

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF JEREMIAH 7:1-26

Performance of selected religious practices, even practices that may have been instituted by God himself, cannot secure a relationship with God or his blessings, if the practices do not exhibit a God-centered trust that expresses itself in holistic obedience to him and a corresponding care for those in the community at large. This is the message God uses Jeremiah to communicate in his temple sermon (Jeremiah 7) – a sermon in which Jeremiah confronts Judah’s confidence in their temple ownership and practice. Despite God’s repeated warnings from other prophets, previous loss of the northern tribes, and encroaching foreign powers, those that remained in Jerusalem believed that the existence of the temple and their religious practice therein would ultimately keep them safe. Through the brave rhetoric of Jeremiah, God reveals his disdain for such confidence. In doing so, he mocks their religious practice, decries their lifestyle, exposes their injustice and lack of compassion, and promises judgment. It is in this exegetical analysis that Judah’s confidence and God’s displeasure is unpacked and applied.

Historical-geographical context. From the days of Ahaz (735-715 BC) to the reign of Josiah (639-609), Judah lived under the shadow of Assyria, with her very existence threatened in the days of Hezekiah. The Assyrian empire, however, weakened in the latter half of the 7th century BC allowing Josiah, the temple reformer, to expand his reign over much of the area occupied by the northern kingdom of Israel prior to its fall in 722 BC (2 Chr 34:6-7).¹ It had been some time since Judah had seen any expansion of its kingdom, and nationalistic fervor undoubtedly arose during the reign of Josiah. With the king’s sudden death in 609 at the hand of Egypt’s Neco (2 Chron 35:20-24), Judah was once again thrust into the position of a vassal state (2 Chron 36:2-4). As such a state of affairs was not uncommon on the landscape of their own history, there likely would have been only limited concern over Judah’s political future as a viable state. With, however, the growing and powerful nation of Babylon expanding its borders southerly towards Egypt, Judah had every reason to believe that it would be crushed between two

¹ F.B. Huey Jr., *Jeremiah, Lamentation*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 20.

warring, world powers² – unless of course it had some “card” which could be used to trump even the greatest of foes. It is into this historical and geographical context which Jeremiah spoke.³

Literary context. The book of Jeremiah is unique among the prophets in that it not only provides a record of prophetic oracles, but also provides the reader with an insider’s perspective on the life and struggles of an unpopular prophet. It is in chapter 7 that the reader is given a deeper understanding of just why Jeremiah was so unpopular. While Jeremiah was forceful in his earliest preaching (as found in chapters 1-6⁴), his prophetic themes were similar to other prophets of his day and were likely tolerated. It is only when he attacks the source of Judah’s “sense of well-being” that his life is put in danger (18:18; 20:6, 26:1-4, 36:1-26, 37:11-16; 38:1-16) and the personal laments begin to flow (11:19b-20; 12:1-4; 15:10, 15-18; 17:14-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18). This attack takes shape in the form of a judgment speech or sermon and presumably is placed where it is in the text so that the reader might understand the nuance of Jeremiah’s message that sparked such a violent and antagonistic response. As historical prose, the passage should be read as a record of the dialogue that occurred at a physical place (the temple) at a specific time (likely 609-608).

The text itself can be divided into five distinct units by both literary and thematic markers. The first unit (vv. 1-7) is set off by its introductory remarks (vv 1-3a) and subsequent if-then propositions (3b-7). The second unit (vv. 8-11) is bracketed by two emphatic “Behold” statements. The third section (vv. 12-15) begins after the second “Behold” and ends as the intended audience switches to Jeremiah. The

² Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah*, The Bible Speaks Today Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1987), 48.

³ The content of Jeremiah’s sermon as found in ch. 7 is similar to that which is indicated in the narrative account of ch. 26 in which Jeremiah is also found in the temple. This gives the present author as well as others reason to conclude that the temple sermon of ch. 7 was presented early in the reign of Jehoiakim (609-605, 26:1). See among others J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, New International Commentary of the Old Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 274; Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1991), 119. Such a conclusion is consistent with the apparent concern for safety Jeremiah’s audience felt as well as the fact that there is no indication in ch. 7 that the Babylonian invasion of 605 had already occurred. In other words, one can say with relative certainty that the sermon took place from 609 to 605, with an early date of 609-608 preferred.

⁴ Evidence that suggests that ch. 1-6 were spoken and/or recorded prior to the ch. 7 are the headings of 1:1 and 3:6 and the lack of post-exilic dialogue.

fourth section (16-20) is marked by words to Jeremiah (v. 16), while the final section (vv. 21-26) re-addresses Jeremiah's audience. These literary divisions are upheld by thematic shifts in the passage as will be evident by the following discussion.

Verses 1-7. After the introductory statement (vv. 1-3a) identifies the source of the message (the LORD), the medium of the message (Jeremiah), the location of the message (the temple gate), and the recipients of the message (Judahite worshippers at the temple), Jeremiah presents the thesis of the opening paragraph and in many ways the entire passage: “Amend your ways and your deeds, and I will let you dwell in this place” (v. 3b). Insight into the unacceptable “ways and deeds”⁵ is found in the two sentences that remain in the paragraph. First, it is evident from the trice repeated saying, “This is the temple of the LORD” (v. 4), that the people have deceived themselves into believing that the temple was the source of their national security – and that because of their possession of it God was somehow bound to keep them from being overrun by surrounding nations.⁶ The source of this theology will be examined more fully later; suffice it to say for now that the change in ways called for by the Lord included a change in the locus of their trust. Secondly, the reader finds in vv. 5-7 that God was not just concerned about right thinking, but also about right doing – in fact, the latter would be the sign that one had “truly” amended their ways. The right action God called for was the abolition of injustice (as particularly related to the neighbor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow) as well as murder⁷ and idolatry. The indicated behaviors are not new teaching, but have undeniable ties to the Mosaic law.⁸ Their abolition is a condition of the

⁵ The phrase “your ways and your deeds” would appear to be a merismus, that is a complementary word pairing that should be treated as single unit. The pairing of “ways and deeds” is common for Jeremiah (4:18; 7:5; 17:10; 18:11; 23:22; 25:5; 26:13; 32:19).

⁶ Walter, Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 74.

⁷ To “shed innocent blood” could mean unjust execution in legal proceedings or child sacrifice consistent with their idolatry. In either case, murder would be involved.

⁸ For example, the triad of “alien, orphan, and widow” can be found in Ex 22:21-24; Deut 10:18-19; 16:11,14; 24:17-22; Ps 146:9.

people's future in "this place"⁹ (v. 7) – a condition which also has its antecedent in the Law (Deuteronomy 28-30).

Verses 8-11. The second unit of the subject passage (vv. 8-11) is bracketed by the emphatic "Behold" (v. 8, 11) and essentially undresses the hypocritical religious practice of Jeremiah's audience. The paragraph, as indicated by another recognition of deception (v. 8), is a corollary of the first, and may be summed up as follows: One cannot expect to act in ways counter to the character of God and then presume he will receive the protection of God. Apparently the Judahites were involved in thievery, murder, adultery, lying, and idolatry (v. 9) all of which were outlined in the Decalogue as defaming the very name of God which is attached to the temple (v. 10-11). The people considered themselves safe in the temple despite their abominable behavior, which God saw as no different than the behavior of a band of robbers (v. 11) that would commit detestable crimes only to crawl back into their safe dens. That the people believed the temple could provide them a safety zone should not be dismissed as naïve. Had not God chosen Jerusalem and the temple as his place to dwell (Ps 11:4, 132:13-14)? Had not Samaria fallen because it had no temple? Hadn't Sennacherib failed when he tried to take Jerusalem (2 Kgs 19)?¹⁰ Had not Josiah seen great victory when he re-instituted the centrality of temple worship (2 Chr 34)? Had not God promised to defend the temple (Is 37:33-35)? Did not God hear David's cry from the temple (Ps 18:6)? Undoubtedly the behavior of the people was entrenched (see 5:12 and 6:14) in a theology that had become the new orthodoxy.¹¹ God saw through it (v. 11b), however, and would act accordingly.

Verses 12-15. This third section effectively communicates that one only needs to look to the past in order to understand that trusting in a "religious safe-haven" divorced from faithful obedience to God is fruitless. In verse 12, God reminds Israel of Shiloh, which was the first real home of the tabernacle and

⁹ The term "this place" is found 6 times in 7:1-26. In some instances, the phrase appears to be related to the temple, while in other places it appears to be related to the land, as is the case in v. 7. The ambiguity of the term, however, is not problematic in that the temple and the land are inextricably connected. See Terrence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, Georgia: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 133.

¹⁰ Elmer A. Martens, *Jeremiah*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1986), 74.

¹¹ Thomas Smothers, "Conflict at the House of God: Orthodoxy Versus Orthodoxy, Jeremiah 7:1-15," *Faith and Mission* 1 (1984), 48-55.

the arc of the covenant, but nonetheless was abandoned and accompanied by defeat.¹² The reason for the abandonment was due to “the wickedness of my people Israel” (v. 12). Because the Judahites that Jeremiah addresses exhibit the same wickedness (despite God’s “rising early and speaking”¹³), God promises to abandon the present temple and bring defeat and loss to the land of Judah as he did to Shiloh (v. 14). To punctuate the argument, a second historical example is implied – the destruction of the northern tribes (“Ephraim,” v. 15), which though not stated also occurred due to wickedness and a refusal to listen (2 Kgs 17:7-23).

Verses 16-20. The fourth section is directed to Jeremiah and calls him to not pray for the Judahites. The injunction on prayer is not the only one Jeremiah would receive (see 11:14; 14:11; 15:1). Considering that God is pleased by prayers that are aimed at repentance (1 Tim 2:1-4) and the fact that the Deuteronomic covenant – “obey and you will be blessed, disobey and you will be cursed” – is alluded to throughout this passage, it can be concluded that the prayer God will not listen to is the one that asks for blessing apart from obedience. In other words, God’s directive in this paragraph is: Do not pray for blessing for those whose lives are adamantly lived in contradiction to the ways of God. The disobedience that God addresses here is rampant and pervasive idolatry that involves men, women, and children (v. 18). Together they prepare and offer customary cakes¹⁴ to the “queen of heaven” whose

¹² The arc was located in Shiloh at the time of Eli (1 Sam 4:3). After losing a battle to the Philistines the Israelites concluded that they could reverse their fortunes if they take the arc with them into battle. The result, however, was a horrifying defeat. There is no mention in the account that indicates that Shiloh itself was destroyed. While a Danish archaeological expedition suggests that Shiloh was destroyed c. 1050 BC (Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Vol. 6*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 429), others contest this date (R.A. Pearce, “Shiloh and Jer. VII 12, 14 & 15,” *Vetus Testamentum* 23, no. 1 (1973), 105-108.

105-8). Extrabiblical proof of a Samuelian date of destruction is not imperative in that Jeremiah’s audience knew that Shiloh, defeat, and the temple’s central artifact were inextricably related, such that the Psalmist could write: “He [God] abandoned the tabernacle of Shiloh” (Ps 78:60).

¹³ “Rising up early and speaking” (v. 13) is a Hebrew idiom that means “to speak again and again” (NIV). This strong anthropomorphism is used by Jeremiah often (7:25, 11:7; 25:3-4; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14-15; 44:4) with the same intended meaning on each occasion. See Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah” 429.

¹⁴ For a complete discussion on cake offerings in the ANE see Walter E. Rast, “Cakes for the King of Heaven,” *Scripture in History and Theology in Honor of Coert Rylaardsdam*, eds. Arthur L. Merrill and Thomas W. Overholt, (Pittsburg: Pickwick Press, 1977), 169.

identity¹⁵ is not certain, but in any case is abhorrent to God. The people's allegiance to this goddess was so great that even after the land was decimated by Babylon, they believed their demise had come about because of insufficient worship of the "queen" (see 44:19). If some thought this action would spite God for the present predicament Judah found itself in, God duly questions such an aim and suggests that it produces nothing but their own shame (v. 19). This shame would be exposed when Judah's "pouring out" of offerings to false gods (v. 18) is met by the "pouring out" of God's wrath on all elements of the land (v. 20), an expectation that is more fully detailed in the passage that follows (7:30-9:11).

Verses 21-26. The final section re-addresses Jeremiah's audience and re-emphasizes God's disdain of their religious practice. This is made clear when the Lord says, "Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh" (v. 21). Such a suggestion from God himself seems inconsistent, since it is the Lord who had decreed that meat from burnt offerings should not be eaten (Lev 7:25). But God dispels any such concern by reminding his listeners that from the very beginning his desire has been for obedience not sacrifice (v. 23, see also 1 Sam 15:22; Pro 15:8; Isa 1:11-17; Hos 6:6; Amos 5:21-25; Mal 1:10). Judah, however, never heeded his call and went its own way (v. 24), and this despite the fact that God had sent many prophets her way to call Judah to himself (vv. 25-26). That God's sees Israel's past stubbornness of heart and refusal to listen as relative to Jeremiah's generation is confirmed by the frequency of their mention throughout the book.¹⁶ One might say then that in this final paragraph God is shouting: Apart from an obedience that comes from listening to me, religious practice of any sort is worthless.

¹⁵ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 213.

¹⁶ For references to stubbornness of heart in Jeremiah see 3:17; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12; 23:17. For references regarding a refusal to listen see 6:17, 19; 7:27; 13:11; 17:23; 25:3-4, 7; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:13, 15-17; 36:31; 40:3; 42:13; 44:5; 44:16.

APPENDIX: SYNTACTICAL LAYOUT & EXEGETICAL OUTLINE

	1	The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD , saying,	
	2	"Stand in the gate of the LORD'S house and proclaim there this word and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah , who enter by these gates to worship the LORD!'"	
	3	Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel,	
Proposition		"Amend your ways and your deeds,	
Result	4	and I will let you dwell in this place. "Do not trust in deceptive words, saying, 'This is the temple of the LORD, () the temple of the LORD, () the temple of the LORD.'	I. A Call to Change Misplaced Trust
Conditional	5	" For if you truly amend your ways and your deeds,	
Conditional	6	if you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, or the widow,	A. Stop trusting in the temple
Conditional		and () do not shed innocent blood in this place,	
Conditional		nor () walk after other gods to your own ruin,	B. Change the way you treat others
Result	7	then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.	C. If you change, I will let you stay

Proposition	8	(Behold) you are trusting in deceptive words to no avail.
	9	"Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery and swear falsely, and offer sacrifices to Baal and walk after other gods that you have not known, then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name, and say, 'We are delivered!' -- that you may do all these abominations?"
Purpose	10	"Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of robbers in your sight?"
Result Emphatic	11	(Behold) I, even I, have seen it," declares the LORD.

II. The Look of Misplaced Trust

A. A lying life

B. A house of liars --
exposed

Effect A	12	"But go now to My place which was in Shiloh	where I made My name dwell at the first,
Cause A		and see what I did to it	
Cause B	13	because of the wickedness of My people Israel.	
		"And now, because you have done all these things," declares the LORD,	
		and () I spoke to you,	
		rising up early and speaking,	
		but you did not hear,	
		and () I called you	
Inferential	14	but you did not answer,	
		therefore, I will do to the house	which is called by My name,
			in which you trust,
		and to the place	
		which I gave you and your fathers,	
Comparative		as I did to Shiloh,	
Effect B	15	"I will cast you out of My sight,	
Comparative		as I have cast out all your brothers, all the offspring of Ephraim.	

III. Historical Results of Misplaced Trust

A. Shiloh fell, so will you

B. Ephraim fell, so will you

Proposition	16	" As for you , do not pray for this people, and do not lift up cry or prayer for them, and do not intercede with Me; for I do not hear you.	IV. A Word to Jeremiah about Those who Trust in the Temple A. Don't pray for people
	17	"Do you not see what they are doing in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?	B. They are wicked
Purpose	18	"The children gather wood, and the fathers kindle the fire, and the women knead dough to make cakes for the queen of heaven; and they pour out drink offerings to other gods in order to spite Me.	
Purpose	19	"Do they spite Me?" declares the LORD. "Is it not themselves they spite, to their own shame?"	
Inferential Emphatic	20	Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, Behold , My anger and My wrath will be poured out on this place, on man and on beast and on the trees of the field and on the fruit of the ground; and it will burn and not be quenched."	C. I will judge them

Proposition	21	Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel,
	22	"Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices and eat flesh.
Temporal		" For I did not speak to your fathers,
		or command them
		in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt,
		concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices.
	23	" But this is what I commanded them, saying,
Result		'Obey My voice,
Result		and I will be your God,
		and you will be My people;
Result		and you will walk in all the way which I command you,
		that it may be well with you.'
	24	" Yet they did not obey
		or incline their ear,
		but walked in their own counsels
		and in the stubbornness of their evil heart,
		and went backward
		and not forward.
Temporal	25	" Since the day that your fathers came out of the land of Egypt
		until this day,
		I have sent you all My servants the prophets, daily rising early
		and sending them.
	26	" Yet they did not listen to Me
		or incline their ear,
		but stiffened their neck;
		they did more evil than their fathers.

V. A History of Trusting in
Sacrifice and Not
Obedience

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