



## Caught in the Middle: Jeremiah's Vocational Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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Jeremiah 20:7-18 is the most intense of the prophet's many laments. Some scholars think it bespeaks a crisis of Jeremiah's very faith in God.<sup>2</sup> This deep anguish, however, is best interpreted in terms of a *vocational crisis*, the prophet's distress at being stuck between an insistent God and a resistant people. As such, this lament of Jeremiah (with others) may prove especially helpful to pastoral leaders who face a comparable crisis. Such laments are revealing of an important dimension of a faithful, interactive relationship with God.

Scholars have sometimes claimed that Jer 20:7-18 is so filled with agony because the prophet sympathizes with the people in their certain death and destruction.<sup>3</sup> But, in fact, because Jeremiah's antagonists can be identified with these very

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on my commentary, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) especially 289-301. Readers should know that I have made several different interpretive moves here from those presented in the commentary.

<sup>2</sup>For studies of Jeremiah's laments, see Kathleen O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988); A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of a Prophetic Drama* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987); see the summary discussion of Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 114-115; S. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of the Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 150-168. See my *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1984) 156-159.

<sup>3</sup>This textual segment is commonly thought to consist of two laments of Jeremiah (vv. 7-12 [13], 14-18). The

*Jeremiah's most intense lament (Jer 20:7-18) is best read not as a crisis of faith, but as a crisis of vocation. Jeremiah is caught between a compelling word of God and a recalcitrant people that rejects that word. This lament may prove helpful to pastoral leaders who face a comparable crisis.*

people, he expresses no sympathy for them at all. Rather, he fervently prays that God's judgment be quickly forthcoming on the whole lot (20:12)! Jeremiah's crisis is better interpreted in specifically vocational terms.

This text also functions at another level, this time with implications for those who listen to the word of God. In reading Jeremiah a distinction must be made between the audience for the *preaching* of the prophet and the audience for the *book* (though these audiences overlap).<sup>4</sup> The opening lines (1:1-3) make clear that the present form of the book is addressed to an audience on the far side of the destruction of Jerusalem; the earlier preaching of Jeremiah has been appropriated as a resource to speak a new word into a new context (probably the exile). A key question for modern readers is this: How would *exiles* have read this lament? It is unlikely they could identify their anguish with Jeremiah's anguish; the prophet's lament could not become their lament.<sup>5</sup> After all, they had been (and perhaps still were) the problem to which Jeremiah speaks. At best, reading this text might engender remorse and/or repentance among them, as they observe the agony through which they put both prophet and God. Look at what it took—such personal cost—for the prophet to speak the word of God to them. In short, the text in its present form functions not as prophetic (auto)biography, but as *proclamation*; the word of God is conveyed in and through a suffering prophet who is *textually embodied*. As such, this text speaks not only to leaders in vocational crisis, but also to those people of God who are resistant to the word that the leader proclaims.

#### GOD “DUPES” AND “PREVAILS”

This lament is remarkable for the strength of its images; given the sharp address to God, it has even been called blasphemous. I begin with the verbs in v. 7, the translation of which will deeply affect the interpretation of the text.

The initial verb (הָפַח) is difficult and translations vary widely. It can have the sense of seduce (so JB; see Exod 22:16), allure/entice (so NRSV; see Hos 2:14), persuade (Prov 25:15), dupe/make a fool of (so NEB/REB, NAB; see Job 5:2), and deceive (so NIV; see 1 Kgs 22:20-22). The verb is used twice in v. 7 and again in v. 10

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common lectionary (which includes only vv. 7-13) assumes this understanding. Verse 13, a call to praise, is often considered interruptive. Yet, praise language and the certainty of a hearing are often found in laments, both within the psalm (see Pss 35:9-10; 144:9) and as concluding words (see Pss 13:6; 59:16-17; 109:30-31). See, e.g., O'Connor, *Confessions*; D. J. A. Clines and David Gunn, “Form, Occasion, and Redaction in Jeremiah 20,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 88 (1976) 390-409. The call to praise in Ps 22:23 (in the middle of the psalm) and Ps 31:24 (cf. 27:14) at the end are important parallels. It is sometimes suggested (as here) that vv. 7-13 and vv. 14-18 belong together (see, e.g., J. G. Janzen, “Jeremiah 20:7-18,” *Interpretation* 37 [1983] 179-183). Concluding sharp laments and questions after a strong confession of faith are attested elsewhere (e.g., Lam 5:20-22 after 5:19 and 3:22-33; cf. Ps 89). It seems best to understand vv. 7-18 as a single lament that includes elements of complaint, confession of trust, petition, certainty of being heard, and thanksgiving, concluding on a sharp note of questioning. This lament brings together several themes previously lifted up by Jeremiah, including complaints of hardships in carrying out his commission (cf. v. 7 with 15:15-18), and calls for judgment against his persecutors (cf. vv. 10-12 with 17:14-18; 18:19-23).

<sup>4</sup>For detail, Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 4-11.

<sup>5</sup>Contrary to Ronald Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 123.

with Jeremiah's persecutors as subject (see below). The translation "take advantage of"<sup>6</sup> could make the point, but "deceive" or "dupe" carries the basic sense well. This is, of course, Jeremiah's interpretation of what God has done.

The sense of the next verb (קוּחַ) is also difficult. It can mean "overpower" in, say, a military or physical sense (1 Kgs 20:25; 2 Sam 13:14; so NRSV, NIV, JB) or, somewhat softer, "be strong" (cf. NAB; NRSV in 1 Kgs 20:23-25). NEB/REB translates "outwit," hence, *mental* strength; such a translation would fit well with "dupe." Perhaps especially important, it can refer to the effect of *words spoken* (e.g., 2 Sam 24:4).

Whatever the nature of the divine action, Jeremiah acknowledges that God has "prevailed" (כָּבַד), the third verb in v. 7. Inasmuch as Jeremiah uses the same verb in v. 9 (I "can[not]" hold the word in; NRSV), that usage may inform its sense in v. 7, that is, God's *word* has prevailed in Jeremiah's life. The issue is not a question of God's power in a general way,<sup>7</sup> as if it were a test of sheer strength. The power with which Jeremiah has to do is the power of the word of God that he hears or that wells up within him. The issue for God is to overcome Jeremiah's strong resistance (v. 9) to speak the word he has been called to speak and in fact has already often spoken, and God is successful in doing so. Even so: Does God prevail because God dupes? Jeremiah apparently believes so.

We return to the issue of God's deception/duping of Jeremiah or at least Jeremiah's sense of having been deceived. Some scholars relate this to God's failure to deliver on the word that Jeremiah proclaimed (to this point). Yet, while Jeremiah may be impatient for the word to be fulfilled (18:19-23), the timing issue is not raised in this context and Jeremiah is confident that fulfillment will come (v. 11).

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***"Jeremiah feels that he has been drawn into a vocation that is much more intense and difficult than God had led him to believe"***

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Other scholars think the deception relates to the lack of a positive response from the people.<sup>8</sup> Yet, his unrelenting announcement of the coming judgment, and the stubbornness of the people evident in both his indictment (e.g., 16:12) and their own admission (18:12), suggests that he was not naïve in this regard. The sense of personal failure seems to be on the edge of this lament, at best.

Another direction for thinking about the deception is preferable, namely, his sense of *entrapment* between a compelling word from an insistent God and a stubborn and derisive people. As has been pointed out, Jeremiah interweaves attention to God (vv. 7a, 8a, 9) and to his persecutors (vv. 7b, 8b, 10).<sup>9</sup> Recall especially v. 7 in

<sup>6</sup>So Brueggemann, *Jeremiah*, 181.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 181; William Holladay, *Jeremiah 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 553, speaks of God's use of "brute force."

<sup>8</sup>So Clements, *Jeremiah*, 122.

<sup>9</sup>So Clines and Gunn, "Jeremiah 20," 390-409.

light of v. 10, where פתה and יכל are also used for the actions of his persecutors. Jeremiah has been deceived by God (v. 7), and the people are trying to do the same thing to him (v. 10). These repeated verbs frame the vocational issue for Jeremiah: he is beset by the word of God on the one hand and beleaguered by antagonists on the other.

Whether or not God intended to dupe him, Jeremiah feels that he has been drawn into a vocation that is much more intense and difficult than God had led him to believe. Though God had clearly warned him of difficulties, God had also promised to deliver him from his antagonists (Jer 1:8, 19), a promise remaining to be fulfilled. Jeremiah did not fully realize what he was “getting into,” and he laments regarding the two parties responsible for his personal quandary.

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*“God has called Jeremiah into a vocation wherein he feels trapped, caught in the middle, squeezed between two parties that have quite different ‘agendas’”*

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At the same time, Jeremiah’s approach to God and the persecutors is different. Though God is sharply addressed, it is doubtful that the language is accusatory (as it is usually designated). Jeremiah’s complaint does not stay focused on God; it immediately (and often) moves to the response that God’s word has engendered. God’s call has placed Jeremiah directly in the line of fire and he finds that oppressive, but he recognizes that this is due, finally, to his antagonists’ failure to acknowledge the truth of the word he speaks. His sharpest complaints are about his persecutors, and his *only* petition relates to them (v. 12). Yes, God did dupe him, but he recognizes that action for what it was and he has done what he was called to do, however much he has struggled with the call. *Deception recognized* changes the equation. Jeremiah’s complaint is accompanied by the acknowledgment that the divine action was in the service of a compelling truth; he never intimates that God’s word was a false word. Jeremiah believes not that God’s *word* is deceitful (see v. 11), but that God has called him into a vocation wherein he feels trapped, caught in the middle, squeezed between these two parties that have quite different “agendas.” Jeremiah expresses confidence that God will deliver him (vv. 11-13),<sup>10</sup> recalling God’s early assurances that his persecutors will not “prevail” (1:19). But that does not lessen the deeply troubling dimensions of his vocation, especially when deliverance seems nowhere in sight.

#### HOW IS GOD’S WORD COMPELLING?

An associated dimension of the accusation of deception immediately follows (vv. 8-9). Jeremiah bemoans his inability to stop speaking the word of God—so

<sup>10</sup>This expressed confidence is a move beyond Jeremiah’s accusation of divine deception in 15:18 and picks up the assuring language of God’s response to that lament in 15:20-21.

compelling is it. He “must” speak it, even the language about violence and destruction. The latter has a double reference: the violence perpetrated by the people, which in turn flows into its violent consequence, that is, the judgment of God (v. 8). Because of this word of God that Jeremiah speaks he has become a reproach and is derided “all day long.” In other words, *because he embodies the word of God regarding violence he suffers what that word suffers at the hand of others.*

When he resolves not to speak God's word because of all the “guff” he receives, he is not able to maintain that stance.<sup>11</sup> The word so burns within him that he “cannot” (כֹּל, as in God's “prevailing” in v. 7) but speak it. He suffers if he speaks the word of God and he suffers if he doesn't, and the God who called him from the womb is ultimately responsible for *both* realities. *Therein lies the essence of the deception.* Trying to hold back the judgment word of God produces a profound weariness (as in 6:11). Notably, God also experiences such weariness (see 15:6). God is weary from holding back the judgment on an unrepentant people. So Jeremiah, in being unable to hold back the word, is conformed to the very word of God he embodies. His weariness and God's are of one and the same piece; as it is with God, so it is with Jeremiah.

This being the case, Jeremiah's inability finally to resist should not be interpreted as a clinical compulsion, but as a theological and vocational one. He finally speaks because he comes to the point where he believes that this is what he must do. The continuing divine pressure on him to speak words of judgment is real, and Jeremiah recognizes that he cannot be true to himself or to his calling by being silent. Jeremiah finally does not speak *against* his own will, as if he were forced to do so; what he says is really what *he* says and not the word of God in some unmediated way (cf. 23:9; Amos 3:8; 1 Cor 9:16). He remains a genuine human mediator of the word.

William McKane says it well: the inner conflict of the prophet over whether to speak “is not to be interpreted as rebellion and guilt or reduced to human frailty.”<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah's lament is an honorable one within a genuine relationship. Even more, if Jeremiah

speaks against his will, his freedom is overwhelmed by a force which he cannot resist, and his utterance is no more his than that of a man whose integrity has been destroyed by violence or torture or drugs....The most that can be made of ‘compulsion’ is that what we are loath to utter and can only utter after overcoming inner resistance is not so subject to the dangers of willfulness, self-assertiveness or self-deception as those utterances which we have a natural inclination to make. The thoughts which are congenial to us and which we are inclined to embrace, or the attitudes which are agreeable with our desire for security are more liable to error than those which force themselves on us because

<sup>11</sup>Following REB, v. 9a is a reference to “it,” the word of God, rather than “him,” God (NRSV).

<sup>12</sup>William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Commentary on Jeremiah I-XXV*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986) 474.

they have a truth which we cannot ultimately evade and to which we must give expression, even if we fear or shrink from the consequences of so speaking.<sup>13</sup>

The most basic personal effect of this divine commission is that Jeremiah has been made to look the fool, a laughingstock to “everyone” (v. 7). People ridicule him and subject him to rebuke and censure. From their perspective, Jeremiah is a disgrace (v. 8, see v. 18). Moreover, they engage in a “whispering campaign,” and Jeremiah quotes them twice in v. 10. They sarcastically repeat his message that “terror is all around” (see v. 3; Ps 31:13), for to all external appearances that is not the case. They conspire among themselves to “get him.” Even his close friends and neighbors are on the watch (see 11:21); they look for missteps so they can obtain a firmer basis on which to silence him. Indeed, they hope to trick him into making a blunder (see Luke 20:20); then they can get rid of him and his accusing words, making him suffer the very end he has been predicting for them (“revenge”; see v. 12).

For all of Jeremiah’s lamenting about the situation into which God has called him, he expresses great confidence that God will provide a “way out” for him (v. 11). His God is a “great warrior” and will turn the tables on his behalf. God would prevail against them rather than they against him. They, not he, will be a “disgrace” (NRSV, “dishonor”) as they so judged the word of God and the prophet in v. 8 (NRSV, “reproach”). For God to visit them with “vengeance”<sup>14</sup> refers to the “revenge” planned by them against Jeremiah (“what goes around comes around”).

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*“Jeremiah’s wrath mirrors the wrath of God”*

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Verse 12 virtually repeats the words of 11:20; it is often thought to provide an *inclusio* for Jeremiah’s laments. He commits his cause to God, trusting that God will see that his persecutors are judged appropriately. This language is not a personal vendetta, but reveals that his stance toward these unfaithful people now conforms to that of God. Jeremiah’s wrath mirrors the wrath of God.<sup>15</sup>

The language of testing (v. 12a; see 17:16) is a personal reflection on Jeremiah’s own situation with respect to God. In effect, he moves to the point of responding to his own initial complaint. Testing is inherent to all relationships of consequence: Will those involved remain faithful to the relationship in the face of every circumstance? Jeremiah understands his negative situation to have constituted such a test, but he also proceeds to call upon *God* to be true to the relationship by delivering him from his persecutors.

Then, in v. 13 Jeremiah urges praise to God, inviting exilic *readers* to do the same. He is certain that God will hear his lament and deliver him from his enemies (see Ps 70), returning to God’s assurance in his call (1:8, 18). But this response proves not to be Jeremiah’s settled disposition on the matter.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>So NIV and most translations; NRSV, “retribution,” is too forensic a notion.

<sup>15</sup>See Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, 156-159.

## JEREMIAH'S CRY OF THE HEART

Jeremiah's cry in vv. 14-18 has occasioned much discussion and has often been interpreted as a sign of Jeremiah's deep despair. The search for language to describe the prophet has ranged widely, including self-hatred and self-curse. Links with Job 3:3-26; 10:18-19 have suggested the latter. From this perspective, these verses are not a prayer addressed to God; they are self-directed. In fact, however, Jeremiah does not direct the curses toward *himself*, but to the day of his birth and to the messenger who announced it. A key question for readers: Is the word "cursed" a call for his birthday (and the messenger) to be cursed, or is it a declaration that they are in fact cursed? The latter interpretation is much more likely.<sup>16</sup>

To curse something/someone is to call down death or destruction on them; it is the opposite of blessing, which is directed toward life, fertility, and well-being. But the day and the messenger lie in the past, irretrievable except to memory; Jeremiah cannot get at them with a retroactive curse. But as a *personal* declaration that these realities *are in fact cursed*, it states what Jeremiah believes their (*ongoing*) status to have been.<sup>17</sup> As such, these realities associated with his birth signify to him that, in view of God's choosing him in the womb (about which he could do nothing), he has personally embodied death and destruction from that point on (see 1:5). This is who he is and it's not pretty!

While vv. 14-18 are not specifically addressed to God (nor is 15:10-11), and no petition is stated, the cry to God is probably implicit. A sharp cry in the night ending in a sharp question is one way of thinking about the lament. As noted above, laments could end with deep questioning even after statements of trust and confidence (notably, there is no curse of God in this lament).

The wish that he would have been killed in the womb (see 15:10 for related motifs) refers to his becoming a dead fetus in the womb ("my grave"), which his mother would have carried to her grave. Inasmuch as he was called from the womb (1:5, a possible *inclusio* with this chapter), this strongly expressed language is, in effect, a fervent wish that he had not been called to this kind of vocation.

Even more, Jeremiah *declares as cursed* the man who delivered the joyful news about his birth (vv. 15-17).<sup>18</sup> But why would this messenger be singled out for such a fate? The role of the messenger has been linked to other reports of bad news (e.g.,

<sup>16</sup>Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 560-561.

<sup>17</sup>The verbs beginning the two halves of v. 16 are often translated as jussives ("let..."), following the LXX rather than the Hebrew. They are probably better translated as simple future (NEB), present, or even past (see Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 560). As for the last line in v. 14, it can be translated, "it could never be blessed," or similarly. These translations would support the understanding that Jeremiah's use of the word "cursed" (in vv. 14-15) is a declaration, not a petition or desire.

<sup>18</sup>Most commentators consider the phrase "like the cities that the LORD overthrew" to be a reference to Sodom and Gomorrah (see Gen 19:25). Yet, these cities are *named* elsewhere in Jeremiah (23:14; 49:18; 50:40) and the phrase "without pity" is not used of those cities. Exilic readers (at least) would probably see in this a reference to the cities of *Judah* that God overthrew without pity (v. 16a; for the pitiless theme, see 4:28; 16:7; 13:14; 21:14). They would have recalled that during that disastrous time they had voiced the "outcry" and heard the "alarm" (see 4:19; 11:11; 18:22).

6:22-26), to which Jeremiah or others respond in anguish. The messenger who brought the news about Jeremiah's birth announced it as good news, but he should have brought *bad* news, for he *himself* will be caught up in the devastation that Jeremiah announces. If he had instead killed Jeremiah in the womb he may have saved not only himself but also an entire people from death and destruction. Alternatively, the subject of the first line of v. 17 may be not the messenger ("he"), but indefinite and translate something like REB, "since death did not claim me before birth."<sup>19</sup>

Jeremiah's final question encapsulates the basic point of the prior verses (cf. the "why?" questions of Gen 25:22; 27:45; Lam 5:20-22). Why did he come forth from the womb to be a prophet and suffer so? From the womb he has been the embodiment of God's word, a word decisively shaped by the message of sword, famine, and death. As a consequence he has had to live a life of great hardship and anguish (cf. Baruch in 45:3), having to spend every day dishonored by his compatriots and friends (see 17:18). Why?!

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***"God does not allow Jeremiah to linger in his despair; God keeps the pressure on. Such is the life of a prophet."***

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The apparent lack of a divine response to Jeremiah is often noted. But is God silent? As for the *textual* Jeremiah (we don't have access to the *actual* Jeremiah), God does *not* respond with silence. Jeremiah speaks his words of complaint and curse, and God is right there with another word to speak (21:1). It is not a word of commiseration or assurance, as many readers might like, but it is, in effect, a word to continue doing what he has been called to do (not unlike 12:5-6; 15:19-20). As if to provide an immediate illustration of Jeremiah's point in 20:8-9, God insists that he keep speaking no matter how he feels. At least from the text's perspective, God does not allow Jeremiah to linger in his despair; God keeps the pressure on. Such is the life of a prophet.

#### A CRISIS OF FAITH OR VOCATION?

Keeping vv. 14-18 together with what precedes, and adopting the above sense of curse, probably makes Jeremiah somewhat less despairing than is commonly thought and makes the issue less a psychological problem. Words like self-pity and self-hatred do not capture the point. If this cry is *vocationally* oriented, then the issue is less that his life has no value than that his life as prophet is so caught between God and people that it has not been worth the trouble. This is *not* a crisis of faith in the sense that if he had a stronger faith in God he wouldn't go through such times. To say that Jeremiah accuses God "of having broken the relation which he had initiated" is unacceptable.<sup>20</sup> Or, to claim that Jeremiah had a "love-hate relation" with

<sup>19</sup>See McKane, *Jeremiah*, 488.

<sup>20</sup>Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 522.



God is much too psychological an assessment.<sup>21</sup> People with genuine faith can use accusatory language—if that's what this is—in prayer to God (e.g., Ps 44:22-23) and raise sharp questions with God (e.g., Gen 18:25). This is the type of honest interaction that God encourages in relationships, and the many biblical laments are witness to that. Persons of sharp insight and rich faith in God often have such moments, as a survey of the lives of faithful people through the centuries will show. God is part of the problem, but that is, finally, occasion for hope, not despair.

This is a crisis of vocation for Jeremiah. For him, it is an issue of having to *be* (!) a certain kind of person. Jeremiah has expressed certainty that God would deliver him from his persecutors, but he still feels squeezed between an insistent God with a compelling word and a resistant people with a derisive word. He has had to voice violence and destruction, and he has had to deal with a people who have done violence to him for doing just that. He is caught in the middle—the story of many a prophet and preacher.

Daniel Berrigan's recasting of Jeremiah's last lament (20:7-18) is remarkable in the way in which it gathers new images to make the lament sing once again.<sup>22</sup> But note that he has changed the order of the verses; v. 13 is placed at the end. This move, of course, changes the rhetorical character of the poem, and it now stands more like many a lament in the Psalter. At least the book of Jeremiah does not want to leave it like this for the reader.

Yahweh, you trickster,  
with a flick of your finger  
you whirl me about—  
this way, that, a weather—  
vane in your wild weathers,  
whim, tornado, mood.

Never shall I countenance  
this mad charade of yours!

You wound me, spur my flanks—  
I must  
under your whip  
a cowering beast  
neigh, whinny, roar—  
“Root up, Tear down!”  
On every side  
ridicule greets me,  
disdain, scorn.

In corners they gather,  
like whispering spiders

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 559.

<sup>22</sup>Daniel Berrigan, *Jeremiah: The World, The Wound of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999) 86-88.

weaving rumors—  
“Malcontent, he sees  
through a glass, darkness only.”

Friends grown sly,  
weave their spells—  
“Only wait,  
await his downfall!”

My soul beleaguered  
whispers;  
    Peace, poor soul, peace—  
let pass this awful  
behest of His  
in sweet forgetting!

Then  
I swear it  
your word erupts—  
a fire shut in my bones  
smolders there, consuming—  
I cannot contain, endure it!

Cursed, thrice cursed  
be the ill-starred  
night of my birth,  
a mother’s womb my tomb!  
Cursed the gladdening word—  
“A child is born, a son!”

Good news?  
    No. A plague—  
sorrow, disgrace my lot.

Nevertheless,  
    You  
cloud of unknowing,  
of undoing—  
I cling to You, fiery pillar cling to You, burn of you  
and I sing, I raise  
a song against the night;  
my Scandal  
my Love—  
stand with me in the breach! ⊕

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