



Justice in the Book of Jeremiah

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The book of Jeremiah is often associated with the prophet's concern for idolatry, the ways that Judah had forsaken Yahweh and turned to other gods. In this regard, Jeremiah's emphasis is understood to be much like Hosea's, focused on apostasy. Yet, scattered throughout the book of Jeremiah are passages concerned with social justice. This essay will explore the theme of justice in the book of Jeremiah in two ways. First, I will explore the meanings of justice (מִשְׁפָּט) in the book of Jeremiah.¹ Further, I will explore how justice is related to the book's understandings of God. The focus will be on the meanings and theological significance of justice when considered in the literary context of the book of Jeremiah. While there may be value in attempting to understand how Jeremiah as an historical figure may have understood justice in particular circumstances in Judah's history, such an historical reconstruction is not the focus of this essay.²

JUSTICE AND THE KINGS

Not surprisingly, the greatest concentration of the word מִשְׁפָּט occurs in the

¹For a discussion of justice in the eighth-century prophets, see James L. Mays, "Justice," *Interpretation* 37(1983) 5-17.

²An historical-critical analysis of the ideas of social justice in the book of Jeremiah is common in commentaries and is the focus of Willie J. Wessels, "A Theology of Renewal: A Perspective on Social Justice from the Book of Jeremiah," in *Spirit and Renewal: Essays in Honor of J. Rodman Williams*, ed. Mark W. Wilson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1994) 92-109.

The book of Jeremiah is concerned with justice—to be exercised by rulers, to be sure, but also by all people. Importantly, then and now, survival in a time of crisis, according to the prophet, depends not on wisdom, might, and wealth, but on doing justice for those on the social margins.

section of the book of Jeremiah directed “to the house of the king of Judah” (21:11-23:8). Jer 21:12-14; 22:1-5; 22:13-19; and 23:5-6 all assert the responsibility of Judah’s monarchs to execute justice.

*“justice is the protection of the weaker members of society
from oppression by those more powerful”*

In Jer 21:12-14, the house of David is admonished, “Execute justice in the morning and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed.” The admonition that the king “execute justice” is paralleled by a second admonition, that the king “deliver” from oppressors those who are robbed. The parallelism suggests that the requirement to “deliver” constitutes the substance of “execute justice.” While we might hope for greater specificity about what is implied by delivering from oppressors those robbed, it seems likely that the issue is not street crime but some form of economic exploitation (cf. Prov 28:16, where “oppressors” are identified with those seeking unjust gain). This passage makes two claims about justice. First, it claims that the administration of justice is integral to the royal office (cf. Ps. 72). Second, it identifies the substance of justice to be the protection of the weaker members of society from oppression by those more powerful. There is a particular emphasis upon economic exploitation. The concern of this text is that Judah’s kings were tempted to shun their duty to administer justice and assumed themselves secure apart from attending to their duties (“Who can come down against us, or who can enter our places of refuge?” v. 13). This passage asserts that the very survival of the monarchy depends upon the willingness of kings to administer justice by protecting the weak from harm by the powerful.

Jer 22:1-5 makes the same points as 21:11-14 in much the same language (cf. 21:12 and 22:3). In this passage, the positive admonitions that kings “act with justice and righteousness, and deliver” those who have been robbed is balanced by a series of prohibitions: “do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place.” The prohibitions suggest the kinds of persons without social or economic status who are to be protected by kings. Again, the substance of justice is protection of those who are weak and on society’s margins. Kings are charged with responsibility to administer justice. The “if you will/if you will not” structure of verses 4-5 again stresses that survival of the monarchy depends upon their obedience to God’s charge to them to “act with justice and righteousness.”

Jer 22:13-17 seems to offer a specific example of the principles about justice and its royal administration articulated in the two texts discussed above. Though it is historically uncertain which king is addressed in vv. 13-17, the juxtaposition of these verses with vv. 18-19 invite the identification of the king as Jehoiakim, who is then contrasted with his father who would be Josiah. This “woe” is occasioned by

the economic practices of Jehoiakim, who executes an elaborate royal building project that is characterized as unrighteous and unjust (vv. 13-14). The specific form of injustice is economic. The king fails to pay the laborers the wages due them (v. 13b). The rhetoric of verses 13-14 is skillfully shaped to contrast the opulence of the royal buildings for which no expense is spared (v. 14) with the exploitation of the laborers who are made to “work for nothing.” A key concern of this text is how those in power relate to those in society who can be easily exploited. Despite the disparity in both power and wealth, the prophet identifies the laborers as the king’s “neighbors” (v. 13), a vision not shared by the king in his position of privilege. The issue of justice is that the king turns “neighbors” into economically useful objects whom he exploits.

Verses 15-17 draw a contrast between Jehoiakim (if that is who is being addressed) and his father (who, though not named, is by inference from v. 18 Josiah). Comparing father and son raises the issue of what makes a king (v. 15a). Verses 15-16 assert that though the father managed to live well (“eat and drink” [v. 15]; twice it is affirmed that “it was well with him” [vv. 15, 16]), he did “justice and righteousness” and “judged the cause of the poor and needy.” The father was a king because he took seriously his duty to administer justice for society’s weak and marginalized. We already know that the son failed to pay a just wage to his “neighbors,” the laborers on his opulent building projects. So there is little surprise when the son is negatively contrasted to the father and the father’s concern for justice: “But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence” (v. 17). The king of these verses, Jehoiakim or whoever, responsible for the administration of justice, is portrayed instead as an oppressor who seeks “dishonest gain” (v. 17, cf. 21:12; 22:3; and Prov 22:16) and who exploits those whom he is supposed to protect. The text calls into question the exploitative king’s right to be called a “king,” a point driven home by his burial as a donkey (v. 19)!

This section of the book of Jeremiah concerned with Judah’s kings (21:11-23:8) affirms that the substance of justice is protection for society’s weakest members from exploitation by the powerful. The concern has a decidedly economic emphasis. The king is understood to be God’s agent responsible for the administration of justice. This section also makes the judgment that, though the survival of the monarchy and Judah depends upon kings’ attention to justice, the record of Judah’s kings in this regard was not good. Though Josiah’s concern for justice is affirmed, other kings are portrayed as attempting to secure themselves apart from attending to justice (21:12-14). Or worse, Judah’s kings are remembered to be oppressors instead of those who defended society’s weak and powerless. The conclusion of this section of the book, Jer 23:5-8, looks beyond God’s judgment to Judah’s restoration. While Jeremiah cites the failure of Judah’s kings as agents of God’s justice, the book persists in its claim that “justice and righteousness” are central responsibilities of Judah’s monarchs by which “Judah will be saved and Israel will live

in safety” (23:6). The welfare of Judah depends upon kings who will execute justice as God expects of them.

JUSTICE AND THE PEOPLE

While the book of Jeremiah places a primary responsibility for executing justice upon kings, kings are not held exclusively responsible for justice. The broader claim of the book of Jeremiah is that concern for justice is to permeate society and is a responsibility for all the people of Judah. For instance, Jer 5:1-9 asserts that no one in Jerusalem, rich or poor, has concern for justice. This passage echoes the search for righteous persons in Sodom in Gen 18, though in Jeremiah only a single person is needed to effect God’s pardon. The prophet is ordered by God to search Jerusalem for even one person “who acts justly and seeks truth” (v. 1).³ The prophet’s initial search is fruitless. Though persons take oaths swearing by Yahweh’s name, Jeremiah finds that they “swear falsely” (v. 2). These verses do not describe the nature of injustice with any specificity. Still, the contrast between the “truth” that God expects (vv. 1, 3, with the implication of trustworthiness, integrity) and the pervasive false swearing that God finds (v. 2) suggests that Judah’s social interactions were characterized by a fundamental dishonesty that undermined just and reliable interactions among people. A portrait of social disintegration emerges.

“God demands all persons in Judah—rich and poor, common citizen or monarch alike—to be attentive to God’s demands for justice”

However, the initial search (5:1-3) was only among the poor, so God orders that the search continue among Jerusalem’s leaders, “the rich” (v. 5). The results are no better, and the conclusion is that among both poor and rich alike “they do not know the way of the LORD, the law [but the Hebrew is מִשְׁפָּט, justice] of their God” (vv. 4-5). The book of Jeremiah understands that God demands all persons in Judah—rich and poor, common citizen or monarch alike—to be attentive to God’s demands for justice. Because not a single person could be found in Jerusalem “who acts justly” (v. 1), the prophet warns that God will effect judgment instead of pardon (v. 6).

In Jer 5:20-31, an oracle addressed to all the people, Jeremiah notes two forms of injustice. First, the prophet makes the charge that the people of Judah “do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan...and they do not defend the rights of the needy” (v. 28). Judah’s kings were upbraided for their failure to attend to those on the social margins, but this text affirms that responsibility to execute justice ex-

³Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 176, proposes that the sense of “truth” in this context is “trustworthiness, integrity; it is the trait that enables one to keep one’s word, to be counted on.”

tends beyond the king to the populace as a whole. In addition to the failure to care for those on the social margins, Jeremiah notes a second form of injustice. He charges that the wealth and opulence of some in Judah is the result of their exploitation of others:

For scoundrels are found among my people;
They take over the goods of others.
Like fowlers they set a trap;
they catch human beings.
Like a cage full of birds,
their houses are full of treachery;
therefore they have become great and rich. (5:26-27)

Even as Judah's kings exploited the citizens for their own extravagant purposes, the description of these verses extends the charge of exploitation to persons who take advantage of others and by which means they become wealthy. Both forms of injustice noted in this oracle—the failure to care for the marginalized and the kind of economic exploitation that allows some to become “rich”—are seen as the consequence of the people's skewed relationship with God that is described in various ways in this text:

- The prophet calls people who engage in such behaviors “foolish and senseless” (v. 21).
- Twice the accusation is made that people who act in these ways do not “fear” God (vv. 22, 24)
- Finally, the prophet understands the people to have “a stubborn and rebellious heart; they have turned aside and gone astray” (cf. 17:1-4; 4:4, 14).

Though described variously, the point is clear. Failure to enact justice either by actively exploiting others for personal gain or by failing to care for those who are marginalized signals a broken relationship with God.

JUSTICE IN THE TEMPLE SERMON

The well-known temple sermon in Jer 7 also claims that it is the responsibility of all the people of Judah to execute justice. Jeremiah demands that those coming to the temple “amend your ways and your doings” (v. 5). Among Jeremiah's specific admonitions is a call to “act justly one with another...not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood” (vv. 5-6). These admonitions, addressed to “all you people of Judah” (v. 4), again echo the ways that Judah's kings were to be responsible for justice.

Beyond the claim that concern for justice is to be a concern for all in Judah, Jer 7 connects concern for justice with several other important issues:

1. Jer 7 links justice with Judah's very survival. The “if...then” structure in which the prophet's admonitions are placed (vv. 5-7) indicates that failure in mat-

ters of justice will mean loss of the land “that I gave of old to your ancestors” (v. 7).⁴ In Jer 7, the land signals God’s long-standing commitment to God’s people. Failure to execute justice does not merely jeopardize the survival of one king. Rather, Judah’s very survival depends upon the execution of justice by all the people.

2. Jer 7:1-15 as a whole is concerned about the link between worship and justice. The problem with those coming to worship is that they assume themselves “safe” because of the temple (vv. 3 and 10). The prophet calls this assumption a deception (v. 4) that will finally result in Judah’s destruction (vv. 13-15).⁵ In critiquing the false sense of security derived from worship apart from justice, the book of Jeremiah adds its voice to a common concern in prophetic literature (e.g., Isa 1:10-17; Amos 5:21-24; Mic 6:6-8). The basis of the false assumption is the sense that Jerusalem and its temple on Mt. Zion were inviolate (see Isa 37:33-35), an assumption that parallels the understanding of Judah’s kings that their security, too, is guaranteed by God “forever” (see 2 Sam 7). Such understandings of temple and monarchy would do little to encourage accountability about justice and concern for those on Judah’s social margins.

3. These verses also suggest a link between justice and idolatry. The string of commands concerned with social justice—to do justice, not to oppress the marginalized, and not to shed innocent blood—conclude with the warning “to not go after other gods to your own hurt” (v. 6). Regretfully, this text does not explain or elaborate the ways that idolatry and injustice are connected. Still, the sequence of admonitions in verses 5-7 suggests that Yahweh is concerned for justice in ways other gods are not (cf. vv. 8-9, citing the Decalogue, that suggest a similar connection between wronging neighbors and worshipping Baal).

Regarding the contrast between Yahweh and other ancient Near Eastern gods, J. P. M. Walsh has proposed that Yahweh and Baal represent conflicting understandings of justice and righteousness. He argues that the Baal myths focus on survival. Thus, when difficult choices about the allocation of social resources need to be made, the Baal myths finally work against concern for those on the social margins:

Make survival primary, central, and absolute, and everything else is secondary, peripheral, and conditional. The potentialities of women, the rights of the widow and orphan, justice, compassion—these become subordinate goods.⁶

Walsh contrasts the survival concern of the myths of Baal with the central concerns of Yahweh:

His [Yahweh’s] *mišpāt* mandated compassionate regard for defenseless peo-

⁴On the significance of land, see Walter Brueggemann, *The Land* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); also Norman Habel, *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995).

⁵On deception or “falsehood” in the book of Jeremiah, see Thomas Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study of the Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Naperville, IL: Allenson, 1970).

⁶J. P. M. Walsh, *The Mighty from Their Thrones: Power in the Biblical Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 28, though his discussion in chapters 2-3 is all relevant to this point.

ple—“the widow and orphan,” the *ger* or resident non-Israelite—who would be easy prey for acquisitive and violent men....Compassion for the widow and the orphan was not just one option among many possible ways of arranging social relationships: it was what the acceptance of Yahweh’s *mišpāt* operatively meant.⁷

Baal supports survival and security and subordinates concern for those on the social margins. Yahweh’s priorities are just the opposite: justice for those without power or status takes precedence over survival and security.

Walsh’s proposal is suggestive for understanding the links between idolatry, security, and injustice in Jer 7. I have noted that one of the issues about worship raised in this chapter is the popular perception that worship ensured Judah’s security, that it provided an assurance, “We are safe!” (v. 10). The undergirding of such a popular view of worship was the sense that Zion was inviolate and the closely re-

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lated idea that Judah’s monarchy was established “forever.”⁸ Judah’s priorities as portrayed in this chapter are clearly those that Walsh associates with Baal and not Yahweh. As Walsh has noted, where concerns with security dominate, concern for the just and compassionate treatment of persons on the margins of society is diminished. Given Walsh’s proposal about the contrasting concerns of Yahweh and Baal, we are helped to understand the link in Jer 7 that connects Judah’s concern for security, idolatry, and the unjust treatment of the widow, orphan, and alien.

JUSTICE AND SECURITY

In Jer 7, Judah is presented with two options: to trust deceptive words or amend their ways and doings. In Jer 9:23-24, the final text concerned with justice to be examined in this essay, the prophet again presents Judah with two options. Judah is warned “not to boast” in wisdom, might, or wealth (v. 23), but instead is urged to “boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the LORD; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the LORD” (v. 24). In this passage, justice is essential to who Yahweh is and how Yahweh acts. The matters that concern Yahweh—steadfast love, justice, and righteousness—are contrasted with an alternate set of values. Commenting on the triad of wisdom, might, and riches, Patrick Miller comments:

⁷Ibid., 31.

⁸Regarding the monarchy, see George Mendenhall, “The Monarchy,” *Interpretation* 29 (1975) 155-170, who argues that the monarchy is the “paganization” of Israel in the sense that, as in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, God again is imagined to legitimize royal power.

The categories of wisdom, strength, and riches represent fundamental grounds of security: intellectual skills and the ability to make things work in life, power and might in oneself or in one's armies, and wealth that enables one to acquire whatever one needs....These are the things that represent the primary avenues for personal self-enhancement and security.⁹

“Jeremiah consistently connects Judah’s embrace of wisdom, might, and riches with their failure to know Yahweh and execute justice”

In the Jeremiah texts concerned with justice examined to this point, we have seen that the book consistently connects Judah’s embrace of wisdom, might, and riches with their failure to know Yahweh and execute justice. Judah’s kings, it will be remembered, are portrayed as using their “might” to exploit rather than enact justice. They defined themselves by their wealth and in so doing perpetrated oppression and injustice (see especially Jer 22:13-19). Jeremiah searched Jerusalem for even a single person who acted justly, and finding none concluded that the people of Judah were “foolish” (5:21) and that “they do not know...the law [מִשְׁפָּט, justice] of their God” (5:4, 5). The book of Jeremiah consistently portrays wisdom, might, and riches as antithetical to the intentions of Yahweh for justice.

In Jer 9:23-24, the prophet associates Yahweh with commitments that contradict wisdom, might, and riches. Brueggemann draws the contrast this way:

The contrasting triad of “steadfast love, justice, and righteousness” (vs. 24) reflects a wholly different orientation, congruent with the character of God who delights in these qualities and insists upon them. Yahweh champions and embodies fidelity, equity, and humanness in the community. Thus, Yahweh is contrasted with other gods who seek satiation (might and riches). If God is committed to covenantal life as marked by steadfast love, justice, and righteousness, it follows that the community is to be ordered differently in light of that which delights Yahweh.¹⁰

The book of Jeremiah is rightly associated with the prophet’s concern with idolatry, with the ways that Judah turned from Yahweh to follow other gods. The concern for justice in the book of Jeremiah makes a sustained case that Judah sought security particularly through the royal exercise of wisdom, might, and riches resulting in oppression and disregard for those on Judah’s social margins. Thus, concern for justice in the book of Jeremiah is linked to the book’s concern about idolatry. Turning from Yahweh to other gods—to the baals, gods of satiation concerned with security, might, and riches—leads to oppression and callous disregard for persons on Judah’s social margins. The book of Jeremiah understands Judah to be a people claimed by Yahweh, who delights in justice (9:24), and so a people called to be a community

⁹Patrick Miller, “The Book of Jeremiah” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 6 (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 656.

¹⁰Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up and to Tear Down*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 95-96.

where those on the social margins are delivered from the hand of the oppressor (22:12).

The connection made in the book of Jeremiah between idolatry and injustice may be important for churches in the American context to contemplate in a post-September 11 United States. Since September 11, we have devoted our national energies—our wisdom, might, and riches—to secure ourselves. To undergird our efforts we regularly invoke a henotheistic deity to bless America.¹¹ The result of such efforts, as the book of Jeremiah saw so clearly, is a diminished sense of justice. With a demand to use our resources to regain our security, concern for persons on the social margins—the elderly, the poor, children, the chronically ill, resident aliens—becomes a low priority. Perhaps with Jeremiah, churches in the American context will find voice to imagine other priorities because the God who gathers the church delights in justice. ⊕

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¹¹See H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) 27ff.