

## THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ROOT *šwb* IN JEREMIAH

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### *Introduction*

The New Covenant announced by the prophets is expressed through many lexical forms and metaphors. While Israel was experiencing death because of the Exile, the prophets announced restoration and reconstitution. One of the key words in Jeremiah with regard to this theme is the Hebrew verb *šwb*, which can mean either “turn away” (apostatize) or “turn back” (return or repent).

The purpose of this synchronic study is to analyze the use of the verb *šwb* in Jeremiah, bringing out the theological meaning of the word. The first part of the article will show from Jer 2:1-4:2 that YHWH is the motivator of the return (forgiveness) and also how “return” involves human conversion (confession and commitment).<sup>1</sup> In the second part, an examination of 31:15-25 will show how Jeremiah presents the New Covenant through the use of the root *šwb*. Israel’s conversion will be seen to involve an acceptance of YHWH’s initial forgiveness and a commitment to live a new covenantal relationship.

<sup>1</sup>Commentaries, articles, and monographs which treat Jer 2:1-4:2 and 30-31 include the following: E. W. Nicholson, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1-25*, CBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973); W. L. Holladay, *A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah: Chapters 1-25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); B. Walter, *A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1-25* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986-1996); W. Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Home Coming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999); T. R. Hobbs, “Jeremiah 3:1-5 and Deut 24:1-4,” *ZAW* 86 (1974): 23-29; D. Jobling, “Jeremiah’s Poem 3:1-4:2,” *VT* 28 (1978): 45-55; T. W. Overholt, “Jeremiah 2 and the Problem of Audience Reading,” *CBQ* 41 (1979): 162-273; P. Bovati, “Dio protagonista del ritorno di Geremia,” *Parola, Spirito e Vita* 22 (1990): 17-34; H. Leene, “Jeremiah 31:22-26 and the Redaction of the Book of Comfort,” *ZAW* 104 (1992): 349-363; M. Zipor, “Scenes from a Marriage according to Jeremiah,” *JSOT* 65 (1995): 83-91; M. E. Shield, “Circumcision of the Prostitute: Gender, Sexuality and Call to Repentance in Jer 3:1-4:4,” *Biblical Interpretation* 3 (1995): 61-74; A. R. Pete and K. M. O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jer 2:1-4:2,” *Biblical Interpretation* 4 (1996): 288-310; B. A. Bozak, “Heeding the Received Text: Jer 2:20a, A Case,” *Bib* 77 (1996): 524-537; J. Unterman, *From Repentance to Redemption: Jeremiah’s Thought in Transition*, *JSOTSup* 54 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1987); M. E. Biddle, *A Redaction of History of Jere 2:1-4:2*, *Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 77 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1989).

*Return as Divine Forgiveness and Human Conversion*

The root *šwb*<sup>2</sup> is often used by Jeremiah in a metaphoric sense to express the idea of forgiveness and conversion.<sup>3</sup> In a number of references, YHWH is the causative agent of this "return" (cf. Jer 12:15; 33:7); in others, the agent is an invitation from YHWH to Israel "to return" (cf. 3:12, 14; 31:21). These texts substantiate YHWH's active role in the historical and religious existence of Israel. At the time when Israel experienced the crisis of the Exile as a result of the nation's weakness, YHWH could be forgive them and invite them to a new way of life. Israel, who recognizes YHWH's love, cries: "Make me return and I shall return" (31:18c).

A panoramic view of Jeremiah's work suggests that from the initial chapters, parting from the concrete historical situation of Israel, the prophet develops the theme of "return" with YHWH as the "primary agent" and Israel as the "secondary agent" of YHWH's causative action. This theme is developed in 2:1-4:2.<sup>4</sup> This section consists of a series of subsections in which the relationship between YHWH and Israel is presented metaphorically as a conjugal union, with YHWH as the husband and Israel as the wife.<sup>5</sup> The theme of "return" in the whole book is inspired by this image. Subsequent texts that speak of "return," especially in the Book of Consolation<sup>6</sup> where the concept of the new covenant is announced, must all be read against this background.

Jeremiah 2 is characterized by words such as *bālak* *ʿab<sup>r</sup>rēy* (2:5, 8, 23, 25), *ʿāzab* (2:13, 17), and *tāḥaq* (2:5), *ʿab<sup>r</sup>bāh*, *ḥesed* (2:2). Israel forsakes the Lord and becomes distant from him by her sexual infidelity (cf. Jer 3). Thus, the two chapters are joined verbally and semantically.

Three noteworthy metaphors employed by the poet in 2:1-3 are marriage, wilderness, and harvest offering.

a. In the marriage metaphor (Jer 2:1-2a), the prophet equates the relationship between Israel and YHWH to a conjugal union in which YHWH remembers better times in the past.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed study on this verbal root, see W. L. Holladay, *The Root šwb in the Old Testament with Particular Reference to Its Usage in Covenantal Contexts* (Leiden: Brill 1958).

<sup>3</sup>We must here distinguish between "virtual" (available or potential) and "actual" (accepted or realized) divine forgiveness, the latter being received through the process of repentance.

<sup>4</sup>The unit ends at 4:2 because in 4:3 there is a change of addressee of YHWH's oracle; YHWH now speaks to Judah and Jerusalem; cf. Unterman, 30-32.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Zipor, 83-91; Pete and O'Connor, 289-291.

<sup>6</sup>Jeremiah scholarship considers Jer 30-31 as "The Book of Consolation"; cf. B. A. Bozak, *Life "Anew": A Literary-Theological Study of Jer 30-31*, *Analecta biblica* 122 (Roma: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1991), 5; see esp. n. 30.

b. The wilderness metaphor (v. 2b) alludes to Israel's wanderings in the wilderness of Sinai for forty years before entering into "the promised land" (cf. Exod 15:22-17:15; Num 10:33-22:1). During this period YHWH guaranteed Israel's safety, i.e., by the pillar of cloud and fire (Exod 13:21-22) and by the provision of food and drink.<sup>7</sup> The prophet notes that Israel's love for YHWH at the time did not diminish in spite of the wilderness experience. He also remembers how Israel remained faithful initially even in the face of hardship. This memory serves as the basis to question Israel's deviant behavior after settling in the promised land under improved conditions.

c. The harvest-offering metaphor (v. 3) refers to the Torah's prescription that the firstfruits of any produce be offered to the Lord as a gift (Exod 23:19; Num 18:12-14; cf. Prov 3:9; Hos 9:11), for this part of the harvest belonged to him. Here Israel, as a nation, is pictured as the "firstfruit" that belongs to the Lord, thus occupying a prime position among all the nations that are gathered in the harvest.

The positive marriage and harvest-offering metaphors demonstrate that Israel belongs completely to the Lord: she is his spouse and precious possession. The wilderness metaphor, on the other hand, shows YHWH's loving care for Israel and Israel's reciprocal response to his love. These divine memories of better days set up a sacred and positive perspective to which the later deviant behavior of Israel will be compared. While YHWH has remained faithful, Israel has abandoned the union and forsaken him.

The roots  $\$sd$ ,<sup>8</sup>  $\$bb$ ,  $\$blk$   $\$bry$  in Jer 2:1-3 are also often found in covenant contexts.<sup>9</sup> This provides some formal similarity between our text and covenant texts. In fact, the language of v. 2 also alludes to the Sinai Covenant, which was metaphorically the wedding of Israel and YHWH.<sup>10</sup> From 2:5, the prophet begins to recount the present unfaithfulness on the part of Israel to YHWH's love ( $\$sd$ ).

Jeremiah 2:4-13 stands out as a literary unit, distinct from the preceding (vv. 1-3) and the following sections (vv. 14-15). In v. 3 we have the phrase  $n^{\text{um}}$ -YHWH ("oracle of the Lord"), which concludes that unit. Verse 14 introduces a thematic change, signaling the beginning of a new pericope.

Within vv. 4-13, the sin of Israel is presented chiasmatically as follows in vv. 5-8:

<sup>7</sup>G. I. Davies, "Wilderness Wanderings," *ABD*, 5: 912-914.

<sup>8</sup> $\$sd$  applies to both YHWH and Israel. It is YHWH's gift of himself in love to Israel and the response in total faithfulness on the part of Israel; cf. Holladay, 83.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Brueggemann, 32-33.

<sup>10</sup>P. C. Craigie and P. H. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah, Chapter 1-25*, WBC 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 24.

A fathers strayed (v. 5a)

B go after (v. 5b)

C where is the Lord (v. 6)

D wilderness (v. 6b, c)

D' my land (v. 7)

C' where is the Lord (v. 8)

B' go after (v. 8)

A' leaders rebelled (v. 8a)<sup>11</sup>

The central part of this chiasmic structure focuses on the land. The wilderness ("a land of deserts and pits," "of drought and deep darkness," where no one lives) stands in contrast to the fertile land of YHWH ("my land"). The negative description of the wilderness suggests it is a lifeless place. From this "lifeless" place, YHWH leads Israel out to settle the nation on a fertile land.

Israel—together with her leaders, priests, and prophets—has forsaken YHWH and gone after other divinities. The ideas expressed in vv. 5-8 are taken up again in v. 13 to summarize the infidelity of Israel. Israel has forsaken the Lord, *an ever-flowing spring of life*, who brought the nation out of Egypt to the fertile land. Israel has distanced herself from YHWH by going after vanity—*waterless and lifeless cisterns*.

On account of their failure, YHWH declares his intention in v. 9 (*lākēn*) to "contend" with Israel and its children. The Hebrew root *rib* means "to contend," specifically "to bring a lawsuit against someone" or "to bring a person to trial."<sup>12</sup> The basis of YHWH's contention against Israel is the Sinaitic covenant and its renewals with subsequent generations. In this covenant, Israel had pledged total allegiance to

<sup>11</sup>Introduced by *lākēn*, v. 9 forms the conclusion to the description of the sin of Israel in vv. 5-8. With the *kî* of v. 10 a subunit begins, which develops further the situational reference of vv. 5-8 that Israel has exchanged her glory for what does not profit. In v. 12, there is a change of addressee; YHWH now speaks to the heavens, asking them to witness to his grief. The *kî* in v. 13 has a consequential value and introduces Israel's double sin.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. H. B. Huffman, "The Covenant Lawsuits in the Prophets," *JBL* 78 (1959): 285-295. For a detailed discussion of how the prophetic *rib* functions, see P. Bovati, *Re-establishing Justice: Legal Terms, Concepts and Procedures*, JSOTSup 105 (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1994), 20-120; see also J. Harvey, "Le *Rib* pattern: Requisitoire prophétique sur la rupture de l'Alliance," *Bib* 43 (1962): 172-196; Brueggemann, 33. A contrary opinion is held by D. R. Daniels, "Is There a 'Prophetic Lawsuit' Genre?" *ZAW* 99 (1987): 339-360. He argues that the genre "prophetic lawsuit" is not identifiable. He argues further that the appeals to heaven and earth in those texts classified as "prophetic lawsuits" are later developments under Assyrian influences and must be understood in relation to the effect of man's behavior on these entities. Daniel's arguments are not convincing, for whether or not there is an Assyrian influence, it still remains that texts such as Jer 2:3-13 perform a certain function in their context (immediate and proximate). It may not be adequate to transfer meaning in one cultural context to the other without taking into consideration the modifications that might have taken place.

YHWH and accepts the consequences of any failure. Failure has occurred; thus YHWH summons Israel to trial.

In the setting introduced already at 2:9, the whole of 2:14-37 discusses the conduct and deviant behavior of Israel as if in a court setting.<sup>13</sup> The case is opened, and Israel's current conduct is examined against its former loyalty (cf. vv. 2-3), which has now become debased. In general terms, v. 11 states that Israel has rebelled against YHWH by abandoning the true faith and resorting to the practices of the fertility cults associated with the Canaanite deity Baal. After receiving salvation from YHWH, Israel has rejected the marital union with YHWH to live as a prostitute (v. 20).<sup>14</sup> Marital infidelity is implied throughout the rest of the chapter, which portrays Israel as now married to Baal. All this serves as the basis of the disputation speech in 3:1-4:2.<sup>15</sup>

In chapter 2, the focus has been on the refusal of Israel to revere YHWH as its only God, a refusal that results in its affliction by foreign powers and ultimately in the Exile. The indictment of evil is presented from the perspective of the covenant. Though the term "covenant" is not used, covenant language is abundant and there is allusion to the marriage relationship between YHWH and Israel. Israel's failure leads to apostasy and servitude to foreign and pagan powers (Assyria and Egypt).<sup>16</sup>

The metaphor of marriage and prostitution in chapter 2 is resumed in chapter 3 to further discuss the unfaithfulness of Israel. A new element, "divorce," is introduced. Nevertheless, there is also a passionate appeal for repentance, together with the assurance of YHWH's forgiveness and mercy. The root *šwb* is dominant in this chapter and is used in a variety of ways (cf. 3:1, 7, 10, 12, 14, 19, 22).

The rhetorical question in 3:1 opens a disputation speech on the adultery of Israel. Israel is equated to a defiled wife, who under the Deuteronomic legislation (cf. Deut 24:1-4) has no possibility of returning to her first husband because she has become an abomination. The verse presents a dilemma. Can Israel, the adulterous wife, return to YHWH in the light of Deut 24:1-4?<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Walter, 40-41; Brueggemann, 37.

<sup>14</sup>For a discussion of translation difficulties of 2:20a, see Bozak, 524-537. She proposes that Hebrew poetic diction must guide the translation of this verse to bring out its contextual meaning. Thus, the MT of Jer 2:20a, as it stands, makes sense if we view it poetically. Hence, the first-person suffix of the verbs *šbr* and *ntq* must be understood as YHWH.

<sup>15</sup>Cf. Shields, 65-66.

<sup>16</sup>Craigie and Kelly, 45.

<sup>17</sup>T. R. Hobbs, "Jeremiah 3:1-5 and Deuteronomy 24:1-4," *ZAW* 86 (1974): 23-29; see

The main issue in this verse appears to be the defilement of the woman—in other words, infidelity to a former relationship. According to Deut 24:1, the husband may send her away if “she has become displeasing.” As long as she has not had sexual involvement with another man, she can return to the first husband. Any later sexual relationship defiles her and becomes an insurmountable obstacle for her return, because it is an “abomination.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus in Jer 3:1-2, we have an argument from a lesser matter to a greater matter. That Israel has forsaken the Lord is sinful, but it is a lesser matter (v. 1). The grievous matter is that she has become a prostitute (v. 2). Her sexual infidelity defiles her; hence the impossibility of her return to the first union. In the light of Deuteronomy, the prophet presents the impossibility of reconstructing such a broken union even though the former husband may desire it. The broken relationship between YHWH and Israel seems to be beyond repair in the face of the law.

The idea of infidelity is developed in the whole pericope (3:1-13)<sup>19</sup> to include both Judah (vv. 2-5) and Israel (vv. 6-10). In v. 12 the return and reconciliation, which seem impossible, become an invitation and a desire from YHWH (cf. 3:14,19-25; 4:1-4; cf. Hos 11:8-9). YHWH’s potential forgiveness (3:12) and Israel’s acknowledgment of sin (3:13; cf. 3:25) make reconciliation possible.

The invitation from YHWH to Israel “to return,” beginning in 3:12, becomes the dominant theme through 4:2, the climax of the whole section. YHWH directly launches the invitation four times (3:12-13; 3:14-15; 3:21-22b; 4:1-2). Below is a brief analysis of the pericopes in which these invitations are found:

Jer 3:14-18

- a. invitation (v. 14a)
- b. promise of unification (v. 14b)
- c. restoration of leaders (v. 15)
- d. restoration of people (v. 16)
- e. restoration of the city (v. 17)
- f. unification (restoration) of Judah and Israel (v. 18)

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also J. D. Martin, “The Forensic Background to Jeremiah 3:1,” *VT* 19 (1969): 82-92; S. Lafont, *Femmes, Droit et justice dans l'antiquité orientale: Contribution à l'étude du droit pénale au proche-orient ancien*, *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* 165 (Göttingen: Editions Universitaires Freiburg Suisse, 1999), 29-91, esp. 87.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Hobbs, 25-26. In her study of biblical sources (OT) on divorce, Lafont, 88, affirms that “le divorce est directement et clairement attesté comme sanction de l'infidélité conjugale en Jer 3:8 seulement.”

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Jobling, 45-55.

As can be seen, this pericope is about YHWH's call to Israel to "return," followed by a promise of unification, restoration (of leaders, people, and the city), and the unification of Judah and Israel. The theme of restoration is continued in the following pericope, where Israel's return (commitment to new life) becomes a blessing for the nations (4:1-2).

Jeremiah 3:19-4:2 presents the following thematic structure:

- a. sons (v. 19a)
- b. sin (vv. 19b-20)
- c. invitation (vv. 21-22b)
- d. repentance (vv. 22c-25)
- e. forgiveness and blessing for all nations (4:1-2)

This unit (3:14-4:2) concludes the theme of chapters 2 and 3. In 3:19-20, we have the combined metaphors of "sons" and the "unfaithful woman." YHWH had adopted Israel and Judah as sons and given them the promised land, but they failed to respond to their sonship and went astray. This has caused "divine agony of heart."<sup>20</sup> These verses reflect the warmth and love that reside permanently in God's heart. Though YHWH is grieved and disappointed at the failure of Israel, he still loves her and desires repentance (cf. 3:22). Such a strong desire on the part of YHWH could be interpreted as "divine mercy."

In 3:1 the rhetorical question was raised, "Is return to YHWH possible?" Now in 3:22 the prophet announces for the third time the divine invitation to return. In light of the preceding narrative, this is an extraordinary and undeserved act of divine grace.

The invitation to return indicates the mercy of YHWH, the Lord's potential forgiveness. Actual divine forgiveness comes about only after true repentance, confession (cf. v. 13a) and commitment (cf. 4:1b-2). Judah did try "to return" with half a heart (3:10), but this was unacceptable to YHWH. Conversion involves an acknowledgment of sin (confession) and a commitment to embrace a new way of life (vv. 22c-25), to "no longer go astray" (4:1). The rhetorical devices of vv. 21-22b are continued in vv. 22c-25, where the prophet speaks as if the words are from the people. It is his hope that the people will take such words on their lips and return to the Lord. In their immediate context, the words of vv. 22c-25 have the form of a liturgy of penitence. They reflect the stages in the return to YHWH. First, they declare their recognition that "You are the Lord our God." This statement is significant because the root of their past failure lies in not recognizing the Lord as the one and true Lord. The second stage is their renunciation of the shrines of the deities in which they had sought

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Craigie and Kelly, 64-65.

refuge and put their trust (v. 23). Now that they have realized that these false gods cannot save them, they affirm that "truly in the Lord our God is the salvation of Israel" (v. 23c). The divine response in 4:1-2, already expressed in 3:14-18, concludes the penitential act. Strangely enough, 4:1-2 applies to the nations the benefits of Israel's confession of sin and commitment to a new covenantal relationship with YHWH (cf. 3:14-18).<sup>21</sup>

The invitation to return in these chapters is not in the physical sense of motion, but concerns an interior change initiated by the grace of God through his potential forgiveness. This leads to true confession of sin and actual divine forgiveness. In consequence, the covenantal relationship is reestablished.

### *Return and the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:15-25*

The images and the theme of return found in the literary unit 2:1-4:2 are also present in the units 31:15-22 and 31:23-25.

The formula "thus says the Lord" in v. 15 indicates the beginning of this unit, which is repeated in v. 16. In v. 23, the same formula begins another unit. The unity of the pericope lies in the repetition of certain key words, i.e., the root *šwb* "turn" occurs nine times in the pericope. Apart from vv. 15 and 20, it is present in every verse. Other words and their synonyms which hold the unit together are "children" in vv. 15-17, also present as "son" in v. 20 and as "daughter" in v. 22.

The unit consists of five parts, each having a different speaker (God, Ephraim, and the prophet) or addressee. It presents the following division:

- a. introduction to the poem by the prophet (v. 15)
- b. YHWH's speech to Rachel (vv. 16-17)
- c. Ephraim's repentance (vv. 18-19)
- d. YHWH's reply to Ephraim (v. 20)
- e. YHWH's calls for Virgin Israel to repent (vv. 21-22)

Verse 15b introduces Rachel as mourning over her children in Ramah. According to the Genesis account, Rachel<sup>22</sup> was the mother of Joseph (and thus the grandmother of Ephraim and Manasseh) and of Benjamin (Gen 30:2-24; 35:15-16; 41:51-52). These are the children over whom she mourns. The name Ramah appears in Jer 40:1 as a stopover for the captives from Judah and Jerusalem on their way to exile in Babylon.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Perhaps this alludes to Gen 22:18 and 26:4.

<sup>22</sup>Rachel was Jacob's chosen wife (Gen 29:18-19) and thus the female ancestor of Israel, who corresponds to Jacob in Jer 30:10. The feelings of Jacob reflected in Jer 30:10 are similar to those of Rachel in 31:15.

<sup>23</sup>L. G. Keown, J. P. Scalise, and G. T. Smothers, *A Commentary on the Book of*

It is, therefore, appropriate to picture Rachel grieving here over the generations of her children who have been taken captive or banished. Her mourning corresponds to the description of the mother who does not forget her children (cf. Isa 49:15).

In vv. 16-17, YHWH answers the disconsolate mother. The response is an invitation to wipe away her tears and end her weeping (cf. Isa 25:8; Jer 30:10). This represents a fulfillment of the promise in 31:13, "I will turn their mourning into joy." Because in v. 15 Rachel is presented as weeping over her missing children, the promise can be seen as referring to the return of the children from the land of the enemy to their own land (v. 16). The root *šwb* in this context has a literal geographical meaning. Yet, because of semantic resonance, the notion of repentance and restoration is always in the background. The consolation of Rachel indicates YHWH's intention and desire to have Israel return, as specified in the invitation to Virgin Israel.

In 31:18-19, the lost child admits ignoring the discipline of the Lord. Ephraim stands for the whole northern kingdom of Israel in this chapter (cf. 31:9, 18-20).

In the Book of Consolation, the punishment suffered by Israel at the hand of her enemies (and also during the Exile) is God's just discipline for her sin (30:11, 14). With the expression "you have disciplined me, and I was disciplined" (31:18b), Ephraim admits its sin and also the effectiveness of YHWH's correction. In v. 18c, the nation submits to the covenant of the Lord with the expression, "Return me and I shall be returned." This verse is formally similar to 3:22b. Just as in 3:22b, only YHWH's initiative makes the action of Ephraim possible. The meaning of 31:18c is not only geographical (a return from the exile), but also theological (an internal conversion to a new way of life). The theological implication finds support in 31:18b, where Ephraim acknowledges its guilt and the effectiveness of the Lord's correction. Acknowledgment of guilt is an interior act that leads to conversion. Further support for this understanding is found in YHWH's answer to Ephraim's prayer, which is followed by YHWH's invitation, no longer to Ephraim, but to the Virgin Israel. The formal similarities between this unit and chapter 3 serve to tie the two passages together, revealing that it is the grace of God that transforms.<sup>24</sup> Israel, the unfaithful wife (3:1-2; 3:20) who committed adultery under every tree (3:12-13), has been transformed into the "Virgin Israel" after she confesses her sin and commits herself to a new life. In v.

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*Jeremiah, Chapters 26-52*, WBC 27 (Dallas: Word, 1995), 119.

<sup>24</sup>J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB 21 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1978), 275-276.

22b, the new status of Israel is attributed to YHWH. There is also a metaphorical presentation of a new conjugal relationship, which the context (immediate and proximate) suggests should be interpreted as referring to the new marital union between YHWH and Israel.<sup>25</sup>

Jeremiah 31:23-25 contains a short introduction (v. 23a) and a divine speech (vv. 23b-25). Verse 26 serves as a transition verse between this divine speech and the next oracle that begins in v. 27.

The oracle is a promise of the restoration of the land of Judah and its surrounding towns.<sup>26</sup> The relationship between vv. 15-22 and vv. 23-25 is suggested by the verbal links "cities" (v. 21/vv. 23 and 24) and "in the land" (v. 22/v. 23).<sup>27</sup> The two pericopes are also linked by the common theme of hope for the restoration of Israel. The anticipated renewal touches on all aspects of life—cultic, economic, social, political, and general well-being. It involves a total transformation, after which Israel will resume the old liturgical refrain "YHWH bless you" (v. 23c). Accordingly, vv. 15-22 and vv. 23-25 together demonstrate that restoration (YHWH's actual forgiveness and blessing) comes about only after confession of sin and commitment.

### Conclusion

The study of *šwb* in Jeremiah leads to the conclusion that "return" in Jeremiah expresses YHWH's call to Israel to repent and receive forgiveness and blessings. Furthermore, YHWH's actual forgiveness of Israel is manifested only when Israel confesses her sin and becomes committed to living a new covenantal relationship. Finally, YHWH's potential forgiveness is always available to sinners who confess their sins.

<sup>25</sup>H. Leene, 349-365.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. W. McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 808-809; see also Keown, Scalise and Smothers, 128-129.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. Leene, 354.