



Meditation upon the Abyss: The Book of Jeremiah*

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The book of Jeremiah is exceedingly complex and difficult to read. The standard historical-critical consensus about the book—established through the work of Bernhard Duhm and Sigmund Mowinckel—reflected the primary assumptions of that method: the book is constituted by the poetic oracles of the historical person Jeremiah (termed “source A”); subsequently, the poetic oracles of the prophet were supplemented by the prose narrative of his secretary Baruch, especially in the narrative of chapters 37-45 (termed “source B”); imposed upon these materials were the interpretative sections reflective of Deuteronomistic theology (termed “source C”).¹ As was characteristic of that mode of scholarship, the poetic oracles assigned to the person of Jeremiah were taken to be the most important material, not only because of their poetic power, but because they were judged to be the earliest and most “authentic,” most readily assigned to the nameable person Jeremiah, who was evidently a “religious genius.” Negatively, the prose materials were judged to be later and second rate and, because later, degenerate and unimportant, at best a de-traction from the “authentic” materials of the prophet Jeremiah. Consequently, the

*This essay is offered in grateful memory of Robert Carroll, the most influential Jeremiah scholar of his generation.

¹The older historical-critical scholarship is succinctly summarized by Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 342-345.

The complex and difficult book of Jeremiah has sometimes been deemed unreadable. If, however, we see the book as a meditation on the abyss—into it and out of it—then it becomes readable in a new and compelling way.

relationship of prose and poetic text has constituted one of the most vexing issues in Jeremiah studies.

FROM PERSON TO BOOK

As with much of Old Testament studies, there has been a radical revolution in Jeremiah studies in the last two decades.² The profound change in interpretation has turned away from the *person* of Jeremiah to the *book* of Jeremiah. It is now widely concluded that any “historical” person of Jeremiah is in any case unrecoverable and that what we likely have in the text is an imaginative literary construct of the person of the prophet presented for interpretive reasons.³ The turn from the person of Jeremiah also signifies a departure from nineteenth-century romantic fascination with the “great person” who is the carrier of “spiritual genius” to the interpretive work of an ongoing community that shaped the literature. Conversely, attention to the book of Jeremiah as a “book” is representative of a general perspective that views a book of the Bible not as an accidental collection of diffuse materials, but as an intentionally constituted corpus that may reflect a sustained interpretive agenda. This shift from person to book underlies most of the new interpretive possibilities in Jeremiah studies.

THEOLOGY OR IDEOLOGY

This shift from person to book was accomplished by two quite contrasted interpretive projects. From a *theological perspective* it has been suggested that the book of Jeremiah is a literary-editorial achievement designed to make a normative theological statement. Brevard Childs, consistent with his more general “canonical” approach, has suggested that the book of Jeremiah is roughly organized around themes of “judgment and deliverance” that correlate extensively with the old sources A and C; the poetic passages commonly assigned to “historical Jeremiah” are statements of judgment, and the Deuteronomic passages characteristically speak of repentance as a foundation for new possibility.⁴ Childs has not worked out this observation in any detail, but the direction of that argument is clear enough.

Ronald Clements (who has devoted a great deal of energy to the book of Jeremiah) had earlier suggested that the several books of the prophets have been systematically organized to be shaped according to the themes of judgment and deliverance.⁵ This thematic organization is most obvious in the book of Ezekiel

²Newer approaches are nicely represented in *Troubling Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Louis Stulman, JSOT Supp. 260 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999).

³See Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Jeremiah: Portrait of the Prophet,” in *Interpreting the Prophets*, ed. James L. Mays and Paul J. Achtemeier (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 113-129.

⁴Childs, *Introduction*, 345-354. In more recent discussions the B source has largely been merged as prose into what was the C material.

⁵Ronald E. Clements, “Patterns in the Prophetic Canon,” *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 191-202. On Clements’s approach to Jeremiah, see his *Jeremiah, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).

(chapters 1-24 as judgment, chapters 25-48 as deliverance) and, in a different way, the book of Isaiah with the development of what has been termed First, Second, and Third Isaiah. That editorial pattern is not as clear in the shape of the book of Jeremiah, but the point is evident with a focus on chapters 29-33 where promissory materials have been gathered together. In a closer study of chapters 1-25, Clements has quite stunningly made the case that the primary theological accents of Deuteronomistic theology have shaped this material that appears to be diffuse; it is suggested, moreover, that Deuteronomistic interpretation is a theological perspective designed to open the way for the emergence of post-exilic Judaism.⁶ In the perspective of Childs and Clements, the material serves as a quite intentional vehicle for the theological accents upon Yahweh's judgment and grace; thus, a theological effort of the first order.

“the book of Jeremiah is reflective of a quite intentional interpretive agenda”

In a quite different idiom and for a quite different purpose, Robert Carroll—the most influential Jeremiah interpreter of recent time—has also focused on the *book* of Jeremiah.⁷ Carroll has little positive appreciation for any intentional theological interpretation that may be found in the book and prefers to use the term “ideology” for such interpretive moves. Though his use of the term “ideological” is not everywhere consistent, his more pejorative usage suggests editorial manipulation of the tradition within the book in order to make claims of meaning under the guise of literary presentation. Carroll argues that the book of Jeremiah is shot through with ideology, which means that the book is neither an innocent rendering of “historical Jeremiah” nor a random collection of old materials, but it is put together, albeit awkwardly, to make an interpretive argument in a more or less sustained way.

It is quite remarkable—and in my judgment more than a little amusing—that Childs and Clements on the one hand and Carroll on the other come to quite parallel judgments about the book of Jeremiah, though with very different perspectives and intentions. Whether the “final form of the text” is termed to be “theological” in a positive way or “ideological” in a polemical way, these scholars are agreed that the book of Jeremiah is reflective of a quite intentional interpretive agenda. It is important to pause to reflect on how far this now commonly shared perspective is removed from the source analysis of Duhm and Mowinckel, an analysis that never entertained a thought about the interpretive coherence of the book.

⁶Clements, “Jeremiah 1-25 and the Deuteronomistic History,” *Old Testament Prophecy*, 107-122.

⁷Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); *From Chaos to Covenant: Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); and “Something Rich and Strange: Imagining a Future for Jeremiah Studies,” in Diamond, O’Connor, and Stulman, *Troubling Jeremiah*, 423-443.

A COHERENT INTERPRETATION

If, in the wake of Childs, Clements, Carroll, and a host of other scholars, it is agreed that the book of Jeremiah reflects something of a coherent interpretive intentionality, then it is important to try to identify the “interpretive engine” that shaped the book of Jeremiah in its final form. While Childs is wont to speak (sometimes mysteriously) of “canonical forces,” Carroll is more concrete in his suggestion, which seems to me to have great merit.

1. It is most plausible that the editorial hand that shaped the whole is that of the “Deuteronomists.” This term, now much used in the field, refers (according to hypothesis) to a powerful body of interpreters that persisted over several generations and was informed by the covenantal-theological accents of the book of Deuteronomy. They continued in their imaginative interpretation in order to extrapolate from Deuteronomy for the sake of the ongoing life and faith of the community of faith in and through the exile. The proposal that the “Deuteronomists” shaped the book of Jeremiah suggests that they took up the remembered poems of “historical Jeremiah”—a character now lost to us—and shaped, arranged, and interpreted these materials, inserting among them their own work in prose in order to create a pattern of interpretation. Louis Stulman has given great attention to the decisive interpretive force of the great prose chapters in the book of Jeremiah, notably chapters 1, 7, 11, 26, and 36.⁸ This claim of interpretive initiative for the Deuteronomists (through the prose) has the dramatic effect of transferring the weight of significance *from early to late texts* and *from poetry to prose*, so that the poetry is placed in the service of the prose, a move that would have scandalized Duhm and Mowinckel!

2. More specifically, one can notice in the book of Jeremiah the importance of scribes, learned men with writing skills who, in and through the exile, emerged as the primal fashioners and interpreters of Judaism.⁹ In the book of Jeremiah, the scribe Baruch occupies a decisive role in the production of the “scroll” of Jeremiah, so that we may imagine that we witness in chapter 36 a signal that the “prophetic” has now passed into the custodial care of the scribal.¹⁰ This may be indicated by chapter 36, whatever one makes of its historical claims. In a second instance, the scribe Seraiah is given a peculiar mandate by the prophet, and his anticipated activity is given a dramatic location in the book of Jeremiah, namely, to assert the effective demise of Babylon (51:59-64). Thus, the scribes seem to have left their signature on the book of Jeremiah, and these references to scribes in the book likely

⁸Louis Stulman, *Order amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998); idem, “The Prose Sermons as Hermeneutical Guide to Jeremiah 1-25: The Deconstruction of Judah’s Symbolic World,” in Diamond, O’Connor, and Stulman, *Troubling Jeremiah*, 34-63.

⁹Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), has summarized the pertinent data, albeit in an eagerly tendentious way.

¹⁰See James Muilenburg, “Baruch the Scribe,” in *Proclamation and Presence: Old Testament Essays in Honour of Gwynne Henton Davies*, ed. John I. Durham and J. R. Porter (London: SCM, 1970) 215-238.

give clues to those who formed, valued, and cared for the emerging book of Jeremiah, long after the disappearance of “historical Jeremiah.”¹¹ Following the lead of Moshe Weinfeld, we may plausibly posit a connection between the Deuteronomists, whose theological intentionality is evident, and the scribes, so that the scribes become the “book men” who give canonical force to the Deuteronomic theological program.¹²

3. If we look more closely, we may notice that Shaphan, his son Ahikam, and Gemariah son of Ahikam occupy conspicuous places in the prose materials of the book (Jer 26:24; 36:10-12, 25; 39:14; 40:5-16; 41:1-6, 10, 16, 18; 43:6; see 2 Kgs 22:3-14).¹³ This suggests that the family of Shaphan constituted a major political force in Jerusalem (that was, after all, a small political economy) and perhaps a major political force in the production of the Deuteronomic-scribal book of Jeremiah. It seems likely, given the attentive support of this family for Jeremiah and his scroll, that the family was a representative of and voice for a powerful political opinion in Jerusalem that opposed the royal policies of resistance to Babylon. The prose passages in the book present Jeremiah with “a word from the Lord” that it was Yahweh’s will that Jerusalem should surrender to Babylon, rather than to be destroyed by that ruthless empire (37:11-21; 38:1-6, 17-24). If Jeremiah’s theological word is also reflective of a considered political opinion, then it may be that the edited book of Jeremiah is a product of Deuteronomic-scribal circles of Shaphan that decided and urged (on theological-*cum*-pragmatic grounds) that surrender to the empire was a responsible policy in the face of sure destruction. Thus, the book of Jeremiah may represent a theological-political teaching against the royal policies that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem—politically and militarily at the hands of Babylon, theologically at the hands of Yahweh. The work may be both a reflection of the actual dispute in Jerusalem and a durable testimony after the fact to the folly of the monarchy.¹⁴

4. If this body of tenacious theological-political opinion in Jerusalem is so convinced of its judgment and so powerful that it could accomplish the “canonical” rendering of its judgment, we may consider its continuing significance after 587. The Cold War policy of “Better Red than Dead” (in order that the community may live for another day) is a latter-day indicator that the interpretive community of Jeremiah and the book it produced are not necessarily fixed solely upon the loss of 587; rather, they are concerned to generate futures of a certain kind beyond 587 and beyond the ignoble domination of Babylon.¹⁵ That is, the book of Jeremiah

¹¹See J. Andrew Dearman, “My Servants the Scribes: Composition and Context in Jeremiah 36,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990) 403-421.

¹²Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972).

¹³It is evident that there are two persons named Shaphan in the tradition. It is of course important to recognize the difference; in the completed tradition, however, one cannot be fully sure of the distinction.

¹⁴On the evidence for dispute in the text itself, see Christopher R. Seitz, *Theology in Conflict: Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah*, BZAW 16 (Berlin: W. DeGruyter, 1989).

¹⁵See Ronald Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy*, 123-141, and Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, 198-225.

moves beyond prejudice of 587 (rolling corpus) to produce a ground for what becomes the reformation of the community of faith, now without monarchy, without a significant temple, without a safe city.¹⁶ Thus, the book of Jeremiah, in its final form, becomes a harbinger of emerging Judaism that came to full expression in the scribal-Torah movement around Ezra, a movement already anticipated in the Deuteronomic-scribal work of the book of Jeremiah that was a remarkable combination of theological passion and political acumen.¹⁷

LOOKING BEYOND JUDGMENT

Indications that the completed book of Jeremiah looks to a future beyond justly deserved judgment in the deportation of 587 are abundant:

- The appeal to “return” in the final form of the text is likely an appeal to the exilic community, because the preexilic community in the book of Jeremiah was well past any “point of no return” (3:12-4; 8:4-7).

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- The proto-canonical scroll of Jer 36 is, not unlike Isa 8:16, a resolve to leave testimony that there had been serious resistance to the destructive policies of the monarchy. The text stands as witness that there could have been another pattern of conduct and policy in Jerusalem that would have led to a very different future.

- The signature references to the scribes cited above indicate a recognition that leadership has now passed beyond king and prophet to the new mode of book men, of whom the quintessential example is Ezra, well beyond the judgment and exile.

- The defeat of Babylon, as the culmination of the oracles against the nations in Jer 50-51, and the narrative rendition of the “sign” in 51:59-64 indicate that the book of Jeremiah looks beyond Babylonian brutality, an acknowledgement that the anguish of Ps 137 has been embraced but will be overcome. The oracle of Jer 50-51, moreover, is reinforced by the proto-apocalyptic oracle of Jer 25 that anticipates the defeat and humiliation of Babylon.¹⁸

- The narrative account of trouble in postmonarchial Judah under Gedaliah is

¹⁶William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 1, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986) 1, has famously termed the book of Jeremiah “a rolling corpus.” He comments on the prose: “Since the prose of the book of Jeremiah is the product of the ongoing growth and development of a prophetic book, we should expect it to have its own character and themes” (629).

¹⁷Since the work of Gerhard von Rad, the ceremony of Torah interpretation in Neh 8 is regularly cited as an example of the kind of proclamation-interpretation reflected already in the book of Deuteronomy. Thus, it is plausible to link Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic impetus in the book of Jeremiah to the movement linked to the work of Ezra.

¹⁸On the pivotal role of chapter 25 in the book of Jeremiah, see Martin Kessler, “The Function of Chapters 25 and 50-51 in the Book of Jeremiah,” 64-72, and John Hill, “The Construction of Time in Jeremiah 25 (MT),” 146-160, in Diamond, O’Connor, and Stulman, *Troubling Jeremiah*.

a harbinger of the “political parties” in emerging Judaism, including those who anticipate the restoration of monarchy (Jer 40-41).¹⁹

All of these indications draw our attention to the later part of the book, consisting of what are judged to be “later” texts. In these texts the horizon of interpretation moves away from 587 and judgment to the prospects for what is yet to come after judgment. Most especially the promissory passages of chapters 29-33 (and especially the “Book of Comfort” in chapters 30-31) are a programmatic anticipation of restoration to the land. Best known in this corpus, of course, is the “new covenant” passage of 31:31-34 that asserts Yahweh’s readiness to restore the relation of Sinai with this chosen people, an old covenant now reconstituted on new grounds.

PLUCK UP AND PULL DOWN, BUILD AND PLANT

The decisive marker of 1:10 indicates that, in the end, the book of Jeremiah is preoccupied with emerging Judaism. This mandate to the prophet, which we may take as a thematic for the entire book, comes as “the words of Jeremiah...to whom the word of the LORD came” (1:1-2):

See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
to pluck up and to pull down,
to destroy and overthrow,
to build and to plant. (1:10).

Of these six verbs in three pairs, the second pair, “destroy and overthrow,” is not much echoed in the book, so attention is first of all given to the first and third pairs.

*“the prophetic literature is concerned with how the world
is uttered to death and to new life”*

The verbs “pluck up and pull down” concern the destruction of Jerusalem that is to be accomplished through the words of Jeremiah. The prophetic literature is concerned with how the world is uttered to death and to new life. In the corpus of Jeremiah, we may see this “plucking up and pulling down” in several rhetorical strategies:

- the prophetic lawsuit that punishes Judah on the basis of indictment, for which Jer 2:4-13 is the most commonly cited example;²⁰
- the lamentations of Jeremiah, surely personal laments but here used to voice the grief of the community over the loss of all that the community cherishes (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18);²¹

¹⁹I refer deliberately to the analysis of Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971). To be sure, Smith’s analysis concerned a later period in Judaism, but the lines of tension already begin to appear in this earlier context.

²⁰On the genre and its crucial importance for prophetic traditions, see Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967).

²¹Basic studies of these lamentations include Kathleen M. O’Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah and Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25*, SBL Dissertation Series 94 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), and A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama*, JSOT Supp. 45 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987).

- the metaphor of wound and sickness, especially utilized to voice the certitude that Judah is terminally ill, beyond healing (8:18-9:3; 30:12-17);²² and
- the familial relationships of husband-wife and parent-child, employed to bespeak the anguish, pathos, and cost that are involved for Yahweh in the recalcitrance of Judah and the necessary response of Yahweh in judgment (2:2-3; 3:1-5, 19-20; 31:20).²³

Together, these passages constitute a remarkable rhetorical assault upon the illusionary certainties of Jerusalem and evidence the ways in which prophetic utterance, with remarkable imaginative force, subverts what had seemed settled and established. The rhetoric “troubles” Judah to death, a striking example of the way in which prophetic utterance leads historical reality in the canonical imagination of Israel.

It is, however, stunning that at the very outset of the edited book of Jeremiah, which is so preoccupied with “exile” (see 1:3), the Deuteronomistic-scribal community of interpreters can anticipate the destruction of Babylon and the restoration of Jerusalem in the word pair “plant and build.” Nothing is denied of the harsh and complete judgment of “pluck up and pull down.” That destruction, in the rhetoric of Jeremiah, is all the way to the bottom, the production of an abyss that is historical, political, economic, and theological, as voiced in the rhetorical. The mandate of 1:10, however, continues, in, through, and beyond the abyss, to speak an utterance to bring Jews through that unutterable abyss by proclaiming the newness that is a gift of the God who “has torn and who will heal” (Hos 6:1; see Job 5:18).

The final form of the book of Jeremiah, designed to walk Jews into, through, and beyond the reality of destruction and exile, is indeed a sustained meditation upon the abyss caused by destruction and enacted through Babylon, an abyss about which Judaism has never ceased to reflect. While the interpretive community employs many diverse materials to provide a script for restoration and hope, it never strays far from the thematic line of the four principal verbs in 1:10. Thus:

• In 18:7-10 the prose passage speaks of “a nation,” clearly Judah, that is subject to Yahweh’s decree, but is able by obedience or disobedience to alter even the resolve of Yahweh for the future. This statement would suggest that Yahweh’s verdict on Israel is not a blind, fixed decree, but a judgment impinged upon by and responsive to Judah’s conduct. Thus, the passage asserts a remarkable zone of historical freedom whereby Israel—even in the wake of destruction—may choose for itself a different future (see Ezek 18:14-18).

• Jer 24:6-7 is clearly addressed to exiles who have already received the effect

²²See James Muilenburg, “The Terminology of Adversity in Jeremiah,” in *Translating and Understanding the Old Testament: Essays in Honor of Herbert G. May*, ed. Harry Thomas Frank and William L. Reed (Nashville: Abingdon, 1970) 42-63, and Walter Brueggemann, “The ‘Uncared For’ Now Cared For (Jer. 30:12-17): A Methodological Consideration,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 104 (1985) 419-428.

²³See Kathleen M. O’Connor, “The Tears of God and Divine Character in Jeremiah 2-9,” 387-401, and A. R. Pete Diamond and Kathleen M. O’Connor, “Unfaithful Passions: Coding Women Coding Men in Jeremiah 2-3 (4.2),” 123-145, in Diamond, O’Connor, and Stulman, *Troubling Jeremiah*; Angela Bauer, *Gender in the Book of Jeremiah: A Feminist-Literary Reading*, *Studies in Biblical Literature* 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1999).

of the negative verbs. The accent is upon the positive verbs, plant and build, addressed precisely to those who “return.”

- In 31:28, the two negative verbs have already been enacted, and now comes the news of Yahweh’s goodness in a “second watch” that constitutes the future of Israel.

- In 45:4, the negative verbs prevail, suggesting that here Baruch is presented as a device for judgment. That wholesale negation is qualified only by verse 5 that promises exemption for Baruch, a representative of the scribal group that constitutes the remnant community of Judaism.²⁴ Thus, even the wholesale negation of Jerusalem is qualified with a promised survival of the remnant into the future (see 39:15-18).

“FUTURE” READINGS OF JEREMIAH

There remain, to be sure, elements of the book of Jeremiah that defy any enquiry about coherence. Still, there is enough coherence in the theological (Childs, Clements) and ideological (Carroll) unity of the book to suggest that it makes a deliberate statement in a way that does not rely upon the recovery of “historical Jeremiah,” and that does not fall back upon any “scissors and paste” editorial explanation. More recent scholarship invites us to read the Bible with greater alertness to the evidence that something intentional is being done with and through the text that is not innocent reportage.

Such a recognition of theological-ideological intentionality in the book itself suggests that the reader of the book of Jeremiah is authorized by the book to continue the work of theological intentionality. As the Deuteronomic-scribal commitment was free and empowered to “roll the corpus” forward to serve new needs in a subsequent generation of the faithful, so we may watch as the corpus continues its interpretive “roll.” I will suggest two “futures” to this theologically-ideologically formed, dynamic scroll.

First, the four verbs and their capacity to utter Jerusalem into the abyss of 587 and the exile and then to utter Jerusalem out of the abyss have as their *derivative counterpoint in Christian tradition the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus*. (A specific connection is made in John 1:19-22). That is, in the story of Jesus the Friday crucifixion is the “plucking up and pulling down” of conventional Messianic possibility; the Sunday resurrection is the “planting and building” of Messianic claim in splendor and power. Of course, I do not suggest that the Christian presentation of Jesus through these same themes should displace the Jewish abyss of city, king, and temple. That Christian act of interpretive imagination, however, is not unlike that committed in the book itself. *Mutatis mutandis*, Christian readers are also invited to ponder the abyss wherein is the truth of our life. Canonically—beyond histori-

²⁴Christopher Seitz, *Theology in Conflict*, makes the interesting suggestion that Ebedmelech (39:15-18) and Baruch (45:1-5) are specifications of the remnant that will be saved and that they function in the text as counterpoints to Joshua and Caleb as the faithful remnant in the book of Joshua.

cally—the book of Jeremiah offers an act of paradigmatic imagination whereby God is always terminating what is most treasured and then giving again beyond explanation.

“the book of Jeremiah may still yield a double utterance of judgment that contradicts denial and hope that overrides despair”

In a second extrapolation, if we think of the four verbs and the invitation to meditate on the abyss, the book of Jeremiah is a useful “script” for the “performance” of abyss in the contemporary world. I believe that the great pastoral reality for the church in the United States is that we are watching the termination of the world we have loved too long and lost, a world of Western, white, male, heterosexual domination, privilege, and certitude. It has evaporated before our very eyes. Its loss creates acres of rage and anxiety.²⁵ That loss, moreover, may be like the loss of Jerusalem—according to the text of Jeremiah, a judgment of God on a power arrangement too long recalcitrant. The two positive verbs of Jeremiah may “script” hope for the newness that God is giving, a newness that we cannot see clearly and that may come in forms we do not prefer.

It is my judgment that the great pastoral opportunity among us is to utter faithful folk into the abyss too long denied, and to utter faithful folk through the abyss to newness, a difficult move given the despair among us. It occurs to me that the book of Jeremiah, given its interpretive intentionality, intends precisely this double uttering in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Because the canonical book of Jeremiah has not ceased to speak in its imaginative way, it may still yield a double utterance of judgment that contradicts denial and hope that overrides despair.

Imagine how it would have been in the days of the abyss if there had been no book of Jeremiah: no text to utter Israel into the truth of its loss so that Hananiah’s phony hope might have prevailed (Jer 28); no text to utter Jews into possibilities beyond the deportation.

Our U.S. society is mostly like that, lacking an adequate script for truth-telling about the abyss, the loss, and the possibility. Without the script, the victims and the perpetrators of abyss engage in denial that does not face reality or in despair that does not hope. The book of Jeremiah, however, invites other utterances. The script of Jeremiah invites other performances. There is a word from the Lord given us by these amazing scroll makers. The ones entrusted with the scroll—Jews and Christians—are exactly the ones for truth-telling. At the center of that truth to

²⁵Obviously the loss of that world of domination, privilege, and certitude is not a cause of rage and anxiety for everyone, for there are many who have been excluded and exploited by that power arrangement who are glad to see it go. Likely the same was the case in the ancient world of Jerusalem. The text is given us, however, by the opinion-makers who had a great stake in that ancient arrangement of power and meaning. No doubt the two cases (ancient and contemporary) are parallel in the fact that the loss is not for everyone, but the loss is deeply inscribed among the opinion-makers who tend to speak for everyone, dissent notwithstanding.

be told is exactly the God who delights in steadfast love, justice, and righteousness (Jer 9:23-24). Without a new performance of that script, we may settle for “wisdom, might, and wealth.”²⁶ There need not be such a deathly settlement, however, because the script awaits new performance. No wonder Paul’s great pondering of the cross ends with allusion to Jeremiah:

He is the source of our life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.” (1 Cor 1:30-31)

It is often observed that the book of Jeremiah is “unreadable.” That judgment, however, refers to our conventional rationality through which the book of Jeremiah makes no sense. If, however, we see that the book is a meditation upon the abyss, into it and out of it, then we can see that the book is indeed readable. What is in fact unreadable is the abyss for which we have no ready categories. The abyss is unreadable, moreover, because the God who presides over the abyss will not be read through our central categories. Once we face that unreadable God who acts in freedom and faithfulness, then the abyss becomes readable and the book of Jeremiah as a script for performing abyss makes sense of an odd but compelling kind. ⊕

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²⁶See Walter Brueggemann, “The Epistemological Crisis of Israel’s Two Histories (Jer. 9:22-23),” in *Israelite Wisdom: Theological and Literary Essays in Honor of Samuel Terrien*, ed. John G. Gammie et al. (Missoula: Scholars, 1978) 85-105.