Jeremiah's Rhetoric of Hope out of Disaster

Chuck Pitts, PhD

Houston Graduate School of Theology

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My recent interest in the theology of the Book of Jeremiah developed very innocently. In teaching a class on Jeremiah in a four-week summer session, the repetition of words in the book struck me as poignant. In fact, Jeremiah's rhetorical use of repetition is overwhelming. Unfortunately, it seems that the academic focus on redaction and sources often causes academic presentation of Jeremiah to miss the prophetic rhetoric. In fact, at the 2014 SBL meetings, a session on Reading and Writing Jeremiah included four papers related to body in the Book of Jeremiah. All of the papers found it necessary to spend portions of their limited time addressing the poetic, prose, or Deuteronomic origin of the texts under discussion. While source criticism is not unimportant, the over emphasis on the hyper-critical text analysis obscures the rhetorical repetitions in the text. Two of those oft-repeated words are רָעָה and שָׁלוֹם, which bring us to Jer. 29:11.

My interest in Jer. 29:11 also began innocently. I had this idea for a book (mostly tongue-in-cheek, along with many others, I am sure) about the most misused verses in the Bible. So, I thought of Phil. 4:13, Rom. 8:28, and Ps. 8:5. Since I was teaching Jeremiah, I also thought about Jer. 29:11—most commonly quoted in the NIV, "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." Anyone who has spent much time listening to contemporary Christian voices knows that this verse is recited in sermons, included on taglines of church webpages and blogs, and hung up in the kitchen of devout Christian homes. My study of Jer. 29:11 led me to the realization that academic studies of Jeremiah had little interest in the use of the verse in the church. As a

churchman and an academic, my trek through the theology of Jeremiah was born. In tonight's

brief presentation, I will summarize my study of Jer. 29:11 and its derivative studies of the use of

רָעָה and שָׁלוֹם in the Book of Jeremiah. This word pair, and their cognates and theological

parallels, present a theology of hope—but one born out of disaster.

Most comments—from commentaries to blogs—related to Jer. 29:11 focus upon the

historical context of the verse. Since the verse begins with כִּי, the importance of context is

amplified. In fact, grammatically, to interpret the verse apart from its context—historical,

canonical, or literary—should be impossible. As part of a letter to the exiles in Babylon, the

reader should recognize that the verse is a word of encouragement to the exiles that God has not

abandoned them, but will indeed deliver them from exile to home, albeit not in the short time

they desire, but only after 70 years—two generations or so. Since modern American readers are

not in danger of an exile to Babylon, a reading of the text as a promise of current prosperity

should be difficult or rare, but obviously is not.[1]

The other issue related to the historical context is the on-going battle between Jeremiah

and the false prophets of hope in Judah. Canonically, in the book of Jeremiah, this prophetic

conflict appears several times. Jer. 27-29 is at its heart a commentary on that conflict. Jeremiah's

rivals, Hananiah chief among them, are encouraging the exiles with a promising message of a

quick return. As discussed above, Jeremiah assures them that a return from exile will come, but it

will not be soon.

Returning to Jer. 29:11, the words are fairly simple. A literal translation is, "For I

certainly know the plans that I am planning for you, says the LORD—plans for well-being, not

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[1] In fairness, many modern popular readers have pointed out this fact. See for example this blog site: Ryan Golias, "What Jeremiah 29:11 Is Not About," http://www.renewedimagination.com/2010/01/what-jeremiah-2911-is-not-about.html, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

evil—to give to you a future and a hope (or, a hopeful future)." A brief review of the components

of the verse is in order. First, יָדַע with the emphatic first-person pronoun puts the focus of the

verse squarely upon the subject of the sentence. God is the one who knows. Because God knows

his plans—for שָׁלוֹם and not for רָעָה—the exiles "can rest back in the divine knowledge and

intention,"[2] to borrow Fretheim's phrase. Because of God's plans, they no longer need to worry

about the disaster of exile.

The word translated "plan," מַחְשָׁבוֹת, is an important one for Jeremiah. This noun is used

56 times in the Hebrew Bible, and 12 of these occurrences are in the Book of Jeremiah. In Jer.

29:11, the prophet uses the noun, מַחְשָׁבוֹת, twice, along with the verb, חָשַׁב. The use of repetitive

cognates is common in the Book of Jeremiah.[3] Jeremiah speaks often of God's plans—both for

רָעָה and שָׁלוֹם. In Jer. 29:11, the prophet assures the exiles that God's plans are still active and

trustworthy. In the surrounding verses, he makes plain that their plans are not.

These plans are "for you," an important prepositional phrase for the interpretation of the

verse. Since English does not have a second person plural form, the pervasive cultural tendency

toward the individualization of all things causes most readers today to simply assume that this

text is about "me," or "me and Jesus," as Brueggemann put it.[4] Since the second person here is

plural, thus spoken to God's people as community rather than strictly as individuals, academics

could help the church and individual readers of scripture to avoid this tendency to make this

verse a personal mantra for success and prosperity based on the phrase, "for you."

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[2] Terence Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 404-405.

[3] Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 354; see also 139.

[4] Walter Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), 18.

At the center of the verse is the statement, "plans for well-being, not evil"—plans for

שָׁלוֹם not רָעָה. To use Brueggemann's word, this statement is programmatic for the coming

restoration.[5] The רָעָה of exile will be replaced by שָׁלוֹם. As Miller surmises, this section of the

Book of Jeremiah is "about שָׁלוֹם, 'peace,' and how the Judean community can find it."[6] שָׁלוֹם

cannot be found in bypassing judgment for the evils that they committed, as the false prophets

professed. This word pair, therefore, should be seen as programmatic for the theology of the

Book of Jeremiah. One can find an on-going tension between these two words.[7] If, indeed, שָׁלוֹם

and רָעָה are programmatic for Jeremiah, a brief investigation of the terms is in order.

I have argued that רָעָה is **the** key word for Jeremiah. רָעָה is used in the Book of Jeremiah

to refer to the sins of the people of Judah (and their leaders), the attacks of the leaders against

Jeremiah, the coming judgment and destruction against Judah, and the judgment that will

eventually come against Babylon. רָעָה is Jeremiah's word to describe his chaotic time in history.

Interestingly, major commentators and monograph authors—including O'Connor's

brilliant study of Jeremiah from the perspective of disaster studies, and even the articles in the

major theological dictionaries, seemed to see no particular significance in the use of רָעָה in

Jeremiah beyond noting the number of uses. Klaus Koch is one of the few who discussed at any

length the significance of רָעָה in the Book of Jeremiah. He argues that in the prophets, "key

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[5] Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 118.
[6] Patrick D. Miller, "Jeremiah," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI, 553-926 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 793.

[7] As well between רָעָה and טוֹב.

words generally form the pivot in the logical progression from the 'now' to the 'impending.'"[8]

For the Book of Jeremiah, רָעָה is the pivot word. Rendtorff also mentions the importance of רָעָה

in Jeremiah, when he concludes his discussion of the Book of Jeremiah with this statement. "The

themes of [Jeremiah's] proclamation are determined by the situation into which he has been sent.

There are primarily two points of emphasis that constitute what is specific to this proclamation in

their mutual connection. They are already clearly formulated in the call vision: Israel has

committed the 'wickedness' (ra'ah) of forsaking God and serving other Gods…; God will

therefore bring disaster (ra'ah) upon Israel."[9] Rendtorff recognized that רָעָה served the historical

realities of Jeremiah and satisfied the needs of the dual emphases of Jeremiah. Without using the

term "paradigm," Rendtorff acknowledged the paradigmatic nature of רָעָה. I argued in a previous

study that רָעָה functions as a paradigm for the message of the Book of Jeremiah, but can only

summarize my conclusions here.

The extent of Jeremiah's usage of רָעָה is almost overwhelming. The noun רָעָה is found

314 times[10] in BHS, and 89 of those are in Jeremiah (28.34% of uses). The verb רָעַע is used 102

times in BHS and 13 in Jeremiah. The noun רֹעַ is used only 19 times in BHS, but 11 of those are

in Jeremiah. The adjective רַע is used only 33 times in Jeremiah, with 347 uses in BHS. The

adjective is most widely used in the Book of Proverbs and the verb in Psalms. However, in both

cases Jeremiah has the second most uses. In total, 18.7% (146 of 782) of the uses of these

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[8] Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, Vol. II, *The Babylonian and Persian Periods*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 20.
[9] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David Orten (Leiden: Deo, 2005), 230.
[10] Logos Bible Software, Version 4.

cognate words is found in Jeremiah. If the adjective is removed from consideration, 26% (113 of

435) of the uses is in Jeremiah. Another common word for "evil" or "bad," רֶשַׁע (and related

words) is found 342 in BHS, but only six of those are in Jeremiah. The lack of the use of רֶשַׁע

underscores the importance of רָעָה in the book. This study will now move to an investigation of a

few selected texts to underscore the significance of and establish patterns of meaning for רָעָה in

the Book of Jeremiah.

The first occurrence of רָעָה in Jeremiah is in Jer. 1:14. In this second sign of confirmation

to Jeremiah's call, the explanation of the boiling pot summarizes the message that Jeremiah will

deliver, combining "elements of divine intervention, the results of that intervention, and the dire

situation that warranted it."[11]Allen points out that רָעָה marks the boundaries of the text, used at

"bad fate" or "disaster" in verse 14 and as "bad behavior" or "wickedness" in verse 16.[12]

Brueggemann stated, "'Evil' will be punished with 'evil,'"[13] or as Fretheim concluded, "רָעָה

issues in רָעָה."[14] Fretheim's statement recognizes the causative nature of רָעָה. Koch argues that

רָעָה is not an "abstract power." Rather, it creates an aura around the agent of רָעָה, by which that

agent brings about his own destiny.[15] Interestingly, the ESV includes a footnote on "disaster" in

verse 14, stating "The Hebrew word can mean *evil*, *harm*, or *disaster*, depending on the context;

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[11] Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 30.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 29.
[14] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 34.
[15] Koch, *The Prophets*. 20.

so throughout Jeremiah,"[16] suggesting that the translators recognized something of the paradigmatic use of the word. With this text, the stage is set for רָעָה to be the paradigmatic word to frame and provide a foundation for Jeremiah's message, leading into Jer. 2-3. In some organic way, chapters 2-3 are an exposition of רָעָה from 1:14-16.

רָעָה is found six times in Jer. 2, with רַע added in 2:19. The chapter begins with a description of Israel's "honeymoon" with God, so to speak, in Jer. 2:2-3. Israel was God's "first-fruits," and anyone eating of that fruit brought רָעָה ("disaster") upon itself. However, after a lengthy description of Israel's apostate ways, verse 19 is striking. Israel's רָעָה will "discipline" or "punish" them and their "apostasies" will "reprove" or "convict" them. Holladay points out that neither of the verbs used here is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible with a subject other than God.[17] Here, their רָעָה will punish them, not specifically God. Thus, the רָעָה itself is the punisher. And, as if to reaffirm this claim, the verse continues by commanding that Israel "see" and "know" that (or "how") the results of abandoning God are רַע ("evil") and מָר ("bitter"). Between these verses are two significant texts.

First, in 2:13, the heavens are called to witness the two רָעוֹת that God's people have committed. The first of these רָעוֹת is abandoning God, the fountain of living water, using the same verb (עָזַב) as 2:19. The second of the רָעוֹת is digging cisterns that cannot hold water—i.e., serving other gods. The message of Jer. 2:1-19 has רָעָה as inclusio and center. In the second text,

[16] *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001). Logos software version.

[17] William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 96.

Jer. 2:8 displays a tendency of Jeremiah—combining similar words with רָעָה. In this verse, the

priests, shepherds, and prophets are held accountable for their role in the judgment upon Israel

and Judah. The word for "shepherd" is רֹעֶה, the participle of the verb root רָעָה, which of course

sounds exactly like רָעָה, "evil" and "disaster." Jeremiah's use of רָעָה and similar words

continues in the Book of Jeremiah, but details are beyond the constraints of this presentation,

with one exception.

Jer. 31:28 offers perhaps the most paradigmatic nature of רָעָה in the Book of Jeremiah.

The Hebrew text[18] of Jer. 31:28 contains all six of the verbs used in the call narrative of

Jeremiah—pluck up, pull up, tear down, destroy, build, and plant—along with the verb "watch"

(שָׁקַד), which was used in the almond branch sign in Jer. 1. The LORD declares that the same

attention that was given to judgment and destruction will now be given to rebuilding. However,

this verse is the only instance where the verb רָעַע is added to the list of verbs from the call

narrative.[19] As Fretheim suggests, "all of these verbs are summarized in the phrase 'bring

disaster' (רָעָה)."[20] God has watched over Israel and Judah to see that their evil actions were

properly judged, but now deliverance is at hand.

Brueggemann asserts that the six verbs are used in this verse to emphasize the two

distinct stages of judgment and hope. "The poet proposes a two-stage philosophy of history

which is crucial for the full acknowledgement of exile and the full practice of hope in the face of

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[18] LXX omits three of the four negative verses.

[19] In Jer. 18 and 24, the noun, רָעָה, is used in contexts that also use two or more of the call verbs, but not in the same formulaic method as Jer. 31:28. The noun also occurs with the verbs in 42:10 and 45:4-5, in narrative texts—one addressed to the leaders in Judah after the Babylonian defeat and one to Baruch.

[20] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 439.

exile. The negative has happened; the positive is only promised…. The oracle places us between a death already wrought and a resurrection only anticipated."[21] What Brueggemann does not mention is the verb that stands between the two distinct stages--רָעַע. I would argue that the paradigmatic word stands between the words—and worlds—of disaster and hope. For Jeremiah, רָעָה is the paradigm for understanding his world—the רָעָה of Israel, the רָעָה of Judah, the רָעָה of the leaders, even the רָעָה of God, which alone allows the possibility of a hopeful future. As we saw earlier, Jer. 29:11 serves as a bridge to this hopeful future, i.e. God's "plans for שָׁלוֹם and not רָעָה."

As we all know, שָׁלוֹם is a difficult word to translate, because of its broad range of usage and meaning. Von Rad writes, "Our word peace can only be regarded as an inadequate equivalent. For שָׁלוֹם designates the unimpairedness, the wholeness, of a relationship of communion, and so a state of harmonious equilibrium, the balancing of all claims and needs between two parties."[22] Von Rad seems to overstate the need for "two parties" in the process of שָׁלוֹם. The word is broader than that. Brueggemann relates שָׁלוֹם to chaos when he defines שָׁלוֹם as, "harmonious, properly-functioning, life-giving order to society…. The opposite of *shalom* is not war but chaos."[23] God's plan is not for the chaos of war, destruction, and exile, but for fruitful life in the land, living in faithful covenant relationship.

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[21] Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*. 290.

[22] Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, trans. by D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper, 1962), 130.

[23] Walter Brueggemann, "A World Available for Peace," in *Like Fire in My Bones*, ed. P. D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 169-170.

Although not as common in the Book of Jeremiah as רָעָה, שָׁלוֹם is still an important word in the Book of Jeremiah—occurring 30 times. One important text for understanding שָׁלוֹם in Jeremiah is in chapter 4, where the leaders of Jerusalem have proclaimed שָׁלוֹם, while their actions have been רָעָה.[24] This condemnation of the leaders' proclamation of שָׁלוֹם continues in chapter 6.

In the midst of the text concerning the prophets of Judah, in Jer. 6:14, Jeremiah states concerning the prophets and priests of Judah, "They have healed the brokenness of my people (as if it was something) insignificant, saying 'שָׁלוֹם שָׁלוֹם,' but there is no שָׁלוֹם." Clearly, for Jeremiah, a correct understanding of God's שָׁלוֹם was important. The word cannot be a mantra, or a word uttered in denial, false hope, or deception. Uttering שָׁלוֹם, no matter how loudly or repetitively, will not bring about שָׁלוֹם. Furthermore, last century's promises of שָׁלוֹם, as in the days of Hezekiah and Isaiah, cannot stand in the present century. In a recent book, Brueggemann accuses Hananiah of being a "strict constructionist," who refuses to do the "hard work of contextual interpretation" of a previous promise. The urban elite of 7th century Jerusalem have made the God of Sinai into the "patron of Zion," as if שָׁלוֹם "could be established by fiat."[25] God's שָׁלוֹם is available according to his plans, not the plans of humanity, even his chosen people. This is the message of Jer. 6 and Jer. 29.

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[24] Brueggemann, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 55.
[25] Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 50-54.

Brueggemann points out the play on the word שָׁלוֹם in Jer. 29. In verses 5-9, the exiles are called upon to seek the שָׁלוֹם of Babylon, for in Babylon's שָׁלוֹם, they will find their own שָׁלוֹם. The שָׁלוֹם of Babylon is the task of the exiles, but their own future שָׁלוֹם will be the gift of God.[26] In fact, the future שָׁלוֹם of the exiles is predicated on seeking Babylon's שָׁלוֹם in the present. Even in exile under the strong hand of empire, שָׁלוֹם is possible. However, in Jer. 29:11, the focus shifts back to the future שָׁלוֹם of the exiles. While in Jer. 29:7 the exiles are told to seek Babylon's שָׁלוֹם, as Lundbom cleverly states, in 29:11 "Jeremiah is speaking of the *shalom* of the city of *shalom*,"[27] which leads to final phrase of the verse.

The last phrase of Jer. 29:11 promises a "hopeful future" to the exiles. A literal translation is "a future and a hope." Most translators seem to prefer following BDB in translating as a hendiadys, "hoped-for future,"[28] or the like. Given the historical context, the conclusion of the verse creates a palpable ironic tension. The exiles will have a hopeful future. However, since the fulfillment of hope must wait 70 years, it would never be a source of false hope. Jeremiah proclaims a hope that cannot avoid the disaster that was predicated by their own disastrous behavior.

The return described in Jer. 29:12-13, and the fulfillment of hope, will be predicated by a return to God—a return to seeking after God and a renewed desire to know and follow God in obedience. As Thompson stated, "Yahweh could not dispense the blessings of the covenant to

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[26] Brueggemann, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 259.
[27] Lundbom, 353.
[28] Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, electronic ed. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), s.v. תִּקְוָה.

rebellious people."[29] Brueggemann sees this as Yahweh's claim to exclusivity. To find their

future שָׁלוֹם, "Judah must … decide to seek its future exclusively from Yahweh."[30] Their future

hope lies only in their willingness to return to covenant fidelity with their God.

A final text that includes both רָעָה and שָׁלוֹם is Jer. 33:1-9. As the destruction of

Jerusalem draws near, the prophet delivers an oracle of both judgment and hope. The judgment

is, of course, a result of Judah's רָעָה. The future hope, which is defined by שָׁלוֹם and טוֹב, is called

"great" and "hidden," or "inaccessible." However, while hidden and inaccessible to human

subjects, as Brueggemann states, "God will do for Israel and Judah what they cannot do for

themselves."[31] Thus, the hope of שָׁלוֹם is only available because a beneficent God is the God of

grace, even for a rebellious people.

However, for one concluding thought, let us also consider that God's שָׁלוֹם is a gift to an

unsuspecting and unknowing world. God desires שָׁלוֹם for all people, but God's own people are

responsible for that שָׁלוֹם. Only by repentance and submission to their God can God's own people

live in שָׁלוֹם. And part of that submission and obedience to God is the practice of שָׁלוֹם on behalf

of the unknowing and unsuspecting world. To "seek the shalom of Babylon" is to seek the שָׁלוֹם

of the enemy. As Brueggemann states, "The well-being of the chosen ones is tied to the well-

being of that hated metropolis …. God's exiles … must find a way to include the very ones we

prefer to exclude."[32] In 1976, Brueggemann published a book entitled *Living Toward a Vision*,

which has been republished by Chalice Press with the mundane title of *Peace*. In that book, the

author lays out a vision for shalom—a vision that he believes is God's vision, as described most

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[29]Thompson, 547.

[30] Brueggemann, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 259.

[31] Ibid., 314.

[32] Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 22.

eloquently in the Book of Jeremiah. Fretheim states concerning this vision of Jer. 29, "This is the image of a Creator God who is active in the world even in the lives of people who do not acknowledge him as Lord."[33]

Finally, the Good News of Jesus Christ is a Gospel of shalom—God's shalom. As the exiled people of God were to pray for and seek the shalom of their world and even their captors, as "aliens and strangers" in our world, followers of Jesus today must seek and pray for that same hope of shalom in our world. We cannot expect to find our own hope unless we are actively laboring for the hope and shalom of the world. So, let's follow Jeremiah and Jesus and build a world of shalom—even if it is a shalom built on the ashes of disaster.

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[33] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 410.

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