

Review

Mark LEUCHTER:
The Polemics of Exile in Jeremiah 26-45,
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João Pedro Vieira

Biblical Studies are facing nowadays a great lack of confidence in the sources provided by the Hebrew Bible. The wide and growing reservations about the historical reliability of biblical data are particularly troubling as regards the book of Jeremiah. A large number of scholars actually doubt that Jeremiah can provide enough reliable information for reconstructing political, religious and cultural history without seriously biasing the final product with its own inherent ideological patterns, sometimes directly imported to research. Stemming from the awareness of the fact that, as Norman Gottwald simply put it, ‘There is a lively sense of the textuality of all history and of the inevitably constructed nature of every reading of the past’ (*The Politics of Ancient Israel*, p. 4), source, literary and redaction criticism, often abandoning pretensions on the historicity of precise events and persons, are currently and programmatically pointing the way and have already defined a powerful research trend. As a result, traditionalist or maximalist positions like the ones held by Holladay are being increasingly rejected or even discredited.

The Polemics of Exile, Mark Leuchter’s second book, is one quite interesting example of the high critically built approaches yielded by the most recent research on Jeremiah. Although apparently posited on the minimalist side, Leuchter fuses high critical methods within the post-structuralist scope with a thorough study of the jeremianic corpus to re-examine the importance, nature and purpose of the so-

called Supplement (Jer 26-45), one of the main redactional sections of Jeremiah. The Supplement is specially explored in its multiple connections with the extant jeremianic pre-exilic oracles and OAN, the Deuteronomy, HD and Ezekiel. By that, Leuchter also enlightens the historical events and ideological thrusts behind Jeremiah's prophetic activity.

It is relevant to note that *The Polemics of Exile* follows the still fresh inquiry opened on *Josiah's Reform and Jeremiah's Scroll*, Leuchter's first book and reworked "version" of its PhD thesis submitted to the University of Toronto on 2003. In *Josiah's Reform*, Leuchter assesses the role of Jeremiah in the josianic reform, arguing that Jeremiah was a levitical prophet bounded to the Šilonite tradition who played a key and more committed role than usually accepted in the deuteronomic reform, openly supporting Josiah's political and religious agenda and acting close to royal and scribal Šaphanid circles as its spokesman. This previous research runs beneath many important assumptions taken by the author at different stages of his reasoning, and that is why one should bear in mind its general conclusions once reading *The Polemics of Exile*, which naturally reinforces and deepens much of that groundwork.

We shall now proceed to a general survey of its primary contents. Leuchter begins its research by discussing a basic set of issues with significant bearing on the interpretation of the following chapters, namely the pro-land and pro-*golah* redaction theory, the relation between Jeremiah and deuteronomism, and the origin and dating of the Supplement. Leuchter recognizes the existence of ideological tensions underneath the construction of the book, but instead of the relying on an accrecional model, like Albertz, or ascribing a large number of verses from the prose sections to exilic Dtr authorship, like Sharp, he thinks those texts are better understood as originating from Jeremiah himself. Additionally, Dtr valences of the jeremianic discourse are likewise rooted in Jeremiah himself. As to the Supplement, Leuchter ascribes it a Babylonian origin or to someone with strong ideological sympathies to

that group, probably a limited group of scribes, who wrote it nearby 570 BCE as an addendum to Jer 1-25.

Chapter 1 starts dealing more closely with the jeremianic data, analysing a series of textual sequences in Jer 26 and beginning to unfold the complex hermeneutical relationship between prophecy and scribes through the rewritten Temple Sermon. The 'hermeneutics of citation' put to work at Jer 26 suggests a theological and prophetic continuum between Jeremiah, on the one hand, and Micaiah, Uriah, and the deuteronomic tradition, on the other hand. Through Jer 36, Leuchter grasps the actual hermeneutical significance conveyed by the redaction of Jer 26: prophet and scribe share the same, unchanged divine word. This is precisely one of the main ideas of the book, further explored in the next chapters: the Supplement authors intend to assert the ability and legitimacy of scribal interpretation over jeremianic and ultimately deuteronomic tradition.

The second chapters carefully evolves through Jer 27 – 32:15. Comparing Jer 26 and 27, Leuchter uncovers a scribal picture of Jeremiah according to which the prophet promotes the relocation of law beyond its traditional frontiers to Babylon, where the remnants of true Israel were, and dissociates himself from Jerusalem's monarchic and temple institutions. In Jer 28-29, obedience to Jeremiah means the obedience to the deuteronomic law and to the josianic reform program in opposition to the anti-types of Hananiah and the Baal guild of 2 Kgs 18:18-40. Along Jer 27-31, the Supplement authors reworked previous original jeremianic materials directed to the 597 BCE *golah* in order to encompass the whole exilic community.

Because monarchy and temple became unsuitable for providing the fundamental patterns of Israelite identity and because the old alliance was dishonoured, a new one was required, although conforming to different standards (Jer 31:31-34). The proper compliance to the new alliance taking place at Babylon demanded the internalization of the deuteronomic law, in accordance to Deut 6:5. There was therefore a need to upgrade the contents of the law, and since the traditional mediating institutions had been punished and destroyed, the legitimate

exegesis of the law and community leadership belonged both to the scribes. By Jer 31:38-40; 32:1-15, the Supplement authors extend the promise implied in the new alliance to 587 BCE exiles. Leuchter then goes to discuss briefly some aspects regarding the redaction of the pre-jeremianic corpus, that is, Jer 1-25+OAN, which he believes was textually established shortly after Seraiah mission to Babylon, before 587 BCE, and was addressed both to the land and Babylonian communities.

On chapter 3, Leuchter proceeds to survey Jer 34-36. The polemics against temple becomes increasingly sharp with the reaction to the emptiness of Zedekiah's covenant-like ceremony (Jer 34:8-22). Through Jeremiah, the josianic scribes, heirs of the šilonite tradition, condemn the priestly language and cult, criticize the corruption of the old covenant and the disregard for the deuteronomic law. As such, Jeremiah is made to express a vehement denial of the priestly ideology as a means of sustaining covenant. The Supplement authors emphasize Jeremiah's levitical status, assimilating the levites who received the law from Moses with those who should eventually read it each seven years, the same levitical priests promoted by the deuteronomic reform. The episode of the Recabites (Jer 35), probably historical, forces the reader to recognize that Jeremiah was a mosaic prophet whose highly prestigious yahwistic ancestry gave him superior authority and undeniable authenticity. Moreover, the Recabites' virtuous example opens the way to the socio-political and ideological conflict between the scribal Šaphanid circles supportive of Jeremiah and the royal officers around Joachim.

The conflict between scribes and royal officers reaches its climax in Jer 36, where the scribes present Jeremiah's *Urrolle* (probably Jer 1-11) to Joachim. Here the Supplement authors bring the scribes to the fore, casting Jeremiah into the shadow for the moment. However, Joachim tears the scroll apart, destroying an authoritative interpretation of the deuteronomic law and showing to compromise on the idolatric *šeqer* ideology reminiscent of the Zedekiah's covenant-like ceremony. The rejection of the scroll meant the rejection of the word of Yahweh,

explained the catastrophic end of Judah and underscored the legitimacy of scribal exegesis and leadership in Babylon.

Chapter 4 moves throughout Jer 37-44 to the issue of the fall of Judah and the Egyptian *golah*. With Joachim and Zedekiah, the doomed Davidic dynasty was being gradually torn apart by internal strife, completely losing its credibility. The renewed polemics against the monarchy aimed at smoothing the differences between 597 and 587 *golah* in Babylon. Joachim and Zedekiah are assimilated to each other in its wrongdoings and impious rule. After a period of growing isolation of the remnant Šaphanid circle in Judah, during which the prophet was imprisoned, tortured and kept from preaching, the capture and destruction of Jerusalem eventually paved the way for the new rise of the Šaphanids. The Supplement recognize Gedaliah's administration in Mišpah emphasizing once more the Šaphanid authority. Gedaliah functioned as mediator between the remnant Judean people and Yahweh's will, creating a future for life in Judah. It may not be coincidence the fact that Gedaliah rules over the occupied land from the exact same place where Samuel did exactly the same. Even after Išmael's massacre at Mišpah, there was still hope for life in Judah under scribal Šaphanid leadership, according to Jer 42.

Disregarding Jeremiah's oracle and returning to Egypt meant a plain denial of Israelite identity as defined by the deuteronomic law. To the Supplement authors, the Egyptian *golah* became a foreign nation, abhorred in the eyes of the deuteronomic law with no share at all in Yahweh's heritage, a nation whose proper treatment one can find out in the OAN. Assuming a post-587 Babylonian consciousness, Jer 44 totally rejects the Egyptian remnants. If doom awaits those who turn their backs on the jeremianic and deuteronomic word, on the contrary salvation will be brought to everyone supporting it, as the salvation oracles on behalf of Baruch and Ebed-Melech stress (Jer 45). Baruch may not had been the author of the Supplement, as Jer 45 seems to imply, but he likely played an important role in the shaping of the book of Jeremiah, providing the living link between prophets and scribes.

This leads us to chapter 5, where Leuchter directly addresses the issue of the ideological struggle between the Šaphanid scribal circles and the Zadokite priestly circles in Babylon, the latter having Ezekiel as its major advocate. To the 597 BCE exiles, Jeremiah, who had suffered the same probations at the hands of the post-597 BCE Judeans, became the symbol of their life experience. Despite the fact of reflecting the Babylonian understanding of the exile, the Supplement was preserved both in MT and LXX, showing its wide acceptance among the exiles. This fact also suggests that the LXX tradition achieved its canonical form at a later period, probably during the fifth-fourth centuries B.C.E..

Summing up the previous argumentation, Leuchter comes to realize that if the 597 BCE exiles were acquainted with Dtr ideology, the same could not be said about the 587 BCE exiles, doubtful as they might have been about the application of the deuteronomic law to the exilic life. Jer 1-25 was shaped to punish the 587 BCE exiles, yet the Supplement intends to include those exiles by stressing the point that they too could take part in salvation and should thus espouse the political and theological perspectives of 597 BCE exiles. The greatest internal threat to scribal Šaphanid authority came from Ezekiel and the Zadokite priestly ideology, spurred by Joachin's release. That ideology harshly blamed Dtr ideology for Judah's catastrophic end. With Ezekiel there was actually a reinterpretation of the deuteronomic theology in the light of priestly Zadokite ideology, through which Jerusalem recovered its mythic religious centrality, although only the Zadokite branch of the levitical was valued. An intense socio-political and ideological conflict between Šaphanides and Zadokites for community leadership arose by then. Also reacting against the Zadokites, the Supplement authors assimilate them to the same temple priests and prophets fought by Jeremiah. Therefore, the main purpose of the Supplement is to speak to the 587 BCE deportees, inviting them to share the divinely bestowed privileges of the 597 BCE exiles.

However, the Šaphanides were not alone in their resistance to the Zadokite priestly circles: for the Levites, the deuteronomic law and Dtr ideology was also the very source of their social power and authority.

They still studied and applied the law among the exiles, keeping the deuteronomic reform and themselves alive within the strictures and parameters set by the Šaphanid scribes. As Leuchter argues, ‘the exilic Levites had their perspectives ‘canonized’ into an official version of the book bearing the legacy of a highly influential prophet [...], and the Shaphanides could rely on these Levites to promulgate their work to the exilic masses against the Ezekiel tradition and other Zadokite literary endeavors’ (p. 175). It was only by the early years of the Persian restoration that such a deep socio-political and ideological rift became gradually meaningless.

Finally, Leuchter brings its hermeneutical undertaking on the Supplement to a close discussing the importance of Dtr thought in the book of Jeremiah and the exile, as well as the relation between Jeremiah, DtrH and Deutero-Isaiah. Jeremianic materials often ascribed to Dtr redaction were already deuteronomic before any previous Dtr redactional intervention. The Supplement authors expanded and commented the jeremianic corpus connecting it to DtrH, thus creating a theological and literary continuum that traced back to the josianic literature and would symbolically extend itself to the rabbinic times: Jeremiah himself had already seen its word as an exegetical expansion of the deuteronomic law. It were the rabbis who finally took the exegetical prophetic heritage.

Following the main arguments of Leuchter’s study and its development is not an easy task. Well written and conceived, it presents no major flaws and the argumentation is carefully and thoroughly documented. Nevertheless, the chapters sometimes display a somewhat unclear and unsystematic chaining of arguments. The complexity of the reasoning and discussion of evidence in its manifold literary connections and ideological implications lacks proper summarizing at the end of each chapter in order to make it more intelligible. The mastery of linguistic and methodological issues related to the study of Jeremiah allows Leuchter to uncover less obvious meanings from textual sequences, but also guides him to speculative readings and interpretations: for instance, when he takes bâ‘altî to mean “to become

a Baal” (p. 57), or when he insists the Supplement authors understood the reading of the *Urrolle* to Joachim as a licensed exegetical initiative upon Jeremiah’s work, and not simply as an account not only relating possibly historical events, but also recasting the image of the scribes by making them fully supportive of Jeremiah (pp. 106-107).

Minor isolated conclusions are used to support conclusions of larger hermeneutical reach, creating a network of assumptions supporting each other over limited or problematic textual evidence. Moreover, while stressing the literary and linguistic features of the texts, the author ends up blurring the distinction between Supplements’ representations and the implied historical events behind them. If one recalls Eco’s argument on the *intentio auctoris*, even Leuchter’s steadfast discussion about the authors/redactors’ intentions may be regarded as problematic.

Therefore, the major drawback on the whole interpretive process is eminently historiographical or hermeneutical, and not methodological. Kurt Noll had already expressed serious reservations to Leucher’s thesis concerning the relation between Jeremiah, the josianic reform process and the Šaphanid scribal circles in much the same grounds (cf. *RBL*, 9/2006). Leuchter takes almost for granted that Jeremiah was enthusiastically engaged in deuteronomic ideology and describes him fully supportive of Josiah’s reform. If the book of Jeremiah experienced extensive Dtr redaction and if the scribal circles controlling that process were in some way close to the Šaphanid scribal circles actively engaged in the deuteronomic reform, as Leuchter believes, one would expect the Supplement to enhance the representation of the Šaphanides, as it does, and to make Jeremiah an outstanding advocate of that reform and its subsequent development. It seems that Jeremiah was not so fully supportive of Josiah’s political action: John Bob’s redactional analysis showed that Jeremiah may had disproved Josiah’s nationalism (*Jeremiah’s Kings*, pp. 43-44).

And so we come to face a structural problem: from the hermeneutical point of view, the book of Jeremiah is being transformed into a *post-modern*. Leuchter’s approach, like many recent others, apparently promotes an overexpansion of the hermeneutical possibilities of the

text based upon problematic conjectures on Jeremiah's socio-political and theological positioning during Josiah's rule. Leuchter feels himself free at several moments to deconstruct the text in order to rethink its meaning in isolation and also within its network of implied meanings and referents, i.e., its 'dictionary' and its 'encyclopaedia', almost exclusively on literary terms. The fragile historical Jeremiah emerging from the shadows of over-critical scepticism due to Leuchter's ascription of various textual sequences to the prophet himself turns out to be less solid than one would expect.

In a field of research so complex and polemical as the book of Jeremiah, one needs to remind the boundaries between the strictures of historical interpretation and the liberties of religious exegesis and literary critics. The text in itself may allow a large number of disparate interpretations, but that does not mean they all worth the same or that they are equally valid. Despite all this critical words, one has to acknowledge the insightful, skilful and well-argued enquiry Leuchter has brought forth, presenting fresh readings and certainly contributing to the enriching of the vast scholarship on the book of Jeremiah.