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Jeremiah and the Conflicting Interpretations of the Exile: Religious Identity in the Context of Religious Diversity

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**JEREMIAH AND THE CONFLICTING
INTERPRETATIONS OF THE EXILE: RELIGIOUS
IDENTITY IN THE CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS
DIVERSITY**

A thesis by

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ABSTRACT

Although the prophet Jeremiah's teachings are aligned with the other prophets of the Old Testament, his symbolic messages regarding the tensions between assimilation and religious identity during the Exile renders the reader of the book dubious about his teachings. Although there are differing views among the scholars and critics about the political and religious contradictions found within the book of Jeremiah, this work will focus on the struggles of the Israelites in the Babylonian exile based on the socio-historical criticism. Jeremiah's wearing of the yoke in chapter 27 illustrates the strange behaviors associated with the biblical prophets, which continues the assertion that the book of Jeremiah creates confusion, rather than clarity for its readers. The ambiguity of Jeremiah in terms of his strange behaviors are significant components when not only analyzing the experiences of the Israelites, but the trials of many Catholic cultures around the world, in particular the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. When I look at the struggle of the Israelites while they were in exile, I am reminded of the struggle of the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church, an offshoot of the Eastern Oriental Church in North India, who encounter severe atrocities in relation to their assimilation to the North Indian culture while preserving their original identity.

This study is begun by connecting my analysis with a summary of the perceptions and instructions Jeremiah gives to the Israelites in exile in the book of Jeremiah, which covers the downfall of Judah and the Israelites at the hand of Babylon. I will further

consider what agreements and disagreements one might find among the prophet's perceptions of the process of assimilation and preservation within the Babylonian exile. Once my findings have been established, they will be utilized to compare the struggle of the Israelites with the Syro-Malabar Catholics of north India. The study is concluded with a synthesis of Jeremiah's teachings on assimilation within the domestic culture and the preservation of Israelite identity, which will then be connected to the struggles and prospects of the Syro-Malabar Catholic church within Northern India.

Dr. James Nati, (Director)

Date

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“You have enticed me O Lord and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed” (Jer.20:7). Pondering over God’s power and influence on his call and the prophetic ministry, prophet Jeremiah acknowledged and exclaimed the incessant divine interventions in all his life. Along with the prophet, I raise my hearts in gratitude for the Providential guidance and protection especially during the last two years.

I thank most sincerely Dr. James Nati, my academic advisor and thesis director who inspires, guides, and constantly accompanies me on my biblical expedition. The appropriate and constructive suggestions he makes ignite my fascination for delving deep into the Hebrew Bible in a more systematic manner.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The complex relationship between religious identity and culture has played a significant role within global history and continues to be a contentious topic, as the world has become increasingly diverse with different faiths and beliefs coming into contact with one another. In particular, as one of the world's largest and oldest religions, Catholicism has a rich history both influencing and being impacted by culture. While the cultural experiences of Catholics around the world vary, with some more challenging than others, these encounters are often seen as problems within the human experience. Despite this outward appearance, the trials associated within the relationship between religious identity and culture is very much a spiritual experience that can be tied to many of the events and experiences highlighted within the Hebrew Bible. Throughout the Bible there are accounts of God's followers having their religious identity tested in response to their cultural environment. These stories range from the subjugation of the Israelites within Egypt to the rule of the Romans during the time of Jesus. Within these narratives are God's messages of faith, morality, and his desire for the ways in which people are to live with one another.

Although God's messages on religious identity are found throughout the Bible, the Book of Jeremiah emphasizes these themes within its account of the Israelite exile and experience within Babylon. The complexity and multitude of interpretations of the Book of Jeremiah are discussed by John Hill in his work, *Friend or Foe: The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah*. Hill states, "The book begins and ends in exile, and is to be read from the viewpoint of a community in exile. While there are promises about an

end of the exile, this is not yet in sight. The exile is unended.”¹ Compared to any other books of the HB, the book of Jeremiah contains a wide variety of material, with internal contradictions, such that one cannot say in any meaningful way that this book conveys a unified message. The exile is unquestionably one of the most important periods within the history of the Israelites. From the year 597, when the first deportation took place, until 587, when Jerusalem finally fell, the Israelites in both Judah and Babylon were wrestling with the need to assimilate to their new cultural and socio-political environment and the preservation of their own identity. Chapter 27 of the Book of Jeremiah focuses on the tension between religious identity and culture during the Babylonian period of the Israelite exile. When reading this chapter, there is an overwhelming sense that there are clashing concepts. The tension is illustrated within the book of Jeremiah 27 where the prophet is to “make a yoke of straps and bars and put them on [his] neck” (Jer 27:2). In a general understanding, the yoke, used agriculturally with oxen, represents “political subjection.”² Although the prophet Jeremiah’s teachings are aligned with the other prophets of the Old Testament, his symbolic messages regarding the tensions between assimilation and religious identity renders the reader dubious about his teachings. The confusion found within Jeremiah is explicit in the following, “But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this king, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, then I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence” (Jer.27: 8-10). This verse illustrates the conflicting nature found within the book of Jeremiah, as the quote indicates the Israelites should submit to the Babylonian king, but within the same book they are also instructed to preserve their

¹ John Hill, *Friend or Foe: The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT* (Leiden: Brill,1999), 17.

² Yee, Gale A.; Page, Hugh R.; Coomber, Matthew J. M., *Fortress Commentary on the Bible Study Edition: Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 748.

identity of submitting only to Yahweh their only and true God. On the one hand there is a call for the Israelites to submit to the Babylonian culture and rulers, then at the same time there is guidance indicating that the Israelites should not forsake their religion. Many theologians and critics have long debated whether the political and religious contradictions found within Jeremiah are due to the various editions and additions within the Hebrew Bible. While they contend the messages surrounding this topic with chapter 27 is the result of various translations and editions, I assert that the seemingly conflicting messages within this section of Jeremiah are in fact God's instruction on the preservation of religious identity and cultural adaptation.

The message of the prophet Jeremiah reveals the concept that the Israelites must preserve their identity, no matter the cultural, political, or religious environment they find themselves in. By the prophet telling the Israelites to submit to this society, he is telling them to find ways to adapt to a culture and a way of life that is entirely the opposite of their own, which creates questions in regard to the religious identity of the Israelites. Chapter 27 of the Book of Jeremiah seeks to show God's followers that part of maintaining dedication to religion is to love and respect thy neighbor. In this case, this means that the Israelites must respect the culture and laws of the Babylonians. At the same time, however, the prophet Jeremiah reminds the Israelites and readers of the book, that respecting another culture does not include violating God's will. Between these two opposing spectrums there are religious messages that influence the thoughts and concepts surrounding religious identity. These deal with what can be considered the various components that contribute to the modern understanding of religious identity. Some of these elements include spirituality (which is the way one envisions and practices their

belief system), the outward expression of faith, religious identity, and nationhood, amongst other components. In many ways, these messages have formed an integral part of Catholic teaching and continue to hold their importance within the present world.

While there are many accounts of the Catholic experience regarding religious identity and culture around the world, the messages on this topic found within chapter 27 of Jeremiah, are extremely relevant to the history of challenges faced by the Syro-Malabar Church. Originating from the great missionary Thomas the Apostle, Catholics within India comprise a small, but significant part of the Indian nation. Although India is a religiously pluralistic society, it contains a religious hierarchical structure akin to the country's caste system. As a result, many religions find themselves in a strenuous and at times in a hostile situation. Due to the extreme differences in culture and religion, those practicing Catholicism within this region of India have been severely criticized and often persecuted despite their constant efforts to acculturate themselves into the local culture. The events of being sidelined from the mainstream of the society and the persecutions enforced on them indicate that the messages found within Jeremiah continue to be a vital component within Catholic teachings and influence the Catholic experience around the world.

Thesis Statement

I argue that Jeremiah 27 calls for submission to Babylon, nevertheless, though misunderstood as treasonous, this call is an encouragement to the Israelites to acculturate to their new circumstances and can function analogically for the Syro-Malabar church in India.

The Scope and Significance

This study will contribute to the field of theology in multiple ways. To begin, this research will emphasize the significance of the prophet Jeremiah and his relationship to the Israelites. By analyzing this connection, I will be able to argue that the prophet Jeremiah played an integral role in guiding the Israelites through their exile. This is a key component, as the prophet Jeremiah himself has an origin story that highlights the foundation of what it means to create a religious identity or to self-identity as being part of a religious community, and the struggles associated with that. The prophet Jeremiah also learned about Yahweh's intentions about religious identification. Specifically, he reiterated the messages of Yahweh that pertained to the tension that occurred between the Israelite's faith and the Babylonian culture in which they were living. This study will not only look at how the teachings of Yahweh and the experiences of the Israelites impacted their faith and spiritual life, but how those messages continue to be relevant in the present world. The relevance will be illustrated through an exploration of the Syro-Malabar Church in Northern regions of India and the various means and ways they employed to acculturate themselves to their native culture.

While the Syro-Malabar Church serves as a modern-day example of the continuation of the teachings of the prophet Jeremiah regarding spiritual life amidst a different culture, it also serves as an example of one of the types of struggles Catholics experience around the world. By analyzing the connection between the Syro-Malabar Church and the book of Jeremiah, readers of this study will also be able to learn and understand about the presence and function of Catholicism within India, a subject that lacks research. My study will illustrate how the practice of Catholicism within this region

of India both influences and is impacted by its environment. This may allow for future studies not only on Catholicism within India, but other parts of the world as well.

The Outline of the Thesis

In order to establish my argument, this research has been organized in a way that will allow the reader to learn about religious identity and its relationship to culture. In addition, it will cover the prophet Jeremiah's origin story in relationship to the Israelite experience and religious identity formation. This will be followed by an exploration of Yahweh's message via Jeremiah and its connection to the modern world. To further illustrate the messages found within the book of Jeremiah, chapter 1 will include a discussion about the historical and cultural significance of this book within the Bible in terms of religious identity and culture, which will cover the long-lasting impact of Yahweh's message during this period of the Israelite exile. The information in the overall contents of this section of the Bible will allow readers to better understand the arguments made concerning chapter 27 of this book, and its relation to the relationship between spirituality and culture. In terms of looking at Jeremiah as a prophet, this analysis will look at his relationship with Yahweh and how this influenced his interactions with the Israelites and their struggle with the Babylonian culture. In addition, chapter 1 will also look at the importance of this point of the Israelite exile. By exploring this period within Israelite history, it will give a depiction of how the Babylonian culture has impacted their faith. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a look at the Israelite religious identity and its dependency on the messages and teachings of Yahweh via the prophet Jeremiah.

In Chapter 2 there will be a focus on the seemingly conflicting notions of Jeremiah's teachings concerning Israelite faith amidst the Babylonian culture. The first

portion of this chapter will delve into the idea of whether Jeremiah's guidance on cultural interaction is a false prophecy which will seek to address the tension between the prophet and Yahweh's message. To explore this assertion, this report will delve into how the Israelites may have perceived their instructions to submit to Babylon, by looking at their past experiences with Yahweh. Then there will be an analysis of the Israelite submission to Babylon and the cultural ramifications of this act.³

In Chapter 3, there will be a focus on the preservation of religious identity within Babylon. This section will begin with an investigation of the message from Yahweh via Jeremiah concerning religious faith and struggles. From there, the chapter will discuss the specific problems and messages that Jeremiah shares with the Israelites and how it relates back to Yahweh's initial guidance. Then there will be a transition into looking at how the Israelites responded to these messages and the overall impact they had on their spirituality. The analysis of these components will seek to demonstrate how religious identity is developed and maintained. Later, the reaction of the Israelites to Jeremiah will be assessed in terms of its lasting meaning and connections to the spiritual struggles in modern times. This will begin to establish the pattern between Biblical messages and the present world.

Chapter 4 will look at the message of Jeremiah far more closely and its effect in the modern context looking at Inculturation in a pluralistic context of India. This section will focus on the example of the Syro-Malabar Church within India and its religious history and context. The chapter has an analysis of the term 'inculturation' and its impact on religious identity within India. The report will then transition into a discussion on how

³ The term ramification points to the consequences the Israelites faced by not following Yahweh, as well as the potential influence their submission to Babylon effected on religious identity.

this rite functions within this northern region of India. This will include looking at information on interaction with other religions such as Hinduism and will address how religious pluralism within India is challenged by its hierarchical system. This portion of the study will finish with an exploration on how this rite preserves its religious identity, and its connection back to the messages brought forth by the prophet Jeremiah to the Israelites.

The study will then contain a general conclusion that attempts to unite both sections of the research which includes an analysis of the Israelites and their exile with the modern-day example of the Syro-Malabar Church. This component will address the struggles of the Israelites during their exile in Babylon and its relationship to the teachings of Yahweh via the prophet Jeremiah. It will also reiterate the connections between the Israelite relationship between spirituality and culture and its continual impact within the modern day. This will include highlights on the experiences of the Syro-Malabar Church in India. Finally, the conclusion will end with a look into the future scope and potential for further research.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

In the case of the Book of Jeremiah, readers of the Bible receive Yahweh's guidance through the words of the prophet Jeremiah. Covering the time period in which the Israelites are in exile, 586-538 B.C.E, the Book of Jeremiah speaks to a time in which Yahweh's people experienced great challenges. His ministry lasted over four of the most turbulent and decisive decades in the history of the chosen people of God⁴ both in Jerusalem and Judah. Taking into consideration common scholarly opinion of among the biblical scholars, the year 627 B.C.E marks the beginning of Jeremiah's prophetic ministry. His entry into the prophetic ministry in a tumultuous time as Judean leaders were struggling for their national and political survival threatened by the powers of Egypt and Babylon. Due to the unstable situations, maintaining the spiritual health of the Israelites⁵ became of vital importance with regard to the messages that Jeremiah began to share. This became an imperative, as the Israelites began to live under a culture that held very different beliefs than their own. Therefore, the Israelites had to contend with their inner spirituality, while learning to adapt to the culture around them. In order to fully understand the significance of Yahweh's guidance on spirituality amidst cultural tension,

⁴ The term 'chosen people' refers to the special status of the Israelites who entered into the covenant with Yahweh. As per the covenantal relationship, Israel was expected to ever be faithful to their only God and obey his commandments and in turn Yahweh would protect and bless them. Deut.7:6 makes the term clear and Jer.7:23 substantiates it.

⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, spirituality is considered one aspect of religious identity as a whole. It is a way of living one's faith in the world. The definition of spirituality within this thesis will follow the Oxford dictionary definition about spirituality being "concerned with the human spirit or soul as opposed to material things."

it is important to know about Jeremiah as a prophet, the historical context of the Israelite exile, and the definition of religious identity within this portion of the Hebrew Bible, which accounts for the Israelite experience with Babylon.

While the focus of this study is on Yahweh and the prophet Jeremiah's guidance on spirituality amidst culture, it is important to understand the significance of this portion of the Bible as a whole. The Book of Jeremiah is a text that unites the experiences of the Israelites, along with the history of the prophet Jeremiah, as well as his work as Yahweh's representative. This concept is addressed by Mitchell Wayne Modine in his work, *Everything Written in this Book: The Perceptions of the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah*.⁶ When discussing this aspect of the Bible, Modine states, "The Book of Jeremiah has a larger viewpoint than Psalm 137, again, because many of its materials deal not only with the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem but also the events leading up to it."⁷ In his analysis, Modine is pointing out that the Book of Jeremiah is unique in that it looks at all the aspects that led to the fall of Jerusalem, as well as the experiences of the Israelites themselves. This is important as the events, such as the Israelite rejection of Yahweh, play a significant role in influencing and understanding spiritual growth in relation to foreign lands and cultures. Basically, while this research is investigating only a small portion of the Book of Jeremiah, recognizing the messages, themes, and patterns concerning religious identity is the key to understanding its function and relationship with the Babylonian culture the Israelites experienced.

⁶ Mitchel Wayne Modine, "Everything Written in This Book: The Perceptions of the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah" (PhD diss., Drew University, New Jersey, 2006), ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

⁷ Modine, "Everything Written in This Book" 4.

The Origins of the Book of Jeremiah

In order to fully understand the content and significance of the Book of Jeremiah, it is important to learn about the source of the book that is available from the two versions, the Hebrew Masoretic (MT) and the Greek Septuagint (LXX). The two textual traditions reveal two different processes of traditioning and that results in two different presentations of the prophet Jeremiah. According to the two-edition theory in scholarship, the LXX is considered to be the earlier and shorter edition and the MT is the subsequent and expanded edition.⁸ The LXX version of the book of Jeremiah is quite shorter than the MT by about one eighth and it arranges the material in a different manner.⁹ The MT received additions over a period of time, making it a longer, with additional details. There is a great difference in length between the MT and the LXX that “one is constrained to believe that the MT is a splendid illustration of the way in which the prose discourses of Jeremiah were verbally expanded in the course of transmission.”¹⁰ While, the MT materials may seem to be given in a rather lengthy size and explicable in terms of their contexts, it is more or less a narrative development of ideas or actions already present in both versions.¹¹ For example, in the MT’s of Jeremiah 27:5, “the land, the cattle which are on the face of the earth” is a narrative expansion of a phrase common to the MT and the LXX “I myself have made the earth” and adds nothing substantially new to the sense

⁸ Gerald Janzen, *Studies in the Text of Jeremiah* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ Press, 1973), 173.

⁹ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville : Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 130.

¹⁰ John Bright, *Jeremiah :The Anchor Bible* (NY : Doubleday & Co., 1986), 202.

¹¹ Thomas W. Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood: A Study in the Theology of Book of Jeremiah* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 26.

of the passage.¹² The equivalents of both these versions were discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and it is clear that the differences in the descriptions found in both the versions indicate significant stages in the process of transmission of the text.¹³ There is no real consensus though among the biblical scholars regarding which of the textual versions is to be considered the more original.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the significance of these two sources is emphasized by Carly Crouch in her book, *An Introduction to the Study of Jeremiah*¹⁵, “...these differences are substantial enough to be apparent even to the lay reader and even in translation. Perhaps the most obvious is their respective running orders whereas the LXX has the oracles against the nations in the middle of the book, the MT has them at the end.”¹⁶ Crouch's statement reveals that there are large variations between both versions of the Book of Jeremiah. Furthermore, she points out that these differences impact how the reader experiences the events within the book, such as the subject of nations being presented in the middle versus the end of the text.

The development of the Book of Jeremiah is also discussed by William McKane who says, “There is a complex and intense debate surrounding the formation and composition of the book of Jeremiah.”¹⁷ The book of Jeremiah turns to be complicated because of the several omissions, additions, transpositions, alterations, and substitutions rampant in the text. The book is termed “rolling corpus” as it emerged as a result of a long process of composition consisting of gradual expansions and additions to successive

¹² Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 25.

¹³ Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 130.

¹⁴ Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 26.

¹⁵ Carly L. Crouch, *An Introduction to the Study of Jeremiah* (London, UK : Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017).

¹⁶ Crouch, *An Introduction to the Study of Jeremiah*, 33.

¹⁷ William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), lxi-lxii.

editions of the book.¹⁸ McKane's analysis highlights the fact that the Masoretic text developed over a lengthy time period, which means it continued to transform in tandem with the events of the ages. The biblical scholars in general regard the book to be a post-exilic work even though some of the writings might have their origin in the pre-exilic period.¹⁹ As a result, the development of the version of the Book of Jeremiah used within this study illustrates how its evolution is directly correlated with the longevity of the prophet's message to the Israelites regarding their servitude to Yahweh amongst the Babylonians.

The length of the book, complexity of its arrangement and difficulty in grasping distinguish the book of Jeremiah from all the other prophetic books. To the modern reader it may look to be a repetitive mess, a mixture of poetry and prose, not arranged in a particular order, but containing traces of attempts to compile and highlight some order to parts of the material.²⁰ The structural complexities of the book of Jeremiah are illustrated through the major divisions found within the text. One of the established outlines of the major divisions in the Book of Jeremiah is suggested as follows: Chapters 1-6 portray the editorial Introduction, The call narration, and the early Ministry of the Prophet; Chapters 7-25 deal with the Temple Sermon and other declarations of Jeremiah from 605 and after; Chapters 26-29 consists of the memoirs of Baruch, Jeremiah's friend, and scribe with an emphasis on the prophet's conflict with the religious establishment of his time; Chapters 30-45 is a collection of additional oracles and biographical notices especially after the fall of Jerusalem in 587; Chapters 46-51

¹⁸ McKane, *Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, lxi-lxii.

¹⁹ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 46-47.

²⁰ Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 9.

comprise of oracles against foreign nations dating from a time later than Jeremiah, although some seem to be from the prophet himself; and Chapter 52 is a historical appendix said to have copied with very little change from 2 Kings 24:18-25:30.²¹ While speaking of the strangeness found in the structure of the book of Jeremiah, Terence E. Fretheim says, "... the book does not present an argument in any usual sense or a clear historical development but seeks to achieve its objective by a kaleidoscopic look at a highly complex situation from a myriad of angles. The resultant portrayal is highly impressionistic, perhaps even surreal, and leaves the reader with a sense of the situation that is much more effective than a photograph or linear argument could achieve."²² The Book in general is a collection of anthologies, memories, utterances, and events that were gathered at different stages from different periods during the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah and arranged according to the themes and literary connections rather than emphasizing its historical order.²³ Underlining the immense contributions by several editors to the present form of the book of Jeremiah, Robert P. Carroll succinctly writes, "A cacophony of voices is heard in the book, which makes it all the more difficult to accept the single attribution of the work to one man and reader who is not confused by reading the book has not understood it!"²⁴ The collection of incomparable materials such as auto-biographical narratives, sermon prose, letters, judgement, oracles against nations, laments, complaints, and consolation point to the fact that the book of Jeremiah underwent extensive process of composition, redaction, and transmission. As a result, the person of Jeremiah that the book presents have evolved through such a wide-ranging

²¹ James D. Newsome, *The Hebrew Prophets* (Atlanta, GA: J. Knox Press, 1984), 118.

²² Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 22.

²³ Newsome, *The Hebrew Prophets*, 29.

²⁴ Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 9.

process. As “Every historical presentation of a person is a mediation and a construction”²⁵ what we see in the character of the prophet is a construction.

The transformation of the Book of Jeremiah has a far-reaching message for religious communities. This is evident when William McKane states that, “They held on to different theological agendas, at different points in time and within separate communities of faith.”²⁶ The quote depicts the ways in which not only have communities of faith inspired the writings of the Book of Jeremiah, but how the messages found within the text continue to influence the religious communities of today. This concept strongly relates to the subject of this thesis work and finds its relevance as it delves into what the prophet's teachings meant for the Israelites, as well as what it can mean for the Syro-Malabar church in the northern India.

The significance of the textual origins and its message is also touched upon by Marvin A. Sweeney in his book, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*,²⁷ when he says, “Interpreters maintain that the Masoretic version of the book was produced in Babylonia during the Second Temple period.”²⁸ An important part of Sweeney's analysis shows that the Masoretic version of the text was produced in Babylonia during the second temple period. This means that the experience of the Israelites within Babylon had a lasting impression. This again points to the fact that the textual differences in the book of Jeremiah can be said to be an aftermath of editorial

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Cambridge: Grand Rapids, 1998), 11.

²⁶ Newsome, *The Hebrew Prophets*, 8.

²⁷ Marvin Alan Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

²⁸ Sweeney, *Tanak*, 295.

revisions, illustrations and expansions occurred over the years in the Masoretic tradition. Since the Israelite exile within Babylon led to a conflict between spirituality and culture, the origins of this text play an integral part in understanding the relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh. Therefore, the origins of the Book of Jeremiah reveal that additions and the expansion of the Masoretic text provides knowledge about the significance of Yahweh and the prophet Jeremiah's relationship with the Israelites and the lasting message of the prophet.

The Life of Jeremiah and his Connection to the Israelites

In addition to the origins of the Book of Jeremiah, the life of Jeremiah is important as it can be correlated to the experiences of the Israelites and the messages of Yahweh. Arguably, unlike many other texts within the Bible, there is a special emphasis on the prophet Jeremiah's background. "It is narrated in third person singular style and projects Jeremiah through the lens of his social background, namely, his immediate family descendant (לְקַיְהוּ בֶן־חִי), his family descendants in general (עֲנָתוֹת), and his tribal group (וְיִמָּה בֶּן זְאֵר בֶּן), and in the context of the monarchical leaders of his society."²⁹ It illustrates that the prophet Jeremiah's life is an active component of the text. This means that his life is directly related to and highlights the spiritual messages found within the Book of Jeremiah. The following examples highlight four particular aspects of Jeremiah's character: his origins, his call, his relationship with Yahweh and the Israelites.

²⁹ Emmanuel Ukaegbu-Onuoha, "Jeremiah in 3D: A Study on Social Roles, Identity, and Image in Jeremiah Literature" (PhD diss., University of Claremont, Claremont, 2016), 238, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.

This argument is reiterated by Louis Stulman in his book, *Jeremiah*,³⁰ when he says, “One of the most daring features of the book of Jeremiah is that the persona of the prophet loom as large as, or even larger than, the message itself.”³¹ Stulman is arguing that the prophet's life is as meaningful as Yahweh's message within the text. This connects to the research focus of this analysis, as it argues that the experiences of the Israelites are integral to understanding spirituality's relationship with culture. Since the prophet Jeremiah's life is filled with personal experiences similar to the Israelites, his life plays a role in understanding the progress of spiritual faith amidst tense circumstances. Therefore, understanding every aspect of the prophet Jeremiah's life is essential for readers to connect to Yahweh's messages within the text.

One of the subjects that is important to understanding the prophet Jeremiah in relation to spirituality and culture is his upbringing in Anathoth. Anathoth shapes the prophet Jeremiah's existence. Located away from Judah and Jerusalem, Anathoth was outside of any official influence. This meant that as a youth, the prophet Jeremiah was able to develop without being impacted by outside entities. Discussing the significance of this in his book, *Critical Access to the Book of Jeremiah*³², Walter Brueggemann states, “We may thus expect that Jeremiah was nurtured in a perspective that was, from the ground up, highly suspicious of the political, economic, and theological pretensions of the urban establishment.”³³ This analysis shows that Brueggemann argues that due to the location of Anathoth, the prophet Jeremiah was able to take on the role of outsider and

³⁰ Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005).

³¹ Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 16.

³² Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Brueggemann, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 29.

observer in relation to the subjects of the political, economic, and theological climate. This means that he was able to gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of each of these concepts and develop his own sense of persona outside of that. In many ways, the prophet Jeremiah is like the Israelites in that he is an outsider to the political establishment, while the Israelites are outsiders to the Babylonian political establishment.

This concept is also emphasized by Stulman who asserts that, “The prophet participates fully in the death of Judah's world. He suffers with, on behalf of, and because of his community. Jeremiah's very life and destiny are associated with Judah's: God calls both the prophet and people (Jer:1-2), both suffer the death of their world.”³⁴ Through his statement, Stulman is emphasizing that the trials of the Israelites and the experiences of the prophet Jeremiah are not a coincidence. It illustrates that the prophet Jeremiah is able to not only understand and relate to the Israelites but know how to properly guide them in terms of Yahweh's wishes. Essentially, the prophet Jeremiah's existence prior to his relationship with the Israelites makes him an efficient messenger for Yahweh, who can expertly guide the group in dealing with their spirituality amongst the Babylonians.

A specific and significant aspect of the prophet Jeremiah's life in relation to his bond with the Israelites is his political and theological connections. It has been noted that the prophet Jeremiah has had many experiences, which include being aligned with multiple families, some representing priests, others coming from economic and political backgrounds. Furthermore, he was a special adviser to King Zedekiah. These positions show that while the prophet Jeremiah evolved outside of the influence and political control, he also immersed himself in those areas as well. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah

³⁴ Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 17.

became skilled in understanding the areas that influence and impact the spiritual life of those that follow Yahweh. These ideas are touched upon by Brueggemann when he says, “... (He) had such powerful political allies and protectors suggest that he was not a lone voice in Jerusalem. Rather, he represented a point of view that had some important adherents in Jerusalem who supported Jeremiah as a voice for their perspective.”³⁵ It shows that due to his positions, the prophet Jeremiah was able to gain universal knowledge regarding Jerusalem and its people, by aligning himself with political allies that were informed on all subject matter related to the Israelites. As a result, he was able to express Yahweh's message utilizing communication that the Israelites could understand.

This idea is covered by Pauline A Viviano in her book, *Jeremiah, Baruch*,³⁶ where she argues that "His appointment as prophet 'to the nations' may indicate his sphere of activity. As the Lord is active in the affairs of the nations, so Jeremiah as the Lord's prophet will likewise have an impact on the affairs of the nations.”³⁷ Through her analysis, Viviano is highlighting the fact that the prophet Jeremiah is given this specific appointment by Yahweh because there is a direct tie to his experiences. “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you, and before you were born, I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer.1:5). There is a cumulative sense of the call and the commissioning that was present all throughout the ministry of Jeremiah and the sense of his mission never wholly left him thereafter nor let him alone.³⁸ The thought and

³⁵ Brueggemann, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 32.

³⁶ Pauline A. Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

³⁷ Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 11.

³⁸ White, *The Indomitable Prophet*, 7.

conviction that his very existence was a conscious part of divine purpose and not an incidental biological occurrence motivated him and filled him with a special sense of destiny. This sense of divine connection doubtlessly contributed to his determination to fulfil his prophetic mission regardless of all his personal considerations.³⁹ Since he held so many different positions within his lifetime, the prophet Jeremiah was able to gain the firsthand knowledge necessary to not only relate to the Israelites, but to understand Yahweh's message and purpose. This has specific connections to the arguments within this study, as it involves looking at how Yahweh's messages are tied to the experiences of the Israelites. Essentially, the events the prophet Jeremiah goes through play an important part in the understanding of Yahweh's intervention within the relationship with spirituality and culture.

Jeremiah's Character and his Relationship with Yahweh

Jeremiah can arguably be characterized as a hesitant, but dynamic prophet, which proved essential for the Israelites during their exile. While some would immediately respond to Yahweh's call, Jeremiah was quite reluctant to become a prophet. This is seen within the book of Jeremiah, when the prophet begins his dialogue with Yahweh, "I then said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you" (Jer.1:6-7). Jack R. Lundbom made

³⁹ R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 51.

an approximate calculation of Jeremiah's age at this time as 12 or 13, at most 15 or 16.⁴⁰ The literary pattern found in the narration of the call event of Jeremiah is the same that happened in the call stories of the earlier prophets of Israel (Exod. 3:2-4, 4:23) and this occurrence establishes and testifies him as a true prophetic spokesperson for Yahweh bestowing him with special powers, a message, and a specific mission. The salient features seen connected to the call narration are the divine encounter or theophany, an introductory word or greeting of intention and relationship, an objection or demurral (Jer.1:6) by the candidate to himself, a transforming action (Jer.1:11-13), an injunction and legal commissioning statement and finally a sign given by Yahweh reassuring and strengthening the candidate (Jer.1:18).⁴¹ It is evident that Jeremiah was attempting to reject Yahweh's desire that he becomes his prophet, but later relents and serves him. This will become an important point later on when we look at how the Israelites react to Yahweh's plans for them, especially as they come through the prophet Jeremiah. Since Jeremiah initially strayed away from Yahweh's plan, it brings us back to the Israelites and their own rejection of Yahweh's guidance. As a result, as the Israelites struggle to continue to follow their spiritual path throughout their exile, Jeremiah functions as a prophet that can best relate and assist the people with coming to terms with conforming to Yahweh's wishes, while respecting the strange Babylonian culture they find themselves in.

⁴⁰ Jack R. Lundbom, *The Anchor Bible: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 233.

⁴¹ Victor Harold Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2011), 27.

The refusal of Jeremiah is touched upon by Viviano who states that, “It may be that Jeremiah was called as a young man, but it may be that the terms of the objection are meant to put Jeremiah in the tradition of Moses and Samuel. It is noteworthy that these two prophets are mentioned by name in the book of Jeremiah.”⁴² Through her argument Viviano is stating that the prophet Jeremiah's rejection of Yahweh's orders has two meanings. The first is regarding the fact that he is young, which reflects the humanity of the prophet, as he would rather live the life he chooses, than to serve Yahweh. This is indicative of the struggle between maintaining spirituality amidst earthly desires. Furthermore, it also plays a part in comparing this experience to that of the Israelites. They have also rejected Yahweh's plan for them, which culminates in their own struggles. As a result, this shows that the prophet Jeremiah can further understand the relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh. There is also an element of subjugation in the call episode of Jeremiah. The word of Jeremiah establishes this fact and the role of being the prophet of Yahweh makes the life of the one who is called burdensome:

You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived you overpowered me
and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me.
Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction.
So, the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day
long (Jer.20: 7-8).

In addition to the concept of youth, Viviano is emphasizing that the prophet Jeremiah is also connected back to the tradition of Moses and Samuel. This demonstrates the power and meaning associated with the prophet Jeremiah and his relationship with the Israelites. Since he is tied to Moses, he represents the continuity of Yahweh's connections with the people, thus adding to the teachings and experiences the Israelites must learn. In addition,

⁴² Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 12.

the representation of continuity suggests the application of Yahweh's teachings is still relevant in the present day. Essentially, Jeremiah's rebellion against Yahweh, made him perfectly aligned with the struggle of the Israelites within Babylon.

The Prophet Jeremiah's Approach to Guiding the Israelites

Approaching the idea of connecting the prophet Jeremiah's relationship to the Israelites in a different way is addressed by Brueggemann when he says "There may be fear because Yahweh's word is a hard, dangerous word to speak. It is a sovereign word that changes the historical process, and finally that purpose can be resisted neither by the prophet nor the king."⁴³ In this quote, Brueggemann is arguing that Jeremiah's hesitation to become a prophet could be due to Yahweh's historical characterization as hard, thus making the ability of sharing his message difficult. Yet, he is quick to point out that while reluctance exists for Jeremiah, ultimately, he cannot resist Yahweh's decision. This in and of itself is important when thinking about the Israelites, as their exile is due to their failures to follow the holy directions of Yahweh, which is demonstrated through their trials following Yahweh following their exodus from Egypt. This illustrates that Jeremiah's struggles parallel that of the Israelites, which adds greater meaning to understanding the spiritual and cultural clash that occurs amongst the people. Furthermore, Bruggeman's emphasis on Yahweh's influence on the historical process suggests that the Israelite exile within Babylon is part of the journey of spiritual growth. This means that as a prophet, Jeremiah is providing Yahweh's blueprint on how to merry

⁴³Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 25.

spirituality with cultural adversity.⁴⁴ Therefore, Jeremiah's own journey as a prophet is closely tied to the struggle of the Israelites.

Not only did the prophet Jeremiah have a past that made him the ideal guide for the Israelites during their exile, but his teachings set the precedent for understanding the relationship between spirituality and culture. The beginnings of these teachings occur when it is noted that, “Now I have given all these lands into the hand of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave” (Jeremiah, 27:6-7). In this passage, it is stated that Yahweh intends Nebuchadnezzar to rule until he deems his time has finished. This is significant because it indicates that Yahweh knows that the Israelites will find themselves in conflict with the culture of Babylon, as it is explained to the Israelites that this is Yahweh's choice to empower Nebuchadnezzar. Furthermore, it illustrates that the prophet Jeremiah not only has an important role in assisting the Israelites through this struggle of accepting the Babylonian environment, but it illustrates that some of the messages found within the Book of Jeremiah can have lasting relevance in the modern world. As a result, the guidance from the prophet Jeremiah is intrinsically tied to not only the experience of the Israelites, but Yahweh's people continuing into the present day.

The focus on the prophet Jeremiah's role as a guide to the Israelites is explored by Stulman as he researches the relationship between the prophet and the people. When

⁴⁴ One of the focuses of this thesis will be to look at the spiritual component of religious identity and its relationship with the surrounding cultural environment.

discussing the teachings of the prophet Jeremiah, Stulman asserts that, “In a world that is under siege by a myriad of forces, Jeremiah asserts that God is still ordering and governing, with the intent to accomplish God's purpose. Sovereignty, however, does not nullify human responsibility and freedom.”⁴⁵ Stulman is arguing that the prophet Jeremiah's role is to not only reiterate to the Israelites that Yahweh is still in control, but to remind them that they have a duty to Yahweh as well. This is an important concept because it puts the prophet Jeremiah in a role where he is teaching the Israelites about the limits of earthly power and how the people should operate within it. In addition, this reflects the prophet Jeremiah's importance as a middleman for Yahweh's messages, as he too has experienced the political and economic attempts at control over people. Therefore, the life of the prophet Jeremiah is an active factor within the study of the relationship the Israelites have between spirituality and culture.

Understanding the Israelite Exile and its Relationship with the Book of Jeremiah

In order to understand Yahweh and the Israelites within the Book of Jeremiah, it is important to gain knowledge about the historical context of the Exile. Although the Israelites had been rescued by Yahweh on many occasions, their rejection of Yahweh's guidance and will led to their Exile, as illustrated with an emphasis within Book of Jeremiah chapters 25-29, which highlights the need of the Israelites to submit to Babylon, as well as their decision to ignore the prophet, Jeremiah. As a result, the Israelites had to face numerous challenges, in order to prove that they would repent and follow Yahweh's plan for them. This also influenced their struggle to maintain faith amidst a different culture. This topic is touched upon by Sara L. Hoffman in her work, *Fight or Flight:*

⁴⁵ Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 19.

*Jeremiah's Polemic Against Emigration to Egypt in Literary and Historical Perspective.*⁴⁶ While discussing the topic of the Exile Hoffman says, “In her view, the Judahites’ core makes use of the first three Deuteronomic perspectives on exile: total calamity in the land, deportation and dispersion ending in death outside the land, and existence in exile that equates living in a foreign land with worshipping foreign gods.”⁴⁷ In her analysis, Hoffman is investigating the conflict between living amongst people with a different culture, and the obstacle that occurs when people are forced to face an environment that has a different set of religious beliefs. Hoffman's association with this subject and the Israelite exile itself, reveals the influential nature of exile on the religious identity component of spirituality amongst the Israelite community. Therefore, this means that understanding the historical past of the Israelites is imperative to understanding Yahweh's message concerning spirituality and foreign cultures.

The Significance of the Israelite Broken Promise

One of the specific ways to look at spirituality and culture within the Book of Jeremiah, is through the idea of the broken promise. Yahweh made the Israelites his chosen people, but the history surrounding their rejection of Yahweh is central to the plight within Babylon. Viviano addresses this concept when she says, “Idols are here spoken of as ‘emptiness’ and the pursuit of idols makes the pursuers themselves ‘empty.’” The exodus, the trek through the wilderness, coming into the Promised Land- all reveal that the Lord has acted on behalf of the people, and so the infidelity of the people is all

⁴⁶ Sara L. Hoffman, “Jeremiah’s Polemic Against Emigration to Egypt in Literary and Historical Perspective” (PhD diss., The Pennsylvania State University, Pennsylvania, 2015).

⁴⁷ Hoffman, “Jeremiah’s Polemic”, 58.

the more inexplicable.”⁴⁸ This quote depicts the Israelites as having a long history of rejecting or breaking promises to Yahweh. By the time Yahweh allows them to enter the Promised Land, they have already been at odds with Yahweh multiple times. This creates a condition where the Israelites must constantly have intervention in some form from Yahweh in order to maintain the spiritual teachings. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah finds himself guiding a people, who are failing to recognize their culpability in ensuring that they follow Yahweh, despite the Earthly environment they find themselves in. Basically, the history of the Israelites and their broken promises with Yahweh remain a catalyst for understanding their struggles with the Babylonian culture, and the prophet Jeremiah's role in assisting them to navigate that.

In addition to the Israelite's history, the relationship with Babylon is an integral aspect to understanding the relationship between spirituality and culture. For the Israelites, the land of Babylon became a new set of challenges and experiences in the people's growth. The significance of this relationship with Babylon is touched upon by John Hill in his book, *Friend or Foe: Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT*, says, “...the function of Babylon as a metaphor for being landless, a condition which is presented here as the reversal of the promises to the patriarchs, that their descendants would have secured possession of the land.”⁴⁹ Through his argument, Hill is highlighting the fact that Babylon itself has a symbolic meaning to the Israelites. Since they broke their promises to Yahweh, the Israelites are forced to enter a land that is not their own. As a result, it functions as a reminder that they must recognize their responsibility to Yahweh.

⁴⁸ Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 16.

⁴⁹ Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 59.

Furthermore, since Babylon is not their own, the Israelites are thrust into the struggle and argument of this report, where their spirituality is at odds with the Babylonian culture. This is compounded by the fact that Hill points out that it is also Yahweh's relationship with the king of Babylon that is important as well. This augments the research of this study as Hill's notation demonstrates that the exchange between how the Israelites receive Babylon is part of the greater discussion on spirituality and culture within the text. Essentially, Babylon itself within the Israelite exile has a role within the Israelite's path toward repairing their relationship with Yahweh and it represents another facet to the struggle between the spiritual and earthly worlds.

Another component to understanding the Israelite exile in relation to their experiences of spirituality amidst the Babylonian culture, is to understand the differing approaches the Israelites took with Babylon. When faced with Babylonian control some Israelites wanted to rebel, others wanted to flee, but this is not what the prophet Jeremiah indicates about Yahweh's will. Viviano discusses the significance of this when she says, "The occasion for these letters continues the themes of the preceding chapters: conflicting prophetic messages. Jeremiah opposes those prophets who maintain that the period of exile will be short."⁵⁰ This quote illustrates that the Israelites continue to struggle with following Yahweh's will. They are willing to rebel, deny, or even turn to other prophets in order to escape their religious responsibility. In addition, this puts the prophet Jeremiah in a situation where he must effectively express that submission to Babylon is serving Yahweh's will. Basically, how the Israelites responded to Babylon indicates Yahweh's messages on spirituality and culture.

⁵⁰ Viviano, *Jeremiah, Baruch*, 84.

In addition, religious identity is an important concept in regard to the subjects of the spiritual and earthly worlds in regard to the Israelites. How the Israelites see themselves, particularly within Babylon, is a journey of faith that influences the understanding of how spirituality interacts with culture. This topic is addressed by Brueggemann who says, “But the Book of Jeremiah is not only a reflection on displacement and restoration as lived, historical realities in an ancient city in the sixth century BCE, it is instead a vigorous testimony of the will, purpose, and action of the incomparable God.”⁵¹ While Brueggemann is discussing the long-lasting impact of the book of Jeremiah, it also has a connection to religious identity as well. The key elements of Brueggemann’s analysis show that Yahweh is interactive with his people through a variety of ways throughout history, whether it be through displacement, culture, or prophets. Therefore, all of these aforementioned subjects are part of the Israelite identity as well, since this are the ways, they come to know Yahweh. This is especially poignant when thinking of how the Israelites perceive themselves and their spirituality amidst Babylonian culture. Furthermore, Yahweh inserts his message through every aspect of the Israelite experience, which includes their submission to Babylon. Therefore, the religious identity of the Israelites is a significant component when thinking about the prophet Jeremiah's teachings on how to support the spiritual life amidst different circumstances.

Finally, in order to proceed with the analysis of Yahweh and the prophet Jeremiah's teachings on spirituality and culture, it is important to understand how religious identity is defined within this research. For the purposes of this study, religious

⁵¹ Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 187.

identity will be defined as the ways in which a group of people practice and view their faith⁵². This will not only play a driving force within the analysis of the prophet Jeremiah and Yahweh's message to the Israelites during their exile, but it will extend to the modern-day example of the Syro-Malabar Church in the northern territories of India. This is an important definition because when looking at both the Israelite and Syro-Malabar experiences there are various components and influential factors that impact religious-identity and they must be analyzed in order to fully understand the significance. In total, this definition will provide an additional layer of context to the forthcoming argument and analysis.

Summary and Closing Remarks

Overall, the relationship between spirituality and culture remains one of the predominant messages within the Book of Jeremiah. In order to fully understand my argument on the subject, it is important to understand the impact of this section of the Bible as a whole. This includes learning about how the origins of the Book of Jeremiah as the formation of two texts has been greatly influential on the messages surrounding spirituality and culture. The long-term development of the Masoretic text, which is the subject of study for this thesis work, is closely tied to the historical experiences found within Babylon.

In addition, it is also imperative to know how the prophet Jeremiah's life, along with his relationship with Yahweh is a highly influential factor within the teachings surrounding the support of the spiritual world within culture. The prophet Jeremiah's

⁵² Royce Kimmons, "Religious Identity, Expression, and Civility in Social Media: Results of Data Mining Latter-Day Saint Twitter Accounts" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 56, no. 3 (2017): pp. 637-657, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12358>.

evolution outside the realm of political influence as a youth, gave him the opportunity to function as an observer that could see the successes and failings found within those systems. Furthermore, as young adult his function within these sectors helped him to grow in understanding in a way that would allow him to be an effective communicator and prophet to the Israelites. In addition, the relativity that the prophet Jeremiah has to the Israelites is his own hesitancy to follow Yahweh's desire that he serves him as a prophet. This provides the prophet Jeremiah a unique understanding of the Israelites and Yahweh's plan for his people.

Finally, the history of the Israelite relationship with Yahweh, along with their religious identity within Babylon further expands the messages of Yahweh on the responsibility of his people on Earth. The Israelite's broken promise with Yahweh influences their experience and reaction to Babylon, which puts the prophet Jeremiah in a special position of guidance. Furthermore, how the Israelites perceive themselves as Yahweh's people adds to the understanding of their spiritual and cultural identity.

CHAPTER II

CONFLICTING NOTIONS IN CHAPTER 27 OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

While the entire Book of Jeremiah contains many concepts and thematic messages concerning Yahweh and the Israelites, the relationship between culture and religious identity is far more emphasized within chapter 27 of the work. Within chapter 27 readers are introduced to a situation in which the Israelites are instructed to submit to Babylon, but later are reminded that their lives must be dedicated to Yahweh. These competing messages arguably lead to many questions. For example, how could Yahweh instruct the Israelites through his prophet Jeremiah to submit to a kingdom and culture that does not align with what the Israelites were taught to believe in? How can they serve both Babylon and Yahweh? The conflicting directives are often explained by scholars to be the result of the many iterations of the Masoretic version of the Book of Jeremiah. My argument, however, is to assert that these messages were intended to be part of the text, as they play an important role in defining religious identity within culture.

In order to explain the significance of these seemingly contradictory instructions, this chapter will approach chapter 27 in a variety of ways. This section will begin with an introspective of Yahweh's call for submission to Babylon, and the perception that this is a false prophecy. There will be an exploration on the significance of these competing messages and their meanings. These conversations will then transition to investigating how Yahweh's instructions culminated in the submission of the Israelites to Babylon. This will include looking at how honoring the culture of Babylon is related to the Israelite experience of exile and their relationship with Yahweh. Finally, this chapter will analyze

the influence of the messages of Yahweh on the religious identity of the Israelites. In addition, this portion will analyze how religious identity functions within culture.

To provide the necessary context surrounding the aforementioned sections, it is important to understand what develops within these sections of the Book of Jeremiah. It has been a wide-ranging accepted idea among biblical scholars that chapters 27-29 of the book of Jeremiah constitute a unit because of “the story told or implied in the arrangement of the oracles and other materials, the common formal pattern found in the oracles, intertextual connections by means of quotation, repetition, or allusion, and the shared historical setting.”⁵³ There is a general consensus among biblical scholars concerning the unity of this section as it stands in the MT.⁵⁴ They are linked so much in their background and the content they expose. The dominant theme of this section is Jeremiah’s prophetic instructions to the people who are in exile and people who stay back in the land. This is a narrative compilation written down later in time after the events it recounts had transpired.⁵⁵ It is a collection of the ‘altercations’⁵⁶ of Jeremiah with the false prophets and it is apologetic in nature of the true prophecy.⁵⁷ This unit probes into the conflict that arose between the false prophets and the prophet Jeremiah when he spoke the word of Yahweh and how prophet Jeremiah was rejected by the false prophets

⁵³Gerald L. Keown, Pamela J. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 26-52* (Texas: Word Inc., 1995), 44.

⁵⁴ Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1983), 187 . Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 523-524.

⁵⁵ Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2012), 160.

⁵⁶ Jer.23:9-40 is a collection of Jeremiah’s words indicating his difference of opinion about the false prophets. The section is begun with the heading לְנִבְאִים (because of the prophets) indicating it is against them and in verse 15 there is an emphasis לָכֵן יְהוָה אֱמַר כֹּה-לֵךְ (therefore, thus says Yahweh of hosts concerning the prophets).

⁵⁷ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 268.

who misled Judah.⁵⁸ It has also been assumed that chapters 27-29 of the book of Jeremiah have gone through extensive editorial overlay and the purpose of the editor was to focus on the fate of the exile community (Jer.29:20) and to condemn the post-597 community in Judah (Jer.29:19).⁵⁹ These chapters are described as a “literary creation” as opposed to a historical record and Jeremiah has a “legendary role” in it and its purpose is to argue that “Babylon had become legitimate center of life for the Lord’s people.”⁶⁰ The redactors or editors of this unit intended to highlight the purpose of Yahweh through Jeremiah “to counteract the effect of the false prophet’s words and to lead Judah, her neighbors, and the exiles in Babylon to submit to Nebuchadnezzar’s divinely delegated authority until Babylon’s appointed time to rule was over.”⁶¹ It could rectify the erroneous teaching of the false prophets who taught that “Babylon was just a passing power, not to be reckoned with.”⁶² The Babylonian rule was supposed to be extended from Nebuchadnezzar to the third generation⁶³(Jer.27:7) and this indicates a long period of time of the Babylonian captivity. Since the LXX does not have any mention of the period of subjection, some interpreters hold the idea that this verse was added during the exile whereas some other interpreters state the idea that the LXX eliminated this prediction of the period of subjection because of the unfulfilled prediction.⁶⁴ Contrary to

⁵⁸ John Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007), 529.

⁵⁹Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 210-211.

⁶⁰Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 523-524.

⁶¹Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Word Biblical Commentary: Jeremiah 26-52* (Texas: Word Inc., 1995), 36.

⁶² Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 187.

⁶³ Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 188.

⁶⁴Andrew Watterson Blackwood, *Commentary on Jeremiah* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1978), 199.

the prediction, Nebuchadnezzar's son, Amel-Marduk was not succeeded by his son, but by his brother-in-law, Neriglissar (560 B.C. -556 B.C.).⁶⁵

The storyline of chapters 27-29 revolves around the narration of the yoke of the prophet and the conflict between Jeremiah and the false prophets. They narrate the prophetic opposition to Jeremiah's message among the exiles in post 597 BC in Babylon.⁶⁶ The narration of the events recorded in this unit occurred in the historical setting of the reign of King Zedekiah, the last king of Judah between the first and second deportations in 597 and 586 B. C. Even though as per the MT, chapter 27 begins with "in the first year of Jehoiakim" the remainder of the chapter mentions matters related to Zedekiah as the king (Jer. 27:3, 12, 20). The LXX is lacking this mention of Jehoiakim and this interpolation is an attempt to bring verse 1 into agreement with Jer.26:1.⁶⁷ The central theme of the entire chapter 27 revolves around Nebuchadnezzar and how he became king of Babylon in the fourth year of Jehoiakim (Jer. 25:1) which makes it impossible to testify the reign of Jehoiakim.⁶⁸ It has been widely assumed therefore among biblical scholars that the difference in the mention of the king's name in the beginning of the chapter is due to a scribal mistake and corruption of the original text that might have caused the loss of the original introduction.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Blackwood, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 199.

⁶⁶Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, 29-30.

⁶⁷ Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 187.

⁶⁸ Solomon Bennett Freehof, *Book of Jeremiah: A Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1977), 166.

⁶⁹ The prominent scholars who hold this view are J. Gerald Janzen, in his book "*Studies in the Text of Jeremiah*" (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 45., and William L. Holladay, in his work, "Jeremiah 2" (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 115., and Henry McKeating, in his work titled "*The Book of Jeremiah*" (Peterborough: Epworth, 1999), 137.

Chapter 27 primarily consists of a prophetic message to those who were remaining in Jerusalem, regarding their submission to the royal regime and necessity to serve king Nebuchadnezzar. Chapter 28 is a narration of the prophetic opposition of Hananiah to the message of Jeremiah. Chapter 29 is comprised of a general message to the exiles with specific examples of prophetic opposition in the exile.⁷⁰ Wilhelm Rudolph suggests that certain linguistic peculiarities noticed in chapters 27-29 in comparison to the rest of the book indicate the unity these chapters share among them. The spelling of “Nebuchadnezzar” is used consistently in this unit with נְבֻכַדְנֶצְצַר which is “closer to the Babylonian form”⁷¹ (Jer.29:21) rather than “Nebuchadrezzar” with ר as it appears in the rest of the book. The name “Jeremiah” is used as shortened with the theophoric ending of יהִיָּה which is different from יְהוֹיָכִן cited at other instances in the book. The appearances of longer spellings in several names such as Zedekiah זְדַכְיָהוּ, Shemaiah שְׁמַעְיָהוּ and Jeremiah (Jer.29:21-32) and shorter spellings such as Kolaiah קוֹלָיָה, Maaseiah מַעֲשִׂיָּה, Zephaniah צְפַנְיָה, (Jer.29:21-32) are unique in this unit of the book of Jeremiah. The use of the title “prophet” following the name of Jeremiah in chapters 28-29 distinguishing Jeremiah from the false prophets is a unique feature of these chapters and that indicates a unifying and overarching literary structure of this section of the Book of Jeremiah.⁷² All these variations peculiar to these chapters add up to the assumption that chapters 27-29 remain as an independent and separate collection.

⁷⁰ Thomas Overholt, “Jeremiah 27–29: The Question of False Prophecy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XXXV, no. 3 (1967): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/xxxv.3>.

⁷¹ Blackwood, *Commentary on Jeremiah*, 199.

⁷² Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia* (Tubingen: J.C. Mohr Paul Siebeck, 1968), 157-158.

Instructions Conflicting with the Past

The conflict in chapter 27 is due to the threefold appeal of prophet Jeremiah to Judah to cease its resistance and surrender to the Babylonian hegemony and his warning of Judah's destruction in their failure to Babylonian submission. The chapter is comprised of three sections (verses 1-11, 12-15, 16-22) wherein prophet Jeremiah is appealing to his people for submission to the Babylonians, and he is warning them not to be deceived by those prophets who were forecasting the imminent downfall of the Babylonian power.⁷³ The false prophets at Jerusalem were encouraging the confederacy of the neighboring countries who were trying to involve Judah to be rebellious against Babylon.⁷⁴ The threefold prophetic pronouncement was addressed to the foreign kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon from south and Tyre, and Sidon, the Phoenician cities of north and to the envoys who came to Jerusalem to consult with the king Zedekiah of Judah regarding likely concerted actions that can be taken against the forces of Nebuchadnezzar (Jer.27:3), to the king Zedekiah of Judah (Jer.27:12), and the priests and all the people of Judah (Jer.27:16). These three episodes of the prophetic pronouncement contain two basic aspects of a warning and exhortation. The prophet's warning not to listen to the false prophets promised deliverance and his exhortation was to serve the king of Babylon because he was aware of the fact that it was Yahweh who handed over Judah and Jerusalem to the Babylonian king.⁷⁵ Although the Israelites were sentenced to exile for breaking their promise with Yahweh, chapter 27 of the Book of Jeremiah creates a new and seemingly confusing message by instructing the people to submit to Babylon. At first

⁷³ Ernest Wilson Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 26-52* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 29.

⁷⁴ Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 187.

⁷⁵ Overholt, "Jeremiah 27-29," 234.

glance, this chapter may give the reader an impression of Jeremiah as “a traitor engaged in seditious activity.”⁷⁶ Jeremiah is very fervent in appealing to his people about the consequence of not heeding to his message of submission. Though Jeremiah’s word may sound like a political strategy, it was not simply born of that situation, and it was not an expression of his political acumen as it was a message from God, and it announced God’s judgement on the nation that was flouting his will.⁷⁷ Jeremiah warned those who were not willing to obey him with the impending disastrous aftermath, “Any nation or kingdom that will not serve Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and will not bow its neck to the yoke of the king of Babylon, I shall punish that nation with sword, famine and plague, Yahweh declares, until I have destroyed it by his hand (Jer. 27: 8).” Within this section, the guidance from Yahweh can be perceived as a shocking one. Thus far within their history, the Israelites were punished by Yahweh when they chose to ignore his will, especially when they chose to dedicate themselves to other gods and deities. As a result, the idea that the Israelites must submit to Babylon is indeed confounding and beyond common readers’ comprehension.⁷⁸

The fact that the guidance is formulated as contradictory is what makes it significant for the Israelites. In the past, they had sidetracked from Yahweh's will, so this message of submission functions as a test for the Israelites to determine whether they can maintain their allegiance to Yahweh. In addition, the instructions state that the Israelites must serve Babylon, but do not mention at all that Babylon is above Yahweh. Therefore,

⁷⁶ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* , 535.

⁷⁷ H. H. Rowley, “The Early Prophecies of Jeremiah in Their Setting,” in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 53.

⁷⁸ An example of when the Israelites began to look towards other deities instead of Yahweh occurs when Moses sees the newly free Israelites worshipping a golden calf described in Exod.32.

surrendering to the rule of Babylon is not only a test of obedience, but a challenge to the Israelites to maintain their religious identity. This is due to the fact that the Israelites maintained a past where they deviated from serving Yahweh and were punished for it as a result of their actions. By asking the Israelites to submit to Babylon it translates as almost asking the Israelites to commit an action they were punished for previously. In addition, since the Israelites had been prone to turn away from Yahweh in the past, serving Babylon might create a temptation to reject Yahweh further. These instructions force the Israelites to learn how to not only follow Yahweh's will, but be able to adapt to a culture without sacrificing their religious identity.

Submission, Prophecy, and Religious Identity

The relationship between Yahweh's instructions for Babylonian submission and religious identity is also apparent through the inclusion of prophecy within the text. Within the Book of Jeremiah, the discussion of the Israelites and Babylon in chapter 27 addresses the speculation of false prophecy. The message of Jeremiah portrays the conflict between the word of Yahweh to submit themselves to the Babylon regime against the word of those prophets who “promised a quick relief from the Babylonian threat.”⁷⁹ The false prophets prophesied a short period of exile for two years (Jer.28:2-4) and Jeremiah prophesied 70 years of exile⁸⁰ (Jer.25:11, 12). They also predicted that “the vessels taken by the Babylonians from the Lord’s house will soon be restored

⁷⁹John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 129.

⁸⁰ Jeremiah prophesied seventy years of exile as divinely decreed time of punishment as a consequence of the past deeds to Judah and the nations around it. Seventy years of exile is a reaffirmation of the power and sovereignty of Yahweh over the entire world. It is the divinely endorsed time in which Babylonian hegemony would prevail.

(Jer.27:16).” The prophet Jeremiah forecasted to the contrary to what the false prophets had predicted by saying that the vessels that the Babylonians had used to leave in 597 would be taken at their next attack.⁸¹ The concept of counterfeit prophets are depicted as follows, “For your own part, do not listen to your prophets, your diviners, dreamers, magicians and sorcerers, who tell you: You will not be enslaved by the king of Babylon. They prophesy lies to you, the result of which will be that you will be banished from your soil, that I shall drive you out, and you will perish” (Jer. 27: 9-10). Within this section the Israelites are ordered to not heed any other predictions or views from other prophets, especially those who say the submission to Babylon is false. Any message that is contrary to the message of Jeremiah even if it has been uttered by prophets, diviners (Jer.27:9), interpreters of dreams (Jer.23:23-28), or sorcerers (Jer.27:9) is cautioned to be considered as lies. These well-known practitioners of the OT (Jer.27:9, 29:8; Deut.18:10,14; Josh.13:22, Isa.3:2; 44:25) were all considered to be שֶׁקֶר ‘peddlers of falsehood’ who were accused of ‘dangerous illusion’⁸² and banned in Israel (Deut.18:9-13) because of the impending judgement, exile and destruction that would fall upon those who accept their teachings.⁸³ Again, this reverts to the idea of the Israelites previously dismissing Yahweh’s will and opting to pledge their allegiance elsewhere. Furthermore, by emphasizing that the Israelites should not trust other prophets is a reaffirmation of the fact that they must stay true to their religious identity. For the purposes of this report, religious identity will be defined as a term comprised of multiple concepts. These aspects include spirituality, faith, outward religious expression, nationhood, and land. Essentially, while chapter 27 provides seemingly contradictory instructions from Yahweh, these

⁸¹ Henry McKeating, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Peterborough: Epworth, 1999), 139.

⁸² McKeating, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 138.

⁸³ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 534.

messages play an important role in the development and maintenance of religious identity of the Israelites.

The relationship between the conflicting messages found within chapter 27 and religious identity is also based upon the idea of faith. Retaining faith forms a large part of religious identity which is a concept touched upon by Modine in her work, *Everything Written in This Book: The Perceptions of the Exile in The Book of Jeremiah*. Modine argues that faith is essential to understanding the themes found within this portion of the Book of Jeremiah. This is demonstrated when Modine says, “The perception of this text is that the political options available to the people are to be understood as a dichotomy between faithfulness and unfaithfulness to God. As a result, the option ascribed in this text to the prophet’s opponents—fleeing to Egypt rather than submitting to Babylon.”⁸⁴ In this section Modine is asserting that the Israelites find themselves in a predicament where they must choose between earthly control and the will of Yahweh. The Israelites could take matters into their own hands by rejecting Yahweh and running away to Egypt or they could follow instructions and submit to Babylon. This reveals that the conflicting messages had a purpose, which was to attempt to solidify the religious identity of the Israelites by forcing them to choose between adapting to their environment as followers of Yahweh or succumb to other desires and temptations, such as those provided by other deities and false prophets. Basically, Yahweh's guidance for the Israelites within chapter 27 connects them to their religious identity via their faith.

In addition to chapter 27 being about faith, it is also about making the Israelites proactive in terms of their religious identity. In the Babylonian environment the Israelites

⁸⁴ Modine, "Everything Written in This Book," 202-203.

are yet again given a choice to either submit to Yahweh's will or to turn away from their religion, if they were to experience a temptation that was rooted within the Babylonian culture. C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell approaches the discussion of Israelite decision making within her work, *The Politics of Scripture: Exile and Identity in Jewish and Christian Readings of Jeremiah*. Part of Ewell's argument revolves around Yahweh's instructions and the Israelite reaction as being a departure from the interactions from the past. This is evident when Ewell states, "...there was a type of epistemological crisis going on in Judah. Such a crisis could only be resolved by the construction of a new narrative— a narrative which, enables the agent both to understand how he or she could intelligibly have held his or her original beliefs and how he or she could have been so drastically misled."⁸⁵ Through her statement, Ewell is asserting that the Israelites are in a different position in regard to the choice Yahweh gives them. She argues that the environment within Judah allows the Israelites to actively engage in the concept of being misled. As a result, this creates a new narrative, where the Israelite relationship with Yahweh changes. Although Ewell's claims are tied to Judah and Yahweh, it is also related to the concept of religious identity during the time of the Israelite Babylonian exile. The fact that the Israelites become engaged in understanding the circumstances and consequences related to following other deities or prophets outside Yahweh, such as the past experience with creating a golden calf as their representation of Yahweh, allows them to make a conscientious decision to actively live their religious identity. This is also alluded to within the Book of Jeremiah when the following is noted, "Do not go after other gods to serve and worship them and do not provoke me to anger with the work of your hands.

⁸⁵ Rosalee Velloso Ewell, "The Politics of Scripture: Exile and Identity in Jewish and Christian Readings of Jeremiah" (PhD diss., Duke University, Carolina, 2003), 147.

Then I will do you no harm. Yet you did not listen to me says the Lord, and so you have provoked me to anger with the work of your hands to your own harm.”⁸⁶ In this quote, it is noted that Yahweh is reaffirming his rule that the Israelites should have no other deities before him. Furthermore, he implies that the Israelites have not listened, which shows that the temptation to move away from Yahweh remains present, even during the exile. Also, by moving away from Yahweh, the Israelites would be moving away from the religious principles that comprise their identity. Part of being obedient to Yahweh and serving Babylon becomes a lesson for the Israelites in learning how to retain the religion that defines their lives amongst a culture that is both tempting and different. Therefore, this proves that religious identity is dependent upon the Israelites making a self-determined choice to follow Yahweh without question and live in a culture that may or may not be accepting of their beliefs.

While chapter 27 reveals the Israelite perspective of religious identity, it also illustrates Yahweh's role within the formation of that concept. In order to retain a religious sense of self, an individual or group must be dependent on an entity or set of spiritual principles. This notion is addressed by William L. Holladay, while analyzing the text of chapter 27 within the Book of Jeremiah, he says, “Yahweh then identifies himself as the one who is responsible for Nebuchadnezzar's steady taking over of one kingdom after another: to rebel against Nebuchadnezzar would be to rebel against God.”⁸⁷ Holladay is arguing that the correct interpretation of chapter 27 regarding the Israelites serving Babylon is about Yahweh's approach to reaffirming his power over all things to

⁸⁶ Book of Jeremiah 25:6-7, Cambridge University Press, *Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized Edition Containing* (Massachusetts: Cambridge Univ Press, 2011).

⁸⁷ William Lee Holladay and Paul D. Hanson, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, Chapters 26-52 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 121.

his followers. This is done through the implication that Yahweh is responsible for Nebuchadnezzar's success. As a result, the Israelites must learn to realize that their actions are part of a larger framework that is dependent on Yahweh's will. This influences religious identity as the Israelites need to evolve and recognize that their actions define who they are in relationship to Yahweh. Therefore, by submitting to Babylon, the Israelites are expressing their loyalty to Yahweh. It also illustrates their determination to retain their religious identity, by finding ways to continue to live out their spiritual lives amidst a different and possibly aggressive culture. This is demonstrated within the Book of Jeremiah in the following:

I by my great power and outstretched arm made the earth, the human beings and the animals that are on earth, and I give them to whom I please. For the present, I have handed all these countries over to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, my servant; I have even put the wild animals at his service (Jer.27: 6-7).

In this quote, Yahweh is noting that he gives power to whom he desires. In this case, he has selected Nebuchadnezzar, who is designated as the invader of the Israelites. Furthermore, it illustrates how religious identity is connected to the expression of religion itself because submitting to Babylon is an outward act. Overall, this shows that the formation of the Israelite religious identity relies upon the active engagement of Yahweh.

In addition to Yahweh's role in the formation of religious identity via the messages found within chapter 27, this section of the Book of Jeremiah illustrates how

religious identity has a mutual relationship with spiritual tenets.⁸⁸ Part of religious identity, especially with the Israelites, is influenced by what the beliefs are in relationship to the expression of identity. These concepts are explored by Klaas A. D. Smelik in his work, *My Servant Nebuchadnezzar: The Use of the Epithet 'My Servant' for the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Jeremiah*.⁸⁹ When investigating the seemingly false prophecy found within chapter 27 of the Book of Jeremiah, Smelik asserts, “However, this exceptional situation will not endure forever. The Babylonian supremacy will end after seventy years. In the future time of restoration, no foreign king will be called 'the Lord's servant' anymore. A king of Israel's own royal dynasty will arise, a descendent of king David.”⁹⁰ In this section, Smelik is emphasizing that prophecy tells the Israelites that Babylon will not rule forever and that their day will come. This reverts back to the idea that the Israelites have a choice to follow Yahweh's will or to defer to their own desires, as stated repeatedly by prophet Jeremiah's remarks that the Israelites have not listened. For those who believe in Yahweh and his instructions, the promise that there will be a resurgence or golden age⁹¹ for the people becomes an incentive to continue to live appropriately. Even though the present moment is grim and depressing for the Israelites, Yahweh has “plans for their welfare and not for harm and to give them a future with hope” (Jer.29:11). Though the duration of the exile would be long, it would not be their permanent state as Yahweh announces, “He will restore their fortunes and gather them from all nations and all the places where he has driven them,

⁸⁸Religious identity-Part of the aspects of this definition concerns spirituality, meaning how the Israelites perceive their relationship with Yahweh, outward expression, meaning how the Israelites demonstrate their religion through ritual and self-identification, nationhood meaning how religion helps to develop nations.

⁸⁹ Klaas A. Smelik, “My Servant Nebuchadnezzar,” *Vetus Testamentum* 64, no. 1 (2014): 109-134, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685330-12301142>.

⁹⁰ Smelik, “My Servant Nebuchadnezzar,” 111.

⁹¹ Jeremiah was convinced that Yahweh's purpose was ultimate welfare of his chosen people instead of endless calamity. Exile was not an end in itself, but there was a future awaiting them beyond the exile.

and he will bring them back to the place from which he has sent them in to exile” (Jer.29:14). By looking to the future and Yahweh's promises, the Israelites are influenced to incorporate their beliefs into their expressions of religious identity. For example, by retaining the belief that their day will come, the Israelites are challenged to conform to Yahweh's desires and submit to Babylon, even when it seems like a false prophecy. “History illustrates that in all the centuries of their world-wide dispersion, the Jews have tried to follow this pattern. They have identified themselves with the country of their residence, while at the same time looking toward eventual restoration to their native land.”⁹² This is further displayed within the Book of Jeremiah that says, “Work for the good of the city to which I have exiled you; pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its welfare yours depends” (Jer.29:7). Jeremiah challenges those already exiled in Babylon not merely to accept their plight as a punishment for their wrongdoing, but to embrace it as a gift from Yahweh for their welfare by relating with those who are entirely different from them. Leslie C. Allen while being agreeable to the fact that Jeremiah was instructing the exiles to consider Babylon as their home Babylon is also deemed to be the land of slavery comparable to Egypt. The purpose of the prophet is to ensure the wellbeing of the community in exile while they are in the foreign land of servitude in view of the exodus from Babylon. Looking at this narrative from a patriarchal perspective, the divine word of ‘increase,’ usually combined with the divine promise of the land, constitutes a blessing (Gen 17:4–8; 35:11–12). This particular blessing as seen in the book of Genesis, was fulfilled in “the land” of Egypt (Gen 47:27; Exod. 1:7), and through the instruction of

⁹²Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 553.

Jeremiah, the exiles are going to fulfill in the land of Babylon. Thus, this future event seems to anticipate a second exodus for God's people and their repossession of their promised land.⁹³ In this quote, Yahweh is correlating submission to Babylon with the Israelite devotion and loyalty to him. As a result, with this promise at hand, the Israelites are encouraged to form an identity that is based upon these religious tenets. Thus, how the Israelites express and perceive themselves is influenced by what they believe is true. Essentially, religious beliefs play a large part in the formation of identity with the Israelites.

Submission to Babylon

While the seemingly false prophecy forms an integral part in understanding the Israelite religious identity, the culmination of the Israelite submission to Babylon is an important influence as well. One of the noted factors of the relationship between the Israelites and Babylon is Yahweh's instructions as to how the Israelites should handle their environment. Yahweh's guidance is depicted as follows:

Thus, says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare (Jer.29:4-7).

⁹³ Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 324.

In this section of the book, Yahweh is instructing the Israelites to assimilate with the Babylonians. The reason for the prophet Jeremiah's insisting upon submission to Nebuchadnezzar was to claim the lives of people of Judah as "a prize of war" and it granted them an opportunity to continue to live in Judah.⁹⁴ They are encouraged to treat Babylon well because their fate is tied to their actions. Jeremiah's instruction on the submission to Babylon is based on the word of Yahweh and he knows well that the Babylonians were the instrument of Yahweh's judgement upon Judah for her breach of covenant.⁹⁵ The fact that adaptation is highlighted as one of Yahweh's main messages shows that the Israelite identity evolves and is impacted by the culture that they surround themselves with. This means that religious identity becomes stronger in the presence of adversity, which is evident by the fact that the Israelites are forced to submit to a culture and power that is not their own. By having the Israelites submit to a different culture it gives them a choice to either pledge their identity to Yahweh or lose the fate to which they are entitled. As a result, the act of submission plays an important role in informing religious identity.

Babylon as Yahweh's Punishment for the Israelites

The connection between the act of the submission and the call to submit within chapter 27 is further tied to Yahweh's belief on punishment. In later chapters of the Book of Jeremiah, Yahweh's will becomes clear that the Babylonian exile is about atonement. Evidence of this is depicted in the following, "For I am with you to save you, Yahweh declares, I shall make an end of all the nations where I have driven you, but I shall not

⁹⁴ Seitz, *Theology in Conflict*, 206.

⁹⁵ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 94.

make an end of you, only discipline you in moderation, not to let you go quite unpunished” (Jer.30:11). In this quotation the emphasis is placed on sense of self, as the responsibility of adhering to Yahweh's will is placed upon the Israelites. Yahweh states that he has the ability and will make an end to all nations, but not his people. Through the Book of Jeremiah, Yahweh is teaching the Israelites that their identity should be dependent on their religious beliefs, rather than the social construct of nationhood⁹⁶. Furthermore, Yahweh insists that this submission is only a light form of punishment, that will teach the Israelites to recognize the power of religious identity in an extreme circumstance. This is evident when Yahweh highlights that he only plans to “discipline” the Israelites in “moderation.” Yahweh would never destroy his chosen people completely even though he chastises Israel. This illustrates that the act of submission allows the religious identity of the Israelites to become concentrated and shaped by their experiences and the will of Yahweh. Basically, the call for submission actively puts the religious identity at a crossroads for the Israelites, but the submission itself influences how this identity evolves.

The submission is part of the Israelites forming a religious identity based on understanding that Yahweh is the one true God and creator. The dominion of Yahweh is stressed by the compilers and redactors in order to give a sufficient clarification to those who lay desolate and who were exiled in Babylon who questioned the power and might of Yahweh in comparison with the gods of Babylon.⁹⁷ The chapter displays the great theological understanding of Yahweh being the creator and having the power and right to

⁹⁶ Nationhood in this case is associated with religious identity and suggests that the exchange that happens between religion and nationhood affects religious identity.

⁹⁷ Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, 32.

give all his nations and creatures into the power of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and this theological assertion is comprehensive:

It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomsoever I please. Now I have given all these lands into the hand of king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings shall make him their slave (Jer.27:5-7).

Here, Yahweh claims the right to rule over the whole earth. Jeremiah has a strong conviction that it is Yahweh, the creator and Lord of the whole earth's execution of his purposes of judgement chose Nebuchadnezzar who was irresistible. Resisting him would be equal to resisting Yahweh (Jer. 27:5-8).⁹⁸ The relationship between religious identity and a higher power is addressed by Modine in *Everything Written in This Book*. While discussing the act of submission Modine states, "Paradoxically, the Book of Jeremiah here resists the power of the state by now encouraging the survivors to submit to the power of the state. That this move can be made due to the theological foundation that has been consistently built throughout similar perceptions in the Book of Jeremiah."⁹⁹ In this quote, Modine is aligning submission of power to Babylon, with Israelite submission to Yahweh. Furthermore, it is asserted that this one act is part of a larger framework of religious messages and principles expressed by Yahweh. This is evidence that power of nationhood is a central factor in determining identity. By highlighting the irresistible might of Yahweh, the powerlessness and non-existence of the other gods is also

⁹⁸ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 93.

⁹⁹ Modine, *"Everything Written in This Book,"* 205.

inferred.¹⁰⁰ Having the sense of self dependent on a source of power, makes the act of submission an expression of religious identity. In the case of the Israelites, by following Yahweh's will they are illustrating that their religious identity exists on the basis of recognizing that they are a lesser being focused on the principle of obedience. This is where the relationship between power and theological themes discussed by Modine becomes central to understanding the religious identity of the Israelites. By becoming obedient and recognizing the power of Yahweh, the sense of self becomes the outgrowth of religious teaching. Therefore, the concept of power in relation to act of submission plays a large part in determining the Israelite religious identity.

Submission to Babylon and Religious Evolution

Another approach to understanding the formation of religious identity as the result of the act of submission concerns looking at this relationship through the lens of religious evolution. In her work, *Politics of Scripture*, Ewell discusses how Yahweh's order to submit results in a new form of expression for the Israelites in terms of their identity. Ewell claims, "... at the end of the exilic period, the people learned the narratives of confession and repentance for the sins of idolatry and syncretism."¹⁰¹ Through her quote, Ewell is stating that the relationship between the Israelite submission to Babylon can be compared to the act of confession due to the Israelites not recognizing Yahweh as the supreme power. This shows that there is a direct correlation between the formation of religious identity and the evolution of the belief system itself. By submitting to Babylon, the Israelites are learning to not disobey Yahweh any longer and developing the means of

¹⁰⁰Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 533.

¹⁰¹Ewell, "*The Politics of Scripture*," 148.

issuing repentance. The existence of the confession depicts how this act is an outward form of expression of the religious identity the Israelites have developed through their history with Yahweh and the submission to Babylon. Therefore, the act of submission perpetuates a change with religion that correlates to the development of religious identity amongst the Israelites.

Religious Identity

Not only does the submission of Babylon impact the relationship between the Israelites, their faith, and Yahweh, but it signifies the foundation of religious identity as well. For the purposes of this report, religious identity will be defined as how one acknowledges their faith, the expression of the faith, and how it is received by the surrounding culture. Within the Book of Jeremiah, religious identity is illustrated through Yahweh's selection of Nebuchadnezzar as his servant, and the Prophet Jeremiah's utilization of the yoke in relation to Nebuchadnezzar.

Through the use of Nebuchadnezzar as Yahweh's servant, the Israelites are able to solidify their identity as followers of Yahweh. An example of this is seen within the Book of Jeremiah that says, "For the present, I have handed all these countries over to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, my servant; I have even put the wild animals at his service" (Jer.27:6). In this section, Yahweh has indicated that although Nebuchadnezzar has been an enemy of the Israelites, he made a conscious choice to make him his servant. This connects back to the concept of religious identity, as it reaffirms the teachings of Yahweh, that he is the one supreme being. The description of Nebuchadnezzar as God's servant (literally slave) does not mean that the Babylonian king worshipped Israel's God

or had committed himself to his service but only that God chose to use him for the fulfillment of his own divine purposes. It reinforces the Yahweh's universal dominion.¹⁰² Through Yahweh's actions, the Israelites are forced to accept that not only are their circumstances controlled by Yahweh, but that they have an obligation to retain their religious identity. This means that regardless of whether an environment is supportive or hostile, the Israelites must remain true to their beliefs and practices. In addition, living in an antagonistic environment, where Nebuchadnezzar is both the enemy and Yahweh's servant encourages the Israelites to take stock of their religious teachings and how to express their faith. Conversely, by making Nebuchadnezzar his servant and later dissolving his power, Yahweh is reiterating the power of religious identity. Although Nebuchadnezzar persecuted the Israelites, the strength of their identity helped them to overcome the hostile culture they were living in.

Another aspect of the relationship between Nebuchadnezzar as Yahweh's servant and religious identity is that of cultural communication. This thought can be attributed to Smelik, who argues that Nebuchadnezzar's role goes beyond the theological aspect. Smelik addresses the questions regarding Nebuchadnezzar as Yahweh's servant by saying, "But is it probable that עֶבְדִּי would have a completely different meaning in these three passages compared to the rest of the book of Jeremiah, where the word עֶבְדִּי is used in a theological and not a diplomatic sense."¹⁰³ In this quote, Smelik is arguing that the analysis of Nebuchadnezzar's role as Yahweh's servant is a multi-dimensional position. Naturally, there is the theological component, but it is also an act of diplomacy as well. Within this example it can be argued that Nebuchadnezzar is putting the Israelites in a

¹⁰² Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, 32.

¹⁰³ Klaas A. Smelik, "My Servant Nebuchadnezzar," 133.

position where they are encouraged to express their religious identity in a way that compliments their environment but does not detract from their purpose. Therefore, this shows that by Nebuchadnezzar assuming the role of Yahweh's servant he is impacting the formation of religious identity.

In addition to Nebuchadnezzar himself, the symbolism of the yoke plays an important part in understanding the development of the Israelite religious identity. This is seen within the Book of Jeremiah which states, “To Zedekiah king of Judah I spoke in exactly the same terms. 'Bend your necks', I told him, 'to the yoke of the king of Babylon; serve him and his people and you will survive’” (Jer. 27:12). By the Prophet Jeremiah assigning the yoke to Nebuchadnezzar, it becomes an outward symbol of his role as Yahweh's servant. Furthermore, it impacts the religious identity of the Israelites by emphasizing expression. By seeing the yoke around Nebuchadnezzar, the Israelites not only understand Yahweh's position, but how they should outwardly be living out their faith.

Symbolism also functions as means of solidifying the religious identity through its representation of core principles and beliefs. These ideas are explored by Pnina Werbner in her work *Religious Identity*.¹⁰⁴ While discussing symbolism and the greater issues surrounding religious identity, Werbner asks, “How are we to understand the paradoxical statement that the totem is both a ‘flag’ of the group and yet not constitutive of pre-existing economic or social groups?.”¹⁰⁵ Although Werbner is delving into one of the questions she is exploring within her analysis, the quote does illustrate an important

¹⁰⁴ Pnina Werbner, “Religious Identity,” *The SAGE Handbook of Identities*, no.4 (January 2009), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446200889>.

¹⁰⁵ Pnina Werbner, “Religious Identity,” 236.

component of the value of symbolism within religious identity. She argues that the symbol both represents the group but does not account for everything that has allowed its creation. These ideas can be applied to the concept of the yoke, as it both represents an aspect of agriculture, but also signifies the power of Yahweh. This means that the yoke transforms from an economic to religious symbol. The Israelites then utilize the symbolism to reaffirm their identities as followers of Yahweh within Babylon.

Therefore, the concepts of the yoke and Nebuchadnezzar as the servant of Yahweh both impact the religious identity of the Israelites. This is achieved through the concepts of interaction between the environment and religion, diplomacy, as well as symbolism as the outward expression of religious identity.

Summary and Closing Remarks

In order to fully understand the concept and development of the Israelite religious identity within the Book of Jeremiah, it is important to recognize the impact of the call of submission, the submission itself, and an overall understanding regarding the development of religious identity. For the Israelites, Yahweh's determination that they submit to Babylon was perceived as being a false prophecy, since the action they were instructed to do seemed to be aligned with their previous actions, such as deviating from Yahweh, which resulted in their punishment. These instructions seemingly went against everything the Israelites had known, as much of their previous punishment was the result of disobeying Yahweh and pledging their allegiance to others. While many contend that this so-called false prophecy was the result of inaccuracies in the development of the

Masoretic text over time, this report argues that it is in fact a true and necessary religious learning lesson for the Israelites, which influences their development of religious identity. The call for submission puts the Israelites in a position where they must recognize Yahweh as the true creator, as he repeatedly reminds the Israelites that he provides power to nations and does not want the Israelites to worship any deities other than him, the impact of their faith and the fate of their future. The components of faith and future all play a big part in influencing religious identity. As a result, all of these concepts set forth a trajectory where the religious identity continues to be constructed. In addition, to Yahweh's guidance that the Israelites must submit to Babylon, the submission itself plays an important role in the outward expression of the Israelite religious identity. The relationship between religious identity and a counterculture, the culture of Babylon, which is in opposition to the Israelite culture, becomes apparent, which determines how the Israelites choose to live and carry themselves. This ultimately leads to a discussion of the significance of religious identity and selfhood, which shows the timeless nature of many of the religious teachings and themes found within the Book of Jeremiah.

CHAPTER III

PROPHET JEREMIAH: AN AID IN THE PRESERVATION OF RELIGIOUS IDENTITY

In many ways both the prophet Jeremiah, as well as the Israelites, struggled with Yahweh's will. The prophet Jeremiah became apprehensive when Yahweh called him to be his servant and when the Israelites questioned his instructions to submit to Babylon. To a large extent, the respective challenges each entity faces becomes the bond that binds them together. As stated in the previous chapters, the prophet Jeremiah's unique relationship with Yahweh and his religious servitude allows him to understand the plight of the Israelites and the reasons for Yahweh's actions towards them. Conversely, experiencing the exile and dealing with the confusion of their Babylonian environment required the Israelites to have a guide that could help them fulfill Yahweh's will. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah became the ideal vessel for Yahweh's desires to be communicated to his people. The significance of this relationship in regard to religious identity is illustrated through Yahweh's communication with the prophet Jeremiah, followed by the problems and the concepts of religious identity the prophet chooses to focus on, along with the response of the Israelites.

Yahweh's Desired Message About Religious Identity and Communication to His People

In order to fully understand the evolution of religious identity from the Israelite perspective, it is important to explore the desired communications that Yahweh wanted to have with the Israelites via the Prophet Jeremiah. Invoking the messenger formula repeatedly, יְהוָה אָמַר כֹּה־ (thus says the Lord), Jeremiah is portrayed as

conveying the divine will to the community. By repetition of the messenger formula (Jer.27: 4, 8, 15,16, 21), the voice of God through Jeremiah, is prominent in chapter 27 within the book of Jeremiah. One of the first messages that Yahweh shares is that the Israelites must be led by a prophet that is truly Yahweh's servant. The editorial presentation of the book of Jeremiah also establishes that fact by creating a deliberately constructed image of the prophet himself throughout the book.¹⁰⁶ The first chapter of this thesis dealt in detail with how the call narrative certified Jeremiah's authenticity and legitimized his prophetic ministry. Many scholars suggest that the call narrative foreshadowed the events of Jeremiah's ministry.¹⁰⁷ The authenticity of the prophet being chosen by Yahweh is depicted and validated within the Book of Jeremiah when Yahweh says,

Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold and they will be fruitful and increase in numbers. For them I shall raise up shepherds to shepherd over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord(Jer. 23:3-4).

In this portion of the Book of Jeremiah, Yahweh is acknowledging the division of his people, and their need for a guide. While it can be argued that this refers to the Davidic king, it can also be attributed to the prophet Jeremiah himself, as he ultimately is the guide that shepherds the Israelites back to order and assists in establishing a stronger religious identity. The Old Testament often pictures Israel as the flock of Yahweh (1 Kgs.22:17, Ps:95:7, Jer.31:10, Num.27:17). The term רֹעִים in a general sense signifies

¹⁰⁶ Carroll, *Jeremiah* , 35.

¹⁰⁷Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah*, 23.; James Philip Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope* (New York: Nabu Press, 1958) 33., E. Tyrell Green, *Book of Jeremiah, and Lamentations* (Rare books club Com, 2012), 25.

political leaders, but here the term indicates “spiritual leaders”¹⁰⁸ who would be acting out on behalf of Yahweh who “intervenes into the affairs of his flocks in restoring them, to security in their land and raising up new shepherd to care for them.”¹⁰⁹ Yahweh goes on to indicate that the shepherd will be of his own choosing, so that the Israelites have a leader who will guide them in the proper direction. This relates to religious identity, as it is evident from the above-mentioned quote, Yahweh is expressing that his people have lost their way and that they must be reminded of who they are. Part of having a unified religious identity is dependent upon solid leadership that reaffirms what the religious identity is composed of. This argument is based on the concept of religious identity put forth by Rein Nauta in his work, *People Make the Place: Religious Leadership and the Identity of the Local Congregation*,¹¹⁰ who says, “The identity of a congregation is determined by the attraction between people. It is the people who gather together who determine the identity of congregational life, people who have certain preferences and who share them with others.”¹¹¹ Nauta's perspective on religious identity not only forms an important component to the definition of religious identity¹¹² that is throughout this analysis but is also related to the question of the aforementioned quote regarding Yahweh's chosen shepherd. In terms of understanding the meaning of religious identity, Nauta demonstrates that social interaction influences how a religious identity is created. In the case of the Israelites, by having the people submit to Yahweh's chosen leader, they are acknowledging that the individual becomes the symbol of religious characterization

¹⁰⁸Robin Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs: Judicial Differentiation in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2008), 71-72.

¹⁰⁹ Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs*, 76.

¹¹⁰ Rein Nauta, “People Make the Place: Religious Leadership and the Identity of the Local Congregation,” *Pastoral Psychology* 56, no. 1 (October 2007): 46.

¹¹¹ Nauta, “People Make the Place,” 56.

¹¹² As part of the argument of this paper, part of the definition of religious identity is the concept's dependency on social interaction and leadership.

and belief. In this case, if Yahweh intends to pick the prophet Jeremiah for this task, the Israelites will understand that they must follow the prophet Jeremiah's plan, which is aligned with Yahweh. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah becomes Yahweh's conduit, so that the Israelites can not only return to the religious principles of Yahweh but develop a solid religious identity that can support their spirituality.

The concept that Yahweh is utilizing the prophet Jeremiah as a tool to bring unity amongst the Israelites is supported by Marvin A. Sweeney in his book, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible*.¹¹³ Sweeney spends his chapter exploring the Book of Jeremiah and Yahweh's role within the Babylonian exile. When discussing the purpose of Babylon, Sweeney says, "Jeremiah states unequivocally in Jer. 21:1-14 that Yahweh will fight against Zedekiah and Jerusalem. Only those who submit to Babylon will survive. Jeremiah 22:1-30 then presents a series of oracles in which Jeremiah condemns Kings Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin for their alleged lack of justice."¹¹⁴ In this section of Sweeney's analysis, he is pointing out that Yahweh makes it clear to the Israelites that their only option is to submit to Babylon if they are to continue to be seen as following Yahweh's will.

The instruction of Jeremiah to submission can be considered as pragmatic advice to the deportees to submit to the imperial reality. It can be understood as a "quietist acceptance of the sovereign demands of the king of Babylon."¹¹⁵ The notion of submission does not represent a failure or weakness, but it means an acceptance of divine judgment. The acceptance of the deportation is to be viewed as a weak response

¹¹³ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012).

¹¹⁴ Sweeney, *Tanak*, 306.

¹¹⁵ R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Lexington, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 172.

and submission must not be viewed as acceptance of tyranny but rather “submission to that condition which can be prophetically identified as divine judgment.”¹¹⁶ This is significant because the Israelites decision to accept submission to Babylon not only works to unite the Israelites under a common will, but that decision to submit impacts their identity by developing a common foundation. With a set of shared decision making, the Israelites begin to further develop a concentrated identity that outwardly displays its identity through group decision making. This means by submitting to Babylon as a group, the Israelites are outwardly expressing what it means to be part of Yahweh's chosen people.

The submission to Babylon also heightens religious identity, due to the lack of land associated with the Israelites. Since the Israelites are exiled and do not have a territory attributed to them, they are forced to rely on their faith and themselves. As a result, this creates a dynamic in which the Israelite religious identity must anchor itself on decision making and shared beliefs. The advice to submission can also be seen as an encouragement to become “peaceable subjects of Babylon” given the fact that the absence from the land would be lengthy and open-ended.¹¹⁷ There are two instances wherein the usage of *בָּנוּ בָּתִּים וְנִטְעוּ גִּזְּזִים* build houses . . . and plant gardens (Jer.29:5, 29) in the same chapter.

Correspondingly, in chapter 32, the motif is repeated but in this instance the emphasis is on the purchase of property in the form of houses and vineyards, apparently as a precursor to settlements, *בָּתִּים וְשָׂדֵה וְכַרְמִים* “houses, and fields, and

¹¹⁶Douglas Rawlinson Jones and Garbett Library, *Jeremiah* (London: Grand Rapids, Marshall Pickering, 1992), 361.

¹¹⁷ Bright, *Jeremiah*, 37.

vineyards will be purchased in this land (Jer.32:15); בָּאֶרֶץ הַשָּׂדֶה הַזֶּה fields will be bought in this land (Jer.32:43); בְּכֶסֶף יִקְנוּ שָׂדוֹת (fields will be bought with silver) (Jer. 32:44). These Biblical passages demonstrate not only the lack of land and its impact on Israelite religious identity, but how the submission to Babylon formulates their identity in a different way. The relationship between religious identity and land is discussed by Emma O'Donnell Polyakov, in her work *Constructions of Christian Identity and the Idea of the Holy Land: A Reciprocal Relationship*. While exploring the subject of land Polyakov states that, "The idea of the Holy Land is intertwined with the negotiation of religious and cultural identity, and in today's world, this idea cannot stand alone as a religious concept removed from political and social contingencies but is entangled in these conflicted contemporary realities."¹¹⁸ Polyakov is arguing that land is an essential component to religious identity. In the case of the Israelites, they are unable to retain this factor. This means submitting to the Babylonian culture shapes their identity as Yahweh's exiles, rather than the ownership of land. Furthermore, it also illustrates the relationship between Israelite religious identity and the cultural environment. Essentially, the tangible element of land plays an important role within the formation of religious identity, but since the Israelites must learn to live in a land that they have no control over, their identity is shaped by the culture of their captors.

The appeal of Jeremiah for submission can also be read as reflecting "political realism, urging the exiles to accommodate their imperial overlord."¹¹⁹ Furthermore, the

¹¹⁸Emma O'Donnell Polyakov, "Constructions of Christian Identity and the Idea of the Holy Land: A Reciprocal Relationship," *Israel Studies* 23, no. 1 (2018): 177, <https://doi.org/10.2979/israelstudies>.

¹¹⁹Walter Brueggemann, *To Build, to Plant: A Commentary on Jeremiah 26-52* (Edinburgh: Grand Rapids, 1991), 32.

prophet Jeremiah reiterates to the Israelites that their rejection of their spiritual principles is an act against Yahweh and justice. When discussing the purpose of Babylon, Sweeney says, “Jeremiah states unequivocally in Jer. 21:1-14 that Yahweh will fight against Zedekiah and Jerusalem...Only those who submit to Babylon will survive. Jer. 22:1-30 then presents a series of oracles in which Jeremiah condemns Kings Jehoiakim and Jehoiachin for their alleged lack of justice.”¹²⁰ In this section of Sweeney's analysis, he is pointing out that Yahweh makes it clear to the Israelites that their only option is to submit to Babylon if they are to continue to be seen as following Yahweh's will. Furthermore, the prophet Jeremiah reiterates to the Israelites that their rejection of their spiritual principles is an act against Yahweh and justice. This shows that Yahweh is communicating to the prophet Jeremiah that his goal is to not only reignite the flock, but to assist in shaping their religious identity. Sweeney's points can be seen within the Book of Jeremiah when Yahweh says, “I spoke to you in your prosperity, but you said, ‘I will not listen.’ This has been your way from your youth, for you have not obeyed my voice. The wind shall shepherd all your shepherds, and your lovers shall go into captivity; then you will be ashamed and dismayed because of all your wickedness” (Jer. 22:21-22). By the prophet Jeremiah focusing on justice, he is emphasizing and continuing Yahweh's statements concerning King Jehoiakim while King Jehoiachin who acted in ways that were contradictory to Yahweh, is reaffirming Yahweh's communication that the Israelites must submit to his will, in order to be considered as a follower. Essentially, one of the main messages that Yahweh seeks to impart on the Israelites is that they must be reignited in their devotion to him.

¹²⁰ Marvin A. Sweeney, *Tanak: A Theological and Critical Introduction to the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 306.

The Analogy of the Fig: Creating the Foundation of Israelite Identity

In addition to wanting to reunite his flock, Yahweh wants to ensure that he continues to build upon the foundation he has created within the Israelites as his chosen people by separating those who are unwilling to comply with his will. Yahweh works to achieve this distinction by utilizing the analogy of the fig with the prophet Jeremiah:

One basket had very good figs, like first-ripe figs, but the other basket had very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the Lord said to me, ‘what do you see, Jeremiah?’ I said, ‘figs, the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.’ Then the word of the Lord came to me: Thus, says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans (Jer.24: 2-5).

The double use of the adjective טו ‘good’ within verses two through five in chapter 24 of the Book of Jeremiah underlines Yahweh’s special consideration for the exiles to be good¹²¹ and his acknowledgement for them to be like ‘the good figs’.¹²² טו also can indicate “for good” or “for a good purpose”¹²³ and ultimately it is a display of “the intention of Yahweh’s action.”¹²⁴ “The exiles are deemed as ‘good’ by Yahweh and their goodness does not rest in themselves but in sovereign assertions of Yahweh who announces them to be good.”¹²⁵ Jeremiah categorizes the exiles taken away to Babylon in 597 B.C. as the “good figs” who will be the privileged ones for the gracious restoration of Yahweh in the future (Jer.24:4-7, 29:10-14). Yahweh seems to be partial to those who

¹²¹ Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs*, 81.

¹²² William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 605.

¹²³ Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs*, 81.

¹²⁴ Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 171.

¹²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2003), 218.

have gone into the exile, just as someone would show partiality toward the good figs.¹²⁶ Yahweh points out to the prophet Jeremiah that he wants to prevent his chosen people from transforming into "bad figs," meaning that Yahweh desires to save the Israelites from deteriorating.

This is illustrated within the Book of Jeremiah in the following, " 'Yahweh, the God of Israel, says this, "As these figs are good, so I mean to concern myself with the welfare of the exiles of Judah whom I have sent from this place to the country of the Chaldeans. My eyes will watch over them for their good, to bring them back to this country, to build them up and not to break them down, to plant them and not to uproot them" (Jer. 24:5-6). In this quote, Yahweh is expressing his intentions to help the Israelites and to find ways to stabilize and sustain them. In order to accomplish this, Yahweh indicates that it will be the prophet Jeremiah's goal to prevent this from happening which is demonstrated by the fact that Yahweh expresses his intentions about the Israelites to the prophet Jeremiah and has him engage with the fig analogy. Yahweh's desires are also aligned with religious identity, as his yearning to separate the bad from the good becomes an effort to concentrate his principles within the people. This is seen by the fact that Yahweh tells the prophet Jeremiah that he plans to "plant" and not "uproot" the Israelites, by planting it can be inferred that Yahweh wants to ground and stabilize the Israelites. Part of the planting approach includes providing the Israelites with roots in the form of a religious identity. By elevating those willing to serve Yahweh, the Israelites as a community are able to see what they are supposed to emulate. Thus, it creates an environment where the Israelites start to engage in consciously thinking of

¹²⁶John H. Walton, "Vision Narrative Wordplay and Jeremiah Xxiv," *Vetus Testamentum* 39, no. 4 (1989): 508-509, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853389x00291>.

their religious identity in terms of their internal self, spirituality, and outward expression.

The fig analogy and its relationship to the prophet Jeremiah, highlights Yahweh's communication that elevating the strongest followers is building the foundation for the Israelite religious identity in the future. The way Jeremiah advises about houses, gardens, and marriage suggests that he believed it possible to survive in land which other prophets might have called unclean and impossible. This survival meant to be a long-range proposition because a house or a family is not built in a few days! Thus, Jeremiah's instruction indicates that the exile should be home, that there would be no reversing the collapse begun in 597. Jeremiah predicted a long, three-generation exile and the resulting message was the same for both the Judean remnant and the exiles: To the Judeans, prophet Jeremiah prophesied, "Thus says the Lord: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, 'Behold, the vessels of the Lord's house will soon be brought back from Babylon,' for it is a lie which they are prophesying to you. Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live. Why should this city become a desolation?" (Jer.27:16-17). "The restoration of the vessels" is an indication of the re-establishment of the continuity of the cults that was somehow interrupted because of the disaster in 597."¹²⁷ To the exiles Jeremiah said, "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for

¹²⁷Peter R. Ackroyd, *Studies in the Religious Tradition of the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1987), 55.

in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer.27:4-7). The very best “figs” were those who had already begun the exile (24:4-5).¹²⁸ The distinguishing element in the prophet Jeremiah from the other prophets was his “interpretation of Israel’s prospects for survival, based on the degree to which Israel is in compliance with the covenant.”¹²⁹ The concept of Yahweh’s message to the prophet Jeremiah that the Israelites must be salvaged is addressed by Gary E. Yates in his work, *The People Have Not Obeyed: A Literary and Rhetorical Study of Jeremiah 26-45*.¹³⁰ When discussing the prophet Jeremiah’s approach with the Israelites, Yates states, “In light of the presence of words of hope, it appears unduly skeptical to hold to the position that Jeremiah held forth no hope for the future of Israel, and the most likely explanation for the rise of chapters 30-33 is that this section is reflective of the teaching of the prophet himself.”¹³¹ Yates is arguing that while the prophet Jeremiah confronts the Israelites about their actions against Yahweh, he still retains hope that they are fated to rise up again and be considered under Yahweh’s favor, which translates to the prophet’s approach to the Israelites, especially concerning the subject of religious identity. This shows that Yahweh is communicating that the Israelites would have to grow in their identity as his chosen people, so that they can proceed into the next chapter of their future. This is due to the fact that in order to obtain the future Yahweh has to offer the Israelites, they must repeatedly submit to his will, which is largely tied to reaffirming beliefs and outward expressions of faith which are all components of religious identity itself. Therefore, the prophet Jeremiah becomes a vital

¹²⁸Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Mifflintown, PA: Sigler Press, 2002), 51.

¹²⁹Victor Harold Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 26.

¹³⁰ Gary E. Yates, “*The People Have Not Obeyed: A Literary and Rhetorical Study of Jeremiah 26-45*” (Faculty diss., Liberty University, Lynchburg, Virginia, 1998,

¹³¹Yates, “The People Have Not Obeyed,”

component in assisting the Israelites reach their goals. Basically, Yahweh's communication that the Israelites must be saved from falling astray, and that the devoted Israelites should be supported, are all major components of Yahweh's message.

Communication Through Punishment

In addition to desiring that the Israelites be unified and reaffirmed, Yahweh indicates that the concentration of religious identity, which in this case means an identity that is stable, strong, and unified, must be learned via their exile. Yahweh has recognized that the Israelites have rebelled or questioned his authority and that they must endure hard lessons in order to understand his power and the value of their religious identity. This is illustrated within the Book of Jeremiah in the following,

Therefore, thus says the Lord of hosts: because you have not obeyed my words, I am going to send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, even for king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these nations around; I will utterly destroy them, and make them an object of horror and of hissing and an everlasting disgrace. And I will banish from them the sound of mirth and the sound of gladness, the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp (Jer. 25:9-10).

Yahweh's communication at this point concerns his intervention within the Israelites. Through his message, Yahweh is stating that he will push the Israelites harder to recognize that they have been committing wrongs and will have to be punished. Nebuchadnezzar, whom Yahweh used to bring judgment upon his people, is said to be facing judgment and he will be accountable for all his doings which is exemplified through Yahweh saying he will “utterly destroy them,” thus showing he can build and break nations. The Prophet Jeremiah reminded the people of Judah about “their obligation to the covenant with Yahweh” and he

warned them of punishment that would befall on them at their failure to keep the covenantal relationship.¹³² There are several instances in the book wherein the harsh threat of prophet Jeremiah, “sword, famine, and pestilence” occurs (Jer.14:12, 21:7, 9, 24:10, 27:8, 13, 29:19, 32:24, 36, 34:17, 38:2, 42:17, 22, 44:13). He declared deliverance lies in the hand of Yahweh when he wills it.¹³³ Although the focus of Yahweh's communication is punishment and lesson learning, it is also related to the development of religious identity. This is because the challenges associated with Yahweh's punishment would force the Israelites to think about who they were as Yahweh's chosen people, and how this affects the environment to which they belong. Punishment for the Israelites means that they are forced to live amongst the Babylonian culture, but retain their loyalty to Yahweh. The experience of a scenario like this, pushes the Israelites to self-reflect on their identity. The argument regarding the punishment of the Israelites, as well as their religious identity and future is discussed by Marius Terblanche in his work, *The Future in the Land belongs to us: Conflicting Perceptions on the Land in Jeremiah 32: 1-44*. While exploring the significance of land within the Book of Jeremiah, Terblanche notes that, “Exile stood for a partial estrangement between Yahweh and Israel. To be in the land denoted that you were the ‘true Israel’. The significance of the purchase of the field in Anathoth, a piece of land fated and designated for the Israelites, was thus shifted entirely to the future”¹³⁴ Although Terblanche is focusing on land, his analysis of the relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh reaffirms the belief that punishment was

¹³²Matthews, *Social World of the Hebrew Prophets*, 21.

¹³³Carroll Stuhlmuehler and Martin McNamara, *Old Testament Message: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1981), 19.

¹³⁴Marius Terblanche, “The Future in the Land Belongs to Us : Conflicting Perceptions on the Land in Jeremiah 32:1-44 (LXX 39:1-44),” *Old Testament Essays* 33, no. 1 (2020) : 119, <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2020/v33n1a7>.

not only a way for Yahweh to unite his flock, but to construct a stronger religious identity. This is depicted through Terblanche's emphasis on the “estrangement” the Israelites had with Yahweh, but there is also a focus on the future. Since the Israelites effectively became separated from Yahweh through their exile, they had to depend on their religious principles, and the shepherds Yahweh sent them via chosen prophets such as Jeremiah.

In terms of religious principles, the Israelites found themselves referring to Yahweh's promise concerning land and continuing to be Yahweh's chosen people. These tenets of faith then worked to assist in the development of an identity that focused on obtaining these things. This implies what Yahweh's punishment achieved in that it put the Israelites in a position where they needed to reaffirm their devotion to Yahweh and develop a strong religious identity. Therefore, the punishment that Yahweh communicates to the prophet Jeremiah and the Israelites has significance from both a unity and identity perspective.

Overall, much of Yahweh's communication with the prophet Jeremiah is with regard to his concerns about the status of his chosen people. The connection between punishment and identity can be seen through Amy Kalmanofsky's exploration of the Israelite Babylonian exile within her work, *Israel's Open Sore in the Book of Jeremiah*.¹³⁵ While discussing the relationship between the Israelites and Yahweh during their exile Kalmanofsky notes that, “Afflicted Israel is seen as a pollutant that needs to be isolated from God and the community. Afflicted skin also signifies a society in crisis, a society that is vulnerable and no longer whole.”¹³⁶ Although Kalmanofsky discusses the Israelite exile through the lens of the afflicted body, her statements help to clarify how Yahweh's punishment impacts the

¹³⁵ Amy Kalmanofsky, “Israel’s Open Sore in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 135, no. 2 (2016): 247-263, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jbl.2016.0022>.

¹³⁶ Kalmanofsky, “Israel's Open Sore,” 232.

Israelite religious identity. As Kalmanofsky states, the Israelites are afflicted which means not only does it result in their separation from Yahweh, but they become a fragmented community. Kalmanofsky's analysis demonstrates that in order to regain a sense of wholeness and a relationship with Yahweh, the punishment of exile is necessary. As mentioned previously, enduring life within a community that is far different from the Israelite way of life encourages Yahweh's people to consolidate and reaffirm their beliefs regarding what it means to be an Israelite. Yahweh has noted that the Israelites continue to reject his teachings and acknowledge him as the one true greater power. This is illustrated within the Book of Jeremiah in the following, "And do not follow other gods to serve and worship them, and do not provoke me with things you yourselves have made, and then I shall not harm you" (Jer. 25:6). In this portion of the Bible, Yahweh is indicating that the Israelites must devote themselves solely to him, in order to avoid his wrath. This also ties back to the prophet Jeremiah's emphasis on the Israelites willingness to follow false prophets, thus moving themselves away from Yahweh, and fragmenting an identity that was meant to be built around the devotion of Yahweh. As a result, Yahweh focuses on ensuring that the Israelites are told to only listen to his chosen shepherds and must face a level of punishment and discipline. In terms of punishment, it is done not only to reignite the Israelite faith, but to solidify their religious identity. To accomplish these tasks, Yahweh communicates to the prophet Jeremiah that he must look at the Israelites like a basket of figs, and to save them from ruin, which leads him to approach the Israelites in a variety of ways. This idea is demonstrated by Elizabeth R. Hayes in her chapter contribution "Of Branches, Pots, and Figs: Jeremiah's Visions from a Cognitive Perspective," within the book *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*. While discussing the meaning of the good and bad figs,

Hayes states, “The agricultural reference to figs points toward the society is a plant conceptual metaphor: individuals are fruit, implying that the people represented are the culmination of the growing process.”¹³⁷ Within her statement, Hayes is arguing the good and bad figs represent the growth Yahweh has designed for the Israelites, which she later alludes to the good figs associated with exile, and the bad figs with the Israelites in Jerusalem. Despite being good and bad, each fig represents the Israelites as a whole, which translates to the ongoing theme of Yahweh designing an environment that encourages the Israelites to reunite under a whole identity.

The Prophet Jeremiah's Focus on Israelite Challenges

Following his instructions from Yahweh, the prophet Jeremiah sought to assist the Israelites meet Yahweh's expectations in a variety of ways. One of the facets that the prophet Jeremiah focuses on is the idea of nationhood¹³⁸ in relationship to Yahweh. When referring to nationhood within this section, it is based on the thoughts put forth by Marian Burchardt and Hovhannes Hovhannisyan in their work *Religious vs Secular Nationhood: Multiple Secularities in Post-Soviet Armenia*.¹³⁹ When discussing the relationship between nationhood and religion they say, “Marian argued that religion is particularly likely to serve as a source and carrier of national identity in dominated nations if the majority religion of imperial powers differs from that of the colony or dominated nation.”¹⁴⁰ In this case the authors are pointing out that there is a direct correlation between religious identity and

¹³⁷ Hans M. Barstad and Reinhard Gregor Kratz, *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 101.

¹³⁸ Nationhood in this thesis is considered to be an element of religious identity.

¹³⁹ Marian Burchardt and Hovhannes Hovhannisyan, “Religious vs Secular Nationhood: Multiple Secularities in Post-Soviet Armenia,” *Social Compass* 63, no. 4 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0037768616663981>.

¹⁴⁰ Burchardt and Hovhannisyan, “Religious vs Secular Nationhood,” 429.

nationhood, that it is a mutually influential relationship. This relates directly to the Israelites as they are looking forward to establishing their own nation but find themselves submitting to another nation. An example of this is depicted in the following:

For thus the Lord, the God of Israel, said to me: Take from my hand this cup of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it. They shall drink and stagger and go out of their minds because of the sword that I am sending among them. So, I took the cup from the Lord's hand, and made all the nations to whom the Lord sent me drink it (Jer. 25: 15-17).

In this quote, the prophet Jeremiah is saying that Yahweh has instructed him to work amongst the nations. This directly deals with the Israelite predicament concerning their submission to Babylon. As stated previously, the Babylonian culture proved to be a challenging experience for the Israelites, as it forced them to live in an environment of persecution. For the prophet Jeremiah the Israelite issues faced within Babylon are indicative of the greater problems they have within themselves and with Yahweh. The Israelites had repeatedly turned against Yahweh and lost their identity in the process, this is illustrated by the fact that there is an ongoing theme of fragmentation associated with the Israelites. They fail to listen to Yahweh's instructions, they acquire false prophets as their leaders, and hesitated to submit to Babylon. These all suggest an Israelite identity that is disjointed. By Yahweh giving the prophet Jeremiah instructions to give nations the "wine of wrath," it is effectively creating a situation where the Israelites must be reminded that everything is given by Yahweh, and a true nation is the one that follows Yahweh's will.

This is due to the fact that Yahweh utilizes vengeance by giving many foreign kings his cup, which demonstrates to the Israelites that he has supreme power over the world. Israel cannot exist without Yahweh as the concept of being the people of Yahweh is

at the heart of their identity. This idea comes from the pattern of the Israelites constantly being reminded of their loyalty to Yahweh and experiencing the separation from him and the results of that. Without Yahweh intervening on their behalf, they are unable to fully obtain positive rewards, which causes a self-reflection and drive to express an identity based upon Yahweh. Thus, the prophet Jeremiah focuses on nationhood as a means of confronting the Israelites about their past and treatment of Yahweh, as well as showing them what true religious identity means.

The concept of nationhood as an issue for the Israelites can also be seen through its relationship to the Babylonian environment and the land the Israelites want to experience freedom and control in. Terblanche argues that there is a correlation between the land and the Israelite journey for identity. An example of this is depicted when Terblanche says, “What lies behind the insertion of 32:36-41 in the text is no longer a group pressing for return and ownership of the land, but apparently a group pressing for religious renewal, a group that has Jerusalem as its center, while also including the Diaspora.”¹⁴¹ Terblanche is asserting that one of the key components of religious renewal for the Israelites is to have a unified foundation and identity.

In the case of Terblanche's example this comes in the form of land, but it also highlights the issues the prophet Jeremiah is attempting to help the Israelites with. The Israelites are lost and divided and unless they can unify and reaffirm their commitment to Yahweh, then they cannot build a community or move forward. This idea is highlighted by Terblanche's focus on religious renewal as the only medium of a return to unification with

¹⁴¹Terblanche, “The Future in the Land Belongs to Us,” 116.

Yahweh. Furthermore, he notes that this is addressed to the Diaspora as well, meaning no matter the amount of separation, Yahweh seeks to unify his flock. In addition, the religious renewal is connected to land; since the Israelites lack this component, it pushes the development of their identity to be reliant on their experiences within Babylon, rather than the land they were hoping to receive and build upon.

Expression of Faith and Identity

While the concept of nationhood is an integral issue for the prophet Jeremiah, so is the element of faith expression in terms of identity. One of the challenges the prophet Jeremiah sees with the Israelites is that their faith expression, does not always align with Yahweh's will, or promotes a solid religious identity. This is illustrated within the Book of Jeremiah when the prophet Jeremiah is expressing Yahweh's teachings:

Thus, says the Lord: stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be that they will listen, all of them and will turn from their evil way that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doing (Jer. 26:2-3).

Within this section, the prophet Jeremiah is asserting that those who come to the Temple of Yahweh with a willingness to listen to his teachings will be rewarded. This shows that the prophet Jeremiah is acknowledging that some Israelites would go to the temple, but that they were not sincere in their actions towards Yahweh. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah is ordering them to stop turning away from their religious beliefs, which is an attempt reaffirm their allegiance to Yahweh. This is illustrated through the instruction that the Israelites must turn away from the evil ways, since the alternative and opposition to the evil is Yahweh and his will.

At the same time, the prophet Jeremiah is also pointing out that the expression of faith is part of religious identity. This is seen through the emphasis placed on the Israelites coming to “worship in the house of the Lord,” as worship is synonymous with the outward expression of religious identity. Furthermore, he is arguing that to profess this sense of self, the outward expression of faith should correspond with inner beliefs. By doing this the prophet Jeremiah is not only associating the Israelite actions with Yahweh but is also highlighting how expression is at play in terms of identity because he addresses turning back towards Yahweh, and part of this has to do with the outward expression of religious identity via public worship.

Part of the relationship between outward faith expression and inward identity is dependent on the Israelite relationship with Yahweh and the future. While exploring the exile and the Israelites as the chosen people, Terblanche notes that the estrangement between the Israelites and Yahweh becomes a significant obstacle in their attempts to reach their goals. Terblanche's argument is illustrated as follows, “This implied that those who remained in the land under Gedaliah’s leadership after 587 B.C.E. could argue that God was on their side. The significance of the purchase of the field in Anathoth was thus shifted entirely to the future.”¹⁴² In this section, Terblanche is showing how having Yahweh's support is indicative of success in the future, by focusing on the Israelite hope to obtain land of their own, and the hope is symbolized by Anathoth.

¹⁴²Marius Terblanche, “‘The Future in the Land Belongs to Us’: Conflicting Perceptions on the Land in Jeremiah 32:1-44 (LXX 39:1-44),” *Old Testament Essays* 33, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.17159/2312-3621/2020/v33n1a7>, 119.

As stated previously, religious identity is often associated with land. Since the Israelites do not have this during the Babylonian exile, they are forced to rely on the culture around them to aid in the development of their faith. At the same time, however, the hope of obtaining a land to call their own also influences the creation of the Israelite identity because it provides motivation for them to reaffirm their devotion to Yahweh, which is at the heart of religious identity. Taking this quote and correlating it with the aforementioned paragraph, if the Israelites are the “true Israel” then their outward expressions of faith, must correspond with sincere belief and action. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah has to encourage the Israelites to see the error in their ways and pledge their allegiance to Yahweh in order to accomplish the goals set by Yahweh for their future.

Basically, in order for the Israelites to enter into Yahweh's good graces they would have to resolve their issues. The prophet Jeremiah attempts to point out to the Israelites that the only way to move past their problems is to unify and reaffirm their faith to Yahweh. In addition, their outward expressions of faith must be matched with sincere action. This shows that each of these problems is rooted in the concept of religious identity. Without having a strong religious identity, the Israelites are unable to fulfill Yahweh's will.

Religious Identity and the Prophet Jeremiah

In addition to emphasizing some of the issues that the Israelites are experiencing in terms of their faith, the prophet Jeremiah also focuses on the concept of religious identity. One of the proposals he makes is to have the Israelites view their religious

aspect of self as part of a contribution to both themselves and society. This is depicted when the prophet Jeremiah says, “Marry and have sons and daughters; choose wives for your sons, find husbands for your daughters so that these can bear sons and daughters in their turn; you must increase there and not decrease. Work for the good of the city to which I have exiled you; pray to Yahweh on its behalf, since on its welfare yours depends” (Jer.29: 6-7). In this quote, the prophet Jeremiah is saying that the Israelites should procreate and contribute to their environment, while honoring Yahweh. These ideas are continued within the Book of Jeremiah within the following: לָכֵן יִהְיֶה בְּשִׁלּוּמָהּ כִּי יִהְיֶה אֵל-בְּעֵדָה וְהִתְפַּלְּלוּ שָׁמָּה אֶתְכֶם הַגְּלִיתִי אֲשֶׁר הָעִיר שָׁלוֹם אֶת-וְדָרְשׁוּ לָכֵן יִהְיֶה בְּשִׁלּוּמָהּ כִּי יִהְיֶה אֵל-בְּעֵדָה וְהִתְפַּלְּלוּ שָׁמָּה אֶתְכֶם הַגְּלִיתִי אֲשֶׁר הָעִיר שָׁלוֹם אֶת-וְדָרְשׁוּ שָׁלוֹם (Jer. 29:7). “The uprooted and orphaned exiles are invited to invest their lives in this new realm of blessing”.¹⁴³ Yahweh’s promises of fertility and growth resonate the mandate of Gene.1:28 and indicates the covenant curses of Deut.28 have been rescinded.¹⁴⁴ Nevertheless, this divine initiative for the prosperity in Babylon and their future restoration is dependent on the way Israel responds to “Yahweh’s fresh turn towards Israel.”¹⁴⁵ This is tied to religious identity because it is encouraging the Israelites to find ways to bring harmony to the society in which they live. The harmony relates to religious identity because it is encouraging the Israelites to merge their identity with the Babylonian culture around them. Instead of instructing them to rebel against their persecutors, the prophet Jeremiah is asserting that by leading with an identity built around Yahweh they can only expect to reap positive rewards. As a result, the prophet Jeremiah is demonstrating that religious identity influences and is influenced by environment.

¹⁴³ Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah* 26-52, 72.

¹⁴⁴ Plant, *Good Figs, Bad Figs*, 127.

¹⁴⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 440.

Furthermore, he is stating that expression of an identity is essential for growth both as an individual and as a community because by seeking harmony with the Babylonian culture the Israelites are learning to expand and develop their religious identity.

The Israelite relationship between religious identity and society reflects a tension that impacts the sense of self but can also build communities. Pnina Werbner explores how religious identity develops and argues that it plays a significant role in the development of all components of society. This is evident and true in the case of the Israelites, when Werbner states, “They raise novel questions about the conservative or democratizing role of religion in the public sphere. But religious identity is also a matter of individual subjectivity. Hence, in the final part of this chapter I explore the emergence of complex religious identities as dimensions of personhood and personal experience.”¹⁴⁶ Werbner is arguing that religious identity is a mix of the perceived sense of self, as well as the experiences of the individual, which is interpreted from his uses of the dimensions of personhood and personal experience. Furthermore, she asserts that the identity itself forms a unique relationship with the public sphere, as it shapes societal components, but also creates a division between the outward and inward sense of self. This is important as it relates to the Israelites since they lived in the challenging environment of Babylon. As a result, Babylon adds to their personal experiences, which shapes their identity. At the same time, their faith is also having an impact within Babylonian society since it exists and is practiced. Therefore, the Israelite identity impacts Babylon, but is also shaped by the Babylonian experience of persecution.

¹⁴⁶ Werbner, “Religious Identity,” 234.

Formation of Religious Identity

Although the prophet Jeremiah devotes special attention to the interaction between religious identity and the environment, he also emphasizes how religious identity builds a community. The prophet Jeremiah spends a good deal of time arguing that religious identity is part of the building blocks of life, and one of the tools needed to earn salvation from Yahweh. The following quote emphasizes procreation and children, which can be seen as the continuation of life. This is illustrated when the prophet Jeremiah says,

“לְחַצְיוֹ כָּל-עַל וּפְקֻדָּתִי תִּכּוֹן לִפְנֵי וַעֲדָתוֹ בְּקֶדֶם בְּנֵי וְהָיוּ” Their children shall be as of old; their congregation shall be established before me; and I will punish all who oppress them. And you shall be my people and I will be your God (Jer. 30: 20, 22).

Within this section, the prophet Jeremiah says that Yahweh's intent is that a community forms, and that he will be their protector. Again, Yahweh's reference to community is correlated with religious identity because he is calling for unity and an establishment sent before him, thus encouraging the Israelites to reaffirm their identity. This is also a moment where the identity is highlighted as an integral component of community. Sharing a sense of belonging, companionship, and loyalty is what allows the Israelite faith to grow and prosper, thus showcasing the importance of religious identity.

The prophet Jeremiah's focus on religious identity is also tied to the concepts of evolution and movement, which not only builds communities, but serves as the internal differentiation between right and wrong. Werbner suggests that religious identity is not stagnant, but continually evolving. This is portrayed when Werbner says, “Religious identities are imbued with power, continuity and sentimental force. Like other identities,

they do not exist in isolation but are located within generative, open, ‘totemic’ systems”.¹⁴⁷ Werbner is asserting that there is power for change, as well as emotion associated with religious identity. In addition, she is arguing that religious identities are impacted by the environment they are a part of. This can be related back to the religious identity of the Israelites as Yahweh calls for their identity to be solidified, in order to combat the power of Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian persecution. Furthermore, the development of the Israelite is ongoing, it reflects the exile, the current predicament within Babylon, and the future. Therefore, this shows that the Israelite religious identity is transformative and retains a form of power.

Essentially, the prophet Jeremiah focuses on the Israelite religious identity by highlighting the relationship between this concept of identity and community. From one perspective, the prophet Jeremiah emphasizes that part of retaining an identity that Yahweh desires is giving back to the community. This is compounded by Werbner who argues that religious identity plays a powerful role in shaping and being shaped by the environment it finds itself in, while also transforming over time. This leads to the second perspective that the prophet Jeremiah focuses on which is that a strong religious identity is the backbone of community development.

The Israelite Response to the Prophet Jeremiah

While the prophet Jeremiah puts a spotlight on the Israelite's challenges and religious identity, the Israelites themselves were not always receptive to what the prophet Jeremiah had to say. The prophet Jeremiah notes that the Israelites continue to turn away from Yahweh's teachings. This is seen when the prophet Jeremiah notes:

¹⁴⁷ Werbner, “Religious Identity,” 235.

זֶה הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה וְעַד יְהוּדָה מֶלֶךְ אֲמוֹן בֶּן- לִיאֲשִׁימוֹ שָׁנָה עֲשָׂרָה שָׁלֹשׁ מֵו-
וְלֹא וַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁרֶם אֲלֵיכֶם וְאֲדָבָר אֲלֵי יְהוָה דְּבַר- הַיָּה שָׁנָה וְעֲשָׂרִים שָׁלֹשׁ
שָׁמַעְתֶּם,
שָׁמַעְתֶּם וְלֹא וְשָׁלַח הַשָּׁמַע הַנִּבְאִים עֲבָדָיו כָּל- אֶת- אֲלֵיכֶם יְהוָה וְשָׁלַח
For twenty- three years, from the
thirteenth year of king Josiah son of Amon of Judah to this day,
the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken
persistently to you, but you have not listened. And though the
Lord persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have
neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear (Jer. 25:3-4).

In this quote, the prophet Jeremiah is indicating that he will not quit his duty in attempting to reunite the Israelites with Yahweh, yet he is noting that they are continuing to turn their backs on the religious teachings. וְאֲשֶׁרֶם אֲלֵיכֶם וְאֲדָבָר reflects the methodology of the Deuteronomist highlighting the “reward of obedience in continuous dwelling forever on the land given by Yahweh.”¹⁴⁸ This shows that despite Yahweh and the prophet Jeremiah's best efforts, there are still those who choose not to adhere to their religious practices and beliefs. While this reflects the strained relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites, it also depicts how the concept of religious identity is not constant. Some of the Israelites choose to revolve around their religious identity and Yahweh, while others value an identity based on their environment and interests, which is the clear value system implied regarding those who turn away from Yahweh's wills and instructions. This reiterates the idea that religious identity has a mutual relationship with the society it is located in. Furthermore, it signifies the internal struggle that the Israelites have in regard to shaping their identity in terms of Yahweh's desires.

The Israelites who choose to be ignorant of Yahweh and the prophet Jeremiah's guidance can be attributed to the impact of Babylonian rule. L. Juliana Classens explores

¹⁴⁸Geoffrey H. Parke-Taylor, *The Formation of the Book of Jeremiah: Doublets and Recurring Phrases* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 111.

how the Israelites were impacted by Babylon within her work, *Going home? Exiles, inciles and refugees in the Book of Jeremiah*. When discussing how the Israelites reacted to the Babylonian environment Claasens says, “In the context of the terrible events associated with the mighty Babylonian empire...one finds evidence of a number of divergent voices that exist during this time as to how to survive imperial domination.”¹⁴⁹ In this section, Claasens is noting that the extreme environment found within Babylon was enough to encourage Israelites to move away from Yahweh. This results in many of the Israelites putting their focus on other entities, or even their own desires. In addition to turning away from Yahweh, these issues also create obstacles for the prophet Jeremiah, as others who falsely declare themselves as prophets gain popularity amongst the Israelites. The prophet Jeremiah then must persevere in his attempts to re-instill religion amongst the Israelites.

Israelites and Rebellion

Not only do the Israelites turn away from many of the lessons the prophet Jeremiah sought to preach, but some chose to rebel against him, and Yahweh's will. Within the Book of Jeremiah, it is noted that some of the Israelites felt threatened by what the prophet stood for. The threats made against the prophet are illustrated in the following,

וְכָל־וְהַנְּבִיאִים הַפְּהֻגִים אָתּוֹ וַיִּתְּפְּשׂוּ הָעָם כָּל־אֶל־לְדַבֵּר יְהוָה צְנֹה אֲשֶׁר־כָּל־אֶת לְדַבֵּר יִרְמְיָהוּ

תְּמִית מוֹת לְאֹמֶר הָעָם And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the

¹⁴⁹L. Juliana Claassens, “Going Home? Exiles, Inciles and Refugees in the Book of Jeremiah,” *HTS Theological Studies* 75, no. 3 (2019) : 12, <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i3.5149>.

people laid hold of him, saying, 'you shall die' (Jer. 26: 8). In this scene, many of the Israelites have turned against the prophet Jeremiah and threaten to kill him for this preaching. This not only shows how the Israelites struggle to conform to Yahweh's will, but the power of identity, as well as environment, when they feel threatened. This is due to the fact that the prophet Jeremiah represents Yahweh's will, and since Yahweh is the core of the Israelite identity, turning against the prophet Jeremiah is turning away from their own identity. The fact that some of the Israelites take an active role fighting against the prophet Jeremiah shows how living within the Babylonian culture can influence religious identity.

Part of the reason that many Israelites chose to utilize violence against the prophet Jeremiah is due to power opportunities. Claassens spends much of her analysis looking at how violence defined the Babylonian experience. While exploring the impact of violence on the Israelites, Claassens asserts that, "(Israelites)...just as the survivors of violence were starting to put the pieces of their fractured lives together. And this time the threat does not come from outside forces but from factions within, who in the leadership vacuum are vying for power."¹⁵⁰ Through this section Claassens is emphasizing that instability within Babylon was equally as threatening as outside enemies. As a result, in fighting created an environment where people, including the Israelites, vied for control. By the prophet Jeremiah attempting to help the Israelites, he is seen as a threat to those who have or are working to attain power. Many of the Israelites might have seen the prophet Jeremiah's actions as his own attempt to gain control as well. Therefore, the

¹⁵⁰Claassens, "Going Home? Exiles, Inciles and Refugees," 3.

violence the Israelites threatened to make against the prophet Jeremiah, can be seen as being built on the concept of gaining power.

Essentially, the Israelites did not always listen to the prophet Jeremiah, and at times even threatened violence against him. This reflects on how the hostile and unstable Babylonian environment transformed the Israelite identity. In the case of the Israelites, some believed it was more profitable to focus on earthly pursuits, as demonstrated by their attempts to ignore or even make threats against the teachings of the prophet. As a result, this reiterates that religious identity can be positively or negatively impacted by the experiences found within the environment it is placed in.

Summary and Closing Remarks

Overall, religious identity for the Israelites is based on a number of factors. The first is the communication given by Yahweh to both the Israelites as well as the prophet Jeremiah. Yahweh has realized that the Israelites have continued to ignore his teachings and feels that they need to reaffirm their loyalty to them, by way of having a unified identity. In order to achieve this, Yahweh seeks to punish the Israelites as a form of discipline to remind them that he is the one true absolute power. In addition, he informs the prophet Jeremiah that his goal is to save the Israelites from ruin. The prophet Jeremiah chose to achieve these goals by focusing on their problems, such as their relationship to a national identity, as well as how their outward expressions match their inner beliefs. Along with attempting to solve the Israelite challenges preventing them from reuniting with Yahweh, the prophet Jeremiah also emphasizes the promotion of religious identity. He accomplishes this feat by pointing out how religious identity is

formed, the contributions it can make, and the overall development of communities based on this concept. While the prophet Jeremiah attempted to utilize a well-rounded approach, many of the Israelites shunned or threatened him because it challenged what they wanted to do within their environment. In many ways, the experiences of the Israelites are relevant to religious groups today, particularly in areas where certain religions might not be well-received, people of faith will be tempted to have their identity eroded or eradicated in its entirety.

CHAPTER IV

RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

In many ways the Biblical account of the Israelites, the Prophet Jeremiah, and Babylon exile seems like a chapter of life that is far removed from the modern experience. Descriptions of Prophet Jeremiah's yoke, Yahweh's selection of Nebuchadnezzar as his servant, and the Israelite exile are arguably perceived as distant and non-relatable events by the common lay person. Despite the imaginative quality that is often attributed to aspects of the Bible, such as those found within the Book of Jeremiah, the challenges and lessons found within the Biblical text are relevant today. As the globe has continued to evolve since the time of the Israelites, the formation of culture, and the persecution of different religions has remained constant. Christianity has not been exempted from discrimination or obstacles, as Christians around the world have unique stories about the capacity or inability to practice their faith unchallenged.

Although the Israelite experience within Babylon has many relevant messages and experiences in regard to its place within modern situations, it is important to note that while some similarities will be made within this chapter, that there are distinct differences as well. The Babylonian exile was a temporary form of punishment for the Israelites, due to their failure to follow Yahweh's guidance. As a result, one cannot claim that the situation the Israelites found themselves in is the exact same thing that people are experiencing today. At the same time, however, there are similarities that can be made, and ongoing patterns and themes from that period that hold special significance within the present world.

One of the best examples of Christian struggles within the modern world is the Syro-Malabar Church. With its origins traced to India, the Syro-Malabar may be a lesser-known sect of Christianity, but nonetheless a significant and relevant example when talking about the lessons experienced by the Israelites within the Book of Jeremiah. The Syro- Malabar Church was founded by St. Thomas, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, who travelled after the Pentecostal experience, to the farthest country known at that time with the proclamation of the Good News. He sailed to India and landed at Kodungalloor, in Kerala in 52 AD. It is believed that he preached the Good News of Jesus in different Kingdoms all around the subcontinent and established seven and a half ecclesial communities in Malabar, today called Kerala. Thus, the growth of Christianity within India is attributed to the result of the arrival of Thomas the Apostle and his works of evangelization. Through his successful conversion within India, Thomas the Apostle ended up being the catalyst behind the creation of Eastern rite churches throughout the country¹⁵¹.

While India retains a long relationship with Christianity, those practicing this faith are a minority within the nation. Christianity shares a space with the major religions of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. The Asian continent is characterized by pluralism and in particular to India, which is considered to be a cradle of religions, as it is the motherland of Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, and a host land for other world religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. According to the recent census, Hinduism, the religion of the majority, is professed by 80% of the people. Muslims in India, the second largest Muslim population in the world,

¹⁵¹ Susan Visvanathan, "The Legends of St. Thomas in Kerala," *India International Centre Quarterly* 22, no. 2/3 (1995): 27-44, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23003931>.

constitute 14%; Christians 2.3%; Sikhs 1.9%; Buddhists 0.80%; and Jains 0.40%.¹⁵²

There are also people practicing the tribal religions, though the Hindu fundamentalists try to count them in their fold.¹⁵³ Religions have much importance in the lives of the people of India, and it is very much tied up with the cultural and social life of the people.¹⁵⁴ Nevertheless, no religion is declared as constitutionally official as India emphasizes its secular and democratic feature availing ample freedom and equal rights to all religions.

Amid these diversities of religions, what makes India unique is its unity of religiosity that binds the people of the land together. It is a peculiar characteristic of India that several religions living together is a reality here and thus it is a quite common phenomenon to see churches, temples, and mosques located in close vicinity. Peoples of all faiths taking part in the feasts of other faiths is quite common and it gives the impression to the onlooker that in many places in India, *Vasudhaivakudumbakam* meaning “the world is counted as one family,” a concept which can be viewed similar to the Kingdom of God, is being lived or trying to be lived.¹⁵⁵ In the midst of clear marked differences in culture between one regional culture with the other, incidence of several languages and religions, India holds an over-all unity that keeps the people as one family. Each of these religions forms an integral part of Indian culture that renders it unique not only in terms of beliefs, but lifestyle. Despite all the diversities and religious affiliations,

¹⁵²M. L. Ahuja, *Major Religions of the World* (New Delhi: UBS Publishers' Distributors, 2008), 142.

¹⁵³Ketan Alder, “Authority, Ethics and Service amongst Hindu Nationalists in India’s Assertive Margins,” *Contemporary South Asia* 26, no. 4 (February 2018): 425, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2018.1548008>.

¹⁵⁴ “Towards an Indian Christian Spirituality in a Pluralistic Context,” accessed April 24, 2021, <https://www.e-bookdownload.net/search/towards-an-indian-christian-spirituality-in-a-pluralistic-context>.

¹⁵⁵J. Mattam and P. Arockiadoss, *Hindutva: An Indian Christian Response* (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2002), 161.

India is a secular country that safeguards the rights and freedom of every individual. It is not antagonistic to religious ideologies, but proactive in supporting religions without favoring a particular religion.¹⁵⁶ Every religion is respected so far as they guide the human beings to perfection. Upholding absolutely no exclusive claim for any religion, K.M. Panikkar writes:

“The doctrine of the monopoly of truth and revelation is altogether alien to the Asian mind. To the Hindu who believes that all good ways lead to God, and to the Buddhist who is taught that the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path will perfect him, the claim of the votaries of any sect that they alone have the truth, and others who do not submit ‘shall be condemned’ has always seemed unreasonable and absurd”.¹⁵⁷

According to the Western understanding, ‘secularism’ is conceived as the separation between religion and state, whereas in India, it “is a bonding principle, which helps all communities, and religions co-exist, collaborate and engage in the national building up.” Different from Western understanding, ‘secularism’ is envisioned as ‘national’ in India.¹⁵⁸ However, as Christianity started taking roots in the land, the dominant fanatic religious groups of Hinduism started alleging against them expressing intolerance to the Christians. They tended to impose superiority over the Christian minorities. The Syro-Malabar church community resisted this non-secular tendency of the fanatic groups among the Hindus holding on to its own religious ideologies.¹⁵⁹ It was unquestionably difficult for the church to consider all varied cultures of India especially that promoted

¹⁵⁶ Anthoniraj Thumma and Alphonse D. Sahayam, *Christian Commitment to Nation Building: Twenty Fifth Annual Meeting of the Indian Theological Association*, ITA, May 3-7, 2002, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore (Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 2003), 43.

¹⁵⁷ K. M. Panikkar, *Asia and Western Dominance* (Mumbai: Somaiya Publications, 1999), 455.

¹⁵⁸ Antony Kalliath and Raj Irudaya, “Indian Secularism: A Theological Response” ITA, 201, <http://www.itanet.in/itapublications.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Gino Battaglia, “Neo-Hindu Fundamentalism Challenging the Secular and Pluralistic Indian State,” *Religions* 8, no. 10 (March 2017): 216, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel8100216>.

superstitious beliefs and code of conduct as having them elements of truth and goodness and as containing within them the saving presence of God.¹⁶⁰ As a result, Christianity often found itself at odds with the rest of the culture within India. Thus, the experiences of the Syro-Malabar Church can be seen as a modern example of the same issues the Israelites experienced throughout their Babylonian exile within the Book of Jeremiah. This is due to the fact that the prophet Jeremiah confronts the Israelites about submitting to Yahweh's will by submitting to the foreign culture of Babylon. The prophet Jeremiah's messaging covers the hesitancy from the Israelites to follow Yahweh's guidance and how religious identity through expression, reaffirmation of faith, and a sense of nationalism are the forefront of this action. This relates back to the Syro-Malabar church, since this Christian community leans heavily on the messages from Yahweh found throughout the Holy Bible and finds themselves in a similar position where the heads of the church are encouraging inculturation, but church members hesitate to undergo the action. This shows that some of the feelings and messages shared by the Prophet Jeremiah and the Israelites is akin to what the Syro-Malabar Christians have with their church leaders in regard to inculturation.

Inculturation and the Syro-Malabar Church

In order to showcase the correlation between the Syro-Malabar Church and the Book of Jeremiah, this chapter will be broken up into a number of sections. The first will outline the meaning of the term of inculturation, which forms the foundation of understanding the experiences of the Syro-Malabar Church within India. Then the focus

¹⁶⁰Xavier Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India: A Theological Analysis of the Missionary Role of the Syro-Malabar Church in the Light of the Vatican II and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1993), 475.

will be on the ways the Syro-Malabar Church shares many similarities with the Israelite exile within Babylon. Specifically, there will be an exploration of how Indian culture, in addition to other religions comprising India receive the Syro-Malabar Church. Finally, this chapter will look at how the Syro-Malabar Church emulates the lessons taught by the Prophet Jeremiah within the Book of Jeremiah. The unique development and current state of the Syro-Malabar Church is dependent on the mutual relationship between the Church and Indian culture. This dynamic of the bond between church and culture is often referred to as inculturation. Inculturation is defined as “the process by which a particular church expressed its faith and life in and through the local culture.”¹⁶¹ It can be termed as another word for the local realization of the church.¹⁶² It is the dynamic relationship between the Church and the variety of cultures. It facilitates a profound insertion of the Gospel and faith into the cultures and it is an ongoing process of reciprocal and critical interaction and assimilation between them.¹⁶³ It implies “the whole body of the Christian message, not just its external wrapping, needs to take flesh, become incarnate, in the patterns of thought, language, and symbols of a particular culture.”¹⁶⁴ Inculturation in its authentic manner is not merely borrowing of certain names from the culture, or certain religious symbols. It must cover the totality of concrete life situation.¹⁶⁵ The complexity and importance of this concept is discussed by Jose Mathai Puthenparambil in his work,

¹⁶¹ Julian Saldanha, *Inculturation* (Bombay: St. Paul Publications, 1997), 14.

¹⁶² Jose Panadan, *Inculturation and Local Church: an Ecclesio-Missiological Investigation of North Gujarat Experiment* (Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 2015), 93.

¹⁶³ Arbuckle, G.A., *Earthing the Gospel: An inculturation handbook for the pastoral worker* (New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 21.

¹⁶⁴ Brian Stanley, “Inculturation:” *Christianity and Cultures*, (January 2008):42, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcmt4.7>.

¹⁶⁵ Edward Schillebeeckx and John Bowden, *Church: The Human Story of God* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2018),185.

Amalorpavadas: Educator of the Indian Catholic Church in the Process of Inculturation.¹⁶⁶ While exploring the circumstances concerning the use of the term inculturation, Puthenparambil says, “Inculturation is the process through which cultures experience redemption, liberation, and transformation through the insertion of the divine into each aspect of every culture. It is in and through the Church that inculturation happens.”¹⁶⁷ In this quote, Puthenparambil is arguing that inculturation is more than just relationship between culture and the church, but the way in which God instills his presence amongst the faithful believers. Furthermore, Puthenparambil is noting that this bond is not stagnant, but constantly changing and ongoing. The Syro-Malabar Church facilitates the process, which allows faith to become a cohesive part of culture. This relates back to the Book of Jeremiah and the Israelite experience within Babylon.

Resistance to Inculturation

Since the Israelites practiced a religion that was far different from what existed within the Babylonian culture, the way it was expressed had an influence on Babylon, even though the nation persecuted the Israelites. This can be tied to what the prophet Jeremiah told the Israelites about worship:

Thus says the Lord: stand in the court of the Lord’s house and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the Lord; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings (Jer.26:2-3).

¹⁶⁶ Jose Mathai Puthenparambil, “Amalorpavadas: Educator of the Indian Catholic Church in the Process of Inculturation” (ETD diss., Fordham University, New York, 1999).

¹⁶⁷Puthenparambil, “Amalorpavadas, 3.

The prophet Jeremiah in this instance relays that those who come to worship will be expanding Yahweh's word and encouraging a turn away from evil, which can be seen as Yahweh impacting the Babylonian culture by way of Israelite worship, as it serves as a reminder for the Israelites when they enter Babylon that devotion to Yahweh must take precedence over anything else. This shows that the term inculturation, was in fact a very real practice within Biblical times and shows that relativity between the Syro-Malabar Church and the Israelite experience. Thus, the concept of inculturation is arguably an important concept and process that explains not only the development of the Syro-Malabar Church, but is connected back to the Biblical experience.

While inculturation is a defining factor for the Syro-Malabar Church, it has been met with some restraint from its local faithful as well. Although there is a clear relationship between the Syro-Malabar Church and the Indian culture, there is some hesitancy on part of the Indian Christians to engage with this mutual influence on a deeper level. The Syro-Malabar community is terrified to immerse itself completely into the local culture fearing that it will acquire and understand new cultural elements. The reaction of Indian Christians to the concept of inculturation is analyzed by Shibin Devasia in his work, *The Church as A Eucharistic and Prophetic Community in India*. When Devasia discusses the impact of inculturation on the locals he says, “Many people, especially the members of the Syro-Malabar Church, are hesitant about inculturation in worship, because any attempts of inculturation in the recent past have polarized the Church and thereby prohibiting to a witness of Christ in the society.”¹⁶⁸ With this section,

¹⁶⁸Shibin Devasia, “The Church as a Eucharistic and Prophetic Community in India: A Theological Exploration into the Challenges and Implications of a Eucharistic Ecclesiology Based on the Early Church

Devasia is pointing out that Indian Christians are apprehensive about participating in any form of inculturation, due to fears concerning what it would mean for their faith, and how the culture would receive this or even influence the church. They are petrified of sacrificing the authentic ecclesial traditions of the church under the pretext of adaptation or inculturation.¹⁶⁹ As a result, the Indian Christians cannot fully experience the benefits of the living church within their culture, while the culture itself becomes put in a position where it is not able to fully receive the impact of the Christian God within society.

In many ways this ties back to the conundrum the Israelites found themselves in when they were asked to submit to Babylon. The fear of inculturation amongst the Israelites is illustrated in the following excerpt, “But if any nation or kingdom that will not serve this king Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and will not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, I shall punish that nation with sword, famine and pestilence, says the Lord, until I have completed its destruction by his hand” (Jer. 27:8). In this quote, the Israelites, while living in Judah, are commanded to submit to Yahweh by not rebelling against Nebuchadnezzar. This requirement causes fear amongst the people, even though it is about the future, because they are being seemingly asked to perform an action that had resulted in their punishment from Yahweh in the past. Therefore, like the Syro-Malabar Church, the Israelites feared they were being led to commit a false action that could put the status of their faith at risk. This shows that both the Israelites and the Syro-Malabar Christians view the concept of inculturation as an intimidating experience, because even though there is potential for positive outcomes and the rejuvenation of

and the Statements of the Indian Theological Association (ITA),” 253, Duquesne Scholarship Collection, <https://dsc.duq.edu/etd/1433/>.

¹⁶⁹Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India*, 481.

spirituality, discomfort with entering the unknown creates obstacles that prevent the achievement of the goals of inculturation.

Inculturation and The Prophet Jeremiah's Message

Despite the relative newness of the term inculturation, its goals are aligned with the prophet Jeremiah's teachings to the Israelites during their Babylonian exile. For the Syro-Malabar Christians, while they are hesitant about the concept of inculturation, the very existence of their faith is dependent on the culture it originated in. Laura Michelle Coles explores Christian identity in India within her work, *Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Blurred Boundaries of Religious Identity*. When analyzing the question of separating culture from religion Coles notes,

“There are then, both those who see the possibility and advantages in dichotomizing culture and religion, but there are also strong critiques like Cardinal Ratzinger’s who view inculturation not perhaps negatively, but certainly as difficult, because they view the relationship between religion and culture in a very different way; that is, as relational, and either incapable of being separated, or at least an undesirable notion.”¹⁷⁰

Since inculturation is achieved through the Church, Coles is arguing that despite there being a mutual relationship with Indian culture, the Church also has a sense of separation from it. She goes on to argue that theologians such as Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope

¹⁷⁰ L. Coles, “Hindu-Christian Dialogue and the Blurred Boundaries of Religious Identity” (PhD diss., Canterbury Christ Church University, UK, 2013), 79.

Benedict) find any sort of separation of church and culture as a difficulty and obstacle to faith, as any given culture is considered to be the foundation of the religion at hand. This relates back to the hesitancy of the Syro-Malabar Christians to fully embrace the relationship between their Church and culture, even though the environment is an essential factor when looking at the development of the Syro-Malabar Church. As a result, this is evident that while the Syro-Malabar Church is unique in that its culture helped to formulate the expression of this Christian sect, it also retains a special separation that many consider as a challenge in being able to fully embrace the evangelization of faith within the culture.

The varying views of inculturation within India correlate with the prophet Jeremiah's teachings on the importance of the Israelites fully embracing the Babylonian culture in order to help develop and spread the faith. The prophet Jeremiah preached that the Israelites must marry their faith with the culture in order to improve humanity. An example of this is illustrated when the prophet Jeremiah says, "But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you in to exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:7). In this quote, the prophet Jeremiah is telling the Israelites that they must contribute to their environment in order to ensure not only that they are following Yahweh's will, but to help humanity move forward. In addition, by the Israelites working "for the good of the city," they are in fact sharing Yahweh's message, thus enacting the process of inculturation. This can be related back to the Syro-Malabar Christians because their engagement with the surrounding culture is both cohesive and separate. On the one hand, the Syro-Malabar Christians welcome and engage with Indian culture because it is the foundation of the creation of their church.

The remark of the Indian theologian Placid Podippara, highlighting the deep-rootedness and inseparable union of the culture and church qualified St. Thomas Christians in India or the Syro-Malabar Christians as “Hindu in Culture, Christian in Religion and Oriental in Worship.”¹⁷¹ This description also displays the diversity and the richness of their tradition, which is very much engrained in the local Hindu culture and Oriental form of worship. At the same time, however, they retain a small sense of separation where they do not fully attempt to immerse themselves with the surrounding environment, which continues to make challenges in not only spreading the faith but being considered as a natural part of the environment.

Essentially, while the term inculturation is fairly new, the concepts and beliefs surrounding this idea within the Syro-Malabar Church in India can be related back to the experiences of the Israelites during their Babylonian exile. The term inculturation refers to the mutual relationship that exists between church and culture. This plays a significant role within the development of the Syro-Malabar Church due to its unique history and conversion experience due to the arrival of Thomas the Apostle. Although a special relationship with Indian culture exists, much like the Israelites and their submission to Babylon, Syro-Malabar Christians struggle with fully embracing their environment. As a result, this creates a situation where the relationship between the Syro-Malabar Church and Indian culture can be seen as both cohesive and separate. Ultimately, these

¹⁷¹Placid Podippara, “The Syro-Malabarians and Their Rite,” *The Harp* 25, (2012):30.
<https://doi.org/10.31826/9781463233143-007>.

challenges are the same ones the Israelites experienced, as the Prophet Jeremiah ordered them to contribute to their culture.

The Persecution of the Syro-Malabar Church

Although Christianity has existed within India for centuries, the religion has yet to be fully embraced by Indian culture and has even resulted in the church encountering various forms of persecution. While Christianity has rooted itself within India, it has done so without achieving full internal cohesion. This means that internal strife has plagued Indian Christianity, thus creating an additional barrier that prevents the fulfillment of faith. Puthenparambil comments on this when he says, “She wastes away her time, talents, and vitality for self-preservation, self-embellishment, and sibling rivalries between the Rites and the Churches, and she remains without fulfilling her prime responsibility of giving authentic witness to Christ and thus without doing effective evangelization.”¹⁷² Within this section, Puthenparambil is arguing that instead of working together the various forms of Christianity struggle against one another, thus fragmenting the religion itself. As a result, Puthenparambil asserts that the feuding renders the faithful not only incapable of reaching their full spiritual potential but preventing God from being evangelized within the Indian culture. This shows that the instability of the Christian religious identity within India becomes a form of self-persecution. Since there is internal competition, it prevents the growth of the religion, which impacts the foundation of faith. As a result, Syro-Malabar Christians begin to focus more on what makes them different, rather than finding common ground with other Christian sects, and finding ways to spread the faith amongst Indian culture. Thus, internal self-persecution becomes a formidable

¹⁷²Puthenparambil, “Amalorpavadas,” 5.

opponent in the journey of the Syro-Malabar Church becoming fully in tune with their Christian faith and culture.

In many ways the internal strife within the Syro-Malabar Church mirrors the dissention of the Israelites during their Babylonian exile. By the time the Israelites had entered Babylon, some continued to turn away from Yahweh and his will. This is illustrated in the following:

One basket had very good figs, like first ripe figs, so bad that they could not be eaten. And the Lord said to me, 'what do you see, Jeremiah?' I said, 'Figs the good figs very good, and the bad figs very bad, so bad that they cannot be eaten.' Then the word of the Lord came to me: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Like these good figs, so I will regard as good the exiles from Judah, whom I have sent away from this place to the land of the Chaldeans (Jer. 24: 2-5).

In this quote, Yahweh is telling the prophet Jeremiah that too many Israelites have turned away from him and like figs once spoiled they cannot be saved. The fig analogy can be tied back to the Syro-Malabar Church as those who choose to feud with fellow Christians and others, are turning away from God's intentions. Furthermore, it can be seen as an act of spoiling the remaining congregation or "good figs". Thus, the self-persecution of the Syro-Malabar Christians is akin to the Israelites in exile choosing to ignore Yahweh's desires.

The Obstacle of Religious Hierarchy within Inculturation

While the Syro-Malabar Christians' utilization of internal feuding as self-persecution hinders the formation of a strong religious identity and successful inculturation, the Syro-Malabar Christians along with the rest of Indian culture add to these obstacles through the concept of religious hierarchy. While Indian secularism aims

at an equal pluralism, in reality there are hierarchies regarding religious faiths that create an environment of inequality. This idea is explored by Devasia who states that, “The condemnable reality is that religion, which is expected to work for the enhancement of human beings, becomes the agent of the perpetuation of oppression and marginalization by defending caste-ism in India.”¹⁷³ Within this section of his work, Devasia is arguing that religion is correlated with caste-ism within India. The idea is that much like the structuring of castes there is discrimination that occurs against religions for Syro-Malabar Christians that serves as another obstacle in the journey to become fully accepted within one's faith and culture. Regarding the Syro-Malabar Christians who participate in this thought process, they are hindering their own faith journey, and religious teachings by not allowing to see others as equal. In addition, for those Syro-Malabar Christians that are discriminated against, it prevents them from fully coming into union with the Indian culture and having an opportunity to promote evangelization.

The concept of religious hierarchy within India can be related back to the Israelite's choice to ignore or even threaten the prophet Jeremiah regarding his teachings on serving Babylon. Throughout the Book of Jeremiah, the prophet constantly reiterates that the Israelites must submit and serve Babylon. The reaction of the Israelites is met within the following, “For twenty-three years, from the thirteenth year of king Josiah son of Amon of Judah to this day, the word of the Lord has come to me, and I have spoken persistently to you, but you have not listened. And though the Lord persistently sent you all his servants the prophets, you have neither listened nor inclined your ears to hear”

¹⁷³Shibin Devasia, “The Church,” 182.

(Jer. 25:3-4). This quote showcases that the Israelites were consistently choosing to believe other supposed prophets who told them what they wanted to hear or simply chose to ignore the prophet Jeremiah's remarks. These decisions can be connected to the Syro-Malabar Church as religious discrimination is not part of the religious teachings, yet it is practiced by the Indian culture and every Syro-Malabar Christians as well. Just like the Israelites, those partaking in the concept of religious hierarchy are moving away from their spiritual principles or are the victims of the continual separation of Christianity from the rest of Indian culture.

Violence and the Syro-Malabar Church

Along with the existence of religious hierarchy in India, comes the threat of violence against Indian Christians, which is reflective of the Babylonian persecution of the Israelites. While India is a religiously pluralistic and hierarchical society, some religious factions, such as Hindus, within the nation have and are attempting to eradicate other religions. These issues are outlined by Puthenparambil when he says, “From without, the growing Hindu fundamentalists, who want all Christians to come back to Hinduism or to get out of India, challenge the Church to cease to be foreign and to become truly Indian.”¹⁷⁴ In this section, Puthenparambil is acknowledging that Syro-Malabar Christians, amongst other religions, within India are persecuted because their beliefs do not match with what Hindus think the religion of India should be. By being put in a position of persecution, Syro-Malabar Christians are unable to fully achieve inculturation, because they are separated from the culture. Furthermore, this creates

¹⁷⁴ Puthenparambil, “Amalorpavadas,” 6.

challenges in terms of faith, as the Syro-Malabar Christians retain the feeling of limitations in terms of spiritual fulfillment and expression.

The persecution of the Syro-Malabar Christians can be connected to the Babylonian treatment of the Israelites. Once the Israelites were exiled to Babylon their experience was anything but easy. The Babylonian environment was hostile to the Israelites and their religion. As a result, they became a people victimized by their oppressors. This in turn impacted how the Israelites practiced their religion. Some felt the need to turn away from Yahweh in order to protect themselves, while others accepted the harassment of the Babylonians. This is illustrated when the prophet Jeremiah confronts the Israelites that they not listening to Yahweh's messages and must face the punishment of surrendering to the Babylonian invader Nebuchadnezzar. The actions of the Israelites can be correlated with the Syro-Malabar Christians as the tensions surrounding Indian culture and Christianity have influenced how the Syro-Malabar Church functions. Some Indian Christians find that the persecution pushes them away from faith, while others feel encouraged, only to find themselves the victims of abuse. Therefore, the persecution of the Israelites is in tandem with what the Syro-Malabar Church experiences in the present day.

Basically, the various forms of persecution that the Syro-Malabar Christians receive are extensions of the same experiences the Israelites faced during their exile within Babylon. The self-persecution the Indian Christians conduct in their feuds with one another is akin to the Israelites choosing to move away from the will of Yahweh due to the hostility of the Babylonian environment. This continues with the concept of

religious hierarchy that is part of Indian culture and prevents the Syro-Malabar Church from reaching its true potential, which is like the Israelites refusing to submit to Babylon. Finally, the physical persecution of Christians within India is much like what the Israelites experienced at the hands of Babylon, thus showing the relevancy of the Israelites within the modern world.

Syncretism and the Syro-Malabar Church

While the Syro-Malabar Church has experienced hardship as part of its attempt to achieve inculturation, it has still found ways to implement the Indian culture within the Church. As stated previously, there is a hesitancy amongst certain groups both within and outside India regarding inculturation. There is a fear that it takes away the Church from its rightful religious platform and in the case of Indian culture itself, those that believe in a homogenous Hindu India feel that Christianity threatens that. It is a growing tendency especially within Christianity to view syncretism in a negative sense as either inadequate or unorthodox. It is because, “The term syncretism has always more or less had the connotation of expressing the illegitimate mingling of different religious elements.”¹⁷⁵ Perry Schmidt Leukel’s chapter titled, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-Faith Encounter Changes Christianity* classifies four charges related to syncretism, namely ‘the corruption of truth’, ‘superficiality’, ‘inconsistency’ and ‘the loss of identity’.¹⁷⁶ Schmidt-Leukel notes that “...it needs to be shown how syncretistic developments can bring about a transformation of identity that is not its loss but its

¹⁷⁵ Leopold Anita Maria and Jeppe, *Syncretism in Religion: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2016) , 41.

¹⁷⁶ Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-Faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2009), 77.

deepening and widening”¹⁷⁷ For Schmidt-Leukel then, syncretism can be a force for good because it can widen and deepen a person’s religious identity, leading to transformation.

Cole discusses the tensions over the inculturation that has occurred when she says:

“This may be understood as syncretism, but the extent to which that syncretism is viewed either negatively or positively often depends on the individual passing comment; admittedly, ‘syncretism’ in Christian terms is often viewed negatively. In these cases, conversion is not an end result and syncretism are viewed with less suspicion, as a means of expressing two religious views simultaneously and thereby having a double religious identity.”¹⁷⁸

In this quote, Cole is highlighting that inculturation in the Indian sense is different than other forms of syncretism from around the world because the goal is not conversion, but the building of faith. Furthermore, she points out that the process within India can still be viewed positively or negatively depending upon the person within the situation. This indicates that even the inculturation that has been successful within India is up for debate on whether it is a positive process or not. As a result, this creates some challenges for the Syro-Malabar Church because lack of unity on this topic hinders the faith from reaching its full potential.

The debate on inculturation within India can be tied back to the reception of the prophet Jeremiah's teachings on Babylon. While the prophet Jeremiah intended for the Israelites to follow Yahweh's will via his messages, many chose to rebel against that. For example, when discussing the relationship between the Israelites and Babylon the prophet Jeremiah says, “Their children shall be as of old, their congregation shall be established before me; and I will punish all who oppress them. And you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Jer. 30: 20, 22). Within this section, the prophet Jeremiah is calling

¹⁷⁷ Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*, 77.

¹⁷⁸ Coles, “Hindu-Christian Dialogue,” 228.

for inculturation with Babylon, but his life is threatened because of it. Although this quote covers the restoration of the Israelites, by being asked to continue to live and populate, even within Babylon, there is also arguably a sense of direction to root in a society that can be viewed as adversarial. The Israelites did not feel that it was the right choice for them, while others embraced it. The same can be said for the Syro-Malabar Christians as some welcome the idea of inculturation, as they see it as furthering the faith, while others fear it will take them away from the sincerity of religion.

The Results of Inculturation within the Syro-Malabar Church

Although there is debate on the value of the inculturation that has taken place within India, the types of syncretism have functioned as a catalyst of growth within the Syro-Malabar Church. In recent years, noted developments on the inculturation front within India, have included changes both within the Church, as well as on a cultural level. Puthenparambil explores the outcomes of inculturation when he says, “Hindus through the association called Brahma Samaj tried to revive Hinduism with inspiration drawn also from Christian revelation. Christians tried to experience and encounter and express Jesus by adopting Indian symbols and life-style.”¹⁷⁹ Puthenparambil shows that both the Indian culture, as well as the Syro-Malabar Church have changed due to inculturation. For the Indian culture heavily influenced by Hinduism, the concept of Christian revelation has become a driving force within their thought approach. At the same time, the Syro-Malabar Church has learned to incorporate Indian symbolism within their religion. As per the demand of the cultural and religious circumstance of India, Syro Malabar community

¹⁷⁹Puthenparambil, “Amalorpavadas,” 76.

allows itself to get immersed in order to find its space in the Indian culture and to make itself relevant; it attempts to present Christian faith and Christ himself in Indian garb.¹⁸⁰ In the process of inculturation, it adapts a method of rejection and assimilation, disallowing what is not in tune with the faith and integrating what is good and acceptable to strengthen the faith. Thus, it is evident that the spirituality of the Syro-Malabar Church has grown due to its embrace of some aspects of Indian culture, which not only elevates their faith, but closes the gap of separation between the Church and its environment.

The resulting inculturation between Indian culture and the Syro-Malabar Church can be related to the Israelite relationship with the prophet Jeremiah and the Babylonian ruler Nebuchadnezzar. When the Israelites were instructed to submit to Babylon by the prophet Jeremiah a form of symbolism became the guiding light for the Israelites and their faith. This is illustrated within the Book of Jeremiah which says, “I spoke to king Zedekiah of Judah in the same way: Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live” (Jer. 27:12). Within this section, serving Babylon becomes symbolized through an actual yoke that is worn. This example demonstrates that there is a tangible result of inculturation. The yoke is the symbol of the surrounding culture the Israelites find themselves in, and it transforms into visible expression of Yahweh's instructions to submit to Babylon. As a result, the Israelites faith is being transformed by the yoke, and the Babylonian culture is also being impacted as the yoke comes to have alternative meaning attached to it. Although the Israelites are enduring a temporary punishment, the symbolism occurring within this moment can be translated to the experienced by the Syro-Malabar Christians. While the process of Indian

¹⁸⁰Kochuparampil, *Evangelization in India*, 476.

inculturation is neither temporary nor a punishment, symbolism plays an integral part in the inculturation bond that occurs between Syro-Malabar Christians and other faiths within India. Therefore, this shows that the Israelite results of inculturation are comparable to what the Syro-Malabar Church has experienced within India.

Essentially, the Syro-Malabar Church has had successes in regard to inculturation. The syncretism that takes place is still up for debate, but the impact has resulted in changes both to the Syro-Malabar Church and the Indian culture. Specifically, the Indian culture, primarily the Hindu faction has adopted the Christian view of revelation, while the Syro-Malabar Church has learned to utilize Indian symbolism from the environment to grow their faith. In each instance, the experiences found within India can be connected to the story of the Israelite exile within Babylon and the continuity of those lessons today.

Summary and Closing Remarks

Despite the distance and distinct differences between the time of the Israelite exile and the current predicament of the Syro-Malabar church within India the experiences and messages from this Biblical period are not only relevant, but present within the modern world. An example of this is seen within the Syro-Malabar Church within India. While Christianity has existed in India for hundreds of years, its development and current status today is dependent on the concept of inculturation, which stands for the relationship between religion and culture that furthers faith. Along the way the Syro-Malabar Christians have inculturation experiences that mirror the events that the Israelites went

through during their Babylonian exile. Like the Israelites, the Syro-Malabar Christians have struggled with their religious identity, as their faith exists in a culture that retains a religious hierarchy that is not always welcome towards Christianity. Furthermore, the Israelite challenges with persecution are also present within the Syro-Malabar Church as internal and external factors hinders its growth. Finally, both groups have had successes on the inculturation front that have shown the ability of culture and religion to have a beneficial relationship with one another.

General Conclusion

While the Hebrew Bible contains many themes and messages, the Book of Jeremiah covers a unique time period that is relevant in the modern world. The Israelite exile within Babylon was an important event in terms of all the components of religious identity, faith, spirituality, and religious expression. Following years of rebelling against Yahweh's religious instructions, the Israelites were exiled and forced to live within the hostile environment of Babylon. As a result, this proved to be an experience that pushed the Israelites to further develop and reinforce their religious identity, while learning to work with the culture around them.

The full impact of this portion of the Book of Jeremiah, which is largely deduced from the Masoretic text, is the culmination of a number of ongoing developments within this portion of the Bible. Not only had the Israelites broken their promise with Yahweh, but they continued to allow themselves to go astray within Babylon. Thus, they were putting their religious favor with Yahweh in jeopardy. At the same time, Yahweh called upon the prophet Jeremiah (pre-prophet) to serve him and despite the urgent nature of Yahweh's need for his assistance, the prophet Jeremiah denied him. As it is outlined within the Bible, the prophet Jeremiah had all of the necessary experience to make him a strong shepherd for the Israelites, but it is his initial rejection of Yahweh that provided him the required relativity with Yahweh's people. Since both the prophet Jeremiah and the Israelites had rejected Yahweh, the prophet Jeremiah gained important insight in learning how to guide them. Furthermore, through his own personal experiences of being an outsider, the prophet Jeremiah was able to understand why the Israelites hesitated to follow Yahweh's instructions and what it is like to be part of a community that is not your

own. This in turn worked to create an environment where the refusal to follow Yahweh's ways became a catalyst for the development and reaffirmation of the Israelite religious identity, as the issues preventing the Israelites from obtaining a unified religious identity are highlighted by the prophet Jeremiah.

While the background of the prophet Jeremiah, along with the Israelite history, are influential factors in the creation of religious identity, Yahweh's call for the Israelites to submit to Babylon remains a pivotal turning point for Yahweh's people. Following their order to comply to Nebuchadnezzar, Yahweh instructed the Israelites via the prophet Jeremiah, that they must surrender and serve the Babylonians. This was a shocking request for the Israelites because it seemed to contradict the teachings and punishments of their past. Previously when the Israelites had chosen to serve another place or god instead of Yahweh, they were punished for their crimes. As a result, asking the Israelites to submit to Babylon seems like a trick. Ultimately, Yahweh makes it clear that the Babylonian ruler, Nebuchadnezzar is his servant and that Israelites serving Babylon is their punishment for being led astray. This action proves two points, first it solidifies that Yahweh is the one supreme being in control of all things. The second aspect is that it forces the Israelites to come to terms with who they are, especially within an environment that is hostile towards their faith. This in and of itself impacts religious identity by demonstrating that there is a core belief and practice a religious community must follow. In this case, it is recognizing Yahweh as the one supreme being. Consequently, the Israelites had to find ways to practice their faith in terms of belief, expression while working with the culture they found themselves in. This leads to the

further development of religious identity that also provides lessons on the relationship between culture and religion.

In order to fully communicate his intentions with the people of Israel, Yahweh drafted the prophet Jeremiah to make his will understood, which included a special emphasis on the actions the Israelites needed to take in order to secure his favor. Yahweh makes it clear to the Israelites that he can build and break nations, but that the people of Israel are responsible for their own future, which should include living by their outward expressions of faith. To ensure that the Israelites are reminded of the importance of this, Yahweh preaches to the prophet Jeremiah the fears of the Israelites spoiling beyond redemption. This prompts the prophet Jeremiah to preach to the people that they must focus on their religious identity and work for the good of Babylon, which occurs through his emphasis of outward religious practices and rituals, amongst how the Israelites should contribute to the Babylonian community. As in their past history, there were some Israelites who chose to ignore the prophet Jeremiah's teachings, while others embraced it. Ultimately, this worked to define the religious identity of the Israelites even further as it encouraged the removal of those who did not want to follow the ways of Yahweh.

Even though the story of the Israelites seems far away from the contemporary world, the experiences and messages from that time translate to the world of today. There are countless religions that have undergone challenges in relationship to the cultures they found themselves in. Specifically, the Syro-Malabar Church remains one of those examples. Originating from the outgrowth of the conversion of Indians by Thomas the Apostle, Christianity has formed a steady hold and growth within the nation of India. Despite its long history, however, the Syro-Malabar Church has had its fair share of

challenges within the country. Due to a long-held belief in the concept of religious hierarchy, religions within India are treated like the caste system. As a result, there is long standing discrimination, and even persecution of the Syro-Malabar Church. This situation is akin to the Babylonian exile the Israelites faced and had to submit to. At the same time however, like the Israelites, the Syro-Malabar Church has learned to formulate a religious identity based on a dialogue with the surrounding culture. This process is known as inculturation and has allowed the faith of the Syro-Malabar Church grow and to have a positive impact on Indian culture.

The Israelite exile within Babylon, along with the current situation of the Syro-Malabar Church reveals that the concept of religious identity and the relationship to culture is more important than ever before. The messages found within both examples show that people of faith continue to deal with similar issues and need to find a balance in maintaining who they are, along with serving the culture around them. It is a field that warrants further exploration on the ways in which the teachings found within the Book of Jeremiah are being utilized within the modern world.

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