

## Jeremiah 29:11 as a 21st Century Church Paradigm

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In the 21<sup>st</sup> century evangelical church, Jer. 29:11 has become a ubiquitous presence. This ubiquity is evident with just a few Internet searches. A Google search for Jer 29 11 results in approximately 122,000,000 hits. This number may sound exorbitant, but John 3 16 brings 169,000,000, Josh 24 15 130,000,000, and Prov 3 5 213,000,000 hits. The difference is that the latter three texts have been popular texts in the Christian church for generations. John 3:16 was the first verse learned by many Sunday School generations and Joshua 24:15 hangs on generations of kitchens. However, Jer. 29:11 is a relative newcomer to this list of popular Bible verses.

The present paper is an examination of the use of Jer. 29:11 in the church and Christian culture, with a view to understanding the bases for its popularity. The initial goal of this project was a broad look at the historical use of the verse. However, because of the ubiquity of the verse in popular Christian culture, this plan quickly proved to be too large a project. As an example of the ubiquity of the verse, in January 2011, while researching for this paper, a community magazine, *Living*, was delivered in my community with a devotional based on Jer. 29:11. The article is entitled, "No Coincidence," and insists that because of God's plan, there are no coincidences in life.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a more modest study was undertaken. This paper will be a perusal of Jer. 29:11 in a variety of websites and blogs, beginning with churches and ministries, and then in the marketplace, with a view to understanding how this verse has become something of a paradigm for much of contemporary evangelical Christianity.

### In the Church

For the purposes of this paper, "church" will be defined fairly broadly to include the local church and para-church ministries, including online ministries that could easily be called blogs or websites more than ministries. However, for this project, such a clear definition is unnecessary. One such ministry simply calls itself Jeremiah 29:11 Ministries. Jeremiah 29:11 Ministries is a family ministry that does music, camps, and youth and children's ministry in churches. They are a multi-generational itinerant ministry. Interestingly, neither their Facebook page nor website contains any reference to Jer. 29:11, except as a logo, or offers any explanation for the choice of the name for the ministry. This would suggest that they see the verse as a paradigmatic scripture text for their gospel ministry.<sup>2</sup>

From Oct. 31-Nov. 4, 2011, the Shiloh Temple Church of God in Christ in St. Louis had a series of blog entries based on Jer. 29:11, although nothing else on the church's website mentions Jer. 29:11. The first blog focuses on "For I know," and compares God to a film director, having "the script for your life. He is the Casting Director. He determines who makes a cameo appearance and who will be the leading men and leading ladies. He determines supporting actors and actresses."<sup>3</sup> The second blog focuses on God's plan,

<sup>1</sup> Michele Wallace, "No Coincidence," *Living*, Cy-Fair edition (Jan. 2012): 22-23.

<sup>2</sup> See Jeremiah 29:11 Ministries, <http://www.facebook.com/jeremiah2911ministries?sk=wall> and Jeremiah 29:11 Ministries, [http://www.jeremiah2911ministries.com/jeremiah\\_2911.htm](http://www.jeremiah2911ministries.com/jeremiah_2911.htm), both accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Shiloh Temple COGIC, "The Director," <http://shilohtemplecogic.wordpress.com/2011/10/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

which is absolute, even if it turns out to be a “deferred hope.”<sup>4</sup> In the next blog entry, the focus turns to “you” in Jer. 29:11. The point of this entry is summed up in these words, “God has a plan for you. It is specifically for you. Not your friend. Not your mother or father. Not your sister or your brother. But it is specifically created for you.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, this interpretation fails to take into consideration that the Hebrew second person forms in the verse are all plural. In the fourth blog entry, the same half verse is used to explain suffering as the discipline of God. God allows hurt in order to bring about his plan—a plan that is always good.<sup>6</sup> In the final blog, after quoting the last line of the verse, one blog entry begins with a definition of hope. “Hope is defined as ‘to cherish a desire with anticipation.’ What is that you desire? What is your ‘hope?’”<sup>7</sup> As is typical of blogs, no source is cited for the definition of hope. After encouraging people to trust God for the future even during suffering, the blog includes an equally obscure definition of favor, “It means that you obtain victory after you have suffered for a season.”<sup>8</sup> The emphasis of the blog is that God wants to give his followers their hopes and dreams, if they have the patience to wait for it. Clearly, in these blog entries, the church is encouraging people to be faithful to God and trust that he has plans for each individual, even if he or she cannot see the plan now. This is clearly a paradigmatic use of Jer. 29:11 as a basis for the Christian life.

While not a church or even technically a para-church ministry, *Charisma* magazine has served the charismatic and Pentecostal church since 1975,<sup>9</sup> so will be treated here as a ministry. A search of the magazine’s website produced multiple pages from 2011 utilizing Jer. 29:11 in some fashion. Most of them are in the form of devotionals. A few of those will be examined here. R. T. Kendall’s devotional on Oct. 9 encourages readers that God planned their lives and chose them from birth. Likewise, God has planned for them to be born again.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Jer. 29:11 is the basis for a teaching taken from Jer. 1 (known from birth) to God’s plan for new birth, presumably from the New Testament.

Three recent devotionals by Rod Parsley in *Charisma* contain portions of Jer. 29:11. All of them contain several scripture quotations about God’s plans and challenge the follower of Jesus to push into God’s plans (Whatever “push into God’s plans” might mean). One of the devotionals focuses upon God’s provision in his plan, which will deliver his followers from poverty.<sup>11</sup> The second calls on people to persevere and press through difficult times. Success in impossible situations shows God at work. Like the Hebrews in the wilderness, God’s followers today cannot retreat to Egypt. They must be “moving forward in

<sup>4</sup> Shiloh Temple COGIC, “The Grand Plan,” <http://shilohtemplecogic.wordpress.com/2011/11/01/the-grand-plan/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Shiloh Temple COGIC, “Just for You,” <http://shilohtemplecogic.wordpress.com/2011/11/02/just-for-you/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Shiloh Temple COGIC, “No Harm Done,” <http://shilohtemplecogic.wordpress.com/2011/11/03/no-harm-done/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Shiloh Temple COGIC, “The End is Better than the Beginning,” <http://shilohtemplecogic.wordpress.com/2011/11/04/the-end-is-better-than-the-beginning/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Charisma Media, “About Us,” <http://www.charismamedia.com/index.php/about-us>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>10</sup> R. T. Kendall, “God Has a Plan for You,” *Charisma* (09 October 2011), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/blogs/rt-kendall/23375-god-has-a-purpose-for-you>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Rod Parsley, “God Has a Plan,” *Charisma* (08 August 2011), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/newsletters/daily-devotionals/daily-breakthroughs/22755-our-father-has-a-plan>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

[God's] plans and purposes."<sup>12</sup> The third, from Feb. 15, 2012, emphasizes the victory that readers have in Christ—a victory that is part of God's plans, as described in Jer. 29:11.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, for Parsley, Jer. 29:11 is a foundational theological verse.

According to an Aug. 1, 2011, *Charisma* article, Sheila Schuller Coleman, pastor of Crystal Cathedral, quoted Jer. 29:11 in reference to the bankruptcy and possible sale of the famous church property. On July 31, 2011, the board of Crystal Cathedral voted not to choose a buyer for their property, deciding instead to trust God to meet the needs of the church. Since the church was in bankruptcy hearings with reported debts of \$50 million, these needs were great. Coleman is quoted as stating, "We're asking our people to 'Walk by faith, not by sight and to believe God's promise and plan as found in Jeremiah 29:11-14.'"<sup>14</sup> While the economic downturn was blamed for the extreme debt leading to the bankruptcy, and certainly played a role, one wonders about the Schuller dynasty and the mindset that would allow a church to get \$50 million in debt. Where was God's plan earlier? Here, Jer. 29:11 seems to be a smoke-screen to avoid fiscal responsibility.

A regular column in *Charisma*, "SpiritLed Woman," contains several references to Jer. 29:11, three of which will be mentioned here. In Dec. 2010, Amie Streater wrote an article concerning avoiding debt and Christmas giving. She quotes Jer. 29:11 to remind readers of "God's amazing plan" for each person's life. She tells her readers that the reason people fail to find God's prosperous future is "counterfeit convictions." She is never completely clear about what these counterfeit convictions are, although two appear to be the pull to buy Christmas gifts and the belief that God is mad at us for sin. She also suggests that readers purchase her book, *Your Money God's Way*.<sup>15</sup> In another article, Iverna Tompkins argues that people fail to live in God's presence because they fail to have faith in the great promises of God, such as Jer. 29:11.<sup>16</sup> Tompkins equates the promise of God in Jer. 29:11 to God's presence with his people. In the third example, Margie Hoomes compares the Christian life to a bonsai tree. Like the bonsai tree, which is a tree designed to stay much smaller than the normal trees of its species, Christians are often bound into a pot

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., "Straight Ahead," *Charisma* (09 February 2012), online edition, <http://www.charisma mag.com/index.php/newsletters/daily-devotionals/daily-breakthroughs/18411-straight-ahead>, accessed 20 Feb 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., "Our Victory Flag," *Charisma* (15 February 2012), online edition, <http://www.charisma mag.com/index.php/newsletters/daily-devotionals/daily-breakthroughs/18488-our-victory-flag>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>14</sup> John Charles, "Crystal Cathedral Not for Sale," *Charisma* (01 August 2011), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/news-old/31680-crystal-cathedral-not-for-sale>, accessed 20 Feb 2012. The property did eventually sale to the Catholic Diocese of Orange, with the sale completed on Feb. 3, 2012. One article stated that the board decided to support this sale because at least the property would remain a church. See Nicole Santa Cruz, Ruben Vives and Mitchell Landsberg, "Crystal Cathedral Congregants 'Devastated' by Church Sale," *Los Angeles Times* (18 Nov 2011), online edition, <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/lanow/2011/11/crystal-cathedral-congregants-devastated-by-church-sale.html>, accessed 20 Feb 2012, and Nicole Santa Cruz, "Crystal Cathedral announces changes to TV-ministries board," *Los Angeles Times* (16 Feb 2012), online edition, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/feb/16/local/la-me-crystal-cathedral-20120216>, accessed 20 Feb 2012. Perhaps God's plan was enacted, after all.

<sup>15</sup> Amie Streater, "No More Plastic Holidays!," *Charisma* (15 December 2010), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/newsletters/spiritled-woman-e-magazine/29776-no-more-plastic-holidays>, accessed 20 Feb 2012.

<sup>16</sup> Iverna Tompkins, "God Are You Really There?," *Charisma* (01 March 2012), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/newsletters/spiritled-woman-e-magazine/30348-god-are-you-really-there>, accessed 20 Feb 2012.

that is much smaller than originally intended. The lies of “the enemy of your soul” keep a person from reaching full potential, like that described in Jer. 29:11.<sup>17</sup>

One final *Charisma* article concerns the movie “Soul Surfer,” which is the story of Bethany Hamilton, a star professional surfer whose arm was severed in a shark attack. The story is essentially a report of an interview with Sarah Hill, Bethany’s youth leader, who was a fairly prominent role in the movie. Ms. Hill relates that when she was rushing to the hospital after the accident, she thought of Jer. 29:11, which she shared with Bethany after the surgery. Ms. Hill states that Bethany clung to the promises of the verse, helping her to return to the top of the professional surfing world.<sup>18</sup> In the actual movie, the role of Jer. 29:11 was not as prominent. In fact, Bethany struggled with the meaning of this verse in her life, eventually coming to a more nuanced view of the verse, allowing for both faith in God and suffering. This variety of approaches to interpreting Jer. 29:11 found in these church and ministry sites will continue into the blogosphere and personal websites, to which the paper now turns.

### Blogs and Websites

The use of Jer. 29:11 on the Internet is almost beyond comprehension. Since Facebook has become ubiquitous, the review will begin there. There is a Facebook page simply entitled, “Jeremiah 29:11—For I Have Plans for You.”<sup>19</sup> The picture on the page has an advertisement for BibleStudyTools.com, suggesting that it is a marketing ploy. The info page of the Facebook profile includes the NIV of Jer. 29:11 and a link to <http://www.biblestudytools.com/jeremiah/29-11.html>, which is a page with links to public-domain study resources for Jer. 29. On the Facebook page are a series of posts of pictures and sayings designed to encourage readers to know that God has a plan, even if it not what one expected, since his plan is always correct. For example, one post is a quote attributed to John Piper, “God has no afterthoughts. Every plan is Plan A. If He changes the trajectory, that was His plan.” There is also a link to an animated video of the verse.<sup>20</sup> Several quotes attributed to Tony Evans encourage readers to be faithful and persistent even in difficult times.

Moving to the more prevalent reference to Jer. 29:11 in blogs, Jules Smith writes:

God tells us in Jeremiah 29:11 “For I know the plans I have for you...they are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” This verse was instrumental in my growth as a person and a “listener” this past year. It is so reassuring to me that God knows the plans he has for me. I find such comfort in that, but what I had to learn was that if I don’t listen to God as he guides me, I will not hear those plans, I will not follow his will and I will not live out the future he has for me.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Margie Hoomes, “Come Out of Confinement,” *Charisma*, online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/charisma-channels/women/31278-come-out-of-confinement>, accessed 20 Feb 2012. The article is undated, but the comments begin in June 2011.

<sup>18</sup> Janet Chismar, “Walking Alongside a Soul Surfer,” *Charisma* (13 April 2011), online edition, <http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/news-old/30689-walking-alongside-a-soul-surfer>, accessed 20 Feb 2012.

<sup>19</sup> “Jeremiah 29:11 For I Have Plans for You,” <http://www.facebook.com/ForIHavePlansForYou?sk=info>, accessed 20 Feb 2012.

<sup>20</sup> “God’s Plans,” [http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=DGYPKGNGX&utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=fbpage&utm\\_campaign=dailyupdate](http://www.godtube.com/watch/?v=DGYPKGNGX&utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=fbpage&utm_campaign=dailyupdate). Accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Jules Smith, “Listen,” <http://liftupavoice.wordpress.com/2011/12/18/listen-2/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

Her use of a translation other than NIV and focus on paying attention to God of leading into his plans is refreshing.

On his blog, Ozzie Cole argued that Christians should never entertain the thought of a bad day. There are no “rainy days and Mondays” for believers. His basis for this statement is Rom 8:28 and Jer. 29:11. He states, “God has a purpose for everyone. His plans are for us to prosper, and not be harmed, to have hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11). So why are you allowing the devil to feed you his garbage, to suppress your joy?”<sup>22</sup> One wonders if the exiles in Babylon in the sixth century BCE would have agreed with this blogger.

On Kisha’s Daily Devotional blog (no other name given), she makes this statement:

If you are looking for a husband or a wife, then stop! Don’t you realize that if God has already predestined your life then he already has your mate chosen? Jeremiah 29:11 says “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.” But he can’t send them if your way is blocked with run down cars that are on flat. In order to receive a blessing, you have to remove those things that are keeping you from getting them.<sup>23</sup>

Kisha has taken a new direction, applying Jer. 29:11 to dating and marriage. God’s plan in Jer. 29:11 includes his choice of a mate!

In a blog entitled, “Kingdom Princess,” Afiya Duncanson connects Jer. 29:11 with a call to use the gifts given by God to help others. The point seems to be that God’s desire that his followers have no “ordinary life,” as promised in Jer. 29:11, depends upon the use of the gifts that God has given. She writes, “God wants to prosper you in every area of your life. God not only wants to bless you but He wants you to be a blessing.”<sup>24</sup> The idea of being a blessing rather than simply receiving a blessing is at least refreshing.

In her blog entitled, “godsplanforme—Jeremiah 29:11,” Kathy Freeland begins with the story of her father’s sudden death 10 days before her high school graduation. She argues that the verse reminds God’s people that he has a plan for them, even when the plans are unexpected and the journey unknown. She states, “He has plans for us to prosper and to have hope. He has an awesome future, one beyond our belief, ready for us. Plans of good, not of harm. I don’t want to miss one second of that great experience coming. And I don’t want you to miss a second of the experiences He has coming your way.”<sup>25</sup> The reader is never too sure where her father’s death fits into the discussion—whether it was part of God’s plan or not.

Richard Rice, a pastor and author, in his blog entitled, “Where Living Begins,” uses Jer. 29:11 to encourage followers of God to stop accepting mediocrity. He concludes his blog:

God desires nothing but good in my life – not just good, but the very good; it’s me who rejects His goodness for the ho-hum. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the Lord, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you

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<sup>22</sup> Oswald Cole, “Bad Days,” <http://hopeenlightenment.com/2011/09/23/bad-days/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Lakisha, “Is That a Revolving Door,” <http://kishasdailydevotional.wordpress.com/2011/12/15/daily-devotional-is-that-a-revolving-door/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Afiya Duncanson, “Be a Vessel for God,” <http://akingdomprincess.wordpress.com/2011/12/07/be-a-vessel-for-god/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Kathi Freeland, “Blink,” <http://godsplansforme.wordpress.com/2011/11/26/jeremiah-2911/#comments>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

a future and a hope (Jeremiah 29:11, NKJV). If God's intentions and plans for us are for a peaceful, good, hope-filled future, let's not settle for anything but God's ultimate best in our lives.<sup>26</sup>

Rice's use of the NKJV removes the theme of prosperity, moving instead to "peace" and "good." Interestingly, he moves from "peace" to "not just good, but the very good." One might wonder if Gen. 1 is creeping in to his thinking here. However, his emphasis on God's plans of hope and goodness is a refreshing change.

In her blog, Ali Gatewood, a senior at Southern Methodist University, begins her discussion of Jer. 29:11 with a quotation from Sophie Scholl, a young member of the German resistance during WWII who was eventually arrested and executed by the Nazis. The quote is a call to live life with purpose lest one miss the "one great joy" and gain only "piffling treasures." She is emphasizing the need to trust God, since he has made his plans. However, the connection of these words from Ms. Scholl with Jer. 29:11 is fairly difficult to find.

Anthonette Anderson, on her blog entitled, "Tonirand's Blog," begins by discussing a difficult time in life that she has endured. She encourages others in similar circumstances to trust in God for the future, as she is endeavoring to do. In the prayer at the end of her blog, she states:

I am thankful that You have not left me alone. I don't like this place of uncertainty, but I know that Your plans for me "are good ... and prosperous," so I will trust You to carry me over the issues I cannot walk through and I trust You to keep me covered when the winds of adversity blow. I am safe and protected in You, even when I don't feel like it.<sup>27</sup>

This is an obviously reference to Jer. 29:11 and not a quotation, with "good ... and prosperous" in quotations, but without a reference given (however, Jeremiah 29:11 was included in the tags for the blog).

Two Latter Day Saints missionaries include this quote in their blog:

Heavenly Father has a very specific plan for each of us. He knows where He wants us to go, what he wants us to learn, how He wants us to feel, and the purpose He wants us to fulfill. He's watching me, and you, very closely to see how we're doing and what we might need to help us along the way.<sup>28</sup>

This post focuses on God's leading in life. After quoting Jer. 29:11, they wrote, "He's begging us to let Him help us."<sup>29</sup>

In her blog, Heather King introduces a quotation of the NIV of Jer. 29:11 with this statement:

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<sup>26</sup> Richard Rice, "Settling for Second Best," <http://calvaryopenbible.wordpress.com/2011/11/22/settling-for-second-best/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Anthonette Anderson, "Who's Watching You," <http://tonirand.wordpress.com/2011/11/21/whos-watching-you/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Jayci Barrus and Jenelle Willis, "It's Your Move," <http://pausetouplift.wordpress.com/2011/11/12/its-your-move/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

When we feel the hopelessness of a bleak unpromising future, we can remember that God doesn't intend to abandon any of us along the journey. He doesn't grow bored with our progress and forget to complete our story.<sup>30</sup>

Using the stories of Hagar and Abraham, she then focuses upon God's leadership in the lives of his people. She concludes, "He'll be faithful to complete your story, carrying you forward on this journey even when you can't tell you're moving. That's because He has a plan to give you a hope and a future."<sup>31</sup> This is an interesting intertextual approach to the verse.

Andrew Summey's blog takes an interesting and unique (at least to this study) approach to Jer. 29:11. He argues that the text is about the return of the Jews to Israel—and that alone. Therefore, Christians who desire to share in the hopeful future of the verse will align with the future of Israel and the Jews in their homeland. After all, Israel's national anthem, "HaTikvah," means "the hope."<sup>32</sup> This is the only blog found in this search that referenced modern Israel or that used the Net Bible translation.

Mike Fisk's blog also used a different translation, the New Century Version, which reads, "'I say this because I know what I am planning for you,' says the Lord. 'I have good plans for you, not plans to hurt you. I will give you hope and a good future.'" Most of his fairly long post on the verse encourages readers that God has a plan for every individual, no matter where the person might find himself. However, at the end, he is the only blog in this research to emphasize the missional nature of Jer. 29:7, which calls on the exiles to make the best life possible in exile, seeking good for Babylon, which will result in good for them also.<sup>33</sup> The paucity of recognition of this emphasis in Jer. 29 is interesting, with all the publications on missional church in the past decade.

In an expected turn, some of the blogs and websites have little to do with the verse, but use it for a title or thematic verse. Debbie Huffaker entitled her blog Jeremiah 29:11 not because she utilizes the verse regularly, but because the focus of her life and ministry is hope.<sup>34</sup> Another Facebook page is entitled "Jeremiah 29:11 is My Favorite Bible Verse." It is listed as a community, but consists solely of quotes, none of which relate to Jer. 29:11.<sup>35</sup> Another Facebook page is titled, "We love you Britt-Britt - Keep looking up! Jeremiah 29:11." The page was created to encourage Brittany Hawley, who is a teenager with a serious nerve disorder. Since Jer. 29:11 is not mentioned in the description of the Facebook page, apparently the title is meant to suggest that Brittany should be encouraged because of God's plan for her life.<sup>36</sup> Another Facebook page entitled Jeremiah 29:11 includes nothing but quotes of the NIV of Jer. 29:11 and parts thereof.<sup>37</sup> These web pages certainly present Jer. 29:11 as a paradigmatic verse for the Christian life.

<sup>30</sup> Heather King, "Lessons from the Theatre, Part 1," <http://heathercking.wordpress.com/2011/11/14/lessons-from-the-theater/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Andrew Summey, "Do You Know the 'Good Plans' of Jeremiah 29:11?," <http://andrewsummey.com/2011/10/29/do-you-know-the-good-plans-in-jeremiah-2911/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Mike Fisk, "His Plans for You Are Good," <http://builtwithgrace.wordpress.com/2011/10/29/his-plans-for-you-are-good/>, accessed 19 Feb 2012.

<sup>34</sup> "Jeremiah Twenty Nine Eleven," <http://www.jeremiah-2911.com/> and "Jeremiah 29:11," <http://www.facebook.com/29.11.Jeremiah>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>35</sup> "Jeremiah 29:11 is My Favorite Bible Verse," <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Jeremiah-2911-is-my-favorite-bible-verse/106573402712741>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>36</sup> "We Love You Britt. Britt Keep Looking Up," <http://www.facebook.com/pages/We-love-you-Britt-Britt-Keep-looking-up-Jeremiah-2911/245007075522796?sk=info>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>37</sup> "Jeremiah 29:11," <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Jeremiah-2911/148096041890685?sk=wall>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

Many blogs and websites have arisen in recent years calling for a more balanced and contextual reading of Jer. 29:11. One of these is the unsigned website entitled Jeremiah 29:11, which contains the statement,

It is important, imperative actually, that we understand the context of passages from the Bible. In studying the context of Jeremiah 29:11, I feel I have a better understanding of the true meaning. Even if you omit the contextualized words "plans to prosper you and not to harm you", I believe this verse still has a very powerful message: God knows us personally, has a plan for us, and allows us to find hope in Him.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, after demanding a contextual reading of the verse, the writer ignores the grammar of the verse, making it a promise to every individual, when no singular second person form occurs in the Hebrew of the verse. The website is one page, with footnotes of blogs and websites that contain references to many other blogs and websites concerning Jer. 29:11.

On a blog entitled, "Christian Resources for Churches," the author uses Jer. 29:11 to encourage high school and college graduates in their future life. The unnamed author encourages the graduates to remember that God has plans and is present with them wherever they are. The author also warns against seeing the verse as a promise of prosperity. These young people are challenged to surrender to God totally to let God lead them into their futures prepared by God.<sup>39</sup>

In a similar mode, Joy Patton emphasizes the importance of Jer. 29:12-13 in understanding v. 11. Joy Patton is an author and women's ministry leader in her church. She explained that the times that she encountered God in her life were not when she was concerned with God's plan or purpose, but when she was seeking to know God. She concludes her blog, "The truth is he wants your heart because when he has your heart and you know his voice, then he can take your feet anywhere he needs them to go. God wants us to depend on him, not just for the big picture, but for every step, every breath, along the way."<sup>40</sup>

In his blog entitled, "The Renewed Imagination," Ryan Golias argues that Jer. 29:11 is not a promise for immediate blessing from God, blessing for those who seek to be prosperous, physical blessing for those alive, or mainly for physical or personal well-being. He concludes that, "It is better than a promise to restore fortunes and lands and people; God promise to restore us to himself. What better future and hope?"<sup>41</sup> In the verses immediately following Jer. 29:11, God states that when his people seek him they will be found.

On his Scripture Zealot blog, Jeff (the only name supplied) argues that the context should dissuade the modern reader from making Jer. 29:11 into an individual promise, suggesting that other texts may do this, but not Jer. 29:11. He also included a quoted critique of Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*,<sup>42</sup> which includes several statements

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<sup>38</sup> <http://www.jeremiah2911.com/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012. A link on the website takes the reader to the author, Eric Martin. See [www.ericmartin.com](http://www.ericmartin.com).

<sup>39</sup> Kerry Egan, "Jeremiah 29:11 – We Have Hope and a Future When We Live for Christ," <http://christianresourcesforchurches.wordpress.com/2011/12/09/jeremiah-2911-we-have-hope-and-a-future-when-we-live-for-christ/>, accessed 18 Feb. 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Joy Patton, "Purpose from a Personal Encounter – Purpose Part 3," <http://joypatton.wordpress.com/2011/11/22/purpose-from-a-personal-encounter/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>41</sup> 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.

<sup>42</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). One might wonder about the influence of *The Purpose-Driven Life* on the popularity of Jer. 29:11, but the



about the purposes of God. The reviewer suggests that if Jer. 29:11 is a promise to each of us, then possibly Jer. 44:27 should also be. “For I am watching over them for harm, not for good; the Jews in Egypt will perish by sword and famine until they are all destroyed” (NIV). The reviewer suggested that this verse would not sell as many plaques as Jer. 29:11.<sup>43</sup> This is certainly a true statement, and leads to the final section of this research, a look at Jer. 29:11 in the marketplace.

### **In the Marketplace**

The marketplace tends to be both a reflection and a catalyst of culture. Therefore, a look at Jer. 29:11 in the marketplace may prove instructive.<sup>44</sup> A multitude of products with this verse printed on them are available. A search of Amazon produced this list. In the area of artwork, one might purchase a blanket, a canvas print, posters, and wall hangings. Several books have been written based on Jer. 29:11, as well as bookmarks to keep the reader’s place in the book. One of these bookmarks is a promise to graduates. Churches can find Jer. 29:11 on Sunday bulletins. Friends and parents can purchase plaques and frames for their graduates. Perhaps an iPhone cover, a journal, or a key chain is more appropriate. For the coffee drinkers, mugs are available. For the office, one might need a paperweight. If jewelry is desired, the shopper will find several rings with Jer. 29:11 inscribed. If someone is looking for new music, several CDs are available with Jer. 29:11 in the title. This quick perusal is not meant to denigrate those who produce or sale these items. It does, however, point out the ubiquity of this Bible verse in today’s Christian culture. Before drawing conclusions about the significance of Jer. 29:11 in that culture, a brief study of the verse may prove helpful.

### **Jeremiah 29:11**

A literal translation of the verse is: “For I certainly know the plans that I am planning for you, says the LORD—plans for well-being, not evil—to give to you a hopeful future (lit., a future and a hope).” One will note that this differs significantly from the most popular version—the NIV translation: “‘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.’” For the sake of the present study, a few brief comments on the differences in these two translations will sufficiently present my understanding of the verse. First, “plans” is emphatic, with the Hebrew verb used once and the cognate noun used twice in the verse. Second, the verb “know” at the beginning of the verse includes an emphatic pronoun. These two points would suggest that the focus of the verse is related to God’s plans and the fact that there should be no doubt that God has plans. Third, the “you” in this verse is plural. The lack of a plural second person in English is a constant problem in exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. Fourth, since the verse ends with a declaration that the future is hopeful, the emphasis of the verse becomes God’s positive future plans for his people.

In light of our study of the use of Jer. 29:11 in the contemporary church, interpretive issues arise immediately. Probably most important for this study, the promise is not to an individual. The promise is to the people of Judah, or Israel, in exile in Babylon. Perusing the context reveals that the verse was spoken to a defeated, defeatist, and hopeless people.

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research to this point has not shown any other connection between the use of the verse and Warren’s book.

<sup>43</sup> Jeff, “Jeremiah 29:11,” <http://www.scripturezealot.com/2008/02/25/jeremiah-2911/>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.

<sup>44</sup> Most of this section will be visual and not lend itself to written form.

God is assuring them that he has not forgotten them. However, God also makes it plain that the hopeful future will not be easy, soon, or as they wanted—in direct contrast to the reading of this verse in *The Message*, which concludes the verse with “the future you hoped for.” They would struggle to make a home in exile, and only after 70 years would the hoped-for return home come—after they had all died. Thus, one should not read this verse as a promise of the great things that God has planned for one’s life.

So, what is the point of this verse, then? The paper that I presented in an earlier session today argued that the point is found in the words translated “welfare” and “evil,” or “prosper” and “harm” above. The Hebrew words used here are שְׁלוֹמַם (*shalom*) and רָעָה (*ra’ah*). Detailed exegesis is not the point of this paper, but the importance of these words is apropos to this study. The Book of Jeremiah uses these two words more than any other book in the Bible (31 and 122 times respectively, the latter including all forms of the root word). In Jer. 29:11, God is assuring the people that he desires to give them *shalom* and not *ra’ah*. However, their current suffering in exile is a result of the evil (*ra’ah* in Jeremiah) that they had committed, which resulted in God bringing disaster (*ra’ah*) upon them. This verse should teach the followers of God that bad (i.e. *ra’ah*) is sometimes necessary, but those followers of God should know that God’s ultimate desire is the best (*shalom*) for his people. However, that *shalom* is predicated by a certain lifestyle and level of obedience to God. The Bible is plain that God’s plans are not humanity’s plans (e.g. Gen. 50:20 and Is. 55:8). This verse simply assures God’s people that he has a plan, and that the plan is for a hopeful future for his people, perhaps well into the future.

### Conclusion

As a final piece of this study, the above perusal of contemporary use and the study of the context and meaning of the verse demand some attempt at reconciliation or explanation for the impossibility of reconciliation. This conclusion will move in two directions. First, many people are indeed using Jer. 29:11 wisely and appropriately as a reminder that God does have a plan and ultimately that plan is for a hopeful future. Also, a certain backlash to the use of the verse as a personal mantra is evident in several blogs and online articles. The latter phenomenon is particularly positive. At least many are recognizing the popular shallow, trite use of the verse. Unfortunately, many of these criticisms seem to be attacks on the teachings of prosperity gospel rather than attempts to actually understand the verse. The use, and abuse, of Jer. 29:11 extends far beyond the borders of prosperity gospel churches into virtually every corner of contemporary Christendom. A final critique of the use of the verse is needed to conclude this paper.

Perhaps the most important critique of the use of Jer. 29:11 today is the tendency toward individualizing the verse. Of course, individualization is a pervasive tendency in all of biblical interpretation. This is the tendency to make everything about the individual, when most of the Bible is about the community. Walter Brueggemann calls this the “me and Jesus” tendency.<sup>45</sup> This study demonstrated a propensity to make the verse address every individual instead of the community of God’s people. Perhaps the worst example of making Jer. 29:11 both individual and trite is the *Message* version of the verse, “I know what I’m doing. I have it all planned out—plans to take care of you, not abandon you, plans to give you the future you hope for.” While Eugene Peterson likely did not intend this result, the verse now becomes a promise from God to do what I want. This was, indeed, the nuance of many readings of the verse in the above study. In this sense, the verse often becomes a sort of mantra to keep a person from despair and to build a person’s faith. This was clearly

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<sup>45</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), 18.

seen in the *Charisma* articles and several websites and blogs. The growth of what has come to be labeled “prosperity gospel” has certainly added to this tendency. This common use of Jer. 29:11 supports the premise of this project—that the verse has become a paradigm for Christian living among many Christians.

One of the premises of this study was that the NIV has had a significant impact on the popularity of this verse. Proving the connection remains elusive. However, the fact that the overwhelming majority of quotations—on websites, blogs, magazines, and paraphernalia—are from the NIV would seem to support this hypothesis, even if only anecdotally. The choice of the NIV translators to use “prosper” has almost certainly affected the use of the verse. Plans for “peace,” “welfare,” or “good” do not sound nearly as appealing as plans “to prosper.” In the current American culture of consumerism and commodification, the infatuation with prosperity in the Bible was likely unavoidable. While the rampant use of Jer. 29:11 to support this consumeristic mentality is disappointing; however, the backlash toward reading the text contextually is promising. Lest the conclusion sound too negative, the desire that people have to know and find the plans of God is also encouraging. Unfortunately, Jer. 29:11 has indeed become a paradigm for abuse of scripture and a mantra for seeking a positivistic, prosperity-centered interpretation of the biblical text.

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