

Whose Words, Whose Mouths: Shared Discourse in Jeremiah 2-6

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“Look, I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jer 1:9)

Jeremiah was heir to a rhetorical tradition already ancient, one that had developed in the oldest known cultures of the Near East before it took root in Israel. As an orator, Jeremiah could hold rank with the best Greek and Roman rhetors, whose stock in trade one will find in such classical rhetorical handbooks as Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, the *ad Herennium*, and Quintilian’s *Institutes*. Jeremiah anticipates them all in style and in modes of argumentation.
(Jack R. Lundbom, pp. 121-22)

entry question

“. . . [M]y words in your mouth. . . .” Bakhtin must have loved it! Can we make use of Bakhtin’s authoring strategies (blending them with other Jeremiah exegetical and interpretive work) to make some useful assertions about the character zones of YHWH, Jeremiah, Judah and various opponents, if we look at distinctive character speech (use of questions; use of attributed speech; shared imagery; self-talk; conversation), and name the co-authoring strategies and their effects? When I wrote this title and abstract, I assumed YHWH and Judah were squabbling spouses, Jeremiah their counselor, and we attentive interns. I now see YHWH and Jeremiah as partners (a team)—joined at the hip and sharing language¹ and viewpoint though without quite coinciding; the therapist is the narrator (or authors)—not saying much but catalyzing discourse by attentive presence; and we are the audience—involved in the lives of deity and prophet. Why is this important? Though scholars seem content enough to let Jeremiah be a literary construct, we seem to have a more difficult time saying that this “textual God” is also fictive. I want to shift some focus from YHWH as embittered husband and military strategist and explore

¹For repeating language in Jeremiah see Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doublets and Recurring Phrases* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2000). He does not cite any of the places I study here. For a project somewhat similar to mine though dealing with different textual material see Mark E. Biddle, *Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature: Rereading Jeremiah 7-20* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996).

alternative characterizations for all players.² I will interact with the inseparable-though-distinguishable team YHWH+Jeremiah to construct them more attentively so that I and those with whom I read are better authored. The project, then, is to ask how the prophetic phenomenon of shared speech, enhanced by attention to Bakhtin's sense of shared discourse and overlapped character zones, can cast new light on God's projects with us, ours with God.

project/thesis

In prophecy (ancient and modern) as generally understood by Jews and Christians, it is impossible to distinguish cleanly between deity and the prophet, commissioner and commissioned. It is an amazingly fallible system, God's choice to communicate through humans while apparently tolerating the very imperfect instrument. Moses got it right when he pleaded that he did not speak well enough to do the job (Exodus 3-4), a point repeated by his successors (e.g., Jer 1:6). That inefficient arrangement of sender, receiver-communicator, and eventual audiences can be frustrating (then and now), since we cannot ascertain or demonstrate with certainty when a prophet is speaking for/with a deity and when not, where the divine words flow well through the human processes and when they stall or misfire. However it was born, our extant biblical Jeremiah ultimately grew into a book written by an author or authors, who gave character zones to all the players: God, Jeremiah, Judah's leaders and people, invading opponents. Despite a relative clarity among them, we are missing the point to separate combatants too cleanly. To see the overlap of speakers and consider the mystery is the challenge. Everyone's word in everyone's mouth.

My project will be to show ways in which they collaborate and to deal with that overlap in ways that are productive of insight: first for other characters in the narrative and also for later readers. A particular interest: Is the bracing—not to say insulting and violent—language helpful or counter-productive, again for textual participants and for later addressees?

²Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Tears of God and Divine Character in Jeremiah 2-9" in Tod Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, eds., *God in the Fray: A Tribute to Walter Brueggemann* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998): 172-88 challenges us to allow the character of God to be multiple and unstable (p. 387) though she seems to settle in general for the angry husband and military leader (p. 392), the impression that seems to precipitate in most commentary.

methodology

I will bring to bear the MMB varieties of discourse, which cut across the standard biblical criticisms. I will work his awareness that character zones are distinct but vastly overlapped. Though I will do some form-critical and redactional work to distinguish the speakers, my main interest will be in their collaboration. I will simply drop into place the historical and social-scientific sense of context relevant in late-monarchic Israel and Judah, specifically at the top of sixth century, more reliant on that data than on the processes of composition, which I will basically ignore. I will draw on rhetorical study in the socio-literary sense utilized by Lundbom, and use his categories: varieties of coherence established by patterns, metaphors, questions, attributed speech, and the like. I will ultimately concede more space to the contemporary reader than to the original ones. My angle will concern itself with verbal violence as specifically and rather routinely assigned to God.

plan

I will adopt as my unit 2:1-6:26, two poetry sections (2-3 and 4-6) between two prose sections (1 and 7:1-8:3).³ There is a shift of some sort between the two poetry units but a good deal remains consistent. Each section has a dominant metaphor⁴ co-ordinating many small ones

³Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), pp. 89-91, shows how on the basis of catchwords, 7:1-8:3 is an insert and that the unit starting at 4:1 does not end with ch. 6 but resumes after 8:3 to run through ch. 10. Others who agree on the unit include O'Connor, p. 388; Leo G. Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 141-46; Marvin A. Sweeney, "Structure and Redaction in Jeremiah 2-6," in *Troubling Jeremiah*, eds. A.R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, Louis Stuhlman, eds. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999): 203, 207; see pp. 217-18 for a structure.

⁴The general cognitive linguistically-framed metaphor in 2-3 is, in my view, is CRUMBLING YAHWISM IS THE DISINTEGRATING PATRIARCHAL HOUSEHOLD, or: the disintegrating patrimonial unit maps to Yahwism under siege. Specifically in chapters 2-3, the language articulates Judah's going out after allies and how those will act (unreliably). In chapters 4-6, the same destruction of traditional Yahwism is the target domain, with source being devastation coming to Judah from invasion as well as from local behavior. Sweeney, p. 202, is of the opinion that the whole unit is constructed to argue that events are punishments, Judah's future on analogy with what happened to Israel. I think the assertion works better as a metaphor than as

that appear there helter-skelter. That text set consists of 150 verses. In that material about five-sixths (125 vv.) are YHWH speech and about one sixth (25 vv.) are Jeremiah speech.⁵ The YHWH/Jeremiah dialogues are set up as follows: In chapters 2-3 there are no dialogues; God dominates.⁶ In chapters 4-6 there are about twenty-two utterances, or switches of speaker (not implying a coherent conversation): 4:1-6 YHWH; 4:7-8 Jeremiah; 4:9 YHWH; 4:10-4:10 Jeremiah; 4:11-12 YHWH; 4:13-14 Jeremiah; 4:15-17 YHWH; 4:18-21 Jeremiah; 4:22 YHWH; 4:23-26 Jeremiah; 4:27-28 YHWH; 4:29-31 Jeremiah; 5:1-2 YHWH; 5:3-5-6 Jeremiah; 5:7-11 YHWH; 5:12-13 Jeremiah; 5:14-6:3 YHWH; 6:4-5 Jeremiah; 6:6-9 YHWH; 6:10-11a Jeremiah; 6:11b-23 YHWH; 6:24-26 Jeremiah.

Concerning the rhetorical units I will discuss: In the unit chapters 2-6 there are thirty-nine *questions*: God has thirty-five and Jeremiah speaks four. In terms of *attributed speech*: God places about twenty-five utterances into the mouths of others, while Jeremiah does it about eight times (depending on criteria for counting). In terms of shared *imagery*,⁷

a theological claim. My work on the metaphor is detailed in “Cognitive Linguistics and the “Idolatry-is-Adultery” Metaphor of Jeremiah 2-3,” presented at SBL Boston, MA, November x, 2008 in the section....

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Following Lundbom, pp. 4-21: 1:1, 4; 3:6, 11; 4:23-26, 29-31; 5:3-6, 12-13; 6:4-5, 10-12, 24-26 is Jeremiah-speech (noting that precision is impossible and unnecessary; the rough count is adequate). William Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), disagrees on the following: 4:7 is given to YHWH (Holladay p. 153); 4:11-12 is assigned to Jeremiah (p. 156); 4:13 (p. 157), 4:29 (p. 168), 5:13 (p. 187) and 6:25 (p. 219) are all given by Holladay to YHWH. None of these is crucial for my discussion, since the rhetorical features in which I am interested do not occur. In a more general discussion (pp. 137-38) Holladay discusses the phenomenon of quick-changing speakers and the difficulty of assigning the language when clear indicators lack. He concludes that this feature in Jeremiah is unusual and has not received the scholarly discussion it needs. For another discussion of character overlap, consult Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), notably ch. 4.

⁶2:1, 4; 3:6 are Jeremiah tags, or “*incipits*.”

⁷In addition to the seven I will discuss, other images carry from chs. 2-3 to 4-6, though in the mouth of the same speaker: the nothing: 2:5, 8, 11; 5:2; water: 2:23, 18; 5:24; 6:7; vines: 2:21; 5:10-11, 17; 6:9; thief: 2:26; 5:26-28; go one’s own way: 2:17-18; 5:22-23;

deity and prophet cross back on each other's language in seven cases. The phenomenon of *self-talk* occurs for both characters a couple of times. Finally there is a pass at *dialogue*: some words each addresses to the other (not engendering response), even one place where the two seem to share an utterance: Jeremiah begins a sentence that God completes. After setting in place the basic contexts I understand as operative, I will move through the five sets of shared discourse features, establishing what happens with brief discussion. Then I will total the column, so to speak, and draw conclusions.

development/demonstration

general contexts

As is well-known, twentieth-century Jeremiah study was heavily interested in the stages of composition and redaction, in dating and positioning language to specific circumstances insofar as claim could be made, and in authenticity.⁸ I am not much interested in those projects though appreciative of their best results. I acknowledge circularity in what I am doing: separating or distinguishing the character discourse sets in order to talk about their relationship. For this project more useful is the rhetorical work on Jeremiah, coupled with social-scientific analysis. Lundbom situates his rhetorical study of Jeremiah within the whole history of western rhetoric: (briefly) how the ancient Near East speakers arranged language, how the Hebrew speakers understood addressed speech; how the Greeks and Romans utilized persuasive language; how such technique was studied and used into the nineteenth century as formation in

6:16-17, 26; children: 2:30; 3:14, 21-25; 4:22; 5:4. For the argument that the images must be read to show development and progression rather than that their reuse might be more impressionistic, see Robert M. Paterson, "Repentance or Judgment: The Construction and Purpose of Jeremiah 2-6," *Expository Times* 96 (1985): 201-203. John T. Willis disagrees: "Dialogue between Prophet and Audience as a Rhetorical Device in the Book of Jeremiah," *JSOT* 33 (1985): pp. 75-77.

⁸Sweeney, p. 200, summarizes efficiently. Older commentaries make such points prominent. See Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1986); William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah, Volume I: Jeremiah I-XXV* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Limited, 1986).

apt speech; and how more recently it became valued both in terms of its beauty and depth and in terms of its effect.⁹ The book of Jeremiah offers a rich pool of rhetoric, and Lundbom organizes a “handbook” of sorts that Jeremiah can be imagined to have mastered so as to speak as he did. Of such elements, I am picking up five and plan to appreciate and query both the figure itself and the effect as I can tease it out.

For relevant historical-social context, I am assuming general sociological analysis of agrarian cultures and more specifically the late 7th and early 6th century when the collapse of Assyria and competing rising of Egypt and Babylon presented for the semi- or quasi-independent small units such as Judah a series of Hobson’s choices.¹⁰ The biggest choice was “do nothing” or “try to do something,” so as to maintain at least the level of independence “enjoyed” under Assyria. Other pairs include variations on “seek help in Egypt” or “co-operate with Babylon;” “resist Babylon’s pressure” or “defy Egypt.” In shorthand, Jeremiah (deity and prophet in that book) urge: “Go willingly to Babylon and get the process of exile/transformation started rather than seek to negotiate a short-term survival at the cost of integrity.” The persuasive language of the book is aimed at Judah’s leaders—kings and elites—those in position to make the decisions (or seeming to think they were).¹¹ On occasion, prophet and deity refer to “the children,” whom I will construe the peasant population,¹² or perhaps the children of those

⁹Lundbom pp. 69-76. I like his expression for rhetoric: “conventionalized dress” (p. 67).

¹⁰Joel S. Burnett, “Changing Gods: An Exposition of Jeremiah 2,” *Review and Expositor* 101 (2004): 290-91. For the general economic picture and its political entailments, consult D.N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003).

¹¹The choices were few and none good. At a certain level, Jeremiah is setting up something false by moralizing but at another level he turns out to be shrewd to think that going into exile with as little bloodshed and damage as possible was preferable to what eventually happened.

¹²Marvin Chaney, “Accusing Whom of What? Hosea’s Rhetoric of Promiscuity,” in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire*, ed. Holly E. Hearon (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2004): 97-115.

whom he is addressing, i.e., another generation.

the questions

In the unit I am doing, God asks thirty-five questions and Jeremiah has four.¹³ We can call these “rhetorical questions,” inferring and implying that they are purely ornamental or even false, in the sense of not really requiring or desiring a response. Rhetorical questions are sometimes characterized as imparting rather than requesting information, or as framing so that only one reply is truthfully possible.¹⁴ But when we are after depth, beauty and effect, those are not useful ways to think of questions. Lundbom says that Jeremiah’s questions serve both to evoke a response and to intimidate the interlocutor. A demand is made which is to be rejoined, but a distance is created; the question constrains what can be said back.¹⁵ I don’t disagree with those points, but I would add to them. The barrage of questions (I think it is fair to call thirty-nine questions in 150 verses a barrage) manipulate the addressee but also reveal the questioner. They thus allow a reader/hearer to discern a point of view or strategy for the questioner though do not, in fact, compel the addressee to buy into it; the effect is often that the addressed digs in and refuses to engage. With Lundbom’s help,¹⁶ I will isolate and name five patterns for the thirty-nine questions asked by the team of deity and prophet. Space precludes considering all of them, so I will sample what is most helpful.

—*dramatic, exclamatory*: ([in order to help us understand the basic small genre in English]: e.g., how long will you persist in your ingratitude?) YHWH’s questions of this

¹³Yahweh’s: In chs. 2-3 there are twenty-four questions; in ch. 4 there are none; in chs. 5-6 there are eleven.

¹⁴Walter A. Brueggemann, “Jeremiah’s Use of Rhetorical Questions.” *JBL* 92 (1973): 358-65, studies the phenomenon—primarily the form—of Jeremiah’s questions and makes a number of useful points.

¹⁵Lundbom, pp. 130-36.

¹⁶

Lundbom names two of these question types, *ibid.* Brueggemann, “Questions,” p. 359 anticipated him, although Lundbom has rung changes on what Brueggemann observed.

type include 2:29, 32; 3:2,6,7; 5:9, 31,¹⁷ with the best of class being 3:6: “‘Have you see what she did, that faithless one Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there?’” God’s question sets up a scene where Israel’s behavior is pointed out, characterized, with hyperbole. The specific question, addressed to the prophet, is “‘have you seen” what God then describes.¹⁸ It does not matter whether the prophet has witnessed the scene, since God elaborates it into detail. Best, perhaps, if not, since the questioner remains the authoritative witness. The heft of the saying is not in the question itself—have you seen—but in the scene painted—the behavior of faithless Israel. The addressee is asked to witness to what is described, to agree to it, thus reinforcing it. That Jeremiah does not respond scarcely dilutes the point established by the question. But we will see later (4:30-31), when discussing imagery shared by deity and prophet, that Jeremiah has indeed seen such behavior. Later still in the book of Jeremiah we can see the prophet break free of this collusion and feel duped; but not here.

Jeremiah contributes three of these: 4:16, 21; 6:10, with his best of class 4:21: “How long must I see that standard, and hear the sound of the trumpet?” Jeremiah’s question is similarly exclamatory and dramatic, if less developed than God’s. The prophet’s is a question unanswerable: the sights and sounds of attack will last until it is over, presumably ending in Judah’s defeat. Again, “how long” is not the main point being made. The attack, nigh-inevitable and likely protracted, must be endured by one who is long-suffering and innocent. Like the other questions, this receives no reply, addressed as it is to those who presumably reject the scene being shown them.

—“*scorpion-tailed*”: (e.g., when did you stop beating your wonderful husband?).

¹⁷Only one strikes me as conceivably real, though I classified it as “simply” dramatic. It is some ways the simplest of all God’s queries: “. . .but what will you do when the end comes?” (5:31).

¹⁸Bakhtin has a name for an appeal to such a trusted witness: the role of the Third, the listener to whom shoulders can be shrugged as speaker and Third agree on the quality of the one being spoken of. Jeremiah will not always have that role, so it is important to see that he has it here. For a quick summary, see Barbara Green, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship: An Introduction* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2000), pp. xx–yy.

YHWH's participants in this class occur at 2:5,17,28,31,34; 5:7; 6:20, with best of class asked at 2:17: "Have you not brought this on yourself by forsaking the LORD your God, while he led you on the way?" This question roots in mutual relationship and in the issue of responsibility: 'Have you not brought your own trouble on your head, despite my good efforts to help you avoid it?' That is, while scolding Judah, God includes a description of God's own behavior—to have led the people on the way—with the accusation that the guidance was right and thus only wrongly refused. The question carries the imputation of behavior foolish, ungrateful, rebellious, sinful and suggests as well that appropriate responsibility may still not be accepted.¹⁹ It is clear from elsewhere in the "dialogue" that Judah vacillates in this matter, sometimes following and sometimes refusing, occasionally demurring and then asking help, or resisting while assuming that all will be well. So the question aligns Judah's leaders with a poor choice and aligns God with proper behavior. And it blames: Your fault, yes? As before, the question floats far more than its single point: your fault? The fault is characterized on multiple levels. Not just a scorpion; a hydra.

Jeremiah has only one of these: 4:30-31 "And you, desolate one, what do you mean that you dress in crimson, that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold, that you enlarge your eyes with paint? In vain you beautify yourself. Your lovers despise you; they seek your life." Here the prophet paints a scene of a city/woman abandoned, despised, endangered, who adorns herself as though she were still able to attract partners. His question: 'What does your behavior mean to you?' The barb lurking under the question's tail is that whatever you mean is pointless, even counter-productive. Were the woman to answer Jeremiah's probe, sincerely or not, she would be wrong, fooled, clueless as to her situation. The question evokes the charge that the woman is self-deluded—the addressee, Judah, looking for allies, doing what "she" thinks will attract them, when the reality is the opposite: They are not drawn but repelled, look not as lover but as enemy. There is no direct or immediate response to the question, though the woman—quick change of scene but the next verse—does utter that she is dying as she brings

¹⁹Lundbom, p. 253, opines against a good deal of criticism that, on balance, the desert was a negative phase. I agree.

forth a child in the presence of killers.²⁰ Her response indicates she has learned something since the question was addressed to her, but it is not clear that the question rather than her experience precipitated her reply, if reply it is.

—*pose two things, a third as vexatious*: (e.g., still here? still hoping? no home to go to?) YHWH provides two sets of these: 2:14 and 3:1. The second set asks, “‘If a man divorces his wife and she goes from him and becomes another man’s wife, will he return to her? Would not such a land be greatly polluted? You have played the whore with many lovers; and you would return to me?’ Says the LORD.” This construction, pointed out by Lundbom, sets up the main point by noting interrogatively two prior things that are evidently well-known and well-established. In effect, they become witnesses to the truth of the third. As commentators point out, these two elements are familiar and ramified from Deuteronomy 24:1-4: A man cannot reclaim a once-divorced wife even if her next husband should die; were he to do so, the land would become unclean. Return is not to be contemplated, except as proscribed. The third question, at the surface, seems to need a resounding “no” as its implied answer. And yet as the passage develops, it turns out that YHWH *would* take Israel back, entertains that possibility, except that *she* will not come back as he desires. So the implied answer is not no, as it logically should be, but “yes you could, if you would, but you won’t.”²¹ The question entertains thought and conversation about alternatives, even logically intolerable ones. This language may imply the breakdown of social order and logic, with players contemplating what should be unthinkable. But it also shows the questioner vulnerable, willing to go to startling extremes. It may be that blame saturates this question and its matrix, or incredulity that the woman resists what’s on offer. But the speaker, in effect, has also rolled over and exposed his throat.

²⁰The image in 4:30 seems to draw on 2 Kgs 9:30-31, Jezebel’s meeting with Jehu; perhaps 4:31 contributes the image responsible for Rev 12:5?

²¹The other example similarly constructed is useful to see. “Is Israel a slave? Is he a home-born servant? Why then has he become a plunderer?” (2:14). The answer to the first two questions is no. The logic is that he should *not* be taken as if he were a slave by birth but Israel *has* been taken off. So both questions open up the fracture in what is expected. A non-slave should not be abducted as though he were fair game—but he has been. A illicit woman should not be received back—but would be.

Jeremiah has no questions like this. This is perhaps the most sophisticated and startling question type.

—*pose a natural thing, then a behavioral anomaly*: (e.g., dogs know when to quit; still wasting your time?). The deity asks several of these: 2:11,21,24,32; 6:16, with the best being 2:32: “Can a girl forget her ornaments, or a bride her attire? But my people have forgotten me, days without number.” Again, Lundbom has identified the small form here: A situation that all know from nature (or culture) is offered as base, and an analogous one is set alongside it as contrast that shouldn’t be. In this instance, the clear answer is that a young woman is not likely to forget her betrothal circumstances, whatever specific details are instanced here.²² Juxtaposed is another relationship that should be unforgettable as well but obviously is not. But built into this particular instance of the form is a deeper communication: The particular “natural” situation of the attentive bride is reversed elsewhere when God speaks of Judah. That is, the attentive bride works both as a figure of comparison and as a more literal descriptor: Brides don’t forget, but my people has (3:1); brides don’t forget but my bride has and admits it (e.g., 2:23 and 25, discussed below with attributed speech).²³ The unthinkable must be contemplated, since voiced. If, as I have suggested elsewhere, this “going out after others” metaphor is aimed more at Judah’s search for foreign helpers than at service of other deities (granted other deities are inevitably involved when other nations are), then the question, scraped bare of imagery, is: Why does Judah feel the need to go for help outside the local system, especially in view of the unreliability of the ‘lovers’ Egypt and Babylon? It is a great question, at least for modern interpreters: Why *would* ‘a bride forget?.’ So this question has the potential to elicit insight in the interlocutors and the later readers. But we may ask whether God does well to imply that Judah’s leaders are a fickle—disloyal, promiscuous—woman.

²²Lundbom, p. 292, offers as a possibility an image from Herodotus, where a bride receives a knotted string and unties the knots to count down to her wedding day.

²³If I were to metaphorize you as a truck, perhaps talk of you in terms of dilapidated appearance, that would be one thing. But if later in the conversation I also spoke of your unreliable battery, your tendency to guzzle fuel, your bumpy progress, I would in fact be investing more heavily in the metaphor. This metaphoric intensification is what Jeremiah accomplishes by returning so often the roles of the patriarchal wife.

How to get a figure bold enough to shock without pushing the hearer into denial and refusal? The pile-up, plausibly exaggerated, seeds doubt of the polarized description. Jeremiah enters no questions in this category.

—*parallelism*: (e.g., can I help you out? which way did you come in?) YHWH has several of these: 2:18, 23; 5:9, 10, 22, 29, the best being 2:18: “‘What then do you gain by going to drink the waters of the Nile? Or what do you gain by going to Assyria, to drink the waters of the Euphrates?’” This is a great question, doubled, intensified in the parallelism.²⁴ When fresh spring water is provided at home (asserted in 2:13), why build leaky cisterns? Why journey (twice) to get river water, which will presumably have its dangers? To strip the question down is to that its point is about seeking allies, the base issue is posed: Why *would* Judah do such a thing? *Is* spring water available? Again, Jeremiah has no questions of this type.

To glean a bit from this interrogative rhetorical feature: First, quantity and quality: God and Jeremiah both ask questions. God’s are the more complex, though Jeremiah has one very clever one. Their constructions are common (Jeremiah uses no form that God has not used, though the deity has some types that the prophet does not employ). Jeremiah specializes in one sort (dramatic, exclamatory), while YHWH’s are richly diverse.²⁵ The interrogative character zones of deity and prophet are similar, though Jeremiah has much technique still to learn. To adumbrate this point, consider the genre “insult,” which can also be classified from simple to more richly complex. We are, perhaps, familiar with insults that use common words (e.g., vulgar epithets) or meaningless expressions. Let’s say we can insult someone by calling him a schmuck.²⁶ It has a nice sound, and we know it’s not a compliment, but it communicates little beyond that (unless we have specialized knowledge). Compare it with an insult slung during

²⁴Burnett, p. 295, comments on this piece in terms of allies.

²⁵Brueggemann says, “Questions,” p. 374, that Jeremiah’s questions (he mean textual Jeremiah, I believe) qualify him as “the man of dispute, par excellence.” I would give that reward to the deity.

²⁶Actually, the *Random House Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (1991) says that is or may be a Yiddish word for penis, but I bet few know that.

the civil rights struggle in the U.S. south by a sheriff referring to demonstrators who had wandered into “his patch”: He characterized them as pointy-headed liberals who couldn’t park a bicycle straight.²⁷ It is much richer as an insult, reveals more surface to hold and aim denigration, characterizes both parties much more precisely. By analogy: Jeremiah’s questions are all of the “schmuck” type, while God’s are all far more colorful.

Second, God’s questions receive no reply, nor do Jeremiah’s (with the possible exception noted above). Do we think they wanted replies? As we are about to see, both attribute speech plentifully, so it seems best to infer is that they don’t want either agreement or disagreement. Why not? Their interrogative assertions themselves are more effective than rejoinders would be, whether those responses argued or agreed. The questions *are* the answers. We may next ask whether these questions are effective as a rhetorical device, which leads us to query what effect is desired. If the questions of deity and prophet were aimed at changing the hearts and minds of Judah’s leaders, it appears that such an effect was not achieved, or at least that result is never acknowledged.²⁸ “Overkill” may pertain here: The YHWH+Jeremiah team gathers only silence from these questions, perhaps not wishing responses, perhaps permitting only what the addressed do not wish to concede or may not feel to be germane. If the questions could be persuasive, taken singly, is the set of thirty-nine too much? The number and cleverness of God’s in particular may discourage rather than encourage co-operation. As we all likely know, silence before an unfriendly question *is* a response, is strategic, can be very communicative. The one reply that Jeremiah’s best of his four questions generates may show us that the question plus experience paid off.²⁹

Third: what is the response of later readers? How do these questions function in the

²⁷Documentation for that information is available somewhere in the vast archive of the civil rights movement. I’ve either watched a film clip or read a transcript of it but I don’t recall where. The point is, it’s so memorable I’ve never needed to look it up.

²⁸There must be in Jeremiah study discussion of the process by which the exile of 597 came to pass. Did Jeremiah’s rhetoric assist with that?

²⁹Note that Zion addresses a question, presumably to Jeremiah, that also receives no response.

biblical tradition, even as Scripture? If their role is to stimulate fidelity to God, it is not clear that they inevitably accomplish that purpose either. My sense of commentators is that the deity/prophet team is seen as hectoring and “the people” are appraised as malevolently non-responsive. Depending on the commentator, God is too relentlessly cruel and the people almost unbelievably obtuse. But if we read these questions more spaciouly, their effect may extend beyond what is usually noted. Questions always open up space beyond what their framers may have intended, and it is impossible to impose limits effectively on what can be heard. For later hearers—those not so much addressed as eavesdropping—the questions are quite provocative. Why is Judah’s behavior so anomalous?

attributed speech

As God said to Jeremiah earlier, ‘we’ll share discourse’ (1:6). And the words go wild: Deity and prophet offer language to various characters, or YHWH and Jeremiah take over the putative speech of others and reshape it in their own divine/prophetic utterances. It becomes difficult artistically—existentially—to know whose words we are hearing. This rhetorical feature is not quite the same as quotations in biblical books (prophetic and otherwise) where a narrator intervenes.³⁰ Speech is attributed or assigned deity and prophet in these five chapters of the book of Jeremiah, with the deity again outdistancing the prophet by about twenty-five to six “quotes.” As with the questions, the attributed speech reveals more about the framer than about those to whom it is assigned. And like the questions we just reviewed, the “real” speaker can compose so as to promote self and disadvantage the other.³¹ We cannot interpret those

³⁰Of course in this book we have God giving Jeremiah language ubiquitously and Jeremiah uttering it in God’s name, massively. I am not talking about that here but about places where speech is put into the mouths of other characters. Willis, pp. 63-82, talks about the impact of this feature, though without specific reference to the fact that the speech is attributed by one character to another rather than composed by the author as direct discourse. He cites an older article by Thomas W. Overholt, “Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of Audience Reaction,” *CBQ* 41 (1979): 262-73, which studies the quotations in Jeremiah 2. Overholt suggests that the rhetorical feature (or form) is distinctive to Jeremiah and observes that the quoted language is best understood as constructed by the prophet for his own polemical purposes. The quotes are, Overholt thinks, always accusing and negative.

³¹It may be that questions promote the speaker and leave the silent/silenced at a

who are given speech except through the filter of the characteral composer. We can, of course, note that the team and each individual are generally consistent in what they attribute, i.e., in the character zones they construct for Judah's leaders and (more rarely) for opponents from the north. We need to recall as well that we do not have tone here, simply words. The same words, intonated differently, will have varying effects. Supplying it is a reader's call, to be done with care and awareness lest our choice pass by unrecognized.

We can classify it in a couple of ways, just to observe it more carefully. First: YHWH's attributed speech:

—what people (usually Judah, but its foe in ch. 6) are said to have uttered:

–bad: they shouldn't have said: 2:20, 25, 31; 6:14, 16, 17;

–good: they should have said: 4:16;

–lies they have said: 2:23, 27, 35, 35; 4:2;

–truth they have said falsely/insincerely: 2:27; 3:4, 5;

—what they are said to have omitted to utter:

–bad: they should not have said: 3:16;

–good: they should have said: 2:6, 8; 3:19, 22-25; 4:2; 5:19, 24.

Jeremiah's attributed speech:

—what people (usually Judah, but also its foe in ch. 6) are said to have uttered:

–bad: they shouldn't have said: 5:12-13;

–good: they should have said: 4:8; 4:13; 4:31; 6:4 (between quotes of foe); 6:24.

But those categories are ambiguous and confusing, since it is difficult to classify speech that should never have needed to be uttered. Virtually all of Jeremiah's attributions that are "positive" emerge from the lips of those who are in terrible straits due to persistent behavior the prophet decries. So "good" is not the best descriptor, even though they are speaking more truthfully than when they deny, which is what they do in the "bad" speech.

If we attend to the "attributor" rather than to the "attributed," what happens? First,

disadvantage. With attributed speech, the opposite occurs: The alleged speaker talks self into a negative space while the non-speaker (who, of course, is the composer of the discourse) looks good—briefly and not inevitably.

when God speaks: The deity says (2:6) what he wants and expects people to say: the recital of how God led the people from Egypt across the dreaded wilderness through which they would have never have passed safely otherwise. It is information reviewed by question (2:17, 2:31) and perhaps in all the language of “straying” or “going out,” which is the base metaphor in chs. 2-3. So here, arguably in some tone besides regret—anger? sorrow?—God prompts speech that is not going to come from those at whom it is directed. We should, I think, be leery of reducing the emotional pitch to one tone only. This speech is, poignantly, a paean of praise emerging from the one who wants to hear it rather than say it, be told it rather than tell it. We may also suppose it is speech that God proffers to those who might need it later but may have forgotten it, had it not been reviewed for them. The second attributed speech (2:8) is the gateway to the first, also handed to others—priests: “‘Where is the LORD?’ (2:8).”³² Without missing God, the people cannot know where to review what they lack. This is language Judah should not have needed, but to omit it is worse than to say it. Is this rhetorically productive—the speaker will reach for these words in the future? Or does it distance—it’s too critical a prompt? Handed what they need, the “beneficiaries” may choose to walk away, leaving the “benefaction” behind.

The next ten attributions are more dialogical, in that they reveal the conversation the deity constructs between Godself and the leaders of Judah. Its salient character is confusion and contradiction, rather than malevolence. First (2:20) Judah whips off its insignia of bondage (service, labor: yoke and straps) and says, ‘no more imposed work!’³³ God next (2:23, 25) articulates Judah denying that he has gone “after the Baals,”³⁴ only in a verse or two to deny that

³²See Willis, pp. 67-69 for possibilities here.

³³This is one of the places where deity and prophet share the same imagery, so I will discuss the language below.

³⁴Chaney, pp. 111-12, characterizes this expression succinctly as follows: “Each of the several facets of urban male warrior elite identity that I have discussed is part of the semantic field of one word in biblical Hebrew, *ba(al)*. Whatever the exact identity of the divinity or divinities and cults evoked by this title in Hosea’s parlance, they served to grant legitimization to one class of elite men and their activities. In religious terms, *ba(al)* was the ‘lord’ of land, women, and political, military, economic, judicial, and social power and privilege writ large. . . .’ Baalism’ sanctioned agricultural intensification and the powerful few who instigated it and

denial and say, ‘well, I did, couldn’t help myself.’ That is, the speaker admits the fault but only to persist in it. A layered denial, from the point of view of the attributor, where the error is first denied and then embraced, though without responsibility. A similar sketch is drawn in 2:27, where Judah is shown to claim stone and tree for mother and father³⁵ while turning the back on the real parent—until 3:4, where YHWH is called to as Father and friend from Judah’s youth. In between (2:31 and 35) we hear claims of independence and non-relations and the wish or wishful announcement that Judah is innocent, surrounding the claim or hope that God’s anger is over (said again in 3:5). Misspeech piles on. These projected quotes all stress the problems in the relationship between God and Judah. Several issues become visible, not simply refusal.

There is a shift in tone at the end of chapter 3, where God anticipates and projects both what will not again be said—“The ark of the covenant of the LORD” (3:16)—and what has not yet been uttered but will be—“the throne of the LORD” and “my father” (3:17, 19). The “speakers” here are the children of those who have “spoken” badly, either another (post-exile) generation or another class than the elites. God here is wistful, hopeful, remote, unreal and contrary to fact. Is this confusion on God’s part reassuring? How is God able to indulge in such unrealistic patter? Having gone through such struggles repeatedly, why will God envision another generation able to claim effectively what earlier ones cannot utter? God sounds optimistic here, perhaps, foolish—in any case, ambivalent.

But back to the more persistent negative attribution (3:22-24):³⁶ Here Judah calls to YHWH as his deity, his salvation, denying that there is anything but destruction in “the shame,” nothing there but the gobbling up of the patrimonial heritage—flocks, herds, sons, daughters. The referent is not discrete false religious practices per se (i.e., in cognitive linguistic metaphor terminology, the alleged practices are the source domain which contributes specificity to the target domain) but the cumulative costs of collaboration with empire. In this speech, poignant

benefited from it.” Lundbom, p. 259, contributes that “the Nothing” is a pejorative term for Ba(al).

³⁵Getting it backwards, commentators feel, e.g., Holladay, pp. 103-04.

³⁶See Willis p. 66.

and wistful as was the previous, YHWH has Judah own its shame and ignominy, confess the perennial practice that has led to the present precarious situation. The speech sits uncomfortably with what God quoted above, which we saw was characterized by layered unreality. Or, prompted from other similar discourse,³⁷ we may hear it as insincere, hypocritical, frantic. Is it language acceptable to the real speaker or not? The unit concludes with God's quoting Judah to swear by God's own name (4:2) so that all may be well. How will one who equivocates be trustworthy? When contradictory positions are thrown in the face of the speaker, what is the effect?

In the second set of chapters (4-6) under consideration here, the attributed language centers around the destruction of the land. The invading nation is shown its quarry: "Here they are!" and to Judah is announced the arrival of the enemy: "Besiegers have come. . ." (4:16). The tone is open for interpretation, but it sounds to me cold, clinical. No assistance is at hand, merely exposure. Whose is this voice, and how brought to bear? It is not the same identity-voice as above but sounds more like a bystander, less involved, not so threatened as those discussed. Who is the leadership faction that is able with relative equanimity to announce the arrival of the foe—whether in fact or as threat? What is the effect when what one dreads another can announce dispassionately, perhaps gleefully?

The oath in YHWH's name, uttered more optimistically in 4:2, is attributed less sincerely by 5:2, as time has elapsed and God's is less inclined to forgive transgression or defer consequences. And perhaps the divine character is justified as the scene continues: "Why has the LORD our God done all these things to us?" (5:19) is followed by "crocodile words" (5:24): "Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives rain in its season, the autumn rain and the spring rain, and keeps the weeks appointed for harvest." As above, language that might in other circumstances be praise-bearing³⁸ rings frantic; better, perhaps, to say nothing? And yet again

³⁷Hosea 6 has a similar ring to it, scholars tend to agree.

³⁸Burnett, p. 294. Cultic speech that is formulaic and familiar can spring to the lips in times of stress. The impact need not be that it is insincere, though that is a possibility. Overholt, pp. 271-72, also cites psalmic verses where the phrases the people are said to cry out here are liturgical: "arise and save us" rings Ps. 3:7; 7:6 [English versification].

the ambivalence, the confusion, is voiced, the perhaps sincere if short-sighted effort of Judah's leaders to try anything, even YHWH. God's final quotations compound the problem: Those who might have advised usefully say falsely, "'Peace, peace,'" (6:14). Those leaders who warn of looming violence are not heeded (6:17), and the refusal of relationship is reiterated: "'We will not walk in the ancient way,'" circling us back to the first of the attributions: refusal rather than confusion.

Re Jeremiah's citations: The prophet joins this conversation of projected discourse only in the second portion of our unit, offering no words to the people in chs. 2-3. Jeremiah's first attributed speech (4:8) is a denial of what God attributed (2:35; 3:5), the point of controversy being the most apt question of whether anything has turned God's anger—or perhaps better—whether anything had changed definitively. That is, what God attributed as rehearsed earlier—the possibility of a divine change of heart—Jeremiah denies—no change. The uncertainty it itself the place of insight: If you have to ask if the anger/danger has been averted, the answer is no. And sure enough, shortly the people cry out at the approach of their foe, "We are ruined!" (4:13). In the complex scene set the prophet paints in 4:30-31, the woman adorning herself for lovers who have already turned away suddenly gives birth, crying out, "Woe is me! I am fainting before killers!" With the same indecision or confusion God articulates, the prophet next attributes denial: "He will do nothing. No evil will come upon us, and we shall not see sword or famine," (5:12).³⁹

Like God, the prophet includes speech of the invader, surrounding the invaded in imitation of the onslaught: "'Prepare war against her; up, and let us attack at noon! . . . Let us attack her at night, let us destroy her citadels'" (6:4). Not whether to attack, simply when (noon, night). And the object and target of this discussion calls out participatively, "'Woe is us, for the day declines, the shadows of evening lengthen!'" (*Idem*): the language of desperation fear, waiting, wondering when attack will come without hoping that it won't. The last Jeremiah quote of the people comes near the end of the unit (6:24) and catches the birth imagery of 4:31: "'We have heard news of them, our hands fall helpless; anguish has taken hold of us, pain as of a woman in labor.'"

³⁹Willis, pp. 67-69.

What to say in summary about the attributed speech? First, as before, the pair of “attributors” speak as a team, sharing certain assertions, constructing the same speakers, and agreeing on the confusion articulated. And as before, prophet understudies the deity, voicing in minor key (less and less vividly) what God has said. Second, as has been observed, the attributions are not to be taken as literal or factual but as strategic on the part of the framers.⁴⁰ Though the cumulative impact of the character zone of Judah-speaking is negative, indecision is also palpable. The liturgical language snatched up in a moment of need is not inevitably hypocritical, even if it may be abandoned later. Such confusion is mirrored in the attributor as well as in the alleged speaker, making them resemble each other, oddly. Hope flames up briefly in the speech of deity and leaders here, granted we know better than to expect much from it. Confusion need not be malevolent. The speakers seem vulnerable and poignant, all of them, excepting, perhaps, those who dispassionately announce the arrival of the destroyer and the destroyer himself, calculating the best time of day to do the attack.

shared imagery: metaphor

There are seven instances in the 150 verses of this unit under consideration where the two speakers use the same imagery, in each case a metaphor. Metaphor is a complicated topic, and so I simply stipulate that here, deity and prophet draw from the source domains of animal behavior, of certain human activities, and of weather phenomena to suggest the target domain of Judah’s condition. Metaphor works by using more vivid particulars (source) to hint at or shout about something more difficult to describe (target) for some reason, to some effect. Here, Judah is blind to, resistant to seeing what deity and prophet urge is obvious. The seven metaphors, each distinctively and all cumulatively, aim to breach Judah’s refusal to see. As before, the language is strong and jolting so it can have a chance of doing its job.

The first image invokes the use of *wild animals*, specifically the lion (YHWH 2:15; Jeremiah 4:7; 5:6). Both deity and prophet remark the destructive lion, which devastates cities to ruin, leaving no inhabitant. As attested in iconography, the lion is a symbol for Assyria, and so we have the generic foe from the north (unnamed, where one group can substitute for the

⁴⁰Look at Willis, pp. 75-77.

other).⁴¹ But the lion is also the animal totem for the tribe of Judah, so arguably the deity-prophet team also accuses Judah of devastating its own heritage, the leaders of destroying their own patrimony (note the attributed speech of the “children” at 3:24, who say the same thing: ‘The false allegiance of our [elders/betters] has trashed what our fathers worked for and what should have been ours.’ The weight of the lion metaphor is on its power to devastate utterly and on its prey, on Judah’s lack of options in the face of its approach. Jeremiah elaborates the figure, adding to the lion from the forest a wolf from the desert and a leopard on the alert, all savaging any who strays from his city and who consequently deserves his fate.

The second image is also from the animal world, a wonderful embedded metaphor, due to the presence of the anomaly of *animal livery* and human speech. YHWH attributes the speech directly to the people (2:20), who breaking yoke and bursting harness, announce they will serve no longer. Jeremiah cites the saying in the third person (5:5), attributing it to the wealthy (elites) who should know the way to go (yoke and harness to guide them), but having broken these off, are lost. Between them, the attributors pile up disloyalty, senselessness, rebellion, and loss of bearings. The deity contributes the vivid image of the refusing animal, and the prophet follows up with the consequences: unconstrained, unrelated, the animal is lost.

The third shared metaphor is most elaborated by deity: the image of the *promiscuous wife* (see 2:1-2, 20, 25, 32-33; 3:1,2,6-11, 13 and possibly other places as well). Elsewhere I have argued that the target domain for this language (the member of the metaphor needing explication) is the survival of fruitful Yahwism, and the source domain (contributing the more visual descriptors) is the patriarchal household. That is, the *znh* metaphor does not so much reference or expatiate false worship practices, literal whoredom or promiscuity (rare if imaginable⁴²) as it uses those realms to characterize the shameless search for imperial allies to underwrite the survival of the life enjoyed by elites at the time of Jeremiah. Hence, I will not here unpack the sexual imagery but rather note the polarities which construct these images.

⁴¹Lundbom, pp. 271-74; at p. 337 he suggests that the young lions are Egypt and Babylon.

⁴²A. R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2-3 (4:2),” *Biblical Interpretation* 4.3 (1996): 291-92.

God makes contrasts between then (days of the past) and now; between remembering and forgetting, following and refusing; there is the opposing of the one relationship and the many, the partner as submissive (following) and as bold, engaging partners on her own. From allegiance to YHWH, she turns to stone and tree (named as her father and mother in attributed speech by YHWH to Judah [2:27]). Indeed, as “dialogue” develops, the spouse of YHWH vacillates between verbal extremes of denying her falseness and repenting of it superficially, between denying it and owning it without admitting any responsibility. The dichotomous language stresses the breach between the spouses and prompts us to wonder why and how things have gotten so bad, how such a discrepancy pile can have accumulated. That is, as we have the utterly accused partner, we wonder if it can be so simple and clear.

Jeremiah, by contrast, has only one reference to this gendered image (4:30-31), and not in the chapters where YHWH’s language about promiscuity accrues (2-3) but in the section on attack of the city. Jeremiah addresses Zion amid language of attack, portraying her as cluelessly or denyingly adorning herself with ornaments and cosmetics when those who once sought her have turned in disgust and with lethal intent. The image is implicitly sexual though also draws on the realm of dishonesty, as if the woman must mask her true self. But scarcely articulated as beautifying herself, the woman becomes in a verse caught by the sudden pangs of labor, and those nearby at the birth are killers. The undertow of this image, then, time bringing sudden reversal—then and now offering another polarity. Those who were once allies to be wooed and wooed by are now enemies, hovering to kill.⁴³ The Zion figure has learned from her own experience what she did not seem to accept when she was addressed about it. Here, the deity and prophet are counterpointing, with God multiplying images and Jeremiah simply supplying one. In God’s many variations on this image, the woman is always objectified; in Jeremiah’s single picture, she speaks a more authentic, even prophetic word. But her options have vanished. Time has run out.

The last four images are short: Both deity and prophet refer to *mourning rites*. God (3:25; 4:28) attributes to the next generation (or to the non-elite peasants) an appropriate call for themselves to mourn in acknowledgment of their despoiled patrimony and their own complicity

⁴³Jeremiah’s celibacy is, perhaps, the foil to God’s troubled marriage.

in its devastation, and then invokes earth to mourn over YHWH's determination to persevere in punishment.⁴⁴ Thus the seriousness of what is happening is ritually owned and enacted. The prophet reinforces the inevitability of disaster (4:8; 6:26), speaking as did God for the people (attributing and also addressing language of mourning to them). The salient characteristic of this image is the relentlessness of the suffering and the responses to it: acknowledging and ritualizing it, though not because such discourse now (cf. earlier) can avert it. The team speaks as one.

The metaphor of *washing* (YHWH 2:22; Jeremiah 4:14) makes a similar point, though perhaps shifting the sincerity factor. God warns that relentless washing of determined sin is futile, at least while the divine eyes are watching. And Jeremiah agrees that washing off the surface what remains lodged in the heart is pointless, perhaps counterproductive.

Each speaker (YHWH 4:11; Jeremiah 4:13; 5:13) characterizes *wind* as negative: God speaks of the invader arriving like a hot wind that does not help with winnowing or cleansing but is only destructive.⁴⁵ Jeremiah also describes the foe from the north as arriving with the speed and effect of a whirlwind: destruction before defense can be attempted. Additionally he characterizes prophets as hot air, risking to include himself as well as his opponents. As was the case with the lion image, the leaders (prophets here) are characterized with the same image as is the invader.

And finally both allude to a topic developed later in the book: the land suffering *drought*. Each equates the dessicated land with the human visage resisting response: source is land, target is the heart behind the face. God (3:3) references the lack of rain that results in the forehead of the harlot, refusing shame.⁴⁶ The prophet names the same lack of responsiveness, the unyielding behavior and the face which resists to register change. Human recalcitrance is made tangible in the parched earth. What is the remedy, once the drought is so far advanced?

⁴⁴Lundbom points out, p. 380, that the only place "the children" are charged with faithlessness is at 4:7.

⁴⁵Holladay, p. 156, characterizes the wind as depositing yellow dust everywhere, obliterating all former hues.

⁴⁶Find that reference—not Lundbom.

The accumulated point: Deity and prophet continue to collaborate, and more equally than before. Their team work is clearer: One positions a figure and the other reinforces and then twists it a bit for fresh effect, additional impact. The quantity and quality are closer to even here, perhaps as God's speech is not so overwhelming. The metaphors, succinct, all paint the crisis as advanced, the options few, positions dire. And the foes are not all from the north, they imply. Local lions and liars threaten, harmful winds of human and divine origin. Metaphors have to be strong, even fresh, to be effective. How strong is too strong? Are Judah's elites likely to be convinced when equated with an invader, with a painted rouée who fools only herself and sees danger from her lovers only when in a moment of extreme vulnerability? Later readers either collaborate too enthusiastically with the gender metaphor or else, now, rebuke it so righteously as to get no insight from it.

self-talk

In this study of dialogue, in Bakhtin's sense of the word, we must also consider the phenomenon self-talk, instances where the speaker muses, claims to reflect within while articulating so as to be understood by a specifically addressed listeners or by later readers. Self-talk is simply the attribution of speech to self, quite similar to doing the same for others, though arguably the point is to make the self look good, compared to others who tend not to do well. Strategically, at least one effect is to reveal the layers of the self-talk-er. The passages are few and perhaps not so revealing as other places, nor so productive of insight.⁴⁷ The self-talk is contrived here, as is all the speech. But as with all constructed speech, this small genre reveals more than its surface may hint.

God admits to self-talk twice: 3:7, 19. In the midst of the description of the outrageous behavior of the spouses Israel and Judah, the deity articulates that—her behavior notwithstanding—he contemplates the return of his spouse to him. Though the point—or effect—may be to establish her recalcitrance, it also exposes his willingness to entertain a reversal, which in terms of the patriarchal household (and in terms of D law), seems almost

⁴⁷For a character offering a rich place to see self-talk, consider Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen*, ch. 5 and *passim*.

unthinkable. As Carroll notes,⁴⁸ the portrait YHWH draws of himself as cuckold is humiliating in the extreme. As we can hear God excoriate his wives, with the same pencil he makes himself look dishonored, while seeming almost unaware of it. Matched is the rumination (3:19) where God imagines the repentance and reconciliation of the people who will return and call YHWH (rather than tree and stone) father. Like other self-talk, it leaves the speaker exposed and defenseless, vulnerable and pathetic, showing among other things the unreal hopes of the deity.

Jeremiah's self-talk, distinctively here (cf. elsewhere, in this present set of verses, God's language is more sophisticated), is richer than God's. In a much-discussed passage (4:19-20) the prophet reveals his anguish, anticipating allusively the birth pangs of Zion in the midst of attack,⁴⁹ when the foe is malevolently present at the birth (4:30-31). I.e., as Zion is suffering pangs of childbirth amid threatening circumstances, Jeremiah, too, is overcome by analogous painful distress. More intensively—extensively—than Zion, the prophet describes his experience of the sound of the attack and his sense that, in a moment, his dwelling of tents and curtains—also invoking God's character zone—vanishes.⁵⁰ A second time Jeremiah reveals his own inner discourse (5:4-5), consequent upon his observation that no matter the attack, the elites refuse repentance. Jeremiah supposes that others among the common people might be amenable to such a change and undertakes to investigate their state, only to conclude that they had broken the yoke, burst the straps. Hopes are again dashed, granted blame is also repeated.

⁴⁸Carroll, pp. 142-43. O'Connor suggests, 390, that an ancient audience would have sympathized with the husband. The whole theory of how readers were and are supposed to react, are coded to do, is complex and ought not be universalized or too generalized. For an example of where I think the assumptions are too vast, see Athalya Brenner, "On Prophetic Propaganda and the Politics of 'Love,'" in *Reflections on Theology and Gender*, ed. Fokkeli van Dijk-Hemmes and Athalya Brenner (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994): 87-105.

⁴⁹Lundbom does not mention Jeremiah's pangs as birth-like, pp. 351-52; McKane sees them as such, pp. 102-03.

⁵⁰For Lundbom (p. 353), the tent and curtains reference a human dwelling ("my house, my tables and chairs" as an equivalent cry) and Holladay suggest they reference as well YHWH's tabernacle in the temple (p. 162).

The poor are bound with the same rope by which the elites have constrained themselves.

As was the case with shared imagery, we see a closer overlap in character zone than was the case with questions and attributed speech. If self-talk is by intent meant to make the self look good, it has the opposite effect as well, simultaneously, inevitably. For both of these speakers, through the self-focus we can also hear solidarity, the affirmation of relationship. God's rehearsal of fresh options may be—has been—read from the analogy of the abusive spouse who promises to do better, and that is one of the possibilities, but only one. The deity also ventures a portrait of himself involving shame and disgrace, if his spouse is willing. Jeremiah exposes the depth of his solidarity with people (pangs of birth) and with deity (associated with tent and curtains). To murmur, even in self-talk, what is ignominious, does not self-promote. This is language unable to decide whose side it is on, or able to be persuaded to all sides, to fill in all the character zones. Each of these self-talkers becomes entangled with the zones of others: God as thwarted deviant, Jeremiah as swept away at a moment of vulnerability, as new life might have emerged. This is language unable to decide whose side it is on, or able to be persuaded to all sides, to fill in all the character zones.

dialogue

The last genre to investigate is dialogue between deity and prophet, both words addressed to each other⁵¹ without explicit reply and the two instances within these 150 verses where a response is made. Words *at* are not the same as words *with*.

First, God: God calls on Jeremiah to witness, even participate in the tirade uttered against spousal Israel and Judah (3:1, 6, 7, 11), ranting to his witness the outrage of their intransigence and simultaneously the scandal of his own weakness. Jeremiah makes no reply. Has God asked too much, presumed too much?

Jeremiah has three conversation attempts. In what is perhaps the most provocative discourse in this portion of the book, the prophet (handing God attributed speech that we cannot verify from elsewhere) accuses, "Then I said, 'Ah, Lord Yahweh, you have really been deceptive

⁵¹This small genre does not include orders or directions of one to the other, e.g., where YHWH says things like, "Tell them," or "This shall you say," e.g., 2:1,4; 3:12; 4:5; 5:19,20.

to this people and to Jerusalem, saying, “It will be well for you [m pl], when the sword as reached their throat”” (4:10).⁵² God makes no reply to that charge, ringing the empty, windy speech we have already heard about (5:13). Jeremiah will, later in the book, accuse God about this again. At 4:18 Jeremiah⁵³ addresses someone (masculine singular), gaining no reply. In 5:3-4 (passage previously discussed, where deity and prophet share imagery), Jeremiah asks God if it is not the case that God was in the right to punish and the people did not react? God makes no reply, which is what sets the prophet off on his quest to see if others would reply differently. But they don’t, having thrown off servitude.

Finally, there is just one set of verses in the 150 where these two speak with each other, or one finishes the thought of the other, catches a phrasal thought tossed by the other. In 6:10-11a, Jeremiah addresses a comment, which YHWH appears to rejoin in 6:11b-12. The prophet registers a question indicating that there is no one who has been responsive to him, and no other candidates to try—all with foreskinned ears. ““With the wrath of Yahweh I am full/I am weary of holding it in. . . .”” And the deity urges ““Pour it out. . . .”” on the child in the street, and on the young men, for God’s punishment is set. Is this actually a conversation? At very least, its content shocks. Why not pour it out on the king on the throne?

This is an amazingly small collection of genuine conversation, especially as it comes at the end of so many words spoken. Actual exchanges are minimal, difficult, uncertain, even shocking. The team of deity and prophet both works together and does not, I think. That is, at one point the two are so overlapped as so voice a virtual duet, God finishing a sentence Jeremiah started. But elsewhere, conversation seems difficult. How can God not reply to the rumination (accusation?) Jeremiah makes in 4:10? Has God been a deceiver? Is the prophet’s allegation true, and how do we know if there is no reply to it?

cumulative insights

As the material piles up, several things become freshly apparent, at least to me, reading. *First*, there is substantial overlap between the character zones of deity and prophet established,

⁵²For Lundbom, p. 339, it is more than simply a surprised comment, closer to a criticism, though addressed in prayer.

⁵³Perhaps? Not clear who is speaker.

not as a constant but as a variable. That is, the sharing of genres—perspective and technique—is substantial and pervasive, even if God is quantitatively and qualitatively better at some. Jeremiah is a good understudy, at least to a point. It need not have been drawn in that way; the team might have been more disparate (may go in that direction elsewhere in their talk).

Second, as we listen to them talk, we are able to note several things. Their language both discloses a view of those they address while at the same time revealing texture about the speakers. That is, as deity and prophet question, talk for, and characterize others, they are revealing themselves as well. It is scarcely possible to ask questions without revealing one's angle, or provide speech without disclosing one's own concerns. At first hearing, what dominates about their "others" is that Judah's elites are stubborn, belligerent, recalcitrant. But also evident was a portrait of basic ambivalence and indecision, fear. The same picture emerges as the speaker/accusers reveal themselves. The speakers/accusers both seem self-serving and other-diminishing, deity and prophet threatening to overpower the other with verbal tides all but impossible to resist—the very bold independence of which they accuse their opponents. As God and Jeremiah let us in on their own self-talk, this impression is reinforced. So all characters emerge ostensibly as invincible but are betrayed as fragile, vulnerable, disgrace-able. The shared discourse unites not only prophet and deity in form but that prophetic team and their opponents in content. Evidenced among all participants is desperation. All of the main characters are drawn with the same crayons: invaders who dither only about the time of attack, Judah's elites proceeding independently until menaced, prophet and deity speaking boldly up to a point but also revealing indecision and uncertainty, refusing reliable speech. Certain imagery wanders to describe others in addition to those at whom it was aimed: God attracts the windbag image slung at false prophets, Jeremiah the childbirth experience of Zion under threat. Deity and prophet fall silent before each other's address. Intriguing, provocative artistry.

Third is the question of larger effect. What can we say about the impact of this speech, or how can we characterize the response of the accused? As God and prophet labor verbally to dissuade Judah's leaders from a course that is only destructive in the view of the preaching pair, the elites themselves seem unable to contemplate (see or choose) a way of life other than the one

they have known as king, prophet, noble. Some of the images slung by prophet and deity return to bite their speakers as we listen carefully. The deity becomes vulnerable in desiring and needing a spouse, and the prophet feels divine deception, pains of birth. It seems clear that at least in this small section of text (though elsewhere too, we may know), the construction of all this speech fails to induce change, perhaps inhibits genuine response or change of behavior or heart from any. The harder the speakers try, the louder the silence becomes, not least when the two of them address each other. Their barrage of speech in these five genres is ineffective, at least so far as we know from the narrative. This, again, is not a great surprise, since failure to convince seems deeply a part of the nature of prophecy. All this harsh and accusatory talk, so

little apparent effect.

conclusions

My entry question was: Can we make use of Bakhtin's authoring strategies (blending them with other Jeremiah exegetical and interpretive work) to make some useful assertions about the character zones of YHWH, Jeremiah, Judah and various opponents, by looking at distinctive character speech (use of questions; use of attributed speech; shared imagery; self-talk; conversation), and by suggesting their effects? And insofar as my close textual work showed substantial overlap of character zones—deity and prophet especially but also some wisps of that team and their opponents (Judah elites and threatening foe), what is the significance? That the deity and prophet choose harsh and violent language for much of their address does not quite cover the fact that some of their language shows uncertainty, vulnerability, and poignancy shared between those accusing and those accused. There is an undertone, an undertow, of something gentle amid the violent language.

If the “prophet team” often speaks powerfully and violently, as they do in this material, was it effective? I find no evidence that those addressed in this language were converted to its point of view; that is, rhetorically, it was ineffective. And as I read commentaries and study

with others, it appears that moderns in general, and biblical scholars in particular, seem little aided by the sort of language God and Jeremiah trade in: loaded questions, tendentious speech forced into others' mouths, deft imagery that can crawl around and surprise us. We do not like being bullied, belittled, battered; it generates recalcitrance, or worse. What to do? Can Bakhtin help?

These matters press on two questions of interest. First is the nature of biblical prophecy with its slippery and sloppy overlap of deity and spokesperson, of prophetic language and receiving ears—both the original intended audience we can construct and our own reception of prophetic talk. Another well-worn interest: Often in the OT/HB, God's language (and that of colleagues and partners) is rough, violent, insulting, abusive. This is the very large question of how God is characterized in the Bible/in Scripture. While working on this paper (and another to be presented here on the so-called marriage metaphor) I was stung by a comment of a doctoral student in Christian Spirituality, ordained in her denomination, active as a chaplain, planning to specialize in the OT who said, "If I could hear God just once where he does not sound unpleasant, I would be pleased." The point is not that we could not recommend passages to her, but that her overall impression is embittered husband and military strategist,⁵⁴ as one Jeremiah scholar puts it. I don't hear it that way, but I know many, many people do. How to manage this challenging speech? If God's and Jeremiah's language were less persistently harsh and softer, would that be better? Or, if I am right to hear its undertow of vulnerability, does that help? Would we, our contemporary receivers of the text, surrounded as we are by violence and abuse, do better if we had ears attuned a bit differently? Would we respond to God more effectively? As we might say in Bakhtinese, if we co-author God a bit differently, do we ourselves emerge as somewhat different creatures?

What if we change our reading angle? One excellent way of reading Jeremiah would be to make a close, sympathetic and critical study of those to whom the words were addressed so that we are not righteously standing with the smart and saved as this biblical language goes to work. If we move away from deity and prophet and take the reception position of Judah's elites, how are we positioned to understand their non-response? Those recalcitrant leaders

⁵⁴O'Connor, p. 392.

strike me as people with their backs to a wall they hate to contemplate, as unable to envision a way of life other than what their ancestors had enjoyed on the heritage land. They seem determined to struggle to remain there, at whatever cost, as though it were inherent to their identity. We can see, in hindsight, that it was not so. Yahwism was not, after all, tied to a particular place, even to a distinctive patrimonial economy. For our own context, I drew on the words of ethicist Daniel Callahan, who calls attention to four intractable culture factors in our time: credit cards, medical technology, global warming and the automobile—troublesome and “admit[ting] of no solution short of a cultural revolution.”⁵⁵ Though evidence abounds to suggest that change for each nigh-intractable situation is urgent, Callahan’s essay is laced with sentences that testify to continued addiction: “The Right and the Left both have their own nostrums, most of them based on hope, speculation, and dubious data. . . .We show no sign of wanting to live any other way. . . .The push for individual prosperity and for constant economic growth remains unabated. That drive is precisely what would have to give way. . . .[T]here may be a problem, but upsetting the economic engine that provides growth and prosperity is too great a risk to take now.”⁵⁶ “It may well be that nothing less than disasters of one kind or another will bring about basic changes in our way of life. Nothing is harder than getting human beings to alter the way they live when the worst scenarios are still in the future, the present is still tolerable, and the costs of change seem exceedingly high.”⁵⁷ What do we desire deeply, that we resist obvious truth claims so strongly? When we and our contemporaries do not respond to our own prophets, why not? I think mainly because what is being urged we do not wish to contemplate actually having to choose. Does logic help us, or strong and stern language? If we don’t want to do what is urged, and the particular language is somehow not persuasive.

What is more persuasive, to us, if not to prophetic audiences like those we construct from the Jeremiah book? If violent talk is not effective, will gentler language appeal to us? Is

⁵⁵Daniel Callahan, “Unsustainable: Hard Truths about the ‘American Way of Life,’” *Commonweal* 135.12 (June 20, 2008): 12.

⁵⁶Callahan, p. 13.

⁵⁷Callahan, p. 14.

Jeremiah more helpful when he is vulnerable? I think so. Is God likely to be more persuasive about God's projects, if the still-strong but also-vulnerable zone of speech is audible? It seems we can allow "textual Jeremiah" to be fictive; can we allow God to be fictive in Jeremiah, allow some slippage between "textual God" and "real God," allow some of the vulnerability ascribed to the deity by our contemporaries (I am thinking of James Alison) to be heard? I think so. The complex biblical prophetic discourse can do it, and Bakhtin can help.

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