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# “You shall Certainly Drink!”: The Place and Significance of the Oracles Against the Nations in the Book of Jeremiah

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## SUMMARY

The oracles against the nations in the book of Jeremiah (Jer. 46-51) bring along with them many exegetical and theological problems. This article deals with some of these problems: the rationale behind the structure and order of this collection, the discussion about the unity and authenticity of these oracles, a survey of the presumed ‘Sitz im Leben’ (cult, warfare, thinking in terms of

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Sprüche gegen die Nationen im Buch Jeremia (Jer. 46-51) bringen viele exegetische und theologische Probleme mit sich. Dieser Artikel behandelt einige dieser Probleme: das Grundprinzip hinter der Struktur und Anordnung dieser Sammlung, die Diskussion der Einheit und Authentizität dieser Sprüche, einen Überblick über den angenommenen „Sitz im Leben“ (Kultus, Kriegführung, vertragliches Denken) sowie die lästige Angelegen-

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## RÉSUMÉ

Les oracles contre les nations dans le livre de Jérémie (Jr 46-51) présentent de nombreux problèmes exégétiques et théologiques. Le présent article traite de certains d'entre eux : la logique de la structure et de l'ordre de cette collection d'oracles, la question de l'unité et de l'authenticité de ces oracles, leur *Sitz im Leben* présumé (est-ce le culte, la guerre, les traités d'alliances ?), la différence entre la

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## 1. Unknown and Unpopular

In the ecclesiastical practices of preaching, pastoral care, and catechism the Old Testament oracles

(treaties), and the troublesome issue of the different placement in the Septuagint and the Massoretic text. By dealing with these problems a brief ‘Forschungsgeschichte’ of this controversial part of the book of Jeremiah is given as well. Finally, a terse ‘theology’ of these oracles against the nations is offered. The function and meaning of these texts are to be found in the proclamation of the sovereign reign of the King of Zion at a juncture, which turned out to be crucial for the ancient Near Eastern nations.

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heit der unterschiedlichen Platzierung in der Septuaginta und im masoretischen Text. Die Behandlung dieser Probleme führt dabei zu einer kurzen Forschungsgeschichte zu diesem kontroversen Teil des Jeremiabuches. Abschließend wird eine knappe „Theologie“ dieser Sprüche gegen die Nationen angeboten. Die Funktion und die Bedeutung dieser Texte sind in der Proklamation der souveränen Herrschaft des Königs vom Zion in einem kritischen Augenblick zu finden, der sich als äußerst wichtig für die Nationen des Alten Orients entpuppte.

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Septante et le texte massorétique quant à leur position au sein du livre. Ce faisant, il dresse un état de la recherche sur cette portion du livre de Jérémie sujette à controverse. Pour finir, l'auteur offre de façon concise une théologie de ces oracles contre les nations. La fonction et la signification de ces textes réside dans la proclamation du règne souverain du Roi de Sion à une période charnière de l'histoire qui s'est avéré cruciale pour les peuples du Proche-Orient ancien.

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against the nations play hardly any role. This is certainly true of the collection of oracles near the end of the book of Jeremiah, Jer. 46-51. Reasons are

easy to find. These chapters are rightly rated among the most puzzling ones of the book of Jeremiah.<sup>1</sup> The exegete will be fascinated by richly varied metaphors as well as by many allusions to historical events that are unknown to us. Frequently, it is unclear when, where, to whom, and why the oracle was declared. Not only the degree of complexity but also the kerugmatic content has contributed to the unpopularity of these oracles. Many an Old Testament scholar interprets the blazing judgment scenes in these oracles as being based on reprehensible emotions and on a nationalistic and narrow-minded way of thinking, and characterizes these parts as the fruit of 'false prophecy' or, at any rate, as texts that are to be found at the periphery of the prophetic message. These scholars hesitate to attach any theological value to such unattractive texts.

This article explores these and similar problems from a bird's-eye view. After a brief overview of the structure of the collection Jeremiah 46-51 we will respectively deal with the authenticity, the background, and the placement of these oracles. The order of discussion is not arbitrary, but reflects more or less the progression in the scholarly analysis of these chapters.<sup>2</sup> In the earliest phase of the research (the end of the 19th century till the beginning of the 20th century) the literary-critical approach dominated, focusing on the authorship and dating of these chapters. Since the beginning of the thirties and forties of the 20th century more and more often the implications of the fact that collections of oracles against the nations occur in the books of almost all Old Testament prophets were taken into account. Oracles against the nations, one contended, are not to be seen as a marginal phenomenon in the Old Testament. During the second period genre-critical and tradition-critical survey turned to the form and origin of these oracles, often with much energy and sometimes with impressive imagination. The seventies of the 20th century show an increase of, mostly, editorial-critical questions concerning the place and function of the oracles against the nations in their own literary context. Finally, by an analysis of theological motives that lie at the basis of the oracles against the nations, we try to better understand the meaning of these so unknown and underestimated passages of Scripture.

## 2. The Structure of the Oracles Against the Nations

In these six chapters the downfall of the nations is declared to them in fierce colors and in a variety of ways. It is YHWH Zebaoth himself who brings destruction or calls on enemies to bring destruction to other nations. The collection opens with a double oracle against Egypt (Jer. 46) and is closed by a long oracle against Babylon, which encompasses as much as two chapters (Jer. 50-51). From an editorial point of view, the unity of this collection is marked by a summarizing superscription at the beginning ("This is the word of the LORD that came to Jeremiah the prophet concerning the nations," Jer. 46:1) and at the end by the mention of Jeremiah's message to Seraiah, asking him to read the oracle against Babylon aloud and to throw the scroll on which it is written into the Euphrates, which is followed by a closing phrase ("The words of Jeremiah end here" Jer. 51:64). Between the oracles against Egypt at the beginning and those against Babylon at the end seven other nations receive a word of judgment: the Philistines (Jer. 47), Moab (Jer. 48), Ammon, Edom, Damascus, Kedar/Hazor, and Elam (Jer. 49).

It is remarkable how many motives and metaphors these oracles have in common: the cup of judgment which has to be drunk (Jer. 48:26, 49:12, 51:7, 51:39), the devouring sword of God (46:10,14, 47:6-7, 48:2, 49:37, 46:16, 50:16, 35ff.),<sup>3</sup> the wrathful ire of God, the plan of God, the kingship of God, the notion of the time and day of wrath, the nation from the north, the terror all round, the approaching vulture, the spreading fire, etc.<sup>4</sup> Also remarkable are the many doublets, passages that are literally identical to passages elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah (these passages are to be found especially in Jeremiah 4-6 and 30-31).<sup>5</sup> Finally, these texts have a lot in common with the oracles against the nations that we find in Isaiah and Obadiah.

Albeit differing with respect to magnitude, form, and content, the oracles against the nations in the book of Jeremiah can be seen as a thematic and editorial unity. It has to be added that this whole consists of two parts, because in several regards the oracle against Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51 differs from the rest of the collection. In Jeremiah 46-49 Babylon is considered to be the suppressor of the nation, the great 'enemy from the north'; in Jeremiah 50-51 Babylon is considered to be the victim of the nations, especially of the Medes, the

new 'enemy from the north'. Moreover, the oracle against Babylon is out of all proportion compared to the other oracles against the nations. Finally, only in the oracle against Babylon are the violence against and the liberation of Israel mentioned.

The order of the oracles against the nations in Jeremiah 46-51 is not arbitrary, but it is not easy to find out what the rationale behind the order is. Both a chronological order and a geographical order have been proposed. The first option is dependent on the dating of each of the oracles, for which concrete data are more than once absent. The collection presents itself as a collection of oracles that were pronounced between the fourth year of Jehoiakim (Jer. 46:2) and the fourth year of Zedekiah (Jer. 51:59), thus between 605 and 594 BC, the period of the expansion of the New-Babylonian empire. Much more than this cannot be derived from a chronological order.<sup>6</sup> That is why other exegetes defend a geographical order in Jeremiah 46-51, which they interpret as a move from the south to the west and then from the east to the north.<sup>7</sup> This order is as unconvincing as the chronological order. It is true that the placing of Egypt at the beginning and the placing of Babylon at the end of the collection are meaningful. These nations were the two most important antagonists that ruled the world in Jeremiah's days. The Nile and the Euphrates frequently flow over the world around them. Israel has to bow down under the invasion by Egypt in 609 (Pharaoh Neco) and several times under the invasion by Babylon after 605 (king Nebuchadnezzar). The small nations of the Orient go up and down, prosper and decline, as the superpowers come and go. The prophet visionary sees that even Egypt and Babylon themselves at some point will have to bow down before the God of Israel, and in their wake all the nations of the world.<sup>8</sup> But Babylon as the last. And Babylon most of all.<sup>9</sup>

### 3. The Authenticity of the Oracles Against the Nations

The first question which has been asked in the survey of Jeremiah 46-51 and over which many scholars have racked their brains, is the question as to the authorship of these oracles. To be sure, it is said in a few places that the word of the LORD came to the prophet Jeremiah or that God spoke through the service of Jeremiah, and the superscript (46:1) and subscript (51:64) of this collection refer to the same prophet. This, however, does not exclude the

possibility of later extensions or additions. According to some Old Testament scholars, the aforementioned clauses are even to be considered as later glosses that do not pretend to be indicating the author in the way such clauses do nowadays. In his work "Die Reden des Buches Jeremia gegen die Heiden. XXV. XLVI-LI" from 1888, an article which, almost everyone agrees, inaugurated the study of the oracles against the nations in the Old Testament, E. Schwally says that it is impossible that Jeremiah is the author of Jeremiah 46-51.<sup>10</sup> Other celebrities of the literary-critical survey, such as K. Budde, B. Duhm, A. Kuenen, J. Skinner and P. Volz, follow the same trail and answer the question concerning authenticity negatively.

The argumentation used by these academics (which, by the way, even in our days can be found in studies on Jeremiah 46-51) is both of a stylistic and theological nature. According to Schwally, the composition and language of the oracles against the nations significantly differ from the even-tempered style of the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>11</sup> This negative judgment is strengthened by presumed derivations from other books from Scripture. The content of the oracle about Babylon's destruction in Jeremiah 50-51, he contends, seriously conflicts with Jeremiah's continuous preaching about Babylon as the "hammer" of God, God's instrument of punishment. Even more ponderous, as he sees it, is the theological difference between the image of God of the 'genuine' Jeremiah and that of the authors of the oracles against the nations. Jeremiah speaks in the name of the exalted God of the covenant, who calls to repentance and conversion and punishes Israel for his disobedience. Entirely different is the 'Rachegott' of the oracles against the nations who seeks after the destruction of the other nations and leaves Israel undisturbed.<sup>12</sup> Here, so these exegetes claim, a moral-religious motivation stands over against particularistic nationalism.

Now, each of these arguments can be weakened in several ways. Nowadays, the literary qualities of the oracles against the nations are thought of completely differently. Also, scholars have learned to value the doublings within the framework of actualization and reinterpretation of texts. A detailed exegesis, which reckons with the progression in history and the changing situation and address in the oracles, gives short shrift to the contention that there are inconsistencies in their content. On second thoughts the presumed difference in the image of God appears to have to do with the specific theological presumptions, rather than with

factual data about the text. Unconsciously, the total image which those scholars formed of the Old Testament oracle strongly influenced their opinion. Since the work of J. Wellhausen and B. Duhm in the older stage of research the pre-exilic prophets were generally considered mostly as doomsayers to Israel, ethical-religious geniuses who, with their new ideas, stood at right angles to the patriotism of the national religion of Israel. Because of this interpretation from the very start the oracles against the foreign nations were discredited and had to be sidetracked as late and non-authentic, because, it was claimed, they implicitly are oracles of welfare for Israel.<sup>13</sup>

Till today much attention is paid in the literature to the Jeremianic authorship of Jeremiah 46-51. Most scholars are now inclined to ascribe a small or big part of this collection to the prophet Jeremiah himself. For many prophets have spoken words against foreign nations; probably Jeremiah was not an exception in this regard. "I appointed you as a prophet to the nations" (1:4,10): thus reads the calling of Jeremiah. God sends Jeremiah to the nations to let them drink the cup of wrath (25:15). Baruch writes on a scroll all the words that God spoke to Jeremiah "concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations" (36:2). Nevertheless, there might be good reasons to date some parts of the oracles against the nations at a later time.<sup>14</sup> A well-known problem is the fact that the criteria for determining authenticity are often based on circular arguments.

That is why in recent research more and more often the question is asked whether the issue of authorship is truly relevant. K. A. D. Smelik, for instance, proposes to cease searching for the *ipsisima verba* of the prophet and to concentrate on the literary figure 'Jeremiah'.<sup>15</sup> R. P. Carroll, a renowned Jeremiah-commentator, interprets the book of Jeremiah as a later collection of a highly diverse range of thought which has grown in the course of time and which has been kept together by the 'idea' of the prophet Jeremiah.<sup>16</sup> Now, on the one hand we will indeed have to be modest in our judgment on the authenticity of the oracles against the nations. We have to realize that our concepts of authorship and copyrights do not directly apply to the production and tradition of texts in the ancient Near East. It is not without meaning that of some entire books of the Bible the author(s) is (are) unknown to us. On the other hand, we deem that modern research risks creating such an enormous gap between the historical and the literary Jeremiah

that the former disappears behind the latter. When the text is more and more disconnected from the historical text references, the go-ahead is given to speculative reconstructions that proceed from an ideological annexation of the figure of Jeremiah by later religious circles that edited Jeremiah's writings at their own discretion.<sup>17</sup> In a word, the issue of the authenticity of the oracles against the nations – however complicated it may be – remains both hermeneutically and theologically of importance.

#### 4. The Background of the Oracles Against the Nations

Of no less importance is the issue of the background and origin of the oracles against the nations. Unmistakably, Jeremiah has not been the innovator of the phenomenon 'oracle against the nations'. Jeremiah himself makes mention of this fact when he tells Hananiah about the prophets of old who "have prophesied war, disaster and plague against many countries and great kingdoms" (Jer. 28:8). The books of almost all prophets contain oracles against the nations that share many themes and images. What was the nature of this prophetic tradition and in which context of deliverance should we place these oracles? It is improbable that Jeremiah made voyages abroad to prophecy in foreign countries. More plausibly, the oracles were declared in Jerusalem, in the presence of the people of Israel. But what did this look like in practice? Can we say more about the original and actual 'Sitz im Leben' of the oracles against the nations? In form-critical and tradition-critical research, which started in the thirties of the 20th century, three things have been singled out: the relation between the oracle against the nations and Israel's cult, the relation between the oracle against the nations and warfare, and the relation between the oracle against the nations and the provisions of treaties.

The undervaluation of the oracle against the nations as a late product of prophetic epigones suddenly came to an end when the initiator of form-critical research, H. Gunkel, on the basis of a 'gattungsgeschichtliche' analysis thought that the oracle against the nations was not the youngest, but the oldest form of prophecy.<sup>18</sup> He situated the declaration of the oracle against the nations in a cultic setting before a military expedition or during the lamentations after a military defeat. These ideas, although in diverse forms, were rapidly accepted by Old Testament scholars. New terms, such as 'cult prophets' and 'prophetic liturgies' were intro-

duced. Highly influential was S. Mowinckel, who interpreted the new year festival in the autumn as a celebration of the kingship of YHWH as Lord of the cosmos, whose accession to the throne also meant judgment on the hostile powers of chaos. It was claimed that prophets put mythical-cultic elements of this accession feast into their oracles against the nations.<sup>19</sup> An even stronger claim was made by H.G. Reventlow, who postulates a prophetic ceremony of imprecation in the context of covenantal feasts. He refers to Egyptian ‘curse texts’ that were scrutinized by A. Bentzen. These were proverbs directed at hostile nations and kings written on earthenware. This earthenware was broken in a ceremony of curse in order to magically destroy the power of potential enemies.<sup>20</sup> Now, the oracles against the nations themselves never give any explicit signal about a cultic origin or function. However, we do know about activities of Jeremiah in, and in the neighborhood of, the temple. It is not impossible that the oracles against the nations had a place within a cultic context – during the Feast of Tabernacles, for instance – but conclusive evidence is still to be found.

Some exegetes interpret the oracles against the nations against a completely different background, especially those who belong to the Harvard school of E.M. Cross: the background of warfare. The ancient Near East knew the practice of imprecations directed at hostile nations at the occasion of war, as is shown, for instance, by the Mari-texts that date from the 18th century BC. The ever present element in the oracles against the nations seems to be the military phraseology.<sup>21</sup> The history of Balaam (Nu 22-24) indeed shows how one could use prophetic imprecations before the battle started to paralyze the enemy. Elsewhere in the Old Testament as well prophets appear to be involved in warfare (cf., for instance, I Ki 20 or II Ki 3). Following G. von Rad the oracles against the nations are related to the tradition of the holy war and the notion of the Yom YHWH, the day on which God himself will destroy the enemies.<sup>22</sup> One can also point to texts such as Psalm 2 and Psalm 110, in which hostile nations are called to bow down before the king of Zion, who is considered to be a universal king. Although I think literary influence is possible, it seems to me improbable that the oracles against the nations are a theological transformation of ancient war oracles. For many oracles against the nations are directed at nations with whom Israel was not at war or could not even get at war with (such as Elam in the prophecy of

Jer. 49:34-39). Moreover, in many cases the reason for the judgment on the nations is not to be sought in an aggressive attitude toward Israel.

A third line of explanation is defended by scholars who were persuaded by the publications of G.E. Mendenhall, F.C. Fensham, D.R. Hillers, and others. These scholars claim that the ancient Near Eastern way of thinking in terms of treaties strongly influenced the oracles against the nations.<sup>23</sup> Treaties, sanctioned by curses, structured and confirmed the international relations of those days. In this way the relation between the suzerain and the vassal could be laid down unambiguously. There are numerous parallels between conventional covenant curses and prophetic doom messages. Not only did the prophets use stereotypical curse formulas in the articulation of their oracles against the nations, but the immediate cause for these oracles is also to be found in the violation of treaties between Israel and other nations. T.G. Smothers, for example, suspects that the thought of the *imperium Dei* is to be sought behind the oracles against the nations in Jeremiah 46-49: God is the suzerain, Nebuchadnezzar is his servant, and the nations rebel against him by violating the treaties with Babylon.<sup>24</sup> A problem for this interpretation as an elaborated covenantal curse is that nowhere in Jeremiah 46-51 – not even implicitly – do we read about the conclusion or violation of a treaty.

In summary we can say that the genre-critical and tradition-critical research of the oracles against the nations, partly inspired by parallels with the Umwelt, has offered enlightening and often surprising points of view that contribute to a better understanding of the function and context of curses directed at the enemy. The question as to the concrete background of the oracles against the nations, however, remains unanswered. Till today it has turned out to be impossible to formally or contextually interpret these oracles, which in all their variation are literature *sui generis*, by a unifying definition.

## 5. The Place of the Oracles Against the Nations

During the last few decennia in the survey of Old Testament oracles against the nations more and more emphasis has been laid on synchronic text analysis. It turns out to be no longer possible to treat the collection of Jeremiah 46-51 as an isolated, secondary appendix. Exegetes pay more and more attention to the place of this part in the

whole of Jeremiah, the function of this placing and possible editorial intentions of this placing. Here, we touch a broad area of text critical and edition critical problems that, because of their size and complexity, we can deal with only summarily.

As we know, there are considerable differences with respect to the size and ordering of the material of the Hebrew and Greek texts of the book of Jeremiah.<sup>25</sup> The old discussion which of these two texts has priority came into a new phase when in Chirbeth Qumran two different sorts of Hebrew texts of Jeremiah were found, one proto-Massoretic text (2 QJer, 4QJer<sup>a</sup> and 4 QJer<sup>c</sup>) and a text which shows great resemblance to the presumed Septuaginta-Vorlage (4QJer<sup>b</sup> and 4QJer<sup>d</sup>).<sup>26</sup> The Septuagint places the oracles against the nations not at the end, but in the middle of the book, after Jeremiah 25:1-13. This is a part in which Jeremiah announces judgment on Judah and the nations. This judgment will be exercised by the enemy of the north. This is followed by the oracles against the nations, but in an order different from that of the Massoretic text. Elam, Egypt, and Babylon, and then the smaller nations. In the Septuagint this is closed by the cup vision of Jeremiah 25:15ff., in which the prophet has to accept the cup filled with the wine of wrath out of God's hand, in order to give it to the nations – an evocative résumé of the oracles against the nations. Often the structure of the Septuagint is thought of as more original than that of the Massoretic text, partly because the Septuagint shows the same tripartite structure which can be found in the writings of the other prophets: first a series of doom oracles against Israel, then oracles of judgment directed at the nations, and finally oracles of salvation for Israel. In this structure the oracles against the nations form the condition for and introduction to Israel's recovery.

Still, a few questions remain. The connection of Jeremiah 25:1-13 to the oracles against the nations is not without problems. The same applies to the relation to 25:15ff. It is telling that some scholars consider the cup vision to be not the closing of, but, the introduction to the collection of oracles against the nations. Also, a transposition of the oracles against the nations from the middle to the end of the book is less intelligible than its reverse. Moreover, the order of the oracles against the nations in the Septuagint clearly differs from the order in the cup vision, which is almost identical to the order of the Massoretic text. Another problem is that in the structure of the Septuagint the downfall of Babylon, which is described extensively, is placed in the

middle of the book of Jeremiah, whereas in the second half of the book the very same Babylon still functions (and functions even more than it used to) as God's instrument to punish Israel.

That is why it is understandable that several exegetes, such as A. Rofé, S.R. Seitz, G. Fischer, and Oosterhoff have pled in defense of the priority of the Massoretic text.<sup>27</sup> According to Oosterhoff, the placing of the oracles against the nations in the Septuagint is based on a misunderstanding both of the first and the second part of Jeremiah 25. He considers certain text elements in Jeremiah 25 that refer directly to the oracles against the nations to be later glosses (vs. 13 and vs. 26b). We think, however, that there are too many formal and material analogies between the cup vision of Jeremiah 25 and the collection of oracles against the nations in Jeremiah 46-51: one cannot deny a certain relation between these two parts, as Oosterhoff does. The wine in the cup which Jeremiah offers to the nations is the judgment which he preaches in the broad fanning out of his oracles against the nations. It remains questionable, however, whether the search for the original literary unity of these parts and the reasons for a later disconnection in the final edition of the book of Jeremiah can lead to satisfactory results.

Further research into the place of the oracles against the nations in the Massoretic text is Jeremiah is desirable. Interesting lines have been drawn by exegetes such as J.G. McConville, who considers the theology of the new covenant in Jeremiah 30-33 to be the key for understanding the oracles against the nations (mostly the oracle against Babylon)<sup>28</sup> and also by C.R. Seitz, who accepts the parallelism between Moses and Jeremiah, the first and last great prophets, as 'Leitmotif' for a deuteronomic edition. According to Seitz, the exegesis of Jeremiah 45 (the promise to Baruch) is crucial, for Jeremiah 45 functions as a bridge and offers an introduction to the oracles against the nations.<sup>29</sup>

However that may be, it seems clear that in the Massoretic text of Jeremiah which has been handed over to us, the place of the oracles against the nations is functional. Their inclusion with Jeremiah's calling vision in chapter 1 puts the whole book under strain. God had appointed Jeremiah "over the nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (Jer. 1:10). After Jeremiah 25, where the cup is handed to all nations, Jeremiah 26-45 recounts the exercise of judgment, because Jerusalem had to drink as the first of all (Jer. 25:19). After Israel

come the nations, Egypt, the great antipode of Babylon, coming in front. It is on Egypt that a refuge remnant from Judah puts its trust (Jeremiah 43-44.). The apotheosis is formed by a prophetic word about Babylon, a cacophonous judgment composition about the downfall of Babylon in which we also hear an eschatological voice telling us about a new beginning for Israel.<sup>30</sup>

## 6. The Purpose and Meaning of the Oracles Against the Nations

This brings us to the last question, the question concerning the theological meaning of the oracles against the nations. This question is quickly answered, if one agrees with P. Volz that the oracles against the nations show “in religiösen und ästhetischen Werten einen unter die Propheten herabführenden Rückschritt,”<sup>31</sup> or if one agrees with H. Barthke that the oracles against the nations have to be ascribed to the starting time of Jeremiah, when he still functioned as a cultic prophet announcing welfare.<sup>32</sup> Less positive is R.P. Carroll, who claims that the oracles against the nations are superseded already within the book of Jeremiah itself: “They (...) represent a view of life rapidly disappearing.”<sup>33</sup> These scholars – and many with them! – paid little attention to the specific function that the oracles against the nations had in the prophetic preaching and in the concrete life of Israel and, therefore, were unable to assess their value.<sup>34</sup> What did prophets such as Jeremiah aim at by their oracles against the nations? What did they want their listeners to do?

In earlier research it was thought that the listeners in question were the heathen nations themselves and that the oracles against the nations contained an implicit call to conversion. One refers to Jeremiah 27, which describes how Jeremiah, having a yoke on his neck, brings a message of God concerning the nations to the delegates that for diplomatic purposes are in Jerusalem. Also, Jeremiah 12:14ff. speaks about nations that get used to the ways of God’s people and want to swear to God. And is it not true that Seraiah has to read aloud the oracle against Babylon in the city itself (Jer. 51:61)? Nevertheless, the addressee of the oracles against the nations, that, by the way, do not contain any call to conversion, is Israel itself. It is in the city of God, in front of God’s people, that the prophets announced judgment to the nations in the name of God. But with what purpose?

Particularly in the literature which places the

oracles against the nations in a cultic context, the view can be found that the words of doom against the nations were in fact words of welfare for Israel. For the downfall of hostile nations *ipso facto* meant the salvation of God’s people. In the same way as ancient prophetic war oracles cursed the enemy and strengthened one’s own armed forces, the oracles against the nations are thought to have been a consolation and encouragement for the assailed Israelites. It is hard to imagine that this was indeed the universal purpose of the oracles against the nations. Only in Jeremiah 50-51 is the judgment explained by reference to the crimes against Israel and does Babylon’s downfall bring the resurrection of Israel. More often the oracles concern Israel’s factual or possible allies than Israel’s enemies, which is why these oracles probably evoked fear rather than joy. This is confirmed by the tone of dismay which governs the oracles.<sup>35</sup> If the oracles against the nations were veiled prophecies of welfare for Israel, it would be incomprehensible that four times in Jeremiah 46-51 a word of welfare is added to a word of judgment on a foreign nation (46:26, 48:47, 49:6, 49:39).<sup>36</sup> This view is also contradicted by the fact that in other collections of oracles against the nations Israel itself has a place among the nations (see Amos 2 and Isaiah 22).

According to another explanation, the central aim of the oracles against the nations is to warn Israel not to trust in foreign powers or to enter into a treaty with them.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps this thought plays a role in some oracles, such as Jeremiah 46, but elsewhere it is completely absent.

We think that the primary intention of the oracles against the nations cannot be translated into terms of a call to conversion, encouragement or warning, but that it only becomes clear when we see that the oracles unanimously put the acts of God at the centre and contain a concentrated preaching of the God, who reveals himself as “the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty” (this clause is used three times in Jeremiah 46-51: 46:18, 48:15, 51:57). A lawsuit between God and the nations is unfolded before the eyes of those who hear these oracles. The heart of the collection of oracles in Jeremiah 46-51 is formed by the oracle against Elam, which is in a class of its own and which shows in a pregnant way the rationale of the oracles against the nations: the erection of the ‘throne’ of YHWH.<sup>38</sup>

From the beginning the relation between God and the nations plays an important role in the book of the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah is appointed as

prophet for the nations (1:5,10), who announces the punishment of God to all who are circumcised only in the flesh, those of Israel and those of the foreign nations (9:25-26), and who himself has prayed for wrath on the nations (10:25). God is called “King of the nations, the living God, the eternal King. When he is angry, the earth trembles; the nations cannot endure his wrath.” (10:7,10). At the same time hope is given that once the nations will come and serve the name of the Israel’s God (3:17, 12:15v., 16:19). In Jeremiah’s preaching the contours of ‘the enemy from the north’ become clearer and clearer: Nebuchadnezzar is the servant who is used by the God of Israel to discipline Israel and the nations. The cup of judgment is given to all the nations and if they refuse to take it, Jeremiah is to say in God’s name: “You must drink it!” (25:28). It is God who ordains by his sovereign will: “With my great power and outstretched arm I made the earth and its people and the animals that are on it, and I give it to anyone I please. Now I will hand all your countries over to my servant Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon” (27:5). “The tumult will resound to the ends of the earth, for the LORD will bring charges against the nations; he will bring judgment on all mankind” (25:31).

In the oracles against the nations themselves this coming judgment is motivated in different ways. Only seldom, as we said, is the attitude toward Israel the cause of God’s anger. The view of Smothers and others, who see at the background of the oracles against the nations a violated treaty with Babylon which is avenged by God as the keeper of international law, does not find any basis in the text itself. The same applies to the view of Barton, who postulates the violation of some sort of natural law as the cause for God’s judgment, an ‘international customary law’, which is not so much related to the laws and commandments of God. Rather, it just follows from ‘common moral sense’.<sup>39</sup> Clearly the motif of hubris can be found in the oracles against the nations: the foreign nation, full of pride and mockery, has turned against God. It is his name which comes into play.

Placed in the historical context of the end of the seventh and the beginning of the sixth century BC the oracles against the nations offer a breathtaking message. In the whirlpool of the downfall of Assyria which terrorized the world for centuries and the emergence of Babylon which takes Assyria’s place, Judah sinks into despair. A storm of destruction proceeds through all countries. Soon, Jerusalem will be taken, the temple will be devas-

tated and the people of Israel will be decimated and dispersed. When everything collapses and all hold falls away, the prophetic finger points to him, who sovereignly goes his way in this hectic world. It points to him who is not bound to geographical or ethnic borders. The prophetic word is the scan which shows the world events in the light of God and his deeds. Not politics, but God determines history. At the background of the insanity of those days, not fate but the hand of God rules. Nebuchadnezzar is only the servant of him who in his majesty calls nations, and governs the progression of times after his will and plan. No injustice will go unpunished: the heathen nations also have to give account to him. Those who reach for world wide power are punished by this King. He does not allow the powers of evil to triumph permanently. In the big tangle of history, with all its evil and incomprehensible suffering, God rules.

In this preaching of God’s world wide sovereign kingship the permanent value of the oracles against the nations is to be found. These passages of Scripture certainly are not the product of a narrow-minded and nationalistic way of thinking. Rather, they offer a universal view of the nations. The centre of history lies in Judah, in Jerusalem – the judgment on the nations is directly related to the judgment on Israel, which has to drink the cup first. Although everything in the Old Testament is centered around Israel, YHWH Zebaot is concerned with much more: the nations over which he rules. In this way the oracles against the nations take their place between particularism and universalism, in a *historia salutis* which leads to the One, who has accepted the cup out of the hand of the Father and has drunk it to the bottom, on whom judgment was exercised fully, as a Lamb who died for his own enemies, and who in that way broke down the separating wall, the Lion from Judah’s tribe, the King of kings.

## Notes

- 1 D. R. Jones, *Jeremiah* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 484: “These chapters compete for the reputation of being the most puzzling in the book of Jeremiah, and no confident conclusions can be expected in respect of date, authorship, purpose or the history of transmission.”
- 2 Besides the commentaries on these chapters, several dissertations are devoted to Jeremiah’s oracles against the nations: L. H. K. Bleeker, *Jeremia’s profetieën tegen de volkeren* (Cap. XXV, XLVI-XLIX) (Groningen: Wolters, 1894); E. Coste, *Die Weissagungen*

- des Propheten Jeremias wider die fremden Völker. Eine kritische Studie über das Verhältnis des griechischen Textes der LXX zum masorethischen Texte* (Leipzig, 1895); L. C. Hay, *The Oracles Against the Foreign Nations in Jeremiah 46-51* (Nashville, 1960); C. de Jong, *De volken bij Jeremia. Hun plaats in zijn prediking en in het boek Jeremia* (Kampen: Kok, 1978); D. J. Reimer, *The Oracles Against Babylon in Jeremiah 50-5: A Horror Among the Nations* (San Francisco: University Press, 1993); A.O. Bellis, *The Structure and Composition of Jeremiah 50:2-51:58* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1995) and B. Huwlyer, *Jeremia und die Völker. Untersuchungen zu den Völkersprüchen in Jeremia 46-49* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament, 20), (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997).
- 3 Cf. P. Volz, *Der Prophet Jeremia* (KAT; Leipzig: Deichert, 1928), 389v.
  - 4 Cf. D. R. Jones, *Jeremiah*, 487.
  - 5 See A. Marx, “A propos des doublets du livre de Jérémie. Rélections sur la formation d’un livre prophétique,” in *Prophecy* (ed. J. A. Emerton; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), 106-120.
  - 6 A clearly chronological order is absent; Jeremiah 47, for instance, seems to treat events that occurred before those in Jeremiah 46, cf. B. J. Oosterhoff, *Jeremia. Deel 1* (COT; Kok: Kampen, 1990), 61. Compare also A. Dicou, “De structuur van de verzameling profetieën over de volken in Jeremia 46-51,” *ACEBT* 10 (1989): 84-87.
  - 7 Thus, for instance, G. Fohrer, “Vollmacht über Völker und Königreiche (Jer. 46-51),” in idem, *Studien zu alttestamentlichen Texten und Themen* (1966-1972) (BZAW 155), (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1981), 44-52.
  - 8 Cf. D. L. Christensen, *Prophecy and War in Ancient Israel. Studies in the Oracles against the Nations in Old Testament Prophecy*, Berkeley 1989; id., “In Quest of the Autograph of the Book of Jeremiah: A Study of Jeremiah 25 in Relation to Jeremiah 46-51,” *JETS* 33 (1990): 145-153.
  - 9 Perhaps the structure of the oracles against the nations, as we find them in the book of Jeremiah, contains a reference to the beginning (Egypt) and the end (Babylon) of Israel’s history; cf. G. Fischer, *Jeremia 26-52* (HThKAT, Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005), 463.
  - 10 F. Schwally, “Die Reden des Buches Jeremia gegen die Heiden. XXV. XLVI-LI,” *ZAW* 8 (1888): 177-216.
  - 11 The style of the oracles against the nations is “unruhig und verworren, voll Wiederholungen, ohne jede Disposition (..) während der echte Jeremia klar und ruhig entwickelt” (“Die Reden”, 206).
  - 12 H. Barthke, “Jeremia der Fremdvölkerprophet,” *ZAW* 53 (1935): 231, for instance, contends: “Auch als Fremdvölkerprophet hätte Jeremia Jahwe richten, nicht rächen lassen.”
  - 13 Cf. F. Fechter, *Bewältigung der Katastrophe. Untersuchungen zu ausgewählten Fremdvölkersprüchen im Ezechielbuch* (BZAW 208), (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1992), 6f. and J. H. Hayes, “The Usage of Oracles against Foreign Nations in Ancient Israel,” *JBL* 87 (1968): 81-92.
  - 14 J. R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (AB 21 A), (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 150, rightly speaks of “a mix of genuine and nongenuine sayings”: “a blanket judgment either for or against Jeremianic authorship of the collection does not seem possible.” The most recent commentary on Jeremiah, that of G. Fischer, published in 2005, places the author of the book in the 4th century BC.
  - 15 K. A. D. Smelik, “De functie van Jeremia 50 en 51 binnen het boek Jeremia,” *NTT* 41 (1987): 265f.
  - 16 R. P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant. Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); idem, “Intertextuality and the Book of Jeremiah: Animadversions on Text and Theory,” in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTS 143) (ed. J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 55-78; idem, *Jeremiah* (OTL; London: SCM, 19962). Cf. W. McKane, *Jeremiah* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), clxxi.
  - 17 Cf. two PhD-thesis on Jeremiah that take opposed views in this matter: J. Dubbink, *Waar is de HEER? Dynamiek en actualiteit van het woord van JHWH bij Jeremia*, (Gorinchem: Narratio, 1997), and H. Lalleman – de Winkel, *Jeremiah in Prophetic Tradition. An Examination of the Book of Jeremiah in the Light of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions* (CBET 26) (Leuven: Peters, 2000).
  - 18 H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen. Die Gattungen der religiösen Literatur Israels*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 19854), xxxii-xxxiii.
  - 19 S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien II*, (Amsterdam: Schippers, 1961), 71-73.
  - 20 H. G. Reventlow, *Das Amt des Propheten bei Amos* (FRLANT 80), (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962), 56-75; idem, *Wächter über Israel. Ezechiel und seine Tradition* (BZAW 82), (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1962), 134-157.
  - 21 Cf. M. Sæbø, Sacharja 9-14. *Untersuchungen zu Text und Form* (WMANT 34), (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969); R. Bach, *Die Aufforderungen zur Flucht und zum Kampf im alttestamentlichen Prophetenspruch* (WMANT 9), (Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener Verlag, 1962).
  - 22 G. von Rad, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (ATHANT 20), (Zürich: Zwingli Verlag, 1951).
  - 23 Cf. the summary of the research on this topic in the interesting monograph by D. J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant. A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testaments* (Analecta Biblica 21), (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981<sup>3</sup>).

- 24 T. G. Smothers, "A Lawsuit against the Nations: Reflections on the Oracles against the Nations in Jeremiah," *Review and Expositor* 85 (1988): 545-554; G. L. Keown (a.o.), *Jeremiah 26-52* (WBC 27; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 275-277.
- 25 The literature offers an extensive treatment of this issue. Among the more recent works are P. -M. Bogaert, "Le livre de Jérémie en perspective: les deux rédactions antiques selon les travaux en cours," *RB* 101 (1994): 363-406; B. Gosse, "La place primitive du recueil d'Oracles contre les Nations dans le livre de Jérémie," *BN* 74 (1994): 28-30; idem, "Jérémie XLV et la place du recueil d'Oracles contre les Nations dans le livre de Jérémie," *VT* 40 (1990): 145-151; A. Schenker, "La redaction longue du livre de Jérémie doit-elle être datée au temps des premiers hasmonéens?," *ETL* 70 (1994): 281-293; J. W. Watts, "Text and Redaction in Jeremiah's Oracles against the Nations," *CBQ* 54 (1992): 432-447; E. Tov, "The Literary History of the Book of Jeremiah in Light of its Textual History," in idem, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible. Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (VTS 72; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 363-384; G. L. Archer, "The Relationship between the Septuagint Translation and the Massoretic Text in Jeremiah," *TEJ* 12 (1991): 139-150; F. D. Hubmann, "Bemerkungen zur älteren Diskussion um die Unterschiede zwischen MT und G im Jeremiabuch," in *Jeremia und die "deuteronomistische Bewegung"* (BBB 98), (ed. W. Gross; Weinheim: Beltz Athenäum, 1995), 263-270; C. J. Sharp, "'Take Another Scroll and Write'." A Study of the LXX and the MT of Jeremiah's Oracles Against Egypt and Babylon," *VT* 47 (1997): 487-509.
- 26 Cf. E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 319-327.
- 27 G. Fischer, "Jer. 25 und die Fremdvölkersprüche: Unterschiede zwischen hebräischem und griechischem Text," *Biblica* 72 (1991): 474-499; B. J. Oosterhoff, *Jeremia*, 64-72; A. Rofé, "The Arrangement of the Book of Jeremiah," *ZAW* 101 (1989): 390-398; C. R. Seitz, "Mose als Prophet. Redaktionsthemen und Gesamtstruktur des Jeremiabuches," *BZ* 34 (1990): 234-245; idem, "The Prophet Moses and the Canonical Shape of Jeremiah," *ZAW* 101 (1989): 3-27.
- 28 J. G. McConville, *Judgment and Promise. An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah*, (Leicester: Apollon, 1993).
- 29 See the literature mentioned in footnote 25.
- 30 Cf. K. A. D. Smelik, "De functie van Jeremia 50 en 51 binnen het boek Jeremia," *NTT* 41 (1987): 265-278; idem, "The Function of Jeremiah 50-51 in the Book of Jeremiah," in *Reading the Book of Jeremiah. A Search for Coherence* (ed. M. Kessler; Winona Lake, 2004), 87-98 and K. T. Aitken, "The Oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51: Structures and Perspectives," *TynB* 35 (1984): 25-63.
- 31 P. Volz, *Jeremia*, 380.
- 32 H. Barthke, "Jeremia", 232.
- 33 R. P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant. Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 252.
- 34 The undervaluation of the oracles against the nations, which dominated Old Testament research for a long time, has come to an end. The view that the oracles against the nations contain an outburst of xenophobia and narrow-minded nationalism (cf. in this line of thinking W. McKane in his commentary on Jeremiah in *ICC*), is shared by only a few nowadays. In recent times several monographs have appeared that try to do justice to the specific intention of the oracles against the nations. Besides the literature mentioned in footnote 2 see, for instance: J. Barton, *Amos's Oracles against the Nations. A Study of Amos 1.3-2.5* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980); D. L. Christensen, *Prophecy and War in Ancient Israel. Studies in the Oracles against the Nations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1989); J. H. Hayes, *The Oracles against the Nations in the Old Testament. Their Usage and Theological Importance* (Princeton, 1964); P. Höffken, *Untersuchungen zu den Begründungselementen der Völkerorakel des Alten Testaments* (Bonn, 1977); B. B. Margulis, *Studies in the Oracles Against the Nations* (Ann Harbor, 1967); M. Cahill, "The Oracles Against the Nations: Synthesis and Analysis for Today," *Lowain Studies* 16 (1991): 121-136; P. C. Beentjes, "Oracles against the Nations. A Central Issue in the 'Latter Prophets'," *Bijdragen* 50 (1989): 203-209; D. H. Ryou, *Zephaniah's Oracles Against the Nations. A Synchronic and Diachronic Study of Zephaniah 2:1-3-8* (Amsterdam, 1994).
- 35 There is good reason to agree with B. Huwlyer, *Jeremia*, 323: "In den Völkersprüchen wird Juda gerade nicht Heil angesagt, sondern zutiefst bedrohlich, ernst und besorgniserregend – dasselbe Unheil, welches in der Sicht Jeremias die Nachbarvölker ohne Ausnahme trifft" (cf. 303f.). Cf. also R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition*, (Atlanta: Blackwell, 1975), 58ff.; G. R. Hamborg, "Reasons for Judgment in the Oracles against the Nations of the Prophet Isaiah," *VT* 31 (1981): 145-159 and D. H. Ryou, *Zephaniah's Oracles*, 328f.
- 36 B. Huwlyer, *Jeremia*, 382, rightly claims that the reason for this number and this placing of promises of welfare is not clear, in spite of the work of P. Höffken, "Zu den Heilszusätzen in der Völkerorakelsammlung des Jeremiabuches. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Frage nach den Überlieferungsinteressen an den Völkerorakelsammlungen der Prophetenbücher," *VT* 27 (1977): 398-412; cf. also C. de Jong, *De volken bij Jeremia*, 381f. It is interesting, by the way, that in the Septuagint, the oracle against Elam is the only one which has a superscript and a prophecy of welfare at the end.

- 37 Thus C. de Jong, *De volken bij Jeremia*, passim.  
38 Cf. H. G. L. Peels, "God's Throne in Elam: The Historical Background and Literary Context of Jeremiah 49:34-39," in *Past, Present, Future. The Deuteronomistic History and the Prophets* (OTS XLIV;

ed. J.C. de Moor & H.F. van Rooij; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 216-229.

- 39 J. Barton, *Amos's Oracles*, passim; idem, "Natural Law and Poetic Justice in the O.T.," *JTS* 30 (1979): 1-14.

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