

שָׁלוֹם (*shalom*) or רָעָה (*ra'ah*)?  
Jer. 29:11 in Its Canonical and Contemporary Context

Chuck Pitts, PhD

Houston Graduate School of Theology

Southwest Commission on Religious Studies

March 10, 2012

שָׁלוֹם (*Shalom*) or רָעָה (*ra'ah*)? Jer. 29:11  
in Its Canonical and Contemporary Context

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. As one who is both an academic and a practitioner in the evangelical church, I find myself stuck between two worlds: the popular world of overemphatic, idiosyncratic use of scripture verses and the scholarly world of clinging to old historical-critical approaches to the text that often seem to ignore realities on the ground—particularly the ground that has the most interest in the Bible that we study, namely the Christian church. In fact, a perusal of critical commentaries produced in the past twenty years yields not a single reference to the popularity of Jer. 29:11 in the contemporary church. The present paper is an attempt to take a close look at Jer. 29:11 in its literary and historical context, as well as to apply the text to the current contemporary context. After a brief look at historical contexts, the bulk of the study will focus upon the text of the verse—with special focus on the meaning of רָעָה and שָׁלוֹם—within the literary context of Jeremiah. (A second paper in the ASSR section of this conference will look at the verse from a socio-cultural perspective.)

#### Historical and Canonical Context

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 (Hebrew *ki* = “for, because”), the

importance of context is amplified. In fact, grammatically, to interpret the verse apart from its context—historical, canonical, or literary—should be impossible (although it is done often). The verse is part of the letter written to the exiles from Judah in Babylon. As such, 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.<sup>1</sup>

The other issue related to the historical context is the on-going battle between Jeremiah and the false prophets of hope in Judah. One of the factors that eventually led to the writing of this paper, in fact, was an article in *Relevant Magazine*, entitled “The Most Misused Verse in the Bible.” The focus of that article was the conflict between Jeremiah and “false prophets of prosperity.”<sup>2</sup> Canonically, in the book of Jeremiah, this prophetic conflict appears several times. In a verse that is important for the interpretation of Jer. 29:11, this conflict is particularly emphasized. In Jer. 6:13-14, prophets and priests are chided for ignoring the brokenness of God’s people, offering promises of שלום, when none exists. Because of this failure, the prophets will fall when the nation falls. Also, in Jer. 18:18, Jeremiah’s adversaries plot an attack against Jeremiah in order to silence his false prophecies. We will return to chapters 6 and 18 later in the paper. At this point, they serve as examples of Jeremiah’s ongoing conflict with false prophets. Jer. 27-29 is at its heart a commentary on the conflict. Jeremiah’s rivals, Hananiah chief among

---

<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Chris Blumhofer, “The Most Misused Verse in the Bible,” *Relevant Magazine* (29 Dec 2010), online edition, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/21141-the-most-misused-verse-in-the-bible> (accessed 5 March 2012).

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.

Overholt pointed out in a 1967 article that the problem of true and false prophecy is not as simple to solve as one might think. Hananiah and his fellow prophets remained faithful to a prophetic tradition that had proven true since the late eighth century. Isaiah had reiterated the Davidic promised protection for Jerusalem, and that promise had remained intact until the sixth century rise of the Babylonians. The “false” nature of the prophecy derives from a failure of the prophets to recognize that a new age had arisen in God’s *heilsgeschichte* with Israel.<sup>3</sup> The people’s rebellion at several points of Torah, as Jeremiah had pointed out in the so-called “Temple Sermon” of Jer. 7 (and elsewhere), had caused a breach in the covenant, and with it the promised protection of Israel. This change in *heilsgeschichte* is the basis of Jeremiah’s prophecies. This specific problem as it relates to true and false is extremely important to the ultimate interpretation of Jer. 29:11, a point to which we will return. We will turn now to a study of Jer. 29:11.

### Linguistic Context

The words of Jer. 29:11 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 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, יָדָעַ (Hebrew *yada*; = “to know”) 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 שְׁלוֹם and not for רָעָה—the exiles “can rest back in the divine

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Overholt, “Jeremiah 27-29: The Question of False Prophecy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 35, no. 3 (S 1967): 245.

knowledge and intention,”<sup>4</sup> 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,” מַחְשְׁבוֹת (Hebrew *machsh<sup>e</sup>both* = “plans” or “thoughts”), 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, מַחְשְׁבוֹת, twice, along with the verb, חָשַׁב (Hebrew *chashab*, “to plan,” verbal root of noun above).

Although the LXX omits a portion of this line, as Lundbom points out, the omission is an obvious haplography. Furthermore, the use of repetitive cognates is common in the Book of Jeremiah.<sup>5</sup> Hence, Yahweh says, “I know the plans that I am planning.” Jeremiah speaks often of God’s plans—both for רָעָה and שְׁלוֹם.

Two other texts will display the variety of usage of this noun, מַחְשְׁבוֹת, in the Book of Jeremiah. In Jer. 18:11, Jeremiah calls on the people of Jerusalem and Judah, “Thus says Yahweh, ‘Behold, I am forming against you evil (רָעָה), and planning (חָשַׁב) against you plans (מַחְשְׁבוֹת). Turn now, each man from his evil (רָעָה) ways.’” In Jer. 6:19, the prophet says, “Hear, earth, behold, I am bringing evil unto this people—the fruit of their plans (מַחְשְׁבוֹת).”<sup>6</sup>

Even these few texts make plain the conflict between God’s plans and Judah’s plans. In Jer.

---

<sup>4</sup> Terence Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 404-405.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 354; see also 139.

<sup>6</sup> LXX apparently read this verb from שׁוּב rather than חָשַׁב.

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.”

At the center of the verse is the statement, “plans for well-being, not evil”—plans for **שְׁלוֹם** not **רָעָה**. To use Brueggemann’s word, this statement is programmatic for the coming restoration.<sup>8</sup> The **רָעָה** of exile will be replaced by **שְׁלוֹם**. As Miller surmises, this section of the Book of Jeremiah is “about **שְׁלוֹם**, ‘peace,’ and how the Judean community can find it.”<sup>9</sup> **שְׁלוֹם** cannot be found in bypassing judgment for the evils that they committed (i.e. **רָעָה**), 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.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Pathway of Interpretation: The Old Testament for Pastors and Students* (Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009), 18.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Cambridge, 2007), 118.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick D. Miller, “Jeremiah,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. VI, 553-926 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 793.

<sup>10</sup> As well between **רָעָה** and **טוֹב**.

If, indeed, **שְׁלוֹם** and **רְעָה** are programmatic for Jeremiah, a brief definition of the terms is in order, particular as used in Jeremiah. **רְעָה** is **the** key word for Jeremiah. Eighty-nine of 314 total appearances of **רְעָה** in the Hebrew Bible are in Jeremiah (28.34%). A full review of the use of the term is, of course, impossible. Its use in connection with “plans” was noted above. **רְעָה** 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. Clearly, **רְעָה** is Jeremiah’s word to describe his chaotic time in history.

As we all know, **שְׁלוֹם** is a difficult word to translate, because of its broad range of usage and meaning. *TDOT* suggests, “For the present we may conclude that *shalom* is a profoundly positive concept associated with the notions of intactness, wholeness, and well-being, of the world and of humanity. ... Perhaps ... we can say that *shalom* denotes a supremely positive quality of being, which can be instantiated in the most various ways in various contexts.”<sup>11</sup> Von Rad writes, “Our word peace can only be regarded as an inadequate equivalent. For **שְׁלוֹם** 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.”<sup>12</sup> Von Rad seems to overstate the need for “two parties” in the process of **שְׁלוֹם**. The word is broader than

---

<sup>11</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, s.v. “שְׁלוֹם,” by F. J. Stendebach.

<sup>12</sup> 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.

that. Brueggemann relates שְׁלוֹם to chaos when he defines שְׁלוֹם as, “harmonious, properly-functioning, life-giving order to society.... The opposite of *shalom* is not war but chaos.”<sup>13</sup> 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.

Although not as common as רָעָה, שְׁלוֹם is found thirty times in the Book of Jeremiah. A key passage for the theology of שְׁלוֹם in Jeremiah is found in the sixth chapter (and repeated in the eighth). In the midst of the text concerning the prophets of Judah, Jeremiah states concerning the prophets and priests of Judah, “They have healed the brokenness of my people (as if it was something) insignificant, saying ‘שְׁלוֹם שְׁלוֹם,’ but there is no שְׁלוֹם.” Clearly, for Jeremiah, a correct understanding of God’s שְׁלוֹם was important. The word cannot be a mantra, or a word uttered in denial, false hope, or deception. Uttering שְׁלוֹם, no matter how loudly or repetitively, will not bring about שְׁלוֹם. God’s שְׁלוֹם 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.

Brueggemann points out the play on the word שְׁלוֹם in Jer. 29. In verses 5-9, the exiles are called upon to seek the שְׁלוֹם of Babylon, for in Babylon’s שְׁלוֹם, they will find their own שְׁלוֹם. The שְׁלוֹם of Babylon is the task of the exiles, but their own future שְׁלוֹם will be the gift

---

<sup>13</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “A World Available for Peace,” in *Like Fire in My Bones*, ed. P. D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 169-170.



of God.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the future שלום of the exiles is predicated on seeking Babylon's שלום in the present. Even in exile under the strong hand of empire, שלום is possible. However, in Jer. 29:11, the focus shifts back to the future שלום of the exiles. While in Jer. 29:7 the exiles are told to seek Babylon's שלום, as Lundbom cleverly states, “Now Jeremiah is speaking of the *shalom* of the city of *shalom*,”<sup>15</sup> which leads to final phrase of the verse.

Finally, the last phrase of the verse promises a “hopeful future” to the exiles. A literal translation of אַחֲרֵית וְתִקְוָה (Hebrew *'acharit v<sup>e</sup>tiqvah*) is “a future and a hope.” Most translators seem to prefer following BDB in translating as a hendiadys, “hoped-for future,”<sup>16</sup> or the like. However, translators as diverse as J. A. Thompson and Eugene Peterson have opted for “the future you hope for.”<sup>17</sup> Since the initial focus of the verse was God's plan and not their own, however, this latter translation seems unwarranted.

Given the historical context, the conclusion of the verse creates a palpable ironic tension. The exiles will have a hopeful future. The irony is lessened somewhat, however, by maintaining contact with the historical and literary contexts. Since the fulfillment of hope must wait 70 years, it would never be a source of false hope. Furthermore, the verses following put the verse into a different literary and theological context.

---

<sup>14</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 259.

<sup>15</sup> Lundbom, 353.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

<sup>17</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 542. See all *The Message* version of the Bible.

The return, 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 rebellious people.”<sup>18</sup>

Brueggemann sees this as Yahweh’s claim to exclusivity. To find their future **שְׁלוֹם**, “Judah must only decide to seek its future exclusively from Yahweh.”<sup>19</sup> Their future hope lies only in their willingness to return to covenant fidelity with their God.

### Contemporary Context

To conclude this paper, the previous historical, canonical, and textual study will be repackaged as a proposal for reading the verse in the twenty-first century. This proposal will suggest three preliminary strategies for reading Jer. 29:11.

First, in keeping with the conflict between true and false prophets, the role of *heilsgeschichte* is relevant. The New Testament is presented as the continuation of the *heilsgeschichte* of the Hebrew Bible. The issue of true and false prophecy seems to be ever significant in God’s *heilsgeschichte*. Jeremiah, Jesus, Peter, and Paul were accused of speaking false words, hence of being false prophets and blasphemers. Yet, Christians today cherish their words as truth. Jeremiah called his people to live in covenant fidelity, to practice justice, and to worship God rather than the kingdom and temple that God inaugurated. Jesus altered the kingdom theology from one of city, king, and empire to a kingdom theology of grace, service, and spirit. Fidelity to covenant remains tantamount, but the expectations of generosity, justice, and mercy take center stage in Jesus’ theology. If a Christian reader approaches Jer. 29:11 in light of this new interpretation of *heilsgeschichte*, that person will seek and find a **שְׁלוֹם** that

---

<sup>18</sup>Thompson, 547.

<sup>19</sup>Brueggemann, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 259.

focuses upon reconciliation of creation to God rather than a focus on wealth, health, and prosperity. Furthermore, perhaps readers of Jeremiah could learn to be more gracious when hearing new words that challenge the status quo. Overholt used the example of Bob Dylan in the 1960s, who challenged notions of empire, much like Jeremiah in Jer. 7.<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann emphasized that prophets in all ages will speak truth that does not bow to either unbridled optimism or despair, as depicted by the prophecies in Jeremiah 29.<sup>21</sup> God will not remain static and quiet in the face of injustice, and students of the Bible could learn from this reality.

Second, in light of Jeremiah's call to the exiles to seek the שלום of Babylon, twenty-first century readers may be called upon to read Jer. 29 from a missional perspective. A missional approach to life assumes God's desire to heal, preserve, and protect the world and humanity's role as partners with God in that mission. Brueggemann asserts, "Christians are people who must tell the truth. Christians are people who reject the lie, the deception, who refuse the propaganda. This text [Jer. 6:13-15, but equally Jer. 29] is a summons to face the chaos among us that destroys, chaos evidenced in hunger, violence, unemployment, and land loss,"<sup>22</sup> to which one might add drug abuse, human trafficking, and many other such social ills. The missional voice declares God's desire for שלום and God's ultimate sovereignty over this world to attain it.

Brueggemann also asserts, "Even in the ancient world of political arrogance, the assertion of divine agency is a daring rhetorical act. How much more so in the modern world where secular assumptions prevail!"<sup>23</sup> A missional approach to Jer. 29 would allow readers to avoid a self-

---

<sup>20</sup> Overholt, 248-249.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *Commentary*, 260.

<sup>22</sup> Brueggemann, "World Available for Peace," 170.

<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 80.

centered, individualistic interpretation of Jer. 29:11 in favor of a far-reaching mission for **שְׁלוֹם** in this world of violence, hate, and disunity.

Finally, the reader can see that the hope of Jer. 29 is found in seeking God through prayer—prayer that expresses itself in fidelity, humility, and obedience. If the people of Judah humbly accepted the exile and remained faithful to God, he would protect them and provide for them, even in exile. Fidelity remains faithful even if the pronouncement is for seventy years of exile, meaning that “I will be dead by then.” In the hope-filled Jer. 31, the last words of Jer. 29:11 are repeated, “There is hope for your future.” Jer. 29:11, then, is a word about hope—even hope in the face of despair.<sup>24</sup> God is present. God is protecting. God is listening. His people must hear the voice of the prophet and grasp onto God’s presence. Herein lies hope—hope for **שְׁלוֹם**, not **רָעָה**.

### Conclusion

After a surprisingly long discussion of Jer. 29:11, Louis Stulman and Hyun Kim conclude that Jeremiah’s “map of hope” imagines a hope where none seems possible. “Jeremiah, God’s harbinger of hope, asserts that the collapse of Judah’s universe signals neither the end of faith nor the death of the community. Despite overwhelming indications to the contrary, God is still at work mending a broken world and healing lives wracked with pain.”<sup>25</sup> A missional reading of Jer. 29:11 that recognizes God’s work in *heilsgeschichte* and seeks God’s presence in honest spirituality will offer hope to all who read it. However, the verse is not a mantra of faith or

---

<sup>24</sup> Gerald Keown, Pamela Scalise, and Thomas Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1993), 73, 80.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, *You Are My People: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 107.

rhetoric of denial. Rather, it is the word spoken in humble acknowledgement that God hears and cares, that God will protect and deliver, and that God responds to his people—but according to his plans, not theirs.

## Bibliography

- Blumhofer, Chris. "The Most Misused Verse in the Bible." *Relevant Magazine* (29 Dec 2010). Online edition, <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/21141-the-most-misused-verse-in-the-bible> (accessed 5 March 2012).
- Brown, Francis, Samuel Rolles Driver and Charles Augustus Briggs. *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- . *A Pathway of Interpretation The Old Testament for Pastors and Students*. Eugene: OR: Cascade Books, 2009.
- . *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*. New York: Cambridge, 2007.
- . "A World Available for Peace." In *Like Fire in My Bones*, ed. P. D. Miller, 168-179. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006.
- Fretheim, Terence. *Jeremiah*. Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002.
- Golias, Ryan. "What Jeremiah 29:11 Is Not About." <http://www.renewedimagination.com/2010/01/what-jeremiah-2911-is-not-about.html>, accessed 18 Feb 2012.
- Lundbom, Jack. *Jeremiah 21-36*. The Anchor Bible. New York: Doubleday, 2004.
- Keown, Gerald, Pamela Scalise, and Thomas Smothers. *Jeremiah 26-52*. Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, 1993.
- Miller, P. D. "Jeremiah." *New Interpreter's Bible*. Vol. VI, 553-926. Nashville: Abingdon, 2001.
- Overholt, Thomas. "Jeremiah 27-29: The Question of False Prophecy." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 35, no. 3 (S 1967): 241-249.
- Stulman, Louis, and Hyun Chul Paul Kim. *You Are My People: An Introduction to the Prophetic Literature*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2010.
- Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*. S.v. "שְׁלוֹם," by F. J. Stendebach.

Thompson, J. A. *The Book of Jeremiah*. The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980.

Von Rad, Gerhard. *Old Testament Theology*. Vol. 1: *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*. Translated by D. M. G. Stalker. New York: Harper, 1962.