

# A DIFFERENT KIND OF HORROR IN JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY TO THE PHILISTINES (JEREMIAH 47)

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## ABSTRACT

Recent research has productively interpreted Jeremiah's oracles against the nations through the lens of horror theory. The prophecy against the Philistines (Jer 47) stands out because it employs horror elements as a means of evoking audience sympathy rather than sentiments of revenge. As a pronouncement in reaction to Nebuchadnezzar's campaign in 604 BCE, the prophecy hints at Judah's doom by lamenting the Philistines' destruction.

**KEYWORDS:** Jeremiah, biblical prophecy, Neo-Babylonian, Philistines, horror theory

Nebuchadnezzar II's western campaign in 604 BCE devastated territories occupied by the Philistines. Archaeological and textual records complement each other to paint a vivid picture not only of the physical destruction but also of its political dimensions and of its impact on human victims and observers (Stager

1996; Stern 2001: 303–31; Master 2018). This brief article analyzes Jeremiah's prophecy to the Philistines (Jer 47)<sup>1</sup> as a reaction to the Neo-Babylonian predations in a nearby territory.<sup>2</sup> Building on Amy Kalmanofsky's application of horror theory to the book of Jeremiah (Kalmanofsky 2008), this study demonstrates the unique ways in which the prophecy to the Philistines deploys elements of horror to identify with Nebuchadnezzar's victims.<sup>3</sup> It compares the use of these horror elements in Jer 47 to the use of similar elements in Jeremiah's other oracles to the nations (Jer 46; 48–51). While Jeremiah's other oracles to the nations use horror to create a triumphant tone against the foreign nations they address, in the oracle to the Philistines, horror conveys sympathy, born from a sense of a shared destiny in the face of the Neo-Babylonian juggernaut.

## Jeremiah 47 and Its Horrors

Following the superscription (47:1), the prophecy consists of three thematic units, as follows:

### I. Disaster and Reactions to It (vv. 2–3)

(2) Thus says YHWH:

Waters are rising from the North,

And shall become an overwhelming river,

They shall overwhelm the entire land, city, and its inhabitants.

People shall cry out,

Every inhabitant of the land shall wail.

(3) At the sound of his stallions' hoof beats,  
At the rumble of his chariots, the noise of their wheels,  
Fathers do not turn back for children, out of weakness  
of hands.

## II. YHWH's Plunder (vv. 4–5)

(4) Because of the day that is coming

To plunder all the Philistines,

To cut off from Tyre and Sidon any remaining ally,  
Because YHWH is plundering the Philistines, the  
remnant of the isle of Caphtor,

(5) Baldness shall come upon Gaza!

Ashkelon shall be silenced, the remnant of their  
plain!

How long shall you gash yourself?

## III. YHWH's Sword (vv. 6–7)

(6) Oh sword of YHWH—How long shall you not be  
silent?

Gather yourself into your scabbard!

Rest and be still!

(7) How can you be silent,

When YHWH has commanded her,  
Against Ashkelon and the seacoast,  
Given its assignment there?

With each unit, the prophecy's horizons and cast of characters grow progressively narrower. Unit I presents an unnamed, broad territory "overwhelmed" by a raging torrent, and the massive invasion affects everyone in sight. Unit II limits the geographic (and geopolitical) scope: the victims are the Philistines and their allies in the Phoenician city-states. Finally, in Unit III, the only characters are the speaker and YHWH's sword, which is addressed in an apostrophe. In fact, by the end of this unit, the speaker talks about, rather than to, the sword. Imagined cinematographically, this short film opens with a wide view of violent destruction and warfare, portrayed by a cast of thousands. In the last shot of the film, the lone speaker addresses the audience, perhaps looking

directly at the viewers, as if to emphasize the totality of the disaster.

In terms of horror theory, as set forward by Noël Carroll and described in Kalmanofsky's study of the book of Jeremiah, Units I and II, especially the progression between them, show two essential movements characteristic of the "complex discovery plot," a rhetorical feature of the horror genre: "onset" and "discovery."<sup>4</sup> Kalmanofsky describes these two movements as follows: "Onset establishes the monster's presence. In this movement, either the monster or the monster's effects are presented to the audience. . . . The characters, who experience the monster's disturbing effects, are as yet unaware of their cause. In the discovery movement, characters learn that a monster, in fact, is to blame" (Kalmanofsky 2008: 95). These features of the onset and discovery readily appear in Jer 47. Kalmanofsky cites 47:2 as an example of the "onset of the monster" (Kalmanofsky 2008: 95), and this can be expanded to include all of Unit I.<sup>5</sup> The prophecy opens with a multi-sensory assault: visions of rising waters combine with the sounds of enemy chariots and the inhabitants' cries alongside the quaking caused by the enemy chariots. Between v. 2 and v. 3 there is a discovery of sorts, when we learn the meaning of the "overwhelming torrent" of waters as a symbol of the enemy army. Even here, though, the third-person possessive suffixes without antecedents keep the enemy's identity shrouded. As Unit II begins, all it provides is an ominous mention of "the day that is coming" (v. 4a). The complete "discovery" occurs only at the end of that verse, which reveals the actual source of destruction: God.<sup>6</sup> It is at this point that the multi-sensory images in Unit I resolve into the prophecy's depiction of horror.

The prophecy's horrifying opening introduces the invading enemy using elements that Kalmanofsky considers typical of the horror in the book of Jeremiah: a rising flood (Kalmanofsky 2008: 66 n. 52), coming from the North (Kalmanofsky 2008: 102), with a mighty, noisy army (Kalmanofsky 2008: 121, on the enemy in Jer 6:22–26). By means of these elements, the enemy is portrayed as what Kalmanofsky calls a "monster of direct horror" (Kalmanofsky 2008: 51–67; compare Grafius 2020: 30–31). Ultimately, all of these destructive forces stem from God, who is also associated with horror elements that

Kalmanofsky has identified. It is God who “is plundering the Philistines” (v. 4b; Kalmanofsky 2008: 59) and the restless sword of vv. 6 and 7 belongs to God rather than to the enemy (Kalmanofsky 2008: 56). The connection and overlap between God and God’s monstrous agents are characteristic of the book of Jeremiah. Indeed, this chapter is an excellent illustration of Kalmanofsky’s observation that, throughout the book, “the monstrous enemy reflects a monstrous God” (Kalmanofsky 2008: 67).

Together with the “onset-discovery” sequence and descriptions of monstrous agents, depictions of characters’ reactions are critical to creating the sense of horror. According to Kalmanofsky, “when characters encounter a terrifying entity, they display behavior that should provoke the audience to react similarly” (Kalmanofsky 2008: 3). A horror text’s depictions of reactions have a “mirroring effect,” and “counsel the audience how to react” (Kalmanofsky 2008: 3). Quite simply, characters’ reactions are what make a horror text a horror text. It is from these reactions on the part of the literary audience—by which is meant characters who observe, experience, and react within the text itself—that the reading (or hearing, or seeing) audience experiences its own horror.

Reactions by the literary characters follow the prophecy’s ever-narrowing progression outlined earlier. Alongside the images of destruction, Unit I presents characters reacting to that destruction: humans crying out, all the inhabitants of the land wailing (v. 2b), and parents’ inability to turn back to rescue children (v. 3b). In contrast to the broad swath of humanity reacting in Unit I, Unit II’s reacting characters are limited to two cities: the city of Gaza tears out its hair in mourning, and the city of Ashkelon falls silent.

The literary construction of both of these units emphasizes the characters’ reactions. In Unit I, the emphasis occurs in the balance between the halves of the two constituent verses: descriptions of reactions in the second halves come after descriptions of the impending disaster in the first halves. This construction suggests that the reactions are, themselves, what make the destruction so horrifying. Similarly, in Unit II, grammar focuses attention on the characters’ reactions. Verse 4 contains a series of subordinate clauses that explain the

reasons for the hair-tearing and gashing in the main clause that follows in v. 5.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the reactions by the Babylonian destruction’s Philistine victims, the prophecy also records the reactions of an outside observer, namely the speaker. This begins at the end of v. 5, when the speaker turns to Ashkelon and asks, “How long will you gash yourself in mourning?” With these words, the prophecy moves from a report of the destruction and its victims’ reactions to the observer’s subjective reaction. There is also a shift in the speaker’s tone from basic neutrality to sadness and lament. In biblical Hebrew, as in modern English, the question of v. 5, “how long,” expresses a sense of dissatisfaction with matters as they stand. Psalmists, for example, use it to complain to God about their difficult situations (Pss 6:4; 74:10; 80:5; 90:13; 94:3). In Unit III, the speaker’s reaction continues in this same vein in the apostrophe to God’s sword (47:6). This speech begins with the cry הוי, a word known to open laments over the dead (1 Kgs 13:30; Jer 22:18) that commonly occurs in prophecies of woe (e.g., Isa 1:4, 24; Jer 22:13; 23:1; 30:7; Ezek 13:3, 18; 34:2; Amos 5:18; 6:1; Mic 2:1; Nah 3:1; Hab 2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19; Zeph 3:1; Zech 11:17). Addressing the sword, the speaker follows this expression of woe with another “how long” question: “How long will you not rest?” The lament over the sword continues (47:7) with another question to the sword: “How can you be silent?” The prophecy concludes with a sort of aside (47:7aβ–b) that ends the address to the sword but maintains the tone of lament. The sword cannot be silent because God has directed it against Ashkelon and the seacoast. This last verse expresses near-complete identification with the Philistines’ predicament. Even though the prophet is clearly the speaker, one could easily imagine these words coming from the mouth of a Gazan or Ashkelonite witness to the horror (Keown, Scalise, and Smothers 2005: 301). Thus, the prophecy ends darkly, with an angry, or at least reluctant, emphasis on God’s hand in the destruction.

As noted earlier, according to horror theory, reactions by characters in a work are meant to “counsel” that work’s audience to horror. Therefore, brief consideration of this prophecy’s original audience is in order here. To some degree, the prophecy blurs the line between literary and

original audiences. The speaker does directly address the Philistines, at minimum the city of Ashkelon, but possibly with broader range, with the question, “How long will you gash yourself in mourning?” (v. 5). Like the apostrophe to God’s sword in v. 6, however, the question to Ashkelon is best understood as a fictional literary device. It is not likely that the prophet appeared and spoke to Philistines in Judah or in Philistia. Internal biblical evidence and extra-biblical evidence, too, suggests that the prophet delivered the prophecy for Judeans to hear.<sup>8</sup> This is the original audience meant to experience the horror and meant to be “provoked” by the horrified reactions of the literary characters.<sup>9</sup>

The speaker-prophet who pronounces this prophecy straddles the line between literary character and member of the community hearing the prophecy. Thus, when it comes to “counseling the audience” toward horror, the speaker’s own reactions carry particular weight. If, indeed, described reactions are meant to move an audience to react, then what better way to provoke a reaction in a Judean audience than to record the reaction of someone like them?

Given the importance of the speaker’s reactions, their placement informs the progression of the prophecy. In Unit I and most of Unit II, the absence of the speaker’s reactions leaves some uncertainty about the audience’s own reaction. An audience might identify with mourning Philistines, but it might just as easily gloat at their downfall. Once the speaker reacts, though, at the end of Unit II and throughout Unit III, this confirms the audience’s horror and pushes them toward identifying with the plundered cities.

By describing the destruction and, most importantly, the characters’ reactions, the prophecy against the Philistines leads its audience toward horror. As the prophecy tells it, God is the ultimate source of the horror. In this way, the horror elements have an effect similar to that which Kalmanofsky observes in Jer 6. About that chapter, she writes, “the reader does not align unequivocally with God, but experiences an emotional struggle and even moments of protest” (Kalmanofsky 2008: 134; compare Grafius 2020: 132). In our chapter, the prophecy laments the Philistines’ fate and, most significantly, explicitly calls out God’s role in bringing about that fate.

It leaves hardly any emotional distance between the Judean audience and the Philistine victims. The prophetic observer’s struggle and protest mirror a likely Philistine reaction.

### The Uniqueness of the Horror in Jeremiah 47

Kalmanofsky has observed that all of Jeremiah’s oracles to the nations employ horror imagery typical of the entire book, as all of them predict, to a greater or lesser extent, the horrible destructions of the nations to which they are addressed (Kalmanofsky 2008: 4; see Kalmanofsky’s index for treatment of specific verses). Only the prophecy to the Philistines, however, evokes its audience’s sympathies. This use of horror elements makes the prophecy to the Philistines stand out among Jeremiah’s prophecies to the foreign nations. Comparison between the prophecy in Jer 47 and the other prophecies to the foreign nations, particularly those addressed to the two ancient Near Eastern superpowers, Egypt (46) and Babylon (50–51), shows that the speaker’s perspective in our text is diametrically opposite to the perspective in the other prophecies.<sup>10</sup>

Compare, to begin, the speakers’ direct address to the Philistines with parallel addresses to Egypt and Babylon. Our prophecy asks the city of Ashkelon, “How long will you gash yourself?” (v. 5), a question characteristic of biblical lament or complaint prayers, as noted earlier. In contrast, the direct addresses to the defeated Egyptians and Babylonians drip with irony and mockery.<sup>11</sup> Egypt is told, “Equip yourself for exile” (46:19) and, in a sarcastic challenge, “Go up to Gilead and get balm,” a task that can only be undertaken “in vain” (46:11). Addressing Babylon directly, the prophet derisively predicts “O you who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your time has come” (51:13; compare 50:11–12). Both prophecies even include questions reminiscent of the mode of lament, but with a mocking answer, for an additional subversive, rhetorical sting. To Egypt, the prophet asks, “Why are your stalwarts swept away?” and answers, “They did not stand firm for YHWH thrust them down” (46:15). To Babylon, the prophecy includes the quintessential exclamatory question of biblical lamentation, “how” (כִּי): “How has

the hammer of the whole earth been hacked and shattered! How has Babylon become an appalment among the nations!” (50:23). God’s own answer, however, confirms that these are mock laments: “I set a snare for you, O Babylon, and you were trapped unaware; you were found and caught, because you challenged YHWH” (50:24).<sup>12</sup>

This comparison and the prophetic mockery it points up also highlight two verbal elements missing from the prophecy to the Philistines: the terms for shame (ש-ו-ב) and fear or “dismay” (ח-ת-ת). Kalmanofsky emphasizes that these terms are specifically associated with the emotions of horror (Kalmanofsky 2008: 12–20). This combination occurs near the very beginning of the prophecy against Babylon, where we read “Babylon is captured, Bel is put to shame (הוביש), Merodach is dismayed (חת); her idols put to shame (הובישו); her abominations are dismayed (חתו) (50:2; also see 50:12; 51:17, 47; 50:36; 51:56). Likewise, in the prophecies to Egypt we read how Egypt is “dismayed” (חתים) (46:5) and “ashamed (הובישה) . . . given over to the nation from the North” (46:24; also see 46:12).<sup>13</sup> The absence of these terms in Jer 47 exposes the absence of the motifs of shame and dismay in the prophecy to the Philistines. This absence makes sense as part of the prophecy’s sympathetic tone, overall. The defeated nation’s shame and dismay are best left unmentioned.

Closely related to the motif of shame, which reflects the defeated nations’ self-perception, is the motif of outside observers who see and react to the defeat (Kalmanofsky 2008: 35–40). Regarding Babylon, we read, “Whoever passes by Babylon will be appalled and will hiss at all her wounds” (50:13). Similarly, foreign nations are aware of Egypt’s defeat: “nations have heard your shame, the earth resounds with your screams” (46:12).<sup>14</sup> As with the motif of shame and dismay, the motif of foreign reaction is also absent from the prophecy to the Philistines. Instead, the only observer reaction we have is that of the speaker or prophet, who, as we have argued, seems more sympathetic than the anonymous foreign viewers elsewhere do.

As a final point of close comparison, let us consider the depiction of God as “plunderer,” indicated by Hebrew terms derived from the root ט-ד-ש. There is a word-to-word correspondence between God’s “plundering” of

the Philistines (47:4) and the Babylonians (51:55). This correspondence, however, also highlights a difference: God plunders Babylon because God is “a God of requital” (אל גמלות; 51:56). In this way, as it affects the Babylonians, God’s plunder comes with some reason, even justification. To the Philistines, however, God’s plunder appears unjustified.

This last difference at the verbal level is a feature of a broader theological difference between the prophecy to the Philistines and the other prophecies to the nations. Above, we suggested that the prophecy to the Philistines ends on a dark note, with, if not outright condemnation, then, at best, a grudging resignation to God’s monstrous action. One aspect of this negative tone is that, per the prophecy, there does not seem to be any reason for God’s destructive intervention in Philistine affairs. This stands in stark contrast to the Egyptian and Babylonian prophecies. There, the destruction is presented as God’s vengeance or retribution (נקמה; Jer 46:10; 50:15, 28; 51:6, 11).<sup>15</sup> In Babylon’s case, the destruction of God’s temple is the explicit reason for the vengeance (50:28; 51:11). Twice, the prophecy recalls Babylon’s destructive conquest to justify Babylon’s own destruction: “as she has done, do unto her” (50:15, 29).<sup>16</sup> In the prophecy to Egypt, admittedly, God avenges an unspecified wrong (46:10), which makes it somewhat less justifiable. Even there, though, interpreting Egypt’s destruction as retribution or vengeance gives more of a reason for God’s action than what is found in the prophecy to the Philistines.

In sum, we have seen how the prophecy in Jer 47 describes the horror of the destruction coming to the Philistines, in general, and to Gaza and Ashkelon, in particular. To convey this horror, the prophecy shows the Philistines’ own reactions to the doom, as well as the speaker’s sympathy, even empathy for the victim nation. Compared to other prophecies to foreign nations, the tone of the prophecy to the Philistines is remarkably not vengeful, nor does it dwell on their shame or dismay. In leaving God’s actions against the Philistines without justification, the prophecy leaves God open to criticism for the human tragedy that befalls the coastal nation.

The prophecy’s sympathetic attitude toward Philistia reflects the two peoples’ political and economic circumstances during most of the seventh century BCE. By this

time, earlier national rivalries between them were distant memories. Politically, both were smaller entities living in the shadows of Assyria (until its collapse) and Egypt. Economically, Judah and Philistia benefited from their incorporation into a Mediterranean regional economic system. Under this system, Judean grain surpluses supported the production of Philistine wine and oil for export on Phoenician ships (Faust and Weiss 2011). Philistia's collapse under Babylonia predicted disaster for Judah, in a way that even other, smaller nations' destructions did not. To a Judean observer like Jeremiah, if Nebuchadnezzar II could come to destroy the seacoast Philistines, as occurred in 604 BCE, then Judah must not be too far behind.

These geopolitical historical circumstances readily translated into theology. The very might of Egypt and Babylon was enough to justify their destruction, and this is what we find in Jeremiah's prophecies against these two great powers. The destruction of the Philistines, in contrast, raised the same sense of terror and the same theological quandaries that the Judeans' own destruction would raise. With Philistia eliminated by Babylon, all that remained was for Judah to look on in horror.

### Notes

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1. The analysis below follows MT, which contains only negligible difficulties that do not impede a sensible reading. For insights based on LXX, see serial commentaries and Huwyler 1997: 142–50. Translations of biblical texts are my own, made in consultation with published versions.
2. On the dating of this prophecy to 604 BCE and a reasonable solution to the problem of the superscription in 47:1, see Peels 2013. For additional discussion, see Hoffman 2001: 758, as well as Hoffman's comments on the specific verses.

3. For additional theoretical discussion and application of horror theory to a broader set of biblical texts, see Grafius 2020.
4. For contextual assessment of Carroll's theories about horror, see Grafius 2020: 17–23.
5. Note that Kalmanofsky does not identify the "discovery movement" in this particular chapter. Compare Holladay 1989: 338 and Huwyler 1997:137.
6. On the topic of God's monstrous aspects in the Hebrew Bible, see Grafius 2020: 125–42.
7. Many commentators interpret v. 4 as subordinate to the preceding main clauses in v. 3. Thus, v. 4 explains the reactions of the characters in Unit I, rather than Unit II. See Hoffman 2001: 778; Holladay 1989: 334; Keown, Scalise, and Smothers 1995: 297; Fischer 2005: 491; and compare NJPS and NRSV. The reading here understands the preposition על at the beginning of v. 4 as the indicator of the cause for the mourning practices of hair-tearing and gashing in v. 5. For a similar use of the preposition compare Mic 1:16—קרחי וגוי על בני תענוגך ("Shear off your hair and make yourself bald over the children in whom you once delighted"). Also see Ezek 27:31 (with אֵל). For the purpose of the present argument, what is crucial is the subordinate role of v. 4 as an explanation of reactions above (vv. 2–3) or below (v. 5a).
8. This much seems clear from the vast literature on the oracles against the nations. For a good statement of the parameters of the questions, see Kalmanofsky 2015: 109–11. For more detailed discussion of possible settings of Jeremiah's oracles against the nations, see Huwyler 1997: 304–23. For discussion of the settings of oracles against nations, in general, see Hoffman 1977: 253–88 and Raabe 1995: 247–54.
9. On the significance of later audiences for understanding Jeremiah's oracles against the nations, see Huwyler 1997: 324–46 and Sharp 2015: 105–8.
10. Examples in the discussion will come from the prophecies to Egypt and Babylon, with only occasional reference, in notes, to Jeremiah's other prophecies to the nations.
11. Compare the similar tone of the direct addresses in the prophecies to Ammon (49:4) and to Edom (49:7–11).
12. See similar mocking use of "how" (אֵיךְ) in 48:39 (Moab) and 49:25 (Damascus). On the "faux laments" to Moab, see Sharp 2015: 101–2 and compare Hoffman 2001: 781.
13. For related terms in prophecies to other nations, see 48:1, 13, 20, 39 (Moab); 49:13 (Edom, חֲרָפָה); 49:23 (Damascus); and 49:37 (Elam).
14. Observers' reactions are mentioned in 48:39 (Moab) and 49:17 (Edom, including "hissing").

15. Kalmanofsky 2015 interprets all of Jeremiah's oracles against the nations as "revenge fantasies." Our understanding of the prophecy to the Philistines builds on the lack of explicit revenge terminology. In contrast, for Kalmanofsky 2015: 122, the prophecy serves as an example of God "transforming himself from victim to avenger."
16. On the motif of retributive justice in the prophecy to Babylon, specifically, see Thelle 2015: 79–81 and Kalmanofsky 2015. Compare the mentions of the haughtiness of Moab (48:7, 26, 29), Ammon (49:4), and Edom (49:16) as justifications for their destructions. A similar sense emerges from 49:31 about Kedar.

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