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# Jeremiah 7 and the Stories We Tell

JASON BEMBRY

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It should come as no surprise to most of us that many Americans have a disinterest in, or a certain ambivalence toward, history. Such an observation was noted earlier on in our nation's existence by the visiting Frenchman, Alexis de Tocqueville. When speaking of democratic ideals in general and America in particular de Tocqueville says,

Not only does democracy make every man forget his ancestors, but it hides his descendants and separates his contemporaries from him; it throws him back forever upon himself alone, and threatens in the end to confine him entirely within the solitude of his own heart.<sup>1</sup>

Downplaying the importance of our past is part of the American psyche that serves existential and collective purposes. Think of all the people who have come to America to escape their past. America in some ways constituted a new start, a way to transcend their own history and the history of their family. They could start anew, as it were, and make a new life for themselves, a life supposedly free of the burdens of history. Some of this ambivalence about history can be seen in the Stone-Campbell Movement, in the primitivist identification with first century-Christianity, as noted by Hughes.<sup>2</sup> There were assumptions, seen in the work of Alexander Campbell, that everyday people could transcend the post-apostolic history so fraught with corruption and return the ancient order of things.<sup>3</sup> I would like us to think about the stories we tell that form and shape us as Americans in the twenty-first century. I am inviting us to recover from our ambivalence toward history and to be healed of our historical amnesia. Doing so is a healthy step, since it is only when we know our history and are able to talk about it openly and transparently, aware of our all too human penchant to embrace self-serving cultural myths, that we are able to know ourselves. Such a perspective is addressed by the prophet Jeremiah in Jeremiah 7, often referred to as the "temple sermon."

## **JEREMIAH'S TEMPLE SERMON**

In this brief sermon Jeremiah speaks the word of God to chide his audience for failing to live out orthodox Yahwism in their day-to-day practices, even though they maintain the sanctity of the temple and hallow it as "the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." He invites them to travel to a place called Shiloh in order to understand Yahweh's perspective on temple precincts. This call to visit Shiloh is a call to remember their collective past. Jeremiah is exhorting the people to remember what God had done in a similar situation, a memory that was probably considered best forgotten in many circles in Israel, given its relatively sparse treatment in the text as we now have it.

That prophets function as historians was nothing new in the traditions of Israel by the time of Jeremiah. Hosea, with whom Jeremiah clearly resonated,<sup>4</sup> is a veritable annotated history of Israel, reminding the people of "the days of Gibeah" (Hos 9.9 and 10.9), the problem with the Baal of Peor (Hos 9.10), and

1. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Part II, book 2, ed. Richard D. Heffner (New York: Signet Classic, 2001), 27.

2. Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 14.

3. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 168.

4. Jack R. Lundbom, "Jeremiah," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol III (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 687.

the sin of Jezreel (Hos 1.4–5). “The days of Gibeah” refers to a time when an outrage led to civil war against Benjamin, narrated in Judges 19–21.<sup>5</sup> The incident at Baal-Peor harkens back to an early story recounted in Numbers 25.<sup>6</sup> The sin of Jezreel probably refers to the bloody work of Jehu detailed in 2 Kings 9.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps to be included here are the writings of the Deuteronomistic Historian (writer of Joshua through 2 Kings), and select Pentateuchal sources detailing the historical warts of Israel’s past alluded to by these prophetic texts.

Jeremiah’s imperative to go to Shiloh is a way to remind the people that Yahweh will not protect his sanctuary at all costs. This was a timely message for the people of God as they approached the end of the seventh century B.C.E., since Jerusalem in general and the temple in particular were assumed by many to be unassailable. A touch of irony is perhaps seen in the role the ark of the covenant (upon which Yahweh was enthroned) played at Shiloh in the early formulation of Zion theology (the name given by scholars to the popular assumption that Zion, the place God resided, was invincible). As Levenson has noted, it is quite likely that the traditions that developed around the ark provided the basis for the early Zion traditions. Once the ark was housed in the Jerusalem temple, these two sets of traditions were easily merged.<sup>8</sup> So yet again, the significance of Shiloh as a prominent place for the development of theology proper in the Israelite tradition finds resonance in Jeremiah’s words. Zion’s special unassailable status probably assimilated earlier traditions about Mt. Sinai.<sup>9</sup> This transformation may have been aided by older Jebusite mythology, traditions created by the people from whom David wrested his soon-to-be capital city.<sup>10</sup> That David purchased a threshing floor from Araunah the Jebusite is perhaps further indication of a putative connection between the traditions of Zion and those of the Jebusites.<sup>11</sup> During Isaiah’s day, the notion of Zion’s inviolability was augmented by the Assyrian king Sennacherib’s failure to remove the Judahite king Hezekiah in 701 B.C.E. It is easy to imagine how such an unlikely outcome in the face of one of the great superpowers of the day would have bolstered the notions of Zion’s invincibility. Such an unlikely victory surely played a profoundly important role in the psychological self-understanding of the citizens of Judah in the eighth-seventh centuries B.C.E. Such is the context within which Jeremiah begins his prophetic ministry.

### MESSAGE OF THE SERMON

The message of Jeremiah’s temple sermon is an indictment of an assumed implication of Zion theology—the temple’s unassailability. It is a call for the people to remember the days of yore when Shiloh was a cult center for Israel, housing the palladium—the ark of the covenant. Though the destruction of Shiloh is not specifically documented in the Old Testament, it is assumed to have occurred after the battle at Aphek, where the ark is captured by the Philistines and taken to their pentapolis.<sup>12</sup> Despite the relative silence of the biblical texts regarding its demise, there is scholarly consensus that Shiloh was destroyed in the mid-eleventh century B.C.E., as suggested in 1 Samuel 4.<sup>13</sup> What is of great interest for our purposes is the connection Jeremiah himself has with Shiloh. There is good evidence to suggest that Jeremiah comes from a priestly family connected with the Elide line of priests who were expelled under Solomon in 1 Kings 2.26–27, a text that explicitly connects this expulsion to the events at Shiloh under Eli’s authority. Hilkiyah, Jeremiah’s father, is a priest at Anathoth, suggesting that he could likely be a descendant of Abiathar.<sup>14</sup>

A further connection between Jeremiah’s ministry and this priestly line is seen in the clear and unmistakable appropriations of traditions about Moses; the connection the line of Eli has with Moses has

5. A. A. MacIntosh, *Hosea* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 412.

6. MacIntosh, 363.

7. MacIntosh, 16–17.

8. Jon Levenson, “Zion Traditions,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol VI (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1101.

9. Jon Levenson, *Sinai and Zion; An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 89–92.

10. John Hayes, “The Traditions of Zion’s Inviolability” *JBL* 82 (1963): 423–424.

11. Levenson, “Zion Traditions,” 1101.

12. William Holladay, *Jeremiah* vol 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 247.

13. Israel Finkelstein, “Excavations at Shiloh, 1981–1984” *Tel Aviv* 12 (1985): 173–174.

14. Lundbom, 686.

long been suggested by a number of scholars.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, Samuel the prophet, who has deep roots with the house of Eli at Shiloh, looms large in the ministry of Jeremiah.<sup>16</sup> If we grant these connections, both familial and traditional, between Jeremiah and the Elide priestly line, we will see the sermon in chapter 7 in an entirely different light. Not only is Jeremiah transparently honest about the unpleasant history of his people as a whole, he is willing to be transparent about his own family. He is willing to remind the people of a time when the sanctuary was destroyed, the sanctuary staffed by his ancestors. What could possibly motivate a prophet to tell this kind of story about his own kin with that level of honesty? I suggest that such a stance is what makes this sermon carry such profundity. Jeremiah was able to speak with such authority because virtually everyone knew that this story was deeply rooted in his own house. Jeremiah's willingness to lay bare his family's own woes constitutes a unique platform from which to speak to the people on God's behalf.

### THE POWER OF MYTH

When we move to consider how Jeremiah's words can speak to us today, it seems that America too possesses assumptions analogous to seventh century B.C.E. Judah. We too believe certain things about invincibility and we embrace certain cultural myths that serve our own interests. To give a few examples of how powerful myth can be, I offer a widely held assumption about skin color and phenotype. Years ago, many jazz critics suggested that although black people like Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong were great jazz innovators, the musical genre was best refined by white musicians like Bix Beiderbecke and Frankie Trumbauer. When we deconstruct those comments, we can scratch beneath the surface and probably see mere white Eurocentric power and privilege applied to the explanation of the origins of jazz. No modern jazz critic would accept such an explanation of jazz's roots today.<sup>17</sup> Yet it takes a telling of the story truthfully and transparently to allow the real story to emerge. It takes courage to engage what Cornel West has called the "nightside of our existence," the times when we have not lived up to the small-d-democratic ideals, when we as a nation have expressed hypocrisy, bigotry, indifference to the world's plight, and antipathy toward those at society's margins.<sup>18</sup> Having the conversation about the roots of jazz may help us to see the deeper narrative of race relations and the way in which Stone-Campbell churches have been relatively silent in the face of such inescapable realities.

As it is true in music criticism, it is true in healthcare. How many Americans assume that if we make healthcare more accessible to more of our citizens, the quality of healthcare we receive will be diminished? The correlating tacit assumption to this position is that the United States currently has the best system of healthcare, even though the data belie this.<sup>19</sup> In recent years we spent 14.6% of our GDP on healthcare while Germany spent 10.9%, France spent 9.7%, Canada spent 9.6%, Japan spent 7.8% and the United Kingdom spent 7.7%. What is interesting is that we are far below all of these countries in life expectancy rates, while we also have the highest infant mortality rate.<sup>20</sup> We people of the church have to seek to shatter those myths perennially in order to have the requisite conversations that challenge those deeply held untruths. We may have to learn from other sources concerning America's historical tapestry. We may have to open our ears to rap artists who clearly have a different point of view than many mainstream voices. We may have to listen to the stories they and many others tell so as to embrace an authentic retelling of the narrative.<sup>21</sup> We may have

15. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1973), 208.

16. Lundbom, 687.

17. Stanley Crouch, *Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 212.

18. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 10.

19. The United States has hovered between 41<sup>st</sup> and 30<sup>th</sup> place on infant mortality in the last ten years. See the CNN article available at <http://www.cnn.com/2006/HEALTH/parenting/05/08/mothers.index/index.html> See also statistics at <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/rankorder/2091rank.html>

20. According to the United States Census Bureau data from 2000, life expectancy in the United States is currently at 77.1 years, but the United Kingdom's is 77.7, Japan's is 80.7, Italy's is 79.0, Israel's is 78.6, Germany's is 77.4, France's is 78.8 and Canada's is 79.4.

21. A fine example of what I have in mind is Adam Cohen's op-ed piece, "What the History of Memorial Day Teaches about Honoring the War Dead," *New York Times*, May 28, 2007, p.18 (A).

to muster the courage to tell the truth about ourselves and our families and our culture. Although there is always a risk of receiving pejorative labels, the purpose is not to promulgate white guilt, self-hatred, or even *exposé*. Certain emotions cannot be avoided and, to be sure, some toes will be trodden. The aim is not to embrace PC chitchat where we address issues in an attempt to look progressive or culturally sensitive. The storytelling embodied in Jeremiah does not seek such ends in themselves. The goal is to tell the truth about God's work in the world, sometimes in keeping with our best efforts and sometimes despite them.

This is obviously a difficult enterprise that I am suggesting. K. Barth has cautioned about the impulse Christians have as we recount our past, saying, "We must not allow ourselves to be confused by the fact that the history of Christianity can be written only as a story of the distress which it makes for itself."<sup>22</sup> Even so, where else are we going to have these interactions? Where else will there be widespread transparency in safe, loving environments? To be sure, it *can* be done outside churches, and it is being done. Why can't we be at the vanguard of such a movement? Why can't we lead the way, with Jeremiah 7 in our heads and hearts?

### CONCLUSION

A few weeks ago I went with my boys to see Disney's *Meet the Robinsons*, and I was reminded of just how relevant this discussion from Jeremiah is. The film is a story about a boy whose biological mother left him at an orphanage when he was merely an infant; he goes on to being adopted. There are a number of subtle comments in the movie about how one ought to view the past. Phrases like "leave the past behind" or some similar sentiment are placed on the lips of wise counsel in the film. The film focuses on the future with the characteristically American optimistic outlook. This perspective, of course, serves the needs of the main protagonist, whose past is troubling because of his feeling of abandonment by his mother. Yet most telling is the commentary at the end, where on a black screen the words appear: "We at Disney don't spend a lot of time thinking about the past," followed by a comment about their future-oriented positive outlook. While I want to avoid the assumption that Disney is a spokesman for American culture, I suspect that the viewpoint encoded in these messages reflects a widespread worldview in the United States. Like the central character in this movie, historical amnesia has served the needs of many who have attempted to escape the past for whatever reason. This myopia continues to bedevil us today, and constitutes a formidable obstacle to truth telling and authentic introspection. If we are to continue to be a peculiar people, walking in the prophetic tradition and trying to follow God in our churches, should we not be cutting against the cultural grain in this regard? The great southern writer William Faulkner wrote in *Requiem for a Nun* the memorable line, "The past is never dead, it is not even past." I suspect that the more we peer into the well of our own history we will discover that Faulkner is right. Jeremiah's invitation—the word of God calling the people to revisit the troubling past—will remind us of who we are and what we are capable of, just as it probably did for the faithful Judahites of his day. So historical amnesia, while culturally ensconced in twenty-first century-America, is not an incurable condition. A good dose of historical introspection and transparency is just what the good doctor ordered.

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22. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. I, Part 2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 337.