



## Surviving Disaster in the Book of Jeremiah

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**T**he book of Jeremiah is a “thick” response to disaster. Disaster and its survival are its chief subjects. Disaster produces the book. Every poem, narrative, or sermon relates to disaster in one way or another, either announcing it, explaining it, or offering hope for living through it. By disaster I do not mean simply a sorrowful time or a set of tragedies out of which the community or individual expects to emerge. Disaster refers to a colossal collapse of the world, a vast interruption of life as it is known, what Louis Stulman calls “a cosmic crumbling.”<sup>1</sup>

Daniel Smith-Christopher defines disasters as situations “that exceed the ability of an individual or group ‘to cope’ with the events in normal mental structures about how the world works.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, more than normal mental structures collapse in a disaster. The world comes to an end; everything is devastated; there is no way forward. There is only the present battle against death, numbness, despair, and the all-consuming struggle to survive.

The disaster that gave rise to the book of Jeremiah was a series of catastrophes surrounding Israel’s exilic period (587-537 B.C.E.). Whether the book was com-

<sup>1</sup>Louis Stulman, *Order amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998) 57.

<sup>2</sup>Daniel Smith-Christopher, “Prophet in the Camp: Ezekiel and Refugee Studies” (paper presented at the Society of Biblical Literature annual meeting, Denver, CO, 2001).

*The stories and poetry of the book of Jeremiah create a world in which the ancient people of God can imagine their own survival. The book provides clues also to contemporary believers in their need to confront the rawness of present reality and to find ways to survive.*

posed during the exile or later during the Persian period, the tragic events of exile shape its imaginative world. The Babylonian army invaded Jerusalem three times. They destroyed the temple, the king's palace, and the governing system. They undermined ordinary domestic and commercial life, and they deported members of the ruling classes to Babylon.

To call the book a "thick" response to disaster is to suggest, following Ricoeur,<sup>3</sup> that the literature rises above a literal representation of events. It rouses up language, images, and stories that both depict the disaster and respond to it. Its poetry and stories create a world, a poetic landscape, in which the people can imagine their own survival. Here are three ways the book addresses survival: it names the disaster, interprets the disaster, and portrays the prophet as a survivor of disaster.

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#### NAMING THE DISASTER

First and foremost, the book of Jeremiah names the disaster, reveals its contours, and mirrors it back to its audience. It depicts the totality of the destruction, speaks of pain and bitter grief, and articulates the rawness of the world in which survivors find themselves. It first names the disaster as a coming event, an onrushing attack upon Jerusalem, by the mythic "foe from the north" (1:14; 4:6).<sup>4</sup> The destruction will disrupt the cosmos. In language that those at our Ground Zero might not find hyperbolic, Jeremiah renders their disaster as the collapse of creation itself. Light, mountains, hills, birds, and the cities will return to primeval "waste and void" (4:24-26; cf. Gen 1:2).

Even if Jeremiah's oracles actually predicted the disaster rather than described it afterward, their preservation after the fact portrays the disaster, gives it shape, and shows the people their true condition in the disaster's aftermath. The book's poetic world mirrors their predicament. It enables survivors to see the overwhelming nature of the catastrophe they have gone through. Its truthful, bitter, often beautiful, depiction of disaster is a survival tactic because it brings pain out of numbness, gives it a language, makes it visible. By showing them their losses, it validates them in their suffering, lets them know they are not alone in it, and provides words for them to begin to speak of it. When they accept the magnitude of their disaster, healing can begin.

<sup>3</sup>For an introduction to Ricoeur's work on symbol, see Werner G. Jeanrod, *Text and Interpretation as Categories of Theological Thinking* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 41-52.

<sup>4</sup>John Hill, *Friend or Foe? The Figure of Babylon in the Book of Jeremiah MT*, Biblical Interpretation Series 40 (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

## INTERPRETING THE DISASTER

Upon first reading, the book of Jeremiah seems far more concerned with placing blame for the disaster than with offering means to survive it. It accuses, blames, and attacks its audience. Its words of comfort are sparse, scattered across the book in a tiny, though continual, rivulet of hope and then concentrated in a small holding pond toward the book's center (Jer 30-33). Accusation and blame are such strong themes of the book that scholars often name its first part "oracles of accusation and judgment against Judah and Jerusalem" or some variation of the same (2:1-25:34).<sup>5</sup> The key word in these titles is "against." The prophet speaks against people, priests, prophets, and kings. All citizens are responsible for the disaster.

From a plethora of blaming texts, here are but two:

As a thief is shamed when caught, so the house of Israel shall be shamed—they, their kings, their officials, their priests and their prophets...for they turned their backs to me. (2:26-27)

How can I pardon you? Your children have forsaken me and sworn by those who are not gods. When I fed them to the full, they committed adultery and trooped to the houses of prostitutes. They were well-fed lusty stallions, each neighing for his neighbor's wife. (5:7-8)

Barely a chapter in the first part of the book omits blaming someone. Human sin caused the nation's fall.

When the book blames the people, it also excuses God, for it claims God is justifiably furious at their betrayal and abandonment. The book's theology of blame is designed to shame survivors and provoke their repentance. Some contemporary readers greet such unnuanced, simplistic theology with disdain. It wrongly blames victims for a colossal disaster that admits of complex historical explanations—all to protect God from charges of mismanaging the world. But against intuition, Jeremiah's theology of blame is a coping mechanism that helps the community survive.

Survivors of disasters often blame themselves for their predicament. Smith-Christopher reports that in the aftermath of disasters, societies frequently resort to self-blaming speech.<sup>6</sup> Some Cambodians, for example, interpret the enormous national destruction under the Pol Pot regime as the result of bad karma. This thinking leaves Buddha free of blame and keeps the people's religious sensibilities in place. They are not victims in an arbitrary and chaotic universe but actors who brought disaster upon themselves.<sup>7</sup>

When survivors blame themselves for the present situation, their larger

<sup>5</sup>For example, Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 86; and E. W. Nicholson, *Jeremiah 1-25*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973) 14.

<sup>6</sup>Smith-Christopher, "Prophet in the Camp," 7-9.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

worldview stays intact, as is also the case among survivors of child abuse.<sup>8</sup> God or the parent remains reliable and just, even if also harsh, abusive, and destructive. From this thinking, survivors gain a sense of control. They caused the disaster; therefore, they can alter their ways, and the future also seems to rest with them. Hence, the theology of blame that courses through the book of Jeremiah like a river in flood, bringing guilt, shame, and the burden of responsibility, also gives structure and meaning to chaotic and vacuous experiences. Blaming becomes a strategy of survival.

The more theologically appalling claims of the book, such as God's orchestration of attacks on the puny and defenseless city by the "foe from the north" (4:5-6:30) and God's rape of Jerusalem (17:20-27),<sup>9</sup> serve in strange fashion to uplift survivors. They provide the community with an explanation and a possible future. The book's theology of blaming and shaming helps them maintain an identity with connections to their past. As a theology of human responsibility for the politics of the world, blaming is a prophetic survival tactic for the nation. As difficult as this blaming may be for some contemporary Christians to understand, Jeremiah's accusations are a balm in Gilead, a healing ointment for the wounds of the people.

It is hard to see Jeremiah's blaming as a healing vision today, except for one important point. Jeremiah's theology of blame insists on the human capacity to shape the course of events. It reminds us of our vocation to live in fidelity, justice, and right relationship with others, with the cosmos, and with God. In the present changing world order, believers in the United States have much to learn from this book ascribed to the "prophet to the nations." Jeremiah knew that survival depended upon interaction and cooperation with the nations. He insisted upon it even for exiles in Babylon, despite resistance from other leaders (29:8). The captives should settle in Babylon, plant themselves there, seek the shalom of that place, pray on behalf of their enemies, for in Babylon's "shalom is your shalom" (29:7). Their survival was linked to their cooperation with the nations. So is ours. And as citizens of the world's most powerful nation, our responsibilities to God, earth, and neighbors stand to indict us. What can it mean in our context that the enemies' shalom is our shalom?

#### JEREMIAH THE SURVIVOR

But if Jeremiah's theology of blame were all the book contained, it seems unlikely that we could sustain attachment to it or perhaps even find life in it.<sup>10</sup> What makes the book attractive, turns it into a haunting evocation of hope, and balances its rhetoric of blame, among other things, is its presentation of the prophet himself. Whatever else the figure of Jeremiah is, he is a survivor, a symbol of possibility, a

<sup>8</sup>Alice Miller, *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

<sup>9</sup>Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Jeremiah," in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) 493-494.

<sup>10</sup>I am grateful to Louis Stulman for this observation.

sign that the people may still have a future. And by contrast with the book's accusations against the people, the book portrays Jeremiah as innocent. His portrayal complicates the book's blaming theology, competes with it, and suggests another way to confront disaster.

The book of Jeremiah presents the most copious glimpse of a prophet's life in the Old Testament. There are stories about him, sermons and prayers by him, and a call narrative inaugurating his mission as the "prophet to the nations." Yet we know ancient peoples were not interested in personality and inner life as are contemporary citizens of the United States. In our post-Freudian world, *People Magazine* and celebrity lives serve as common icons of the culture, and talk shows turn us into prurient analysts of people's inner lives. Why would ancient composers of the book of Jeremiah be interested in his life, in a "biography" of his inner struggles and his prophetic behaviors except as a symbol of something larger than the personal?

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*"a symbol of the people's fate, Jeremiah's suffering signifies their suffering; his survival points to their survival"*

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Preoccupation with the history of Jeremiah's life has caused modern interpreters to miss the symbolic power of the character Jeremiah, leaving large sections of the book underinterpreted.<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah is a complex and multifaceted figure, a symbol of many aspects of the disaster. He is a work of literary imagination, a "persona" with many faces. He functions uniquely as a prophet to his people. He stands over against them as their accuser, their enemy, and the bearer of blame. He stands with them as a mediator with God and the announcer of a new covenant and a new future. But he also stands for the people in many stories and poems. A symbol of their fate, his suffering signifies their suffering; his survival points to their survival. When he is thought of as a many faceted figure, new aspects of the text open to us.

Stories and poems of Jeremiah's life mirror aspects of the national disaster. Whatever their historical connection to the prophet's life, these texts transcend mere historical reporting to incorporate aspects of the nation's fate. They present Jeremiah as an emblematic figure who experiences suffering similar to that of his people. Like them, he is taken captive, battered, and starved. He faces death repeatedly and is exiled to a place he did not wish to go.<sup>12</sup> Yet he survives that suffering again and again. Because he survives, they may as well.

<sup>11</sup>For the range of historical views, see William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah*, 2 vols., Hermeneia (Philadelphia and Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986 and 1989); William McKane, *Jeremiah*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1986); Carroll, *Jeremiah*. For literary and symbolic functions of the character Jeremiah, see Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 32 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1984); and Stulman, *Order*, 137-166.

<sup>12</sup>H. Kremers made similar observations about the prophet, but he saw Jeremiah as a type of Christ in ways that abstracted the prophet from his own literary existence, in "Leidensgemeinschaft mit Gott im Alten Testament: Eine Untersuchung der 'biographischen' Berichte im Jeremiabuch," *Evangelische Theologie* 13 (1953) 122-140.

### *Jeremiah's Life as Mirror of Disaster*

God commands Jeremiah to remain celibate to symbolize the disaster about to destroy the nation and the city (16:1-13). His celibacy signifies the end of life in the land, a symbolic interpretation offered by the text itself. Children born there will die and be neither lamented nor buried. They will perish by the sword and famine, and their bodies will become food for the scavenging creatures (16:4-5). Jeremiah's abstention from domestic life embodies and expresses the community's fate, for God will banish from the land "the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride" (16:9).

Stories of Jeremiah's captivity abound in the book and call forth the captivity of the occupied city and of the exiles. Enemies threaten his existence. Even though these enemies are Jeremiah's own people (11:21-23), the enemies' threats parallel attacks on the people. Like them, he faces conspiracies and schemes against him, death and terror all around. At the book's beginning, God promises he will survive attack. "I have made you today a fortified city, a bronze wall, against the whole land. They will fight against you but they will not prevail" (1:19). Jeremiah will suffer greatly, but the enemies will not triumph. He will survive.

Jeremiah is taken captive and threatened with death more than once, yet he survives every imprisonment. He has several close calls but escapes with his life "as a prize of war." He has allies that appear mysteriously out of nowhere and rescue him.

### *Stories of Jeremiah's Captivity and Survival*

1. Jeremiah's first imprisonment occurs in the temple, the place where prophet and word should be most welcome. Instead, the high priest, Pashur, strikes him and puts him in the stocks (Jer 20:1-6). Pashur releases him the next morning, but not before Jeremiah prophesies the captivity in Babylon and exile for the high priest and his friends.

2. A mob attacks Jeremiah because of his sermon in the temple (cf. 7:1-15) and announces, "You shall die" (26:8, cf. 7:1-15). In a complicated legal trial, priests, people, and Jeremiah himself declare him innocent, but his life is still threatened anyway (26:14-23). Without explanation or preparation in the narrative, Ahikam son of Shaphan saves him, "so that he was not given over into the hands of the people to be put to death" (26:24). Jeremiah survives with unexpected help.

3. When Jeremiah and his scribe Baruch create a scroll of all Jeremiah's words, the prophet is in danger again. Because Jeremiah is barred from the temple, he sends Baruch to read it aloud. Allies realize the danger his prophecy creates for him and Baruch, and they tell them to hide from the king's wrath: "Let no one know where you are" (36:19). Jeremiah and Baruch survive with unexpected help.

4. As the Babylonian army withdraws from Jerusalem, a sentinel accuses Jeremiah of deserting to the enemy (37:11-21). Despite his denials of treason, officials arrest, beat, and imprison him. The king intervenes and orders the captors to

give him a loaf of bread each day, a subsistence diet that lasts only until the bread runs out in the besieged city, but it keeps him alive. Jeremiah survives with most unexpected help.

5. In a story with many similarities to the previous one, officials capture Jeremiah again but now they throw him into an empty cistern (38:1-21). His offense is his instructions for the people's survival. Those who cooperate with the invading Babylonians "shall live; they shall have their lives as the prize of war, and live" (38:2).<sup>13</sup> The very king who saved his life previously gives him over into the hands of captors who say he should die. They lower him into a muddy cistern; Jeremiah sinks in the mud. The literary detail of the mud may well describe his place of captivity, but it also signifies the pit of suffering and humiliation, the physical and psychic consequences of the communal disaster. All is lost. Death awaits and hope fades.

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*"Jeremiah's audience too may gain assistance with equal surprise from unexpected allies"*

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Inexplicably and with no prior intimations in the story, an Ethiopian servant of the king named Ebed-melech dramatically rescues Jeremiah from certain death. Ebed-melech, an African slave, risks his own life to save Jeremiah. The name Ebed-melech means "servant of the king" in Hebrew, but the story implies that this slave serves only the divine ruler. Jeremiah does not gain immediate freedom after this rescue, but against all expectations he does gain his life. Ebed-melech's intervention indicates the possibility of survival for Jeremiah's audience. They too may gain assistance with equal surprise from unexpected allies. In a sequel to the story (39:11-18), Ebed-melech receives word from Jeremiah that though the city will fall, he shall have his "life as a prize of war" (39:18). Jeremiah survives, and Ebed-melech will as well.

6. In events that parallel the exile of people to Babylon, Jeremiah is forced into exile, although in his case he is taken to Egypt, not Babylon (Jer 43-44). Jeremiah and Baruch are forcibly removed from the land and survival once more seems unlikely. Jeremiah then promises Baruch that he will survive. Jeremiah tells him not to seek great things for himself. God is going to bring disaster upon all flesh, "but I will give you your life as a prize of war in every place to which you may go" (45:5). Baruch the scribe survives, as does the book of which he is the symbolic protector. The deportees may survive as well, if they adhere to Jeremiah's word.<sup>14</sup>

7. While imprisoned at the palace, Jeremiah arranges through Baruch to purchase property in Jerusalem (32:6-15). The Babylonians are invading the city, making real estate valueless and life in the city unthinkable. But God commands him to

<sup>13</sup>O'Connor, "Jeremiah," 519.

<sup>14</sup>Brueggemann, *A Commentary*, 413-417.

make the purchase because “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land” (32:15). Jeremiah survives, and life in the land will somehow survive as well.

Episodes of Jeremiah’s captivities gather up the people’s experiences of disaster. They reflect aspects of the tragedy back to a community split by foreign exile and military occupation. Because Jeremiah survives these catastrophic events, the people can also imagine survival by unanticipated means.

#### *Jeremiah’s Laments*

The portrait of Jeremiah as survivor is not complete without attending to his laments, called “confessions” (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-24; 20:7-14).<sup>15</sup> With amazing artistry, these poems also portray Jeremiah as a survivor, even as they depict a prophet set against his people who refuse to listen to his words. Yet he suffers as they do, and, in the case of these poems, his anguish arises from his sense that God has betrayed and abandoned him. These prayers of lament disrupt the book’s theology of blaming, for in them the tables are turned. It is God who fosters evildoers and God whom Jeremiah accuses of betrayal and abandonment. Jeremiah’s prayers are instruments of survival. Across them is an atmosphere of terror, of doubt, and of rage at the disintegration of his faith in God and the world.

The prophet joins with victims of disaster by perceiving himself as innocent, “a gentle lamb led to the slaughter,” the object of schemes, a tree about to be destroyed (11:19). Even his family betrays him (12:21-23; 12:6). He is persecuted (15:15; 17:18); he knows of plots to kill him (18:23); he is “a laughingstock,” shamed and mocked all day long, denounced by scorners (20:7-10).

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***“Jeremiah must turn to God, and then God will make  
him a fortified wall of bronze”***

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Jeremiah rages at God for his suffering. God has betrayed him, abandoned him, given him a calling that God thwarts with divine fickleness. Has God no culpability for what has happened to the chosen people? “You will be in the right, O LORD, when I lay charges against you” (12:1). God makes “the way of the guilty prosper” by planting them and enabling them to “grow and bring forth fruit” (12:1-2). He accuses God of acting like a stream that dries up, “a deceitful brook, waters that fail” (15:18). He begs God not to be a “terror” to him, for God is his refuge (17:17). He accuses God of seducing and raping him (20:7). The violence of Jeremiah’s world appears in the violence of his God.

The confessions conclude with the affirmation that Jeremiah will survive be-

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<sup>15</sup>See A. R. Pete Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement 45 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1987); Kathleen M. O’Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25*, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series 94 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988).



cause of God's promises. But Jeremiah must turn to God, and then God will make him a fortified wall of bronze. His enemies will not prevail over him, "for I am with you to save you and deliver you. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless" (15:20-21). God assures Jeremiah's survival even though suffering still besieges him.

Jeremiah changes from an accuser of God in the last lament to a confident praiser of God with the knowledge that God is with him "like a dread warrior" (20:11). His enemies will not prevail against him; they will be greatly shamed. He concludes with a command to the audience. "Sing to the LORD, praise the LORD." God "has delivered the life of the needy from the hands of evildoers" (20:13).

Although many of these complaints are specific to Jeremiah's prophetic vocation, the prophet's suffering is emblematic of the people's suffering. The national disaster has fractured their relationship with God and ended covenant fidelity between them. They, too, must think God has fostered and abetted the enemy, and turned like a treacherous stream that dries up in time of need. Yet Jeremiah survives. They, too, will gain their lives as a prize of war if they cry out to God in honest, probing anger, hold fast to God's promises no matter the devastation around them, and seek to restore a badly broken intimacy.

The book of Jeremiah invites contemporary American believers to confront the rawness of our present reality among the nations. It urges upon us recognition of our responsibilities in the world, and it calls us to absolute fidelity to the God who delivers the needy. Our survival depends upon it. ⊕

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