

THE HISTORICAL SETTING OF JEREMIAH 21:1-10

MICHAEL AVIOZ
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat-Gan, Israel

Scholars seeking to reconstruct the historical continuity of the descriptions of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem must rely on biblical sources, since the extrabiblical sources contain no orderly documentation of those times. This applies in particular to the Babylonian chronicle,¹ in contrast to other chapters of the book of Jeremiah, which have parallels in various extrabiblical sources or which are supported by archaeological finds.² An additional difficulty is that this quest is connected to the question of the composition and redaction of the book of Jeremiah, a problem whose resolution is still far from being agreed upon by all scholars.

The purpose of this essay is to endeavor to reconstruct the historical background of one of the stages in the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah, as described in 21:1-10.³ It is of interest that scholars tend to ignore Jer 21 when striving to reconstruct the historical events during the last days of Jerusalem.⁴ This holds true both with regard to historical surveys of the

¹For a translation and discussion, see William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *The Context of Scripture 1: Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 467-468.

²On the historical study of the book of Jeremiah, see, most recently, D. J. Reimer, "Jeremiah Before the Exile?" in *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. J. Day, JSOTSup 306 (London: T. & T. Clark, 2004), 207-224. Reimer does not include Jer 21 in his essay, erroneously assuming that the historical setting of biblical prophecies can be reconstructed only when it is accompanied by relevant archeological findings. This approach was refuted by J. M. Müller, "Is it Possible to Write a History of Israel Without Relying on the Hebrew Bible?" in *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past*, ed. D. V. Edelman, JSOTSup 127 (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991), 93-102; and most recently by J. B. Kofoed, *Text and History: Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005). My approach as to the possibility to reconstruct history from the biblical text is close to that of Miller and Kofoed.

³Among the biblical sources dealing with the Babylonian siege in the book of Jeremiah, we may list the following: Jer 32, 34, 37-38. Outside the book of Jeremiah, see 2 Kgs 24-25; Ezek 17; Obadiah; Lamentations; 2 Chron 36. For a discussion of the other passages in Jeremiah, see Oded Lipschits, *The Fall and Rise of Jerusalem: The History of Judah Under Babylonian Rule* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi Institute, 2004). Lipschits's book is in Hebrew; however, an English edition of it is forthcoming from Eisenbrauns.

⁴See, e.g., H. Migsch's study, which does not deal with Jer 21 since he holds the view that it is a doublet of Jer 37-38 (*Gottes Wort über das Ende Jerusalems: Eine literar-, stil-, und gattungskritische Untersuchung des Berichtes Jeremia 34,1-7; 32,2-5; 37,3-38,28*

period and also with regard to studies dealing with the chronology of the conclusion of the era of the kingdom.⁵

Abraham Malamat's studies⁶ contain a historical reconstruction of the events described in the chapters on the siege. However, Jer 21 is missing from his charts, as well as from his historical reviews. In light of this, the main references to the historical background of Jeremiah are to be found in the commentaries to the book of Jeremiah.

The prophetic unit in Jer 21:1-10 describes a certain stage in the course of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem that is difficult to uncover at first sight. From the opening words of 2 Kgs 25:1, it transpires that the siege started in the ninth year of the reign of Zedekiah, that is, in 589 B.C.E. The verse continues: "in the tenth month, in the tenth day of the month." Therefore, the siege started on the tenth of Tevet in the year 589 B.C.E. (December 588/January 587 B.C.E.). The biblical sources, according to 2 Kgs 25:3, also give the date the siege ended—"on the ninth day of the month"—though this passage can be assumed to be incorrect.⁷ In the parallel passages in Jer 39:2 and 52:6, a full date is given: "in the fourth month, the ninth day of the month," that is, on the ninth of Tammuz (July 586 B.C.E.). On that date, the Babylonians breached the walls of Jerusalem.⁸

In contrast to other prophesies in the book of Jeremiah, which give the year the events took place (e.g., Jer 25, 26, 28, 29), chapter 21 does not give a date beyond noting the fact that the event was during Zedekiah's reign. Most scholars are of the opinion that there is a close connection between the description in Jer 21:1-10 and a similar description in Jer 37:1-10, but they differ on the question of the nature of the connection between the narratives. Many scholars are of the opinion that these are two versions of the same event.⁹ The arguments for this approach include:

(Klosterneuburg: Osterreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 210.

⁵H. Tadmor, "The Chronology of the First Temple Period," in *The Age of the Monarchies: Political History*, World History of the Jewish People, 4/1, ed. A. Malamat (Jerusalem: Massada, 1979), 44-60; E. R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 3d ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983); J. Finegan, *The Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998); G. Galil, *The Chronology of the Kings of Israel and Judah* (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Lipschits.

⁶A. Malamat makes no mention of Jer 21; only Jer 37-38 is discussed (*History of Biblical Israel: Major Problems and Minor Issues* [Leiden: Brill, 2001]).

⁷See, e.g., Mordecai Cogan and H. Tadmor, *II Kings*, AB 11 (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 315, 317, and the literature cited in Lipschits, 96, n. 15. I tend to accept the view that the MT in Jer 52 is to be preferred over the parallel version in 2 Kgs 25 ("When Was the First Temple Destroyed, According to the Bible?" *Bib* 84 [2003]: 562-565).

⁸Scholars are divided as to the duration of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem and the exact year that the First Temple was destroyed. See the literature cited in Lipschits, 96, nn. 14 and 17.

⁹See W. Rudolph, *Jeremia*, HAT 1.12, 3d ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1968), 135;

1. *The similarity of the situation.* Chapters 21 and 37 describe the dispatch of a royal delegation of two ministers to the prophet. A. Rofé's excuse for the different names of the minister in Jer 21:1 (Pashhur) and in Jer 37:3 (Jehucal) is that the author did not remember the exact name of the second minister.¹⁰

2. *The similarity of purpose.* The purpose of the dispatch of the delegation and the prophet's reply are identical in both narratives. The delegation asks the prophet to pray for the people and to try to avert the evil decree. The prophet responds that Jerusalem will not be saved and will fall into the hands of the Babylonians.

c. *Similarity of language.* For example, 21:1 = 37:3; 21:2 = 37:3; 21:2 = 37:5; 21:3 = 37:7; 21:4 = 37:5.

d. *Emphasis on the Lord's role.* Jeremiah 21:1-10 teems with deuteronomistic terminology and so cannot be regarded as a historical source, documenting events as they occur.¹¹ The purpose of the deuteronomistic editing is not to deliver a historical report of the battle between the fighters of Jerusalem and the Babylonians, but to emphasize the Lord's role in bringing the calamity on the people: the Lord is the one who will fight against his own army, and will help the Babylonians. This accords with the perception reflected in deuteronomistic literature (e.g., Deut 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh 10:14, 42; 23:3).

If it is the case that these passages describe the same event, how can the fact that the narrative appears in both chapters 21 and 37 be explained? Scholars who support one single event claim the reason for this problem lies in how the book was edited. Yair Hoffman believes that the topic under discussion is a prophecy and thus is appropriate in the context in which it appears: the chapters contain calamity prophecies against Judah (1–24 or 1–25). He resolves the question of the connection between chapters 21 and 37 thus:

The episode [= Jer 21] was written as a quasi-summary of chapters 37–38, with the intent of providing very few details on the exact historical circumstances of the event, so as to stress the essential contents of the prophesy [sic]. The use of language taken from the same episode is intended to refer the reader, interested in the historical details, to it [i.e., to Jer 37–38].¹²

W. Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1–25*, WMANT 41 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 230-237; A. Rofé, "Studies in the Composition of the Book of Jeremiah," *Tarbiz* 44 (1975): 5-10 (Hebrew); C. R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah*, BZAW 176 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 253; W. J. Wessels, "Setting the Stage for the Future of the Kingship: An Ideological-critical Reading of Jeremiah 21:1-10," *Old Testament Essays* 17 (2004): 470-483.

¹⁰Rofé, 6. For a different explanation, see Seitz, 253.

¹¹On the deuteronomistic phrases in Jer 21, see M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972), 329, 346, 348; Thiel, 86-87, 233, 235-236; Rofé, 6, 8-10. For a survey of research regarding the relationship between Jeremiah and the deuteronomistic literature, see R. Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (Atlanta: SBL, 2003), 302-345.

¹²Y. Hoffman, *The Book of Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25, Miqra Leyisrael* (Hebrew)

According to some scholars, chapter 21 is a deuteronomistic adaptation of chapter 37, which contains the older, historical description of the event.¹³ K. F. Pohlmann and W. McKane go even further: they believe that the descriptions in both chapters 21 and 37 are historically unreliable.¹⁴

Faced with these arguments, I would like to present a different picture of the course of events. I am of the opinion that chapters 21 and 37 describe two separate events, and that the dispatch of the delegation to Jeremiah in chapter 21 occurred earlier than the event described in chapter 37.¹⁵ Here are my main arguments:

1. *The names of the delegates.* It is hard to explain the two different names as negligence on the author's part. A typical characteristic of the prophetic narratives in the book of Jeremiah is their accuracy in the names of places, people, and dates. Therefore, there is no reason not to assume that the king sent a delegation to the prophet more than once.¹⁶

2. *The military situation.* It emerges from the description in chapter 21 that the fighters of Jerusalem tried to attack the Babylonian army from the rear and to cause it losses: "I will turn back the weapons of war that are in your hands, wherewith ye fight against the king of Babylon" (Jer 21:4). There is no mention of Egypt in this chapter. On the other hand, Jer 37:3-10 deals with the temporary pause in the Babylonian siege that occurred following the arrival of the Egyptian auxiliary force. In chapter 21, the king expresses his wish that the Chaldeans will retreat, but no actual retreat is described.¹⁷ It emerges from his wish, "peradventure the Lord will deal with us according to all His wondrous works" (Jer 21:2), that he hoped for a miracle like the one that occurred during

(Jerusalem: Magnes, 2001), 439.

¹³See J. P. Hyatt, "The Book of Jeremiah," *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1956), 5: 977; Rudolph, *Jeremiah*, 134; Thiel, *Die deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 1-25*, 230-237; R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, OTL (London: SCM Press, 1986), 410; Rofé; G. Wanke, *Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Bruchschrift*, BZAW 122 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971), 100-102. Carroll, 408-410, 672, considers all of these stories "variations on a theme." For a similar opinion, see W. McKane, "The Construction of Jeremiah 21," *VT* 32 (1982): 59-73.

¹⁴K. F. Pohlmann, *Studien zum Jeremiabuch. Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung des Jeremiabuches*, FRLANT 118 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 1978), 183-197; W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 1: 493-494; idem, *Jeremiah*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 2: 943.

¹⁵W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); D. R. Jones, *Jeremiah*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); J. R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36*, AB 21B (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 95.

¹⁶Holladay, 570; Jones, 279.

¹⁷Holladay, 570. On the Egyptian aid of Judah in Jer 37:11, see the literature cited in Lipschits, 98, n. 25. It is possible that Jer 34:8-22 is to be dated to this period as well. See Lisbeth S. Fried and D. N. Freedman, "Was the Jubilee Year Observed in Preexilic Judah?" in *Leviticus 23-37*, ed. J. Milgrom, AB 3B (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 2, 260.

Sennacherib's expedition. In addition, the king's appeal to the prophet is reminiscent of the narrative on Sennacherib's expedition.¹⁸ These allusions do not appear in the narrative in chapter 37.

3. *The attribution of expressions to deuteronomic editing is unjustified.* It should be noted that, in recent years, there have been calls for a reexamination of the hypothesis of the deuteronomic school.¹⁹ However, even if we accept the assumption that there ever was such a school, a comparison between the passages in Jer 21 and the passages in the books of Deuteronomy through Kings shows that the differences between the meanings of the same expressions in Jer 21 and in the book of Deuteronomy are greater than the similarities.²⁰ Thus, for example, the expression in Jer 21:5, "with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm," has the opposite meaning to the same expression used in the book of Deuteronomy (4:34; 5:15; 7:19; 11:2; 26:5). In the former, the expression means: the war is not YHWH's war on behalf of

¹⁸For the analogies between these stories, see C. Hardmeier, *Prophezie im Streit vor dem Untergang Judas: Erzählkommunikative Studien zur Entstehungssituation der Jesaja- und Jeremiaerzählungen in II Reg 18–20 und Jer 37–40*, BZAW 187 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 307ff., 358-362; A. R. P. Diamond, "Portraying Prophecy: Of Doublets, Variants and Analogies in the Narrative Representation of Jeremiah's Oracles—Reconstructing the Hermeneutics of Prophecy," *JSOT* 57 (1993): 113-114. Kings appealed to the prophets during times of war, as can be shown from 1 Sam 28, 1 Kgs 22, and other sources. This motif also appears in ancient Near Eastern documents. See Hans M. Barstad, "Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah and the Historical Prophet," in *Sense and Sensitivity: Essays on Reading the Bible in Memory of Robert Carroll*, ed. Alastair G. Hunter and Philip R. Davies, JSOTSup 348 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 87-100, esp. 90-92; D. Launderville, *Piety and Politics: The Dynamics of Royal Authority in Homeric Greece, Biblical Israel, and Old Babylonian Mesopotamia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 194-202; K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 384-392.

¹⁹Several scholars have recently doubted the existence of the so-called "Deuteronomic School." They have also doubted the methodology used to find deuteronomic phrases. See R. Coggins, "What Does 'Deuteronomic' Mean?" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, ed. L. S. Schearing and S. L. McKenzie, JSOTSup 268 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 22-35; N. Lohfink, "Was There a Deuteronomic Movement?" in *Those Elusive Deuteronomists*, 27-57; R. R. Wilson, "Who Was the Deuteronomist? (Who Was Not the Deuteronomist?): Reflections on Pan-Deuteronomism," *Those Elusive Deuteronomists*, 67-82; W. L. Holladay, "Elusive Deuteronomists, Jeremiah, and Proto-Deuteronomy," *CBQ* 66 (2004): 55-77. The most thorough study made on this topic is by Helga Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches*, BZAW 132 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973).

²⁰H. J. Stipp states: "[I]ts terminology is related to Deuteronomic language, but it is relatively unspecific" ("Zedekiah in the Book of Jeremiah: On the Formation of a Biblical Character," *CBQ* 58 [1996]: 633, n. 17). See, further, J. M. Berridge, *Prophet, People, and the Word of Yahweh: An Examination of Form and Content in the Proclamation of the Prophet Jeremiah* (Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1970), 204-205; H. Weippert, "Jahwekrieg und Bundesfluch in Jer 21:1-7," *ZAW* 82 (1970): 398-400; Holladay, *Jeremiah*; Lundbom, 102.

his people but, rather, against them.²¹ The use of the expression “the way of life and the way of death” (Jer 21:8), which also appears in Deut 30:15-20, must be regarded similarly. In the book of Deuteronomy, it is used in connection with keeping the covenant between the people and their God. However, in the book of Jeremiah, “the way of life” is the voluntary surrender to Babylon, while “the way of death” is to fight against Babylon, contrary to Divine command.²²

4. *The Lord's place in Jer 21, as compared to Jer 27.* As for the argument regarding the Lord's place in Jer 21, compared with the description in Jer 27, I accept I. L. Seeligmann's position: “In Israeli thought, just as in thought outside of Israel, the divine element is not separated from the human element. The integration of both elements is no reason to assume the integration of two different sources.”²³ And indeed, there is not necessarily a contradiction between the religious shaping of Jer 21:1-10 and the assumption that the passage is a historical description by an eyewitness. The ascription of victory or loss in battle to the Lord lies within the bounds of the worldview prevalent among the nations surrounding Israel. Such a description is found in many documents from the ancient Near East.²⁴

Indeed, chapter 21 is not the ideal historical source for historians. It uses stereotypic expressions and a style foreign to historical reports. At the same time, however, this does not necessarily mean that historical facts cannot be elicited from it.²⁵ Chapter 21 is constructed according to the covenant model,

²¹W. L. Moran, “The End of the Unholy War and the Anti-Exodus,” *Bib* 44 (1963): 333-342; Lundbom, 102.

²²Cf. Lundbom, 105. Jer 21:8-10 is not part of the dialogue between Jeremiah and the royal messengers. Whereas in these verses God appeals directly to Jeremiah, in vv. 3-6 Jeremiah is speaking to the king's messengers. The date of this oracle is probably later than vv. 1-7. See Carroll, 408.

²³I. L. Seeligmann, “The Might of Man and the Deliverance of God: Dual Causality on Biblical Historical Thought,” *Studies in Biblical Literature*, ed. A. Hurvitz et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1992), 73. See also A. R. Millard, “Story, History, and Theology,” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context*, ed. A. R. Millard et al. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 37-64.

²⁴See Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 177 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989). I follow Stolz, who views the concept of “Holy War” or “Yahweh War” as an early construction, stemming from the Monarchic age or even before it. See F. Stolz, *Jahwes und Israels Krieg. Kriegstheorien und Kriegserfabrungen im Glaube des alten Israels* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972). For the opinion that the concept of “Holy war” is based on historical reality, see T. R. Hobbs, *A Time for War: A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989).

²⁵See Weippert, “Jahwekrieg”; K. Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament, Jewish, and Early Christian Writings*, trans. D. E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 58, n. 108; Weinfeld, 136; Lundbom, 101. The threat of sword and pestilence already appears in Lev 26. For an early dating of this chapter, see J. Milgrom, “Covenants: The Sinaitic and Patriarchal Covenants in the Holiness Code (Leviticus 17-27),” in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, ed. C. A. Cohen et al. (Winona Lake, IN:

which contains curses against those breaching the covenant.²⁶ Jeremiah's threats of pestilence, the sword, and famine (Jer 21:7) are reminiscent of the curses in Deut 28, an episode that has parallels with the vassal treaty of Esarhaddon, king of Assyria. On the other hand, the description in 37:1-10 has all the characteristics of a historical report, and does not mention the covenant. It can be hypothesized that the editors of the book of Jeremiah did not place chapters 21 and 37 after each other because each chapter has a different purpose and is incorporated in a different framework: chapter 21 opens the unit of prophecies about the kings of Judah, which are mainly calamity prophecies. In contrast, chapter 37 is incorporated in the narrative part of the book (chaps. 26-45)—its framework is the narratives dealing with the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, the destruction of the city, the Babylonian exile, and the history of the survivors of Judah after the destruction (chaps. 36-45).

Summary

In this essay, I attempted to uncover the historical background of Jer 21:1-10. I did this primarily by comparing this unit to a narrative with a similar historical background, Jer 37. Jeremiah 21:1-10 describes the first stage of the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem, which started on the tenth of Tevet in the year 588 B.C.E.²⁷ We do not have enough details to determine the exact date. However, it seems it occurred several months after the start of the siege. At this stage, Egyptian help had not yet arrived and Zedekiah, king of Judah, hoped that the Babylonians would retreat miraculously, just as the Assyrians did during Sennacherib's expedition. Jeremiah 37:1-10 describes the dispatch of an additional delegation to the prophet, apparently during the final days of the siege. This delegation reached the prophet following the arrival of the Egyptian army, which led to a temporary Babylonian diversion from the siege.

Eisenbrauns, 2004), 91-101. For arguments against the view that considered Deut 28 to be a seventh-century composition, see Kitchen, 283-294.

²⁶For a thorough analysis of Jer 37-45, see Lipschits, 353-388.

²⁷See J. Bright, *The Book of Jeremiah*, AB 21 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 216-217; B. Oded, "Judah and the Exile," *Israelite and Judaeon History*, ed. J. Hays and J. M. Miller (London: SCM Press, 1977), 473; P. C. Craigie, P. H. Kelly, and J. F. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25*, WBC 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 284; Holladay, *Jeremiah*; Lundbom, *Jeremiah*.