

COMMENTARY

“BUILD AND PLANT”

A NEW PHASE IN THE PROPHET'S MINISTRY (26:1-24)

Overview

Except for its lack of poetic oracles, ch 26 mirrors the complex character of the book of Jeremiah. In the words of Fretheim, this chapter is “incoherent” whether we approach it “from a literary or historical perspective” (2002, 367). Carroll describes it as a “fictional story” made up of a “complex of different strands of redaction which has developed an original story about a public procedure for establishing Jeremiah’s authenticity in a number of different ways” (1986, 515). If Carroll’s assessment of ch 26 is accepted, then one would expect to find in the narrative some artificial cohesiveness, which is woefully lacking in the narrative. Stulman describes ch 26 as the introduction to the second half of Jeremiah with its focus on the intense opposition to Jeremiah’s message, the culpability of the opposition to the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the emergence of a community of faithful who are receptive to the prophetic message (26:16-19), which shows up at certain critical points to save the life of Jeremiah (26:24; 36:19; 38:7-13). This chapter, according to Stulman, introduces hope for Judah’s future and its new beginning, in spite of its impending exile and the destruction of the city and the temple (2005, 233-42). Some who see this chapter as the trial that followed the temple sermon (see in ch 26) also find in this narrative the influence of Deuteronomic ideas and language (in vv 3-5, 12-15) and place it in the exilic period (Nicholson 1970, 52-56).

Chapter 26, though it has the appearance of a unified story, has gaps at several critical points. These gaps suggest the possibility that we have before us a loosely constructed biographical narrative that seeks to accomplish multiple goals; this means that there are multiple ways of reading this narrative. The usual explanation is that ch 26 provides the account of the trial that followed Jeremiah's temple sermon (7:1-15). However, there is no sufficient explanation for its placement in ch 26. Why didn't the editors place this narrative immediately following the sermon in 7:1-15? This question does not have a good answer. It is also not clear when this narrative was added to the book, though the likelihood is that there is an interval between the date of the delivery of the sermon and the trial, and the date of the composition of the narrative and its addition to the book. It is likely that the sermon and the trial took place in 609 B.C., the first year of Jehoiakim's reign. There is sufficient evidence in the book that serious threat to Jeremiah's life and intense opposition to his message, however, developed only after Jehoiakim's burning of the scroll (36:1; the fourth year of Jehoiakim). Thus a date following Jehoiakim's burning of the scroll in 605 B.C. is a good possibility (ch 36) for the composition of this narrative. This may further explain the general, rather than specific, historical reference in 26:1 ("at the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim," v 1 NRSV; compare with specific dates in 25:1; 36:1; 45:1). Stulman's view that ch 26 introduces the second half of the book with focus on opposition to the prophet's ministry thus provides a reasonable explanation for its present location in the book. It can even be said that the general historical reference provides a link between the sermon and the trial, and perhaps a second phase of Jeremiah's ministry, a period of conflict, opposition, and death threat that will continue for the rest of the prophet's life.

A cursory examination of the parallels between the call and commission of the prophet in 1:4-19 and ch 26 yields some support for the view that the editors may have intentionally placed this narrative in ch 26 to introduce a new phase in the career of the prophet. The prophet's personal life experiences narrated here are intimately linked to his call and commission, and his message and the experience of the nation described in chs 27—45. In 1:4 and 26:1, Yahweh's word comes to the prophet (following the historical reference). Yahweh commissions Jeremiah to speak whatever Yahweh commands him to speak (1:7). In 26:2 Yahweh commands the prophet to speak *all the words* that he commands him to say to the people of Judah. In chs 2—25, the focus of Jeremiah's message was on judgment. However, the message of restoration dominates the prophet's message in chs 27—52.

There is a clear warning about opposition to the prophet in 1:18-19; the narrator focuses on opposition to Jeremiah in 26:7-9. In ch 1, the opponents are powerful political and religious leaders and the people of the land. In ch 26, Jeremiah's opposition comes from the priests, the prophets, and the people. In chs 27—29, the opposition to Jeremiah's message comes from false

prophets. King Jehoiakim remains in the background in ch 26, but the incident about Jehoiakim's murder of Uriah (26:20-23) clearly indicates the royal opposition to the prophet's message, which is taken up in ch 36, where the king is the leading antagonist of the prophet. In chs 37—38 royal officials and even Zedekiah stand opposed to the prophet's message.

Yahweh warns Jeremiah not to be afraid in 1:7-8; in ch 26, the prophet speaks with courage and defends his message in spite of the demand for his death by religious leaders (vv 8, 12-15). This courageous stand of the prophet continues at every critical point in the second half of the book (see his words to Zedekiah in chs 37—38, words to Johanan and his associates and the Jewish exiles in Egypt in chs 42—44).

The content of the message Yahweh gives to Jeremiah in ch 1 includes Yahweh's work of uprooting and tearing down (1:10); Jeremiah speaks of the destruction of the city and the temple (26:6). Chapter 39 focuses on the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Judah. The theme of building and planting (1:10) is taken up in detail in chs 30—33.

Yahweh promises to be with Jeremiah to rescue him from his opposition (1:8, 19). Jeremiah is saved from the death sentence by the verdict of the court by the officials; he also receives the support of the elders who spoke in favor of a verdict of innocence, and his life is spared by Ahikam son of Shaphan (26:16, 17-19, 24). Threat against his life is intensified, but Yahweh preserves the life of the prophet through help that comes from some unexpected sources (see 36:19; 37:7-13; 39:11-14; 40:1-6). Yahweh himself hides the prophet from the associates of King Jehoiakim (36:26). Even King Zedekiah acts at a critical time to save the prophet's life by keeping him in the court of the guard rather than sending him to the prison in the house of Jonathan (37:20-21). Moreover, Yahweh also promises to protect those who demonstrated loyalty to the prophet (see 39:15-18; 45:1-5).

The above analysis provides some justification for viewing ch 26 as the beginning of a new section in the book of Jeremiah, and the introduction to a new phase in the ministry of the prophet. The survival of the prophet from the hands of those who seek to kill him signals hope for the survival of Judah beyond the days of its impending destruction. Both the prophet and the nations survive solely because of Yahweh's gracious intervention. This is a key issue in chs 26—52.

BEHIND THE TEXT

Chapter 26 contains the biographical account of a key incident in the life of the prophet. In the LXX, this narrative is located in 33:1-24. The narrative begins with a historical reference that places the event reported here to the beginning year of the reign of Jehoiakim. This narrative is most likely the report of the events that happened after Jeremiah's temple sermon (Bright

1965, 171; Holladay 1989, 101-3; Lundbom 2004a, 284-85). The narrative contains a summary of 7:1-15 in 26:4-6. The narrative focuses on the consequence of preaching the temple sermon, and hence only a brief summary of the sermon is given in this narrative. Holladay considers this narrative as the work of Baruch (1989, 103). Others find in this narrative the influence of Deuteronomistic ideas and language and place it in the exilic period (Nicholson 1970, 52-56). This is the earliest dated event in Jeremiah's career aside from the reference to "the thirteenth year of Josiah" in 1:2, and its historical value cannot be underestimated. The Uriah incident (26:20-23) and the strong biographical orientation of the narrative lend further support to the authenticity of the historical reference in v 1. This narrative places the ministry of Jeremiah in an intensely hostile setting, and the hostility reflected in this narrative will follow him throughout his prophetic career.

This biographical narrative follows the pattern of a detailed trial. It aims to tell the story of a critical incident in the life of the prophet; it also functions to authenticate Jeremiah as a true prophet who courageously proclaimed Yahweh's word in the midst of intense opposition from powerful religious authorities.

This narrative unit has three parts: part 1 (vv 1-6) begins with Yahweh's instructions to Jeremiah to speak his words in the temple courtyard (vv 1-3); it is followed by a summary of Jeremiah's sermon (vv 4-6). Verses 1-6 together thus present the crime, which is instigated by Yahweh and committed by the prophet. The crime of the prophet is that he truthfully and obediently proclaimed the word given to him by Yahweh.

Part 2 narrates the actual trial itself (vv 7-16). This trial section opens with the indictment of the prophet by the people, the priests, and the prophets and their verdict of death to the prophet (vv 7-9). The priests and the prophets and the people thus assume the role of prosecution, judge, and jury. This is followed by the report of the arrival of the princes of Judah who together with "all the people," assume the judicial role in this narrative. The priests and the prophets officially bring the charges against Jeremiah and argue for the death penalty (vv 10-11). In the next section, the prophet makes his defense before the princes and the people in which he reiterates his message and claims that he is a true prophet of Yahweh. Any punishment imposed upon him will incur blood guilt upon the people and the city (vv 12-15). The trial section ends with a verdict from the officials and the people (v 16). They find the prophet not guilty of the charges against him, but as a true prophet who does not deserve the death sentence.

In part 3, the narrator adds to the trial account two additional elements. In vv 17-19, some of the elders of the land speak in favor of the prophet, almost as if they take the role of witnesses for the defendant. Ironically, this defense follows the verdict in v 16, and so it seems out of place in the narrative structure. In its present location, this defense seems to serve as a defense of the

verdict, and not of the prophet himself. The second element of this section is a report about another prophet who was put to death by Jehoiakim for preaching the same words of judgment that Jeremiah preached (vv 20-23). It is likely that the incident of Uriah took place not too long after the trial of Jeremiah. The intent of this additional story is probably to show the dangerous consequences of prophetic preaching during the reign of Jehoiakim. The trial narrative ends with the report that Jeremiah's life was saved by the intervention of Ahikam son of Shaphan (v 24). This last part (vv 17-24) also serves to contrast Hezekiah the penitent king with Jehoiakim the defiant king. The purpose of the entire narrative is clear. Jerusalem's future depends on the penitent response of the people to God's word of judgment; continued defiance will only lead to death and destruction.

IN THE TEXT

I. The Temple Sermon (26:1-6)

■ **1** This unit introduces the year, the setting, and an abbreviated version of Jeremiah's temple sermon. Some scholars regard "the beginning of the reign" (NRSV) as Jehoiakim's accession year or the period between his accession to the throne and his first New Year's Day (v 1). Bright dates this to a period between September 609, the year of Jehoiakim's accession, and April 608, his first New Year's Day, assuming that the Nisan calendar was in use in Judah during this time (Bright 1965, 169). Verse 1 assumes that the recipient of *this word from Yahweh* was Jeremiah.

■ **2** Verse 2 states the command from Yahweh to Jeremiah. This command seems to be a paraphrase of 7:2. The command in 7:2 is to stand in the "gate" of the temple and speak, whereas here the command is to stand in the *court* of the temple and **speak**. In 7:2 the location is perhaps the gate to the inner courtyard of the temple. **Courtyard** in 26:2 is most likely the inner courtyard where the people assembled daily and on festival days. The temple court is also the location of Jeremiah's preaching in 19:14. The general location of Jeremiah's preaching is thus the same in both 7:2 and 26:2.

The message is addressed to **all the cities of Judah** (v 2). The intended audience is the people of the cities of Judah. This corresponds to "all . . . Judah" in 7:2. Verse 2 also makes clear that worship was the context in which Jeremiah was to deliver Yahweh's word. The occasion was most likely a festival or some other special time when all the people of Judah came to Jerusalem to worship in the temple. Yahweh's command also insists on the full delivery of the content of his message ("do not hold back a word" [NRSV]). This additional command, which is lacking in 7:2, is parallel to Moses' command to Israel to not subtract or take away anything from what he commands them to do (Deut 4:2; 12:32). Jeremiah must not submit to pressure from his oppo-

nents and reduce or diminish Yahweh's words out of fear of consequences. Lundbom states, "Prophets of Yahweh must 'speak the word, the whole word, and nothing but the word'" (2004a, 287).

■ **3** Verse 3 makes clear the goal of the prophet's preaching. Yahweh's purpose is to give warning to his people through Jeremiah concerning the judgment he is planning against them, in the hope that the people will pay attention to his warning and consequently *repent* (*šub*) of their *evil way*. The repentance of the people will in turn prompt Yahweh to cancel the judgment he has planned against them. The people's repentance will lead Yahweh to *re-lent* (*nḥm*). The people's response to Yahweh's word anticipates contriteness and recognition of wrongdoing. Yahweh's response, on the other hand, is a change in his plan, which does not imply feeling of remorse or contriteness (see 18:8). It is also important to note here that what Yahweh hopes to see take place is individual decision and response (*each will turn from his evil way*). Though the people as a whole is intended here, emphasis is given in this verse to each individual's response to Yahweh's word.

■ **4** Verses 4-6 contain Yahweh's word that Jeremiah was commanded to speak. The worshipping community is the recipient of the message (*you shall say to them*). The message conveys two demands from Yahweh: listen to Yahweh's word and walk in his law, and listen to the words of Yahweh's prophets (vv 4-5). The issue of listening to Yahweh and walking in his law sums up Yahweh's explicit demands outlined in 7:3-10. The temple sermon touches on the subject of Yahweh speaking persistently (7:13; see 7:25 on Yahweh sending his servants the prophets).

Yahweh's demands are introduced with a conditional clause (*protasis*) in the negative in 26:4 (*if you do not . . .*), which strongly implies dire consequences for disobedience. This negative conditional clause deals with two issues—the worshipping community's failure to listen to and live by the demands of Yahweh's Torah (v 4) and its failure to pay attention to the words of the prophets (v 5). The consequence (*apodosis*) is stated in v 6. The conditional formula appears in 7:5 in the positive, which is stated there as a challenge to obey Yahweh's word in order to enjoy the benefits and blessings of obedience (see 7:7).

The negative conditional clause in 26:4 implies that the worshipping community exists without any regard for Yahweh's Torah (*my law*) that he has *set before* them at Mount Sinai. Listening to Yahweh's word and walking in his law exemplify covenant relationship. Yahweh's speech is a strong denunciation of the nation's breaking of the Sinai covenant. The temple sermon deals with this issue more explicitly by giving detailed listing of covenant-breaking activities by the worshipping community (7:8-9).

■ **5** In vv 4 and 5, keeping of the Sinai covenant laws and listening to the words of the prophets receive equal importance. Israel received Yahweh's Torah through Moses, Yahweh's servant ("my servant," Num 12:7). Later in Israel's

history, Yahweh's prophets (**my servants the prophets**) have occupied the office that Yahweh established through Moses. An important task of the prophets was to remind the covenant people to live the Torah obedient life. The phrase **constantly I am sending** implies Yahweh's continued efforts in the past and the present to bring the people back to the covenant way of life though the people **have not listened** to the prophetic message (v 5). The Torah obedience here is not the cultic and ritual observances of the law. The people being addressed here are worshippers in the temple, which imply that they keep the legal requirements of the Torah. The Torah obedience here in this text, as in 7:5-10, is the fulfillment of the ethical and moral requirements of the Torah—living out the demands of the Torah in social and communal relations.

■ **6** The consequence of persistent rejection of the Torah and the prophetic word is stated in v 6. If the people continue to pay no attention to Yahweh's demands, then certainly the temple will suffer the fate of **Shiloh**. In 7:12 the sermon directs the people to see for themselves the impact of Yahweh's judgment on the place where the tabernacle was located in the early history of Israel in Canaan. The mention of the ruined Shiloh and linking it with the fate that awaits the temple would have been sufficient reasons for the priests to become angry and hostile toward the prophet.

A further consequence of the rejection of the Torah and the prophetic word is that the city of Jerusalem will become "a curse for all the nations of the earth" (v 6 NRSV). "Curse" (*qēlālā*) is a word found often in Jeremiah and in Deuteronomy to convey the idea of a person or a nation as the object of contempt and ridicule. The text here indicates that the city will be the object of contempt for all the nations of the earth. The threat in 7:12-15 lacks specific and explicit words about the fate of the city. The narrator understands and interprets the implications of the threat against the temple on the city in which it is located. Stulman finds in this curse word against the city echoes of the ancestral promises in Gen 12:3 and points out that here we have the threat of the reversal of "the promise of life to intimate the death of Israel" (2005, 238). The city is the symbol of the vocational calling of Israel to be a source of blessing to all the families of the earth. Its death means that no blessing will flow from the city to the nations of the earth. The nations that were to become participants in Israel's ancestral blessings will curse the city because of its failure to bring them a blessing. This threat is a powerful challenge to the people to take the necessary action to avoid this grave calamity that awaits the city.

The sermon in its summary form implicitly invites the worshipping community to respond positively to the demands of Yahweh, which is essential to the continued existence of the temple and the city, the symbols of Yahweh's presence and protection of his people. The judgment of the exile of the nation in 7:15 does not receive any mention in this text. What is strongly implied is the hope that positive response to Yahweh's demand will result in his change of plans.