



The Suffering of the Prophet Jeremiah

Drs. H. Lalleman-de Winkel graduated from Utrecht State University, taking Old Testament as her main subject. She wrote a thesis on *Medical Metaphors in the Book of Jeremiah*, and continues research on that book.

We live in a remarkable time. In our western world with its material prosperity we can get almost everything we want. Even if not all are rich, generally speaking we have more than we really need. Yet even in our modern world money cannot buy freedom from sorrow and suffering. So many books are written on this theme nowadays, (for instance the book by Harold S. Kushner *When bad things happen to good people*), along with books about: how to be healthy, successful in business, etc. Suffering does not agree with our success, and so it hardly figures in our thinking. The book of Jeremiah offers one model of suffering. Even if the suffering of Jeremiah has certain specific meanings which do not apply to suffering in general, some analogies with suffering in the content of Christian discipleship remain. In any case, this aspect of the prophecy of Jeremiah is not always well understood, and repays study in itself.

The prophet Jeremiah would have been a 'failure' in our society, a tragic figure who treads a lonely path. But this man fulfilled precisely in and through his suffering God's purpose for his life and for the people of his day. Jeremiah gave voice to his suffering in laments. But these do not remain private; rather they render a part of his message as well. The suffering of the prophet must be seen in the context of the whole of the book of Jeremiah and in the light of his relationship with God.¹

In the book of Jeremiah several subjects suffer: the prophet Jeremiah, the people, Baruch (Jeremiah's scribe) and even God himself.² There are several kinds of suffering. The suffering of the people is different from Jeremiah's. Jeremiah's suffering clearly has different forms, different accents. Because of its prominence, however, we shall deal here only with the suffering of Jeremiah.

"They will fight against you; but they shall not prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you."

Already in the story about Jeremiah's call in Jeremiah 1 (at the time of King Josiah c. 626 B.C.) we find things which set the tone for the book: the way in which God and prophet meet each other is a very personal one (verses 4-9; cf. the 'solemn' language at the call of Ezekiel); the message to be proclaimed is mainly one of judgment; Jeremiah will be made strong for it, and badly needs the encouragement that nobody will 'prevail against you, for I am with you, says the LORD, to deliver you' (v.19, cf. v.8)

Biographical Sections.

In those parts of the book which tell of Jeremiah's life, what we read in the story of his call is developed: his message of judgment is not accepted with enthusiasm; indeed the story has been called a 'passion narrative'. Let us consider some of these reports which relate to Jeremiah's suffering.

Jeremiah 20:1-2 describes how Jeremiah is captured by the chief officer in the temple, Pashhur; he is considered a disturber of the peace (cf. 29:26, apparently this happened more often). People take offence at his message of judgment, he is beaten and put in a kind of straitjacket.

"Then Pashhur beat Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the upper Benjamin Gate of the house of the LORD."

In Jeremiah 26 we read that priests and prophets want to let Jeremiah die because he proclaimed to them the destruction of the temple, their pride (verse 6: 'then I will make this house like Shiloh') and of the city of Jerusalem, unless they repent. The murder of Jeremiah is narrowly prevented (v. 16).

In Jeremiah 36 the scroll containing his words is burned by King Jehoiakim (605 B.C.; the historical facts are not given in chronological order, as we see from Jeremiah 34 which concerns king Zedekiah and the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians about 587 B.C.).

In Jeremiah 37:11-16 we read how, during the reign of Zedekiah, Jeremiah is accused of going over to the Babylonians, 587 B.C. He is imprisoned, but soon transferred to a better place by Zedekiah. (On this as on other occasions Zedekiah had asked the prophet for advice about his dangerous political situation, cf. 21:1-10 and 38:14 ff). Chapter 38:1-13 tells of one final trial, where again a timely intervention saves him from death. In due course, Jeremiah experiences the conquest of Jerusalem. Later, he and Baruch are taken to Egypt, together with a remnant of the people who had escaped deportation to Babylon (Jer. 43:6).

Personal Constraints

As well as these reports about suffering and persecution in Jeremiah's life, we must also consider texts which contain a word of God to the prophet which results in suffering in his life. In 7:16, 11:14 and 14:11 God forbids Jeremiah to pray for his people, as

judgment on the sins of the people is inevitable. In Jeremiah 16 God forbids the prophet to marry and to have children. This is a sign of the coming judgment, when fathers, mothers and children will die. This will certainly have drawn attention to Jeremiah and his message, because it was very unusual for a man not to marry. Jeremiah is also not allowed to mourn or to condole, as a testimony to the time when so many people will be killed that no one will have time to do so. He is also not allowed to enter a house where a feast is given, for gaiety shall be silenced. And when people ask with astonishment: 'Why this great evil?', then Jeremiah has to explain: 'Because you have forsaken the Lord' (vv. 11-12).

This presentation of the message in a symbolic way is something we also find with other prophets, as for example Hosea. See also Jeremiah 28, where he has to carry a yoke. Not being allowed to marry influences his personal life much more deeply of course. To Jeremiah, the prohibitions in chapter 16 imply a lonely life, without normal relationships with other people.

The Confessions

The facts mentioned above form the 'outward side' of the prophetic suffering. The 'inner side', the personal reactions of Jeremiah to his suffering, is found in the so-called Confessions of the prophet, in which he turns to God in lament.

Many elements in these texts remind us of the Psalms, particularly the lamentation-psalms such as 22, 42, 43, 44. For instance we find the typical 'why' or 'how long' question, the appeal to God, the utterance of the lament itself, together with some explanation of the situation (persecution, illness or loneliness), the prayer for salvation, words of trust and encouragement

"Why is my pain unceasing, my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?"

(which often come very unexpectedly). The laments we find in the Confessions clearly stem from a prophet. Here the suffering in question is caused just by being a prophet. The Confessions therefore form an essential part of the book.

As an example we may take the lament in Jeremiah 17:12-18. The motive turns out to be the sneering at the prophet because his prophecies of doom had failed to materialize. Verse 16 here represents the urge to proclaim the coming judgment, an urge which Jeremiah himself had not asked for. And only God, the Sender, can take care lest the messenger be ashamed (v.18).

This element of mockery, then, is important in the Confessions. All the other Confessions, indeed, contain laments about persecution on account of his message. For instance 11:19b says 'I did not know it was against me they devised schemes, saying, "Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more".' Jeremiah calls himself 'a man of strife and contention to the whole land' (15:10). And in 20:10b, 'Denounce him! Let us denounce him!', say all my familiar friends, watching for my fall. "Perhaps he will be deceived, then we can overcome him, and take our revenge on him."

As well as mockery and persecution, 15:17b shows that he suffered loneliness too by virtue of his being a prophet: 'I sat alone, because thy hand was upon me, for thou hadst filled me with indignation.' (He means here the wrath of God against sin, resulting in judgment, which Jeremiah had to proclaim.) The proclaiming of a message of judgment placed Jeremiah outside normal relationships with other people.

The Confessions are laments addressed to God, sometimes even accusations. In 15:18b Jeremiah says: 'Wilt thou be to me like a deceitful brook, like waters that fail?' (In the Dutch Bible this verse is stronger than in the RSV, because it is put in the affirmative form - 'thou art truly a deceitful brook to me'. God reprimands him sternly because of these audacious words; cf. New English Bible.) Jeremiah is dismayed; as he sees it, being a prophet only yields misery. Following his outburst he has to repent and utter no more audacious words. Only then will he be in a position to speak God's word again. God in this text repeats the promises made in Jeremiah 1 to strengthen the prophet, to deliver him from his enemies and to be present. So this can be seen as a renewed call and rehabilitation as a prophet.

In 20:7ff. Jeremiah complains that God was too strong for him when He appointed him to be a prophet. Now he is threatened from all sides. The language used in texts like this one strongly reminds us of parts of the book of Job. In verse 14ff. Jeremiah curses the day when he was born, cf. Job 3. Yet the situation in which the lament in Jeremiah 20 arises, is very clearly that of a prophet. The circumstances of being a prophet are themselves the cause of Jeremiah's suffering. Because of this he comes into conflict with his call. Yet he cannot refrain from proclaiming the words of God. He would like to stop speaking in God's name, but the words must be uttered, he cannot keep them for himself (v.9). This Confession is the strongest, most intensive lament of all.

Reactions to the Message

There are also in Jeremiah a number of laments about the suffering which are not simply the prophet's reactions to suffering, but reactions to the message of judgment. Some are indeed the reactions of the prophet himself to what he has seen and heard; however others are reactions of the people, voiced by Jeremiah. The laments differ from the Confessions in that they are not addressed to God.

"My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war."

Here too, however, we find elements originating from lamentation-psalms, but less clearly so than in the Confessions.

In 4:19-20 we read: 'My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain! Oh, the walls of my heart! My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent; for I hear the sound of the trumpet, the alarm of war. Disaster follows hard on disaster; the whole land is laid waste. Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment.' In the chapters surrounding this text, the unfaithfulness of Israel and Judah to the LORD and the neglect of his commands are denounced. Jeremiah 4:5ff. speaks about 'the people from the

North' that will bring destruction upon Judah. The calamity is seen beforehand in this chapter and verses 19ff. form a reaction to the vision. This could be a case either of Jeremiah's own reaction or a voicing of the feelings of the people. 'My tents', plural, could support the latter opinion. (In verse 22 God speaks, but the grammatical subject more often changes within one paragraph (cf. 12:1-4 and 5-6). So it is not necessary, as some do, to say that God is speaking in verses 19-20. Some commentaries choose the first possibility (Jeremiah utters his own feelings),⁷ others the second one (Jeremiah feels, so to speak, the feelings of the people).⁸ It is difficult to make a choice. I am inclined to think it is the personal utterance of the prophet. Either way, of course, the prophet speaks. And the question is whether prophet and people always can in the end be clearly distinguished. In the whole book we have the impression that Jeremiah suffers with his people and in the light of this, we can imagine such a deep entering into the feelings of the people caused by what they go through.

“Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.”

In Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 we have the reaction of the prophet to the judgment God shows him (he also brings the word to the people, v. 20). In several commentaries these verses are related to the present (famine, great calamity etc.),⁹ but it seems to me, when we look at the context, that they refer to the coming judgment, viz. the Babylonian exile.

It is noteworthy that in 4:19-20 and 8:18-9:1 the laments are part of the message of judgment. The laments make the judgment present, so to speak, they present the message by reacting very concretely to the judgment, as if it were already visible. Two more facts from 8:18-9:1 confirm this relationship between laments and message. In the first place, in the middle of the lament God Himself speaks (v. 19c). In the second place, the lament in verse 22 prepares for the charge which follows in 9:2-3. Why has the 'health of the daughter of my people not been restored?' (verse 22). The cause is at the same time the accusation: 'they do not know me' (9:3).¹⁰ We see that the laments have a function in the framework of the message and are not to be loosened from it. In my opinion we also have to be careful lest we connect the laments with Jeremiah's character, so that we make all kinds of speculations concerning his 'sensitive soul', something which we find in several commentaries. In 23:9 we have Jeremiah's reaction to the sins of prophets and priests, which he sees increasingly sharply because of his relationship with God. The phrase 'because of the LORD and because of his holy words' makes clear, that this is the lament of a *prophet*. 'My heart is broken within me, all my bones shake ...' The message gains expressiveness by this concrete wording, as it did in the parts mentioned above.

The Meaning of Suffering

We saw that the suffering of the prophet Jeremiah had several aspects: it is suffering caused by the very loneliness of being a prophet, but also by mockery and persecution from his fellow-

countrymen because of his message. It comes also simply from being one of the people, a suffering in solidarity. This appears from his reaction to what God shows him of what is to come. And this brings us to another dimension; Jeremiah's whole life can be seen as an illustration of the desperate situation of Judah.

In his suffering and life the prophet bears the signs of his message. He is ordered to proclaim judgment and doom, but endures these things himself. We see the troubled times of the people reflected in his own life. H. J. Stoebe says: 'Jeremiah not only had to proclaim anger [cf. 15:17b-H. L.] but bears it himself in his body and has to represent it by his fate.'¹¹ There is another side to this. For in the suffering of Jeremiah we also see a suffering of God (31:20).

Jeremiah therefore stands between God and his people: messenger of God, member of the people to which he has to proclaim judgment. W. C. Kaiser rightly speaks of vicarious suffering in 15:15 and 8:18-21.¹² 'There is in Jeremiah's ministry therefore, as in the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, a foreshadowing of the work of Christ himself, both bringing and seeing judgment through his cross'.

We often ask for the meaning of suffering. It is not possible to give a single answer to the meaning of the suffering of the prophet Jeremiah. His suffering has several aspects, of which all have a certain function in relation to the message of the book. Jeremiah himself did not see the meaning of his suffering clearly, as we may conclude from the Confessions. Anyone who reads the book nowadays is impressed by the deep and intensive way in which Jeremiah exercised his ministry as a prophet. Jeremiah. 30-33, the part of the book in which salvation is proclaimed and a new covenant is promised, brings all the more relief because of the passionate message of judgment in the rest of the book.

It is clear that the suffering man, no less than others, has a place with God, Jeremiah perhaps a special one. The common opinion that everyone who suffers has sinned and is not right before God, is in any case not true for Jeremiah (cf. Job). The opposite is true: his life is used in the service of the message God wants to convey to his people. His life can even be seen as an illustration of the way in which the people will go.

So we cannot say that *despite* his suffering Jeremiah is of great importance to us/was a great prophet, but that *thanks to* his suffering he is/was so. The suffering of the prophet is not a failure. God's way does not pass by affliction but goes through it, and suffering becomes an integral part of his message.

This article first appeared in the Dutch journal Bijbel en Wetenschap, and we are grateful for the opportunity to reproduce it here, in slightly modified form.

Notes

1. New York, 1981.
2. I think we have to take care not to see suffering as a kind of proof of faith, as if God only is on the side of those who suffer. The opposite, to think that suffering is a punishment of God, is no more true (cf. the friends of Job). I have not dealt with all the texts in Jeremiah that relate to suffering, nor entered into debates about form, redaction-history and additions. As a starting-point I take the book of Jeremiah as a unity and relate the texts about suffering to Jeremiah personally.
3. *The people* - the ten tribes (Israel) were taken into exile already a century ago. Jeremiah is especially preaching to the two tribes,

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for her unmarried friends, urging them to wait for the right time to enjoy these pleasures in the context of the marriage relationship (8:4).

A2. Affirmation (8:5 – 8:14)

The picture of the seal in 8:6 suggests the idea of ownership and possession. It's as if she wants to imprint her claim to her husband deeply and openly on him for all to see. Love is as strong as death (8:6) in the sense that just as when death calls, you have to go, whether you like it or not, so when love calls, the call is irresistible! When husband and wife know and feel that they belong to each other (2:16, 6:3, 7:10), they have a right to feel jealous of their relationship and not allow any third party to spoil it (8:6).

**“I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine;
he pastures his flock among the lilies.”**

The fire of love in marriage is so strong that it cannot be quenched or washed away; and love is so precious that it cannot be bought by money (8:7).

The friends of the bride speak about their ‘younger sister’, who is not yet ready for marriage and needs to make sure that she is

not seduced before marriage (8:8-9). The bride then expresses her gratefulness that she has kept herself for her husband (8:10). Solomon’s mistake was that he gave his body (‘his vineyard’) to far too many different women, and reaped disaster as a result (Baal-Hamon in 8:11 means ‘possessor of tumult’). But she has determined to give herself exclusively to her husband (8:12).

The proof of the pudding is in the eating! Does this way of interpreting the book make sense? If it does, it has something to say about marriage and sex as God intends them to be enjoyed in any culture. And there seems little need to go one step further and interpret the book in every detail as an allegory of the relationship between God and his people.

If we can find the right contexts in which to expound the book in this way, we may be able to help all God’s people – both young and old – to respond to its teaching, not with a titter of embarrassment, but with real enthusiasm: ‘This is the word of the Lord!’

Notes

1. G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Songs*, Tyndale Commentary.
2. Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet and Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes. A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, Eerdmans, 1983.
3. Derek Kidner in *The Lion Handbook to the Bible*, Lion Publishing, 1973, page 367.

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- called Judah. Israel is mentioned regularly, however; *Baruch* – see Jer. 45; *God* – in this way Jeremiah 31:20 can be explained. Much more could be said concerning this subject.
4. Among these we can reckon: 11:18-23-12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23 and 20:7-18.
 5. This is also apparent from the fact that we also find words of God in these passages, for instance 11:21-23; 15:19-21.
 6. I mean passages like 4:19-21; 8:18-9:1 (Hebrew Bible: 8:18-23); 10:19-22; 13:17; 14:17-22; 23:9.
 7. E.g. R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, London, 1973; C. F. Keil – F. Delitzsch, *Jeremiah, Lamentations*, Commentary on the Old Testament 8, 2nd Impr., Grand Rapids 1978 (According to K. & D. Jeremiah here utters his personal feelings, yet he is voicing the feelings the godly in the land may have); W. Rudolph, *Jeremia*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament, Erste Reihe 12, Tübingen 1947; A. Weiser, *Das Buch Jeremia*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch 20-21, 6. Aufl., Göttingen, 1969.
 8. E.g. A. van Selms, *Jeremia, De Prediking van het Oude Testament* 1, 2nd Impr., Nijkerk, 1979; 2, Nijkerk 1974 (a very useful commentary); P. Volz, *Der Prophet Jeremia*, Kommentar zum Alten Testament 10, 2 Aufl., Leipzig, 1928.
 9. *Famine* – e.g. W. Rudolph, *ibid.*; *calamity* – e.g. P. Volz, *ibid.*
 10. On this figure of speech in 8:22, where rhetorical questions are used in 22a and b followed by ‘why then?’, see W. A. Brueggeman, ‘Jeremiah’s Use of Rhetorical Questions’ in *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 1973, 92, pp. 358-374. See also the explanation of A van Selms, ‘Jeremia’, *De Prediking van het Oude Testament*, 1, 2nd Impr., Nijkerk 1979, Excurs 8, p. 272-273.
 11. H. J. Stoebe, ‘Seelsorge und Mitleiden bei Jeremia’ in *Wort und Dienst*, 1955, pp. 116-134.
 12. W. C. Kaiser, Jr., *A Biblical Approach to Personal Suffering*, Chicago, 1982, p.124. This work focuses on the book of Lamentations.