

“When All Hope is Gone, Sad Songs Say So Much:
The Importance of Jeremiah’s Laments for Energizing the Oppressed”
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It was a pastoral call I never want to make again. I had been up all night at a youth lock-in, when I was called to the home of one of my youth, Mary. She had just found her father unconscious on the bathroom floor. Her mother was doing CPR and the ambulance had just pulled into the driveway, but Mary already knew the outcome. Her father was dead. Friends and family slowly flooded their home. Mary had her friends with her in her room. Someone turned on the stereo, hoping for some words to accompany the event. I heard the strains of Bobby McFerrin crooning out “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” followed by a loud CRASH, and the sound of breaking glass. Mary had hurled her boom box out the two story window. For her, McFerrin’s sentiments were more than inopportune or inappropriate; they were offensive. This was not the time for a cheerful song.

Mary threw the boom box out her bedroom window because neither the form nor the content of “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” matched, or expressed, her grief. Instead, her actions affirmed another popular lyric: “When All Hope is Gone, Sad Songs Say So Much.”¹ In other words, when one is grieving, perhaps a more somber tune better fits, and thus articulates, one’s emotions. This truism is not new to the psalmist, for the biblical record is full of both individual and communal laments. Both the psalmist and those who edited, transmitted, and used this ancient hymnal well knew the validity of this claim.

In his article, “The Formfulness of Grief,” Walter Brueggemann compares the movement from grief to praise in the psalms of lament with Kübler-Ross’s five stages of loss and grief. He finds some similarities, but ultimately is most concerned with the striking dissimilarities between the two systems. In his article, “Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer,” Sam Balentine asserts that in his so-called ‘confessions,’ Jeremiah adapted the form and content of the psalm of individual lament to his unique situation: “Jeremiah prayed as he had been taught to pray...in the individual psalms of lament he found a ready-made form...He does not simply imitate his predecessors, however, rather, he infuses old and conventional forms and ideas with his own interests.”² Attention to both the adapted form and content of one of Jeremiah’s ‘confessions’ gives insights into his unique context and his relationship with God. There is much scholarly debate as to the extent of the prophetic persona in these ‘lament/confessions.’ Many decry a purely historical view, sustaining instead a liturgical view of the prophet as a representative of the entire nation. That Jeremiah’s life mirrors the life of the people of Judah is seldom disputed among scholars,³ for we see in his call narrative (Jeremiah 1:1-3) that his mission is coterminous with Judah’s history. He is also, then, a representative of his people.

¹ Elton John, and Bernie Taupin, *Sad Songs (Say So Much)*.

² Samuel E. Balentine, “Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer,” *Review and Expositor* 78.3 (Summer 1981): 335.

³ Douglas Rawlinson Jones, *Jeremiah*, ed. Ronald E. Clements, *The New Century Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans, 1992), 220.

This paper maintains that a close study of Jeremiah 15:10-21 as an “adapted individual psalm of lament”⁴ contributes much to our description of the prophetic office and thus, the office of the prophetic religious educator. Prophetic religious education, like the Hebrew prophetic literature from which it is derived, is not a new teaching but a new application of an old teaching⁵ that changes the pedagogies one uses and shapes the interior life of the educator. It is a model for teaching which is prophetic in two ways: (1) the religious educator both critiques abuses of power and energizes the oppressed to resist further oppression⁶ and (2) the religious educator nurtures prophetic behavior in others. This model of teaching acknowledges the importance of a sense of call, understands the meaning of pain and suffering, musters the courage to critique when such is warranted, and encourages the religious educator to embody his or her office. For the purpose of this study, confession and lament as found in Jeremiah will be synonymous terms, thus resulting in the term ‘confession/lament.’ Similarly, suffering is viewed as that which produces grief, thus these terms are used somewhat interchangeably. Kübler-Ross’s stages of grief and loss prove a worthy dialogue partner for glimpsing the efficacy of the ‘adapted individual psalm of lament’ in expressing, and possible managing of, the prophet’s, and thus the prophetic educator’s grief.

What exactly is a biblical lament? Paula Scalise answers: “A lament is not a soliloquy on suffering; it is addressed to God as prayer.”⁷ This prayer describes current circumstances of peril or loss and appeals to God for assistance. Often times the threat is illness or from enemies, and the supplicant may remind God of the covenantal relationship, as well as express assurance in God’s intervention. Brueggemann says that the definitional function of the lament is that it not only highlights the experience of suffering, aids in its articulation, but also “limits the experience of suffering so that it can be received and coped with according to the perspectives, perceptions, and resources of the community.”⁸ He claims that use of the lament form intends to enable the sufferer to work out his or her grief in the presence of, and managed by, the faith community. Using a prescribed form gives structure to the grief experience just when the experience appeared to be formless and chaotic. Giving form to one’s grief limits its destructive power.

Let’s look at how this functions for Jeremiah.

10) (Jeremiah speaking) “Woe is me, my mother that you gave birth to me, a person of strife (litigation)⁹ and strife to all of the earth, for I have not lent money, nor have people lent me money, but all of them curse me.”

⁴ Balentine, “Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer,” 335.

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model of Biblical Education* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 41.

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 13.

⁷ Pamela J. Scalise, “The Logic of Covenant and the Logic of Lament in the Book of Jeremiah,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28.4 (Winter 2001): 399.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation* 31.3 (July 1977): 265.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann suggests litigation is a better translation here than “contention” because of its legal connotation. However, since “contention” is found with strife in the psalmist’s language and in Israel’s proverbial tradition, we have used it primarily. Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck Up, To Tear Down*, ed. Fredrick Carlson Holmgren and George A. F. Knight, International Theological Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 144.

11) The Lord has said: “I swear I have exerted myself on your behalf for good. I swear I have intervened with you in times of disaster and in times of distress. 12) Can iron and bronze break iron from the north? 13) Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder, free of charge, for all your sins, throughout all your territory. 14) I will make you serve your enemies in a land that you do not know, for in my anger a fire is kindled that will burn forever.”

15) “Oh Lord you know; remember me, attend to me, and avenge me with my persecutors. In your patience do not take me away; know that on your account insults are lifted up against me. 16) Your words were found, and I ate them and your words became a joy to me and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name Oh Lord, God of Hosts. 17) I did not sit in the company of scoffers nor did I rejoice; under the palm of your hand I sat in isolation, for you had filled me with indignation. 18) Why is my pain perpetual; and my woundedness refusing to be healed? Truly you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that are unreliable.”

19) Therefore, thus says the Lord: “If you turn back then I will take you back and you will stand before me. And if you publish what is precious and not what is worthless, you will be my mouthpiece. It is they who will turn to you, not you who will turn to them. 20) And I will make you to this people an inaccessible wall of bronze; they will wage war against you but they will not prevail against you for I am with you to save and deliver you.” An utterance of the Lord. 21) “I will snatch you away from the hand of the wicked and I will redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.”¹⁰

In verse 10, one glimpses the depth of Jeremiah’s despair, for he uses the traditional lament exclamation “Woe is me.” His life is overwhelmingly conflicted; he is assaulted and maligned on every side; he cries out in agony. The mention of his mother here is a rhetorical device that reminds the hearer of Jeremiah’s call narrative. Here Jeremiah decries his birth because God has called him to the prophetic office even *before* his birth.

In stage one, where Kübler-Ross describes denial, the psalmist instead petitions God to rectify the situation. Here God is approached boldly, for God is the only one who can, and may, act. So Jeremiah, in verse 10 addresses God indirectly and directly in verse 15. Indeed, addressing God is particularly vital to Jeremiah since God called him to the prophetic office in the first place and his suffering is a result of having faithfully fulfilled that office. In the face of suffering, Israel “does not endure absurdity submissively and patiently, it protests.”¹¹ Protest directed to God is valid because of the covenantal relationship between God and Israel; Israel’s speech presumes a history of

¹⁰ This is an original translation by the author.

¹¹ Claus Westermann, “The Role of Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament.” *Interpretation* 28.1 (January 1974): 30.

God's life-giving presence and interaction.¹² It is Jeremiah's practice of prayer that gave him the authority to speak on God's behalf and the authority to be heard and believed,

The text portrays him to be so deeply rooted in his life with God that he is compelled to speak God's truth. Allegiance to God alone enables him to "gird up his loins" against the people's resistance and to "stand up and tell them everything" God commands him (1:17).¹³

Jeremiah protests to God because God is ultimately the cause of his suffering, and that suffering is unfair. Moreover, his life is connected to God's in a way that energizes and steadies him in the face of such suffering. O'Connor describes, "They (the confessions) mark the true prophet as a contemplative, a mystic, a person of deep prayer, smitten by his encounter with the divine."¹⁴ The prophetic religious educator, like Jeremiah, prays regularly and has a mature, truthful, and intimate relationship with God. In addition to the lament, he or she knows many types of prayer.

In verse 10, Jeremiah described himself as a man of "contention" and "strife". The term "contention" is a legal term. In Jeremiah it is most often used to describe a conflict between a person and God. For instance, in 2:9, it describes God's indictment against the people. In 12:1, it describes the people's indictment against the Lord, and in 25:31, God's indictment is against the nations.¹⁵ Such legal trouble is indeed unwarranted, for Jeremiah has even avoided the typical business dealings that most often produce strife¹⁶ (usury). Moreover, not only has he avoided wrongdoing, but he also has faithfully executed his prophetic ministry. Jeremiah is innocent of any misconduct; the charges against him are invalid.

In verses 11-14, God answers Jeremiah even though God has been addressed indirectly. God's response begins with an oath formula "I swear."¹⁷ Here God's response is surprising, for what is expected in response to such a despondent cry is a sympathetic word. Instead God gives both good and bad news; God's response is ambivalent. William Holladay asserts that this ambivalence contributes significantly to the translation difficulties in this pericope.¹⁸

The good news is that God intends the divine interventions in Jeremiah's life as "for good." Whether God's intervention is for *his* good, or for the good of Judah is unclear. Even the abuse Jeremiah has suffered is "for good," perhaps because abuse is evidence that Jeremiah has fulfilled his role as one who is called to "pluck up and tear

¹² Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," 269

¹³ Kathleen M. O'Connor, "The Prophet Jeremiah and Exclusive Loyalty to God," *Interpretation* 59 (April 2005): 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁵ Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, ed. John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary vol. 26 (Dallas: Word Books, 1991), 210.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁷ William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah Chapters 1-25*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, *Hermeneia—A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 450.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 448. A complete treatment of the textual difficulties in this passage is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that there is great textual variance between the MT and the LXX.

down.”¹⁹ Jeremiah’s complaint reflects the costliness of a ministry of such candor and discernment. The message is so difficult the messenger is at risk. The fact that this suffering on the part of Jeremiah could not only be a sign of Jeremiah’s faithfulness, but also could be within the plan of God is strangely comforting. It implies an underlying structure, purpose, and meaning to the apparent chaos of Jeremiah’s suffering, a structure Brueggemann claims are suggested by the lament form. However, that meaning of that structure is yet to be discovered by Jeremiah, what is heard now is Jeremiah’s anger.

In stage two Kübler-Ross’s description of anger parallels Israel’s tradition: “Israel asserts indignation at being cheated, exploited, humiliated, betrayed, and abandoned.”²⁰ This response is certainly seen in the previous two verses in Jeremiah. Jeremiah’s anger is understandable. *Unlike* Judah, for whom Jeremiah himself has interceded, he has been faithful, yet, *like* Judah, he is cursed. It is ironic²¹ that Jeremiah frequently intervenes on behalf of the very people by whom he is now cursed. In fact, he has been such an intense advocate for Judah before Yahweh that Yahweh has had to tell him to desist. He is a faithful advocate for Judah before God who is now treated by Judah as if he were an adversary. Like Jeremiah, the prophetic religious educator intercedes on behalf of God’s people.

Where Kübler-Ross observed an inability of the community to handle the sufferer’s expression of anger, Israel had a context in which anger could be “received and contained.”²² In other words, Israel’s relationship with God was strong enough to handle Israel’s expression of anger. This axiom has much more to do with the character of God who established the covenantal relationship with Israel than with Israel’s (or Jeremiah’s) character. That Jeremiah could rant at God as he has, (and will in later verses), and not receive the divine lightning bolt in response is testimony to the incredible patience of God.

Now comes the bad news of God’s response. First, verse 12 speaks of the overwhelming threat of the enemy from the north. We have heard of this enemy before in Jeremiah’s call narrative (1:15). At his calling, God indicated that Jeremiah would be “an iron pillar, and a bronze wall” so his enemies could not prevail against him (1:18-19). Now God declares that Jeremiah—iron and bronze will not be able to break “iron from the north” (15:12).²³ God’s response to Jeremiah in verse 12 suggests that while enemies have not prevailed against him personally, neither has Jeremiah prevailed through his intercessions against God’s intention to use the foe from the north “to pluck up and tear down.”²⁴

The action this enemy will take at the behest of God is illuminated in verses 13-14. God announces judgment upon Jeremiah’s enemies (verse 13), and acknowledges further suffering that both Jeremiah and his enemies will undergo (verse 14). God’s surprising answer is not an oracle of comfort for Jeremiah, who has originally complained. Rather, it is yet another decree of judgment against Judah.²⁵ All that Judah

¹⁹ John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, ed. Patrick D. Miller, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville:

²⁰ Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” 269.

²¹ Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, 134.

²² *Ibid.*, 269.

²³ Jones, *Jeremiah*, 221.

²⁴ Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, 135.

²⁵ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 144.

treasures (2 Kgs. 24:13-17; Isa. 39:5-7) is now given to Babylon by God, and no amount of prophetic intercession can stop it. The language even shifts from the second person singular to the second person plural: “the intention is to include both Jeremiah and his enemies in the description of the effect of God’s anger.”²⁶ Both Jeremiah and his enemies will suffer; here the innocent suffer with the guilty. The switch from singular to plural changes the subject from Jeremiah’s personal vocation (15:10-12) to the destiny of Israel. What counts is not the prophet, but the sin of Judah and the response of God. In other words, it is as if God is saying: “Jeremiah, it’s not all about you.”

Brueggemann considers verses 10-12 and 13-14 to be connected by the theme of land. For instance, in verse 10 the prophet is in conflict with “the whole land.” In verse 13 there is spoil taken “throughout your territory,” and now in verse 14 there is exile to another land, one “which you do not know.” The sequence, thus, is a move from the land of contention to the land of exile, in which contention is futile.²⁷ There is not a hint of vindication or comfort for the prophet, since he cries out again to God in verses 15-21. Jeremiah does not take comfort in the suffering of his enemies. Verses 13-14 thus serve a double purpose: they assure Jeremiah that those who persecute him will be punished, and they prophet’s words of intercession will not prevail against God’s “anger” (15:14). Judah is unable to see that the real danger is God’s relentless anger, not Jeremiah’s persistent proclamation. Here God’s resolve is more grave, more devastating, and more certain than any proclamation of Jeremiah.

Perhaps because the previous divine response was personally unsatisfying, this time, in verse 15, Jeremiah pleads directly to God. God had already promised the divine presence to accompany and sustain Jeremiah throughout every phase in his ministry in Jeremiah’s call narrative (1:8). Thus, Balentine asserts that it is this promise that Jeremiah invokes in this prayer, “and it is his confidence in, indeed his assumption of, God’s faithfulness to this promise that he confesses when he begins his prayer with ‘O Lord.’”²⁸ The promised presence is believed, but how it will occur is unknown and can not be manipulated.

The lament contains three elements: the petition (verse 15b), a statement of innocence and fidelity (verses 15c-17), and a statement of complaint (verse 18). The petition’s initial words “you know” are abrupt. Brueggemann claims they may be: “an act of trust and submission to the One from whom no secret can be hidden.” But they may also be: “words of reproach to Yahweh, who knows and yet does nothing on behalf of the one who suffers innocently.”²⁹ The petition consists in four imperative verbs: “remember,” “visit,” “take vengeance,” and “do not seize” (RSV “take away”). According to Brueggemann, these four imperatives are curious because they ask God both to be patient and not to “seize” the prophet. This abrupt verb “seize” is used in Amos to describe the prophetic call (Amos 7:15), and in Gen. 5:24 is used with reference to God’s seizure of Enoch. Here the term refers to the death of the prophet,³⁰ thus Jeremiah prays in order to save his life. For Brueggemann, this fight for his life reveals a theological stance towards death that is vastly different

²⁶ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: Chapters 1-25*, 456.

²⁷ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 145.

²⁸ Balentine, “Jeremiah, Prophet of Prayer,” 335.

²⁹ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 145.

³⁰ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 145.

from that of Kübler-Ross. We will address this view of death in our discussion of Kübler-Ross's stage five.

The imperatives suggest not only a statement of strong passion, but also an established relationship that permits bold and candid speech. This petition is not the beginning of the relationship.³¹ It rests on promises and previous interactions. This candid dialogue between God and Jeremiah demonstrates how important an intimate, trusting relationship with God is for the prophet, and thus for the prophetic religious educator.

In stage three, something akin to Kübler-Ross's bargaining occurs in Israel's laments. Biblical Form critics call it: "motivation,"³² giving God reason for changing the situation. Israel's reasons, like Kübler-Ross's bargaining include good conduct, reliance upon God, covenant fidelity, and outright innocence. Brueggemann claims that Israel is much bolder in communicating with God, resorting to: "threats, intimidation, and appeals to Yahweh's pride and vanity."³³ We certainly see this in Jeremiah 15c-17. Here the prophet supplies the motivations for God's heeding the petition. For example, in verse 15c Jeremiah reminds God that it is the Lord who has gotten him in this mess. Since God is responsible, God must rectify.

Jeremiah has not only embraced the prophetic mandate, but has delighted in the words entrusted to him by Yahweh. In verse 16, Jeremiah insists that when the words of the Lord were found, he ate them. Scholars wonder if the Lord's word "found" in this passage is a reference to the scroll found during the Temple renovation in 622.³⁴ Others think it is a reference to Jeremiah's calling in which God put the divine word in Jeremiah's mouth (1:9). There is yet another parallel: the prophet Ezekiel also ate the word of the Lord when he consumed a scroll in Ezekiel 2:8-3:3. In eating the word of God, Jeremiah is not only personally sustained by that word, but the prophet takes the word into himself; he makes God's word part of his being. Perhaps this is why when the prophet describes his avoiding the proclamation of God's word: "it feels something like a fire shut up in his bones" (20:8-9). God's word has become such an integral part of Jeremiah that to avoid proclaiming is to damage himself. So it is for the prophetic religious educator who is called by God to proclaim God's word to God's people.

Moreover, Jeremiah maintains that God's word was a joy and delight. Not only has he accepted the prophetic mandate, but he was delighted by the words entrusted to him by God. The joy and delight experienced may have been intense. Holladay asserts that use of the marriage terms "joy" and "delight" suggest that Jeremiah's acceptance of the call to be a messenger of Yahweh's word gave him the delight analogous to that in marriage³⁵ (since marriage was forbidden him by God in 16:2). This marriage theme is strengthened by the term "called by the name of God." Being called by God's name has the connotation of ownership³⁶ and is used to describe the relationship of

³¹ Ibid., 145.

³² Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," 269.

³³ Ibid., 269.

³⁴ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: Chapters 1-25*, 458.

³⁵ Ibid., 458.

³⁶ Craigie *Jeremiah 1-25*, 210. He asserts that this is the only time in scripture where an individual is called by God's name.

a bride to the bridegroom. How ironic is it then, that in 20:7, Jeremiah's accusation of sexual assault³⁷ by God suggests that this metaphorical marriage was a farce?

Stage four, which is characterized by depression, is likewise experienced by Israel, but Brueggemann claims Israel's depression, while present, is differently nuanced. He claims that Kübler-Ross's suffering subject has no one to address in his or her complaints, and thus will finally be depressed. On the other hand, because of the form of Israel's lament and the covenantal relationship that undergirds it, Israel's anger is more "healthy and buoyant."³⁸ He claims that Israel's anger never becomes a "full blown depression"³⁹ because within the form of lament there is automatically one who not only listens, but also takes Israel's protests seriously. God is addressed in passionate expectancy, not in hopeless despair, although it is admittedly difficult to discern the difference through external observation. Israel's grief is dialogical, not monological. Unfortunately, unlike the other stages, Brueggemann does not supply textual evidence for this claim, thus making a correlation in Jeremiah difficult to find.

There is a possible parallel in verse 17, which describes additional implications of Jeremiah's calling. Because of his prophetic mission, he is socially isolated and did not join in the usual social relationships. Craigie claims that the prophetic vocation requires "an unnatural way of life."⁴⁰ His prophetic vocation prevented him from being a normal person and in fact brought rejection by his people. The phrase "your (God's) hand was upon me" is a figure of speech meaning inspiration, for God's hand is a metaphor for God's Spirit.⁴¹ It is interesting that the divine hand metaphor in extra-biblical literature is associated with illness, for earlier descriptions of pre-classical, ecstatic, prophetic inspiration often used terms that now pertain to emotional illnesses. Is this association with illness in any descriptive of Jeremiah's state of being? Jeremiah's complaint "I sat alone," highlights his segregation, reminding one of the requirement that lepers should sit alone, outside the camp (Lev. 13:46). Jeremiah had become a social leper, an outcast among his own people because they had excluded him. Next Jeremiah describes the reason for his ousting: "you have filled me with indignation." In other words, he is possessed with the message of doom he is charged to deliver. One wonders what physical and emotional symptoms would accompany such a divine obsession. What burdens, then, befall the prophetic educator who likewise represents the people to God and vice versa? In this passage the prophet admits that the prophetic mandate has been the overriding reality of his life. He asks for that to which he is entitled as a faithful partner and obedient servant.⁴²

Jeremiah's petition reaches a fevered pitch in verse 18, where Jeremiah describes the "pain" of his circumstance as: "unceasing, a incurable wound which refuses to be healed." This word pain refers to physical as well as psychic pain.⁴³ The ancient worldview considered illness to be a sign of sin, but here Jeremiah claims that he has not

³⁷ Kathleen, M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25*, ed. J.M. Roberts, Society of Biblical Literature Dissertations Series 94 J (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 159.

³⁸ Brueggemann, "The Formfulness of Grief," 269.

³⁹ Ibid., 270.

⁴⁰ Craigie, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 211.

⁴¹ Jones, *Jeremiah*, 224.

⁴² Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 146.

⁴³ Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: Chapters 1-25*, 460.

sinned. The image of an incurable wound is further developed in Jeremiah 30: 12-17, 8: 18, 21-22. In verse 18b, he then does the unthinkable; Jeremiah accuses God, calling the Lord “a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.” The double use of “you” in this unit places the poetic focus on Yahweh.⁴⁴ God is singled out because God is the cause of his trouble. God has failed to honor the divine promises of solidarity and protection. One is struck again by the audaciousness of the prophet. Shifting the imagery from illness to a stream, the indignant prophet calls God an untrustworthy stream that will not sustain life. Brueggemann asserts: “the fountain of living waters (2:13) has failed.”⁴⁵ Note that Jeremiah is not surprised that proclaiming God’s word has provoked hostility; it was a harsh word designed to be “iconoclastic,”⁴⁶ shattering all conventions. What surprises him here is that the One who has sent him has not stood by him. The prophet turns out to be more faithful than the God who sent him!⁴⁷ This is a remarkable accusation, characteristic of the utterly direct and honest approach of the prophet.

Finally, in verse 19, God responds, but the Lord’s initial response is more a rebuke than an assurance. As God earlier called Judah to “return” to God (3:22; 4:1), now God requires the same of Jeremiah. God characterizes Jeremiah’s accusation as “worthless,” unworthy of one who is God’s spokesperson, while the words God gives the prophet are “precious.” In effect, Jeremiah is told, “Get your act together if you want to continue as my prophet.”⁴⁸ At the end of verse 19, a play on the word “turn” demands that Judah repent (“turn to you”) and the prophet not give in to the people (“turn to them”) who persecute him for speaking the word of the Lord. The Lord demands that Jeremiah turn from his complaints and recriminations, only then, can he again serve as the mouth of the Lord. Many scholars attempt to soften these words by claiming that here Jeremiah is not personally at fault, but standing as a representative of the faith community,⁴⁹ which is at fault. They are ashamed of his frail humanity. But to Kathleen O’Connor, his frailty is a positive attribute: “Uniting the suffering person and the prophet causes the prophet to witness to God even in his broken humanity.”⁵⁰ In this way, Jeremiah carries on the tradition of the Suffering Servant, of Israel, and of Christ Jesus. Jeremiah may “stand again before me” (God). The expression “stand before me” is one used of the service of God (1Kg. 17:1; 18:15; 2Kg. 3:14; 5:16); and in the Temple (Deut. 10:8; Ezek. 44:15; 2Chr. 29:11).⁵¹ Not only must Jeremiah purge his speech, but he also must stand firm; he must not alter his message to appeal to the people as his prophetic contemporaries; he must wait for them to turn to him.

At last, it is in verses 20-21 that Jeremiah receives a word from God that will satisfy. Here God offers Jeremiah at least some assurance. The image of the prophet as a “fortified wall of bronze,” reminiscent of his calling (1:18),⁵² assures Jeremiah of God’s continuing protection. Still, Jeremiah recognizes that he will still encounter resistance “they will fight against you.” It is not quite clear what God’s promises of presence,

⁴⁴ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 146.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

⁴⁶ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 16.

⁴⁷ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 147.

⁴⁸ Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, 137.

⁴⁹ Jones, *Jeremiah*, 225.

⁵⁰ O’Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah*, 136

⁵¹ Jones, *Jeremiah*, 225.

⁵² Craigie, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 211.

deliverance, and redemption may mean for Jeremiah except that “they (his enemies) shall not prevail over you.” If Jeremiah hopes that God will ease the burden of his service or end the conflict that surrounds him, then God’s assurance here is at best partial. Furthermore, there is no hint that God intends to relent in judging Judah, and the threat of “iron from the north” still looms. This prophetic complaint ends with an evident tension between God and Jeremiah. Jeremiah expected more of God and God expected more of Jeremiah.⁵³ Yet, God promises to renew Jeremiah’s strength and guarantees his safety. He is again able to proclaim the word of the Lord.

In the fifth stage, where Kübler-Ross describes acceptance, meaning serene resignation to or triumphant affirmation of death as the final outcome,⁵⁴ Israel offers praise. This doxology is undergirded by the certainty that the sufferer has been heard and the situation dealt with. Both responses, acceptance and praise, depend upon the presence of another with whom the sufferer may shed tears, pound fists, rant, and shout. This presence is articulated in God’s response to Israel: “Fear not, I am with you.” For Kübler-Ross, someone from the medical community most likely performs this pastoral duty, thus assuring the sufferer that he or she is not as alone as is feared. Similarly, the presence of God is promised Jeremiah in verse 20: “for I (God) am with you to save you and deliver you.” Jeremiah has no one else on whom he can depend, so he clings to God alone. We do not see the resulting praise in response to God’s promises that are seen in the Psalms, but it surely occurred, for who could not respond with praise in the face of such promises? Perhaps this is the most important role of the prophet, and thus, the prophetic educator—to imaginatively⁵⁵ proclaim through lament that God’s grace is at work even when others may not see it.

Jeremiah responded to the persecution resulting from the ministry with confusion, bitterness, and recriminations. While written for a specific time and place, this sad and angry prayer captures a human experience that has a universal quality about it. The innocent suffering wherein God becomes a deceitful stream is an experience known to every generation of believers. In this experience, faithful ones are led through a dark valley to emerge with renewed hope.

The Lord responded with a call for repentance and a reaffirmation of Jeremiah’s calling. This passage reflects the great depth of despair that Jeremiah experienced in his ministry. Brueggemann claims that such risk is expected for any who protest against “established reality.”⁵⁶ The conclusion of the matter is the renewal of Jeremiah’s office in terms of his original calling with the reassurance of divine assistance.

This prayer of Jeremiah becomes the prayer of people who, in many times and places, have responded to God’s call, served the Lord in costly ways, but in the end feared they were abandoned by God. Partially, this text speaks the words of comfort all long to hear. Yet alongside this word of comfort, Jeremiah 15:15-21 also illustrates that the purpose of God’s comfort is so persons can serve God fully and freely, even when the cost is high. Prophets and apostles and martyrs and Christ Jesus himself have witnessed in word and deed to the Comforter’s call to costly service.

⁵³ Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, 139.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 27.

⁵⁵ In *The Prophetic Imagination*, Brueggemann claims that the prophet can envision the newness God is creating and then encourages God’s people to join in God’s work. This ability is prophetic imagination.

⁵⁶ Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25*, 144.

What are the contributions of Jeremiah 15:10-21 to a description of the prophetic educator? 1) The prophetic educator, like Jeremiah, is an expert pray-er with a mature and intimate relationship with God. He or she knows, participates in, and teaches many different forms of prayer. Such a maturity has broad implications both for theological education and the nurturance of the educator's spiritual life beyond seminary. 2) The prophetic educator is especially one who intercedes on behalf of God's people for their well-being. The practical implication of this priestly function is one of the issues at the heart of the current debate in the PCUSA on the ordination of religious educators. As such, it also suggests changes needed in theological education. 3) The prophetic educator is called by God to proclaim God's word to God's people. In this respect, the religious educator has many tools and a variety of settings in which to proclaim God's word. 4) The prophetic educator is both an individual and a representative of God's people to God and vice versa. Attention to the nurture of the educator's personal and spiritual life needs to occur so he or she can live in and between the human and the divine. 5) The prophetic educator works to incorporate the imaginative expression of lament into the Church's life.

So, what would a prophetic educator do with Mary? Perhaps he or she would help her pick out a psalm of lament, a sad song to match her mood. Then he or she would sing, shout, or wail it with her. He or she would offer other opportunities for the people of God to mourn with Mary, thus helping her express, and manage her grief. Together, they would perform this ritual again, and again, and again, all the while knowing that *eventually*, perhaps haltingly, there would be praise.

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