

# Jeremiah 50-51 (MT) as Catalyst in the Development of Babylon as a Symbol of Oppressive Empire

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## ABSTRACT

*The figure of Babylon became a symbol of any oppressive empire in Jewish as well as Christian literature. This essay proposes that the particular placement of the oracles against Babylon as attested in the Masoretic Text of the book of Jeremiah was a catalyst in the development of this conception of the figure of Babylon. It is proposed that the oracles against Babylon have been placed deliberately in their present location in Jeremiah MT. As a result, Babylon evolved to represent more than the historical Babylon. When the oracles against Babylon are read in combination with Jer 25, Babylon becomes the ultimate enemy of YHWH, the entity that stands under an almost cosmic judgment. Since the oracles against Babylon occur in the Septuagint in a position to which no importance can be attached, a comparison between the MT and LXX versions of the book of Jeremiah is taken as a point of departure.*

**KEYWORDS:** Babylon, Book of Jeremiah, Oracles against the Nations, Masoretic Text

## A INTRODUCTION

In Jewish as well as Christian literature, the figure of Babylon represents a symbol of any oppressive empire.<sup>1</sup> The precise nature of this process is debatable. Although the effect of the oracles against Babylon in the book of Isaiah cannot be underestimated, the allusions in Rev 17–18 to Jer 50–51 imply that the oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah played a vital role in this process.<sup>2</sup> In the Masoretic

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Sib. Or. V 143, 149; 1 Pet 5:13; Rev 17, 18.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the allusions in Rev 17:4 to Jer 51:17 and in Rev 18:4 to Jer 50:8; 51:6, 9, 45. Bellis recognises four stages in the transformation of the figure of Babylon. She is of the opinion that Jer 50–51 reflects the second stage. In these chapters, Babylon still refers to the historical city lying on the Euphrates. See Alice O. Bellis, “The Changing Face of Babylon,” in *Prophetic/Apocalyptic Literature: Seventh Century*

Text (MT) of the book of Jeremiah,<sup>3</sup> the oracles against foreign nations occur in the penultimate section of the book, chapters 46–51. In the Septuagint (LXX), conversely, these oracles are placed in the middle of the book, after Jer 25:13.

In an essay published in 2007, John Hill highlights the presentation of Babylon in Jeremiah MT. Hill notes that Jeremiah MT has its own distinctive view of Babylon.<sup>4</sup> He however concedes that his conclusions are necessarily provisional and sometimes speculative.<sup>5</sup> Bellis suggests that the metaphors which are employed in Jer 50–51 played a significant role in the development of the figure of Babylon.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, a comparison between the texts of the oracles against Babylon in the LXX with those in the MT, reveals that most of the metaphors employed in the MT are also present in the precursor of the LXX.<sup>7</sup> Sals’ remark that the version of the book of Jeremiah attested in the LXX “Babylon” is less evil and therefore less important than in the Masoretic version is however of significance.<sup>8</sup> This essay suggests that the placement of the oracles against Babylon in the penultimate position in the book of Jeremiah was an important catalyst in the growth of Babylon as a symbol of an oppressive empire.

The focus on Babylon is also detectable in Jer 25:1–14.<sup>9</sup> The LXX lacks the reference to Babylon in 25:1. Verse 14 is not reflected at all in the LXX.<sup>10</sup> In verse 9, the LXX refers to YHWH’s agent of judgement simply as a people from the north. In the MT, the invader is explicitly identified as the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar who is designated as the עבד (“servant”) of YHWH. In the MT, the conqueror (not only of Judah, but also of the neighbouring nations) is

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*BCE to First Century CE and Beyond. Knowing the End from the Beginning. The Prophetic, the Apocalyptic and Their Relationships* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe and Robert D. Haak; London: T & T Clark, 2003), 67–68.

<sup>3</sup> Besides those marked as LXX, all other references to the book of Jeremiah in this essay are from the MT.

<sup>4</sup> John Hill, “The Book of Jeremiah (MT) and Its Early Temple Background,” in *Uprooting and Planting: Essays on Jeremiah for Leslie Allen* (ed. John Goldingay; New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 154.

<sup>5</sup> Hill, “The Book of Jeremiah (MT),” 171.

<sup>6</sup> Bellis, “The Changing Face of Babylon,” 67. By referring to texts in Jer 50 and 51, Bellis notably reflects on Jeremiah MT.

<sup>7</sup> The LXX reproduces the phrase בלענו כחנין in Jer 51:34 with κατέπιεν ὡς δράκων (“He has swallowed me like a dragon”); see Jer 28:34 LXX.

<sup>8</sup> Ulrike Sals, “‘Babylon’ Forever or How to Divinize What You Want to Damn,” in *Memory and the City in Ancient Israel* (ed. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi; Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2014), 300.

<sup>9</sup> Andrew G. Shead, “The Text of Jeremiah (MT and LXX),” in *The Book of Jeremiah: Composition, Reception and Interpretation* (ed. Jack R. Lundbom, Craig A. Evans and Bradford A. Anderson; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 273; Sals, “‘Babylon’ Forever,” 301.

<sup>10</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 116.

specified as Babylon.<sup>11</sup> The theme of the future punishment of Babylon obviously links chapters 50–51 to chapter 25. The atbash<sup>12</sup> in Jer 25:26 also underscores the coupling of Jer 25 and 50–51.<sup>13</sup> As Kessler notes, the oracles against Babylon need to be viewed in conversation with chapter 25.<sup>14</sup>

## B THE TWO TEXT FORMS OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The text form presented in Jeremiah MT is about a sixth longer than the text form presented in Jeremiah LXX. The longer text form is also attested in fragments of 2QJer, 4QJer<sup>a</sup> and 4QJer<sup>c</sup> and in various ancient translations, i.e. the Targums, various Hexaplaric witnesses, the Peshitta and the Vulgate. The shorter form is found in Hebrew in fragments of 4QJer<sup>b</sup> and 4QJer<sup>d</sup>.<sup>15</sup> The variant readings between the two text forms range from subtle shifts to matters of style, word order and diction.<sup>16</sup> The majority view among scholars is that the shorter form, attested in the LXX, reflects a shorter Hebrew *Vorlage*.<sup>17</sup> Although the conclusions of scholars on the relationship between the precursor of the MT and that of the LXX remain frustratingly diverse,<sup>18</sup> the divergences between the two text forms should seemingly be attributed to both transmissional and redactional processes.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>12</sup> An atbash is a cryptographic device in which letters of the alphabet in reverse order substitute letters in the proper order – ששך for בבל. See Klaas A.D. Smelik, “My Servant Nebuchadnezzar: The Use of the Epithet ‘My Servant’ for the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar in the Book of Jeremiah,” *VT* 64 (2014): 13.

<sup>13</sup> See Jer 51:41.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Kessler, *Battle of the Gods: The God of Israel versus Marduk of Babylon: A Literary/Theological Interpretation of Jeremiah 50-51* (Assen: Royal van Gorcum, 2003), 182.

<sup>15</sup> Richard D. Weis, “The Textual Situation in the Book of Jeremiah,” in *Sôfer Mahîr: Essays in Honour of Adrian Schenker Offered by the Editors of Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (ed. Yohanan A.P. Goldman, Arie van der Kooij and Richard D. Weis; Leiden: Brill, 2006), 269–270. The 4QJer<sup>b</sup> is not identical to the reconstructed *Vorlage* of the LXX.

<sup>16</sup> A.R. Pete Diamond, “Jeremiah,” in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible* (ed. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 547.

<sup>17</sup> See Emanuel Tov, *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 363; Anneli Aejmelaeus, “Jeremiah at the Turning-point of History: The Function of Jer XXXV 1–14 in the Book of Jeremiah,” *VT* 52 (2002): 460. It is noteworthy that Frohlich recently came to the conclusion that the large-scale differences between the MT and the LXX in Jer 39–41:3 and 52 are due to a divergent Hebrew *Vorlage* used by the Septuagint translator. See James Frohlich, *The Relationship between MT and LXX in Jeremiah 39(46):1–41(48):3 and 52* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

<sup>18</sup> Shead, “Text of Jeremiah,” 258.

<sup>19</sup> Weis, “Textual Situation,” 271.

While Fischer<sup>20</sup> and Lundbom<sup>21</sup> attribute the divergences between the two text forms primarily to the transmissional processes, it is evident that the translation technique applied in Jeremiah LXX is fairly literal.<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah LXX nonetheless seems to be a minimally revised text that suffered significant haplography in the course of its textual transmission. Jeremiah on the other hand reflects a much-expanded text that strengthens the link between the prophet and the divine word. It has been suggested that Jeremiah LXX reflects an earlier edition of the book of Jeremiah.<sup>23</sup> Shead claims that the longer Hebrew version in the MT is the result of conscious editing by a recension.<sup>24</sup> Tov suggests that many documents were available from which to make a new edition of the book.<sup>25</sup> In this process, various new ideas were added.<sup>26</sup> The stable transmission of the MT between ca. 100 C.E. and modern times allows us to treat it as basically identical to its Second Temple Period precursor.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Georg Fischer, “Jeremiah – ‘The Prophet Like Moses?’” in *The Book of Jeremiah: Composition, Reception and Interpretation* (ed. Jack R. Lundbom, Craig A. Evans and Bradford A. Anderson; Leiden: Brill, 2018), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, “Haplography in the Hebrew *Vorlage* of LXX Jeremiah,” *HS* 46 (2005): 306.

<sup>22</sup> Where the LXX and MT correspond, the translation mostly appears to be very literal. See Georg Walser, “Translating the Greek Text of Jeremiah,” in *XII Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* (ed. Melvin K.H. Peters; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2008), 355.

<sup>23</sup> See Emanuel Tov, “The Septuagint in the Literary Analysis of Hebrew Scripture,” in *Exploring the Origins of the Bible: Canon Formation in Historical, Literary and Theological Perspectives* (ed. Craig A. Evans and Emanuel Tov; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 36; Shead, “Text of Jeremiah,” 364; Hermann-Josef Stipp, “Der prämasoretische Idiolekt des Buches Ezeziel und seine Beziehungen zum Jeremiabuch,” in *From Qumran to Aleppo: A Discussion with Emanuel Tov about the Textual History of Jewish Scriptures in Honor of His 65<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (ed. Armin Lange, Matthias Weigold and József Zsengellér; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 141. On the other hand, Gesundheit, “Shimon Gesundheit, “The Question of LXX Jeremiah as a Tool for Literary-Critical Analysis,” *VT* 62 (2012): 56, sees the LXX as an abridgment of the MT.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew G. Shead, “Jeremiah,” in *T & T Companion to the Septuagint* (ed. James K. Aitken; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015), 479.

<sup>25</sup> Tov, *Greek and Hebrew Bible*, 365, supposes that the editor of the longer text form had access to Jeremianic material not included in the shorter edition.

<sup>26</sup> Emanuel Tov, *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible, and Qumran: Collected Essays* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 157. Langlois however notes that the limited manuscript evidence at our disposal implies that the shorter recension attested in the LXX is not necessarily older than the recension reflected in the MT. See Michael Langlois, “The Book of Jeremiah’s Redaction History in Light of Its Oldest Manuscripts,” in *Jeremiah in History and Tradition* (ed. Jim West and Niels P. Lemche; London: Routledge, 2020), 26.

<sup>27</sup> Shead, “Text of Jeremiah,” 255.

Chae notes that a comparison between the MT and LXX versions of the book of Jeremiah can greatly contribute to the understanding of the formation and message of the entire book. He asserts that such a comparison illuminates the redactional intentions of the redactor of Jeremiah MT.<sup>28</sup> Since this essay is concerned with the particular placement of the oracles against Babylon in the MT, Jeremiah LXX provides a valuable point of comparison.<sup>29</sup> As was mentioned above, consideration will also be given to Jer 25, which anticipates the oracles against Babylon in chapters 50 and 51, especially the focus on Babylon.<sup>30</sup>

### C BABYLON IN JER 25

Jeremiah 25, which has undergone much revision,<sup>31</sup> plays a pivotal role in the overall structure of the book of Jeremiah.<sup>32</sup> While 25:3 contains a chronological flashback to 1:2, the reference to "the nations" in 25:13 links chapter 25 to 1:5, where Jeremiah is called "a prophet to the nations." In conjunction with Jer 1, Jer 25:1–14 provides an editorial framework for the first half of the book.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, the fixing of the oracle addressed to Jeremiah to the fourth year of Jehoiakim (25:1) links Jer 25 to Jer 36. Like Jer 36, Jer 25 mentions a scroll in which are inscribed the prophecies that are yet to be fulfilled (25:13).<sup>34</sup> The announcement of the punishment of the neighbouring nations (25:9, 11) links 25:1–14 to the cup of wrath pericope, 25:15–38, as well as the Oracles against the Nations (chs. 46–51).

<sup>28</sup> Moon Kwon Chae, "Redactional Intentions of MT Jeremiah Concerning the Oracles against the Nations," *JBL* 134 (2015): 577–593.

<sup>29</sup> See Hill, "The Book of Jeremiah (MT)," 154.

<sup>30</sup> See Else K. Holt, "The Meaning of an *Inclusio*: A Theological Interpretation of the Book of Jeremiah MT," *SJOT* 17 (2003): 199.

<sup>31</sup> See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah Chapters 1-25* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 664; Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon: Smyth & Hellwys, 2002), 353.

<sup>32</sup> Shimon Gesundheit, "The Question of LXX Jeremiah," 37. Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Jeremia 25-52* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 8, regards chapter 25 as a hinge between the two parts of the book of Jeremiah.

<sup>33</sup> See Louis Stulman, "The Prose Sermons as Hermeneutical Guide to Jeremiah 1-25: The Deconstruction of Judah's Symbolic World," in *Troubling Jeremiah* (ed. A.R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor and Louis Stulman; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999), 47. See also Martin Kessler, "Jeremiah 25,1-29: Text and Context. A Synchronic Study," *ZAW* 109 (1997): 53. Stipp, *Jeremia 25-52*, 40, assumes that Jer 25:1-13/14 goes back to a Deuteronomistic judgment oracle that originally formed the end of the Judean book of Jeremiah (Jer 1:1\*-25:13a2). In the LXX, Jer 25:1-13 serves as an introduction to the Oracles against the Nations. See Aejmelaeus, "Jeremiah at the Turning-point," 481.

<sup>34</sup> See Gesundheit, "The Question of LXX Jeremiah," 37–38. Gesundheit does however note that the similarity between Jer 25 and Jer 36 is secondary.

Jeremiah 25 consists of a judgment oracle, verses 1–14, and the cup of wrath pericope, verses 15–38. Verses 1–14 announce doom for Judah and the other nations, including Babylon. The motivation for the judgment concerning Judah is given in verses 1–7. Verses 8–14 contain the oracle itself.<sup>35</sup> The judgment oracle reaches its climax in verse 13.<sup>36</sup>

The text of Jer 25:1–13 LXX is markedly shorter than that of the MT. One should however take into consideration that some of the differences between the MT and the LXX might have come from the normal processes of text transmission and translation.<sup>37</sup> In Jer 25:1–14, Babylon is portrayed as a figure corresponding to the Babylon of the sixth century B.C.E., which invaded Judah and whose domination was to last seventy years (25:9, 11, 12). Its king is named and a particular year of his reign is cited.<sup>38</sup> Nebuchadnezzar is the instrument of YHWH in his judgment against sinful Judah.<sup>39</sup> The depiction of Nebuchadnezzar as the עבד of YHWH demonstrates that the mighty world ruler Nebuchadnezzar is no more than a servant to the God of Israel.<sup>40</sup> Nebuchadnezzar's rule testifies to the sovereign rule of YHWH.<sup>41</sup> It is however noteworthy that the foe from the north, which may have mythical connotations,<sup>42</sup> is explicitly identified with Babylon. Jeremiah 25:1–13 LXX on the other hand mentions neither Babylon nor its king Nebuchadnezzar. However, from the reference in 21:2 it would be evident to the reader that the Babylonians should be identified as the foe from the north.

Jeremiah 25:15–29, the first part of the cup of wrath pericope, is an announcement of disaster.<sup>43</sup> After announcing doom over Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, the attention turns to the neighbouring nations.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, the version of the cup of wrath pericope in the LXX (32:1–17) also lacks any direct reference to Babylon. However, since the cup of wrath pericope follows the Oracles against the Nations in the LXX, the phrase πάντα βασιλείς ἀπὸ

<sup>35</sup> Kessler, "Jeremiah 25,1-29," 53.

<sup>36</sup> Aejmelaeus, "Jeremiah at the Turning-point," 478.

<sup>37</sup> See Richard D. Weis, Jeremiah amid Actual and Virtual Editions: Textual Plurality and Editing of the Book of Jeremiah" in *The Text of the Hebrew Bible and Its Editions: Studies in Celebration of the Fifth Centennial of Complutensium Polyglot* (ed. Andrés P. Otero and Pablo T. Morales; Leiden: Brill, 2017), 372.

<sup>38</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 195.

<sup>39</sup> See Hill, "The Book of Jeremiah (MT)," 155.

<sup>40</sup> Smelik, "My Servant Nebuchadnezzar," 133.

<sup>41</sup> Stulman, "Prose Sermons as Hermeneutical Guide," 47.

<sup>42</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 336.

<sup>43</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 288.

<sup>44</sup> Kessler, "Jeremiah 25,1-29," 59.

ἀπηλιώτου (32:12 LXX) was in all likelihood regarded as a reference to the Babylonian Empire.

Although the reference to the kings of the north in Jer 25:26a seemingly refers to Babylon,<sup>45</sup> the hearer/reader is left with the question, Why is Babylon not explicitly named as Elam and Media, for instance? The structure of Jer 25:26 implies that the phrase מלך ששך, “the king of Sheshach,” is not included among “all the kingdoms on the face of the earth.” The מלך ששך is the subject of the verb ישחה and is used for emphasis in the clause מלך ששך ישחה אחריהם. The reference to the king of Sheshach was in all likelihood secondarily added.<sup>46</sup>

Various explanations have been given for the use of the atbash ששך in Jer 25:26. It would be dangerous perhaps to bring up the predicted downfall of the oppressive empire.<sup>47</sup> However, 20:4–6 does mention explicitly Babylon and its king.<sup>48</sup> The editor who inserted 25:26c in the MT, apparently linked the cup of wrath pericope to the oracles against Babylon in chapters 50–51. In 51:41, the atbash ששך is explicitly related to Babylon.

In Jer 25:15, the particle כִּי subordinates the report of the symbolic act (vv. 15–29) to the announcement of doom in verses 1–14.<sup>49</sup> The list of nations has the rhetorical effect of suspense leaving the hearer/reader with the question: What about Babylon which according to Jer 25:12, 14 would also experience YHWH’s punishment?<sup>50</sup> The repeated references to Babylon and Nebuchadnezzar in 25:1–14 make the absence of these names in 25:15–29 more noticeable. The atbash ששך in verse 26 furthermore hides the identity of the figure it represents thereby giving it an air of mystery. As Hill observes, the designation of Babylon as ששך gives it an unknown and timeless quality.<sup>51</sup> Babylon is a figure that transcends historical settings and boundaries. It is a figure which cannot be completely identified with a particular nation or land and which cannot be confined to one particular nation or country or to one particular period in history.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Stipp, *Jeremia 25-52*, 73.

<sup>46</sup> It is likely that the editor(s) created the precursor of Jeremiah in the MT. See also Hermann-Josef Stipp, „Jeremia 25,1-14 im masoretische und alexandrinischen Text des Jeremiabuches: Ein Gespräch mit Shimon Gesundheit,“ *VT* 69 (2019): 293–294.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 228.

<sup>48</sup> See Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 20.

<sup>49</sup> Allen, *Jeremiah*, 288.

<sup>50</sup> Martin Kessler, “The Function of Chapters 25 and 50-51 in the Book of Jeremiah,” in *Troubling Jeremiah* (ed. A.R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O’Connor and Louis Stulman; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1999), 66.

<sup>51</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 196.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

The cup of wrath pericope, Jer 25:15–38, puts the Babylonian invasion of Judah in a wider setting—it was an ingredient of an international upheaval that would finally reach Babylon.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, in Jer 25, one can see the development of Babylon as a historical entity to a Babylon, which shows some of the characteristics of the archetypical enemy of YHWH.<sup>54</sup> At the end of Jer 25, Babylon is portrayed as an evil empire that will ultimately be conquered by God.<sup>55</sup>

#### **D BABYLON IN THE ORACLES AGAINST BABYLON (JER 50–51)**

The collection of oracles against Babylon is introduced in Jer 50:2–3 by an oracle in which unidentified heralds are called upon to announce the demise of Babylon to the nations. These nations were in all likelihood those which were subjects of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. According to Jer 50:24, Babylon challenged YHWH,<sup>56</sup> which may well be an allusion to the destruction of the temple by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. (see 51:11, 51). Babylon clearly had acted arrogantly against YHWH (50:29).

The oracles in Jer 50–51, which are directed particularly against Babylon, pictured not only a city but also as an empire. Babylon regarded itself as autonomous and invincible.<sup>57</sup> Like the Tower of Babel (51:53), it was fortified in vain against the attack of YHWH. In comparison with the other Oracles against the Nations, there is clearly a heightened rhetoric in these oracles. Kessler, for example, notes that the term *הרם* (“ban”), which signals total destruction, is introduced in 50:21.<sup>58</sup> In chapter 51, the rhetoric is heightened even more. YHWH’s plan was to destroy Babylon (v. 11).<sup>59</sup>

There are relatively few references to the Babylonian king in Jer 50–51. He is nevertheless depicted as an arrogant oppressor like the Pharaoh of the Exodus story (50:29–34); a lion like the Assyrian king (50:11). He crushes and devours Judah like a monster (51:34). However, as Hill has justly remarked, the Babylonian king is not the demonised figure that he is for example in Isa 14.<sup>60</sup> Thelle furthermore notes that the language of Jer 50–51 is very concrete and stays

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<sup>53</sup> See Allen, *Jeremiah*, 293.

<sup>54</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 18.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> The verb *הִתְּוֹתָהּ* *hitpa’el* means “to provoke a fight.” See William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 2: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah Chapters 26-52* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 419.

<sup>57</sup> See Walter Brueggemann, “At the Mercy of Babylon: A Subversive Reading of Empire,” *JBL* 110 (1991): 4.

<sup>58</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 67.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 191.



within what can be classified as a historical domain with regard to metaphorical reference.<sup>61</sup>

As noted above, a comparison between the oracles against Babylon in the LXX with those in the MT, reveals that most of the metaphors employed in the MT are also present in the precursor of the LXX. The most obvious difference between the MT and the LXX is seen in the repeated occurrence of the epithet יהוה צבאות in the MT.<sup>62</sup> It is attested in 50:18, 25, 31, 33, 34; 51:5, 14, 19, 33, 57 and 58.<sup>63</sup> The epithet emphasises YHWH's royal majesty.<sup>64</sup> Jeremiah 50–51 stresses that YHWH as king could bring an end to the empire of Babylon.<sup>65</sup>

Although the atbash ששך in Jer 51:41 might seem to be no more than a poetic parallel for בבל,<sup>66</sup> its use creates an intertextual bond with the cup vision in Jer 25. To use the phraseology applied by Mastnjak in a different context,<sup>67</sup> the use of the atbash in Jer 51:41 points to a dynamic relationship between the cup vision and the oracles in Jer 50–51. Babylon, the evil empire, indeed would be destroyed by YHWH. The location of the oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah MT did however play a crucial role in the growth of Babylon as a symbol of an oppressive empire.

## E LOCATION OF THE ORACLES AGAINST BABYLON IN JEREMIAH MT

As noted earlier, in Jeremiah MT, the oracles against foreign nations occur in the penultimate section of the book, chapters 46–51. In the LXX, these oracles are placed in the middle of the book. The majority view is that the LXX presents the

<sup>61</sup> Rannfrid I. Thelle, "Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah (MT): Negotiating a Power Shift," in *Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (ed. Hans M. Barstad and Reinhard G. Kratz; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 216.

<sup>62</sup> The epithet יהוה צבאות occurs 82 times in the MT of the book of Jeremiah. In contrast, it occurs in the LXX only ten times.

<sup>63</sup> The LXX reflects the epithet יהוה צבאות only in Jer 50:34; 51:5. Rofé suggests that the translator of the LXX Jeremiah deliberately refrained from translating the epithet יהוה צבאות in some texts. See Alexander Rofé, "The Double Text of Jeremiah Revisited," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah* (ed. Louis Stulman and Edward Silver; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 179–180.

<sup>64</sup> See Siegfried Kreuzer, "Zebaoth: Der Thronende," *VT* 54 (2006): 349; Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Trans. F.H. Cryer; Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1982), 24.

<sup>65</sup> See Jer 51:57.

<sup>66</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 130.

<sup>67</sup> See Nathan Mastnjak, *Deuteronomy and the Emergence of Textual Authority in Jeremiah* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 227.

original placement of the Oracles against the Nations.<sup>68</sup> Albertz, however, argues that the location of the oracles against the foreign nations in the MT is original. In the postexilic period (the fifth or fourth century), under the influence of eschatological prophecy, a shift occurred during which the oracles of judgement against the nations were moved to precede the oracles of salvation for Israel and Judah. Albertz claims that at a later stage these oracles were again moved to the end of the book in the textual tradition represented by the MT.<sup>69</sup> Mastnjak, on the other hand, argues that in the early Persian period, the Jeremian literary traditions were an unordered or only loosely ordered collection of materials rather than a linearly arranged book scroll. The orders which were conferred in the MT and LXX should in each case be regarded as an independent creative act.<sup>70</sup> Whether the location of the oracles against the foreign nations in the MT is original or secondary, it is clear that in the MT the Oracles against the Nations occur in an emphatic position.

In the sequence of the Oracles against the Nations in the MT, Babylon occupies the final position. In contrast, in the order of the oracles in the LXX, Babylon is just one of several nations which are addressed. The oracles against Babylon are third, between the oracles against Egypt and the one against Philistea,<sup>71</sup> a position to which no importance can be attached.<sup>72</sup> The majority view is that the order in the MT is a later development.<sup>73</sup> However, the sequence attested in the MT does not appear to be coincidental.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Karen Finsterbusch and Norbert Jacoby, „Völkergericht und Fremdvölkersprüche: Kommunikationsebenen in (der hebr. Vorlage von) LXX Jer 25–32, MT–Jer 46–51 und MT Jer 25,“ *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 6 (2015): 49; Chae, “Redactional Intentions,” 582. See also Beat Huwlyer, *Jeremia und die Völker. Untersuchungen zur den Völkersprüche in Jeremia 46–49* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 380; Emanuel Tov, “The Nature of the Large-Scale Differences between the LXX and MT S T V, compared with similar Evidence from other Sources,” in *The Earliest Text of the Hebrew Bible: The Relationship between the Masoretic Text and the Hebrew Base of the Septuagint Reconsidered* (ed. Adrian Schenker; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 126. Some scholars do however disagree. See Alexander Rofé, “The Arrangement of the Book of Jeremiah,” *ZAW* 101 (1989): 397; Christopher R. Seitz, “The Prophet Moses and the Canonical Shape of Jeremiah,” *ZAW* 101 (1989): 25.

<sup>69</sup> See Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile: The History and Literature of the Sixth Century B.C.E.* (trans. D. Green; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 320–321.

<sup>70</sup> Nathan Mastnjak, “Jeremiah as Collection: Scrolls, Sheets, and the Problem of Textual Arrangement,” *CBQ* 80 (2018): 43.

<sup>71</sup> Hill, *Friend or Foe*, 163.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>73</sup> Peels does however argue that the MT presents the original order. See H.G.L. Peels, “De Volgorde van de Volkenprofetieën in het Boek Jeremia,” *AcT Sup* 26 (2018): 136–154.

<sup>74</sup> See Huwlyer, *Untersuchungen*, 349.

The oracles against Babylon differ from the other Oracles against the Nations in several regards. Babylon, which is portrayed as the oppressor in the other Oracles against the Nations, will become the victim of YHWH's wrath. The conqueror of the nations will itself ultimately be conquered.<sup>75</sup> Violence against Israel is mentioned only in the oracles against Babylon.<sup>76</sup> While the oracles against Babylon repeatedly announce that Babylon would never be rebuilt, Jeremiah MT foretells the restoration of Egypt (46:26), Ammon (49:6), Moab (48:47) and Elam (49:39).<sup>77</sup>

Remarkably, Moab, the final nation in the list of nations in the Septuagint, is of no significance.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, in Jeremiah MT, the oracles against Babylon, which occupy almost one-half of the total volume of the space,<sup>79</sup> occur in the final position. It is furthermore noteworthy that the oracle against Elam, which precedes the oracles against Babylon in Jeremiah MT, concludes with a promise of the restoration of the fortunes of Elam (49:39). On the other hand, the oracles against Babylon proclaim that Babylon will forever be destroyed (50:39). The order of the nations in Jer 46–51 accentuates the differences between the oracles against the other nations and those against Babylon.

## **F BABYLON AS CIPHER FOR ANY OPPRESSIVE EMPIRE**

Although little consensus has been achieved with regard to the determination of a clear, intentional overarching structure of the book of Jeremiah,<sup>80</sup> Jer 25 and 50–51 seemingly play an important role in Jeremiah MT. These chapters emphasise that the Babylonian dominance will end. Moreover in Jer 25, Babylon is presented as an evil empire, which ultimately will be conquered by God. With the placement of the oracles against Babylon in the penultimate chapters of Jeremiah MT, Babylon is set apart from the other nations. Babylon will be completely destroyed, with no hope of restoration. Based on the intertextual link with Jer 25, the notion that Babylon is an evil empire which ultimately will be conquered by God, is transferred to Jer 50–51.

Furthermore, the oracles against Babylon attribute the demise of Babylon to the Medes. However, in 539 B.C.E. the city fell to the Persians under Cyrus.

<sup>75</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 159.

<sup>76</sup> See H.G.L. Peels, "'You Shall Certainly Drink!' The Place and Significance of the Oracles against the Nations in the Book of Jeremiah," *EuroJTh* 16 (2007): 82–83.

<sup>77</sup> Remarkably, Jeremiah LXX includes the restoration of only one nation besides Israel, namely Elam (LXX 25:19; MT 49:39). Chae regards it as an indication that Jeremiah MT reflects a later edition of Jeremiah than Jeremiah LXX. See Moon Kwon Chae, "Theological Reflections on the Oracles against the Nations," *HBT* 37 (2015): 168.

<sup>78</sup> Finsterbusch and Jacoby, "Völkergericht und Fremdvölkersprüche," 49.

<sup>79</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 67.

<sup>80</sup> See Mark E. Biddle, "Jeremiah: Content and Structure," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah* (ed. Louis Stulman and Edward Silver; New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 337.

The circumstances of Babylon’s fall unquestionably did not correspond to the events described in the oracles against Babylon. The city was not destroyed and its walls were not torn down.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, Kessler assigns the oracles against Babylon to the period between 586 B.C.E. and 550 B.C.E., when Media fell to the Persians.<sup>82</sup>

As far as the text form presented by Jeremiah LXX is concerned, an early date gives time for the haplographic nature of the LXX to emerge.<sup>83</sup> Proposals for the dating of the text form reflected in the Jeremiah MT vary from the early Persian Period, i.e. 538–450 B.C.E., to the Maccabean era. Isaiah 13–14 contains prophecies which were re-actualised to address Babylon during the formation of the book of Isaiah.<sup>84</sup> These prophecies probably were directed originally against Assyria or an Assyrian monarch. Berges asserts that behind the Oracles against the Nations in Isa 13–14 laid not only the capture of Babylon by Cyrus and Darius’ suppression of two Babylonian revolts (522–521), but also particularly the acts of Xerxes (482).<sup>85</sup> Should the placement of the oracles against Babylon in climactic position in Jeremiah MT be associated with the same events?

The image of Babylon and the Babylonians in Isa 13 is ambivalent. The language largely consists of standardised formulations with a general reference.<sup>86</sup> It should furthermore be noted that the announcement of Babylon’s destruction in verses 14–22 is set within an eschatological framework (vv. 2–13). As Eidevall notes, the quasi-apocalyptic overture, with its amassment of expressions carrying cosmological overtures, seems to indicate that Babylon became the epitome of evil.<sup>87</sup> Jeremiah 50–51 has frequently been labelled as a revision of Isa 13 but Kessler has demonstrated that the similarity between these oracles has been overstated. Although the amount of common vocabulary and phraseology is insufficient to make a case for indirect borrowing,<sup>88</sup> these oracles are thematically comparable.

With regard to Isa 14, Eidevall observes that, detached from its present literary context, the chapter could be read as a depiction of almost any tyrant known from the history of the ancient Near East.<sup>89</sup> It is of significance that Jer

<sup>81</sup> See Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 196.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>83</sup> Shead, “Text of Jeremiah,” 277.

<sup>84</sup> See Annti Laato, *Message and Composition of the Book of Isaiah: In Interpretation in the Light of Jewish Reception History* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 64.

<sup>85</sup> Ulrich F. Berges, *The Book of Isaiah: Its Composition and Final Form* (trans. M.C. Lind; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012), 136.

<sup>86</sup> Göran Eidevall, *Prophecy and Propaganda: Images of Enemies in the Book of Isaiah* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 110–111.

<sup>87</sup> Eidevall, *Prophecy and Propaganda*, 132.

<sup>88</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 183–185.

<sup>89</sup> Eidevall, *Prophecy and Propaganda*, 116.

50–51 differs from Isa 14 in the presentation of the Babylonian king. In Isa 14:3–23, the Babylonian king is represented in mythological terms. In the Jeremianic texts, he is presented metaphorically. Isaiah 14 depicts the Babylonian king unmistakably as an enemy of YHWH. In Jer 51:34, that view is articulated more indirectly. As Kessler<sup>90</sup> notes, the depiction of Israel being swallowed by a sea-monster may be an exilic metaphor. Furthermore, as noted earlier, unlike Isa 14, there are relatively few references to the Babylonian king in Jer 50–51. These oracles are particularly directed against Babylon.

Although the Jeremian oracles against Babylon fit into the same category as Isa 13 and 14 as "anti-Babylonian prophecies,"<sup>91</sup> they do not necessarily presuppose the Isaian texts. After the demise of the New Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C.E., the Judeans found themselves to be subjects of another empire. Babylon now became a symbol, capable of representing any oppressive empire. This is demonstrated by the placement of the oracles against Babylon in climactic position in Jeremiah MT. Interestingly, there are indications that in some circles Babylon was regarded as a place of refuge. Boda asserts that those responsible for the final form of the Book of the Twelve, which includes Mic 4–5, Zeph 3 and the Haggai-Malachi corpus, made the Neo-Babylonian Period and the city of Babylon key to the hope for renewal rather than being the force that threatened the survival of the Jewish community.<sup>92</sup> In contrast, in the Jeremian oracles against Babylon, the Judeans are urged to flee from Babylon (Jer 51:6, 45).

## G CONCLUSION

It seems plausible to assume that the oracles against Babylon have been placed deliberately in their present location in Jeremiah MT. Placed in the penultimate chapters of the book, the oracles against Babylon signalled hope for the readers living in the enduring post-Babylonian imperial reality. Babylon did however also evolve to represent more than the historical Babylon. Read in combination with Jer 25, Babylon became the ultimate enemy of YHWH, the entity that stands under an almost cosmic judgment.<sup>93</sup> Babylon became a cipher for any oppressive empire. This is illustrated by the portrayal of the fall of Rome in the book of Revelation.<sup>94</sup> Together with texts like Isa 13–14, Jer 50–51 acted as a catalyst for the growth of Babylon as a symbol for any oppressive empire.

<sup>90</sup> Kessler, *Battle of the Gods*, 126.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>92</sup> Mark J. Boda, "Babylon in the Book of the Twelve," *HBAI* 3(2014): 247.

<sup>93</sup> See Thelle, "Babylon," 216–217.

<sup>94</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 345.

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