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“The Call for the Unfaithful Wife to Return:
The Rhetoric of Prophetic Appeal in Jeremiah 2:1-4:4”
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Introduction

Martin Luther observed that that the prophets “have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next, so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at.” One might be inclined to these sentiments when attempting to make sense of the composition and arrangement of Jeremiah 2:1-4:4, the opening block of prophetic messages in the book following the call narrative of chapter 1. Abma notes concerning this section:

Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 is a complex text which switches from poetry to prose, from the past to the present, from one addressee to another and from one eloquent metaphor to another in order to portray Israel’s conduct. At the same time it is characterized by a general focus on Yhwh and Israel and a great degree of non-specificity in terms of historical setting and occasion. No specifications of time and space are provided, and the text moves easily from the period in the wilderness to the return to Zion and to a glorious period in the future when Yhwh will be present in Jerusalem without mediation.¹

The most common understanding of the editorial process behind Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 is that messages from Jeremiah’s earliest ministry during the reign of Josiah dealing with the exile and return of northern Israel have been reworked and expanded as a message for Judah during the Babylonian crisis.² The fact that messages targeted for “Israel” (cf. 2:4, 14, 17, 25, 26, 31; 3:12, 20; 4:1) and “Judah” (cf. 2:28; 3:6-11) are framed by addresses to “Jerusalem” (2:2) and “Judah/Jerusalem” (4:3-4) would seem to support this idea.³ This reconstruction also reflects how Jeremiah’s message of hope could be applied by analogy to different historical events and circumstances—if Yahweh is willing to restore

¹ R. Abma, *Bonds of Love: Methodic Studies of Prophetic Texts with Marriage Imagery (Isaiah 50:1-3 and 54:1-10, Hosea 1-3, Jeremiah 2-3)*, SSN (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1999), 214.

² See Marvin A. Sweeney, “Structure and Redaction in Jeremiah 2-6,” in *Troubling Jeremiah*, JSOTS 260, ed. A. R. P. Diamond, K. M. O’Connor, and L. Stulman (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 200-218. Note specifically the reference to the reign of Josiah as the setting for the prose message in 3:6-11. For an overview of the scholarship on this issue, see Mark E. Biddle, *A Redaction History of Jeremiah 2:1-4:2*, ATANT 77 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1990), 3-29.

³ In certain passages, “Israel” seems to clearly refer specifically to the northern kingdom: “House of Jacob/Israel” (2:4, 26; 3:20); the reference to Israel and subjugation at the hands of Egypt and Assyria in 2:14-17; the contrast between “Israel” and “Judah” in 3:6-11; and the promise of the reunion of the “House of Israel” and “House of Judah” in 3:18 (cf. the “rebellious sons” who return to Zion in 3:14, 17). See Sweeney, “Structure and Redaction,” 203-204. However, from the retrospective view of 2:1-4:4, the term “Israel,” unless being clearly distinguished from Judah, should be read as referring to all of Israel, both north and south. The name “Israel” is also frequently used in this section because the prophet is focusing on the entire history of the people of God as a nation.

Israel, then the same is true of Judah.⁴ However, attempts to reconstruct the exact development of this text, to separate authentic words of the prophet from later editors, and/or to discern various redactional levels within the text are less successful.⁵ Brueggemann writes concerning 3:1-4:4: “It is not necessary or possible to trace the details of redactional development.”⁶ The primary reason for this difficulty is that the text as it now stands provides a retrospect on the whole of Jeremiah’s message and ministry in light of the Babylonian exile. McConville explains that the differing perspectives of Jeremiah from his long ministry “have become part of the whole” to such a degree that the book “does not generally invite us to reconstruct its constituent parts.”⁷ The primary responsibility of the interpreter is to deal with the text as it stands in its present literary setting.⁸

⁴ Sweeney (“Structure and Redaction, 214) specifically views 2:1-2aa, 28; 3:6-11; and 4:3-4 as the redactional material making the analogy between Israel and Judah.

⁵ Biddle (*A Redaction History*) isolates four stages in the development of this text: 1) a Schuldübernahme redaction that blames the fall of Jerusalem on the generation that experienced this event (2:14-25, 33-37); 2) a Repentance series, providing various perspectives on the possibility and conditions of Israel’s return to God (3:1-5, 6-12a, 14-18, 19f, 22-25); 3) The Generations Redaction, expanding Israel’s guilt into the distant past and presenting this guilt as a continuing problem for the post-exilic generation (2:4-13, 26-32); and 4) The Framework Redaction, (2:2b-3; 4:1ff) suggesting that Yahweh is willing to forgive and restore his people. Biddle rejects the idea that this section reflects material from the early part of Jeremiah’s ministry and views the entire section as a later retrospective on Jeremiah’s ministry. The study provides many helpful insights, but its redactional reconstructions are not convincing. Biddle uses changes in verb gender and number to isolate different strands in the text, which is problematic in any Hebrew discourse and particularly in this text where gender alternation appears to be a rhetorical device. Biddle argues that 3:1-5 views return to Yahweh as impossible, while the rest of the chapter suggests the possibility of such a return. However, perhaps the suggestion that return was impossible was designed to motivate the people to seek such a return. He argues that one layer of the text conditions return to Yahweh upon Israel’s repentance (3:12-13), while another attributes this return to Yahweh’s sovereign prerogative (3:14-18). This tension between human responsibility and divine sovereignty underlies moral exhortations elsewhere in the OT as well (cf. Deut 10:16; 30:1-10). Biddle views the blessings for Israel in the return (3:16-18) as standing in tension with the blessings of the nations through Israel’s return (4:1-2), but the promise that Abraham would be “a blessing to all peoples” underlying the Abrahamic covenant (cf. Gen 12:3) demonstrates that these truths actually complement one another.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 21.

⁷ J. G. McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An interpretation of the book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 27-28.

⁸ For the movement in Jeremiah studies to a more holistic and book-oriented approach to Jeremiah, see Martin Kessler, *Reading Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004); and Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry*, The Biblical Seminar 57 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998). The differences in the two editions of the Jeremiah volumes in the Anchor Bible commentary series are reflective of these changes as well. In the first edition, Bright provided a reconstruction of the order and arrangement of 2:1-4:4 (2:1-3, 14-19, 4-13, 20-37; 3:1-5, 19-25; 4:1-4; 3:16-18), whereas Lundbom’s more recent commentary treats 2:1-4:4 more as a literary entity reflecting a variety of literary structures and devices. See Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20, Jeremiah 21-36, Jeremiah 37-52*, AB 21a, 21b, 21c (New York: Doubleday, 1999, 2004, 2004); and John Bright, *Jeremiah*, 2nd ed. AB 21 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978).

Whatever its compositional history, there are clear signs of literary and editorial unity in Jeremiah 2:1-4:4. The goal of this study is to set forth these evidences that call for a cohesive and holistic reading of the passage. Additionally, this study will seek to demonstrate that this passage (along with the call narrative in Jeremiah 1) functions as a theological introduction to the book of Jeremiah as a whole.⁹ The themes of the unfaithful wife judged, the dialogue between Yahweh and Israel, and the restoration of female Israel set forth in this chapter play a major role in helping the reader to discern the literary and theological message of this book.

The Unified Message of Jeremiah 2:1-4:4

Unifying Terms in Jeremiah 2:1-4:4

A number of recurring lexical terms and expressions provide an overarching unity and coherence for Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 as the first major section of prophetic material in the book of Jeremiah. Some of these terms are directly related to the dominant husband-wife metaphor in this text. The “love” (אהב) of Israel’s youth for Yahweh (2:2) has turned into a “love” (אהב) for foreign gods (2:25, 33) so that Israel is guilty of both “prostitution” (זנה—2:20; 3:13; 6:8) and “adultery” (נאף—3:8,9).¹⁰ Israel’s marriage or allegiance to Yahweh or other gods is conveyed by the expression הלך + אחר (“to follow after”).¹¹ Israel “followed after” Yahweh in her youth (2:5) but then turned to “following after” other gods (2:5, 8). In the same breath, Israel claims to have “not followed after” other gods (2:23) and that she must “follow after” them (2:25). The verb הלך additionally refers to the wife “leaving” her husband in 3:1 and for both Israel and Judah “going” to commit prostitution in 3:6 and 8. This defection away from Yahweh is especially egregious in that Yahweh is the one who “brought” (Hiphil of הלך) Israel into the promised land (2:17). In the future restoration, Israel will no longer “follow after” (הלך + אחר) their stubborn ways but instead a unified Israel and Judah will “walk” (הלך) together in their devotion to Yahweh (3:17-18).

The use of הלך and הלך + אחר in Jeremiah 2-4 correlates with the related image of “road” or “way” (דרך) in this passage.¹² Yahweh led Israel on the “way” to the promised land (2:17), but Israel took their own “way” (דרך) by practicing idolatry (2:23, 33; 3:2,

⁹ Though taking a different approach to the book, Biddle (*A Redaction History*, 220-28), also views this section as a “theological prologue” to the book.

¹⁰ Their infidelity is also described as “rebellion” (פשע) against Yahweh (2:8, 29; 3:13).

¹¹ Abma, *Bonds of Love*, 239.

¹² Ibid.

13, 21) and forming alliances with Egypt and Assyria (2:18, 36). Even the worst of women could learn from the corrupt “ways” of Israel (2:33).

The way in which Israel has walked can only be characterized as “evil.” The noun רעה and the adjective רע appears ten times in 2:1-4:4.¹³ The first usage of רעה in 2:3 refers to the “calamity” that came upon Israel’s enemies when Israel had been faithful to Yahweh. By turning away from Yahweh and practicing “evil” (2:13, 19, 33; 3:5; 4:4), Israel has instead brought “calamity” upon herself (2:27-28).

Other recurring terms also reflect the devastating consequences of Israel’s evil ways. Their infidelity has “defiled” (טמא) the land (2:7; cf. 2:23—though they claim otherwise, they have done the same to themselves) and “profaned” (חנף) it (3:1, 2, 9). They have also brought “shame” (בוש) upon themselves through their actions (2:26, 36; 3:24-25).

The term ארץ (“land”) is prominent, appearing 16 times in 2:1-4:4, and 9 times in chapter 2 alone.¹⁴ As noted above, the prophet asserts (reflecting the apparent influence of Leviticus 18:25-29 and Deuteronomy 24:1-4) that the sin of the people has “defiled” and “profaned” the land (2:7; 3:1, 2, 9). The first five references to ארץ in chapter 2 have reference to the “wilderness” or to “Egypt” from which Yahweh delivered his people (2:2, 6 [4]). Ironically, the time in the barren wilderness was when Israel was actually faithful to Yahweh. Following the first reference to the “fertile land” given to Israel as its national heritage in 2:7 comes the accusation that the people have “defiled” the land. Their sin has also caused the lions (foreign armies) to ravage their good land (2:15). Israel has ruined what Yahweh gave to her as an “inheritance” (note the root נחל in 2:7 and 3:19).

Israel has made the fertile land Yahweh gave to them into the barren “desert” from which Yahweh had delivered them, and this decision apparently suits the people because they prefer to be like the wild donkey and nomad who spend their time in the “desert” (מדבר) pursuing or waiting for their potential mates (2:27; 3:2). Israel’s choices are irrational because they have viewed Yahweh himself, the giver of the good land, as a “desert” and a “land of deep darkness” (ארץ מאפליה)—2:31; note how this description of Yahweh serves as a conceptual parallel to the צלמות . . . ארץ describing the land from which Yahweh delivered Israel in 2:6). The final four references to ארץ in this section of Jeremiah point to the positive future when Yahweh will ultimately restore his people (3:16, 18 [2]), but sadly also what could have been Israel’s positive experience of blessing in the land if they had only been faithful to Yahweh (3:19).

Various forms of the root שוב highlight the centrality of the call to “return” to Yahweh (or to the land following the exile) that is central to this passage. “Return” is the only

¹³ Ibid., 241.

¹⁴ Ibid., 242-43.

thing that can restore Israel to Yahweh and bring Israel back to the promised land.”¹⁵ Irony is reflected in the interspersing of positive and negative uses of this root. Israel believes that Yahweh will soon “turn” from his anger (2:35), failing to see that their own turning must first occur. The two uses of **שׁוּב** in 3:1 in connection with an intertextual referencing of the divorce law in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 seems to deny the possibility of any return to Yahweh on the part of Israel, making the calls for return that do come later in the chapter more significant. The prophet declares that the northern kingdom is “Apostate/Backsliding/Turncoat” (noun **מְשֻׁבָּה**) Israel (3:6, 8, 11), because Yahweh anticipated that she would “return” (Qal impf. of **שׁוּב**) but she did not (Qal perf. of **שׁוּב**) (3:7). Despite observing what happened when Yahweh divorced the northern kingdom, Judah has not learned her lesson and also has refused to genuinely “return” to Yahweh (Qal perf. of **שׁוּב**) (3:10), making her more culpable than Israel.¹⁶ The uses of **שׁוּב** prior to the direct commands to “return” in 3:14 and 22 make it clear that the people are not deserving of the opportunity to return to Yahweh, are not inclined to repent, and do not even see their need for repentance. They are waiting for Yahweh to turn from his anger while continuing in their sinful ways. Feminine forms of the root **שׁוּב** have predominated in the passages describing Israel’s apostasy, but the imperatives to “return” in 3:14, 22 are in the masculine plural. The sons commanded to “return” are also characterized as “faithless” or “rebellious” (**שׁוֹבֵב**) Similarly, the imperfects of possibility (**הֲשׁוּב**—“if you will return”) and instruction (**הֲשׁוּב**—“return”) in 4:1 are in the second masculine singular.

Repetition of terms also provides an inclusio for 2:1-4:4. The term “Israel” appears 14 times in this section, while “Judah” is used 8 times, but the framing references to “Jerusalem” in 2:2 and “the men of Judah and Jerusalem” in 4:3 demonstrate that this text as a whole is addressed to the southern kingdom.¹⁷ The expressions “not sown to Yahweh” in 2:2 and “do not sow among the thorns” in 4:3 (both using the verb **זָרַע**) are also part of the envelope structure for 2:1-4:4.¹⁸ In the opening section, the term **רָעָה** refers to the “calamity” that befell Israel’s enemies (2:3); at the close, **רָע** refers to the “evil” from which Israel must turn (4:4). If Israel responds to the call for repentance, there will be a positive impact on the nations. Yahweh’s past relationship with Israel resulted in destruction for the nations who harmed Israel (2:3); in the future, the nations will be blessed when Israel returns to Yahweh (4:2-4).

¹⁵ Ibid., 241-42.

¹⁶ The repeated root **בָּגַד** (“treacherous”) stresses the refusal of Judah to turn from its sinful ways (3:7, 8, 10, 11; cf. 3:20).

¹⁷ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 250.

¹⁸ Ibid., 251.

The Unfaithful Wife as Controlling Metaphor

The controlling or “root” metaphor in Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 is the picture of Israel as the unfaithful wife of Yahweh.¹⁹ In chapter 2, the prophet charges Israel with being an unfaithful wife who has shamelessly prostituted herself. In 3:1-4:4, the prophet calls for the unfaithful wife to return to her husband. The marriage metaphor was a particularly apt image for the covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel. The marriage metaphor conveys that this relationship is “a bond between loving intimates” and provides a story-line for the drama of Yahweh’s interaction with Israel as a nation.²⁰ There was first of all an ideal time in Israel’s early history when she was devoted to her husband (cf. Hos 2:17; Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:6-14). As Chisholm has observed, “This exaggerated portrayal of Israel’s early history is so obviously idealized that it seems laughable.”²¹ Israel has since turned away from her husband.

In its ancient Near Eastern context, the picture of Yahweh as husband and Israel as wife also effectively communicates the hierarchical nature of their relationship. This marriage “is not a love affair between equal partners.”²² The marriage metaphor falls in line with other hierarchical images for Yahweh’s relationship with Israel, including those of “ruler-ruled, king-subject, master-servant/slave, father-child and shepherd-flock.”²³ The asymmetrical nature of the husband-wife relationship connotes both privilege and responsibility for Israel. While subordinate to Yahweh as her husband, Israel the wife also enjoys the husband’s protection and beneficence. Yahweh as a good husband provides for the needs of his wife (cf. Hos 2:10-11, 23-25; 3:5). Yahweh’s *hesed* is the basis of the relationship, but Israel is expected to reciprocate by showing *hesed* toward Yahweh. Israel’s duty as faithful wife is to give exclusive loyalty and faithful obedience to Yahweh.

The prophets warn that Israel is guilty of marital infidelity and faces a judgment that threatens her national existence. The charge of marital infidelity in graphically sexual terms was no doubt designed to shock the audience into response. As Ben Zvi has argued, the predominantly male audience that the prophet spoke (and later wrote) to would be moved because of the “dreaded thought that their own wives might be adulterers” and could identify with the intense emotions that such betrayal would arouse

¹⁹ A. R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2-3 (4:2),” in *Troubling Jeremiah*, 124.

²⁰ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 147.

²¹ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 156. Elsewhere, Jeremiah states that Israel has been unfaithful to Yahweh since the time they left Egypt (cf. 7:25-26; 11:7-8).

²² *Ibid.*, 147.

²³ Ehud Ben Zvi, “Observations on the Marital Metaphor of YHWH and Israel in its Ancient Israelite Context: General Considerations and Particular Images in Hosea 1:2,” *JSOT* 28 (2004): 370.

within them.²⁴ The prophet's audience would also recognize that such behavior demanded serious penalties, thus validating the intensity of the prophetic warnings of national destruction. Israel's infidelity provides a rationale for Yahweh's extreme anger and demonstrates that this response is "absolutely just."²⁵ As Frymer-Kensky notes, there is a sense of talionic justice in that just as "Israel's sin is sexual" (Jer 2:20—"spread out under every tree") so also "her punishment will be equally sexual" (Jer 13:25-27—"stripped naked and bare").²⁶ The prophet's intent is that the powerful emotions evoked by the accusation of infidelity to Yahweh will bring about repentance and a change of behavior on the part of his hearers, though Jeremiah in the course of his ministry became increasingly aware that national repentance would not occur.

The marriage metaphor is also critical to the prophetic message of hope, stressing the enduring quality of Yahweh's commitment to his people. Even though Yahweh has severely punished Israel, the marriage metaphor highlights that Yahweh wishes to restore his relationship with Israel (cf. Isa 50:1; 54:1-8). The prophetic message of hope anticipates a future union in which Israel's fidelity is guaranteed, so that Yahweh will never again have cause to think of divorcing or punishing his spouse (Hos 2:20; cf. Jer 31:30-33; Ezek 36:26-27).²⁷

Ben Zvi reflects on how the marital metaphor would impact the later exilic and post-exilic audience reading the prophet's message and suggests that at one level that these readers would identify with the people of Israel on the basis of kinship and be reminded of the need to avoid the sins of the past. They would be motivated to turn from the sinful ways of the past because of their desire to be the wife of Yahweh and to become the "post-judgment" Israel of the future envisioned by the prophets.²⁸ Ben Zvi comments, "Readers of these texts were by default asked to identify with the hegemonic partner's perspective . . . rather than that of a wayward subordinate."²⁹ They were to accept the justness of Yahweh's cause against his wayward wife and to align themselves with Yahweh's demands and expectations for this marital relationship. It was only in this way that lasting change could occur.

As Diamond and O'Connor explain, the marital image as "root metaphor" in 2:1-4:4 assembles "a cascade of other metaphors . . . into itself."³⁰ In the opening oracle, the

²⁴ Ibid., 376. Similarly, women in the audience would feel the shame and dishonor of being identified as an adulteress and the fear of the consequences of such behavior.

²⁵ Ibid., 369.

²⁶ Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 150.

²⁷ Ben Zvi, "The Marital Metaphor," 368.

²⁸ Ibid., 373.

²⁹ Ibid., 373.

³⁰ Diamond and O'Connor, "Unfaithful Passions," 126.

image of Israel as Yahweh's bride in 2:2 is closely conjoined to the agricultural figure of Israel as the "first-fruits of the harvest" (ראשית תבואתה) in 2:3. The Mosaic Law stipulated that the "first-fruits" belonged to Yahweh (cf. Ex 23:19; 34:26; Lev 2:12; 23:10, 17, 20; Nu 18:12-13; 28:26; Deut 18:4). Thus, the link between the marriage and first-fruit metaphors is the idea that Israel belongs exclusively to Yahweh. Bauer explains, "The connection between the marriage metaphor in 2:2 and the first fruits in 2:3 lies in the notion of property."³¹ Israel as the bride is "God's special possession."³² These images also share the notion of "purity, of being yet untouched," making the defection and defilement that follows all the more tragic.³³

The picture of Israel's idolatry as drinking water from "broken cisterns" in 2:13 also has marital and sexual overtones. As Brueggemann has written, "The metaphor is water but behind it lies the metaphor of marriage."³⁴ In Proverbs 5:15-18, the wise man instructs his son to avoid the adulteress and to "drink water from your own cistern" (מיים + שחה + בור or באר is found in both passages). Zipor objects to the connection of the "cistern" with marriage in Jeremiah 2 by noting that the image of drinking from the cistern applies to the husband in Proverbs 5, but the contextual focus on marriage and the alternation of male and female forms of address and the blending of wife and son imagery (see below) in Jeremiah 2-4 lessens the force of this argument.³⁵ The portrayal of Israel's appeals to Egypt and Assyria for military assistance as "drinking" (שחה) the waters of those lands in 2:18 also reflects the idea that Israel's alliances with other nations constitute adultery just as much as their idolatry (cf. Hos 5:15; 7:8-11; 8:8-10). Turning to other nations for security involves trusting in their gods and renouncing Yahweh's sovereign prerogative to protect and defend his people.

Israel's turning from Yahweh reduces them from a "choice vine" (שרק) to a "wild (foreign) vine" (גפן נכר) (2:21). Israel is portrayed as a vine elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps 80:8-16; Isa 3:14; 5:1-7; Hos 10:1), and the imagery is especially appropriate in Jeremiah 2-4 because of the emphasis on the land and its fertility/defilement. The use of "vine" or "vineyard" imagery in the love poetry of Song of Songs (Song 2:13; 6:11; 7:12) and in Isaiah's song concerning Yahweh's unrequited love for Israel (Isa 5:1-7) demonstrates its referential connection to marriage and sexuality.³⁶ The use of the root נכר ("foreign, strange, alien") as an adjective to describe the vine is a reminder that Israel has been promiscuous by chasing foreign gods and

³¹ Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading*, Studies in Biblical Literature, 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 22.

³² *Ibid.*, 23.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 87.

³⁶ See Moshe A. Zipor, "Scenes from a Marriage—According to Jeremiah," *JSOT* 65 (1995): 89.

alliances. As is more fully emphasized in Isaiah 5, the imagery here suggests that Yahweh has wasted his investment of time, effort, and expense in this “choice vine.”

The figure of Israel being unable to “wash/ cleanse” away her guilt in 2:22 is also directly connected to the defilement caused by her “spreading out as a prostitute” in 2:20. The verb כָּבַשׁ refers to ritual cleansing from various forms of uncleanness in Leviticus (cf. Lev 14:8-9, 47; 15:5-8, 10-11, 13, 17, 21-22, 27; 16:26, 28; 17:15-16), the contrast here being that Israel is unable to wash away her defilement no matter how hard she may try. The verb נָכַח (Niphal ptcp of כָּחַח.) reflects a *hapax* in the OT, but the related כָּחַח refers to menstrual stains on a woman’s clothing or body in post-biblical Hebrew adding credence to the idea that the washing away of sexual impurity or defilement is specifically in view here in 2:22.³⁷ The defilement by menstrual blood also provides a suggestive connection to the picture of the prostitute Israel’s skirt stained with blood in 2:33-34, though the blood in that passage belongs to the victims of Israel’s social crimes.

Perhaps the most graphic sexual imagery in this section occurs in the prophet’s portrayal of Israel as a “restless female camel” and a female donkey in heat (2:23-24). Lundbom explains that the female donkey in heat “sniffs for the scent of the male that is left behind in his urine. When she gets the scent, she rubs her nose in the dust, straightens up, and with head held high in the air begins sniffing the wind. Then off she goes in search of the male.”³⁸ Similar imagery appears in Jeremiah 5:8 and 13:27, where Israel’s desire for other gods is depicted as the neighing of a lusty stallion, and is taken to an even greater extreme in Ezekiel 23:30, where Israel lusts after foreign gods because of the size of their genitals (like donkeys) and the strength of their seminal emissions (like stallions). The shocking imagery reflects that Israel’s desire for other gods is like “raw, animal lust.”³⁹ The animal imagery also reflects the extent to which Israel has degraded herself in pursuing other gods. In their condemnation of the people, it is not enough for the prophets to portray Israel as wanton wife or unfaithful prostitute; their rhetoric goes further in characterizing Israel as the worst sort of prostitute. Jeremiah offers the rebuke that “the worst of women can learn from your ways” (2:33), and Ezekiel asserts that Israel is unlike the normal prostitute in that she pays others for the privilege of servicing them (Ezek 16:30-31).

Along with the husband-wife imagery to portray the relationship of Yahweh and Israel, the people of Israel are also depicted as Yahweh’s daughters and sons (cf. 2:9, 30; 3:14, 19-22). This overlapping of family metaphors seems strange or perhaps even incestuous to the modern reader but is more understandable from an ancient perspective. Progeny was central to the marital relationship, and both the husband-wife and father-child relationships were asymmetrical in nature. The portrayal of Israel’s relationship to Yahweh as both child and spouse stresses the closeness of their bond and the fact that

³⁷ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 278. See also Zipor, “Scenes from a Marriage,” 89.

³⁸ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 281-82.

³⁹ Diamond and O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions,” 141.

Yahweh has been intimately associated with his people from their inception (cf. Ezek 16:1-14). The shift from the prevailing female-wife imagery in 2:1-3:13 to the male-son relationship in 3:14-4:14 is actually part of the larger male-female alternation in this passage as a whole.⁴⁰ While changes in person, number, and gender are not uncommon in Hebrew, one apparent reason for the male-female alternation in this passage is that wife-Israel is essentially a literary metaphor, while the “sons of Israel” represent the actual people and leaders in the prophet’s predominantly male audience who are called to repent of their sinful ways. When Yahweh speaks to wife-Israel and refers to the people as “your sons” (2:9, 30), it reflects a sense of alienation. However, Yahweh later calls for the “sons” to “return” (3:14) and longs for the time when he can reward them as faithful sons rather than punish them as an “unfaithful wife” (3:19-20). The call for the people of Israel to “circumcise” themselves to Yahweh in 4:4 results in the picture of a “circumscribed prostitute” emerging from the whole of 2:1-4:4.⁴¹ The significance of this imagery and movement in the passage will be explored further later in this paper.

Unifying Logic, Argument, and Appeal

The Dispute in Jeremiah 2

Jeremiah 2 represents a dialogue between Yahweh and Israel that serves to indict Israel for covenantal infidelity. Yahweh states his intention to “bring charges” (רִיב) against Israel (2:9) and to refute Israel’s attempt to “bring charges” (רִיב) of covenant unfaithfulness against him (2:29). As de Roche has correctly surmised, Jeremiah 2 represents more a disputation than some type of formal legal proceeding or covenantal lawsuit.⁴² In the indictment of chapter 2, the prophet charges Israel with being an unfaithful wife who has repeatedly prostituted herself and chased after other lovers (2:20, 23-25, 33-36). The structure of the chapter reflects that Israel’s adultery against Yahweh specifically takes the form of idolatry and alliances with foreign nations:

- A Israel’s worship of foreign gods (2:4-13)
- B Israel’s involvement in foreign alliances (2:14-19)
- A Israel’s worship of foreign gods (2:14-19)
- B Israel’s involvement in foreign alliances (2:20-28)⁴³

⁴⁰ Abma (*Bonds of Love*, 238) has laid out this alternation as follows: 2:1-3 (2fs and 3ms); 2:4-13 (2mp); 2:14-25 (2fs); 2:26-32 (2mp); 2:33-37 (2fs); 3:1-5 (2fs); 3:6-10 (no addressee); 3:11-18 (2fs and 2mp); 3:19-20 (2fs and 2mp); 3:21-4:2 (2mp and 2ms); 4:3-4 (2mp).

⁴¹ See Mary E. Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute: The Rhetorics of Intertextuality, Metaphor and Gender in Jeremiah 3:1-4:4*, JSOTS 387 (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

⁴² See Michael de Roche, “YHWH’s *Rib* Against Israel: A Reassessment of the So-Called Prophetic Lawsuit,” *JBL* 102 (1983): 563-74.

⁴³ Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute*, 11.

Israel's idolatry in the Hebrew Bible often takes the form of Baal worship. Though Baal is mentioned only twice in 2:1-4:4 (cf. 2:8, 23), there appear to be several word plays in this section that call attention to Baal.⁴⁴ In the initial charge of idolatry, the prophet asserts that Israel has followed after “worthlessness” (הִבָּל) and as a result they themselves “became worthless” to Yahweh (Qal wayy. of הִבָּל) (2:5). Following the mention of בָּעַל in 2:8, the prophet again employs a similar sounding verb stressing the idea of worthlessness—“they followed after what could not help them (יַעַל).” The prophet repeats the root עַל in 2:11 in contrasting “worthless” idols to Yahweh as the true and living God. In 3:14, Yahweh appeals to his relationship with Israel as “husband” (Qal of בָּעַל) as the reason for them to return.⁴⁵

One of the striking rhetorical features of the dispute between Yahweh and Israel in Jeremiah 2 is the strong element of self-indictment, in which Israel essentially proves her own guilt by the things that she says in response to the charges of her husband. Fretheim has observed: “One characteristic of Jeremiah, more generally, is its fundamentally dialogical character.”⁴⁶ The prophet makes effective use of audience reaction quotations as a means of condemning Israel with her own words.⁴⁷ Overholt notes that there are nearly 100 such quotations in the book of Jeremiah and that these quotations are spread fairly evenly throughout the entire book.⁴⁸ These quotations reflect the beliefs and perspectives of the prophet's enemies, although often in extreme form. The prophet uses these quotations for rhetorical effect, frequently casting his opponents as saying what is shocking, illogical, or absurd as a way of confirming the veracity of his own message.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Note other explicit references to Baal in Jer 7:9; 9:14; 11:13, 17; 12:16; 19:5; 23:13, 27; 32:29, 35; 40:14.

⁴⁵ As Richard Hess (“Yahweh and His Asherah: Religious Pluralism in Old Testament Times,” in *One God, One Lord: Christianity in a World of Religious Pluralism*, ed. A. D. Clarke and B. W. Winter [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992], 28-29, note 35) has noted, the portrayal of Israel as Yahweh's wife in the prophets may also serve as a polemic against the belief that Baal's consort Asherah was the consort of Yahweh, and the metaphor of Israel as prostitute would overlap with the reality of Israel's practice of pagan fertility rites associated with the worship of Baal and Asherah. Jeremiah will later condemn the people for their worship of “the queen of heaven” (cf. Jer 7:17; 44:17-19, 25).

⁴⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga: Smith & Helwys, 2002), 74.

⁴⁷ See Thomas Overholt, “Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of ‘Audience Reaction,’” *CBQ* 41 (1979): 262-73; R. E. Manahan, “An Interpretive Survey: Audience Reaction Quotations in Jeremiah,” *GTJ* 1 (1980): 163-83; John T. Willis, “Dialogue Between Prophet and Audience as a Rhetorical Device in the Book of Jeremiah,” *JSOT* 33 (1985): 3-25; and W. J. Horwitz, “Audience Reaction to Jeremiah,” *CBQ* 32 (1970): 555-64..

⁴⁸ Overholt, “Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of ‘Audience Reaction,’” 262.

⁴⁹ Cf. Isa 28:15, where the prophet Isaiah has the leaders of Judah admit that they have made a “covenant with death” as a way of providing security in the Assyrian crisis. By putting this extreme quotation in the mouth of his opponents, the prophet seems to be saying, “So you have, and I hope that the two of you will be very happy together.”

In the unfolding dispute of Jeremiah 2, Israel openly expresses rebellion against Yahweh (2:20—“I will not serve you”; 2:31—“We are free to roam, we will not come to you any longer”) and expresses her love for and loyalty to other gods (2:25—“I love foreign gods; 2:27—they say “you are my father” to a piece of wood and “you are my mother” to a piece of stone). They claim to be not guilty of infidelity to Yahweh (2:23—“I have not defiled myself or given allegiance to the Baals”; 2:35—“I am innocent”) at the same time they confess their addiction to pursuing false gods (2:25—“It is no use; I love foreign gods and must pursue them). In nearly the same breath, they protest their innocence and confess their nymphomania. Their words reflect that their relationship with Yahweh is a sham. They call themselves the children of idols, but when they are in trouble, they cry out to Yahweh, “Come and save us” (2:27). They cannot believe that Yahweh could possibly be angry with them (2:35). As much as they are indicted by their wrong words, they are also guilty because of the right things that they have failed to say. The people and leaders have not asked “Where is Yahweh?” in order to remind themselves of his saving acts of the past and the requirements of his commandments (2:6, 8).

Because Israel had demonstrated their guilt through their words, the prophet anticipates in 3:1-4:4 that Israel will say the right things to Yahweh when they are rightly restored to him. The prophet envisions that returning to Yahweh will involve Israel’s confession of their sinful past. As openly as they have expressed “I will not serve you” or “I am innocent” in the past, they will freely confess the futility of their pursuit of false gods and will acknowledge their root problem of “not obeying” the word of Yahweh (3:22-25).⁵⁰ Israel moves from protesting “I have not sinned” (חטא) (2:35) to acknowledging “we have sinned” (חטא) (3:25).

Along with self-indictment, the prophet in Jeremiah 2 appeals to a rhetoric of futility as a means of making his case against Israel. Yahweh presses his argument by stressing the foolishness of Israel’s choice to abandon him for other gods and foreign alliances. The gods that Israel turns to cannot “save” (שע) them, as the people themselves acknowledge (2:27-28). These gods are characterized as “worthless” gods (2:8, 11). The nations with whom Israel makes political alliances will also not be able to “deliver” (צלה) them (2:37). Israel’s choice to follow these gods is leading to her ruin. When Israel was devoted to Yahweh as his “first fruits,” anyone who harmed her was “consumed” (אכל) (2:3), and Yahweh brought Israel into the fertile land so that they might “eat” (אכל) of its abundance (2:7). However, Israel, because of its idols and foreign alliances, is now being “consumed” (אכל) by the wild animals who invade the land (2:15).⁵¹ This punishment gives Israel her just desserts in that her apostasy has caused her to “devour” (אכל) her own prophets like a voracious lion (2:30). When Israel was faithful, “calamity” (רעה)

⁵⁰ Failure to “obey” or “listen to” the prophetic word is the recurring charge that Jeremiah levels against the people (cf. see 6:19; 9:13; 16:11; 25:3-4, 7-8). This charge is the special theme of the narrative section of Jer 26-45 (cf. 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 34:14, 17; 35:14, 15, 16, 17; 36:31; 37:14; 40:3; 42:13, 21; 43:7; 44:16, 23).

⁵¹ Note 3:24 and Israel’s anticipated confession where she acknowledges to Yahweh that her false gods have “consumed” (אכל) her agricultural produce and her children.

fell on other nations (2:3); now Israel's "evil" causes "calamity" (רעה) to fall upon her (2:19)

Just as Israel's search for fertility has turned eating from something positive to negative, she also has been frustrated in her search for alternative sources of water. They turn to gods who are broken cisterns unable to hold "water" (מים) instead of trusting in Yahweh who is the source of living "water" (מים) (2:13). Their alliances with Egypt and Assyria are likened to drinking the water" (מים) from the rivers of those lands (2:18), but the armies of Egypt have already inflicted humiliation on the land (2:16) and their trust in Egypt and Assyria will prove to be a failure and a disappointment (2:36). Israel's throats are parched as they pursue after other gods with shameless abandon (2:25).

Israel's turning away from Yahweh has turned her own salvation history upside down. She has made herself a "slave" (עֶבֶד) to other nations (2:14) by refusing to "serve" (עבד) Yahweh (2:20). Jeremiah 2 begins with a reminder of how Yahweh brought Israel out of Egypt (2:6), but the chapter concludes with Israel leaving Egypt again as captives after turning to Egypt for military assistance (2:36-37). As noted earlier, Israel's sin has turned the "fertile land" (2:7) into a barren wasteland (2:15), like the "desert" from which Yahweh had delivered Israel (2:6). The interplay of ארץ and מדבר most effectively demonstrates the futility of Israel's trust in fertility gods like Baal. If they had remained loyal to Yahweh, they could have enjoyed a "fertile land" (ארץ הכרמל) (2:7) instead they trusted in Baal and ended up with a מדבר.⁵²

The prophet repeatedly uses rhetorical questions in chapter 2 as a means of bringing the people to their senses regarding the foolishness of their abandonment of Yahweh. Fretheim states that Yahweh's "why" questions in chapter 2 "are neither rhetorical nor informational. They are existential questions. God is genuinely baffled that the rebels would complain against him and mystified that they would express their freedom from God and pursue other lovers."⁵³ The rhetorical questions in Jeremiah 2 focus specifically on the issue of covenant fidelity within the relationship of Yahweh and Israel:

- 2:5,29, 31—What charge of unfaithfulness could be brought against Yahweh as a covenant partner?
- 2:14—Why has Israel reduced herself to the status of slave and plunder in light of its exalted status as bride and first-fruits of Yahweh
- 2:17-18—Why go back to Egypt when Yahweh had already brought them out of Egypt?
- 2:23-25—How can Israel claim to not be defiled when they insatiably pursue after idols and confess their addiction to them?

⁵² In contrast to the fertility gods who helped Israel turn the promised land into a מדבר, Yahweh is a God who was able to produce "first fruits" in "a land not sown" in 2:2. See Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 62.

⁵³ Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 71. For the use of rhetorical questions in the book of Jeremiah as a whole, see Walter Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions," *JBL* (92): 1973: 358-74.

2:27-28—Why does Israel profess loyalty to so many gods when they themselves acknowledge that these gods are unable to save them in trouble?
2:36—Why is Israel so fickle and constantly changing its ways?⁵⁴

Two rhetorical questions in this chapter go so far as to stress that Israel's conduct conflicts with the natural order of human behavior. What Israel has done simply does not happen, but incredibly, it has. Yahweh asks in 2:11-12—the nations are loyal to their deities even though they worship “no gods” and “worthless idols.” Yahweh should have been able to expect at least the same level of devotion from his people. In 2:32, Yahweh wants to know what kind of bride would forget her jewelry or wedding garments, but Israel has even forgotten her husband. She prefers her relationships with other lovers and confesses that wood and stone are her father and mother (2:27).

The Call for the Unfaithful Wife to Return (Jeremiah 3:1-4:4)

The focus changes from accusation and indictment in chapter 2 to appeal for Israel to “return” to Yahweh in 3:1-4:4. As in chapter 2, the prophet continues to effectively use rhetorical questions and audience reaction quotations to draw his audience into engagement with the call to repentance and change of behavior. In 3:1-11, the prophet appears to argue that Israel (particularly his Judean) audience has forfeited the opportunity to return to Yahweh, but then closes in 3:12-4:14 with repeated calls for the people to return. By appearing to shut off the people from the opportunity to repent, the prophet motivates his audience to respond to the gracious offer of a restored relationship with Yahweh.

An intertextual referencing of the divorce law found in Deuteronomy 24:1-4 is central to the poetic oracle in 3:1-5 and the prose message in 3:6-11.⁵⁵ The divorce law in Deuteronomy 24 states that if a man divorces his wife, he is not allowed to take her back if she marries another man and is subsequently divorced or widowed. Marriage to the

⁵⁴ With the rhetorical questions in ch. 2, there is specifically a pattern of question followed by imperative that calls for the audience to consider the evidence that leads to the proper answer for the question. In 2:5, Yahweh asks: “what fault did your fathers find in me?” followed by a series of five imperatives in 2:10 asking them to go to the extreme lengths of traveling to a distant land and doing a careful search to see if any other people has committed the unnatural act of abandoning their god. In 2:18, Yahweh inquires as to what good it will do the people to go to Egypt and Assyria for military assistance, followed by the command to “know” and “see” that it was disastrous for Israel to “abandon” Yahweh. A rhetorical question shortly follows in verse 23 where Yahweh incredulously asks how the people can claim that they have not “defiled themselves,” to which he calls upon them to “see” and “know” the extent of their flagrant idolatry in the valley. There is then the command for Israel to “cease” (בַּעַל) chasing after other gods (v. 25). In v. 29, Yahweh wants to know, “Why have you brought charges against me?” (v. 29) with the imperative to “see” that he has never mistreated his people (v. 31). This word from Yahweh actually comes in the series of rapid-fire questions that appear to bring the indictment against Israel to a climax (there are three questions in vv. 31-32—“have I been a wilderness to Israel or a land of deep darkness?”; “why do you say...?” Does a young woman forget her jewelry or a bride her wedding garment?). This flourish of questions closes with the summary accusation, “But my people have forgotten me.”

⁵⁵ For further discussion of this intertextual connection and the specific lexical parallels, see Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 307-12.

first husband after the woman has married another man would bring defilement on the land. The rhetorical questions in 3:1-5 seek to bring the prophet's audience to an understanding of their precarious position as Yahweh's wife. The questions "should he return to her?" and "would not the land be defiled?" in verse 1 call for obvious "No" and "Yes" answers. The following *וְשׁוּב אֵלַי* is more ambiguous both in construction and intent. The infinitive absolute could be translated as an imperative, but this understanding seems unlikely in light of the previous questions. More likely, the construction should be read as another question—"Would you return to me?"⁵⁶ As Fretheim explains, the question suggests that "no renewal of the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is possible."⁵⁷ In fact, Israel's flagrant and repeated infidelity goes beyond the circumstances set forth in Deuteronomy 24, making the possibility of return even less likely (vv. 2-3).⁵⁸ The rhetorical question connected to the audience quotation in verses 4-5 reflects the extent to which Israel's view on the covenant breach differs from that of Yahweh. Israel continues to refer to Yahweh as "Father" and "Friend," not recognizing that even the Mosaic Law would appear to call for the dissolution of her marriage to Yahweh.

The standing of the marriage becomes even more precarious in the prose message found in 3:6-11. Stretching the marriage metaphor, Yahweh is portrayed as the husband of sisters Israel and Judah.⁵⁹ In the early days of his ministry, Jeremiah called for Judah to learn from the exile of the northern kingdom and to repent before experiencing a similar judgment. The divorce (exile) of Israel has already occurred and a similar fate awaits Judah if there is no repentance. Countering Judah's belief in its own inviolability and favored status, the prophet warns that Judah is more culpable than Israel, whom Yahweh has already divorced. Judah is more guilty because she has failed to learn from what happened to her older sister. In light of Deuteronomy 24, Yahweh has already divorced Israel, and Judah is even worse, meaning that Judah's marriage to Yahweh is in grave danger.

After seeming to argue that return is not possible, it is all the more surprising that Yahweh repeatedly calls for the return of his people in 3:12-4:4. One might compare the rhetoric of Judges 10:13-16 where Yahweh states that he will not deliver Israel and then turns around and delivers them anyway. Though it appears the covenant is irrevocably broken, imperatives calling for Israel's "return" dominate this section:

⁵⁶ As in ch. 2, the pattern of rhetorical question(s) followed by imperative(s) appears again, as the prophet commands "lift up your eyes" and "see" in 3:2. See note 54 above.

⁵⁷ Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 73.

⁵⁸ *Contra* J. A. Thompson (*Jeremiah*, NICOT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 191), who argues that the fact that Judah had not "married a particular lover" provided a "loophole" to the Deuteronomic provision. The rhetoric here is actually the opposite point that Judah's behavior is worse than anything envisioned in Deut 24.

⁵⁹ Lev 18:18 forbids a husband from marrying sisters.

3:12	“Return” (שׁוּבוּה) —directed to the exiles from northern Israel ⁶⁰
3:13	“Acknowledge” (fem. sing. impv. of יָדַע)
3:14, 22	“Return (שׁוּבוּ)
4:3	“Break up (נִירָו) your unplowed ground” (also note אֵל + the jussive in the parallel line—“do not sow among thorns”)
4:4	“Circumcise (הַמּוֹלֵו) yourselves to the Lord”
4:4	“Remove (הַסְרֵו) the foreskin of your heart”

The motivation for the people to repent is the gracious offer of restoration when there is no legal right or reasonable expectation of such an offer. The willingness of Yahweh to restore the broken marriage reflects his magnanimity as a covenant partner. In chapter 2, Israel demonstrated its covenant infidelity by acting against the natural order; the contrast here is that Yahweh shows loyalty to Israel by acting against the legal order that he himself has established for the human institution of marriage.⁶¹

In his early ministry, it appears that the prophet Jeremiah called for the northern exiles to return to Yahweh and for national repentance on the part of Judah. However, from the retrospective viewpoint of Jeremiah MT, the call for return is directed to all of exilic and post-exilic Israel. Fretheim explains that the prophet’s words in Jeremiah 3 “are not simply reports of past failures. The language of promise inserted in the middle of calls to repentance (3:14-18) assumes the fall of both Israel and Judah. And so the call to repentance, whatever its force as an earlier message of Jeremiah (that did not issue in repentance) is now represented as a word to exiles, for whom repentance is possible.”⁶² This focus on the final exilic (or post-exilic) audience in Jeremiah MT may explain the use of prose to relay the prophet’s message in 3:6-11 and 3:14-18.⁶³ Stulman has noted that prose passages like Jeremiah 7, 25, and 26 often play a key role as signposts and

⁶⁰ In the flow of 3:1-4:4, the call for the exiles in the north to return in 3:12 creates ambiguity. Since 3:6-11 has made the point that Judah is worse than Israel, perhaps the call to the north suggests that Judah is excluded from this offer. Ultimately, however, the call for Israel to return provides on the basis of analogy an assurance for Judah. If Yahweh is gracious to Israel after the divorce, then he is willing to extend this same grace to Judah both before and after the Babylonian exile has occurred.

⁶¹ The Hebrew Bible as a whole stresses that Yahweh’s covenant with Israel is based on a love that cannot be explained at the human level (cf. Deut 7:6-8; Hos 11:1; Isa 43:1-4; 48:14; Jer 31:3; Mal 1:2). See Ben Zvi, “The Marital Metaphor,” 382.

⁶² Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 81.

⁶³ As Thompson (*Jeremiah*, 189) notes, the fact that the prose passages interrupt the flow of the poem suggests that they were later editorial additions. However, he also notes that nothing in these passages “is inconsistent with Jeremiah’s thought in general.” If Jeremiah envisioned a return of the northern exiles early in his ministry, it seems highly likely that he envisioned a similar return for Judah from its exile. Commentators seeing more of a disconnect between the poetic and prose traditions in Jeremiah would understand these prose texts as later revisions of the message of Jeremiah. Cf. William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah. I. Introduction and Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV*, ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986), 87-89. McKane, with his understanding of Jeremiah as a “rolling corpus” views the prose passages as later exegetical commentary and expansion on the poetic tradition.

interpretive summaries for the reading of the prophet's poetic oracles in the book as a whole, and one can imagine a similar role for these prose passages within the smaller unit of 2:1-4:4.⁶⁴ The prose passages set forth the options facing post-judgment Israel—disobedience and continual judgment (vv. 6-11) or repentance and restoration (vv. 14-18). In their prose form, the messages provide a historical object lesson that invites post-judgment Israel to learn from the mistakes of the past and to begin the process of restoration.

As noted earlier, an important shift from the prevailing husband-wife to father-child relationship occurs in 3:19-22 as part of the appeal for Israel to return to Yahweh. Female imagery for Israel is present in 3:19-20. Yahweh expresses the desire to give his daughters an inheritance as sons.⁶⁵ As Lundbom observes, the passage reflects a quite honored status for the female in that daughters normally did not receive an inheritance (cf. Num 27:1-8; 36:1-12; Job 42:15).⁶⁶ The honored status that Yahweh wished to confer upon Israel (as well as the fact that Israel had rebelled not only against her husband but also her father) makes her betrayal of Yahweh all the more deplorable. After the final reference to Israel as “unfaithful wife” in 3:20, Israel is only addressed or described as the male “son(s)” of Yahweh in 3:21-4:4. The anticipated confession when Israel returns to Yahweh in 3:22-25 is that of rebellious sons returning to their father (note בָּנִים in 3:21-22 and the masculine plural impv. שׁוּבוּ in 3:22). The image of male circumcision symbolically represents Israel's repentance in 4:4.

Feminist readings of this text tend to focus on how the change from female to male imagery perpetuates patriarchal views of the female as representing evil and unrestrained sexuality and/or how the female is marginalized in order to maintain male control over her.⁶⁷ Shields comments, “The switch from female to male imagery and direct address

⁶⁴ Stuman, *Order Amid Chaos*, 57-58.

⁶⁵ A reference to daughters is understood here because the pronominal suffixes used with the verbs “I would place you” (אֲשִׁיחֶךָ) and “I would give to you” (אֶתֶּן לְךָ) in v. 19 are 2FS. There is a Kethib-Qere problem regarding the gender of the verbs in the second half of the verse. The Kethib reads 2MS for the verbs “you would call me” and “you would not turn from me”; the Qere reading (preferred because of the suffixes in the first half of the verse) reads these verbs as 2FS. Translating the phrase אֲשִׁיחֶךָ בְּבָנִים as “I would place you as sons” involves reading the ב on “sons” as the *beth essentiae*.

⁶⁶ Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 318.

⁶⁷ For representative examples of these types of studies, see Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books*, trans. L. M. Maloney (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2003); Athalya Brenner, *On Gendered Sexuality in the Hebrew Bible and in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); “Pornoprophets Revisited: Some Additional Reflections,” *JSOT* 70 (1996): 63-86; “‘On Prophetic Propaganda and the Politics of Love’: the Case of Jeremiah,” in *Reflections on Theology and Gender*, ed. F. van Dijk-Hemmes and A. Brenner (Kampen: The Netherlands, Kok Pharos, 1994), 87-107; Cheryl Exum, “The Ethics of Biblical Violence Against Women,” in *The Bible in Ethics: The Second Sheffield Colloquium*, ed. J. W. Rogerson, et al (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), 248-71; “Prophetic Pornography,” in *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 248-71; *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)Versions of Biblical Narratives* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity, 1993); Deborah T. Setel, “Prophets and Pornography: Female Sexual Imagery in Hosea,” in *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, ed. L. Russell

relies on a construction of gender and sexuality which . . . is harmful to both genders.”⁶⁸ In looking at the Hebrew Bible as a whole, Exum notes the incongruity of the circumcision of the male as a symbol of covenant fidelity, while the female body and womb is associated with uncleanness, defilement, and death.⁶⁹ Admittedly, it would appear at first glance that Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 serves as a *prima facie* example of her point.

While acknowledging the difficulties for the modern reader surrounding patriarchal language and graphic sexual imagery in the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible, it would appear that the shift from female to male imagery in this passage is more the prophet’s attempt to deliver the “punch line” of his controlling metaphor and to make direct application of his message to his predominantly male audience. Just as the prophet Nathan in his confrontation of David had to move beyond house pets and lamb chops to the real issues of adultery and murder, so the prophet Jeremiah must also move beyond the metaphor of the unfaithful wife in order to address the real need for his male audience to change their sinful ways. In making the appeal for change, the prophet calls for his audience (and readers) to first identify with the unfaithful wife and then to dissociate themselves from her. They are the unfaithful wife who has abandoned Yahweh (3:20), but they are to become the sons who repudiate their mother’s sinful ways and turn back to Yahweh (3:21-25).⁷⁰ As O’Connor notes, “The children signify and encode the implied readers in exile who are invited to return and are provided here with a model of liturgical repentance.”⁷¹

The issue here is not female wickedness versus male righteousness.⁷² It is the “sons” who have acted “unfaithfully” (שׁוֹכְבִים) (3:14, 22) in making Israel an “unfaithful” (מַשְׁבָּה) wife (3:6).⁷³ It is the wickedness of the male leadership and populace that has

(Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985); Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, “The Metaphorization of Women in Prophetic Speech: An Analysis of Ezekiel 23,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 244-55; P. Gordon, “Rape as a Military Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible,” in *A Feminist Companion to the Latter Prophets*, 308-25; Claudia Camp, “Metaphor in Feminist Biblical Interpretation: Theoretical Perspectives,” *Semeia* 61 (1993): 3-36.

⁶⁸ Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute*, 2.

⁶⁹ Cheryl Exum, *Fragmented Women*, 124-28.

⁷⁰ Diamond and O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions, 134.

⁷¹ Kathleen M. O’Connor, “The Tears of God and Divine Character,” in *Troubling Jeremiah*, 390.

⁷² *Contra* Brenner (“On Prophetic Propaganda, 92), who writes, “Female sexuality is pornographically (re)presented as negative in relation to a positive or neutral male sexuality.” She adds later (p. 104) that prophetic propaganda “cleverly constructs a stereotype: everywoman, especially everywife, is a potential deviant and should therefore be tightly controlled.”

⁷³ The same pattern emerges in the book of Hosea. After the metaphorical presentation of the marriage of Hosea and Gomer as figurative for the relationship between Yahweh and Israel, it is the male practice of engaging in adultery and prostitution through idolatry that is condemned in the prophet’s preaching (note the male verb forms and pronouns in Hos 5:3-4.

inflicted untold disaster on Israel's "sons and daughters" (3:24-25). In concluding his appeal for repentance, the prophet eschews the metaphor of unfaithful wife and plainly calls for the removal of idolatry (4:1). It is the predominantly male audience who will decide Israel's future and who must change their ways if restoration to Yahweh is ever to occur.

Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 and the Book of Jeremiah

In addition to the ways that Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 reflects its own inner unity, this block of prophetic material also appears to serve as a programmatic introduction to the book of Jeremiah in that it introduces themes and motifs that are central to the book as a whole.⁷⁴ Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 introduces an unfaithful wife who disputes with her husband Yahweh over his charges of infidelity against her. This dispute and the ultimate transformation of Israel, the unfaithful wife, are central to the plot and structure of the book of Jeremiah. Developing how Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 functions within the larger book as a whole is crucial to understanding the book of Jeremiah as a cohesive and coherent book.

The Judgment of the Unfaithful Wife

Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 opens the book with the repeated call for Israel to "return" to Yahweh and the possibility that the nation might avoid the judgment that is to befall her. Beyond 2:1-4:4, the call for return or statements that judgment might be averted appear in 4:14; 5:1, 6:8; 7:3-7, but these calls for return become less and less frequent (cf. 13:15-17; 17:19-27; 18:11).⁷⁵ Yahweh ultimately instructs Jeremiah not to intercede for the people because their judgment is inevitable (7:16; 11:14; 14:11). Yahweh has offered a legitimate opportunity for his people to change their ways and be spared from judgment (18:7-9), but their obstinate refusal to change necessitates their judgment (18:11-12). Jeremiah's two visits to the potter in chapters 18-19 effectively demonstrate this movement from potential repentance and avoidance of judgment to refusal to repent and inevitable destruction.⁷⁶ Yahweh calls for the people to "circumcise their hearts" (4:4), but the reality is that they are circumcised only in the flesh (9:25-26).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ This proposal is not a denial of the introductory function of the call narrative in Jer 1 as well, but this section represents the opening section of the prophet's preaching. J. Andrew Dearman (*Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NIVAC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002], 61) refers to 2:1-37 as a "sampler" of Jeremiah's preaching, and this "sampler" reflects in important ways the prominent themes of Jeremiah's overall message.

⁷⁵ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Do Not Trim a Word: The Contributions of Chapter 26 to the Book of Jeremiah," *CBQ* 51 (1989): 628.

⁷⁶ See McConville, *Judgment and Promise*, 52-53. In the first visit in ch. 18, there is still the potential for the ruined clay to be refashioned; in the second visit in ch. 19, the pottery is smashed.

⁷⁷ Disputing the claim that the covenantal sign conferred special status on them as the people of the covenant (cf. Gen 17), the prophet asserts in 9:25-26 that Israel is really no different from any other people practicing physical circumcision.

Rather than turning to Yahweh, Israel continues to be the “unfaithful wife.” The placement of the metaphor of Israel as unfaithful wife in Jeremiah 2-3 means that the entire book is stamped by this understanding of Israel’s relationship to Yahweh.⁷⁸ Israel needs to “wash” (כבס) herself (4:14; cf. 2:22) because she remains “rebellious” (מרה) (cf. מר in 2:19). The threat of the invading “lion” looms large (2:15; 4:7), because she will not turn away from being “faithless” (בגד) (5:11; cf. 3:8, 11, 20). Israel persists in her refusal to “know” (ידע) Yahweh (4:22; cf. 2:8).⁷⁹ In 4:30-31, Israel elaborately adorns and beautifies herself in an attempt to seduce her lovers, not realizing that her lovers are the ones who want her dead. The image changes from prostitute in verse 30 to a woman in the pains of childbirth in verse 31. Israel will suffer the consequences of her persistent adultery, and the irony is that she is getting dressed up to die.⁸⁰

The graphic images of animal sexuality from 2:25-26 return in 5:7-9. Israel cannot resist the animalistic impulse to pursue other gods (v. 7; cf. 9:2 [1]). However, it is important to note that it is now Israel’s “sons” who commit adultery and male animal imagery is used to describe their perversion. Carroll thus notes that “biblical condemnation of sexual activity, whether real or metaphorical, is a balanced matter of condemning male as well as female behaviour.”⁸¹ In addition to religious infidelity toward Yahweh, the prophet also condemns the practice of human adultery in marital relationships that fills the land and heightens Judah’s guilt (cf. 7:9; 13:27; 23:10, 14; 29:23).

In her opening dialogue with Yahweh, Israel confesses herself to be an incorrigible nymphomaniac, and Yahweh concurs with this assessment (13:20-27). Yahweh is left with no alternative other than to severely punish his wife for her infidelities. Her “skirt” (כנף) has been stained with blood (2:34), so it is fitting justice that her “skirt” (שול) be removed as she is publicly exposed and humiliated (13:22, 26-27). The image of a husband exposing his wife, with the accompanying sexual abuse and degradation that

⁷⁸ Baumann, “Jeremiah: YHWH’s Marriages,” 105.

⁷⁹ The persistence of Israel/Judah in their sinful ways is also highlighted in Jeremiah by the repetition of a number of other terms and phrases from 2:1-4:4 later in the book. Biddle (*A Redaction History*, 219-220), for example, notes the following literary ties between chs. 2-3 and 4-6: “I/you smote them . . . , they [did not] take correction” (2:30; 5:3); “They refused to be ashamed/to take correction” (3:3; 5:3); “my people/-they have forgotten me/Yahweh” (2:32; 3:21); the people have “forsaken” Yahweh (2:13, 17, 19; 4:29; 5:19); “The land [made] a waste” (2:15; 4:7; 5:30); “its cities desolate” (2:15; 4:7); “without inhabitant” (2:15; 4:7, 29); “The anger turned from me/us” (2:35; 4:8, 26); the leadership list of “kings, princes, priests, prophets” (2:8, 26; 4:9; 5:3; 6:13). Additionally, passages relating to the guilt and/or punishment of Israel/Judah appear as doublets elsewhere in the book.: 1) 2:26b = 32:32b; 2) 2:27b = 32:33a; 3) 2:28b = 11:13; 4) 4:4 = 21:12b. For the use of these types of doublets in the Book of Jeremiah, see Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doublets and Recurring Phrases*, SBLMS 51 (Atlanta: SBL, 2000).

⁸⁰ Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah*, 69-71. Cf. 2 Kgs 9:30-37, where Jezebel paints her eyes in anticipation of the arrival of Jehu and her impending death.

⁸¹ Robert Carroll, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 180.

would accompany such an act (cf. Hos 2:10-13), is disturbing and particularly shocking to modern sensibilities. However, the imagery falls short of portraying Yahweh as the Divine Rapist, as some have claimed (as is also true of Nah 3:5-7).⁸²

Reading Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 in light of the book's later message of judgment helps to clarify the rhetorical intent of the unfaithful wife metaphor. In the opening dispute, the prophet is calling on the predominantly male audience (and readers) to identify themselves as the unfaithful wife and to change their ways. When moving forward in Jeremiah, the use of female imagery when portraying Judah's judgment further motivates repentance by placing the people in the vulnerable position of the woman in the context of the realities of ancient Near Eastern warfare. If the people of Judah (especially the male leaders), in light of their understanding of these realities, can see themselves as the vulnerable woman about to suffer siege, rape, public exposure, and the loss of husband and children, then perhaps they will be motivated to change. It is the "daughter of my people" (4:11; 8:11, 19, 21, 22; 9:1, 7) and "daughter Zion" (6:2, 23, 26) that is about to be attacked.⁸³ O'Connor observes that "Daughter Zion's gender heightens the unequal possession of resources among the opponents."⁸⁴ Rather than denigrating the female, the image of Zion as daughter/wife/mother portrays the city as "fragile and gentle," (6:2), something beautiful and precious.⁸⁵ Jeremiah's metaphoric imagery attempts to convey the pathos and tragedy of something so central to Judah's national identity and covenant with Yahweh falling into ruin because of human sin.

⁸² It is also important to recognize that this passage does not legitimize the practices of spousal abuse and/or atrocities against women in warfare. The passage is metaphor used for rhetorical impact, not a prescript for the treatment of women. Deuteronomic law limited Israel in its normal practice of warfare from acts of violence against non-combatants (Deut 20:13-15). In his judgment oracles against the nations surrounding Israel, the prophet Amos condemns the nations for their atrocities against each other (not just Israel) in battle, particularly their abuse of women (cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9-10, 13; 2:1). The prophets in general view Yahweh as the instigator and leader of the armies who attack Israel and Judah—Yahweh fights against his people using enemy armies (cf. Isa 10:5-6; Jer 4:5-6; 21:3-7). At the same time, the prophets hold these armies accountable for the manner in which they go beyond Yahweh's intent to punish through their excessive violence and cruelty (Isa 10:7; Jer 50:11-13; Hab 2:15-17; Obad 15-16). Isaiah 24:1-5 pictures the final judgment of the nations on the basis of the "everlasting covenant." If this covenant refers to the Noahic covenant and its prohibition against shedding blood (cf. Gen 9:5-6), then it appears that all nations will be judged by this standard and held accountable for their atrocities.

⁸³ Note other references to the "daughter(s)" in 4:31; 5:17; 7:31; 9:20; 11:22; 14:16, 17; 16:3; 19:9.

⁸⁴ O'Connor, "The Tears of God," 393.

⁸⁵ For the personification of Zion as female in both its OT and ANE context, see Mark E. Biddle, "The Figure of Lady Jerusalem: Identification, Deification and Personification of Cities in the Ancient Near East," in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspective: Scripture in Context IV*, Ancient Near Eastern Texts and Studies 11, ed. K. L. Younger, W. H. Hallo; and B. F. Batto (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellin Press, 1991), 173-94; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion: A Study of the City-Lament Genre in the Hebrew Bible*, BibOr 44 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1993); Julie Galambusch, *Jerusalem in the Book of Ezekiel: The City as Yahweh's Wife*, SBLDS 130 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992); J. Schmitt, "The Motherhood of God and Zion as Mother," RB 92 (1985): 557-69; "Psalm 87: Zion, The City of God's Love," in *Psalms and Other Studies on the Old Testament*, ed. J. C. Knight and L. A. Sinclair (Nashotah, Wisc.: Nashotah House Seminary, 1990), 34-44.

Along with the personification of Zion as female is the reality of how invasion and war will inflict female suffering. Women will mourn over the loss of their family members and the piling up of corpses (6:11, 26-27; 9:17-21; 15:8-9; 18:21). Women and daughters will die along with men and sons as the innocent collateral of warfare (7:20; 11:22; 14:16-17) and will be reduced with other survivors to the horrible practice of cannibalism (19:9). The prophet employs the image of pain in childbearing to describe the reality of the military defeat, exile, and death that awaits the people (cf. 4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23). Childbearing as an image for doom presents an arresting reversal in that the giving of life is associated with death. However, the prophet intends an even more significant reversal in the minds of his hearers and readers as he leads the men and leaders of the nation to identify themselves as helpless females. This idea is explicit in 30:6 where warriors in battle put their hands on their stomach as they go into labor. The prophet wants his audience to understand the futility of any political, military, or religious attempt to abate the coming judgment.

The judgment that Jeremiah warns of is especially terrifying because it involves the loss of the covenant blessings that are most centrally important to the normal experience of life—family, marriage, and childbearing (cf. Lev 26:9; Deut 28:4). The corruption of the marriage between Israel and Yahweh brings about the disruption of marriage at the human level. Marriages will no longer occur (7:34; 25:10, 16), and established families will be torn apart by war. Even as a prophet to this generation, Jeremiah must share in the interruption of the normal cycle of life. His own birth becomes a curse (15:10; 20:14-18), and Yahweh forbids him to marry or have children (16:2). The blessing of marriage and family is ironically reserved for those who are taken away to Babylon as exiles (29:6).

The shocking and repulsive sexual imagery in the book of Jeremiah must be understood in the context of equally graphic language and figures used throughout the book. Kozin, drawing upon the analysis of medieval literature by Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, categorizes much of the imagery in Jeremiah as “carnival” and “grotesque.”⁸⁶ These images employ the human body, clothing, food, drink and drunkenness, sex, death, and defecation in some rather startling ways. Human bodies are left unburied and lie on the battlefield like animal excrement (9:22; 16:4, 6). Those who experience Yahweh’s judgment are like drunks who stagger and vomit (25:16, 27). Israel has become like a ruined waistcloth that a man has worn and then buried in the ground (13:1-11). Those who remain in the land waiting for the final defeat of Judah are like rotten figs (24:1-8). The metaphor of the unfaithful wife in Jeremiah is thus not a value statement on the character of female versus male. Rather, this image, along with many others in the book, demonstrates both the wickedness of the people and the horrible fate that awaits them. Kozin notes that the most horrible image of all in Jeremiah is that of Death itself: “Death assumes truly grotesque proportions in the book of Jeremiah Death reigns supreme

⁸⁶ Sergey Kozin, “The Book of Jeremiah: A Bakhtinian Reading,” http://www.ocabs.org/cgi-bin/current_articles.pl?detail=15.

in Jerusalem and Judah: it flies into the windows, enters palaces, it cuts people both young and old off the streets (9:21).”⁸⁷

The Ongoing Dialogue Between Israel and Yahweh

The dialogue between Israel, Yahweh, and Jeremiah that begins in 2:1-4:4 carries over into the rest of the book. Yahweh will restore Israel so that they will move from their empty confession of covenant fidelity to the proper confession of past sin and true loyalty (envisioned in 3:22-25; 4:2), but to the very end of this book, Israel continues to say the wrong things and to either defy Yahweh or profess loyalty to Yahweh that is nothing more than empty words. Earlier studies have noted the importance of audience quotes in the book of Jeremiah but have not developed how these quotes are central to the “plot” or message of the book of Jeremiah as a whole. Through these quotations, the reader can almost visualize the entire book as a debate between Yahweh and his people with Jeremiah as the intermediary.

In Jeremiah 1-25, the prophet frequently offers quotations from the people and leaders of Israel/Judah reflecting their beliefs and/or responses to the prophetic word announced by Jeremiah. The quotations can be grouped into the following categories:

1. Assertions of false security—5:12 is typical—“The Lord will not do anything” (cf. 6:14; 7:4, 10; 8:8, 11; 14:13-15; 21:13; 22:14). All of the oracles of the false prophets in 23:17, 25, 31, 33-38 belong in this category.
2. Questions concerning why Yahweh is bringing judgment (5:19—“Why has the Lord done all of this to us?” is typical— cf. 8:19; 13:22; 16:10; 17:15). Yahweh in some cases immediately reminds the people that their idolatry and sinfulness are the causes of judgment (cf. 5:19; 13:22; 16:11-13)
3. Expressions of despair over their situation in light of God’s judgment (8:20 is typical—“The harvest has ended; the summer is past, and we are not saved;” cf. 8:14-15).
4. Statements of intent to persist in sinful behavior (18:12—“Each of us will follow the rebelliousness of his evil heart;” cf. 22:21).
5. Expressions of derision or intent to harm the prophet Jeremiah for proclaiming an unpopular message (11:19 is typical—“Let us cut him off from the land of the living” is typical; cf. 13:22; 11:21; 12:4; 18:18).
6. The speaking of “falsehood”(5:2—They swear “as surely as Yahweh lives...,” but they speak with “falsehood” (שָׁקֶר); cf. 6:28; 9:3, 4, 5, 8, where the people are accused of speaking שָׁקֶר without any reported speech.
7. Jeremiah also notes the proper things that Judah has failed to say (5:24—“Let us fear Yahweh” who provides agricultural bounty; cf. 8:6)

Fretheim comments that Israel’s speech in its opening dialogue with Yahweh in 2:1-4:4 is “confusing . . . , illusory, self-serving, and self-condemning,” and the problem is that this

⁸⁷ Ibid.

same type of speech characterizes the dialogue between Israel and Yahweh (and his prophet) throughout this book.⁸⁸ Jeremiah 2:1-4:4 anticipates a future time when Israel will say the right words that reflect a right relationship with Yahweh. They will confess the sinfulness that they have refused to acknowledge (3:22-25). It will not be a confession in word only because they will put away their idols and will swear truthfully in the name of Yahweh (4:1-2—“As surely as Yahweh lives”). The central section of hope found in the Book of Consolation (Jer 30-33) anticipates this same transformation of Israel’s speech. Israel will respond to Yahweh’s discipline by acknowledging even the sins of their youth (31:18-19), the time that the opening section of the book views as their time of greatest devotion (2:2). Yahweh was unresponsive to Israel when they called out for him to “save” (עשׂ) while giving their allegiance to other gods (2:27), but he will hear when the repentant remnant cries out “Save (עשׂ) your people” (31:7). Instead of prostituting themselves to other gods, the people will exhort one another “Let us go up to Zion to Yahweh our God” (31:6) and they will bring thank offerings to Yahweh as they make confession of his enduring נִחַם (33:11). These words of blessing and joy replace the past words of lament and mourning (cf. 4:31; 14:1; 30:5-7; 31:15-16). The people will no longer charge Yahweh with unfairness or claim that they were not responsible for the judgment that had befallen them (31:29). The fact that the people will no longer need to say to each other the words “Know Yahweh” (31:34) demonstrates that they will all truly know him in a way that has not characterized Israel’s past (cf. 5:4-5; 8:7; 9:24; 22:15-16).⁸⁹

While the “days to come” will bring a time when Israel’s speech and relationship to Yahweh is transformed, Jeremiah’s ministry occurs in a historical context in which the words of the people continue to reflect a rebellious posture toward Yahweh. Israel’s problem is that they continue to speak “falsehood” (8:5). Israel will be judged for the things that they say (5:14). Jeremiah 3:19-22 looks forward to Israel’s confession of sin when they return to Yahweh, but in 8:6, Yahweh laments that the people will not honestly ask, “What have we done?” Jeremiah 4:2 anticipates the time when Israel will use the oath “as surely as Yahweh lives” in an honest manner, and this oath will be used with reference to the deliverance from exile in the same way that it was used in the past with regard to Israel’s deliverance from Egypt (cf. 12:16; 16:14-15; 23:7). However, Jeremiah 5:2 condemns the Israel of Jeremiah’s day for continuing to swear falsely by “as surely as Yahweh lives.” King Zedekiah uses this oath in a promise to protect Jeremiah from harm (38:16), a rather flimsy promise in that Zedekiah himself is soon to be taken prisoner to Babylon. Israel’s words of outright defiance toward Yahweh reflected in 2:20, 25b, 31 resurface again in 18:12 when the people are presented with the need to change their ways through the sign act of Jeremiah’s first visit to the potter.

This defiance is reflected to varying degrees among the people that Jeremiah interacts with in the narrative portions of chapters 26-45. When Jeremiah announces the impending destruction of Jerusalem, the priests, prophets, and people say, “You must

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 443.

die” (26:8). False prophets like Hananiah counter Jeremiah’s message of judgment with their own words of hope and blessing (cf. 28:10-11). Most dramatically, defiance continues to characterize Judah’s speech even after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Johanan and the Judean refugees attempting to escape the grasp of Babylon after the assassination of Gedaliah flee to Egypt and kidnap Jeremiah in direct disobedience to the word of Yahweh (43:7), after giving an oath that they will do whatever the prophet instructs them to do (42:1-6; note especially v. 5). Just like the leaders of Judah before the fall of Jerusalem, they accuse Jeremiah of being a liar and traitor to his country (43:2-3; cf. 37:13; 38:4). In Egypt, the refugees remain defiant by openly stating that they will not “obey” (שמע) Yahweh and that they will instead continue their sacrifices and offerings to the Queen of Heaven (44:16-17). They will keep their oaths, not to Yahweh, but to the Queen of Heaven (44:17, 25). Jeremiah 4:2 looks forward to Israel swearing honest oaths in the name of Yahweh, but the narrative of Jeremiah’s ministry concludes with the people of Israel swearing false oaths in defiance of Yahweh. Announcing a punishment that fits the crime, Yahweh himself swears that these Jews in Egypt who have defied him will never again be able to swear an oath in his name (44:26).

In fact, the narrative of Jeremiah’s interaction with the Judean refugees in Egypt found in chapter 44 returns the reader full-circle to the dialogue introduced in Jeremiah 2-4. Yahweh has engaged in honest dialogue with Israel throughout the book, but in a sense the conversation has been a waste of time. Even after the experience of exile, Israel’s posture toward Yahweh has not changed. Jeremiah 3:22-25 looks forward to Israel acknowledging that it was their worship of Baal that took away their blessing and prosperity. In Jeremiah 44:17-20, the remnant in Egypt suggests the very opposite, arguing that it was when they ceased their offerings to the Queen of Heaven that disaster fell upon them. Jeremiah 4:2 promises the blessing of other nations when Israel is restored to Yahweh, but at the end of the story, Egypt and the Jews living there will both experience the wrath of Yahweh at the hand of the Babylonian army (43:8-13; 44:29-30). The book of Jeremiah opens with the call for Israel to “return” (שוב) to Yahweh, but the warning in chapter 44 is that only a tiny remnant of those Jews living in Egypt will ever “return” (שוב) to their homeland (44:14, 28). The indictment of Israel in Jeremiah 2 warns of a time when Israel will regret its reliance on Egypt and will cover their faces in shame (2:37). While the warning in chapter 2 relates to the exile that was coming, it also appropriately is a portent of what happens to Israel at the end of the book of Jeremiah as the people continue in their defiance of Yahweh even after the fall of Jerusalem.

The message of the book of Jeremiah is that the conditions of judgment and exile will persist until the people get their words (and hearts) right with Yahweh, thus leaving the question of when the fulfillment of restoration promised in chapters 30-33 will occur open-ended and unanswered. Israel’s true restoration will not simply take place when the 70 years of exile are over (cf. Jer 25:11-12; 29:10).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ For the concept of the “unended exile” in Jeremiah, see John Hill, “‘Your Exile Will Be Long’: The Book of Jeremiah and the Unended Exile” in *Reading Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence*: 149-61.

Hope for the Transformation of the Unfaithful Wife

Ehud Ben Zvi notes that the OT prophetic books are generally “variations on a tripartite structure” of punishment for Israel, punishment for the nations, and salvation for Israel (or Israel and the nations).⁹¹ Words of judgment ultimately give way to words of hope.⁹² It is remarkable that a book like Jeremiah focusing so heavily on covenantal breach and the devastating judgment of the Babylonian exile also contains such a strong emphasis on hope and restoration in the opening section of the book. However, Jeremiah’s mission as a prophet is “to uproot . . . and to plant” (1:5), and the duality of his message is evidenced even at the beginning of the book in the programmatic message of 2:1-4:4. The message of hope in Jeremiah is most prominent in the Book of Consolation, located in chapters 30-33 at the center of the book. There are a number of key parallels between the message of judgment and call to repentance in 2:1-4:4 and the poetic oracles of salvation in chapters 30-31. These parallels demonstrate that the transformation of Yahweh’s unfaithful wife is central to the theological message of Jeremiah.⁹³

The poetic oracles of salvation in Jeremiah 30-31 reflect a male-female alternation similar to what is found in 2:1-4:4 that invites comparison between these two sections of the book.⁹⁴ Many of the lexical and thematic connections between chapters 2-4 and 30-31 are no doubt simply the result of general themes and language related to the larger message of the book as a whole. However, the number of specific connections suggests a more specific rhetorical intent to directly link these two sections of the book. At the beginning of the book, Yahweh calls for his people to “return” (שׁוּב), but they are unwilling and unable. In the promissory section at the center of the book, Yahweh redemptively acts to bring this “return” (שׁוּב) about. The recurring promise that even frames the Book of Consolation is that Yahweh will “restore the fortunes” (שׁוּב שְׁבוּרָה) of his people (30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26). Israel’s broken relationship with Yahweh as both “wife” and “son” will be properly restored. Because of Yahweh’s grace

⁹¹ Ehud Ben Zvi, “The Prophetic Book: A Key Form of Prophetic Literature,” in *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. M. A. Sweeney and E. B. Zvi (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 285.

⁹² Even the book of Amos, which pictures the remnant of Israel as the ear or legs of a sheep torn from the mouth of a lion (Amos 3:12), concludes with a word of hope concerning the rebuilding of the house of David and Israel’s future prosperity (Amos 9:11-15).

⁹³ This same motif is also central to the book of Isaiah. Because of divine grace, the unfaithful harlot (1:21) will become a pure and holy bride (62:4). Yahweh will take back Daughter Zion, the wife he sent away with a certificate of divorce, and the barren city will be so filled with inhabitants that her walls will not contain them (49:14-18; 50:1; 54:1-8; 62:5; 66:6-11).

⁹⁴ See Barbara A. Bozak, “*Life Anew*”: *A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30-31* (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991), 20. Bozak provides the structure reflected in 30-31 by this male-female alternation: 30:1-4—prose introduction; 30:5-11—male audience; 30:12-17—female audience; 30:18-31:1—male audience; 31:2-6—female audience; 31:7-14—male audience; 31:15-22—female—male—female audience; 31:32-40—prose conclusions.

and covenant fidelity, Israel will become the son that Yahweh has always wanted, and the unfaithful wife will once again become “Virgin Israel.”

The covenantal restoration in Jeremiah 30-31 repairs the covenantal dissolution in chapters 2-4. Despite Israel’s infidelity and lack of lasting רָחֵם toward Yahweh, Yahweh has remained faithful to his covenantal commitments and will act in the future on Israel’s behalf on the basis of these commitments. In the promissory passages at the beginning of the book in 3:14-18 and 4:1-4, there appears to be particular emphasis on the Abrahamic covenant. In 3:14-18, Yahweh promises to greatly increase Israel’s numbers when they return to the land promised to their fathers. Additionally, the nations will join the people of Israel in worshipping Yahweh at Jerusalem. Thus, Israel’s hope for the future is the realization of the trifold blessing of the Abrahamic covenant—descendants, land, and blessing to all peoples.⁹⁵ The call to “circumcise the heart” in 4:4 recalls the physical sign of the covenant between Yahweh and Abraham (cf. Gen 17:10-14).

Covenantal restoration is the dominant theme in chapters 30-33. Following the undoing of Israel’s covenantal history in the Babylonian exile, Yahweh will perform a second exodus even greater than the first (cf. 31:2-6) and will establish a “new covenant” that forgives the sins of the past and ensures Israel’s future fidelity (31:31-34; 32:38-41). The foundation for this hope of restoration is Yahweh perpetual love and רָחֵם toward Israel (31:3), and Yahweh’s commitment to Israel is as permanent as the established order of creation itself (cf. 31:35-37; 33:23-26). The covenantal formulary that Yahweh will be Israel’s God and Israel his people will be realized as Israel lives in right relationship with Yahweh (cf. 30:22; 31:1, 33; 32:38). The promises throughout chapters 30-33 that Yahweh will increase Israel’s numbers and allow them to live securely in the land are related to the Abrahamic blessings (cf. 30:18-20; 31:5-6, 10-14, 23-29, 38-40; 32:15, 37-41; 33:6-9, 10-13), and there is a special emphasis in these chapters on the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to David (cf. 30:8-9, 21; 33:14-26). This emphasis on the Davidic covenant is likely due to the focus on the historical failure of the house of David and the removal of the Davidic rulers from the throne of Judah in what precedes and follows this section (cf. chs. 22, 26-27; 34-39).

A closer examination of the individual oracles in 30-31 reveals more direct connections to the language and imagery found in 2:1-4:4. In 30:5-11, Yahweh promises to “break

⁹⁵ Fretheim (*Jeremiah*, 88) observes the specific connection between the inclusion of the nations and the language of the Abrahamic promises (cf. Gen 12:3; 22:8; 26:4; Ps 47:9; 72:17). Christopher J. H. Wright (*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*, [Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP, 2006], 241) notes this same connection when commenting on Jer 4:2: “The Abrahamic echo in the final two lines is very clear, but the logic of the whole sentence is remarkable. God’s mission to the nations is being hindered because of Israel’s continuing spiritual and ethical failure. Let Israel return to their mission (to be the people of YHWH, worshipping him exclusively and living according to his moral demands), and God can return to his mission—blessing the nations.” Wright calls attention to similar ideas in Jer 12:14-17, where the nations and Israel are both offered “the hope of restoration and establishment” (p. 351). The condition placed upon the nations for this restoration is the same one placed upon Israel—repentance and true worship of Yahweh.

the yoke” (שבר + על) and “tear off the bonds” (מוסרה + נתך) of Israel’s servitude to the nations (30:8), directly reversing Israel’s defiant “breaking of the yoke” and “tearing off of the bonds” of loyalty to Yahweh in 2:20. Israel has made itself a “slave” (עבד) to the nations (2:14), but Yahweh promises that they will no longer be “enslaved” (עבד) by foreigners. Instead, the people will once again become his “servants” (note verbal and nominal forms of עבד in 30:9-10). Yahweh will “save” (Hiphil of ישע of in 30:10-11), the very thing he refused to do when Israel gave its allegiance to other gods (note Hiphil of ישע in 2:27).

The oracle in 30:12-17 also promises a reversal of Israel’s subjugation to the nations that recalls Jeremiah 2 in particular. The statement that Israel has been disappointed by her foreign allies (lit. “lovers,”) is in line with the warnings in chapter 2 that Israel would receive no benefit from “drinking the waters” (figurative for love-making) of Egypt and Assyria (2:16-18, 36-37). Yahweh has done what he warned of in “striking” Israel and inflicting “discipline” upon his people (note verb נכה and noun מוסר in 30:14 and 2:30). Israel’s punishment has fit the crime because she has suffered the effects of turning to a covenant partner that is as unfaithful as she has been toward Yahweh. Her lover nations have “forgotten” (שכח) her (30:14) in the same way that she has “forgotten” (שכח) Yahweh (2:32; 3:21). When Israel was faithful to Yahweh, he “devoured” (אכל) any nation that dared to touch his “first fruit” people (2:3), but Israel’s defection has caused her instead to be “devoured” (אכל) (2:30; 3:24). Yahweh promises that he will once again “devour” (אכל) Israel’s enemies (30:16), and that the nations, rather than Israel, will become “plunder” (בוז) (contrast 2:14 and 30:16).

The promise of Israel’s restoration because of Yahweh’s abiding love and fidelity to Israel in 31:2-6 appears to directly recall the indictment of Israel’s fickleness and covenant infidelity in the prophet’s opening words of chapter 2. Israel will become the beneficiary of Yahweh’s grace in the “desert” (מדבר), the very place where she had once been loyal to Yahweh (cf. 31:2 and 2:2). Israel’s “love” for Yahweh quickly faded (2:2), but Yahweh has “loved” (אהב) Israel with an אהבת עולם (31:2). Yahweh’s חסד is of a different quality than the חסד of Israel’s youth. Israel will “find” (מצא) Yahweh’s grace even though they have lived in the past as if they have “found” (מצא) Yahweh to be an unfaithful partner (2:5). Yahweh’s abiding commitment to his covenant promises will transform his unfaithful wife into “Virgin Israel” (31:4) and will once again enable Israel to enjoy the benefits of the fertile land that had become a barren wasteland because of the defilement of Israel’s sin (contrast 31:4-6 with 2:7, 15).

Less directly, the oracle in 31:7-14 continues the theme of Israel’s restoration as the reversal of the conditions of judgment set forth in the opening oracles of the book. As in the previous oracle, there is an emphasis on the agricultural bounty that Israel will enjoy when they are restored to the promised land (31:12-14). Israel had not been loyal despite the fact that Yahweh had “brought” (Hiphil of בוא) them from the “land” (ארץ) of Egypt (2:7), but he will once again “bring” (Hiphil of בוא) them from the “land”

(אֲרִי) of the north (31:8).⁹⁶ In Jeremiah 2, Israel suffers from a shortage of water because they have trusted in “broken cisterns” and drank the “waters” (מֵיִם) of Egypt and Assyria (2:13, 18), but Israel will enjoy abundant “water” (מֵיִם) for themselves on their return home (31:9) and for their crops when they are back in the land (31:12). The people who have been parched in their pursuit of fertility gods (2:25) will be satiated because of Yahweh’s provision (31:14). The relationship of father and son that Yahweh desired with Israel (cf. 3:19) will be restored (31:9)

Jeremiah 31:15-22 breaks down into three stanzas focusing on Rachel (vv. 15-17), Ephraim (vv. 18-20), and “Virgin Israel” (vv. 21-22). Bozak notes, “The three stanzas are linked by the common theme of change of heart and fortunes.”⁹⁷ The oracle connects back to Jeremiah 2-4 because of its repetition of שׁוּב and its emphasis on the restoration of Israel to Yahweh as both wife and son. The passage begins with Rachel (Israel) grieving over the loss of her children, but there is the promise that the children will “return” (שׁוּב) from the land of the enemy and to their homeland (31:16-17). The image then shifts to Ephraim (Israel) as the repentant son. Ephraim expresses the confession of wrongdoing and remorse for sin that is anticipated in 3:19-21. Israel as Yahweh’s son has been unresponsive to his “discipline” (מוֹסֵר) in the past (2:30), but is now willing to admit that he has “received correction” (verbal root סָר appears twice in 31:18). The “unruly calf” in v. 18 could be viewed as the male counterpart to the uncontrollable she-camel and wild donkey in 2:23-24. שׁוּב is prominent in Ephraim’s confession—he prays for Yahweh to “restore” (Hiphil of שׁוּב) so that he might “return” (v. 18) and he characterizes his defection as a “turning” from Yahweh (v. 19). In the past, “the voice of weeping has been heard” (בְּכָה + נִשְׁמַע + קוֹל) as Israel cries out to her pagan gods (3:21) and the “voice of weeping has been heard” (בְּכָה + נִשְׁמַע + קוֹל) as Rachel mourned over her disastrous judgment (31:15). Now, Israel is finally weeping over her sins. In making this confession, Ephraim has come to recognize the “shame” (בוֹשׁ) of his past actions (cf. the root בוֹשׁ in 2:26, 36; 3:24-25). Because of this confession, Yahweh will have compassion on Ephraim and restore his “son” (3:20). In contrast to how Israel “forgot” him in chapter 2, Yahweh avows that he will “remember” his son (3:21).

The call for “Virgin Israel” to “return” in 31:21-22 joins the image of male and female, as in 2:1-4:4, in order to highlight the completeness of the restoration of Israel’s restoration. The twofold command to “return” in verse 21 focuses on Israel’s return to the land from exile, but this “return” can only occur when Israel ceases to be a “faithless daughter” (v. 22). This adjective “faithless” (שׁוֹבְבָה) with reference to Israel parallels the use of the same adjective to describe Israel as “faithless” sons in 3:14, 22 and the noun מְשׁוֹבְבָה (“turning back/apostasy”) with reference to Israel in 3:12.⁹⁸ This transformation

⁹⁶ Cf. 3:14 where Yahweh promises to “bring” (Hiphil of בִּיאַ) his people to Zion. 31:8 also provides an interesting contrast to 4:6 where Yahweh warns that he is about to “bring” disaster from the “north.”

⁹⁷ Bozak, “Life Anew,” 24.

⁹⁸ And note the use of the synonymous root בָּגַד (“treacherous”) with reference to Israel and/or Judah in 3:8, 11, 20

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

Yahweh’s promise to establish a new covenant with Israel in 31:29-37 provides the climax to the portrayal of Israel’s future restoration in Jeremiah 30-31, and this passage clearly reflects a reversal of the warnings of covenant dissolution in chapters 2-4. In this new covenant, Yahweh will restore the two unfaithful sisters, Israel and Judah, as one people (cf. 3:6-11; 31:31). The relationship between Yahweh and Israel will not be like the failed marriage of the past when Yahweh brought his people out of Egypt (cf. 2:6; 31:32) and Israel had reciprocated by worshipping “Baal” (בעל) rather than acknowledging Yahweh as her “husband” (בעל) (cf. 2:8, 23; 31:32). Israel had become a “wild vine” when Yahweh had “planted” (נטע) her in the land, but Yahweh will “plant” (נטע) his people in the land once again (cf. 2:21; 31:33). Yahweh will write his law on the hearts of his people, thus bringing about the “return” and the circumcision of the heart that Yahweh had commanded of Israel but that Israel had refused to carry out (cf. 4:4; 31:33). The “sin” (חטא) and “iniquity” (עון) of the past that has fractured the relationship between Yahweh and Israel will be forgiven and forgotten (cf. 2:22, 25; 3:13; 31:34).

The picture of Israel as a woman restored to her husband and children in Jeremiah 30-33 provides reversal and resolution for what is found at the beginning of the book. The image of ישראל בחולת dancing for joy in 31:4 sharply contrasts to the images of women weeping and mourning found elsewhere in the book. As with Jeremiah’s message of judgment, female imagery suggests associations with marriage and family. Yahweh will act to restore the blessings of family, marriage, and childbearing. Pregnant women will join the exiles returning to the land (31:8-9), and marriage celebrations will occur throughout the land (33:11). The families of David and Levi, representative of the people of Israel at large, will become as numerous “as the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore” (33:22). Brenner views the promises related to Israel as the wife rather negatively and argues that they “constitute an additional transference of male concern about legitimate, properly allocated gender roles to religious discourse.”⁹⁹ Like a good mother, Rachel is concerned primarily with her sons, and a “Virgin Israel” “is a better spouse for a male than a tainted wife.”¹⁰⁰ Bozak, on the other hand, assesses the imagery much more positively:

The portrayal of Israel according to feminine categories is an effective means of alluding to the desired relationship with Yhwh. Israel is not a ‘possession’ of Yhwh any more than a woman is the property of her father or her husband. There is obvious dependence on the male yet this dependence is not absolute. Love and

⁹⁹ Brenner, “On Prophetic Propaganda,” 98.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

intimacy determine the husband's deeds for his wife while at the same time she acts with responsibility and even a certain autonomy.¹⁰¹

A biblically informed view of family and marriage as a covenant blessing would certainly favor this latter reading of the text and its imagery. The willingness of the prophet to portray the future as the time when "a woman shall encompass a man" (31:22) hardly seems to reflect a concern to keep the woman in her proper place. Rather, the prophet anticipates a future in which the transformation of the marriage between Yahweh and Israel will result in blessing and transformation for marriage and all other human relationships as well.

¹⁰¹ Bozak, *Life 'Anew,'* 164.