



The Way of Weeping: Reading the Path of Grief in Jeremiah

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The bitter tears of God's people going into exile marked the route with guideposts for their promised return (Jer 31:15, 21).¹ Grief also marks the path for the reader through the complex book of Jeremiah. Summonses to mourn, the example of Baruch, and the revelation of Yahweh's own grief delineate the believing response to what the book says about the death of the kingdom of Judah and the rebirth of the covenant people Israel.

SUMMONS TO MOURN

Readers of the book of Jeremiah know the extent of the devastation completed by the Babylonian conquerors, but death did not seem certain to the people of Judah in the last decades before 587/6 B.C. There were alternatives to Jeremiah's unwelcome preaching of doom. Other prophets offered their own, easier view of Judah's future: "Peace, well-being..." (6:14; 8:11). A reasonable assessment of the international situation may have led some of the people to the conclusion that Babylonian victory was inevitable, yet hopes for rescue by the Egyptians survived almost to the end (37:6-11).

¹Two Hebrew words with the same spelling have these two meanings, "bitterness" in v. 15 and "guideposts" in v. 21. For a discussion of a proposed emendation in v. 21, see G. Keown, P. Scalise, and T. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, Word Biblical Commentary 27 (Dallas: Word, 1995) 118.

Modern readers of Jeremiah are invited by the book and by Yahweh to mourn the destruction of God's people (ancient and modern) produced by our own failure. Weeping becomes the route that leads to restoration.

Jeremiah's summons to mourn the death of the southern kingdom in advance of its demise required his audience to accept this coming conquest as Yahweh's judgment for the sins and failings numbered in his preaching. The context of each summons to mourn includes an announcement of the conquerors that were poised to invade the land and points to the reasons why God would bring them. For example, God says, "for I am bringing evil from the north, and a great destruction" (Jer 4:6). The command in 4:8 follows logically from this announcement, "Because of this put on sackcloth, lament and wail."² The second half of verse eight quotes the text of the lamentation, "The fierce anger of the LORD/ has not turned away from us." Yahweh's anger burned "because of the evil of your doings" (4:4).

The merciless invader portrayed in Jer 6:22-23 provokes terror in Zion (6:24-25). Yahweh calls for mourning:

O my poor people, put on sackcloth,
and roll in ashes;
make mourning as for an only child,
most bitter lamentation.³ (Jer 6:26)

The text of the lamentation completes the verse, "Suddenly the destroyer will come upon us."⁴ Reasons for this judgment and mourning bracket verses 22-26. Yahweh accuses the people of rebellion, slander, and corruption (6:28) and of disobeying God's word and rejecting divine guidance (6:19). They had chosen their own schemes (6:19) over God's good way (6:16).

Readers of the book find the same pattern in two prose contexts also. An indictment in 7:30-31 and announcement of judgment in 7:32-34 follow a summons to mourn, "cut off your hair," and the text of a lamentation in Jer 7:29, "The LORD has rejected and forsaken the generation that provoked his wrath." Vile practices had polluted the temple and the people sought to secure life by killing their children in a perverted ritual just outside Jerusalem's walls (Jer 19:4-5; 32:35). Therefore, Judah will be silenced by death, with the carrion birds and animals consuming the unburied corpses.

²The repertoire of mourning gestures in the Old Testament includes: tearing one's clothes (2 Sam 1:11-12); wearing sackcloth, a course fabric of camel or goat hair, probably next to the skin (2 Sam 3:31); tearing or shaving the hair (attested in Mic 1:16 but forbidden in Lev 19:27 and Deut 14:1); throwing dust on one's head (Ezek 27:30); sitting on the ground (Lam 2:10); rolling in dust or ashes (Ezek 27:30); weeping and wailing (Ezek 27:30); and fasting (2 Sam 1:11-12). Ezek 27:29-32 includes all but the last item. See Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 372-373.

³"Bitter" in 6:26 is the only other occurrence of the word also found in 31:15. Its homophone, meaning "guideposts," appears in 31:21.

⁴Interpreters disagree about how to identify the speakers in this verse. William Holladay labels this verse as Jeremiah's speech, but recognizes the final colon as a quotation. NRSV renders the final colon of verse eight as a causal clause, "for," so that the speaker of the verse is included in the first person plural, "the destroyer will come upon us." Jeremiah or personified Jerusalem ("daughter Zion" in v. 23) could say this, but presumably not Yahweh. In the book of Jeremiah, Yahweh is the only one who uses the phrase, "my people." K. M. O'Connor lists nineteen occurrences, all spoken by God, although she sets apart 6:26 and 14:17 as less clear. ("The Tears of God and Divine Character" in *Troubling Jeremiah*, ed. A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, and Louis Stulman [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999] 397). In the context of the book, v. 26 stands under the messenger formula of v. 23, and in the following verses God addresses the prophet and speaks again of "my people" (v. 27).

The same picture of the uninterred dead is part of the extensive judgment depicted in Jer 25:32-33. The leaders of the nations (“shepherds,” “lords of the flock”) are summoned to mourn in 25:34 (“wail,” “roll in ashes”). The mourning command communicates the certainty of conquest for the small neighboring states. If

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these nations were to obey Yahweh’s command to mourn, they would accept the claim that the God of Israel was behind the Babylonians’ success, as articulated in Jer 27:5-11. A summons to mourn is part of the oracle against the Ammonites (49:3), and Yahweh also grieves for Moab (48:31-33, 36). The oracles against foreign nations in Jer 25 and 46-49 identify the causes and effects of Yahweh’s wrath, supporting the book’s assertion that Yahweh had given the whole region over to the Babylonians. Nebuchadnezzar’s successful military campaigns were not just a convenient coincidence that Yahweh could use to bring judgment on Judah.

The command to hire expert mourners is a variant of the summons to mourn. These women were skilled in the composition of dirges and in leading communal lamentation. Their ministry enabled the community to participate in mourning. They should “raise a dirge...so that our eyes may run down with tears” (9:18). Jer 9:21-22 provides them with a text for their lamentation:

“Death has come up into our windows,
it has entered our palaces,
to cut off children from the streets
and the young men from the squares.”
Speak! Thus says the LORD:
“Human corpses shall fall
like dung upon the open field,
like sheaves behind the reaper,
and no one shall gather them.”

The expert mourning women were to become tradents of the prophetic word.⁵ By obeying the command to teach it to their neighbors and their daughters they would spread this word from God among their contemporaries and to succeeding generations.⁶ This command to call mourning experts is closely connected to a depiction of the judgment in 9:11, 16, 9:19 (Zion’s lamentation), and to the reasons for it in 9:2-9. This extensive indictment expounds the absence of trustworthiness and love among neighbors. They slander and deceive one another. Behind a façade of friendliness they plot to attack one another. Society disintegrates because they refuse to know the

⁵The command to “speak” fits the dirge form, in which the leader calls for audience participation. The messenger formula, “thus says the LORD,” indicates the prophetic use of the dirge genre in this context. This dirge is introduced in v. 20 as “the word of the LORD,” which the women are to hear and teach to their counterparts and daughters. The command and the messenger formula in v. 22 serve to identify the dirge in vv. 21-22 as the divine word heard in v. 19 and commanded to be taught.

⁶Cf. 2 Sam 1:18. David ordered that the dirge for Saul and Jonathan be taught in the temple.

Lord. Yahweh articulates the causal connection between indictment and judgment in 9:9: “Shall I not punish them for these things? Says the LORD, and shall I not bring retribution on a nation such as this?”

Verses 12-16 provide a further explanation of the connection between the people’s sin and divine judgment. Key words make the logic clear: “*Why* is the land ruined? (v. 12)....*Because* they have forsaken my law (v. 13)...and have gone after the Baals (v. 14)....*Therefore*...I am feeding this people with wormwood (v. 15)....I will scatter them...and I will send the sword after them (v. 16).”

GOD MOURNS

Divine wrath is apparent many places in this context, but near the center is an expression of God’s own grief. In the masoretic Hebrew text, Jer 9:9 [English v. 10] begins with a first person verb. The Septuagint, however, uses a second person form, and many English translations have followed suit (e.g., NRSV, “Take up weeping and wailing”). Commentators have often identified Jeremiah as the subject of the verb in the masoretic text, “I will lift up....”⁷ Three considerations support this attribution: (1) Jeremiah’s “confessions” seem to be related to the dirge in tone; (2) expressions of anguish, pain, and grief are believed not to be compatible with the character of God; (3) grief contradicts Yahweh’s determination to judge Judah and Jerusalem. Yet Yahweh is undoubtedly the “I” in verses nine and eleven, and grammar and poetry link verses nine and ten.⁸ Numerous formulas identifying Yahweh as the speaker punctuate chapter nine.⁹ If the interpreter suspends assumptions about who may express grief, Yahweh emerges as the most likely subject of verse nine [English verse ten], “I will lift up weeping and wailing.” The placement of this verse in its context addresses the third consideration. God weeps in this passage because the people have caused one another to suffer. God mourns for the people who suffer at their neighbors’ hands and for the nation that will be destroyed because of this sin. Yahweh mourns over the sin and over its consequences.¹⁰

God’s grief is a crucial factor in the theology of the book of Jeremiah. Interpreters who are troubled by Yahweh the overlord, calling forth armies to destroy his people, take comfort in this picture of God who “vacates sovereignty” and weeps.¹¹ This point of view finds separate, irreconcilable pictures of God in Jeremiah: the wrathful, powerful Yahweh and the grieving, vulnerable deity. The passages about God’s grief, however, sketch a logical connection. God mourned the

⁷E.g., Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, Anchor Bible, vol. 21A (New York: Doubleday, 1999) 549.

⁸Verse 10 begins with *waw*-consecutive, and v. 9b and v. 10a are in the *qinah* meter. Page H. Kelley in Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, Westminster Bible Commentary, vol. 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991) 218.

⁹Mark Biddle gives the most weight to these formulas. When other voices appear, Yahweh is quoting them. As a result, Jeremiah’s persona recedes from view: *Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature: Rereading Jeremiah 7-20* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1996) 28-40.

¹⁰Mark Biddle also identifies 13:17 and 14:17-18 as divine mourning speech; *ibid.*, 28.

¹¹O’Connor, “The Tears of God and Divine Character,” 401.

suffering of Israelite individuals and families because of the wickedness of their neighbors. The other side of this grief, however, was wrath.¹² Divine justice demanded judgment on the corrupt society. God's mourning and the summonses of the people to mourn functioned in Jeremiah's ministry to emphasize the certainty of the judgment before it occurred, like a death announcement published in the newspaper before the person expires. The dirges described the widespread devastation and death that were eventually brought by the Babylonian conquest. The lam-

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entation genre, however, has a surplus of connotation. Grief at the nation's death reveals compassion that, in turn, becomes the ground of God's promise to save and confer new life.

The revelation of divine grief is crucial to distinguishing Yahweh's plan from Nebuchadnezzar's ambitions. The book of Jeremiah identifies the Babylonians as the foe from the north who would execute the divine judgment (25:9-11). God had granted Nebuchadnezzar the right to rule the region and had called him “my servant” (27:6). The kings in Jerusalem were vassals of Babylon from 605 to 587/6 B.C. The book of Jeremiah is aware that political rebellion by Jehoiakim and then Zedekiah brought on the conquests of 597 and 587/6 B.C. Yet the book favors the theological interpretation that Nebuchadnezzar acted as Yahweh's vassal, carrying out divine judgment on Judah and the neighboring states. A cynical evaluation of this claim might say that Yahweh's judgment is only a cipher for what the Babylonians would have done anyway or an attempt to attach Yahweh to Nebuchadnezzar's coattails. The motif of divine mourning is one way that the book defends against this critique.¹³ God mourns over the ruin of Judah and Jerusalem, but Babylon rejoices in her victory. They “rejoice...exult” and “frisk about like a heifer in the grass, and neigh like stallions” (50:11). Those who listen to God's word, however, will share God's sorrow.

THE DECISIVE SCROLL

Grief is the necessary response to the indictments for sin and announcements of judgment and death collected and written in a scroll. The final form of the book presents the incident recounted in Jer 36 as a decisive turning point. The date, in the fourth year of King Jehoiakim, corresponds to Nebuchadnezzar's rise to power,

¹²Walter Brueggemann attributes this change to God's “transformed heart...on the other side of grief...This God is chastened, sobered, and wounded”; *Hopeful Imagination, Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 41.

¹³The book separates Yahweh's plan from Nebuchadnezzar's success in at least two other ways: by limiting the term of Babylonian hegemony to seventy years or three generations of rulers (25:12; 27:7; 29:10) and by including judgment on Babylon for excessive cruelty and idolatry (chapters 50-51).

but Jehoiakim's destruction of the scroll of God's word through Jeremiah is the watershed event of that year.

Jer 36 contrasts King Jehoiakim's reaction to hearing this scroll to King Josiah's response to the book of the law in 2 Kgs 22. Both scrolls were encountered in the temple but read aloud to the king in the palace. Both kings listened to the whole scroll. Josiah, however, grieved over the sins and failings of Judah in the light of the law and the curses that threatened them. He tore his clothing as a sign of mourning and remorse. The prophet Huldah gave a divine word of approval for this response to God's word (2 Kgs 22:19). Jehoiakim in Jer 36 fails in comparison with Josiah. Jehoiakim and some of his courtiers did not mourn. Instead of tearing his clothes, the king tore the scroll. Instead of consulting a prophet, he sent men to arrest Jeremiah and Baruch. Instead of burning illegitimate cultic structures, as Josiah had, he burned the scroll.¹⁴ Jehoiakim's punishment for his failure to grieve over the ruin of Judah is ironic—burial without mourning rites (36:30b). Jer 22:18-19 describes his funeral as "the burial of an ass."

The final form of the book of Jeremiah marks the scroll burning as a decisive occasion for understanding the book. Three of the four major subdivisions of the book end with references to the fourth year of Jehoiakim and a scroll written in that year (Jer 25:1, 13, at the end of chapters 1-25; 36:1-32, at the end of chapters 26-36; and 45:1-5, at the end of chapters 37-45).¹⁵ The account in chapter 36 explains why this occasion was so important to the editors of the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah and Baruch prepared the scroll at God's command in order to provoke repentance (36:3). When Jehoiakim refused to mourn and destroyed the scroll, however, his opportunity to turn was lost. Judgment had become certain for Judah and Jerusalem (36:31). The prominence of the date and the scroll from the fourth year of Jehoiakim have the effect of extending the invitation to repent to audiences of the book in the exile and beyond. By its arrangement, the book repeatedly returns the reader to the occasion of Jehoiakim's failure to mourn, turn, and amend when he heard the first Jeremiah scroll so that readers of the final Jeremiah scroll will identify with Jehoiakim's opportunity and avoid his mistake.¹⁶

Chapters 36 and 45 are far removed from chronological sequence in their respective contexts. Jer 36 stands between chapters dated in Zedekiah's reign (chapters 34 and 37). Jer 45 follows accounts set in the years following the Babylonian conquest. Jeremiah and Baruch have been forcibly removed from the territory of Judah by Jews who reverted to the worship of the queen of heaven. Ronald Clements describes Baruch in the context of Jer 43-45 as the "archetype of 'the wandering Jew.'"¹⁷ He is unable to return home to Judah and Jerusalem, but he re-

¹⁴Jer 22:13-17 makes an explicit comparison between Jehoiakim and his father. Jehoiakim used forced labor to build an extravagant palace, but Josiah had done justice and righteousness as his regular habit.

¹⁵The fourth major subdivision, chapters 46-51, ends with a scroll written in the fourth year of Zedekiah, 594 B.C.

¹⁶It is impossible to determine what parts of the present book of Jeremiah would have been included in either scroll prepared in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Consult the commentaries for learned conjecture.

¹⁷Ronald Clements, *Jeremiah*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988) 243.

mains faithful to Yahweh in spite of exile and oppression. Jer 45 traces Baruch's faithfulness back to his response to the scroll he wrote and read in the fourth year of Jehoiakim. Baruch's brief prayer quoted in verse three resembles Jeremiah's "confessions," but the key words are "I mourn." The shared date and occasion of chapters 36 and 45 call for a comparison between Baruch and Jehoiakim also. Baruch mourned when he heard the scroll, and God promised him his life "as a prize of war," wherever he went as an exile. His survival in Egypt fulfills the promise. Jehoiakim did not mourn, and God promised him death without a proper burial. The twenty-year gap between the dates of chapter 44 and chapter 45 is not a mistake. Because Baruch had grieved over the ruin of Judah when he read the scroll, he had survived conquests by Babylon, the assassination of Gedaliah, and a forced march to Egypt. As an archetypal exile or diaspora Jew, Baruch's response to reading the first scroll models for other readers the proper response to the final scroll. Readers of the book also face a choice between rejecting God's word in Jeremiah or grieving over it.

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BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

The rhetorical device of summoning people to mourn before the subject of the dirge had died has a different function for readers of the book. Device has become reality. The conquest has certainly occurred, and the dirges are no longer anachronisms. In its aftermath there was ample cause to mourn the myriad individual deaths and the extinction of national life. One does not require faith or religious sensitivity to acknowledge the brutal results. What role do these summonses to mourn have for readers? Their content and contexts in the book of Jeremiah express a particular theological understanding of the death of Judah. The summonses to mourn in the early chapters of the book each cite a brief dirge text. To mourn using these words is an expression of belief, an acceptance of the book's claims that Judah's death was a consequence of the people's failure to be the nation that Yahweh had called them to be. Sharing God's grief over that failure sharpens one's awareness of the enormous harm done to neighbors and even to the land itself by people who reject God's way of righteousness, justice, and faithfulness (Jer 4:28; 12:4, 11; 23:10).¹⁸

The very structure of the book offers repeated reminders that grief is the reader's appropriate response. Jer 1-25, 26-36, and 37-45 each end with a reference to the occasion in the fourth year of Jehoiakim when the king decided to reject the op-

¹⁸Kathleen Norris echoes the words of a monk of St. John's Abbey in her reflection on the community reading of 1-20, "Coming unglued came to seem the point of listening to Jeremiah": *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead, 1996) 34.

portunity offered by the Jeremiah scroll, “It may be that their plea will come before the LORD, and that all of them will turn from their evil ways” (36:7). These references indicate that the reader has an analogous opportunity: Will you reject the word and burn the scroll, or will you grieve and turn back to God?

Mourning the death of Judah as a kingdom is also an acknowledgment that God is creating something new in the world. The end of the southern kingdom and the exile were “not simply a condemnation of the past but also a stage within the working out of a larger purpose.”¹⁹ Those who mourn express their belief that only God’s action can bring life and hope.

The way of weeping is the route that leads to restoration. The promises of new life and homecoming are addressed to mourners in Jer 31:15-22. Ephraim, who sways in sorrow as he repents, is remembered with compassion and called home (31:18-21). To Rachel, who weeps inconsolably for her lost children, God promises “wages” for her work as a mourner and hope for her future. Her descendants will return to their land (31:15-17). God, in mercy and love even greater than that of a mother who dies giving birth to her child, grants reconciliation and victory over death.²⁰ ⊕

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¹⁹Peter Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration: A Study of Hebrew Thought of the Sixth Century B.C.* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 234. See also Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5.

²⁰Keown, Scalise, and Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52*, 124.