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Alternative Visions: Reflections on Jeremiah

MARK W. HAMILTON

“Contrariwise,” continued Tweedledee, “if it was so, it might be; and it if were so, it would be; but as it isn’t, it ain’t. That’s logic.”¹

Besides being the longest book of the Bible, Jeremiah has the distinction of being among the most confusing. Its interweaving of stories and oracles, its steadfast refusal to follow chronological order or an easily discernible thematic outline, and even the existence of two ancient versions of the book (the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint)—all these signal the perplexity awaiting the book’s reader.

Yet behind the glorious muddle of the book lies a comprehensive vision of alternative possibilities open to the people of God. In his violent protests against the elites’ abuse of power, his dismay at the nation’s idolatry, and his discomfort with YHWH’s call, Jeremiah looks behind appearances to discern a different and more hopeful reality. Such a vision distinguishes him from the cynics who have often masqueraded as prophets, in his time and ours. And it allows him to defy Tweedledee’s too hasty demarcation between what is and what ain’t. Such a vision underlies the entire book. To get at it, let us consider two exemplary texts: a poem of doom (chapter 2) and one of hope (chapter 31). We will then reflect on how the two converge on a recognizable view of reality that could inform our own.

BEHIND DOOM, WORDS OF HOPE (JEREMIAH 2)

Part of a larger series of early oracles of Jeremiah (chapters 1–4) that open the larger complex often called the Book of Doom (chapters 1–25), Jeremiah 2 consists of ten separate but related units (vv. 1–3, 4–9, 10–13, 14–19, 20–22, 23–25a, 25b–28, 29–30, 31–32, 33–37).² The editor of the book has stitched these units together into a consistent picture of Israel’s reckless repudiation of YHWH’s providential care.

To create this intricate network of metaphors, first Jeremiah and then the transmitters of his oracles in their oral/aural and written versions must draw on all sorts of social and natural images. Consider some of them:

<u>Image</u>	<u>Verse numbers</u>
Prophetic preaching	1
Wooing and marriage	2, 32, 33
Family relations	4
Desert topography	6
Agricultural fertility	7
Rules of honor and shame	7
The priesthood	8

1. Lewis Carroll [Charles Lutwidge Dodgson], *Through the Looking Glass*, chap. 4 (in *The Best of Lewis Carroll* [Edison, NJ: Castle, n.d.], 207).

2. Jack Lundbom divides vv. 25b–27ab from 27c–28, see *Jeremiah 1-20* (AB 21A; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 4-8, 286. Given the close thematic relationships among these verses, such a division seems unnecessary.

The assembly of the handicapped	8
Family images	1, 9, 20, 23, 32
Fertility	12, 14, 23, 27
Rescue of Jacob	11
Weeping/cessation of weeping	15, 16
The righteous pasture/holy mountain	23
Covenant-making	31–32
Remember and forgetting	34
Building/builders	38

By piling up the images, the prophetic book creates a moving portrayal of a saved people.

Consider the example of verses 15 and 16–22, the second unit being a response to the first. In verse 15:

A voice in Ramah: howling is heard, bitter weeping.
Rachel weeps over her sons, refusing to be comforted for her sons,
for they are not.

The poet focuses on a single family's loss of all its males as a symbol for the nation's devastation. No ordinary person, this widow; Rachel is the ancestress of the tribe of Benjamin. Apparently this is an older oracle that Jeremiah reuses, or if not, he at least focuses on a location—north of Judah—that speaks of the earlier devastations of the land. In doing so, he demonstrates a profound interest in the sufferings and potential redemption of the entire nation, not just Judah.

Verses 16–22 reverse the image of mourning, while still focusing on the individual who typifies the whole. Thus the responding oracle opens,

Stop your voice from weeping and your eyes from a tear.
For there is pay for your exertions—an oracle of YHWH—
and they will return from the foe's land.
Yes, there will be hope for your future—an oracle of YHWH—
and your sons will return to their territory (31.16–17).

The second person pronouns are feminine singular, for the poet allows the northern widow still to personify the mourning nation. Her rightful mourning can stop because the impossible has occurred: the dead nation has risen from its tomb. The return of deportees at the end of the sixth century marks a new beginning.

The text continues with a report from YHWH in verses 18–19. Here God quotes Ephraim's statements of self-discovery, "You disciplined me, and I was disciplined, like an untaught calf; return me and I shall return." In the imagined world of the text, terrible suffering leads to repentance. Again, divine grace extends to the old northern kingdom, since restoration of any part of the people necessitates restoration of the whole. Jeremiah's hope for a righteous remnant depends on locating persons from all parts of the chosen people.

The miracle of such a transformation suggests the close of this section in verse 22: "How long will you turn this way and that, distractible daughter? For YHWH has created something new on earth, a female surrounding a male." By using the Hebrew word *bara'* ("to create"), the operative verb of Genesis 1, the text connects the impending deliverance ("return to these cities of yours"; v. 21) of Israel to the original creation of the world.⁸ Marvels do not cease because the creator does not stop working.

8. See Jeremiah 4.26–26; 10.12–13; Holladay, *Jeremiah* 2, 195. Compare the connection between creation and return from exile in Isaiah 40–55.

At this point, then, we should ask what vision of human flourishing Jeremiah 31 assumes. In addition to all the elements of Jeremiah 2, the following items come to the fore.

1. Old traditions (e.g., creation, exodus) find new realizations in contemporary events. The past is never past, but is merely a template for the present.
2. Israel flourishes when in its own land. Geography has symbolic resonance. Space matters because persons associate with it the stories and practices of justice and peace (or their opposites).
3. Repentance is possible even in extreme situations. Mechanisms for correcting behavior must exist.
4. God shows mercy. Since worship is a gift from God related to the proper relationship between God and humankind, worship can be a leverage point for social justice. God acts repeatedly to create the conditions necessary for worship.
5. The words of the prophet can serve to reform hearers.

To summarize, then, our short survey of two chapters, we have seen that although one oracle can speak of doom and the other of hope, based on close analyses of differing historical realities, both reflect an underlying vision of what ought to be. The book of Jeremiah assumes that Israel will flourish when it attends to its true nature by remembering its core stories (rightly understood), exercising justice, and worshipping YHWH alone.

WHERE WE GO FROM HERE

If the book of Jeremiah constructs from such disparate material a comprehensive vision of human flourishing, we as faithful readers must ask what it implies for our own behavior today. Granted that Jeremiah was an oral poet, not an economist, a preacher, not a politician, we can ask what sorts of orientations his words might foster in us.

One could answer this in several ways. For example, it would be legitimate to think through the implications of his words for the contemporary global economy. Jeremiah and his disciples would have agreed with Amartya Sen that society should make the flourishing of human life possible by insuring responsible political structures, economic opportunities, social opportunities, practices of transparency vis-à-vis power structures, and protective security.⁹ Indeed, it is difficult to imagine any plausible accounting of a just society that ignores these elements. Yet the Bible adds another dimension when it calls us to conceive of human flourishing in religious terms. A Christian view avoids secularism, but acknowledges that economic and political behaviors have moral and spiritual dimensions.

To be sure, difficulties confront a pursuit such as Jeremiah's. One difficulty arises from the fact that a comprehensive vision of human flourishing needs both practices that provide stability and those that allow change. Another is that, for religious people, the defining work of prayer and sacrifice necessary to sustain the pursuit of peace and justice does not always occur in churches.

Thus we must consider a more immediate context—the church. We should put our own house in order. In Churches of Christ, to take our immediate context, too often our fear of mainline Protestantism's over-emphasis (as we see it) on the social gospel has allowed us to pursue an *antisocial* gospel that threatens our ability to carry a vision of humankind made whole. Many factors indicate this: our expenditures on buildings, our falling contributions to missions, our rising salaries for some ministers (though by no means all), the growing gap between the incomes of the churched and the unchurched, and the increasing affluence of elderships, to name a few. One less obvious, but still telling, indicator comes from the Association of Theological Schools, whose tests of seminary graduates of many denominations for their social awareness place students from Churches of Christ near the bottom. Our churches often live captive to reactionary

9. Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Knopf, 1999), 10, 34-53.

political and economic forces. We can point to villains who have brought us to this place, but the challenge is to find ways forward.

Here, I think, Jeremiah helps us. Not only does the prophet's book call for rigorous self-examination, but it envisions alternative behaviors that can help sustain the pursuit of justice. We can make new choices. As Kent Van Til put it in an article about American Christianity's excessive attachment to the untrammelled market, our failure to tackle poverty "is not a technical one.... The problem is, in fact, a moral one: we have simply not chosen to distribute goods in such a way that the basic needs of all human beings are met."¹⁰ Although he refers primarily to economic goods, the same thing applies to social goods such as status, knowledge, health, and so on. Such goods are not well distributed in our churches. Yet they could be.

Jeremiah teaches us that, as people who see in the Bible the world as God wishes it to be, we can recover our prophetic role as dreamers of dreams and seers of visions whose behaviors begin to bring about the vision of reality that Jeremiah and others, most notably Jesus himself, articulated. If we are bold and honest, loving the downtrodden as ourselves, we can be the people who know God, from the least to the greatest. May it be so.

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10. Kent A. Van Til, "Just Deserts: Beyond the Free Market," *Christian Century* 124/6 (March 20, 2007): 20-23. See also his book, *Less Than Two Dollars a Day: A Christian View of World Poverty and the Free Market* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).