

A structural-historical investigation of חמס ושד in Jeremiah 6:1-8¹

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Abstract

The text internal features of Jeremiah 6:1-8 are examined, focussing on the demarcation of the pericope, text critical matters and the structural characteristics of the text. A three part division of the pericope is proposed, namely verses 1-3, 4-5 and 6-8. A “Steigerung” between the different parts of the text is detected: in verses 1-3 the people are warned by the prophet to flee from Jerusalem, then in versus 4-5 the shouts of the enemy forces can be heard and finally in verses 6-8 there is a word of warning from Yahweh Himself. Text external features are also investigated. The Gattung can be indentified as an announcement of judgment presented as a warning. Reference is made to two of the well known salvation traditions in Israel: the tradition of the conquest of the land and the Zion tradition.

1. INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah 6:1-8 is part of a larger corpus, running from Jeremiah 4:5-6:30. The foe or enemy from the north is a well kown concept in the book of Jeremiah. In chapters 4-6 mention is made of the enemy coming from the north. In this pericope – for the only time in chapters 4-6 – one hears the shouts of the enemy. This passage is also remarkable for another reason: according to a scribal note in the margin of the text, בור in Jeremiah 6:7 is the middle most word in the Old Testament.

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1.1 Approach and problemstatement

Various approaches to a text may be followed nowadays. The one followed in this paper may be described as basically a literary one sensitive to the historical dimensions of the text as well. Literary (structural) features of the text will be highlighted, while historical questions will also get some attention. This article investigates the word-pair חָמָס וְשָׂדֶה from a structural-historical perspective. The question put in this paper is: how should this well-known word-pair be interpreted in this particular instance? Should the phrase be interpreted as the event of violence or as the characteristic shout of one set upon by robbers? Or is there perhaps a third possibility?

2. THE TEXT OF JEREMIAH 6:1-8

The text of Jeremiah 6:1-8 according to the New International Version reads as follows:

¹ “Flee for safety, people of Benjamin! Flee from Jerusalem! Sound the trumpet in Tekoa! Raise the signal over Beth Hakkerem! For disaster looms out of the north, even terrible destruction.

² I will destroy the Daughter of Zion, so beautiful and delicate.

³ Shepherds with their flocks will come against her; they will pitch their tents around her, each tending his own portion.”

⁴ “Prepare for battle against her! Arise, let us attack at noon! But, alas, the daylight is fading, and the shadows of evening grow long.

⁵ So arise, let us attack at night and destroy her fortresses!”

⁶ This is what the LORD Almighty says: “Cut down the trees and build siege ramps against Jerusalem. This city must be punished; it is filled with oppression.

⁷ As a well pours out its water, so she pours out her wickedness. Violence and destruction resound in her; her sickness and wounds are ever before me.

⁸ Take warning, O Jerusalem, or I will turn away from you and make your land desolate so no one can live in it.

Vervenne, dean of the faculty of Divinity for making my stay a most enriching experience. The major part of this article was written during my stay in Louvain.

3. EXEGESIS

3.1 Text internal investigation

3.1.1 Demarcating the pericope

Scholarly opinion is divided on the issue of demarcating the pericope. There are broadly speaking two main positions taken on this problem. The vast majority of commentaries are convinced that Jer 6:1-8 forms a unit (Bright 1965:43-44; Van Selms 1972:112; Thompson 1980:252; McKane 1986:138; Clements 1988: 41; Oosterhoff 1990:216; Jones 1992:131; Brueggemann 1998:69-71; Werner 1997:85). Holladay (1986:204) remarks for instance that “a new unit begins with 6:1 and still another with 6:9; these eight verses form a rhetorical unity.” Other scholars make a two part division in Jeremiah 6:1-8. Carroll (1986:190-193) and also Feinberg (1982:63-65; cf also Pohlmann 1989:143) are convinced that Jeremiah 6:1-5 forms a unit while 6:6-8 forms another unit. Pohlmann (1989:143) argues that the *Botenformel* in verses 6 marks the beginning of a new textual unit. It is however, difficult to understand verses 6-8 without any reference to the preceding verses and therefore it seems a better option to take verses 1-8 as a unit. Furthermore the כִּי at the beginning of verse 6 necessitates the link between verses 1-5 and 6-8. The pericope commences with a call to the Benjaminites to flee from Jerusalem and closes with a plea to the city of Jerusalem. Verse 9 opens with a אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת – saying – a prominent indicator of a new pericope.

3.1.2 Textcritical remarks

The text of Jr 6:1-8 is in good condition and there is no need for altering the text. Some eastern manuscripts have the mappiq in עֲצֵה (trees), reading “its tree” or “its trees” in verse 6, but there is no compelling reason to adopt this reading. Also in verse 6 the LXX has quite a different reading from the MT, reading “woe the city of fraud/deceit/falsehood”, accepted by Bright (1965:41) and Thompson (1980:252), but

rejected by McKane (1986:142). The LXX and the Peshitta read the last part of verse 7 with verse 8. What would then be implicated is that the threatening invasion of a foreign power would serve as a corrective discipline, rather than a totally destructive judgement (McKane 1986:143). This, however is to a certain extent already implied in the rest of verse 8.

3.1.3 The text viewed from a structural perspective

Viewing the text from a structural perspective, Bright (1965:49) has a two part division of the pericope. Verses 1-5 comprises a poem describing the coming of the foe from the north, leading to an oracle of Yahweh in verses 6-8. Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard (1991:99) have a much more detailed analysis of the pericope. According to them the structure of the pericope can be set out in three parts: verse 1 is a portion of a “call to alarm”, verses 2-3 is a brief pastoral scene, converted into a battle scene in verses 4-5, characterized by a note of urgency. The third and final part of this poem consists of a divine oracle in verses 6-8 in which the enemy is instructed to lay siege to Jerusalem, while a final warning to the city is also issued in verse 8. McKane (1986:138) sees verses 1-8 as a complex unity where Jeremiah speaks in verses 1-3, the enemy in verses 4-5 and Yahweh in verses 6-7, finally issuing a last call in verse 8 to repentance.

It is argued here that the text of Jeremiah 6:1-8 can be divided into three parts: verses 1-3, 4-5, 6-8. Verses 1-3 are marked by an interesting word-play. In verse 1 one reads: *וּבַתִּקְוֵה תִקְעוּ שׁוֹפָר*. In verse 3 *תִּקְעוּ* reappears as *תִּקְעוּ*. (Carroll 1986:191; Oosterhoff 1990:219; Jones 1992:131-133; Bright 1965:47). The word play is taken up in verse 8 with *תִּקְע* (Jones 1992:133). Holladay (1986:205) also brings the *מִקְרָב* and *בֵּית הַפְּרָם* in verse 1 to the attention of readers. One can also point to *רָעָה* in verse 1 and *רָעִים* and *רָעוּ* in verse 3. Verses 1-3 are further marked by a number of proper nouns (Jerusalem, Benjamin, Beth-hakkerem, Tekoa, Zion) unique in this part and absent in verses 4-5.

Verses 4-5 belong together due to the similar *קִוְמוּ* in verses 4 and 5, summoning foreign peoples to make war against Jerusalem. The day-night word-play is also a contributing factor for grouping verses 4-5 together. In verses 4-5 it is the voice of foreign military rulers and commanders that can be heard and not that of either the

prophet or Yahweh. Holladay (1986:204) noted that the repeated “Arise, let us attack”, is arranged chiasmatically in the speeches of the enemy.

Verses 6-8 belong together. It is introduced by a *כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת* saying, thereby clearly bracketing itself from the previous part. Jerusalem is mentioned twice (verse 6 and 8) creating a kind of inclusio. The word-play mentioned earlier in verses 1-3, returns in verse 8 with *תִּקַּע*, for Rudolph (1968:44) an indication that verses 1-8 “*einen zusammengehörigen Abschnitt bildet*”.

According to Holladay (1986:204) verses 1-3 and 6-8 enclose a sequence of shouts in verses 4-5 making it the centerpiece of the passage. Taking the structure of the whole of the pericope into account I would rather suggest that verses 6-8 form the climax of this pericope. It is not only the longest part of this pericope, it is also introduced by *כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת* and the ultimate result of the pending invasion of the enemy of the north is mentioned: the people stand in danger of losing the land. There is thus rather a *Steigerung* present in the text: in verses 1-3 the people are warned by the prophet to flee from Jerusalem, then the shouts of the enemy forces can be heard in verses 4-5 indicating their determination and will power to besiege the city and finally there is a word of warning coming from Yahweh Himself in verses 6-8.

Holladay (1986:204) detects a structural similarity between verses 1-3 and 6-8: both verses 1a and 6a embody battle orders; there is a vocative (Zion, Jerusalem) in the first colon of each of the tetracola (verses 2-3, 8) and those tetracola involve the action of shepherds, metaphorically in verses 2-3 and by implication in the empty land in verse 8.

3.1.4 Ambiguities in the text

Verses 1-8 are also characterized by a number of contrasting ambiguities. The people from the surrounding areas were once urged to flee to Jerusalem for safety (4:5), now they must flee from Jerusalem (Rudolph 1968:43) because it is no longer a safe place to be. Jerusalem, a place where peace ought to reign, is due to become a besieged city. They are given the advise to flee to Tekoa and Beth-Kerem, places of far less importance than the city of Jerusalem. In verse 2 Jerusalem is described as “fair Zion”, a beautiful and tender one. In stark contrast to this description stands the reality of a threatening

war. McKane (1986:141) puts it this way: “The daughter of Zion is portrayed as a woman who is doomed ...”

The shepherds coming to let their flocks graze around Jerusalem turned out to be shepherds of quite a different kind. The word play between עֲרֵב in verse 1 and עֲרֵבִים verse 3 suggests that the shepherds have more in mind than simply grazing their sheep. Total destruction is at stake for the people (Pohlmann 1989:144) The shepherds are in actual fact rulers who will come “to graze” Jerusalem. Shepherds are used here in the sense of (foreign) rulers (Holladay 1986:206; Oosterhoff 1990:220; Van Selms 1972:112-113), a sudden and abrupt change of imagery. According to McKane (1986:141) “The peaceful pastoral sketch of shepherds with their tents and flocks takes on a threatening aspect ... the grazing of the pastures is the stripping bare of the country”. Over against and in contrast with the image of a shepherd peacefully grazing his sheep in green pastures, stands the image of doom and destruction as well. The pastoral scene of Jerusalem is sharply contrasted with the raucous preparations for battle that would soon become reality (Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard 1991:100). Carroll (1986:191) says: “The beautiful meadow infested with shepherds grazing their sheep is in reality a city under siege from a formidable enemy. Sheep may *not* graze safely here”.

The image of war also provides an interesting ambiguity. Holladay (1986:206) notes how verses 4-5 are a striking example of how the image of a holy war is used against the people. Carroll (1986:191) notes that Jerusalem as the target of the enemy rather than the foreign power as Yahweh’s object of attack is an inversion of normal holy war concepts. Furthermore, it is clear that the enemy forces approaching Jerusalem are in fact instruments in the hands of Yahweh to punish his people (Brueggemann 1998:70). This is according to Jones (1992:133; cf also Werner 1997:86; Soggin 1960:79-83) a reversal of the fundamental principle of the holy war that the Lord fights for his people and gives them salvation.

Holladay (1986:206) points to another ambiguity. Under other circumstances the words “arise, let us go” would be that of joyous pilgrims going up to Jerusalem to the temple. Now these words are used by the enemy: they are also on their way to Jerusalem but not for the purpose of worshipping in the temple, rather preparing to take the city by force of war.

Brueggemann (1998:70) has his own and unique interpretation of this part. The reference to daughter Zion in verse 2 is a reference to the self-indulgent well-being women who will be destroyed. So desolate will Jerusalem become that it will be a place for grazing, inhabited by shepherds representing the lowest social class. Thus, Brueggemann (1998:70) concludes, Jeremiah 6:2-3 provides a sharp contrast between well-bred urban women and low-grade shepherds.

The simile in verse 7 produces yet another contrasting ambiguity. A well keeps water cool and fresh and available - especially in a context of battle. In the same way the city keeps evil fresh and available. Evil is something they should rather get rid of (Jr 4:14; Holladay 1986:207). A positive image (water flowing from a well) is used in a negative sense (evil). Hess (1991:347-349) illustrates how this simile should be interpreted as a well overflowing, even bursting with water. Thus, Jerusalem is a city overflowing with evil.

There is also a contrasting ambiguity in Yahweh himself in this passage. Although doom and destruction are announced upon the city because of a never-ending stream of evil bubbling from it, there is still a ray of hope. Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard (1991:100-101) speaks of the perpetual tension within God; he is presented as the one who orders Jerusalem's destruction because of the city's evil, yet laments the evil that makes such an order necessary. Verse 8 serves as a warning: the announced destruction may stop if Jerusalem corrects herself. Otherwise, the doom is inevitable, but the severing of ties with the people will inflict the deepest hurt on Yahweh (Feinberg 1982:65; McKane 1986:143; Carroll 1986:193). However it may be, the last minute warning stand in contrast with the preceding announcement of doom upon the city.

3.2 Text external investigation

3.2.1 The Gattung of the text

The Gattung can be described as "an announcement of judgment presented as warning" (Holladay 1986:204) with verses 6b-7 as an accusation against the city (Holladay 1986:205). Verse 8 is "a call to repentance" (Holladay 1986:205) and Rudolph (1968:44) calls it a *Mahnwort*. Bright (1965:49) calls this a poem describing the coming of the

“Foe from the North” (verses 1-5) leading into an oracle from Yahweh (verses 6-8; cf also Carroll 1986:193). For Werner (1997:85-86) this part consists of a *Prophetenrede* (verses 1-5) and a *Jahwerede* (verses 6-8) while Schreiner (1981:49) considers verses 6-8 as a *Jahwewort*. Carroll (1986:193) describes verses 6-8 as an oracle and Jones (1992:131) calls verses 1-8 an alarm call.

3.2.2 The historical setting of the text

Bright (1965:49) does not want to fix a date to this passage except to say that it is one of the earlier of the poems of this type (Thompson 1980:255), but Holladay (1986:205) situates the text between the battle of Carcemish (May or June 605) and the dictation of the scroll at March 604. It is difficult to pinpoint a date as close as Holladay did, it is perhaps better to suggest a date a couple of years before the exile.

3.2.3 Tradition material

There is reference to two of the salvation traditions so well known in Israel, that is the tradition of the conquest of the land and the Zion tradition.

3.2.3.1 The conquest of the land

Yahweh did not only promise the land to Abraham, the promise was reiterated to the people, and eventually Yahweh brought them miraculously into the land, full-filling all his promises made to the people (Jos 21:45). During the conquest of the land it was Yahweh siding with his people against the people inhabiting the land at that time. In this passage one finds a complete reversal of roles: it is Yahweh siding with the enemies of the people to bring them to a terrible downfall. The people face the unthinkable possibility of losing the land once granted to them by Yahweh.

3.2.3.2 The Zion tradition

It is also possible that the reference to Zion and Jerusalem brings to mind the Zion tradition. The Zion tradition, emphasizing the presence of Yahweh in Jerusalem and as a result of that the belief that Jerusalem cannot be conquered by foreign forces, is threatened. According to Schreiner (1981:48) “*Die Erwählung und die Auszeichnung der*

Stadt durch die göttliche Gegenwart, all die Vorzüge, die ihr der Herr schenkte, können das Strafgericht nicht verhindern.” The fall of Jerusalem is at hand contra the popular belief embodied in the Zion tradition.

Although the history of the text may indicate that the text underwent a process of growth over a period of time, the text in its final form forms a coherent unity. Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard (1991:99) is in agreement. They noted that although parts of this poem may have been drawn originally from separate sources, in its present form it is an effective poetic unity.

4. חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה IN JEREMIAH 6:1-8

Holladay (1986:208) notes that there are two different interpretations possible of this phrase. The one possibility is to render the phrase חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה as the event of violence. The other possibility is to interpret חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה as the characteristic shout of one set upon by robbers (Bright 1965:48; Feinberg 1982:65; Thompson 1980:255). Holladay (1986:208) notes how difficult it is to distinguish between חַמַּס and וְשָׂדֵה. According to Wolff in his commentary on Amos חַמַּס is violence directed against the person in the sense of attempted murder while וְשָׂדֵה) is violence directed against property in the sense of damaging material goods (Wolff 1977:193-194). But חַמַּס may also involve violent words or bloodshed and וְשָׂדֵה may involve violent theft and pillage as well as devastation. The former tends to violence that lasts while the latter tends to refer to violence that is passing.

Schreiner (1981:49) and Carroll (1986:193) see violence as the oppression of the weak in society. Brueggemann (1998:70-71) is in agreement. He sees חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה congruent with Jr 5:27-28 as terms suggesting a social system in which the strong exploit the weak.

5. חַמַּס וְשָׂדֵה IN JEREMIAH 6:1-8 – A NEW SOLUTION

The solution proposed here is to relate the term חמס ושד to other surrounding words in verses 6-8. It is interesting to note that no less than six terms are used in the *Jahwerede* (verses 6-8) to describe the conditions current in Jerusalem: oppression (verse 6), wickedness (verse 7), violence (verse 7), destruction (verse 7), disease/sickness (verse 7) and wounds (verse 7). The first two words can be interpreted as a general description of the condition current in the city. The next two words חמס ושד can be interpreted as a more precise definition of what is wrong in the city. Violence and destruction then do not only refer to the event of violence or to the physical outcry of one set upon by robbers, but rather to a condition in society which is characterized by violence and destruction by the upper class against the weaker ones. It is only the upper class that would have the power to exercise oppression upon the rest of the people – the result of which is nothing but wickedness. The oppression and wickedness exercised by some and experienced by others can only be described as חמס ושד. The last two words are a description of the eventual results of a condition like that: a society that is sick and wounded. Violence and destruction are symptomatic of a sick and wounded society suffering from the oppressive measures exercised by the powerful ones in society upon the rest of the people. Violence begets violence. Those who make use of violent means will eventually suffer violence themselves brought about by Yahweh.

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