

## THE CHARACTER OF JEREMIAH\*

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It is not an easy task to characterize most of the so-called "writing prophets" of the OT. To learn something about a man's characteristics, his likes and dislikes, his emotional struggles, his spiritual qualities, his relationships with his family, and so forth, requires a certain minimum amount of biographical details, recorded either by the man himself or by one of his friends or disciples. Such details are plentiful for men like Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Samuel, or David, so that we have no particular difficulty in evaluating their personalities with some degree of confidence.

But when we begin thinking about the lives of men like Isaiah, Ezekiel, Joel, Habakkuk, or Zechariah, the number of biographical details suddenly shrinks considerably by comparison. And yet we would have to confess that Isaiah and Joel and Zechariah were fully as great in their own spheres as Abraham and Joseph and David were in theirs. In fact, if we only knew something of the personal experiences and inner struggles of the writing prophets, I am sure that we would discover incidents and events just as glamorous and exciting as those in the lives of their more famous predecessors.

The matter boils down to this: in the case of the writing prophets the message, rather than the man, is the important thing. Isaiah and Joel and Zechariah and the rest of the canonical prophets spoke the words of God as they, the prophets, were carried along by the Holy Spirit to pronounce God's blessing on the righteous and his judgment against sinners. In any theatrical production "the play's the thing," and whenever one of the actors or actresses tries to upstage another

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or to attract undue attention to himself or herself in some other way, the message or moral of that production has a harder time getting through to the audience.

The same holds true for a prophecy, or a sermon, or a Sunday school lesson. When the personality of the speaker in any way blocks the content of his message, he defeats his own purpose. More than once I have heard Billy Graham deplore the fact that the media of our country devote more space to descriptions of him, his organization, and his family than they do to the Word that he preaches. As for himself, he is careful always to give God the glory for his success, and in interviews he concentrates his comments on the Bible rather than on Billy. Graham knows full well, as he himself has stated repeatedly, that as soon as God and his Word are pushed into the background, Billy Graham will be through as an evangelist, and the cause of Christ will suffer untold damage. As witnesses for the Lord Jesus in every walk of life, we are to adorn the gospel, not ourselves.

Having said this, however, I do not mean to suggest that there is nothing of value to be gained in learning the basic details of a preacher's life or of a prophet's life. If a man is a believing witness and practices what he preaches, knowing something of his background may actually help us to understand his message better. What I am saying is that there is nothing inherently foolish in reading a biography of Billy Graham; it is only the exaggerated or merely curious interest in his life that is unproductive.

In turning, then, to the prophetic writings of the OT, we are a little disappointed when we find a scarcity of material concerning the lives of the prophets themselves. But there is one notable exception to this general rule: a number of autobiographical notes on the life of Jeremiah have been preserved for us. In fact, the amount of information we have concerning Jeremiah's life makes it impossible to describe the man fully in a paper such as this. In short, more is known of Jeremiah's life than of that of any other OT writing prophet, because throughout the Book of Jeremiah the writer gave us numerous clues concerning himself and his times. In the case of Jeremiah, then, surfeit rather than scarcity is our problem--or at least so it would seem.

In recent years, a skeptical approach to the question of the literary identity of the man called Jeremiah has set up a roadblock in the path of those who might wish to undertake a summary of the details of his life. At the outset we are obliged to admit the possibility that when the pronoun "I" is used in the Psalms, it may on occasion represent the worshiping community of Israel, that the psalmist in this or that praise hymn, lament, or thanksgiving hymn is expressing not

only his own joy, sorrow, or gratitude but is also representing or acting as proxy for--or in behalf of--his fellow believers. In other words, the psalmist's "I" may in fact be intended by the author himself as a communal "I." The Book of Psalms was, after all, the main hymnbook in ancient Israel, and its universal appeal right down to our own time resides in its unique ability to voice the deepest religious experiences of Everyman. To paraphrase the comic strip character Pogo: "We have met the psalmist, and he is us."

Building on the widely accepted, communal "I" that appears here and there in the Psalms, some scholars have suggested--indeed, promoted--the idea that the communal "I" occurs in the prophetic corpus as well. A prime example is the approach of T. Polk,<sup>1</sup> who discusses in turgid prose and at numbing length what it is that Jeremiah means when he uses the "language of the self." As the psalmist's first-person singular pronoun may be intended as a figure of speech for a plural or collective unity, so also the prophetic "I" in Jeremiah is ambiguous and may betoken bigger fish to fry. Rather than retaining its most obvious meaning as the best way of stating the self-identification of the prophet--like the covenant "I, Shuppiluliuma," in the ancient Hittite treaty formularies or the epistolary "I, King Artaxerxes," in the OT (Ezra 7:21) or "I, Paul," in the NT (I Cor 16:21)--the prophetic "I" of Jeremiah is often to be interpreted as a community "we," as a metaphor for communal identity, as a paradigm for the existential *Angst* of Israel at large.

I wish to observe immediately that Polk in no way denies the existence of the historical prophet Jeremiah. Rather, he insists that

at one moment Jeremiah may speak in a voice that is purely his own (10.19b), while at the next speak as or with the voice of the people (10.20, 23-25; 14.7-9, 19-22; 8.14-15), and in the next speak in a voice indistinguishable from Yhwh's (14.17-18; 9.1-5). We have also maintained that, whenever he speaks, he speaks *qua* prophet. It is therefore inappropriate to refer his speech to his "private" experience, or to explain it in terms of innate temperament or spiritual genius. Jeremiah's personal and prophetic identity are one.<sup>2</sup>

With some of what Polk says I have no quarrel, and with a few of his examples in the previous quotation I am in complete agreement. When Jeremiah uses "we," as in 14:7-9, surely he identifies himself and his sins with those of his people, and his life and destiny are bound up with theirs. But other verses that Polk cites do not in fact contain the

<sup>1</sup> T. Polk, *The Prophetic Persona: Jeremiah and the Language of the Self* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament-Supplement 32; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

ambiguity that he sees in them. To say that in 9:1-5 Jeremiah speaks "in a voice indistinguishable from" that of the Lord is, in my judgment, simply to misdivide the literary units. Jer 8:21-9:2 constitutes one of the classic passages traditionally used to characterize Jeremiah as the weeping prophet, while beginning at 9:3 the Lord speaks.

Despite basic methodological flaws in the "prophetic persona" theory, however, a not insignificant number of scholars have voted in its favor. To illustrate the nature of the debate, I call your attention to the two most stimulating full-scale commentaries written on Jeremiah in the past few years: those of R. P. Carroll<sup>3</sup> and W. L. Holladay.<sup>4</sup> Carroll, though perhaps not going quite so far as to consign the prophet Jeremiah to the make-believe world of fictional characters, says of him that "the 'historical' Jeremiah disappears behind the activities of redactional circles and levels of tradition which have created the words and story of Jeremiah ben Hilkiyah of Anathoth!"<sup>5</sup> Holladay, on the other hand, vigorously affirms the flesh-and-blood, real-life, historical existence of Jeremiah from beginning to end, although he adopts an alternate chronology for that life that puts his birth, rather than his call in 627 B.C.<sup>6</sup> (The latter position remains the dominant one, shared by formidable scholars like H. H. Rowley<sup>7</sup> and J. Bright<sup>8</sup> as well as by myself.<sup>9</sup>)

It goes without saying, then, that I have very little patience with reductionist views of the space-time existence of a great prophet named Jeremiah, who ministered in and around Jerusalem during the last forty years of its death throes that culminated in the destruction of its temple and the dispersion of its people in 586 B.C. When viewed historically, Jeremiah can be demonstrated to have handed down to us the fullest account of a prophet's life and character, the fullest account by far, to be found anywhere in Scripture. In this regard, attention is often focused (and rightly so, in my judgment) on the so-called "confessions" of Jeremiah (Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:12-18; 18:18-23;

<sup>3</sup> R. P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> W. L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Carroll, 48 (*italics his*).

<sup>6</sup> Holladay, 1, 1; see also *idem*, *Jeremiah: A Fresh Reading* (New York: Pilgrim, 1990) 13-14.

<sup>7</sup> H. H. Rowley, "The Early Prophecies of Jeremiah in Their Setting," in *A Prophet to the Nations: Essays in Jeremiah Studies* (ed. L. G. Perdue and B. W. Kovacs; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1984) 33-36.

<sup>8</sup> J. Bright, *Jeremiah: Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (AB 21; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1965) xxviii, xxix, xxxvi.

<sup>9</sup> R. F. Youngblood, "The Prophet of Loneliness," *Bethel Seminary Quarterly* 13/3 (May 1965) 15.

and 20:7-18).<sup>10</sup> For the sake of brevity, I will confine my summary of various aspects of Jeremiah's character to an examination of the first two confessions (11:18-23; 12:1-6) and part (15:15-21) of the third. Each of them constitutes a dialogue between Jeremiah and the Lord.

We observe that the "confessions" of Jeremiah are not merely laments, as we might expect from an inherently timid man. Jeremiah, often called the "weeping prophet," might in fact better be called the "groaning prophet"--or, better still, the "screaming prophet." His confessions were complaints, what the Germans call *Klagen*. On occasion their ferocity expanded them into *Anklagen*--i.e., "accusations," "charges brought in a lawsuit." Though Jeremiah was timid at the time of his call, God caused him to become a tower of strength--"a fortified city, an iron pillar and a bronze wall," to quote the divine word to Jeremiah in 1:18. That strength of character shows up in various ways in Jeremiah's confessions, in Jeremiah's complaints.

A subtly different metaphor may be implied in the name "Jeremiah" itself, which means something like "the LORD hurls/launches." Jeremiah was the world's first guided missile, aimed by God at specific targets and with pinpoint accuracy. His ministry was successful (from God's standpoint at least), a fact that not only provoked retaliation from Jeremiah's enemies but also provided additional ammunition for his confessions and complaints. His sense of freedom in "talking back" to God is similar in many respects to that of Moses (Num 11:11-15), in whose prophetic tradition Jeremiah found himself.

Jer 11:18-23 and 12:1-6 both speak of assassination plots against Jeremiah (by the "men of Anathoth" in 11:21, by Jeremiah's "brothers" and "family" in 12:6). The two complaints are remarkably similar in other ways as well, as my analysis will seek to demonstrate. In terms of structure, for example, 11:18-20 voices Jeremiah's first complaint, evoking the Lord's first reply in 11:21-23, while the second prophetic complaint and its divine response appear in 12:1-4 and 12:5-6 respectively. Furthermore, in each of the two complaints Jeremiah quotes the words of his enemies (11:19b; 12:4b).

It was only after the Lord had "revealed" (literally, "caused to know") the enemies' plot to Jeremiah that he "knew" it (11:18); up to that time he did not "realize" (literally, "know") it (11:19). Only when the Sovereign Lord shares his plans with his servants the prophets can

<sup>10</sup> Although my list of six "confessions" is typical, there is no general agreement concerning either their parameters or their number. A recent study, for example, argues for only five confessional units (by combining the first two) and shortens the sixth (by excluding 20:14-18); K. M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (SBLDS 94; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

they possibly know the future and their part in it (Amos 3:7). At the same time, the true prophet rests content in the perception that God always "know(s)" him in the bond of covenant relationship (Jer 12:3).

Sensing himself to be "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" because of his enemies' schemes (11:19), Jeremiah pleaded with the Lord to turn the tables and "drag them off like sheep to the slaughter" (12:3). Accounts of imprecation--curses against one's enemies--are a frequent feature of Jeremiah's confessions (cf., e.g., 15:15), appear elsewhere in the OT with unsettling frequency, and cause no end of consternation to believers on the one hand and no end of "I told you so" glee to unbelievers on the other hand. Although substantial treatises have been written on this subject, let the apologetic of J. A. Thompson (in his commentary on 15:15) summarize the main arguments:

The persecutors who would seek to harm Jeremiah were really seeking to harm God's spokesman and therefore to harm God. The hour called for a display of Yahweh's sovereignty over those who persecuted his servant. It is not a case of a petty vendetta waged against Jeremiah's persecutors, but rather a display of Yahweh's positive action to restrain the evildoers and to enable his servant to continue the task to which Yahweh had called him. It was, after all, for Yahweh's sake that the prophet suffered the rebuffs of his persecutors. . . . There is a boldness about such words which only those in a very close relationship with Yahweh may show.<sup>11</sup>

Jeremiah complains to God that the men of Anathoth not only want to destroy him ("the tree and its fruit") but also to wipe out all reference to him ("his name") and thus in effect to nullify his entire ministry (11:19). Jeremiah further complains that, by way of contrast, his enemies "grow and bear fruit"--and this as a result of God's having "planted them" (12:2)! Convinced that the Lord judges "righteously" when he commits his "cause" to him (11:20; cf. 12:1), and knowing that the Lord "sees" him (12:3), Jeremiah wants to "see" divine vengeance upon his enemies (11:20). After all, God tests the heart and mind, the thoughts, not only of the men of Anathoth (11:20) but also of the prophet from Anathoth (12:3), and therefore the innocent Jeremiah has an airtight case against his guilty enemies. Jeremiah knows, deep down inside, that the hearts of his fellow citizens are far from God (11:20; 12:2; cf. the similar language used of the citizens of Jerusalem in Isa 29:13).

<sup>11</sup> J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 395-96. For a recent sensitive treatment of imprecation in the Psalms see E. H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989) 93-103, 149.

The Lord's response to Jeremiah's complaint (11:21-23) promises to bring disaster on the men of Anathoth. Though they had threatened Jeremiah with death because he was prophesying in the Lord's name and therefore presumably endangering their livelihood as priests, they and their families would feel the stroke of death by sword and famine.

Jeremiah's second complaint (12:1-4) and the divine response to it (12:5-6) begin with the age-old question, "Why do the wicked prosper?" How can the justice of God permit such blatant injustice? Since evil continues to exist, it is obvious either that God cannot or will not eradicate it. If he cannot, he is not omnipotent. If he will not, he is not supremely good. Like Jeremiah, all of us struggle with such antinomies. The sovereignty of God and the free will of human beings, if both are to have full sway, must often be viewed as remaining in paradoxical tension. Philosophical dualism is not the answer, since the end is not in dispute: righteousness will ultimately win the victory and overcome the world. In the meantime, our small peephole will keep us from clearly seeing the big picture, and we will continue to look for better--if only partial--answers (for example, that the patience and mercy of God give the evildoer time to repent). Perhaps we can learn to rest in the realization that although we may not understand, it should be enough for us to know that our loving heavenly Father understands.

Continuing his complaint against his enemies with dogged persistence, Jeremiah pleads with God to "set them apart for the day of slaughter" (12:3). Since they had refused to be set apart for God's glory, they should be set apart for God's wrath.<sup>12</sup> Jeremiah, in using the verb "set apart," perhaps reflects on the fact that God had "set" him "apart" before he was born (1:5).

In the tradition of Job, the Lord's answer to Jeremiah begins with questions (12:5) designed to steel him for the more difficult burdens he will yet be asked to bear. Though weary now, Jeremiah will become wearier still, and God simply tells him what he probably already knows: not to trust the members of his family (12:6). To his lack of necessary information, his pursuit by neighbors and relatives, his perception of divine injustice, his high dudgeon at the prosperity of the wicked, his puzzlement in the face of divine inaction, his impatience with divine agendas, his being told that things are sure to get worse--to these problems will be added a few more, as the record of his next confession reveals.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. similarly S. R. Driver, *The Book of the Prophet Jeremiah* (New York: Scribner's, 1906) 71.

The two confessions found in 11:18-12:6, when taken together, begin with Jeremiah's complaint and continue in sequence with God's answer, Jeremiah's complaint, and God's answer, as already noted. The confession recorded in 15:10-21 uses the same outline: Jeremiah's complaint (v 10), God's answer (vv 11-14), Jeremiah's complaint (vv 15-18), God's answer (vv 19-21). We are thus reminded once again that Jeremiah's confessions are often examples of prayer as dialogue between a supplicant and his God. Let us turn our attention to the second divine-human interchange in this confession: 15:15-21.

Jeremiah begins (15:15) by acknowledging that the Lord is always in a position to "understand" (literally, "know") him and what he is going through, an emphasis seen also in a previous confession (12:3). The prophet then states his personal agenda in three imperatives: "remember me," "care for me," "avenge me." The last of the verbs reprises his earlier desire for divine vengeance on his enemies (11:20). Knowing from experience how patient God often is with evildoers ("You are long-suffering"; cf. Exod 34:6, "slow to anger," where the underlying Hebrew is the same), Jeremiah pleads that the Lord not "take" him "away," an expression often referring to termination of life on this earth and translation to the afterlife (Gen 5:23; Ps 49:15; 73:24). His persecutors are seeking his life, and he pleads with God not to grant them success in that endeavor. Again using the verb "know" ("think of"), Jeremiah reminds the Lord that the reproach he suffers is due not to his own folly but to his divine commission. It is "for your sake," he says to God, that his enemies are bent on killing him.

Indeed, the reproaches and insults that come to him on a daily basis are a direct result of his proclamation of the word of God (20:8). Referring back to his original divine call, when the Lord had put his words in Jeremiah's mouth (1:9), the prophet says that he "ate them" (15:16), he digested them, much as Ezekiel would later do at the time of his call (Ezek 2:7-3:3). Just as in Ezekiel's case the scroll he "ate" was as "sweet as honey" in his mouth (3:3), so also the Lord's words were the "joy" and "delight" of his heart (Jer 15:16). Quoting Deut 8:3, Jesus later rebuked Satan by reminding him, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4). The law from the Lord's mouth was more precious to the psalmist than "thousands of pieces of silver and gold" (Ps 119:72). And God would soon remind Jeremiah that if the prophet's words were worthy, he himself would be the Lord's "mouth" ("spokesman," Jer 15:19).

A word that comes from God is always worth proclaiming faithfully: it is like fire, like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces, like the best of grain from a bountiful harvest, (23:28-29). The fact that the Lord's words were Jeremiah's joy contrasts sharply with the reproach

that he suffered because of them. His joy also forms a contrast with the "indignation" (v 17) that he felt "at the grievous sins of his people."<sup>13</sup> Jer 15:16 "is the only place where Jeremiah allows us to see that he found any joy in his calling whatever. Yet he declares that it was so: he was happy to know that he was God's man."<sup>14</sup>

Verse 17 tells us that Jeremiah never had the experience of sitting among "revelers." It is possible that the "revelers" were "not making merry in general but . . . at (Jeremiah's) expense, or at the expense of his message,"<sup>15</sup> since he complains in 20:7 of being an object of "ridicule" (the underlying Hebrew root is the same as that of "reveler"). But because of the immediate context, the word is more likely a reference to the "house of feasting" mentioned in 16:8, where Jeremiah states that God told him not to "sit down" there (cf. "never sat" in 15:17). In this connection it is instructive to compare Ps 26:3-5, where the psalmist refuses to "sit with deceitful men. . . and . . . the wicked."

Where Jeremiah never sat is balanced, as it were, by where he *did* sit: "alone." Jeremiah may aptly be characterized as the prophet of loneliness. For example, he remained a bachelor throughout his life. "The word of the LORD came to me: 'You must not marry and have sons or daughters in this place'" (16:1-2).

The Lord gave Jeremiah a good reason why he was not to marry. Hard and difficult times were coming, and his family might be killed in the siege of Jerusalem. We can also assume that the Lord did not want to subject a wife and her children to the suffering that his prophet would have to undergo. But all of this must have been of little comfort to Jeremiah, because if by nature and temperament anyone ever needed a wife and family it was he. In spite of everything, however, he was forced to go through life alone. His neighbors and relatives turned against him, just at the times when he needed them most; His true friends can be counted on the fingers of one hand: Ahikam, Ebed-Melek, Baruch. And even from these he was separated for long periods of time by being placed in various prisons and dungeons, although his only crime was that he continually issued warnings about the coming judgment of God. Each successive king after Josiah considered Jeremiah an enemy of the court, although if they had only known the truth, they would have realized that Jeremiah was by far the best friend they had.

But nobody likes a prophet of doom, and the minister who persistently lashes out against the evils in his community will never be the

<sup>13</sup> Thompson, 397.

<sup>14</sup> J. Bright, "A Prophet's Lament and Its Answer: Jeremiah 15:10-21," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, 330.

<sup>15</sup> Holladay, 459.

most popular man in town. He will never be a "regular guy"; he will not be a prominent socialite; the local lodges and services clubs will not usually invite him to join their organizations. We can be sure that Jeremiah's ideas for social reform and spiritual renewal were far too radical for him to be elected to the Anathoth chapter of the Lions Club.

Nevertheless, everyone must have companionship. Without a friend, any of us would dry up inside; at best we would become eccentric, at worst insane. Jeremiah doubtless knew this, and so he built up extensive spiritual reserves that served him well when he was in prison. He knew that God was a friend who would never fail him, because at the very beginning of his ministry the Lord had said to him, "I am with you and will rescue you" (1:8, 19).

Just as in the life of Jesus, so also in the life of Jeremiah, loneliness was accompanied by pain and suffering, both inward and outward. "Why?" (15:18), Jeremiah asks (cf. also 12:1; 20:18). Why does my pain never end, while you, O Lord--you who are supposed to be a spring of ever-flowing, never-failing, living water (2:13; 17:13; cf. especially the simile in Amos 5:24)--you are apparently going to be to me "like a deceptive brook, like a spring that fails"? Jeremiah has now clearly and decisively moved from *Klage*, "complaint," to *Anklage*, "accusation." What he says to God teeters perilously on the edge of blasphemy. He questions whether the Lord is a liar, just as in 20:7 he complains that the Lord has "deceived" him--a verb that elsewhere means "seduced" (Exod 22:16 [MT 22:15]; cf. NIV footnote "persuaded" at Jer 20:7)--by forcing him into the prophetic office.

But God is good, great, and gracious. He answers his distressed and distraught servant with words that are remarkably gentle and healing in their intended effect. Knowing that Jeremiah is already experiencing agony and confusion beyond belief, the Lord brings relief and solace.

He begins his response, however, by reminding Jeremiah that he has sinned and that a change of heart and attitude is thus called for. Over and over the Lord, through Jeremiah, had pleaded with his people to "repent" ("return"; e.g., 3:12, 14, 22; 4:1). Now the Lord, to Jeremiah, uses the same terminology as he makes repentance a condition of Jeremiah's restoration to divine favor and service. "Repent" and "restore" in 15:19 are translations of the same Hebrew verb (literally "return"). Only as we return to God will he cause us to return to him and to his ministry; only as God's people return to him will he return to them (Zech 1:3). In the case of Jeremiah, "'the prophet of repentance' in the Old Testament,"<sup>16</sup> his demand that others repent comes home to roost.

<sup>16</sup> J. P. Hyatt, *Jeremiah: Prophet of Courage and Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1958) 94.

There is no reason to doubt that Jeremiah in fact repented on this occasion and that the experience resulted in a second call to prophesy. The Lord of the second chance told Jeremiah that if he uttered words that were "worthy," he would once again be God's "spokesman," God's "mouth" (15:19; cf. Exod 4:16). The people would then "turn" ("return") to him (to hear God's voice), but he was not to "turn" ("return") to them (as though he needed to listen to the ridicule--or heed the advice--of sinful Israelites).

Verse 20 makes it certain that this third confession leads to a renewal of Jeremiah's call to be a prophet. Virtually every word in the verse echoes the language found in the first chapter of the book. The Lord promises to "make" ("give") Jeremiah a "fortified wall of bronze" (cf. 1:18) to the people of Judah. The rest of the verse quotes 1:19 almost verbatim. Jeremiah's three self-seeking and petulant requests in 15:15--"remember me," "care for me," "avenge me"--are more than overbalanced by the Lord's three final guarantees in 15:20-21: "I will rescue you," "I will save you," "I will redeem you."

Jeremiah has been called "the most human and tragic prophet of all the Old Testament story."<sup>17</sup> He "continued to meet persecution, and continued to see his word rejected, to the end of his life."<sup>18</sup> He experienced very few moments of rest and relaxation and security after being called to be a prophet. His life was one round of persecution and imprisonment and beating and anguish after another. He confessed many times to being harassed and tormented. But his persistence in his calling even after the fall of Jerusalem "bears witness to his own deep conviction about Yahweh's promise."<sup>19</sup>

In the confessions of Jeremiah we encounter "the entire spectrum of human, emotional distress: fear of shame, fear of failure, loss of strength, doubting of faith, loneliness, pity, disappointment turning to hostility towards God."<sup>20</sup> But the confessions "were not the words of a quitter! Jeremiah's whole life seems to have been lived in tension with his calling. The only way in which he could have put an end to that tension would have been to quit the prophetic office--and that he never did."<sup>21</sup> He may have wanted to on more than one occasion--but he never did. Jeremiah's qualities of character remain a standing rebuke to any believer who excuses himself from serving God because of personal disinclination or incapacity. "It was precisely this man who, for all his weakness and in his weakness, was God's chosen

<sup>17</sup> Rowley, 61.

<sup>18</sup> Bright, "Prophet's Lament," 337.

<sup>19</sup> Thompson, 149.

<sup>20</sup> G. von Rad, "The Confessions of Jeremiah," in *A Prophet to the Nations*, 346.

<sup>21</sup> Bright, "Prophet's Lament," 334-35.

instrument to speak his word, his judging and saving word, to his people."<sup>22</sup>

The prophet Jeremiah learned the meaning of obedience, felt the discomforts of anguish, and endured the trials of loneliness; but through it all the Lord was steadfast and Jeremiah was satisfied. In greater or lesser degree, we who love Jesus Christ with all our hearts and want to serve him to the very core of our being must learn the same lessons. May we glorify the Savior in learning them!

Jesus! What a Friend for sinners!  
Jesus! Lover of my soul!  
Friends may fail me, foes assail me;  
He, my Savior, makes me whole.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 333.

<sup>23</sup> J. W. Chapman, "Our Great Saviour," in *Worship and Service Hymnal* (Chicago: Hope, 1966), no. 121.

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