

Seek the Peace of the City... For in Her Peace There Shall Be Peace for You (Jeremiah 29:4-9)

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ABSTRACT

Most of the uses of the concept שָׁלוֹם in the book of Jeremiah are negative. They are related either to the false concept of peace in Judah that was being promoted by political and religious leaders, or to the oracles of false prophets who were opposed to the ministry of Jeremiah. This essay argues that for these opponents (false prophets, political and religious leaders), the assurance of peace was mostly grounded in a false sense of security motivated by the traditions of Zion's inviolability and the election of the Davidic dynasty. However, Jeremiah himself uses the word שָׁלוֹם in 29:7 to urge the exiles of Judah in Babylon to seek the peace of the city where they have been forced to live. The hard question this article tries to address is: how could exiles seek the peace of their enemy? Jeremiah responds to the question in two ways: the exiles must first accept that they are not in Babylon because of the military power of the army of Nebucadnezzar, but because of their disobedience to the covenant. Secondly, Yahweh has not forgotten his people despite their current situation in exile. The author analyzes this passage in the context of Africa, where it is not uncommon to learn that refugees are creating problems for the cities where they live.

1 INTRODUCTION

The word שָׁלוֹם (*shalom/peace*) is one of the key concepts in the book of Jeremiah. The prophet from Anathoth uses it 26 times.¹ Many of these uses are related either to false prophets' oracles or to a false concept of peace in the community.² To give but a few examples, in 14:13, Jeremiah complains about false prophets who were saying to the people: "You shall not see the sword, nor shall there be famine, but enduring שָׁלוֹם I will give you in this place." In 4:10, he directly complains to God who has allowed false prophets to continue telling lies about peace while devastation was approaching: "Lord God, surely you have totally deceived this people, and Jerusalem too, in saying you shall have

¹ If one considers all the doublets, the word שָׁלוֹם is used 31 times in the book of Jeremiah.

² Of the 26 uses, the following 16 (22) references are of direct interest to the concept of peace as used in the Jerusalem cultic community: 4:10 (23:17); 6:14 (8:11) six references; 12:12; 14:13; 8:15 (14:19); 15:5; 28:9; 29:7 (3 references); 29:11; 30:5; 33:6; 33:9; 38:4.

שְׁלֹום, when a sword is pricking their throat." Finally, in 6:14 Jeremiah utters a strong complaint: "They have healed my people's wound superficially, saying: "שְׁלֹום שְׁלֹום but there is no שְׁלֹום." Thus, the concept שְׁלֹום might be one of the distinguishing marks of Jeremiah's prophetic opponents.

From the examples given above, it is possible that for these opponents (both prophets and political and religious leaders), the assurance of peace was mostly grounded in a false sense of security motivated by the traditions of Zion's inviolability and the election of the Davidic dynasty.³ In this way, most of the uses of the concept שְׁלֹום by Jeremiah in relation to the false prophets are negative, except in one case, Jer 29:7, where he uses it positively, to urge the exiles of Judah in Babylon to seek the peace of the city where they have been forced to live.

In the context of the exile, this is an interesting passage. In chapters 27 and 28, Jeremiah warned his fellow citizens several times to submit to Babylon. Unfortunately, the people of Judah rejected his advice. As a consequence, the country was devastated, and a good number of people were taken into exile.

In chapter 29, Jeremiah continues with the same message. This time, he addresses his letter to the people of Judah who are already living in exile. Jeremiah sent a letter in which he asks them not to have a negative attitude toward Babylon or start another rebellion against it, but to live in שְׁלֹום (peace) and seek the שְׁלֹום (peace)⁴ for their new home.

In the context of Africa, this is an interesting passage. It is not uncommon to learn that refugees create problems for the cities where they live. A recent case is that of Uganda where in July 2010, at least 50 people were killed and more than 100 admitted in hospitals as a result of three separate bomb blasts in Kampala, the Ugandan capital as the residents watched the 2010 World Cup final on giant screens.

BBC News Africa of July 12, 2010 reported a message from a certain Somali Sheik Yusuf Sheik Issa who made the following statement to the Asso-

³ John Bright, *Covenant and Promise: The Future in the Preaching of the Pre-Exilic Prophets* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 140-41 expresses this idea of a false sense of security in Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah well: "Men could tell themselves that, regardless of what the future might hold, no reason existed to worry about the nation's continued survival. Has not God promised to David a dynasty that will never end? Is not this temple-palace here in our midst on Mt Zion? Is it conceivable that he would ever abandon it, and the city in which it stands, to destruction? Perhaps the future will bring crisis after crisis – who knows? *But one thing is sure: this nation will always survive. God has so promised, and he does not alter the word that passed from his lips or lie to David [Ps. 89:33-37]*" (emphasis mine).

⁴ Most English versions and commentators translate the Hebrew word שְׁלֹום with "welfare."

ciated Press News: "Uganda is one of our enemies. Whatever makes them cry makes us happy. May Allah's anger be upon those who are against us."⁵ We understand this statement from the fact that Somali extremists are not happy with Ugandan involvement in keeping peace in their country. In fact, they have been promising similar attacks to all the countries that have sent soldiers to protect the current government.

It might be difficult to prove that this attack was carried out by the Somali refugees living in Uganda, but the attack put the life of such "exiles" in Uganda and the entire East Africa region in greater danger, as Ugandan military and security agents started extending operations among Somali refugees to investigate if any had been involved in the blast. This essay seeks to understand the text of Jer 29:4-9 in its context and in its relevance to my African context. The reading of my context is instinctive, spontaneous, especially when there is a clear connection between the text and the interpreter's context. In other words, where possible, my interpretation will be a permanent conversation between Jeremiah's and my own context, be it social, religious, economic or political.

B THE TEXT IN ITS CONTEXT

1 Literary Context

Jeremiah 29 is a complex and confusing document.⁶ Its analysis presents severe difficulties.⁷ John Hill rightly recognizes that the limits of the letter are difficult to define.⁸ Dennis Bratcher notices that most scholarly attention has been directed toward identifying an original core of the chapter and the interpretative redactional additions.⁹ In this process, some have even suggested that the entire

⁵ The same information can be found in Josh Kron, "Bombers Kill More than 50 in Attacks in Uganda Capital," *The New York Times* 11 July (2010); n.p. [cited 28 May 2013]. Online: www.nytimes.com/2010/07/12/world/africa/12uganda.html?_r=0.

⁶ Jean Hadey, "Jérémie 29: Demain n'est pas Hier...," in *Lire et Dire: Etudes Exégétiques en vue de la Prédication* 64 (2005): 5. Hadey qualifies the text of Jer 29 as an accumulated and disorganized oracles that challenges all search for coherence: "*Le livre de Jérémie se présente comme une accumulation assez désordonnée d'oracles et de récits, qui défie encore toute recherche de cohérence d'ensemble.*"

⁷ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2 (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989) 134.

⁸ John Hill, *Foe or friend? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah* MT (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 145.

⁹ Dennis Bratcher, "Jeremiah 1:4-10," in *The Voice: Biblical and Theological Resources for Growing Christians*, 2009; n.p. [cited 22 April 2013]. Online: <http://www.textweek.com/prophets/jer1.htm>.

section of chs. 27-29 is an independent tradition within the surrounding material.¹⁰

The chapter is introduced as the “written document”¹¹ (הֲסִירָה) that Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to Babylon (v. 1). This written document seems to be more than an ordinary letter. For example, the messenger formula כִּי אָמַר יְהֹוָה (thus says Yahweh), typical of prophetic speech begins every unit addressed to the exiles: vv. 4, 8, 10, 16, 17, 21, 25, 31, 32. This is why some have qualified this chapter as a “prophetic booklet”¹² sent to the exiles in Babylon. However, despite all the challenges presented by the text, a careful reading can reveal how the chapter should be broken up into several parts, including most probably some interpretive redactional additions:

- The king’s messengers carry Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles in Babylon (vv. 1-9);¹³
- Jeremiah’s message is expanded in vv. 10-23 to both the exiles and those who remained in the land (v. 16), explaining to them that there is a future for the exiles (vv. 11-14), but that this hope for a future must be deferred for seventy years (v. 10), after which they will be brought back home;
- In the meantime, there is an announcement of God’s anger first against the people who remain in the land and who continue to reject God’s messengers (vv. 15-19);
- and second, against Zedekiah and Ahab who also continue to mislead the exiles (vv. 21-23);
- Shemaiah, one of the exiles, reacts to Jeremiah’s letter by sending another letter to Zephaniah, the priest in Jerusalem, asking him to rebuke Jeremiah and put him in the stocks (vv. 25-28);
- Zephaniah reads Shemaiah’s letter to Jeremiah but it seems that he did not take any action against the prophet (v. 29);

¹⁰ Bratcher, “Jeremiah 1:4-10,” n.p.

¹¹ John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980) 545, translates the word הֲסִירָה by “the text of the letter.”

¹² Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* (Dallas, Tex.: Word Books Publishers, 1995), 65.

¹³ In this section, vv. 1-3, provides an introductory framework for the letter, and should therefore not be considered as part of the body of the letter itself (this is why I do not include it in my analysis). Like many commentators I think I think the body of the original letter is contained in vv. 4-9. Some limit it to vv. 4-7 (see for example, Hadey, “Jeremie 29,” 3).

- The Lord then commands Jeremiah to deliver an oracle against Shemaiah (vv. 24, 30-32).

For this article, we consider vv. 4-9 as embodying the basic theme of this document. It can be summarized this way: settle down and "live peacefully" in Babylon; pray for the peace of Babylon (vv. 4-7), and do not listen to optimistic prophets who falsely excite your hopes (vv. 8-9).

2 Historical Context

There is no indication of a precise date for this letter, but it is clear from vv. 1 and 2 that the setting of the correspondence is in the days immediately following the downfall of Judah in 597 B.C.E.. The culmination of this downfall was the carrying away of the elite of Judah: king Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, the smiths and a good number of the vessels of the Temple. One would expect that the people of Judah and their leaders would learn from these painful events, but they became more and more divided. This division was both religious and political and could be observed among the exiles and those who remained in the land. The main issue that divided the nation was this: should the people submit to Babylon whose army was still threatening the nation or revolt against it by seeking help from Egypt and the neighboring smaller nations?¹⁴ Yahweh sent his prophet to give clear guidance.

Thus, chapter 29 can be summarized in the following four points:

- (i) Jeremiah received information that false prophets in Babylon were agitating the exiles telling them that Yahweh, their God, would act quickly against Babylon and that they would return home soon (29:24-32). As a consequence of the activity of these false prophets, the exiles were becoming hesitant to make any effort to accept their situation and adjust to their new surroundings for a long stay.¹⁵ In this sense, Jeremiah's letter can be called a pastoral letter to give direction to the exiles during a time of uncertainty and crisis.
- (ii) For the people who remained in the land, this was a time of unrest in the region and king Zedekiah of Judah was under pressure to break with Babylon. This pressure was from both inside and outside.

From inside, the new elite was pro-Egyptian and saw in Necho and later in his successor Psammetichus II, the political potential that might

¹⁴ It is important to note that this division runs throughout the book of Jeremiah, but that it becomes more apparent from ch. 26 and continues until after the total destruction of Jerusalem during the reign of Zedekiah.

¹⁵ F. B. Huey, Jr. *Jeremiah, Lamentations: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman Press, 1993), 250-51.

restore a balance of power to the region and allow Judah and other small nations to regain independence. False prophets who had become popular were beating these drums of nationalism.

From outside, Egypt has been consistently stirring up discontent among the small surrounding kingdoms, especially Edom, Moab, Ammon, Phoenicia and Judah itself. It is more probably in this context that in the fourth year of Zedekiah's reign, the year of the accession of Psammetichus II, the Egyptian king sent a delegation to Jerusalem, to encourage King Zedekiah to join the anti-Babylonian coalition (27:3).¹⁶

- (iii) There was a period of unrest all over the Babylonian Empire. In 596-595, Elam attempted to attack Babylon but was repelled (cf. Jer 49:34-39). A year after this attack (which was Nebuchadnezzar's tenth year), the king of Babylon had to quickly put down a rebellion in the capital itself, in which some of the deported Jews seemed to have been involved. Nebuchadnezzar executed at least two of them (29:21-23). All these events seem to have made Nebuchadnezzar vulnerable and opened the door to surrounding nations to hope for a change in the region.¹⁷
- (iv) The fact that Jeremiah's letter was sent by official envoys from Zedekiah to Nebuchadnezzar (29:3) fits well with a date of 594 B.C.E., when Zedekiah may have been obliged to report on recent events in Judah and to reaffirm his loyalty. This also means that at the beginning of this rebellion against Babylon, Zedekiah might not have joined the conspiracy. However, it is clear from chapter 39 that the political restlessness continued to mount, reaching its peak in 588 B.C.E. when a new Egyptian pharaoh, Apries (called Hophra in 44:30) came to the throne (589-570 B.C.E.),¹⁸ and probably forced Zedekiah to change his mind.

C THE MESSAGE

1 Naming the Author of the Exile (v. 4)

Verse 4 opens with the introductory prophetic formula **כִּי אַמְرָה יְהוָה** and it marks the beginning of the body of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. Two important elements in the passage can be underlined: (a) Yahweh as the true author of the

¹⁶ Keown, Scalise and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 47, quote Drives (*Textus 4* [1964] 86-88) who purports that the diplomatic mission from the five neighboring kings might have come during Zedekiah's first year, in the month of Shebat (596 B.C.E.).

¹⁷ A good summary of Nebuchadnezzar's reign can be found in William S. Lasor, "Nebuchadnezzar," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 506-508.

¹⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *The Living World of the Old Testament* (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1967), 346.

exile, and (b) the confusion between Nebuchadnezzar and Yahweh as the authors of exile.

1a The naming of Yahweh as the true author of this exile

Verse 4 states: *Thus says Yahweh, the Lord of Hosts, God of Israel, to all the exiles whom "I" have exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon.*

This introductory prophetic formula helps to establish that Jeremiah's word is not his own, but comes from God. As in all prophetic books, Jeremiah is the messenger of Yahweh. However, if the larger context of the passage is taken into consideration, if one takes into consideration the larger context of this passage, one can quickly notice a tension concerning the formula. In chapter 26, Jeremiah had to defend himself against accusations that he was not speaking for God (26:12, 15). In the same way, one can also note a bitter contest between Jeremiah and "other" prophets in chapters 27-29. In these passages, Jeremiah struggles to prove that he was sent by Yahweh and that others were not. Unfortunately, at some point, the false prophets seem to have won the battle against Jeremiah. In other words, it appears that in the context of crisis the people tended to listen to the false prophets more than to Jeremiah. In chapter 28 in particular, Hananiah, probably the leader of the false prophets, uses exactly the same formula during his confrontation with Jeremiah (28:2). In v. 11 of that chapter, Jeremiah, confronted by Hananiah, seems to be short of words and prophecies. The text states that "at this, the prophet Jeremiah (silently)¹⁹ went on his way." This must have created confusion among the people who listened to the contesting prophetic groups, because it might have been difficult to determine who was telling the truth. This confusion is one of the central issues of these chapters, the problem of determining whether a prophecy is true or false. The implication might be that the prophetic formula *כִּי אָמַר יְהוָה* (*thus says Yahweh*) alone is not by itself a valid indicator that a prophet's oracle is God's message. This passage helps us to understand our contemporary context. Our century has produced many prophets, especially in independent churches and sects and it is not easy for the people of God today to discern the true message coming from Yahweh. For the book of Jeremiah in particular, Dennis Batcher²⁰ helps us to grasp the nature of this confusion when he says:

This helps reveal the larger and most important overarching issue in this text that the conflict between prophets highlights: the tension between established orthodoxy that is safe and credible, that expresses what the people have come to expect of God; and the lone voice that represents a newness in history, that speaks an upheaval of the status quo that cannot be contained in the old orthodoxy and

¹⁹ The word in parenthesis is my addition.

²⁰ Batcher, "Jeremiah 1:1-10," n.p.

the old promises, the "heresy" that is the true voice of God for the future...

Thus according to Bratcher, the confusion came from what people wanted to hear – that is, the old theology that Yahweh will never forsake his people and his holy city, despite their unfaithfulness. This is what the false prophets were singing in the ears of the people.

The immediate context for the tension and confusion in our reading is Jeremiah's instructions to the exiles contained in the letter. This was a time of severe national crisis. God has finally punished his people by sending a good number of them into exile because of their disobedience. Again, we know from our African experiences, that such a period of crisis (both political and socio-economic) can open the door to many false prophecies, thus deceiving multitudes with wonders and promising them a quick bright new future.

1b The confusion between Nebuchadnezzar and Yahweh as the authors

In v. 1, it was stated that this letter which Jeremiah sent, was addressed to the rest of the elders of the exile, the priests, the prophets, and all the people whom "Nebuchadnezzar" had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.

This is an interesting combination of Yahweh and Nebuchadnezzar as the two authors of the exile, though v. 4 clearly shows that there is a shift from Nebuchadnezzar to Yahweh himself. Both the combination and the shift tell us that there is a relationship between the Babylonian king and the God of Israel. In the book of Jeremiah, Nebuchadnezzar is presented as Yahweh's partner in dealing with Judah and other surrounding nations (Jer 25:9-11). In 25:9, 27:6 and 43:10, Yahweh goes further by calling Nebuchadnezzar "my servant."

In the OT, the title "Yahweh's servant" is normally used for a few persons who had a special relationship with God and who were obedient to his will in the life of his people. These were people like Moses (Num 12:7; Josh 1:2, 7), David (1 Sam 22:8; 2 Sam 3:18; 1 Kgs 11:32, 34), and Isaiah the prophet (Isa 44:28).²¹ So, this designation of Nebuchadnezzar is the only place where a foreign king is called Yahweh's servant in the OT.

What this designation means in this passage is that Nebuchadnezzar is the instrument that Yahweh chose in order to bring divine judgment to his unrepentant people. In other words, after unsuccessfully using the prophets to warn Judah (25:4), now God sends his "servant," Nebuchadnezzar, to punish this people for their wickedness. Said differently, the picture that Jeremiah paints of Nebuchadnezzar reflects the prophet's understanding of God's work.

²¹ John 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. Martin Kessler; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 154.

As it will become clear in the interpretation of v. 7, Jeremiah understood that Yahweh had given Nebuchadnezzar the power and the authority to subjugate kingdoms and nations. As the instruments of God's judgment,²² the king of Babylon and Yahweh are partners in the banishment of Judah.²³ However, it is important to note that this partnership is not without limit and restraint.²⁴

2 Exhorting the Exiles to Settle Down in Babylon (vv. 5-7)

Verse 5 is an admonition to the exiles to settle down in their new land. Yahweh, through his prophet, gives four clear directions about life in the new city.

2a Build Houses and Settle Down

First, Jeremiah tells them to build houses and live in them. This must have been a response to the question being asked by the newly arrived exiled people of Judah. This was a time of uncertainty, of fear, of terrible depression and tension. Leo Perdue thinks this was the most important crisis that the people of Judah had to face.²⁵ Therefore, it was important to help them settle down and show them how to cope with this new situation. They needed to develop a new "metanarrative" that provided a theological basis for existence. In other words, they needed a change of mindset, accept their situation and consider their stay in Babylon as positive.

Jeremiah's advice that they build homes in Babylon implies that they had not been there for a long time, and these first years must have been very difficult for them. There is a general agreement among scholars that life for the Judean captives was relatively pleasant.²⁶ The argument to support this view is

²² Among the many researches on the figure of Nebuchadnezzar in the book of Jeremiah, one can read with interest Thomas W. Overholt, "King Nabuchadnezzar in the Jeremiah Tradition," *CBQ* 30 (1968): 46.

²³ John Hill, *Friend or Foe?*, 146.

²⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 510. He argues that the actual working out of "Babylonian policy, reflects no such restraint, no mercy congruent with the intended mercy of Yahweh . . . This is why the book of Jeremiah, so long supportive of Babylonian policy as reflective of Yahweh's intention, culminates in a savage, extended oracle against Babylon (chapters 50-51)."

²⁵ Leo G. Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 99.

²⁶ Leon J. Wood, *A Survey of Israel's History* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 385-86. He lists five factors to demonstrate that the deportees lived fairly well in Babylon: (1) some of Judah's own institutions (elders, prophets, priests) were maintained (Jer 29:1); (2) the captives enjoyed freedom of movement in the land (Ezek 8:1); (3) they had contact with those who remained in Judah (Jer 29:25; 28:3-4); (4) they certainly had opportunities for employment; (5) they were permitted to live on fine, fertile land (Ezek 1:1,3; 3:15, 23, etc.). See also John Bright, *A History of*

the fact that when allowed to go home, some did not want to return (Ezra 8:15). But this understanding of the exile can be misleading, because we need to remember that the deportation was primarily Yahweh's punishment. Jeremiah 29 was uttered during the first years of the deportation. This must have been a time of terrible suffering for the deportees. Adjustment takes time in a foreign land. The exiles left home under foreign military pressure, probably with beating and humiliation.

This reminds me of the situation of Rwandan refugees who flooded the eastern part of DR Congo in June 1994. At their arrival in our country, those who had cars and other precious items started selling them at a very derisory sum. I know some who sold their luxurious cars for only four hundred American dollars or even less. Others went ahead to "sell" their daughters to local Congolese people with the expectation that the sons-in-law would help other members of the family with some food and shelter. Others did this for physical protection from the hostile local population overwhelmed by the number of refugees and from the undisciplined and corrupted Congolese army who was abusing helpless refugees. Unfortunately, whatever they were able to sell, was not enough to help them survive for a long time. From this picture of Rwandan refugees, I can argue that the situation of Judeans might have been difficult at the beginning of the exile.

Another aspect of the suffering comes from the fact that the Judeans thought of themselves as the people of the most powerful God, who was protecting his nation from his unshakable temple in Zion. Therefore, for the elites and the advocates of the long-trusted "official theology," the humiliation of being led captive in a foreign land, far from the temple (and therefore from Yahweh) was agonizing. It was torture – both physical and spiritual.

In addition, economically speaking, these were the people who owned so many things in Jerusalem, who enjoyed a good life but who now found themselves far from these comforts. Thus I have my doubts about the simplistic argument that Judeans enjoyed a good life in exile right from the beginning. This way of thinking needs to be analyzed again in order to discover how life was during the first years of the exile, and what the factors were that helped them to slowly adjust in the foreign land.²⁷

Israel (3rd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 345-6; Joseph Rhymer, *The Exile* (vol. 4 of *The Babylonian Experience: A Way Through the Old Testament*; London: Sheed, 1971), 65-66.

²⁷ As one can read in my argument, I recognize that the people of Judah managed to adjust well in exile (can this be part of Yahweh's promise to set his eyes on the exiles?), but it will not be realistic to accept that this adjustment came as easily as some might think. Otherwise, it could not have been a punishment from Yahweh.

One good example in the Bible that shows the plight of refugees is Ps 137, composed most likely by one who was in Babylon among the exiles.²⁸ The opening stanza of the poem recalls how the Israelites refused to sing their sacred songs in Babylon for the amusement of their conquerors. These were enemies who had destroyed Jerusalem, who had looted and maybe destroyed the Lord's temple, but who then had the effrontery and cruelty of asking the Israelite refugees to sing to them a temple song. With this poem and the reaction of the exiles, we cannot say that everything was all right for Judeans in Babylon, especially at the beginning of the exile. It is true that with Yahweh's help, they indeed adjusted and most of them were richly blessed. But I would think of Judah in exile (especially at the time this prophecy was uttered) as essentially a community that grieved and longed for their homeland.

2b Plant Gardens and Eat their Fruit

Secondly, Yahweh asks them to plant gardens and eat their produce. These farming activities imply a certain attitude. One needs to accept that he will be there for a long period before he starts looking for a piece of land to cultivate. Jeremiah's advice probably means that the exiles were reluctant to do this. In our days, most refugees live in tents and survive from UNHCR-donated food. They keep pressing the international community to quickly find solutions to their problem. What this means is that refugees normally find themselves counting the days till they return home, marking the time meanwhile.²⁹ Jeremiah's mission was to correct this negative attitude and remind them that they will be in Babylon for a long time and that their stay there "must not simply be negative because their home for the indefinite future must be in Babylon, and it is there that they must build their lives."³⁰

John Hill notices that in Jer 29, Babylon is represented as a place in which the exiles can experience the very blessings of land which the Deuteronomic traditions associate with life in the land given by Yahweh to Israel.³¹ Nevertheless, G. Keown, P. Scalise and T. Smothers contrast the situation of the description of settlement in Canaan in Josh 24:13 with Jer 29:5-7. In Joshua, "cultivated land, cities, vineyards, and olive groves, all of which were technical and cultural achievements representing generations of work, were given to the Israelite settlers. In the Babylonian exile, however, they had to begin with the basics, family homes for shelters and kitchen garden for sus-

²⁸ This text might be located in the last deportation of 586 B.C.E., but it does not make any difference, as long as it shows how degrading the humiliation of the exiles was.

²⁹ See Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 141.

³⁰ Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 141.

³¹ Hill, *Friend or Foe?*, 127.

nance."³² However, in both situations, Yahweh's promise of blessings was assured.

2c Get Married and Have Children and Grandchildren

Thirdly, Jeremiah emphasized not only the settling down in the land, but called them to focus on the next generation, those who would be the bearers of a new future that was to come. Thus Yahweh, through his prophet, asks his people to "take wives and become the fathers of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters...." (Jer 29:6)

This passage reminds us of the mandate to multiply that Yahweh pronounced on humankind in the book of Genesis. It also reminds us of the great increase of the children of Israel in Egypt before the exodus (Exod 1:7). Wherever they went and whatever the situation, God wanted his people to multiply. In this specific passage, the command is to guarantee a future generation of children that will survive beyond the exile (v. 6).

Read carefully, the passage suggests that the exiles will be in Babylon for at least two generations. The text says that they have to marry and have children and give wives/husband to these children so that these might also have children. Understood this way, Jer 29 seems to say that the generation that went into exile has already lost the future. There is no hope for them to return home. It was therefore important that they focus on the next generation that will experience restoration in the land.

Such a message would have been an extremely bitter realization for the exiles, especially those who were mistaken that there still was hope of immediate return. This is true not only for the exiles, but for many of us who have difficulty investing in something that cannot be immediately gainful. We tend to claim each promise from God as our own, rather than accepting it as something that will benefit those who will live many generations after us. This is the truth that Yahweh was trying to communicate to the exiles through Jeremiah. In other words, God was saying that the present has been lost, and that the focus must now be on preparing the future generation that will return home from Babylon.

This passage speaks loudly to our own situation in Africa. Many countries have experienced years of wars and destruction with lasting consequences. Rebuilding Uganda after many years of bloody conflicts and wars (1971 to 1986) has taken years. It is the same with Liberia, Sierra Leone, the DRC, etc., where the reconstruction is painfully but slowly taking place. How many years will it take for the Somali people to rebuild their country after they have

³² Keown, Scalise and Smothers, *Jeremiah*, 71.

destroyed it for many years? There will surely be at least one whole generation of Somalis who have no hope for a normal life in their land.

There is another interesting intertextual reading of these three verses (5-7) particularly in the light of the books of Deuteronomy and Isaiah. Deuteronomy 20 refers to the conduct of the holy war in general. In 20:5-7, there is an exemption given to three categories of people: "anyone who has built a new house and has not dedicated it" (v. 5a), "anyone who has planted a vineyard and has not begun to use its fruit" (v. 6), "anyone who is engaged to a woman and has not married her" (v. 7). The explanation of the exemption of the people engaged in these activities is that these activities represent the blessings associated with the nation's life in the Promised Land which was given to them by Yahweh. Nobody should, therefore, be deprived of their enjoyment. Whoever is deprived of enjoying these blessings is cursed. This is what is said in Deut 28:30:

You shall become engaged to a woman,
but another man shall lie with her;
you shall build a house,
but you shall not live in it;
you shall plant a vineyard,
but shall not enjoy its fruit.

When the text of Jer 29:5-7 is read in the light of Deut 20: 5-7 and 28:30, it becomes clear that the activities that are associated with the blessings in the Promised Land are being carried out in Babylon. However, although there is a change in location, Yahweh's blessing on his people remains constant.

Another passage, Isa 65:21-23, is also clearly connected to Jer 29: 5-7. The passage of Isaiah is a vision about the life of Israel in the land after the return from exile. It reads like this:

They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat...
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD— and their descendants as well.

Isaiah 65:21-23 is contained in Deutero-Isaiah (Isa 40-66 including Trito-Isaiah), that speaks about abundant life in Israel after the restoration of Israel. What is surprising in Jer 29 is that Yahweh does not need to wait for this

future time to restore his people. The enjoyment of restoration can start even in the foreign land, in exile, considered as a place of banishment and suffering.

2d Seek the Peace of the City

It is possible to treat the exhortation in v. 7 with great skepticism. The capital city of the conqueror is the last place one would love to live in. Babylon was the last place in the world where the people of Judah would like to live because of the brutality of the invasions. For Judah, the Babylonians were the worst of all the enemies. Nobody would actually think about praying for its peace. Instead, one would pray for its destruction! Like the Somali Sheik Yusuf Sheik Issa on the BBC (see my Introduction), Judah was supposed to declare that "whatever makes them (Babylonians) cry, makes us (the exiles) happy. May Yahweh's anger be upon those who are against us." From our own context, we can say that this is the normal attitude we have towards the city whose army has brutally invaded our land.

Thus, the prophetic recommendation to pray for Babylon sounds like an impossibility in the context of war. According to Volz, this is the only place in the OT where prayer for one's enemies and for unbelievers is commended (cf. Matt 5:43-48; Rom 12:21; Titus 3:1-2; 1 Pet 2:18).³³ Bratcher calls it one of the most extraordinary and seemingly incongruous passages in Scripture.³⁴

Because Jeremiah had already been accused on several occasions of being in collaboration with the enemy, this passage could also be seen as another example to prove beyond any doubt that he worked for Babylon against his own nation. Nevertheless, this was not the case. It should actually be understood as Yahweh's call to his people, to open their eyes. It is an invitation to see beyond political events, to see beyond Nebuchadnezzar's army. The commandment to pray for Babylon was the invitation to understand that it is Yahweh himself dealing with them because of their unfaithfulness. The central point in this call comes in v. 7a when God commands his people to pray for the peace of the city "where 'I' have sent you into exile" (v. 7). In other words, Yahweh is asking the exiles to stop looking at Nebuchadnezzar with bitterness and to turn to him. This attitude would help them to understand why they have been taken into exile.

Thus, the important issue in v. 7 is how the deportation could possibly be seen in relation to Yahweh. In other words, the exiles were being invited to come to terms with the exile itself. If God was at work in the exile, then they

³³ Paul Volz, *Der Prophet Jeremia* (KAT 10; Leipzig: Diechert, 1928), 269.

³⁴ Bratcher, "Jeremiah 1:1-10," n.p.

needed to accept the exile in order to accept God's dealing with them.³⁵ Such change of attitude would have several positive impacts on the exiles. First, it would create internal healing. Secondly, the people of Judah would know that they are not in Babylon because of the powerful army of Nebuchadnezzar but because of their unfaithfulness. They would also understand that Babylon is not the enemy but that they have been punished because of their breaking of the covenant. Moreover, they would know that Yahweh is still accessible to them through prayer. They would, finally, know that Nebuchadnezzar is not as powerful as they think but a simple instrument in Yahweh's hand to help open the eyes of his people. With this positive attitude, prayer for Babylon would become a possibility. If God really was at work with the Babylonians and in some sense Nebuchadnezzar was God's servant, then the welfare of the Babylonians was, indeed, inextricably linked with their own welfare. This is a powerful lesson for some of us in Africa. In times of war, we tend to condemn the enemy but we forget that the destruction of our country starts with our own internal corruption that weakens us as a country. Instead of looking at the real cause of our problems, we concentrate on condemning others.

D EXHORTATION TO IGNORE FALSE PROPHETS (vv. 8-9)

The question of falsehood in general and of false prophecy in particular is a recurring problem in the book of Jeremiah,³⁶ and there is no need to repeat it here. Throughout this essay, I have argued that the concern of Jeremiah in this passage is practical and that it is a call for a change of attitude. I also argued that this was a time of deep national crisis and it was easy for false prophets to deceive the people, as they had been doing. There is no doubt that the exiles have been attracted to these prophecies. Some have even claimed that Yahweh himself had raised up these prophets in exile (v.15). God warns the exiles about the message of these prophets, given in the name of Yahweh, and the dreams they claimed to have had (see also 23:23-32). They were deceivers and liars, for God did not send them. To listen to them would mean to continue widening the gap with Yahweh. Therefore, the warning of vv. 8 and 9 is against an emotional, imaginative engagement in an illusion. False prophets need to be silenced and the actual voice of Yahweh needs to be heard. As W. Brueggemann nicely puts it, "no pretense based in religious fantasy can extricate God's people from their actual place in history. Prophetic faith is hard-nosed realism that is resistant to romantic, ideological escapism."³⁷ In this way,

³⁵ One of the best books dealing with this exilic situation is Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 128-173.

³⁶ See especially Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of Jeremiah* (Naperville, Ill.: Allenson, 1970), and Thomas W. Overholt, "The Falsehood of Idolatry: An Interpretation of Jer 10:1-16," *JTS* 16/1 (1965): 1-12.

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998), 258.

those who try to let religion abrogate historical-political reality speak a lie. In other words, a correct reading of historical-political events can help us hear Yahweh's voice, if we are able to hear it correctly. This is true not only for Israel but also for most of us in Africa.

E CONCLUSION

Let Babylon become the place of מִלְשָׁם! Let it become a new Judah! These two sentences can make a good summary of our argument in this article. In vv. 1 to 4, Babylon is depicted as a place of exile, of suffering, of banishment and humiliation for Judah. But in vv. 5 to 9, Babylon changes the status and becomes the place of Yahweh's blessings. The people of Judah can experience the blessings of the land, of the offspring, and they can live in peace. In other words, Babylon becomes the place in which all the blessings associated with life in the Promised Land can be experienced again. The new beginning is possible. Babylon becomes a new Judah where Yahweh can continue to bless his people. Nevertheless, there is a condition for this: the exiles have to forget about their falsehood through false prophecy; they have to change their attitude, to accept their new reality, to accept that they have been taken to exile by Yahweh, not by Nabuchadnezzar. The time of exile must become a time of reflection about their own nation, with its corruption and injustice. With this changed attitude, they need to pray for the welfare of their new home as they have been doing for Jerusalem, the city of שָׁלֹום (Ps 122:6). This prayer becomes a confirmation that Yahweh, the God of judgment, is also the God of deliverance; that the God of wrath is also the God of love who cares for his people wherever they find themselves. Like Israel, our failures do not defeat God. He can forgive us and follow us in foreign nations or any other places where we find ourselves as refugees or exiles.

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