

Is There Life after Wreckage? *Jeremiah as a Map of Hope*

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Jeremiah is a book for our time.¹ Its haunting language of death and destruction resonates with us in strange and unexpected ways. Jeremiah's portrayal of the horrors of war and a crumbling world are no longer unfamiliar terrain. It seems as though only yesterday they were an oddity, another's script but certainly not our own. Only yesterday Jeremiah's dangerous world, in fact, the mere idea of a colloquium on the shaking of earth and heaven, would have been as alien as can be. Our place in the world was safe and settled; our lives were well insulated and stable, with only a few glitches along the way.

But all that has now changed! In the year 2003 we are engaged in a war that millions still consider deeply troubling. Our country's foreign policy has cast a dark cloud over international law and American credibility. Like no other time in recent history, hard wrought social programs, especially for the most vulnerable among us, are in grave danger. After careful scrutiny, trusted institutions—political, religious, and economic—are now suspect. I am not an alarmist, by any stretch of the imagination, but I'm worried about the future of our country and the world and our children's part in it. It seems as though the entire global arena is coming unglued and our nation is in part a protagonist in the undoing. Maybe it is my age, but who would have ever thought that crippling fear, cynicism, and loss of confidence would be part of our individual and national narrative?

Over the years, Walter Brueggemann has given poignant testimony to the end of past certainties. He has spoken of our situation as a "time of dislocation,"² and he has repeatedly employed the metaphor of exile to speak of the Church in North America.³ But to be perfectly honest, I am not sure I really grasped the implications of his reading until recently. Now it seems quite clear, if there were ever a doubt, that the shaking of earth and heaven speaks directly to our present moment in history.

Jeremiah as a Map of Hope for Exiles

I would like to suggest that the book of Jeremiah is a map of hope for people living on the brink of despair—for exiles in Babylon and for exiles today. When we think of the book of Jeremiah, we usually think of doom and gloom. The "weeping prophet" weeps because he must proclaim judgment and speak of death and destruction. And there is little doubt that Jeremiah pulsates with such language. Yet, while the text critiques Judah's trusted social structures and theological systems, it also articulates a script for new life and hope beyond the disaster. Ronald Clements goes so far as to argue that the central message of the book is that of hope.⁴ Brevard Childs finds the key to Jeremiah in its "salvation oracles."⁵ Walter Brueggemann organizes his commentary around the dual role of divine judgment and salvation, "exile and homecoming."⁶ Kathleen M. O'Connor has recently proposed that the intent of the book is to create a world in which survivors can name the disaster, interpret it, and find hope through the persona of Jeremiah.⁷ I would simply follow suit and add only that

the literary organization or architecture of Jeremiah, governed by the prose tradition, leads us on a path to hope.⁸ After the first scroll (or Jeremiah 1-25) dismantles Judah's longstanding social and theological foundations, the second scroll (or Jeremiah 26-52) outlines strategies for coping and survival in a new and dangerous world.

At the end of the day, the book of Jeremiah heralds hope for Jewish refugees living in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, Judah's defining moment. But this formulation of hope is diametrically at odds with the establishment position. Unlike the prophet Hananiah and others who would insist that the disturbing events of 587 BCE are merely bumps in the road, Jeremiah asserts that they represent a true turning point. That is, the hope Jeremiah holds is not for a return to the old dynastic world, but for a new beginning and a new community defined by justice, obedience, and inclusion. This hope, by the way, in part gave birth to Judaism. And this hope, I trust, may be instructive to us in our troubled post 9-11 world!

Organizing the Chaos in Manageable Shapes

First, the brutal honesty that makes healing and restoration possible! Jeremiah speaks of a world under massive assault and of a people whose lives are wracked with pain. With disturbing images and raw emotion, the book bears witness to a disaster so terrible that it defies ordinary categories. For the citizens of Judah, the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon represented nothing less than the shaking of earth and heaven. Perhaps the most poignant words to describe this cosmic shaking appear in Jer 4:23-26. The NRSV captures the text's cadence of terror:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void;
and to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
and all the birds of the air had fled.
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger.

Jeremiah envisions the horrors of war. Make no mistake: the text alludes to enemy invasion and occupation in haunting, symbolic language. (This is the real stuff and not the safe images and heartwarming stories of entrenched American reporters.) The order of creation collapses and reverts to its primeval state of chaos, "wild and waste" (cf. Gen 1:2); the heavens become dark, mountains and hills tremble, birds take flight, fertile land turns into an uninhabited desert. The earth loses its form and beauty as all is reduced to rubble. Ironically, this vision of chaos is meticulously structured. The fourfold construction, "I looked...I looked...I looked...I looked," is followed in each case by the Hebrew predicator of existence (*hinnē*), "there was...there was...there was...there was," although no lifesigns can be found. The symmetry and repetition of the prophet's words only heighten the dread.

This alarming text is one of many that speak of unbearable suffering and loss of meaning. Indeed the first twenty-five chapters of Jeremiah outline the collapse of Judah's once stable world.⁹ Governed by prose sermons in chapters 7, 11, 18, 21, and

25, the text reenacts the fall of the nation's sturdiest pillars, its sacred canopy: *the great temple of Solomon* and its venerated systems of worship (7:1-15); *the beloved covenant* between God and Israel (11:1-17); *the election tradition* (18:1-11); *the land and its capital city Jerusalem*; and *the beloved Davidic dynasty* (21:1-10)—all come to a screeching halt, all go down in ruins, all are dismantled. By the end of the first half of the prophetic drama, nothing remains to prop up a toppling world. Such candor, such a scathing critique of the secure old world, is ironically the starting point for hope and recovery. Once Jeremiah nails the coffin shut on the nation's old modes of living, public policies, and understandings of reality—especially those associated with the temple and the dynasty—the text begins to map out a path of hope through the wreckage. The God who plucks up and pulls down also sculpts new beginnings out of the wreckage of fallen worlds and broken lives.

A Path of Hope Through the Wreckage

Although Jeremiah's path of hope is neither unified nor systematic (cf. Ezek 40-48), we can still discern its broad features. From the literary arrangement of the second scroll (Jer 26-52) and from its recurring motifs, the following shapes emerge.

1. *Hope is rooted in suffering.* "The people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness...With weeping they shall come, and with consolations I will lead them back...I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (Jer 31:2, 9, 13). Please note in these passages that the presence of sadness pervades all moments of joy! Indeed, the Book of Comfort (Jer 30-33), located at the center of Jeremiah, unites all expressions of hope with suffering and marginality.¹⁰ Hope is possible only when the people of God embrace the painful realities of exile. Jeremiah asserts that there can be no joy without mourning, no homecoming without exile, no salvation without judgment, no real celebration without the memory of loss. Any vision of the future that avoids the reality of human suffering makes a travesty of the past and can never deal with the emotional and symbolic pain of exile. It is therefore no accident that the Book of Comfort depicts the people of God as "survivors." They have endured war, amputated hopes, splintered families, and the travail of a shattered world. Now, by the prophetic word, God empowers broken and shipwrecked people to imagine a future when none seemed possible.

2. *Hope involves letting go of the old world.* Jeremiah maintains that the people of God cannot return to the securities of the past. The old social world and its conventional scripts are gone forever. There is a powerful temptation during times of fear and uncertainty to cling to the familiar and glamorize the past, no matter how destructive it may have been (see, e.g., the stories of the wilderness wanderings in Exod 16:1-3; Num 11:1-9). Jeremiah urges the Jewish refugees in Babylon to recognize this temptation and abandon all expectations of returning to the old world. When they do, when they relinquish the illusions of the past and its modes of power and orientation, when they surrender their old identity and accept their marginal status in Babylon, despair loses its grip, and hope is born.¹¹ Only then are exiles open to the new things God has waiting for them. "There is hope for your future," Jeremiah declares, "for the Lord has created a new thing on the earth..." (31:17a, 22c).

In his wonderful book, *With Open Hands*, Henri Nouwen describes prayer as letting go and surrendering to God.¹² Nouwen tells a disturbing story of an old woman

brought to a psychiatric center clenching her fist and swinging at everything in sight in fear that the doctors might take from her a penny. "It was as though she would lose her very self along with the coin," Nouwen writes. With this image he speaks of prayer as opening one's hands and heart to God. When we let go of our "small coins," we discover the many gifts God has in store. Indeed with open hands we discover God. Nouwen's story illustrates that relinquishment is frightening, even terrifying, but it is especially so when the prevailing voices of the time insist that one hold on for dear life!

Jeremiah's prophetic opponent Hananiah represents one of those voices (28:1-17). According to Hananiah, there was little need to let go of the past, for Judah's crisis was only temporary and in the long run inconsequential; after a few difficult years of hardship, life would return to business as usual. "Be patient, give it some time, and the market will rebound!" With ringing authority Hananiah even gave dates and places. "Within two years [the Lord] will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house...and all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon..." (28:3-4).

To Jeremiah, Hananiah's appeal to traditional categories of continuity was not only dangerous and deceptive but also a demonstration of profound denial. Indeed in the narrative account, Hananiah embodies denial. He rejects the fissured and broken dimension of Judah's experience in favor of unfounded hope. Anesthetized by wishful thinking, he would forget the personal and national traumas and live as if they did not really happen. Hananiah would create a pleasant, comfortable world that conforms to his own daydreams.¹³ And we, of course, do much the same! Yet, the fabrication of a fictive world, no matter how appealing, precludes healing and redemption. Hope involves truth-telling and letting go of the old so God's newness can break through.

3. *Hope exists on the margins and not at the center.* I think this claim may have caused the most stir and incited the most opposition! We almost intuitively associate hope with winning. To be perfectly honest, it is difficult for me to imagine otherwise. It seems so natural, even instinctive. I get a rush of adrenalin when I win: I get a rush of adrenalin when the Baltimore Orioles win or when Tiger Woods adds another trophy to his showcase! The feeling of euphoria accompanies winning. But please listen closely: For Jeremiah, hope is not found in triumphant nationalism, in hegemony, or in the customary military pomp and circumstance, that is, in the garb of winners. Hope emerges among the vulnerable and wounded, amidst those located on the fringes.¹⁴ The first readers of Jeremiah well understood this counter-cultural claim. The community that survived the fall of Jerusalem was no longer privileged in the old ways; it no longer enjoyed the insulation of a safe and reliable world; and it could no longer look to the reassuring modes of orientation as a sign of God's blessing.

One need only look at Jeremiah and his loyal scribe Baruch to see that faithful living is not always rewarded in the traditional ways. There were no trophies for "Best Prophet" or "Best Scribe." Jeremiah suffers for God's sake and Baruch is told not to seek great things for himself. "And you [Baruch], do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them; for I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh, says the Lord; *but I will give you your life as a prize of war* in every place to which you may go" (45:5). Even though the faithful might expect "great things" for their service to God in normal times, during the shaking of earth and heaven God promises only that they will survive. But living on the margins as exiles is no sign of God's rejection or God's impotence. Despite appearances to the contrary—amid all the devastation—God is present. Only now it becomes altogether clear that God's place is among the

broken people of the world. The importance of this overture of hope cannot be overstated: by unmasking the illusion of power, it broaches the mystery of incarnation, and perhaps even that of the cross.

4. *Hope involves community building.*¹⁵ Although the new world of exile pulsates with anxiety and vexation, it also presents unique opportunities. Jeremiah encourages the exiles in Babylon to seize the moment to create genuine community. “Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce...multiply there, and do not decrease...For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your *shalom* and not for harm, to give you a future with hope” (29:5, 6d, 11). During their time of displacement, the people of God might be tempted to sit back and do nothing or hastily follow the guidance of those who promise a speedy return to Jerusalem. However, Jeremiah presses the exiles to unpack their bags, put the past behind them, affirm the bonds of family, and work toward peace and community building in their own neighborhoods, that is, in their own local settings in life. “Seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*” (29:7). There may be better times and better places, and I often find myself fantasizing about these. But the key to survival and hope is to join God right where we are in creating a just and compassionate society, a place of new shapes and social alternatives, where violence, exploitation, and idolatry do not reign.

5. *Hope is textual.* It is really quite remarkable that the formation of hope in Jeremiah is so often tied to a scroll, that is, to the written word of God. The prophetic scroll authorizes and sustains the future of the surviving community of exiles (Jer 26-52). At the start of the second scroll (26:1-24), for instance, officials come to Jeremiah’s defense by citing an oracle of Micah, presumably a written oracle (26:16-19). As a result, Jeremiah’s life is spared. At the end of the book, one finds a strange story of Jeremiah recording on a scroll his prophecies predicting Babylon’s downfall—a symbolic action that clearly bears seeds of hope for the Judean exiles (50:59-64). In the intervening chapters, we read of Jeremiah sending letters to the exiles in Babylon aimed at dispelling despair and engendering hope (29:1-32). At the command of the Lord, Jeremiah prepares a “book of comfort,” which takes dead aim at heartache and hopelessness (30:1-31:37). Days before the Babylonian invasion, God instructs Jeremiah to preserve written documentation of the real estate transaction that testifies to future restoration, so the story goes (32:6-44).

Perhaps the best-known example of the shift from spoken to written prophecy is the confrontation between King Jehoiakim and Jeremiah in Jer 36. In the narrative account, Jeremiah dictates the word of the Lord to Baruch, who reads it before Jehoiakim. The king in turn destroys the scroll, only to have Jeremiah create another one, which contains “all the words of the scroll that King Jehoiakim of Judah had burned in the fire and many similar words” (36:32). When all is said and done, the seemingly innocuous scroll trumps the king. In the new epoch, hope and renewal rest firmly on Yahweh’s written word. In lieu of fallen social and theological systems—a temple, a king, a land and the old privileged status—the scroll, and ultimately the God who stands behind it, now forms the foundation for hope and newness. This word matters even when “shock and awe” campaigns *appear* to render it powerless. (Here I speak for the losers!) This word matters even when we are tempted to domesticate its subversive force. This word matters because it disarms powers and principalities and engenders hope in those suffering from debilitating despair.

6. *Hope emerges in the form of a new spirituality.* The spirituality of the new world enjoys a deeply “personal” texture.¹⁵ While the book of Jeremiah does not promote a piety that divorces the individual from the group—an idea that is clearly modern—it does envisage a community in which individuals enjoy a close relationship with God, where people’s lives and personal affairs matter to God. The “new” relation, described in one place as a “new covenant” (31:31-34) and in another place as an “everlasting covenant” (32:36-44), carries with it the assurance of full acceptance before God (31:34; 33:6-8), divine favor and protection (30:10-11; 32:36-44; 33:1-9), deliverance from captivity (30:10-11, 18-21; 31:7-14, 23-25), joy (30:18-19; 31:3-6), and inner renewal (31:33; 32:39-40).

Unlike the old piety, which emphasized human responsibility, moreover, this new spirituality depends far more on the extraordinary workings of God. The “if” of the divine-human relation takes a back seat to the sovereign and gracious workings of God.¹⁶ Such a shift is absolutely necessary for people whose treasured theologies, ritual, nationalism, and ancestry have all failed. To address these failures, God, in a grand display of mercy, pledges to mend the broken relationship. In a bold and unprecedented move, God promises to inscribe the Torah on the hearts of the women and men who make up Israel. (The Church would do well to remember that it is a latecomer in receiving these promises of God.) This internalization of divine instruction empowers victims of exile to love and obey God, and it enables them to break out of a vicious cycle of guilt and failure. The cornerstone of the new spirituality is divine forgiveness. Indeed, the new divine-human relationship hinges on God’s resolve to “forgive [their] iniquity and remember [their] sin no more” (31:34). Refugees laden with guilt are granted clemency and let off the hook. Only then can the dispirited find the emotional energy to face the challenges of the new world order.

7. *Hope is found within the context of worship.* Some scholars have made a plausible case for the liturgical character of sections of Jeremiah.¹⁷ I wonder if the Oracles against the Nations (OAN) in Jer 46-51 do not belong to this category (see also Amos 1-2, Isa 13-23, and Ezek 25-32). It seems to me that this literature, especially the oracles against Babylon, may emanate from Israel’s public worship rather than elsewhere in the social world of ancient Judaism. Using language of warfare, the worshipping community would reenact God’s victory over oppressive regimes and celebrate God’s reign on earth. Affirmations of divine sovereignty surely signal hope for the world. But the OAN do even more!

As the Jewish refugees assembled in the synagogues of Babylon to glorify God and confess their faith in the reign of God, something quite exquisite took place: their vision improved to 20/20 and they could see clearly that worldly power is not ultimate reality, that Babylonian domination is not the final word, and that God acts on behalf of those who have been devastated by loss. If the OAN are in fact liturgy-like or “guerilla theater,” a term Brueggemann has used to describe other texts of resistance,¹⁸ then the book of Jeremiah concludes with a liturgical act of holy defiance (cf. Rom 12:1-2).

This is a different understanding of worship for many of us because it is the script of the marginal and poor. Here worship reenacts the fall of the powerful, without resorting to physical violence; it rejects oppressive politics as normative; and it says “no” to despair and inertia. This kind of worship sees through sinful social and political

systems and in response creates its own matrix of justice and mercy. It ennoble the people of God to protest and dissent, ridicule and revel, and to imagine a counter world order, which often materializes in social change. For the exiles in Babylon and for exiles today, such worship is anything but boring or innocuous; it is a dangerous and subversive “weapon of hope” that refuses to knuckle under to political aggression and military hardware.

Conclusion

Hope is a rare commodity these days! In fact despair may be one of the most debilitating diseases of our time. It is palpable, and it is everywhere. Jeremiah provides an alternative script to despair, after 587 and after 9/11 in New York City, Washington, D.C., Baghdad, Belfast, and elsewhere. The prophetic book intends to inspire hope in those whose lives have been ransacked by loss. Not the kind of hope that imagines a return to the world as it was, but one that generates faith and courage to live through the shaking of earth and heaven. Hope that is rooted in suffering and that calls for open hands and open hearts! Hope that exists on the edge and not the center. Hope that springs forth when people are let off the hook. Hope in action, building genuine community. And hope that emanates from the scriptures and comes alive in worship. In sum, the book of Jeremiah is a map of hope for the vulnerable and needy. It is a word for our troubled lives!¹⁹

Notes

¹ See, e.g., the many references to September 11, 2001, in the recent issue of *Word & World* 22/4 (Fall 2002), which is devoted to the Book of Jeremiah.

² Walter Brueggemann, “Conversations Among Exiles,” *Christian Century* (July 2-9, 1997): 630.

³ See, e.g., Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

⁴ Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah*. Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 3; note also his article “Jeremiah. Prophet of Hope,” in *Review and Expositor* 78 (1981): 345-63.

⁵ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 350-352.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah. Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998); see also *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 29-31.

⁷ See Kathleen M. O'Connor, “Surviving Disaster in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Word & World* 4/22 (2202): 369-377.

⁸ Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah as Symbolic Tapestry* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 56-98; 137-166.

⁹ Louis Stulman, *Order Amid Chaos*, 23-55.

¹⁰ Ronald E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, 180.

¹¹ See Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination*, see esp. 1-7, 10-47.

¹² Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria, 1972). This is the first edition of Nouwen's work with marvelous photographs by Ron P. Van Den Bosch and Theo Robert.

¹³ See Henri Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, nd), 22.

¹⁴ An incisive treatment of the conditions of the diasporic community in Babylon can be found in Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile: Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002).

¹⁵ For a provocative anthology on hope in action, see *Hope for the World: Mission in a Global Context*, edited by Walter Brueggemann (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

¹⁶ For a critical analysis of personal religion, especially as it appears in second millennium Mesopotamian texts, see Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), 145-164.

¹⁷ See T. A. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977).

¹⁸ E.g., H. G. Reventlow, *Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia* (Gtersloh: Gtersloher, 1966); see also M. E. Biddle, *Polyphony and Symphony in Prophetic Literature. Rereading Jeremiah 7-20*. Studies in Old Testament Interpretation 2. (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Ichabod Towards Home: The Journey of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001); *A Commentary on Jeremiah*, 418-424. See also Louis Stulman, *Jeremiah*. Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, forthcoming).

² This essay, which I first presented at Columbia Theological Seminary's Colloquium, "Shaking Earth and Heaven: Bible, Church, and the Changing Social Order," is given in grateful friendship to Walter Brueggemann, whose many words, both written and spoken, have been an oasis on the journey.