

PLOT, PROPHECY AND JEREMIAH

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Jeremiah's canonical form has always generated lively discussion among critics. The prophecy's many genres, seemingly chaotic chronology, and uncertain authorship provide ample opportunity for a variety of scholarly ideas, even scholarly "schools." Despite the diversity of opinion, however, commentators generally agree on one topic. They almost all doubt that Jeremiah exhibits any unity of content or purpose. Indeed many writers rearrange the prophecy before attempting to analyze its message.

Besides the book's unusual nature, the normal scholarly means of explicating Scripture may work against discovering unity in Jeremiah. Most commentators focus on the historical situations that led to the writing of Biblical books.¹ Thus Jeremiah experts are compelled to note Jeremiah's lack of consecutive historical sequencing and then must reconstruct the text according to their proposed historical setting. Over time this methodology has produced brilliant studies on Jeremiah's text, historical background and authorship, but it has not led to consensus on the order of the canonical prophecy.

The present article uses literary-critical principles to analyze Jeremiah. Historical approaches are not thereby deemed unnecessary or inappropriate. Rather, they are simply not expected to yield results foreign to their own purpose. Historical criticism must seek to recover the order in which every part of Jeremiah was composed, but literary criticism can exegete the book in its received order. Plot analysis is stressed to discover potential unifying elements in Jeremiah. If the book has a coherent plot, then the prophecy's canonical form may make more sense.

I. PLOT: A WORKING DEFINITION

Any work attempting to explain a literary piece's plot must provide a definition of "plot." A definition is not needed for special pleading or imposing foreign ideas on the Biblical text but because of the complexity of plots in various literary genres and because of disagreements among literary scholars concerning the nature of plot.

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¹ Recently some writers have interpreted parts of Jeremiah in its literary context; cf. T. Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of Self* (JSOTSup 32; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984); A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* (JSOTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987); K. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (SBLDS 94; Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).

Various definitions of plot have been forwarded. Some scholars think it is a structural device, some a way of introducing and developing characters, some simply what occurs in a story, and some how the author orders the reader's emotions.² I take an Aristotelian approach to plot. Aristotle believed that effective plots include specific elements. Plot reveals a definite progression of events that unfold due to "causal necessity":

Now, according to our definition, Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole and of a certain magnitude. A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it. A well-constructed plot, therefore, must neither begin nor end at haphazard, but conform to these principles.³

Note that the events that compose the beginning, middle and end take place as a natural consequence of "what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity."⁴ At its most foundational level, then, plot is a unified sequence of logically-caused happenings. One event leads to another as a work divulges its purpose.

Aristotle also charts how a beginning, middle and end are formed. He claims that every well-formed plot has its three major sequential segments formed by a distinct problem or conflict that must be settled.⁵ Without such elements, plot dissolves into an insignificant account of an event. Indeed without these plot devices, Hugh Holman warns, "*plot* does not exist."⁶

Holman also discusses how conflicts are normally resolved. An author introduces the story's characters and setting, exposes the conflict, brings the conflict to a crisis point, begins to solve the problem, and eventually provides a conclusion—what Aristotle called a denouement—to the conflict.⁷ Each of these aspects is implicit in Aristotle's comments on a logically-caused beginning, middle and end.

Because there are various types of conflicts in a story there are several kinds of plots in literature. For example, a story can be tragic, comic, or satirical. Aristotle contended that whether a plot is tragic or comic depends on how an author decides to imitate life. Tragedy takes a character who is superior to other human beings and changes the protagonist's fortunes from good to bad, doing so to inspire terror and pity in the reader.⁸ Comedy, on the other hand, presents a main figure who is often flawed in some

² Note W. Martin's excellent analysis of relevant theories in *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986).

³ *Dramatic Theory and Criticism: Greeks to Grotowski* (ed. B. F. Dukore; New York: Holt, Rinehart, 1974) 37–38.

⁴ *Ibid.* 39.

⁵ *Ibid.* 47.

⁶ C. H. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (3d ed.; New York: Odyssey, 1972) 398.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Dramatic* 42–43.

way but who still triumphs. At times the comedic hero has talents equal to those of other characters but is harassed by enemies or circumstances. Nevertheless the hero emerges victorious. Since the conclusion in comedy is pleasant to the audience, there is little or no regret at story's end.⁹

It is important to note that the ordering of plot elements depends on what an author intends for a work to accomplish.¹⁰ Each writer, OT or otherwise, carefully selects the literary devices that best convey the writer's purpose for writing. Many events, characters and themes may be available. But, as Holman explains,

the demands of *plot* stipulate that the author *select* from this welter of event and reflection those items which have a certain unity, which point to a certain end, which have a common interrelationship, which represent not more than two or three threads of interest and activity. *Plot* brings order out of life; it selects only one or two emotions out of a dozen, one or two conflicts out of hundreds, only two or three people out of thousands, and a half-dozen episodes from possible millions. In this sense it focuses life.¹¹

From this extremely brief survey it is possible to offer an initial working definition of plot. Plot is a selected sequence of logically-caused events that solve a conflict by utilizing established literary conventions such as introduction, complication, crisis and denouement. Plots are usually tragic or comic and convey the author's message. These characteristics are the heart of the Aristotelian meaning of plot and will be used to analyze Jeremiah.

II. PLOT AND PROPHECY

It is fair to question whether Biblical prophecies exhibit coherent plots. After all, many commentators focus on the minute details of the smallest units of each book. Such critics pay little attention to the prophecies' larger strategies for conveying truth, though outlines of books are offered. Many writers stress the oral nature of prophecy and question whether a collection of sermons can have a purposeful sequence. So the typical way of approaching prophecy leads to basic questions of sequence and purpose.

In response, no good reason exists to interpret prophecy solely in an atomistic fashion. Certainly the smallest portions of a book must be scrutinized. But it is undesirable to enthrone the atomistic approach as the only means of analyzing texts. In its canonical form the Bible appears as a finished literary product. The prophetic books, particularly the major prophets, emerge as distinct literary constructions. To interpret them as such does justice to the final form of the books themselves.

Some misconceptions about plot itself also make it necessary to determine if prophecies have plots. (1) Some people only identify plot with narrative fiction—that is, they imagine that novels and short stories have

⁹ Cf. *Dramatic* 35. For a more thorough description of comedy and tragedy cf. N. Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (New York: Atheneum, 1967).

¹⁰ The word "author" here means whoever first finalizes a text.

¹¹ Holman, *Handbook* 398.

plots but assume that poems and prophecies do not. Upon further reflection they may recall that verse drama and epics like the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have plots, but they continue to doubt that shorter (lyric) poems possess a story line. (2) Too many readers think that, even if a short poem or speech has a plot, a collection of brief poems such as we find in Jeremiah could not produce a coherent plot. (3) Some may doubt that a work like Jeremiah that contains more than one genre could possess elements of plot. (4) Since Jeremiah does not follow strict chronological order, suspicions about its coherence have arisen.

Such misconceptions, however, reveal an unnecessarily narrow view of plot. If such ideas are accepted, then much great literature cannot be said to have unity in any real sense of the word.

Though plot is perhaps easier to locate in prose it also appears in poetic works. Even sonnets, which have only fourteen lines, present a narrative.¹² Other examples of short poems with progression of thought or action are easy to find. John Donne's love lyrics have a sequence of action, as do George Herbert's religious poems. Many short psalms display similar tendencies. Some poems may not have narrative movement. But without a serious analysis of the question it is incorrect to argue that short poetic segments, as are often displayed in Jeremiah, cannot have plots.

Can a collection of poems or speeches possess a plot? Obviously a set of poetic speeches can constitute a plot, since verse drama spans at least 2,500 years. In that genre, how the author arranges the characters' speeches determines a play's story line. With the proper structuring, a collection of short poems can dictate causal action. For example, Herbert gathers his poems together to lead the reader through *The Temple*. Chaucer uses his tales to get his travelers to Canterbury. John Walton, Gerald Wilson and John Stek have argued that groups of psalms may work toward a common thematic purpose.¹³

Many great literary works make use of more than one genre. Chaucer mixes prose and poetry, sermon and fabliau, narrative and dramatic presentation. Shakespeare places sonnets in the mouths of his characters. The *Iliad* is an epic with tragic implications, while the *Odyssey* uses many comic devices. Furthermore Jonah, a prophecy with a prose narrative framework, combines poetry and prose to convey its message. The battle poems found in Exodus 15 and Judges 5 are narrative in nature, the collected materials in Job form a coherent plot, and the diverse materials in the Pentateuch do not obscure its unified design. Plot can be created out of composite pieces.

Time does not always pass in smooth chronological fashion in the Bible. At certain points Genesis foreshadows events or moves forward

¹² Ibid. 504.

¹³ Note G. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (Chico: Scholars, 1985); J. H. Walton, "Psalms: A Cantata about the Davidic Covenant," *JETS* 34/1 (March 1991) 21-31. Cf. J. Stek's study notes on the book of Psalms in *The NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 787-941.

with a story, only to retrieve a story line or character for the reader (e.g. Genesis 24; 35:28–29). The Former Prophets practice the same tendency. Simply noting the sequence of events in a book does not always tell an interpreter the whole story. Jeremiah's chronology is not consecutive, but it still may make sense.

Therefore it is possible that though Jeremiah contains many different literary materials the prophecy may still have a plot. Its outward form alone does not preclude its coherence. Perhaps it has no unifying principles. But that issue can be settled only from the text itself, not from a misconception of the nature of plot.

To decide whether Jeremiah has a plot one must first decide whether prophecy itself has a plot. Too little scholarship deals with the nature of literary prophecy. Magnificent studies of the background of prophecy have appeared in the past. Much has been learned about the prophets' historical, sociological, political and religious situations. What is lacking is a sense of how literary prophecy works and how each prophetic book fits, or does not fit, that mold.

B. D. Napier makes a solid contribution to a literary definition of prophecy by suggesting what literary themes characterize prophetic books. The themes reveal the unified content of prophecy and hold promise for illuminating prophetic plot. Napier thinks written prophecy "rises . . . first in the consciousness that Israel now stands between Egypt, that what she was she will be again."¹⁴ Israel was chosen and redeemed, sinned, was judged, but will be redeemed again. A constant cycle, not unlike that in Judges, exists in prophetic literature. To further explain the cycle Napier lists seven distinctive components of literary prophecy: (1) "Thus says Yahweh" (word and symbol); (2) "Out of Egypt I called my son" (election and covenant); (3) "They went from me" (rebellion); (4) "They shall return to Egypt" (judgment); (5) "How can I give you up?" (compassion); (6) "I will return them to their homes" (redemption); (7) "a light to the nations" (consummation).¹⁵

Napier's themes can be compressed into four major emphases: election, sin, punishment, restoration. These themes develop by "causal necessity." They reflect developments in Israel's history. God condemns Israel's sin on the basis of their breaking the Sinai covenant (Exodus 20–Leviticus 27). God has been faithful, but the people have been corrupt. Therefore they bring punishment on themselves (cf. Deuteronomy 27–28). They are without excuse. But punishment comes slowly. Israel always has time to repent, but only a few, a remnant, ever change. Thus judgment falls due to the nation's stubbornness, not the Lord's harshness. Despite Israel's rebellion, however, Yahweh will restore the nation for the faithful remnant's sake. Such ideas crisscross the prophetic literature, creating a common notion of what should occur in prophetic writing. Only as the reader notes all the aspects can literary prophecy be grasped.

¹⁴ B. D. Napier, "Prophet," *IDB* 3:911.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 910–919.

Most scholars focus on the sin and punishment aspects of prophecy. They find the prophets' ethical admonitions to be the most significant parts of prophecy. Certainly the prophets do denounce sin and urge people to repent. But to emphasize that theme to the exclusion of the restoration motif denies prophecy's conflict its resolution. Only half a plot receives treatment.

Throughout the OT, God offers forgiveness and threatens punishment with redemption in mind. The divine intent is always to create a bright future for the faithful. It is therefore necessary to maintain a sense of the magnitude of worldwide sin without overlooking the fact that the overwhelming conclusion to the prophetic books is that God will save a remnant. Only as the whole range of prophetic plot is considered, however, can such an assessment be confirmed.¹⁶

Napier's metaphorical scheme has many merits, but the prophets—particularly the postexilic prophets—also have some concrete situations in mind. They see Israel's sin as leading to the punishment brought by Assyria and Babylonia, the great nations that merely carry out God's orders. After these cataclysmic events, the nation's return to the land begins the Lord's promised restoration. The preexilic prophets predict the return, and the postexilic prophets—especially Haggai and Zechariah—cast their works in its light. So throughout written prophecy there moves what Norman Gottwald calls an "implied narrative." He observes

that the prophetic writings are a kind of occasion-oriented commentary on an implied narrative. This implied narrative is the ever moving point of juncture between Israel's remembered past viewed as an arena of the judging and saving work of God and the specific events unfolding within the immediate milieu of any particular prophet.¹⁷

Jeremiah's place in history allows him a personal vantage point on sin and punishment. He knows Israel's election, the fall of Samaria and, by personal experience, the fall of Jerusalem. In exile, and even before, he looks to a new day for Israel.

Is Jeremiah's plot tragic, comic, or something else? Caution must be exerted at this point, since prophecy is its own distinct genre. Classical literary distinctions may help understand prophetic plot but may not define it absolutely.

For instance, Northrop Frye divides the Bible into seven phases: creation, revolution, law, wisdom, prophecy, gospel, apocalyptic. He concludes

¹⁶ R. Clements addresses the unnecessary dichotomizing of punishment and salvation in "Patterns in the Prophetic Canon," *Canon and Authority: Essays in Old Testament Religion and Theology* (ed. G. W. Coats and B. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 42–55. He concludes: "The place where both aspects are brought together is to be found in the structure of the canonical collection of prophecy. The threat of doom is followed by the word of salvation, which does not evade judgment, but looks beyond it. By holding these two things together in this way, the prophetic part of the OT canon witnesses to the wholeness of the Word of God."

¹⁷ N. Gottwald, "Tragedy and Comedy in the Latter Prophets," *Semeia* 32 (1984) 83.

that the prophets felt the human race was rebelling against God but that this situation was temporary. Frye finds that

the prophet sees man in a state of alienation caused by his own distractions, at the bottom of a U-shaped curve. . . . It postulates an original state of relative happiness, and looks forward to an eventual restoration of this state, to, at least, a "saving" remnant.¹⁸

Despite the bleak present the future is bright. Because Frye holds to the U-shaped nature of prophecy he thinks that prophetic plot is basically comic.

Other writers have debated whether prophecy is comic in the modal sense or comedy in the generic sense. Notable among such efforts are the articles that appear in *Semeia 32: Tragedy and Comedy in the Bible*. Generally the authors find that comparing prophecy to comedy illuminates the Biblical materials enough to say that prophecy is by nature comic, or at least that it is optimistic. They do not claim, however, that the prophets wrote comedies. Thus they distinguish between mode and genre, which reflects sound literary analysis.¹⁹

What emerges from recent discussion is that it is impossible to call every prophetic book a full-fledged comedy. It is, however, possible to claim that the prophets have a comic outlook. In fact their optimism grows out of bleak circumstances. They see and experience the worst parts of Israel's history. But their writings forge a new hope for the future and at times even for their seemingly hopeless present.

So far I have not suggested tragedy as the governing nature of prophetic plot. There are several good reasons for my refusal to do so, most of which should be apparent by now. (1) Though doom oracles are prominent in prophecy, the trend in the prophetic books is toward eventual salvation. The depth of worldwide sin makes the plot's resolution that much more significant. (2) The characters in prophetic books are not typically tragic. Even Jeremiah is not superior in kind to other human beings, as his confessional statements prove. He is victimized by Israel's sin. But as part of the remnant he is a victor, not a victim. Nor does the Lord feel the need merely to grasp control of the earth, since his control was never lost. (3) There is no sudden rise and crushing fall of Israel. The nation either sinks into sin or rises from the depths.

Thus the overall tenor of prophecy is comic or optimistic. Defeat and disappointment occur and at times last for a long while, but such difficulties eventually give way to restoration. Prophets take the bottom of their U-shaped curve more seriously than many playwrights, which coincides with the gravity of their message.

¹⁸ N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982) 128-129.

¹⁹ Note my discussion of *Semeia 32* in *The Unity of the Twelve* (JSOTSup 97; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990) 121-123.

III. PLOT AND JEREMIAH

1. *Jeremiah 1:1–19 introduces the plot of the book by announcing its characters, setting, themes and conflict.*²⁰ Like most long literary works, Jeremiah includes several characters. Chief among them are Jeremiah and the Lord (1:1–2), which is hardly surprising. What is unusual in the prophetic books is Jeremiah's use of minor characters, such as Judah's kings, officials, priests and people (1:18). The characters help shape the plot as they respond to Yahweh and interact with Jeremiah.

The book's episodes reflect the prophet's historical setting, set forth in 1:1–3. Indeed the author gives away the prophecy's major events before the story reaches v. 4. Jeremiah lives during Josiah's reform, endures the gradual downfall of his nation, and experiences Jerusalem's devastation. From his seemingly bleak viewpoint he somehow manages to envision a bright future for God's people.

Three word pairs in 1:10 announce Jeremiah's major themes. Jeremiah must attempt "to pluck up and to tear down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant." E. W. Nicholson observes that "the terminology here employed to describe Jeremiah's mission centers on one of the main themes of the book, the theme of judgment and renewal or salvation after judgment."²¹ Nicholson is partially correct. Judgment ("to destroy and to overthrow") and salvation ("to build and to plant") are present, though he could add that denunciation of sin appears here too ("to pluck up and to tear down"). The metaphors for sin, punishment, and restoration appear periodically (e.g. 12:14–17; 31:4–5, 38–40; etc.), reminding readers of the primacy of such themes in prophecy in general and in Jeremiah in particular. Though Jeremiah lives in a unique situation (1:1–3) he will preach standard prophetic concepts (1:10) to his audience (1:18).

Because of his message, Jeremiah will be persecuted (1:17–19). People who rebel against God will rebel against God's messenger. Thus the plot's conflict is outlined in 1:10 and 1:17–19. Further, 1:3, 11–16 indicates that Israel's destruction may solve the conflict. At least sin will no longer seemingly prevail in Israel. Yahweh's prophet will be vindicated when the resolution occurs (1:19).

2. *With the plot fully introduced, the story's conflict receives extensive treatment.* God instructs the prophet about Israel's crass rebellion (chaps. 2–6), has him warn the people of the consequences of their rebellion (chaps. 7–10), allows him to experience the people's rebellion (chaps. 11–20), and helps him survive (chaps. 21–29). Israel's sin lies at the heart of each of these sections. Each major character group helps produce the nation's downfall. Despite all Yahweh has done for the chosen people they continue to transgress against their God. They despise God and the proph-

²⁰ For more thorough analyses of Jeremiah 1 cf. H. P. Nasuti, "A Prophet to the Nations: Diachronic and Synchronic Readings of Jeremiah 1," *HAR* 10 (1986) 249–266; P. R. House, "Jeremiah One and the Unity of Jeremiah," *The Whole Counsel of God: A Tribute to E. Herbert Nygren* (ed. P. R. House and W. A. Heth; Upland: Taylor University, 1991) 29–45.

²¹ E. W. Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1–25* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1973) 26.

ets. Through the years they systematically cut off any chance for forgiveness and fellowship with the Lord.

3. *The book resolves its conflict.* After much tension building and foreshadowing, chap. 29 leads the reader to the brink of the nation's destruction. Suddenly the book pulls back, stresses restoration (chaps. 30–33), then plunges into judgment again (chaps. 34–51). Two resolutions emerge. The first is a long-term, ultimate resolution. The second applies more closely to Jeremiah's historical context.

Restoration is the ultimate goal of prophetic plot. It is not enough to stress Israel's or the Gentiles' sin and punishment. Something must lie beyond those themes or the book has less long-term value. Since Jeremiah understands such matters, the prophecy envisions a better Israel—one that has a new monarchy, a new capital, a new people, a new covenant (chaps. 30–33). Such an Israel would eradicate the nation's sin, thus solving the plot's conflict.

But the author has a temporal problem. Israel will not repent unless it does so under duress (chaps. 34–38). Therefore the day of Yahweh is unleashed. Jerusalem falls (chap. 39). Exile beckons (chaps. 40–44). The nation ceases to exist. But out of the devastation Yahweh creates a new nation, a remnant that will return to Israel and live out the law of God. So national renewal cannot occur without punishment, and punishment is meaningless without the hope of restoration. Both resolve the conflict, but neither can do so without the other.

The partnership of restoration and punishment is unique among OT prophecies. Certainly Isaiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve stress restoration after punishment, but none of them makes the themes solve a plot conflict by having them intersect and exist alongside one another. Solving the conflict in this way fits the 627–587 BC time frame the book sets for itself, for it allows a prophet who suffers through defeat and exile to anticipate and participate vicariously in the nation's future revival.

Throughout the book, characters help form the plot. Whether as sinners, friends of the prophets, or distant foreign figures they provide a compass for the plot. As Jeremiah deals with God, his foes and his supporters, the plot's emphases on sin, punishment and restoration emerge. Again, such highlighting of personae is unique among the prophets. Other books analyze the prophet-Yahweh relationship, or the prophet-Israel conflict, but no other work includes so many characters in so many settings.

Jeremiah therefore exhibits the following plot elements:²²

1. Introduction to the plot (chap. 1)
2. Conflict (chaps. 2–29)
 - a. introduction (chaps. 2–10)

²² This structuring follows the MT ordering of Jeremiah. The major difference between the Hebrew and Greek texts is that the LXX places chaps. 46–51 (in different order) between 25:13 and 25:15. The placement has the effect of informing readers earlier in the book that Israel's enemies will perish. The Hebrew text forces Israelite readers to face their own destruction and its causes before taking heart in their opponents' demise. Jeremiah's message remains the same, though the plot's temporal resolution is altered.

- b. rising action (chaps. 11–20)
- c. crisis (chaps. 21–29)
- 3. Ultimate resolution (chaps. 30–33)
- 4. Temporal resolution (chaps. 34–51)
- 5. Conclusion (chap. 52)

IV. CONCLUSION

Is Jeremiah a totally confused book? Was it composed in a haphazard or arbitrary manner? Does reading the prophecy in its consecutive order constitute eisegesis? The evidence presented in this article leads to a negative answer to all three questions. Jeremiah has a discernible plot.

Jeremiah is an innovative prophecy that strikes out in new literary directions. It uses characterization extensively, welds together two seemingly irreconcilable ideas in its conclusion, and yet never loses sight of its historical context. Its artistry escapes interpreters who only examine its rich historical background. Other matters must be stressed if its unity and coherence are to be appreciated. Once understood, however, its unified plot exhibits great artistry, great vision and great beauty.