

Jeremiah Lecture Notes—Summer 2011
Jeremiah's Confessions

Jer. 11:18-12:6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18

Introduction: The “Confessions of Jeremiah” are a collection of responses of Jeremiah to the LORD. These are essentially prayers of Jeremiah. These confessions relate to the reader much about Jeremiah’s prayer life and his relationship with the LORD.¹

--Jeremiah’s confessions exhibit a great deal of mental and spiritual unrest. What are the sources and effects of Jeremiah’s mental and spiritual unrest?

--His Call Experience—His call experience laid out something of a *Via Dolorosa* for Jeremiah. He had begun timidly and reluctantly, and his experience validated his reasons for concern.

--An Adulterous People—Jeremiah loved his people, but they were unfaithful to Yahweh. Then when the prophet tried to help the people, they sought his life. And to compound the situation, the poor and weak suffered to a greater extent than the leaders who responsible for the disasters.

--An Exacting Lord—The LORD expected Jeremiah to obey. The prophet did not preach because he was eager to deliver the message, but because he was compelled to do so. In fact, he could not cease proclaiming even when he wanted to do so.

--Jeremiah’s confessions and prayers reflect certain values. The prophet’s relationship with Yahweh was based upon several assumptions.

1. He assumed that he could communicate with God, even without ritual or liturgical intervention.
2. He assumed that Yahweh would hear and answer his prayers.
3. He assumed that he could influence the LORD by his prayers.
4. He believed that he could bring any matter before the LORD in prayer. One might compare here Brueggemann’s discussion of psalms of disorientation.²
5. He assumed that God would help him. God had the necessary resource to resolve the matters at hand.

Jeremiah 11:18-12:6—Like a Lamb led to the Slaughter

Jer. 11:18-23—Because the LORD revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time he showed me what they were doing. I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying, “Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more.”

But, O LORD Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind,
let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.

“Therefore this is what the LORD says about the men of Anathoth who are seeking your life and saying, ‘Do not prophesy in the name of the LORD or you will die by our hands’--therefore this is what the LORD Almighty says: ‘I

¹ The basic data in this section is from Steven P. Hicks, “An Investigation of Jeremiah’s Prayer Life,” Unpublished Th.D. Dissertation, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1973, *passim*; as summarized in Philip J. Lee, “A Critical Book Review of An Investigation of Jeremiah’s Prayer-Life by Steven P. Hicks,” An Unpublished Paper, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1984), *passim*.

will punish them. Their young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters by famine. Not even a remnant will be left to them, because I will bring disaster on the men of Anathoth in the year of their punishment.”

--Jeremiah proclaims his innocence, like a lamb, a lamb that has been subjected to threats and plots. People have wanted to kill him and remove him from the people's memories.

--The prophet calls upon God for vengeance. He calls on the almighty LORD, who is a righteous judge for protection. A question of interpretation revolved around the final word in v. 20, “cause” (Hebrew *rib* רִיב).

--The term is used by the prophets as a legal term, but normally with God as subject, presenting his “case” concerning his people, with the people deserving judgment. In Jer. 18:20, Jeremiah is presenting the “case” and asking the LORD, the righteous judge, to pronounce his enemies guilty.

--However, another connotation of the term is in the sense of physical, rather than legal, combat. In this case, Jeremiah has turned his battle over to the LORD. However, sense Yahweh is referred to as the “righteous judge,” the legal use of the term seems warranted. Jeremiah has simply altered the normal use of the term in the prophetic literature.

--Jeremiah has discovered that the plot is among the people of his hometown, a further insult to the prophet. God's resolution is that He will bring disaster upon those who seek his life.

Jeremiah 12:1-6— 12:1 You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you.

Yet I would speak with you about your justice:

Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?

JER 12:2 You have planted them, and they have taken root; they grow and bear fruit.

You are always on their lips but far from their hearts.

JER 12:3 Yet you know me, O LORD; you see me and test my thoughts about you.

Drag them off like sheep to be butchered! Set them apart for the day of slaughter!

JER 12:4 How long will the land lie parched and the grass in every field be withered?

Because those who live in it are wicked, the animals and birds have perished.

Moreover, the people are saying, “He will not see what happens to us.”

JER 12:5 “If you have raced with men on foot and they have worn you out, how can you compete with horses?

If you stumble in safe country, how will you manage in the thickets by the Jordan?

JER 12:6 Your brothers, your own family-- even they have betrayed you;

they have raised a loud cry against you. Do not trust them, though they speak well of you.”

--Jeremiah cannot understand how a righteous God can allow him—the righteous—to suffer, while at the same time allowing the “wicked” and “faithless” to prosper. He again uses the Hebrew *rib* in bringing his “case” to the LORD for justice.

--These people talk of God, but they do not know Him. He is “on their lips” but not in “their hearts.”

--Jeremiah then (v. 3b) calls upon God to “butcher” and “slaughter” his enemies. These words of imprecation are difficult for modern ears. However, they may simply represent a healthy release of anger.

--In fact, Brueggemann³ has argued that of the three possibilities for dealing with this kind of vengeful feeling, the prophet has chosen the best one. [The other two are denial

³ In an unpublished lecture, Christchurch Cathedral, Houston, TX, Feb. 18-19, 2005. See also W. Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *Journal for the Study of the OT* 36 (1986): 57-71.

and action, the first of which leading to psychosis and the second to violent, dangerous, and sinful actions of vengeance.]

--The LORD's response seems to be "you ain't seen nothing yet!" Jeremiah has run with men, but soon he would race with horses.

--Yahweh tells Jeremiah not to trust even his family, because even they are deceitful. Jeremiah had said that his enemies spoke of God without knowing Him. God says that Jeremiah's family speaks well of him, but they have his demise in their hearts.

Jeremiah 15:10-21

--Jeremiah: "Why was I born?"

JER 15:10 Alas, my mother, that you gave me birth,

a man with whom the whole land strives and contends!

I have neither lent nor borrowed, yet everyone curses me.

JER 15:11 The LORD said, "Surely I will deliver you for a good purpose;

surely I will make your enemies plead with you in times of disaster and times of distress.

JER 15:12 "Can a man break iron--iron from the north--or bronze?"

JER 15:13 Your wealth and your treasures I will give as plunder, without charge,

because of all your sins throughout your country.

JER 15:14 I will enslave you to your enemies in a land you do not know,

for my anger will kindle a fire that will burn against you."

--In a manner similar to Job, Jeremiah lamented the day of his birth. Surely, he is questioning his call, since God had told him that the call was before birth. Jeremiah wishes that he had not been born, thus avoiding the prophetic role altogether. Lending and borrowing, both activities that tend to cause conflict, have not been a part of the prophet's lifestyle, yet he is treated with contempt.

--Verses 11-14 are extremely difficult, primarily because of textual and translation issue. A simple perusal of various English versions displays the difficulty. As Fretheim concluded, "Only a general sense of these verses can be given."⁴

--The interpretive problems revolve around the speaker in these verses. Is Jeremiah quoting the LORD, in continuation of the lament, or is Yahweh responding to Jeremiah? The Masoretic Text and LXX do not agree, thus compounding the issue.

--Verses 12-14 appear to be the LORD's reassurance to the prophet that he will be vindicated, because his enemies will not thwart His plans.

--Jeremiah 15:15-18—Jeremiah: "Avenge Me!"

JER 15:15 You understand, O LORD; remember me and care for me. Avenge me on my persecutors.

You are long-suffering--do not take me away; think of how I suffer reproach for your sake.

JER 15:16 When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight,

for I bear your name, O LORD God Almighty.

JER 15:17 I never sat in the company of revelers, never made merry with them;

I sat alone because your hand was on me and you had filled me with indignation.

JER 15:18 Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?

Will you be to me like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails?

⁴ T. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 236. See also, P. Miller, "Jeremiah," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 696-697.

--As Fretheim points out, "Jeremiah's lament moves from petition to protestation to complaint."⁵

--The prophet calls on God to remember him. He asks for God's vengeance for his suffering. He knows that God is faithful, and that faithfulness is a reason for God to act.

--The protestation begins in the last line of v. 15. He protests that he (the prophet) has remained faithful to his calling, but that calling has reaped for him reproach. He protests that he gladly ingested God's word, thus in some cosmic way bearing the very name of the LORD. Yet, in spite of his faithful actions, God has neglected him. He sits alone in indignation because the LORD's "hand was upon" him."

--Verse 18 is a classic complaint, "WHY?" Why does the pain go on? Why is the wound so terrible? Why is the wound incurable? Where is the living water promised in Jer. 2:13? He had not neglected the LORD. He had not dug cisterns for other sources of water. He had trusted in the word of the LORD. Yet, here he was, sitting alone, dry, injured, and thirsty. Indeed, Yahweh was no better for him than a wadi in the dry season—nothing but a dry river bed, longing for rain to fill its courses.

--As Miller points out, Jeremiah has cited three causes for his lament: his own pain and isolation, Yahweh's hand upon him (i.e., "the deceitful brook"), and persons who persecute him.⁶ These three sources of lament often appear together. The human condition of suffering leads one to question God. When suffering appears unbearable, God seems to be absent at best or an enemy at worst. As one scholar suggested, Jeremiah might turn Paul's testimony around and cry, "If Yahweh is against me, who is for me?"⁷

Jeremiah 15:19-21—Yahweh: "Return and I will save!"

JER 15:19 Therefore this is what the LORD says:

"If you repent, I will restore you that you may serve me;
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words, you will be my spokesman.
Let this people turn to you, but you must not turn to them.

JER 15:20 I will make you a wall to this people, a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you but will not overcome you,
for I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the LORD.

JER 15:21 "I will save you from the hands of the wicked and redeem you from the grasp of the cruel."

--Are these verses a call to Jeremiah to repent? Have his words so offended God that he must repent or no longer serve as a prophet? This is the implication of the NIV. However, the Hebrew for "repent" (*shuv* שׁוּב) also means "to turn" or "to return." Perhaps the call here is not to "repent," but to "return" to the focus of his calling.⁸

--This Hebrew verb is used three times in v. 19. Jeremiah is "to repent" or "return" to his calling (or to the LORD, if repentance is intended) not "turn" back to the people. Rather, the people must "turn" to Jeremiah, heeding his words. Thus, he must continue to faithfully deliver the word of the LORD. If he continues, Yahweh will deliver him.

⁵ Fretheim, 237.

⁶ Miller, 699.

⁷ J. M. Bracke, "Expository Articles," *Interpretation* 37 (Jan. 1983): 173-187; quoted in R. Kelvin Moore, "The Confession of Jeremiah," an unpublished paper presented in a Th.D. seminar, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1986.

⁸ Fretheim, 241-242.

Jeremiah 18:18-23; Jeremiah 20:7-18

--Following the two parabolic actions in chapters 18-20, Jeremiah faces strong opposition, leading to strong words of protestation from the prophet.

JER 18:18 They said, "Come, let's make plans against Jeremiah; for the teaching of the law by the priest will not be lost, nor will counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophets. So come, let's attack him with our tongues and pay no attention to anything he says."

JER 18:19 Listen to me, O LORD; hear what my accusers are saying!

JER 18:20 Should good be repaid with evil? Yet they have dug a pit for me.

Remember that I stood before you and spoke in their behalf to turn your wrath away from them.

JER 18:21 So give their children over to famine; hand them over to the power of the sword.

Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men be put to death,
their young men slain by the sword in battle.

JER 18:22 Let a cry be heard from their houses when you suddenly bring invaders against them,
for they have dug a pit to capture me and have hidden snares for my feet.

JER 18:23 But you know, O LORD, all their plots to kill me.

Do not forgive their crimes or blot out their sins from your sight.

Let them be overthrown before you; deal with them in the time of your anger.

--The prophet angrily cries out for God's vengeance against Pashhur and his other enemies. He asks—demands—that the LORD pour out His vengeance upon them. These words in 18:18-23 are some of his strongest words. While no one can justify these desires, they do, nonetheless represent honest feelings of frustration (see above on 12:1-6). Should Jeremiah have been so honest? Should this much pathos be in the scriptures? Perhaps not, but God's Word continues to be utterly human, while yet powerfully divine.