

The Meaning of the Phrase *dib·ber 'ā·la·yik rā·'āh* in Jeremiah 11:17: An Exegetical Study

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Abstract - The phrase *dib·ber 'ā·la·yik rā·'āh* in Jeremiah 11:17 is the primary focus of this research. The verb *dib·ber*, in its Piel form, carries an intensive meaning, indicating that God "forcefully spoke" or "decisively ordained" disaster upon Israel and Judah. This study employs an in-depth exegetical approach to address key questions: How does the Piel form of *dibber* affirm the final and authoritative nature of the divine proclamation against Israel and Judah? And what are the theological implications of choosing this phrase within the framework of covenant theology? The analysis shows that *dib·ber 'ālayik rā'āh* is not merely a statement about disaster but an unavoidable legal decree resulting directly from the people's violation of the covenant. The intensity in the verb *dibber* underscores that God's decision was not impulsive but the realization of His sovereign and performative word creating what it speaks. This research concludes that a deep understanding of this phrase enriches insight into divine justice, where God's judgment is a communicative act faithful to His holy character and His covenant. This study contributes to the theological discourse on the nature of the prophetic word and the balance between grace and righteous judgment.

Keywords: Intensive, Piel Verb, Judgment, Divine Justice, Covenant

I. INTRODUCTION

Jeremiah was commanded to deliver the word of the Lord concerning the "covenant" to the people. Even though God had repeatedly warned them to obey Him, they refused to listen. Therefore, God swore to bring upon them "all the curses of the covenant" (Dye et al., 2001, p. 601). Jeremiah's words not only teach us much about the relationship between God and humanity but also serve as a warning not to underestimate this relationship (Carson et al., 1994, p. 683).

Jeremiah 11:1–17 reveals God's sorrow concerning Israel's violation of the covenant. According to observations by Holladay and Hanson (1986), the phrase *'dib·ber 'ā·la·yik rā·'āh* found in Jeremiah 11:17 carries significant theological meaning related to the link between transgression, divine consequences, and the people's faithfulness to the covenant (pp. 348-349).

Although many studies have been conducted on Jeremiah 11, a deeper understanding of the phrase 'dib·ber 'ā·la·yik rā·'āh' still requires exegetical analysis to explain its theological significance of the Hebrew words. This phrase holds great importance in capturing the overall intent of Jeremiah 11.

There are several different interpretations of this sentence. According to Huey (2001), the reason for the decreed disaster is clearly stated: they had committed evil and offered sacrifices to Baal; they had forsaken the Lord (p. 135). Keil and Delitzsch (2002) argue that here, the LORD who had planted Israel is said to have spoken, meaning He decreed disaster upon both houses, Israel and Judah, for their sins. The word דִּבֶּר (dibber) does not directly mean "to decree," but also indicates the delivery of that decree through a prophet (p. 136). Henry (1996) asserts that it is clear that the evil against God, which provoked His wrath, was actually evil against themselves. They wounded their own souls; God was beyond their reach, yet they destroyed themselves (Jeremiah 7:19–34). Henry concludes that every sin against God is essentially a sin against oneself, and this will prove true sooner or later.

Spence-Jones (2004) adds another dimension: the LORD of hosts, who had "planted" Israel, also has the power to uproot it. However, He would not completely destroy them for the sake of His covenant with Abraham. Nevertheless, He must still act as a Judge to punish their many transgressions. Spence-Jones also notes that the prophets often mention Israel and Judah together because they did not recognize the division of the two kingdoms. Furthermore, he explains that the phrase "against themselves" is more accurately translated as "for themselves," meaning they acted for their own pleasure (p. 295).

Thus, each interpreter highlights a different aspect: Huey emphasizes the reason behind the punishment, Keil and Delitzsch focus on the role of divine revelation delivered through the prophet, Henry asserts the moral principle that sin ultimately harms the sinner, while Spence-Jones stresses God's authority as both a punishing Judge and a faithful covenant-keeper. Although the commentators place different emphases some highlighting the reason for judgment (idolatry), others focusing on the divine decree delivered through the prophet, and still others stressing the moral dimension that sin is self-destructive they all point to one central truth: the God who planted Israel also has the right to uproot it. Judgment is not merely an act of wrath but the consequence of the people's own choice to prioritize self-interest and personal gratification over faithfulness to God.

II. METHODS

The research methodology employed is the "Historical-Grammatical Method" (Conservapedia, n.d.), which is based on the principle of Sola Scriptura, meaning it relies solely on the Bible (Reid, 2005, p. 111). This method seeks to understand the historical context and analyze the grammatical structure through word choice and writing style, with the aim of uncovering the underlying meaning within the text. This study bases its analysis of the Indonesian Bible on the ITB version. For in-depth comparison, the primary Hebrew text

referenced is the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS), recognized as the original source for the Old Testament.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Historical Background

Jeremiah authored most of this book, but the actual writing was done by his trusted secretary, Baruch son of Neriah (Jeremiah 36:4, 27, 28, 32). Baruch likely also collected, edited, and preserved the integrity of the material in the book, and may have contributed to the biographical narratives within it. Baruch, as the scribe and secretary to the prophet Jeremiah, is believed to have had a good educational background. The historian Josephus mentions that Baruch came from a prominent family in Judah. His brother even reportedly served as a logistics officer under King Zedekiah and participated in the exile to Babylon. Baruch's personality and influence are evident from the accusations leveled against him by the remnant of Judah's people who intended to flee to Egypt. They accused him of influencing Jeremiah to oppose them. Furthermore, his name is associated with several apocryphal writings, such as the Book of Baruch, which appeared later and are considered inauthentic. Despite facing challenges, Baruch remained loyal to Jeremiah, even accompanying him when they were both forced to join the group of Judahites fleeing to Egypt (Nichol, 1977, p. 343).

The Book of Jeremiah has two main purposes: historical and theological. Historically, it serves as a record of God's messages to Judah and Jerusalem, warning them about the consequences of idolatry and disloyalty that led to their destruction and a seventy-year exile to Babylon (Jeremiah 25:1–14). It also documents the nation's rejection of Jeremiah's warnings, his persecution, and ultimately the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, affirming God's sovereignty over historical events. Theologically, the book highlights God's justice and steadfast love, showing that although sin will be punished—such as the Babylonian exile as a form of discipline—God remains faithful to His promise to restore His people (Jeremiah 29:10–14). Furthermore, the book prophesies the coming of the Messiah, the "righteous Branch of David" (Jeremiah 23:5–6), offering hope for future spiritual restoration and justice (Unger et al., 1988).

Literal Context

According to Thiel (1973), God desired His people to remain faithful to the covenant established since the time of Moses, where obedience would bring blessings, while disobedience would lead to punishment (Deuteronomy 28:1-68). Jeremiah 11 can be understood as a Deuteronomic affirmation of covenant violation, particularly in relation to the warnings given in Deuteronomy 28 (p. 88). In 2 Kings 22, King Josiah's reform, which took place around 622 BC, aimed to restore proper worship to the Lord and re-establish the Law, including the statutes in Deuteronomy 28 (Hobbs, 1998). This movement began after the discovery of the Book of the Law in the Temple (2 Kings 22:8-13), which many scholars believe was most likely part of the book of Deuteronomy (Hobbs, 1998, p. 325).

Close Context

In the context of Jeremiah 11:1-17, the phrase "I will bring disaster" (Jeremiah 11:17) is delivered by the Prophet Jeremiah as God's message concerning Israel's violation of the covenant. God reminds Israel of the covenant He made when He brought them out of Egypt, which demanded absolute obedience. However, Israel had violated it by worshipping other gods and ignoring the voice of the Lord, so God would uphold the curses of the covenant if they did not repent. Jeremiah also reveals a conspiracy among Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem who had returned to idolatry, meaning God would not listen to their cries when disaster came. As a consequence of their egregious disobedience, God commands Jeremiah to no longer pray for Israel. Verse 17 depicts Israel as a "green olive tree, beautiful in fruit and form," yet because of their wickedness, God will actively and intentionally bring disaster as punishment (Gaebelein, 1986, p. 412).

Genre

Jeremiah 11:17 belongs to the genre of prophetic judgment oracle with a covenant lawsuit pattern. This verse shows that God, who once caused Judah to flourish, now brings judgment because the people have broken the covenant. Its literary form is marked by divine declaration, legal language, and oracular style that emphasize the certainty of judgment. Rhetorically, the text highlights a sharp contrast between the blessings Israel should have received as God's chosen plant and the calamity that has come instead, illustrating the shift from love to punishment. Thus, Jeremiah 11:17 is a divine indictment underscoring the serious consequences of disobedience (Brueggemann, 1998; Lundbom, 1999)

Text Analysis and Interpretation

Indonesia Terjemahan Baru (ITB)	New American Standard (NAS)	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS)
<p>Yeremia 11:17 TUHAN semesta alam, yang telah membuat engkau tumbuh, telah menentukan malapetaka atasmu karena kejahatan yang telah dilakukan oleh kaum Israel dan kaum Yehuda untuk menimbulkan sakit hati-Ku dengan membakar korban kepada Baal."</p>	<p>Jeremiah 11:17 And the LORD of hosts, who planted you, has pronounced evil against you because of the evil of the house of Israel and of the house of Judah, which they have done to provoke Me by offering up sacrifices to Baal. (Jer. 11:17 NAS)</p>	<p>וַיְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הַנּוֹטֵעַ אוֹתְךָ דְבַר עֲלִיף רָעָה בְּגִלְלֵי רְעִית בֵּית־יִשְׂרָאֵל וּבֵית יְהוּדָה אֲשֶׁר עָשׂוּ לָהֶם לְהַקְטִיף לְקַטֵּר לַבַּעַל: ס (Jer. 11:17 BHS)</p> <p>Transliteration: va·YHWH tseva'ot ha- notea' ot·kha dibber 'alayikh ra·'ah biglal ra'at bet-Yisra'el u·vet Yehudah asher 'asu lahem le·hakh'iseni le·qatter la·ba'al.</p>

Table 1: Translation of Jeremiah 11:17

The table above presents the translations of Jeremiah 11:17, which serve as comparative material in this study. This research examines several Bible translation versions originating from different languages. The Indonesia Terjemahan Baru (ITB) represents the Indonesian version, the New American Standard (NAS) represents the English version, while the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS) presents the original Old Testament text in Hebrew.

Morphological and Syntactical Analysis

dib·ber דִּבֶּר (verb piel perfect 3rd person masculine singular homonym 2). According to Holladay et al. (1971), this word comes from the root word דבר "speak," "speak together," "speak about," (pp. 66–67). According to Koehler et al. (1999), HALOT translates this as "to speak" (p. 210). This word appears with the Piel verb, which signifies an intensive, causative, or repeated action. The Piel verb form in Hebrew generally serves to express an action performed intensively or repeatedly (Gesenius, 1910). In a prophetic context, the term *dibbēr* (דִּבֶּר) means "the word" or "the message." Jeremiah, as a prophet, delivered the word of the Lord which rebuked the people of Israel for their disobedience. This message reflects God's decision to punish them for the evil they had committed, likened to a tree that is cut down because it does not bear good fruit (Baker, 2003, p. 223).

‘ā·la·yik אֶלַיִךְ (particle preposition suffix 2nd person feminine singular homonym 2). This word appears with the prefix (עַל). According to Koehler and Baumgartner (1999), the prefix can mean, “on”, “over”, “in front of”, “on account of”, “with regard to”, “concerning”, “against”, “to”, “towards”, and the feminine prepositional suffix is for the second person feminine. In the context of the people's response to the word of the Lord, the concept of *ālāh* (הָעֹלָה) can be understood as "to go up" or "to draw near." Supposedly, the people were to "go up" or draw near to God in obedience. However, the opposite occurred; they turned away and committed evil (Baker, 2003, pp. 834–835).

rā·‘āh רָעָה (noun common feminine singular absolute). This word is an adjective, which comes from the root word (עָרַע). Holladay (1971), translates this word as “evil,” “harm,” “wickedness,” “perverseness,” “crime”, “misery,” “trouble,” “disaster”. The word *rā·āh* (רָעָה) in this context refers to evil or wickedness in a moral and ethical sense, reflecting the unfaithfulness and sin of the people of Israel. As God's chosen people, they were supposed to produce good fruit, but instead they turned to doing evil in His sight. This shows the seriousness of their violation of the covenant with God (Baker, 2003, pp. 1062–1063).

The Piel verb appears in the phrase "I will decree disaster." This emphasizes God's active and intense action in punishing the people of Israel. This verb indicates that God does not merely allow evil to happen, but deliberately and actively brings about disaster as a consequence of the covenant violation. The use of Piel also affirms God's authority and sovereignty as a just judge. God is not passive in the face of evil; He actively intervenes to restore justice (Swanson, 1997).

The phrase *dibber ‘ālayik rā·āh* is a complete transitive clause unit with a Predicate-Adverbial-Object (P-A-O) pattern. The main predicate is the verb, דִּבֶּר whose form (Piel, masculine singular) also implies its subject, "he". The action of this predicate is then completed by the direct object *rā·āh* ("evil"), which serves to explain the content of the utterance. Meanwhile, the prepositional phrase *‘ālayik* ("concerning you" feminine) functions as an adverbial that identifies the target of the action. An important syntactic aspect is the use of the Piel conjugation, which emphasizes the active, intense, and deliberate nature of the action, indicating that the message was delivered emphatically by the subject.

Semantic Analysis

dib·ber “דִּבֶּר” According to Swanson (1997), the meaning of this root word cannot be separated from the intent, authority, and social context of the utterance. As one of the most frequently occurring verbs in the Old Testament, the historical significance of the root דבר (d-b-r) is also reinforced by its appearance in other ancient Semitic languages, including Akkadian (*dabābu*) and Ugaritic (*dbr*). The meaning of this word is not static; rather, it is strongly influenced by its verbal conjugation form. For example, the Piel form signifies an active act of speaking, while the Niphal form is used to express reciprocal communication or "speaking to one another" (VanGemeren, 1998).

‘ā·la·yīk “עַל־יְ” According to Gesenius and Tregelles (2003), determining the meaning of the preposition עַל (‘al) is highly dependent on the analysis of the conceptual relationship between the words it connects, not merely their physical position. Based on Swanson's (1997) analysis, the Hebrew preposition עַל (‘al) is fundamentally a marker of physical relationships in space, encompassing meanings such as "on," "near," "among," and "toward." From this concrete foundation, its meaning then extends metaphorically to perform various abstract grammatical functions. For instance, the concept of "on" or "over" is used to denote authority, "against" for opposition, and it also functions as a marker for logical relationships (like cause-and-effect) as well as temporal ones (such as the adverb of time "when" or "during"). This development shows how a word that originally described space became a vital tool for constructing complex clauses by marking non-physical relationships.

rā·‘āh “רָעָה־” According to the analysis by Brown et al. (2000), the Hebrew noun רָעָה (rā‘ā) has two primary semantic domains. First, it can refer to misfortune or suffering that a person undergoes as a negative experience. Second, it can mean a wrongful deed or immoral act that is actively committed with evil intent. The verb pattern used in a sentence often clarifies which meaning is intended: calamities tend to "befall" someone, whereas evil deeds are "planned" or "done." Gender is used to distinguish between a quality or an agent (masculine) and an abstract concept or event (feminine). Meanwhile, the glossary by Heiser et al. (2007) highlights the different grammatical functions of the root for "evil." The masculine form, רָע (ra‘), is flexible and can be used both as an adjective to describe something of poor quality and as a noun to refer to the concept of evil or its perpetrator. Conversely, the feminine form, רָעָה (rā‘ā), is more specifically used as a noun to name the abstract concept of evil or a specific evil event.

Theological Implications

A study of the phrase dib·ber ‘ā·la·yīk rā·‘āh in Jeremiah 11:17 has profound theological implications concerning the nature and character of God. First, the use of the Piel form of the verb "dibber" (to ordain/decreed) affirms that God is not a passive or indifferent entity towards the wickedness of His people. On the contrary, He is an active and sovereign God who consciously and deliberately intervenes in history to uphold justice. This shows that divine judgment is not merely "allowing" the natural consequences of sin; rather, it is a deliberate decision and action of God. This strengthens the doctrine of God's sovereignty, where He has full authority over all events, including bringing disaster as a tool of discipline and correction for a rebellious people.

God's Sovereignty

Jeremiah 11:17 asserts that God actively and intentionally brings disaster (rā‘āh) upon Judah and Israel as punishment for their worship of Baal, a decree (dibber) from Him. This message aligns with Jeremiah 11:11, which also portrays God as the active agent bringing about (mē·bī‘) an unavoidable disaster. The two verses are theologically complementary: verse 11 states the unavoidable fact of judgment, while verse 17 explains the specific cause behind it,

clarifying that this judgment isn't a passive consequence but a sovereign decree from a just God. Together, these verses reinforce the doctrine that God is a sovereign Judge who both establishes and executes His judgment in response to His people's sin.

God's Faithfulness to the Covenant

Second, the theological implication of this phrase highlights God's faithfulness to His covenant, even when His people are unfaithful. God had planted and nurtured Israel and Judah like a beautiful olive tree, demonstrating His love and care from the Exodus event. However, when they repeatedly violated the covenant by worshipping other gods (Baal) and committing wickedness (*rā·'āh*), God acted according to the terms of the covenant He Himself had established (as recorded in Deuteronomy 28). This demonstrates that the coming judgment is not an arbitrary act but a logical consequence of deliberate covenant violation. God's justice cannot be separated from His faithfulness; He is faithful to the promise of blessing for obedience, and also faithful to the promise of curses for disobedience. This affirms that a covenant relationship with God demands responsibility and obedience.

God's Uncompromising Justice

Third, this study also underscores God's uncompromising justice in the face of sin. The phrase *rā·'āh* (moral and ethical evil) indicates that Israel and Judah's transgression was not a minor error, but a deliberate rebellion against the God who had sustained them. Their actions provoked God's wrath. Therefore, the decree of disaster is a manifestation of absolute divine justice, which cannot tolerate sin. This serves as a stern reminder that although God is love and full of grace, He is also a holy and just God who will ultimately punish sin. This concurrently emphasizes the importance of true repentance and a return to obedience to experience blessing and restoration, rather than judgment.

IV. CONCLUSION

An exegetical study of the phrase *dib·ber 'ā·la·yiq rā·'āh* in Jeremiah 11:17 reveals a profound theological meaning regarding God's intensive judgment against Israel and Judah. This phrase, with its Piel verb root, emphatically highlights God's active and deliberate action in ordaining disaster as a response to covenant violation. God, who was previously the planter and nurturer of His people (like a green olive tree), is not merely allowing the consequences of sin to unfold; He is now sovereignly and intensively declaring punishment. This is due to the moral and ethical wickedness (*rā·'āh*) committed by both houses, which involved turning away from obedience to the Lord and offering sacrifices to Baal, directly provoking divine wrath.

In Jeremiah's historical and literary context, the intensity of this judgment is rooted in repeated transgressions of the Deuteronomic covenant established since Moses' time. Despite numerous warnings and even King Josiah's reforms, Israel and Judah continued to "distance

themselves" (ālāh in its negative sense) from God, choosing a path of rebellion and idolatry. Therefore, the phrase *dib·ber 'ā·la·yik rā·'āh* not only indicates the presence of disaster but also affirms God's justice, which is not passive; He acts proactively to uphold justice and covenant faithfulness, demonstrating that sin against God ultimately harms oneself and will bring divinely ordained consequences.

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