

# Personal, National and International Vengeance Motif in Jeremiah

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Vengeance appears numerous times in the Book of Jeremiah, in various contexts. The aim of this article is to understand the reasons for the vengeance motif in the Book of Jeremiah, in relation to the historical and social circumstances in which it was created. A survey of the vengeance motif in the book shows a distinct literary structure of vengeance in the Book of Jeremiah, from personal vengeance, through national vengeance, to international vengeance. The Shaping of this structure is rooted in the psychological and sociological reality of the redactors of the Book of Jeremiah, as a response to the theological and social turmoil caused by the destruction and exile of Judah. The rage and spiritual crisis that followed the harsh events are manifested in the "vengeance scenes" throughout the book. These scenes serve as a way of coping with the disaster and its repercussions.

In this article, our goal is to survey the theme of vengeance in Jeremiah, and through interpretative analysis to gain insight into the reason for the broad use of this motif specifically within this book. In order to deal with this topic thoroughly, we must first discuss the notion of vengeance in a broader scope.

The established meaning of the concept of vengeance is that of evil retribution, repayment, or punishment in response to an evil deed or some kind of harm (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1951; Koehler and Baumgartner, 1994).<sup>1</sup>

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The urge to avenge constitutes one of the most basic social and psychological characteristics, as testified by the place of the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible, one of the first events in the history of humanity. Vengeance also occupies a central place in additional constitutive events in the Bible, such as the stories of the deluge, the overturning of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the exodus. Vengeance as a literary motif is also prevalent in Greek drama and mythology, in the plays of Shakespeare, and in world literature of all ages and numerous cultures.<sup>2</sup>

Vengeance is a universal phenomenon, although the norms of vengeance vary between different societies. In some areas of the world, blood vengeance is customary, aiming to prevent behavior that is considered immoral and undesired in the society where it is conducted. In the Hebrew Bible, vengeance is clearly connected to the redeemer of blood, for example in Gen 4,15.24, Deut 32,43, and 2 Kgs 9,7. Additional roots used in reference to vengeance are: *šlm* ש"ל"ם (i.e. Jer 51,6); *pqd* פק"ד (i.e. Lev 18,25); *nhm* נה"ם (i.e. Isa 1,24); *hmy* חמ"י (i.e. Isa 59,18); *ryb* רי"ב (i.e. 1 Sam 25,39); *gal* גא"ל (i.e. Num 35,12); *bqš* בק"ש (i.e. Ez 3,18.20); *drš* דר"ש (i.e. Ez 33,6).<sup>3</sup>

The root *nqm* is also used within the same semantic field in other Western Semitic languages besides Hebrew, such as Amorite, Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic, Ancient South Arabian (Sabaeen), Pre-Islamic North Arabian (Safaitic), Classical Arabic, and Ethiopic (Ge'ez).

In his comprehensive study of the biblical root *nqm*, its uses, and meanings, Peels raises the problem of the attribution of this very human concept – to God (Peels, 1995). Vengeance is the result of hate feelings, wherefore it by definition is unique to human beings. However, the bible nevertheless attributes the act of vengeance to God numerous times. Relatively few scholars have occupied themselves with the subject of vengeance in the bible, although a number of important studies on this subject have nevertheless been written, amongst others by Merz (1916), McKeating (1963), Mendenhall (1973), Dietrich (1976), Pitard (1982), Peels (1995), and Szabolcs-Ferencz (2015). A comprehensive survey of research on the subject can be found in the study of Peels. According to Mendenhall, blood vengeance has been considered illegitimate by any human society with official government institutions. The concept of vengeance is mentioned mainly in ancient mythological texts (i.e. the Ugaritic Epic of Aqhat) and international correspondences (especially the El-Amarna letters). In this kind of literary sources, vengeance is carried out by gods or kings and is therefore considered legitimate. Although this spirit is also apparent in biblical cases of vengeance, the root *nqm* underwent a semantic development over the long course of the bible's composition. According to Mendenhall, its ancient and original meaning is "redemption" or "rescue". He bases this claim on extra-biblical texts such as the El-Amarna letters, where Canaanite kings ask the king of Egypt to interfere

in their conflict with their enemies, using the verb *ekēmu*.<sup>4</sup> Mendenhall concludes that what these kings ask from the king of Egypt is redemption and rescue, but not vengeance in the late sense of the word: retribution. The meaning of the root *nqm* derives from the meaning of the Akkadian verb *ekēmu*, which means to take by force, rob, conquer, or grab (Oppenheim *et al.*, 1958). However, notes Mendenhall, the Canaanite scribes who chose the Akkadian term *ekēmu* in order to express the Western Semitic concept of "vengeance" were unjustified in their choice of this verb (or perhaps they did it for lack of a proper Akkadian alternative). Hence, *nqm* is an original Western Semitic root. According to Pitard, there is no connection between *nqm* and the term *ekēmu*, and there is no place in the bible where the root *nqm* means "redemption". Pitard claims that the meaning of *nqm* in the bible is the common meaning of evil retribution for harm caused, without the negative connotations usually attributed to this concept. On the contrary, in the bible the context is positive, and vengeance is connected to the enactment of justice. Peels, in his study, goes deeper in his treatment of the subject, and in his view, it is unjustified to adopt a generalizing exegetical and linguistic attitude when analyzing the concept of "vengeance" in the bible. Rather, each appearance of the root *nqm* should be judged by itself. Also Szabolcs-Ferencz, like Peels, claims that the root *nqm* carries different semantic nuances in its various appearances in the bible, however in general it is a legal term that describes the enactment of justice in accordance with the severity of the crime. The root *nqm* undoubtedly carries a negative meaning (as an evil deed, but not necessarily as retribution or response) in passages such as Lev 19,18, Ps 8,3; 44,17, Lam 3,60, and Jer 20,10. One should note the unique phrase *nqm* + תא in Lev 19,18. The root *nqm* mostly occurs with the prepositions מן / מאת / ב. It is unclear whether the law in Lev 19,18 refers to blood vengeance, evil retribution, or some kind of harm, or a private person taking the law into his own hands in any conceivable situation. According to Peels, this is not an instruction to the judges but an educational message aimed at the people, in accordance with the general orientation of the "Holiness Code" in Leviticus to avoid evil in all its manifestations and to strive for purity and moral perfection.

In his study, Peels divides the biblical appearances of the concept of vengeance into two main categories: a human being taking revenge on another human being (including personal revenge or national revenge on the enemies), and God taking revenge on human beings (whether on the people of Israel or on other nations). In this context, the concept of vengeance is connected to a reaction to a breach of the covenant, a just and rightful reaction, unavoidable, indispensable, and carrying legal validity (a kind of last resort). God, as the supreme judge, carries out his verdict in a completely legitimate manner. Vengeance is the punishment, the means. The goal is to carry out justice and to enforce it, to straighten out what has been distorted.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Mendenhall, Peels does not try to reconstruct the diachronic development of the concept of vengeance in the Bible (because in his

opinion such an attempt lacks sufficient literary, linguistic, and historical basis), rather he works out a synchronic categorization of the five parallel semantic meanings of the root *nqm* in the bible:

1. Legal vengeance (punishing the wicked part of the trial), combined with parallel roots such as *šft*, *dyn*, and *ryb*.
2. Retributive vengeance, punishing evil-doers and sinners, combined with roots such as *šlm*, *gml*, *pqd*, *ykh*.
3. Redeeming vengeance, combined with roots such as *g'l*, *plt*, *yš'*, *šdq*.
4. Emotional vengeance that brings mental satisfaction, combined with the concepts "anger", "fury", "jealousy", and the roots *nḥm* and *nṯr*.
5. Vengeance out of enmity and hate, combined with the roots *sn'*, *nṯr*, *šrr*, *'yb*.

In order to complete the background discussion on vengeance, it is important to dedicate an important place to the psychological aspects of vengefulness. This aspect, we believe, is based on all literature, including ancient theological literature. Berger, for example, deals with a vengeance from a psychological-therapeutic perspective (Ulrić, Berger and Berman, 2010). According to modern Western standards, vengeance is a negative, illegitimate, primitive, and anti-liberal phenomenon. It is forbidden by law and is considered the legacy of old-fashioned barbarian societies (especially blood vengeance). However, According to Berger, being involved in vengeance connects and confronts man with his own problematic past and apparently makes progress and healing difficult.

Psychology and psychoanalysis deal little with vengeance. Many have approached vengeance as an expression of mental disorder, and have connected it to "Drive theories". On the other hand, as already mentioned, literature and drama deal a lot with vengeance. The attitude towards the subject is somewhat ambivalent, comprising both repulsion and fascination at the same time. It is possible that the source of the repulsion is found in an attempt to repress and avoid carrying out vengeance and the price the arbitrator is apt to pay for his actions. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, vengefulness is a characteristic of people who have not processed their crude feelings properly and people with low developmental functioning.

Berger rejects this "traditional" approach and suggests approaching vengeance from a post-modern angle. She sees in the desire to avenge a potential therapeutic tool, which in the framework of a rational, cautious, and thorough treatment procedure can lead to the mental recovery of the revenge seeking victim. The

issue is complex, and differs from case to case and person to person. Traditional education, which causes conscious or unconscious repression of vengefulness, is unhealthy because it cuts off people from basic legitimate feelings and brings about a feeling of guilt, self-condemnation, lack of self-esteem, and shame. This might result in extreme outbursts in times of crisis and pressure. However, recent psychological writings contradict the traditional condemnation of vengefulness, hate, anger, and jealousy, especially when these feelings are found among victims of extreme violence (such as holocaust survivors). The new approach is not judgmental and not critical towards these feelings (in accordance with the "relational" tradition in psychoanalysis). The feeling of vengefulness is considered normal, normative, and even important. This feeling can serve as a psychological "warning light" that warns about the existence of an injury in need of processing and handling. This mechanism can be the key to recovery. It is precisely the abstention from taking revenge, it is overcoming, psychological recovery, the victim's success, achievements, and rehabilitation that appropriately ought to be considered his revenge on the one who caused him harm.

Generally speaking, the desire for vengeance stems from the other's lack of recognition, a recognition that is crucial for personal and interpersonal existence in society. The perpetrator's non-recognition of his victim, his existence, or his humanity constitutes a devastating blow to the personal world of the victim and his ambition to be "the sovereign of his own world". The victim is expected to understand the pressure put on him by society to forgive, to renounce his right for vengeance, "to move on in his life", as a society demand for him to forfeit recognition of the injustice done to him. In this way, the feeling of loneliness and experience of mental suffering intensifies, and this is the most dangerous and critical point with regard to the victim's attempt to take revenge on the one who caused him harm. Since the feeling of vengefulness is intensively repressed from a young age, in most cases it becomes indirectly manifested in arguments, insults, fury, or accusations, not necessarily directed towards the perpetrator, but rather towards the immediate surroundings that are not necessarily connected to the initial harm caused.

## Vengeance in the Book of Jeremiah

The topic of vengeance is a prominent theme throughout the book of Jeremiah, appearing both linguistically, by use of the root *nqm* נקם, and also inexplicitly, through select episodes within the book. The number of occurrences of *nqm* is greater in Jeremiah than in the rest of the deuteronomistic literature, as well as in all other prophetic books. The root *nqm* appears seventeen times within the book of Jeremiah (in 52 chapters); eleven times in the book of Ezekiel (in 48 chapters), seven times in Isaiah (three in chs. 1-39, four in chs. 40-66); four

times in Deuteronomy (all within the Song of Moses in ch. 32); three times in the book of Nahum; once in Micah; and once within 47 chapters of 1-2 Kings (Even-Shoshan, 1993). In total, *nqm* appears in the Hebrew Bible 79 times in 19 books: 44 times as a noun (נָקַם or נִקְמָה), and 35 times in its verbal form. The root is found in historiography, law, prophecy, and wisdom literature.

In the following parts of this study, we will examine and analyze the explicit occurrences of the idea of vengeance in the book of Jeremiah. After this, other episodes in the book must be discussed which contain words or acts of vengeance, but do not use a distinct linguistic root to express it. Finally, after attaining a more complete picture, we will be able to discuss the questions arising from our survey, first and foremost of which are: who is the avenger, who is avenged, and what is the motive for vengeance in each instance? Additionally, why does the concept of vengeance hold such a central role in the book of Jeremiah?

In our discussion of vengeance in Jeremiah, we will divide the topic into three main categories: 1) collective vengeance on the people of Israel for breaking their covenant with Yahweh; 2) vengeance on other nations (on Egypt in chs. 44, 46; and on Babylon in chs. 50-51); 3) personal vengeance on Jeremiah's enemies. Regarding Yahweh's vengeance on Israel, Babylon, and Egypt, we will examine the passages that contain explicit use of the root *nqm*. Then, we will examine two passages that deal with vengeance but do not contain the root *nqm*: the account of Pashhur the son of Immer the priest (Jer 20,1-6), and the account of Hananiah the son of Azzur (Jeremiah 28).

## The Vengeance of Yahweh on Israel

Jeremiah blames the people living in Judah for a decline both in morality and in faith, of social sins, and of ungratefulness toward Yahweh. The people are distorting justice (5,1-3, 28; 7,5-6; 22,13), committing adultery (5,7-8; 7,9), and exploiting the weakest members of society on the judicial, social, and economic planes (5,26-28; 6,6; 7,6). The general atmosphere described by the prophet is characterized by the adoption of immoral norms, which create a sense of social insecurity, a type of *homo homini lupus*. It is impossible to trust anyone because everyone is concerned with attempts to defraud, deceive, exploit, and abuse the trust of the other (6,13; 9,2-5). Societal confidence has been lost, and in its place are suspicion, lies, and deception. This social decline is the result of a decline in faith, in that the people do not fear Yahweh (5,22. 24). The ultimate judge has lost his authority, and thus his ability of deterrence in the eyes of the people. Therefore, all moral boundaries have been breached, resulting in chaos and cold-hearted recklessness. The heart of the people has become "revolting and rebellious" (5,23 - סוֹרֵר וּמוֹרֵד), like the "stubborn and rebellious son" of Deut 21,18-21 who does not

heed moral exhortations and warnings, and whose punishment is death. Yahweh views this as a betrayal and a breach of covenant that cannot be forgiven (5,7). The people pay no heed to the goodness and abundance that Yahweh graciously provides (5,24; 25,5), and in their great pride, they despise the God who subdued the raging sea and defined its borders as "an everlasting ordinance" (– עוֹלָם – 5,22). For all these things, Yahweh decrees vengeance on the people of Judah and Jerusalem. This is declared as an undeniable fact and is presented as a rhetorical question repeated three times over, a type of chorus that emphasizes the finality of the divine decision to punish the people.

### Yahweh's Vengeance on Babylon

The instrument of Yahweh's violent punishment of the people of Judah was the Neo-Babylonian Empire. During the entire period leading up to, during, and after the conquest, Jeremiah preaches in support of capitulation to Babylonian rule and presents Babylon as a tool in the hands of Yahweh for the discipline of Judah. Indeed, immediately after his designation as a prophet, Jeremiah refers to Babylon as "the families of the kingdoms of the north", (1,15 מִשְׁפָּחוֹת מַמְלָכוֹת צָפוֹנָה-) and then in a more explicit and detailed manner in chapters 20-29. According to Jeremiah, Yahweh will give to Babylon all the treasures of Jerusalem (20,5); the inhabitants of Jerusalem will be taken in exile to Babylon, Jerusalem will be completely destroyed (21,10) and its residents massacred. By divine decree, sovereignty over all the nations of the region has been given to Babylon, thus necessitating complete submission to Nebuchadnezzar, the servant of Yahweh (25,9; 27,6). The arrogant people of Judah, who have forgotten the mercies of Yahweh and despised his mighty power, will be humbled and brought to understand their true geopolitical status: they will be forced to bow before Yahweh's representative, Nebuchadnezzar the idol worshipper.

This radical viewpoint stood in direct opposition to the isolationist and pro-Egyptian stance held by Jehoiakim and Zedekiah and even opposes the popular belief in the eternal endurance of Jerusalem and the temple (Jeremiah 7,4; 26,7-24). As a result, Jeremiah attracted much harsh harassment, and at times found himself in actual mortal danger (20,1-2; 26,7-24; 37,12-16; 38,4-6). On the other hand, after the conquest, Jeremiah received preferential treatment from the Babylonian government, for his perceived faithfulness to their interests (39,11-14). However, even within his prophecies of Judah's destruction by Babylon, Jeremiah hints at the bitter end of Babylon to come at the close of her days of greatness (25,12; 27,7; 29,10). Jeremiah's anti-Babylonian prophecy comes to a climax in chapters 50-51, which are wholly dedicated to Yahweh's vengeance on Babylon.

Due to the dissonance that arises from these two seemingly conflicting aspects of the prophet's attitude toward Babylon (in other words, placing chs. 50-51 against the other parts of the book), some have claimed that chapters 50-51 were the fruit of later redaction, and are not part of the original or earliest edition of the book (Carroll 1986; Vanderhooft 1999). According to them, the mention of the destruction of the temple in 50,28; 51,11.24.35.51 proves that the time of writing or redaction was exilic, after 586 BC. Likewise, in certain passages, it seems that the writer was physically in Babylon at the time of writing or had been there in the past, and in person had seen its magnificent fortresses, including its " *'ošyôl*" (50,15 – תִּיִּשָׁר, see *asītu* in Akkadian: a fortified tower on the wall of the city), as well as its water fountains (50,38; 51,13.36). However, one of Jeremiah's unique attributes is his sober political viewpoint. He clearly recognizes that the defiance of Judah, such a small and marginal kingdom, against Babylon, at the peak of its power, will lead to disaster and total destruction. This sober and pragmatic perspective is not contradicted, but is rather further highlighted by Jeremiah's prediction of the fall of Babylon, being aware that "nothing lasts forever", and that the end of every empire is to fall and yield its place to a new rising power. In addition, his expression of feelings of vengeance against Babylon would likely have reflected the feelings of the whole nation after the conquest. Therefore, even if the writing of chapters 50-51 is later relative to other parts of the book of Jeremiah, it does not necessitate a contradiction in the prophet's approach (on this issue, see the analysis of Amesz, 2004). Jeremiah is a prophet of Yahweh, and as such, his primary role is not to protect the national interests of Babylon, but rather to be concerned with the fate of Yahweh's people and their moral and religious integrity. His preaching for surrender to Babylon does not stem from his love for Babylon, but from concern that his people would preserve their moral values and faith, even if they are unable to maintain their sovereignty.

All things considered, the first and foremost task of the prophet is the communication of the word of Yahweh to its intended recipient, and the recipient of chapters 50-51 is Babylon. Therefore, regardless of his own political views, Jeremiah delivers his message to Babylon in a direct and forthright manner. Because Yahweh's vengeance on Babylon is theologically motivated (rather than politically), the root *nqm* appears in close proximity to references to the destruction of the temple (Jer 50,28; 51,11). This would likely have been the central most painful part of the conquest of Jerusalem for Jeremiah and his countrymen. Besides losing national autonomy, the people lost their center of religious and community life.

## Yahweh's Vengeance on Egypt

In the last decade of the seventh century BC, Egypt, led by the pharaohs of the twenty-sixth dynasty, took advantage of the imperial void left by the crumbling Assyrian empire in the areas west of the Euphrates, and tried to increase its political influence in the region. While Assyria, Babylon and Egypt competed for hegemony over the ancient Near East, kings of smaller kingdoms were often forced to make quick and fateful decisions about their politically and militarily alliances. These kings hoped, in light of the volatile political situation, that their chosen ally would rise as the victor. The book of Jeremiah describes a fascinating political battle within the kingdom of Judah that took place between the camp that favored loyalty to Babylon and the camp that favored loyalty to Egypt. In the "pro-Babylonian" camp were the scribes in the family of Shaphan, who were known as people of great influence in the courts of the kings in Jerusalem from the period of Josiah and onward (see 2 Kings 22). The Babylonian connection with this family is recognized clearly in Babylon's choice of Gedaliah son of Ahikam son of Shaphan as their representative that was placed in authority over the remnant community after the destruction of Jerusalem and after the deportation to Babylon. Jeremiah is also among the supporters of the pro-Babylonian position, shown by his blatant words in favor of submission to Babylonian rule throughout the book, and by the protection, he received from the officers of the house of Shaphan from those who sought his harm (See Jer 26,24). In addition, Nebuchadnezzar himself instructed that no harm be done to Jeremiah, and that he should be given permission to act freely (Jer 39,11-14). However, the "pro-Babylonian" camp was in opposition to the "pro-Egyptian" monarchy in Judah in its final years, especially during the days of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. It seems that the most prominent figures in the pro-Egyptian camp were top commanders in the Judean army, who advised the king in strategic decisions. For example, Letter 3 from Lachish mentions "the commander of the army Konyahu son of Elnathan" who traveled to Egypt during the Second Revolt against Babylon. Likewise, in Jer 26,22 "Elnathan the son of Achbor" is mentioned, who went down to Egypt as the head of a delegation, most likely military in nature, to imprison the prophet Uriah.

In 605 BC, the imperial power struggle in the ancient Near East was decided in favor of Babylon. The armies of Assyria and Egypt suffered defeat at Carchemish, and Nebuchadnezzar began to consolidate and extend his power and influence throughout Syria and the land of Israel. Jehoiakim, king of Judah, who was appointed by Pharaoh Necho II instead of Jehoahaz his younger brother, held a clear pro-Egyptian stance throughout his reign. However, at approximately the end of 603 BC he was compelled to yield to Babylonian vassalage (see Dan 1,1-2; 2 Chr 36,6-7). For three years, Jehoiakim paid taxes to Babylon, however the failed Babylonian attempt to invade Egypt in 601 BC seems to have encouraged Judah,

along with some of its neighbors, to try to break free from the yoke of Babylon. The Babylonian response to the attempted uprising was firm and resolute, as demonstrated by 2 Kgs 24, and by the Babylonian chronicle from the seventh year of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (Grayson, 1975).

Jehoiakim died in unclear circumstances during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem. His son Jehoiachin surrendered and was exiled to Babylon, and his uncle Mattaniah (Zedekiah) was installed as ruler over Judah by Nebuchadnezzar.

The Egyptian defeat at Carchemish is discussed extensively in the words of the prophet Jeremiah in chapter 46, and is described as a humiliating defeat, followed by panic and bewilderment (46,5-6). The forces of Egypt in their military might are compared ironically to the overflowing Nile (46,7-8). Nevertheless, they are stopped when Yahweh decides to take revenge on Egypt (possibly there is a textual corruption between the words "Egypt" מצרים and "of His adversaries" מצריו in v. 10), and Pharaoh's army is wiped out as a "sacrifice to Yahweh the God of hosts" on the banks of the Euphrates (Irony is implied here as well, insinuating the loss of Pharaoh's army in the Red Sea). Just as Babylon served as Yahweh's vehicle for punishing Judah, so it serves him in punishing Egypt.

### Yahweh's Vengeance on Jeremiah's Enemies<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the three examples of national, collective vengeance mentioned above, now we turn to Jeremiah's plea to Yahweh for personal vengeance on those who seek his harm. As noted above, Jeremiah's views concerning domestic and foreign affairs were defiant, aggressive, and infuriating to the government, the priesthood, and the people. In his preaching, he did not spare criticism of the local government, neither did he not shrink back from predictions of coming destruction and atrocities. For this he paid a heavy personal price, and suffered abuse at the hands of many classes of society: the king (36,26; 38,5), the princes (38,4), the priests and prophets (26,8), "all the people" (26,8.24b), and even "all my close friends, watching for my fall" כל אֹנֹשׁ שְׁלֹמִי שִׁמְרֵי צְלָעֵי (20,10 ESV). The identity of his harassers here is not fully clear in this rather unique phrase. Hoffman (2001) estimates that these are the people closest to Jeremiah, who were supposed to be concerned for his welfare and protection, but instead were trying to trap him. This interpretation fits well with what is written in 12,6. In Ps 41,10 this same meaning is found in a similar wording. Thus, in this case, it seems that the word שִׁמְרֵי in 20,10 is best interpreted as עֲקֹבֵי "watchers", "pursuers", or even "betrayers" rather than the typical meaning of "protectors" or "defenders". The Septuagint also supports this analysis, with the reading: πάντες ἄνδρες φίλοι αὐτοῦ· τηρήσατε τὴν ἐπίνοιαν αὐτοῦ ("even all his friends: watch his intentions" Brenton), which can be reconstructed in Hebrew as כל אֹנֹשׁ שְׁלֹמִי שִׁמְרֵי צְלָעֵי. Jeremiah's movements are

under surveillance, in order to frame him or even physically harm him (see also Ps 56,7; 71,10). If so, it seems that this is the most painful part for Jeremiah: betrayal at the hands of family and friends, and their enlistment to the camp of his enemies that are threatening his life. A great sense of isolation is apparent in Jeremiah's complaints to Yahweh, and he feels that he has no one left to rely on but Yahweh. His prayer for vengeance reveals Jeremiah's humanity, his human weakness. He not only desires salvation from his persecutors and the failure of their schemes, but he also longs for their suffering and death (12,3). He is not described as one of the merciful righteous but as hungry for revenge, a man whose hardships have drawn out of him cravings for violence, even against his own family and fellow residents of Anathoth (11,21-23).

At this point in our discussion, we would like to discuss in detail two episodes that contain the motif of Jeremiah's "personal" vengeance on his enemies (by the hand of Yahweh). These narratives are not poetic in style, as in the segments discussed above, but are rather prose descriptions of Jeremiah's experiences. First, we turn to Jeremiah's encounter with Pashhur the son of Immer the priest (Jer 20,1-6), and then to his dispute with Hananiah the son of Azzur (Jeremiah 28, particularly vv. 15-17).<sup>7</sup> Notably, the root *nkm* does not appear in these sections, but vengeance undoubtedly stands at the heart of the story.

### **Vengeance on Pashhur son of Immer (Jer 20,1-6)**

In Jeremiah 19 Jeremiah proclaims a prophecy of wrath on Jerusalem. In chapter 20, as a direct response to this, Pashhur son of Immer the priest, the "chief officer in the house of the Lord", has Jeremiah beaten. It is likely that Jeremiah delivered his prophecy publicly, presumably in the temple during a major pilgrimage to Jerusalem, in order to obtain as large a number of listeners as possible. This is similar to other speeches given by Jeremiah in the temple, such as the "Temple Sermon" in 7,1-15 or the sermon of rebuke that leads to the trial of Jeremiah in chapter 26.

Concerning Pashhur's identity, we can safely assume that he held an administrative role in the temple, presumably responsible for maintaining order in the temple complex. His title "chief officer", and his actions against Jeremiah, are reflected in Jer 29,26 in which the "officers of the house of the Lord" are responsible for the imprisonment and removal of "every man that is mad, and maketh himself a prophet". Thus, Shemaiah the Nehelamite expects Zephaniah son of Maaseiah the priest to rebuke Jeremiah and imprison him for the letter he sent to the exiles of the second exile (29,23-24). In this letter, Jeremiah advises the exiles to establish themselves in Babylon, since their exile will be long, and to ignore false prophecies of a quick return to Judah.

After being beaten, Jeremiah is placed in "the stocks" (הַמִּהְפָּכֹת - a place of confinement, mentioned alongside "the collar" הַצִּינָק in Jer 29,26), probably for one night. After his release, his first action is to rename Pashhur to "*māgôr missābîb*", and he invokes the name of Yahweh as his authority. Following LXX (in which *māgôr* alone appears), it seems that *missābîb* מִסְבִּיב is an addition, perhaps influenced by v. 10, in which the same two words describe the plots of Jeremiah's enemies. The term *māgôr* מָגוֹר normally indicates fear and terror, but McKane (1986) notes a theory that *māgôr* may refer to destruction or even exile, and not necessarily dread or fear. This component in Pashhur's new name is a symbolic keyword in his punishment for persecuting Jeremiah and attempting to frighten him into silence. Yahweh will make Pashhur "a terror to thyself, and to all thy friends", who will fall by the sword of their enemies in front of his eyes (v. 4a).

However, this punishment is not only limited to Pashhur's personal and family sphere. Jeremiah takes this opportunity to sharpen his message further and presents a dual meaning by predicting the comprehensive punishment of the nation of Israel. Thus in verses 4b-5, Jeremiah describes the nation's exile to Babylon, the looting of the treasures of Jerusalem, and the collapse of the kingdom. In verse 6, the text returns to Pashhur and his family and refers to their journey into exile in Babylon. There Pashhur will die and be buried. At the end of verse 6, Pashhur is further accused of being a false prophet, although the book of Jeremiah records no false prophecies given by him. Essentially, by his assault and imprisonment of Yahweh's spokesman, Pashhur has contradicted Jeremiah's message and is therefore regarded as a false prophet (See Deut 18,22b on the link between the root *gwr* to false prophets). Hoffman (1983) develops this point further, arguing that Pashhur's role was not administrative only, but that there are grounds to assume he was an active member of the anti-Babylonian political camp in Judah. While we do not have information that can verify this claim, his punishment and retribution are indeed deeply associated with Babylon. Interestingly, these verses (20,1-6) are the first that mention Babylon specifically as the empire that will destroy and deport Judah. Conversely, there are those who argue that Babylon is not yet presented in these verses as the cause of a national disaster, but only as the tool of Yahweh for the personal punishment of Pashhur and his family (Reimer, 1998). This argument ignores the unambiguous text of verse 5, in which Jeremiah prophesies the capture of Jerusalem and its treasures by the Babylonians. Possibly, though, the start of the prophecy (v. 4a) and its end (v. 6) comprise a frame and could be seen as the essence of the original prophecy, which focuses on the punishment of Pashhur and his family.

### Vengeance on Hananiah son of Azzur (Jer 28,15-17)

Chapter 28 relates the confrontation between Jeremiah, a true prophet who preaches capitulation to Babylonian rule, and Hananiah, a false prophet promising a rapid return to Jerusalem both of the exiles and of the temple vessels, within two years. This confrontation takes place in Zedekiah's fourth year as king. The survival of Jehoiachin in Babylon caused a schism in Judah between the supporters of Jehoiachin, who held out hope for his return, and the supporters of Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar's appointed representative. This became a major point of contention between the prophets, among them Hananiah, who prophesied Jehoiachin's quick return (28,3-4 here labelled "Jeconiah"). In addition, it is important to remember that in 594 BC, Zedekiah convened a regional anti-Babylonian conference in Jerusalem, which involved representatives of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon (27,3).<sup>8</sup> The clash between Jeremiah and Hananiah apparently occurred as a result of this anti-Babylonian conference, or just prior to it. The conference was perhaps convened after a series of political and military problems in Babylon, both at home and abroad, such as the attack by Elam in 596/5 BC. Likewise, Jer 49,34-39 also describes a military confrontation between Elam and its enemies and the defeat of Elam. Moreover, in the winter of 595/4 BC, a revolt broke out in Babylon and was suppressed by Nebuchadnezzar.

Several years earlier, at the beginning of 598 BC, Pharaoh Khafrā had come to power in Egypt. He was supportive of subversive activities against Babylon among the smaller kingdoms of the Southwestern Levant. It seems, therefore, that the combination of all these factors drove Zedekiah and his allies in their attempt to break free from the yoke of Babylon.

In chapter 27, at the command of Yahweh, Jeremiah made "bands and bars" (מִסְרָוֹת וּמִטּוֹת) for himself, and placed them around his neck as a symbol of the yoke of the king of Babylon on the peoples of the region. However, in chapter 28, Jeremiah plays a passive role, in comparison to the charismatic, dramatic figure of Hananiah. Hananiah begins his words in verse 2 in the name of "the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel", the full, unequivocal name of Yahweh, and dramatically declares that the yoke of Babylon will be broken from off the neck of all the nations. In Assyro-Babylonian imperial rhetoric, the term "yoke" (*nirū*) was used to illustrate the empire's undisputed power, as well as the utter enslavement of the smaller regional kingdoms. Thus Hananiah both opens (v. 2) and closes (v. 4) his statement by ironically referencing this yoke, creating a frame for emphasis. Moreover, Hananiah commits himself to a specific time frame in the near future: "Within two full years" Yahweh will bring back to Jerusalem the exiles and the temple vessels, including Jehoiachin, whom Hananiah views as the legitimate king of Judah.

This creates an interesting position for Jeremiah, who usually stands in opposition to the existing government authorities. Suddenly, the situation is turned on its head, and Jeremiah finds himself opposing, and in effect invalidating, the words of an opposition leader. However, he does not do so through direct confrontation. Jeremiah, who knows that the prophecy of Hananiah will not be fulfilled, initially expresses hope for its realization (v. 6), perhaps due to fear of further harassment. On the other hand, in verses 8-9, he does hint at one of the difficulties with Hananiah's optimistic prophecy. In the case of prophecies of peace, the final outcome is the only way to prove the reliability of the prophet. Jeremiah's words here are directly connected to the passage in Deut 18,20-22 that prescribes death as the punishment for a false prophet whose words are not fulfilled. Hananiah is aware of this hurdle, and in order to win over his temple audience, he recognizes that he must perform a physical and dramatic act to refute Jeremiah's contentions and to counter Jeremiah's symbolic act of carrying "bands and bars" on his neck (27,2). Therefore, Hananiah takes the bar off Jeremiah's neck and breaks it in front of all the people (28,10), symbolizing Yahweh breaking the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar from over the nations. The text does not provide a response from Jeremiah to this act, and the reader is left with the impression of Jeremiah's public humiliation and degradation, and Hananiah's overwhelming victory. Consequently, some argue that 28,12-17 is a later editorial addition, which aims to defend Jeremiah's honor and to clarify that Yahweh did not abandon his prophet. Jeremiah is sent to Hananiah with a new message for the nations, built on the principle of *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye". Just as Hananiah broke Jeremiah's wooden bars, so Yahweh will place a yoke of iron upon all the nations, in the form of servitude to Babylon. Even the beasts of the field will serve Nebuchadnezzar (This detail is missing in LXX). Furthermore, in verses 15-16, Jeremiah gives Hananiah an entirely different kind of message, of a very personal nature. Hananiah has made false promises and has breathed false hopes into the hearts of the people, and this is considered *sārâ* הָרָצָה in the eyes of Yahweh – falsehood, and rebellion. According to Deut 13,6, the punishment for a false prophet who speaks *sārâ* is death, and indeed verse 17 discloses the death of Hananiah, two months later.

In Pashhur's case (20,1-6) vengeance was both personal and national alike, and the avenger was Yahweh. Here, in contrast, Jeremiah takes matters into his own hands and initiates revenge on Hananiah as punishment for his public humiliation. Paradoxically, Yahweh is then obligated to stand by his prophet and fulfill his words. This is reminiscent of the prophet Elijah in the affair of the drought (1 Kgs 17) and in the punishment given to Ahab for taking Naboth's vineyard (1 Kgs 21,17-24). In both cases, it seems that Elijah acts on his own initiative, without an explicit divine order. In the same way that Jeremiah is motivated by his personal rivalry with Hananiah, so Elijah is driven by his personal rivalry with Ahab. In both cases, Yahweh stands by his prophet, fulfilling his words, despite the personal

initiative of the prophet. In Elijah's case, however, it cost him his prophetic post, and led to his replacement by Elisha (1 Kings 19).<sup>9</sup>

## Cycles of vengeance in the book of Jeremiah

In summary of our research thus far, it is clear that vengeance is a thematic motif in the book of Jeremiah. Yahweh himself is the avenger, and the objects of his vengeance are varied: at times the people of Israel, at other times a foreign nation, and at other times the personal enemies of his prophets. Yet still, the question remains, why does this motif exist in Jeremiah? Does it express any certain theological, philosophical, political, or social perspective meant to influence the contemporary readers of the book?

To better answer these questions, we must now turn our attention to an additional number of instances in the Bible in which divine vengeance is enacted on those who harm Yahweh's spokespeople. As seen above, Yahweh interprets the harassment of his representatives as a personal attack on himself (Avioz, 2005). For example, Num 16,28-35 describes the supernatural punishment of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who publicly challenged Moses and Aaron by sharply criticizing their leadership (vv. 3, 13-14), claiming arrogance on their part, and attempting to incite others to rebellion. Moses appeals to Yahweh concerning this insurrection (v. 15), and he receives the full support and protection of Yahweh, who supernaturally wipes out the rebels and all their possessions from the face of the earth (vv. 31-33).

Another related case can be found in 2 Kgs 2, 23-25. The prophet Elisha encounters a group of "little children", who mock him: "Go up, thou baldhead; go up, thou baldhead". With no divine directive or even an appeal to Yahweh, Elisha curses these children in a most ruthless manner "in the name of the Lord", and forty-two of them are killed by "two she-bears out of the wood". Unlike Moses in the Korah incident, the vengeance here is Elisha's personal revenge, without any religious or political motives. In this sense, Elisha's private, egocentric revenge is more analogous to Jeremiah's vengeance on Hananiah.

An even more closely related example can be found in Amos 7,12-17. Like the confrontation between Pashhur the priest and Jeremiah, similarly Amaziah the priest of Beth-El clashes with Amos in a sharp war of words. Amaziah demands that Amos will go back to the land of Judah, and "there eat bread, and prophesy there" (v. 12). Note the nickname "seer", used by Amaziah to belittle Amos, implying that he sought financial gain from his prophecy. A pre-classical prophecy was characterized by "seers" (חֹזֵן or רֹאֵה) of various types, who made their living through prophecy (see 1 Sam 9,6-9). To this accusation Amos answers: "I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet's son" (v. 14). In other words, "prophecy is not my

livelihood, but agriculture. I was not born a prophet nor did I inherit this role from my ancestors." (This stands in contrast to the priest, who inherited his position by virtue of his family line, and not by virtue of his distinctive qualifications or direct election by Yahweh). Amos goes so far as to apply to himself a well-known Biblical metaphor related to God's chosen individual: "And the Lord took me from following the flock" (v. 15). This immediately brings to mind several "chosen" figures, including King David (2 Sam 7,8).

Amaziah's punishment, pronounced by Amos in verse 17, will be enacted by Yahweh in stages: Amaziah's wife will prostitute herself in the city; his sons and daughters will fall by the sword; his land "shall be divided by line" (i.e. taken by strangers); Amaziah himself will die on the unclean ground; and so also Israel "shall surely be led away captive out of their land." The incremental structure moves from the personal (Amaziah) to the collective (Israel). This is the reverse order of the structure of the punishment given to Pashhur in Jer 20, 4-6 in which Jeremiah begins with the nation, and then focuses on Pashhur. Still, there is a great similarity between these two episodes.

In light of the passages presented above, the existence of a literary convention has been suggested that includes stories and traditions about personal revenge on the enemies of the prophets of Yahweh (so, for example, Avioz, 2005). However, there are objections to this theory, and as we have demonstrated, the vengeance motif in Jeremiah is diverse and multi-faceted. Personal vengeance is only one component of the comprehensive vengeance motif in the book and therefore should be discussed as one part of a system of concentric circles: individual characters, the nation of Israel, and the regional empires. One of the prominent principles that surface in these circles of vengeance is the principle of *lex talionis*, "an eye for an eye". Just as Jeremiah's enemies desire to cause his death, he yearns for and prophesies their death (compare Jer 11,19 with 12,3, and 2,10 with 20,12). Many scholars, such as Kalmanofsky (2015) and Amesz (2004), have also pointed out the principle of *lex talionis* in Jeremiah's prophecies of vengeance on Babylon, Egypt, and other nations, such as Moab (ch. 48) and Edom (49,7-22).

According to Kalmanofsky, Jeremiah's prophecies of vengeance on the nations represent revenge fantasies on the psychological plane, a type of emotional and moral survival strategy that gave heart to the people of Israel during the conquest and exile. As already mentioned in our treatment of the psychological background of vengeance, the desire to avenge (including "vengeance fantasies") is considered dangerous, undesirable, and illegitimate. However, according to Berger, citing the words of Goldberg, vengeance fantasies can function as an important therapeutic tool, since they function as an imaginative satisfaction of the urge for vengeance and prevent the actual enactment of vengeance with its devastating consequences. This kind of restraint and the ability to rest content with fantasies of vengeance is

a sign of mental strength. One of the most common ways to describe vengeance fantasies is through art, like in the book of Jeremiah.

Prophecies of destruction against Babylon were intended to strengthen the sense of hope and divine justice in the hearts of listeners and readers. The Babylonians had violated the holy people of Israel and their God; they had plundered and destroyed the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem; they turned Jerusalem into a heap of deserted ruins; and they had tortured, humiliated and massacred the inhabitants of the city. Therefore, Babylon will become "a dwelling-place for jackals, an astonishment, and a hissing, without inhabitant" (51,37); its temples will be desecrated (51,52); and its people will be tortured (51,54) and killed en masse (51,57). While restoration and redemption are anticipated for Judah, Babylon's fate will be final and absolute, with no hope of renewal. In our opinion, the prophecies of vengeance on Babylon in chapters 50-51 are rooted in the tangible experience of life in exile after the conquest. These deported people were desperate to know that Yahweh had not abandoned them and that justice would be done to Babylon and its allies for its violence. However, documents and inscriptions such as the Kurkh monolith (Grayson, 1996), which describes the early years of the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC), the annals of Sargon II (Fuchs, 1994) from Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), and the Rassam Cylinder A of Ashurbanipal King of Assyria (in the description of his military campaign against the mainland portion of Tyre, Ušū) from 645-643 BC (Sterck, 1916), it appears that the fate of Jerusalem and the temple was not different from that of other insurgent kingdoms in the area of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquests. It was not unusual for an empire to punish a rebelling kingdom by damaging their temples, and even taking their gods and temple vessels captive (compare the fall of the Ark of the Covenant into the hands of the Philistines in 1 Sam 4-6). However, this fact does not lessen the grief and sorrow of the exiled people of Israel for their destroyed temple, and so it seems likely that Jeremiah 50-51 does indeed express a burning desire for revenge on Babylon.

Regarding Yahweh's vengeance on Egypt in Jeremiah, some claim, such as Peels, that Egyptian imperialism and the Egyptian sense of superiority are its cause. His assumption is based on several verses from chapter 46, such as verse 8b, that perhaps describe Egyptian "abuse" of various cities outside of Egypt in exchange for a ransom. In Jeremiah's view, Yahweh is the judge of the entire world (27,5) and he has a "quarrel" with humanity as a whole (25,35). In this interpretation, the words of wrath toward Egypt in chapter 46 also serve as words of comfort to Israel, who suffered greatly under Egypt's hand. Indeed, Israel's comfort is the subject of the final two verses of chapter 46 (vv. 27-28). This view is clearly consistent with the anti-imperialistic tone of Jeremiah's speeches against Babylon and Egypt. However, taking a broader perspective, an additional, distinctly anti-

Egyptian layer can be discerned in Jeremiah, and in fact in the entire corpus of deuteronomic literature.

Jeremiah expresses strong opposition to any link between the kingdoms of Judah and Egypt, both before and after the Babylonian conquest (despite the fact that he went down to Egypt with the rest of the people after the assassination of Gedaliah). Jeremiah's anti-Egyptian stance is closely related to the figure of King Josiah and his religious reform, and also to the family of Shaphan the scribe, who played a major role in the reform's design and implementation, as seen in 2 Kings 22. In Jer 26, 24 it becomes apparent that this family had given Jeremiah protection from his adversaries (from the priests, the prophets, some members of the royal court, and even from the kings Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, apparently). According to the title verses of Jeremiah, the prophet began his activities in the days of Josiah, "in the thirteenth year of his reign" (1, 2). Based on 2 Kgs 22,1 Josiah introduced the religious reform in the eighteenth year of his reign (in 622 BC). However, in 609 BC, Josiah's life came to a premature end at Megiddo by the hand of Pharaoh Necho, when the Egyptian army made its way north to the Euphrates River to assist the Assyrian forces in combating Babylon. It seems that the death of the king brought an end to his religious and political reform, especially since Josiah's successor, Jehoahaz, was assessed harshly: "he did that which was evil in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kgs 23,32). In other words, Jehoahaz did not continue pursuing the centralization of the worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem, or the eradication of idolatry from the land. The author-redactor of the Book of Kings gives a similar assessment of all the kings of Judah after Josiah, all the way up to its final destruction. In light of this, a significant link can be established between Jeremiah's (and Shaphan's) pro-Babylonian stance and Egypt's responsibility for the death of Josiah and the disruption of his reform.<sup>10</sup> Egypt is presented in the book of Jeremiah as a place from which comes disaster, and as a result, all contact should be avoided with this kingdom.<sup>11</sup> When he arrived in Egypt together with "Johanan son of Kareah, and all the captains of the forces" (43,5) perhaps taken against his will, Jeremiah's first act on Egyptian soil was to pronounce a prophecy of the destruction of Egypt, a trend that continues from chapter 43 to chapters 44 and 46.

After the death of Josiah, it seems that Jeremiah considered Jehoiakim to be the representative of the Egyptian government in Judah. As seen above, his opposition aroused the wrath of the religious and political "establishment". Thus, the words of the prophet reflect an anti-Egyptian tradition, which fueled his desire for divine vengeance on Egypt. This link constitutes an important component of the interconnecting circles of vengeance in the book of Jeremiah, each interrelated to the other, which is used by the author as a rhetorical-psychological tool to convey

his messages, both moral and political, to readers who are expecting divine justice to appear and to save them from their spiritual suffering.

## Summary

At the center of the book of Jeremiah stands the destruction. The destruction and exile of the kingdom of Judah left a deep wound in the soul and spirits of the survivors from the destruction in Judah and the exile. Feelings of fury, humiliation, abandonment, impotence, and frustration that awoke within the beaten community following the terrible trauma, found literary expression at the hand of the authors and redactors of the book of Jeremiah. The desire to avenge is part of the processing of the victim's harsh emotions. It is normal and to a certain extent even healthy, as long as the victim is strong enough emotionally in order to abstain from carrying out real vengeance and channel his desire for revenge into the ability to rehabilitate himself, recover, thrive, and see this as constituting the perfect vengeance.

From the emotional and crude desire to avenge, having been literarily processed at the hand of an artist, the motif of vengeance developed in the book of Jeremiah and infiltrated the areas of theology and politics. In this way, "cycles of vengeance" came into being in the book of Jeremiah, and they focus on different factors, from the personal domain (the prophet's personal enemies), through the relations between God and the people of Israel, to the relations between God and other kingdoms and different nations. Especially the third domain, the international domain, which seemingly has nothing to do with feelings and man's inner world, stands at the center of the personal pain of the book's author. The personal and the political are mixed up since the tragedy was a national tragedy with a tremendous impact on all areas of the lives of individuals.

The authors retrospectively "take revenge" on the objects of their fury: the kings of Judah, who in their political shortsightedness rebelled against Babylon; the false prophets, who led astray the hearts of the people and the rulers and thereby hastened the end; the stubborn, arrogant, corrupt, and cruel people, which hurried towards the disaster and did not heed the voice of God's prophets; and the demolishing and exiling empires, that brought an end to the kingdom of Judah. The will to avenge is the will for correction, justice, religious repentance, and for national resurrection. In his vengeance, God restores the divine justice, and in this way the readers of the book of Jeremiah, that is to say, the victims whose honor has been downtrodden, feel and know that justice shall be done and that God has not abandoned them despite the destruction of his sanctuary in Jerusalem.

## Notes

- 1 On the sociological aspect of the phenomenon of vengeance, see Elster, 1990.
- 2 For a fascinating survey of this issue, see Rosen, 2007.
- 3 The order of the roots in this list does not indicate their distribution in the Hebrew Bible, and for each root, only one example of many has been presented.
- 4 A number of examples of this appear on pp. 78—82 in the work of Mendenhall.
- 5 In several later cultures, vengeance is even considered a legitimate tool for obtaining justice, restoring lost honor, and making peace, but also as a political tool in the service of the Church and the monarchy. For example, in the European middle ages, as shown by Smail and Gibson (2009).
- 6 The Issue of "Jeremiah's complaints" is extended, and exceeds this paper's scope. The following segment will deal with some of the lamentation/complaint texts in Jeremiah. For a comprehensive analysis of this issue, see chapter five in Polk's exegesis on Jeremiah (Polk, 1984).
- 7 We could also include in the category of "personal vengeance" Jeremiah's prophecy to king Jehoiakim in 36,30 which he delivered after the tearing and burning of the scroll containing Jeremiah's prophecies in v. 23. Nevertheless, this case is different from those of Pashhur and Hananiah, in that the confrontation here between Jeremiah and his enemy is not physical and direct, but rather indirect and at the ideological level, without a face-to-face conflict.
- 8 This assumes that the title verse of Jeremiah 27 is corrupted, and originally referred to Zedekiah and not Jehoiakim, as in chapter 28.
- 9 The matter of Elijah's character and actions in this and other contexts is at the center of the study done by Garsiel (2014).
- 10 See Reimer's extensive discussion (Reimer, 1998).
- 11 See the narrative concerning Uriah the prophet in Jer 26,20-24.

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