Abstract and Keywords

The Jeremiah traditions are firmly ensconced in the political and social crises of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE, with the destruction of Jerusalem and the displacement of many of its inhabitants constituting key historical touchstones. This chapter examines the ancient Near Eastern political context of Judah's demise, analyzing the end of Assyrian power and the struggle between Babylonia and Egypt to succeed it; the growing political turmoil in Judah, as its leadership sought and failed to respond to these wider changes; and the implications of these domestic and international contexts for the interpretation of the books of Jeremiah.

Keywords: Jeremiah, Judah, Israel, Mesopotamia, Assyria, Babylonia, Egypt

Introduction

THE books of Jeremiah address themselves to the political crises of the late seventh and early sixth centuries BCE. While the books themselves—the two divergent Greek and Hebrew versions—came into being over a much longer period, they are set against the background of these decades. We will make some mention of the later historical circumstances that shaped these traditions, but our primary focus will be on the events through which the books seek to convey their message.

Indeed, though scholarly efforts to understand the books of Jeremiah have in recent decades produced a veritable *floruit* of non-historical approaches, there is growing recognition that the interpretation of these complex traditions cannot be fully divorced from the late seventh- and early sixth-century events of which they speak. The political, social, and economic upheaval that characterized this period posed serious theological challenges to the received status quo, and it is to these concerns that the Jeremiah traditions are primarily addressed. The prolonged development of these traditions reflects the fact that many of these issues—most notably, the contest between those deported to Babylonia and those who stayed in the land—remained unresolved well into the late sixth and fifth centuries. Nevertheless, the rhetoric of these debates continued to be cast against the

backdrop of events of the final decades of the kingdom of Judah's independent existence and the immediate aftermath of its demise.

(p. 26) The Ancient Near Eastern Stage

The stage on which Judah's demise played out was one dominated by foreign empires. Judah's leadership sought to anticipate these powers' successes and thereby align themselves with the eventual victors. That they failed in their efforts led ultimately to the state's destruction.

The small states of the Levant, including Judah, had been dominated for much of the eighth and seventh centuries by the Neo-Assyrian Empire, whose westward expansion had begun under Tiglath-pileser III in the mid-eighth century. Early attempts to resist Assyrian authority were largely unsuccessful, although Hezekiah's rebellion at the turn of the century provoked less punitive ire than might have been expected; the king was allowed to remain on the throne and the city was spared destruction. This precedent undoubtedly colored the expectations of the Jerusalemite elite when, just over a century later, they again faced the prospect of invasion by a Mesopotamian army (Jer 7:4). In the interim, however, Judah's kings elected to submit to Assyrian authority, making regular tribute payments and occasionally appearing before the Assyrian king in affirmation of the kingdom's loyalty.[2]

Assyrian power began to crumble with the advent of the last third of the seventh century. The last great Assyrian king, Aššur-bāni-apli (Assurbanipal), died in 627 BCE and was succeeded by a series of ineffective rulers. The dearth of written records to survive from this period allows little certainty surrounding the precise cause of the empire's collapse; however, it seems likely that the empire's leadership was subsumed by internal power disputes and unable to retain control over a vast empire, whose structure depended heavily on a strong central government. Typical vulnerability during transference of royal power appears to have been compounded by the near-simultaneous death of the Assyrians' agent in Babylonia, Kandalanu. As the Assyrian court devolved into disarray, Nabû-apla-uṣur (Nabopolassar) seized power in Babylonia. Having secured his claim to the kingship, Nabû-apla-uṣur set out to expel the Assyrians, finally achieving decisive success after about a decade of fighting. Once he had established this secure Babylonian base, Nabû-apla-uṣur allied with the Medes and invaded the Assyrian heartland. To deal with this threat, the Assyrians began to withdraw from their Levantine garrisons and consolidate strength in their principle Mesopotamian cities. Their departure from the Levant raised hopes of renewed autonomy and independence in the many small kingdoms that had spent the previous century under the Assyrian thumb. Though they did not know it yet, the upheaval resulting from Assyria's downfall would cause many of their demises.

In their efforts to fend off the rising Babylonian tide, the Assyrians elected to ally themselves with Egypt. Although Egypt was nominally under Assyrian authority for (p. 27) part of the seventh century, its distance from the homeland and the retained strength of its native systems of government made it one of the more tenuous parts of the empire. With As-

syrian power on the wane, Psamtik (Psammetichus) I was able to reclaim Egyptian independence. With this renewed autonomy came renewed interest in the southern Levant, over which previous Egyptian dynasties had exerted their imperial ambitions. Indeed, there is growing evidence to suggest that the Egyptians directly succeeded the retreating Assyrians as the dominant power in the Levant. Although Egyptian control was probably not as pervasive as the Assyrian presence had been—Egypt appears to have concentrated its attention on the Mediterranean coastline, where the trade routes converged, rather than on the Cisjordanian highlands—we should not imagine the withdrawal of the Assyrians as creating a political vacuum in which the small Levantine states could exert themselves unchecked. Indeed, Egypt's involvement in the affairs of these states is well demonstrated by the report of its interference in the royal succession after the death of Josiah, together with demands for tribute payments necessitating the levying of taxes on the population (2 Kgs 23:30–35).

That this period of Egyptian influence is frequently forgotten is a consequence of the eventual and resounding triumph of the Babylonians over the entirety of the region. The Assyrians, having already largely abandoned the economic and political life support system of empire, succumbed remarkably quickly to Nabû-apla-uṣur's attacks: the city of Assur fell in 614 BCE, followed by Nineveh in 612 BCE and Harran in 610 BCE. In only a few short years, the once-mighty Neo-Assyrian Empire lay in ruins. In due course the Neo-Babylonian Empire would assume control of all of Assyria's territories, claiming for itself the riches of its far-flung provinces and vassal kingdoms and using them as stepping stones to even wider powers.

Yet, unsurpassed power was not immediately forthcoming. Because the southern Levant had already passed into Egyptian hands, the region evolved as a locus of significant conflict between Egypt and Babylonia. This struggle for control—over lucrative international trade routes and the small kingdoms whose subservience provided a useful buffer against potential invaders—began in earnest in the last decade of the seventh century, after the Babylonians had firmly established themselves in Mesopotamia. It continued well into the second decade of the sixth century, with the Babylonians making repeated campaigns to the west in their efforts to win the region's submission. Evidence for who had control over the Levant at any given moment during this period is not very clear, but this uncertainty is probably a fair reflection of the era's atmosphere of upheaval and confusion, as the Levantine kingdoms sought to judge the likely outcome of an ongoing power struggle between two parties who appeared evenly matched. Vacillating loyalties would play a critical role in Judah's downfall.

In hindsight, a battle on the upper reaches of the Euphrates River in 605 BCE proved to be the tipping point in favor of Babylonian power. An army led by Crown Prince Nabû-kudurri-uṣur (Nebuchadnezzar) II met and defeated Egyptian forces under the command of Necho II at Carchemish, where an Egyptian contingent had established itself as part of efforts to extend Egyptian authority up the Mediterranean coast. As a result of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's victory, the kingdoms of the Levant came under the purview of (p. 28)

Babylonian authority for the first time. In practice, this meant the swearing of oaths of loyalty and the payment of tribute.

At the time, however, the battle at Carchemish was not obviously decisive. Nabû-apla-uṣur's death shortly afterward obliged Nabû-kudurri-uṣur to return to Babylonia to claim the throne. Although he returned to the Levant immediately after his coronation, the inconclusive outcome of a campaign to the Egyptian frontier in 601 BCE undermined his authority and prompted a number of Levantine kings to switch their allegiance to the Egyptians. The Babylonians were disinclined to let these kingdoms go without a fight; indeed, much of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's forty-two-year reign was taken up by efforts to subject the Levant to the sheer force of his military might. That his eventual success was hardly a foregone conclusion is witnessed by the fact that the region was targeted by no fewer than eight of the nine campaigns undertaken in the first decade of his reign. This amounted to a campaign nearly every year, as the kingdoms of the Levant vacillated between compliant tribute to Nabû-kudurri-uṣur and suits for support lodged at the feet of the Egyptian pharaoh, hoping that he might lend his army in defense of a kingdom's rebellion.

The most famous of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's campaigns to the west include his legendary thirteen-year siege of Tyre—a siege whose duration perhaps reflects the Babylonians' near-annual return to the region over the course of at least a decade, although the chronology of the campaign is difficult to establish with certainty—and his two attacks on Judah, a decade apart, after each of which the Judahite king and other members of the population were deported to Babylonia. Unlike the Assyrians, who practiced two-way deportation—transferring conquered peoples from one part of the empire to another, then replacing the depleted population with deportees from elsewhere—the Babylonians appear to have been largely disinterested in the economic re-development of conquered territories. Although these areas were hardly left devoid of all their inhabitants—the Babylonians, like the Assyrians, focused their devastation on the elites whose power posed the most likely source of future rebellions—they suffered significant structural destruction and reduced economic circumstances as a result of the Babylonian policies of conquest.

The structure of the empire is unfortunately poorly understood, as documentation that might shed light on Babylonian practices has been little preserved. Most of what is known in detail relates to the cultic and economic operations of temples and the commercial activities of private persons, rather than the royal court.[3] With regard to the political policies of the empire, scholars are frequently obliged to presume a general continuity between Assyrian and Babylonian practices, because the evidence for (p. 29) Babylonian imperial operations is so sparse. The Babylonian empire seems to have been interested primarily in the extraction of resources from these provincialized kingdoms and in their dutiful observance of oaths of loyalty, with subject populations eventually subjected to the authority of local governors when their native monarchies failed to grasp the advisability of obedience with sufficient expediency.

Judah in the Spotlight

The books of Jeremiah begin with the assertion that the divine word first came to the prophet during the reign of King Josiah of Judah, whereafter it came again during the reign of Jehoiakim and lasted until the destruction of Jerusalem under Zedekiah (Jer 1:2–3). This heading omits Jehoahaz, whose brief reign as successor to Josiah was terminated by the Egyptians in 609 BCE in favor of his brother, Eliakim, upon whom they bestowed the throne name Jehoiakim (2 Kgs 23:30–35). In Jeremiah 1:3, the royal *inclusio* of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah implies but does not name Jehoiachin, whose reign of three months was terminated by the Babylonians in 597 BCE as a result of his father's earlier rebellion. The heading also omits Gedaliah, the native governor appointed by the Babylonians after the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

As has been widely recognized, these opening verses are not a straightforward tabulation of the period of Jeremiah ben Hilkiah's prophetic activity. The omission of Gedaliah effects the illusion that the prophetic word ceased with the fall of the city, despite the books' inclusion of material that describes Jeremiah conveying such words after 586 BCE (MT Jeremiah 39–45 [LXX Jeremiah 46–51]). By neglecting this ongoing activity in the land, the heading orientates the reader toward Babylonia, to which the inhabitants of Jerusalem were deported, and signals that it is (or should be) the fate of these exiles that constitutes the most salient point of reference for the books' interpretation. In the process, it suspends the reader in a state of perpetual exile.[4] At the same time, the enumeration of both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah as sons of Josiah hints at but ultimately obscures the awkward generational reversion in the royal line represented by Zedekiah, enthroned as a Babylonian puppet after the deportation of Josiah's grandson Jehoiachin. The Jeremianic traditions' rejection of Jehoiachin and his progeny's claim to the throne of Judah (Jer 22:24–30) is foreshadowed by his absence from the heading.

The dating of the beginning of Jeremiah's activity to the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign has caused significant puzzlement. As Josiah came to the throne after the assassination of Amon in 640 BCE, the thirteenth year to which the heading refers is 627 BCE. (p. 30) The significance of this year for the tides of ancient Near Eastern politics has already been mentioned, as the death of Assurbanipal in Assyria and Kandalanu in Babylonia in close succession set off a contest for dominance in Mesopotamia whose reverberations would be felt across the ancient world. This is also the year that the Chronicler pinpoints as the start of Josiah's religious reforms in Jerusalem (2 Chr 34:3); this and other factors have led to suggestions that Josiah's reforms may have involved a political component, aimed at throwing off waning Assyrian power.[5] Unfortunately, the Chronicler and the Deuteronomistic Historian disagree at this point, with the latter dating the beginning of the reforms to 621 BCE, several years later (2 Kgs 22:3).

Whether Josiah's enthusiasm for reform was characteristic already of his teen years, as the Chronicler indicates, or prompted by the discovery of a book of the law during temple repairs, as reported by Kings, the declaration that the word of YHWH first came to Jeremiah in 627 BCE gives the impression that the period of Jeremiah's prophetic activity in-

cluded the years of the reform. Oddly, however, very little of the material that follows seems concerned with these changes, even though both Kings and Chronicles depict them as radical alterations to Jerusalemite worship practices.[6] Moreover, apart from appearances in the patronymics of his successors and reiterative assertions of the duration of Jeremiah's warnings in Jeremiah 25:3; 36:2 [25:3; 43:2], Josiah is almost entirely absent from what follows; the only explicit identification of any material with his reign is in Jeremiah 3:6, in a curious allegorical interlude contrasting Israel and Judah.[7] This dearth of Josianic contextualization is striking, given that a beginning to Jeremiah's activity in 627 BCE would have him working in a kingdom under Josianic rule for nearly two decades. Because of Josiah's minimal presence in the book, most attempts to identify Jeremianic material relating to his reign have been obliged to point to the unusual preponderance of deuteronomistic-like language and theology in parts of the Jeremiah traditions as evidence for an interest in—or at least a sympathy with—Josiah's reform activities. Others have concluded that the heading's identification of 627 BCE as the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic activity, together with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BCE (p. 31) as its supposed end, should not be taken historically but rather figuratively, as a means of granting to the prophet a Moses-like forty-year career; Jeremiah is to be understood as the prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15–22), preacher to an entire generation of the unrepentant.

Although the activity, or lack thereof, of a historical Jeremiah in the reign of Josiah remains an open question, the impact of political and religious changes begun under that king inevitably shaped the circumstances to which the bulk of the Jeremiah traditions respond. Although the details are murky, Josiah's death at the hand of Necho II at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23:29–30) was probably the result of a poorly executed response to the waning of Assyrian power and the burgeoning struggle between Egypt and Babylonia for power over the Levant. Traditional interpretation sees Josiah's presence at Megiddo as an ill-judged attempt to prevent the Egyptian army from reaching Assyria, there to support its beleaguered allies. In this view, Josiah's death marked the culmination and simultaneous collapse of nationalistic aspirations founded on a (re)new(ed) commitment to exclusive Yahwism and a desire to reunify the long-divided northern and southern kingdoms under one Yahwistic banner. Josiah's intervention at Megiddo represented a valiant stand against empire, determined to prevent the possibility of a resurgence in Assyrian power over the Levant.[8]

The advanced stage of the Assyrian Empire's disintegration by 609 BCE (recall that all its major cities, including Assur and Nineveh, had already been defeated by 610 BCE), combined with Egypt's extension into the Levant as the arena of its own imperial ambitions, suggests that Josiah's presence at Megiddo was more likely for the purpose of affirming the transference of his allegiance to this new regional authority. That this ended in his death indicates suspicion about this loyalty on the part of Necho or his representatives. Whatever the cause of Necho's dislike for Josiah, his control over the kingdom of Judah is apparent in Egypt's interference in the appointment of Josiah's successor. When the "people of the land"—an indeterminate body whose appearances tend to coincide with exertions of power, especially over the kingship—elected to install one of Josiah's younger

sons, Jehoahaz, as king in his stead, Necho promptly incarcerated the new king at Riblah, then deported him to Egypt and his eventual death (2 Kgs 23:30–34). A brief elegy for the deposed Jehoahaz (aka Shallum) appears in Jeremiah 22:10, with its prose explanation in Jeremiah 22:11.[9]

(p. 32) In Jehoahaz's place, Necho installed another one of Josiah's sons, Eliakim, in 609 BCE. The extent of Egypt's control of Judah's king is hinted in the note that Necho "changed his name to Jehoiakim" (2 Kgs 23:34). In one of just a few passages attending to Jehoiakim's reign in Jeremiah, he is described as sending men all the way to Egypt in pursuit of a prophet of unwelcome words, in order to execute him; such reach would been impossible without at least tacit support from the Egyptians (Jer 26:20–23 [33:20–33]). Yet, Jehoiakim's inability to commit to an imperial overlord would ultimately trigger the first of two devastating invasions of the kingdom. Though placed on the throne by the power of the Egyptians, Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's success at Carchemish in 605 BCE provided ample incentive to change the kingdom's loyalties.

The Jeremiah traditions' opposition to Jehoiakim is expressed most extensively by the lengthy narrative of the scroll in Jeremiah 36 [43], although it appears already in poetic form in Jeremiah 22:18–19. That the latter derives from a moment prior to the king's death in 597 BCE is perhaps suggested by its threat of non-burial (contrast 2 Kgs 24:6, which suggests burial in the family tomb). The narrative of Jeremiah 36 [43], on the other hand, is a temporal throwback in the midst of a series of chapters describing the situation in Jerusalem during the city's second siege by Nabû-kudurri-uṣur. The events it reports are said to have begun in Jehoiakim's fourth year, namely, 605 BCE.[10] The traditions repeatedly emphasize the significance of this year for Judah's fate, with references to it appearing also in Jeremiah 25:1; 45:1; 46:2 [25:1; 26:2; 51:31]. These include one of the major structural passages of the Masoretic form of the book (Jeremiah 25) as well as oracles concerning Egypt that are specifically linked to its defeat at Carchemish (Jeremiah 46 [26]). Looking back on Judah's final decades, the Jeremiah traditions thus weight this fourth year of Jehoiakim's rule with heavy theological baggage; they see in the Babylonians' military and political ascendance a sign that Judah's disobedience and infidelity to YHWH had finally reached a similarly decisive moment. Jeremiah 36 [43] in particular appears intent on emphasizing the extent and thorough-going character of the population's guilt; although its direct focus is on Jehoiakim's rejection of the prophetic word, the chapter emphasizes that "all Judah" (Jer 36:6 [43:6]) had the opportunity to hear the divine warning and could therefore be held responsible for having disregarded it. Central to the chapter's interpretation of Judah's history is the conviction that 605 BCE marked a crucial turning point: the decisions made by Jehoiakim at that time set the kingdom on a path from which it would never recover.

Curiously, the book does not suggest—at least not directly—that Jehoiakim was wrong to submit to the Babylonians after their triumph at Carchemish. Indeed, the oracle concerning Egypt in Jeremiah 46 [51] makes clear that continued reliance on Egypt would have been an unmitigated disaster. Rather, it seems that it is Jehoiakim's decision to submit to the Babylonians, only later to rebel against them, that marks out his reign as the begin-

ning of an irreversible trajectory toward catastrophe. A glimpse of the (p. 33) theological reasoning behind this may be seen in Ezekiel 17, which—though focused on subsequent kings' misdeeds rather than Jehoiakim's—explicitly connects these kings' loyalty to the king of Babylon with loyalty to YHWH. Politics and theology were inextricably intertwined; to betray one's oath to the human king was tantamount to betraying one's oath to the divine king, YHWH. Albeit differently expressed, Jeremiah's repeated efforts to persuade Zedekiah to surrender to the Babylonians envisages a similar equivalency in the relationships between the people and YHWH and the people and Nabû-kudurri-uṣur.

Judah's irreversible trek down the road to its demise was thus set in motion when Jehoiakim reneged on his oath of loyalty to Nabû-kudurri-uṣur, turning again toward Egypt after the stalemate between Egyptian and Babylonian forces on the border of Egypt in 601 BCE. The Septuagint dating of the activity involving the two scrolls to this year—the eighth of Jehoiakim's reign—may indicate a recognition of the influence of this event on the subsequent vacillations of Judah's kings. It took another three years before Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's forces ventured back to the Levant, but when they arrived, they were set on vengeance. The Babylonian army arrived at the gates of Jerusalem in 598 BCE, securing the city's surrender on March 16, 597 BCE. The Babylonian Chronicles preserve the Babylonian perspective:

> The seventh year: In the month Kislev the king of Akkad mustered his army and marched to Hattu. He encamped against the city of Judah and on the second day of the month Adar he captured the city and seized [its] king. A king of his own choice he appointed in the city [and] taking the vast tribute he brought it into Babylon.[11]

Among Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's captives from this campaign against Jerusalem was the priest Ezekiel, whose prophetic activity among a community of deportees resettled near the River Chebar gave rise to the book called by his name, as well as King Jehoiachin, son of Jehoiakim and ruler of Judah for a mere three months in 597 BCE.[12]

Exactly what happened to Jehoiakim in the midst of this is not clear. While 2 Chronicles 36:6 reports that he was taken captive to Babylon, 2 Kings 24:6 says that he died in Jerusalem. Jeremiah 22:18–19 reflects a desire, albeit not a report, that he would suffer an ignominious death and not be honored with a proper burial (cf. Jer 36:30 [43:30]). The reports of his death in Jerusalem seem most likely; if he died sometime (p. 34) during the siege his actions had provoked, this would have provided the impetus for Jehoiachin's coronation and explained the latter's occupation of the throne at the moment of the city's surrender. That it took Jehoiachin three months to surrender to the Babylonians on his doorstep would, in turn, justify his deportation in the eyes of those Babylonians, as an insubordinate vassal king who refused to bend the knee to his imperial overlord. Whatever the details of the transition from Jehoiakim to Jehoiachin, it is certain that the latter's defeat included his deportation to Babylon by Nabû-kudurri-uṣur and that the Babylonian king chose to install another member of the royal family—Mattaniah, Jehoiachin's uncle and yet another of Josiah's sons—as his puppet in Jerusalem. As with Necho's renaming of

Eliakim as Jehoiakim, Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's dominance over his appointee is encapsulated in the declaration that he "changed his name to Zedekiah" (2 Kgs 24:17).

Despite his brief tenure on the throne, Jehoiachin possesses substantial symbolic significance in the literature of this period—a result of a major internecine dispute over the causes and consequences of the kingdom's defeat in 597 BCE. The deportation to Babylonia in 597 BCE of part of the population divided the community in two, with differing interpretations of what had happened in 597 BCE and differing views regarding whether this represented YHWH's final judgment or only its first phase. Those deported to Babylonia viewed themselves as chosen to undergo a period of purification in exile, while those left behind in the land suffered a final judgment that was still to come. Afterward, the deportees would be brought back to the land by YHWH. This perspective is most clearly evident in the book of Ezekiel, which contains substantial and extensive argumentation against claims to the land and temple being made by those remaining in Jerusalem.[13] Although the perspective of the people left in Judah after 597 BCE is muted by the eventual success of the deportees in this dispute, evidence from the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel make clear that the homeland community viewed their preservation as a sign of YHWH's rejection of the deportees and of their own election.

The deportation of Jehoiachin to Babylon and the installation of Zedekiah in Jerusalem gave these two factions two kings with whom to identify. Jehoiachin symbolized the claims of the deportees, while Zedekiah represented the claims of the non-deported. Much of the competition between these two groups centered on these royal figureheads, ciphers for their respective communities. In the traditions associated with Ezekiel, with whom the young king was deported, Jehoiachin represents the sole legitimate heir to the kingship of Judah. The book dates the prophetic word according to the years of Jehoiachin's exile, rather than Zedekiah's rule in Jerusalem, and attacks Zedekiah's legitimacy in allegory (Ezekiel 17) and lament (Ezekiel 19). This preference for Jehoiachin and accompanying animosity toward Zedekiah form a stark contrast to the Jeremiah traditions, in which Jehoiachin is rejected and Zedekiah holds a more ambiguous status. Even were Jehoiachin YHWH's own signet ring, he would be torn off (p. 35) and thrown out, doomed to die in a foreign land (Jer 22:22–27); judgment extends even to Jehoiachin's progeny (Jer 22:28–30).[14] Prioritizing the vantage point of those left behind, this prophetic word rejects the king who failed to protect the kingdom from the Babylonians and refuses the possibility that his dynastic line might one day return to the throne.

The Jeremiah traditions' attitude toward Zedekiah are much less clear. A native dynast but on the throne at the whim of an imperial overlord, Zedekiah is depicted as a king of negotiable affections. Jeremiah 27 describes a prophetic sign-act said to have occurred at the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah and depicts a king already sounding out his political options; the initial audience of the message is identified as the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, whose emissaries are said to be in Jerusalem to confer with the (presumably) newly installed Zedekiah. Although nothing is explicitly said of what the envoys are doing in Jerusalem, the ferociousness with which Jeremiah advocates submission to Nabû-kudurri-uṣur suggests that the conference may have been bent on sedition. Un-

fortunately, the Babylonian chronicles break off in 594 BCE, so nothing is known of Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's response to these murmurs of insurrection—if the small kingdoms of the Levant were indeed plotting rebellion so soon after his campaign to Jerusalem in 598–597 BCE.

It will be surprising to some to realize the extent to which the Jeremiah traditions advocate submission to a foreign power. Repeatedly, the prophet is shown imploring Zedekiah to submit to Babylonian authority in order to save himself, his house, and his kingdom (Jer 38:17 [45:17]; cf. 27:12–15 [34:12–15]). Again, the theological logic is rooted in an effective equation—or at least a significant convergence—of expressions of loyalty to a foreign king and expressions of loyalty to YHWH. For Zedekiah to rebel against Nabû-kudurri-uṣur, against the express advice of the prophet, was a rejection of not only Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's sovereignty but also YHWH's.

This suspension of certainty regarding the fate of Zedekiah and those left behind with him in the land after 597 BCE represents one of the key narrative tensions in the Jeremiah traditions. Though their final form is designed to explain the eventual and disastrous outcome—with chapter after chapter conveying prophetic warnings of the dire consequences to come should the kingdom not change its habits—the narratives set in Jerusalem's final days continue to put before Zedekiah the possibility of submission to YHWH. In the process, the Jeremiah traditions preserve an important witness to the hope of those left behind in the land that they might constitute a legitimate branch of the Yahwistic community—provided that their king and the people he leads attend to the word of the prophet, and thereby to YHWH. YHWH's judgment in 597 BCE could be final, if only those left behind in the land were willing to amend their ways. That this possibility was not realized is reflected in the passages that declare Zedekiah and his line finished; this is through some combination of his own death (Jer 21:7; 24:8–10), the (p. 36) death of his sons (Jer 39:6; 52:10), the deportation of his sons (Jer 38:23), or his own deportation and implied death in Babylonian captivity (Jer 32:3–5; 34:2–5, 21; 37:17; 39:7; 52:11; cf. 44:30 [39:3–5; 41:2–5, 21; 44:17; 52:11; cf. 51:30]). Zedekiah's persistent failure to act decisively—to follow the advice of Jeremiah and surrender to Nabû-kudurri-uṣur—seals the fate of the kingdom.[15]

Dénouement: The Destruction of Jerusalem and Its Aftermath

Even without the help of the Babylonian chronicles, it is clear that Zedekiah ignored his advisors' warnings concerning the dire consequences of rebellion; the devastation brought down on Jerusalem and on the surrounding countryside in 586 BCE could have no other proximate cause than the exaction of punishment on an insubordinate vassal. For a decision with such catastrophic consequences, remarkably little is reported of the rebellion's instigators, its intentions, or even whether Judah had any allies in its attempt to throw off the Babylonian yoke. Nearly all of the information preserved by the biblical texts is filtered through a theological lens; Nabû-kudurri-uṣur's invasion of Judah, de-

struction of Jerusalem and its temple, and deportation of still more of the kingdom's inhabitants constitute the judgment of YHWH for the failure of the people and their kings to heed the words of YHWH's prophetic emissaries and attend to the demands of Yahwistic worship.

It is generally agreed that the siege began in Zedekiah's ninth year, on January 15, 597 BCE, and concluded approximately a year and a half later, in his eleventh year, on July 18, 586 BCE (2 Kgs 25:1–3//Jer 52:3–6; Jer 39:1–2 [46:1–2]). As the Babylonian army approached Jerusalem, it targeted other towns and cities of the kingdom, driving their inhabitants toward Jerusalem (Jer 6:1; 34; 35; [41; 42; 47:11]) and the Transjordan (Jer 40:11, 12 [47:11]; 43:5) in search of safety. Eventually, those in the city were also obliged to flee, though not all did so successfully (Jer 39:4–9 [MT]; 52:7; cf. 37:11–16 [44:1–16]).[16]

That the Egyptians were somehow involved in Judah's demise is suggested by a brief episode in Jeremiah 37:5–10 [44:5–10], in which Jeremiah seeks to disabuse Zedekiah of his hope that the Egyptian army, whom the Babylonians besieging Jerusalem have gone out to deal with, will somehow alter the city's fate. It is during this temporary respite that Jeremiah attempts to leave the city for Benjamin and is accused of treason (Jer 37:11–16 [44:11–16]). Changes in the balance of power between Babylonia and Egypt may, once more, have proved the incentive for a Judahite king to risk revolt against Babylonia; (p. 37) power appears to have shifted sufficiently in the Egyptians' favor that Psamtik was able to undertake a royal procession through the region in 590 BCE. That there was significant disagreement among Jerusalem's leadership over the best route forward, in the midst of the Egyptian-Babylonian conflict, is conveyed by the numerous reports of disputes over the divine will.

When the city finally surrendered, the Babylonians held little back. They denuded the temple of its décor, then burned it and much of the rest of the city.[17] There is a recurring vitriol in sixth-century texts that suggests the Edomites were somehow involved in the devastation of the city, or sought to take advantage of it, although the details of the offense are not clear (Isa 34:5–17; Jer 49:7–22 [29:8–23]; Ezek 25:12–14; 35; 36:5; Obadiah). The kingdom's defenses against such intrusions would have been greatly reduced by the dislocation of much of the population. Large numbers had already been displaced in the years before Jerusalem's fall, as people in the towns and villages fled before the Babylonian army. The social breakdown attendant on this was compounded after 586 BCE, as the Babylonians deported a significant proportion of the kingdom's elites to Babylonia. That some of the lesser leadership was left behind is suggested by the names and titles mentioned in the books of Jeremiah (Jer 40:7–8 [47:7–8]).

Because this was the second time of Judah's asking for trouble, the Babylonians elected to abandon their attempts to work with a native dynast, turning the territory into a province under direct Babylonian surveillance. According to a brief note in 2 Kings 25:22–24 and the longer account given in Jeremiah 39–41, the Babylonians appointed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam—part of a non-royal but evidently powerful family in Jerusalem, whose members have a recurring role in Jeremiah—to a gubernatorial role over the new

province, with headquarters in the town of Mizpah in the region of Benjamin.[18] After some unknown length of time, Gedaliah was assassinated by Ishmael, son of Nethaniah, said to be "of royal seed" (Jer 41:1 [48:1]), in a plot purportedly engineered by the king of Ammon (Jer 40:14 [47:14]). A civil war (or civil skirmish) ensued. The appearance of a group of pilgrims in the narration of these events suggests ongoing liturgical activities at the site of the destroyed temple (Jer 41:4–8 [48:4–8]; cf. Lamentations).

Fearing Babylonian reprisals, the remaining population is said to have fled to Egypt, although the theological need to clear the land for a period of rest and purification—thus (p. 38) ensuring its availability come time for the deportees' return from Babylonia—suggests that the purported totality of this last migration serves purposes other than the historical. Much of the narrative about this period is concerned with the locus of future hope —whether the future of the community lies with the Babylonian exiles, with those in the land, both, or neither. Jeremiah's inclusion among the group that flees to Egypt underscores the prophet's representative function; he, like so many others, experienced this time as one of forced dislocation.[19] A third deportation in 582 BCE, reported only in Jeremiah (Jer 52:30), may have been connected with Gedaliah's assassination and its aftermath.

Afterwords: Peregrinations

After this, there is almost complete silence. Apart from the claim that the exiled king Jehoiachin found favor in the Babylonian court (2 Kgs 25:27–30//Jer 52:31–34), there is no biblical material concerning the fate of Judah's inhabitants between what is reported in the books of Jeremiah and the summons to the Babylonian community to return in Isaiah 40–55. Life for those deported to Babylonia over the course of these two decades has to be pieced together from the evidence of the book of Ezekiel and extrabiblical materials concerned mainly with economic activities and rations. Both biblical and archaeological evidence indicate that the land continued to be inhabited, but the voices of these people remain unheard.

This lack of detail poses a challenge, because the interpretation and reinterpretation of the prophetic traditions surrounding Jeremiah clearly continue well into the sixth century, if not beyond. Most prominently, the books' ultimate preference for those deported to Babylonia points to a time in which these traditions were circulated among one or more of the communities in exile. Given their attention to life in the homeland through the kingdom's last decade and the early years of its provincialization, these peregrinations should probably be linked with those left in the land after 597 BCE, then taken to Babylonia in 586 BCE or 582 BCE. Where these later groups were settled is completely unknown. The historical context(s) of the books' final stages of development must therefore remain largely speculative, although the concerns of other involuntary migrants—claims to homeland and attention to the past foremost among them—point the way toward a better understanding of their concern with the theological legitimacy of the deportees and

non-deportees, their respective claims to the homeland, and a reiterative attention to the past as explanatory of both.[20]

Further Reading

Barstad, H. M. 2012. "Jeremiah the Historian: The Book of Jeremiah as a Source for the History of the Near East in the Time of Nebuchadnezzar." In *Studies on the Text and Versions of the Hebrew Bible in Honour of Robert Gordon*, edited by G. Khan and D. Lipton, 87–98. Leiden: Brill.

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Notes:

(1) In memory of Hans Barstad, whose work on the prophetic literature encouraged us all to think more carefully and critically about the relationship between these books and the historical contexts they purport to describe.

(2) E. Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680–669 BC)* (RINAP 4; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), no. 1, v 54; no. 5, viii 7b'.

(3) Of the private archives preserving contracts and other activities of the merchant classes, those from Al-Yahudu and Murašu are of particular interest to biblical scholars, because they mention the activities of certain deportees from Judah. See L. E. Pearce and C. Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer* (CUSAS 28; Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2014); C. Wunsch, with L. E. Pearce, *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon: New Historical Evidence in Cuneiform Sources from Rural Babylonia* (Babylonische Archive 6; Dresden: ISLET, forthcoming).

(4) See J. Hill, "'Your Exile Will Be Long': The Book of Jeremiah and the Unended Exile," in *Reading the Book of Jeremiah: A Search for Coherence*, ed. M. Kessler (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 149–161; Y. Raz, "Jeremiah 'Before the Womb': On Fathers, Sons,

and the Telos of Redaction in Jeremiah 1," in *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. C. M. Maier and C. J. Sharp (LHBOTS 577; London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 86–100.

(5) The significance of 627 BCE for the demise of the Assyrian Empire would have been apparent only in hindsight. If Josiah's changes had a political undercurrent, therefore, this would have arisen from the more specific potential of a change of overlord for a successful rebellion. On the intersection of religion and Assyrian imperial policy, see A. Berlejung, "The Assyrians in the West: Assyrianization, Colonialism, Indifference, or Development Policy?," in *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010*, ed. M. Nissinen; VTSup 148 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 21–60; A. Berlejung, "Shared Fates: Gaza and Ekron as Examples for the Assyrian Religious Policy in the West," in *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond*, ed. N. N. May; Oriental Institute Seminars 8 (Chicago, IL: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2012), 151–174; A. M. Bagg, "Palestine under Assyrian Rule: A New Look at the Assyrian Imperial Policy in the West," *JAOS* 133 (2013): 119–144.

(6) This is not to say that the Jeremiah traditions are not concerned with the exclusive worship of YHWH in Jerusalem, but rather that these concerns are not explicitly linked to Josiah's reforms.

(7) On the interpretation of this passage, including the reason for its identification with Josiah, see C. L. Crouch, "Playing Favourites: Israel, Judah, and the Marriage Metaphor in Jeremiah 3," *JSOT* 44 (2020): 594–609; on the significance of the year 627 BCE, see also C. L. Crouch, "Ezekiel's Immobility and the Meaning of 'the House of Judah' in Ezekiel 4," *JSOT* 44 (2019): 182–197.

(8) On the influence of European nationalisms on the interpretation of Josiah's reign, see U. Kim, *Decolonizing Josiah: Toward a Postcolonial Reading of the Deuteronomistic History* (The Bible in the Modern World 5; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005).

(9) If the interpretation of Jeremiah 22:10 as a word concerning Jehoahaz (the one "who goes away") is correct, its injunction not to weep "for him who is dead" represents a rare, albeit indirect, reference to Josiah. Given the brevity of Jehoahaz's tenure, it may also confirm the books' assertions of Jeremianic activity in the reign of Josiah, even if not as early as the references to the thirteenth year of Josiah suggest. Indeed, a career begun not long before Josiah's death would date this prophetic commentary on the state of Yahwistic worship to ten or more years after any Josianic reform and thereby make some sense of its failure to refer to those reforms explicitly. A career begun around the time of Necho's execution of Josiah and intervention in the Judahite kingship might also account for these traditions' anti-Egyptian tendencies.

(10) Both the Greek and the Hebrew books begin the episode in Jehoiakim's fourth year, but the dramatic action is delayed until the fifth year by the Hebrew and the eighth by the Greek.

(11) A. K. Grayson, *Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), no. 5 11'–13'.

(12) The exact location of Ezekiel's community is unknown, though it may have been outside Nippur, with residents put to work on royal agricultural estates. A number of later administrative documents bear Yahwistic names and mention a place called "Judah-town" in this area (see Pearce and Wunsch, *Documents of Judean Exiles*; Wunsch with Pearce, *Judeans by the Waters of Babylon*). Jehoiachin, his sons, and several other unnamed deportees are attested as resident in Babylon proper, following an imperial policy of keeping deposed kings close at hand in the capital. These texts may be found in the ORACC project "Cuneiform Texts Mentioning Israelites, Judeans, and Other Related Groups" (http://oracc.iaas.upenn.edu/ctij/corpus).

(13) The foregrounding of claims to the homeland and concerns over the legitimacy of its current government are typical of involuntary migrants; see C. L. Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined: Migration, Trauma and Empire in the Sixth CenturyBCE* (SOTSMS; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

(14) For a discussion of this oracle, including its claim that Jehoiachin had no offspring—a claim directly controverted by the cuneiform evidence—see C. L. Crouch, "Jehoiachin: Not a Broken Vessel but a Humiliated Vassal (Jer 22, 28–30)," *ZAW* 129 (2017): 234–246.

(15) On the ambiguity of Zedekiah's portrayal and the exploitation of this by the versions, see S. L. Birdsong, *The Last King(s) of Judah* (FAT/II 89; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017).

(16) On the consequences of these various internal and external involuntary migrations on the self-conception of the people, see Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*.

(17) On the archaeological evidence for destruction associated with 586 BCE and the consequences of Babylonian provincialization on life in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, see O. Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: Judah under Babylonian Rule* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005); A. Faust, *Judah in the Babylonian Period: The Archaeology of Desolation* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012).

(18) Members of the family of Shaphan appear in Jeremiah 26; 29; 32; 36; 51 [28; 33; 36; 39; 43]; 2 Kings 22–23. The frequency with which they are depicted engaged in scribal activities has prompted suggestions of their involvement in the Jeremiah traditions' transmission; see, e.g., H.-J. Stipp, *Jeremia, der Tempel und die Aristokratie: Die patrizische (schafanidische) Redaktion des Jeremiasbuches* (Kleine Arbeiten zum Alten und Neuen Testament 1; Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 2000); J. A. Dearman, "My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36," *JBL* 109 (1990): 403–421.

(19) On Jeremiah's representative function here, see D. J. Reimer, "There—But Not Back Again: Forced Migration and the End of Jeremiah," *HeBAI* 7 (2018): 359–375.

(20) On these and related concerns as characteristic of biblical migration literature, see Crouch, *Israel and Judah Redefined*.

The Historical Contexts of the Books of Jeremiah

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