

FACTFILE: GCE RELIGIOUS STUDIES

THE PROPHET JEREMIAH



The Prophet Jeremiah

History and Influences: The book of Jeremiah is a multi-layered meditation of faith prompted by the crisis surrounding the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the subsequent trauma of deportation, which was accompanied by a deep sense of loss. It contains many voices, filled with deep feeling, predominantly of grief and mourning; but there is also a degree of hope for the future. Jeremiah is the second book of the Latter Prophets and is exceptionally complicated, having been put together in its final form through a complex process of redacting/editing different strands of the Jeremiah tradition.

The book is grounded in the speech of the prophet Jeremiah in Jerusalem at the end of the seventh century – perhaps as early as 626 BCE in the view of some scholars or as late as 609 BCE in the view of others. There seems little doubt that the book of Jeremiah contains the well-remembered poetic oracles of the prophet Jeremiah, especially in chapters 1–20. It is apparent that these poetic utterances were shaped as speeches of judgment intended to indict Jerusalem for its disobedience to God’s Torah/Law and to sentence Jerusalem to the punishment commensurate with such Torah/Law disobedience. The core message is presented in imaginative ways, expressed in arresting imagery and striking metaphor. The cumulative force of these prophetic oracles of judgment is to anticipate the destruction of Jerusalem in an enemy attack that is presented as the will of God, who ultimately will not be disobeyed or mocked.

While the core of the “prophetic lawsuit” – that is, when the prophets acted and spoke like prosecutors on behalf of God against the people – is commonly

shared among Israel’s pre-exilic prophets, the speeches of Jeremiah reflect a particular influence and perspective. In terms of tradition, Jeremiah belongs to the Ephraimite (i.e., northern) school of thought. Hosea is a key early voice in this school, which claims to reach back into the Mosaic tradition for its central focus and understanding.

The antecedents of the prophet Jeremiah may be identified even more specifically within the biblical tradition. He is deemed as being “of the priests in Anathoth in the land of Benjamin” (1:2). That particular strand of priesthood refers back to 1st Kings 2:26–27, where Abiathar the priest is banished by King Solomon from the centre of power in Jerusalem to his home village of Anathoth (see 1st Samuel 22:20–23). The connection of Jeremiah to the banishment of Abiathar through both being from the village of Anathoth suggests that Jeremiah’s home base and theological outlook is as an outsider to the royal reality and perspective of Judaism. He is thus capable of sharp, radical–indeed elemental – criticism of the monarchical establishment. This is perhaps influenced and tinged by long generations of resentful brooding since the expulsion of the ancestor Abiathar in the much earlier era of Solomon. Shaped by this history, when “the word of the Lord” is given to him (1:2), Jeremiah is ready to anticipate the end of the royal-temple establishment in Jerusalem.

As noted, there is no doubt in critical study that in the *book* of Jeremiah we have poetic speech from the *person* of Jeremiah. There is also no doubt, however, that we do not have direct and immediate access to the person of Jeremiah, because whatever he originally said has now been refracted through

a sustained, intentional and insistent traditioning process. Thus attention must be turned from the *person* of Jeremiah, to whom we have no access, to the *book* of Jeremiah, which in its final form is the proper subject of study: the redaction/editorial process has effectively incorporated what has been retained of the person of Jeremiah into the book of Jeremiah. Note that it is the long-held view of scholarship that the traditioning has been ultimately carried out by advocates of Deuteronomistic theology, i.e., interpreters committed to the Torah/Law theology of the book of Deuteronomy. These interpreters are closely connected to – and for some scholars are identified with – the Deuteronomistic historians of the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

Poetry, Prose and Final Redaction:

The relationship of the *poetic oracles* in the book of Jeremiah (assessed to be from the person of Jeremiah) and the *prose sections* (acutely shaped by the assumptions and vocabulary of Deuteronomistic and Deuteronomistic thought) is one of the most difficult questions in Jeremiah studies. A conservative scholarly view is that the prose passages are only another version of the poetic work and so authentically reflect the prophet (William Holladay follows this line). A more radical view is that the prose is the insertion and imposition of a very different theology that came later and was perhaps intended to speak to the community that had experienced the first Babylonian deportation in 598 BCE (see 2nd Kings 24:10–17); some scholars believe that the prose material is actually addressed to those who had survived the second and major deportation of 587 BCE (e.g., Robert Carroll). However this is adjudicated, it may be noted, as Louis Stulman has demonstrated, that the prose sections rooted in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic thought have been strategically placed to give an overall shape to the whole.

To summarize the journey of scholarship:

- A. The Poetry of Jeremiah – found chiefly in chapters 1–25, some scholars insist that Jeremiah’s genuine oracles are found only in the poetic sections; in which case, the letter “A” stands for authentic.
- B. Biographical Prose – found mainly in chapters 26–45, but also interspersed among the opening poetic materials, many of these narratives seem to represent the memoirs of Baruch, Jeremiah’s faithful supporter and scribe, who may initially have developed the Jeremiah tradition; in this case, the letter “B” stands for Baruch’s biography.

C. The Contribution of the Compiler (i.e., Redactor/ Editor) – frequently the prose sections of the book of Jeremiah resemble the language and literary style of Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History. These sections show that the book in its present form has been compiled by redactors/editors of (or sympathetic to) Deuteronomistic perspective; in this case, the letter “C” stands for the complier (editor/redactor) of the book.

The Call of Jeremiah:

A number of scholars have pointed out that in the prophet Jeremiah’s call there are strong similarities to Moses: thus Jeremiah was not simply appointed as a prophet but was specifically designated a *Mosaic* prophet. In reply to Jeremiah’s objection to God’s original call, God touches the prophet’s lips and declares, “I have put my words in your mouth” (1:9). This phrase is almost identical to the one used in Deuteronomy 18:18, where God says of the promised Mosaic prophet, “I will put my words in his mouth.” As a Mosaic prophet, Jeremiah is told only to speak the divine word that God gives: “Whatever I command you, you shall speak” (1:7); “say to them everything that I command you” (1:17). Similar instructions were also given to Moses and his prophetic successors: “He shall speak to them all that I command him” (Deut. 18:18). Of course, it is impossible to know whether Jeremiah actually quoted the words of Deuteronomy in describing his call or whether the quotations were inserted by later editors/redactors in the Jeremiah tradition (the latter is possibly more likely). In either scenario, the call narrative places the prophet clearly in the distinctive Ephraimite prophetic tradition. As a Mosaic prophet, he is to speak the pure word of God to the people, who are required to obey the word that comes through such a prophet. In the Deuteronomistic view, the purpose of the call of Jeremiah is to assert the themes of 1:10:

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

With this approach, the book is to exhibit the way in which the prophet is (a) “to pluck up and to pull down” into exile and (b) “to build and to plant” out of exile. Thus, note from the outset of the book of Jeremiah, a theological perspective of *judgment* and *restoration* is an influence on the final form of the work (as it is in much of the prophetic literature): whatever the specific traditions that

have shaped the book of Jeremiah, it is also part of the wider editorial/redactional achievement in which warnings of doom and disaster are always followed by promises of hope and restoration.

Condemnation of the Temple:

Commonly termed the “Temple Sermon” (7:1–8:3), this passage places Jeremiah in a public place summoning Judah to “amend” its ways according to Torah/Law requirements (vv.3–7), and threatening Jerusalem with destruction and extinction (like the ancient shrine of Shiloh) if it does not repent (vv.13–15). The call to repent (literally to turn, turn away from or turn around) is characteristic of Deuteronomistic theology, except that in this instance, by the latter verses, the time for repentance or turning seems past. Overall, the sermon constitutes a frontal assault on the claims and pretensions of the temple apparatus. It appears to have been delivered at the beginning of Jehoiakim’s reign. Notice that Jeremiah, true to the Mosaic tradition, uses the conditional “if” (vv.5–7) and appeals to covenant law, the Decalogue (vv.8–10).

In addition to playing the tyrant, Jehoiakim revived the sorts of religious practices that his father, Josiah, had tried to eliminate under the Deuteronomic Reform he instigated. But now people were returning to their former ways: cakes are made for Ishtar, Queen of Heaven (the mother-goddess worshipped in Assyria and Babylon; 7:18); child sacrifice was practiced in the Valley of Hinnom; idols were set up in the temple. Confronted with this, Jeremiah challenged one of the central tenets of Davidic covenant theology: the temple as the place of God’s presence. There was no point chanting glib words about the temple being a sanctuary of refuge when it had become a den to harbour thieves. The temple was no bulwark of security, no guarantee that assured God’s presence to protect and see that no harm would come: according to Jeremiah, the temple would fall and Judah would go into exile along with the northern Kingdom; God had not commanded sacrifices when Israel came out of Egypt, but rather had asked for loyal and obedient hearts so that the covenant promise might be fulfilled (vv.21–23). Faithfulness within the covenant relationship was fundamental to its failure.

Note how chapter 26 reports Jeremiah’s trial as an enemy of the Jerusalem establishment, apparently with direct reference to the sermon of chapter 7. Jeremiah is condemned to death by religious leaders (v.11), but continues, driven by conviction, to be relentless about the pressing

need for repentance (v.13). Like some of his prophetic predecessors, Jeremiah took his stand on the covenant tradition rooted in the Exodus and wilderness experience; in his context, he uses this tradition to challenge the royal covenant theology, with its divine guarantee of support for the Davidic king and its promise of God’s presence in the Jerusalem temple. The establishment wants him dead, and had it not been for some elders appealing to the precedent of Micah (26:18; and the citation of Mic. 3:12), who a hundred years before had prophesied the fall of Jerusalem and the temple, Jeremiah would have lost his life.

Jeremiah and the Politics of Prophecy:

It is clear that the scroll (book) of Jeremiah (see chapter 36), in its completed Deuteronomic/Deuteronomistic form, represented a powerful challenge, and therefore threat, to royal Jerusalem. This threat and challenge may in part be seen as rooted in the old priestly tradition of Abiathar of Anathoth, who stood against the self-aggrandizing monarchy. If we explore more specifically the circle of traditionists who fostered the development of the scroll, we may notice that in 26:24 it is a son of Shaphan who protected the prophet; further, in chapter 36 powerful officials, also connected to Shaphan, urged Jeremiah and Baruch to hide from the threat of the state (v.19), with which they comply (v.26). From this it may be deduced that in Jerusalem a cadre of influential officials were sympathetic to Jeremiah’s assault on the monarchy, and themselves represented a loyal opposition to the king inside the royal government. It is possible that Jeremiah became a spokesperson for that opinion and received surreptitious support from those in the hazardous position of exposing and opposing the foolish policies of the king. It is also plausible that in this cadre of advocates there may have been the scribes who edited/redacted the traditional words of Jeremiah into the book of Jeremiah. So it may be suggested that the book of Jeremiah, rooted in the words of Jeremiah, became a vehicle and rallying manifesto for Torah/Law-based policies that stood in deep opposition to royal policies in Jerusalem. In this perspective, a strand of the book of Jeremiah may be understood as contributing to an intensely subversive dynamic in the crisis of Jerusalem. Thus, the traditioning process, combining immense theological passion with political courage, found in the tradition of Jeremiah a very significant voice for articulating an alternative in Jerusalem that undermined royal theology and ideology.

Contrasting Kings and a Challenging Option:

In almost every respect, Jehoiakim was a very different person from his father, Josiah, to whom he is contrasted. Josiah wanted to model his reign on David, but Jehoiakim's ambition seems to have been to pursue policies like Solomon's. Jeremiah draws a sharp distinction between the two rulers in his oracle in 22:13–19. Jehoiakim was a typical tyrant: exploitive, brutal and indulgent. Like Solomon, he subjected his people to forced labour to build his opulent palaces (22:13). To him, being a king meant entitlement to luxurious living (22:15). Those who opposed him courted death: he was the only Judean king (as far as we know) who dared to put a prophet of God to death (26:20–23). In order to enhance his own prestige by his conspicuous consumption, this king violated the most elemental responsibility of covenantal kingship: presiding over a just and equitable society. In this way, he violated what it really meant to be king.

Building on this condemnation, verses 15–16 are a stunning act of social criticism, one of the most powerful and poignant of its kind in the whole Bible. Jeremiah raises the question of what constitutes legitimate social power: he asks with disdain if it is visible luxury that constitutes kingship. That rhetorical question is answered in verses 15–16 by comparison to Josiah, who “did justice and righteousness.” These key terms are placed in opposition to the seductions of cedar and vermillion, marks of affluence: so justice and righteousness are a precise contrast to the self-serving values of Jehoiakim. As a result of his social policy of caring for the weak and needy, Josiah prospered and had secure rule. He is regarded as the king who enacted policies according to the covenantal requirements of the Deuteronomist and is thus portrayed as the embodiment of the best of Moses' covenantal proposal.

Note that the final line of verse 16 is one of the most remarkable in scripture in the way it equates “knowing God” with doing justice to the poor. The equation needs to be teased out to understand its full claim. It is not asserted that knowledge of God leads to justice, nor conversely is it claimed that social justice leads to knowledge of God. Rather, God and justice are indivisible: they are the same. On the basis of this text it is possible to conclude that the practice of justice is the very reality of God.

The conclusion of the passage is that in contrast to Jehoiakim, Josiah did not practice oppression and violence. He did not succumb to a self-serving royal ideology, but still understood that the king

existed for the people. Jehoiakim is thus exposed as one who imagined he was autonomous and did not need Torah/Law.

Confronted with an utterly corrupt and unjust society, it should be noticed that Jeremiah envisages God turning against Judah and fighting alongside Babylon. In chapter 21:3–7 the great verbs of the Israelite tradition are now used against Judah and in favour of Babylon. In effect, Jeremiah has reversed the credo tradition of Judah to use against Judah. The most telling inversion is in verse 5, which uses the particular language of the Exodus. The image of “outstretched arm and strong hand” is an old formula, but now it is used against Judah by God, who has become Judah's enemy. For ordinary people, the only option for life offered by Jeremiah is surrender to Babylon: the social ideology and policy of the throne and temple establishment, and the power arrangements that sustain them cannot save Jerusalem or its people.

It should be observed that opposition to royal policy is theologically based in the idea of “the word of the Lord.” Such opposition, however, also has immediate political implications: the assertion that it is the will of God that Jerusalem should surrender to Babylon directly contradicts royal policy that was determined to resist Babylon; thus prophetic urging, while deeply rooted theologically, also concerns real and dangerous policy decisions that have real and dangerous consequences. Effectively, in advocating submission to empire rather than destruction by empire, the Jeremiah tradition takes a long view of history: it can envisage the restoration of Jerusalem in a radically new form, assured that Babylonian victory is not ultimate termination for Jerusalem.

Creation Undone and Chaos Returned:

For Jeremiah the crisis facing Jerusalem is of elemental importance and proportions. He graphically underlines this in a startling poem in chapter 4, in which the impending destruction of Judah is presented as the undoing of God's creation, explicitly referencing Genesis 1. In verses 23–28, historical-political allusions give way to cosmic imagery as the rhetoric escalates: as Jeremiah looks at the world around him he sees creation run amok and on the brink of reverting to chaos. Note that covenantal Israel held the staggering conviction that human conduct mattered for the well-being of creation (see Hosea 4:1–3). Working from that conviction, the vision of this poem is grim: it asserts that disobedience finally leads to chaos for the entire creation.

Indeed, the poem may be understood as a step by step dismantling of creation: 4:23 uses the exact Hebrew phrase of Genesis 1:2, translated “formless and void,” to express the resurgence of chaos and disorder that is experienced by the poet at every level of life. Then in quick succession the poetry depicts: the loss of light (sun, moon, stars); the failure of even mountains and hills to embody stability; the disappearance of humanity and absence of birds; and finally the end of fertile land and functioning city. In this way it is stressed that wholesale dismantling follows massive disobedience. The power of chaos is so pronounced, it is as though creation never happened.

Verse 27 confirms the devastation that has just been envisioned: the whole world comes unglued when Israel is disobedient long enough; the nullification is total, comprehensive and without qualification. So the last phrase, “yet I will not make a full end” comes as a surprise. It seems to qualify and contradict what has preceded it. Scholars have handled this in two ways: some have argued that the line is a late insertion intended to soften the harshness; others have suggested that the negative “not a full end” can on textual grounds be amended to read, “I will make a full end of it.” Such explanations, however, seem contrived. Perhaps the poetry indicates that God has been provoked to a harsh resolve from which God momentarily draws back: there is a yearning in God not to destroy completely (a strong biblical theme); it is an understanding of this reluctance to destroy completely on God’s part that becomes the basis for hope in the midst of exile.

Immediately, though, verse 28 returns to the theme of devastation. It portrays both heaven and earth engaged in deep mourning. Frequently the prophets use the image of the earth mourning to refer to drought. In this instance it is a way of indicating that the life giving functions of earth will come to an end. Thus, in its way, this poem serves to delegitimize the regime, because it recalls that the only purpose of the royal-temple apparatus is to ensure the full flourishing of creation: the grief (drought) illustrates the ultimate failure of the regime to maintain the earth. Consequently, the poem concludes with God’s resolve to persist until the old creation has been fully nullified.

Note that this is a poem: it is not a blueprint for the future; it is not a prediction; it is not a theological argument that seeks to scare into repentance. It is, rather, a rhetorical attempt to engage with a numbed, unaware community about what is really

happening: the world is becoming unglued; and the poet has the great burden of helping people understand that this, their presumed world is in danger because God’s holy patience is over. The divine pronouncement made about creation in the beginning, “It is very good” (Gen. 1:31), has become in effect “It is very evil.”

Clinging to Privilege Rather than Relying on Covenant:

The opening of Jeremiah 34 (vv.1–7) parallels 21:1–7: yet again a harsh announcement against Jerusalem and the king is delivered in the face of the threat of Babylon. In this instance, verses 8–22 can be understood as a remarkable “case study” in infidelity to covenant requirements. King Zedekiah made a covenant to release slaves (We do not know of this act from any other report in scripture; but see Nehemiah 5:1–13 for something similar). The action is rooted in the old Torah/Law commandment that debt slaves could only be held in bondage for six years, and then released with their debt cancelled (see Deut. 15:1–11; Exod. 21:16). But note that the legal provision and the action by the king apply only to “Hebrew slaves.” So this narrative concerns fellow members of the community of faith who are in trouble because they are poor and cannot pay their debts to other members of the community.

Notice how, in a progressive, humane provision, the Torah/Law of Moses limited the way the community could exploit such poor people: and Zedekiah enacts the provision of liberation and debt cancellation. We are not told what prompted the action, but it is undoubtedly an economically disruptive act, for it simply writes off unpaid debts around which the economy is in part organized. Interpreters usually suggest this was a frantic gesture to show good faith towards the Torah/Law commandments in an emergency. But it is thinkable that in this episode Zedekiah is as responsive as his father Josiah to the demands of Torah/Law. Whatever the motivation, Zedekiah’s political constituency obeyed the covenant, liberating their debt slaves and cancelling their debts (34:10): this wealthy group heard and heeded, acting differently, at some obvious risk to their economic advantage.

Then, however, there is a reversal of intent and practice (34:11): “But afterwards” the economic leadership reneged and reinstated slavery, thereby violating the Torah/Law, nullifying the covenant, and reducing social relations between the haves and the have-nots in the community to a matter of sheer economic power. Unbridled wealth and greed prevailed over neighbourly solidarity. As the

covenant is rejected, instead of covenant blessings, Judah receives one more condemnatory oracle from the prophet. We are not told why the people of Jerusalem reneged, any more than we are told why the king took such a positive initiative, but we can see that two views of social relations are engaged in a powerful struggle: on the one hand, the act of covenanting is an acknowledgement that all persons are members of the community and each must care for all; on the other hand, commodity interest – i.e., viewing people as “things” that as much money as possible can be made from – prevails over covenant, and the strong will exercise their will against the weak and at their expense. Note that the phenomenon of debt slavery raises the overarching question of social power: are there limits to the ways of the strong against the weak? Are there zones of human solidarity which over-ride and curb raw economic drive and strength?

The Torah/Law of Moses compelled Zedekiah and the elite into modes of covenantal thought for just an instant. Their commitment to sheer economic power, however, caused them to “afterwards” yield to the rule of wealth at the expense of community. The dramatic and inexplicable reversal, illustrative of a deep resistance in Jerusalem’s ruling cohort to the demands of Torah/Law, evokes a harsh prophetic word, signaled in verse 8 and delivered in verses 12–22.

In this passage, the statements in verses 15–16 are precisely parallel in construction, but to opposite effect. Verse 15 asserts, “Recently you repented” (literally in Hebrew, “Recently you *turned*”): Judah turned back to Torah/Law obedience, enacted the commandment of release, and in the temple solemnly swore to practice the commandment – the economic is influenced and shaped by the theological and underpinned by worship. But then that act is promptly countered in verse 16: “Now you have *turned around*” (the same Hebrew word as for “repent” in verse 15); the powerful have turned away from Torah/Law obedience and from covenant fidelity. The oath sworn in the house called by God’s name (v.15) now profanes God’s name – it mocks God and diminishes God’s reputation by re-enslaving those who have no money. Note that an interface has been established between theology and economics which is intense and interesting, and suggests that economics and theology are inextricably intertwined.

The result of the completed assertion of verses 8–16 is to establish that Judah has reneged on its oath to God and its obligations to the disadvantaged within the community, showing itself to be a disobedient people that does not heed Torah/Law and does not honour its own covenant commitments to its needy members. There then follows a sweeping, harsh sentence (vv.17–22). The first element in the sentence plays on the word “freedom/release” and matches the punishment to the crime: the elite did not “free/release” their neighbours from their debts, so God will now “free/release” sword, pestilence and famine (the same Hebrew word for “free/release” is used in both cases). What God frees/releases is the unfettered devastation and unrestrained terror of covenant curses. The list is a classic, highly stylized recital, but it also reflects the types of damage that come in the wake of an invading army.

The central thrust of this oracle is clear: the practice of Torah/Law and the implementation of the commandment of release would have generated safety and well-being for the city. Reneging on the covenant and consequently practicing economic exploitation evoke the invasion of Babylon. This reflects the prophetic conviction that internal disorder invites external threat, which implements God’s sovereign rule. The first step towards death is internal economic exploitation that pits the “haves” against the “have-nots.” Such internal exploitation reflects the fundamental recalcitrance in Judah. The reference to the Exodus (v.13) is a reminder that God’s initial act of rescue was an act of liberation in which the slaves of Egypt were set free from their economic plight of helplessness. Israel is expected to continue to re-enact new economic beginnings in its own ordering of social life. When it fails to hear and heed, when it no longer remembers its own history, it becomes vulnerable to the exploitation of more powerful “haves.” Thus, a failure to order economic life differently endangers the city, the king, the villages, the temple, and finally the viability and existence of the entire nation.

“We Have Not Been False to Your Covenant” – An Alternative Voice: As has been noted, stressed and underlined the heart of the Jeremiah tradition articulates the conviction that persistent violation of covenant stipulations and requirements lead to punishment, historically envisaged as the destruction of Jerusalem and the traumatic humiliation of exile. But note well that this is not the only biblical perspective on the matter: Psalm 44 gives voice to a very different view.

Psalms 44 is the first of the corporate prayers for help in the final form of the book of Psalms. It differs from the others in this category in one remarkable feature that has always drawn the attention of interpreters: its firm profession of innocence under the covenant (vv.17–22); in this respect it stands perfectly alone and apart from other psalms. As Franz Delitzsch, a nineteenth-century scholar, insightfully observes, Psalm 44 is like a national mirroring of the book of Job, taking a unique position in the range of Old Testament literature alongside Lamentations 3 and Deutero-Isaiah. According to this reading, in this psalm Israel stands in exactly the same relationship to God as Job and the servant of God in Isaiah.

The prayer begins with a recollection of salvation history (vv.1–3) followed by a confession of faith (v.4) and a statement of trust (vv.5–8). Then in sharp contrast a current reality marked by defeat (vv.9–12) and humiliation (vv.13–16) is described. Next, note carefully that responsibility for the disaster is disclaimed in an assertion of covenant faithfulness (vv.17–22). Petitions (vv.23, 26) and complaints against the Lord (vv.24–25) conclude the prayer. In terms of the covenant theology laid out in Deuteronomy, such disasters as the psalm describes would be visited on the people of God for breach of the covenant (see Deut. 28:15–69). But the congregation reciting this hymn insists it has not betrayed the covenant (vv.17–18). Specifically, it says it has not turned to other gods, even in secret (vv.20–21; the key concern of Deuteronomy's theology of covenant). This protest does not claim a perfect sinless state or total innocence under the covenant: such would be too much in light of Israel's history. But the protest does claim basic loyalty. The confession of verses 4–8 is the truth claimed about this congregation. In essence, the psalm constitutes a protest of faithfulness that expresses bewilderment rather than understanding.

At the end of the protest of their faithfulness, those who used this psalm make an assessment of their affliction that is of importance in the development of a strand of biblical thought. "For your sake we are slain," they say to God (v.22). In the psalm this phrase "for your sake" refers to the taunts of their foes described in verses 13–16. In that age when each nation had its gods the taunt flung at those overwhelmed by their enemy was the decisive insult "Where is your God?" The people who felt able to utilize Psalm 44 had faced their foes in the name of the Lord and trusting in God: their defeat meant they could see no other meaning and

purpose in their confession and trust than that they were accounted as sheep for the slaughter. But this limited interpretation of their suffering develops into a biblical understanding of suffering as a service to the kingdom of God; it may be related to the idea of the suffering servant in Isaiah and more widely, the concept of martyrdom.

A New Covenant...with Israel and Judah:

Although the book of Jeremiah is overwhelmingly dominated by a tone of doom and despair, there are also passages of hope (e.g. 29:10-14 anticipates the promises of chapters 30-33). Within these chapters scholars have identified what is known as the "Book of Comfort" (chapters 30-31), and within this "book" there is one particularly intriguing and startling promise: that concerning the promise of a "new covenant" (31:31-34).

From the text it is clear that the contrast between "old" and "new" concerns the *Israelite* community of covenant in both cases. The "old" covenant belongs to that Israelite community which forfeited covenant with God through its sustained disobedience; the "new" covenant enacted by God is also with an Israelite community. This is the community formed by God among the exiles. So there is a deep sense of discontinuity between old and new, but it is initially and historically between those who lived prior to 587 BCE and those after 587 BCE who embraced the covenant offered afresh by God. The promise of a new covenant offers a new relationship, given by God without reason or explanation, out of God's own resolve and initiative.

The contrast between old and new covenant is rooted in how it is received and actualized. The old Sinai covenant was resisted until it was broken and abrogated. The new covenant will not be resisted because the Torah/Law – the same commandments as at Sinai – will be written on the hearts of the people: thus, the commandments will not be an external rule which invites hostility, but will be an internal identity-giving mark, so that obeying will be as normal and as readily accepted as breathing and eating. In a sense, Israel will practice obedience because it belongs to Israel's character to live in this way: all inclination to resist, refuse or disobey will have evaporated because the members of the new community will have rightly inclined hearts. There will be a transformed communion between God and reconstituted Israel. This may seem very idealistic (perhaps all religion is at its best), but four practical points can be made:

1. There will be genuine solidarity between members of the community because each person knows that God is in an equally close relationship with every other member of the community.
2. This shared access to God's guidance and instruction creates a framework for fundamental egalitarianism in the community: on the crucial matter of connection to God, the least and the greatest stand on an equal footing; no one has superior, elitist access; all share fully in the new relationship; all embrace the commands.
3. There will be full knowledge of God: on the one hand, this denotes a cognitive capacity to recite the saving tradition (see 2:6–8); on the other, it constitutes an affirmation of God as sovereign Lord, along with a readiness to obey the commands for justice that are the will of God (as in the sense of 22:15–17).
4. The concluding statement of the oracle is crucial ("For I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more."): all the newness is possible because God has forgiven. Indeed, beginning again in and after the exile depends upon God's willingness to break out of a system of rewards and punishments, for the affront of Israel and Judah could never be satisfied by punishment; it is this broken cycle that allows Israel to begin again.

This oracle of promise is among the best known and most relied upon of all Jeremiah's promises. It has frequently been utilized by Christians in what can be termed a supersessionist way, as though Jews belong to the old covenant now nullified (i.e., superseded) and Christians are the sole heirs of the new covenant: but the covenant is "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (v.31). Ultimately this raises questions about the relationship between Judaism and Christianity (as profoundly struggled with by Paul in Romans 9-11, in which Paul asserts that God did not reject Israel). Perhaps the most accurate way to articulate this relationship is to say that Christians come derivatively to share the promise of newness: as Paul puts it, they are grafted in.

Jeremiah's Inner Struggle...with God: Although the public oracles of Jeremiah present a figure who is certain of what God requires, a series of poems indicates that in private Jeremiah engages in prayer with God in an intimate, doubting, combative way. Scholars have listed the full extent of this series as: 11:18–12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23;

20:7–13; 20:14–18. These poems are patterned after conventional laments known in the book of Psalms, but come across as particularly poignant in the pressurized circumstances of the prophet. They may be understood in two ways: (a) as the personal articulations of faith when the prophet feels that his assignment from God is more than he can bear; or (b) as lamentations, written in a first-person voice, which can be used to express the communal grief of Judah at its suffering and dismay confronted with historical threat. Either way (and it is not necessary to choose one to the exclusion of the other), these poetic prayers are deeply moving articulations of grief and consternation brought to speech in powerful ways. This series of poems established the identity of Jeremiah as the one who laments, a designation that led belatedly to the tradition that Jeremiah was the author of the book of Lamentations. These poems are popularly known as the "Lamentations of Jeremiah." They are also termed "Confessions."

Jeremiah 12:1–6 – The Complaint (found in vv.1–4) raises the most fundamental question of faith: the reliability of God to look after faithful covenant partners. Verse 1 asserts the deep biblical truth that God is righteous but this then causes the question to be asked: why do wicked people prosper (as the undoubtedly do)? Thus the issue of theodicy is introduced, a concept that may be summarized as: if God is good and God is powerful, why do bad things happen? This is the classic question of Job. Jeremiah (21:2) adopts an accusatory tone against God: it is God who causes the unjust to prosper, contrary to our expectation of God, if indeed God presides over a morally coherent creation. The unspoken part of Jeremiah's assault on God is that while the unjust prosper, righteous people like him do not.

In verse 3, Jeremiah indicates that he believes himself to be righteous: so his complaint is a serious suit filed by a righteous practitioner to a righteous judge. Confident of his innocence, he proposes a sentence against the wicked that in his view would represent an important righting of wrong: the wicked should be set for slaughter; what his enemies have proposed for him, he now wishes for them. We do not know who Jeremiah's enemies are: they may be construed as the "men of Anathoth" from the previous complaint (11:18–23). More generally, they may be understood as those who resist Jeremiah's prophetic oracles. In any case, note that we are not dealing with a theoretical conflict but with an intense struggle over social reality: for Jeremiah, the severe drought ("the land mourns") has been caused by the wickedness of people like his enemies; their

actions and the subsequent drought threaten to undo creation. Ultimately, Jeremiah is concerned about the moral shape of reality and whether the reading he offers of that reality can be sustained. The poem is about the struggle of Jeremiah, but more than that, it is about the power of truth in a society dominated by falsehood.

The answer (in vv.5–6) is a surprise to Jeremiah. It is not supportive of the prophet. Instead it is hard-nosed, reprimanding and warning that more severe demands are still to come: what Jeremiah is encountering is modest compared with what is to come; indeed, the danger inherent in proclaiming prophetic truth will intensify as the judgment draws closer. Thus the petitioner gets neither assurance nor relief: if the petition reflects uncertainty about whether God is indeed righteous and reliable, the answer is that the speaker will have to live with that uncertainty. Strict obedience is what is required from Jeremiah; the issue of God's reliable righteousness is held in abeyance. Beyond the reprimand, the second element of the response is a warning (12:6): the depth of resistance to the prophetic vision of reality is so pervasive that the poet should trust nobody.

Notice however, that God's response in 12:5–6 does not address the issue of verse 1 and the desperate petition: theodicy is not engaged with. In many ways, God's response is like the speech from the whirlwind in Job 38–41, which over-rides the theodic question. Those who raise this question with God are given no comfort by God: it is as though fidelity to God must be its own reward. So we are left with a God confessed to be righteous, who does not address the problem of wickedness: perhaps this is how the obedient often experience the sovereign rule of God.

Jeremiah 15:10–21 – The Complaint in this prose unit is found in a reflective lament by the prophet in which, as he says at the outset, his life is overwhelmingly conflicted: he is assaulted and maligned on every side, and in response he protests violently against his destiny. His faith has brought him to the very brink of despair, including serious doubt about God's righteous governance of the world. In the anguish of his inner despair he cries out that God has deceived him, like a deceitful brook that overflows with water during the heavy spring rains but then quickly dries up (15:18). He castigates his mother for having borne him.

The answer Jeremiah receives from God for his bitter lament is a rebuke that like the people he too must repent (15:19). This is very different

from the conventional answer of the lament form, which is an assurance of God's presence, power and compassion. In the midst of the rebuke, however, there is a promise that God will be with Jeremiah and this is expressed in three powerful verbs: God will "save", "deliver" (used twice), and "redeem." God stands with the prophetic messenger but this element of hope only emerges from lengthy struggle with God: because the word carried by Jeremiah is so scandalous, the carrier of the word is inevitably always at risk. It is noteworthy that after these two laments, no other answers to Jeremiah's complaints come from God.

Jeremiah 17:14–18 – These verses resume the prayers of complaint and petition. It is not clear how they are related to the broader context of chapter 17, but perhaps they can be understood as a counterpart to the harsh lawsuit, which envisages a bleak future: in this circumstance, the prayer of Jeremiah constitutes a response of faithful, necessary speech in the midst of a people that has not been faithful and does not realize the necessity of faithfulness. The prayer contains elements familiar in Lament Psalms: (a) petition in verse 14a; (b) motivation in verses 14b–16; (c) petition in verse 17a; (d) motivation in verse 17b; (e) and petition in verse 18.

The initial petition (v.14a) is a personal one, asking for healing and deliverance, in which the poet throws himself utterly on God as the only source of help. The second petition (v.17a) forms a negative counterpart to this, asking God to: "Be a healer... not a terror" (see 20:10). The third petition (v.18), like the first, is also a personal one, including the requests: "Let me not be put to shame...let me not be dismayed." These requests appeal to the usual assurances given in laments in such circumstances and seek to guide God into making such an assurance. The main petitions in 17:18, however, are four requests for punishment of Jeremiah's enemies: "put to shame...be dismayed...bring the evil day...destroy." It may surprise us to hear such hostility in a prayer, but this is characteristic of the type of frankness with God that took place in Israel.

The prayer offers alternative motivations in an attempt to move God to act. First, in verse 14b the motivation is a statement of praise ("You are my praise"), while in verse 17b it is a statement of needful trust ("You are my refuge"). Both the praise and the plea seek to draw God into involvement with the situation of need, so that God should act and intervene in Jeremiah's crisis. The motivations, particularly in verse 16, reflect a very strong bond between Jeremiah and God.

In this lament, it may be observed that Jeremiah is filled with hurt and rage, and entrusts vengeance to God. Such complaints are usually answered by an oracle of assurance in this form of prayer, but in this instance there is no answer: in an intense and dreadful situation there is a break with the conventional form; the faithful poet, Jeremiah, prays an unanswered prayer. The hostility he faces from human agents is made worse by the silence of God. No theological explanation is given for this divine silence; but it is a reality in Jeremiah's anguished life of faith. God's silence to Jeremiah corresponds to God's absence announced to the whole people: God is no longer available either to Israel or to the poet. Thus, Jeremiah experiences the very absence that is the destiny of Israel.

Jeremiah 20:7–13 – The final two complaints follow the prophet's extraordinary challenge to established religion (see vv.1–6) and are the most pathos-filled of the laments. In the wider perspective of 18:1–20:6 Jeremiah speaks powerfully of judgment. He does so boldly and unflinchingly, full of confidence that he is delivering what has been entrusted to him by God. But note that in announcing this harsh judgment, Jeremiah is not only speaking against those who are his adversaries, but also against the very symbolic world he inhabits and has given his life meaning. The lament stands in stark contrast to what has gone immediately before: in public Jeremiah has been unflinching, but now, after defiant proclamation, we are given access to his private struggle with God, in which he assaults God over the cost of his public work.

The prayer bears all the marks of a psalm of lament, but while the genre is familiar, it is filled with personal poignancy. It opens with a powerful complaint against God (vv.7–10). Although Jeremiah complains about human hostility and that he has become a laughingstock, the primary focus is on the way God seems not be faithful or trustworthy. Indeed, Jeremiah begins the complaint with the accusation that God has seduced him (v.7). This term is often translated as "deceived" but it can be rendered more strongly as "harassed," "taken advantage of," "abused," or even "raped." Jeremiah finds himself helpless before God's power, which is overwhelming, even if it is not apparently trustworthy. So, Jeremiah acknowledges the power of God but concedes nothing else: the complaint asserts God's raw force to overwhelm even the one who seeks to serve.

Jeremiah is in a no-win situation: on the one hand, he is mandated to speak against Jerusalem, which evokes deep hostility; on the other hand, when he

does not speak, he is even more troubled, for the word of God is a burning compulsion within him. The prophet has two options and neither works: when he speaks, God does not support him; but when he is silent, God does not console him. He has an awesome burden from God, but without the supportive power or presence of God. In the midst of opposition and hostility, Jeremiah prays an urgent prayer: he asserts that he is in real danger (20:10), and that he is in trouble on account of his faithfulness to God (v.8). He insists that his danger is God's responsibility, and that God must care and act.

Strangely, given the circumstances, the prophet makes a proclamation of trust in God (v.11), which is a characteristic element in a lament. But in this case such a statement of trust is almost contradictory to the complaint: whereas earlier God had been accused of infidelity (v.7), now God's powerful steadfastness is celebrated. This assertion of trust in God serves two functions: (1) it is a statement of genuine trust; through hard struggle and severe doubt Jeremiah has forged a sense that God is reliable and can be counted on; (2) it is a motivation addressed to God, reminding God of God's character and responsibility. The third element in this prayer (20:12) is a petition to God, in which the prophet appeals to the belief that while God tries the heart, God also gives people what they deserve: here Jeremiah asks to be rewarded for his relentless obedience by his enemies being punished. His petition is short and pointed: "let me see your vengeance." He does not propose taking vengeance into his own hands, but prays that God should enact vengeance appropriate to God's own character.

Jeremiah is aware that he is weak and helpless: he cannot prevail, but he is confident that God can and will; his only hope is that God will be his ally and not his enemy, for when Jeremiah is alone he is lost. Everything depends on God: that is why the prayer is so urgent and passionate. Jeremiah must have God on his side: only prayer can summon and evoke God to stand with him.

Again, verse 13 (which may not be part of the original passage) strikes a strangely discordant note: that of praise. This is generally the fourth element of a lament psalm. In this instance, the praise may suggest that Jeremiah is so confident of God's answer and intervention, and of his own innocence, that he anticipates a resolution as though it had already happened. Overall, the prayer moves dramatically in four steps: complaint; trust as motivation; petition; praise. This is the classic pattern of a prayer of lament in Israel.

Ultimately, in this lament, Jeremiah is driven to God as his only source of comfort and strength. The God who was experienced as fickle at the start of the poem is perceived through engaged prayer to be finally reliable: through its long history Israel had found God to be sufficient in every threatening situation, and Jeremiah too finds this to be true. On this basis he turns to praise of God: his lonely voice of truth is joined to the God of all truth.

Jeremiah 20:14–18 – After the bold conclusion expressed as praise in verse 13, verses 14–18 are immensely surprising: it is clear that Jeremiah’s complex and troubled life leaves more to be said even after triumphant praise. In this lament, the poet finds himself alone, abandoned, hopeless and full of despair. The depth of the crisis is indicated by the fact that this tortured cry is not addressed to God or anyone else (vv.14–15) for the prophet is bereft of anyone to address: he is utterly alone raging against a hostile abyss in an assault on everything that is conventionally held near and dear. No clue is given as to what has prompted this lament of violent rejection and self-hatred.

Whatever the reason, the verses are a cry from the depths (see Psa. 130:1). It is a cry so personal and so urgent that it lacks the proper form of lament; it is a yearning for non-being, in which the poet wishes the day of his birth had never happened (20:14) and his main assault is against the bearer of the news that he had been born (20:15–17). The poem ends with the great “why” question of human existence; but it is not a general existential wondering. Instead it is a specific questioning of why he has been burdened with the message of “plucking up and tearing down”, which was doomed to failure and resistance. Jeremiah’s dread-filled question lingers unanswered: we do not know why, as Jeremiah does not know, because the reason is hidden in the purposes of God.

Two aspects of this poetic unit may be pondered. (1) The Bible is searingly honest. It explores without denial or deception how costly it is sometimes to speak for God: faith of the depth of Jeremiah’s does not lead easily to well-being but to recurring crisis. Thus, the Bible knows about troubled, bitter faith that is left unresolved. (2) Note that finally, no matter how bad things get, Jeremiah never curses God: in his anger and despair he comes very close, but like Job he knows the boundaries and honours them; so he may be viewed as expressing powerful, troubled faith, in which times of profound trust alternate with periods of bitter alienation. But the alienation never quite reaches nullification.

Concept Deepening – The Elements of a Lament:

A complaint or lament psalm contains different component elements, which may be put together in a variety of orders and ways; a lament does not necessarily contain all the elements of the ideal form. That form has two broad parts:

1. *The Plea*, which is a complaint that God should correct a skewed situation. It is composed of a combination of:
 - (a) *Address to God* – the complaint is not spoken by someone who is a stranger to God, but someone who has a long history of trustful interaction with God. Thus the address tends to be personal and intimate.
 - (b) *Complaint* – the purpose of the prayer is to describe for God how desperate the situation is and to make God responsible for doing something about it. Thus, the lament recounts a situation of sickness, isolation, imprisonment, destruction, threat of death, or whatever else has gone wrong, hopefully to evoke an intervention by God.
 - (c) *Petition* – on the basis of the complaint, the speaker makes a bold and intense request, petitioning God to act decisively. It is a plea for justice as much as mercy, with the suggestion that the unjust situation has arisen because of God’s inattentiveness.
 - (d) *Motivations* – there is an inclination in these psalms to provide motivations to give God reason to act. Among these the speaker is: innocent and so is entitled to help; guilty but repents and seeks forgiveness; recalls God’s goodness to an earlier generation, which serves as a precedent for God’s goodness now; is valued by God as one who praises, and so if the speaker dies her/his praise will cease and the loss will be God’s;
 - (e) *Imprecation* – this is the voice of resentment and vengeance that will not be satisfied until God visits retaliation on those who have done the wrong (see Psa. 109 for an extreme example and Psa. 137:8–9). Such speech tends to be regressive in the way it uses violent language that is censored and precluded from most religious discourse.

2. *Praise*, which comes as a surprise and indicates that urgency and desperation have been replaced by joy, gratitude and well-being. It tends to include three factors, with a fourth proposed outside the text:
- (a) *Assurance of being heard* – after often accusing God of being absent, remote, unresponsive, not listening, the situation is changed and the speaker becomes convinced that God has heard the petition. At one level, in stressful situations what some people most yearn for is to be heard, but at a deeper level in these psalms more expect that if God has heard, God will act, for it is unthinkable that God would hear and then not act;
 - (b) *Payment of vows* – often, in a time of trouble, the speaker would vow that if delivered he would keep such and such a vow to give/pay/sacrifice something as an offering of thanksgiving and praise. The fulfilment of the vow is an act of faithfulness expressed by keeping one's word;
 - (c) *Doxology and praise* – the most important element of resolution is doxology and praise because the God who has been accused is now acknowledged as generous and faithful and saving. It is possible to argue that this part of the psalm focuses on the true character of God, while the earlier accusation and protest are a misunderstanding and therefore unfair. But it is better to say that both parts are necessary and both are faithful in a tradition of honesty with God;
 - (d) *Salvation Oracle* – it should be noted that in the movement from plea to praise, scholars have suggested that there is some sort of action or transaction in the unspoken space in the poem between the two elements. So, in Psalm 13 something happens between verse 4 and 5 to move the speaker from plea to praise. It is thought that at the end of a plea, an authorized figure (most likely a priest) answered it with a salvation oracle rooted in the message of “fear not” (e.g. see Jer. 30:10–11; Isa. 41:8–13, 43:1–7). This salvation oracle is understood as a promise by God to be present with, to help, and to intervene on behalf of the complainer. It is the oracle that allows the complainer to move to praise.

Psalm 13 is an accessible introductory lament: verses 1–2 describe what is wrong in the life of the speaker through a series of questions; verses 3–4 provide petition and motivation; and verses 5–6 conclude in praise. In Psalm 130, the opening two verses succinctly encapsulate key dimensions of a lament: “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; O Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.” But Psalm 30 may be considered as classic because it includes the element of thanksgiving, underlining that the cycle of trouble, prayer, and help is not complete without specific and public acts of gratitude.

The opening declaration of Psalm 30 (“I will exalt you, O Lord”) identifies the purpose of the song. The declaration is supported by an acknowledgement of the Lord's deliverance (vv.1–3); the basic report of prayer and deliverance in verse 2 anticipates the longer narrative in verses 6–12. An invitation in the form of an imperative hymn calls the faithful to join in the praise because God's anger and human weeping are so quickly replaced by God's favour and human joy (vv.4–5). Then an extended narration of deliverance tells of previous distress (vv.8–10), and confesses that it is the Lord who has turned mourning to celebration and silence to praise (vv.11–12). Note how the speaker has woven a pattern of alternation and reversal through the entire poem: “I cried out – you healed” (v.2) sets the basic theme and what follows are variations on it. Thus, the movement from divine anger to favour in verse 5 is correlated with the opposite movement from divine favour to abandonment in verse 7. The alternation of weeping and joy in verse 5 anticipates the move from mourning to gladness in verse 11. The danger of the silencing of praise by death (v.9) is resolved in the change from silence to praise (v.12). The repeated and complex use of the pattern of alternation reinforces the transformation from complaint to praise that is the axis of the lament.

Jeremiah, the Contemporary World and Synoptic

Assessment: The book of Jeremiah offers a rich variety of connections to the modern world. Among these are: the way religion and religious texts may have a role in critiquing how a society deals with the gap between rich and poor, including why it arises; the cost of commitment in pursuing an interpretation of appropriate religious observance that is at variance with prevailing norms; the impact of isolation on the mental health of religious leaders, including struggling with God, doubts about God and alienation from God, and how all this may be dealt with; the way visionaries like Jeremiah have difficulty relating to a society that seems deaf and blind to their radical

message, including current or historical examples of this type of process; the clash within one religious tradition of different interpretations (in this case between Davidic and Mosaic understandings) and examples of this type of thing in the modern world in different religions; the way the new covenant has been understood in a supersessionist way in Christianity and possible connections to anti-Semitism; the concept of structural sin, including a connection between social practices rooted in consumerism and environmental degradation (derived from Jer.4 and the return to chaos).

