



# Characterizing Jeremiah

PAULINE A. VIVIANO

Jeremiah is one of those biblical characters that cannot be ignored. We sense behind the words of this prophet a character passionate about his message, but torn apart by the very message he must proclaim and by the response he receives to that message. We gain a rather vivid picture of Jeremiah, yet the book itself actually tells us but few details of his life, and there is no delineation of his character. How biblical narratives create memorable characters has been the subject of considerable discussion among literary critics,<sup>1</sup> but little has been said of the characterization of the writing prophets, whom we meet first and foremost not in story, but in word. The book of Jeremiah seemingly gives us more information about the life of Jeremiah than we find in other prophetic books, for there are several narratives in the book in which Jeremiah is the main character. However, even these so-called biographical narratives focus mainly on the words of Jeremiah, and so, as with the other prophets, we are left with determining his character primarily from his message.

<sup>1</sup>Several significant works in literary analysis of biblical narratives have been recently published: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic, 1981); Shimon Bar Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, trans. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1989); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Almond, 1983); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1999); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1985).

*The book of Jeremiah introduces the prophet as a character consumed with his message and passionate in language and action. The tools of literary analysis produce a picture of Jeremiah as paradigm, not simply of a prophet but of all who are called to ministry.*

## CHARACTERIZING CHARACTERS

In a narrative, what we know of a character depends upon what the narrator tells us about that character. We do not know the “real” character, but only the one that is found in the story.<sup>2</sup> This holds true for prophetic literature as well. We do not know the “real” or “historical” prophet,<sup>3</sup> but only the prophet that is mediated to us by the words and actions of the prophet that the editors chose to include and/or adapt when compiling the prophetic books. In narratives we gain insights into character from how the character is described, from what the character says and does (speech and action), from what is revealed of the inner life of the character, and by various forms of contrast.<sup>4</sup> In prophetic literature we must look to the same kind of data to delineate the character of the prophet.

Biblical characters are rarely described either in narrative or in the prophetic books. Lengthy descriptions of such things as physical appearance, clothing, mannerisms are minimal at best and usually wholly absent. The rarity of such description makes it significant when it is found, but it is so rare that our understanding of a character must be based elsewhere. In biblical literature it is primarily what a character says and does that gives us insight into that character, but there are limitations to what can be known from a character’s speech and actions. Without knowing the inner life (thoughts, feelings, etc.) of the character, we cannot know what motivations are behind what is said and done. Intention is at least as important as the words and actions themselves for determination of character. The same words and actions can be spoken or acted out for altruistic reasons or to deceive, but without access to a character’s inner life we are without the data necessary to fully assess character. In narratives, we rely upon narrators to tell us if the words spoken or the actions performed match or do not match a character’s intent, but in prophetic literature narrators have minimal input. We encounter almost exclusively the words of the prophet, the oracles themselves, and these are by and large presented without any comment from the editors of the prophetic books. Having no evidence to the contrary, we can only assume congruity between the content of the message and the point of view of the prophet himself.

A further complication in determination of character from prophetic oracles emerges from the claim made that these oracles are not the words of the prophet, but the words of God. Prophets are but spokespersons; God is the real speaker. However, that being said, we must recognize that the prophet is not a mere vessel.

<sup>2</sup>Bar Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible*, 47.

<sup>3</sup>What can be known of the historical Jeremiah remains a debated issue. Scholars taking a psychological-biographical approach continue to reconstruct the life of Jeremiah taking the biographical and autobiographical data in the book as historically reliable. Scholars employing a tradition-historical approach find little in the book that relates to the historical Jeremiah, but rather see the figure of Jeremiah, the impassioned but rejected and sorrowful prophet, as a creation of the exilic and post-exilic communities. For an interesting reconstruction of Jeremiah’s life see William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 1-10; for an opposing view see Robert P. Carroll, “The Quest of the Historical Jeremiah,” *From Chaos to Covenant* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 5-30, and in his commentary, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 55-64.

<sup>4</sup>Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, 34-41.

The message may come from God, but the style and language of the message comes from the prophet, and thus the character of the prophet stamps the message that God has given. As Abraham Heschel notes,

The prophet's task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he *is* a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation. We must seek to understand not only the views he expounded but also the attitudes he embodied: his own position, feeling, response—not only what he said but also what he lived; the private, the intimate dimension of the word, the subjective side of the message.<sup>5</sup>

For all the sameness of the messages of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the other prophets, there is a distinctiveness that betrays the character of the individual prophet. It is in that distinctiveness in the message itself and in the shaping of the message that we find the character of the prophet revealed.

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It is difficult to access the inner life of a prophet. In biblical narratives a narrator gives us some insight into a character's thoughts, emotions, and motivations, but narrators are notably absent from most prophetic books. The book of Jeremiah is significantly different in this regard for we have more narratives than is the case with other prophetic books. However, though we learn something about Jeremiah from the narratives in the book, these narratives focus most often on the word that the prophet delivers and so what we can glean about the prophet's inner life is minimal. However, in addition to these narrative passages we have a number of poetic passages in the book of Jeremiah that reveal the inner life of the prophet. In these passages, most notably but not exclusively “the confessions” of Jeremiah, it is clear that the “I” of these oracles is the prophet speaking of his own thoughts and feelings. These passages add a dimension to the character of Jeremiah to which we are not privy with other prophets.

The distinctiveness of a character becomes even clearer when that character is contrasted to other characters. Contrasts may be drawn in different ways, but in the book of Jeremiah it is his words and actions that are contrasted with those of the leaders of Judah, its priests, and most especially, its other prophets.

#### BRIEF SKETCH OF JEREMIAH'S LIFE

Before addressing these four areas—description, speech and actions, inner life, and contrast—it will be helpful to set out a brief sketch of the life of Jeremiah.

<sup>5</sup>Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962) x.

The material in the book of Jeremiah is not arranged chronologically, and I will not attempt a chronological reconstruction here, but only highlight what we know of Jeremiah from the book.

The book of Jeremiah opens with his call. Jeremiah is to be a prophet whose task is “to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant” (1:10). This anticipates what will follow in the rest of the book: a message of doom and destruction that is only partially alleviated by a few short chapters of hope. Jeremiah is commanded by God to get ready for battle (“gird up your loins,” 1:17), to be obedient (“tell them everything I command you,” 1:17), and not to panic or be terrified<sup>6</sup> (“do not break down before them,” 1:17). He is given the assurance that God has prepared him for the task (“I...have...made you...a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall,” 1:18); the task will not be easy (“they will fight against you,” 1:19), but God will come to his aid (“they shall not prevail,...for I am with you...to deliver you,” 1:19). As the book unfolds we find Jeremiah proclaiming his message to Judah’s kings and princes, to the people, and to individuals (Baruch, Hananiah, Pashtun, Shemaiah). His message that destruction is on the way is not well received. He is beaten (20:2; 37:15) and placed in stocks (20:2), put on trial (ch. 26), jailed (32:2; 37:15), and attempts are made to put him to death (11:19; 18:18; 26:11; 38:4-6). In spite of the impression given that everyone is against him, he is assisted by Ahikam (26:24), and even the king spares his life when Ebed-melech intercedes on his behalf (38:7-13). Jeremiah is commanded by God not to marry (16:2), not to partake of funerals (16:5) or feasts (15:17; 16:8). These actions are prophetic signs reinforcing his message that God is unleashing punishment. Smashing a pot in the Valley of Hinnom (19:10-11), the soiled loincloth (13:1-11), the attempt to have the Rechabites violate their prohibition against drinking wine (ch. 35)—these are dramatic signs that underscore his message that the people persist in turning away from Yahweh and so devastation will come upon them. There is some hope found in the book of Jeremiah (chs. 30-33), and minimal as it is, it is also accompanied by a sign: buying a plot of land from his cousin Hanamel during the siege of Jerusalem (32:6-44). Jeremiah is in prison for treason when the Babylonians take over and destroy the city of Jerusalem. They release him and allow him to remain in Judah, but after the assassination of Gedaliah he is taken to Egypt by Johanan’s faction and the last we hear of him he is prophesying in Egypt (chs. 39-44).

#### DESCRIPTION

Description can give us an insight into character, but only minimally with respect to Jeremiah for there is hardly any description of him in the book. The opening verse identifies the prophet in terms of his lineage, his tribe, his town, and the length of his reign as a prophet. He is the son of Hilkiyah, but as we do not know who this Hilkiyah was, we can say little about his family background or social posi-

<sup>6</sup>This is Holladay’s translation of the root תתת in *Jeremiah 1*, 44.

tion. He is of the tribe of Benjamin, a small tribe, but one from which came Israel's first—though tragic—king, Saul. He is from a priestly family, but nothing is said here or in the rest of the book as to what this meant for Jeremiah. His town of Anathoth was about three miles northeast of the city of Jerusalem, on the edge of the wilderness. He does not come from a large city, but a rural village, which may explain both his attitude towards Jerusalem and its temple and the wilderness imagery that pervades his message. That Anathoth was a town of priests whose ancestor, Abiathar, was banished by Solomon may explain in part the antagonism of the Jerusalem priests toward Jeremiah. The forty-year length of his work may indicate the tenacity with which he carried out his prophetic task. In spite of the negative reception of his message his role as prophet was a lifelong commitment.

The only other description of Jeremiah comes from his call. He is reticent about taking on the task to which he is being called because he is “only a youth” (1:6). This self-description may be more a conventional response of humility than a biographical fact,<sup>7</sup> but there is something about Jeremiah in the book itself that suggests that he really was naive or innocent when initially called. He was “like a gentle lamb” (11:19); he was “enticed,” even “overpowered,” by God (20:7). There is no other description of the prophet in the rest of the book and so we are forced to turn to his speech and actions to flesh out our characterization of him.

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#### SPEECH AND ACTIONS

In terms of content the poetic oracles in the book of Jeremiah are similar to the poetic oracles of any prophetic book. They contain accusations and announcements of punishments, interspersed with calls to repentance. It is in the distinctiveness of Jeremiah's message and in its shaping that we discover the character of Jeremiah.

The focus of Jeremiah's indictment is that the people and their leaders have turned away from the worship of Yahweh to the worship of other gods. The constant thread throughout the book is the apostasy of Judah. The sense of betrayal runs deep in Jeremiah's words. The people have betrayed their God and turned to “things which do not profit” (2:8; cf. 2:9-13). They have forsaken Yahweh (2:17); they are faithless (3:20). Their betrayal extends also to the prophet himself, whom they treat not simply as a nuisance and troublemaker; but as indicated above they have him beaten, imprisoned, and even attempt to put him to death. The force of Jeremiah's personality is impressed upon the reader from his dogged insistence on the magnitude of their sin and its dire consequences and his refusal to back off in spite of the hostility such an accusation has brought against him.

From his message we can say that Jeremiah has a heightened moral sensitivity

<sup>7</sup>Carroll, *Jeremiah*, 98.

that enables him to see what others do not see: the horror of their apostasy and the destruction to which it will lead. His righteous indignation is unleashed in particularly harsh denunciations of their actions and the announcements of devastation that will come upon them as punishment. They do the unthinkable in going after other gods (2:11-12). The land will mourn, it will be ravished (4:27-28); creation will be undone (4:2-26). Over against a Jeremiah bursting with tirades, we find a Jeremiah filled with grief and horror because of what he must announce. His message moves between anger and anguish. He announces the doom of his people, but he tells us that he did not want this punishment (17:16). He tries to intercede on their behalf (18:20), but he is under compulsion to proclaim this wrathful message, a message he finds distasteful. We find in the words of Jeremiah a person torn. He cannot ignore the sin of his people and the ruin that will come upon them, but at the same time it grieves him to the core of his being. He is not entirely without hope, but what hope we find pales in comparison to the message of doom. His message reveals him to be perceptive, single-minded, tenacious, and forceful. He is a “fire-and-brimstone” preacher in the positive sense of that phrase, but perhaps in the negative sense as well.

No less than content, the shaping of the message reveals the character of Jeremiah. The message is forceful and unrelenting and so is his style. It is impossible to be exhaustive here, but a few examples will reveal what is characteristic of Jeremiah’s rhetoric. His words are chosen to provoke a response, to shock. His audience must be roused; they must be pushed out of their lethargy to change the direction of their lives. To do this, Jeremiah uses strong language and at times crudely sexual language. The people are accused of whoring (2:20; 3:2-3), being like camels in heat (2:23-24) or lusty stallions (5:8), seeking their lovers (2:33). This language is incendiary; it is hard to ignore. To engage his hearers, Jeremiah frequently uses rhetorical questions, e.g., “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods?” (2:11); “Can Ethiopians change their skin or leopards their spots?” (13:23); “Can a man bear a child?” (30:6). Rhetorical questions have an evocative character. They demand a response, but the response is already known. Everyone knows the answer, but in speaking aloud the answer, the respondent indicts himself. Jeremiah uses hyperbolic language. The devastation is total (4:23-26); faces are harder than rock (5:3); sins are shameful abominations (6:15); widows will be as numerous as the sands of the shore (15:8). There is no middle way in Jeremiah’s vision. All have failed, all are indicted, and all will be destroyed. Rhetorical questions, hyperbole, along with other rhetorical devices, such as repetition (e.g. 4:19; 6:14; 22:29) and accumulation (e.g. 7:34; 14:12; 24:9), all suggest a person consumed by his message and intent upon provoking a response. He employs every rhetorical skill to deliver his message with a frenetic intensity that reflects the passion of this prophet.

His speech is underscored by his actions. Their dramatic character reinforces the passion of his rhetoric. Actions, such as smashing a pot to symbolize the destruction of the city (ch. 19) or wearing a yoke to symbolize submission to Babylon

(chs. 27-28), are vivid displays highlighting his message. Whether in speech or in action the fiery passion of Jeremiah is apparent.

#### INNER LIFE

The prophet Jeremiah not only shapes his message, but he is shaped by the message he must speak. The message, which he both announces and lives (15:17), sets him apart from the society in which he lives. He does not marry, does not join in festivals or in mourning rituals. He is alone (15:17) and yet seems desperately to be in need of others. The message of destruction and the rejection he experiences because of it profoundly affect him. He lives as one who is “full of the wrath of Yahweh” (6:11). Sorrow overwhelms him: “My joy is gone, grief is upon me, my heart is sick” (8:18); “I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me” (18:21); “O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night” (9:1; cf. 13:17). He has a visceral response to the message he must speak: “My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly” (4:19); “My heart is crushed within me, all my bones shake; I have become like a drunkard” (23:9).

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The “confessions” of Jeremiah<sup>8</sup> reveal to us a prophet whose grief spills over into his prayer and his anger finds expression in repeated requests for Yahweh to avenge him. When they plot against him (11:19; 18:18; 20:10), when he sees that wickedness prospers (12:1), when his pain is unceasing (15:18), when he is mocked (20:7b-8), when his friends turn against him (20:10), when even Yahweh seems untrustworthy (17:17; 20:7a), Jeremiah raises his complaint to Yahweh. The outrage and despair expressed in these “confessions” and in the passages mentioned above reveal a person who feels deeply and reacts passionately. He who is innocent suffers and cries out against the injustice of it all. Yet he stays the course and fulfills his prophetic task to the end.

#### CONTRAST

Contrast serves to heighten the distinctiveness of a character. Jeremiah is set over against the people, Judah’s kings and princes, its priests and prophets. The

<sup>8</sup>There is some debate about the exact verses to be included in the six passages identified as the confessions of Jeremiah, but generally they are given as 11:18-12:6; 15:10-12, 15-21; 17:9-10, 14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-18. There is considerable debate concerning the actual nature of these “confessions.” Some scholars maintain that they are an expression of Jeremiah’s innermost feelings; others that they are conventional laments put into Jeremiah’s mouth by the exilic or post-exilic editors of the book of Jeremiah. For a mediating position see Kathleen M. O’Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25*, SBL Dissertation Series 94 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1988).

prophet stands in sharp contrast to those who array themselves against him. The people do not see the depth of their sin and its consequences; Jeremiah sees clearly. There is constancy in Jeremiah's message, but constancy is not a characteristic shared by the people or their leaders. The people mend their ways for a time, but at the first excuse they return to their former ways (34:15-16; 44:17-19). The leaders vacillate, especially Zedekiah, but Jeremiah stands firm. He never wavers from the view that Judah must submit to Babylon or be destroyed (27:8-15). They will not heed his words (18:18), but the prophet will speak out even when he doesn't want to (20:9).

Priests and prophets provide a sharp contrast with Jeremiah (14:18; 23:11), but it is particularly against the other prophets that Jeremiah stands in clear relief. The other prophets prophesy by Baal and lead the people astray (23:13). Their behavior is reprehensible (23:14). They proclaim peace when war is on the horizon (23:7) and urge the people against submitting to Babylon (27:8-15). They do not stand in the council of Yahweh (23:18, 22); they do not speak Yahweh's word (14:14; 27:10, 14-16). They delude the people by speaking of visions, but these visions originate in their own minds (23:16). Against all of them—people, kings and princes, priests and prophets—Jeremiah stands as a prophet who has received the word he proclaims directly from Yahweh. It is not a word he wants to proclaim, but one that he must proclaim and will proclaim, no matter what it costs him personally. The sharp contrasts underscore what we have already seen. Amidst the sorrow and pain of his life and for all of his complaining, no matter how much he hates his task, Jeremiah nevertheless continues to proclaim the message he is given with an unrelenting passion.

The vivid picture of Jeremiah that we carry in our minds is created primarily by the words he speaks and the few details of his life found in the book. It is a picture enhanced by what is revealed of his inner life and by contrasting him with the religious and political leaders of Judah. Jeremiah is a person consumed with his message, a person profoundly disappointed in his people, at times enraged, often filled with grief. He is a person who is strong in his opinions, passionate in his language. He experiences rejection and misery, and reacts with hurt and anger. He perseveres, and even in the midst of his pain he is convinced that Yahweh remains with him. Jeremiah becomes a paradigm, not simply of a prophet but of all who are called to ministry. In his passionate commitment we find our own. In his rejection and pain we come to understand our own. In his hope of a new and brighter future we find our way to the resurrected Lord. ⊕

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