, she polluted the land, committing adultery with stone and tree. [10] Yet for all this her false sister Judah did not return [*shūv*] to me with her whole heart, but only in pretence [*sheqer*], says the LORD. [11] Then the LORD said to me: Faithless [*shūv*] Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah.

Whether or not one can identify a particular historical allusion in verse 10,[42] the important point for our concerns is the juxtaposition of two of the key terms within Jeremiah, 'turn' (*shūv*) and 'pretence/falsehood' (*sheqer*). Claims, even attempts, to turn to YHWH, whether in response to Jeremiah or someone else, may be vitiated by superficiality. As we will see, *sheqer* in the context of moral and spiritual language and practice denotes a fundamentally self-serving attitude which lacks integrity ('a whole heart', verse 10).[43] Even a moving, and genuine-sounding, expression of turning to YHWH (3:22b–25) receives only a cautious response which emphasizes that turning to YHWH must be genuine (4:1–2), and the section concludes with a restatement of what turning to YHWH entails (4:3–4):

> [3] For thus says the LORD to the people of Judah and to the inhabitants of Jerusalem:
>> Break up your fallow ground,
>>> and do not sow among thorns.
>> [4] Circumcise yourselves to the LORD,
>>> remove the foreskin of your hearts,
>> O people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem,
>> or else my wrath will go forth like fire,
>>> and burn with no one to quench it,
>>> because of the evil of your doings.

The initial image is that of a field which has suffered neglect – its ground has become hard and given over to weeds. If it is to become fruitful again with a crop that a farmer may want, then the sowing of seeds requires

---

42. Probably the most common option among modern commentators has been to find a reference to Josiah's reform.

43. Indicative for the sense of *sheqer* is Jer. 5:2–3, where it appears as the opposite of *'emunah* ('faithfulness', 'trustworthiness'); *sheqer* is comparably contrasted to *'emeth* in 9:4 (ET 5); also in 6:13 being greedy for gain (*bôtsēa' betsa'*) is closely linked with practising *sheqer*.

thorough preparation: the removal of the weeds and the tilling of the earth. The second image, circumcision, recognizes the way in which any ritual practice may become so externalized that it fails to symbolize a reality larger and deeper than itself. The prescription for this is twofold: first, to have a renewed sense of the purpose of the ritual not as sufficient in itself but as directed towards God ('circumcise yourselves *to the* LORD'); secondly, so to internalize and appropriate the ritual that it represents a purifying of the very springs of thought and action ('remove the foreskin *of your hearts*').[44] Each image seeks to overcome likely superficiality by requiring depth and thoroughness in turning to God; the temptation to try to turn to God, only 'not with a whole heart', must be recognized as a fraud (*sheqer*).

Jer. 7:1–15. The temple sermon and religious complacency

Jeremiah's address in the temple precincts in Jerusalem comes twice within the book (for reasons that are not entirely clear). In ch. 7 there is mainly speech, with a brief narrative introduction, while in ch. 26 there is mainly narrative, with a brief speech summary at the outset. Our focus will be upon ch. 7, which further amplifies some of the key moral and theological concerns within Jeremiah.

> [1] The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: [2] Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, Hear the word of the LORD, all you people of Judah, you that enter these gates to worship the LORD. [3] Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Amend your ways and your doings, and I will let you dwell in this place.[45] [4] Do not trust in these deceptive [*sheqer*] words:

44. There is comparable language in Deut. 10:16. Moses has reviewed Israel's history as continuously stiff-necked and rebellious, not only at the very mountain of God but elsewhere in the desert (9:7, 8, 22, 24) and is climaxing this part of his address with a challenge to Israel to respond more faithfully in future (10:12–22); within this context there is an appropriate emphasis that Israel's response must be as searching and fundamental as possible.

45. NRSV margin, adopted here, which follows the vocalization of MT (*sh-k-n, pi'el*), is preferable to NRSV text (*sh-k-n, qal*, 'and let me dwell with you'), because the threat of exile is the note on which the sermon culminates (verse 15), and so the possibility of averting exile is the appropriate note to sound at the outset (*contra*, e.g., Ehrlich 1968:259, 261; Rudolph 1968:50, 54). The issue is whether YHWH will permit Judah to remain in and around Jerusalem or else send them into exile, rather than whether YHWH's presence will remain in the temple or else depart – which is indeed the content of Ezekiel's powerful vision (Ezek. 8–11); but Jeremiah should not be conflated with Ezekiel. Jeremiah's point is not that Judah's sin will cause YHWH to distance Himself from Judah, but that Judah's sin will cause YHWH to distance Judah from Himself. These are not just two sides of the same coin, for Jeremiah's point is that the divine presence can become a positive danger to a sinful people – in offending God, they endanger themselves.

'This is[46] the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.'

A position in the entrance, with people coming and going, would give Jeremiah's words maximum exposure to the would-be worshippers of YHWH. Two things are proclaimed initially (verse 3). First, there is a call to 'amend' (*heytiv*) their ways. We have seen that elsewhere Jeremiah's prime call is to 'turn' (*shūv*). Why that word is not used here is unclear, but the difference is only one of terminology, not of substance,[47] for with each term a change towards greater integrity under God is the goal.

Secondly, there is a promised consequence of amendment, continued dwelling in Jerusalem and Judah around the temple as the heart of the land. The presuppositions here are twofold. On the one hand, warfare was a regular part of life, and deportation into slavery was a regular consequence for failing to withstand a powerful aggressor. The possibility that enemies might come and overthrow Judah and take the most significant of its surviving inhabitants into exile was never far away; especially when Jeremiah had regularly spoken of YHWH raising up an enemy against Judah as an instrument of divine judgment upon their faithlessness.[48] On the other hand, YHWH can protect his people, and keep them from overthrow and deportation. However, this protection is not unconditional, as it requires appropriate human conduct. Moreover, there is an implicit warning, which will soon become explicit, that YHWH's presence may in fact become the prime reason for an unresponsive people to be taken into captivity and exile.

It is the thought of divine protection that leads into verse 4. For the natural assumption would be that in the place where YHWH is in some way specially present – which is how all strands of the OT in their various ways understand the Jerusalem temple – His power to deliver would be most likely to be realized. If therefore the people wish to reassure themselves in time of threat, then the most natural thing to do would be to invoke the fact of the divine presence in that place. Thus the repeated assertion that 'this is the temple of YHWH' is clearly envisaged as a ground

---

46. There is a textual problem noted by NRSV margin: 'Heb *They are*'. For the Hebrew has the plural pronoun *hēmmah* instead of the expected singular *hū'* or *zeh*. Amidst various proposals – one thinks perhaps of a cluster of buildings in the area – the most apt comment is McKane 1986:161: 'The puzzle of *h-m-h* is unsolved.'

47. The wording of 7:3aβ, *heytivu darkeykem uma'aleleykem*, is identical to that of Jeremiah's challenge to Judah in 18:11bβ, where it is immediately preceded by *shūv*.

48. So important is this within Jeremiah's message that it constitutes the content of the second of the visions which immediately follow Jeremiah's commissioning (1:13–16).

for confidence and trust. One naturally thinks of those psalms that celebrate YHWH's presence in Zion: 'The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge' (Ps. 46:12 ET 11).[49]

Jeremiah, however, pronounces such a trust in YHWH's protecting presence to be a falsehood or deception (*sheqer*). If one can understand this, then much else within Jeremiah, not least to do with prophetic authenticity, will also make sense.

It is important initially to see that what Jeremiah pronounces to be deceptive or false is, on one level, undoubtedly true. For, as a matter of fact, the building in question was a temple and it was dedicated to YHWH. Nor is Jeremiah implying that the dedication is empty or meaningless, either in the sense that it should really be called 'temple of Baal', or in the sense that YHWH was not there but somewhere else; as the address continues, YHWH emphatically acknowledges the temple as his own, both in that it is called by his name (verses 10, 11, 14) and in that when people come to worship they stand 'before me [YHWH]' (verse 10). Thus words may be factually true and yet, in the way that they are understood and used, be false. How and why this is the case is spelled out in what follows.

> [5] For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly
> act justly one with another, [6] if you do not oppress the alien, the
> orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if
> you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, [7] then I will let you
> dwell[50] in this place, in the land that I gave to your ancestors for
> ever and ever.

49. Commentators regularly suggest that the tradition of Jerusalem's deliverance in the time of Hezekiah and Isaiah (Isaiah 36–7) underlies the confidence that is here called in question. Some such background awareness is certainly conceivable. However, a strong thesis that differing attitudes to the Isaian tradition is the key to understanding prophetic conflict in Jeremiah as a whole has recently been put forward by Sweeney 2003. In discussing the temple sermon he comments (p. 17): 'The presumption that the Jerusalem Temple signaled YHWH's guarantee of security for the city of Jerusalem and the house of David is a basic tenant [sic] of Isaiah's prophetic message approximately a century before. The book of Isaiah is clear throughout, i.e., if the Davidic monarchs would put their trust in YHWH, YHWH would protect Jerusalem and the Davidic line . . . From the standpoint of late-seventh/early-sixth century Jerusalem, Isaiah's prophecies were understood to support the notion that YHWH would protect Jerusalem and the house of David.' Yet the confident assertion about how Isaiah was understood is a hypothesis, and one which says nothing about the significance of Isaiah's precondition of putting trust in YHWH, and what would count as its realization. From a theological perspective the appeal to Isaiah hardly furthers understanding if there is no clear distinction between genuine trust, which brings with it an openness to YHWH and obedience to his will, and complacency, which uses religious language uncomprehendingly, not least to buttress self-will.

50. The Hebrew verb is identical to that in verse 3. NRSV fails to repeat its marginal note as in verse 3.

The succinct formulation of verse 3 is now resumed and expanded. The content of amendment (or turning) is spelled out. First and foremost, the content is the practice of justice (*mishpāt*) in public dealings.[51] This general thrust is then given detailed specification (characteristic of the OT) in terms of refraining from taking advantage of those of whom advantage could most easily be taken; first the resident foreigner, who is away from the protection and support of family and kin and so easily victimized; secondly, the orphan and widow, who have lost the protection and support of their man in a male-dominated society. Shedding of innocent blood envisages manipulation of the processes of law to condemn and execute those who, like Naboth, had done nothing to deserve it. The going after other gods represents fundamental disloyalty to YHWH (as in the first of the Ten Commandments), and a denial of the heart of Israel's identity as the people of YHWH, in the kind of way that would lead to their own disintegration. The moral and spiritual demands articulated by Jeremiah are to do with the practices, priorities, and allegiance of Judah's public life. Finally, the fact that the land was given of old as a gift in perpetuity gives no reason for a complacent assumption that residence in the land is assured; only if there is amendment of living will continued dwelling in Jerusalem and Judah be permitted.

> [8] Here you are, trusting in deceptive [*sheqer*] words to no avail. [9] Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, [10] and then ·
> come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are safe!' [*nātsal*] – only to go on doing all these abominations?

The formulation of verse 4 is now, like that of verse 3 in verses 5–7, resumed and expanded. The earlier repetition of 'This is the temple of YHWH' is now clarified by the declaration 'We are safe.' The verb in question, *nātsal*, is one that is used for deliverance from one's enemies, as in YHWH's opening assurance to Jeremiah (1:8). So the people are clearly proclaiming YHWH's (anticipated) deliverance of Jerusalem from its enemies.

This, says Jeremiah, is false, *sheqer* – because of the people's behaviour, their self-seeking exploitation of others, and their failure to be true to

---

51. The emphatic form of the verbs 'amend' and 'act/practise' (prepositive infinitive absolute) contributes to Jeremiah's wider concern that response should be genuine and not superficial. NRSV 'truly' well captures the idiomatic sense.

their basic allegiance to YHWH. The fundamental nature of this failure is highlighted by the fact that each of the transgressions mentioned here is prohibited in the Ten Commandments, the prime charter of Israel's existence as the people of YHWH.[52] Jeremiah thus spells out a basic contradiction between corrupt living and expectations of God's protection. To speak of YHWH and His presence and protection is self-involving language, which commits those who would speak thus to live in accordance with YHWH's own priorities. To suppose that one can use the language and yet detach oneself from its intrinsic moral and spiritual dimensions is to empty the language of its content and indeed to abuse it – which is why claims about YHWH's temple, which may be factually true, can become essentially untrue, *sheqer*. But not only is it the case that YHWH's presence in the temple does not guarantee protection for the corrupt; the thrust of Jeremiah's indictment and warning is that the divine presence will actually ensure the very thing that the people fear and from which they seek deliverance.

> [11] Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den[53] of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD.
> [12] Go now to my place that was in Shiloh, where I made my name dwell at first, and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.
> [13] And now, because you have done all these things, says the LORD, and when I spoke to you persistently, you did not listen, and when I called to you, you did not answer, [14] therefore I will do to the house that is called by my name, in which you trust, and to the place that I gave to you and to your ancestors, just what I did to Shiloh. [15] And I will cast you out of my sight, just as I cast out all your kinsfolk, all the offspring of Ephraim.

The point of the ironic reference to a den/cave of robbers appears to be that the temple has become a place where corruption can flourish and its perpetrators can consider themselves secure. Yet although a cave is an enclosed space where those inside might think that they are out of sight, the temple, though indeed an enclosed space, is where YHWH is present and all that goes on is transparent to his sight. YHWH's response to what he sees can be learned from a precedent, the former temple at Shiloh.

52. The OT's presentation distinguishes the Ten Commandments from all other laws, not only by setting them first, but also by presenting them as uniquely spoken and written by YHWH without the mediation of Moses. Deut. 4:13 even identifies the Ten Commandments with the covenant itself.
53. Heb. *me'arah* means 'cave'.

At the time of Jeremiah's speaking, this temple was in ruins and had been abandoned. The temple in Jerusalem is no more privileged than the one in Shiloh, even though each is a place of YHWH's name. If the corruption of Israel led to the overthrow of Shiloh – presumably envisaged in terms of YHWH's using the Philistines whose victory over Israel is recounted in 1 Samuel 4 (even though that narrative focusses on the fate of the ark and the priests of Shiloh, and does not mention the destruction of the temple)[54] – then the corruption of Judah can similarly lead to Jerusalem's overthrow at the hands of an enemy, operating at YHWH's behest. The result will be that Judah will no longer be 'allowed to dwell in this place', but they will suffer the deportation that is the fate of the vanquished.

The point, therefore, of Jeremiah's warning is not only that the failure to display moral and spiritual integrity (*mishpāt*) transforms any kind of claim to YHWH's presence and protection into a falsehood (*sheqer*), such that without amendment (in effect, *shūv*) destruction and exile will happen. For the very divine presence that was looked to for protection will become the decisive factor in the people of Judah losing everything as they become slaves in a foreign land – 'I will cast you out of my sight.' Complacency and corruption can transform the divine presence from blessing to bane.[55]

Jer. 6:13–15//8:10b–12.[56] Superficial words

> [13] For from the least to the greatest of them,
>   everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
> and from prophet to priest,
>   everyone deals falsely [*sheqer*].

54. There are strong theological resonances between Jeremiah 7 and 1 Samuel 4. The complacent, indeed superstitious, attitude of the Israelites, who suppose that the presence of the ark will guarantee victory over the Philistines, is confounded by the fact that the presence of the ark leads to a defeat far more crushing than that suffered previously. The words of Israel's elders in 1 Sam. 4:3, 'Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the LORD here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies', are a close functional equivalent to 'This is the temple of YHWH' and 'We are safe' (Jer. 7:4, 10); and YHWH's response, implicit in the narrative of 1 Sam. 4–6, and explicit in Jeremiah's warning, is closely comparable.

55. There are strong theological resonances between Jeremiah's temple sermon and Micah's 'temple sermon' in Mic. 3:9–12. Micah denounces Israel's leadership: they are corrupt and venal, and yet they claim YHWH's protection, 'Surely the LORD is with us! No harm shall come upon us.' As a result of this (*lākēn*, 'therefore') both temple and city will be destroyed; that is, the very divine presence to which they complacently appeal will bring about the disaster they fear. The fascinating use of this passage in Jer. 26:17–19 illustrates, among other things, the intrinsically response-seeking and contingent nature of prophecy as articulated in 18:7–10.

56. The following passage occurs in almost identical form in the two contexts noted. The translation given is of 6:13–15. The repetition in ch. 8 is only in MT and not LXX.

¹⁴ They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
> saying, 'Peace, peace',⁵⁷
> when there is no peace.
¹⁵ They acted shamefully, they committed abomination;
> yet they were not ashamed,
> they did not know how to blush.
Therefore they shall fall among those who fall;
> at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown,
> says the LORD.

Jeremiah's indictment begins with a general complaint about widespread venality, that people seek to profit at the expense of others (verse 13a). This leads into the more specific complaint that religious leaders, those with special responsibility to lead and guide others, have fallen into falsehood and deception (sheqer). This is given content by what immediately follows. The wound of the people is probably a metaphor for their moral corruption (of a kind addressed in the temple sermon). The pronouncement not just of 'peace' but of 'certain peace' is presumably a reassurance, at a time of national unease about security, perhaps especially about the possible predation of the Babylonians, that security is not endangered. Such reassurance is no doubt what the people of Judah deeply longed to hear and believe in such a context.⁵⁸ Yet to tell people what they want to hear, when it is not what they ought to hear, is to speak in a way that is basically self-serving. Jeremiah labels such reassurance 'light'/'careless', i.e. inadequate (in effect, sheqer) for the reasons that are spelled out in 7:1–15. The pronouncement of 'certain peace' is an exact functional equivalent of 'this is the temple of YHWH' and 'we are safe', which complacently presumes YHWH's protection when in reality the wound of the people needs to be confronted by a challenge of genuine

57. The familiar English replication of the Hebrew repetition tends to obscure the idiomatic force of the repetition, which Hebrew uses for emphasis. For example, in the case of adjectives: ra' ra', 'quite worthless' (Prov. 20:14), 'amōq 'amōq, 'extremely deep' (Eccles. 7:24); or with nouns, be'ērōt be'ērōt, 'full of pits' (Gen. 14:10). In Isa. 26:3 shālōm shālōm is often rendered 'perfect peace', and that should presumably be the tenor in our passage, which might perhaps be rendered 'certain peace'.

58. It is difficult not to think of Neville Chamberlain when he returned from Munich in 1938 and proclaimed 'Peace in our time', in the vain hope that the corrupt and brutal ambitions of Hitler's Nazism could be appeased without having to be confronted. At the time his words were widely welcomed within England, because they articulated what people longed to hear (not least, because of memories of the war of 1914–18 and because of Hitler's opposition to communism). To criticize Chamberlain is not simply to indulge in the wisdom of hindsight, for Churchill had long since discerned the nature of the threat that Hitler's Germany posed, even though he had been 'a voice crying in the wilderness'. Churchill spoke as a true prophet (though he himself would not have put it in those terms), who was also vindicated by events.

amendment of life, without which there will be calamity for both leaders and led.

Jer. 22:13–19. The criteria for 'knowing YHWH'

The last few passages have illuminated the meaning of key terms in Jeremiah's vocabulary, especially *shūv* and *sheqer*, and the concern with the searching integrity that God seeks of His people. The last passage to be considered before an analysis of the material 'Concerning the prophets' in Jer. 23:9ff. is an indictment of a particular king. As will be seen, Jeremiah's critiques of king and of prophets have deep affinities between them.

[13] Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness,
    and his upper rooms by injustice;
who makes his neighbours work for nothing,
    and does not give them their wages;
[14] who says, 'I will build myself a spacious house
    with large upper rooms',
and who cuts out windows for it,
    panelling it with cedar,
    and painting it with vermilion.
[15] Are you a king
    because you compete in cedar?
Did not your father eat and drink
    and do justice[59] and righteousness?
    Then it was well with him.[60]
[16] He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
    then it was well.[61]
Is not this to know me?
    says the LORD.
[17] But your eyes and heart
    are only on your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
    and for practising oppression and violence.
[18] Therefore thus says the LORD concerning King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah:
    They shall not lament for him, saying,

---

59. A translation which brought out the idiomatic sense would be: 'practise justice and righteousness as naturally as eating and drinking'. See further below.
60. A likely idiomatic rendering would be 'then he was a true king'. See further below.
61. A likely idiomatic rendering would be 'then kingship was true'. See further below.

'Alas, my brother!' or 'Alas, sister!'
They shall not lament for him, saying,
'Alas, lord!' or 'Alas, his majesty!'
[19] With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried –
dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

The context of this material is a lengthy section devoted to the kings of Judah (Jer. 21:1–23:8). The identity of this particular corrupt king, who is compared unfavourably with his father, is not specified at the outset, but it becomes clear in verse 18 that Jeremiah's target is Jehoiakim and the praiseworthy father is Josiah. Jehoiakim is the king of Judah most strongly criticized by Jeremiah. Significantly, Jehoiakim is never specifically criticized for worshipping a deity other than YHWH, such as Baal, and so one may presume that in formal terms his Yahwistic allegiance was not in question; the problem was on another level. Jeremiah's message made no headway with Jehoiakim, however, whose attitude to Jeremiah is most memorably portrayed in Jeremiah 36, where an unheeding king steadily slices up the scroll which contains Jeremiah's message as it is read to him, and throws it bit by bit into his wintertime brazier.

Jeremiah's criticism focusses on a lavish building project[62] – for a perennial temptation for rulers who do not rightly understand their responsibilities is to indulge in prestige building projects so as to enhance the image of their authority.[63] His criticism is initially focussed on the exploitation of those involved in the building work, the reduction of Jehoiakim's fellow people[64] to mere sweated labour (verse 13). But pretension as well as

62. It may be that the appropriate level of the impressive structures excavated at Ramat Rahel between Jerusalem and Bethlehem is the lasting remains of Jehoiakim's project (so Aharoni 1978:1000, 1006), though the text could envisage an extension of the royal palace complex in Jerusalem (so Clements 1988:133), none of which now remains (or is accessible for excavation).

63. In recent history more than one such corrupt ruler comes to mind. President Félix Houphouët-Boigny of the Ivory Coast managed to divert substantial resources of his poor country into building the world's biggest basilica at Yamoussoukro, when there was no substantial popular desire for such a building as a focus of national faith and identity. The basilica was then offered to the Vatican, which presumably felt that it could not refuse. However, the prize must surely go to Saddam Hussein. A 1999 State Department report estimated that since 1991, forty-eight palaces had been built in Iraq, at a cost of approx. $2.2 billion, in addition to the twenty or so palaces already there before the Gulf War. Some estimates put the total number of palaces at over a hundred; but there is disagreement as to what counts as a 'palace'.

64. The Heb. rē'a ('neighbour', NRSV), where one might perhaps have expected 'am ('people'), is noteworthy, for it depicts a person with whom one stands in a reciprocal relationship. The use of this word may be an implicit critique of royal pretension. Thompson 1980:478 makes a similar point about rē'a with a delightful anachronism: 'there is a strong democratic note here'.

oppression is attacked, that is the assumption that what shows a king to be a king is the grandeur of his building work. Jehoiakim's imaginings of architectural splendour and luxury (verse 14) are confronted with a withering 'Are you a king because you compete in cedar?' Over against this are set the priorities of Josiah, which are summed up in the fundamental OT word-pair 'justice and righteousness' (*mishpāt ūtsedāqāh*), which were as regular and natural to Josiah as eating and drinking,[65] and which were appropriately expressed in judicial integrity for the poor and vulnerable who could not 'afford' justice; *that* is the proper image of kingship.[66]

Jeremiah's commendation of Josiah's judicial integrity is now strikingly transposed into a different, more explicitly 'religious', idiom: '"Is not this to know me?" says the LORD.' Although the passages chosen for consideration in this chapter have not yet included the language of 'knowing YHWH', it is another recurrent term in Jeremiah's moral theology, so that its use here is not surprising. Here we are given a quasi-definition[67] of a term which, at least in part because of its use within

---

65. Various different proposals have been offered for the initially puzzling reference to eating and drinking, but they generally struggle to express a relevant sentiment. So, for example, while it may be pleasing to contemplate the image of Josiah as an 'earnest, God-fearing man' who is also 'enjoying in measure the pleasures of the table (in this resembling Charlemagne, and William the Silent, and other distinguished personages), but resolute in administering justice . . .' (Skinner 1930:248), or as a man who 'enjoyed a balanced life of aesthetic pleasure and the practice of justice' (Carroll 1986:428), such thoughts are extraneous to Jeremiah's concerns, whose problem with Jehoiakim was neither gluttony nor immoderation. The construal which I offer here, that 'eat and drink' indicates that which is natural and regular (so also Ehrlich 1968:298–9 who makes the case more fully), makes excellent contextual sense by emphasizing that the practice of justice was intrinsic to Josiah's character.

66. Again, there is difference of opinion as to the sense of the repeated '*āz tōv (lō)* ('then it was well (with him)', NRSV). The issue is precisely what is being pronounced as 'good'. Commentators tend to think in terms of either Josiah's or the kingdom's condition, the point then being that justice makes for personal and/or social well-being. My suggestion is that, in context, where the nature of what constitutes true kingship is the immediate issue at hand, kingship itself is the implied antecedent. The text is a commendation of Josiah as the model of a king; so its sense, if paraphrased, is: 'that was how he showed the right pattern of kingship', 'that was how he got it right'. Michael Sadgrove has interestingly suggested a possible parallel between *tōv lō* here and *wayyahshevēhāh lō tsedāqāh* in Gen. 15:6, which would also support a sense of divine approval of Josiah's construal of kingship.

67. I say 'quasi-definition' rather than simply 'definition' because of the strongly rhetorical and polemical context. To recognize the polemical rhetoric is not in any way to undermine or fail to take seriously what is said, for what is said is clearly meant. It is to allow that this is not the kind of definition which would exclude questions of analytical precision or the specifying of further content to 'knowing YHWH' in other contexts. Unfortunately scholars who have seen the importance of the text have not always allowed for this. For example, Miranda 1977:44–5 (who has influenced Brueggemann 1988:193, 1997:613) observes: 'Here we have the explicit definition of what it is to know Yahweh. To know Yahweh is to achieve justice for the poor. Nothing authorizes us to introduce a cause–effect relationship between "to know Yahweh" and "to practice justice". Nor are we authorized to introduce categories like "sign" or "manifestation of". The Bible is well acquainted with these categories, and when it means them, it says so. A fundamental hermeneutical principle is at stake here: What possibility are

Jeremiah, has received a prominent position in Jewish and Christian theology and spirituality. A contemporary context offers many ways in which knowledge of God might be construed, but few would be likely to use Jeremiah's category of the consistent and heartfelt[68] practice of public integrity and justice.

A brief look at some of the prior usage within Jeremiah of 'know' (*yāda'*) with YHWH as object will underline the nature of the moral content ascribed to knowledge of YHWH in 22:16. The examples are predominantly negative, specifying how Judah fails to know YHWH, and they well illustrate the interpretative value of poetic parallelism:

'For my people are foolish,
> they do not know [*yāda'*] me;
they are stupid children,
> they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil,
> but do not know [*yāda'*] how to do good.'
(4:22)

They bend their tongues like bows;
> they have grown strong in the land for falsehood [*sheqer*], and not
> for truth;
for they proceed from evil to evil,
> and they do not know [*yāda'*] me, says the LORD.
(9:2, ET 3)

They all deceive their neighbours,
> and no one speaks the truth;
they have taught their tongues to speak lies [*sheqer*];
> they commit iniquity and are too weary to repent.
Oppression upon oppression, deceit upon deceit!
> They refuse to know [*yāda'*] me, says the LORD.
(9:4–5, ET 5–6)

we leaving to the sacred authors of affirming a strict identification if, whenever they attempt it, we "interpretatively" put in our categories of "sign of" or "cause" or "manifestation", which imply duality? If we were to use this procedure the biblical authors could never tell us anything which our theology did not already know.' On this account, one must presumably conclude that since Jeremiah himself did not achieve justice for the poor (the text makes no mention, nor was it his task), Jeremiah did not know YHWH. Miranda's passionate rhetoric seems somehow tone-deaf to Jeremiah's passionate rhetoric. Alternatively Volz's contention (1928:224), that verse 16 is a generalizing gloss by a pious reader of the prophetic corpus, also arrives at a decontextualizing construal by a different route.
68. This is a further paraphrase of the sense of 'Did not [he] eat and drink . . ?'

These texts all ring the changes on one basic insight – the practice of oppression, falsehood, and evil in one form or other is a disqualification from knowing YHWH. The fundamental theological rationale underlying this is articulated positively in a famous passage in the same general context:

> Thus says the LORD: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know [*yāda'*] me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things[69] I delight, says the LORD.
> (9:22–3, ET 23–4)

The obvious and common grounds for human assurance[70] are here relativized in favour of a different kind of good, one which most fully and appropriately grounds human confidence and assurance: knowing YHWH.[71] Why is this the supreme good? Because of YHWH's qualities, which are not theoretical or ethereal but which are demonstrated and realized in the known realms of human life ('in the earth'). In addition to the already familiar word-pair 'justice and righteousness' there is also the quality of 'steadfast love' (*hesed*), a term which, among other things, expresses YHWH's gracious initiative and unfailing commitment towards his covenant people.[72]

However, the point of the words is missed if they are thought solely to depict YHWH in Himself, for they implicitly presuppose a human

---

69. It is preferable to see the final clause as a reference to those people who boast appropriately and to translate 'for in such people I delight' (cf. Duhm 1901:97). The Hebrew just has 'these' (*'elleh*), which could refer either to people or to things. Contextually, to say that YHWH delights in the qualities He practises would be somewhat redundant, for His practising them necessarily implies His delight in them. The point of the text is what kind of person most meets with divine approval.

70. Although being wise, a strong soldier, and wealthy are all conditions which may become problematic, and so are sometimes criticized in the OT, there is no reason to suppose that Jeremiah here views these categories pejoratively. His point is the relativization of that which usually would give acceptable grounds for self-esteem.

71. The usual *yāda' yhwh* is strengthened by an additional verb *haskel* (and the combination is also used of the qualities of good shepherds of YHWH's people, 3:15). If there is significance in this, it may perhaps be to add the dimension of an 'intellectual' understanding of YHWH's ways, in addition to the more moral and existential dimensions of *yada'* (see further Holladay 1986:318).

72. Within the canonical structure of the OT, the weightiest presentation of the nature of YHWH is Exod. 34:6–7, YHWH's self-revelation to Moses on Sinai in the context of response to Moses' intercession for the renewal of the covenant after Israel's paradigmatic sin with the golden calf. Here *hesed* is said to characterize not only YHWH's intrinsic nature (verse 6) but also His actions (verse 7).

dimension also. The reason a person can supremely 'boast' in knowing YHWH is that such a person will have imitated and appropriated YHWH's own qualities of steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. The realization of these divine characteristics as human characteristics enables an appropriate sense of human assurance, for they make the most important and fundamental difference to life in the world that can be made, and such people receive unqualified divine approval ('in these/such people I delight'). Thus the vision of right human life is a corollary of the vision of God.[73]

However – to return to Jehoiakim in Jeremiah 22 – the problem is that the Davidic king, who has the greatest responsibility to display qualities appropriate to God,[74] may construe his power not in terms of responsible service ('judging the cause of the poor and needy') but in terms of self-aggrandizement at the expense of others. Thus Jeremiah's initial critique of oppression and pretension is renewed by an attack on Jehoiakim's venal self-seeking and generally oppressive practices (22:17). The result of these will be that when Jehoiakim dies people will not lament him with the usual expressions of grief heard at funerals; rather his end will be that of an animal, unlamented, unceremonious, and uninterred (22:18–19).[75] One might perhaps paraphrase the sense of the passage by saying that because Jehoiakim has denied the humanity of others, treating people as mere objects for oppression and exploitation, so at his

73. Compare Berrigan 1999:54: 'Here Jeremiah touches on the apogee of the religion of Israel: true "knowledge" of God ... In these three graces the self-revelation of Yahweh is complete – and the people are granted their full humanity.'

74. Compare, for example, Psalm 72, where the portrayal of the king's priorities in terms of justice and righteousness is presented not only as a prayer, for such priorities cannot be taken for granted, but also as implicit guidance by Israel's greatest king David (72:20) for his son Solomon (I take *lishelòmòh*, 72:1, to mean 'for Solomon'), and thus as fundamental as could be within Israel's royal traditions.

75. There is a similar prophecy of Jehoiakim's unburied end in 36:30. There has been much discussion about the relationship between these Jeremiah passages and the account of Jehoiakim's death in 2 Kings. Does 'he slept with his fathers' (2 Kgs. 24:6) imply normal burial, or is it a routine formula compatible with lack of burial? The formula generally (though with some exceptions) is used for national leaders who die peacefully (Johnston 2002:34–5), and so one might expect the Kings writer, if aware of an ignominious end in line with Jeremiah's words, to choose different wording. In general terms, however, the question of what actually happened to Jehoiakim is unanswerable because of a lack of evidence beyond the texts already mentioned. The underlying issue is: what difference might possible non-fulfilment make to an understanding of Jeremiah's prophetic words? There are, however, numerous imponderables. On the one hand, whether or not Jehoiakim at any time or in any way turned to YHWH, and the difference this could have made to the outworking of the prophecy, is unknown. On the other hand, the moral vision of Jehoiakim's final loss of humanity because of his treatment of others would retain imaginative moral power as the depiction of an appropriate fate of a cruel tyrant even if its details were not realized in the history of an impenitent Jehoiakim.

dying his humanity too will be denied, and he will be treated as a mere object of heedless neglect.

Jer. 23:9–22.[76] Setting out criteria for discernment of prophetic authenticity

I have so far offered an outline of some key concepts within Jeremiah's moral theology and his construal of prophecy. YHWH's word through Jeremiah has potent authority to transform human life; prophetic speech instrinsically seeks a response of serious engagement with God (predominantly through turning to YHWH, *shūv*), such that a prophesied future is contingent upon that response; turning to God is easier to say than to do, and apparent turning may be superficial, that is false (*sheqer*); popular complacency and corruption can transform otherwise true claims about YHWH into falsehood (*sheqer*), because corrupt practice and self-serving language transform YHWH's presence from blessing to threat; religious leaders easily encourage this popular complacency and self-deception by speaking in comparably self-serving (*sheqer*) ways; lack of knowledge of YHWH is displayed by the absence in life of YHWH's moral priorities. Against this background, it is at last appropriate to consider Jeremiah's specific account of criteria for prophetic authenticity.

> [9] Concerning the prophets:
> My heart is crushed within me,
>   all my bones shake;
> I have become like a drunkard,
>   like one overcome by wine,
> because of the LORD
>   and because of his holy words.

Most interpreters, surely rightly, construe the opening word (*lannevi'im*) as a heading for the section, separating it from the oracles about the kings of Judah that have preceded.[77] But before Jeremiah says anything about other prophets, he says something first about himself. It is a striking picture of a man overwhelmed: mentally incapacitated[78] and trembling,

---

76. The full unit is 23:9–32 (33–40 are a distinctive supplement). My reason for going only as far as verse 22 is pragmatic, on the grounds that the basic logic and pattern of Jeremiah's critique are already apparent by that point.

77. Comparable is 21:11, which heads the preceding collection of admonitions to the house of David.

78. I am assuming that 'heart' (*lēv*) here, as so often in the OT (e.g. Ps. 14:1, Isa. 10:7), indicates the seat of thought.

one whose behaviour is beyond his own control in the way that those who are drunk can no longer control themselves. The reason for this is 'YHWH and his holy words'. It is quite likely that the 'holy words', rather than having general and unspecified reference, are referring to all of what follows,[79] so that verse 9 is Jeremiah's response to everything that is said about the other prophets. Jeremiah's feelings are not those of superiority or triumphalism, but rather an acute anguish, discomfort, and disorientation that words and deeds that are incompatible with YHWH's holiness should be ascribed to YHWH.

> [10] For the land is full of adulterers;
>> because of the curse the land mourns,
>> and the pastures of the wilderness are dried up.
> Their course has been evil,
>> and their might is not right.
> [11] Both prophet and priest are ungodly;
>> even in my house I have found their wickedness, says the LORD.
> [12] Therefore their way shall be to them
>> like slippery paths in the darkness,
>> into which they shall be driven and fall;
> for I will bring disaster upon them
>> in the year of their punishment, says the LORD.

This opening section focusses not on prophets alone but on prophets and priests together, as commonly elsewhere (cf. 6:13//8:10). It is a general characterization of leaders with special responsibilities to YHWH and his people who are faithless[80] and corrupt. This corruption extends even to the place of greatest sanctity, the temple. As a result, any security and stability which they think they have achieved by their corrupt ways will become the opposite – precariousness, darkness, and falling, as disaster

79. Some commentators see verse 9 as part of a unit comprising verses 9–12, with a new unit beginning at verse 13 with the specific reference to 'prophets' (e.g. McKane 1986:569). In compositional terms this may be correct. Since, however, the divine address is more or less consistent throughout the chapter after verse 9, it is probably more appropriate, in terms of reading the text in its received form, to construe 'YHWH's words' as the totality of what follows.

80. Here and subsequently it is unclear whether the primary sense of 'adulterers' is moral (faithlessness within marriages) or, more metaphorically, spiritual (faithlessness to YHWH). Although either sense is appropriate, we should note that when Ahab and Zedekiah are condemned as prophets who speak *sheqer* (Jer. 29:21–3), their conduct is sexually immoral ('folly'/'outrage', *nevālāh*, a term which seems to be used for various kinds of non-adulterous sexual malpractice, cf. Gen. 34:7, 2 Sam. 13:20; Judg. 20:6,10), and they also commit adultery explicitly 'with their neighbours' wives'.

overtakes them. It seems to be implied, as in Jeremiah 7, that it is the very proximity of corruption to YHWH's presence in the temple that makes YHWH into an agent of overthrow.

> [13] In the prophets of Samaria
>   I saw a disgusting thing:
> They prophesied by Baal
>   and led my people Israel astray.
> [14] But in the prophets of Jerusalem
>   I have seen a more shocking thing:
> they commit adultery and walk in lies [sheqer];
>   they strengthen the hands of evildoers,
>   so that no one turns [shûv] from wickedness;
> all of them have become like Sodom to me,
>   and its inhabitants like Gomorrah.
> [15] Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts concerning the prophets:
> 'I am going to make them eat wormwood,
>   and give them poisoned water to drink;
> for from the prophets of Jerusalem
>   ungodliness has spread throughout the land.'

The comparison of Samaria with Jerusalem, to the detriment of the latter, is a rhetorical device we have already encountered (3:6–11). If the prophets of the northern kingdom had generally failed to speak and lead faithfully, the prophets of Jerusalem had not only acted faithlessly and deceptively (sheqer) in their own right, but they had positively encouraged evildoers to persist in their course of action, with the result that any turning to YHWH (shûv) was out of the question. This point (which anticipates the climactic verse 22) is at the very heart of Jeremiah's critique. The consequence of all this is that ways of life estranged from YHWH's character and priorities had flourished and spread. Jerusalem has thus become like the paragons of sin (cf. Gen. 13:13). And as the undrinkable water of the Dead Sea and the blasted character of its environment are a symbol of YHWH's judgment on sin, so too the self-serving prophets will have to consume that which is bitter and life-destroying as a symbol of what they have done to the land.

> [16] Thus says the LORD of hosts: Do not listen to the words of the
> prophets who prophesy to you; they are deluding you. They
> speak visions of their own minds, not from the mouth of the
> LORD. [17] They keep saying to those who despise the word of the

LORD,[81] 'It shall be well [shālōm] with you'; and to all who stubbornly follow their own stubborn hearts, they say, 'No calamity shall come upon you.'

After the appraisal of the character of the prophets and the nature of their impact upon others, the focus now shifts to those who are addressed by the prophets: they are warned to beware. In terms of the reader of the text, it encourages an existential awareness of the need to engage with and evaluate all purported messages from God, beginning with those in the text of Jeremiah. The prophets are 'deluding' people,[82] because what they say is merely the product of their own imagination and does not convey the realities of YHWH. Their message that things will be well, presumably in the sense that there will be national peace and security (shālōm),[83] is vacuous for reasons already made clear, especially in the temple sermon. Their message is detached from serious moral content, since it is supposed that national well-being and peace, which presuppose divine protection, can be expected on the part of those who are heedless of the will of YHWH. Jeremiah has reiterated that moral complacency and carelessness are incompatible with divine blessing. In other words, the absence of a challenge to the morally corrupt or heedless that they should turn (shūv) qualifies a prophetic promise of security (shālōm) as falsehood (sheqer).[84]

[18] For who has stood in the council [sōd] of the LORD
       so as to see and to hear his word?
       Who has given heed to his word so as to proclaim it?
[19] Look, the storm of the LORD!
       Wrath has gone forth,
   a whirling tempest;
       it will burst upon the head of the wicked.
[20] The anger of the LORD will not turn back
       until he has executed and accomplished

81. Here and elsewhere in this section there are difficulties in the MT both in itself and in relation to the Versions. If the difficulties make no difference to the tenor of Jeremiah's words, and do not pose any specific problem for my use of the text, then I will not enter into the text-critical debate and will simply follow NRSV.

82. The verb is cognate with the noun hevel ('emptiness', 'vanity'), which is most famously used as the keynote of Ecclesiastes (Eccles. 1:2, etc). The point is the vacuousness of the hopes which these prophets engender.

83. Compare 14:13, 'Here are the prophets saying to them, "You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place."'

84. For an interesting generalization of the issue of true and false prophecy in Jeremiah 23 in relation to human attempts to establish security (shālōm) in the wrong ways, see Niebuhr 1028.

the intents of his mind.
In the latter days you will understand it clearly.

The point that what the prophets say represents only their own imaginings and is not from YHWH is now put in a different way: they have not had that access to the mind of God which would come from their standing in His presence, as someone who is privy to the divine deliberation and decision-making. The Hebrew term *sōd*, multi-nuanced and difficult to translate,[85] here probably means 'council', and so may imaginatively depict YHWH as a monarch surrounded by advisers and messengers, the kind of picture that is utilized by Micaiah ben Imlah (1 Kgs. 22:19–22). But *sōd* also more generally indicates a gathering of people (Jer. 15:17), and by extension the kind of understanding that characterizes those who are intimate with one another (Prov. 25:9); so it can be used to depict that knowledge of YHWH's will that is the hallmark of authentic prophets, those who stand close to YHWH, as in the axiomatic formulation of Amos 3:7: 'Surely the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret [*sōd*, better is "counsel" or "purpose"] to his servants the prophets.' This depiction is not in essence different from the deuteronomic picture of Moses as the paradigmatic prophet who stands in YHWH's presence, and is thereby able to hear YHWH's word and convey it to others (Deut. 5:23–33)[86] – or indeed from the comparable portrayal of Abraham in Gen. 18:17–19, where the famous dialogue between YHWH and Abraham about the fate of Sodom is prefaced by YHWH's explicitly speaking of admitting Abraham to a knowledge of his purposes, which is with a view to furthering obedience to God's will among Abraham's descendants.[87]

The absence of the prophets from this intimacy with YHWH is evidenced by the fact that what is coming upon the people of Judah is the opposite of the *shālōm* of which they speak; rather it is a violent storm which will bring YHWH's judgment upon the wicked. However, YHWH's wrath is not random and is to fulfil his own (sc. moral) purposes, at which point it will

---

85. See, e.g., Fabry 1999 or McKane 1986:581–2.   86. See Chapter 1, pp. 4–10.
87. Significant also is the succinct formulation in Ps. 25:14, *sōd yhwh liyrē'āyw*, which is better translated 'the LORD confides his purposes to those who fear him' (REB) than 'the friendship of the LORD is for those who fear him' (NRSV). The basic thought is that intimacy with YHWH, in terms of access to an understanding of his will and ways, is for those who 'fear him', which is the prime OT term for appropriate human responsiveness to God (cf. Moberly 2000:78–88, 96–7). Since Abraham is a prime exemplar of fear of God (Gen. 22:12), it is a natural intertextual move to relate the principle of Ps. 25:14 to Abraham and the depiction of his privileged access to YHWH in Gen. 18:17–19 – a move interestingly made, for example, in *Gen. Rab.* 49:2.

cease. Yet it is only in the aftermath of the disaster that represents YHWH's judgment that those addressed will understand the nature of YHWH's intent (where the 'you' of the persons in danger of being deluded by the prophets readily transposes to the reader of the text).

> [21] I did not send [*shālah*] the prophets,
>   yet they ran;
> I did not speak to them,
>   yet they prophesied.
> [22] But if they had stood in my council,
>   then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
> and they would have turned them[88] from their evil way,
>   and from the evil of their doings.

The problem with the prophets is summarized. The prophet who would speak for God must, as a corollary of standing in God's council, be sent [*shālah*] by God.[89] Only the speaker whose initiative is from God speaks for God. Yet these prophets have eagerly spoken in YHWH's name without his authorization, with the result that they 'prophesy lies [*sheqer*] ... and the deceit of their own heart' (23:26); they speak self-servingly, telling people what they want to hear. The absence of these prophets from YHWH's council is shown by their failure to proclaim a message whose purpose was to turn [*shūv*] people from evil into ways that would be more in keeping with YHWH's will and character.[90]

Conclusion: discerning the criteria for discernment in Jer. 23:9–22

How should the argument of this key section, Jer. 23:9–22, be evaluated as a whole? There are clearly three main emphases. First, there is a lack of

---

88. Better is 'and they would have sought to turn them ...', or perhaps simply 'so as to turn them ...'. See the discussion in Excursus 1.

89. See above, p. 4.

90. I offer no detailed discussion of verses 23–32 because these verses do not, in my judgment, break fresh ground but rather develop variations on the theme of the conceptuality already established. The two prime issues that are raised in verses 23–32 are dreaming and stealing. The dreaming in particular should not be decontextualized as though it were an independent discussion of appropriate channels of divine revelation (as, for example, verse 28 might appear if taken out of context). The dreaming of verses 25, 27, 28 is rhetorically interpreted by reference to *sheqer* and 'their own heart' in verse 26, thus linking the unacceptability of dreams to the moral critique of the earlier verses, while the dreaming of verse 32 is comparably construed in terms of corrupt guidance of YHWH's people. The stealing of verse 30 underscores the derivative, merely human origin of pronouncements made in YHWH's name (verse 31). The theme of 'the burden of YHWH' in verses 33–40 develops a different and distinct facet of the problem posed by the prophets whom Jeremiah critiques.

integrity in the character and conduct of the prophets (verses 10, 11, 14a). Secondly, they fail to try to turn evildoers from their ways, indeed they positively encourage them to be morally complacent (verses 14b, 17, 22). Thirdly, their message originates within themselves and is not from YHWH, for they have not stood in the divine council (verses 16, 18, 21, 22).

The first two points, and the implied relationship between lifestyle and message, are not difficult to grasp, especially in a book where attention is paid to Jeremiah's own life as well as his prophetic words. It is the third point, and its relationship with the other two points, that has caused most difficulty to modern interpreters. This is because comprehension of Jeremiah's meaning raises the issue of the adequacy of the conceptual categories with which one seeks to construe the text. For this reason I will change the mode of argument in this section, so as to engage explicitly in my main text with the interpretations, and implied conceptual categories, of significant interpreters, in the hope that this will illuminate most clearly what the biblical text does, and does not, mean.

The claim that someone has, or has not, stood in the divine council may easily appear to be an empty claim,[91] empty because incapable of meaningful adjudication.[92] To Robert Carroll, for example (1981:164), the claim to speak for YHWH is only meaningful as an exercise in partisan hindsight, in this case that of the deuteronomistic editors responsible for the portrayal of Jeremiah:

> That is the problem with this analysis [sc. that some prophets speak out of their own minds] – it does not help determine which prophet is true and which false at the time when both are speaking in the divine name but offering different visions of the future ... Because it is *not* obvious to the audience which prophet is speaking lies from the

91. Alternatively, it may be a puzzle to be circumvented. Overholt 1970:61 says, 'The problem, then, is whether Jeremiah is denying the validity of his opponents' message on the grounds that they had received no call. My contention is that he is not doing this, but is instead centring his attack on the content of their message.' Yet patently Jeremiah is doing both, and Overholt misses the sense in which there are distinct but related dimensions to the reality of prophetic inauthenticity (because of his own thesis, which is shared by others also, that the only real fault of the criticized prophets is their failure to read their contemporary historical circumstances with a sufficiently flexible construal of past tradition).

92. Typical is the comment of Grabbe 1995:84: 'This is not very helpful, though, since we do not know who did this. We cannot assume that other prophets did not see themselves as called by God or standing in Yhwh's council.' Unhelpful in a different way is Sweeney 2003:11, who says: 'Such a contention cannot be demonstrated by absolute standards of empirical observation.' For whatever exactly 'demonstrated by absolute standards of empirical observation' means, it sounds like a yardstick of the natural sciences by which not just theological claims but a substantial proportion of work in the humanities generally would be found wanting.

deceit of his own mind, and which prophet is really speaking the divine word (assuming one is and the other is not, rather than that both are not), the judgment made by the redactors (through hindsight and out of their own ideology) is not available to the audience.

Yet even seasoned and sympathetic theological interpreters of Israel's scriptures can find themselves in difficulty here. If we go back to John Calvin (n.d.:3753–5), we find that he is rather unhelpful on this material. He seeks a resolution in terms of the classic understanding of prophets as interpreters of the law.[93] Calvin construes 'standing in the divine council' in terms of 'knowing the content of God's revealed Law', and interprets God's 'my words' which the true prophet would have spoken to people as 'the word of the Law'. Thus the distinction between true and false prophet is the distinction between faithful and faithless interpreters of God's Law. As he puts it later in a summary way, in the context of Jeremiah 28 (n.d.:3858):

> But as our state now is different from that of the ancient people, we must observe that sent by the Lord is he only whose doctrine is according to the rule of the Law, and of the Prophets, and of the Gospel. If, then, we desire to know whom the Lord has sent, and whom he approves as his servants, let us come to the Scripture, and let there be a thorough examination; he who speaks according to the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, has a sure and an indubitable evidence of his divine call; but he who cannot prove that he draws what he advances from these fountains, whatever his pretences may be, ought to be repudiated as a false prophet.

Unfortunately this is more a transposition into a different frame of reference than it is a substantive engagement with the subject matter of the text.[94] And as long as the notions of 'thorough examination' and 'prove' in relation to Scripture are considered apparently unproblematic, the genuine problems of discernment in this different frame of reference are also being sidestepped.

---

93. McKane (1995:48) sees Calvin's conception of the prophets as 'no more than teachers of the Law' as the reason for a lack of interest in certain critical questions surrounding prophecy. Because prophecy is derivative, 'there is no agonizing over the theological problems of inspiration and revelation'.

94. McKane (1995:48) points out that Calvin's working analogy between biblical prophet and Christian minister underestimates the differences between them and 'reduces' the prophetic office.

More recent commentators have the benefit of a sharper historical frame of reference and more nuanced religio-historical conceptualities than were available to Calvin, but these of themselves do not resolve the problems. Walter Brueggemann (1997:631, 632), for example, says in a general way that:

> Prophetic mediation makes a claim of authority that is impossible to verify. That is, all of these claims and uses are reports of a quite personal, subjective experience. No objective evidence can be given that one has been in the divine council. No objective support can be given to a messenger formula. No verification of a call experience is possible. These are all formulations that seek to confirm a hidden experience of transcendence … The prophets provide only tenuous, highly subjective grounds for their disturbing utterances.

It is surprising that, in a book which consistently seeks to reconfigure the task of theological interpretation of the Old Testament within a contemporary pluralist (postmodern) context, Brueggemann at this point lapses into characteristically 'modern' categories of a sharp antithesis between the 'objective' and the 'subjective' in which speech on behalf of God, and talk of the divine council, is entirely relegated to the latter. The basic biblical and theological notion that the given (objective) knowledge of God may be intrinsically self-involving (subjective) is strangely absent. To be sure, Brueggemann does not want to abandon the notion of prophetic truth, and so formulates how it may still be conceived (1997:631):

> In the end the canonizing process has accepted certain prophets as genuine, even though these prophets were not readily accepted in the context of their utterance. We must not imagine, however, that a decision in such a canonizing process is necessarily an innocent or neutral one. Undoubtedly the process of determining who speaks a true word of Yahweh is decisively controlled by larger, albeit not disinterested, notions of what constitutes genuine Yahwism in any particular moment of crisis. The canonizing process, which produced and authenticated the voices now accepted by Israel as 'true prophets', is surely an ideological struggle, both to define Yahwism and to determine who would define it.

But again Brueggemann's categories are surprising, as though the only choice were between an 'innocent or neutral process' or an 'ideological struggle'. I cannot imagine that any informed interpreter today would

envisage the canonizing process as 'innocent or neutral', while 'ideological struggle' is too amorphous and all-embracing to lend analytical precision in this context. Neither alternative captures well the kind of particular moral and spiritual vision of God and humanity that underlies the canonizing of a book such as Jeremiah, or the way in which the content of this vision implies particular kinds of struggle on the part of those biblically rooted communities of faith for whom the text becomes normative. Ultimately, it is hard to see how, in substance, Brueggemann differs from Carroll, since for each the bottom line appears to be an ideological struggle that has embodied the wisdom of hindsight in the biblical text but appears otherwise to be intrinsically beyond the realm of meaningful arbitration;[95] the difference is that Brueggemann is favourably disposed towards the ideology of the canonizing process while Carroll is not.

Alternatively, Terence Fretheim (2002:342) summarizes his analysis of Jeremiah 23 thus:

> Various criteria were apparently used to try to distinguish truth from falsehood, and some of these efforts may be evident in this text. Examples include: their worship of false gods, including Baal; promising good news rather than judgment; false claims to have received a word from God or to have had visions or dreams; immorality; absence from the council of the Lord. Yet, these are not sure-fire criteria, not least because these claims cannot be publicly demonstrated ... finally, one is stuck with a 'Wait and see' approach to such matters.

Fretheim simply lists the various apparent criteria mentioned in the text, and makes no attempt to analyse their intrinsic logic and interrelatedness. It is hardly surprising, then, that he can find no genuine value in them – his 'not sure-fire' seems to be a disarming euphemism for 'effectively unworkable in practice'. He makes no progress beyond Carroll and Brueggemann, since he too finds hindsight to be the only real criterion of discernment.

---

95. In his earlier commentary (1988:205), when discussing Jer. 23:18–22, Brueggemann ascribes a positive role to the content of the prophetic message: 'Against this background of the divine council, the final adjudication among these various voices is made on the actual substance of the message.' Since, however, he also (1988:201) speaks of 'no objective criteria by which to adjudicate the various claims' and depicts Jeremiah being legitimated by the canonical process through the benefit of hindsight, there does not appear to be any significant shift within Brueggemann's thinking, for his consistent point appears to be that the content is only validated in hindsight.

Finally, Patrick Miller (2001:752, 754), sees two prime criteria of discernment in Jer. 23:9–40: access to the council of YHWH, and speaking a challenging message. These he discusses in isolation from each other, as though there were no intrinsic relationship between them. With regard to the divine council he says:

> It is difficult for the interpreter to determine how it was that the prophet gained access to the council of the Lord. Isaiah 6 and 1 Kings 22 suggest the likelihood of some kind of visionary experience that may have belonged to the ecstatic dimensions of prophecy. Contemporary language for this would be an 'out-of-body experience'. From a number of texts, we know that the prophets had visions … Such a revelatory medium is not accessible to rational analysis or objectification, but the authority of such a vision was profound and clearly part of the credentials of the true prophet. The only problem, of course, was that any prophet could claim to have a vision of the council of the Lord.

Miller makes two assumptions, each of which is characteristic of a peculiarly 'modern' construal of religious experience.[96] First, claims about the divine council must be based upon unusual or abnormal states of consciousness;[97] secondly, they are non-rational and subjective in a privatizing kind of way. In the light of these, however, the claim that 'the authority of such a vision was profound' is hard to credit with much content, as it is immediately undercut by the problem that anyone could make such a claim.

The problem is that certain widely held, but in fact deeply questionable, assumptions about the nature of religious experience and language make it difficult to appreciate the logic of the biblical text in its appeal to the divine council. Within the Old Testament, however, the deuteronomic account of Moses' standing in YHWH's presence (5:23–33), or the

96. The classic formulation is William James 1960 [1902]. Yet recent work in the philosophy of religion has revealed deep conceptual confusion within James' work, and has proposed alternative models for envisaging encounter with God, models both conceptually more coherent and also more deeply rooted in biblical and historical Christian theology and spirituality. See especially Lash 1988. The essence of Lash's approach is succinctly spelled out in Lash 1996:93–111.

97. To be sure, unusual experiences and times of heightened consciousness, even out-of-body experiences, do happen and are well attested. The most famous biblical example is probably Paul's being taken up to the third heaven, though whether in or out of the body he was unsure (2 Cor. 12:1–4). The key question, however, is what kind of significance should be attributed to such experiences. We will discuss this later, pp. 201–6.

comparable account of Abraham's standing in YHWH's presence (Gen. 18:17–19), may provide a more helpful heuristic guide. In these accounts there is no interest whatever in 'ecstasy' or in content whose validity would require hindsight, but rather in a moral and spiritual proximity to YHWH whose purpose is explicitly to convey a content to Israel for their benefit.[98] In the light of this, the logic of Jeremiah's argument becomes, in principle, simple: the all-important claim to be from God – to have stood in the divine council, to be sent, to speak YHWH's word(s) – is to speak of a divine realm that is not vacuous, for the reason that it is the prophet's lifestyle and message, whose moral character are open to scrutiny in the present, which give content to the claim about God. The 'spiritual' nature of the prophetic message, whether or not it is from God, is determined by its 'moral' content and accompaniment.[99] Claims about the invisible spiritual realm are validated (or not) by the content of the visible and accessible realm of character, conduct, and priorities. Standing in the council of YHWH is not a matter of some unusual 'experience' but of having a disposition that is open to, engaged with, and responsive to YHWH's will for his people when YHWH calls; such a person's consciousness is indeed altered, but not through transitory or induced states of 'exaltation' but through appropriation of God's will in such a way that one's vision of the world and of life within it, and one's conduct correspondingly, is transformed. The trouble with the prophets whom Jeremiah denounces is that the character of their conduct and message show all too clearly that what they say is self-willed and people-pleasing and does not convey the will of YHWH.

This critique of the prophets is not fundamentally different from the critique of the kings, however much the specifics and the details vary. If one sets alongside each other the culmination of the critique of Jehoiakim and the culmination of the critique of the prophets, the point should be clear:

> Did not your father [Josiah] practise justice and righteousness
> > as naturally as eating and drinking?
> > Then he was a true king.
> He judged the cause of the poor and the needy;

---

98. The linkage between divinity and the practice of justice upon earth in Psalm 82 could also be fruitfully developed in this context.

99. As in Chapter 1, the inverted commas are reminders of the ease with which these generalizing categories may be narrowed and misconstrued.

then kingship was true.
Is not this to know me? says YHWH.

(22:15b–16, my translation)

For who has stood in YHWH's council
    so as to see and to hear his word? ...
I did not send the prophets,
    but they for their part went eagerly to the task;
I did not speak to them,
    but they for their part delivered prophecies.
But if they had stood in my council,
    then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
and they would have sought to turn them from their wicked way,
    and from their evil deeds.

(23:18a, 21–2, my translation)

The reality of YHWH may be discerned in public life when His character and priorities are appropriately enacted in the words and deeds of His human representatives. By this criterion either prophets or kings – or, by extension, others also – may be discerned as demonstrating, or lacking, genuine engagement with the God they profess to serve. As Nicholas Lash (1996:179) has well put it in a more generalizing way:

> The search for God is not the search for comfort or tranquillity,
> but for truth, for justice, faithfulness, integrity: these, as the
> prophets tirelessly reiterated, are the forms of God's appearance in
> the world.[100]

To be sure, the right application of this criterion will itself be a demanding matter, not susceptible of reduction to any kind of moralistic check-list.[101] But if it is demanding to discern as well as to be discerned, that is no argument against the validity of the enterprise; as will, I hope, become clear in the next two chapters.[102]

---

100. At a time when much 'spirituality' is concerned with a quest for inner peace, this point is crucial for discerning the authenticity of spirituality generally. Compare Lonsdale 1992:60: 'A person whose heart is basically set on satisfying his or her own desires and interests without much regard for others, for the reign of God or for living the gospel, can experience a form of "inner peace" when those fundamentally self-centred desires are being satisfied. In this case the "inner peace" may be more akin to complacency, a sense of satisfaction with oneself, than to "the peace which the world cannot give".'
101. See further Excursus 2.
102. One particular difficulty for my thesis, the relationship of Jeremiah's moral theology to certain other emphases in the book, is discussed in Excursus 3.

Excursus 1: Jer. 23:22 and Robert Carroll's construal of a criterion of prophetic authenticity

The interpretation of Jer. 23:22 deserves fuller attention. This is partly because of its intrinsic interest, but also because Robert Carroll clearly regarded it as a test case within his approach to prophetic authenticity; Carroll singled the verse out in an early (1976) and a late (1995:41–6) article, not to mention giving space and emphasis to it in a commentary (1986:461–3) and also in monographs (1979:191; 1981:171–3, 193) in between the articles, and in one of his last essays on Jeremiah (1999a:77–8).[103] In his view the verse clearly demonstrates the vacuousness of the criteria within Jeremiah for distinguishing between true and false prophets. It is appropriate, therefore, in the context of this account of prophetic authenticity, to take seriously the detailed exegesis and understanding which played a key role in Carroll's different construal.[104]

The essence of Carroll's construal is stated succinctly in his Jeremiah commentary (1986:463). He bases his remarks upon the RSV translation of 23:22, which is identical to that of the NRSV:

> [22] But if they had stood in my council,
>> then they would have proclaimed my words to my people,
> and they would have turned them from their evil way,
>> and from the evil of their doings.

He comments:

> The claim in verse 22 cannot be substantiated because there is no inherent connection between preaching the divine words and turning the people from the evil of their doings. A simple *tu quoque* argument will demonstrate this. The holistic approach to the tradition makes Jeremiah the speaker of these oracles, yet in the summary of Jeremiah's twenty-three years of preaching it is quite clear that he failed to turn the people or to persuade them to turn (25.1–7). If failure to turn the people is evidence of not having stood in the council then Jeremiah had no more stood in the council than had the other prophets. The argument of verse 22 lacks cogency as well as coherence.

---

103. In this latest essay Carroll says with reference to his earlier treatment: 'I cannot think of a convincing argument which would make me dissent from that judgment made then.'
104. Carroll had kindly agreed to debate with me the interpretation of Jer. 23:22 at the January 2001 meeting of the Society for Old Testament Study in Leeds. Unfortunately this was prevented by his premature death. The content of this excursus is what I would have presented on that occasion.

This incoherence of this particular text then serves a generalized observation about the nature of Jeremiah's attempts to discern the genuineness of prophetic speech:

> The arguments used against the prophets are ideological ones and, like all ideological argumentation, only achieve what is already believed to be the case. If they are reversed in a *tu quoque* manner they undermine the ideologists as effectively as their opponents.

All the biblical text provides is 'mere' ideology, a clatter of contradictory claims.

In his later essay (1995:42) Carroll raises one obvious objection to his construal, only to dismiss it summarily as apologetic rationalization and poor philology:

> Readers of Jeremiah usually can avoid this reading of the texts [sc. Jer. 23:22 and 25:3–7] together by modifying the sense of 'turn' in 23:22 to mean 'try to turn', so that the quarrel is between prophets who make no effort to change people's ways and prophets who try to turn the people even though they fail with their efforts. To me that looks like some form of rationalization driven by the need to 'save the appearances' and rescue the prophet from failure.[105] I do not believe that the Hebrew word *shuv* includes the sense 'try to turn', nor would it have to if the problem of implicating Jeremiah in a failure similar to the other prophets was not entailed by the conjunction of the two sets of texts.[106]

Carroll then considers two reading strategies to try to cope with the contradiction between 23:22 and 25:3–7 and concludes (1995:44, 46) that either Jeremiah is shown as incapable of learning from his experiences of failure or Jeremiah must be exempted from what is said about other prophets in a way that is forced. Carroll's underlying thesis in the essay

---

105. Compare his earlier (1981:172): 'Some would modify it [Jer. 23:22] to mean: the genuine prophet is the one who preaches repentance and *tries* to turn the nation from its evil ways. This is the slippery slope down to the death by a thousand qualifications, but it is necessary to slide down it a little if the criterion is to be retained in any sense as a criterion.'

106. Similarly, in the earlier essay (1976:46–7) Carroll comments: 'Perhaps his [sc. Jeremiah's] principle could be saved by insisting that all he meant was that the genuine prophet would have preached against the people and challenged them to change their way of life. Thus "turning from evil" would simply mean "preaching against evil". But such an attenuated position, while distinguishing between Jeremiah and the other prophets, has really suffered from that form of attack known among philosophers as "death by a thousand qualifications".' And he concludes that the most likely construal of 23:22 is 'that at this stage of the argument Jeremiah had lost his grip on rationality and simply accused them [sc. other prophets] of failing to do what he had failed to do'.

is that 'treating these texts as contradictory ... is a much more interesting approach which generates greater interpretative possibilities than the conventional approaches' (1995:41);[107] but despite this rhetoric about the value of being unconventional, the actual yield seems to me rather less than is promised.

How should this construal be evaluated? In general terms, Carroll's handling of the text appears distinctly wooden. To suppose that success in eliciting response should be a mark of verification of prophecy would be a strange assumption both within the book of Jeremiah and within the Bible more generally. As we have seen, Jeremiah is portrayed as constantly urging the people of Israel/Judah to turn/repent (shūv, e.g. 3:1–4:4), yet most of those to whom he speaks refuse to heed his message (e.g. 5:3b, 'they have refused to turn back [shūv]'), the paradigmatic example being King Jehoiakim, for whom Jeremiah's words are merely an irritant which provoke contemptuous destruction of Jeremiah's written scroll and a desire to arrest and punish their author (Jeremiah 36); or if there is some expression of turning, it may be a superficial expression which does not touch the wellspring of people's thoughts and deeds (3:10, 4:3–4). Within such a context, if Jer. 23:22 really does mean that the proof of prophetic authenticity is the hearers' positive responsiveness, then it conflicts not only with 25:1–7 but with the rest of the book as a whole. Within the wider biblical context *no* prophet who is portrayed as speaking genuinely for YHWH is also portrayed as eliciting consistent or even regular responsiveness[108] – with the sole exception of Jonah, where the point of depicting unparalleled prophetic success is not to hold Jonah up as a model of authenticity to admire or emulate but rather to set an ironic context for probing and exposing Jonah's failure to understand God's mercy and his sullen reluctance to allow others than himself to benefit from that mercy.[109]

---

107. Compare his: 'having read so many theological readings of Jeremiah, especially Christianized theological readings, I felt I desperately needed to escape from the throttling suffocation of piety and its domestication of the text' (1999b:436).

108. Within the OT even Moses can elicit no more than a vacillating response from Israel, while a Micaiah (see Chapter 3 below) meets solely resistance and imprisonment. Within the NT Jesus' ministry meets with very mixed responses which culminate in his betrayal, abandonment, torture, mockery, and execution. To be sure, with respect to most of the canonical writing prophets, and the apostolic letter writers of the NT, we simply are not told in any detail what kind of response they encountered, though references to resistance to their messages are not uncommon (e.g. Isa. 6–8, 30:8–11, Ezek. 3:4–11, 1–2 Corinthians). Generally speaking, responsive recipients are not to be equated with original or intended recipients, but rather with 'ideal readers'.

109. On the interpretation of Jonah see Moberly 2003a.

Carroll would presumably respond to the above point along the lines he adopts in his essays by insistently pointing to what the text actually appears to be saying – no apologetic smoother of the rough text was he;[110] yet his exegetical discussion is strangely truncated. Carroll says that the only alternative to taking 'turn' at its face value is to make it mean 'try to turn' – where the fact that this appears to be poor philology in terms of the meaning of the verbal root *shūv* seems intended to serve to discredit any such attempt to 'evade' the face value of the text. But he makes no attempt to explore either semantic or possible rhetorical factors of the sort that one would expect a commentator at least to consider.

If Hebrew has a verb for 'try', it is probably *biqqēsh* (as in Exod. 4:24). Although this is not very common, it might have been used in Jer. 23:22b, and it is not. This in itself could favour Carroll's construal. However, from a semantic perspective one should bear in mind the well-known point that Hebrew is not well provided with modal forms of verbs, i.e. what is usually expressed in other languages either by specific conjugations such as subjunctive and optative or by auxiliary terms ('can', 'may', 'must', 'want'; 'could', 'might', 'would', 'should', etc.). Hebrew does indeed have some verbs for modal nuance, such as 'can' (*yākōl*) or 'want' (*hāphēts*). Yet it also uses the imperfect/*yiqtol* form of the verb, which is the form used in 23:22b, to express modal nuances.

Particularly significant here is the possible nuance of desire/volition. A recent Hebrew grammar (JM #113n) lists nine examples where the sense of 'want' may appropriately be found in a *yiqtol* form. Perhaps the clearest example is Ruth 3:13, Boaz's words to Ruth about there being a next-of-kin/redeemer with a claim upon Ruth prior to his own, who thus must have first refusal: 'if he wants to act as next-of-kin for you [*'im-yig'ālek*], good, let him do so; if he is not willing to act as next-of-kin [*we'im lō' yahpōts lego'olēk*] ...'. Here the simple *yiqtol* form in the first clause is balanced by the explicit auxiliary use of 'want' (*yahpōts* from *hāphēts*)

---

110. Carroll repeatedly portrays himself as one of the few scholars who really take seriously the difficulties within Jeremiah which other scholars are inclined to smooth over: 'Whatever the more sanguine commentators on Jeremiah may say and think, I am still of the opinion that the book of Jeremiah is a very difficult, confused and confusing text ... I do not think it is the contemporary commentator's task to make the text conform to our own values or to protect the text from critique ... It is not part of my remit to save the appearances of the text, to make it conform to my expectations or to yield comfort to my prejudices' (1999a:75, 78). One can entirely agree with the need to be intelligently attentive to the text and to recognize that it may not conform to expectations, and yet still think that Carroll is offering a distinctly limited account of what is necessary for good interpretation.

in the parallel negative in the second clause.[111] Although the sentence structure of Jer. 23:22b differs from that of Ruth 3:13, it nonetheless becomes clear that in terms of Hebrew idiom a good case can be made for the *yiqtol* of *shūv* having a volitional sense if appropriate to the context.[112] Thus we may quite properly translate 23:22bβ: 'they would have sought to turn them from their wicked way and from their evil deeds'.[113]

From a rhetorical perspective one must consider extensive recent work on the nature of religious (and other) language, not least in relation to speech-act theory in development of the work of J. L. Austin (1975).[114] Here a basic and helpful distinction is between (a) that which is done intrinsically *in* an utterance, in terms of its meaning or significance according to the conventions of the speaker and the context – its 'illocutionary' force, and (b) that which is done *through* an utterance, in terms of the effect or impact it has upon its audience – its 'perlocutionary' force. So Austin (1975:102), for example, distinguished between 'the illocutionary act "he argued that ..." [i.e. what the speaker is intentionally doing] and the perlocutionary act "he convinced me that ..." [i.e. the effect achieved by what the speaker said]'.

The possible implications of this distinction for the construal of prophetic speech in general, and Jer. 23:22 in particular, are not hard to see. As Walter Houston 1993:177 has well put it:

> the successful performance of an illocutionary act does not in general depend upon the appropriate response of the hearers. It is necessary to distinguish, as Carroll has failed to do, between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary effects of an utterance. For example, if an officer gives an order to a mutinous army, the order may or may not be obeyed, but there can be no question that he has given an order ... The *illocutionary* act of giving an order has been successfully performed,

111. Other good examples of a volitional nuance in a *yiqtol* form of a verb are: Deut. 18:6, 'And if a Levite wants to come [*wekı yāvō' hallēwı*] from one of your towns ... he may come whenever he desires [*ūvā' bekol 'awwat napshō*] ...'; 1 Sam. 21:10 (ET 9), '[Ahimelech speaking to David at Nob about the sword of Goliath] If you want to take it [*'ım 'ōtāh tiqqah lekā*], take [*qah*] it'; Ruth 1:11, '[Naomi to Ruth and Orpah] Why do you want to come [*lammāh tēlaknah*] with me?'.

112. Compare McKane's more general observation on Carroll's construal, that 'to understand verse 22b ... as "exerting themselves to turn them from their wicked ways and evil deeds" is not straining after sense to a greater degree than is often demanded in the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible' (1986:584).

113. There is a good Greek parallel in 2 Cor. 5:11 where Paul's 'we persuade people' is routinely taken to have a conative sense, 'we seek/try to persuade people'. See pp. 188–9 below.

114. Carroll was, of course, well aware of J. L. Austin's work, and he offers his own account (1979:69–77) of the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary acts, and the importance of all this for understanding prophetic discourse; though here too he shows a tendency to assume that perlocutionary failure undermines the convention-constituted legitimacy of the illocutionary act.

even though the *perlocutionary* effect of getting them to obey has not . . .
In these terms, as long as the prophet's hearers understood that they
were warning them, calling for repentance or whatever the particular
speech act might be, then the prophets had *done* what they set out to
do, even if they had not achieved the effect they had hoped for.

It should be readily apparent that the semantic point about the modal
expression of desire and the rhetorical distinctions of speech-act theory
converge in their implications for the interpretation of Jer. 23:22. For
both point to ways of understanding the significance of prophetic speech
that distinguish clearly between the determinate intentionality of a pro-
phet's message of repentance (a desire that people should turn is intrinsic
to the sense of the words and the conventions they embody) and the
consequences that may or may not follow from that message according to
how people respond. Carroll's failure to make such a distinction leads
him to suppose that the text is saying that failure of responsiveness
negates the genuineness and meaningfulness of a challenge to respond,
when in fact the text is saying that it is constitutive of genuine prophetic
speech that its intrinsic meaning and purpose should be such as to
confront sinful people with their need to turn to God.

Excursus 2: is the moral-theological criterion of discernment workable? An engagement with Robert Carroll

The viability of the biblical criteria for discernment is an issue I will
address in the final chapter. Nonetheless, it is appropriate at this stage
briefly to note some broad and basic objections that are often raised by OT
scholars. As in the previous excursus, I will focus on the work of Robert
Carroll, who wrote extensively on prophecy in general and Jeremiah in
particular, and who took seriously the changing nature of contemporary
biblical studies; his work therefore constitutes a significant contribution,
requiring serious response. Although, as is apparent, I regularly disagree
with his approach to and construal of the biblical text, Carroll usually saw
more clearly than many other scholars what were the fundamental issues
at stake underneath all the surface noise of scholarly debate, and he tended
to formulate the issues with refreshing sharpness.[115]

---

115. I will draw on a number of Carroll's writings. As with his views on Jer. 23:22, I can
find no significant shift of outlook within his writings over time.

Carroll's general view of discernment of prophetic authenticity is well spelled out in a general book on biblical interpretation (1991:44):

> No one can distinguish between words spoken under the influence of Yahweh and words spoken out of a prophet's own mind. If the two activities could be differentiated the Hebrew Bible would not be so full of lengthy tirades against the prophets (e.g. Jer. 23.9–40; 27–29; Ezek.13.1–14.9; Mic. 3.5–8). The claim to speak for the gods is easily made, but testing the truth of the claim has so far defeated the wit of human communities.

Discernment simply cannot be done in a way that is valid and meaningful. In this Carroll no doubt speaks for many a modern agnostic, who finds the religious certainties of former ages both puzzling and inaccessible. Nonetheless, the way in which he puts things is open to obvious question. On the one hand, his first two sentences are surely a *non sequitur*. For why should the fact that a problem recurs mean that it is incapable of any kind of meaningful resolution? One might compare: 'No one can distinguish between honest government and corrupt government. If the two activities could be differentiated, human history would not be so full of lengthy tirades against corrupt government.' The well-known corrupting effects of power do not mean that an uncorrupt, or relatively uncorrupt, exercise of power is impossible, but only that it is an always-to-be-sought goal that can only be achieved through high levels of discipline, self-denial, and vigilance.

On the other hand, Carroll's confident assertion that 'testing the truth of the claim has so far defeated the wit of human communities' is simply an assertion. It receives no warrant or substantiation, presumably because Carroll considered it a self-evident truth. But what I miss (here and in all the places where he discusses prophetic authenticity) is any acknowledgement of, let alone engagement with, the substantial literature in classic Christian theology and spirituality which deals precisely with such issues and offers criteria of discernment which many have found, and still find, meaningful and valid.[116] Carroll's sweeping dismissal of the possibility of testing is more revealing about Carroll than about possible testing.

---

116. At the very least, when one of the major theologians of the twentieth century has written explicitly on the subject – Rahner 1963 – one might reasonably expect some acknowledgement and engagement. And this is quite apart from the voluminous literature on discernment, especially in the searching contexts of Carmelite and Jesuit spirituality.

In terms of Carroll's overall approach to the moral theological criterion that is advanced within Jeremiah (and elsewhere), one can find remarks of a generally pejorative nature liberally sprinkled through his various writings (1979:190, 192):

> The general charges of immorality and idolatry may have been the standard form of abuse directed at opponents which was characteristic of all the prophets ... The polemic against the prophets had here a certain hysterical note of desperation induced by the frustration experienced by Jeremiah as he tried to make a coherent and cogent case against the prophets. The unsatisfactory nature of his criteria against them was part of the difficulty of producing a criteriology for distinguishing one prophet from another as the authentic spokesman of Yahweh.

Alternatively (1981:176):

> Fierce struggles, abusive onslaughts, *ad hominem* arguments and the hurling of whatever functioned in those days as the Hebrew equivalent of *Anathema sit* – such were (and always have been) the stock-in-trade of the accomplished polemicist. Given this structuring factor behind the oracles, the small details of the argument should not be too closely examined.

If what the text really offers is variations on the theme of more or less hysterical abuse, then it may indeed follow that the specifics of the text ('the small details of the argument') do not need too much careful thought. Indeed, one wonders why it is worth bothering with such material at all, except for the purpose of disabusing those who misguidedly suppose that it contains truth about God and human life. But such an approach to the text, which Carroll himself consistently maintains is 'liberating',[117] is by no means the only possible or responsible approach. Indeed, Carroll's lack of sympathy for the perspectives within the text may obstruct rather than enable an accurate understanding of what the text does, and does not, mean.

With regard to the practical viability of the kind of moral theological criteria of authenticity that emerge in Jeremiah, Carroll offers various main arguments (1979:192–3). First, he draws on the work of James Crenshaw (1971:56–61) to argue that the charge of immorality is open to a *tu quoque*; for it is possible to find examples of canonically approved

117. See, for example, 1991:7–33.

prophets behaving in ways that are open to moral question. He recognizes, of course, that actions that look immoral to us may not have looked so within ancient Israel, but still thinks that the examples given 'sufficiently muddy the waters' to 'indicate that, as a criterion of genuine prophecy, Jeremiah's charge of immorality against the prophets was inadequate'. I do not propose here to examine all the suggested examples of immorality on the part of canonical prophets, though I find most of them less than compelling,[118] but solely to focus on the one example given from the book of Jeremiah: 'Jeremiah was guilty of telling a lie to protect King Zedekiah' (Jer. 38.24–7).[119]

The context of Jeremiah's words is this (to précis Jeremiah 38): Jeremiah's message that the only future hope lies in surrender to the Babylonians is resented as defeatist by senior officials. Although King Zedekiah in some way thinks well of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 37), he weakly does not try to resist his officials (he even says 'the king is powerless against you', verse 5), but hands Jeremiah over to them. Jeremiah is lowered into a muddy cistern, where he is left (to die?). Ebed-melech, a junior official ('eunuch'), makes representations to Zedekiah, who orders that Jeremiah be rescued from the cistern; which he is, though he is still detained. Zedekiah, who again wants to hear what Jeremiah has to say, then arranges a clandestine meeting with Jeremiah. Jeremiah does not want to speak, but Zedekiah swears to preserve his life, even from his officials. Jeremiah repeats his message that the only hope for future life lies in surrender. When Zedekiah expresses the fear that if he surrenders he will be handed over to Judaeans, who have already defected to the Babylonians and who will treat him badly, Jeremiah reassures him that this will not be the case, and renews his warning of the dangers of not surrendering. At this point Zedekiah tells Jeremiah to keep their conversation secret, on pain of death; and should his officials hear of it and press Jeremiah to tell, he should just say that he was making a plea to the king for merciful treatment. The officials do question Jeremiah, and Jeremiah responds 'in the very words the king had commanded', which satisfies them, and Jeremiah is just left in general detention.

---

118. One of the examples is Micaiah deceiving King Ahab (1 Kgs. 22:16). We will see in the following chapter that this is a superficial misreading of the text. Moreover, I cannot see why Isaiah's symbolic 'wandering about half-naked' (Isa. 20.2) should be classified as 'immoral' rather than 'shocking', which is what it is clearly meant to be.

119. Others also, e.g. Osswald 1962:16, have found Jeremiah's 'lie' problematic for moral evaluation of prophetic authenticity.

Indeed, Jeremiah told a lie. However, the situation is readily recognizable as the kind of difficult situation in which people often find themselves, in which there is no entirely satisfactory course of action – if Jeremiah did not lie to the officials, he would have had to ignore not only the royal instructions (which could be represented as disobedient to legitimate authority and so in some way morally questionable) but also the feelings and fears of a weak man who was clearly afraid of his power-broking officials. To find fault with this at all is surely astonishing. I suppose that one might conceivably argue that Carroll displays a Kantian concern for truth-telling as a categorical imperative; but the criticism more naturally suggests a small-minded moralism which I am sure Carroll would have been the first to denounce if he had encountered it in any other context. Carroll not only finds fault but implicitly[120] suggests that Jeremiah's minor lie to the officials is somehow comparable to the systematically self-serving use of language that elsewhere is designated *sheqer*, in the kind of way that Jeremiah's lie to the officials could in part counterbalance, and so at least in part cancel out in any moral calculus, the other kind of lie. This suggests a worrying failure to distinguish between (a) a healthily and robustly moral view of life, in which compromises and failures are more or less inevitable but signify little unless they get out of control and are not set within a context of humility and self-examination, and (b) a rigid and legalistic moralism which is so preoccupied with small trees that it never even realizes that there is a wood. Again, in other contexts I have no doubt that Carroll would have been quick to make just such a distinction, and to distance himself from the latter option. So why handle the biblical text here so flatly?

Interestingly, Carroll backtracked somewhat, but only somewhat, when he had to discuss the passage in its own right in his commentary on Jeremiah (1986:689–90). For in the dialogue between Zedekiah, Jeremiah, and the officials he recognizes 'conscious irony', and comments:

> It would be inadvisable to take Jeremiah's 'white' lie in verses 24–27 too seriously, though recent writers on prophetic conflict have noted it

---

120. In his discussion of prophetic conflict and authenticity, Carroll (following Crenshaw) does not really discuss Jeremiah's lie on its own in relationship to the rest of the book of Jeremiah, but rather uses it as part of a cumulative portfolio of immorality on the part of canonical prophets. It is the portfolio which is then used to counterbalance Jeremiah's account of moral criteria for prophetic authenticity (and the focus is primarily Jeremiah, for it is Jeremiah who makes the case most fully).

carefully (e.g. Crenshaw 1971, 59). If moral issues are to be imported into the scrutiny of prophecy then it may be of some importance, but in the context of a story variation it is only an element used by a storytelling technique to explain how Jeremiah overcame the hostility of king and princes ... It is hardly the intention of the writers to present Jeremiah as a liar by their development of the theme of his interview with the king.

His recognition that the lie is trivial, and that the narrative portrayal of Jeremiah is not that of a liar, is clearly right. Is it indicative of a slight unease that when he notes the use of the episode by 'recent writers on prophetic conflict' he cites only Crenshaw and omits any reference to his own use of Crenshaw? Yet he does not distance himself from his earlier view. Indeed, his comment that 'if moral issues are to be imported into the scrutiny of prophecy then it may be of some importance' is a weaker statement than in his previous work, but suggests no basic change of mind. His position seems to be: Jeremiah is not a liar here, and the lie is trivial – but if you want to assess prophetic authenticity in moral categories, then this passage still counts as a counter-example to Jeremiah's main thesis. But is this really different from 'heads I win, tails you lose'?

A second issue that Carroll raises (1979:193) is to suggest that finding fault with prophets on moral grounds may be a kind of category mistake.

Further difficulties are involved in the argument that morality so validates a message that immorality would invalidate it. This is the old problem of 'would a good man make a better pair of shoes than a good cobbler?' ... The complicated arguments involved in determining the relation between morality of speaker and speaker's utterance (in terms of its truth value) indicate that the matter is a good deal more complex than Jeremiah's easy equation of life style and falsity of message.

Carroll is indeed correct that the issues are complex, but is wrong on a point of detail and a point of substance. The point of detail is his 'Jeremiah's easy equation', for 'easy' is a trivializing and dismissive epithet, which makes Jeremiah sound like a complacent moralist. This does justice neither to Jeremiah's searching exposure of moral and spiritual complacency and self-serving (e.g. Jer. 7:1–15, 6:13–15)[121] nor to the

---

121. Another aspect of Jeremiah's thought in this regard, which has not yet featured in our exposition, is a recognition of the unfathomability of so much human thought and action.

prefacing of his indictment of the prophets with an account of the disturbing impact it makes upon himself (23:9).

The point of substance is the supposition that moral concerns in relation to a prophet are not essentially different from moral concerns in relation to a cobbler. Since Carroll is clearly (and not unreasonably) doubtful that a cobbler need be a good person to make a good pair of shoes (and similar issues are regularly and cogently raised about artists and their work), he extends this also to prophets. But this is to fail to recognize the distinctive nature of the vocation of a prophet, which is not to do with the creation of material objects (which may have moral implications but are not primarily or intrinsically moral) but rather to do with the formation of human lives. If human life is intrinsically moral and spiritual, which is a premise of biblical prophecy, then prophets must necessarily partake of those qualities of life that they seek to engender in others. A better analogy than that of the cobbler would be whether someone can teach well without first having mastered their subject. The issue at stake, for teacher or prophet, is whether the person up front does or does not know what they are talking about.

Finally, we may note Carroll's handling of a closely related issue, the significance of appropriately moral conduct on the part of those who hear a prophet. In the course of discussing Jeremiah's temple sermon Carroll says (1986:211–12):

> Jerusalem fell, but those who survived that fall, and their descendants, needed to be taught the lessons of that fall. Wherein lay security? Not in false beliefs about cultic security but in following a certain ethical way of life. If that conviction also appears false (šeqer) to the modern reader, then it is not because of the hermeneutics of suspicion but because Job, Qoheleth and the lament psalms (e.g. Ps. 44.17–22) have exposed it, too, as being ideologically based and therefore capable of becoming šeqer.

If Carroll's point were solely that Jeremiah's words are *capable* of becoming false, one could not disagree. For there is nothing – certainly no moral or spiritual truth – which is not susceptible of misunderstanding and misuse in the kind of way that makes it, in practice, false. But his real concern seems to be the stronger one that Jeremiah's moral understanding *is* false, and that for the (apparently unarguable) reason that other

except ultimately *coram deo*: 'The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it? I the LORD test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings' (Jer. 17:9–10).

voices in the canon have revealed its intrinsic inadequacy. This is obviously not the place to discuss Job, Qoheleth, or the lament psalms,[122] but on any reckoning Carroll's appeal to these texts is odd. For if Job and his comforters in their respective ways show the inadequacy of a moralistic understanding of God, if Qoheleth stresses the apparent indeterminacy of so much of life, and if the Psalms recognize the pain and puzzlement that are intrinsic to following YHWH faithfully, none of these emphases show that a profound moral dimension is not still intrinsic to a right understanding of YHWH and of human life. The mainstream of Jews and Christians down the ages, following the compilers of the biblical canon, has not had undue difficulty in holding together both the moral and the imponderable in their knowledge of God.

Here as elsewhere, Carroll narrows a substantive moral understanding into a rigid moralism, and treats this moralism as a kind of Aunt Sally target to be knocked down. This is a disappointing and unpersuasive handling of the biblical text.

Excursus 3: divine freedom and responsiveness: some further reflections on the potter and the clay

One difficulty with my thesis that must be addressed relates to the role within the book as a whole of Jeremiah's moral theology as outlined. For there are two emphases within the book which stand in some tension with this moral theology.

On the one hand, the shape of the book as a whole conveys the message that national disaster for Judah is inevitable. Thus, for example, the prime section of the temple sermon (7:1–15), which seems to envisage as a real possiblity both amendment and aversion of destruction, is directly followed by material which emphasizes the inevitability of coming judgment upon an unresponsive people, for whom Jeremiah is forbidden to intercede (7:16–8:3).[123] Alternatively, one genuine-sounding expression of repentance (14:7–9) meets with a rebuff (14:10), while another genuine-sounding expression of repentance (14:19–22) meets a further rebuff and a

122. Carroll's appeal to Ps. 44:17–22 is, however, a decontextualized misreading of that portion of the psalm. For the overall sense of Psalm 44, and the related Psalm 89, see Moberly 1997:880–2.

123. It is interesting that most commentators are inclined to take this prohibition at face value, even though they are equally inclined to take YHWH's prohibition to Moses in Exod. 32:10 in the opposite way as, in effect, an invitation to intercede. I hope to discuss this issue in another context.

further prohibition of intercession (15:1–4, cf. 14:11). One could, of course, classify such expressions of repentance as superficial – to a greater or lesser extent *sheqer* – and that could be right. But another possibility is that the expressed turning may be genuine in intention, but it can no longer make any difference. Jeremiah is required to say that a lifetime's subjugation to the Babylonians is God's will for Judah, and attempts to play this down are necessarily mistaken, that is false (*sheqer*) – so the narrative sequence in Jeremiah 27–9. Even if once there was a time when human turning (*shūv*) might have elicited a divine rescinding (*niham*), that time has now passed, and disaster is inevitable. If there is hope for the future, it is hope only on the far side of judgment; Judah must pass through the valley of deep darkness, and cannot go around it.

On the other hand, corresponding to this emphasis that turning to God cannot avert the coming national disaster is an emphasis that turning to God is not a precondition of national restoration. On the contrary, the initiative lies entirely with God. In the oracles of hope for the future, Jeremiah 30–3, there is only marginal reference to human turning, and overwhelming emphasis upon divine initiative in a way that seems to bypass human action. This is the point of the famous 'new covenant' passage (31:31–4), where yhwh says: 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.' The consequence, or corollary, of this divine initiative is that normal human processes of formation and growth will no longer be needed: 'No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the lord.' In a comparable way Jeremiah's symbolic purchase of a field that expresses hope for the future (32:1–15) is interpreted by a prayer that expresses astonishment that yhwh should act thus for a disobedient people (32:16–25). This prayer receives an answer (32:26–44) that underlines the evil of Israel and Judah and says nothing of their turning (other than that they have failed to do it), but again speaks of divine initiative in restoration under the general principle, 'See, I am the lord, the God of all flesh; is anything too hard for me?' (32:27).

If disaster cannot be averted by repentance, and if restoration does not presuppose repentance, then what role is played by Jeremiah's moral theology with its repeated insistence upon the necessity of repentance, knowing yhwh, practising justice and righteousness, and avoiding falsehood? We are faced by the fundamental issue of the relationship of divine

sovereignty and initiative with human moral responsibility and account-ability. Can one articulate the one without misrepresenting or down-playing the other? Or, to use Jeremiah's own terms, how are we to understand the relationship between the potter and the clay?

As already noted, the image of the potter working with the clay is, like all good images, open to more than one way of having its implications developed. The prime move within the text is to stress the power of the potter (18:6), but then immediately to complement this with an account of the moral and responsive nature of that power as channelled through prophetic witness, which leaves the future open and contingent (18:7–10). It is this upon which I have laid emphasis, not least because the language of the text explicitly relates it in an interpretative way to the nature of Jeremiah's comissioning as a prophet. The wider context of the book, however, necessitates a more precise articulation of the bearing of verses 7–10 upon verse 6. A first reading might perhaps suggest that verses 7–10 represent a comprehensive construal of divine sovereignty, as only and always exercised in a moral and responsive way. However, a second reading in the light of the wider context strongly suggests that verses 7–10 are to be understood as a general or normative construal, that is a rule, but a rule that admits of exceptions which 'prove' (i.e. test) it: although as a rule YHWH the potter handles the clay in the responsive way specified (which accords with the frequency of the language and concep-tuality elsewhere in the Old Testament), there may be times, of which the fall and restoration of the kingdom of Judah becomes a prime example, when this cannot account for YHWH's actions.

The second move within the text is to see the potter as shaping dis-aster, in a way that constitutes the warning that Jeremiah is to give to the people of Judah (18:11). Although this is explicitly a challenge to turn, with an implicit possibility of the disaster being averted, the refusal of the people to respond appropriately (18:12) means that the disaster that is in the process of being formed will surely be brought to completion.

The third move is that, because of the utter unresponsiveness of Judah to YHWH, Judah is the vessel which YHWH the potter will smash so thoroughly that it is beyond repair (19:1–15, esp. 11). This seems to symbolize and enact the point that disaster and exile have become inevitable.

However, a fourth move is latent in the initial depiction of the potter at work (18:4). As noted above, one implication of the depiction that is

open to development, though not actually developed in the immediate context, is that the new vessel appears to be a remaking of the original vessel, which is not discarded as it might have been. This can be taken as a picture of a fresh start that is entirely dependent upon the will of the potter ('as seemed good to him') to work with recalcitrant material rather than start afresh with new clay.[124] Although the images of future restoration in chs. 30–3 do not use the imagery of the potter refashioning spoiled clay 'as seemed good to him',[125] the consistent tenor of these chapters could undoubtedly be expressed in terms of a potter reworking unresponsive clay into a fine new vessel.

Thus all the dimensions of our problem are capable of being expressed in terms of the image of the potter with the clay. Three conclusions may be drawn from this. First, the openness of the imagery to different construals suggests that one may be unwise to seek some particular theological formula to express both YHWH's moral responsiveness and His freedom to act irrespective of the responsiveness of His people; it may be preferable, and less likely to lead to reductiveness or one-sidedness, to stay with the image, for the image has a dynamic and an imaginative power that could be lost in the transposition to a different mode of theological thought.[126]

Secondly, the juxtaposition of accounts of YHWH's responsiveness with accounts of His independent initiative and the resultant tension between them is an important guide to the understanding of the language that is used – in essence, that although the language is to be taken seriously, it must not be taken woodenly. For example, Christians historically have shown a tendency to fix upon the wording of Jer. 31:31–4 as

124. This dimension of the text has, of course, regularly been noted. Nicholson 1973:155, for example, comments: 'verses 1–6 alone look like the original saying of the prophet. The message of this original saying was one of judgement and renewal after judgement, a theme which is found frequently elsewhere in the book. As a potter remoulds a spoilt vessel on his wheel, so God would remould his people who had been "spoilt" by their sinfulness; he would destroy what they had been and reconstitute them to conform to the original purpose he intended for them.' My only quibble is that Nicholson suggests that this is the explicit meaning of verses 4–6 (taken on their own), while in fact it is entirely implicit, one possible reading of the imagery.

125. There is a passing use of *ytsr* in 33:2, in parallel with *'asah*. Interestingly, each verb has an unspecifed object, a pronominal suffix 'it'. Although most commentators, following the lead of the LXX, suppose that 'earth'/'world' is the implied referent, in accord with the usage of Isaiah 40–55, it may be that Israel/Judah should be understood as the referent. However, the Hebrew reads awkwardly and the text may be corrupt, so it would be unwise to lay weight upon it.

126. Compare Calvin's comment (n.d.:3652) on the significance of the potter's house as the context for God's speaking to Jeremiah: 'Naked doctrine would have been frigid to slothful and careless men; but when a symbol was added, it had much greater effect.'

depicting the radical newness of God's redemption through Christ in ways that have not been fair to the text; the emphasis upon newness and 'not like the old' has been prioritized, while the text's equal emphasis upon the needlessness of teaching and learning faith in God, which of course does not correspond to Christian experience, is passed over in some embarrassment. Rather than turning one's reading of this text into a matter of, in effect, picking and choosing, it would be better to take the picture of 31:31–4 as a whole as a strong portrayal of divine initiative and commitment (in which human action is downplayed) which is to be held in constructive tension with other passages such as, say, 18:7–10 with its strong portrayal of divine and human responsiveness (in which what people do matters). Theological thinking that is attuned to Scripture requires a richness which, while not anti-systematic, resists any easy transposition into any systematic formulation which would diminish those tensions that are intrinisic to life.

Thirdly (notwithstanding the first point), the text's portrayal of disaster and restoration points to an understanding of divine action which is characterized in Hebrew as *hesed* (Jer. 9:23 (ET 24), 31:3) or *hēn* (31:2) and in Christian theology as 'grace'. To be sure, the language of grace looks more applicable to the promise of restoration than it does to the warning of inevitable judgment, and yet these are two facets of a single whole (analogous to the inseparability of the death and resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament). For all the text's emphasis upon the fact that what people do matters to God and makes a difference to God, there is a corresponding concern both with human self-will which cannot bring itself to live rightly and respond to God's will and also with God's refusal to be bound by that failure. Among other things, this is perhaps the clearest guidance within the text that its strong moral emphasis is not to be reduced to any kind of moralism, least of all a moralism that excludes the unfathomable divine dimension of grace.