

Jeremiah



I N T E R F A C E S

Series Editor: Barbara Green, O.P.

Jeremiah

Preacher of Grace, Poet of Truth

Carol J. Dempsey, OP



A Michael Glazier Book

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To Ben Asen
who first awakened the prophetic spirit within me
To Bob Vaughn, OP
who helped to free that spirit
and
To my students of many years
for whom this book is written

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P R E F A C E



The book you hold in your hand is one of fifteen volumes in an expanding set of volumes. This series, called INTERFACES, is a curriculum adventure, a creative opportunity in teaching and learning, presented at this moment in the long story of how the Bible has been studied, interpreted, and appropriated.

The INTERFACES project was prompted by a number of experiences that you, perhaps, share. When I first taught undergraduates, the college had just received a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and one of the recurring courses designed within the grant was called Great Figures in Pursuit of Excellence. Three courses would be taught, each centering on a figure from some academic discipline or other, with a common seminar section to provide occasion for some integration. Some triads were more successful than others, as you might imagine. But the opportunity to concentrate on a single individual—whether historical or literary—to team teach, to make links to another pair of figures, and to learn new things about other disciplines was stimulating and fun for all involved. A second experience that gave rise to this series came at the same time, connected as well with undergraduates. It was my frequent experience to have Roman Catholic students feel quite put out about taking “more” biblical studies, since, as they confidently affirmed, they had already been there many times and done it all. That was, of course, not true; as we well know, there is always more to learn. And often those who felt most informed were the least likely to take on new information when offered it.

A stimulus as primary as my experience with students was the familiarity of listening to friends and colleagues at professional meetings talking about the research that excites us most. I often wondered: Do her undergraduate students know about this? Or how does he bring these ideas—clearly so energizing to him—into the college classroom? Perhaps some of us have felt bored with classes that seem wholly unrelated to research, that rehash the same familiar material repeatedly. Hence the idea for this series of books to bring to the fore and combine some of our research interests with our teaching and learning. Accordingly, this series is not so much about creating texts *for*

student audiences but rather about *sharing* our scholarly passions with them. Because these volumes are intended each as a piece of original scholarship, they are geared to be stimulating to both students and established scholars, perhaps resulting in some fruitful collaborative learning adventures.

The series also developed from a widely shared sense that all academic fields are expanding and exploding, and that to contemplate “covering” even a testament (let alone the whole Bible or western monotheistic religions) needs to be abandoned in favor of something with greater depth and fresh focus. At the same time, the links between our fields are becoming increasingly obvious as well, and the possibilities for study which draw together academic realms that had once seemed separate is exciting. Finally, the spark of enthusiasm that almost always ignited when I mentioned to students and colleagues the idea of single figures in combination—interfacing—encouraged me that this was an idea worth trying.

And so with the leadership and help of Liturgical Press Academic Editor Linda Maloney, as well as with the encouragement and support of Editorial Director Mark Twomey, the series has begun to take shape.

Each volume in the INTERFACES series focuses clearly on a biblical character (or perhaps a pair of them). The characters from the first set of volumes are in some cases powerful—King Saul, Pontius Pilate—and familiar—John the Baptist, Jeremiah; in other cases they will strike you as minor and little-known—the Cannibal Mothers, Herodias. The second “litter” I added notables of various ranks and classes: Jezebel, queen of the Northern Israelite realm; James of Jerusalem and “brother of the Lord”; Simon the Pharisee, dinner host to Jesus; Legion, the Gerasene demoniac encountered so dramatically by Jesus. In a third set we find a similar contract between apparently mighty and marginal characters: Jezebel’s husband Ahab, king of Israel; the prophet Jonah who speaks a few powerfully efficacious words; and Ben Sira, sage in late second temple Judah; and less powerful but perhaps an even greater reading challenge stand Jephthah’s daughter and Ezekiel’s wife. The fourth cluster features the prophet Jeremiah, the northern king Ahab, and the apostle Peter. In any case, each of them has been chosen to open up a set of worlds for consideration. The named (or unnamed) character interfaces with his or her historical-cultural world and its many issues, with other characters from biblical literature; each character has drawn forth the creativity of the author, who has taken on the challenge of engaging many readers. The books are designed for college students (though we think suitable for seminary courses and for serious Bible study), planned to provide young adults with relevant information and at a level of critical sophistication that matches the rest of the undergraduate curriculum.

In fact, the expectation is that what students are learning in other classes of historiography, literary theory, and cultural anthropology will find an echo in these books, each of which is explicit about at least two relevant methodologies. It is surely the case that biblical studies is in a methodology-conscious moment, and the INTERFACES series embraces it enthusiastically. Our hope is for students to continue to see the relationship between their best questions and their most valuable insights, between how they approach texts and what they find there. The volumes go well beyond familiar paraphrase of narratives to ask questions that are relevant in our era. At the same time, the series authors also have each dealt with the notion of the Bible as Scripture in a way condign for them. None of the books is preachy or hortatory, and yet the self-implicating aspects of working with the revelatory text are handled frankly. The assumption is, again, that college can be a good time for people to reexamine and rethink their beliefs and assumptions, and they need to do so in good company.

The INTERFACES volumes all challenge teachers to revision radically the scope of a course, to allow the many connections among characters to serve as its warp and weft. What would emerge fresh if a Deuteronomistic History class were organized around King Saul, Queen Jezebel, and the two women who petitioned their nameless monarch? How is Jesus' ministry thrown into fresh relief when structured by shared concerns implied by a demoniac, a Pharisee, James—a disciple and John the Baptist—a mentor? And for those who must “do it all” in one semester, a study of Genesis' Joseph, Herodias and Pontius Pilate might allow for a timely foray into postcolonialism. With whom would you now place the long-suffering but doughty wife of Ezekiel: with the able Jezebel, or with the apparently celibate Jonah? Or perhaps with Herodias? Would Jephthah's daughter organize an excellent course with the Cannibal Mothers, and perhaps as well with the Gerasene demoniac, as fresh and under-heard voices speak their words to the powerful? Would you study monarchy effectively by working with bluebloods Ahab and Saul, as they contend with their opponents, whether John the Baptist, Peter, or Pontius Pilate? What words of consolation and alarm might Jeremiah offer? Depending on the needs of your courses and students, these rich and diverse character studies will offer you many options.

The INTERFACES volumes are not substitutes for the Bible. In every case, they are to be read with the text. Quoting has been kept to a minimum, for that very reason. The series is accompanied by a straightforward companion, *From Earth's Creation to John's Revelation: The INTERFACES Biblical Storyline Companion*, which provides a quick overview of the whole storyline into which the characters under special study fit. The companion

is available gratis for those using two or more of the INTERFACES volumes. Already readers of diverse proficiency and familiarity have registered satisfaction with this slim overview narrated by biblical Sophia.

The series challenge—for publisher, writers, teachers, and students—is to combine the volumes creatively, to INTERFACE them well so that the vast potential of the biblical text continues to unfold for us all. These volumes offer a foretaste of other volumes currently on the drawing board. It has been a pleasure to work with the authors of these volumes as well as with the series consultants: Carleen Mandolfo for Hebrew Bible and Catherine Murphy for New Testament. It is the hope of all of us that you will find the series useful and stimulating for your own teaching and learning.

Barbara Green, O.P.
INTERFACES Series Editor
May 16, 2006
Berkeley, California

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INTRODUCTION AND INTERSECTIONS

Encountering Jeremiah



Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,
Before I formed you in the womb
I knew you
And before you were born
I consecrated you;
I appointed you
A prophet to the nations. (Jer 4:1)

Perhaps no other prophet in the Bible is as complex and developed as Jeremiah, a poet of grace and a prophet *par excellence* who knew, first hand, the bittersweet experience of what it means to be madly in love with God and madly in love with God's people. Such a wildly compelling and intimate love is at the heart of Jeremiah's prophetic vocation. This great and deep love sustains, energizes, and empowers Jeremiah even when he is faced with relentless adversity, cruel rejection, and unjust oppression, all of which would have cost him his life had it not been for the wonderful promise given to him by God at the beginning of his divine call and commission: "I will be with you . . . to deliver you" (1:19). This promise remains steadfast in Jeremiah's life and becomes a sacred reminder of God's presence to him and to the people, even under the most horrible of circumstances when Judah is ravaged, the holy city Jerusalem destroyed, the Temple burned, and the remnant of his people scattered. For the people of his day, and certainly for people today, Jeremiah—as a survivor of such tragedies—becomes a living symbol of God's enduring promise to be faithful to the ancient covenants made with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekkah, Jacob, Rachel, Leah, Moses, and David. Just as Jeremiah lives on, so will God's people, in spite of their experience of great pain, suffering, and loss.

This study, as a contribution to the series INTERFACES, focuses on Jeremiah as a literary character in the book of Jeremiah to (a) determine how his

character evolves and develops through (1) what he says, (2) what he does, (3) what he experiences, (4) how he interacts with other characters in the text, (5) how he interacts with God, and (6) how he interacts with the social, political, and religious situation of his day; and to (b) present Jeremiah as a gifted and skilled preacher whose rhetoric is poetic, passionate, and prophetic. The biblical texts used throughout the study are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Because a prophet is informed by and responds to his or her historical times and social location, this study sketches the historical dimensions of Jeremiah's times as they pertain to his character, its development, and the work he must do on behalf of his God and God's people. The study employs in detail the art of rhetorical criticism as well as narrative criticism when necessary, to shed light on Jeremiah as a primary actor in the book of Jeremiah. A focus on the use of various rhetorical forms—imagery, symbolism, metaphor, simile, the use of the vocative, among others—is included in the study of each chapter's texts. Also highlighted is the role imagination plays in Jeremiah's religious experience, and how imaginative religious experience finds its way into Jeremiah's proclamations that become prophetic for his hearers. The study is a synchronic treatment of the Jeremiah material, and one that is text and reader-centered. Finally, the study has a hermeneutical dimension to it that raises questions for continued thought while bringing to the fore various points held up for critical theological and ethical reflection. Thus this study "interfaces" on several levels and in several ways, and includes to some extent an "interface" with the prophetic tradition as well.

Seven chapters and an epilogue comprise this study. Chapter 1, "'Now the Word of the Lord Came to Me . . .': A Poet Graced, A Prophet Afflicted," begins with a detailed study of Jeremiah 1:4-10, which becomes the cornerstone text for the entire discussion that follows in this first and subsequent chapters. The chapter focuses on Jeremiah as the one graced by God and having a mission and word that are deeply personal and profoundly repugnant to his audience.

Chapter 2, "'Declare This in the House of Jacob . . .': A Portrait of Uncompromising Fidelity," features Jeremiah fulfilling the mission ordained by God: he proclaims what God has told him to say and performs certain actions God has commanded him to do. Jeremiah's fidelity to God is the focal point of the chapter. Selected texts also highlight the religious imagination of Jeremiah and the role imagination plays in the prophetic tradition as embodied by him. The breadth of Jeremiah's mission becomes clear through passages that feature him addressing not only the house of Judah but also other nations. His proclamations of woe and comfort attest to the

justice and compassion of God, and feature Jeremiah as God’s poet of chaos and comfort. The chapter focuses on Jeremiah faithfully delivering God’s word and doing what God asks him to do, and boldly proclaiming the divine word of woe to Judah and other nations, though it is not the prophet’s final word to them. Rather, the final word offered is one of divine comfort and promised restoration.

Chapter 3, “Gussied in Loincloth and Sporting a Yoke: Symbols Come to Life,” continues a theme introduced in chapter 2, specifically the theme of symbolic gesture. This chapter features Jeremiah as one who willingly performs a series of symbolic actions commanded by God, the meaning of which God explains to Jeremiah. In this chapter readers see Jeremiah’s life become the living embodiment of what is about to occur historically to his people and the kingdom of Judah.

The central focus of the series in which this study appears comes to light in chapter 4, “In Conversation with God.” This chapter explores God “interfacing” with Jeremiah. Such “interfacing” sheds light not only on Jeremiah but also on Jeremiah’s experience and perception of God.

The theme of “interfacing” continues in chapter 5, “Persistence and Courage in the Face of Opposition and Threat.” Here Jeremiah “interfaces” with a variety of other characters present in the book. Such exchanges continue to elucidate Jeremiah’s person and prophetic vocation and mission.

Chapter 6 portrays Jeremiah known to his God as a person of prayer who, in fact, is seen as one who prays to his God for understanding. This is perhaps the most intimate of all chapters in this study. Jeremiah’s unreserved faith and trust in God stand in stark contrast to his people’s idolatry and apostasy.

More than any other chapter in this study, the final chapter, “The Prophetic Paradox of Letting Go,” focuses on the self-reflective language of Jeremiah, which reveals his inner struggles and pain as he moves from pathos to trust, from imprisonment to freedom, from desperation to conviction. The images of Jeremiah as a preacher of grace and a poet of truth—a prophet *par excellence*—converge in this chapter, suggesting to readers a sense of wonder and awe.

Finally, the Epilogue provides a brief summary, a few concluding remarks, and some implications for readers today. This last section of the study pulls together the character and personality of Jeremiah and suggests to readers how they, too, have the potential to be preachers of grace and poets of truth like Jeremiah, who did in fact live to see the world fall apart around him but whose own life became a living testimony to the enduring and sustaining presence of God whose work of redemption and transformation is never-ending.

Setting the Stage

Before delving into the study of the Jeremiah text itself, we will first give a basic overview of the historical times of Jeremiah, followed by a general introduction to the literary and theological content of the Jeremiah text as a whole, and then a brief comment on the character Jeremiah as a person, a prophet, and a poet.

Approaching the Character and Text of Jeremiah Methodologically

In order to gain insight into the character of Jeremiah and arrive at a holistic understanding of his person as a biblical figure within the prophetic tradition we need first to listen to the biblical text itself, especially to the voice of Jeremiah, whose various proclamations, lamentations, and symbolic gestures are all revelatory of his character, his world, his community, his experience and perception of God, and essentially of God. Woven throughout this study, then, is a historical perspective that takes into account those events that shaped the life, mission, ministry, and preaching of Jeremiah the character as reflected by the biblical text. Attention is also given to certain theological perspectives and influences embedded in the prophet's proclamations, all of which attest to the humanness of the sacred and inspired word of the prophet—a word that will forever be historically, culturally, socially, and theologically conditioned but that, at its core, has the power to transform by exposing, exhorting, encouraging, and envisioning.

Central to gaining knowledge about Jeremiah will be the use of rhetorical criticism, one approach among many biblical methods that focuses on the rhetoric of the biblical text, the function of that rhetoric, and the effects the rhetoric had on an audience in Jeremiah's time and has on subsequent audiences in later eras, including today. Since much of the book of Jeremiah is poetry and since the character Jeremiah is a preacher, rhetorical criticism is one method highly appropriate to the focus of this study and the task at hand.

One of the leading voices in rhetorical criticism has been that of Jack R. Lundbom,¹ who in turn acknowledges that this analytical method for the

¹ For a detailed discussion of rhetorical criticism as it pertains to the study of the book of Jeremiah see Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*. AB 21A (New York: Doubleday, 1999), especially 68–92; idem, *Jeremiah 21–36*. AB 21B (New York: Doubleday, 2004); idem, *Jeremiah 37–52*. AB 21C (New York: Doubleday, 2004); idem, *Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric* (2nd ed. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1997). For additional discussion of rhetorical criticism with respect to the writings of the prophets in general, see also Phyllis

study of discourse was born on American soil more than seventy-five years ago and that he is following in the trail blazed by James Muilenburg. Lundbom's own discussion of rhetorical criticism, as well as his use of it in his study of the book of Jeremiah, informs the present work.

For those engaged in rhetorical criticism, three elements are primary: structure, style, and audience. A rhetorical critic's first task is to identify and delimit units of discourse within the text. Once isolated, these individual units are then defined according to the canons of ancient Hebrew rhetoric, and not categorized according to literary genres superimposed on the various units.² Thus one asks: Is this unit a confession? a proclamation? a prayer? a liturgy for cultic recitation? a letter? a proverb or parable? a memoir? an argument? a narrative? a vision? Following the delimitation of units and the classification of these units into rhetorical forms, the rhetorical critic next pays attention to the literary techniques embedded in the units themselves. These techniques include simile, metaphor, imagery, symbolism, chiasmus, rhetorical questions, particles, wordplays, accumulation, verbal irony, parallelism, merismus, paronomasia, and many more. Attention is also given to catchwords and keywords used within and throughout the rhetorical units. Finally, the rhetorical critic is concerned with the text's primary and later audiences. How might Jeremiah's listeners have heard his proclamations? How do people hear them today? What is the interplay between literary form and technique and Jeremiah's message, and the impact that message has on his present and later audiences with whom he interfaces? What does Jeremiah's rhetoric reveal about himself, his audience, and his God? All of these dimensions will come into play throughout this study.

Because a good portion of the Jeremiah material is prose, and because the book as a whole is a literary work, the use of narrative criticism is also germane to this study.³ Complementing rhetorical criticism with its concern for the audience, narrative criticism considers who the real and implied readers might be. The narrative critic has an eye for the same information as the rhetorical critic but pays careful attention to such elements as point of view, characterization and character development, character traits, setting, conflict, and feelings that a character's actions and words can elicit from an audience, e.g., empathy, sympathy, antipathy.

Trible, *Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*. Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), and Yehoshua Gitay, "Rhetorical Criticism and the Prophetic Discourse," *JSNT* 50 (1991) 13–24.

² For example: a lawsuit, a judgment statement, a call to repentance, etc.

³ For further study of narrative criticism see Mark Allan Powell, *What Is Narrative Criticism?* Guides to Biblical Scholarship (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

Both rhetorical and narrative criticism have within their treasuries the tools for unlocking the wondrous and mysterious person of the character Jeremiah, and still more: the impetus for unleashing a compelling vision and vocation needed for the ongoing transformation of the entire planet.

The Historical Times and Social World of Jeremiah

The period between 627 B.C.E. and approximately 581 B.C.E., when Jeremiah is said to have lived, was a time of political upheaval, social unrest, and religious turbulence. Two of the great world powers and archrivals were Assyria and Babylon, with Assyria being the stronger of the two during the earlier part of the period. Assyria ruled by terror, and one of its major achievements was the invasion of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, an event that led to the deportation of countless numbers of Israelites. The gradual realignment of world powers, however, resulted in the toppling of the Assyrian empire, an event that paved the way for the rise of Babylon in Assyria's place. Governed by King Nebuchadnezzar, this new superpower had a voracious appetite for expansion. Babylon became the greatest threat to Judah, the surviving kingdom in the land of Israel, a situation that evoked a profound and sustained response from Jeremiah as he repeatedly warned the Judahites about what was to be their great misfortune in the national arena—the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the loss of the entire Southern Kingdom—all of which did happen. Jeremiah's preaching reflected and was informed and influenced by these events, the details of which will now be unraveled in order to provide a more comprehensive view of the world into which Jeremiah was born and that later received his word of grace, his message of truth.

Before the death of Solomon, around 922 B.C.E., Israel was a united country, but when Solomon died the kingdom split into two rival states: Israel and Judah, known as the Northern and Southern Kingdoms respectively. The capital of Israel was Samaria; the capital of Judah was Jerusalem. These two separate kingdoms had military regimes of their own as well as two different governments and religious practices. Israel was the larger and wealthier of the two kingdoms, but both were invaded by imperial Egypt at different intervals during their history, and both battled with their neighbors—Israel with the Arameans and Moabites, and Judah with the Edomites.

In the eighth century B.C.E. Israel and Judah both prospered, until the latter half of the century when geopolitical and religious events gravely affected both kingdoms. At that time Assyria, under the rule of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.E.), was one of the strongest empires in the region. Assyria sought to increase its power base through territorial expansion, overrunning

small, less powerful, vulnerable nations. In order to protect themselves against Assyria many of the smaller nations attempted to form a coalition, a move led by Rezin of the Aramean state of Damascus and Pekah ben Remaliah, ruler of Israel (737–732 B.C.E.), who came into power after he had usurped the throne of Israel's previous king. Both Rezin and Pekah ben Remaliah wanted Judah to join the coalition, but Judah's king Ahaz (735–715 B.C.E.) refused in an attempt to maintain Judah's independence.

Ahaz's decision not to join the coalition was met with opposition and in 735–732 B.C.E. brought on the so-called Syro-Ephraimite crisis, with Israel and Damascus allied against Judah. The Southern Kingdom was invaded as Rezin and Pekah ben Remaliah plotted to overthrow Ahaz. With his land under siege and his throne threatened, Ahaz lost trust in God and appealed to Tiglath-pileser III for assistance, a move the prophet Isaiah strongly contested. In order to secure the Assyrian king's support Ahaz sent him a large gift (see 2 Kgs 16:7-8). In return, Tiglath-pileser III moved against the Syro-Ephraimite coalition and destroyed it, thwarting its attempt to seize Judah and depose Ahaz. Tiglath-pileser then marched into Israel, took control of the Israelite lands in Galilee and the Transjordan, turned them into three Assyrian provinces, and destroyed Damascus in 732 B.C.E. Under the royal rule of Hoshea (732–724 B.C.E.) Israel became a small vassal state subject to Assyria. Judah remained an Assyrian vassal state until Assyria itself collapsed.

Incorporation into Assyria's power base did not offer Judah a respite from its geopolitical problems, though the threat of complete annihilation by another country or countries was greatly reduced for a brief period of time. The price Judah had to send to Assyria for assistance, however, was steep. As a vassal state Judah had to pay tribute to Assyria, and Ahaz had to appear before Tiglath-pileser in Damascus and pay homage to Assyria's gods at a bronze altar there. Ahaz then had to set up a copy of this altar in Jerusalem's Temple (see 2 Kgs 16:10-15). For the Judahites the religious stipulations were costly, but the kingdom's submission to Tiglath-pileser at these early stages of Assyria's rise to power perhaps safeguarded Judah against what Israel would eventually experience—invasion by the Assyrians and total collapse as a kingdom.

Because of a renewed spirit of rebellion among the Israelites led by Hoshea, who sought the help of Egypt, Shalmaneser V (727–722 B.C.E.), Tiglath-pileser's successor, became enraged with his vassal. He marched into Israel, took Hoshea prisoner, and occupied the land except for the capital city of Samaria, which eventually fell in 722/1 B.C.E. Thus the Northern Kingdom came to an end as Sargon II (722–704 B.C.E.) succeeded Shalmaneser V as Assyria's new king.

Israel's downfall was most likely due to internal political instability; six kings had ruled within twenty-five years. According to the biblical text, however, the kingdom's demise is said to have stemmed from the people's social depravity and religious infidelities that involved the worship of other gods and forgetfulness of Yhwh and Yhwh's covenant. There were also countless violations of Torah, especially worship of the Canaanite fertility god Baal alongside Yhwh (see 2 Kgs 17:7-18). Torah called Israel to single-heartedness. The prophet Hosea railed repeatedly against these transgressions but met with little, if any, success. The people continued in their duplicitous ways until such ways led to their own downfall.

Judah was aware of Israel's vulnerable situation before Shalmaneser V and before God, knew of the consequences endured, yet followed a similar path, trusting in the false pretense of the Zion Tradition and the inviolability of Jerusalem. From the Judahites' perspective the Temple was God's dwelling place, Jerusalem was God's holy city, and they were part of God's chosen people. No harm could come to them, regardless of their deeds—or so they thought.

Ahaz's successor was his son Hezekiah (715–687 B.C.E.). Hezekiah tried to reverse his father's policy. Since Judah was suffering from widespread and all-pervasive apostasy during Ahaz's reign, Hezekiah's first order of business was to usher in a religious reform and to instill a sense of patriotism into the Judahites that, he hoped, would lead them to want to seek independence from Assyria. Under Hezekiah's leadership Judah experienced a sweeping reform that had widespread positive social impact as well, all of which was needed to deal with the internal injustices that also plagued the kingdom. While Sargon II reigned, Hezekiah made no attempt to rebel against Assyria. It should be noted that Assyria also had control of Egypt at this time, with Sargon II plotting to reconquer Babylon even though Babylon's king Merodach-baladan was holding out against Assyria's efforts to depose him. Sargon II's son Sennacherib (704–681 B.C.E.) succeeded him, and under Sennacherib's reign Hezekiah, king of the vassal state Judah, made his move. He refused to pay the required tribute to Assyria (see 2 Kgs 18:7), thus asserting Judah's independence.

Hezekiah joined a coalition against Sennacherib and Assyria and sent envoys to Egypt in an effort to negotiate a treaty with that country as well (see Isa 30:1-7; 31:1-3). Egypt was committed to acting against Assyria. Sennacherib organized his troops and crushed the coalition in 701 B.C.E. Judah could not withstand Assyria, did not gain its independence, and was forced to pay Assyria a heavily increased tribute (see 2 Kgs 18:9–19:37). Assyria then turned its attention to rebellious Babylon, which it succeeded in overpowering in 689 B.C.E.

In Judah, King Manasseh (687–642 B.C.E.) succeeded his father Hezekiah. Unlike his father, Manasseh led Judah into becoming a noble vassal state; Judah gave full submission to Assyria, which reached the zenith of its power during Manasseh's reign. Led by Sennacherib's successors Esarhaddon (681–669 B.C.E.) and Ashurbanipal (669–627 B.C.E.), Assyria invaded Egypt and destroyed its capital in 663 B.C.E. Manasseh, for his part, followed in the ways of his grandfather Ahaz, beginning with the recognition of Assyria's gods. Such recognition led to other religious changes initiated by Manasseh. These included the restoration of local shrines, tolerance of the fertility cult with its sacred prostitution in the Temple precincts (see 2 Kgs 21:4-7; Zeph 1:4-5), permission for human sacrifice to the god Molech (2 Kgs 21:6), the erection of Asherah, and the worship of Baal and other astral deities. Amon (642–640 B.C.E.), Manasseh's son and successor, followed his father's policies. During Amon's reign Assyria under Ashurbanipal began to decline in power. Amon was assassinated, and Manasseh's eight-year-old grandson, Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.), became king.

Assyria's decline in power eventually provided Josiah with an opportunity to seek, once again, Judah's independence from Assyria. Like Hezekiah, Josiah made sweeping reforms, which included reviving and renewing the covenant spirit and the Passover feast. During Josiah's reign, Jeremiah began his ministry as a prophet. Josiah's reform did not achieve its intended widespread success.

Ashurballit II succeeded Ashurbanipal. Babylon, under Nabopolassar, revolted against the Assyrians from 626 to 612 B.C.E., when Nineveh was finally destroyed, leaving the Assyrians no option but to retreat to Haran. The Babylonians eventually overran Haran in 610 B.C.E., and the Assyrian empire came to an end. Josiah died tragically in 609 B.C.E. Judah fell under at least nominal control of Egypt, and Babylon became the new world power.

Jehoiakim (609–598 B.C.E.) succeeded Josiah and allowed the reforms to lapse. Pagan practices became widespread (see, e.g., Jer 7:16-18; 11:9-13); the people became dispirited once again and continued in their socially and morally corrupt ways (see, e.g., Jer 5:26-29; 7:1-15). In Babylon, Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar succeeded him. Jehoiakim, seeking independence from Egypt, seems to have transferred his allegiance to Nebuchadnezzar, thus making Judah a vassal state of Babylon (see 2 Kgs 24:1). Once again Judah's fortunes were in the hands of a powerful empire that, like Assyria, had ruthless and arrogant ambitions of its own. However, when Babylon launched an attack against Egypt and was not overwhelmingly victorious, Jehoiakim interpreted the situation as a sign of Babylon's weakness. He seized the opportunity to rebel against Babylon (see 2 Kgs 24:1). His rebellion was the beginning of the demise of Judah at the hands of the Babylonians.

In 598 B.C.E. Jehoiakim died as the Babylonians began their march into Judah. Jehoiakim's eighteen-year-old son, Jehoiachin, succeeded his father (2 Kgs 24:8), and his reign was less than three months old when Jerusalem surrendered to the Babylonians (March 16, 597 B.C.E.). Jehoiachin, his mother, several central officials, and a number of key citizens were exiled to Babylon. Zedekiah (597–587 B.C.E.) was put on the throne to replace Jehoiachin. Judah persisted in its rebellious spirit and its corrupt internal ways. Political and social strife as well as religious depravity left Judah in chaos and vulnerable to attack. Many Judahites still considered Jehoiachin their king, which undermined the authority of Zedekiah. Still rebellious against Babylon, Judah met its fate in July of 587 B.C.E. when the Babylonians breached Jerusalem's walls and took the city. Zedekiah and some of his soldiers fled, only to be captured by Nebuchadnezzar's forces. Zedekiah was brought before the Babylonian king, who executed Zedekiah's sons as Zedekiah watched. He then blinded Zedekiah and took him in chains to Babylon, where Zedekiah eventually died (2 Kgs 25:6-7; Jer 52:9-11). Shortly after that Nebuzaradan, one of Nebuchadnezzar's commanders, torched Jerusalem, leveled its walls, and destroyed its Temple. The Judahites were exiled to Babylon and Egypt, and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, like Israel before it, came to an end. The biblical character Jeremiah lived through the harrowing reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah. He witnessed the fall of Jerusalem and the end of Judah, and was himself exiled to Egypt.

Jeremiah's preaching is to be understood against the background of all these events of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C.E. as well as some of what happened earlier to Israel in the eighth century B.C.E. Indeed, Jeremiah's task as a prophet was monumental and his vision almost surreal. True to his vocation, he remained faithful to his preaching, his vision, and his God, despite all odds and despite the eventual loss of everything for Judah, which he knew was inevitable. Furthermore, Jeremiah understood all these events as Judah's "just desserts" from God for its internal political, social, and religious depravity. One of Jeremiah's several rousing proclamations delivered at the Temple gate provides a glimpse into the situation of his community:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. Here you are, trusting in deceptive words to no avail. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after

other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, “We are safe!”—only to go on doing all these abominations? Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your sight? You know, I too am watching, says the LORD. (Jer 7:5-11)

God’s chosen people, who had been called to holiness, abandoned their God, broke covenant, chose another path, and in doing so cast the die for their own future disastrous course. The rampant injustice, loss of integrity, and debilitating discord left a once strong and vibrant community splintered within and prey to the ravenous appetite of the world’s strongest empire, which eventually gobbled them up.⁴

The Literary Dimensions of the Book of Jeremiah

The literary composition of Jeremiah has sparked a lively conversation among scholars for years. The most active controversy has been the prose-poetry debate, which tried to determine which type of material was “authentic Jeremiah.” This debate led earlier scholars, e.g., Friedrich Giesebrecht (1894) to assume multiple sources in the text of Jeremiah.⁵ This idea of sources is largely a moot point today, although the common rhetorical tradition shared by the book of Jeremiah, the book of Deuteronomy, and the Deuteronomistic History is still an area of inquiry among contemporary scholars. The text’s portrayal of Jeremiah is also debated.

With respect to the book’s overall structure, scholars’ proposals vary. Common among the suggestions is that chapters 1–25 consist of a series of prophetic messages; chapters 26–33 contain a famous Temple speech (ch. 26), followed by a series of conflicts between true and false prophets (chs. 27–29), and the Book of Consolation (chs. 30–33). Chapters 34–45 are a narrative account of what happened to Jeremiah in the last days of Judah, up to his exile to Egypt.

As a work of literary artistry the book of Jeremiah is rich in rhetorical form and technique; it includes, among other forms, psalms of praise, petition,

⁴ For further discussion of the historical and social world of Jeremiah see John Bright, *A History of Israel* (4th ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), especially 269–339; Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the Book of Jeremiah 1–25* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988); Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, especially 102–106; and Henry McKeating, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 1999).

⁵ In his commentary (Jeremiah 1–20, 57–101) Lundbom succinctly outlines the prose and poetry debate as well as other literary issues generic to the book of Jeremiah.

and thanksgiving, individual and communal laments, a letter, and a parable. Dialogues between God and Jeremiah and the speeches Jeremiah delivers to his community are often poignant, heart-wrenching, consciousness-stinging, and heart-warming. Perhaps no other book in the prophetic corpus contains as moving and dramatic a collection of speeches as is found in the so-called “confessions” or laments of Jeremiah, where the poet bares his heart to God and prays through the pain associated with his prophetic office and vocation. Many of the rhetorical forms and techniques reveal Jeremiah as a gifted and talented preacher who is able to appeal to the heart, mind, moral conscience, and religious imagination of his community who, after hearing his message, often failed to heed it.

Theological Themes in the Book of Jeremiah

The overall fabric of the book of Jeremiah consists of announcements of doom and proclamations of hope. To examine these texts closely is to discover that embedded in these speeches, as well as in the book as a whole, is Jeremiah’s own theology and theological perspective, reflecting the influence of both the Exodus and Wisdom traditions as well as many of the concerns of earlier prophets. Jeremiah’s God is the God of creation⁶ who “knows” people, events, and what the future holds,⁷ who “remembers” (Jer 2:2; 14:10), who “sees” and acts, who is perceived as a righteous judge (Jer 11:20) and merciful (Jer 3:12), and who can be overpowering (Jer 20:7).⁸

Central to the book of Jeremiah is “the word of the Lord.” For Jeremiah, God’s “word” is central to his vocation and his preaching. This divine word is powerful. It moves Jeremiah to proclaim weal and woe, hope and comfort. Uncontrollable and all-consuming, it leads Jeremiah to an awareness of what is and a consciousness of what will be.

Two major themes that run through the book as a whole are sin-judgment and repentance-redemption-salvation. Embedded in these two themes is a theology of suffering. Jeremiah’s community suffers because of its estrangement from God and its powerlessness in the face of an aggressive and powerful empire. This empire’s charted course of conquest leads to destruction and exile. Consequently, the religious experience of Jeremiah’s people, in the wake of such a horrific life experience, is nothing less than the excruciating pain that comes from the perception that, indeed, the God of Israel who had

⁶ See, e.g., Jer 5:22, 24; 14:22; 27:5.

⁷ See, e.g., Jer 1:5; 12:3; 15:15; 18:23; 29:11-23; 33:3.

⁸ For further discussion of Jeremiah’s experiences of God see Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 144.

promised to remain faithful to the Israelite community has now, once and for all, abandoned the people. The rubble of the two kingdoms, described above, reflects the condition of the community: a heap of smoldering embers out of which will arise a spark to ignite the process of repentance, redemption, and restoration of the community, and the return of the community to its land.

As a member of his community, Jeremiah suffers because he sees the path his people have chosen. He is rebuffed and rebuked when he speaks out against their odious ways and choices. He bears not only the pain of the oppressed within the community, the pain of the impending and eventual loss of Judah, and the personal pain of having to do “the right thing” demanded by his prophetic vocation and office, but also the pain of God who agonizes over the people’s infidelity and the tragedies that are about to befall them as a result of their internal strife and discord. And yet both Jeremiah the character and Jeremiah the book are essentially about a theology of hope, first expressed in Jeremiah 1:10:

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.

The newly emerging vision is contained within the leveling process of the old; exposure of infidelities and injustices provides the requisite fertilized terrain on which hope can once again spring eternal.

The Prophetic Persona and Jeremiah

In order to appreciate Jeremiah as a passionate, prophetic, and poetic preacher we need to know something about the prophetic persona and tradition Jeremiah so clearly embodies.

The prophet is one who is madly in love with God and God’s people. Usually a very “ordinary” person, the prophet is often God’s “surprise” to a group of people, presenting them with an unexpected word, insight, or vision that can either jar and cut to the quick or comfort, soothe, and salve a bleeding wound, a broken dream, a shattered life. Delivering God’s word is never easy, and as Jack Lundbom observes, “the prophet has to be as hard as a rock even while [he is] being torn apart inside.”⁹ Thus to be prophetic

⁹ Ibid.

and to embrace the prophetic tradition is to embrace and free that Spirit of God within the context of one's own life and in relation to one's sense of mission that is always divinely ordained.

As a vocation, the prophetic office and way of life are, together, a profound gift that demands a freedom of spirit and a willingness to let go to God. The vocation carries with it a responsibility to God, to God's people, and to God's creation. Often feeling a sense of reluctance about assuming and bearing this responsibility, a prophet is called not to be successful but to be faithful. Perhaps the greatest gift a prophet can give to a community is to become the living embodiment of God's Spirit. Thus a prophet becomes prophetic through his and her life and being, and not just through deeds. This integration of a prophet's being and work in the context of the prophetic tradition helps, then, to link the prophet to both the mystical and apostolic traditions. In the character of Jeremiah we can discover these links if we are willing to forego a more traditional understanding of prophets and prophecy.

The person whose life reflects the vocation of the prophetic office and way of life lived in the context of the prophetic tradition, and who, in turn, can thus be viewed as a "prophet," speaks about concrete things and events, hears the silent sigh of the powerless and oppressed, feels the pain of the oppressor, and intercedes to God for all. Gifted with tremendous passion, heightened sensibilities, and enlivened imagination, the prophet speaks with authority the hard word that wells up and gushes forth from the deep reservoir of uncompromised love. Often living life both on the periphery and on the cutting edge, the prophet is someone who remains faithful to God, faithful to the community, and faithful to the mission, even if it means having to stand alone. A servant of the divine word and vision, the prophet becomes the one capable of leading all to wholeness and holiness in the measure that the prophet is willing "to act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with God" (Mic 6:8). Jeremiah, the central actor in the book of Jeremiah, is God's prophet and the living symbol of God's fidelity to a community even in its most depraved state and painful moments. In Jeremiah, Israel can find hope. In the midst of destruction and Exile, he lives on in his words. He is God's promise to Israel that, indeed, the final word is not death but life. The drama of Jeremiah's life unfolds in a series of events that finds him confronting not only the political and religious leaders of his day but also his own people as well as the leaders and peoples of other nations. Through his proclamations and those people with whom he interfaces in the course of his mission and ministry we are able to catch a glimpse of his character that continues to challenge, inspire, and disturb people today who encounter him amid the leaves of the biblical text.

Jeremiah: Preacher of Grace, Poet of Truth

The book of Jeremiah opens with a superscription that contextualizes Jeremiah historically (1:1-3). Immediately following the superscription, Jeremiah the character introduces himself to us. He begins his life story by sharing with us who he is. His understanding of himself and his life's work was not something he arrived at on his own. It was revealed to him by God, and this divine revelation is the first word Jeremiah shares with us. Jeremiah tells us that God had chosen him to be a prophet before he was born, and that, despite his reluctance, he really had no choice in the matter. He was going wherever and to whomever God would send him, and as far as his feelings of inadequacy were concerned, they were not to be stumbling blocks. God knew what Jeremiah needed. God prepared Jeremiah's mouth for speech, provided him with the necessary words, made him a promise of enduring divine presence and deliverance, and gave him knowledge of his mission. This mission involved the destruction of an old world order and its myriad injustices and experiences of exile. The new world order that would emerge gradually from the ashes of the old would be characterized by justice, covenant relationship with God, and right relationship with one another.

As he narrates his life story, Jeremiah tells us that as part of his vocation as a prophet he was the recipient of intuitive visions, some of which included a branch of an almond tree (1:11), a boiling pot (1:13), and good and bad figs (24:1-10). Each of these visions was connected to divine revelations about what was to befall his people and his land because of the people's wicked ways. He also tells us that his life as a prophet entailed a series of divine promises meant to strengthen him internally so that he could deliver the divine word of judgment against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and all the people of the land. Jeremiah tells us that God promised to make him a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall (1:18-19). His strength would not be his own; it would be a divine gift.

Jeremiah also tells us that as part of his prophetic work he had to perform various symbolic actions like remaining celibate (16:1-4) and buying a field during the siege of his people's land (32:1-15).¹⁰ These symbolic actions served not only to offer his people a warning of the disasters about to befall them, but also to give them a promise of hope that they could remember when disaster struck. Restoration, not destruction, annihilation, or exile, was God's ultimate intention and vision.

¹⁰ For other examples see Jer 13:1-11: the linen loincloth; 13:12-14: the wine-jars; 19:1-15: the broken earthenware jug; 25:15-29: the cup of God's wrath; and 27:1-22: the sign of the yoke.

Jeremiah's proclamations provide us with an insight into his multifaceted work as a prophet. The content of his proclamations also sheds light on his character. With candor, boldness, and searing honesty, Jeremiah railed against the prophets of his day—those who are false prophets (5:13, 30-31; 14:15-17; 23:9-40) and those who, as true prophets, have corrupted their prophetic office and vocation (23:13-15). He exposed the hypocrisy of the priests (5:31; 27:16-22) and the foolhardiness of other religious leaders (10:21), and he did not cower before kings (22:11-30; 27:1-15; 34:1-22; 37:1-21) or people in general whose injustices he tried to stop from becoming a permanent part of the fabric of daily life (5:20-31; 6:13-15; 9:1-6; 10:1-16; 17:1-13). His confrontations uncovered not only the hard-heartedness of his people but also their arrogance. They were without the capacity to be critically self-reflective, and consequently they saw themselves as “innocent” (2:35). They rested in their thought that God had turned divine anger away from them (2:35) because in their eyes they had not sinned (2:35).

Such hard-heartedness evoked two responses from God. Jeremiah tells us that, on the one hand, God is completely anguished over the wicked state of the people (4:9-31). Jeremiah communicates God's word, experience, and grief: “My joy is gone; grief is upon me; my heart is sick” (8:18, 19-21; see also 4:19-31). On the other hand, Jeremiah lets us know that God is completely disgusted with the people's wrongdoings and covenant betrayal (11:17). Jeremiah tells us how God ordered him not to pray for the people (7:16-20; 14:11-12). God's disgust and anger, however, are not the prevailing sentiments. Jeremiah reminds us that he repeatedly called the people to return (3:14), to repent (3:14; 4:1-4), to take up weeping and wailing (9:10). Furthermore, Jeremiah assures the people that God will not be angry forever, if only the people will acknowledge their guilt (3:22-23). The people, however, did not repent; they refused to return to God (8:4-13). Jeremiah has given us a view into the hardened nature of his people and has shown us through his proclamations how disconnected they are from their God and God's ways (5:1-3). Despite the people's hard-heartedness and God's grief and anger, God, as Jeremiah tells us, will remain faithful to covenant relationship. Healing after divine chastisement and restoration after exile are promises that, in time, will come to fulfillment (23:1-8; 30-31; 33:1-13). Thus we see that Jeremiah's vocation as a prophet is bittersweet, and even if the divine word to be proclaimed is either bitter or sweet, Jeremiah makes no distinction in his efforts. He simply proclaims it even though it may cause him pain and distress at times (11:18-20). He performs his task faithfully. He lives out his vocation as prophet regardless of its cost to him personally, though he shows us that he is not silent about his struggles, nor is he shy in expressing his sentiments to his God (20:7-18).

The main character with whom Jeremiah interfaces throughout his life is God, who gives Jeremiah the word that must be proclaimed, who shows Jeremiah what the future holds for his land, his people, and his world, and who compels Jeremiah to address all sorts of people. Jeremiah has shown us not only the hard-heartedness of his people but also, as depicted by the biblical writer, the retributive side to God who threatens to bring evil upon peoples and nations for the evils they have done (11:17). Jeremiah is aware of this retributive side of God and appeals to it. Jeremiah wants divine retribution on his enemies (11:18-20; 12:1-4; 18:19-23; 20:12). God's response, however, is neither retributive nor compassionate. God, instead, challenges Jeremiah to remain steadfast in his ways (12:5-6). Despite all odds, Jeremiah trusts in his God (20:11), hopes in his God (20:13), and in the face of divine sovereignty and power he does not flinch from expressing his strong feelings about God to God directly (10:25; 15:15-18). He even challenges God about God's ways (5:3). Jeremiah, God's prophet whom God has empowered, is not shy and retiring in his relationship with his God. He is assertive. Just as God calls Jeremiah to task, so Jeremiah calls God to task.

As Jeremiah's relationship with his God continues to unfold in the midst of his unfolding life story, we see an unassuming side to Jeremiah's life. He did not immediately realize that some of his own people were indeed his "enemies," plotting against him (11:18-19). He became aware of his fate, as well as the people's evil deeds, only after God made such things known to him (11:18). He also had to rely on God to help him distinguish between true and false prophets (14:13-18). Thus Jeremiah learns what he has to know in the course of his life and mission as a prophet. Both his strength of character and his knowledge and awareness evolve in relation to his vocation, until he is able to say to the officials and people in his land: "But as for me, here I am in your hands. Do with me as seems good and right to you" (26:14). Having grown confident in God's promise to deliver him, Jeremiah continues to be faithful to his God and his mission, and when he encounters persecution (20:1-6) and life-threatening experiences (38:1-6) he neither fights against nor curses his enemies. His non-aggressive response remains constant and sheds light on his inner strength, his faith, his single-heartedness and single-mindedness, and his commitment to justice and the divine vision and hope for transformation. Even though he takes no action against his enemies except to talk to them directly, he remains true to himself and does speak out in justice on his own behalf (37:13-14). He is quick to confront King Zedekiah about the unjust imprisonment the king imposed on him (37:18-21).

Jeremiah's interfacing with other characters shows us not only his strength of character but also his strong sense of self. Under divine compulsion to

proclaim God's word, he remains self-possessed with regard to his own experiences suffered on behalf of the divine mission given to him. He expresses his agony to his God, but to his enemies he raises a question that points up their wickedness (37:18), offers a word of encouragement after acknowledging God's role in his work and in their lives (26:12-13), and simply endures his unjust persecution, which becomes the impetus for one person—Ebedmelech the Ethiopian and “outsider”—to speak to King Zedekiah on Jeremiah's behalf. Ebedmelech acknowledges the injustice done to “the prophet Jeremiah” by the men who acted “wickedly” in throwing him into a cistern to die (38:8-9). Little did Ebedmelech know, perhaps, that the king had washed his hands earlier of Jeremiah's fate when he handed the prophet over to the officials who told the king lies about Jeremiah's activities, claiming that he was seeking the people's harm and not their welfare (38:4-5). The intercession of one righteous man, Ebedmelech, saves Jeremiah's life (38:10-13) and gives us an insight into God's saving activity, which is accomplished not only directly by God, but also through people.

Finally, Jeremiah, God's prophet par excellence, is a great poet skilled and trained in the rhetoric of his day. He has the capacity to engage an audience, as evidenced by his people's responsive reactions to him. A man of symbolic action, Jeremiah is a maker of metaphors and a weaver of images. Through the use of various literary techniques he captures with gusto the realities of both his day and his community, and despite his having to make harsh and disturbing announcements he tells his audience the truth about themselves, their life with their God, and the perceived threat about to befall them. Thus even Jeremiah's most foreboding messages are moments of grace, if only his people will heed his word and respond accordingly. It is my view, then, that both the judgment and salvation proclamations offer a double-visioned sense of hope, one that demands a change of heart and could lead to redemption, and one that bespeaks restoration and renewal, leading to transformation. Jeremiah's great love of God and God's people, his firm commitment to a divinely ordained sense of mission, his willingness to be God's servant-leader, so much so that his life is profoundly knitted to God and God to him, his rhetorical skill as an orator, and his openness to bear the cost of being prophetic, no matter what it may be, make him a preacher of grace and a poet of truth.

What follows in the next chapters of this book is a glimpse of Jeremiah interfacing with the most important person in his life—God—who in turn pushes Jeremiah to “interface” with the people of his day. All these characters with whom Jeremiah interfaces show us that God's vision for salvation and transformation is accomplished through relationship and the interaction with the events of daily life, both locally and globally.

CHAPTER ONE

“Now the Word of the LORD Came to Me . . .”: A Poet Graced, A Prophet Afflicted



Introduction

Little did Jeremiah realize that when God extended the divine hand to touch his mouth, his life would never be the same. Known by God before he was formed in the womb, consecrated and appointed a prophet to the nations before he was born, and destined to become a “fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall against the whole land” (Jer 1:18), this person named Jeremiah, who saw himself as “only a boy” (Jer 1:6), had no idea what was in store for him. He had no idea that for many he would become a poet graced as he himself became a prophet afflicted. This first chapter begins the magnificent story of a marvelous biblical character who, as God’s prophet, is a reminder of God’s enduring, transformative presence and compassionate face even when all is lost and seems for naught. As God’s prophet this man called “Jeremiah” is a thorn in his people’s side, but at the same time he is their greatest hope. And so begins the poetic story of a prophet and the journey of his life.

Jeremiah 1:4-10: Call and Commission

For Jeremiah the drama of his life begins with his divine call and commission (1:4-10), a vocation given and a directive revealed that will eventually turn his own personal world upside down and inside out as the physical world around him spirals downward toward its own demise. And yet, there is hope. . . .

Following a brief superscription that situates Jeremiah and his message in a historical context, Jeremiah addresses his unnamed and thus timeless audience with a familiar statement: “Now the word of the LORD came to me”

(v. 4). Immediately Jeremiah engages his audience with his straightforwardness and story-like proclamation signaled by the word “now,” which he uses in a narrative rather than a temporal sense. One can picture Jeremiah enthusiastic and filled with a sense of awe and wonder from having had an experience of God and having been encountered by God’s word, an experience he just cannot wait to share with others. From a historical and narrative perspective verse 4 gives authority to Jeremiah’s proclamation and helps to legitimate him as a prophet.

In verses 5-10 Jeremiah recounts his wonder-filled experience, which involves a dialogue between God and Jeremiah. God tells Jeremiah:

“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.”

By using a poetic catalogue of verb clusters—“I formed you,” “I knew you,” “I consecrated you,” “I appointed you”—Jeremiah emphasizes that his vocation is divinely ordained. Furthermore, by twice repeating the word “before,” Jeremiah forms a unity of time and sense between the first and second colon, and indicates to his audience that it was indeed God’s intention that he should be a prophet. “I formed you” recalls the creation account (cf. Gen 2:7), “I knew you” implies intimate knowledge, and “I consecrated you” connotes being “set apart.” Through the use of the phrase “I appointed you a prophet to the nations” Jeremiah lets his audience know the extent of his mission.

Jeremiah next shares with his audience his candid response to God:

“Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak,
for I am only a boy.”

Jeremiah reveals to his listeners and readers his initial hesitation and unease at such a mission. His comments indicate how he perceives himself: unskilled and without the wisdom needed for such a daunting task. Jeremiah then acknowledges that God was not going to accept his lack of skill and wisdom as an excuse. His next words, “But the LORD said to me,” continue to frame and unify the dialogue. Jack R. Lundbom notes that “this introductory phrase, which is repeated in verses 9, 12, 14; 3:6 (expanded), 11; 11:6, 9, and elsewhere, is precisely the phrase that introduces the ‘prophet like Moses’ promise of Deuteronomy 18:17.”¹ On a rhetorical level the use of this phrase at this point in the book of Jeremiah situates Jeremiah in the prophetic tradition of Moses.

¹ Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*. AB 21A (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 233.

In verses 7-8 Jeremiah again quotes for his audience what God had said to him:

“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,
and you shall speak whatever I command you,
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you,”
says the LORD.

Here Jeremiah makes known to his listeners and readers God’s rebuttal of his argument, and also points out that his mission will be divinely directed and lived out within the context of divine promise. With this divine promise given, God ushers Jeremiah into the company of renowned ancestors who have also received the same promise: Jacob (Gen 28:15), Moses (Exod 3:12), Joshua (Josh 1:5), Gideon (Judg 6:16), and others. This same promise will be repeated to Jeremiah two more times (see 1:19 and 15:20), and will also be extended to Israel (30:11). With this divine promise Jeremiah foreshadows his own personal experience (see Jeremiah 38–39), which will one day be Israel’s, after the people’s experience of exile. This promise later becomes a source of hope for Jeremiah in the context of his painful suffering (Jer 20:11-13).

Jeremiah next recounts God’s further interactions with him (vv. 9-10). God touches Jeremiah’s mouth, and in so doing gives him the divine words he needs to accomplish his mission. This action on God’s part fulfills what was promised in Deuteronomy 18:18; Jeremiah is a “prophet like Moses.”

Jeremiah then relates the last part of his story. After God had put the divine words into his mouth, Jeremiah learned the full extent of his task:

“See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant.”

What Jeremiah learns is that God’s intention for him in verse 5 has now become part of God’s commissioning him (v. 10). Jeremiah’s verb clusters indicate the types of activities his vocation will entail. In the context of the book of Jeremiah and its overall message the verbs speak of both judgment and hope. Embedded in these verb clusters are royal and agrarian images that apply to both foreign nations and Israel. Lands will be ravaged, monarchies toppled, cities and a temple destroyed, but only to pave the way for new building and new planting in a new world order. Devastation, then, will not

be for the sake of annihilation, but rather for the purpose of reconstruction, rebuilding, restoration, and renewal—a new life lived in accordance with God’s ways and vision.

Looking at the passage as a whole, listeners and readers experience Jeremiah not only as a marvelous poet but also as a great storyteller. Like Moses, Jeremiah talks with God as one would with a friend. The dialogue indicates a level of trust and intimacy between God and Jeremiah. God has entrusted Jeremiah with a vocation and mission and, though reluctant at first, he embraces God’s desire, call, commission, and mission. For Jeremiah’s listeners and readers this passage establishes the prophet’s credibility and authority as a prophet. For Jeremiah’s own people the message for them is that in their midst is one who is empowered by God and will act with God’s power. Such a person is both a source of hope and a figure to be feared.

From Jeremiah’s poetic story of his experience with God we also receive an understanding of God and God’s intentions. Jeremiah’s God is one who plans to remain interactive in human lives and in the course of history, who has a divine plan of salvation in whose unfolding humanity plays an intricate role. Jeremiah’s God is persuasive, caring, reassuring, and yet determined.

Finally, Jeremiah’s poetic story makes clear that a direct encounter with God is possible for humanity. The contents of that encounter, when revealed, become prophetic insofar as they reveal something about the mystery of God and God’s ways.

Jeremiah 1:11-19: Revelation, Challenges, and Promises

Having told his listeners about how he was called and commissioned by God (Jer 1:4-10), Jeremiah continues his story by describing his further encounter with God and the two visions that were part of that experience. The phrase “the word of the LORD came to me . . .” subdivides verses 11-16 into two smaller units, 11-12 and 13-16. In the first subunit the main symbol is an almond tree branch; in the second it is a boiling pot. Both symbols are related to the impending doom that is about to befall the southern kingdom, Judah: the Babylonian invasion that will result in the loss of land, the burning of the Holy City Jerusalem, and the devastation of the Temple. Furthermore, in both subunits there is a natural exchange of dialogue between God and Jeremiah. This encounter and exchange provide credence to Jeremiah as a prophet and situate him in the context of the entire prophetic tradition. He has had an experience of God, the contents of which are meant to inform and serve as a warning to his own community.

To look at verses 11-16 more closely is to discover something about the characters of God and Jeremiah through their interaction with each other. We can also, perhaps, come to a better understanding of what an experience of God is like in the context of the prophetic tradition. In this passage Jeremiah is not only telling his audience a story; he is also teaching them a lesson. Let's listen:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying, “Jeremiah, what do you see?” and I said, “I see a branch of an almond tree.” Then the LORD said to me, “You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.” The word of the LORD came to me a second time, saying, “What do you see?” And I said, “I see a boiling pot, tilted away from the north.”

Then the LORD said to me: Out of the north disaster shall break out on all the inhabitants of the land. For now I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, says the LORD; and they shall come and all of them shall set their thrones at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its surrounding walls and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have made offerings to other gods, and worshiped the works of their own hands. But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them. And I for my part have made you today a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall, against the whole land—against the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests, and the people of the land. They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you. (vv. 11-16)

When Jeremiah says to his audience, “The word of the LORD came to me,” he is sending them a double message. First, he wants his listeners to know that what he is about to tell them is not something he concocted. Rather, it is a word that “came” to him. Hence it is a message that seems to have been revealed to him intuitively at first, which he later preached, and which was later written down. Second, Jeremiah wants his listeners to know that the origin of the message is divine: God is its initiator (vv. 11, 13). For Jeremiah's listeners this simple phrase is meant to lend authority and credence to his two visions and the messages they contain for his community.

The fact that God calls Jeremiah by his first name before saying anything else to him indicates that Jeremiah is known by God (see 1:5). The dialogue that ensues between God and Jeremiah both in verses 11-12 and in verses 13-16 reveals a certain level of intimacy between God and Jeremiah. God speaks to Jeremiah as one would with a friend; God asks him two simple questions and Jeremiah responds in kind. God's questions and Jeremiah's

responses indicate a certain sense of mutuality in the relationship. Jeremiah's ability to see the symbols God has placed before him, coupled with God's affirmation that Jeremiah has "seen well" (v. 12), confirms that Jeremiah understands God's message.

With a sense of intimacy established, and a knowledge base affirmed, God entrusts still more to Jeremiah. God reveals to him the divine intention and plan that are prepared for the people of Judah. The revelation Jeremiah receives, which he must tell to his people, is ominous. Beyond even this, God allows Jeremiah to become privy to God's plan for him, a plan that carries with it an implied promise of mutuality but this time is more hierarchical in tone and less friendly: "Do not break down before them, or I will break you" (v. 17). In verses 14-19 one can detect a shift in tone. Here God sounds more like an instructor teaching and informing Jeremiah in a more discursive, less intuitive way than in verses 11-13. For Jeremiah, however, one fact remains clear: he has been instructed by God and entrusted with God's mission—"But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you" (v. 17a). He now lives under divine threat (v. 17b) and divine promise (vv. 18-19).

When Jeremiah delivers his message to his community members they learn that: (1) his message to them comes from a credible source (but whether or not they believe its content remains questionable); (2) their holy city, Jerusalem, and Judah are going to be invaded and taken over by the Babylonians, an event that originates with and is sanctioned by God, who is "watching over" the divine word to perform it; (3) they themselves stand guilty before God, judged and condemned for having fallen out of right relationship with God by violating the covenant when they forsook God, made offerings to other gods, and then worshiped the works of their own hands; (4) Jeremiah is now different from them; he has been set apart by God (vv. 17-19) and is guaranteed God's presence and divine deliverance insofar as he remains faithful to God's mission and commands.

The original community who heard Jeremiah's message was probably enraged by his words. Their transgressions have been exposed publicly through Jeremiah's proclamation of his encounter with God, and they now know where they stand with God: judged and condemned. What a chill must have run up their spines when they heard of the impending invasion! As for Jeremiah, he has now become an enemy to the corrupt among his own people. He is no longer one of their comrades. Instead, he belongs to the God they have forsaken, and if they have turned away from God, Jeremiah can rest assured that they will now turn against him.

Audiences today who listen to or read Jeremiah 1:11-19 learn several additional lessons about God, Jeremiah, and what we could call an experi-

ence of the divine in the context of the prophetic tradition. We can say at least six things about how God appears in this passage. First, Jeremiah shows us that God can be very personal, capable of interacting with human beings. Second, when God wants someone to learn something, God as teacher uses both inductive and deductive methods. Ordinary and common elements from life and, in Jeremiah’s case, elements from his natural world and those common to his life experience are used in such a way that they become symbols of something greater than meets the ordinary eye. In the prophetic tradition symbols and symbolic actions become revelatory of the human and the divine; they help to communicate what is yet to unfold. Third, Jeremiah’s posture as someone being instructed by God offers an insight into how God can communicate knowledge, namely, through the use of our intuition and imagination. Fourth, while the proclamation of God’s word is an auditory experience full of rhetorical and historical inferences and references, the actual encounter with God is a deeply personal experience that can involve our internal sensibilities, and in turn can affect our auditory and visual perceptions of reality. Fifth, within the context of the prophetic tradition Jeremiah’s experience makes clear that an encounter with the divine is not meant to be of a self-serving nature or purpose, for the human person is engaged in the encounter. The encounter with God often carries with it knowledge for and about something related to a person’s community and informs that person of his or her role and mission within the context of the community and world. An encounter with God assures all life of God’s enduring presence in the midst of creation and the course of history as it unfolds. Finally, Jeremiah’s experience of God makes clear that God will not tolerate infidelity. There will be consequences.

The proclamations of Jeremiah reveal many aspects of his inner character. First, he is perceptive and intuitive and very capable of responding to God’s questions. Second, he is gifted and graced by God—he has been entrusted with a direct experience of God, one of “hearing,” with visual images serving the purpose of instruction. Third, although Jeremiah’s life is prophetic by virtue of his creation, when God’s *ruach* (“spirit”) was breathed into him he did not choose to be God’s prophet; he was appointed and consecrated by God before birth (1:5), given a divinely-ordained mission that required specific tasks, and then gradually strengthened and transformed by God so that he could fulfill the divine tasks and mission. Fourth, empowered by God, Jeremiah is “under” God’s power. Last, Jeremiah’s message about and portrayal of God reflect the theology and culture of the prophet’s day. On the one hand God is depicted as friendly and personable; on the other hand God is the one “in control” and “watching over” the divine word in order to fulfill it. Jeremiah’s God is portrayed as a tit-for-tat God who will bring

disaster on the Judahites because of their infidelity. Jeremiah's reading of his times and the inevitable takeover by the Babylonians is interpreted through his own theological lenses, which seem to be colored by the deuteronomistic theology of retribution (see Deuteronomy 28).

In summary, chapter 1 of the book of Jeremiah sets the stage for the entire development of Jeremiah as a character and the book as a whole. What will be seen in subsequent pages of this study is how Jeremiah evolves into God's prophet as a preacher of grace and a poet of truth in the context of his mission (v. 10), and how the foreshadowed transformation of Jeremiah from a boy (v. 6) into a "fortified city," "an iron pillar," and "a bronze wall" against the whole land takes place, along with the unfolding of the divine promise: "I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you" (v. 19). Last, in looking at verses 4-10 in relation to verses 11-19 one observes two literary styles: poetry and prose. What makes these verses prophetic, and for that matter the book as a whole, is the dynamic relationship that exists between the characters of God and Jeremiah, revealing the direct and purposeful intervention of God into the life of Jeremiah and Jeremiah's disclosure of the entire experience and its contents in a way that is both poetic and prosaic. Jeremiah the person and preacher, together with his craft as a poet and a storyteller, have become the means and the medium by which revelation occurs.

Jeremiah 2:1–3:10: A Divine Indictment

Jeremiah 2:1–3:10 is a series of oracles that have been woven together into a coherent narrative whose theme is Israel's and Judah's sinfulness and God's powerful condemnation and indictment against the people as a whole. Although this passage is composed of several small poems, its overall structure is made up of two literary units: a proclamation of remembrance (2:1-3) and a judgment proclamation (2:4–3:10). Throughout the entire passage Jeremiah stands center stage, proclaiming God's message to his listeners. What Jeremiah was called and commissioned to do in 1:4-19 he now does, beginning with a focus on the house of Jacob (2:4–3:5). Thus the drama of Jeremiah's life as a prophet commences as the beginnings of a coherent narrative start to take shape on a literary level.

A Proclamation of Remembrance (2:1-3)

Jeremiah's mission begins in 2:1-3. No longer being told *about* his mission, he is being commanded to carry it out. God tells Jeremiah to go and proclaim the divine word that has been revealed to him, and Jeremiah does as he is commanded:

The word of the LORD came to me, saying: Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem, Thus says the LORD:

I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to the LORD,
the first fruits of his harvest.
All who ate of it were held guilty;
disaster came upon them,
says the LORD. (2:1-3)

The phrase “the word of the LORD came to me saying” (v. 1) recalls 1:4, 11, 13 and thus links Jeremiah’s call and commission to his mission: we see him living out his call and going forth as commissioned. Jeremiah is the poetic preacher of the message, but God is the one who speaks through the prophet. Lundbom succinctly outlines the rhetorical function of verses 2b-3 in the context of the book of Jeremiah as a whole:

As lead oracle, 2:2b-3 introduces the entire apostasy-repentance collection of 2:1–4:4. . . . The present oracle has an even broader function, i.e., to introduce both the apostasy-repentance collection (2:1–4:4) and the foe-lament collection (4:5–10:25). Verse 2b is a foil for the oracles on apostasy, and v. 3 for the oracles on the foe from the north. In the Jeremiah book we see evidence of an “outbuilding” process.²

In this proclamation Jeremiah depicts God remembering the goodness, the holiness of Israel in its youth. He captures God’s sentiments through the use of two metaphors: Israel as a bride (v. 2), and Israel as the “first fruits” of God’s harvest (v. 3). All who treated Israel unjustly or came after Israel received their “just deserts” in return. This suggests some sort of divine judgment against Israel’s enemies resulting in a punitive retribution that, according to the deuteronomistic theology of retribution, could be interpreted as coming from the hand of God. With the reference to the “wilderness” Jeremiah appeals to the exodus tradition and the trust Israel had in God early in their covenant relationship. This also recalls Hosea’s preaching, when God promised to bring Israel into the wilderness to speak tenderly to Israel’s heart (Hos 2:14-15). In the days of Hosea, too, Israel had gone astray (see

² Ibid. 251.

Hos 2:1-13). Jeremiah's use of the past tense is telling: "Israel was holy to the LORD" (v. 3).

By casting God's speech in the form of a remembrance proclamation, and by comparing Israel to a bride and the first fruits of God's harvest, Jeremiah calls his audience to think back on their past when Israel's love was young, devoted, and trusting, to recall the covenant relationship that existed between God and Israel, and to be mindful that the land belongs to God (see Lev 25:23), with Israel as the first fruits—first fruits that also belong to God (see Exod 23:19) and are God's harvest as well. By sandwiching the phrase "Israel was holy to the LORD" (v. 3) between the two metaphors Jeremiah sets up a contrast by way of implication. Without casting any judgment on Israel, Jeremiah lets Israel know that it is no longer holy. In not condemning Israel outright, Jeremiah works to capture the attention of his audience by appealing to the memory of the community's past lived experience. Once he has their attention he can lower the boom, which is what happens in Jer 2:4–3:5. Thus verses 2b-3 set the stage for Jeremiah's next proclamation.

In summary, Jer 2:1-3 portrays Jeremiah as a prophet, once again entrusted by God with God's word. It also shows Jeremiah being faithful to God and God's ways. Jeremiah's rhetorical devices and strategy show him to be a skilled and savvy orator who knows how to preach to his primary audience. Jeremiah's message also sheds light on God and the relationship that exists between God and Israel. In verse 2a God talks to Israel very personally, as signaled by the use of first- and second-person pronouns. In verse 3, however, beginning with the phrase "Israel was holy to the LORD," the tone becomes more impersonal as God talks about God's self and Israel in the third person. This shift in tone mirrors the shift in relationship between Israel and God. They have grown distant from each other on account of Israel's present state, which is "unholy" to the LORD. Heard from the perspective of God, Jeremiah's message becomes a song of lament. The interface that occurs between God and Jeremiah, with Jeremiah delivering God's message, testifies to the unity that exists between God and the prophet as they work together to carry out the divine mission.

Readers and hearers of today will be impressed by the intimate relationship that exists between God and the prophet. The text sheds light on the character of Jeremiah, but also reveals the love relationship that existed between God and Israel in ancient times, a love relationship that was not only metaphorically marital but also intrinsically hierarchical and patriarchal. Israel "follows" God in the wilderness, and as first fruits Israel is to be understood as belonging to God. Furthermore, Israel's God was a God of power who could use that power punitively to another's detriment, as implied by the last verse of the text. Thus the character of God as portrayed by Jeremiah reflects both the culture and the theology of an ancient world.

Jeremiah’s Judgment Proclamation (2:4–3:10)

Having set the stage with his first proclamation (Jer 2:1-3), Jeremiah now delivers his second (2:4–3:5), and again he focuses on Israel: “Hear the word of the LORD, O house of Jacob, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the LORD . . .” (2:4).³ Jeremiah does not always invite his audience to listen; he commands them to hear the word of the LORD and speaks with ultimate authority: “Thus says the LORD.” Jeremiah’s own strong and clear voice has prepared the ears of his listeners for an even stronger voice they will now hear—God’s voice—delivering a blunt, shocking, “knock your socks off” message. A people once holy to the LORD has become estranged from its God, its partner in covenant. God with righteous anger confronts them, and through Jeremiah’s voice gives expression to the felt anger, pain, and indignation that many within the community have caused because of their violation of covenant and consequent estrangement from God and God’s ways. Let us listen now to God’s message that Jeremiah the poet-preacher delivers.

JEREMIAH 2:4-13

Jeremiah casts the first part of God’s message (Jer 2:4-9) into the form of a “classic indictment, asserting that Israel has forfeited the relationship with YHWH.”⁴ Jeremiah begins this “classic indictment” with God’s recollection of Israel’s past, thus inviting the listeners of his community to enter into reflection and remembrance as well. This spirit of recollection and remembrance continues the tone and sentiment of Jer 2:2-3. In verse 5a Jeremiah uses a rhetorical question to begin God’s personal recollection:

What wrong did your ancestors find in me
that they went far from me,
and went after worthless things,
and became worthless themselves?

³ Lundbom notes that the superscription in 2:4 “points to a Northern Israel audience, which could be exiles in Assyria, or those living in the old territory of the Northern Kingdom, or both” (ibid. 258). With respect to the historical background of Jer 2:4-9 in particular Lundbom suggests that this proclamation was probably “one of Jeremiah’s earliest, and a date soon after 622 B.C. is as good a proposal as any.” He observes further that the spirit of reform (rather than outright judgment) fits well; in this spirit people were offered the opportunity to repent, “and . . . Jeremiah, in this and the prior oracle, brings to the people a message entirely consonant with views formulated at the highest levels of government” (ibid. 263).

⁴ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 34.

Expecting no reply to this rhetorical question, and keeping his audience focused on their ancestry, Jeremiah continues:

They did not say, “Where is the LORD
 who brought us up from the land of Egypt,
 who led us in the wilderness,
 in a land of deserts and pits,
 in a land of drought and deep darkness,
 in a land that no one passes through,
 where no one lives?”

Jeremiah’s clever use of rhetoric and rhetorical devices continues to keep his audience not only silent, but also ensconced with God in the memory of past experiences as he, Jeremiah, brings forth the next part of God’s message:

I brought you into a plentiful land
 to eat its fruits and its good things.
 But when you entered you defiled my land,
 and made my heritage an abomination.
 The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?”
 Those who handle the law did not know me;
 the rulers transgressed against me;
 the prophets prophesied by Baal,
 and went after things that do not profit. (2:7-8)

By assuming God’s voice ever so personally, Jeremiah focuses his audience’s attention on God, who now zooms in on Israel’s ancestors. No longer talking about them with Jeremiah’s audience listening in, God now talks to them directly and recalls all the personal divine effort and goodness that were bestowed on them: “I brought *you* into a plentiful land. . . .” God also makes the Israelite ancestors remember what they had done in spite of all the divine favor bestowed on them: “But when you entered you defiled my land . . .” (v. 7b). Continuing in this same spirit of recollection, God then recalls for the ancestors how the religious and political leadership among them had gone astray and become prey to corruption. The sin of Israel’s ancestors was apostasy and idolatry. Jeremiah, recalling it in the presence of the listeners of his day, reminds his community of the past and makes them aware of their family’s sins that ultimately led to the downfall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel. The punch line to the whole unit comes in verse 9:

Therefore once more I accuse you
says the LORD,
and I accuse your children’s children.

Wham! Having accused Israel’s ancestors in the past for their infidelity and wicked deeds, and having exposed their infidelity and transgressions in the hearing of Jeremiah’s listeners, God once again accuses Israel’s ancestors of infidelity and transgression, even though these ancestors have died. The second part of God’s accusation now comes into focus: “and I accuse your children’s children” (v. 9b). Not only have the ancestors been accused, but also their children’s children, specifically Jeremiah’s addressees—the house of Jacob and all the families of the house of Israel. With a subtle progression of interlocking thoughts and an appeal to a common Old Testament retribution formula,⁵ Jeremiah has taken his audience by surprise. He has disclosed their infidelity and transgression with grace and style. He has paved the way for the next part of his message; above all, he has been faithful to his divine mission.

Jeremiah continues to shed light on his audience’s infidelity and transgressions in a manner that directly “exposes” their wickedness. In verses 10-13, the second part of Jeremiah’s long proclamation, God is the main speaker, addressing two imaginary audiences: (1) messengers God has dispatched to the Greek islands and to Kedar, and (2) the heavens. Verse 10 features a series of imperatives: “cross . . . look . . . send . . . examine . . . see.” Here Jeremiah creates for his listeners an image of God gathering information via messengers. The rhetorical question in verse 11 clarifies the mission of the messengers:

Has a nation changed its gods,
even though they are no gods?

The focus on other nations’ fidelity to their gods makes an indirect statement about Israel’s God and monotheism. The rhetorical question invites the answer, “No,” which in turn results in another indirect condemnation of Israel:

But my people have changed their glory
for something that does not profit. (v. 11b)

⁵ See, e.g., Exod 20:5; 34:7.

Both God and Jeremiah, by their word and message, have once more uncovered Israel's waywardness and delivered it to them in their ear. Having heard this statement, along with the rhetorical question just before it, Israel has now been made aware by Jeremiah of its grave offenses, warranting cosmic condemnation.

By means of triple imperatives and an apostrophe Jeremiah communicates God's dismay at Israel's deeds, and lets the people know that God has called on the heavens to act against them:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
be shocked, be utterly desolate,
says the LORD. (v. 12)

With this third command God orders the heavens to withhold rain, which would cause a drought, dry up the land, and bring famine upon the people. Jeremiah has now provided his audience with a prospect of impending events. Walter Brueggemann notes:

It is no wonder that the great cosmic powers, heaven and earth, observe this sorry situation and are stunned (Jer 2:12). Heaven and earth in this poem (cf. Isa 1:2) function as witnesses who guarantee oaths and observe patterns of faithfulness and fickleness. Because heaven and earth know Yahweh to be the true God (cf. Ps 96:11), Israel's shabby response to Yahweh is exposed for what it is. In this cosmic court there is no doubt about the guilty party.⁶

And why should the heavens be appalled, shocked, and utterly desolate at Israel's "changing its glory for something that does not profit"? With candidness and metaphorical language, the poet presents God's case further:

for my people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living water,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water. (v. 13)

Essentially the two evils are but one: Israel has abandoned God for other gods. By metaphorically describing God as the fountain of living water

⁶ Brueggemann, *Exile and Homecoming*, 36.

Jeremiah depicts God as a fertility god. Israel has cut itself off from the source of life. The nation of Israel digging out cracked cisterns for itself is symbolic. Lundbom unpacks Jeremiah’s image of the cistern:

These are holes dug into the foundation to collect water when spring water is unavailable or to store water from some natural water supply. Cistern walls were plastered to make them watertight, but the plaster could crack, in which case the water would become unusable or would seep into the ground. Broken cisterns were therefore useless.⁷

Thus Israel has rejected God, the fountain of living water, and has put its trust in leaky cisterns that are unusable for holding water. Jeremiah’s use of metaphor and symbolism communicates a single thought to his audience: Israel has cut itself off from life. Embedded in the broken cisterns is the allusion to the Baals, which are generally associated with fertility. No rain from the heavens (v. 12), out of relationship with the fountain of living water (v. 13b), and in possession of broken cisterns (v. 13c)—Israel’s fate is sealed. The people are doomed to die. What a harrowing message Jeremiah has just delivered to his audience! What Jeremiah has made clear is that Israel, once holy to the Lord and the first fruits of God’s harvest (v. 3), has chosen its own fate.

JEREMIAH 2:14-19

In the next section of Jeremiah’s message to Israel there is an allusion to an earlier poem (2:1-3). The unit opens with Jeremiah commenting on Israel, raising two interrelated rhetorical questions that point up Israel’s identity as understood by God (v. 14a). Both questions expect “no” as a response. “No,” Israel is not a slave; Israel has been called to be God’s “servant” in the best sense of the term (Jer 30:10; Isa 42:1). And “no,” Israel is not a “homeborn servant,” which would imply that Israel was born in its master’s house and thus considered a slave from birth. Israel was chosen by God because God loved Israel, redeemed by God from the house of slavery, joined to God through covenant, and entrusted by God with God’s holy law (see Deut 7:7-11). With these two rhetorical questions Jeremiah invites his audience to remember who they are and to hear God’s utter bewilderment at them, expressed more directly through a third question: “Why then has he become plunder?” (v. 14b). This is what God thinks about Israel, namely

⁷ See Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 268.

that in light of who Israel is, none of what has happened to it or will happen to it has been within the divine plan. The use of the present perfect tense, known in Hebrew grammar as the “prophetic perfect,” signals what has already happened to Israel historically and what is about to happen. The prophetic perfect tense is also known as the tense of vision. Jeremiah makes his audience see their past history through God’s eyes and tries to make them see what their future holds in a way that makes it seem that the future has already happened. The prophetic perfect tense carries with it the sense of certitude. Hence Israel’s past and future is going to be the same: devastation. All these points are made clear through the imagery in verses 15-16.

Jeremiah’s metaphors present God replaying Israel’s past and foreshadowing its future (vv. 15-16). The “lions” (v. 15) refer to the Assyrians.⁸ With their infiltration and takeover of the Northern Kingdom, Israel was laid waste and its cities left in ruins, without inhabitants. Many of the Israelites had been either killed in battle or deported by the Assyrians. By using the plural “lions” Jeremiah opens up the possibility of another interpretation of the metaphor. In the historical context of this passage the “lions” are also the Babylonians, the most powerful empire in the world and Judah’s enemy to the North whom God will raise up against Judah on account of Judah’s transgressions (see Jer 1:15). Thus, embedded in the images of Israel’s destruction and the metaphor of the lion is Judah’s future fate, made clear in verse 16. Here Jeremiah adds another dimension to the metaphor and imagery already begun:

Moreover, the people of Memphis and Tahpanhes
have broken the crown of your head.

This image is an allusion to the Egyptians, who will eventually turn on Judah as well. The crown that has been broken hints at Jerusalem’s fate. The question to be asked is: Do Jeremiah’s listeners understand thus far the warning he has given them through the message he has delivered, the scenes he has recalled, and the pictures he has created?

In verses 17-19 Jeremiah, in the voice of God, speaks directly to his listeners and drives home the point that everything that has befallen Israel in the past and all that will befall the Israelites and Judahites in the future is the result of the people’s own doing the moment they forsook God and broke

⁸ Contra Lundbom (*Jeremiah 1–20*, 271–72), who sees the lions as representing only the Babylonians and Egyptians. He does not see the “lions” of former times, the Assyrians, being alluded to in this text.

the covenant relationship. Implied in this text is the deuteronomistic theology of retribution (see Deut 28). The people’s wickedness and apostasies will be the source and cause of God’s retribution and punitive justice.

JEREMIAH 2:20-22

In verses 20-21 Jeremiah’s thought pattern and rhetoric present his audience with two implied contrasts that on the one hand highlight God’s goodness in the face of Israel’s depravity (vv. 20-21a), and on the other hand show up Israel’s uncleanness despite its attempt at washing (v. 22). To accent his first contrast he uses two metaphors. Depraved Israel has become like a whore, even though God planted it as a choice vine from the purest stock. The harlotry image is associated with Baal worship, and the vine image recalls Isaiah 5. Both are related to fertility, with Baal being the god of fertility and Israel’s God often assuming that *persona* as creator and LORD of creation. The rhetorical question Jeremiah voices on behalf of God is self-explanatory and harks back to verse 17. Israel is in its degenerate state because of its own choice, beginning with its forsaking God. Jeremiah makes sure his audience realizes that God has not forgotten Israel’s guilt. What remains a mystery, though, is whether Israel—and Judah in Israel’s mirror—truly sees itself and hears Jeremiah’s and God’s word. If God’s people have abandoned God, how can they even begin to understand Jeremiah, the one sent by God? Still, Jeremiah’s voice and God’s presence among the community remain persistent and constant, a sign of hope and a testament of God’s enduring love and fidelity to covenant.

JEREMIAH 2:23-29

With metaphor upon metaphor, complemented by rhetorical questions and quotes within quotes, Jeremiah gives voice to God’s indignation over Israel and Judah while setting the stage for his blistering indictment yet to come (see Jer 2:35).

Jeremiah, continuing to assume God’s voice, opens this segment of his message with a rhetorical question that once again points at the people’s apostasy. The two metaphors that follow, namely “a restive young camel interlacing its tracks” (v. 23c) and “a wild ass at home in the wilderness, in her heat sniffing the wind” (v. 24a) symbolize the people’s “lustful behavior.”⁹

⁹ Ibid. 282.

In verse 25b Jeremiah quotes God quoting the people:

But you said, “It is hopeless,
for I have loved strangers,
and after them I will go.”

Through this rhetorical device Jeremiah points up the people’s resolve not to change their ways. They see themselves as too far gone. By articulating the people’s statement back to them, however, Jeremiah allows them to hear themselves, and in so doing he hopes, perhaps, that after hearing their own pitiful state and attitude they might reach out for help. This may not be the case with God, though, who after quoting the people next lays out for them in metaphorical language the shame that is to come upon them because of their decision not to reverse their course:

As a thief is shamed when caught,
so the house of Israel shall be shamed. (v. 26a)

The parade of indictments—“they, their kings, their officials, their priests, and their prophets”—indicates that both the people and their leadership will be shamed because they are all depraved, as revealed by their own words that God quotes (v. 27a).

In verse 27b, when Jeremiah again quotes God, he draws attention to the root of the people’s problem:

For they have turned their backs to me,
and not their faces.

This people turn to God only when they are in need. God offers them a stinging rhetorical response that points up their foolhardiness:

But where are your gods
that you made for yourself?
Let them come, if they can save you,
in your time of trouble;
for you have as many gods
as you have towns, O Judah. (v. 28)

The final vocative adds an element of surprise. Not only is Israel guilty of apostasy, but also Judah! The rhetorical question in verse 29a, followed by

God’s comment in verse 29b, pulls together the thought of verses 23-29. Here Jeremiah sheds light on God’s righteousness and indicts both Israel and Judah: “You have all rebelled against me, says the LORD.”

JEREMIAH 2:30-37; 3:1-10

The people’s final upbraiding occurs in verses 30-37, with the climax in the last three verses. The words are still the words of God. In verse 30a they describe some of the pain of God’s past relationship with Israel:

In vain I have struck down your children;
they accepted no correction.

This God who is madly in love with the people is someone who has exerted punitive chastisement over them in their times of waywardness. To Jeremiah’s listeners this comment would be frightening. If former generations have felt the blow of God’s hand as a corrective measure, then why should this wayward generation think it will be any different for them if they do/do not acknowledge their transgression and guilt, repent and return to God? The deuteronomistic theology of retribution that underlies the prophetic texts, that has shaped the prophet’s and people’s theology and their idea of God, leaves the audience of this text bewildered, perhaps, and contemporary audiences in a quandary as to how to understand and make sense of an Old Testament God who is shown to feel justified in exerting violence as a means to an end.

After several more expressions of divine rage over the people’s behavior, including their pretense of innocence (v. 35a), Jeremiah delivers God’s final decision:

Now I am bringing you to judgment
for saying, “I have not sinned.” (v. 35b)

Jeremiah’s entire message thus far, with all its metaphors, rhetorical questions, symbols, images, and quoted speeches has led up to this point. God’s people stand accused and indicted, Israel first and then Judah (see Jer 2:8). The extended metaphor in 3:1-5 harks back to 2:2. Israel, the one who loved God so much in the early days of the marriage, has become another man’s wife. Israel, God’s chosen one, has forsaken God and chosen the Baals. And Judah, Israel’s younger sister, did not learn from having seen and heard about her older sister’s experience (see Jer 3:6-10), but rather has followed in her sister’s ways, without returning to God (3:10).

Jeremiah 2:4–3:10 in Context

By delivering this incredibly graphic message to Israel and in Judah's hearing as well (see 2:2, 28), Jeremiah has set the stage for his mission—"to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow" (1:10)—a mission that will continue to unfold throughout his lifetime and throughout the book as whole. One can imagine how incensed Jeremiah's audience became on hearing one of their own people proclaim such a message with the declared authority of and often in the very voice of God. It is no wonder that this poet will become a man repulsive to and rejected by his own, who lie in wait to put an end to him.

Jeremiah 2:4–3:10 also provides many insights into the character of Jeremiah and what type of person the historical Jeremiah might have been. First, Jeremiah as a character is wedded to his God and to God's mission. He proclaims what God tells him to make known and often assumes God's voice while doing so. Second, Jeremiah is committed to shoring up and renewing the loving relationship that once existed between God and God's people. One way of helping the people find their way back to God is by identifying the root cause of why the relationship has gone sour, exposing that root cause, helping the people see it, and then working persistently to get them to change their choices and course to the point of estrangement. Jeremiah's work as a preacher demonstrates that he is taking the steps necessary to try and bring his people back to their God. Third, as a preacher Jeremiah is not only a gifted orator but also a poet. His words reveal his genius for putting together a speech that is highly imaginative, well-crafted, and candid so as to appeal to his audience's intellectual, emotional, psychological, imaginative, and religious sensibilities. Fourth, as a prophet Jeremiah carries out with power and strength that dimension of his vocation that challenges him to call people to holiness. His message portrays his persistent efforts at this task. Often transparent in his person, Jeremiah as a character provides his audience with an insight into who God might be and what are God's ways. But because everything is historically, socially, culturally, and religiously conditioned, both the prophet and God, along with God's ways as revealed by the biblical text, must be held up for ongoing critical theological reflection, and appropriated and understood accordingly. What is clear about Jeremiah as a prophet from his words thus far is that his mission is divinely ordained and brings with it the authority, power, prowess, freshness, creativity, candidness, boldness, strength, energy, and persistence characteristic of the Spirit of God. Jeremiah is someone who "cuts to the chase," one on whom God's favor rests.

Jeremiah 3:11–4:4: Return, O Faithless Children

Besides exposing a people’s breach in covenant relationship with God, a prophet also has the responsibility of helping that people find their way back to God. The words of Torah, “Be holy, for I am holy” (Lev 11:44-45) ring in the prophet’s ear and become a driving force for the divinely entrusted mission. Although God can become fiercely and justly angry at the Israelites who seemingly have fallen out of love and right relationship with the One whose heart had been set on them from the beginning (see Deut 7:8), this God of faithful and steadfast love (Exod 34:6) never stops reaching out to those who have gone astray and have become estranged. The prophet cannot give up on the people, either. Jeremiah 3:11–4:4 is a wonderful story set to poetry that Jeremiah proclaims, revealing the desire of God’s heart.

Looking at 3:11–4:4 as a literary whole, we can detect several rhetorical subunits:

3:11-12a	Superscription: Statement about faithless Israel and false Judah
3:12b-14	Address to Israel and Judah
vv. 12b-13	Plea to faithless Israel
v. 14	Pleas to faithless children: Israel, with Judah implied
3:15-18	Divine promise and vision of restoration: A united house
3:19-25	A divine reflection: A liturgy of repentance
vv. 19-20	Statement to Israel
vv. 21-25	Statement to the faithless children: Israel, with Judah implied
4:1-4	Address to Israel and Judah
vv. 1-2	Conditional statement
vv. 3-4	Exhortation and threat

Within and among these units and subunits are various rhetorical elements that reveal Jeremiah the character as a poet of great genius. These rhetorical elements help to unify the poem, whose interlocking units contribute to the poem’s overarching theme: return, repentance, restoration.

Jeremiah 3:11 sets the stage for the entire passage, which will focus on Israel and Judah (3:12-14, 15-18, 19-25; 4:1-4). In the first main unit (3:12b-14) the phrases “Return, faithless Israel” (v. 12b) and “Return, O faithless children” (v. 14) link the two subunits together. The reference to Zion at the end of the unit (v. 14) leads into the next unit (3:15-18), where Jeremiah

speaks about Jerusalem (v. 17). Zion/Jerusalem represents the whole nation. The reference to the house of Judah and the house of Israel at the end of this second unit (see v. 18) leads into the third unit (3:19-25), where Jeremiah addresses Israel and Judah. The pastoral imagery in verse 15 and verse 24, coupled with a reference to the “ancestors” in verses 18, 24, and 25 also adds to the coherence between the two units. Finally, 3:19-25 is joined to 4:1-4, the last unit, through common addressees: both units focus on Israel and Judah, with the idea of Israel returning to God linking this last unit to the first one (4:1; 3:12).

Collectively, all the units are addressed to Israel and Judah, and all develop the themes of “return” and “repentance” with the exception of 3:15-18, which speaks of “restoration”: God to the people, the people to God, and Israel and Judah to each other. Then there will be one God, one people, and one kingdom, with Jerusalem as God’s throne—God’s holy city—the center of the united kingdom, to which all nations shall come and be transformed (v. 17). If 3:15-18 is seen as the heart of the entire literary unit (3:11–4:4), one could say that Jeremiah uses his rhetorical skill to make a powerful theological statement: restoration to and transformation into God by God is contingent on a people’s return to God—to right relationship—through their repentance of the ways that caused their state of estrangement in the first place. Simultaneously, a return to God (3:11, 14) with acknowledgment of one’s guilt (3:13) is the way to restoration and unity (3:17-18), a divine promise offered and one that leads to the transformation of others. Jerusalem, then, becomes the main symbol on which this whole Jeremiah passage turns. Ironically, Jerusalem is where Jeremiah delivers his most profound message (see Jeremiah 7 and 26).

Jeremiah 3:11-12a

Jeremiah begins his speech with a raw comparison: “Faithless Israel has shown herself less guilty than false Judah” (v. 11). Jeremiah is now privy to what God thinks about Israel and Judah, and by announcing it he makes his audience privy to God’s thoughts as well. The Israelites and Judahites hearing Jeremiah have just learned how God sees them, and the Judahites have been informed that God sees them as worse than the Israelites. They would also perhaps see Jeremiah as someone standing apart from them and acting in a way that smacks of self-righteousness. After all, he is a community member pointing the finger at his own. From a rhetorical perspective this verse is ironic. On the one hand Jeremiah’s comment condemns the entire community; they are all either faithless or false—a rotten bushel of apples. On the other hand there is one among them who is part of the bushel

but not in the basket with them—Jeremiah himself, who is the embodiment of fidelity and truth. In any case, verse 11 is an indictment of Israel and Judah. By using the word “then” at the beginning of this verse that opens 3:11–4:4 Jeremiah signals to his audience that there is and was a sense of progression to this encounter with and experience of God, and he also adds a sense of narrative unity to his poetic proclamation.

In verse 12a Jeremiah makes clear to his audience that God is the one who directed him to make the proclamation that follows in 3:12b–4:4. From a rhetorical perspective, Lundbom notes that “the designation of an audience in ‘the north’ intends to make clear that ‘Rebel Israel’ is Northern Israel, even though in verse 18 both Israel and Judah are said to be returning ‘from the land of the North.’” From a historical perspective Lundbom goes on to say that “‘the north’ could be the place of exile in Assyria (2 Kgs 17:6) or else the old Northern Kingdom, where many original inhabitants still live.”¹⁰ Because the text is obscure, it is possible for multiple audiences to be hearing Jeremiah’s word.¹¹

Jeremiah 3:12b-14

Jeremiah directs his opening lines to Israel (vv. 12b-13). Verse 14 is addressed to Israel as well, but now with Judah implied. Giving utterance to God’s voice, he pleads with Israel to return to God and to acknowledge its guilt, and then spells out for the people once again what they are guilty of. This elaboration is another divine indictment, but this time it is done indirectly and in the context of a sincere call to return (vv. 12b-13). A second call to return is given in verse 14. Jeremiah’s metaphorical vocative, “O faithless children,” now draws Judah into the picture, with the rest of the verse focused on a promised return to Zion. In this verse God makes no bones about the relationship with Israel and Judah: “I am your master.”

The Israelites and Judahites listening to Jeremiah receive a clear picture of where they stand with God and where God stands with them. God sees them as “faithless,” and although they have written God off, God has not written them off. Even though they have heard and experienced God’s anger in the past, God promises to be merciful to them as well. But there is one thing they must do, and that is to acknowledge their guilt and transgression.

¹⁰ Ibid.; see also Herbert G. May, “The Ten Lost Tribes,” *BA* 6 (1943) 58; and David C. Greenwood, “On the Jewish Hope for a Restored Northern Kingdom,” *ZAW* 88 (1976) 381.

¹¹ Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 311, where he suggests that the audience might be “people in Judah, exiles in Egypt, Babylon and Assyria, and those living in the old territory of Northern Israel.” Lundbom proposes a date of 597 B.C.E. or later for the material.

Thus God is willing to meet the people halfway if they will meet their God halfway.

From what God communicates about God's self to and through Jeremiah, Jeremiah's past and contemporary audiences learn several lessons: (1) that God does get angry over infidelity and that such anger is justifiable and righteous; therefore human anger over infidelity is also appropriate, justifiable, and righteous; (2) that God's gaze upon a transgression is also one of mercy—compassion—and not one of anger, and by extension, judgment; (3) that God's feelings of anger can pass if the guilty party acknowledges his or her offense; (4) that God's ultimate plan is for unity (see vv. 14 and 18); and (5) that the relationship between God and the people is hierarchical, with God as the "master."

For contemporary audiences, too, the lessons gleaned from the text can be challenging because they call people to "be holy" as God is holy. This would suggest embracing a way of life characterized by fidelity, compassion, and justice that acknowledges one's own pain and the injustices of another that may have caused such pain. Acknowledgment of this sort by both parties or more would allow personal and communal integrity to flourish.

Jeremiah 3:15-18

In this next section Jeremiah offers his audience a word of hope and a magnificent vision of long-awaited restoration and unity. God wants nothing more than to be reestablished with the people, but in a new and different way:

I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding. And when you have multiplied and increased in the land, in those days, says the LORD, they shall no longer say, "The ark of the covenant of the LORD." It shall not come to mind, or be remembered, or missed; nor shall another one be made. At that time Jerusalem shall be called the throne of the LORD, and all nations shall gather to it, to the presence of the LORD in Jerusalem, and they shall no longer stubbornly follow their own evil will. In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your ancestors for a heritage. (vv. 15-18)

Once restored to their God, the people will one day be restored to their land as well. Jerusalem will be reestablished and expanded, and even the Gentiles will come to it. God's city will be a home for all the peoples of the earth (cf. Isa 2:1-4; Mic 4:1-5). Jeremiah's temporal references, "at that time"

(v. 17) and “in those days” (v. 18) indicate the eschatological nature of the message. Both the prophet and God have given the people a word of hope and a vision yet to unfold. Historically, Jeremiah lived to see Jerusalem destroyed, and although he experienced the end of the southern kingdom and the Temple as well, this message given to him by his God was not only a source of hope for his people but also the probable seed of light he carved in his own heart in his bleakest hours (cf. Jer 20:13; 31:31-34, 38-40; 32:26-44).

Jeremiah 3:19-25

This rhetorical unit consists of two parts: God’s lament song (vv. 19-22) and the Israelites’ and Judahites’ lament song (vv. 23-25). In vv. 19-20 Jeremiah expresses God’s dashed hopes and dreams for the people—plans for giving this people the best land and hopes for a most intimate relationship with them as their “Father,” a relationship characterized by unswerving fidelity. But this did not happen; Jeremiah’s metaphor of the faithless wife captures Israel’s relationship to God (cf. 3:11, 14, 22).

Through family imagery and a marital metaphor Jeremiah has not only communicated to his audience God’s sentiments, but has tried to show them what they have lost through infidelity, probably has tried to make them feel guilty by letting them hear God’s sadness, and above all has indicted them again for their apostasy. Here we need to recognize that Jeremiah’s imagery is culturally conditioned and the metaphor is gender-specific. Israel is pictured as a child, with God represented as a male deity and head over the family, and thus the image is both patriarchal and hierarchical (cf. 3:14). Furthermore, the metaphor of Israel as God’s wife could color our religious imagination negatively. Because this metaphor is historically, culturally, and religiously tied to covenant, with God understood as “husband,” the metaphor can only fit one gender—the female—which feeds into an older understanding of Eve as the first human to cause estrangement from God. Thus Jeremiah’s rhetoric needs to interface with contemporary thought and audiences if the biblical text is to remain a living tradition, with the prophetic imagination offering new metaphors to help transform age-old attitudes and problems.

In verses 21-22 Jeremiah portrays God imagining the faithless people lamenting and, as God states why Israel’s children are weeping, the people stand indicted once again by the prophet and by God. Finally there comes a poignant word from God and a promise:

Return, O faithless children,
I will heal your faithlessness.

Israel and Judah have received an invitation and God continues to imagine the words of their “plaintive weeping” (vv. 22b-25). In God’s imagination Israel and Judah have acknowledged their offense.

Jeremiah 4:1-4

The tone of the passage shifts in 4:1-4, yet the same divine plea is heard. This time it is couched in a series of conditional “if” clauses that Jeremiah uses to reinforce in the people’s hearing that God’s graciousness is contingent on their actions. In these verses one can hear the ever-so-slight echo of 3:12b-13. Finally, in verses 3-4 God, through the prophet, addresses Judah directly. The messenger formula authenticates Jeremiah as a credible prophet and lends divine authority to his forthcoming proclamation. The agricultural imagery of 4:3b is an allusion to Hos 10:12 and indicates what Israel must do to escape God’s anger and judgment. In the command given to the Israelites to circumcise themselves to the LORD and to remove the foreskin of their hearts, Jeremiah appeals to Torah (Deut 10:16). For the ancient people both Torah and the prophets were associated with revelation. By appealing to the tradition and by stacking four imperatives together Jeremiah sends the Judahites a strong message with rhetorical grace: heed God’s advice or else prepare to endure the consequence (v. 4b). Finally, by the image of circumcising the foreskin of one’s heart Jeremiah reminds his audience that covenant involves more than outward signs; it is “an affair of the heart” (see Deut 7:7).

In sum, like a solitary drummer Jeremiah beats out the same message over and over again with rhetoric and semantic variations on a theme. True to his God and his mission, his words reveal the marvelous relationship he shares with God and the great love God has for the people. With God he exposes what is and envisions what can be. And though steeped in the theology and culture of his day, which colors his imagination and consequently his rhetoric, Jeremiah remains constant in his cause and persistent in his preaching, reminding his audience that in spite of their weakness, fickleness, and infidelity there is still hope.

In Retrospect

Selected texts studied in this chapter have provided an initial introduction to and insight into the complex person of the character Jeremiah, beginning with his call and commission as a prophet and continuing through his early preaching. Charged with the mission to proclaim God’s word, and entrusted with that word, Jeremiah is seen as one faithful to his task, but

with no apparent support from his community. Their own voices are not heard except where they are quoted by God through Jeremiah; these quotations reveal (1) their stubborn and recalcitrant attitude toward God: “I will not serve” (Jer 2:20); (2) their inability to acknowledge their infidelity to God and covenant: “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Baals” (Jer 2:23), “I am innocent; surely his anger has turned away from me” (Jer 2:35a), and “I have not sinned” (Jer 3:35b); (3) their own sense of personal desperation when they do achieve some self-realization: “It is hopeless, for I have loved strangers, and after them I will go” (Jer 2:25); (4) their own misguided understanding of themselves: “who say to a tree, ‘You are my father’ . . . and to a stone, ‘You gave me birth’” (Jer 2:27a); and (5) their ultimate dependence on God when crisis strikes: “Come and save us!” (Jer 2:27c). To this community Jeremiah offers a word of truth. His proclamations keep exposing their sinful ways to them while expressing God’s anger at them for their infidelity to covenant and to their love-relationship with their God. And yet, to this stubborn, recalcitrant, wayward people who see themselves and their situation as “hopeless,” Jeremiah holds out a graced word. He lets them hear God’s dashed hopes and dreams, God’s anger and frustration, but above all he lets them hear the desire of God’s heart: “Return . . . I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful . . .” (Jer 3:12c) and God’s divine intent: “In those days . . .” (see Jer 3:15-18).

As a skilled orator with a highly developed rhetorical style, Jeremiah makes transparent the dynamic relationship that exists between the human and the divine. And because his message is both timebound and timeless he offers audiences today the opportunity to enter into critical theological reflection to understand the contours and continuity of the prophetic word and its tradition as it continues to unfold in text and life. Both Jeremiah the character and Jeremiah the book are still but deep waters, waiting to reveal the next “pearl of great price.”



CHAPTER TWO

“Declare This in the House of Jacob . . .”: A Portrait of Uncompromising Fidelity

Introduction

As we have seen, Jeremiah is a highly gifted and complex character, and his work within his community and among the nations is equally complex. In this chapter we will concentrate on Jeremiah’s words of alarm, his words of consolation, and his new covenant, all of which provide us with an insight into the breadth of the prophet’s mission. The rhetorical devices Jeremiah uses to communicate his message remind us of his skill as an orator.

A person with a broad mission, and called to be a prophet both to Israel and to the nations, Jeremiah is constantly on the move from person to person, place to place, proclaiming God’s word and making known God’s ways. He goes to the people in the streets, to the houses of kings, to a potter’s house, and he even takes time to write in a book all the words God has spoken to him. His message of justice is disturbing. His words of hope are comforting. He stands in the midst of peoples and nations, persistently, patiently, and passionately calling them back to right relationship and to the embrace of fullness of life for all. A sign opposed, a person rejected, he faithfully does his work of plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing, building and planting by delivering God’s creative word that strikes at the heart to chasten, to renew.

Words of Alarm

The short poem in Jer 4:5-8 shows Jeremiah being commanded by God to declare a message in Judah, in Jerusalem; as the book continues, Jeremiah is seen fulfilling God’s command. He shouts out a divine word of doom and calls the people to mourn. Jeremiah’s cry is a battle cry, signaled by the images of the trumpets and the standard. He is calling the people to prepare