

Jeremiah

“Death has come up into our windows” (9:21) “**Terror** is on every side”

In the New Testament, the longest quote from the Hebrew Bible is the famous text from Jeremiah about the New Covenant (31:31-34; → Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17):

31 The days are surely coming, says the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and the house of Judah.
32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—
a covenant that they broke,
though I was their husband [*baal*, master], says the Lord.
33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my law within them,
and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
34 No longer shall they teach one another,
or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’,
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,
says the Lord;
for I will forgive their iniquity,
and remember their sin no more (Jer 31:31-34).

However, if we think that the prophet is a “progressive” figure, herald of new things to come, we are mistaken, since – although less known – Jeremiah also had his conservative, even reactionary side. Perhaps, early in his ministry, when he collaborated with King Josiah to promote a reform based on Deuteronomy, emphasizing Yahweh as the only God and the Temple of Jerusalem as the only place for making sacrifices, Jeremiah had proclaimed:

Stand at the crossroads, and look,
and ask for the *ancient paths*,
where the good way lies; and walk in it,
and find rest for your souls (6:16).

Although the promised covenant is qualified as “new”, scholars have had difficulty identifying the novelty of the promised covenant, since Jeremiah never spoke of a covenant which the Messiah (Christ) would make with his church (of gentile majority), living under grace instead of the law, and enjoying the abundance of the Spirit. The new (and renewed) covenant comes from the same God (Yahweh), is with the same people (Israel and Judah), and with the same law, put in the same place, and with the same theme: “I will be their God / and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33ef). Jeremiah thus appears to hold just as much interest in the continuity and elements shared by the two covenants as in any new element. In what, then, does the newness consist? Although highly controversial, we can discern three elements:

- *A New Heart*. Surely, as for the law’s place, the ideal would be in the heart, as God commanded through Moses (Deut. 6:6; 11:18; see Psalms 37:31). Knowing such texts, however, Paul could contrast the law of

Moses, written on stone tablets, with the new covenant, written by the Spirit in the believer's heart (2 Cor. 3:1-6; Ex. 24:12; 31:18). No one insists more the Jeremiah in the sinfulness of the human heart (4:4; 17:1, 9). Therefore we may conclude that, with his promise of the law written on the heart, he prophesied that the new covenant would create an ideal reality: that which Moses commanded the *people* to do, *God* promises to do in the new covenant (cp. → Ezek. 11:19; 36:26):

*I will put my law within them,
and I will write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33b).*

- *Forgiveness.* “This is the really new element of the new covenant”¹ since the mosaic covenant emphasized punishment for disobedience, not forgiveness (Joshua 24:19-20). Divine grace was manifested in the mosaic covenant in the liberation of Egypt (Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6). But in the New Covenant, God promises to transform the corrupt human heart and also to forgive and re-establish his relationship with the nation that had been unfaithful to its commitment to God:

*for I will forgive their iniquity,
and remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:34b).*

After Jeremiah, when the priestly literature came to form a part of the Pentateuch, forgiveness also became a fundamental part of the Mosaic covenant (Lev. 25; cf. Psalms 103, 51; etc).

- *Democratization and justice:*

*No longer shall they teach one another,
or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’,
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest (Jer. 31:34a).*

In making the covenant with Moses, Yahweh promised to make the entire nation “...a priestly kingdom and a holy nation”) Ex. 19:6), a provision developed in the New Testament with the concept of the holy priesthood of all believers (→ 1 Peter 2:4-5). However, the priestly source of the Pentateuch (“P”; see Leviticus) ordained that Aaron's sons would be a class of professional priests, which Jeremiah denounced as corrupt (6:13; 8:10; 23:11, 33-34). Jeremiah also pointed out that to know Yahweh meant to practice liberating justice in favor of the poor and oppressed (*pace* David Pleins²; cf. Hosea 2:18).

The promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah occurs in the Book of Consolation (Jer. 30-33) and 32:37-41 points out that the promised New Covenant would be an “eternal covenant” *berit 'olam*), unconditional, like the covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:16) and Abraham (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19) and the priestly theology of the south (see also 31:35-40).

Tensions in the New Covenant between continuity and elements show just how dialectic Jeremiah is. There is no consensus about details, but we can recognize ideological differences in the book which reflect contributions from:

- 1) The disciples who stayed in Judah and preserved Jeremiah's condemnations of the oppressive pre-exile elite in Jerusalem, and
- 2) The exiled and repentant elite in Babylon, where they produced a later edition of the book ³ (→ Lamentations).

In the two principle divisions of the book (1–25; 26–52) the commentaries commonly point out three elements:

- A nucleus of the book communicates the teachings of Jeremiah himself (especially in the *poetic prophesies* of judgment in **Jeremiah 1-25**); but in addition, Jeremiah's disciples subsequently adapted the teachings to later circumstances.
- Above all, it is common to recognize the influence of the authors of Deuteronomy and deuteronomist history (→ Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings), especially in the second half of the book (**Jer. 26-45**, mainly *prose narratives* about the life of Jeremiah). The fact that the final historical appendix (Jer. 52) textually quotes the deuteronomist history (2 Kings 24:18-25) confirms the this influence.
- In addition to the poetic prophesies of judgment (Jer. 1-25) and the prose narratives about Jeremiah's life (Jer. 26-45 + 52), throughout the **entire book** we find **sermons in prose** that reflect the style and theology of the discourses of Deuteronomy, Samuel and Kings (see the famous sermon in the Temple, Jer. 7 // 26).

In addition to the three elements (prophesies, narratives, sermons), as in other prophetic books, Jeremiah, the "prophet to the nations" (1:5) includes prophesies about/against the nations (Jer. 46-51; → Isaiah 13-23; Ezek. 25-32), mainly from later disciples⁴.

Due to the incomparable quantity of narratives about Jeremiah's life in the second book, scholars commonly affirm that we know more about the life and character of Jeremiah than of any other prophet (NJB 1170). At the other extreme, one highly respected commentator concludes that of the prophet himself we know almost nothing, since the biographical material of the book is almost completely fictitious⁵. Nevertheless, the last three highly erudite commentaries (Hermeneia, ICC, Anchor Bible), although they recognize certain later editorial work, do not support Robert Carroll's skepticism, and consider the book trustworthy as a source of knowledge about the historical Jeremiah and his teachings⁶.

Outline

1:1-3 Introduction

I. Prophetic messages concerning Judah and Jerusalem, 1-25 (mainly *poetry*).

In the time of Josiah (640-609 B.C.)

1:4-19	Jeremiah's calling and mission (Vision #1: the almond + #2 the boiling pot)
2:1-3:5	Israel and Judah's unfaithfulness and rebelliousness
3:6-4:4	Call to repentance
4:5-31	A northern invasion threatens Judah
5:1-31	The injustice of Jerusalem and Judah
6:1-30	The horror of the imminent invasion.

[Joacaz (609 B.C., 3 months), no text from Jeremiah].

The epoch of Joaquin (609-598 B.C.).

7:1-8:3	Sermon in the Temple against the hypocritical cult.
8:4-17	Imminent judgment from the north.
8:18-9:26	Jeremiah's pain for his nation
10:1-22	Satire against idolatry vs. the authentic cult to God.
11:1-17	How Israel and Judah violated the alliance. 1. 11:18-20 + 12:1-4: <i>First Confession/Lament</i>
12:5-17	Yahweh answers (5-6) and laments (7-13), but will judge the nations (14-17).
13:1-27	Symbolic acts and warning of the imminent exile. Vision #3 – the loincloth in the Euphrates river, 13:1-11
14:1-18	The great drought, Jeremiah's intercession and denunciation of false prophets.
15:1-9	Announcement of inevitable punishment 2. 15:10-21: <i>Second Confession/Lament</i>
16:1-21	Symbolic act #1: Jeremiah celibate, without children; Israel's restoration
17:1-13	Israel's indelible sin vs. divine wisdom 3. 17:14-18: <i>Third Confession/Lament</i>
17:19-27	The observance of the Sabbath. (#4 of the 10 Commandments).
18:1-17	Symbolic act #2: the potter and the clay. 4. 18:18-23: <i>A plot against Jeremiah and his Fourth Confession/Lament</i>
19:1-15	Symbolic act #3: the broken jug.
20: 1-6	The priest Pashur's violence and oppression against Jeremiah. 5. 20:7-18: <i>Fifth Confession/Lament: Yahweh the seducer</i>

The Epoch of Zedekiah (598-587)

21:1-10	Yahweh refuses Zedekiah's request.
21:11-22:30	Message to the royal house of Judah.
23:1-8	Denunciation of governors (pastoral) and the promise of a just king and liberator.
23:9-40	Denunciation of the false prophets.
24:1-10	Vision #4: two baskets of figs
25:1-14	The enemy from the north and imminent captivity; → Daniel 9.
25:15-38	Introduction to the prophecies against the nations; → Jer. 46-51. Vision #5: the cup of wine.

II. Biographical accounts and promises of liberation, 26-45 (mainly *prose*).

Jeremiah, Authentic prophet and those exiled

26:1-24	Sermon against the Temple; arrest and judgment; → Micah 3:12.
27:1-22	Symbolic act #4: the wooden yoke, submission of Babylon.
28:1-17	Hananiah prophecies false hope and death.
29:1-23	Jeremiah's letter to the exiled
29:24-32	Letter condemning the false prophet Shemaiah

The Book of Hope

30:1-24	Promise of restoration of Israel from the North.
31:1-40	The New Alliance with Israel and Judah.
32:1-15	Symbolic act #5: Jeremiah buys a field, prays, and assures restoration.
33:1-26	New promises of restoration for Jerusalem and Judah: a just seed.
34:1-7, 8-22	Judgment against Zedekiah; liberation of betrayed slaves.
35:1-19	Example of the Rechabites.

The Passion of Jeremiah

36:1-32	Baruch reads the scroll, king Jehoiakim burns it, Jeremiah dictates another.
37:1-21	Zedekiah's spurious hope, Jeremiah's incarceration.
38:1-28	Ebed-melech rescues Jeremiah from the cistern, Zedekiah interviews him.
39:1-10	Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) conquers Jerusalem (587/6 B.C.).
39:11-18	Jeremiah is freed, communicates prophecies to Ebed-melech.
40:1-12	Jeremiah decides to remain with the governor, Gedaliah (in Mizpah).
40: 13-41:18	Ishmael's conspiracy, insurrection and assassination of Gedaliah.
42:1-22	Jeremiah advises the people in exile to remain where they are.
43:1-13	Jeremiah is taken to Egypt, where he predicts that Nebuchadnezzar will invade. Symbolic act #6: large stone at the entrance of the Pharaoh's palace.
44:1-30	Jeremiah denounces the persistent idolatry of the Jews in Egypt.
45:1-5	Word of advice for Baruch, Jeremiah's "beloved disciple" (→ John 21).

III. The prophecies against/about the nations, 46-51 (→ see the separate chapter on this theme).

46:1-28	1. Egypt
47:1-7	2. The Philistines
48:1-47	3. Moab
49:1-6	4. The Ammonites
49:7-22	5. Edom
49:23-27	6. Damascus (Syria)
49:28-33	7-8. Kedar and Hazor (Arabia)
49:34-39	9. Elam
50:1-51:58	10. Babylon
51:59-64	Symbolic act #7: the scroll (prophecy) thrown into the river.
52:1-34	Historical appendix // → 2 Kings 24:18-25: Jerusalem's catastrophe but with grace granted to Jehoiakim.

1. Oppression, poverty and liberating justice. In the second half of the book, Jeremiah 26-52, there are few explicit references to poverty and oppression. Chapters 26-34 focus more on spurious and real hopes, while 35-45 and 52 are mainly concerned with the suffering of Jeremiah and Jerusalem during the time of the conquest. Still, in the entire Bible, only in Jeremiah 34:8-22 do we have a story in which the Israelites free their slaves, which occurred as an emergency measure under the last king, Zedekiah ⁷ (DHHBE 34:8 note; → Lev. 25 and the year of Jubilee). Also, in Jeremiah 26-52 the only explicit references to the poor in these chapters speak of the “poorest of the people” (*dallot ha’am*; 39:10; 52:15), or “the poorest of the land” (*dallot ha-‘arets*; 40:7; 52:16). David Pleins points out that, as in the → Pentateuch, also in Jeremiah, *dal / dalla* occurs in agricultural contexts and refers to poor peasants without land or with very small parcels ⁸ (see the only other reference to the *dallim* in Jeremiah in 5:4 // the *gedolim*, “rich”, 5:5). In Jeremiah, the conquerors appear in a most favorable light, since to the poor, who had nothing, Nebuzaradan, commander of the royal guard, gave them royal vineyards and fields (39:10; cf. 2 Kings 25:12) ⁹. The liberation of the poor of the earth did not last long, however, since they soon returned to their status as laborers without land (Jer. 52:16; 2 Reyes 25:12) ¹⁰.

We can see the arbitrariness of the powerful oppressors and the extreme weakness and dependency of the poor classes as much in the case of the slaves (freed and the again enslaved), as with the poor of the land (given farms in an “agrarian reform” but soon reduced to mere day laborers) ¹¹. Although it lacks an explicit vocabulary for oppression as a cause of poverty in these contexts, the operating mechanisms are evident. Jeremiah is threatened with death and the prophet Uriah dies, victim of the institutional violence under king Jehoiakim (26:1-24). In addition to the elite’s manipulations with their slaves under Zedekiah, we have the story of the censoring of the prophetic message, when Jehoiakim burns the scroll (Jer. 36) and Zedekiah orders Jeremiah to be confined and thrown in the pit (Jer. 37-39). For the kings and elite of Jerusalem, the letter of support which Jeremiah sent to the exiled in Babylon (Jer. 29:1-23) would have constituted an act of treason ¹².

In Jer. 26-45, vocabulary for oppression is especially common in the first chapter of the Book of Consolation (30-31/33). Before focusing on glorious restoration of the New Covenant, Jeremiah describes, without precedent, the “time of distress for Jacob” (30:4-7). That *tsarah* in this context refers to oppression is obvious from the following verse, which speaks of the “yoke” of the “bonds” of the foreigner and the promise that Yahweh will break the yoke in order to free his people from Babylon (30:8) ¹³. In the same chapter Yahweh promises to punish the “oppressors” of Israel (30:20), using the same word which refers to the oppression of Israel in Egypt (*lakhats*; Ex. 3:9) ¹⁴. Also in Jeremiah 30, more language for oppression occurs in the texts which describe the oppressors as “foes” who “devour... plunder... and prey” on Israel (30:16) and “wicked” (*resha’im*) who provoke Yahweh’s wrath (30:23-24; → Proverbs).

In these prophecies against/about the nations (Jer. 46-51), the only reference to the poor occurs in the prophecy concerning Edom (49:7-22), where Yahweh threatens with total destruction, including the children (v. 10), but immediately assures: “Leave your orphans, I will keep them alive, and let your widows trust in me” (v. 11). The text has left commentators perplexed. Some interpret it literally as a promise of Yahweh to make an exception of Edom’s widows and children and protect them from judgment; others suppose that it is an annotation which attempts to correct the prior attribution of the death of children to Yahweh. William Holladay ¹⁵ concludes that the text in 49:10-11 represents the consoling words that could have been said by a neighbor, but a neighbor does not exist: “[there is no neighbor who says] ‘Leave your orphans...’” (followed by DHHBE; cf. BJ, RV95).

The prophecies mainly focus on Yahweh’s judgment against the nations, but within the prophecies against Babylon (50-51), one text makes explicit the oppression that Israel has suffered: “The people of Israel are oppressed (*‘ashaq*), and so too are the people of Judah; all their captors have held them fast and refuse to let them go (50:33). This text (v.34) speaks of Yahweh as Israel’s Redeemer (*go’el*) and makes explicit in that this Redeemer will free his people of oppression (→ Exodus). However, such text’s perspective differs from the pre-exile prophecies in Jeremiah 1-25, where the prophet denounces the elite in Jerusalem and Judah for oppressing the weak and the poor. Now, it is the same exiled elite that suffer imperial oppression, the “sword of the oppressor” (*yanaḥ*; 46:16; 50:16); cf. “the sword” (48:10, BJ) that kills Yahweh’s “enemies” (*tsar* II) 46:10). In addition to the frequent use of the

roots *tsar/ar* I and II in these prophecies (46:10; 48:5; 49:22; 50:7), the prophecies against Babylon ask for revenge against Babylon for the “violence” (*khamas*) of Nebuchadnezzar against Jerusalem (51:34-35; cf. the prior violence between the governors of Babylon, 51L46).

In general, the prophecies are very different in the first half of the book (Jer. 1-25, mainly pre-exile poetry), where the prophet denounces the elite in Jerusalem for its oppression and violence against the poor and the weak. For example, in his fifth “confession / entreaty to God (20:7-18), Jeremiah refers to himself as “poor” (*ebyon*; 20:13). David Pleins points out that this is “the only case where a prophetic figure uses the terminology of poverty as a self-designation”¹⁵. This use of the term *ebyon* to characterize the prophet’s own condition “lays stress on his unjust treatment vis-à-vis the elite”¹⁶—although according to a text in the second half of the book, Jeremiah has sufficient money to buy land (36:6-23).

Laurent Wisser (1982) has demonstrated that the teachings of Jeremiah concerning the poor, oppression and liberating justice follow the tradition of the great prophets of the 8th Century (→ Amos, Micah, Hosea and Isaiah). David Pleins concludes that Jeremiah even develops this prophetic social criticism in two ways: (1) he unmasks the link between idolatry and the oppression of the poor, and (2) he denounces the monarchy (21:11-23:8), especially King Jehoiakim (609-598; Jer. 22:13-19), and reveals an unprecedented specificity of concepts¹⁶.

Of the six texts in Jeremiah 1-25 where the prophet explicitly refers to the poor, in four cases the context points up oppression as the cause of poverty. The only references that do not show a relationship between oppression and poverty are the ironic references, which link the poor (*dallum*) with the senseless / ignorant (5:4), and Jeremiah’s fifth confession / entreaty (20:13), where the prophet refers to himself as “poor” (*ebyon*) and expresses confidence that God would free him¹⁶. Especially powerful is the denunciation against King Jehoiakim for his oppression and violence against the poor:

¹³Woe to him who builds his house by injustice (*lo-tsedeq*),
and his upper rooms by oppression (*lo-mishpat*);

who makes his neighbors work for nothing,
and does not give them their wages;

¹⁵Are you a king
because you compete in cedar?

Did not your father [Josiah] eat and drink
and practice liberating justice (*mishpat*) and rectitude (*tsedaqah*)?

Then it was well with him.

¹⁶He judged the cause of the poor (*'ani*) and needy (*'ebyon*);
then it was well.

Is not this to know me?
says the Lord.

¹⁷But your eyes and heart
are only on your dishonest gain,
for shedding innocent blood,
and for practicing oppression (*'osheq*) and extortion (*merutsah*) (22:13-17).

Also directed to the king of Judah is the sermon at the beginning of the chapter:

³Act with justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedaqah*), and deliver from the hand of the oppressor (*'ashoq*) anyone who has been robbed (*gazal*). And do no wrong (*yanah*) or violence (*khamas*) to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place (22:3).

The victims of oppression are the three classes of weak and poor: aliens (immigrants), orphans and widows. This prose sermon is probably a post-exile elaboration of the poetic prophecy at the beginning of the previous chapter,

also directed against the king. Oppression being so fundamental to Jeremiah's theology, the prophet continually points out that Yahweh's justice is a justice that will free the oppressed (also in 15:21; 23:5-6):

Execute justice in the morning,
and deliver from the hand of the oppressor (*gaza*)
anyone who has been robbed (*'osheq*),
or else my wrath will go forth like fire,
and burn, with no one to quench it,
because of your evil doings (21:11-12).

Also, Jeremiah points out that the sin which most provokes God's anger is oppression and violence (see 22:22-23). In two prophecies against the nations (25:30-38) the verses that closes the first half of the book (1-25) also link oppression with God's wrath, but in this case it is Yahweh, in the heat of his anger, who judges (oppresses) the nations:

For the Lord is despoiling their pasture [of the gentile king-shepherds],
and the peaceful folds are devastated,
because of the fierce anger of the Lord.
Like a lion he has left his covert;
for their land has become a waste [of the Gentiles]
because of the cruel (*yanah*) sword¹⁸,
and because of his fierce anger (25:37-38).

Also, in his famous sermon in the Temple, Jeremiah proclaims justice and warns against the exploitation of aliens (immigrants), orphans and widows:

For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly (*mishpat*) one with another,⁶ if you do not oppress (*'ashaq*) the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place... then I will dwell with you in this place... (7:5-6 // 26:1-6; see the "den of robbers", 7:11).

In an earlier prophecy, probably under Josiah (640-609 B.C.), Jeremiah denounces the elite in Jerusalem for its idolatry, for having sought "lovers" (political alliances with Egypt and Babylon) and accuses them of violence against the poor¹⁹:

Also on your skirts is found
the lifeblood of the innocent poor (*'ebyonim*), 2:34; see Ex. 22:2-3

Furthermore, Jeremiah shows how the oppressors (*resha'im*) utilize robbery and fraud (*mirmah*) to make themselves rich, powerful and fat (5:26-27), and in the judicial courts:

they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan...
and they do not defend the rights of the needy (*'ebyonim*, 5:28).

In addition to these texts which demonstrate how oppression functions to enrich the powerful and impoverish the weak²⁰, in Jeremiah 1-25 there are also frequent denunciations of oppression (without explicitly referring to the poor):

Cut down her trees;
cast up a siege-ramp against Jerusalem.
This is the city that must be punished;
there is nothing but oppression (*'osheq*) within her...
violence (*khamas*; LXX *'asebeia*) and destruction are heard within her... (6:6-7).

Other texts which speak of the siege of Jerusalem also repeatedly refer to oppression, but in these later texts it is the oppression and violence that Jerusalem suffers at the hands of the conquerors (10:17-18, *matsor y tsarar* I; 19:9, *matsog, matsor, suq*; cf. violence, *khamas*, in 13:22 and 20:8; *tsarar* I in 15:11 and 16:19; *tok* in 9:6?).

Although we thus find abundant references to oppression, the poor and liberating justice in Jeremiah, when the prophet refers to the “least to the greatest”, all guilty (Jer. 6:13=8:10; cf. 31:34 and 5:4), these “least” are not the poor, since the “least” refers to the functionaries of the lowest levels of the bureaucracy ²¹.

2 Women. Recent studies of gender in Jeremiah demonstrate that the book contains a surprising “abundance of feminine language and feminine images” ²², which are concentrated in the first half of the book (Jer. 1-25) and in the Book of Hope (Jer. 30-31) ²³. The special sensitivity of this unmarried prophet is evident in the personification of the suffering of a woman in labor (4:19, 31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23). Furthermore, God is like a woman (31:20) and laments and cries over Jerusalem like a woman (8:19-9:3; 9:16-21), a traditionally feminine role in Israel (→ Lamentations; Jesus, Lucas 19:41-44).

On the other hand, Israel is compared to an impious daughter, an adulteress and a violated prostitute (4:30; 13:22-27) and the prophet denounces the idolatry of women who make a cult to “the queen of heaven”, probably a goddess adored at the side of the God of Israel (7:18) ²⁴. Angela Bauer asks: “What does it mean that female images in the book of Jeremiah reduce female sexuality mostly to motherhood and sexual violence?...Why...do most (male) commentators remain silent about the implications of sexual violence in Jeremiah?” ²⁵.

What will you say when they set as head over you
those whom you have trained
to be your allies?

Will not pangs take hold of you,
like those of a woman in labor?

²²And if you say in your heart,
‘Why have these things come upon me?’

it is for the greatness of your iniquity

that your skirts are lifted up,

and you are violated....[lit. “your heals have suffered violence”; “heals” a euphemism for genitals]

25b [Yahweh:] because you have forgotten me

and trusted in lies.

²⁶*I myself will lift up your skirts over your face,*
and your shame will be seen. ((13:21-22, 25b-26).

Jeremiah 13:20-27 juxtaposes the image of a woman giving birth (v. 21) and a sexually violated woman (verses 22, 26). The Hebrew language has no specific words for sexual violation (such as ‘rape’ in English), but uses other terms for oppression (*‘anah*) and violence (*khamas*) in a sexual context ²⁶. Concerning the metaphor of Yahweh as sexual violator of a woman (Jerusalem, conquered by Babylon in 587/6) ²⁷, → Ezekiel.

In the entire Bible, only Apostle Paul (also unmarried) and Jeremiah express the awareness of a divine calling *from the maternal womb* (Gal. 1:15; → Romans). Probably for lack of a wife and a certain distancing of the father (→ Timothy), Jeremiah manifests a special sensitivity relative to his mother, “from the womb”.

1:5 Before I formed you in the womb (*beten*) I knew you,
and before you were born (*rekhem*) I consecrated you;

I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

20:14 ¹⁴Cursed be the day
on which I was born!

The day when my *mother* bore me,
 let it not be blessed!
¹⁵Cursed be the man
 who brought the news to my father, saying,
 ‘A child is born to you, a son’,
 making him very glad.
¹⁶Let that man be like the cities
 that the Lord overthrew without pity (*nikham*);
 let him hear a cry in the morning
 and an alarm at noon,
¹⁷because he did not kill me in the womb (*rekhem*);
 so my mother would have been my grave,
 and her womb (*rekhem*) for ever great.
¹⁸Why did I come forth from the womb (*rekhem*)
 to see toil and sorrow,
 and spend my days in shame?

One of the most widely circulated of modern myths has been that the close link with the mother (“dominant”) and a distancing from father figures is “the cause” of masculine homosexual orientation. However, beginning in the 60’s psychology has shown that, to the contrary, such a familial configuration has been rather the *result*, not the cause, of a homosexual orientation which emerges from other roots. Fundamentalists who try to get from the Bible certain texts which prove that all abortion is equivalent to homicide quote verses such as Jer. 1:5, but such a text does not indicate any specific point where life begins. All the texts of the Bible are pre-scientific and “conception”, the fertilization of the female ovum by the masculine semen / seed, was a concept totally ignored until the XIX century A.D. Furthermore, according to the pre-scientific biblical authors, life was present in the masculine semen (e.g. Levi in “Abraham’s loins” four generations before he was born, → Hebrews 7:10).

Commentators compare Jeremiah’s brief cursing of the day of his birth (20:14-18) with that of Job (Job 3:1-26), but Job (a married male) only once refers to the womb (3:11) and makes no mention of his mother, while Jeremiah (in five verses) refers three times to the uterus and twice to his mother. The closeness that Jeremiah felt for his mother is evident – he wished he had died in her womb without ever leaving it so that she would be eternally pregnant with him – and she is seen as active, giving birth to him. The father, on the other hand, is purely passive and so distant from Jeremiah that it was necessary to send a messenger to inform him of the birth of his son.

Moreover, in this curse, uttered by the son who is never going to marry, with a distant father and an active mother dominating the text, there falls over this scene the shadow of Sodom and Gomorrah (20:16), the cities God destroyed (for lack of hospitality and the attempt to rape two visiting angels, → Genesis 19; see the image of seduction and rape in Jer. 20:7). As Angela Bauer points out so well, the first part of the book (Jer. 1-20) is enclosed between the two texts (1:5 and 20:14-18) that speak of the mother’s uterus the a place of his divine calling and his potential grave – his origin and his destiny: “Jeremiah, who has identified with the female, is portrayed as seeking rescue in the female organ that has provided him with the ambiguity of origin and destiny, of being set apart for struggle and difference” (1999:119). The fact of being different and not marrying made it more possible that Jeremiah was a prophet “for the nations” (1:5; see also Jesus and Paul, unmarried “eunuchs for the Kingdom of God”, Matthew 19:12; 1 Corinthians 7:7-9).

For Robert Carroll²⁹, in the third text referring to Jeremiah’s mother, the prophet speaks to her utilizing a rhetorical technique (“apostrophe”, as if she were present):

Woe is me, my mother,
 that you ever bore me,
 a man of strife and contention

to the whole land!
I have not lent, nor have I borrowed,
yet all of them curse me (15:10).

Angela Bauer questions such reductionism³⁰, since the text could be rhetorical “apostrophe” (the mother was not literally present), but it is remarkable that Jeremiah never speaks in this way to his father, and we can understand why a prophet without a wife experienced a feeling of intimacy with his mother, with his intimate masculine friends (Baruch, Ebed-melech) and with his God (the five “confessions/laments”). When the prophet complains to his mother that “all of them curse me” (15:10), we must ask if his father (distant, 20:15), is included in those. Perhaps Jeremiah was never literally cursed and abused as a “queer” (→ Matthew 5:22; “*Raqa*”), but his deep sense, from the womb, of being apart and “different”, and his calling as a confirmed bachelor (sexual minority), surely contributed to his sensitivity and solidarity with the other commonly oppressed groups: the poor, the weak, women and blacks.

If Jeremiah had always walked the streets of Jerusalem with the “perfect wife” (Prov. 31:10-31 taking his arm, it is doubtful that many prostitutes would have come close. The bachelor’s walk (or that of the married man traveling or walking alone) invites the attentions of prostitutes and hustlers (Prov. 7:6-27; see Luke and Jesus as “friends of fishermen and publicans”; cf. → Revelations 17-18; Paul, → 1 Cor. 6:12-20). Such experiences as a confirmed bachelor can explain in part Jeremiah’s concern with prostitution as an image for the fisher-woman, Israel. Without a doubt the text that best reveals the prophet’s fascination with prostitutes and his familiarity with the “low life” of the big city is the text where the prostitute is seen as “dressed to kill” and an apparent victim of the violence of her clients:

³⁰And you, O desolate one,
what do you mean that you dress in crimson,
that you deck yourself with ornaments of gold,
that you enlarge your eyes with paint?
In vain you beautify yourself.
Your lovers despise you;
they seek your life.
³¹For I heard a cry as of a woman in labor,
anguish as of one bringing forth her first child,
the cry of daughter Zion gasping for breath,
stretching out her hands,
‘Woe is me! I am fainting before murderers!’ (4:30-31).

Those who advocate legalization of prostitution point out that when the state makes prostitution a crime (the prostitute is always guilty, not the clients), the result is not a reduction of the practice of prostitution but an increase in violent acts against prostitutes. Although prostitution was not illegal in Israel, Jeremiah observed how frequently the prostitutes were victims of murderers – and he takes this common image of the big city to convince the people of Jerusalem that their “life style” (looking for many “lovers” as clients, meaning, make alliances with neighboring countries) was rather a “death style”. Angela Bauer paints a picture similar to Jezebel in the window (2 Kings 9:30; 1999:70; see also the voyeur in his window, contemplating the prostitute in the street, Prov. 7:6-27). Only Jeremiah, however, portrays the irony of the prostitute luxuriously dressing herself with such care in order to walk about the streets of a destroyed and abandoned city ³⁰.

After the reference to his mother’s uterus as the place of his divine calling (1:5; 20:14-18), Jeremiah presents the idyllic image of Israel as Yahweh’s “wife” (2:1-3, 32), but only as a background for launching repeated and fierce denunciations against Israel as an adulterous wife and prostitute (2:20-28, 29-37; 3:19-20; 13:20-27), divorced (3:1-5, 6-10), and with adulterous male children who visit prostitutes (5:7-9):

2:20 For long ago you broke your yoke
 and burst your bonds,
 and you said, 'I will not serve!
 On every high hill
 and under every green tree
 you sprawled and played the whore (*zonah*).
 23 How can you say, 'I am not defiled,
 I have not gone after the Baals'?
 Look at your way in the valley;
 know what you have done—
 a restive young camel interlacing her tracks,
 24 a wild ass at home in the wilderness,
 in her heat sniffing the wind!
 Who can restrain her lust?
 None who seek her need weary themselves;
 in her month they will find her.
 25 Keep your feet from going unshod
 and your throat from thirst.
 But you said, 'It's hopeless,
 for I have loved strange gods (*zarim*),
 and after them I will go' (2:20, 23-25).

As Angela Bauer points out, ancient accounts and well as modern studies provide more evidence of masculine promiscuity and aggressiveness than feminine. Still, the literature (written mainly by men) commonly refers to women as irrational beings who can't control their sexual impulses³¹. Cheryl Exum concludes that Jeremiah 2:23-24 unmasks the fears of feminine sexual desire common among men and their fascination with this desire (quoted in Bauer, 34). The metaphors of Israel as prostitute do function to blame the males in the subsequent judgments. Denunciations of masculine idolatry using metaphors of masculine promiscuity would not have been rhetorically efficacious with the audience and the readers (mainly males). Jeremiah took advantage of the patriarchal disdain of women and prostitutes in order to make his male readers aware of their infidelity to Yahweh.

¹⁷ Thus says the Lord of hosts:
 Consider, and call for the *mourning-women* to come;
 send for the *skilled women* to come;

¹⁸ let them quickly raise a dirge over us,
 so that our eyes may run down with tears,
 and our eyelids flow with water.

²⁰ Hear, *O women*, the word of the Lord,
 and let your ears receive the word of his mouth;
 teach to your *daughters* a dirge,
 and each to her *neighbor [fem.]* a lament.

²¹ 'Death has come up into our windows,
 it has entered our palaces,
 to cut off the children from the streets
 and the young men from the squares.'

²² Speak! Thus says the Lord:
 'Human corpses shall fall
 like dung upon the open field,
 like sheaves behind the reaper,
 and no one shall gather them' (Jeremiah 9:17-22 [16-21 Hebrew]).

Jeremiah 9:19 “is the only instance in the entire Hebrew Bible where the deity addresses women directly with the words ‘Hear, o-women, the-word-of YHWH?--[and] As God calls the women to listen, so God orders the women to teach’³².”

After the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem (586 B.C.), neither the youth nor the children remained alive in the streets and Jeremiah calls to the mourning women and to the wise to direct a national mourning. Baal, the Canaanite god, had constructed his palace without windows to make impossible the entrance of the enemy, Death (Mot), but in Nebuchadnezzar’s conquest of Jerusalem, there was no escape – death entered through every window. The women, mourning and wise, are juxtaposed with the arrogant “wise” men (9:17-22, 12) who had carried the nation to destruction.

²³ Thus says the Lord:
Do not let *the wise* [male] boast in his wisdom,
do not let the mighty boast in his might,
do not let the wealthy boast in his wealth;
²⁴ but let him who boasts boast in this,
That he understands and know me,
that I am the Lord;
I act with steadfast love,
liberating justice, and rectitude in the earth,
for in these things I delight, says the Lord (9:23-24).

A text of the Book of Hope (Jeremiah 30-31/33) prepares us to accept that among the “new things” of the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34) will be a liberation of women from their traditional roles (→ Gal. 3:28; cp. Gen. 3:16):

¹⁵ Thus says the Lord:
A voice is heard in Ramah,
lamentation and bitter weeping.
Rachel is weeping for her children;
she refuses to be comforted for her children,
because they are no more.

²⁰ Is Ephraim my dear son?
Is he the child I delight in?
As often as I speak against him,
I still remember him.
Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
I will surely have mercy (*rakhem*) on him, says the Lord.

²¹ Set up road markers for yourself,
make yourself signposts;
consider well the highway,
the road by which you went.
Return, O virgin (*bethulah*) Israel,
return to these your cities.

²² How long will you waver,
O faithless (*hashobeba*) daughter?
For the Lord has created (*bara'*) a new thing on the earth:
a woman encompasses (*sabab*) a man/warrior (31:15-22).

According to Luis Alonso Schökel, the verb *sabab* (v. 22d) has a military meaning (“to surround” / “to encompass”) and a sexual meaning (“to embrace”) ³³. Developing the two meanings of the Hebrew verb, John

Thompson, an Evangelical commentator, describes the text as a proverb with “powerful sexual overtones....Women will take the initiative in war and in sex....The virgin Israel shall arise, something of an Amazon, and do exploits. A woman (Israel) will take the lead.”³⁴ (see Jer. 30:5-7; Deut. 32:10). William Holladay also accepts the double meaning of the last line (31:22d): (1) the sexual, “a female shall encompass a hero’ suggests that the female shall be the initiator in sexual relations” (Deut. 32:10) and (2) the meaning of encompassing, thus demonstrating military capacity (30:6). Concerning the sexual meaning, he says: “The reassignment of sexual roles is innovative past all conventional belief, but it is not inconceivable to Yahweh”³⁵ (see in the same chapter the New Covenant, 31:31-34). William McKane translates verse 22d: : “[a] woman is changed into a man”³⁶. He affirms that the text has a “focus on the revolutionary nature of Yahweh’s new world upside down and would introduce unheard and undreamed of conditions of life”³⁷. Angela Bauer questions the “disappearance of the woman” in McKane’s interpretation³⁸, but supports the double meaning of woman in the future taking the initiative in the war and in sexual relations³⁹. (see also Kathleen O’Conner 1998:185).

Barbara Bozak summarizes the principal interpretations of verse 22d in this way (1991:103, cited by Patrick Miller 2001:811):

- The female will become male;
- A metaphor for perfect peace: there will be so much peace that women will be able to protect the city, including its males;
- The female will court the male;
- The wife will take the sexual initiative with her husband (a metaphor for Israel taking the initiative to return to Yahweh);
- The woman will encompass the male and will embrace him in such a way that there will be procreation in the earth.

Common in all of these interpretations is *the change of sexual roles*. In this context of the Book of Hope, Jeremiah characterizes woman as “virgin”, *Amazon and lover*, but never as a traditional woman, weak, housewife, submissive to a man as husband; → Song of Songs.

In spite of the commentators’ discerning perceptions, we can see in the history of the text how traditional ideologies about women and sex has led the translators and commentators to totally incorrect conclusions. At least the RV95 preserved something of the sexual meaning of the text: “the woman will court the man!”. But everywhere else we encounter efforts to impose ideologies and traditional family values (the submissive woman) that contradict the teachings of the text concerning feminine initiatives in sexual relations:

LXX: “the men will walk in security”

Vulgate: *femina circumdabit virum*;

Jerome: a prophecy of the Virgin Mary embracing the baby Jesus;

NJB: “The woman sets out to find her husband again”; note: “the loving relationship between Israel and her Husband Yahweh”;

NVI: “la mujer regresará a su esposo” (“the woman will return to her husband”);

BL: “la mujer es la que busca a su marido” (“the woman is she who seeks her husband”).

Traditionally women in Israel had been leaders in the cults, in singing praise as well as in national mourning (Jer. 9:16-21). In a context of war and death, Jeremiah describes how some women, in the last decades before the Exile, also functioned as leaders in the idolatrous rites of the Queen of Heaven, Ishtar (Assyrian name) or Astarte (Canaanite name), the “goddess mother” venerated for her connection with sexuality and with the sources of life (DHHBE, note 7:18)⁴⁰:

16 As for you,
do not pray for this people,

do not raise a cry or prayer on their behalf,
and do not intercede with me, for I will not hear you.
17 Do you not see what they are doing
in the towns of Judah and
in the streets of Jerusalem?
18 The children gather wood,
the fathers kindle fire, and
the women knead dough,
to make cakes for the queen of heaven;
and they pour out drink-offerings to other gods,
to provoke me to anger.
19 Is it I whom they provoke? says the Lord.
Is it not themselves,
to their own hurt?
20 Therefore thus says the Lord God:
My anger and my wrath shall be poured out on this place,
on human beings
and animals,
on the trees of the field
and the fruit of the ground;
it will burn and not be quenched (7:16-20).

Angela Bauer points out that Jeremiah is not referring merely to mothers, nor is it limited to family members – he speaks of “women”, which includes mothers, spinsters, daughters and sisters (see the cultic activities of women in → Ezek. 8:14, crying for Tamuz) ⁴¹. The judgment of God’s anger, spilling out (like liquid) and burning (like fire), is definitive and permanent. And not only for human beings, but for all the earth (animals, trees, fruits) suffer the same punishment. The idolatrous practices included the sacrifice of sons and daughters burned in fire (7:30-34).

The condemnation of the adoration of the Queen of Heaven appears again in the second half of the book (Jer. 44:15-25). Only there, Jeremiah directs himself to the husbands in Egypt who knew that their wives had adored the Queen of Heaven – they made cakes in the form female genitals – with the approval of even the kings and officials in Jerusalem ⁴².

In the prophecies against/about the Nations (Jer. 46-51) the feminine images occur especially in the first prophecies against Egypt (46:1-28) and in the last against Babylon (50:1-51:58).

3. Sexual Minorities: Jeremiah, Baruch and the Black Eunuch – Bachelor prophet (but well accompanied). Patrick Miller acknowledges that the Hebrew Bible gives us “little information” about the prophets’ marriages and families ⁴³, but appears to accept the heterosexist presupposition that almost all the prophets had wives and children. However, Miller points out that in the books of the 16 canonic prophets, the Bible speaks of spouses only in the case of → Hosea, Isaiah and Ezekiel (cf. the husband of the prophetess Huldah, 2 Kings 22:14). God ordered Hosea to marry a whore, and Ezekiel remained a widower (Ezek. 24:15-27), leaving only → Isaiah as an example of a common matrimony (but with a woman prophetess, Isa. 8:1-3). Only Jeremiah, however, speaks of an explicit divine commandment *not* to marry, a commandment that appears to contradict the order of the Creator of procreation (Gen. 1:28; → Jesus, Matthew 19:12; Paul, 1 Cor. 7:7-10):

1 The word of the Lord came to me:
2 You shall not take a wife, nor shall you have sons or daughters in this place.
3 For thus says the Lord concerning the sons and daughters who are born in this place, and concerning the mothers who bear them and the fathers who beget them in this land:

4 They shall die of deadly diseases. They shall not be lamented, nor shall they be buried; they shall become like dung on the surface of the ground. They shall perish by the sword and by famine, and their dead bodies shall become food for the birds of the air and for the wild animals of the earth.

According to William Holladay, Jeremiah was 27 years old when he thus declared himself a confirmed bachelor⁴⁴, but it was such a strange occurrence in Israel that el Hebrew didn't even have a word that meant "unmarried"⁴⁵. David Pleins comments that Jeremiah's visions and parables, together with the calling to the bachelor life, are "representations of a shamanic behavior which attracts attention"⁴⁶; (see Herbert Huffman 2001, "a unique commandment in the Hebrew Bible"). Like a motive for the unmarried life, Jeremiah refers to a divine judgment to come concerning children, without giving any hint of other motives or purposes in matrimony (see his purchase of inherited land in Jer. 32).

For company in his solitude, Jeremiah mainly had his personal secretary, Baruch the scribe, "a rather enigmatic figure in Jeremiah and strangely absent from chaps 37-42"⁴⁷. However, Jeremiah was rescued from the cistern by Ebed-melech, the Ethiopian eunuch, another gesture of intimate and loyal friendship (38:7-13; cf. 13:23). In his five confessions/laments (psalms of supplication), Jeremiah presents himself as someone who has personally suffered sexual violation (20:7):

7 O Lord, you have seduced me,
and I was seduced;
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughing-stock all day long;
everyone mocks me.

It appears that, after so much suffering, Jeremiah interpreted his divine calling as a type of seduction and sexual violation on God's part⁴⁸. See → Ezekiel concerning the metaphor of God as sexual violator.

In the five confessions/laments we can sense a bachelor prophet's intimacy with God and, as was already recognized in the 19th century, in these texts we can discern the prophet's tender and feminine side⁴⁹ (see (1) Jer. 11:18-20 + 12:1-6; (2) 15:10-21; (3) 17:14-18; (4) 18:18-23; (5) 20:7-18). On the other hand, Jeremiah does not indicate attraction but when faced with feminine sexuality (Jer 2:23-24) considers it "wild, disgusting and uncontrollable."⁵⁰ Not only for Israel's intransigence, but perhaps also, due to undeniable homoerotic desires, Jeremiah felt a profound anger (15:17). Like Qohelet (1:15; 7:13), he did not share the easy optimism of those who believe in a God who continually offers himself for whatever miracle, but rather recognizes that certain things don't change (13:23, in reference to the color of the skin and the sinful nature of Israel; cf. the "Ex Gay" ministries → www.fundotrasovejas.org.ar; www.otrasovejas.org; www.othersheep.org).

END NOTES

1. Jack Lundbom 2004:470.
2. David Pleins 2001:301-304; cf. Angela Bauer 1999:145-148
3. Carolyn Sharp 2001
4. concerning the edition history, see Leo Perdue, HCSB, Jeremiah, Introduction; McKane 1999; cf. the simpler introductions in BJ, DHHBE and RV95, Study Edition
5. Robert Carroll 1981:5-30; 1986:55-64
6. William Holladay 1986-89; William McKane 1986-96; Jack Lundbom 1999/2004.
7. David Pleins 2001:303

8. David Pleins 2001:290-291
9. David Pleins 1992:405-407
10. David Pleins 2001:291
11. Milton Schwantes 1977:159-166
12. David Pleins 2001:302
13. Hanks 1983:22, 25
14. Hanks 1983:10-11; 126, note 8
15. David Pleins 2001:290
16. David Pleins 2001:283
17. David Pleins 2001:300
18. William Holladay 681
19. David Pleins 2001:290
20. David Pleins 2001:238-284
21. David Pleins 317 note 53; Wisser 1982:33
22. William McKane 1999:574
23. Angela Bauer 1999:1-9; Kathleen O'Connor 1998:178-186
24. Susan Ackerman 1989; 1992
25. Angela Bauer 1999:4-5
26. Elsa Tamez 1982:52-53; Hanks 1983:15-17
27. Bauer 1999a:100-109 and 1999b:258-269
28. Angela Bauer 1999:119
29. Robert Carroll 1986:326
30. Angela Bauer 1999:68-69
31. Angela Bauer 1999:33
32. Angela Bauer 1999:89
33. Luis Alonso Schökel 1994 :524
34. John Thompson 1980:575-76
35. William Holladay 1989:195
36. William McKane 1996:807
37. William McKane 1996:143
38. Angela Bauer 1999:143
39. Angela Bauer 1999:143
40. Angela Bauer 1999:75-80
41. Angela Bauer 1999:77
42. Angela Bauer 1999:149-156
43. Patrick Miller 2001:702
44. William Holladay 1989:5
45. Lundbom 2001
46. David Pleins 2001:291-292
47. David Pleins 315, note 1
48. Angela Bauer 1999a:113-117; 1999b:258-269; Lundbom 2001:854-855
49. Cheyne 1883:xi, xiv, cited in Lundbom 2001:115
50. Kathleen O'Connor 1998:180

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