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# From Prophet to Scribe: Jeremiah, Huldah and the Invention of the Book

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ACUMEN

## Chapter 7

FROM PROPHET TO SCRIBE: JEREMIAH, HULDAH AND  
THE INVENTION OF THE BOOK

Thomas Römer

German historical-critical exegesis coined the term *Schriftprophet* to distinguish prophets whose names are attached to books (the three major and the twelve minor prophets) from prophets who only appear in narratives (Elijah, Elisha, etc.). The notion of *Schriftprophet* also implied that prophetic books were written by the prophets themselves or by their immediate disciples. This concept is still current in many Anglo-Saxon commentaries and also in the recent German commentary of W. H. Schmidt (2008). In the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, one finds indeed stories where God orders a prophet to write. Isaiah must write on a tablet or on a cylinder-seal (לְגַלִּי, Isa. 3:25,<sup>1</sup> a rather enigmatic expression). Later, he is told to write “this” (probably the following oracles) on a tablet (לְטַבֵּל) and inscribe it in a scroll (סֵפֶר, Isa. 30:8),<sup>2</sup> in order to guarantee a permanent validity to the prophetic word. Habakkuk is ordered to put in writing a vision (לְחַזֵּק cf. חֲזוֹן in 1.1) and to “make it plain” (Hab. 2:2).<sup>3</sup> The prophet Jeremiah is by far the most prolific “writer” among the prophets. In Jeremiah 29, he writes a *sepher* for the Babylonian golah and a deed of purchase in 32:10, 12, 44 (*sepher*). In 30:2 he is obliged to copy onto a scroll all the words Yhwh has spoken to him. Jeremiah 25:13 (MT) again mentions divine words written in a book, addressed via the prophet to all the people; these are the words addressed to the nations that in the LXX immediately follow this verse. Jeremiah 51:60 identifies Jeremiah as the author of a book<sup>4</sup> containing oracles uttered against Babylon, and, finally, Jeremiah 36 (see also 54:1) describes in detail the making of a scroll, its destruction and its replacement by a new edition (see below).

1. This rare term is not attested elsewhere except in Ezra 3:25.

2. This might rather mean an inscription on a wall or a stela.

3. כֹּחֵן is not entirely clear (see Deut. 1:5 and the discussion of the meaning of the word: “explain,” “interpret” or simply “pronounce,” or even “engrave”; cf. Peritt (1990: 22).

4. The term “book” means indeed a scroll (*sepher*).

How do we explain this insistence on the “writing” prophet or scribe in the book of Jeremiah? It is interesting to note that in the Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b.15a) Jeremiah is the only one among the Latter Prophets to have written books, his own book as well as Lamentations and Kings. The book of Isaiah is attributed to King Hezekiah and his assistants, and Ezekiel and the Twelve to the “men of the Great Assembly”. The close association between Jeremiah and books of Kings is very important for the understanding of the narrative in Jeremiah 36. The insistence on the prophet as the “author” of a book might be explained against the background of a juxtaposition of the figure of Jeremiah with the figure of Moses.

## MOSES AND JEREMIAH: FIRST AND LAST PROPHETS OF YHWH

In Deuteronomy 18:15-19, Moses is presented as the first prophet of Yhwh, a prophet who will be followed by others:

Yhwh your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet ... Yhwh said to me ... “I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command. Anyone who does not heed the words that the prophet shall speak in my name, I myself will hold accountable”.

This passage can be deemed “deuteronomistic” because it conveys the notion of prophets constantly sent by Yhwh to exhort Israel to keep the divine commands (Nihan 2007). The theme runs throughout the Deuteronomistic History and culminates in 2 Kings 17 with the explanation of the fall of Samaria as the result of the rejection of the prophets of Yhwh.

Likewise Deuteronomy–Kings, the book of Jeremiah is also marked by several deuteronomistic redactions (Curtis and Römer 1997; Maier 2002; Sharp 2003), a phenomenon that provides a social-historical context for the linkage of the figures of Moses and Jeremiah, from Jeremiah 1 onwards. It has often been observed that the closest parallel to Jeremiah’s vocation in 1:4-9 is the call of Moses in Exodus 3. In this very report of Jeremiah’s calling the announcement in Deuteronomy 18:18 of a prophet to come after Moses is applied to Jeremiah in 1:7, 9.

Deuteronomy 18:18	Jeremiah 1	
וְדַבַּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוֶּנּוּ	וְאֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר אֲצַוֶּךָ תְּדַבֵּר	v. 7
נְתַתִּי דְבַרִּי בְּפִיךָ	נְתַתִּי דְבַרִּי בְּפִיךָ	v. 9

The root שָׁלַח in Jeremiah 1.7 introduces the theme of the sending of prophets of Yhwh that appears in Jeremiah 7:25, 14:14; 23:21; 25:4; 26:5; 28:9; 35:15; 44:4. According to 2 Kings 17:13-15, Yhwh constantly sent his servants, the prophets, to warn his people and call them to repentance—just as Jeremiah does throughout his book. Jeremiah is in fact a deuteronomistic prophet because he calls (Deut. 18:19) to be heard, but without receiving a favourable response from his audience. The fact that the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon occur during his lifetime proves that the deuteronomistic redactors considered him as the last prophet, since the judgment that had been proclaimed has now taken place. This idea is confirmed elsewhere in the identical conclusions of the books of Kings and Jeremiah (2 Kgs 25 // Jer. 52). As Lohfink has observed (Lohfink 1995: 312–82), this identical conclusion is a clue from the redactors that the books of Kings and Jeremiah should be understood, and read, together. The link between Moses and Jeremiah is also reinforced by the themes of books and writing.

#### MOSES, JEREMIAH AND THE PRODUCTION OF BOOKS

There is something of a consensus that the epitaph of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy 34:10–12 was conceived as a correction of Deuteronomy 18 and thus belongs to a later redactional layer, probably to a Pentateuchal redaction that aims at fostering the coherence of the Torah (Schmid 2007: 183–97):

10 Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom Yhwh knew face to face. 11 He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that Yhwh sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, 12 and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Here, Moses is not only the first prophet like in Deuteronomy 18, he is also a man of God without equal, above all the other prophets (in Deut. 34:10–12 he performs signs and wonders normally worked by Yhwh). A similar concept is found in Numbers 12:6–8 where Moses is expressly distinguished from “ordinary” prophets, described as a direct recipient of the divine word (God speaks to him “face-to-face”) and Yhwh’s chancellor (Römer 2007). The death of this incomparable mediator outside the promised land is simultaneously the birth of the Torah. Moses’ connection with the Torah and its writing down is foreshadowed in Exodus 17:14 where he records the victory over Amalek as a memorial (זִכְרוֹן) and puts it in the “ears” of Joshua. This episode prepares for the opening of the book of Joshua where Moses’ successor is exhorted to “observe to act according to all the Torah that Moses my servant commanded ... This book of the law

shall not depart out of your mouth ...” (Josh. 1:7–8). The entire collection of the Latter Prophets is thus placed under the authority of the Torah whose writing down by Moses is affirmed in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy (28:58; 29:19–20, 26; 30:10; 31:9, 19). Deuteronomy 31:24 even claims that Moses wrote “down in a book the words of this law to the very end”. The expressions “Torah of Moses” or “book of the Torah of Moses”, which originally referred to Deuteronomy only (2 Kgs 14:6 quotes Deut. 24:16) are found from Joshua to Josiah (Josh. 1:8; 8:31; 23:6; 1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 14:6; 23:25) and at the end of the *Prophets* in Mal. 3:22. The (re)discovery and reading of the book of the law make Josiah the best of all the kings for the redactors of 2 Kings 22–23: “Before him there was no king like him, who turned to Yhwh with all his heart, with all his soul, and with all his might, according to all the Law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him” (2 Kgs 23:25 cf. Deut. 6:5).

Josiah is the only king who entirely respects the Torah of Moses (2 Kgs 23:25 is the only text in the Hebrew Bible that repeats word for word the four anthropological terms of Deut. 6:5). Contrary to the “law of the king” in Deuteronomy 17:14–20, Josiah does not have a copy of the law written, since he has the “original” at hand. Through reading the “book of the covenant” (2 Kgs 23:2) Josiah becomes the precursor of Ezra. It has often been noted that Josiah is presented here as the type of the ideal king submitting to the authority of the book, in contrast to the wicked king Jehoiakim who in Jeremiah 36 is also confronted with a book that he destroys (Isbell 1978; Venema 2004). The *sepher* in Jeremiah 36 is not, however, the same as in 2 Kings 22–23. It is a prophetic book, the “first edition” of Jeremiah’s oracles gathered in a scroll. In Jeremiah 36:2, Jeremiah receives the divine command to write such a book and he does so with the aid of a scribe, Baruch.

Recording oracles is not of itself unusual. In a second-millennium text from Mari we find a prophet who is looking for a scribe, with the following instruction: “send me a meticulous scribe who I can have write down the message Shamash has sent through me to the king” (ARM XXVI/1).<sup>5</sup> The Mari text presupposes an important geographical distance between the prophet and the king, a distance not presupposed in the book of Jeremiah. According to chapters 7 (MT)<sup>6</sup> and 26, the prophet can proclaim his oracles in the Temple with no trouble and according to other passages he enjoys direct access to the king (Jer. 34:1–7). The *sepher* of Jeremiah 36 is not therefore a simple letter but rather, as we shall see, a substitute. In chapter 36 Jeremiah is neither a visionary (as in 1:4–9; 24) nor a messenger

5. Thanks are due to Jean-Marie Durand for pointing this text to me. Despite some differences, the writing of Neo-Assyrian oracles can also provide an interesting backdrop for Jer. 36.

6. The introduction in v. 1–2 that locates Jeremiah’s speech at the entrance of the Temple is missing in the LXX.

of divine oracles. He is the prototype of a "senior scribe" who dictates to another scribe the words to be written on a scroll.

#### THE BOOK AS SUBSTITUTE IN 2 KINGS 22–23 AND IN JEREMIAH 36

As already demonstrated by B. Diebner and Claudia Nauerth (1984), the story of the discovery of the scroll in 2 Kings 22 reflects a legendary motif (*Buchauffindungslegende*) very popular since antiquity. In order to legitimate antiquity or the divine origin of writings that often contain attempts at modification of an established order, old documents that order these changes exactly are "discovered", hidden in sanctuaries or elsewhere.

The literary function of the book-finding motif can equally be set in the context of royal inscription on sanctuary buildings, notably those of the Neo-Babylonian period. The inscriptions of Nabonidus, the great builder on behalf of Shamash and Sin, describe especially the rediscovery of the foundation stone that allowed the building to be reconstructed according to the will of the gods:

A king from ancient times had looked for the foundation, but not found it. He had, on his own initiative, had a temple built for Shamash ... that did not correspond to that which suited the deity.

The king therefore sent some experts to seek the foundation:

Search for the ancient foundation ... the group of experts saw the ancient foundation and said to me "I have seen the ancient foundation ... rejoicing, I put the foundations on the ancient foundation."  
(Ebabbar Cylindre from Sippar)<sup>7</sup>

In the text of Nabonidus, the discovery of the ancient foundation stone enabled a "reform", that is, the construction of a new sanctuary for Shamash. This motif is taken up and transformed in 2 Kings 22–23: instead of the foundation stone, a *sepher* is found. The book becomes a substitute for the temple. 2 Kings 23 records, in effect, that Josiah emptied the temple of all the statues and other cultic objects in order to replace them with the reading of the book. The temple thus becomes a "proto-synagogue", the book replacing the sanctuary.

But the book also replaces the prophet. Jeremiah 36 begins in an astonishing way: instead of being called to convey the divine exhortations to the people, as on many other occasions, Yhwh tells the prophet to write down all the words he had spoken to him since the days of Josiah (v. 2). These

7. Translation inspired by the German translation of Schaudig (2001: 392).

words are intended to bring about a conversion on the part of the inhabitants of Judah. A similar situation arises in chapter 26, except that here Jeremiah addresses the audience directly.

#### Jeremiah 26

2 Thus 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.

3 It 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.

#### Jeremiah 36

2 Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today.

3 It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin.

The parallels suggest that the scroll has taken the place of the freely spoken prophetic word. The chronological note "since the days of Josiah" in 36:2 is perhaps a hint to the other book found during the reign of this exemplary king. After the Torah of Moses, Jeremiah 36 relates the birth of another scroll that could represent the nucleus of the Prophets. The connection of 2 Kings 22–23 and Jeremiah 36 would thus represent a first attempt to consider and to define the relationship between the Law of Moses and the Prophets.

Let us return to chapter 36. Jeremiah cannot address the people directly any more. Baruch and the book take his place. The audience is told that Jeremiah is "prevented" (אני עצור). The passive form of עצור is found again in Jeremiah 33:1 and 39:15, and in both cases it is a matter of the prophet being imprisoned during the siege of the city. Does chapter 36 therefore allude to the prophet's fate? In any case, Jeremiah cannot reach the king except through the scribe and the book, and when Jehoiakim, unlike Josiah, burns the book, a new edition is produced, with the help of Baruch (the conclusion of chapter 36 no doubt reflects the editing of the prophetic scroll in its various stages). It is thus not surprising that, having been replaced by scribe and book, Jeremiah vanishes now from his book. The penultimate chapter according to the Greek order (McKane 1996: 106–109; Fischer 2005: 457–60) contains an oracle of consolation for Baruch who in some way becomes the successor of the prophet (Jer. 45). In this somewhat complicated text, Jeremiah transfers his abilities to Baruch himself, who receives a divine oracle similar to the one given to Jeremiah when he was first called.

Jeremiah 1:10

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down [לְנַחֵשׁ וְלִנְתּוֹץ], to destroy and to overthrow [וְלִהְרֹס וְלִהְרַס], to build and to plant [וְלִבְנוֹת וְלִנְטוֹעַ].

Jeremiah 45:4

Thus says Yhwh: I am going to break down what I have built [וְאֲשַׁר־בְּנִיתִי אֲנִי הָרִס], and pluck up what I have planted [וְאֶת־אֲשַׁר־נִטַּעְתִּי אֲנִי נֶחֱשׁ]—that is, the whole land.

When Jeremiah is taken by force to Egypt, it is Baruch who must go to every place (Jer. 45:5) to spread the word of judgment. In the Greek, Jeremiah 45 is followed immediately by the narration of the destruction of Jerusalem without any mention of Jerusalem. Hence, the book of Jeremiah is revealed as a book of transition, from the vision and the oracle to the prophetic book. From then on, the prophet cannot exist without the book, an idea equally conveyed in the episode of the prophetess Huldah.

#### NO PROPHETESS WITH A BOOK: THE CASE OF HULDAH

The consultation of Huldah by Josiah's envoys has astonished more than one commentator. Why did the officials have to seek out the prophetess after the king had already perfectly understood the words of the divine book? There is no doubt that Near Eastern kings consulted prophets before military operations or other major decisions (e.g. see the very instructive story of 1 Kgs 22; for other consultations, see 1 Sam. 9:8-10; Ezek. 20:1-2; Zech. 7:3). However, in 2 Kings 22, the prophetess is not consulted until after the king has commented on the content of the book, a commentary that strongly recalls the oracles of Jeremiah:

2 Kings

Great is the wrath of Yhwh that is kindled against us, because our ancestors did not obey the words of this book, to do according to all that is written. (22:13)

Jeremiah

Great is the anger and wrath that Yhwh has pronounced against this people. (36:7)

your ancestors ... refused to heed my words ... they have broken the covenant that I made with their ancestors ... but they did not hear.<sup>8</sup>

8. This passage is missing in the Greek. Huldah confirms Jeremiah's interpretation and speaks as if she was Jeremiah.

2 Kings

Thus says Yhwh: I will indeed bring disaster on this place and on its inhabitants—all the words of the book that the king of Judah has read. (22:16)

Jeremiah

Therefore thus says the Lord Yhwh: My anger and my wrath shall be poured out *on this place... it will burn and not be quenched.* (7:20)

Because they have abandoned me and have made offerings to other gods, so that they have provoked me to anger with all the work of their hands, therefore my wrath will be kindled *against this place*, and *it will not be quenched.* (22:17)

Because the people have forsaken me, and have profaned this place by making offerings in it to other gods ... (19:4)

... they have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. (1:16)

In 2 Kings 22 and in the parallel in 2 Chronicles 34, Huldah is no autonomous prophet. She is the interpreter of a book, a transformation that may be reflected in the name "Huldah" (even if this is speculative). It occurs only in these two passages, and means "mole" (Noth 1966: 230), a rather inappropriate name for a prophet who is also a seer (חֹזֵן), even if Greek seers are sometimes presented as blind. But it makes some sense in the light of other prophets consulted in the Bible. Balaam, engaged by Balak to curse the Israelites, receives the divine response in dreams (Num. 22), while Micaiah ben Imlah sees a vision of the divine council that allows him to defend his negative reply on the possibility of military victory. Numbers 12:6-8 describes in a general way how Yhwh communicates with the prophets—by dreams and visions. Huldah, the "non-seer" bases her words on the book. Her first oracle, as we have seen, is a "targum" on the royal interpretation of the book that has been found. Her second, which concerns the individual fate of Josiah, goes beyond the content of the book and is tinged with a certain ambiguity. According to the criteria established in Deuteronomy 18:21-22, she should be labelled a false prophet since Josiah was, for obscure reasons, killed at Megiddo by the king of Egypt (2 Kgs 23:29) instead of dying in peace (בְּשָׁלוֹם; 2 Kgs 22:20). What this prophecy means is not clear; it needs interpretation, and that is exactly what comes in 2 Kings 24–25: the בְּשָׁלוֹם signifies that Yhwh spares the pious king the spectacle of Jerusalem's destruction. Read against Jer. 36, Josiah's death "in peace" is the opposite of the oracle of doom concerning Jehoiakim, whose body will be deprived of burial (36:30-31), unless we can go further with Françoise Smyth and see Josiah's death announcing also the peaceful passing away of kingship (Smyth 2000). Once he has cleared the temple to make room for the reading of the scroll, the king, the traditional mediator

between God and humans, becomes dispensable. The king is dead, long live the book!

One final path needs exploring. If, as we have suggested, the two books in 2 Kings 22 and Jeremiah 36 indeed reflect the relation between the Torah and the Prophets, Huldah's relation to the Torah of Moses in 2 Kings 22 may belong to the same attempt to articulate *Torah* and *Nebiim*. In the canonical outlook of Judaism, the *Nebiim* are not autonomous. They complete and interpret the Torah. Huldah could represent this new definition of the Prophets within the deuteronomic milieu.

#### SCRIBES AND BOOKS IN JUDAH AND IN THE PERSIAN-ERA GOLAH

For the Talmud (*Baba bathra* 12a), prophecy was taken away from the prophets after the destruction of the temple to be handed over to the wise. This is the notion of the end of prophecy at the Persian period. The allusion to the wise men refers to the first prophetic scrolls. The formation of the collection of the *Nebiim* could be seen as the reaction of the intelligentsia in charge of the affairs of the province of Yehud and of the Babylonian Diaspora against a charismatic and nationalistic prophecy during the Persian era. The passages in some prophetic books that present ideological and stylistic similarities with the Deuteronomic History would have been conceived as supplements to this History. They should be understood as part of a deuteronomic library. This is likely for Jeremiah, probable for Hosea, possible for Micah, Zephaniah and Nahum (Albertz 2003; Wöhrle 2006).<sup>9</sup>

One may also ask if Ezekiel, Haggai and proto-Zechariah originated in priestly milieus. Historical-critical exegesis used to postulate a particular milieu of production for each prophetic book. In light of the economic and demographic limitations in Persian Yehud, this hypothesis is quite untenable. The production of the Prophets and possibly also of the Torah should be attributed to a narrow circle of *literati* who expressed a range of theological notions, sometimes contrary notions, in different styles (Ben Zvi 2004). Nevertheless, one should admit that "the wide range of interest reflected in the prophetic scrolls themselves and the differences in their composition ... make it necessary to think in terms of more than one canonizing process" (Davies 1998: 115). Are two milieus, lay and priestly, sufficient for the prophetic canon and then should one or several specifically

9. The case of Isaiah is as complicated as it is interesting since 2 Kgs 18–20 (// Isa. 36–39) connect the prophet and his book (Isa. 1–35\*) to the Deuteronomic History. The addition of Isa. 40–55 and 56ss corresponds doubtlessly to a moment when the all the prophetic scrolls were gathered as the counterpart of the Joshua-Kings collection.

"prophetic" groups be envisaged? Joshua 1:8 places the *Nebiim* under 'Moses' patronage (the Torah) while on the other end of the *Nebiim*, Malachi 3:22 announces the return of Elijah in the eschatological perspective of the day of Yhwh. Still, this eschatological outlook remains linked to Moses. Hence, the prophets and their books can only be read as the sequel of the 'Torah as 2 Kings 22 and Jeremiah 36 suggest.

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