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The Inner Cohesion of Jeremiah 34:8–22, on the Liberation of Slaves during the Siege of Jerusalem, and its Relation to Deuteronomy 15

Klaas A.D. Smelik

According to scholars, Jer 34:8–22 is a compilation of texts written by different authors, and in the opinion of some, a rather clumsy compilation. Even those who presuppose that the chapter was written by only one author are not impressed with his style. In this contribution, I take a different approach to the Biblical text, suggesting that Jer 34:8–22 has an inner cohesion and that the phenomena which led other scholars to conclude that we are dealing here with a compilation of texts or a piece of poor writing, are, in fact, literary devices meant to grab the reader's attention. We will also discuss the intriguing question of why a rule from the Torah is cited in v. 14 that only partially addresses the actual situation.

The author's deliberate choice not to provide all necessary information to the reader at once is characteristic of the chapter. Instead, he distributes the data over the whole text, so that the reader gradually understands what has happened by combining the author's different clues. In this way, the reader has a role to play in understanding the meaning of the text. It is a literary device which is very popular in crime stories.

1 I like to thank Carolyn Coman for editing the English text.
3 Cf. R.P. Carroll, Jeremiah (OTL), London 1986, 648: ‘As the story appears in its edited form in vv. 8–22 it is an amalgam of various strands and motifs.’
4 One points in this respect to Jeremiah’s secretary Baruch.
6 Note, however, the advice of Georg Fischer: ‘[Es] empfiehlt sich, Jer 34 insgesamt als Einheit auszulegen.’ G. Fischer, Jeremia 26–52 (HThKAT), Freiburg, Basel & Vienna 2005, 247.
7 Cf. L.G. Allen, Jeremia (OTL), Louisville KY & London 2008, 386: ‘The reticence is intentional—so as to present these facts climactically at the end of reason and announcement.’
Let’s have a closer look at the text. The account begins in v. 8 with the standard introduction to a prophecy but is not followed by the prophecy itself. Instead, the author recounts in four verses what happened in the period directly before the prophecy was given. This flashback is so elaborate that the author deemed it necessary to repeat in v. 12 the standard introduction to a prophecy, in a slightly different way, before the Lord’s word is at last rendered.

The passage in vv. 8–11 starts with King Zedekiah featured as the main character and ends in the same way with this monarch and his future fate. The beginning of the chapter, vv. 1–7, also focuses on him. In this way, King Zedekiah functions as a pivot for the whole chapter.

In v. 8, King Zedekiah initiates the account by making a covenant with the people in Jerusalem, and then does not return in the text until v. 21. Other characters assume his place in the narrative: the members of the ruling classes in Jerusalem and Judah. In this way, a clear distinction is made between the king and the elite of Jerusalem. The king does not play a part in the account dealing with the liberation of the slaves in Jerusalem. In the final verdict, he does not share the fate of the other characters—there follows a separate prophecy announcing his future (v. 21).

The covenant made by the king provides for the liberation of the slaves in the city. The reason why Zedekiah wants to free the slaves at that particular moment is not given. Moreover, in the wording of the covenant in v. 9 we find not only the designation יְהוּדִי ('Judaean'), but also the term וְהָﬠִבְרִיָּה (a Hebrew and a Hebrewess; both male and female) without any elucidation. The word וְהָﬠִבְרִי is used only here, in Jer 34:9 and 14, nowhere else in this book of the Bible. In the Torah, however, it is a special designation for slaves belonging to the own people—in contrast to foreign slaves. Because it is not explained in the text why this specific term has been used, it must serve as a reference to another text. To which text, however, does this catchword refer?

In v. 10, we find a repetition of what was said in v. 9 but—as is always the case with repetitions in the Hebrew Bible—the wording is not exactly the same. The designations יְהוּדִי and וְהָﬠִבְרִיָּה are missing. The repetition in

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v. 10 is, in fact, redundant: the last two words of the verse: ‘they listened and sent away’ are sufficient to let the reader to know what happened. Why then this repetition? The author uses repetition to stress that before the covenant was made, the people of Israel were divided into two groups, to wit, masters and slaves. The purpose of the king’s covenant is exceptional because it annuls this important distinction in society. Henceforth, slaves and masters will become equal to each other, in Biblical terms: ‘brothers’.

Note also that וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ (‘and they listened’) occurs twice in this verse. This emphasis on the willingness of the people to hearken to the LORD’s word emphasizes the contrast with v. 17, where it is stated that the people did not want to listen to God anymore and returned to the disobedience of their fathers who had not hearkened to Him either (v. 14).

Also in v. 11, the designation הָﬠִבְרִיָּה הָﬠִבְרִי (‘slaves’) is missing. The words עֲבָדִים (‘slaves’) and שְׁפָחוֹת (‘handmaids’)—already used in vv. 9 and 10—occur, however, twice. By forcing the male and female slaves into subjugation, the situation is back to normal: slaves are slaves again and the social division into two groups has been restored. Brothers have become slaves once again.

We notice in v. 11 a wordplay: וַיָּשׁוּבוּוּ (‘they returned’), and וַיָּשִׁבוּ (‘they caused to return’; Hiphil). The verb שָׁב (‘to return’, ‘to repent’) is the Leitwort in this chapter as we will see later on; it offers the author various possibilities for repeated wordplay.10

Having read the flashback in vv. 8–11, the reader knows now what has happened in Jerusalem but several questions remain unanswered: what was the purpose of the king’s covenant and why was it made at this moment; why are the slaves designated as הָﬠִבְרִי (‘slaves’) and for what reason did the participants in the covenant change their minds and force their slaves and handmaids into subjugation again?11

1 The Actual Prophecy

After a second introduction, the prophecy announced in v. 8 is rendered at last, starting in v. 12 and encompassing the remaining part of the chapter. The LORD first refers to his own covenant in comparison to the covenant King Zedekiah

10 See also Fischer, Jeremia 26–52, 260.
11 Robert Carroll provides in his commentary even a longer list of unanswered questions and concludes with the exclamation: ‘Many questions, no answers!’ (Carroll, Jeremiah, 648).
had made with the people.\textsuperscript{12} The grammatically superfluous personal pronoun אָנֹכִי (‘I’) stresses the difference between the initiators of the two covenants: the LORD on the one hand and King Zedekiah on the other. The LORD made his covenant much earlier, in the period directly after the Exodus from Egypt. In v. 13, the author adds the designation יִבְנֵי (‘out of the house of slaves’) after the country name Egypt.\textsuperscript{13} In this way, he reminds his readers that their ancestors had been slaves themselves in Egypt.\textsuperscript{14} To own slaves is therefore not self-evident; slaves remain brothers notwithstanding their bondage.\textsuperscript{15}

In v. 14, the riddle as to why in v. 9 the slaves in Judah and Jerusalem are defined by the author as וְהָﬠִבְרִיָּה הָﬠִבְרִי (‘out of the house of slaves’) is solved: it is a reference to a ruling in the LORD’s covenant. But to which text in the Pentateuch is the author referring here? There is no exact parallel in the Pentateuch; the closest resemblance is with Deut 15:12,\textsuperscript{16}

We see that most of the wording in Deut 15:12 returns in Jer 34:14 but that the sequence in which the words appear is different. The version in Jer 34 emphasizes when the slaves should be freed: ‘At the end of seven years’. This emphasis is remarkable because in the account in Jer 34 this time limitation plays no part at all. It is also not in accordance with Deut 15:12, where it is stated that the slaves should be freed after six years, not seven. Moreover, the other stipulations about the release of slaves in Deut 15:12–18 are not repeated in Jer 34—neither the duty to provide the former slaves with goods or the ruling regarding what should happen if a slave wishes to remain a slave. These rules were clearly not relevant to the account of Jer 34. But why then are the time periods of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Cf. Brueggemann, \textit{A Commentary on Jeremiah}, 328. See also Fretheim, \textit{Jeremiah}, 487: ‘Notably, God’s making covenant with Israel’s ancestors (v. 13) is set alongside Zedekiah’s making covenant (v. 8) […]’.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} An expression from the Torah, where it occurs in the Book of Exodus as well as Deuteronomy.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} This also stressed in the Haggadah of Pesach: ‘We were slaves of the Pharaoh in Egypt’.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Compare the conspicuous use of בְּאָח (‘brother’) and בְּרֵע (‘neighbour’) in vv. 9, 14, 15 and 17—in contrast to יִבְנֵי (‘slaves’) and שֶפָּחָה (‘handmaids’).
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Cf. Fretheim, \textit{Jeremiah}, 488.
\end{itemize}
six and seven years mentioned? As already noted, this stipulation makes no sense here: the slaves in question had been slaves for a much longer period of time than six or seven years.\(^\text{17}\) We will return to this question later.

In v. 16, we again note the Leitwort שׁוב (‘to return’). While the verb שׁוב in v. 15 connotes conversion and repentance, this time it means to recant, to turn away from the right path. In the sequel, we notice the verb שׁוב (‘to return’), yet again, now as Hiphil: ‘to cause to return’. By turning away from the right path, the participants in the king’s covenant caused the slaves to return to subjugation—the second use of wordplay with שׁוב in the text.\(^\text{18}\)

The breaking of the covenant is considered a desecration of the LORD’s name, in the first place because it is contrary to both God’s and the king’s covenant, and in the second place because the king’s covenant was concluded in the temple of Jerusalem, ‘the house which is called by my name.’ Accordingly, the king’s covenant had become God’s covenant. The ritual according to which the covenant was made, however, is not yet explained; it will be revealed in vv. 18 and 19. This delay is another example of the literary device used by the author to postpone delivering relevant information until in the sequel of the story.

V. 16 stresses that the breaking of the covenant is not the responsibility of individual Judahites but of the people as a whole. Therefore, the retaliation will be collective too. In the following verse, v. 17, the LORD’s verdict is finally pronounced. This is standard in the book of Jeremiah: first a description of the wrongdoing, then a juridical conclusion, followed by the actual prophecy announcing what will happen and what the LORD will do to retaliate against the committed sins.

The LORD’s reaction is based on the principle of lex talionis.\(^\text{19}\) To describe it, the author makes use of wordplay once again, this time with the Hebrew word דְּרוֹר (‘liberation’). The people had proclaimed liberty for their brothers and neighbours who had been their slaves before; now the LORD will also proclaim

\(^{17}\) For this reason, some scholars (for instance Lundbom, Jeremiah 21–36, 560–61) turn to Lev 25:10, the beginning of the laws in relation of the Jubilee Year, in order to elucidate the liberation of the slaves in Jer 34, but there is no clue in the Jeremiah text that we are dealing here with a year of Jubilee. The same applies to the assumption that the text refers to a Sabbatical Year. See also N.P. Lemche, ‘Manumission of Slaves—the Fallow Year—the Sabbatical Year—the Jubilee Year,’ VT 26 (1976), 38–59, especially 56. Pace N.M. Sarna, ‘Zedekiah’s Emancipation of Slaves and the Sabbatical Year’, in: H.A. Höffner (ed.), Orient and Occident: Essays Presented to Cyrus H. Gordon on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday (AOAT 22), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1973, 143–149.

\(^{18}\) See also Lundbom, Jeremiah 21–36, 564; Fretheim, Jeremiah, 487; Fischer, Jeremia 26–52, 256.

liberty, but this time ‘to the sword, and to the pestilence and to the famine’, the well-known triad in the book of Jeremiah.\textsuperscript{20} Also in this instance, the author specifies what is announced in the prophecy only later on, in vv. 18 and 19. His typical style is not to provide the reader with all the necessary information at one time, as we have seen before.

V. 18 stresses that the covenant that King Zedekiah made became a covenant with the \textsc{Lord} himself because it was concluded in his presence (לְפָנָי) and corroborated by a special ritual, briefly described as: ‘when they cut the calf in twain and passed between the parts thereof.’ This ritual is mentioned for a second time in v. 19: ‘who passed between the parts of the calf.’ In both cases, the description is not elaborate enough to be understandable to a reader unacquainted with the ritual. Although the ritual also occurs in Gen 15, we have to turn to extra-Biblical sources for more information.\textsuperscript{21} The brevity in wording suggests that the first readers were assumed to know the ritual and its meaning.

We notice in v. 18 a wordplay with the Hebrew verb עבר (‘to pass’ but also ‘to transgress’). The author speaks about the men who have transgressed \textsc{Lord’s covenant}, although they had passed (וַיַּﬠַבְרוּ) between the parts of the calf before.\textsuperscript{22} The wordplay underlines the sinful inconsistency in their behaviour.

In v. 19, we are finally informed who was present during the ritual: ‘the princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land.’ It is striking, however, that the list of participants does not include King Zedekiah, although he gave the order to liberate the slaves in v. 8. Only in v. 21 is the fate of the king announced, and his destiny differs in some aspects from that of the participants in the ritual, described in v. 20, as we have previously mentioned.

Note that the first part of the prophecy of doom is the same both in v. 20 and in v. 21. The \textsc{Lord} will deliver the participants in the ritual as well as King Zedekiah ‘into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of them that seek their life.’ But the participants in the ritual will encounter an even more horrible fate: ‘their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven

\textsuperscript{20} Here, however, not in the standard sequence, ‘by the sword, and by the famine, and by the pestilence’—pestilence and famine have changed places. Cf. e.g. W.L. Holladay, \textit{Jeremiah} 2 (Hermeneia), Minneapolis 1989, 242. More elaborate in: H. Weippert, \textit{Die Prosareden des Jeremiabuches} (BZAW 132), Berlin/New York 1973, 149–191.

\textsuperscript{21} The most important parallel is the treaty between the Assyrian king Assurnirari v and his vassal Mat’i’lu of Bit-Agusi; cf. e.g. Lundbom, \textit{Jeremiah} 21–36, 565.

\textsuperscript{22} See also Allen, \textit{Jeremiah}, 387–88; Fischer, \textit{Jeremia} 26–52, 257–58; Lundbom, \textit{Jeremiah} 21–36, 564.
and to the beasts of the earth’, while King Zedekiah apparently will not be killed by the enemy. Strangely enough, the princes of the king are spared too according to v. 21, while according to v. 20 the princes of Judah and Jerusalem will be killed and not buried.

In v. 22, it is finally revealed that the LORD will order the army of the Babylonian king—that according to the preceding verse had withdrawn itself from King Zedekiah—to return to Jerusalem. We notice here another instance of the use of שׁוב (‘to return’), as Leitwort, this time as Hiphil: ‘to cause to return’. In the same way that the people of Jerusalem had caused the slaves to return to bondage, the LORD will cause the army of the Babylonian king to return to Jerusalem.23

The prophecy that the army of the Babylonian king will return to Jerusalem after having raised his siege of the town by withdrawing the troops, has been placed at the end of the account but it sheds a different light on what has been related before. What is the connection between the making and the subsequent breaking of the covenant on the one hand and the movements of the Babylonian army on the other?

There is an event from Roman history that could be of interest.24 It took place during the Second Slave War, when Salvius, the leader of the insurgent slaves, besieged the Sicilian town of Morgantina. To quote the ancient Greek historian Diodorus Siculus,

Having in this way made himself absolute master of the open country, [Salvius] again besieged Morgantina, and promised liberty to all the slaves who were in the city. But their masters promised the same to them, if they would be faithful, and join with them in the defense of the place; and they chose rather to accept what was offered by their masters. They fought so resolutely, that they forced the enemy to raise their siege. But the strategos afterwards revoked the promise of liberty for the slaves; and this caused many of them to run away to join the rebels. (Diodorus Siculus, 36,4)

It is possible that the ruling class in Jerusalem followed the same tactics: they liberated the slaves in order to use them as soldiers against the enemy25 but

23 See also Holladay, Jeremiah 2, 242; Lundbom, Jeremiah 21–36, 564.
25 Cf. e.g. A. van Selms, Jeremia deel II (POT), Nijkerk 1974, 118: ‘krijgsdienst was een prerogatie van vrije mannen.’
after the retreat of the Babylonian army they enslaved them again. But if this was the case, why were the female slaves set free too? They surely could not serve as part of the Jerusalem defence . . . Other solutions have been proposed.\textsuperscript{26} Wilhelm Rudolph, for instance, suggested:

\begin{quote}
Wahrscheinlich wollte man durch diese soziale Tat Jahwe gnädig stimmen: daß dabei die einzelnen Dienstherren weniger hungrige Mäuler zu stopfen hatten, war eine nicht unangenehme Nebenwirkung.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

In any case, it is probable that the author is suggesting a connection between the retreat of the Babylonian army and the breaking of the covenant. He did not offer the readers this clue earlier in his account because he wanted them to remain curious about the reason the recently liberated slaves were enslaved again. What could seem another example of the author’s clumsiness\textsuperscript{28} is in fact a literary device to introduce suspense into the account.

\section{Scriptural References within the Hebrew Bible}

Two problems in the prophecy of Jer 34 are not solved yet, to wit, why the specific term \textit{הָﬠִבְרִיָּה הָﬠִבְרִי} is used and for what reason the time limit of the seventh year is mentioned in the text. In search of an answer, we must turn to another chapter in the Book of Jeremiah, to wit chapter 26.\textsuperscript{29} In this text, the author concentrates on the audience’s reaction to the words of the prophets; therefore, he does not elaborate on what the prophet Jeremiah was actually saying. Instead, he uses without much elucidation catchwords and catchphrases referring to other passages in the book of Jeremiah where more information about the contents of his prophecies is given.

In Jer 26:6 for instance, the Lord announces that He ‘will make this house like Shiloh’ without any clarification. What is the meaning of this prophecy?

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27] Rudolph, \textit{Jeremia}, 223.
\item[28] ‘Es ist stilistisch wenig geschickt, daß man erst durch diese Schlufssätze erfährt, daß die Aufhebung der Sklavenbefreiung und die Strafrede Jer’s in die Pause während der Belagerung fallen.’ (Rudolph, \textit{Jeremia}, 225).
\item[29] See also Klaas A.D. Smelik, ‘Jeremia 26 als literaire compositie’, in: B.E.J.H. Becking et al. (eds), \textit{Door het oog van de profeten: Exegetische studies aangeboden aan prof. dr. C. van Leeuwen} (Utrechtse Theologische Reeks, 8), Utrecht 1989, 79–96.
\end{footnotes}
The catchword ‘like Shiloh’ refers the reader to other passages such as Jer 7:14, where it states,

Therefore will I do unto this house,
which is called by my name,
wherein you trust,
and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers,
as I have done to Shiloh.

Apparently, there is a connection between the trust in the inviolability of the temple in Jerusalem and the fate of Shiloh. But we need more information. In order to get this, we have to turn to Jer 7:12,

But go you now unto my place which was in Shiloh,
where I set my name at the first,
and see what I did to it for the wickedness of my people Israel.

According to this prophecy, the evil fate of the temple in Shiloh can still be seen. This means that its ruins were still visible at the time. Some scholars see a connection to the events described in 1 Sam 4 but it is rather improbable that the author is referring to such an early period here. Moreover, in the prophecy it is stated that God did this ‘for the wickedness of my people Israel’, referring to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom by the Assyrian kings around 720 BCE.

What the prophet is saying, is that the Judahites show the same sinful behaviour that previously led to the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh. Therefore, the temple of Jerusalem will share its fate,

Therefore will I do unto this house,
which is called by my name,
wherein you trust,
and unto the place which I gave to you and to your fathers,
as I have done to Shiloh.
And I will cast you out of my sight,
as I have cast out all your brethren,
even the whole seed of Ephraim. (Jer 7:14–15)

The reference to the exile of Ephraim, which stands for the Northern Kingdom, suggests that the destruction of the temple at Shiloh happened at the end
of the eighth century BCE, one hundred years earlier than Jer 26 is situated in time.

Finally, the meaning of the expression ‘to make this house like Shiloh’ becomes clear to the reader: the enemy will come to destroy the temple of Jerusalem. We conclude that without knowledge of Jer 7 the meaning of the prophecy in chapter 26 cannot be understood. For this reason, the author uses catchwords and catchphrases referring to this text.

Along with the references within the book of Jeremiah, chapter 26 also contains a quotation from another book of the Bible, to wit Mic 3:12. In Jer 26:18, this text is cited in almost the same wording as in the original,30

Micah the Morasthite prophesied in the days of Hezekiah, king of Judah, and spoke to all the people of Judah, saying,
Thus says the LORD of hosts,
Zion shall be plowed like a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest.

The quotation is, however, too short to reveal why Jerusalem will be destroyed. The reason why only becomes clear by reading the whole passage Mic 3:9–12, in which the prophet refers to the contradictory behaviour of the Judahite elite: corrupt as they are, they are sinning against the LORD but at the same time trusting in his protection against all evil,

The heads of [Jerusalem] judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money: yet will they lean upon the LORD, and say, Is not the LORD among us? none evil can come upon us. (Mic 3:11)

We are dealing here with the general belief among the inhabitants of ancient Jerusalem that the LORD will protect the Temple in all circumstances, because it is his dwelling place on earth. No evil can come upon the city notwithstanding the sinful behaviour of its inhabitants. This trust is also an important theme in the prophecy we find in Jer 7:1–15, as we have seen before. This is all the more

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30 Only the introduction and the spelling of the plural of one word are different; cf. e.g. Van Selms, *Jeremia deel II*, 31–32.
striking because there are no other texts in the Hebrew Bible dealing with this unjustified trust in the inviolability of the temple. Therefore, it is improbable that the reference to both texts by the author of Jeremiah is simply coincidental. Through the use of catchwords and catchphrases he urges the reader to combine the contents of various Biblical passages in order to understand what is at stake.

If I am correct in assuming that the author wanted his readers to look at both texts—Jer 7:1–15 and Mic 3:9–12—in order to understand the meaning of Jer 26, then we have a clue about the way Scriptural texts are referred to in the Hebrew Bible. The reference is not only to the words actually cited but also to the original context of the quotation. This is also the way that references to Biblical texts are given in Rabbinic literature. Only part of the Biblical passage is actually cited but the reader is supposed to consider the context of the quotation as well. Sometimes, the most relevant part of the text is not even quoted. For instance, in the Mekhilta we find a listing of Biblical texts relating to the Hebrew word אֱמוּנָה. One of these texts is Exod 17:12. In this case, only the beginning of the verse is cited (‘And Aaron and Hur stayed up his hands’) while the word אֱמוּנָה occurs in the second part, not quoted (‘and his hands were steady [אֱמוּנָ֖ה] until the going down of the sun’). The reader is assumed to know the whole verse by heart, including the part not cited. If one does not consider the rest of the verse, the meaning of the quotation will remain obscure.

I want to suggest that this kind of partial reference where the reader has to fill in the remainder—typical of Rabbinic literature—was already in use in the Hebrew Bible itself. The reader of Jer 26 is supposed to have knowledge of the whole passage in Micah 3 in order to understand that the unjustified trust in the inviolability of the Temple is also at stake, not only the coming destruction of Jerusalem.

Similarly, Jer 34 contains catchphrases which refer the reader to Deut 15:12–18 as a whole, not only to v. 12. The first instance is in v. 9, when the reader encounters the specific term מביאוּרֵי אֵלֵבֶר יָהְבָא יָהְבָא without elucidation. The second instance occurs in v. 14, when the term is used again—this time in combination with the time limit of six years and the end of the seventh year. The (hidden) purpose of both references is to make readers consider the sequel of the text in Deut 15 when reading Jer 34, in this way combining Jer 34:14 with another verse in the Torah, to wit Deut 15:15,

32 Mekhilta, Tractate Beshallach 7,144 (ed. Lauterbach 1, 167).
And you should remember
that you were a slave in the land of Egypt,
and the LORD your God redeemed you:
therefore I command you this thing today.

After how many years a slave should be let free, is therefore a question of no
importance in the interpretation of Jer 34. What is important is that the people
of Judah remember that their ancestors had been slaves in the land of Egypt,
‘the house of slaves’, before they were redeemed by the LORD and before He
gave them the commandments relating to bondage. Their attitude towards
their own slaves should, therefore, be in accordance with the covenant made
by the LORD with his liberated people after the Exodus. In that sense, the new
covenant made by king Zedekiah with his people was a correct response to the
earlier one—not because of any time limit regarding bondage but because it
acknowledged that the people of Israel as a whole were liberated slaves, a fact
with consequences for the way they should treat their own slaves.

King Zedekiah’s covenant, in proclaiming liberty for the slaves in Jerusalem,
was therefore ‘right in the eyes of the LORD’ (v. 15) because it showed that the
king had finally understood the message of Deut 15:12–18—in contrast to his
ancestors. Moreover, the king’s covenant had been made in the House of the
LORD, the temple of Jerusalem. Thus the liberation of the slaves had been a
religious act and to break the covenant was a desecration of the LORD’s holy
name. Retaliation was inevitable, as the first readers of the text had experi-
enced in their own lives having survived the destruction of Jerusalem and
Judah by the Babylonians in 586 BCE.

3 Conclusion

In this contribution, we have established that various literary devices and
Leitwörter appear in all parts of the text of Jer 34 underlining the inner coher-
ence of the chapter. Furthermore, we have seen that Jer 34 is part of a much
more extensive collection of texts to which Deut 15 belonged as well. Attempts
to harmonize Jer 34 with the laws in the Torah in relation to debt slavery,
however, appear to miss the point; they make no sense because we are deal-
ing here with catchwords and catchphrases, not with an historical account of
what actually happened in Jerusalem during the Babylonian siege. Referring to
other Biblical texts with catchwords and catchphrases proves to be a common
device in the Book of Jeremiah. In this respect, the suggestion was made that
the way of referring to other Biblical texts in the Book of Jeremiah resembles the
way Biblical references are made in Rabbinic literature.