The Missio Dei as an Integrative Motif in the Book of Jeremiah

JERRY HWANG
SINGAPORE BIBLE COLLEGE

The theme of missio Dei in the book of Jeremiah has been overlooked in mission studies and OT scholarship even though Jeremiah is uniquely commissioned as a “prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5). The missio Dei imparts literary and theological coherence to a sprawling book as a unifying link among the significant themes of Jeremiah’s prophecy: personal suffering in the prophetic task, a catalytic divine word that judges and saves God’s people, theodicy in the face of impending exile, and the final restoration of both Israel and the nations.

Key Words: Jeremiah, nations, oracles, restoration, judgment, mission

Jeremiah of Anathoth is unique in the OT for being appointed as “a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5). Despite this calling to an international ministry, the theme of the missio Dei in the book of Jeremiah has received scant attention in both mission studies and OT scholarship.¹ The seminal books on the missio Dei by Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, Andreas Köstenberger and Peter O’Brien, and David Bosch focus on the NT.² The detailed study of mission in the OT by Christopher Wright treats Isaiah at length but makes comparatively few references to Jeremiah.³ Though

³ Christopher J. H. Wright, The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006). It should be noted that Wright has recently written an essay on mission in Jeremiah (“A Prophet to the Nations”: Missional Reflections on the Book of Jeremiah,” in A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon McConville on his 60th
the notion of God’s sending out his messengers for the purposes of proclamation lies at the heart of the *missio Dei*[^4], biblical theologians of mission have not yet provided a systematic treatment of the words of the prophet whom Yahweh repeatedly “sends” (שָלָח) in order to “speak” (דבר) to many different peoples (e.g., Jer 1:7).

OT scholarship has tended toward issues other than the theme of *missio Dei* in Jeremiah. The well-known differences between the LXX and MT versions of Jeremiah have led to much study of the transmission history of the book[^5], whereas theological and literary tensions have provided an impetus for proposals that investigate the book’s underlying sources and traditions[^6]. Though more recent research has centered on the final form[^7], no study has yet been undertaken on how the prophetic call narrative and the *missio Dei* impart coherence to the entire book[^8]. Most notably, OT scholars typically propose a redactional solution for a literary conundrum: why is Jeremiah called as a “prophet to the nations” who must go wherever Yahweh sends him (1:4–10), even while his ministry mainly consists of staying in Jerusalem to preach among his own people (1:11–19)? An explicit shift from the particular nation of Judah to the universal horizon of the nations seems to happen only in the oracles against the nations in chaps. 46–51. Even if one accepts literary-critical proposals to separate the particular and universal dimensions of the book into discrete layers of tradition[^9], the task still remains of interpreting the book of Jeremiah as canonical Scripture by trying to bridge its literary polarities. As Walter Brueggemann has noted, the canonical shape of the book has remained elusive despite many attempts to understand it[^10].

[^4]: Eckhard J. Schnabel (*Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008], 22–27), argues that a proper definition of mission should include the elements of movement and intentionality as connoted by the Latin words *missio* and *mittere*, from which the English word “mission” is derived.


[^8]: Many scholars have noted the introductory function of Jeremiah 1 without demonstrating this in detail (e.g., Paul R. House, “Plot, Prophecy and Jeremiah,” *JETS* 36 [1993]: 304).


This article argues that the *missio Dei* provides an integrative motif for the significant themes of Jeremiah’s prophecy: personal suffering in the prophetic task, theodicy in the face of impending exile, a catalytic divine word that judges and saves God’s people, and the final restoration of both Israel and the nations. The book of Jeremiah depicts the prophet’s international mission in three stages. Jeremiah goes first to Judah as an unrepentant people to be judged by the hand of the nations. Then he speaks to these same nations, who must be judged for their own transgressions, and finally he addresses all the inhabitants of the earth as those whom Yahweh will save. Following an analysis of the call narrative in Jer 1:4–19, I will trace the themes introduced in Jeremiah’s call as a “prophet to the nations” through the major units in the book: (1) Jeremiah 2–10; (2) Jeremiah 11–20, the so-called “Confessions” of the prophet; (3) Jeremiah 21–25; (4) Jeremiah 26–45, a section that includes the “Book of Consolation” (chaps. 30–33); and (5) Jeremiah 46–51, the oracles against the nations (hereafter, OAN). Chapter 52 is a historical narrative that is in all likelihood drawn from 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30 and will not be included in this study.¹¹

**THE NARRATIVE OF JEREMIAH’S CALL AS PROPHET**

A closer look at the call narrative of Jeremiah (1:4–19)¹² reveals how the motif of *missio Dei* is developed in the rest of the book. The opening chapter of Jeremiah serves more to foreshadow the themes of the prophet’s ministry than to provide biographical information about the prophet’s life. Though Jeremiah’s call certainly contains several elements of the call narrative *Gattung*, two features of Jeremiah 1 are distinctive in the OT and highlight his status as a missionary prophet.

The first salient feature of Jeremiah’s call is the beginning of his ministry by virtue of “prenatal predestination.”¹⁴ The motif of being “chosen” (יֵדֻע)¹⁵ before birth is a standard feature of the accession accounts of


₁⁴ Esther H. Rosshwald, “Jeremiah 1:4–10: ‘Lost and Found’ in Translation and a New Interpretation,” *JSOT* 34 (2010): 352. Samson is consecrated to God from the womb (Judg 13:5), but unlike Jeremiah, he was not fashioned before he was even conceived.

₁⁵ ידֻע ("to know") can function as a synonym to בָּחֵר ("to choose") in denoting divine election (e.g., Gen 18:19; Amos 3:2).
ancient Near Eastern kings, who would typically describe their calling to kingship as the foreordained task of enforcing the divine will on earth. Jeremiah bears a similar responsibility to speak exactly and only what God has said (1:7). The unusual nature of Jeremiah’s consecration to ministry is also evident in how he is specially “set apart” (שׁקד Hiphil; 1:5) despite his descent from a priestly family (1:1). Such a trio of prophetic, priestly, and royal traits finds numerous parallels in the description of the servant in Isa 49:1–6, who bears similar offices as the prophet Jeremiah in being chosen from the “womb” (בטן) to mediate between Israel and Yahweh (Isa 49:5) and to bear God’s salvation to the nations (Isa 49:6).

The mediatory character of Jeremiah in chap. 1 is reinforced by the unusually protracted dialogue between him and God, an exchange that depicts the prophet as a “new Israel” of sorts. At first glance, the call of Jeremiah echoes other call narratives by recording an objection from the servant whom God has called (“I do not know how to speak/I am a youth”; Jer 1:6; cf. Exod 3:11; Judg 6:15). In the call narratives of Moses and Gideon, for example, the objection is followed immediately by God’s words of assurance to the chosen individual (Exod 3:12; Judg 6:16). But in Jeremiah 1, the expected assurance from God (“I am with you and will deliver you”; 1:8) is delayed by a rebuttal in which God rejects the lament using the exact words just uttered by the prophet: “Do not say, ‘I am a youth’” (1:7).

This use of a direct negation recalls the confrontation between Moses and Israel before entering the land (see table 1). This language of negation is unique

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yahweh/Moses Forbids the Objection</th>
<th>“Do not say”</th>
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<tr>
<td>Yahweh Rebuts the Speaker’s Words</td>
<td>“I am a youth.” (Jer 1:7)</td>
<td>“These nations are greater than I. How can I dispossess them?” (Deut 7:17)</td>
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<td>Yahweh Responds with Words of Assurance</td>
<td>“Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you.” (Jer 1:8)</td>
<td>“Do not be afraid of them . . . do not dread them, for Yahweh your God is in your midst.” (Deut 7:18, 21)</td>
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Table 1. Confrontation between Moses and Israel before Entering the Land


19. Strawn (ibid.) convincingly shows that Jeremiah’s self-appellation as a “youth” reflects his feelings of inadequacy rather than his tender age.
to Jeremiah 1 and Deuteronomy 7, thereby indicating that the prophet recapitulates Israel, perhaps in a typological way, through their common protest over God’s choice of them (cf. Deut 7:6–7) for the difficult task of opposing the nations (cf. Deut 7:1–2, 17–26).20 A typological interpretation of this passage is reinforced by Yahweh’s offer of an alternative typology to Jeremiah as a pattern for his prophetic ministry. Instead of embodying a timid and disobedient Israel, Jeremiah is commanded to become a new Moses who speaks “all that I have commanded him / you” (Deut 18:18c; Jer 1:7) because of divine words “in his / your mouth” (Deut 18:18b; Jer 1:9).21 The semiotic world of the book is fluid enough to portray Jeremiah as representing his people when fearing the opposition of the “nations” as well as redirecting him toward the persona of Moses when confronting false prophets among his own people. Jeremiah’s awkward position of representing both God and his own people demonstrates how the missio Dei entails a significant “missional cost to the messenger.”22 Thus, the call narrative portends the various disputes in the book over who is truly “sent” (שלח) to “speak” (דבר) the words of God, as in chaps. 27–28.

The second distinctive feature of Jeremiah’s call is his identification as a prophet of international scope. But as noted earlier, Jeremiah’s title “prophet to the nations” seems to contradict his focus on Israel. The solution to this puzzle lies in how Jeremiah 1 broadens the term גוים (“nations”) from a primarily ethnic designation (that is, non-Israelite) to denote any people who exhibit rebellious conduct against God.23 In the verses following Jeremiah’s call to the “nations” (1:5), for example, Yahweh reassures the reluctant prophet, “Do not fear them [3mp suffix], for I will be with you” (1:8a). Here, the 3mp suffix “them” (1:8a) could only refer to the “nations” (1:5) because the surrounding context contains no other references to a grammatically masculine plural group of people.24 Though “them” in this passage remains a nonspecific group of people, the identity of this recalcitrant group begins

21. The portrayal of Jeremiah as a “new Moses,” and specifically a “prophet like me from among you” (Deut 18:15), has often been noted (e.g., William L. Holladay, Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1–25 [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 29–30; Robert P. Carroll, From Chaos to Covenant [London: SCM, 1981], 33–34; cf. Luis Alonso Schökel, “Jeremías como anti-Moisés,” in De la Tôrah au Messie; Études d’exégèse et d’herméneutique bibliques offertes à Henri Cazelles pour ses 25 années d’enseignement à l’Institut Catholique de Paris (Octobre 1979) [ed. Maurice Carrez, Joseph Doré, and Pierre Grelot; Paris: Desclée, 1981], 245–54). However, these interpreters have tended to overlook the flexible typology of Jeremiah between Israel and Moses in chap. 1.
22. Wright (“Prophet to the Nations,” 128–9) uses this phrase to describe only Jeremiah’s confrontations with other people, but it is clear that his confrontations with God are even more painful.
24. Besides Jer 1:8, the construction מפני + אל-תיירא + pronominal suffix (“do not be afraid of”) is found three other times in the OT: Josh 11:6; 2 Kgs 1:15; Neh 4:8[14]. Since the pronominal suffix in those instances always refers to a plural group of people introduced earlier, the most probable conclusion is that “them” in Jer 1:8 refers to “nations.”
to be specified in chap. 2 as God’s own people whose pagan tendencies outdo other nations (2:11) in worshiping an inordinate number of manmade gods (2:28; cf. 7:6). The changing of positions between Israel and the גוים furnishes a prime example of how the preaching of Jeremiah surprises his audience through “shifts in symbolic arrangements.”

The ironic inclusion of Judah among the גוים is buttressed by Yahweh’s statement after placing his words in the mouth of the prophet (1:9). Unlike Isaiah’s mouth, which was touched by a seraph to cleanse his sin, Yahweh personally touches Jeremiah so that his words have catalytic power to rule “over the nations and over the kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10). These six infinitives that describe the power of the prophetic word are thematic threads that run throughout the book, primarily referring to the judgment and salvation of God’s people, and secondarily for all nations. Israel is thus classified among the “nations” and “kingdoms” to be judged and saved by the divine word through the prophet Jeremiah.

The characterization of Israel as first among the גוים corresponds with another shift in Jeremiah 1 from the particular to the universal plane. In Jeremiah’s second vision of a boiling pot (1:13–16), the prophet sees an enemy coming on “all the inhabitants of the land [ארץ] . . . from the north [צפון]” (1:14). The phrasing of 1:14 contains two lexical ambiguities that point to something more than a localized destruction. First, the word ארצ could refer either to “earth” or “land,” thus raising the question of whether the enemy comes to wreak havoc only on the inhabitants of Israel or on all the inhabitants of the earth. Second, the source of this enemy is צפון, a direction from which will come both Babylon as the instrument of God’s

Similarly, Harry P. Nasuti admits that the grammatical antecedent of “them” (1:8) must be “nations” (1:5) while maintaining that “[t]here is no contextual justification for reading a specifically Judean reference here, despite the naturalness of such a reading in view of the persecution of Jeremiah at the hands of his countrymen which one finds later in the book” (“A Prophet to the Nations: Diachronic and Synchronic Readings of Jeremiah 1,” HAR 10 [1986]: 254, emphasis added).


26. Norman Habel tries to force Isaiah and Jeremiah to fit the sameGattung. For example, Habel (“Call Narratives,” 307) suggests that the word-event formula parallels Yahweh’s summons to Jeremiah into the divine council (Jer 23:16–18), but this interpretation reads too much into Jer 1:4.

27. The application of Jer 1:10 to a variety of situations, objects, and subjects in the rest of the book is discussed by Saul M. Olyan, “‘To Uproot and to Pull Down, to Build and to Plant’: Jer 1:10 and Its Earliest Interpreters,” Hesed Ve-Emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs (ed. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 63–72. Georg Fischer notes that Jer 1:10 is the only instance in the book that this list of verbal infinitives is applied to the prophet himself (Jeremiah 1–25 [HTKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005], 137).

28. This depiction of the performative power of the divine word is unique among prophetic call narratives. Other prophets (e.g., Moses, Isaiah, and Ezekiel) begin to speak only after God appears to them in a sign or theophany, but the word simply “happens” to Jeremiah. When Jeremiah finally does see visions, as described in 1:11–19, these visions serve the purpose of validating the divine word already vouchsafed to the prophet.
judgment (25:9) and Babylon’s own destroyer (50:2, 3). In Jeremiah 1, however, it is noteworthy that צופן (רעה) is identified only as the source of “destruction” (רעה) rather than a particular enemy of Israel.

The general identification of צופן as “destruction” rather than Babylon is intentional. Jeremiah 1 draws on a shared ancient Near Eastern tradition in which צופן denotes the exalted seat of deity from which destruction is sent, as in the Baal material from Ugarit. As David Reimer observes, the overall sense of צופן in Jeremiah indicates “that the צופן tradition does not specify an historical foe, and that the variety of imagery used suggests simply the coming of destruction rather than the means or agent of doom.” Babylon does serve later in the book as both the instrument of judgment against Israel as well as itself being a recipient of judgment, but Yahweh is the ultimate source of judgment who repeatedly “sends” (שלח) his agents to earth from his heavenly dwelling. Thus the multivalence of צופן, in conjunction with Jeremiah’s emphasis on the sovereignty of Yahweh in judgment, points to more of a vertical rather than horizontal orientation for צופן. The God who dwells at an otherworldly צופן accomplishes his purposes by sending a variety of earthly agents from a geographical, this-worldly צופן.

Another reorientation of divine judgment from the horizontal to the vertical dimension occurs through the summoning of “all the families of the kingdoms of the north” to Jerusalem (1:15). Though “all the kingdoms of the families of the north” (1:15; cf. 1:5, 10) is often interpreted as a reference to foreign nations coming to attack Jerusalem, it is more likely that these foreign nations are included among “them” whom Yahweh will judge. As in 1:8, the closest 3mp referent for “them” as objects of God’s judgment (1:16) is the 3mp noun “nations” in 1:10. This group of “them” is not an ethereal group of people who exist only within Jeremiah’s visionary experience, for this same group of “them” will actually oppose Jeremiah’s ministry in the near future. Again, Yahweh reassures Jeremiah: “Now, gird up your loins and arise, and speak to them all which I command you. Do not be dismayed before them, or I will dismay you before them” (1:17). The later career of Jeremiah reveals that his main opposition comes more from false prophets among his own people than from foreign nations.

32. John Hill, Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT (Biblical Interpretation Series 40; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 47–50.
34. In 1:15, “families” (משפחות) and “kingdoms” (ממלכות) are both feminine plural nouns that could not be the referent of “them” (1:16), a 3mp pronoun.
35. The only other reference to Jeremiah being “dismayed” (חתת) before his enemies, appears in Jer 17:18, when Jeremiah asks God for help not to be “dismayed” (חתת) before “those who persecute me,” which in the context must refer to false prophets in Jerusalem.
nations. This observation shows that גוים has assumed a satirical sense in Jeremiah 1 through classifying the people of God among the pagans. In fact, the unwillingness of Jerusalem’s inhabitants to heed the prophet means that Jeremiah now replaces Jerusalem as “a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls to stand against the whole land” (1:18). As one who must take a courageous stand against his sinful countrymen in Jerusalem, Jeremiah stands in temporarily as a “surrogate city” to fulfill Jerusalem’s intended mission to be a gathering place for the repentant from among the nations (cf. 3:17–18; 15:20–21).

The lexical ambiguities in Jeremiah frame a part-to-whole relationship between Judah and the nations on the one hand, and the land of Canaan and the whole world on the other. As the following analysis will show, Israel and its land have become a particular representation of a universal paradigm of judgment followed by salvation in God’s dealings with the whole earth.37

THE MISSIO DEI IN THE REST OF JEREMIAH

The prophetic call narrative raises two interrelated questions about the mission of the prophet: To whom is Jeremiah the prophet “sent” (שלח) as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5)? And what must he “speak” (דבר) to his international audience, among whom are the people of God? These questions will be addressed through an analysis of the main sections in the book.

The Missio Dei in Jeremiah 2–10

The literary unit of Jeremiah 2–10 is a mixture of poetry (chaps. 2–6, 8–10) and prose (chap. 7). While these generic differences are typically used as a redactional criterion,38 a unifying theme of these chapters is Israel’s journey among the nations as a people who are “holy to Yahweh” and the “first of his harvest” (2:3). Jeremiah the prophet is commanded to retrace Israel’s steps from exodus to exile,39 with important waystations along this journey punctuated by appearances of the Leitwörter הלך (“to go, walk”), דרך (“way”), and שב (“to return”). The multivalence of these Leitwörter serves to show that Israel’s spiritual and physical journeys with Yahweh are not only coterminous in character, they also have significant implications for the advance of the missio Dei among the nations.

38. Following the influential work of Bernhard Duhm (Das Buch Jeremia [Khat 11; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1901], the scholarly tendency has been to isolate poetry (chaps. 2–6, 8–10) as the earliest layer coming from the prophet himself. In contrast, the Temple Sermon (chap. 7) has affinities with deuteronomic passages and is thus considered Deuteronomistic (E. W. Nicholson, Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah [Oxford: Blackwell, 1970], 33–34).
The retelling of these journeys begins with Israel’s “following after” (אחרי הלך; 2:2) Yahweh in the wilderness, a time when Israel experienced divine protection from the surrounding nations (2:3). But despite God’s guidance out of Egypt (2:6–7), the ancestors “went far away” (לך) and “walked after” (אחרי הלך) worthless things (2:5). Their descendants continued this pattern in the land of promise and “walked after” (אחרי הלך; 2:8) the pagan gods (cf. 2:23–25). Such foolishness in rejecting the true God is unprecedented among the nations: “Has a nation [גוי] changed gods when they were not gods?” (2:11; cf. 2:28). The people of God have become more pagan than the pagans, thereby confirming that Israel should be reckoned among the “nations” to whom Jeremiah must prophesy (cf. 1:5, 10).

The journey motif is also developed using the Leitwort דרך (“way”) in that going astray from the “way” of Yahweh is mutually exclusive to the “way” of misplaced trust in foreign nations. Jeremiah 2 plays on these various meanings of דרך to link apostasy with exile from the land: “Have you not done this [disgrace of exile] to yourself by your forsaking Yahweh your God when he led you in the way [דרך]? But now what you are doing on the way [דרך] to Egypt? . . . Or what are you doing on the way [דרך] to Assyria, to drink the waters of the Euphrates?” (2:17–18).

Exile will be the inevitable result for a rebellious people who “prepare your way [דרך] to seek love” (2:33) and “go around so much changing your way [דרך]” (2:36). Having forsaken the right “way” for the wrong “way,” the people will go on the “way” to the foreign nations whose gods they gladly but foolishly worship (cf. 2:23; 3:21; 4:11, 18).

Chapter 3 introduces the next phase of Israel’s history through the use of the Leitwort שׁוב (“to return, turn back”). In a parable with similarities to Ezekiel 16 and 23, Yahweh proclaims that Israel “went” (לך; 3:6) to play the harlot and Judah followed Israel’s example and “went” (לך; 3:8) to do the same. Though both kingdoms failed to “return” (שׁוב; 3:7, 10) from this adulterous path (cf. 3:1–2), God now calls both kingdoms to “return” (שׁוב; 3:10) from their exile in the north and “repent [משׁובה] from apostasy [למשׁובה]” (3:12). The spiritual connotation of שׁוב as “repent” is primary here, for only after repentance does Yahweh promise to “bring you to Zion” (3:14). As in the Leitwort usage of שׁוב in Deuteronomy 30, the spiritual “return” to Yahweh must precede the physical “return” to the land.

The restoration of God’s people occurs for the sake of the missio Dei in the entire world and not only Zion’s inhabitants. Once God appoints

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40. Israel’s designation as “holy to Yahweh” (2:3) parallels Jeremiah’s calling as one who is “consecrated” (1:5).

41. Fischer (Jeremia 1–25, 164–5) helpfully notes the double meaning of “way” here to signify both Judah’s journey into exile and its foolish inclination to look to the nations for help.

42. Cf. the argument of Holladay that here שׁוב “carries the primary meaning of geographical return from exile and of return from political and cultic schism” (Jeremiah 1, 118). The various senses in which the Leitwort שׁוב is used in Jer 3:1–4:4 are well-discussed by Fischer, Jeremia 1–25, 203.

just leaders over his people (3:15), Jerusalem will become known as the “throne of Yahweh” where “all nations will be gathered . . . for the name of Yahweh. Then they will not again walk after [אחרי] the stubbornness of their evil heart” (3:17). Here it is startling that obduracy in “walking after” heathen ways is attributed to the “nations” rather than to Israel and Judah.44 These nations will one day experience a spiritual renewal at the same time that “the house of Judah will walk [הליך] with the house of Israel” (3:18). The final restoration of the nations to Yahweh heralds a broadening of the “new covenant” of Jeremiah 31 to include non-Israelite peoples,45 thereby strengthening the declaration of the call narrative that all nations will gather at Jerusalem to be judged for “burning incense to other gods and bowing down to the works of their hands” (1:16).

The connection between Israel’s own return to Yahweh and the advance of the missio Dei among the nations is elaborated in the following verses. Shifting from a future restoration back to the present need for repentance, Yahweh invites Israel to repentance in more specific terms by adding a missional motivation in Jeremiah 4: “Return [שׁוב], O faithless sons, I will heal your faithlessness . . . if you will return [שׁוב], O Israel, Yahweh declares, then you will return [שׁוב]. And if you will put away your detestable things from before me and will not waver and will swear, ‘As Yahweh lives,’ in truth, in justice, and righteousness, then the nations will bless themselves in him and in him they will boast” (3:22a; 4:1–2). Much like Abraham in Gen 22:16–18, the blessing of the nations is conditioned on adherence to Yahweh’s commands by God’s people. These echoes of the Abrahamic promise are remarkable for tying the ability of the nations to come to Yahweh with the forsaking of idolatry and injustice by Israel.46

But the people of God refuse to turn back despite these exhortations (5:3; 8:4–6). Thus, the following chapters intersperse predictions and portrayals of invasion from the north. At the conclusion of each series, God repeatedly declares that they who walk in pagan ways (”ways”) must be treated as one of the גויים (“nations”): “Shall I not punish these ones, on a nation [גוי] such as this shall I not avenge myself?” (5:9, 29; 9:8[9]). The finality of the third cycle is signaled by the summoning of mourners to sing for a people who are about to die (9:9–21[10–22]). Yahweh is now forced to punish those who have “walked after [הלך] the stubbornness of their heart and after the Baals” (9:13[14]) by scattering them “among the nations, whom neither they nor their fathers have known; and I will send the sword after them [לאיריהם] until I have exterminated them” (9:15[16]). The self-destructive nature of Israel’s journey is powerfully captured by a pun on the locative adverb אחר (“after”): Walking “after” foreign gods will be followed “after” by destruction through the sword.

46. Wright, Mission of God, 240–1. The Apostle Paul seems to envision a similarly interdependent relationship between Israel and the nations in Romans 9–11.
Much like Jeremiah 3–4, the judgment of Israel in chaps. 9–10 provides the overture to the completion of the *missio Dei* among the nations. The nations have already been summoned as an audience to witness Yahweh’s dealings with his people (6:18). Now against those who might boast that Israel has fallen (9:22–23[23–24]), Yahweh declares his judgment against “all who are circumcised and yet uncircumcised—Egypt and Judah, and Edom and the sons of Ammon, and Moab . . . for all the nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised of heart” (9:24–25[25–26]). Since Israel is first among the “uncircumcised” peoples to be dealt with, the theme of *missio Dei* depicts Israel as the exemplar of judgment and restoration among the nations. The paradoxical description of Israel as “circumcised” (9:24[25]) and yet “uncircumcised in heart” (9:25[26]) confirms that Israel is to be reckoned among the גוים that must be judged at Jerusalem for their idolatry (1:16).

Because Israel has become indistinguishable from the “nations,” Jeremiah 10 asserts the incomparability of the God of Israel in order to recast the identity of his people as distinct from the nations. Yahweh declares that Israel must be different: “Do not learn the way of the nations, and do not be terrified by the signs of the heavens, although the nations are terrified by them” (10:2). In addition, worship of foreign gods and astral deities is as wrong as it is irrational: “There is none like you, O Yahweh; you are great, and great is your might. Who would not fear you, O King of the nations?” (10:6–7). The praise of Yahweh as the God of creation and the King of the nations is not for Israelites alone, for the trembling nations (10:10) are then summoned in Aramaic, the *lingua franca* of commerce and politics, to confess that their gods are worthless: “The gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens” (10:11). Since Yahweh is sovereign over all creation and thus must judge idolatry in all forms (10:12–16), the poet (either Jeremiah or Jerusalem personified) recognizes the rightness of Israel’s exile through the agency of the nations (10:17–24) while also pleading for divine justice to be shown against these same nations: “Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you and on the families that do not call on your name” (10:25). As in Isaiah 7–12, the foreign nations are both the instruments of God’s judgment as well as objects of his mercy after being punished for their crimes against Israel. The book of Jeremiah, however, is distinct among the OT prophetic books for condemning the nations for their pagan actions using their own language.

**The Missio Dei in Jeremiah 11–20**

Chapters 11–20 depict an intensification of the judgments against Israel proclaimed in chaps. 2–10 as refracted through the lenses of the prophet’s

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47. E. Ray Clendenen (Discourse Strategies in Jeremiah 10:1–16,” *JBL* 106 [1987]: 403–5) notes that Jer 10:11 resides at the center of a chiasmus and may also be a case of “code switching” to warn the nations in their own language.

personal life. Thus, Jeremiah 11–20 has traditionally been known as Jer-
emiah’s “Confessions,” though this label is misleading for two reasons. First,
the individual laments of the prophet comprise only a small portion (11:18–
includes prophetic oracles (e.g., 11:1–17; 12:7–17), sign acts (13:1–11; 18:1–
date, this article, the form-critical tendency to posit a specific Sitz im Leben
behind the laments has obscured their literary function in chaps. 11–20 as
well as the logical flow of chaps. 1–25, the first half of the book of Jeremiah.
In particular, the resonances between the prophetic call narrative and the
laments of the prophet illustrate how chaps. 11–20 develop the theme of
missio Dei in the book. Not only does Jeremiah encounter the opposition
to the missio Dei already predicted in chap. 1, his existential struggle with
God regarding his prophetic commission also reveals how the concept of
theodicy is tied to the missio Dei. Thus the prophet Jeremiah embodies in
various ways the people’s clashes with God in the face of impending exile.

Jeremiah 11–20 opens with Yahweh’s command for the prophet to
preach that the covenant curses have now come upon the land: “Thus says
Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘Cursed is the man who does not obey the
words of this covenant that I commanded your fathers in the day that I
brought them out of the land of Egypt . . . [to] be my people, and I will be
your God’” (11:3–4). The collocation of the “covenant” (ברית) at Sinai, the
exodus from Egypt (“brought out”; ייצא Hiphil), the covenant-making for-

mula (“you will be my people, and I will be your God”), and the resultant
need for obedience (שׁמע) can hardly be accidental. The same cluster of
ideas is also present in Exodus 19–20, a pivotal narrative for the
missio Dei in which a newly delivered Israel is commissioned by the God who owns
“the whole earth” (Exod 19:5) to serve as a “kingdom of priests and a holy
nation” (Exod 19:6). The unique and supreme deity who delivered Israel
from Egypt (Exod 20:2) thus forbids the worship of “other gods” (Exod
20:3). But in Jeremiah’s day, Israel had squandered its calling by refusing to
“obey” (שׁמע; Jer 11:8, 10) and by “walking after other gods to serve them”
(Jer 11:10; cf. 11:13). In an ironic echo of Exod 19:5–6, Jeremiah argues by
implication that Israel’s failure to “hear my voice and keep my covenant”
(Jer 11:10; compare the protasis in Exod 19:5a) has upended its calling to
be “my [Yahweh’s] own possession among all the peoples . . . a kingdom of
priests and a holy nation” (i.e., the apodosis in Exod 19:5b–6).

How were Yahweh’s redemptive purposes for the nations to be ful-
filled through a priestly people and an interceding prophet? An answer is
hinted at through Yahweh’s subsequent command that Jeremiah must no
longer pray for Israel (11:14; cf. 7:16). This prohibition on prayer signals a
collapse of the notion that prophetic intercession could ensure Jerusalem’s
position as the center of God’s creation, a place of moral שלום ("peace, har-
mony, order") from which missional שלום could flow to other nations. The
formulaic references to שלום by the false prophets (e.g., 6:14; 8:11) reflected
their distortion of
a cultic tradition that perceived YHWH in Zion-Jerusalem as the sole author and guarantor of the order of creation. He was the giver and sustainer of life, whose residence on Zion, the omphalic mountain, ensured the continuing fertility of nature. He was, at the same time, the lord of heaven and earth, the divine warrior, whose claims to dominion extended beyond the community in Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. Indeed, the universal dimension of his kingship was grounded in the act of creation, which was understood as a single event in which the deity had subdued the forces of chaos and instituted a set world order, encompassing the natural, social, and political spheres of life.\(^49\)

The false prophets evidently regarded themselves (14:13) and their intercession (15:5) as ensuring the שלום of Jerusalem.\(^50\) But because שלום as exemplified by social justice in the covenant community was missing,\(^51\) Yahweh instructs Jeremiah to stop praying for the שלום of the people as the false prophets commonly did (cf. 14:11–14). The withdrawal of the true prophet’s prayers is synonymous with Yahweh’s abandonment of the people: “I have withdrawn my peace [שלום] from this people” (16:5; cf. 12:12). The missio Dei of such a priestly people resumes only when שלום is restored in their midst, as when Jeremiah reassures the penitent exiles in Babylon: “Seek the welfare [שלום] of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray [صلاة] to Yahweh on its behalf; for in its welfare [שלום] you will have welfare [שלום]” (29:7). Here the explicit link between prophetic intercession and the advance of שלום in the world repeals the various prohibitions on Jeremiah’s intercession (7:16; 11:14; 14:11),\(^52\) so that all the exiles in Babylon can resume their priestly duty to pray and work for שלום.

Jeremiah’s clashes with his opponents over the impending loss of this שלום lend structure to chaps. 11–20, a section framed by two episodes of opposition to the prophet: the murder conspiracy of the men of Anathoth (11:18–23) and the persecution led by Pashur the priest (20:1–6). The personal struggles from these conflicts lead to the visceral outbursts commonly known as Jeremiah’s “confessions” or “laments.” However, these labels obscure the fact that Jeremiah’s prayers differ from other biblical laments by virtue of their emphasis on divine vengeance rather than personal vindication.\(^53\) The demand that Yahweh would “avenge” (נקם; 15:15) the prophet

51. Sisson notes the double sense of שלום as “both the welfare of the cultic community [in Jerusalem] and the manner of conduct that led to such welfare” (“Peace,” 431).
or carry out “revenge” (עבת; 11:20; 20:10, 12) against his persecutors closely parallels the language of two other kinds of retributive justice in the book of Jeremiah: (1) Yahweh’s “vengeance” (5:9, 29; 9:8[9]) against a sinful Israel that is sinful like other גוים and (2) Israel’s cries for vengeance against the גוים who have invaded the land, especially Babylon (50:15, 28; 51:6, 11, 36; cf. Lamentations 1). More than individual prayers of lament, the prophet’s cries for justice represent the theological intersection of two kinds of divine retribution against the גוים. After Israel has been judged by the hand of the גוים, the גוים will themselves be judged for their transgressions as a prelude to the final restoration of all peoples. Thus, the problem of theodicy is addressed in Jeremiah by anticipating that theological objections related to the first judgment against Israel by the hand of the גוים will be resolved by the second judgment against these same גוים.

The prayers of Jeremiah herald both kinds of judgment within this salvation-historical scheme, though emphasis falls in chaps. 11–20 on God’s judgment against Israel. As a representative example, the second of these prayers (12:1–4) is offered in response to the revelation that the men of Anathoth seek the prophet’s life (11:18–21). It is significant that the opponents’ posture toward Jeremiah is emblematic of Israel’s posture toward God, for Yahweh warns that the Anathotites’ sins against the prophet will be punished by the national fate of exile (11:22–23). Jeremiah’s subsequent prayer reinforces this corporate scope by broadening the object of divine judgment from his relatives in Anathoth to the entire nation as “all who deal in treachery” (12:1).54 Jeremiah seeks vindication from Yahweh as one who “knows” (ידע; 12:3) him, an obvious reference to God’s reassurance from the call narrative (1:5).55 But where a positive answer to this lament might have been expected, Yahweh shockingly rejects the prophet’s prayer by asserting that he must continue to carry out his commission and that things will only become worse for him (12:5–6). The people’s continued rejection of the prophet then necessitates that God will abandon his people (12:7–13), thereby fleshing out one side of the theodicy. Israel must be judged by the hand of the גוים for its opposition to Jeremiah, the true prophet of God.

However, exile by the hand of the nations also raises the theological problem of how God can claim to maintain justice by using evil vessels. Thus, Yahweh promises to apply the same standard of judgment to “my wicked neighbors” (12:14), a parallel group to “my inheritance” (12:7) which has already been punished. God declares to the nations, “I am about to uproot them from their land and to uproot the house of Judah among them” (12:14). The sequence of Israel first, and then the nations, as objects of the verb שׁנת (“to uproot”) brings to historical realization Jeremiah’s original appointment as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5) whose word will “uproot


and break down” (1:10).\(^{56}\) Now that both God’s people and the nations have been successively “uprooted” as punishment for their respective sins, God offers the promise of restoration to the nations in language that is identical to his promises to Israel (12:15–17).\(^{57}\) The full-orbed theodicy offered through these twin and sequential judgments sets the stage for the completion of the missio Dei in which all nations, including Israel, come to worship Yahweh. In the context of Jeremiah’s first two prayers (11:18–20; 12:1–4), the sequence of events that ultimately lead to the blessing of all nations is set in motion by the rejection of the prophet Jeremiah.

Two subsequent prayers of Jeremiah extend the theme of missio Dei by echoing Jeremiah 1 and its emphasis on the prophet as a representative figure. The third prayer (15:10–18) begins with a complaint about his prenatal predestination as a prophet: “Woe to me, my mother, that you have borne me as a man of strife and man of contention to all the land” (15:10). As in Jer 12:3, the prophet appeals for justice to God as one who “knows” (ידע; 15:15; cf. 1:5, 6), whose words are in his mouth (15:16; cf. 1:9), and whose hand is on him (15:17; cf. 1:9). The sixth and final prayer (20:7–18) heightens the stakes by throwing back the prophetic call to God: “Why did I ever come forth from the womb [רחם; cf. 1:5] to look on trouble and sorrow, so that my days have been spent in shame?” (20:18). The logical flow among Jeremiah’s prayers remains a matter of some dispute,\(^{58}\) but these echoes of the prophetic call narrative in the third (15:10–18) and sixth (20:7–18) prayers of Jeremiah set a trajectory in the missio Dei from the predictions of opposition in the prophet’s call in chap. 1 to the historical narratives of opposition in chaps. 21–24. The progression between the third and sixth prayers also fleshes out the theodicy sketched in the first two prayers (11:18–20; 12:1–4) as well as their surrounding material (11:1–23; 12:5–17).

The third prayer (15:10–18) records Jeremiah’s frustration with God that the prophetic word remains unfulfilled.\(^{59}\) The prophet had embraced his commission to preach (15:16) and experienced reproach and loneliness as a result (15:15, 17). He recalls Yahweh’s promise to strengthen him against foes who would inevitably come: “Yahweh has said, ‘I am determined to armor you well; I am determined to bring upon you, in time of distress and time of trouble, the enemy’” (15:11).\(^{60}\) The invincibility of the prophet as “iron” and “bronze” (15:12) against his enemies, however, has given way to a sense of vulnerability due to the delay in prophetic fulfillment. This delay has opened up Jeremiah to constant attacks that challenge his faith: “Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable,
refusing to be healed? Will you indeed be to me like a deceptive stream with water that is unreliable?” (15:18). The accusation that Yahweh has become like a “deceptive stream” undermines the earlier assertion that Yahweh is a “fountain of living water” (2:13). The prophet is apparently ready to renounce his call and go down a wayward path like his people.

But Jeremiah must not turn back because his mission must succeed where his people have failed. Using terms identical to Yahweh’s call for Israel to repent, Jeremiah is now summoned to turn back from his rebellion: “If you return (שׁוב Qal), then I will bring you back (שׁוב Hiphil), before me you will stand . . . they may turn (שׁוב Qal) to you, but as for you, you shall not turn (שׁוב Qal) to them. Then I will make you (נָתַתִּיךָ; cf. 1:5) for this people a fortified wall of bronze; though they fight against you, they will not be able to overcome you” (15:19–20). The repeated wordplay on שׁוב links Jeremiah’s repentance from blasphemous speech to Yahweh’s restoration of his prophetic commission. If Jeremiah “repents” as the people have already failed to do (cf. 3:12–14; 5:3; 8:4–6), Yahweh will redeploy him against his opponents as a “fortified bronze wall” (15:20; cf. 1:18) which is once again invulnerable (15:12).

The description of Jeremiah as a city under attack (15:20) presages a transition in his mediatory role as prophet. Jeremiah will no longer symbolize the people as one under judgment who must repent (15:19), but now depicts the alternative destiny of a remnant that will emerge after judgment. As in 1:18–19, Jeremiah receives a salvation oracle that distinguishes him from his people as a fortified city (15:20) to be delivered from its oppressors (15:21). The preservation of the remnant embodied by Jeremiah advances the *missio Dei* by narrowing the scope of God’s people to a righteous few who will embody the שלום of Yahweh on earth and subsequently bring honor to him among the nations (33:9). The scope of redemption is later broadened from Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon (24:4–7), the entire people of Israel (chs. 30–33), Baruch the scribe (chap. 45), and finally to the nations, though not Babylon (chs. 46–51).

It is surprising, though, that no response of Jeremiah is recorded to this salvation oracle (15:20–21). Instead his protests increase in stridency and volume (17:14–18; 18:19–23) toward the final prayer (20:7–18) in which, as Gerhard von Rad famously described, “Night has now completely enveloped the prophet.” The note of trust struck in previous prayers (e.g., 15:15–16) now dissipates into unrestrained fury toward God: “O Yahweh,

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61. Diamond, *Confessions*, 75. Holladay (*Jeremiah 1*, 464) notes the parallels between the sins of Israel (Jer 2:31) and the prophet (15:18) in treating Yahweh as a “dubious source of fertility.”


64. On which, see Polk (*Persona*, 102), though he does not note the foreign nations among this group.

you have deceived me and I was deceived; you have overcome me and prevailed" (20:7). In light of God's failure to answer, Jeremiah revisits and amplifies his earlier protest of the prophetic commission (15:10) by de-crying his very existence: "Why did I ever come forth from the womb to look on trouble and sorrow so that my days have been spent in shame?" (20:18). Such unfettered rage might appear to nullify the prophet's calling from the "womb" (cf. 1:5) or lead to God's rebuke (cf. 15:19).

But Jeremiah's rhetorical question about the prophetic commission is allowed to linger since it finds an answer through the historical narratives of the subsequent chapters. As Joel Dubbink observes, "the book does not end with chap. 20 but resumes in 21.1, in the only possible way: 'The word that came from YHWH to Jeremiah . . .' The prophet goes his way to the end as one called. The word that almost crushed him by the great force it exudes [20:9], also takes him along on the way where he is going." Thus, the final prayer (20:7–18) furnishes one of the main structural pillars for Jeremiah 1–25 by citing the opening call narrative as well as anticipating the confrontations engendered by the prophetic word in chaps. 21–24. The utter injustice suffered by Jeremiah in the missio Dei against his own nation confirms the rightness of Yahweh's "vengeance" (20:10, 12) against this unrepentant "nation." In turn, Jeremiah's apparent failure in preaching to his own people serves to propel the missio Dei forward by preparing Israel for display among the "nations" as a paradigm of salvation after judgment.

The Missio Dei in Jeremiah 21–25

Chapters 21–25 historicize God's judgment against Israel through the agency of Nebuchadrezzar king of Babylon. But unlike the later oracle against Babylon (chaps. 50–51), Babylon is cast in a mostly favorable light since Judah's real enemies are mainly found in two groups of "bad insiders," that is, the unfaithful Davidic kings and the false prophets who serve them (chaps. 21–24). Jeremiah predicts that the corrupt kings

66. Note the incisive comment on Jeremiah 20 by Abraham J. Heschel (The Prophets [2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009], 1:119): "Jeremiah hated his prophetic mission. To a soul full of love, it was horrible to be a prophet of castigation and wrath. What rewards did he receive for carrying the appalling burden?"


69. Diamond (Confessions, 177–88), rightly argues that the main theme of chaps. 11–20 is theodicy rather than the psychological anguish of the prophet.

70. References to "Babylon" are notably absent before chap. 21, with only a small cluster of four references in Jer 20:4–6. In contrast, "Babylon" appears 44× in chaps. 21–29 (cf. a total of 169 instances of Babylon in the MT), the narrative section before the "Book of Consolation" (chaps. 30–33).

71. Stulman, "Insiders and Outsiders," 77–79.

72. Martin Kessler ("Jeremiah 25,1–29: Text and Context," ZAW 109 [1997]: 46–50) observes that chronology is a subordinate concern of these chapters: "[S]everal kings are
of Israel and Judah will one day be replaced by a “righteous Branch, a King who will reign wisely. . . . This is the name by which he will be called: Yahweh Our Righteousness” (23:5–6). This Davidic king will be God himself who comes in the last days (cf. 46:18; 48:15; 51:57). But before this final restoration, an intervening stage of history must take place in which Nebuchadrezzar is commissioned as an earthly ruler to accomplish God’s myriad international purposes (chap. 25).

Jeremiah’s diatribes against the kings in chaps. 21–24 mainly concern monarchy as an institution rather than the fate of specific kings. The sins of social injustice and idolatry that were earlier ascribed to the people are now placed at the feet of Judah’s kings (e.g., 22:13–17). In a parody of Zion’s magnetic glory among the nations (cf. Pss 46–48), foreigners will come to gawk at Jerusalem’s misfortune, which stems from covenantal negligence: “Many nations will pass by this city; and they will say to one another, ‘Why has Yahweh done thus to this great city?’ Then they will answer, ‘Because they had forsaken the covenant of Yahweh their God and bowed down to other gods and served them’” (22:8–9). Ironically, here as in chaps. 2–10, the גויים apparently know the covenantal requirements of Yahweh better than Israel does. The motif of Israel’s reproach among the nations recurs in a subsequent description of the “bad figs” who disregard Jeremiah’s prohibition on fleeing to Egypt or staying in the land. Though called to be a “blessing” to other nations (Gen 12:1–3; cf. Jer 4:1–2), Israel will instead become a “curse” among the nations for such disobedience: “I will make them a terror and an evil for all the kingdoms of the earth, as a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse in all places where I will scatter them” (24:9).

Chapter 25 enacts the sovereignty of Yahweh over all nations through his prophet Jeremiah. The crossing fates of the Davidic monarchy and Yahweh’s appointed ruler become explicit through the double references to kings, “The word that came to Jeremiah concerning all the people of Judah in the fourth year of Jehoiakim . . . that is, the first year of Nebuchadrezzar” (25:1). The role reversal of the Judean and Babylonian kings is underscored by Nebuchadrezzar’s identification using the Davidic title “my servant” (25:9). 

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74. Hence the emphasis on Zedekiah, Judah’s last king, at the beginning (21:1–10) and end (24:1–10) of this section. These chapters also refer to an unnamed “king of Judah” (21:11; 22:1, 2, 6) to highlight the monarchy as a whole. With the exception of 25:1, regnal dates are notably absent in these chapters, in contrast to the historical narratives of chaps. 26–45 and particularly their highlighting of the “fourth year of King Jehoiakim” (i.e., 605 BC; Jer 36:1; 45:1; 46:2). See Gary E. Yates, “Narrative Parallelism and the ‘Jehoiakim Frame’: A Reading Strategy for Jeremiah 26–45,” JETS 48 (2005): 263–81.


76. Konrad Schmid (‘L’accession de Nebuchodonosor à l’hégémonie mondiale et la fin de la dynastie davidique: Exégèse intrabiblique et construction de l’histoire universelle dans
in addition to his acting as a Joshua-like figure who carries out holy war against the enemies of God by placing them under the “ban” (חרם; 25:9). The Missio Dei as an Integrative Motif

After serving God’s purposes in judging Judah, Babylon will itself be judged in order to complete “all that is written in this book which Jeremiah prophesied against all the nations” (25:13). Jeremiah’s ministry as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5, 10) is specified as being “sent” (שלח; 25:15, 17) to bring the nations under the yoke of Nebuchadrezzar (25:8–11) and to carry the cup of God’s wrath to many nations: Judah, Egypt, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, Sidon, and other nations (25:18–26). The final stage of salvation history will come when God arrives as a judge over all nations (25:30–38). As in chaps. 11–20, the sequence of events which sets this salvation history in motion is the refusal of God’s people to “obey” (שָׁמַע; 25:3, 4 [2×], 7, 8) the “word” (דָּבָר; 25:1, 3) that Jeremiah the prophet has “spoken” (דִּבֶּר; 25:2–4), which possess divine authority as “my [Yahweh’s] words” (דְּבָרַי; 25:8). A refusal to heed the prophet(s) whom Yahweh has “sent” means that Yahweh must “send” (שלח; 25:4, 15–17, 27) punishment on the disobedient. The multiple references to Jeremiah’s prophetic activities among the “nations” (25:9, 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 31) clearly echo the call narrative because the word spoken through the prophet has resulted in building up and tearing down of many nations (cf. 1:10). In addition, the reckoning of Judah as first among the “nations” (25:18) to be judged confirms the opening chapter’s sardonic description of the people of God as the first object of the missio Dei.

The missio Dei in chap. 25 begins to transcend historical dimensions in a manner anticipating the eschatological thrust of the OAN (chaps. 46–51). Following a list of known nations that must drink the cup of God’s wrath (25:18–25), the scope of divine judgment is broadened to “all the kings of the north, near and far, one with another, and all the kingdoms of the earth which are on the face of the ground, and the king of Sheshach shall drink after them” (25:26). The grammatical structure of this verse indicates that the “king of Sheshach” is not considered among “all the kingdoms of the earth.” As John Hill observes, the use of the cryptogram “Sheshach” functions as a cipher to indicate that Babylon has come to symbolize more than the historical kingdom of Babylon from the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. (cf. 25:1, 9, 12). As will become explicit in chaps. 50–51, Babylon in the book of Jeremiah ultimately embodies the relentless presence of evil in the world which must be destroyed by God.

le livre de Jérémie,” ETR 81 [2006]: 211–27) notes that this Davidic title becomes even more poignant in light of the assertion that Jehoiakim will have no offspring to sit on David’s throne (Jer 36:30). Nebuchadrezzar has apparently replaced the Davidic king in God’s global purposes for the time being. Cf. the unlikely suggestion of Werner E. Lemke, “Nebuchadnezzar, My Servant,” CBQ 28 (1966): 45–50, that the epithet “my servant” arose from a scribal error.


78. Judah’s inclusion among the עם גוים reinforces the likelihood that the people are spiritually wayward like their neighbors.


80. Hill, Friend or Foe?, 120–2.
The Missio Dei in Jeremiah 26–45

Chapters 26–45 prefigure the eschatological triumph of the *missio Dei* in the world (chaps. 46–51) by narrating the judgment of Judah as a paradigm for the rest of the nations. A recurring idea in this section is that Yahweh uses Babylon as his proxy to judge “old Israel,” which remains in the land, whereas Babylon temporarily becomes a “new Israel” through the presence of the exiles. Though the international dimensions of Jeremiah’s ministry are more subdued in these chapters, the theme of *missio Dei* is still present through his own people’s opposition to him as one who is “sent” (שָׁלַח) to “speak” (דָּבָר) for God. The broader significance of Israel’s role among the nations is still present, though, in that divine punishment through exile is frequently described as God’s people becoming a “curse” to all the nations of the earth.81 The failure of this blessed people to be a blessing (cf. 4:1–2) means that Israel must be made a paradigmatic example of judgment in the presence of the nations, which will then be judged in Jerusalem for their own sins (cf. 1:15–16; 25:1–29).

In contrast to Jerusalem’s becoming a curse to the nations, Babylon will provisionally replace Israel as the recipient of God’s blessing. As already noted, Nebuchadrezzar rather than Zedekiah is identified using the Davidic title “my servant” (עַבְדִּי; 25:9; 27:6) whom the nations must “serve” (עָבַד). Nebuchadrezzar is portrayed as the recipient of kingdoms and beasts of the earth from God who sovereignly created them all (27:5–7; 28:13–14).82 Babylon even assumes Edenic characteristics through its description as a prosperous place in which the exiles will live as if in the land of promise (29:5–6). The exile itself is recast in positive terms when Yahweh promises to bless the exiles whom he has “sent” (24:5; 29:20, 28; שָׁלַח) to Babylon as preparation for a new exodus back to Canaan: “For I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them [בַּשָּׁבָה Hiphil] again to this land; and I will build them up and not overthrow them, and I will plant them and not pluck them up” (Jer 24:6; cf. 1:10). Before returning to the land, exile in Babylon will be a time of pilgrimage when Israel receives “a heart to know me, for I am Yahweh; and they will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with their whole heart” (24:7; cf. 29:11–12).

An examination of the “Book of Consolation” (chaps. 30–33), one of the theologically richest sections of the book, illustrates the implications of Israel’s judgment and restoration for the *missio Dei* in the world. This section mainly addresses the “spiritual metamorphosis”83 of Israel in which God promises to “restore the captivity [בָּשָׁבָה Hiphil + שָׁבָה] of my people . . . I will bring them back [בַּשָּׁבָה Hiphil] to the land” (30:3). Here the *Leitwort* שָׁבָה reappears (cf. chaps. 2–20) to denote the various aspects of Israel’s restoration to God. Even given this focus on Israel and Judah, however, the “Book of Consolation” makes four references to the “nations” (30:11;

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31:7, 10; 33:9) which are noteworthy for projecting the salvation history of God’s people onto a bigger stage. As a narrative character in this section, the nations undergo a transformation from bystanders to participants in the salvation history of Israel. These references to the nations are certainly not as vivid as Isaiah’s description of the ingathering of the nations (e.g., Isa 45:20; 49:6, 22), but the “Book of Consolation” in Jeremiah remains important for the missio Dei by placing the inward renewal of Israel’s “heart” within the broader context of the blessing of the nations.

The first characterization of the nations in these chapters is as the undesirable places from which Israel will return. Yahweh promises his downcast people in exile: “I will destroy completely all the nations where I have scattered you, only I will not destroy you completely” (30:11). After a period of chastening (30:12–15), Israel will cease to be under divine condemnation (30:16; cf. 25:12–26). Precisely when these nations ridicule Israel’s lot in exile, “It is Zion, no one cares for her” (30:17), God promises to redeem his people: “Behold, I will restore the captivity of the tents of Jacob and have compassion on his dwelling places” (30:18). Thus, the opening description of the nations is unambiguously negative as places of judgment in which the people of God suffer reproach.

The depiction of the nations takes a positive turn in chap. 31, however. As a joyful response to their redemption, Yahweh commands his people to summon the “nations” to listen to Israel’s worship: “Sing aloud with gladness for Jacob, and shout among the chief of the nations. Proclaim, give praise and say, ‘O Yahweh, save your people, the remnant of Israel’” (31:7). Here, it is striking that the nations are summoned as an audience to listen to Israel’s own story of deliverance. The metaphor of redemption shifts a few verses later from Zion as God’s mountain (cf. 31:6) to that of the people as God’s flock: “Hear the word of Yahweh, O nations, and declare in the coastlands far off, and say, ‘He who scattered Israel will gather him and keep him as a shepherd keeps his flock’” (31:10; cf. 10:21; 23:1).

The final reference to the “nations” in these chapters moves them from bystanders to participants in the worship of the God of Israel. Forgiveness of sin will result in the people of God being elevated as a “name of joy, praise and glory before all the nations of the earth which will hear of all the good that I do for them, and they will fear and tremble because of all the good and all the peace that I make for it” (33:9). The reestablishment of Zion’s central place in the created order means that “good” (טוב) and “peace” (שלום) can once again flow from God’s earthly throne to all nations.

84. Georg Fischer (Jeremia 26–52 [HTKAT; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005], 149) observes that the phrase “chief of the nations” only appears once elsewhere in the OT as a description of David’s universal rule (2 Sam 22:44 // Ps 18:44[43]). Thus the royal status of David among the nations has now been extended to the entire people of God.


86. The reappearance of the keywords טוב and שלום is notable for reinstating the theology of Zion as a place of blessing for the nations (cf. Jer 4:10; 5:25; 6:14, 16; 8:11; 12:5, 12; 14:13, 19;
These four references to the “nations” in the “Book of Consolation” show that the restoration of Israel and Judah is intended to prepare for the way for a larger harvest of people to enter the family of God.

Further hints of this broadening of the covenant people are found in chaps. 26–45 through the introduction of two foreigners who, unlike his own people, help the prophet Jeremiah: Ebed-melech the Ethiopian eunuch (chap. 38) and Nebuzaradan the Babylonian captain of the guard (chap. 40). Ebed-melech plays a crucial role in delivering Jeremiah from the false prophets who seize him for advocating submission to Babylon (cf. chaps. 27–28). When these opponents try to execute Jeremiah for sedition by casting him into a muddy cistern (38:1–6), it is Ebed-melech who obtains permission from King Zedekiah to extract Jeremiah lest he die (38:7–13). Yahweh declares that the righteousness of the foreigner “Ebed-melech the Ethiopian” means that he will be saved from the coming disaster in a way that the Judeans will not be (39:15–18). As Tom Parker explains, the Ebed-melech story offers a pointed commentary on Yahweh’s rhetorical question on whether the Ethiopian can change his skin color (13:23): “Africans cannot change their skin, but it was not the African who needed to change . . . In the end, it is again recognized that it is the Israelites who needed to change, but their refusal to do so cost them their lives, whereas Ebed-melech’s actions saved his life.”

Immediately following the salvation oracle to Ebed-melech, Nebuzaradan the Babylonian appears in the story as another foreigner who exhibits more faithfulness to Yahweh than the Judeans in Jerusalem. “The word (הַדָּבָר) that came to Jeremiah” (40:1) now takes the form of Nebuzaradan’s flawlessly deuteronomic statement regarding the fate of Judah: “Yahweh your God promised (דִּבֶּר) this calamity against this place; and Yahweh has brought it on and done just as he promised (דִּבֶּר). Because you people sinned against Yahweh and did not listen to his voice, therefore this thing (הַזֶּה הַדָּבָר) has happened to you” (40:2–3). In contrast to the numerous Judeans who desired to harm Jeremiah for the God-given “word” that was nonetheless fulfilled, Nebuzaradan recognizes the fulfillment of this “word” and shows kindness to Jeremiah by giving him the option of staying in Jerusalem rather than going to Babylon (40:4; cf. 39:11–14).

Through the saving actions of Ebed-melech and Nebuzaradan toward Yahweh’s prophet in Jerusalem, the book of Jeremiah testifies of an inaugural fulfillment of the day when “all the nations will be gathered . . . to Jerusalem and no longer walk after the stubbornness of their evil heart”


89. Fischer (Jeremiah 26–52, 368) points out that this wordplay on דִּבֶּר reinforces the theological connection between the words and deeds of Yahweh.

These two foreigners are the firstfruits of a worldwide harvest from non-Israelite peoples toward Yahweh, the God of Israel. But how can the final restoration of the nations happen given that God’s people are so wicked, as in the sordid narrative of the Judeans who assassinate Gedaliah the Babylonian governor (40:7–41:3) immediately after Nebuzaradan’s kindness to Jeremiah (40:1–6)?

Besides Jeremiah himself, the only Judean to be affirmed in a manner like Ebed-melech and Nebuzaradan is Baruch the scribe. Intriguingly, Baruch receives a somewhat muted version of the same salvation oracle that Ebed-melech did: “‘Behold, I am going to bring disaster on all flesh,’ declares Yahweh, ‘but I will give your life to you as booty in all the places where you may go’” (45:5; cf. 39:17–18). This promise of deliverance is striking in light of how Yahweh is preparing Baruch to bear the central message of the missio Dei:

Thus you [Jeremiah] are to say to him [Baruch], “Thus Yahweh says, ‘Behold, what I have built I am about to tear down, and what I have planted I am about to uproot, that is, all the earth [ארץ].’” (45:4; cf. 1:10)

Though the ambiguous term יארץ could refer narrowly to a judgment against the “land” (e.g., RSV, NIV), the double-sided commission of Jeremiah from the call narrative (1:10) is clearly ascribed an international scope through its echoes in 12:14–17 and 18:7–9. An international referent for יארץ also makes more sense in Jer 45:4 because the “word of Yahweh to Jeremiah against the nations” (46:1) immediately follows in introducing the OAN. This divine oracle to Baruch is significant for being dated to “the fourth year of Jehoiakim” (45:1; cf. 36:1), a momentous year (605 B.C.) in the ancient Near East when Nebuchadrezzar came to power (25:1) and consolidated his hegemony over the region by defeating Pharaoh Neco at Carchemish (46:2). Thus, the promise to Baruch provides a theological bridge for the missio Dei between the historical narratives of judgment against Judah (chaps. 26–44) to poetic oracles of judgment against the nations (chaps. 46–51). The judgment that has already come against Judah will be mirrored in the judgment to come against all nations, most notably Babylon. Here, Baruch serves not only as a “new Jeremiah/Moses” who will carry on the tradition of the prophetic word (chap. 36; 45:1), but more importantly, Baruch becomes a typological symbol of a “new Israel” which will survive the exile to witness God’s judgment and restoration on the rest of the nations.


93. See the groundbreaking discussion of Moses/Jeremiah, Joshua/Baruch, and Caleb/Ebed-Melech typologies by Christopher R. Seitz, “The Prophet Moses and the Canonical Shape
The Missio Dei in Jeremiah 46–51

Chapters 46–51 are the most obviously international portion of the book of Jeremiah, but studies of the missio Dei in the OAN have been rare despite the recognition that these oracles are somehow related to Jeremiah’s status as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5). The terminology of war, exile, and divine wrath previously used to condemn Israel and Judah is now extended to the nations (e.g., 49:37 // 9:15[16]; 50:41–43 // 6:22–23) that have sinned against “the King, whose name is Yahweh of Hosts” (46:18; 48:15; 51:57). The superiority of the God of Israel against all comers (cf. 10:1–16) is reinforced by another polemic against idolatry (51:15–19) as well as Yahweh’s defeat of numerous foreign gods: Amon and the divine kings of Egypt (46:25), Chemosh of Moab (48:7, 13), and Milcom of Babylon (49:3). Most importantly among these, Bel-Marduk and the other idols of Babylon will be vanquished (50:2; 51:44, 47, 52). The earthly conflicts among kingdoms portrayed in chaps. 26–45 now find their cosmic analogues in conflicts among the gods in chaps. 46–51.

Besides the destruction of foreign gods, the OAN in the book of Jeremiah share several judgment motifs. The nations of the world stand guilty before Yahweh of pride, both in their attitude toward God (48:26, 29; 49:35; 50:11, 36–37) and through trust in their military strength (48:15; 50:11, 36–37) or material wealth (48:11, 16, 31). They have also mistreated God’s people (48:27; 50:11, 33; 51:24, 34–35, 49). Though these nations must be judged harshly on account of these sins, several of them receive the promise that Yahweh will restore them to their land: Egypt (46:28), Moab (48:47), Ammon (49:6), and Elam (49:39). The salvation history of these nations in judgment followed by salvation thus mirrors that of God’s own people. As Paul Raabe rightly remarks, “The logic of these [OAN] texts considers the impending woe to be preparatory for the subsequent weal that both Israel and the nations will experience.”

These promises of restoration imply that Yahweh offers his covenant to the

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94. The exception that proves the rule is Erich Scheurer, Altes Testament und Mission: Zur Begründung des Missionsauftrages (Giessen: Brunnen-Verlag, 1996), 358–74. See also the most recent Forschungsgeschichte on Jeremiah’s OAN as well as advocacy of an intentionally theological approach found in Julie Woods, Jeremiah 48 as Christian Scripture (Princeton Theological Monograph Series 149; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 1–22.

95. Jeremiah 46:25 is the only appearance in the OAN of gods and kings being listed sequentially as objects of judgment, a striking collocation which may allude to the divinization of kings in ancient Egypt. For a balanced discussion of the divinization of Egyptian kings, see Ronald J. Leprohon, “Royal Ideology and State Administration in Pharaonic Egypt,” CANE 1:274–5.

96. Scheurer, Altes Testament und Mission, 358, observes that the OAN in Jeremiah are unique in the OT prophetic corpus for explicitly addressing these foreign gods by name.

nations on the same terms as Israel (cf. 12:14–17; 18:7–12).98 In the oracle against Moab, for example, Yahweh’s surprising lament over Moab hints that this nation is to be regarded as his covenant people too.99

The fact that Jeremiah spoke extensively “against” (46:1, יֵשָׂע) and “to” (ָל or לָשׁ, e.g., 47:1; 50:1) various nations raises the question of whether the prophet ever traveled to deliver personally these oracles of judgment and salvation. OT scholars have usually proposed that the prophetic genre of OAN was situated in the Israelite cult or royal court rather than being pronouncements to be set before the nations.100 The intended audience of the OAN in Jeremiah would putatively be those in Jerusalem, as when the prophet advocates his pro-Babylon policy to the foreign envoys who had come to Jerusalem to discuss an alliance against Babylon with King Zedekiah (chap. 27).101 In an analogous fashion, missiologists have typically held that the missio Dei in the OT is “centripetal” (inwardly directed) rather than “centrifugal” (outwardly directed) in nature.102

But in chap. 51, it is notable that the words of Jeremiah travel to a foreign nation through Seraiah, the brother of Baruch. After writing down the Babylon oracle (50:1–51:58), Jeremiah instructs Seraiah, “As soon as you come to Babylon, then see that you read all these words aloud and say, ‘You, O Yahweh, have promised to this place to cut it off so that it will have no inhabitant, neither man nor beast, but that it may be a perpetual desolation’ (51:61–62). Seraiah must then throw this scroll into the Euphrates River as a sign that Babylon would never rise again (51:63–64). Though the narrative is silent on whether the other oracles were similarly presented, the journey of Jeremiah’s words to Babylon reorients his ministry as a “prophet to the nations” (cf. 1:5) in a centrifugal direction.103

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98. For Moab (48:47), Ammon (49:6), and Elam (49:39), Yahweh even reverses their own version of the Babylonian exile when he promises to “restore your captivity.” Similar language was previously applied to the restoration of Israel and Judah from exile (e.g., 29:14; 30:3, 18; 31:23; 32:44; 33:7, 11, 26). On the minor variations in terminology and meaning of “restoration” (i.e., the verbal root שׁוֹב and its derivative forms) in the Jeremianic OAN, see Beat Huwyler, *Jeremia und die Völker: Untersuchungen zu den Völkersprüchen in Jeremia 46–49* (FAT 20; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 192–3.


101. It is also noteworthy that Jeremiah’s oracle concerning submission to Babylon is dated to “the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah” (27:1), roughly a decade after the OAN had already been entrusted to the prophet “in the fourth year of Jehoiakim” (45:1; 46:2). Thus Huwyler proposes that Jeremiah’s mixed audience in Jerusalem could have heard or been aware of some form of the OAN (*Jeremia und die Völker*, 308–15).

102. E.g., George W. Peters defines centripetal mission as “sacred magnetism that draws to itself” and asserts that “nowhere in the Old Testament was Israel ‘sent’ to the nations. It was not commissioned to go to the nations to proclaim the revelational truth committed to God’s people” (*A Biblical Theology of Missions* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1976], 21). Compare, however, the more accurate and recent assessment by Chris Wright that “prophetic visions concerning the nations . . . included both centrifugal and centripetal dynamics” (*Mission of God*, 331).

103. The contextualization of the OAN using pagan imagery also supports the possibility of a centrifugal mission for Jeremiah. In the Babylon oracle, for example, the strength of
availability of the prophetic word to all peoples is likely why Jeremiah frequently summons the “nations” as an audience or participant in the OAN (e.g., 46:12; 48:39; 49:14–15; 50:23, 46; 51:27–28). This shift from centripetal to centrifugal mission through the agency of an embodied divine word may also anticipate the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, “the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us” (John 1:14).

As the longest and most elaborate of the collection, the oracle against Babylon deserves special attention in regards to the missio Dei. The preceding oracles had cast Babylon as the aggressor against the nations (chaps. 46–49). But Babylon is not only the victim in its own oracle (chaps. 50–51), its oracle is distinct among the OAN for the repeated vow that the city will never be built again (50:26, 39–40; 51:39, 57, 64). The destruction of Babylon also coincides with the eschatological salvation of Israel and a restored Zion (50:28; 51:10) which will be joined to Yahweh in “an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten” (50:5). These sweeping statements about Babylon raise the intriguing prospect that the nation described in chaps. 50–51 signifies more (though not less) than the historical kingdom of Nebuchadrezzar.

The cataclysmic fall of Babylon recorded in chaps. 50–51 is difficult to correlate with the comparatively subdued military conflicts of the sixth century B.C. Martin Kessler outlines several elements of discontinuity between the biblical text and ancient Near Eastern history: (1) The “enemy from the north” is named as the Medes (Jer 51:11), but it was Cyrus the Persian who sacked Babylon; (2) Jeremiah portrays Babylon as completely destroyed (50:26, 39–40; 51:39, 57, 64), but the defeat of the city in 539 B.C. was relatively uneventful due to the mediation of the priests of Marduk; and (3) Babylon’s walls are described as “torn down” (50:15), but the Greek historian Herodotus claimed that the walls were undamaged in the Persian takeover. Thus, Kessler concludes, “The naïve reader who interprets the oracles as describing or predicting imminent ... catastrophe for Babylon and redemption for Israel/Judah, will be disappointed.” It seems probable, then, that Yahweh triumphs in Jeremiah 50–51 over a figurative that symbolizes the timeless presence of evil in the world (cf. Gen 11:1–9; Isa 14:12–14). This figurative use of Babylon as a metaphor for human evil extends to the NT, especially in the book of Revelation's use of Babylon

Yahweh in defeating Babylon is described as a roaring lion (50:44). King Nebuchadrezzar and his war machine were often portrayed as a lion in Babylonian iconography (e.g., the Ishtar Gate). Though references to Yahweh coming in judgment as a roaring lion are also found elsewhere in the prophets (Hos 5:14; 11:10; 13:7; Amos 1:2; 3:4, 8), the reference to Yahweh as a lion in the OAN likely represents a play on the Babylonian icon because Jeremiah has already described the kingdom from the “north” as a lion (Jer 4:7; 50:17).


106. See discussion by Fischer, Jeremiah 26–52, 630–2. “Babel” and “Babylon” are both בבל in Hebrew, a lexical datum that leads most scholars to date Genesis 11 to the exilic Priestly source.
imagery from Jeremiah 50–51.\textsuperscript{107} Without losing its historical moorings in the events of the sixth century B.C.,\textsuperscript{108} the oracle against Babylon also prefigures the ultimate victory of the \textit{missio Dei} in the last days.

### Conclusion

More than any other OT prophet, Jeremiah embodies the mission of his people and his city as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5). But then and now, the primary opposition to the \textit{missio Dei} in the world comes from God’s own people who serve as a curse (e.g., 24:9) rather than a blessing (e.g., 4:1–2) to the nations. Once God uses the nations (chap. 25) to judge his people for their failures, he will restore the fortunes of Israel and Judah while judging the nations, especially Babylon. This sort of universal judgment is only a penultimate stage in the \textit{missio Dei}, however, for salvation history goes one step further with the nations (though notably not Babylon) being restored from captivity (e.g., 49:39) to worship the God of Israel (e.g., 3:17–18; 33:9). The prophecy of Jeremiah thus contains a sweeping vision of God’s sovereignty in which the particular judgment and restoration of Israel are intimately bound up with the universal triumph of the \textit{missio Dei} in the world (e.g., chaps. 25, 50–51).

These observations on the \textit{missio Dei} in Jeremiah suggest several avenues for further research. For NT studies in particular, the conception of Jeremiah as one who symbolizes an alternative city or temple resonates with recent studies on temple Christology.\textsuperscript{109} There are numerous similarities in the Gospel of Matthew between Jeremiah and Jesus as rejected prophets who both struggled against the Jerusalem temple (e.g., Matt 21:13; cf. Jer 7:11) and wept over the city (e.g., Matt 23:37; cf. Jer 9:1).\textsuperscript{110} The typological connections between Jeremiah and Jesus are flexible rather than fixed, however, as when Jesus commissions his disciples with divine authority for a ministry like Jeremiah’s (Matt 16:13–23).\textsuperscript{111} The apostle Paul evidently also cast himself as a prophet in the Jeremianic mold for being “set apart from my mother’s womb” (Gal 1:15; cf. Jer 1:5).\textsuperscript{112} In light of


\textsuperscript{108} Kessler (\textit{Battle of the Gods}, 197) notes that Marduk’s gigantic statue was destroyed as predicted in Jer 50:2.

\textsuperscript{109} E.g., Nicholas Perrin, \textit{Jesus the Temple} (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Stephen T. Um, \textit{The Theme of Temple Christology in John’s Gospel} (LNTS 312; London: T & T. Clark, 2006).


these numerous connections between the testaments, it is suggested that closer attention to the shape of the missio Dei in Jeremiah could illumine NT theologies of mission.

This article has limited itself to the missio Dei in Jeremiah, a sprawling and complex prophetic book in which we frequently find that “Jeremiah is the most accessible of the prophets; Jeremiah is the most hidden of the prophets.” 113 Many literary-critical problems remain in the book, most notably the presence of doublets and repeated sayings. 114 Much work on the book of Jeremiah undoubtedly remains to be done, but our exploration of the missio Dei has indicated that Jeremiah’s commission as a “prophet to the nations” (1:5) furnishes an integrative motif that lends structure and coherence to the book as a whole. Thus, it is proposed that OT scholars will find the theme of missio Dei to be a fruitful starting point for reflection on the book of Jeremiah as well as a biblical theology of mission. In an age when the people of God frequently still pose a significant hindrance to God’s worldwide purposes, a rediscovery of the book of Jeremiah could go a long way toward advancing the understanding and practice of the missio Dei.

