



The Book of Jeremiah Jeremiah, Part 3

Jeremiah 36 and Prophetic Authorship

Chapter 36 of the Book of Jeremiah is perhaps one of the most fascinating chapters in the Hebrew Bible. This narrative involves the prophet Jeremiah and his personal scribe Baruch: it involves the composition of a scroll, its subsequent destruction at the hands of King Jehoiakim, followed finally by the rewriting of that same scroll. This episode proposes many questions about the nature of texts, authorship, and prophecy itself.

In this story we find Jeremiah unable to enter the temple because everyone is angry with him on account of his previous messages. Jeremiah, however, is undeterred, and persists in his attempts to convey his prophetic words to the people of Judah. To do so, he must rely on his personal scribe, Baruch. Baruch's role as a scribe is a fascinating one: at various points he seems to only transcribe what Jeremiah says to him, as we can see in verse 18 for example, and other times Jeremiah and Baruch might be co-authoring, as is perhaps indicated in verse 32.

This narrative provides an invaluable window into how texts were understood to be composed at this time. The notion that Baruch transcribed, and possibly even co-authored, this scroll eliminates any sense of individual authorship that we might have. At the same time, the destruction and rewriting of the scroll raises questions about where meaning actually lies. This scroll, which is comprised of precepts and messages that Jeremiah wishes to communicate, is ritually destroyed by King Jehoiakim, but is then completely reconstituted by Baruch and, in fact, added to. This narrative demonstrates the imperviousness of Jeremiah's message: if the scroll is destroyed, Jeremiah's message continues, and as such meaning cannot exist solely within the written artifact - it must exist somewhere else.

What is Prophecy?

For many, the assumption when reading a prophetic book like Jeremiah is that we are reading either the actual authored words of the prophet, or at least some kind of transcript of their words. The text is presented to the reader as though this is the case, and so it's no accident that this is the impression we are often left with. We can already see how the reality is far more complicated than we might imagine; indeed, the practice of additions to and extrapolations of a text by completely new authors, often to fill gaps in narratives, is common throughout the transmission of the Hebrew Bible. Crucially, these new additions are seen as complete continuities of the original texts, which completely goes against our modern idea of authorship and continuity. Additionally, we also get an

insight into what might be considered a “scribal unit” by the way Jehoiakim dismembers the scroll: he burns the text three or four columns at a time, which might be akin to our “page by page.”

All of these details speak to an intense textuality and raise the question of where the lines between the vision of the prophet, as a moment of direct and immediate divine access, blur with the expression of that moment in simple human terms through a written text. There is a kind of mixing of the divine message with human language that belongs to, and is embodied within, the body of the prophet. This is even further complicated by Baruch’s involvement in the process: as Jeremiah’s scribe, there is now a chain between the original divine word, Jeremiah as the prophetic receptacle, and Baruch as the literary professional who creates a material object based on the two former links.

The Original Words of the Prophet, and the Location of Meaning

The notion of composition as a collective or individual endeavor is a complex question. There are multiple levels to the conversation surrounding how a work like the Book of Jeremiah came to be. Many biblical scholars recognize that most of the Deuteronomic material makes up one layer of editing or addition, and the third-person narratives are likely another layer. This often leaves snippets of material, mostly first-person oracular statements, that some scholars see as the “actual” or “original” words of Jeremiah. This pursuit, to find the so-called *ipsissima verba* of the prophet, has often been especially fervent amongst those studying the Book of Jeremiah. It is ironic that this is the case with the very same book that calls into question the capacity to ever really “go back” to the “original words” of the prophet, given how texts evolve within the book itself.

Readers often like to see the scroll from Jeremiah 36 as the actual text of the Book of Jeremiah itself, despite the fact that it cannot be - the scroll that Jehoiakim burned could not have contained a description of the event that, from the perspective of Jeremiah writing that scroll, could not have happened yet. Again, this speaks to the idea of where meaning is located: scrolls can be destroyed, but then reconstituted in their entirety, even featuring new additions, from some other locus. Jeremiah speaks constantly about his persecution, that no matter what Jehoiakim or the people do to him or his scrolls, his message will come right back. The meaning of his message has this kind of cosmic location that lives outside of him or his words and can always return the people of Israel - it is undeniable.