

1-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Robarts, Charme (2007) "It Took Me By Surprise," *Leaven*: Vol. 15: Iss. 4, Article 8.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol15/iss4/8>

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It Took Me by Surprise

CHARME ROBARTS

Threads of surprising news run through the fabric of the Jeremiah texts. Surprises whether good or bad have the common effect of awakening senses and arresting business-as-usual.

YHWH is surprised about the failed relationship with Judah. Judah is taken back by surprising news of YHWH's/Jeremiah's announcement that they, the people of God, were mistaken about their identity, or more correctly, mistaken about the implications of that identity for their relationship with YHWH. Judah's apparent surprise that there is a problem is exceeded by YHWH's incredulity over the situation. Jeremiah also must deal with the unpleasant surprise of his commission to speak of the coming disasters this failed relationship will bring. Readers enter the fray experiencing the unsettling nature of these surprises, and find even more to come as YHWH's powerful emotions move between anger and agony. Finally, the experience of judgment leaves Judah in a deep abyss of despair—a surprising environment for hope to grow.

IDENTITY ISSUES

The picture of the faithful bride following her husband receives slight attention in the opening speech of Jeremiah 2, with the rhetoric quickly moving to descriptions of unfaithfulness. In the subsequent chapters, the weight of attention focused on unfaithfulness—in contrast with the fleeting mention of the days when Israel followed YHWH as a bride follows her husband—signals the real situation between the two. Judah apparently felt that the ring, the bridal gown, and the ceremony made the relationship. YHWH had greater expectations.

A cursory glance through the early chapters shows the intensity of the identity struggle. Jeremiah lodges numerous accusations that spell out charges of Judah's unfaithfulness: the people have strayed away from YHWH to follow worthless idols and they have become worthless like their gods (2.5), their priests do not know the Lord (2.8), and the people have forsaken the Lord (2.13). The broad social implications of these charges are made clear in 5.21–28, where the rhetoric moves along familiar lines of prophetic speech:

- The people have eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear (like their gods).
- The people do not fear the Lord.
- Their hearts are stubborn.
- The people do not care for the orphans and poor.
- Their prophets lie and their priests abuse authority.

Here covenantal identity and community life are inextricably joined. To forget YHWH is to forget ethical living. To reject YHWH is to reject social structures that create life. A community cannot be good without remembrance of God. The entire ethical system of Israel's life is rooted in remembering God's just deliverance of these former Egyptian slaves. When Jeremiah recalls YHWH bringing Israel out of Egypt, he is recalling the whole story of deliverance from oppression and the expected response to that divine act of justice and mercy. The response should have been the formation of a community that imitates that same

justice and rejects oppressive systems of government and communal life. Instead Judah is stained with the blood of the innocent poor (2.34), Jerusalem is filled with oppression (6.7), and everyone is greedy for gain (8.10). Jeremiah's language of forgetting, forsaking, straying, failing to see and hear, not knowing the Lord, etc., is shorthand for forgetting not only what God had done for Israel, but also for forgetting the ethical behaviors such memory should effect. Judah's self-understanding was wrong because they did not "know me, that I am the Lord who exercises justice and righteousness on earth" (9.24).

YHWH's passion for the oppressed and the needy runs throughout Israel's history, beginning with the exodus. But Israel does not share this concern. YHWH, through his prophet, charges the people again and again with injustice; the narrative of Jeremiah's personal life reveals how the community leaders treated him unjustly. YHWH will not stand for this forever. The devastation that YHWH eventually brought on Egypt for its unjust treatment of Israel has now come to Israel/Judah's door. YHWH is bringing disaster and destruction—and this, according to the Covenant agreement, was to be expected. YHWH assumes that Judah knows that sin does not go unpunished and that the people should regard the disaster that comes upon them as their own doing (5.24–25; 11.1–8; 25.7; *passim*). But Judah has misread the situation. Clinging to false religious assumptions about the presence of the temple (7.4–12) and relying on the "law of the Lord" handled by false scribes instead of on the word of the Lord (8.8–9) indicate the severity of the problem.

Jeremiah's famous temple sermon states in no uncertain terms that the presence of the temple did not equal relationship with God. Identity as people of God is sealed by the practice of justice and obedience to the Ways. Worship and rhetoric are not enough. Repetition of religious talk—"the temple of the Lord" (7.5)—is met with God's declaration, "I have spoken to you again and again but you did not listen" (7.13). The repetition of words is not the problem; failing to listen for response is. It seems that communication with God is expected to be two-sided. The section ends with God's threat to cast the people from his presence just as he had done to Northern Israel (7.15). This reversal of the accepted beliefs about God's relationship with the people was apparently surprising to them.

Judah's self-understanding then is woefully distorted. Their apparent surprise punctuates these early chapters: "I am innocent," "he is not angry with me," "[the Lord] will do nothing," "the temple of the Lord" (2.35; 3.3; 5.12; 7.4). Judah's understanding of what it meant to be the people of God left them surprised to find themselves turned over to the sword of the Babylonian army.

ANGER AND AGONY

YHWH is also surprised. In chapter 2, descriptions of YHWH as the rejected husband, traded in for idols with no power, are enriched and enhanced by metaphors of living waters exchanged for cisterns that cannot hold water, and, still worse, for the waters of Egypt and Assyria (2.13,18). The imagination goes to the bloody Nile during the days when Moses was negotiating deliverance for the Hebrew slaves. YHWH's explicit question of "why go back" (2.18) is delivered with decided exasperation.

YHWH is taken back with Judah's claims of innocence ("I am not defiled" in 2.23) when the people are undeniably running after false gods. Unflattering images of the people running after gods as animals run in pursuit of mates in heat, and of senseless running until shoes wear out and throats are parched tell the story of people bent on running as fast as they can in the wrong direction. Also, just as a thief gets caught red-handed with evidence in his possession, so God's people are found sending Father's Day cards to idols of wood and stone, in essence saying, "What's the problem?" (2.25–27).

YHWH is surprised and cries out in anguish: "What fault did you find in me?" "I brought you to a fertile land and you defiled it!" "You have as many gods as you have towns," and "My people have forgotten me!" (2.5, 7, 28, 32).

The reader may be surprised by YHWH's agony. But YHWH does not just agonize over being rejected. YHWH also mourns the consequences for beloved Judah. The political crisis that overwhelmed the people of Judah, as they vacillated between allegiance to Egypt and Assyria, would bring them suffering and misery

in spades. Eventually the land would lie in ruins, the temple would be burned to the ground and many of the people deported to Babylon. The violence of these events is graphically described in page after page of the Jeremiah text. At this YHWH is grieved. And again we, and perhaps Judah and the prophet, are surprised by the grief because YHWH claims responsibility for the disasters that befall the homeland.

How is it that God can be angry enough to bring violent judgment and still speak as a weeping husband or father? Why is God so anguished by what God brings about? Attempts to discern whether the speaker of the doom pronouncements is God or the prophet do not ease the difficulty of the stark polarities of God's anger and agony since these two voices bleed together in many places.

Terrence Frethiem argues that God's anger is not, however, incongruous with profound grief and announcement of judgment. His view is that the metaphors of marriage and parent suggest how these emotions are held together in God.¹ God is relational; the covenant which God is now ready to abandon is also relational. But relationship requires two parties. YHWH has held up what has turned out to be a one-sided relationship, yet now will give it up—but reluctantly.

In dramatic flourish, YHWH describes the broken relationship and the ruined cities of Judah in terms of reversal of creation:

I looked at the earth and it was formless and empty
At the heavens and their light was gone
I looked at the mountains and they were quaking...there were no people, every bird in the sky has
flown away (4.23–25).

This is surely an agonizing situation for the One who had pronounced creation “good... very good.” And so God weeps over the devastation. With the surprising sound of a weeping God, the text seeks to persuade the reader to understand the agony and anger of YHWH. YHWH is alternatively announcing judgment and calling for Judah to return/repent. Readers of the text may resonate with one or the other of these possibilities. If one has been mistreated and rejected, she may identify with the anger and judgment of God. If, however, she is oblivious to such suffering, or if she prefers to resist the inconvenient truth of the erosion of life that rejecting God brings, then the compassionate reluctance of YHWH may be the most vivid picture. But the two views are surprisingly held together in the text, neither one allowing the neglect of the other.

Brueggemann notes a startling thing regarding torah. YHWH intimates a willingness to take Judah, the defiled woman back—YHWH is willing to violate torah.² Willingness to contravene torah works in a different direction with the awful picture in chapter 6, where Jerusalem is under siege. YHWH is willing to reverse the intent of gleaning laws of torah—which were for mercy—for the purposes of wrath: “glean the remnant of Israel as thoroughly as a vine; pass your hand over the branches...” (6.9). This is juxtaposed with an earlier allusion to gleaning in chapter 5 where YHWH commands, “go through her vineyards and ravage them, *but do not destroy them completely.*” YHWH's justice requires judgment, but justice includes compassion; so YHWH is torn. The focus shifts from one emotion to the other, sometimes making it difficult to discern between the two. The rhetorical effect of this movement between agony and anger, between willingness to punish and fierce desire not to, draws the reader into the deep emotions of this relational God. We are brought to a shoreline where we experience the most surprising element of the Jeremiah texts—hope emerging from the black river of loss.³

1. Terrence E. Frethiem, “The Character of God in Jeremiah,” in *Character and Scripture: Moral Formation, Community and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. W.P. Brown (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 215. Frethiem engages several other scholars on the implications of mixed theological characterizations.

2. Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25, To Pluck Up, to Tear Down* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1988), 39.

3. From Mary Oliver's poem, “In Blackwater Woods”: “... the black river of loss, whose other side is salvation.”

THE BLACK RIVER OF LOSS

But hope is only meaningful against the backdrop of certain and actual judgment. Though YHWH agonizes and pleads for Judah to return, finally the curses for covenantal disobedience are carried out. Jerusalem is besieged and the people are carried into exile.

YHWH's faithfulness to the covenant, which includes just judgment, is contrasted throughout the book with rampant *injustice* practiced among the people and especially by the prophets, priests and kings. But the judgment scene is hard to bear. The homeland is no longer secure and images of towns burned and deserted move before our eyes (2.13). Grim pictures of captives being marched with hands on their heads from the land they thought would provide refuge are eclipsed by still shots of a woman gasping as she delivers her first child. The shadow of her oppressor looms over her with drawn sword ready to devour her and perhaps the child as well (3.37; 4.31). Adding to this picture of doom is the scenario in which the prophets and priests are cavalier about the wounds of the people. They dress gaping wounds with band-aids and administer cortisone shots, sending them back out on the field saying, "peace, peace, it will be all right" (6.14, 8.11). But things will not be all right. Jerusalem becomes a heap of ruins.

HOPE

Fretheim's explanation, "God mediates judgment so that sin and evil do not go unchecked in the life of the world,"⁴ points out that certain judgment is rooted in God's yearning to save the world from itself. But as Brueggemann states, the book of Jeremiah cannot be understood only in terms of covenant violation and covenant curse.⁵ The powerful love expressed in the agonized words and relentless pleading of YHWH give way to the surprise of God's creation of the new community. The certainty of judgment and the validation of the prophetic word make room for certain hope of restoration.

Just as it is difficult to separate the anger and the agony of God, so it becomes difficult to mark out the path of restoration and repentance. Orthodoxy claims that repentance precedes restoration. But the rhetorical form of Jeremiah is not so linear. Interspersed with pleas for return and demand for repentance are visions of renewal, restoration, and return to the land. Again the interplay of these texts is surprising and serves to heighten the experience of God's merciful decision to restore the nation, and this as a free gift of God's mercy. Repentance would have stayed the hand of God's judgment, but now that judgment is done, God will choose to restore.

Hints of the hope of restoration appear several times, beginning with the charge of Jeremiah's commission not only to uproot and tear down but also to build and to plant (1.10). Interwoven with the prophecies of doom are visions of hope, renewal, and repentance. A few examples include the vision of Jerusalem as the place where all the nations gather to honor the name of the Lord (3.17), God imagining the people confessing sin (3.25), the people recalling the deliverance from the land of the north just as they had once recalled deliverance from Egypt (16.14), and the vision of God raising up a king who would do what is just and right (23.5).

All these hints come to fruition in chapter 30, with the picture of the return to the homeland after the days of exile have ended. The remarkable and surprising reversals pictured in that chapter persuade the reader of the power of YHWH's covenant love that now heals incurable wounds. The need for repentance is not set aside, but the powerful surprise of the creation of the new community with no real evidence of repentance is arresting. Just as YHWH began with Israel through no merit of their own, so YHWH builds and plants among the ruins. Righteousness and justice—absent in the people—burst forth in God, who breaks the yoke of oppression (30.8), saves (30.10–11), heals wounds (30.17), and restores fortunes (30.18). The echoes of covenant language ring out, "So you will be my people and I will be your God" (30.22).

4. Fretheim, "The Character of God in Jeremiah," 213.

5. Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25, To Pluck Up, to Tear Down*, 4.

A question hangs over the text: Will God's surprising mercy bring repentance? Remembering that they have received mercy, will Israel now return home to form communities characterized by mercy and justice? Will they recall Jeremiah's words in the palace of the king: "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood..." (22.3). Will we?

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