Human Responsibility and the Responsive Sovereignty of Yahweh: An Exegetical Study of Jeremiah 18:1–12

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Abstract

This article addresses the complex relationship between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility. An exegesis of Jeremiah 18:1–12 highlights a framework within which to make sense of the interplay of these key theological concepts. The discourse grounds the discussion within the sovereignty of God, and it is from this foundation that human responsibility can then be understood. The analogy of the potter and the subsequent interpretation succinctly affirms God's sovereignty. The word of the sovereign God serves as the basis for his dealings with mankind, and it is from this that mankind's actions are adjudged. Though all things come to pass, invariably, according to God's will and word, he allows for contingencies, particularly that of human action, to affect his responses. In this way, human responses are crucial in determining how history unfolds. The main point of the passage, and this paper, therefore, is that the power of God, though absolute, is responsive in nature, allowing for human actions to shape God's response. Two key words, שׁוּב and נָחַם, are used to portray this responsive relationship. The passage and the principles portrayed are also helpful in understanding the nature of prophetic contingency in the Old Testament.

Keywords: Responsive Sovereignty of God, Human Responsibility, Repentance, Prophetic Contingency

Introduction

In Jeremiah 18:1–12, we encounter two seemingly contradictory images of God. First, He is portrayed as a potter, highlighting his sovereignty in doing whatever he desires, as the potter does with the passive clay. In the next breath, the author of the book expounds on the fact that God's actions towards the people are dictated by their response to Him. God, through Jeremiah, states that he will change his mind depending on their resulting actions. Various scholars have questioned how the different sections in 1–12 relate to each other. Verses 1–6 have often been taken to be distinct from verses 7–10 and 11–12, particularly by those of the Deuteronomic school of thought.[1] They argue that verses 7–10 are a later insertion by a Deuteronomic redactor based on the seeming incongruence of the message. Other scholars uphold the unity of the text, its authorship, and the message. As the text now stands in its present form, the coherence of verses 1–12 must be acknowledged to make sense of the passage.

This approach, however, raises numerous questions that we must grapple with. Are God's actions dependent on his people's response, or does he sovereignly achieve whatever he wills independent of the actions of men? How can we comprehend the seeming change of God's mind and plans, and yet we are to understand Him as immutable? How are we to reconcile divine sovereignty with human responsibility? From a surface reading, this responsiveness to human action seems to not only conflict with but also belittle the concept of a sovereign, immutable God. Or, as D. A. Carson asks, 'Must God be reduced to accommodate the freedom of human choice?'[2] An exegesis of the passage helps answer some

[1] Mckane, for example, sees verses 7–10 as having been interposed between 1–6 and verse11 and takes verse 12 as a subsequent addition. He sees these verses as typical of Deuteronomic thought in that they emphasize repentance and change in behavior. See William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), 426. Child's sees the function of this Deuteronomic framework as an attempt to interpret Jeremiah's ministry and message for the life of the post exilic community. See Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 1st American ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 348. Carroll concurs arguing that the concept of turning, שׁוּב, was a deuteronomistic one that came up in exilic and post exilic years to encourage the post-exilic community live in a certain way so as to avoid further destruction as a form of divine punishment. The application of the principle to any nation, he takes as an even later development in the Jeremiah tradition. See Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament library (London: SCM Pr, 1986), 373. Stulman, on his part, argues that this unit was written for the post-587 readers to debunk entrenched assumptions and to forge trust in God who was still 'shaping' their current reality in exile. See Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*, Abingdon Old Testament commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 181–182.

[2] D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, Marshall's theological library (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 1.

of the questions and find a way in which God's sovereignty coheres with the understanding of human responsibility.

Exegesis of Jeremiah 18:1–12

The Symbolic Message at the Potter's House (Verses 1–4)

The passage is introduced through a formula, הָיָה אֲשֶׁר הַדָּבָר, that is frequently used to introduce Yahweh's message through the prophets and occurs multiple times in the book of Jeremiah.[3] The opening phrase יְהוָה מֵאֵת אֶל־יִרְמְיָהוּ הָיָה אֲשֶׁר הַדָּבָר , may be translated as 'The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord'[4] This kind of phraseology has parallels in the Ancient Near East, where it was used to speak of the dictates of gods and individuals in positions of authority, such as kings and leaders.[5] Thus, 'the word of' encompassed the power and authority of the one from whom the words preceded. Jeremiah stood within the prophetic tradition that understood the sovereign word of Yahweh as one that had the power to order historical events.[6] Through his word, every social, religious, and political ideology was to be evaluated against and legitimated or discarded.[7]

The opening statements of the prophetic texts do not simply introduce a message to be relayed by the prophet but sometimes introduce a course of action that the prophet is to follow.[8] Jeremiah was instructed to go to the potter's house, and while there, Yahweh would cause him to hear his word. The Hiphil imperfect אַשְׁמִיעֲךָ gives this causative sense. As verse 3 indicates, there was prompt obedience to Yahweh's instruction on Jeremiah's part. Jeremiah observed the potter working at his wheel. The dual noun הָאָבְנָיִם describes a common type of potter's wheel made up of two wheels or stones.[9] The basic technique for throwing a pot remains the same to this day. The potter places the clay on the rotating upper wheel and molds

[3] It is also found in the first verse of chapters 7, 11, 14, 21, 30, 32, 34, 35, 40, 44, 46 as well as 34:8.
[4] The book of Jeremiah, like other prophetic literature, places singular importance on the word of God. The root דבר, in both noun and verb form occurs more frequently in Jeremiah (over 300 times), than any other book in the Old Testament. The combination of דָּבָר and יְהוָה occurs over 180 times in Jeremiah, representing majority of occurrences in Old Testament. (1 King-74, Ezekiel-65, 1 Sam -41, and Isaiah-30)
[5] Chicago Assyrian Dictionary, as quoted by Samuel A. Meier, *Speaking of Speaking: Marking Direct Discourse in the Hebrew Bible*, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum v. 46 (Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1992), 316.
[6] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 23.
[7] Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 28.
[8] Meier, *Speaking of Speaking*, 265.
[9] Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, Life in Biblical Israel, 1st ed., Library of ancient Israel (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 135.

the rotating clay between his wet hands. The clay itself is not passive within this engagement and exerts a centrifugal force as it spins on the wheel. The interplay between the force exerted by the clay and the pressure of the potter's hands plays an integral part in the shaping process.[10] This interrelationship is crucial for the comprehension of the analogy and its application.[11]

In verse 4, Jeremiah notes that the potter's work did not turn out as intended. As he watched, the vessel being molded between the potter's hands became misshapen and spoiled (וְנִשְׁחַת).[12] This Niphal form of the verb שָׁחַת appears six times in the OT.[13] When used by an object, it expresses the condition of being so spoiled that it cannot be used as originally intended, thus rendering it useless or productive.[14]

The text does not specify the details of what exactly went wrong. Different things could go wrong in the making of a vessel. The main variables are the clay's quality and the potter's skill. Most of the reasons given in the literature for the spoilage describe a deficiency in the potter's skill or a defect in the clay.[15] When applied to this passage, the main drawback of these reasons is that only an unskilled potter would face such difficulties. Given the subsequent interpretation of the analogy in verse 6, with God as the Potter, it is more probable that this was likely not an issue with the potter, but with the clay. The text itself lends support to this. The main verb referring to the clay, וְנִשְׁחַת, is in the Niphal that has no element of causation. A defect in the clay, such as a piece of rock or wood or different clay types, could lead to such an outcome.[16]

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[10] Peter C. Craigie et al., *Jeremiah 1 - 25*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 26 (Waco, Tex: Word Books, Publ, 2000), 245. Craigie describes the clay as having a will of its own that it exerts in the process.

[11] William Lee Holladay and Paul D. Hanson, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25*, Hermeneia--A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 513.

[12] The verb may be taken iteratively. However, it is unlikely that in a single sitting a master potter would have to redo his work multiple times. This would be an indictment of the skill of the potter. Skill notwithstanding, it did happen at least once as Jeremiah watched.

[13] It also appears in Gen 6:11,12; Exo 8:20; Jer 13:7, Eze 20:44

[14] Its use here corresponds to that in Jeremiah 13:7, another sign act, where the word is used to describe a sash that became spoiled and no longer useful.

[15] J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 433. Thompson summarizes the main possible reasons as (1) The potter's wheel moving too fast such that the centrifugal force generated spoils the clay's shape, (2) the clay is either too wet and sags or too dry and doesn't take shape, (3) the quantity of clay was not enough for the desired vessel, and (4) the particular clay on the wheel was not suitable for what the potter had in mind.

[16] Craigie et al., *Jeremiah 1 —25*, 244. Craigie sees this as a reference to a blemish in the clay and translates the section as 'the vessel which he was making was blemished in the clay at the potter's hand.'

Following the spoilage, verse 4 tells us that the potter remade the clay vessel. The potter remade the clay into another vessel. He possibly took the misshapen lump, smashed it down, kneaded it again to remove any air or possible foreign particles, and began to shape it again on the wheel. The only characteristic the text gives of the remade vessel is that it was יָשָׁר בְּעֵינֵי הַיּוֹצֵר לַעֲשׂוֹתכַּאֲשֶׁר translated literally as 'just as it seemed right in the eyes of the Potter to make.'[17] This phrase describes the potter's prerogative to determine what will become of the clay. It ultimately points to Yahweh's divine prerogative to do as he pleases with his creation.

This symbolic act at the potter's house highlights the relationship between the potter and the clay. Though the potter remains in control of the entire process and chooses what will ultimately become of the clay, the clay has a measure of influence in the process. It can influence the potter to change his plans. As Wright surmises, the outcome is a "mysterious combination of the sovereign will of the potter and the condition of the clay."[18]

The Interpretation of the Symbolic Message (verses 5–10)

Elucidation of the Principle (Verses 5–6)

In verse 5, Yahweh responded to Jeremiah's obedience to his word and gave him a further revelation, just as he had promised (18:2). The prophetic formulation וַיְהִי דְבַר־יְהוָה אֵלַי לֵאמֹר signals the shift from the prophetic performance to divine interpretation. Yahweh's message begins with a preposed phrase, הַכַּיּוֹצֵר הַזֶּה, that has the combination of the interrogative הֲ followed by the preposition כְּ.[19] To the intended audience, this was likely a literary prompt for them to continue thinking of the potter even as they listened to the message from Yahweh. The same verb עָשָׂה that had been used in the potter analogy is also used in the comparison, further linking the two.

Yahweh's speech commenced with a rhetorical question that compared what the potter had done with the clay with what he could do with Israel. The use of the rhetorical question

[17] Brueggemann argues that like all skilled craftsmen, Yahweh seeks not just functionality or utility but also a certain satisfaction or delight out of his work. He sees a similarity in the phrase 'just as seemed right in the eyes of the Potter to make' and that of the repeated exclamation of Genesis 1, 'It was very good.' He points out that both give not just a functional judgment but an aesthetic one as well. See Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 250–251.

[18] Chris Wright, *Message of Jeremiah - Grace in the End.*, 2014, 211.

[19] Holladay and Hanson, *Jeremiah 1*, 516. This is the only instance of such a combination in the book of Jeremiah.

was essentially a tool of persuasion.[20] The question reflects an ongoing dispute between Yahweh and Judah about Yahweh's control of Judah's present and her future."[21] The prophetic formulation נְאֻם־יְהוָה that follows is commonly associated with rhetorical questions, as it is here, and often separates the rhetorical question from a restatement in the indicative.[22] The phrase seems repetitive in light of verse 5, but to the audience, it further stresses that the words spoken were indeed of divine origin.[23]

In responding to Judah, Yahweh likened himself to the potter and the clay to the house of Israel. The analogy of God as the potter is used extensively in the Old Testament in the context of God's work of creation. The verb יָצַר commonly describes Yahweh's creative acts, not by speaking, but by his hands-on engagement.[24] It includes God's shaping and forming of man from the ground (Gen 2:7–8), the creation of the world (Isa 45:18, Amos 4:13, 7:21 Ps 95:5) and of the animals (Gen 2:19, Ps 104:26). The potter analogy is also widely attested in other Ancient Near Eastern literature.[25] When linking the gods and humans, it conveyed the idea of human frailty and servility in the presence of divine power.

As their sovereign creator, Yahweh sought to remind his people of the creator-creation distinction, emphasising his divine prerogative to do whatever pleased him with them, just as the potter had done with his clay. The rhetorical question here belies a disputation between

[20] Lénart J. de Regt, "Discourse Implications of Rhetorical Questions in Job, Deuteronomy and the Minor Prophets," in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. J. de Regt, Jan de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (Van Gorcum; Eisenbrauns, 1996), 52. Speakers commonly used rhetorical questions to make pointed assertions. The questions were often stated in the negative to reinforce the speaker's point resolutely. To affirm this point meant making a firm rejection of any contrary position. See similar rhetorical use of negatives highlighted by Yehoshua Gitay, "Psalm 1 and the Rhetoric of Religious Argumentation," in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. J. de Regt, Jan de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (Van Gorcum; Eisenbrauns, 1996), 232–233.

[21] Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, 1st ed., The Old Testament library (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 214.

[22] Parunak, "Some Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas in Jeremiah," in *Literary Structure and Rhetorical Strategies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. L. J. de Regt, Jan de Waard, and J. P. Fokkelman (Assen, The Netherlands: [Winona Lake, IN]: Van Gorcum ; Eisenbrauns, 1996), 509.

[23] The phrase itself is not present in the Septuagint. It commonly appears within quotations, re-stating the identity of the speaker. See Meier, *Speaking of Speaking*, 306. Some authors, like Carroll see it as a redundant gloss that reflects the MT tradition of stressing the oral nature of the message. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 370. Parunak differs stating that the phrase plays an important role of highlighting a clause or a phrase with which it is associated marking it for special attention. See Parunak, "Some Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas in Jeremiah," 511.

[24] Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, Old Testament theology (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 277.

[25] Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 185. For example, it is seen in reliefs of the Egyptian ram god Khnum who is seen to make humans on a potter's wheel. It is also found in the Babylonian epic *Atrahasis* where the gods fashion men from clay.

Yahweh and the people. The dispute was about Yahweh's sovereign directing of Judah's future.[26] Jeremiah had consistently called into question the pillars of Israel's faith, showing that the people had falsely placed their trust in election, law, covenant, temple, and monarchy. Indeed, because of their faith in Jerusalem and their election, they did not believe that God could destroy the city.[27] This 'falsehood' or שֶׁקֶר that Jeremiah consistently called out, encouraged them to remain unrepentant and prevented them from taking the necessary action to avert the pending destruction.[28] The basis of his coming judgment upon the people was his discernment of the wicked condition of their hearts, evidenced in their actions (17:9 –10). Yet Judah maintained her claim of innocence before God and the inappropriateness of his judgment upon the nation (2:35, 5:19, 9:12–16, 16:10–30). This was God's response to their questioning of his intended action as prophesied by the prophets.

As will be seen in the subsequent verses, this analogy focuses not only on God's sovereignty over his people but his "initiative, creativity, patience and responsiveness in relation to the possibilities inherent in the situation."[29] It emphasises the twin aspects of the 'responsibility' of the clay and the 'response-*ability*' of God to change his plans accordingly. [30] It must be noted, however, that this does not mean that God would forever be patient with his people and continually reinvent them into new vessels. The second potter's symbolic act that follows in Jeremiah 19 does not provide room to think in that direction. There, Jeremiah was tasked by the Lord to buy a clay vessel that he then smashed to pieces. This was a sign of the destruction of the nation in the coming judgment due to persistence in sin despite the call to repentance. Again, there was a limit to God's responsiveness.

Further explication of the role of human responsibility (verses 7–10)

One of the main areas of contention among scholars of Jeremiah 18:1–12 is whether verses 7–10 are linked to the rest of the passage, and if so, how.[31] To some, the main point of verses 7–

[26] Allen, *Jeremiah*, 214.
[27] See Jer 5:12 'They have lied about the Lord and said, it is not he. Neither will evil come upon us, nor shall we see sword and famine.'
[28] Thomas Overholt, *The Threat of Falsehood*, Studies in Biblical Theology (SCM Press LTD, 1970), 92.
[29] Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, Ga: Smith & Helwys, 2002), 270.
[30] Wright, *Message of Jeremiah - Grace in the End.*, 212.
[31] McKane, for example, sees verses 7-10 as having been interposed between 1-6 and verse 11 and takes verse 12 as a subsequent addition. See McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 426.

10 appears to be inconsistent with that of verses 1–6.[32] Moreover, the focus of the passage shifts from what God does singularly (verses 3–6) to God's actions that seem to be determined by man's actions (verses 7–10). This is thought to contradict the concept of divine sovereignty elucidated in the parable of the potter. The authorship of verses 7–10 has thus been severely scrutinised. The literature finds two main schools of thought around the verses' authorship. Some scholars take verses 7–10 as an insertion of a Deuteronomic redactor(s) who added their own interpretation of the potter narrative reflecting their ideology in the post-exilic period.[33] Presumably, the main goal of the redaction is thought to have been to align Jeremiah's writings with the teachings and doctrines of the Deuteronomic school of thought, thus lending credence to it. Deuteronomic teaching emphasises 'divine retribution' with a reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked.[34]

There is literary evidence for the unity of the passage that points to the Jeremianic authorship of the entire passage as advocated by those in the second school of thought. Drawing from Wieppert's extensive research, Holladay gives several counters to the claim of Deuteronomic redaction.[35] The setting of the unit and its content point toward a pre-exilic setting. The discourse warns of looming judgment if the people fail to heed Yahweh's voice

[32] Carroll, for example, is quite scathing in his dismissal of verses 7–10 that he takes as a "theoretical theological abstraction. He sees the contractual nature of the relationship between the nations and the deity as idyllic and unreal. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 372.

[33] There are phrases seen here that are thought to be typical of the Deuteronomic redactor. These include: Amend your ways and your doings; turn now, each from his own way; and the verbal pairs, build and plant, pull down and uproot. Hyatt argues that the occurrence of these phrases together in a passage indicates the work of a deuteronomist redactor. See Philip J. Hyatt, "The Deuteronomic Edition of Jeremiah," in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies*, ed. Leo G. Perdue and Brian W. Kovacs (Winona Lake, Ind: Eisenbrauns, 1984), 253. McKane sees these verses as typical of Deuteronomic thought in that they emphasize repentance and change in behavior. See McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 426. Child's sees the function of this Deuteronomic framework as an attempt to interpret Jeremiah's ministry and message for the life of the post exilic community. See Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, 348. Carroll concurs arguing that the concept of turning, שׁוּב, was a deuteronomistic one that came up in exilic and post exilic years to encourage the post-exilic community live in a certain way so as to avoid further destruction as a form of divine punishment. The application of the principle to any nation, he takes as an even later development in the Jeremiah tradition. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 373. Stulman also argues that this unit was written for the post-587 readers to debunk entrenched assumptions and to forge trust in God who was still 'shaping' their current reality in exile. See Stulman, *Jeremiah*, 181–182.

[34] Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 143. Mckane also sees verses 7–11 as typical of Deuteronomic thought in that they emphasize repentance and change in behavior. See William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1986), 426.

[35] Holladay and Hanson, *Jeremiah 1*, 514. The use of רָגַע in verses 7 and 9, and the use of the verbs that appear in Jeremiah's call in Jeremiah 1 are not characteristic of the so called Deuteronomic language. Holladay also adds that the use of נָחַם with טוֹב in verse 10 points to irony consistent with Jeremiah and not a redactor. He quotes Weippert, Helga. Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2018, 48-62, 191–209.

and repent (vs 11). Furthermore, the message of the different sections of the passage is linked. Verses 1–6 show God's sovereign power over Israel. Verses 7–10 highlight this sovereignty but explain how human responsibility plays into God's actions.[36] In verse 11, God is planning disaster upon the people, just like the principle mentioned in verses 7–10. This planning is described in the language (יוֹצֵר) that reflects the potter image given in verses 1–6. The application that is then given to Judah is really an application of the principle explained in verses 7–8, that if they turn from their evil, God will relent of the disaster he was to bring upon them. Further exegesis of the text highlights the unity of the message.

The Conditions or Alternatives (Verses 7–10)

Two scenarios given in verses 7–10 give two alternatives or possibilities. Both scenarios have similar outlines. The sequence of events begins with Yahweh speaking. Both verses 7 and 9 start with an asyndetic clause beginning with the word רֶגַע, a temporal indicator of an action that occurs in a defined time that may be rendered 'the moment.' It is used here to introduce a specific event, Yahweh speaking, that then initiates what follows. Everything else must follow from this. God's word to the people is singularly essential and forms the basis for judging and weighing the people's actions. In both scenarios, Yahweh speaks to a generic audience, גּוֹי וּמַמְלָכָה (a nation and a kingdom). This likely encompasses all the nations of the world.[37] The protasis then gives one possible reaction of that nation to what Yahweh had spoken. The nation's response to what Yahweh has spoken is crucial to the outcome as it determines what follows from Yahweh in the apodosis. The apodosis thus reflects Yahweh's readiness to act in response to the behaviour of the nation.

In the first scenario, the three infinitives plus lamed used, נָתַשׁ (to uproot), נָתַץ (to tear down) and אָבַד (to destroy), speak of destruction and devastation, whether directly by God or

[36] Ibid., 513.

[37] The lack of specificity, and the conditionality of the verses has led to some scholars dismissing verses 7–10 entirely. Carroll is quite scathing with his dismissal. Carroll sees verses 7–10 as a "theoretical theological abstraction," arguing that its contractual nature with the nations is simply illusory. See Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 372. There are those who contend that the idea of punishment for breach of covenant cannot apply to the nations, but to Israel alone as the covenant nation.[37] McKane, like Carroll, sees the verses as a later additional reflection aimed at incorporating the Deuteronomic theme of repentance. He argues that this being a hypothetical account, it is not addressed to the gentile nations nor implies that through obedience to the law, these gentile nations can somehow become right with Yahweh. However, this argument weakens the case for Deuteronomic redaction somewhat. It is hard to imagine that such a theological statement on the nations included in verses 7–10 would be a creation of the Deuteronomists. One would imagine that as conservatives, they would not have intentionally added a passage that introduces such ambiguity but focused solely on the covenant people of Israel. See McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, 425.

through human vessels, that comes due to judgment. Yahweh, who spoke creation into being, is seen here to speak destruction into being.[38] Within this context of Yahweh speaking judgment upon the nation, the condition given is that the nation שָׁב (turns) from רָעָתוֹ (it's evil). The apodosis then states what would happen if there was a turning from evil in view of the word of judgment. Yahweh would נָחַם (relent) from the judgment spoken.

In the second scenario, Yahweh's message is more positive. Two infinitive constructs combined with lamed are used: לִבְנֹת meaning to build, and לִנְטֹעַ, to plant. These two verbs, לִבְנֹת and לִנְטֹעַ, are used in tandem throughout the Old Testament to convey the idea of a stable, prosperous life (Deut 28:30; Isa 65:21–22; Jer 29:5; Ezk 28:26; Amos 5:11, 9:14). They are, in fact, opposites of two of the three negative infinitives given in the previous scenario and are also reflected in Jeremiah's commission (Jer 1:10). The nation may respond to Yahweh's word by doing evil. The evil constitute ,לִבְלְתִּי שְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹלִי, not listening to his voice. In this context where Yahweh, the sovereign, is speaking to his subjects, the phrase שְׁמֹעַ בְּקוֹלֵי denotes not only listening but taking heed to what Yahweh has said by acting upon what is heard.[39] Yahweh's response to their rebellion and disobedience to his word is to relent (נָחַם) of the good that he had said he would do. Taking heed to God's word was of decisive importance.

The responsive relationship depicted by שׁוּב and נָחַם

In the two scenarios, Yahweh depicts himself as a God who considers man's response toward his word, considers it, and revises his course of action accordingly. The main verbs that are used in verses 8–11 to depict this responsive relationship are שׁוּב and נָחַם. The root שׁוּב has over 1000 occurrences in the OT, with the highest concentration in the book of Jeremiah (over 100).[40] Jeremiah uses שׁוּב in different ways in the context of the relationship between God and humankind. When used of the latter, it speaks of (1) a return to a right relationship with God (3:1,7,10,12,14,22; 4:1; 15:19; 24:7; 31:21), (2) turning from evil to good (8:4–5; 15:7; 23:14; 23:22; 25:5; 26:3; 35:15; 36:3,7; 37:7; 44:5) (3) repentance and acknowledgement of one's sin before God (5:3, 8:6, 34:15), and (4) turning God's wrath away from the people

[38] The three words, that are a combination of lamed plus infinitives, are also seen in Jer 1:10 and 31:28 with God as the subject. These two verses also have the verb וְלְהָרֵס (to overthrow) that is missing from Jeremiah 18.
[39] Willem A. VanGemeren, ed., *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis. Vol. 4:*, 9. print., vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2009), 178.
[40] Ibid., 4:56.

(18:20). The prophets consistently used שׁוּב to call the nation back to the right relationship with God based on the covenant he had with Israel.

The concept of שׁוּב is closely linked to that of נָחַם. Within the prophetic literature, נָחַם is infrequently used of people.[41] In the Niphal form, it is used of God in four main ways; (1) to indicate his retraction of an intended punishment on the people (Jer 4:28, 15:6, 26:3,13,19; Isa 57:6; Amos 7:3,6 Jon 3:9,10; 4:2, Zech 8:14); (2) to show deep compassion and pity on his people (Jer 20:16); (3) describe a vengeful consolation because of wrong done against him (Isa 1:24); (4) to describe his character (Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). The use of נָחַם in this passage describes a revocation of a previously determined course of action.[42] In this context, there would be a reversal or change with respect to a word that God had given.

The combined use of שׁוּב and נָחַם aptly portrays God's relationship with people as one that is responsive in nature. When a nation repents or turns back (שׁוּב), then God relents of disaster (נָחַם). Conversely, when a nation does not obey God's voice, He relents of blessing. Both point to change in their actors in terms of the enactment of a new action. This mutuality in change is essentially a reversal that is triggered by one being deeply moved by the action or words of the other.[43] When God speaks, he expects humankind to respond appropriately to his word and holds them to account for their response.

God and evil (רָעָה)

Another way in which the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is highlighted in the passage is through the interaction between God and evil (רָעָה) in this text.[44] The word רָעָה is used numerous times in the book of Jeremiah of both God and man. When used of God, it does not refer to moral evil but to a calamity that God was to bring about because of mankind's wrongdoing. Thus, God's action of bringing about רָעָה (disaster) is a response to men's רָעָה (evil actions). Jeremiah's use of the same word to describe these two

[41] In all but four of the fourteen occurrences of the word in Jeremiah, God is the subject. The exceptions are Jer 8:6; 16:7; 31:15, 19.
[42] VanGemeren, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis. Vol. 4*, 4:57.
[43] Terence E Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10, no. 1 (June 1988): 51.
[44] The word רָעָה appears five times in this discourse; in verses 8 and 11 it is used once of God and once of men in both verses, and in verse 12 it is used once of men.

acts highlights the fact that for men, their actions and outcome are closely linked.[45] Jeremiah's message consistently pointed to the fact that the fruit of רָעָה is רָעָה (Jer 6:19). The רָעָה that Yahweh was to bring upon the people was a consequence of their רָעָה (Jer 4:18, 6:19, 21:14). Yahweh gave to each according to their way and according to the fruit of their deed (Jer 17:10). He meant to pour out their own רָעָה upon them (Jer 14:16). The emphasis of the prophet's message to the people was that the evil that was to come upon the land was a consequence of their own evil actions. They were fully responsible for the disaster that was to come upon them. And yet, as God would have it, his responsive nature made a provision where man's turning (שׁוּב) could prompt God's relenting (נָחַם).

The Application to Judah (Jer 18:11)

The application of the message to the nation of Judah in verse 11 begins with the phrase וְעַתָּה אֱמָר־נָא that links this to all that has been spoken and seen in verses 1–10. The prophetic formula כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה (thus says the Lord) directly introduces the prophetic oracle.[46] Yahweh informed the people that he was bringing judgment upon them. The phraseology is previously used in both the Potter narrative (verses 1–6) and in the conditionals of verses 7–10 (יוֹצֵר, חָשַׁב and רָעָה). Like the potter, Yahweh was 'shaping' disaster against them. Based on an understanding of the conditions given in verses 7–8, when God spoke a judgment over the people, he would then look out for an appropriate response from the people. Following the thrust of verses 7–10, this should have prompted the people to reflect on what evil they may have done to cause God to bring disaster upon them and cause an appropriate response. In making this declaration of coming judgment, God indicated that he was decisively moving in a certain direction, that of bringing disaster upon the people, even as he awaited a repentant response from his people. Based on their resultant actions, he could relent from bringing disaster.

In addition to the spoken judgment is a call to repentance. The word שׁוּב is again used to call the people to turn back from their evil and to make good their ways and their deeds. Koch defines דֶּרֶךְ as "the ways that lead through life and the conduct of life itself," and argues

[45] The word רָעָה, when used of God, is often translated as 'disaster' to avoid the connotation that God can be implicated in an evil deed (ESV, NIV, and Jerusalem Bible). Using the same word in English would lead to possible misunderstanding, thus the fact that it is the same Hebrew word is often lost to the English reader.
[46] This full formula is, however, absent in the LXX.

that it is best identified through what one does.[47] Polk contends that שׁוּב is more than just a verb of motion that denotes movement toward a goal. The action entails intentionality that encompasses motives, purposes, desires, and wishes. Thus, it is an "orientation of the self, an orientation all important for what the self is and will be…it is a question of the people's ultimate loyalty and on this loyalty depends on their ultimate identity."[48] The stress on שׁוּב meant that their response, through actions and attitudes, played a crucial part in the eventual outcome.

Contingency in Prophecy

Jeremiah 18:1–12 is a critical passage in understanding the contingency of prophecy and how God's providence in his sovereign responsiveness is displayed in his interaction with humankind. Christian teaching has traditionally stressed the immutability and transcendence of God, particularly in prophetic decrees and their fulfilment. Even so, there are several instances in scripture where prophecies were made, yet, as history unfolded, they did not come to pass as stated. A good example is in Micah 3:12, where Micah prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. This did not happen as the people, led by Hezekiah, repented, and the disaster was averted (cf Jer 26:17-19). Likewise, in Jonah, there is a clear example of prophetic judgment decreed upon a nation that did not come to pass because the people repented (Jonah 3:10). Even in Jeremiah 18, after the decree of judgment, in verse 11, there is a clear call to repentance with the anticipation that a change in human actions will lead to a different outcome, that is a reversal in the judgment.

A spoken prophecy that does not come to pass because of human contingency does not contradict the immutability of divine decrees nor the sovereignty of God. On the complexity of how God responds in history, Pratt states, "God did not simply make eternal plans that fixed all events. He sees that his plan is carried out by working through, without and contrary to created means…all events are fixed by eternal decrees, but secondary causes play a vital role in the providential outworking of those decrees."[49] Human choice is one of God's secondary causes in working out his decrees. Hill and Walton provide a simple analogy to

[47] Klaus Koch, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Persian Periods*, vol. 2 (SCM Press LTD, 1983), 28.
[48] Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self*, Journal for the study of the Old Testament 32 (Sheffield: JSOT press, 1984), 38.
[49] Richard. L Pratt, "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I Packer and Sven Soderlund K, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 182.

explain further the role of the prophetic word in this outworking process. They propose that we regard prophecy not as a 'prediction' but as 'God's syllabus.'[50] A syllabus, they explain, presents the teacher's plans and intentions for the class but does not, with finality, predict what will actually transpire in the class. Thus, with prophecy, God is stating his intentions and judgments. What transpires in the human context partly depends on what men do, and this, too, is part of the plan.

Prophecy, therefore, is not just about informing about what will happen in the future. It has dynamic functions that are geared toward changing those it directs to. It seeks to change attitudes, values, and commitments by shedding light on the truth and stimulating a reaction.[51] Hence, decrees of judgment and salvation are meant to motivate, energise, and encourage people to change their behaviour. The judgment oracles are often intended to prevent the said judgment, and salvation prophecy aimed at facilitation.[52] Biblical prophecy, therefore, was a means through which the listeners could participate in determining their own future. Here in verse 11, there is a prediction of judgment, and the Israelites are invited to change their behaviour and, in so doing, reverse the coming judgment. This contingency of prophecy further amplifies the responsive nature of the relationship and highlights the way divine sovereignty and providence complement human responsibility. As Brueggeman surmises, "Judah's obedience is of decisive importance…Judah is exhorted to choose carefully how it will act, for its future depends on its action. Yahweh's responsive sovereignty and Judah's determinative obedience are both constitutive of Judah's life."[53]

The People's Response to Yahweh's Word (Jer 18:12)

The people's response to Yahweh's call is, at best, perplexing. It begins with a very unusual word נוֹאָשׁ. There are three occurrences of this Niphal form in the prophets: Jer 2:25, 18:12 and Isa 57:10.[54] In each of the three, it is taken as an interjection of hopelessness or despair- 'It is hopeless!' The people further state that they would follow their own plans, and each one

[50] Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009), 512.
[51] Robert B. Chisholm, "Making Sense of Prophecy Recognising the Presence of Contingency," 2007, 2.
[52] Robert B Chisholm, "When Prophecy Appears to Fail Check Your Hermaneutic," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53, no. 3 (2010): 563.
[53] Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck up, to Tear down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1--25*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Edinburgh: W.B. Eerdmans ; Handsel Press, 1988), 161.
[54] In Jeremiah 18, it is preceded by weqatal (waw consecutive perfect), in Jer 2:25 by a wayyiqtol (waw consecutive imperfect) and in Isa 57:10 by a perfect verb.

would do 'according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.' The description does not seem to be one that people would make of themselves.[55]

The phrase לְבַּוֹ־הָרָע שְׁרִרוּת, translated as 'stubbornness of his evil heart' is frequently used in Jeremiah (3:17, 7:24, 9:13, 11:8, 16:12). In all these passages it is used as a third person description in the context of a speech from God indicting the people for failing to listen to his word and respond to him appropriately. Thus, the entire response, as reported, is likely God's assessment of the state of the people's hearts and not their own assessment of their condition.[56] These words portray the contrary disposition of the people and articulate their belief, reflecting the hardened heart of a people who did not care what God had to say to them. McConville rightly notes that "Judah's disobedience is deeper than moral weakness or turpitude. It is the ideological rejection of the word of God."[57] This final unequivocal rejection dismissed all the hopes and possibilities of repentance and justified the coming judgment.

The Implication of the Message

Based on a careful exegesis of Jeremiah 18:1–12, the paper has argued that God's sovereignty is not detached, aloof, or indifferent but responsive in nature. While reinforcing and affirming the divine prerogative, the passage highlights the participatory way in which man is incorporated into God's sovereign actions.

The analogy of the potter and the subsequent interpretation by Yahweh himself succinctly affirms God's sovereignty. Just as Master Potter expertly works the clay between his hands, God forms and shapes our destiny in his own hands and according to his pleasure and purpose. All things come to pass in accordance with his plan and under his sovereign control.

[55] William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah: Spokesman out of Time* (Philadelphia: United Church Press, 1974), 517. Holladay takes it as an authentic observation by Jeremiah but added at a later date and that reflects his experience with the people's response to his message.

[56] Thomas W. Overholt, "Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of 'Audience Reaction,'" *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41, no. 2 (April 1979): 263. Overholt argues that though the quotations are true in that their content reflects the views of the group accurately, the prophetic concern was more for the truth being conveyed than for authenticity. Thus, the audience quotations would reflect the style and words of the prophet as a rationalization for the indictment.

[57] J. G. McConville, *Judgment and Promise: An Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1993), 45.

The word of God serves as the framework for his dealings with humankind. How God providentially governs the nations, and the intersection between this and human responsibility is anchored on his word. God's revelation of Himself through His word offers the basis and the boundaries within which we can conceive of and understand Him and the way He works. The conditionals described in Jeremiah 18:1–12 underscore the significance of human responsibility in how God works out his plans. Judah's call to repentance and subsequent rejection of God's word further proves that God does allow men their choice. Though all things come to pass, invariably, according to God's will and plan, he allows for contingencies, particularly that of human action, to affect the way history unfolds.

Conclusion

Jeremiah 18:1–12 affirms a universal principle about how God providentially governs the affairs of men. God is the sovereign creator of all and thus retains the sovereign prerogative to do as he wills with his creation. However, like clay in the hands has the capacity to affect and change the potter's plans, so man has the ability to influence God's plans. God's sovereignty is not exercised according to an unchangeable predetermination. His judgments and promises are conditioned by the response of men to his word. Man's choice to rebel or obey God's word is a contingency that makes a difference as God responds to that choice. Therein lies the responsibility of man to influence his own future. In a sense, history then becomes a reflection of man's response to God's sovereignty. The future, then, is a future in the hand of a sovereign responsive God, shaped by the choices man makes in response to his word.

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