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# Jeremiah: Compelled by the Word and Presence of Yahweh

CRAIG D. BOWMAN

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Learning the verses of the book of Jeremiah to produce a spiritual portrait of the prophet is a fairly straightforward and simple task if one ignores the complicated process behind the text and the tense debate concerning the book's authorship. How much of the person of Jeremiah is really in this text? In what sense is it autobiographical, the actual words of the prophet himself? How much of it is the literary imagination of Baruch or a later redactionist remembering, retelling, and rhetorically reshaping Jeremiah's call, complaints, and unique career?<sup>1</sup>

If biblical spirituality can be defined as an experience of God articulated in the Bible and engaged in personally through participation and transformation within the world of the text, then one cannot avoid some historical-critical exegesis and literary analysis in the action of reading and entering this textual-spiritual reality.<sup>2</sup> That being the case, the emphasis in this article will be on constructing a spiritual profile of Jeremiah that recognizes some of the difficulties associated with this prophetic book. The critical issue for determining Jeremiah's spirituality is not so much where and how the words of the book came together, but more the assessment of his person as "God's man," the impact of his life during Israel's deepest crisis, and his lasting influence as a spiritual mentor for members of the twenty-first century church.<sup>3</sup>

Jeremiah lives in the chiasmic tension of his calling,<sup>4</sup> compelled by the word and presence of Yahweh to pluck up and break down, to build and to plant among Israelite kings who would rather not hear any of his words. Although we as Christians are not called as prophets we are called to testify to God's word and presence in the world and to speak prophetically the gospel of grace and warning.<sup>5</sup> We, like Jeremiah, are promised God's abiding presence as we go into the world, but we are also assured that we will suffer as he did for being faithful witnesses to what God is doing. Jeremiah's spirituality, and ours, is thus very much in this world, though there is a transcendent dependence on God's spirit. A lasting sense of calling is vital to every aspect of Jeremiah's identity, integrity, and incessant complaining to Yahweh about His summons and commitment to be with and to deliver Jeremiah.

## **A BRIEF PROFILE OF JEREMIAH'S SPIRITUALITY**

### *Yahweh as Source of Spirituality*

In Jeremiah's call, Yahweh Himself defines the true nature of the prophet's spirituality.

Now the word of Yahweh came to me:  
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
Before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Then I replied,  
"Ah, Lord Yahweh!  
Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am too young."

But Yahweh said to me,  
 “Do not say, ‘I am too young.’  
 You shall go wherever I send you,  
 and you shall speak whatever I command you.  
 Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you declares Yahweh.”

Then Yahweh put out his hand and touched my mouth; and Yahweh said to me, “Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.” (Jer 1:4-10)

Even though Jeremiah protests that the divine description of what it means to be spiritual doesn't quite match his tradition-bound view, Yahweh has the last word. Jeremiah has a priestly heritage, but that is inadequate and irrelevant. Yahweh forces him to embrace a new, personal, unpopular, unsuccessful spirituality that will alienate Jeremiah from family, friends, palace, and temple. Yahweh prescribes a completely subversive spirituality for this prophet that severs revered political, ecclesial, and theological ties.

As called by Yahweh, Jeremiah must part ways with kings, priests, and prophets. The resulting outcast spirituality causes Jeremiah to lament and prepares him to identify with those taken away in exile. While we heartily applaud Jeremiah's pastoral sensitivity to those displaced, we often are bewildered by his complaints and shy away from his spirituality of divine castigation and overwhelming rejection.

### *Spirituality of Grieving*

Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, mediates the anguished pathos of Yahweh to a rebellious people who have turned away from covenant and Torah to worship Yahweh with presumptuous freedom and perilous independence (Jer 12:1-13).<sup>6</sup> This grieving spirituality that endures the embodiment of divine emotion to the degree of inward burning and outward abuse is certainly uninvited by Jeremiah. And he hardly tolerated it. Nonetheless Jeremiah's *pathos* becomes one of his spiritually defining traits. He is able to empathize with God and suffer the scorn of Israelite society, which would turn its anger and mockery toward Yahweh, rather than prophet, if the people only new Yahweh better and could recognize his Spirit in the prophet.

### *Spirituality in Frustration*

Jeremiah has been labeled the complaining prophet, who always has a *rib* or complaint against Yahweh because of how he has been deceived or raped or abandoned by Yahweh time after time.<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah presses theology to the limit where God is blamed, accused, cursed, doubted, and refused. Jeremiah's complaints must be understood certainly against what he endures, but also against the promise Yahweh makes at the beginning, “I am with you to deliver you” (1:8, 19). It is Yahweh's promised presence and protection that causes Jeremiah to continually wonder where God is, concretely and existentially.

The *elusive presence* is what Samuel Terrien calls it.<sup>8</sup> Terrien correctly emphasizes that Jeremiah was not formally called to prophethood but rather was informed that “he was born to be a prophet.” Thus, the presence of God, “the presence of the holy embraced Jeremiah and drew him into an awesome involvement with the divine.”<sup>9</sup> Yahweh's assurance to him, and against his fear, was continual presence and protection (Jer 1:8, 19; 15:20; cf. 30:11).

To his credit, Jeremiah is able to affirm this promise and even to celebrate divine rescue on one occasion (20:11-13), albeit quite briefly since he quickly curses the day he was born (20:14-20). Jeremiah's spirituality is broad enough to include the full range of frustrated emotions that question—verbally and mentally—the faithfulness and integrity of God.

*Spirituality in Prophetic Contest*

Yahweh as the source of Jeremiah's spirituality is dramatically displayed amidst prophetic contest where he reveals the true substance of his opponents' pseudo-spirituality, hot air. In 5:13 Jeremiah is told that the false-speaking prophets are nothing but windbags and that Yahweh's prophetic word is not in them!<sup>9</sup> These imposters are ignorant of Yahweh's words but always have a word to speak and claim that it comes from Yahweh. In contrast, Jeremiah's prophetic words have divine substance, and he reads the spiritual reality of impending doom on Judah accurately. He warns the residents of Jerusalem not to trust blindly those who "heal the wounds of my people lightly" (Jer 6:14).

Yahweh commands him to enter the temple urging those gathered for worship not to "trust in these deceptive words: 'This is the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh'" (7:4). In 23:9-24:10 Yahweh announces his sustained judgment against evil prophets after Jeremiah describes how different his experience as Yahweh's prophet has been compared with these others. Certainly one gets the impression that these rivals, accepted as genuine by the people, have a strange, perverse spirituality which in the midst of their sedition still claim Yahweh as the source of their words and skill.

Eventually, Jeremiah must challenge his peer, Yahweh-prophet Hananiah, who has spoken a word of comfort about a short exile (Jeremiah 28). Hananiah (Gracious is Yahu!) offered a counter prophecy to Jeremiah's word of doom (70 years of exile), "Thus, says Yahweh of Hosts ... within two years ... I will restore ..." the temple, the Davidic king, and my people exiled by Babylon. The text says that Jeremiah went his way and that some time later delivered another message from Yahweh to Hananiah, announcing that Yahweh hadn't sent Hananiah, that he had lied to the people, and consequently he would die within the year. Hananiah died within the predicted timeframe, but as Yahweh's faithful prophet, Jeremiah was never fully vindicated.

Chapters 41-44 are indicative of Jeremiah's repeated rejection by audiences that implored him to seek Yahweh's direction only to do whatever they pleased. After Gedaliah dismissed Johanan's help and the puppet-king was slain, a remnant group led by Johanan asked Jeremiah to pray to Yahweh about whether they should remain in Judah or flee to Egypt. While Jeremiah waited 10 days for an answer, in dramatic fashion, Johanan and the remnant pledge their absolute obedience to do whatever Yahweh answers, good or bad. In the end, however, they pronounce Jeremiah a lying prophet and take him against his will to Egypt in disobedience of Yahweh's response (Jer 43:2-7).

*Spirituality in Effective Ministry*

True spirituality for Jeremiah is measured by genuinely effective ministry—justice, righteousness, and deliverance extended to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the homeless; the Deuteronomic ideal (Jer 5:27-28; 7:6; 22:3). Real spirituality, justice, and righteousness must be manifest in physical action. In the wake of political collapse and religious lapse following the death of Josiah, Jeremiah countered the plans of the rich, wise, and powerful by pointing to Yahweh as the center of spiritual life who alone was able to offer actual healing and security.

Thus says Yahweh: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am Yahweh; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says Yahweh. (Jer 9:23-24)

Moreover, one cannot miss the connection between Yahweh's actions and those Jeremiah prescribes for the community. The prophet insists that true worship and compassionate righteousness are the only basis for a people joined to Yahweh, though they persist in worshipping the gods of wealth, military power, and international security. In the end, Josiah's political reform was too little, too late. The polar opposite of spiritual-

ity for Jeremiah is idolatry. The Deuteronomic reforms of Josiah were too superficial to purge the practice of Baal worship from the homes and hearts of Judahites. Covenantal ideals and commandments were not enough to prevent this cultural syncretism from finally destroying Jerusalem.

### *Spirituality in Prayer*

Jeremiah's spirituality is characterized by intensely hopeful prayer. Three times Yahweh commanded Jeremiah not to pray for the people of Judah (Jer 7:11; 11:14; 14:11). But the prophet encourages those already taken in exile to pray (Jer 29:7, 12), and both Zedekiah and Johanan implore him to pray to Yahweh on their behalf (Jer 37:3; 42:2, 4, 20). In Jeremiah 32, Yahweh directs the prophet to redeem family property from his uncle in Anathoth. As incomprehensible as this business transaction sounds to Jeremiah when Jerusalem has just been besieged, he obeys. Afterwards, Jeremiah prayerfully reflects on the meaning of this event in light of Yahweh's covenant loyalty (*hesed*) as creator, judge, and redeemer of a rebellious people. He is a prophet who knows God to be present at all times, the one who orchestrates human history. Thus, in the balance of tragic loss and expectant hope, he knows Yahweh.

Jeremiah knows what time it is, while his contemporaries seem to have no understanding of the signs of their time. Unfortunately this mocked prophet, nicknamed "terror-on-every-side," has a dreadful task. He must accuse his people of provoking Yahweh's anger, though they cannot, and will not, acknowledge the reasons why (Jer 7:18-19; 11:17-18; 25:6; 44:3-8). At the same time, however, because he knows the immediacy of Yahweh's rage and power, Jeremiah recognizes that hope for the future can only be grounded in the reality and presence of Yahweh. Thus, Jeremiah's practice of prayer, filled with inner turmoil, theological frustration, and sorrowful physical suffering, produced a distinctive spirituality predicated on Yahweh's faithfulness alone.

### CONCLUSION

Our blessing from the book of Jeremiah comes not when we admire his spirituality, but when we, like him, embrace Yahweh's call to a prophetic ministry characterized by a suffering, subversive spirituality rooted solely in righteous compassion and prayer. We must be courageous to enter the textual-spiritual world of Jeremiah's God to experience the essence of his spiritual life, God himself.<sup>10</sup>

We must not let the extreme language of his complaints or the frightening description of Yahweh's pathos burning within him prevent us from accepting God's promise to be with us to deliver us. We, like Jeremiah, have a responsibility to a complacent community of faith to enter the world more confident of the reality and presence of God than its changing circumstances and compromise, particularly when chaos and crisis threaten our very existence. May our spirituality have the divine integrity of Jeremiah's, and may we become more impassioned by his spirit of suffering love.

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### NOTES

- 1 Jeremiah is a difficult book to read given the complexity of its literary arrangement and chronological disarray. For a stimulating introduction to the prophet and the problems of his book, see the very fine series of articles brought together conveniently in *Interpretation* 37 (1983). See also the exceptional entry-level treatment by William Holladay, *Jeremiah: Spokesman out of Time* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1974).
- 2 For the purpose of this article, my definition of biblical spirituality rests on Sandra Schneiders, "Biblical Spirituality," *Interpretation* 56 (2002): 133-42. In her conclusion, Schneiders reminds us that, "Especially in our own times the critical study of the biblical text is an indispensable foundation for any use of the Bible in spirituality. ... Transformative engagement with the text is the ultimate *raison d'être* of biblical study within the ecclesial community." For a cautionary critique and constructive corrective to contemporary understandings of Christian spirituality, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *Faith's Freedom: A Classic Spirituality for Contemporary Christians* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Johnson clearly identifies

- qualitatively the weaknesses of most spiritualities: 1) lacking specific theological grounding; 2) disconnected with real life; and 3) falsely assuming that the core of Christian faith is understood.
- 3 One of the most enduring spiritual dynamics of the biblical text emerges from sound exegetical work. Indeed, in "To What End Exegesis? Reflections on Exegesis and Spirituality in Philippians 4:10-20," in *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 276-89, Gordon D. Fee writes, "We bring our exegesis to fruition when we ourselves sit with unspeakable wonder in the presence of God, contemplate his riches, pray that they might be poured out on our own friends and family; and stay there in contemplation long enough that our only response is doxology: 'to our God and Father be glory for ever, Amen.' . . . To be true exegetes we must hear the words with our hearts, we must bask in God's own glory, we must be moved to a sense of overwhelming awe at God's riches in glory, we must think again on the incredible wonder that these riches are ours in Christ Jesus, and we must then worship the living God by singing praises to his glory." Thus, the exegesis of Jeremiah allows the 7th century prophet to shape our spirituality in dramatically real and refreshing ways.
  - 4 Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah: A Study in Ancient Hebrew Rhetoric* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1975); and William Holladay, *The Architecture of Jeremiah 1-20* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1976) have noted persuasively the rhetorical structure of the call narrative and the larger framework. Although one cannot ascertain definitively the source of the inclusio formed by 1:4-10 and 20:14-18, the prophet is called by Yahweh, and spiritually empowered by Yahweh, to upturn the world of his birth and lay the foundation for a new one. Jeremiah's spirituality is no superficially private matter of the heart. He is engaged with the world politically, physically, and purposefully.
  - 5 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13; states quite boldly that "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." He goes on to argue that we, as believers called by God, are involved not so much in addressing major public events, but dealing with the daily onslaught of our cultural milieu's domestication and deception that fosters false experiences of God and community, ultimately causing the majority to become content with counterfeit expressions of truth. Of ancient Israel's many prophets, Jeremiah may be our best contemporary example of one who spoke out of the alternative consciousness that Brueggemann describes.
  - 6 Although 12:1-6 is the first of a series of personal laments by Jeremiah (the others are 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; 20:14-20), verses 7-13 are Yahweh's lament. The two sections merge together almost seamlessly to suggest that emotional anguish is shared by both the prophet and his God, even though it is to God that Jeremiah weeps and complains. Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (Peabody, Mass: Prince Press, 2001), 1:111; describes Yahweh's words in chapter 12 as "sorrow [which] rises again and again to unconcealed heights of expression." Moreover, Heschel declares, "Israel's distress was more than a human tragedy. With Israel's distress came the affliction of God, His displacement, His homelessness in the land, in the world." Heschel was the first to describe divine heartache with the term *pathos*: God Himself is capable of emotion, and in fact is more emotionally sensitive than human beings. In Heschel's words, "He is moved and affected by what happens in the world, and reacts accordingly" (2:4). Thus, "The prophet is guided not by what he feels, but by what God feels" (2:94). Heschel's comments about the divine spirit as *pathos* are highly appropriate to this article on spirituality. He describes the language used alongside the Hebrew word for spirit, *ruach*, as denoting particular emotional states: "grieved of spirit" (Isa 54:6; "a spirit of jealousy" (Num 5:14, 30; "a spirit of humility" Isa 57:15; 66:2; "broken hearted and crushed in spirit" Ps 34:18. Heschel goes on to say that "Emotion is inseparable from being filled with the spirit" (2:96). "The prophet is called *ish ha-ruach*, a man filled with divine *pathos* (Hos 9:7)" (2:96).
  - 7 Note Heschel's treatment and translation of this passage (20:7), in *Prophets* (1:113), in which he emphasizes the offensive nature of the individual words: "O Lord, Thou hast seduced me, And I am seduced; Thou hast raped me, And I am overcome." Heschel points out that Jeremiah's words used "to describe the impact of God upon his life are identical with the terms for seduction and rape in the legal terminology of the Bible" (1:114).
  - 8 Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).
  - 9 Terrien, 254-55.
  - 10 On the translation and context of this passage, see Peter Craigie, *Jeremiah 1-25* (WBC; completed by Page Kelley and Joel Drikkard, Jr.; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1991), 89-93; and Jack Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1999), 391-92.
  - 11 Again, the admonitions of Luke Timothy Johnson concerning authentic spiritual encounter of God and human speech about it are appropriate, *Faith's Freedom*, 16-30. Jeremiah, however, stretches Johnson's insistence that "The essential requirement for talk about God is modesty before the Mystery" (16).

