



Adapted from a woodcut
by Nikos Stavroulakis

Jeremiah—Prophet Of the Soul

Getting acquainted with the stormy, eloquent voice in this quarter's Sabbath School lessons.

by Douglas Clark

READING THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH IS A GUT-wrenching experience. The prophet's words are a "scream in the night."* Jeremiah impatiently demands that we shed deceptive masks and open ourselves to the selves of others, indeed to God. In the political, religious, and social turmoil surrounding the turn from the seventh into the sixth century before Christ, Jeremiah responds to Yahweh's summons "to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10, NRSV).

Over a period of approximately 40 years, Jeremiah is *persona non grata* within Judah's society, both assaulting heartless social injustices and nurturing a personal heart religion. Jeremiah prophesied during a national night of the soul for Judah. Judah liquidated all its assets in the futile and ill-fated attempt to save itself from the ominous Babylonian military machine

that twice crushed the nation, finally devastating its capital and temple. For Jeremiah, the cost involved the loss of friends and ideological foes alike, and ultimately of his life.

From his book we can follow the soul-portrait of the prophet. A young man of priestly lineage when called, he served 40-some years as a prophet of the heart. His "confessions" reveal a deeply susceptible person, with strong emotions and a frank openness about his feelings quite uncommon among his prophetic peers. These "confessions" or personal laments in Jeremiah 11:18-12:6; 15:10f, 15-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; and 20:7-13, 14-18 express the prophet's profound sorrow, acute loneliness, moral anguish at the prosperity of the wicked and suffering of the righteous; awareness of his own sinfulness and God's grace; and renewed energy to proclaim Yahweh's word.

Probably the most poignant laments appear in chapter 20, where the prophet chastises God for overpowering him. At the same time he discovers burning within his bones an unquenchable fire, which he cannot contain.

Douglas Clark, dean of the School of Theology at Walla Walla College, received his M.Div. from Andrews University and his Ph.D. in Hebrew from Vanderbilt University. He is consortium director of the Madaba Plains Project.

O Lord, you have enticed me,
 and I was enticed;
 you have overpowered me,
 and you have prevailed.
 I have become a laughingstock all day long;
 everyone mocks me.
 For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
 I must shout, "Violence and destruction!"
 For the word of the Lord has become for me
 a reproach and derision all day long.
 If I say, "I will not mention him,
 or even speak any more in his name,"
 then within me there is something like a burning fire
 shut up in my bones;
 I am weary with holding it in,
 and I cannot (20:7-9, NRSV).

At length, he comes to the point of cursing his
 birth and everyone connected with it:

Cursed be the day
 on which I was born!
 The day when my mother bore me,
 let it not be blessed!
 Cursed be the man
 who brought the news to my father saying,
 "A child is born to you, a son,"
 making him very glad.
 Let the man be like the cities
 that the Lord overthrew without pity;
 let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,

because he did not kill me in the womb;
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb forever great.
 Why did I come forth from the womb
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame? (20:15-18, NRSV).

A prophet of the heart, Jeremiah looks past
 external actions to the core of the being, the
 center of existence, to the very soul of human
 life. The book delineates three kinds of heart
 religion. First of all the evil heart is tenacious,
 intransigent, and open to divine judgment. It
 is unpredictable in its attitudes, the source of
 pride and deception, and fearful in the face of
 exposure. Chapter 17 exposes a grim plummet
 into the depths of the heart's corruptive deceit:

The heart is devious above all else;
 it is perverse—
 who can understand it? (17:9, NRSV).

Secondly, however, Jeremiah understands
 that a religion of the heart is a gift from God.

Then when you call upon me and come to pray to
 me, I will hear you.
 When you search for me, you will find me; if you
 seek me with all your heart,
 I will let you find me, says the Lord (29:12-14, NRSV).

Study Helps

The following are recommended for further ex-
 amination of Jeremiah.

Brief Outline of the Book

I.	Oracles Against Judah and Jerusalem	1-25
II.	Temple Sermon and Other Prophets	26-29
III.	"Book of Consolation"	30-33
IV.	Narratives About Jeremiah	34-45
V.	Oracles Against Foreign Nations	46-51
VI.	Historical Appendix	52

A Brief Bibliography

- WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic
 Voices in Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).
- To Pluck Up, To Tear Down: A Commentary on the
 Book of Jeremiah 1-25* (Grand Rapids, Mich.:
 Eerdmans, 1988).
- ROBERT P. CARROLL, "Arguing About Jeremiah: Recent
 Studies and the Nation of a Prophetic Book," in
Congress Volume, Lewen 1989, VTS, J. A. Emerton,
 ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1991).
- PHILIP J. KING, *Jeremiah: An Archaeological Compan-
 ion* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993).
- KLAUS KOCH, *The Prophets: The Babylonian and Per-
 sian Periods* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

The “Book of Consolation” in chapters 30-33 consists of a number of positive speeches about the heart. Especially significant are the provisions of the new covenant in 31:31-34, promising internalized, heart-centered response and total forgiveness. God’s graciousness comes to its fullest expression in this promise, which results in safety, security, a new heart, God’s good wishes, and a renewed covenantal ties (32:36-41). These chapters represent the centerpiece of the book of Jeremiah, the basis for New Testament reflections on the new covenant. Consequently, this “Book of Consolation” is the

high point of relational religious faith in the Hebrew Bible.

Finally, God’s heart religion involves Jeremiah’s total commitment to the well-being of his people:

“I will rejoice in doing good to them, and I will plant them in this land in faithfulness, *with all my heart and all my soul*” (32:41, NRSV [emphasis supplied]).

* For some of the most moving language about the prophets in general, see the first chapter of Abraham J. Hechel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), Vol. I, pp. 3-26. Prophetic proclamation as a “scream in the night” appears on page 16.