

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – September 22, 2019

Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

(From *Homiletics*; “Have a Good Cry”, September 22, 2019)

The book of Jeremiah presents its interpreters with a range of challenges stemming primarily from its severely damaged text and the extensive editing which the book has undergone in the course of its transmission history. (The Septuagint version of Jeremiah, for example, made several centuries B.C., is approximately an eighth shorter than the Masoretic Text [MT] of Jeremiah, which is the text used by modern translators. The discovery of fragments of Jeremiah among the Dead Sea Scrolls has led most scholars to conclude that there were at least two Hebrew traditions of the book, one considerably shorter than the other.)

These challenges make even the most basic Jeremianic interpretive tasks uncertain. Determining the boundaries of a “reading” from Jeremiah, for example, is by no means obvious. The lectionary’s choice for today’s reading, 8:18–9:1, is one possibility. Verse 9:1 in English is verse 8:23 in Hebrew (see the text note in *NRSV*), so the reading consists of the last six verses of the eighth chapter. However, the editors of *NRSV* consider the oracle from which today’s reading is taken to end not at 9:1 or 8:23, but rather to extend through English 9:3 (or even 9:11), which is the next logical break in thought, so the lectionary passage is a portion of an oracle.

The decision to start the reading at 8:18 is based on the formula “says the Lord” in 8:17, the customary conclusion of oracles in Jeremiah (see also 8:12; 6:12, 15; the apparent confusing similarity between “says the Lord” at the end of an oracle [e.g., 8:15] and “Thus says the Lord” at the beginning of an oracle [e.g., 8:16] is less confusing in Hebrew, where the phrases employ different words that are also different parts of speech).

Today’s reading comes from a collection of poetic oracles of judgment that are part of a larger section of the book that returns to the theme of the “foe from the north” (8:4–10:25; see also 4:5–6:30). In it, Jeremiah expresses his grief over the destruction about to befall (or having recently befallen) Judah at the hands of the Babylonians, either in their initial invasion of 597 B.C. or, more likely perhaps, in their definitive destruction of Jerusalem and the start of the Babylonian exile of the Jewish people in 587 B.C. John Bright, in his commentary, has also suggested, with others, that the scene over which the prophet laments is the “death by a thousand cuts” of the ravaging of the land by marauding guerrilla bands in the desperate lawless days leading up to the Babylonian incursion (*Jeremiah* [Anchor Bible 21; New York: Doubleday, 1965], p. 66).

In an opening tristich (three short poetic clauses or lines of roughly the same length), the prophet summarizes his feelings about this historical moment: Devoid of joy, he is heartsick with grief (v. 18). Of all the biblical prophets, none is more revealing of his psychological, emotional, mental and spiritual anguish than Jeremiah, and none identifies himself more closely with the people of Israel than does this prophet from a priestly lineage.

The English word “Hark” (v. 19) is not the most felicitous translation of the Hebrew participle *hinneh*, in this context, since “Hark” is likely to convey, at least initially, positive associations (as in “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” “Hark, My Soul, It Is the Lord,” “Hark, the Glad Sound!,” etc.). The traditional translation of *hinneh* as “Behold” is even less satisfactory here, so some sort of circumlocution, such as “Attend closely to” or “Hear now” seems more fitting.

Again, the English translation of “my poor people” has connotations that may or may not be contained in the Hebrew original. The English word “poor” in ordinary usage may have nothing to do with material resources (as in “you poor thing” or “what a poor showing”), and that may, in fact, be what the writer or writers in Hebrew wished to convey with the term of endearment they used here, *bat `ammi*, literally, “Daughter, my people” (or, with John Bright, “My Daughter-My People”; see his discussion of the term in his commentary, 32). On the other hand, “poor” in this context may also refer to the people left impoverished by the catastrophic collapse of the socio-economic order on which they depended. The ambiguity of the translation may be an accurate reflection of the Hebrew. Although it has been suggested that some sort of natural calamity, such as drought, is the cause of the people’s distress, the overall context of Jeremiah’s lament suggests political rather than ecological disaster.

The current passage continues to demonstrate the troublesome nature of the text of Jeremiah. The words of the quotation in verse 19 (“Is the Lord not in Zion ... their foreign idols?”) fit far more logically immediately after verse 18 (as the editors of the Jewish Publication Society translation have placed them), leaving the quotation in verse 20 (“The harvest is past ... and we are not saved”) as the cry of the destitute people of the land, which makes much better sense than the NRSV arrangement, which follows the MT. Although the JPS arrangement makes better sense of a difficult passage, its weakness is that it lacks support from the versions.

The JPS editors also understand the quotation in verse 19 to be spoken by the deity (see their text note), which makes the idolatry condemned at the end of that verse a more logical sequel, coming from the same speaker (and obviating the need for enclosing the words in parentheses, as NRSV feels obliged to do). The first rhetorical question is clearly meant to be answered in the affirmative — Yes, Yahweh remains in his holy temple in his holy precinct — which makes the answer to the second rhetorical question a baffled, “Who knows?” There is a cultic logic behind the questions that may escape modern hearers. The close association of deity and geographical territory in the ancient Near East, combined with Israel’s exclusivist monotheism, meant that the presence of any deity’s image on Yahweh’s turf (as it were) was not only unfaithful, but it was also illogical. The very existence of a sacred precinct (Zion) and a sacred shrine (the temple) implied devotion to the deity to whom both precinct and shrine were dedicated; to bring statues of other deities into such spaces simply made no sense to the Bible’s Yahwistic theologians, whose perspective formed the canon of Scripture.

Further evidence of the confusing nature of the text of Jeremiah is found in the question of whether the divine quotation should include the sentences containing the phrase “my poor people,” an expression that occurs in verses 19, 21 and 22 (and only in Jeremiah, occurring elsewhere at 4:11; 6:26; 9:1, 7 [translated there as “sinful”]). It is rare for anyone other than the Lord to refer to the people of Israel using the first-person singular possessive suffix (“my people” in English), and for a human to refer to all the Israelites as “my people” is a stylistic peculiarity of Jeremiah (see 9:2; 14:17; Lamentations 3:14).

The imagery evoked in verse 22, celebrated in African-American hymnody, is less clear now than it was to Jeremiah’s contemporaries. Both Genesis (37:25) and Jeremiah (here and 46:11) identify the area of Gilead as a source of healing balm, apparently resin from the styrax tree. The prophet may be using this physical commodity metaphorically here, or he may also be referring to Gilead’s prominent role among the Israelite tribes in the Transjordan (and indeed in all of Canaan; cf. Judges 10:3; 12:7). Elijah, the greatest of the classical Yahwistic prophets, was from Gilead (1 Kings 17:1), and Gilead was a frequent place of refuge or deliverance for the faithful (e.g., Jacob fleeing from Laban [Genesis 31:21]; Israelite refugees fleeing the Philistines [1 Samuel 13:7]; and David’s victory over the insurrection led by his son, Absalom [2 Samuel 17:26]). This larger, metaphoric

understanding of Gilead may lie behind Jeremiah's imagery, which was obviously commonplace to Jeremiah's first audience.

The lectionary reading concludes with the prophet's dolorous wish that he had powers of weeping commensurate with the catastrophe about to overtake (or which had recently overtaken) his "poor people," using again the catch-phrase unique to Jeremiah. Here, the prophet has a good cry. His identification of himself with his doomed nation is painful, bringing anguish to him and a profound prophetic witness to the Bible of Jews and Christians.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Jeremiah 8:18-9:1

1. Alphonetta Wines, *workingpreacher.org* (September 22, 2019) begins her commentary on this passage with a series of questions that many of us have pondered at one time or another: "*What do you do when you've lost it all? What do you do when all hope seems lost? What do you do when the problems just keep coming, one after another?... When, Lord, when? Will it ever end?*" Can you relate? When have you asked such questions in your own life? How does Jeremiah's lament speak to your own soul?
2. Who is really talking in this passage? Who is weeping? Is it Jeremiah? Is it God? Or is it both?
3. In a time of distress and upheaval, leaders are often faced with a question – Should I put aside my own pain and grief, anxiety and despair so as to project confidence and purpose, strength and encouragement? Or should I be honest and transparent in my own fears and pain so as to identify and be in solidarity with my people? In this passage, we clearly see on which side of that equation Jeremiah came down. How do you respond to such leadership? When you look to those who lead, what brings you hope and gives you the strength to carry on in tumultuous times?
4. The balm of "Gilead" has become a commonplace metaphor for hope and healing, despite the fact that few, if any, of us have any connection whatsoever to this place. Are there other metaphors that serve this purpose in your life – places, people, communities, etc that serve as beacons of hope and healing for you today?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?