

PREFACE

This book is not a commentary on the biblical book of Jeremiah. It is an interpretation of aspects of Jeremiah using insights drawn from contemporary studies of trauma and disaster. Trauma and disaster studies investigate how overwhelming violence and debilitating losses afflict minds, bodies, and spirits. In Jeremiah every passage anticipates disaster, speaks about it, or searches for ways to cope with its enduring consequences. A full-throttle response to a multi-leveled calamity, the book of Jeremiah addresses the victims of the Babylonian assaults on Judah in the sixth century B.C.E., including invasions, displacements, and deportations. Trauma and disaster studies examines the impact of such violence and the less visible wounds upon the life of the community that come inevitably in its wake.

Writing this book was both painful and promising. It was painful to write because its subject is how to survive pain, physical and spiritual, communal and individual. Writing was painful also because somewhere deep in my spirit the sufferings depicted in Jeremiah distantly evoke my life in ways beyond words. And mostly, it was painful because I have tried to write it for a wide audience, for students of the prophet, preachers and ministers, clergy, caregivers, and for anyone who has experienced loss, displacement, and brokenness. It would have been much easier to write only for my colleagues in biblical studies, and, yes, I am trying to persuade them that trauma and disaster studies illuminate the book of Jeremiah in startling ways.

But writing about Jeremiah and disaster was also promising because trauma and disaster studies have explained so many problems I have had with Jeremiah, especially with his portrait of a violent, angry God and the book's entry and reentry into violent images, metaphors, and relationships. I vigorously searched the literature to discover how these features of the book might have helped the people of Judah carry on after the Babylonian assaults.

I discovered how Jeremiah's artistry lifts violent destruction into worlds of poetry and symbol where horrible pain and loss can be seen, taken in, and acknowledged without overwhelming its victims anew. I saw how Jeremiah's potent images, metaphors, and dramatic scenes enact on a small stage the plight of the nation. I rethought how the life of the prophet embodies the fate of the people, the threat to their life, their public humiliation, their approaching death, and always miraculous escape.

I discovered how Jeremiah promises a future beyond the death of the nation, a future that is uncertain, open-ended, and just over the horizon. That future will come because God, whom they thought had punished them, failed them, or left them, was still there, still loving, and still yearning for them. Jeremiah does not explain suffering in any satisfactory way, at least to me (no biblical book does), but the book pledges that God will make a future and points the way toward it. Jeremiah's literary artistry is a mode of survival, an expression of hope, even when the words themselves are hopeless.

Because violence saturates the world of the readers, Jeremiah sees violence in every sphere of life, even within God's own being. This literary violence offers victims of disaster language to speak about their experiences, a capacity of expression brutally undermined by the violent events themselves. The tears of Jeremiah, God, the people, and the earth itself flow across the book, promising to awaken hearts turned to stone by brutality. Jeremiah's portrait of an angry God promises, first, that God is alive even though every faith tradition of the past had been smashed to pieces like their environment, and, second, there is a cause and effect in the world, order in the mist of utter chaos.

Viewed from this perspective, Jeremiah is a work of resilience, a book of massive theological reinvention, and a kind of survival manual for a destroyed society.

In its poignant beauty, the literature transforms memories of violence, reframes them, and gives them coherence—partial and momentary—to lead victims and their offspring through the turbulent morass that is disaster. Because the book of Jeremiah is a work of art, it can reach out to embrace other sufferings, losses, and doubts of the world. This is the book's promise.

I am writing this preface as disaster strikes Japan in earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear hazard, as Libya and other parts of northern Africa boil up in violence and warfare, as Israelis and Palestinians continue struggling over the land, and the United States and western powers occupy Iraq and Afghanistan. If nothing else, Jeremiah mirrors the plight of these peoples and invites those of us in more tranquil places to understand and perhaps to act.