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## **Another Decade: A Dialectic Model of the Decentred Universe of Jeremiah Studies 1996 —2008**

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*Another Dodecade: A Dialectic Model of  
the Decentred Universe of Jeremiah Studies  
1996–2008*

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ABSTRACT

In the years since the publication of Robert Carroll's 'Surplus Meaning and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Dodecade of Jeremiah Studies (1984–95)', in *Currents* 4 in 1996, major paradigm shifts in biblical studies have resulted in an unprecedented level of innovation. Increased engagements with the element of chaos in the text and the resultant innovative encounters with this problematic scriptural material include influential contributions from philosophy, cultural and literary theories. The present review surveys the current state of the field of Jeremiah studies by tracing the impact of post-structuralist methodologies of decentring on ways of thinking about and engaging with Jeremiah. It argues that in the aftermath of the widely acknowledged end of the hegemony of historical-criticism as the dominant paradigm of biblical interpretation articulated by Perdue as 'the collapse of history', Jeremiah studies has taken on the shape and nature of a dialectic between the principles of order and chaos.

Keywords: chaos, criticism, cultural, decentring, dialectic, Jeremiah, methodology, model, order, post-structuralism, realignment.

*The End of the Spectrum: Robert Carroll's 'A Decade'  
and the Beginning of the Dialectic State of Jeremiah Studies*

Robert Carroll's 'Surplus Meaning and the Conflict of Interpretations: A Decade of Jeremiah Studies (1984–1995)', which appeared in *Currents* 4 in 1996, is indicative of a now widely acknowledged paradigm shift in biblical studies which took place in the final decade of the twentieth century. 'A Decade' at times appears to be caught between attempts to pin down treatments of Jeremiah to solid set models of understanding, and the beginning of those newer developments that would soon undermine these same structures. The article commences with the construction of the primary interpretive spectrum (1996c: 118–20). This consists of a line flowing between the poles of the traditional historical-critical approach as found in Bright (1965), Thompson (1980), Holladay (1986; 1989), and Lundbom (1999; 2004a; 2004b), and the redaction-critical approach to be found in McKane (1986). This spectrum is, in Carroll's view, 'the spectrum of Jeremiah Studies'; it embodies the mainstream concerns of the field, acting as a valuable tool in taking stock of the contemporary landscape. It is clear, however, that this structure is no longer the most suitable expression of the current state of the field.

The beginnings of a third way of reading Jeremiah may be associated with Carroll...essentially a postmodernist one which employs an ideological-critical analysis of the text...In spite of giving the impression that he and Carroll are on the same end of the spectrum of Jeremiah Studies, McKane appears to disagree with Carroll at most specific points of interpretation (Carroll 1996c: 118–20).

At no point are we told where exactly Carroll sits on this line. His approach is represented as at variance with the traditional historical-critical perspective *and* dissimilar from the methodology advocated by McKane. More confusing still is the fact that, although we are told McKane occupies the far end of the spectrum from Bright, Holladay *et al.*, it remains unclear what principles inform that pole of the construct and hence characterize McKane's work on Jeremiah. The fact that Carroll's perspective is termed 'the beginnings of a third way' sounds the alarm that this mono-linear spectrum will not hold up long term.

As 'A Decade' moves through the various issues at play in Jeremiah studies, Carroll gives progressively reduced attention to those works considered far less important. Because of their perceived greater distance from the concerns of the central spectrum, particular ideological and faith-based perspectives are largely ignored. Feminist approaches to the book, and the continued

challenging role of Jeremiah in all varieties of theology, are addressed together perfunctorily on a single page. This single spectrum mistakenly proposes a bifid construction of the field, representing the historical-critical approach as diametrically opposed to the interests of those involved in redaction-critical methods; it also considerably narrows our field of vision in terms of what is seen as properly Jeremiah studies and what is dismissed as not.

*When the Bow Breaks: Methodological Re-evaluations in the Aftermath of 'The Collapse of History'—Carroll, Perdue and Hegelian Dialectics*

The launch of a selection of new reading strategies in our approaches to Jeremiah was born directly from the concerns of 'A Dodecade'. Since 'A Dodecade' points toward the watershed between efforts to corral understandings of the text within solid, set interpretive structures and models which eschew structure, privileging instead the apparent chaos of the book, it is part of a wider disciplinary acknowledgment that methodologies of the past were no longer holding up under present scrutiny (Nations 1983; Perdue 1994; Stulman 1998).

A significant proportion of the impetus behind the methodological re-evaluations which so strongly inform the current landscape of Jeremiah studies lies with what Perdue has titled 'the collapse of history'. *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testament Theology* (1994) highlighted the end of the reign of historical-criticism as the dominant paradigm of biblical studies. More recently *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History* (2005) offers a detailed account of developments since the breakdown of the hegemony of historical-criticism became apparent. Perdue brings perspectives on the fracture he revealed in 1994 into direct relation with the full range of current interpretations and innumerable lived experiences of Scripture:

Words, grammar, and syntax that produce the theological construction of reality are increasingly elusive, due to both the destabilization of traditional paradigms that have allowed theological discourse to take place...and the emergence of several new ones often with competing yet quite different claims (Perdue 1994: 3-4).

Different philosophies have led to a diversification of theologies shaped by an almost unlimited set of global contexts and the multiple varieties of social communities...within the myriad of interpreters with their vast networks of multiple social, sexual, gender, ethnic, and postcolonial milieus...blown by the winds of differentiated and conflicting possibilities into many situations and numerous ways of knowing and being (Perdue 2005: 2-3).

It is within this context that the current state of Jeremiah studies is to be understood. The dialectic of engagements, formed from the persistent storming of anxious negotiations between chaos and order, is part of the contemporary condition of biblical studies in the wake of the ‘collapse of history’.

We need look only as far as ‘Century’s End: Jeremiah Studies at the Beginning of the Third Millennium’, which appeared in *Currents* 8 (2000), four years after ‘A Dodecade’, to see a shift away from the perspective of a mono-linear construct towards the dialectical understanding of the field, which has since significantly informed our negotiations across the pages of Jeremiah. Implicit in Carroll’s acknowledgement that his own thinking on the subject has altered since his 1986 OTL commentary is a recognition of the constant state of flux enjoyed by Jeremiah studies.

...as the new century and millennium begin, the situation of Jeremiah studies may fairly be described as being in a most interesting state constituted by a *dialectic* of conservative reinterpretation and radical rethinking (2000: 19-20; emphasis added).

At the end of an era for Jeremiah studies, Carroll pointed toward a potentially more suitable model for taking stock of the present challenging, multifarious array of scholarship.

The first two moments of the triplicity are abstract, *untrue* moments which for that very reason are dialectical...the third is the conclusion, in which the concept through its negativity is mediated with itself and thereby posited for itself as the universal and the identity of its moments (Hegel 2004: 649; emphasis added).

If we take the vision of Jeremiah studies as constituted by a dialectic, it is the third moment resulting from the interaction between a pair of principles, and the tensions which such interplay creates, which brings us to a fuller and more meaningful epistemological reality.

### *The Quest Model: The Current Dialectic State of Jeremiah Studies*

Though it may appear that what is being suggested in Carroll’s statement is a dialectic event between two principles—conservative reinterpretation on the one hand and radical rethinking on the other—it is preferable to consider these two activities as part of the third moment of the dialectic: the mediation resulting from the interplay between two earlier untrue moments. In order to render this more digestible, it is helpful to remind ourselves that Carroll states the arena of Jeremiah studies may be understood as a dialectic *of* conservative reinterpretation and radical rethinking, rather than one *between* these

two. Furthermore, we should remain mindful of the fact that conservative reinterpretation and radical rethinking are not in fact diametrically opposed principles. Hence, what Carroll has described in 'Century's End' is best understood as the processes taking place within the dialectic itself.

The dialectic state under discussion here, then, may be understood as constituted *between* the two key players in any interaction with Jeremiah; the principles of chaos and order. Conservative reinterpretations and radical rethinkings are part of the overall dialectic of anxiety which occurs between the two untenable positions of complete order and complete random nothingness. While on the one hand we cannot accept the destructive impact of a purely chaotic (non)understanding of the book of Jeremiah, at the same time we are similarly unable to deceive ourselves into accepting the blatantly false and inadequate constructs of knowledge, the reified interpretive structures which rely on illusions of order in refusing to acknowledge all that cannot be known about the text.

Between these two untenable positions lies the constant intellectual quest of Jeremiah studies. The dialectic between chaos and order feeds on our anxiety in being unable to occupy either one realm or the other. The quest is a persistent navigatory one, involving a full array of methodological approaches, the interactions of which cannot be stabilized by the simple polarization of approaches seen in 'A Dodecade'. The quest is an insistent process without any ultimate conclusion. Constantly occurring, it is fuelled by our intellectual, social, psychological, and emotional needs for some kind of meaning. One of the strongest currents running through Jeremiah as a whole is that it constantly challenges and frustrates this desire in the reader.

This quest-model, posited as the dialectical truth of Jeremiah studies in its present incarnation, informs a considerable amount of the analysis which follows. As an interpretive tool, it lends itself well to a negotiation of the variety of contemporary engagements with the text. However, as a constructed model of the field it must be treated with the same caution and flexibility as all other structures of supposed meaning in Jeremiah studies, and further with an awareness that as an interpretive tool it too should not be maintained beyond its usefulness in our engagement with the scriptural material.

### *Rendered Strange and New: Poststructuralist Decentring*

A related feature of the current nature of the field has been increased levels of exchange between biblical studies, theology, philosophy and a full range of critical and cultural theories. Although the principles of another discipline can never be mapped perfectly onto our interpretive efforts with Jeremiah,

much has been gained by increasingly experimental expositions of the text, using key interpretive tools originating very much outside the traditional sphere of the biblical scholar.

While it is not unusual to see many other terms from a variety of philosophies and critical theories in frequent use in relation to Jeremiah (postmodernism, dialogism, formalism, etc.), it is apt at this juncture to concentrate specifically on the impact of post-structuralism by virtue of the fact that so many of these new strategies make effective use of the concept of decentring.

[W]e enter a universe of radical uncertainty, since we can have no access to any fixed landmark which is beyond linguistic processing and hence we have no certain standard by which to measure anything... This situation, of being without intellectual reference points, is one way of describing what post-structuralists call the *decentred universe*, one in which, by definition, we cannot know where we are... (Barry 2002: 61-62; original emphasis).

*...the limits of knowledge play an unavoidable role at its core.* This is the common thread running through poststructuralism (Williams 2005: 1; original emphasis).

Decentring is the process by which our conventional constructs of knowledge are subverted and destabilized. It has been essential in studies of Jeremiah in recent years to repeatedly carry out acts of decentring on the text. Decentring takes place via all the interpretive techniques we use to render the text of Jeremiah new and strange to our minds. It is one name for all the ways in which we re-approach the book from different angles, and how we have succeeded in breaking down many of the false constructs of order which previously held us back from more in-depth engagements with all that is chaotic and troubling in the book.

Post-structuralism assumes a lack of solidity in our constructs of knowledge and thus employs techniques to destabilize the critical landscape, removing set standard definitions and intellectual markers. As a consequence of finding ourselves disoriented in the absence of any fixed point of reference, our thinking on Jeremiah has taken off in many new directions. Each fresh perspective which has emerged in recent years is itself also a further act of destabilization in the universe of Jeremiah studies.

### *McKane's Rolling Corpus as a Post-structuralist Act of Decentring*

'All language is human language and God does not speak' (McKane 1986: xcix). McKane's insightful statement of the basic and unavoidable inadequacy of linguistic expression of divine revelation is a truism in our field.

[I]t is a mistake to suppose that the ineffability of a prophet's meeting with God can be contained and expressed in any linguistic account of it; that it can be reproduced in a straightforward way, with a simple correspondence between the mysterious event and its reduction to language, as if both were on the same linguistic plane... (McKane 1986: xcvi).

Since Saussure (2004) exposed our confinement within systems, particularly linguistic ones, we are aware that our encounter with Jeremiah will always be limited by the structurally linguistic nature of the scriptural accounts. Hence, the intellectual markers and boundaries used to define our assumed knowledge of Jeremiah are themselves flimsy and limited. Though certainly not posing himself as a self-consciously post-structuralist commentator, the prominent message of McKane's 1986 commentary can be seen in this light:

We are encountering aggregations of material with a piecemeal character which are products of generation or triggering; they accumulate from local stimuli which consist of no more than a verse or a few verses of text...aggregations to the core which are in accord with the 'generation' or 'triggering' process... [and] do not produce a cumulative literary unity (McKane 1986: lxii).

More than twenty years later, it is obvious that McKane's proposal of the 'rolling corpus' theory of composition has not met with universal accord. The absence of broad consensus in support of McKane's theory of a process of haphazard piecemeal aggregations to small earlier 'core' verses in Jeremiah is completely natural. Dissonance, objection, discord and all their resultant new departures in thinking are the natural consequences of decentring. McKane's unparalleled exposition in 1986 is an early and vital example of the process of decentring in Jeremiah studies, which has since taken off in such a massive way. The task remains here to assess how this decentring, born of the destabilizing injection of post-structuralism into the arena of biblical studies after the said 'collapse of history', has radically transformed much of Jeremiah studies in the decade since 'A Decade' first appeared.

Using the disruptive impact of McKane's 'rolling corpus' theory as an early example of a disruptive decentring event, it is possible to recognize a similar process taking place across a broad spectrum of interpretive approaches. This decentring process is characterized by more unconventional hermeneutic practices, interdisciplinary approaches to the text, and an increased recognition of the vital destabilizing role of chaos in Jeremiah.



*Hope in the Pit: Chaotic Meaning in Stulman,  
O'Connor and Brueggemann*

It is becoming increasingly obvious that in order to achieve any sense of full dialogue with the material of Jeremiah, the element of the chaotic unknown which pervades the book must be explored. As we have seen, this has contributed significantly to articulations of meaning beyond the normal expectations of straightforward or surface readings. The ongoing processes of decentring have been instrumental in bringing chaos into the foreground of work on Jeremiah, and hence encouraging the dialectic interchange within which we find ourselves currently inscribed. Our recognition of Jeremianic chaos is largely dependent on these processes continuing to render the material new, strange and unsettled to our minds. It is clear then that much of the progress in Jeremiah studies in recent years has been realized in acts of disruptive and unconventional interpretation.

The efforts of Stulman from 1998 to 2008 form a strong presence within the anxious dialectic quest of Jeremiah studies described above. Stulman's open acknowledgement of the truly complex and challenging nature of the material is strongly evident in three key areas: the question of synchronic and diachronic approaches to the text; the tandem presences of both structure and counter-cohesion; and tensions among a variety of 'theologies of suffering' in Jeremiah.

Stulman's *Order Amid Chaos* (1998), framed as 'a synchronic reading of Jeremiah that is informed by diachronic sensibilities', achieves a valuable methodological fluidity. This self-consciously liminal position between synchronic and diachronic concerns is expressed repeatedly in Stulman's remarkably self-aware engagements with the text (1998: 14-17; 1999: 36; 2004: 316), hence equipping him to avoid one of the major academic pitfalls prevalent in so much of recent Jeremiah studies:

...countless articles and monographs have privileged one genre, tradition, or source in the book above all others...they have failed to domesticate Jeremiah's chaos...they have unfortunately been more successful in dismissing marginal voices (Stulman 2004: 316).

Stulman's willingness to see multiple conflicting presences within the text has allowed him a more holistic vision of the book, assessing both structure and counter-cohesion simultaneously:

...the sermonic prose of the first scroll creates structural unity and cohesion by providing literary and symbolic *seams* that hold together a symbol system and imagined world replete with counter-coherence and *anomie* (Stulman 1999: 61; original emphasis).

An extensive vocabulary of disorder is indicative of the perpetual encroachment of chaos on all articulations of apparent structure. Nowhere is the constant necessity of reengagement with the void of meaning, or indeed the meaning of the void, in Jeremiah more obvious than in Stulman's multiple expositions of codes of suffering. Each re-articulation reads as a constituent segment within an overall exploration of the subject, which cannot be reduced to first principles or brought to any final fruition. While chapter 5 of *Order Amid Chaos* (1998) can speak in terms of order maintaining outsiders and destabilizing insiders, 'Jeremiah as a Polyphonic Response to Suffering' (2004) postulates three distinct 'theologies': the orderly one in which the culpable justly suffer; the inverse of that in which the righteous (e.g. Jeremiah himself) suffer; and the third, in which both deity and prophetic mediator are missing, and a paramount absence of meaning appears to reign supreme. Each segment (1995; 1998; 2004; 2008) openly bears the caveat that no end will be forthcoming:

The wreckage is too massive, complex and unmanageable. The losses and resultant despair are beyond ordinary patterns of speech...the three voices expose the inadequacy of monolithic assertions and assured assumptions (Stulman 2004: 316).

In addition to the many interpretations of catastrophe, one can also recognize the rich conversational texture of Jeremiah... The interpretive community resists domesticating Jeremiah the prophet or Jeremiah the book, even by the voice of YHWH or by a formidable deuteronomistic *Tendenz* to control and organize symbolic disorder...this cacophonous texture leaves the reader not only disconcerted but also engaged and hopeful... (Stulman 2008: 14-15).

A related sense of fluidity and continuous encounter with the text is discerned in O'Connor's analyses of Jeremianic articulations of suffering and trauma (1999; 2002a; 2002b; 2008). Of particular note are her perceptive comments upon the inherent discourse of hope located within texts of profound violence and pain:

It provides a glimpse of another kind of deity, a non-predictable, unknown and uncontainable being with a fluid inner life...deeply relational, infinitely active, and 'radically multiple'... Without such disjunction in the divine character, healing would not be possible (O'Connor 1999: 401).

It is telling in the work of both Stulman and O'Connor that the engagement with trauma is never complete. The fact that again and again passages of pain, despair, and pure terror must be constantly revisited serves to highlight our inability to control the text and its far-reaching disruptive impact. Of particular value in this respect is the enthusiasm of both interpreters for

articulations of hope not in opposition to the depth of suffering in these passages, but arising very much from their midst:

Here is what to do in the pit of hopelessness. Cling to God, even when God has slipped away from you. Yell at the top of your collective lungs...shout and scream at the deity...express rage, despair, and loss right to the divine face of the 'Just Judge'. Hold nothing back. Complain, protest, resist. Reach into yourself to claim your experience and your capacity to see and name reality (O'Connor 2008: 45).

'Meditation upon the Abyss' by Brueggemann (2002) offers a thought-provoking synthesis of some of the difficulties of reading Jeremiah, and like Stulman chooses to highlight the incompatibility of Jeremiah with both linear logic and conventional notions of 'readability':

What is in fact unreadable is the abyss for which we have no ready categories. The abyss is unreadable, moreover, because the God who presides over the abyss will not be read through our central categories...the book of Jeremiah as a script for performing abyss makes sense of an odd but compelling kind (Brueggemann 2002: 350).

Bringing the terrifying chaotic void termed 'the abyss' to the forefront of his analysis, Brueggemann teaches us to absorb the concept of 'odd sense'. Just as Stulman argues that the seemingly senseless can make sense, and O'Connor alerts us to the inherently hopeful spiritual meaning to be found in the concept of taking to task a distraught divinity, Brueggemann also adjusts our vision of Scripture by altering the lens through which we read. The central decentring act of 'Meditation upon the Abyss' is highlighting the central presence of the abyss itself, dealing with it as it stands inherent and purposeful within the text, rather than as a threatening outside element of meaninglessness. All three interpreters allow the chaos of Jeremiah to come sit at the centre of the book's complex of meanings.

*A Rock Symphony: Cross-Disciplinary Decentring in Mark Biddle's  
Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature (1996)*

*Polyphony and Symphony* appeared in the same year as Carroll's 'A Dodecade', and embodies within it a great deal of the nature of the then burgeoning dialectic state of our discipline. Biddle's willingness to employ a number of creative approaches in his interrogation of Jeremiah 7-20 sets him squarely in the midst of the present dialectical milieu. Offering a rationale akin to Stulman's, he too advocates an informed synthesis of

synchronic and diachronic concerns, highlighting specifically the necessity of a greater sensitivity to the personification of concepts, characterizations of the various speakers within the text, and the dialogic nature of the interplay of their voices:

...developing something of a new harmonic theory of prophetic literature... many instrumental voices, counterpoint, and fuller, richer harmonic structures, in a grand unity (not a grand unison)... Prophetic music is symphonically complex, yet no approach currently in use views the prophets symphonically. Each in their own way, both historical-critical and literary readers of prophetic symphony, have ears trained only to hear plainsong (Biddle 1996: 8).

At various other points in this study, Biddle is happy to use examples from geology and physics in order to display for us the particular nuances of the book and our encounters with it. Jeremiah is by these techniques rendered uncanny to the mind of the once familiar reader. Hence, approaching the book as if it were a rock-sample, for instance, can help us to see Jeremiah afresh, thus avoiding the risks of excessive solidity and resultant stagnation.

### *Intertextuality as Problematic for Jeremiah Studies*

In the last twelve years, particularly in the collection of essays *Troubling Jeremiah* (Diamond *et al.* 1999), the concept of intertextuality has become central to several approaches within the dialectic quest. As an interpretive approach, intertextuality offers many opportunities for the deliberate rendering-strange of Jeremiah, and is thus a key feature of many acts of decentering. It is discussed here as a special case, deserving particularly careful attention as it carries its own unique set of difficulties and possibilities.

Intertextuality is arguably one of the most difficult aspects of the post-structuralist decentering enterprise in Jeremiah studies of the last decade. Much of this difficulty stems from its roots as a literary concept. According to R. Carroll, the first use of *intertextualité* occurred in Kristeva's survey (1969) of Bakhtin's theory of dialogical texts (Carroll 1999a: 223). It has come to be loosely defined in common parlance as the reading of a text in light of its relationship with, and/or differences from, another text or texts. A quick perusal of the *Oxford English Dictionary* online is enough to demonstrate the great breadth of this definition, its cited usage spreading far and wide; from semiotics to *Star Trek*. Consequently, it is easy to find oneself rather lost, reading at one time about the intertextual relationship between Jer. 26, 32 and 2 Kgs 22, and at another time, digesting the apparent parallels between our dialectic quest as interpreters of Jeremiah and Alice's own

decentred experience during her wander through the unstable universe of Wonderland (Diamond 1999). At other times, it appears to make a great deal of odd sense to represent our struggles with the biblical text as analogous to the debate over meaning, reading tea-stained letters, and the Irish Constitution as found in *Finnegan's Wake* (Joyce 2000; C. Carroll 2008). Intertextuality in Jeremiah studies is problematic because it has a wide appeal in offering new, unusual, and at times quite entertaining and well-known lenses through which to access certain aspects of the text and our relationship with it, while being deeply rooted in a complex arrangement of densely philosophical and often inaccessible twentieth-century literary and cultural theories, Kristeva's comments on Bakhtin being only a tiny fraction of the dense thought matrix of dialogics which informs intertextuality.

*The Curious Incident of Peter Rabbit in Wonderland: A.R.P. Diamond  
Intertext and Multiple Orracular-Narrative Dialogics*

If such interactions with Jeremiah, using other written cultural artefacts, whether closely related biblical texts or works seemingly far removed from the context of the prophet, can all be gathered under the umbrella phrase 'intertextual approaches', extra levels of rigour and methodological self-awareness are pivotal within this particular branch of interpretation. This is paramount if a dangerous, lax nebulousness within our anxious dialectic is to be avoided. It is a great relief that Diamond continues to meet this demand for precise yet adventurous analyses.

[T]he shift in reading strategies may seem surprising, quixotic, even mad (but then the Cheshire Cat would say 'we're all mad here...') ... 'Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?' ... Talk of paradigms and prophets, of cabbages and kings, and other fancy interpretative pursuits, however, requires attention to the accompanying subtext of contemporary hermeneutic debate... '—so long as I get *somewhere*...' said Alice. 'Oh, you're sure to do that,' said the Cat, 'if you only walk long enough' (Diamond 1999: 16-20).

Diamond in particular appears to have gained a great deal from the possibilities of dialogues between a variety of literatures and the state of our field. He repeatedly reminds us that at times we are better equipped to negotiate the mire of thought by using an alternative or complementary text as a tool and sounding board. Diamond's use of the dialogues between Alice and the characters scattered throughout the decentred universe of Wonderland works to illustrate our own journeys of interpretation, which it is his task to map in *Troubling Jeremiah*. More recently, he has pushed the

boundaries of intertextual approaches even further by ending 'Interlocutions: The Poetics of Voice in the Figuration of YHWH and His Oracular Agent Jeremiah' with a dreamscape dialogue between himself and one that may or may not be a tattooed Y (Diamond 2008a).

In his own newly published analysis (2008b) of the place Jeremiah studies currently finds itself in, 'The Jeremiah Guild in the Twenty-First Century', Diamond introduces what he terms the 'Peter Rabbit principle'. Here he offers the reception history of the character created by Beatrix Potter as an analogy of the position of historical-critical-minded searches for the figure of Jeremiah within the text that bears the prophet's name. While insightful and pithy, the analysis to which the 'Peter Rabbit principle' is attached would certainly risk a polarization along the old single line of Carroll's 'A Dodecade', were it not for Diamond's closing caveat that each act of interpretation that relies upon modern literary theory and critical practice is no less 'alchemical' in nature (2008b: 248). Again we find, in the dialectic between the purities of chaos and order, that instability is the only constant.

### *Looking Forward Laterally: Boase's Bakhtin*

Diamond's 'Interlocutions', one of the most recent discourses on the dialogic nature of Jeremiah, brings us back yet again to the appropriation by Jeremiah studies of aspects of the literary theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). A significant number of recent works on Jeremiah focus on the polyphonic, multivalent nature of the text. These readings of the book in terms of its multivocal elements broadly touch upon Bakhtin's literary formulations of dialogism and heteroglossia, for instance. However, much more remains to be done, and in this light it is apt that we look beyond what we were long tempted to consider the set limits of our field.

In her study on the dialogic interaction between Lamentations and the pre-/early exilic Prophetic Literature, Boase provides one of the very best illustrations of the inherent potential use of Bakhtinian dialogics. Taking particular care to break the concept of dialogism down further into elements specifically relevant to the pieces of Scripture under discussion, she offers us an accessible summation of the central concepts of dialogic and monologic truth, plurality of consciousness and double-voiced texts created by both active and passive double-voicing (Boase 2006: 21). Though not concentrating exclusively on Jeremiah like the other scholars under discussion here, Boase's work deserves particular notice, as it can act as an admirable

model for some of the new directions in which we can expect our study of Jeremiah to travel over the next few years. For example, her investigation of the characterization of Jerusalem as female in Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Lamentations is clearly relevant to the exegetical pursuits of Biddle, for instance (Biddle 1996: 20).

### *Final Comments: The Absence of Finality*

As this survey article demonstrates, the current scholarly landscape of Jeremiah studies is most certainly far from flat. Furthermore, it is most certainly uncertain. The dodecade just past has seen an unprecedented level of innovation, conflict, and playfulness surrounding the prophetic book, and as such has produced works of a radically different nature than might have been expected before the fundamental paradigm shifts and methodological re-evaluations, which so characterize this current dialectic, took place.

The breaking open of the field, the removal of set reified interpretive structures, has no doubt left study of Jeremiah vulnerable to charges of incoherence. We have been forced by the persistent and lasting impact of decentring to sacrifice our comfortable familiar concepts of knowledge, and to come face to face with all that we know we cannot know. However, the selection of works cited in this survey does point a clear way forward for as far as we can currently see. Each work discussed in the foregoing analysis demonstrates a level of sincere skilled and reflective engagement with this notoriously troubling text. Though approaches to Jeremiah are remarkably diverse, many share a common thread of expertise which, in a domain of enquiry as energized and volatile as we currently find it, is no small feat.

As a model to aid in our negotiations through the perpetual difficulties of Jeremiah, the dialectic quest suggested above may itself be short-lived. It sits as an individual point within the constant progress of our sub-discipline. From a single line spectrum, to a dialectic triplicity inscribed between order and chaos, Jeremiah studies has been in constant metamorphosis. What is offered here, then, may be read as a snapshot in a single moment from a single critical perspective which takes particular note not only of exegetical encounters with the inherent chaos of the text itself, but also the associated chaos and consequent destabilization and invigoration of a discipline which can be expected to reject stagnation for much time to come.



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