**Covenant, Creation, and the Limits of Human Wisdom: Revisiting Jeremiah 31:35-37**

One of the most central and most studied prophecies in the series of prophecies of consolation in the book of Jeremiah is that of the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). This passage stands at the center of the series of pronouncements appearing at the end of the collection and it opens with the words, “See, a time is coming” (31:27-40).[[1]](#footnote--1) In this prophecy, God promises the people He will make a new covenant with them, the essential innovation of which will be the loss of the human ability to violate the covenant[[2]](#footnote-0): unlike the previous covenant, which was annulled as a result of the people’s misdeeds and God’s subsequent rejection,[[3]](#footnote-1) in this covenant God will take the initiative and inscribe the Torah directly on their hearts. In doing so He will obviate the need for human guidance and all of the people, from the least of them to the greatest, will know God. This prophecy has been dated by many scholars to the time of the historical prophet Jeremiah.[[4]](#footnote-2) It is immediately followed by two statements in poetic diction (31:35-37), structured in the form of condition and result:

Thus said YHVH, Who established the sun for light by day, The laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is YHVH of Hosts: *If* these laws should ever be annulled by Me —declares YHVH— *only* *then* would the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time.

Thus said YHVH: *If* the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, *only then* would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares YHVH.

These two statements promise the eternality of the covenant between God and the offspring of Israel using images from creation.[[5]](#footnote-3) Both follow the same structure: “If… then…,” placing an impossible condition as proof of the impossibility of another event.[[6]](#footnote-4)

The phrase, “See, a time is coming” appears three times in v. 27-40, dividing them into three prophecies: v. 27-30, 31-37, and 38-40. According to this arrangement, v. 35-37 belong to the prophecy of the new covenant. However, many scholars have argued that these verses were added by a later hand, basing their claims primarily on affinities to Second Isaiah and additional later writings.[[7]](#footnote-5) In contrast, other scholars have seen the passage as original, explaining the affinities to the prophecies of Second Isaiah as the influence of Jeremiah on that work and not the other way around.[[8]](#footnote-6)

In this study, I intend to reopen this discussion and claim that v. 35-37 are an inseparable part of the prophecy of the new creation. An exacting analysis of the rhetoric and meaning of these verse reveals their deep connection to the rest of this prophecy. These verses rely on the concept of the change that will be made in the new covenant and further develop it, and they reflect a uniquely Jeremian perspective on the future covenant that God will make with the people.

In a previous study, I claimed that the essential innovation in the prophecy of the new covenant relates to a despair regarding the human study that brought about the destruction.[[9]](#footnote-7) I revealed the dominant didactic context of this covenant, showing how it “rectifies” previous prophecies by Jeremiah in which he criticizes the people as fools because of their ignorance of God. Indeed, in previous prophecies Jeremiah expresses the expectation that the people will use their human wisdom in order to come to know God (4:22; 5:21), but Jeremiah’s despair of the efficacy of human wisdom brought him to transfer the roles of the sage to God Himself, and to prophesy that in the future human study will be extraneous. The prophecy of the new covenant represents, therefore, the climax of Jeremiah’s wrestling with the people over epistemological questions, especially the question of whether or not people can know God through the faculties of the human intellect. In this study I hope to show that v. 35-37 add to the discussion of these questions and serve as the basis for Jeremiah’s worldview as reflected in the prophecy of the new covenant. These very verses express the limits of human wisdom and serve as a “rectification” of previous prophecies by Jeremiah treating wisdom and the wise. The solution these verses pose to the problems resulting from reliance on human wisdom depends directly on the new covenant of v. 31-34.

**The Laws of Nature and the Covenant Between God and the People (v. 35-37)**

In the first statement (v. 35-36) the prophet equates the connection between God and the people to the natural order and in fact turns this connection into a natural law that cannot be broken:

Thus said YHVH, Who established the sun for light by day, the laws of moon and stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is YHVH of Hosts:

If these laws should ever be annulled by Me —declares YHVH— only then would the offspring of Israel cease to be a nation before Me for all time.

The images drawn from creation are integrated into the promise of the covenant with Israel, and the relationship between God and His people parallels the laws established at creation: just as the laws of nature cannot be annulled, so the covenant with the people will never be annulled. This fact is expressed through a uniquely Jeremian expression that also appears in other passages presenting contemplation of the natural order as a means to obtain the proper relationship with God. One of the most salient examples is found in Jeremiah 8:7: “Even the stork in the sky knows her seasons, and the turtledove, swift, and crane keep the time of their coming; but My people pay no heed to the law of YHVH.” This verse expresses the expectation that the people will know the law of God as the migrant birds know their seasons. Using the verbs “know” and “keep,” the prophet emphasizes the volitional nature of these activities: they are not presented as intuitive responses but as obedience. The comparison is constructed of two elements: first, there is a kind of law inherent to the migrations of the birds and, second, the birds obey that inherent law. These two elements serve the prophet’s claim against the people: the law of God is a form of natural law that must be obeyed, as the migrations of birds; and the expectation of the people is that it should recognize this law and be faithful to it, an expectation that they do not meet.[[10]](#footnote-8)

In another passage, in which the prophet rebukes the people for their foolishness and lack of fear of God, the expectation is set forth that the people will learn through contemplation of nature how it should behave towards God (Jer 5:21-24):

Hear this, O foolish people, devoid of intelligence, that have eyes but can’t see, that have ears but can’t hear! Should you not revere Me —says YHVH— Should you not tremble before Me, Who set the sand as a boundary to the sea, as a limit for all time, not to be transgressed? Though its waves toss, they cannot prevail; though they roar, they cannot pass it. Yet this people has a wayward and defiant heart; they have turned aside and gone their way. They have not said to themselves, “Let us revere YHVH our God, Who gives the rain, the early and late rain in season, Who keeps for our benefit the weeks appointed for harvest.”

These verses clearly address human wisdom and critique the people for its lack thereof: the prophet rebukes the people for not using their own eyes, ears, and hearts to internalize the proper relationship to God; the prophet expects the people to learn through contemplation of nature, as the sages do, and since the people does not do so the prophet declares it a nation of fools. This passage emphasizes the contemplation of natural law: God set for the sea a “a limit for all time” and keeps the law of the yearly seasons. The emphasis on law strengthens the connection to wisdom: the law allows for the art of the sages, whose primary goal is to understand the natural order and to act according to it in order to pursue a good life.[[11]](#footnote-9) The prophet calls on the people to contemplate the origin of all laws and to fear Him. He calls on them to use the methods of Wisdom, of learning through contemplation and internalization, but he now introduces an important innovation: Jeremiah seeks to adopt those methods in order to derive theological insights, in order to learn to fear God.

As he did with the image of the stork (8:7), in the verses under discussion (31:35-36) the prophet points to the connection between the people and God as a part of the natural order; however, in contrast to the two passages brought above, in which the people is expected to learn the proper relationship to God from natural law, in this passage the prophet emphasizes the singular role of God as the one who sets that law and accordingly the eternal relationship between Him and the people. This emphasis is evident in the structure of the passage: instead of setting natural law as parallel to the people’s relationship to God directly within the conditional language of “if… then…”, the passage opens with the expansive poetic language describing the role of God as the lawgiver, which the conditional language evokes: “If *these laws* should ever be annulled by Me.” This structure does not appear in other instances of the “if… then…” phraseology, in which the impossible event on which the condition is based appears in the conditional portion of the dual structure: “If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed” (Jer 31:37). The introductory words of the condition emphasize God’s role as the one who established natural law, an emphasis that applies to the conditional response as well: just as God is the source of the law, so He is the source of His relationship to the people, and both of them exist by the authority of His singular will.

By emphasizing God’s role as the source of law, whether in nature or in His relationship to the people, the prophet uses a common method in prophecies of consolation: the “rectification” of prophecies of doom.[[12]](#footnote-10) The prophecy transforms one of Jeremiah’s earlier pronouncements (4:22-26), which also bound the continued existence of creation to the relationship between God and the people, and also within a Wisdom context, but to a different end:

For My people are stupid, they give Me no heed; they are foolish children, they are not intelligent. They are clever at doing wrong, but unable to do right. I look at the earth, it is unformed and void; at the skies, and their light is gone. I look at the mountains, they are quaking; and all the hills are rocking. I look: no man is left, and all the birds of the sky have fled. I look: the farm land is desert, and all its towns are in ruin— because of YHVH, because of His blazing anger.

The juxtaposition of the charge against the people as being fools, that is to say, ignorant of God, presents a relationship of cause and effect: foolishness returns the world to a state of primordial chaos,[[13]](#footnote-11) and ignorance brings about its destruction. As I noted above, the worldview of the Wisdom sages is based on natural law: the world was created with wisdom (Prov 3:19; 8:22-31), and the law that is inherent in it allows for the art of the sages. The utilization of the return to chaos as an image of the impending destruction complements the charge made immediately before it in v. 22.[[14]](#footnote-12) The picture drawn in these verses grants the people great weight in preserving their covenant with God: if the sages’ wisdom, derived from contemplation of natural law, does not bring them to knowledge of God, then the law itself is liable to collapse.

In sharp contrast to this conception, the passage under discussion emphasizes God’s role as the one who upholds both the law and the eternal existence of the people.[[15]](#footnote-13) The affinity between 4:22-26 and 31:35-36 therefore points to the relationship between the prophecies as one in which the latter rectifies the former. In the former, the people are described as capable of bringing about the collapse of creation with their foolishness, whereas in the latter it is the eternality of the world, guaranteed by God, that guarantees in turn the continued existence of the people. The people cannot return the world to chaos, because God has taken the initiative.

This conception of the bond between God and the people also appears in the description of the new covenant, in which God likewise annuls the people’s agency. In the new covenant, the people have lost the ability to come to knowledge of God; in v. 35-36 the causative relationship that had existed between the people’s deeds and the persistence of natural law is severed, and along with it the relationship between the people’s deeds and the persistence of its bond with its God.

However, the connection between these texts is not limited to a shared conception of this bond between the people and God; it extends to a genuine dependency between the rectification expressed in v. 35-36 and that presented in the description of the new covenant. While in the other prophecy we saw that ignorance of God (v. 22) is likely to bring about the destruction of the world (v. 23-26), in the prophecy of the new covenant the problem of ignorance of God is resolved through the transfer of agency from the people to God – all the people will know God, from the least of them to the greatest (31:34). God Himself is described as a sage or a teacher who inscribes the Torah on the heart of the people and so prevents their ignorance of Him – the situation described in chapter 4. Since “after these days,” that is, in the time of the new covenant, such a situation will be impossible, the human capability to impact the laws of nature and to bring about their collapse will thereby be annulled and the covenant with the people will automatically be upheld, since it too is part of the natural law on which the existence of the world depends. As I wrote above, the taking of initiative by God, who places knowledge of Him in the heart of the people, resolves the problems created in chapter 4 and brings about their rectification in chapter 31.

**Human Limitations and the Covenant Between God and the People (v. 37)**

The connection between the description of the new covenant and that covenant’s guarantee as expressed through images from creation continues in v. 37: “Thus said YHVH: If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares YHVH.” Here too God’s limitless capabilities are juxtaposed with the negligible ability of mankind, but while v. 35-36 emphasize God’s ability to establish eternal laws, v. 37 focuses on the inability of mankind to comprehend the acts of God. This prophecy also suggests a future rectification of the relationship between God and the people, and this rectification is also based on the innovation of the new covenant.

Human limits are expressed through the use of two linguistic roots: *madad* (measure) and *haqar* (fathom or investigate). The two verbs are connected to comprehension of God’s acts: measuring is the ability to span or measure an amount[[16]](#footnote-14); fathoming is the ability to understand a certain event or act.[[17]](#footnote-15) These two terms are not commonly used in the context of creation, and they appear precisely within the specific context of the comparison of divine wisdom to human wisdom.

For example, the rhetorical question in the verse “Who measured the waters with the hollow of His hand, and gauged the skies with a span, and meted earth’s dust with a measure, and weighed the mountains with a scale and the hills with a balance?” (Isa 40:12) is meant to clarify that no mortal is able to understand the ways of God: “Who has plumbed the mind of YHVH, what man could tell Him His plan?” (Isa 40:13).[[18]](#footnote-16) The verb *haqar* appears twice in the praises of wisdom in Job 28,[[19]](#footnote-17) of which wisdom it is said that “No man can set a value on it; it cannot be found in the land of the living” (v. 13). However,

God understands the way to it; He knows its source;

For He sees to the ends of the earth, Observes all that is beneath the heavens.

When He fixed the weight of the winds, Set the *measure* (*midah*) of the waters;

When He made a rule for the rain And a course for the thunderstorms,

Then He saw it and gauged it; He measured it and *probed* it (*haqarah*) (Job 28:23-27).[[20]](#footnote-18)

Such acts are the purview of God, and exceed human abilities.

A treatment of the limits of human wisdom in understanding divine acts of creation is also found in the wisdom literature of many other cultures, one of the better-known of which is the Mesopotamian saying, “The tallest man cannot reach heaven, the broadest man cannot cover the earth.” Variations of this saying appear in Mesopotamian, Sumerian, and Akkadian literature. In its Akkadian version, the saying expresses the human inability to arrive at divine wisdom. Various Biblical texts reflect a familiarity with this saying.[[21]](#footnote-19) The version in Jeremiah 31:37 is relatively close to the original saying: the verse expresses the two phenomena mentioned in the Mesopotamian saying – heaven and earth, in contrast to other Biblical sources which add the sea[[22]](#footnote-20) – and both sayings express the same idea, that is, the limits on the human ability to fathom the heavens and the earth.

Verse 37 treats the limits of human knowledge, a topic that naturally engaged the sages of the Wisdom tradition. The prophet juxtaposes limited human wisdom with the infinite wisdom of God as a condition guaranteeing the persistence of the covenant between the people and God. Just as humans could never fathom God’s acts, so too God will never reject the people.

This concept, placing the juxtaposition of divine potential and human limitations within the context of the divine-human relationship, also reflects the central idea of the new covenant: the nullification of human agency. The affinity between the texts, however, goes further: the inscription of the Torah on the heart of the people obviates the need for human study and instruction. Knowledge of God will be placed within the human heart by the power of God, not the power of man. This significant statement on the limits of human wisdom – a wisdom that was at the least ineffective in stopping the destruction and, in certain prophecies, is even blamed for causing it (4:22; 8:8-9; 9:11) – is rearticulated in v. 37: human wisdom is limited. A man cannot fathom the acts of God, and by the same token he cannot break the covenant.

The removal of the possibility that God will reject the people also “rectifies” Jeremiah’s earlier prophecies of doom, and understanding the mechanism that brings about this rectification reinforces the connection between this guarantee and the description of the new covenant. The root *ma’as* (reject, scorn) appears ten times in Jeremiah, and nine of those appearances describe the relationship between the people and God: God rejects the people because they reject the Torah or the word of God. In chapter 6, for example, both of these uses appear: “Hear, O earth! I am going to bring disaster upon this people, the outcome of their own schemes; for they would not hearken to My words, and they *rejected* My Instruction” (v. 19); “They are called ‘*rejected* silver,’ for YHVH has *rejected* them” (v. 30). Chapter 37 describes the end of such a possibility – God will never reject the people. The connection to the new covenant provides the background for this promise, that is, the impossibility of rejecting God or His Torah, since the Torah will have been written on the heart of the people and all of the people will know God.[[23]](#footnote-21)

Verse 37 reflects, then, a close affinity to the description of the new covenant. The nullification of human study flows from the situation that was created in the previous covenant: the people violated the covenant and God scorned them.[[24]](#footnote-22) The promise of the new covenant reflects a despair of the efficacy of human study, which led to such negative results in the past, and transfers agency from the people to God, who will inscribe the Torah on the heart of the people and thereby prevent its rejection and his own rejection of the people in turn. Verse 37 returns to these principles from a different angle, through the use of a variation on a saying treating the limits of human knowledge: mortal knowledge is limited compared to divine wisdom, and just as man can never fathom God’s deeds, so the covenant will never be broken. In this way does the verse create a fitting conclusion to the prophecy of the new covenant.[[25]](#footnote-23)

Conclusion

We find a complex system of connections between the description of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the guarantee of that covenant in v. 35-37. First, both passages express the same central idea: in the future, no human deed will threaten the persistence of the covenant; God will be solely responsible for its everlasting existence. Second, a genuine reciprocity is at play between the conditions of the new covenant and its guarantees: the removal of human agency in v. 31-34 is bound up with the limits of human learning and knowledge pointed out in v. 35-37. Lastly, the background to both passages is the failure of human wisdom in preventing the destruction.

Both passages upend previous prophecies by Jeremiah, and an analysis of the relationship between the prophecies of doom and the prophecies of consolation clarifies the affinity between the verses describing the new covenant and those that follow guaranteeing the persistence of that covenant: the latter equate the eternality of the people with the eternality of natural law and promise that the people will never be rejected. These guarantees reverse the prophecies of doom in which ignorance of God and rejection of His Torah lead to destruction of the land, described in terms of a return to chaos and a rejection of the people. This chain of cause and effect will be broken in the new covenant, since the Torah will be inscribed on the heart and all the people will know God. Human agency will be removed from the equation, thereby guaranteeing the persistence of the eternal covenant.

Based on this close connection between the passage on creation and the prophecy of the new covenant, we can conclude that, even though the verses guaranteeing the covenant are different in their literary character from those describing the new covenant, they should all be seen as a single prophetic unit, opening with the words “See, days are coming” in v. 31 and concluding with the words “declares YHVH” in v. 37. This unit bears a clear and unified message: the future existence of the covenant depends solely on God, and not on any human factor.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the interpretation suggested here to the prophecy of the new covenant in its entirety (31:31-37) is likely to have ramifications on our understanding of theological developments within the Wisdom tradition. The parallels between the prophecy of the new covenant and Jeremiah’s critique of the people’s claim to wisdom (4:22; 5:21-25; 8:8-9; 9:11); the inscription of the Torah by God and the removal of human agency in acquiring knowledge of God; the perception of the covenant as part of the natural order of the world; and the critique of the limits of human knowledge – all of these are bound up with the epistemological question found at the heart of Biblical Wisdom literature: Can man arrive at insights through the use of his reason? It would seem that in the prophecy of the new covenant Jeremiah answers in the negative: the prophecy views God as the sole source of theological knowledge and negates the power of human wisdom to arrive at theological insight. A testimony to the existence of this conception at the end of the sixth century BCE is a landmark in the development of the Wisdom tradition.[[26]](#footnote-24)

1. All translations are taken from the New Jewish Publication Society of America Tanakh unless otherwise noted. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. For such an interpretation, see for example William McKane, *Jeremiah II* , ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clarck, 1996,) 818, 820; Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 21-36,* AB (New-York: Doubleday, 2004), 467. Becking remarks that the meaning of the word *hadash* in the Bible often takes the meaning of “renewed” and not “entirely new,” and so too here. Bob Becking, *Between Fear and Freedom: Essays on the Interpretation of Jeremiah 30-31* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. In the Masoretic tradition, God’s response is described with the words “I have espoused them.” The other appearance of the phrase in the Bible carries a positive meaning of a renewal of bonds (Jer 3:14). The current context, however, requires a verb signifying the rejection of the people as a result of God’s scorn. The Septuagint version of this verse, “I have spurned them,” therefore seems preferable. For the parallelism between rejection (*me’isah*) and spurning (*ge’ilah*) see Lev 26:15 and Jer 14:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. For example,  Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia*, Tubingen 1968, 201; John Bright, *Jeremiah*, AB (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 287. Hyatt reasons that the ideas are Jeremiah’s, but it is likely that one of his disciples worded the prophecy itself:  James Philip Hyatt, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 1040. Some scholars have claimed that the prophecy should be dated later, especially given its affinities to Deuteronomic and Deuteronomistic writings. See for example Siegfried Herrmann, *Die Prophetischen Heilserwartungen im Alten Testament*, (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1965), 195-204. Among those who have followed in this line of thinking are Ralph W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 64-66; Winfried Thiel, *Die Deuteronomistische Redaktion von Jeremia 26-45* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981), 24. See, however, McKane’s critique of the identification of a number of the affinities to Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic literature: McKane, *Jeremiah* *II*, 825. The affinities to D and the Deuteronomistic writings may be original and it need not be assumed that they are a sign of a later date of origin. For a discussion of the affinities between the Pentateuch and various layers in Jeremiah, see for example  Dalit Rom Shiloni, "Actualization of Pentateuchal Legal Traditions in Jeremiah: More on the Riddle of Authorship", *Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und Biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 15 (2009), 254-281. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. The term “images from creation” in this study refers to cosmogonic images. Some authors, however, have greatly expanded the definition of the term, using it to refer to various types of divine creation; see for example Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom in Revolt : Metaphorical Theology in the Book of Job* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1991), 32-60; idem, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 79. Dell, aspiring to provide a basis for the affinity to wisdom in Jeremiah on, *inter alia*, images from creation, takes this more expansive approach (Katharine J. Dell, "Jeremiah, Creation and Wisdom", In *Perspectives on Israelite Wisdom: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Jarick [London: Bloomsbury, 2015], 375-390). In my estimation, the broad definition of images from creation prevents the possibility of assessing the theology expressed in descriptions of the creation of the world, as well as their affinities to wisdom, and so I focus narrowly on cosmogonic images. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. This structure is rare in the Bible; aside from the two statements under discussion, it only appears two more times in Jeremiah (33:20-21, 25-26) and once in Genesis 13:16. For a discussion of this structure, see for example  William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah* II, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 171; Barbara A. Bozak, *Life 'Anew': A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30-31*, (Rome: Pontificio Istituto biblico, 1991), 125; Becking, *Fear and Freedom*, 267-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. James Philip Hyatt, *The Book of Jeremiah* (The Interpreter's Bible), NY 1956, p. 1040; Holladay, *Jeremiah II*, 166. For a discussion of the affinity of v. 35 to Isa 51:15, which uses the same poetic phrase, “Who stirs up the sea into roaring waves, Whose name is YHVH of Hosts,” see McKane, *Jeremiah II*, 828; Robbert P. Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah*, London 1986, 615. Brueggemann discusses a number of what he sees as significant distinctions between the passages, for example the lack of continuity inherent in the new covenant and the dominant motif of continuity in v. 35-37 (Walter Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming: A Commentary on Jeremiah*, Grand Rapids 1998, 295-296). As I will argue below, the continuity between the texts’ most profound concepts is more significant than any differences between them. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Lundbom, *Jeremiah* *II*, 483. Lundbom also addresses the relevance to the question of the strong nationalistic tone in the prophecies, which does not match Jeremiah’s worldview as it appears in other passages of the book, and argues that the focus of the prophecy is not nationalism but the covenant with God. For a comprehensive discussion of the affinities between Second Isaiah and Jeremiah, see  Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 32-107, esp. 46-50, which address this prophecy. See also no. 47, in which Sommer explicitly raises the possibility of a later date for v. 35-37 and then rejects it, because of, among other reasons, the parallels to Isaiah, in which motifs from v. 31-37 appear. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Reinsert [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. Natural events are also defined as law in Jer 33:25: “Thus said YHVH: As surely as I have established My covenant with day and night—the laws of heaven and earth.” However, it is reasonable to assume that these verses are later and are based on the parallel verses in ch. 31. See below, note …. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. For this reason, creation is the foundational event in the thought of the sages [Wisdom literature ??]. See Zimmerli’s famous definition: “Wisdom thinks resolutely within the framework of the theology of creation.” Walther Zimmerli, "The Place and Limit of the Wisdom in the Framework of the Old Testament' Theology", *SJOT* 17 (1964), 146-158. See also  Hans-Jürgen Hermisson, "Observations on the Creation Theology in Wisdom", in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, eds. John G. Gammie et al (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 44. Since creation is the foundational event in the thought of the sages [Wisdom literature ??], chaos is the most significant threat to their world; see James L. Crenshaw, "Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom: Prolegomenon", in *Studies in Ancient Israelite Wisdom*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (New York: Ktav, 1976), 121-125. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. For a general description of this phenomenon see  John M. Bracke, *The Coherence and Theology of Jeremiah 30-31* (Ann Arbor: Univ. Microfilms International, 1983), 69 ff. Bracke presents *inter alia* the reversal of the motif of the destruction of the Judean hills and of the motif of famine and drought (ibid., 75-76). However, he does not address all the examples brought below. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Many scholars have addressed the affinity between this description and the creation of the world, which is reinforced by the use of the phrase “unformed and void,” a rarity in the Bible. Fishbane claims a more direct connection, also expressed in the order of creation in Gen 1 and the return to chaos in Jer 4:23-26.  Michael A. Fishbane, "Jeremiah iv 23-26 and Job iii 3-13: A Recovered Use of the Creation pattern", *VT*  21 (1971), 151-152. Compare, however, David T. Tsumura, *The Earth and the Waters in Genesis 1 and 2: A Linguistic Investigation* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 36-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. For a discussion of the question of whether the description of chaos in these verses serves as an image of the [?? – that is, “the destruction of the Temple” as opposed to simply destruction in general] destruction and, if so, is meant to match the style and content of Jeremiah, or if it describes the destruction of the world in an apocalyptic style, in which case it would be reasonable to assume that it is not Jeremian, see for example  Paul Volz, *Der Prophet Jeremia* (Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1922), 50; Hyatt, *Jeremiah*, 840-841; Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 168, who claim that the prophecy is apocalyptic and therefore later in origin; in contrast, see  Johannes Lindblom, "Wisdom in the Old Testament Prophets", in *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East – Essays Presented to H.H. Rowley*, eds. Martin Noth and D. Winton Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 127; Lundbom, *Jeremiah II*, 357, who claim that chaos is a metaphor for the destruction [of the Temple/of the land??]. I am inclined to accept the latter’s arguments, since the climax of the hymn of destruction, articulated through the change of subject and the break in the rhythm, describes the destruction of the land (“I look: the farm land is desert, and all its towns are in ruin— because of YHVH, because of His blazing anger”), and so it seems that the first lines of the hymn serve as an image meant to emphasize the extent of the destruction. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. Brueggemann identifies a parallel between 4:23-26 and 31:35-37 and even suggests that the latter are based on the former. Walter Brueggemann, "Creation in Extermis", in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, eds. William P. Brown & Samuel D. McBride (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 157-159. Brueggemann focuses, however, on the point of commonality between the two passages: the first passage presents the destruction in terms of the reversal of creation and the second presents the eternality of the people in terms of creation – such that, in his interpretation, the emphasis is not on the destruction or the redemption *per se* but rather on the power of God and the people’s dependence on Him. I would argue that it is precisely the opposition between the passages that creates the message, since in the first passage in ch. 4 it appears to be the people who bring about God’s anger and the destruction, while in ch. 31 such a possibility has been removed. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Compare Exod 16:18; Num 35:5; Deut 21:2, and others. *BDB*, מדד, p. 551. The Septuagint has ירומו in place of ימדו, but most scholars prefer the Masoretic text. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Compare Deut 13:15; Judg 18:2; 1 Sam 20:12, and others. *BDB*, חקר, p. 350. ?? argues that all instances of the verb in the *nifal* [passive??] form refer to incomprehensible phenomena. V, *TDOT*, חקר, p. 150. For an in-depth discussion of the root *haqar* and the distinction between its four different meanings, see  James K. Aitken, "Lexical Semantics and the Cultural Context of Knowledge in Job 28, Illustrated by the Meaning of haqar", in: *Job 28: Cognition in Context*, ed. Ellen van-Wolde (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 119-137. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. In v. 28 of the same chapter, the root *haqar* also appears, as a noun rather than a verb, but in the identical context, as will be discussed below – the extent of divine wisdom as expressed through creation: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? YHVH is God from of old, Creator of the earth from end to end, He never grows faint or weary, His wisdom cannot be fathomed.” [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. For a comprehensive treatment of the role of ch. 28 in the book of Job, its literary genre, and more, see Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job*, OTL, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 391-395; Edward L. Greenstein, "The poem on wisdom in Job 28 in its conceptual and literary contexts", in *Job 28: Cognition in Context,* ed. Ellen van Wolde(Leiden: Brill, 2003), 253-280.‏ [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. A similar idea is expressed in the speech by Zophar the Naamathite, which also employs the roots *haqar* and *madad*: “Would you discover the mystery of God? Would you discover the limit of the Almighty? Higher than heaven—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?” (Job 11:7-8). The root *haqar* appears elsewhere in Job to express the inability to understand God’s deeds. See 5:9; (and with minor changes 9:10); and 38:16. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Nili Samet, ‘“The Tallest Man Cannot Reach Heaven; the Broadest Man Cannot Cover Earth”: Reconsidering the Proverb and its Biblical Parallels’, *JHS* 10 (2010), 2-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. See for example Ps 139:8-9: “If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too. If I take wing with the dawn to come to rest at the end of the sea” (translation altered from NJPS). See also Samet, ‘“The Tallest Man,’ 9-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 616 discusses the connection between the verses based on the eternality of the covenant, but does not address the motif of the divine initiative. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. For a correction of the term “I have scorned,” based on the text of the Septuagint, see above … [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Verses 35-37 bear a parallel in style and content to Jer 33:19-26. Scholars almost universally consider these verses as later in origin based on literary differences between them and certain verses in ch. 31, primarily because of their total absence from the Septuagint and their treatment of the house of David and the priesthood, familiar from the writings of the restoration period (see for example, Hyatt, *Jeremiah*, 298, Bright, *Jeremiah*, 1052). This rationale seems to arise [??] from a comparison of the verses in ch. 33 to those in ch. 31, which shows that elements alluded to in ch. 31 appear explicitly in ch. 33. For example, the covenant between God and the people, presented in ch. 31 but without such language, is explicitly mentioned in ch. 33 (v. 19, 21, 25) and serves as a keyword [consider: *leitmotif*] in that chapter. In addition, the integration of the covenant between God and the people into the laws of nature, derived in ch. 31 from the dependency between the persistence of the natural order and the persistence of the people’s connection with God, is made more explicit in ch. 33. In this chapter, natural law is referred to as a “covenant” (v. 20, 25), the exact same term used to refer to the relationship between the people and God (v. 21). The possibility of Israel’s breaking the covenant, alluded to in ch. 31, is explicitly ruled out in ch. 33. An examination of the parallel in ch. 33 [parallel to what??] shows us how the early readers of the prophecy in ch. 31 understood its essential message: the reciprocity between natural law and the covenant with Israel, and the annulment of the possibility of the people’s breaking the covenant.

 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. This is likely to reflect a decisive phase in the development of Biblical Wisdom, on the threshold of the complete identification of wisdom with the word of God in the Second Temple period. In a future study I intend to investigate this development in Jeremiah vis-à-vis conceptions reflected in Wisdom literature and additional Wisdom traditions in the Bible. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)