

# **JEREMIAH'S TRIAL AS A FALSE PROPHET (CHAPTER 26): A WINDOW INTO THE COMPLEX RELIGIOUS STATE OF THE PEOPLE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

When reading the Book of Jeremiah, it is easy to assume that all of Jeremiah's adversaries must have been wicked for opposing God's prophet. However, there potentially was a wide range of motivations underlying the actions of Jeremiah's opponents. Some may have been wicked, but others were sincerely religious, even if they were mistaken.

Jeremiah chapter 26 provides a window into the complex religious state of the society that Jeremiah confronted at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign. In this essay, we will explore three approaches of commentators – Abarbanel, Malbim, and Menahem Boleh<sup>1</sup> – who suggest comprehensive explanations of the narrative. Each interpretation presents a different understanding of the religious state of the people.

## **HOW WERE JEREMIAH'S OPPONENTS CERTAIN THAT JEREMIAH WAS A FALSE PROPHET?**

Jeremiah entered the Temple precincts at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (c. 609 BCE)<sup>2</sup> to prophesy the destruction of the Temple if the people failed to repent. Just as God allowed the holy city of Shiloh to be destroyed because of Israel's sins,<sup>3</sup> so too Jerusalem was vulnerable. The priests, prophets, and people were outraged by Jeremiah's message and wanted him executed immediately as a false prophet: *And when Jeremiah finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, the priests and the prophets and all the people seized him, shouting, 'You shall die! How dare you prophesy in the name of the Lord that this House shall become like Shiloh and this city be made desolate, without inhabitants?'* (Jer. 26:8-9).

Superficially, one might conclude that they all were wicked people who hated Jeremiah for criticizing them and for threatening their religious authori-

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ty. Although this explanation may account for some of their motivation, nobler factors also may have been involved.

In chapter 7 – likely a parallel prophecy to the narrative in Jeremiah 26<sup>4</sup> – Jeremiah censured the people for believing that the Temple would never be destroyed: *Don't put your trust in illusions and say, 'The Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord, the Temple of the Lord are these [buildings].'* No, if you really mend your ways and your actions; if you execute justice between one man and another . . . (Jer. 7:4-5). The people also served God as pagans would serve their deities by offering sacrifices while persisting in their immoral and even idolatrous behavior (Jer. 7:9-11).

Although such individuals were both misguided in their service of God and immoral, even fully righteous individuals might have suspected that Jeremiah was a false prophet. Jeremiah prophesied the destruction of the Temple soon after the righteous King Josiah's abrupt death (609 BCE). Jeremiah's critique of Judean society, then, came in the wake of Josiah's reformation (622 BCE). Were the people already so wicked to warrant the destruction of the Temple? Addressing this concern early in his career, Jeremiah censured the insincerity of the ostensibly penitent Judeans: *The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what Rebel Israel did, going to every high mountain and under every leafy tree, and whoring there? . . . And after all that, her sister, Faithless Judah, did not return to Me wholeheartedly, but insincerely – declares the Lord* (Jer. 3:6, 10). However, it is likely that many believed that the people were generally righteous at that time.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, Jeremiah stated this prophecy of destruction less than a century after the miraculous salvation of Jerusalem in Isaiah's time (701 BCE): *'I will protect and save this city for My sake and for the sake of My servant David.'* [That night] an angel of the Lord went out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp, and the following morning they were all dead corpses (Isa. 37:35-36).

In principle, the religious establishment could have cited this prophecy of divine protection of Jerusalem as a further precedent against Jeremiah's prophecy.<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah would respond that Isaiah's prophecy was intended for Isaiah's generation, but times had changed and Jeremiah's new prophetic revelation called for the destruction of Jerusalem. However, such a claim from an unproven prophet would be difficult to accept, even for the most

righteous members of that society. Thus, Jeremiah's adversaries could have been anything from purely evil, to misguided and immoral God-worshippers, to sincerely religious individuals who believed that Jeremiah must be a false prophet since he contradicted their worldview and their perception of the religious state of the post-Josiah society.

#### THE TRIAL

In response to the accusations, Jeremiah insisted that God sent him. Jeremiah was powerless against his accusers; nevertheless, he calmly and heroically retained his prophetic integrity in the face of intense hostility and danger:

*'As for me, I am in your hands: do to me what seems good and right to you. But know that if you put me to death, you and this city and its inhabitants will be guilty of shedding the blood of an innocent man. For in truth the Lord has sent me to you, to speak all these words to you'* (Jer. 26:14-15).

The officials ruled in Jeremiah's favor, and the people supported the prophet as well: *Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and prophets, 'This man does not deserve the death penalty, for he spoke to us in the name of the Lord our God'* (26:16).

From this verdict, it appears that the story should be over. Jeremiah prophesied the impending destruction of Jerusalem if the people would not repent, the people insisted that Jeremiah should be executed as a false prophet, Jeremiah maintained that God sent him, and the officials ruled in his favor. However, the narrative surprisingly continues with an ensuing discussion that provides precedents in support of and against Jeremiah:

*And some of the elders of the land arose and said to the entire assemblage of the people, 'Micah the Morashtite, who prophesied in the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: "Thus said the Lord of Hosts: Zion shall be plowed as a field, Jerusalem shall become heaps of ruins and the Temple Mount a shrine in the woods." 'Did King Hezekiah of Judah, and all Judah, put him to death? Did he not rather fear the Lord and implore the Lord, so that the Lord renounced the punishment He had decreed against them? We are about to do great injury to ourselves!' There was also a man prophesying in the name of the Lord, Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim, who prophesied against this city and this land the same things as Jeremiah. King Jehoiakim and all his warriors and all the officials heard about*

*his address, and the king wanted to put him to death. Uriah heard of this and fled in fear, and came to Egypt. But King Jehoiakim sent men to Egypt, Elnathan son of Achbor and men with him to Egypt. They took Uriah out of Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who had him put to the sword and his body thrown into the burial place of the common people. However, Ahikam son of Shaphan protected Jeremiah, so that he was not handed over to the people for execution (Jer. 26:17-24).*

Commentators prior to Abarbanel<sup>7</sup> focus primarily on one question: Who is the speaker in verses 20-23? The elders in verses 17-19 presented a positive precedent in Jeremiah's favor, whereas Jehoiakim's killing of Uriah is a precedent against Jeremiah. Tosefta *Sotah* 9:5, followed by medieval commentators including Rashi, Radak, R. Isaiah of Trani, and R. Menahem b. Shimon, suggests that after the righteous elders spoke, the wicked priests and prophets countered with the Jehoiakim-Uriah precedent as an argument against Jeremiah. It was a genuine trial, with defense and plaintiff supplying arguments against one another.<sup>8</sup>

However, the text does not indicate a change in speaker. Consequently, R. Joseph Kara suggests that the narrator relates the Jehoiakim-Uriah incident to inform the reader that Jeremiah was indeed in great peril at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, which explains why Ahikam urgently needed to intervene.<sup>9</sup>

Also concerned with the omission of a change in speaker in the text, R. Joseph ibn Caspi alternatively suggests that the elders quoted both precedents in verses 17-23 to argue that Hezekiah's righteous response of repentance after Micah's prophecy was preferable to Jehoiakim's wicked response of killing Uriah for his prophecy.

The aforementioned commentators do not address additional questions: (1) What did the elders contribute by citing the positive precedent of Hezekiah-Micah? After all, the officials already had reached a favorable verdict in verse 16! (2) What role did Ahikam play in saving Jeremiah, if the prophet already had been deemed innocent by the court? Abarbanel, Malbim, and Menahem Boleh offer different ways of understanding how the details fit together.

In his review of the predominant position of his predecessors, including Rashi and Radak, Abarbanel surmises that after the officials' ruling in favor

of Jeremiah, the elders jumped onto the bandwagon by citing the Hezekiah-Micah precedent. The elders meant well by supporting Jeremiah, but unwittingly reopened the discussion after the verdict. The wicked priests and prophets seized the opportunity by invoking the precedent of Jehoiakim-Uriah (following the reading of the Tosefta, that they were the speakers in vv. 20-23). The masses, who initially had accepted the verdict of the judges (v. 16), now began to turn against Jeremiah. Therefore, Ahikam intervened to turn the tide back in Jeremiah's favor.

In this reading, the elders were righteous but somewhat cowardly by waiting until the officials' verdict before speaking on Jeremiah's behalf. The priests and prophets were wicked and determined to silence Jeremiah. In contrast, the masses were genuinely unsure who was right – Jeremiah or his adversaries. This view of the masses is supported by the fact that Jeremiah addressed both the officials and the people (v. 12), evidently trying to win them over; and from the decision of the officials and the people that Jeremiah was not a false prophet (v. 16).

After presenting his reconstruction of the view of his predecessors, Abarbanel rejects their approach since he is troubled by the omission of a change in speaker in verse 20. Therefore, he adopts a view similar to that of Ibn Caspi, that the elders cited both precedents and preferred Hezekiah's righteous response to Jehoiakim's wicked response. Unfortunately, the people were not swayed by the elders' argument, so Ahikam needed to intervene.

Malbim adopts a different reading from Abarbanel's reconstruction of the view of Rashi and Radak or Abarbanel's preferred reading. According to Malbim, the priests and prophets sincerely believed that Jeremiah must have been a false prophet. Unlike the priests and prophets, the masses believed that Jeremiah was a true prophet. However, they were wicked and did not want his rebuke. Thus, the priests, prophets, and people all wanted Jeremiah to be killed (vv. 8-9), but they had very different motivations.

Once the officials ruled in favor of Jeremiah, the priests and prophets accepted their verdict. However, the masses then attempted to lynch Jeremiah, since they believed that he was a true prophet but they still did not want him to prophesy. The elders therefore intervened by invoking Hezekiah's repentance as the proper response. The narrator then explains that the climate at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign was antagonistic to Jeremiah (following the

reading of Kara, that the narrator relates vv. 20-23). Emboldened by this royal precedent, the mob ignored the elders and surged toward Jeremiah. Ahikam therefore forcefully rescued Jeremiah from the mob. Verse 24 states that Ahikam saved Jeremiah from “the people,” which supports Malbim’s reading that it was the masses, rather than the priests and prophets, who posed the final threat to the prophet.

In Malbim’s reading, the elders were righteous and heroic. The priests and prophets were righteous but misguided, and they accepted the officials’ verdict. The masses agreed with the officials that Jeremiah was a true prophet and therefore did not deserve legal execution. However, they were wicked people who wanted to silence the true prophet, and attempted to lynch him.

Although there are significant differences between the perspectives of Abarbanel and Malbim, both read the narrative in sequential order. In contrast, Menahem Boleh suggests that the narrative moves from general to specific, first stating the outcome of the case broadly, followed by a detailed description of the arguments made during the trial. The officials’ verdict in verse 16 in fact came *after* hearing the arguments recorded in verses 17-24. The elders defended Jeremiah with the Hezekiah-Micah precedent, and then the wicked priests and prophets accused Jeremiah with the Jehoikim-Uriaiah precedent (following the reading of the Tosefta, that they were the speakers in vv. 20-23). Because the precedent of the plaintiff was so recent, the officials were inclined to accept their argument. Therefore, Ahikam intervened to the court and convinced them to rule in Jeremiah’s favor.<sup>10</sup> The masses accepted the ruling of the court after that, whereas the priests and prophets evidently did not (v. 16).<sup>11</sup>

According to Boleh, all of Jeremiah’s opponents were wicked. The priests wanted Jeremiah executed since he prophesied the destruction of the Temple – the source of their livelihood. The false prophets opposed Jeremiah since he contradicted their prophecies of peace. The masses were wicked, and opposed Jeremiah because he criticized them.<sup>12</sup> Accepting Boleh’s reading of the narrative moving from general to specific, one also could argue that some of Jeremiah’s adversaries were religiously motivated, yet mistaken.

## CONCLUSION

Abarbanel, Malbim, and Boleh offer three significantly different interpretations of the narrative in Jeremiah chapter 26. In their attempts to make sense of the account in verses 16-24, they explain not only the respective roles of the characters, but also the religious state of the priests, prophets, and masses at that time. In Abarbanel's reconstruction of the view of his predecessors, the priests and prophets were wicked, whereas the masses were unsure who was right and therefore gave everyone a fair hearing. In Malbim's reading, the priests and prophets were religiously mistaken but sincere and law-abiding, and could not believe that Jeremiah was a true prophet. In contrast, the masses believed that Jeremiah was a prophet but they were wicked so they attempted to kill the prophet in order to silence him. Boleh maintains that all parties were wicked and wanted to silence Jeremiah. However, consistent with his reading that the debate in verses 17-24 influenced the officials in verse 16, one may argue that some of Jeremiah's adversaries were religiously motivated, albeit misguided.

According to Malbim and Boleh, the elders played a heroic role in standing up for Jeremiah. In contrast, Abarbanel suggests that while righteous, the elders were cowardly in not defending Jeremiah until after he received a favorable verdict. They also unwittingly caused more harm than good.

Through this debate, Abarbanel, Malbim, and Boleh open possibilities for understanding not only this chapter, but also the religious state of Jeremiah's audience – both the leadership and the masses. In so doing, they bring the dramatic scene in chapter 26 to life.

#### NOTES

1. M. Boleh, *Da'at Mikra: Jeremiah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1983).
2. Boleh, p. 331, Y. Hoffman, *Mikra LeYisrael: Jeremiah* vol. 2 (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2001) p. 520, and J. R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36 [The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries]* (New York: Doubleday, 2004) pp. 285-286 maintain that the "beginning" of Jehoiakim's reign might indeed refer to his first year (609), but it need not and may refer to one of the early years of his reign.
3. Cf. Psalm 78:58-60. The Book of I Samuel does not mention the actual destruction of Shiloh (chapter 4). However, the Ark was not brought there after the Philistines returned it to Israel (chapter 7).
4. For a list of literary parallels between the two chapters, see Hoffman, p. 518.
5. The Talmud suggests that Josiah himself overestimated the positive religious state of the people: "Josiah, however, did not know that his generation found but little favor [in the eyes of God]" (TB *Ta'anit* 22b; cf. *Lam. Rabbah* 1:53).

6. Cf. Lundbom, p. 288.

7. I have used the critical editions of Rashi, R. Joseph Kara, Radak, R. Isaiah of Trani, R. Joseph ibn Caspi, and R. Menahem b. Shimon from the *Mikraot Gedolot HaKeter* edition, ed. M. Cohen (Ramat-Gan, Bar-Ilan, 2012).

8. Cf. M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985) p. 246.

9. Cf. S. D. Luzzatto, Hoffman, pp. 516-517; Lundbom, p. 285. Lundbom adds that the narrator wishes to contrast Uriah's fate with Jeremiah's salvation, serving as a reminder of God's promise to Jeremiah that he would protect him from his enemies (Jer. 1:8, 18-19; 15:20-21).

10. Boleh, p. 340.

11. Boleh, p. 336.



**עשה תורתך קבע**

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR**

**DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ**

January	Genesis	32 – 50
	Exodus	1 – 9
February	Exodus	10 – 37
March	Exodus	38 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 25
April	Leviticus	26 – 27
	Numbers	1 – 26
May	Numbers	27 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 18

