

Becoming part of the Jeremianic Tradition

6.1 How to understand the Jeremianic Tradition

This study has researched the way groups negotiate religious identity, memory and authority within the ongoing tradition of Jeremiah 32. How does this tradition shape identity and how is it shaped by ongoing appropriations? In chapters 2-5, different appropriations of Jeremiah 32 [39] and its ongoing history of interpretation were analyzed in terms of group identity and interests, with special attention given to imaginations of landscape and power exchange between centre and periphery. I understood the Jeremianic tradition as a form of collective memory, viewing the text itself as interpreted tradition, and ongoing appropriations as part of that process of *tradere*. I now collect the fruits of this approach: this study used a method of analysis that is capable of opening up narratives, both the narratives of the tradition as also the narratives of the heirs of the tradition.

In chapter 2, I pointed to the narrative of purchase (vv. 5-15) as being the central story out of which the rest of the chapter evolved, even though this narrative fails to connect to all sections of the chapter. I do not mean to say that the 'real message' of the chapter lies in this narrative. Rather, this narrative is ambiguous, as is the chapter. In addition, according to the Masoretic Tradition, vv. 36-41 are the heart of the chapter, in which the purchase does not play a role. I distinguished between different layers in the chapter, offering possible explanations of how to understand the positions reflected in these layers. I presented an understanding of the shift in imaginations of landscape, understanding the negative image of Jerusalem as part of the narrative of those who remained in the land, with Benjamin as their centre. I argued that the negative image of Jerusalem was taken over by returning exile, and that only slowly Jerusalem's central position was restored. I argued that in the last layer of the chapter, vv. 36-41, testifies to a different understanding of exile, leaving space for the possibility to be in exile inside of the land, and 'in place' outside of the land.

What the differences between LXX and MT make clear, is that both structure and content play an important role in creating a meaningful, albeit ambiguous, text. I have shown that the Jeremiah 39 [32] according to the Septuagint present the whole chapter as a narrative told by Jeremiah and the

narrator. Jeremiah becomes a figure of identification detached from history here. Jeremiah 32 [39] according to the Masoretic Text explicitly shifts in space and time. Here, the focus shifts from the prophet to a new addressee. Jeremiah 32 [39] according to MT and LXX can therefore best be read as two variant interpretations of a tradition that must have existed in yet different shapes preceding these two manifestations. They both represent a stage in the development of the diverse Jeremianic tradition, leading to further developments of the tradition, on account of their being contrasting, overlapping shapes in which the tradition manifests itself. All of these manifestations are marked by their own internal tensions and ambiguities.

On the basis of chapters 2 and 3 I have concluded that given the layeredness of Jeremiah 32, an *Urtext* (a pure form of the text on which to base an analysis) does not exist. Therefore, all exegesis is reception history. It is the task of exegetes to open up the text and existing readings, making the layeredness visible and giving insight into the processes shaping tradition. The character of the text as collective memory indicated that the search for an *Urtext* or pure tradition is futile. It is not possible to find one text on which a 'correct reading' can be based. Neither is it possible to select one of the voices of the text in order to identify it as 'the voice' of the text. This has implications for how religious traditions relate to their corpus of holy texts. It renders all fundamentalisms – claiming that their position is above subjectivity or intersubjectivity – as futile. It also means that claims of being orthodox – meaning: having the right interpretation – are difficult to establish. What we have, is a diversity of voices, along with the challenge to live with that diversity, to create meaning in full awareness of it, without attempting to explain it away.

The processes of identity shaping in the Jeremianic tradition have certain dynamics. Some of these dynamics are given on account of the specific traits of the Jeremianic tradition, including its focus on land, its markedly layered and ambiguous nature, the marginal position of the prophet, and, for more than in other traditions, the circumstance within which textual development and literary development went hand in hand. Other dynamics involve more general dynamics of how narratives of (religious) identity are shaped, such as the need to reshape group narratives in changing circumstances and group conflict as one of the factors stimulating *tradere*.

The capacity of the tradition to continually be reinvented, has to with its ambiguity of the figure of the prophet and the *Endgestalt* of the tradition in MT and LXX. The tradition is capable of hosting a diversity of positions. I have pointed at the way the tradition attracts marginal voices, given the marginality of Jeremiah as a prophet not going into exile, but ending up in Egypt. I have highlighted, however, that there is a danger of over idealizing the Jeremianic tradition as a tradition of marginal voices. It needs to be underlined, first, that power relations are continually shifting. The returning exiles are likely not to

have been a powerful group when they came to Judah, but their position became the loudest voice found in the chapter.

I have pointed out that, to a certain extent, the last layer of Jeremiah 32 steps over older debates, thus creating a more inclusive identity. However, this inclusive identity silences or misrepresents aspects of the complex identity of Judeans in the period before, during and after the exile. An identity has been created that presents us with only a limited understanding of what Judean identity is about. It has to be said that from our perspective and with the resources we have, it is impossible to reconstruct 'reality' and to point out exactly where the state of affairs reflected in the book of Jeremiah is 'wrong' or 'false' or 'deceptive'. However, by combining the material from the book with insights from studies on how identity develops in situations of conflict, I pointed out what may have happened. I did so in an attempt to diversify the way we look at this text.

As we have seen, the processes of tradition building taking place in this text, have parallels with later appropriations. Not only are similar themes picked up and developed, but also the dynamics of appropriation and of using existing traditions to build group discourse often are similar. Group narratives tend to simplify 'reality' and to overstress differences, while at the same time the narratives leave traces of other realities and do not attempt to be fully coherent. Differences vis-a-vis other groups are overstressed, while differences within the groups are largely ignored.

It has become clear that a driving force of the ongoing process of *tradere* is group conflict, and that it is therefore necessary to be attentive to power negotiations in the text, and to hidden and dominant narratives. I pointed at the capacity of the tradition to host very diverse and opposing tradition, such as the voice of the people of the land underlying continuity in the land, and the 'returning exiles' claiming exile as a necessary experience. I have also pointed out that some of these debates have been overcome in the tradition: with the passing of time, some disputes become irrelevant. Again, I think optimism about the capacity of religious tradition to overcome conflict should be avoided. Rather, this study shows that religious identity is often understood in exclusive terms. I have pointed out that vv. 36-41 present a more inclusive understanding of identity. However, the passing of time is the crucial factor here in overcoming the animosity present in older debates, and the religious tradition merely functions as a basin in which the voices are held together. Nonetheless, the capacity of 'holding together' can be crucial, as I point out in chapter 5.

On the basis of chapter 4 I conclude that the ambiguity pointed out in chapters 2 and 3 and the openness of the tradition to ongoing appropriation led to a wide variety of traditions in early Jewish and early Christian exegesis. The context of the appropriations is very diverse, but the attitude towards tradition is similar. I pointed out that these documents testify to immediate

appropriation. The communities behind these texts seem to experience no distance between themselves and the religious tradition. Tradition can be freely adapted and transformed to become relevant to their new contexts. In such appropriations history becomes the stage on which God enacts a plan of redemption. The contextuality of the processes taking place in the text is lost out of sight. The text is viewed as containing examples and truths that have value outside of historical processes.

What this research makes clear, is that paying careful attention to the different aspects of chapter 32, brings out its layered character, and leads to questions on the growth of tradition and the character of religious tradition. This has relevance both for scholarship and for religious communities identifying as heirs of this tradition. On the basis of this research, the plurality of voices and conflict between those voices has been established. This method is also relevant for contemporary interpretations – in a way, chapter 5 is the laboratory of the method used in this study. It gives insight into the Jeremianic tradition-at-work. The chapter has made visible that the processes by which tradition shapes identity, which in its turn shapes tradition, are complex negotiations of group identity. It showed how the factor conflict creates very fixed identities and narratives, which makes negotiation of narratives (i.e., the kind of appropriation in which transformation takes place) very difficult. I have pointed out that the Israeli readers tend to identify with the returning exiles, seeing themselves as a marginal group. In general, they lack insight in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. I have also pointed out that Palestinian readers tend to identify the text with the Zionist narrative. Generally, this leads to an enforcement of existing ideas of the conflict: Israeli readers view themselves as an endangered marginal group, Palestinians feel marginalized both by Jer. 32 and by the Zionist narrative.

I have pointed out a variety of identifications in the different chapters. For instance, Jeremiah was identified with, or closely linked to the exiles (for instance in the G-discourse of the Apocryphon), Jeremiah has been identified with Jesus (in Paraleipomena, for instance, and by Laith), and Jeremiah has been seen as an exemplary notary (LXX). At the same time, groups have identified with the returning exiles (such as the Jewish women, but also Hibba), or with the people of the land (Boulus). These identifications are part of processes of appropriation. However, I have argued for an appropriation that understands a group approaching the tradition as heirs to this complex tradition as a whole. I argued that this approach of the text is more fruitful than identification with one of the voices in the text.

I have made clear that including the analysis of contemporary reading in the work of exegesis is fruitful for understanding the text. The appropriations of the groups in Jerusalem and Bethlehem made me aware of the importance of imaginations of landscape in relation to power, a perspective that was very relevant for understanding images of space in

Jeremiah 32.

In chapter 5 I argued that simply reading the text does not stimulate negotiation of narratives. The text does not contain an antidote against conflict. However, I have pointed out moments of transformation, both in the separate meetings and in the encounters between the groups. I also pointed out attitudes that lead to closed readings and immediate appropriation, in which no transformation takes place. To begin with the latter, strictly separating between religious and national aspects of identity leads to closed readings. This was the case in Laith's reading, Amira's reading and that of most of the Jewish women. Laith's and Amira's view of religious tradition did not leave room for any contextual Palestinian significance of the text. In addition, Laith's orthodox understanding disabled him from having an understanding of Jeremiah 32 that takes its layeredness seriously. He was not able to allow for perspectives on the text different from his own. Among the Jewish women, there was no distinction between different aspects of identity. This negation of tensions that do exist between being Jewish and being Israeli lead to a fixed and closed narrative. The Israeli-Jewish women experienced the text as theirs, not being able to acknowledge the political implications of their reading. On the other hand, the insight of the interrelatedness of different aspects of identity, and the tensions between these, as in the reading of for instance Anna, Hibba and Boulus was a positive factor. Such awareness led to several critical questions.

The tendency of the Bethlehemites to identify the text with the Zionist narrative, left no room for alternative approaches of the text. A contextual Palestinian reading could not develop. Such fixed views on identity, narratives and religious tradition left very little space for transformation to occur. I concluded that retreating to exclusivist, fixed understandings of national and/or religious identity is a frequent but hopeless strategy.

Attitudes that open space necessary for the negotiation of narratives can be summarized as vulnerability, allowing for ambiguity and tension (as mentioned above), allowing for questions that cannot (immediately) be answered, and allowing for diversity and openness. The participants from the students groups especially, except for Laith, were capable of showing vulnerability with respect to their own identity and the narratives of their society. They were open about conflicts they experience between religious and national aspects of their identity. They were not only capable of seeing ambiguity and layeredness in their own national narratives, they were also open to a new understanding of Jer. 32. As a result, there was space for transformation, and openness to hear the narrative of the other. They allowed for insecurity, not demanding ultimate answers. They showed willingness to begin a quest for a more inclusive understanding of identity. Most of the Bethlehemites testified to a strong desire for an inclusive understanding of identity, which made them reject chapter 32. They were less open to a new

understanding of religious tradition.

An understanding of identity as always in development, and therefore open, as was visible for instance in Hibba's approach to the text, is required. Thus, religion is not used as a place of refuge to escape from problems, but rather as a space in which to address the central questions of life. Such a reading understands the need for a contextual reading of one's self in relation to the need of the contextual reading of the other, which leads to the desire to formulate inclusive narratives, as was the case in for instance Boulus' approach. Such a reading understands that the text is open to a diversity of meaning, as Michal discovered.

Acknowledgment of what is difficult and unresolved, both in the narratives of tradition and in one's own narratives, leads to space to ask questions, and to seek for new ways of understanding narratives. The Jewish students and Hibba approached their own narratives and identity critically, as well as the biblical narrative. They were less attached than the older generation to religious preconceptions of what the text should be, along with of what their own identity should be. Hibba's and Boulus' authentic search for contextual reading was combined with a wish not to exclude others. Not all of these attitudes can be taught. However, exegetes can help to point at the nature of the text, and therefore the (intellectual) impossibility of sticking to immobile understandings of narratives.

I have therefore also pointed out the responsibility of exegetes in stimulating a different approach to religious texts. This means pointing out the complexity and richness of this tradition, over against voices naively or more aggressively claiming the text. Exegesis can offer arguments about why exclusive readings fail to recognize the character of the text. This study shows that the analytical work of the exegete leads to the discovery of layeredness and plurality, so that taking refuge in an exclusive position is no longer an option. I hold that this approach also has value for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Here too, careful analysis can open up fixed identifications and lead to transformation.

I have concluded that it is fruitful to look at the ongoing and diverse Jeremianic tradition as collective memory, and to make a careful analysis of the different manifestations of the tradition by precisely observing patterns of communication, layers and interests. As a scholar of the Old Testament, I argue that this is how the text presents itself and wants to be understood. I have argued that recognition of the different voices in the text, and therefore of the important role that the communities of readers have into finding their own voice requires a postcolonial approach, attentive to power negotiations taking place. To some readers, like to most of the Jewish women and Laith, the text speaks with one voice, and this voice supports their position. It is a reading that does not allow for diversity and that does not take power differences into account. I have therefore underlined the responsibility of exegetes to provide

alternative readings of Jer. 32 and other texts, pointing out the ambiguity and layeredness that characterize such texts.

I have pointed out that biblical texts can be used in contexts of conflict in which the text plays a dubious role, albeit in a very careful way. Biblical tradition sometimes plays a negative role in conflict, as it does in the Zionist narrative, and, more importantly, it contains exclusivist traditions that feed into conflict. The marginalization of the perspective of the people who remained in the land in the Jeremianic tradition is an example of such exclusion. The Jeremianic tradition can therefore not be used in a naive way. However, when biblical scholars help readers discover the text in its layeredness and ambiguity, they provide the reader with a framework to connect to their own narratives. This creates space to also recognize the layeredness and ambiguity of one's own narratives. Groups who dare to go into hidden aspects of identity, uncovering new parts of self and of the biblical narrative, are capable of reviewing and reformulating their narratives, and come to a more inclusive understanding of identity.

In addition, reading a text like Jeremiah 32 in which marginal and dominant voices play a role, asks for sensitivity to marginal voices. Questions need to be asked such as: 'Why do we read the text as we read it?' 'In whose interest is this reading?', 'Is this reading life-giving, and if so, to whom?' We saw in the reading groups that these questions are not always asked. Readers coming from the 'centre' are even more in need of such sensitivity. Readers who read from the margins are at least aware of marginal voices. The Jewish women, for instance, experienced themselves as marginalized and as victims, without taking into account those who have been excluded and victimized by the Zionist narrative with which they identify. I introduced a normative element here that is not derived from the text, but from the act of reading. I have argued for a reading that takes ethical questions seriously and is open to negotiation. I further discuss this in 6.3. and 6.4.

6.2 Continuity: what keeps the tradition together?

Identity and narratives of identity are never stable, but continually need to be adapted because contexts continually change. In religious tradition, this necessitates the ongoing process of *tradere*. Part of religious tradition is therefore a tension between the necessity to adapt and transform (discontinuity) and the need to identify as part of the ongoing tradition (continuity).

My approach of the Jeremianic tradition as a form of collective memory allowed me to make comparisons between diverse manifestations of the tradition. Each appropriation is produced in very specific circumstances, although these circumstances cannot always be reconstructed. The Jeremianic tradition has not developed coherently. Rather, each aspect of the tradition could take root and become itself a fresh stem, to which new interpretations are diachronically connected, while later interpretations influence the way earlier manifestations of the text are read. Processes in which tradition is shaped are coincidental, fragmented, even chaotic. This leads to questions regarding what holds the tradition together.

Parallels can be pointed out in appropriations of the chapter, in recurring themes and interpretation of events and characters. Coherence and continuity can be found here, for instance in the concept of exile or in the figure of the prophet himself. However, the many roles Jeremiah receives in the course of the tradition, that of a notary, a new Moses, a traitor, a man of peaceful resistance, the guard of the temple treasures, are very diverse. Exile continues to be a meaningful concept, but it is put to use in different contexts with different goals. That being said, the tradition of Jeremiah 32 proves to stimulate reflection on land, identity and exile. It brings its readership to point out their connections to land, their struggles with identity, and what imaginations of landscape are central to them.

Continuity cannot be established on the basis of the authority of the 'original text'. As has been argued, there is no 'original Jeremianic text' that is subsequently received, the text is received and interpreted tradition all along. This text has then never really reached an end-stage, but only intermediate fixed forms, such as MT and LXX, that then became subjects of processes of development, of being received, appropriated and passed on. The Greek and Hebrew text can be seen as more fixed forms of the tradition, in which the tensions between continuity and discontinuity, identity and tradition, have found a momentary balance that continues to be read and reinterpreted. They run the risk, however, of being seen as fixed forms and as speaking one authoritative voice. Such a view does not take the character of tradition into

account. Meanings are formed and transformed in the ongoing development of tradition. One meaning cannot be claimed as more true than the other. What a text means to a reader is not a stable trait of religious tradition, but is in constant flux. We should not envision that text with its context meets a reader with his or her context, but rather that both text and reader exist in shifting realities that both partially overlapping with the space of the text. That is: two layered worlds (or landscapes) between which overlap exist. In chapter 5 this overlap consists, for instance, in the shared dominant Israeli narrative and a shared (but different) sense of historical, cultural and religious connection to the text. The text has at the same time aspects that seem familiar within the landscape of a reader (as part of her or his religious or cultural heritage) and aspects that are strange. In the process of appropriation often aspects that might have seemed familiar suddenly appear as ambiguous and different, and what once seemed strange may appear as 'nearby'.

What keeps the tradition together then, is rather the fact that it continued to be passed on, being appropriated by new groups, who by this act have made themselves heirs of the tradition. The continuity is in the first place in the act of appropriating, in the experience of being addressed by this tradition – which actually may mean many things. All groups appropriating the tradition identify as heirs to this tradition. I will argue in 6.4 what I understand as being the main challenge resulting from this shared heirship today: the willingness to formulate towards inclusive narratives.

6.3 Towards a different understanding of religious texts: the contribution of biblical scholars

How does scholarship deal with the diversity of religious and other claims present in these books? This question is related to methodology, on account of the nature of the material studied. A more integral method is needed that can effectively address questions pertaining to the text tradition as a whole, not just to one aspect of it, such as the question of meaning. What matters in these texts, and what good theology consists of, I argue, is not what comes out only after all long and tedious analyses of texts are done, and the findings are put together, so that finally the question of meaning can be asked. Nor does it consist of general statements applying everywhere and always. Rather, the question of meaning plays a role at every level of dealing with the text, and in every stage that the text is going through. Meaning is not found in what is 'original', or in one shape in which the tradition manifests itself, for instance according to the Masoretic tradition. Meaning is continually (re)shaped in the processes the tradition (the interaction between texts, readership and context) is going through. This means that biblical scholars should testify to meaningful, religious readings of the text, in full acceptance of its layeredness. The richness of the text because of its layeredness should be explored and made visible, without – again – idealizing the text, and turning multivocality into an idealized image of dialogue. This study shows that such a new approach of religious texts is possible, and it leads to exciting results.

The question of the complexity of texts is also related to ethical questions particular to this type of scholarship. The texts of the Old Testament influence reality, and Old Testament scholarship negotiates how these texts are read and understood. I want to indicate how in my view religious tradition can be meaningfully studied. In the preceding chapters, I have pleaded to view the layeredness and complexity of the text as something positive, something that contains hermeneutical possibilities, rather than something that renders any quest for meaning futile. A text that contains multiple meanings and is continually in processes of reinterpretation asks to be debated, for hidden voices to be uncovered, for continuity and discontinuity to be pointed out. Exegetes should resist the need to make the texts easier to understand, smoother, fitting into existing religious ideas, etc. They should challenge themselves, as well as other readers of these texts, to acknowledge the diversity of the texts.

The Hebrew scriptures are not unique because they contain unique claims to truth or because these narratives are from a moral high level that is unique. Rather, as I have shown, its value exists in its layeredness, reflecting

the flow of life, the way in which human beings collect experiences. Conflicts, power difference and exclusiveness are therefore part of these narratives. I have argued for the importance of an approach of biblical tradition that is attentive to its layered and ambiguous character, and to the power negotiations taking place. I have presented a postcolonial approach taking its point of departure in the text and the stumbling blocks it presents as very suitable for the Jeremianic tradition. It takes the character of the text seriously, is attentive to power, to the importance of space, and to the need of negotiating narratives.

I have argued for an ethical approach to the Jeremianic tradition, not in the sense that ethical principles need to be or can always be derived from the text, but rather that being part of this layered and ambiguous tradition requires a sensitivity to ethical questions. We have seen that some of the Palestinian readers argued for an inclusive Palestinian reading of the text. I underlined the importance of this insight, that is in fact part of Palestinian and Israeli initiatives of non-violent resistance. It is an insight that is of importance for any context of appropriation of religious texts: an appropriation of a text entails a certain claim of the text, that can exclude others. This is not necessarily problematic: a Jewish interpretation of Jer. 32 as part of one's family history can co-exist with a Christian reading of the text as foreshadowing Jesus. However, when either of these readings is perceived as a closed reading, and the only possible reading, problems result. The diversity that is part of the tradition is then not acknowledged. More importantly, appropriations should take into account who have been excluded in a certain reading, and what the consequences of that exclusion are. This means that processes of appropriation are always open to negotiations, since exclusion is always part of processes of appropriation.

6.4 Negotiating narratives

The aim of this study has been a renewal of the way religious tradition is approached. The challenge is to acknowledge diversity in the text and in one's own context, and to feel compelled to find inclusive ways of reading text and self. This asks for vulnerability, openness, and the willingness to accept that there is no absolute truth or pure text to take refuge in.

Inclusive identity is somewhat counterintuitive. Social memory or narratives of identity aim to establish and strengthen identity. This is necessary, since we need identity to position ourselves in the world, even though identity is also a fragile thing. Narratives of identity, by definition, create difference and sameness, in order to establish an in- and an out-group, and erase difference where it is in fact present, in order to present a homogenous picture of the in-group. Thus, difference is pictured as something unwanted and dangerous, instead of something to embrace and enjoy. Narratives of identity have the tendency not to present the full variety present in a group. In spite of their ambiguity, these narratives have to and are intended to simplify reality. The text may easily perpetuate constructions of otherness, unless a method of analysis is used that is aware of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

I have made clear that the task of a scholar attempting to shed light on ideological religious debates in Old Testament narratives is not methodologically different from doing the same in contemporary appropriations. Exegetes should be aware of their role in stimulating the awareness that diversity is part of the biblical tradition, as are power struggles and ambiguity. It is therefore the responsibility of biblical scholars to search for hidden voices, for 'the other' and for the margins, in all appropriations of the ongoing tradition of Jeremiah. This commitment is part of the willingness to be part of the journey towards inclusivity, without having found it.