



Death, Grief, Agony, and a New Creation: Re-reading Gender in Jeremiah after September 11

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It was not supposed to happen—the destruction of the city and the holy of holies. And yet, it did. The people had been warned, but the warnings had gone unheeded, mocked, dismissed. During and after the events, sounds of war have clashed with pleas for justice and peace, as death, grief, and agony have taken on international proportions in the conflict of empire politics. It all sounds so familiar. Yet, I am talking about the first quarter of the sixth century B.C.E., the beginning of the Babylonian exile (even as I invite the reader to keep in mind the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century C.E.). The book of Jeremiah has its many locations in that ancient time—whether in authorship and socio-historical contexts or literary images and metaphors—while it reverberates in the present.

AFTER THE DESTRUCTION

So what did this experience of exile mean for the people of Israel? Exile has not been just a historical experience, but a concept, a way of seeing the world. It has

Jeremiah provides one set of answers to the terrible questions that arise in the face of extreme physical suffering and loss of meaning, leading the reader from repentance, through mourning, to a vision of redemption. In the aftermath of September 11, those answers are read by present believers in a new light.

meant that one feels as a stranger, carries a sense of betrayal, and feels alienated. Read from the perspective of exile, the Bible is a response to a sense of massive betrayal in the face of history. “Why has our God allowed this to happen?” “Why are we suffering?” The book of Jeremiah, joined by most of the Old Testament canon, presents the exile as punishment, disaster, separation from God. Yet, for the Old Testament, exile is the “historical norm” (as it is for millions of people today). We are looking here at something that never should have happened in terms of the theology of Israel, something literally unthinkable. There was this covenant God made with David that was to last forever and ever (2 Sam 7; cf. Ps 48:13-15). But now there is the temple destroyed, the priesthood exiled, the people in a foreign land (Ps 44:9-16; Ps 137). To recapitulate briefly, in 597 B.C.E., Nebuchadnezzar marched against Judah and succeeded. In a first deportation the king, the members of the court, the civil and military leaders, as well as the temple establishment, were taken to Babylon into exile. Zedekiah was made king. Then in 595/94, uprisings in Babylon made the life for Jews more difficult as the exile progressed. The period 589/88 witnessed an open conspiracy in the west, including Judah, Tyre, and Ammon with Egyptian backing. Nebuchadnezzar struck back and besieged Jerusalem. After an eighteen-month siege, Jerusalem fell, the temple was destroyed, the people exiled—the second and major deportation (Jer 52; cf. 2 Kgs 25). In the exile, the Jewish people after a while settled down, chiefly in the city of Babylon, where they were used as laborers in Nebuchadnezzar’s building programs. They were allowed to stay together as communities and were allowed to worship and live in peace as long as they respected the Babylonian law. They corresponded with the remnant in Jerusalem, back in “the land” (Jer 29). Indeed, there was limited freedom for the exiled Judahites as long as they were obedient to Babylon. Thus, rather than a time of extreme physical suffering, the exile was a time of agony, a time of deep searching for meaning in light of faith tradition: What does it mean about faith in God that the nation has been destroyed despite the promises of “forever” (2 Sam 7; cf. Gen 12:1-3)? What does this experience of death and destruction mean for the chosen people who believe that their God is the most powerful? What have they done to deserve this? And could they have known? Again, familiar questions for many here in the present.

AND JEREMIAH?

The book of Jeremiah provides one set of answers to such questions. And the way gender dynamics surface in both the prophetic proclamation and the socio-historical context is worth considering. Juxtaposed to traditional male language, in Jeremiah female imagery appears in central passages. In the final form of the book, these texts guide the reader from call to repentance in the face of impending death and destruction, through remembrance in mourning to an eschatological vision of redemption in exile.

In the beginning of Jeremiah, following the superscription (Jer 1:1-3), the im-

age of the womb encompasses both the origin and the destiny of the prophet (Jer 1:5). It is followed by images of bride, prostitute, wife, and promiscuous woman in judgment oracles that call the people to repentance (Jer 2:1-4:4). Pornographic in their portrayal of Israel as female, these images raise questions as to the presumably mostly male audience and the rhetorical strategies in terms of gender. Later, woman's pain in childbirth and her suffering of sexual violence illustrate the people's own fate of destruction and exile (e.g., Jer 4:29-31; 13:20-27). Along the

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way, the conflict over women worshiping the queen of heaven raises questions as to the everyday lives of women in sixth-century B.C.E. Israel/Judah (Jer 7:16-20; cf. 44:15-25). When death strikes, dirge-singing wise women are called to be mourners, musicians, and teachers (Jer 9:16-21). Furthermore, people and prophet take on female personae: Israel is addressed as “virgin daughter—my people” and “daughter Zion”; Jeremiah suffers labor pains (Jer 4:19-21) and accuses Yahweh of seduction and rape (Jer 20:7). In the realm of eschatology the female is omnipresent in maiden Israel dancing (Jer 31:2-6), Rachel weeping for her children, God showing motherly compassion, and the vision of female surrounding male (Jer 31:15-22). Then, in the oracles against the nations at the end of the book of Jeremiah (Jer 46-51), some of the same vocabulary and images for the female that served to depict Israel illustrate the fate of the nations in recollections of judgment.

What to make of this literary dynamic that ends in hope and in revenge? What role does gendered language play in this rhetoric of anti-language in light of events that never should have happened? What effects have such images had on contemporary readers, women and children as well as men? And how do we, the readers, respond?

A REQUIEM

After September 11, Jeremiah's appeal to the women to teach each other the art of leading the people in mourning spoke anew to me. After the warnings had gone unheeded, then and now,¹ despite the hypocrisy of claiming peace when there is none (cf. Jer 8:11), the consequences have become inevitable, destruction no longer a question of “whether” but of “when.” And then it happens; and right after, incomprehension, grief, and anger. In the book of Jeremiah at that point a requiem of remembrance (Jer 9:16-21; Engl. 9:17-22) gathers the audience. Jer 9:16-21 is the cadence of a long lament that starts in Jer 8:13. Vocabulary of finality characterizes

¹Compare the writings of the Hebrew prophets with writings on global dynamics and globalization; for example, Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Ballantine, 1995); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000).

the beginning and the end: “Their fruit harvest has been gathered in....I will make an end of them” (8:13); and “No one is gathering”(9:22). Death encloses divine and human voices that join in grief, yearning for comfort (cf. Jer 8:18-23).

- 16 Thus says YHWH Sebaoth
 pay-attention
 and-call for-the-dirge-singing-women that-they-may-come
 and-for the-wise-women send that-they-may-come;
- 17 that-they-may-hurry
 that-they-may-lift-up for-us a-wailing
 that-may-let-run-down our-eyes tears
 and-our-eyelids may-drip-down water.
- 18 Indeed a-sound-of wailing is-heard from-Zion:
 how are-we-devastated
 we-are-ashamed deeply
 for we-have-left the-land
 for they-have-thrown-down our-dwellings.
- 19 Indeed, hear, O-women, the-word-of YHWH
 and-may-take your-ear the-word-of his-mouth;
 and-teach your-daughters a-wailing
 and-each-woman her-female-companion a-dirge;
- 20 for climbed-has death into-our-windows,
 has-come into-our-palaces
 to-cut-off infants from-the-(narrow)-street
 young-men from-the-(broad)-spaces.
- 21 Speak thus, —oracle-of YHWH,
 and-have-fallen carcasses-of humankind
 like-dung upon the-face-of the-field
 and-like-grain-stalks behind the-reaper
 and-no-one [is] gathering.
 (Jer 9:16-21; Engl. 9:17-22; author’s translation)

Into death and destruction, threat and terror, YHWH Sebaoth speaks. First, God commands the prophet to pay attention. To pay attention is to attend to an assignment which is to follow. Jeremiah is asked to call the dirge-singing women and to send for the wise women. These women are musicians and mourners, called by God in this time of death and destruction. Parallelism of the two lines suggests equation and identity: dirge-singing women are wise women.² Whether two groups of women or one and the same, wisdom here informs mourning, as the ability and willingness to mourn is part of wisdom, as keening has been one of the first female professions. The women are needed to lift up a wailing. They are to enable the

²Most translations read “skilled women” for תְּכֵנִיטִים, while the same root תְּכֵנִיטִים is translated “wise” when describing men (v. 22).

community (“us”) to weep. Divine speech encompasses prophet and people. Personal pronouns make the point that the wailing is “for-us”; it is “our-eyes” that weep; it is “our-eyelids” that cry. There is no distance possible when death and destruction descend. And as God has “lifted-up a-wailing” (Jer 9:9), so are the women to do for “us.” Their action unites God, prophet, and people in a ritual of mourning. The upward movement, in the image of the women’s lifting up a wailing, is countered by a double image of downward motion of running down tears and dripping down water, drowning our vision in tears and at the same time clearing the way, being cathartic (again, an experience for many after September 11).

“the wailing is ‘for-us’; it is ‘our-eyes’ that weep; it is ‘our-eyelids’ that cry”

The sound of their wailing is heard from Zion (9:18). In the depth of mourning, when vision is drowned in tears, hearing replaces seeing; the weeping turns into speech. The women’s wailing is audible in a dirge about the devastation, assessing the situation of utter destruction and resulting deportation and exile: “for we-have-left the-land; for they-have-thrown-down our-dwellings.” Remembrance is crucial in the face of death. From bewailing the devastation in general, the lament moves to narrow the scope to the basis of communal life, the land, and then even closer, to the individual dwelling places, which have been thrown down. If the tears running down “our eyes” and the fact that “we left” are still in a way “our” doing, the destruction of “our dwellings” is not. “They” have done it; “they” are to blame. In the form of a personal pronoun, yet impersonally, the enemy has entered the terrain, though the Babylonians are not named explicitly in this passage (again, I cannot help but recall recent events).

Divine summons opens the second strophe of the jeremiad (9:19-21). God speaks. Though the sound is the same (כִּי) as the introduction of the preceding movement, it has a different effect. Thus it provides continuity even as it moves the response. Immediately, an imperative of the prevalent root שָׁמַע (hear) in its rare feminine plural form summons the women to listen. Only two other instances attest to the same word form: Gen 4:23, where Lamech orders his wives to attend to his word, and Isa 32:9, where the prophet urges ignorant women to act upon his prophecy. On these two occasions the discourse takes place between men and women; females are commanded by males to listen to them. Yet Jer 9:19 is the only instance in the entire Hebrew Bible where the deity addresses women directly with the words שְׁמַעְנָה נָשִׁים דְּבַר־יְהוָה, “Hear, O-women, the-word-of YHWH.” The prominent precursor of prophetic announcement addresses exclusively the women. The ones whose wailing has been heard from Zion are asked to hear a divine declaration of their duty: “Hear, O-women, the-word-of YHWH.” A haunting Jeremicanic echo appears in Jer 22:29 with a feminine singular imperative of “O-

land, O-land, O-land, hear the-word-of YHWH,” a connection in substance and theology already familiar to the audience from earlier chapters (Jer 2-3).

The familiar verb for teaching (למד) describes the task. In its use as a feminine form of the imperative, the expression is unique in the entire Hebrew Bible. As God calls the women to listen, so God orders the women to teach. One imperative has led to another; listening has led to learning. The women are called to be instructors; in a time of terror and tribulation, they are to be the teachers.³ Having received divine instruction, the dirge-singing wise women are asked to pass on the wisdom to their daughters at a time when the future of the people involves the uncertainties of exile. They are to teach them “a-wailing.” Modeled by Yahweh (Jer 9:9) and amplified by the women (Jer 9:17), this capacity to cry out is to be shared as a process of grieving for the catharsis of the community.

If the women who have led the lament are professionals, now each woman is asked to teach her female companion a dirge, both staying within their role as leaders of the mourning rituals and including the wider community of women who during wartime are the only ones left at home to join in. Indeed, the circle of addressees, who are called to carry out the command, widens to invite each and every woman as an instructor of another in their communal crying. Women across generations, regardless of family connections or any other implicit boundaries (of race or class), are learning to sing the songs of mourning. Beyond discrimination, the divine imperative has become inclusive. From God through the women keeners the melody of mourning has moved to every woman. It yields a קִינָה. The sound of wailing has taken the special shape of a dirge.

Death has entered. Death finds them everywhere—in the narrow street and in the broad spaces, regardless of who they are and what they do. When death enters, there is no hiding place. From private houses to palaces to the street and public places, the democracy of devastation is inclusive. To cut off infants and to kill young men is to cut off the future. In the accumulation of familial imagery, however, the patriarchs are strikingly absent. Are they already dead or deported? The text does not say; rather, it continues. The power of death has not ceased but is to lay even broader claim on life in what is to follow. The extinction has expanded; from the individual infants and the countable young men, death has extended to include the carcasses of humankind. The fall of Jerusalem has become universalized. (And again I am struck by the parallel dynamics of reactions after September 11.)

The movement of death is stressed more than the dead materials. For the calamity culminates in the concluding colon: “and-no-one [is] gathering” (Jer 9:21). Two words mediate the mortal message, affirm the finality of all. There is no one, neither human nor divine, to turn the terror; there is no one, neither human nor

³למד is the verb used most frequently for teaching in the book of Deuteronomy. There it refers to a passing on of knowledge of God, Torah, to the next generations. The people are called to teach their children (e.g., Deut 4:10; 6:1; 11:19). This involves whole families, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters.

divine, to take care of the fallen. Leniency remains lacking. Yet amidst the finality arises the question of the identity of the implied object. What/who is not gathered? The cut-off grain stalks? So the image itself suggests. The carcasses of humanity? So the metaphor suggests. The people? “We”? So the context suggests. Whatever the answer, the jeremiad ends here. Yet the absence of a definite object of the gathering undercuts complete closure. Finality, ironically, presses for responses to this requiem of remembrance. At a turning point in the history of the people, a turning point in the book of Jeremiah, it is the women who embody a response to the devastation, in being there and doing the only wise and compassionate thing: to mourn themselves and to teach others to grieve in the face of death and utter destruction. The terror of such an ending is hard, if not impossible, to bear. Thus, the immediate canonical context provides a first response.

*“in response to death and devastation, the book of
Jeremiah offers a theocentric orientation”*

AN IMMEDIATE WISDOM RESPONSE

Contrasting the wise women with the lack of male wisdom, the editor(s) of the final form of the book of Jeremiah juxtapose(s) the jeremiad to a wisdom saying (9:22-23; Engl. 9:23-24). In the form of a divine oracle, the following verses address the boasters—the wise men, the mighty men, and the rich men—deploring their action. Male wisdom, power, and wealth are not praiseworthy. Harking back to Jer 8:8-9 and 9:11, where the failure of the wise men is proclaimed, the wisdom saying pleads for another option. The wisdom of the men is worthless; true wisdom is to know God. Yahweh is God who makes **דָּוָר**, **מִשְׁפָּט**, and **הַקְּדוּשָׁה** (covenant-loyalty/faithfulness-in-action, justice, and righteousness) in the land. The wholeness of this threesome embodies the divine presence.⁴ Thus, in response to death and devastation, the editor(s) of the book of Jeremiah offer a theocentric orientation. Furthermore, over against the failed wisdom of boasting wise men has already been set the compassionate wisdom of wise women who know to sing and teach the melodies of mourning. Whether or not such gender dualisms are helpful for the audience, to compassion this antiphon returns. It does not render songs of sorrow; it sings of the unmitigated compassion of God that transcends death.⁵

A FURTHER THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE

The Jeremianic theologian(s) also cannot bear a vision without hope. And strikingly, from within the book of consolation (Jer 30-31), God speaks concerning

⁴The verse echoes Hos 2:20-22 (Engl. 2:18-20) where the triad of **דָּוָר**, **מִשְׁפָּט**, and **הַקְּדוּשָׁה** surfaces—together with **רַחֲמִים**, compassion—the only other time together in the Hebrew Bible. The context of this promise is an eschatological one; compare the language of a new covenant in Jer 31:31-34.

⁵Strikingly, this very melody of the wisdom poem becomes part of the Septuagint version of the song of Hannah in 1 Sam 2. Hannah sings of the true wisdom that lies in knowing Yahweh.

the future (“for indeed the days are coming,” 30:3; and “in that day,” 30:8), while jolted by the pain of the present (30:5-7). Here the suffering of impending exile is likened to the pain of a woman in labor, a familiar image, yet with a difference. While in the earlier passages it has been the people, as female, who have borne this uniquely female agony, the image in this passage explicitly renders the pain of the strong young men who serve as warriors in times of crisis. A symbol used in Jeremiah for the utmost distress, woman’s birth pangs, characterizes the epitome of male anguish here. The comparison of the presumably strong warrior-male with a woman in labor pain emphasizes the extent of the panic and desperation. After the male audience all along has been urged by the rhetorical strategies to identify with Israel/Jerusalem as female in judgment oracles, here the male is directly named and explicitly likened to the metaphor. There seems nothing worse imaginable.

Remarkably, the juxtaposed eschatological passage (31:15-22) will also play on a reversal in 31:22b where female surrounds warrior-male. Here in another lament, Rachel, eponymous mother of Israel (cf. Gen 29-33; 35:16-20), mourns her children. She refuses to be comforted for her sons; and she gives a simple reason: “for they-are-not/no-more.” With this fierce statement Rachel’s speech fades into silence while God begins to speak, asking her to stop her weeping. As the women earlier were ordered to wail (Jer 9:16-21 [Heb]), Rachel is now asked for the reverse in a divine command that is grounded in a promise pledging the return of her children from the land of the enemy. Indeed, God, with tangible empathy of trembling inner parts, promises motherly compassion (Jer 31:20). And for a moment exile has moved to eschatology. As if that were not enough, the divine voice goes on to promise a new creation where the status quo will be turned upside down (Jer 31:21-22).

Adding to the creation of the universe, of living creatures, and of human beings (cf. Gen. 1), this creative act takes place in the land. Yet while particular in location, the new creation at the same time transcends any boundaries, playing on the ambiguity of “land” and “earth,” of particular place and universal space (cf. Gen 1:28). Again gendered language describes the new thing God promises to create: “female surrounds warrior-male.” Enigmatically, three words interweave creation, exile, and eschatology. *אִשָּׁה*, the generic term for “female,” recalls the creation of the female in the divine image in Gen 1:27. Used as a term only here in the book of Jeremiah, it incorporates all the female images in the book as it connects endings and new beginnings in a vision of new gender relations as presented in the text. The second word of the verse describes this relating as “surrounding” (*אֶסְבֵּב*). While this meaning of the word is well established,⁶ it mystifies the meanings of the eschatological promise. What exactly is this new thing the female is doing? The object of the female surrounding is *אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה*, “warrior-male” (cf. Jer 30:6), and by extension it embraces the male audience. Embodying youth and virility, warrior-male here is not the subject but the object. Female surrounds him. This is

⁶See, e.g., Judg 19:22; 1 Kgs 5:17; 7:24; 2 Kgs 6:15; 8:21; Ps 17:11; 22:13, 17; 49:6; 88:18; Job 40:22; Deut 32:10; Jon 2:4, 6; et al.

the new thing that God created. What does it mean? In the poem itself meanings multiply. Rachel embraces her sons with wailing; Yahweh the mother shows compassion for Ephraim the son. As for the book of Jeremiah, female imagery sustains judgment as well as promise and encompasses Jeremianic theology embodying exile as well as eschatology. Yet the meaning of this verse has puzzled interpreters throughout the centuries. Whether understood as a new reality of protection in war or a new order of society or yet something different, the turning upside down of present realities is a layer of meaning shared by all interpretations. The hope is that things will be radically different. And similarly, this turning upside down of present realities will further manifest itself in a new covenant where relationships between God and people, and people and people, female and male will be radically transformed (Jer 31:31-34).

AND OUR RESPONSE?

Thus the book of Jeremiah leaves us, the readers, with a gendered portrayal of movement from a call to repentance in the face of impending death and destruction, through remembrance in mourning, to an eschatological vision of redemption in exile. And I cannot help but read the messages of Jeremiah in light of the experience of September 11 in New York City and elsewhere, as I cannot help but read September 11 in light of Jeremiah: promises taken for granted, responsibility for one's impact in the world reneged, one's own grief and pain magnified at the expense of others near and far, whether in Afghanistan or in Egypt, whether directly or indirectly. And yet, after all is said and done, we are left with painful, powerful memories of grief and agony, and the hope for the possibility of a new creation after radical change of the status quo—a hope worth working and praying for, indeed. ⊕

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