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"Do not pray for this people …" (Jer 7, 16; 11, 14; 14, 11; 15, 1): Prayer as an Intensifying Lens in the Book of Jeremiah[1]

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Abstract
On three occasions the book of Jeremiah (7, 16; 11, 14; 14, 11) portrays God instructing the prophet not to pray for "this people" of Jerusalem and Judah. In a fourth text (Jer 15, 1), God announces that even if Moses or Samuel were to pray for "this people", God would not listen. The instructions not to pray are unique in the Hebrew Bible, and set in one of the most traumatic periods of biblical history. They are also set within two complicating literary features and appear to be part of a wider editorial strategy. The paper explores how these texts operate and how prayer more widely is used as a way of intensifying both threats against and promises to different pre-exilic, exilic and post-exilic groups, and also to reflect on the shared trauma of Jeremiah and of God.

Keywords
Prayer, trauma, intensify, response

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I. Trauma-studies, Disaster and the Book of Jeremiah

Trauma studies have significantly influenced the study of texts relating to the exile and its onset, and of Jeremiah in particular, as the introduction to the recent *Oxford Handbook on Jeremiah* clearly indicates[2]. In particular, O'Connor, Sharp and Rom-Shiloni have used trauma to explain the often confusingly contradictory statements in the book of Jeremiah, and this has been codified further by Claassens[3].

O'Connor notes that trauma leads to turmoil in an individual's thought, speech and writing as diverse views are espoused in (often rapid) succession and without consistency; in the face of existential threat and worry, the focus is on survival rather than logical consistency of thought. For O'Connor, the trauma of the exile and its onset explains the sheer variety of responses represented in the book, often portrayed on the lips of Jeremiah, and even of God. Sharp refers to trauma-responses underlying the dramatically shifting views expressed by groups of people as the situation develops and their responses change[4]. Rom-Shiloni refers to recent research on the Holocaust to show how varied responses to trauma begin as part of the experience rather than after a significant passage of time[5]. More recently, Claassens has drawn on modern narrative theory to see how traumatized characters are depicted, concluding that Jeremiah is a traumatized prophet, affected particularly as a witness to the violence around him and the persecution he endures.

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[2] Louis Stulman and Edward Silver, "A Critical Introduction", in: Louis Stulman and Edward Silver (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2021, pp. 1-21.

[3] Cf. Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2013; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology in Jeremiah: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose*, Old Testament Studies, T & T Clark, London and New York, 2003; Carolyn J. Sharp, "Buying Land in the Text of Jeremiah: Feminist Commentary, the Kristevan Abject, and Jeremiah 32", in: Christl M. Maier, and Carolyn J. Sharp (eds.), *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 577, Bloomsbury, London, 2013, pp. 150 – 172; Dalit Rom-Shiloni, *Voices from the Ruins: Theodicy and the Fall of Jerusalem in the Hebrew Bible*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2021, esp. pp. 77-125; L. Juliana Claassens, "Jeremiah the Traumatized Prophet", in: Louis Stulman and Edward Silver (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah*, pp. 358-373.

[4] C. J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology...*, conveniently, pp. 157-166.

[5] D. Rom-Shiloni, *Voices from the Ruins...*, pp. 90-95.

This should probably not surprise us given the disaster to his people ("this people" for our purposes[6]) that Jeremiah was called upon to warn about, announce, witness and live through, let alone the opposition he experienced. And in this setting, Jeremiah is portrayed as praying for "this people", presumably to get them to change, and as interceding with God, presumably to avert or reduce the punishment – only to be told by God "do not pray for this people" (Jer 7, 16; 11, 14; 14, 11), reinforced by a refusal to listen even to Israel's most significant intercessors (15, 1).

"This people" seems to refer specifically to the population of pre-exilic Jerusalem and the towns of Judah, and more specifically to (all) those who are guilty either of ethical (Jer 7, 3. 5-9a) and cultic abuses (Jer 7, 4.17-31; 11, 9-13.17) or who do not hear the words of the covenant (Jer 7, 23-26; 11, 2-8). Maier has recently argued that the prohibitions on prayer in chs. 7 and 11 are essentially post-exilic retrojections into the pre-exilic setting in order to create an impression of the past that places the blame for the exile firmly with the pre-exilic Judahite community and which aided their authors in addressing the issues that they the wished to address.[7] This may be overly complicated and traditions from Jeremiah's time could easily have been adapted or extended to address later exilic or post-exilic issues[8]. More importantly, "this people" presages the negative judgements of these texts. We have moved from Judah as the covenantal "my people" (11, 4) to the more general and derogatory[9] "this people"; and if we follow the trajectory, Jer 7, 27 refers to Judah as "them" and in 7, 28a as הגּוֹי "the nation", reflecting God's distancing from "my people" by using the same word as for foreign nations. Judah has simply become one of the nations. As Billingham puts it; "The description of Judah as הגוי ('nation') infers

[6] I will focus on Jer. 7, 1 – 8, 3; 11; 14, 1 – 15, 9, the pericope connected with the command "do not pray".

[7] Christl Maier, *Jeremia 1-25*. *IEKAT*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2022, pp. 184-89.

[8] Cf. esp. E. W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1970 and Schocken Books, New York, 1971.

[9] As noted by numerous commentators, including e.g. Hetty Lalleman, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, *TOTC* 21, Inter-Varsity Press, Nottingham and Downers Grove, 2013, p. 150: "God and his people are indeed estranged"; Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, *OTL*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London, 2008, p. 175.

that they are not even Israelites. In a negation of the covenantal script of love and protection, Yhwh rejects the people"[10].

Most of the commentaries are clear that the reason why God will no longer listen is "this people" is persistent disobedience and gross offence to God as set out in the context of each prohibition on prayer (cf. Jer 7,1 – 8,3; 11, 1-23; 14, 1 – 15, 9). Jer 7, 16 and 11, 14 both belong to the prose speeches of the book, and their immediate contexts[11] refer to the abuse of the temple and the worship of other gods. Ch. 11 makes additional reference to the covenant, the persecution of Jeremiah and his short poetic response confession. Jer 14, 11 seems to emerge from initial concerns about a drought, but the language of the cycle in 14, 1 – 15, 9 shifts and intensifies to include war and military defeat[12].

The judgement announced in each case is utterly devastating. Jer 7, 15 threatens throwing Judah out of the land, as Israel was before her, and the land becoming a "waste" (7, 34) where the dead will fill the valley of Hinnom (7, 32) so that the corpses of "this people" will be unburied and left for carrion. Jer 8, 1-3 recounts how the bones of the dead will be brought out of their tombs and left on the ground like dung (8, 2), while the "remnant" that has been "driven away" will prefer death to life (8, 3). God has "rejected and forsaken the generation that provoked his wrath" (7, 29). Jer 11, 9-11 describes a "conspiracy among the people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem" which sees them serving other gods and breaking the covenant, leading to inescapable disaster, described in vv. 16-17 as a consuming "fire" and "evil".

As in so much of the book, God's case against "this people" is presented with forensic clarity and moves systematically from offence, through God's patient and persistent calls for change, to punishment. In this, ch. 7 is relatively straightforward in this regard, but chs. 11 and 14 – 15 introduce some complicating factors to which I now turn.

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[10] Valerie M. Billingham, *The Great Drama of Jeremiah: A Performance Reading*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 95, Sheffield Phoenix Press, Sheffield, 2021, p. 135. Cf. also C. Maier, *Jeremia 1-25*, p. 178.

[11] Jer 7, 1 – 8, 3 and 11, 1-23.

[12] Cf. e.g. Erhard Gerstenberger, "Jeremiah's Complaints: Observations on Jer 15:10-21", in: *Journal of Biblical Literature* 82 (1963), pp. 393-408, esp. p. 403.

II. Do Not Pray for "This People" …

The book of Jeremiah records three occasions (Jer 7, 16; 11, 14; 14, 11) when God is portrayed as instructing the prophet not to pray for "this people" of Jerusalem and Judah – people who have grievously offended God. In a fourth text (Jer 15, 1), God announces that even if two of Israel's most effective intercessors Moses[13] or Samuel[14] were to pray for "this people", God would not listen. While, together with Jer 18, 20; 21, 2; 27, 18; 37, 3 and 42, 1-6, these texts confirm that intercession was a normal part of the role of a prophet in Judah at the turn of the 7th/6th centuries BCE,[15],[16] the command "do not pray" is a different matter and is without parallel in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament[17].

Some commentators suggest that the use of אל rather than לו for "not" in "do not pray" suggests a temporary ban on Jeremiah interceding. However, the tone is emphatic; not only is Jeremiah told not to "pray"; he is told not to "lift up a cry or prayer" (7, 16; 11, 14), nor to "make intercession" (7, 16), or "call" (11, 14). Further, each instance of "do not pray for this people" contributes a different focus to a comprehensive ban. Jer 7, 16 emphasises that God will not listen to *Jeremiah*, 11, 14 emphasises that

[13] Cf. e.g. Ex 32, (7-)9-14.30-35; Num 14, 10b-20(25); 21, 7-9; Deut 9, 18-29; 10, 10-11.

[14] Cf. e.g. 1 Sam 7, 5-10; 8, 4-10.19-22; 12, 14-25, esp. v. 23.

[15] Cf. for example, David L. Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets*, JSOT Supplements 17, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1981; Robert. R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1980; Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, OTL, SCM Press, London, 1986, p. 213. John L. Mackay *Jeremiah: An Introduction and Commentary. Volume 1: Chapters 1 – 20*, Mentor, Fearn, 2004, p. 310 argues that intercession was not part of the prophetic role as it is not mentioned in Deut 18, 14-22, but this ignores the wider evidence both within and outside of the deuteronomic/deuteronomistic corpus.

[16] For prophets and others as intercessors see also Gen 18, 22-33; 20, 7.17; 2 Kings 19, 4; Ps 99, 6; (Ps 27, 7; 72, 15); 2 Chr 30, 18-20; Ezra 9, 5 – 10, 1; Neh 1, 4-11a; Isa 37, 4; Ezek 14, 12-16; Dan 9, 2-23; Am 7, 1-9.

[17] I will return to God's comment to Moses in Ex 32, 10 "now let me alone so that my wrath may burn hot against them (Israel) …", but it does not have the same rhetorical register as the triple command to Jeremiah. 1 John 5, 16 has been suggested as a parallel, but the writer's advice (ἔστιν ἁμαρτία πρὸς θάνατον οὐ περὶ ἐκείνης λέγω ἵνα ἐρωτήσῃ - there is a sin that leads to death I do not say one should ask about that) is much less direct than the divine commands to cease intercession.

God will not listen to *"them"– this people*, and takes up the language of v. 11 that "though they cry out to me, I will not listen to them". Jer 14, 11 adds that Jeremiah should not pray *for good* or *the welfare* of "this people".

However, God's command "do not pray for this people" in 14, 11 is followed in MT by the prophet's immediate response in v. 13 which is portrayed as … yes, intercession for his people. "Then I said: 'Ah, Lord God! Here are the prophets saying to them, 'You shall not see the sword, nor shall you have famine, but I will give you true peace in this place'". Note, only in MT; in the Septuagint, the text continues as divine speech as part of God's indictment against "this people". In essence, in the MT, Jeremiah sets out a mitigating factor and (like Abram at the judgment of Sodom and Gomorragh[18]) appeals for justice. Vv. 14-16, 17-18 provide an explanatory diatribe and pronouncement from God against Judah's lying prophets and the people of Jerusalem. The rhetorical strategy here seems similar to that in Jer 32, 16-44 where, as I have argued elsewhere[19], Jeremiah is portrayed as using a form of prose prayer identified by Moshe Greenberg as setting out a contradiction as a means of questioning God's intention and inviting a response which leads to an 'explanation' from God[20].

Jer 14, 19-22 then questions God further and intercedes for God's help; but, whose intercession is this? Perhaps a communal liturgical prayer[21], but given its position in the flow of the text, is it a further portrayal of Jeremiah's intercession? Jer 15, 1 brings God's penultimate word about not listening even to Moses or Samuel and is followed by an instruction to send Jeremiah's petitioners away to pestilence, sword, famine and captivity, and for dogs, birds and beasts to devour. The final word is a poetic confession from God about how Jerusalem has rejected him and the consequences of this, which reflects something of God's own turmoil, referring in 15, 7 to "my people" …

[18] Cf. Gen 18, 16-33.

[19] Cf. John Applegate, "«Peace, Peace, when there is no Peace»: Redactional Integration of Prophecy of Peace into the Judgement of Jeremiah", in: A.H.W. Curtis and T. Römer (eds.), *The Book of Jeremiah and its Reception*, BETL 78, Leuven University Press and Peeters, Leuven, 1997, pp. 51–90.

[20] Cf. Moshe Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer: As a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel*, University of California Press, Oakland, 1983 and Wipf and Stock, Eugene, 2008.

[21] Possibly as a continuation of the intercession/lament of ch 14, 1-10.

For Georg Fischer, the reference to Moses and Samuel is determinative, God will not listen even to these persistent intercessors and judgement follows[22]. However, the reference is rather double-edged. For example, God's cry to Moses in Ex 32, 10 to "let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" leads to Moses interceding and successfully persuading God not to destroy Israel in favour of his own family. As Tiemeier[23] has demonstrated, God's comment to Moses is seen by both Jewish and Christian interpreters as an invitation for him to intercede – as he does, successfully. So, first, Jeremiah simply follows the example of Moses, Israel's greatest intercessor and continues to pray.

Second, the reference to Samuel is highly ambiguous. 1 Sam 12, 23 presents Samuel's parting shot to the Israelites who have finally acknowledged their sinfulness … "far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord by ceasing to pray for you; and I will instruct you in the good and the right way." Invoking Samuel as part of this prohibition makes clear that ceasing to pray is not a real option for Jeremiah. Indeed, it reinforces the persistence of Moses in the face of God's opposition, and hence encourages Jeremiah to continue praying. Hence, the reference to Moses and Samuel seems to act more as a rhetorical spur to continue interceding than a command to stop it. In Jer 14, 1 – 15, 9 we find a rhetorical subtlety which is at odds with the blunt assertions of 7, 16 and 11, 14 and which seems to be designed not to forbid prayer, but to encourage it. Does God want Jeremiah to pray or not? The dynamics of the text suggest some confusion or, at least, the possibility of God's own mind changing.

III. Rejection and Persecution

There is a further twist in Jer 11 where, immediately following the command not to pray and God's rationale for punishment, vv. 18-20 presents

[22] Cf. Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 1 – 25, HTKAT*, Herder, Freiburg, 2005, pp. 495-496 and 514.

[23] Cf. L.-S. Tiemeier, "The Compassionate God of Traditional Jewish and Christian Exegesis", in: *Tyndale Bulletin* 58 (2007), pp. 183-206.

a short confession of the prophet. Jeremiah is portrayed as ignorant of his neighbours' plot to kill him until God revealed this to him, which leads him to pray for God's retribution, which in turn leads to a prophecy against the plotters and their families, which threatens obliteration by sword and famine. There is more than a hint of Jeremiah's own turmoil; the rapid movement from his ignorance of the חשׁבו ("plot", "scheme" or "plan" 11, 19) to disorientation and to retribution is quite shocking, but not unusual for a person in trauma. Even if this pattern is generally familiar to readers of the psalms where retribution is often sought against *anonymous* enemies, here the enemies are identified clearly as *Jeremiah's close neighbours*. Jeremiah's response to the plot reflects something of God's own response to the קשׁר ("conspiracy" or, perhaps, "treachery" 11, 9)[24] against God in Judah and Jerusalem to follow other gods, for which God threatens devastating punishment. Ch. 11 is keen to portray God's patience before taking such devastating action after years of unheeded warnings (vv. 6-10), but it leads to an outpouring of frustration.

Two points emphasise the close connection between God's and Jeremiah's responses. First, while different words are used, the "conspiracy" against God in v. 9 and the "scheme" against Jeremiah in v. 19, are clearly not completely dissimilar and both words suggest some deliberation on the part of the plotters. Second, the same stereotyped language of sword and famine is used in Jeremiah's cry for retribution and in God's announcement of punishment on "this people" – the same people who have plotted against Jeremiah. God announces death by sword and famine, and Jeremiah calls for the same for his enemies (vv. 21-23).

This portrayal suggests that the 'experience' of God and of Jeremiah are reflected in each other's words and responses. In other words, though we might struggle with language at this point, it is not simply a matter of Jeremiah announcing the words that God gave him, but of living out in some way the 'experience' of God or the 'feeling' of God for "this people". Two intriguing verses in Jer 14, 17-18 present a commission to speak of tears, turmoil and a vision of the disaster; but whose tears and turmoil?

[24] For חשׁבו and קשׁר see David J.A. Clines (ed.), *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, Sheffield Phoenix Press, Sheffield, Vol. III, 2009, pp. 326-327 and Vol. VII, 2010, pp. 337-338 respectively.

They could be those of the prophet, but as part of a commissioned speech ("You shall say to them this word"), they seem to speak of God's tears and turmoil, or perhaps of tears and turmoil shared by God and the prophet, or even with the people as they witness the realities of violent death and famine. Indeed, the construction of these two verses suggests a deliberate ambiguity[25] which invites reflection on how God 'feels' about Judah. Further, the movement from "my people" to "this people" is reversed in Jer 14, 17 where God returns to calling Judah "my people". Here, then, we see God portrayed as weeping over "this people", and as both rejecting and accepting them. Hence, we see something of God's turmoil and maybe even God's trauma. Georg Fischer[26] has suggested that "the weeping God" rather than "the weeping prophet" is a key to understanding the book of Jeremiah, and sets out both the darkness of God's anger and hatred for "this people" and the unique references to God 'feeling' rejected (Jer 2); to God weeping or on the edge of tears (cf. Jer 8, 23; 9, 9; 14, 7; 48, 31-32). Indeed, Fischer suggests translating the repeated doublet in Jer 5, 9.29; 9, 9 as God questioning three times whether God should be punished for his actions. Fischer suggests that what God "feels internally" and is "almost forced to act on the outside" are different („dass er *innerlich anders fühlt*, als er nach außen zu handeln nahezu ‚gezwungen' ist"). He sees these unique elements of Jeremiah as a seed of hope in the face of the disaster. Nevertheless, God's violence against "his own people'" („sein eigenes Volk") is designed to "provoke questions and reflection". He goes on to note that the Septuagint systematically avoids the references to God weeping by presenting them as a call from God for Jeremiah or the people

[25] Cf. the comments on ambiguity of Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self*, JSOT Supplements 32, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1984, pp. 165-166, 170.

[26] Georg Fischer, "Die weinende Gott – Ein Schlüssel zur Theologie des Jeremiabuches", in: Georg Fischer, *Gott und sein Wort: Studien zu Hermeneutik und biblischer Theologie*, Stuttgarter Biblische Aufsatzbände 70, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 2019, pp. 402-417. Originally published in Italian in: Guido Benzi, Donatella Scaiola, Marco Bonarini (eds.), *La Profezia tra l'uno e l'altro Testamento. Studi in onore del Prof. Pietro Bovati in occasione del suo settantacinquesimo compleanno Copertina flessibile – 1 gennaio 2015*, Analecta Biblica Studia 4, Gregorian and Biblical Press, Rome, 2015, pp. 233-244.Cf. also, conveniently, Georg Fischer, *Jeremiah Studies, FAT* 139, Mohr Siebeck, 2020, p. 26.

to weep (9, 9 and 14, 7) or removing the reference to God as speaker (48, 30), and (characteristically and combatively!) contradicts H.-J. Stipp[27] on this.

Swapping between "this people" and "my people" in Jer 14 reflects the way that in Hosea 1 the prophet names and renames his children to communicate God's message; "not loved" becomes "loved", and "not my people" becomes "my people". Indeed, Hosea chs. 1 – 4; 11; 14 portray a range of God's contrary, rapidly changing and apparently 'emotional' attitudes to Israel. In the rhetoric of that book, God's responses resonate with the prophet's traumatic experience of marriage and parenthood and hint at God's own trauma in dealing with "this people".

How should we understand the resonance of 'feeling' in the relationship between God and Jeremiah? There are a number of factors to unpick; first, the complex issue of how life experience shapes experience of God; next, and not least, the competing voices of the inter-communal rivalry that played out in shaping the book of Jeremiah; similarly, the task of theodicy in explaining the exile in a way that allowed the possibility of restoration and renewal of the covenant; and perhaps most significantly, what trauma and mental distress do to the way that people think, act and write. There are complex multiple dynamics here that lie beyond the scope of this short paper. We can, however, draw some further conclusions on the way that these dynamics are presented in the text.

IV. Prayer as an Intensifying Lens

Outside of Jeremiah, a number of other Hebrew texts threaten that God will not listen to prayer which is tainted with injustice, ethical abuse or the worship of other gods (cf. e.g. Pr 21, 13; 28, 9; Isa 1, 15; Eze 8, 18; Mic 3, 4). In a similar vein, the figure of Wisdom in Proverbs 1, 20-33 warns that she will not listen when those who have ignored her, face calamity

[27] See G. Fischer, "Die weinende Gott...", n.25. Cf. Hermann-Josef Stipp, "Gottesbildfragen in den Lesartdifferenzen zwischen dem masoretischen und dem alexandrinischen Text des Jeremiabuches", in: Johann Cook and Hermann-Josef Stipp (eds.), *Text-critical and Hermeneutical Studies in the Septuagint*, *VTS* 157, Brill, Leiden, 2012, pp. 237 - 274.

and call for help (v. 28) in what McKane describes as following "prophetic modes of address"[28]. These texts vary from the reflective, teaching tone of Proverbs to the more urgent concerns of the prophetic texts. Zech 7, 13 provides a simple retrospective explanation of the exile; God did not listen to "their" prayer because "they" did not listen to his law or his prophets (7, 11-12). Comparing the bracketing divine speeches of Zech 7, 9-10 and 8, 14-17 (esp. vss. 16-17), Zechariah's purpose is clearly to provide a basic theodicy and paraenesis for the restored community.

Another small group of texts portray the pray-er's experience of God not listening (cf. e.g. Job 19, 7; 30, 20; Ps 22, 2; 80, 4; esp. Lam 3, 7-9 and 43-44; Hab 1, 2;). Each of these texts is a cry for help in distress rather than a more worked-through reflection. In some cases these cries are balanced with praise that God heard the petitioner's prayer and rescued them (cf. esp. Ps 22, 21b-25; Lam 3, 55-57)[29].

In this context, the instruction to Jeremiah to not pray is a significant intensification compared to texts which say that God did not or will not hear. They suggest a change of disposition on God's part and a decided turn for the worse for "this people". This is encapsulated in Jer 14, 1 – 15, 9 which portrays an intensification of God's punishment in the shift between laments about a famine to war and the threat of military defeat.

There is further intensification of God's response to "this people" in three episodic narratives that portray Jeremiah being asked to pray in situations of acute difficulty or uncertainty, to which I now turn.

Jer 37, 3-10 is set during a short break in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem when an Egyptian army forced the Babylonians' temporary withdrawal. When King Zedekiah requests Jeremiah to "pray for us to the

[28] Cf. JiSeong James Kwon, "Calling-not-answering and internalisation of Torah in Proverbs 1 – 9: Jeremiah and Israelite wisdom literature", in: Jim West and Niels Peter Lemche (eds.), *Jeremiah in History and Tradition*, Copenhagen International Seminar, Routledge, London and New York, 2020, pp. 106-121 who notes his dependence on Scott L. Harris, *Proverbs 1 – 9: A Study in Inner-Biblical Interpretation*, SBL Dissertation Series 150, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1995. The reference appears to be to William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach*, OTL, SCM Press, London, 1970, p. 7, referring to Prov 1, 20-33 and ch. 8.

[29] Many psalms call on God and declare the petitioner's faith that God will answer them in their distress, but these are distinct from the declaration that God is not listening or has not listened, and are not considered here.

Lord our God", God replies that the Egyptians will themselves withdraw, and the Babylonians return to fight against the city and burn it. God goes further to say that if the Babylonians had only wounded troops, Jerusalem would still be taken and burned.

Jer 21, 1-10 is set during the final siege of Jerusalem. This time, when King Zedekiah sends to Jeremiah to "inquire of the Lord" what comes back is a word that offers the choice to surrender (21, 8-9) but which predominantly threatens destruction by "sword, famine and pestilence"[30], of the people of Jerusalem (and their animals) who will not surrender, with capture and execution for any who survive. In a startling reversal of the covenant in 21, 5-7, God fights against the city and imposes the Deuteronomic ban of complete destruction on Jerusalem[31]. Jer 7, 32 – 8, 3 does not identify its threatened slaughterer, leaving perhaps an ominous space in which God acts to fulfil that role.

Jer 8, 3 also mentions a "remnant" that has been driven away and will prefer death, which resonates with the complete destruction of a "remnant" in 42, 1 – 43, 7 who are intent on seeking refuge in Egypt[32]; the third group to ask Jeremiah to pray. This text is set in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion as a frightened "remnant" (42, 2) ask the prophet to "listen to our plea and pray to the Lord your God for us" to "show us where we should go and what we should do" (42, 2-3). The word that Jeremiah brings back

[30] Cf. Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Deuterojeremianishe Konkordanz,* Arbeiten zu Text und Sprache in Alten Testament 63, EOS, St Ottilien, 1998, p. 49 on the stereotyped nature of this trio (Plagentrias).

[31] On the relationship between Jer 21, 7 and Deut 13, 12-18, esp. v. 15 cf. Helga Weippert, "Jahwekrieg und Bundesfluch in Jer 21:1-7", in: *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 82 (1970), pp. 396-409 and Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Studien zum Jeremiabuch: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung des Jeremiabuches*, FRLANT 118, Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1978, pp. 39-40 who argues also (p. 40, n.128) that the portrayal of the burning and complete destruction of Jerusalem may arise from the association with the ban in Deut 13, 15-17 and Joshua 8, 18-28; 11, 6-14.

[32] Jer 8, 3 would also seem to include the exiles in Babylon. There is a further resonance with the destruction of the remnant in the land and in Egypt in Jer 24, 1-10 (which also includes the language of "build and plant"). There is not space to pursue this here, but cf. forthcoming, John Applegate, "«To build and to plant»: Hope in Ordinary Things in a Time of Medical, Communal and Environmental Emergency"; forthcoming (2024), in: *FS for Professor J. Gordon McConville.*

again offers a choice; this time to stay in the land and thrive – to be "built up and planted" under God's protection, or to escape to Egypt "where we shall not see war, or hear the sound of the trumpet or be hungry for bread" (42, 14) but where, in fact, sword, famine and pestilence will quickly (42, 16-17) overtake and kill them. The rhetoric against any "remnant" in Judah and Egypt continues in ch. 44, 11-30.

It is ironic that these extreme intensifications of God's judgements in Jer 37, 3-10; 21, 8-10 and 42, 8-22 are made in response to prayer made by Jeremiah at the request of his petitioners; they are complete reversals of the petitioners' hopes and expectations. These three texts suggest how unwise it can be to intercede for "this people" – though these emphases belong to the prose traditions of Jer and have almost certainly been highlighted as part of post-exilic inter-communal rivalry.

Two further texts support my suggestion that prayer is used in Jer as a lens to intensify God's response to various groups of "this/his people".

Jer 32 – 33 provides another example of intensification in response to prayer. I have suggested elsewhere[33] that ch. 32 may mark an important redactional turning point in moving from judgement to restoration. Here, the major prose prayer of Jer 32, 16-25 leads to a series of responses from God in 32, 26 – 33, 26. Jeremiah has been led by God during a break in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem to buy a piece of ancestral land just outside the city and to proclaim that "houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (32, 15). At the point when his preaching of judgement is about to be fulfilled, a puzzled prophet, who has suffered for preaching judgement and exile, finds that God now requires him to preach a return to normal life in the land. Jeremiah's prayer sets out his puzzlement and leads to a series of responses from God (32, 36 – 33, 26), which build on the first simple announcement of 32, 15 and intensify God's promises to restore "my people" to the land. Common sayings about the land's devastation are turned on their head; "my people" will return, be cleansed and forgiven and will be a joy to God. The covenant will be renewed, recast as an eternal arrangement, and extended – for example, from "David" to the priests and Levites. Much of this intensifying material appears to be quite late and is

[33] Cf. J. Applegate, "«Peace, Peace when there is no Peace»...".

missing from the Septuagint (ch. 40) and some elements have a different theological emphasis to earlier Jeremianic concerns[34]. As Carolyn Sharp has pointed out, these chapters probably arose as a challenge or corrective to more exclusive versions of restoration[35]; but what I want to note here is the way that these generous visions of restoration arise from Jeremiah's prayer in ch. 32.

Finally, in contrast to the prohibition texts, Jer 29, 1-9 (and on to 14) portrays the prophet writing to encourage the exiles to pray for the cities to which they have been deported (29, 7)[36]. This is a very deliberate theological and pastoral contrast to the earlier commands not to pray, and the reverse of the requests for Jeremiah to pray which led to such disastrous prophecies. Indeed, in direct contrast to Jer 14, 11 which forbids Jeremiah from praying for "the good of this people" (טוב), 29, 7 emphasises the "welfare" (שלום) of the Babylonian city to which God has sent them – and the exiles dependence on its welfare. Jer 29, 1-9 highlights the contrast between God's judgement on the pre-exilic Judahite community and God's favour towards the Babylonian exiles. It asserts that God is active and 'for' his people in exile and that the traditional symbols of God's favour (land, temple, monarchy) are not essential for the community to live within the covenant or to experience covenant peace[37]. This is a decisive theological shift which (as T.M. Raitt noted nearly fifty years ago[38]) understands going into exile as initiating a new experience of God's goodness and a renewal of the covenant which is not open to those who do not undergo the full trauma of deportation. As Stipp has also argued, it can be viewed as a profound theological shift to seeing exile as blessing[39]. Adele Berlin has

[34] Different in theological emphasis include the place of the Levitical priesthood and Levites (cf. 33, 18.21-22) and the eternal nature of the covenant, for example.

[35] C. J. Sharp, "Buying Land...", pp. 150-172, esp. p. 168. Cf. also C. J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology...*, pp. 157-159.

[36] The language of "build and plant" is again used. Cf. forthcoming, John Applegate, "«To build and to plant»: Hope in Ordinary Things in a Time of Medical, Communal and Environmental Emergency"; forthcoming (2024), in: *FS for Professor J. Gordon McConville*.

[37] Compare this to the restoration of the monarchy, priesthood and sacrificial cult in ch. 33.

[38] Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel*, Fortress, Philadephia, 1977.

[39] Hermann-Josef Stipp, "Jeremia 24: Geschichtsbild und historische Ort", in: *Studien*

also noted a clever re-use of Deut 20, 5-10 in the letter to the exiles, which extends the release from military service to the whole community and also to the host Babylonian community to enjoy covenant peace[40]. It might also mark an end of hostility towards Babylon, and potentially protects the exiled community from accusations of sedition or insurrection.

The injunction of Jer 29 to pray for the deportees' cities of exile is often read in an irenic sense, but it too emerges from the turmoil of exile. It may address potential hostility towards the Babylonians but given the widely acknowledged inter-communal rivalries behind the development of the book[41], it also addresses Jeremiah's ongoing conflict with prophets and others in the exilic community who looked for an early return to the land (cf. Jer 29, 7-32), and also reflects rivalries between different groups of exiles. While it validates the exilic community by offering a hope for peace in exile, it is still part of the turmoil, a longer-term seeking for survival and the opposite pole to "do not pray" in the face of looming disaster.

The pattern of intensification of judgement in chs. 14; 21; 37; 42 and of restoration in chs. 29; 32 – 33 associated with prayer makes clear that it is God's decisions that count. The decision to punish is God's and the initiative to restore is God's (cf. T. Raitt [1979]). Between these two poles, Jer portrays God in turmoil, referring to "this people" using a range of terms of estrangement and endearment: forensically setting out the reasons for judgement, reacting violently against "this people's" schemes and weeping over their punishment. And that turmoil is reflected in the portrayal

zum Jeremiabuch: Text und Redaktion, FAT 96, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2016, pp. 349-378; "Jeremiah 24: Deportees, Remainees, Returnees, and the Diaspora", in: Ehud Ben Zvi, and Christoph Levin (eds.), *Centres and Peripheries in the Early Second Temple Period*, FAT 108, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2016, pp. 163–179.

[40] Adele Berlin, "Jeremiah 29:5-7: A Deuteronomic Allusion", in: *Hebrew Annual Review* 8 (1984), pp. 3-11.

[41] Cf. for example, Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Jeremia 25 – 52*, *HAT* I 12/2, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 2019, pp. 6–26; C. Maier, *Jeremia 1 – 25*, esp. pp. 45-53; C. J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology...*; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Jeremiah 26 – 52*, *IECAT*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2022, pp. 21-45; Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah*, De Gruyter, Berlin, 1989; Mark Leucher, *The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26 – 45*, The University Press, Cambridge, 2008; Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E., Studies in Biblical Literature 3*, Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2003, trans. by David Green from *Die Exilszeit*, Kohlhammer, Stuttgart, 2001.

of Jeremiah who felt called to intercede and side with "this people" and who lashes out at them and who weeps over their devastation. Overall, then Jeremiah's prayer is set in the double context of both questioning and aligning with God's will. In the end, theologically, these texts emphasise God's choice and decisions, but also the prophet's role in seeking both to change the behaviour of his people through preaching and of persuading God to turn from judgement to compassion.

V. Not Praying as Protection and Theodicy

Several commentators note that God's prohibition on Jeremiah praying may protect his reputation from accusations of failure to prevent the exile, and most recently, Maier suggests that it may also be a basic element of post-exilic theodicy[42]. This is similar to O'Connor's view[43] that Jeremiah's confessions were collected as a means of arguing that the prophet was not responsible for God's judgment on Judah and indeed was distressed by this. For O'Connor, the confessions were collected in Jeremiah's lifetime (and this might be extended to the prohibitions on prayer) to show that Jeremiah was innocent of accusations that he was responsible for God's judgment and the unfolding disaster, and whom God would vindicate.

Tiemeier[44] has argued that the prohibition on Jeremiah's prayer is related to the silence of Amos and Ezekiel. She argues that God's motive is to prevent his prophets from calling on his compassion and influencing the judgement that he is determined to inflict. While I accept elements of her argument, I suggest a different interpretation.

First, Diarmaid MacCulloch[45] notes that silence in the Hebrew Bible is a sign of powerlessness and defeat, or in the wisdom tradition, that the

[42] Cf. C. Maier, *Jeremia 1-25*, p. 185.

[43] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25*, *SBL Dissertation Series 94*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1988, esp. pp. 85-92.

[44] Lena-Sofia Tiemeier, "God's Hidden Compassion", in: *Tyndale Bulletin* 57 (2006), pp. 191–213.

[45] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, Allen Lane [Penguin], London and Viking, New York, 2013, pp. 12-15.

decisive word has been spoken (cf. Job 29, 7-10. 21-22; cf MacCulloch, p. 19). On this reading, the silence of Amos and Ezekiel is about the prophet's powerlessness to alter the coming events. God has spoken decisively and will do what he will do.

Second, in Amos' case, the prophet falls silent as his visions move from general pictures of judgement (7, 1-6) to more specific indictments and more discriminating and measured judgements (7, 7-9 and 8, 1-3). The first two visions show the indiscriminate destruction of locusts and a shower of fire, compared to the third vision of God holding a plumbline against a wall (7, 7-9) and the fourth vision of God assessing summer fruit (8, 1-3). The form of the two sets of visions also differ with God being seen actively in the latter two and asking Amos what he sees. The final clause of Am 8, 3 ("Be silent!") could be seen as a dramatic ending to the vision reports and potentially related to the commands to Jeremiah to not pray. However, the formal differences suggest that we should not press this too far and a number of commentators see it as addressed to temple or palace singers[46], or it is firmly connected with death or national mourning[47]. "In Amos silence is associated with that brought by death from divine judgment"[48].

Third, in Ezekiel's case, Tiemeier emphasises the prophet's second call to be a watchman (3, 16) followed by God isolating him and preventing him from speaking[49]. However, we should also take account of his initial

[46] Cf. James L. Mays, *Amos: Commentary*, OTL, SCM Press, London, 1969, pp. 141-142; Hans Walter Wolff, *Joel and Amos: A Commentary on the Books of the Prophets Joel and Amos*, Hermeneia, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1977, pp. 319-320. ET from *Dodekapropheten 2 Joel und Amos*. BKAT 14/2, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969 by Waldemar Janzen, S. Dean McBride, Jr. And Charles A. Muenchow.

[47] Cf. Daniel Mark Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos: Prophetic Poetics in Latin American Perspective*, *JSOT Supplements 132*, JSOT Press, Sheffield, 1992, pp. 233-234.

[48] D. M. Carroll R., *Contexts for Amos...*, n.4; pp. 237-238.

[49] Cf. the important and nuanced study of Robert R. Wilson, "An Interpretation of Ezekiel's Dumbness", in: *Vetus Testamentum* 22 (1972), pp. 91-104 and the cessation of legal mediation and dialogue for the people as part of Ezekiel's role. *En pari* with MacCulloch's observation, God's decisive word has been spoken. Stephen L. Cook, "The Speechless Suppression of Grief in Ezekiel 24:15-27: The Death of Ezekiel's Wife and the Prophet's Abnormal Response", in: John J. Ahn and Stephen L. Cook (eds.), *Thus Says the Lord: Essays on the Former and Latter Prophets in Honor of Robert R. Wilson*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament 502, T & T Clark, London

emotional state and silence following his initial call (3, 14-15) in response to his initial experience of God; "I went in bitterness in the heat of my spirit … I sat there … stunned for seven days". As Zimmerli puts it: "The experience weighed so heavily upon him … that he remained for seven days completely overwhelmed"[50]. In other words, we should pay regard to the way in which Ezekiel's own traumatised state is portrayed[51].

The difference between Ezekiel and Amos compared with Jeremiah, is that the latter continues to pray, and that begs the question 'why?'

The instruction not to pray, could be seen as one of the varied responses to "this people" that emerged from the trauma of Judah's invasion and exile. As such they represent a series of responses to the disastrous actions of "this people", the disasters announced by Jeremiah and disasters past and future inflicted by God. This might be applied most helpfully to Jer 14, 1 – 15, 9 with the changing emphases on the acceptability of prayer and on whether Judah is "this people" or "my people". In particular, it suggests a sense of turmoil without resolving whether the turmoil is Jeremiah's or God's. The book of Jeremiah has a number of associations with the book of Hosea which presents God's turmoil and changing attitudes to the prophet's wife and children and to Israel itself. Jer 14 – 15 might, then, portray God's turmoil over what to do about "this people" (14, 11) / "my people" (15, 7). That said, I should note that Jer 7, 1 – 8, 7 and ch. 11, present clear quasi-judicial rationales for the culpability of "this people", and both God and prophet are frustrated to the point of resignation over "this people's" continuing abuses. Further, ch. 11 also emphasises the surprise, hurt and lashing-out that "this people's" treachery provokes by providing a link between God's reaction to *them* and the prophet's reaction to his persecutors. Hence, a quasi-judicial rationale for Judah's punishment

and New York, 2009, pp. 222-233 takes a different view, relating Ezekiel's silence to his priestly role.

[50] Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1-24*, Hermeneia. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1979, p. 139; ET by R.E. Clements from *Ezechiel 1, I. Teilband*. BKAT 13/1 Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969.

[51] Cf. Moshe Greenberg, "On Ezekiel's Dumbness",in: *Jornal of Biblical Literature* 77 (1958), pp. 101-105.

is only part of the picture; there is also a visceral response to betrayal and frustration.

VI. Conclusions

There is not space here to develop connections between the focus of this paper and Jeremiah's confessions. So, briefly, prayer is used in the book of Jeremiah to further three theological points.

First, the three instructions to Jeremiah, "do not pray'" each in themselves represent an intensification of God's determination to punish "this people" which is borne out of frustration. Two of our texts, and especially ch. 11, emphasise that this change comes after a long period of God persistently sending his prophets to warn "this people", and of God's forbearance in withholding judgement. The instruction not to pray moves to a new phase in God's dealing with "this people", but when portrayed as an outburst of frustration and violence, it throws God's patience into sharp relief and reflects something of God's own turmoil about how to deal with "this people".

Second, chs. 11 and 14 – 15 especially, portray the development of a resonance between Jeremiah's feelings about his people and his experience of rejection, and God's apparent feeling and experience of rejection. The way in which God's anger and frustration boils over is echoed in Jeremiah's response to persecution. Both God and prophet experience deliberate rejection which leads to both verbal and emotional turmoil, to weeping and to them lashing out. The extent to which Jeremiah perceives in God or projects onto God a sense of turmoil is difficult to discern without a full discussion of the literature on feelings and emotion in the ancient world, and on the more general psychology of religion, so my focus has been principally on the text and how it appears to work.

Third, the three narrative requests for Jeremiah to pray lead to a further intensification of God's judgement, each with a shocking reversal of the situation that the petitioners seem to hope for. In Jer 37 the hoped-for relief provided by the Egyptians is reversed; in Jer 21 God declares that he will fight against Jerusalem and impose on it the Deuteronomic ban or

holocaust – the reversal of the "mighty acts" that Zedekiah looked for; in Jer 42 the hoped-for haven of Egypt is violently denied. The response to Jeremiah's prayer in ch. 32 also overturns his expectations, by intensifying a move to peace as God responds with increasingly generous declarations of restoration. Finally, the intensification of God's promise of peace is also reflected in the call for the exiles to pray for peace in Babylon. In all five cases, prayer is used to highlight a significant change in God's dealings with "this people" – for good as well as ill. As in so much of the book, God's initiative is highlighted, and it is surprising and often disturbing.

Disaster and trauma clearly affect prayer and open it to disturbing influences, to inconsistency and dramatic changes of purpose. Behind the texts I have touched upon, however, there appears to be an organising mind which, consciously or unconsciously, is using prayer in the ways outlined above. The fact that significant elements of these intensifications and turmoil are missing from the Septuagint (*pace* Fischer) suggests that we are looking at some form of deliberate shaping of what became the MT.