

Jeremiah as Ideal Survivor

Kathleen M. O'Connor

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

Recently after receiving news of the dire illness of a most beloved family member, I began to imagine within myself the presence of a jar of water, a bottle of tears filled to the brim. I did not look for this image, it just showed up, and then one day when I was taking a walk, it moved. Involuntarily, I imagined myself offering it to God, holding up the jar to unseen mystery, not for a reprieve, not for anything but as an act of worship, somehow being absorbed into the “fountain of living waters.” Maybe that image arose from thinking the day before about the “fountain of living waters” (Jer 2:13; John 4:10) or from watching a friend collect jars to preserve late summer tomatoes. Wherever it came from, that brief inner experience has both surprised and steadied me, and for the moment, at least, opened my spirit to what will come. In my imagination, it joined me and my family to the Paschal mystery, though I can hardly explain it.

I think the telling of Jeremiah’s life in that big, complicated book named after him, worked in a similar, steadying way for its early readers who lived in the midst of disaster. A disaster is much more than sad or tragic events. It is a situation of collapse where people lack the necessary material or spiritual resources to get on with their lives.¹ In the sixth century B. C. E., the Judean people survived three Babylonian invasions, had their land occupied by the invaders, and some were deported. They lost loved ones, routines of daily life, government structures. The ancient covenant traditions that connected them with God were broken to pieces. God who dwelled with them on Mount Zion had turned against them.

The effects of brute violence and destruction upon individuals and communities are to destroy speech, to isolate people in their traumatic state, to leave them overloaded with pain in mute despair. The book of Jeremiah is utterly preoccupied with the disaster; every poem, story, or sermon anticipates or addresses it in some way. In the process, it creates poetic and symbolic language to help traumatized survivors speak of their suffering and to begin to interpret it, cope with it, and to endure through it until that new day when life might again appear among them. One way it does this is by telling Jeremiah’s life as the story of the “ideal survivor.” Of course, Hosea talks of his marriage and family (Hos 1), and the book of Isaiah presents episodes about his life (Isa 7:1-25; 37-39), but the book of Jeremiah does more. It relates events of the prophet’s life from birth to his disappearance in Egypt at the end of his ministry.

Double Vision

By telling Jeremiah’s life, the book puts forward a flesh and blood figure with whom readers can identify.² His struggles render visible and human their own sorrow, anger, and contradictions, and in doing so, his life summons them to come to grips with their reality. Of course, things are not simple because Jeremiah is more than a mere survivor of disaster. He is also a prophet whose suffering is largely caused by the very people whose lives he embodies. But as a rich symbolic figure, his life straddles two opposing hermeneutical directions. To interpret his stories requires a kind of double vision not to blur his prophetic identity but to expand its meanings. On one level,

Jeremiah is separate from the community. His suffering is unique to his role as a prophet who stands against and indicts his own people.³ On another level, he embodies their fate and the ethical behavior they need for survival.⁴ The telling of Jeremiah's life evokes lives of survivors, and although his suffering comes from the community's resistance to God's word, the shapes and patterns of that suffering match theirs.

Jeremiah's Bodily Deprivations and Pain

Even as a courageous and persistent prophet, Jeremiah is not a hero of epic proportions. He is an anguished figure, a kind of anti-hero, wounded, isolated, and broken like the community in the grip of disaster. His celibacy, for example, makes personal the fate of the nation that has seen in war and occupation the disruption of ordinary domestic life result from war and occupation. Jeremiah both prophesies and lives that disrupted existence when God will banish the "voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of bridegroom or the voice of the bride" (16:9). God forbids him to take a wife or beget children because the children of Judah will die of disease, perish by sword and famine, and their bodies will become food for birds and animals (16:1-4). Children and ordinary life have already perished among the book's readers.

Jeremiah suffers in his body what the community suffers in the long course of the national disaster. Enemies capture him multiple times (20:1-6; 26:1-24; 37:11-21; 38:1-6), attack him (11:18-19, 21-23; 20:1-6; 26:1-24), and forcefully exile him to Egypt (chaps 42-44). The first story of his captivity ironically occurs in the Temple where the High Priest Pashur strikes him, imprisons him in the stocks, and then releases him (20:1-6). Jeremiah uses this occasion to announce the captivity and exile of the priest and his friends, explicitly joining his experience with theirs even though the two have different causes. His next captivity a mob threatens his life and puts him on trial for preaching the Temple Sermon (26:1-24; cf., 7:1-15). In this episode, the prophet acknowledges his captivity with seeming equanimity. "But as for me, here I am in your hands, do with me as seems right to you," (26:14). He warns his enemies that if they put him to death, they will bring a curse upon themselves. In this precarious situation, he models quiet acceptance of captivity and then inexplicably escapes with his life (26:24).

Jeremiah survives all of his captivities. Two take place while the Babylonians are attacking Jerusalem. During the siege, King Zedekiah imprisons Jeremiah. Officials beat him, starve him, and threaten his existence (chaps 37-38). In the second of the two stories, officials let him down by ropes into an empty cistern to die (38:4-6). There he sinks in the mud, to the lowest point of hopelessness, the place of death and abandonment. This particular moment of Jeremiah's suffering at the hands of his own people parallels the people's fate at the hands of the Babylonians. They too are deprived of food, held captive, and mired in the mud of death and abandonment. With help from unlikely people, however, Jeremiah surprisingly survives both episodes. In the first case, the king orders Jeremiah's captors to feed him, and in the second, the African servant Ebed-melek takes the initiative to rescue by lifting him up from the pit. These survival stories and most of the book, with a few exceptions, (e.g., chaps 30-33) promise readers very little. A repeated refrain across the latter part of the book offers the meager possibility that some will gain their "lives as the booty of war" (21:9; 38:2; 39:18; 45:5). To win your life as the booty of war means that your life is all you have. You are a survivor, no more and no less. To recognize this reality offers survivors the

basic ingredient necessary for rebuilding their life together, knowledge of their true condition.

Interpreters frequently puzzle over the absence of information about Jeremiah's death, but the book's silence leaves his life story open-ended, filled with possibility for the unknown future. Jeremiah's survival is of the greatest import for the people. He must survive and endure in exile, for so must they, even up to seventy years for those who are in Babylon (29:10). Jeremiah's endurance in bleak captivity parallels that reality. Stories of Jeremiah's captivity and survival (26:24; 36:19; 37: 21; 38:7-12; see also 40:1-6) powerfully enact experiences of the book's readers, and they promote hope that Jeremiah's survival will be repeated in their own lives on some future day.

Jeremiah's Laments and Communal Suffering

Jeremiah's "confessions" (11:8-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-14) express the painful spiritual quandaries of survivors. The title, "weeping prophet," fits Jeremiah not only because he urges readers to "weep and wail" (9:10) and calls for the mourning women to help the effort (9:17-22), but also because he weeps and wails himself. His prayers use disconcerting first-person language characteristic of lament psalms. That means these are liturgical pieces, suited for public performance, available for communal prayer and specifically suited to survivors of trauma and disaster. But the first person speech of the confessions does more than mark the genre. It establishes Jeremiah as one who suffers like the community. It crystallizes in one anguished voice experiences of grief that lie dormant or denied among survivors. It portrays Jeremiah's inner life as a world of loss, betrayal, and the collapse of meaning, even as it also depicts a life of burning fidelity.

Jeremiah's confessions set before God his complaints about mortal threats against him. He names himself victim of violence, "like a lamb led to the slaughter," schemed against, attacked by enemies who want to "cut him off from the land of the living," and betrayed by members of his own family (11:18-19, 21; 12:6). His troubled relationship with God shows tormenting doubt that echoes the community's loss of confidence in divine justice. He accuses God of violently overpowering him, betraying him, and leaving him to his suffering (20:7). He calls God "a deceitful brook, like waters that fail" (15:18). He begs God to heal and save him (17:14) and to give him justice against his enemies (18:19-21). He wants his persecutors to be shamed, dismayed, and destroyed "with double destruction" (18:18). He longs for God's "retribution upon them" (20:12). The turbulence of this inner life functions publicly to embrace the doubts, fear, and rage of the community.

When God responds with words of assurance to the first two confessions, the assurance expands to embrace the needs of the community (12:5-6 and 15:19-21). "If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses?" Things will get worse between the "safe land" and "the thickets of Jordan" (12:5). Jeremiah must endure through accelerating hard times ahead. Curiously, God calls Jeremiah to repent, though of what he should repent is not clear. "If you turn back and then I will take you back and you will stand before me" (15:19-20). Whatever these words mean for Jeremiah, they raise to the attention of the surviving community a major theme of the book, the call to "return." "Return, O faithless children, and I will bring you to Zion" (3:6-4:4).

At the end of his life story, all Jeremiah has gained is his life, but his behavior offers

language of new social definition.⁵ He is the ideal wounded survivor, the personal embodiment of the fate of his people and their possible future. His life provides them with a visible representation of their experience. His life comforts because it expresses “the abyss” into which the people have been flung.⁶ It signals to them that they are neither alone nor isolated in their suffering. It creates a language with which they can begin to speak of their own trauma. His prayers show them how to live with God in the midst of their anger, loss, and sense of betrayal.

Virtues For Survivors

As the ideal survivor, Jeremiah exemplifies behaviors and attitudes the community must practice to reconstitute itself as God’s covenanted people. These virtues give them an orientation toward God and the world that pushes them into the process of restoration and healing.

Jeremiah’s Engagement with God

Jeremiah abides for his entire life in God’s presence in the midst of fury, betrayal, and bereavement. Jeremiah and God were connected from “before the womb” (1:5). In the Hebrew idiom of intimacy, God “knew” him and appointed him before he was born. From the beginning, Jeremiah wants to avoid suffering and tries to refuse his calling. “Ah, Lord God, truly I do not know how to speak for I am only a boy” (1:6). Although his mission is to announce the disaster to come and although he will suffer for it, God is with him to deliver him (1:8). The encouraging assurance that God will make him “a fortified city, an iron pillar, and a bronze wall” (1:18), often thought to refer only to the prophet, has resonances for an occupied people. Even as nations fight against them, YHWH is with them.

Jeremiah engages with God at every turn, and most evidently in the confessions (11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-14). Despite attacks on his life (11:18, 21-23; 12:6; 20:10), his isolation from others (15:17), his sense of abandonment by his community, and, above all, by God (12:1; 15:18; 20:7), he stubbornly keeps the conversation open. Both his confessions and his call portray him as a mystic, a contemplative, one utterly united with God, one who knows God, communes with God, and argues with God. God seduces, rapes, and bullies him (20:7-13), yet Jeremiah stays in conversation no matter what.

More than anything else, the confessions are about that continuing connection. In passionate wrestling and searing truth-telling, Jeremiah clings to God. Of course, this intimate relationship is the fiery source of his unique role as prophet. His loyalty in the thick of devastation stands as a counterpoint to the behavior of the community whom he accuses of abandoning YHWH for other gods (chaps 1-20, especially 2:1-4:2). Yet for those who read Jeremiah’s story with double vision, his life becomes iconic, emblematic, a model of how readers should live into and through the disaster around them. His life encourages them to live as wounded, enraged contemplatives, engaged with God at every turn, even while his fragile life seems about to end, and even as God has abandoned him and them. Jeremiah’s struggles with God are an expression of his loyalty.

Trust

Jeremiah’s scuffles with God in the cauldron of his suffering summon Judean

survivors to recall their pre-disaster identity when they knew they were God's chosen. Their trust is broken because the God who promised to dwell with them in Zion appears to have utterly abandoned them. Yet God is with Jeremiah, and he with God in painful wrangling and dramatic arguments. Like Jeremiah, the survivors should be utterly and completely given over to God. This is their only hope, their only security, and the only way forward. In his last confession, Jeremiah finally proclaims trust in God: "The Lord is with me like a dread warrior, therefore my persecutors will stumble and they will not prevail" (20:11). If the people cling to God with the tenacity and daring of the prophet, then their relationship with God will be rekindled and they will be reconstituted as a community of God's covenanted people.

Resistance

Because his loyalty to God undermines and overrides any other loyalty, Jeremiah resists the political power of his nation's rulers, monarchical (37-38) and religious (27-28). And because his loyalty to God shapes his understanding of political and international relations, he sides with enemy Babylon and urges survivors to do the same. In his letter to the exiles, he pleads with them to accept their exile, to cooperate with their captors, and to live with them in peace for the long haul. Build houses, take wives from the Babylonians, seek the shalom of the city (29:7). For the Judean community to survive into the future, the people must accept their condition, cope with it, and find life in it.

Jeremiah's courage to resist spurious patriotism and false nationalism comes from his loyalty to YHWH who alone governs the nations. He has courage to oppose kings, government officials, other prophets, priest, elders, and any human leader who stands against God's plans. For most of Judean officialdom, Jeremiah was a traitor, a heretic, and great disturber of the peace (see 29:24-32). Every effort was made to silence him, from burning his prophetic scroll (Jer 36) to imprisoning and attacking him (Jer 20:1-6; 38-38). Yet he objects vehemently to all political and international relationships that identify God's cause exclusively with his nation's well-being. His political stance is pro-Babylonian propaganda, but for survivors it is a wise, theologically grounded position to keep them alive under the heel of an overwhelming empire.

Spirit of Cooperation

Jeremiah survives because others help him. The stories about his captivity and survival exhibit a spirit of cooperation, or at least, show Jeremiah benefiting from interventions by others from inside and outside the community, from officials and foreigners. He is the spokesman for a community of resisters and a party of pro-Babylonian Judeans. Ahikam, son of Shaphan, mysteriously rescues him after his trial (26:24). King Jehoiakim's officials save Baruch and Jeremiah from the king's wrath by counseling them to hide before Jeremiah's scroll is read to the king (36:11-19). Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian slave of the king, rescues Jeremiah from the cistern (36:7-13; 39:11-18). Implicit in these stories is a call for a spirit of openness and a willingness to find God's rescuing work in cooperation with others. Like Jeremiah, exilic survivors must also seek alliances with others, for Babylon's shalom is their shalom (29:7).

Ultimately, of course, it is God who "rescues the needy," God who is the "dread warrior" who prevails against enemies (20:11-13). Absolute loyalty to God remains

the central virtue for survivors. “When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart, I will let you find me...and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you.... I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile,” so the letter to the exiles urges (29:13-14).

The book of Jeremiah creates a “persona,” an impressionistically told literary account of a life that transcends itself in meaning and power. The prophet’s life is like a bottle of tears and a testimony to brokenness. It is also an angry cry for divine justice and a symbol of survival. As a fellow survivor, he negotiates the shoals of attack, occupation, and exile. In the midst of chaos, he weeps, rages, and doubts God’s fidelity and just governance of the world. He is the ideal survivor whose life embodies God’s word for his devastated people.

Perhaps these strange stories about a suffering prophet surprised and steadied the book’s readers in their immense sorrow and confusion. Perhaps stories of Jeremiah’s endurance gave them energy to endure, opened them to the future, and revealed a way forward in their life together with God. In our treacherous, deceitful times, the telling of Jeremiah’s life challenges us to live contemplative lives, to root our politics in loyalty to God above nation or any other human group, and to open our hearts and minds to peoples living in disasters of our making and otherwise.

Notes

1. Daniel Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001).
2. See Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile & Homecoming* (Grand Rapids: William. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 11-12.
3. Terence E. Fretheim, “Caught in the Middle: Jeremiah’s Vocational Crisis,” *Word & World* 4/22 (Fall 2002): 351-60.
4. See Heinz Kremers, “Ledensgemeinschaft mit Gott im Alten Testament,” *EvT* 13 (1953 122-40). This old article in German speaks about the importance of Jeremiah’s suffering, though it has unfortunate Christological intentions.
5. James Boyd White, *When Words Lose Their Meaning: Constitutions and Reconstitutions of Language, Character, and Community* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 72.
6. Walter Brueggemann, “Meditation upon the Abyss: The Book of Jeremiah,” *Word & World* (Fall 2002): 340-50.