

Jeremiah Against Orthodoxy (Ancient and Modern)

Description

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The message of the prophet Jeremiah repudiated the orthodoxy of his day, and it repudiates the orthodoxy of our day. In doing so, it also positively teaches us some valuable lessons.

Before getting into that, though, let's go over a few important facts about Jeremiah.

The When – Jeremiah delivered his message during the last few decades of the 7th century BCE and into the first couple decades of the 6th century BCE.

Jeremiah's Historical Context – When learning about anyone from the ancient past, it's important to keep in mind the differences between their world and ours. It's all too easy to use our modern assumptions to misinterpret the past. Also, it's easy to flatten the ancient past into one homogenous period when really, the past is full of changes. If we think the time of Jeremiah was pretty much the same as the time of David, we're making a mistake. So, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Jeremiah lived in ancient Judah which was a small nation ruled by the Davidic Dynasty. Judah had once been part of a larger Kingdom called Israel, but in Jeremiah's time that was distant history – something that ended hundreds of years ago.
- About 300 years before Jeremiah started teaching his message, the 12-tribe nation of Israel split into two countries; Israel (the 10-tribe kingdom) in the north and Judah (the two-tribe kingdom) in the south.
- About 100 years prior to Jeremiah's activity, the Israelite kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrian Empire. Judah was also attacked by Assyria and lost a number of cities, even important cities, but survived.
- During the first half of Jeremiah's ministry, a major political shift took place with the Assyrian Empire meeting its demise at the hands of the Babylonians.
- With Babylon becoming the dominant power by the end of the 7th century, they became a threat to Judah and eventually destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BCE, bringing an end to the Judahite kingdom and to the Davidic Dynasty as its political rulers.
- At about the same time, the Jerusalem Temple which had been built by Solomon was destroyed.

Here are a couple of other facts to keep in mind:

- Jeremiah's language was Hebrew. This is helpful to remember since it should set the expectation that when you read his writings, even in English translation, you should expect to find him expressing things differently from how you would.
- Jeremiah's world was a "pre-Bible" world. That's right – the Bible didn't exist yet. Many of the writings that you recognize today as part of the Bible weren't even written yet, and those that were written had not been collected together and didn't have the status of "Bible." Texts and ideas that are now canonized, were not then canonized, so we can't take for granted that Jeremiah and his teachings must conform to what we might now consider established "Bible truths."

This brings us to our next important fact about Jeremiah:

Jeremiah Was An Outcast – While Jeremiah is acknowledged as a prophet by Jews, Christians, and Muslims today (half the world's population), he was not widely accepted in his own day. In fact, his message was considered downright offensive to such a degree that his contemporaries felt justified to treat him with contempt. Here are some examples:

- Jeremiah 11:18-21 describes how the people of Anathoth (Jeremiah's hometown) responded to his message. They offered him a "deal," saying, "You won't prophesy by the name of Yahweh, and you won't die by our hand." The inverse implication is clear. Yahweh described it to Jeremiah as the people of Anathoth "seeking your throat," and Jeremiah's own description was this: "And I was like a coachable lamb brought for slaughtering."
- Jeremiah 20:1-2 describes how when Pashhur, the priest who had charge over the Temple, heard Jeremiah's message, he struck him and put him in confinement.
- Jeremiah 26:8 and 11 describe how when Jeremiah delivered his message in the temple, the people wanted to kill him. He was ultimately spared, but...
- Jeremiah 36:5 says he was banned from the temple. Consequently, he later had to deliver his message to the people in the temple by sending his scribe, Baruch, to read his words from a scroll. This didn't escape the notice of officials of the king of Judah at the time (Jehoiakim), and when the king had the scroll read to him, he burned it up bit by bit and then commanded for both Baruch and Jeremiah to be arrested, though they both escaped.
- In Jeremiah 37:11-16, however, we read that later, during the reign of King Zedekiah, Jeremiah was arrested.
- Jeremiah 38:6 tells us that some officials then threw him into a muddy cistern to die. But thankfully, he was rescued from that affair as well.

Obviously, Jeremiah's message was quite controversial. Probably the only way at least some of his writings survived and eventually became included in the bibles of Jews and Christians is that his declaration that the temple was going to be destroyed and the people led captive became a reality. Yet, his message was still so contrary to ancient orthodoxy, that it had to be tamed, which brings us to the last preliminary fact I need to mention:

The Book of Jeremiah is a Montage – I made another post on this a while back ([read here](#) or [listen here](#) or [watch here](#)). In fact, you can listen right here:

Basically, the book of Jeremiah as it is currently preserved is a mish-mash of a lot of different material from originally separate sources. Some material is written in 1st person (as from Jeremiah) while other material is written as a narrative in 3rd person (about Jeremiah). This makes it obvious that not all of the book of Jeremiah was written by Jeremiah. Plus, there are actually two major versions of Jeremiah, one of which is about 1/8th longer than the other. And when you compare these two versions, even the material they share isn't exactly the same, nor is it always in the same order. It is also evident that some of the 3rd-person material is based on the 1st-person material and deradicalizes it, thus making Jeremiah and his message (or the watered-down version of his message) more palatable. Even some of the 1st-person material can be shown to be secondary deradicalizing rewrites. Yet, we can be grateful to have both versions of Jeremiah preserved, plus fragments of Jeremiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls. This material, critically analyzed, makes it clear that some portions of the book of Jeremiah preserve the actual teachings of the prophet. This is the case for the section that is the focus of this post (with the

exception of a few scribal changes).

Before diving into the text itself, here's a

Quick Note on the Translation:

Unless otherwise specified, the translation of Jeremiah and all other texts quoted here is my own, *Not A Bible Translation* (NABT). In some ways, it will be unlike what you're used to. For example, most translations attempt to render biblical texts into "common English" since it is thought to be more comprehensible if it "talks how we talk." While on one level this makes sense, on another level, it has some serious problems. First, we don't all talk the same. English isn't one thing; it is a catch-all term for many varieties of English – or, many Englishes.

To translate into "common English" is really to privilege one variety of English over the others – the variety that has gained dominance through the social and political dominance of its speakers. It is these factors, and these factors alone, that have enabled and maintained the perception that this variety of English is "proper" and "correct" while other varieties are supposedly incorrect and inferior. When we translate into Standard(ized) English, we make these texts speak the language of the dominant. To those whose natural vernacular is African American English, Southern American English, Caribbean English, Australian English, or any of the many other Englishes, these translations don't "talk how we talk" – they "talk how *they* talk."

The only way to avoid this situation is to not privilege any variety of English. You might rightly ask, What kind of English is it translated into then? Answer: into a form of English tailored for the task. The main goal is to communicate the Hebrew text into an English that you can understand. It doesn't need to talk how you talk, it just needs to talk so you can understand. To accomplish this, it pulls from any variety of English necessary to convey the Hebrew more accurately and fully. Here's an example. Hebrew has distinct singular and plural 2nd-person pronouns. Standardized English uses "you" for both, while certain other varieties of English (like African American English, South African Indian English, and Southern American English) have the plural pronoun "y'all." Even if you don't say "y'all," you can understand it. Since y'all understand it and since it better reflects the Hebrew text, it is used in the translation.

NABT is also innovative with English when doing so is understandable and better communicates the Hebrew. There are well-known ways of transforming words in English that people can readily understand even when applied to words to which they have heretofore not been applied. For example, -ize is a suffix commonly understood to create causative verbs. Finalize means to make something final. Sanitize means to make something sanitary. If you come across a word "brilliantize," you know it has to mean something like "to make brilliant" even though you've never come across this word before and it isn't used (to my knowledge) in any variety of English. And this turns out to be very useful for translating Hebrew since there's a Hebrew word that means something like "brilliant" and it has a corresponding causative verb which I translate as "brilliantize."

So, as you read this translation of Jeremiah, read it with the openness to understand its variety of English even though it's not your variety of English. Speakers of non-standard varieties of English have been doing this all along when reading translations of ancient Hebrew texts. The difference with NABT is that the variety you're reading isn't that of your privileged contemporaries, it is a variety tailor-made to reflect ancient Hebrew.

One other thing, as we go through this, I'll keep my comments on translation issues to a minimum; the focus is on understanding Jeremiah's message.

Jeremiah's Temple Talk

7:1 The issuance that did its thing to Jeremiah from Yahweh, saying, 7:2a Stand in the gate of the house of Yahweh and there call this issuance and say,

As you can see, these couple lines are written in 3rd person about Jeremiah rather than being written by Jeremiah himself. In fact, this is a relatively late addition found in the Masoretic Version of Jeremiah, but not in the Septuagint. It was evidently added to provide the historical setting of the speech of Jeremiah that follows. This depiction of the historical setting is doubtless accurate, as confirmed by the content of Jeremiah's words in this chapter and by another chunk of text in Jeremiah 26 which is a narrative account based on this text in Jeremiah 7 and manifestly designed to deradicalize it. What follows are Jeremiah's own words:

7:2b Hear the issuance of Yahweh, all Judah, enterers into these gates to bow to Yahweh.

7:3 So Yahweh of hosts, the deities of Israel, has said, "Make good y'all's ways and y'all's dealings and let me dwell with y'all in this place.

7:4 Don't let yourselves trust in the issuances of falsehood, saying,

'The temple of Yahweh! The temple of Yahweh! The temple of Yahweh' – roaring!¹The Hebrew here, as pointed in the Masoretic Text, would be read "The temple of Yahweh *are* they." Scholars puzzle over the word "they" (???). "Temple" is singular so "this" (??) would seem more appropriate. The explanation that is probably the most widely accepted is that it is plural in order to refer to the various parts of the temple collectively comprising the temple complex. But if the idea is to focus on different aspects of the temple, why say "temple" in the singular? Furthermore, why "they" (???) instead of "these" (???)? "These" typically refers to things of close proximity while "they" refers to things more distant. It doesn't seem to make much sense that people in the temple shouting "The Temple of Yahweh" would be referring to its parts as distant (they) rather than near (these). This problem also applies to interpretations which understand "they" to refer to the people. The word translated "they" (???) here seems unnatural and hard to explain. Scholars acknowledge it as an oddity, and thus far no satisfactory solution has been put forward. One solution I've never seen proposed before is the one adopted in this translation. It understands the same consonants usually interpreted as the word "they" (???) as another word with different vowels (the vowel pointing was added about 1200 or so years after Jeremiah's time). My suggestion is to repoint the vowels to ????? – making an infinitive absolute of an identical root meaning "roar." This would result in the word not being part of what the people say, but rather a description of the manner in which the words are said. The advantage of this solution is that it is the only one, to my knowledge, that leaves the text without internal difficulties while also avoiding conjectural emendations (it doesn't change the text). The only argument I can think of against this solution is that it is contrary to the traditional interpretation. While this argument might seem weighty to some, logically speaking, it simply doesn't follow that because an interpretation is traditional, it is therefore correct. Likewise, the fact that a solution hasn't been proposed before is no strike against its correctness. All that said, I present it here as the best solution I know of, but if better arguments and evidence can be produced indicating another solution, let it be so.

So, Jeremiah enters into the temple and addresses those who've come there to bow down to Yahweh. Yahweh's message is that they need to change their behavior to good behavior. On one hand, this contains an implicit rebuke, but on the other hand, it's calling for a change, which indicates that a change is possible. It also shows that Yahweh's immediate concern is of a moral nature. This isn't so shocking to us, but as I've written about elsewhere recently (see [here](#)), morality and truth were generally not considered conditions for entering a sacred space of a deity in the ancient world – even among the Israelites. But here, moral goodness is indeed a condition for dwelling with Yahweh. Saying, "Make good y'all's ways and y'all's dealings and let me dwell with y'all in this place" has the inverse implication that if they don't make their ways good, Yahweh won't dwell with them. And actually, it is implying that Yahweh wasn't dwelling with them at the time this message was delivered – it is expressed as what Yahweh wishes for, not what Yahweh already has.

This last point is dramatically confirmed in the next verse. The exclamation "The Temple of Yahweh" was evidently something often said (even roared) by the people – likely priest and layperson alike. To them, this was likely a sincere expression of their reverence for Yahweh and His House. Was not this the place of wherein His presence resided and where He had instructed them to bring sacrifices and offerings – to worship Him?

Shockingly, Jeremiah, speaking by the name of Yahweh tells them that the words "The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh! The Temple of Yahweh!" are falsehood! No wonder people were offended! Imagine someone coming into your church and declaring, "This isn't the house of God!" If you can imagine the offense taken at such a statement, you've only begun to understand how offensive Jeremiah's words were. The Temple wasn't a church. Church buildings are places for Christians to congregate, as synagogues are for Jews. But these houses of congregation aren't viewed as the unique dwelling place of God. While many believe God in some sense dwells in their church, they think he is equally in other churches. The Temple, though, was one of a kind. It was God's unique dwelling place, built by Solomon, and Divinely Appointed as the center of worship. Of all lands, none was holy as Israel, and of all its cities, none was holy as Jerusalem, and of all its buildings, none was holy as the Temple, with its innermost sanctum being the holiest of all. This one location was regarded as being literally the most sacred spot on earth – the very dwelling of God. For Jeremiah to come into the temple, presuming to speak as Yahweh's spokesperson, and to say that their holy exclamations are issuances of falsehood was nothing short of sacrilege in their eyes. Jeremiah continues,

7:5 As if making good, y'all make good y'all's ways and y'all's dealings –
if doing, y'all do adjudication between a man and his friend,
7:6 a traveler, an orphan, and a widow, y'all do not oppress,
and y'all don't pour innocent blood in this place,
and after other deities y'all don't go for y'all's bad,
7:7 then I'll dwell with y'all in this place in the land that I gave to y'all's progenitors
from ineffable time and until ineffable time.

Verses 5-6 lay out the conditions the Judahites were required to meet in order for Yahweh to decide to dwell with them, as specified in vs. 7. Overall, what they are supposed to do is what He said earlier – to make good their ways and their doings. But here things are expressed more specifically. Most of the things listed are self-explanatory, but I'll comment a little. First, it's important to note that they evidently weren't doing the good things mentioned and they were doing

the bad things mentioned – otherwise, they wouldn't be given as conditions.

The one aspect that needs some comment is the line, “and y'all don't pour innocent blood in this place.” From verse 3 and from the context of the historical situation, it's clear that “this place” is the temple. And whose blood was being poured out in the temple? The answer is obvious, the blood of sacrificial animals. Some find it unthinkable that Jeremiah could be speaking against the system of animal sacrifice, but why? Do we really know that such a thing is impossible, or are we just taking for granted that Jeremiah's message must conform to other, more popular texts in a biblical canon? But by what logic can we justly infer what an author must or must not be saying based on the fact that their writings were collected together with other writings by different authors hundreds of years later? No – such “logic” doesn't work. If we want to know what Jeremiah taught, let him speak for himself. The most obvious meaning of the line under consideration is that he's speaking against sacrificing animals. But also, Jeremiah spoke against animal sacrifice even more plainly elsewhere. For example, in Jeremiah 6:19-20 we read,

Hear, land, Look, I am bringing badness to this clan,
the fruit of their thoughts.
As over my issuances they didn't show alertness
and my direction, they rejected it.
For what is this to me?
Frankincense comes from Sheba
and good spice from a distant land.
Y'all's ascent offerings – not acceptable.
And y'all's sacrifices, they don't please me.
– Jeremiah 6:19-20

And, as we'll see, Jeremiah's objection to animal sacrifice becomes even plainer later in this chapter – Jeremiah 7.

Now, if Judah was to fulfill the conditions outlined in vss. 5-6, Yahweh says, “then I'll dwell with y'all in this place in the land that I gave to y'all's progenitors from ineffable time and until ineffable time.” The inverse implication of this is that if they don't fulfill the conditions, Yahweh will not only not dwell with them in “this place” (the temple), but He'll not dwell with them in the land at all. This is the beginning of a threat to both the value of the temple as well as the security of the land. If Yahweh won't dwell with them in the land, it means Yahweh will either leave the land, thus leaving them without His protection, or He will cast them from the land thus bringing about exile – the death of the nation.

On the positive side, if they do fulfill the conditions, Yahweh will dwell in the temple and thus be with them in the land – even forever. Let's continue,

7:8 Here, y'all are trusting for yourselves on the issuances of falsehood to no benefit.

It should be becoming apparent that according to Jeremiah, Yahweh is very concerned with morality and truth. The concern for truth partly manifests in rebukes against falsehood, lies, fraud, etc. Here, Yahweh points back to the words of falsehood (“The Temple of Yahweh!”) and tells them that trusting themselves on these words isn't doing them any good.

7:9 ?!Stealing, murdering, and committing adultery,
and being sworn to falsehood,
and smokening to the master,

and going after other deities that y'all haven't known?!

7:10 Then y'all come and y'all stand in the face of this house that my name was called on, and y'all say, "We're saved!" so as to keep doing all these abominations!

It's like Yahweh is saying, "Do you really think you can do all these evil things and think we're all good?" From this, it looks like they really believed that Yahweh had established a system of worship that didn't demand moral perfection. They might have thought that the very function of the sacrificial offerings was (at least in part) to cover their sins so that they could maintain good relations with Yahweh. But such a system would only leave the door open for people to keep doing evil things. But Yahweh here repudiates the idea that he would establish any such system. Clearly, for Yahweh, the line is drawn and no falsehood or immorality is allowed.

Notice also that Yahweh continues to distance himself from the temple. He could have said, "Then y'all come and y'all stand in the face of my house." But he doesn't. He says, "in the face of this house that my name was called on." He doesn't even say, "this house that I called my name on." It is as though he takes every linguistic opportunity possible to emphasize that he isn't dwelling in the Temple in order to make it clear that he won't have any part with immorality or falsehood. He then says,

7:11 Has a cave of bursters done its thing as this house that, in y'all's eyes, my name was called on?!

Look! I also, I've seen!" declares Yahweh.

This is usually translated more like how it reads in the King James Version: "Is this house which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes?"

First of all, in Hebrew, the "cave" bit comes first and serves as the primary identification of the temple. It isn't saying, "How can it be that my holy temple has been turned into a place of corruption?" No, it's saying, "Do you really think this corruption-filled place will serve as a house for me?" And again, the linguistic opportunity is taken to distance Yahweh from the temple. He doesn't call it "my house" but "this house that...my name was called on." But here he emphasizes even more that He isn't the one calling his name on the house by saying, "this house that, in y'all's eyes, my name was called on." The KJV and other translations connect "in y'all's eyes" to the house being a "den of robbers." But this isn't what the Hebrew says, and it makes no sense in the context. The people didn't think it was a den of robbers; they kept shouting that it is the "Temple of Yahweh!" Jeremiah, speaking in the name of Yahweh, rejected this and kept emphasizing that Yahweh isn't dwelling there. This context and the Hebrew text of this verse agree that the thing that was merely "in y'all's eyes" is that Yahweh's name was called on the house.

In the last line, Yahweh essentially says, "I have eyes too, you know! And I see your immorality and falsehood for what it is!"

Why is the temple called a cave of bursters? To emphasize the violent nature of those who controlled the temple, both against the sacrificial animals and against those to whom they denied justice, and instead harmed by mistreatment and by falsehood.

7:12 "As y'all can go to my place that is in Shiloh,
where I let my name dwell in the beginning,
and see what I did to it from the face of the badness of my clan, Israel.

7:13 And now, because y'all are doing all these deeds
and I've issued to y'all,

rising early and issuing,
and y'all haven't heard,
and I've called y'all
and y'all haven't answered,
7:14 I'll do to the house that my name was called on,
which y'all are trusters in,
and to the place that I've given to y'all and to y'all's progenitors,
just as I did to Shiloh.
7:15 And I'll throw y'all from my face
just as I threw y'all's brothers – all the seed of Ephraim.

Here, Yahweh draws the attention of the people to the previous temple of Yahweh, which was in a place called Shiloh. He points out that he destroyed it in response to the badness of his people. In other words, the Judahites of Jeremiah's time should have known that Yahweh wouldn't reside with unrepented-of immorality and that he would bring destruction on institutions that his people use to justify themselves in committing evil.

He then points out that he has repeatedly spoken to them (through his prophets – as is clear from the connection between 7:13 and 7:25), but they wouldn't hear his messages. By refusing to respond to reason and truth, they left Yahweh with no other means of ending their evil and falsehood than to destroy the place and scatter the people, as he had done with Shiloh and Ephraim (the 10-tribe kingdom). Of course, Jerusalem and its temple were, in fact, destroyed soon after this. As I mentioned earlier, this is probably why Jeremiah's message was later preserved. After the temple was destroyed, there was no denying that he was right.

7:16 And you, don't intercede in behalf of this clan
And don't lift up, in their behalf, an exclamation or an intercession
and don't hit up against me,
as I won't hear you.

Here, there is a switch from plural "y'all" to singular "you." Yahweh addresses Jeremiah directly and tells him not to attempt to change his (Yahweh's) mind. The Judahites had already reached the point where they had proved themselves unrepentant and unwilling to hear Yahweh's messages. They were increasing in wickedness, and the innocent were suffering as a result. For Jeremiah to plead with Yahweh to refrain from destroying the temple and scattering the people would be, in effect, to plead with Yahweh to allow the innocent to continue to suffer and die at the hands of evildoers. This would be to work against Yahweh (to "hit up against" him). If it's not already clear that the wickedness of the people had become so severe as to justify the destruction of the temple and exile of the nation, it will become apparent by the end of the chapter. Yahweh continues to Jeremiah:

7:17 Aren't you a seer of what they are doers
in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem?
7:18 The sons are gatherers of trees
and the progenitors are burners with fire
and the women are kneaders of dough to do cakes for the host of the skies
and libate libations to other deities so as to grieve me.
7:19 Is it I they are grievors of?" declares Yahweh,

“Is it not themselves, so as to shame their faces?”

In order to explain to Jeremiah why the time for intercession is past, Yahweh points him to the evil deeds of the Judahites that are right before him. He says, “aren’t you a seer of what they are doing...?” In other words, “don’t you see what they’re doing?” And what were they doing? Well, the thing immediately mentioned appears to be a joyous day of family fun, or at least that’s how it was surely perceived and experienced by those who took part in it. The whole family was involved in making the campfire and the women made cakes. But these events weren’t occasions of educating people in the ways of Yahweh. Yahweh hadn’t instituted them, and Yahweh wasn’t involved. Instead of honoring Yahweh, these occasions honored other deities – the host of the skies.

It’s clear that Yahweh regarded these occasions as corrupt since he pointed to them as evidence for the lost state of his people. Yet, Yahweh evidently wasn’t taking it personally – he didn’t focus on personal harm done to himself by their deeds, even though they were being unfaithful to him by engaging in the worship of other gods. Yahweh’s focus was on the harm they were doing to themselves. He knew that their experience of happiness was temporary. They were indeed causing grief, but chiefly grief for themselves – and deep shame.

Even though it departs from the main point, there’s a textual issue that needs to be addressed. In most translations, you’ll read “the queen of heaven” rather than “the host of the skies.” “Heaven” and “skies” are simply two different translations of the same Hebrew word. I favor “skies” since “heaven” is often understood as designating a “spiritual realm” whereas the Hebrew word simply refers to the skies. It is where birds fly (Gen. 1:26) and where the sun, moon, and stars make their circuits (Gen. 1:14-16).

“Queen” and “host” on the other hand, are not two translations of the same Hebrew word. They represent two variants in the manuscripts. The Masoretic Text says “queen” while the Septuagint says “host.” There’s only one manuscript of this passage known from the Dead Sea Scrolls and it is, unfortunately, fragmentary and this word (whatever it was) is missing. However, the size of the missing portion lets us know that whatever this manuscript said must have been shorter than what is in the Masoretic Text. Since the Hebrew word for “host” is shorter than the word for “queen,” and since the Dead Sea Scroll manuscripts of Jeremiah often agree with the Septuagint, “host” is a reasonable candidate for the reading in the manuscript. “Host of the skies” is also the exact expression used later in this very text (Jer. 8:2), establishing that it fits the context of the passage. So, why does any of this matter? Well, this is one of only two passages that people use to argue that Jeremiah opposed the idea of female deities (the other being Jer. 44:17-25). A little critical thinking soon reveals that there’s a logical problem with this use of these texts. If a person opposes the worship of a particular female deity, this does not warrant the inference that this person would oppose the worship of any other female deity, much less would it warrant the inference that they have an aversion to the very idea of a female deity. Remember, Jeremiah and other Hebrew prophets opposed the worship of certain male deities, but this doesn’t mean they opposed the worship of every male deity, nor does it mean they disavowed the notion of a male deity.

Aside from this logical problem, there are historical and textual problems with using these texts to suggest that Jeremiah opposed the idea of goddesses. The textual problem is what we just covered in Jer. 7:18. The historical problem pertains to Jeremiah 44 since it is a 3rd-person narrative about Jeremiah, not a text written by Jeremiah. It thus cannot be taken for granted as accurately reflecting Jeremiah’s own views. The fact of the matter is that some portions of the

book of Jeremiah (portions not actually written by Jeremiah) deradicalize Jeremiah's message. Compare Jer. 26 with Jer. 7 and see how the former waters down the latter. Or see how the passage in Jer. 17:19-27 rewrites the text from Jer. 22:1-15 in such a way as to make Jeremiah say things antithetical to the incontrovertibly authentic teaching of Jeremiah here in chapter 7. The rewrite of Jer. 23:5-6 and Jer. 31:31-37 in Jer. 33:14-26 is another similar instance. The point is that there is clear evidence that at least some of the sections of the book of Jeremiah not written by him represent his message inaccurately. This doesn't mean Jer. 44 is certainly inaccurate, but it does mean its accuracy cannot be merely assumed.

In short, even though reading most English translations of the book of Jeremiah leaves one with the impression that Jeremiah specifically spoke against the veneration of "the queen of heaven," a more thorough investigation reveals that neither of the relevant passages provides clear evidence that he did. And even further, should evidence establish that he did indeed speak against venerating "the queen of heaven," this would only establish his objection to venerating this one goddess; it would not constitute an objection to any and all goddesses.

Given that these two passages in Jeremiah are really the only two passages people could use from the Hebrew scriptures (or from "the bible" as a whole) to object to the notion of female deities, and given that this use of these texts is demonstrably dubious, all who recoil at the notion of a female deity should realize that their aversion stems, not from the scriptures, but from some other influence.

Now, let's return to the ideas set forth in Jeremiah 7. Yahweh had just pointed out to Jeremiah some of the shameful acts of the Judahites.

7:20 For this fact Yahweh has said,
"Here, my nose and my `heat will gush forth to this place
over the humans and over the mammals
and over the trees of the field and over the fruit of the ground
and `it will burn and not be quenched."

The reference to "my nose and my heat" is Hebrew idiom for anger. The focus of the idiom is less on anger as an internal mental state than on anger as a bodily event. This is true for humans (see, for example, 1 Sam. 17:28 "and the nose of Eliab heated up against David") and also for Yahweh, as is the case here.

A common misunderstanding of this verse is that it describes the humans, mammals, trees, and fruit of the ground as being the objects of Yahweh's anger and/or the recipients of his destructive wrath. This, however, is incorrect. First of all, the verse begins with the phrase "For this fact." This points back to what was previously mentioned as the reason for what follows, making it clear that Yahweh was angry at the Judahites for their unrepented of wickedness. Furthermore, the verse doesn't say that Yahweh's anger will gush forth to humans, mammals, trees, and fruit. No. It says that his anger will gush forth "to this place;" that is, the place where this declaration is being delivered – the temple (which is called "this place" in 7:3, 6, and 7).

Furthermore, it simply doesn't make sense for Yahweh to be angry with fruit, trees, etc. Rather, he was angry over what had been done with and to these things. And this is made obvious by the context. In the preceding verses, Yahweh pointed Jeremiah to the fact that Judahites were using trees and grain (the fruit of the ground) to worship other deities (7:18). And in the verses that follow this, he points to Judeans abusing mammals (7:21-22) and humans (7:31). And later, when a description is given of the punishment to be executed on guilty humans, it is clear that mammals

weren't judged, but are instead left without anyone to disturb them (7:33). All of this makes it plain that Yahweh was angry, not at the fruit, trees, mammals, and humans mentioned, but at the wrongdoing Judahites over their corrupt abuses of humans, mammals, trees, and the fruit of the ground.

7:21 So Yahweh of hosts, the deities of Israel said, "Add y'all's ascent offerings onto y'all's sacrifices and y'all eat flesh!"

7:22 As I didn't issuance with y'all's progenitors and I didn't command them in the day I caused them to come out from the land of Egypt on the issuances of ascent offering and sacrifice.

7:23 As if! This issuance I commanded them, saying, 'Hearken y'all to my voice and I'll do my thing for y'all as deities, and y'all will do y'all's thing for me as a clan. And y'all must walk in every way that I command y'all so as to do good for y'all.'

7:24 But they didn't hear

and they didn't make their ear reach,

but they went in the counsels of the stubbornness of their bad heart,

and they did their thing to a back, and not to a face.

7:25 From the day that y'all's progenitors went out from the land of Egypt until this day, I've sent to y'all all my servants the prophets, each day rising early and sending.

7:26 But they didn't hearken to me, and they didn't make their ear reach. But they hardened their neck and badified more than their progenitors."

What is Jeremiah saying here? Well, the basics should be clear. Yahweh rejects the sacrifices offered to him and says that he didn't instruct Israel to offer him sacrifices when he brought them out of Egypt. He then says what he actually did say, namely, that he would serve as deities for them and they should serve as a clan for him, walking according to his instructions. Yahweh fulfilled his duty and delivered his instructions through his prophets, but Israel didn't listen and instead did wrong.

Now, let's examine this important passage more closely. First, in order to fully understand the phrase "Add y'all's ascent offerings onto y'all's sacrifices and y'all eat flesh!" it is necessary to understand the priestly laws regarding ascent offerings and sacrifices. The slaughtered animals referred to by the term "sacrifices" were partly burned on the altar while other parts of their bodies were eaten by the priests and sometimes parts were eaten by the Israelites who brought the animal to be offered (Lev. 7:15, 28-36; 22:29-30). The slaughtered animals called "ascent offerings," on the other hand, (often translated "burnt offerings") were not to be eaten by laypersons or by priests, but were to have their entire bodies (besides the skin – Lev. 7:8) burned on the altar (Lev. 1:9) Importantly, that which was offered on the altar by fire was considered food for Yahweh (Lev. 21:6). With this in mind, it becomes clear that Yahweh's statement constitutes a refusal to participate in the sacrifice. He knew he couldn't convince the people and priests to stop sacrificing animals and eating their part, but he was sure to tell them that he would have no part in it. It's like he was saying, "If you're going to be eating the flesh of slaughtered animals, then *you* eat it – but don't think I'm going to join you!"

But, you might wonder, in eating the sacrificial animals and placing sacrificial flesh on the altar to be food for Yahweh, weren't they just following the instructions that Yahweh himself had given through Moses when he brought them out from the land of Egypt? Well, that is evidently what the priests and people thought, and they thought they had Yahweh's written law to prove it (see the passages I just cited). But Yahweh, through Jeremiah, said something completely different. He

said, “I didn’t issuance with y’all’s progenitors and I didn’t command them in the day I caused them to come out from the land of Egypt on the issuances of ascent offering and sacrifice. As if! This issuance I commanded them, saying, ‘Hearken y’all to my voice and I’ll do my thing for y’all as deities, and y’all will do y’all’s thing for me as a clan. And y’all must walk in every way that I command y’all so as to do good for y’all.’” This is a flat denial that Yahweh’s law given to Israel at the time of the Exodus included instructions regarding burnt offerings and sacrifices. Yahweh insists that he didn’t give such commands and that instead, what he commanded had to do with establishing something like a teacher-student relationship between himself and Israel. He would instruct them, and they were to hearken to his instructions and walk in the way that he directed them – all for their benefit. Yahweh points out that he kept his end of the deal by continually sending them prophet after prophet to deliver his instructions, but Israel kept rejecting those messengers with their messages and instead they “badified” more and more – they became more and more immoral.

We have the writings of some of these prophets and know what they said. Amos, for example, declared his message in the first half of the 8th century BCE. He delivered Yahweh’s message as follows,

If y’all ascendify to me ascent offerings and y’all’s offerings, I will not accept.
And peace offerings of y’all’s fattened animals, I will not look at.
Remove from me the roaring of your songs
and the music of your lyres, I will not hear.
But let adjudication roll like the waters
and righteousness like an ever-flowing river.
Did y’all cause sacrifices and offerings to come near to me in the wilderness forty
years, house of Israel?
– Amos 5:22-25

Amos was clearly saying the same thing as Jeremiah would later say: Yahweh doesn’t want slaughtered animals. What he wants is righteousness. The only difference between what we read here and in Jeremiah is that while Jeremiah had to counter the idea that Yahweh gave instructions regarding animal sacrifice at the time of the Exodus, Amos’ audience evidently knew that Israel didn’t offer sacrifices during the Exodus experience (hence the ability for Amos to ask the rhetorical question, the implied answer of which is clearly “No”).

Another prophet, Hosea, writing around the 3rd quarter of the 8th century, gave the following issuances of Yahweh:

I desire commitment and not sacrifice,
And knowledge of deities rather than ascent offerings.
– Hosea 6:6

‘Ephraim increased altars for purging sin;
altars have done their thing for him for sinning.
I’m writing for him many of my instructions;
they’ve been thought of as foreign.
That which I love, they sacrifice as sacrifices
and they eat flesh.’

Yahweh has not accepted them.
Now, he'll remember their ruination
and he'll attend to their errors.
They – they will return to Egypt.
– Hosea 8:11-13

This is plain language. Yahweh doesn't want sacrifice. He wants commitment and knowledge and for his people to walk in his instructions.

In perhaps the last quarter of the 8th century, the prophet Micah said,

With what should I approach Yahweh
bowing myself to deities of a height?
Should I approach him with ascent offerings,
with bull calves – sons of a year?
Will Yahweh accept thousands of rams
with myriads of rivers of oil?
Should I give my firstborn for my transgression,
The fruit of my belly for the error of my body?
He has declared to you, human, what is good
and what Yahweh seeks from you; that is,
doing adjudication,
and love of commitment,
and going humbly with your deities.
– Micah 6:6-8

These statements are only a sample of the teachings of the prophets Yahweh doubtless referred to in Jer. 7:25-26. As shocking as these teachings may be in that they cut across what many (ancient and modern) have taken for granted as the word of God, who can deny their moral rightness? Those who have pictured Yahweh as designing a system whereby immorality is dealt with not by its cessation but by slaughtering the innocent, make Yahweh out to be a partner and perpetuator of sin. The message of Jeremiah and these other prophets stands in stark contrast with this system. Their message was that Yahweh denied having commanded people to slaughter animals, and instead, he called people to cease immoral behaviors and to walk in the ways of truth and righteousness. Who can deny the integrity and good principle of such a message? Yet inexplicably, many do prefer darkness rather than light, as is clear from Yahweh's next words to Jeremiah:

7:27 And you'll issuance to them all these issuances,
and they won't hearken to you,
and you'll call to them,
and they won't answer you.²This verse is in the MT, but not in the LXX. 7:28 And you must
say to them,
'This is the nation that hasn't hearkened to the voice of Yahweh of their deities and hasn't
taken reproof.
Truthfulness has been lost;
she has been cut from their mouth.

Here, Jeremiah is instructed regarding the heart of the matter, and he's told to relate this to the people of Judah. Ultimately, Judah's immorality persisted because of their refusal to accept Yahweh's reproof. Truth is a quality possessed by some statements and ideas, the defining feature of which is correspondence to material reality. Truthfulness, on the other hand, is a quality of a person that consists in their entire devotion to truth – in thought, word, and deed. The reproving voice of Yahweh conveyed truth, so by rejecting it, the nation ostracized truthfulness. Now, in poetic vividness, Truthfulness is personified as a woman to whom Jeremiah is to say,

7:29 Shear your devotum and throw away
and lift over barren heights a lament...

A devotum is something that has been devoted. So what does it mean for a woman to shear her devotum? The background is found in the "Nazarite vow" or the "vow of a devotee." Numbers 6 explains that a man or a woman who was so inclined could become a Nazarite (a devotee). There were several stipulations involved in this, one of which was the requirement to let one's hair grow long. There's one passage, in particular, that's worth reading in connection with Jer. 7:29 since it uses the same word ("devotum"), and it also explains the circumstance in which a devotee would need to shear it.

6:7 All the days of his devotizing to Yahweh, he must not come upon a dead body.
6:8 For his father, and for his mother, and for his brother, and for his siter, he must not defile himself for them with their dying, as the devotum of his deities is on his head.
6:9 And a dier, as he dies upon him in an instant, suddenly, and he defiles the head of his devotion, he must shave his head on the day of his cleansing – on the seventh day he must shave it.
– Numbers 6:7-9

Obviously, the devotum (the thing devoted) was the hair. The circumstance in which the devotee was to shear it was if they came in contact with a dead body. The idea in Jer. 7:29, then, is that Truthfulness had been defiled by contact with the dead – the wicked Judahites who rejected her. You may have noticed that this passage in Numbers doesn't use the word "shear" but rather "shave." Shear can be used as a synonym for shave (see Mal. 1:16), but even so, why not just say "shave." The Hebrew word for "shear" is used in the context of shearing sheep in the vast majority of instances, so it wouldn't be the automatic word to use when speaking of Truthfulness as a personified woman. Why, then, was it used? Well, as we've already seen, Jeremiah had empathy for sacrificial animals, even comparing himself to one when his throat was being sought by wicked men (Jer. 11:19). In principle, Truthfulness was receiving the same treatment. While the primary

personification in this passage is Truthfulness as a woman, she was a woman who could be compared to a sheep just as Jeremiah was a man who could be compared to a sheep. The rejecters of Yahweh's reproof had many victims, from sheep, to prophets, to Truthfulness herself!

There's one more layer to this. Hebrew poetry, and prophetic poetry in particular, is known for wordplay, including double entendres. There is a word that looks just like the word for "devotum" here that means "diadem" (a royal headband). In other words, "Shear your devotum and throw away" could be just as easily read as "Shear your diadem and throw away." For Truthfulness to have a diadem means she rules – she is supreme. The fact that throwing away the diadem requires shearing indicates that the diadem of Truthfulness is inherent – natural to her – it is part of her. This is a symbolic way of conveying the reality that Truthfulness is supreme by nature. To deny Truthfulness sovereignty is to dethrone what is naturally enthroned – to refuse to be under the rulership of truth. This is certainly what Jeremiah is saying in the straightforward statements of this passage, and it is what this second-level meaning of this symbol teaches as well.

In both levels of meaning, Truthfulness is disparaged and this situation compels her to lift up a lament.

Before moving ahead, I should mention that while readers up till now have, to my knowledge, assumed that Jer. 7:29 addresses Jerusalem, the fact of the matter is that Jerusalem is not mentioned. The addressee of the verbs is a feminine singular entity and the one such entity in the context is Truthfulness, who was introduced in the preceding verse. Let's continue:

7:29 Shear your devotum and throw away
and lift over barren heights a lament
as Yahweh has rejected and forsaken the generation of his crossness,
7:30 as the sons of Judah have done the badness in my eyes," declares Yahweh.
"They set their contaminants in the house that my name was called on defiling it,
7:31 and they built the high places of the pyre that is in the valley of the son of Whimper
to burn their sons and their daughters in fire,
which I did not command and which did not ascend on my heart.

It should be apparent that Yahweh had good reason to get cross. What wickedness! Notice how Yahweh classes the evil deeds done in the temple (mentioned earlier) with the evil deeds done at the pyre in the valley of the son of Whimper. Both sets of deeds slaughter the innocent. And amazingly, both were evidently defended by claiming that Yahweh had commanded that they be done. Yahweh, through Jeremiah, explicitly denies that he commanded animals to be sacrificed to him, whether they be quadrupeds or bipeds. For Yahweh to say that it "did not ascend on my heart" is to say that he never imagined that his people would commit such evils. To learn about the Israelite understanding of the physical heart as the organ of intellect, see [Cognitive Kidneys \(Israelite Anthropology\)](#) and [Material Minds and Mortality: Human Nature and Death in Ancient Israel](#).

Next, Yahweh points forward to the day when heinous deeds of the Judahites will have come to an end:

7:32 For this fact, behold coming days," declares Yahweh,
"when it won't any longer be said, 'the pyre' and 'the valley of the son of Whimper,'

As if! 'The Valley of the Killing'
And they'll bury in a pyre from absence of place.
7:33 And the carcass of this clan will do its thing as food
for the bird of the skies and for the mammal of the land,
with absence of a disturber.
7:34 And I'll make cease
from the cities of Judah
and from the streets of Jerusalem
the sound of jubilation and the sound of joy
the sound of the groom and the sound of the bride,
as the land will do its thing for desolation.
8:1 In that time," declares Yahweh, "they'll bring out
the bones of the kings of Judah
and the bones of its princes
and the bones of the priests
and the bones of the prophets
and the bones of the residents of Jerusalem
from their graves.
8:2 And they'll strew them
to the sun and to the moon
and to all the host of the skies –
they whom they loved
and they whom they served
and they whom they went after
and they whom they enquired of
and they whom they sought
and they whom they bowed to.
They won't be gathered,
and they won't be buried
they'll do their thing as dung on the face of the ground.
8:3 Death will be chosen above life
by all the remnant – the remainees – from this bad family
in all the places where I will have driven them," declares Yahweh of hosts.

This looks ahead to a day when Judahites would no longer be bringing their children to the pyre in the valley of the son of Whimper to be sacrificed in fire. Moreover, they will no longer call it "the valley of the son of Whimper." Yahweh's response, "As if!" rejects this name as suitable. What has characterized this valley has not been a mere whimper, but killing. Formerly, it had been a place of the bodies of the innocent, the horror of whose sacrifice was masked behind an air of piety. In the "coming days," it will be a place for the bodies of the guilty – those who justified themselves in slaughtering the innocent. The scene is just as morbid; the chief difference beyond the identity of the dead is that the illusion of righteousness and Yahweh's blessing has vanished. Birds and mammals, now free from bursters, will feast on those who feasted on them with no one to disturb them. They (probably the animals) will scatter the remains of the Judahites, from the highest to the lowest, before the sun, the moon, and the whole host of the skies. These objects of devotion stare down upon them with blank eyes, as it were, offering no help. Their worship was in vain. Evidently not all would die, but this is no reprieve to the living since those who remain would

choose death over life. What a terrible end for those who refuse Yahweh's reproof and push aside Truthfulness!

Yahweh continues to Jeremiah:

8:4 And you'll say to them, "So Yahweh has said,

'Do they fall and not get up? Does one return and not return?

8:5 Why has this clan of Jerusalem returned an orchestrating returnaholic?

They've gotten a grip on fraudulence; they've refused to return.

I've been alert, and I've heard.

8:6 They did not, in fact, issuance.

There was an absence of man reverting over his badness, saying,

'What have I done?'

Everyone is a returner into their runway

like a horse is a plunger into battle.

"Do they fall and not get up?" This is a rhetorical question. The answer is obviously, "No." When people fall, they do get up. To do otherwise would be unusual and shameful behavior.

"Does one return and not return?" This takes us from the unusual to the absurd. Can one return without returning? This is nonsensical behavior. Were one to attempt it, she would be neither going nor coming. And this is exactly the point.

"Why has this clan of Jerusalem returned an orchestrating returnaholic?" In other words, this clan of Jerusalem returned to Yahweh in pretense, but didn't really return to actually be with Yahweh. Instead, she returned as an "orchestrating returnaholic" – she returned already fixin' to return again to where she came from. The Judeans were trying to have the advantages of associating with Yahweh while retaining their "liberty" to go their own way. But Yahweh will not be trifled with.

"They've gotten a grip on fraudulence; they've refused to return." They've refused to return *from* fraudulence, utterly leaving it behind. Instead, they fraudulently "repented" in an attempt to stay in Yahweh's good graces. But Yahweh sees things as they really are. He says,

"I've been alert, and I've heard. They did not, in fact, issuance. There was an absence of man reverting over his badness, saying, 'What have I done?' Everyone is a returner into their runway like a horse is a plunger into battle." Yahweh sees when repentance isn't true. He can see that people aren't actually looking at their deeds, words, and thoughts with astonishment. They aren't actually denouncing their former selves and reverting (actually changing their behavior). Instead, they just keep returning to their well-beaten path – doing the same deeds, speaking the same sentiments, thinking the same thoughts – with no sense of their true danger.

8:7 Even a stork in the skies has known her appointed times.

And a turtledove and a swallow and a crane have kept the season of their coming.

But my clan hasn't known the adjudication of Yahweh.

A statement worthy of contemplation.

8:8 How do y'all say,

'We are wise and the direction of Yahweh is with us?'

Surely, look: the false pen of the scribes has done her into falsehood!

8:9 The wise will be put to shame;

they'll be shattered and seized.

Look, the issuance of Yahweh they've rejected,
And wisdom of what – have they?

These supposedly wise think they have the direction of Yahweh, but instead what they have is a writing that purports to contain the direction of Yahweh, when in fact, it has corrupted the direction of Yahweh, turning it into falsehood. It should be obvious that this applies in principle to any writing that teaches the things that Jeremiah said Yahweh didn't command, despite the claims of popular orthodoxy to the contrary (see Jer. 7:21-23). And let it be understood that the falsehood Jeremiah countered was not just the outward observances commanded in pseudo-Yahwistic writings, but also the principles from which those observances spring. Note: those who think themselves wise will be put to shame. They have rejected the actual issuance of Yahweh for a pseudo-issuance of Yahweh of their own devising. They don't heed the actual directions of Yahweh that he has given through his prophets. Instead, they comfort themselves by changing the directions of Yahweh into what they want – into something that doesn't require them to surrender their cherished opinions and practices. So, the "wisdom" they have, of what is it the wisdom, exactly? Is it the wisdom of Yahweh? Is it the wisdom of Truthfulness? It is the wisdom of...of what?

(More to be added soon!)

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The Hebrew here, as pointed in the Masoretic Text, would be read "The temple of Yahweh are they." Scholars puzzle over the word "they" (???). "Temple" is singular so "this" (??) would seem more appropriate. The explanation that is probably the most widely accepted is that it is plural in order to refer to the various parts of the temple collectively comprising the temple complex. But if the idea is to focus on different aspects of the temple, why say "temple" in the singular? Furthermore, why "they" (???) instead of "these" (???)? "These" typically refers to things of close proximity while "they" refers to things more distant. It doesn't seem to make much sense that people in the temple shouting "The Temple of Yahweh" would be referring to its parts as distant (they) rather than near (these). This problem also applies to interpretations which understand "they" to refer to the people. The word translated "they" (???) here seems unnatural and hard to explain. Scholars acknowledge it as an oddity, and thus far no satisfactory solution has been put forward. One solution I've never seen proposed before is the one adopted in this translation. It understands the same consonants usually interpreted as the word "they" (???) as another word with different vowels (the vowel pointing was added about 1200 or so years after Jeremiah's time). My suggestion is to repoint the vowels to ????? – making an infinitive absolute of an identical root meaning "roar." This would result in the word not being part of what the people say, but rather a description of the manner in which the words are said. The advantage of this solution is that it is the only one, to my knowledge, that leaves the text without internal difficulties while also avoiding conjectural emendations (it doesn't change the text). The only argument I can think of against this solution is that it is contrary to the traditional interpretation. While this argument might seem weighty to some, logically speaking, it simply doesn't follow that because an interpretation is traditional, it is therefore correct. Likewise, the fact that a solution hasn't been proposed before is no strike against its correctness. All that said, I present it here as the best solution I know of, but if better arguments and evidence can be produced indicating another solution, let it be so.

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This verse is in the MT, but not in the LXX.