

DEUS INIMICUS:
DIVINE WORD AND HOSTILE DIVINE PRESENCE
IN THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

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ABSTRACT: This article makes the case that the Jeremianic tradition construes the divine word as a mode of divine presence—indeed, a locus of *hostile* divine presence. This oft-neglected biblical conceptualisation of divine presence has the potential to call into question our submerged assumptions about the nature of divine presence, absence, and hiddenness. The investigation traces the echoes of the *mīs pī pīt pī* rituals in Jeremiah 1 as well as the relationship between the word of Yhwh and the written word. The book of Jeremiah *itself* emerges as an embodiment of hostile divine presence. Jeremiah’s *Deus Inimicus* mysteriously abides in the Jeremianic scroll.

KEY WORDS: Jeremiah; divine presence; divine absence; hostile divine presence; divine word; divine hiddenness; *mīs pī pīt pī*

In its opening scenes, *Fiddler on the Roof*, one of the most famous film musicals of all time, invites its audience to eavesdrop on a tragicomic monologue. Tevye, a pious milkman from a small Jewish village in what is now Ukraine, is on his way home after a particularly miserable day. His horse has gone lame, forcing Tevye to pull the obstinate milk cart himself. Exhausted and more than a little frustrated, our hero begins to talk to God. God stands accused of making Tevye desperately poor. To make matters worse, God has chosen to bless Tevye with five daughters. As a consequence of this divine beneficence, the poor man now faces the challenge of marrying his daughters off in a cut-throat marriage market.

In a no-holds-barred parley, we find Tevye complaining to God, ‘Sometimes I think, when it gets too quiet up there, you say to yourself, “What kind of mischief can I play on my friend Tevye?”’ Today divine mischief has resulted in a lame horse. ‘Dear God, was that really necessary?’ Tevye continues. ‘Did you have to make my horse lame just before the Sabbath? That wasn’t nice. It’s enough you pick on me.

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Bless me with five daughters, a life of poverty, that's all right. But what have you got against my horse?'

The problem of divine hiddenness has engendered a rich and vibrant discussion reverberating from biblical studies to philosophy of religion and various fields of study in between (Rea 2018; Weidner 2021). The scholarly conversation about divine hiddenness has chiefly revolved around a tightly spun web of interrelated issues such as divine absence, silence, and concealment (Rea 2018: 12n.3). The hidden God has been generally understood as absent, silent, or, in some sense, veiled. Simply put, why does God not make his existence more obvious and apparent? Why does he ostensibly hide himself from humanity? Why does he seemingly absent himself?

In a recent study of the hidden God, Rea (2018: 6) reframes the problem of divine hiddenness 'not as a referendum on the existence of God, but rather on the viability of certain ways of understanding the nature of God and God's attributes.' The problem of divine hiddenness, Rea (2018: 25) argues succinctly, 'is fundamentally a problem of violated expectations.' Behind violated expectations, there lurk 'contestable theological assumptions' (Rea 2018: 6). In other words, the problem of divine hiddenness provides an auspicious opportunity to reassess the myriad assumptions and expectations at work in the contemporary philosophical and theological discussion of divine presence. In this spirit, the present essay is intended as a renewed foray into the Hebrew Bible in search of fresh insights into its construals of the presence of the divine. The biblical data complicates our understanding of what it means for God to be present and challenges our expectations regarding divine nature and activity.

My interest lies particularly in a phenomenon we might term 'hostile divine presence.' God is not so much absent as he is hostilely present. Hostile divine presence is highly germane to the present discussion, for, perhaps surprisingly, according to the Hebrew Bible, the hidden God can be present and hostile rather than absent (Fabrikant-Burke 2021). In a characteristically playful way, the story of Tevye touches upon this phenomenon. It is not that God is nowhere to be found. Far from disappearing, Tevye's God is present and set on making mischief. In one sense, this experience of hostile divine presence bears more than a fleeting resemblance to divine absence or abandonment, to the degree that in both cases, God's salvific and comforting presence is unavailable. But in a situation of hostile divine presence, God is present oppressively and overwhelmingly; divine presence is felt acutely.

With the imperial Babylonian juggernaut thundering through its pages at Yhwh's command, it is, arguably, the biblical book of Jeremiah that furnishes us with one of the richest scriptural portrayals of hostile divine presence. Jeremiah's *Deus Inimicus* is also hidden (Jeremiah 33:5). Of course, it is not my aim to scale the full heights and depths of hostile divine presence, as it is depicted within the Jeremianic corpus, let

alone beyond its literary bounds. Instead, I seek to give the subject an overall shape. My overarching argument centres on the divine word as a mode of divine presence. It is hardly a new thing to propose that the word of Yhwh (*dēbar yhwh*) is central to the warp and weft of the book of Jeremiah (von Rad 1965: 80–98; Moberly 2006: 41–99; Shead 2012). But what has not always been fully recognised and systematically developed is that the Jeremic tradition construes the divine word as a mode of divine presence—indeed, a locus of *hostile* divine presence. Similar developments, towards the elevation of the divine word as a locus of divine presence, have been observed elsewhere in biblical literature: for example, the Torah (van der Toorn 1997) and Ezekiel (Middlemas 2010).

In what follows, the unfolding of this argument will proceed in three stages. I will begin by making the case that the divine word is, in fact, an expression of divine presence in the book of Jeremiah. I will then move on to paint a picture, unavoidably brief and impressionistic, of this presence, with the emphasis on its predominantly hostile nature. Finally, the essay draws to a close by attending to the relationship between the word of Yhwh and the written word. Throughout, Jeremiah 1, the opening chapter of the book that details the prophet's call and commission, will serve as the focal point of the study. As a strategically crafted introduction, it programmatically sets the stage for the book as a whole and serves as a fruitful entry point into the larger topic.

The conclusion of the investigation comes to this: the book of Jeremiah *itself* emerges as an embodiment of hostile divine presence. Thus, the scenario of hostile divine presence, as contemplated in the book of Jeremiah, has the potential to call into question our submerged assumptions about the nature of divine presence. This is the case not only because the divine presence of which it speaks is disturbingly hostile—and, therefore, difficult to square, at least on some views, with the traditional Jewish or Christian belief in a perfectly loving God—but also because of the surprising mode of its mediation. My goal in the present essay is to put the spotlight on this oft-neglected biblical conceptualisation of divine presence in an effort to bring it within the orbit of the wider discussion of the hidden God.

Divine Word as a Mode of Divine Presence

Where is God? In the ancient Near East, divine images, such as cult statues, functioned as the principal conduits and loci of divine presence (Hundley 2013; Berlejung 1998). As well as residing in heaven, the gods were understood to be also present in the terrestrial realm—principally, in their temple cult images. To be sure, the deity was not straightforwardly coterminous with its cult images (Hundley 2013: 168). Nevertheless, the divine presence, despite its earthly vessel, was regarded as real. Neither a mere symbol nor a vague signpost, but inextricably intertwined with the deity it represented, the cult image was thought to partake of the essence and manifest the

presence of its divine referent (Walker and Dick 1999; Winter 1992). The image, stated otherwise, was far more than an exercise in imitation or mimesis (Hundley 2013: 149n.46). Thus Oppenheim (1977: 184): ‘Fundamentally, the deity was considered present in its image.’ However, the connection between the deity and the image was neither inherent nor inevitable (Bonfiglio 2020). Instead, it had to be carefully and meticulously established by means of special animation and consecration ceremonies—namely, the washing of the mouth (*mīs pî*) and the opening of the mouth (*pīt pî*) (Oppenheim 1977: 183–98; Berlejung 1997; McDowell 2015). It is through these rites that divine images were transformed into a suitable receptacle for and were imbued with divine presence (Hundley 2013: 169). [According to McDowell (2015: 19n.75), the two rituals, *mīs pî* and *pīt pî*, were originally distinct, but eventually came to be subsumed under the same rubric. For the sake of brevity, I refer to this family of consecration rituals as *mīs pî pīt pî*.]

The echoes of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ritual resound throughout the Hebrew Bible. The prophetic polemic against idolatry in Jeremiah 10 forms one prime example of this biblical familiarity and engagement with its broader cultural and religious milieu (Lundberg 2007). The poem shows a strong awareness of the Mesopotamian *mīs pî pīt pî* conceptuality (vv. 3–4, 9), which it denigrates in a vitriolic parody. Despite the skilled efforts of the artisans, the idols they fashion are incapable of either speaking or moving (v. 5). But perhaps more unexpectedly, the imagery of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ceremonies would appear to lie behind the call narratives of the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel (Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 1; Ezekiel 1–3) (Müller 1995: 200; Brown 2018).

To be sure, on any account, questions of divine presence were woven into the very fabric of the phenomenon of ancient prophecy. Thus, within ancient Israelite thought, prophets were conceived as standing in the divine council, in the presence of Yhwh and his entourage, enjoying special access to their deliberations and decisions (e.g., 1 Kings 22:19; Jeremiah 23:18) (Nissinen 2002). What is more, although many biblical texts, not least Jeremiah, present a complex and often sharply conflictual picture of the prophetic relationship to the temple and its worship, there is little doubt that prophecy was, in fact, strongly associated with the temple, the main symbol and site of divine presence in ancient Israel and the broader ancient Near East (Nissinen 2017: 201–56). But the employment of the *mīs pî pīt pî* imagery in the prophetic call narratives is indicative of a still more radical notion at work.

To begin with, the opening chapter of Jeremiah is suggestively rife with the imagery of divine presence. In v. 8, Yhwh assures the diffident would-be prophet of his protective presence: ‘I am with you to deliver you.’ An almost identical promise of divine presence rounds off the chapter (v. 19). But of particular interest to us is v. 9. In it, Yhwh stretches forth his hand, and touches the mouth of the prophet. In so doing,

Yhwh places his words in Jeremiah's mouth. The episode, at an elementary level, depicts the delivery of a divine communication, while also addressing attendant issues of authorisation and legitimation. In this vein, scholars have tended to perceive in this verse a communicative act, the conveyance of a message from the deity to his newly appointed mouthpiece (see, e.g., Sharp 2003: 151). This analysis is no doubt true and to the point as far as it goes. There is no question that the issues of communication and authorisation were of great interest to the author. But the theatre of divine-human communication at play in v. 9 is encased in a divinely executed *mīs pî pīt pî* ritual (Müller 1995: 200; Brown 2018)—which is itself, of course, closely linked to communication between human and divine realms in its intentions. [Translations of biblical texts come from the New Revised Standard Version translation.]

At the heart of the *mīs pî pīt pî* imagery in this passage lies Yhwh's manipulation of Jeremiah's mouth, a sense organ, in a way that is reminiscent of the animation of cult statues in the *mīs pî pīt pî* ceremonies. To the extent that it recalls these ceremonies, the passage goes as far as to configure Jeremiah as nothing short of a 'living idol' (cf. Kutsko 2000: 70n.163). Jeremiah comes to embody divine presence; he emerges as an 'earthly instantiation' of Yhwh (cf. Lambert 2016: 102). Viewed through the *mīs pî pīt pî* lens, the argument of ch. 1 acquires fresh resonances. The theme of idols, for instance, is picked up later in the chapter, namely in v. 16, where idolatry comes under fierce condemnation as the main sin of which Judah stands accused. In vv. 15–16, the people are charged with worshipping 'the works of their own hands.' In response, Yhwh takes matters into his own hands and fashions a living idol out of Jeremiah—the product not of human effort, but of divine initiative. Further, in Mesopotamia, it was the common military policy for the victors to despoil conquered lands of their cult statues, thereby capturing and humiliating the gods of the subdued nations, who had been proven impotent against the invaders (Kutsko 2000: 109). This practice may be reflected in the threat in v. 15 that 'all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north' will 'set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem' (Holladay 1986: 41). But Yhwh will not be left powerless or humiliated in these proceedings. Yhwh is, in fact, at work behind the scenes orchestrating this very judgement against Judah, with his true idol, Jeremiah, emerging as an effective venue through which the undefeated deity will execute his plans.

One of the fundamental aspects of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ritual, and what is most salient for our purposes, is that, by means of these rites, divine presence was thought to enter the divine image (Sommer 2009: 21). In fact, from a literary perspective, if the flow of Jeremiah 1:7–9 is anything to go by, we would expect divine presence to stage an appearance in v. 9 anyway—after all, it has just been promised in v. 8. And it is striking *what exactly* is deposited at this moment of the impartation of divine presence in v. 9.

What Jeremiah is filled with, what comes to inhabit this living idol, are divine words. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the divine words here function as nothing less than an expression of, a mode of, divine presence.

To illuminate the logic of our passage further, a brief look at the analogous dynamics in the book of Ezekiel might prove helpful. According to Kutsko (2000: 137n.138), the re-creation of Israel envisioned in Ezekiel 36–37, the Ezekelian vision of the valley of dry bones, is indebted to the Mesopotamian *mīs pī pīt pī* ritual. In fact, like Jeremiah, Ezekiel the prophet himself may, too, be a product of the divinely executed *mīs pī pīt pī* ritual (Kutsko 2000: 70n.163). However, whereas in Ezekiel it is the spirit of God (*rûaḥ*)—yet another mode of divine presence (MacDonald 2013)—that is instrumental in the *mīs pī pīt pī* ritual (e.g., Ezekiel 2:2; 3:12; 37:1, 9, 10), in Jeremiah it is the divine word that seems to act as the animating divine force. Since Jeremiah's *dābār* and Ezekiel's *rûaḥ* appear to play functionally comparable roles in these passages, and given that the spirit of God is widely recognised as a mode of divine presence, it seems justified to draw the conclusion that the divine word, too, is a mode of divine presence. [However, the Jeremianic and Ezekielian traditions differ in their assessment of *rûaḥ*. In the book of Jeremiah, false prophets are described as full of “wind” (*rûaḥ*) rather than the word (Jeremiah 5:13), whereas Jeremiah is the bearer of divine words.]

The final observation to be made is more speculative. Some scholars are inclined to view the wider context of v. 9, especially vv. 4–12, as an outright theophany (Fretheim 1992; Gieschen 1998: 105). The divine word, on this interpretation, comes close to being portrayed as a hypostatic entity. This strange anthropomorphic or angelomorphic figure, the word of Yhwh, who *is* Yhwh himself, comes to visit Jeremiah, converses with him, touches his mouth, and, finally, comes to inhabit the prophet as its earthly vessel.

In addition, it is likely that we are dealing at this point with a creative instance of inner-biblical exegesis. The author of Jeremiah 1:9 fuses Isaianic and Deuteronomistic themes. Indicative of Isaianic influence is the phrase ‘touched my mouth.’ Apart from Jeremiah 1:9 and Isaiah 6:7, the combination of the verb ‘to touch’ (*ng'*) and the noun ‘mouth’ (*pē*) occurs in these two passages and nowhere else. Therefore, it is likely that our author found an evocative precedent for his prophetic *mīs pī pīt pī* theology in this Isaianic passage. The Isaianic experience of the *mīs pī pīt pī* ceremony in Isaiah 6:7 tackles the problem of sin (Hurowitz 1989). Isaiah is a ‘man of unclean lips’ (v. 5). Until his lips are thoroughly purified, divine presence will remain potentially lethal. By way of contrast, the issue of sin and purification is not central to the Jeremianic call, for Jeremiah is described as holy even from the time before he was born (1:5). Rather, what comes to the fore in Jeremiah's appointment to the prophetic office are

divine words. This emphasis on the divine word foreshadows and lays the groundwork for the remainder of the book, where the divine word stands front and centre.

The statement about the divine manipulation of Jeremiah's mouth, inspired by Isaiah, is paired with an unmistakable allusion to Deuteronomy in v. 9c: 'Now I have put my words in your mouth.' Compare this to the almost exact wording in Deuteronomy 18:18: 'I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet' (Mastnjak 2016: 51–59). Interestingly enough, Isaiah 6:7 and Deuteronomy 18:18 have an important lexeme in common—the mouth (*pê*). This lexical link could have stimulated our author's melding of Deuteronomistic and Isaianic elements in his composition. The widely accepted way of interpreting this allusion to Deuteronomy 18:18 is as an attempt to identify Jeremiah as a prophet 'like Moses.' Picking up the words from its Deuteronomistic source, Jeremiah 1 heralds Jeremiah as the foretold prophetic successor to Moses. Thus, in this creative account of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ritual, the prophet like Moses becomes a living idol and the divine words are re-imagined as an expression of divine presence. As bold as this theological move may come across initially, it should occasion little surprise. Recent scholarship has taken seriously the theological trends within the book of Deuteronomy itself, to the effect that the divine word largely comes to replace the divine image as a locus of divine presence (van der Toorn 1997).

Finally, before moving on, we need to consider briefly whether we are on firm ground to detect the echoes of the *mīs pî pīt pî* ritual here in the first place. Is Jeremiah 1:9 a clever discourse about divine presence? After all, the verse is, as we have seen, hardly composed from whole cloth. Instead, Jeremiah 1:9 is derived almost entirely from Isaiah and Deuteronomy. In reusing these locutions, the author may simply be tapping into wider prophetic tropes, collecting scriptural imagery and language from here and there, without necessarily making claims about divine presence, let alone the *mīs pî pīt pî*. Does the conceptuality of the *mīs pî pīt pî* inform this passage?

To begin with, several general considerations strengthen the case for our interpretation of this verse in the light of the *mīs pî pīt pî*. The fact that other parts of Jeremiah, not least Jeremiah 10, reflect familiarity with this ritual renders such a hypothesis at least possible to entertain. Nor would the construal of the divine word as a mode of divine presence be out of kilter with Deuteronomistic theology, as I have argued above. Also important to note, in this regard, is the stress placed on divine presence (vv. 8, 19) and idolatry (v. 16) in the adjacent verses. It is unlikely, of course, that all these verses come from the same hand. But at the level of the final form of this passage, a degree of familiarity, even fluency, in the ancient Near Eastern *mīs pî pīt pî* conceptuality seems to underpin Jeremiah 1.

In fact, I would argue that there is every reason to attribute the presence of this *mīs pī pīt pī* conceptuality to the composition of Jeremiah 1:9 and not just its early reception. In my judgement, the borrowing of the memorable image of Yhwh touching the mouth of the prophet from Isaiah cannot be accounted for by any reason other than a learned interest in the *mīs pī pīt pī*. The significance of this reused Isaianic language and imagery is firmly anchored in the *mīs pī pīt pī* practices and the creative application thereof to the call of a Yahwistic prophet. It is hardly conceivable that these associations are a mere accident of citation and that the interest in the *mīs pī pīt pī* was not part of the rationale for the reuse. It is more likely that the author of Jeremiah 1:9 readily recognised the *mīs pī pīt pī* in Isa 6:7 and re-conceived it for the Jeremianic context.

In sum, poised at the beginning of the book, Jeremiah 1, esp. v. 9, programmatically establishes the divine word as a mode of divine presence and the prophet Jeremiah as its earthly vehicle.

Divine Word as a Mode of Hostile Divine Presence

As intimated above, the theme of divine presence makes itself felt throughout Jeremiah 1 (e.g., vv. 8, 9, 16, 19). I would also submit that divine presence is sounded as a key theme in v. 10, immediately following the execution of the *mīs pī pīt pī* ritual. As the prophetic commission continues to unfold, what comes into full force in v. 10 is another dimension of the divine word—namely, its potency, agency, and power. Strictly speaking, it is Jeremiah who is charged with the mission ‘to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant.’ Yet the charge is clearly linked to the preceding verse with its impartation of the divine words. Elsewhere, the same language is used of Yhwh himself, who will do the heavy lifting of causing the rise and fall of nations and kingdoms (e.g., 12:14, 15, 17; 18:7; 24:6; 31:28; 42:10; 45:4). Accordingly, taken together with v. 8, it is reasonable to conclude that it is the divine word in the mouth of Jeremiah that will ‘uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow, build and plant.’ Filled with fighting divine words, Jeremiah becomes an integral part of the divine war machine that Yhwh is about to unleash against the wayward Judah (1:18).

By all accounts, the divine word—in this case, the prophetic divine word—is closely tied to divine action. In an insightful foray into the nature of the prophetic utterance, Lambert (2016: 96) argues that prophetic speech not only ‘describes the future but also makes it so.’ That is to say, prophecy is not only, or even primarily, about proclamation and pedagogy, but it is supremely about action, power, and effective agency. Along the same lines, Shead (2012: 226) draws on the recent conceptual work in speech-act theory to argue that divine speech ‘both declares and effects the contents of that declaration.’ The biblical *locus classicus* of this line of thinking is Isaiah

55:10–11. The divine word, Yhwh claims, will ‘accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it’ rather than ‘returning empty.’

The closest Jeremianic equivalent of this idea of the powerful divine word that does not return empty is, arguably, found in Jeremiah 23:29. Amid a scathing critique of false prophecy, Yhwh throws down the gauntlet: ‘Is not my word like fire ... and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’ Both the truth and power of the divine word are probably in view. Similarly, in 20:9 (cf. 6:11), so powerful are the divine words inside Jeremiah—like a ‘burning fire’—that he is unable to contain or control them. Fire, then, is a Jeremianic image of choice for the potent and active divine word. Notably, fire also serves as an important symbol of divine presence in the Hebrew Bible (Simone 2019). Consider, for instance, the enigmatic narrative about the burning bush in Exodus 3. That fire, as an image of active divine presence, is closely associated with the divine word in Jeremiah would support the thesis developed in the preceding section that the divine word is a mode of divine presence. In fact, divine presence in general is closely allied with divine action. Inasmuch as the divine word is a locus of divine agency, it is also a locus of divine presence.

By way of example, we see this close link between divine presence and divine action operative in the Psalms. In this connection, the psalmic accounts of divine absence are particularly illuminating, for the lack of divine presence seems to go hand in hand with, and can be identified by, the lack of divine action—salvific divine interventions in the affairs of the supplicants. Take, for instance, Psalm 22:19. Paired in *parallelismus membrorum* is the protest against divine absence (‘But you, O Lord, do not be far away!’) and the request for divine intervention (‘O my help, come quickly to my aid!’). A similar picture obtains in Psalm 71:12. The dual petition is for divine presence (‘O God, do not be far from me!’) and divine action (‘O my God, make haste to help me!’). When the psalmists call upon God, the measure of divine presence is divine action. Beyond the example of the Psalms, we may observe the close connection between divine presence and divine word in Ezekiel. So Kutsko (2000: 2) with respect to the Ezekelian aniconic tradition: ‘Though absent in physical representation Yahweh is present in his actions, while cult statues—idols—are physically present but are powerless.’ The account of divine presence as divine action is also fleshed out in an article by Arcadi (2017: 631), who draws an explicit equivalence between the two: ‘One ought to conceive of God’s presence at a location as God’s acting at that location.’ Divine action and divine presence, including the divine word as one of its modes, go hand in hand.

To return to the imagery of fire, it alerts us to yet another key dimension of the divine word. Fire is an agent of destruction. Words like fire, for their part, are words of judgement, which will ‘uproot and tear down, destroy and overthrow’ (Jeremiah

1:10). The image of fire serves the purpose of expressing divine judgement in such passages as 4:4; 5:14; 15:14; 21:12. For example, in 4:4, a failure to obey Yhwh will lead to the unleashing of the destructive force of fire: 'My wrath will go forth like fire, and burn with no one to quench it, because of the evil of your doings.' Thus, not all forms of divine presence, or divine activity, associated with the divine word are salvific or benevolent. God is sometimes present in wrath—hostilely present with devastating consequences—especially in response to human sin, when divine demands go unheeded. Time and again, the book of Jeremiah reverberates with statements of hostile divine presence. The clearest examples are perhaps those that employ the term *pānīm*, 'face,' which in Hebrew functions as a metonym for divine presence, such as Jeremiah 21:10 and 44:11. In these passages, Yhwh sets his face against Judah and Jerusalem for harm, and not for good. Yhwh is present and arrayed for battle. [By way of ground-clearing, it is important to observe that the divine word is not a mode of exclusively hostile divine presence. It will, after all, be involved in 'building and planting.' But the ratio in Jeremiah 1:10 is suggestive: judgement is primary.]

Central to this divine programme of doom is the menacing figure of Babylon, through which Yhwh will enact his dreadful judgement. Babylon is but an instrument in the divine hands—so much so that it sometimes vanishes from view altogether. The primacy of divine agency receives its clearest expression when Yhwh adopts the first-person singular. He is the author of judgement against Judah, not Babylon: 'I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and mighty arm, in anger, in fury, and in great wrath' (Jeremiah 21:5). Observe, too, how unmediated and immediate divine aggression appears in the Jeremianic imagery of wrath. It is as though divine wrath is akin to an independent divine force—molten fiery liquid that pours out of the heavens and engulfs Judah (44:6). In fact, Babylon does not seem to warrant an explicit mention until ch. 20, almost halfway into the book. Prior to this revelation, we only hear of the enigmatic foe from the north (*šāpôn*). Notably, the significance of the 'north' is not purely geopolitical—once again, Babylon is not front and centre. Based on Ugaritic parallels, Reimer (1989: 231) argues that the north is not so much a 'compass point' as 'the seat of the deity, remote in the heavens, a place beyond human ken and control. It is from this place that the agent of judgement is sent, an agent often portrayed in metaphorical or highly vivid terms.' The cumulative effect of this literary portrayal is to emphasise the role of Yhwh over and above that of Babylon.

When Babylon does feature in the Jeremianic rhetoric of judgement, either explicitly or cloaked as a foe from the north, texts tend to interweave, or even dilute, statements regarding human causality with references to direct divine agency. Divine and human effectual elements are combined in Jeremiah 4:6–7. On the one hand,

Yhwh is 'bringing evil from the north, and a great destruction.' On the other hand, Babylon, likened to a lion, 'has gone up from its thicket, a destroyer of nations has set out.' Elsewhere, Yhwh and the Babylonians are also surprisingly in sync (Fretheim 2002: 36). There are remarkable similarities between divine actions and those ascribed to Babylon. Consider that Yhwh, according to 13:14, 'will not pity or spare or have compassion.' Neither, as it turns out, will King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon 'pity them, or spare them, or have compassion' in 21:7. All in all, the presentation of Babylon as an agent of Yhwh is overwhelming. The Masoretic version of the Jeremianic tradition even goes as far as to bestow the title of 'my servant' upon Nebuchadnezzar (*'abdi*).

Given the above, where does this leave the divine word? We have seen that the divine word is a mode of divine presence and, as such, also inextricably linked with divine action. What is more, when garbed in the imagery of fire, the divine word is connected to judgement. But what role does the divine word play in this wider matrix of hostile divine presence that incorporates Babylon in the role of the executioner? Babylon is, ultimately, an agent of the divine word. The imagery of fire, once again, ties together the various moving parts I have been tracing in this section. Let us consider the major confluence of ideas in Jeremiah 5:14–15. In the aftermath of rejection by his own people, Yhwh embarks on his course of judgement. He is emphatic: 'I am now making my words in your mouth a fire.' The divine words of judgement are ignited like fire, for they are active and effectual. Thus, the doomed nation becomes 'wood, and the fire shall devour them.' In v. 15, the discussion swerves immediately to Babylon. It is Babylon, so it turns out, that will be doing the actual burning, as the appointed agent of the divine word (so also 21:14; 32:29).

Or let us come back to the opening chapter of Jeremiah. Verse 12 announces that Yhwh is 'watching over [his] word to perform it.' Immediately thereafter, this promise to bring the divine word to fruition leads into an extended reflection on Babylon, from v. 13 onwards. The fulfilment of the divine word has to do with the 'boiling pot, tilted away from the north' (v. 13). In fact, it is the potent divine word that turns this foe from the north into an instrument for meting out divine punishment. Thus, Yhwh is 'calling' (*qr*) 'all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north' (v. 15). The term 'to call,' *qr* is significant. Elsewhere, it is employed to portray divine words being proclaimed (e.g., 2:2) or the scroll, which contains the written divine word, being read out (e.g., 36:6). The divine word, it seems, is summoning its dreaded agent.

Written Word as a Mode of Hostile Divine Presence

Thus far, I have argued that the divine word serves as a mode of divine presence in the book of Jeremiah; and that it is, in certain Jeremianic texts, imagined as a mode of

hostile divine presence. At this juncture, we turn to focus our attention more closely on the notion of the divine word, and especially its relationship to the written word.

It is noteworthy that, despite proposed but unpersuasive emendations (Holladay 1986: 36), it is the divine ‘words,’ in the plural, that figure in the *mīs pī pīt pī* ritual narrated in Jeremiah 1:9. In Jeremiah 1 alone, we encounter the whole gamut of words, such as Jeremiah’s words (*dibrē yirmyahū*, v. 1), God’s word (*dēbar yhw̄h*, vv. 2, 4, 11, 13, cf. 12), or God’s words (lit., ‘my words,’ *dēbārāy*, v. 9). We may legitimately wonder, therefore, whether any significance attaches to the plural form we find in v. 9. In this connection, Shead (2012: 61, with emphasis added) notes a curious pattern, which he summarises in the following way: ‘What is heard and obeyed is described in Jeremiah as *the word of God*, and when that word is spoken or written by the prophet the words that come out are *the words of God*.’ To be sure, as Shead (2012: 55) himself concedes, none of this is an exact science, and we would do well to exercise caution when drawing sweeping conclusions on the basis of such general tendencies. Be that as it may, the pattern is strong enough to prove intriguing and suggestive. The use of the plural form in v. 9 seems deliberate and strategic as opposed to coincidental. It appears that what is in view in v. 9 is not some abstract and detached notion of the divine word, but something altogether more reified. We might say that bound up within this notion of the divine ‘words’ that enter Jeremiah is a sense of concreteness, specificity, and particularity.

Upon reflection, this is, in fact, entirely unsurprising given the overarching purpose of the *mīs pī pīt pī* ceremony. Berlejung (1997: 72) speaks to the intention of this rite as follows: ‘The ritual thus enabled [the cult statue] to become the pure epiphany of its god and to be a fully interacting and communicating partner for the king, the priests and the faithful.’ In the words of another scholarly formulation (Winter 1992: 13): ‘The image was then indeed empowered to speak, or to see, or to act, through various culturally subscribed channels.’ Stated otherwise, the divine image, thanks to the *mīs pī pīt pī*, becomes an effective means of attaining access to the deity. The ceremony paves the way for divine-human communication. And the nature of divine presence that enters Jeremiah, signified by the plural ‘words,’ would seem to fit this wider context of the *mīs pī pīt pī* perfectly, if Shead is correct in his analysis. These divine ‘words’ emerge as a mode of a revelatory and communicative divine presence—perhaps even, in some sense, a verbal presence—and closely aligned with actual words proclaimed and rejected in human history as the book of Jeremiah imagines it.

What is more, not only are these ‘words’ proclaimed and rejected, but they are also written down. In the book of Jeremiah, the divine word takes on written form; it is enshrined in a scroll. The Jeremianic tradition is at pains to establish an airtight chain of transmission going from Yhw̄h, who deposits his words in the mouth of his

prophet (Jeremiah 1:9), who then transmits these words from his mouth to his scribe (36:4), who, in turn, writes them down (36:4, 18, 32) (Eggleston 2016: 164). The implications of this carefully constructed chain for our purposes cannot be overstated. It appears that the scroll is as much a vehicle for divine presence as the prophet Jeremiah himself (Brown 2018: 191–234). The written word that ends up in the scroll, for its part, is as much a mode of divine presence as the divine word originally imparted to Jeremiah.

At the heart of the story of the written divine word lies Jeremiah 36, a fascinating chapter that is widely recognized as shedding valuable light on the composition of the book of Jeremiah and biblical texts in general. For this reason, it has garnered a significant amount of attention for the insight it provides into the scribal culture and scribal practices to which we owe the Hebrew Bible. But, as Hartenstein (2016: 72) points out, such readings, while undoubtedly insightful, tend to overlook the actual role of the chapter within the narrative framework of the book of Jeremiah. In fact, Jeremiah 36 portrays the crucial turning point in the fortunes of the Kingdom of Judah (Kessler 1969). It is the rejection of the scroll that sets in motion divine judgement that is so richly described in the first half of the book. We might say, then, that before the events narrated in Jeremiah 36, hostile divine presence is but a threat. But after what happens in Jeremiah 36, hostile divine presence becomes actualised, going from potentiality to fulfilment. The rest of the book of Jeremiah, chs. 37–45 in particular, detail the unfurling of history and the fulfilment of the divine word.

In all of this, the scroll figures as an active and effective agent. So Eggleston (2016: 97): ‘The scroll is not only acted upon, but is itself an active agent in ch. 36 and throughout the book of Jeremiah.’ We might say that it is as though the scroll, or rather the written divine word within it, unleashes and effects divine judgement; it is as though hostile divine presence is poured out of the scroll itself (v. 29). King Jehoiakim’s reaction to the scroll is instructive in this respect. His actions to destroy the scroll betray his assumption that the written word possesses efficacy and numinous power. By destroying the written word, Jehoiakim hopes to neutralise the divine judgement. His efforts, needless to say, prove futile.

In fact, there is a degree of irony in the proceedings. At this point, we come again to the imagery of fire, by now familiar. It is the raging royal brazier that Jehoiakim uses to extinguish the fiery divine word (Jeremiah 36:22; cf. 5:14). The king methodically cuts off portions of the scroll and throws them into the blazing fire until the whole scroll is consumed (v. 23). But instead of thwarting the purposes of the divine word, the brazier ends up igniting the judgement of which these fiery words speak. Yhwh promptly reiterates the disaster in v. 31. Actually, what is remarkable is that Yhwh does not simply reiterate the disaster. Rather, he commands that a replacement

scroll be written, containing all the words of the former scroll (v. 28), as if to insist that the written divine word will accomplish its purposes. Eventually, the agent of the divine word, Babylon, is summoned, as is hinted at in v. 29.

It should not escape our notice that it is the written word, inscribed on a scroll, that is accorded pride of place in the architecture of the book of Jeremiah. The whole plot of Jeremiah, such as it is, hinges on the scroll. The presenting issue in the text is that Jeremiah is prevented from entering the temple. Therefore, a scroll is written to replace the prophet (vv. 4–6). But we should not miss the main literary impact of such a framing. By virtue of this focus on the scroll, the story is transformed into a message aimed squarely at the reader. The world within the text and the world of the reader merge. The scroll in Jeremiah 36 is, after all, none other than the book of Jeremiah itself. To be in the presence of the book of Jeremiah is to be in the presence of Yhwh, for the written divine word is nothing short of divine presence (Tigay 2013). For those who reject it, it is a terrifying and fearful prospect. The book, the scroll, of Jeremiah embodies divine presence—indeed, hostile divine presence. Those who reject the book of Jeremiah, who, like Jehoiakim, cast (*šlk*) it into the fire (v. 23), will find that their dead bodies will, too, be cast out (*šlk*) ‘to the heat by day and the frost by night’ (v. 30). And in some mysterious way the book of Jeremiah itself, insofar as it embodies the written divine word, will bring this about. To be in the presence of the book of Jeremiah is to find oneself in the hostile presence of Yhwh.

Conclusion

My goal in this essay has been to sketch out a rough portrait of hostile divine presence, with the book of Jeremiah as my guide, and with an eye on expanding the wider discussion of divine hiddenness to incorporate a more robust consideration of hostile divine presence. To be sure, the far-reaching implications of hostile divine presence for what Rea has termed ‘violated expectations’ must await a fuller investigation. But we find that this necessary reflection on divine presence and ‘violated expectations’ is already well under way in the Jeremianic tradition itself. I close by signposting this reflection.

As in the modern world so also in the ancient, expectations about divine presence abounded. The book of Jeremiah paints a grimly vivid picture of what has come to be known as the tradition of Zion’s inviolability. At its heart lay the conviction that Israel, as the object of divine election, could rest secure in Yhwh’s eternal and enduring salvific will for Zion, where he sits enthroned. Divine election of Israel and divine presence in the Temple were evidently viewed, at least by some, as inviolable and unconditional. Such illusory expectations are on display in the almost incantational words uttered by the people in Jeremiah 7:4: ‘This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord.’ Along the same lines, as the dwelling place

of Yhwh, Zion was regarded as immune to military threats. The prophets and priests are portrayed as making unfounded promises of peace in 6:14: 'They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace.' [The extent to which this theology of Zion's inviolability, and its portrayal in Jeremiah, is a historical account or a literary construct remains debatable. Regardless of the extent of its historicity, it serves as a useful foil for the theology of the book of Jeremiah.]

The claim to Zion's inviolability was eventually crushed by the Babylonian juggernaut. Ideas about God's salvific nearness and benevolent presence seemed to have been swept away in the fateful encounter with the Babylonian military might. In the aftermath of the exile as well as the destruction of the Temple and the monarchy, beliefs about divine presence required urgent re-evaluation. In the light of the devastating experiences that engulfed the Kingdom of Judah in the exilic period, Divine presence and activity became a major subject of theological reflection and debate.

From the standpoint of the Jeremianic tradition, the optimistic theology of Zion's inviolability was theologically ill-equipped to deal with the drama of either divine absence or hostile divine presence. By contrast, the Jeremianic theology of divine presence proved enduring. From the dispersion and desperation of the exile, this ancient text seeks to provide a blueprint for how to conceive, and for how not to conceive, of divine presence. What is more, in presenting *itself* as a locus of divine presence, including hostile divine presence, the book of Jeremiah positions itself at the centre of this theological reflection not only as a source of authoritative teaching about divine presence but also, paradoxically, as its effective agent. It is not simply that the book of Jeremiah bears witness to hostile divine presence and its operations in the distant exilic age. As we have seen, the Jeremianic tradition goes a step further. It puts its mysterious *Deus Inimicus* in close proximity to its audience. The word of Yhwh, as a mode of hostile divine presence, mysteriously abides in the Jeremianic scroll itself.

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