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Playing favourites: Israel and Judah in the marriage metaphor of Jeremiah 3

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Abstract

The depiction of YHWH's marriage to Rebellious Israel and Treacherous Judah in Jeremiah 3 has resisted interpretation in terms that cohere with the text's surroundings or our wider historical and theological understanding of the entities named by the text. Though commentators consistently identify the sisters as the northern and southern kingdoms, they are obliged to engage in interpretive gymnastics to explain the text's preference for Israel, the northern kingdom. This article examines recent interpretations and their underlying assumptions, then reviews immediate and wider evidence for the entities called Israel and Judah, en route to a new proposal for their identification and significance in this passage. It proposes that the apparent incoherence of the allegory and its relationship with the surrounding material may be resolved by the recognition that Israel is meant to signify the community exiled to Babylonia, while Judah represents those left behind in the land.

Keywords

Exilic theology, Israel, Jeremiah, Judah, marriage metaphor, pro-*golah* theology

The allegory of the two sisters in Jeremiah 3 has attracted more than its share of scholarly attention. This is in part because the passage, along with a number of other prophetic texts, makes use of evocative but often theologically problematic sexual and marriage metaphors in order to articulate the relationship between YHWH and his people. These have been the focus of particular study in recent years.[1] Yet, while all of these passages

1. Recent analyses of the passage in the context of the prophets' use of sexual and marital metaphors include Abma 1999; Baumann 2004; Macwilliam 2011; Moughtin-Mumby 2008; Shields 2004. It has been well and recently examined in these terms, which will not form the focus of attention here.

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pose a certain theological challenge for modern interpreters, peculiar to the instantiation of the metaphor in Jeremiah 3 has been its resistance to interpretation, in any terms that cohere with the text's immediate surroundings or our wider historical and theological understanding of the entities named by the text.

The immediate issue concerns the identification of YHWH's two sister wives, whom the text calls 'Rebellious Israel' and 'Traitorous Judah'. At first glance, the identity of Israel and Judah is uncontroversial: they are inevitably identified by commentators as representations of the northern (Samarian) and southern (Jerusalemite) kingdoms.[2] Yet, though these identifications are almost never disputed, the uneasiness of the interpretation thus produced is apparent in the interpretive gymnastics demanded of commentators in subsequent discussion, as they attempt to balance the text's consequent preference for the northern kingdom ('Israel') with the expectation that YHWH's ultimate favour must rest with the southern kingdom ('Judah'). Many commentators, in despair, have concluded that the editor who inserted vv. 6-11 into the chapter must have misunderstood the meaning of the existing material and, in his ineptitude, produced an incomprehensible muddle of a text.[3] Amongst those who attempt to make sense of it nevertheless, the awkwardness of interpretations offered strongly suggests that the conundrum of Jeremiah 3 has yet to be satisfactorily resolved.

The following will offer a revised interpretation of the identities of Israel and Judah and thereby of the passage, with the aim of producing a more coherent and comprehensible text. It will first examine recent interpretations of the passage and their underlying assumptions, then review the immediate and wider evidence for the entities called Israel and Judah, en route to a new proposal for their identification and significance in this passage.

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Undoubtedly, the most significant dilemma produced by the identification of Rebellious Israel as the northern kingdom and Traitorous Judah as the southern kingdom concerns the passage's consequent preference for the northern kingdom. This is apparent both implicitly (v. 10) and explicitly (v. 11). Judah is condemned and the opportunity

2. This is often done with reference to Ezekiel 16 and 23, in which a trio and a duo of sisters, respectively, are condemned for their wayward behavior. Although these extended allegories make liberal use of a similar root metaphor, the usefulness of the cross-reference for the correct interpretation of Jeremiah 3 is hindered by the fact that neither of the passages in Ezekiel refers to Israel or Judah. Rather, three different kingdoms are identified by their capitals: Samaria, Jerusalem and—in the case of Ezekiel 16—Sodom. This latter is particularly noteworthy, insofar as it suggests that the 'sisters' variant of the metaphor was not limited to discussions of the Samarian and Jerusalemite kingdoms; it thus warns against any easy assumption that this form of the metaphor must necessarily refer to the northern and southern kingdoms.
3. Biddle 1990: 95; Carroll 1986: 145; Holladay 1986: 81, 116; McKane 1986: 68-69; cf. Moughtin-Mumby 2008: 108, who declares the marriage metaphor so badly handled in vv. 6-11 as to be effectively dead. That the passage is very probably a late addition to the chapter will not be disputed in the following, though its relationship to its immediate and wider contexts will be reconsidered. For a brief review of the reasons to suspect the verses' origins, see Shields 2004: 81-82 n. 35.

for repentance/return[4] offered to Israel alone.[5] Though not 'sent away' like her sister (v. 8), Judah is unambiguously denounced. She saw[6] Israel's punishment but did not fear (vv. 7-8), imitating Israel's bad behaviour in her own infidelity (vv. 8-9) and failing to return to YHWH save but in lies (v. 10). The result of this appalling behaviour is that Israel is declared more righteous than Judah (v. 11) and the summons to repent/return is issued not to Judah, but to Israel (v. 12).[7] Although vv. 14-17 speak of a return to Zion and the replacement of the ark of the covenant with YHWH's own presence in Jerusalem, no further mention is made of Judah until v. 18. Indeed, following Duhm, vv. 14-17, 18 are widely identified as a subsequent editorial attempt(s) to gloss over the awkward omission of Judah in the preceding allegory (and, indeed, most of the surrounding chapters).[8]

This attention to Israel contradicts the expectations of interpreters, who find it difficult to imagine that the text intended to exclude the southern kingdom from its message of potential (and eventual) restoration. Abma is typical in declaring, 'the parable must be interpreted as containing a message for Judah, since Judah is the audience implied by the text as a whole' (1999: 250). That is, because the wider section of which the allegory is a part—usually identified as Jer. 2.1-4.2, though often extended to include Jer. 4.3-4—is addressed to Jerusalem (Jer. 2.2; cf. 4.3-4), mentions Judah in the allegory (cf. Jer. 2.28),[9] speaks of return to Zion (Jer. 3.14) and Jerusalem (Jer. 3.17), and is ulti-

4. The root שוב is a recurring motif throughout much of Jeremiah 2–3. It appears in the title allotted to Israel, משבה ('Rebellious,' 'Apostate,' 'Faithless,' Jer. 3.6, 8, 11, 12, 22), as well as in various verbal forms ('turn,' 'return,' 'turn back,' 'repent,' Jer. 2.24, 35; 3.1, 7, 10, 12, 13, 19, 22; 4.1). Its multivalence is key to its rhetorical usefulness; because it signifies both 'turning' and 'returning' and may be used to denote both physical turning/returning and metaphorical turning/returning, it is able to elide theological ideas about turning away from and returning to YHWH (themselves underlain with a degree of physical significance, as they evoke the physicality of worship) with more concrete summons to return to a particular place (itself often implicitly or explicitly contingent on repentance). Though commentators frequently attempt to distinguish between various connotations in the root's individual appearances, this is surely overly dogmatic; the root's effectiveness is precisely its ability to evoke multiple shades of meaning. The fullest examination of the root remains Holladay 1958.
5. The precise point at which the allegory begun in v. 6 concludes and its relationship to what follows is not agreed. Although the *petuḥah* after v. 10 marks a pause, the continuation of the titular Rebellious Israel/Traitorous Judah in v. 11 has led most commentators to read v. 11 as part of the same section; Shields 2004: 86 remarks that v. 11 'steps out of the frame of the metaphor to deliver the punch line.' Although vv. 12-13(14) are often separated as poetry, v. 12 likewise continues the allegorical conceit in its summons to Rebellious Israel. For immediate purposes the division matters relatively little, insofar as the text's preference for Israel is explicit already from v. 10 and is not decisively modified until v. 18.
6. Following *qere* and versions; see McKane 1986: 64-65.
7. Verse 13, in whole or in part, is often seen as an expansion of the summons of v. 12; see Thiel 1973: 86-87.
8. Biddle 1990: 97-102; Carroll 1986: 149-151; Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 59-60; Fischer 2005: 196; Holladay 1986: 64-65; Lundbom 1999: 213; Schmidt 2008: 111; Thiel 1973: 85, 91-93 (who goes so far as to claim that vv. 14-17 neutralize the positive attitude toward Israel); cf. Shields 2004: 101.
9. Note that Jer. 2.28 is problematic; LXX and MT vary substantially and the verse is nearly duplicated in Jer. 11.13, suggesting that its appearance here may be an interpolation. See

mately incorporated in a book which speaks to the population of the southern kingdom and their descendants, it is inconceivable that the intention of the allegory was to favour the northern kingdom to the exclusion of the southern. Indeed, a preference for the northern kingdom over the southern one would be theologically radical. Although some biblical texts seem to suggest that some of the inhabitants of the former northern kingdom might join together with those of the south in the worship of YHWH in Jerusalem, nowhere is this presented as the complete usurpation by the northern population of the southern population's place in YHWH's favour.

Most commentators, therefore—if they do not blame the situation on a confused editor[10]—contend that the hope which appears from v. 12 onward is intended for Judah as well as for Israel, although nothing in the text requires such an interpretation and its success relies heavily on Judah's explicit appearance in v. 18 and on the assumption of its implicit appearance in vv. 14-17.[11] Thus, O'Connor suggests that the invitation to Israel to return (v. 12) must be a hypothetical offer, a rhetorical device designed to emphasize the Israelites' lack of response and thus to enable the turn towards the next generation in vv. 14-18, where the true recipients of the promise are identified as Judah (2001: 491). Shields argues that the temporary disappearance of Judah is designed to startle a Judahite audience and attract its attention, as the text 'leaves Judah's fate hanging in the balance' for a long several verses before it is finally resolved by Jer. 4.3-4 (2004: 93). Others rely on the non-mention of Judah's divorce to claim that its future remains open, despite its bad behaviour,[12] or simply declare that both Israel and Judah are included in the promises of vv. 12-18, even though v. 12 refers to Israel alone and Judah appears only in v. 18.[13]

Biddle 1990: 153; Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard 1991: 36; Duhm 1901: 29; Holladay 1986: 54. Even Lundbom 1999: 286-87, whose chiastic analysis produces a text amongst the most inclusive of any commentator, is obliged to admit that Jer. 2.27c-28 sits outside any chiasm he can identify. Most commentators also tend to assume that Judah and Israel are effectively interchangeable (whatever they think about Jeremiah's early ministry to the former northern kingdom, on which see below); thus, e.g., Carroll 1986: 135; McKane 1986: 71. Although Israel and Judah do eventually come to be equated (thus Jer. 3.18, cf. 5.11; 11.10, 17; 31.27, 31 [LXX 38.27, 31]; 33.14), eliding them hinders rather than helps the interpretation of the passage.

10. That is, an editor who mistook the Israel of the earlier material for the northern kingdom, concocted the allegory in order to explain why Jeremiah had been proclaiming salvation to it rather than to Judah, and created the present and equally problematic rejection of Judah in the process. Blaming an incompetent editor who misunderstood the text before him thus resolves one problem, but creates another.
11. The latter is based, though rarely explicitly, on the assumption that any addressee promised a return to Zion/Jerusalem should be identified as 'Judah.' In fact, this is by no means the case; to this we will return below.
12. Baumann 2004: 114; cf. Abma 1999: 250; Lundbom 1999: 307. The construction of the declaration that Israel is 'more righteous' (צדקה נפשה משבה ישראל מבגדה יהודה, v. 11), however, suggests that it is not a relative statement but an absolute one; that is, Israel is righteous and Judah is not. Similar comparative constructions with צדקה מן occur in Gen. 38.26; 1 Sam. 24.18; here נפשה further emphasises the contrast (Fischer 2005: 191).
13. Abma 1999: 251; cf. Thiel 1973: 85, 90 ('Gerade im Lichte der Katastrophe Judas mußte der Heilsspruch an Nordisrael zum thematischen Durchreflektieren sub specie Iudae

All of these efforts struggle against the explicit and persistent preference for Israel shown by the text itself (vv. 10-12). Although the final appendix of v. 18 has the canonical effect of including Judah alongside Israel—despite its condemnation in v. 10 and omission from the rest of the text—it does very little to explain the earlier and overt preference for Israel alone.[14] Indeed, while Shields' declaration that 'the fate of the former Northern Kingdom is being set up as a negative example to the Southern for the purpose of showing Judah that its current behaviour is leading to the same historical conclusion' (2004: 83 n. 40) reflects a widely held understanding of the purpose of the allegory, the conclusion put forward by the text itself—that Israel is more righteous than Judah—works against such an interpretation. If the point of the allegory were to present the northern kingdom as an example to the southern kingdom, the parable ought to conclude with an open-ended invitation to the southern kingdom to respond in light of the lesson offered therein (even if it has previously failed to take advantage of a similar, implied offer, per v. 10). What the allegory notably does not do, however, is extend any invitation to Judah to repent/return. Rather, it makes its offer to Israel (v. 12), after explicitly denying Judah's merits (v. 11). However, guilty in her own right, Israel is unambiguously the allegory's favoured sister.

Amongst other things, this very strongly suggests that the audience to whom this material is addressed should be identified as an entity going by the name Israel, who are herein reassured that salvation belongs to it alone. This, however, raises an equally baffling question, namely, the identification of an entity by this name within the literary-historical frame of a late 7th- to early 6th-century prophet. The northern kingdom, as widely admitted, was already a century gone, its territory provincialized and its population deported. Prophetic proclamation to—let alone a preference for—this disappeared northern kingdom and its dispersed inhabitants presses the bounds of plausibility and thus the limits of rhetorical persuasiveness.[15] With this awkwardness in mind, most commentators are obliged to conclude that the Israel in question—if its appearance is not

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veranlassen'); also Lundbom 1999: 213-313, whose elision of multiple historical entities is especially noteworthy in his declaration that v. 14 was 'intended, most likely, for Jews exiled to Assyria.' McKane 1986: 72 contends that Israel in v. 12 should be understood over the top of vv. 6-11, as an answer to the question posed by v. 5; 'Judah, the harlot, whose divorce appears to be irrevocable, is, nevertheless, invited to repent and return to her husband.' Whilst his belief that the offer of repentance should be seen as an offer to the southern kingdom is sound (see below), neither passage refers to this entity as Judah; vv. 1-5 names no names, whilst v. 12 refers to Israel. The analysis thus does little to resolve the issues of vv. 6-11 or their relationship to the following verses.

14. Fischer 2005: 196: 'Die gemeinsame Rückkehr von Judah mit Israel klingt nach v 6-11 versöhnlich. Es ist, als ob beide Gruppierungen sowohl von ihrer Gottesferne also auch von ihrer wechselseitigen Rivalität geheilt werden.'

15. This is at least as much of a problem at any later stage of the book's development. Shields 2004: 79, 86-87 offers the most convincing defense of the rhetorical viability of an appeal to the fate of the northern kingdom, arguing that the allegorical conceit allows a temporal collapse and thereby enables a comparison across two centuries which would not be otherwise obvious. Shields' contention that the purpose of the allegory is to present a comparative warning to the southern kingdom, however, stumbles in the face of the text's explicit rejection of Judah.

merely rhetorical—is some remnant of the population yet living in the region of the former northern kingdom.[16] Thus, Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard conclude that the focus on Israel suggests 'a prophetic oracle explicitly addressed to the north, not Judah, in the first instance' and that 'one may suppose that a part of Jeremiah's ministry was exercised in the territory that formerly belonged to the northern state, but came under the control of Judah in Josiah's time'.[17] The text's apparent preference for the northern kingdom is thus caught up in long-standing debates over whether an historical Jeremiah included as part of his early prophetic activities a period of proclamation to the (former) northern kingdom and/or its remaining inhabitants.[18] If so, the preference for Israel in Jeremiah 3, like the propensity of the surrounding poetry to refer to its audience as Israel (Jer. 2.3, 4, 14, 26, 31; 3.20, 21, 23; 4.1), might be understood as a remnant of the earlier purpose of this material as a prophetic proclamation to the population of the former northern kingdom. This material was later reapplied, albeit awkwardly, to the southern kingdom.

This interpretation—of both the allegory of Jeremiah 3 and the wider material in which it appears as directed to the northern kingdom, at least initially—is in turn entangled in debates about the relationship of Jeremiah to Josiah, with a tendency to identify Josiah's expansionist excursions as the occasion for Jeremiah's proclamations to a northern population and with some suggesting that the false, half-hearted return of Judah in v. 10 should be seen as a reference to Josiah's (failed) reforms. Thus, for example, Henderson declares that '[b]y the time of Josiah (3.6), the southern nation of Judah had proved more faithless than her northern sister (3.11), and Yahweh sent Jeremiah to call his divorced wife Israel and her children to return (3.12-14)' (2007: 150). Similarly, Holladay concludes that 'the word echoes the dream of Josiah for a reunion of the north and the south in loyalty to Jerusalem'.[19] Underlying such proposals is the claim made by Jer. 1.2-3 that Jeremiah was active in the reign of Josiah, together with the prevalence of deuteronomistic language and theology in some parts of the book, which is deemed reflective of the prophet's engagement with Josiah's deuteronom(ist)ic reforms.

The keenness with which scholars have sought material which might be located in Josiah's reign, or thought to comment on his reforms, is rooted in the acknowledged difficulty of Jer. 1.2-3, namely, that nothing else in the book suggests such a context.[20] Indeed, the book's silence on the subject is remarkable. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, there has been an increased scepticism regarding the plausibility—or necessity—of

16. Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 57 (though cf. p. 27); Henderson 2007: 143; Holladay 1986: 62-63, 68, 119-120; Lundbom 1999: 258, 310; Schmidt 2008: 109; those who dismiss the awkwardness of apparently northern addressees as essentially rhetorical include Carroll 1986: 145 and O'Connor 2001: 491-492.
17. Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 57; cf. Holladay 1986: 118-119; Thiel 1973: 87.
18. The rationale for this is sometimes linked to the prophet's apparent origins in Anathoth (Jer. 1.1; cf. 11.21, 23; 32.7-9), in the region of Benjamin, whose northern or southern affiliation appears to have been somewhat fluid for much of the Iron Age.
19. Holladay 1986: 118, similarly 120; cf. Carroll 1986: 146; Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 57; Lundbom 1999: 254, 258; Schreiner 1981: 27; Thiel 1973: 91. See McKane 1986: 66 for a review of the idea's origins.
20. The date formula in Jer. 3.6—the only such formula in Jeremiah 2–20—is the sole exception and is widely considered erroneous. For a brief review of points of contention concerning the association between Jeremiah and Josiah, see Perdue 1984: 2-6.

positing a close relationship between Josiah's expansionist ambitions and Jeremiah's early prophetic career. Both the existence and the specifically deuteronomistic character of Josiah's activities have also been called into question by recent investigations into the theological and ideological purposes of the account in 2 Kings 22-23.[21] The idea that Jeremiah's oracles to Israel arose from such a context is therefore a shaky foundation for the exegesis of the present text.

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The fundamental premise of all of these interpretations is that the Israel of which much of the book's poetry speaks is most naturally read as a reference to the northern kingdom and that any interpretation which wishes to deviate from this default setting requires special pleading.[22] Indeed, the long-standing historical and theological challenge posed by Jeremiah's apparent interest in the northern kingdom—as understood from his use of the name Israel to refer to his audience—is based on the assumption that the most natural way to understand any reference to Israel is as a reference to the northern kingdom. Given Jeremiah's literary-historical location in the late 7th and early 6th centuries, long after the demise of such a kingdom, this is the root cause of the wide-ranging and often ingenious appeals—from a prophetic enthusiasm for (or opportunistic exploitation of) Josiah's expansionist programme to the prophet's personal connection to Anathoth—designed to explain such an outré obsession. Closer examination suggests that the premise itself is faulty.

First, it is apparent that the book otherwise expresses very little interest in Judah's northern neighbour, once the assumption that references to Israel signify such an interest is set aside. Indeed, apart from an antiquarian note in Jer. 41.9 concerning the origins of a cistern in Mizpah, there is nothing in the book to suggest an interest in the political

21. Most recently see Monroe 2011; cf. Lowery 1991; Stavrakopoulou 2004.

22. In the immediate context, an originally northern audience is often further adduced from the directional instructions in v. 12: 'Go and proclaim these words to the north.' This is an easy elision, especially for scholars accustomed to employing 'the northern kingdom' as a circumlocution designed to avoid the ambiguity inherent in calling the kingdom latterly centered on Samaria by the name 'Israel.' However, in the book of Jeremiah the term otherwise refers to the place from which the Babylonian devastation will come (Jer. 1.13-15; 4.6; 6.1, 22; 10.22; 13.20; 15.12; 25.9; cf. 46.6, 10, 20, 24 [LXX 26.6, 10, 20, 24]; 47.2 [29.2]) and thus the location to which the population is deported and the place from which they or their descendants will return (Jer. 16.15; 23.8; 31.8 [38.8]). It is not used as a shorthand way of referring to the northern kingdom. With this understood, the instructions in v. 12 cannot be read as evidence for the location of Israel in the northern kingdom. Rather, the most natural interpretation of the phrase is as an instruction to speak words of return to an Israel which has been deported. Although the possibility exists that the northerly—that is, Mesopotamian—destination of these deportees might be Assyrian (or, more precisely, the locales to which the inhabitants of the northern kingdom were deported by the Assyrians), this would be exceptional within the book, in which the north is otherwise always used as shorthand for Babylonia. The sole exception to this rule is in the oracles against Babylon, in which the destroyer of Babylon will come from the north (Jer. 50.3, 9, 41 [27.3, 9, 41]; 51.48); this derives from an underlying principle of poetic justice, in which tropes previously used to describe judgment against Jerusalem are reapplied to Babylon.

history of the Samarian state or its provincial successors, either on the part of Jeremiah himself or on the part of the keepers of his tradition. Rather, the book is overwhelmingly concerned with the southern kingdom, especially Jerusalem. The Jeremiah tradition is dominated by proclamations of judgement on this kingdom's inhabitants, warning—in a seemingly unending series of inventive variations—of the looming destruction of its capital and the deportation of its population. The monotony is relieved not by a diversion of interest to its neighbours—save the standard prophetic fare involved in the oracles against the nations—but by a few tantalizing promises of eventual restoration. These, too, are centred on Jerusalem. To understand the references to Israel as expressing a concern with the northern kingdom is to introduce an incongruous anomaly into the tradition.[23]

There are, allowably, a certain number of references in the book to traditions that have at least some association with the area of the former northern kingdom. Undoubtedly, most prominent amongst these occur in Jeremiah 30-31, in which Israel appears alongside Jacob (Jer. 30.10, 18; 31.7, 11), Ephraim (Jer. 31.9, 18, 20), and the children of Rachel (Jer. 31.15, 17). Though muted within the immediate text, these alter egos link the entity called Israel to a complex of ancestral traditions that have ties to the area north of Jerusalem, though even these are far weaker than commonly assumed.[24] Throughout these chapters, moreover, the strongest geographical association of Israel is not with these ancestral territories, but with Jerusalem, alter ego Zion. Thus, there is a clear emphasis on Zion as the focus of Israel's restored community life (Jer. 31.6, 12), even if the community may reside over a wider area (Jer. 31.5-6). The text also declares that the city and its fortifications will be rebuilt (Jer. 30.18) as a prerequisite for the re-establishment of the Israelite community's cultic proximity to YHWH (Jer. 30.18-21). Throughout this material, the repeated theme is return and restoration (Jer. 30.10, 18; 31.8, 16, 17, 18, 21), consistently articulated using variations of שוב. The semantic range of this verb emphasizes that the future envisioned for Israel includes its return to where it came from. That is, it will go back to the place from which it was sent out.[25] The concomitant emphasis on Zion indicates that the origins of Israel are in Jerusalem. It is Jerusalem to which Israel will return, because it was Jerusalem from which Israel was expelled.

The poetic material of Jeremiah 2-20 similarly undermines the assumption that the most natural reading of Israel is as the northern kingdom (or as an entity in the northern kingdom), by consistently associating the entity which it calls by that name with Jerusalem. That is, alongside these passages' persistent interest in an entity addressed as Israel, they reveal their equally strong focus on the fate of the southern kingdom,

23. That the book of Jeremiah is beset by eccentricities and inconsistencies is, of course, well known; it is not, however, an invitation to multiply such difficulties any more than necessary.
24. The geographical associations of the Israel/Jacob traditions as gleaned from the Genesis narratives are complicated both by the narratives themselves and by texts which, like Jeremiah 30–31, locate Israel or Jacob in Zion/Jerusalem, or otherwise associate these entities with the southern capital. See below.
25. The basic meaning of the root as established by Holladay is with reference to someone who has shifted direction in a particular way and then shifted back in the opposite way, with the assumption, barring evidence to the contrary, that this turning back results in reaching the point from which the person or people originally departed (Holladay 1958: 53).

especially its capital, Jerusalem/Zion. It is in Jerusalem that the addressees of this material are located[26] and it is the fate of the city, its countryside and its inhabitants that constitute their overriding concern.[27] In Jeremiah 2-20, as in Jeremiah 30-31, therefore, Israel's strongest geographical associations are with the southern kingdom—more specifically, with Jerusalem. To extricate Israel from the southern kingdom may only be achieved by drastic redactional action. This is quite unnecessary, if the misplaced assumption that the two are inherently incompatible is acknowledged. That such action is also unwarranted is confirmed by the fact that nothing in this material locates the audience or its interests anywhere *other* than in the southern kingdom. Evacuating it from the southern kingdom, in other words, leaves it geographically adrift. Contrary to common assumption, therefore—that Israel refers to the northern kingdom unless otherwise indicated—the evidence from the book of Jeremiah suggests that it is the claim that Israel refers to an entity that is *not* resident in the southern kingdom that requires special pleading.

This association between Israel and the southern kingdom is reinforced by the overwhelming propensity of other texts from this period to refer to those who were deported to Babylonia as Israel. This is most unambiguously apparent in the Book of Ezekiel, whose particular predilection is to refer to its audience as the House of Israel. The phrase appears no less than 83 times in MT. These exiles are also called the sons of Israel, the remnant of Israel or, simply, Israel. Whatever variation of the name is used for Ezekiel's audience, it is evident that the people to whom it is applied are the deportees of Jerusalem presently alongside Ezekiel in Babylonia, and/or their compatriots who remain yet in Jerusalem. Nowhere in the book is Israel used to refer either to the northern kingdom or to its inhabitants.[28] Likewise, Isaiah 40-55 refers to those in Babylonian exile as Israel, doing so more than 40 times in 16 chapters. Both Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah are addressed to those who were deported by the Babylonians in the wake of the conquest of Judah and the destruction of its capital, Jerusalem (and/or their descendants).[29] This is unambiguously their 'Israel'.

The implication of this survey of the wider contemporary usage is that there is no reason to assume that the Israel to which the allegory refers should be understood as the northern kingdom. Indeed, that the interpretation of Israel as the northern kingdom constituted a mistake on the part of the author of the allegory has been alleged as an

26. Jeremiah 2.2; 4.3-5; 5.1; 6.1, 8; 8.4; 14.5; 15.5.

27. Jeremiah 4.6, 10-11, 14, 16, 31; 5.1; 6.2, 6, 23; 9.10; 10.22; 13.19-20, 27; 14.2, 19. In the immediate context, Israel is associated with Zion/Jerusalem by vv. 11-17; as with the book's other summons to return from exile (often, as here, from the north), the imperative in v. 12 strongly implies that Zion is not only where the restored Israel will be brought by YHWH but its previous home, from which it was earlier deported. Similarly, Jer. 5.15 warns Israel of a looming conqueror, in a passage clearly concerned with the conquest of Jerusalem; cf. the close associations between Israel and Jerusalem, Zion and/or Judah in Jer. 5.20; 10.23-25; 14.2-9 and, implicitly, in e.g., Jer. 6.9; 17.12-13.

28. Where the text wishes to refer to the former state to the north of Jerusalem it uses different terms, as in the comparison between Jerusalem, Sodom and Samaria in chap. 16 or the comparison between Jerusalem and Samaria in Ezekiel 23. See Joyce 2009: 85-86.

29. This is true even if Deutero-Isaiah is thought to have been written in Yehud, as has been argued by Barstad 1997 and Tiemeyer 2011.

explanation for its apparent incoherence vis-à-vis the rest of the chapter.[30] Yet, as the various attempts to make sense of the resulting text attest, the identification of the Israel of the allegory as the northern kingdom causes equally as many problems as it purports to resolve. Not least of these is why an editor—far more nearly contemporaneous to this strong association between Israel and the southern kingdom than the modern scholar and thus seemingly far less likely to have forgotten it—would have bungled the matter so badly. Although the idea that the Israel of the surrounding material ought to be understood as a southern entity has been mooted—and is indeed implied in the suggestion that the author of the allegory made a mistake in doing otherwise—this has not led to a reconsideration of the assumption that the Israel of the allegory is the northern kingdom.[31] To such a reconsideration we now turn.

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In what follows, we will propose that much of the apparent incoherence of the allegory and its relationship with the surrounding material may be resolved by the recognition that Rebellious Israel is meant to signify the community exiled to Babylonia, while Traitorous Judah represents those left behind in the land.

As already noted, the use of the name Israel to refer to the deportees in Babylonia and their descendants is extensively and unmistakably attested by the book of Ezekiel and by Isaiah 40-55. The texts of this period consistently identify these deportees with some version of the name Israel (Israel, house of Israel, sons of Israel, etc.). For the allegory to use Israel to refer to the community in Babylon would be in keeping with this pattern.

The identification of Israel with the exiles is further reinforced by the observation of Israel's strong association with Jerusalem, the capital city. This phenomenon was discussed above with regard to Jeremiah 2-20, in which the condemnations of Israel are intertwined with announcements of judgement on Jerusalem, and Jeremiah 30-31, in which the restoration of Israel is linked to the restoration of Zion. In Isaiah 48-55, a similar effect is achieved by oracles of salvation addressed alternately to Israel and to Zion; restoration of the one amounts to the restoration of the other. In Ezekiel, the city of Jerusalem and the house of Israel are the unrelenting focus of attention, their fates intimately entwined.

On the one hand, this association is hardly surprising. The majority of the deportees would have been residents of the capital, amongst its elites and ruling classes.[32] It would have been only natural for these exiles to have been concerned with the city's fate, even after their own departure. Nevertheless, the combination of the texts' dogged focus on Jerusalem and their identification of their exilic audience as Israel is highly significant for our understanding of Israel and, in turn, for our interpretation of the allegory in Jeremiah 3. This is because it suggests an Israel that was not only present in the southern kingdom

30. Biddle 1990: 95; Carroll 1986: 145; Holladay 1986: 81, 116; McKane 1986: 68-69.

31. For the suggestion that the Israel of Jeremiah's poetry might be understood in terms of an audience somewhere in the southern kingdom, at least sometimes, see already Skinner 1922: 83 n. 1, followed by McKane 1986: 72; cf. Carroll 1986: 147, who concludes that 'the Jerusalem community as addressee of the discourse in 2.5-3.7 and the enemy of the north cycle in 4.5-6.26 is the most obvious referent of this material' also.

32. The most exhaustive analysis of Mesopotamian deportation practices remains Oded 1979 (see especially pp. 43-45); on Babylonian practice see Lipschits 2005: 82-84 and Faust 2011.

prior to the exile, but specifically comprised people associated with—and ultimately deported from—Jerusalem. Israel, in other words, does not appear to have comprehended the whole of the kingdom's population. Rather, Israel consisted of Jerusalemites, and most probably its ruling elites more specifically. Israel constitutes those who were of sufficient standing as to merit deportation at the tip of a Babylonian sword.

If Israel constitutes the upper echelons of Jerusalemite society who have since been deported to Babylonia, who or what is Judah? Here, it is significant to observe that, in contrast to the narrow and particular association of Israel with Jerusalem, the texts of this period use the name Judah when they wish to refer to the kingdom beyond the capital. This is especially apparent in Jeremiah, which expresses a greater interest in the fate of the kingdom as a whole than any other text of this period.[33] Its frequent use of the phrases 'each man of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem'[34] and 'in the cities of Judah and in the squares of Jerusalem'[35] suggests that Jerusalem and Judah together represent *pars* and *toto*. References to 'all the people of Judah'[36] and to 'all Judah'[37] emphasize the comprehensiveness of the population envisaged by the term. Jeremiah's apparently innovative use of 'Judahites' as a way to refer to the general population, especially in passages describing the situation after the fall of Jerusalem, is similarly suggestive.[38] Though Ezekiel uses Judah much less frequently, it also uses the term to refer to the wider countryside beyond Jerusalem (Ezek. 8.17; 9.9).[39]

These wider trends in the usage of Israel and Judah strongly support an interpretation of the allegory in Jeremiah 3 in which Rebellious Israel and Treacherous Judah refer to deportees and non-deportees, respectively. Thus, we have seen that Israel is well established as a name for the elites of Jerusalem, who are now exiles in Babylonia. Rebellious Israel is this group personified: a community presented with a bill of divorce and sent away from its home as a consequence of its infidelity. Judah, by contrast, is used to refer to the population of the kingdom more generally. Though the term does not inherently exclude the country's Jerusalemite elites, the latter's deportation naturally placed the term's emphasis more strongly on the non-elite and non-Jerusalemite portion of the population that had been left behind. Indeed, that the term developed a much greater prominence as a response to Jerusalem's downfall is suggested by its particular concentration

33. Judah appears upwards of 180 times in MT Jeremiah (and upwards of 150 in LXX Jeremiah), compared to 15 times in Ezekiel and three times in Isaiah 40-55. Ezekiel's negligible interest in the general population is mirrored by the rarity of its mention of 'Judah'; conversely, the more comprehensive perspective of the prose material in Jeremiah is precisely where Judah dominates.
34. Jeremiah 4.4; 11.2, 9; 17.25; 18.11; 32.32 [LXX 39.32]; 35.13 [42.13], 36.31 [43.31].
35. Jeremiah 7.17, 34; 11.6; 33.10 [LXX 40.10]; 44.6, 17, 21 [51.6, 17, 21].
36. Jeremiah 25.1, 2; 26.18 [LXX 33.18].
37. Jeremiah 7.2; 17.20; 20.4; 26.19 [LXX 33.19]; 36.6 [43.6]; 40.15 [47.15]; 44.11-12 [51.11-12]; 44.24, 26 [51.26].
38. Jeremiah 32.12 [LXX 39.12]; 34.9 [41.9]; 38.19 [45.19]; 40.11-12 [41.11]; 41.3 [48.3]; 43.9 [50.9]; 44.1 [51.1]; 52.28, 30.
39. In the present context it is especially interesting to note the contrast between Ezekiel's query about the extent of YHWH's destruction in Ezek. 9.8, which concerns only Jerusalem and refers only to the house of Israel, and YHWH's answer in Ezek. 9.9, which mentions Judah as well as the house of Israel in its condemnation of both city and countryside.

in Jeremiah 40-44, as a motley collection of the surviving population attempted to find its way forward.[40] In this light, the allegory's Traitorous Judah may be understood as a personification of the general population; ultimately, those who were left in the land after Rebellious Israel's banishment.

This reading of the allegory has a number of advantages. First, it coheres with the location of Israel in exile within the frame of the allegory, which declares that Rebellious Israel was sent away (v. 8). Although this has traditionally been assumed to denote the deportation of the population of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians, there is nothing in the text that requires this. In fact, that Israel is the only sister wife to be so treated has caused a significant amount of consternation.[41] The identification of Rebellious Israel as the deportees and Traitorous Judah as those who were not deported explains why the allegory makes no reference to Judah having been divorced; Judah represents those who were, in fact, *not* 'sent away'.

Second, this reading explains the text's unequivocal and otherwise baffling preference for Israel. In its partiality for the community in Babylonia, the passage is situated squarely in line with the other parts of Jeremiah which claim YHWH's favour for the Babylonian *golah* (e.g. Jeremiah 24; 29).[42] Similarly, the rejection of Judah is comprehensible, as it enters the ranks of passages that reject the legitimacy of those left in the land (most comprehensively, Jeremiah 42-44).[43] Attentive to such struggles, Carroll very nearly captured the significance of the passage:

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40. 'Remnant of Judah' (שארית יהודה), as a descriptor for the non-deported population, occurs only in Jeremiah 40-44 (Jer. 40.15 [LXX 47.15]; 42.15, 19 [49.19]; 44.12, 14, 28 [51.14, 28]). 'All Judah' (כל יהודה) is concentrated there (Jer. 40.15 [47.15]; 44.11-12 [51.11-12]; 44.24, 26 [51.26]), whilst 'Judahites' (יהודים) also takes on a particular prominence in these chapters (Jer. 40.11-12 [41.11]; 41.3 [48.3]; 43.9 [50.9]; 44.1 [51.1]). By contrast, the double-barreled phrases which parallel Judah and Jerusalem nearly disappear.

41. Craigie, Kelly and Drinkard 1991: 55; Lundbom 1999: 307; Baumann 2004: 110, 114; Shields 2004: 40, 79, 83-85; Abma 1999: 249-51.

42. The classic discussion of this pro-*golah* strand is Seitz 1989; also Seitz 1985. Note also the earlier work of Pohlmann 1978 and the subsequent work of Sharp 2003. On the self-appellation of the *golah* community as 'Israel', see especially Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (discussed above).

43. Given the language used of Judah in the allegory, it may be possible to locate its condemnation more specifically, in the period immediately following Israel's deportation(s). Bearing in mind the multivalence of the marriage metaphor with regard to both religious and political infidelities (see Kelle 2005: 284-85; cf. Moughtin-Mumby 2008: 102-105; Shields 2004: 84, 98), the description of Judah as 'traitorous' (בגדה) and as acting 'deceitfully' (בשקר) resonates as a condemnation of the persistent political betrayals which marked the end of Judah's existence, as a series of disastrous decisions led directly to its ultimate destruction (*DCH* 2:90-91; *DCH* 8:557-59). That Judah pursued such policies after 597 BCE, despite having observed the devastating consequences of betrayal, is what merits its final rejection; Traitorous Judah represents those who had witnessed the punishment wrought upon the country's highest elite (Israel) and yet failed to change their ways. (The close association in Jeremiah between the Babylonian king and YHWH is a salutary reminder of the proximity of theology and politics; as submission to Nebuchadnezzar is portrayed as tantamount to submission to YHWH, so betrayal of an oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar [as undertaken by Zedekiah and, presumably, by Gedaliah] is tantamount to the betrayal of YHWH.) If the allegory is intended to be read at this

> After the fall of Jerusalem there developed opinions among the exiles that to be in exile was virtuous and to have remained behind in Judah was to be subject still to the judgment of Yahweh (cf. 24.4-10; 29.1-7, 15-19; Ezek. 11.14, 21). This outlook included the construction of a paradigm of comparative wickedness in which Israel/Samaria, for all its evil, was superior to Judah.[44]

Yet, still caught in his own paradigm—that Israel must refer to the northern kingdom—Carroll was obliged to introduce the exiles as a third, shadow character in the play, though no third party appears in the text. Even he admitted that the scenario 'border[s] on the absurd', invoking as it does a 'kingdom destroyed some centuries previous' (Carroll 1986: 145); he was only able to justify such a strange appeal on the grounds that the desperate intensity of the struggle between the exiles and the non-exiles called for desperate measures. While the struggle was undoubtedly as intense as Carroll and others have imagined it, the absurdity of the allegory is eliminated as soon as Israel is identified as the exiles. Part of a substantial pro-*golah* strand in the book, the allegory announces YHWH's preference for the exile community in Babylonia, to the detriment of those left in the land.

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With this in mind, a few final words concerning the relationship between the allegory and the surrounding material are in order.

As a number of commentators have observed, the allegory develops ideas and vocabulary from elsewhere in the surrounding chapters, especially Jer. 3.1-5.[45] Verse 1 presents a legal analogy (cf. Deut. 24.1-4), asking whether a woman sent away by her husband may be reunited with him; the implied answer is 'no'.[46] If the final words of the verse are understood as a question, as they usually are, this impossibility is then applied to the addressee, who has been unfaithful to YHWH. Verses 2-5 raise a pair of related questions, asking whether YHWH may forgive his unfaithful wife/daughter or whether his anger is everlasting. The feminine singular addressee of v. 1 is not named, nor is the woman of vv. 2-5. The context suggests, however, that the woman in question is the community whose infidelity has been the subject of Jeremiah 2 and whose punishment looms in Jeremiah 4-6. It is, in other words, the community called Israel, whose infidelities in Jerusalem/Zion are subsequently punished through the city's destruction and their own deportation.[47]

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level of specificity, it would seem most appropriate as a description of the situation between 597 and 586 BCE, although the indications of ongoing political chaos and betrayals of loyalty after 586 BCE would render a post-586 BCE situation possible.

44. Carroll 1986: 145; cf. Holladay 1986, who compares the allegory to the vision of the fig-baskets in Jeremiah 24, without realizing that the comparison is far closer than he imagines.
45. See Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 47; Holladay 1986: 116; Lundbom 1999: 300; Fischer 2005: 191; Schmidt 2008: 105-6; Shields 2004: 71-91; Thiel 1973: 88.
46. Surprisingly, the phrasing in MT v. 1 asks not whether the woman may return (שוב) to her man (as LXX) but whether the man may return (שוב) to his woman. For discussion see Craigie, Kelley and Drinkard 1991: 49, 51; Lundbom 1999: 301; Shields 2004: 41.
47. The historical location of v. 1, like other parts of these chapters, is polyvalent; it may be read either as a rhetorical question intended as an advance warning of the consequences for infidelity or as an after-the-fact reflection on them.

If this is the intended remit of the question—as it is generally deemed to be—the verse concerns the ultimate fate of the exiles, who have been sent away by YHWH: may they be reconciled? The implied answer of the legal analogy is 'no', with a finality which seems to be upheld by the demanding final question of the verse: 'And you have been unfaithful with many lovers—and you would return to me?' Curiously, however, there is a degree of ambiguity in the extant form of the text: unlike the question concerning the hypothetical woman in v. 1a, the declaration concerning YHWH's own lover in v. 1b lacks the interrogative. That is, it may be read not as a question but as a statement: 'And you have been unfaithful with many lovers—but return to me'.[48]

The allegory picks up on this material, spinning out the image of the woman sent away by her husband. As it does so, it much more explicitly turns the legal precedent on its head, rejecting the expected 'no' of v. 1a and (implicitly) reading v. 1b as a positive declaration. Though sent away, Rebellious Israel is still YHWH's favoured wife (v. 11), now summoned to return to him (v. 12). 'Return appears not . . . as illegal and impossible, but is demanded in the imperative'.[49] As Carroll points out, however, this is 'quite incompatible with what precedes it'.[50] Indeed, the allegory's inversion of expectations seems intentionally designed to rebut the implied conclusions of v. 1 and to answer the questions of v. 5 with a resounding 'not long!' Though Israel's banishment may seem to be irrevocable, in fact it is not.

Such inversion and rejection of older sayings occurs several other times in the book. Thus, Jer. 16.14-15 and its close parallel in Jer. 23.7-8 quote an existing saying—'As YHWH lives, who brought the sons of Israel up from the land of Egypt'—in order to transform it; in the future, the oath will be 'As YHWH lives, who brought the sons of Israel from the land of the North'. So, too, Jer. 31.29-30 introduces the saying about sour grapes, in order to reject it (it is likewise rejected in Ezek. 18.2). Most immediately, v. 16 declares that 'they will no longer speak of the ark of the covenant'. Like the allegory, each of these instances has cause to be considered amongst the book's final developments.[51]

The implication of this is that the relationship between the questions of v. 1 and the allegory may be closer than has generally been recognized. The truncated opening of v. 1 is especially noteworthy; although the messenger formula is conventionally inserted ('the word of YHWH came to me'), לאמר is the nearest that exists in Hebrew to an opening quotation mark. It may function here to introduce the saying which is about to be refuted.[52]

48. Lundbom 1999: 301-2, who notes that this is how later Jewish and Christian tradition elected to interpret it; Moughtin-Mumby 2008: 99-100; Shields 2004: 42-43, 56, 93, who observes that the rhetorical effectiveness of the appeal to a legal analogy depends, at least in part, on the unexpected turn which the exegesis then takes; Fishbane 1985: 310.
49. Fischer 2005: 191-92 ('Umkehr erscheint nicht. . .als ungesetzlich und unmöglich, sondern wird im Imperative gefordert').
50. Carroll 1986: 147; cf. Baumann 2004: 116-117; Shields 2004: 89, 93, 96.
51. Several of these exhibit characteristics of type broadly considered 'deuteronomistic', though they also exhibit notable differences; it is beyond the scope of the present discussion to theorize as to their relative relationships.
52. Cf. Shields 2004: 37, who suggests that it functions as a citation marker.

The claim in circulation is that the exiles are like a divorced wife, sent away and not permitted to return. Such words may be readily imagined on the lips of those who have escaped deportation, allowed to remain in the land. Surely, they are the chosen people; YHWH has sent Israel away and, like a divorced wife, they will hardly be permitted to return—either to YHWH or to the land, lest they defile it. One might imagine such words circulating as a counterargument to claims that the deportees would soon return, of the kind reported in Jeremiah 28-29. The allegory declares that this analogy is not correct. To the contrary, it is the exiles—unfaithful though they may have been, divorced though they may be—who remain in YHWH's favour. They can, and indeed will, be summoned to return, both to YHWH and to the land.[53] The allegory has not been introduced in order to explain Judah's absence from the chapter's promises to Israel; its purpose is to insist upon its exclusion.[54]

The final form of the chapter relents, of course; v. 18 promises that Judah will go alongside Israel and that together they will come to the land that YHWH bequeathed the ancestors. Along with a handful of other similar passages in the book, this represents a belated attempt at inclusive language, putting Judah on equal footing with Israel.[55] As here, these usually appear in contexts that are otherwise concerned with Israel alone; Judah is an afterthought. In light of the foregoing, such conciliatory gestures may be understood as later attempts to reunite a population sundered by deportations and lives apart. When such efforts were undertaken, however, will have to await further investigation.

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53. Notably, the only other reference in the Hebrew Bible to a 'bill of divorce' (ספר כריתת) is Isa. 50.1, which similarly implies that the exiles could be described as YHWH's divorced wife.
54. Contra Biddle 1990: 94; Thiel 1973: 93, who see the allegory as arising from an attempt to explain the saying to Israel (and absence of Judah) in vv. 12-13.
55. Jeremiah 5.11; 11.10, 17; 13.11; 31.27, 31; 32.30, 32 [LXX 39.30, 32]; 33.13; 50.4; 33 [27.4, 33].

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