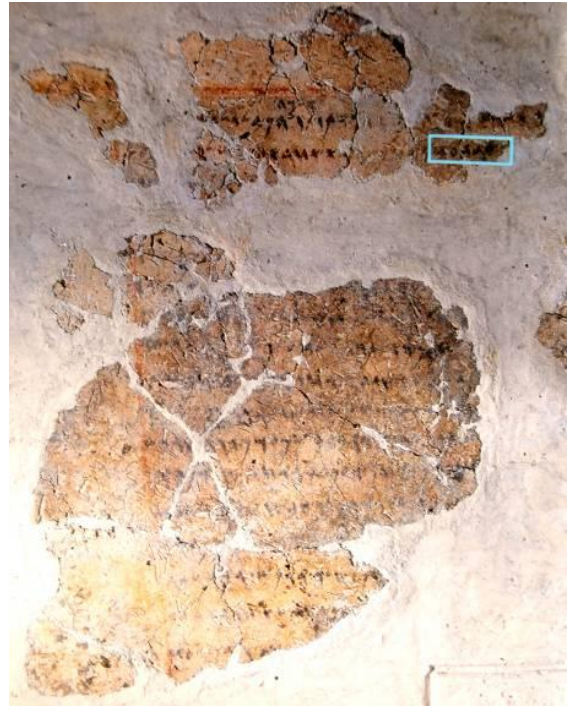


## LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

### PROPHETS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

*The category of the prophet was not in itself unique to Israel. Prophecy was a widespread ancient Near Eastern phenomenon. Various ancient texts from Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt demonstrate that belief in inspired speech at the initiative of a divine being was widely accepted (cf. Je. 27:1-15).*

*As members of the courts of their kings, such prophets were expected to be supportive. A good example is the prophets of Ahab's court, all of whom were prophesying what the king wanted to hear (2 Kg. 22:6). When Micaiah, a true prophet, was called to give his opinion, he was coached about what his "message" was supposed to be before he ever arrived in the court (2 Kg. 22:13). It was really only in Israel that prophets could oppose their kings.*



*An inscription naming Balaam, son of Beor, the Mesopotamian prophet who was hired by Balak to curse Israel (Num. 22-24), was discovered in 1967 in Jordan.*

*Scholars date it to about the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC. It describes Balaam as a "seer of the gods." The blue rectangle contains his name.*

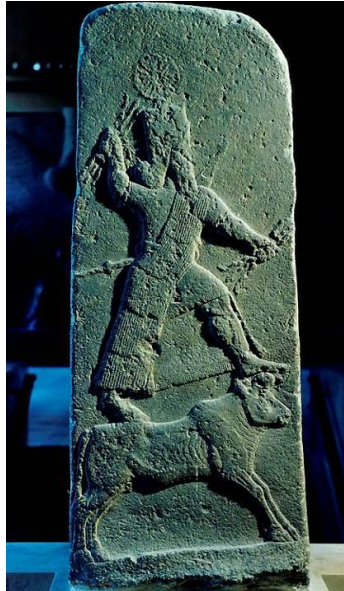
Since the court prophets of Jeremiah's day were primarily supporters of the king and the *status quo*, Jeremiah's assault on the royal theology naturally brought him into conflict with the prophetic guild as well as with the kings themselves. Four sections of Jeremiah especially develop this antagonism, though hints of it are to be found repeatedly throughout the book.

### The Great Drought (14)

One of the specific Deuteronomic curses for covenant violation was drought and massive crop failure (Dt. 28:18, 22-24, 38-42; 29:19, 22-24). To fail to remain faithful to Yahweh meant that the land itself would suffer. Ironically, the Canaanite cults surrounding Israel were fertility cults in which the worship of Ba'al was believed to ensure good weather and abundant harvests. This collision of religious ideals between Yahwehism and the Ba'al cult continually forced the people to make a choice, since religion and economics were tied together. In the days of Elijah, the threat of no rain was a frontal assault upon not only the weather but the religion of Ba'al (cf. 1 Kg. 17:1). In the days of Jeremiah, a severe drought in Judah pointed both toward the ineffectiveness of the Ba'al cult (which the people were following) and Yahweh's determined commitment to fulfil the Deuteronomic code (which the people were ignoring). The cisterns were drying up (14:3), the ground was cracked (14:4a), the farmers were desperate (14:4b), and the pastureland was exhausted (14:5-6). Yet, while the people of Judah acknowledged that they had sinned, they blamed

the drought on either Yahweh's unwillingness or his inability to help them (14:7-9). Their tentative admission of guilt was tainted with the insinuation that Yahweh was himself at fault. Such arrogance prompted Yahweh again to instruct Jeremiah that it was useless even to pray for the people (14:11-12; cf. 11:14; 15:1).

How came this penchant for defiance? Jeremiah saw clearly that it was augmented by the prophetic guild who preached a doctrine of prosperity (14:13; cf. 2:8, 26; 4:9-10; 5:12-13; 6:13-14; 8:10-11). These prophets were liars, and though they had the rhetoric for speaking the oracles of Yahweh, they had not been sent by him (14:14-16). Jeremiah was left to weep over the tragic aftermath of their insidious oracles (14:17-18). The nation was dying due to its failed leadership but



*This 4.5' bas-relief of Ba'al was stereotypical, depicting this deity with thunderbolts in his right hand, a symbol of his control over the sky and rain.*

The Louvre, Paris

### THE BA'AL MYTH

*Until the discovery of an ancient Ugaritic library in Ras Shamra in 1929, we had only a cursory knowledge of Canaanite religion. Now, however, we know that the Canaanites believed that fertility came in cycles. Ba'al engaged in a terrific struggle with Mot, the god of death, who imprisoned him in the underworld. He was rescued from his prison by Asherah, his mistress, and their sexual union led to fertility and good harvest. This mythology paralleled the seasons, the imprisonment of Ba'al denoting the dry season and the emergence of Ba'al from the underworld denoting the rainy season. The worship of Ba'al and Asherah included imitative magic, in which worshippers engaged in sacred prostitution, mimicking the union of Ba'al and his consort. Both male and female prostitutes served the public in the Canaanite bamoth or "high places."*

could not seem to perceive that all was lost. Even though the terrible future was fixed, Jeremiah continued his petition on behalf of the nation (14:19-22), but to no avail (15:1).

### The Third Commandment (23:9-40)

It is popular to understand the Third Commandment in the Decalogue as a prohibition against bad language (cf. Dt. 5:11). While such an ideal is worthy, the Third Commandment is concerned with a much more serious matter, the improper use of God's name in formulae, such as, in taking oaths and prophesying (i.e., "as Yahweh lives" or "thus says Yahweh"). Jeremiah's oracle against the prophets (23:9ff.) was not only because they abused their positions of influence (23:10b), not only because they were godless (23:11), and not only because they mixed the religion of Ba'al and Yahweh (23:13) while participating in sin (23:14), though surely these things guaranteed for them Yahweh's judgment (23:15). What was worse was that the prophetic guild had falsely spoken their messages in the name of Yahweh himself (23:16-18). He had not sent them (23:21-22). Their claims of divine communication, such as dreams, were simply human imaginations, not the true word of Yahweh (23:25-29). To preface an oracle with the formula, "Yahweh declares," proved nothing about authenticity (23:30-32). Because of these repeated abuses of Yahweh's name, which were violations of the Third Commandment, Jeremiah declared a moratorium on the prophetic formula,

"Yahweh says" (23:33-40).

### TALKING POINTS

- *In biblical times, do think there were more false prophets than true prophets?*
- *How about in modern times?*

### Jeremiah and Hananiah (27-28)

Early in Zedekiah's reign (27:1),<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah was instructed by Yahweh to perform an acted-out parable in which he wore an ox-yoke constructed of the wooden bar which normally was to be attached to an animal's neck or lashed to its horns by leather thongs or cords (27:1-2). This contraption was intended to call attention to the fact that Judah and the nations which surrounded her would soon be in servitude to Babylon, the Mesopotamian superpower (27:3-15). Any prophet, whether from Judah or elsewhere, who had promised otherwise was a liar according to Jeremiah (27:9-10, 14-15). Not only had the false prophets predicted to their kings safety from Babylon, they had predicted to the Zion priests that the booty of utensils, which had been stripped from the temple at the time of Jehoiachin's exile (cf. 2 Kg. 24:13//2 Chr. 36:9-10), would soon be returned (27:16a). Such false predictions were unforgiveable, and Jeremiah declared that not only would this *not* happen, the other temple treasures would soon follow into the hands of the foreigners (27:16b-22).

One of the court prophets, Hananiah, was so bold as to predict a reversal of Judah's fortunes within two years (28:1-4). He promised that the temple utensils would be returned and that Jehoiachin himself would be restored to take the Judean throne. Though Jeremiah could wish with all his heart that the oracle was true (28:5-6), the Deuteronomic test of prophethood-, the acid test of historical fulfillment (Dt. 18:19-22), had yet to be applied (28:7-9). Hananiah attempted to reinforce his prophecy with his own parabolic act. He broke the yoke from Jeremiah's neck (28:10), once more predicting a restoration in two years (28:11). Jeremiah merely turned silently away.

Sometime later, Jeremiah returned to Hananiah with a rebuke from Yahweh. He announced that the yoke of wood would be replaced with a yoke of iron (28:12-14). Further, Hananiah had signed his own death warrant when he presumed to use the formula, "Yahweh says." Yahweh himself would carry out the death penalty called for by the Deuteronomic code (Dt. 13; 18:20). Within two months, Hananiah was dead (28:17).

### False Prophets Among the Exiles (29)

The problem of false prophets who spoke in Yahweh's name was not limited to the Jews in Jerusalem. Among the 10,000 exiles who had been deported to Babylon with Jehoiachin (2 Kg. 24:14) were other prophets as well. These, like their counterparts in Jerusalem, described an attractive future of restoration. In opposition to this popular but misdirected message, Jeremiah wrote a letter to the exiles to warn them not to listen to such speculation (29:1-3). He advised the exiles to be content in their new home and to work toward its well-being (29:4-9). The exile would

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<sup>1</sup>There is a textual discrepancy here. The MT reads "Jehoiakim" (followed by the KJV) while the LXX and Syriac read "Zedekiah" (followed by the ESV and virtually all modern Versions). The references to Zedekiah in 27:3, 12; 28:1 clearly favor the latter reading.

last for 70 years before there would be a restoration (29:10-14; cf. 25:11).<sup>2</sup> Not only would those already exiled not return in the near future, those left in the land would soon join them in exile (29:15-19). In particular, two of the false prophets, Ahab ben-Kolaiah and Zedekiah ben-Maaseiah, would suffer the Deuteronomic death penalty for their lies, just as had Hananiah (29:20-23).



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Jeremiah's letter, as might be expected, caused repercussions. One of the leaders of the company of prophets in Babylon, Shemaiah, contacted the temple overseer in Jerusalem by letter to reprimand him for not putting madmen such as Jeremiah in stocks and shackles (29:24-28). The temple overseer reviewed this letter with Jeremiah, who shot back a return to the effect that Shemaiah and his family would soon perish. The Deuteronomic code would stand!

We do not know what either of these letters looked like or how they were composed. However, a common form for letter writing was to use a the smooth surface of a potsherd, called an ostrakon. Archaeologists have recovered many texts, some of them letters, written in such a way, and the example to the left is typical.

*This letter, dating to about the time of Jeremiah, might be the form of Jeremiah's letter. Alternatively, Jeremiah's letter might have been written on a scroll. Scrolls, made of leather, were more expensive. Potsherds, which were plentiful, were cheap.*

## TALKING POINTS

- *How difficult or how easy would it be to tell whether a prophet was genuine? What sorts of criteria might one use?*
- *How does this relate to St. Paul's statement in the New Testament, when he says, "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said?" (1 Cor. 14:29)*

<sup>2</sup>Jeremiah's figure may merely have been intended as a round number, but even so, it was amazingly accurate. The interval between the destruction of Solomon's temple in 587 BC and the construction of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, completed in 516 BC, was seven decades (2 Chr. 36:20-23; Zec. 1:12).