CONTRA CREATION, COVENANT AND CONQUEST
(Jer. viii 13)

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Jer. viii 13 is one of those passages whose meaning continues to elude modern scholars. The very first clause, ‘āšēp ḫāšēm, has been translated, “When I would gather them” (RSV), “I will gather them all in” (NAB), “I will destroy them utterly” (J. Moffatt), and “Gathering I will end them” ¹), to give only a few examples. J. Bright wants to revocalize the MT so that it reads either, “I will gather their harvest”, or, “I will thoroughly harvest them” ²).

Even more problematic is the last colon, wa’ēttēn lāhem ya’ābōrûm which is usually translated along the lines of the RSV: “and what I gave them has passed away from them”. Literally the colon is translated “I gave to them, they pass by them”. The apparent difficulties with this colon have led most scholars to one of two conclusions. Either they emend the text, or they follow the LXX and omit the colon ³) Lundbom, not knowing with which group to side, retains the colon on some occasions (pp. 30, 66), and omits it on others (pp. 82-4). However, as will be shown, the problem arises not from the Hebrew text, but from a failure on the part of modern scholars to appreciate the varied and intricate imagery used by Jeremiah in

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²) Jeremiah (Garden City, 1965), p. 61.

³) For a discussion of the arguments that advocate textual emendations see D. Aberbach, “w’tin lhm y’r wūn (Jeremiah viii 13): The Problem and its Solution”, VT 27 (1977), pp. 99-101. Aberbach’s own solution, that the phrase wa’ēttēn lāhem ya’ābōrûm should read w’tin lhm y’r wūn, “And I gave them a naked forest”, is not convincing. It supposes that the text was corrupted on at least two different occasions. Since there is no textual evidence in support of this argument it remains only another possibility which has no more or less merit than any of the other suggested emendations.
this oracle. In what follows it will be shown that the allusions evoked by this oracle suggest that Jeremiah is returning Israel to a period before the Conquest, revoking Yahweh’s promises to the patriarchs, and reaffirming Zephaniah’s reversal of creation in Zeph. i 2-3 4).

Significantly, another name for the festival of tents is Ingathering, or, in the Hebrew, ‘āšîp (Exod. xxiii 16). It is widely agreed that this agricultural feast was the most important feast in early Israel. In fact, Lev. xxiii 39 calls it the feast of Yahweh. Its purpose was to celebrate the fall harvest, i.e., the harvest of the grape vine and fig tree. In addition, it was a new year celebration. Jeremiah draws meaning from both aspects of this feast.

The allusions to the Ingathering are obvious. Jeremiah proclaims that there is neither grape nor fig left in the land. As 1 Kgs iv 25 demonstrates, the fig tree and grape vine are symbols of God’s presence and favour. The same point is made from a negative use of this imagery in Mic. vii 1-2. Hence, without the fig tree and grape vine Israel is without the presence of Yahweh. This point is made all the more sharply with the inclusion of the phrase, “even the leaves are withered”. Furthermore, as remarked above, Ingathering was also a new year’s festival, Yahweh’s own feast. Hence, in keeping with the nature of an ancient New Year’s celebration, during Ingathering the Israelites would also celebrate Yahweh’s kingship over his creation. Therefore, when Jeremiah announces the end of the vineyards 5), he is, in fact, announcing the end of the festival of Ingathering, the end of Yahweh’s feast. By implication this announcement would remove Yahweh from his creation, and therefore effectively destroy creation. Since the Hebrew word for Ingathering is ‘āšîp, and it is possible that there is a word play between ‘āšîpām and ‘āšîpēm, Jeremiah may also have meant to say, “I will destroy their Ingathering”.

Jeremiah’s announcement of the reversal of creation is enhanced by his variation of and allusion to Zeph. i 2-3. The first thing to note is the similarity in the form of these two oracles.

4) For the argument that Zeph. i 2-3 is a reversal of creation see the present author’s article “Zephaniah i 2-3: The ‘Sweeping’ of Creation”, VT 30 (1980), pp. 104-9.

5) H. W. Wolff, Dodekapropheton 1: Hosea (Neukirchen, 1961 [2nd edn, 1965], p. 46 = E. tr. Hosea [Philadelphia, 1974], p. 38), notes that fig trees were planted in the vineyards. Therefore, to kill one was to kill the other.