

**HOW שׁוּב AND נָחַם CONTRIBUTE TO UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF  
JEREMIAH 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 AND 26:3, 13 AND 19**

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## **DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the work contained in this dissertation is my own original work and has not previously been submitted to any institution for a degree.

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. This thesis affirms three hypotheses: (1) When Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 are exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) plays a vital role in understanding the overall message of those passages. (2) Jeremiah used *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people. (3) Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) reveals that conditional propositions are real not only from man's perspective but also from God's.

This thesis reveals how the covenantal relationship of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) proved to contribute much to the understanding of the Jeremiah passages. For example, the covenantal relationship shows that the response of the nation had an influence on what God did or did not do, meaning that to some degree the future of the nation was in the hands of the people depending upon how they responded to God. God's relenting was based on the nation repenting. Another example is when Jeremiah 18:1-10 is viewed in the context of covenant relationship, it was found that the main point of the passage shifted from the potter's unilateral control and sovereignty over the clay to the flexibility of the potter to work with his clay.

This thesis challenges the traditional notion that נָחַם (*nacham*) with God as its subject does not have literal meaning and is merely an anthropomorphic metaphor. This thesis provides a framework for metaphorical interpretation as it relates to anthropomorphisms. Instead of interpreting all anthropomorphisms in the same way and by the same standard, this thesis calls for a distinction to be made between material (physical) and immaterial (non-physical) anthropomorphic statements in the Old Testament and shows why they cannot be interpreted in the same way. For example, this thesis shows that if an immaterial anthropomorphism is not to some degree interpreted literally, then it loses its meaning and purpose. Furthermore, this thesis concludes that an anthropomorphic non-literal interpretation of God relenting נָחַם (*nacham*) is not necessary based on the exegesis of the Jeremiah passages and is not consistent with the evidence presented in the Old Testament.

This thesis also offers a possible explanation as to why Christian tradition has largely dismissed God's relenting as "anthropomorphic metaphor" despite the evidence from the exegesis and the Old Testament. This is accomplished by comparing the concrete thought of the ancient Hebrews with the abstract thought of the ancient Greeks and shows why the early Greek philosophers disliked anthropomorphic depictions of the gods and how that led the philosophers to develop an idea of the divine as utterly transcendent and in most cases separated and un-relatable to creation. This thesis continues the discussion by showing how this thought influenced some of the early Christian leaders in their mind-set and thinking about God as utterly transcendent, which resulted in non-literal views of God relenting.

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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

In Jeremiah 4:28, God spoke through the prophet and said, “Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back”.<sup>1</sup> Likewise in Jeremiah 15:6-7, God said, “You have rejected me’, declares the LORD. ‘You will keep on backsliding. So I will reach out and destroy you; I am tired of holding back”. On the surface, it appears as if God was saying he was tired of holding back (perhaps judgment, as the context will reveal) because of the unrepentant hearts of the original audience. God had made up his mind. Later, however, in Jeremiah 26:3, God said, “Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done”. Likewise, Jeremiah recorded similar language in 26:13, “Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you”. To further illustrate his point, the author referred to Hezekiah’s testimony in 26:19, “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the LORD and seek his favour? And did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture is quoted from the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves”.

And finally, God’s recorded words in Jeremiah 18:7-10 should be considered. “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it”.

One common denominator in the above verses are two Hebrew verbs שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) that are used in close proximity and are often translated “repent” and “relent”. In Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19, English translations translate נָחַם (*nacham*) as relent, repent, change of mind, reconsider, think better of, showing compassion and holding back. The semantic range of נָחַם (*nacham*) extends beyond the idea of relenting as it is most often translated as “comfort” in the Old Testament. English translations translate שׁוּב (*shub*) as repent, turn back from, turns, return, changed and renounces. In Jeremiah, שׁוּב (*shub*) is most often used to speak of man, while נָחַם (*nacham*) is most often used to speak of God. One exception is Jeremiah 4:28, where both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) are used to speak of God.

When speaking of God, there is a consensus that נָחַם (*nacham*) is rightly translated to express an idea of change, however, the issue among scholars is how this “change” is to be understood. The debate is on whether נָחַם (*nacham*) is best understood as an accommodating anthropomorphism or as straightforward (literal) language. For example, J.T. Willis (1994) offered an insightful word study associated with divine repentance and argued that biblical writers do not agree on whether God can literally change his mind (נָחַם) or not. How נָחַם (*nacham*) is understood can affect the interpretation of the meaning and message of its passages, and in the case of the book of Jeremiah it can affect a person’s understanding of the relationship between God and mankind.

Furthermore, it appears from preliminary research that שׁוּב (*shub*) hardly ever if even at all enters the discussion when scholars try to determine how נָחַם (*nacham*) is to be understood and the effect it has on its passages.

## 1.1 The statement of the problem

### 1.1.1 The main problem

The premise of this thesis is that to fully understand the meaning and message of the selected Jeremiah passages, then both Hebrew verbs have to be examined. In what ways does נָחַם (*nacham*) apply to God? Under what conditions, perhaps, does God נָחַם (*nacham*)? What role does man's responsibility play in understanding how God responds to specific circumstances as indicated by the selected Jeremiah passages? The point is that without examining both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in their respective contexts, an important relationship between the two may be missed. Therefore, the purpose of this thesis is to explore how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19.

### 1.1.2 The key questions

The main problem cannot be solved without answering and investigating the following key questions:

1. What are the current views surrounding the use and meaning of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19?
2. How does the general background, historical context and literary context of the book of Jeremiah assist in understanding these verses?
3. What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience?

4. What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19?
5. What is the application of these chapters for contemporary Christianity?

### 1.1.3 The hypothesis

This thesis will test the following hypotheses:

- The first hypothesis is that when Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 are exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) plays a vital role in understanding the overall message of those passages.
- The second hypothesis is that Jeremiah used שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people.
- The third hypothesis is that based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) reveals that conditional propositions are real not only from man's perspective but also from God's.

## 1.2 Research methodology and design

### 1.2.1 The design

This thesis uses the Biblical exegesis approach to theological research and will consist of literary components. This thesis consists of eight sections: introduction, current views, context, biblical exegesis, the bigger picture, application, conclusion and bibliography. There are five steps necessary to take in answering the research problem. First, this thesis reviews the current literature on the use and meaning of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. Second, this thesis analyses the

context of the book of Jeremiah including its general background, historical and literary context. Third, this thesis exegetically examines and analyses Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 to determine the meaning for the original audience. Fourth, this thesis analyses the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament and ask how this picture relates to the context of Jeremiah 4, 15, 18 and 26. Finally, this thesis discusses the application of these findings for contemporary Christianity and their understanding of God's character in relating with his people.

### 1.2.2 The methodology and tools

This thesis uses the following data to accomplish its goals:

1. *Primary sources*- the biblical text including the original language. This can be utilized by using different translations, studying the original language through Logos Bible Software, concordances and Hebrew lexicons.
2. *Secondary sources*- dissertations (ProQuest), Encyclopaedias, commentaries, Old Testament theology books and articles relevant to the Hebrew words שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) or Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19.

In addition to the data listed above, below is the list of the five steps taken in this thesis with the tools necessary to take each step.

**Step 1** -- This thesis reviews the current literature on Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19, and the theories on the meaning of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). This step includes analysing key scholars and their works, the major debates and the differences in scriptural interpretation surrounding the topic. This step includes dialogical and comparative methodologies. This step is accomplished utilizing and interacting with recently published books on the topic, as well as commentaries, dissertations and articles.

**Step 2** -- This thesis analyses the context of the book of Jeremiah including its general background, historical and literary context. This requires interacting with Bible handbooks, Old Testament introductions and history books, background commentaries, Bible atlases, Bible dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

**Step 3** -- This thesis exegetically examines and analyses Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 to determine how the original audience would have understood Jeremiah's use of and the significance of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in those passages. This is accomplished by breaking down the texts verse by verse. This step employs numerous methodologies related to the exegetical process including textual criticism, historical criticism, lexical analysis, syntax analysis, discourse analysis and redaction criticism. This step includes:

1. Preliminary analysis in analysing the textual variants
2. Contextual analysis in analysing the historical setting and literary context
3. Verbal analysis in analysing the key words in the passages
4. Literary analysis in examining the genre, structure, composition and rhetoric of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19
5. Exegetical synthesis in forming a conclusion based on the evidence of exegetically working through the texts

**Step 4** -- This thesis analyses the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament in the context of Jeremiah 4, 15, 18 and 26. This step involves showing how the conclusions from the exegetical study of the anchor texts fits with the rest of the Old Testament as well as in theological history, meaning how church history has largely understood the meaning and interpretation of the Old Testament's use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*).

**Step 5** -- This thesis examines how contemporary Christians can apply the meaning and message of Jeremiah's teaching to their lives today.

### **1.3 Theological and practical value**

This thesis contributes theologically by (a) examining the anchor texts in Jeremiah, (b) continuing the attempt to better understand the nature of God and how he relates in the world and (c) continuing the attempt to better understand the relationship between God and man. This thesis benefits contemporary Christians by (a) showing that human decisions matter, (b) showing the importance of repentance, prayer and communicating with God and (c) showing the unchanging character and loving heart of God.

### **1.4 Definitions of key terms**

The following terms must be made clear before proceeding with this thesis:

- Anthropomorphism: a biblical reference describing God as having human-like characteristics
- Material Anthropomorphism: a biblical reference describing God as having the physical characteristics of humans (eyes and hands)
- Immaterial anthropomorphism: a biblical reference describing God as having non-physical or unseen characteristics of humans (emotions)

### **1.5 Basic assumptions of the researcher**

This thesis operates with the basic assumptions that (a) the 66 books of the Bible are the inspired and inerrant Word of God, (b) the purpose of the biblical exegetical process is to help determine what the author intended the text to mean for its original audience and (c) the book of Jeremiah contributes to the understanding of the relationship between God and man.

### **1.6 Delimitations of this thesis**

The following delimitations should be applied to this thesis:

- The first delimitation is that Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 are the only passages considered for full examination.
- The second delimitation is other Old Testament passages are brought into the discussion as they are deemed relevant to this thesis and necessary for determining the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19.
- The third delimitation is outside of determining the meaning and use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4, 15, 18 and 26, other issues about the attributes of God are out of the scope of this thesis.

### 1.7 Introductory conclusion

Examining both *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) is required to fully understand the meaning of the selected Jeremiah passages. When both words are examined in their respective contexts, will an important relationship between the two be found? Only after the five key questions have been answered can we determine how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. With this in mind, we must now turn our attention to exploring the current views and debates on the topic.

## Chapter 2

# THE LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter is a discussion on and interaction with the current resources and major views concerning the theories on the meaning of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), as well as Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. The literature presented in this chapter is divided into four categories that best represents the overall main arguments concerning the topic of this thesis. Under each category, key scholars and their works, using their own words, are analysed. This is necessary to show the evolution of thought on the matter, give a fair treatment of the literature that already exist and allow this thesis to go deeper into the subject. First, this chapter deals with the viewpoint that says when נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, it should be interpreted as an accommodating anthropomorphic metaphor. Second, this chapter deals with the view that says when נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, it should be interpreted as straightforward literal language. Third, this chapter deals with the conditional prophecy viewpoint, which argues that the Jeremiah passages reveal the nature of conditional prophecy. Fourth, this chapter deals with the sovereignty debates that have arisen in the past three decades concerning how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) are understood. Literature presented in this chapter consist of books, articles and commentaries.

## 2.2 The accommodating anthropomorphism metaphor viewpoint

The first major category is the accommodating anthropomorphism metaphor viewpoint. In this view, נָחַם (*nacham*) when it refers to God, is interpreted as a metaphor or figure of speech that does not reflect literal reality but instead describes God in human terms so he can be understood. This view appears to have strong roots dating back to the church fathers and was espoused by St. Augustine (1905:88) in the fourth and fifth centuries AD (circa 354-430 AD). Augustine (1905:88) wrote, “. . . we may understand God, if we are able, and as much as we are able, as good without quality, great without quantity, a creator though He lack nothing, ruling but from no position, sustaining all things without ‘having’ them, in His wholeness everywhere, yet without place, eternal without time, making things that are changeable, without change of Himself, and without passion”. Augustine (1905:88) believed that God is without passion, or as other translations say, “God is not moved or acted upon”. This is the belief that God is not moved by his creation. Even when God’s people repent, שָׁב (*shub*), as indicated in Jeremiah 18:7-10, their repentance does not change or move God to action.

To further his point, Augustine (1907:237) wrote, “For that which specially leads these men astray to refer their own circles to the straight path of truth, is, that they measure by their own human, changeable, and narrow intellect *the divine mind, which is absolutely unchangeable*, infinitely capacious, and without succession of thought, counting all things without number (emphasis added)”. So in this view, God does not literally נָחַם (*nacham*), and it is a theological error to apply human attributes to the divine mind.

John Calvin (circa 1509-1564 AD) (2006:127) also held this view and added the concept of accommodation to anthropomorphisms. He argued that the Anthropomorphites, who took the biblical writers literally when they wrote of God as having a mouth, ears, eyes, hands and feet, are easily refuted. He insisted that any language that described God in human terms should be understood like a nurse talking to an infant. Thus, Calvin (2006:127) concluded,

“Such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as *accommodate* the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must *descend* far beneath his loftiness” (emphasis added). So, in Calvin’s (2006:127) view, this type of language is accommodating man’s ignorance rather than describing God as he is.

He later applied the same accommodating concept specifically to passages where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God (Calvin, 2008:132). For example, in the case of Jeremiah 18:8 where God promised to relent from judgment if people repent, Calvin (2008:132) believed that “repentance” is not a quality that we can attribute to God. He (2008:132) wrote, “As to repentance, we must hold that it can no more exist in God than ignorance, or error, or impotence”. Rather, when the Bible describes God as having relented or repented, “the term *change* is used figuratively” (Calvin, 2008:132). Again, the reason Calvin (2008:132) interpreted such passages in this way stemmed from his belief that man cannot understand God. For example, he (2008:132) wrote, “Because our weakness cannot reach his height, any description which we receive of him must be lowered to our capacity in order to be intelligible. And the mode of lowering is to represent him not as he really is, but as we conceive of him . . . we . . . ought to consider the mode of speech accommodated to our sense. . .”.

As Like Augustine (1907:237), Calvin (2008:132) believed that man’s actions did not move God to action. As mentioned above, in the case of Jeremiah 18:7-10, if man repents, שׁוּב (*shub*), then God’s change of mind, נָחַם (*nacham*), is only to be understood figuratively, not literally. This figurative language is accommodating language, that is, accommodated to man’s understanding but does not depict literal reality. A question that should be asked is on what basis does Calvin determine which Scriptures to interpret literally or metaphorically? In other words, how does someone determine which language about God is “baby” talk rather than “adult” talk? I discuss these matters and the basis for metaphorical versus literal interpretation in greater detail in chapter seven.

Scott Oliphint (2012:123) referred to a process known as accommodated revelation. He (2012:123) acknowledged a confusion over interpreting anthropomorphisms in that it is tempting to interpret passages that portray God as changing his mind as anthropomorphic metaphor and interpret passages that speak of God not being capable of changing his mind as literal. Oliphint's (2012:123) proposed solution is that we should see all of God's revelation to us as anthropomorphic, that is, "accommodated revelation; it is revelation accommodated to our mode of being and our mode of understanding".

Oliphint's (2012:123) process of "accommodated revelation" is confusing, because he claims that it does not mean that every truth given in Scripture automatically refers to God as accommodated. For example, he wrote, "Though all of your knowledge begins with God's accommodation, not all of our knowledge necessarily refers to accommodation" (Oliphint, 2012:123). He added, "Our knowledge of God presupposes his accommodating himself to us, but the very knowledge that he gives us can and does refer at times to that which is nonaccommodated, that is, to God apart from, 'outside,' or 'before' creation" (2012:123). Oliphint (2012:123) provided an example of how this plays out in Scripture. For example, when the Bible uses נָחַם (*nacham*) in referring to God as having changed his mind (as in Jeremiah 18) or having been moved by emotions, a person should see that as a literal statement, because it is God dealing with mankind. However, he pointed out that "one should also see that the God who really changes his mind is the accommodated God, while remaining the 'I Am,' nevertheless stoops to our level to interact, person-to-person, with us" (2012:124).

Once again, a problem for Oliphint's view is how are we supposed to know which parts of the Bible are referring to an "accommodated" versus a "nonaccommodated" view of God? If God has to accommodate himself to us in order to reveal himself to us (in a literal way), then we would have to know what "nonaccommodated" language looked like before we could distinguish it from the "accommodated" language.

In essence, Oliphint (2012:123) arrived at the same conclusion as Calvin (2008:132). For example, both Calvin (2008:132) and Oliphint (2012:123) believed God used anthropomorphic language (because of his transcendent nature) to descend to the level of human understanding, which in turn makes him appear a certain way throughout the biblical texts. In this view, the use of  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*) has a double meaning of sorts. Even though some of these anthropomorphisms (such as God changing his mind  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*)) look literal to humans, they are not literal with God. They are only literal in the sense that they appear literal from man's perspective. This viewpoint presupposes that for God to literally accommodate himself (as in him changing his mind to communicate literal truth), then God would not only have to descend to the level of humans but would also have to live there (2012:126).

For example, Oliphint (2012:126) believed God would have to adopt man's ignorance and constraints (such as living inside of time) before he could adapt to the circumstances and situations around him. The conclusion in this view is that God will never literally accommodate himself since he transcends human thought capacities. As a result, this only reinforces the belief that Oliphint (2012:123) held that it is the accommodated God that changes his mind and not the literal God. The problem is that nowhere in the Bible does God refer to himself as the accommodated God.

This viewpoint has consistently remained popular to the present times. Several commentaries of the past few decades have espoused this view. For example, in the 1980s, Jon Arthur Thompson (1980:434) in the New International Commentary on the Old Testament for Jeremiah wrote concerning  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*) and Jeremiah 18:8, "The verb here translated *think better of* is translated . . . as 'repent.' It is hardly to be understood in the human sense; rather, because of a change in attitude in the people or nation, Yahweh is able to modify his action toward them. Thus it is not so much a change of mind as a change of treatment because of modified behaviour".

Of noteworthy interest is how Thompson proposed that when נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, it should not be understood in the human sense. He believed to some degree the interpretation is accommodated to our understanding and does not make sense with a literal rendering. Thompson (1980:434, 524), when discussing Jeremiah 18:8 and 26:3, went on to mention the context in which Jeremiah seemed to have used the Hebrew verb שׁוּב (*shub*). This context appears to be in reference to the people turning away from evil. He wrote, “Evildoers may *turn back* שׁוּב (*shub*) from the *evil way* . . . they have followed . . . The prophet has in mind the act of turning from evil” (1980:434). Thompson did not explain in any way the relationship that possibly exists between both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*).

Charles L. Feinberg (1983:134) acknowledged in his commentary on Jeremiah that 18:7-10 is about how God deals with humanity but attributes it to being a “mysterious blending of the divine sovereignty and human responsibility”. Appealing to this idea of a mystery, he brought in the concept of accommodating anthropomorphisms. When נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God in Jeremiah 18, Feinberg (1983:135) wrote, “Jeremiah speaks of the Lord in strongly anthropomorphic terms to accommodate our human inability to comprehend the divine mystery of God’s ways. . .” He (1983:135) continued, “When the Scriptures speak of God’s relenting or repenting, we must understand this in light of Numbers 23:19. When used of God, repentance never means what it does for man...”

Although Feinberg (1983:135) believed that נָחַם (*nacham*) is to be understood as an accommodating anthropomorphism, he nevertheless stated that human repentance, that is, שׁוּב (*shub*), can change God’s decree of judgment. Feinberg never explained or worked out the details of how on one hand he could say that נָחַם (*nacham*) does not in this case reflect literal reality, but on the other hand, he could say that man’s repentance שׁוּב (*shub*) could make God change his course of action. Instead, he consistently referred to it as a mystery.

Robert Jamieson, Andrew Robert Fausset and David Brown (1997:Jer18:8) explained the mystery by saying that God adapts himself to human conceptions meaning that “the change is not in God, but in the circumstances which regulate God’s dealings: just as we say the land recedes from us when we sail forth, whereas it is we who recede from the land (Ez 18:21; 33:11)”. In their view, “God’s unchangeable principle is to do the best that can be done under all circumstances; if then He did not take into the account the moral change in His people (their prayers), He would not be acting according to His own unchanging principle” (1997:Jer18:8).

So, one way of explaining this mystery of how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) affect the interpretation of the passage is saying man’s *שׁוּב* (*shub*) leads to a change in the circumstances surrounding the situation at hand but not a literal change with God. Jamieson, Fausset and Brown (1997:Jer18:8) did not address fully how God could take into account the actions of his people and at the same be affected by those actions but not changed by them. This thesis hopes to address this problem and look more closely at the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) as it relates to man and God.

In 1987, RC Sproul (1987) released a theology book that dealt with different attributes of God. In his book, he included a section on passages where *נָחַם* (*nacham*) refers to God. Sproul (1987:92) acknowledged that this is a “thorny” problem, because on one hand the Bible seems to indicate that God relents (as in the passages in Jeremiah), while on the other hand the Bible indicates that he cannot (as in Numbers 23:19-20). Instead of giving in to Bible critics that this is evidence of a contradiction in Scripture, Sproul (1987:93) explained the *נָחַם* (*nacham*) passages by introducing the concept of phenomenological language, that is, the biblical writers explained things as they would appear to the naked eye.

In other words, from the human perspective, it would appear as if God changed his mind *נָחַם* (*nacham*) if the nation were to repent *שׁוּב* (*shub*). In this instance, the idea of phenomenological language is similar to the idea of accommodating

anthropomorphisms. The text does not mean what it literally says and should not be pressed for literal details. Sproul (1987:93-94) offered his reasoning for interpreting the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages in this manner using the discussion between Moses and God in Exodus 32 as an example. He (1987:93-94) argued that if the discussion between Moses and God is taken literally, then it would mean that God relented because Moses “showed God a more excellent way”. Moses was God’s “superior guidance counsellor” who kept God from making a foolish mistake (1987:93-94). For example, Moses argued that God’s reputation would be tainted if he destroyed the Israelites in the desert. Sproul (1987:93-94) believed if taken literally then God “must have overlooked the consequence of that action on His reputation, and God’s reasoning was flawed”.

Sproul (1987:93) believed the qualifier for determining the interpretation of the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages as in Jeremiah is 1 Samuel 15:29, God is not a man that he should relent. He pointed out that where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, the narrative that surrounds them deal with threats of judgment and punishment. The threats then are followed by the people repenting שָׁבָה (*shub*). Sproul did not explain the connection of how God could figuratively remove the threat of judgment without literally relenting in response to the repentance of the people, instead, he (1987:94) wrote, “the point of these narratives is to encourage us to pray. We are to make intercession”.

Norman L Geisler (2010:117) is another scholar who argued that when נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God in the Old Testament, no real change of mind actually occurred on God’s part. He believed that if נָחַם (*nacham*) is translated to mean “change of mind”, then this presents a contradiction in Scripture, namely, with 1 Samuel 15:29 (2010:117). Because God cannot contradict himself, the argument goes, the texts cannot literally mean that he changed or can change his mind (2010:118). Geisler (2010:118) instead insisted that נָחַם (*nacham*) be translated into something else rather than “repent” or “relent”. For example, he (2010:118) believed that נָחַם (*nacham*) really means to be grieved and should be “properly translated *regret* . . .”. This means that instead of God changing his

mind, he experiences a “deep regret when human beings do not do what He desires” (Geisler, 2010:118). In his (2010:118) view, “God’s genuine interaction with petitionary prayer is possible by His being proactive, not reactive, to their request”. While it is true that נָחַם (*nacham*) has an emotional component to it such as regret or grief (see chapter four), the Hebrew verb root cannot be limited to only those two meanings. Depending on the context, repent or relent is a viable interpretation for the word (see chapter four).

In the end, Geisler (2010:118) concluded that “the idea of God repenting or regretting is a figure of speech”. He offered several reasons as to why scholars should not interpret the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages in a literal straightforward fashion (2010:119). First, he noted that God cannot have contradictory attributes in that he cannot change his mind and not change his mind in the same sense. Geisler wrote, “Humans change in relation to God, but God does not change in relation to them” (2010:119). We will address this “contradiction” in more detail in chapter six and discover that there are other ways to interpret this “contradiction”.

Second, he noted that “. . . good reason demands that God must be unchangeable, for we cannot measure change except by what does not change . . . Hence, any language attributing change must be metaphorical” (Geisler, 2010:119). The idea that God must be unchangeable is a matter of definitions. What does Geisler mean by unchangeable? If he means by an unchangeable character, then God being moved by human decisions can be a part of his unchanging character and nature. If “unchangeable” is meant in terms of divine impassibility, then what are we to do with the amount of Scriptures in the Old Testament that portray God as having emotion and changing depending on circumstances? I show in chapter seven how the idea that a perfect God cannot change stems from Greek philosophers more than the biblical texts.

Third, Geisler (2010:121) argued that “everything that changes has a cause” and if God changed then he would cease to be God. Finally, he (2010:121) believed that when repentance takes place, humans are the ones who actually

change instead of God. I argue in chapter five that human repentance does indeed influence what God does or does not do. This has to do with the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) that is brought out in that chapter.

Robin Routledge (2013:251) in his Old Testament theology book argued for an anthropomorphic interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) as it relates to God, because any other interpretation in his view raises the question of God's reliability. If God can literally change his mind, he argued, then does that mean he is reacting to something unforeseen? Instead, Routledge (2013:252) said the biblical writers often used anthropomorphic language to convey truth about God. In those cases, he noted that the anthropomorphic language does not need to be interrogated too deeply. He gave the example of "God's hand", and wrote, ". . . it is clear what is meant, and it is fatuous to ask why only one hand, or to enquire about the number of fingers" (2013:253). He went on to write, "Why might the idea of God changing his mind not be understood in the same way?" (2013:253). In his view, the biblical writers, in passages as found in Jeremiah, were not making theological statements about God's sovereignty, foreknowledge or reliability, because those things are a theological given. He wrote, "implying that the idea raises questions about them is reading too much into the language" (2013:253); therefore, he warned against pressing an anthropomorphism too far.

In this view, appealing to anthropomorphic metaphor keeps scholars from reading too much into what was originally intended by the biblical author as figurative language (Routledge, 2013:253). Routledge (2013:253) explained that when God is portrayed in the Bible, the "writers focus only on those aspects of his character and his relationship with his people and with the world that are relevant to that particular story". This means that different sections of the story would place an emphasis on different characteristics of God (2013:253). Those who "adopt a deconstructive approach to the text, consider the way God is described in a particular case, extend its theological significance beyond the

context of the narrative (and beyond the intention of the writer) and use it as an example of dissonance within the OT canon” (Routledge, 2013:253). The problem with this approach is that it creates tension and contradiction where there is none and “points to a much more varied, and much more uncertain, understanding of God than the text justifies” (Routledge, 2013:253).

The job of the interpreter, then, according to this view, is to focus on the anthropomorphism in light of the context of its passage in order to figure out and understand the nature of God’s character as he relates to the people in that specific story. Routledge did not explain, however, how the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contributes to that understanding. A problem with Routledge’s view is that if anthropomorphic metaphors were used by biblical writers to convey truth about God, then what truth is revealed in the passages that portray God as having relented or being willing to relent? If, as Routledge claims, those statements are not to be pressed literally for details, what truth are they conveying? This raises another question of then deciding how truth is extracted from anthropomorphic metaphors. I offer solutions in chapter seven where I deal with the anthropomorphic problem.

### 2.3 The straightforward literal language viewpoint

The second major category is the straightforward literal language viewpoint. Under this view, when *נָחַם* (*nacham*) refers to God, interpreters interpret the meaning as straightforward literal language. In other words, in this view the text simply means what it says. There are no reasons, this view says, to apply a metaphorical meaning to *נָחַם* (*nacham*). Even if a scholar takes the view that *נָחַם* (*nacham*) should be interpreted metaphorical, not all scholars agree that every metaphor should be treated in the same way. For example, with the accommodating anthropomorphism metaphor viewpoint listed above, scholars will dismiss passages where *נָחַם* (*nacham*) refers to God as being a metaphorical figure of speech because of the passage’s anthropomorphic language, that is, speaking of God in human terms. Scholars who espouse the straightforward literal language viewpoint will instead argue that even if the

phrase was metaphorical, it does not necessarily and automatically negate a straightforward literal interpretation of the phrase, because metaphors can be interpreted differently depending on what type of metaphor it is. James Barr (2013:49) ever so slightly noted a distinction in the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Old Testament. He wrote (2013:49):

My first point is to make a distinction. . . . Thus studies of anthropomorphism commonly begin with those often-mentioned references to God's hands, feet, ears, nose, his speaking, smelling, walking in gardens, shutting doors, laughing, whistling, treading winepress, rising early in the morning, rejoicing, being disgusted, changing his mind, being jealous, and so on; and the appearances of God in human forms are lumped in with all these as further examples of the same phenomenon. It seems desirable however to make some distinction between them.

In the context of Barr's quote above, he believed a distinction should be made between theophanies and anthropomorphisms and was not necessarily referring to anthropomorphic metaphors in and of themselves. However, his work on anthropomorphisms and the distinction he proposed in separating the anthropomorphic language from the theophanies helped to pave the way for Terence Fretheim (1984:5-12) who wrote on anthropomorphic metaphors and drew out a distinction among them. Fretheim (1984:5) pointed out that "virtually all of the language used in the Bible to refer to God is metaphorical; the word 'God' would be an exception".

With this in mind, Fretheim (1984:6) argued that not all anthropomorphic metaphors should be interpreted as completely figuratively. He (1984:6) believed that understanding "this language in a purely figurative sense would mean that it is thought finally to stand over against the concreteness and realism commonly said to be characteristic of OT thought". In other words, Fretheim (1984:7) argued that the anthropomorphic metaphors must communicate something true about God. In his mind, labelling phrases as in

Jeremiah 18:7-10 where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God as simply an anthropomorphic metaphor does not allow the interpreter to dismiss them as non-literal figures of speech that do not reflect reality.

Fretheim (1984:7) warned of the danger of “positing no real or essential relationship between the metaphor and God as God really relates to the world”. In other words, there is a temptation for scholars to think of metaphors as only being “illustrative or decorative of thought” as they search for abstract meanings (1984:7). “But”, Fretheim (1984:7) wrote, “as with all metaphors, while there is no one-to-one correspondence, the metaphor does say some things about God that corresponds to the reality which is God, while saying other things as well”. So, Old Testament metaphors do describe God and give us information about God, though they do not describe him fully (1984:7). Fretheim (1984:7) concluded, “The metaphor does not stand over against the literal. Though the *use* of the metaphor is not literal, there is literalness intended in the relationship to which the metaphor has reference”.

Even in Fretheim’s belief that all anthropomorphic metaphors and phrases communicate something true about God he, nevertheless, qualified and made a further distinction as to which metaphors are reality depicting. For example, he wrote, “On the other hand, there is a danger of suggesting that a literal correspondence exists between metaphor and reality in every respect” (1984:7). He suggested that the danger is essentially reducing “God to human frailty”, and that there is always that in the anthropomorphic metaphor “which is discontinuous with the reality which is God. . . God outdistances all our images; God cannot finally be captured by any of them” (1984:8). So, in the instance of Jeremiah where God promises to relent נָחַם (*nacham*) when a nation repents שׁוּב (*shub*), he (1984:8) suggested that the text, “with the basic ideas of reversal and change, does have some basic points of continuity with the way God actually relates to the world. Yet, there is no one-on-one correspondence between the way people and God repent”.

I explore in greater detail Fretheim's idea that all metaphors to some degree reflect reality in chapter seven. A great strength to his argument is that it should keep scholars from simply dismissing anthropomorphisms in the Old Testament that might cause problems with a person's theology as non-important. Instead, it forces us to deal with the texts to seek what truth the "metaphor" is communicating and what it reveals to us about God's relationship with the world. We will see that the concern or issue at hand with interpreting anthropomorphic metaphors is determining which metaphors carry more weight than others. Fretheim (1984:9) understood this issue and pointed out that "the tendency in OT scholarship has been to forfeit many such metaphors, primarily by collecting a large number of them and drawing a few general conclusions, rather than examining each in turn for the insight it might generate".

While all metaphors are important in terms of specificity and generality, they do not all share the same value and each has "varying degrees of correspondence" (Fretheim, 1984:10). Fretheim (1984:10) categorized metaphors into two groups of revelatory capacity: low and high capacity. Those with low capacity are not "communal property and are used for their surprise and shock value, while those with high capacity are "communal", meaning they have found a "staying power in the community of faith over a longer period of time" (1984:10). High capacity metaphors are important, because "they have a richness of association in human experience; they are true to life, revealing a certain fitness with respect to that experience" (1984:10). In other words, "they have a capacity to capture, organize, and communicate our experience and understanding of God; to focus our thinking, feeling, and living" (1984:10). With this categorization, the art of metaphorical interpretation is perhaps taken to a deeper level. The question still remains, though, of how we determine which metaphoric statements have greater value than others.

To help answer this question, Fretheim (1984:10-11) proposed that "rather than accommodating God to the level of the human or raising human characteristics to the nth degree, the human is seen to be fashioned in the likeness of God.

Hence the human is seen in theomorphic terms, rather than God in anthropomorphic terms”. This led to the development of the concept of “controlling metaphors”, which are metaphors that are the most foundational to a person’s understanding of God. Controlling metaphors are “able to bring a coherence to a range of biblical thinking about God; they provide a hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole” (1984:11).

To determine which metaphors qualify as controlling metaphors, the interpreter has to figure out which elements of the human experience are not appropriate for God and which ones are appropriate for God (Fretheim, 1984:12). To help aid this process, the following question should be considered: What does the anthropomorphic metaphor add to the understanding of the relationship between God and the world? This question is used to help drive the exegetical process of our Jeremiah texts in chapter five in determining how significant our two Hebrew verb roots are to their respective passages. In essence, Fretheim’s study on anthropomorphic metaphors was a break-through in the sense that it applied pressure to the first viewpoint discussed in this chapter of simply dismissing as pure “language of accommodation” passages like in Jeremiah where נָחַם (*nacham*) is directly related and refers to God.

Three years later after writing about his concept of the controlling metaphor, Fretheim (1987) wrote an article dealing specifically with Jeremiah 18:7-10. He noted (1987:82) that one of the concerns scholars have with a literal interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) referring to God is that the entire context of Jeremiah 18:1-10 had been interpreted in light of understanding God’s sovereignty and freedom. The result of this interpretation presents נָחַם (*nacham*) as being problematic for such scholars, he argued, because “it seems to bind God to the world and to human activity . . .” (1987:82). This appearance of “binding” relates to the proposed relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) that this thesis is seeking to address.

Fretheim (1987:82) only mentioned this “binding” but did not explain in detail the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) as it contributes to this

passage. Instead, he briefly mentioned human response playing a role and argued that scholars should interpret Jeremiah 18:1-6 in light of Jeremiah 18:7-10, instead of predetermining that the point of the entire passage is to say that God is in total control over what the clay does (1987:82-85). He went on to write, “The focus is not on God’s power and control, but on God’s initiative, creativity, patience, and responsiveness in relation to the possibilities inherent in the situation” (1987:86).

Fretheim (1987:86) cited Jeremiah 18:7-10 as support of his view. He wrote, “In these verses it is made clear that the people of the world can take two directions in response to the word of God: depending upon what the word is, they can repent of their evil and turn to God or they can turn from God, not listening to God’s voice. God does not control which direction people take” (1987:86). Fretheim (1987:86-91) argued that when Jeremiah 18:1-10 is considered in its entirety in terms of context, scholars should conclude that Jeremiah 18:7-10 has literal meaning. In his view, God literally changes his mind נָחַם (*nacham*) and should not be dismissed as mere “language of accommodation” (1987:90-91).

A recent publication of an article by Daniel Frese (2013) challenged the view that Jeremiah 18:7-10 is directly related to Jeremiah 18:1-6. Frese (2013:373) argued that Jeremiah 18:1-6 and 7-10 should be “understood as complementary points which serve the larger purpose of vv. 1-11, which is to call the people of Judah to repentance”. He claimed that the point of Jeremiah 18:1-6 points to “Yahweh’s prerogative to determine Israel’s fate” (2013:374). In Jeremiah 18:7-10, Frese (2013:375) pointed out that even though Yahweh announced his plans does not mean they are final. He proposed that Jeremiah 18:7-10 were added by a later editor as a reinterpretation of the latter section (2013:376). In his view, both sections (Jeremiah 18:1-6 and 18:7-10) fit together within the larger context of the entire passage (2013:376).

Where he disagrees with Fretheim is that Jeremiah 18:7-10 does not “mean to explain and elaborate on the metaphor of the potter” (2013:377). Instead, Frese

(2013:377) proposed that Jeremiah 18:7-10 serves a “rhetorical purpose that is not directly related to the potter”. Frese (2013:383) argued that using 18:7-10 to interpret 18:1-4 illegitimately adds to the depiction of the potter as one who is willing to change. Instead, he argued that the original description of the potter is one who does not change his plans based on the clay’s behaviour (2013:383). Because God is portrayed as being willing to change in 18:7-10 based on the actions of the nations, these verses, he believed, are better seen as moving on to a different topic (2013:383). The relationship between 18:1-4 and 18:7-10 is discussed in chapter five. I argue that the context of 18:1-10 does indeed lend itself as one coherent unit, and the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) is significant to understanding the coherent nature of the passage.

Frese (2013:387) concluded that in “vv. 7-10, Yahweh moves on to a complementary point that also serves to encourage the people to repent. He now points out that his plans for nations are not rigidly fixed; they are based on the peoples’ behaviour, and thus can be altered”. One problem with Frese’s viewpoint is that separating 18:1-4 from 18:7-10 does not accomplish anything or teach us anything new about God. He still believed that the passage teaches that God can and does change his direction in light of human decisions. Why does he feel so strongly to separate the potter and clay analogy from his conclusion of 18:7-10? In the end, Frese (2013:388) arrived at a similar conclusion as Fretheim (1987:86), that is, “God’s will” is contingent upon the decisions of people, but he did not explain how this relationship works or how it contributes to the overall meaning of the passage. What is interesting to note, however, is *how* Frese and Fretheim arrived at similar conclusions about the passage.

For example, Fretheim (1987) argued that Jeremiah 18:1-6 should be interpreted in light of 18:7-10, while Frese (2013) argued that neither section has anything to do with each other except for complementing the overall point of Jeremiah 18:11. As will be shown, similar contextual arguments can be used to explain why this passage relates to the sovereignty of God and how a literal

rendering of God changing his mind would undermine that sovereignty. This shows a study of Jeremiah 18:7-10 in its context is required to further develop and show how the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contributes to the overall meaning of the Jeremiah passages.

John Goldingay (2003:98) acknowledged that sometimes Christians become uneasy about the idea of נָחַם (*nacham*) being interpreted in a literal fashion to mean God changed his mind, because they believe it imperils God's sovereignty or consistency. He admitted that it is difficult to dismiss the number of occasions when Scripture speaks of God having a change of mind as "concessions to the way things look to us" (2003:98). What does Goldingay do with the Scriptures that speak against God being capable of changing his mind? He stated, "the First Testament also denies that God has a change of mind, and when it does that, it is asserting that God is not fickle. God does not arbitrarily say one thing today and another tomorrow" (2003:98). In his view, when God makes a decree, if there is good reason "within the terms of other aspects of God's purpose for the world", God can have a change of mind (2003:98). He wrote, "There will then be consistencies about God's policies even if flexibility about their outworking" (2003:98).

Goldingay (2006:89) later wrote that there is "a consistency about Yhwh's work, but there is also change and flexibility". In his view, Yahweh's changeableness is him being open to having a change of heart (2006:89). He wrote, "Yhwh can declare the intention to act in a certain way and in the same breath urge people to pray for the opposite" (2006:90). Goldingay (2006:90) showed how a more literal interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) can affect how a person understands the importance and purpose of prayer. He believed that statements in the Bible that portray God as having a change of mind or relenting based on human actions shows that God intends "prayer not as a way of aligning us with Yhwh's will but as the means of changing Yhwh's will" (2006:90).

Concerning נָחַם (*nacham*), Goldingay (2006:90) wrote, "The verb (נָחַם *nacham*) is an inherently affective word. Insofar as it suggests a change of mind, this is a

change of mind that issues from a change of heart". He acknowledged how the English translation "repent" has a negative connotation especially when referring to God (2006:90). This translation can make people think God has made a mistake and has to repent from wrongdoing. Goldingay (2006:90) prefers translating the word as "relent". In fact, he claimed that the idea of God relenting is found all throughout the Old Testament in the examples of Jonah (Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2), Moses (Ex 32:12, 14) and Joel (Joel 2:12-14) (2006:90). We shall discover that this concept of God relenting is found in many more passages than those listed, and this is explored in chapter six.

Goldingay (2006:91) also briefly mentioned the Hebrew verb שׁוּב (*shub*). He again acknowledged how this verb is translated "repent", but that translation can be misleading. At its core, the verb "refers to the action of turning from one direction of behaviour to another, rather than to the feelings that accompany the action" (2006:91). The prophets used the verb "*turn* to describe both God's action toward human beings and human beings' action toward God . . . The dialogical reciprocity highlights the paradoxical nature of the sovereignty of God" (2006:91).

Goldingay (2006:91) showed how this "paradoxical" nature of God's sovereignty is reflected in how the prophets spoke about history. The prophets spoke "as if history is divinely predetermined and not dependent on the dialogue between prophet and God . . . yet the events they speak of do not come about wholly in the ways Yhwh says, and that also implies that God assumes room to maneuver" (2006:91). For example, (2006:91) (1) God can relent without being asked (2 Samuel 24:16). (2) God can get tired of relenting (Jeremiah 15:6). (3) God can choose not to relent (Jeremiah 4:28). (4) "Amos prevails on Yhwh to relent about an intention to bring disaster on Ephraim, an intention so real it could be envisioned, which implies it is already a reality and not merely an idea. Indeed, Amos so prevails more than once (Amos 7:1-6)" (2006:91).

In this view, God's change of heart can mean "turning from a positive attitude to a negative one (Genesis 6:6-7) or from a negative one to a positive one"

(Goldingay, 2006:91). For example, if God declares an intention to bring judgment upon a nation and then decides to have a change of heart, it does not mean that God abandons promises but instead rejoices to “abandon the plan to punish people” (2006:91). On the other hand, “if a nation turns from faithful ways, then Yhwh may relent concerning the good that had been planned for it (Jeremiah 18:10)” (2006:91). Goldingay (2006:91-92) provided 1 Samuel 15 and Jeremiah 18 as examples of this in the Old Testament. Goldingay (2006:91-92) rightly showed how 1 Samuel 15:11-35 does not mean that God never has a change of heart. Instead, God was showing Samuel that he is not “fickle” (2006:91-92). “Yhwh does not relent about things in the way that a human being does. There is consistent principle about Yhwh’s actions. It is not God’s nature to have a change of heart about bringing blessing, though God can do so if necessary” (2006:91-92).

While advocating a literal interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) when it refers to God (as having a change of heart), Goldingay (2006:92) offered contextual insight into one of the Old Testament passages (1 Samuel 15:29) that appears to contradict this idea. His view is that ultimately God can be trusted to be reliable even if there is room for God to have a change of heart in his plans (2006:92). Goldingay’s stance and argument was important for the scholars who interpret the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages in a literal straightforward way, because as will be shown, one of the main critiques of this viewpoint is that a literal interpretation makes God seem unreliable. I deal with 1 Samuel 15:29 and other seemingly contradictory passages to a literal interpretation of God relenting in chapter six.

Peter Enns (2005:106) contributed to the subject of whether נָחַם (*nacham*) should be interpreted as literal language or as accommodated language by challenging readers to pay attention the language the Old Testament uses about God. He wrote, “I am not interested in asking whether God can or cannot change his mind as some abstract discussion. The issue I am addressing is how the Old Testament *describes* God” (2005:106). Enns (2005:106) believed most scholars miss the point of the issue because they focus on the abstract

instead of what is actually in the biblical texts. He went on to write, “To ask in the abstract what God can or cannot do is interesting . . . but . . . it is not the God *behind* the scenes that that I want look at, but the God *of* the scenes, the God of the Bible, how he is portrayed there” (2005:106).

Even with his view of sticking to how the Old Testament describes God, Enns (2005:106) realized his methodology would raise questions, such as, “Does not God, as he is portrayed in the Bible, correspond to the God behind the scenes”? The argument is that because the Bible is the Word of God, it gives an accurate portrait of what God is really like. Enns (2005:106) wrote, “After all, if you drive a wedge between what the Old Testament says about God and what God is *really* like, how can we speak meaningfully of the Bible as God’s authoritative word”? Enns (2005:106) further explained his reasoning and process for determining what language is literal and what language is accommodated:

I am not trying to drive a wedge between the Bible and God . . . I feel bound to talk about God *in the way(s) the Bible does*, even if I am not comfortable with it. The Bible really does have authority if we let it speak, and not when we – intentionally or unintentionally – suspend what the Bible says about God in some places while we work out our speculations about what God is “really” like, perhaps by accenting other portions of the Bible that are more amenable to our thinking. God gave us the Bible so we could read *it*, not so we can ferret our way *behind* it to see how things really are. God reveals himself *throughout* the Old Testament. There is no part that gets it “more right” than others . . . So, for the Old Testament to speak of God as changing his mind means that this is *his* choice for how *he* wants us to know him. He speaks about himself in ways that reflect our ability to understand.

In his view, Enns (2005:106) believed a person should not suspend certain biblical passages only because it disagrees with his current understanding or

view of God. As shown in the above quote, he deduced that God can choose to speak to us humans in any way that he desires, and we should accept the way the Old Testament describes him, even the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages that describe God as relenting or as having changed his mind (2005:106-107). Enns argument is strong if scholars believe the Bible is one of the primary ways God has revealed himself to humanity. I can sympathize with Enns on this point, because after all, he is trying to remain true to the biblical texts.

Enns (2005:106-107) acknowledged that his view has certain implications for how a person views prayer. He wrote, "I might add at this juncture that Christian prayer, which is often expressed as *pleading* before God, operates on the assumption that our words will have some *effect* on God" (2005:106-107). He went on to add, "But many of us have seen enough examples of answers to prayer in the face of a life-threatening illness and dire financial problems to admit that there is a ring of truth to all of this" (2005:107).

Finally, Enns (2005:107) had a word of caution for scholars who are quick to dismiss how the Old Testament describes God, whether they interpret the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages literally or not. He wrote (2005:107):

There are diverse portrayals of God in the Old Testament. He is, on the one hand, powerful, one who knows things before they happen and who causes things to happen, one who is in complete control. On the other hand, he finds things out, he can feel grieved about things that happen, he changes his mind. If we allow either of these dimensions to override the other, we set aside part of God's word in an effort to defend him, which is somewhat of a self-contradiction. But as we think about God, as we learn of him more and more, as we enter deeper into relationship with him through Christ, we will see that there is much in the full-orbed biblical portrait of God that we need to know. And of course, this is no surprise, for this is what he intended.

In other words, as we study the biblical text in search of who God is, we must take all accounts and viewpoints into consideration whether we agree with them or not, and we must not so readily dismiss interpretations of texts that seemingly disagree with our theology. Although Enns (2005) supported a more literal interpretation of the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages that refer to God, he offered a unique perspective in that he was more neutral in his writings on the subject than others. He did appear to sympathize with both the accommodated language and the literal language viewpoints, but ultimately challenged the notion of trying to read too much into those נָחַם (*nacham*) passages.

### 2.4 The conditional prophecy viewpoint

The third viewpoint is the conditional prophecy viewpoint. Conditional prophecy is considered an interpretative challenge, because it includes both a God and human element that could lead to someone to thinking it indicates uncertainty on God's part (Hays, 2010:82). One of the biggest factors that separates the conditional prophecy viewpoint from the previously two viewpoints that have been discussed is that the following scholars do not attempt to defend whether they believe נָחַם (*nacham*) should be interpreted literally or as accommodated language. Instead, those who hold to the conditional prophecy view believe that passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 and the example of King Hezekiah as mentioned in Jeremiah 26 give a glimpse into the nature of how conditional prophecy works. For example, Scott Duvall and Daniel Hays (2005:383), in their academic hermeneutics textbook, wrote, “. . . some biblical prophecies appear to have aspects of conditionality attached to their fulfilment. God himself states this clearly in Jeremiah 18:7-10”.

Concerning Jeremiah 18:7-10, Hays (2010:82) wrote, “In a text like this, Yahweh appears to be saying that what will actually happen depends on the response of the people to the prophetic word”. So, in passages where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, it is sometimes connected with a human condition. Hays (2010:82) responds to critics who say conditional prophecies cast doubt on God's sovereignty or indicate uncertainty in God's knowledge of the future

by concluding that “conditionality” is part of God’s will and “is related to his sovereign right to decide such things”. He argued that passages like Jeremiah 18:6 “prevent us from distorting sovereignty and foreknowledge into fatalism and determinism” (2010:82). He turned to the book of Jonah as another example and concluded that the Ninevites’ repentance and being spared from destruction fit the pattern described in Jeremiah 18:7-10 (2010:82).

Furthermore, Hays (Hays, Duvall and Pate, 2007) gave another example of conditional prophecy besides Jeremiah 18 and Jonah’s encounter with Nineveh, that is, King Hezekiah’s story of healing (found in 2 Kings 20:1-6 and Isaiah 38:1-6). This story is mentioned in Jeremiah 26. When the prophet Isaiah told King Hezekiah to get his house in order, for he was going to die, Hezekiah prayed and God relented *נָחַם* (*nacham*), adding fifteen years to Hezekiah’s life. Concerning when God changes his mind *נָחַם* (*nacham*) based on the response of the people (prayer as in the case of Hezekiah), Duvall and Hays (2005:383) wrote, “This does not indicate any kind of failure on the part of God’s Word”. Hays (2010:82) believed passages like these are an example of the nature of how conditional prophecy works. He wrote, “. . . while Yahweh’s prophetic word is powerful and always true, he remains free to exercise his sovereign choice and to modify the fulfilment of a prophetic word according to the response of the people”. Hays (2010:82) acknowledged that conditional prophecy has its problems and challenges, “The interpretative challenge for us is to discern which prophetic descriptions of the future are certain and unconditional and which ones are conditioned by the response of the people”.

As shown Duvall and Hays (2005:383) did not believe conditional prophecy cast doubt on God’s sovereignty or certainty. This appears to be a constant theme among those who write on the nature of conditional prophecy, especially when the question of the future is brought into the equation. This appears to have to do with how scholars view the prophecies themselves. For example, J. Andrew Dearman (2002:187), in the NIV Application Commentary for Jeremiah and Lamentations offered two ways in which scholars see prophecies as in

Jeremiah 18:7-10 claiming that “some interpreters will see in prophecy a blueprint for things as yet unrealized, others will see primarily a teaching about God’s moral resolve that preserves his freedom to act in surprising ways”.

A major difference between Dearman (2002) and Hays (2010) is that Dearman (2002:187), instead of saying passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 are examples of conditional prophecies, believed they are unconditional prophecies with conditional elements to them. For example, he wrote, “Some prophecies explicitly contain conditional elements within their formal structure. The issue for later readers, however, is whether unconditional prophecies should be understood as determinism (as unalterable) or as an expression of God’s resolve to act in light of particular circumstances, a resolve that may change as historical circumstances themselves change and as God moves toward fulfilment of his temporal purposes to a yet grander design” (2002:187).

Dearman (2002:187-188) did not believe the use of נָחַם (*nacham*) in these “unconditional” prophecies make God look fickle or take away from the overall message of the prophecy. He (2002:187-188) wrote, “The theological issue at stake is not God’s repentance from evil or whether God is fickle; rather, the issue is how to account for the personal activity of God who responds as Judge and Deliverer in the historical process”. An example of this could be Jonah, for he did not believe God to be “fickle” for relenting in light of Nineveh’s repentance. Instead, Jonah “believed all along that God was slow to anger and abundant in mercy – and for that reason, he knew that God might use Jonah’s own unconditional prophecy of judgment as a means by which to effect change in Nineveh”. Jonah’s encounter with divine relenting will be discussed in chapter six. I disagree with Dearman’s view that the prophecy is unconditional. The use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) indicates there is a condition placed on the prophecy. Furthermore, how could God literally change in light of a nation’s repentance if his judgment decree was unconditional.

Robert Chisholm Jr. (1995) offered a slightly different insight on the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages in Jeremiah where they refer to God. He wrote an article

that dealt specifically with the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages and the question of whether God can change his mind (1995). He acknowledged the tension in the Old Testament where some passages appear to make it seem that God does relent נָחַם (*nacham*) and other passages that make it appear God cannot relent נָחַם (*nacham*) (1995). Concerning the scholars that interpret נָחַם (*nacham*) as an anthropomorphism, Chisholm (1995:387) wrote, “Some dismiss these texts as ‘anthropomorphic,’ but this is an arbitrary and drastic solution that cuts rather than unties the theological knot”. In his mind, dismissing נָחַם (*nacham*) as an accommodated language does not solve the apparent contradiction and offered “a more satisfying solution exists, if the biblical evidence is allowed to speak for itself” (1995:387).

Chisholm (1995:387) ultimately argued that the answer to the question of whether God can change his mind נָחַם (*nacham*) is “It all depends”. In defending his answer, he offered a look into four kinds of “forward-looking” divine statements found 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 (1995:387-388).

As previously indicated, there is debate among scholars as to whether Jeremiah 18:7-10 is conditional or unconditional. Whereas Dearman (2002) insisted on the prophecy being unconditional, Chisholm (2002:176-177) wrote, “In other words, God’s announcements of judgment and blessing are not necessarily set in stone, as if he has decreed unconditionally what will take place”. Chisholm (2002:176) believed that because the nation has responsibility in the prophecy, the decree from God should be considered conditional instead of unconditional. He wrote, “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” (2002:177). Despite the potter and clay analogy in Jeremiah 18:1-10, he did not see any room for “fatalistic

determinism . . . for the ‘clay’ is depicted as exercising its own will, prompting an appropriate response from the divine ‘potter’” (2002:177).

Chisholm (1995:389), however, acknowledged that “not all statements of intention are the same”. He distinguished the different “statement of intention” prophecies as either divine decrees or announcements (1995:389). For example, he wrote, “Some are decrees or oaths that are unconditional and bind the speaker to a stated course of action. Others, which may be labelled announcements, retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action” (1995:389).

How would a scholar further know how to distinguish between a decree and announcement? Chisholm (1995:389) believed that scholars can discern the distinction between the two at the theological level, meaning that a divine decree is “an unconditional declaration” while a divine announcement is a “conditional statement of divine intention”. For divine decrees, what is said to come to pass will happen, although the timing of the fulfilment can be conditional (1995:389). For divine announcements, the fulfilment depends on the response of the recipient or others affected by it (1995:389). I agree with Chisholm’s definitions of divine decrees and announcements and think this distinction helps bring the idea of God relenting in light of human repentance into a more viable option for scholars to embrace. I also believe that the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in our Jeremiah passages could lend support to Chisholm’s idea.

There are other clues in the texts that help scholars distinguish between decrees and announcements. Chisholm (1995:389) believed that divine decrees are “usually clearly marked as such”, meaning that there is something in the actual texts itself or its context that indicates the statement’s unconditional status. He cited Genesis 22:16-18 as an example of a clearly marked unconditional decree (1995:390). In Genesis 22:16-18, God promised to bless Abraham by making his descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and then use Abraham’s descendants to bless all the nations on the earth.

Chisholm (1995:390) wrote, “Later references to this promise call it an ‘oath’ and regard it as an unconditional gift (Gen. 26:3; Ps. 105:9-10)”.

In the same way as unconditional decrees, Chisholm (1995:390) believed that conditional statements of “divine intention are often clearly marked as well”. He cited Jeremiah 26:4-6 as an example of a clearly marked conditional statement (1995:390). In Jeremiah 26:4-6, God threatened the audience with judgment if they did not listen to and obey the prophet. Chisholm (1995:390) wrote, “Sometimes an announcement completes an indirect volitive sequence, implying that it will be fulfilled if the accompanying command is observed”. In other words, the blessing or judgment on the nation is contingent on the obedience or disobedience of the people.

Chisholm (1995:390) observed 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”, because “these ambiguous statements of divine intention sometimes prove to be decrees”. An example of this is found in 2 Samuel 12:14, when Nathan the prophet told David that his son with Bathsheba would die. The text indicates that David was not sure if that judgment was unconditional, because he fasted and prayed for the child’s life (2 Samuel 12:22). In the end, the child died. Chisholm (1995:390-391) believed that God’s refusal to act shows that the statement of intention was unconditional.

Another example is found in Micah 3:12 where Micah told that Jerusalem would be destroyed. However, Chisholm (1995:390-391) pointed to Jeremiah 26:17-19 as proof that this judgment was dismissed because of Hezekiah’s repentance, “thus proving the announcement’s conditionality”. The important thing to remember here is that when God said something, the original audience needed to take him seriously at his word. They could try to change God’s mind, but, as we saw with David and his son, that was not a guaranteed thing to happen. Chisholm’s insight and categorization of decrees, announcements and

intentions can perhaps help us understand why sometimes God will or will not relent.

Concerning God's relenting or lack thereof, Chisholm (1995:391) concluded, "On the one hand those verses that declare that God does or will not change His mind pertain to decrees . . . On the other hand those passages indicating that God does/will/might change His mind pertain to announcements". To give a specific example of this and to illustrate the nature of an unconditional decree, he cited Numbers 23:19, where the text states that God is not like a man that he should relent נָחַם (*nacham*) (1995:392). Chisholm (1995:392) believed there are several factors that point to the unconditional nature of this passage. First, Balaam affirmation that God would not relent marks it as a decree (1995:392). Second, this text is a divine blessing that cannot be changed (1995:392). Finally, this blessing is an extension of God's unconditional promise to Abraham (1995:392). I discuss Numbers 23:19 in chapter six, and I believe this text is unconditional in that in this instance, God had already made up his mind and was not going to change it. I do not believe as others may that this is a proof text in which we can categorically say that God never changed his mind in the Old Testament.

Jeremiah 4:28 would fall into the same category of an unconditional decree according to Chisholm (1995:395). He wrote, "In Jeremiah 4:28 the words . . . 'nor will I turn from it' . . . 'and I will not change My mind' (regarding to what I have spoken) . . . is used of God's oath to David in Psalm 132:11: 'The Lord has sworn to David, a truth from which He will not turn back'" (1995:395). In his view, God was upholding his oath to David, and because Jeremiah 4:28 pointed the audience back to that earlier oath, it is considered unconditional. Chisholm (1995:395-396) rightly pointed out that "God's refusal to retract a statement refers directly or applies indirectly to a specific decree identified in the context". Again, we must look for contextual clues to help determine the meaning and intention.

Chisholm (1995:395-396) gave an example of what he considered to be announcements of divine intentions, which differ from divine decrees in the sense that announcements are conditional. Concerning the specific Jeremiah passages for this thesis, he placed Jeremiah 15:6, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 as conditional announcements (1995:395-396). As already noted, he placed Jeremiah 4:28 as a decree (1995:396). He believed that God's coming judgment on Judah that the prophet gave in Jeremiah 4:28 dates later than Jeremiah 15:6, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 (2002, 161-162). He wrote, "The presence of this unalterable decree suggests this speech (or at least portions of it) dates from a time relatively late in Jeremiah's career, because during the prophet's early ministry the Lord made it clear that he would relent from sending judgment if Judah repented" (2002:161-162). This decree in Jeremiah 4:28 was made only after many warnings (1995:396). In the earlier dated passages, Jeremiah's audience still had the opportunity to respond to the prophet's message, repent and be restored as a nation.

In other words, the nation's time had run out. Chisholm (1995:397) was saying that the underlying principle of Jeremiah's message was that God was willing to relent of the oncoming judgment if they had repented, but after a while that opportunity went away. Judah did not respond to the prophet's call for repentance; therefore, God decided to judge them and decreed that intercessory prayer no longer would work in this situation and context.

Distinguishing between divine decrees and announcements of divine intentions is how Chisholm came to his conclusion that "it all depends" on whether God changes his mind. He wrote, "If He has decreed a certain course of action or outcome, then He will not retract a statement or relent from a declared course of action . . . If God has not decreed a course of action, then He may very well retract an announcement of blessing or judgment" (1995:399). He then added a caution to scholars, ". . . statements describing God as relenting should not be dismissed as anthropomorphic. At the same time such passages should not be overextended" (1995:399). In other words, we should not draw conclusions

about God and how he relates to the world based on a single passage. In chapter six, I deal with how my exegetical conclusions from chapter five compare and fit in with the whole council of the Old Testament in hopes of avoiding such a mistake.

Walter Brueggemann (2002:171) offered insight into the context of repentance *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) within the Old Testament as well as specifically within the book of Jeremiah. He believed the concept of repentance should be understood in light of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel (2002:171). In their covenantal relationship, Israel is bound in obedience according to Old Testament Law (the Torah). Brueggemann (2002:171) wrote, “Israel knows very well that the Torah requirements of covenant with YHWH can and may be fully obeyed. Of course, Israel also knows that Torah obedience is not fully kept, and therefore restoration in light of violated Torah is a major issue in covenantal faith”.

Brueggemann (2002:171) noted that when the covenantal relationship needed restoration, both Yahweh and Israel had a role to play in bringing the restoration to fruition, and Yahweh’s role sometimes consisted of repentance *נָחַם* (*nacham*). God, on one hand, made a way for Israel to be forgiven through the sacrificial system, and on the other hand, he would sometimes forgive and restore them through divine decree (2002:171). Both actions, Brueggemann stated, involved a “turning” *נָחַם* (*nacham*) on God’s part (2002:171). This belief goes against the idea discussed earlier that when a sinner repents, the change only happens in the sinner and not in God. God changes in the sense that he “ends anger and judgment, and reembraces Israel” (2002:171).

Brueggemann (2002:171) also noted Israel’s role of repentance *שׁוּב* (*shub*) in the restoration of the covenant relationship, as restoring the covenant is not a one-sided effort. Israel’s role and restoration comes through repentance, which is a turning away from a life of disobedience and returning to covenantal obedience with Yahweh (2002:171). Repentance, then, is a “deliberate act, a decision that involves a sustained, long-term resolve to act differently,

according to YHWH's will and way as known in the Torah" (2002:171). In Brueggemann's (2007:26) view, the call to repentance *שׁוּב* (*shub*), in the context of the covenantal relationship, has repercussions for the future. For example, at least from Israel's perspective, the "future (still) depends on covenantal obedience" (2007:26).

Concerning *נָחַם* (*nacham*) as it relates to God, Brueggemann (2002:172) further explained that the motif of Yahweh repenting "allows God to take into account the changed stance of Israel or of any other creature bound to God in obedience". He cited the Book of Jonah as an example of this concept (2007:156-157). For example, in the Book of Jonah God announced judgment on Nineveh. When the Assyrian king and the people repented, God changed his mind *נָחַם* (*nacham*) about the impending judgment (Jonah 3:5-10). Brueggemann wrote, "The divine response to repentance is a decisive inversion of divine intention . . . The prophetic message is that repentance permits restoration of life under YHWH's governance" (2007:157).

Brueggemann (2007:157) noted that Jonah 3:5-10 has "direct and immediate parallels with the teaching of Jeremiah 18:7-10". If the nation turns *שׁוּב* (*shub*), then God would take their repentance into consideration and decide to relent *נָחַם* (*nacham*) from impending judgment. In this sense, the decisions of the people could evoke change in God (2007:157). Nineveh and Jerusalem could decide their own future by appropriately responding to God. In chapters five and six, we will see a dichotomy between how Jerusalem and Nineveh responded to God and how God responded to them.

Brueggemann (2002:172) understood that God's relenting *נָחַם* (*nacham*) was conditioned upon a nation's repentance *שׁוּב* (*shub*), which at the least indicates there is a relationship between the two Hebrew verbs in how they work together to add meaning to the specific Jeremiah passages of this thesis. In Brueggemann's view, that both God and Israel have responsibilities that come with their covenantal partnership is unmistakably clear. God stood ready to

refrain from sending judgment to Jerusalem, but he would not do so unless they repented.

How did Brueggemann (2007:11) understand God's sovereignty in light of his views on the covenantal partnership and the conditionality of some of the prophecies in the Old Testament? The answer seemed to be rooted in the fact that conditional phrases can be found early in Israel's history. For example, at Sinai, God told the Israelites, "Now if you fully obey me and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Exodus 19:5). Brueggemann (2007:11) noted, "It is clear that YHWH is the decisive and defining character in the meeting, who, at the same time, asserts a *cosmic sovereignty* and a *special commitment* to Israel". He went on to write, "That sovereignty, however, is not simply a brusque, one-dimensional assertion of power. It is rather a sovereignty that willingly participates in the public process of history in order to evoke, form, and commit to a new community that is constituted by the gathering of emancipated slaves" (2007:11).

In other words, God in his sovereignty chooses to participate in the process of history, which in the case of Israel, included entering into a covenantal relationship and partnership with them at Sinai. As part of their covenantal partnership, both God and Israel had a responsibility in remaining faithful to each other. When Israel would fall away and then repent שׁוּב (*shub*), God in some cases would relent נָחַם (*nacham*). In Brueggemann's (2007:11) view, this partnership does not take away from or diminish God's sovereignty as some may suggest. I argue later in my thesis that God's willingness to change (relent) in some instances is a part of his unchanging character and nature, and it is a part of how he sovereignly set up the relationship between he and his people when he created the universe.

CF Keil and F Delitzsch (1996:183-184) offered similar insight into how God's sovereignty relates to the conditionality of Jeremiah 18:7-10 in that God uses his unlimited power depending on how man responds and acts. They argued that in the same way the potter has the power to remould the clay if the clay

went wrong, God has the power to change directions and remould his people based on their conduct (1996:183-184). This power, they concluded, is not exercised according to “unchangeable determination” (1996:183-184). I agree with their assessment and argue in chapter five that the potter and clay analogy does not indicate God’s unilateral control over the nation, and that the nation does have a responsibility in their relationship with God.

In the same way as Brueggemann (2002), FB Huey Jr. (1981:64-65), in his earlier commentary on Jeremiah, associated the context of Jeremiah 18:7-10 with the covenant between God and Israel. He acknowledged the nation’s responsibility in that they must repent *שׁוּב* (*shub*) if they were to avoid the coming destruction, but ultimately the nation would “continue with their own plans and follow the stubbornness of their evil hearts” (1981:64). Huey (1981:64-65) believed there were important theological principles that were implied in Jeremiah’s “symbolic” visit to the potter’s workshop.

First, this passage teaches the sovereignty of God in that the potter can do what he wants with the clay (Huey, 1981:64-65). Second, this passage teaches the grace and patience of God in that he did not throw away the nation after the first time they rebelled against him (1981:64-65). Third, this passage teaches us that “God deals with us on the basis of the moral choices we make” (1981:64-65). Along with this, Huey (1981:64-65) advocated for the conditional prophecy interpretation of Jeremiah 18:7-10, and believed the passage could be misinterpreted if this conditional element is overlooked.

In his later commentary on Jeremiah, Huey (1993:81) discussed his interpretation and translation of *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the context of the specific Jeremiah passages. Huey (1993:81) preferred translating *נָחַם* (*nacham*) as “relent” instead of “repent”. He wrote, “‘Repent’ in modern English implies that a mistake has been made that must be corrected, but God does not make mistakes” (1993:81). He continued, “The word [*נָחַם* (*nacham*)] suggests that grief is so deep that God finds an alternate response for the necessity of punishment when we repent. When we change, God can change his actions

towards us without compromising his sovereignty or holiness” (1993:81). Huey (1993:81) further explained that נָחַם (*nacham*) “conveys the emotion of deep grief, like the sorrow of a parent for a wayward child” (1993:81).

Concerning Jeremiah 4:28, where God declared that he would not relent נָחַם (*nacham*), Huey believed that this verse does not mean that God could not have relented, but instead the verse indicates that God knew Judah would not repent (1993:86). In his mind, the decree of Jeremiah 4:28 that God would not relent נָחַם (*nacham*) was a fixed decree, but it does not show an unwillingness on God’s part to forgive the nation (1993:81). In other words, if God in his sovereignty had seen Judah preparing to repent, then he would have considered relenting concerning the judgement he pronounced upon them. As previously mentioned, this verse indicates the time had run out for Judah to repent.

### **2.5 The sovereignty debates surrounding שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*)**

The fourth and final viewpoint given consideration is the sovereignty debates that surround שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). The current state of the debates, which has been revitalized in the past three decades, seeks to solve the problem of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. In the context of the selected Jeremiah passages for this thesis, שׁוּב (*shub*) would represent human responsibility or free choice to repent or not. DA Carson (1994:1) raised several important questions concerning this debate:

The sovereignty-responsibility tension is almost impossibly broad . . .

The most common questions it raises are well known. If God is absolutely sovereign, in what sense can we meaningfully speak of human choice, of human will? In what way are we to relate passages which stress divine transcendence and omnipotence with those which speak of divine repentance? How does the shape of the sovereignty-responsibility tension affect the problem of theodicy? Must God be reduced to accommodate the freedom of human

choice? Does significant human responsibility so lean on power to the contrary that God becomes contingent?

Along with the questions above, another major aspect of the problem appears to be centred on what the impact the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's free will has on the future. Ronald Clements (1988:113) brought out this discussion in his commentary on Jeremiah 18:1-10, saying that divine justice in this passage "demands and expects" human repentance. Thus, human response might determine the shape of the future (1988:113). In the context of this thesis, the question is asked in what the relationship between *שוב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) means for the future? In other words, how can or does human repentance *שוב* (*shub*) change the course of future events? As will be shown, there are different ways that scholars answer and debate the problem, with each answer offering different variations of the overall answer.

Some scholars (e.g. Pinnock, 1994 and Rice, 1989) solve the problem by saying God limits his knowledge to some degree and that limitedness allows for human repentance to genuinely affect what God does. In this view, God literally changes his mind *נָחַם* (*nacham*). Other scholars (e.g. Roy, 2006 and Ware, 2000) answer the question by arguing that man does not have free will; therefore, God sovereignly and ultimately determines the outcome of the future, possibly including the future decisions of people or nations. In this view, God does not literally change his mind *נָחַם* (*nacham*). Instead, the references to God relenting are generally interpreted as being a metaphor, or these scholars will say that God only changes his mind from the perspective of people but not from God's own perspective. Still, there are others who argue that God uses his omniscience to always perfectly accomplish his will on earth, but at the same time he works with humans that are completely free to make decisions. For the main research focus of investigating the relationship between *שוב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this thesis, it is important to review the past scholarship of each of the major views in the sovereignty debate, because they provide a framework into the overall implications, applications and significance of the topic at hand.

In the 1980s, there was a movement to contrast God as a personal and relational being as opposed to the classical view of God as transcendent, immutable and impassible. This view first was known as process theology. Ronald H Nash (1987:14) noted that process theologians “deny that God is pure actuality and they reject both the immutability and the impassibility of God”. Process theologians believe that rejecting divine immutability and impassibility allows God to genuinely be affected by his creation; therefore, the response of a nation such as in Jeremiah 18:7-10 can literally affect what comes to pass in the future (Bowman:2006:20). In doing so, they believe they are holding to a more literal rendering of Old Testament Scripture.

For example, Robert Karl Gnuse (2000:4) wrote, “The God of the biblical text was portrayed in dynamic fashion, as a deity with human emotions whose mind could change”. He noted that it has been “the tendency of Jews and Christians to ignore these stories and to place the ideas expressed by the narratives into our modern thought forms” (2000:4). I agree with his assessment that oftentimes scholars dismiss the images of God of having changed his mind or experienced pain over the rebellion of his people as “symbolic”; however, as Gnuse (2000:4) stated, “These passages will not go away, and the sincere reader of the biblical texts cannot ignore them”.

Process theologians argue that for God to literally be affected by the decisions of people, he cannot exist outside of time. For example, Nash (1987:14) wrote, “The God of process theology is not outside of time; His existence is inextricably involved in the process of time”. The belief that God lives inside of time obviously affects God’s knowledge of future events and would mean the “expressions of God’s love are constantly changing in response to the decisions and needs of the world” (Mesle, 1993:40). C Robert Mesle (1993:40) argued that God’s knowledge is an “unchanging structure” of his nature, and he knows all there is to know. However, Mesle (1993:40) added, “what exists for God to know – the decisions of the creatures – is constantly changing, constantly becoming”. In other words, God’s knowledge, in this view, is always changing,

because the circumstances of others are always changing. This would seem to be a problem in terms of limiting God's omniscience, but process theologians do not believe their view limits God's knowledge. They hold he still possess infinite knowledge; therefore, he can perfectly change in response to a changing world (Mesle, 1993:40).

Process theologians also places an emphasis on a person or nation's freedom to choose. Mesle (1993:40) wrote, ". . . God has eternally had perfect and unchanging knowledge of all the possibilities for the world. But because the world has real freedom to choose between these possibilities, God's knowledge of the actual choices made is constantly changing as the world changes". He used his interpretation of the message of Jeremiah 18:7-10 as evidence of process theology's view of God's foreknowledge as being biblical. For example, he argued that Old Testament prophets constantly confronted their constituents with choices, evidenced from Jeremiah 18 (1993:40). Therefore, in their view, God gives true freedom to nations and individuals, and God waits to respond until they make their choice (1993:40). While I would agree that God gives people the freedom to make choices, I do not agree with the idea that God sits around and waits for those choices to be made. It appears like God is passive and reactive, neither proactive nor intervening in the world without human consent.

As process theology became more prevalent in the 1980s, not all evangelical scholars were on board with its message. Clark H Pinnock (1987:313) discussed that process theology arose out of a concern that classical theism had been influenced by Hellenistic philosophies. The main concern, according to Pinnock (1987:314), is that classical theism "does not present God as a dynamic personal agent involved with us in our joy and sorrows, but rather as a closed and immobile structure". Pinnock (1987:314) noted, however, that the problem with process theology is that it "presents us with a God who is not even creator of the world, but rather one of several factors interacting with each other in the process of evolution", and that process theology "robs God of his

sovereign freedom . . . makes him metaphysically dependent on the world and unable to do what he chooses” (1987:315).

In light of these problems, Pinnock (1987:313) challenged evangelicals to move beyond both process theology and classic theism, “A serious one-sidedness in the direction of transcendence crept into classical theism owing to the Hellenistic influence, and process theism is an equally one-sided reaction to it tending toward radical immanence”. He continued, “This pattern of one-sidedness on both sides means that we have to move in the direction of a model which keeps a proper balance between transcendence and immanence, and makes such adjustments in our thinking about God as will serve the dynamic biblical presentation in a faithful way” (1987:313-314). This “balanced” model espoused by Pinnock (1987) paved the way for what became known as classical free-will theism, or open theology.

Classical free-will theologians, like Pinnock, placed an emphasis on the relationship between God and man as displayed in the Bible. For example, Richard Rice (1989:132) wrote, “From beginning to end the Bible supports the view that God’s relation to human beings is one of the dynamic interaction”. Rice (1989:132) noted the example of Genesis 6 where man’s wickedness grieved God’s heart and various prophets where God responded to the nation with different emotions. He used Jeremiah 18:7-10 as an example of how human decisions affects God in a personal way. In this passage, he argued, “Jeremiah describes God as adapting his plans to human decisions”; therefore, “God not only influences the events of this world, but the events of this world influence him, too” (1989:132).

The question again arose as to how this affects God’s knowledge of future events. In classical theism, absolute divine foreknowledge means that God sees the entire future in advance and, according to Rice (1989:133), this view is incompatible “with the concept that God interacts with his creatures on a momentary basis”. Rice (1989:133) noted, “If God knows everything that will ever happen, including all our future decisions, then the actual occurrence of

events contributes nothing to his experience”. In other words, in the context of the *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) passages in Jeremiah, how could man’s decisions have any effect on God or contribute to God’s experience if he knows everything that is going to happen in the future? If this is not the case, open theologians would argue, then how should scholars understand the meaning of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in those passages? For open theologians, the question was ultimately how is it possible for God to genuinely take into consideration the nation’s response as in Jeremiah 18:7-10?

Open theology answered this question in similar fashion as process theology by advocating for a literal interpretation of *נָחַם* (*nacham*) when it refers to God, in that God could literally change his mind based on the decisions of people or nations. One of the differences, however, between process theology and open theology is how open theologians redefined the nature of understanding divine sovereignty and foreknowledge as it relates to God’s decision-making and reliance upon the world. For example, Pinnock (1986:145) wrote, “God is sovereign according to the Bible in the sense of having the power to exist in himself and the power to call forth the universe out of nothing by his Word”. He continued, “But God’s sovereignty does not have to mean what some theist and atheist claim, namely, the power to determine each detail in the history of the world” (1986:145).

Unlike process theology, which taught that God was in total dependence upon the world, Pinnock (1986:145) believed that God existed outside of the world and sovereignly created a universe where he gave a degree of power to his creation. In his view, the world is dependent on God, and God is self-sustainable, not needing the world (1986:145). Pinnock (1986:145-146) explained, “It is possible for God to make a world with some relative autonomy of its own, a world where there exist certain structures which are intelligible in their own right and finite agents with the capacity for free choice”.

Pinnock (1986:152) believed God created a world where he gave his creation the freedom to follow or reject his plan, as evidenced in Jeremiah 18:7-10, and

that God's sovereignty "should not be thought of as a blueprint of everything that will ever happen . . . it refers instead to the activity of God, who framed the world and is working out his saving plan in the sphere of history". Pinnock's view of God's sovereignty can be respected, because if God, in his own sovereignty, decided to create a world in which agents have free will. So, God is sovereign in the sense he created the world and set the limitations, laws and standards from which the world operates.

How does Pinnock apply his views to understanding and interpreting passages where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God? In one of his later works, Pinnock (2001:43) wrote, "If we take divine repentance language seriously, it suggests that God does not work with a plan fixed in every detail but with general goals that can be fulfilled in different ways". In other words, God is faithful to the goals but "flexible as to how to fulfil them" (2001:43). Pinnock (2001:43) believed "repentance" is "revelatory of the way God exercises sovereignty". God is free to change his plans if a situation merits such a change. God can take things into consideration, then, and be flexible in how he chooses to respond (2001:43).

Again, Pinnock (2001:43-45) argued that his views do not diminish God's sovereignty. He wrote, "God sovereignly created human beings in his image in order to enter into personal relations with them. God can choose what kind of sovereignty to exercise and he has chosen to exercise an open and flexible sovereignty" (2001:45). Pinnock (1994:123) believed that on a philosophical level, "if choices are real and freedom significant, future decisions cannot be exhaustively foreknown". Pinnock's writings were an improvement over process theology in terms of securing God's sovereignty and making classical free will theism sound more "biblical".

Greg Boyd (2000:15) continued to refine open theology's understanding of divine foreknowledge, that in their minds, help scholars understand and interpret texts where human decisions appear to change God. He insisted that the debate is not about God's foreknowledge at all but instead the nature of the

future (2000:15). He preferred to change the label from the “open view of God” to the “open view of the future” (2000:15).

Boyd (2000:13-14) attempted to reconcile two themes that he thought runs throughout the Old Testament, that is, passages that portray God as foreknowing or predestining specific things about the future and passages that portray God as facing a partly open future. He believed the key to reconciliation is not assuming the theme of future determinism paints the entire picture about God’s foreknowledge. In other words, if scholars do not assume the future is entirely settled, Boyd (2000:14) argued, then the theme of future openness make more sense. In this view, God knows the future as some degree *settled* and to some degree *open*. The openness of the future does not mean that God does not know *anything* or does not predestine *anything* about the future (2000:15). Open theists conclude that most of the future is already settled ahead of time, but it is not “exhaustively” settled ahead of time, and the “unsettled” part of the future is known by God as a “realm of possibilities, not certainties” (2000:15).

Boyd (2000:92) believed that accepting the Bible’s teaching about God’s settled foreknowledge and God’s openness to future possibilities provided a coherent framework of theology. This framework provided direction for which Boyd interpreted and understood the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages in Jeremiah. Boyd (2000:75) saw Jeremiah 18 as the strongest evidence for the theme of future openness. If God is willing to change his plans, he argued, then what is permanently fixed cannot be changed (2000:75). Thus, Boyd (2000:76) insisted that scholars make a mistake when interpreting the potter/clay analogy in Jeremiah 18:1-10 as evidence that God exercises unilateral control over his creation. He believed scholars misunderstand Paul’s use of the analogy in Romans 9:21-23 (2000:76).

Instead, he argued that Jeremiah used the analogy to make the opposite point, that is, God was willing to change and revise his plan for the nation once he saw his first plan had become spoiled. Boyd (2000:77) critiqued classical

theologians for their interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) as being nothing more than an accommodating metaphor, meaning it looked like God changed his mind, but in reality, he did not. Boyd (2000:77) argued that the biblical texts tell us in plain terms that God intended to do one thing and changed his mind and did another thing as opposed to indicating that God only looked as if he had changed his mind. Boyd (2000:77) concluded, “There is simply no reason to interpret language about changeable aspects of God less literally than language about unchangeable aspects of God”. In other words, Boyd (2000:77) did not believe there is anything in the text that indicates anything other than what it plainly says. I discuss Jeremiah 18:1-10 in chapter five, and I argue for Boyd’s interpretation of the potter’s flexibility in working with his clay, and I try to show how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to the main point of the text not being God’s unilateral control over every decision of his clay.

The rise in popularity of process theology and open theology led to an increase in writings from scholars who disagreed with their interpretation of the Scripture. For example, Bruce Ware (1986:431-446) wrote an article on the immutability of God in which he argued for an anthropomorphic interpretation of the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages where God is the subject. In Ware’s view, God did not actually relent נָחַם (*nacham*), but instead, Ware (1986:431-446) believed the biblical writers used such terms from ordinary human experiences to put it in a way so that humans can understand. For example, Ware (1986:441) wrote, “Scriptural writers use this and other similar terms to express the change in his (God’s) action toward his people— e.g., he formerly threatened judgment but now he blesses”.

Ware (1986:441) continued, “A natural human way of expressing such a change of action is with a term such as ‘repentance’ or ‘change of mind,’ for human repentance or change of mind is indeed often accompanied with such changes in action”. Ware (1986:441) made his point clearer when he wrote, “Scriptural writers used such terms from ordinary human experiences, then, to describe the radical change that often occurs in God’s attitude and action

toward his people, while not intending to depict God as having had a literal change of mind”. In other words, according to Ware (1986), in the *נחם* (*nacham*) passages where God is portrayed as having relented or as being willing to relent, God could have had a literal change in attitude and action but not a literal change in mind.

Ware (2000) went on to write a full rebuttal of open theology and their arguments for a literal interpretation of *נחם* (*nacham*) when it refers to God. In Ware’s (2000) view, a literal interpretation of *נחם* (*nacham*) has negative effects on the understanding of God’s sovereignty. For example, Ware (2000:51) believed that if God literally relented, then that would mean God would have to have received new information that he did not possess beforehand. In this view, God would have to continually readjust his plans to fit the changing circumstances of his people, or an unexpected situation may arise that changes God’s working in a situation (2000:51). Therefore, Ware (2000:51) argued that if a literal interpretation of *נחם* (*nacham*) is correct, then prayers and unforeseen situations would force God to be open to changing his mind about things he had planned to do. He instead offered alternative meanings for the *נחם* (*nacham*) passages if they are viewed as anthropomorphic (2000:90-91).

For example, Ware (2000:90-91) said that when God repents, it indicates “1) his awareness that the human situation has altered and 2) his desire to act in a way fitting to this changed situation”. This does not mean, however, that God learned something new in the changed situation (2000:90-91). Instead, “these expressions of repentance may indicate more narrowly that God was aware of what had changed and chose to act in accordance with this new situation” (2000:90-91). God’s change of plans would have been in place from eternity, “yet he interacted in the temporal and existential flow of developing and changing human situations”.

Ware (2000:91) further developed his understanding of how the concept of God’s relenting *נחם* (*nacham*) relates to divine foreknowledge by likening God’s anticipation of future events to that of an engaged couple waiting to be married.

He wrote, “Although both have ‘known’ for months where, when, and whom they would marry, and likewise both have ‘known’ the changed situation that will result the moment they are declared husband and wife, yet in the actual moment of their marriage union, their thoughts toward each other ‘change’” (2000:91). Ware (2000:91) wrote that the “point of the analogy, simply, is to indicate that although God can know and anticipate some future changed situation and can know and plan how he would correspondingly respond, in the moment these changes take place, he may be said to ‘change’ in respect to that situation as he relates to it differently than he previously indicated he would”.

Ware (2000:91-92) believed that his view of reconciling divine foreknowledge with the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages where it appears God “changes” based on human decisions does not paint a portrait of a God who is stoic and not connected to his people or incapable of relating to his people on a personal level, as critics of this view will say. He argued that “just because God knows in advance that some event will occur, this does not preclude God from experiencing appropriate emotions and expressing appropriate reactions when it actually happens” (2000:91-92). So, in this view, God can literally show emotions and mercy depending on the prayers and repentance of the people, but the difference is that God knows from all of eternity past exactly what would occur and what his response would be for each situation (Ware, 2000:92). For example, if the nation had repented in Jeremiah 18:7-10, then God would have relented concerning the judgment he had planned, but God would have known all along that the nation was going to repent, and he had determined beforehand to relent.

Ware (2000:133) challenged openness theologians’ idea that Jeremiah 18:7-10 provides an example of a “normative basis by which to claim that virtually *any* divine prophecy may be exempt from exact fulfilment”. He (2000:133) wondered how often scholars should expect to find conditional elements in prophetic passages. If all biblical prophecies had conditional elements to them, then that would mean that God could not be absolutely certain that any prophecy would

ever be fulfilled. Furthermore, he wrote, “Since all prophecy is *potentially* set in a framework in which unstated and implicit conditions are present, in all such cases, according to open theists, God is not obligated to do just what he said” (2000:133).

Ware (2000:134-135) offered four considerations against the open theist’s interpretation of Jeremiah 18:7-10: (1) the potter/clay analogy in 18:1-4 shows that God does what he pleases, (2) In 18:11-12, God shows that he already knew in advance what the nation would decide to do, (3) “What, then can Jeremiah 18:5-10 mean, when these verses are bracketed by affirmations of God’s *sovereign control* (18:1-4) and *certain future knowledge* of what Israel will do (18:11-12)?” and (4) It is inappropriate to view 18:5-10 as a template to determine how God works in the world.

In light of these four considerations, Ware (2000:136) concluded that by saying each biblical prophecy consists of conditional elements ultimately robs God of the honour that is due him for fulfilling the prophecies however he had predicted to do so. He wrote, “Oddly enough for open theists, in the very text they appeal to most regularly to support the idea that God does not know how people will act and so his prophecies must be alterable depending on what unfolds, here in fact God declares that *he knows exactly what his people will do*” (2000:134). The problem with Ware’s four considerations given above is that ultimately there are alternative ways of viewing the passage. For example, first, not everyone agrees that the point of the passage is God’s unilateral control over the clay. Second, the nation’s response in 18:11-12 could be indicative of their own theological flaw in thinking there was no hope for them, so why bother repenting? Third, when viewed in a different light, 18:5-10 makes sense in its context. And fourth, this passage is not the only one in the Old Testament that indicates God sometimes changes his plans based on human decisions.

In some cases, scholars believe that God does more than have knowledge of future decisions and events, but that God may have even determined beforehand every future event, including whether the nation repents or not. To

this point, John Feinberg (1986:27) did not believe that God's determining or knowledge of future decisions negated a nation or person's free will. For example, he wrote "God can decree all things and yet we can still act freely in the compatibilist's sense of freedom" (1986:27). In this view, regardless of God decreeing from eternity everything that happens in the future, humans are still responsible for their actions; therefore, in the case of Jeremiah 18:7-10, God's plea for repentance from the nation and his promise to relent based on their response is indeed genuine.

Steven C Roy (2006:133) believed scholars should focus on the nature of God's change of mind  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*). He asked, "Does God, in response to new and unanticipated developments, change his mind in ways that even he did not anticipate or foreknow? Or does God change his mind and revise his previously announced course of action in keeping with his ultimate purpose and plan"? (2006:133). Roy (2006:168) appealed to the anthropomorphic argument of interpreting  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*), but he went farther than others in calling divine foreknowledge an anthropomorphic metaphor as well. He wrote, "As such, in each case there are both similarities and differences between the human experience from which the metaphor is drawn and the divine experience. Thus, for example, I believe that God's foreknowledge is similar to its human counterpart in God's experience of cognition and relationship, but it is very different in that it is infinitely more vast, is uniformly certain and true, and has an entirely different relationship to time" (2006:168).

Even though Roy (2006) believed divine foreknowledge and divine repentance was to be understood as anthropomorphic metaphor, he did not believe it could be completely understood on the human level. For example, humans change their mind based on receiving new information, realizing they do not have the power to do what they wanted or on gaining a new perspective on a changing circumstance. None of these examples would apply to God. Roy (2006:173) wrote, "With regard to divine repentance and the knowledge of God, it must be noted that in none of the divine repentance texts is God's ignorance of the

future free human decisions specifically affirmed”. How, then, does Roy suggest we understand the repentance of God if we affirm his foreknowledge of human future decisions? He wrote, “I suggest that divine repentance denotes God’s awareness of a change in the human situation and his resulting change of emotions or actions in light of this changed situation” (2006:174). However, this change in emotions and actions were not unforeseen by God, and God did not learn anything new “as a result of these free human decisions” (2000:174).

Roy (2006:280) sought to understand the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 in light of their nature as anthropomorphic metaphors. Because of the evidence Roy (2006:176) presented throughout his work, he concluded that the anthropomorphic metaphor is “indeed reality depicting”. However, he argued, God’s repentance is different than man’s repentance in that it does not imply a lack of foreknowledge or an admission to making a mistake (2000:176). Roy’s work should be applauded for recognising to at least some degree the literal reality behind the divine repentance texts all the while holding a traditional view of God’s foreknowledge.

During the sovereignty debate between process, open, and classical theologians, there arose another group of scholars who advocated another way of thinking (the middle knowledge viewpoint) about the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages as they relate to God, divine foreknowledge and human freedom. In the middle knowledge viewpoint, prophecies like Jeremiah 18:7-10 are known to God as counterfactual statements, that is, things that *would* happen instead of what *will* or *could* happen (Craig, 2001:121). In this view, God possess what scholars call “middle knowledge”, meaning that God knows exactly how a person or nation would respond in every circumstance and situation. In the context of Jeremiah 18:7-10, God knew what would happen no matter which way the nation responded. If the nation responded with repentance, then God knew he would withhold his pronounced judgment. On the other hand, if the nation did not repent, then God would not withhold his judgment. William Lane Craig (2001:124), who espoused this view, wrote, “In such cases, the prophecy from

God was counterfactual knowledge of what would happen under the prevailing circumstances; but were intercessory prayer or repentance to occur, then God would not carry out what had been threatened”.

Kenneth Keathley (2010:36) espoused the middle knowledge view and believed that a “counterfactual is a statement that is contrary to fact yet possess truth content”. He believed that because the  $\text{נָחַם}$  (*nacham*) passages where God is shown as having a change of mind or the willingness to have a change of mind are counterfactual statements, they must not be simply dismissed as anthropomorphic metaphors without no real meaning (2010:33). For example, he wrote, “Anthropomorphic language always has a referent; that is, it points to a spiritual reality in accommodated language” (2010:33). He did not believe divine repentance passages should be described as anthropomorphic metaphors, because metaphors “have points of contact with our everyday understanding of things” (2010:33). The biblical authors, he argued, “used such language to emphasize the reality of human participation and responsibility” (2000:33).

Keathley (2010:34) believed the counterfactual statement of Jeremiah 18:7-10 was also contingent because of the “if, then” conditional propositions in the text. In his view, the Bible most often presents contingencies in the form of conditional statements. He wrote, “The biblical writers use conditional statements to highlight that God has placed the outcome of certain contingencies in our hands” (2010:34). In the end, scholars who espoused the middle knowledge viewpoint believed to provide a sort of “middle ground” in the sovereignty debate while ultimately affirming God’s foreknowledge and human responsibility with the idea that God accomplishes his will through the use of his foreknowledge, and that God knows what people will do in certain circumstances and situations.

### **2.6 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter was necessary in determining how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of my Jeremiah texts, because it answered the first key research question, “What are the current views surrounding the use and meaning of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19”? This chapter reviewed the current scholars primarily within the past three decades to show the development of the major viewpoints concerning the different theories on the meaning of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. This chapter dealt with four main categories that represent the current major views on the subject: (a) *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this context is an accommodating anthropomorphism that does not depict literal reality, (b) *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this context is straightforward language that does depict literal reality, (c) these texts in Jeremiah reveal the nature of how conditional prophecy works and (d) interpreting *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and *שׁוּב* (*shub*) in light of understanding God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.

The first major category was the accommodating anthropomorphism metaphor viewpoint. In this view, *נָחַם* (*nacham*) when it refers to God, is interpreted as a metaphor or figure of speech that does not reflect literal reality but instead describes God in human terms so he can be understood. This viewpoint presupposes that for God to literally accommodate himself (as in him changing his mind to communicate literal truth), then God would not only have to descend to the level of humans but would also have to live there (2012:126). For example, Oliphint (2012:126) believed God would have to adopt man’s ignorance and constraints (such as living inside of time) before he could adapt to the circumstances and situations around him. The conclusion in this view is that God will never literally accommodate himself since he transcends human thought capacities. One way of explaining this mystery of how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) affect the interpretation of the passage is saying man’s *שׁוּב* (*shub*) leads to a change in the circumstances surrounding the situation at hand but not a literal change with God. We saw that this view has strong roots dating back to the church fathers. This thesis hopes to address this problem and look

more closely at the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) as it relates to man and God.

The second major category was the straightforward literal language viewpoint. Under this view, when נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God, interpreters interpret the meaning as straightforward literal language. In other words, the text simply means what it says. We saw that scholars who espouse this viewpoint argue that even if the language was metaphorical, it does not necessarily and automatically negate a straightforward literal interpretation of the phrase, because metaphors can be interpreted differently depending on what type of metaphor it is. We saw that Fretheim (1984:7) warned of the danger of “positing no real or essential relationship between the metaphor and God as God really relates to the world”. In other words, the anthropomorphic metaphor would still have to communicate something true about God and his relationship to the world. The concept of “controlling metaphors” was discussed, because not all “metaphors” carry the same weight in biblical interpretation. In the end, this view understood that the use of נָחַם (*nacham*) in passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 appears to bind God to some degree to human activity. This appearance of “binding” relates to the proposed relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) that this thesis is seeking to address.

The third viewpoint was the conditional prophecy viewpoint. We saw that the biggest factor that separates this view from the previously two viewpoints is that this view does not attempt to defend whether נָחַם (*nacham*) should be interpreted literally or as accommodated language. Instead, this view holds that passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 and the example of King Hezekiah as mentioned in Jeremiah 26 give us a glimpse into the nature of how conditional prophecy works. For example, we saw that the divine statements can be divided into four categories: (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 (Chisholm, 1995:387-388).

With these divisions, there were marks given to help interpreters identify if a passage contained one or the other. We saw that in the case of Jeremiah 18:7-10, the presence of the word “if” along with שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) is an indicator of a conditional statements, meaning that the audience’s response could have influenced what God did or did not do. Along with this, we saw that Brueggemann (2002:171) believed the concept of repentance should be understood in the context of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel. This concept will prove to be helpful as we study the texts in chapter five.

The fourth and final viewpoint given consideration was the sovereignty debates that surround שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). We saw that the debate, primarily within the last three decades, sought to solve the problem of God’s sovereignty and man’s free will. The first view was known as process theology, which challenged Classical Theism’s view of divine immutability and impassibility. Process theologians believed that rejecting divine immutability and impassibility allows God to genuinely be affected by his creation.

Another view came to be known as open theology, or the open view of the future. This view placed an emphasis on the relationship between God and man as displayed in the Bible. The response of a nation such as in Jeremiah 18:7-10 could literally affect what comes to pass in the future. God not only influences the world, but the world to some degree influences God. This view had ramifications for how God may know the future, either as possibilities or as a settled reality. Another view discussed was the middle knowledge viewpoint. They sought to provide a middle ground that protected God’s foreknowledge as well as allowed for genuine human decisions to make a difference. We saw that they argued that statements like Jeremiah 18:7-10 are known by God as counterfactual statements, that is, things that *would* happen instead of *will* or *could happen*.

Overall, there are five conclusions that can be drawn from this chapter that relate directly to my thesis: (a) the majority of the past literature has been centred around the meaning of נָחַם (*nacham*), with little work focused on שׁוּב

(*shub*), (b) there are many philosophical reasons given for interpreting נָחַם (*nacham*) as either metaphorical or literal, (c) there does not appear to be an entire work dedicated to the exegesis of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19, (d) there is a need for an in-depth word study for both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of the Jeremiah passages and finally (e) there is a great need to study שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of these Jeremiah passages to determine how they contribute to the understanding of the passages and the understanding of God's relationship to the world. In light of all of this, it is now time to turn our attention in the next chapter to the second key question, "How does the general background, historical context and literary context of the book of Jeremiah assist in understanding Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19"?

## **Chapter 3**

# **THE CONTEXT OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH**

### **3.1 Chapter introduction**

This chapter answers the second key question, “How does the general background, historical context and literary context of the book of Jeremiah assist in understanding Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19”? This chapter is an examination, analysis and discussion of the context of the book of Jeremiah. The belief is that before the key texts of my thesis can be exegetically examined, it is necessary to devote a chapter to the overall context of the book of Jeremiah. In keeping with this belief, the purpose of this chapter then is to answer the question of how the general background, historical context and literary context of the book of Jeremiah assist in understanding the key passages of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. The contents of the chapter are broken down into three main headings. First, this chapter examines the general background of the book of Jeremiah and highlights the different views concerning the book of Jeremiah and the prophet himself, as well as the dates and timeframe of the events of the biblical book and the audience in which the book is addressed. Second, this chapter explores the historical context, dealing with the political background and religious context of Jeremiah’s day as well as the purpose of the book of Jeremiah. Third, this chapter deals with the literary context and explores the Hebrew and Greek

versions of the texts, the book's structure and argument and its theological themes.

### **3.2 General background of the book of Jeremiah**

#### **3.2.1 Debates about Jeremiah: the book and prophet**

Before we can ever begin discussing the general background of the book of Jeremiah, it is important to note from the outset that not every biblical scholar has agreed on contextual matters such as the book's origin, timeframe or the prophet himself. Robert P Carroll (2004:9) claimed, "Every aspect of the book is controversial and much of modern scholarship on Jeremiah consists of disputes and arguments about its meaning and how it came into existence". These disagreements have led to interesting academic discussions over the past three decades on how the book of Jeremiah and the prophet should be approached by interpreters. For example, William L Holladay (1986) believed that much of the book of Jeremiah could be attributed to the prophet himself. Holladay's view is that the book of Jeremiah reveals accurate and reliable historical information from which scholars can "reconstruct the historical Jeremiah from that data" (Brueggemann, 1988:11). Brueggemann (1988:8) noted that Holladay's style of approaching Jeremiah "seeks to determine the date and exact historical setting of each textual unit"; therefore, in this approach, we can ask specific historical questions for each passage.

Brueggemann (2007:4) elsewhere referred to Holladay's approach as "out of fashion among interpreters". He wrote, "While the work of William Holladay does not figure greatly in newer methods and approaches, his prodigious efforts serves the important purpose of pushing historical critical study as far as can now be imagined" and that "Holladay has provided a reliable and stable baseline and foil for newer ventures" (Brueggemann, 1999:404). Carroll (2004:32), likewise, stated, "Thus in modern Jeremiah studies the belief in Jeremiah (or Baruch) as the book's author, though still held by some scholars (e.g. Bright, Holladay, Rudolph), may be assigned a place in the history of the

interpretation of the book rather than treated as a contribution to theories about its formation”.

Unlike Holladay (1986), Carroll (2004) did not believe that the book of Jeremiah provides accurate and reliable historical information from which scholars can reconstruct the personal career of the prophet himself. Brueggemann (1988:9) noted, “Holladay is inclined to assign to the prophet Jeremiah as much as possible, whereas Carroll believes that the work of the original prophet is beyond identification or recovery . . . “. Carroll’s view “focuses on the Deuteronomic editing of the book of Jeremiah in the Exile, a generation or two after the person of Jeremiah” meaning that redactors and editors transformed the original text for the “community in the exile, under the influence of the book of Deuteronomy” (Brueggemann, 1988:8). Brueggemann (1988:8) stated, “This approach focuses on the constructive pastoral and theological intention of the community in exile that construed the tradition of Jeremiah in fresh directions in order to meet fresh religious needs”. Because of the exilic editing, then, modern interpreters cannot know for sure which words belong to the actual prophet Jeremiah.

In Carroll’s (2004) view, “we have no access to the person of Jeremiah or his words, except as mediated by the community, and to pose such an historical question is both futile and irrelevant” (Brueggemann, 1988:8), and in light of all this, “Pursuit of such historical questions about the person or the words of the prophet should be abandoned” (Brueggemann, 1988:8-9). Carroll (2004:25) understood that not all scholars would agree with his view. He stated, “It should be noted, however, that not all scholars see the hand of deuteronomistic editors in the many prose passages of chs. 1-45 . . . As a theory the notion of a deuteronomistic edition of Jeremiah has much explanatory value, but like all hypotheses it is subject to serious dispute by scholars who believe the data to be capable of being explained in rather different ways”. Criticism of Carroll’s (2004:25) view is that “such prose is typical of normal seventh-century (BCE) speech patterns and would accordingly attribute the sermons to Jeremiah” and

“such a line of argument would deny the existence of a deuteronomic edition of Jeremiah altogether”.

Brueggemann (1987:113) acknowledged that current scholarship leans more towards a minimalist view when it comes to the historical Jeremiah. He (1987:113) wrote, “Scholars are assigning more and more work to the redactional process, which leaves less and less material assigned to the ‘authorship’ of Jeremiah and yields (according to the hypothesis) less reliable historical information about the prophet”. Brueggemann (1987:114) took an approach that is not as simple as Holladay (1986) yet not as extreme as Carroll (2004). His approach and view is that what is produced in the book of Jeremiah is a “portrait of the prophet”, meaning that the picture of Jeremiah we are given in the text is “passed through the perceptions of the artist” (Brueggemann, 1987:114). In this view, there was an actual prophet Jeremiah who made an impact and impression on the people of his day. As a result, he became a literary figure. The reconstruction of the prophet given to us, then, is not necessarily historically precise, but it is not purely imaginative fiction either as the stories are based on an actual person at a certain time in history.

Although Brueggemann (2007:27) disagreed with Holladay (1986) in that the book of Jeremiah does not present historical reportage on the prophet himself, he also did not agree with Carroll’s (2004) belief that the portrait of Jeremiah presented in the biblical book is a result of a “willfully imposed ideological construct”. Furthermore, Brueggemann (2007:28) thought it possible that the prophet Jeremiah would have been “fully resonant” with the Deuteronomic tradition; therefore, “this latter ‘portrayal’ need not be a wilful imposition or an intentional ideological distortion”. He wrote, “I suggest that Jeremiah fit rather easily into the perceptual field of the covenantal theology espoused by the Deuteronomic traditionists and that he stood with and alongside a small network of persons in Jerusalem who were deeply critical of and resistant to the dominant practices of the urban establishment” (2007:28). In other words, the

prophet would have been familiar with Deuteronomy, so the later editors were not pushing the Deuteronomic tradition onto the portrait of Jeremiah.

William R Domeris (1999:244) argued that Jeremiah “represented not the society at large but rather an antisociety (the Yahweh-alone party) and the text follows the format of an antilanguage”, that is, a language created and produced by an alternative society to the society at large. For example, Domeris (1999:244) explained that antilanguage affects how reality is portrayed in a given culture:

Unfortunately, texts rarely mirror their social setting, with any accuracy, but are instead the projection of that reality (as intended or unintended) by the author(s) . . . As a representative of the prophetic minority, Jeremiah sought to devaluate the dominant ideology of the popular religion. His metaphors . . . intentionally skewed the position of his rivals. Consequently, he also left modern scholars with the difficult task of sorting out myth from fact, the apparent promiscuity of the popular religion from vivid metaphor.

In other words, the social settings we receive from the finished work of Jeremiah is from this antisociety’s worldview. So, we see what they want us to see. This is where the difficulty lies in determining what was actual reality. Domeris (1999:251) went on to write, “An antisociety uses antilanguage both to create an alternative reality . . . and to maintain that reality” and is “used in the redefining of social boundaries between those who are the insiders and those who are the outsiders” (1999:253). The use of metaphorical language is one of the ways this is accomplished (1999:253). In the context of the religious setting, Jeremiah critiqued Israelite worship and was “obligated to establish an antisociety by redefining the boundaries of the religion of Yahweh” (1999:253). Domeris (1999:253) believed Jeremiah’s antisociety was “set up in opposition to the official religion”, and the “values of his antisociety are defined in contrast to the perceived practises of that religion”. In this view, the book of Jeremiah was

written with an “anti-society intention, using language to overthrow one political ideology with another” (Mills, 2015: 52-53).

Other scholars, such as Andrew E Hill and John H Walton (2000:425), believe that the final form of the book of Jeremiah give enough clues as to how it came into being and have noted that the Book of Jeremiah is “one of the few books of the Old Testament to provide information about its writing”. They (Hill and Walton, 2000:425) pointed to several passages to support their claim. For example, Jeremiah 36:1-3 reads:

In the fourth year of Jehoiakim son of Josiah King of Judah, this word came to Jeremiah from the LORD: “Take a Scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken to you concerning Israel, Judah and all the other nations from the time I began speaking to you in the reign of Josiah till now. Perhaps when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, they will each turn from their wicked ways; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin”.

Hill and Walton (2000:425) estimated that the words of Jeremiah 36:1-3 were given to the prophet in 605 BC, approximately twenty years after he had begun his prophetic ministry. Jeremiah 36:4 reveals that after the prophet received this word from God, he instructed Baruch to do the actual writing for him. Jeremiah 36:4 reads, “So Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and while Jeremiah dictated all the words the LORD had spoken to him, Baruch wrote them on the scroll”. The scroll containing Jeremiah’s prophecies were read before King Jehoiakim, but the king interrupted the reading by throwing the scroll into the fire (36:23). God instructed for the scroll to be rewritten a second time. Jeremiah 36:27-28 reads, “After the king burned the scroll containing the words that Baruch had written at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: ‘Take another scroll and write on it all the words that were on the first scroll, which Jehoiakim king of Judah burned up’”. Jeremiah 36:32 reveals that Jeremiah and Baruch obeyed God’s instruction and dictated another scroll.

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Jeremiah's prophetic words contained in the initial scroll are preserved in what is traditionally known as Book 1, that is, Jeremiah chapters 1-25 (Hill and Walton, 2000:426). Hill and Walton (2000:426) noted that two other collections of Jeremiah's prophecies can be found in chapters 30-31 (Book 2) and chapters 46-51 (Book 3). They (2000:426) wrote, "Interspersed among these are biographical sections (26-29, 32-45) that refer to Jeremiah in the third person and focus mainly on the latter part of his career". These biographical sections are thought to be later additions to Jeremiah's sayings by Baruch (2000:46). Another example of a later addition is chapter 52, for Jeremiah 51:64 reads, "The words of Jeremiah end here".

Although we have seen that there is debate about whether the book of Jeremiah contains the accurate words of an actual prophet named Jeremiah, Geisler (2004:263) believed there is more than enough evidence to support a traditional view for Jeremiah's, the son of Hilkiyah, authorship. Geisler (2004:263) offered six reasons to support his view. First, he believed the first verse of the book (1:1) tells us the words are from Jeremiah. An argument can be made that all references to the prophet are grounded in a historical figure, so there should be no surprise that the final edit attributes the book to him. Second, Geisler (2004:263) believed the character and content of the book fits the chaotic political era in which the prophet lived. Again, an argument can be made that the content of the book could have resulted from the perspective of an antisociety, so the actual social setting could be harder to pinpoint. In any case, the editors would have been familiar with the political backdrop of the prophet's lifetime.

Third, the prophet Daniel was a contemporary of Jeremiah and cited from his prophecies thus verifying Jeremiah wrote them (Daniel 9:2) (Geisler, 2004:263). This is strong evidence that the book was at the very least based on a real historical figure and prophet. Fourth, other sources much later than Jeremiah attribute the book to him, such as Ecclesiasticus 49:6-7 and Josephus Antiquities, X.5.1. Fifth, the Lachish letters dating from 588 BC offer support for

the traditional Jeremiah authorship. Finally, the New Testament's use of the book appears to attribute the work to Jeremiah (Matthew 2:17, 21:13 and Hebrews 8:8-12). If editors attributed the book to the prophet Jeremiah, then it would make sense that later works including the New Testament writers would have attributed the book to the prophet as well.

As we have seen thus far, all six of these claims are debated, and counterarguments can be made. However, for those that believe the book of Jeremiah contains much of the actual prophet's works, then the information within the book shows that scholars know more about the personal life of the man Jeremiah than any other Hebrew prophet (Lundbom, 2015:1). For example, Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth (Jeremiah 1:1). Anathoth was three miles' northeast of Jerusalem, which indicates Jeremiah lived within sight of Jerusalem. God instructed Jeremiah to neither marry nor have children (Jeremiah 16:1-4).

And finally, Jeremiah suffered greatly for his service to Yahweh, which caused him great personal doubt and showed how much he struggled with his "calling". Bill T Arnold and Bryan E Beyer (2008:384) summarised the prophet Jeremiah's sufferings along with his faithfulness: "(1) He suffered beatings and public humiliation (20:1-6), and battled many false prophets (6:13-14; 28:1-17; 29:8-9). (2) King Jehoiakim scorned his words, and even sought to kill him (36:21-23, 26). (3) Zedekiah, Judah's last king, often sought Jeremiah's counsel, but then refused to obey it (37:17; 38:14-23)". Arnold and Beyer (2008:384) concluded that Jeremiah's complaints "show a man with a deep relationship to God, a man who knew he could trust God with his innermost thoughts and feelings. In spite of all the opposition, Jeremiah faithfully pursued his prophetic calling. By God's strength, he determined to complete all the Lord gave him to do".

### **3.2.2 Dates and timeframes of the events of the book of Jeremiah**

The debates pertaining to the different views of the book of Jeremiah and the prophet himself mentioned in the section above certainly carry over into the

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discussion concerning the dates and timeframes for the events of the biblical book. Jeremiah 1:1 indicates that the prophet received the word of the LORD in the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign. Jack R Lundbom (2012:2) believed the thirteenth reign of King Josiah was 627 BC, five years before the law was found in the Temple (2 Kings 22-23). Concerning 627 BC, Lundbom (2012:4) wrote, ". . . in this year also Jeremiah accepted his call and began straightaway a public ministry on behalf of Yahweh God". Holladay (1990:10) acknowledged that "commentators have almost unanimously assumed without question that 627 B.C.E. is the date marking the beginning of Jeremiah's career as a prophet". In this view, Holladay (1990:10) says, "Jeremiah began to speak out God's words to his fellow citizens in that year".

Holladay (1990:10), however, presented five problems with this common view that should be considered. First, no oracles can confidently be assigned to Jeremiah in the years just after 627 BC. Second, Jeremiah never mentioned Josiah's reform which would have occurred in 622 BC. Third, identifying the "foe from the north" (Jeremiah 4:6-7, 5:15-17 and 6:22-23) becomes much more difficult for this timeframe. Fourth, the language of Jeremiah 15:16 suggest the prophet accepted his call after the scroll was found in the Temple in 622 BC. Fifth, Jeremiah would have been too old to declare his celibacy in 601 BC, if he had accepted his call to ministry in 627 BC.

These objections are legitimate, and they are resolved if Jeremiah started preaching later than 627 BC, perhaps during the reign of King Jehoiakim, Josiah's son (Holladay, 1990:13). Holladay (1990:14) saw 627 BC as the year of the prophet's birth. He pointed to Jeremiah 1:5 as evidence to support his claim, "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations". If Holladay's (1990:14) theory is correct, then Jeremiah would have only been five years old when the scrolls were discovered in the Temple, thus igniting the Josiah's reform.

Although scholars cannot know with certainty the age of the prophet during his ministry, I argue that an approximation on the range of the timeframe for his

ministry can be established. This timeframe is given in Jeremiah 1:1-3: “The words of Jeremiah son of Hilkiah, one of the priests at Anathoth in the territory of Benjamin. The word of the LORD came to him in the thirteenth year of the reign of Josiah son of Amon king of Judah, and through the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, down to the fifth month of the eleventh year of Zedekiah son of Josiah king of Judah, when the people of Jerusalem went into exile”. Josiah’s reign as king of Judah begin in approximately 640 BC. Jeremiah’s call or his birth, depending on the viewpoint, happened in 627 BC. Jehoiakim became king of Judah in 609 BC and reigned until 598 BC. Zedekiah’s reign lasted from 598 BC until the destruction of Jerusalem in 587/586 BC. After 586 BC, the people of Judah were taken into exile as indicated in Jeremiah 1:1. Jeremiah 43:4-7 indicates that after Jerusalem fell, the prophet and his scribe Baruch were also forced in exile to Egypt. As is shown through the biblical texts and history, the prophet Jeremiah’s ministry is attributed to have been during approximately the last forty years of the nation Judah.

Scholars, like Brueggemann (1988:21), put an extra emphasis on the timeframe given in Jeremiah 1:3, as he noted, “The word of the LORD is not a romantic or floating spiritual notion. It can be precisely linked to a chronological process”. Of particular interest is the significance of the last phrase of Jeremiah 1:3, where Jerusalem is captured and the people is led into exile. Brueggemann (1988:21) believed this is a chronological reference and serves as a “clue to the intent of Yahweh’s word about a signal about the nature of the book of Jeremiah”. This means that “the canonical scheme announces that the end point of this prophetic tradition coincides with the end point of historical Judah and of viable Jerusalem”. Although passages could have been added after 587 BC, the big finale is Jerusalem captured and Judah sent into exile.

### **3.2.3 The audience(s) of the book of Jeremiah**

The prophet’s primary audience was the southern kingdom of Judah and Jerusalem before the nation’s final assault from the Babylonians in 587/586 BC

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(Holt, 2013:112). Jeremiah also addressed his Hebrew audience after they had lost their nation and were forced into exile between 587 and 538 BC (House,1996). The nation of Judah needed to know why they had been defeated, and the older generation needed to assume responsibility for their sins, while the younger generation needed to learn to avoid the mistakes of those who came before them (House, 1996). While in exile, the people would have needed to understand that hope still existed, and Yahweh could be trusted to restore his people upon repentance. Even though Jeremiah lived through and experienced first-hand the events of the last forty years of Judah, he referenced previous events that eventually led to the northern kingdom of Israel's downfall in 722 BC at the hands of the Assyrians in the hope that Judah would learn from the mistakes of her sister nation (House and Mitchell, 2007:201). There are clues in the context surrounding the biblical texts that reveal the intended audience is Judah and Jerusalem for the selected Jeremiah passages of this thesis (Jeremiah 4:28, 15:5-6, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19).

The following are the contextual clues leading up to Jeremiah 4:28. First, Jeremiah 4:3 reads, "This is what the LORD says to the people of Judah and Jerusalem". Second, again, in Jeremiah 4:5, God tells the prophet to, "Announce in Judah and proclaim in Jerusalem and say . . ." Third, Jeremiah 4:11-12 reads "At that time this people and Jerusalem will be told . . . Now I pronounce my judgments against them". Fourth, Jeremiah 4:14 reads, "Jerusalem, wash the evil from your heart and be saved". Fifth, Jeremiah 4:16 reads, "Tell this to the nations, proclaim concerning Jerusalem: 'A besieging army is coming from a distant land, raising a war cry against the cities of Judah". And finally, Jeremiah 4:27 reads, "This is what the LORD says: 'The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely". The context reveals the land in this passage under judgment is Jerusalem and Judah.

The following are the contextual clues leading up to Jeremiah 15:5-6. First, Jeremiah 14:2, "Judah mourns . . . and a cry goes up from Jerusalem". Second, concerning the false prophets' followers, Jeremiah 14:16 reads, "And the

people they are prophesying to will be thrown out into the streets of Jerusalem because of the famine and sword”. Third, in Jeremiah 14:19, the prophet asked God, “Have you rejected Judah completely? Do you despise Zion”? Fourth, Jeremiah 15:4 reads, “I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem”. And fifth, Jeremiah 15:5 reads, “Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem? Who will mourn for you? Who will stop to ask how you are”? The context reveals this message is for the people of Jerusalem and Judah.

The following are the contextual clues for Jeremiah 18:7-10. First, after God sent the prophet to visit the potter’s shop, he said to Jeremiah, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does”? Second, God then proceeded to tell Jeremiah that if a nation’s fate, whether good or bad, can be changed depending upon the choices of the people (Jeremiah 18:7-10). Third, Jeremiah 18:11 reads, “Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against your ways and your actions’”. The context reveals the immediate audience for this message is the nation of Judah and the people in Jerusalem.

The following are the contextual clues for Jeremiah 26:3, 13 and 19. First, Jeremiah 26:1-2 gives the timeframe and audience, “Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the LORD: ‘This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word’”. Second, Jeremiah 26:10 and 12 reads, “When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the LORD and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the LORD’s house . . . Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: ‘The LORD sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard’”. The

context reveals that the message of this chapter was intended for the people of Judah and the temple in Jerusalem.

Although the intended audience for the selected passages of my thesis is the people of Judah and Jerusalem, there are recorded messages that God gave to Jeremiah for the foreign nations and cities in Jeremiah 46-51. The audience for these messages were Egypt (46), the philistines (47), Moab (48), Ammon (49:1-6), Edom (49:7-22), Damascus (49:23-27), Kedar and the kingdoms of Hazor (49:28-33), Elam (49:34-39) and Babylon (50-51).

### **3.3 Historical context of the book of Jeremiah**

#### **3.3.1 The political background of the book of Jeremiah**

The prophet Jeremiah lived during a time when the nation of Judah was involved in political drama and an age of crises, and “anyone who attempts to read the book without knowing something of the times will be more bewildered than ever” (Thompson, 1980:10). The book of Jeremiah “makes contact with historical events at many points” (Thompson, 1980:9). To understand the full scope of the political background of the book of Jeremiah, it is necessary to give historical details prior to the prophet coming onto the scene in 627 BC.

The Assyrians had dominated the ancient Near East, been the major political power for centuries and had many military victories, including sending the northern kingdom of Israel into exile in 722 BC (Snell, 1997:78-88). However, after the death of the last great king of Assyria, Ashurbanipal, circa. 627 BC, the Assyrian Empire disintegrated in around thirty years (Dillard and Longman, 1994:286). By the time God “called” Jeremiah into his prophetic ministry, the Assyrian empire was already well on its way in decline. The Assyrian’s demise allowed nations that had once been major powers in the world, including Judah, to regain their freedom.

Josiah had become king of Judah at the age of eight years old in 640 BC. With the opportunities that freedom from the Assyrian yoke afforded him, Josiah

wanted to return the influence of the dynasty of David over the areas that had once been aligned with Israel as one united kingdom (Dillard and Longman, 1994:287). He began to “seek the Lord” (2 Chronicles 24:36) in his eighth year as king circa. 633 BC, and he implemented a series of reforms to help Judah purge itself from Assyrian pagan worship practices and to reunite the surrounding areas (Lundbom, 2015:38). It was during his reforms that the Book of the Law was rediscovered in the temple (2 Kings 22:3-8).

The problem for Josiah was during this time both Babylon and Egypt began gaining in power and started to “reassert their own imperial ambitions in the wake of Assyria’s demise” (Dillard and Longman, 1994:286). For Babylon, Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar advanced the armies northwest along the Tigris and Euphrates (Saggs, 1988:126). For Egypt, Psammetichus and his successor Neco advanced north through ancient Israel and Syria (Dillard and Longman, 1994:287). In 609 BC, Josiah wanted to block Egypt’s northward expansion by engaging Neco’s army at Megiddo, a move that ultimately cost Josiah his life (Pritchard, 2008:117). Historians estimate that both Babylon and Egypt were seeking to control the territories of the diminished Assyrian empire, and under the Nabopolassar and Nebuchadnezzar era, Babylon established itself as the major power of the ancient Near East over and against the other nations (Lipschitz, 2005:20). Here is a concise statement on how Babylon eventually won out as the major power.

The Medes under Cyaxeres captured Asshur by 614 B.C. The Babylonians, then in league with the Medes, besieged Nineveh until it fell in 612. The armies of Egypt under Neco en route to assist what remained of the Assyrian state advanced toward Haran in 609 . . . . Eventually the major battle for influence and control over the remnants of Assyria would be fought in north Syria at Carchemish (605); here Nebuchadnezzar gained a decisive victor. The future of the states of the ancient Near East would lie with the Babylonians

until Cyrus and the Persians came to power in 539 (Dillard and Longman, 1994:287).

So, Babylon won big at Carchemish and stayed strong until their fall to the Persians in 539. During the timeframe that most scholars' attribute to Jeremiah's ministry (627-586 BC), however, the nation of Judah found itself "caught up in the drama" of the surrounding nations (Thompson, 1980:10). Judah was "nominally a vassal of Assyria, then for a brief period independent, then a vassal of Egypt, and finally a vassal of Babylon, under whom Judah lost even her identity as a nation . . ." (Thompson, 1980:10). After Josiah's death on the battlefield at Megiddo in 609 BC, the people of Jerusalem chose the second son of Josiah, Jehoahaz, to replace his father as king of Judah. Jehoahaz advocated an anti-Egypt and pro-Babylon policy (Feinberg, 1983:9). Three months after Jehoahaz became king of Judah, Neco, the pharaoh of Egypt, replaced him with Eliakim, who later became known as Jehoiakim.

Jehoiakim's reign in Judah started in 609 BC. He favoured pro-Egypt policies, and the prophet Jeremiah repeatedly counselled that Judah should serve the king of Babylon (Feinberg, 1983:9). During his eleven-year reign, the battle of Carchemish took place, which historians believe is significant because it transferred power of the Middle East from Egypt to Babylon (Mills, 1991:136). The Babylonians made Judah their vassal state and sent many people from Judah into exile, including the prophet Daniel (2 Kings 24:1 and Daniel 1:1). Jehoiakim's reign lasted until he refused to pay tribute to Babylon, and Babylon sieged Jerusalem in 598 BC (Lipschitz, 2005:51). After Jehoiakim died in the siege, his son Jehoiachin took the throne for three months in Judah and afterwards was taken to Babylon into exile (Lipschitz, 2005:54, 57).

Nebuchadnezzar then placed another one of Josiah's sons, Mattaniah, later known as Zedekiah on the throne in Judah. Zedekiah plotted rebellions against Babylon, not heeding the counsel of Jeremiah (Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 1996:219.). Nebuchadnezzar eventually responded by invading Judah. Zedekiah reigned from 598 to 586 BC, when the Babylonians destroyed the city

of Jerusalem along with the temple. After 586 BC, Judah became another province of Babylon under the rule of Gedaliah, who had been appointed by Nebuchadnezzar (Dillard and Longmann, 1994:287). Gedaliah was assassinated by “a scion of the Davidic house, possibly at the instigation of pro-Egyptian sympathizers”, and “fearing the reprisal from Babylon, the survivors of this tragedy fled to Egypt, taking Jeremiah and Baruch by force with them” (Feinberg, 1983:10). With Jeremiah forced to Egypt into exile after the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of Solomon’s temple, scholars note that the period of the monarchy in Israel and Israelite power was officially over (Smith-Christopher, 2015:17).

Each of the selected passages in the book of Jeremiah for this thesis must be exegetically examined against the backdrop and understanding that Jeremiah’s ministry took place during the tumultuous years of the nation of Judah trying to maintain independence “in the flow of the crosscurrents and riptides of the imperial ambition of the surrounding states”, and the book of Jeremiah “vividly describes the nationalism, the paranoia, the competing interests of pro-Babylonian and pro-Egyptian groups . . . in Judah” (Dillard and Longman, 1994:287). Perhaps this time of political unrest and crises during Jeremiah’s ministry can be summarised in God’s message to the prophet about the nations and the kingdoms in Jeremiah 1:9-10, “Then the LORD reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘I have put words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant”.

### **3.3.2 The religious context and setting of the book of Jeremiah**

To understand the religious context and setting of the book of Jeremiah, we must first explore what the Bible reveals concerning the religious direction the nation Judah underwent during King Manasseh’s reign. Doing so will help shed light on the religious mind-set of the Judeans during Jeremiah’s ministry.

Manasseh was the son of King Hezekiah and reigned in Judah from 687-643 BC. He has been “condemned as the most evil king” in the history of Judah (Freedman, 2000:852). 2 Kings 21:2 supports this claim, “He did evil in the eyes of the Lord, following the detestable practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before the Israelites”. Manasseh was largely responsible for leading the people of Judah away from Yahweh worship. 2 Kings 21:9 reads, “Manasseh led them astray, so that they did more evil than the nations the LORD had destroyed before the Israelites.”

There are primarily two biblical accounts found in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles of how Manasseh did evil in the eyes of the Yahweh, that is, 2 Kings 21:1-18 and 2 Chronicles 33:1-20. In these texts, we learn that Manasseh rebuilt the high places his father Hezekiah had destroyed. Afterwards, he built altars to the false god Baal and made Asherahs. Furthermore, he built altars to false gods and Asherahs and had them put in the temple of Yahweh. Then, he sacrificed his own son in the fire in the valley of Ben Hinnom, practiced divination, sought omens and consulted mediums and spiritists. Thus, he led Judah into sins through idolatry.

The Bible implies that the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon in 586 was a result of Manasseh’s wickedness that took place a few generations before Judah was taken into exile. 2 Kings 24:1-4 reads:

During Jehoiakim’s reign, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon invaded the land, and Jehoiakim became his vassal for three years. But then he turned against Nebuchadnezzar and rebelled. The LORD sent Babylonian, Aramean, Moabite and Ammonite raiders against him to destroy Judah, in accordance with the word of the LORD proclaimed by his servants the prophets. Surely these things happened to Judah according to the LORD’s command, in order to remove them from his presence because of the sins of Manasseh and all he had done, including the shedding of innocent blood. For he had filled Jerusalem with innocent blood, and the LORD was not willing to forgive.

Manasseh's influence over the culture apparently lasted well past his death. The majority of the people of Judah were still participating in idolatry, falling away from Yahweh worship and turning to the pagan practices of the Assyrians and surrounding nations (McGee, 1991:35-36). Jeremiah 15:4 hints at the lingering influence Manasseh had over the culture, "I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem" (Dearman, 2002:155).

2 Chronicles 33 reveals that perhaps Manasseh repented toward the end of his life. In a time of distress when the Assyrians had taken Manasseh prisoner, he sought the favour of Yahweh and humbled himself before God. God was moved by Manasseh's prayer and restored him to Jerusalem. 2 Chronicles 33:13 says, "Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God". After he repented, Manasseh "got rid of the foreign gods and removed the image from the temple of the LORD, as well as all the altars he had built on the temple hill and in Jerusalem; and he threw them out of the city" (2 Chronicles 33:15). He even restored the altar of the LORD and made sacrifices to Yahweh. Even if Manasseh repented, as scholars' debate whether he repented or not (Grabbe, 2007:203), the damage had already been done. The religious culture of Judah had shifted from Yahweh-alone worship into idolatry and pagan worship.

After Manasseh died, his son Amon became the king of Judah for two years. 2 Kings 21:20-22 reads, "He did evil in the eyes of the LORD, as his father Manasseh had done. He followed completely the ways of his father, worshipping the idols his father had worshipped, and bowing down to them. He forsook the LORD, the God of his ancestors, and did not walk in obedience to him". 2 Chronicles 33:23 pointed out that "unlike his father Manasseh, he did not humble himself before the LORD; Amon increased his guilt". So even if Manasseh had repented and tried to make things right towards the end of his life, his successor Amon stopped the good progress and advocated idolatry in the land once again (George, 2016:496).

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The nation's next leader, Josiah, was a leader who, unlike his previous two predecessors, "did what was right in the eyes of the LORD and followed completely the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or to the left" (2 Kings 22:2). "Fulfilling the duty of a pious ancient Near Eastern king, Josiah began temple renovations" (Dumbrell, 2002:101). During the temple renovations, the Book of the Law was rediscovered circa 621 BC. When Josiah heard what was written in the Book of Law, he became distressed that his nation was not following God's laws, and he placed the blame on his predecessors. 2 Kings 22:13 reads, "Great is the LORD's anger that burns against us because those who have gone before us have not obeyed the words of this book; they have not acted in accordance with all that is written there concerning us".

Josiah then preceded to renew the covenant between God, the people of Judah and himself as king and promised to "follow the LORD and keep his commands, statutes and decrees with all his heart and all his soul, thus confirming the words of the covenant written in this book" (2 Kings 23:3). During his reform, Josiah tried to undo the pagan religious practices that had been influencing the Judean culture since the time of Manasseh and Amon (Perdue and Carter, 2015:67-68). He ordered Hilkiah the high priest to remove all forms of pagan idols from God's temple to re-sanctify and make holy the temple for Yahweh-alone worship. Outside of the temple and all across the land of Judah, he removed all forms of pagan idols, shrines and worship sites. Josiah did this to "fulfil the requirements of the law written in the book that Hilkiah the priest had discovered in the temple of the LORD" (2 Kings 23:24). 2 Kings 23:25 reads, "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses".

Nevertheless, Josiah's reforms did not permanently change the religious culture of Judah, and God still promised to destroy Jerusalem because of Manasseh's sin. 2 Kings 26-27 records, ". . . the LORD did not turn away from the heat of his

fierce anger, which burned against Judah because of all that Manasseh had done to arouse his anger. So the LORD said, 'I will remove Judah also from my presence as I removed Israel, and I will reject Jerusalem, the city I chose, and this temple, about which I said, 'My Name shall be there''.

2 Kings 23-24 reveals that all of Josiah's successor's, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah, "did evil in the sight of the LORD" (23:32, 37 and 24:9, 19). "It was because of the LORD's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end, he thrust them from his presence" (2 Kings 24:20).

Jeremiah lived through Josiah's reforms and possibly was hopeful for a repentant nation, however, that was not to be the case (Lods, 1996:153). The messages that God gave Jeremiah to proclaim in Jerusalem and throughout all of Judah reveal that the idolatrous sins of the nation were still prevalent throughout most of Jeremiah's ministry. For example, Jeremiah 2:11 and 13 reads, "But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols . . . My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water". Furthermore, Judah's leadership in all areas was religiously corrupt during Jeremiah's ministry. Not only the kings, but the supposedly religious leaders, the priest and the prophets of Jeremiah's day, was religiously corrupt. For example, Jeremiah 32:32 reads, "The people of Israel and Judah have provoked me by all the evil they have done—they, their kings and officials, their priests and prophets, the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem. Jeremiah 23:11 reads, "Both prophet and priest are godless; even in my temple I find their wickedness', declares the LORD".

Perhaps God's plea to the prophet in Jeremiah 5:1-2 provides a summary of the overall religious mind-set of Judah during the bulk of Jeremiah's ministry: "Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and

seeks the truth, I will forgive this city. Although they say, ‘As surely as the LORD lives’, still they are swearing falsely”.

### **3.3.3. The historicity of the biblical texts**

Another matter of importance to note is, among almost every detail concerning the book of Jeremiah, not all scholars agree with such a straightforward reading and interpretation of the “historical” information found within the book of Jeremiah and in the Old Testament, like presented in the above section. For example, Carroll (2004:32) gave a warning for developing theories about Jeremiah from the biblical texts themselves. His warning appeared to have been for scholars like Holladay (1986) who view the book as largely the prophet’s work. Carroll (2004:32) wrote, “There is however in much modern writing about Jeremiah a tendency to work with an implicit eyewitness or earwitness theory of its composition which, though never argued for, allows for the attributing sections of the book to the prophet Jeremiah”. The problem with this, according to Carroll (2004:32), is that there is no concrete evidence to support this theory. He concluded, “It may be a reasonable viewpoint, but it cannot be corroborated by assuming the truth of the text and then arguing from the text for the claim! This would be a circular argument following question-begging procedures and most unscholarly” (2004:32).

Was Carroll (2004:32) correct in that it is a logical fallacy and unscholarly to assume the truth of the biblical text and argue from the text for a claim? Question-begging, or circular reasoning, is when the conclusion of an argument is also a part of its premise, and an individual assumes that which he is trying to prove. The following example should be considered (Lisle, 2009:114):

“(A) The Bible must be the Word of God because it says it is. (B) What the Bible says must be true since it is the Word of God” . . . this argument is fallacious because it begs the question. Since (A) is only guaranteed to be true if (B) is true, and since (B) is only guaranteed to be true if (A) is, the argument is a vicious circle and does not really

prove anything. It's perfectly consistent to assume both (A) and (B), but we cannot use merely one of these as proof of the other.

Begging the question is a unique fallacy, because with all other logical fallacies, even when the premises are true the conclusion can still be false, which is considered an invalid argument in deductive arguments. On the other hand, in deductive arguments, if the conclusion follows from the premises, it is considered valid. In the case of question-begging, the conclusion will necessarily follow from the premises; therefore, question-begging is valid. Why then is question-begging considered fallacious? Jason Lisle (2009:114) wrote, “. . . when we make an argument, we take for granted that the premises are true, and . . . the person with whom we are arguing also takes them as true. The idea is to convince our opponent of a new conclusion”. When we “beg the question”, however, “if our opponent already accepts the premises then he already accepts the conclusion too” (Lisle, 2009:114). In other words, there would be no reason to make an argument. If, on the other hand, “our opponent does not accept the conclusion, then he will necessarily reject the premise as well” (2009:114). Lisle concluded, “So while valid, circular reasoning is not useful. It does not prove anything new. It would seem that begging the question is not legitimate because it is arbitrary”.

If it is a vicious circle to use the biblical texts to argue from the texts, then does that mean scholars should not use the Bible as an ultimate standard for exegetical study? There is a thought in need of consideration: an ultimate standard is unavoidable. For example, Lisle (2009:143) wrote:

For any belief that a person has (**p**), we can always ask, “How do you know that to be true?” The person will supply an argument . . . that supports his belief. In his argument, the person will appeal to another proposition (**q**) that he believes supports his conclusion. But since he has appealed to another proposition (**q**), we must ask the question, “Okay, but how do you know **q** is true?” In his defense of **q**, the

person will appeal to yet another proposition (**r**), which we can again question, leading him to suggest another proposition (**s**), and so on.

In other words, for whatever a person believes, there must be an ultimate standard. The “chain” of reasoning as described in the quote above must come to an end, otherwise it would go on forever, and an argument would be incomplete and ultimately prove nothing (Lisle, 2009:143). Lisle (2009:143) wrote, “Therefore, everyone must have an ultimate standard: a proposition (upon which all others depend) that cannot be proved from a more foundational proposition”. The next logical question that follows is how does a person know his ultimate standard is true? An ultimate standard cannot be proven true by another proposition, otherwise, the ultimate standard would not be the most foundation proposition. An ultimate standard cannot be merely assumed, otherwise, it would be arbitrary and no one could know anything at all. Lisle (2009:144-145) believed this left one possible answer to the question of how an ultimate standard is proved, “An ultimate standard must prove itself”, that is, it must use itself as the criterion.

For example, Lisle (2009:145) believed that Hebrews 6:13-14 is an example where God used this type of reasoning: “When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants’”. Hebrews 6:16 reveals that humans appeal to a greater authority when confirming oaths, but because God is ultimate, he can only use himself as the authority. This shows that “some degree of circular reasoning is inevitable when it comes to proving an ultimate authority” (2009:145). We should keep in mind that “question begging” is not actually invalid, but instead “it is normally considered a fallacy because it is arbitrary” (2009:145). But, as Lisle (2009:145) noted, “what if it were not arbitrary? What if the argument went ‘out of its plane,’ going beyond a mere simple circle, and used other additional information to support the conclusion”? If we found “*after* making an assumption that we had good reasons for it”, then “this would be perfectly legitimate” (2009:145)?

In other words, in this context, if scholars have good reasons for their views, then using this type of circular reasoning is not illegitimate. Not every scholar has to accept the biblical account as reality or agree on how to interpret the context. Scholars can respect each other and disagree on how to read the texts, but it does not mean that they are choosing their beliefs arbitrarily. In the same way that Carroll (2004) had reasons for how he viewed the Jeremiah texts, Holladay (1986) and others<sup>2</sup> have reasons for holding to the view that the Jeremiah texts on some level communicates accurate historical truth as written. Neither “school of thought”, I would argue, have chosen a “side” arbitrarily.

### **3.3.4 The purpose of the book of Jeremiah**

As a prophet, Jeremiah’s purpose was to deliver the messages God gave him and “in doing so he desired to bring the people back to the Lord and to warn them of the consequences should they continue their present course of action” (Hill and Walton, 2000:427). Hill and Walton (2000:427) believed the “purpose of the book is to record the prophecies of Jeremiah but also to tell us something about the man Jeremiah and his lot as God’s prophet, struggling both with the people and the Lord”.

Geisler (2004:264) presented three areas of purpose that are nicely summarised for the book: “(1) The historical purpose: Jeremiah’s prophecies served as God’s final warning of the impending judgment of the Babylonian captivity” (2004:264). “(2) The doctrinal purpose: The book lays great stress on morality and on the supremacy of the one God (as opposed to idolatry). It teaches that ‘righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people’ (Prov. 14:34)” (2004:264). “(3) The Christological purpose: There are many presentations of Christ: He is the fountain of living waters (2:13; cf. John 14:14), the balm of Gilead (8:22), the good Shepherd (23:4), a righteous Branch (23:5), and the Lord our righteousness (23:6). Overall He is the weeping Prophet to His

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<sup>2</sup> For example, for more information on the historical reliability of the Old Testament, see Kitchen (2003), Kaiser (2001), Harrison and others (1997), Brotzman and Tully (2016), Brug (2014), Wilson (2007) and Hoffmeier (2008).

people (cf. Matt. 23:37, 38)” (2004:264). Viewing the purpose of Jeremiah from these three perspectives is helpful, because it keeps us focused on the overall picture and scope of the book.

### **3.4 The literary context of the book of Jeremiah**

#### **3.4.1 The Hebrew and Greek versions of the book of Jeremiah**

The book of Jeremiah was preserved in two “significantly different versions”, that is, the Hebrew version of the Old Testament or Masoretic Text (MT) and the Greek version of the Old Testament or the Septuagint (LXX) (Petersen, 2002:99). The Greek version of Jeremiah is estimated to be around three thousand words shorter than that of the Masoretic Text (Petersen, 2002:99). Significant passages that are in the Masoretic Text but not in the Septuagint include Jeremiah 33:14-26; 39:4-13; 51:44b-49a and 52:27b-30 (Hays, 2010:147).

Additionally, the two versions structure the actual texts in a different order. For example, the “oracles against the nations” occurs as chapters 46-51 in the Masoretic Text, but in the Septuagint, they follow the first half of 25:13 and occur as chapters 26-31 (Petersen, 2002:99). The “oracles against the nations” also occur in a different order. For example, “The major section against Babylon, which occurs as the final element in the Hebrew oracles against the nations (Chaps. 50-51), appears as the second portion of the oracles against the nations in the LXX (LXX chaps. 27-28)” (2002:99). “In addition, the oracles directed against Moab (LXX 31:1-44) provide the conclusion for the Greek oracles against the nations (cf. 48:1-44 [vv.45-48 do not occur in the LXX])” (2002:99).

Petersen (2002:100) noted, “Both versions have been known for centuries, but the significance of the LXX version was not fully appreciated until after the Dead Sea Scrolls had been discovered and analyzed”. In “earlier times, the LXX was thought to be an abbreviated form of the Hebrew text, the abbreviation having occurred during the process of translation from Hebrew to Greek” (Petersen,

2002:100). The discovery of the scrolls at Qumran revealed several of the Hebrew scrolls were the same length as the text in the Septuagint, so it became clear that “the difference in size was not due to the vagaries of translation” (Petersen, 2002:100). Hays (2010:148) added that “when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, one of the ancient Hebrew fragments of Jeremiah reflected the reading of the LXX rather than the MT, suggesting that the LXX was an accurate translation of an ancient Hebrew text that was older than the MT . . . some other fragments, however, followed the MT”. Petersen (2002:102) offered further insight into the differences between the two versions. For example, he claimed that the MT “tends to indict God in a particularly virulent and ironic way, the LXX text conveys the lament in terms like those in biblical psalms” (2002:102). Because the “MT offers the harsher judgment on the deity”, the reader of the “MT receives quite a different picture of Jeremiah’s complaints than does the reader of the LXX” (2002:102).

Hays (2010:148) noted that scholars disagree as to how the differences should be viewed. First, some argue that the “MT is the superior text and should be followed”. Second, others believe the “LXX reflects an earlier tradition and is superior to the MT”. Third, others believe the two versions “were composed, one in Babylon (on the basis of the MT) and one in Egypt (on the basis of the LXX)”, thus, “both editions could be viewed as the inspired word of God”. Thompson (1980:119-120) offered his belief, “It may be that both traditions had relatively long histories of scribal transmission. Where they diverge it is not possible always to decide which reading is preferred. One might ask whether the MT traditions added material or the LXX tradition subtracted material. Perhaps both processes were at work”.

Gleason L Archer Jr (1974:369) believed there is good evidence “that even apart from the original edition of Jeremiah’s prophecy, which was destroyed by Jehoiakim, there was a later edition which preceded the final form of the text as we have it in the Masoretic tradition” and that “after Jeremiah’s death . . . Baruch made a more comprehensive collection of his master’s sermons and

rearranged the material in more logical order". Geisler (2004:264) agreed with Archer (1974:369) in that Baruch incorporated the additional prophecies of Jeremiah after his death and published a longer work that became the basis for the Hebrew and English texts. RB Dillard and T Longman (1994:292) wrote, "If we are able to see the final stages of a process of literary growth in Jeremiah, it is important to ask whether other books of the Old Testament were not edited and rewritten in a similar way, even though the earlier editions may no longer be preserved". Carroll (2004:25) acknowledged that we would not have any biblical book without substantial editing, and it is impossible to know for sure who the editors were. In Jeremiah's case, there are many traces of editing, including the "different arrangements of blocks of material by the Greek and Hebrew editions" (Carroll, 2004:25). Carroll (2004:25) noted that "in spite of the many discrete, disparate and even disjunctive pieces constituting the book it is held together by a complex editorial framework which, at times, gives it some appearance of coherence and direction".

Despite the different views on how to approach the differences in the two versions, Dillard and Longman (1994:292-293) warned that although "in Jeremiah the LXX differs perhaps more widely from the MT than in any other book of the Old Testament, one should not overstate these differences" (1994:292-293). In a similar fashion, Hays (2010:148) concluded, "At any rate, while the textual differences are significant, there are no significant theological differences between the two versions, and the central message of Jeremiah is clear in both traditions".

### **3.4.2 The structure and argument (flow of thought) of the book of Jeremiah**

Huey (1993:26) wrote, "Scholars generally agree that there are three types of literary material in the book". They do, however, have different ways of explaining the three types of material found within Jeremiah. For example, Huey (1993:26) described the literary materials in the following way: "(1) the poetic oracles, most from Jeremiah himself; (2) biographical prose narratives about

events in the life and time of Jeremiah; and (3) sayings and prose discourses akin to the style and vocabulary found in Deuteronomy and the Historical Books (the so-called Deuteronomistic history)". Furthermore, Jeremiah's three major categories of literary features are sometimes referred to as Types A, B and C" (Hill and Walton, 2000:428). For example, Hill and Walton (2000:428) wrote, "Type A consists of prophetic oracles written in poetry. Type B comprises historical narratives about Jeremiah. Type C is the prose speeches of the book".

Petersen (2002:103-104) followed the same approach but associated each category with sections of chapters within Jeremiah. He simplified the literary form into a "basic tripartite structure: an agglomeration of poetic oracles and brief prose speeches (chaps. 1-25), primarily prose narratives about Jeremiah's activities (chaps. 26-45), and primarily oracles against foreign nations (chaps. 46-52) (Peterson, 2002:103-104)". Simplifying the book in this way allows for the reader to follow the book's flow of thought. Peterson (2002:103-104) added, "When reading the book in this way, the reader may perceive a movement from indictment and judgment to hope and then to a placement of Israel within the international perspective".

Whether scholars agree on a more simplified division like Petersen (2002:103-104) or not, the consensus is that each of the three major literary features, poetry, historical prose and speech prose is distributed widely throughout the book" (Hill and Walton, 2000:428). This is partly what makes the book of Jeremiah difficult for scholars and why they cannot come to a universal agreement concerning the book's origin. For example, Brueggemann (1988:7) implied that the literary features and structure of the book reveals "there is a core of material that originated with the historical person of Jeremiah" and that "an extended process of editorial work has transformed and perhaps made beyond recovery the original work of the prophet".

In addition to the three major categories of literary material, another thing most scholars can agree on is that the book of Jeremiah is not compiled in

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chronological order (Hays, 2010:147). In other words, the final form of Jeremiah does not take the reader through his ministry in successive years. In light of this, there are several views on how the book should be outlined and divided. For example, Hays (2010:147) believed the book is structured around thematic elements and divided the book into the following sections: (1) Jeremiah 1-29: The broken covenant and imminent Judgment, (2) Jeremiah 30-33: Restoration and the new covenant, (3) Jeremiah 34-35: The final days of Jerusalem and Judah, (4) Jeremiah 46-51: Oracles against the nations and (5) Jeremiah 52: Postscript. On the other hand, Hill and Walton (2000:427) divided the book into the three major “books” with interludes separating each “book”:

- I. The call of Jeremiah (1)
- II. Book 1 of the oracles of Jeremiah (2-25)
- III. Biographical interlude 1 (26-29)
- IV. Book 2: The book of consolation (30-31)
- V. Biographical interlude 2 (32-45)
- VI. Book 3: Oracles against the nations (46-51)
- VII. Historical appendix: the fall of Jerusalem (52)

Geisler (2004:265-268) proposed an outline of Jeremiah that is divided into prophecies given during the reigns of the kings that the prophet’s ministry supposedly took place:

- I. Prophecies before the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 1-39)
  - A. Prophecies during Josiah’s reign (1-12)
  - B. Prophecies during Jehoiakim’s reign (13-20; 25-26; 35-36)
  - C. Prophecies during Zedekiah’s reign (21-24; 27-34; 37-39)
- II. Prophecies after the fall of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 40-52)
  - A. Prophecies to the remnant in Palestine (40-43)
  - B. Prophecies to the remnant in Egypt (44)
  - C. Prophecies to the remnant in Babylon (45-52)

In the next chapter, we shall discuss where the selected passages for this thesis, Jeremiah 4:28, 15:5-6, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 fit into the structure and flow of the book of Jeremiah. We shall also discuss the literary composition of their respective chapter and section and how that might help with interpreting the passages.

### **3.4.3 The theological themes of the book of Jeremiah**

#### *3.4.3.1 Themes from oracles in the book of Jeremiah*

Hill and Walton (2000:427-428) believed the book can be themed by categorizing the different types of oracles: indictment oracles, judgment oracles, instruction oracles and aftermath oracles. For example, first, they believed the “indictment oracles are all in Book 1 and are mostly concentrated in chapters 5-9” (2000:427). The indictment, here, was potentially threefold: the people had forsaken Yahweh and started worshipping idols (Jeremiah 2:5-3:5), the people’s stubbornness and injustice (Jeremiah 5:20-31) and the people’s misuse of the temple and sacrificial system (Jeremiah 7:8-31) (2000:428). Second, the judgment oracles were national in scope and political in their nature and dealt with themes of exile, destruction and plunder (2000:428). Third, the instruction oracles were primarily: a call to repent from their sins and return to Yahweh worship (Jeremiah 3:12-13 and 10:2-16), instruction about the supremacy of Yahweh over and against other idols (Jeremiah 10:2-16) and instruction concerning the Sabbath (Jeremiah 17:19-23) (2000:428). Fourth, the aftermath oracles, Hill and Walton (2000:428) argued, are summarized in Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future”. The themes associated with the aftermath oracles are messages of hope, rescue from exile (Jeremiah 29:10), a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), a rebuilt city (Jeremiah 30:18) and a new Davidic king (Jeremiah 33:15-26) (2000:428).

#### *3.4.3.2 The covenant theme of the book of Jeremiah*

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The covenant, I will argue, is not only a major theme throughout the book of Jeremiah, but it is the foundation for the content within the book. Brueggemann (1988:2-3) stated, “Jeremiah’s reading is not shaped by power politics but by the categories of Israel’s covenantal traditions of faith, which concern the holy purpose and power of Yahweh and the aches and hopes of the faithful community”. The prophet Jeremiah understood that his original audience was in a covenant relationship with God and referred to them as “the Lord’s ‘firstfruits’ (2:3), his ‘choice vine’ (2:21), his beloved bride (2:2; 3:14), his ‘flock’ (13:17), his vineyard (12:10), his own inheritance (12:7-9); the Lord was father to a wayward son, husband to a faithless wife (3:19-20)” (Dillard and Longman, 1994:298).

Jeremiah spent his ministry calling the nation back to the days of the Mosaic Age. Brueggemann (1988:3) wrote, “The governing paradigm for the tradition of Jeremiah is *Israel’s covenant with Yahweh, rooted in the memories and mandates of the Sinai tradition*”. With the covenant comes the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Brueggemann (1988:3) noted, “When the events of 587 are read in light of the claims of covenant, the Babylonian invasion and deportation are understood as the means of implementation of the harsh sanctions (covenant curses) already known and articulated in the Sinai tradition”. In this view, Jerusalem’s destruction was God’s covenantal response to the nations’ disobedience and refusal to adhere to “covenantal requirements” (Brueggemann, 1988:3). The book of Jeremiah’s connection with Deuteronomy has been duly noted (Brueggemann, 1988:3-4; 2007:26).

My conviction is that Jeremiah should be understood through the Deuteronomic-covenant context, partly because the themes and theology of Jeremiah are like what we find in Deuteronomy. When viewed from this perspective, the motifs of sin, repentance and a call to return to Yahweh for salvation can be understood in light of the covenant between God and the nation. For example, Kevin J. Vanhoozer (2008:216) recognised that both Deuteronomy and Jeremiah have the same theme of pattern of salvation and

wrote, “The Law and the Prophets share an analysis of the human problem (persistence in sin), call for thoroughgoing moral and spiritual reconstruction (from the ‘heart’), and point to the grace of God, ultimately as the source of reformation”. Because of these same themes, it seems hard to deny the influence Deuteronomy has on the book of Jeremiah; therefore, it should be noted that in light of this section, a major assumption moving forward in this thesis is that the prophet Jeremiah and its writers were familiar with the Deuteronomic covenant and composed the book within the covenant mind-set.

### *3.4.3.3 The canonical themes of the book of Jeremiah*

Vanhoozer’s (2008:216) work proved to be helpful in determining the canonical themes and importance of Jeremiah. He (2008:216) wrote, “The canonical importance of Jeremiah is evident not only from its length and its prominent position, but also from its influence on later books”. He noted that “Chronicles, Ezra, and Daniel cite Jeremiah’s ‘seventy years’ in their respective assimilations of the idea of a purposeful ‘exile’ followed by salvation” (2008:216). Themes presented in the book of Hosea also appear in Jeremiah: “God’s faithfulness, the covenant people’s unfaithfulness, the prophet’s deep involvement in his message, signifying God’s personal engagement with his people, and salvation after judgment” (2008:216). Furthermore, the new covenant theme presented in Jeremiah is consistent with other prophetic books (2008:216).

Vanhoozer (2008:219) also noted a covenantal connection between the book of Jeremiah and 2 Kings. He wrote, “They tell the story of the covenant that is set up in Exodus-Deuteronomy, showing how the covenantal curses, threatened in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28, finally fall (Jer. 11:3-4; 2 Kings 17:19-20)” (2008:219). He noted that while “Kings knows that the exile of Judah will not be the end of the covenant between Israel and God . . . Jeremiah is more explicit on an actual restoration to its full blessings, especially in terms of return to the promised land. In this respect. Jeremiah echoes Deuteronomy more fully than Kings does (Deut. 30:3-5)” (2008:218). Finally, the new covenant theme in Jeremiah finds fulfilment in the New Testament, where Jesus fulfilled the covenant (Mark

14:12-24, John 6:54 and Hebrews 8:8-13). These New Testament occurrences of new covenant language “draws attention to the promise in Jeremiah (and behind it Deuteronomy) that God himself would act decisively to bring about the salvation that had always eluded his people because of their hardness of heart” (2008:218). The advent of Christ, then, is the culmination of the “incarnational trend, already visible in Hosea and Jeremiah, in which God commits himself, at cost, to the salvation of his people” (2008:218).

Paul R House (1998:301) believed that a canonical approach to Jeremiah allows scholars to examine the value of prophetic biography. For example, he wrote, “Rather than considering the narratives only in light of their value for illuminating the sermons, a canonical approach encourages comparing the stories about Jeremiah to those about Ahijah, Elijah, Elisha, Micaiah and Isaiah in Kings to determine their theological message” (1998:301). He went on to write, “Seen this way, biography is as important as poetic or prose sermons for developing theology” (1998:301). House (1998:300) also believed “a canonical approach to theology accepts Jeremiah as a document written for God’s people by God’s servant . . . it interprets Jeremiah as it appears in the Hebrew version and observes its connections to previous biblical books and its influence on later Scriptures”. House (1998:300) concluded that “part of Jeremiah’s canonical significance is due to its diversity, creativity and difficulty”.

In addition to the book of Jeremiah’s canonical significance and importance within the Old Testament, Vanhoozer (2008:218) showed how some of Jeremiah’s themes anticipates key ideas found in the New Testament. He concluded, “Jeremiah tells a story that promises renewed salvation after judgment and names this as a new covenant, which canonically, leads to fulfilment in God’s act of salvation through Christ” (2008:218). This is significant, because the work we do in the book of Jeremiah with its themes should point us towards repentance and the redemptive work of God through Christ.

### **3.5 Chapter conclusion**

### Chapter 3: The Context of the Book of Jeremiah

This chapter answered the second key question, “How does the general background, historical context and literary context of the book of Jeremiah assist in understanding Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19”? This chapter was important in determining how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19, because it explored the general, historical and literary contexts of the book of Jeremiah, including a few differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions of the Jeremiah texts. Almost every detail of the context of Jeremiah is debated among scholars, and there is no consensus as to how the context of Jeremiah should be viewed. I have also argued that each view is not chosen arbitrarily by its holders, and there is support for multiple views concerning the material in this chapter. In other words, not one viewpoint can consistently make its case on evidence alone; therefore, there are presuppositions involved by all “sides” of the debates.

The first category examined was the general background of the book of Jeremiah. We saw that Holladay (1986) believed that much of the book of Jeremiah could be attributed to the prophet himself, and that the book reveals accurate and reliable historical information. Carroll (1986) believed the book was edited and constructed in later times, and that any work from the original prophet is beyond identification and recovery. In other words, the book does not give accurate historical data from which we can derive accurate views about the prophet himself. We saw that others, like Brueggemann (1987:114), take a middle approach where the information presented in the book is a portrait of the prophet.

In other words, the book does not necessarily provide accurate historical details at every point, but the stories are based on an actual person at a certain time in history. Although scholars do not always agree on exact dates for historical references in the book, I argue that an approximation on the range of the timeframe for his ministry can be established. As is shown through the biblical texts and history, the prophet Jeremiah’s ministry is attributed to have been

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during approximately the last forty years of the nation Judah. The social settings and “picture” we receive from the finished work of the book are from an antisociety’s worldview, meaning we are seeing the alternative reality antisociety, the Yahweh-alone party, created.

The second category examined was the historical context of the book of Jeremiah. We saw that the prophet lived during a time when the nation of Judah was involved in political drama and an age of crises. I argued that each of the Jeremiah passages for my thesis must be exegetically examined against the backdrop and understanding that the prophet’s ministry took place during the tumultuous years of the nation of Judah trying to maintain independence amidst being caught up in the political unrest created by the Egyptians and Babylonians.

In this section, we looked at the history of Judah that led them to being in the cross-fire of the imperial ambition of the surrounding nations. We saw that God promised to destroy Jerusalem because of Manasseh’s sins. We saw that Josiah brought reformation to Judah, but ultimately the culture at large was not changed and stayed in rebellion against Yahweh. Josiah’s successor’s, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah were evil and did not follow Yahweh in the way they were instructed. The prophet lived through Josiah’s reforms and was possibly hopeful for a repentant nation. The messages that God gave Jeremiah to proclaim in Jerusalem and throughout all of Judah reveal that the idolatrous sins of the nation were still prevalent throughout most of Jeremiah’s ministry.

Because a large part of Judah’s history is taken from accounts in the Old Testament, we looked briefly at the historicity of the biblical texts. Here, we saw that Carroll (1986) claimed it was circular reasoning, “question-begging” and a logical fallacy to use other books of the Bible to make claims and develop theories about the book of Jeremiah. We saw that begging the question is a unique fallacy, because in deductive reasoning if the conclusion of an argument follows the premises, then it is considered valid. Begging the question is

considered fallacious, because it is arbitrary, meaning when we “beg the question”, our opponent either already accepts the premise and conclusion as true or rejects the conclusion and thereby the premise as false. Therefore, there is no need to make an argument at all. This circular reasoning, while valid, does not prove anything.

I argued that for whatever a person believes, there must be an ultimate standard, a proposition upon which all others depend and cannot be proved from a more foundational proposition (Lisle, 2009:143). Without an ultimate standard, the “chain” of reasoning would go on forever, an argument would be incomplete and ultimately prove nothing. We saw that Lisle (2009:144-145) argued that an ultimate standard must ultimately prove itself and use itself as the criterion. In other words, if scholars have good reasons for their views, then using this type of circular reasoning is not illegitimate. Not every scholar has to accept the biblical account as reality or agree on how to interpret the context. Scholars can respect each other and disagree on how to read the texts, but it does not mean that they are choosing their beliefs arbitrarily.

The last category examined was the literary context of the book of Jeremiah. In this section, we saw that the book contains poetic oracles, prose narratives and deuteronomic discourses. We also saw that the book is not compiled in chronological order but according to themes, that is, broken covenant and imminent judgement, promise of restoration and a new covenant, the final days of Jerusalem and Judah, oracles against the nations and a postscript. In addition to the structure of the book, we identified three major categories of themes: oracles, covenant and canonical. First, oracle themes include indictment oracles, judgment oracles, instruction oracles and aftermath oracles. Second, the covenant is foundational for the content of Jeremiah and much of the material is similar to Deuteronomy. Third, Jeremiah, when viewed in light of the biblical canon points us towards repentance and the redemptive work of God through Christ.

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Overall, there are a few conclusions and presuppositions that my thesis makes from the results of this chapter that will assist in understanding the key passages of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 in the chapters that follow. First, Jeremiah was a real prophet who was alive during the timeframe of at least 627 BC to 586 BC, although his birth and death dates are unknown. Second, Jeremiah's ministry occurred during approximately the last forty years of the nation of Judah before Jerusalem was sacked in 586 BC, and he was carried into exile. Third, in the specific passages for this thesis, Jeremiah's messages were primarily for the nation of Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem before the exile and amid a chaotic political backdrop in the ancient Near East. Fourth, along with the political chaos, Jeremiah was part of a minority group that advocated Yahweh-alone worship amid a religiously corrupt culture. Fifth, Jeremiah was familiar with the book of Deuteronomy and the covenant God had made with the nation. Sixth, Jeremiah's messages should be viewed through the lens of the Deuteronomic-covenant context.

Having understood different viewpoints of the contextual issues and background of the book of Jeremiah, we may now turn our focus in the next chapter to partly answering the third key question, "What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience"? The next chapter will help answer this question by looking in-depth at שׁוּב (shub) and נָחַם (nacham) through word studies.

## Chapter 4

### WORD STUDIES OF שׁוּב (SHUB) AND נָחַם (NACHAM)

#### 4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter helps partly answer the third key question, “What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience”? The purpose of this chapter is to conduct a word study of both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). The word studies will begin by examining the philological background of the Hebrew verb roots. Next, their meanings and usages in the Old Testament will be explored. Then, we shall see the different ways they are translated in the Septuagint (LXX). Finally, how the book of Jeremiah uses the verbs will be discussed.

#### 4.2 Word study of שׁוּב (*shub*)

##### 4.2.1 Philological background of שׁוּב (*shub*)

###### 4.2.1.1 *The Akkadian Semitic language*

Akkadian Semitic language was a language used in ancient Mesopotamia. Holladay (1958:9) wrote, “The oldest written evidence now at hand for the root *subh* is to be found in Amorite personal names compounded with the root which appear in Akkadian tablets from Hammurabi’s time (eighteenth and seventeenth

centuries B.C.)”. David Ellis Donnell (1988:24) noted that a translation of the names found on the tablets “give some indication of the religious background from which the Hebrew root is derived: (1) Dagan returns; (2) God returns; and (3) Return, O God”. Because each of the names are associated with a “religious return”, perhaps they provide a sort of anticipation for how the Hebrew root will be used in the Old Testament, especially in the context between God and his people (Holladay, 1958:9).

#### 4.2.1.2 *The Northwest Semitic language*

William Foxwell Albright (1948:18-22) found שׁוּב (*shub*) cognates in three Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions from the fifteenth century BC Canaanites. Albright (1948:18-19) interpreted the Semitic root *twb* which can mean “return” as a substitute for “die”. He wrote, “In these texts ‘return’ is an obvious euphemism for ‘die’, presumably chosen from synonyms because of the ardent desire of the miners to return to Egypt (or to Canaan)” (Albright, 1948:19). Holladay (1958:9) noted that the Hebrew root שׁוּב (*shub*) is a derivation of the Semitic root *twb*. In the context of the inscriptions found by Albright (1948:18-22), there was a religious connection in that one of the translations of “restore me” was an “imperative directed to the goddess” (Donnell, 1988:24).

Marvin Stephen Davis (1983:8) acknowledged the importance of examining the Ugaritic cognate *twb* for studying שׁוּב (*shub*) in the Old Testament. For example, *twb* is used often in Ugaritic and has a wide range of meanings: come back, do again, declare, send back and return (Gordon, 1955:335, Young, 1956:70 and Holladay, 1958:10). Davis (1983:8) noted that the meanings of *twb* in Ugaritic “indicates that the numerous meanings for שׁוּב, which are found in the Old Testament, are not unique to the Hebrew language”.

In addition, Holladay (1958:10) wrote, “The verb *subh* appears on the Moabite Stone: definitely in line 12 . . . and almost surely in lines 8-9”. The Moabite Stone is dated to around 830 BC, and the Moabite language is similar to ancient Hebrew (Beyerlin, 1975:237). For example, Holladay (1958:10) noted

that the example found in lines eight and nine, translated “he restored it” is closely related to the hiphil form of שׁוּב (*shub*) in 1 Kings 20:34.

There is also evidence that the “cognate verb tubh can be found many times in Aramaic” (Davis, 1983:9). For example, Davis (1983:9) wrote, “Dupont-Sommer (1944-1945:31) noted its appearance in the peal and haphel stems in a seventh century B.C. ostrakon from Asshur. Both Cowley (1923:315) and Driver (1957:104) listed tubh in their works on fifth century B.C. Aramaic. The verb tubh appears about eight times in biblical Aramaic” (citations added). Holladay (1958:10-11) noted that *tubh* appears “sometimes with noteworthy denotations that parallel OT usage”.

#### 4.2.1.3 The Southwest Semitic language

Holladay (1958:11) wrote, “The cognate verb appears in both North and South Arabic, but seemingly not in Ethiopic. The verb *tawaba* occurs in classical Arabic in a great variety of meanings, some of them paralleling Hebrew usage”. For example, the parallels can be seen by the range of usages contained in the Arabic root: ‘he returned to the pace to which he had come before’ (Northern Arabic); ‘God requited or rewarded him’ (causative, Northern Arabic); ‘I restored to myself’ (reflexive, Northern Arabic); and ‘rewarded’ or ‘pay back’ (causative, Southern Arabic)” (Donnell, 1988:26).

The biggest parallel for how the Arabic root is used in comparison to the Hebrew root is that the term consistently means to return and to restore. Edward William Lane (1955:361) believed the verb in its first form meant “he returned to a place to which he had come before”. As we shall see, this is essentially the same definition Holladay (1958:54) came to describe as the basic meaning of the Hebrew root שׁוּב (*shub*). One last thing to note is that some scholars have “linked שׁוּב (*shub*) to an Arabic root meaning ‘to return to God’ or ‘be converted’ (Davis, 1983:10 and Gesenius, 1854:1039). This is helpful in looking at the word in the context of our Jeremiah passages for this

thesis. In those contexts, the nation is being called by to God through repentance.

#### 4.2.2 The meanings and usages of שׁוּב (shub) in the Old Testament

The Hebrew root שׁוּב (shub) is used 1059 times, making it the twelfth most used verb in the Old Testament (Holladay, 1958:2). שׁוּב (shub) has a wide range of meanings and can be translated: to turn back (to God), return, turn away from, abandon, to bring or lead back, to give back, to repay, to answer, to revoke or cancel, to convert from evil, to restore and to repent. As evident from the semantic range, the verb is primarily associated with motion (Holladay, 1958:2). The usage of שׁוּב (shub) in the Old Testament can be broken down into the following categories: verbal, nonverbal, proper names and synonyms.

##### 4.2.2.1 The verbal usage of שׁוּב (shub)

שׁוּב (shub) appears in five different Hebrew verb forms: qal, hiphil, hophal, polel and polal.

##### 1. The qal verb form

שׁוּב (shub) appears in the qal form 679 times in the Old Testament (Donnell, 1988:27). The qal stem is “the simple or basic verbal stem”, and qal verbs are mostly active in voice, meaning the subject is doing the action (Practico and Van Pelt, 2009). Donnell (1988:28) gave an overview of eight ways שׁוּב (shub) is used in qal form, although this list is not exhaustive. First, שׁוּב (shub) is used to describe “physical motion” (Judges 7:15). Second, it is used as an adverb meaning “again” (Genesis 26:18). Third, it can mean “revert in ownership” (Deuteronomy 28:31). Fourth, it is used in the context of life and death (Job 1:21). Fifth, Isaiah 29:17 used the verb as “change into”. Sixth, Exodus 32:12 used the verb to describe the “emotions, attitudes, vows, oaths, plans, and deeds of a person”. Seventh, the verb is used in 1 Kings 2:33 as “inanimate nouns used as the subject in the expression of a person”. And finally, it is used in the context of psychic defeat (Lamentations 1:8).

As we can see, the verb is used in a variety of ways in qal form, and the subject of שׁוּב (shub) is most often man, but there are instances where God is the subject.<sup>3</sup> For example, Holladay (1958:59-87) presented different meanings for שׁוּב (shub) in qal form, one of those being “physical motion, without further implication” and “motion back to the point of departure”. Holladay (1958:59) noted there are 273 occurrences of this definition in the qal form and that God is found as the subject eight times. Davis (1983:13) further commented, “All eight of these occurrences convey the blessings of God, except Hos. 5:15, which contains a word of judgment.” Hosea 5:15 reads, “Then I will return my lair until they have borne their guilt and seek my face—in their misery they will earnestly seek me”.

This verse is strikingly similar to the statement used in Jeremiah 18:10 when God promised to “reconsider” the blessings he intended for the nation, with an exception being the root נָחַם (nacham) instead of שׁוּב (shub) is used of God in Jeremiah 18 (Davis, 1983:14). In both cases, it appears that “God’s movement away from his people in Israel . . . was contingent upon God’s . . .reconsidering . . . about his former course of action” (Davis, 1983:14). The root שׁוּב (shub) in qal form is also associated with emotions. For example, there are five occurrences where it is used to describe God either “turning back” or “not turning back” his anger.<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps one of the most significant ways שׁוּב (shub) is found in qal form is in the context of the relationship between God and man. In these instances, שׁוּב (shub) can be described primarily in two ways: “‘return’ in the sense of relationship” (Donnell, 1988:27) and “covenantal” in the sense of “expressing a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God, each for each other” (Holladay, 1958:2). The difference between these two “usages” is that the first example can also apply to human-to-human relationships, such as marriage or kinships. The second example applies exclusively to people’s relationship to God and

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Deuteronomy 13:17 reads, “. . . Then the Lord *will turn* from his fierce anger, will show you mercy, and will have compassion on you . . .”

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 32:12; Deuteronomy 13:17; Joshua 7:26; 2 Kings 23:26 and Jonah 3:9

God's relationship to people. Donnell (1988:27-28) noted that there are twelve examples in the Old Testament where שׁוּב (shub) refers to a "return in a relationship", and there are 129 times where שׁוּב (shub) in qal form is used exclusively in a "covenantal context".<sup>5</sup> Holladay (1958:53) went on to define what he considered to be the central meaning of שׁוּב (shub) when it appears in qal form: "The verb (שׁוּב), in the qal, means: *having moved in a particular direction, to move thereupon in the opposite direction, the implication being (unless there is evidence to the contrary) that one will arrive again at the initial point of departure*".

In the covenantal contexts, the idea of "moving in the opposite direction to arrive at the initial place of departure" implied a return on unfaithful Israel's part to Yahweh. In other words, Israel was once faithful, but now they had become unfaithful and moved away from Yahweh. Repentance would have moved the nation in the opposite direction of their unfaithfulness and brought them back to where they once were positioned, that is, in a faithful relationship with Yahweh.

## 2. The hiphil and hophal verb forms

שׁוּב (shub) is used 371 times in hiphil form and five times in hophal form within the Old Testament. Hiphil verbs normally serve as the active causative of qal verbs, and hophal verbs serve as a passive counterpart to hiphil verbs (Hostetter, 2000:95). For example, "to cause to repent" (hiphil) or "to be caused to repent" (hophal). The hiphil of שׁוּב (shub) "may refer to emotions, plans, deeds, and the like, to express the actions of a person, with the particular meaning of 'making someone change' (his mind, plans)" as in Job 9:12, 11:10 and 23:13 (Davis, 1983:17). There are also examples of שׁוּב (shub) used in the context of covenantal relationships in hiphil form, which will be briefly discussed under the "שׁוּב (shub) in covenantal context" heading in this chapter. Donnell (1988:29) summarized eleven usages of שׁוּב (shub) in hiphil form:

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<sup>5</sup> These are primarily found in the writings of the prophets.

(1) physical motion of a person or object (Psalm 89:43); (2) put back into position, place—inanimate objects (Exodus 34:35); (3) restore someone to an office (Isaiah 1:26); (4) give or pay back (Leviticus 25:28); (5) in contexts of life and death (Job 10:9); (6) part of the body, as the object of שׁוּב (Malachi 4:6); (7) “word” as its object (Genesis 37:14); (8) with “anger” as its object (Ezra 10:14); (9) bring back—recall of people (Isaiah 46:8); (10) expression of a person as in emotions, attitudes, plans, commands, and deeds (Amos 2:4); (11) covenantal relationship (2 Chronicles 19:4).

As we can see from the usage in hiphil form, the verb root again is associated with the idea of “returning”, “restoring”, “bringing back” or the “expression of someone”. The usage, here, is similar to its usage in qal form that we listed previously. The verb in the hophal form, on the other hand, can be described in primarily three ways: physical motion, be replaced and be paid back (Donnell, 1988:31). For example, first, in Exodus 10:8, the context of physical motion is used twice in hophal form and the subject can be either men or vessels. Second, in Genesis 42:28, שׁוּב (*shub*) is translated “be replaced” and the subject is an inanimate object. And third, in Numbers 5:8, שׁוּב (*shub*) refers to being paid back, and the subject is man.

### 3. The polel and polal verb forms

שׁוּב (*shub*) occurs eleven times in the polel verb form and only once in the polal verb form within the Old Testament. The polel form is closely related to the piel form and is intensive. The polal is passive intensive and closely related to the pual verb form (Hackett, 2010:206). There are three definitions commonly associated with the polel form of שׁוּב (*shub*): bring back, restore and lead astray. For example, first, in Ezekiel 39:27, the subject of שׁוּב (*shub*) is God, and the context is God bringing back his people from exile. Second, in Psalm 23:3, God restores the soul of man. And third, in Isaiah 47:10, the subject is man, and the context is that man’s own wisdom has lead him astray (Donnell, 1988:33).

As mentioned, the polal form of שׁוּב (shub) is used only once in the Old Testament and is translated to mean “be brought back”. In Ezekiel 38:8, the subject of the verb is land (an inanimate object), and the context is the land being brought back from the sword (Donnell, 1988:33).

#### 4.2.2.2 The nonverbal usages of שׁוּב (shub)

There are examples of nouns and adjectives used in the Old Testament that derive from the root שׁוּב (shub). For example, the nouns are sometimes translated as retirement, withdrawal, act of faithlessness, turning away from God and return or answer<sup>6</sup>. The adjectives have the meaning of “backturning or apostate” (Donnell, 1988:34)<sup>7</sup>.

#### 4.2.2.3 The usages of שׁוּב (shub) as a proper name

There are examples of nine proper names in the Old Testament that derive from the root שׁוּב (shub). They are as follows: Eliashib (1 Chronicles 3:34), Jushab-hesed (1 Chronicles 3:20), Jaashubi-lehem (1 Chronicles 4:22), Jashobeam (1 Chronicles 11:11), Jashub (Numbers 26:6), Meshobab (1 Chronicles 4:34), Shear-jashub (Isaiah 7:3), Shubael (1 Chronicles 24:20) and Shobab (2 Samuel 5:14) (Donnell, 1988:34-35).

#### 4.2.2.4 The synonyms of שׁוּב (shub)

There are other verbs of motion used in the Old Testament as synonyms to the root שׁוּב (shub) (Holladay, 1958:155-156). First, רָפָה (raphah) is used in Deuteronomy 4:31 and can mean “forsake” or “abandoned”, “For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your ancestors, which he confirmed to them by oath”. Second, סוּר (sur) is used in 1 Samuel 16:14 to mean “to turn away” or “depart”

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<sup>6</sup> Examples include: Jeremiah 2:19, 3:6, 8, 11, 12, 22, 5:6, 8:5, 14:7; Isaiah 30:15; Hosea 11:7, 14:5; Proverbs 1:32; 1 Samuel 7:17; 2 Samuel 11:1; 1 Kings 20:22, 26; 1 Chronicles 20:1; 2 Chronicles 36:10; Job 21:34 and 34:36.

<sup>7</sup> Examples include: Isaiah 57:17; Jeremiah 3:14, 22, 31:22, 49:4 and Micah 2:4.

(Gesenius, 1854:716), “Now the Spirit of the LORD had departed from Saul . . .”.

Third, נָטַשׁ (*natash*) is used in 1 Kings 8:57 and can mean “forsake”, “May the LORD our God be with us as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us or forsake us”. Fourth, סָבַב (*sabab*) is used in 1 Kings 18:37 and can mean “turning” (Holladay, 1971:251), “. . . you, LORD, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again”. And finally, מָאַסׁ (*ma’ac*) is used in Jeremiah 7:29 and can mean to “refuse’ or “reject”, “. . . for the LORD has rejected and abandoned this generation under his wrath”.

Donnell (1988:22) observed concerning the synonyms for שׁוּב (*shub*) when they are used in the context of God’s relationship with man, like the ones listed above, that they “indicate the idea of God’s ‘forsaking,’ ‘rejecting,’ and ‘departing’ is not limited to the root שׁוּב. Rather, Donnell (1988:22) explained, it reveals a God who is not a “. . . static God, but one who is active, moving, and very responsive to the conduct of his people”. This leads us into our next discussion of how the verb root שׁוּב (*shub*) is used, that is, in covenantal context between God and his people.

#### **4.2.3 The covenantal usages of שׁוּב (*shub*) in the Old Testament**

Holladay (1958:116-157) has written extensively on what he called a “covenantal usage” of שׁוּב (*shub*) and defined it as expressing “a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God, each for the other”. In other words, as previously mentioned, the covenantal usages of שׁוּב (*shub*) deal mainly with the context of the covenantal relationship between God and man in the Old Testament. Davis (1983:18-19) noted that covenantal שׁוּב (*shub*) branched into two opposite meanings: “repent” and “become apostate”. Davis (1983:19) wrote, “Such a bifurcation is not as strange as it might seem, ‘for it is intrinsic to a verb meaning ‘turn back’ that it is a kind of two-edged sword, cutting either way, depending upon one’s point of view””. In other words, God’s covenant people had two choices when came to the action of covenantal שׁוּב (*shub*).

They could either “turn away” from their sin and “turn back” toward God, or they could “turn away” from God and “turn back” toward their sin and rebellion.

Overall, there are 164 occurrences of שׁוּב (*shub*) in the covenantal context. Most of them occur in the writings of the prophets. For example, over thirty percent, or 48 instances, are found in the book of Jeremiah alone. There should be no surprise that the prophets used שׁוּב (*shub*) as an expression of the covenant between God and Israel, as they often called the nation back into right relationship with God. Holladay (1958:120) noted that the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) in the covenantal contexts was predicated on the assumptions of the covenant, “namely, that it was established in the past on the initiative of God”. In this context, שׁוּב (*shub*) does not represent the initial turning to Yahweh but a “re-establishment of something old” (Holladay, 1958:120). As indicated from the context of covenantal usage, it refers to a turning back from evil to God. Donnell (1988:28) discovered that of the 129 times שׁוּב (*shub*) is used in the context of covenantal relationships in qal form, Israel is the subject of the verb in all but seven instances.<sup>8</sup> In the other seven occurrences, God is the subject (Donnell, 1988:28). Davis (1983:19) noted that Jeremiah 32:40 is the only instance in qal form where God is the subject that his relationship to Israel was not dependent upon what Israel did or how they related to God.<sup>9</sup> In fact, there are “eleven hiphils<sup>10</sup> in this category and none have God as the subject” (Davis, 1983:19). Holladay (1958: 119-120) wrote, “In other words, the covenant led the Israelite to think overwhelmingly more about his relationship to God than about God’s relationship to him”.

This is significant, because it shows that the normal usage of the verb with God as the subject associates God’s response as relating to Israel’s actions. For example, in Deuteronomy 30:1-5, God’s “turning from” judgment and promise to

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<sup>8</sup> Specific examples found in Jeremiah are as follows: Jeremiah 3:1, 7, 10, 12, 14, 22, 4:1, 5:3, 8:4-6, 15:7, 19, 18:8, 11, 23:14, 24:7, 25:5, 31:19, 34:15, 35:15, 36:3, 7 and 44:5.

<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah 32:40 reads, “I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me”.

<sup>10</sup> Examples include: Jeremiah 15:19, 23:22; Ezekiel 24:6, 18:30, 32; Lamentations 5:21; Nehemiah 9:26, 29; 2 Chronicles 19:4 and 24:19.

“restore” is solely dependent upon the obedience of Israel. Deuteronomy 30:1-5 reads:

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the Lord your God disperses you among the nations, and when you and your children return to the Lord your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors.

As the text indicated, God’s actions are directly related to Israel’s actions. The usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) with God as its subject in the covenantal relationship context shows that God’s “turning from” judgment or blessings and the promise to “restore” fortunes is contingent upon the Israelites obeying him. As we have seen and will continue see, this covenantal concept is significant in understanding the use of the word in Jeremiah.

#### 4.2.4 How שׁוּב (*shub*) is translated in the Septuagint (LXX)

The LXX uses several different words to translate the Hebrew root שׁוּב (*shub*). Below are seven of the more popular words used in order of the number of times they appear, starting with the greatest to least (Peterson, 2016:229-235): First, ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrepho*) is used eighty-seven times and can mean “to turn back”, “revert” or “return” (Jeremiah 18:8-10). Second, ἀποστρέφω (*apostrepho*) is used fifty-eight times and can mean “to turn away or back”, remove or restore (Numbers 14:43). Third, ἀναστρέφω (*anastrepho*) which can mean to overturn, return or turn-about (Jeremiah 3:7, 8:4, 33:26 and 46:27).

Fourth, κατοικία (*katoikia*) which can mean a dwelling, habitation or settlement (Jeremiah 3:6, 8 and 12). Fifth, ἀφίστημι (*aphistemi*) which can mean to lead away, draw away or abstain from. Sixth, ἀνακάμπτω (*anakampto*) which can mean to return or turn back (Jeremiah 3:1). Finally, seventh, καταλείπω (*kataleipo*) which can mean to abandoned, desert or leave behind (Isaiah 10:21).

It is evident that the majority of the Greek words chosen to translate שׁוּב (*shub*) are closely related to the Hebrew meaning of motion, whether it is used figuratively or literally.

#### 4.2.5 How שׁוּב (*shub*) is used in the book of Jeremiah

Specific to the book of Jeremiah, the root שׁוּב (*shub*) is used 124 times. Donnell (1988:37) noted that Jeremiah accounts for over ten percent of the total occurrences of שׁוּב (*shub*) in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> שׁוּב (*shub*) is primarily found in two verbal forms: the qal and hiphil. There are seventy-two examples in the qal form and twenty-seven examples in the hiphil form. Other verbal forms include one occurrence of the hophal stem (Jeremiah 27:16) and three examples of the polel form (Jeremiah 8:5, 50:6 and 19). In addition, Jeremiah contains nine examples of a derived noun<sup>12</sup> of שׁוּב (*shub*) and two adjectives<sup>13</sup> that are used a total of four times (Donnell, 1988:37-38).

Holladay (1958:128-157) considered the book of Jeremiah the heart of the studying covenantal usages of שׁוּב (*shub*). He believed the prophet proved to be a master of the verb root in the following ways. Jeremiah's way of using the word in original ways that had not been used in other places, Jeremiah's use of wordplays with שׁוּב (*shub*) and Jeremiah's way of "juxtaposing the two contradictory meanings of the verb". Thus, Holladay (1958:153) concluded, "It is perhaps not too fanciful to state that Jeremiah saw in the two-facedness of this

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<sup>11</sup> For an academic resource that provides discussion on the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) in other Old Testament books, see Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-522.

<sup>12</sup> The nouns are found in: Jeremiah 2:19, 3:16, 8, 11, 12, 22, 5:6, 8:5 and 14:7.

<sup>13</sup> The adjectives are found in: Jeremiah 3:14, 22, 31:22 and 49:4.

verb a fitting picture of the two-facedness of his people”. The usages of שׁוּב (*shub*) that occur in the specific Jeremiah passages for my thesis will be examined in their context later in this chapter.

### 4.3 Word study of נָחַם (*nacham*)

#### 4.3.1 The philological background of נָחַם (*nacham*)

As noted above, philology deals with studying the relationship between languages and words in ancient resources and documents. The Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) has cognate parallels or the same linguistic derivations in the Akkadian, Northwest and Southwest Semitic language groups. The relationship between these three Semitic language groups and נָחַם (*nacham*) are discussed in brief below.

##### 4.3.1.1 *The Akkadian Semitic language*

נָחַם (*nacham*) is not found directly in Akkadian (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340). Donnell (1988:12) wrote, “The Hebrew term נָחַם (*nacham*) may derive from the Akkadian root nh, of which the Hebrew term נוּחַ (*nuah*) is a definite derivative”. H. Van Dyke Parunak (1975:514) noted that both נוּחַ (*nuah*) and the Akkadian *nh* share the same meaning of “rest”, and he suggested that because נָחַם (*nacham*) stems from *nh* and they also possibly share the basic meaning of “rest”. Davis (1983:22) noted that “in some instances nh can be translated in ways that suggest the common translations of Hebrew נָחַם (*nacham*), namely, “be comforted,” “comfort oneself”. Donnell (1988:12) further suggested that נָחַם (*nacham*) as “to comfort” may be a “logical expansion of the Akkadian and Hebrew terms”.

##### 4.3.1.2 *The Northwest Semitic language*

Parunak (1975:14) noted that נָחַם (*nacham*) first appears “with clear meaning in Ugaritic”, which is closely related to biblical Hebrew (Finegan, 1946:147). This term appears in the Ugaritic texts of Ras Shamra (Gordon, 1955:443). Davis

(1983:23) wrote, “The Ugaritic had the same tri-literal root, נָחַם (*nacham*), meaning “to console”. This is one of the meanings assigned to Hebrew נָחַם (*nacham*) and note should be made at this juncture of the emotional content of the Hebrew root”. Donnell (1988:13) added that “the term nhm occurs several times in Aramaic texts. In Imperial Aramaic, the sense of the word is difficult to determine due to a damaged text. The pael and ithpael are rendered ‘comfort, console, or solace’ in the Western Aramaic. The term is absent from the Aramaic of the Old Testament”.

#### 4.3.1.3 *The Southwest Semitic language*

There has been debate about whether נָחַם (*nacham*) can be traced to the Arabic root *nahama*, which means to “breathe hard or snort” like the snorting of a horse (Michell, 1933:428) or “to sigh deeply” as in a “groan” (Harper 1905:163). There are some scholars who affirmed these two words are indeed related (Gesenius, 1854:664; Harper, 1905:163; Snaith, 1952:225), but this claim has not been without controversy. For example, Parunak (1975:515) wrote that “the sense ‘sigh, snort’ enters the Semitic vocabulary only in the post-biblical period”. Barr (1961:116-117) argued that a connection in Arabic does nothing to help an interpreter determine the meaning of the Hebrew root. For example, Norman H. Snaith (1952:225-226) tried to show how the relationship between נָחַם (*nacham*) and the Arabic *nahama* was a basis for the Hebrew root to come to mean “repentance”. Barr (1961:116-117) responded by arguing the etymology of the word cannot decisively settle the matter and stated, “It is patently absurd to suppose that a use in Arabic for the breathing of a horse is decisive for discovering the sense in a religious Hebrew text.

Barr (1961:116-117) did not indicate that נָחַם (*nacham*) cannot ever mean “repent”, “change of mind” or be connected with an emotional component. Instead, he argued that the meaning of the Hebrew verb root cannot ultimately be found in a possible Arabic counterpart. Davis (1983:24-25) noted that even if it could be undoubtedly proven there was an Arabic source for the Hebrew root נָחַם (*nacham*), there would still be a question of how various Hebrew writers

would have used the term. An example of this is noted by Henry Robinson (1979:59) in that the two meanings given by the Arabic word leads to two inconsistent meanings in Hebrew, “be grieved” and “be comforted”. Nevertheless, Davis (1983:24-25) rightly concluded that “a safe statement is that it seems there was a relationship to the Arabic nahama, so that Hebrew נָחַם indicates deep breathing of distress or relief”.

#### 4.3.2 The usages and meanings of נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament

The Hebrew verb נָחַם (*nacham*) is used 108 times in the Old Testament. נָחַם (*nacham*) occurs in four verbal forms: Piel, Pual, Niphal and Hithpael. Of the 108 occurrences in the Old Testament, fifty-five appear in the Niphal and Hithpael stems, while fifty-three appear in the Piel and Pual stems (Donnell, 1988:14, 16). In the Piel and Pual forms, the verb most often refers to “comfort”, “console” or “compassion” and appears to have an emotional connection (Holladay, 1976:234). When God is the subject of the verb in these forms, he is said to bring comfort to the people from judgment or oppression from enemies by removing or changing the circumstances. The Niphal and Hithpael verb forms of נָחַם (*nacham*) pose a bit more of a lexical problem, because the meaning seems to vary depending on the context as will be discussed. Examining the usages of the Hebrew root may be broken down into three categories: verbal, nonverbal and proper names.

##### 4.3.2.1 The verbal usage of נָחַם (*nacham*)

נָחַם (*nacham*) is found in four verbal forms as mentioned above. They are easily grouped into two categories because of their similarities.

##### 1. The piel and pual verb forms

The piel verbs are active in voice and oftentimes serve to intensify the simple action of the qal stem (Ellis, 2006:114). The pual verbs are usually the passive forms of the piel stems, so instead of the subject doing the action, the action is being done to the subject (Ellis, 2006:115). In the Old Testament, there are fifty-

three examples of נָחַם (*nacham*) in the piel and pual stems.<sup>14</sup> Concerning these usages, Parunak (1975:516) wrote, “The contexts regularly point to some calamity, such as death (Genesis 37:35), danger (Psalm 23:4), misfortune (Job 2:11), or divine anger (Isaiah 12:1) which is allayed by the interest of some comforter”. The Old Testament audience would have viewed hardships and misfortune as God’s punishment for sin; therefore, God is oftentimes used as the subject of the נָחַם (*nacham*) in these verb forms to “describe the comfort which he gives by forgiving sin” (Parunak, 1975:516). Along the same lines, when sins are forgiven, then the adversity or punishment is also relieved; therefore, God is said to have brought comfort by relieving the people from their troubles.

Donnell (1988:15-16) presented three examples of the piel and pual form from the law, prophets and writings divisions of the Old Testament that distinguishes their usage from the niph'al and hitp'hal. First, Genesis 5:29 reads, “He named him *Noah* and said, ‘He will *comfort* us in the labor and painful toil of our hands caused by the ground the LORD has cursed’”. Noah is a derivative of נָחַם that means “to rest”, showing a further connection to the Akkadian root *nh*, discussed previously (1988:15). Second, 2 Samuel 10:2 reads, “David thought, ‘I will show kindness to Hanun son of Nahash, just as his father showed kindness to me.’ So David sent a delegation to *express his sympathy* to Hanun concerning his father”. Third, Job 2:11 reads, “When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite and Zophar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and *comfort* him”.

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<sup>14</sup> Examples include: Genesis 5:29, 37:35, 50:21; Ruth 2:13; 2 Samuel 10:2-3, 12:24; 1 Chronicles 7:22, 19:2-3; Job 2:11, 7:13, 16:2, 21:34, 29:25, 42:11; Psalm 23:4, 69:20, 71:21, 86:17, 119:76, 82; Ecclesiastes 4:1; Isaiah 12:1, 22:4, 40:1, 49:13, 51:3, 12, 19, 52:9, 54:11, 61:2, 66:13; Jeremiah 16:7, 31:13; Lamentations 1:2, 9, 16-17, 21, 2:13; Ezekiel 14:23, 16:54, Nahum 3:7; Zechariah 1:17, 10:2. Some of these passages contain נָחַם (*nacham*) more than once within a verse.

As can be seen, the usage of the root נָחַם (*nacham*) in these three examples implies the sense of a person who is seeking to empathize with another person in their suffering (Donnell, 1988:15-16). The subject of the root in this context can either be God or man. For example, Isaiah 54:11 and 66:13 portray God as being one who causes calamity and brings divine comfort.

Another parallel word for the piel and pual forms of נָחַם (*nacham*) is the Hebrew verb root נָוַד (*nud*), which can mean to move to and fro, wander or show grief. Sometimes the verb can refer to “shaking of the head”. Parunak (1975:517) gave a broader view of the word’s meaning, “Describing first a shaking or nodding of the head, the word refers by extension to underlying emotion. But what is that emotion? Sometimes *nud* suggests the idea ‘comfort, show sympathy’ (Jeremiah 15:5)”.

The significance of this parallel is it shows once more the emotional connection of the root נָחַם (*nacham*), which implies the subject of the verb (sometimes God) feels emotional pain. Parunak (1975:517) concluded that compassion is at the heart of the biblical concept of comfort in that the person who is comforting shares the pain of the one who is being comforted. In other words, the basic meaning of “comfort” and “consoling” for נָחַם (*nacham*) begs the question of how can someone genuinely comfort, show compassion to or console another person or group of people if they first do not take on and bear at least to some degree the grief or the burden the mourner is experiencing. Dismissing the emotional component of נָחַם (*nacham*) perhaps does not allow scholars to understand the full weight of the word. For example, is it possible to hypothetically comfort or show compassion to someone without literally being affected by the circumstances surrounding the situation? As Davis (1983:26) wrote, “Once again the emotional content of the root נָחַם can be seen, and this emotional pain will be significant when discussing passages pertaining to the repentance of God”.

## 2. The niph'al and hithpael verb forms

The Old Testament contains fifty-five examples of נָחַם (*nacham*) in the niphāl and hithpael verb forms.<sup>15</sup> The Niphāl stem is used to express simple action with either a passive or reflexive voice (Practico and Van Pelt, 2009). Oftentimes, “whatever a verb means in the Qal stem, it becomes passive or reflective in the Niphāl stem” (Practico and Van Pelt, 2009). The hithpael stem is used to express an intensive action with a reflexive voice; therefore, it is considered intensive reflexive meaning in the simplest form that the subject does the action to himself (Practico and Van Pelt, 2009). The hithpael form of נָחַם (*nacham*) “expresses the affective and effective relationship between two parties: between Yahweh and the people or a specific person, or between individuals; the stronger party supports the weaker, takes an interest in their fate, takes them in hand, and helps rectify their problems” (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:350).

The complexity of the lexical problems when it comes to the niphāl and hithpael of נָחַם (*nacham*) can be seen by the unrelated translations given in the following lexicon. In the niphāl, definitions offered are “be sorry,” “moved to pity,” “have compassion,” “rue,” “suffer grief,” “repent,” “comfort oneself,” “be comforted” and “ease oneself”. In the hithpael, definitions offered are “be sorry,” “have compassion”, “rue,” “repent of”, “comfort oneself,” “be comforted and “ease oneself” (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1907:637). We should see that the definitions are practically the same for both the niphāl and the hithpael.

The lexical problems stem from the variety of ways the lexicons define the word. Along the same lines, “modern versions of the Bible are varied in their treatment of the Hebrew term נָחַם in the niphāl or hitpael” (Donnell, 1988:18). For example, first, the King James Version translates it as “repent” in forty-one of the fifty-five occurrences and all but six of the forty-one occurrences have

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<sup>15</sup>Genesis 6:6-7, 24:67, 27:42 (hp), 37:35 (hp), 38:12; Exodus 13:17, 32:12, 14; Numbers 23:19 (hp); Deuteronomy 32:36 (hp); Judges 2:18, 21:6, 15; 1 Samuel 15:11, 29, 35; 2 Samuel 13:39, 24:16; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Job 42:6; Psalm 77:2, 90:13, 106:45, 110:4, 119:52, 135:14; Isaiah 1:24, 57:6; Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6, 15:6, 18:8, 10, 20:16; 26:3, 13, 19, 31:15, 19, 42:10; Ezekiel 5:13, 14:22, 24:14, 31:16, 32:31; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9-10, 4:2; Zechariah 8:14.

God as the subject<sup>16</sup>. Second, when God is the subject, the American Standard Version translates it as “repent”. Third, the Revised Standard Version translates it as “repent” and “relent” but sometimes uses “to be sorry”. Fourth, the New International Version translates it as “grieved”, “relent” and “reconsider”. As difficult and diverse as the meaning נָחַם (*nacham*) may be in the niphal and hithpael, Parunak (1975:519-525) grouped the basic meanings of נָחַם (*nacham*) into six categories:

(1) Suffer emotional pain

Genesis 6:6 reads, “The LORD regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled”. Parunak (1975:519) gave three reasons as to why he believed this meaning was correct: parallelism, context and idiom. First, “In several passages, *nhm* with this meaning is parallel with an expression for emotional pain. Gn 6,6 has *yt’sb* “be grieved”. Second, “This meaning is also indicated when the cause for the action of *nhm* is stated as a grief-stimulating situation, as in Ex 13,17 and Jgs 21,6.15”. Third, Genesis 6:6-7, Judges 21:15 and 1 Samuel 15:11, 35 are linked together with “a distinctive *ki* clause”.

(2) Be comforted, comfort oneself

Genesis 37:35 reads, “All his sons and daughters came to comfort him but he refused to be comforted. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I will continue to mourn until I join my son in the grave.’ So his father wept for him”. Parunak (1975:520) offered three reasons as the correctness of this translation. First, Genesis 37:35 and Ezekiel 14:22 “have clear parallels with *nhm* in the *Piel*, supporting this meaning”. Second, there are many passages where the subject of the verb is a bereaved mourner, and “in these contexts, the verb could be replaced with *nhm Pual* without any discernable change in meaning”. Third, there is an idiom which “denotes the object of sorrow from which one is comforted” and “shows the essential unity of this meaning”.

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<sup>16</sup> Exodus 13:17; Judges 21:6, 15; Job 42:6; Jeremiah 8:6, 31:19

(3) Execute wrath

Isaiah 1:24 reads, “Therefore the Lord, the LORD Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel, declares: ‘Ah! I will vent my wrath on my foes and avenge myself on my enemies’”. Parunak (1975:521) confirms the meaning of “execute wrath” or “vent my wrath” in three ways. First, “*Nhm* in Is, 1, 24 is in strong parallelism with *nqm*, ‘avenge, take vengeance’”. Second, “in Ez 5, 13 *nhm* is parallel with the idiom *nuah* (*Hiphil*) with *hamati*, ‘cause my anger to rest’ . . . elsewhere this idiom indicates relief of emotional tension (specifically, wrath) through its execution. Third, the context of Genesis 27:42 reveals that “Esau’s attitude of *nhm* involves killing Jacob”.

(4) Retract punishment

Jeremiah 18:7-8 reads, “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned”. Parunak (1975:524-526) confirms the meaning in the following ways. First, “*Nhm* occurs in parallel with other expressions indicating forgiveness”, and “frequently it is explained as a turning on God’s part”. Second, “there is a contextual reference to punishment, and usually to its withdrawal on condition of a change in the sinner”. Third, נָחַם (*nacham*) with this meaning parallels the usage of the verb in Joel 2:13 and Jonah 4:2 that reveals God is a “gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”.

(5) Retract blessing

Jeremiah 18:9-10 reads, “And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it”. Parunak (1975:523) says this meaning is confirmed in two ways. First, “a comparison of this passage with the preceding two verses shows that it refers to the retraction of a promised blessing if the beneficiary should rebel, as Jer 18, 7.8 assures the

retraction of a threatened punishment if the sinner should repent” (Parunak, 1975:523). Second, “Ps 110,4 emphasizes an oath of blessing with the parallel promise that God will not exercise *nhm*. Nm 23, 19 affirms that God will neither lie (by cursing the people whom Balaam has blessed), nor exercise *nhm*” (Parunak, 1975:523).

(6) Retract a life of sin

Jeremiah 8:5-6 reads, “Why then have these people turned away? Why does Jerusalem always turn away? They cling to deceit; they refuse to return. I have listened attentively, but they do not say what is right. None of them repent of their wickedness, saying, ‘What have I done?’ Each pursues their own course like a horse charging into battle”. Parunak (1975:525) confirms this meaning in two ways. First, “the surrounding verses depict well the attitude of turning from rebellious intentions to obedience” (Parunak, 1975:525). Second, “this is the only use of *nhm* ‘al-(ha)raa with a human, rather than divine, subject for the action described as *raa*. Thus the concept of ‘retract punishment’ is not suitable. But the notion of retracting a previously declared action (in this case, sin) which obtains elsewhere with the idiom, fits well with the context” (Parunak, 1975:525).

Parunak (1975:532) ended his study of נָחַם (*nacham*) by concluding the basic meaning of the root, “attested both etymologically and in every form of the Hebrew, is ‘comfort, console’”. Nominal derivatives of נָחַם (*nacham*) make the word mean “compassion” and denotes “the emotional pain or sorrow felt by a comforter through sympathy with a mourner” (Parunak, 1975:532). Parunak (1975:532) added that “the *Niphal* and *Hithpael* stems develop the “comfort/“compassion” dualism much more fully”. For example, the word can mean “suffer emotional pain” and be extended to “describe the release of emotional tension involved in performing a declared action (executing wrath), or retracting a declared action (such as sin, punishment, or blessing)” (1975:532).

Specifically, in the cases where God is the subject of נָחַם (*nacham*), the piel and pual form deals mainly with God showing compassion and bringing comfort to people. In the niph'al and hithpael form, there are examples of: God grieving decisions that people have made, God regretting decisions he has made based on the disobedience of people, God changing his mind in response to the obedience or disobedience of people.

#### 4.3.2.2 Nonverbal usages of נָחַם (*nacham*)

There are times when the root נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in the Old Testament as four nonverbal derivatives (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1907:637). First, the derivative נְחָמָה (*nachamat*) means “comfort” and “describes the reviving effect of the divine word in times of personal trouble (Ps. 119:50 and Job 6:10)” (Donnell, 1988:18). Second, the word תְּנַחֲמִים (*tanchumim*) means “consolation” and is “used to specify the cup of mourning at the time of death (Jer. 16:7)” (Donnell, 1988:18-19). Third, the derivative נִחְמוּמִים (*nichumim*) means “compassion” and “comfort”, and “words of ‘comfort’ are the Lord’s response to his angel (Zech. 1:13 and Isa. 57:18)” (Butterworth, 1997:82 and Donnell, 1988:19). Furthermore, the “compassion” of God “is aroused in Ephraim’s favor; he will not give him up (Hos. 11:8)” (Donnell, 1988:19). Fourth, the word נֹחַם (*nocham*) is used once in Hosea 13:14 and can also be translated “repentance”. Donnell (1988:19) wrote, “If salvation is promised, the translation may be ‘self comfort’. The continuation of threat would require the rendering ‘compassion’”.

#### 4.3.2.3 Usages of נָחַם (*nacham*) as a proper name

Aside from verbal and nonverbal usages, there are seven proper names that derive from the Hebrew root נָחַם (*nacham*) found in the Old Testament. They are as follows: (1) נָחָם (*Nacham*) which means “comfort” (1 Chronicles 4:19), (2) נַחֲוּם (*Nachum*) known as Nahum (Nahum 1:1), (3) נְחֻמְיָה (*Nechemya*) known as Nehemiah, which means “Yah comforts”, (4) נַחֲמָנִי (*Nachamani*) which means “compassion” (Nehemiah 7:7), (5) מְנַחֵם (*Menachem*) which means “comforter” (2 Kings 15:14), (6) נְחֻם (*nechum*) which means comfort (Nehemiah 7:7) and

(7) תַּנְחֻמֶת (*Tanchumeth*) which means “consolation” (Jeremiah 40:8) (Donnell, 1988:19-20).

#### 4.3.3 How נָחַם (*nacham*) is translated in the Septuagint (LXX)

Daniel Peterson (2016:227-229) listed thirteen different Greek words the LXX uses to translate the Hebrew root נָחַם (*nacham*). The first word is μετανοέω (*metanoëo*) which can mean “to think differently or afterwards, reconsider or repent<sup>17</sup>. The second word is μεταμέλομαι (*metamelomia*) which can mean to change one’s mind, regret or a change of concern after a change of emotion<sup>18</sup>. The third word is παρακαλέω (*parakaleo*) which can mean to comfort, summon or console<sup>19</sup>. The fourth word is παύω (*pauo*) which can mean to cause to cease, hinder or restrain<sup>20</sup>. The fifth word is ἀναπαύω (*anapauo*) which can mean to give rest or take my ease (Jeremiah 42:10). The sixth word is ἀνίημι (*aniemi*) which can mean to release, let go or desist from (Jeremiah 15:6).

The seventh word is ἀπειλέω (*apeileo*) which can mean to threaten or forbid by threatening (Numbers 23:19). The eighth word is ἐνθυμέομαι (*enthumeomai*) which can mean to meditate upon, reflect upon or to ponder (Genesis 6:6). The ninth word is ἡγέομαι (*hegeomia*) which can mean to lead, command or suppose or consider (Job 42:6). The tenth word is ἰλάσκομαι (*hilaskomai*) which can mean to have mercy on, show favour or forgive (Exodus 32:14). The eleventh word is ἴλεως (*hileos*) which can mean forgiving or merciful (Exodus 32:12). The twelfth word is μεταλλάσσω (*metallasso*) which can mean to change, alter or transform (Hosea 11:18). Finally, the thirteenth word is παράκλησις (*paraklesis*) which can mean comfort, consolation or exhortation (Hosea 13:14) (Peterson, 2016:227-229).

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<sup>17</sup> 1 Samuel 15:29; Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6, 18:8, 10, 31:19; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jonah 3:9, 4:2; Zechariah 8:14.

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 6:7; Exodus 13:17; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35; 1 Chronicles 21:15; Psalms 106:45, 110:4; Jeremiah 20:16

<sup>19</sup> Deuteronomy 32:36; Judges 2:18, 21:6; 2 Samuel 14:16; Psalms 90:13, 135:14; Ezekiel 24:14

<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah 26:3, 13 and 19

As shown, the LXX translators were varied in their usages and descriptions of the Hebrew root נָחַם (*nacham*). There are scholars like Charles Theodore Fritsch (1942:17) who contended that the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was anti-anthropomorphic in nature. The significance is that if the Greek translators were indeed anti-anthropomorphic, then they would have “softened” their translations of נָחַם (*nacham*), especially in situations like Jeremiah 18:7-10 where God is the subject. The argument goes that the LXX has softened the language when it comes to depicting God in human terms. I address in depth the issue of anthropomorphisms in chapter seven, but for now it is worth mentioning that there are some who believe the LXX downplays certain meanings of נָחַם (*nacham*) as opposed to the Hebrew text and presents “weaker” translations of נָחַם (*nacham*) in those instances (Argyle, 1963:367).

#### 4.3.4 How נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in the Book of Jeremiah

נָחַם (*nacham*) is found fourteen times in the book of Jeremiah. There are only two verb forms of נָחַם (*nacham*) found in Jeremiah, the piel and niphil. The piel stem is used twice located in Jeremiah 16:7 and 31:13. Donnell (1988:22-23) noted that the piel form is rendered παρακαλέω (*parakaleo*) in the LXX meaning “comfort or console”, and the LXX “omits נָחַם in its translation of Jer. 31:13”. The niphil stem is used twelve times and is translated “repent” in eleven of those occurrences<sup>21</sup> (Donnell, 1988:22). The LXX uses four Greek words to translate the niphil usages in Jeremiah: μετανοέω (*metanoeo*) found in Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6, 18:8, 10 and 31:19, μεταμέλομαι (*metamelomia*) found in Jeremiah 20:16, παύω (*pauo*) found in (Jeremiah 26:3, 13, 19 and 42:10 and ἀνίημι (*aniemi*) found in Jeremiah 15:6. Donnell (1988:23) noted that “the root נָחַם in Jer. 31:15 is omitted in the Septuagint”. Seven of the passages that contain the niphil form of נָחַם (*nacham*) will be examined in more detail later in this chapter (Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6, 18:8, 10 and 26:3, 13, 19).

#### 4.4 Chapter conclusion

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 4:28, 8:6, 15:6, 18:8, 10, 31:19, 20:16, 26:3, 13, 19 and 42:10. Donnell (1988, 22) also noted that in Jeremiah 31:15, it is translated “comforted”.

## Chapter 4: Word Studies of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*)

This chapter helped partly answer the third key question, “What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience”? This chapter was necessary in determining how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of the Jeremiah texts, because it explored in detail the Hebrew verb roots שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). The word studies began by examining the philological background of the Hebrew verb roots. Next, their meanings and usages in the Old Testament were explored. Then, we saw the different ways they are translated in the Septuagint (LXX). Finally, how the book of Jeremiah uses the verbs was discussed.

We saw that שׁוּב (*shub*) is used 1059 times in the Old Testament and has a wide range of meanings: to turn back (to God), return, turn away from, abandon, to bring or lead back, to give back, to repay, to answer, to revoke or cancel, to convert from evil, to restore and to repent. We saw that the verb root is primarily associated with motion. In the Old Testament שׁוּב (*shub*) appears in five Hebrew verb forms: qal, hiphil, hophal, polel and polal. We saw that one of the most significant ways שׁוּב (*shub*) is found in qal form is in the context of the relationship between God and man, where it can be described primarily in two ways: “return’ in the sense of relationship” (Donnell, 1988:27) and “covenantal” in the sense of “expressing a change of loyalty on the part of Israel or God, each for each other” (Holladay, 1958:2).

As I pointed out, the first example can also relate to human-to-human relationships whereas the second example can only relate to the covenantal relationship between God and people. In the covenantal context of man’s repentance, שׁוּב (*shub*) is the idea of moving in the opposite direction to return at the initial place of departure. Repentance would have moved the nation in the opposite direction of their unfaithfulness and brought them back to where they once were positioned, that is, in a faithful relationship with Yahweh. We also saw that the book of Jeremiah is the heart of studying the covenantal usages of שׁוּב (*shub*).

## Chapter 4: Word Studies of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*)

We saw that נָחַם (*nacham*) is used 108 times in the Old Testament in four verbal forms: Piel, Pual, Niphal and Hithpael. We also saw that Parunak (1975) was the leading scholar of נָחַם (*nacham*). The verb root often refers to “comfort”, “console” or “compassion” depending on the verbal stem. Six basic categories of meanings were offered: suffer emotional pain, be comforted, execute wrath, retract punishment, retract blessing and retract a life of sin. Like שׁוּב (*shub*), there is an emotional component with this root, such as, “suffering emotional pain”. I pointed out that the basic meaning of “comfort” and “consoling” for נָחַם (*nacham*) begs the question of how can someone genuinely comfort, show compassion to or console another person or group of people if they first do not take on and bear at least to some degree the grief or the burden the mourner is experiencing.

The basic definitions of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) do not necessarily translate into the term “repentance”. However, under certain contexts, both verb roots can “exhibit a context of repentance” (Donnell, 1988:39). For example, in the book of Jeremiah, נָחַם (*nacham*) is most often associated with the concept of repentance or change. In Jeremiah, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used fourteen times. Eleven times in the niphal form it is translated as having to do with repentance, either by man or God. In the Old Testament, in the cases where God is the subject of נָחַם (*nacham*), the piel and pual form deals mainly with God showing compassion and bringing comfort to people. In the niphal and hithpael form, there are examples of: God grieving decisions that people have made, God regretting decisions he has made based on the disobedience of people, God changing his mind in response to the obedience or disobedience of people.

Having taken an in-depth look at both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), we are ready to turn our attention to the next chapter which finishes answering the third key question, “What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience”? The next chapter does this by including an exegesis of our Jeremiah passages and exploring how our two Hebrew verb roots contribute to their understanding and meaning.

## Chapter 5

### EXEGESIS OF THE KEY TEXTS

#### 5.1 Chapter introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to finish answering the third key question, “What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience”? The purpose, then, is to determine how the original audience would have understood the meanings and messages of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. Along with this purpose is determining how the original audience would have understood Jeremiah’s use of and the significance of the Hebrew root verbs שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in those respective passages. In doing so, we will discover how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to the meaning and message of the specific Jeremiah passages for my thesis.

Before we begin, it is necessary to remember my presuppositions given in the conclusion of chapter three from which I will be examining the Jeremiah texts. Jeremiah was a real prophet who was alive during the timeframe of at least 627 BC to 586 BC. His ministry occurred during the last forty years of Judah before Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 BC. The messages contained in the four Jeremiah texts that we will be examining in this chapter were primarily for Judah and the citizens of Jerusalem amid a chaotic political backdrop in the ancient

Near East. The prophet Jeremiah was part of a minority group that advocated Yahweh-alone worship amid a religiously corrupt culture. The prophet was familiar with Deuteronomy, and the book of Jeremiah should be viewed through the lens of the Deuteronomic-covenant context. Having remembered my presuppositions concerning overall contextual matters, we shall now examine the four Jeremiah passages to determine how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding their meaning.

## 5.2 Exegesis of Jeremiah 18:1-10

Jeremiah 18:1-10:

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: <sup>2</sup>“Go down to the potter’s house, and there I will give you my message.” <sup>3</sup> So I went down to the potter’s house, and I saw him working at the wheel. <sup>4</sup> But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. <sup>5</sup> Then the word of the Lord came to me. <sup>6</sup> He said, “Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?” declares the Lord. “Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel. <sup>7</sup> If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, <sup>8</sup> and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. <sup>9</sup> And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, <sup>10</sup> and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

*שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) are used in Jeremiah 18:7-10, but in order to understand the full scope of these verses, we must also include 18:1-6. My hypothesis is that the usage of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) is significant in understanding the meaning and message the author(s) was trying to communicate to his audience in this passage. Thus, after exegetically

examining Jeremiah 18:1-10 in its context, we will find how much the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) influences the understanding of the text.

### 5.2.1 The Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX)

The Masoretic Text uses the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*), while the Septuagint uses the Greek word ἐπιστρέφω (*epistrepho*) in Jeremiah 18:7-10 (Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-521 and Bertram, 1971:723-725). Both words can mean “to turn back” and in the sense of a covenantal relationship, they can mean “repent” (Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-521 and Bertram, 1971:723-725). שׁוּב (*shub*) in this passage is found in qal form. The Masoretic Text uses the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*), while the Septuagint uses the Greek word μετανοέω (*metanoëo*) in Jeremiah 18:7-10 (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Behm and Würthwein, 1967:975-977). Both words can mean “to think differently” or “reconsider” previous thoughts or planned actions (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Behm and Würthwein, 1967:975-977). There are no major discrepancies between the Masoretic Text or the Septuagint concerning this passage. In fact, both of them affirm the concept of repentance portrayed by the Hebrew roots שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) without any textual problems.

### 5.2.2 Literary and historical-cultural matters

Jeremiah 18:1-10 is considered part of a Deuteronomistic narrative, and not every scholar believes that the actual prophet Jeremiah was the original author of all the words contained in this passage. For example, some scholars (e.g. Thompson, 1980 and Stulman, 2005) believe 18:1-6 are the words of the actual prophet, while the words of 18:7-10 were probably added later by the Deuteronomist. In this view, 18:1-6 happened prior to the exile in 597 BC (Thompson, 1980:432), while 18:7-10 was an addition during the exilic period between 561-520 BC (Stulman, 2005:182). Also in this view, the Deuteronomist “appropriated the earlier material and adapted it to the spiritual climate of his

day” (Donnell, 1988:89), and the material reflects their experiences and theology. Concerning adding vv. 7-10 during the exile, Donnell (1988:93) wrote:

The concept of repentance is to be understood as the deuteronomist’s attempt to explain the exile after the fact. The theological crisis experienced by the nation as a result of the exile (561-520 B.C.) was softened somewhat by the development of explanations concerning God’s behaviour, such as the dualistic nature of divine repentance. The flexibility of God’s action as described by the phrase “repent of the good” (or evil) is a development of the concept of repentance which was required by historical circumstances.

Donnell (1988:96) also believed the exilic period best represents what is happening in the text mainly because the “flexibility of the concept of repentance assigned to God in the deuteronomic narratives would not have been conceivable to the theological mindset of the nation prior to the exile”. Where I disagree with Donnell (1988:93) is that while the addition of 18:7-10 during the exilic period may have “softened” the nation’s experience of the exile or at the least given them a way to deal with being in exile, I do not believe this was the main motivation for the latter addition. Even if the nation could not have conceived of divine repentance prior to the exile, this does not mean that the truths found in 18:7-10 were not true and thereby did not apply to the nation prior to the exile. Rather, it means that the people of Judah were probably not in a position spiritually to understand that specific aspect of God’s nature and character. Once the nation was under judgment in exile, it was easier for them to look back to the time prior to experiencing the judgment from God and clearly see the errors of their ways. If they only would have repented, then God would have relented from the coming judgment. Because they were in exile, they were now perhaps able to understand more about God. The fact that the form of 18:1-6 has been consistently described and known as a parable (Wenthe, 2014:145) gives credence to this thought.

For example, we know from the New Testament (Matthew 13:10-17) that not everyone will understand the truths behind parables. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that God progressively revealed more of himself throughout Old Testament history leading to the full revelation of himself in Christ Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-3) (Boyd, *Crucifixion*, 2017a:441). It is perfectly conceivable that a nation did not understand a part of God's nature and character until years later into exile looking back on their history; therefore, I conclude that regardless of a scholar's view on this issue, it does not affect Jeremiah 18:1-10. In light of this, the final compilation of this text is the text we shall explore.

### 5.2.3 Jeremiah 18:1-4

Jeremiah 18:1-4 began with Yahweh telling Jeremiah to visit the potter's workshop. This command represented another symbolic act, like that of Jeremiah 5:1-6 and 16:1-4, that Yahweh planned to use to illustrate Jeremiah's prophetic messages (Longman, 2008). The structure of this chapter is such that 18:1-4 is a narration of the illustration, while 18:5-10 is the explanation and interpretation of the action in vv. 1-4. Furthermore, 18:11-12 applied the general principle of vv. 1-10 specifically to Judah and showed that Judah responded negatively to God's call for repentance (Longman, 2008). In 18:13-17, there is a poetic oracle "registering surprise at the people's unwillingness to change" and a "statement of their coming destruction" (Longman, 2008). In v. 18, the people plotted against Jeremiah because of their hatred of his prophetic messages, and finally, in 18:19-23, Jeremiah lamented the plots against him and called on God to punish his enemies (Longman, 2008).

Jeremiah 18:1-2 reads, "This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message". The Hebrew word for "message" is דְבַר (dabar) and reiterates that the following illustration and message is from Yahweh and not Jeremiah's own concoction (Hays, 2016:125). Jeremiah was obedient and went down to the potter's house. In ancient cultures, making pottery was an important occupation (See King, 1993:164-178). Jeremiah had probably watched a potter at work prior to this

event recorded here, but the difference for this visit was that he was going to learn something about God (Huey, 1993:180). Upon his arrival, he saw the potter “working at the wheel” (18:3). The “wheel” was “two discs revolving one above the other” (Brown, Driver and Briggs, 1907:7). Huey (1993:180) described the process of how the potter’s wheel operated:

The lower stone was turned with the feet. It was attached by an axle to the upper wheel. As the lower wheel was turned, the upper wheel, on which the lump of clay was placed, rotated. As the wheel turned, the potter skillfully shaped the clay into a vessel by the pressure of his fingers against the pliable material. If the clay did not achieve the desired shape, he did not throw it away. Instead, he patiently reworked it until it became the vessel he wanted it to be. If it became misshapen as he worked it, it was not because of his lack of skill. The clay may have been of an inferior quality, may have contained defects, or perhaps was not sufficiently moist and pliable.

Huey’s (1993:180) point about the potter patiently reworking his clay until he received the desired result is important for understanding the illustration of Jeremiah 18:4. We should notice that it was not the poor skill level of the potter that was responsible for the “misshapen” clay. The reserve was true: the potter was skilled enough to take the “misshapen” clay and turn it into something desirable. Jeremiah 18:4 reads, “But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him”. “Marred” is the Hebrew verb *שָׁחַת* (*shachath*) and its basic meanings are “to ruin, destroy, annihilate; to behave corruptly, cause trouble” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:366-367). In the context of 18:4, *שָׁחַת* (*shachath*) means “to have become ruined or corrupted”. The clay had not turned out the way the potter was hoping or had originally intended. The word “formed” is a variation of the Hebrew verb root *שׁוּב* (*shub*) (Hays, 2016:125). In this context, the potter had to change directions (or turn back) and rework his clay to get his desired product. In other words, the potter revised his plan.

#### 5.2.4 Jeremiah 18:5-6

Jeremiah 18:5-6 reads, “Then the word of the LORD came to me. He said, ‘Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?’ declares the LORD. ‘Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel’”. In these verses the symbolism of the illustration becomes clear. In this specific context, the potter represented God, while the clay represented Judah. Timothy M Willis (2002:164) explained that God addressed Judah as “house of Israel” rather than “people of Judah”, because God was appealing to their sense of obligation as a covenant people. A common misconception among Judah was that this covenant relationship guaranteed their divine protection (Jeremiah 7:1-15). The prophet, on the other hand, was proclaiming that the covenant relationship demanded obedience and faithfulness on Judah’s part (Willis, 2002:164). The nation’s choices mattered, and if they wanted to experience the blessings of the covenant, they had to obey.

In this section (vv. 5-6) God pointed Judah back to the illustration of the potter working with the clay. The rhetorical question, “Can I not do with you . . .”, expects an affirmative answer, but “the fact he asks it suggests that there was some doubt—probably based on their sinful actions—as to whether they actually accorded him this ‘right’” (Willis, 2002:164). God reminded the nation that he has the right to do with them as the potter did with the clay. The question is, “What did the potter do with the clay”? Many commentators believe the main point of 18:5-6 is to show God’s absolute sovereignty over nations and people. For example, Longman (2008) wrote, “The language of the oracle here changes, but the implication is clear. God is sovereign over the nations and particularly Israel”. Huey (1993:181) wrote, “God reminded Israel that, like the potter with his clay, God’s power is absolute (Rom 9:19-24). In our age of emphasis on individual autonomy the doctrine of God’s sovereignty has largely been lost or rejected”. Ware (2000) wrote, “The clear emphasis of these first four verses of Jeremiah 18 is *not* that what God, the potter, will or will not do *depends on* the clay. Just the reverse is true . . . The clear message here is that

God does as he pleases, and the clay takes the shape that the potter decides”. While we may agree that God is certainly sovereign, is the main point of the potter and clay illustration to show the potter’s absolute sovereignty over the clay? Answering this question leads us back to the question I posited above: God says he can do with Judah as the potter did with the clay, so what exactly did the potter do with the clay?

As indicated from 18:1-4, the potter saw that the clay was defected, so he crushed it and started over, and perhaps this process continued until he received his desired result. In the same way, God knew that Judah had become defected, corrupted or marred, because of their disobedience and sin. In other words, at this point in their history, Judah was not what God had originally intended for them to be according to their covenant relationship and standards. This passage shows that God, like the potter, instead of throwing them away completely, was willing to change or revise his plans based on the response of the people as indicated in 18:7-10. If the potter and clay illustration was solely about God’s unilateral control over Judah, then would that not make God responsible for Judah’s failures? I suggest that perhaps a more consistent way of understanding the potter and clay illustration is that it shows God’s flexibility in dealing with his covenant people. In other words, God can be flexible in that he is sovereign and can revise his plans and change directions if the circumstances require him to do so. This “change”, however, is never arbitrary as we shall see in vv. 7-10.

### 5.2.5 Jeremiah 18:7-10

Jeremiah 18:7-8 reads, “If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned”. The phrase “uprooted, torn down and destroyed” is comprised of three Hebrew verbs: *נָתַשׁ* (*nathash*), *נָתַץ* (*nathats*) and *אָבַד* (*abad*). *נָתַשׁ* (*nathash*) can mean “to remove, to drive out, to be torn up and plucked out” (De Moor, 1974:442). *נָתַץ* (*nathats*) can mean “to tear down, to pull down and to break down” (Zodhiates,

1984:1617). אָבַד (*abad*) can mean “to perish, get lost, go astray, to destroy or annihilate” (Vine, Unger and White, 1996:§Perish). The phrase “repents of its evil” consists of the Hebrew verb שָׁחַב (*shub*) and רָעָה (*ra’a*). The same word for “evil” is also used for “disaster” when God says he will relent, נָחַם (*nacham*), of the disaster, רָעָה (*ra’a*), that he “intended to do to it” (Hays, 2016:126).

Jeremiah 18:9-10 reads, “And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it”. “Built up and planted” are the Hebrew words בָּנָה (*banah*) and נָטַע (*nata*) which can mean “to build up” and “to establish” (Wagner, 1975:168 and Vine, Unger and White, 1996:§To Plant). The phrase “does not obey me” literally renders “not listening to my message or voice” (Allen, 2008:155). God said he will “reconsider”, נָחַם (*nacham*), the good or the blessings, טוֹב (*tob*), he had “intended to do for it”.

If there is any confusion about what vv. 5-6 are teaching, then vv. 7-10 provide clarity. I understand this statement is not agreed upon by all. For example, Frese (2013) argued that 18:7-10 is not connected in any way to 18:1-6, except that they are both complementary points that help serve the large purpose of 18:1-11, that is, calling the people of Judah back to repentance. Frese (2013:377) believed that 18:7-10 does not elaborate on or explain the metaphor of the potter. One of the main objections Frese (2013:383) raised is that the potter and clay in vv. 1-6 are not depicted in the same way as God and the nations in vv. 7-10. In other words, the potter should have been described as changing his plans based on the behaviour of the clay.

In Frese’s (2013) analysis of Jeremiah 18:1-10, he missed two important points. First, the potter does in fact change his plans in vv. 1-6, because the clay had become marred in his hands. In fact, I would argue that the words of Jeremiah 18:7-10 show examples of exactly how God, like the potter in vv. 1-4, changes or revises his plan for the nations. These verses (7-10) also show a contrast “between how the LORD responds to evil nations who repent (vv.7-8) and how

the LORD responds to good nations who ‘repent’ and become evil (vv.9-10)” (Willis, 2002:164). Second, and perhaps more importantly, these verses show a relationship between the Hebrew verbs שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), particularly in the context of covenant relationship. For example, when a nation repents, then God will relent. On the other hand, if a nation does not repent, then God will not relent. In other words, without man’s שׁוּב (*shub*), there is no נָחַם (*nacham*) from God. As I mentioned in chapter two, Frese (2013:388) ultimately concluded that God’s plans for the nations are not rigidly fixed and can be altered based on people’s behaviour, even though Frese’s method of structuring the text is different than mine.

In the same sense, Huey (1993:181) observed that when a nation repents of its evil, “God will alter his response to that nation” and that the word נָחַם (*nacham*) “suggests that grief is so deep that God finds an alternate response for the necessity of punishment when we repent”. He concluded, “When we change, God can change his actions toward us . . .” and that “the clay cannot challenge the potter, but Israel can act so that Yahweh will change” (Huey, 1993:181). A main point of Jeremiah 18:7-10 is that when people or circumstances change, God can adapt his actions in response to the change (Willis, 2002:167).

I am arguing here that both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), in the context of a covenantal relationship, work together to form a powerful relationship that has an enormous influence over the entire meaning of the passage. For example, understanding the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of Jeremiah 18:1-10 reveals that God’s change of mind does not happen arbitrarily. As Longman (2008) wrote, “These decisions are conditional upon the response of the nations and kingdoms. If those announced for judgment repent or those who are established sin, then all bets are off”. The blessings and curses listed in Deuteronomy 28 give strong evidence that in covenantal contexts, conditional clauses are literal not just from man’s perspective but also from God’s perspective. In other words, there is nothing about the use of these words in this covenantal relationship context that implies

they are not to be taken literally. As R.W.L. Moberly (2013:129) wrote, “. . . to say that God repents implies that God’s relationship with humanity in general, and with Israel in particular, is a genuine and responsive relationship, in which what people do and how they relate to God matters to God”.

Understanding the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of this passage allows us to reaffirm the main point of the entire potter and clay illustration. For example, the covenantal relationship in this passage does not emphasize a firm definition of God’s sovereignty where he unilaterally controls everything, including the clay. If this was the central message of 18:1-10, then Jeremiah’s use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in vv. 7-10 does not make practical sense. This illustration shows, rather, that in the context of covenantal relationship God is able and willing to adjust his plans with people just as a potter adjusts his plans with a vessel that has been spoiled. “Because he is the potter and has the right to fashion clay as he sees fit, he will ‘change his mind’ about intentions to bless or curse a nation if that nation changes its ways, for better or for worse” (Boyd, 2000:141).

So, in Jeremiah 18:1-10, God brought the prophet to a potter’s workshop who was shaping a vessel that was not turning out the way he had hoped. The potter changed his plans and worked the clay into something else. God showed the prophet this to illustrate that because he is the potter and Judah is the clay, he has the right to change his mind about his plans for them, if they will repent (Boyd, 2017b:*Romans* 9). Again, the potter and clay analogy is not about God’s unilateral control but his right to change plans in response of the nation’s decisions.

The original audience did not likely fully understand this aspect of God’s nature and character prior to the exile. This is evidenced by the nation’s response to God’s plea for repentance in Jeremiah 18:12, “But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; we will all follow the stubbornness of our evil hearts’”. The nation did not think repentance could have saved them. They did not understand their actions could have a literal influence on God. They

instead thought it was of “no use”. God had already declared judgment was coming, and there was nothing they could do about it.

#### **5.2.6. Exegetical conclusions from Jeremiah 18:1-10**

The meaning to the original audiences only depends slightly upon whether a scholar believes the entirety of the passage was written before the exile in 597 BC or if 18:7-10 was added during the exile (561-520 BC). For the pre-exilic audience, the message would have been to repent to avoid the oncoming judgment. The post-exilic audience would have understood the message in the past tense, ‘if we would have repented, we could have avoided God’s judgment’.

Furthermore, when Jeremiah 18:1-10 is exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) plays a vital role in understanding the overall message of the passage. When viewed in a covenantal context, the main point of the passage shifts from the potter’s unilateral control and sovereignty over the clay to the flexibility of the potter to work with his clay. In this covenantal context, the author(s) used שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people. Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, this covenantal relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) reveals that conditional propositions are real not only from man’s perspective but also from God’s perspective. The use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context reveals that the response of the nation has an influence on what God does or does not do, meaning that to some degree or another the future of the nation lies in the hands of the people, all of course, depending upon how they respond to God.

### **5.3 Exegesis of Jeremiah 4:23-31**

Jeremiah 4:23-31:

<sup>23</sup> I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. <sup>24</sup> I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. <sup>25</sup> I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. <sup>26</sup> I looked, and the fruitful land was a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger. <sup>27</sup> This is what the Lord says: “The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely. <sup>28</sup> Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back.” <sup>29</sup> At the sound of horsemen and archers every town takes to flight. Some go into the thickets; some climb up among the rocks. All the towns are deserted; no one lives in them. <sup>30</sup> What are you doing, you devastated one? Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? Why highlight your eyes with makeup? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you; they want to kill you. <sup>31</sup> I hear a cry as of a woman in labor, a groan as of one bearing her first child—the cry of Daughter Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands and saying, “Alas! I am fainting; my life is given over to murderers”.

שוב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) are used in Jeremiah 4:28, but in order to understand the full scope of this one verse, we must examine the verse with its surrounding context and include the section of Jeremiah 4:23-31. My hypothesis is that the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in 4:28 is significant to understanding a part of God’s nature and character. Thus, after exegetically examining Jeremiah 4:23-31 in its context, we will find out what the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contributes to the understanding of the text and of God.

### 5.3.1 The Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX)

The Masoretic Text contains the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) in niphal form in Jeremiah 4:28, while the Septuagint contains the Greek word μετανοέω (*metanoëo*) (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Behm and Würthwein,

1967:975-977). Both words can mean “to think differently”, reconsider and repent (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Behm and Würthwein, 1967:975-977). Jeremiah 4:28 also contains the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*) in qal form in the Masoretic Text, while the Septuagint contains the Greek word ἀποστρέφω (*apostrepho*) (Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-521 and Bertram, 1971:719). Both words can mean “to turn back”, remove or restore (Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-521 and Bertram, 1971:719). Both the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint support the meaning of “repent” and “turn back” when used in this passage, and there are no major variances between the two texts concerning Jeremiah 4:28. We should note that Jeremiah 4:29-30, which are in the context of 4:28, do contain differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, but the differences in these two verses do not affect the overall passage and is even referred to as a “simple problem” (See Holladay, 2007:191-193).

### **5.3.2 Literary and historical-cultural matters**

Jeremiah 4:28 is known as part of the prophetic poetic oracles and more specifically known as a “judgement oracle” in the book of Jeremiah (Boda and McConville, 2012:429 and 910). There are debates about the origins of the prophetic oracles in Jeremiah. For example, some scholars believe the prophetic oracles originated with the actual prophet Jeremiah (see Childs, 1979:346 and Harrison, 1969:813). Donnell (1988:47) gave three reasons to believe these oracles consisted of the actual words of Jeremiah: (1) “the poetry is written from the perspective of a participant (first-person account)”, (2) God or his messenger is always identified as the speaker and (3) the prophetic oracles have been “traditionally assigned to the prophet” (Francisco, 1977:202). On the other hand, Carroll (2004:47) argued it is impossible for scholars to know what passages can confidently be attributed to the prophet Jeremiah. As with entire book of Jeremiah, it is my personal conviction that whether this judgment oracle contains the words of the actual prophet or if they were added later, this does

not affect the passage's status as God-breathed Scripture; therefore, this passage is worthy of study.

The prophetic oracle of Jeremiah 4:23-31 has several characteristics that are relevant to its study. (1) The oracle contains one speaker, that is, Yahweh. (2) The setting appears to be that of a courtroom where the "king in his heavenly court hands down a decision of cosmic destruction" (Donnell, 1988:49). (3) The message is given in poetic form. (4) The concept of repentance is in the negative, that is, God refuses to repent and man does not show any signs of repenting either. Holladay (1976:66) labelled this passage as part of a unit he described as the "Foe Cycle" which consisted of Jeremiah 4:5-6:30. Holladay (1976:71-72) divided Jeremiah 4 as follows: (a) The first battle scene (4:5-8), (b) The first double interlude (4:9-12), (c) The second battle scene (4:13-18), (d) The second double interlude (4:19-28) and (e) The third battle scene (4:29-31). Walter Brueggemann (1998:57) divided the latter part of Jeremiah 4 into five metaphors: (1) Personal anguish and disruption because of an invading army (vv. 19-22), (2) A scenario of the dismantling of all of creation (vv. 23-28), (3) A scene of frantic escape (v. 29), (4) The futility of a prostitute whose allure is empty and ineffective (v. 30) and (5) The death cry of a woman in labor, vulnerable to murderers (v. 31).

Unfortunately, there are not conclusive references to events and dates located in this unit to definitively assign Jeremiah 4:23-31 to a specific timeframe other than the pre-exilic (597 BC) or post-exilic (560-521 BC) dates depending on a person's view of authorship. I will refer to the writer of this poem as the prophet, poet, author or Jeremiah.

### **5.3.3 Jeremiah 4:23-26**

Jeremiah 4:23-26 reads, "I looked at the earth, and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone. I looked at the mountains, and they were quaking; all the hills were swaying. I looked, and there were no people; every bird in the sky had flown away. I looked, and the fruitful land was

a desert; all its towns lay in ruins before the Lord, before his fierce anger". These verses are told from the perspective of the prophet, and each verse starts with רָאִיתִי (rā·'î·tîy), meaning "I saw" or "I looked" (Holladay, 1986:163). This phrase indicates there is no hint of Jeremiah's own involvement with the events taking place in the poem; rather, he is a bystander and recording what he saw without emotion (Holladay, 1986:164). There is also a shift that takes place in this passage. For example, the previous poetry in Jeremiah 4:19-22 "has focused on historical-political destructions. With these verses the picture becomes cosmic in scope" (Brueggemann, 1998:59).

The words "formless" and "empty" are the Hebrew nouns תֹהוּ (*tohu*) and בְהוּ (*bohu*). These are the same Hebrew words used to describe the condition of the earth at creation in Genesis 1:2, and both are used here to "express the resurgence of chaos and disorder that is experienced by the poet at every dimension of life (Brueggemann, 1998:59). Holladay (1986:164) wrote that, here, the prophet "envisages a 'de-creation' of the cosmos, the world again becomes the chaos before creation began; not a retroversion, turning the clock back, but a moving ahead to a state identical with that before Yahweh's creative activity began . . .". In this view, the "earth" could represent the nation of Judah, although this is not a required interpretation for the message of poem to be effective. For example, תֹהוּ (*tohu*) can also mean "wilderness" and parallels the word מִדְבָּר (*midbar*) meaning "desert" in Deuteronomy 32:10 (Holladay, 1986:165). Johannes Pedersen (1973:456) wrote, "The wilderness is a land of chaos, because the law of life does not operate there; we hear several times that the desert is *tohu* . . . the characteristic expressions of chaos, the lawless, the empty". If the law of life does not operate in the wilderness, then what parallel does that have with the state of the nation of Judah? The law of life for the nation of Judah, I would argue, was their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. When the law of life was fully operational, that is, when the nation was fulfilling their covenantal obedience, then order would have been in the land. Unfortunately for the audience of Jeremiah, that was not the case. This poem "is an unsettling reminder that sin and rebellion against God lead to darkness

and chaos” (Huey, 1993:85). Brueggemann (1998:59) noted that “the poets of the Exile are able to use the old traditions of chaos as a way of speaking about exile. The historical experience of exile is akin to the cosmic sense of disorder given in the old myths of chaos”.

After the prophet started the poem with an overall view of the chaotic state of the land or nation, that is, formless and void, he then proceeded to walk his audience through a step-by-step dismantling of the original creation order found in Genesis 1. In Genesis 1:3-5, the light came into the world and pierced the darkness (Dyer, 1983:1136), but in Jeremiah 4:23 the heavens no longer gave off their light, which indicates permanent darkness “without any hope that light might come again” (Holladay, 1986:165). In Genesis 1:9-10, the mountains and hills had been separated by the waters (Dyer, 1983:1136), but in Jeremiah 4:24, they were “quaking” and “swaying”. Mountains are thought to be symbols of strength and stability throughout the Old Testament (Huey, 1993:85). For example, mountains and hills are called on as witnesses in a “cosmic law-court scene” indicating their dependability (Micah 6:1) (Holladay, 1986:165). Nevertheless, the mountains “quaking” and the hills “swaying” poetically expresses the “ultimate collapse” of their stability (Holladay, 1986:165).

In Genesis 1:26-27, God created man and woman in his own image, but in Jeremiah 4:25, all humans are gone. The phrase “I looked” is different from the previous verses in that it lacks a complement. The prophet looked to see, but no one was there for him to see. Holladay (1986:165) gave a historical contextual reason as to why this would have been significant to Jeremiah’s audience:

Folk of the present age, crowded in overpopulation, crave solitude from time to time, but solitariness for the Israelites was a nightmare: they craved above all the companionship of family, clan, village. Lot’s first-born daughter, after the destruction of Sodom . . . contrived to have intercourse with him to preserve offspring (Gen 19:31): incest is

preferable to the horror of solitariness and the end of the human race. But now, in Jeremiah's vision, it is come to that.

In Genesis 1:20-23 birds are created and flying all throughout the air, but in Jeremiah 4:25, the birds had fled the area. This once again reinforces the message of destruction, because "even off in the desert one sees birds" (Jeremiah 49:16) (Holladay, 1986:166). In Genesis 1:11-13, God made the land sprout vegetation, but in Jeremiah 4:26 the once fruitful land has now become a desert. Like the previous verse, the phrase "I looked" lacks a complement. Perhaps the references to the fruitful land and desert would have brought back into the mind of the original audience images of stories they had heard from the exodus and their ancestors wandering around in the desert for forty years before being brought into the land of Canaan, flowing with "milk and honey". Holladay (1986:166) wrote, "The desert was the horrifying place, the garden-land a gracious gift from Yahweh, and now that gracious gift is turned into a place of horror like that from which he had delivered them".

Again, this poem is progressively showing the undoing of what God had done for his people, and along with the land now becoming desert, the prophet saw that all the cities were laid in ruins and abandoned (Jeremiah 4:26). Cities could normally provide protection in times of war, but in this vision, they are laid to waste and nowhere is safe from destruction. Jeremiah 4:26 ends with the phrase, "before the LORD, before his fierce anger". Holladay (1986:166) noted that "before the LORD" translates literally to "from the presence of Yahweh", and the word "presence" translates literally to "face", which implies "fury". Holladay (1986:166) concluded, "As Yahweh was the only agent for creation, so now he is the only agent of destruction. It is his righteous wrath, elicited by the covenantal disobedience of his people, that has brought on this smashing of creation".

#### **5.3.4 Jeremiah 4:27-31**

Jeremiah 4:27 reads, “This is what the Lord says: ‘The whole land will be ruined, though I will not destroy it completely.’” The word “ruined” is the Hebrew word *שָׁמָמָה* (*shemamah*) which can mean waste, desolation or a reference to an uninhabited region (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:376). This seems to confirm the message of devastation that was depicted in the previous poem. The phrase “destroy it completely” is the Hebrew word *כָּלָה* (*kalah*) which can mean annihilation, complete or full end or entirely (Lundbom, 1999:361). At first glance, the latter part of verse 27 appears to be a contradiction in light of the poetic dismantling of creation. It would appear as if the entire land was headed for destruction, but here, God reassures that he will not *כָּלָה* (*kalah*), or he will not bring the land or nation to its full end. Brueggemann (1998:59) wrote that in the first clause of verse 27 the “nullification is total, comprehensive, and without qualification”, but the latter clause comes as a surprise.

There have been several reasons given to explain the conflicting nature of the latter clause and the interpretation of the Hebrew word *כָּלָה* (*kalah*). First, the phrase was added later by editors intending to soften the harsh language concerning the judgment (Brueggemann, 1998:59). Second, the phrase was included to show that the poetic description of the devastation in the previous verses was not to be taken literally (Smith, 1992:§Jeremiah 4:27-31). Third, after hearing the poetic dismantling of creation, the original audience likely would have thought God was going to completely destroy Israel; therefore, the phrase was added to “guard against this misunderstanding” (Dyer, 1983:1136).

Fourth, Holladay (1986:166-167) suggested restructuring the phrase to read, “and none of it shall I remake” in keeping with the context of total destruction. Fifth, Brueggemann (1998:59) argued that the phrase can be textually amended to read, “I will make a full end of it” but “such explanations seem contrived”. Sixth, John Calvin (2013:§Jeremiah 4:27) interpreted the phrase to read, “I have not made an end yet to the devastation”, implying there was more judgment to come (Brueggemann, 1998:59). For example, he argued that *כָּלָה* (*kalah*) can mean perfection or consummation, and what is consumed is

perfected in that it comes to an end. “If this explanation is approved”, Calvin (2013:§Jeremiah 4:27) argued, “we now see the reason why he declares that he would not make a consummation with whatever severity he might punish the sins of his people; it was, that some hope might remain for the faithful, so that they might not be wholly discouraged; which would have been the case had not God promised to be propitious and mindful of his covenant”.

Although Calvin (2013:§Jeremiah 4:27) acknowledged that many scholars interpret כָּלָה (*kalah*) as “I will not make a full end” in terms of not bringing complete destruction to the land or nation, he ultimately interpreted the phrase as meaning God was not through bringing destruction at that particular time to the land. This interpretation is like Holladay’s (1986:167) view, and I think it is the closest interpretation that remains true to the context of the passage in its entirety. This interpretation of the phrase as God “has not yet made an end to his destruction” in verse 27 not only keeps in line of the context of the poem in Jeremiah 4:23-26 but also the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28.

Jeremiah 4:28 reads, “Therefore the earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark, because I have spoken and will not relent, I have decided and will not turn back”. “Therefore” is a combination of the Hebrew proposition עַל (*al*) and the pronoun זֹאת (*zoth*). The combination is sometimes translated “because of this” or “for this” and connects the previous thought in 4:27 to the upcoming thought in 4:28. God had promised judgment on the land or nation, and that he had not yet made an end to his destruction. “Therefore” or “Because of this” the “earth will mourn and the heavens above grow dark”. “Mourn” is the root אָבַל (*abal*) and can mean “caused lamentations or grief” (Baumann, 1974:44-47). The judgment placed on Judah would be so severe to cause the “earth” to grieve. Holladay (1986:167) wrote, “Mourn’ suggests a permanent situation: one mourns for someone who is dead, with all the finality that death implies”. The heavens growing “dark” appears to be a play on 4:23 where the prophet looked and the heavens did not give off any light.

Then comes another Hebrew combination of עַל (*al*) and כִּי (*ki*) and can be translated “because” or “for”. This word combination once again connects the previous thought with the upcoming thought. “I have spoken” can also be translated “I have decreed” (Keil and Delitzsch, 1996:74-75). The phrase “I have decided” contains the Hebrew word זָמַם (*zamam*) which can also be translated “purposed”, “considered” and “devised” (Sanders, 2014:267). In keeping with the context, the author seemed to be showing how serious God was about the devastation on the land. God had “decreed” and “purposed” what was to come. This is confirmed by the phrase used after each of these statements. “I have spoken and will not relent” and “I have decided and will not turn back”.

“Relent” is the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) and “turn back” is the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*). The usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context is different than Jeremiah 18:7-10 in two main ways: (1) God is the subject of both verbs in this passage, and (2) the message in 4:28 is the opposite of the message in 18:7-10. In fact, Holladay (1986:167) referred to 4:28 as the reverse of Jeremiah 18:7-10.

נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in the niphal first person singular, which is reflexive in nature and means the subject (God) both receives and carries out the action of the verb. נָחַם (*nacham*) is also used in the qatal perfect, which views the action of the verb from an outside perspective. The qatal perfect is the “perspective of seeing or thinking of the action of the verb as a whole and complete, without respect to the time of the action” and in the Hebrew language, “an action may be viewed or conceived as entire even if that action has not yet taken place (Heiser and Setterholm, 2013:§qatal (perfect)). In the context of verse 28, God says he will not relent. Holladay (1986:168) preferred to translate נָחַם (*nacham*) here as “retract”. After speaking or decreeing judgment, God was not going to retract his words. The author of this poem could look at the situation in the nation and see from an outside perspective that the time for God’s relenting had

concluded. Covenant disobedience had led God in making up his mind about bringing devastation to the land.

On the other hand, שׁוּב (*shub*) is used in the qal first person singular and yiqtol imperfect. Yiqtol imperfect views the action of the verb from the inside perspective and can “speak of habitual actions, actions in progress, or even completed actions that have unfolding, ongoing results” (Heiser and Setterholm, 2013:§yiqtol (imperfect)). The yiqtol imperfect of שׁוּב (*shub*) can imply that God’s decision to “not turn back” had ongoing consequences for the land, evidenced by the fact they were exiled for many years. God had purposed or decided what he was going to do. In this specific instance, he was not going to “turn back” from his purposed judgment on the land. As a result, Judah would cease to be a political entity (Smith, 1992:§Jeremiah 4:27-31). The audience hearing the author’s use of both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context with God as the subject should have understood the severity of devastation of the poem’s message, but unfortunately, as will be shown, verses 29-31 reveals that the population at large did not understand the seriousness of their situation.

There is a difference in God not being willing to שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) and not being able to שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). What is clear from the context of this poem is that God was not willing to retract, change his mind or turn back from his announced devastation and judgment. The text nowhere implies in the context that he could not have relented. This strengthens the point made earlier about the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 18:7-10, that God’s relenting and turning back is never arbitrary. Apparently, in the timeframe of 18:7-10, there was still a chance for repentance, whereas in 4:23-31, that time had passed. Huey (1993:85-86) observed, “The entire picture of inescapable and total destruction is a solemn reminder that although God is patient, his patience has limits (2 Pet 3:9). When all warnings have been ignored, nothing but judgment awaits (Amos 4:11-12)”. The judgment was final then, not because “God was unwilling to forgive but because he knew that Judah would not repent” (Huey, 1993:86).

Jeremiah 4:29-31 reads, “At the sound of horsemen and archers every town takes to flight. Some go into the thickets; some climb up among the rocks. All the towns are deserted; no one lives in them. What are you doing, you devastated one? Why dress yourself in scarlet and put on jewels of gold? Why highlight your eyes with makeup? You adorn yourself in vain. Your lovers despise you; they want to kill you. I hear a cry as of a woman in labor, a groan as of one bearing her first child—the cry of Daughter Zion gasping for breath, stretching out her hands and saying, ‘Alas! I am fainting; my life is given over to murderers’”.

These verses continue the theme of total destruction. “In verse 29 the desolation of the land is further portrayed, set forth in verse 30 as inevitable, and exhibited in its sad consequences of verse 31” (Keil and Delitzsch, 1996:75). Brueggemann (1998) wrote, “These verses continue with the imagery of an invading army” and citizens of Jerusalem “scramble for safety”, “then in Jer. 4:30 the poem abruptly introduces the metaphor of a prostitute” and “Jerusalem is so insensitive and brazen that she has not the sense to hide”. Instead, the poem portrays Judah as dressing like a prostitute readying herself to perhaps seduce the invading army.

Brueggemann (1998:62) wrote, “Judah the whore continues to misunderstand her true situation of danger, continues to misjudge the real threat of invasion, confiscation, and seizure. Instead she stands idly in front of the mirror, preoccupied only with appearance, not with the reality of death on the move”. In Jeremiah 4:31, the metaphor shifts again, and Judah is portrayed as “helpless, exposed woman in labor” (Brueggemann, 1998:62). Brueggemann (1998:62) wrote, “Jerusalem may not know it, but the city is as shameful as a prostitute, as helpless as a woman in labor, exposed and endangered now because the betrayed husband has had enough of fickleness and will tolerate no more. Death must come. No one stands with Jerusalem to grieve, or to rescue”. Brueggemann (1998:59) offered a sobering conclusion and insight into the covenantal relational aspect of this entire poem:

The Creator waits for the world to become the world hoped for. Yahweh waits for Israel to become fully God's people. But each time the poet looks at the world, he sees more and more of creation being nullified, regressing to the murky condition of Gen. 1:2. Israel refused to embrace the ways of the Creator. Covenantal Israel held the staggering notion that human conduct matters for the well-being of creation (cf. Hos. 4:1-3). Working from that notion, the picture of this poem is grim. Since there had not been obedience, there will be no viable creation. Disobedience finally leads to chaos for the entire creation.

Brueggemann (1998:59)'s comments stressed the importance of obedience in covenantal relationship. What a humbling word-picture the prophet illustrated here that creation relied on the faithfulness and obedience of Judah to the covenant, and unfortunately for their situation, covenant disobedience ruled the day.

### **5.3.5 Exegetical conclusions from Jeremiah 4:23-31**

The message to the original audience changes slightly depending once again on whether the audience was already in exile looking back at what had happened to them, or if this poem was given before the nation was judged. If the poem was given during the exile, it would have been used to explain in a poetic way the judgment they faced from God. If the poem was given to the audience prior to the exile, then it would have served as a warning of events to come to them in the near future. Regardless of when the poem was given, there are a few exegetical conclusions we can take from this passage and its usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*).

First, the poem shows how the covenantal relationship between God and Judah was unravelling. The text portrays how Judah's sin and rebellion against God led them into darkness and chaos by poetically describing the dismantling of creation. Second, the author's use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah

4:28 sheds an interpretive light on the second clause in Jeremiah 4:27. The clause “Though I will not destroy it completely” is better translated as “I have not yet made an end to the devastation”, meaning God would carry out the judgment to its end. This interpretation fits more closely in line with the context of the entire passage and is supported by the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the following verse.

Third, the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) shows the seriousness with which God was bringing the devastation against the nation and land. Because of continued disobedience, God had made up his mind to judge the nation, and he was not going to retract or turn back from his judgment. Fourth, unlike Jeremiah 18:7-10, the situation in Jeremiah 4:28 did not leave any room for repentance on behalf of the nation. Apparently, time had run out for the nation to repent, whereas in 18:7-10 the option for repentance was still available. Fifth, the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context shows that God’s relenting or turning back (or lack thereof) is not arbitrary. While Judah kept ignoring warnings from God, judgment was the only option left on the table. Sixth, the author’s use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) strengthens the theme of total destruction given throughout the entire passage.

#### 5.4 Exegesis of Jeremiah 15:1-7

Jeremiah 15:1-7 reads:

Then the Lord said to me: “Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go! <sup>2</sup>And if they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ tell them, ‘This is what the Lord says: “Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity.’ <sup>3</sup>“I will send four kinds of destroyers against them,” declares the Lord, “the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy. <sup>4</sup>I will make them abhorrent to all the

kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem. <sup>5</sup>“Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem? Who will mourn for you? Who will stop to ask how you are? <sup>6</sup>You have rejected me,” declares the Lord. “You keep on backsliding. So I will reach out and destroy you; I am tired of holding back. <sup>7</sup>I will winnow them with a winnowing fork at the city gates of the land. I will bring bereavement and destruction on my people, for they have not changed their ways.

Both *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) are found in Jeremiah 15:6-7, but in order to understand the full scope of these verses, we must include 15:1-5. My hypothesis is that the usage of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in 15:6-7 is significant in understanding the meaning of the entire passage. Thus, after exegetically examining Jeremiah 15:1-7, we find out how the usage of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contributes to the understanding of the covenantal relationship between God and his people.

#### 5.4.1 The Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX)

The Masoretic Text contains the Hebrew verb root *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in niphal form in Jeremiah 15:6, while the Septuagint contains the Greek words ἀνήσω αὐτούς (*aneso autous*) (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Bultmann, 1964:367-368). Both the Hebrew and Greek words carry the connotation of “retracting”, “letting loose”, “changing one’s mind” or “giving another chance” (Parunak, 1975:523-526 and Bultmann, 1964:367-368). Jeremiah 15:7 contains the Hebrew root *שׁוּב* (*shub*) in qal form in the Masoretic Text meaning “turn” or “repent”, while the Septuagint does not translate *שׁוּב* (*shub*) in this verse. There is a difference in the reading of 15:7 between the MT and LXX. For example, an English translation of the LXX reads, “And I will completely scatter them; in the gates of my people they are bereaved of children: they have destroyed my people because of their iniquities” (LXX, 2012), unlike in English translations of the MT where God will bring judgment on the people, because they have not changed or turned from their ways.

#### 5.4.2 Literary and historical-cultural matters

Jeremiah 15:1-7 is a prophetic oracle; therefore, the material concerning authorship and the nature of prophetic oracles discussed for Jeremiah 4:23-31 applies to Jeremiah 15:1-7 and does not need to be repeated here. Donnell (1988:55) further noted similar elements among three oracles in Jeremiah (4:27-28, 8:4-7 and 15:6-7): “simple Hebrew parallelism is used in the construction of the individual thought blocks”, elements of divine judgment is present and repentance never happens.

Although there are similarities among prophetic poetic oracles in Jeremiah, there are differences on a more specific level. For example, whereas Jeremiah 4:28 was part of a judgment oracle, Jeremiah 15:1-7 is a lament. Laments are “private in nature and belong to a cultic setting (temple)” (Donnell, 1988:49), and they usually contain a sacrifice (Koch, 1969:176-177). Jeremiah 15:1-7 is part of a larger unit (14:1-15:9) that has been named the Drought Complex (Holladay, 1976:145). The unit can be broken down in the following way (Donnell, 1988:54): 1) A description of drought (14:2-6), 2) a communal lament (14:7-9), 3) Yahweh’s response (14:10), (4) Conversation between God and the prophet (14:11-18), (5) second communal lament (14:19-22), (6) Yahweh’s response (15:1-4), (7) A lament by the prophet (15:5) and (8) Yahweh’s response (15:6-9).

There are some scholars who assume the prophet Jeremiah “here functions as a cult prophet, composing a liturgy for the people at a time of national emergency” (Holladay, 1986:422 and Bentzen, 1952:164). For example, Holladay (1986:422) wrote, “The emergency in 14:2-6 is the drought, in 15:5-9 it is a military catastrophe in which widows increase in number and mothers are bereft of their soldier sons. But drought implies famine . . . and 14:17-18, the central section, speaks of the emergency as both sword and famine. This central section thus binds 14:2-6 and 15:5-9 together”. In light of this, Holladay (1986:422) believed these three passages must be understood together, and he

further stated that Jeremiah 18:21<sup>22</sup> formed an outline for all three. Holladay (1986:422) concluded, “Given these structural features, the most plausible solution is to view the whole complex, 14:1-15:9, as a unit drafted at one time for a specific setting, a counter-liturgical expression of the judgment of Yahweh”. This view was not shared among all Jeremiah scholars. For example, Carroll (2004:45) argued that the “interweaving of so many different strands may suggest a liturgical pattern behind the present text, but so little is known about the production of the book of Jeremiah that it is always easier to posit a liturgy than to prove one”.

Because this oracle focuses on the impending judgment from God onto the nation of Judah, Donnell (1988:55) believed the impending “disaster is caused by the nation’s disruption of the covenant relationship. A cessation of repentance is a part of the divine response; The Lord is weary of repenting (v. 6)”. The covenantal-relational aspect of the oracle is why God’s relationship to the prophet is portrayed as “personal and direct, rather than secondary” (Donnell, 1988:102).

As with other passages in the book of Jeremiah, dating and attaching Jeremiah 15:1-7 to a specific historical timeframe proves to be difficult, mainly because there are no references to a specific date contained within the literary unit. Although destruction and judgment is a theme of the poem, there is no evidence whether it has or has not taken place. Carroll (2004) and Holladay (1986) were opposite each other in terms of dating each passage in Jeremiah. For example, Holladay (1986:427-429) believed the date for the emergencies listed in this unit was “November/December 601” BC and listed reasons for his claim, whereas dating each passage to a specific historical event was not a priority of Carroll (2004). At any rate, if the prophetic oracle was experienced by the prophet Jeremiah, then the words predate the exile, but if the oracle was the

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<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 18:21 reads, “So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword. Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death, their young men slain by the sword in battle”.

words of editors, then the date would be post-exile. Nevertheless, the language of this lament indicates impending judgment on Judah.

### 5.4.3 Jeremiah 15:1-2

Jeremiah 15:1-2 reads, “Then the Lord said to me: ‘Even if Moses and Samuel were to stand before me, my heart would not go out to this people. Send them away from my presence! Let them go! And if they ask you, ‘Where shall we go?’ tell them, ‘This is what the Lord says: ‘Those destined for death, to death; those for the sword, to the sword; those for starvation, to starvation; those for captivity, to captivity’”. These verses are an answer to the prophet Jeremiah’s confession in 14:19-22 (Dyer, 1983:1148) and signify God’s rejection of the prophet’s intercession on behalf of the people of Judah (Huey, 1993:156). Instead, God brought the prophet’s memory back to his relationship with Moses and Samuel. The significance of this is that both “Moses and Samuel were great intercessors in the past<sup>23</sup>”, and they were also covenant mediators (Holladay, 1986:439). The phrase “stand before me” is an indication of intercessory pleading or praying.

Moses and Samuel’s relationship with God can be summarised according to Psalm 99:6, “Moses and Aaron were among his priests, Samuel was among those who called on his name; they called on the LORD and he answered them”. When these men interceded for their people, God oftentimes answered their prayers, making them known in the Old Testament world as great intercessors. For God to bring up his own relationship with Moses and Samuel to the prophet Jeremiah shows how much stress was placed on God’s relationship to the nation of Judah during this timeframe. The word translated “heart” is the Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ (*nephesh*) and literally means “soul” or “life” (Seebass, 1998:497-503 and Ringgren, 1980:338). God was saying his “soul was not to this people” (Holladay, 1986:439). The appearance here is that

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<sup>23</sup> Examples of Moses’ intercession can be found in Exodus 32:11-13, 20-34 and Numbers 14:13-19. Moses interceded on behalf of the Israelites when God had threatened to destroy them. Examples of Samuel’s intercession can be found in 1 Samuel 7:9 and 12:19-25. Samuel interceded on behalf of the Israelites after they had fallen into sin.

intercessory prayer would no longer be effective. Even if two of the greatest Old Testament intercessors were to plead on Judah's behalf, they would be turned away. God was no longer going to tolerate the stubbornness of the people (Huey, 1993:156).

The phrase “send them out of my presence” consist of the Hebrew root words שָׁלַח (*shalach*), מִן (*min*) and פָּנֶה (*paneh*). שָׁלַח (*shalach*) can mean “to let go” or “to bid farewell” and when used with מִן (*min*) “out”, it is the same word used in the book of Exodus when God told Moses and Aaron to tell Pharaoh to “let my people go” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:371). The difference is that in Exodus, God was rescuing his people, whereas here in Jeremiah 15, he is sending them out for judgment. פָּנֶה (*paneh*) is translated “presence”, but it can literally be translated “face” (Joseph, 2011:49-50). Standing before Yahweh's face “implies the people's standing before the Lord in the temple, where they had appeared bringing sacrifices, and by prayer invoking His help (Jer. 14:12)” (Keil and Delitzsch, 1996:159). To be driven out from the temple means to be driven out from God's face or presence.

Yahweh anticipated the people asking, “where shall we go?”, and he responded by giving four options, known as the four destroyers: pestilence, sword, famine and captivity. These four curses are a direct result of covenant disobedience on the part of Judah<sup>24</sup>. The idea is that the full weight of covenant curse will be executed and all hope is now gone (Brueggemann, 1998:141). The fourfold judgment continued to expand in 15:3.

#### 5.4.4 Jeremiah 15:3-5

Jeremiah 15:3-5 reads, “I will send four kinds of destroyers against them”, declares the Lord, ‘the sword to kill and the dogs to drag away and the birds and the wild animals to devour and destroy. I will make them abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth because of what Manasseh son of Hezekiah king of Judah did in Jerusalem. Who will have pity on you, Jerusalem? Who will

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<sup>24</sup> For example, covenant curses are found in Deuteronomy 28:15-68 and Leviticus 26:14-39.

mourn for you? Who will stop to ask how you are”)? The word “destroyers” does not appear in the Hebrew text and was added to qualify the “four kinds” God was sending toward Judah: (1) sword, חֶרֶב (*chereb*), (2) dogs, קָלֵב (*keleb*), (3) birds, עוֹף (*oph*) and (4) wild animals, בְּהֵמָה (*behemah*). The purpose of these four “kinds” was to “devour and destroy”. “Devour” is the Hebrew verb אָכַל (*akal*) and can mean “to consume”, “to eat” and “to eat prey hungrily and quickly” (Ottosson, 1974:236-242). “Destroy” is Hebrew verb שָׁחַת (*shachath*) and can mean to “put an end to existence of something by damaging or attacking it” or “ruin” (Conrad, 2004:583).

Huey (1993:157) sees a progression in this verse as to how the four kinds will destroy. For example, the “sword” would kill a person, the dogs would drag the dead bodies away, the birds of the air would eat the carcass and the wild animals would finish off anything that was left (Huey, 1993:157). Regardless, the four different “kinds” are destructive and are meant to “prepare a miserable end” for the nation of Judah (Keil and Delitzsch, 1996:159). This is a poetic way of describing the judgment set to befall the nation.

After the “four kinds” that devour and destroy, Judah will be “abhorrent to all the kingdoms on the earth”. “Abhorrent” is the Hebrew word זֶוְעָה (*zeva’ah*) and is better translated as “horror” or “an object of horror” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:87-88). God will make Judah an object of horror to rest of the world. Further evidence that this judgment was a result of their covenant disobedience is that the first clause of 15:4 is taken straight from the curses of Deuteronomy 28:25, which reads, “The LORD will cause you to be defeated before your enemies. You will come at them from one direction but flee from them in seven, and you will become a thing of horror to all the kingdoms on earth”. The prophet listed the cause of the coming judgement to be what King Manasseh did in Jerusalem. Manasseh is considered by some to be the most wicked king Judah ever had<sup>25</sup>. Huey (1993:157) provided a concise summary as to Manasseh’s legacy as king of Judah when he wrote, “He encouraged Baal worship and

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<sup>25</sup> For a more detailed list of what King Manasseh did, see 2 Kings 26:1-16.

worship of the starry hosts of heaven. He erected altars to them in the temple. He sacrificed his own son, practiced sorcery and divination, and consulted mediums and spiritists". Huey (1993:157) further warned that "care must be taken not to interpret passages like this one to mean that one generation (or person) is punished for the sins of another". Each person is still held responsible for their own actions. Manasseh stands as a "paradigm for failed covenant" (Brueggemann, 1998:142) further indicating the reason for their destruction was due to covenant disobedience.

Jeremiah 15:5 is a rhetorical question in the form of a lament. God speaks in the first person (Brueggemann, 1998:142). The lament is divided into three questions. Who will have pity on you, who will grieve for you, and who will turn aside to ask about your welfare, O Jerusalem? Pity is the Hebrew word חָמַל (*chamal*) and can mean "to treat with compassion", "to spare" or "feel sorrowful for the suffering of others" (Tsevat, 1980:470-475). Grieve is the Hebrew verb נָדַד (*nud*) which can mean "to show sympathy", "to console" or literally, "to be aimless or homeless" (Hakak, 2009:70). "Turn aside" is the Hebrew verb root סָוַר (*sur*) and means "to change direction" to ask about Judah's peace, health, happiness and fortune (Snijders, 1999:202). The Hebrew word for "ask" is the same word for "Sheol" which may be a play on words intended in the lament (Huey, 1993:158). The expected answer to all three rhetorical questions is an emphatic "no one". No nation on earth would look to pity, mourn, or stop to consider helping Judah once God brought judgment to them.

#### 5.4.5 Jeremiah 15:6-7

Jeremiah 15:6-7 reads, "'You have rejected me,' declares the Lord. You keep on backsliding. So I will reach out and destroy you; I am tired of holding back. I will winnow them with a winnowing fork at the city gates of the land. I will bring bereavement and destruction on my people, for they have not changed their ways". These two verses contain the Hebrew verbs שָׁוַב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in 15:6 for "holding back". God is the subject, and he is tired of "holding back", "relenting" or "showing compassion". שָׁוַב

(*shub*) is used in 15:7 for the phrase “changed their ways”. The people of Judah is the subject, and they have not “changed their ways”, “repented” or “turned from their evil ways”.

These two verses continue the lament that God was making against his people. The nation had “rejected” him and kept on “backsliding”. “Rejected” is the Hebrew word נָטַשׁ (*natash*) and means to forsake, abandon or to give up (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:236-237). “Backsliding” is the Hebrew word אָחַזֵר (*achor*) and has the connotation of heading in the wrong direction (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:9-10). The text is clear that it was the nation who began the process of forsaking the covenant with Yahweh, instead of the other way around. God was faithful, but Judah kept heading in the wrong direction, perhaps with no intention of returning.

Brueggemann (1998:142) showed how Judah’s unfaithfulness was a rejection of their covenantal relationship with Yahweh that led them down a continuous road of disobedience and further away from Yahweh. Because of these actions, God grew tired or weary of giving them another chance and showing compassion to them (נָחַם *nacham*). Dyer (1983:1149) wrote, “The only One who had ever cared for her was God, but she had rejected him. Therefore God vowed to destroy her without compassion. He would winnow her as a farmer winnowed his grain to remove the unbelievers who were like chaff”. The original audience would have understood that analogy to refer to the scattering of their nation (Huey, 1993:158).

God then threatened to bring “bereavement” and “destruction” on his people. “Bereavement” is the Hebrew verb root שָׁכַל (*shakal*) and can mean to “make them become childless” and to “take away their offspring” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:369). “Destruction” is the Hebrew verb root אָבַד (*abad*) and means to annihilate, perish or destroy (Otzen, 1974:19-24). Why is this judgment coming upon Judah? Because they have not “turned” (שׁוּב *shub*) from their ways. “Ways” is the Hebrew root דֶּרֶךְ (*derek*) and can literally mean “road”, “journey” or “manner” (Koch, 1978:271). In Jeremiah 15:6, one of the reasons God was

tired of “relenting” and “showing compassion” was that Judah kept on “backsliding” or heading in the wrong direction. Here, God continues his threat of not “relenting” because Judah has not turned and is still heading down the wrong road.

The major reason God did not נָחַם (*nacham*) from his threatened judgments in this passage is the lack of שׁוּב (*shub*) on Judah’s part. The text does not indicate that God was incapable of showing compassion or relenting from his judgments, but instead he was weary of holding back his judgments because of the unrepentant nature of the people of Judah. The usage of both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this passage shows that God’s unwillingness to “relent” was directly connected to Judah’s unwillingness to “repent”. The usage of both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) also imply that perhaps if Judah had repented of their ways or changed their direction, then God would have showed them compassion and not brought the destruction he was planning for them. This interpretation would certainly be consistent with other uses of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in covenantal context within the book of Jeremiah.

The usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context further reveals that God placed a premium on the nation’s decisions. For example, Donnell (1988:105) wrote, “The setting of judgement is appropriate with regard to Jeremiah’s concept of repentance as expressed in the prophetic oracles, which indicates that the disasters resulting from the transgression of the covenant are inevitable without man’s repentance. Repentance is one of the key elements contained in the poetic forms of the prophetic oracles”. The nation had a responsibility to remain faithful to their covenantal relationship, but in this passage, they abandoned that responsibility. Apparently, their decisions ultimately affected how God responded and the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) shows that aspect of covenantal relationship.

#### **5.4.6 Exegetical conclusions from Jeremiah 15:1-7**

If this prophetic oracle was recorded by the prophet Jeremiah, then the words contained within would predate the exile, but if the lament was recorded by editors, then most likely the words of the oracle would fall into a post exilic timeframe. The language of which the lament consisted indicated impending judgment on the nation of Judah.

There are several conclusions that can be made about this passage. First, this lament shows that there was much stress placed on the relationship between God and Judah. For example, God rejected the intercessory prayers of the prophet. Second, the judgments pronounced on Judah were consistent with what is found within the curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28. Third, the judgments were a result of covenantal disobedience on Judah's part. They had for the most part abandoned their covenantal relationship with Yahweh. The mention of former King Manasseh as a paradigm for failed covenant gives evidence to this thought. Fourth, the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of this passage reveals that: (1) the lack of repentance from Judah is the main reason God would not relent from his judgment, (2) God's unwillingness to show any more compassion was directly related to Judah's unwillingness to "turn" from their ways, (3) perhaps if Judah had repented earlier, then God would have not brought the coming destruction on the nation and (4) Judah's actions directly affected how God responded, meaning that in this context human decisions had an impact on God, and the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in this passage shows that aspect of covenantal relationship.

### 5.5 Exegesis of Jeremiah 26:1-19

Early in the reign of Jehoiakim son of Josiah king of Judah, this word came from the Lord: <sup>2</sup>“This is what the Lord says: Stand in the courtyard of the Lord's house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the Lord. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways.

Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. <sup>4</sup>Say to them, ‘This is what the Lord says: If you do not listen to me and follow my law, which I have set before you, <sup>5</sup>and if you do not listen to the words of my servants the prophets, whom I have sent to you again and again (though you have not listened), <sup>6</sup>then I will make this house like Shiloh and this city a curse among all the nations of the earth.’” <sup>7</sup> The priests, the prophets and all the people heard Jeremiah speak these words in the house of the Lord. <sup>8</sup> But as soon as Jeremiah finished telling all the people everything the Lord had commanded him to say, the priests, the prophets and all the people seized him and said, “You must die! <sup>9</sup>Why do you prophesy in the Lord’s name that this house will be like Shiloh and this city will be desolate and deserted?” And all the people crowded around Jeremiah in the house of the Lord. <sup>10</sup> When the officials of Judah heard about these things, they went up from the royal palace to the house of the Lord and took their places at the entrance of the New Gate of the Lord’s house. <sup>11</sup> Then the priests and the prophets said to the officials and all the people, “This man should be sentenced to death because he has prophesied against this city. You have heard it with your own ears!” <sup>12</sup> Then Jeremiah said to all the officials and all the people: “The Lord sent me to prophesy against this house and this city all the things you have heard. <sup>13</sup> Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the Lord your God. Then the Lord will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you. <sup>14</sup> As for me, I am in your hands; do with me whatever you think is good and right. <sup>15</sup> Be assured, however, that if you put me to death, you will bring the guilt of innocent blood on yourselves and on this city and on those who live in it, for in truth the Lord has sent me to you to speak all these words in your hearing.” <sup>16</sup> Then the officials and all the people said to the priests and the prophets, “This man should not be sentenced to

death! He has spoken to us in the name of the Lord our God.”  
 17 Some of the elders of the land stepped forward and said to the entire assembly of people, 18 “Micah of Moresheth prophesied in the days of Hezekiah king of Judah. He told all the people of Judah, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: “Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets.’ 19 “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the Lord and seek his favor? And did not the Lord relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves!”

נָחַם (*nacham*) and שׁוּב (*shub*) are used together in Jeremiah 26:3, and then נָחַם (*nacham*) is used again in 26:13 and 19. Although all nineteen verses are quoted above, these three verses will be the main focus of exegesis in this section. The other verses are used to bring context and meaning to the passage as a whole; therefore, their exegesis will be brief. My hypothesis is that the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in 26:3, 13 and 19 is significant in understanding the meaning of the entire passage. Thus, after exegetically examining Jeremiah 26:1-19, we see how the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contributes to the understanding of the relationship between God and his people, and we see understand a part of God’s nature and character.

### 5.5.1 The Masoretic Text (MT) and Septuagint (LXX)

The Masoretic Text uses the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) in niphal form in Jeremiah 26:3, 13 and 19, while the Septuagint uses the Greek word παύω (*pauo*) (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Peterson, 2016:227). נָחַם (*nacham*) in this context can mean “reconsider”, “change one’s mind” or “give another chance”, while παύω (*pauo*) can mean to “stop”, “restrain” or “refrain” (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356 and Peterson, 2016:227). The Masoretic Text contains the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*) in qal form in 26:3, while the Septuagint uses the Greek word ἀποστρέφω (*apostrepho*). שׁוּב

(*shub*) in this context can mean to “turn from” and “repent”, while ἀποστρέφω (*apostrepho*) means “to turn away from” or “turn back to” (Peterson, 2016:231). The major difference between the MT and LXX is that the LXX’s translation of παύω (*pauo*) for the Hebrew נָחַם (*nacham*) deprives “the divine action of the emotional content which is present in the Hebrew root” (Donnell, 1988:75), which is why English translations of the LXX prefers to “stop” or “cease” over the words “repent” or “relent” that occurs from English translations of the MT. There are no other major differences between the MT and LXX translations of this passage.

### 5.5.2 Literary and historical-cultural matters

The book of Jeremiah contains prose materials, and Jeremiah 26 is considered biographical narrative prose. This type of narrative is in the form of a biography, and the “prophet and his activities occupy ‘center stage’ in the accounts” (Donnell, 1988:78). This narrative chapter is divided into scenes that identifies several speakers identified: First, Yahweh spoke to Jeremiah (Jeremiah 26:3). Second, Jeremiah spoke to the elders and leaders in the land (Jeremiah 26:13). Third, the elders and leaders of the nation spoke to the people (Jeremiah 26:19). In the first scene, the royal court is the setting as “the king speaks and his will is done” (Donnell, 1988:79). In the second and third scenes, the law court is the setting as Jeremiah “stands accused before the people” and he “is defended by the elders of the land” (Donnell, 1988:79). Huey (1993:235) believed the temple sermon in Jeremiah 26 was the same sermon described in Jeremiah 7:1-5. He (1993:235) wrote, “The emphasis of 7:1-15 was the content of the sermon whereas chap. 26 focuses on the reaction of the people to the message”.

There are three structural elements listed in Jeremiah 26 that are common for biographical narratives: introductory formulas, repeated phrases and dialogue. For example, the introduction is found in 26:1-2 and consists of the two phrases “This word came from the LORD” and “This is what the LORD says”. The concept that “God will relent and not bring about the planned destruction” is

repeated in 26:3, 13 and 19. In each of these occurrences, the text predicates whether God might relent on some action of the people. In this way, this passage repeatedly calls the people to act favourably toward Yahweh by turning from their evil ways. Lastly, the entire structure of Jeremiah 26 is one of dialogue. TM Raitt (1977:37-39) referred to this dialogue as a “summons to repentance”.

Unlike the other passages we have examined in Jeremiah, it is easier to date this biographical narrative, because of the historical chronological reference in Jeremiah 26:1, “Early in the reign of Jehoiakim . . .”. Jehoiakim became king of Judah circa 609 BC after the death of his father Josiah. After Jehoiakim became king, Huey (1993:234) believed, “Jeremiah discerned that the idolatrous practices of the king and his encouragement for the people to participate in those rituals would bring God’s wrath on the nation. Therefore he felt compelled to warn the people of what was going to happen unless they returned to God”.

Scholars who accept this premise believe the account was possibly written by Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch, because Baruch would have been assisting and writing the prophet’s story during this timeframe and offering an eyewitness account of the events (Mullenburg, 1984:242-243). EW Nicholson (1970:17-18), however, attributed the final form Jeremiah 26 to a group of deuteronomic writers, and he does not necessarily reject Baruch as Jeremiah’s scribe but instead rejects the idea that the passage was not edited in later times. In this view, the reference to Jehoiakim is that he was “the model of disobedience in the tradition of Jeremiah” (Brueggemann, 1998:233). Regardless of a scholar’s belief of the origin of the material, Jeremiah 26 is written from the perspective of the prophet or at least someone who is close to him; therefore, the examination of the passage will be dealt with from that point of view. That is not to say, however, that we must deny the deuteronomic influence that is present in the chapter or deny that the final form was later edited by a group of editors of the deuteronomic school of thought.

What is interesting to note is the editor(s) concept of repentance. For example, the narratives contain Baruch's perspective of repentance relating to his experiences with the prophet. There are two phrases that shape the concept of repentance, that is, repent of evil and obey the voice of God (Donnell, 1988:86-87). In this context, repentance is in conditional terms. God is also the subject of repentance, and divine repentance remained a possibility if the nation remained faithful in the covenant relationship.

Whether scholars agree that chapter 26 could be ascribed to Baruch, one thing that is evident is the editor(s) had a particular understanding about repentance as it applied to God and man, that is, God's repentance appeared to be conditional based on man's repentance, specifically in the context of covenant relationship.

### **5.5.3 Jeremiah 26:1-9**

God instructed the prophet to stand in the "courtyard of the LORD's house" and address the crowds that would have been gathered there. "The area was the outer court where the people were allowed to assemble. It may have been a festival day when great throngs of worshipers would have been at the temple. It was an appropriate place to denounce the people's misplaced trust in the temple to protect them from outside threats" (Huey, 1993:234). Jeremiah was "admonished not to omit a word from what God commanded him to speak (cf. Deut 4:2; 12:32)" (Huey, 1993:235). Because the prophet's messages did not make him popular among the people, it is reasonable to assume there would have been temptation for him to tone down God's message in order to avoid judgment from his own nation. There is no indication in the text that Jeremiah did anything but boldly preach the message God gave him and as we shall see later, it almost cost him his life. God gave the reasoning behind his message, for Jeremiah 26:3 reads, "Perhaps they will listen and each will turn from their evil ways. Then I will relent and not inflict on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done".

“Listen” is the Hebrew verb root שָׁמַע (*shama*) and has a deeper connotation than only to “hear” but to “obey” and “heed” what has been heard (Fohrer, 1973:289). “Turn” is the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*) and in this context means to repent from their evil ways (Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-521). שׁוּב (*shub*), however, does not only mean turning away from sin but turning to something else, and in this case it would be the nation turning back to Yahweh and covenant faithfulness. If the nation were to שׁוּב (*shub*) from their sin, then God promised to נָחַם (*nacham*) or “relent, reconsider and change his mind” about the disaster or רָעָה (*ra*) that intended to bring on them. The content of this verse is similar with the content of Jeremiah 18:7-10. First, the same Hebrew word is used for “disaster” and “evil” in both passages. Second, God’s relenting, נָחַם (*nacham*), of judgment is directly related to the nation’s repenting, שׁוּב (*shub*), of their evil ways. Third, we see here in this passage again the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), and that without one the other does not happen.

In 26:3, God gave the reasoning for giving his message, that is, in hopes the people would repent and turn back to him. In 26:4-7, God gave the prophet his actual message to be given to the people. The message was a warning that if the people did not listen to him or the prophets, then the city, Jerusalem and thereby Judah, would be cursed among all the nations. The emphasis in God’s warning is again on whether the people will listen (obey) or not. The usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) together in this passage is significant, because they strengthen the conditional nature of God’s message to the people.

The usage of these Hebrew verbs show a strong bond between what people do influencing what God does. The “if-then” formula listed in 26:4-7 is like that of 18:7-10 and puts the future in the hands of the nation. They could either turn from their sin and avoid judgment, or they could continue in their rebellion and receive God’s judgment. As Huey (1993:235) stated, “These verses imply that we are free to accept or reject God’s words, but we will suffer the consequences. God blesses obedience and punishes disobedience. God’s

attitude toward sin and disobedience does not change, but we can change”. This concept and idea is taken straight from the deuteronomic covenant. Again, the covenant required faithful obedience to experiences the blessings of the covenant.

Jeremiah 26:8-9 record the audience’s response to God’s message. The priest, prophets and all the people wanted Jeremiah dead. Huey (1993:237) explained that this passage contains one of the most complete trials evidenced in the Old Testament: the arrest (26:8), the accusation against the defendant (26:9), the actual trial, including the defendant’s testimony (26:10-15) and the verdict (26:16).

#### 5.5.4 Jeremiah 26:10-15

In the next section, the priests and the prophets take up their case against the prophet in front of the officials of Judah. They wanted Jeremiah sentenced to death, because he prophesied against Jerusalem. Brueggemann (1998:234) stated, “It is the analogy to Shiloh that unnerves the religious leadership. The devotees of the city had imagined that Jerusalem had a privileged place with God and so was immune to the fate of Shiloh”. Jeremiah was able to give his defence to the officials and the people. He started by reminding the people that it was Yahweh who had sent him to give the word to the nation.

In Jeremiah 26:13, the prophet said, “Now reform your ways and your actions and obey the LORD your God. Then the LORD will relent and not bring the disaster he has pronounced against you”. This verse does not contain the combination of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*), but it does include *נָחַם* (*nacham*) as “relent” with God as its subject. Instead of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) “turn from your ways”, the verse uses the Hebrew verb root *יָטַב* (*yatab*) which means to “reform”, “amend” and literally, “return to health” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:133). The prophet calls Judah to do two things: “reform” their ways and “obey” Yahweh. “Obey” is the Hebrew word *שָׁמַע* (*shama*) and can mean to “hear”, “announce”

or “submit to the authority of” someone by carrying out demands and instruction (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:376-377).

Jeremiah announced to his audience that God sent him to deliver the message they had received, which meant he was not a false prophet. Furthermore, he warned them that if they killed him they would be guilty of killing innocent blood. Finally, he presented God’s message as being conditional. Thus, Jeremiah was reiterating what he had spoken in 26:3. If the nation will change their behaviour and once again obey Yahweh, then God will “relent” of the upcoming destruction and judgment. Jeremiah gave a threefold defence on his behalf.

#### **5.5.5 Jeremiah 26:16-19**

After hearing Jeremiah’s testimony, the officials and the people changed their mind about the prophet’s death sentence, because “he has spoken to us in the name of the LORD our God”. Some of the elders in the land reminded everybody of Micah prophesying in the days of King Hezekiah. The elders quoted Micah 3:12, “Therefore because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble, the temple hill a mound overgrown with thickets”.

Jeremiah 26:19 reads, “Did Hezekiah king of Judah or anyone else in Judah put him to death? Did not Hezekiah fear the LORD and seek his favour? And did not the LORD relent, so that he did not bring the disaster he pronounced against them? We are about to bring a terrible disaster on ourselves”! The elders continued to bring to everyone’s mind the story of Hezekiah<sup>26</sup>. In fact, they contrasted two kings, that is, Hezekiah and Jehoiakim. Hezekiah tried to obey God, while Jehoiakim did not. The phrase “seek his favour” can literally mean “smooth his face” and “suggests that one would seek a favourable response from another by stroking the face to soften the countenance (Huey, 1993:238). Perhaps part of Hezekiah’s story that is being recounted here is from 2 Chronicles 32. 2 Chronicles 32:24-26 reads:

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<sup>26</sup> Hezekiah’s story is found in 2 Kings 18-20, Isaiah 36-39 and 2 Chronicles 29-32.

In those days Hezekiah became ill and was at the point of death. He prayed to the LORD, who answered him and gave him a miraculous sign. But Hezekiah's heart was proud and he did not respond to the kindness shown him; therefore the LORD's wrath was on him and on Judah and Jerusalem. Then Hezekiah repented of the pride of his heart, as did the people of Jerusalem; therefore the LORD's wrath did not come on them during the days of Hezekiah.

The question is why did the elders decide to reference this aspect of Hezekiah's life. Why was this a relevant story for their situation? There are a few possible answers to this question. First, the prophecy from Jeremiah states that if the people *שוב* (*shub*) and repent of their evil ways, then God will *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and relent of the disaster he has planned. The implication as we have already noted is that the future to some degree at least is in the hands of the people. Hezekiah appeared to face a similar situation at least twice, when he was healed and when he repented. The account of Hezekiah's sickness and recovery is recorded in Isaiah 38:1-8. Isaiah was sent by God to tell Hezekiah to set his affairs in order, because he was going to die and not recover. The language there appeared to be definite and implies a terminal illness.

After hearing this news, Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to Yahweh. He beseeched Yahweh and reminded him of how faithful he had been. God responded to Hezekiah's prayer by letting him know he heard his prayer and decided to extend his life by fifteen years. This story shows that one man's actions were able to have some sort of an influence on God in terms of what God decided to do. The prophet Jeremiah was telling Judah that as a nation if they were to repent, then God would relent and not send judgment their way. In other words, he was telling them their actions could influence what God decided to do or not to do. Perhaps the elders of Judah remembered the story of Hezekiah's influence on God in this context.

2 Chronicles 32 reveals that Hezekiah had pride in his heart some time after his healing and God's wrath was on him and Jerusalem. Hezekiah repented and

humbled his heart and God's wrath did not come on him or the city. Once again, Hezekiah's actions had an impact to some degree or another on what God did or did not do. These two instances in Hezekiah's life was on the mind of the elders of Jerusalem after hearing God's message delivered through the prophet Jeremiah. The message was clear. All hope was not lost yet. If the people repented, God would not bring judgment on the nation.

#### **5.5.6 Exegetical conclusions from Jeremiah 26:1-19**

We see in this passage the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the context of the relationship between the nation and God. One does not happen without the other. For example, if the nation does not *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and repent of their evil ways, then God will not *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and relent of the judgment headed their way. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this passage reveals and strengthens the conditional nature of God's message to the nation. The emphasis of God's message was on whether Judah would listen and obey Yahweh and return to covenant faithfulness. The future of Judah was partly in their own hands. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and the entire concept of Judah's response having an impact on God's decisions shows that God's relenting is never arbitrary. Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, in a covenantal context between the relationship of God and his people, the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) shows that conditional propositions such as the one we have in this passage is real not just from the nation's perspective but from God's perspective as well.

### **5.6 Chapter conclusion**

This chapter finished answering the third key question, "What was the meaning and message of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 for the original audience"? The purpose of the chapter, therefore, was to determine how the original audience would have understood the meanings and messages of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. Along with this purpose was determining the significance of the Hebrew root verbs *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם*

(*nacham*) to discover how they contribute to the meaning and message of those passages. For each passage, the chapter examined the differences between the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX) if there were any, the literary and historical-cultural matters pertinent to the passages and a commentary style approach to the breakdown of the verses.

For Jeremiah 18:1-10, we saw that when the passage is exegetically examined, the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) does play a vital role in understanding the overall message of the passage. For example, the main point of the passage shifted from the potter's unilateral control and sovereignty over the clay to the flexibility of the potter to work with his clay. In this covenantal context, the author(s) used *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people. Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, this covenantal relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) revealed that conditional propositions were real not only from man's perspective but also from God's perspective. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this context revealed that the response of the nation had an influence on what God did or did not do, meaning that to some degree or another the future of the nation was in the hands of the people depending upon how they responded to God.

For Jeremiah 4:23-31, we saw how the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28 shed an interpretive light on the second clause in Jeremiah 4:27. The example given was the clause, "Though I will not destroy it completely" is better translated as "I have not yet made an end to the devastation", meaning God would carry out the judgment to its end. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) showed the seriousness with which God was bringing the devastation against the nation and land; therefore, the use of the two Hebrew verb roots strengthened the theme of total destruction given throughout the entire passage. Unlike Jeremiah 18:1-10, this text did not leave any room for repentance on behalf of Judah.

For Jeremiah 15:1-7, we saw how much stress was placed on the relationship between God and his people in that he rejected the intercessory prayers of his prophet. We also saw that the usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of this passage revealed: (a) the lack of repentance from Judah was the main reason God would not relent from his judgment, (b) God's unwillingness to show any more compassion was directly related to Judah's unwillingness to "turn" from their ways, (c) perhaps if Judah had repented earlier, then God would have not brought the coming destruction on the nation and (d) Judah's actions directly affected how God responded, meaning that in this context human decisions had an impact on God.

For Jeremiah 26:1-19, we saw a clear example of how the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) worked, meaning that one did not happen without the other. For example, if the nation did not repent, then God would not relent. The usage of the two verb roots also strengthened the conditional nature of God's message to the nation. The emphasis of God's message was on whether Judah would listen and obey Yahweh and return to covenant faithfulness, thus, the future of Judah was partly in their own hands.

In this chapter, I have argued for a more straightforward approach of the interpretation of the Hebrew verb roots שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) as opposed to the accommodating language viewpoint we discussed in chapter two. In other words, I have argued that the nation's actions could genuinely have had an effect on God and influenced him to either turn from judgment or withhold blessings. For those who contend the language used in these passages are anthropomorphic metaphors and therefore, do not communicate reality as we know it, we shall discuss in chapter seven that Fretheim (1984:7) rightly espoused that the anthropomorphic metaphor still has to communicate truth. Furthermore, I have argued that conditional promises play a huge role in understanding these passages. In other words, in the cases where God would have relented, there was conditions placed on the promise. Passages like Jeremiah 18:7-10 have conditional indicators, like the word "if" along with the

usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*). In this straightforward and conditional approach to these passages, it was up to the nations to respond accordingly as to how God they wanted God to act.

We can draw four overall conclusions from this chapter. First, the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) was significant in each of the passages. Second, Jeremiah used שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people. Third, the covenantal context of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) showed that the response of the nation had an influence on what God did or did not do, meaning that to some degree the future of the nation was in the hands of the people depending upon how they responded to God. Fourth, based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the covenantal relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) revealed that conditional propositions were real not only from man's perspective but also from God's perspective.

Having answered the first three key research questions, we can now turn our attention to answering the fourth key question, "What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19"? The next chapter, therefore, looks at the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament in the context of Jeremiah 4, 15, 18 and 26 to see how the exegetical conclusions from this chapter fits in with the rest of the Old Testament.

## Chapter 6

# THE DIVINE COUNCIL

### 6.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter helps partly answer the fourth key question, “What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19”? Chapter five included three hypotheses: (1) when Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 are exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) plays a vital role in understanding the overall message of those passages, (2) Jeremiah used שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people and (3) based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) reveals that conditional propositions are real not only from man’s perspective but also from God’s. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament in the context of Jeremiah 4, 15, 18 and 26. This includes answering the question of does the whole council of the Old Testament affirm or deny the conclusions from the exegetical study in chapter five.

## 6.2 Statistics drawn from biblical data concerning שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*)

The Old Testament's usage of the Hebrew verb root שׁוּב (*shub*) as it is used in the context of Jeremiah has been well documented (see the discussion of שׁוּב (*shub*) in chapter four, Holladay, 1958 and Fabry and Graupner, 2004:461-522). The Old Testament is plentiful in examples where שׁוּב (*shub*) is used exclusively in the context of God's relationship to his people. Scholarship has not been so well documented when it comes to the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*), especially in the covenantal context between God and man; therefore, the following discussion is an attempt to document and draw statistics on the usage of נָחַם (*nacham*) as it is used in reference to God in the Old Testament.

We saw in chapters four and five how the Hebrew verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in the book of Jeremiah, specifically with God as the subject. As previously documented, in the entirety of the Old Testament, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used 108 times in verbal form (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:342). In thirty-three of the 108 times, the verb associates God with relenting or experiencing emotions. For example, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used as an emotion on eight occurrences. Seven of these present God as experiencing regret, sorrow and pity<sup>27</sup>. In the other instance, God stated, "I will not show pity" (Ezekiel 24:14), which implies that he can feel pity if he chooses to do so.

In the remaining twenty-five of the thirty-three occurrences, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in reference to God relenting and can be broken down in the following way. On three of these uses, the text directly states twice that God does not change his mind (Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29). On six of these occasions, the text implies that God can and does change his mind<sup>28</sup>. Finally, in

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<sup>27</sup> These occurrences are found in Genesis 6:6, 6:7, Judges 2:18, 1 Samuel 15:11, 15:35, 1 Chronicles 21:15 and Psalm 90:13.

<sup>28</sup> Psalm 110:4, Isaiah 57:6, Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6, 20:16 and Zechariah 8:14.

sixteen occurrences, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used to portray God as either changing his mind or promising to change his mind depending on if his people repent<sup>29</sup>.

With this data concerning the thirty-three uses of נָחַם (*nacham*), three conclusions can be drawn: (1) On eight occasions, the text states that God is moved with emotion or at least implies that he can be. (2) In twenty-two occurrences, the text says that God relented or at least implies that he can or does. (3) On three occasions, נָחַם (*nacham*) is used when the text states twice that God does not relent or change his mind.

Besides the verb root נָחַם (*nacham*), there are five other Hebrew words used in the Old Testament in reference to God relenting and showing emotion: פָּרַע (*para*) (Ezekiel 24:14), שָׁנָא (*shana*) (Malachi 3:6), שָׁוַב (*shub*) (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11; 2:1, 4, 6), אָצַב (*atsab*) (Genesis 6:6) and חָסַם (*chus*) (Jeremiah 13:14). In addition, there are eleven Old Testament passages that portray God as having relented or changed his mind in accordance with prayer or repentance of people<sup>30</sup>.

In combining these examples, the following data emerges. There are eleven occurrences where God changes in response to human actions (noted above). There are nine instances where the text implies God could change his mind if he chose to do so (Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13, 2:1, 4, 6 and Ezekiel 24:14). There is one instance in which the text portrays God as feeling emotional pain (Genesis 6:6). There is one instance where God declares directly that he does not change (Malachi 3:6). There is one instance where the text implies that God could feel emotion if he chose to do so (Jeremiah 13:14).

With the above data, the following three conclusions are drawn. (1) Outside of the Hebrew word נָחַם (*nacham*), there are twenty times where God changes his mind or at least implies that he could if he chose to do so. (2) Outside of the use

<sup>29</sup> Exodus 32:12, 14, 2 Samuel 24:16, Psalm 106:45, Jeremiah 18:8, 10, 26: 3, 13 and 19, Joel 2:13, 14, Amos 7:3, 6, Jonah 3:9, 10 and 4:2.

<sup>30</sup> Examples include: Isaiah 38:1-7, 2 Kings 20:1-11, 2 Chronicles 32:26, Numbers 11:1-2, 14:12-20, 16:20-35, 2 Samuel 24:17-24, 1 Kings 21:27-29, 2 Chronicles 12:5-8, Psalm 106:23, Deuteronomy 9:13-14, 18-20 and 25.

of נָחַם (*nacham*), there are two occurrences where God feels emotional pain or implies that he could feel emotional pain. (3) Outside the use of נָחַם (*nacham*), one instance declares directly that God does not change.

Given the number of times and application in which נָחַם (*nacham*) is used along with the other Hebrew words and Old Testament texts, four overall conclusions are drawn about the entire council of the Old Testament concerning the concept of God changing his mind or experiencing emotion. (1) There are forty-two occurrences in the Old Testament where God relented or changed his mind, or the texts at least imply he could if he chose to do so. (2) There are ten occurrences in the Old Testament where God experienced genuine emotion, or the texts at least imply he could experience emotion. (3) There are two occurrences in the Old Testament that state directly that God does not change his mind. (4) There is one occurrence in the Old Testament that directly states God does not change.

The Old Testament is full of examples of God changing his mind or experiencing emotion. In reality, only three texts (Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29 and Malachi 3:6) depict God as not changing his mind or not changing in general. There does not appear to be any evidence in the Old Testament that God is incapable of experiencing emotion. On the contrary, the council of the Old Testament does not deny emotions to God and appears to affirm there is literal truth in those verses.

### **6.3 Similar usages of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Old Testament to that of the context of Jeremiah**

When we examine the Old Testament, we discover שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) are used in the same passage on multiple occasions.<sup>31</sup> Not all of

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<sup>31</sup> Other examples excluding the book of Jeremiah include: Genesis 27:42-44, 37:30-35, 50:5-15; Exodus 13:17, 32:12-14; Numbers 23:5-20; Deuteronomy 32:36-43; Judges 2:18-19; 21:6-23; 1 Samuel 15:11-30; 2 Samuel 10:2-14, 12:23-31, 24:13-16; Isaiah 1:24-26, 51:3-11, 52:8-9, 66:13-15; Ezekiel 16:54-55, Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:8-10; Zechariah 1:16-17, 8:14-15; Psalm 23:3-4, 71:20-21, 90:13, 119:52-59, 119:76-79; Job 42:10-11; Lamentations 1:8-21, 2:13-14; 1 Chronicles 19:2-5 and 21:12-20.

these occurrences use שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the same context as we have examined thus far in the book of Jeremiah, but there are at least six of them that do.<sup>32</sup> For example, Joel 2:13-14 reads:

Rend your heart and not your garments. *Return* to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he *relents* from sending calamity. Who knows? He may *turn* and *relent* and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God (emphasis mine).

In addition, there are other Old Testament passages that use only נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of what we have studied in the book of Jeremiah. This section takes a brief look at six passages in which three of them use both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), and the other three use only נָחַם (*nacham*).

### 6.3.1 Exodus 32:7-14

Perhaps the most famous example is Moses' encounter with divine relenting in Exodus 32:7-14. God had finished giving Moses the covenant on Mount Sinai and the two stone tablets of the Testimony (Exodus 31:18) (Stuart, 2006:655). Meanwhile, the Israelites, who were camped at the bottom of the mountain, built a golden calf to worship (Exodus 32:1-6) (Hamilton, 2011:531). In doing so, the Israelites committed an abomination against Yahweh, as partaking in idol worship was strictly forbidden (Exodus 20:3-6, 22-23) (Fretheim, 1991:242-243). To make matters worse, this sin of idolatry took place after God had delivered his people from slavery in Egypt and was renewing the covenant he had previously made with Abraham with this new generation of Israelites (Exodus 24). Exodus 32:7-10 reads:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go down, because your people, whom you brought up out of Egypt, have become corrupt. They have been

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<sup>32</sup> Exodus 32:7-14, Judges 2:18-19, 1 Samuel 15:11-30, Joel 2:13-14, Jonah 3:8-10 and Zechariah 8:14-15.

quick to turn away from what I commanded them and have made themselves an idol cast in the shape of a calf. They have bowed down to it and sacrificed to it and have said, ‘These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt’. “I have seen these people”, the Lord said to Moses, “and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation”.

The word “corrupt” is the Hebrew word *שָׁחַת* (*shachath*) (Conrad, 2004:583-584). This is the same word used in Genesis 6:11-12 where God referred to mankind as “corrupt” before he destroyed them and started over with Noah and his family (Cotter, 2003:54-55). *שָׁחַת* (*shachath*) means more than to only be corrupted; that is, perverted from an original condition. *שָׁחַת* (*shachath*) carries the connotation of being corrupt to the point of ruined or destroyed (Conrad, 2004:583-584). With this in mind, perhaps a better translation of this verse is “Go down, for your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, have *ruined* themselves” (emphasis mine). The Israelites had corrupted themselves to the point of being ruined or destroyed because of their adulterous actions against Yahweh, in which death was the penalty for adultery (Leviticus 20:10) (Hamilton, 2011:531). Fretheim (2010:284-285) wrote:

Israel has openly and willingly entered into a relationship with Yahweh . . . . To use an analogy found elsewhere in the Old Testament, Israel has entered into a marriage relationship with Yahweh with all that that entails in terms of faithfulness . . . . To make such a commitment to Yahweh is a serious matter. The benefits are considerable, but at the same time, the effects of brokenness will be all the more severe if and when rejection of Yahweh occurs.

God responded to the Israelite’s adultery by commanding Moses to leave him alone so in his anger he might destroy them and start over with Moses (Exodus 32:10) (Cole, 1973:226). God apparently did not even want Moses praying about this issue (Hamilton, 2011:538). Douglas Stuart (2006:670-671) believed

God's request in Exodus 32:10 was a rhetorical demand, and God challenged and invited Moses to intercede instead of commanding him to not intercede. Stuart (2006:670-671) believed Moses did not have any influence to stop God from doing anything and viewed this verse as God saying, "I will do this if you do not intervene".

There are three ideas to consider with believing God's request to Moses (Exodus 32:10) was rhetorical and that Moses did not have any influence to stop God's judgment on the Israelites. (1) A scholar would have to make the text mean something other than how it plainly reads, which is exegetically acceptable if the genre and context allows him to do so (See, Corley, Lemke and Lovejoy, 2002:244-255). (2) In viewing Exodus 32:10 as rhetorical, this does not rid the interpreter of the problem of God changing his mind but only creates more problems with the consistency of his interpretation. For example, if one is to say that God invited Moses to intervene in the sense of "I will do this (destroy the Israelites) if you do not intervene (pray)", then does that not still communicate that God's response would be based off of what Moses decided to do? Even with this interpretation, God's response would depend on Moses' actions, so God would still have literally changed his mind (Gowan, 1994:222). Because the outcome remains the same, this view cannot be used to say that Moses did not influence God in this passage. (3) The language used in this passage appears to be definitive. For example, the language used does not appear to allow for the interpretation that God was somehow playing a mind game with Moses (Enns, 2000:572). Instead, God wanted Moses to leave him alone about the matter. The nature of the language parallels with what happened earlier in history when God flooded the earth and started anew with Noah and his family (Genesis 6) (Sanders, 2007:61). In the same way, God threatened to destroy the Israelites and start anew with Moses (Exodus 32:10). The word "destroy" is the Hebrew word *כָּלָה* (*kalah*) (Helfmeyer, 1995:157-164). In the piel stem (which intensifies the verb), *כִּלְהַ* (*kalah*) means, "to finish", and "takes into account the way that leads to this end and describes the goal attained" (Helfmeyer, 1995:161). In this view, God genuinely meant what he

said to Moses in Exodus 32:10 (Enns, 2000:572). He was ready to destroy the Israelites and start anew with Moses.

Exodus 32:11-14 reads:

But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God. “Lord”, he said, “why should your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, ‘It was with evil intent that he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains and to wipe them off the face of the earth’? Turn from your fierce anger; relent and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember your servants Abraham, Isaac and Israel, to whom you swore by your own self: ‘I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and I will give your descendants all this land I promised them, and it will be their inheritance forever’”. Then the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.

JD Hannah (1983:156) noted that Moses pleaded for mercy for the Israelites on two bases: God’s testimony to the Egyptians and God’s promises to the patriarchs, because such destruction of the nation of Israel would have vindicated Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt. How would it have looked in the eyes of the Egyptian people if Yahweh destroyed the Israelites after showing his power to the Egyptians in Egypt to rescue the Israelites from them? Destroying everyone could damage Yahweh’s testimony to the nations on earth. Moses argued that others would view Yahweh as a God who breaks his promises and asked God directly to relent about the disaster he planned to bring on the Israelites (Exodus 32:12) (Fretheim, 1991:285-286). Moses did not even put his request in question form. Moses spoke to Yahweh boldly and told him to turn from his anger and change his mind (Hamilton, 2011:539). The word “turn” used here is שׁוּב (*shub*).

God responded to Moses' prayer by relenting נָחַם (*nacham*), or changing his mind about the disaster he had planned to bring on the Israelites (Exodus 32:14) (Hamilton, 2011:539). In examining commentaries, it appears that scholars agree to the literalness of the conversation between Moses and God but disagree as to the literalness of God's change of mind (See Enns, 2000:572-573 and Cole, 1973:227). For example, Hannah (1983:156) stated, "As a result, God relented of His threatened course of judgment. The word 'relented' does not mean that God changed his mind but that He embarked on another course of action". There is admission that God embarked on another course of action because of Moses' prayer, but that embarking on another course of action does not mean that God changed his mind (Cole, 1973:227). The problem with this view is that if God was intending on doing one thing (destroying the Israelites) but embarked on another course of action because of Moses' prayer, then does that not still imply that God relented and changed his mind?

Peter Enns (2000:572) wrote, "It certainly seems that Moses, through argument and pleading, has been able to get God to alter his plans. To put it in plain English, Moses gets God to change his mind. There is really no other way to read this, and we should not try to avoid it". Enns (2000:572) took a more literal approach in his commentary and as a result did not have to find an alternative meaning to how the text reads. Even if this encounter is interpreted as "language of accommodation", the verse presumably must still communicate truth. In this case, what does "God relented" mean if God literally did not relent? Exodus 32:7-14 is not the only encounter Moses had with divine relenting (Numbers 11:1-2, 14:12-20 and 16:20-35). By the end of his life, Moses' intercessory prayers appeared to have changed God's mind on at least four occasions.

### **6.3.2 Amos 7:1-6**

Amos 7 consists of two accounts of נָחַם (*nacham*) as it relates to divine relenting. Yahweh indicted Israel on four accounts: they sold the righteous for

silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, trampled on the heads of the poor, denied justice to the oppressed and committed immoral sexual acts (Clendenen, 1998: 353). The prophet Amos prophesied at a time when Israel's greed and pride caused much spiritual and moral decline (House, 1998:357-358). Amos started his book by recording Yahweh's pronouncement of a series of judgments set to befall Israel's neighbours (Amos 1:3-2:5) (Hussell, 2013:4). After this, Amos turned his attention on the impending judgment set to befall Israel for the fullness of her sins (Smith, 2001:353). In Amos 7, Yahweh gave the prophet visions of what he had planned for the Israelites, because they refused to heed the call to repentance. Amos 7:1-6 reads:

This is what the Sovereign LORD showed me: He was preparing swarms of locusts after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up. When they had stripped the land clean, I cried out "Sovereign LORD, forgive! How can Jacob survive? He is so small"! So the LORD relented. "This will not happen", the LORD said. This is what the Sovereign Lord showed me: The Sovereign Lord was calling for judgment by fire; it dried up the great deep and devoured the land. Then I cried out, "Sovereign Lord, I beg you, stop! How can Jacob survive? He is so small"! So the Lord relented. "This will not happen either", the Sovereign Lord said.

In this passage, God threatened to destroy Israel's crops at the hands of locusts and the great deep, and land by fire (Amos 7:1, 4) (Smith and Page, 1995:128). Amos interceded on behalf of the nation (Amos 7:2, 5). In response to Amos' prayer, Yahweh changed his mind about the disasters he had planned on the Israelites (Amos 7:3, 6). At this point, scholars may be tempted to deny the literalness of God relenting since the genre of this passage is prophetic vision, which can take on the characteristics of symbolic and figurative language (see Duvall and Hayes, 2005:368-385). While it is true that these are prophetic visions, the genre of a passage in reality does not change the meaning of anthropomorphic statements. For example, whether or not scholars believe

these visions literally happened has no effect on the literal truths communicated by these visions. There are three points to consider concerning the literalness of these visions in Amos 7.

(1) Amos' introductory statement credits these visions to Yahweh (Amos 7:1), indicating this was not a hallucination or daydream (Smith and Page, 1995:128). Billy Smith and Frank Page (1995:128) noted, "God was at work revealing an imminent, potentially devastating event". (2) The nature and content of the first vision appears logical and tangible. In other words, the first vision contained locusts that are eating crops (Amos 7:1-2). Exodus 10 reveals that the plague of locust is something Yahweh had brought on a nation in the past. The word "preparing" is the Hebrew word יָצַר (*yatsar*) and refers to God's creativity in either the forming of creation or in this case the forming of the destruction of Israel (Otzen, 1990:257-266). From Amos' vision, Yahweh prepared to plague Israel with locusts as he had plagued Egypt during the time of Moses (Exodus 10). Furthermore, there are locust plagues throughout the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 28:3, 2 Chronicles 7:13-14 and Joel 1:4). Even if the locust threat is not interpreted literally, the truth is still extracted; that is, the Israelites' food supply would be destroyed. (3) The timing of the locusts' swarm was to be "after the king's share had been harvested and just as the second crop was coming up" (Amos 7:1). Smith and Page (1995:128) noted, "A locust swarm at the end of the rainy season, as the grass used the last available moisture for final growth, would result in tragedy for the farmers and their livestock. The onset of the dry season would allow no more growth until the next rainy season". In other words, this signified that the people had not yet had their crops, and a famine would have resulted.

"When they had stripped the land clean" begins with the Hebrew verb הָיָה (*hayah*) (Bernhardt, Bergman and Ringgren, 1978:369-382). The verb used here, literally means "and it will be" or "and it shall come to pass" (Smith and Page: 1995:128). Either way, the Hebrew language appears definitive. Either Yahweh was serious in his vision to Amos about bringing judgment on the

nation, or he mislead Amos with this vision. The language indicates that Yahweh intended to send this plague, and he was going to do so imminently. In response to seeing this vision, Amos desperately interceded on Israel's behalf (Amos 7:2). His action showed that Amos at the least thought God was serious in this threat. Amos pleaded that God forgive them. Forgive is the Hebrew word סָלַח (*selach*). This verb “has no object and may not have its usual meaning of ‘pardon for sin.’ Rather, the prophet’s appeal was for God to exercise forbearance and turn the threatened locust plague away from Israel.” (Smith and Page, 1995:129).

Yahweh responded to Amos's plea by relenting (Amos 7:3) (Hill and Patterson, 2008:197). The text communicates that God cancelled the threat of the locust plague, but as documented, not everyone will agree that God changed his mind. How then can God cancel a threat he was intending on bringing to the Israelites if he did not literally relent? נָחַם (*nacham*) means “to allow oneself a change of heart regarding something” (Smith and Page, 1995:128). Stuart (1987:370-371) commented that “this vision gave a glimpse of the potential future of what would have happened in Israel if Amos did not intervene”.

The same pattern is found in the second vision (Amos 7:4-6). The fire symbolized drought, hence the drying up of the great deep (Smith and Page, 1995:131). Amos saw God's fire dry up the water and possibly the people (Amos 7:4). With no food or water, this meant tragedy for the Israelites. Amos intervened on behalf of Israel asking Yahweh to stop the fire (Amos 7:5). God responded by changing his mind about the disaster (Amos 7:6).

The components of both visions do not have to be literal for God to have literally changed his mind. For example, whether or not the locusts are seen as symbolic of crop failure and the fire as symbolic of severe drought (which would cause crop failure) has no bearing on the reality of the truths communicated by these visions. The point of the visions is that Yahweh threatened judgment onto Israel but later relented because Amos intervened through intercessory prayer on behalf of the nation (Smith and Page, 1995:269). Even though the language

here is written in almost poetic form, it is still definite. God intended to do one thing but decided in his sovereignty to do something else. If this is not the case, then what meaning does the use of נָחַם (*nacham*) have?

Like Exodus 32:7-14, the reasons God wanted to judge Israel should be noticed. In Amos 3:2, God reminded them of their special election; that is, they were God's chosen people to fulfill their duty in life and take God's kingdom all over the earth (Deuteronomy 7:6) (Smith and Page, 1995:70). Yahweh entered a marriage covenant with Israel, and once again, they were guilty of adultery and not keeping their end of the covenant. The penalty for this under the covenant was divorce and death (Leviticus 20:10). This helps shed light on the seriousness of the visions and judgments that God intended to bring on Israel. There appears to be nothing in the text or language that suggests God was testing Amos by saying something he did not ultimately mean.

### 6.3.3 Jonah 3:3-10

Jonah's interaction with God concerning Nineveh is perhaps one of the most extraordinary examples of the use of נָחַם (*nacham*) pertaining to God relenting based off the decisions of people (whether by intercessory prayer or repentance). Interestingly, this account is different from the others (Moses, Amos and Jeremiah) in that Jonah's encounter does not deal directly with the nation of Israel or Judah. Jonah's encounter with divine relenting shows that God cares and has compassion for the other nations as well (Allen, 1976:175-176). After Jonah rejected God's commission to preach to Nineveh and repented of that sin (Jonah 1:2, 2:1-9), God came to Jonah a second time with a proclamation to give the people of Nineveh (Jonah 3:1-10).

Jonah 3:3-4 reads, "Jonah obeyed the word of the Lord and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. Jonah began by going a day's journey into the city, proclaiming, 'Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown'". The phrase "forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown" consists of five Hebrew words: **וְנִינְוֵה יִינְוֶה בְּיָמֵי אַרְבָּעִים עוֹד** (*od*

*arbaim yom ninweh nehpaket*) (Limburg, 2011:150). The last verb in this phrase, *הָפַק* (*haphak*) carries a sense of vagueness, because it can mean destroyed, overturned, or changed (Seybold, 1978:423-427). Was God saying that in forty-days Nineveh would experience judgment or a change of heart (Smith and Page, 1995:259)? Because this is the only phrase spoken to Nineveh from Jonah (Longman and Garland, 2008:479), textual clues are considered. The context of this passage allows the reader to see how Nineveh understood Jonah's message.

The argument here is that the Ninevites understood Jonah's message to say that judgment was coming. Jonah 3:10 would seem to confirm this when it says God did not bring about the destruction he had planned. The argument could be made that if God had not intended on destroying Nineveh in the first place, then he would not have had any reason for changing his mind about the matter. If the verb *הָפַק* *haphak* meant that Nineveh would experience a change of heart (which nonetheless was the outcome), then the text would be misleading to say God in fact intended to bring destruction on the city of Nineveh. Jonah 3:5-7 reads:

The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth. When Jonah's warning reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, covered himself with sackcloth and sat down in the dust. This is the proclamation he issued in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let people or animals, herds or flocks, taste anything; do not let them eat or drink.

The fact that the Ninevites "believed God" does not mean they converted to faith in Yahweh, rather, this should be understood as they believed the message Jonah preached (Smith and Page, 1995:259). They knew Jonah's God was serious about bringing destruction on their city. This is evident in the king's call for repentance on behalf of the Ninevites (Jonah 3:8). *שׁוּב* (*shub*) is used four times in Jonah 3:8-10 and has both God and man as its subject. *נָחַם*

(*nacham*) is used twice and only has God as its subject. For example, Jonah 3:8-10 in the English Standard Version reads:

But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and let them call out mightily to God. Let everyone *turn* from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands. Who knows? God may *turn* and *relent* and *turn* from his fierce anger, so that we may not perish". When God saw what they did, how they *turned* from their evil way, God *relented* of the disaster that he had said he would do to them, and he did not do it (emphasis mine).

The king thought that perhaps Jonah's God would relent and save them from sure destruction (Jonah 3:9). This is yet another example of where Yahweh's relenting or change of mind appeared to be connected with human choices. He saw the Ninevites repent and decided to relent (Jonah 3:10). Smith and Page (1995:271) stated, "God decided that in light of Nineveh's turning, he would save them rather than follow through on his previous announcement to destroy them".

Not believing that God literally relented forces a reinterpretation of this interchange as an anthropomorphic metaphor, where God is accommodating himself to the human level. In other words, it appears that God relented but in reality, he did not. However, the ultimate problem is not in labelling of this as an anthropomorphic metaphor. Instead, the problem is extracting the literal truth behind the anthropomorphism. If this passage is interpreted as nothing more than "language of accommodation", then what truth is the metaphor communicating? If this interchange is interpreted literally, the truth is clear. God literally relented when the Ninevites literally repented.

Furthermore, how Jonah understood his encounter with divine relenting should be considered. According to Jonah 4:1-2, he understood God's change of mind as literal. Jonah 4:1-2 reads, "But Jonah was greatly displeased, and became angry. He prayed to the LORD, 'O LORD, is this not what I said when I was still

at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity”.

Jonah knew that Yahweh was a God who relents from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2) (Bruckner, 2004:18). God responded in Jonah 4:4 to this claim, “But the LORD replied, ‘Have you any right to be angry’”? God did not rebuke Jonah for knowing he was a God can relent in light of human repentance. In fact, Jonah argued that the reality of God’s possible change of mind was the driving force behind him trying to get out of the responsibility of going to Nineveh in the first place (Jonah 4:2). Jonah knew that in the event Nineveh repented, Yahweh would have compassion on them and relent from the disaster he had planned against them (Jonah 4:2) (Boda and McConville, 2012:464). This is why the Book of Jonah is perhaps one of the most extraordinary examples of God relenting. The literalness of God relenting is foundational to the entire story involving Jonah and Nineveh (Boyd, 2000:78). Dismissing this encounter as nothing more than an anthropomorphism without any literal truth possibly leads to a misunderstanding of a major theological theme of the book and message of Jonah.

#### **6.3.4 Genesis 6:6-7**

Genesis 6:5-6 reads, “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The LORD was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain”. The Hebrew word verb root נָחַם (*nacham*) is translated “grieved” (Fabry and Simian-Yofre, 1998:340-356). The verb אָצַב (*atsab*) is translated as “filled with pain” (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:279-280).

God was grieved to the point of feeling pain in his heart over man’s wickedness and sin (Matthews, 1996:344). If this language does not express literal truth and present a correct view of reality, then what does it mean? How can the text say

God was grieved in his heart if he was not grieved in his heart? Furthermore, an examination of the context reveals that God's grief and the pain in his heart were the catalyst behind his decision to flood the earth (Genesis 6:7). The flood would seem to only makes sense if God literally experienced genuine grief. The point is there is no reason to assume this passage does not express reality. Humanity, in their wickedness and sin, grieved God's heart to the point where he judged them with a flood.

If נָחַם (*nacham*) is not interpreted literally in this passage and God is truly not capable of experiencing emotion, then on what basis can he judge sin? Would not a God who cannot experience emotion be indifferent to sin? The Old Testament, however, reveals a God who genuinely experiences emotion and is grieved when his creation ultimately chooses wickedness and sin over him (Ezekiel 6:9-10, Jeremiah 23:9-11 and Isaiah 63:9-10).

### 6.3.5 1 Samuel 15:10-11, 35

1 Samuel 15:10-11 reads, "Then the word of the LORD came to Samuel: 'I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions'. Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the LORD all night". The Hebrew verb נָחַם (*nacham*) is used to represent God being grieved, whereas in 15:35, the Hebrew verb אָבַל (*abal*) is used to signify God's grief over making Saul king (Baumann, 1974:44-47). This entire chapter dealt with God's rejection of Saul as Israel's king. God's rejection of Saul was not arbitrary, and God's grief stemmed from the decisions that Saul made. Saul had "turned", שָׁבַח (*shub*), away from God. Saul did not carry out the instructions of Yahweh; therefore, God was grieved that he had made him king (1 Samuel 13).

Bergen (1996:170) noted the similarity between 1 Samuel 15 and Genesis 6. (1) Humanity's sin in Genesis 6 caused God to remove the sinners, while Saul's sin caused God to remove him as king. (2) The wickedness of man led to the choosing of the righteous Noah, while Saul's wickedness led to the choosing of

David, a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22). Bergen (1996:170) wrote, "Clearly, both passages teach that God is aware of and responsive to choices made by people, reacting favorably only when people choose the option of obedience to the divine will".

God's change of mind concerning Saul as king should not come as a surprise. God's first choice for Israel was to not have a king but instead look to him as their leader (1 Samuel 8:6-9). Still, at the people's persistence God gave them a king (1 Samuel 8:19-22). 1 Samuel 13:13 reveals that God intended to bless Saul's kingship as long as he followed Yahweh's command. Saul's choice to follow his own agenda resulted in God changing his plans for him. The argument here is that because God changing his plans based on human choices is a theme repeated in the Old Testament, the literalness of those passages should be considered. In other words, in the case of 1 Samuel 10-11, what does the passage mean when it says God was grieved, if in reality God was not grieved?

### **6.3.6 1 Chronicles 21:14-15**

1 Chronicles 21:14-15 reads, "So the LORD sent a plague on Israel, and seventy thousand men of Israel fell dead. And God sent an angel to destroy Jerusalem. But as the angel was doing so, the LORD saw it and was grieved because of the calamity and said to the angel who was destroying the people, 'Enough! Withdraw your hand'". David had provoked God to anger with his disobedience in counting Israel's fighting men (1 Chronicles 21:1-8). The consequences of David's actions led to 70,000 men dying from diseases. God was grieved נָחַם (*nacham*) when he saw the Israelites dying and changed his mind about the destruction he had planned.

Thompson (1994:162) wrote, "In at least human terms, God does not repent or change his mind. It is better to think of a divine decree going forth that would be fulfilled unless a change of circumstances came about, such as repentance". In Thompson's (1994:162) view, there is evidence that David expressed true

repentance; therefore, God removed the judgment. This interpretation, however, contains an inconsistency. If this passage is seen as God issuing a divine decree that says, “If there is no repentance, then there will be judgment”, then would it not be correct to say that God is ultimately saying “If there is repentance, I will change my mind about the disaster I have planned”? How is this view any different from what the biblical text conveys? The point is that the literalness behind the action within the passage must be accepted in order for the interpretation to make sense. In this case, Thompson (1994:162) avoided advocating that God relented but ultimately affirmed that David’s repentance changed God’s plan.

#### **6.4 Reconciling other Old Testament passages**

To believe there are no exegetical reasons to interpret passages that depict God as relenting merely as “language of accommodation” with no literalness behind the anthropomorphism means there must be reconciliation with the texts that appear to convey that God does not relent. Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29 and Malachi 3:6 are the only references in the Old Testament that state directly that God does not change his mind or change in general. To believe God does not change his mind assumes these three verses describe God in literal terms, and by default, the forty-two occurrences (previously documented) that imply God can and does change his mind speak about God in non-literal figurative terms. However, is this assumption correct? Perhaps examining the context of the chapters gives a broader understanding of the verses and answers the following question: in what way is God not like a man in that he does not change his mind?

##### **6.4.1 Numbers 23:13-20**

Balak, king of Moab, sent a message to Balaam the prophet to come curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:11). God refused to allow Balaam to fulfil the king’s wishes (Numbers 22:12). Balak then offered Balaam a handsome reward to curse the Israelites (Numbers 22:16). Balaam could only speak what God put in

his mouth, which was blessings (Numbers 23:12). This angered Balak (Numbers 23:11), and God responded with a message to him. Numbers 23:18-19 reads: “Arise, Balak, and listen; here me, son of Zippor. God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfil”?

The context of this passage reveals that God was responding to Balak’s intentions of hiring Balaam to curse Israel (Boyd, 2000:80-81). God informed Balaam that he is not like a man who can lie when it is profitable or change his mind whenever it is convenient for him to do so (Bellinger, 2001:269). In other words, God is not like a man to change his mind in the way that Balak wanted him to do so. Balak wanted God to change his mind and curse Israel through Balaam. Instead of this passage being used to support the idea that נָחַם (*nacham*) should not be interpreted literally when it refers to God and he does not relent at all, it is perhaps better reconciled to the whole council of the Old Testament as showing that when God does change his mind, the decision is not arbitrary. In this view, there is no contradiction with this verse and the others that say God relented in certain situations. This verse simply shows that God does not always change his mind in the way a man thinks he should.

#### **6.4.2 1 Samuel 15:27-29**

1 Samuel 15:29 is an almost word-for-word quote of Numbers 23:19. “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind”. In the same way as Numbers 23:19, this verse appears to be definite proof God does not change his mind. An examination of the context, however, reveals that this verse does not necessarily have to render that interpretation.

The context reveals that Samuel spent all night trying to persuade God to change his mind about dethroning Saul (1 Samuel 15:10-11). Does this not demonstrate that Samuel at least thought it was possible for God to relent (Boyd, 2000:80)? Samuel concluded that God in this instance would not change

his mind regarding Saul's dethronement (Bergen, 1996:174). In reality, Saul did not give God a reason for him to change his mind. As shown in the previous texts, perhaps if Saul would have repented when he still had a chance, God would have relented concerning his dethronement. God had decided to remove Saul as king based on Saul's actions, and he was not going to change his mind about the matter (1 Samuel 15:26). In light of the whole council of the Old Testament, this verse does not necessarily teach that God never changes his mind. If all references to divine relenting are interpreted literally, there still is no contradiction. For example, God decides when he changes his mind and when he does not. In the context of 1 Samuel 15:29, God chose not to relent concerning ending Saul's kingship.

#### 6.4.3 Malachi 3:6

The last verse in the Old Testament that states directly that God does not change is Malachi 3:6, "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed". Does this verse support the idea that God does not relent? In reality, the verse does not address whether or not God can relent, and it does not include נָחַם (*nacham*). Instead, the word "change" is the Hebrew root שָׁנָה (*shana*), which can also mean "alter" (Holladay and Köhler, 2000:378).

An argument can be made that the context reveals this passage is about God's unchanging character, rather than his impassibility (Boyd and Eddy, 2009:68). Israel was the unfaithful wife deserving destruction (Malachi 2:1, 11). The people of Israel essentially charged Yahweh with false accusations; namely, unfaithfulness and loving evildoers (Malachi 2:17, 3:14-15) (Taylor and Clendenen, 2004:400). God brought up charges against Israel for unfaithfulness to the marriage covenant (Malachi 2:11). God prepared Israel for the day of his coming, which signified his judgment, when he purified the priestly lineage of the Levites so that the sacrifices became acceptable again (Malachi 3:2-4). The context reveals that if "Yahweh were the kind of unfair and unfaithful God they charge him with being, who acted capriciously on the basis of momentary convenience, he would have put an end to them long ago" (Taylor and

Clendenen, 2004:401). Because Yahweh is steadfast, despite Israel's fickleness, he would not destroy Israel (Baker, 2006:282).

The verb form of Malachi 3:6 indicates actions that have already taken place and is better translated, "Because I, Yahweh, have not changed, you, the sons of Jacob, have not perished" (Taylor and Clendenen, 2004:401). In terms of the covenant, Yahweh kept his end of the bargain. Israel could rely on God's unchanging character to save them. The point of Malachi 3:6 is that if it were not for God's unchanging character and covenantal integrity, then Israel's unfaithfulness would have destroyed them. This verse, then, does not ultimately prove that God does not or cannot relent, but rather, proves that God is unchanging in his character.

### 6.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter helped partly answer the fourth key question, "What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19"? This chapter has shown that the hypotheses of chapter five are consistent with the whole council of the Old Testament, and the Old Testament contains numerous examples of the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the same context as what we examined in the book of Jeremiah. This chapter has also argued for a literal interpretation of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) when it relates to the context between God and man, and we examined several passages that show how the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contributes to the meaning of the overall passage. The chapter ended showing that three texts commonly used to deny a literal interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) as it relates to God can be interpreted in alternative ways, thus rendering no contradictions with the exegetical conclusions from my thesis.

The question remains why then, as previously documented in chapter two, have some scholars, like Oliphint (2012:123) and Geisler (2010:117), have denied the reality of the literalness behind certain phrases or concepts in light of how

many times they appear in the Old Testament? Why have so many scholars dismissed these usages of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) as anthropomorphic metaphors that do not depict reality but instead are nothing more than “language of accommodation”? These questions shall be explored in the next chapter as we deal with the bigger picture of moving towards a metaphorical interpretation.

## **Chapter 7**

# **TOWARDS A METAPHORICAL INTERPRETATION**

### **7.1 Chapter introduction**

This chapter helps finish answering the fourth key question, “What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19”? The purpose of this chapter is to look at the bigger picture of moving towards a metaphorical interpretation. This chapter begins with a discussion on the anthropomorphic problem and interpreting anthropomorphisms within the Old Testament. The discussion moves into comparing ancient Hebrew thought and Greek thought and how anthropomorphic depictions of the divine would have been understood according to the Hebrews and Greeks. The chapter closes by examining the bigger picture of metaphorical interpretation among prominent ancient Greek philosophers and prominent early Christian leaders from the first to fourth centuries AD. This section examines selected philosophers and early church leaders, using their own words, to trace how metaphorical interpretation evolved and the possible influence on how that evolution has affected the interpretation of “divine” references to שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*), the Old Testament’s portrayal of God relenting or showing emotion.

## 7.2 The anthropomorphic problem

A main argument I have made in my thesis is that based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in their covenantal context shows that the conditional propositions are real from God's perspectives as well as man's. In other words, when man literally repents, then God literally relents. This stems from the exegetical work on the passages and that there does not appear to be anything in the text that indicates the conditional propositions are not real. The biggest argument against this idea is that God's relenting is an anthropomorphism; therefore, it is not meant to be taken literally. The argument sometimes goes that God's change of mind only appears that way from the human perspective. The different views on God as the subject of נָחַם (*nacham*) was discussed in detail in chapter two. I believe it would greatly enhance the exegetical work of my thesis if I devoted an entire section to working out the anthropomorphic problem. The following section is my attempt to do just that in hopes of strengthening my conclusions from the previous chapters of exegetical work and to show that the anthropomorphic problem is no problem at all. In order to accomplish this goal, we must discuss the background of the anthropomorphism, the use of anthropomorphism within the Old Testament and interpreting anthropomorphisms.

### 7.2.1 Background of the anthropomorphism

#### 7.2.1.1 Origin and history

"Anthropomorphism" stems from two Greek words: *ánthrōpos* (human) and *morphē* (shape or form). Anthropomorphism, in the biblical sense, can be defined as when the biblical authors ascribed human terms or characteristics to God (Bromiley, 1979:136-138). Although the English word "anthropomorphous" originated in the mid-eighteenth century AD in reference to the attribution of human form and behavioural characteristics to deity and animals, the concept of the anthropomorphism extends back into the earliest of biblical times. The first examples of biblical anthropomorphisms are found in Genesis where God

is depicted as speaking (Genesis 1:3), seeing (Genesis 1:3), and walking (Genesis 3:8).

Ancient cultures, such as the Greeks and Romans, attributed humanlike characteristics to various forms of deity.<sup>33</sup> Throughout Old Testament history, ancient Mesopotamian people groups, such as the Canaanites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, oftentimes created idols that physically represented their gods, thus, representing their gods in anthropomorphic ways (Yamauchi, 1968:29-44). These ancient religions believed that their deity and the man-made idols were so closely fashioned that whatever one did to the idol, he ultimately did to that god (Bromiley, 1995:495). The idol represented the deity's image and abode.

The Israelites, descendants of Abraham who were specifically chosen to be Yahweh's treasured people and kingdom of priest in the ancient world (Exodus 19:5-6 and Deuteronomy 7:6), were explicitly commanded not to build any idol in the form of anything in heaven or on the earth for the purpose of worship (Exodus 20:4-6). Because the Israelites were monotheistic, Yahweh was to be their only God. Furthermore, they themselves were created in his image, and there was no need for him to be expressed in an anthropomorphic way by idols. The ancient Israelites were to be his physical representation as he "dwelled with them" (Exodus 29:46). This was supposed to be one of the major distinctions between the Israelites and their neighbours that worshipped multiple pagan gods (Bright, 2000:159). Evidence such as that of Elephantine Island in Egypt and the religious state of the nation before the exile in Jeremiah's day indicates Israel did not always worship Yahweh alone (Drane, 2009:81 and Huey, 1993:172).

While the concept of anthropomorphism is found in ancient religions, not all anthropomorphisms are expressed through a physical representation of deity. For example, the Old Testament does not portray God in the form of a physical

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<sup>33</sup> The Greek and Roman gods were depicted as experiencing jealousy, pride, and love, as well as participating in human activities such as hunting, war, and sexual desires. See Luke Roman and Monica Roman (2010).

idol. Rather, the Old Testament ascribes human characteristics and emotions to God through the language used by the biblical writers, such as God relenting (Exodus 32:14).

Although anthropomorphic language can be seen as a source of controversy and tension among biblical scholars today, the earliest known commentator on the concept of anthropomorphism in terms of its use in religion was the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. Xenophanes stated, “If oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds” (Jones, 1970:19). In other words, Xenophanes believed that portraying the gods in human terms did not reflect reality about God, because if certain animals were like humans, then they would portray the gods in their terms. In this view, the gods transcend human capabilities and thus are not comparable to creatures.

Murray Rae (2005:48) argued that out of deference to the transcendence of God both Jewish and Christian traditions since have tried to minimize the use of anthropomorphic language when speaking of deity in that “Aramaic translations of the Old Testament as well as the Septuagint try to avoid the attribution of human characteristics to God”. The Hellenized Jews found anthropomorphic depictions of God as highly offensive; therefore, the Septuagint translators removed most of them (Roetzel, 2002:119). For example, in the Septuagint, Moses does not see the back of God (Joosten, 2012:169). There are a number of problems with this approach of trying to minimize anthropomorphisms, which becomes clear in light of the purpose and function of anthropomorphisms.

### *7.2.1.2 Purpose and Function*

What is the purpose of anthropomorphisms; that is, biblical writers portraying God in human terms? What function do anthropomorphisms serve, especially in terms of interpreting Scripture? The answer to these questions lies in how anthropomorphic language is understood. For example, anthropomorphic

language is characterized as figures of speech or metaphors, and as such not all of them should be interpreted in a literal fashion (See Howell, 2013). In this understanding, the purpose of anthropomorphisms is simply to describe God in human terms, thus providing the best possible way for humans to properly understand him (Guthrie, 1995:63).

Because of finite human minds, it only makes sense that biblical writers used metaphorical language in order for mankind to comprehend and learn about the infinite God. In reality, all language about God in the Bible is to some degree anthropomorphic because all language is human language. John Sanders (1998:22) wrote:

. . . the term *anthropomorphism* may have a narrow or broad meaning. The narrow, and customary, sense refers to speaking of God as having human characteristics such as emotions or eyes. Anthropomorphism, however, is sometimes used more broadly in the sense that all our language about God is *human language*. When speaking of God, whether we use abstract terms such as *necessity* and *aseity* or concrete terms such as *lover* and *rock*, we are inevitably predicating properties of God that are derived from human categories.

Because God is immaterial Spirit (John 4:24), the only way possible for humans to have a framework to understand him is through anthropomorphic language. Perhaps a better understanding of the purpose of anthropomorphisms is to describe God in ways that are more understandable to mankind; therefore, anthropomorphisms allow mankind to relate to God. When it comes to the function of anthropomorphisms, there appears to be a question of whether they function only as “language of accommodation”: that is, they accommodate man’s ignorance, or serve in some capacity to depict reality; that is, even though they are metaphorical they still communicate literal truths about God’s nature and character (Howell, 2013:22-23).

The “language of accommodation” argument appeals to the reverence for the transcendence of God, as this “reverence requires that from these [metaphorical] expressions an allegorical meaning should be extracted” (Rae, 2005:48). Biblical support for this view is found in Isaiah 46:5 and Isaiah 55:8-9. Isaiah 46:5 reads, “To whom will you compare me or count me equal? To whom will you liken me that we may be compared”? In this passage, it appears that God is making his case that he is not comparable to humans in any way. Furthermore, Isaiah 55:8-9 reads, “‘For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways’, declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts’”. These verses appear to show that God is not comparable to mankind, for his ways are not man’s ways (he is transcendent).

This reverence to the absolute transcendence of God may be the reason theologians, such as Augustine (1907:237) and Calvin (2006:127), assumed that the anthropomorphic language used to describe God within the Old Testament should be interpreted in a non-literal accommodating way that does not always depict literal reality. We discussed in chapter two that Calvin referred to anthropomorphic depictions of God as a sort of “baby talk”. A closer look at the context of Isaiah 55:8-9 and Isaiah 46:5 reveals they do not necessarily need to be cited as support for minimizing the function of anthropomorphisms and searching for literal truths in anthropomorphic language. In the context of Isaiah 55, God openly invited the nation of Israel back into a vibrant relationship with him even after they had turned away, worshiped idols, and committed spiritual adultery. God offered to forgive all their sin and wipe their slate clean. The immediate context seems to imply that because God’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts, he will forgive them. Other people may have been ready to judge the Israelites, but God’s ways are higher than man’s ways in terms of his forgiveness and love for his own people. Likewise, Isaiah 46:5 should not be used in support of minimizing the function of anthropomorphisms. The context indicates this chapter has to do with worshipping false gods. One verse later in Isaiah 46:6, God said that some people take gold from their bags and hire a

goldsmith to fashion an idol so they can worship it as a god. The context does not support the idea that God made a case that he is unlike humans in every way in that he should never be compared to them. Rather, God made the point that he is not equal and is incomparable to the false gods of Babylon.

Regardless of whether someone classifies anthropomorphic language as “divine accommodation,” the argument here is that anthropomorphisms are still responsible for communicating something literally true about God. Sanders (1998:23) wrote, “Our language, anthropomorphic though it is, remains reality depicting. That is, there really is a being, God, to which our language refers”. In other words, just because the language is anthropomorphic in nature does not mean that one cannot know anything about the reality of God’s nature. This is the distinction between the view held by Calvin (2006:127) and Oliphint (2012:123-124) that certain anthropomorphisms (such as God relenting) do not depict reality from God’s standpoint. The argument put forth is that one can gain literal knowledge about God by anthropomorphic metaphors.

Because essentially all of man’s references to God are to some degree anthropomorphic, it should be noted that anthropomorphisms are a legitimate way of speaking about and relating to God. Sanders (1998:23) noted, “We have no knowledge of God other than in and through his participation in our history”. In other words, a person only knows about God as much as he has chosen to reveal himself. As Hilary of Poitiers (2007:73) wrote, “We must believe God’s word concerning himself, and humbly accept such insight as he vouchsafes to give. We must believe in him as he is, and this is in the only possible way, by thinking of him in the aspect in which he presents himself to us”. Anthropomorphisms are one of God’s ways of revealing himself to humans. Is not Jesus becoming flesh the ultimate living example of the anthropomorphism? Hebrews 1:3 reads, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word”. An argument could be made that the incarnation of Christ shows God’s approval of using anthropomorphisms to reveal his nature to mankind. Christ’s coming into

this world showed that anthropomorphisms must be more than Calvin's (2006:127) notion of "baby talk," because Jesus is the exact representation of God (Hebrews 1:3). Even if Calvin's (2006:127) claim that anthropomorphisms are God lisping to humans is true, how would he know this? Where does he gather this idea of "lisping" and "baby talk" from reading the Bible? Sanders (1998:30) wrote, "After all, we know that the nursemaid is speaking 'baby talk' because we know what 'adult talk' is like. But if Scripture is 'baby talk,' then from where do we get our 'adult talk' about God".

In answering the question, are anthropomorphic metaphors to function only as "language of accommodation" or do they to some degree depict reality, Fretheim's (1984:11) idea of "controlling metaphors," deserves consideration. We shall recall from chapter two that controlling metaphors are metaphors that are the most foundational to a person's understanding about God. So, what classifies an anthropomorphism as a controlling metaphor? Fretheim (1984:11) understood the importance of determining "whether a given metaphor is appropriate, is being misused, or has been exhausted". He noted (1984:11), "It is clear from a survey of the Old Testament metaphors for God that some elements of the human experience are not considered appropriate, even in part: death, sexuality, embitterment, lack of wisdom, and capriciousness . . .". What does the anthropomorphism add to the understanding of the relationship between God and the world? When that question is answered, it becomes clear that anthropomorphisms function as more than mere "language of accommodation". Instead, the truth in the anthropomorphism to some degree depicts reality, because they help reveal God's relationship to the world, which is why they have importance within the Old Testament.

### *7.2.1.3 Importance*

While it is true that anthropomorphisms do not describe God fully, the danger of saying there is no essential relationship between the anthropomorphic metaphor and God as he relates to the world should be acknowledged. As will be shown, anthropomorphisms do convey truths about God that correspond to

reality and man's understanding of him. We shall recall from chapter two that Fretheim (1984:6) wrote, "The metaphor does not stand over against the literal. Though the use of the metaphor is not literal, there is literalness intended in the relationship to which the metaphor has reference . . . One must say that such metaphors reveal that God is literally related to the world, unless one is prepared to say that God is literally not in relationship to the world". In other words, not all anthropomorphisms should be interpreted in a literal physical way, but the general principle behind the metaphor helps shape a person's views about God. For example, a reference to God's eyes and ears (2 Kings 19:16) should not be interpreted to say God literally has eyes and ears, but instead this reference shows that "God's experience of the world is not superficial" in that "he takes it in as real a way as people do who use their eyes and ears" (Fretheim, 1984:9). In this view, the importance of anthropomorphisms is seen in that the truth in them helps determine God's nature and how he relates to mankind in the world.

### **7.2.2 Use of Anthropomorphism within the Old Testament**

#### *7.2.2.1 Types of Anthropomorphisms*

The Old Testament contains anthropomorphic metaphors that portray God as having the physical material characteristics of humans as well as the non-physical immaterial emotional characteristics of humans. For example, physically, God is depicted as having a hand (Exodus 7:5), heart (Hosea 11:8), arm (Jeremiah 27:5), and fingers (Deuteronomy 9:10). Immaterially, God is depicted as experiencing regret (Genesis 6:6), changing his mind (Exodus 32:14), loving (Exodus 15:13), showing compassion (Jonah 4:2), being jealous (Exodus 34:14) and expressing anger (2 Kings 17:18).<sup>34</sup>

Concerning the immaterial anthropomorphisms, there is no denying that all of these emotions are human emotions, but is it fair or correct to say that these metaphors are ascribing human-like emotions to God; therefore, are they truly

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<sup>34</sup> This list is not exhaustive and was taken from Kohler (1957).

metaphors at all? There are two possible answers. First, given the definition of anthropomorphism, yes, it is fair and correct to say these metaphors are ascribing human-like emotions to God. However, this is only fair and correct from the human perspective, making it a true anthropomorphism. In other words, these emotions ascribed to God are human emotions from a human standpoint; therefore, from the perspective of humans, it appears as if those certain passages are ascribing human-like characteristics (emotions) to God, making them anthropomorphic.

Second, on the other hand, could it be possible that it is not fair and correct to say these metaphors are ascribing human-like characteristics to God? After all, from where does man's ability to love, change his mind, extend compassion, and regret come? Presumably, the answer is God, as made evident in the traditional understanding of Genesis 1:26-27, which is that being made in God's image does not reflect physical characteristics, for God does not have a corporeal body like humans (John 4:24) (Wilson and Blomberg, 1993:8-15). With this in mind, are not these "human-like emotions projected onto God" in reality "God-like emotions projected onto humans?" From this point of view, is it fair or correct to simply dismiss these emotions as non-literal anthropomorphic metaphors? (Barr, 2013:31-38).

### *7.2.2.2 The tension*

At this point, it might be tempting to think the tension among scholars concerning the interpretation of anthropomorphisms has to do with whether or not they are meant to be taken literally. In reality, the issue of the literalness of anthropomorphisms ultimately could be labelled as an underlying issue to the main problem; that is, what biblical truth do they teach about God? In other words, how do certain anthropomorphisms help someone understand God's relationship to the world? In considering the material anthropomorphisms, there is little debate among theologians concerning these particular metaphors. The reason for this has to do with the belief in Christendom that God does not reside in a physical body, with the exception of the incarnation of Christ (Wilson and

Blomberg, 1993:8-15). From this perspective, it is easy to immediately label the verses that compare God to the physical human form as being non-literal. After recognizing this, the true meaning behind the verse should be sought by asking the question, what biblical truth does this verse teach about God?

For example, in Numbers 11, the Israelites complained about their dietary menu and even claimed they were better off in Egypt where at least they had access to meat. Moses prayed on behalf of the people, and God revealed to Moses that they would have enough meat to last an entire month. Moses apparently doubted. In Numbers 11:23, God replied with “Is the LORD’s arm too short? Now you will see whether or not what I say will come true for you”. Now, someone may deduce that God does not have a literal arm, but this phrase still communicates something true about God. In fact, Deuteronomy 4:34, Isaiah 30:30, Jeremiah 27:5 and Psalm 136:10-12 also depict God as having an arm or hand. When these texts are studied, it becomes clear that the point of this metaphor was to communicate God’s strength and power (Huey, 1993:242).

Another example is Proverbs 15:3, “The eyes of the LORD are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good”. Understanding that God (being Spirit) does not have literal eyes leads to a search for the truth communicated about God through this anthropomorphic metaphor. Other references to God’s eyes are found in 2 Chronicles 16:9, Psalm 33:18 and Proverbs 22:12. The reference to the eyes of the LORD is a metaphor for his perfect and infinite knowledge (Geisler, 2001:21).

The above examples using material anthropomorphisms show that the literalness of the metaphor is not necessarily the end goal when interpreting anthropomorphisms. Instead, the more important goal is to figure out the biblical truth they communicate about God. Here is where the major tension comes into full light. Concerning the immaterial anthropomorphisms, if they are not interpreted literally, then how is the biblical truth that is being communicated determined?

For example, “Your love endures forever” is a popular phrase repeated numerous times in Psalm 136. Love is most certainly a human emotion, but love is also considered an essential part of God’s essence (1 John 4:8). Surely, no conservative scholar would deny the literalness behind God’s love. The same could be said of the verses that speak of God’s compassion, mercy, and forgiveness. Surely, no conservative scholar would deny these characteristics of God’s nature.

How does someone know that these emotions are a part of God’s character? God has revealed himself through his word. A person obtains the idea that God is loving because he reads it in the Bible and takes those verses at face value. The point here is that to logically reason that God loves, is compassionate, and forgives sinners, means these immaterial anthropomorphisms must be interpreted as literal truth. If those immaterial anthropomorphic statements were treated like the material anthropomorphisms, then how could one possibly determine the biblical truth being communicated? What would it mean for a verse to say that God loves if that is not interpreted in a literal fashion? A reference about God’s arm communicating truth concerning his power and strength can be easily recognized, but passages about God’s emotions can only have that same type of meaning if they are taken at face value. Otherwise, how else could the truth of the statement possibly be determined?

Theologians (e.g. Oliphint, 2012 and Roy, 2006), whether they admit it or not, ascribe literal truth to the immaterial anthropomorphisms that depict God with certain emotional attributes, such as, love, forgiveness, compassion, and mercy. However, as shown in chapter two, they do not all ascribe literalness to the immaterial anthropomorphisms that depict God as changing his mind or relenting. The tension is presented again concerning what truth they convey. Logically, the biblical truth being communicated about God through immaterial anthropomorphisms cannot be determined if they are not interpreted literally. For example, if the cases where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to “God relenting” is not interpreted in a literal fashion, then what exactly does the statement mean? In

fact, the immaterial anthropomorphisms only make sense when they are interpreted in a straightforward way. If God “relenting” does not mean that God relented, then what truth does that anthropomorphism convey? If it is not interpreted in a straightforward way, then that anthropomorphism has no meaning and does not provide understanding of God’s relationship to this world.

### **7.2.3 Interpreting anthropomorphisms**

When should a passage be interpreted in a straightforward way? When dealing with anthropomorphisms, it is important to consider the phrase and nature of the language. Figures of speech, or metaphors, most often associate a concept with a pictorial “representation of its meaning in order to add richness to the statement” (Osborne, 2006:122). As demonstrated above, this can be seen in all of the material anthropomorphisms, because they allow the reader to have a better glimpse of God’s attributes. For example, Job 40 gives a picture of God’s power and strength. Job 40:9 reads, “Do you have an arm like God’s, and can your voice thunder like his”? Scholars do not interpret this verse as literal reality (God literally having an arm) but at the same time do not deny the literal reality behind the figure of speech (God’s arm communicates power and strength) (Duvall and Hays, 2005:353). In other words, each material metaphor carries a deeper meaning that sheds light on an attribute of God.

Immaterial anthropomorphisms pose much more of a problem when it comes to interpretation because to deny them of their literal reality (God literally having an emotion) appears to automatically deny the literal reality behind them (God having the emotion does not communicate truth). There is a temptation at this point to argue that they communicate truth by analogy; that is, comparing an aspect of God to the human relationship. This argument is not necessarily wrong. Wayne Grudem (1994:159) wrote, “If God is going to teach us about things we do not know by direct experience . . . he has to teach us in terms of what we do know”. For example, Psalm 103:13 reads, “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him.” Here, the analogy shows the compassion God has for those who fear him

is compared to the compassion a father has for his children. In Grudem's (1994:159) view, this verse can be understood in light of understanding the father-child human relationship.

The point should be made, however, that just because an immaterial anthropomorphism sometimes appears as an analogy does not take away the literal reality behind the analogy. In referencing Psalm 103:13, either God is capable of compassion or not. If God is not capable of emotions (impassibility), then what truth does that verse communicate? In determining whether to interpret anthropomorphic metaphors as straightforward or not, two hermeneutical criteria are offered.

First, the context of the entire passage should be considered. A major rule in hermeneutics is summarised in the simple phrase "context determines the meaning" (Zuck, 1996:154). After all, any biblical interpreter should be seeking the meaning of the text in the overall passage, because discovering the meaning of the texts should be truly the heart and motivation for the exegetical process. Anthropomorphisms help determine the meaning of the text, because these metaphors add richness to the text. However, if the overall context of the passage is not considered, then anthropomorphisms can be misrepresented in ways the biblical writers never intended.

Textual clues; that is, any words or phrases in the context, shed light on the meaning of the metaphor (Rhodes, 2010). For example, in Exodus 33:11, Moses is referred to as speaking with God "face-to-face as a man speaks to his friend". Did God and Moses literally have a face-to-face meeting or does the textual clue of "as a man speaks to his friend" reveal the intimacy in which God spoke with Moses? From this viewpoint, the meaning of the metaphor is to show the intimacy in which God and Moses spoke, not to convey a literal truth that they were literally face-to-face. This shows that by knowing the context, the purpose or idea being communicated from the metaphor can be understood.

Second, the entire council of Scripture should be consulted. “Scripture interprets Scripture” is another major hermeneutical principle, and it is rooted in the belief of the Reformers (Zuck, 1996:54). Martin Luther (Althaus, 1966:76) wrote, “Scripture is therefore its own light. It is a grand thing when Scripture interprets itself”. The Westminster Confession of Faith (Grudem, 1994:1180) states, “When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture . . . it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly”. Grudem (1994:159), writing about the anthropomorphism noted, “It should caution us not to take any one of these [anthropomorphic] descriptions by itself and isolate it from its immediate context or from the rest of what Scripture says about God”. Why should there be an emphasis on consulting the entirety of Scripture before forming a conclusion concerning anthropomorphisms?

According to Ware (2000:66), scholars should be cautious about denying the straightforward meaning of a text unless there is evidence presented to the contrary. In other words, in consulting Scripture, evidence is found that either supports or disapproves of a straightforward interpretation of a text. For example, in consulting the entirety of Scripture, there is enough biblical evidence that God does not reside in a physical body; therefore, scholars look for non-literal interpretations to the material anthropomorphisms. However, if scholars apply this same principle to the immaterial anthropomorphisms, then is there enough biblical evidence to support denying the straightforward reading of passages where נָחַם (*nacham*) refers to God promising to relent or shows that he relented in response to human decisions? This is explored in chapter five.

### **7.2.4 Conclusion**

Divine anthropomorphisms communicate truths about God. Interpreters should look for how the anthropomorphism adds to a person’s understanding about God and his relationship to the world. Their classification as either material or immaterial affects the way scholars should interpret the meaning behind the anthropomorphism. For example, it was argued that for material anthropomorphisms, there is a literal truth communicated behind the metaphor.

For immaterial anthropomorphisms, it was argued that if they are not interpreted in a literal fashion, then scholars could not determine what they add to the understanding of God's nature and how he relates to the world. Overall, it was concluded that whether a scholar attributes passages where God is the subject of נָחַם (*nacham*) as strictly anthropomorphic, it does not change the fact that the anthropomorphism must still communicate some form of literal truth to the audience.

### 7.3 Ancient Hebrew thought compared to Greek thought

Another area that needs consideration is how the ancient Hebrew mindset (the major original audience of the Old Testament) and the ancient Greek mindset differed from each other. The argument is that the ancient Hebrew mindset was more concrete than the abstract mind of the Greek, and thus, this would have affected interpretations of "anthropomorphic" statements in the Old Testament. For example, Barr (1982:34) wrote:

The Greek mind is abstract, contemplative, static or harmonic, impersonal; it is dominated by certain distinctions-matter and form, one and many, individual and collective, time and timelessness, appearance and reality. The Hebrew mind is active, concrete, dynamic, intensely personal, formed upon wholeness and not upon distinctions. Thus it is able to rise above, or to escape, the great distinctions which lie across Greek thought. Greek thought is unhistorical, timeless, based on logic and system. Hebrew thought is historical, centered in time and movement, based in life.

Concrete thought expresses concepts and ideas in ways using the five senses; that is, sight, touch, taste, sound, and smell (Benner, 2005:11). For example, Psalm 1:3 reads, "That person is like a *tree* planted by *streams of water*, which yields its *fruit* in season and whose *leaf* does not *wither*, whatever they do prospers" (emphasis added). By using the imagery of a tree, streams of water, fruit, and a leaf that does not wither, the author expressed his thoughts in

concrete terms. George Smith (1944:10) wrote, “Hebrew may be called primarily a language of the senses. The words originally expressed concrete or material things and movements or actions which struck the senses or started the emotions”.

The Hebrew language reveals that along with being concrete thinkers, they lived an action-centred lifestyle (Wilson, 1990:137). Marvin Wilson (1990:137) noted that in Hebrew grammar, oftentimes the verb comes first in the clause, rather than the noun as in the English language. This is significant because the position of emphasis is usually the beginning of the clause. Wilson (1990:137) wrote, “So it should not be forgotten that Hebrew, unlike English, confronts the listener or reader immediately with a verbal form even before the subject itself is designated”. Because the ancient Hebrews were an active people, their language has few abstract terms and deals mainly with the senses (Wilson, 1990:137).

On the other hand, abstract thought expresses concepts and ideas that are not experienced by the five senses (Benner, 2005:11). Even though the ancient Hebrew people were concrete thinkers, abstract words find their way into English translations of the Hebrew Bible. For example, Psalm 103:8 reads, “The Lord is *compassionate* and *gracious*, slow to *anger*, abounding in *love*” (emphasis added). The words *compassionate*, *gracious*, *anger*, and *love* cannot be experienced using the five senses and are abstract terms. Why then do abstract terms appear in the English translations of the Hebrew Bible?

Wilson (1990:137) noted that the Hebrews conveyed abstract thoughts or immaterial conceptions through material and physical terminology. For example, the Hebrew word אַף (*aph*), translated “angry,” literally means, “nose” (Johnson, 1974:351). In the English language, it does not make sense for God to be “slow to nose”. However, the Hebrew mind associated the nose with anger, because the typical physical response to anger is hard breathing and the flaring of nostrils. Bible translators use the English word, in this case, *anger*, to translate the original Hebrew word. The following examples illustrate the Old

Testament's use of abstract concepts expressed through physical terminology: "look" is "lift up the eyes" (Genesis 22:4), "angry" is "burn in one's nostrils" (Exodus 4:14), "reveal" is to "unstop someone's ears" (Ruth 4:4), "have no compassion" is "hard-heartedness" (1 Samuel 6:6), "stubborn" is "stick-necked" (2 Chronicles 30:8), "get ready" is "gird up the loins" (Jeremiah 1:17) and "to be determined to go" is "set one's face to go" (Jeremiah 42:15) (Wilson, 1990:137).

Another difference between the ancient Hebrew and Greek mindset is that Hebrews described objects in relation to function, while Greeks described objects in relation to appearance (Benner, 2005:12). For example, the Greek mind would describe a ram and an oak tree in two different ways because of the difference in physical appearance. The Hebrews, on the other hand, had one word, אַיִל (*ayil*), for both the ram and oak (Renn, 2005:681). The reason for this is the functional description of both the ram and oak would have been the same in the Hebrew mind. אַיִל (*ayil*) can mean a strong leader, or ruler (Benner, 2005:12). Benner (2005:12) noted that the ram was considered a strong leader of the flock, and the oak tree and its hard wood made it a strong leader among the trees.

The Hebrews applied this same concept when portraying God in the Old Testament. The analogies and terms they use described God in function, not physical anatomy. For example, when the Hebrews described God using physical anatomy, they were not espousing that God had a literal arm or eyes. Rather, the anatomical terminology was their way of using concrete terms to describe God functionally, in that he has great strength (arm) and sees everything (eyes) (Boman, 1960:101-108). Thus, an anthropomorphic depiction of God sheds light on his being and properties (Boman, 1960:101-108). This explains why there is little to no debate among evangelical scholars concerning the material anthropomorphic metaphors in the Old Testament. Scholars are able to extract the truth being taught about God from those metaphors, because they describe God functionally rather than physically.

A logical conclusion should be that the Old Testament's depiction of God as

changing his mind and experiencing emotion falls in the same category; that is, the Hebrews describing God in a functional way. There appears to be no evidence that the biblical authors or the Israelites would have thought of such depictions as mere “language of accommodation” that does not depict reality. The Hebrews saw reality for what it was in that God on several accounts relented in response to prayer and repentance. The Hebrews would have expected their actions to have an impact on God, because they valued the personal relationship with God (Exodus 6:7, Leviticus 26:12 and Jeremiah 32:38). The Hebrews did not think of God in an abstract way of being so transcendent that he could not relate to his creation. Rather, the roughly 3600 years of Old Testament history reveal a God who was heavily involved in the world and wanted a relationship with his people from the beginning of creation.

According to WKC Guthrie (2013:46), Parmenides in the fifth century BC “started the Greeks on the path of abstract thought, set the mind working without reference to external facts, and exalted its results above those of sense-perception”. Parmenides, unlike Heraclitus who saw the universe empirically, viewed the universe from abstract thought, which means reality was non-sensible, only to be reached by thought (Guthrie, 2013:46). He believed that “whatever exists must be eternal and uncreated, because that which exists could not have been derived from something that does not exist” (Hopkins, 1998:38). Additionally, he believed all reality was composed of a single substance called “being,” and that nothing exists or would exist outside of “being” (Hopkins, 1998:38).

Parmenides’s concept of “being” was his concept of god (Johansen, 2005:56). Unlike Heraclitus, who believed change and movement were the only realities (Vamvacas, 2009:25), Parmenides held that all of reality was in perfect unity, because it was made up of a single, motionless, and unchanging substance (Fernandez-Santamaria, 2006:166). Because change and movement could be observed in the universe, he concluded the visible universe was the figment of man’s imagination (Hopkins, 1998:39). Concerning the “being” Parmenides

wrote, “One way only is left to be spoken of, that it is; and on this way are full many signs that what is *uncreated* and *imperishable*, for it is *entire*, *immovable* and *without end*. It was *not in the past*, nor *shall it be*, since *it is now*, all at *once*, *one*, *continuous*; for what creation wilt thou seek for it . . . (emphasis added)” (Raven, 1965:7).

Parmenides’s ideas changed the way the future Greek philosophers, such as Plato, viewed reality. Guthrie (2013:46), in writing about the influence of Parmenides’s shift of focus from the physical to the abstract, wrote:

In this the Greeks were apt pupils, so much so that according to some of their genius for abstract thought and for neglecting the world of external fact set European science on the wrong track for a thousand years or so . . . Parmenides was the first to exalt the intelligible at the expense of the sensible . . .

Concerning this influence, Richard Hopkins (1998:39) wrote:

This notion caused philosophers after Parmenides to question the validity of human sensation and knowledge. They turned to speculation on ultimate reality and became fascinated with questions about what really exists as opposed to what only seems to exist, what permanently exists in contrast to what temporarily exists and what exists independently and unconditionally rather than what exists dependently and conditionally.

Essentially, this is where the Hebrew mindset and Greek mindset part ways. As shown, the Hebrews thought concretely concerning reality as being what it was. For example, the Hebrews would have seen the immaterial anthropomorphic passages depicting God as showing emotion or changing his mind as describing God in a functional way; that is, those passages depict reality and not “language of accommodation”. The Greeks started viewing reality from a different perspective after the influence of Parmenides. Instead of focusing on reality observable with the senses, the greater emphasis was on abstract

thought and the mind. As will be shown, the Greek's emphasis on abstract reality led to a transcendent view of God that completely separated the divine from his creation, so that the divine was above change and emotion. In particular, the idea of reality consisting of one single, unchanging, motionless substance, as Parmenides taught, would have been a foreign concept to the Hebrew mind.

#### **7.4 Metaphorical interpretation among the philosophers**

So far in this thesis, we have examined Jeremiah 4:23-31, 15:1-7, 18:1-10 and 26:1-19, and I have argued for a straightforward approach of the interpretation of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the covenantal contexts of these passages. I have argued that there was no good exegetical reason to interpret divine relenting in light of man's repentance as anything other than in a literal way, thus people's decisions could have a genuine effect on God and influence him to either bless or judge their nations. We have just seen from the previous discussion that the ancient Hebrews and Greeks had different thought patterns, with Hebrew thought being more concrete and functional and Greek thought being more abstract. The question remains, then, as to why Christian tradition took a more abstract view of interpreting שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of God and man as found in our Jeremiah passages. As I have shown in chapter two, the "non-literal accommodating anthropomorphism" viewpoint has its root in the church fathers.

The following discussion is an attempt to document metaphorical interpretation among the philosophers and later among the early church fathers in order to show that the interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of the relationship between God and man as only an accommodating anthropomorphism was ultimately due to the influence of the Greek mind-set onto some of the influential early church fathers (e.g. Clement, Origen and Augustine). This is not to say that every doctrine these early church fathers espoused was influenced by Greek philosophy. I am simply hoping to show how the Greek's emphasis on abstract reality led to a transcendent view of God that placed him incapable of

change and emotion; therefore, we can follow the evidence in the biblical texts and interpret Jeremiah's use of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in a literal fashion. To best document and trace metaphorical interpretation from the philosophers to the church fathers, I have included the philosophers and church fathers own words. Other attempts (e.g. Hopkins, 1998 and Sanders, 1994) claim Greek philosophy's influence on early Christianity but do not show the words of the philosophers or church fathers; therefore, their cases are not well proven in some instances.

#### **7.4.1 Xenophanes (Circa 570-475 BC)**

Perhaps the earliest known commentator on the concept of anthropomorphism in terms of its use in religion was the Greek philosopher Xenophanes. He is believed to have taught Parmenides (Guthrie, 1965:2). His writings reveal his opposition to the idea of bringing a god down to the human level. For example, he wrote, "There is one god, greatest among gods and men, similar to mortals nether in shape nor in thought" (quoted in Barnes, 2001:42). He continued, "But mortals think that gods are born, and have clothes and speech and shape like their own" (quoted in Barnes, 2001:43). In his view, the gods cannot be compared to "mortals" in any way.

Xenophanes further stated, "If oxen and horses or lions had hands, and could paint with their hands, and produce works of art as men do, horses would paint the forms of the gods like horses, and oxen like oxen, and make their bodies in the image of their several kinds" (quoted in Jones, 1970:19). In other words, Xenophanes believed that portraying the gods in human terms did not reflect reality about god, because men were simply portraying the gods in their own image. In this view, god transcends human capabilities and thus is not comparable to creatures. The transcendent nature that Xenophanes applied to god meant that god was "neither limited or limitless, nor moving or motionless" (Barnes, 2001:44). For example, Jonathan Barnes (2001:44) wrote:

He [Xenophanes] showed that god is ungenerated from the fact that

what comes into being must do so either from what is similar or from what is dissimilar; but similar things, he says, cannot be affected by one another, and if it comes into being from what is dissimilar, then what exists will come from what does not exist . . . He is neither limitless nor limited because what is limitless, having no beginning, no middle and no end, does not exist, while what is limited is a plurality of things limiting one another. He does away with motion and rest in a similar fashion: it is what does not exist which is motionless, while it is a plurality of things which move. Hence . . . he says that god reposes in the same state and does not change.

What made Xenophanes adamantly oppose anthropomorphic depictions of the gods? The answer lies in Xenophanes' disagreements with how Greek mythology portrayed the gods, particularly Homer's (2011) *Iliad* and Hesiod's (1987) *Theogony*, which describe the origins of the world and the gods. He described Homer and Hesiod as the poets "from whom all men have learned since the beginning" (quoted in Grant, 1986:76). The popularity of ideas and concepts in the works of Homer and Hesiod contributed to the Greek culture's acceptance of the gods as portrayed in their works. Xenophanes criticized their portrayal of the gods. He wrote, "Homer and Hesiod attributed to the gods everything which among men is shameful and blameworthy – theft and adultery and mutual deception" (quoted in Barnes, 2001:42).

For example, in both *Iliad* and *Theogony*, the Greek gods are portrayed in anthropomorphic ways that make them less than perfect. As Xenophanes (Barnes, 2001:42) noted, the Greek gods partake in theft and adultery. Likewise, they are portrayed as being arrogant, selfish and manipulative. The Greek gods regularly interfered with human affairs but only for personal gain. Xenophanes wrote that Homer and Hesiod "recounted many lawless deeds of the gods . . ." (quoted in Barnes, 2001:42). He realized that these characteristics are not what would be expected from gods; therefore, he concluded that the gods were not like man in any way (Barnes, 2001:42). Thus,

Xenophanes advocated a transcendent nature of god that opposed that of the traditional Greek stories. Because he rejected anthropomorphic attributes of god, Xenophanes's god was transcendent, did not intervene in human affairs and did not change (Drozdek, 2016:15-25).

Xenophanes was justified in his attempt to show that god was not like that of the traditional Greek stories; however, he went too far. The fact that his culture's anthropomorphic depictions of god were less than perfect does not mean that every anthropomorphic depiction of god makes him less than perfect. In Xenophanes's attempt to break away from the traditional Greek view of the divine, he overcorrected with his strict transcendent view of god.

### **7.4.2 Plato (Circa 429-347 BC)**

Parmenides's influence on Plato has been well documented (See Fine, 2011, Palmer, 1999, Guthrie, 1975:34-35 and Nash, 1984:31). Plato seemed to have adopted and expounded upon the abstract thought that Parmenides espoused. Plato believed in Rationalism; that is, man only obtains knowledge by reason, not through the senses and naturalism (Nash, 1984:31). In his writings, he discussed four ideas concerning god. First, Plato believed god was in every way perfect. He wrote, "But god and his attributes are in every way perfect . . . So god would be most unlikely to take many shapes as a result of external causes" (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:67). Because of his perfection, external factors cannot influence and change god.

Second, Plato espoused the immutability of god. He wrote, "Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every god remains absolutely and for ever in his own form" (Plato, 1945:142). In Plato's mind, any change in god would be for the worse and not for the better. He wrote, "If he does change, it must necessarily be into something worse. I don't imagine we are going to say that god is lacking in beauty or goodness" (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:67).

Third, Plato advocated an impassible god. He wrote, "If so, the gods, at any

rate, cannot be supposed to have either joy or sorrow” (quoted in Jowett, 1931:602). In *Symposium* 201d-204c (Plato, 2012:185-189), he argued that because the gods are happy and perfect, they do not love. Love would require the gods to be without and wanting, lacking what is good and beautiful. As a result, he concluded that love is neither beautiful nor good (Plato, 2012:186). Because of his view of god’s perfection, he believed it was impossible for god to experience emotion. Experiencing emotion would have made god less than perfect.

Fourth, Plato also held to a strict transcendent view of god; that is, god’s interventions in the world were limited, if any at all. In *Symposium*, he wrote, “For God mingles not with man . . .” (Plato, 2009:80). What led to Plato’s view of god as perfect, unchanging, and ultimately transcendent? Like Xenophanes, Plato disagreed with how Homer and Hesiod portrayed the gods in the *Iliad* and *Theogony*, causing him to reject the traditional attributes of the Greek gods (Ferrari, 2003:62). For example, concerning the traditional stories about the Greek gods, Plato (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:62) wrote, “The ones Hesiod and Homer both used to tell us, and the other poets. They made up untrue stories, which they used to tell people, and still do tell them”. He went on to write, “When a storyteller gives us the wrong impression of the nature of gods and heroes, it is like an artist producing pictures which do not look like the things he was trying to draw” (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:62). Plato then described specifically the problems he had with Homer and Hesiod’s portrayal of the gods. Plato (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:62-63) wrote:

“I’ll start,” I said, “with an important falsehood on an important subject. There is the very ugly falsehood told of how Ouranos did the things Hesiod says he did, and how Kronos in his turn took revenge on him.<sup>35</sup> As for what Kronos did, and what his son did to him, even if they were true I wouldn’t think that in the normal course of events these stories should be told to those who are young and uncritical.

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<sup>35</sup> See Hesiod (1987), *Theogony*, §154-182 and 453-506.

The best thing would be to say nothing about them at all. If there were some overriding necessity to tell them, then as few people as possible should hear them, and in strict secrecy.”

Plato did not want children hearing the stories of Homer and Hesiod. He (quoted in Ferrari, 2003:63) explained:

When the young are listening, they are not to be told that if they committed the most horrible crimes they wouldn't be doing anything out of the ordinary, not even if they inflicted every kind of punishment on a father who treated them badly. We won't tell them that they would *merely be acting like the first and greatest of the gods* (emphasis added).

In the *Republic*, Plato clearly espoused a view of god at odds with Homer and Hesiod's portrayal of the gods. Whereas Homer and Hesiod portrayed the gods as warlike, anthropomorphic, manipulating human affairs, and evil, Plato's god was perfect in every way, meaning he was incapable of evil and change, and transcendent, not mingling in human affairs (see Plato, 2008:177-202). The Greek gods were changeable and affected by external influences. Plato's concept of god was impassible and immutable.

#### **7.4.3 Aristotle (Circa 384-322 BC)**

Aristotle was a student of Plato. Recent studies have noted that Aristotle was not interested in solving the mystery of the god's existence (Owens, 1977:415-442). Rather, he was interested in solving the problem of change. As a result, his view of god was a metaphysical principle needed to explain motion (Owens, 1977:415-442). He believed there had to be an uncaused and unchanging being who was responsible for all that existed; that is, an unmoved mover.<sup>36</sup> Aristotle (2017:§7:7) wrote:

There is, then, something which is always moved with an unceasing

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<sup>36</sup> Aristotle expounded on this idea in *Metaphysics* 7 [2017] and *Physics Book VIII* (1999).

motion, which is motion in a circle; and this is plain not in theory only but in fact. Therefore the first heaven must be eternal. There is therefore also something which moves it. And since that which moves and is moved is intermediate, there is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality. And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved.

Aristotle (2017:§7:7) referred to this unmoved mover as the final cause of the universe. The reason for this is if god had pushed the world in any way, then that would have meant a change in him. Aristotle (2017:§7:7) described the unmoved mover as incapable of being moved upon, because that would imply change:

That a final cause may exist among unchangeable entities is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not. The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved. Now if something is moved it is capable of being otherwise than as it is. Therefore if its actuality is the primary form of spatial motion, then in so far as it is subject to change, in this respect it is capable of being otherwise, -in place, even if not in substance. But since there is something which moves while itself unmoved, existing actually, this can in no way be otherwise than as it is. For motion in space is the first of the kinds of change, and motion in a circle the first kind of spatial motion; and this the first mover produces. The first mover, then, exists of necessity; and in so far as it exists by necessity, its mode of being is good, and it is in this sense a first principle. For the necessary has all these senses-that which is necessary perforce because it is contrary to the natural impulse, that without which the

good is impossible, and that which cannot be otherwise but can exist only in a single way.

Furthermore, the unmoved mover is described in the following ways: as an immaterial substance, immutable (impossible to change), impassible (unalterable and not acted upon), and transcendent. Aristotle (2017:§7:7) wrote:

It is clear then from what has been said that there is a substance which is eternal and unmovable and separate from sensible things. It has been shown also that this substance cannot have any magnitude, but is without parts and indivisible (for it produces movement through infinite time, but nothing finite has infinite power; and, while every magnitude is either infinite or finite, it cannot, for the above reason, have finite magnitude, and it cannot have infinite magnitude because there is no infinite magnitude at all). But it has also been shown that it is impassive and unalterable; for all the other changes are posterior to change of place.

Aristotle's god does not have a relationship with the world (Zubiri, 2010:48). Having a relationship with the world would imply a dependency upon the world. For example, the unmoved mover "cannot receive knowledge from other beings", because "to receive anything would imply dependency and deficiency" (Sanders, 1994:66). The unmoved mover is perfect and only aware of itself (Sanders, 1994:66). Thus, god cannot enter into a relationship with other beings or the world (Sanders, 1994:66). Aristotle (1935:437) wrote, "This is most manifest in the case of God; for it is clear that as he needs nothing more he will not need a friend, and that supposing he has no need of one he will not have one".

In the end, Sanders (1994:65) noted that Aristotle did not try to solve the mystery of god's existence, instead, he needed an unmoved mover to explain the problem of change in the universe. Thus, unlike Xenophanes and Plato, there appeared to be no evidence in his writings where he attempted to critique

Homer and Hesiod's views of the gods. However, his ideas concerning the unmoved mover were similar to the view of god held by Xenophanes and Plato. Each of these three influential Greek philosophers espoused a view of god that was to some degree incapable of change in any regard, could not be influenced by external factors and did not have relationship with the world or other beings. In other words, the new view of god espoused in Greek philosophy that broke away from the traditional view of the gods in Homer and Hesiod was that the divine is highly immutable, impassible and transcendent to the point of little to no relationship with other beings.

### **7.4.4 Philo of Alexandria (Circa 20 BC-50 AD)**

Philo is considered as one of the most important Jewish philosophers and authors of the Second Temple period of Judaism (Yonge, 1993:xi). He lived his life in Alexandria, Egypt and wrote in Greek. History shows that during his lifetime much of Judaism was Hellenized; that is, converted to the Greek way of thought and life. Philo was largely steeped in Greek philosophy and even referred to Moses as a philosopher who had reached the "summits of philosophy" (Philo, *On the Creation*, 1993:§2.8). He is widely credited with harmonizing Greek philosophical ideas with Jewish theology (Hilgert, 1995:1-15).

For example, first, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chisholm, 1911:409) reads that Philo is the "most important representative of Hellenistic Judaism". Second, Roger Olson (2009:55) wrote, ". . . Philo had attempted to wed Judaism and Greek philosophy in Alexandria, Egypt". Third, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Hillar, 2017) acknowledged that "when Hebrew mythical thought met Greek Philosophical thought in the first century B.C.E. it was only natural that someone would try to develop speculative and philosophical justification for Judaism in terms of Greek Philosophy. Thus Philo produced a synthesis of both traditions developing concepts for future Hellenistic interpretation of messianic Hebrew thought . . .".

For these reasons, Philo is important for understanding the development of Hellenistic philosophy and first-century AD Hellenistic Judaism (Yonge, 1993:xi). In his attempt to fuse Greek philosophy with Jewish theology, Philo implored the allegorical interpretive traditions that were developed and used in Alexandria, Egypt, primarily for understanding Homer and other Greek traditions (MacDonald, 2017). Thus, allegorical interpretation became a huge part of his exegetical and hermeneutical understanding of Scripture (see Mansfield, 1996:70-102). This inherently is not a problem. Because Old Testament writers made use of allegory in Scripture, allegorical interpretive methods are needed to understand deeper meanings of certain passages. However, the problem for Philo is that Greek philosophy; that is, Alexandrian Platonism, Stoicism, and Pythagoreanism heavily influenced his allegorical interpretive methods (see Borgen, 1997:1-13). For example, the Stoics and Platonists believed the writings of Homer and Hesiod contained philosophical truths, and these hidden insights “surpassed the wisdom that humans can now attain through ordinary cognitive means” (Svendsen, 2009:1). In his quest to apply Greek philosophy to the writings of Moses, Philo came to view the Pentateuch in the same way. Concerning Philo’s application of Greek philosophy to Moses, John Dillon (1996:141-142) wrote:

Such an application was made easier precisely by the gaps in Philo’s own knowledge. He knew no Hebrew (or certainly not enough to read a text), and did not even understand the conventions of Hebrew poetry. He was dependent upon the Septuagint version of the Bible, and the uncultured Greek of that work is even on occasion too much for his perfectly educated sensibility, so that he frequently misunderstands Hebraisms or colloquialisms. But the great revelation for Philo was that this apparently primitive collection of works, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, when looked at with a properly trained eye, contained the highest and most profound philosophy. He had learned from the Stoic (and perhaps Pythagorean) exegesis of Homer what philosophical truths could be

concealed behind battles and fornications, shipwrecks and homecomings, and it must have suddenly struck him that this was just what was going on in the Pentateuch.

This way of thinking led Philo to believe that Moses never communicated his insights straightforwardly. For example, he (On Joseph, 1993:437). wrote:

It is worth while, however, after having thus explained the literal account given to us of these events, to proceed to explain also the figurative meaning concealed under that account; for we say that nearly all, or that at all events, the greater part of the history of the giving of the law is full of allegories . . . .

The fact that Philo's Greek-influenced allegorical methods influenced his view of God has been duly noted. David Runia (1986:434-435) listed how strands of Greek philosophy are found in Philo's view of God. For example, Philo borrowed from Aristotle the idea that God is the highest cause, immutable, impassible, immovable and the mover of all things (Runia, 1986:434). Following Plato, Philo viewed God as the highest form of perfect; therefore, he was ultimately transcendent, unchanging and in his essence unknowable (Hopkins, 1998:64). Thomas Billings (1919) connected Plato's idea of Forms to Philo's idea of Logos. Thus, history reveals that Plato and other philosophers heavily influenced Philo's view of a transcendent, immutable, impassible and unknowable God (See Hatch, 1891:65-76).

Following the Greek philosophers, Philo's doctrine of God led him to reject anthropomorphic depictions of God which speak of him as relenting and expressing emotion. For example, Philo (On Abraham, 1993:428) wrote, "For the human race is subject to sorrow and to exceeding fear . . . But the nature of God is free from grief, and exempt from fear, and enjoys the immunity from every kind of suffering, and is the only nature which possesses complete happiness and blessedness". In referencing Genesis 6:6, Philo (On the Unchangeableness of God, 1993:162-163) wrote, "Now some persons . . .

imagine that the living God is here giving away to anger and passion; but God is utterly inaccessible to any passion whatever". He went on to argue, "But God, inasmuch as he is uncreated, and the Being who has brought all other things to creation, stood in need of none of those things which are usually added to creatures" (On the Unchangeableness of God, 1993:162-163). Philo's response to anthropomorphisms that depict God as having changed his mind or showed emotion was to reference Numbers 23:19, "God is not a man" (On the Unchangeableness of God, 1993:162-163).

Philo compared anthropomorphisms in Homer's *Odyssey* (2000) with that of the Jewish Scriptures (see Nichoff, 2012:130-166). Referencing Homer's *Odyssey*, he wrote, "There is an old story . . . that the Divinity, assuming the resemblance of men . . . goes round to the different cities of men, searching out the deeds and iniquity and lawlessness; and perhaps, though the fable is not true, it is a suitable and profitable one" (Philo, On Dreams, 1993:386). He went on to write, "But the scripture . . . advances its conceptions of the deity in a more reverential and holy tone, and which likewise desires to instruct the life of the foolish, has spoken of God under the likeness of a man" (Philo, On Dreams, 1993:386). In Philo's view, anthropomorphic depictions of God are not expressing literal reality but instead teaching those who lack wisdom. Philo's view is similar to the view held by some modern scholars that God does not actually relent or experience regret (see chapter two). Instead, the biblical writers used such terms from ordinary human experience to put it in a way that humans who lack wisdom can understand. The question then becomes what exactly are the immaterial anthropomorphisms supposed to be teaching if they do not to some degree depict reality?

In Philo's attempt to reconcile Greek philosophical ideas with the Jewish Scriptures, he interpreted the writings of Moses with an allegorical method similar to how the Greeks understood the writings of Homer and Hesiod (Yonge, 1993). His study of Greek philosophies, such as Platonism, Aristotelism, and Stoicism, led him to attribute aspects of their philosophy to the

God of the Bible (Alesse, 2008). For example, first, God is transcendent in that his essence is ultimately unknown (See Calabi, 2008:40 and 39-51). Second, God is immutable in that he is perfect in every way and has no need of change (Calabi, 2008:17-19). Third, God is impassible in that external factors, such as human decisions, cannot have any effect on him, because he is above emotion and has no relationship with the world (Calabi, 2008:18).

The problem with Philo's view of God is that it contradicts what we have observed in the Old Testament's portrayal of God. First, as previously documented in chapter six, the Old Testament portrays God as being immutable in the sense that his nature and essence does not change. Second, the Old Testament appears to teach that God as a part of his unchanging nature is moved with emotions based on the choices his people make, and that God cares for his creation. Third, the Old Testament portrays God as having a real relationship with the world, not ultimately transcendent in the sense that God is unaware of what is happening in the world. Thus, it could be said that Philo's Greek philosophical version of God forced him to reinterpret the Old Testament's version of God. For example, nowhere does the Old Testament state that God is above emotions or impassible in the sense Philo espoused.

The importance of Philo's beliefs, as will be shown, is that he influenced early Christian leaders such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen in their view of God. Another argument could be made that Philo's allegorical reading of the Old Testament was a catalyst for future church leaders and scholars to render non-literal interpretations of the texts that did not fit with their understanding of God's nature.

### **7.5 Metaphorical interpretation among the early church fathers**

In the following discussion of prominent early Church leaders, it is my goal to continue to show the evolution of metaphorical interpretation, using the writings of the church leaders, pertaining to the concept of God relenting and showing emotion. It is important to note that in this section I am not arguing that

philosophy should never be studied alongside theology, nor am I arguing that every doctrine held by the following Christian leaders were influenced negatively by philosophy. What I am arguing, however, is that philosophy influenced some of the early church leader's concept of transcendence, immutability and impassibility, which in turn affected, to a degree, how they interpreted Old Testament passages where *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) dealt the relationship between God and people.

### 7.5.1 Justin Martyr (Circa 100-165 AD)

Justin Martyr was a Christian apologist during the second-century AD. Concerning God's immutability he wrote, "For they proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all . . ." (Justin, First Apology, 1870:17). Justin understood divine immutability in the context of God's transcendent nature (Barnard, 1967:79-80). In fact, Justin believed God was so transcendent that he was ineffable; that is, too great to be expressed in words, and He carried this idea of transcendence further and declared God as nameless. For example, he wrote, "For no one can utter the name of the ineffable God; and if any one dare to say that there is a name, he raves with a hopeless madness" (Justin, Second Apology, 1870:60). Elsewhere he wrote, "But to the Father of all, who is unbegotten, there is no name given" (Justin, Second Apology, 1870:76).

Justin's idea of God's transcendence and immutability is similar to that of the philosophers. He seemed to argue that the God of the Bible was a more fully defined version of the philosophers. He wrote (Justin, First Apology, 1870:24):

And the Sibyl and Hystaspes said that there should be a dissolution by God of things corruptible. And the philosophers called Stoics teach that even God himself shall be resolved into fire, and they say that the world is to be formed anew by this revolution; but we understand that God, the Creator of all things, is superior to the

things that are being changed. If, therefore, on some points we teach the same things as the poets and philosophers whom you honor, and on other points are fuller and more divine in our teaching . . . .

He went on to write:

For while we say that all things have been produced and arranged into a world by God, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of Plato. And while we say that there will be a burning up of all, we shall seem to utter the doctrine of the Stoics. And while we affirm that the souls of the wicked, being endowed with sensation even after death, are punished, and that those of the good being delivered from punishment spend a blessed existence, we shall seem to say the same things as the poets and philosophers . . . (Justin, First Apology, 1870:24).

Justin spent a part of his life studying the Greek Philosophers. In his *Dialogue with Trypho* (1870:85-278), he described his journey with philosophy. In his testimony, further evidence that the philosophers at least to some degree influenced his view of God can be found. Justin believed that studying philosophy led to God, and he had great respect for the philosophers. For example, he wrote, "I will tell you what seems to me; for philosophy is, in fact, the greatest possession, and most honorable before God, to whom it leads us . . . and these are truly holy men who have bestowed attention on philosophy" (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 1870:87).

Justin explained how on his journey with philosophy he was looking for God. He started with the Stoics, but soon left after he had not acquired any further knowledge about God (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 1870:87-88). He then went to an Aristotelian philosopher and a Pythagorean but was disappointed in each of these. He felt helpless in his search for God. Justin (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 1870:88) wrote, "In my helpless condition it occurred to me to have a meeting with the Platonist . . . and I progressed and made the greatest improvements

daily . . . I expected forthwith to look upon God, for this is the end of Plato's philosophy".

Justin's journey for truth did not end with Platonism for he later converted to Christianity. Eric Osborne (1973:7) wrote, "He wore his philosopher's cloak after his conversion to indicate that he had found in Christianity the true philosophy and that he was eager to defend its truth by argument". Runia (1993:97-105) wrote on the discussion of whether Justin was influenced by Philo of Alexandria after his conversion to Christianity. Runia (1993:104) showed that modern scholarly consensus is that Justin was "acquainted with themes from Hellenistic Judaism, but through other channels, which differ from Philo".

### **7.5.2 Clement of Alexandria (Circa 150-215 AD)**

Clement of Alexandria was a second-century AD Christian theologian. He argued that any passage that described God as having human affections were to be interpreted as God accommodating himself to the weakness of men (Clement, 1991:206-207). Concerning passages where God displays human emotions, he wrote:

It seems that we continually think of the Scriptures in worldly terms in such respects, making analogies from our own passions, wrongly accepting our understanding of the will of God (who is impassible) by the analogy of stirrings within us. If we, who have a capacity for hearing, were to imagine a similar condition in the Almighty, we should be committing a godless error. It is not possible to speak of the divine in its actual nature. But even though we are fettered to flesh, it is possible for us to hear the Lord, accommodating himself to human weakness for our salvation, in the words of the prophets (Clement, 1991:206-207).

In other words, in Clement's view, those passages do not describe God as he literally is. He appealed to the "language of accommodation" argument. Those passages accommodate man's ignorance or weakness. He later wrote:

God is impassible, free of anger, destitute of desire. And He is not free of fear, in the sense of avoiding what is terrible; or temperate, in the sense of having command of desires. For neither can the nature of God fall in with anything terrible; nor does God flee fear, just as he will not feel desire, so as to rule over desires (Clement, 2007:437).

Clement's view of an impassible God naturally flowed from his view of ultimate transcendence, which he derived from Philo (see Lilla, 1971:212-226). He referred to God as far off, unapproachable, and ineffable, and that "God is not in darkness or in place, but above both space and time, and qualities of objects" (Clement, 2007:348). Clement believed God has "no natural relation to us, as the authors of the heresies will have it . . ." (Clement, 2007:364). He also wrote that God is unapproachable and separated even from the archangels (Clement, 2007:493). Because of his view of transcendence, he believed God was above the experience of emotion and suffered in no way (Clement, 2007:365). Of importance to note is that Clement was contradictory in his statements regarding divine impassibility and transcendence. Clement (2007:364) referred to God as rich in pity and mercy and caring for mankind, even though mankind does not relate to God in either essence or nature. How can his statements regarding God's passionless nature and transcendence be reconciled with these thoughts? For example, even though he believed God was far off, unapproachable, and above the experience of emotion, as shown above, he nevertheless wrote:

But God being by nature rich in pity, in consequence of His own goodness, cares for us, though neither portions of Himself, nor by nature of His children. And this is the greatest proof of the goodness of God: that such being our relation to Him, and being by nature wholly estranged, He nevertheless cares for us. For the affection in animals to their progeny is natural, and the friendship of kindred minds is the result of intimacy. But the mercy of God is rich toward us, who are in no respect related to Him; I say either in our essence

or nature . . . (Clement, 2007:364).

Because of Clements view on divine impassibility and transcendence, he rejected all anthropomorphic depictions of God (Osborne, 2005:88). In fact, his views on impassibility, transcendence, and rejection of anthropomorphisms can be traced to Greek Philosophy. For example, Albert Outler (1940:217) claimed that Clement of Alexandria “occupies a crucial place in the process of what is often called ‘the hellenization of Christianity’” in that he was influenced by Hellenistic philosophy more than other Christian theologians of his time.

Clement believed that in the same way God gave the Law to the Jews as a covenant that would lead them to Christ, God also gave philosophy to the Greeks as a covenant that would lay the foundation for Christ (Hopkins, 1998:33). He wrote, “Indeed philosophy has been given to the Greeks as their own kind of Covenant, their foundation for the philosophy of Christ” (Clement quoted in Hopkins, 1998:33). He tried to connect Greek philosophy with the doctrine of Christianity by claiming the Greek philosophers borrowed from Moses (Clement, 2007:347 and 465-476). He wrote:

As Scripture has called the Greeks pilferers of the Barbarian philosophy, it will next have to be considered how this may be briefly demonstrated. For we shall not only show that they have imitated and copied the marvels recorded in our books; but we shall prove, besides, that they have plagiarized . . . the chief dogmas they hold, both on faith and knowledge and science, and hope and love, and also on repentance and temperance and the fear of God, a whole swarm, verily, of the virtues of truth (Clement, 2007:347).

Using allegorical methods of exegesis, Clement went on to argue that the Greek poets taught Christian truths. For example, Hopkins (1998:76) noted that Clement “interpreted the withdrawal of Oceanus and Tethys from each other in Homer’s *Iliad* to mean the separation of land and sea spoken of in the Old Testament” (Clement, 2007:468). Using allegorical interpretive methods,

Clement rejected literal interpretations of anthropomorphisms in the writings of Moses (Patrick, 1914:82-84). Hopkins (1998:76) wrote, "He also argued that Homer, when he made Apollo ask Achilles, 'Why fruitlessly pursue him, a god', meant to show that Divinity cannot be understood by bodily powers". In other words, man cannot understand divinity or be compared to him.

In the same way that the Greek philosophers such as Xenophanes and Plato rejected anthropomorphisms on the basis of the negative depictions given to the gods through Homer and Hesiod's writings, Clement followed their influence and concluded that ascribing humanlike characteristics, material or immaterial, to God was bad doctrine (Patrick, 1914:82). Concerning anthropomorphisms, Clement (2007:528-529) quoted Xenophanes and wrote:

Now, as the Greeks represent the gods as possessing human forms, so also do they as possessing human passions. And as each of them depict their forms similar to themselves, as Xenophanes says, "Ethiopians as black and apes, the Thracians ruddy and tawny," so also they assimilate their souls to those who form them: the Barbarians, for instance, who make them savage and wild; and the Greeks, who make them more civilized, yet subject to passion . . . Now also we say that it is requisite to purify the soul from corrupt and bad doctrines by right reason . . . .

This is further evidence that the trend seemed to have been to reject or reinterpret all anthropomorphic depictions of God in the Old Testament, because a literal interpretation would imply that God was not perfect in every way, and any "change" in God would be negative.

### **7.5.3 Origen of Alexandria (Circa 182-254 AD)**

Origen presumably was a pupil of Clement of Alexandria (Broek, 1996:198). He has been associated with Platonic thought and being greatly influenced by Philo of Alexandria (Dillon, 1996 and Armstrong, 1967:182-192). There is evidence in his writings that he struggled reconciling the biblical texts that portray God as

having human affections such as repenting or showing emotion with the doctrine of divine impassibility. For example, he wrote:

And now, if, on account of those expressions which occur in the Old Testament, as when God is said to be angry or to repent, or when any other human affection or passion is described, (our opponents) think that they are furnished with grounds for refuting us, who maintain that God is altogether impassible, and is to be regarded as wholly free from all affections of that kind . . . But when we read either in the Old Testament or in the New of the anger of God, we do not take such expressions literally, but seek in them a spiritual meaning, that we may think of God as He deserves to be thought of (Origen, 2007:277-278).

Origen appeared to argue for the impassibility of God and for an alternative interpretation to those biblical passages that portray God as having human affections. Much like Philo and Clement of Alexandria, he sought an allegorical meaning to those texts. For example, Origen argued that Scripture contained multiple levels of meaning, primarily literal, moral, and spiritual, each of which corresponds with the body, soul, and spirit (Hauser and Watson, 2003:335). He wrote, “Just as man consists of body, soul, and spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture . . .” (Origen quoted by Dawson, 2003:102). He acknowledged that some passages that lack a literal or bodily interpretation must be interpreted in a spiritual or allegorical sense (Bouteneff, 2008:100). One such example as already shown above is the passages that portray God as having emotion.

Origen’s belief in interpreting divine emotion as allegorical stemmed partly from his view of divine transcendence. For example, he wrote, “Having refuted, then, as well as we could, every notion which might suggest that we were to think of God as in any degree corporeal, we go on to say that, according to strict truth, God is incomprehensible, and incapable of being measured” (Origen, 2007:243). In other words, mankind cannot truly know God because man’s ability to conceive of God would be inaccurate. He continued, “For whatever be

the knowledge which we are able to obtain of God, either by perception or reflection, we must of necessity believe that He is by many degrees far better than what we perceive Him to be . . . Our understanding is unable of itself to behold God Himself as He is . . .” (Origen, 2007:243). In Origen’s mind God is never as he appears. For whatever man conceives him as being, he is far superior.

Certainly, God is transcendent in that he is above his creation in the sense he has infinite knowledge, power, and is the sovereign Creator. His attributes are far greater than any human’s attributes. If divine transcendence is defined in terms of how Origen defined it, then naturally he would have to reject any literal interpretation of passages that portray God as having emotion or changed his mind. As previously shown, the thought that God is transcendent in that he is in no way comparable to humans and ultimately not knowable by them can be traced to Platonic influence. There is further evidence of this in Origen’s writings. For example, Origen wrote *Contra Celsum* in which he countered the writings of Celsus the Platonist. Following Plato, Celsus made the claim that God is unnamable (Origen, 2003:380). Joseph McLelland (1976:102-103) wrote:

If God is unknowable He cannot be spoken of, and therefore man cannot give him a name. Such was the theology of the Platonists: for Albinus, God is transcendent so decisively that he is unspeakable and therefore unnamable. Celsus had also stated that “he cannot be named” and Origen takes this up as worthy of a detailed reply. Celsus is right, Origen states, if he means that our descriptions by word or expression cannot show the divine attributes . . . But if by “name” one means that he can “*show something about His attributes in order to guide the hearer and to make him understand God’s character insofar as some of His attributes are attainable by human nature,*” then this is a valid mode of speaking.

Origen (2003:381) continued, “In this way also we would make a distinction in

the words 'For he has no experience which can be comprehended by a name.' And it is also true that God is outside any emotional experience". In the above quote, Origen connected his view of transcendence with divine impassibility. As a whole, his writings show he did not believe that God is passible and capable of change. However, later in his life, Origen appeared to contradict his previous writings on divine impassibility (Origen, 1956:256-257). He argued that Jesus in becoming flesh suffered and went on to argue that God is in fact passible. Origen (1956:256-257) wrote:

He came down to earth in pity for human kind, he endured our passions and sufferings before he suffered the cross . . . He first suffered, then he came down and manifested. What is that passion which he suffered for us? It is the passion of love. The Father himself and the God of the whole universe is "longsuffering, full of mercy and pity." Must he not then, in some sense, be exposed to suffering? So you must realize that in his dealing with men he suffers human passions . . . The Father himself is not impassible. If he is besought he shows pity and compassion; he feels, in some sort, the passion of love, and is exposed to what he cannot be exposed to in respect of his greatness, and for us men he endures the passions of mankind.

Although scholars such as Rob Lister (2013:75-77) and Jeff Pool (2010:387-389) deny that Origen changed or altered his views on divine impassibility toward the end of his life, this quote portrays a more accurate description of God based on the evidence in the biblical text than his previous writings on God's transcendence and impassibility. Joseph Hallman (2004:46) suggests that the tension presented in Origen's writings over the issue of impassibility is due to his loyalty to both the Scriptures and Platonism. Despite the evidence for divine passibility in the Old Testament, in the end, Hallman (2004:46) believed Origen could not overcome his philosophical presuppositions about God's nature.

#### **7.5.4 Tertullian (Circa 160-225 AD)**

Tertullian, from Carthage, Africa, is worthy of study, because he was not keen on mixing philosophy and doctrine. He referred to the mixing of philosophy and Christianity as the doctrine of men and demons Tertullian, *Prescriptions*, 1887:246). He wrote:

These are “the doctrines” of men and of demons produced for itching ears of the spirit of this world’s wisdom: this the Lord called “foolishness,” and “chose the foolish things of the world” to confound even philosophy itself . . . . Indeed heresies are themselves instigated by philosophy (Tertullian, *Prescriptions*, 1887:246).

Tertullian recognized the influence Greek philosophy was having on early Christianity and argued that Christians should avoid attempting to harmonize Greek philosophical beliefs and Christian teachings (see Tertullian, *Prescriptions*, 1887:243-268). He is known for posing the question, “What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem” (Tertullian, *Prescriptions*, 1886:246)? In his question, Athens referred to the Platonic Academy and thus all of Greek philosophy. Jerusalem referred to the teachings of Jesus and the apostles (Olson, 2009:93). Tertullian (*Prescriptions*, 1887:246) continued:

What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? What between heretics and Christians? Our instruction comes from “the porch of Solomon,” who had himself taught that “the Lord should be sought in simplicity of heart. Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition! We want no curious disputation after possessing Christ Jesus, no inquisition after enjoying the gospel! With our faith, we desire no further belief. For this is our palmary faith, that there is nothing we ought to believe besides.

Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:309-310) wrote extensively on his rejection of divine impassibility. He argued that God’s attributes should be derived from the writings of the prophets, not from the philosophers (*Against Marcion*, 1887:309).

He wrote, "We are taught God by the prophets, and by Christ, not by the philosophers nor by Epicurus" (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:309). He separated his beliefs from what he referred to as the belief of the heretics. He wrote:

We who believe that God really lived on earth, and took upon Him the low estate of human form, for the purpose of man's salvation, are very far from thinking as those do who refuse to believe that God cares for anything. Whence has found its way to the heretics an argument of this kind: If God is angry, and jealous, and roused, and grieved, He must therefore be corrupted, and must therefore die (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:309).

In Tertullian's attempt to dispel the popular belief of his day that a passible God is corrupted, he wrote, "Superlative is their folly, who prejudge divine things from human; so that because in man's corrupt condition there are found passions of this description, therefore there must be deemed to exist in God also sensations of the same kind" (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:309-310). Only because man is corrupted does not mean God is corrupted if he shares like passions. Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310) believed that although God and man share the same passions, the difference between the nature of God and man allow emotions to not affect God in a negative way. For example, Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310) wrote, "Now, as great as shall be the difference between the divine and human body, although their members pass under identical names, so great will also be the diversity between the divine and the human soul, notwithstanding that their sensations are designated by the same names". He continued, "These sensations in the human body are rendered just as corrupt by the corruptibility of man's substance, as in God they are rendered incorruptible by the incorruption of the divine essence" (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:310).

Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310). rejected the preconceived notion that Greek philosophy's view of divine transcendence that led to the mainstream

view of divine impassibility of his era was correct. For example, he wrote, “Him whom you do not deny to be God, you confess to be not human; because, when you confess Him to be God, you have, in fact, already determined that He is undoubtedly diverse from every sort of human conditions” (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:310). This included emotion. He argued that the emotions humans have is indicative of mankind being made in the image of God (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310). Being made in the image of God explains how humans relate to God on an emotional level in the sense that the divine and man share the same emotions, but God experiences them out of his perfection whereas man does not experience emotions out of a perfected nature (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310). Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:310). wrote:

Furthermore, although you allow, with others, that man was inbreathed by God into a living soul, not God by man, it is yet palpably absurd of you to be placing human characteristics in God rather than divine ones in man, and clothing God in the likeness of man, instead of man in the image of God. And this, therefore, is to be deemed the likeness of God in man, that the human soul have the same emotions and sensations as God, although they are not of the same kind; differing as they do both in their conditions and their issues according to their nature . . . For we indeed do not possess them in perfection, because it is God alone who is perfect.

In light of Tertullian’s rejection of Greek philosophy’s influence on Christianity and the doctrine of divine impassibility, he argued that God does and can relent, and that divine repentance does not tarnish God’s character or nature. For example, he used Saul and Nineveh as examples:

With respect to the repentance which occurs in His conduct, you interpret it with similar perverseness just as if it were fickleness and improvidence that He repented, or on the recollection of some wrongdoing . . . as if He meant that His repentance savoured of an acknowledgment of some evil work or error. Well, this is not always

implied. For there occurs even in good works a confession of repentance . . . in this case of Saul, the Creator, who had made no mistake in selecting him for the kingdom, and endowing him with His Holy Spirit, makes a statement respecting the goodness of his person, how that He had most fitly chosen him as being at the moment the choicest man . . . (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:315).

Regarding the case of Nineveh, Tertullian (*Against Marcion*, 1887:315) pointed out that Jonah attributed repentance as an attribute of God. He wrote, "It is well, therefore, that he (Jonah) premised the attribute of the most good God as most patient over the wicked, and most abundant in mercy and kindness over such as acknowledged and bewailed their sins, as the Ninevites were then doing" (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:315). In the same way Tertullian differentiated between human emotions and divine emotions, he attempted to differentiate divine repentance from human repentance (*Against Marcion*, 1887:316). For example, he wrote:

And it now remains that we should understand what God's repentance means. For although man repents most frequently on the recollection of sin, and occasionally even from the unpleasantness of some good action, this is never the case with God. For, inasmuch as God neither commits sin nor condemns a good action, in so far is there no room in Him for repentance of either a good or an evil deed . . . divine repentance takes in all cases different form from that of man, in that it is never regarded as the result of improvidence or of fickleness, or of any condemnation of a good or an evil work. What, then, will be the mode of God's repentance? It is already quite clear, if you avoid referring it to human conditions. For it will have no other meaning than a simple change of a prior purpose; and this is admissible without any blame even in a man, much more in God, whose every purpose is faultless. Now in Greek the word for

repentance is formed, not from the confession of a sin, but from a change of mind, which in God we have shown to be regulated by the occurrence of varying circumstances (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:316).

Tertullian believed that God granted humans free will (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:300-303). Based on the choices made with the free will, God would grant either blessings or punishments. He explained divine passibility in the same way (Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:315-316). Human choices affected how God responded in the Scriptures, sometimes causing him to change his mind.

#### **7.5.5 Augustine of Hippo (Circa 354-430 AD)**

The writings of Augustine have been influential in the development of Western Christianity (Deshen, 1999:16). He argued that God was immutable and impassible. For example, he wrote:

. . . we may understand God, if we are able, and as much as we are able, as good without quality, great without quantity, a creator though He lacks nothing, ruling but from no position, sustaining all things without 'having' them, in His wholeness everywhere, yet without place, eternal without time, making things that are changeable, *without change of Himself, and without passion* (emphasis added) (Augustine, 1907:88).

Concerning God's immutability in regards to divine repentance, Augustine referred to God's mind as "absolutely unchangeable" (Augustine, 1907:237). He continued:

For that which specially leads these men astray to refer their own circles to the straight path of truth, is, that they measure by their own human, changeable, and narrow intellect *the divine mind, which is absolutely unchangeable*, infinitely capacious, and without

succession of thought, counting all things without number (emphasis added) (Augustine, 1907:237).

Although Augustine believed in an immutable and impassible God, there is evidence elsewhere in his writings where he hinted that God does in fact repent and experience emotion but not in the same way that humans do. For example, he wrote:

God does not repent as does a man, but as God; just as He is not angry after the manner of men, nor is pitiful, nor is jealous, but all He is He is as God. God's repentance does not follow upon error; the anger of God carries with it no trace of a disturbed mind, nor His pity the wretched heart of a fellow-sufferer, . . . nor His jealousy any envy of mind. But by the repentance of God is meant the change of things which lie within His power, unexpected by man; the anger of God is His vengeance upon sin; the pity of God is the goodness of His help; the jealousy of God is that providence whereby He does not allow those whom He has in subjection to Himself to love with impunity what He forbids (Augustine quoted in Mosely, 1926:106).

In the above quote, Augustine wrote, "God's repentance does not follow upon error", and "the anger of God carries with it no trace of a disturbed mind". These statements imply that any change in God, such as changing his mind or becoming angry, would be a negative change in God. This closely resembles Plato's belief that a perfect being cannot truly change but for the worse (See Plato as quoted in Ferrari, 2003:67). Augustine tried to separate divine repentance from the viewpoint of human repentance and God's emotions from the experience of human emotions, and although it may appear as if he advocated a theology where God was in some way mutable and impassioned, his writings as a whole show otherwise. For example, he continued, ". . . when God repents He is not changed and He brings about change; when He is angry He is not moved and He avenges; when He pities He does not grieve and He

liberates; when He is jealous He is not pained and He causes pain” (Augustine quoted in Mosely, 1926:106-107).

Augustine (Mosely, 1926:106-107) argued that although God is impassible, the emotions ascribed to him in the Bible still apply; however, he believed that these characteristics and emotions do not exist in God in the same way they exist in humans. Augustine was able to hold to the belief that God is indeed impassible but at the same time, God could be considered as becoming angry, jealous, and patient. He wrote:

The virtue of the soul which is called patience is so great a gift of God that it is even said to belong to Him who bestows it, in that He waits for the wicked to amend. So, although God cannot suffer, and patience surely has its name from suffering, we not only faithfully believe in a patient God, but also steadfastly acknowledge Him to be such. Who can explain in words the nature and quantity of God’s patience? We say He is impassible, yet not impatient; nay, rather, extremely patient. His patience is indescribable, yet it exists as does His jealousy, His wrath, and any characteristic of this kind. But if we conceive of these qualities as they exist in us, He has none of them. We do not experience these feelings without annoyance, but far be it from us to suspect an impassible God of suffering any annoyance. Just as He is jealous without any ill will, as He is angry without being emotionally upset, as He pities without grieving, as He is sorry without correcting any fault, so He is patient without suffering at all (Augustine quoted in Meagher, 1952:237).

Ultimately, Augustine (1907:480) believed that when the Bible depicts God as having relented or having showed emotion, the characters in the story were the ones who changed, not God. He wrote:

And consequently, when God is said to change His will, as when He becomes angry with those to whom He was gentle, it is rather they

than He who are changed, and they find Him changed in so far as their experience of suffering at His hand is new, as the sun is changed to injured eyes, and becomes as it were fierce from being mild, and hurtful from being delightful, though in itself it remains the same as it was (Augustine, 1907:480).

Augustine reiterated that the Bible does not always speak of reality but accommodates man's ignorance. In those situations, Augustine believed the Bible suites itself to babes (Augustine, 1905:18). This idea is similar to what Calvin (2006:127) later espoused; that is, those passages are like an adult talking to a nursing child. Augustine (1905:18) wrote:

In order, therefore, that the human mind might be purged from falsities of this kind, Holy Scripture, which suites itself to babes has not avoided words drawn from any class of things really existing, through which, as by nourishment, our understanding might gradually rise to things divine and transcendent. For, in speaking about God, it has . . . borrowed many things from the spiritual creature, whereby to signify that which indeed is not so, but must needs so be said: as, for instance, "I the Lord thy God am a jealous God", and "It repenteth me that I have made man".

What caused Augustine to view passages with immaterial anthropomorphisms in a way other than in a literal fashion? The evidence shows that Augustine's study of philosophy influenced him to reject anthropomorphic depictions of God or at least not interpret them literally and view God as being utterly transcendent. For example, he wrote, "I no longer thought of thee, O God, by the analogy of a human body. Ever since I included my ear to philosophy I had avoided this error . . ." (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017:§7.1.1). He continued, ". . . I believed that thou art incorruptible and inviolable and unchangeable, because . . . I could still see plainly and without doubt that the corruptible is inferior to the incorruptible, the inviolable obviously superior to its opposite, and the unchangeable better than the changeable" (Augustine, *Confessions*,

2017:§7.1.1).

Augustine admitted that when he started learning philosophy, he changed his views about God. He started placing an emphasis on the incorruptible being far superior to the corruptible. He wrote, “For in my struggle to solve the rest of my difficulties, I now assumed henceforth as settled truth that the incorruptible must be superior to the corruptible” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017:§7.4.6). He started thinking about God in the way the philosophers thought about him; that is, as the highest form of good, transcendent, and separated from his creation. He wrote, “For there never yet was, nor will be, a soul able to conceive of anything better than thee, who art the highest and best good” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017:§7.4.6). The platonic view of the divine being the best good conceivable assumes that change is always for the worse. The argument, as previously noted, is that if God were the highest and best good, then there would be no reason for a change in him at any time.

The influence of Platonist writings on Augustine’s journey in finding God is recorded in his own words (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017:§7). He compared the writings of the Platonists to that of Scripture. He wrote, “. . . you did procure for me . . . certain books of the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin . . . therein I found, not in the same words, but to the selfsame effect, enforced by many and various reasons that ‘in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .’” (Augustine, *Confessions*, 2017:§7.9.13). Augustine (*Confessions*, 2017:§7.21.27) claimed that the truths he learned from the Platonists were found in the writings of the apostle Paul but combined with the exaltation of God’s grace.

Augustine credited the Platonist writings for influencing him to see spiritual meaning through metaphorical language over literalism and to view God as transcendent in the sense that there is no motion within him. For example, Augustine (*Confessions*, 2017:§7.20.26) stated:

By having thus read the books of the Platonists, and having been

taught by them to search for the incorporeal Truth, I saw how thy invisible things are understood through the things that are made. And, even when I was thrown back, I still sensed what it was that the dullness of my soul would not allow me to contemplate. I was assured that thou wast, and wast infinite, though not diffused in finite space or infinity; that thou truly art, who art ever the same, varying neither in part nor motion; and that all things are from thee, as is proved by this sure cause alone: that they exist.

Augustine has long been associated with Neo-Platonism, a period of Platonic philosophy influenced by Plotinus. For example, the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Augustine, 2017) stated that Augustine's "philosophy infused Christian doctrine with Neo-Platonism". The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Mendelson, 2012) labelled Augustine as a Christian Neo-Platonist and states that he was one of the main figures in merging the Greek philosophical tradition with the Judeo-Christian religious and scriptural traditions. G.K. Chesterton (1986:468) wrote, "Granted all the grandeur of Augustine's contribution to Christianity, there was in a sense a more subtle danger in Augustine the Platonist . . .". The argument has been that the Platonists influenced Augustine's view of divine immutability and impassibility; therefore, he sought alternative meanings to biblical passages that would seem to argue against his view of divine immutability and impassibility. Thus, the concept of divine relenting such as in our Jeremiah passages was reviewed as a "non-literal accommodating anthropomorphism".

### 7.6 Chapter conclusion

This chapter helped finish answering the fourth key question, "What is the bigger picture surrounding the use of שׁוּב (shub) and נָחַם (nacham) in the Hebrew Bible, and how does it relate to the context of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19"? The purpose of this chapter was to analyse the

bigger picture of moving towards a metaphorical interpretation. The chapter began with a discussion on the anthropomorphic problem, where I tried to show that anthropomorphisms, both material and immaterial, still must communicate some form of literal truth. This idea supports the conclusion that if a nation had literally repented, שׁוּב (shub), then God would have literally relented, נָחַם (nacham), in those specific passages where he promised to do so. The chapter then moved into a discussion about the ancient Hebrew mind differing from the abstract mind of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Hebrews, I argued, would not have viewed the immaterial anthropomorphic passages in the Old Testament as anything other than depicting reality. The Greeks on the other hand thought more abstractly, and it was not until the fusing of Greek philosophical ideas with the Scriptures that the early Christian leaders started interpreting those selected Old Testament passages as not depicting reality but instead accommodating man's ignorance.

Evidence shows that prominent Greek philosophers rejected anthropomorphic depictions of the gods based on their distaste for the way Homer and Hesiod portrayed the gods in Greek mythology. In contrast to Homer and Hesiod's writings, certain Greek philosophers came to view God as utterly transcendent and defined immutability in that the divine would be unchanging in all ways. This resulted in referencing the divine as being utterly transcendent and impassible. Furthermore, the evidence shows that Philo of Alexandria attempted to harmonize certain elements of Greek philosophy with the Jewish Scriptures. Philo popularized the allegorical interpretative methods that would shape how certain early Church fathers allegorized biblical texts that were originally meant to be interpreted in a literal fashion.

Following the lead of the influential Greek philosophers and Philo of Alexandria, evidence has been presented that a number of early Church fathers accepted the utterly transcendent view of God. Thus, despite the Old Testament evidence that contradicts their premises, they, nevertheless, reinterpreted those passages and sought alternative meanings. This was the beginning, I argue, of

the strict “non-literal accommodating anthropomorphic” viewpoint of divine relenting as we have in our Jeremiah passages. Jeremiah, rather, described a God who was willing to relent if the people repented and turned from their sins. This picture of God that Jeremiah described was not transcendent in the sense that he was so far cut off from his creation that people could not influence him in any aspect. Instead, the God Jeremiah described took into consideration the decisions and actions of the nations and gave them a real proposition with conditions attached, that is, “if you repent, then I will relent, but, on the other hand, if you do not repent, then I will not relent from sending judgment”.

## **Chapter 8**

# **APPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **8.1 Chapter introduction**

The purpose of the first part of this chapter is to answer the fifth key question, “What is the application of these chapters for contemporary Christianity”? This chapter accomplishes this by drawing applications from the heart of the exegesis of the Jeremiah texts in showing how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning and messages of those passages. The applications that are drawn are meant to benefit contemporary Christianity and to show that this thesis could have significance in a Christian’s life. This is accomplished by examining theological and practical applications from my thesis and includes three major categories: biblical exegesis, covenant relationships and Christian living. The purpose of the second half of this chapter is to draw conclusions for the entire thesis.

### **8.2 Theological and practical applications**

#### **8.2.1 Biblical Exegesis**

(1) On interpreting anthropomorphisms

There are several ways my thesis has application and could affect a person's exegesis of the Old Testament. One of the specific examples has been the calling into question the way scholars have interpreted and handled anthropomorphic depictions of God. Many scholars have not made a distinction between material and immaterial anthropomorphisms (Feinberg, 2001:215). Instead, they have interpreted all of them in the same way, which has led to a potential misunderstanding of the full weight and significance of certain anthropomorphisms (For example, Calvin, 2006:127 and Routledge, 2013:251). There have been others who have seen the importance of making a distinction of certain usages of languages about God in the Old Testament (Barr, 2013:49 and Fretheim, 1984:5-12).

For example, material anthropomorphisms still communicate truth about God even though they are metaphors (Fretheim, 1984:7). Furthermore, I have tried to show in chapter seven that immaterial anthropomorphisms do not make sense if they are not interpreted to some degree in a literal fashion. Thus, they cannot be interpreted in the same way as material anthropomorphisms. If a distinction is made among scholars in interpreting anthropomorphisms, then we could possibly determine what all anthropomorphisms add to the understanding of God's nature and how he relates to the world, and the references to שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) passages relating to God and his people would not be dismissed as strictly metaphorical with no real meaning.

## (2) On conditional prophecy

Another application from my thesis addresses the issue of conditional prophecies in the Old Testament. Prophecies are "classified on the basis of their fulfilment: conditional, unconditional, or sequential" (Kaiser and Silva, 1994:148). Textual clues are needed to help determine the category of a prophecy. For example, in Genesis 15, God made a covenant with Abraham and passed through the sacrificial animal halves signifying his promise to keep the oath. Abraham did not have to pass through the animal pieces; therefore,

the covenant was “unilateral, one-sided” and “unconditional on the part of God” (Kaiser and Silva, 1994:148-149).

The examination of the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the Jeremiah passages can provide a clue for determining whether a prophecy is unconditional, conditional or sequential. For example, in the case of Jeremiah 18:7-10, there is a human and God element to this prophecy (Hays, 2010:82). Because the nation has responsibility in this prophecy, the decree should be considered conditional (Chisholm, 2002:176). This conditionality is expressed in the if/then clauses but also made stronger by the use of and relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this passage. The same argument could be made for other *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) passages like the ones found in the book of Jonah (Hays, 2007). The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in these contexts help the interpreter identify the human element in the prophecy, which in turn helps identify the passage as a conditional prophecy.

Another aspect of conditional prophecy that should be considered is the nature of God’s response. Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew texts and the examination of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*), it would appear that conditional propositions are real from God’s perspective as well as from man’s. This would mean that some prophecies have aspects of conditionality attached to their fulfilment and that conditionality is part of God’s sovereign will (Duvall and Hays, 2005:383). God is able to genuinely respond because announcements of judgments and blessings are not set in stone (Chisholm, 2002:176-177). The relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in those passages should allow scholars to better identify, interpret and understand conditional prophecies and God’s relationship to the world.

### (3) On seeming contradicting passages

My thesis applies to biblical exegesis by offering solutions to reconcile the seeming contradiction in the Old Testament where on one hand, God is

portrayed as incapable of relenting and, on the other hand, some passages portray God as having relented. The passages that appeared to contradict the exegetical conclusions of chapter five were Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29 and Malachi 3:6. It was determined that examining these verses in their surrounding contexts would reveal there is no contradiction between these three passages and the other passages examined in my thesis. In Numbers 23:19, God reveals that he is not like man and will not relent in the way that Balak wanted him to do so (Bellinger, 2001:269). In other words, when God does relent, it is never arbitrary. Whereas man can change his mind for no apparent reason, God does not operate in this way (Boyd, 2000:80-81).

In 1 Samuel 15:29, Saul did not give God a reason to change his mind, so in that particular instance, Samuel concluded that God would not relent concerning Saul's dethronement (Bergen, 1996:174). My thesis helps interpreters see that in the context of the passage, 1 Samuel 15:29 does not have to be taken to mean that God never relents; therefore, every passage that portrays God as having relented should not be taken in a non-literal fashion.

In the same way, my thesis helps interpreters see that Malachi 3:6 is ultimately about God's unchanging character and does not exclude God from ever choosing to relent (Boyd and Eddy, 2009:68). The context shows that the point of Malachi 3:6 is that If God were not unchanging in his character, then Israel would have been destroyed a long time ago because of their unfaithfulness (Taylor and Clendenen, 2004:401). God having the option to relent can be a part of his unchanging character like conditions in prophecy can be a part of his sovereign will and how he chooses to relate to the world. In the end, my thesis shows that these three texts do not pose an exegetical problem at all when interpreted in light of their context and the entire council of the Old Testament, as shown in chapter six; therefore, they are not contradictions to the exegetical conclusions of the Jeremiah passages in chapter five.

## (4) On examining views about God

Finally, my thesis applies to biblical exegesis by challenging interpreters to examine from where their views about God originate. In chapter seven, much discussion was given to tracing the origins of metaphorical interpretation from the Greeks to some of the early church leaders. This included how the Greeks and others viewed anthropomorphic depictions of the divine. My thesis argued that the traditional notion to interpret the concept of God relenting as strictly metaphorical with no literal meaning has its roots in the Greek idea that a change in God would make him less than perfect (Calabi, 2008:17-19). This traditional notion has affected how the concept of divine repentance has been largely understood throughout church history. Granted, not everyone has agreed with the mainstream thought. For example, some have argued that a change in God does not make him less than perfect as was commonly thought (See Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, 1887:310).

An argument can be made that the “language of accommodation” viewpoint concerning divine repentance, and therefore, the נָחַם (*nacham*) passages with God as its subject, has been largely based on the philosophical idea of “change”, described above and in chapter seven, rather than what the Old Testament seems to convey and affirm (as shown in chapter six). This is perhaps one of the main reasons scholars have been quick to seek alternative meanings to שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of the Jeremiah texts used in my thesis, instead of taking the verbs at what would appear to be face value with a more literal meaning. The application from my thesis would be for interpreters to examine origins of certain beliefs about God, to the best of their ability, to make sure those beliefs are ultimately rooted in Scripture. In the case of the שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) passages, there is far more evidence in the Old Testament of God appearing as having relented or being capable of relenting than there is of the idea that he never relents or is incapable of doing so.

## 8.2.2 Covenant Relationships

### (1) On repentance

My thesis is applicable to our understanding of repentance, because repentance plays a vital role in understanding the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*). First, chapter four takes an in-depth look at the meanings of the words and reveals both Hebrew verb roots can mean “repentance” and refer to the act of repenting (Donnell, 1988:39). Second, in the Jeremiah passages for this thesis, whether God relented was based on whether the nation repented. Third, my thesis has shown that repentance in the Jeremiah context should primarily be understood in light of the covenant relationship God had with his people (Brueggemann, 2002:171 and Holladay, 1958). Specifically, the deuteronomic covenant was the driving force behind the commitment Judah had with Yahweh (Brueggemann, 1988:4).

In Jeremiah, this covenant relationship facilitated the boundaries in which God’s relenting did or did not take place. This means that an apparent change of mind on God’s part never happened arbitrarily, for it was always connected with human response as the human response “evokes” divine change (Brueggemann, 2007:171). In Jeremiah 18:7-10, Judah still had an opportunity to repent from their evil ways and escape the judgment. The nation’s choices could still have an impact on the future (Clements, 1988:113). In other passages like Jeremiah 4:23-31 and 15:1-7, repentance seemed to be an option that was taken off the table (Donnell, 1988:105). Jeremiah 26:1-19 affirms that a lack of repentance on man’s part was the main reason for the lack of relenting on God’s part.

While the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) is closely associated with the covenant relationship between God and Judah, there is at least one example mentioned in chapter six that extends this relationship to a foreign nation. The example of Nineveh recorded in Jonah is an exception to the rule in terms of how the two Hebrew verbs are used together in this context

throughout the Old Testament. Jeremiah 18:7-10 shows that God's love extends to other nations, and Jonah shows how God responds to other nations who repent. This is further evidence that repentance is a major factor in divine relenting.

We saw in chapter four that the Hebrew words for repentance involves a turning from something and turning to something else. For contemporary Christians, the act of repentance works the same way. In the same way that God called Judah to repentance, he calls all humans to repentance (2 Timothy 2:3-4). If Judah would have repented from their evil ways and turned back toward God, they would have been saved from the judgement that was headed their way. Under the New Covenant, when a person repents from their sin, and turns to Christ as their Saviour, they are saved from the eternal judgment coming their way (John 3:16-21). Dan Allender (2009:185) wrote:

Repentance is far more than merely saying, "I am wrong, and I am sorry." It is certainly no less. But it is a radical movement from where we have found life (Egypt) to the hope of the Promised Land, thus enabling us to wander as foreigners and strangers in a land that is not yet our own . . . The Sabbath turns us to God—it is a day of turning toward God which is the heartbeat of repentance.

The importance of repentance for contemporary Christians is that when a sinner repents and turns to God, God responds and transfers that person from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13-14). Repentance can influence God and move him to action; therefore, "repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

## (2) On prayer

Two fundamental questions are: Do our prayers make a difference, and how does God work in the world (Tiessen, 2000)? While almost everyone would agree *that* prayer makes a difference, there are disagreements as to *how*

prayer makes a difference in the world, particularly whether God is genuinely affected by prayer (Boyd and Eddy, 2009:32-69 and Tiessen, 2000). For example, some people believe “prayer does affect the outcome of things in the world, although it does not do so by changing God’s mind about what he will do in the situation” (Tiessen, 2000:233). Others believe that “prayer has a real effect on the way things turn out and even on the actions that God takes to influence those outcomes (Tiessen, 2000:72).

It would seem that according to the Old Testament, in the same way repentance affected God, prayer also affected God. For example, there are numerous examples that indicate prayers influence God. Exodus 32:7-14 and Amos 7:1-6 are two examples that were examined in chapter six. Other examples include: 1) Numbers 11:1-2, 14:12-20, 16:20-35, 2) Deuteronomy 9:13-29, 3) 2 Chronicles 7:14 and 4) Ezekiel 22:30. For contemporary Christians, James 5:16-18 calls the prayers of the righteous powerful and draws on the experience of the prophet Elijah to make his point:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. Elijah was a human being, even as we are. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Boyd and Eddy (2009:43) believed that how a Christian views prayer will affect his passion and motivation for praying. They wrote, “We may continue to pray simply out of obedience to God’s Word, but we may not pray as passionately as we would if we believed that whether God’s will is done in a particular situation is genuinely up to us” (Boyd and Eddy, 2009:43). Boyd (2000:128) noted that “there are more conditional promises attached to prayer in Scripture than to any other human activity”. He gave an interesting perspective on prayer in a Christian’s life:

We may think of prayer as the central way our God-intended place of authority is restored. Because God is relational and his central goal for creation is love, almost everything he does is through mediators. God's specific goal for humans from the start was to have us mediate his loving lordship over the earth. He created us to have dominion over the world (Gen. 1:26-31). The New Testament declares that God wants a bride who will reign *with him* on earth (2 Tim 2:12; Rev 5:10; 20:6). For this reason, God gives us say-so not just on a physical level but also on a spiritual level. He empowers us to pray (Boyd, 2003:130).

In this view, prayer is applicable because it is “an essential aspect of our co-reigning with God. God perhaps designed the world in which he not only influences us but we also influence him” (Boyd, 2003:130). This of course does not mean that every prayer a Christian prays will get answered in the way they would like them to. There are theories to explain unanswered prayer, but that subject is out of the scope of this research study. For more information on this topic, Boyd (2003) argues that unanswered prayers are not the result of God arbitrarily deciding which prayers to answer or not, and Terrance Tiessen (2000) provided eleven models of how scholars view prayer and how God possibly works through prayer.

### **8.2.3 Christian living**

#### (1) On reconciliation

Another application of the significance of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Jeremiah passages of my thesis is the message of reconciliation and the effect it has on the Christian's life. Reconciliation means “to put back” or “to bring into harmony” (Richards and Richards, 1987:883); therefore, the word “assumes ruptured relationship, alienation and disaffection” (Garland, 1999:289) The Old Testament passages that portray God as willing to change his mind in light of mans or a nations repentance reveals God's “commitment to reconciliation with

humanity (Bruckner, 2004:50). Although a nation's sin cut them off from God and ruptured the relationship (Isaiah 59:1-2), we find that God on many occasions was willing to forgive and reconcile them if they would only turn away from their sin and turn back to him.

There are many correlations to the way things work under the New Covenant. The New Testament emphasizes the message of reconciliation in Romans 5:1-11 and 2 Corinthians 5:11-21. In the same way that Judah was cut off from God because of sin and headed down the path of God's wrath, we too were dead in our transgressions and sins and by nature deserving of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3). David Garland (1999:289-290) wrote:

The problem, however, is not with God, as if God were some cruel taskmaster from whom humans rebelled. Human sinfulness created the problem, and this sinful condition had to be dealt with before there could be any reconciliation . . . God can never be reconciled to sin, but God does not turn away from sinners in disgust and leave them to their just desserts. Instead, while humans were still in open revolt, God acted in love (Rom 5:8) to bring the hostility to an end and to bring about peace (see Rom 5:1; see Isa 32:17). This peace . . . refers to the mending of the broken relationship that results from God justifying us (making us right) through faith and changing us from enemies to friends.

Because of God's love, mercy and grace, we have been saved through faith (Ephesians 2:4-10). The New Testament takes the idea of reconciliation a step further. Not only does the sinner's relationship with God become mended, we are given the "ministry of reconciliation". For example, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 reads:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them.

And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

In other words, as a New Testament believer, now that we have been offered forgiveness of our sins and have been reconciled with God, we are to take this message all over the world. Like the prophets in the Old Testament pleading with their nation to repent and turn to God, we are to "implore" people to be reconciled with God through Christ.

#### (2) On faithfulness

Another way my thesis is applicable to a Christian's life has to do with faithfulness. This faithfulness can be spoken of in two ways: God's faithfulness and the faithfulness he requires of us. First, my thesis teaches that when we repent, God is faithful to forgive and reconcile us back into a right relationship with him, as he was willing to do with the nations of the Old Testament. We can count on God's faithfulness. Second, we can take from this thesis that God is asking us to be faithful in proclaiming his message to the world (Bruckner, 2004:103). In the same way that God expected his prophets like Jeremiah to be faithful in giving his message to the nations, he expects us to be faithful in whatever role he gives us to carry out the advancement of the Kingdom of God on this earth. Warren Wiersbe (1981:9-10) wrote:

Faithfulness is an important character quality found throughout the Bible. For example, Noah was faithful in completing the ark despite public ridicule. Abraham demonstrated faithfulness in offering his son Isaac as a sacrifice to the Lord. Moses was faithful as he led the Israelites out of Egypt . . . David was a faithful king who shepherded God's people . . . And on and on it goes; story after story throughout the Old Testament extols this virtue of faithfulness. Faithfulness is

likewise emphasized in the New Testament. Through his parables, Jesus taught the importance of being faithful, drawing attention to the fact that every disciple is a steward and must be faithful with the resources that he or she has been given by God. The apostle Paul echoes Jesus' words about the importance of faithfulness throughout his letters, especially in 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon.

As shown, faithfulness is “an important concept that runs throughout the Bible and is an essential character trait that God wants each of His children to cultivate” (Wiersbe, 1981:10). Luke 16:10 reads, “Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much”. As Christians, we must “make the most of every opportunity” by being faithful and investing portions of our time and resources into the work of the Kingdom of God (Wiersbe, 1981:10).

### (3) On love

Not only can we see God's desire that humanity be reconciled to him, and God asking for our faithfulness in proclaiming the Gospel, we also see a glimpse of God's love for all people. Essentially at the heart of this entire discussion of the significance of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the Jeremiah passages selected for my thesis, we see the depth of God's love for his people. In the Old Testament, God could have left his people to continue to pander in their own sin, without caring enough to try to rescue them from it, but because he genuinely loved his people, he desired to restore, redeem and bring them back into right relationship with him on multiple occasions. God knew that their sinful ways would ultimately end with their death and destruction, so he pursued them by sending his prophets in hopes of getting them to repent and start heading towards life once again. It is perhaps precisely because of this love that God made propositions like what is found in Jeremiah 18:7-10, where he offers them a way out through repentance, and ultimately God has offered us all a way out of the vicious cycle of sin through the Gospel. Boyd (2004:25) wrote:

The Bible doesn't give us an abstract definition of *agape* love. It rather points us to its perfect expression in the person of Jesus Christ, dying for us on the cross . . . Love, as defined by the one who is love, lays down its life for another, however undeserving. As such, it always manifests Jesus Christ. The thing about God's sacrifice on Calvary that makes it a perfect expression of *agape* love is that it demonstrates God giving that which had unsurpassable worth—his Son—on behalf of a people who had no apparent worth. This is the nature of *agape* love. It is the act of unconditionally ascribing worth to another at a cost to oneself.

Boyd (2004:26) explained that "God expresses unsurpassable love for us and ascribes unsurpassable worth for us by sacrificing the One who has unsurpassable value on our behalf". As Christians, we are to extend this same kind of sacrificial love to others all over the world by living in love and in service to God and doing his will to advance the Kingdom of God on this earth.

#### **8.2.4 Conclusion from the applications**

The purpose of the first half of this chapter was to offer applications for contemporary Christianity. The chapter accomplished this purpose by examining theological and practical applications from my thesis and included three major categories: biblical exegesis, covenant relationships and Christian living. Under the biblical exegesis category, we saw how my thesis applies to interpreting and understanding material and immaterial anthropomorphisms, how the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the Jeremiah passages can provide a clue for determining whether a prophecy is unconditional, conditional or sequential, how my thesis offers solutions in an attempt to reconcile seeming contradicting passages in the Old Testament that deal with whether or not God relents and how my thesis challenges interpreters to examine where their beliefs about God originate.

Under the covenant relationships category, we saw how my thesis is applicable to our understanding of repentance, especially in the context of the covenant relationship that God had with his people and how my thesis should affect a Christian's prayer life and whether our prayers have any influence on God. In the third and final category, Christian living, we saw how the significance of שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in the context of my thesis reveals the vital role of the message and ministry of reconciliation that is provided by God for humanity, how God is always faithful, and he expects us to be faithful in proclaiming the message he has given us to the world and how the heart of this entire discussion reveals the depths of God's love, that he was willing to step into history and redeem mankind despite our continued rebellion against him. Having looked at several ways my thesis is applicable to believers' lives, we are now able to turn our attention to the conclusion of the thesis.

### 8.3 Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to explore how שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. In these passages, both Hebrew verb roots are used in close proximity and are often translated as "repent" and "relent". Furthermore, apart from Jeremiah 4:28, שׁוּב (*shub*) is used in reference to man, while נָחַם (*nacham*) is used in reference to God. While it was shown that scholars generally agree that נָחַם (*nacham*) expresses an idea of change, they are divided as to how this "change" should be understood (Willis, 1994). Thus, it was concluded that how נָחַם (*nacham*) is understood can affect the interpretation and meaning of a passage, and in the case of Jeremiah, it can affect how scholars understand the relationship between God and his people.

The premise of this thesis was that to fully understand the meaning and message of the selected Jeremiah passages, both Hebrew verbs had to be examined. The point was that without examining both שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in their respective contexts, an important relationship between the two may be missed.

### 8.4 Summary and results

My thesis found that the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) was significant in each of the Jeremiah passages. For example, when Jeremiah 18:1-10 was exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) played a vital role in understanding the overall message of the passage. When viewed in a covenantal context, the main point of the passage shifted from the potter's unilateral control and sovereignty over the clay to the flexibility of the potter to work with his clay. In this covenantal context, the author(s) used *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relents in response to the decisions of his people. Based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, this covenantal relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) revealed that conditional propositions were real not only from man's perspective but also from God's perspective. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this context revealed that the response of the nation had an influence on what God did or did not do, meaning that to some degree or another the future of the nation was in the hands of the people depending upon how they responded to God.

When Jeremiah 4:23-31 was exegetically examined, the poem showed how the covenantal relationship between God and Judah was unravelling at the time, and the text portrayed how Judah's sin and rebellion against God led them into darkness and chaos by poetically describing the dismantling of creation. The author's use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28 shed an interpretive light on the second clause in Jeremiah 4:27. For example, the clause "Though I will not destroy it completely" is better translated as "I have not yet made an end to the devastation", meaning God would carry out the judgment to its end. It was determined that this interpretation fit more closely in line with the context of the entire passage and was supported by the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the following verse. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) further showed the seriousness with which God was bringing the devastation against the nation and land, and unlike Jeremiah 18:7-10, the

situation in Jeremiah 4:28 did not leave any room for repentance on behalf of the nation. Furthermore, the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this context showed that God's relenting or turning back (or lack thereof) was not arbitrary. Finally, the Jeremiah's use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) strengthened the theme of total destruction given throughout the entire passage.

When Jeremiah 15:1-7 was exegetically examined, this lament showed that there was much stress placed on the relationship between God and Judah. The judgments pronounced on Judah were consistent with what is found within the curses of the covenant in Deuteronomy 28 and were a result of covenantal disobedience on Judah's part. The usage of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the covenantal context of this passage revealed four things. First, the lack of repentance from Judah was the main reason God would not relent from his judgment. Second, God's unwillingness to show any more compassion was directly related to Judah's unwillingness to "turn" from their ways. Third, perhaps if Judah had repented earlier, then God would have not brought the coming destruction on the nation. Fourth, Judah's actions directly affected how God responded, meaning that in this context human decisions had an impact on God, and ultimately, the usage of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this passage showed that aspect of covenantal relationship.

When Jeremiah 26:1-19 was exegetically examined, this passage revealed the relationship between *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in the context of the relationship between the nation and God, meaning one did not happen without the other. In other words if the nation did not *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and repent of their evil ways, then God would not *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and relent of the judgment headed their way. The use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) in this passage revealed and strengthened the conditional nature of God's message to the nation. The emphasis of God's message was on whether Judah would listen and obey Yahweh and return to covenant faithfulness, thus, the future of Judah was partly in their own hands. Furthermore, the use of *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) and

the entire concept of Judah's response having an impact on God's decisions again showed that God's relenting was never arbitrary.

### 8.5 Contributions to theological knowledge

Concerning נָחַם (*nacham*), scholarship has largely been focused on whether the verb root should be translated literally or figuratively when God is its subject as in Jeremiah 18:8 and 10. When it comes to שׁוּב (*shub*), scholarship has noticed its covenantal usage in the book of Jeremiah and the importance of the role that repentance plays in the covenantal relationship between God and his people. My thesis adds to this theological knowledge by bringing the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) into the equation and showing how that relationship contributes to the meaning and understanding of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. Whereas the focus has been on the covenantal usage of שׁוּב (*shub*) and the importance of repentance, this thesis shows that נָחַם (*nacham*) is included in that covenantal relationship as well, meaning that one does not happen without the other. This adds to the discussion of the role of repentance within the covenant relationship between God and the nation. God will not relent from judgment if the nation does not repent. The extent of the contribution and importance of the relationship between the two verbs to each of their passages has been detailed above in the chapter-by-chapter summary.

Based on the exegesis of the selected Jeremiah passages and the evidence presented from the Old Testament, my thesis challenges the traditional notion that נָחַם (*nacham*) with God as its subject does not have literal meaning and must be interpreted as a figure of speech or accommodated language. My thesis adds to the discussion by providing a framework for metaphorical interpretation as it relates to anthropomorphisms. Instead of interpreting all anthropomorphisms in the same way and by the same standards, my thesis calls for a distinction to be made between material (physical) and immaterial (non-physical) anthropomorphic statements in the Old Testament and shows why they cannot be interpreted in the same way. For example, if an immaterial

anthropomorphism is not to some degree interpreted literally, then it loses its meaning and purpose. My thesis adds to the knowledge by showing that a fully anthropomorphic non-literal interpretation of נָחַם (*nacham*) is not necessary based on the exegesis of the Jeremiah passages and is not consistent with the evidence presented in the Old Testament.

My thesis goes an extra step in offering a possible explanation as to why tradition has primarily written off the concept of נָחַם (*nacham*) referring to God as an anthropomorphic metaphor with no literalness to its meaning. This explanation is shown by first comparing the concrete thought of the ancient Hebrews with the abstract thought of the ancient Greeks. The theory is continued by tracing metaphorical thought in showing why the early Greek philosophers disliked anthropomorphic depictions of the gods and that led the philosophers to develop an idea of the divine as utterly transcendent and in most cases separated and un-relatable to creation. My thesis continues to add to the discussion by showing how this thought influenced some of the early Christian leaders in their mind-set and thinking about God as utterly transcendent, which resulted in non-literal views of God relenting.

In the end, my thesis adds to theological knowledge by exploiting the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) in Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 to determine how the two verbs contribute to understanding the meaning and message of those passages. Overall, this thesis contributes theologically by examining the anchor texts in Jeremiah, continuing the attempt to better understand the nature of God and how he relates in the world and continuing the attempt to better understand the relationship between God and man. On the other hand, this thesis benefits contemporary Christians by showing that human decisions matter, showing the importance of repentance, prayer and communicating with God and showing the unchanging character and loving heart of God.

## 8.6 Recommendations for further research

Having completed my thesis, there are four areas of recommendation that I would propose for further research. First, detailed exegetical studies of other *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) passages apart from the book of Jeremiah are needed. Second, the scope of this thesis did not allow for a fully developed antithesis of the concepts of “divine transcendence” and “a perfect being has no need of change”. What was shown is that the concept of divine transcendence in the sense that God is utterly transcendent and not comparable to his creation in any way and the concept of a perfect being that cannot change in any respect has its roots in Greek philosophy. Scholars would do well to continue to explore philosophically how a perfect divine being could experience change and not be affected for the worse, as was commonly believed in Greek culture and by some in the early church. In other words, they could continue to develop the argument that a perfect God can experience change and not be affected in a negative way such as having his sovereignty compromised. Third, although comparing ancient Greek and Hebrew thought was touched upon in this thesis, there may be a need for scholars to explore more ancient Greek and Hebrew sources to possibly further affirm the arguments laid forth in this thesis and chapter seven. Fourth, scholars could continue examining and analysing the beliefs of Christian leaders after the fourth century to follow the trace of the traditional interpretation and understanding of immaterial anthropomorphisms, specifically related to the concept of divine repentance or relenting.

### 8.7 Overall conclusion

By answering the five key questions, we explored how *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) contribute to understanding the meaning of Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19. My thesis affirms all three hypotheses: First, when Jeremiah 4:28, 15:6-7, 18:7-10 and 26:3, 13 and 19 were exegetically examined, the relationship between the Hebrew words *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) played a vital role in understanding the overall message of those passages. Second, Jeremiah used *שׁוּב* (*shub*) and *נָחַם* (*nacham*) to demonstrate that God sometimes but not arbitrarily relented in response to the

decisions of his people. Finally, based on a careful reading of the Hebrew Text, the relationship between שׁוּב (*shub*) and נָחַם (*nacham*) revealed that conditional propositions were real not only from man's perspective but also from God's.

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