JEREMIAH'S POEM IN III 1-IV 2

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In Memory of James Muilenburg

We suggest that, underlying the present form of Jer. iii 1-iv 2, is a poem by Jeremiah consisting of iii 1-5, 19-20, 12b (beginning שֶׁבֶת) - 13, 21 - iv 2; a poem showing remarkable structural symmetry—two clearly demarcated halves, each of four four-line strophes—and striking inner rhetorical patterns.

In the first section, we shall submit this proposal to an external examination, in the light of existing criticism of this part of Jeremiah. In the second section, we shall submit it to internal examination, offering a rhetorical analysis of the proposed poem. In the third section, we shall seek further evidence from a consideration of the process of redaction, suggesting that there was a stage consisting of iii 1-5, 19-20, 6-13, 21 - iv 2, and that it was through the later addition of vss. 14-18 that vss. 19-20 were dislocated to their present place.

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W. Rudolph 1) analyses Jer. iii 1-5, 19 - iv 4 as a single poem of Jeremiah, in two parts, each with four four-line strophes, as follows:

First half: iii 1, iii 2-3a, iii 3b-5, iii 19-20.

Our proposal is similar, and in fact leaves the first half of Rudolph's poem unaltered. For future reference, we give sigla to the strophes:

Part I
I A. iii 1
I B. iii 2-3a
I C. iii 3b-5
I D. iii 19-20

Part II
II A. iii 12b-13
II B. iii 21-2
II C. iii 23-5
II D. iv 1-2

(This scheme depends on the excision of glosses in iii 13, 24, 25, to be discussed below.)

Rudolph's dividing point between the two halves is unexceptionable, being the point of transition from the ryb form in iii 1-5, 19-20 to what may be called a "liturgy of penitence" 2) in iii 21 - iv 2 (or 4), related to xiv 1 - xv 4, xxxi 18-20 (or 22), and the communal laments in the Psalms.

There is, further, widespread agreement with his view that iii 1-5, 19 - iv 4 is a consecutive piece of Jeremiah material. But some scholars diverge from this view, and we must consider the divergences which relate to our position.

An original connection between iv 3-4 and what precedes is doubtful. These two verses lack the root šwb which, in its various meanings, dominates iii 1 - iv 2; they introduce new imagery; they show evidence of deuteronomic redaction; and they seem to prepare the way for the following major section, iv 5 - vi 30. W. Thiel above all has argued cogently, and to us convincingly, that these two verses were composed separately from the preceding poetry.

On the other hand, almost no one denies an original connection between iv 1-2 and at least iii 21-25 6); rightly so, since the people's confession requires a divine response 7).

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2) J. Bright, Jeremiah (Garden City, New York, 1965), p. 25.
4) E.g. Bright, p. 25; Berridge, p. 77.
5) W. Thiel, Die deuteronomische Redaktion von Jeremia 1-25 (Neukirchen, 1973), pp. 93-7. He sees a Deuteronomic composition around a Jeremiah saying. He denies that the function is to introduce the next section; rather, it is to underscore the preceding one. But the sudden mention of Jerusalem, and the threat of YHWH's wrath, surely provide the mood and the locale for what follows. E. W. Nicholson, Jeremiah 1-25 (Cambridge, 1973), p. 44, suggests such a connecting function, and A. Weiser, Das Buch Jeremia (6th edn., Göttingen, 1969) p. 37, hints at it. Both deny an original connection with what precedes. Rudolph himself (p. 32) sees iv 4b as providing a transition—it is surely hard to reconcile this with its being part of the preceding poem.