

Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Human and divine suffering in Jeremiah 11:18-12:13 and the problem of evil

David P. Melvin

The author is a Ph. D. Candidate (ABD) in Biblical Studies (Old Testament) at Baylor University in Waco, TX and a Teaching Fellow in the Department of Religion.

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Introduction

One of the perennial questions which have plagued theology, religion, and humanity in general for millennia is the seeming lack of a positive correlation between righteous living and prosperity. Were it even so simple as there being absolutely no connection between one's behavior and one's prosperity (or the lack thereof), the dilemma would not be so problematic. However, as Job, the classic example of the righteous sufferer, points out:

Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?
Their descendants are established in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes, their houses are safe from fear, and the rod of God is not on them (Job 21:7-9 NASB).

The trouble is that there *does* seem to be a correlation between the way one lives and blessing or curse. But it is a *negative* correlation. The righteous suffer, while the wicked grow fatter and fatter. This fact is well borne out in modern society, in the form of crooked politicians, corrupt businessmen, and persons of wealth and power who advance themselves to the detriment of others. However, it was also readily apparent in antiquity, as is evident not only from the Book of Job, but also from a wide array of wisdom literature from the ancient Near East.¹ Even within the Hebrew Bible such musings are not restricted to Job, but they appear in many texts spanning the entire biblical period. One of the clearest and most poignant statements of this problem is found in Jer. 11:18-12:13. Here the people of Jeremiah's hometown, his own kin, plot against him (11:21), causing Jeremiah to cry out to Yahweh with a *rib*, a formal complaint or lawsuit, asking why God seems to bless the wicked so that they prosper, while the right-

¹ A few examples of ancient Near Eastern theodicies are 'Man and His God', translated by S. N. Kramer (*ANET*, 589-91) and 'The Babylonian Theodicy', translated by Robert D. Biggs (*ANET*, 601-4).

eous (namely, Jeremiah) suffer (12:1-4). The startling answer given to Jeremiah is that the suffering he has endured up to this point is as nothing compared to the troubles that await him (12:5-6). But there is more to the answer than this stern warning, for Yahweh continues on by describing his own personal sorrow at the condition of his people. So hardened are they toward him that he has no choice but to destroy them. But while Yahweh is enraged toward his inheritance, which has turned on him, he is heartbroken at the fact that he must now forsake the love of his life (12:7-13). Herein an answer to Jeremiah's complaint emerges. Jeremiah's fate is tied to that of the people; their suffering will also be his suffering. But this same suffering will be felt by Yahweh, whose pain is even greater due to the heart-wrenching fact that he himself must inflict the blows to his beloved children.

Textual analysis

The text of Jer. 11:18-12:13 is filled with difficulties. There is considerable variation between the MT and the ancient versions. In several places the LXX omits words or even entire phrases (11:20, 22; 12:3). Furthermore, some commentators have suggested that the verses are out of sequence or that the unit consists of a number of formerly independent elements which have been combined by a later redactor.² John Bright suggests that 12:1-6 should be placed before 11:18-23. He proposes this rearrangement on the basis that the deeds which are shown to Jeremiah in 11:18 correspond to the plot against his life by the men of Anathoth. This revelation, according to Bright, does not actually occur until 12:6, where Jeremiah is told that his own relatives have 'dealt treacherously' against him.³ However, the arrangement of the text as it stands forms two parallel laments. Both laments follow an identical pattern/arrangement: Invocation (11:18; 12:1a), Complaint (11:19; 12:1b-2), Prayer (11:20; 12:3-4), and Divine Response (11:21-23; 12:5-13).⁴ This logical sequence suggests that even if these words were originally spoken on different occasions or in a different order, they are placed together in the book in a sequence which is essential for transmitting the message of the book. Furthermore, the 'deeds' spoken of in 11:18 could just as easily refer to the initial revelation of the sins of the people and the impending judgment on the nation (cf. Jer. 2:1-3:10). Indeed, the plot against Jeremiah was most likely a reaction by the people to the words of condemnation and judgment that he proclaimed, so it makes perfect sense for the revelation of these "deeds" to precede the plot against his life by the men of Anathoth in 11:19.

2 William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah 1* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 365-66; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 349.

3 John Bright, *Jeremiah* (AB 21; Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 89.

4 For a presentation of this basic layout, see Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel E. Drinkard, *Jeremiah 1-25* (WBC 26; Dallas: Nelson, 1991), 177. However, I have modified their layout to include in the second Divine Response 12:7-13, which I think continues to address Jeremiah's complaint/question, and indeed, form the real core of the response.

If the arrangement of the text is left as it is, Yahweh's response in 11:21-23 becomes intriguing in light of its sharp contrast with the second response in 12:5-13. In 11:21-23, Jeremiah's enemies are punished. So thorough will be their destruction that no remnant of them will remain.⁵ Following Jeremiah's *rib* in 12:1-4, Yahweh offers no comfort, no vengeance for Jeremiah's suffering. Instead, Jeremiah is promised that he will face more and greater persecutions. While this could support Bright's proposed rearrangement of the text, it could also simply indicate that the judgment on the people of Anathoth will not spare Jeremiah from further suffering; on the contrary, the very same calamity that will destroy Anathoth will also bring more hardship for Jeremiah (though probably not to the extent that his kinsmen will suffer).

A further difficulty which Bright's rearrangement creates is the reason for Jeremiah's complaint in the first place, since (according to Bright) Jeremiah did not know about the plot against his life until after he made his complaint to Yahweh (cf. 12:6). While Yahweh's words concerning the actions of Jeremiah's kin in 12:6 probably do refer directly to the plot described in 11:21, granting chronological priority to this 'revelation' in 12:6 leaves Jeremiah's *rib* without any clear cause. Conversely, if Jeremiah's proclamations of the word of Yahweh had brought him nothing but suffering, then his questions in 12:1-4 are more understandable. As is also the case with Job, the question of the lots of the righteous and of the wicked does not arise until the righteous individual find himself suffering without apparent cause. Jeremiah's portrayal of the wicked and his imprecations against them *presuppose* the persecution of 11:19-21, as is evident from several allusions to 11:18-20. In 11:19, the people of Anathoth speak of Jeremiah as a tree, which they wish to cut down in its prime. Jeremiah then states in 12:2 that Yahweh has planted them, that they have taken root, and that they bear fruit. The similarities of the metaphors are surely not coincidental.⁶ The prayer Jeremiah then utters in 12:3 reiterates that Yahweh 'tests the mind/heart', which mirrors his imprecation in 11:20. Finally, in 11:19 Jeremiah describes himself as being 'like a docile lamb led to slaughter'. In 12:3 he asks that Yahweh "lead them away like sheep to slaughter...." Once again, the similarities strongly suggest that Jeremiah's complaint arose as a reaction to his persecution by the people of Anathoth.

Yahweh's response in vv. 5-6 is quite shocking in light of his response in vv. 21-22 to Jeremiah's first lament. However, Jeremiah's first lament had not called into question Yahweh's justice in dealing with the righteous and the wicked. To this Yahweh responds by asking Jeremiah how he intends to endure the suffer-

5 Ezra 2:23 and Neh. 7:27 list 128 men of Anathoth who returned from Exile, which may indicate that a remnant was indeed left to the men of Anathoth (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah* 1-25, 179). However, it is also possible that the men who returned from Exile were not descendants of the inhabitants of Anathoth in Jeremiah's time, but perhaps of people taken from there in an earlier deportation, perhaps Sennacherib's campaign in Judah in 701 B.C.

6 Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah* 1-25, 180.

ing which lies ahead if he cannot withstand the 'minor' persecutions that he is now facing (v. 5).⁷ He then follows this up with a stern warning to Jeremiah not to listen to his kin, though they promise him good things (v. 6). Presumably this refers to assurances of peace and safety if he will refrain from prophesying, as in 11:21. Thus, Yahweh's answer to Jeremiah's charge does not even seem to address Yahweh's role in allowing the wicked to prosper, while righteous individuals like Jeremiah suffer.⁸ However, there may indeed be an answer embedded in Yahweh's response if one includes vv. 7-13 in Yahweh's response to Jeremiah's question in vv. 1-4.

As a prophet, Jeremiah is connected to the people in such a way that his fate is tied to their fate.⁹ Shalom Paul describes the central role of the true prophet as an intercessor for the people,¹⁰ and in some cases this intercessory role appears to have extended to intercession through suffering. Jeremiah's allusions to his being led like a lamb to slaughter are strikingly similar to the portrait of the suffering servant in Isa. 53:4-12. Christian interpreters throughout history have been keen to pick up on this, and have thus understood both the sufferer of Isa. 53 and Jeremiah as foreshadowing Jesus' atoning suffering.¹¹ Other prophets were called on from time to time to suffer as part of their prophetic calling, such as Elijah (1 Kgs. 19:1-14), Ezekiel (Ezek. 24:15-18), and Hosea (Hos. 1:2-3:5). However, Jeremiah and the suffering servant of Isa. 53 stand out as persons whose careers are defined by their suffering. This theme is picked up by the writers of the New Testament, who portray Jesus as one who, like Jeremiah, is a true prophet but is rejected and persecuted by his own people. The same may be said of many other New Testament figures, such as the disciples (Luke 21:12-19) and the first Christian martyr, Stephen (Acts 7). Indeed, the New Testament portrays suffering and rejection as the marks of true prophethood.¹² Suffering and rejection

7 But cf. A. R. Diamond, who argues against such a reading of v. 5, on the basis that Jeremiah's lament did not concern the plot against his life, but rather the seeming failure of Yahweh to fulfill his promise to judge the wicked (*The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of Prophetic Drama* [JSOTSup 45; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987], 48-49). Unfortunately, such a reading of Jer. 12:1-4 leaves Diamond with no real grasp on the meaning of v. 5, as he himself admits.

8 Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 354-55.

9 Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, *Jeremiah* 1-25, 181.

10 Shalom M. Paul, "Prophets and Prophecy in the Bible", *EncJud* 13:1169-71.

11 Holladay, *Jeremiah* 1, 372; Origen, *Homily* 10, 4.2-3; Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 350.

12 This may be seen in a number of instances, such as Stephen's declaration just before his death, 'Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed all those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become' (Acts 7:52 NASB), and Jesus' addressing Jerusalem as one 'who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!' (Matt. 23:37a). Jesus furthermore warns his disciples to expect persecution, saying 'If the world hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you....If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you' (John 15:18-20).

tion certainly seem to have been central to Jeremiah's prophetic ministry. Thus, suffering, both alongside and at the hands of the people, was part of Jeremiah's calling as a prophet, as indicated even in Yahweh's words to Jeremiah at his call (Jer. 1:17-19).¹³ His fate was intertwined with that of the people, so that the disasters which were about to come upon the nation would touch him as well.

Most commentators separate 11:18-12:6 from the verses that follow. The result is that Yahweh's 'answer' to Jeremiah's complaint ends with the warning in v. 6. However, the ancient Christian theologian Origen tied these verses with the words spoken by Yahweh in 12:7-9,¹⁴ and a few recent commentators have also proposed reading 11:18-12:13 as a single unit.¹⁵ Viewing the passage in its canonical context, the following of 12:1-6 with 12:7-13 suggests that two are to be read together, and this arrangement is consistent in both the MT and the LXX. In other words, regardless of whether 12:7-13 'originally' formed the conclusion to the prophetic oracle begun in 12:1-6, the present, canonical form of the text leads one to read the two portions of text together. Moreover, Yahweh's answer in vv. 5-6 seems incomplete by itself, for it only addresses Jeremiah's immediate situation, but not the more universal question that Jeremiah poses in 12:1-2. This is the question of why injustice exists in the first place – why the people who break all of Yahweh's laws seem to be rewarded, while those who obey suffer. Such a world is not problematic as long as God is not a personal, moral deity. But since this is precisely how Yahweh was and is understood, Jeremiah and others expect that the order of the world be in line with Yahweh's character.¹⁶ When this does not find extension in the actual world, a crisis of theodicy arises.

In 12:7-13, Yahweh speaks of his abandonment of his own people, whom he describes as *bêti* ("my house"), *nahālātī* ("my inheritance"), and *yēdidūt napši* ("the love of my life"). These are terms of endearment and intimacy. While Yahweh says here that he is abandoning his people, handing them over to their enemies, and destroying them, it is readily apparent that doing so causes him

13 While Yahweh assures Jeremiah that he will be with him and protect him from his adversaries, there is ample indication given that Jeremiah will encounter stiff opposition. Though Jeremiah may be dismayed at his foes, Yahweh will make him like a "fortified city" (*ʾir mibšār*), an "iron pillar" (*ʾammūd barzel*), and a "bronze wall" (*hōmōt nēhōšet*) (Jer. 1:18).

14 Origen, *Homily 10*, 7-8.

15 E.g., Leslie C. Allen, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 133-65; Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 187-202; Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah*, 154-57.

16 James L. Crenshaw, 'Popular Questioning of the Justice of God in Ancient Israel', *ZAW* 82 (1970): 382-83. It should be noted, however, that not all texts approach the problem of evil in the same way, nor do they all react to it in the same manner as Jer. 11:18-12:13. Job, for example, explains suffering in cosmic terms, rather than in terms of divine *pathos* (Job 1:6ff; 38-41). The theme of divine suffering in the theodicy of Jer 11:18-12:13 is consistent with the overall theme of *pathos* in the book of Jeremiah as a whole.

immense pain and suffering.¹⁷ Were this not the case, and were Yahweh all too happy to strike his people, he would not describe them with such affectionate terms. True, Yahweh is the one who does the destroying, but this only adds to his grief, for he knows that he must inflict the dreadful blows with his own hands. Thus, a picture begins to emerge. Jeremiah suffers at the hands of the people as a part of his prophetic calling (11:19-20). Yahweh will punish the people for their sin, including their mistreatment of Jeremiah (11:21-23), but this will not free Jeremiah from suffering. On the contrary, the suffering of the people will become Jeremiah's suffering, because as a prophet, he is inextricably bound to the people (12:5-6). Finally, Yahweh himself suffers in punishing the people. Indeed, his suffering is the most intense, for he must will himself to inflict the fatal blows upon his people whom he loves (12:7-8).¹⁸ Nevertheless, he must do this if there is ever to be an end to the suffering. There is a three-way causal relationship here. Jeremiah is suffering because of the sin of the people, and they must therefore be punished. Yet, their punishment will also cause Jeremiah to suffer, because he is connected with the people. Yahweh must punish the people, because they have become 'like a lion in the forest...' which utters threatening roars at him (12:8). But punishing the people will bring Yahweh unimaginable suffering, because he loves them dearly. It seems that there are no good options. All available choices lead to pain and suffering, for both Jeremiah and Yahweh. Indeed, as Diamond notes, 'the prophet's experience of treachery appears destined to become a reflection of the treachery which Yahweh experiences at Israel's hands'.¹⁹

Divine suffering and the problem of evil

The question which remains is from whence this injustice (and the suffering that it then causes) arises. Jeremiah assumes, as does Job, that it must be Yahweh who prospers the wicked, turning a blind eye to their sin. Yet Yahweh's revelation of his own suffering due to the present situation makes it clear that he is not the source of this state of affairs. The only other source for the exaltation of wickedness and the diminution of righteousness is from society itself. Walter Brueggemann describes just such a scenario directly pertaining to our passage. He writes:

Those who [prosper] are those who benefit from the best rewards of the social system. It is not thought that the blessings and well-being are given like a bolt from the blue, but are given the way that such matters are always administered, through the responsible and reliable function of the social system.²⁰

17 Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah*, 50, 154; Allen, *Jeremiah*, 152-53; Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 195-96.

18 The description of Yahweh's punishment of the people continues through 12:13, but we are only considering through 12:8 for our purposes.

19 *The Confessions of Jeremiah*, 50; see also Allen, *Jeremiah*, 152.

20 Walter Brueggemann, 'Theodicy in a Social Dimension', *JSOT* 33 (1985): 11.

Following Brueggemann's line of thought, the wicked prosper because society allows them, perhaps even helps them, to prosper. The problem then becomes quite different. The prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous are then part of the sin of the society which has necessitated Jeremiah's prophetic ministry and which now necessitates the destruction of the nation. Because the problem lies within the people themselves, there is no way to eliminate the injustice and suffering without bringing calamity upon the nation. Brueggemann sees in Jeremiah's questionings, not an attack on Yahweh's justice, but a critique of the society which has enabled such a thing to take place. While I agree that this is the *solution* to Jeremiah's question, Jeremiah phrases the entire question as a *rib* to Yahweh, indicating that he holds him responsible. Furthermore, in 12:2, Jeremiah states, 'You have planted them', which clearly indicates that he believes that the wicked prosper from Yahweh's hand, and on this account, Yahweh's response ultimately comes up short. No explanation for why the wicked are allowed to prosper appears, just as Job never receives an answer as to why he has been made to suffer (cf. Job 38-41).²¹ Yet as Jeremiah himself confesses at the outset of his complaint, 'You are righteous, O Yahweh...' (12:1a). From the beginning of Jeremiah's complaint, there is anticipation of Yahweh's vindication, as the focus shifts from the prosperity of the wicked to the coming divine recompense (12:3b-5, 7-13). The judgment which Yahweh will unleash will bring even greater pain and suffering, at least initially, to the people, to Jeremiah, and even to Yahweh himself. This is not the calloused, uncaring, even complicit God whom Jeremiah fears in 12:1-2, but rather a God who suffers as well so that suffering might one day end.

Conclusion

Jer. 11:18-12:13 stands alongside other classical statements of the problem of evil. While the existence of evil and suffering, natural evil, and a host of other issues arise in considering the evils of the present world, it seems that it is often easier to accept that bad things happen to everyone, the righteous and the unrighteous, than it is to wrestle with the apparent prosperity of the vilest of sinners in contrast with the suffering of the most noble of souls. As Crenshaw has pointed out, this is troublesome because it seems to contradict the very idea of a personal, just, predictable God which is so dear to western society (as it also was to ancient Israel).²² This glaring inconsistency drove Jeremiah to question Yahweh's justice, for he, the chosen messenger of Yahweh, suffered death threats

21 The closest that Yahweh comes to offering an explanation for Job's suffering in the conclusion of the book is his affirmation of Job's righteousness, in spite of his companions' accusations (Job 42:7-8). Even the restoration of Job's fortunes in 42:10-17 does not explain why he was afflicted, and the narrative gives no indication that Job ever learns of the heavenly bet between Yahweh and *hašāṭān* (cf. Job 1:6ff).

22 Crenshaw, *Popular Questioning*, 383.

and various other persecutions, while those who opposed him seemed to go on living, even prospering. Yahweh's reply to Jeremiah's questioning indicates that the prosperity of the wicked is not his doing. He also suffers at the hands of his people, his beloved inheritance, which has turned against him (12:8). Therefore, the only way to end the suffering and injustice is to destroy the nation. This act, however, will bring more suffering for Jeremiah, who is bound to the people by virtue of his prophethood. His fate is tied to the fate of the nation, and as the days grow darker for Judah, things will only become more difficult for Jeremiah. Yet the ultimate sufferer is Yahweh, who must fight through the agonizing grief of destroying, with his own hands, his inheritance, the very 'love of his life'.

Abstract

By reading Jer. 11:18-12:13 as a single literary unit, one may discern a fuller divine answer to the prophet's question regarding suffering and divine justice uttered in 12:1-4. Yahweh's response to Jeremiah's complaint indicates that the task of the prophet is such that his fate is bound to that of the people, so that judgment of the people will result in greater suffering for Jeremiah. While most interpreters conclude this unit with v. 6, by allowing Yahweh's response to continue into vv. 7-13, one finds that the sin and judgment of the people also results in suffering for Yahweh, who must destroy the 'love of his life'. This passage illustrates the disastrous effects of sinfulness within society itself, which makes impossible any easy answer to the problem of suffering and evil.

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