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JEREMIAH: RELEVANT FOR THE EIGHTIES

Elmer A. Martens

*the crisis of evil
... demands
rebuke and a
prescription for
righteousness*

Jeremiah: a prophet of ancient, forgotten times with a message to an almost forgotten people — can his words mean anything today? Robert Carroll, a British Old Testament scholar, is not sure. Like Zedekiah, he asks concerning Jeremiah, "Is there a word from the Lord?" His answer is, essentially, there might be, but there need not be.¹

But if the final years of the twentieth century are a time of crisis, then Jeremiah is very relevant indeed; for this prophet brought God's word to his people during the greatest crisis in their history. Jeremiah is a book for crisis times.

Crisis Times — Then and Now

A prophet "knows what time it is," says Abraham Heschel, a Jewish writer.² Jeremiah knew that for Judah the end was imminent. In 609 the Egyptians had marched northward attempting to halt the Babylonian advance, but at Carchemish in 605 they were defeated and the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar were poised to swoop south. By the next year the forces of this "enemy from the north" were in Askelon on the Mediterranean coast.

Politically, times were unstable. It was

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a confused and contradictory age during which Jeremiah repeatedly asserted that Judah's sin would be her ruin. And then the end came. The state collapsed, security vanished, the city fell and the people, if not destroyed by famine or sword, were exiled. Such a catastrophic end could not come, some said. But it had.

Today the nuclear age has brought instability of a new kind. Some disbelieve the horrors of a vast destruction; others, more realistically, are frightened by what could be the end of civilization and human life on planet earth. With the build-up of ammunition, threats and counter threats, the nuclear disaster so ominously portrayed by apocalyptic writers, including some scientists, simply cannot be put out of mind. The end of our modern world could be imminent.

Religiously, Judah in Jeremiah's time was characterized by its morality of convenience, its lack of scruple, a professed interest in religion but a simultaneous disregard of its claims. The poor were oppressed, corruption was the trademark of the age (5:25-28; 7:6; 9:3). About all this the people were unconcerned. "Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct? No, they have no shame at all" (8:12).

Yet Judah was ridden with pious cliches. The prophets and priests were pronouncing, "Shalom! Shalom!" They were assuring self-willed leaders, "No harm will come to you" (23:17). God was present with his people, they claimed; his protection was guaranteed. It was a time of slogans: "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!" (7:4). A former pious theology had been frozen into fixed cliches, though the piety had long vanished.

One thinks of modern cliches: "born-again," "Biblical inerrancy," "eternal security" — phrases that point to the right and the true but too often are no more than shibboleths of orthodoxy. Right belief there may be, but the real question is, how much does it modify our behavior? Wide disparity between faith and faithfulness eventually precipitates a crisis.

A Disturbing Message — Then and Now

Into the unsettled political situations and stale religious atmosphere of 6th-century Judah came Jeremiah the prophet. His message assumed that God was the great actor in history, both Israel's and the world's (23:7-8; 25:15-32). His message built on the covenant promises of the past; more particularly, he singled out the covenant requirements and declared them violated. Jere-

miah took on politicians, prophets, priests and the populace generally, all of whom, he said, had forsaken God and could expect judgment. His overall message, though larger than single words, crystallizes around such terms as: repentance, deception, God's wrath, nations, obedience, and hope.

IT IS TIME TO REPENT

"Prophecy is essentially a ministry of disclosure, a stripping bare." In laying bare the crimes of society, Jeremiah simultaneously pled for repentance, a spiritual turn-around (*sub*). "No prophet explored the meaning of this root *sub* more than did Jeremiah."⁴ "Turn to God," he called to an ever-turning people, and prescribed for them how their turning, or repentance (*sub*), might be phrased:

We have sinned against the Lord our God,
both we and our fathers;
from our youth to this day
we have not obeyed the Lord our God (3:25b).

So numerous are these appeals that one can identify a stereotyped form, the "summons to repentance," consisting of *admonition*, *threat*, *accusation* and *promise*.

Examples of the "summons to repentance" in Jeremiah are: 4:1-2; 7:3-7; 15:19; 22:3-5; 25:5-6; 31:21-22).

The *threat* of war, ruin, exile or death is amplified at length in chapters 4-20. The advance of the foe from the north is described in horrifying detail (6:1-7). There are laments arising out of famine conditions (14:2-6; 15:17-18). The *accusations* deal with forsaking God (2:13; 5:11; 16:11), resorting to idolatry (13:25), neglecting the ethical requirements of justice (9:2-5), and refusing to listen — more than thirty times he says, "You [they] did not listen" (e.g., 7:24; 11:8; 35:15).

The motives for repentance are strongly stated. Twenty-four of 29 times the appeal to repent (admonition) is combined with both positive grounds for compliance (the promise) and negative grounds (the accusation or threat).⁵

By contrast, the repentance language addressed to well-dressed, proper, pious twentieth century audiences, if heard at all from our pulpits, is so hedged with qualifications that it only rarely brings discomfort and even more rarely pricks the conscience. Appeals for repentance are often indirect, fuzzy, unclear, garbled, and calculated not to offend financial supporters.

Or perhaps the warning is softened by appeal to New Testament "grace" as opposed to "law."

The New Testament, however, echoes Jeremiah. As John Howard Yoder has well said, "The Gospel does not say anything about sin as an unavoidable phenomenon in all human existence; it says, 'repent!' which, being interpreted, does not mean 'continue in sin, but sorrowfully,' but rather 'STOP IT!'"⁶ Jeremiah's denunciations are disconcertingly relevant.

DON'T BE DECEIVED

Jeremiah's frequent warning, "Don't be deceived," turned on three points. First, he warned against an orthodox, but now invalid theological viewpoint. It was indeed true that God was with his people, as the false prophets claimed. But because of altered conditions, God was not now present to save, but to judge. In Hezekiah's and Isaiah's time, a century earlier, Jerusalem's safety was assured by God. The mood had been fervent. Now the mood was defiant; everywhere people disregarded God's law. "Don't be deceived," cried Jeremiah: one cannot rightly claim the blessings of covenant and seize on a fragment of the truth, such as God's promise of his presence, while ignoring the other truth that his presence calls for holiness among his people.

Second, Jeremiah warned against the deception lurking in the notion that one could serve God but, for double insurance, pay one's respects to idols. Idols, he said, were a fraud (51:17). To trust in them was to be fatally deceived.

Third, Jeremiah spoke much and often, with heavy heart, about another vicious deception: the consolations of the false prophets. "With no group was Yahweh's prophet more bitterly, more irreconcilably at odds than with the prophets!"⁷ They minimized the coming catastrophe (28:3). They endorsed the evil status quo (23:9-40). Their message was in accord with the spirit of the age, and not with the spirit of God. They had not, as Jeremiah had, stood in the councils of God. Like ill-informed weather forecasters, they promised good times ahead.

Jeremiah perceived the future differently:

See, the storm of the Lord will burst out in wrath,
a whirlwind swirling down on the heads of the wicked
(23:19).

Jeremiah pled, "Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes" (23:16). But the people

preferred to listen to fair-weather prophets like Hananiah (28: 1-11) or to spiritual con-men like Ahab and Zedekiah (29:20-23).

“Surely here is a word from Jeremiah if any will receive it — yesterday’s dogma is today’s lie!”⁸ There are “belief pieces” to which people cling, but they are pieces only, and their validity is to be questioned since, cut off from the larger doctrine of God’s actions, they can be misleading, even false. Example: Yes, God is a God of goodness. Jeremiah himself affirmed it (32:42; 33:11). But to draw from this fact a ‘gospel of health and wealth’ is to truncate the teaching about God and to offer a misleading “gospel.”⁹

False prophets appear wherever the genuine exists. H.W. Wolff says, “The false prophet ... makes things easier for his listeners.” Now as then, the hearers require instruction so that they can discriminate between the false and the true, lest they be deceived.¹⁰

GOD’S WRATH IS REAL

Jeremiah — like Jesus — is disconcertingly vocal about God’s wrath. In 42 different verses or passages in Jeremiah speaks about God’s anger.

God’s anger is pictured as “breaking out and burning like a fire” (21:12). It is described as something almost tangible which leaves God’s presence and is not diverted or recalled until it has reached its target (30:24) — a modern image indeed! In still another image, God’s anger is in a cup to be poured out or taken as a drink (25:15).

God’s anger is not an irrational outburst or injudicious vengeance but it is aroused by the sin of his people (4:4; 32:31). God’s anger defends what he loves and protects, namely his holiness and integrity. His anger must not be thought of as opposite to his love, for love’s opposite is indifference, apathy, and non-caring.

Is there not a strange silence in the church about God’s anger? Do people outside the church, or even within it, have an inkling of the fact that the God with whom they need to deal is a deity capable of anger? Has the welcome message of God’s love so captured clergy that it has thrown the larger teaching of God’s work off balance? Have modern preachers become so psychologically sophisticated that mention of God’s anger as motivation for taking his commands seriously is considered educationally embarrassing?

GOD IS SOVEREIGN OVER NATIONS

In insisting that God was sovereign over the nations, Jeremiah was in the company of other prophets such as Amos (1:3-2:3), Isaiah (13 - 23) and Ezekiel (25 - 32). The Babylonians were understood as the undisguised agents of God. Nebuchadnezzar was dignified with the title, "my servant" (27:6). Furthermore God, said Jeremiah, had the right to judge the nations, for their pride especially (48:30), but also for their trust in riches (49:4) and illicit territorial take-overs (49:14).

But nations were also the objects of God's compassion. More than once God said of some of them, as he also did of Israel, "I will restore your fortunes" (48:47; 49:39). This phrase, translated in KJV as, "I will bring again your captivity" is better rendered in the light of the Aramaic Sefire inscriptions and other evidence as "I will restore your fortunes." At the core of this phrase is the notion of recovering what has been lost.¹¹

The nations were not only to regain what was lost; in a high moment of the book, there is pictured a marvelous turn-about by the peoples of the world:

... to you the nations will come
 from the ends of the earth and say,
 'Our fathers possessed nothing but false gods... ?
 Then they will know
 that my name is the Lord (Jer. 16:19-21).

The subject of the world's nations dominates modern news media. Yet sermons do not deal with God's work on so large a scale, especially in churches where the favorite subject is personal piety. The book of Jeremiah could help Christians move beyond their intuitive knowledge that God is sovereign. Their belief could be reinforced, and something of God's way with nations explained. To be sure, today's preacher cannot pinpoint which nation is at any given moment God's special servant, but there is ample instruction in Jeremiah about what it is in nations that pleases or displeases God. To become explicit about such matters in the context of both church and state would not only strengthen the moral purpose of the electorate, but could over time influence national life significantly.

OBEDIENCE IS INDISPENSABLE

Jeremiah did not present his generation with a treatise on God, though he disclosed much about him. Jeremiah was concerned to instruct, urge, nudge and — were it possible — to

coerce people into the way of obedience. The ideas of listening physically and obeying morally are expressed by one and the same Hebrew word, *sama'*. Of the 1159 times the word occurs in the Old Testament, 184 (15%) are found in Jeremiah. Thirty times there is a summons "to listen." Thirty more times Jeremiah files the complaint, "You [they] have not listened" (see esp. chapters 7, 11, 26, 35, 42).

The high importance given to obedience is shown also by God's sending the prophets "again and again" to urge obedience (25:3). The import of the Hebrew idiom, translated blandly as "again and again" (NIV) is one of rising early. God got up early to send his prophets. He gave top priority to it. One might render, "But I have spoken to you *urgently and persistently*, yet you have not obeyed me. I sent all my prophets to you with *urgency and persistence* ... yet you have not paid attention or listened to me" (35:14b-15).

A symbolic action about obedience involved the Rechabite clan, which was committed to abstinence because of the command of their ancestor Jonadab. Jeremiah invited them to drink wine, but they refused (Jer. 35). The Rechabites refused to drink wine — a trivial action by comparison — in obedience to an ancestor; but the people of Judah refused to obey their God!

The coming disaster was linked directly to a refusal to obey. "I am going to bring on Judah ... every disaster I pronounced against them. I spoke to them, but they did not listen; I called to them but they did not answer" (35:17).

Is not the call to obedience to God, the Holy One, desperately needed today in both the church and society? Is the church's negligence, apathy, its alignment with culture rather than God, and its lack of vision to go unrebuked? Must not government and industry be called to sensitivity to justice and to moral accountability? Can the military nuclear build-up be left to drift?

And if it is argued that Jeremiah's situation was vastly different from ours, since he was addressing a people who were both "state and church," then a fitting rebuttal is the fact that he also advised foreign embassies — countries completely outside Israel (27:2-11)! God's prophets must call the world to obedience or run the risk of joining Jeremiah's opposition, the false prophets.

THERE IS HOPE FOR YOUR FUTURE

The book is not all doom and gloom. The concentration of

hope materials is found in 30 — 33, the Book of Consolation. Hope also glimmers elsewhere (23:1-8; 12:15-16; 24:4-7).

It has been maintained that while the judgment oracle, announcing judgment, is based upon the people's conduct, there is by contrast in the salvation oracle no ground for hope other than God's initiative alone.¹² The distinction between the judgment and the salvation oracle is a sharp distinction to be sure, but it is not as sharp as Raitt suggests (cf. the importance of "turning" in 31:16-20). For one thing, the salvation oracles follow the judgment oracles and are given in consideration of completed judgment. Second, repentance from sin is ingeniously woven into an oracle of hope using a word-play on "turn," which can mean both a spiritual "return" as in "repent," or a physical "turning as in returning to the land" (31:16-20). Third, in such statements as "Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place" (7:3), human repentance is coupled with divinely-initiated hope. Yes, hope is predicated on the gracious, self-initiated intervention of God; but the human factor is not absent.

"To depict the future, Jeremiah did not just add brighter tones to an old picture; he used a different canvass."¹³ One of the several shapes of hope was the new covenant (31:31-34). The goal of this covenant was the formation of a people of God. The covenant formula, "I will be their God and they shall be my people" is more frequent in Jeremiah than any other Old Testament book. A further goal was for persons to know God. That would mean, as H.W. Wolff states, "nothing less than the final end of the teaching profession."¹⁴

Another aspect of hope was physical: Jeremiah's purchase of property as a symbolic action made explicit the hope of the exiles to return to possession of their land (32:6-15; 42-44). Other aspects of hope were judgment of oppressors, vindication of God's honor, and promises for an everlasting Israel.

Where is the current relevance of hope messages? It is not everywhere that the church is in distress, but for the suffering church in Russia and elsewhere, tempted beyond endurance and moaning with the exiles, "Our hope is lost!" there is great need of the promise, "There is hope for your future!" Has such language not relevance also for third world countries where people are often dispossessed and at the mercy of the powerful? Is there even hope for our present world, threatened by nuclear destruction, should the peoples repent?

Jeremiah's call was to be an agent in God's hand "to uproot

and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:10). Even though his greatest energies were given to confrontation, to unmasking, and to overturning cherished beliefs, his work was also to build, to encourage, to speak hope.

The Passionate Prophet — Then and Now

It is often in the prophet himself that the word is "made flesh." Jeremiah, of all prophets, was most decidedly a part of his message; he not only spoke God's words but himself struggled, argued, grieved. He accepted his assignment reluctantly, was often disheartened at the people's resistance to his message, and complained about the way man and God treated him.

We know something of his inward journey, for his spiritual wrestling with God is recorded in his "laments." Though some scholars have wanted to interpret these laments as expressions of the community rather than of an individual, recent debate by scholars is affirming their personal character and attributing them to Jeremiah himself. In the "laments" the prophet voiced his misgivings, his doubts and made accusations that are hardly becoming to a man of God. He had questions: "Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease" (12:1)? He had complaints: "I never sat in the company of revelers ... I sat alone ... why is my pain unending ..." (15:17-18)? He pled with God: "Do not be a terror to me" (17:17). He accused God in frustration, even anger: "O Lord, you deceived me, and I was deceived; you overpowered me and prevailed" (20:7).

God did not reply sweetly or pamper his discouraged prophet. He answered that if in a footrace "you fall flat on your belly," how will you do when you compete with horses? And, "If you repent, I will restore you ..." (15:19). Or God was silent, even when the prophet was about to crack under the pressure and exploded, "Cursed be the day I was born" (20:14)!

Jeremiah's grappling with God is relevant to that company of folk "who cannot find the hand of God so clearly in the world and in our lives but who still, in the name of God, would question his ways and struggle with him."¹⁵ His spiritual transparency and honesty are heartening, and substantial encouragement arises simply through the record of another struggler's trials. The vessels which God uses are of clay and far from perfect: "Jeremiah did not arrive at sainthood."¹⁶ Empathy with this imperfect servant comes easily.

More striking than Jeremiah's struggling, and in contrast to

it, is his strength. He had courage to carry on in isolation. So evil were the times and so radical his message that he seemed to be a "spokesman out of time." He was pitted against his world. He did verbal battle with his peers — prophets of the status quo whose message was sweetness and light. He was locked in combat with priests and other religious leaders, who seized him after one sermon and declared, "You must die!"

In the trial that followed, Jeremiah did not back down but retorted, "Now reform your actions and obey the Lord your God" (26:13)! He demanded of Jehoiakim, in connection with his expansionist building projects, "Does it make you a king to have more and more cedar? [Your father] defended the cause of the poor and needy, and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me" (22:15-16)? When the king cut up his scroll and threw the pieces in the fire, Jeremiah simply dictated another one.

His message was one of the most unpopular ever preached: Surrender to the Babylonians (e.g., 27:12-15; 38:17-18). The message was regarded as treason. He was arrested and thrown into a cistern to starve. Yet he did not back off one jot from proclaiming God's message. Added to physical torture was the mental anguish of forty years of futile preaching: no one obeyed.

Paul Tillich wrote about "courage to be." What is to be said, in circumstances such as these, about "courage to serve?" Untiringly Jeremiah called the people to accountability before God; unflinchingly he confronted the men in power and let the chips fall where they might.

Today's prophet has need of the same courage to call society to account, to rebuke both church and government, to speak the word of the Lord with passion. Whether the message is popular is not his concern. What does matter is its truth.

Is there then a word from the Lord? There is! Jeremiah's life and book are relevant to 1984 because the horizons of his day merge with ours; the crisis of evil now, as then, demands rebuke and a prescription for righteousness. We desperately need passionate prophets possessed of the words of God for our endangered, apathetic, unholy times.

NOTES

- 1 Robert P. Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant* (SCM Press, 1981), p. 278.
- 2 Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 108.
- 3 H.W. Wolff, *Confrontations with Prophets* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 35.
- 4 J.A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 111.
- 5 T.M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), p. 39.
- 6 J.H. Yoder, "A Light to the Nations," *Concern* #9 (March, 1961), p. 18.
- 7 John Bright, *Jeremiah* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), p. cvi.
- 8 Robert Carroll, *From Chaos to Covenant*, p. 278.
- 9 E.A. Martens, "Psalm 73: A Corrective to a Modern Misunderstanding," *Direction*, 12,4 (1983): 15-26 and the entire issue.
- 10 H.W. Wolff, "How can we recognize false prophets?" *Confrontations with Prophets*, pp. 63-76.
- 11 E.A. Martens, "Motivations for the Promise of Israel's Restoration to the Land in Jeremiah and Ezekiel," (Unpublished Dissertation, 1972), pp. 172ff.
- 12 T.M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile*, pp. 126, 145.
- 13 S. Blank, *Jeremiah: Man and Prophet* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1961), p. 228.
- 14 H.W. Wolff, *Confrontations with Prophets*, p. 57.
- 15 Wm. Holladay, *Spokesman Out of Time* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1974), p. 144.
- 16 J. Bright, *Jeremiah*, p. cxii.