

POTTER, PROPHET AND PEOPLE: JEREMIAH 18 AS PARABLE

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Jeremiah 18 is one of the best-known chapters of a relatively well-known book. The questions it has attracted in the scholarly literature are typical enough of Jeremiah scholarship: how best to divide the text into its various sources and/or strata so as to yield either (a) a history of the book or of the tradition about Jeremiah (e.g., Carroll, 1986), or (b) the history of the prophet himself (e.g., Holladay, 1986). The aims of Jeremiah scholarship have always been either to explain the form of the book or write the biography of the man (with Polk [1984] as an interesting exception).

I do not wish to dismiss either of these strategies in principle. But (a) they are each extremely hypothetical and largely unverifiable, and (b) they both entail using literature for purposes other than those for which it was assembled—namely, to be read, and, most immediately important, they can render no satisfactory account of chapter 18. Duhm's dismissive verdict (1901, p. 153), "a very childish haggadah," eloquently expresses the frustration of a scholar searching for either historical or theological enlightenment. A more substantial challenge comes from William McKane (1986, especially pp. 1–lxxxiii) who denies that there is any coherence to the book as a piece of literature: it was created as a "rolling corpus," and its meaning has to be decoded in terms of *process* rather than *finished product*. This carefully worked-out reconstruction calls into question the coherence not only of the final form but also of the various intermediate stages in the growth of the book. Did the "corpus" at *any* point exhibit coherence? Such questions are probably fruitless, and the intricate argumentation of McKane in particular is not to be undone in a few sentences. In the end, therefore, this critic at least must see his task as *revealing* coherence rather than explaining it; and revealing through the act of reading in ways which the text prompts one to read it.

On reading the chapter

The chapter begins with a description of a simple process: a potter refashioning a pot. However, the fact that a prophet is commissioned to witness this, and that his account is followed by an “interpretation” of the event categorizes this opening picture as a parable, a brief story asking for a meaning. The reader is directed *by the text* to expect some answers to the meaning of the parable to follow. But, additionally, the reader may be directed *by her or his own preconceptions of how parables work* to construe that which follows the parable in a certain way. The discussion of parable in Hebrew Bible research lags behind that in NT research, where the work of Funk (1966), Via (1967) and Crossan (1975) may be particularly cited as using elements of the “new hermeneutic” to challenge univocal, historical-critical and dogmatic readings of the parables of Jesus. The notion of “performative utterance” has been developed with respect to Proverbs by Fontaine. Prophetic parables, however, remain sadly underinvestigated in this regard.

Two preconceptions derived from recent hermeneutical theory have determined the reading which follows. They are that (a) parable does not have a single “objective” meaning, but requires the reader to apply it, and (b) the significance of a parable lies in its total picture and not in its individual details. In both respects, parable can be differentiated from allegory.

With these preconceptions at work, Jer 18 opens up to a coherent exegesis. Whereas many NT parables are either given a single explanation or provided with a context which elicits a single explanation, Jer 18 only *begins* in this way. But the initial interpretation, far from being *the* interpretation sets off a process which takes the parable through a series of different interpretations, each one plotted to undermine or to extend the previous one. The parable, which describes a process of making and remaking, becomes both the object of the chapter and at the same time its plot: the chapter “makes” and “remakes” the parable, as the following reading tries to show.

The parable: vv. 3–5

The crucial first challenge of most commentators is to discover what exactly the opening picture describes. Did the prophet observe the potter making only *one* vessel, or is the description that of the potter’s *habitual* method of working? Does the potter make a rare false start, or does he frequently abandon his intention because of the unsuitable materials?

Most recent, and several older commentaries seem to opt for the latter (Volz [1922], Rudolph [1968], Bright [1965], Holladay [1986], McKane [1986]). The second question to absorb the average commentator is whether the clay is unsuitable *for the intended vessel*, or just bad clay. What exactly is 'spoilt' or 'corrupted' (*nšht*)? But neither of these questions can be answered on the historical or linguistic level. First, we don't *know* what the prophet saw—if he saw anything. Second, we cannot resolve the meaning of the words *in this case* by appealing to linguistic probability. In either case the solution will be unverifiable. The only level on which this sort of question can be asked, and answered, lies in the *interpretation* of the parable which is given in the text. What, in other words, is the picture taken to mean in the remainder of the narrative? To underline the futility of the commentators' approach, let us consider whether Jesus in Mk 4:3–9, Matt 13.3–9, Luke 8:5–8 spoke of any particular sower, or non-particular sower, or many sowers, or indeed ask whether the prodigal use of the precious seed was intended to be taken as normal practice or as idiosyncratic. The procedure is akin to explaining a joke. A parable is a parable is a parable and gains its meaning *only in being applied*. So the picture of the potter here cannot be made to say more than it does except in the process of being interpreted. Of itself, the activity of the potter means nothing to the text or to us. The meanings of parables are their applications.

The first interpretation: v. 6

The first interpretation seems to be the definitive one, since it is uttered by Yahweh to the 'house of Israel': 'Can I not do with you as this potter has done? . . . like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand'. This sentence makes Yahweh the potter and Israel the clay in his hands; possibly it makes the 'hand' into the 'power'—though this is a shift of meaning which cannot be demonstrated, if probably assumed. The parable, in this first interpretation becomes 'You, Israel, are in my power'. It is an interpretation which cannot be taken as definitive by either text or reader. The reader will inevitably find the interpretation underexploits the parable by dealing only with the items of potter, clay and hand, and ignores the *action* of the parable, which consists of destruction and refashioning. The text refuses the interpretation by proceeding to give further interpretations immediately. It is thus obvious that the first offered interpretation does not close off the process, but leaves the way open for more interpretation; in so doing, it prompts the reader with a clue to the construction of the entire chapter.

The second interpretation: vv. 7–10

Verses 7–10 can be separated as a distinct interpretation on several grounds. Most commentators sever these verses, on the basis of vocabulary and ideology, as a Deuteronomistic insertion (see Thiel, 1973, pp. 210–218, followed by McKane, 1986 and Carroll, 1986; against, Weippert, 1973, pp. 48–62 and 191–209, followed by Holladay, 1986). This may be a correct account source-critically. Rhetorically, other criteria are to be applied. Verse 11 marks a break by a shift of audience from ‘house of Israel’ to the prophet: the ultimate recipients of the remarks are no longer directly addressed *through* the prophet (as v. 5 awkwardly manages), but the prophet is told to convey the words which follow. Furthermore, the eventual recipients are called ‘people of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem’. We have a new conversation beginning here, and an old one ending. The break at v. 7 is more difficult to effect. It reads like a continuation of v. 6, and indeed, it appears to be supplying that detail of interpretation which v. 6 failed to provide—an account of the *action* of the potter. This means that we are not reading another speech. However, we are certainly reading another *interpretation*, and the fact that it follows directly means simply that we are given a change of interpretation by Yahweh in mid-discourse. If this is a problem, it is not one which can be solved by attempting to harmonize v. 6 with vv. 7–10. For in vv. 7–10 one element in the interpretation from v. 6 is changed: Israel is not the clay, but ‘any nation’. At least, this is how it seems at the surface. The exposition of the potter’s action, however, points to a different application. For it is given not, as one might have expected, in terms of a vessel being abandoned and recreated, but in terms of the *potter’s change of mind*. It makes no sense really for a *nation* to play the role of pot, for on this reading the ‘destruction’ or ‘corruption’ of the clay will signify either ‘turning from its evil’ or ‘doing evil’! No: what is destroyed and reformed is the *divine intention*. Yahweh is the potter and Yahweh’s intentions are the clay. According to this interpretation, the parable is *all* about Yahweh. But in one sense it is not; and this sense is to become extremely important later. For Yahweh’s change of mind is not unconditioned, but a response to external changes of mind. If the ‘nation’ repents, Yahweh will remake his pot. Albeit slightly, there is a shift of initiative from Yahweh to the people which is unimportant so long as it is Yahweh’s *plan* which constitutes the clay. But when, with the other interpretation, the *nation* is the clay, the parable begins to deconstruct alarmingly. The first and second inter-

pretations cannot be safely combined or juxtaposed, as will be seen presently.

We have thus far, then, two different interpretations of the potter parable, both from the mouth of Yahweh. One focuses on the *roles* as Yahweh and Israel, the other on the *action* as divine change of mind. Both interpretations, of course, constitute general assertions and do not relate explicitly to the circumstances in which Jeremiah is being compelled to convey the parable and its meaning. The parable remains to be applied directly to the situation of its audience.

The third interpretation: v. 11

Verse 11, addressed to the prophet for transmission to the men of Jerusalem, is, then, an actualization of the preceding two interpretations. It applies their generalizing sentiments to the here-and-now audience and the here-and-now situation. Yahweh plans destruction, but by repentance it can be averted. It seems to be the most straightforward interpretation of the parable, the one which any reader of the first 17 chapters of Jeremiah would have supplied if asked.

Yet this interpretation is really not a straightforward one. Who, given this meaning, is the clay? Yahweh is 'devising evil against' Judah. What is the object? Is it the evil (the plan) or Judah which is signified by the clay? The previous two interpretations, each having given a different answer to this question, undermine the confidence of the reader at this point. The use of *šwb* adds to this uncertainty. For in the parable, the *potter* is the subject of *šwb*; here it is the *people* who are being asked to *šwb*. A new element has been insinuated into the parable: the potter, on Yahweh's reading, seems no longer entirely in control of the situation. The initiative has passed to the clay—i.e., the people. This state of affairs would be entirely acceptable were it not for the parable itself. For Yahweh to demand repentance and promise withdrawal of retribution does not compromise his authority; but to make this point by means of a potter parable *is* dangerous, because parables have a life of their own, and this parable is about to take over, or, more precisely, to be taken over. The mechanism by which this will occur is imported by Yahweh himself in a new motif. Yahweh characterizes the activity of the potter as 'scheming' (*hšb*: this involves a wordplay which I shall discuss presently). The language here picks up the motif of potter as deviser, as creative artist, but creative of destruction: *hšb* does not have a benign connotation in this chapter. God reveals himself here as the scheming potter,

with Judah the victim of his schemes. As we have just observed, however, Yahweh has interpreted the parable in ways which allow the clay to be other than a passive substance. This lack of passivity permits the hijacking of parables. Interpretations are not definitive simply because a deity says so. Up to this point all the interpreting has been by Yahweh. If we like, we can see that the parable has been Yahweh's clay, which he has refashioned twice already. But now occurs a change of role. The clay of Yahweh's parable seizes the initiative and becomes the potter of *its* parable.

Clay becomes potter: verbal stage: vv. 12-17

The clay in the potter's hands is the subject, in the parable, of a passive verb (*nšḥt*); even its 'corruption' is not active! But Yahweh has, in his interpretation of the parable, provided the clay with a mind of its own. The movements of the previous verses now reach their climax. What happens in v. 12 is that the clay stands up and challenges the potter. Instead of an *acted parable* being fought out between two prophets with yokes around their necks (as in Jer 28) we have an *acted interpretation*. The reply of the people is 'no: we stick by our own schemes' (v. 12). That is to say, 'the parable means to us that *we are the potters*'. But then, who can be the clay? For the time being, it seems that the plans themselves are the clay, as in vv. 7-10. But can it be long for the inevitable chiasm to operate and provide the new potter with a real pot? This we shall see presently; but we have first to witness Yahweh's astonished reaction at this impudence. Clay pretending to be potter? 'Who has ever heard of such a thing?' (v. 13) As we shall see, the initiative has indeed passed from Yahweh; in the remainder of the chapter he is not the agent at all: it is the people or the prophet who act and speak. But before this occurs, Yahweh will have his last, outraged speech.

The speech is presumably not written for the occasion: form-critical and textual problems abound here. But from our point of view, the general tone and the fundamental argument are what count. The tone is outrage, and the argument consists of two parts: the first takes the form of an astonished appeal to the audience—look what these people are doing to me! The second threatens punishment; the psychology of this reaction is easy to comprehend. Israel had behaved quite unnaturally. Precisely what the metaphors detail is not always clear, but all that matters to us is that they describe inconceivable behavior which might be construed as either unnatural or rebellious. The unnatural behavior is spelled out in v. 15 in terms of deserting Yahweh and following ways not

suitable for them. The language of walking and the use of *drk* in this verse picks up vv. 11 and 12 where the dispute between God and the people is couched in these terms. It is therefore permissible to read the divine speech as a direct response to the challenge of v. 12. Indeed, this is the interpretation which explains best the function and form of the speech. And in the light of the parable, the behavior of the 'virgin of Israel' is that of the pot behaving like the potter. The divine protest, or tantrum, ends with the threat of total destruction which will, of course, prove who really is the potter and who the pot. However, the dispute is not over and the next section of the chapter finds the people taking up their newly-claimed role of potter by finding a pot to play with.

Clay becomes potter: active stage: v. 18

The contest for the role of potter intensifies. The text continues with an unspecified 'they' beginning to make plans against the prophet. The continuation is in fact resumption. 'They' and their 'plans' are those of verse 12. The intervening speech has not disturbed the scenario, which presented the people determined to abide their own schemes. Such a scheme is now hatched, with the poor prophet playing the part of the pot. This move of course intensifies the confrontation with Yahweh. Action against his spokesman is an affront to the divine dignity and the divine claim to pottership—a blatant challenge. The prophet's response to this initiates a further step in the interpretation of the parable, and again it is one which follows naturally and logically from the behavior of the people. He accepts that he is playing pot. The issue then becomes: whose pot?

Who is Jeremiah's potter? vv. 19–23

The prophet, finding himself the victim of the people's plot, appeals to Yahweh to make sure that he does punish them. Interestingly, he does not ask to be helped, only avenged. But he seems anxious—as if (and here many commentators concur) he has some doubt about the earnestness of Yahweh's intentions—perhaps even some nagging doubt about who will win the pottery contest. From our vantage point we might suspect that he has some doubt about who is the potter: he seems reconciled to being the pot, at all events. This is hardly a satisfactory point at which to end the chapter. Several commentators escape this dilemma by supposing that ch. 19 continues the story (Rudolph, [1968]; Bright, [1965]; Carroll, [1986]; Holladay, [1986]). The device of ending our hero in a pit (be it anticipated or even metaphorical) with the

audience in suspense is memorable from cinema and TV serials of childhood: each week left the hero in dire distress, but by the following week one had partly forgotten how badly off the hero was and so the miraculous escape which opened the new episode did not shatter the suspension of disbelief. Here, too, the next episode of *Jeremiah and the Potter* in ch. 19 sees the prophet free with one bound and ready at the prompting of Yahweh to go shopping, and in the company of the ruffians whose plan it is to throw him in a pit! No: this will not work. A better resolution must be attempted. But this, as convention permits, shall be left until the end. There remains the task of looking at some features of the *language* of the text which hint that the reading just undertaken is not entirely the whim of a reader but a response to hints of a fairly explicit kind.

Some linguistic markers in the text (see table at the end of article)

The parable contains some key words. Their importance is not obvious at first, but becomes evident during the interpretations which follow. Now that we have gone to the end of the chapter we can, without cheating, go back and identify what the key words turned out to have been. They are, *yšr*, *šh*, *nšht* and *šb*. These comprise nine of the twenty-four words of vv. 3–4. We can—with the value of hindsight—assemble them into two pairs, each of which will transmit one of the two major themes of the chapter. *šh* and *yšr* convey the idea of action. One strand of the chapter deals with the question: who is doing what to whom? Who is the *yošer*? The other pair of words, *nšht* and *šb* are treated less straightforwardly: each has another meaning applied to it subsequently. *Šht* means ‘destruction’, and that is what is promised to Israel. It also means ‘pit’, as occupied by the prophet later. *Šb* can also mean ‘change of mind’—and this applies either to Israel’s ‘repenting’ or to Yahweh’s. Yahweh wants Israel to repent: he is then willing to repent himself. Ironically, in the end, the prophet is praying that God does *not* repent!

In the first interpretation of the parable, vv. 5–6, it is the first pair of words which are reinforced. The verbal and conceptual simplicity—crudity even—of this first interpretation contrasts strongly with the complication of the second, third and fourth applications in vv. 7–10, 11 and 12. First, the straightforward play: if a nation ‘returns’ (*šb*), Yahweh will ‘repent’ (*nšm*), v. 8. Then the complication begins. The verbs *šb* and *šh* pool their radical genes and produce an offspring called *hšb*: we find the development *hšabti la‘šôt lô* at the end of v. 9. In vv. 11–12 this is underlined: *wehōšēb ‘ălēkhem maššābāh šūbū nā’ . . . ‘ahārē maššēbō-*

tēnū nēlēk. In all this, the other word pair is not forgotten, either: *šh* in v. 10, *ywšr* in v. 11 and *nšh* to finish the first act at the end of v. 12.

The wordgame resumes after the divine outburst. In v. 18 comes *naḥšēbāh ʿal yirmēyahū maḥšābôt*. Further elaboration takes place in the next scene, where the prophet mentions the *šwhh* which has been dug for him. He repeats this in v. 22 (with emendation of MT). And in case we had forgotten about that other word-pair, we find *lēhāšīb ʿaet-ḥāmōtēkā* in v. 20 ‘turning back anger’. But so much for that sentiment: the chapter concludes *ʿāšēh bāhem*, ‘do it to them!’

There is further wordplay in this chapter, of course. For instance, the words *rʿ* and *ʿwb* play an important part. But I am not after a fuller account of the chapter than I have offered. Except, that is, to explain the ending.

Interpretation moves on

One possibility of construing the ending has just been hinted at, of course: the prophet ends up calling on Yahweh to ‘do it to them’, which perhaps returns us to the first interpretation of the parable in v. 6: ‘Am I not able to *do to you* as this potter, house of Israel?’ With this reading the chapter folds in on itself and the fancies of the people are dissipated in the spelling out of the bottom line. You don’t play the potter with Yahweh—or his prophet—and get away with it. Except that, sticking to this chapter alone, we don’t know whether they do get away with it or not. So on this reading the chapter ends with a question mark: who is going to end up playing potter? Who is the potter? That, of course, might also tell us who is the pot.

But if we cast our eyes a little further for a meaning, we find another issue. Look at the poor product, the victim of the people’s plots, calling to Yahweh. He does this so often—compare 11:19–23, for example. Jeremiah has been faithfully pronouncing oracles, going hither and thither, buying a linen belt, running through the streets of Jerusalem. He voices complaints to God. He is, as we find him at the end of ch. 18, in a familiar position of being a football kicked between Yahweh and the people. In ch. 20 it all pours out. The people are continually threatened in this book, but it is the prophet who is hurt most. Whose fault is it that the people persecute him? Isn’t it really the case that Yahweh is the potter but Jeremiah is the pot, and has been all along? Chapter 18 does not give us this interpretation. It presents us at the end with Jeremiah, not arguing with the people or appealing to them, but turning to Yahweh, whom he regards as the potter. His complaint here focuses on

Yahweh's future treatment of the people; he clearly still sees them as Yahweh's pot. But for two reasons the attentive reader may regard Jeremiah as Yahweh's pot. First is the realization that ch. 18 has already set him up as the people's pot. Second is the prompting of the rest of the book of Jeremiah. To readers who have studied the rest of the book, there must be a certain irony. Who could but doubt that it is Jeremiah who looks most like the pot all along? Considered as an integral part of the book of Jeremiah, then, the parable of chapter 18 acquires yet another meaning.

Linguistic Markers

- vv. 3 w^ᵛrd byt HYWṢR whnhw ^ᶜśh ml^ᵛkh ^ᶜl-h^ᵛbnym
 4 wnšht hkly ᵛšr hw^ᵛ ^ᶜśh bhmr byd HYWṢR **wšb** wy^ᶜśhw kly ᵛḥr
 k^ᵛšr yšr b^ᶜyny HYWṢR l^ᶜšwt
 8 **wšb** hgwy hhw^ᵛ mr^ᶜtw ᵛšr dbrty ^ᶜlyw wnḥmty ^ᶜl-hr^ᶜh ᵛšr
hšbty l^ᶜšwt lw
 11 . . . hnh ᵛnwky YWṢR ^ᶜlykm r^ᶜh wḥšb ^ᶜlykm mḥšbh **šwbw** n^ᵛ
 ᵛyš mdrkw hr^ᶜh. . .
 12 . . . ᵛhry mḥšbwtynw nlk w^ᵛyš šrrwt lbw-hr^ᶜ n^ᶜśh
 18 . . . lk wnḥšbh ^ᶜl-yrmyhw mḥšbwt . . .
 20 . . . ky krw šwḥh lnpšy. . . **lhšyb** ᵛt-hmtk mh
 23 . . . ^ᶜśh bhm

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On another occasion Jeremiah must visit the potter's house (Jer. 18) and observe his work. "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make." From this, Jeremiah draws a lesson: If the people turn away from their evil ways and doings, God may repent of His sentence against them. On the other hand, if finally they turn away from him, the announced blessing can be lost. Then in the sight of the elders of the people and the elders of the priests, the prophet breaks the bottle. Thus God will "break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel which cannot be made whole again." (Jer. 19:11).