



## Jeremiah and the revelation of quotation

### Introduction

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We may know as much about the Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah, and his personal life as any writer in the Hebrew Bible. He certainly wore his heart on his sleeve. We may also know as much about the mental state and spiritual character of the people to whom he ministered as any audience in the Hebrew Bible.

One of the means that Jeremiah uses to help us understand the spiritual state of his fellow citizens is direct quotation. More—far more—than any other Hebrew prophet, Jeremiah reports the words that he personally heard his audience, Judah’s citizenry, speak. Jeremiah quotes the words of Judah’s citizens not only to reveal their attitudes and feelings, but to serve as a kind of testimonial evidence against them—evidence that justified Yahweh’s indictment against them and their impending punishment.

In this homily, we will conduct a short survey of Jeremiah’s life. We will then examine his methodology of “quotation,” noting, particularly, what we learn about the people of Judah. In concluding our survey, we will briefly consider the relevance of Jeremiah’s observations concerning his own people for modern America and its citizenry.

As we have said, Jeremiah provides as much personal information about himself as any other writer in the Hebrew Bible. In this portion of our homily, we want to look at some of the features of his life that have stood out to us.

Jeremiah, we learn, remained unmarried, and fathered no children—this in obedience to Yahweh’s directive. “Thou shalt not take thee a wife, neither shalt thou have sons or daughters in this place.”<sup>1</sup> We can’t help but wonder and imagine how Jeremiah felt when, after a long day of rejection, he return to an empty home without anyone to talk to or anyone to comfort and encourage him. One might imagine that God played this role, but as we will see that, at times, Jeremiah found God to be a very poor comforter indeed. We wonder if he longed to be a father and nourish his children in the ways of the Lord.

Jeremiah’s life of solitude was magnified by Yahweh’s further injunction that he refuse to join either family and friends—or foes, for that matter—at such important social occasions as weddings and funerals.

“Thou shalt not also go into the house of feasting, to sit with them to eat and to drink”<sup>2</sup>

“Enter not into the house of mourning, neither go to lament nor bemoan them...”<sup>3</sup>

Again, we find our imagination activated. Did he receive thoughtful wedding invitations? Were those so thoughtful as to invite him offended by this snub? How would they and he feel the next time they met on the street? What did he think of those departed friends and family members whose burials he absented? Did he miss them? Did he experience a soul wound when he did not participate in a public grieving that seems so healthy and necessarily healing to the human soul? How was he greeted weeks or months later by a wife, mother, son, father of the departed one? What sort of tensions and stresses did all this solitude create in him and between him and those who might have formerly been friendly and loving with him?

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 16.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jeremiah 16.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Jeremiah 16.<sup>5</sup>

Such solitude was not, indeed, easy. Jeremiah often felt lonely in, chaffed at, and complained of the solitary life Yahweh demanded that he live, and the misunderstanding it produced between himself and his fellow citizens.

“I sat alone because of thy hand:  
for thou hast filled me with indignation.  
Why is my pain perpetual,  
and my wound incurable,  
which refuseth to be healed?”<sup>4</sup>

By his own candid confession, we also know that at such moments when he wore his heart on his sleeve before Yahweh, he was often rebuked and called to repent, rather than comforted.

“Therefore this is what the LORD says:  
‘If you repent, I will restore you  
that you may serve me;  
if you utter worthy, not worthless, words,  
you will be my spokesman.  
Let this people turn to you,  
but you must not turn to them.’”<sup>5</sup>

His social isolation was exacerbated by a spiritual distance that Yahweh demanded he maintain from his fellow citizens.

“Therefore pray not thou for this people, neither lift up cry nor prayer for them, neither make intercession to me: for I will not hear thee.”<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding Yahweh’s injunction that Jeremiah not presume to advocate for his people,

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 15.<sup>17-18</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jeremiah 15.<sup>19</sup> (NIV)

<sup>6</sup> Jeremiah 7.<sup>16</sup>

Jeremiah's love for his people and his sorrow at their impending destruction led him to do so anyway. At such moments, Yahweh quickly and straightforwardly put him in his place.

“Then said the LORD unto me,  
“Though Moses and Samuel stood before me,  
yet my mind could not be toward this people:  
cast them out of my sight,  
and let them go forth.”<sup>7</sup>

How's that feel, I wonder: “Jeremiah, you're no Moses. And even if you were, I wouldn't listen.”

Although Jeremiah's love for his people drove him to risk Yahweh's displeasure, he would get little love back from a citizenry that, increasingly, misunderstood and mistrusted him until, finally, it considered him public enemy number one.

“Then said they, ‘Come, and let us devise devices against Jeremiah; for the law shall not perish from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor the word from the prophet. Come, and let us smite him with the tongue, and let us not give heed to any of his words.’”<sup>8</sup>

Jeremiah would be publicly humiliated by being subjected to the constraints of stocks.<sup>9</sup> He would be accused on treason.<sup>10</sup>

“...the son of Hananiah... took Jeremiah the prophet, saying, ‘Thou fallest away to the Chaldeans.’”<sup>11</sup>

“... Let this man be put to death: for thus he weakeneth the hands of the men of war that remain in this city, and the hands of all the people... for this man seeketh not the welfare

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<sup>7</sup> Jeremiah 15.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Jeremiah 18.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Jeremiah 20.<sup>1-2</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See Jeremiah 29

<sup>11</sup> Jeremiah 37.<sup>13</sup>

of this people, but the hurt.”<sup>12</sup>

“This man is worthy to die; for he hath prophesied against this city, as ye have heard with your ears.”<sup>13</sup>

He would be repeatedly imprisoned.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps, had Jeremiah experienced some success; seen even a hint of improvement in the moral condition of his fellow citizens to whom he preached, his personal sacrifices might have been less burdensome. However, Yahweh himself warned him that success was not forthcoming.

“Therefore thou shalt speak all these words unto them; but they will not hearken to thee: thou shalt also call unto them; but they will not answer thee.”<sup>15</sup>

At times, it all became too much for the lonesome figure.

“Woe is me, my mother, that thou hast borne me  
a man of strife and a man of contention to the whole earth!”<sup>16</sup>

“Cursed be the man who brought tidings to my father, saying,  
A man child is born unto thee;  
making him very glad.

Because he slew me not from the womb;  
or that my mother might have been my grave,  
and her womb to be always great with me.

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<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah 38.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Jeremiah 26.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Jeremiah 36.<sup>5</sup> (fourth year of Jehoiakim); 38.<sup>6</sup> (first year of Zedekiah?); 32.<sup>2</sup> (tenth year of Zedekiah)

<sup>15</sup> Jeremiah 7.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Jeremiah 15.<sup>10</sup>

Wherefore came I forth out of the womb  
to see labour and sorrow,  
that my days should be consumed with shame?”<sup>17</sup>

Yahweh seemed unaccountably unsympathetic to Jeremiah’s depression.

“If thou hast run with the footmen,  
and they have wearied thee,  
then how canst thou contend with horses?  
And if in the land of peace, wherein thou trustedst,  
they wearied thee,  
then how wilt thou do in the swelling of Jordan?”<sup>18</sup>

Tortured by such feelings and unsure of Yahweh’s commitment to him, Jeremiah, on at least one occasion, decided that he would retire from Yahweh’s service.

“Then I said, ‘I will not make mention of him,  
nor speak any more in his name.’”

Yet, committed to Yahweh’s ministry and driven by his love for his fellow citizens, this tortured man could not retire.

“But his word was in mine heart as a burning fire  
shut up in my bones,  
and I was weary with forbearing,  
and I could not stay.”<sup>19</sup>

Even with this small survey of Jeremiah and his life, it is clear that he was an extraordinary man. I, for one, am most grateful that Jeremiah, solitary and lonely, endured the near maddening hardships he faced. Certainly, he provides a model of endurance for those

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<sup>17</sup> Jeremiah 20.<sup>15, 17-18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah 12.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jeremiah 20.<sup>9</sup>

challenged by trials of all kinds. In addition, however, the book he left behind—a book that I consider to be one of the great treasures of antiquity—not only provides insights into his day, his culture and his nation, but a window into ours as well. We will now turn to some of his insights concerning his nation and its citizenry.

### The art of quotation

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Jeremiah was a careful and insightful observer of his fellow citizens. He was just as skillful at describing the nation and society of which he is a member. For example, Jeremiah wrote these lines of poetry, descriptive of Judah's departure from God and allegiance to false gods.

“Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this,  
and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate,  
saith the LORD.

For my people have committed two evils;  
they have forsaken me  
the fountain of living waters,  
and hewed them out cisterns,  
broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”<sup>20</sup>

Upon imagining the bone-dry, cracked, and desiccated cistern flood, burnt and bleached under a hot scorching sun, one truly is astonished at the insanity of relying on a cistern as a dependable water source. It appears all the more irrational when one understands that God openly invited them to drink from a constant and calm spring of cool, pure water.

And who can forget what is for me one of the most creative and enduring of images in scripture? Here, Jeremiah is once more addressing Judah's propensity toward idolatry.

“See thy way in the valley,  
know what thou hast done:

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<sup>20</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>12-13</sup>

thou art a swift dromedary  
traversing her ways;  
A wild ass used to the wilderness,  
that snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure;  
in her occasion who can turn her away?  
all they that seek her will not weary themselves;  
in her month they shall find her.”<sup>21</sup>

Once read and reimagined, this imagery of an out-of-control dromedary or ass in heat becomes seared into the pathways of one’s brain, never to be forgotten. In considering the imagery, one is unsure which is more appropriate: to laugh at the insanity of the rebellion or cry at the tragedy it represents.

Significant to our present discussion, this imagery of the dromedary/ass in unrestrained heat was imagined and uttered in response to words Jeremiah had often heard his fellow citizens speak. In fact, this imagery immediately follows Jeremiah’s first experiment with “quotation.”

“I do not transgress...”<sup>22</sup>

“How is it that you continue to say,  
‘I am not defiled,  
I have not followed Ba‘al?’”<sup>23</sup>

It is to be noted that the people to whom Jeremiah ministered—whether leader, religious or secular, or commoner—insistently maintained their innocence and correctness. They consistently responded to Jeremiah’s criticisms by asserting that their relationship with God was whole and healthy and that they were, unquestionably, exceptional.

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<sup>21</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>20</sup>, author’s translation. This is the Qere reading (what is read) rather than the Kethib (what is written). I take the imperfect tense as indicative of custom rather than future time. Not, “I will not transgress,” as if it were some type of commitment concerning future action, but rather, “I never transgress” (“have not, do not now, and will not in the future transgress.”

<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>23</sup>, author’s translation.



“We are wise.

We possess YHWH’s Tôrah.”<sup>24</sup>

Willful in their apostacy and self-delusion, they presented themselves as baffled by Jeremiah’s societal critique.

“Rest assured, when you have passed along this entire message to this people, they will reply:

‘Why has YHWH pronounced this huge disaster upon us?’

And, ‘What is our offense?’

And ‘What sin have we committed against YHWH, our God?’”<sup>25</sup>

“For what reason is YHWH, our God, going to do all this to us?”<sup>26</sup>

“Just see how I oppose you,

you who dwell in the valley

you who dwell on the tells of the plains, proclaims Yahweh;

you who say, ‘who is able to march down,

let alone storm our towns?’”<sup>27</sup>

Such questions were not real or searching, but rhetorical in nature; more assertion than query. They were meant to question Jeremiah’s assertions about their character rather than introspectively examine their own lives. Indeed, Jeremiah never heard a word of rational introspection. Rather, Judah acted more the part of unthinking animal.

“I was attentive and listened.

The appropriate response is missing.

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<sup>24</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>8</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>25</sup> Jeremiah 16.<sup>10</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>26</sup> Jeremiah 5.<sup>19</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>27</sup> Jeremiah 21.<sup>20</sup>, author’s translation

Not a single one of them regrets his perversity,  
lamenting, ‘What am I doing?’—

but all of them turning, dashing  
as a horse sweeping into battle.”<sup>28</sup>

Once more utilizing quotation, Jeremiah objected to all false assertion of innocence and exceptionalism.

“Since you have professed, ‘Because I am innocent,  
it is certain that his anger will not be directed at me,’  
Listen up! I have a dispute with you,  
when you claim: ‘I have not sinned.’”<sup>29</sup>

It might be well, here, to recall the words of an indoctrinated Laman and Lemuel.

“Neither did they believe that Jerusalem, that great city could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets...”<sup>30</sup>

“We know that the people who were in the land of Jerusalem were a righteous people; for they kept the statutes and judgments of the Lord, and all his commandments, according to the law of Moses; wherefore, we know that they are a righteous people; and our father hath judged them...”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>6</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>29</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>35</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>30</sup> 1 Nephi 2.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>31</sup> 1 Nephi 17.<sup>22</sup>. This doctrine of exceptionalism—an exceptionalism that often claims to exempt individuals and society from criticism and consequence—seems to run in a straight line from these two brothers right through the end of the book of Mormon. We hear it articulated most clearly by King Noah’s subjects: “And now, O king, what great evil hast thou done, or what great sins have thy people committed, that we should be condemned of God or judged of this man? And now, O king, behold, we are guiltless, and thou, O king, hast not sinned; therefore, this man has lied concerning you, and he has prophesied in vain. And behold, we are strong, we shall not come into bondage, or be taken captive by our enemies; yea, and thou hast prospered in the land, and thou shalt also prosper.” (Mosiah 12.<sup>13-15</sup>).

Now, neither Laman and Lemuel nor the people of whom they think so highly created such false security out of thin air. Their self-delusion was fed by false prophets, pundits of national exceptionalism. Jeremiah quoted these too.

“They say still unto them that despise me,

‘The LORD hath said,

Ye shall have peace;’

And they say unto every one that walketh

after the imagination of his own heart,

‘No calamity shall come upon you.’”<sup>32</sup>

“From prophet to priest,

all of them act deceptively.

Their attempts to heal the brokenness of my people is pathetic, saying

‘Relax. Be calm.’

But there’s no call for being calm!”<sup>33</sup>

But Jeremiah, boldly and against the insanely confident voices that proclaim otherwise, testified that all this talk of supposed rightness and the security that flows from it was a lie. He does so, again, through quotation, this time repeating back to them the very words that they dismissively and sarcastically threw at him.

“Just look at them! They say to me,

‘Where is YHWH’s word?

Please, let it materialize.’”<sup>34</sup>

“They knowingly lie about YHWH

when they claim, ‘He does no such thing.

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<sup>32</sup> Jeremiah 23.<sup>17</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>33</sup> Jeremiah 6.<sup>13-14</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>34</sup> Jeremiah 17.<sup>15</sup>, author’s translation

Nothing catastrophic will happen to us.

We will experience neither attack nor scarcity.

The prophets are like a puff of air.

There is not a truthful word in them.

For this reason, all they say will happen to them.”<sup>35</sup>

As we have said, the public’s dismissive and sarcastic attitude toward Jeremiah often turned violent. As evidence, Jeremiah let the public speak for itself.

“They say, ‘Come on! Let’s instigate a plot against Yirm<sup>e</sup>yāhû. For “Tôrah is not disappearing from priest, or good advice from the wise, or oracles from the prophet.” Let’s go, then, and smack him in the mouth, so we need not be required to listen to another word from him.”<sup>36</sup>

“For I have heard the slander of many;  
quarrelsomeness is everywhere.  
‘Contradict! We must contradict him;’  
all of them, ‘my friend,’  
waiting for me to make a mistake.  
‘Perhaps he can be corrupted,  
and then we will have our triumph over him;  
we will take our revenge upon him.”<sup>37</sup>

“Even as Yirm<sup>e</sup>yāhû was finishing up, relating all that Yahweh had commanded him to say to all the people, the priests, the prophets, and all the people seized him, shouting, ‘You must die! What do you mean by prophesying in Yahweh’s name, asserting, “As Šîlô is, so shall this temple be,” and “this city will be emptied, without inhabitant?”’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jeremiah 5.<sup>12-13</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>36</sup> Jeremiah 18.<sup>18</sup>, author’s translation. In “Tôrah is not disappearing from priest, or good advice from the wise, or oracles from the prophet” I understand Jeremiah to be quoting the people as they quote his unwelcome criticism.

<sup>37</sup> Jeremiah 20.<sup>10</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>38</sup> Jeremiah 26.<sup>8-9</sup>, author’s translation

But Jeremiah revealed all society's claims about innocence and mastery and exceptionalism to be empty bravado. And what did he use as proof? You guessed it, their own words. Like Alma, a millennium later and half a globe away, who heard, stupefied, the perverse and arrogant Zoramite prayers offered at their Rameumptom, Jeremiah stood at the idolatrous Judean shrines, including the nation's central temple at Jerusalem, and listened in on their blasphemous prayers.

You say to a block of wood, "You are my father;"  
and to a hunk of rock, "You have given me life."<sup>39</sup>

And what did they have to say to the One and Only True and Living God?

"We are free to do as we please.  
We can no longer trust you."<sup>40</sup>

God welcomed Judah to obedience and the peace that follows. He warned them of the evil consequences that attended rebelliousness. But Judah responded to God's gracious invitation and wise counsel with stubbornness.

"This is what YHWH says,  
'Stand on the road, and look about  
to rediscover the paths of a bygone era.  
Inquire after the proper way, walk in it,  
and then you will find a place of rest for yourselves.'  
But they said, 'We will not walk this way.'"<sup>41</sup>

"I spoke to you," God laments, "when you felt secure,

You replied, 'I will not listen.'

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<sup>39</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>27</sup>, author's translation

<sup>40</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>31</sup>, author's translation

<sup>41</sup> Jeremaih 6.<sup>16</sup>, author's translation

“this has been your habit since youth;  
for you have never listen to my voice.”<sup>42</sup>

And then, in its declining days, weary and hopeless, the nation’s citizenry gave up.

“You replied, ‘Give it up!  
For, I have always loved forbidden gods,  
and intend to continue to chase after them.’”<sup>43</sup>

“But they will reply: ‘Give up! For we will follow our own imagination;  
each of us steadfastly acting as our evil heart directs.’”<sup>44</sup>

By means of a gloss, we witness Jeremiah lose his “objective” reportage in this final quote. While it is entirely conceivable that his audience at various points might have replied, “each of us steadfastly acting as our heart directs,” Jeremiah has, through his quotations, provided proof positive that they never considered or confessed that their heart was “evil.”

## Conclusion

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We are the beneficiaries of Jeremiah’s enduring love for his wayward fellow citizens, his personal commitment to faithful ministry, his skilled poetic discourse, and his faith in a God who will ultimately have his victory over chaos and confusion and insanity. In his poetry, Jeremiah pointedly describes Judah’s deluded self-understanding in the most creative and imaginative of ways. Far more than any other Hebrew prophet of antiquity, he utilizes quotation as evidence of Judah’s self-delusions and false sense of security.

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<sup>42</sup> Jeremiah 22.<sup>21</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>43</sup> Jeremiah 2.<sup>25</sup>, author’s translation

<sup>44</sup> Jeremiah 18.<sup>12</sup>, author’s translation. Here we see Jeremiah losing his “objective” reportage. It is conceivable that they replied, “each of us steadfastly acting as our heart directs,” but less likely that they confessed that their heart was “evil.” This would seem to be a judgmental gloss on the part of Jeremiah.

I treasure the Book of Jeremiah. My appreciation is more than antiquarian. I find in Jeremiah's poetry a window into my own world. I often find something terrifyingly familiar in his quotations. I see my own world mirrored in them.

In the myriad of daily printed headlines, we often see the same self-delusion that we see in Jeremiah's quotations. In the non-stop partisan propaganda, we often hear the same willfully ignorant claims of righteousness. In manipulative politicians' arrogant claims of superpower status and military invincibility, we are subjected to the same false sense of security. In the itch-their-ears sermons of Christian ministers we are taken prisoner by the lies of American exceptionalism. Through the utterances of false prophets across the political and religious divide, we, like they, become resistant to any who proclaim our need for repentance. In the citizenry's acceptance of all these lies, we witness the same habit of lying about God and thus making him party to our delusions, our ignorance, our insanity—our blasphemy. It often seems, in fact, that, desperate, the citizenry has given up, abandoned themselves to their worst instincts.

I do believe that we are fully justified in thinking Jeremiah's criticisms applicable to our own day and our own nation. We may appropriately fear that without evidence of dramatic repentance, the full weight of his dire warnings and threats will become our rightful inheritance. We may fear that without a national change of heart we too may find ourselves reluctantly utilizing the art of quotation.

“Why do we just sit here?

We should gather ourselves and enter the fortified cities

to there, wail

because YHWH, our God, has decimated us

and given us poison to drink

because we have offended YHWH

We hoped for security, but we didn't experience anything good.

We longed to experience a restoration, but, look at that, terror assails!"<sup>45</sup>

"Oh, our pain; for we are violently overthrown."<sup>46</sup>

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

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<sup>45</sup> Jeremiah 8.<sup>14-15</sup>, author's translation

<sup>46</sup> Jeremiah 4.<sup>13</sup>, author's translation