

CROSSINGS
A STUDY GUIDE



JEREMIAH

Part 2

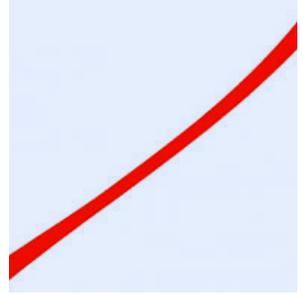
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Introduction to Part 2

We last left Jeremiah proclaiming, in gruesome detail, the certainty of Exile to the leaders of Jerusalem and the towns of Judah. From Jeremiah's call scene in chapter 1, the prophetic texts grow gloomier and more despondent over the prospects of Israelite leadership to course-correct. Jeremiah vacillates from lashing out at his people and God, to expressing a desperate hope that things can be made new.

The remainder of Jeremiah is much the same, with a few major exceptions: 1) much of what occurs in Jeremiah's scroll are *narratives*, descriptions of events as they occurred, 2) concrete declarations of hope in an *exilic context*, and 3) specific prophecies against the kingdoms that oppressed Israel in its final years, *especially Babylon* (chapter 51).

As a whole, the book ends ambiguously. More on that later. For now, it's important to bear in mind that the book of Jeremiah was written to, for, and by exiles and refugees. May we have the ears to hear their voices speaking to us.

The indeterminate ending of the book and its address to a people scattered, confused, and looking for hope made Jeremiah one of the most re-read scrolls of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). The author of Daniel puzzles over the fulfillment of the "70 years" of exile, as did the writers whose literature was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran. It is both the *clarity* of Jeremiah's prophecies against abusive religious leadership, desperate politics, and societal injustice *and* his *ambiguity* over when and how the necessary reforms would take place that have baffled so many readers, including us.

As you read the concluding passages of Jeremiah, ask yourself: *How should I understand these texts written to people living in a place that doesn't feel like home? How do these texts speak to someone who has lost a religious space of safety? How do these words address a people for whom political hope seems bleak and an experience of God seems distant?*

If you haven't read Part 1 of this study guide (or just forgot what was in it), we will continue to question the text on the basis of four questions.

- **Personal Deconstruction:** How does the text of Jeremiah reveal ideas, structures, or actions which have been harmful to you as an individual? What notions of religion, politics, society, relationships do you need to dismantle as an act of resistance?
- **Personal Reconstruction:** How does the text offer a direction toward rebuilding? What practices or ideas do you need to engage that would consciously lead to a more healthy, whole version of yourself?
- **Public Deconstruction:** How does Jeremiah point out ideas, structures, or actions which are harmful to the *Imago Dei* (image of God) in our neighbors and fellow citizens of the world? What modern entities parallel the destructive forces in Jeremiah's time and how should we combat them?
- **Public Reconstruction:** How does the text model conversations, actions, or structures which might bring healing to the brokenness of the world? What do you glean from Jeremiah that might be practiced as reconciling our fragmented society and bringing *shalom*, the way it was intended to be?

There's been a lot of deconstruction going on in the world in the last sixty years or so. Jacques Derrida and Jean-Paul Sartre wanted to show the world that by reading a text well, we could subvert dominant ways of thinking. But the limits of the postmodern project are beginning to show. Despite claiming to resist "postmodernism," modern fundamentalists dissect books and news reports for the "agenda" of the "other side." Despite progressive notions of the continual improvement of society, the inability of some supposed postmodernist thinkers to see their own ideological commitments is astounding.

Our study of Jeremiah certainly intends to engage the text so that we may subvert dominant ways of thinking and living which have turned out to be harmful. But we aren't here to deconstruct for the sake of deconstruction. Our hope is that we may consciously, humbly build something which avoids past mistakes, blind ideology, and the worship of celebrities, politicians, and clergy. As you read Jeremiah, may you be compelled to deconstruct and reconstruct toward individual and communal *shalom*.

Jeremiah 26:1-24

Prophetic Peril

One of the reasons Jeremiah can be such a hard book to read stems from issues that appear in Jeremiah 26. This scene is a development from an episode we read about *in chapter 7!*

In Jeremiah 7, the prophet stands at the gates of the Temple and announces doom on Jerusalem and the holy shrine if a change of heart and action ("repentance," *teshuvah*) does not take place. The question on everyone's mind was: *can a prophet really announce disaster on God's chosen place and people?*

The ancient world had all kinds of prophets; in this, Israel was not unique. Mostly, the function of these prophets was to be "yes-men" (and women). They told the ruling powers what they wanted to hear. That they would be victorious in battle, that their kingdoms were established. Ironically, we have those prophecies preserved because the fires of destruction burned so hot that it baked the clay upon which they were written.

Jeremiah's prophecies say otherwise. He claimed that Jerusalem would be destroyed much in the same way Shiloh was destroyed.

Shiloh had been a previous site of Yahweh's presence (see 1 Samuel 2-6). Many believe that the place was destroyed by the Philistines when they captured the Ark of the Covenant, a symbolic box believed to represent the divine presence. Jeremiah's message was simple: *God has done this before, and God can certainly do this again.*

Jeremiah's words were viewed as seditious, unpatriotic, heretical, and treasonous. But he also claims to have spoken in Yahweh's name, no mere footnote.

The story revolves around two parties. The priests and prophets, who work in the Temple and are paid by the Temple, want to kill him. Other officials, curious about whether God is actually somehow behind this message, fear the divine repercussions of killing a prophet.

That's when the gray-headed elders step up. Perhaps they had been alive some forty years prior to this scene, when another prophet, Micah, spoke a similar message. These wise sages remind the people that King Hezekiah (a good king by biblical standards) did not kill Micah, but actually listened and avoided the coming destruction by doing so.

This is one of the more remarkable scenes in the Bible, particularly the Hebrew Bible.

The Bible quotes itself.

Jeremiah cites Micah.

And, apparently, it worked.

Jeremiah's life was spared.

This passage is remarkable for other reasons though. It tells a less-fortunate tale of a Uriah ben-Shemiah from a little village close to Jerusalem, Kiriath-Jearim (another home to the Ark of the Covenant!). He was enthralled by Jeremiah's message and said similar things. But when they came for him, he ran to Egypt, only to be extradited back and murdered.

What's striking is that the authors of Jeremiah explicitly state that Jeremiah's rescue wasn't so much an act of piety or reverence for the God's prophet as it was a result of Jeremiah's political friends in high places.

If you really pay attention to the names in Jeremiah (hard to do, I know), you'll see people from the clan of Shaphan pop up everywhere. This family was connected. Shaphan himself is linked to Jeremiah's reform (2 Kings 22). Others in his family appear to be high-rolling politicians in Jerusalem. Gedaliah, the son of Ahikam from

this story (grandson of Shaphan, himself), eventually becomes the governor of Judea after the Babylonians take control. This appointment was made by the Babylonian administration itself. This family, with its apparent ties to Babylonian politics are ardent supporters of Jeremiah's message. And they save his life.

The overlap between politics and religion is hard enough today. Do we hold political positions on the basis of our religious convictions? Or do we interpret religious beliefs to suit us politically? If we're honest, *it's so murky*. Did Ahikam save Jeremiah out of piety or political expediency, seeing as his son became a governor after the exile? Or is that just a coincidence? Was it just a random, unlucky contingency that the family that supported Jeremiah religiously also stood to gain politically by accepting his message?

This scene also serves as the structure of Jesus' trial, something the Gospel writers did intentionally. A man submitting himself to the court. Innocent of no wrong, except for teaching truthfully. But Jesus suffers Uriah ben-Shemiah's fate, not Jeremiah's. Jesus is killed by political plotting, not saved by it.

This story should make us pause.

Can there be good from involvement in the political sphere, using politics to achieve what we might consider "on earth as in heaven?"

How do we even know the difference between the political project and the Kingdom one?

How then may we be saved?

Questions:

- **Personal Deconstruction:** *Have you ever been ostracized or rebuked for connecting the dots between a God-idea and its implications for your community? What kinds of political views do you hold out of religious conviction? Can you be sure that your views are based on reality or might they be conveniently beneficial to the way you already wish to live your life?*
- **Personal Reconstruction:** *What ideas, actions, or paradigms need to take the place of out-of-date, harmful ones? How can you be more conscious of the voices you allow to shape your perception of reality? What choices will you make to craft a more honest assessment of the world and your place in it?*
- **Public Deconstruction:** *In what ways do religious or political systems oppose the truth which threatens them? How do you know when you are reading a view whose authors stand to gain by you believing them? How can you expose these structures?*
- **Public Reconstruction:** *How do we create structures and communities that value a diversity of opinions and voices, even ones that seem threatening to us?*

Jeremiah 27:1-31:1

Postcards to Exiles

Seek the welfare (shalom) of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its prosperity you shall prosper.

Jeremiah 29:7

This passage of Jeremiah continues on a theme of conflicting perspectives regarding the painful reality of Israel.

In 597 BCE, Babylon deposed King Jehoiachin and exiled leading members of the community to its borders. Ezekiel and Daniel were likely among them. The Babylonians placed Zedekiah, Jehoiachin's uncle, on the throne. The early days of his administration would set the tone for how Jerusalem would respond to Babylonian hegemony. Would they submit or retaliate?

Jeremiah 28 tells the story of a particular prophet, Hananiah, who opted for resistance against Babylonian exile and cheap optimism. He claimed that the crisis would be over in two years and that Babylon's yoke would be broken. He went as far as literally breaking things to prove his point.

Jeremiah listens to Hananiah's sermons of cheap hope. He even goes as far as saying, "Amen!"

But it's an ironic "Amen."

Jeremiah wishes it could be true.

But it's not.

Hananiah died later that year, his prophecy unfulfilled, proven to be a lie.

The rest of this portion of Scripture is essentially and exchanging of postcards from Jeremiah in the chaos of a crumbling Jerusalem to the chaos of the Babylonian exiles and their existential crisis.

Jeremiah's message to these exiles: *Prepare for a long stay*. Specifically, Jeremiah says that the fullness of the time of the exile will be seventy years. In all likelihood, this is a metaphorical figure (seven, the number of perfection and creation multiplied by a factor of ten). In a sense, Jeremiah is saying that it will be a long time before Israel's prison sentence is up. His advice then is to plant gardens, marry off children, build lives in the exile, and seek the welfare of the place where they live, even if it isn't their ideal destination. For Jeremiah, exile wasn't the end, but a possible beginning of a new understanding of identity.

This seems to be a contradictory thought, that exile leads to a true understanding of purpose and a refinement of identity. But according to Jeremiah, it is a necessary ending, the ground from which new life could emerge.

We're all given basic constructions as children. Constructions as to how the world works, how language works, how society works or should work, how to love (or hate), how to spend time and resources. Some of these constructions aren't even inherently bad. For some, they may be useful starting points; for others, they can be destructive lies.

At some point, however, we must come to an end of the things we've inherited, things formed for us but not by us. Adding nuance to pre-existing beliefs could be as simple as moving from block text to cursive writing. Or, it could be as violent as taking a sledgehammer to house you want to completely renovate. It all depends on what you've been given and where you want to go.

Whether by choice or not, some kind of exile comes for us all. The question is: *what do we do with that opportunity?*

Questions:

- **Personal Deconstruction:** *What forms of faith (or lack thereof) did you inherit? How subtly or drastically have you had to make revisions to that form? What do you see as elementary but incomplete versus harmful and needing a complete overhaul?*
- **Personal Reconstruction:** *Where do you want your faith to take you? How can you allow a desired goal to be the thing that shapes or reshapes the inherited form of your religious/spiritual belief? What actions do you need to take to get there?*
- **Public Deconstruction:** *How do larger social systems shape public beliefs? You could consider public discourse on politics, religion, economy, etc. How do the voices one chooses to listen to affect perception? How do you need to deconstruct social structures (denominations, political parties, historical policies, economic structures) in a way that makes you conscious of some of their harmful or biased outcomes?*
- **Public Reconstruction:** *How can you, with your specific skills, gifts, training, make changes in these structures so that less people are harmed and more people are healed?*

Jeremiah 31:2-34:22

The Way Back

*Erect markers,
Set up signposts;
Keep in mind the highway,
The road that you traveled.
Return, Maiden Israel!
Return to these towns of yours!*
Jeremiah 31:21

Every journey requires a map. If you've ever read *The Lord of the Rings* or *Game of Thrones*, you need to have a good mental image of the fictional landscape. When reading the Bible, it's also useful to have a good idea of the geography (see the map in part one of the Jeremiah Study Guide).

Just as geographical maps are important, existential, mental maps are perhaps more so. It's hard to know how you ended up where you are and where you'd like to go, unless you know where you came from and the roads you took to get there.

Israelite history is the story of many side roads and back alleys taken.

Though the story of Israel as a political unit begins with unification under kings Saul, David, and Solomon, it quickly disintegrates into a fractured people split in half. Around 922 BCE, ten tribes of Israel (all but Judah and Benjamin) separated to form the Northern Kingdom of Israel, leaving the Kingdom of Judah in the south as a smaller, inferior sibling.

The biblical authors in Kings and Chronicles describe how, eventually, the Northern Kingdom was conquered by Assyria in 722 BCE. They were apparently exiled to Mesopotamia, forgotten, and their land repopulated with foreign people. This scene in history is a site of trauma for the biblical storytellers.

Jeremiah 31:2-34:22 is a passage in search of a future destiny. Jeremiah 31 remembers the fracturing of God's people into factions, their exile among the nations, and their loss of identity. But here, Jeremiah holds on to a future in which past differences, broken relationships, and forgotten identities will be made new. Verses 31-33 say, "I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah...It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors...I will put my Teaching into their inmost being and inscribe it upon their hearts."

Such a reversal of the brokenness of the past is imagined that Jeremiah declares that no one will need teaching anymore, they'll just intuitively get what God is up to (v. 34). Radical.

Even though other stories in this passage demonstrate that all is not well in Jerusalem (deceptive social programs release slaves in a time of crisis so their owners don't have to provide for them, only to re-enslave them when the crisis is over, Jeremiah is imprisoned, exile is reiterated, etc.), there are plenty of reasons to believe in a hopeful future and take action on that belief.

In Jeremiah 32:6-15, Jeremiah buys property in order to declare that the threat of war will one day be gone and people will thrive in the city once more. Even though exile is a foregone conclusion, there will be a return from it.

Jeremiah never confuses optimism about the future with a sense of determinism which precludes human action. Jeremiah must buy property. Humans ought to be treated with dignity by their political leaders. Abusive policies must be denounced and abolished. Hope requires *action* for Jeremiah. Believing in a better future means making it so *here and now*.

Questions:

- **Personal Deconstruction:** *What parts of your personal history have led you to feel that parts of your life are determined to be negative? How have past relationships shaped your views about the future and reconciliation? What do you need to recognize as lies or less-than-shalom?*
- **Personal Reconstruction:** *What would it take for you to believe that you aren't the sum total of past events or family history? What actions should you take to break cycles of brokenness in your life, your family, or faith community?*
- **Public Deconstruction:** *Have you ever been affected by public policies which are racist, abusive, or dehumanizing? Have you witnessed this or heard of this happening to others? What role have you played or not played in contributing to those policies or behaviors?*
- **Public Reconstruction:** *What kinds of abusive situations are you personally called to change in your community or city? How can you build something new, however small, that can set an injustice right? What public venues can you take to address these needs for change in a healthy, practical way?*

Jeremiah 35:1-36:32

The Scriptures We Burn

"Get a scroll and write down everything I've told you regarding Israel and Judah and all the other nations from the time I first started speaking to you in Josiah's reign right up to the present day.

Maybe the community of Judah will finally get it, finally understand the catastrophe that I'm planning for them, turn back from their bad lives, and let me forgive their perversity and sin."

So Jeremiah called in Baruch son of Neriah. Jeremiah dictated and Baruch wrote down on a scroll everything God had said to him.

Jeremiah 36:2-4, MSG

Most people are familiar with *The Jefferson Bible*. The third president of the United States, with scissors and razors, literally cut and pasted the Gospels and rewrote the story. He removed all traces of miracles, keeping only the moral teachings of the man from Nazareth. Jefferson, who struggled with religion and doubted the supernatural, edited the Bible to create a narrative he was comfortable with, one that confirmed his views.

The Jefferson Bible has attracted the attention of biblicists who lambast the modernist thinker for tinkering with the Holy Writ. I don't want to condone what Jefferson did; but at times I approach admiration of his authenticity. Thomas Jefferson did what we all do, he was just honest about what he was doing and why he did it.

We all edit the Bible, whether consciously or unconsciously. Consider, how many times have you read the Book of Jeremiah from cover to cover until now? How many times have you heard the whole text taught in a Christian setting? What about comprehensive teachings on Leviticus, Lamentations, Song of Songs, or Zephaniah, to name a few?

These books would all be considered "God-breathed" and inspired by orthodox Christians. Any attempt to deny their divine nature would be considered heretical by those who revere the Bible. But in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, the idea of Scripture (the Hebrew Bible) being inspired or "God-breathed" essentially boils down to its usefulness for righteous living. So if we don't *use* certain Scriptures, *are they useful?* Do we truly consider them "inspired?" Have we created our own versions of the canon of Scripture without even knowing it? What have we lost if so?

These two chapters of Jeremiah (35 & 36) are remarkable for a variety of reasons. For starters, this passage contains one of the few occasions in the Bible where the authors are self-conscious about how a holy text came into existence. This passage describes how part of the Bible was written!

But these two chapters are also alarming in their assertions about what it means to really live into the ideas expressed in Scripture and the dangers of rejecting divine warnings.

Take Jeremiah 35 as a starting point. Jeremiah receives word from God to set up a luncheon for a small community of Rechabites. The Rechabites were nomads. They didn't live in cities or permanent buildings. They were tradespeople. They had a religious conviction, based on their ancestry, to avoid alcohol. They were forced to come into the walls of Jerusalem because the shoddy politics of Judean kings had brought the ruthless Babylonian armies into the territory. The Rechabites moved to Jerusalem for protection, but didn't change their convictions based on where they lived.

At the dinner party, Jeremiah offers this group of teetotalers a glass of wine. They staunchly refuse. How could they betray their traditions?!

Jeremiah takes their faithfulness to their non-Israelite traditions as an object lesson. These wandering nomads who did not observe God's instructions were more faithful than Yahweh's covenant people. If only Israel could be as devoted as these outsiders, maybe they'd have a chance.

I'm fascinated when the Bible pays attention to the margins, the outsiders. Whether its the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-29), the Samaritan woman (John 4), or the eunuchs and foreigners (Isaiah 56, Acts 8:26-40), the authors of Scripture seemed to understand that the lines of in/out that we draw are artificial and often misleading. What if there are more true believers "outside" than "inside?"

Jeremiah's message in chapter 35 states that while Judah will be punished for not keeping the covenant, God will preserve the non-Israelite Rechabites because of their faithfulness to their *ethnic, non-religious traditions*. For Yahweh, the point was less in holding religious ideas and more about living well and faithfully.

Now for the finisher.

Jeremiah 36 describes a breath-taking scene.

In Jeremiah 36, we are told how at least part of this book was written. God tells Jeremiah to take his scribe-friend, Baruch, and write down all that he had been proclaiming about the need to change course before disaster came.

Full disclosure, it's absolutely necessary to read 2 Kings 22 before you really get what's going on in this story. In 2 Kings 22, the biblical historians describe a scene in which "a scroll of the Torah of Moses" was found in the Temple. Whether or not this scroll was "found" or freshly composed is a debate. Most scholars assume that this scroll was some version of the Book of Deuteronomy. In that scene, the priest Hilkiah gives the scroll to a *scribe* named Shaphan (same family that saves Jeremiah in Jer. 26). The scribe reads the law book to King Josiah. After consulting a *prophet*, a woman named Huldah, the book is validated. Josiah tears his clothes in lament and institutes a series of religious and political reforms to try to get Judah back in good covenant standing.

That's not how the story goes in Jeremiah 36.

In this story, prophet and scribe collaborate to write down God's message to Judah.

Micaiah, the grandson of the famous Shaphan reports the words of this scroll to the administration of the King of Judah, Jehoiakim (who is the son of Josiah). The officials obtain the scroll and read the text aloud to the king. As each line is read, Jehoiakim, with his Jeffersonian penknife in hand, slices the text line by line and burns the prophetic words in the fireplace.

In this case, the apple has fallen far from the tree.

Jeremiah's words challenged and threatened the structures Jehoiakim was trying to build and preserve. So he did what most of us do when we are uncomfortable with a text. He files it in the archive of the oblivion, never to be read.

Maybe we don't burn the Bible, but filing certain portions in the basement archives, never to see the light of day, is basically the same thing. Jeremiah's opponents are rigorously religious when it comes to their buildings, rituals, and professionals who allow them to maintain the *status quo*. But their religion is shown to be unconscious and contrived when exposed to ideas that unsettle their primary operating software. Really, how different are we?

Questions:

- **Personal Deconstruction:** *What books of the Bible, if you are honest, have you just never read? Why? Why do you think religious institutions (churches, seminaries, etc.) don't educate people in these supposedly sacred texts? How have you been complicit?*
- **Personal Reconstruction:** *Where can you go to build up a better understanding of the total story of Scripture? It can't be One Story if there are parts missing. How might you reframe certain Scriptural metanarratives, contrived by tradition, by reading all parts of the Bible?*
- **Public Deconstruction:** *How have parts of the Bible, ripped from context and missing balancing voices from Scripture, been used to cause harm in society? You could think largely about systemic oppression (slavery, Jim Crow, indigenous Americans, etc.) or locally, in faith communities? Where does the light need to shine?*
- **Public Reconstruction:** *What unread or reduced Scriptures can you emphasize to bring balance? What sphere do you work and live in that needs to hear silenced Scriptures for a renewing of all things?*

Jeremiah 37:1-45:5; 52:1-30

Imprisoned Bodies, Liberated Minds

So Jeremiah entered an underground cell in a cistern turned into a dungeon. He stayed there a long time...

Ebed-Melek the Ethiopian, a court official assigned to the royal palace, heard that they had thrown Jeremiah into the cistern...Ebed-Melek went immediately from the palace to the king and said, "My master, O king - these men are committing a great crime in what they're doing, throwing Jeremiah the prophet into the cistern and leaving him to starve. He's as good as dead..."

Ebed-Melek...pulled Jeremiah up out of the cistern by ropes.

Jeremiah 37:16; 38:7-9, 12-13, MSG

Who is free? Lots of philosophers from Lyotard, to Foucault, to Derrida, to Sartre, to Nietzsche, to Gadamer, to Habermas have asked these types of questions. If truth and God are dead, if we are their murderers, on what bloody ground do we base our reality? Who can be liberated? How tightly are we bound by chains of determinism?

The stories in this long stretch of text are really reflections on these types of questions.

The first story in Jeremiah 37-38 is the model. Jeremiah is imprisoned (again) for his seditious message against a crumbling kingdom. The prophet isn't formally given the death sentence but there's nothing to prevent that from being the outcome. By all appearances, it would seem that the king and his courtiers have all the power and freedom in the story, while God's messenger is confined to chains and cells.

But there's another way of looking at this passage. The real prisoners in this text are the ones incarcerated by their own obstinate choices. At least two times King Zedekiah comes to the cell of Jeremiah begging for advice (37:17-21; 38:14-28). He commands Jeremiah, "Don't let anyone know about this conversation or you will die!"

Jeremiah remained in a form of imprisonment until the day the Babylonians breached the gates of Jerusalem (38:28). Yet he had more freedom and was more liberated than the king.

Another counterpoint is Ebed-Melek, an Ethiopian eunuch who served the king. His name in this story literally means "Servant of a King."

In this passage, the Bible is a bit too close to our own history and society. Jeremiah describes a black man's body, whose name points only to his function in the king's empire as an object to be owned. By most accounts of Israelite law, this man would have been bound from entering the Temple or worshipping Yahweh. Could anyone be more bound to his circumstances than this man?

And yet he proves himself liberated by his detachment to the abusive system of kings. Because he holds no stakes in preserving the sinking ship of Jerusalem, he may speak and act freely. He denounces the petty politics and appeasement tactics of the monarchy. He realizes Jeremiah as a prophet of truth. He takes a bundle of ropes, sprints to the cistern, and pulls the prophet out of the mud. In doing so, he saves not only Jeremiah, but himself (39:15-18).

The rest of the story follows history up to the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of many of its residents. But even after this, many have not learned the lesson. Those left after the exile murder the Babylonian-appointed governor, Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, son of Shaphan.

In their panic, they flee to Egypt to avoid Babylonian countermeasures, which Jeremiah tells them will not take place. In tow, they drag Jeremiah into Egyptian exile, kicking and screaming at their faithlessness.

But before this, a Babylonian guard named Nebuzaradan unshackled Jeremiah in prison. He gave him the option to move to Babylon, out of the cesspool of destructive Jerusalem politics, into the comfort of another king. Or, he could remain in the Babylonian-controlled Jerusalem.

All of Jeremiah has been seemingly leading up to this moment. All of Jeremiah's prophecies have come true. Jerusalem is in shambles. The Temple is on fire. The blindness of King Zedekiah has been made literal when Nebuchadnezzar has his eyes gouged out.

But there is nothing to be triumphant about.

Jeremiah's validation is his people's disgrace.

Given the choice to retire in Babylon, end his days in the ambivalence of his prophecies fulfilled and his people defeated, or stay with his slow-learning, hard-headed, barely-conscious countrymen, Jeremiah opts for the latter.

Jeremiah stays with his people.

Jeremiah ends up in an exile of woe in Egypt rather than an exile of luxury in Babylon.

I have to admit, I'm still not sure how I feel about this passage. I don't know whether to laugh at the stupidity of the political lackeys, weep with Jeremiah, rage over the injustice, praise the liberated actions of Ebed-Melek, or just collapse in exhaustion because of where the story has taken us so far.

The last bit of this passage, in Jeremiah 52:1-30, is just a detailed of the destruction of the Jerusalem and the Temple. It is eerie in its chronicling tone. Just a straightforward account of the forced relocation of the people of God, the theft of the sacred past.

It's all come full circle. Israel is back where Abraham started in Babylon. Israel is back where Moses started in Egypt. It's a regression, not a progression. The innocent are swept up with the wicked. The spiritually liberated are incarcerated with those imprisoned by their own small, limited perspectives.

The truth is, to some extent, we are all of us bound by our experiences, our pasts, our commitments. In Jeremiah 45:5, God says: "And do you expect great things for yourself? Don't expect them. For I am going to bring disaster upon all flesh...but I will at least grant you your life in all the places where you may go."

Hardly a storybook ending.

But it's not over.

Not yet.

Yes, this story ends in chains for everyone.

We must learn to live with our limitations as we seek liberation.

We at least have our *lives*.

What will we make of them?

Questions:

- **Personal Deconstruction:** *How free or liberated do you think we can be as humans? Have you ever experienced pain or punishment due to the actions of others? How has this shaped you?*
- **Personal Reconstruction:** *When is an ending a beginning? How do you want to build your life out of past or present disasters? What small choices can you make within your determined context that seek the liberation of yourself and others? How would you make Jeremiah's decision to either leave those who have hurt you or stay with them?*
- **Public Deconstruction:** *How has the church played a role in willfully silencing voices? How has it punished the innocent? How has it exiled concerned, faithful members seeking reconciliation? In what ways have other forces co-opted its purpose?*
- **Public Reconstruction:** *What do you want to build and make of your experiences? Specifically, how do you want to make structures which cause less harm and are less cruel? What story do you have to tell that might be healing for others?*

Jeremiah 46:1-51:64; 52:31-34

Cut to Black...

The word of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah concerning the nations.

Jeremiah 46:1

When you finish reading this scroll, tie a stone to it and hurl it into the Euphrates.

Jeremiah 51:63

In the thirty-seventh year of the exile of King Jehoiachin of Judah...[the King of Babylon] took note of King Jehoiachin of Judah and released him from prison.

Jeremiah 52:31

A good story can be ruined by a bad ending. Just ask people who devoted countless hours to consuming the stories of ABC's *Lost* or HBO's *Game of Thrones*.

A good ending should tie up all the major loose ends while still making you wonder about how characters have grown and what aspects of our humanity have been examined but left unresolved.

Jeremiah has a great ending.

In no way is the ending of Jeremiah some absolutely conclusive statement about what God was up to this whole time. Nowhere in the book's conclusion do the authors give us the impression that they have settled the question of humanity's deceptive mind, partisan political blindness, religious self-medication, or how justice is established in the world.

If you don't have some serious questions and conversations after reading Jeremiah, well, I just don't know what else can be done.

On one level, Jeremiah 46-51 claims, unequivocally, that Judah will not be the only group of people who are undone by their own assumptions of playing God. The nation-state (a concept foreign to biblical authors) can provide no salvation.

All empires end.

By their nature, they acquire power through violence. Just read through the chapters. Look at all the blood. These texts were written before Patriot missiles and nuclear bombs. What would Jeremiah say to us? To believe solely in political power, Yahweh often says, is to be drunk to the point of destruction. Sure it's fun for a while. But the hangover is deadly.

Speaking of geopolitics, what should we even make of the ending of this book?! We are told that Jehoiachin, who was exiled first in 597 BCE, after thirty-seven years was promoted from prison to the king's table. No more prison clothes. He was put on a Babylonian rehabilitation program until he died on foreign soil.

My opinion: I think the end of Jeremiah is a Rorschach test. If you're naturally gloomy, see injustice everywhere and in everyone, question everything with a hermeneutic of suspicion, you see the ending as tragic. After fifty-two chapters of prophecy and warning, here we are, in exile. The best outcome is receiving government aid from the Empire. Not much cause for celebration.

But if you're an optimist, if you know how to find every silver lining, make every glass half-full, you're going to see this ending as a foreshadowing to triumph - a comedy in the classical sense. Sure, it's just four verses tacked on to the end. But it *is* the end. David's descendent is released from prison early for good behavior. He's the favorite dominated king in the Babylonian court. He's spoken of kindly and well-fed. *How could this not be an upward trajectory?!*

I have no interest in resolving this tension.

If you read Jeremiah again in a different circumstance of life, you might change your mind.

I don't think the point of this ending is to give you a sense of certainty that history is in a tailspin or screwing upward.

Jeremiah and the scribes who preserved his words would be damned if you didn't have questions after reading their book.

You're supposed to come back for second, third, seventieth helping.

Jeremiah's ending is a cut to black.

Our knowledge of the contingency of the coronavirus, public faith in elections, racial reconciliation, economic justice, and religious ethics are just as murky as that of Jeremiah's time. Of course we have scientists, truth-tellers, activists, and reformers out there believing the truth as we know it at the moment. But it's that last part of that sentence: *the truth as we know it at the moment*.

Cut to black.

What do you know about Jeremiah's message now? Maybe more importantly, what do you still need to ask?

Final Questions:

In the same way Jeremiah ends abruptly, causing us to reflect and ask questions, so too will this guide.

Hopefully by now, if you've followed along, you have become habituated to asking questions of personal and public deconstruction and reconstruction. That's the point. To catechize, liturgize, and shape our minds by asking these good questions. If you wish, you can ask your own questions in this format. Or you can answer some reflective questions on the journey of Jeremiah as a whole below.

How do you receive the ending of Jeremiah?

Tragically? Comically? Hopefully? Ironically?

What would you be willing to say this book has done to you as a person of faith with varying degrees of doubt?

What might this book be pushing you to do next in your personal life or public persona?

What conversations, areas of research/study, or actions do you need to engage now?

Wherever you end up going next...

Shalom.