

THE REPENTANCE OF GOD: A STUDY OF JEREMIAH 18:7-10

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Scholarly judgments with respect to the repentance of God motif in Jer 18:7-10 have often been unusually harsh.¹ For example, von Rad (1965, p. 198) states that this passage is meant "to indicate Jahweh's freedom" as he directs history, but it does this in an oddly theoretical way by giving imaginary examples which are quite contrary to the sense of the passage, for they almost make Jahweh's power dependent on law rather than on freedom." Or, J. Jeremias (1975, pp. 83-87, 119) in the only monograph devoted to the topic of divine repentance, thinks the Jeremiah text turns this dynamic theme into a dogmatic formulation, indeed a legalism, independent of any concrete historical situation, placing God's judgmental and salvific activities in reaction to human response and on the same level of importance. Similarly, R. Carroll speaks of "rigidity" and "dogma," whereby God is committed "to acting in accordance with human behavior. . . . Not only does that contravene the principle of divine transcendence; what is worse, it preempts divine initiative and makes the deity countersign human activity. . . . The formulation of Jer 18:7-10 leaves much to be desired."² W. McKane (1986, p. 426) concludes that vv. 7-10 "have too abstract an aspect to entitle them to be considered seriously as an interpretation of the parable of the potter and his clay."

What are we to make of such judgments? It is the purpose of this article to examine this passage within the larger context of Jeremiah 18

1. The first draft of this paper had been completed when I heard Philip Davies give a paper at the 1987 SBL International Meeting in Heidelberg, "Potter, Prophet and People: A Reading of Jeremiah 18." His literary study helped nuance this paper in some ways.

2. R. Carroll (1981, p. 81). In his commentary (1986, pp. 372, 374) Carroll speaks of vv. 7-10 as "idyllic and unreal," as "very mechanical" and that it "lacks any depth of content." The openness of the principle in these verses is limited by "the fixity of its reciprocity and the highly abstract nature of its terms."

with the intent of moving toward a response to this and related questions.

A number of assumptions that underlie these negative judgments need to be articulated at the outset:

1. Verses 7–10 tend to be considered only as a part of a unit limited to vv. 1–11 (12); vv. 13–17 are not thought to inform the interpretation of these verses in any special way. It can be shown that the larger context is very important for a proper understanding of the passage.

2. It would appear that the interpretation of vv. 1–6 has commonly been determined prior to any consideration of its relationship to vv. 7–10; for example, von Rad (1965, p. 198) seems to have decided that the “immense freedom at God’s disposal” is central to the potter story in and of itself, and hence he must struggle with how vv. 7–10 fit with that. But, it must be insisted that, whatever the history of the traditions in this chapter, the present text has indissolubly linked vv. 7–10 with the potter story. Hence, in discerning the meaning of the present text, vv. 7–10 must inform the interpretation of vv. 1–6 just as much as the other way around.

3. It would appear that there is a predisposition to consider more theoretical statements (such as vv. 7–10) as less adequate and more problematic theologically than more concrete or historically immediate statements. Generally, biblical scholarship of the last generation has not been particularly attentive to such statements and has perhaps been even suspicious. I have sought to show elsewhere (Fretheim, 1984, pp. 24–29) that such abstractions are central to Israel’s reflections about God; in fact, their role is indispensable in sorting out the meaning of other types of biblical material.

4. It would seem that the interpretation of this passage is often decisively informed by an understanding of God that stresses divine sovereignty and freedom. Consequently, the theme of divine repentance becomes somewhat problematic, for it seems to bind God to the world and to human activity in ways that compromise such sovereignty. It need not be so, however. More appropriate ways of speaking of divine sovereignty and transcendence are necessary in order to accommodate the important theme of divine repentance.

A closer look at the text will assist us in formulating some responses to the above-noted concerns.

Jer 18:7–10 is embedded in the context of Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s (*yṣr*) house, and the parallels that are drawn therefrom regarding

God's relationship to "the house of Israel" (vv. 1-6). It is probably best understood, with Holladay (1986, p. 513), as a "narrative of a symbolic event" comparable to 13:1-11. It is followed by a statement regarding the judgment which God is "shaping" (*yšr*) for Israel, in light of which they are called to repent (v. 11). Verse 12 reports that Israel will follow its own devices rather than return to the Lord. This is followed (vv. 13-17) by an announcement from God on the unnaturalness of Israel's conduct and the judgment which must inevitably follow. The chapter concludes (vv. 18-23) with a report of plots against Jeremiah and a "Confession" by Jeremiah which parallels the divine announcement.

Scholarly assessments of the literary issues presented by this chapter are very complex; we note only the basic trends here. It is very common to separate vv. 1-6 (which many assign to the prophet entirely or in part) from vv. 7-12 (commonly assigned in whole or in part to the deuteronomic editor of Jeremiah); vv. 13-17 are usually considered an independent Jeremiah oracle (cf. e.g., Nicholson, 1970, pp. 80-83; Thiel, 1973, pp. 210-19; Wanke, 1980, pp. 151-62). On the other hand, a powerful case for the unity of the passage and its non-deuteronomic character has been made by Weippert (1973, pp. 48-67, 191-209; 1981, pp. 77-86). While we are inclined to accept Weippert's view, our concern here is only for the text in its present redaction. That is to say, whatever the pre-history of these verses, there is a coherence to vv. 1-17 that needs to be considered, and it is only in view of this larger unit that good sense can be made of vv. 7-10.

A strong case can also be made for integrating vv. 18-23 into this unit; this could in turn reinforce our point. These verses are parallel in many ways with vv. 12-17. The people speak in v. 12 and in v. 18. In v. 12 they say (with RSV; cf. Holladay, 1986, p. 517, for textual issues) that they will follow their own plans (*maḥšāšābôt*); in v. 18 these plans take concrete shape in the plots (*maḥšāšābôt*) against Jeremiah. Plans against God are correspondent to plans against Jeremiah; they are two sides of the same coin. To oppose one is to oppose the other. Moreover, God's word in vv. 13-17 is parallel with the prophet's words in vv. 19-23. I have sought to show elsewhere (Fretheim, 1984, p. 158) that the speeches of God and the confessions of Jeremiah are often parallel: "It is important to see Jeremiah's cry for vengeance on his persecutors as correspondent to God's announcement of judgment. What might seem to be a very personal vendetta is, in fact, a conformation of the prophet's words to the message of the wrath of God." Jeremiah's words mirror God's words. The people's

failure to repent is now accompanied by the end of prophetic intercession on their behalf (v. 20). God and prophet agree; judgment is now inevitable for Israel.

It is often thought that a more general teaching is central to this analogy, namely, the absolute sovereignty of God.³ Just as a potter can shape what he wills with clay, so God can do what God wills with Israel. Thus, for example, Davidson (1983, p. 150) speaks of the clay as being "totally under the control" of the potter. Inconsistently, he also uses the language of relationship; but it is difficult to understand how one can speak of relationship in any significant sense if God is in total control. Wanke (1980, pp. 157–60) appeals to references to God as potter elsewhere in the Old Testament to reinforce such an interpretation (Isa 29:15–16; 45:9–13; 64:8). This argumentation is problematic, however, for the potter image generally, and in each of these texts, is primarily associated with God as Creator (*yṣr*; cf. Gen 2:7) and human beings as creatures. In Isaiah 29 and 45 the Creator's prerogative and knowledge is affirmed in response to the creatures' questioning the propriety of God's actions (cf. Jer 27:5); the nature of the human activity in these texts indicates that the issue is divine right/knowledge not divine rule or control. To the extent that the image of Creator implies sovereignty, it should be noted that human activity is a powerful force in these texts. The clay is not considered passive in these passages; the divine rule is not absolute.

This conclusion is reinforced by a closer analysis of the text. The interpretation of v. 4 has proved to be the most problematic. Most translate the verse as a general, iterative reference to the potter's activity rather than a one-time event; to cite NEB: "Now and then a vessel he was making out of the clay would be spoilt in his hands, and then he would start again and mould it into another vessel to his liking" (cf. TEV; Holladay, 1986, p. 512; McKane, 1986, p. 420). Some scholars have given this verse positive import with respect to Israel (e.g., Nicholson, 1973, p. 155): just as the potter takes clay that turns out badly on the wheel and starts over again, reworking that clay into another vessel, so God will take unfaithful Israel and work with it until it becomes the vessel God intends it to be. Others have given it a negative interpretation: just as the potter takes the clay that turns out badly and replaces it with

3. For a recent effort, see especially Wanke (1980). Cf. C. Brekelmans (1981, pp. 345–46), who affirms God's "absolute power" in this text, but seems to deny "absolute sovereignty," a distinction which escapes me. Cf. McKane's discussion (1986, pp. 421–22).

another vessel, so God will replace corrupt Israel with another vessel.⁴ It seems to me that, in view of vv. 7-11, one should interpret v. 4 in such a way that the future remains open; just as the potter recreates a vessel that seems good to him in view of the possibilities inherent in what he has to work with, so God will take corrupt Israel and work with all the possibilities inherent in the situation (determined in part by the nature of Israel's response to God's continuing work), shaping it in a way that is consonant with God's good purposes for Israel. Israel's future is open-ended; the possibilities could be negative or positive. This interpretation connects directly and coherently with the possibilities outlined in vv. 7-10. It also coheres with the openness of the future implicit in v. 11; this then makes unnecessary the claim of McKane (1986, pp. 425-26) that the new possibilities of v. 11 are a theological modification of vv. 1-6.

Let us look at this interpretation in greater detail. First of all, it is clear that the potter (God) initiates all stages of work with the clay. It is the potter's will to make a vessel in the first place and to rework it when it has turned out badly. Moreover, it can be assumed that the potter wants to make the best vessel possible with the materials with which he has to work; it is also clear that the potter will work perseverently toward that objective. At the same time, it is evident that the potter is faced with a problem; his work now and then turns out badly. Either the potter does not do his work well enough or the clay is inadequate in some way. In terms of the analogy, the problem is either with God or the people. It is difficult to suggest that the problem lies with God, though this would be implicit in any interpretation of divine sovereignty as "total control." That is to say, if God had this kind of control, the clay would not have been spoiled; an all-determining God could have prevented that from happening. In any case, another direction seems preferable.

It is the clay/people that are responsible for the inferior results. In terms of Israel, the analogy presupposes that the people are corrupt. The story of the potter does not assume a situation in which all is well, in which many options are available to him; we are introduced to a potter

4. Cf. J. Bright (1965, p. 125); Weippert (1973, p. 50). As we develop these considerations, it will be evident that this is a word which would function in comparable ways both before and after the events of 586 B.C.E. Cf. Nicholson (1970, pp. 81-83). For R. Carroll (1986, p. 372), a positive note in vv. 1-6 is removed in vv. 7-10, where the focus is on the clay's capacity for choosing what will happen to it. For further discussion, see W. McKane (1986, pp. 421-23), who considers vv. 1-4 to be a "parabolic proclamation of doom."

who is working in a situation already fraught with difficulty. Given this situation the problem lies in discerning the possibilities for the future.

It is often wondered whether the clay/people analogy really works. It is true that the clay is inanimate and that the people are living, and that the range of response on the part of the people to God is barely analogous to the clay's responsiveness to the potter. Yet, knowledge of pottery-making suggests that the clay can adversely affect the potter's work. Holladay notes that "any potter will affirm that because of the centrifugal force developed on the wheel the clay presses against the hand of the potter." Hence, "though God is sovereign, the people have a will of their own which they exert against him."⁵ This seems sufficient to make the analogy work. In any case, it is clear from the Isaiah passages noted above that Israel considered the clay as anything but passive. We are then presented with a dynamic situation in which God is faced with the task of working with existing negative and positive factors in order to shape Israel into the best vessel possible. The focus is not on God's power and control, but on God's initiative, creativity, patience, and responsiveness in relation to the possibilities inherent in the situation.

Verses 7-10 support this interpretation. In these verses it is made clear that the people of the world can take two directions in response to the word of God: depending upon what that word is, they can repent of their evil and turn to God or they can turn from God, not listening to God's voice. God does not control which direction the people will take. In v. 12 we see clearly that, in spite of God's appeal, the people will follow their own plans in opposition to God. It is evident from this that God's future activity with respect to the people is not predetermined; by their response the people have the God-given capacity to shape God's own response, but only in a limited way. Certain human actions (e.g., not listening to God's voice) will lead to certain divine responses (e.g., divine repentance of a good), as they seem "good to the potter to do." Still, the direction of God's reshaping will depend on what God has to work with in this situation, including the nature of the people's response.

Verse 11 immediately announces that the situation is such that God is "shaping" judgment for Israel, and that its proper response is one of repentance. It is not yet an announcement of "bringing evil"; that

5. W. Holladay (1986, p. 515). Also R. Mize (1972). Because pottery-making was so common in that world, such knowledge would probably have been commonplace. I understand Holladay's use of the word "sovereignty" in this context to be a "soft" usage, that is, a divine rule which is not absolute.

awaits a later moment (v. 17; cf. 19:3). We see here an example of the common distinction between God's "plans" and their execution (see Fretheim, 1984, pp. 49-53; Holladay, 1986, pp. 513, 515, 517). In other words, v. 11 announces that the declaration of judgment noted in v. 7 has been made, but the execution of that judgment is not a foregone conclusion. The future is still open, albeit moving in a certain direction. The announcement awaits a response from the people before it moves finally toward execution.

Verse 12 immediately informs us of that response; the people refuse to repent.⁶ Hence, the judgment will now follow; the potential divine repentance of v. 7 is no longer possible. The potter must start all over once again with the clay. The potter's intent to make a vessel which seems good to him remains, but the possibilities have narrowed even further and any future which the people now have lies through judgment (cf. 12:14-15; 4:27; 5:18). Verse 11 and v. 12 may be related to earlier and later stages in Jeremiah's career (so Holladay, 1986, p. 517)—in the absence of repentance, history's passing inexorably narrows Israel's possibilities for the future. But vv. 11-12, having now been mixed redactionally, together serve theologically to show that what became inevitable was not always so; the sharp limitation in the range of options for divine response must be placed squarely at the door of Israel's non-response to the divine call for repentance.

But what function do vv. 7-10 serve in their outline of possibilities? It is important to recognize that, unlike vv. 6 and 11, vv. 7-10 speak not of Israel but of "nations and kingdoms."⁷ The general reference places this passage in the context of the wider creation, and not Israel's particular history. As Weippert has pointed out,⁸ a creation theology informs this passage. She does not draw out the full significance of this observation, however. The point of the text is that God's actions towards Israel in these respects are not unique in the world. God does not treat Israel in a different way from anyone else; this is the pattern of God's ways with people everywhere. The use of the "natural" analogy of the potter as an image of God as Creator is thus in fundamental continuity with this

6. It seems best to understand Jeremiah as the speaker in v. 12, as is the case in v. 19, though an introductory phrase indicating a change in speaker is lacking in both instances. This lack is common in Jeremiah (cf. 6:27-28; 8:18-9:3).

7. See the discussion of Weippert (1973, pp. 48-49). No distinction in these words is intended. See Jer 1:10; Isa 60:12; Ezek 37:22.

8. See especially Weippert (1973, pp. 77ff.). In 1973, p. 66, Weippert considers vv. 7-10 to provide a distancing point whereby Israel can be made to take a more objective look at its own situation, as Nathan does for David in 2 Samuel 12.

creation-wide perspective. The point of the text is anchored in the way God generally deals with creation (cf. 31:35–37; 33:19–26).

But to what end? This approach appears to anticipate the argument that Israel was being treated unfairly (so 5:19; 16:10–13; 31:27–30, where v. 28 contains parallels to this passage; cf. 2:5–6, 29; 9:12–16; Ezekiel 18). God not only works this way with Israel, this is God's way with all creation. God will turn away from a judgment word upon human repentance (see 12:14–16 and Jonah 3, where this abstraction is given flesh and blood; cf. also 16:19–21; 46–51); God will turn away from a promised blessing upon rejection of a divine word (see 12:17; 27:1–11). Given the worldwide pattern of God's ways of working, Israel cannot bring God into court claiming unfair treatment.

Given the creation context in which vv. 7–10 are to be read, how would they apply specifically to Israel? Israel is faced with *both* possibilities. In vv. 7–8, in the face of an announcement of judgment, a positive possibility for the future is presented. It depends upon Israel's repentance; the will of God for Israel is clear in providing this possibility. In vv. 9–10 Israel's future is viewed from another perspective. As the chosen people of God, Israel has lived with the future possibilities articulated in v. 9. Israel's negative response to this, however, provides for the possibility of a negative future. Israel cannot rely on the divine declaration of a promise irrespective of its own response to that word of God (see below). In fact, Israel's unfaithfulness to God makes this negative possibility a near reality. The key to Israel's future is its repentant response to the word of God.

The divine oracle in vv. 13–17 is closely connected with the preceding verses by the word "therefore," a typical introduction to an announcement of judgment which follows the reason for it (though vv. 13–16 continue the speech of accusation). A connection is also made through the use of "nations" (*gōyim*, vv. 7, 9, 13), placing Israel once again in the context of the larger world of creation (cf. 4:2; 12:14–17; 16:19–21). Here the nations of the world are asked to make an assessment of Israel's rejection of God, not in terms of anything revealed uniquely to Israel (e.g., the Sinaitic law), but in terms of *natural* relationships (cf. 8:7; 17:5–11). Brueggemann (1973, pp. 358–74) has shown how the pattern of rhetorical questions in Jeremiah commonly draws on arguments from the created order (e.g., 8:19–22; 14:19–22; 30:4–7). Hence, in terms of argumentation, vv. 7–10 are parallel to vv. 13–17. The nations of the world are placed in the striking position of making a judgment on Israel from within their own understanding of how such relationships ought to work (v. 14 would highlight faithfulness or constancy). There is

thus an appeal to norms for relationships which are common to all peoples, indeed all of creation, not just Israel (see Barton, 1979, pp. 1-14). Anyone who passes by will immediately recognize the issue and will be horrified, shaking their head (v. 16; cf. 2:10-11; 19:8; especially 22:8-9, where the reference is to something specifically internal to Israel, but the evaluative norm is the more general one of faithfulness to a relationship). There is a creation-wide "ethical consistency" to God's ways of acting which is known by the nations; God's ways with Israel are God's ways with all. Verses 13-17 thus reinforce vv. 7-10 in moving toward the judgment of v. 17. The entire world (cf. the appeal in 2:12) will recognize that what God does with Israel is just; Israel has violated basic human norms for relationships and must suffer the consequences. Israel cannot have recourse to accusations that God has in any way been unfair.

Finally, it is important to respond to two primary theological difficulties scholars have had with the divine repentance theme in vv. 7-10 (see Jeremias, 1975, pp. 83-85, 119; Carroll, 1981, pp. 81-82). The first has to do with God's openness to repenting of a promised good. This text deals with the same kind of phenomenon encountered in the divine repentance in the flood story and the rejection of Saul's kingship (Genesis 6-8; 1 Samuel 15; cf. Fretheim, 1985; Jeremias, 1975, pp. 19-38). As in those texts, here also promised "goods" are opened up to the possibility of divine repentance. Rather varied "goods" seem to be in view (cf. Jer 12:15-17; 27:1-11). In his negative assessment, Jeremias seems to confuse the unchangeable character of God's salvific purposes for the people, indeed the creation as a whole, and the particularistic articulation of those and other purposes to Israel (or any other *corporate* entity). God's good purposes may be relied upon absolutely, but neither Israel nor any other entire community can be *guaranteed* participation in the reality of fulfillment irrespective of their response (for application of this concern at an individual level, cf. Ezek 18:21-26). God will remain true to God's promises, but not in some universalistic sense. Those who reject God's word will not participate in the promised good (a situation not unlike that of Amos 5:18-20 must be in view). Hence, this passage does not raise God's freedom to some new heights. On the contrary, God is not free of God's salvific purposes or promises of blessing, but people are free to reject God and suffer the consequences of self-removal from the sphere of the promise, a move which God will honor.

A second (somewhat contradictory) difficulty relates to what Jeremias calls a hardening of the theological arteries, or what Carroll considers the preempting of the divine initiative, with the metaphor of divine

repentance having been turned into dogma. The difficulty here seems to be some perceived loss of divine freedom (and even transcendence): there should be a more dialectical relationship between repentance and freedom. Such a judgment fails to consider certain aspects of the text. Both sides of the statement in vv. 7–10 presuppose the “declaring” of the word of God (vv. 7, 9), implicit in which is divine initiative and freedom as well as the divine will to save. At the same time, the human response to God’s word is given a high level of importance by God. The relationships which God establishes are relationships of integrity, with all the ramifications of taking seriously what the other party says and does. What people say and do will affect the possibilities God has for moving into the future. While there is some predictability evident in the articulation of the divine options (“at any time”), this serves the important purpose of guarding against any suggestion of capriciousness on God’s part. On the one hand, God can be depended upon to react in consonance with the divine will to save by responding positively to human repentance. On the other hand, God will not coerce submission to that will; God will allow people to say what Israel does in v. 12 and to suffer the consequences of being deprived of the promised good. The divine freedom is thus one step removed from God’s specific responses to the human responses herein outlined. It is in freedom that God has determined that these will be the divine responses for the purposes we have noted. In freedom God has limited the divine options for the sake of a relationship of integrity with the creatures and for the sake of God’s own will to make of Israel the best possible vessel in view of the possibilities inherent in a highly problematic situation for both God and people.

Given the function we have seen for this passage in the larger context, one ought not understand this formulation as “dogma” (a word which should not have only a pejorative sense in any case), but as a way of alerting Israel to the *basic pattern* of God’s non-capricious ways of working with all peoples everywhere. If these verses are understood as a pattern of the way in which God responds, this prevents any understanding of these verses in terms of, say, a daily fluctuating divine response. There is no suggestion, for example, that for *every* instance of human disobedience there would be a responding divine repentance of good, as if the divine patience would no longer be in view. The focus on national rather than individual response in these verses makes clear that the concern is with pervasive tendencies among a people (which is the level at which the prophets generally speak regarding Israel). Far from being a legalism, these verses reveal the amazing responsiveness of God

within relationships established, not simply with Israel but with peoples throughout the entire world. The mere fact that their God will repent in both ways noted should impress upon Israel the remarkably patient and merciful ways of its God as well as the seriousness with which it should take its own response to God.

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