

PART THREE

LIFE & TIMES OF JEREMIAH

JEREMIAH 26-45

Introduction to Chapters 26-45

Unique among the prophetic scrolls is the interest shown in the life and times of the prophet Jeremiah. This is not surprising when we consider that his ministry coincided with the final years of the Davidic dynasty in Judah. Jeremiah spoke for God during the tragic reigns of Jehoiakim (609-598), and Zedekiah (597-587), years which saw the devastation of Judah and the siege and capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army (598-597), and the second siege and destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 588-587.

Those taken off into exile in Babylon, and those who returned to rebuild the temple and their religion in the small province of Yehud within the vast Persian Empire, wanted to record the extraordinary ministry of this lone prophet who stood out against the leaders, the priests and the court prophets of his generation, and who alone spoke the truth. People wanted not to forget Jeremiah and his inspired words, lest they would see a repeat of the catastrophes he witnessed.

Part One of the scroll (chapters 1-25) focuses on Jeremiah's words with only a few references to their historical setting (see 1:1-3; 19:1-2; 20:1-3; 21:1-2; 24:1 and 25:1). Much of it consisted in threats of divine justice because of the people's infidelity. This was 'balanced' in Part Two (Chapters 25:15-38 and Chapters 46-51). God is just, so Judah's enemies would also be punished for their behaviour. It is here in Part Three (chapters 26-45) and in the Epilogue (chapter 52) that we see the interest of the scribes in the life and times of the prophet. If we exclude chapters 30-31 which form a special insertion, these chapters make up a third of the whole scroll.

To read these stories is not unlike reading Shakespeare's Richard III. Some of the characteristics of Richard III in the play, and some of the situations dramatised, may well coincide with the life and times of the historical Richard III. But the drama cannot be read as a straight-out historical account. Shakespeare uses his creative artistic talent to present Richard III in a way that enables him to connect with his audience and invite them to examine their own lives. Much the same should be said of the authors of Part Three. They no doubt draw on events that have been handed down in the tradition, but the character Jeremiah (as distinct from the Jeremiah of history) is being presented to portray what were considered essential elements of Yahwism to the exiles in Babylon and to the inhabitants of Yehud in the post-exilic period. Different 'schools' stressed different aspects of this, and we will find here, as in other parts of the scroll, unresolved inconsistencies that witness to the debates and arguments that went into the genesis of the text (see Introduction pages 8-9).

1. CONFLICTS with ‘PROPHETS’

JEREMIAH 26:1 - 29:32

¹At the beginning of the reign of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, this word came from YHWH: ²Thus says YHWH: Stand in the court of YHWH's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of YHWH; speak to them all the words that I command you; do not hold back a word. ³It may be that they will listen, all of them, and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. ⁴You shall say to them: Thus says YHWH: If you will not listen to me, to walk in my law that I have set before you, ⁵and to heed the words of my servants the prophets whom I send to you urgently—though you have not heeded— ⁶then I will make this house like Shiloh, and I will make this city a curse for all the nations of the earth. ⁷The priests and the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speaking these words in the house of YHWH. ⁸And when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that YHWH had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, "You shall die! ⁹Why have you prophesied in the name of YHWH, saying, 'This house shall be like Shiloh, and this city shall be desolate, without inhabitant'?" And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of YHWH.

Chapter 26 gives us the most detailed description of a trial in the Older Testament. We are at the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign (609-608), and so early in the prophetic ministry of Jeremiah. Verse 2 and verses 4-6 link this occasion with Jeremiah's declaration presented in chapter 7. It sets the scene for the difficult relationship that Jeremiah had with the authorities and the people of Judah throughout his prophetic career.

Jeremiah is instructed by God not to keep silent, but to declare every word of God, however unwelcome (verse 2). His message is a threatening one. He does hold out the possibility of avoiding the catastrophe that is coming, but only if the people change their mind and heart and behaviour. If they don't God would see that the temple would suffer the same fate as the shrine of Shiloh (see Psalm 78:60).

His words put the priests and cult prophets attached to the sanctuary and the crowd into a rage (verses 7-9). To curse YHWH's city and temple is to blaspheme against YHWH. This is a capital offence (see 1 Kings 21:10, 13; Deuteronomy 18:20). Had not God given them the following assurance?:

This is my resting place forever; here I will reside, for I have desired it.

– Psalm 132:14

Tragically they hear the threat presented by Jeremiah, but they fail to hear how they could avoid it: they fail to hear what he says about repentance (compare their words in verse 9 with Jeremiah's words in verse 4).

We have already read, earlier in the scroll, that the opposition Jeremiah suffered here from the priests and the prophets set a pattern for the whole of his prophetic ministry (see 4:9; 5:31; 6:13; 14:18; 23:11).

Jeremiah is brought before those responsible for justice and accused of treason ('he has prophesied against this city'(verse 11).

In verses 12-15, Jeremiah asserts that the word he has spoken is not his own but comes 'in truth'(verse 15) from YHWH. He repeats the call for the people to 'amend your ways'(verse 13). He declares his innocence (verse 15) and reminds the officials that if they do put him to death the 'city and its inhabitants' will suffer the consequences.

Jeremiah's defence persuaded the court to rule in his favour: 'he has spoken to us in the name of YHWH our God'(verse 16).

¹⁰When the officials of Judah heard these things, they came up from the king's house to the house of YHWH and took their seat in the entry of the New Gate of the house of YHWH. ¹¹Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and to all the people, "This man should be tried on an capital charge because he has prophesied against this city, as you have heard with your own ears."

¹²Then Jeremiah spoke to all the officials and all the people, saying, "It is YHWH who sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the words you have heard. ¹³Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of YHWH your God, and YHWH will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. ¹⁴But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you. ¹⁵Only know for certain that if you put me to death, you will be bringing innocent blood upon yourselves and upon this city and its inhabitants, for in truth YHWH sent me to you to speak all these words in your ears."

¹⁶Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, "This man does not deserve the sentence of death, for he has spoken to us in the name of YHWH our God."

17And some of the elders of the land arose and said to all the assembled people, ¹⁸“Micah of Moresheth, who prophesied during the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, said to all the people of Judah: ‘Thus says YHWH of hosts: Zion shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house a wooded height.’ ¹⁹Did King Hezekiah of Judah or anyone else in Judah actually put him to death? Did he not fear YHWH and entreat the favour of YHWH, and did not YHWH change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced against them? But we are about to bring great disaster on ourselves!”

²⁰There was another man prophesying in the name of YHWH, Uriah son of Shemaiah from Kiriath-jearim. He prophesied against this city and against this land in words exactly like those of Jeremiah.

²¹And when King Jehoiakim, with all his warriors and all the officials, heard his words, the king sought to put him to death; but when Uriah heard of it, he was afraid and fled and escaped to Egypt. ²²Then King Jehoiakim sent Elnathan son of Achbor and men with him to Egypt, ²³and they took Uriah from Egypt and brought him to King Jehoiakim, who struck him down with the sword and threw his dead body into the burial place of the common people.

²⁴But the hand of Ahikam son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah so that he was not given over into the hands of the people to be put to death.

‘Elders of the land’ (so not part of the city establishment) bring up a precedent from the tradition. In the time of King Hezekiah, the prophet Micah (see Micah 3:12) had threatened punishment from YHWH. They did not kill Micah. Instead they listened to him and repented and so averted the threatened punishment. The elders support the acquittal. They should not run the risk of opposing YHWH.

Verses 20-23 tell the story of Uriah, an otherwise unknown prophet whose message was similar to that of Jeremiah. Uriah escaped to Egypt to avoid death at the hands of Jehoiakim, but the king sent his father-in-law, Elnathan (see 2Kings 26:8) to arrange for Uriah to be extradited. He was killed and thrown into a common grave.

The court has ruled in Jeremiah’s favour, but we are yet to see how the king would react.

The suspense is broken in verse 24. Jeremiah found himself to have a supporter in Ahikam who was close to the centre of power. Ahikam’s father, Shaphan, was royal secretary during the reign of Josiah (see 2Kings 22:12, 14). Ahikam’s son, Gedaliah, was appointed ruler of Judah by Nebuchadrezzar after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 (see 2Kings 25:22; Jeremiah 39:14; 40:7). His brother Gemariah was also a powerful figure in Judah at this time (see 2Kings 22:12,14). It would seem that this prominent family were in favour of Judah allying itself with Babylon (rather than Egypt). It is not known why they were unable to save Uriah, but here we see them supporting Jeremiah.

The Hebrew text repeats 26:1 and links the scene with Jehoiakim (not Zedekiah). Chapter 28 is a variation on the theme of chapter 27 and speaks of the fourth year of Zedekiah. In 594 a revolt in Babylon encouraged Zedekiah to gather envoys from the surrounding nations in the hope of organising an anti-Babylonian alliance.

The significance of the symbolic action that Jeremiah is instructed to perform is clear. Jeremiah is telling the neighbouring countries what he has been telling his own king: political wisdom requires that in the present climate they submit to Nebuchadrezzar, and resist the temptation to stir up rebellion. Verse 6 declares that it is YHWH who is behind the victory of Babylon and speaks of Nebuchadrezzar as YHWH's 'servant' (compare Isaiah 45:1).

Verse seven is correct in that Babylonian rule lasted only three generations (even though Nebuchadrezzar's successors, Neriglassar and Nabonidus were not part of his dynasty). The key point is that YHWH has put a limit on control by foreign powers.

Verse nine offers a range of activities associated in the ancient world with prophecy. Diviners read omens (see Micah 3:6; Ezekiel 21:16); on 'dreamers' see Jeremiah 23:23-32 and Deuteronomy 13:2-4; sorcerers perform magic. They are all 'prophesying a lie to you' (verse 10; see 14:14). This gives rise to a major concern: how to discern genuine from false prophecy (compare Deuteronomy 18:9-13).

¹In the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from YHWH. ²Thus YHWH said to me: Make yourself a yoke of straps and bars, and put them on your neck. ³Send word to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre, and the king of Sidon by the hand of the envoys who have come to Jerusalem to King Zedekiah of Judah. ⁴Give them this charge for their masters: Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: This is what you shall say to your masters: ⁵It is I who by my great power and my outstretched arm have made the earth, with the people and animals that are on the earth, and I give it to whomever I please. ⁶Now I have given all these lands into the hand of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, my servant, and I have given him even the wild animals of the field to serve him. ⁷All the nations shall serve him and his son and his grandson, until the time of his own land comes; then many nations and great kings will reduce it to servitude. ⁸But if any nation or kingdom will not serve this king, Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, then I will punish that nation with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, says YHWH, until I have completed its destruction by his hand. ⁹You, therefore, must not listen to your prophets, your diviners, your dreamers, your soothsayers, or your sorcerers, who are saying to you, 'You shall not serve the king of Babylon.' ¹⁰For they are prophesying a lie to you, with the result that you will be removed far from your land; I will drive you out, and you will perish. ¹¹But any nation that will bring its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon and serve him, I will leave on its own land, says YHWH, to till it and live there.

¹²I spoke to King Zedekiah of Judah in the same way: Bring your necks under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serve him and his people, and live. ¹³Why should you and your people die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence, as YHWH has spoken concerning any nation that will not serve the king of Babylon? ¹⁴Do not listen to the words of the prophets who are telling you not to serve the king of Babylon, for they are prophesying a lie to you. ¹⁵I have not sent them, says YHWH, but they are prophesying falsely in my name, with the result that I will drive you out and you will perish, you and the prophets who are prophesying to you.

¹⁶Then I spoke to the priests and to all this people, saying, Thus says YHWH: Do not listen to the words of your prophets who are prophesying to you, saying, "The vessels of YHWH's house will soon be brought back from Babylon," for they are prophesying a lie to you. ¹⁷Do not listen to them; serve the king of Babylon and live. Why should this city become a desolation? ¹⁸If indeed they are prophets, and if the word of YHWH is with them, then let them intercede with YHWH of hosts, that the vessels left in the house of YHWH, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem may not go to Babylon. ¹⁹For thus says YHWH of hosts concerning the pillars, the sea, the stands, and the rest of the vessels that are left in this city, ²⁰which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not take away when he took into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the nobles of Judah and Jerusalem— ²¹thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning the vessels left in the house of YHWH, in the house of the king of Judah, and in Jerusalem: ²²They shall be carried to Babylon, and there they shall stay, until the day when I give attention to them, says YHWH. Then I will bring them up and restore them to this place.

Verses 12-15 reinforce the message of verses 1-11. This time Jeremiah is addressing King Zedekiah. Those composing this narrative are reminding their readers that it was Jeremiah who spoke the truth from YHWH, however unpalatable. The others, who claimed to be prophets, and to whom the people listened because they wanted to hear what they were proclaiming, were 'prophesying a lie' (verse 14). This contributed to the catastrophe and the exile.

Verses 16-22 are inserted in order to give an example of the kind of promises that the false prophets were announcing. Even after the capture of Jerusalem in 597 and the first lot of exiles, they were saying that the exile would soon be over, that the city would not be destroyed (as Jeremiah kept telling them), and that the temple treasures would soon be back in Jerusalem, and things would go on as usual. The destruction on 587 once again proved them wrong.

Jeremiah continues his appeal for them to stay under Nebuchadnezzar's yoke. The exile would last as long as YHWH determined (verse 22).

The message of hope in verses 19-22 (see verse 7) appears to be from the Deuteronomistic School in exile, assuring the exiles that Jerusalem and its temple, though destroyed, would be restored.

Chapter 28 is constructed as a dramatic encounter between Hananiah, representing those who prophesied peace, and Jeremiah. It is best read from the perspective of those who have already witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple (587), and so from the perspective of writers and readers who have witnessed events which finally, and beyond doubt, have shown Jeremiah to be right and his opponents wrong.

Already in the previous scene we have heard the ‘peace prophets’ predicting that the exile will be brief. In this scene Hananiah directly challenges Jeremiah’s words in 27:16-22. He is also more precise in prophesying the end of the exile ‘within two years’ (verse 3). He includes King Jeconiah’s return in his prediction (verse 4), though he is not included in verse 6 (or earlier in 27:16-22). He cannot see YHWH’s faithful love acting in any other way.

Jeremiah’s response (verses 5-9) fits better with the theologising of the Deuteronomistic School than it does with the Jeremiah we have heard through his own oracles. Jeremiah is portrayed as espousing the criteria worked out by the Deuteronomistic School as they struggled (with very limited success) to work out how to discern true from false prophecy – something they could not avoid attempting in the light of the fact that all the ‘prophets’ except Jeremiah were proved wrong. Verse 9 picks up Deuteronomy 18:21-22.

You may say to yourself, “How can we recognize a word that YHWH has not spoken?” If a prophet speaks in the name of YHWH but the thing does not take place or prove true, it is a word that YHWH has not spoken. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously; do not be frightened by it.

¹In that same year, at the beginning of the reign of King Zedekiah of Judah, in the fifth month of the fourth year, the prophet Hananiah son of Azzur, from Gibeon, spoke to me in the house of YHWH, in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying, ²“Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. ³Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of YHWH’s house, which King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. ⁴I will also bring back to this place King Jeconiah son of Jehoiakim of Judah, and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon, says YHWH, for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.” ⁵Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who were standing in the house of YHWH; ⁶and the prophet Jeremiah said, “Amen! May YHWH do so; may YHWH fulfill the words that you have prophesied, and bring back to this place from Babylon the vessels of the house of YHWH, and all the exiles. ⁷But listen now to this word that I speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people. ⁸The prophets who preceded you and me from ancient times prophesied war, famine, and pestilence against many countries and great kingdoms. ⁹As for the prophet who prophesies peace, when the word of that prophet comes true, then it will be known that YHWH has truly sent the prophet.”

¹⁰Then the prophet Hananiah took the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, and broke it.

¹¹And Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says YHWH: This is how I will break the yoke of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years." At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way. ¹²Sometime after the prophet Hananiah had broken the yoke from the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah: ¹³Go, tell Hananiah, Thus says YHWH: You have broken wooden bars only to forge iron bars in place of them! ¹⁴For thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke on the neck of all these nations so that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, and they shall indeed serve him; I have even given him the wild animals. ¹⁵And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, "Listen, Hananiah, YHWH has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie.

¹⁶Therefore thus says YHWH: I am going to send you off the face of the earth. Within this year you will be dead, because you have spoken rebellion against YHWH." ¹⁷In that same year, in the seventh month, the prophet Hananiah died.

In a dramatic gesture Hananiah demonstrates the folly of Jeremiah's prediction of doom, and in YHWH's name he repeats his prediction that the yoke of the Babylonian king will be broken 'within two years' (verse 11; see verse 3). In the period between the capture of Jerusalem (597) and its destruction (587), the party recommending resistance to Babylon had support from the 'prophets' (with the notable exception of Jeremiah), as well as the neighbouring countries mentioned in chapter 27. It also offered hope to the exiles that their suffering would not last long.

Jeremiah's response (verses 12-16) is to declare that all such gestures of rebellion against Babylon have the effect of endangering Judah and strengthening Nebuchadnezzar's opposition – something proved right by the fateful events of 587. By that time it was clear that Hananiah and the other 'peace prophets' had been shown up as false prophets. The effect of the words placed on Jeremiah's lips in verses 13-16 is to reinforce the perception of the people in exile that Jeremiah is indeed a genuine prophet. This was deemed necessary by the Deuteronomistic School and others, if they were going to learn from the catastrophic events of 597 and 587, and set out on a new path of obedience to YHWH, trusting that the exile, which was dragging on much longer than the 'peace prophets' had predicted, would be brought to an end by YHWH.

Jeremiah's prediction and the account of Hananiah's death have the same feel about them as the legends about Elijah and Elisha recorded by the Deuteronomistic School in the Books of Kings.

Chapter 29 opens with a letter to those who had been taken into exile in Babylon as a result of the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 597. The letter is attributed to Jeremiah. It is interesting that one of the ambassadors sent to Babylon by King Zedekiah is a member of the Shaphan family who supported Jeremiah (see the commentary on 26:24).

The thrust of the letter is consistent with what Jeremiah had been saying from the beginning. It was YHWH's will that they cooperate with Babylon. It was the failure to do this that led to 597. Exiles who fostered rebellion would not only make things worse for themselves and the other exiles, it would also be opposing YHWH's will for them. Jeremiah urges them to settle down and be good citizens with the other peoples who shared their exile and with the local Babylonians. In their welfare 'you will find your welfare'(verse 7).

Verses 8-9 return to the problem of true and false prophecy. Jeremiah continues to warn the exiles not to listen to the false prophets. They listened to them back in Judah and they were shown to be wrong there. They must not get caught up in the lies that they are mouthing in YHWH's name.

¹These are the words of the letter that the prophet Jeremiah sent from Jerusalem to the elders among the exiles, and to the priests, the prophets, and all the people, whom Nebuchadnezzar had taken into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon. ²This was after King Jeconiah, and the queen mother, the court officials, the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the artisans, and the smiths had departed from Jerusalem. ³The letter was sent by the hand of Elasah son of Shaphan and Gemariah son of Hilkiah, whom King Zedekiah of Judah sent to Babylon to King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. It said: ⁴Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: ⁵Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ⁶Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. ⁷But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to YHWH on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. ⁸For thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let the prophets and the diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, ⁹for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, says YHWH.

¹⁰For thus says YHWH: Only when Babylon's seventy years are completed will I visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. ¹¹For surely I know the plans I have for you, says YHWH, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ¹²Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. ¹³When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, ¹⁴I will let you find me, says YHWH, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says YHWH, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.

¹⁵Because you have said, "YHWH has raised up prophets for us in Babylon,"— ¹⁶Thus says YHWH concerning the king who sits on the throne of David, and concerning all the people who live in this city, your kinsfolk who did not go out with you into exile: ¹⁷Thus says YHWH of hosts, I am going to let loose on them sword, famine, and pestilence, and I will make them like rotten figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten. ¹⁸I will pursue them with the sword, with famine, and with pestilence, and will make them a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth, to be an object of cursing, and horror, and hissing, and a derision among all the nations where I have driven them, ¹⁹because they did not heed my words, says YHWH, when I persistently sent to you my servants the prophets, but they would not listen, says YHWH.

The 'seventy years' picks up 25:11-12. The number is symbolic for the fullness of time as determined by YHWH.

Verses 10-14 hold out a wonderful promise of hope. The exile is not YHWH's last word. The punishment that they are enduring is deserved, but it is YHWH who is punishing them, and YHWH's punishment is always in view of repentance.

The promise that 'I will gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you' appears to be an extension of Jeremiah's message, drawing out its universal implications, and coming from a later period.

Verse 15 returns to the problem of false prophets in Babylon (see verses 8-9). There is a break at verse 16 and the topic is not picked up till verse 20.

It is interesting that verses 16-19 are not found in the Greek Septuagint Version. This often points to a later insertion coming from later reflections on the implications of Jeremiah's words. In fact Jerusalem was destroyed in 587. Jeremiah's beautiful words in verses 10-14 are true, but back in Judah the authorities continued to ignore what Jeremiah was saying and so brought the catastrophe, and so further divine punishment, upon themselves.

Some scholars see in verses 16-19 the hand of a homilist from the Deuteronomistic School. The words are consistent with the oracles of Jeremiah, though they fit rather awkwardly here in a letter written to the exiles.

Verse 20 picks up from verse 15. Jeremiah is concerned at the influence being exercised by false prophets on the community in exile. The ‘prophets’ Ahab and Zedekiah (verse 21) are not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible. The same goes for Shemaiah (verse 24) and Jehoiada (verse 26). Zephaniah (verse 25) has appeared already in 21:1 (see later, 37:3; 52:24).

The accusation of ‘adultery’ (verse 23) is unexpected and distracting from the main issue. Perhaps it has been influenced by 23:14?

In verse 24, Jeremiah tells the exiles of a letter sent by Shemaiah from Babylon to the priest Zephaniah and the other priests responsible for keeping order in the temple in Jerusalem. Shemaiah is clearly unhappy about the kind of advice Jeremiah is giving the exiles, and wants him kept in check.

²⁰But now, all you exiles whom I sent away from Jerusalem to Babylon, hear the word of YHWH: ²¹Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel, concerning Ahab son of Kolaiah and Zedekiah son of Maaseiah, who are prophesying a lie to you in my name: I am going to deliver them into the hand of King Nebuchadrezzar of Babylon, and he shall kill them before your eyes. ²²And on account of them this curse shall be used by all the exiles from Judah in Babylon: “YHWH make you like Zedekiah and Ahab, whom the king of Babylon roasted in the fire,” ²³because they have perpetrated outrage in Israel and have committed adultery with their neighbours’ wives, and have spoken in my name lying words that I did not command them; I am the one who knows and bears witness, says YHWH.

²⁴To Shemaiah of Nehelam you shall say: ²⁵Thus says YHWH of hosts, the God of Israel: In your own name you sent a letter to all the people who are in Jerusalem, and to the priest Zephaniah son of Maaseiah, and to all the priests, saying, ²⁶YHWH himself has made you priest instead of the priest Jehoiada, so that there may be officers in the house of YHWH to control any madman who plays the prophet, to put him in the stocks and the collar. ²⁷So now why have you not rebuked Jeremiah of Anathoth who plays the prophet for you? ²⁸Because you did not keep him in check, he has sent to us in Babylon, saying, “It will be a long time; build houses and live in them, and plant gardens and eat what they produce.”

False prophets

²⁹The priest Zephaniah read this letter in the hearing of the prophet Jeremiah.

³⁰Then the word of YHWH came to Jeremiah: ³¹Send to all the exiles, saying, Thus says YHWH concerning Shemaiah of Nehelam: Because Shemaiah has prophesied to you, though I did not send him, and has led you to trust in a lie, ³²therefore thus says YHWH: I am going to punish Shemaiah of Nehelam and his descendants; he shall not have anyone living among this people to see the good that I am going to do to my people, says YHWH, for he has spoken rebellion against YHWH.

Those responsible for the Jeremiah scroll tell us how Jeremiah got to know about the contents of Shemaiah's letter.

Jeremiah's response is consistent and predictable. Shemaiah (and anyone else who dares to lie in YHWH's name) will not be beneficiaries of the promises delivered in verses 10-14.