

Speaking Truth to Power

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Jer 10:11

(BHS)		(reordered NKJV)
כְּדָנָה תֵּאמְרוּן לְהוֹם		Thus you shall say to them:
אֱלֹהֵי־א	A	“The gods
דִּי־שָׁמַיִם־א	B	that the heavens
וְאֶרְצָא	C	and the earth
לֹא עָבְדוּ	D	have not made
יֵאָבְדוּ	D'	shall perish
מֵאֶרֶץ־א	C'	from the earth
וּמִן־תַּחַת שָׁמַיִם־א	B'	and from under heavens
אֵלֵהֶֿ:	A'	these.”

The verse you are looking at is a snippet of Aramaic in an otherwise Hebrew book. If you are preparing for an Aramaic exam, remember that in addition to half of Daniel and some memos in Ezra, this verse is also fair game. Your sneaky professor will put this on the exam to try to throw you.

Note the red alephs at the end of words. They are the definite article, like the *ha-* prefix in Hebrew. In B, *dî* is the relative pronoun, “that” or “which.” Much of the vocabulary overlaps between the two languages. “Say” in line 1 is recognizable, as is the proposition ל. In line A, you may recognize “the gods.” “Not” in D is just like Hebrew. You may also identify “the earth,” “the heavens,” “from,” and so on. Line D' is *'abad*, “perish,” another Hebrew cognate. Note how “to make” and “to perish” look and sound alike, as do “gods” (A) and “these” (A'). Take a good long look at the verse’s organization. This essay is based on Reid’s 2006 article in *JSOT*. Email me for it.

Now stop and read Jer 10:1 – 16.

Doesn't verse 11 seem to intrude? Look again.

Not only does it feel alien there, it is written in a different language than the rest of the book! (Jeremiah is the longest book of the Bible, you know.) Rejecting verse 11 as a late obtrusive interpolation is one reasonable way of explaining it.

But there is a better way. Like the verse, the poem can be organized into a symmetrical structure called a chiasmus, its first half mirrored in the second. After the prologue (10:1 – 5), Reid recounts it like this:

- A** There is none like **Yahweh**, his great **Name** (6 – 7)
- B** **idols** are **stupid and empty** (8 – 9)
- C** **Yahweh** shakes the **earth** (10)
- X** the gods shall perish from earth and heaven (11)
- C'** **Yahweh** rumbles heaven and **earth** (12 – 13)
- B'** **stupid and empty** **idol** worship (14 – 15)
- A'** He is not like these, **Yahweh** is his **Name** (16)



In a chiasmic structure, the middle element is often the most important. Far from being an intrusive anomaly, our verse is actually the heart of the poem. “Thus you shall say to them”—in Aramaic, the language of their captivity—that the gods of Babylon are nothing. Reid sees this as a summary statement of the whole poem. It encapsulates the truth of the uniqueness of Israel’s God, in the language of a slightly later time.

Aramaic was the language of empire then, and the exiled Jews adopted it as their spoken tongue. Nehemiah complained that the Jews were losing their Hebrew (Neh 13:24). When the gospels give non-Greek examples of Jesus’s words, they are Aramaic: *Abba*, *Mammon*, etc. Jesus spoke Aramaic from the cross.

What did Jeremiah tell them to say in Aramaic? Say that the gods of the dominant culture are nothing and will perish from the earth. Say that the values and ideology and religion of Babylon are nothing compared to the Creator of heaven and earth.

The Jews in exile were daily confronted with a superior culture to their own. The Babylonian civilization was powerful—and Nebuchadnezzar was able, seemingly with the help of his gods, to destroy Yahweh's people and temple. Israel's God seemed unable to stand against Babylon's pantheon. Over against that is Jeremiah's bold assertion that they were nothing compared to Yahweh.

The question for today is: what are the counterfeit truth-claims that we must definitively condemn in the language of our own time? What falsehoods are vigorously asserted today that will inevitably pass away and become as nothing? What "gods" do Jer 10:11 call us to decry and reject *right now*?

Some matters in our day seem great and overwhelming. We feel that the course of history is leaving us behind. All the power is with the secular culture. But remember that untruths are as nothing compared to the surpassing glory of knowing Christ and his gospel. Holding on to this perspective takes faith. Especially when we gather in community, we must remind ourselves of the truth, until the end. It is a lifelong struggle.

But when Jesus returns, the final and consummate meaning of Jer 10:11 will be seen. All lies will be definitively dealt with. The truth of all things will be seen and known by all.

How wonderful that Day will be!