Jeremiah

# Jeremiah and the Superpower

Through most of Old Testament Israel’s history, one superpower or another dominated the political, economic, cultural, and religious life of the world as Israel knew it—Assyria, then Babylon, then Persia, then Greece. The sequence of superpowers continues in much of subsequent history over much of the world as Rome, then Turkey, then Britain, then the USA has played this role. Like the other Latter Prophets and some other books, Jeremiah pays considerable attention to the theological significance of the superpower of its day. The themes that recur in this material are not very specific to the particular power in question at any one moment. Persia (for instance) is seen as a new embodiment of Assyria (Ezra 6:22) while prophecies relating to Assyria are reapplied to Greece (Dan 11), as the New Testament will see Rome as a latter-day Babylon (1 Peter 5:13). In Jeremiah itself, Babylon becomes “a figure of mystery whose identity cannot be reduced to any one nation or geographic region from any one period in history.”[[1]](#footnote-1) That suggests that these books offer raw material for a theological understanding of superpower as such, and thus offer a resource for reflection on (for instance) the rise and fall of the British Empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries or on the place of the USA in the twentieth and twenty-first. (Britain and the USA have been inclined to see themselves in light of God’s relationship with Israel, but Israel was a small people in its world and was a specially-chosen people, and neither of these apply to Britain or the USA. Because of its dominant position in its world, Babylon provides a more plausible model.)

The books that speak of the superpower are not so much concerned with the ethics of its position, though they make some points about that. What they suggest is a theology of being the superpower. Perhaps if a superpower gets its theology of itself straight, it will have the necessary framework for its ethics.

## 1. The Superpower’s Subordination to Yahweh

Yahweh’s first words in Jeremiah declare, “I hereby make you a prophet to/for/about the nations” (1:5).[[2]](#footnote-2) Subsequently, Yahweh adds, “See, I hereby appoint you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, in uprooting and pulling down, in destroying and overthrowing, in building and planting” (1:10).[[3]](#footnote-3) Neither the subject nor the object of the gerunds is explicit. Given that it is Israel that the Book of Jeremiah subsequently makes the victim of the overthrowing and the beneficiary of the planting, it might seem that we should take Israel as the implicit object here. Yet the book will also speak of the fall of nations and kingdoms and even of their positive destiny, so we should perhaps leave the understanding open. As regards the subject of the gerunds, either Yahweh or Jeremiah or the nations and kingdoms might be the implicit agents of the overthrowing and planting. All are involved in these events.

Yahweh goes on to declare, “I am summoning all the clans of the northern kingdoms” (1:15). At the beginning of Jeremiah’s time the plural might point to a variety of possible invaders, but in the context of Jeremiah’s ministry it directly denotes the Babylonians, like Isaiah’s plural referring to the Assyrians (e.g., Isa 5:26; cf. Jer 4:16).[[4]](#footnote-4) In both cases the superpower is the embodiment of world forces attacking Judah. The reference to Babylon is subsequently explicit: “I am sending and taking all the northern clans (Yahweh’s oracle), yes, Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon my servant, and bringing them against this country and against its inhabitants and against all these nations around” (Jer 25:9). But the north is not merely the geographical direction from which the Babylonians will attack Judah. The north symbolizes the abode of God (see Isa 14:13; Ps 48:2-3 [1-2]), and insofar as the Babylonians (or anyone else) are the nations from the north, they are the agents of a destruction that comes from God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

### Agent of Yahweh’s Destructive Purpose

As a prophet to the nations, Jeremiah is commissioned to send word to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon by the hand of their envoys who have come to Jerusalem to see Zedekiah, with whom they are apparently in alliance against Babylon (Jer 27:3-4). It is Yahweh’s comments about Babylon that concern us here.

I am the one who made the earth, the people and the animals that are on the face of the earth, by my great power and my extended arm, and I give it to whomever I please. Now I myself am giving all these countries into the control of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant, and I am also giving him the wild animals to serve him. All the nations are to serve him, his son, and his grandson, until his country’s time comes, too, and many nations and great kings make him a servant. (27:5-7)

Yahweh will attend to (*pāqad*)any nation that will not do so (27:8).

Yahweh’s words offer a strange contrast with the creation story and the exodus story. Genesis 1 and 2 in different ways dispute the common Middle Eastern view that kings have a god-like position in the world, and assert that it is humanity that has this God-like position. One expression of this is humanity’s sovereignty over the animal world (Gen 1:26-28). It is thus odd that this sovereignty should now be given to one person (cf. Jer 28:14). Indeed, that oddity draws attention to the broader strangeness of Yahweh’s framework of thinking here. The creation stories give no place to the exercise of authority by some human beings over others. There are no emperors or kings or lords or presidents in the Garden of Eden. Humanity does serve the garden (2:15); human beings are not in servitude to one another. But subsequent events introduced the realities of authority and servitude into the world (3:16), and God here works within that framework.

As creator of the world, including humanity and the animals, God retains sovereignty over the world, and in a context in which empire has developed, God asserts the right to use the superpower and also to constrain it. Judah needs to settle down under Babylonian authority. This will hold not just for one generation, but for two, and for three—through the time of the current king’s successor, and that of his successor. The declaration compares with the assertion that the exile will last seventy years (when Hananiah was talking about two years—Jer 28:2).[[6]](#footnote-6) It will not last forever, but it will last a long time.

Yahweh backs up this assertion with a reference to having made the world “by my great power and my extended arm.” In the First Testament story these phrases appear not in connection with creation but with the exodus (e.g., Exod 6:6; 32:11). There is again some shock about their appearance in the present connection. In the exodus story Yahweh used great might and an extended arm to act against the regional power and to free the Israelites. Here that great might and extended arm are seen to have been involved in creation, and this involvement is made the basis for subjecting the Israelites and other peoples to a superpower.

This means that a nation that resists serving the superpower that Yahweh put in place is resisting Yahweh, and will pay for it. And this includes Judah. The God who wielded such power in creating the world and bringing Israel out of Egypt will wield this power to take Judah to Babylon. But if the people of God (or any other people) accept their servitude to the superpower, then they will be free to stay in their own land (Jer 27:8-22).

Yahweh is not content with a mere generalization about submitting to Babylon. He goes on to tell Jeremiah to urge the kings, via their envoys, not to pay heed to their prophets, diviners, dreamers, and so on, when these advise them not to submit to Babylon. These advisers are prophesying falsehood. They risk Yahweh throwing them out of their own country into exile (27:8-11). Jeremiah does not tell us about fulfilling Yahweh’s commission; this need not suggest he never did so, but it does indicate that in the story the real interest does not lie in Yahweh’s relationship with those other kings but in Yahweh’s relationship with Zedekiah. While elsewhere the book does suggest an interest in the destiny of the nations (e.g., 3:16-18; 4:1-2), here Jeremiah is involved in their affairs purely because of their significance for Judah. Nevertheless the way he thus speaks about the other peoples is very striking. Yahweh is sovereign over their destiny. These other peoples have their prophets—even the fact that they are prophesying falsehood draws attention to the similarity between them and the Judean prophets. These other peoples can be exiled by Yahweh or allowed to stay in their own country.

### Yahweh’s Servant

So the agent through whom Yahweh will take action in relation to Judah or these other peoples is “Nebuchadrezzar, the king of Babylon, my servant” (cf. 25:9; 43:10). Who are the servants of Yahweh? In Jeremiah, David (33:19-26), Jeremiah himself and the other prophets (e.g., 7:25; 25:4; 26:5), and Israel as a whole (30:10; 46:27-28) are all so described. But so is the Babylonian king—a “startling designation.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The superpowers, who think they serve no one but themselves, actually serve Yahweh.

Thus Yahweh can summon them to be the means of bringing chastisement to Israel.

I am bringing disaster from the north,

great calamity

A lion has come up from its thicket,

a destroyer of nations has set out, has left its place,

To make your country a desolation;

cities will fall in ruins, without inhabitant. (4:6-7)

This tumultuous event can be looked at from three angles. For the lion or the destroyer, it is a matter of fulfilling its own destructive instinct. For the victim, it is a disaster. But for Yahweh, it is an expression of an initiative. This destroyer is an agent of death who works under Yahweh’s command (cf. Exod 12:23; cf. 2 Sam 24:16).[[8]](#footnote-8) The lion thinks it is emerging from its thicket because it wants to get some food, but it does so as Yahweh’s instrument.

I am bringing against you

a nation from far away….

It is an enduring nation,

it is an ancient nation. (5:15)

A nation undertakes its initiatives because it has thought about it and made a decision, but in doing so, this nation unwittingly comes because it has been brought. Jeremiah’s point is not merely that a superpower arises because of its own ambition and Yahweh then harnesses its instincts in order to get done the things Yahweh wants done. Yahweh’s summons lies behind and is prior to its arising. Yahweh warns Kedar and Hazor about trouble that is coming and bids them flee, because Nebuchadrezzar has formulated a plan against them (49:30). Yet it is Yahweh who brings this calamity (49:32), even if acting indirectly via Nebuchadrezzar. Nebuchadrezzar marches against Kedar and Hazor on Yahweh’s commission (49:28, 31). The very language of “planning” was earlier used of Yahweh (49:20). Similarly Jeremiah speaks both of Nebuchadrezzar setting up his throne in one of these countries (43:10) and of Yahweh doing so (49:38).[[9]](#footnote-9) The former is a means of the latter.

The superpower comes on the scene as a destroyer, but in being a destroyer, it acts as Yahweh’s agent. Yahweh speaks of “sending and taking… and bringing” the Babylonians against Judah and the nations around (25:9). The combination of verbs is quite peremptory. Babylon is the superpower, but there is no doubt who is the Superpower over the superpower. Thus Jerusalem falls because Nebuchadrezzar takes it, but it falls because Yahweh gives it into his hand like a Christmas present (e.g., 21:10). His success is nothing to do with his own military numbers or ability. Yahweh says to the Jerusalemites themselves, “Even if you defeated the entire force of Chaldeans who are fighting with you, and the people who were left among them were wounded men, each in his tent, they would rise up and burn this city with fire” (37:10).

### The Old Enemy and the New Resource

Jeremiah makes the point in another way in his oracle “for Egypt, about the army of Pharaoh Neco” (46:2). In 609 in the last days of the Assyrian empire, Neco had attempted to support Assyria against the rising Babylonians. Whether or not he had pretensions to a Mesopotamian empire, defeating Babylon would preserve and increase his authority in his own region (including Judah). Four years later, in 605, we hear a voice again commissioning Neco’s troops, then asking why they are on the run instead of continuing to aim to create a world empire. It transpires that

That day is for the Lord Yahweh Armies a day of redress, for taking redress against his foes. The sword will devour, will be full, will gorge on their blood. For the Lord Yahweh Armies has a sacrifice in the northern country, by the River Euphrates. (46:10)

It was Yahweh’s voice that was summoning the troops, then asking somewhat sardonically why they are on the run and commenting on their inability to find healing for their wounds. Yahweh was speaking as the super-general over this army that is more directly urged on its way by its earthly king. Behind the latter’s machinations is a quite different design of Yahweh, for a day of terrible slaughter, not world-conquering victory. The blood will flow the way it does at a sacrifice. Egypt is an enemy whom Yahweh is punishing.

Why should this be? On that earlier occasion in 609, Neco had to take on Judah in a battle in which he killed Josiah, but Jeremiah does not hint that Neco’s defeat is a punishment for that. Nor does he more than hint that it was his pretensions to the creation of a world empire that made Yahweh put Neco down. He may imply the awareness that history is simply like that. If you take part in the war-based system whereby nations determine who is to rule in the world, you contract into an arrangement where there have to be winners and losers, and this time Egypt is the loser. Jeremiah as a whole does refer to Egypt more often than any book since Exodus, and its references could suggest why Yahweh might prefer to see Egypt lose in this battle. Egypt is the old enemy, the old oppressor, the house of slavery from which Yahweh had originally brought Israel out (e.g., 32:20-21; 34:13; lit., “the house of servants”—that word again). It was indeed Egypt that had defeated the Judeans and killed the great King Josiah (2:16). Before that, Egypt was a source of support against Assyria, and after that, against Babylon (2:18, 36). In the last years before the fall of the city, Egypt was one of the places where Judeans took refuge (24:8; cf. 26:21-23). Egyptian activity had delayed the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem that Yahweh intended (37:5, 7). Egypt was then again a refuge for Judeans who escaped exile to Babylon; as a place to live it seemed much preferable to Judah, though Jeremiah declares that they will not find it so (chaps. 42—45). Yahweh will bring Nebuchadrezzar to ravage Egypt and become its ruler and to destroy its temples and take off its divine images (43:8-13), and will give Pharaoh Hophra over to his enemies, as happened to Zedekiah (44:30).

Historically, it needs to be the earlier of these events that provide the rationale for Yahweh’s putting Egypt down in Neco’s time, but the broader context shows Egypt’s ongoing key significance for Judah. Perhaps God was no more involved in Egypt’s defeat than we usually reckon God was involved in events such as (e.g.) the defeats of France and the USA in Vietnam, but the event reminds a little people such as Judah neither to be excessively trusting in its big neighbors, nor excessively fearful of them.

### Yahweh As King

In the years after his defeat of Egypt in 605, several times Nebuchadrezzar took the conflict with Egypt onto its home territory. So Jeremiah pictures Egypt’s forces (MT) and/or its god (LXX) running for their lives on one of these occasions. Yahweh makes them fall over each other (46:15). They blame “the king of Egypt,” calling him “the big noise who let the moment pass” (46:17). His misfortune was that he came to be confronted by another king, “the King, Yahweh Armies” (46:18).

“King” is not a common title for Yahweh. But Yahweh is King of Judah, so it would be wise to take more notice of Yahweh (8:19); Yahweh is King of the nations, so is much more powerful than their gods (10:7, 10). Only in 46:17-18 is Yahweh’s kingship set over against human kingship (51:57 will speak in similar terms in asserting Yahweh’s power in relation to Babylon, though it does not set the divine king over against the human king). One is almost invited to feel sorry for the king who can only make a lot of noise but is unlucky to be set against such a more impressive King. But Yahweh comments,

Now. I am attending to Amon of No, and to Pharaoh—to Egypt, its gods, and its kings—to Pharaoh and those who trust in him. I will give them into the power of those who seek their life, into the power of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon and into the power of his servants. (46:25-26)

The passage resonates with all three possible antitheses that may be implied by describing Yahweh as King. Yahweh’s attending to the Egyptian gods reflects the fact that Yahweh is God of the whole world and is much more powerful than other gods. Yahweh’s attending to the Egyptian kings reflects the fact that Yahweh is King of the whole world and a much more powerful being than a mere human king. And Yahweh’s attending to the people who trust in the king of Egypt reflects the fact that Yahweh is the real King of Judah. Of course ordinary Egyptians are people who have to trust in their king, and it might be that they are to pay the price for that—which seems unfair, but is how life works. Yet the context makes little reference to ordinary Egyptians and focuses on kings and armies, and in any case, talk of trust in Egyptian power resonates with a negative attitude to Judean trust in anything else but Yahweh (e.g., 2:36-37; 5:17; 17:5-8; for more specific reference to trusting in Egypt, see Isa 31:1; 36:9). Nebuchadrezzar’s invasion will demonstrate the emptiness of Egyptian power and Egyptian religion, and of Judean trust in Egypt. And by virtue of happening in fulfillment of Yahweh’s word, it will demonstrate the power of Yahweh as God and King, power in the realm of religion and the realm of worldly politics, and the possibility and advisability of trusting in Yahweh rather than those others.

We have noted that Yahweh warns Kedar and Hazor about plans that Nebuchadrezzar has formulated against them (49:30). A superpower naturally thinks it is in a position to formulate plans and implement them. Formulating plans is integral to the life of a superpower. A nation does not become a superpower without making plans, and it does not remain one without making plans. And those plans can be the means of implementing Yahweh’s own intentions. But in due course Yahweh will formulate a plan to put the superpower down (50:45). That is Yahweh’s plan for the world. Yahweh will declare this well ahead of time as a sign of determination to fulfill it and as a subsequent evidence that events indeed issued from this plan.

So in reality, the superpower is not always able to implement the plans it formulates. Only a greater Superpower is in that position. The superpower can easily think it is the Superpower, but it is not. The frame around Middle Eastern history is actually the fact that “Yahweh Armies is with us.” This fact undergirds Judah’s political destiny (e.g., Ps 46:7, 11) and thus affects people involved with Judah. It is the x factor in the superpower’s relationship with Judah. It means the superpower can raise the battle cry and put on its armor but then find itself falling apart. It can make plans and announce them, but find them strangely foiled.

### A Means of Deliverance

The superpowers’ role in relation to the other nations is a byproduct of their role in relation to Judah. It is because of the need to chastise and then to restore Judah that Yahweh gets involved with Assyria, Babylon, and Persia. But this work of God’s through the superpower can fulfill a positive purpose for Judah.

On the eve of Jerusalem’s fall, Yahweh warns the people left in the city that Nebuchadrezzar “would put them to the sword and not have pity on them or show mercy or have compassion” (21:7). LXX’s reading complements that: it has Yahweh declaring, “I will not spare them or have compassion on them.” Yet the fall of Jerusalem did not mean the complete annihilation of the people. Yahweh had also said there would be some leftovers. And “the king of Babylon allowed leftovers to Judah” (40:11). The superpower is the means of Yahweh’s allowing leftovers to survive.

After the city’s fall there is yet a further act of rebellion against Yahweh and against the king of Babylon, when Ishmael slays the Babylonian-appointed governor. Yet even after that, Yahweh promises the Judean community that if it now submits to the Babylonian emperor and stays where it is in Judah, “I will grant you compassion, and he will have compassion on you and restore you to your land” (42:12). On the other hand, if the people continue to resist Yahweh’s authority expressed by means of the superpower’s authority, they will again experience Yahweh’s wrath expressed by means of the superpower’s wrath.

Yahweh can be tough by means of the superpower, and Yahweh can be compassionate by means of the superpower. Yahweh had once withheld compassion (13:14; 16:5) and used the superpower’s refusal to have compassion to that end (6:23; 21:7). But Yahweh always intended to have compassion again (12:15; 30:18; 33:26) and superpowers are capable of being merciful towards subordinate peoples. No doubt they generally do so for their own reasons, but Yahweh can also use that fact and if necessary push them in this direction. The possibility of the Babylonians restoring the people to their land makes the same point, for elsewhere Yahweh is the one who does such restoring (e.g., 30:3; 32:37).[[10]](#footnote-10) Yahweh can get the Babylonians to act positively as Yahweh can get them to act negatively.

So under Yahweh’s control a superpower can have a positive theological role as a means of fulfilling promises and furthering a positive purpose. In both respects its acts bring a partial realization of Yahweh’s ultimate purpose in the world. They bring Yahweh’s Day. But all this is unwitting. It is not trying to serve Yahweh but doing its own thing. A superpower often claims that its policies are designed to benefit the world it dominates, though things commonly look different to their alleged beneficiaries. Ironically, the superpower’s self-perception is right in a different direction from the one it imagines. Both its rise and fall serve the destiny of Yahweh’s own people.

There is another irony. Actually, Judah had earlier been only too willing to treat the superpower as a potential resource, but it was right for the wrong reasons. It was right to resist pressure to rebel against Assyria, but actually seeking support from Assyria was a different matter, because it implied putting one’s trust in the superpower rather than the Superpower; that was one reason why the superpower would be the means whereby the Superpower brought calamity on Judah (Isa 7). Jeremiah offers the same critique in the context of Assyria’s dog days—by which time Judah ought to have learned its lesson the hard way. Like the traditional religion of Canaan, the superpower is a leaky water tank compared with the Superpower (Jer 2:13, 18, 36).

## 2. The Putting Down of the Superpower

Every superpower gets its turn. All the nations were to serve Nebuchadnezzar, his son, and his grandson, but only until his country’s time comes, too. Then many nations and great kings would make him a servant (27:6-7). As creator, Yahweh has the power to give sovereignty to Nebuchadnezzar, and has the power to take it away. Nebuchadnezzar is someone whom other peoples serve, but he is that because he is himself Yahweh’s servant. So Yahweh has the authority to terminate this form of service on Nebuchadnezzar’s part and give him a different role in which he will serve other peoples. No superpower retains its position forever. It is subordinate to Yahweh, and Yahweh decides when its “time” comes (27:7).

### Put Into Its Place for Its Insolence

At that point there is no comment on the moral significance of Babylon’s eventual downfall or on this being good news for (e.g.) Judean exiles. It is simply an expression of Yahweh’s sovereignty. But there is indeed a moral and theological necessity for the superpower to be put in its place. Assyria had been the agent of Yahweh’s wrath, but then its victim (50:13, 15), and this next superpower has failed to learn the lesson from its predecessor—superpowers never do. It has been guilty of wrongdoing (‘*āwôn*; 25:12). It has fallen short or failed (*hātā’*; 50:14). “Towards Yahweh it has been insolent, towards Israel’s Holy One”; indeed, it is the embodiment of such insolence (50:24-32; cf. 51:11). “Yahweh and Babylon have been in dispute over who should control Israel and the land of Israel.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Babylon had challenged Yahweh to a fight (*gārâ* hitpael, 50:24), and inevitably found itself outmatched. Whereas it was supposed to be acting as Yahweh’s servant in its involvement with Israel, it has been pursuing its own agenda in its preoccupation with carving out its own empire, but it is in the midst of losing the conflict with Yahweh that it has thus initiated. It has been the agent of Yahweh’s wrath but it is now its victim (50:13). Yahweh is taking redress from it (*nāqam*;50:15). Yahweh could have delivered Israel from Babylon without destroying the city or the power of Babylon, but that would not restore moral order to the world political situation. It is no longer possible to avoid Babylon’s punishment, because “its case has reached the heavens, risen to the skies” (51:9).

Israel is a sheep driven away, one that lions have chased, that as the first the king of Assyria devoured and now as King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon has gnawed its bones. Therefore Yahweh Armies, the God of Israel, has said this: “Now. I am attending to the king of Babylon and his country as I attended to the king of Assyria.” (50:17-18; cf. 41-46)

The one who has shown no compassion will receive none (50:42).

For the nations, as for Israel, experiencing Yahweh’s wrath is like drinking a cup of poisoned wine. At a banquet it is a good sign for the host to have a cup of wine in their hand that they want to share with their guests, but when the wine has the wrong spices in it, the cup can turn out to have sinister implications. These are additives that turn the cup of blessing into a cup of poison (e.g., Ps. 75:8 [9]). Such is the cup in Yahweh’s hand. “Take this cup of wine (wrath)[[12]](#footnote-12) from my hand and make all the nations to whom I am sending you drink it. They will drink, and they will convulse and go mad, because of the sword that I am sending among them” (25:15-16). So Jeremiah did so, giving the cup to Judah (!), and then to Egypt, the Philistines and other peoples of the Levant, the peoples of the desert, Elam and Media—and Babylon. “Now. I am beginning by doing ill to the city over which my name is pronounced, and you, can you really go free? You will not go free, because I am summoning the sword on all the inhabitants of the earth (Yahweh’s oracle)” (25:29). For different reasons all these peoples might think they would be exempt from disaster, but none will be—even Yahweh’s own people, and the superpower that is sure it will stand when all else fall. The order and the logic thus contrast with that in Amos 1—2, where Yahweh moves from the nations to Judah and Ephraim.[[13]](#footnote-13) If the nations must be punished for their wrongdoing, then Judah and Ephraim must be; if Judah must be punished for its wrongdoing, so must the nations, even the most powerful.

Babylon was a gold cup in Yahweh’s hand

making the whole earth drunk.

Nations drank of its wine;

that is why nations go mad. (Jer 51:7)

The nations are not merely intoxicated but poisoned. This does not necessarily take place in an entirely fair way, Yahweh observes to Edom: “People who by rights should not drink the cup really do drink it. Are you really the one to go free? You will not go free, because you really will drink” (49:12).

### Taking Redress

More specifically, Yahweh is punishing the Babylonians for what they did to Yahweh’s palace in Jerusalem. Because of this action, Yahweh has a task to do among the Babylonians, and is in the midst of attending to them (50:25-28; cf. 51:11). “This is Yahweh’s redress; take redress from her, do to her as she has done” (50:15).

He devoured me, discomfited me,

Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon….

The violence done to my body be on Babylon,

says the one who lives in Zion,

My blood be on the inhabitants of Chaldea,

says Jerusalem.

Therefore Yahweh has said this:

Yes, I am upholding your cause

and taking redress for you….

Babylon will become rubble,

a den of jackals. (51:34-37)

The point is made vividly by the reappearance of a declaration about Edom (49:19-21) as a declaration about Babylon (50:44-46). Babylon is the means of the action against Edom that will cause disquiet in the region, but now someone else is the means of equivalent action against Babylon that will cause disquiet through the earth as Babylon’s cry makes itself heard among the nations. Earlier in the book Jeremiah was working hard to get his audience to see Nebuchadrezzar as Yahweh’s servant, but now he is working hard to make the opposite point, as “the purpose of Yahweh and the rule of Babylon are no longer compatible.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Although Babylon has been Yahweh’s war club for smashing nations, Yahweh declares, “I will repay Babylon and all the inhabitants of Chaldea for all the wrong that they did to Zion before your eyes” (51:24).

Yahweh will roar from on high,

from his holy dwelling will give forth his voice.

He will indeed roar against his fold;

a shout like grape-treaders echoes

to all the inhabitants of the earth.

A yell is reaching to the end of the earth,

because Yahweh has a case against the nations.

He himself is arguing it with all flesh;

the faithless—he has given them to the sword (Yahweh’s oracle). (25:30-31)

Yahweh goes on to picture disaster spreading from one nation to another, through the world, with the dead so numerous they lie unburied from one end of the world to the other. The leaders of the nations wail as they find there is no more escape for them than there is for ordinary people. Picturing the leaders as shepherds perhaps encourages a correlative picture of Yahweh:

He is leaving his lair like a lion,

because their country is becoming a desolation

Through his oppressive fury,

through his angry fury. (25:38)

Survivors of its destruction come to tell of “the redress of Yahweh our God, redress for his palace” (50:28). After all, “aliens came into the holy precincts of Yahweh’s house” (51:51). “Yahweh is a God of recompense. He repays in full” (51:56). When Egypt advances to take on Babylon, “that day will be for the Lord Yahweh Armies a day of taking redress, for taking redress from his foes” (46:10). “The day of their calamity has come upon them, the time of their being attended to” (46:21). The Judeans have had their “day of their calamity,” Yahweh has attended to them and punished them (e.g., 5:9; 18:17), and now Egypt has its equivalent.

### Deliverance from the Superpower

The plunderer thus becomes the plundered, and the rest of the world is rescued from the superpower.

Grave your shattering,

severe your wound…

Therefore all your devourers will be devoured,

all your foes, every one of them, will go into captivity.

Your plunderers will become plunder,

all your spoilers I will give up for spoiling.

For I will bring out healing for you

and cure you of your wounds (Yahweh’s oracle),

For they called you an outcast—

“It is Zion [MT]/it is our prey [LXX]—no one seeks it out.” (30:10-17)

For Judah, defeat and exile meant having its conquerors and their allies pillaging its city. That will now be reversed. Jeremiah urges,

Declare among the nations, proclaim,

raise a banner, proclaim,

Do not conceal it, say,

Babylon is taken. (50:2)

Another northern power has attacked it, captured it, and shamed the deities that were supposed to protect it. In imagination, the prophecy locates itself at the moment when this fall has happened, though the devastation of the country that will follow is still to happen (50:2-3). And this is to be declared among the nations for whom Babylon is their overlord. It is good news for them because they would prefer to be free rather than be under Babylon’s control. It is bad news for Babylon (which might like to conceal it) because it brings Babylon shame and disgrace.

There might be several reasons for declaring this among the nations. It is relevant to them simply because Babylon is their overlord. It is good news for them because they would prefer to be free rather than be under Babylon’s control. Jeremiah goes on,

The Israelites are oppressed,

the Judeans, with them.

All their captors showed their strength over them,

refused to let them go.

Their restorer is strong,

Yahweh Armies is his name.

He will firmly champion their cause,

so that he may settle the earth

but unsettle the inhabitants of Babylon. (50:33-34)

The last line is especially striking. Yahweh intends to settle “the earth,” which implies a positive concern for the earth as a whole. Yahweh acts against Babylon for Israel’s sake, but the whole world benefits.

This fits with the strange transition that comes in the middle of Jer 25. The one who is a servant of Yahweh (‘*ebed*)and who as such exercises authority over many nations becomes one who serves many nations instead of being served by them (‘*ābad*). When Judah has lived in subservience to Babylon for the time decreed, “I will attend to the king of Babylon and to that nation (Yahweh’s oracle) for their wrongdoing… for many nations and great kings are making them into servants,[[15]](#footnote-15) too, and I will requite them for their conduct and for the activity of their hands”(25:12-14). The subservience they have imposed on others will become their experience.

### A Warning to Other People

Other peoples are therefore unwise to identify too closely with the superpower, or at least they are wise to be able to tell the time and to know when to abandon it. In Jer 25—29 Jeremiah urged the Judeans in exile since 597 to settle down under the Babylonians for a lifetime, and urged Judeans in Jerusalem to submit to Babylon. Jeremiah 50—51 declares that Yahweh will put Babylon down. Both perspectives are important.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Flee from the midst of Babylon,

get out of the country of the Chaldeans;

be like he-goats leading the flock.

Because here, I am arousing and bringing up against Babylon

an assembly of great nations

from a northern country….

They should turn, each one, to their people,

they should escape, each one, to their country….

Flee from the midst of Babylon;

save your life, each one,

do not perish for its wrongdoing.

For this is a time of redress for Yahweh;

he is dealing retribution to it….

Come out from its midst, my people;

save your life, each one,

from Yahweh’s angry fury….

Babylon is to fall, slain of Israel,

as the slain of all the earth fell to Babylon.

Fugitives from the sword, go,

do not stand there. (50:8-9, 16; 51:6, 45, 49)

When the Persians are advancing on Babylon, like the Babylonians advancing on Jerusalem as in the last days of the pre-exilic period, it would be natural to be paralyzed by events, but this is a time for courage. Yahweh is acting to punish Babylon. The Judean community needs to believe that and act accordingly.

For the Judeans in Babylon, the city’s fall will mean “Yahweh has brought forth faithfulness to us. Come, let us declare in Zion the deed of Yahweh our God.” Touchingly, the people’s initial response to Babylon’s fall is to try to bind up its wounds, but the task is futile. “We tried to heal Babylon, but it could not be healed.” The only thing to do is to abandon it to go and make that proclamation. There is no one to deliver a superpower (51:8-10).

### Yahweh Puts One Down by Raising Up Another

The way Yahweh puts a superpower down is by raising up another. Assyria had been overwhelmed by Babylon. After Babylon, the Medo-Persian Empire was to be next, its first act as superpower being the putting down of its predecessor. And it is Yahweh who stirs the Medes against Babylon. “Listen to the plan that Yahweh has formulated against Babylon, the intention that he has formulated against the country of the Chaldeans” (50:45). At one stage Yahweh had a plan that positively involved Babylon. Now there is a different one. “His plan against Babylon is to destroy it.” “Yahweh has both planned and done what he said against the inhabitants of Babylon” (51:11-12). It is through a new superpower that Yahweh does it. Because Yahweh is stirring them, Babylon will not be able to buy them off. They will not be put off from their gruesome task. Once again one can picture this as the act of “a company of great nations from the northern country” (50:9). Yahweh summons the northern army that will destroy Babylon as Yahweh once summoned the Babylonian army from the north to destroy Israel (50:14-16, 21-30, 41-43). As Jeremiah originally spoke of an army from the north without naming it, so initially he does not name its vanquishers (see only 51:11, 28).

## 3. Is There Any Good News for the Superpower?

This is all gloomy. Is there any good news for a superpower?

### The Exposure of Its Resources

A paradoxical form of good news is the declaration that the powerlessness of its religious resources will be exposed. When Babylon is taken,

Bel is shamed,

Merodoch is dismayed.

Its images are shamed,

its idols are dismayed. (50:2)

The gods that were supposed to protect the superpower’s capital and the images that represented them have failed. Their powerlessness has been exposed. The shame and dismay of the gods reflects that of their worshipers; the shame and dismay of the images reflect those of their makers.[[17]](#footnote-17) “Days are coming (Yahweh’s oracle) when I shall attend to its images” (51:52).

So the nations will appear before Yahweh with a twofold confession:

To you nations will come

from the ends of the earth, and say,

“Our ancestors possessed only lies,

emptiness and things that are useless.

Can human beings make gods for themselves?—

these are not gods!”

So, now—I am making them acknowledge,

once and for all I will make them acknowledge

My power and my might,

they will acknowledge that my name is Yahweh. (16:19-21)

They grant that on one hand, they have received from their ancestors a form of faith that was all these ancestors had to pass on, but the gods they called gods are nothing of the sort. The nations are imagined repeating essentially the same judgment about these gods by means of three different expressions. They are lies (*šeqer*), objects that give the impression of reality, but it is a false impression. They are emptiness (*hebel*), mere breath. And thus there is nothing in them that achieves anything; they cannot actually do anything. The nations are of course talking about the outward representations of their gods, the divine images, which as usual the prophet declines to distinguish from the gods themselves. The immobility and inactivity of the image he takes to be a true reflection of the powerlessness of the actual deity. The other side of the coin is the fact that the real God cannot be imaged satisfactorily, and therefore should not be imaged at all. A further telling fact about the image is that it is humanly-made. There is an obvious nonsense about the idea that human beings can make gods. What they make cannot be gods. (We might be inclined to add that the human origin of the images also points to the human origin of the actual deities—the entire religion was a human construction. But it is doubtful if the First Testament works the logic that way. It does not argue for the non-existence of heavenly beings other than Yahweh. Passages such as Deut 32:8 and Ps 82 suggest that these so-called deities do indeed exist, but they do not count as God.)

The correlative positive confession is that the nations will acknowledge Yahweh’s power and might. Yahweh has the power that the images and the gods they represent do not have. To say “they will acknowledge that my name is Yahweh” is actually to say the same thing in different words. “My name is Yahweh” has similar implications to those of statements such as “they will acknowledge that I am Yahweh,” and thus it is not the truism or triviality it sounds. It is a shorthand way of saying, “my name is Yahweh, and that means I am the only real God.” The finality of the nations’ confession is underlined by the threefold repetition of the key verb “acknowledge” (along with the qualifier “once and for all,” *bappa*‘*am hazzō*’*t*, lit. “by this stroke/time”). And the causative form of the first two occurrences of the verb underlines the sovereignty of Yahweh over this process. Yahweh will bring it about. That means it is certain.

How does Yahweh do that? The implication from the context is suggestive and/or frightening. Jeremiah has spoken about Yahweh’s bringing the Israelites back from all the foreign countries where they have been banished (16:14-15). It will be an exodus-like event, one that replaces the exodus in people’s own confession of faith. It would not be surprising if that had the same, or more spectacular, effects as the original exodus, in leading foreigners to acknowledge Yahweh (e.g., Exod 18:8-12). But Jeremiah has even more immediately spoken of Yahweh’s sending fishermen and hunters to hunt the Israelites out because of their own addiction to images (Jer 16:16-18). The nations’ double confession about images and about Yahweh follows on that act of exposure of Israel’s images.[[18]](#footnote-18) Perhaps both the act of grace and the act of exposure draw the nations.

### It’s Never Too Late

Jeremiah was appointed over the nations and over the kingdoms, and spent a significant amount of his time declaring their destiny because of its significance for Judah. If Judah must drink the cup of poisoned wine, then so must they. On the other hand, if Judah can evade that cup, so can they.

Momentarily I may speak concerning a nation or a kingdom about uprooting and pulling down and destroying, but if that nation concerning which I spoke turns from its wrongdoing, I will relent concerning the trouble that I intended to do to it. (18:7-8)

Jeremiah speaks directly about Judah; if it turns, then Yahweh will relent. But Jeremiah speaks in general terms, and has presupposed (as do other prophets) that the principles of Yahweh’s attitude to other nations are not so different from the principles of Yahweh’s attitude to Judah.

Now. The days are coming (Yahweh’s oracle) when I attend to everyone who is physically circumcised, to Egypt, to Judah, to Edom, to the Ammonites, to Moab, and to all the people with shaven temples who live in the wilderness. Because all the nations are uncircumcised, and the whole household of Israel is uncircumcised in heart” (9:24-25).

Circumcision is the covenant sign; it marks someone as belonging to the covenant people and heir to the covenant promises. Jeremiah subverts the implications of that fact. First, there are many other peoples who are circumcised, so the fact that Yahweh will attend to the nations carries with it the uncontroversial fact that Yahweh will thus be involved in attending to peoples who are circumcised. In declaring that, Jeremiah has no difficulty slipping in reference to Judah as one of the circumcised peoples. Of course the nations are circumcised only physically—the disciplining of the inner person that circumcision could suggest does not apply to them. But then neither does it apply to Judah. Indeed it fails to apply to the household of Israel as a whole. In their inner uncircumcision, Judah and its neighbors are one.

And the war that Yahweh was prepared to make on other nations has become the war Yahweh is prepared to make on Israel. But it is never too late for Judah. And it is never too late for a nation, even a superpower. Jonah famously illustrates the principle that a superpower that turns can find that Yahweh relents of the trouble with which it has been threatened. (If Nineveh stands for Jerusalem in this story,[[19]](#footnote-19) that still presupposes the point about Nineveh. The trope works only if that is so.) It is never too late to turn, and never too late to find deliverance.

Of course it *was* too late for Judah, as Jeremiah goes on to declare (18:12)—though again I take this to be at one level a rhetorical point, designed to provoke Judah into falsifying it. And it becomes too late for Babylon. But until the calamity comes, Yahweh’s invitation to the superpower still stands, just like the invitation to Judah.

# (b) Responses to Questions on Jeremiah

*What kind of freewill does Jeremiah really have?*

\*\*The same kind as Jonah or Saul of Tarsus when Jesus knocks him over? In theory you could say “No” but God may not take “No” for an answer.

*Why would anyone ever want to be a prophet?*

\*\*I can’t imagine. You’d have to ask Isaiah (see Isaiah 6).

*Why do we know more of Jeremiah’s thoughts and feelings than other prophets?*

\*\*Because his own person comes to be an embodiment of the message in a distinctive way. Though why that is so, I don’t know.

*Why do people want to kill Jeremiah?*

\*\*Because his words are powerful—both to implement God’s purpose and to lower morale and to make people feel guilty.

*11:14; 14:11 Yet 14:7-9, 19-22.Does God say one thing and mean the opposite?*

\*\*I don’t know, but a child whose father says “No” doesn’t necessarily take “No” for an answer. Maybe God is testing you. Yet further, remember that everything that a prophet says is being said to Israel—it’s part of his prophetic ministry to people. So telling him God says not to pray for them is a way of trying to get through their thick skulls.

*12:8: What does it mean for God to hate his people?*

\*\*It implies rejection. Compare Romans 9:13.

*12:14-17; 16:19-21: Does this imply the conversion of the nations?*

\*\*Certainly an openness to that.

*16: Why isn’t Jeremiah allowed a family? Is that often the case with prophets? Doesn’t he need a family’s support? Why do prophets have to go it alone?*

Verses 3-4 and the rest of what follows give the reason. A prophet may have to embody the message in his own life. That overrides the consideration about support.

*16:20: So the gods aren’t real?*

\*\*That’s not the point here—Jeremiah is talking about images of gods. The OT assumes that the gods themselves are real enough—they are just not God (more like angels and demons).

*18: How does the potter idea fit with predestination? Does God depend on us?*

\*\*The OT consistently sees the relationship between God and people as a personal one in which there is interaction. God is willing (in fact keen) to negotiate with people. This doesn’t mean he is weak or not really sovereign—in fact, a willingness to negotiate is a sign of strength. The OT doesn’t picture God as having fixed everything before anything started. But there are things God is committed to and won’t compromise on—such as his election of Israel.

*23: What is “the burden of the Lord”? Why is this such a bad things to say?*

\*\*The word is massa’, which means both “message” and “burden.” So people ask Jeremiah for Yahweh’s message, but they don't intend to listen to it, so they become Yahweh’s burden—something he is tired of carrying.

*29:11 often gets quoted: what is its significance?*

\*\*It’s a promise to Judah in a particular context, assuring them that God’s long term policy for them is good. It’s not what God always says!

*29:16-23: So will it be worse to be left behind?*

\*\*Yes; but remember again, the people who need to hear this message are the people in Judah, who need to face these facts. They are given the chance to overhear them by overhearing what is in the letter.

*35: What are the Rekabites?*

\*\*They were an Israelite family who vowed not to live as settled people but to live as people did on the journey though the wilderness. They are an example because they keep their commitment—it’s not the particular commitment that makes them an example, but the fact that they keep their commitment.

*36: Is this scroll part of what we are reading?*

\*\*That seems plausible, yes.

*38:24-28: Are prophets allowed to lie?*

\*\*The OT is very worried about lying in your relationship with God or in testifying about something that has happened, but not about lying to people who are not living truthfully with you: see especially the midwives in Exodus 1—2.

*It seems that Yahweh has made up his mind about the fall of Jerusalem. Is there now no possibility of repentance?*

\*\*It’s never over until it’s over. But Yahweh suspects they are not going to repent.

*There isn’t so much about social justice in Jeremiah compared with Isaiah, is there?*

\*\*No, that’s right—the emphasis is more on commitment to Yahweh rather than to other gods, and to aspects of that commitment such as keeping Sabbath and sacrificing human beings.

*40: Why was Jeremiah freed by Nebuchadnezzar?*

\*\*Because he had been saying that Nebuchadnezzar was Yahweh’s servant and Jerusalem should surrender.

*What was exile like? Were they prisoners or slaves or send-class citizens or what?*

\*\*The last gives you the best idea. They were able to do quite well and most of their descendants had no desire to come back to Jerusalem when they could. Just like the position of exiles or refugees in the U.S., in fact.

*Why isn’t the Book of Baruch in the OT?*

\*\*It’s a later work that we have only in Greek that likely comes from the second or first century B.C. So by the time Jeremiah had been accepted into the Scriptures, Baruch hadn’t been written.

*Why is OT prophecy gloomier than NT prophecy?*

\*\*Because it comes from a later period in the life of God’s people, when they have chance to get thoroughly degenerate?

*If Jeremiah spoke to Judah but he was a failure, what do we do with that fact?*

\*\*The prophets were all failures, weren’t they, and so was Jesus?

*How does a covenant theology fit with a faith-based relationship with God? What about grace? How does preaching Christ’s life, death, and resurrection affect the way we understand covenant theology?*

\*\*I’m not sure what you mean by covenant theology, but what I would mean is that God in his grace makes a covenant commitment to us and we respond with faith and with a covenant commitment to him. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection don’t change the nature of that relationship. The kind of arrangement that both OT and NT wouldn’t accept is either the idea that God’s grace doesn’t require a response of commitment on our part or the idea that we can earn God’s grace by making our commitment first.

1. John Hill, *Friend or Foe: The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (BIS 40; Leiden/Boston: Brill, 1999), 117. Like Hill, in this paper I am discussing Babylon in Jeremiah MT (though I occasionally refer to LXX readings); the profile in the LXX form of the book is rather different. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I take *nĕtattîkā* as a performative, but it might continue the past reference of the two preceding verbs, “I made you.” The meaning of the preposition *l* is not clear. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Again, I take *hipqadtîkā* as a performative. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In passages such as Jer 1:15; 25:9 LXX has the easier singular. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, e.g., Louis Stulman, “Insiders and Outsiders in the Book of Jeremiah,” *JSOT* 66 (1995): 65-85 (70-71). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. In the event, Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson did not reign, though this more likely reflects the fact that Yahweh here speaks in images (as when speaking of a seventy-year exile) than that Yahweh had a change of mind (as Terence E. Fretheim suggests, *Jeremiah* [Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2002]), 383. (Following the Book of Jeremiah’s own usage, in referring to Jer 27:1—29:3 I use the conventional spelling of Nebuchadnezzar’s name but elsewhere use the form Nebuchadrezzar.) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cf. John Hill, “‘Your Exile Will Be Long,’” in Martin Kessler (ed.), *Reading the Book of Jeremiah* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 151-61 (154). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Cf Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cf. Fretheim, *Jeremiah,* 616. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cf. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* 552. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26—52* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: Handsel, 1991), 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The construction is ungrammatical—hence this way of representing the sentence. “Wrath” interprets the word “wine.” [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1—25* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Edinburgh: Handsel, 1988), 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Brueggemann, *To Build, To Plant*, 269; the first nine words are italicized. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. I take the verb as instantaneous qatal. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 647-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Cf. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 626. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cf. William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1--25* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Cf. Ronald E. Clements, “The Purpose of the Book of Jonah,” in *Congress Volume: Edinburgh 1974* (VTSup 28; Leiden: Brill, 1975), 16-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)