

NOTES ON JEREMIAH 20:7-13

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To understand this speech of Jeremiah, it's important to recognize that prophetic speeches are always addressed to specific situations, so if we want to understand them, we have to read them in those contexts. In this specific case, it's also important to recognize that two contexts are at work: Jeremiah's own context in which the speech was created, and the context of the readers of the book we now have. Indeed, an enormous existential gulf stands between Jeremiah in his context and the readers of the book in their context, a gulf created by the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem and the deportation of the king and many others. Moreover, the generation who first read the book of Jeremiah would have seen this speech as something from the past. They read the speech in full knowledge of what the Babylonians had done to Jerusalem, and what had become of many of Jeremiah's prophecies.

When Jeremiah preached this, his audience lived in Jerusalem, which still stood as the capital of the relatively independent kingdom of Judah, and which had successfully resisted the attempts of the Mesopotamian superpowers Assyria and Babylon to conquer it. They saw no reason to think this would change because they attributed their survival to God's fierce devotion to Jerusalem, its temple and its king from the house of David. Jeremiah had been preaching for a couple of decades about how the future would be catastrophically different because the people and their rulers misunderstood what God sought from them. But nothing had happened; things continued as before.

The audience of readers of the book of Jeremiah sit in Babylonian deportee camps. The Jerusalem they loved had been destroyed, the temple burned, and the king of the house of David taken to Babylon and kept there. They worked at forced labor for the benefit of their Babylonian masters. They had been in that situation long enough for an entire new generation to have come of age, and for their hopes that God would restore them to have died.

Jeremiah's speech is a kind of psalm known as a complaint (not a "confession" as it has sometimes been labelled). It's a common type of prayer in the Bible. It's the song one sings when something is not right with the universe, so you file a complaint with the ruler of the universe, God, to bring the problem to divine attention and remedy. This is a prayer of deep faith, trusting that if God were only alerted to the problem, God would surely fix it. As is common with this form of prayer there are two distinct halves. The first, vv 7-10, is the complaint about the problem. The second, vv 11-13, is an expression of the worshipper's confidence in and reliance on God for the solution.

It turns out that Jeremiah's complaint is unusual in that it is not about some part of God's universe, but about God Godself. Jeremiah reproaches God in the bitterest of terms for having seduced him, even for having overpowered him. This is very strong language because Jeremiah is completely fed up with God. Jeremiah has been preaching about the coming catastrophe the people's choices are bringing them – to scorn and persecution, but God has done NOTHING to make that future happen. As result, Jeremiah has become a laughing-stock, a source of ridicule even among his closest family and friends as "Mr. Doom and Gloom All Around." Nothing worse could happen to a prophet who wants people to change their ways than to become a source of amusement. Jeremiah tries to stop preaching, but finds that he can no more succeed at that than at bringing about change in the society to which he was sent because God – who does nothing to bring the future – cannot be resisted. The strong affirmations of confidence in vv 11-13 seem strange after the bitterness of Jeremiah's language in vv 7-10, but this is exactly the way it

works in complaint psalms. Even the bitterest complaint is addressed to God in the faith that God will respond and act, thus the expression of confidence is neither suppressing the anger of the opening verses, nor a denial of their reality, but an expression of confidence that God will hear even our burning anger at God and respond positively.

A generation later, the first readers of the book of Jeremiah would read this as a speech from the past before the Babylonian destruction of the kingdom of Judah, Jerusalem and temple, with their consequent deportation. They or their parents had experienced firsthand the catastrophe that Jeremiah complained God was not enacting. They knew that Jeremiah's faith in God had not been misplaced. Paradoxically, they would have found this re-assuring in their long wait for the fulfillment of other prophecies of Jeremiah about the restoration of Jerusalem, Judah and them. Jeremiah's words would have given voice to their own bitter frustration and anger, but his confidence would also have bolstered theirs, now in prophecies of hope and salvation.