



JEREMIAH, ZEDEKIAH,  
AND THE FALL  
OF JERUSALEM

MARK RONCACE



LIBRARY OF HEBREW BIBLE/  
OLD TESTAMENT STUDIES

423

*Formerly Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*

*Editors*

Claudia V. Camp, Texas Christian University  
Andrew Mein, Westcott House, Cambridge

*Founding Editors*

David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davies and David M. Gunn

*Editorial Board*

Richard J. Coggins, Alan Cooper, John Goldingay,  
Robert P. Gordon, Norman K. Gottwald, John Jarick,  
Andrew D. H. Mayes, Carol Meyers, Patrick D. Miller



*This page intentionally left blank*

JEREMIAH, ZEDEKIAH,  
AND THE FALL OF JERUSALEM

Mark Roncace



NEW YORK • LONDON

Copyright © 2005 by Mark Roncace

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the written permission of the publisher, T & T Clark International.

T & T Clark International, Madison Square Park, 15 East 26th Street, New York, NY 10010

T & T Clark International, The Tower Building, 11 York Road, London SE1 7NX

T & T Clark International is a Continuum imprint.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Roncace, Mark.

Jeremiah, Zedekiah, and the Fall of Jerusalem / Mark Roncace.

p. cm. — (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series; 423)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-567-02671-X

1. Bible. O.T. Jeremiah XXXVII, 1–XL, 6—Criticism, Narrative. I. Title. II. Series.

BS1525.52.R66 2005

224'.206—dc22

2005006786

Typeset and edited for Continuum by Forthcoming Publications Ltd  
[www.forthcomingpublications.com](http://www.forthcomingpublications.com)

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0-567-02671-X (hardback)

## CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	ix
Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
CHARACTER, PERSPECTIVE, AND INTERTEXTUALITY	5
Characterization	5
Point of View	10
Contextual Analysis	15
Intertextual Theory	16
Intertextuality and Jeremiah	19
Chapter 2	
OF PROPHETS, KINGS, AND DESTRUCTION: PART I	26
Overview	26
Introduction: 37:1–2	31
Language Analysis	31
Intertextuality	32
First Episode: 37:3–10	35
The “Dialogue”	36
Narrative Time and Doubling	38
Point of View	39
Rhetoric	41
Intertextuality	42
Second Episode: 37:11–16	47
Point of View	47
Contextual Analysis	49
Intertextuality	51
Third Episode: 37:17–21	53
Setting	53
Point of View	54
The Dialogue	56
The Plot: The Second Scene	61
Contextual Analysis	62
Intertextuality	63

## Chapter 3

OF PROPHETS, KINGS, AND DESTRUCTION: PART 2	67
Fourth Episode: 38:1–6	67
Point of View	68
Contextual Analysis	72
The Plot: The Second Scene	74
Intertextuality	76
Fifth Episode: 38:7–13	85
Setting	86
Contextual Analysis	87
Point of View	88
Rhetoric	91
The Plot: The Second Scene	92
Intertextuality	93
Sixth Episode: 38:14–28	95
Setting	96
Point of View	97
Rhetoric	101
Contextual Analysis	109
The Plot: The Second Scene	111
Intertextuality	113

## Chapter 4

OF PROPHETS, KINGS, AND DESTRUCTION: PART 3	116
Seventh Episode: 39:1–10	116
Contextual Analysis	116
Point of View	119
The Plot: Fulfillment of Jeremiah's Message?	119
Intertextuality	123
Eighth Episode: 39:11–14	126
Contextual Analysis	126
Point of View	127
The Plot	128
Intertextuality	129
Ninth Episode: 39:15–18	130
Contextual Analysis	131
Point of View	132
Intertextuality	132
Tenth Episode: 40:1–6	134
Time	135
Contextual Analysis	136
Point of View	138
Intertextuality	142

Chapter 5	
JEREMIAH, ZEDEKIAH, AND PROPHET-KING NARRATIVES	146
Samuel and Saul	147
Nathan and David	159
The Man of God from Judah and Jeroboam	162
Summary	165
Conclusion	167
 Bibliography	 174
 Index of References	 183
Index of Authors	191



*This page intentionally left blank*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An earlier version of this book was submitted as a dissertation to the faculty at Emory University. I thank Martin Buss, Vernon Robbins, and especially Carol Newsom for their expert guidance. This book would have been impossible without them. I also thank my student-colleagues at Emory—Megan Moore, Amy Cottrill, Brad Kelle, Tamara Yates, and David Casson—for offering substantive feedback in the early stages of the project.

Jeff Shade provided important technical assistance in preparing the final draft. My mother, Paula Roncace, edited the manuscript; it is much better because of her efforts. Finally, I thank my wife, Michelle, who supported me in so many ways throughout the process. I dedicate the book to her.

*This page intentionally left blank*

## INTRODUCTION

The book of Jeremiah features several fascinating narratives about the life of the prophet, one of which is found in Jer 37–44. This text is by far the longest continuous narrative in all the prophetic books. It is a lively and sophisticated account, contains complex characters and vivid dialogue and action, and participates in an intertextual network with a variety of other stories. This study offers a narratological and intertextual analysis of Jer 37:1–40:6, roughly the first half of the story which depicts the dynamic interactions between Jeremiah and Zedekiah as they attempt to negotiate the inevitable destruction of Jerusalem, a deeply complex social and religious watershed. The study follows them through the vicissitudes of their personal lives and the public tragedy.

A broad overview of 37:1–40:6 gestures toward its richness. After a short introduction (37:1–2), Zedekiah sends a delegation to consult Jeremiah who delivers a message of unconditional defeat to the emissaries (37:3–10). Jeremiah is then arrested as he attempts to leave Jerusalem and is incarcerated (37:11–16). Zedekiah calls a meeting with Jeremiah who again renders a word of destruction to the king (37:17–20). Nonetheless, the king honors Jeremiah's request not to be sent back to the life-threatening prison into which the officials had placed him and commits him instead to the court of the guard (37:21). The officials subsequently approach Zedekiah and demand that Jeremiah be killed because of his seditious message; the king yields and the officials throw the prophet into a cistern (38:1–6). Sanctioned by Zedekiah, Ebed-melech rescues Jeremiah from the pit (37:7–13). Zedekiah again summons Jeremiah and a long, intricate conversation ensues (38:14–28). Next the narrative reports the fall of Jerusalem, the blinding of Zedekiah, and the slaughtering of the king's sons and nobles at the hands of the Babylonians (39:1–10). Jeremiah, however, is rescued by Babylonian officials and entrusted to Gedaliah (39:11–14). An interlude reports an oracle delivered to Ebed-melech when Jeremiah had been imprisoned (39:15–18). The section concludes with a Babylonian official's monologue addressed to Jeremiah as the prophet is released and remains in the land under Gedaliah (40:1–6).

Scholars who have closely studied Jer 37–44 consider it to be among the finest of biblical narratives.<sup>1</sup> Despite the artistry of this story, there has been little

1. Gunther Wanke, for instance, observes that these stories are “von hohem dichterischen Rang” and are unparalleled by any other Hebrew Bible narrative (*Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchsschrift* [BZAW 122; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971], 144). Else Holt analyzes “the literary tools of the author of this fine novella” and describes the story as a “skillfully composed narrative” (“The Potent Word of God: Remarks on the Composition of Jeremiah 37–44,” in *Troubling Jeremiah* [ed. A. R. P. Diamond, K. M. O'Connor, and L. Stulman; JSOTSup 260; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic

sustained, detailed analysis of its literary features. Recent major commentaries have devoted minimal in-depth attention to it apart from text-critical observations, identification of major themes, and a few comments on its overall structure. Several important monographs on the subject have been published, namely those by Gunther Wanke,<sup>2</sup> Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann,<sup>3</sup> Herbert Migsch,<sup>4</sup> Christopher Seitz,<sup>5</sup> Axel Graupner,<sup>6</sup> and Hermann-Josef Stipp.<sup>7</sup> Building on the classic work by Bernard Duhm, Sigmund Mowinckel, and Wilhelm Rudolph, these studies employ some combination of historical-critical, source-critical, or redaction-critical approaches; they address questions of provenance, authorship, and the ideological nature of the various sources. In general, these works presume that there are layers within the text which can be unraveled. Their objective is to separate the original narrative from secondary insertions and then to determine how the redactor edited these hypothetical sources. While the weaknesses of these traditional methods have been well documented, their valuable contributions to the understanding of Jer 37–44 should be recognized.<sup>8</sup> It is misguided to deny the presence of multiple layers in the text or to challenge the importance and validity

Press, 1999], 161–70). See also Herbert Migsch, *Gottes Wort über das Ende Jerusalems* (Klosterneuburg: Österreichisches Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1981), 268.

2. Wanke, *Untersuchungen zur sogenannten Baruchschrift*.

3. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann, *Studien zum Jeremiabuch: Ein Beitrag zur Frage nach der Entstehung des Jeremiabuches* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978).

4. Migsch, *Gottes Wort*.

5. Christopher Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah* (BZAW 176; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

6. Axel Graupner, *Auftrag und Geschick des Propheten Jeremia: Literarische eigenart, Herkunft und Intention vordeuteronomistischer Prosa im Jeremiabuch* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1991).

7. Hermann-Josef Stipp, *Jeremia im Parteienstreit: Studien zur Textentwicklung von Jer 26, 36–43 und 45 als Beitrag zur Geschichte Jeremias, seines Buches und jüdischer Parteien im 6. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main: Anton Hain, 1992).

8. For example, it seems unlikely that one can make such precise separations between the “original” layer and secondary insertions. One could easily point to the different conclusions of these studies as evidence of the difficulty of this task. After all, the redactor’s goal is to blend earlier materials with his own stories so as to leave behind as few fingerprints as possible. Cf. John Barton, *Reading the Old Testament: Method in Biblical Study* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 56–58. One wonders how much editing redactors can do before they become authors. Redactional studies also assume that different viewpoints within the text are indicators of different levels of tradition. This assumption demands too much consistency. Rather, various ideas and views can be held by the same individual, whether it be the author/editor or Jeremiah himself. Furthermore, tensions and contradictory perspectives may be part of the overall literary or rhetorical nature of the text. It seems quite possible that a final editor/author was strategically making use of, or at least was aware of, such discrepancies. Finally, these redaction-critical readings appear to be guilty of the “intentional fallacy.” They calculate that the author/editor is speaking from a specific viewpoint which can be determined from evidence offered in the text. Not only does this assume that the redactor’s motivations and intentions can be identified, a notion that has been challenged by literary critics, but it also tends toward circular reasoning. Features in the text reconstruct the author’s viewpoint which is then used to find evidence in the text for that perspective. Cf. Gail Streete, “Redaction Criticism,” in *To Each its Own Meaning* (ed. S. L. McKenzie and S. R. Haynes; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 105–21 (116).

of diachronic approaches. It is clear that the narrative material in the book of Jeremiah has been through several hands; studies which attempt to separate those layers and to demonstrate the nature of the redactional work provide a deeper understanding of the text. Redaction critics, however, need not claim that the inconsistencies, tensions, and seams in the text preclude an integrated reading of the final form. Likewise, literary critics would do well not to dismiss the kinds of incongruities and disparities which lead a redaction critic to propose a composite text and which provide the clues for reconstructing the text's sources. Indeed, synchronic and diachronic approaches each have something to contribute to the interpretation of the narrative.<sup>9</sup>

Quite tellingly, in David Gunn's 1987 prediction of the future proliferation of poetic-literary studies of Hebrew Bible narratives, he anticipated that there would be a growing number of works on Genesis through 2 Kings, with special focus on Joshua, Judges, and Kings, as well as an interest in Chronicles, and Ezra and Nehemiah. He mentions nothing of work on narratives found in the Prophets.<sup>10</sup> Gunn was right. While there are numerous narrative-critical and intertextual studies of many texts in the Hebrew Bible, there are very few such studies on the prose material in Jeremiah.<sup>11</sup> This is a somewhat curious phenomenon. Perhaps it is because so many of the stories in Genesis through Kings deal with the "family" unit and are marked with sex, love, lies, jealousy, violence, anger, and other elements that modern readers tend to find intriguing and entertaining. Many of the biblical texts that have been the subject of extensive analysis by literary critics are often the same texts that could serve as scripts for box office hits—and, of course, have served as such.<sup>12</sup> They make for stimulating productions, in part, because of their focus on the "personal" face of history, which engages modern audiences. To be sure, Jer 37:1–40:6 has its share of intrigue, deception, personal suffering, and violence, but it is set against a backdrop of national and international politics. It is one in which all the main characters are men, and women appear only in visions and even then only to provoke male action (38:22–23). If contemporary readers relish stories of love, sex, and war, the one under consideration here is mainly a story of war. Furthermore, one

9. Brian Boyle also stresses that both synchronic and diachronic approaches are necessary for a fuller appreciation of Jer 37–38. See his two short articles, "Ruin in Jerusalem: Narrative Technique and Characterisation in Jeremiah 37–38," *Compass* 12 (1998): 38–45; and "Narrative as Ideology: Synchronic (Narrative Critical) and Diachronic Readings of Jeremiah 37–38," *Pacifica* 12 (1999): 293–312.

10. David Gunn, "New Directions in the Study of Biblical Hebrew Narrative," *JSOT* 39 (1987): 65–75 (72).

11. A striking attestation of the accuracy of Gunn's forecast is seen in Leo Perdue's *The Collapse of History* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). Perdue analyzes Jer 37–44 in his discussion on "narrative theology." What is remarkable about his eleven-page treatment of this text is that there is not one footnote on these pages. Although nearly all other pages in Perdue's book contain footnotes (some quite extensive), here Perdue has multiple consecutive un-footnoted pages. He had no one to cite when doing a narrative reading of these chapters. His analysis, incidentally, is little more than a summary of the story.

12. One thinks of the films and plays featuring Joseph, Moses, David and Bathsheba, Samson and Delilah, and Esther.

of the two main characters in the text is a prophet, a type of character with whom identification is perhaps more challenging. Whatever the reason, the fact remains that much work remains to be done on the prophetic narratives in the book of Jeremiah.

Scholars have longed recognized Jer 37–44 as a unified narrative describing Judah's last days. The narrative is framed by chs. 36 and 45, both of which are dated to the fourth year of Jehoiakim's reign, and it is evident that 37:1–2 serves as an introduction to a new section. The present study, however, concludes at Jer 40:6, the point at which Gedaliah becomes the main character and Jeremiah, in fact, disappears from the story (until ch. 42). There are a number of structural clues, outlined in the study, which suggest that 40:6 represents an appropriate breaking point. Most notable and easily identifiable are the six similar recurring phrases which indicate where Jeremiah remained (יָשָׁב), the last of them appearing in 40:6. Perhaps a future project will examine the remainder of the story.

The present study will proceed as follows. Chapter 1 lays the theoretical groundwork by discussing narratological and intertextual analysis. Characterization and point of view receive special attention; the discussion of intertextuality outlines this study's understanding and employment of the concept and addresses the interconnected nature of the book of Jeremiah as a whole, as well as of Jer 37:1–40:6. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 represent the heart of this study. These three chapters are better seen as a single unit with three divisions—hence each chapter has the same title, distinguished only by the subtitles. The division into three chapters has been made strictly for logistical reasons (i.e. to prevent footnote numbers from becoming too cumbersome). Chapter 2 opens with an overview of Jer 37–44, and then more specifically of 37:1–40:6, observing some of the structural features of both units. The remainder of Chapter 2 and all of Chapters 3 and 4 closely examine each of the ten episodes in 37:1–40:6, beginning with a translation of the MT.<sup>13</sup> The narratological analysis does not apply rigidly a given set of categories to each episode; instead, it addresses issues as they arise. For instance, some episodes require a consideration of the setting, while for others the development of the plot or the rhetoric of the characters' speech will need to be assayed. Each section concludes with an examination of the intertextual features of the episode. I hope that this multi-faceted approach will illuminate the text's sophistication and richness, which in turn can shed new light on the understanding of the book of Jeremiah and promote fresh ways to study the prose material in the prophetic books. Chapter 5 develops the intertextual aspect of the study by exploring the portrayals of Jeremiah and Zedekiah and their relationship in terms of other prophet–king narratives in the Hebrew Bible, particularly those of Samuel and Saul, Nathan and David, and the anonymous man of God from Judah and Jeroboam. A conclusion summarizes the main findings and offers a few reflections on the import of the study.

13. See William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah XXVI–LII* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) for a thorough discussion of the text-critical problems for each episode.

## Chapter 1

### CHARACTER, PERSPECTIVE, AND INTERTEXTUALITY

In the last several decades narrative criticism has been broadly and successfully applied to many texts in the Hebrew Bible. Due to its widespread acceptance and employment, a thorough explanation and defense of a narratological method is unnecessary. There are, however, a couple of issues for which a short discussion may be helpful, namely, characterization and point of view. The same is true for intertextual studies: the approach is well established in biblical studies, so detailed theoretical discussion is not needed. Nevertheless, I want to outline the specific nature of the intertextual approach taken here and to make some general remarks about the intertextual features of the book of Jeremiah as a whole and of the narratives in particular.

#### *Characterization*

The stories in Jer 37:1–40:6 are about people. Ten different named characters have roles in the narrative, five of whom have speaking parts, including the officials collectively. Jeremiah and Zedekiah, both of whom are complex figures, are of obvious significance. Quite simply one cannot study the stories in Jer 37:1–40:6 without giving close attention to the development of the characters.

As many others have observed, however, character can be difficult to discuss and define and it is especially difficult to separate from other aspects of the work.<sup>1</sup> Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan writes, “Any element in the text may serve as an indicator of character and, conversely, character-indicators may serve other purposes as well.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as another theorist states, “it is in the nature of literary character to be dependent for its very existence on other parts and to cohere, ultimately inextricably, with plot and with every other part.”<sup>3</sup> Consequently, “it is not possible to face a text and announce, ‘I shall now talk about character’ in the

1. See, for example, Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985), 13–27; Charles C. Walcutt, *Man's Changing Mask: Modes and Methods of Characterization in Fiction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1966), 5–6.

2. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 59. Cf. also James Phelan, *Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), ix.

3. Mary Springer, *A Rhetoric of Literary Character* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 12.



same way that one might say, 'I shall now talk about plot' or 'metaphor.'"<sup>4</sup> Because it is intertwined with all other aspects of the text, at some level one is always discussing characterization, for "without personification there can be no storytelling."<sup>5</sup> Thus, there is not a separate section for "characterization" in the analysis of each episode.

The portraits of biblical characters are achieved through a variety of techniques which are generally the same as those found in non-biblical literature: statements, descriptions, and evaluations by the narrator, the characters' inward and outward speech and their actions, what other characters say about them, and how characters compare and contrast with other characters.<sup>6</sup> Of course, these techniques of characterization occur in combination in biblical texts, but the different types of characterization need not always be in harmony. As Rimmon-Kenan observes, one must examine "the interaction among the various means of characterization. The result, as well as the reading process, will be different according to whether the indicators repeat the same trait in different ways, complement each other, partially overlap, or conflict with each other."<sup>7</sup> This study will pay attention to these different modes of characterization.

The dialogue between characters, particularly between Jeremiah and Zedekiah, is especially important for characterization in the Jeremianic narratives. In fact, over half of chs. 37–38 is presented as direct speech. The narrator creates suspense and deepens tension in the story by dwelling on the intricate personal interactions between prophet and king. The audience watches them and listens to them, perceiving their inner life (or, in some cases, becomes frustrated in the attempt to do so). Characters cannot be studied in isolation, but rather one must "examine the respects in which the impression of individual character rises from the relationships among and between characters."<sup>8</sup> What the characters say to and about each other can be considered alongside what the narrator says about the characters, how point of view is constructed by the narrator, and how analogous figures respond in similar situations (intertextuality).

When careful attention is given to these various elements of characterization, both Jeremiah and Zedekiah emerge as complex and ambiguous figures—"round" to use Forster's classic terminology.<sup>9</sup> Other interpreters have recognized the

4. Rawdon Wilson, "The Bright Chimera: Character as a Literary Term," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1979): 725–49 (726).

5. J. Hillis Miller, "Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (ed. F. Lentricchia and T. McLaughlin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 66–79 (75).

6. Cf. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 30, 114; Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Bible and Literature Series 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 33–42; Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989), 47, 92; David Gunn and Dana N. Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 46–89; Jan Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 55–72.

7. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction*, 70.

8. Bert O. States, *Hamlet and the Concept of Character* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), xix.

9. Edward M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 67–78.

depth of Zedekiah's depiction, even if they have not analyzed it in close detail. For example, Gerald Keown, Thomas Smothers, and Pamela Scalise write that Zedekiah is a "gray figure, neither fully positive or fully negative."<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Mary Callaway concludes that no other figure throughout the Hebrew Bible is depicted more poignantly than Zedekiah;<sup>11</sup> others have referred to Zedekiah's image as a tragic one.<sup>12</sup> Zedekiah's complexity is no different from many other characters in the Hebrew Bible, including that of the most prominent Judean king, David. In fact, Charles Conroy's description of David's characterization could also be said of Zedekiah's portrayal, although the stories about them vary in length and kind: "It seems that the narrator wants the reader to sympathize with the king but, at the same time, not to ignore the flaws of character and errors of political judgment that were largely responsible for the pain and disasters both within the king's family and within his kingdom. The narrator's presentation of David, then, is sympathetic but not uncritical."<sup>13</sup> Given David's obvious importance and centrality in the Hebrew Bible, it is quite significant that Zedekiah's characterization is akin to his, for at first glance, most readers would not put these two kings in the same category. Rather, even those who see Zedekiah as a complex character ultimately label him a "weak figure." Keown, Smothers, and Scalise, for example, despite their appreciation of Zedekiah's ambiguous nature, conclude that Zedekiah is "consistently weak." A recent work by Stuart Lasine, however, offers a different and helpful lens through which one can view Zedekiah's characterization and the narrative dynamics surrounding its development. It is helpful to introduce very briefly his work here since it will be explored further in the study.

Using a variety of methods—psychological, literary, and social-scientific—Lasine demonstrates the way in which information management functions in the maintenance and exercise of monarchical power. While his focus is on biblical kings and kingship, he also considers royal power and information management in the ancient Near East (Rameses II, Esarhaddon) and Greece (Homer's Achilles, Sophocles's King Oedipus), as well as those of European kings. A main purpose of Lasine's study is to illuminate the paradoxical nature of the king's position—a position that must constantly monitor information management, gossip, the private–public distinction, loyalty, and scapegoating. He writes: "While the king may seem to be totally independent and powerful, he is utterly dependent upon his courtiers to demonstrate their loyalty by sharing information with him. The paradoxical nature of the king's situation became more and more evident to me.

10. Gerald Keown, Thomas Smothers, and Pamela Scalise, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC 27; Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 214.

11. Mary Callaway, "Telling the Truth and Telling Stories: An Analysis of Jeremiah 37–38," *USQR* 44 (1991): 253–65 (265).

12. Bernard Duhm, *Das Buch Jeremia* (KHC; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1901), 301; John Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 631; and Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia* (3d ed.; HAT; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1958), 203.

13. Charles Conroy, *Absalom, Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam 13–20* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978), 112.

He is simultaneously powerful and helpless, knowledgeable and ignorant, an idol and a potential scapegoat."<sup>14</sup> Lasine's study features insightful analyses of the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. Yet it is clear that the topics that Lasine mentions are also germane to Zedekiah's kingship. Lasine observes Jer 37–38 as a text where "royal knowledge and information management" are key—but he devotes barely one page to studying it. Lasine's work sheds light on Zedekiah's character by helping one see that Zedekiah's situation and his handling of it are characteristic of not only other biblical kings, but also of monarchs throughout history. Rather than being a "weak" figure, Zedekiah is enmeshed in the game of information management in which all kings must participate. Zedekiah is, in fact, at times presented as a powerful figure because he controls the flow of information in his kingdom. Like all kings, however, Zedekiah is a paradox, as will be shown.

Jeremiah's portrayal in these narratives is equally sophisticated, although surprisingly few commentators have considered his depiction in these stories specifically. If Zedekiah can be called a tragic figure, so too can Jeremiah. The observations of Gerhard von Rad capture much of Jeremiah's portrayal:

Jeremiah's sufferings are described with a grim realism, and the picture is unrelieved by any divine word of comfort or any miracle. The narrator has nothing to say about the guiding hand of God; no ravens feed the prophet in his hunger, no angel stops the lion's mouth. In his abandonment to his enemies Jeremiah is completely powerless—neither by his words nor his sufferings does he make any impression on them. What is particularly sad is the absence of any good or promising issue. This was an unusual thing for an ancient writer to do, for antiquity felt a deep need to see harmony restored before the end. Jeremiah's path disappears in misery, and without any dramatic accompaniments. It would be completely wrong to assume that the story was intended to glorify Jeremiah and his endurance. To the man who described these events neither the suffering itself nor the manner in which it was borne had any positive value; he sees no halo of any kind round the prophet's head.<sup>15</sup>

It is safe to say that this is not the typical image of a Hebrew prophet. Jeremiah's sufferings and the absence of divine assistance, as was promised in Jer 1, create a pathetic and simultaneously dubious image. Jeremiah's ambiguity arises from consideration of the details in the text, as the analysis will show. His motives and intentions remain obscure; there are discrepancies between his words and events as they unfold; and he is concerned for his personal safety to the point of being willing to prevaricate to preserve his security. Jeremiah is a prophet of Yahweh, but he is a human being too.

14. Stuart Lasine, *Knowing Kings: Knowledge, Power, and Narcissism in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), xiv.

15. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:207–8. It is interesting that von Rad is reading intertextually (the references to Elijah and Daniel) in order to sketch his portrayal of Jeremiah. John Goldingay notes that "our last sight of Jeremiah is his back as he turns his feet wearily south, his ministry apparently fruitless, his future apparently only death, far away from the inheritance that he had promised that he and his brethren would repossess in Palestine" (*God's Prophet, God's Servant* [Greenwood, S.C.: Attie, 1984], 17).

Both Jeremiah and Zedekiah, then, are ambiguous and complex figures—ones who cannot be easily defined. Robert Alter speaks of an “abiding mystery” in biblical characters because their “unpredictable and changing nature” prevents one from being able to assign to them “fixed Homeric epithets.” Instead, “only relational epithets determined by the strategic requirements of the immediate context” can be applied to them.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, Meir Sternberg states that “reading a character becomes a process of discovery,” whereby the reader must perform “progressive reconstruction, tentative closure of discontinuities, frequent and sometimes painful reshaping in the face of the unexpected,” and must accept that there may exist “intractable pockets of darkness to the very end.”<sup>17</sup> Because of the “mystery” and “darkness” that surrounds characters, the reader’s ability to make a final or fixed judgment is not always possible. In this vein, Peter Miscall maintains that the analysis of biblical characters will often “end in undecidability.”<sup>18</sup> In his analysis of Abraham, for instance, Miscall writes that “he is either faithful and obedient or cunning and opportunistic.” Miscall prefers, however, to leave both options open: “it is not a matter of choosing either one or the other, but of choosing both at the same time.” For him characterization is not a matter of deciding between various alternatives, but of seeing them on a “continuum.” Accordingly, he concludes that “the two Abrahams are not two distinct possible characters, but positions at either end of the continuum of the person Abraham which are already merging into other possible characters and are moving towards each other.”<sup>19</sup>

Something of the sort can be said of the characters in Jer 37:1–40:6. They can be read in various and contrasting ways, but one need not decide between the alternatives. Rather, the interpretations can be permitted to exist on a continuum in which the various possibilities interact with each other. In other words, the various actions and speeches of the characters are susceptible to wide-ranging interpretations with each interpretation making more undecidable a portrayal that is already complex and undecidable.<sup>20</sup> The goal of this study to draw out the “complex and undecidable” features of the characters, mainly of Jeremiah and Zedekiah. One, however, can only arrive at tentative conclusions because both king and prophet “end in undecidability,” shrouded in “mystery” and “darkness.”

A final note on characterization remains. While Zedekiah and Jeremiah are clearly the main actors in the story, there are “minor characters” who also contribute in substantive ways to the plot. As David Galef remarks, “understanding how an author deploys minor characters helps one understand how the work is

16. Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 64.

17. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 323–24.

18. Peter Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 21.

19. Miscall, *The Workings of Old Testament Narrative*, 21.

20. Cf. Gerald Prince (*Narratology: The Form and Function of Narrative* [New York: Mouton, 1982], 71), who observes that because of the many “presuppositions, implications and connotations to a set of propositions (about a character), different readers’ descriptions of a given character may vary: the readers will all isolate the same set . . . but they will think of different connotations.”

put together.”<sup>21</sup> Minor characters give the story “depth” by providing “a contrasting, shifting background against which the major figures play out the drama of their lives.”<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, it will be necessary to consider not only such figures as Irijah, Ebed-melech, and the officials, but even more peripheral characters who have no speaking parts, such as the emissaries sent by the king (37:3) and the poor people who remain in the land (39:10). The importance of some of these characters is derived from their patronymic, which links with other minor players in the book of Jeremiah. Indeed, “the analysis of minor figures will inevitably reveal the painstaking construction of the work; how the author intends to get from alpha to omega, or what contrast he has in mind, or what thematic principles he is stressing.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, concerning minor characters in biblical narrative, Uriel Simon observes their “great importance to the biblical narrator” as they frequently “provide the key to the message of the story” by “furthering the plot . . . and the characterization of the protagonist.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Point of View*

Characterization is difficult to discuss apart from other narratological features of the text, one of which is point of view. Here biblical critics have most often appropriated the works by literary theorists Boris Uspensky and Seymour Chatman.<sup>25</sup> Chatman distinguishes between the interest point of view—the object of the story’s interest—and perceptual point of view—the perspective through which the events of the story are perceived. The object of the story’s interest in Jer 37–40 is obviously Jeremiah; the audience watches what he says and does and what happens to him. Although the narrative’s focus is clearly on Jeremiah, his perceptual point of view is noticeably absent. The reader does not know what he is thinking or feeling, or how events appear from his perspective. Chatman’s categories help one to see that the object of the story is not always the same character from whose point of view the story is related.

Somewhat similar to Chatman’s categories, Uspensky distinguishes four different levels of point of view. The ideological point of view is a “general system of viewing the world conceptually,” and therefore “least accessible to formalization.” It is the view through which the events of the story are evaluated. The

21. David Galef, *The Supporting Cast: A Study of Flat and Minor Characters* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 1.

22. Galef, *The Supporting Cast*, 22.

23. Galef, *The Supporting Cast*, 22.

24. Uriel Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (trans. L. J. Schramm; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 269.

25. Boris Uspensky, *Poetics of Composition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973); and Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1978). See also, Mieke Bal, *Narratology: An Introduction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); and Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980). In biblical studies, see Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 43–82; Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative*, 123–55.