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At the potter's workshop. Jeremiah 18:1–12: A narrative that reveals more than meets the eye

Author:
Wilhelm J. Wessels[1]

Affiliation:
[1]Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies, College of Human Sciences, University of South Africa, Pretoria, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Wilhelm Wessels,
wessewj@telkomsa.net

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Jeremiah 18:1–12 is a favourite passage often quoted and preached from pulpits. This prose passage however is much more complicated than taken at the face level. A one-dimensional reading misses the intricacies of these verses. The potter scene in verses 1–4 has its first application in verses 5–6 and again in verses 11–12. It is a question how verses 7–10 relate to the other sections in this narrative. The argument presented in this article is that verses 18:7–10 present a different theological viewpoint and serves to clarify what is to be understood what שׁוּב in verse 4 implies in real terms. This illustrates that the biblical text is organic and not static, and shows instances of ongoing interpretation within the text itself.

Contribution: This article offers original research in the field of biblical studies, more specifically in the field of the Old Testament. This is in line with the scope of *HTS Theological Studies*. The article aims at indicating that detail textual analysis reveals the complexity of the text tradition we are dealing with.

Keywords: Jeremiah 18:1–12; Jeremiah; potter narrative; Israel; Judah; nation; Yahweh; turn (repent).

Introduction

The narrative of the potter in Jeremiah 18:1–12 is one of the most known, loved and quoted passages.[1] Upon closer reading and analysis of Jeremiah 18:1–12, I have realised that the text is much more complicated than at face value. The research done on reading this passage has also shown that there are as usual many differing views and proposals on how to understand this passage. Subsection 18:7–10 seems to be the cause of disagreement. The main question is how these verses relate to 18:1–6. Most of the interpreters attempt to argue that 7–10 relate to 1–6 in one way or the other. Some of these suggestions will be entertained later in the article again. The extreme view is to argue that verses 7–10 do not relate to 1–6 at all, but that these verses offer a subsequent message to Judah (Frese 2013:371–388). The observations mentioned in this paragraph will be discussed in greater detail at a later stage in this article.

In the South African context, and I also suppose that in most religious communities on the globe, debates are raging about the interpretation of the biblical text. In some instances, the whole issue threatens to result in church disunion and splitting. In many instances, ordinary Bible readers take the biblical text at face value that simply should be read attentively to discover the inherent truths. However, a more analytical reading of the biblical text shows many discrepancies, even many voices, and even some contradictory voices. The truth of the matter is that people over many centuries have sincerely engaged with the biblical text in an attempt to understand what God wants to communicate to them in their context.

There will always be tension between the ordinary faithful reader of the Bible and those whose life's mission is to study the biblical text intensively as an academic endeavour (cf. Duvall & Hays 2005:21).[2] This is a healthy tension provided that both these parties' accept one another's sincerity in seeking the best possible understanding of the biblical text. Scientific text analysis is a rational endeavour and needed. On the other hand, ordinary Bible readers allow for an emotive experience when reading the Bible, a matter that should not be degraded as inferior. However, reading the Bible does not exclude the rational aspect of reading and understanding. We should acknowledge this aspect, which means that rationality cannot be ruled out in any form of engagement with the Bible (cf. Grey 2008:19–20). The main differences between the two approaches are perhaps just a matter

1.A Google search will show the popularity of sermons on the potter passage in Jeremiah 18.

2.Duvall and Hays (2005:19–21) aptly describe the difference between what they call an '*intuitive or feels-right approach*' and an approach that not only promotes a methodology that takes the context of the biblical text seriously, but is also interested in the relevance of the text for today.

of degree of rationality and allowing for emotive (inspirational) experiences. Between these two mentioned approaches lies the 'truth', which in all honestly can never fully be captured. Doubting one another's sincerity or thinking one superior to the other does not serve the 'truth', but an attitude of openness and willingness to listen to one another creates room for insight and understanding. Martin (2012:206) is adamant in his discussion of Jeremiah 18:1–12 that pastors cannot leave the work of engaging the text to professional theologians in the academy alone. It is a valid point as long as pastors have the skill and knowledge to analyse the text meticulously. It is also true that pastors and ministers most probably best understand the contextual needs of congregants.

An approach focusing more on the rational and critical aspects of text analysis will result in more detailed text scrutiny. Such critical approaches will lead to questions regarding matters that are unclear, inconsistent and in some instances noticing discrepancies in the text. Research on the book of Jeremiah has, for instance, revealed instances where some text reinterpretation has taken place within the same Jeremiah text corpus. An example of this is Jeremiah 23:5–6, which has been reinterpreted in Jeremiah 33:15–16 (Wessels 1991:231–246). My view is that some form of text interpretation or clarification has also occurred in Jeremiah 18:1–12.

The idea of interpretation or even reinterpretation may be seen as a threat to the authenticity of the biblical text. I propose to argue that this, in turn, is proof that the biblical text is organic and not a static entity. What I mean is that in various contexts and even in different historical periods, biblical texts were read, interpreted and appropriated for their relevance. In the case of the Jeremiah text, there is ample evidence that custodians of the Jeremiah oracles collected, safeguarded and structured the Jeremiah material (McEntire 2015:91–92, 95–96). The custodians and scribes responsible for the collection and composition of the Jeremiah text we have in the Masoretic version did not purify the text or silenced the various voices and 'strands of interpretation' present in the Jeremiah material, but preserved it (cf. Carroll 1986:78–79; Sharp 2019:87–88). The book of Jeremiah is complex and its formation is difficult to determine (Troxel 2012:208).[3] Biddle (2004) remarks:

> [O]nly with great audacity would an interpreter of Jeremiah attempt to reconstruct a progression in Jeremiah's thought and preaching: the book is so clearly a compilation of materials from a variety of sources and perspectives. The editors had little interest in providing a clear chronology of Jeremiah's career. (p. 20)

What this adds up to is that we should treat the biblical text as an organic text, which has been interpreted through the ages of textual interpretation and appropriation in both the Jewish and various Christian traditions with their canons.

From preliminary observations, it seems that the passage in Jeremiah 18:1–12 might be an example of a text that reveals some phases of growth through interpretation and application. To be more specific, 18:1–4 is the sign-act where the prophet Jeremiah is demanded by Yahweh to observe. The first application of this event is 18:5–6 with communication to Jeremiah that Israel is in the hands of Yahweh as the clay is in the hand of the potter. This is followed by verses 7–10 that on the surface do not seem to relate directly to the foregoing four or even six verses. The second application of the sign-act at the potter's house in 18:11–12 applies to Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. I will argue that the people of Judah and Jerusalem are the audience to which Jeremiah is supposed to convey what he has observed at the potter's house, and understood Yahweh wants to convey to Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem.

With regard to 18:7–10, I propose that these verses seem to clarify how the 'reworking' (cf. verse 4) of Judah can be accomplished. Jeremiah 18:7–10 not only clarifies the idea of reworking, but also broadens to scope to include nations and kingdoms. The organic text of 18:1–12, therefore, consists of components of application (verses 5–6 and 11–12), as well as clarification or interpretation (verses 7–10).

Analysis of Jeremiah 18:1–12

Jeremiah 18:1–12 forms part of a block of material Jeremiah 18:1–20:18. This unit can be subdivided into 18:1–23 and 19:1–20:18, both introduced with pottery narratives and both consist of prose and poetic sections (Allen 2008:212). Jeremiah 18:1–12 is in prose and serves as an introduction to the first main section (Stulman 1999:56). The main motif of 18:1–12 is the exercise of divine power against Israel (Allen 2008:212).

Jeremiah 18:1–4

Jeremiah 18 is introduced by the formula הַדָּבָר אֲשֶׁר הָיָה אֶל־יִרְמְיָהוּ that also occurs in 7:1, 11:1, 21:1, 30:1, 32:1, 34:1, 34:8, 35:1, 40:1 and 44:1. In Jeremiah 1–25, 7:1, 11:1, 18:1 and 21:1 all introduce prose passages. Verse 2 commences with a Qal imperative masculine of the verb קום, urging the prophets to come in motion to go down to the potter's workshop. What is interesting is that Jeremiah is to observe what the potter is doing, but the Hi verb is that Yahweh will 'cause (let) him to hear' his words. One would have expected the verb 'to see'. Verse 3 states that Jeremiah obeyed and found the potter working at his wheel.

Verse 4 is quite significant. The verse starts with a waw consecutive and the Ni form of the verb שׁחת [to be marred]. The emphasis is therefore on the fact that the article or object the potter was making was spoiled. The potter was forming the vessel from clay that was in his hand when it turned out to be spoiled. This does not imply that the clay as such was of inferior quality, but the intended or envisaged shape it was to take on did not transpire.

The next main section of the verse is introduced by a waw consecutive, followed by a third- person Qal perfect verb 'to turn', (שׁוב), or in this context 'to rework'. The emphasis is on the reworking of the clay. This verb is then followed by another verb (waw consecutive plus third-person Qal

3.For a comprehensive discussion of the complexity and formation of the book of Jeremiah, see Römer (2009:168–183) and Thelle (2009:184–207).

imperfect of the verb עשׂה with a third-person masculine singular suffix). It is stated that the potter reworked (the clay) and made another (אַחֵר) vessel or object according to what he as the potter regarded fitting in his view to fabricate.

To recap, Jeremiah 18:1–4 sketches the scene of Jeremiah commanded by Yahweh to go down to the potter's house to receive a message from Yahweh. By observing, Jeremiah is supposed to learn what Yahweh wants to communicate to his people. Jeremiah observes the normal process of a potter at work, creating an object he envisaged. As observed, verse 4 is crucial in the whole event, for the creation the potter anticipated to produce was not going according to plan, therefore the potter started over to reshape the clay to fabricate another vessel, which was to his liking (as he envisioned it to be or as the potter seemed fit to make). This verse communicated that the potter can rework and reshape the clay to create another vessel. Besides the fact of the ability and willingness of the potter to create something new, it should also be acknowledged that the creation of a clay object can flop. This, however, is not the end, and something new can be created from the same clay. At the end of verse 4, the Masoretic Text (MT) has a *petucha*; therefore, there is a paragraph break in the narrative.

Jeremiah 18:5–6

Verse 5 is introduced with a waw consecutive, followed by the messenger formula. It is stated that the message is to a first-person singular, in the context, Jeremiah. Verse 6 follows on verse 5 with an interrogative particle and a preposition particle כְּ attached to the noun with article (הַכְיוֹצֵר). The verb יכל first-person singular Qal imperfect has Yahweh as a subject. This verb is followed by an infinitive construct followed by a second-person masculine plural as an object. The object is then clarified as being the house of Israel. An interjection particle that calls for attention introduces the next clause again with a preposition כְּ with an article attached to the noun חֹמֶר (clay). The front position of the noun places the focus in this clause on the clay that is in comparison with the pronoun second-person masculine plural, explained to be the house of Israel. The comparison is detailed by indicating that as the clay is in the hand of the potter, so is the house of Israel in the hand of the first-person singular subject, Yahweh.

To recap, Jeremiah 18:5–6 seems to be the immediate application of the events that have transpired in 18:1–4. In these verses, the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah asking: 'Can I not do with you Israel similar as the potter did with the clay?' The answer to this rhetorical question is obvious, yes He can. Verse 6 then continues by Yahweh stating: 'As the clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hands Israel'. At the end of verse 6, the MT has a *setuma*, indicating a pause in the thought narrative.

Jeremiah 18:7–10

Following verses 5–6, verses 7–10 seem to belong together. Jeremiah 18:7–10 can be subdivided into 7–8 and 9–10, with each of these subsections ending with a *setuma*. These two subsections are similar in structure. Verse 7 and verse 9 both introduce the particular sections with the noun רֶגַע, meaning a moment or an instant. This noun in both verses is followed by a first-person singular Pi imperfect form of the verb דבר 'to speak or declare', followed by the object, in both cases concerning a nation or a kingdom. It should be noted that verse 7 does not commence with a waw consecutive that would indicate the continuation of the narrative.

In verse 7, three infinitive construct verbs follow to indicate negative consequences: to plcuk up or uproot (Qal infinitive construct of נתשׁ), to break down or tear down (Qal infinitive construct of נתץ) and to destroy or exterminate (Hi infinitive construct of אבד).

In verse 9, two infinitive construct verbs follow to indicate positive consequences: to build up (Qal infinitive construct of בנה) and to plant (Qal infinitive construct of נטע).

The similarity is that style is continued in both verses 8 and 10 with the statement, 'but if …'. However, what follows in verses 8 and 10 are contrasting statements following on the negative announcement in verse 7 and the positive pronouncement in verse 9.

Verse 8 commences with the proviso that if this nation 'turns' (שׁוב) from its evil (רָעָה), the nation concerning that Yahweh has spoken of, then Yahweh will regret or relent (first-person singular Ni perfect verb plus preposition וְנָחַמְתִּי עַל־) the disaster or harm he has devised or planned (חָשַׁבְתִּי) to bring on this nation. Verse 8 makes it clear that there is a way to change the outcome of the destructive intent of Yahweh as pronounced in this verse.

The key is that the nation should be willing to turn away from its evil doings. The punishment is conditional and therefore avoidable. It is interesting to observe that verse 8 now only mentions the nation and not the kingdom, as was the case in verse 7.

Verse 10. Whereas verse 7 announces the possibility of total annihilation, verse 8 leaves the possibility open for a positive outcome if a particular condition is met. In contrast, the announcement of a constructive outcome in verse 9 (to build and plant) is followed by a negative consequence in verse 10. It is stated that Yahweh will regret or relent the good he intended doing for the nation if the nation does what is evil in his sight (eyes) and disobey him.

Verses 7–10 are a general statement to an unidentified nation or kingdom. It is important to note that Yahweh is now speaking in direct speech (first-person singular verbs). The mention of a nation (no definite article) and a kingdom is not specific, rather neutral, although one can argue from the broader context that Israel is also implied here (cf. verse 6).

Further research is needed on the use of the terminology to uproot, to tear down and to destroy used in verse 7. The variation of the terminology 'to build up' and 'to plant' used in verse 9 also needs further investigation. These are all verbs used elsewhere in the book of Jeremiah as well. The same sequence and form of the two verbs also occur in Jeremiah 1:10 (to build and to plant), as well as 31:28. This last mentioned verse, similar to 1:10, includes all of these verbs, both the negative and positive ones. Variations of some of these verbs are used in 24:6, 32:41, 42:10 and 45:4.

In sum, an interesting observation in 18:7–10 is that Yahweh can be swayed or moved to change his intended action on grounds of how people respond to the proclaimed prophetic word. The clay metaphor does not allow it to happen; the clay in verses 1–4 is at the mercy of the potter, and so is Israel according to the application in 18:5–6. Verses 7–10 communicate that people can change the outcome of a prophetic announcement of either doom or good fortune. In terms of what prophecy implies, this means that the future implications of a prophetic proclamation will be determined by either a positive or a negative response to Yahweh's word.

The possibility should be investigated whether verses 7–10 are a secondary addition to the symbolic act at the potter's house and clay metaphor in 18:1–4 and the application in 18:5–6 or a clarifying expansion. The possible link with verses 1–4 is perhaps the fact that the potter has the freedom to do with the clay whatever he wants. He can shape it according to his imagined creation or, as verse 4 has made clear, mould it and reshape it to an object of his liking. Yahweh, similar to the potter, has the freedom and the ability to do with the clay and by implication with Israel as he wishes. Verses 7–10 emphasise Yahweh's freedom to act as he wishes to do by either destructing a nation or a kingdom or building it. This also applies to Israel. It emphasises his sovereignty over nations, kingdoms and people, and that includes Israel. The fact remains that 18:7–10 expresses in general terms what Yahweh can do and has a broader application than just Israel. Another possible link to 18:1–4 is the use of the verb 'to turn' (שׁוּב) or in the context in verse 4 'to rework'; this verb is also used in verse 8 where the nation should 'turn' away from evil doings. The difference is that the potter, who in verse 6 is understood to be Yahweh, is the one doing the 'reworking', whilst in verse 8 the people of the nation should do the 'turning'.

Jeremiah 18:11–12

Verses 11–12, as was the case in 18:5–6, have the prophet speaking the words he received from Yahweh. Verse 11 commences with a conjunction particle and an adverb 'now' (עַתָּה). The waw links what is about to come in verses 11–12 to the previous four verses, 18:7–10. The introductory adverb is followed by an imperative form of the verb 'to say', instructing the prophet to address the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jeremiah 18:6 referred to Israel, 18:7 to a nation and a kingdom, and 18:9 to a nation. Jeremiah 18:11 makes it explicit that those who should adhere to what the prophet has to say in service of Yahweh are the people of Judah and in particular the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The prophetic formula introduces what Yahweh has to say. The interjection particle (הִנֵּה) functions as an appeal to pay attention to the seriousness of the message that is about to follow: Look, I (first-person singular suffix) am he who is creating (Qal participle masculine singular of the verb 'to form, shape or create' יצר) evil or disaster against you (third-person plural suffix). The participle form of the verb יצר is used in 18:1–4 as a noun for the potter. This is followed by another Qal participle form of the verb 'to devise' (חשׁב). He is devising an evil or disastrous plan against the Judeans and the people of Jerusalem. This is noticeably a threatening message to the addressees. It seems that this part of the message links back to verse 7, echoing the fact that Yahweh can decide to act destructively.

The second part of the prophetic message aimed at the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem is a call for every person to turn away from their evil conduct (literally 'every person from his evil way') and to amend (literally 'make good' – Hi imperative masculine plural form of the verb יטב) their conducts (ways) and their doings (deeds). This section of the message resembles verse 8 where the same verb 'to turn' (שׁוּב) was used, indicating that Yahweh will respond positively to an act of turning away from the wrong (evil רַע) people were doing. This latter part of verse 11, calling the people to mend their ways and deeds, therefore, implies that Yahweh will respond positively and forgive people if the call to turn is heeded.

Verse 12 reveals the response of the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They respond by saying, the prophet quoting them: 'hopelessness or it is hopeless' (Ni participle masculine singular of the verb יאשׁ). This is followed by כִּי, indicating emphasis – indeed! – we will follow (first-person imperfect plural of the verb הלך) our own ideas (intentions or thoughts), and everyone will do according to the stubbornness of their evil will (literally heart). This means that they will continue living as they please and according to their judgement, though it may be wrong.

It seems that the Masoretes had a sense that the section in 18:1–12 consists of various subdivisions; therefore, there are a *petucha* at the end of verse 4 and a number of *setumas* at the end of verses 6, 8, 10 and 12.

Interpretation

Many researchers regard Jeremiah 18:1–12 as one of the Deuteronomistic prose passages that introduce main sections in Jeremiah 1–25. Bright (1965:lxxi) sees a resemblance in style to the Deuteronomic literature, but argues that the discourse 'is a style in its own right with peculiarities and distinctive expressions of its own'. It should therefore not be

regarded as 'Deuteronomistic'. Weippert (1973) also holds this view and refers to these passages as *Prosareden*. After looking into the style and vocabulary of this passage, Jones (1992) concludes:

> [*A*]t least authorship by an independent Deuteronomist is excluded, and the framework belongs firmly to the prose tradition. The elevated prose and parallelism is best explained as a form held in memory and therefore going back either to Jeremiah or one close to him, and this is supported by the relation to 1.10. (pp. 254–255)

It is not all clear that all these prose passages should be attributed to the Deuteronomistic redaction of Jeremiah, though perhaps to people who were exposed to or influenced by the dominant intellectual and literary Deuteronomic circles or as Allen (2008:9) states 'on the fringe of this tradition'.

Some of the issues in the interpretation of this passage have surfaced in the foregoing discussion. First is the understanding of verse 4. In general, the view is that the clay is inanimate and dependent on the potter (Frese 2013:381). Some scholars regard the clay as playing an important role in terms of quality and texture and having a 'will' (cf. Craigie, Kelley & Drinkard 1991:245; Holladay 1986:512; Huey 1993:181; Thompson 1980:433–434). This seems to be an over-interpretation of the sign-act and the metaphor, taking into account 7–10 where people's decisions play a role. If the clay plays an active role, then it will explain the actions of people to be able to 'turn' (שׁוּב) as stated in verses 7–10. The emphasis in 18:1–4 is on the potter who reshapes the same clay to form a new object, and not on the clay as such. Clearly, the issue of the clay as inanimate or bringing the quality of the clay in play will influence the decision whether or not it accommodates what is to follow in 7–10. Whereas the potter in verse 4 had to interact with clay, the symbolism of the narrative progresses to Yahweh's interaction with living humans (Rudolph 1968:122–123).

Some scholars regard 18:1–6 as comprising of a threat to Israel and proclamation of doom in reference to the spoiled clay and the emphasis on אַחֵר in verse 4. McKane (1986:422) who follows Theil in this regard promotes this view. Schmidt (2008:314) regards the process of reworking of the clay as indicating a threat to Israel. Jones (1992:255) is probably correct in saying that both judgement and hope are implied in that the marred clay is collapsed and a new satisfactory object is created. Verses 1–4 seem to emphasise the ability and freedom of the potter to do with the clay as he pleases. It also indicates that the potter's intention is to complete the process of shaping the object and to create an object that is to his liking.

Verses 5–6 are the first general application of what Jeremiah observed in 18:1–4. The potter in this application refers to Yahweh and the clay according to verse 6 to Israel. Schmidt (2008:314) understands verse 6 as a threat to Israel. Weiser (1969:153) regards the rhetorical question in verse 6 as a confirmation to Jeremiah of Yahweh's sovereignty, but to Israel a reprimand. Verse 6 states Yahweh's sovereignty over Israel in a more general fashion (Rudolph 1968:122). There is nothing *per se* negative in the rhetorical question, but an assertion that Yahweh can take the role of the potter and shape and, if necessary, reshape Israel (Fretheim 2002:271). Carroll (1986:372) views the metaphor and its application in verses 1–6 as positive, indicating hope for the future. The second part of verse 6 gives the assurance that Israel is like clay in Yahweh's hands. Yahweh has control of the present and future history of his people (Allen 2008:214). Theologically, one can conclude that Jeremiah 18:1–6 implies the sovereignty of Yahweh.

The second major issue is found in verses 7–10. As argued, syntactically there does not seem to be a continuance from verse 6 to verse 7. There is also a change to a first-person singular subject (Yahweh), stating in general terms what Yahweh can do. In verses 7 and 9, there is also a change in objects in that a nation and a kingdom are addressed and not Israel *per se* as in verse 6.

Schmidt (2008:315) states that 'An den Selfstberich (2–6) schliessen sich bedeutsame *Erweiterungen* (V. 7–10 mit Applikation V.11) an – als eine entfaltende Exegese mit erheblicher Tonverlagerung'. He continues by saying that Jeremiah 18:7–10 concerns a general reflection of Yahweh's universal action concerning judgement and salvation. This once again affirms Yahweh's universal sovereignty. Moberly (2013:123–125) offers an extensive discussion of the theological implications if Yahweh's willingness to change makes him dependent on humans' response. He, therefore, suggests that we should rather translate it as that he 'may' change his response to humans' actions. He continues by saying that 18:7–10 should be taken as a generalising declaration and not as a universal statement. There is clearly a bigger theological case at stake here, but it exceeds the scope of this article. What is clear from these verses is that Israel is now treated on an equal level as the nations. Allen (2008:213) regards verses 7–10 as a theological reflection that finds their application in verses 11–12. He calls it a novel interpretation of the potter event (Allen 2008:215).

Theologically, there also seems to be a different view promoted in these verses. Israel in verse 6 played no active role, but took the role of the clay that was in the hands of Yahweh. In verses 8 and 10, an active role is afforded to the nation and kingdom addressed in that they should 'turn' to change the outcome of Yahweh's response in the negative or the positive. As Biddle (2004:20) states: 'Jeremiah18:7–11 announces a fundamental theological principle – God responds to repentance'. In his discussion of these verses, Allen (2008:215) argues that this novel theological discourse is based on three suppositions. The first is knowledge of Jeremiah 1:10; the second is the application of creation imagery in the potter scene (רָצוֹי), which implies Yahweh's sovereign rule over the nations of the world (cf. also Fretheim 2002:271–272); and third, 'by right of creation Yahweh assigns

providential power to "anybody I deem appropriate" to have it (27:5; cf. 18:4)'. His first point is obvious, but the other two points stretch the argument somewhat, although the correspondence to creation vocabulary is present in both verses 4 and 11.

Some scholars simply ignore these observations and continue to interpret 7–10 as part of the ongoing narrative that commenced in 18:1 (cf. Bright 1965:125–126; Fretheim 2002:271). Frese (2013:373) on the other hand regards verses 7–10 as the introduction of a second idea, which is not directly related to 1–6. He argues for the unity of the narrative, but reasons that although 7-10 should be understood as complementary, it still serves the main point verses 1-11 promotes, namely a call to the people of Judah is call to repent. I agree with Frese that the emphasis is on the call to the people of Judah and Jerusalem to repent (turn - verse 11), but as explained, I regard 7–10 as clarifying how Yahweh's decision of destruction can be averted. In reality, humans should 'turn' towards Yahweh, and in his sovereignty, he will change his mind. In his sovereign control, Yahweh allows for human's possible actions (Allen 2012:214). Although it is not clear when this clarification section of 7–10 was made in respect to the potter-event narrative, the idea of repentance (שׁוּב) is not foreign to Jeremiah, but formed a key aspect of Jeremiah's preaching (cf. Biddle 2004:3; also Jones 1992:257).

Two other important issues in 18:7–10 to address are the use of the familiar set of verbs that occur several times in varied forms in the book of Jeremiah and the use of שׁוּב in combination with נחם (Ni). In verse 7, the verbs are 'to uproot, to tear down and to destroy'. The verbs 'build- up' and 'plant' are used in verse 9. Another point of difference with Frese is that he does not take cognisance of the formulaic repetition of the verbs we find in 1:10 and at several other places in the book of Jeremiah.

Attention should also be given to the use of the verb שׁוּב and in particular its usage in combination with the verb נחם (Ni). Lalleman-de Winkel (2000:85–373) made an extensive study of the use of שׁוּב in the books of Amos, Hosea and Jeremiah. He concludes that Jeremiah stands in the tradition of Amos and in particular Hosea when it comes to the meaning of שׁוּב. Lalleman-de Winkel (2000:162) indicates that in the pre-exilic period the verb שׁוּב meant repentance. He is of the view that the verb developed in Jeremiah in that it changed in meaning in the time of King Jehoiakim when it began to imply the 'return' from exile. This is however not what is implied in chapter 18. Lalleman-de Winkel (2000:163) has also noticed the resemblance between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy 30:1–10 in terms of Yahweh's positive response to Israel's 'return' and obedience of Yahweh. In Jeremiah, prophecy of salvation is conditional in that the people have to repent (שׁוּב) and be obedient to Yahweh. What is promoted in 18:7–10, therefore, is in line with Jeremiah's theological view of salvation. Obedience is the key to Jeremiah's theology of salvation, which implies adherence to Yahweh's covenant requirements and his subsequence grace shown as response to obedience. The concept of covenant in Jeremiah is further developed in the idea of a new covenant as mentioned in Jeremiah 31:31–34 (Brueggemann 2003:293; Lalleman-de Winkel 2000:204).

In an article on the relationship between שׁוּב (Qal) and נחם (Ni) in Jeremiah 18:1–10, Marsh and Domeris (2018:123) conclude that these two verbs should be understood from the covenantal context. From the frequent use of these terminologies within a relational context between Yahweh and his people, they draw a valid conclusion that it assumes a covenantal context. It is however somewhat problematic to assume that this is also the case in 18:7–10 where the objects Yahweh addresses are a nation and a kingdom in the general sense, not Israel in particular. Carroll (1986:372–373) finds the content of this passage idyllic and unreal and concludes that it changes Jeremiah to a prophet to the nations. Thus said, it remains true that Yahweh will relent or change his mind on condition that the objects repent (שׁוּב). As indicated, the idea that Yahweh will change his mind on condition of a certain response is not strange to Jeremiah's theological view that strongly relates to Northern Kingdom theology (Brueggemann 2003:177; Wilson 1984:236–237).

Rochester (2012:84–85) strongly criticises Carroll, McKane and Von Rad, blaming them 'that they fail to engage with the subtleties of the image and reduce it to a simple, flat stereotype that will not permit any development of surprise'. It all boils down how one treats the metaphoric language and whether the desire is to see 18:1–12 as a unified passage. My view is somewhat in between in that I regard the various components of the narrative as relating to each other. The final version has attempted using vocabulary to present a coherent narrative. The verb שׁוּב in verses 4, 8 and 11, variations of the root יצר in verses 4 (noun) and 11 (participle form of the verb), the noun רָעָה in verses 8, 10 and 11, adjective feminine of רַע in verses 11 and 12, and adjective masculine of רַע in verse 12 are examples of the keywords that support this argument. I agree with Rochester about the idea of development in that 7–10 seems to clarify how the שׁוּב in verse 4 is playing out in reality in the relationship between Yahweh and people. Verses 7–10, however, go beyond the scene metaphor by generalising the scope of Yahweh's engagement to people to include nations and kingdoms. This development could have been performed by Jeremiah or at a later stage in the process of the development of the narrative.

The second clear application of the potter scene is 18:11–12, which is now addressed to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Verse 11 follows the more traditional form of prophecy in that the prophet is instructed to address Yahweh's people on behalf of Yahweh. Syntactically, verse 11 is introduced with *we* (וְ) plus the introductory adverb עַתָּה, linking this verse either back to 18:7–10 or perhaps even to 18:1–6. The more obvious choice seems to be the link to 7–10. Allen (2008:216) states that in verse 11 'a deduction from the

theorizing of vv. 7–10 now appears'. Similarly, Fretheim (2002:272) regards 18:11 as the application of the general principles set out in verses 7–10. It is here applied to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Jeremiah 18:7-10 also serves to link verses1-4 and 5-6 to 11-12. There is movement from the potter scene (1–4) to the application to Israel in verses 5–6 and finally the more defined targets of the prophecy, the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (11–12). There is some similarity in vocabulary between 18:7–10 and verse 11, in particular the occurrence of verb שׁוב promoting the same theological idea as in 7–10, namely that the people of Judah could 'turn' their fate by their response of obedience.

Concluding suggestions

Jeremiah 18:6 is one of the most loved passages for believers. They find comfort in the idea that God's people are like clay in his hands and the belief that he is a loving and caring God. Very few, if any, will notice that 18:7–10 introduces a somewhat different view that humans play a part in the outcome of events, an idea not promoted in verse 6. Biblical scholars have to enrich the understanding of passages such as Jeremiah 18:1–12. Their research offers possible ways of understanding difficult linguistic and theological issues that are of great importance to assist our ongoing interpretation and application of text from pulpits and in public spaces.

I stated that we should regard the biblical text as an organic entity that in the process of its formation showed signs of interpretation and growth. This process, as far as Jeremiah is concerned, reached some form of finalisation in post-exilic times when scribes compiled and structured the book of Jeremiah. It is important to note that '… while the prophets lived and preached as critical events unfolded, the *books* that preserve their preaching were compiled and edited *after* the crises have ended' (Biddle 2004:20). Jeremiah 18:12 seems to be a response at a stage when it was clear that the people of Judah and Jerusalem did not respond positively to the prophetic message of 18:1–11. What we have in reality is the history of the Jeremiah text, most probably finalised in the Persian period (Römer 2009:171).

I propose that Jeremiah 18:1–12 concerned the people of Judah and Jerusalem as verse 11 indicates. The observation Jeremiah made at the potter's workshop was meant to be a message to the Judeans to 'turn' away from their evil ways back to obedience to Yahweh. This option to 'turn' was offered as an opportunity for them to change their fate. We learn from verse 12 that they did not respond positively to the prophetic message and the outcome would be to their detriment (cf. Schreiner 1981:114). From history, we know that the exile occurred because of their disobedience.

In the history of the formation of Jeremiah 18:1–12, a need arose to clarify how in reality the process of שׁוב (the verb used to indicate the reworking and reshaping of the clay in verse 4 by the potter) should take place. In Jeremiah 18:1–4 and the application in 5–6, the theological emphasis is on the sovereignty of Yahweh (cf. Brueggemann 1998:167; Frese 2013:374; McKane 1986:422). As sovereign, Yahweh has the freedom to act either negatively in terms of destruction or positively in terms of planting and building (cf. verses 8 and 10). However, humans should take responsibility by changing their ways and therefore receive one of the determined outcomes Yahweh has stated. The general clarification in 18:7–10 had implications not only for Israel and Judah, but also for nations and kingdoms (cf. Goldingay 2007:76–77; Lundbom 2010:54).

In the final text of Jeremiah in the Masoretic version, Jeremiah 18:1–12 is prose and serves as an introduction to a collection consisting of poetic and prose passages in section 18:12–20:18. Stulman (1999) says in this regard:

> [J]eremiah 18.1–12, introduces the cycle's dominant themes and redefines yet another of Judah's domain assumptions or first principles: Judah's status as chosen and blessed. Such insider-status, the text asserts, is not an unconditional claim. Because of persistent infidelity and recalcitrance, Judah has forfeited its privileged position and will face the fate once reserved for the nations. (p. 56)

The passage in 7–10 therefore not only served the purpose of clarifying how the שׁוב process referred to in verse 4 should be understood when appropriated in reality, but also stated in general that it applies to nations and kingdoms in general. As Stulman (cf. 1999:57) indicated, Israel has lost its privileged position; they are now a nation amongst other nations.

This clarifying section in 7–10 was also necessary to accommodate verse 11 where it was stated that the people of Judah and Jerusalem had to 'turn' to avoid Yahweh's punishment. It is not so important for the argument to determine precisely who was responsible for creating this prose passage. What I am arguing is that Jeremiah 18:1–12 reveals a process of organic growth. It is possible that Jeremiah's prophecy formed the basis of this passage and that people influenced by Deuteronomistic circles in the final instance composed the prose passage and placed it at its present position as an introductory passage to a larger collection 18:1–20:18.

If we are honest, reading and interpreting a biblical text today in a sense also contributes to the organic 'growth' of the text. Our reading, interpretation and application of texts are influenced by our context, presuppositions and ideologies. The best we can do is to admit that it is the case and then analyse the text to the best of our abilities with the tools available to do so. This, in essence, implies that meaning is never final, but an ongoing process of searching for the best understanding given our contexts and issues in our societies. Jeremiah 18:1–12 is a striking example of exactly this interpretative dynamic.

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