The Potter’s House: An Exegesis of Jeremiah 18:1-11

**Jeremiah 18: 1** The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 2 “Come, go down to the potter’s house, and there I will let you hear my words.” 3 So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. 4 The vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter’s hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as seemed good to him. 5 Then the word of the Lord came to me: 6 Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. 7 At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. 9 And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it. 11 Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings.

The story of the Potter’s House in Jeremiah 18:1-11 has garnered much attention. It has become the name of a megachurch pastored by Bishop T. D. Jakes and a song sung by Tramaine Hawkins. However, is this really a passage to sing about? God sends Jeremiah the prophet to a potter’s house where the potter is reworking a clay pot that was originally flawed. God is the Great Potter wanting to mold the clay, Judah and Jerusalem, which God has been working on for centuries. The clay, Judah, has become marred by her evil ways. If Judah will only repent, she can be remade. Otherwise, she will be destroyed. Unlike a human potter, the omnipotent God has ultimate control over the clay, or does God? Many scholars wrestle over this question but in the end believe this passage is one of hope. God stands ready to change God’s mind about the disaster awaiting Judah if she will only repent.
**Historical and Literary Considerations**

There are differing analyses of when our text was written. Louis Stulman proposes that the text took shape after 587 BCE when Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed.¹ This is supported by Katharine Sakenfeld, who states that this fourth literary division of the first scroll that is Jeremiah 1-25, in its challenge to the pre-exilic beliefs of Judah and Jerusalem was written for a post-exilic audience. This entire scroll was written as an indictment of Judah’s behavior and the systematic destruction of their erroneous beliefs. This fourth unit consisting of Chapters 18-20 is specifically written to challenge the notion of Israel’s election.² Notably, it follows 17:19-27, a passage of hope, imploring Judah to observe the Sabbath as a sign of the covenant and benefit from maintaining the Davidic monarchy and all the blessings that come with it. It precedes the fifth unit, which forebodes the end of the monarchy.³ This chapter is the linchpin that connects the plea in chapter 17 to the results of noncompliance in Chapters 21-24.

In contrast, William L. Holliday places the organization of this passage in the timeframe of 609 through 605 or 604 BCE between Jeremiah’s temple sermon and the writing of the first scroll.⁴ This would have been when Jeremiah was active during the early part of Jehoiakim’s reign and placed squarely in a pre-exilic period.

Whenever the text was recorded, it is clear that the prophet addressed the nation before the fall of Jerusalem, but the passage still has meaning for those who are in exile in Babylon. Their political, national, and religious infrastructures have been destroyed. There is a different worldview as the Babylonians now control much of the geopolitical area. There are the learned

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and skilled exiles in Babylon, revolutionaries in Egypt, and a remnant in Judah all wondering what the future holds.⁵

**Form, Structure and Movement**

Jeremiah 18:1-11 is a prose sermon, a particular device frequently used in the Deuteronomistic History tradition, of which Jeremiah allegedly is a part. This device symbolizes transitions in the structure and emphasizes important ideas. It also serves as an introduction to the key segments of the first book of Jeremiah (Chs. 1-25), and presents a new theme or theological insight not previously encountered.⁶

The passage has three main characters: God, Jeremiah, and the potter, but the potter remains silent in the story. It begins with God speaking to Jeremiah, giving him an order to go to the potter’s house to hear a message from God (vv 1-2). When Jeremiah arrives, he sees a potter at work on a vessel. Somehow, the vessel becomes marred, and the potter reworks the clay into another piece of pottery (vv 3-4). Once the demonstration is over, God then speaks to Jeremiah to interpret what Jeremiah witnessed. God informs Jeremiah that God is the potter with Judah in hand. God can and will change the outcome of a nation depending on the nation’s response to God’s warning. If a nation initially faced destruction because of its evil, but repents, it will not be destroyed. However, if a nation was originally destined to be prosperous, but does evil, it will face destruction instead of the promised blessing (vv 5-10). Finally, in verse 11, God commands Jeremiah to warn Judah that they are facing an unfortunate fate unless they repent of the evil they had been committing.

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⁵ Stulman, 22-23.
⁶ Ibid., 31.
Detailed Analysis

*The Word from the Lord Comes (vv. 1-2)*

In verses 1-2, we witness God speaking to Jeremiah and sending him on an assignment. Terence Fretheim in the *New Interpreter’s Bible* proclaims that this visit is a symbolic act. The journey may be a little of both. There is deep symbolism in the visit to the potter. The word potter here is derived from the word *yatsar*, which is used in the Genesis 2 (vv 7-8, 19) narrative of creation. When God “formed” the human from the dust, the action word was *yatsar*. From where is clay taken? It is obtained from the ground. This is further confirming God as the Creator and leading to the interpretation of the symbolism that is to follow. When God has a Word, God prepares the vessel to speak what needs to be said. This is a perfect dramatic set up for the hearers, and later, the readers of Jeremiah.

*The Visit to the Potter’s House (vv. 3-4)*

Verses 3-4 describe Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house. Robert H. Johnston reports that potters in ancient Palestine played a key role in their society. They were responsible for creating many items needed for their community’s daily life, from household pots and basins to ceremonial objects and general goods. Everyone had to go to the potter to get objects to help him or her in their lives. The hearers and readers would understand this process and could later identify what God would later say could happen to Judah.

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In our passage, the potter working on clay serves as the sermon for the day. Here is the potter working with clay at the wheel, attempting to make a vessel that is perfect and useful. As with all artisans, the potter probably envisioned the piece to be made before making it. In the mind’s eye, it is perfect, beautiful and will serve the purpose for which it will be created. The potter sets out to develop that perfect image in reality, but somehow the clay becomes marred. Maybe the clay was too wet and collapsed under its own weight. Maybe it was too dry and was resistant to shaping. The potter destroys the creation and molds it again into another vessel.

This is where the passage becomes troubling for exegetes. Clay is an inorganic substance that cannot think or move on its own. It is completely under the power of the potter. The only way that it can resist the potter is due to internal conditions that make it difficult to work with or because of the centrifugal forces of the wheel. For some, the fact that the clay cannot make a conscious choice not to be shaped makes this metaphor fail. For others, the metaphor is not as troubling. The internal condition of the clay or external forces makes the clay difficult to work with. That is still similar to a human being. Evil can exist as an internal condition of the heart, mind, or spirit or can be due to an external event causing us to make wrong choices, repelling God’s shaping in our lives. Judah had both internal and external situations. Their heart as a nation was not right as they turned from God, forsook God’s way, and neglected those whom they were commanded to protect. The external influence was the practices and customs of surrounding nations that that crept into Judah leading them to worship other gods.

This leads to a greater question: If God is omnipotent and omniscient, how can God not be able to shape us whether or not we want to be shaped? Does God not know what choices we

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11 Holladay, 515.
are going to make and what we are going to do? How can a perfect God create an imperfect vessel?\textsuperscript{12} Shipp states, “Divine determinism is not so much the focus…as is the interplay of human freedom and divine sovereignty.”\textsuperscript{13} While we struggle with the idea of God determining the outcome from the beginning versus that of free will, these verses show Judah’s limited ability to resist God. Judah can be difficult, but ultimately God can, and more importantly will begin again. The Potter does not dispose of the clay, which the Potter rightfully could do, but remolds it. This is a critical point to remember as the passage continues with the exposition of what Jeremiah just witnessed.

\textit{God the Potter and the Plans for the Nation (vv. 5-11)}

For those who did not understand the symbolism, God reveals God is the potter working on Judah. They started out as the vessel whose image was perfect in the mind of God. They were God’s chosen people – a vessel to display the Word and presence of God throughout the world. They were to be the perfect example of God’s loving relationship with humanity. However, as God worked on them throughout time, that vessel became marred through sin. As their hearts became hardened, they turned from God through idolatry, hatred, injustice and other sins. They were that clay that the potter could not make into the original receptacle. Because of this, those in Jeremiah the Prophet’s time were hearing why they were about to be exiled to Babylon, and the readers of the Book of Jeremiah heard why they were in exile. However, God had a message of hope for the hearers and the readers. For the hearers, Judah and Jerusalem

before the exile, the hope was if they allowed themselves to be shaped into that perfect vessel, God would not allow the disaster that was about to occur.

For the readers, the message of hope is that even though God had flattened the creation on the wheel, God had not yet given up on the lump of clay, and could yet still shape them into an acceptable people again.\textsuperscript{14} There is also hope to other nations, not initially under the favor of God, but yet having the possibility to be built as planned by God, if they repent from their evil ways. Fretheim proffers the thoughts of others that this is not a hopeful message as Judah faces replacement by the foreign nation that repents and becomes a benefiter of God’s favor.\textsuperscript{15}

If these negatives were true, we would see the potter dispose of the clay and replace it with new clay, which would be shaped into that vessel that the potter originally intended to make with the original clay. Instead, we see the potter reuse the same clay and shape it into something else. It would be a different narrative and have a different meaning if we see the potter fire the marred pot and then dispose of it. It would be useless to fire something you know was damaged. In the same token, an experienced potter would know if the clay being worked with could be used for anything. If it is too difficult to work with and could not be turned into anything, the potter would just dispose of the clay and start with new clay. However, we see neither of those scenarios. We see the potter rework the same clay, just forming it into a different vessel.

Unlike clay, Judah has a choice to be shaped or face severe consequences. This is a new concept for Judah, as they had always believed that nothing adverse could happen because of their election. God had covenanted with their ancestors, promised them the land, and to be their God always. The contingency was that they had to remain God’s people, obedient to God’s

\textsuperscript{14} Coffman, 207; Fretheim, 270.
\textsuperscript{15} Fretheim, 271.
every Word. However, they had wallowed in their sin for so long without witnessing a complete destruction of Jerusalem; they could not imagine that God would do anything.\textsuperscript{17} What would be the need to repent? God says to Judah that God’s action is predicated upon a hearer’s reaction to the Word. God may have promised to “plant and build up” but if Judah and Jerusalem do not change their evil ways, God will destroy their nation. The converse, a nation that was condemned can be saved by repentance. They become putty in God’s hands.

\textbf{Synthesis}

Despite the seemingly incongruent aspects of the metaphor of the potter and the seemingly harsh punishment that Judah seems to receive for its disobedience - the loss of the favor they had previously enjoyed, Jeremiah 18:1-11 is still a passage of hope. God sends Jeremiah to the potter to witness the material for a warning that Judah can comprehend. God then translates what the symbolism means for the people in plain and simple terms: repent and be saved or continue in your evil ways and face God’s destructive plan. God offers that those who are currently without God’s benefits and destined for destruction can be blessed if they repent.

Judah has a choice to make. As we know, they make the wrong choice and are exiled; the temple is destroyed, and Judah is never the same again. Yet those in exile see that God is not done, the clay has not been destroyed but can be remolded.

\textsuperscript{17} Stulman, 179.
Reflection

God wants all to come to repentance; thus, the message is to not just Judah and Jerusalem, but also to the nations that were initial enemies of God. There is hope for all, whether or not you have the belief that election bestows a free pass on your sin. Those who know God must repent or suffer the consequences of sin, “The wages of sin is death.” Yet, God offers a gift to those who know God and those who do not – to be built and planted – eternal life. God, the Potter, can take the mess of our lives and reshape them into something that will give God honor and glory in our daily living.

This serves as a warning to those who hold a particular viewpoint of their inalienable right to hold power in this country and claim a monopoly on righteousness. Like Judah, the “Christian Right” believes they are the benefactors of God’s grace and blessing, yet they have failed to take care of the widows and orphans. It almost seems that they are working against them. They worship the idol gods of power and money and believe that they will always maintain the favor of God. However, as with Judah, calamity can befall anyone who does not turn from his or her evil ways. However, God desires to reshape them as well.

This is a story of hope for those that are seemingly in exile reading this story, looking from the outside in. The marginalized of our society and particularly African American women, as the exiles reading Jeremiah after the conquest, hear the message that there is still hope for them. Their lives are not set; God is still molding them, and their lot can yet change.

The evidence of this wonderful message is that God did not completely wipe out the people of Judah, which God was within God’s right to do. God left a remnant in Jerusalem and

18 Romans 6:22
Babylon. He smashed the clay but did not throw it away. God spared a few that God could reshape into another vessel. We know that this vessel, which existed from the original clay, carried within it the lineage that led to Jesus. Judah remained a good vessel, ever still the conveyor of the love of God to the world in the person of Jesus Christ.
Bibliography


