

Jehoiakim, Jerusalem, and Jeremiah

Contextual, Linguistic, and Interpretational Links of Jer. 22:20-23 to Jer. 22:13-19

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“I spoke to you in the time of your foolish confidence; you said, ‘I will not listen’;
 this has been your path
 from when you were a youth, you have not listened to my voice.” – Jer. 22:21¹

A skilled author or orator possesses the ability to reach and teach an audience on both rational and emotional levels. In a good speech, multiple meanings and even multiple audiences may exist. The author of Jeremiah was a master of words, and one may presume that the messages Jeremiah delivered in person were no less eloquent.

Jeremiah 21:1-23:8 contains a series of events and prophetic utterances regarding the kings of Judah throughout Jeremiah’s ministry. In the middle of this portion of the scroll is what many experts identify as two distinct sections. Jer. 22:13-19 is a condemnation against the unjust King Jehoiakim and the prediction of his death. This is followed by Jer. 22:20-23. This passage is not addressed to a specific king or context and is therefore much more complicated to interpret. As a result of the examined evidence, most scholars identify this as a separate message of judgment, presumably directed towards the people of Jerusalem at some ambiguous date.

The purpose of this paper is to enrich that understanding of the passage by elucidating the language and context of Jer. 22:20-23. In doing so, we will assert that though the original oratory messages may have been separate, the author of the scroll of Jeremiah intended Jer. 22:13-23 as one, contiguous message for two primary targets. In doing so, the author uses the context of King Jehoiakim’s specific transgressions to eloquently bring to light and align the corporate sins of the people and their leaders with

¹ I took some creative license in interpreting the passage based on my own word studies, my (admittedly novice) command of Hebrew, and the help of my wife (who’s Hebrew is better than mine).

that of their king. Moreover, the alignment of this single message to these two targets allows the author to present a more convincing argument to the original reader regarding the failing of the people of Jerusalem in Jeremiah's day.

Target

The *primary* target of these words appears to be the inhabitants of Jerusalem – the royal city and capital of Judah. These were not country peasants but people of influence, leaders, and public figures. There are several factors that seem to make this a valid supposition. First, Jerusalem was where Jeremiah conducted almost the entirety of his ministry prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.E.² Second is the point made by Holladay and many others around the use of language throughout the passage. A quick review of the Hebrew of this four-verse section confirms the overwhelming prevalence of female verbs; a review of references to the city of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible demonstrates the poetic pattern of referencing Jerusalem as a woman throughout the prophets.³ According to Holladay, “the address is not to the masculine plural but the feminine singular – the call is to the personified city.” He compares this reference to a similar construct used in Isaiah 14:31.⁴

Places

If one assumes Jer. 22:20-23 to be wholly distinct from the previous section, determining the precise setting becomes significantly more complex. There are no direct references to dates or kings and only three place names to identify. All three places in the

² All dates assume B.C.E. unless otherwise noted.

³ John Joseph Owens, *Analytical Key to the Old Testament: Isaiah-Malachi*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 296-297.

⁴ William Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 601.

text correspond to geographic regions relatively *around* Judah that each has a higher altitude than Mount Moriah (the Jerusalem Temple Mount). Abarim is the mountain range in Moab of which Mount Nebo is the peak; it is in a section of modern-day Jordan on the northeastern end of the Dead Sea. Due to its proximity, it would have a relative vantage point on Judah as a region.⁵ The mountains of Lebanon are west of Mt. Hermon and north of the land of Israel (modern and ancient). Bashan refers to the plateau northeast of the modern-day Sea of Galilee on the border of Syria. Today, this land is the disputed Golan Heights, but in Jeremiah's day, the Aramean people would have occupied it. In the case of Lebanon and Bashan, they are each approximately 150 miles north of Jerusalem and would have no direct line-of-sight to the region. Moreover, Lebanon and Bashan would not have been Judah's closest neighboring regions to the north with the Ammonites and the former Assyrian provinces of Samaria and Megiddo having direct geographical connection to Judah. Bashan and Lebanon were relative neighbors to Judah when compared to Babylon but not truly *next to* Judah and therefore an unlikely physical reference. It is therefore plausible to surmise that the passage is meant to have a poetic flair on some more meaningful relatedness between those specific locations and Judah.

Date

Given its placement in the text and the contextual inadequacy of other periods, dating this text to sometime during Jehoiakim's reign is the most likely option. The 25-year old king began his reign as a vassal to the Egyptian Pharaoh in 609. His reign lasted 11 years, to 598 when his son Jehoiachin succeeded him and was taken to Babylon. Dates in the latter portions of Jehoiakim's reign present contextual issues. If we align the accounts of the Babylonian Chronicle with that of 2 Kings 24:1, we date Jehoiakim's first

⁵ J. A. Thompson, *NICOT: The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 481.

rebellion from Nebuchadnezzar to 601. However, by that time, both the Moabites and Arameans were conscripted to raid Judah on behalf of the Babylonians.⁶ No matter the precise interpretation of the language, it is unlikely Jerusalem would “cry out” to those who were seeking to do them harm. This makes a date prior to 601 probable.

According to Holladay, who marks this passage as separate from 22:13-19, the setting is best understood as the summer or autumn of 604.⁷ That December was the year in which Jehoiakim was compelled to transfer his allegiance from Egypt to Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was campaigning in Palestine to claim the territories that previously belonged to Egypt. This campaign was itself a continuation of his success against Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish in 605. According to the Babylonian Chronicle, Nebuchadnezzar conquered down through lower Syria and into Palestine where, “he [Nebuchadnezzar] marched about victoriously in Hattu. All the kings of Hattu came into his presence and he received their vast tribute.”⁸ He also razed the city of Ashkelon and subjugated the Judean king.⁹ Verse 21 speaks of Judah “feeling secure” (a topic that will be addressed later in the paper), but for the purposes of dating, we must ask the question, “*secure* from what?” Given the known history of Jehoiakim, two possible answers remain, leaving two possible dates. The first is the 604 date supported by Holladay, in which Judah did (or used to) feel secure from the oncoming Babylonians. The second

⁶ Anson Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World: The Sacred Bridge* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 263.

⁷ Holladay, 603.

⁸ A. K. Grayson, *Texts from Cuneiform Sources Vol. V: Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles*, (Locust Valley, NY: J.J. Augustin Publisher, 1975), 100. Note: throughout the Babylonian Chronicle, Hattu (or Hatti-land) is the chosen nomeclature for Palestine.

⁹ Ephriam Stern, *Archeology in the Land of the Bible Volume II: The Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian Periods 732-332 B.C.E.* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 304.

would be some time prior to the 601, in which Jehoiakim may have forged some unknown (and ultimately unreliable) alliance with other vassal states of Babylon that ultimately turned against him. Of the two, I suggest that Holladay is correct. It is the final phrase in verse 20 that leads me to that conclusion. If these “allies” are “crushed”, something or someone must have broken them. Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of the former Egyptian vassalage seems the most likely scenario. As such, the autumn of 604 seems the best fit.

Language and Interpretational Review

Many authors interpret this passage in the light its prolific use of feminine verbs and v. 23’s reference to labor pains to align the poem with the story of Jephthah (Jdg. 11:37-38), but the language choice of this passage suggests something very different.

“Go up to Lebanon and **cry out**,
let your voice be heard in Bashan,
cry out from Abarim...” – Jer. 22:20¹⁰

The verb translated “cry out” is *sa`aq*.¹¹ It is used fifty-five times throughout the Hebrew Bible and four times by Jeremiah (twice in 22:20, 49:3, and Lam. 2:18). There are many other references where a man *sa`aq* to Yahweh, and we see the first reference in Gen. 4:10 when the Able’s blood *sa`aq* from the ground after he is murdered by his brother. In Judges, tribes or warriors are said to *sa`aq* by neighboring tribes or by their own people (Jdg. 4:3, 7:23, 7:34, 10:12, 10:17, 12:1). Samuel is said to have *sa`aq* the

¹⁰ All passage quote from the NIV unless otherwise stated.

¹¹ John R. Kohlenberger and James A. Swanson, *The Hebrew-English Concordance to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998). (G/K 7590)

people to congregate (Sam. 10:17). 2 Kings contains several references of specific utterances being *sa`aq* (2 Kings 4:40, 6:5, 6:26). Notably missing from the usage of the verb are references to mourning; it cannot be found in the story of Jephthah nor is the word used in reference to weeping anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. To *sa`aq* appears to imply calling out loud for someone's attention or assistance, but it does not appear to connote sadness or mourning.

“Let your voice be heard” is the confluence of two Hebrew words, *qol* and *natan*.¹² *Qol* is the Hebrew word for voice and is translated in several different voice-related words in the Old Testament. *Natan* is a Hebrew word that is most commonly translated “give” but is used in every activity from giving away a bride to throwing stones to being put some place. The two words together in this context can be literally translated “give your voice” or “say out loud”. The commonness of this phraseology is notable in its lack of specificity to woman, mourning, or pain. Jeremiah is simply finding a poetic synonym for his use of the word *sa`aq* in the couplet.

“...all your **allies** are **crushed**.” – Jer. 22:20

Perhaps in part influenced by the assumed associations with woman and mourning, many commentators have taken to translating this phrase, “all your *lovers* are *broken*.” The key words are *`ahab* and *sabar*.¹³ *`Ahab* is most commonly translated “love” (as in “the one I love”), but it is also correctly translated “friends” or “allies”. The concept of Jerusalem *sa`aq* to its *lovers* who are themselves *sabar* is no less pointed, but

¹² Ibid. (G/K 7754, 5989)

¹³ Ibid. (G/K 8689)

in this case, I submit that “allies”, “friends”, or “compatriots” may be a better rendering of the word than lovers.

Jeremiah uses *sabar* in 19:11 when Yahweh instructs him to *sabar* the pottery in the presence of the elders of Jerusalem and adds the phrase “and cannot be repaired”. In the more than twenty uses of the word in Jeremiah’s writings, the connotation appears to be a significant break, one that is not usable or useful in its now *sabar* form. For the purposes of dating the passage, it is notable that *sabar* is used in the perfect tense, meaning the action has already taken place. Jeremiah is not predicting that Judah’s *’ahab* will *sabar* but that they are *sabar* already. The prophet appears to be calling for the people (and its king) to call out for help to their political allies and find that all of them are broken and of no help or use to them in Judah’s hour of need.

“I warned you **felt secure**, but you said, ‘I will not **listen!**’
this has been your way
 from your **youth** you have not **obeyed** me.” – Jer. 22:21

I believe this verse to be a key to identifying and interpreting the whole of the passage, balancing two echoed phrases of youthful, foolish rejection with the central indictment against the city and its youthful and arrogant king.

The verse begins with the use of the word *salwa*¹⁴ translated in the NIV as **felt secure**. The word is translated elsewhere as “unconcerned” or “complacent”. Ezekiel 16:49 uses the word in his allegory of unfaithful Jerusalem, “This was the sin of your sister Sodom [Israel]: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed, and **unconcerned**;

¹⁴ Ibid. (G/K 8932)

they did not help the poor and needy.” In this context, the word seems to express the foolishness of a false sense of security. Balancing this word is *ne'urim*¹⁵ the Hebrew word for a child; in this case the form of the word is the female rendering of the word **youth**.

Both **listen** and **obey** are the same word *sama*¹⁶. This common Hebrew verb is used over 1000 times through the Old Testament and one hundred times in Jeremiah's scroll alone. In Jeremiah, it seems to be used most frequently to reference not just listening but to listening intently with the intention to obey. More important to this discussion is the poetic symmetry that the reuse of the word provides to the verse. Additionally, *ne'urim* seems to enhance the understanding of *salwa*, all leading to (what I believe to be) the central message of the passage.

The central phrase uses the words *zeh* and *derek*.¹⁷ **This has been your** is directed at the female audience, and the **way** is the Hebrew word for “road”. It could be literally translated, “this is/has been your road.” Jeremiah's point seems particularly poignant given the context of his previous message against the 30-year old king.

If Jeremiah were indeed framing his message to Jerusalem in comparison to his word against Josiah's wayward son, it would not be the only time the prophet turned his oratory attention to the people after speaking out against the king. Jer. 21:1-7 records God's message of rejection to Zedekiah and is followed by the message to the people of Jerusalem in Jer. 21:8-10 as if to say “and as for you [people of Jerusalem]”. Jeremiah delivers a message that is comparative and complementary to his message to the king. I

¹⁵ Ibid. (G/K 5830)

¹⁶ Ibid. (G/K 9048)

¹⁷ Owens, 297.

therefore suggest a similar pattern here – at least in its literary form if not in the original delivery.

“The **wind** will **drive** all your **shepherds away**,
and your **allies** will **go into exile**.
Then you will be **ashamed**
and **disgraced** because of all your **wickedness**.” – Jer. 22:22

It seems noteworthy that *ruah*¹⁸ (the word used for breath, wind, and spirit) is used at the beginning of this verse. Given the adjacent words, I believe its use is primarily poetic; when pronounced in Hebrew, the phrase is quite compelling. The root words come together as “The *ruah* will *ra`a*¹⁹ all your *ra`a*.” *Ra`a* is most commonly translated “shepherd” and the verse has been accurately translated by Holladay and others, “the wind will shepherd your shepherds.” The point seems to be that whoever the “shepherds” are, they will be driven like flocks from Jerusalem. Who are these shepherds? Throughout the book, God and Jeremiah often refer to the leaders of the people as shepherds.

`Ahab from 22:20 is echoed again in the word “allies”, and the word for exile, *sebi*²⁰, means captivity. To again draw on the emphasis in 22:20, we have yet to see much in the way of mourning or female metaphors beyond the conjugation of the words, which is easily addressed by the convention of the speaking to the city.

¹⁸ Kohlenberger, (G/K 8120)

¹⁹ Ibid. (G/K 8286)

²⁰ Ibid. (G/K 8660)

*Bos*²¹ and *kalam*²² are elsewhere translated “put to shame” and “humiliated” respectively. The verse concludes with the word *re`eh* and in doing so, presents another point of alignment with the “shepherds” and “wind”. There are still no mourning or household activities listed, and God continues to point out Judah’s failed alliances.

“You who **live** in ‘Lebanon’,
 who are **nestled** in cedar buildings,
 how you will groan when pangs come upon you,
 pain like that of a woman in labor!” – Jer. 22:23

The Hebrew word for “nestled” is *qanan*.²³ The word is used five times throughout the Old Testament and refers directly birds and their nests in every occasion. More perplexing to our proposed premise is the apparent address to “Lebanon” and the reference of birth “pangs”. We will address the latter first.

As stated earlier, other scholarly interpretations of this passage use the phraseology of these labor pains in combination with the cries of v. 20 and the female verbs to draw a conclusion of this passage focusing on a type of lament by the female personification of Jerusalem. I trust that our language examination to this point has at least opened the possibility for that assumption to be challenged. As such, I suggest that this metaphor is precisely that – an effective and common metaphor. Like a mother about to give birth, Jerusalem has a painful time in store and cannot stop it’s oncoming.

²¹ Ibid. (G/K 1017)

²² Ibid. (G/K 4007)

²³ Ibid. (G/K 7873)

As for the reference to Lebanon, on the surface there is a legitimate concern that this passage (which has entirely focused on Jerusalem) is now addressing Jerusalem's supposed ally. Thompson, Holladay, and others tend to agree that the audience has not suddenly shifted in this verse; instead, the metaphors of those who are "*qanan* in cedar buildings" are referred to as "Lebanon". If this is correct, then the question of who lives in these cedar buildings becomes relevant. Holladay translates the verb *yasab* as "enthroned" rather than "live", and ties the use back to a similar word in Jer. 21:13.²⁴ I submit that a not so subtle shot at the foolish king that Jeremiah had recently condemned for the greed of wanting "more and more cedar" is a valid and right interpretation of this passage and provides another, logical tie back to the previous message.

Conclusion

Given the examination of the evidence, we've made notable, legitimate progress in addressing the existing, published interpretations of this passage in an attempt to make room for a competing theory. The language does not appear to support the Jephthah theories of mourning and labor proposed by current scholarly thinking. The passage is directed at a female personification of some subset of leaders in Jeremiah's sphere of influence who were foolishly placing their trust in political alliances that had failed. We continue to assert that this group's common understanding of the prophet's message to King Jehoiakim framed the tone and choice of words directed at this larger audience and that Jeremiah's words contained a not so subtle public word to Jehoiakim himself.

However, there is no direct evidence to verify neither the precise dating of the passage nor the climate of public sentiment that prompted God's word to the people. Given the available data, the premise of this paper must remain in the realm of theory and opinion,

²⁴ Holladay, 603.

though hopefully and measured and viable one. As future evidence becomes available, further exploration of this premise may prove warranted.

Regardless of the direct link of Jer. 22:20-23 with Jer. 22:13-19, we are certain that the message of God's priorities for His people (both king and leader) is consistent with Jer. 22:15-16:

“Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar?

Did not your father have food and drink?

He did what was right and just, so all went well with him.

He defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well.

Is that not what it means to know me?" declares the LORD.

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