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<center>רָעָה (*ra'ah*) As a Paradigm in the Book of Jeremiah</center>

In 2012, I presented a paper at SWCRS that was a study of Jer. 29:11 and its usage in

academia and the church. The paucity of academic study on Jeremiah was both an impetus and a

conclusion of the study, particularly when compared to the other prophetic books of the Hebrew

Bible. In the course of researching that paper and teaching a course on the Book of Jeremiah in a

compact summer term, the prophet's use of [1]רָעָה and its cognates was poignantly obvious.

However, major commentators and monograph authors, 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. In fact, only Koch discussed at any length the significance of

רָעָה in the Book of Jeremiah. He argues that in the prophets, "key words generally form the

pivot in the logical progression from the 'now' to the 'impending.'"[2] For the Book of Jeremiah,

רָעָה is the pivot word. Jeremiah's use of רָעָה certainly demonstrates that the word is important

to him.[3] In fact, the thesis of this study is that רָעָה functions as a paradigm for the message of the

Book of Jeremiah. This paper will proceed in the following manner: an overview of Jeremiah's

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[1] רָעָה will be used in the paper generically because it is the form most widely used in the Book of
Jeremiah.

[2] Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, Vol. II, *The Babylonian and Persian Periods*, trans. Margaret Kohl
(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 20.

[3] The author is not naïve concerning the complexities of the study of Jeremiah. However, while most
studies of Jeremiah expend significant energy on the differences between the A, B, and C sources of Jeremiah, or the
poetry, prose, and Deuteronomistic portions of the book, the current paper is a study of the received text of Jeremiah
in the BHS, with the possible shortfalls of such an approach acknowledged.

<center>1</center>

use of רָעָה, a discussion of the meaning of רָעָה by investigating several texts in Jeremiah, and a

conclusion of why רָעָה functions as a paradigm in the Book of Jeremiah.

The first question that arises in this study is the use of the term "paradigm." For a

paradigm to exist, some pattern of usage must be established. With reference to Jer. 29:11,

Brueggemann suggested that the phrase at the center of the verse, "plans for well-being, not

evil"—plans for שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) not רָעָה—is programmatic for the coming restoration[4] that will

be described in later chapters of Jeremiah. Indeed, the contrast between שָׁלוֹם and רָעָה, as well

as טוֹב (*tov* = "good") and רָעָה, functions as important theological statements. However, the use

of רָעָה far exceeds the use of שָׁלוֹם and טוֹב. While the final section of the paper will make

conclusions on the paradigmatic usage of רָעָה in Jeremiah, the patterns of usage of the word (and

its cognates) will be the first focus of the paper.

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

314 times[5] in BHS, and 89 of those are in Jeremiah (28.34% of uses). The verb רָעַע (*ra'a'*) is

used 102 times in BHS and 13 in Jeremiah. The noun רֹעַ (*ro^a'*) is used only 19 times in BHS, but

11 of those are in Jeremiah. The adjective רַע (*ra'*, = "bad") 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 cognate words is found in Jeremiah. If the adjective is removed from

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[4] Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 118.
[5] Logos Bible Software, Version 4.

consideration, 26% (113 of 435) of the uses is in Jeremiah. Furthermore, all but seven of

Jeremiah's 52 chapters contain at least one of these words, and three of those without the

paradigmatic words are the foreign prophecies.[6] Another common word for "evil" or "bad," רֶשַׁע

(*resha'*, and related words) is found 342 in BHS, but only six of those are in Jeremiah.

Furthermore, in two of those cases in Jeremiah, רֶשַׁע is used in a rhetorical question, which may

suggest an influence from Wisdom literature in those particular texts.[7] The lack of the use of

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

investigation of several 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."[8]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.[9] Brueggemann stated, "'Evil' will be punished with 'evil,'"[10] or as

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[6] Thus, the paradigm relating primarily to Judah and Israel's relationship with God would be less applicable.

[7] Walter Brueggemann, "Jeremiah's Use of Rhetorical Questions." Journal of Biblical Literature 92, No. 3 (Sep., 1973), 358-374. JSTOR database, accessed on Feb. 26, 2014.

[8] Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 30.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 29.

Fretheim concluded, "רָעָה issues in רָעָה."[11] 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.[12] 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; so throughout Jeremiah,"[13] 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

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[11] Terence Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 34.

[12] Koch, *The Prophets*. 20.

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

than God.[14] 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 (*mar*,

"bitter"). Between these verses are two significant texts.

First, in 2:13, the heavens are called to witness the two רָעוֹת (*ra'ot*, plural of *ra'ah*) that

God's people have committed. The first of these רָעוֹת is abandoning God, the fountain of living

water, using the same verb (עָזַב, *'azab*, "abandon") 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, 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 similar words continues in Jer. 3.

Jer. 3 continues the relational analogies of chapter 2, but Israel and Judah are accused of

prostitution with foreign gods. In 3:2, the prophet says that the land is polluted because of the

people's prostitution and רָעָה ("evil"). In 3:1, however, they are accused of committing

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

prostitution with many "companions" or "lovers," which is the Hebrew רֵעַ (*re^a'*), from another

meaning of the verb רָעָה.[15] Verse 5 concludes that God's people have "committed all the evils

(רָעוֹת) they were able." After an extended call for repentance, the potential for reconciliation is

highlighted in God's statement in 3:15. "I will give you shepherds according to my heart, and

they will shepherd you with knowledge and insight," again using רֹעֶה (*ro'eh*, "shepherd").[16]

Thus, the noun רֵעָה and two different meanings of the verb root רָעָה are used in Jer. 3.[17] Since

the noun is the consolidating factor when these related words are used in Jeremiah, the

paradigmatic understanding of the רָעָה is suggested. However, more evidence is present.

Jer.13:23 contains a single, but important use of the verb רָעַע, which is relatively rare in

Jeremiah. In the same way that the leopard can change its markings or a Cushite his skin, so can

the people of Jerusalem do good. The people are called לִמֻּדֵי הָרֵעַ (*limmudey hare^a'*). Most

English translations apparently follow Brown Driver Briggs (and maybe the King James) in

translating this phrase "accustomed to do evil."[18] Thus, David Baker in *New International*

Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis stated, "The contrast and incompatibility of

the concepts [good and evil] is clear in Jer 13:23, where one who is **accustomed** [emphasis

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[15] The reader might also note the common use of רָאָה in these texts.

[16] See G. Wallis, "רָעָה" *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, Vol. XIII, ed. by G. J. Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and H. Fabry, trans. David Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 551, for the use of "shepherds" in Jeremiah.

[17] See Mary Shields, *Circumscribing the Prostitute: The Rhetorics of Intertextuality, Metaphor and Gender in Jeremiah 3.1-4.4*, JSOT Supplement 387, ed. P. R. Davies and D. J. A. Clines (London: T & T Clark, 2004), 45.

[18] There are a few exceptions. JPS translates "who are practiced in doing evil" and NASB "you who are instructed in evil."

mine] to evildoing is not capable of good deeds."[19] Yet, the text may be saying something even

stronger. לִמֻּד (*limmud*) typically has the connotation of learning. Koehler-Baumgartner suggests

translating the phrase "trained to do evil." The people of Jerusalem are followers of evil deeds

and have been trained to do evil. Thus, since the practices are ingrained in their lives, change is

no longer possible. Being "trained to do evil" may be supported by the repeated condemnation of

the prophets, priests, and shepherds by Jeremiah, as in chapters 2-3.

Another example of condemnation addressed to the leaders is found in Jer. 23. Jer. 23:14

contains another use of the verb רָעַע. The prophets of Jerusalem are accused of "making strong

the hands of those doing evil."[20] The previous verses contain two prophetic declarations

concerning the priests and prophets: they have brought "evil (רָעָה) even into my house" and "I

will bring disaster (רָעָה) upon them" (23:11-12). These verses highlight the role of the leaders in

perpetrating and perpetuating the רָעָה in Jerusalem and Judah. This concept could support the

translation, "trained to do evil," above in Jer. 13.

The vision of the good and bad figs in Jer. 24:1-10 introduces another related word to this

study.[21] The second basket of figs is "exceedingly bad, which cannot be eaten because of

badness," where "bad" translates the adjective רַע and "badness" the noun רֹעַ. Both are from the

verbal root רָעַע. The text climaxes in 23:9-10 with a prophecy of destruction to the bad figs,

designated as Zedekiah and his officials. In verse 9, the Masoretic Text states, "I will make them

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[19] David Baker, "רעע," *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Vol. 3, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1157.

[20] "Those doing evil" is a participle of רָעַע.

[21] Although this is not the first time the word is used in Jeremiah.

a horror—an evil (רָעָה)—to all the kingdoms of the land." רָעָה is not reflected in LXX and is

omitted by many commentators and translations.[22] However, Lundbom argues against its

omission as unnecessary.[23] If רָעָה is genuine, the text summarizes the judgment upon the bad

figs with the usual paradigmatic word. Of course, if רָעָה was inserted by a later editor, the

paradigmatic nature of רָעָה is still not diminished, since the ancient editor or reader assumed that

רָעָה was the proper word for this context.

The importance of רָעָה in Jeremiah is never more obvious than in Jer. 44, where the noun

רָעָה is used 14 times. The text is a presented as a conversation between God, Jeremiah, and the

exiles who have migrated to Egypt. After a description of the רָעָה that precipitated the

destruction and exile that the people now endured, God asks how they could commit a "great

evil" (רָעָה גְדוֹלָה, *ra'ah g^{e}dolah*) against God by continuing to make offerings to the gods of

Egypt. Jer. 44:9 then recounts the "evils" committed by God's people in Judah and Jerusalem,

using רָעָה five times—the רָעָה of their ancestors, the kings and queens, themselves, and their

wives. Even in Egypt, the people could not escape their self-destructive רָעוֹת, and thus God says

in verse 11, "Look at me, setting my face against you for רָעָה." No hopeful future exists for

those in Egypt. רָעָה is still the paradigm for the prophetic perspective of their existence.

As the Book of Jeremiah moves toward a conclusion, however, a hopeful future is

presented as a reality, but in Babylon rather than Egypt. Even in the hopefulness, however, רָעָה

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[22] E.g., ESV, Allen, McKane, and Bright. Others move the word to the end of v. 8, e.g., Holladay.

[23] J. R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 234-235.

is still seen as a paradigmatic force. One such text is Jer. 29:11, where Brueggemann called the

combination of שָׁלוֹם and רָעָה "programmatic for the coming restoration."[24] An important word

in Jer. 29:11 is מַחְשָׁבוֹת (machsᵉbot), "plans." In Jer. 29:11, the prophet uses the noun,

מַחְשָׁבוֹת, twice, along with the verb, חָשַׁב. Hence, God says, "I know the plans that I am

planning."[25] Normally, God's plans in Jeremiah are for disaster or judgment. In fact, R. J. Plant

points out that only in 29:11 are the verb and noun used together in a positive sense.[26] 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."[27] שָׁלוֹם cannot be found,

however, in bypassing judgment for the evils (רָעוֹת) that they committed, as the false prophets

professed.[28] After deliverance and restoration, רָעָה will become a paradigm of the past, but still

a paradigm nonetheless. The move from honeymoon to abandonment to disaster to deliverance

comes full circle in Jeremiah 31.

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[24] Brueggemann, *Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 118.

[25] Chuck Pitts, "שָׁלוֹם or רָעָה? Jer. 29:11 in Its Canonical and Contemporary Context," Paper presented at Southwest Commission of Religious Studies (March 10, 2012), 4.

[26] R. J. R. Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah*. Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 481, ed. Claudia Camp and Andrew Mein (New York: T & T Clark, 2008), 122.

[27] Patrick D. Miller, "Jeremiah," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI, 553-926 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 793.

[28] Pitts, "שָׁלוֹם or רָעָה," 6.

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

Hebrew text[29] of Jer. 31:28 contains all six of the verbs used in the call narrative of Jeremiah—to

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

shaqad), which was used in the almond branch sign. 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.[30] As

Fretheim suggests, "all of these verbs are summarized in the phrase 'bring disaster' (רָעָה)."[31]

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

exile. The negative has happened; the positive is only promised…. The oracle places us between

a death already wrought and a resurrection only anticipated."[32] What Brueggemann does not

mention is the verb that stands between the two distinct stages--רָעַע. One can only assume that

the verb, rather than the more common noun, is used here to match the verbal nature of the verse

and to balance the metaphorical verbs of tearing, pulling, building, and planting with the more

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[29] LXX omits three of the four negative verses.
[30] 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.
[31] Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 439.
[32] Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah*. 290.

usual (for Jeremiah, at least) and well-defined רָעַע, "bring evil," "bring disaster," or as Allen

suggests "treat badly."[33] Thus, 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. One final question remains for investigation.

Why did Jeremiah use רָעָה as a paradigm for his message? First, the family of Hebrew

words has a broad meaning, much broader than the traditional English translation of "evil." In

Jeremiah, these words can be translated "evil," "bad," "disaster," and "wild" (as in inedible

grapes). When moral failure is included in the meaning, the word connotes both "evil" and "sin,"

perhaps as a sub-category of "evil," understanding evil in a broad sense.[34] The broad nature of

the רָעָה words made them a perfect set of words for Jeremiah. Second, the fortunate existence of

רָעָה, "to shepherd," and רֵעַ, "companion," from the same root but with a different meaning,

allowed Jeremiah to use these words in wordplay, which he did several times (e.g., Jer. 3 and

23). These related forms allowed the paradigm of רָעָה to expand even beyond the possibilities of

its own meanings.

Third, the times of Jeremiah were indeed "evil." The reason that O'Connor's work on

Jeremiah[35] related to disaster is appealing is that the end of the 7th and the beginning of the 6th

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[33] Allen, *Jeremiah*, 354.

[34] David Baker, "Evil," *Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets*, ed. Mark Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012), 194-195.

[35] O'Connor, Kathleen. *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011. Interestingly, O'Connor calls no special attention to the use of רָעָה in the Book of Jeremiah.

centuries were indeed disastrous. Rendtorff concluded 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."[36] 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.

The remnant that survived the twenty or so years following Josiah's death experienced invasions by two nations, two reigns of only a few months, two sieges of Jerusalem, at least two exiles, and the destruction of the city and temple. As Rhett Butler said of the south in "Gone with the Wind," while he and Scarlett watched Atlanta burn, the people of Israel and Judah had watched their world disappear. No other set of words could capture these times quite like רָעָה.

They had committed evil acts, done bad things, and been led into evil, and their evil had brought disaster upon them. However, רָעָה would not have the last word. God's plan for שָׁלוֹם would triumph after their 70 years of רָעָה were finished. A life lived in טוֹב, rather than רַע, would experience שָׁלוֹם, rather than רָעָה, in return. Such is the message of Jeremiah's paradigm.

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[36] Rolf Rendtorff, *The Canonical Hebrew Bible: A Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. David Orten (Leiden: Deo, 2005), 230.

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