

Review Essay

Jeremiah: The Fate of a Prophet by Binyamin Lau (New Milford: Maggid Books, 2013) translated by Sara Daniel, 230 pp.

By: Heshey Zelcer*

The Book

Jeremiah: The Fate of a Prophet (“our book”) contains an introduction to the *Book of Jeremiah* followed by three sections corresponding respectively to the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, the three main kings of Judah during the time Jeremiah prophesied. At the end of the book are two indices that cross-reference its chapters to those in the *Book of Jeremiah*. This is necessary, according to the author, because certain chapters and events in the *Book of Jeremiah* are not in chronological order,¹ a claim very much within the tradition of our commentators (*ein mukdam u-meubar ba-Torah*).

* I dedicate this essay to my dear friend Heshy Roz, ז"ל whose enthusiasm and love for learning remains an inspiration to my colleagues and myself.

¹ Our author reorganizes the chapters in the *Book of Jeremiah* as follows: Josiah 1, 3, 31, 23, 30, 2, 10, 17, 11, 18, 5, 7, 8, 11, and 16. Jehoiakim: 22, 26, 19, 20, 46, 4, 6, 25, 35, 36, 45, 36, and 13. Zedekiah: 22, 24, 29, 27, 28, 14, 37, 14, 21, 34, 37, 38, 39, 32, 33, 39, 40, 41, 42, 44, and 52. He does not suggest any organizing principle for the *Book of Jeremiah*. On p. xxi, n. 8, however, he does mention some works that discuss this.

See *Da'at Mikra: Sefer Yirmiyahu* (Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1983) pp. 41–44, which sees the *Book of Jeremiah* as originally being five scrolls. Three of these scrolls are mentioned: the book of Baruch b. Neriah, Jeremiah's scribe (36:2); the prophecies of Jeremiah to the nations (25:13); and the prophecies of Jeremiah regarding the redemption of Israel (30:2). When Jeremiah and Baruch went to Egypt they combined the five scrolls into a single work.

See also James L. Kugel, *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now* (Free Press, 2007) pp. 569–597, who notes that the Hebrew text of the *Book of Jeremiah* is 12% longer (about 2,700 words) than the Greek Septuagint, and the order of the chapters of these two works is different. In the Septuagint, chapters 46–51 follow chapter 25:13. Manuscripts of the *Book of Jeremiah* found among the Dead Sea Scrolls support both the Septuagint and our Hebrew version.

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The Author

The author, Rabbi Binyamin Lau (“our author”), is the rabbi of the Ramban Synagogue in Jerusalem. He is the son of Naftali, the older brother of the former chief rabbi of the State of Israel, R. Israel Meir Lau. He has written various books in Hebrew, some of which have been translated into English. Of his previous works, *From “Maran” to “Maran,”*² a biography of R. Ovadia Yosef, is arguably his most important.

Purpose

In our knowledge of the Prophets (Nevi'im) and The Writings (Ketuvim)—collectively NaKh—there is a stark contrast between the United States and Israel. In the United States, secular Jews have no education in NaKh and most male³ Jews who attended traditional yeshivot have little if any. It is not just that there is more emphasis in Israel on teaching NaKh but that educated Jews in Israel are assumed to be able to think critically and speak and write about NaKh⁴ whereas in the United States there is no such expectation. In Israel, NaKh is part of its history and culture. Indeed, I acquired the Hebrew version of the book under review not from a *seforim* store specializing in religious works but from Steimatzky, the Israeli equivalent of Barnes and Noble.⁵

Literacy of NaKh in Israel cuts across many segments of society—both religious and secular. For example, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated there were articles in the secular Israeli press (p. 199) comparing and contrasting his assassination to that of Gedalia ben Aḥikam as recounted in the *Book of Jeremiah* (41:2-3). Here in the United States, however, Jews are so unaware of NaKh that their consciousness

² *From “Maran” to “Maran”: The Halachic Philosophy of Rav Ovadia Yosef* (Tel Aviv: Miskal – Yedioth Ahronoth and Chemed Books, 2005) Hebrew.

³ Yeshivot for girls generally teach NaKh, while Yeshivot for boys focus on Ḥumash and Rashi in the early grades and Talmud and its commentaries in higher grades.

⁴ On the back cover of the book is a quotation from the first Prime Minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, “There is no doubt that the greatest prophet before the destruction of Jerusalem and also its most tragic and hated—and yet strong in spirit—was Jeremiah. He was not covered by prison, corporal punishment or even death. He chose to tell his people the bitter truth until the end... Jeremiah loved his people and believed in their future...”

⁵ My thanks to David F. and David and Tikva A. for taking time during their vacation in Israel to purchase the Hebrew version of the book for me.

of Jeremiah is formed more by their exposure to Western culture than by Jewish education.

The book's audience, according to the author, is the Israeli public, both secular and religious, and its main purpose is to recast their understanding of Jeremiah, who is commonly portrayed in broad monochrome strokes as the prophet of doom and gloom or, even worse, as a prophet who advocated servitude and capitulation to the reigning superpower.

What makes Jeremiah—a prophet of destruction—such an important prophet in Jewish consciousness? Leaving aside the halakhic parameters for establishing a true prophet, our author suggests two traits of a true, and truly great prophet. Whereas a false prophet takes positions that are in keeping with the prevailing government policy, a true prophet challenges it. Another trait of true prophets is their love for their people.⁶ Both of these traits were exemplified by Jeremiah.

Introduction

I have always been struck by the beautiful prose in two of the books attributed to Jeremiah—the *Book of Jeremiah* and the *Book of Lamentations*—even as they deal with destruction and exile, but especially with their sublime reminiscence of God's love for youthful Israel, and the hopeful prophecies of better days to come:

...I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride—how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown, Israel was holy to the LORD, the first fruits of His harvest... (2:1-3)

...Eternal love I conceived for you then; therefore I continue My grace to you. I will build you firmly again, O Maiden Israel! Again you shall take up timbrels and go forth to the rhythm of the dancers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the hills of Samaria; men shall plant and live to enjoy them. (31:3-5)

...Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is reward for your labor—declares the LORD: They shall return from the enemy's land. And there is hope for your future—declares the LORD: Your children shall return to their country. (31:16-17)

...Again shall be heard in this place... in the towns of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem... the sound of mirth and gladness, the voice of

⁶ Our author writes that today the role of the moral critic is often played by the journalist, but that more often than not their criticism is laced with venom and loathing. How true.

bridegroom and bride, the voice of those who cry, “Give thanks to the LORD of Hosts, for the LORD is good, for His kindness is everlasting!...” (33:10-11)⁷

The *Book of Jeremiah* and the *Book of Lamentations*, however, are very different. While the *Book of Lamentations* has a consistent theme of destruction and mourning, the *Book of Jeremiah* is confusing. It spans the careers of three noteworthy⁸ Jewish kings over a period of about fifty-five years, but it leaves us confused as to the chain of cause-and-effect between the opening prophecy of Jeremiah in chapter 1 and the awful destruction wrought by Nebuchadnezzar toward the end.

After reading the entire *Book of Jeremiah*, many questions are likely to remain unanswered. Are the three Jewish kings who are mentioned in 1:2-3 good, evil, or complicated human beings with spiritual highs and lows? What about the surrounding countries and empires—were they allied with the kingdom of Judah or were they enemies? Did the Jewish kings and their subjects respond affirmatively to Jeremiah’s prophecy and his call for repentance? If not, why didn’t they? If yes, why the destruction? In short, what is missing in the *Book of Jeremiah* is both context and the big picture.

While the classic commentators translate and explain each verse in the *Book of Jeremiah*, they do not address the historical setting, the shifting alliances and the relative power of the surrounding nations. Their goal (and that of Tanakh) is not primarily to teach us history but to convey moral and religious principles that are as relevant today as they were then.

In *Jeremiah: The Fate of a Prophet* our author does an admirable job of putting the *Book of Jeremiah* in its historical perspective. He interweaves sources from the *Book of Jeremiah*, the *Book of Kings*, and *Chronicles* and he also utilizes archeological and historical sources. In a lively and engaging manner he explains the historical context and in the process he helps make sense of some puzzling statements in the *Book of Jeremiah*.

Josiah

Josiah was king of Judah for thirty-one years from c. 640 – 609 BCE. He was the grandson of Manasseh who reigned over a politically peaceful kingdom for fifty-five years (c. 696 – 642 BCE). Manasseh’s long and

⁷ English translations of the *Book of Jeremiah* are from *JPS Hebrew English Tanakh* (Philadelphia: JPS, 1999).

⁸ The three main sections in our book correspond to the three kings mentioned in verses 1:2,3. There were actually five kings during that time: Josiah (31 years), Jehoahaz (3 months), Jehoiakim (11 years), Jehoiachin (3 months), Zedekiah (11 years).

peaceful reign dovetailed with his political alignment and subjugation to Assyria, the then undisputed superpower. The alignment included identification with the culture of Assyria and the worship of its gods. It was the sinful reign of Manasseh, according to the prophecy of Jeremiah, that would cause the downfall of the kingdom.

Following the death of Manasseh, his son Amon reigned for two short years and left no apparent impression on the kingdom or on history. Following Amon's assassination the people crowned his son Josiah who was then but eight years old. The beginning of Josiah's reign coincides approximately with the birth of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's first prophecy—which sets the tone for his future prophecies—takes place when he is just thirteen. “See, I appoint you this day over nations and kingdoms: to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jeremiah 1:10). First must come destruction and only afterward can Judah be rebuilt. Jeremiah then elaborates that the destruction will come from the north⁹ and that its plan is being put into place.

Eight years into his reign, at the young age of sixteen, Josiah began distancing his country from Assyria's culture, and worked toward the reunification of his kingdom, Judah, with the remnants of the ten exiled tribes.

Sixteen years into his reign, in the process of removing the idols from the Beit ha-Mikdash, a Sefer Torah scroll was discovered. When it was read before the king he was distraught and realized how far his people had strayed from God's teachings. To confirm the authenticity of the Torah's message, Josiah sent a delegation to the prophetess Huldah. The message from Huldah was succinct and dire: God is ready to unleash the curses contained in the Torah because His people had abandoned Him and were worshipping idols.

Our author discusses why Josiah would enquire from the prophetess Huldah when he could have asked the apparently more prominent prophet Jeremiah. He cites two answers given by the Gemara (Megillah 14b) that a) Jeremiah at the time was on a mission to restore the ten exiled tribes, and b) as a woman, Huldah would be more compassionate in her response. The author offers another solution—at that time Jeremiah was young, an unknown prophet, one among many.

⁹ The vision seen by Jeremiah is a *sear nafuah*, usually translated as a “steaming pot.” Our author translates *sear* as a “thorny shrub” (which is either smoking or being blown by the wind). See p. 15 and n. 4 *ibid.* (The translator has “thorny tumbleweed.”)

Jeremiah was sympathetic to Josiah's ambitions and admired his reforms. Despite his own prophecy of destruction, Jeremiah continued to hope that his exhortations would lead the people to repent and that he would ultimately receive a prophecy that God's decree was rescinded. As time passed, however, Jeremiah became discouraged as he saw that despite the reforms of Josiah and the public identification with the God of Israel, idolatry was still widespread and injustice was the norm.

In 612 BCE, to the north of Judah, there was a shift in the world's military balance. The combined armies of Babylonia and Persia defeated the formerly invincible army of Assyria and captured its capital Nineveh. Josiah saw these developments as a sign that Assyria was crumbling and that the time was right for him to become the king of a united Judah including the territories of the ten exiled tribes. When Egypt under Pharaoh Necho marched from the south and crossed Judah on his way to assist Assyria, Josiah confronted him at Megiddo. Josiah was wounded by Pharaoh's army and died shortly thereafter.

Why did Josiah, the ruler of a relatively minor power, take the initiative to confront a rising military might? The author suggests that, unlike Jeremiah, Josiah was convinced that he had succeeded in turning his people toward God. Having done what is right and proper, Josiah was confident that God would fight his battles. Alas, only a prophet can tell us what God might do.

The lesson for us today appears to be that the State of Israel should never act irrationally, not militarily and not politically, believing that God—who has seen fit to bring us back to the Land of Israel—will also save us from our own folly. We cannot know the mind of God.

On the final page our author warns us against false prophets who confidently proclaim that the "Third Temple" can never be destroyed. Instead, he cautions us to act smartly and righteously, to solve our internal problems, and to heal the rifts within our state so that we remain worthy of our homeland.

Jehoiakim

Following Josiah's death the people appointed his second son Jehoahaz who, like his father, was anti-Egypt and anti-Assyria. Egypt was not happy with this appointment; they captured Jehoahaz and replaced him with Josiah's oldest son Jehoiakim, who was more sympathetic to Egypt—whether for ideological or practical reasons. Jehoiakim does not bring idols back into the Temple. Instead he uses the Temple as an "insurance policy." The Temple has withstood other onslaughts. Surely it will continue to protect us.

Uriah, who had prophesized that Jerusalem and the Beit ha-Mikdash would be destroyed, was Jehoiakim's first casualty. After Uriah fled to Egypt, Jehoiakim dispatched a delegation to bring him back and he was executed (26:22-23).¹⁰ In the eyes of Jeremiah, Jehoiakim was an unworthy successor to the throne of David who was in power only because of the dictates of Egypt.

Jeremiah's first prophecy to Jehoiakim was presented outside the tall windows of the king's winter palace. (22:18-19) "Therefore, God says to Jehoiakim, the son of Josiah, king of Judah: 'They will not lament for him: 'Woe, my brother! Woe for the sister!' They will not lament for him: 'Woe, master, woe for his departed greatness!' Just as one covers a donkey with earth, so will he be buried, dragged and thrown away, far from the gates of Jerusalem.'" Apparently neither the king nor his household heard this prophecy as there were no consequences.

Jeremiah was then instructed by God to prophesize in the courtyard of the Beit ha-Mikdash. This time his prophecy was heard by the priests and the false prophets. The people were ready to lynch Jeremiah but the ministers insisted that Jeremiah have a formal hearing. During the trial the ministers and the gathered people told the priests and the "prophets" that he cannot be executed because he is a prophet of God, and Jeremiah was freed. Jeremiah was by now a well-known prophet. His next prophecy in Gai Henom was verbally and visually clear: he was instructed to break a clay pot to symbolize that Jerusalem is as good as destroyed.

From 609 Egypt fought against Babylonia. There were no decisive battles. In 605, however, Nebuchadnezzar assumed power and during his first year he managed to subdue Egypt. In 601 Babylonia inflicted a mortal blow against Egypt. Jeremiah interpreted the downfall of Egypt as divine punishment for their killing of Josiah. This is one reason that Jeremiah refers to Nebuchadnezzar as a "servant of God." He also refers to him as such because Jeremiah believed God is using Nebuchadnezzar to punish Judah for its sins.

For three years Jehoiakim paid tribute to the new superpower, Babylonia, but in 601 he rebelled. By 597 it was all over for Jehoiakim.

¹⁰ The execution of Uriah is actually mentioned after Jeremiah's prophecy in the Beit ha-Mikdash. The commentators (Rashi, Mezuot David, Radak), however, all understand that this is a reference to what happened earlier. This incident is bracketed by the words *ve-gam* (27:20) "although," and *akb* (27:24) "nevertheless." I.e., although a prophet who spoke similar to Jeremiah was once executed... nevertheless Jeremiah was not.

Zedekiah

After the death of Jehoiakim, his son Jeconiah/Jehoiachin took over. Three months and ten days into his reign, Nebuchadnezzar marched on Jerusalem and Jeconiah promptly opened the gates of the city for him. As an “award” for avoiding a bloody war, Jeconiah’s life was spared but he, his mother and his family were forced into exile to Babylonia. Also exiled with him were the commanders and the warriors—ten thousand of them—and the craftsmen and smiths (*ba-heresh ve-ha-masgir*), i.e., those who were capable of producing weapons that could be used against Babylonia.¹¹ A heavy tax was levied upon the community; the money in the king’s treasury was confiscated, as was the money within the Beit ha-Mikdash, along with its gold vessels and ornaments (II Kings 24:12–16.)

Our author explains that during the Jeconiah exile there was no mass slaughter. Jeconiah and his entourage were not marched out in chains; their exile was more civilized. They settled near the city of Nehardea and became the nucleus of the Jewish community in Babylonia. Although Jeconiah was jailed he was freed 37 years later (52:31)¹² and ate at the table of the king for the rest of his life.

Jeremiah prophesied to these exiles, “Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat their fruit. Take wives and beget sons and daughters: and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters. Multiply there, do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper” (Jeremiah 29:5–7.)¹³

Jeremiah also instructed them not to listen to the false prophets who were urging them to return to Judah but to wait seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10). In that approximate time frame the Babylonian Empire would fall to the victorious Persian forces. Cyrus the Great, the ruler of Persia,

¹¹ This explanation, of why *ba-heresh ve-ha-masgir* were exiled, is also found in *Da’at Mikrah* p. 18.

¹² Our author writes (p. 123) that a well-known Babylonian record from that time records the rations Babylonia provided for Jeconiah and his five sons. In n. 1 *ibid* he dates this to the fifth year of the exile. This is contrary to Jeremiah 52:31 which has him in jail for 37 years.

¹³ Although directed toward the exiled in Babylonia, the letter containing this prophecy was sent from Zedekiah to Nebuchadnezzar. See Jeremiah 29:3. I suppose that a side benefit of this was the opportunity for Zedekiah to show his loyalty toward Nebuchadnezzar.

would invite the descendants of these exiles to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Jeconiah's grandson, Zerubbabel, would lead 42,000 Jews back to their homeland and begin the rebuilding of the Beit ha-Mikdash.

After exiling Jeconiah, Nebuchadnezzar appointed Josiah's third son, Matanya/Zedekiah, to rule over a much poorer and diminished kingdom.

Despite his oath of loyalty to Nebuchadnezzar, in 594 BCE Zedekiah met with delegations from Moab, the Ammonites, Tyre and Sidon to form an alliance against Nebuchadnezzar (Jeremiah 27). The problem is that this chapter begins by dating itself to the reign of Jehoiakim. Other commentators acknowledge this problem, especially since two verses later it mentions Zedekiah. Our author insists that based on the context it must be referring to Zedekiah and that the reference to Jehoiakim is an error.

Although there are some manuscripts that contain Zedekiah instead of Jehoiakim,¹⁴ this emendation is troubling. Our commentators go to great lengths to reinterpret difficult passages rather than change even a single word. Rashi explains *ibid* that Jeremiah wore the leather straps and bars around his neck for fifteen years from the first year of Jehoiakim's reign until the fourth year of Zedekiah's. *Da'at Mikra* *ibid* explains that this prophecy was uttered twice, once during the reign of Jehoiakim and again during the reign of Zedekiah. The explanations of both Rashi and *Da'at Mikra* can coexist with our author's claim that the meeting with Moab, the Ammonites, Tyre and Sidon described in 27:3 is corroborated by outside sources as having occurred during the reign of Zedekiah.

In 592 BCE with the death of Pharaoh Psammetichus II, and the rise of his son Pharaoh Apries, the entire region became optimistic that a coalition led by this new Pharaoh could defeat Babylonia. Sensing this optimism, Judah rebelled and failed to pay its taxes to Babylonia. This was an unforgivable sin. The rebellion would need to be put down with overwhelming and deadly force.

Despite Judah's alliance with Egypt, Egypt was insufficiently prepared for war and could not defeat Nebuchadnezzar. In 588 BCE Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem and in the second year of the siege there was great hunger and thirst made worse by the summer heat. With morale and strength ebbing within the city, Nebuchadnezzar's army was able to break through the walls of Jerusalem.

¹⁴ Mss. *The Syriac version of the OT*, and *The Vulgate* are different. Instead of בראשית מלכות יהויקים read בשנה הרביעית לצדקיהו. See *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1967/77) p. 836. Our author notes that the Septuagint does not contain this introductory verse.

Zedekiah fled but after being captured in Jericho he was brought to Nebuchadnezzar. All of his children were executed in front of him, following which his eyes were blinded and Zedekiah was brought in chains to Babylonia where he was imprisoned until his death. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed and burned and countless people were killed or led away in chains into exile.

Nebuzaradan, the chief of the guards (lit., chief executioner) then appointed Gedaliah b. Aḥikam to rule in the area of Binyamin over the remnants of Judah. Gedaliah was more of a governor than a king and had no power over security or foreign affairs. Jeremiah who until that point was imprisoned was ordered by Nebuzaradan to be freed and he was given the option of staying in Judah with Gedaliah or joining the exiles in Babylonia. Jeremiah chose to stay with Gedaliah.

A short time afterward, Ishmael b. Nethaniah, of the royal family of Judah, visited Gedaliah and assassinated him. At that point, fearing the wrath of Babylonia, many Jews fled to Egypt and Jeremiah accompanied them. The Jews would have to wait seventy years, i.e., after the entire generation was gone, for the opportunity to return to Jerusalem.

Novel Interpretations

On pages 17–28 our author does a remarkable job explaining chapters 3 and 31 of the *Book of Jeremiah*. It is remarkable because chapters 3 and 31 suddenly become clear, and remarkable because after reading it the explanation seems obvious.

As previously mentioned, Jeremiah was enamored with King Josiah's success in purging Jerusalem of Assyria's idols and turning Judah's national identity back to God. In chapters 3 and 31 Jeremiah is further aligned with Josiah as his prophecy coincides with Josiah's desire for the remnants of the ten exiled tribes to return to Judah. These remnants are referred to by Jeremiah as: the north (3:12, 18, 31:8), Israel (3:12, 18, 31:21, 31), and Ephraim (31:6, 9, 20). That Jeremiah is directing his prophecy to the remnants of these tribes can be seen from the following verses:

And the LORD said to me: Rebel Israel has shown herself more in the right than Faithless Judah. Go, make this proclamation toward the north, and say: Turn back, O Rebel Israel—declares the LORD. I will not look on you with anger, for I am compassionate—declares the LORD; I do not bear a grudge for all time (3:11, 12). Turn back, rebellious children—declares the LORD. Since I have espoused you, I will take you, one from a town and two from a clan, and bring you to Zion. (3:14).

Ephraim is then assured that when they return they will be treated by Judah differently and better than they had been in the past:

And I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will pasture you with knowledge and skill (3:15).

We then come across a startling and strange statement:

And when you increase and are fertile in the land, in those days—declares the LORD—men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD, nor shall it come to mind. They shall not mention it, or miss it, or make another (3:16).

What does Jeremiah mean when he says “men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant”? These are not hopeful words. They sound like a terrible prophecy, almost blasphemous. What is Jeremiah saying?

The commentators offer various answers. Rashi explains: “Your entire habitation will be holy and I will dwell in it as if it is an Ark.” Radak explains: “...they would take the Ark with them into battle, but in those [future] days this will not be needed for they will no longer have wars.” *Mezudat David* explains: “One person will not say to another let us go to the Ark to pray because it will be too crowded.” *Malbim* reads the verse as saying, “They will no longer say, ‘the Ark of the Covenant of the LORD’ while not really taking it to heart.”

Our author explains that in these two chapters Jeremiah is marketing his prophecy to Ephraim. He wants to capture their heart and make them believe that reuniting with Judah is a good thing. For example, when Jeremiah says (31:8), “Ephraim is my first-born,” these are words that are sweet to the ears of Ephraim. Similarly, when Jeremiah says, “men shall no longer speak of the Ark of the Covenant,” such words can resonate only when spoken to Ephraim. Our author explains that during the bitter wars between the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, the Ark symbolized Judah’s spiritual superiority over Israel. Jeremiah is assuring Ephraim that the Ark, which at this point has been hidden, will no longer be flaunted as a symbol of Judah’s spiritual superiority.

Our author then takes his approach—of chapters 3 and 31 being directed toward Ephraim—to its logical conclusion. In chapter 31 we read:

Thus said the LORD: A cry is heard in Ramah—wailing, bitter weeping—Rachel weeping for her children. She refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone. Thus said the LORD: Restrain your voice from weeping, your eyes from shedding tears; for there is reward for your labor—declares the LORD: Your children shall return to their country. (31:15–17)

Our author argues that when Jeremiah prophesized the above, it was meant to console the remnants of Ephraim that Rachel, their ancestral mother, wept during the exile of **her** children, i.e., the descendants of Joseph, the remnants of Ephraim. Jeremiah then reassured Ephraim that their return will find favor in God's eyes.

Our author notes that this interpretation is contrary to the famous midrash quoted by Rashi in Genesis 48:7¹⁵ in which Rachel is viewed as the mother of **all** Jews crying for her children as they pass her burial ground when they were exiled by Nebuzaradan. It also changes the prophecy from one that was fulfilled, to a prophecy of what ought to be. There is no halakhic prohibition to offer an interpretation that conflicts with a midrash, but this midrash is so beloved and so ingrained in our Jewish consciousness for so many generations that this interpretation is sure to encounter resistance.

Recommendation

The most remarkable part of our book are the two indices at the end in which our author reorganizes the *Book of Jeremiah* into chronological order.¹⁶ This is the blueprint that enabled our author to provide us with a

¹⁵ Ramban (Genesis 48:7) quotes this aggadah and wonders how it can possibly say that Rachel was not buried in the Land of Israel; she was buried in Ramah. (Others explain that *le-aretz* refers not to the Land of Israel but to an inhabited area.) He also writes, "nevertheless there should at least be some hint in the verse for this interpretation of the aggadah." See his answer *ibid*.

¹⁶ In his review, "Bringing the Prophets to Life: Rabbi Binyamin Lau's Study of Jeremiah" *Tradition* vol. 44, no. 1 (pp. 57-58) R. Hayyim Angel writes, "R. Lau often makes assumptions in order to place the undated prophecies into historical context." R. Angel is correct. Some of R. Lau's dating is subjective. Nevertheless, R. Lau's reconstruction is mostly correct and gives us a framework within which to study the *Book of Jeremiah*. Future scholarship will undoubtedly fine-tune our understanding of the chronology.

It should be noted that R. Angel's statement (p. 56) "He concluded that there was no future in Israel and did not get married there" is not precise. Jeremiah did not marry because he was instructed not to (Jeremiah 16:2).

Also, R. Angel states (p. 60), "... R. Lau all but ignores Menachem Boleh's 1983 *Da'at Mikra* commentary... there are only two references to Boleh's commentary on Jeremiah..." True, he may have only quoted him twice, but he appears to lean heavily on his commentary. One example is his explanation of why *ba-heresh ve-ha-masgir* were exiled (they were involved in weapons manufacture, p. 18). Another is his explanation of why Josiah sent messengers to Huldah rather than Jeremiah (he was young and relatively unknown at that time, p. 33).

lucid work, which leads us chronologically through the reigns of the last three important kings of Judah until the awful destruction wrought by Nebuchadnezzar.

Another technique used by our author is more subtle. We have a tendency to reinterpret difficult passages in NaKh to make them conform to how we understand reality. Our author often does the reverse. He retains the plain meaning of the passage and convinces us to change how we see reality. While the first approach allows us to retain our pre-conceived notions, the latter forces us to rethink what we believe. While the first approach is comfortable and static the latter is educational and exhilarating.

Our book is not the first to provide a summary of the life of Jeremiah organized around the political and military background of the three main kings who reigned during his career. There are many fine introductions, including that of *Da'at Mikrah*, that do this very well. Also, our book does not attempt to give the reader every view of every issue to justify all of its assertions.

None of this, however, is meant as criticism. The success of our book should be measured only by whether the author achieved his goal—to realign the educated layman's perception of Jeremiah, and to educate us about the complicated world in which Jeremiah lived and prophesied. Our author accomplished these remarkably well. His writing style, his organization, his use of unconventional sources—spiced up with his own interpretations—provide us with a very lucid and readable book that educates us and challenges us to grapple with our understanding of one of our most beloved prophets who was charged with a terrible message.

The English Edition


After reading the Hebrew version of our book (Tel Aviv: Miskal and Chemed Books, 2010) and writing the bulk of this review, Maggid Books reissued it in English. My page numbers refer to the English version.

The cover and the layout of the English version are far superior to the Hebrew. The cover of the English version is beautiful, and despite a few typos¹⁷ the English translation is accurate, fluent and elegant.

Finally, on pp. 62-63 R. Angel argues that there is no evidence that Jeremiah was “confused” at any stage whether God’s decree was irreversible. It is my own understanding that although Jeremiah’s prophecy became shriller as time passed, a prophet can only repeat and interpret his prophecy. Whether repentance is sincere and what God might or might not do—at any stage—is always God’s prerogative.

¹⁷ Some of the typos are as follows:

When a book is translated, the original introductions are usually left intact and the author or the translator usually adds an introduction unique to the new edition. This was not done and it could have been a good place to specify, for example, which translation was used for verses quoted from Jeremiah.¹⁸

The lack of an index and bibliography even in the Hebrew version, and the apparent reluctance of our author to discuss every view and source for every issue, testify that the intent was to produce a popular work for anyone interested in the life and times of Jeremiah. The author and translator were very successful in achieving this goal. 

P. xxii “In restructuring the book in a correct, consistent, and chronological order, was forced to take issue with several classic interpretations.”

On p. 14, translator’s n. 2 “Though most translations render this vision as a “seething pot” or the like, “thorny tumbleweed” is more consistent with the interpretation that follows.” It should read “a wind-blown thorny tumbleweed” or perhaps “a smoking thorny tumbleweed.”

P. 15, n. 4 “Felix debates whether Jeremiah’s vision, a *sir nafuach*, is indeed a nature image or the more common explanation, ‘a seething.’” It should read ‘a seething pot.’

P. 18 “The inhabitants of Jerusalem must merely purge their hearts of idolatry...” The connotation ‘merely’ is wrong and does not exist in the original.

P. 200 “Although the desire to tragic events is understandable...”

Same page. “...but to suggest that, if not for the assassination, the Jewish people would have dwelled securely upon their soil is no more than a delusional.”

¹⁸ I compared the English translation of the verses with those of JPS, ArtScroll and Koren and it matched none of them. If they are the translator’s I note the following: On p. 37 in a translation of Jeremiah 2:34 “In addition, your garments are stained with the lifeblood of the innocent destitute...” The translation of ‘garment’ for *‘bikhnafayikh’* (lit., your corner, fringe or end) lacks the imagery of the edge of a garment stained from being dragged through blood on the ground. Also the translation of Ezekiel 9:4, *ve-bitvita tav* is explained correctly by the author “and mark with an ‘x;’” a *tav* in *kitav ivri* is shaped as an ‘x.’ Why did the translator use the more generic ‘and put a mark’?