Like a Priest Exposing His Own Wayward Mother: Jeremiah in Rabbinic Literature

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This is an initial attempt to provide a context for rabbinic homilies on Jeremiah in toto; an admittedly hopeless effort in a paper. And thus in what follows I am going to give a selective and partial picture and supply some generalizations, bordering on the criminal, of a rich, complex and conflicted literature, without making the proper distinctions between different times and places. I will, however, focus mainly on classical rabbinic literature, Tannaitic and Amoraic midrashic compilations and both Talmudim, with one foray into later midrash (Pesiqta Rabbati) at the end of the paper.

But first, let me offer a few (way too general and sweeping, once again) introductions on the manners in which the rabbis treat scripture. In stark contrast to our most basic modern instincts, the rabbis do not read scripture first and foremost as a series of books, but rather as a set of verses which are to be read in the immediate context of scripture in its entirety. De-contextualization and re-contextualization are among the most basic characteristics of midrash.\(^1\) An example for this is the rabbinic use of Jeremiah’s description of a true prophecy, as opposed to a false one, as bursting from within him like an unstoppable fire: “Behold, My word is like fire—declares the Lord—and like a hammer that shatters rock” (Jer 23:29).\(^2\) Jeremiah, it should be noted, is quite focused on (shall we say obsessed with?) this theme, repeating “declares the Lord” 171 times in his eponymous book, much more than all the other prophets together. Although this verse indeed appears in the talmudic discussion of identifying a false prophet (t. Sanh. 14:14; b. Sanh. 89a), where we would expect it to be, it is much more commonly employed in rabbinic literature to describe the power (and polysemy) of the Torah, with little connection to Jeremiah’s specific polemical context: “and like a hammer that shatters rock—just as this hammer is divided into many sparks, so one verse goes out [=] is read] in many ways

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2 Biblical translations are generally quoted from the NRSV and modified to fit midrashic usage. Unless noted, translations of ancient texts are my own.
[lit. flavors]” (Mek. R. Ishmael Shirta 8, Sifre Num 42, b. Sanh. 34a, and more);³
“If this rascal meets you, drag it to the study house. If it is made of rock, it will melt, and if it is made of steel it will burst, as it says “my word is like fire—declares the Lord—and like a hammer that shatters rock (b. Qidd. 30b; note that this homily too is from the school of R. Ishmael); “R. Judah b. Bathyrah says: the words of the Torah are not susceptible to impurity, as it says behold, My word is like fire, declares the Lord” (b. Ber. 22a), etc. In a different, yet no less decontextualized manner, the harsh words God speaks to the prophet: “do not pray for this people, do not raise a cry of prayer on their behalf, do not approach Me (המת ב’ ) (7:16) are used by the rabbis to prove that the root p-g-ʿ denotes prayer (b. Ber. 26b). And the words “O Hope of Israel! O Lord” (Jer 17:13) are employed by R. Akiva, at the end of m. Yoma, to prove that God purifies Israel (punning on the dual meaning of the word mqwh—both hope and an immersion pool), while totally ignoring their highly anxious context (“All who forsake you shall be put to shame . . .”).⁴

And yet, Jeremiah is not just a collection of verses for the rabbis; there is also a character at play. The name “Jeremiah” refers, in Tannaitic and Amoraic midrashim, both to the man and to the book.⁵ Thus, for example, most of the opening homilies (petihtot) at the beginning of Lamentations Rabbah end with the formula: “once they were exiled, Jeremiah began to lament over them, Eikha.” This recurring formula is sometimes even expanded with a narrative flourish: “the Holy One said to Jeremiah: today, I am like a man who had an only son, and he built a nuptial house for him and he died in it. Have you no pain for me or for my son?” (Petihta 24). This sharp critique pictures Jeremiah as being especially callous regarding the destruction. But the rabbis could not fail to notice that biblical Jeremiah is conflicted and torn, and that alongside harsh, uncompromising judgments there is also deep empathy and compassion. And so while the homilist avoids depicting Jeremiah as crying (“go call Abraham, Isaak and Jacob and Moses from their graves, for they know


⁴ Even if the rabbis had contextual sensitivity (see Christine Hayes, “Displaced Self-Perceptions: The Deployment of Minim and Romans in B. Sanhedrin 90b–91a,” in Religious and Ethnic Communities in Roman Palestine, [ed. Hayim Lapin; Potomac, Md.: University Press of Maryland, 1999], 249–89), midrashic praxis is definitely not confined to it.

⁵ See e.g. the term “and thus Jeremiah says” in Mek. R. Ishmael beshalah 2; Haim Shaul Horovitz and Israel A. Rabin eds., Mechilta d’rabbi Ismael cum variis lectionibus et adnotationibus (Frankfurt am Mein: Kauffmann, 1931), 98; ibid., 6, Horovitz and Rabin eds., Mechilta, 110.