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Prophets During the Babylonian Exile

During the reign of Nebuchadnezzar (605 BCE - 562 BCE) there existed two major prophets of the Israelites: Jeremiah and Daniel. This essay will examine the influence of Masoretic and Septuagint traditions upon the understanding of Jeremiah 29 by religious groups. In this endeavor there are a few questions that must be explored. Who was Shemaiah the Nehelamite? Was he a person, a literary character, or a pen name for a group of people? How do these different perspectives on Shemaiah influence the interpretation of Jeremiah? Why was Jeremiah believed to be a true prophet instead of Shemaiah? Lastly, why is Daniel completely silent regarding Jeremiah and Shemaiah? All of these questions can have a lasting impact upon the understanding of the book of Jeremiah and, as a result, it is worth keeping updated on the current views in scholarship regarding these questions.

To begin understanding the influence of the Masoretic and Septuagint traditions, it is important to know their respective origins. The oldest surviving Masoretic manuscript dates to 1000 CE (Leningrad Codex). The Masoretic translation was compiled by a group of scholars called Masoretes who used the canonized documents at the time, to copy the scriptures with added vowel markings so that people would be better able to read and understand the scriptures.

The Septuagint was translated from Hebrew manuscripts around the 3rd century CE. There is a unique story behind the Septuagint's name. Supposedly, it was translated on the order of a Greek king who wanted to be familiar with the Jewish holy texts and chartered 70 Jewish scholars to translate the Hebrew Bible from Hebrew to Greek. The reasoning behind the chartering of 70 scholars was so that if all 70 produced the same bible in Greek without assisting one another then it would be preserved as a divine text. This story, however, is unlikely. Some scholars believe the Septuagint arose as a result of Jewish people living in predominantly Greek areas.

For hundreds of years scholars have argued whether the Masoretic or Septuagint translation was closer to the original text with no conclusion. However, in 1947 the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered and revealed that as early as 200 B.C.E, Hebrew texts corresponding to both the Masoretic and Septuagint traditions were considered important by the people of the region. Prior to 1947, the struggle between the Masoretic (MT) and Septuagint (LXX) was because of the 700 year gap between the Septuagint (3rd century CE) and the Masoretic (1000 CE). This gap in time causes various issues with some scholars due to the fact that both manuscripts are so far removed in age from the original copies. Ultimately scholars are still unsure as to whether the Masoretic or Septuagint tradition is closer to the original. Part of the debate includes the differences in scripture. Looking into Jeremiah 29 there is an immediate example of these differences. The Septuagint refrains from using the name of the then current king of Babylon while the Masoretic includes this information. This points to a difference in focus by the writers; the Masoretic Scholars appear to have been focused on preserving historical context for the prophecies within chapter 29, whereas the writers of the Septuagint seemed to focus on the Israelite side of history, preserving the cultural importance of the prophecies. Some

scholars believe that during the time period suggested in Jeremiah, there were groups of Israelite scribes who viewed the monarchy as a broken and negative institution which would explain why the Septuagint does not preserve the individual name of the Babylonian king, but rather the essence of the kingship. The next point of interest is verse 10, which discusses the 70 years of Babylonian captivity. The Septuagint and Masoretic texts do not have any differences on this specific verse, aside from diction choice, therefore having little impact on the meaning of the passage. Overall, there are not many differences between the Septuagint and Masoretic text of Jeremiah in these passages.

The narrative of Jeremiah is indistinguishable between the Masoretic and Septuagint texts when viewing the narrative there are a few questions worth examining. How exactly did the Israeli culture impact the reception of Jeremiah's works as a prophet of the Lord? Looking into the first section of Jeremiah we see the declarations: "carried away captive from Jerusalem unto Babylon" and "I am delivering them into the hands of the king of Babylon" (Jeremiah 36:21 LXX). Why exactly did the Lord deliver the Israelites into the hands of Babylon? Verses 21 and 22 are the prophetic declaration of the Babylonians conquering Israel as a result of Ahab and Zedekiah falsely prophesying. Towards the end of Jeremiah 29 MT and Jeremiah 36 LXX there is a letter from Shemaiah the Nehlemite from Babylon warning the Israelites that Jeremiah is a false prophet and a madman, calling out the priest for not rebuking him. This letter was sent to the priest, Zephaniah, who then read it to Jeremiah. Historically, Jeremiah and Daniel would have been prophets at the same time, and as a result, Jeremiah's letter to the Israelites in Babylon would have reached Daniel's sphere of influence. The letter from Jeremiah to the exiles would have been sent between 597 and 586 B.C.E. It is notable that Shemaiah, the Nehlemite, would

have been an active prophet during the time of Daniel. This prompts the exploration of two questions posed earlier in this work: who was Shemaiah, and why didn't Daniel make mention of this supposed pseudo prophet? According to Jeremiah, Shemaiah was a false prophet who challenged Jeremiah's authority amongst the Israelite people in response to Jeremiah's letter to those in exile. At the time of Jeremiah's letter to the exiled Israelites, they were being treated exceptionally well and some started to believe that the oppression would not last much longer. This hope was discouraged by Jeremiah's letter. It is understandable that some would resent the proclamation that the exile would continue for another 70 years. Since Daniel would have been a prophet around the same time as Jeremiah, he most likely would have been aware of those who were disgruntled by Jeremiah's letter. Those who had not assimilated into Babylonian culture would have clung to the hope that, since the conditions of the exile were not horrible, that the exile itself would be short lived. Sadly, even though Jeremiah's prophecies were true, there would have been people who fought back against them. At this point there are three distinct routes to take in the examination: Shemaiah was a purely literary character, he was an individual challenging Jeremiah's authority while trying to gain some sort of recognition amongst the exiled Israelites, or Shemaiah could have been a pen name for a group of individuals who were disgruntled by Jeremiah's exclamation regarding the length of the exile. Operating under the first line of thought, the lesson that is learned from this section of Jeremiah is that opposition will always come to those who obey God, people will always grow complacent when comfortable, and that hope can persist even in the face of an absolute guarantee. Operating under the second line of thought one can glean the reality of life that there will always be someone who opposes truth and that someone will always try to gain power or notoriety through the slandering of

another. Lastly when operating under the third line of thought, it is seen that there will always be people who want to influence others at the cost of another individual. Sometimes these people hide behind false names and masks to protect their own reputation should their manipulations fail. While most scholars believe that Shemaiah is a literary character due to the lack of corroboration in regard to his existence, some still argue for either of the last two options. Lastly, why Daniel does not address Shemaiah must be examined. On the surface there appears to be a few explanations. Either Daniel did not know of Shemaiah, he believed Shemaiah's influence over the Israelite people to be insignificant, Shemaiah did not exist as a single person, or Shemaiah was written in at a later point to teach a lesson about adversity. Due to previous verses in Jeremiah it can be concluded that either Daniel did not know of Shemaiah, the byplay between Jeremiah and Shemaiah was an addition to the book of Jeremiah, or Shemaiah in actuality represents a larger group of people. Ultimately the identity of Shemaiah does not hinder the lessons that can be learned from this scripture as the ambiguity leads to more lessons than the direct understanding.

While the Identity of Shemaiah does not have major implications, Jeremiah's authority does, prompting the question of how the Israelites knew that Jeremiah was a true prophet? The answer to the question of Jeremiah's divine authority lies within the nature of the situation alongside the long established covenant between God and the Israelites. Since God delivered the Israelites to the Babylonians, it can be inferred that God wanted the Israelites to obey Nebuchadnezzar as long as it did not disregard the instructions of the Torah, Israel's covenant with God. The covenant is a contract between God and the Israelites, however this contract is unique when compared to modern contracts. A covenant only has requirements for one party.

With regard to the biblical covenant, God is not held to any requirements but the Israelites are held by the commandments and laws present in the latter portion of the Torah. The layout of a covenant usually goes in the following order: Introduction of the greater party, history of the greater party's relationship with the lesser party, requirements of the lesser party, and finally the promises of the greater party. In the torah this layout reveals the claim that God holds all authority on the Earth. Jeremiah was the only prophet whose claims supported God's ultimate sovereignty over the exile, including the command to submit to Babylon. However, other pseudo-prophets were telling the Israelites to disobey Babylon despite the fact that doing so would be an act of defiance against God's will as it was revealed through the circumstances at the time. There is also the fact that it would be a breach of the covenant which is what caused the exile in the first place. Because Jeremiah was the only prophet in the homeland who supported the covenant, those who still held firm to its requirements would have seen Jeremiah as a true prophet, whereas those who had assimilated into Babylonian culture would have been indignant about Jeremiah's claims because they were in contradiction to how they were living.

Christians throughout history have exhibited a similar disgruntlement when faced with their mistakes. In modern times, one of the prominent verses that causes doubt or misunderstanding of God's nature is Jeremiah 29:11. When considering this verse's impact on Christian faith it is important to recognize the differences between the Masoretic, Septuagint, and modern translations. The MT passage reads: "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope." The LXX passage reads: "And I will plan a plan of peace for you, and not give you these evils." The LXX verse seems to be a declaration of intention to return the Israelites to their land and not deliver

them into the hands of oppressors. In the MT verse, God appears to be declaring a passive action such that by simply remembering Israel his good word would be accomplished. A troublesome question arises from this analysis: Can God forget Israel if by remembering them, his good word is accomplished? The additional remark about a future and a hope seems to be unnecessary when connected with the promises towards the Israelites because it is implied ~~that~~ they have a future if God's good word truly means for them to return from exile. A troublesome question based on the LXX is that of God's power. Why must God be physically present to bring the Israelites out of exile? Why must he visit them in order to return the Israelites from exile? Both the LXX and the MT offer a challenge towards the traditional nature of God and oddly enough, the two aspects are related. The MT challenges God's omniscience whereas the LXX challenges God's omnipotence. Despite these differences, the overall narrative remains the same, but how does the modern translation impact the interpretation, understanding and usage of Jeremiah 29:11?

Modern Christians are notorious for taking Jeremiah 29:11 out of context. By doing this the interpretation becomes corrupted due to the missing context. With the removal of the historical context compounded with the modern translation, it becomes incredibly easy to reach a point of interpretation where God's plan does not include any hardship at all. As a result, Christians typically have one of two views regarding Jeremiah 29:11. Either God promises to reward obedience with stewardship of material and worldly benefits, or God's ultimate plan for his Kingdom is developed through humans. Both of these views have merit but neither remains true to the historical context. The promise given by God to the Israelites through Jeremiah is not to give them worldly benefits nor is it meant to develop the kingdom of God. With the context

included, Jeremiah 29:11 is seen as a reminder of the covenant that Christians are bound to obey God, and when the covenant is broken God can and will deliver his children into hardship so that they might remember their agreement with the covenant. Further, Jeremiah 29:11 can also be interpreted as a promise to return people to their origin and remove them from hardships he has delivered them into as a result of wrongdoing. In this way the nature of God as a father is seen -- a parent both punishes and delivers their child from punishment. Jeremiah 29:11 is not about the prosperity of the Kingdom or the individual. It is rather a further promise of the coming of the messiah who would not only be delivered into punishment, but as a direct result, deliver others out of it.

The examination of these questions and biblical passages result in the following observations. The understanding of Jeremiah as a narrative experiences very little impact from the textual differences between the Masoretic and Septuagint texts. With regard to the insight of Israelite culture at the time the textual differences point to different intentions and communal opinions between the writers of the Masoretic tradition and those of the Septuagint. Scholars are still undecided which textual version is closer to the original as the discovery of the dead sea scrolls added more complexity to the issue. When considering Jeremiah's interaction with other prophets, the ambiguity of Shemaiah's identity actually enhances the lessons that can be learned from the text. Daniel's lack of attention towards Shemaiah lessens the possibility of him being a single individual and further supports the possibility that he was a pen name for a group of people disgruntled by Jeremiah's claims. Jeremiah's authority as a prophet stems from his support of the covenant and for the Israelites who kept the covenant. Jeremiah's claims were of a greater reliability due to his keeping with the traditions of the Israelite people. Christians have a

track record of ignoring the historical context for biblical passages and the understanding of Jeremiah 29:11 suffers from this as well. The resulting misunderstanding can cause doubt in Christians who are facing difficult times as a result of their lifestyle breaking the covenant. Christians typically regard Jeremiah 29:11 in such a way that it has nothing to do with its original intention as Christians tend to read the New Testament into their understanding of this passage. The common misconceptions are that God will not allow them to experience hardship, that God rewards obedience with material things, or that God was not even discussing the Israelite plight at the time and was rather discussing his mode of operation and plan for the kingdom of God. Some Christians have interpreted the passage as a way to reveal God's nature as a father. This interpretation is one of the most accurate within Christianity even though it is not perfect. The differences between the Masoretic and Septuagint really make themselves known when viewing the interpretations of the passages that are different. Jeremiah 29: 11 exemplifies this to the extreme. Even though Jeremiah is not impacted at a macro level the impact on the micro level can leave significant differences in schools of thought.

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