

# A Burkean Analysis of the Oracles of the Prophet Jeremiah

Frederick W. Podris

## Introduction

Prophetic literature comprises a significant portion of the Hebrew scripture. This impressive and diverse collection of oracles, mystical reflections, apocalyptic visions and social criticism has played an important role in the development of Jewish and Christian theology. It is not surprising, therefore, that much scholarly energy has been devoted to understanding these texts and the historical context in which they were composed. In this essay, I offer a rhetorical analysis of the prophetic message delivered by one of the greatest of Judea's ancient prophets, Jeremiah. Through such analysis, I hope to identify some of the rhetorical strategies employed by Jeremiah in his hopes of bringing about social change and religious conversion. The focus of my analysis will not be the content of Jeremiah's prophetic message per se, but rather the rhetorical means with which that message was conveyed. Or, to put it simply, I am more interested in examining how Jeremiah conveyed his message to his contemporary audience rather than what his message was. In doing so, I hope to add new knowledge to the cultural, historical, linguistic, theological understandings of the text produced by scholars working within a wide range of academic disciplines.

Rhetorical examination of the type I offer here, which is secular in nature, is not intended to be dismissive of, or a challenge to, the notion that many people have that Jeremiah's prophetic message was inspired by God. Indeed, the author of this essay believes as much. My hope is to help believers and non-believers alike to develop a deeper appreciation of this very important religious text.

*Chrestomathy: Annual Review of Undergraduate Research at the College of Charleston*

Volume 2, 2003: pp. 201-220

© 2003 by the College of Charleston, Charleston SC 29424, USA.

All rights to be retained by the author.

**Jeremiah: A Brief Biographical Sketch**

The prophet Jeremiah was born in Anathoth, a town located three miles northeast of Jerusalem. The year of his birth is disputed, but many scholars suggest he was born around 640 B.C.E. (Thompson 95). In the beginning of the book of Jeremiah, we are told that in 627, the 13<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of Josiah — Jeremiah received a call from YHWH to be his spokesman. Jeremiah was initially reluctant to accept this call from YHWH, but he eventually accepted the offer when YHWH promised to protect him.

Because Jeremiah was brought up in a priestly family, he was familiar with the responsibilities of the priests with respect to the law. He was no doubt aware of how they neglected their responsibilities and supported the paganism which flourished during the reign of Manasseh (Thompson 97). Jeremiah was also familiar with the prophetic tradition, especially the oracles of the prophet Hosea. In many of Jeremiah's oracles, he builds on the unfaithful wife metaphor employed by Hosea, who likened Israel to a wife that prostitutes herself and is unfaithful to her husband, YHWH. Jeremiah extended this metaphor, which became one of his key themes. (Thompson 96).

When Jeremiah began his public ministry, possibly at the age of 16, Josiah's reform had not been fully accomplished.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the pagan influences prevalent during the reign of Manasseh still plagued Judah. Jeremiah began his career by calling the people to turn from their unfaithfulness, as manifested in their following other gods, and to return to the true worship of YHWH (Thompson 97). Soon after Jeremiah began to preach, the "Book of the Law" was found in 622. This would make Jeremiah around 22 years old, and from this time until Jehoiakim began his reign in 609 there are no dated oracles of Jeremiah (Thompson 98). That Jeremiah was silent during these years has led to a wide range of speculation regarding how he responded to the reforms of Josiah. Some have argued that Jeremiah became instrumental in the propagation of the reform, but there is no evidence to support this. It can be assumed that Jeremiah did not oppose the reforms because they had managed to purge the pagan influences, and were an attempt to turn the people back to YHWH, which was the very thing Jeremiah wanted. However, the people did not embrace Josiah's reform, which deeply concerned Jeremiah. Thompson,

speaking of the failed reform, states, “such superficial and external measures did not touch the area of personal commitment to YHWH and his covenant” (98).

The next time we hear from Jeremiah occurs when Jehoiakim was crowned king, when Jeremiah was about 35 years old. In 609, Jeremiah delivered his famous “temple sermon.” Thompson describes the circumstances in which Jeremiah delivered this message:

The immediate background to the temple sermon was the state of the nation under the willful, selfish, arrogant, young king, Jehoiakim, who abandoned the reforms of his father Josiah and permitted a return to the paganism of his great-grandfather Manasseh. (99)

When Jeremiah delivered the temple sermon, a misguided belief in the inviolability of Zion was beginning to gain prominence in the national mindset. And it is perhaps for this reason that Jeremiah broke his silence and reentered the public scene. Newsome, a Jewish historian, traces this new development in Judah’s theology:

Reflecting Isaiah’s statement about YHWH’s concern to protect [Jerusalem] (Isa. 37:33-35) and Josiah’s command that all worship should be centralized there, a twisted parody of these teachings emerged about the time of Jehoiakim’s coronation. It was the false belief that, because Jerusalem was the special city of YHWH, no harm could ever befall it. (108)

The temple sermon opens with Jeremiah declaring that if the people amend their ways, then YHWH will cause them to dwell in the land. In making YHWH’s protection conditional upon Judah’s actions, Jeremiah challenged the then conventional belief that YHWH’s protection was unconditional. Jeremiah, speaking for YHWH, said, “Do not trust in these lying words saying, ‘The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord’” (7:4). Jeremiah illustrated the conditional nature of YHWH’s protection through the use of a historical example. Jeremiah spoke about Shiloh, the place

where YHWH had first caused his name to dwell, and how YHWH destroyed it because of the “wickedness of my people, Israel” (7:12). Jeremiah went on to state that YHWH threatened to destroy the temple in Jerusalem if the people would not amend their ways (7:14). The priests’ response to the temple sermon was swift. Jeremiah was immediately brought before a tribunal, where some priests argued that Jeremiah should be put to death. Though acquitted, Jeremiah was prohibited from speaking in the temple (Newsome 109). Jeremiah’s unpopularity with Judah increased after the temple sermon, so much so that even his own family in Anathoth plotted to take his life.

Included throughout the book of Jeremiah are introspective statements that record Jeremiah’s inner turmoil, referred to as the “Confessions of Jeremiah.” These confessions give us a glimpse into the soul of Jeremiah, and his personal response to the message that YHWH gave him to deliver. It is perhaps during this time, when Jeremiah’s life is threatened on account of delivering the word of YHWH, that he utters his confessions. In one of Jeremiah’s confessions, the prophet expressed his discontent with the burden of delivering such an unpopular message (12:1-4). In another confession, Jeremiah records a time when he tried to stop speaking for YHWH:

I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed I cannot. (20:7b-9)

Soon after Jeremiah delivered the temple sermon, and was henceforth banned from the vicinity of the temple, Jehoiakim began his extravagant building projects. He oppressed the poor by subjecting them to forced labor. Jeremiah condemned this, saying:

Woe to him who builds his palace by unrighteousness, his upper rooms by injustice, making his countrymen work for nothing, not paying them for their labor. He

will have the burial of a donkey — dragged away and thrown outside the gates of Jerusalem. (22:13,19)

After being banished from the temple, Jeremiah made a companion of the scribe Baruch, who was responsible for compiling those statements that comprise the book of Jeremiah (Newsome 110). In 605, after the battle of Carchemish, Jeremiah dictated a summary of all his oracles from the time he began his ministry until then (Thompson 102). Baruch took this scroll to the temple and read it to the priests and all who had gathered there to worship. He was detained and ordered to appear before Jehoiakim. Jehoiakim read the scroll and subsequently threw it into the fire. Jeremiah and Baruch were forced to go into hiding. While they were hidden Jeremiah dictated another scroll to Baruch. This second scroll was like the first, except that it also included an oracle against Jehoiakim for disregarding YHWH by burning the previous scroll.

The Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, had exiled most of the population of Judah in 597. At that time, Zedekiah was placed on the throne to rule what was left of Judah. Jeremiah described the two groups — the ones exiled, and the ones left in the land — as good and bad figs (Thompson 105). Jeremiah countered the false prophets, who said that the exile would only last two years, by writing a letter to the good figs in exile. He told them to settle down and make Babylon their home. Jeremiah also said that they will be there for 70 years, and he even admonished them to pray for the prosperity of Babylon. The bad figs, however, tried to persuade Zedekiah that Judah still had a future, and that YHWH would soon deliver them (Thompson 104). This went against Jeremiah's key theological idea that YHWH had doomed the city to destruction because of their unfaithfulness, and that YHWH himself was fighting against the city.

Early in the reign of Zedekiah, Jeremiah put a wooden yoke around his neck, and paraded through the streets of Jerusalem proclaiming that YHWH had determined to put Jerusalem under the yoke of Babylon. He proclaimed this message specifically to Zedekiah, "Bow your neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people, and you will live" (27:12). The prophet Hananiah took the yoke off Jeremiah and broke it, saying, "This is what the

Lord says, ‘In the same way I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon off the neck of all the nations within two years’” (28:11). Jeremiah then made a yoke of iron and said:

Listen, Hananiah! The Lord has not sent you, yet you have persuaded this nation to trust in lies. Therefore, this is what the Lord says: “I am about to remove you from the face of the earth. This very year you are going to die, because you have preached rebellion against the Lord.” (28:16)

In 589 Babylon laid siege to Jerusalem because Judah’s king, Zedekiah had rebelled by joining in a coalition with the Egyptians. Zedekiah sought an interview with Jeremiah in order to receive the words of YHWH regarding the siege. In contrast to the other prophets the king consulted, Jeremiah declared that the city was doomed, and that Zedekiah should surrender. Indeed, Zedekiah probably would have surrendered, but the bad figs, as Jeremiah referred to them, pressured Zedekiah not to give up the city (Thompson 105).

During the siege, Zedekiah proclaimed that all Hebrew slaves should be freed in accordance with the law of YHWH, which forbids such slavery. This was a last effort to win the favor of YHWH and earn his protection. In the middle of the siege, when Babylon left in response to an Egyptian threat, the people thought that YHWH had delivered the city, just as he did during the reign of Hezekiah. Soon after the Babylonians withdrew, the people reversed Zedekiah’s decision and the slaves were promptly taken back. Jeremiah spoke against this hypocrisy and declared this word from YHWH:

You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom for your fellow countrymen. So now I proclaim “freedom” for you, declares the Lord —“freedom” to fall by the sword, plague and famine. (34:17)

The Babylonians returned and laid siege to Jerusalem. Jeremiah urged surrender, but was not heeded. Jeremiah attempted to leave Jerusalem and return to Anathoth, but he was accused of defecting to

the Babylonians, and was thrown into a cistern to die. Jeremiah would have died in the cistern, but Zedekiah desired another interview with him. Jeremiah again told Zedekiah that the city was doomed and that Zedekiah should surrender (Thompson 105). Jeremiah was then placed in prison, and under orders from Zedekiah, he was to be provided food and water until provisions ran out. While in prison, Jeremiah is directed by YHWH to buy a plot of land. This purchase symbolized that the destruction of Jerusalem would not be permanent, but that YHWH would again show compassion on the land (Thompson 106).

After Nebuchadnezzar broke through Jerusalem's wall in 587, a Babylonian general named Nebuzaradan found Jeremiah chained in prison. The general offered Jeremiah the choice of going to Babylon under his care, or remaining in Judah under the leadership of Gedaliah. Jeremiah chose to stay in Judah, and Nebuzaradan then gave Jeremiah provisions and a gift and set him free. This treatment suggests that the Babylonians had a great deal of insight regarding the political orientations of the people whom they conquered. Jews not willing to surrender were executed, while others were carried off to Babylon.

Some of the Jews, who had by that time been scattered, heard that Gedaliah had been left in charge, and returned. Gedaliah was assassinated soon thereafter, however, and the people, fearing a Babylonian response, came to Jeremiah to inquire of YHWH. They questioned whether or not to flee to Egypt for asylum. Jeremiah prayed for ten days, and then answered them with YHWH's message: "If you stay in this land, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you, for I am grieved over the disaster that I have inflicted on you" (42:10). Jeremiah also gave the alternative if the people should decide to flee to Egypt: "If you are determined to go to Egypt and you do go to settle there, then the sword you fear will overtake you there and the famine you dread will follow you into Egypt, and there you will die" (42:15-16). In spite of this prophecy, the Jews decided to go to Egypt and forced Jeremiah to go with them. Jeremiah was then about 57 years old. The last of his recorded words are a rebuke of the people who fled to Egypt. The death of Jeremiah is not recorded in Bible, and there are conflicting traditions regarding his death. Some hold that he suffered a martyr's death, while others maintain that he died of natural causes in Egypt (Lundbom 120).

**Burkean Theory**

The rhetorical theory I employ to analyze the rhetorical dimension of Jeremiah's prophecies is that of Kenneth Burke. One of the foundational concepts of Burkean rhetorical theory is the idea of "the negative." Burke sees language as the primary thing that separates humans from animals. Language also makes "the negative" possible. The "negative" arises out of language and produces "such things as property rights, moral and social proscriptions of all kinds, law, justice, and conscience" (Rueckert 130). Without language, there would be no rules, and thus no negative. Without a negative there can be no disobedience because there would be no rules to disobey. Since there is language, and thus the presence of the negative, then there are rules to be broken.

Burkean theory maintains that the breaking of the rules produces guilt in the trespasser. Such guilt is something that Burke believes is foundational to all rhetoric. In fact, Burke believes that the "ultimate motivation of all public speaking is to purge ourselves of an ever present, all-inclusive sense of guilt" (Griffin 312). When Burke speaks of guilt he is using the term as an "all-purpose word for any feeling of tension within a person: anxiety, embarrassment, self-hatred, disgust, and so forth" (Littlejohn 179). Guilt is a byproduct of the negative, which is a byproduct of language.

Another source of guilt identified by Burke is the principle of hierarchy; as explained by Littlejohn: "In seeking order, people structure society in social pyramids or hierarchies. This ranking is a symbolic phenomenon. Competition and divisions result among the classes and groups in the hierarchy, and guilt results" (179). Guilt is thus also produced by class systems. Those in lower classes try to elevate their status, and in attempting to do so come into conflict with those in higher classes. Those in lower classes may feel guilt in their low positions, and those in higher classes may feel guilty because of their supremacy (Littlejohn 179).

Guilt, which Burke claims is universally experienced by all of humanity, must be alleviated. According to Burke, such purification is frequently effect through a process he calls the Guilt-Purification-Redemption cycle, which consists of seven "interlocked" moments that create an ethical drama. The seven moments of the ethical drama

are the Negative, Hierarchy, Guilt, Mortification, Victimage, Catharsis and Redemption. The negative is what makes the whole drama possible (Rueckert 131).

Here is how a typical drama is played out. Man,<sup>2</sup> through language, creates the Negative and with it all kinds of Hierarchic codes accompanied with “hundreds of ‘thou-shalt-nots.’” Man enters into a covenant and promises to abide by these laws. Man is not capable of meeting all of these laws, and fails to uphold his end of the covenant. This causes Guilt, and the guilt must be purged through a Catharsis. The catharsis can occur either through Mortification or by Victimage, “and the end result of both is Redemption, or the alleviation of guilt” (Reuckert 131).

As stated above, guilt can be purged either by mortification or by victimage. Mortification is the process where “one admits to a transgression and accepts appropriate punishment for it” (Westerfelhaus and Ciekawy 269). Mortification, which is self-inflicted and limited only to the transgressor, includes “self-enforced denials and restrictions” (Reuckert 146). In contrast, victimage alleviates guilt by transferring the punishment to a vessel outside of the perpetrator. This vessel is called a scapegoat. The scapegoat can be any number of things, from a lamb sacrificed once a year for the sins of the Jewish people, as described in Leviticus, to Hitler’s attempt to unite Germany by eradicating the Jews, which group he claimed had polluted the Fatherland.

Burke calls the study of this rhetorical process “dramatism.” Within the framework of dramatism, Burke developed a tool he refers to as “the pentad” to help analyze how a speaker attempts to persuade an audience. The pentad can be viewed as a snapshot of a single scene in the ethical drama of human relations, while the guilt-redemption cycle (as discussed above) would be the plot of the whole drama. The pentad is comprised of five terms: Act, Agent, Agency, Scene, and Purpose. Simmons and Westerfelhaus explain the terms of the pentad thus, “Burke defines act as what took place; agent as the person ‘who performed the act’; agency as ‘the means or instruments he [sic] used’; scene as ‘the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred’; and purpose as the goal prompting the act” (10). The terms that make up the pentad are very similar to the

journalistic method of determining who, what, when, where, why, and how. The difference between the pentad and journalism is that the goal of the pentad is not simply to name the five categories, but to evaluate the ratios governing the categories; such evaluation helps the rhetorical critic identify the main features of the discourse under analysis, and thus provides some insight into how that discourse works (Griffin 311).

After the pentadic terms have been named, the ratios need to be identified. Ratios are defined as “a pairing of two of the elements in the pentad to discover the relationship between them and the effect each has on the other” (Foss 339). An example of such a ratio would be the Scene-Act ratio. Identifying the ratios that dominate rhetorical discourse enables critics to discover the speaker’s god and devil terms. A god-term is “the word to which all other positive words are subservient,” and a devil-term “sums up all that a speaker regards as bad” (Griffin 311). As Foss explains, this is done by:

An examination of all or any of the ratios possible from the five terms [which] should produce one term that has the most impact on the other terms or that determines the nature of all or most other terms in the pentad. This term is the term that receives the greatest attention...and in it the critic looks for the motive of the act. (341, see also Simmons and Westerfelhaus 11)

### **Negative**

Rhetorical use of the Negative, which as mentioned is one of the primary sources of guilt production, is found throughout the book of Jeremiah. For Jeremiah, the source of the Negative is the Mosaic Covenant, and he repeatedly reminded his audience that they have breached the covenant by forsaking YHWH and his law. In the opening of the book, in one of the first recorded oracles, Jeremiah, speaking for YHWH, registered these complaints, “For My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewn for themselves cisterns — broken cisterns that can hold no water” (2:13). These “broken cisterns” refer to other gods. Jeremiah did not regard these as actually other gods, but rather viewed

them as mere idols. These two complaints are made throughout the book and expressed in many different ways. For example, in another oracle, Jeremiah said, “They have forsaken My law which I set before them, and have not obeyed My voice, nor walked according to it, but they have walked according to the dictates of their own hearts and after the Baals, which their fathers taught them” (9:13-14).

Jeremiah also brought up many other aspects of the Mosaic Covenant in his rhetorical use of the Negative, such as the laws regarding the observance of the Sabbath and the prohibition of slavery of fellow Hebrews, and he pointed out how Judah was in material breach of these laws. In another example, Jeremiah listed how Judah was guilty of breaking five of the Ten Commandments:

Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely,  
burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom  
you do not know, and then come and stand before Me  
in this house, which is called by My name, and say,  
“We are delivered to do all these abominations?” (7:9-  
10)

If Burke is right in stating that the failure to live up to rules, the codification of which is made possible by the idea of the Negative, is a key cause of producing guilt, then Jeremiah’s message is a message aimed in part at exploiting the negative to induce guilt.

### **Hierarchy**

Another source of guilt is Hierarchy. According to Burke, humans construct hierarchies and orderings to “rank how well people observe society’s negative rules” (Griffin 313). This ranking, combined with the “hierarchic psychosis,” which Burke defines as “any uneasiness stemming from the social order,” produces guilt in many different ways (Rueckert 132). There can be any number of hierarchies within a society, such as social, economic, religious, and political hierarchies.

In the book of Jeremiah, five rungs of the Jewish hierarchy are listed. Jeremiah made mention of these when in the middle of an oracle he clarified what he meant by the word they: “They — their kings, their princes, their priests, their prophets, the men of Judah and

the inhabitants of Jerusalem” (32:32). Jeremiah brings attention to political, religious, and social hierarchies in his oracles and prose. The primary responsibility of each of these hierarchal elements is adherence to YHWH and the stipulations of his covenant. According to Jeremiah, each hierarchical element failed to live up to this responsibility.

The first hierarchal element that Jeremiah addressed are the kings, who, with the exception of Josiah, had failed to live up to their covenant responsibilities. In an oracle of YHWH, Jeremiah described the expectations of a king:

Hear the word of the Lord, O King of Judah, you who sit on the throne of David ...thus says the Lord, “Execute judgment and righteousness, and deliver the plundered out of the hand of the oppressor. Do no wrong and do no violence to the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” (22:2-3)

Jeremiah outlined what YHWH expected of the kings, and thus defined what the kings should strive to accomplish. However, the kings of Judah, especially Jehoiakim, did not live up to these standards. Jehoiakim did not consider himself governed by YHWH’s covenant. Jeremiah contrasted Jehoiakim with his father, Josiah, to illustrate how he deviated from the defining features of the true king. Jeremiah spoke this oracle to Jehoiakim:

Did not your father [Josiah] eat and drink, and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well...Yet your eyes and your heart are for nothing but your covetousness, for shedding innocent blood, and practicing oppression and violence. (22:16,17)

Jeremiah, who was a prophet himself, had a lot to say about the other prophets. He argued that they were not living up to the rules governing their hierarchical stratum. A prophet was one who was supposed to “stand in the counsel of YHWH” and deliver YHWH’s

message to the intended audience. For Jeremiah, prophets who did not do so posed a difficult problem. First, their message was often a direct contradiction of Jeremiah's message; and second, the people all favored the oracles of those whom Jeremiah called the "false prophets." Jeremiah stated that if the people of Judah did not repent of their transgressions concerning the Mosaic covenant then YHWH would destroy them. The false prophets, on the other hand, told Judah that there would be peace, and that YHWH would protect Judah and fight on her behalf. This message, naturally, had a greater appeal than Jeremiah's, whose message emphasized reform and promised dire consequences in the absence of such. Jeremiah went so far as to declare that YHWH would actually fight against Judah because of her wickedness (23:16-17). According to Bright, "The prophet's duty is to warn, to admonish, to correct, and to summon the people to penitence and conformity to YHWH's will" (157). Jeremiah declared that the false prophets were not doing this, about whom he said:

I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran. I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused My people to hear My words, then they would have turned from their evil way and from the evil of their doings. (23:21-22)

The last hierarchal element that Jeremiah spoke of was of the people, or the general population of Judah. Jeremiah judged them to be in violation of their covenant with YHWH, especially their obligation to "know" YHWH. Jeremiah makes frequent mention of failure throughout the book. For example, Jeremiah said of the people:

For My people are foolish, they have not known Me.  
They are silly children, and have no understanding of.  
They are wise to do evil, but to do good they have no knowledge. (4:22 see also 9:3 and 9:6)

### **Mortification**

Although much of Jeremiah's rhetoric is aimed at identifying guilt and its sources, mere identification of such was not his ultimate

goal. Guilt was only the rhetorical vehicle that Jeremiah used to try to restore the people of Judah to YHWH. If the people came to appreciate the extent of their guilt, then it follows that they should want to alleviate the weight of that guilt, and as a result Jeremiah could lead them through that process and back to YHWH.

According to Burke, mortification is one of the two primary ways to alleviate guilt, and it is the method that Jeremiah suggested for the people of Judah to purge their guilt. Burke defines mortification as “self-inflicted punishment for one’s sins or self-imposed and self-enforced denials and restrictions” (Rueckert 146). In two separate instances, Jeremiah called for mortification on the part of the people. First, Jeremiah called the people to purge the idolatry of the nation and return whole-heartedly to YHWH. And second, when this call failed, Jeremiah called on the people to surrender willingly to Babylon and be carried off into exile.

Jeremiah’s call for mortification is found scattered throughout the entire book. He calls for the people to admit that they have transgressed against YHWH, and then to return to him with all their heart. This would involve a return to observance of the Mosaic Law, which would require a drastic change in the social fabric of the day. For instance, the idols that had been introduced would have to be destroyed, the Sabbath laws observed, the enslaving of fellow Hebrews stopped, as well as any other practices not allowed under the Law. During the reign of Josiah, Jeremiah spoke this oracle to Israel:

‘Return, faithless Israel’ declares the LORD, ‘I will frown on you no longer, for I am merciful,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt — you have rebelled against the LORD your God, you have scattered your favors to foreign gods under every spreading tree, and have not obeyed me,’ declares the LORD. (3:12-13)

This is a call for mortification, and an offer of restoration to the people of Judah if they were to heed this word. This same call and accompanying offer is found in numerous places in Jeremiah’s oracles (3:14,4:1,7:3). If the people heed the call to mortification, then

YHWH will redeem them. When Jeremiah's call for the people to mortify themselves was rejected, he predicted their doom, prophesying that YHWH would fight against them and destroy Judah by means of a nation to their north, Babylon.

After Jeremiah's first call for mortification on the part of the people was rejected, he offered them a second chance. This time the people would have to accept YHWH's punishment and willingly surrender to Babylon. If the people did so, then YHWH would allow the people to live; and if not, then they would be punished with "the sword, famine and plague" (27:8). The people rejected this call to mortification as well. The mortification that Jeremiah was calling for was something more than the outward changes made during the reign of Josiah. Jeremiah sought a deep inward change among the people that would be reflected in outward change. An outward change alone would not be an acceptable form of mortification.

### **Pentadic Analysis**

I now attempt to understand the motivation behind Jeremiah's message using Burke's method of pentadic analysis. The text that will be analyzed is the Temple sermon, which is found in the first fifteen verses of chapter 7, and consists of a message that Jeremiah delivered at the temple in Jerusalem:

<sup>1</sup> The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying,

<sup>2</sup> "Stand in the gate of the LORD's house, and proclaim there this word, and say, "Hear the word of the LORD, all you of Judah who enter in at these gates to worship the LORD!"

<sup>3</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: "Amend your ways and your doings, and I will cause you to dwell in this place.

<sup>4</sup> Do not trust in these lying words, saying, "The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD are these."

<sup>5</sup> "For if you thoroughly amend your ways and your doings, if you thoroughly execute judgment between a

man and his neighbor,

<sup>6</sup>if you do not oppress the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place, or walk after other gods to your hurt,

<sup>7</sup>then I will cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers forever and ever.

<sup>8</sup>“Behold, you trust in lying words that cannot profit.

<sup>9</sup>Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods whom you do not know,

<sup>10</sup>and then come and stand before Me in this house which is called by My name, and say, “We are delivered to do all these abominations?”

<sup>11</sup>Has this house, which is called by My name, become a den of thieves in your eyes? Behold, I, even I, have seen it,” says the LORD.

<sup>12</sup>“But go now to My place which was in Shiloh, where I set My name at the first, and see what I did to it because of the wickedness of My people Israel.

<sup>13</sup>And now, because you have done all these works,” says the LORD, “and I spoke to you, rising up early and speaking, but you did not hear, and I called you, but you did not answer,

<sup>14</sup>therefore I will do to the house which is called by My name, in which you trust, and to this place which I gave to you and your fathers, as I have done to Shiloh.

<sup>15</sup>And I will cast you out of My sight, as I have cast out all your brethren — the whole posterity of Ephraim.

We will begin our analysis by naming the terms. In the temple sermon, the act, (what took place) is a call to reform. In the second verse, Jeremiah called on the people to, “Reform your ways and your actions.” The people of Judah comprise the agent, because they are the ones directed to reform their ways. More specifically, the agent, or agents, consists of the audience addressed by Jeremiah, who directed the temple sermon to “all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the LORD” (7:2). Lundbom and other scholars date

the temple sermon to the time that Jehoiakim ruled (Lundbom 454). More specifically, Lundbom dates the temple sermon to a fast or festival day in the year that Jehoiakim was inaugurated, which was in 609 (Lundbom 471). If this is true, then there would be a great many of people who would have congregated at the temple to worship.

The agency, or the method of accomplishing the reform, is an adherence to the Law given by Moses. Jeremiah clarified his message by stating exactly which “ways” and “actions” needed to be reformed if the people were going to be restored unto YHWH and “live.” For instance, the people had to stop putting their trust of security in the physical temple of YHWH, abide by the commandments outlined by Moses, and stop burning incense to Baal (7:4,9).

The scene is the present. Jeremiah’s call for repentance was one that he expected to occur at the temple when he finished speaking. The purpose of the act, the call for reform, is for the people of Judah to return to YHWH by once again adhering to the covenantal relationship that Moses described. If the people returned to YHWH then they would be allowed to live in the land, (7:3,7), and if they did not return to YHWH then they would be rejected (7:15). The immediate purpose of the temple sermon was to prick the conscience of the people so that they might amend their ways and return to a covenantal relationship with YHWH. However, this option of blessings returned for obedience only lasts until the seventh verse.

Now that the pentadic terms have been defined, the main ratio or ratios need to be named. The dominating ratio is the act-purpose ratio. The act, which is the call to reform, is the term that is preeminent among the terms of the pentad. The temple sermon begins with a call for reform, and that sets the tone of the whole oracle. The purpose, or the goal of the people of Judah to return to YHWH, is the intended fruit of the completed act. The act and the purpose are the two pentadic terms highlighted in the temple sermon. Agency is also important in the temple sermon, and the agency-purpose ratio also reveals insights into the motivation of Jeremiah. The agency-purpose ratio is similar to the act-purpose ratio. The agency-purpose ratio, however, provides more detail about the nuts-and-bolts of accomplishing the proposed reform.

Jeremiah’s God term, “amend” (or in some translations,

“reform”) is easy to find. Jeremiah begins the temple sermon by calling on the people to amend their ways, and promising blessings if the people do amend their ways. The rest of the temple sermon consists of examples of how the people have failed to amend their ways, and the consequences thereof. The devil term that Jeremiah uses is “trust,” or rather misplaced trust. The people have abandoned the proper use of trust, which is to trust in YHWH, and have trusted in “lying words.” (7:4,8)

The five terms, the dominating ratio, and the god and devil terms I have identified above suggest that Jeremiah’s prophetic message had three primary purposes. First, Jeremiah wanted the people to be restored. This restoration would only happen if the people amended their ways, however. Thus, his second purpose was to rebuke the people. This purpose is subservient to the first, though, because the rebuke was intended to drive the people to repentance. The third purpose informing Jeremiah’s message was to defend the judgments of YHWH. This purpose was not primary, but rather a consequential purpose.

### **Conclusion**

As I have pointed out, the rhetorical strategy that Jeremiah employed to persuade his audience to return to the Mosaic covenant was one that attempted to instill within them a sense of guilt through a rhetorically strategic evocation of the negative, and a call for them to purge this guilt through mortification. Jeremiah’s god-term, reform, clearly indicates the form such mortification should take: compliance with and adherence to the Mosaic Law as articulated in the then newly discovered “Book of the Law.” According to Jeremiah, God would reward compliance with, and punish deviation from, the Law. The conditional nature of YHWH’s relationship with Judah challenged the conventional view which many of the Jewish people held at the time, which took YHWH’s protection for granted, regardless of how his people behaved.

My analysis of Jeremiah’s prophetic message illustrates how Burkean rhetorical theory might be used to examine the messages of other Hebrew prophets. The prophets were a diverse group, with different perspectives and different approaches to delivering their

messages. When applied to the messages of other prophets, rhetorical analysis of the type offered here should uncover, I suspect, a wide variety of rhetorical strategies, some of which, like Jeremiah's, also exploit the negative to induce guilt, some of which employ other strategies. Identifying these strategies and charting their features should help us better appreciate the prophetic literature by understanding more fully how the prophets rhetorically framed their messages. The development of such understanding would serve to complement the cultural, historical, linguistic and theological insights that other scholarship has generated.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The religious reforms of Josiah were instituted in 622 when the "Book of the Law" was found. This was probably the book of Deuteronomy, because many of the reforms that Josiah made coincide with specifications found in that book (Bright 319). After the "Law" was found, it was read in the presence of the elders, and Judah reentered into a covenant with YHWH. Three main objectives were accomplished through Josiah's reform. First, Assyrian cult objects and practices were purged from Judah's temple and society. Second, the practitioners of the various pagan cults were put to death in accordance with the specifications outlined in Deuteronomy. And third, Josiah closed the local shrines of YHWH and centralized the worship of YHWH at the temple in Jerusalem. Up until this point there were many shrines, complete with their own priests, which enabled the population to worship in their own areas. This practice, expressly forbidden in the book of Deuteronomy, was halted during the reign of Josiah (Bright 318-319).

<sup>2</sup> The gender specific language Burke uses reflects grammatical conventions current during the time he wrote.

### Works Cited

- Albertz, Rainer. *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, Vol. 1. (Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).  
Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed.

(Prentice Hall, 1986).

Bratcher, Dennis. *Old Testament History: Assyrian Dominance 745-640 B.C.* <<http://www.cresourcei.org/othassyrian.html>>

Bright, John. *Covenant and Promise* (Westminster, 1976).

Bright, John. *A History of Israel* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Westminster, 1981).

Carter, Allen C. *Kenneth Burke and the Scapegoat Process* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1996).

Foss, Sonja K. *Rhetorical Criticism: Exploration and Practice* (Waveland Press, 1989).

Griffin, Em. *A First Look at Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (McGraw-Hill, 1994).

*The Holy Bible: New King James Version* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999).

Lundbom, Jack. *Jeremiah 1-20: A new Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Doubleday, 1999).

Littlejohn, Stephen W. *Theories of Human Communication*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1992).

Newsome, James D. *The Hebrew Prophets* (John Knox Press, 1984).

Rueckert, William H. *Kenneth Burke and the Drama of Human Relations*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (University of California Press, 1982).

Simmons, Donna, and Robert Westerfelhaus. "Alternative Organizational Scripts as Instruments of Unobtrusive Discipline: A Dramatistic Analysis of Restructuring in a Federal Agency" (Conference Paper).

Thompson, J. A. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Jeremiah* (W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

Westerfelhaus, Robert and Diane Ciekawy. "Cleansing the Social Body: Witchcraft Accusation in an African Society as an Example of Multi Hierarchical Victimage," *Communication Quarterly* 46 (1998), pp. 269-283.