Jeremiah as a Messenger of Hope in Crisis

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> Jeremiah is an artifact of terror. . . . Jeremiah is an artifact of hope.

Some thirty years ago William L. Holladay, one of the leading historical-critical scholars of our time, made an intriguing case for reading Jeremiah as a "spokesman out of time." While insisting that the prophet was firmly grounded in "a very particular and unique historical situation,"[1] Holladay dared to assert that Jeremiah "speaks to us in [a] . . . *more* special and direct way *than* [he did] *to his own time*."[2] Following Holladay's lead, I would suggest that this strange sense of immediacy is even more palpable today. And it is not difficult to garner support for such a contention.

Jeremiah's[3] coarse language of violence and alarm together with penetrating images of cultural ruin, emotional malaise, and symbolic "dis-ease" resonate in a world where "optimism . . . has given way to a sense of ambiguity."[4] Jeremiah's horrifying accounts of death and destruction—often in the form of siege, military occupation, and forced deportation—are curiously not unlike those that cover the front page of *The New York Times*.[5] The prophetic testimony to the breakdown of meaning and civility, as well as to the crumbling of trusted social systems and venerable institutions all sound remarkably familiar. Even the eerie vision of the order of creation returning to primeval chaos (4:23–28) is no longer merely the stuff of science fiction, especially in view of the torrent of contemporary ills:

> Cities in crisis
> Schools in disarray
> A burgeoning national debt that threatens future generations and whittles away at already dwindling funds for basic human services
> Preemptive military doctrines that destabilize large regions and erode international morale and morality
> New technologies that result in alienation and dehumanization

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[1] William Holladay, *Jeremiah: Spokesman Out of Time* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1974), 135.

[2] Ibid., 141.

[3] When I allude to "Jeremiah" in this essay, I am referring either to the book of Jeremiah (MT) or to the prophetic persona, that is, to the literary/theological representation of the prophet by the interpretive community.

[4] *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity* (ed. Miroslav Volf and William H. Katerberg; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), ix.

[5] One major disconnect with the biblical text can hardly be ignored: while Jeremiah speaks from below, as a citizen of a minor "state" victimized by the formidable neo-Babylonian empire, the vast majority of readers of *Interpretation* are children of a superpower with all the attendant rights and privileges. Such a chasm presents interpretive dilemmas that we have only begun to broach.

Consumerist values that anesthetize us to our true selves
Immigration legislation rooted in xenophobia and garbed in evangelical piety
Global economic policies that breed resentment, rage, and abject despair
Rapid depletion of non-replaceable natural (and cultural) resources
Limited access to basic health care, adequate food, and safe water among the world's most vulnerable communities
Mounting indifference to savage acts of violence including torture and the systemic killing of civilians
Children exploited as sexual commodities

Notwithstanding the ever increasing threat of nuclear, biological, and chemical terrorism, such a list has cumulative force. No wonder the prophet's haunting scenarios and poignant utterances of anger and despair ring true to many today!

Taken in totality, the book of Jeremiah is a literary artifact of terror, a disturbing cultural expression of lament and chaos. Danger, disjunction, and distress bubble beneath the surface of virtually every text. Sometimes in denial, sometimes in despair, and sometimes in defiance, the implied readers of this literature find themselves located at the edge of time. As such, Jeremiah is clearly eschatological; it addresses dispossessed people who have suffered unmanageable loss and are eking out life on the margins of the empire. Put differently, *the book is war literature: it speaks of annihilated worlds, shattered communities,* and the collapse of cherished institutions and understandings of life before viable alternatives emerge to fill the chasm. This ethos of liminality is apparent not only in the barrage of devastating events and in the anguish of the major characters of the book—Judah, Jeremiah, and YHWH—all of whom suffer beyond words, but also in the jumbled and erratic poetry itself. There we encounter language that throbs with pain, staggers in confusion, and rages in disappointment. Attempts to order the chaos and tone down the incendiary texture—often through deuteronomistic prose discourses—do little to mute the text's raw emotion.[6]

The book of Jeremiah not only gives speech to the disaster, but it also functions as a complex polyphonic response. The text's judgment-salvation schema[7] *and* its embedded cacophony of voices and counter-voices create a thick meaning-making map, *a tapestry of hope, designed* to help at-risk and displaced people survive a world in which irrationality, violence, and loss are more tangible than moral coherence and meaning. As Gordon W. Allport notes in the foreword to Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning,* "to live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in this suffering."[8] The book of Jeremiah is in large measure an attempt to find meaning in events that defy ordinary categories, events that are beyond communal recognition.[9]

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[6] For more on the role of the prose sermons in Jeremiah as colonizing agents, see Louis J. Stulman, *Jeremiah* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

[7] *Ibid., 11–19.*

[8] Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1985), 11.

[9] An important distinction must be made here between oral and written prophecy. Although the two clearly belong on the same trajectory, they nonetheless represent two distinct stages with different audiences, settings, and intentions. Based on what can be determined by the poetry in the book, which likely represents the earliest stage of the tradition, for instance, Jeremiah the spokesperson sought to reform communal behavior and warn Judah of impending disaster. Jeremiah the book grapples with the collapse of the nation and the theological and human dilemmas related to war, forced deportation, and colonization.

While this meaning-making map is wild and unwieldy, it is not formless. Not unlike human survival itself, which depends on certain micro-organisms and complex physical and chemical reactions, one can speak of an anatomy of meaning in Jeremiah. That is to say, for those suffering a cascade of direct traumas, including military invasion, occupation, the loss of homeland and family, shaming, torture, forced displacement and resettlement, and even for victims of "historical trauma,"[10] or what sociologists call "secondary traumatization," a taxonomy of hope is discernible.

JEREMIANIC HOPE UNFOLDS ALONG CANONICAL LINES AND WITH NARRATIVE FORCE

The interpretive community (MT)[11] presents Jeremiah as a messenger of hope and his book as a meaning-making map. It does so by organizing the polyvalent tradition as a two-part prophetic drama with Jeremiah (and of course YHWH) as the major player(s): the first act performs the collapse of Judah's once stable and reliable world (Jer 1–25), while the second articulates a survival script in the face of social and symbolic mayhem (Jer 26–52). In Act One, Jeremiah takes dead aim at the nation's sturdy pillars of faith and venerated institutions: the temple and its systems of worship (7:1–15), covenant arrangements (11:1–17), insider status of privilege (18:1–12), as well as ancestral land claims and the Davidic dynasty as traditionally understood (21:1–10). YHWH's iconoclastic spokesperson deconstructs these defining beliefs and institutions, which long served as a bulwark against dangers from inside and outside the borders. With uncompromising force, Jeremiah insists that the securities of the old world will not save Judah from loss and dislocation.

Once these hopes are dashed, the prophetic drama seizes almost every opportunity to demonstrate that the implied readers, the Jewish refugees in Babylon, will survive the dismantling of their once stable culture. In other words, the end of the old world is not the end of the line for Judah! Clearly the horrors of war still loom large, as do the emotional scars and symbolic debris, but amidst the devastation Jeremiah emerges as a wounded harbinger of hope announcing the advent of God's program of "building and planting." The prophet first takes on powerful representatives of the royal-temple establishment who are absolutely sure that the embattled systems will remain intact despite the onslaught by Babylon. Jeremiah rejects their optimism, arguing that authentic hope must bear the scars of disaster and embrace the harsh realities of the shattered world (Jer 27–29). Adamant that returning to the past is no longer possible, Jeremiah outlines the contours of God's fresh initiative: the Jewish refugees

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[10] For two fine studies on direct and secondary trauma, see Ibrahim Aref Kira, "Taxonomy of Trauma and Trauma Assessment," in *Traumatology* 7/2 (June, 2001): 73–86, and Elzbieta M. Gozdziah, "Refugee Women's Psychological Response to Forced Migration: Limitations of the Trauma Concept," http://www.georgetown.edu/sfs/programs/isim/Publications/ElzPubs/Refugee%20Women's%20Psychological%20Response.pdf. For a sophisticated treatment of trauma and the book of Jeremiah, see Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Surviving Disaster in the Book of Jeremiah," *Word & World* 22/4 (Fall 2002): 369–77, and more recently, "The Book of Jeremiah: Reconstructing Community after Disaster," *Character Ethics and the Old Testament: Moral Dimensions of Scripture* (ed. M. Daniel Carroll R. and Jacqueline E. Lapsley; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 81–92.

[11] The Greek text of Jeremiah (and its Hebrew *Vorlage*) also functions as a meaning-making map, but it does not sustain the same level of hope that is present in Jeremiah MT (see, e.g., the role and placement of the Oracles Against the Nations in the Hebrew text).

will survive the ravages of war and the travail of a shattered world, albeit without many of the old support systems. The exiles will be bound by the memory of suffering and situated on the margins, although ever mindful of God's gracious acts of salvation (Jer 30–33).

No sooner does Jeremiah punctuate this resilient script than the prophet and his countrymen plunge into the abyss. Landowners renege on their covenantal obligation to the poor (Jer 34), Jehoiakim shows "cutting" disdain for the prophetic scroll (Jer 36), and the nation violently refuses to "listen to" YHWH, all of which set in motion a series of shocking events (Jer 37–44). Yet even during this dark hour, when Jerusalem falls and Judah plunges into civil war, when coups, massacres, and duplicity saturate the landscape and Jeremiah is led off to Egypt, modest signs of hope are visible. Perhaps the most significant of these is Jeremiah's own survival: despite torture and imprisonment, his life is spared and the voice of God is not silenced. Faithful supporters come to his aid at the royal palace (36:11–19, 26) and at the cistern of Malchiah (38:7–13), as well as during the siege of Jerusalem (39:11–18; 40:1–6). Thanks to the courage of these faithful few, Jeremiah, who comes to symbolize the war-torn people of God, endures personal assaults and national devastation. And eventually the prophet heralds the downfall of Babylon and the liberation of the beleaguered Jewish exiles (Jer 50–51). The performance concludes with an intentionally ambiguous vignette in which Judah's captive king, Jehoiachin, is released from prison and afforded a place of honor at the royal palace in Babylon (52:31–34; *see* also 2 Kgs 25:27–30). The cryptic allusion to the kind treatment of Jehoiachin, literally the lifting of his head (in Jer 52:31, which is strangely reminiscent of Gen 40:13 and 40:19), may signal the restoration of the Davidic dynasty or more broadly God's continuing work among the Jewish refugees in Babylon.

As a whole, the prophetic drama appears as a diptych of sorts;[12] on the one hand it is governed by "plucking up and pulling down" (Jer 1–25) and on the other by "building and planting" (Jer 26–52). It is not unusual for readers to interpret only (sections of) the latter as hopeful, in large measure due to an almost intuitive correlation of judgment with divine wrath and salvation with divine love. Such a view, however, is reductionistic. While oracles of judgment must be distinguished from oracles of salvation *formally*, the two are not mutually exclusive in Jeremiah's formulation of hope. The first makes healing and survival possible by looking massive loss straight in the eye and breaking various forms of denial. The second moves beyond denials and despair to meaning-making constructions (especially in chs. 30–33 and 46–51). Accordingly, the text's motto (1:10) is not a dualistic formula that divorces plucking up and pulling down from building and planting, but language that belongs together and translates into an anatomy of hope in crisis.

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[12] I am indebted to Bob Becking for this language.

Within these canonical boundaries, meaning-making arrangements—a taxonomy of hope—emerge for exiles of old and those on pilgrimage today.

JEREMIANIC HOPE IS BORN OUT OF THE MAELSTROM OF CONCRETE PARTICULARITIES OF LIFE

Almost without exception, the interpretive communities of the Latter Prophets situate their "heroes" in a particular time and place. Likewise, the book of Jeremiah opens with an apparently innocuous superscription (1:1–3) that anchors "the words [or "affairs"] of Jeremiah" as well as "the word of YHWH" in spatial and temporal categories.[13] Henceforth, "divine revelation" is pinned down and defined by a particular corner of the world. It is neither an abstraction nor an unfettered imagination, but like the faith of Israel, is tied to and shaped by memory and physicality. The word of YHWH spoken through Jeremiah is concretely existential, community-based, and rooted in a particular world-historical context. Specifically, the first words of the prophetic drama establish the "chronological" boundaries of this disorderly and discontinuous book: the unfolding events take place "from the thirteenth year of King Josiah's reign [627 B.C.E.] to the fifth month of the captivity of Jerusalem [587/6 B.C.E.]." It is important to note that these turbulent years culminate in the disorienting memory of "the captivity of Jerusalem," which represents the defining *kairos* of the book.

At first, this ominous framework seems to have little at all to do with hope. However, the same text that establishes the alarming "historical" circumstances also affirms that YHWH enters the fray of this "history" to lament and liberate, to judge and save, to disrupt and embrace, and to subvert and sustain.[14] To generalize the particular then—to divorce "the words of Jeremiah and the word of YHWH" from the realities of community life, to deny its human face, and to extricate it from the actual world of human posturing and power plays—is to read against the grain of the text. While generic language may create fewer epistemic problems, it does not sustain careful scrutiny, especially for suffering communities. Any notion of hope worthy of its name must grow out of the crucible of local contexts—even if those contexts are the ovens of Auschwitz or the killing fields of Cambodia, Kosovo, Rwanda, Baghdad, or Darfur. And so, while Jeremiah may well be a "spokesperson out of time," he nonetheless speaks out of his own peculiar corner of the world. Jeremianic hope is rooted deeply in a particular social reality, the disturbing reality of sixth century B.C.E. Jewry as a subject community.

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[13] The historical reliability of prophetic superscriptions has long been debated. For a recent assessment, see Philip Davies, who argues that the superscriptions introducing the "minor prophets" "are guesswork . . . either composed and transmitted anonymously or attached to a name and not more" in *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 118. Although the referential value of prophetic superscriptions is clearly uneven, their literary and theological import should not be underestimated.

[14] Admittedly, the theological claim that God is involved in the world raises troubling existential questions, especially in the face of unbearable physical and emotional wreckage, random suffering, and the seemingly deafening silence of God. Yet, at the same time, it serves as a profound source of strength and encouragement to those who find themselves in ordinary corners of the world, doing quite ordinary things, and lending a helping hand to ordinary people. For ordinary neighborhoods, even if defined by regal categories (Jer 1:1–3), are nothing less than arenas for the extraordinary. And so the "beyond in our midst" engenders hope in the trenches.

I sometimes run a clip from the movie "Smoke" (Director Wayne Wang, Miramax, 1995) starring William Hurt (as Paul Benjamin) and Harvey Keitel (as Auggie Wren) to drive home the importance of the contingent character of texts and the situated texture of our lives, as well as the mystery of the mundane. In the film, Paul, a writer who can barely cope with the murder of his pregnant wife by random street violence, stops by Auggie Wren's tobacco shop on the corner of 3rd and 7th Streets in Brooklyn. Near the register Paul notices a camera, which Auggie explains holds the key to who he is and what he's really about. He shows Benjamin a pile of photo albums with thousands of pictures of the same scene, people passing by the corner of 3rd and 7th Streets at 8:00 in the morning every day of the year. "It's my corner after all. I mean, it's just one little part of the world, but things happen there, too, just like everywhere else. It's a record of my little spot." Paul, however, doesn't get it. He only sees pages and pages of the same thing, until he slows down and looks closely. Then he begins to understand! As Auggie explains,

> They're all the same but each one is different from every other one. You've got your bright mornings and dark mornings. You've got your summer light and autumn light. You've got your weekdays and weekends. You've got people with overcoats and galoshes and . . . people in tee shirts and shorts. Sometimes the same people, sometimes different ones; sometimes the different ones become the same. The same ones disappear . . . every day the light from the sun hits the earth from a different angle.

When Paul slows down and becomes more observant, he even discovers a few photos of his wife Ellen going to work. At first, Auggie's corner store and his 4000-plus pictures of 3rd and 7th Streets at 8:00 a.m. appear trite and rather odd. A closer look reveals that his small slice of the world, his concrete particularity, was nothing less than extraordinary.

The opening words of the prophetic drama discourage disengagement from real communities living in particular corners of the world. For the Jeremiah tradition, this world is wounded by war and engulfed in tears. In *this* place of crisis hope takes shape.

JEREMIANIC HOPE IS CANDID ABOUT DEEP RUPTURES OF LIFE

An essential ingredient of Jeremiah's meaning-making map, his tapestry of hope, is truth-telling. From the outset, the prophet names and breaks up a surplus of denials and deceptions and dares to critique social structures, domain assumptions, and prevailing values that anesthetize the community to its true condition. After putting his nation under a prophetic

microscope, he is convinced that Judah's world is shattered beyond repair and that its institutional and ideological mainstays will do little to rectify its condition. Impressive sanctuaries, brawny nationalism, urban think-tanks, and even trusted doctrines will not avert disaster and fundamental transformations in community life! And so Jeremiah speaks truth to the power-brokers invested in these systems: prophets and priests who proclaim, "'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace" (6:14; 8:11), sages who reject wisdom and "the word of YHWH" (8:8–9), and Judean kings who show utter disdain for opposing positions (see, e.g., 36:1–32; 37:17–21; 38:14–28).

The prophetic critique, however, is not restricted to the powerful: Jeremiah places the entire enterprise under biting scrutiny. As YHWH's spokesperson, he exposes the spiritual and moral bankruptcy of the shareholders as well (e.g., 2:1–13; 5:1–5, 20–29): ". . . all have broken the yoke . . . all have burst the bonds" (5:5). Greed is insatiable, apostasy is rampant, neglect of the poor is reprehensible, and liturgy devoid of compassion is an affront to YHWH. Put succinctly, Jeremiah the truth-teller asserts that all is not well! No wonder professional mourners are called upon to lament: "Death has come into our windows, it has entered our palaces, to cut off the children from the streets and the young men from the squares" (9:21). The tradition of Jeremiah simply will not trade in prevarication, fantasy, and denial, nor will it close down the senses and banish memory.[15] The text confronts social and symbolic patterns that foster exploitation, idolatry, and specious assurance for the future. And it refuses to conceal the truth of the city's death.

Such scathing commentary again appears to have little to do with hope. But healing—communal and individual—begins with the candor and courage to relinquish false hopes and detrimental securities. YHWH's prophet of hope insists that the refugee community must surrender its old identity in the land and accept its marginal status in diaspora in order to survive and eventually flourish (e.g., 21:1–10; 29:4–10).[16] Although his opponents, including Hananiah and Shemaiah, conclude otherwise and so appear to be harbingers of hope, their patriotic fervor only strengthens the grip of despair. Truthtelling—facing life's particularities head on and abandoning the illusions from the past, with their various modes of control—is the starting point of hope and the principal resource of "collective healing" (a term used by psychiatrist and human rights advocate Jean-Marie Lemaire). Or as therapist Linda Centers observes with regard to ALS patients, "real hope cannot thrive in a climate of deception or where truth is being withheld."[17]

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[15] I am reminded here of W. G. Sebald's thesis in his work *On the Natural History of Destruction* (New York: Random House, 2003) that post-war Germany did exactly that: it demonstrated well "people's ability to forget what they do not want to know . . . and carry on as if nothing had happened" [41]. The book of Jeremiah resists this propensity, at least for its implied audience. Admittedly the tradition's memory is selective: it is apparently capable of "disappearing acts," as in the case of the Judean community that remained in the land after the Babylonian invasions.

[16] If hope is defined as the expectation for a good outcome or the assurance that what one longs for will eventually occur, then Jeremiah is at best marginally hopeful and far more disturbing, counterintuitive, and attentive to mere survival (see 5:10–19, especially v. 18; 45:1–5; 50:4–5, 33–34; 51:1–10). While hope in the tradition of Jeremiah involves newness and a resilient script for the future (30:1–33:26), it is never detached from the fissured world of war and exile. In fact, arrangements of hope that do not take these harsh realities seriously are deemed dangerous and ultimately destructive.

[17] Linda Centers, "Beyond Denial and Despair: ALS and Our Heroic Potential for Hope," *Journal of Palliative Care* 17 (2001): 260, quoted by ethicist Matthew Stolick, "Fostering True Hopes of Terminally Ill Patients," *BIO Quarterly* 17/2 (Summer 2006): 3.

JEREMIANIC HOPE ATTEMPTS TO MAKE SENSE OF THE NONSENSE OF RADICAL SUFFERING[18]

Cognitive, emotional, and spiritual "understanding" of disaster is a key to resilience and the management of grief among refugees. Viable explanations of suffering are crucial to individual and community hope.[19] The book of Jeremiah is a complex theodicy—or more precisely, a theology of suffering—that strives to help survivors cope with massive devastation and imagine fresh possibilities springing forth from the ruins of war and forced deportation. Virtually every utterance of this meaning-making map is informed by the conviction that YHWH reigns, which is arguably the root metaphor of the book. The prophet envisions the fractured world and its array of vicissitudes under YHWH's sovereignty. Consequently, suffering is not arbitrary. Judah's crisis is not a fluke of world historical forces or the result of strategic geopolitical actions. It signals neither life spiraling out of control nor the impotence of Israel's God. From start to finish, Jeremiah affirms that despite national disaster and social upheaval God is still ordering the world with the intent to accomplish God's purposes. Or to echo the book's refrain, God is plucking up and pulling down, destroying and overthrowing "the whole earth" (45:4).

The assertion that YHWH reigns does little to diminish human responsibility. On the contrary, Jeremiah claims that YHWH holds all people accountable for their actions, especially the people of God. "Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. But they say, 'It is no use! We will follow our own plans . . .'" (18:11, 12). Agency is an essential, albeit disturbing, ingredient of Jeremianic hope. The prophet holds to the belief that Judah's predicament is in large measure a consequence of its own actions. The breakdown of Torah values, especially fidelity, justice, and compassion, results in chaos and destruction. It is hard to deny that this ethical vision on some level blames the victim. To place responsibility on the shoulders of the Judean people is to let the principal protagonists in the fall of Jerusalem off the hook (see, however, Jer 50–51). While this causal argument is no doubt problematic, it serves in part as a survivor's strategy to make sense of inexplicable suffering.[20] For those victimized by geopolitical and natural forces beyond their control, the re-establishment of agency, even through scapegoating and blame, is a core ingredient of hope and resilience. It renders dangerous forces "powerless" and eradicates "mess." In particular, it serves to demonstrate that the community's crisis is not gratuitous or indiscriminate, but an outcome of an orderly and morally meaningful universe. And the tradition garners a rich variety of metaphors, including deuteronomic and covenant understandings, to harness symbolic, intellectual, and emotional chaos and set it within a coherent context of meaning (see, e.g., 11:1–17).

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[18] Wendy Farley uses the term "radical suffering" to refer to suffering that is "destructive of the human spirit and . . . cannot be understood as something deserved." See her *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1990), 21.

[19] Gozdziah, "Refugee Women's Psychological Response to Forced Migration," 14.

[20] See Kira, "Taxonomy of Trauma and Trauma Assessment," 76. Also note Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 105–123.

What is rather distinctive about the book of Jeremiah is that the prophetic persona subverts these stable and symmetrical categories. The interpretive community depicts its hero as faithful yet tortured, obedient yet rejected. On the heels of the covenant sermon, which draws a direct correlation between Judah's conduct and its condition, for instance, the prophet cries out that he has done nothing but heed YHWH's demands and yet is still abused and persecuted. He sees himself as innocent as "a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (11:19). Like many psalmists as well as suffering Job, Jeremiah appeals to YHWH for protection and vindication. Although YHWH is responsive to his cry and promises to restore moral order (see, e.g., 11:21–23), the suffering prophet is still caught in the chaotic interim before justice materializes. During this already/not yet interlude (cf. Rom 8:18–39), Jeremiah bears witness to and embodies the disturbing reality of undeserved suffering and the apparent indifference of God. In stark contrast to his morally coherent (prose) proclamation, therefore, the besieged prophet inhabits a social environment riddled with evil and injustice. His "confessions" describe this world without explanation or justification. In this way the tradition refuses to deny the randomness of suffering or give pat answers that might numb people to their deeply fissured world. Even innocent prophets, who represent a host of tormented people, suffer abuse and failure! Accordingly, Jeremiah the innocent sufferer becomes a symbol of hope when justice languishes in exile. In the prophetic persona, we discover that suffering is not shameful but rather a mark of faithful service to God.[21]

JEREMIANIC HOPE REFUSES TO FLATTEN THE WORLD INTO MONOLITHIC AND RIGID CATEGORIES

Perhaps more than any other prophetic writing in the HB, the book of Jeremiah is an elaborate tapestry of meaning-making that honors complexity, delights in ambiguity, and relishes *heteroglossia* (Bakhtin's term): it dares to grapple with focal concerns and crippling fears that challenge ordinary conventional understandings. As such, this bold literary tradition eschews superficiality and resists the temptation to flatten the world into safe, monolithic categories. We see this interpretive propensity in the text's unstable quality, dissonant voices, plethora of genres, and perhaps most poignantly in its penetrating understandings of disaster. The Jeremiah tradition will not reduce the crumbling of Judah's world to a single cause or a unified explanation. Instead, the interpretive community participates in "an ongoing *conversation* . . . concerning the crisis faced by the community of Israel at the demise of Jerusalem."[22]

This conversation includes those who would censure the upper tiers of social hierarchy—hostile kings, inept prophets, and self-serving priests—while others implicate the nation as

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[21]See Louis J. Stulman, "Jeremiah as a Polyphonic Response to Suffering," in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honour of Herbert B. Huffmon* (JSOTSup 378; ed. John Kaltner and Louis Stulman; London: T & T Clark International, 2004), 302–318.

[22] Walter Brueggemann, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (OTT; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 5, emphasis added.

a whole for systemic wrongdoing. Some speak of communal rebellion and apostasy, covenant and Torah infractions, and unlawful political alliances. Others assert that Sabbath violations led to the unraveling of the universe. Still others conclude that the cessation of offerings to the Queen of Heaven—likely after the Josianic Reform—contributed to their plight (44:15–19). A prose constituency makes a sustained case that Judah's predicament is inextricably linked to its rejection and ill-treatment of Jeremiah (Jer 37–44). At the same time, the tradition gives voice to those who accuse YHWH of excessive and indiscriminate force. Like Dostoyevsky's Ivan Karamazov, Jeremiah dares to call God's justice into question (see, e.g., 12:1–4).

Amidst these clashing voices are those that reject retributive and punitive categories and opt instead for expressions of sorrow, exasperation, pain, and disappointment. It is not incidental that much of the poetry of Jeremiah is cast in the form of a lament. Nor is it inconsequential that the major participants in the drama, YHWH and Jeremiah, are often depicted as fractured figures who participate in the anguish of the community. Their requiem for Israel pulsates with grief. Notwithstanding this painful involvement, the tradition is also capable of disassociating God from human violence and suffering. Notice, in this regard, the divine absence in the narrative of Gedaliah's assassination and the "massacre of the innocents" (40:7–41:18), as well as in the telling of Jerusalem's fall (39:1–10).

In addition to the many interpretations of catastrophe, one can also recognize the rich conversational texture of Jeremiah in the array of divine images, ideological platforms, [23] understandings of empire (cf. 27:1–11 and 50:1–51:58), and renderings of the prophet. The tradition depicts its hero as a complex character, who is multidimensional, conflicted, and hard to pin down. [24] He is YHWH's faithful spokesperson as well as the community's advocate; as YHWH's messenger he indicts Judah for infidelity, injustice, and hardness of heart (e.g., 2:1–37; 5:1–5, 20–31); as guardian of the community, he takes YHWH to task for harsh and indiscriminate judgment (e.g., 12:1–4; 14:13–18; see also 14:19–22). This same Jeremiah is a survivor, iconoclast, sage, poet, cynic, performer, tester and refiner, pariah, intercessor, itinerant preacher, covenant mediator, political advisor, harbinger of violence, and harbinger of hope—to name only a few. He supports Babylonian imperialism (Jer 27–28) and eventually condemns it (Jer 50–51). He encourages capitulation to Babylon and then tacitly fosters rebellion against the empire.

The interpretive community resists domesticating Jeremiah the prophet or Jeremiah the book, even by the voice of YHWH or by a formidable deuteronomistic *Tendenz* to control and organize symbolic disorder. Admittedly this dissonance has been a source of great con-

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[23] See, e.g., the recent work by Carolyn J. Sharp, *Prophecy and Ideology: Struggles for Authority in the Deutero-Jeremianic Prose* (OTS; London: T & T Clark, 2003).

[24] Contra Sigmund Mowinckel, who argued that the Jeremiah of the prose sermons is a shallow and dogmatic figure, *Zur Komposition des Buches Jeremia* (Kristiania: Jacob Dywad, 1914), 38–39.

sternation for readers interested in linear speech, authorial intent, and historical exactitude;[25] yet this cacophonous texture leaves the reader not only disconcerted but also engaged and hopeful: hopeful because Jeremianic dissymmetry takes seriously massive and unmanageable loss; hopeful because it honors a range of human responses to the horror of suffering; hopeful because it provides language when ordinary speech fails. The text's labyrinth of voices and counter voices will not settle for simple answers to complex questions, and thus it commands an integrity and force that is capable of helping victims cope with the ravages of palpable disease.

JEREMIANIC HOPE IS SUSTAINED BY ENGAGEMENT AND DISPUTATION RATHER THAN RESIGNATION AND PASSIVITY

If the "confessions" of Jeremiah are more than personal prayers, as Graf Reventlow, Mark Biddle, and others have cogently argued,[26] they represent a daring, disputatious communal spirituality which does not shrink from liturgical engagement, "scandalous" complaint, and combative dialogue. While these laments differ markedly one from another, they share a common ethos and orientation. From the first lament (11:18–12:6) to the final utterance of despair (20:7–18), these prayers reflect a social world fraught with fear and vulnerability. As already noted, Jeremiah, the larger than life figure, is not insulated from danger—divine or human—but must live in a fractured and morally problematic universe in which the righteous suffer, while God appears indifferent (12:1–4).

Rather than accepting this situation as it is or painting an implausible picture of it, Jeremiah confronts it head-on and seeks recourse through prayer and social pressure. In this dangerous world, the prophet is adamant about his own virtue and the wrongdoing of his adversaries. One looks in vain for confessions of sin or pleas for forgiveness from Jeremiah. Like Job, he is more convinced of his own innocence than he is of the innocence of YHWH. And so he protests, rages, and accuses God of ethical mismanagement and covenant infidelity. Jeremiah even hurls at YHWH a battery of frontal questions concerning his own plight and divine inertia. This language of defiance, this spirituality of candor, refuses to acquiesce easily; it will not fall in line and submit—even to God! Nor will it let God off the hook. In the unstable and perilous social world of Jeremiah's laments, God is not scandalized by such dissent or disputation; on the contrary, cries of distress and protests of innocence become "a modicum of hope."[27] And even though God offers Jeremiah—and the community he represents—little hope for an immediate reprieve from disorientation, God is still responsive to human suffering

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[25] Interpretive problems are made all the more challenging by the fact that the prophetic persona and message are mediated through poetry, prose sermons, and narrative accounts.

[26] Henning G. Reventlow, *Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher, 1966); Mark E. Biddle, *Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature: Rereading Jeremiah 7–20* (Studies in Old Testament Interpretation 2; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996).

[27] Mark S. Smith, *The Laments of Jeremiah and Their Contexts: A Literary and Redactional Study of Jeremiah 11–20* (SBLMS 42; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 67.

and promises to be present during the deluge. Such understandings reflect a rugged spirituality that is comfortable with raw emotion, astonishing boldness, ethical uncertainty, and intense displays of public grief.

HOPE IS IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT THE PROSPECT OF A BETTER LIFE AND FUTURE

Jeremiah's map of hope involves more than truthtelling and deconstruction, emotional integrity and candor, engagement and disputation; in the tradition of Jeremiah, hope imagines a future when none seems possible. It is no accident that the two primary occurrences of the word "hope"(*tqvh*) in the book refer to the future of the displaced community (29:11; 31:17; see also the word *tqvh* as used in 14:8; 17:13; 50:7). "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for your harm, to give you *a future with hope*" (29:11). "There is *hope for your future*, says the LORD: your children shall come back to their country" (31:17). Without the prospect of a future, hope is impossible; with little chance of survival and a better future, life becomes unbearable. Jeremiah, God's harbinger of hope, asserts that the collapse of Judah's universe signals neither the end of faith nor the death of the community. Despite overwhelming indications to the contrary (read, for instance, the two verses that immediately precede 31:17), God is still at work mending a broken world and healing lives wracked with pain.

While Jeremiah's vision of Judah's future is far from unified or systematic, its broad outlines emerge most clearly in the second act of the prophetic drama (chs. 26–52). There we encounter glimmers of hope (e.g., 26:24; 38:7–13; 39:15–18; 45:1–5) as well as lush gardens (30:1–33:26). Jeremiah envisions a future in which YHWH consoles and heals, creates and transforms, liberates and restores, builds and plants, and eventually gathers scattered Israel for a grand homecoming (see, e.g., 29:10–14; 30:1–3; 32:1–44). In a display of mercy, YHWH promises to act unilaterally in the creation of a new covenant with Israel based on internal renewal and forgiveness (31:31–34). YHWH even resolves to restore the royal leadership of David and the priestly supervision of the Levites (33:14–26, although missing from the Greek version).

These striking overtures of restoration, however, are never far from the purview of exile and empire. Rarely utopian or Edenic, God's script for newness is replete with reminders of the painful past. "Thus says the LORD: The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness . . . With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back . . ." (31:2, 9a; see also 30:4–11). Such renderings create a hopeful realism that takes seriously the

plight of the captured community, while affirming that it will survive and eventually thrive. One day— indeed, "the time is surely coming" (for the eschatological formulation see 23:5, 7; 30:3; 31:27, 31; 33:14; 51:47)—YHWH will restore justice and moral sanity to all people.

In the meantime, before God's wondrous work of renewal is fulfilled, the displaced community must resist the temptation to sit back and do nothing or hastily follow the guidance of those who promise imminent restoration. To do either would result in further suffering. And so Jeremiah challenges the exiles in Babylon to put down roots and work hard at creating a viable communal life in a faraway place. Rather than clinging to an old identity, Jeremiah urges the Jewish refugees to accept their new place on the margins of society (29:4–10). "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29:5–7). Such a disenfranchised social position surely looks bleak, but Jeremiah argues to the contrary: accepting this reality and letting go of the past makes room for the new workings of God. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the exiles will find God in their place of risk. There they will participate in God's new creation, and there they will discover seeds of hope.

HOPE IS BUOYED BY RESISTANCE

Resistance and hope are partners in meaning-making. Whether it takes the form of a beauty pageant in Kosovo, reading Lolita in Tehran, draft card burnings in the United States, boycotts in South Africa, mass demonstrations on the streets of Paris, or hunger strikes at the U.S. prison in Guantanamo Bay, resistance keeps hope alive and sometimes sets it ablaze. As is often the case in the tradition of Jeremiah, perceptions of resistance and empire co-exist in tension. Throughout much of the prophetic drama, Jeremiah opposes insurrection and in fact encourages capitulation to the empire and its king whom he calls "YHWH's servant" (25:9; 27:6; 43:10):

> Thus says the LORD: See, I am setting before you the way of life and the way of death. Those who stay in this city shall die by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence; but those who go out and surrender to the Chaldeans who are besieging you shall live and shall have their lives as a prize of war. For I have set my face against this city for evil and not for good, says the LORD: it shall be given into the hands of the king of Babylon, and he shall burn it with fire. (21:8–10)

Similarly, Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, "Thus says the LORD, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live" (38:17). From a geopolitical perspective, one could certainly make the case that Jeremiah's "pro-Babylonian" rhetoric pulsates with political realism. Submission to Babylon, in compliance with the word of YHWH, was clearly the only viable option to ensure Judah's survival. Jeremiah's instructions to the Judean exiles reflect the same realism: "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29:7).

Notwithstanding this political pragmatism, Jeremiah eventually takes on Babylon (50:1–51:58). The final image of Jeremiah presented by the Hebrew text is that of a dissident prophet to the nations who speaks out against the empire and its imperial designs toward absolute power. In this context, Babylon is no longer YHWH's instrument of judgment or even one of many nations that sins against YHWH. Rather Babylon is "the hammer of the whole earth" (50:23), "a horror among the nations" (50:23), a country that has "challenged" (50:24) and "arrogantly defied the LORD" (50:29), a "destroying mountain" (51:25); to be sure, Babylon is "the pride of the whole earth" (51:41), the embodiment of insolence (50:31–32).

Once Jeremiah exposes this hubris, he heralds the empire's demise. YHWH disposes of brazen Babylon once and for all. "Suddenly, Babylon is fallen and is shattered . . . How Sheshach is taken . . . How Babylon has become an object of horror among nations . . . For the LORD is laying Babylon waste, and stilling her loud clamor . . ." (51:8, 41, 55). This grand realignment not only signals the defeat of Nebuchadnezzar and the powers of Marduk,[28] but it also inaugurates an epoch of hope. Now Judean exiles situated on the margins can imagine life without the oppressive regime. Now dispirited refugees have lenses to see that worldly power is not ultimate power, that military technology is fleeting, and that God acts on behalf of those who cannot act on their own. And now those who bear the physical wounds and psychological scars of war and forced displacement can entertain the possibility of their own freedom. By the force of this "hidden transcript" of justice, no doubt deployed under the radar of Babylon, Jeremiah empowers God's people with the will to survive and the resolve to act.

If this script of resistance "emerged in the midst of liturgic celebrations of the sovereignty of Yahweh" as Walter Brueggemann has suggested,[29] we might do well to reconsider conventional notions of worship. In addition to addressing the deity with language of adoration, this subversive expression of worship dares to address the empire; it refuses to

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[28] Martin Kessler, *Battle of the Gods: The God of Israel Versus Marduk of Babylon, A Literary/Theological Interpretation of Jeremiah 50–51* (Assen, The Netherlands: Royal Van Gorcum, 2003).

[29] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 418; see also Louis Stulman, "Conflicting Paths to Hope in Jeremiah," in *Shaking Heaven and Earth. Essays in Honor of Walter Brueggemann and Charles B. Cousar* (ed. Christine Roy Yoder, Kathleen M. O'Connor, E. Elizabeth Johnson, and Stanley P. Saunders; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 54–55.

ignore political aggression and monstrous immorality; it rejects cruel power structures as normative; and it says "no" to systems of oppression and humiliation. This liturgical performance, however, does not employ violence to rectify the empire's offenses.[30] Rather, through holy defiance, it provides sacred space and time that is removed from infected time and space.[31] In such a setting the world is realigned and hope is born. In the end worship becomes a robust matrix for hope.

CONCLUSION

Jeremiah is an artifact of hope. Jeremiah is an artifact of terror. This enduring literary tradition neither placates nor pacifies and certainly does not traffic in entitlements. Jeremianic hope is instead dangerous, disruptive, and disturbing. It subverts long-held beliefs, dismantles trusted social structures, and exposes illusions and trivialities. It does not avert its gaze from hypocrisy and injustice but demands wholehearted obedience. Clearly Jeremiah's "future of hope" is not what Judah desired! It includes few assurances of victory and even fewer exemptions from suffering. The promised future for God's people is not unlike that pledged to Baruch: "Thus says the LORD: I am going to break down what I have built, and pluck up what I have planted— that is, the whole land. And you, do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the LORD; but *I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go*" (45:4–5). Like faithful Baruch, the community will not triumph (nationally or militarily) but it will survive, and survival is nothing to scoff at during times of war.

This artifact of hope, this artifact of terror, may indeed be as urgent today as it was for a refugee community living under the shadow of the empire in the sixth century B.C.E. It may also be as disconcerting, *especially for citizens of the empire.* With economic systems in jeopardy and longstanding geopolitical and religious institutions under scrutiny, with an increasing awareness of United States' vulnerability, many of us find ourselves longing for the restoration of the old world and its standard modes of operation. Such inclinations do not bode well for those who take this meaning-making map seriously. While the book of Jeremiah is full of fractures, tensions, and contradictions, it is firm in the conviction that conventional power structures, settled religious categories, and robust geopolitical systems are the wrong places to look for hope and God's blessings. By the end of the book, it becomes clear—if there were ever doubt—that God's place in the world is among the broken and

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[30] This observation is supported in chapter fifty-one where YHWH resolves to reduce Babylon to rubble. In an overwhelming display of combat imagery (51:11–33), Israel's divine warrior resolves to crush Babylon and its gods. Since the "destroying mountain" has devastated the whole earth (51:24–26), YHWH deploys the multitudes against Babylon (51:27–33). They have borne the brunt of Babylon's abuse, and it stands to reason that they must witness and participate in the liturgical drama of Babylon's defeat. Every nation, as it were, takes a shot at Babylon for the damage it has done—with the exception of the Jewish refugees in Babylon. Though Judah has suffered sorely at the hand of Babylon, YHWH does not summon the citizens of Jerusalem to battle. Instead, YHWH, their warrior-king, directly and decisively repays Babylon for the wrong it has afflicted on Zion. ". . . Yet a little while and the time of her harvest will come" (51:33). For the exiles listening, this enactment of divine vengeance flags YHWH's just kingship in the world, and it indirectly serves as a script for non-violent resistance. Rather than relying on their own strength and ingenuity, they are to trust that YHWH will realign the world as they imagine it in worship.

[31] Gozdziah, "Refugee Women's Psychological Response to Forced Migration," 17.

dispossessed, the captured and conquered. Hope is to be found among the vulnerable and wounded. In this way, the book of Jeremiah unmasks illusions of power and reveals God's solidarity with exiles of old and exiles today.[32]

[32] This article is adapted from *Prophetic Literature: Collages of Chaos, Tapestries of Hope*, to be published by Abingdon in Fall 2009, and used with permission from the publisher.