

# **Conditionality in Prophecy (Jer 18)**

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Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts on the meaning and implications of Jeremiah 18. The short and well-known object lesson of the potter in Jeremiah 18 is cited by theologians ranging from covenant theologians to dispensationalists to open theists to support their views regarding divine sovereignty and human choice. The issue which Jeremiah 18 raises is a hermeneutical one: Are some or all prophecies conditional? Behind this question are implications for our theologies. If all prophecies are contingent, what purpose do they serve? Do they provide any reliable information at all about the future? Jeremiah is a key text in any discussion of prophetic hermeneutics.

In doctoral seminars I often begin by telling the students that I'm not going to lecture all week; my job is to throw the cat out on the table and let them, the dogs, go after it. My apologies to those of you who love cats, but I think that you can at least understand the analogy. My present aim is to describe the text and context of Jeremiah 18, raising a number of hermeneutical issues connected to Jeremiah 18 and the hermeneutics of prophecy, and then to involve all of you in discussing these problems. First, let's look at the problem.

## **The Problem**

Open theists point to Jeremiah 18 as proof that God changes and the future is still open and unknown. Pinnock says that "some prophecies are conditional, leaving the future open, and, presumably, God's knowledge of it."<sup>1</sup> He then cites Jeremiah 18:9-10. Boyd says that "the Lord tells us that even after he has prophesied for or against a nation, he will 'change [his] mind' if the nation changes (Jer. 18:1-12). We find many examples of this 'changing' occurring at national and individual levels. Thus, even when the Lord announces that some aspect of the future is settled, it may still be alterable. The 'settledness' may be conditioned on unsettled factors, such as decisions we make."<sup>2</sup>

Sanders discusses Jeremiah 18 more extensively. Having discussed briefly the potter/clay metaphor in Isaiah 29:15-16 and 45:9-13, he says this:

In Jeremiah 18 it is also a question of divine prerogative. Does not God have the right to change his plans regarding Israel? Cannot God change his mind about a prophecy he has given if the people's behavior warrants such a change (Jer 18:7-10)? The metaphor of potter and clay leads some people to expect a clear assertion of God's complete control of Israel. But such is not the case. Jeremiah repeatedly speaks of the conditional ("if") in connection to both the clay (Israel) and the potter (God). If Israel repents, then God will

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<sup>1</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 50.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 44. Brackets original.

relent. If Israel is recalcitrant, then God may change his mind regarding the promised blessing (vv. 7-10).<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to argue that “not all aspects of the source domain apply to the target domain because we selectively lend the elements we deem appropriate for our purposes” and then argues that this metaphor “should not be understood as teaching total divine control over all things, since the biblical writers do not make use of this aspect of the metaphor.”<sup>4</sup> He concludes that “God has sovereignly decided to providentially operate in a dynamic give-and-take relationship with his creatures.”<sup>5</sup> Does this mean, in other words, that God has sovereignly decided not to be sovereign?

Some conservatives also point to Jeremiah 18 as proof that some/most/all prophecies are conditional and we should not always expect fulfillment. For example, Sandy cites Jeremiah 18:7-10 to support his assertion that “at least from the surface level of the text, God can appear to change his mind, but conditionality is not always stated.”<sup>6</sup> Pratt states categorically that “The universal perspective of Jer 18:1-12 strongly suggests that all unqualified predictions were subject to implicit conditions.”<sup>7</sup> Feinberg declares that “there is a conditional element in his dealings with his people (vv. 7-10). Repentance can always change the Lord’s decree of judgment. His threatenings are never unconditional.”<sup>8</sup>

Chisholm, likewise leans on conditionality to explain apparent non-fulfillment of prophecies. In his 1995 article “Does God ‘Change His Mind?’” Chisholm “defines and illustrates the four kinds of forward-looking divine statements in the Old Testament: (a) marked or formal decrees, (b) unmarked or informal decrees, (c) marked or explicitly conditional statements of intention, (d) unmarked or implicitly conditional statements of intention.”<sup>9</sup> Chisholm suggests that

Most divine statements of intention are unmarked. In these cases one cannot be sure from the form of the statement whether it is conditional or unconditional. For this reason the recipient of such a message sometimes does what is appropriate, declaring, “Who knows? The Lord may be gracious/turn/relent” (cf. 2 Sam. 12:22; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9).<sup>10</sup>

He then provides the example of Nathan’s announcement of the pending death of the child born to Bathsheba as an example of one that turned out to be unconditional: The child died despite David’s repentance and grief.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 91.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>6</sup> D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> Richard L. Pratt, Jr., “Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions,” pp. 180-203 in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, eds. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 189.

<sup>8</sup> Charles L. Feinberg, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 135; cf. Derek Kidner, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1987), 77; Hobart E. Freeman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Prophets* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 116.

<sup>9</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God ‘Change His Mind,’” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 387-88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 390.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 390-91.

In Chisholm's 2002 *Handbook on the Prophets*, he at times reverts to conditionality as an explanation for the non-fulfillment of prophecy, along with language that is "stylized," "exaggerated," or "stereotypical," or prophecies which are fulfilled "in essence." After discussing God's promise in Joel 2 that "he would never again subject them to such humiliating judgment," Chisholm argues that

God's people were subsequently humiliated on several occasions, making this promise sound rather hollow. However, just as God's warnings of judgment are often conditional and can be averted by repentance, so his promises of prosperity are often contingent on their recipients remaining loyal to God (see Jer. 18:7-10). The promise given here, while *obviously implicitly conditional*, was an honest statement of God's commitment to his people.<sup>12</sup> [emphasis added]

In this case, there is nothing "obviously implied" in the immediate verses to make it conditional. However, verses 12-14 provide an explicit offer of blessing in exchange for repentance. Consequently, the promise of verse 19 is in the immediate context of the give and take between the Lord and His people in which repentance could bring reward. "Implicit" is used by Chisholm and Pratt both for cases where there is something in the text to mark a condition and also for other cases where there is not. Discussing Jonah 3, for example, Chisholm points to the fact that the destruction of Nineveh was yet forty days off as suggesting to the king of Nineveh that there was an opportunity to repent.<sup>13</sup> The time limit, then, would be an implicit marker in the text and inherent in the meaning of the text. What Chisholm and Pratt seem to mean in some cases by "implicit," without actually discussing it, is that there was either a cultural or theological expectation that such pronouncements were, or at least could be, conditional. We will discuss this further below.

In discussing Jeremiah 18:1-12 in particular, Chisholm concludes in this way: "God makes plans and announces his intentions, but how nations respond to his warnings and moral standards can and often does determine what actually transpires. Despite the imagery of the potter and the clay, there is no room for fatalistic determinism here, for the 'clay' is depicted as exercising its own will, prompting an appropriate response from the divine 'potter.'"<sup>14</sup>

In a paper entitled "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic" which Chisholm presented at the National Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2003, Chisholm collects together the various ways he deals with unfulfilled prophecies. He states that "to explain adequately the phenomenon of 'failed' prophecy we must move beyond this simplistic hermeneutic [i.e., all unfulfilled prophecies are eschatological] and recognize that prophetic language is inherently functional, often contingent, and invariably contextualized."<sup>15</sup> Chisholm discusses Pratt's article mentioned above and then discusses Jeremiah 18 at some

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<sup>12</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 373.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 413.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>15</sup> Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check Your Hermeneutic" (Atlanta: ETS National Meeting, 11/19/2003), 1. Soon after I presented this paper on Jeremiah 18, a revised version of Chisholm's ETS paper appeared: Robert Chisholm, "When Prophecy Appears to Fail, Check your Hermeneutic" (*JETS* 53 (2010): 561-77). The present quotation is on p. 561 of the *JETS* article. In subsequent footnotes, brackets will indicate page numbers or changes in the *JETS* article as compared to the original ETS paper.

length, harmonizing conditionality of “second causes” with God’s omniscience.<sup>16</sup> He illustrates his point from Jonah:

The Book of Jonah illustrates this. Jonah announced in seemingly unconditional terms that Nineveh would be destroyed in forty days (3:4). Uncertain if the message was unconditional or not (3:9), the king and the entire city repented. After all, the inclusion of a time limit might imply a window of opportunity for repentance. Sure enough, Nineveh’s response prompted God to withhold the threatened judgment. Jonah pouted about this; he explained that this was why he had refused to go to Nineveh in the first place. He knew that God is merciful and that he characteristically relents from sending judgment when people repent of their sin.<sup>17</sup>

While I would mostly agree with this analysis, the idea of conditional and unconditional is not here well defined. If the inclusion of a time limit *implies* an opportunity to repent, then the prophecy is *implicitly* conditional and the announcement is not in “seemingly unconditional terms.”<sup>18</sup> Jonah’s words, “Thou art a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, and one who relents concerning calamity” (NASB used throughout), in fact, seem to allude to Exodus 34:6-7. This suggests that even if we cannot point to a condition inherent in the meaning of the text, explicitly or implicitly, some prophecies may have been conditioned theologically by prior revelation and are not merely open-ended. God acts in accord with his character, which has in some measure been revealed to Israel. Chisholm touches upon this in a brief discussion of Deuteronomy 18 at the end of his ETS paper, but it seems we need to explore this problem and provide clearer terminology. He concludes his discussion of Jonah baldly, “In other words the prophecy, rather than being a fixed decree of what the future holds, is really a conditional threat or warning.”<sup>19</sup>

Chisholm even uses conditionality to explain why Ahab did not die where the prophet said he would: “God did not prevent the king’s men from taking Ahab to Samaria. When they did so, they seemingly circumvented the last part of the prophecy.... But God had dogs stationed in Samaria as well and the prophecy was fulfilled in its essence.”<sup>20</sup> Does this mean that God didn’t really know where the prophecy would be fulfilled?

Kaiser, likewise, points to Jeremiah 18 as proof that some prophecies are conditional.<sup>21</sup> Kaiser provides two “helpful guidelines” for determining whether a prophecy is conditional or not: “(1) if it refers to an event which is fairly proximate in time and space, and (2) if it is capable of being answered by some act of obedience or repentance on the part of the prophet’s contemporaries.”<sup>22</sup> While this seems helpful, and answers the issue of messianic prophecies, Kaiser does not point to any specific texts which provide such qualifications, only to events which seem to fit them.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 3-4 [564-66].

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 4 [566].

<sup>18</sup> Compare also Joseph Parle, “Polysemantic Wordplay and Implicit Conditionality in Jonah 3-4” (Ph.D. diss., Baptist Bible Seminary (Clarks Summit, PA), 2009), for further discussion of the issues in Jonah.

<sup>19</sup> Chisholm, “Check Your Hermeneutic,” 5 [the exact quotation appears to have been removed, but similar ideas are discussed on pp. 566-67].

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 9 [the JETS article appears to remove this entire test case].

<sup>21</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Back Toward the Future: Hints for Interpreting Biblical Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 63-64.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 65.

Kaiser hints at another possible qualification, namely oath-taking, citing Psalm 110:4.<sup>23</sup> Some things God has affirmed by oath and he will not change.

There can be no doubt whatever that there are some conditional prophecies. Chisholm, Pratt, and others provide examples of prophecies that were explicitly conditional and others that have implied conditions, and others where no condition was expressed but God seems to have revoked the punishment. Please understand, I am not suggesting that either Chisholm or Pratt are heretics. Dr. Chisholm was my dissertation advisor and I have great respect for him. The problem lies in that many—even conservatives— make sweeping generalizations on the basis of Jeremiah 18. The lack of hermeneutical clarity and control over when conditionality is invoked is disturbing. I find the suggestion that the details of a prophecy were irrelevant and a prophecy might be fulfilled “in essence” profoundly disturbing, but that must be saved for a later discussion. Does Jeremiah 18 really support the contention that all prophecies are contingent and conditional? Can Jeremiah 18 be stretched to cover either God’s absolute sovereignty or his “openness”? If all prophecies are conditional (or hyperbolic, or can be “fulfilled in essence”), then what are we left with?

The second problem is that the terminology in use by everyone is poorly defined. What is the difference between a prophecy which is explicitly conditional, one that is implicitly conditional, and one which is unmarked? Implicit is used in these discussions for cases where there are markers or indications in the text and those where there is only an underlying assumption on the part of the listener. While the word “implicit” may be used legitimately in both ways, it seems that we need greater precision in these discussions. What constitutes the difference between a decree and an announcement and how may one tell which is which? How does a prediction differ from a promise differ from a warning? Are certain kinds of prophecy consistently conditional? Does the classification “judgment” and “salvation” comprehend all of prophecy or should there be other categories? Even the terms “sovereignty” and “decree” seem poorly defined in these discussions. Does sovereignty refer to God’s “right to rule” or to his minute control of every event? What is the difference between God’s desires and his decisions?

### **The Exegesis**

Jeremiah 18 declares that God has the right to do with Israel whatever pleases him (6). If he has threatened judgment and the people repent, he may revoke the judgment (7-8); if he has promised blessing and the people sin, he may revoke the blessing (9-10). Consequently, the people of Israel ought to repent in order to avert the judgment which is surely coming if they do not (11). This declaration is rooted in an object lesson given to the prophet in verses 1-4. This pericope is part of a larger unit, chapters 18-20. Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard put it this way:

In several ways chaps. 18 through 20 are connected literarily. On the level of theme, the potter theme as the basis for the message of chap. 18 is closely related to the potter’s decanter which serves as the thematic center of chap. 19. These two themes are both similar and contrastive. In chap. 18 the vessel is remade according to the potter’s wishes. But in chap. 19 the vessel is destroyed. While still plastic, clay can easily be

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 68.

remolded and shaped; once fired it becomes fixed and brittle. It can no longer be reshaped as the potter might wish, but it can be destroyed at its owner's hand!<sup>24</sup>

Verses 13-17 provide a new announcement of judgment which follows naturally from the expectation that the people would refuse to repent (12), and verses 18-23 report a plot against Jeremiah's life for persisting in prophesying judgment and Jeremiah's resulting lament. Consequently, verses 1-12 may be approached as a unit. This unit may be outlined thus:

- I. (1-4) The Lord commands Jeremiah to visit the potter's shop where he observes the potter at work.
  - a. (1-2) The Lord commands Jeremiah to visit the potter's shop where He will give him a message.
  - b. (3-4) Jeremiah visits the potter's shop and observes the potter making and remaking vessels according to his design and pleasure.
- II. (5-11) The Lord commands Jeremiah to offer Israel the opportunity to repent and avert judgment.
  - a. (5-6) The Lord declares that he is free to deal with Israel according to his design and pleasure.
  - b. (7-10) The Lord declares that he is free to withdraw or impose punishment on the basis of repentance or sin.
    - i. (7-8) The Lord declares that he may reward repentance with the withdrawal of judgment.
    - ii. (9-10) The Lord declares that he may likewise withdraw promised blessing on account of sinfulness.
  - c. (11) The Lord declares that judgment is pending.
- III. (12) The Lord informs Jeremiah that Israel will refuse to repent.

Within this unit, verses 1-4 are narrative, reporting God's instruction for Jeremiah to go down to the potter's shop and his consequent obedience and observations. Verses 5-11 comprise a divine utterance urging the people to repent in the face of coming judgment, and verse 12 reports the stubborn refusal of the people to respond. The Petuchah following verse 4 and the Setumoth following verses 6, 8, 10, and 12 for the most part confirm this analysis.<sup>25</sup> Most commentators seem to date this prophesy to early in Jehoiakim's reign since judgment may yet be averted by repentance.<sup>26</sup> Lundbom suggests a date during the reforms of Josiah.<sup>27</sup> Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard merely suggest a time before the reign of Zedekiah.<sup>28</sup>

### The Example of the Potter (1-4)

<sup>1</sup>The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying, <sup>2</sup>“Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will announce My words to you.” <sup>3</sup>Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something on the wheel. <sup>4</sup>But the vessel that he was making of clay was spoiled in the hand of the potter; so he remade it into another vessel, as it pleased the potter to make.

Object lessons are not unknown in Jeremiah (cf. ch. 13) or in the other prophets (cf. Ezek. 4). What is unusual in this case is that Jeremiah does not perform the object lesson but observe it.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Word Biblical Commentary 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 240. Cf. Kidner, *Message*, 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1997), *ad loc.*

<sup>26</sup> John Bright, *Jeremiah: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 21 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 126; R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOTC (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 108; Kidner, *Message*, 76; David R. Armstrong, “When God Isn't Good,” pp. 13-33 in *Church Divinity*, ed. John H. Morgan (Bristol, IN: Wyndham Hall Press, 1984), 15.

<sup>27</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 21a (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 817.

<sup>28</sup> Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah*, 243.

<sup>29</sup> Mark Brummit, “Showman or Shaman? The Acts of a Biblical Prophet,” pp. 55-68 in *Meanings of Magic*, ed. Amy Wygant (Oxford: Gerghahn Books, 2006), 59-60.

The Lord instructs him to go down to the potter's shop where he is to receive a message. The word used for the potter is the participle of the verb יָצַר which means "to form, fashion, create." This verb is often used of the Lord's creative work (Gen 2:7-8, 19; Psa 95:5; 104:26; Isa 45:7, 18; Jer 10:16; 51:19; Amos 4:13) and is a key term in this pericope.<sup>30</sup>

Jeremiah obeys in verses 3 and 4 and observes the potter at work "making a work on the stones." The Kethiv יִהְיֶה אֲבָנִים is "otherwise unattested" in Biblical Hebrew,<sup>31</sup> but not impossible and as the more difficult reading should be retained. The dual "[two] stones" refers to the potter's wheel which consisted of two wheels on a vertical spindle. The lower wheel was turned with the feet while the clay was worked on the upper wheel.

The generic term מְלֵאכָה, "a work," is used in verse 3 and the generic כֵּלִי, "vessel," in verse 4. No particular type of vessel is in view nor is the purpose to which the product might be put (as in 2 Tim 2:20-21). The potter is simply making something. The vessel "was spoiled." The verb is strikingly a waw-consecutive perfect here. Driver suggests that the wcp following a participle should be taken in an indefinite sense of "whenever" or similar.<sup>32</sup> Jeremiah apparently saw this happen more than once. It is futile to speculate, and quite irrelevant to the purpose of the analogy, whether the fault is in the clay (too wet, too dry, containing foreign materials) or in the potter. For whatever reason, the particular attempt or idea did not work out and the potter quickly reshaped the clay and began something else "as it pleased the potter to make." The text does not blame either the potter or the clay, so it would be as wrong-headed to insist this pictures Israel's sinfulness or their ability to thwart God's plan as it would be to impugn God's skill.

### The Explanation of the Lord (5-11)

<sup>5</sup>Then the word of the Lord came to me saying, <sup>6</sup>"Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?" declares the Lord. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. <sup>7</sup>At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it; <sup>8</sup>if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it. <sup>9</sup>Or at another moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to build up or to plant it; <sup>10</sup>if it does evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless it. <sup>11</sup>So now then, speak to the men of Judah and against the inhabitants of Jerusalem saying, 'Thus says the Lord, "Behold, I am fashioning calamity against you and devising a plan against you. Oh turn back, each of you from his evil way, and reform your ways and your deeds.'"

Jeremiah now receives the message from the Lord. The Lord begins with a rhetorical question whose answer is clearly positive: The Lord can, indeed, do whatever he wishes with Israel, just as the potter does with the clay. One should not read more into the analogy than that. The point is

<sup>30</sup> Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah*, 244; see also J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 434; F. B. Huey, Jr. *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, NAC 16 (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 180; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 515.

<sup>31</sup> Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 813, notes that it is attested in the Talmud and recommends retaining. Cf. Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah*, 241; Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 512. Holladay recommends following the Qere.

<sup>32</sup> S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew: And Some Other Syntactical Questions*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892; reprint Norwich: Fletcher and Son, 1969), 137. Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990 [hereafter *IBHS*]), 32.2.5, cite and follow Driver in this. Cf. Bright, *Jeremiah*, 124; and Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 434; and Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 813, who term this "iterative." Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 515, terms this "frequentive."

not that the potter continues to rework the clay until he succeeds.<sup>33</sup> It is not that the clay is sinful, resists the work of the potter, or has a will of its own.<sup>34</sup> The Lord declares the point quite clearly: “Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel.” The Lord is in control and is free to deal with Israel as he sees fit, but he does so in interaction with His people.<sup>35</sup>

The Lord provides two symmetrical illustrations of his work. The first illustration is in verses 7 and 8. If the Lord announces judgment on any people and they repent, he is free to revoke the announcement of judgment. The construction is somewhat difficult. The particle *רָנַע*, “suddenly, quickly, in a moment,” which begins verses 7 and 9 is a rare term. It is used in Jeremiah 4:20 in the sense of “suddenly.” Semantically, the last clause, “I will relent,” must be the apodosis of an unmarked conditional clause.<sup>36</sup> The beginning of the protasis is problematic. The particle *רָנַע* is not elsewhere used with the protasis of a conditional clause. One may construe the following imperfect *אֲדַבֵּר* in a progressive (*IBHS* 31.3a) or habitual (*IBHS* 31.3e) sense meaning “whenever I speak.” This fits with the indefinite waw-consecutive perfects in verse 4. NASB translates verse 7 “At one moment I might speak...” and begins the protasis in verse 8 with “if that nation.” Others begin the protasis at verse 7, “If at any time I announce,” (NIV; cf. LNT, RSV, ESV). Taking the verb as progressive/habitual and beginning the protasis in verse 8 provides a closer parallel to the construction of verse four, but both options make good sense.

The Lord speaks concerning “a nation (*גּוֹי*) or concerning a kingdom (*מַמְלָכָה*).” The Lord is clearly drawing a larger principle here than just his control of Israel. Israel is his people. As Creator (with the repeated use of *הַיּוֹצֵר*, “the potter, the shaper/creator” in the context, an allusion to God’s creative control over all the earth seems likely), the Lord has a right to control all peoples. This provides an implicit *qal wehomer* argument.<sup>37</sup> If the Lord controls all of creation, *how much more* he controls Israel, his own special people. The terms of the threat, “to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it,” (*לְגַתּוֹשׁ וְלְגַתּוֹץ וְלְהַאֲבִיד*) are drawn from Jeremiah’s commission in 1:10. Jeremiah was to be prophet to the nations announcing both judgment and restoration (cf. 28:8; chs. 46-51).

The apodosis follows: “I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it.” While the verb *נָחַם* in the Niphal can mean “to repent, to regret, to be grieved,” it is probably better taken here in the sense of “to relent,” that is to withdraw a threatened or offered course of action. Huey puts it this way: “Repent’ in modern English implies that a mistake has been made that must be

<sup>33</sup> Huey, *Jeremiah*, 180.

<sup>34</sup> Bright, *Jeremiah*, 125.

<sup>35</sup> R. Mark Shipp, “Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom in the Old Testament,” *Christian Studies* 22 (2007-08): 16, puts it this way: “Divine determinism is not so much the focus of this text as the interplay of human freedom and divine sovereignty. What at first appears to be divine caprice and arbitrariness in judgment—the clay is completely subject to the potter’s will—quickly becomes an illustration of God’s grace in responding to Judah’s repentance.” The entire article by John Peckham, “The Passible Potter and the Contingent Clay: A Theological Study of Jeremiah 18:1-10” (*Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 18:1 (Spring 2007): 129-149) is worth reading in this regard. He says, for example, “From a biblical standpoint, clearly in Jeremiah 18, God cannot rightly be viewed as dependent upon the world. Rather, as the Creator, God is different from the world and transcends His own creation *while* being intimately active” (p. 135, italics original).

<sup>36</sup> Craigie, Kelley, and Drinker, *Jeremiah*, 244, and most translations.

<sup>37</sup> Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 814, 817.



corrected, but God does not make mistakes. The word *nāhām* suggests that grief is so deep that God finds an alternate response for the necessity of punishment when we repent.”<sup>38</sup> This is no arbitrary whim. God rewards good behavior and punishes evil. In other words, God is being consistent with his revealed character. In Exodus 34:6-7 God revealed his own character as both punishing sin and forgiving. In Deuteronomy God warned Israel that they would sin, be exiled, and eventually receive restoration and blessing (Deut. 30:1-10, for example). Consequently the frequent references to God “changing his mind” as though he were indecisive in some absolute sense are unnecessary and misleading.

If any nation repents of its evil God will withdraw the punishment (הָרַעַד, not moral evil but calamity), which he had “thought” or “considered” (חָשַׁב) bringing on them. The use of the verb אָמַר (“to say”) in the parallel panel in verse 10 should caution us against drawing too sweeping of theological conclusions from the verb חָשַׁב. God has proposed or declared judgment. The context regards the real, historical interaction between God and his creatures, and no conclusions regarding God’s ultimate sovereignty are in view here.

The second illustration of God’s work is the reverse of the first and the construction is very similar. Whenever God announces that he will “build up or plant” any nation, and that nation consequently sins by “not obeying My voice,” then the Lord will withdraw the good which he had proposed. The expression “to build up or to plant” also comes from Jeremiah’s commission (1:10). Pratt seeks to make these two cases all-inclusive:

These verses describe the two major types of prophetic prediction: judgment (Jer 18:7-8) and salvation (Jer 18:9-10). In terms of form-critical analysis, all prophetic oracles gravitate in one or both of these directions. Referring to these two major directions of all predictions underscores the categorical nature of the dynamic described here.<sup>39</sup>

Yet Pratt has simplified all of prophetic prediction to two categories so general as to be meaningless. Presumably prophecies of the coming Messiah would be predictions of salvation. One might wonder what conditions attach to the prediction that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Yet this text is limited to announcements of judgment or promises of blessing to a nation or kingdom. It seems presumptuous to extend these verses beyond that. Chisholm’s use of contingency/conditionality to explain the apparent failure of the prophecy concerning Ahab’s demise would seem to make conditional something not really covered by Jeremiah 18.<sup>40</sup>

God then draws his conclusion in verse 11: Israel ought to repent because God intends to bring judgment for their evil behavior. God is literally “shaping calamity” (using צָרָה which has been used repeatedly in this pericope of the potter as symbolic of God as Creator) against Israel.<sup>41</sup> In the context of verse 7-10, this implies that in this case God would be willing to retract the threat of judgment if Israel repents. Hence, the threat of judgment in verse 11 is implicitly conditional.

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<sup>38</sup> Huey, *Jeremiah*, 181. Cf. Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 434; Kidner, *Message*, 76; Feinberg, *Jeremiah*, 135; Lundbom, *Jeremiah*, 816; Michael D. Stallard, “A Dispensational Critique of Open Theism’s View of Prophecy,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (2004): 30; Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 516, 168. Interestingly, in this context the concept of the people’s repentance (שׁוּב) and God’s relenting (נָחַם) seem to be kept lexically distinct.

<sup>39</sup> Pratt, “Historical Contingencies,” 189.

<sup>40</sup> Chisholm, “Check Your Hermeneutic,” 9 [see FN 20 above].

<sup>41</sup> Huey, *Jeremiah*, 181.

## The Expectation of the People (12)

<sup>12</sup>“But they will say, ‘It’s hopeless! For we are going to follow our own plans, and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.’”

The verb **וַיֹּאמְרוּ** is a waw-consecutive perfect. It could be construed here as future (“they will say” as in NASB) or as habitual (“they say” as in ESV). Whether the text is predicting a specific response to this specific announcement of judgment or reminding Jeremiah that they always reject his announcements of judgment and refuse to repent makes little difference. Verse 12 anticipates a negative response from the people. In either case, verse 12 takes the view that God is simply in a try-it-and-see mode waiting to see what Israel would do out of play. As Huey remarks, “Because he knew their hearts, he knew what their reply would be.”<sup>42</sup>

While some might mistake verse 6 for a kind of fatalism in which God will do whatever he chooses without regard for his creatures, verses 7-11 clearly offer the creatures a choice. God will treat them according to their choices, their behavior. Verse 12 then, ironically, suggests that the Israelites consider the possibility of repentance and change hopeless. They reply, “It is hopeless!” (**נִרְאָה**). This is a Niphal participle from a verb which means “to despair.” It is used here as an exclamation. The imperfects “we will go” (**נֵלְכָה**) and “we will do” (**נַעֲשֶׂה**) imply a sense of inevitability, “we must go,” “we must do.” The noun **מִחֲשָׁבָה** seems to be used ironically. The verb form is used in verse 8 of God’s plan or intention, the judgment he has announced. Here, the people declare their own intention, their plan to continue in sin, which the Lord will allow but punish.

## Jeremiah 18 in Context

In the preceding chapters in Jeremiah, the prophet has made clear to Israel that the judgment which is coming is the Babylonian invasion and exile (1:14-15; 4:5-7; etc.). There are only two options in view: Israel is offered the opportunity early on to repent and return to the Lord (4:1). If they do not, they will be punished by the Babylonians. That God can use another, pagan, nation, precisely when and where he chooses implies a great measure of control on God’s part. God is not simply going with the flow and using whatever is handy if his people thwart his will. The clay does not control the situation, and while it has certain choices or options which are real, valid choices, contingency is limited. When I tell my son that he can clean his room or receive a spanking, he cannot, for example, choose ice cream. He has a real choice to make, but the options are set by me.

The book of Jeremiah as a whole pictures God as in control. Bell says that “as the everlasting ‘King of nations’ (10:7, 10), the Lord is the controller of history (27:5-7, 28:14, 51:20-33).”<sup>43</sup> Brekelmans says concerning 27:5, “Here the absolute power of Yahweh is underlined: the one who has made the earth, can give it to whomever he wants. In my opinion, this must be the meaning of 18,4 too: The potter makes the clay into another vessel just like he wants.”<sup>44</sup> Mitchell

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Robert D. Bell, “The Theology of Jeremiah,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 18:2 (Nov. 1984), 60.

<sup>44</sup> Christian Brekelmans, “Jeremiah 18,1-12 and Its Redaction,” pp. 343-350 in *Livre de Jeremie*, eds. Adrian Curtis and Thomas Römer (Louvain, Belgium: Leuven University, 1981), 345.

cites 5:22, 1:10, 15; 5:15ff, 23:7f; 25:9; 28:14; 32:27 and 43:10 as proof of the power of God in Jeremiah.<sup>45</sup>

Progressively Jeremiah is urged to stop praying for his people, which he is unable to do (cf. 7:16 with 10:19-25; 11:14 with 14:7-9; and 14:11 with 14:20-22), until God finally tells him that even if Moses and Samuel were to intercede for the people, their judgment is now certain. There is certainly some truth to Pratt's assertion that "Yahweh forbade prayers in response to some oracles precisely because prayer usually had the potential to affect outcomes."<sup>46</sup> "Usually," however, would seem to be a stretch. It is certainly a stretch if he means to imply that prayer can change God in some mechanical way against his will, hence God needs to plead with the prophet not to pray, lest the prayer change his mind against his will.

God made certain promises to Abraham and his descendants, and consequently to David and his descendants.<sup>47</sup> Israel had come to depend on those covenants as though they were some kind of magic talisman against evil (Jer 7 and 11). Those covenants were not without condition, however. David, for example, is warned that though the Lord's lovingkindness was certain and permanent (2 Sam 7:15), discipline for sin was still a very real possibility (v. 14). Jeremiah 18 makes very good sense in such a context. God's promises do not prevent him from punishing Israel. God's threats of judgment do not prevent him for showing mercy where there is genuine repentance. While God is in control and sets the options, Israel has a very real and meaningful choice to make.

### **The Conclusion**

Jeremiah 18 does say that threats of judgment and promises of blessing are, in many cases, conditional. It clearly does not say that all unmarked prophecies are conditional. God is interacting with his creatures in a meaningful and real way, but he is still in control of the options. The problem comes in that if Jeremiah 18 is used to explain all manner of apparent inconsistencies in the fulfillment of prophecies, what is left of prophecy? Could Jesus have been born in Hebron and we merely excuse God's "ignorance" on the basis that he could not have foreseen a lack of inn space in Bethlehem? Could God move the Emperor in Rome to call for a census at exactly the right moment and not see that there was a place to stay in Bethlehem? Chisholm is perhaps right in criticizing past commentators for blindly assigning all apparent inconsistencies to the eschaton, but perhaps he is doing the same thing with his literary criteria like contingency/conditionality. And what of prophecies yet to be fulfilled? If all prophecy is conditional, perhaps the promises to national Israel were all conditional and the church has replaced Israel. Perhaps there will be no antichrist. Perhaps there will be no judgment and hell is, as some suggest, merely a state of mind. Perhaps there will be no millennium. All prophecy becomes, at best, figurative.

Some prophecies are conditional. Jeremiah 18 affirms that warnings of judgment and even some promises may be conditional. This does not negate our theology. God, while ultimately and absolutely sovereign, interacts with his creatures in a real and meaningful way. Conditionality

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<sup>45</sup> H. G. Mitchell, "The Theology of Jeremiah," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 20 (1901): 59.

<sup>46</sup> Pratt, "Historical Contingencies," 187.

<sup>47</sup> Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 435; Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah*, 245; and Pratt, "Historical Contingencies," 191-92, for example, all tie the operation of the promises and threats to God's outstanding covenants.

does explain some apparent inconsistencies between prediction and fulfillment. Other problems remain. A very necessary step forward will be to define prophetic pronouncement more precisely. We need to look at the different kinds of utterances that prophets made and how they marked them. We need to look at “antecedent theology” (to use Kaiser’s famous term) to see what understanding and assumptions the prophet’s listeners would bring to their hearing.