

*Mg. art.*

# ARTA SKUJA

## DECIPHERING A METAPHOR: JEREMIAH 31:22 AND VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

### Introduction

*“The woman will encompass the man”*

Jer. 31:22

*“All meanings, we know, depend on the key  
to interpretation.”*

George Eliot

In the tapestry of biblical exegesis, the metaphor of Jeremiah 31:22, “The woman will encompass the man”, stands as a perplexing enigma. Jeremiah’s words ring out in a patriarchal landscape of male prophets, male language, male culture, all meanings encompassed within a gendered “he” God. Women, on the other hand, are far in the background, mostly silent, except for the Daughter of Zion and Rachel. The overarching feminine image left to readers is that of a woman who is an unfaithful partner, an insatiable prostitute, or depicted in the vulnerability of childbirth.

This essay embarks on a scholarly exploration with the aim of discerning nuanced readings of Jeremiah 31:22, converging with contemporary propositions in biblical scholarship that reposition the woman as an active participant and partner within this metaphor.

Historically, this verse has puzzled scholars and frequently it is dismissed as “unclear” or “enigmatic.” However, the resurgence of feminist and gender theology, post-colonial, and trauma informed approaches, has unveiled new diverse interpretations.

Intriguingly, we discover a linguistic nuance, in the Latvian translation of the Bible (2012), where the verb “encompass”<sup>1</sup> subtly implies a nuanced, perhaps even submissive

---

<sup>1</sup> תִּסְבֵּב (transliteration *sabab*). Strong’s Concordance suggests various translations to the verb, e.g., encompass, to turn, to turn around, to change, to turn into, to surround, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5437.htm> (last viewed 13.10.2023)

role for women – she serves, waits or flows around the man. This linguistic revelation not only underscores the challenges in cultivating local feminist interpretations but also highlights the broader cultural shifts and societal perceptions encapsulated within biblical translations.

This essay is structured into two main chapters, each replete with subchapters. The initial phase delves into the intricate task of unravelling the identities of the woman and the man within this metaphor. These identities traverse a spectrum from generic archetypes to symbolic representations of cities, traditions, and biblical figures. Furthermore, this essay contemplates the potential queering and gender reversals within Jeremiah’s narrative, an aspect that has been notably absent from conventional interpretations.

The second chapter navigates the terrain of “encompassing” and the concept of “a new thing on the earth”. Diverse translations and interpretations surround the act of encompassing, from joyous dance to sombre burial rituals. Meanwhile, the enigmatic promise of “a new thing on the earth” beckons us to explore the boundaries of linguistic transference and theological implications. As this essay unfolds, it invites readers to contemplate the rich tapestry of resilience, hope, and renewal woven into Jeremiah’s metaphor.

Ultimately, this academic endeavour invites us to revisit ancient texts with fresh perspectives, transcending temporal and cultural confines. Jeremiah 31:22 emerges as a conduit for contemporary dialogue, prompting us to scrutinize questions of identity, agency, and the evolving narrative of gender equality within the pages of sacred scripture. The case of this metaphor may well serve as a reminder that within the Hebrew Bible lies an enduring wellspring of thought-provoking inquiry and among other things it holds the potential to further dialogical understandings, for the meaning and revelation is not only to be sought behind the text in the past.

## Who are they?

### Identification of the “woman”

The quest to identify and interpret the figures of the woman and the man within this metaphor has yielded a rich tapestry of scholarly perspectives. The ensuing discourse showcases an array of suggestions and viewpoints articulated by various scholars.

The most obvious identification made with the character in the metaphor is that this is a **generic woman**, whose dominance, leadership, strength, and assertiveness is unquestionable in v.22.

She can be a woman **from a parable**, riddle or a song who embraces, encircles, seduces a man. There is scant evidence that connects her to a specific historical text or tradition, nevertheless, some scholars, in their attempt to decode this verse, suggest

that the metaphor might be a fragment of a poetic composition, or a quotation from a once popular proverb<sup>2</sup>.

An alternative interpretation situates the **woman as a symbol of a city**, an embodiment of urban space and its population. This concept of a woman as a city extends beyond the confines of the Jewish Bible, resonating within the broader landscape of Near Eastern cultures. Notably, as Christl Meier's<sup>3</sup> research shows, she is indelibly linked with Jerusalem, though similar associations can be found in West-Semitic, Sumerian, Neo-Assyrian iconography, and even Greek culture. The subjugation or conquest of a city, often involving forced displacement and exile, consequently casts the woman in the role of a humiliated entity. This physical dimension inevitably entails the harrowing spectre of torture and sexual violence inflicted upon women during times of warfare.

This woman is also **Rachel** – the multifaceted persona grieves, weeps, is shattered, and refuses to be comforted (v.15). Her inconsolable sorrow is counterbalanced by the subsequent solace offered by Yahweh, who declares that “there is hope for your future” (v.17). She is the mother who will embrace all the scattered children of Israel.<sup>4</sup>

She is the **woman in labour** (30:6), ensconced in the throes of pain and gripped by the fear of death. However, she also emerges as the bearer of hope, bestowing the gift of new life. Amy Kalmanofsky, in a feminist reading, interprets the metaphor “as a stylistic device of prophetic horror rhetoric that shocks a predominantly male readership and to shame by means of an opposite-sex identification”.<sup>5</sup> In this feminist interpretation, the critique pivots away from a one-sided focus on vulnerability and powerlessness, instead shedding light on the hope and vitality that spring forth from her toil.

The woman can also be envisaged as a **dancer**, a participant in liturgical rituals, weddings, and even in funerals<sup>6,7</sup>, where her movements bear symbolic and cultural significance.

---

2 Bob Becking, “Between Fear and Freedom: Essays on the Interpretation of Jeremiah 30–31”, in *Biblical Studies*, vol. 51, ed. J. C. de Moor (Boston, MA: Brill, 2004), 13–14.

3 Christl M. Maier, “Das Weibliche umschließt den starken Mann (Jer 31,22) Geschlechterkonstruktionen im Jeremiabuch im Licht feministischer Hermeneutik”, *Evangelische Theologie* 80.2 (2020): 85–99.

4 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 107–110.

5 Amy Kalmanofsky, “Israel’s Baby: The Horror of Childbirth in the Biblical Prophets”, in *Biblical Interpretation* 16 (2008): 60–82.

6 Ekaterina E. Kozlova, “Grave Marking and Wailing: Ritual Responses to the Babylonian Crisis in Jeremiah’s Poetry (Jer 31, 21)”, in *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*, 31.1 (2017): 92–117.

7 Julia Schwartzmann, “From Mystical Visions to Gender Equality Aspirations: a Hermeneutical Journey of Two Biblical Verses”, in *Journal of Jewish Studies* 66.1 (2015): 138–156.

She is the woman in **Babylonian exile**. Barbara Bozak draws attention to the transformative influence of the surrounding cultures, where women enjoyed a different standing within society, marked by increased freedom and legal autonomy. From her perspective, women mentioned in Jeremiah serve as symbols of inclusivity<sup>8</sup> and are responsible for the anticipated return from the exile (31:21–22, 31:8). Archetypally, she represents both security and stability while simultaneously embodying the transformative element that engenders new life and birth.<sup>9</sup> Within the broader context of Jeremiah 30–31, the woman emerges as an active, non-passive agent, drawing attention by showcasing elements of independence and responsibility.

Lastly, the woman in the metaphor traverses the realms of **virgin, prostitute, and wife** – the figures who seek both rupture and recommitment within their marital covenant with Yahweh. Her multifaceted persona can be interpreted as a metaphor for peace or as a symbol of Israel – a woman initiating a renewed relationship with Yahweh.<sup>10</sup>

This subsection provides a comprehensive exploration of varied perspectives concerning the identity of the metaphorical woman. The analysis is conducted through the prisms of vulnerability, strength, and transformative agency, with due consideration given to insights from contemporary scholarly discourse.

### Identification of the “man”

The identification of the man within this metaphor lends itself to several nuanced interpretations:

Firstly, the man may be perceived as a **generic male figure** who heeds the woman’s call for equality, yielding to her leadership both in sexual and political spheres. This portrayal embodies a departure from conventional gender dynamics, underscoring themes of partnership and surrender.

Alternatively, the man assumes the guise of a **strong warrior** – a stalwart protector, a paragon of masculine strength and dominance, and a quintessential patriarch. This characterization underscores traditional gender roles, wherein the man embodies qualities of might and authority.

Furthermore, the man can be construed as a **humiliated warrior**, analogous to a woman in labour who grapples with an inability to bring forth life. In verse 30:6, this depiction evokes imagery of anguish and suffering.<sup>11</sup> Various interpretations of this identification emerge: one perspective casts the “man” as an object of ridicule, subjected to

---

<sup>8</sup> Barbara A. Bozak, *Life Anew: A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30–31* (Rome: Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1991), 169.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>11</sup> According to Anderson, the first to link these two verses is William Holladay in 1966.

laughter and exposure in his vulnerability. In such an interpretation, verse 31:22 assumes an ironic tone. Paul Kruger suggests an alternative view, positing that this imagery may have functioned as a curse, as evident in texts from other Near Eastern cultures.<sup>12</sup> An additional explanation reframes this symbolism, contending that the image of the warrior in a moment of weakness serves as a symbolic representation of the exiled state, symbolizing a state of turmoil and anguish. In this context, verse 31:22 could be understood as a triumph over weakness, emphasizing the woman's strength and initiative.<sup>13</sup> Bernhard Anderson challenges the notion that the connection between these two verses bears an exclusively sexual character. Instead, he suggests that the woman envelops the humiliated warrior, with the ensuing "newness" residing in Yahweh's designation of the woman as the initiator of the sexual act, granting her leadership in this regard, thereby redeeming the man and preserving his masculinity.

The man can be interpreted as a metonym for **Israel**<sup>14</sup>, embodying the collective identity of the nation.

The man is **Ephraim** – Israel in exile; repentant, ashamed, pleading to be taken back as Yahweh's dear son (v.18–20).

The man is **Yahweh** who welcomes the woman Israel back into marriage, by the creation and call to enter a new covenant. It is Yahweh who is both male and female; Phyllis Trible points out that the verb, that in NRSV is translated as deeply moved can be linked to the inner parts – the womb of a woman<sup>15</sup> and in other biblical texts exposing the tender, motherly nature of Yahweh.

Interpretations of the metaphorical man unfold with complexity, offering depictions that include a generic male figure challenging traditional gender dynamics, a formidable warrior, a humiliated man likened to a woman in labour, an exile, an image of the collective nation of Israel and a representation of Yahweh himself.

### Queering and gender reversal

The phenomena of gender reversal in Jeremiah are a prominent and unusual theme in the corpus of the Hebrew Bible – a facet that has attracted the scrutiny of contemporary scholars, including Christl Meier, Kathleen O'Connor, and Stuart Macwilliam.

---

12 Paul A. Kruger, "A Woman will Encompass a Man: On Gender Reversal in Jer 31,21b", in *Biblica*, 89.3 (2008): 385.

13 Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Lord Has Created Something New: A Stylistic Study of Jer 31:15–22", in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 40.4 (Oct. 1978): 463–478.

14 Stuart MacWilliam, "Queering Jeremiah in Biblical Interpretation", in *A Journal of Contemporary Approaches* 10.4 (2002): 391.

15 Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 45.

Their findings suggest that such queering appears in several chapters, for instance MacWilliam<sup>16</sup> finds that in the marriage metaphor in Jeremiah 2–3 (2:33, 3:13 and 3:19), and not least in Jeremiah 31 (v.16), although without the explicitly sexual component defining the relationship between the woman and the man. MacWilliam concludes: “when we look at Jer chapter 2–3, we find that the main person addressed or talked about is at times masculine, at other times feminine, and in addition, sometimes singular and at other times plural. It is not always clear whether these variations indicate different people or not”.<sup>17</sup> In his view, the metaphor works in two ways: by blurring the distinction between the tenor/vehicle; target/source – male and female with their assigned characteristics; and it requires the male reader to read from the woman’s position (faithful husband/faithless wife).<sup>18</sup>

The phenomena of alternating address in this poem (v.15–22) is also noted by Bozak, where the feminine/masculine address changes to a regular pattern<sup>19</sup> and is not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. In Tribble’s reading, the gender reversal involves two distinct characters: Ephraim the son has become Israel the daughter,<sup>20</sup> and that goes paralleled to the weeping and consoled Rachel and Yahweh who is displeased but feels tenderness for his dear son.

This intricate web of gender fluidity invites a broader contemplation, one extending beyond the text itself. It engenders inquiries into the persona of Jeremiah, the author, a male figure whose identity does not seamlessly align with the conventional imagery of the warrior – a representation that conforms to established gender norms in the patriarchal milieu of his era. Jeremiah’s status as an unmarried, childless individual, whose prowess lies not in martial might but in the eloquence of his words, evokes further questions. While these inquiries fall beyond the purview of this paper, scholars such as MacWilliam and Suzanna Asikainen<sup>21</sup> have embarked on explorations of this intriguing facet, offering nuanced perspectives on the queering tendencies inherent in Jeremiah’s prophetic corpus.

This subchapter delves into the recurring theme of gender reversal in the prophetic writings of Jeremiah. It scrutinizes the alternating address between male and female in Jeremiah’s text, considering the potential of this phenomenon to challenge established gender norms. This examination prompts scholars to reflect on Jeremiah’s unconventional identity and its implications within his prophetic discourse.

---

16 Stuart MacWilliam, “Queering Jeremiah in Biblical Interpretation”, 384–404.

17 *Ibid.*, 390.

18 *Ibid.*, 400.

19 Barbara A. Bozak, *Life Anew: A Literary-Theological Study of Jer. 30–31*, 135.

20 Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 47.

21 Suzanna Asikainen, “The Masculinity of Jeremiah”, in *Biblical Interpretation* 28 (2020): 34–55.

## The “encompassing” and “the new life”

## Resilience and Hope

Jeremiah 31:22 finds itself embedded within a broader textual landscape – a poetic tapestry that resonates with themes of resilience and hope. To discern its true contextual home, it is vital to examine its placement within the larger narrative of Jeremiah. In this quest for contextual clarity, scholars like Barbara Bozak, Phyllis Trible, and Carolyn Sharp have provided valuable insights.

Bozak positions Jeremiah 31:22 within a poem in the text group Jeremiah 31:15–22 and views these verses as one of seven motifs or patterns punctuating the poems found in chapters 30–31<sup>22</sup>.

Phyllis Trible, in her interpretation of Jeremiah 31:15–22, presents it as a multifaceted “drama of voices”<sup>23</sup> that progressively leads towards a visionary conception of newness. Carolyn Sharp sees in Jeremiah 30–3 family (man, woman, child) related metaphors, and public expressions of grief, joy, hope in the structure of series of Resilience poems.<sup>24</sup>

Kathleen O’Connor’s<sup>25</sup> trauma-informed reading offers a perspective that underscores the power of the language and imagery employed in Jeremiah 30–31. She emphasizes the strategic compositional placement of words of hope and solace at the heart of the book. In doing so, O’Connor highlights the significance of hope as an essential element in envisioning a path from trauma to a brighter future. Jeremiah 31:22, as part of this larger narrative, becomes a pivotal expression of this hope – a beacon of resilience in a time of adversity. These chapters are seen as a coping mechanism, a sort of a survival strategy of the exiles – the reimagining of the rebuilding and the restoration of the city with healed and hopeful people returning home, and the reversal of the weak / strong; dominant / submissive stances.

This subchapter examines Jeremiah 31:22 within the broader context of the theme of resilience and hope found in the middle of the book of Jeremiah. The verse is interpreted as a key expression of perseverance amidst adversity, envisioning a transformative process for the exiles.

---

22 Barbara A. Bozak, op. cit., 135. Seven motifs highlighted by Bozak: Feminine image; voice and listening; suffering and punishment; turn and return; city or settlement; mountain and Zion; covenant.

23 Phyllis Trible, op. cit., 40.

24 Carolyn J. Sharp, *Jeremiah 26–52: International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021), 161. Sharp explains Jer 31: 15–26 as the fifth Resilience poem.

25 Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise*, 103–113.

## “A woman encompasses a man”

Various translations exist for this verb “encompassing”, suggesting varied meanings. Anderson points out to a number of translations that take up a hermeneutical stand, where the last line is interpreted as: the woman protecting, wooing the man; as a woman who sets out to find her husband again; as a woman who must encompass the man with devotion; as a woman turned into a man<sup>26</sup>.

Julia Schwartzmann notes that a traditional reading of this metaphor takes it outside of its apparent messianic context; she suggests that if it is treated as a literal expression, it translates as a dance with a circular movement and this dance motif is reminiscent of the biblical account of the prophet Miriam leading women in a dance, understood as whirling around men (Exodus 15:20). The semantic range of the verb “encompassing” adds complexity to this interpretation, as it can connote surrounding, spinning, turning into, or turning someone into, among other meanings.<sup>27</sup>

Another dance interpretation, contrasting the joyful marriage and new covenant dance, is proposed by Ekaterina Kozlova<sup>28</sup>. She interprets this scene as a ritual – a circumambulatory burial dance. She sees Rachel and the mourning, loss, destruction in the background of Jeremiah’s writing; seeing the road signs and guideposts as markers to commemorate Judah’s unburied (Jeremiah 7:33, 8:1–3, and others), for a proper commemoration of the deceased is required for the beginning of the newness, the return to the land of the forefathers. However, it must be noted that although Carolyn Sharp<sup>29</sup> acknowledges Kozlova’s perspective, she expresses scepticism regarding how such conclusions are reached.

The semantic complexity of the verb “encompassing” is examined, introducing a variety of translations. Diverse interpretations in light of other scriptural texts are put forth, primarily centred on the woman and the associated action, thereby expanding the broader contexts encapsulated within this metaphor.

## “A new thing on the earth”

The phrase “A new thing on the earth” in Jeremiah 31:22 has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with some scholars exercising caution in their attempts to fully translate its meaning. It is widely acknowledged that this phrase is intricately linked to the themes

---

26 In Anderson’s *The Lord Has Created Something New: A Stylistic Study of Jer 31:15–22*, 466. respectively: RSV, American Translation, JB, NAB, NER.

27 Julia Schwartzmann, “From Mystical Visions to Gender Equality Aspirations: A Hermeneutical Journey of Two Biblical Verses”, 149–150.

28 Ekaterina E. Kozlova, “Grave Marking and Wailing: Ritual Responses to the Babylonian Crisis in Jeremiah’s Poetry”, 92–117.

29 Carolyn J. Sharp, *Jeremiah 26–52: International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament*.



of returning to Yahweh and to the land, and it inherently carries a forward-looking orientation within the text.

Bernhard Anderson's interpretation posits that this "new thing" emerges subsequent to the address to Israel, where she is referred to as Virgin and Daughter, signifying that Yahweh has already initiated this transformative process. Israel is thus beckoned to follow suit. This interpretation encompasses both a physical return to the homeland – a geographical movement – and a more metaphorical and spiritual return, signifying a rekindling of the relationship with Yahweh.<sup>30</sup>

In a similar vein, Barbara Bozak offers an interpretation in which "the return" can be understood in two distinct ways: as a return from physical exile to the homeland or as a return to Yahweh from a state of spiritual separation.<sup>31</sup> Bozak tends to favour the metaphorical interpretation, characterizing it as a phenomenon of miraculous and messianic significance. She draws a parallel between Jeremiah 31:22 and Isaiah 43:19, where Yahweh is depicted as effecting the impossible, the novel, and the unexpected – mirroring the sense of newness found in the enigmatic phrase "a woman will encompass the man"<sup>32</sup>.

The inquiry into the phrase "a new thing on the earth" reveals caution in translation and points to its intricate connection to themes of spiritual and physical returning to Yahweh and the land.

## Creation

The proposition set forth by Julia Schwartzmann<sup>33</sup> introduces an intriguing dialogue between Jeremiah 31:22 and Genesis 1:16, illuminating a perspective that has been relatively absent in exegetical tradition – the examination of these verses in the context of social realities, particularly women's roles in societal systems. Schwartzmann contends that the comparative terms "greater" and "lesser" are not inherent in the original text, advocating for a literal translation that reads, "And God maketh the two great luminaries, the great luminary for the rule of the day, and the small luminary – and the stars – for the rule of the night."<sup>34</sup> This translation implies a departure from the traditional portrayal of women in subordinate, secondary roles within various domains of life. Drawing parallels between Genesis 1:16 and Jeremiah 31:22, both of which challenge

---

30 Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Lord Has Created Something New: A Stylistic Study of Jer 31:15–22", 463–478.

31 Barbara A. Bozak, *op. cit.*, 101.

32 *Ibid.*, 103.

33 Julia Schwartzmann, *op. cit.*, 138–156.

34 *Ibid.*

the place and role of women, suggests that Jeremiah calls for a return to Yahwe's originally intended order, imbued with futuristic and eschatological dimensions.

In alignment with this perspective, Barbara Bozak identifies connections to the Genesis creation story, indicating a transformative process akin to a new beginning or a reimagined created order. Bozak astutely discerns another connection, contrasting it with the role reversal mentioned in Jeremiah 30:5–6. Unlike the latter, where role reversal carries connotations of humiliation or curse, Jeremiah 31:22 is framed as a blessing,<sup>35</sup> signifying a reversal of the curse described in Genesis 3:16. This reversal points toward a state of Yahweh's intended relational equality between women and men. Although the woman initiates this paradigm shift, it is Yahweh who fundamentally reconfigures the existing order. Nevertheless, the woman is the first to respond to this transformative invitation.

Kathleen O'Connor's reading of the hopeful chapters within Jeremiah 30–31 centres around the evocative imagery of a broken but prospectively restored family encompassing both humans and Yahweh. Within this metaphorical framework, Mother Rachel is symbolically aligned with God's wife and Israel as the people, while Child Ephraim represents the new generation of hope, embodying the progeny of both God and Rachel (Israel), a symbol to the nation come back to life and to life together on Zion. While the woman's voice may remain unspoken, the text suggests that Yahweh responds by proclaiming the inception of a novel creation. O'Connor posits that Jeremiah's family metaphor encapsulates Rachel embracing her returning child. Furthermore, there exists room for multiple interpretations; when subsequent verses are considered, the woman may embody Jerusalem, welcoming all her returning children – representing the entirety of Israel.<sup>36</sup> The subsequent verse's fertility imagery may allude to a union between the woman and the man, manifesting in a sexual act and producing offspring – a notion consonant with Yahweh's promise of impending newness. Thus, O'Connor suggests that Yahweh's proclamation of forthcoming novelty aims to overturn the extant order, paving the way for a renewed relationship and reunification among the people through a new covenant.<sup>37</sup>

Bob Becking<sup>38</sup> situates this verse as the epicentre of a more extensive message of solace and hope found within Jeremiah 30–31, which heralds the potential return from exile. The nation's renewal commences with the woman's readiness to unite with the man, thereby infusing her body with the seed of rejuvenation for the nation chosen

---

35 Barbara A. Bozak, *op. cit.*, 104.

36 Kathleen M. O'Connor, *op. cit.*, 109.

37 *Ibid.*, 111.

38 Bob Becking, "Between Fear and Freedom: Essays on the Interpretation of Jeremiah 30–31", 13–14.

by Yahweh to be in a profound relationship with. A novel perspective emerges as Becking suggests considering the encompassing embrace as a tangible event awaiting the return of exiles. In support of this perspective, he references a discovery by Adrie van der Wal,<sup>39</sup> in which Neo-Assyrian art depicts a deportation scene with men and women separated. Under this interpretation, the encompassing signifies the long-awaited reunion of these separated parties upon their return home.

This subchapter explores connections between Jeremiah 31:22 and the Creation narrative, further questioning and reimagining the created order. The discussion centres on social realities, challenging traditional gender roles, and envisioning a return to Yahweh's intended order, with implications for a renewed relationship and reunification.

## Covenant

Several scholars have interpreted the metaphor “a woman will encompass the man” within the context of inaugurating a new covenant between Yahweh and His people. Notably, Amanda Morrow and John Quant's<sup>40</sup> research underscores the close relationship between the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of Deuteronomy. Specifically, they point to the literary allusion in Jeremiah 29–33 to Deuteronomy 30:3, where themes of restoration and the new covenant are prevalent. A comparative analysis reveals striking similarities, including the notions of a new covenant, repentance, restoration, the gathering of dispersed individuals, and circumcision of the heart.<sup>41</sup>

Marvin Sweeney, in his examination of Jeremiah 30–31/37–38, identifies these chapters as containing oracles concerning restoration and the establishment of a new covenant between Yahweh and the people of Judah and Israel.<sup>42</sup> The theme of Israel's repentance, particularly evident in Jeremiah 31:16–22, serves as a precursor to the announcement of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:23–34. Furthermore, the chapter reaffirms Yahweh's eternal promise to Israel, cementing the covenantal dimension of the metaphor.

Leslie Allen offers an insightful perspective on the metaphor, contextualizing it within Yahweh's covenantal relationship with His people. The Covenant-centred image of hope with Yahweh and his people, is linked to a marriage proposal, only here the woman is making the customary “move”. This theme harmoniously weaves together the chapters

---

39 Ibid., Becking in page 223, refers to Van der Wal's article *Rachel's troost*.

40 Amanda R. Morrow and John F. Quant, “Yet Another New Covenant: Jeremiah's Use of Deuteronomy and שוב שבות/שביית in the Book of Consolation in The Book of Jeremiah”, in *The Book of Jeremiah Composition, Reception and Interpretation*, eds. Jack R. Lundbom, Craig A. Evans, Bradford A. Anderson (Boston: Brill, 2018), 170–190.

41 Ibid., 171.

42 Marvin A. Sweeney, “Hope and Resilience in the Book of Jeremiah”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Jeremiah*, eds. Louis Stulman and Edward Silver (NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 424.

of hope in Jeremiah. Allen draws inspiration from the medieval Jewish expositor Rashi, who interpreted the verb in the metaphor as “going after a man with the intent of marrying him”. From this vantage point, Allen suggests that the encompassing gesture symbolizes a metaphor of marriage for the covenant.<sup>43</sup>

Allen discerns covenantal language in Jeremiah 3:19–20, where the father-daughter relationship transforms into a partnered image between a man and a woman. Here, the woman embodies Israel and its desire to engage in a covenantal partnership with Yahweh. This interpretation draws a parallel between the metaphorical daughter and the eldest son, as seen in Jeremiah 31:9 and 31:20, both emblematic of a covenantal relationship.<sup>44</sup>

The metaphor is interpreted within the context of a new covenant between Yahweh and His people, drawing parallels between Jeremiah and Deuteronomy, emphasizing themes of restoration, repentance, and the establishment of a profound covenantal relationship.

## Utopia

Paul Kruger<sup>45, 46</sup> introduces a notable perspective in his scholarly exploration by emphasizing the often-overlooked cross-cultural contexts found in literature, iconography, and religion within the Near East. Kruger contends that while this widespread concept permeates numerous cultures, the notion of an “upside-down world” or *mundus inversus* proves especially instrumental in elucidating the metaphor encapsulated in Jeremiah.<sup>47</sup> Within the realm of Jeremiah 31:22, this vision of an inverted reality assumes the character of an optimistic gender reversal, starkly distinct from the curses frequently associated with such inversions in other Near Eastern texts.

Kruger posits that this vision of the future world promises a paradigm shift, overturning established norms and expectations that traditionally govern gender performance within society. In this utopian reconfiguration, conventional gender roles and societal expectations stand poised for a dramatic reversal, ushering in a future characterized by a profound transformation in the dynamics of gender norms.

A cross-cultural perspective is introduced, exploring the concept of an “upside-down world” or *mundus inversus* within the Near East. From this perspective, Jeremiah’s vision promises a utopian future oriented paradigm shift.

---

43 Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 344.

44 *Ibid.*, 350.

45 Paul A. Kruger, “A Woman will Encompass a Man: On Gender Reversal in Jer 31,21b”, 380–388.

46 Paul A. Kruger, “The World ‘Topsy-turvy’ and the Ancient Near Eastern Cultures: A Few Examples”, *Anthropology Southern Africa* 29.3–4 (Sept. 2006): 115–121.

47 Paul A. Kruger, *op. cit.*, 381.

## Conclusion

Over the years, Jeremiah 31:22 has perplexed and intrigued scholars, leading to a diverse array of interpretations. In the past, some dismissed it as a corrupted text, an unsolvable riddle, or a lost meaning. Even in contemporary scholarship, it has occasionally been relegated to mere mentions in lists of challenging verses.

However, the advent of feminist, post-colonial, and gender perspectives has breathed new life into the exploration of this metaphor. These lenses have illuminated its original context while also suggesting fresh approaches that consider its relevance in today's world. Yet, a facet still relatively uncharted in this discourse is the extensive exploration of its intercultural and iconographic context, a realm that promises to yield further insights. Scholars like Kruger, Kozlova, and Van der Wal have ventured into these uncharted territories, hinting at the potential for novel interpretations. This metaphor, enigmatic and challenging, emerges as a critique of deeply ingrained and unequal gender norms, the ones that have persisted across civilizations. It invites us to transcend time, invoking the poetic, yet conventional language to address the enduring dichotomy between the sexes, finding resolution in mutual complementarity.

Within the context of Jeremiah 30–31, this metaphor signifies hope for Israel, uniting exiles in Babylon, those who remained in Judah, and those who fled to Egypt. It presents a vision of woman as the life-giver, in contrast to the man as the harbinger of death, leading the way toward a new life in a fruitful and covenantal relationship with Yahweh and His people.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that every interpretation of this metaphor contains an element of speculation, as noted by Sharp.<sup>48</sup> Some may be closer to the truth than others, or perhaps the utopian and eschatological world it envisions is yet to be realized. As the quest of deciphering continues, be it through text criticism, historical readings, gender perspectives, or other lenses, we remain vigilant for signs that this metaphor might indeed find fulfilment in the future. Jeremiah 31:22 remains a captivating enigma, one that invites us to persist in our exploration of its profound and enduring puzzle. The pursuit of revelation and interpretation extends beyond historical contexts, as the metaphor is envisioned not merely as a relic of the past but as a dynamic and living entity. In embracing this perspective, it beckons us towards the transformative potential of renewed engagement, offering the promise of a revitalized understanding and a path to newfound vitality.

---

48 Carolyn J. Sharp, *op. cit.*, 160.

Jeremijas grāmatā 31:22 rakstītais “sieviete iekļaus / aptvers vīrieti” ir noslēpumaina metafora, kas saista Vecās Derības pētniekus. Patriarhālā ainavā, kurā dominē vīriešu pravieši, vīriešu valoda un vīriešu kultūra, šis metaforiskais apgalvojums izaicina tradicionālās dzimumu lomas un cerības. Raksturīgi, sievietes atrodas fonā un bieži vien atveidotas padevīgas, neuzticīgas vai neaizsargātas dzemdību laikā. Šī eseja uzsāk zinātnisku izpēti ar mērķi izšķirt niansētus Jeremijas 31:22 lasījumus. Aplūkojot sievietes un vīrieša identitāti metaforas ietvaros, jēdzienu “aptveršana” un “jaunas lietas uz zemes” nozīmi, šī eseja iedziļinās panta sarežģītībā un neskaidrībās. Raksts balstās NRSV Bībeles tulkojuma tekstā un savā intonācijā nav veiksmīgi salāgojams ar tulkojumu latviešu valodā, kuru lasot paveras pavisam cits skats, kas nav aktuāls, meklējot feministiskās iezīmes teksta interpretācijas iespējās.

Raksts sākas ar sievietes identitātes izpēti metaforas ietvaros. Tiek aplūkotas dažādas interpretācijas, sākot no simboliskas sievietes tēla, ko definē pašpārliecinātība, līdz sievietei kā pilsētas, īpaši Jeruzalemes, simbolam. Vēl sievietes iespējamā identitāte ir Rāhēle, māte, kas apskauj izkaisītos Izraēla bērnus; sieviete identificējama arī kā dzemdētāja, kas norāda gan uz sāpēm un bailēm, gan cerību un jaunas dzīvības iespējamību. Turklāt sievieti var iztēloties kā dejotāju liturģiskos rituālos, kas piedāvā simbolisku un kultūrtelpā balstītu nozīmi. Metaforā sieviete iemieso arhetipiskas lomas: jaunava, prostitūta un sieva, norādot uz Izraēla atjaunotām attiecībām ar JHWH un miera izlīgumu.

Arī vīrieša identitātei metaforā iespējamās dažādas interpretācijas. Vīrieti var uzskatīt par vispārēju maskulīnu figūru, kas pakļaujas sievietes vadībai; kā spēcīgu karotāju, kas iemieso tradicionālo dzimuma lomu; vai kā pazemotu karotāju, kas simbolizē trauslumu un satricinājumu un līdzinās sievietei dzemdībās. Dažās pētnieku interpretācijās vīrieti ir Izraēla mitonīms vai Efraims, kas nožēlo grēkus un meklē izlīgumu ar Dievu. Turklāt metaforas vīrieti var tikt identificēts ar JHWH, norādot uz daudzšķautņainu Dieva dabu, kas aptver gan feminīno, gan maskulīno.

Viens no intriģējošiem Jeremijas metaforas aspektiem ir dzimuma maiņas klātbūtne, kas ir neparasta tēma Vecās Derības tekstos. Kristla Meiere, Ketlīna O’Konora un Stjuarts Makviljams ir atzīmējuši šo fenomenu, īpaši Jeremijas grāmatas 31. nodaļā. Teksts ritmiski mijas starp vīrišķo un sievišķo uzrunu, izjaucot atšķirības starp dzimumiem. Šī dzimumu plūstamība sniedzas ārpus teksta, aicinot pārdomāt paša Jeremijas kā autora identitāti un sava laika kulturālās normas.

Raksts iedziļinās “aptveršanas / ieskaušanas” nozīmē metaforas ietvaros, pētot dažādus tās tulkojumus un interpretācijas; kā arī frāze “jauna lieta uz zemes” padara tekstu sarežģītāku, liekot domāt par teksta nākotnes, eshatoloģisko orientāciju, kas iezīmē gan Izraēla fizisku atgriešanos no trimdas, gan garīgu saiknes atjaunošanos ar

JHWH. Dažas interpretācijas to saista ar Genesis radīšanas stāstu, izaicinot tradicionālās dzimumu lomas.

Vairāki pētnieki šo metaforu interpretē kā aicinājumu uz jaunas derības slēgšanu starp JHWH un Viņa tautu. Derības valoda uzsver vēlmi pēc partnerības un savstarpējas saistības. Turklāt metafora norāda uz utopisku vīziju, kur patriarhālā kultūrā veidojušās dzimumu normas dramatiski mainās.

Jeremijas grāmatas 31:22 joprojām ir mīklains teksts, un Vecās Derības pētniecībā, sevišķi attīstoties kontekstuālai pētniecībai, tiek piedāvātas daudzveidīgas metaforas interpretācijas iespējas, bagātinot izpratni par tās sarežģītību. Jeremijas grāmatas 30.–31. nodaļas kontekstā tas nozīmē cerību Izraēlam, apvienojot trimdiniekus, tos, kas palika Jūdejā, un tos, kuri aizbēga uz Ēģipti. Šī metafora izaicina dziļi iesakņojušās dzimumu normas un aicina mūs pārvarēt laiku, risinot pastāvīgo dzimumu dihotomiju. Lai gan katrā interpretācijā ir potenciāls nepilnības vai pat kļūdas elements, tās kolektīvi iezīmē kādus no metaforā iekodētiem skaidrojumiem. Jeremijas 31:22 kalpo kā atgādinājums par Svēto Rakstu nemainīgo spēju rosināt jaunus ieskatus, atklāsmes un veicināt dialogu, tai skaitā arī par dzimumu lomu un nākotnes normatīvātī.



© 2023, Arta Skuja, University of Latvia

This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)