

Job/Jeremiah: faith in the face of misfortune

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Jeremiah A

How do you hold on to faith when everything is falling apart around you and inside you? Can you still believe when your theological universe collapses? These are not new questions, for all their contemporary flavour. The struggle to hang on – still believing in God, still praying, still serving – is epitomised by two figures from the prophetic and the wisdom traditions: Jeremiah and Job.

All prophets are a bit strange, but the book that bears Jeremiah's name is stranger than most. It's a mixture of material: prose sermons, poetic oracles, metaphors and enacted parables, biographical account and piercing lament. It's not chronologically ordered, which can make it confusing as it jumps back and forth in time. Jeremiah was active during the reigns of the last four kings of Judah: Josiah (640-609 BCE), Jehoiakim (609-598), Jehoiachin (598-597) and Zedekiah (597-587), and carried on until some time after Jerusalem fell in 587 BCE. So he began his career in that island of relative peace and worship under Josiah, but by the time of his death Judah itself had gone under. This was never going to be an easy story, to tell – or to live.

Jeremiah describes his call and commissioning as a prophet, being sent by God to go where God directs him and to speak what God commands.

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD 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." (1:9-10, NRSV)

Brueggemann suggests that the range of those six verbs shapes the book of Jeremiah: the ending of beloved Jerusalem (plucking up, pulling down, destroying and overthrowing) and the formation of a new beloved Jerusalem (building and planting).¹ When Jerusalem fell in 587 it meant the end of the two institutions – the Temple and the Davidic monarchy – which represented for the people the assurance that God had chosen them and was with them.² It called into question Israel's special relationship with God: how do you live as the people of God when God isn't there any more? The theological universe of Jeremiah and of his people had collapsed: could they still believe?

Jeremiah had seen what was coming, the people had not. God's people had become foolish: 'they do not know me', says God, 'they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.' (4:22) Corruption and idolatry had taken up residence in the land, and God was judging the people, while they, their leaders, and the other prophets were proclaiming business as usual. Over and over Jeremiah speaks God's words, trying to call them back before it was too late.

Now, therefore, say to the people of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: Thus says the LORD: Look I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. But they say, "It is no use! We will follow our own plans, and

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: a commentary on Jeremiah 1-25*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: 1988, Eerdmans), 24.

² R.E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, Interpretation Commentary (Atlanta: 1988, John Knox Press), 6.

each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil will.” (18:11-12)
The prophet’s task was to interpret theologically the crisis the nation was facing³, to point out, to a people who would not listen, what God was doing in their history. Jeremiah was called to speak faith in the midst of secularity, to insist that there was a moral dimension to what was happening.

As we might expect, this proved an extraordinarily difficult task and Jeremiah paid a heavy price. He was beaten, put in the stocks, thrown into a cistern. Even the people in his home town of Anathoth, even his kinsfolk and his own family, wanted to kill him. (11:21, 12:6) All his close friends were watching for him to stumble. (20:10) ‘I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter’, he says (11:19). Several sections of the book give us Jeremiah’s ‘confessions’, where he opens his heart in lamentation. He tells God exactly what all this is doing to him: ‘under the weight of your hand I sat alone, for you had filled me with indignation. Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed?’ (15:17-18a) This, says Petersen, is Jeremiah at prayer, ‘scared, lonely, hurt, angry’.⁴

Significantly, Jeremiah blames God, and not the people, for his pain. ‘My heart is crushed within me, all my bones shake; I have become like a drunkard, like one overcome by wine, because of the LORD and because of his holy words.’ (23:9) God has done this, and God’s words may well be holy, but they are, accuses Jeremiah, scarcely honest: ‘Truly, you are to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail.’ (15:18b) Like Job, Jeremiah hits back at God, trying to provoke a response, seeking support which does not seem to come. Like Job, he curses the day of his birth, wishing he had been killed in the womb rather than being born to a life of toil, sorrow and shame. (20:14-18) And Jeremiah goes further than Job, he accuses God of first seducing him and then raping him. Habel comments, ‘Finally God prevails, and the victim is left for people to mock. The overpowering of Jeremiah with the word of doom he must speak amid constant derision and disgrace is tantamount to being raped by God.’⁵

Part of Jeremiah’s pain was because these were his people, against whom he was forced to speak, and he loved them. Abraham Heschel points out that not only was the prophet someone concerned with right and wrong but he was also ‘a soul of extreme sensitivity to human suffering.’⁶ He would speak the words God gave him to speak, and if the people would not listen he would weep, bitterly and in secret, for them. (13:17)

Calling up metaphor and acting out parables, Jeremiah lived out God’s message to the people at a particular point in history, even as that message tore him apart. Horribly painful though it was, he was able to see the world through the eyes of God⁷ - the God who plucks up and pulls down, the God who destroys and overthrows. Much of Jeremiah’s suffering came precisely because of his faith. Did he manage to hold on to it as everything fell apart around him?

THE BOOK OF JOB

³ W Lee Humphreys, *Crisis and Story: An Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd edition (Mountain View, CA: 1990, Mayfield), 159.

⁴ Eugene H Peterson, *Run with the Horses: the quest for life at its best*, (Downers Grove, IL:1983, Inter-Varsity Press), 103.

⁵ Norman Habel, *The God of Jeremiah* (Homebush, NSW: 1996, St Paul’s), 33.

⁶ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: an introduction* (New York: 1962, Harper Colophon), 120.

⁷ Heschel, 138.

Part A:

This is a book of painful and unavoidable questions, on the meaning of suffering, of life and existence. It is one of the greatest works of Western literature. Of all the books in the First Testament, Job requires least by way of prerequisite knowledge, because we all have personal acquaintance with the questions the book raises. The shape of the book is deceptively simple: a folk tale that provides a narrative framework for a series of poetic dialogues by Job and his three friends. The first two chapters introduce us to a wealthy potentate of extreme moral character, whose faithfulness is challenged by the Satan/Adversary, who is a member of the heavenly court. God allows Job to be tested, and Job refuses to blame God.

READING: Job ch.1-2 and 42:7-17. This is the prose section of the book, and provides the basis for an ancient folk tale that may go back as far as the 18th century BCE. What lies between these chapters is poetry and dialogue. Job is a jumble of genres.

THE FOLK TALE: The curtain opens on the land of Uz; it even sounds like a "once upon a time" story (v.1). This "blameless and upright man" (v.1) is not "everyman," but "superman." So we can expect a tale of an unshakeable being who slips on the banana peel of life - or has his top hat knocked askew by a well-directed snowball. But he will finally emerge, banana peel on his shoe, snow clinging to his hat, unbroken with perfect integrity intact. And that is probably how the original version ended.

Job's life is flawless. He really is the perfect moral businessman who knows how to succeed at the reward game in life, and with God. Keep the rules, do all things right, sit back and wait for rewards. He even takes out celestial insurance policies on his children (1:4-5). It was all described by one writer (Calvin Trilling) as "the Era of year-round Yom Kippur."

But the scene shifts from Uz. The heavenly court appears. God and the angels, including the Adversary, are there. "Did you notice my servant, Job?" (1:8) is a loaded question. Behind it lay the reasons and the ground for Job's piety and relationship with God. Satan attributes Job's piety to dependence upon and gratitude towards the divine Creator who blesses, protects, and gives good things. Job's piety arises out of a creaturely response to divine goodness. In v.10 the image of the hedge shows God as giving protection and safety from human and non-human marauders.

From v.13 on, the perfectly wonderful becomes perfectly miserable. It is all like some disastrous insurance advertisement on television: a cyclone bears down on the roof, a cricket ball is heading for the large glass window, a burglar is making off with the video, a tree is falling on the garage in which the new car is parked, and flames are coming out of the basement. Here, in Job, in six verses, is more tragedy than in the entire TV advertisement. Even after a second round of heavenly wagers, which now brings physical suffering, Job, remains firm. Nothing can shake him.

A THEOLOGY THAT IS FLAWED: The original version of Job was an edifying tale that ran - perfect world / disaster / perfect world restored. This is the pattern of the whole of the Bible when you reflect on Eden / sin / new creation in the Apocalypse. Job's perfect world is built on the assumption that God played by a set of moral rules that were widely known and publicised to humanity. This is what is called the Deuteronomistic theology, underlying the biblical works stretching from Deuteronomy to 2 Kings. It emerges in Deuteronomy

11:8-12; 28:1-2; 30:15-20. Do good and good things will be done for you; do evil and evil will be done to you (the theory of retribution). This was the explanation that was given for the tragedy of Israel's exile to Babylon; they lost their land, their king, and their temple. The people's sin and the sin of the monarchy were blamed.

The problem with such theology is that it does not take long to come up with a terrible distortion, that if bad things happen to you it is because you are a bad person. If good things happen to you it is because you are a good person. "What have I done to deserve this?" "Why does God let this happen?" We have found this terrible distortion of God's justice to be alive and all too well today. It was not long before some people began to question such a neat explanation of God's dealings with humanity. And the folk tale of Job contains some pretty big flaws. I hope you felt uneasy with the story.

Look again at Job, at God, and at the Adversary. Does the way each one behaves leave you feeling uncomfortable?

a. Job obeys the rules, engages in acts of purification in case one of those rules may have been inadvertently broken, and God is supposed to "play fair" and preserve and protect all that is dear to Job. Self-interest is the motive the Adversary ascribed to him. But Job suffers not because he violated some holy rule; bad things do happen to a good person in this plot, and this destroys the foundation upon which the neat and tidy world of the story is based.

b. God's behaviour has to be questioned; it is a religious atom bomb under the world of a distorted picture of God's dealing with humanity. It all appears like an apparently unmotivated divine attack on Job. The crucial question is not why Job suffers so, but what kind of God and what kind of creation allows for such an arbitrary God who goes in for such testing on the basis of a wager. And the result is the suffering of a genuinely righteous person; this was a mathematical impossibility in the equation: *Good things happen to good people; Bad things happen to bad people.*

How does one survive when one's theological universe collapses? Who is the God we have come to know? Is God really like we think God is?

c. The Adversary is an interesting figure, too. The fact is he is an angel, not a bad one, one of the court of heaven, carrying out a particular function in the heavenly scheme as "challenger" or "tester" of humanity. He loses both wagers and disappears from the story. We are not yet at the stage when under foreign influences, i.e. Persian (with its god of good and god of evil), we will have the Devil who represents the Evil god. Even the serpent in the garden in Genesis is one of the 'good animals that God made' (Gen 3:1). He may be a little craftier, but the Adversary is a little more sceptical than the others are. It is wrong to read later theological developments on the Devil back into early biblical material; it is also illuminating to know how, when, and from where the whole question of the Devil got into Christian theology!

Jeremiah B

So, does Jeremiah hang on to his faith amid all the misfortunes that beset him? There were times when he comes close to giving up. Like Job, he lays charges against God ('Why do all who are treacherous thrive?'), while still assuring God that 'my heart is with you.' (12:1-3) He complains, but God lays it on even thicker: 'If you have raced with foot runners and they have wearied you, how will you compete with horses? And if in a safe land you fall down,

how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?’ (12:5). As they say, with friends like that ... who needs enemies?

Jeremiah has several things going for him, that help him hold on when life is almost unbearable and everything is collapsing around him. One is the memory of his original call and commissioning (‘I am with you to deliver you’ 1:8). Another is God’s later promise that whatever happens, Jeremiah himself would survive. But this promise is hard-won. Jeremiah has been complaining about what he sees as God’s deceit: ‘why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable?’ Instead of sympathy, God asks him to repent: the message he has been taking to the people of Jerusalem is turned against him.

Therefore thus says the LORD: if you turn back, I will take you back, and you shall stand before me. If you utter what is precious, and not what is worthless, you shall serve as my mouth. It is they who will turn to you, and not you who will turn to them. And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save and deliver you, says the LORD. I will deliver you out of the hand of the wicked, and redeem you from the grasp of the ruthless.’ (15:19-21)

These exchanges tell us something about Jeremiah. When it got tough – really tough – he prayed: raw, honest, unflinching prayer. The confessional laments lay bare Jeremiah’s inner life. This is an I-Thou dialogue with God: God is someone he talks to, not an It he talks about.⁸ And God talks back. Unlike Job, Jeremiah does not have to wait for most of the book for a response from God. What God says is that Jeremiah is required to be faithful⁹: to rely on God, to stick to God, to be obedient to God. But Jeremiah knows that, despite all the suffering his calling brought him, he would be saved and not abandoned.¹⁰

We eavesdrop on Jeremiah praying and we hear God stiffening his resolve, bolstering his flagging spirits, getting him back on track again. As Peterson reminds us, ‘priorities are re-established in prayer’, over and over, as God listens and responds.¹¹ This is what keeps Jeremiah going, what stops his theological universe coming apart at the seams. Humphreys notes, ‘for all their harshness, Jeremiah’s laments express his ever-deepening trust in and reliance on his god, for his depth of feeling reveals the depth of his relationship with the deity as well.’¹²

This is what enables Jeremiah to convey a stubborn message of hope to his people when at last they begin to face the truth of what is happening. By the simple economic and legal action of buying a field during the siege (32:1-25) he indicates that there will come a time – eventually – when the Babylonian invasion is over and the economy will resume and regain its health.¹³ This is proclamation acted out, a sign of reliance on God, an expression of faith that God is in control. God’s response to Jeremiah’s prayer following the land deal is to indicate that God will give the city into the hands of the Babylonians, but that in the end the people

⁸ Petersen, 98-99.

⁹ Brueggemann, *To pluck up*, 142.

¹⁰ Ralph W Klein, ‘Saying Yes to Exile – and No! Reactions to the Exile in the Book of Jeremiah’ ch 3 from *Israel in Exile*’ <http://fontes.lstc.edu/~rklein/Documents/chap3.htm> accessed 17.07.2013

¹¹ Petersen, 105.

¹² Humphreys, 163.

¹³ Brueggemann, *To Build, to Plant: a commentary on Jeremiah 26-52*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: 1991, Eerdmans), 80-81.

shall return and live in safety and 'they shall be my people and I will be their God'. (32:38) The message of the book of Jeremiah is that the city of Jerusalem will be dismantled by the will and power of God, and not by the will and power of Babylon. That is ultimately a hopeful message, since it makes it possible for a new community and a new covenant to emerge after all the disasters, as a free gift of God.¹⁴

I have heard that a key task of ministry is to 'comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable' – and woe betide the minister who puts anyone into the wrong category! Jeremiah tried and failed to afflict the comfortable, reality-denying leaders and people of Jerusalem, and so the city fell, its citizens carried off into exile in two waves. But after that, the prophet stayed on in the ruins, and wrote to the exiles, offering them comfort in their affliction.

Thus says the LORD of hosts, ... to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them, plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (29:4-7)

This is an amazingly hopeful message, though it may not have been at all what the exiles wanted to hear. They were to put down roots in Babylon, instead of living like refugees; they were to continue their normal lives in family and society. They were even to pray for the foreign empire – and that meant that prayer was still possible, even without the Temple. God had sent them into exile, and God was with them in exile, and God would, in time, bring them home again. (29:11-14) When all the apparatus of faith, all the means by which the people knew that they were special to God – the Temple and the Davidic kingship – was overthrown they discovered new ways to worship, and new ways to be God's people, for God had not deserted them.

They had gone from a city and a land which were supposed to be God's – but which, because of their corruption and idolatry had become increasingly secular, and they had found themselves able to pray in the middle of an overt and pagan secularity. Perhaps we can do the same.

Jeremiah prayed his way through the crisis, finding his trust in God deepening even as he cried out his anger and his distrust of God. And then Jeremiah spoke God's words of hope into the lives of the exiles, telling them it was still possible to sing the Lord's songs in a foreign land, holding out the prospect of building and planting in a new future.

This is another part of the answer to our question about holding on to faith in the face of misfortune. There are things we cannot control: we are not always in charge of our lives, and sometimes disasters will happen. But we can control how we react. We can choose to adapt to new situations instead of despairing. Habel puts it like this: 'There is life after doom. Or, in Jeremiah's theology, new life emerges through the doom.'¹⁵

Job B

¹⁴ Brueggemann, *To pluck up*, 7.

¹⁵ Habel, 65.

JOB'S DEFENSE: Job is not only talking to his friends/comforters; he is talking to a space that God may or may not occupy. He shakes his fist at God, but then his hand opens in longing as he reaches out to God. Job loves God, but he knows that he cannot return to the cosy simple answers of the past. He wants to speak to God and present his case to God, even at the risk of his own life (ch.29-31). Unlike his friends, Job is ready to give up his theology, his system of belief, but he will not give up on the God he loves.

The intensity of Job's bewilderment and pain comes out of his confidence in the justice of God; justice has been miscarried; the Creator should protect and cherish Job, instead of cruelly trapping and destroying him. Suffering is bad enough; suffering without meaning is unbearable.

Ch.29-31 is a summary as if by a defence lawyer. With nostalgia Job recalls his happier days (29:2-6), when life was harmonious and beautiful, and he was respected in the community. But now he is "cast into the mire" (30:19). Cruelty replaces friendship with God; mockery replaces the support of his friends; his neighbours drive him out of community. Job pleads his innocence in 16 solemn legal oaths (ch.31):

"If I have done this...then let this happen..."

God has to act if Job is guilty; if God does not act, then Job is innocent (and dare we say God is guilty??). God now chooses to meet Job face to face.

C. GOD'S SPEECHES: *"Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?" (38:2).* God plays the role of prosecutor in a courtroom, interrogating Job about his knowledge of the world and experience of the universe: (38:4-12, 19, 39; 39:1, 19). Now Job might not have understood the mysteries of the universe which we might understand better today, but the point being made is that wisdom alone was present at creation, plumbing its depths and understanding its secrets. Job's reply in 40:3-5 is quiet and humble. But note that God has changed the subject from Job's suffering to the divine government of the universe:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth...or shut in the sea...?"

One finds it all a little like God thumping God's celestial chest, like a schoolteacher, and saying, "Who do you think you are to be questioning the creator of the universe? Be silent and submit to One who knows better!" Job gets put in his creaturely place, one of awe before the plan of God's creation.

ii. Ch.40:5-42:6. God's second speech dwells on the mythical monsters that threaten to return the world to chaos and destroy the harmony and beauty of the world that God described in the earlier speech. The Behemoth and the Leviathan were the two most feared monsters of destruction in the ancient world; but here they are presented as God's playthings. God asks Job if he has the power to control these creatures (40:15-19 and 41:1-5). God controls the forces of chaos and death; they have a purpose in the plan of God.

Job replies by recognising God's wisdom and power (42:1-6), but his eyes are opened powerfully in v.5-6:

*"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you;
therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes."*

Job sees God face to face and no longer claims to be right; he repents. Chaos does not reign; God does. Evil is restrained. What he had heard at the school of Wisdom and Deuteronomistic teaching has now been supplemented and corrected by his personal experience of seeing God. Dust and ashes may refer to where he sat or his condition as a

human. He need no longer fear; his trust in God is restored. God is right; Job is right with God. The yearning in Psalm 80:3, 7, 19 catches much of Job's longing:

"Let your face shine (on us), that we may be saved."

A SEQUEL TO JOB a poem by Robert Frost (abbreviated).

I've had it on my mind a thousand years
To thank you someday for the way you helped me
Establish once for all the principle
There's no connection man can reason out
Between his just deserts and what he gets.
'Twas a great demonstration we put on.
Too long I've owed you this apology
For the apparently unmeaning sorrow.
You were afflicted with in those old days.
But it was the essence of the trial
You shouldn't understand it at the time.
It had to seem unmeaning to have meaning.
And it came out all right. I have no doubt
You realise by now the part you played
To stultify the Deuteronomist
And change the tenor of religious thought.
My thanks to you for releasing me
From moral bondage to the human race.
You changed all that. You set me free to reign.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STORY: Traditionally the question asked of the book was **"Why do bad things happen to good people?"** The answers are not encouraging:

- 1. Prologue:** It's an arbitrary divine decision; God and Satan had a wager. Like in *King Lear*: "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport."
- 2. Comforters:** Punishment is your own fault; your sin brings it on your own head.
- 3. Job:** God is the cause or source of suffering. You can't trust someone who builds you up on one day, then pulls the trap door out from under you on the next.
- 4. God:** God is free to answer or not answer the question. And doesn't!

What God, and the book, has done is to raise a new question: **"How do we relate to God in faith?"**

- 1. Prologue:** Satan says the relationship is purely mercenary; true mutuality is impossible. We relate to God as provider of gifts.
- 2. Comforters:** It all depends on our being good. There is no friendship, only rules. We control God's grace and mercy by being good or being bad.
- 3. Job:** Relationship is impossible because God is not faithful or trustworthy.
- 4. God:** God cares for all creatures; the God of the whirlwind is free and we have to relate to God in freedom. We neither control, nor are controlled by God. "Let God be God" is the ultimate message of Job. Let us, too, be ourselves so we can relate to God in freedom and dignity.

Conclusion: "The tormented, devout, rebellious man has raged against the human situation and demanded that God *justify his ways to humans*" R.F. McKenzie. Central to both books (Jeremiah and Job) is the way we speak to and about God. Prophecy attacks injustice and

deprivation and their structural causes. Jeremiah epitomises this. Contemplation takes account of God's plan at creation, the wonder that arises in face of God's wisdom and power. Job addresses this, not by answering the problem of suffering but raising the problem of faith. How does it all turn out in the end for both works? New life emerges through the doom. Hope endures!

'The truth that Job has grasped and that has lifted him up to the level of contemplation is that justice alone does not have the final say about how we are to speak of God. Only when we come to realise that God's love is freely bestowed, do we enter fully and definitively into the presence of the God of faith.' (Guitierrez).

ON RETHINKING GOD: How do you respond to this delightful little story of Leo Rosten: (from Vawter B. *Job & Jonah* (Paulist Press) p.48).

On the eve of Yom Kippur, the most solemn and sacred day, an old Jew looked up to heaven and sighed: "Dear God, listen: I, Herschel the tailor, put it to You! The butcher in our village, Shepsel, is a good man, an honourable man, who never cheats anyone and always gives full weight, and never turns away the needy; yet Shepsel himself is so poor that he and his wife sometimes go without meat! ...Or take Fishel, our shoemaker, a model of piety and kindness - yet his beloved mother is dying in terrible pain... And Reb Label, our teacher, who loves all the children he teaches and is loved by all who know him - lives hand to mouth, hasn't a decent suit to his name, and just developed an eye disease that may leave him blind! ... So, on this most holy night, I ask You directly, God: Is this fair? I repeat: Is this fair? ...So, tomorrow, O Lord, on our sacred Yom Kippur - if You forgive us, we will forgive You!"

[I really wonder how God would react to such a prayer!]

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