

Returning from the Abyss

Pivotal Moments in the Book of Jeremiah

Walter Brueggemann

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Series Foreword

Pivots in Scripture

Not long after arriving in Atlanta for my first tenure-track job, still very green in my field and profession, I somehow found the courage to invite Walter Brueggemann, who taught a few miles away at Columbia Theological Seminary, to lecture in my Introduction to Old Testament course. To my great delight he accepted, despite the fact that the class met at eight o'clock in the morning and Atlanta traffic is legendary. (Those who know Walter better than I did at that time know what I discovered only later: that such generosity is standard operating procedure for him.) I either offered, or perhaps he suggested, that the topic of his guest lecture should be Jeremiah. And so it was that a few weeks after the invitation was extended and received, my students and I were treated to eighty minutes of brilliant insight into Jeremiah from one of the masters of that biblical book, not to mention the larger Book to which Jeremiah belongs.¹

Even now, twenty years later, I remember a number of things about that lecture—clear testimony to the quality of the content and the one who gave it. In all honesty, I must admit that several of the things I remember have made their way into my own subsequent lectures on Jeremiah. In this way, Walter's presence could still (and *still can*) be felt in my later classes, despite the fact that I couldn't ask him to guest lecture every year (alas!). One moment from that initial lecture stands out with special clarity: Walter's exposition of a specific text from Jeremiah 30. I suspect I knew this particular text before, maybe even read about it in something Walter had written, but as I recall things now it was that early morning lecture at Emory

University in 2002 that drilled it into my long-term memory banks. The text in question was Jeremiah 30:12–17:²

¹²For thus says the LORD:

Your hurt is incurable,
your wound is grievous.

¹³There is no one to uphold your cause,
no medicine for your wound,
no healing for you.

¹⁴All your lovers have forgotten you;
they care nothing for you;
for I have dealt you the blow of an enemy,
the punishment of a merciless foe,
because your guilt is great,
because your sins are so numerous.

¹⁵Why do you cry out over your hurt?
Your pain is incurable.

Because your guilt is great,
because your sins are so numerous,
I have done these things to you.

¹⁶Therefore all who devour you shall be devoured,
and all your foes, every one of them, shall go into captivity;
those who plunder you shall be plundered,
and all who prey on you I will make a prey.

¹⁷For I will restore health to you,
and your wounds I will heal,

says the LORD,

because they have called you an outcast:

“It is Zion; no one cares for her!”

The passage is striking for a number of reasons, but what Walter highlighted was the remarkable shift—or better, *pivot*—that takes place in the space between verses 15 and 16. Prior to this point, God’s speech to Israel emphasizes the incurable nature of its wound: “no healing for you” (v. 13)! Israel’s wound is, on the one hand,

the blow of an *enemy*,
the punishment of a *merciless foe* (v. 14).

On the other hand, the blow is also and more fundamentally *God’s own doing*:

for *I have dealt* you the blow (v. 14)
I have done these things to you (v. 15).

Like the original audience, contemporary readers are left no time to ponder this double-agency since immediately after the second ascription of this wound to the Lord's hand, the text pivots both suddenly and drastically. From verse 16 on, we read that those whom the Lord used to punish Israel will now themselves be punished; we also learn that what had before been a terminal illness turns out to be treatable after all (v. 17a). The reason for this dramatic shift is given only in verse 17b: God will cure the incurable wound because God will not stand by while Israel's enemies call it "an outcast," claiming that "no one cares for Zion."

Now in truth, what God says to Israel/Zion in verse 13 sounds very much like "no one cares for you," but as Walter memorably put it in his lecture, while it is one thing to talk about your own mother, it is another thing altogether when *someone else* talks about your mother! God, it would seem, claims privilege to say certain things about Zion that others are simply not allowed to say. If and when they ever do utter such sentiments, God is mobilized to defend and to heal. Zion, it turns out, is no outcast, after all; there is, after all, at least One who still cares for her.

The space between verses 15 and 16 is a *pivot*, explained most fully in verse 17. This, then, is a turning point that changes everything in this passage—a passage that can be seen, more broadly and in turn, as a pivotal moment in the larger book of Jeremiah, coming, as it does, early in a section that shifts decidedly toward consolation and restoration.

And Jeremiah 30:12–17 is not alone in the Old Testament. Another remarkable pivot takes place in the space between the two lines of Psalm 22:21:

Save me from the mouth of the lion!
 From the horns of the wild oxen you have rescued me.

In the first line, there is an urgent plea for immediate help: "Save!"; in the second, testimony to past deliverance: "You *have rescued* me." Something drastic, something pivotal has taken place here, in between

two parallel lines of Hebrew poetry. Before this pivot, the psalmist knew only of *God-forsakenness* (v. 1). But after it, the psalmist is full only of *God-praise* (vv. 22–24) that extends to the most remarkable and unexpected corners of the world and underworld (vv. 25–31).³

Spiritual writer and humanities professor Marilyn Chandler McEntyre has written recently of “pausing where Scripture gives one pause.”⁴ She comments on memorable biblical phrases like “teach me your paths,” “hidden with Christ,” and “do not harden your hearts.” Phrases like these, she writes,

have lives of their own. Neither sentences nor single words, they are little compositions that suggest and evoke and invite. . . . They are often what we remember: “Fourscore and seven years ago” recalls a whole era, triggers a constellation of feelings, and evokes an image of Lincoln. . . . In the classic film *A Bridge Too Far*, one soldier, rowing for his life away from an impending explosion, repeats again and again a fragment of the only prayer he remembers: “Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . . Hail Mary, full of grace . . .”—and somehow we believe that such a prayer at such a time suffices.⁵

So it is that key phrases are “powerful instruments of awakening and recollection for all of us.”⁶ McEntyre goes on to note that the spiritual practice of meditative reading known as *lectio divina* encourages readers to pay attention to specific words or phrases:

Learning to notice what we notice as we move slowly from words to meaning, pausing where we sense a slight beckoning, allowing associations to emerge around the phrase that stopped us is an act of faith that the Spirit will meet us there. There is, we may assume, a gift to be received wherever we are stopped and summoned.⁷

Pivotal moments in the Old Testament like the ones in Jeremiah 30 and Psalm 22 aren’t exactly the same thing as the practice of pausing commended by McEntyre, but the two seem closely related nevertheless. Pivotal texts are precisely the ones that arrest us, demand our attention, change everything:

- Suddenly, *healing*—Jeremiah 30:16–17
- Suddenly, *deliverance*—Psalm 22:21b

Of course, the pivots found in Scripture are not always so benign. One may think, alternatively, of these:

- Suddenly, *trouble*—as in 2 Samuel 11:5, Bathsheba’s report (only two words in Hebrew) to David: “I’m pregnant.”
- Suddenly, *judgment*—as in 2 Samuel 12:7, Nathan’s statement (also only two words in Hebrew) to David: “You’re that man!”

Now one could, especially in a more skeptical mode, wonder just how many pivotal moments, how many *suddenlys* like these, might actually exist in Scripture. But before we assume that the list is quite finite—more of a curiosity than a persistent call to attention—and take our leave to attend to some piece of distracting drivel on our electronic devices, we should stop and remember the Gospel of Mark, which makes a living on *suddenlys*. Jesus is always doing something or having something done to him *suddenly* or *immediately* (*euthus*), and the same is often true for those gathered around him.⁸

What Mark shows us is that, in the end, *suddenly* can aptly describe an entire Gospel, an entire life lived toward God—indeed, a life lived most perfectly toward God. The same may be true for the gospel of God writ large, across both testaments of the Christian Bible. And so, along with the practice of pausing where Scripture gives us pause (McEntyre), the practice of pivoting where Scripture itself pivots has the same effect: it turns us toward something new, something deeper, something *transformative*. These texts are places where the Bible, and we who read it, may pivot toward another world—another *divine* world—that can change our own world for the better, forever. In contrast to McEntyre’s pauses, which anticipate that the Spirit will reach out to us through the text, these pivotal moments in Scripture are not acts of faith but *places* of faith, established sites where the Spirit has *already* met the faithful. They are gifts *already* given, though they seem largely still waiting on us to receive them. The goal of the present volume, and this series dedicated to pivotal moments in the Old Testament, is to mediate those gifts. We are fortunate to have Professor Brueggemann lead the way.

Brent A. Strawn, *Series Editor*

Preface

*T*his book is an invitation to a sustained study of the book of Jeremiah. This invitation is issued to pastors, church members, and other serious readers. As with other books in this series, this book is organized in brief expositions of specific verses of the book of Jeremiah. It is my intention that each such exposition might be readily accessible for reading and reflection without undue attention to too much background. It is, moreover, my expectation that if these verses are taken in sequence, by the end of the study the reader will have a good sense of Jeremiah even though this prophetic book is quite complex. I have sought to introduce the *literary and historical complexity* of the book of Jeremiah, all the while keeping one eye on the *primary plotline* of the book.

That plotline pivots around the abyss experienced in the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the resultant deportation of leading inhabitants of the city into exile in Babylon. The work of the prophet, first, is to break the illusion of the city and its leadership in the run-up to the destruction by an assertion that a political economy organized against the will of the God of covenant cannot prevail. Conversely, once the destruction has occurred, it is the prophetic task to foster hope for restoration and return. Thus Jeremiah's work is to *walk Israel into the abyss of exile* (in the face of denial) and then to *walk Israel out of that abyss* (in the face of despair).

It has long been my pedagogical mantra concerning the book of Jeremiah that "it reads like it was written yesterday." That is, the book teems with stunning contemporaneity. "Contemporaneity" in Scripture study is a quite tricky matter, because it evokes all kinds

of poor analogues and highly subjective “applications” to our time and place. My use of “contemporaneity” intends something other than that. Rather, I mean to suggest that the plotline of the book of Jeremiah—*into abyss / out of abyss*—is a plotline to which sober American Christians can pay attention. The “Christian” part of that contemporaneity is that the *into abyss / out of abyss* plot, in the Jesus narrative, morphs into *Friday crucifixion* and *Sunday resurrection*. Beyond that specificity in the Jesus narrative, moreover, I want to suggest that the plotline of ancient Israel can illuminate the plotline of U.S. history. First, Israel was, so the prophet contends, walking toward self-destruction for a very long time, even though in its “chosenness” Israel did not notice that slippery slope toward destruction. Thus it was easy in a self-satisfied Jerusalem to say “peace, peace” when there was no peace (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). The United States, the more it has moved to become an empire and world power and the more it has depended on the cheap labor of slavery with concomitant self-indulgence, the more it has contradicted the will of the creator God. In our prosperity, however, we mostly have not noticed the slip toward self-destruction. In ancient Israel that long, slow slope culminated in the inescapable wake-up call of 587 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians. In like manner, I suggest, the crisis of 9/11 constituted a brusque wake-up call summoning us away from the smug confidence in exceptionalism, asserting that “chosenness” for the United States was no guarantee against the untamed work of the historical process through which the inscrutable holiness of God is at work. Since 2001, the news and various circumstances—especially the multiple pandemics experienced in COVID-19, racial injustice, and socioeconomic disparity—have only served to uncover the lies that lie at the root of “the American Dream.”

Second, as it faced loss, destruction, and displacement, Israel easily enough could slide into despair about its future (see, for example, Ezekiel 37:11). In that circumstance, it was the task of the prophet to articulate new historical possibility, albeit in poetic anticipation. In like manner, given the obvious failure of the social fabric of the United States and the inability of our political economy to keep its promises to the “left behind,” it is easy enough among us to despair of any viable future for the United States that would convincingly embody “the American Dream.” In such circumstance,

the prophetic task is to foster hope that might be costly and inconvenient but that might provide energy, courage, and imagination for a just and moral economic-political historical future. It was exactly the rhetoric of Martin Luther King in his “dream speech” that invited us to such a restorative vision and to the risky work that such a vision would entail.

It is my hope that as readers invest in this study of Jeremiah, they will be able more knowingly to situate themselves in *the plotline of destruction and restoration* as voiced in the book of Jeremiah as it pertains to the United States, with our long-standing racism and economic injustice. Without “applying” the text of Jeremiah to our circumstance with any specificity, it is possible and useful to allow this ancient text to seed our imagination in fresh discernment concerning both our past and present historical realities and our future historical possibilities. Such reseeded imagination works from the assumption that the creator God who makes covenant has a will and intention distinct from the world (and from us!) that cannot be easily or safely disregarded. The gods of the establishment who occupy the dominant narrative are, in contrast to the Lord of the covenant, quite benign and irrelevant. Thus Jeremiah can see that his own people worshiped gods who

cannot do evil,
nor is it in them to do good.
10:5

Likewise mighty Babylon, cipher for every imperial power, worships gods of whom the poet says,

There is no breath in them.
They are worthless, a work of delusion.
51:17–18

So it is with the gods of white capitalist nationalism. These are the gods of “our thoughts and prayers that are with the victims” who never make any difference for the victims. The book of Jeremiah, in all of its complexity, attests a very different theological reality that impinges in real ways upon historical processes. Any serious reader of Jeremiah may consider how this claim concerning the intentionality of a holy God matters, and how that claim impels the way we

understand the plotline of our historical experience. We, too, face the abyss and are walking resolutely into it. Jeremiah helps us see that. Jeremiah also offers a way to return, come back, even repent from that abyss.

This book is not a full-scale commentary on the book of Jeremiah. I have written such a commentary,¹ and I am also indebted to a host of other Jeremiah interpreters, most especially my friends Kathleen O'Connor, Carolyn Sharp, and Louis Stulman, but also John Bracke, Ronald Clements, Terry Fretheim, and Patrick Miller. Readers who want to go further into the book of Jeremiah can readily consult their felicitous studies.

I am glad to dedicate this book with great appreciation to Jim Wallis. There is no one in the recent generation among us who has so compellingly and faithfully practiced prophetic ministry as Jim. He has constantly told the hard truth about our society. He has, beyond that hard truth, articulated faithful ways forward toward a neighborly society, not least in his recent initiative concerning "Reclaiming Jesus." As the founder and point person for the Sojourners community, he is not unlike the scribal community attached to Jeremiah led by the two sons of Neriah, Baruch and Seriah (see Jeremiah 36:4 and 51:59, respectively). The work of such a community is to keep alive the testimony of faith; Jim's work with the Sojourners community has done just that. My debts to him are great and abiding.

Walter Brueggemann

Suggested Sessions for Study Groups

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|--------------------------|
| Week 1 = Chapters 1–2 |
| Week 2 = Chapters 3–5 |
| Week 3 = Chapters 6–7 |
| Week 4 = Chapters 8–10 |
| Week 5 = Chapters 11–12 |
| Week 6 = Chapters 13–14 |
| Week 7 = Chapters 15–16 |
| Week 8 = Chapters 17–18 |
| Week 9 = Chapters 19–21 |
| Week 10 = Chapters 22–23 |
| Week 11 = Chapters 24–25 |
| Week 12 = Chapters 26–27 |

Chapter 1

The Word of the Lord “Came” (and Still Does) (Jeremiah 1:3)

It came also in the days of King Jehoiakim son of Josiah of Judah, and until the end of the eleventh year of King Zedekiah son of Josiah of Judah, until the captivity of Jerusalem in the fifth month.

Scripture Passages for Reference

Jeremiah 1:1–3
2 Samuel 8:13
1 Kings 1:13, 25
2 Kings 22–23

The book of Jeremiah opens with an editorial introduction (1:1–3). These verses are likely a notation added later by scribes; they give us important data that serve as clues about how to read the book that follows. The “it” of verse 3 is “the word of the LORD” that was uttered and enacted through the long historical period that concerns the book. We are not told how the word of the Lord “came.” Verse 2 tells us that it came to Jeremiah the prophet; thereafter the prophet uttered his own words that became the book. But we are also permitted to think that “the word of the LORD,” as the exercise of divine sovereignty, “came” in and through the historical processes that are reflected in the book of Jeremiah. Either way, or in

both ways, what follows is testimony about the way in which the sovereign will of YHWH impinged upon the historical processes of Jerusalem. It is to this impingement, by utterance and by action, that the words of Jeremiah and the words of his book bear witness. What follows in the book is a consideration of the odd interface between that effective but elusive word of the Lord and the palpable realities of public history.

In order to articulate a timeline and a historical frame of reference for the book of Jeremiah, this editorial introduction mentions three kings in Jerusalem. The first is King Josiah (639–609 BCE), who is elsewhere scarcely present in the book, but his fingerprints are all over it. In 2 Kings 22–23 we are told that King Josiah instituted a great reform in Jerusalem that called Israel back to the realities of the Sinai covenant, realities that had long been disregarded by royal Jerusalem. The reform of Josiah was grounded in the conviction that adherence to the commandments of YHWH was the inescapable precondition of public well-being. It is likely that the “covenant” to which Jeremiah bears witness in Jeremiah 11:6–7 refers to the work of Josiah. The prophet, moreover, reports that “listeners” did not “listen” but promptly and completely rejected the requirements of covenant: “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear.” Josiah is referenced, moreover, in Jeremiah 22:15–16 as “your father” (father of Shallum), who did justice for the poor and needy.

The introduction also names Jehoiakim (also called Shallum [609–598]), who is reckoned by Jeremiah to be an evil king who violated covenant by refusing to pay his workers (22:13), thus bringing trouble upon his people. The third king mentioned is Zedekiah (598–587), brother of Jehoiakim, who is portrayed in the book as a vacillating coward who wanted to obey the covenant but who also wanted to appease Babylon (Jeremiah 37–38) and who finally ended as a brutalized failure (52:10). While absent from this introduction, there is a fourth king to be noted, Jehoiachin (598), son of Jehoiakim, also called Coniah. In 22:28–30 he is imagined as a broken potsherd to be cast off—that is, deported to Babylon (more on this later). It is anticipated in the poetry of 22:30 that Jehoiachin will be childless—that is, without an heir. The long-running dynasty of David will come to an end!

Thus the book of Jeremiah has as its context and historical material the sweep of the Davidic dynasty that reaches its apex of faithfulness in Josiah and soon after its nadir of humiliation in the two deported kings, Jehoiachin and Zedekiah. The book of Jeremiah intends to point to the effective operation of the word of the Lord in, with, and under historical vagaries of the Jerusalem sacral-political establishment.

Over against that establishment is set only the single person of Jeremiah. The opening verses want us to see that this adjudication of the rule and interpretation of history is a quite unequal contest. On the one side is the monarchy, with its deep dynastic promises from God. On the other side is only Jeremiah—except we know more of him. We are told in 1:1 that he derives from “the priests of Anathoth,” a village in the tribal area of Benjamin not far from Jerusalem. When we scroll back on “the priests of Anathoth” in the Bible, we come to the ancient priest Abiathar, who was one of the two priests of David (2 Samuel 8:18). He was clearly closely connected to royal power (2 Samuel 15:13; 17:3; 19:11).

In the struggle for the succession to the throne after David, however, Abiathar sided with David’s son Adonijah (1 Kings 1:19, 25) against the ambitious claim of his other son Solomon. In the end, of course, Solomon prevailed, and the adherents to Adonijah (the loser) were in the disfavor of the new king. Abiathar, the priest, was on the wrong side and was banished by King Solomon to his home village of Anathoth (1 Kings 2:26–27). It is from the rootage of this banished priest that Jeremiah comes. It is credible to think that Abiathar long ago opposed Solomon for king because he anticipated the self-aggrandizement that would mark Solomon’s reign. Thus it is credible to think that Jeremiah was heir to this old and deep resistance to Solomon and all that he came to represent in the royal Jerusalem power structure. Jeremiah may be seen as a carrier of long-term critical resentment against the lavish covenant-violating Jerusalem dynasty.

This innocent-looking introduction thus sets up for us the mighty struggle for the truth of history that is to be waged in the book of Jeremiah. This struggle is between the *long-legitimated royal dynasty* and an old *deep critical resentment* that is grounded in the covenantal tradition and the ancient theological conviction that had not

been erased by the force of money and power. The reader of the book of Jeremiah is recruited to participate in that struggle for the truth of history. It is an ancient struggle in the purview of biblical faith. The reason we continue to read the book of Jeremiah, however, is that this ancient struggle for the truth of history is at the same time an astonishingly contemporary struggle. And we readers are summoned into that contemporary struggle.

The book of Jeremiah was composed over a long time—as long as all of these kings and beyond. From the outset, however, the makers of the book of Jeremiah and presumably the prophet himself understood the sure outcome of that struggle. They understood the outcome ahead of time because they never doubted that the rule of God, enacted by the word of God, would prevail over the policies of monarchy and temple. They saw, as Jeremiah did, that the monarchy and the royal city were quite temporary affairs in the long story of Israel:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be:
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.¹

When we reach the final phrase of our verse, we come to the theme of the book of Jeremiah: “*until the captivity of Jerusalem.*” From the outset, the book and its framers (and the prophet Jeremiah) knew that the entire collection of the book was headed toward and would pivot around the deportation and displacement of the leading members of the Jerusalem regime—the deep abyss of exile. They knew there would be a final king, the last on the royal timeline. They knew the coming end of the dynasty. They knew of the coming destruction of the temple. They knew that the power status of Jerusalem and its dominant narrative could not be sustained, because they contradicted the will and purpose of the Lord of history. In Jeremiah 52:28–30 we are given a sober report concerning the deportations—three times: 598, 587, and 581. Of these, the second is reckoned as the decisive displacement, the ultimate abyss, as it were. In our reading we are struck now by how few were the number of deportees: 4,600. But the impact and durable significance of the deportation, for the book of Jeremiah and for the ongoing faith of Judaism, are quite disproportionate to the actual historical data. The displacement is the defining

fracture in the history of God and Israel as God’s people. It is a fracture that signifies God’s full estrangement from God’s people. The deportation is a manifestation of the truth that the will and purpose of YHWH are not tied to any historical reality. YHWH will govern in freedom according to YHWH’s own purpose.

It is the work of the book of Jeremiah to reflect on that decisively broken connection. The book is a witness to that reality, but it is also a pastoral enterprise to walk the faithful into the abyss and to dwell there. And then, before the book is finished (and long after the prophet), the work of the book is to walk the faithful back out of the abyss of exile into a new life of fidelity with God. The introduction speaks only “until the captivity.” The book itself, however, goes beyond that. It knows that even after the deep fracture there is more, because God is relentlessly passionate for this people and its city that have been so wayward. The book of Jeremiah, from its initial “until,” invites its readers into the deep, powerful trauma of *loss to death*, then *new life through inexplicable gift*. *Into* and *back from* the abyss!

Questions for Discussion

1. How has the Lord’s word come in the past? Where do you see it now?
2. Can you imagine a decisive break now like that of the exile for ancient Israel?
3. Do you agree that devastating experiences like the deportations of Judah can be “the will and purpose of God”? How do these experiences show that God’s work and will “are not tied to any historical purpose”?
4. What do you think it means or looks like for the Lord to “govern in freedom according to God’s own purpose”?

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