

HÅKON SUNDE PEDERSEN

The Retributive and
Suffering God
of the Book of Jeremiah

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Mohr Siebeck

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The Retributive and
Suffering God
of the Book of Jeremiah

A Study of YHWH's 'Āzab-Complaints

Mohr Siebeck

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Preface

The present study is a revised version of my dissertation at MF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion, and Society from 2018. In 2010 I designed a project to pursue and further develop the notion of divine pathos of Terence E. Fretheim and Walter Brueggemann. My goal was to contribute to the understanding of the character of YHWH as a suffering God in the book of Jeremiah. The project, however, took me on a long journey filled with twists and turns, and in the end, I ended up challenging my own starting point – that is, challenging Fretheim’s and Brueggemann’s notions of divine pathos – as I do in this study. But even if I do so, it is done in deep appreciation of Fretheim’s and Brueggemann’s thought-provoking contributions to the study of Jeremiah and Old Testament theology. I owe them both a lot! In fact, I very much owe them my love for the Old Testament. I was doing my master’s thesis in New Testament studies when Terje Stordalen (University of Oslo) introduced me to the works of Brueggemann and Fretheim. I was so inspired by their works that after submitting my master’s dissertation, I converted to Old Testament studies.

In any study that has taken a long time to write and revise, one becomes indebted to many people. Most of all I am indebted to my supervisors Kristin Joachimsen and Corinna Körting – Corinna for encouraging me to let my original idea go when I got stuck and could not see a way forward for my original project, and Kristin for helping me pull my revised ideas together and make a dissertation out of them. Without your encouragement and patient guidance, I would never have made it.

Further acknowledgements go to other colleagues at MF: Karl William Weyde, Gard Granerød, and my fellow PhD students Ingunn Aadland, Matthew Monger, and Hans Olav Mørk. Thanks for welcoming me aboard and for your generous sharing of knowledge and experience. It has been a pleasure!

Special thanks go to the board and management at Fjellhaug International University College – thank you for believing in me and for giving me the opportunity to do a PhD: Jan Ove Selstø, Hans Aage Gravaas, Ketil Jensen, and Frank-Ole Thoresen. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Fjellhaug. Thank you for your encouragement! Special thanks to Harald Aarbakke for helping me with all kinds of technical issues and Tom Erik Hamre for invaluable help with finding needed literature.

Finally, I want to thank my family. First, I would like to thank my parents, Jofrid and Knut Pedersen, for their encouragement and support. Thank you for being there for me and my family these past years. And finally, thanks to my wife Inger Elise. Thank you for your love and faith in me and for blessing me with our three children: Jonathan, Samuel, and Cornelia.

Oslo, June 2022

Håkon Sunde Pedersen

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Abbreviations and Formalities

BCP	Blackwell Companion to Philosophy
BIBAL	Berkeley Institute of Biblical Archaeology & Literature
BibCS	Bibal Collected Essays
BibLa	Biblical Languages Series
CTP	Contributions To Phenomenology
NIVAC	The NIV Application Commentary
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
PES	Postmodern Ethics Series
VSH	Vanderbilt Studies in the Humanities

All other abbreviations follow *The SBL Handbook of Style, Second Edition*. Quotations from the Hebrew Bible are taken from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Translations in this study are my own unless otherwise indicated

Chapter I

Introduction

1. Context and Focus of the Study

Portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God appear side by side in the book of Jeremiah. My goal in this study is to contribute to the understanding of some of these portraits and of the problem of their juxtaposition in the book.¹

In modern and contemporary scholarship, the contrast and conflict between portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God in the book of Jeremiah have often been emphasized.² Traditionally, this has been done primarily by implication. Since the portraits tend to feature in different types of literary material (i.e. prose and poetry), the different portraits of YHWH have been ascribed to different authors and/or redactions. Put simply, the different portraits of YHWH illustrate the traditional distinction between Deuteronomistic prose and (Jeremianic) poetry.³ Although the idea of a clear-cut distinction between Deuteronomistic prose and (Jeremianic) poetry now, of course, is outdated, traces of the distinction still manifest themselves in current scholarship. Tensions and conflicts between different types of literary material are still being emphasized. But instead of trying to solve the problem by appealing to different authors and/or redactors behind the text, the tensions and conflicts now tend

¹ By “the book of Jeremiah” I mean the Masoretic text (MT) of Jeremiah. In other words, this is a study of MT, not the Septuagint text (LXX). As occasionally will become clear throughout the study, things would look somewhat different if LXX was made the focus of the study. Several observations important to my argument are manifest only in MT. In fact, in some cases, LXX seems to suggest quite opposite conclusions. Unfortunately, due to the limited scope of the study, I will not pursue the differences between MT and LXX.

² The starting point of modern research on the book of Jeremiah is commonly dated to the publication of Bernhard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia*, KHC 11 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1901).

³ See more below in I.2.1 and I.3.1. For good surveys of the history of modern research on the composition of the book of Jeremiah, see, for example, Leo G. Perdue, “Jeremiah in Modern Research: Approaches and Issues,” in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 1–32; Rüdiger Liwak, “Vierzig Jahre Forschung zum Jeremiabuch: Grundlagen,” *TRu 76* (2011): 131–79; Liwak, “Vierzig Jahre Forschung zum Jeremiabuch: Zur Entstehungsgeschichte,” *TRu 76* (2011): 265–95; Mary E. Mills, *Jeremiah: Prophecy in a Time of Crisis*, PGOT 20 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 17–46.

to be considered essential to sound theological and ideological readings of the book in its present form. Accordingly, different portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God are seen to testify to the polyphonic character of the book, representing competing voices that leave the reader of the book with no unifying or finalizing voice.⁴ A major representative of the latter tendency is Walter Brueggemann – one of the most influential proponents of divine suffering in the book of Jeremiah. Characteristic of Brueggemann is that he tends to portray the suffering YHWH very much in contrast to the retributive YHWH and to consider the suffering YHWH almost as a different kind of God to the retributive YHWH.⁵

A significant exception to the current tendency represented by Brueggemann is Terence E. Fretheim – another major proponent of divine suffering in the book of Jeremiah and in that sense a close ally of Brueggemann. Fretheim mitigates the contrast and seeks the unity between the retributive and the suffering YHWH. Admittedly, Fretheim too may contrast the suffering YHWH with the retributive YHWH, but primarily then with common and, in Fretheim’s view, misleading portrayals of the retributive YHWH. By offering a different understanding of YHWH as a retributive God, Fretheim tends to emphasize the unity of the retributive and the suffering YHWH as both “[t]ears and anger are held together in God”.⁶

In this study, I provide a basis for pointing out trajectories for a new understanding of the relationship between the portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God in the book of Jeremiah, an understanding that is both very different and, at the same time, may be seen to negotiate between the positions of Fretheim and Brueggemann. In short, despite contrast and difference, I propose that portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God in the book of Jeremiah might in fact be seen to unite and connect in ways that ultimately contribute to highlighting central theological concerns of the book in its present form. This proposal follows from a reconsideration of common and well-established understandings of portraits of both the retributive and the suffering YHWH in the book of Jeremiah.

Obviously, there is not just one image of YHWH as a retributive God in the book of Jeremiah, nor only one of YHWH as a suffering God. The well-recognized complexity of the book also manifests itself in this case. However, my focus of study is on what I prefer to call “the *‘āzab*-complaints of YHWH”. The complaint of YHWH that the people have forsaken him (אָזַב/ *‘āzab*) is

⁴ See, for example, A. R. Pete Diamond and Louis Stulman, eds., *Jeremiah (Dis)Placed: New Directions in Writing/Reading Jeremiah*, LHBOTS 529 (New York: T&T Clark, 2011); Christl M. Maier and Carolyn J. Sharp, eds., *Prophecy and Power: Jeremiah in Feminist and Postcolonial Perspective*, LHBOTS 577 (New York: T&T Clark, 2013).

⁵ For a more detailed presentation of Brueggemann’s view, see I.3.2.4.

⁶ Terence E. Fretheim, “Theological Reflections on the Wrath of God in the Old Testament,” *HBT* 24 (2002): 7. For a more detailed presentation of Fretheim’s view, see I.3.2.3.

among the most frequent accusations voiced by YHWH in the book of Jeremiah, occurring no less than 10 times in the book – in 1:16; 2:13, 17, 19; 5:7, 19; 9:12; 16:11(2x); and 19:4.⁷ My primary research question is quite simply: *How are the ‘āzab-complaints of YHWH to be understood?*

What makes these complaints interesting is that in the ‘āzab-complaint the retributive and the suffering YHWH are brought together, so to speak. According to prevailing readings, in about half of the ‘āzab-complaints (i.e. 1:16, 5:19, 9:12, 16:11, and 19:4) we hear the voice of the Deuteronomistic YHWH of retribution. Taken as forming part of and reflecting a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah, these ‘āzab-complaints are commonly read as utterances of YHWH as a justified judge. The other half (i.e. 2:13, 17, 19, and 5:7), however, are quite different, and following the lead of Terence E. Fretheim and Walter Brueggemann, an increasing number of scholars argue that these ‘āzab-complaints are best understood as painful cries of lament of YHWH. In other words, in the ‘āzab-complaints in 2:13, 17, 19, and 5:7 YHWH is seen to be speaking as the forsaken one – that is, as a vulnerable victim of the people’s forsaking of him.

Considering these common readings, I take as a point of departure that the ‘āzab-complaints of YHWH basically appear in two variants in the book of Jeremiah – roughly speaking, one voiced by a retributive YHWH, the other by a suffering YHWH.⁸ For the sake of simplicity, I term them, respectively, the prosaic and the poetic ‘āzab-complaints of YHWH, as the former feature in prose passages and the latter in poetic units.⁹ It must be admitted, however, that like all categories and clear-cut distinctions made by scholars, neither will mine, as will be seen, fit the material completely.

However, the objective of my analysis of the ‘āzab-complaints is threefold. First, my fundamental objective is to challenge prevailing readings of the two types of ‘āzab-complaints by clarifying the profile of each type by means of a close reading of each individual ‘āzab-complaint in light of its literary context.

Second, the analysis of the profile of the two types of ‘āzab-complaints is motivated by the conviction that common and well-established portrayals of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God in relation to these ‘āzab-complaints need to be revised. The problem lies with the understanding of, respec-

⁷ The primary focus of this study is the ‘āzab-complaints voiced by YHWH. Hence, those voiced by Jeremiah and the nations (גוים) in 17:13 and 22:9, respectively – “they have forsaken (עזבו) YHWH, the fountain of living water” (17:13) and “they have forsaken (עזבו) the covenant of YHWH, their God” (22:9) – will be dealt with only secondarily, as part of my discussion of specific ‘āzab-complaints of YHWH.

⁸ This is also the reason why I have chosen to use the term “complaint”, as it can be used as a synonym for both “lament” and “accusation” in English.

⁹ It might be worth emphasizing that I here use “prosaic” and “poetic” in purely descriptive and not value-laden terms.

tively, the character of the retribution and the nature of the suffering and lament. In other words, the central objective and driving force of the study is to provide new and convincing portrayals of YHWH as a retributive and suffering God in relation to the *'āzab*-complaints.

Finally, I will argue that my readings of the *'āzab*-complaints invite us to reconsider the juxtaposition of portraits of YHWH as a retributive and suffering God in the book of Jeremiah. I seek to contribute to this endeavour by looking at my conclusions regarding the *'āzab*-complaints and their related portraits of YHWH from the perspective of the book as a whole. In short, by drawing attention to some interesting points of unity and connection between the different *'āzab*-complaints and portraits of YHWH I suggest that their juxtaposition in the book of Jeremiah ultimately contributes to highlighting central theological concerns in the book in its present form.

Of course, given the complexity of the book of Jeremiah and the variety of images of YHWH as a retributive and suffering God in it, the exclusive focus on the *'āzab*-complaints limits somehow the force of my proposal. However, the choice of focus is not arbitrary. By focusing on the *'āzab*-complaints of YHWH it means that we will be dealing with texts often considered to be key texts in the book of Jeremiah with respect to the themes of both divine retribution (especially 5:19, 9:12, 16:11) and divine suffering (especially 2:13, 17, 19). Moreover, as regards the poetic *'āzab*-complaints, one could argue that they serve as a test case for other parallel complaint expressions like, for instance: “they went far (רחק) from me” (2:5), “they turned their back (פנה ערף) to me” (2:27), “they have forgotten (שכח) me” (2:32; 3:21; 13:25; 18:15), “you were treacherous (בגד) to me” (3:20; 5:11), and “you have rejected (שטת) me” (15:6). Therefore, the relevance of an in-depth study of the *'āzab*-complaints of YHWH should not be underestimated.

As might already be clear by now, the following study will be divided into two major and quite distinct parts. The poetic *'āzab*-complaints will be analysed in dialogue with scholars who read them as laments of a forsaken and victimized YHWH (ch. II), whereas the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints will be analysed in dialogue with scholars who take them to reflect a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah (ch. III). Based on my conclusions regarding the *'āzab*-complaints and their related portraits of YHWH, I finally (ch. IV) suggest trajectories for a new understanding of the relationship between the portraits of YHWH as a retributive and a suffering God in the present form of the book of Jeremiah. Before turning to my analyses, however, the context, theses, and approach of my study need some further clarification.

2. Prevailing Readings and My Theses

In the following, I will first introduce the texts to be analysed and present prevailing readings, and in doing so develop and formulate my theses (I.2). Then I will survey particularly relevant parts of the broader research context of the study in order to dig deeper into the rationale of the readings with which I will be dialoguing throughout, and to clarify the hermeneutical basis and working assumptions of my own readings (I.3). Finally, I will clarify the approach and outline of the study (I.4).

2.1 The Prosaic 'Āzab-Complaints: A Typical Deuteronomistic Explanation of the Defeat and Exile of Judah?

All the prosaic 'āzab-complaints in Jer 1:16, 5:19, 9:12, 16:11, and 19:4 form part of a rather fixed and formulaic pattern: the 'āzab-complaint – in the perfect form – introduces a series of closely associated accusations of disobedience and worshipping of other gods, normally in the wayyiqtol form. To take 1:16 as an example: “they have forsaken me (עזבוני) and burned incense (ויקטרו) to other gods and worshipped (וישתחו) the works of their hands” (1:16b). Moreover, in their literary contexts, all the prosaic 'āzab-complaints serve to justify acts and/or announcements of divine judgment. Again 1:16 may serve as a helpful case in point: “And I will speak my judgments on them, against all their evil, that they have forsaken me [...]” (1:16a).

Considering this pattern, it is not surprising that scholars usually call attention to Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic History (DtrH) when reading the prosaic 'āzab-complaints of YHWH. As a matter of fact, with the exception of 2 Chronicles, the accusation that the people have forsaken YHWH is predominantly found in Deuteronomy, DtrH, and the book of Jeremiah.¹⁰ Indeed, it serves almost as a leitmotif in DtrH.¹¹ Because of this, it is hardly disputed that the prosaic 'āzab-complaints of YHWH in the book of Jeremiah are terminologically and conceptually at home in the Deuteronomistic covenant tradition and thus are to be understood in light of central tenets of this tradition – like the idea of exclusive loyalty, disobedience, and worship of other gods as the fundamental sin, and divine judgment as divine retribution. As a consequence,

¹⁰ The accusation that (some of) the people have forsaken (עזב) YHWH occurs 16 times in Deuteronomy and DtrH (Deut 28:20; 29:24; 31:16; Judg 2:12–13; 10:6, 13; 1 Sam 8:8; 1 Kgs 9:9; 11:33; 18:18; 19:10, 14; 2 Kgs 17:16; 21:22; 22:17). Elsewhere we find it 10 times in 2 Chronicles (12:1; 13:10, 11; 21:10; 24:18, 20, 24; 28:6; 29:6; 34:26) as well as in Isa 1:4; Hos 4:10; Jonah 2:9; and Dan 11:30.

¹¹ Erhard Gerstenberger, “עזב,” *TDOT* 10:590; see also H.-P. Stähli, “עזב,” *TLOT* 3:866–68.

the prosaic 'āzab-complaints are commonly understood as legal indictments of disloyalty justifying the retributive judgment of YHWH.¹²

However, many scholars have taken a step further, arguing that the prosaic 'āzab-complaints reflect a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah and thus bear evidence of Deuteronomistic influence in the composition of the book of Jeremiah.¹³ Evidently, all the prosaic 'āzab-complaints occur in the formulaic prose material of the book of Jeremiah. Or more precisely, they are found in the brief prose passages – 1:15–16; 5:(18–)19; 9:11–15; 16:10–13; 19:2b–9, 11b–13 – scattered throughout the first part of the book (Jer 1–25), and, notably enough, not in the characteristic prose sermons or so-called “C-material” of the book.¹⁴ Obviously, concerning the question of Deuteronomistic redaction in the book of Jeremiah, it is the latter material that has received the most attention from scholars through the years, but not to the neglect of the brief prose passages. Rather, the brief prose passages have often been closely associated with the prose sermons as they show close similarity in style, language, and theology. In support, one may also point to the fact that all the brief prose passages containing prosaic 'āzab-complaints bear a close

¹² See, for instance, the commentaries of Ernest W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1–25*, CBC 22a (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia, MI: Fortress, 1986); William McKane, *Jeremiah 1–25*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1–25*, ITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, IBC (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988); Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Jeremiah*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992); Gunther Wanke, *Jeremia 1,1–25,14*, ZBK 20.1 (Zürich: TVZ, 1995); Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, AB 21a (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Georg Fischer, *Jeremia 1–25*, HThKAT (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 2005); Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005); Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008); Tremper Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NIBCOT 14 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008); Werner H. Schmidt, *Das Buch Jeremia: Kapitel 1–20*, ATD 20 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

¹³ See, for instance, the commentaries of Nicholson, *Jeremiah*; Carroll, *Jeremiah*; Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1–25*; Clements, *Jeremiah*; Jones, *Jeremiah*; Wanke, *Jeremia*; Stulman, *Jeremiah*; Schmidt, *Jeremia*.

¹⁴ To the so-called “C-material”, Sigmund Mowinckel, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1914), 31, originally assigned 7:1–8:3; 11:1–5, 9–14; 18:1–12; 21:1–10; 25:1–11a; 32:1–2, 6–16, 24–44; 34:1–7, 8–22; 35:1–19; and 44:1–14. Although 16:1–13(15) and 19:2b–9(11b–13) have occasionally been counted among the prose sermons (e.g. Enno Janssen, *Juda in der Exilszeit: Ein Beitrag zur Frage der Entstehung des Judentums*, FRLANT 69 [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1956], 105; Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia*, HAT 12 [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1958], 100–02; Louis Stulman, *The Prose Sermons of the Book of Jeremiah: A Redescription of the Correspondences with the Deuteronomistic Literature in the Light of Recent Text-Critical Research*, SBLDS 83 [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986], 67–70, 76–79), most often they have not.

resemblance to, and even parallel, passages in Deuteronomy, and DtrH. Jeremiah 1:16b closely parallels 2 Kgs 22:17a. Jeremiah 19:2b–9, 11b–13 are characterized by mixing several quotes from Deuteronomy (e.g. vv. 7, 9 parallel, respectively, Deut 28:26, 53), DtrH (e.g. v. 3b parallels 1 Sam 3:11 and 2 Kgs 21:12), and from formulaic prose material elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah (e.g. vv. 5–6 parallel Jer 7:31–34; 32:35). For many scholars, however, it is the case of Jer 5:19; 9:11–15; 16:10–13 that proves the point. Shaped in the form of an apparently rather fixed question–answer scheme, which indeed is paralleled in Deut 29:21–27; 1 Kgs 9:7–9; as well as in Jer 22:8–9, the theodicy question – the question with which the Deuteronomists are so fundamentally associated – takes centre stage in these passages: “Why has YHWH our God done all these things to us?” (5:19a); “Why is the land ruined?” (9:11b); “Why has YHWH announced all this great evil against us?” (16:10a). And the answer offered in response is basically the same in all three passages: because the people have forsaken YHWH and served other gods (cf. 5:19b; 9:12–13; 16:11–12). So, in short, there seem to be good reasons for viewing these passages as “Deuteronomistic through and through”, as Ernst W. Nicholson puts it,¹⁵ and for taking the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints as representing a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah.

However, there are also reasons to challenge this traditional view, as has already been done by some scholars. But instead of focusing on the style of language in the passages of which the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints form part and arguing that the style cannot be identified as Deuteronomistic,¹⁶ I would like to draw attention to the theological profile of the passages. And in connection with that, I would like to challenge some of the basic assumptions commonly associated with the expression “a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah” and their bearings upon the reading of the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints and of the related portraits of YHWH.

Admittedly, “Deuteronomistic” and “Deuteronomism” are elusive terms in contemporary scholarship.¹⁷ As Hermann-Josef Stipp notes, “[t]he demarcation

¹⁵ Ernst W. Nicholson, *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study in the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 63.

¹⁶ Cf., for example, John Bright, “The Date of the Prose Sermons of Jeremiah,” *JBL* 70 (1951): 15–35; William L. Holladay, “Prototype and Copies: A New Approach to the Poetry–Prose Problem in the Book of Jeremiah,” *JBL* 79 (1960): 351–67; Holladay, “Fresh Look at ‘Source B’ and ‘Source C’ in Jeremiah,” *VT* 25 (1975): 394–412; Helga Weippert, *Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches*, BZAW 132 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973). Of the commentaries consulted in this study, the following adhere to a similar line of reasoning: Thompson, *Jeremiah*; Holladay, *Jeremiah I*; Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*; Longman III, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*. See more below in I.3.1.2.

¹⁷ Cf. Linda S. Schearing and Steven L. McKenzie, eds., *Those Elusive Deuteronomists: The Phenomenon of Pan-Deuteronomism*, JSOTSup 268 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999). See more below in I.3.1.2–3.

of Deuteronomism is ultimately a matter of definition and thus subject to negotiation and agreement among scholars”.¹⁸ Therefore, what various scholars mean by arguing that the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints reflect a typical Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah is not self-evident. Still, as will be further clarified below, the following assumption seems quite common: more than a mere explanation, a Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah tends to anticipate some sort of hope. As an explanation in service of the survivors – most often identified as the exiles or Babylonian Golah community – the explanation ultimately brings order to the chaos of the disaster and teaches the lesson to be learned from the disaster. Furthermore, when ascribed to the Deuteronomists, the passages containing the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints tend, as already mentioned, to be closely associated with other types of formulaic prose material in the book of Jeremiah, especially the parenetic discourses calling the people to repentance and pointing to alternatives to judgment (e.g. 7:1–8:3; 11:1–14; 18:1–12; 22:1–5).¹⁹

However, we need to be careful when transferring linguistic expressions from their present literary contexts into a more or less fixed frame of reference. The prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints in the book of Jeremiah are good examples in that respect, as there seems to be a tension, as I will argue, between how the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints function in their immediate literary contexts and how they are assumed to function as a Deuteronomistic explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah – at least if the latter implies the assumptions just pointed out. For, as I attempt to demonstrate in this study, when read in light of their present literary contexts, the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints are characterized by justifying announcements and acts of divine retribution describing scenarios of what I would call “total judgment”. By “total judgment” I mean that the judgment announced is unconditional, applies to the entire people, and suggests that the YHWH–people relationship has come to an end – either because YHWH will annihilate the people or because YHWH rejects the people by alienating himself from the people and/or the people from himself. Here it may suffice to briefly point to the announcements of judgment in 9:15 and 16:13 as telling examples:

I will scatter them among the nations [...], and I will send the sword after them until I have made an end to them (9:15).

I will hurl you out of this land, into the land that you do not know, nor your fathers. There you shall serve other gods day and night, and I will show you no favour (16:13).

¹⁸ Hermann-Josef Stipp, “Formulaic Language and the Formation of the Book of Jeremiah,” in *Jeremiah’s Scripture: Production, Reception, Interaction, and Transformation*, ed. Hindy Najman and Konrad Schmid, JSJSup 173 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 164.

¹⁹ See more below in I.3.1.3.

More than “just” the defeat and exile of Judah, here YHWH seems to announce total annihilation and definitive rejection of the people, including those in exile. Intuitively, it is not easy to see how these announcements of judgments can be reconciled with the claim that the *‘āzab*-complaints in 9:12 and 16:11 reflect an explanation of the defeat and exile of Judah that anticipates hope for the survivors of the catastrophe. Of course, attempts at reconciliation and harmonization have been made, but quite often the conflict is ignored. Ignored is also the fact that the other prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints seem to justify similar words of judgment – if not as equally clear and dramatic as those in 9:15 and 16:13. For, as I will argue, in their present literary contexts, it is characteristic of all the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints that they serve to justify words of total judgment.

It is against this background, I suggest, that we need to revise common portrayals of the retributive YHWH of the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints. For if YHWH justifies total judgment in the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints, they are utterances not only of a justified judge but of a God who is done with his people. This is the central thesis of the present study of YHWH’s prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints.

However, while the character of the retributive judgment justified by the *‘āzab*-complaints will take centre stage in my analysis of YHWH’s prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints, I would also like to draw attention to another feature characteristic of these *‘āzab*-complaints. For in addition to the total judgment motif, the prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints are characterized by featuring in literary contexts where, in some way or another, they contribute to highlighting the foolishness of people having forsaken YHWH. To clarify, let me briefly draw attention to the *‘āzab*-complaints in 1:16. In 1:16 the people are being accused of having forsaken YHWH for “the work of their hands” (למעשי ידיהם). Evidently, the contrast between YHWH and “the work of their hands” – a contrast that, as will be shown below, is further emphasized by the characterization of YHWH in the literary context of 1:16²⁰ – highlights that the people have not only been disloyal to YHWH but have been foolishly so. To forsake YHWH for “the work of their hands” is foolishly absurd and reveals the people’s lack of good sense and judgment. Hence, in the *‘āzab*-complaint in 1:16 YHWH addresses not only the disloyalty of his people, but the foolishness of their disloyal behaviour. In other prosaic *‘āzab*-complaints, the foolishness is somewhat different and may be better defined as misconceptions or a lack of recognition and insight. Either way, my point is that it is characteristic of the *‘āzab*-complaints of YHWH in the book of Jeremiah that they feature in contexts in which, in some way or another, they contribute to highlighting the foolishness of people forsaking YHWH.

²⁰ See III.2.3.1.

Of course, the features I define as characteristic of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints manifest themselves in different ways and with varying degrees of clarity in the different *'āzab*-complaints. In fact, I must even admit that on one occasion, the map I have been drawing in the preceding does not entirely fit the terrain, as one of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints (i.e. 19:4) seems not to highlight the foolishness of the people forsaking YHWH. Despite this exception, I nevertheless think it is adequate to speak of a basic pattern and, ultimately, a common profile for the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints – that is, that the *'āzab*-complaints in 1:16; 5:19; 9:12; 16:11; and 19:4 are basically to be understood as quite formulaic indictments of disloyalty, characterized by justifying announcements of total judgment and highlighting the foolishness of the people forsaking YHWH. As will be seen, this profile of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints involves points of both sharp contrast and interesting similarity to the poetic *'āzab*-complaints.

2.2 The Poetic *'Āzab*-Complaints: A Lament of a Forsaken and Victimized YHWH?

As we turn to the poetic *'āzab*-complaints in 2:13, 17, 19, and 5:7, we face a quite different picture. Certainly, the poetic *'āzab*-complaints also relate closely to accusations of turning to others than YHWH. Yet, in contrast to the formulaic patterns of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints, the literary contexts of the poetic *'āzab*-complaints are filled with thought-provoking rhetoric and rich imagery. For instance, 5:7–8 speak of “no-gods”, whorehouses, and lusty stallions, while the *'āzab*-complaints in 2:13, 17, and 19 connect with accusations shaped in water imagery: “Me they have forsaken (עזבו), the fountain of living water, to dig themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that do not hold water” (2:13); they are going “to Egypt to drink the water of the Nile” and “to Assyria to drink the water of the Euphrates” (2:18). However, the difference between the prosaic and the poetic *'āzab*-complaints cuts deeper than poetics. In sharp contrast to the total judgment motif of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints, all the poetic *'āzab*-complaints feature in contexts suggesting that YHWH still desires relationship with the people. For instance, in 2:13, YHWH continues to refer to the people forsaking him as “my people”, whereas in 5:1, 7, YHWH’s willingness to forgive is emphasized. Furthermore, all the poetic *'āzab*-complaints connect with references to YHWH’s benevolence and generosity towards the people, e.g. “I brought you into the garden land” (2:7); “He was leading you in the way” (2:17); and “I fed them full” (5:7). We find no such elements in the literary context of the prosaic *'āzab*-complaints.

Despite these observations, however, scholars have traditionally often sought to cast all the *'āzab*-complaints of YHWH – the prosaic and poetic ones alike – into one fixed concept. Typically, given the particular association with Deuteronomy and DtrH noted above, the idea that the people are bound to

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