

Droughts Without and Within

(*Jer 14:2–6, 7–9, 10–16; 15:15–18, 19–20*)

JUDAH ON THE GROUND IN MOURNING

JUDAH EXPERIENCED A SEVERE drought in the time of Jeremiah. It did not come, so far as we know, as the result of a prophetic word, which happened when Elijah announced the drought to King Ahab (1 Kgs 17:1); nevertheless, it became a national crisis calling for mediation by the prophet (Jer 14:1). As a result we have another sequence in chapters 14–15 containing a lament, which was probably spoken by Jeremiah (14:2–6); a communal confession and petition, perhaps directed by Jeremiah, that Yahweh act to end the suffering (14:7–9); and a divine oracle rejecting the confession, in which Jeremiah, by implication, is rejected as covenant mediator (14:10). The rejection of Jeremiah's mediation is made explicit in the dialogue that follows (14:11–16). The present verses have long been recognized as constituting a drama, possibly being a Temple liturgy recited on a fast day called in response to the drought. This lament–confession–rejection sequence proceeds along the same lines as the lament–confession–rejection sequence of 14:17b–15:3.

Jeremiah's lament over the drought:

²Judah mourns
 her gates languish
 they are black to the earth
 The cry of Jerusalem goes up

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³Their nobles send their young ones for water
they come upon the canals
They do not find water
their containers return empty

They are ashamed and disgraced
and they cover their heads
⁴On account of the ground being cracked
because there is not rain in the land

The farmers are ashamed
they cover their heads
⁵Because even the doe in the field gives birth and forsakes
because there is no grass

⁶The wild asses stand on the bare heights
they pant for air like jackals
Their eyes fail
because of no herbage. (Jer 14:2–6)

The city is depicted here as a mourner sitting on the ground. Its gates are desolate—no one gathers there, or passes through them. The drought is severe. Canals have no water, and young boys return to their masters with containers empty. They are ashamed. The masters, too, are ashamed, and so are the farmers. The ground is cracked for lack of rain. Does, who normally give birth deep in the woods, are now in the open fields forsaking their fawns. They themselves are looking for grass. There is none. Without a mother's milk newborn fawns die quickly. Wild asses, the hardest of wild animals, stand on the bare heights panting for air like jackals; their eyes have the look of death. There is nothing to eat. Signs, all of them, of divine displeasure!

The people are led to make a corporate confession, which acknowledges sin, affirms Yahweh to be the “Hope of Israel,” and asks for deliverance and Yahweh's ongoing presence:

⁷Though our iniquities testify against us
Yahweh, act for the sake of your name
For our backslidings are many
against you we have sinned

⁸The Hope of Israel
its savior in time of trouble

Why will you become like a sojourner in the land
and like a traveler turned aside to lodge?

⁹Why will you become like a helpless man
like a mighty man unable to save?
But you are in our midst, Yahweh
and your name upon us is called
do not leave us! (Jer 14:7–9)

Yahweh is the “Hope of Israel” (17:13), where the Hebrew word for “hope” can also mean “pool (of water).” Looks to be a double meaning in light of the drought. Having confessed their sin, the people now want deliverance and Yahweh’s ongoing presence. They ask Yahweh to act for his own name’s sake. The argument is an old one, appealing to Yahweh’s honor in having chosen Israel as his own (14:21). The confession ends positively. The people affirm that Yahweh is in their midst, something they were unsure about in 8:19, and that they bear Yahweh’s name (Deut 28:10). But then a final plea: “Do not leave us.”

Yahweh responds in a brief oracle that he will not accept the confession. The people have made a habit of wandering after other gods, so he will not be their savior. Instead he will punish them. Yahweh’s response:

¹⁰Thus said Yahweh to this people:
So they loved to wander
their feet they did not restrain
Thus Yahweh did not accept them
now he will remember their iniquity
and call to account their sin. (Jer 14:10)

Jeremiah’s mediation has failed, particularly if he was leading the corporate confession. The prose following (14:11–16), which is a dialogue between Yahweh and Jeremiah, makes the failed mediation clear. Yahweh tells Jeremiah to stop praying on behalf of this people, which is what he was doing if he was leading the corporate confession. Yahweh is going to put an end to them. But Jeremiah says that other prophets are preaching peace in Yahweh’s name. Yahweh says it is a lie. He has not sent these prophets, and their words derive from lying visions and worthless divination. Yahweh concludes the prose dialogue with judgment on the peace prophets: The sword and famine they say is not coming will in fact finish them off, and a shameful death with no burial awaits a people to whom these prophets are prophesying, also their wives and children.

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JEREMIAH'S CONFESSIONS

In the book of Jeremiah, mostly in chapters 11–20, are a number of compositions commonly called the prophet's "confessions," so named because of their likeness to the confessions of Saint Augustine. These are a singular legacy of Jeremiah, for in them the prophet is not so much speaking Yahweh's word with power and passion, although this does turn up, but is telling others how he feels about the message he has been called to deliver, what is going on around him, and how both are impacting him personally. No other prophet bears his soul in the way Jeremiah does. Most of the confessions are in poetry, which means we are probably closer to the prophet's own words than in compositions surviving in prose.

The Jeremiah confessions are individual laments, basically, the sort of which we find in the Psalter. This insight derives from Hermann Gunkel. Only one confession expresses confidence in besting an enemy (20:11–12), and only one is a ringing word of praise (20:13). From Jeremiah come also a few communal laments / confessions, which we have looked at in chapters 8, 9, and 14.

Gunkel believed the "I" in these individual laments was the voice of an individual; it was not a personification of the community, at least not originally. In them one senses deep, personal suffering, the purpose of the lament being to move Yahweh to compassion. Individual laments are very emotional, often embodying complaints about enemies who are mocking the sufferer in his misery, and waiting for his death. The sufferer, for his part, sometimes claims innocence and tries to persuade Yahweh of the same (Psalms 17 and 26). But in other cases the sufferer confesses sin and asks for forgiveness (Psalm 51). Gunkel noted that individual laments protesting innocence occur in both Jeremiah and Job.

In the plea to remove the calamity, whatever it happens to be, is often a call for divine revenge. Various arguments are used. A strident confidence may be expressed. Not infrequently one will note in these compositions the alternation of lament and entreaty, on the one hand, and confident hope on the other (Psalms 3, 123, 130). Individual laments also include, very often, the certainty that God has heard the sufferer's plaint (Psalm 22). In Jeremiah individual laments usually, but not always, receive a divine response. In one case, Jeremiah answers his own lament, first with a word of confidence, then with ringing praise to Yahweh (20:11–13).

JEREMIAH'S OWN DROUGHT

In one Jeremiah confession we see that the prophet has a drought of his own to contend with, which, like the drought that has come upon Judah, has its source in Yahweh. In this confession Jeremiah reflects back on his acceptance of the call to be a prophet (15:15–18). It receives a divine response (15:19–20). The confession:

¹⁵You, you know, Yahweh
remember me and take account of me
and take vengeance for me on my pursuers
Do not in your slowness to anger take me away
know that on your account I bear reproach

¹⁶Your words were found and I ate them
and your word was to me for joy
and for the gladness of my heart
For your name is called upon me
Yahweh, the God of hosts

¹⁷I sat not in the happy crowd and acted jolly
because of your hand, all alone I sat
for with indignation you filled me

¹⁸Why has my pain become continual
and my blow desperate
refusing to be healed?
Will you really be for me as a deceptive stream
waters that are not sure? (15:15–18)

Jeremiah begins by invoking the divine name, as he does elsewhere (11:20; 12:1; 20:7), and asks Yahweh to “remember” him, using a word occurring often in the Psalms (Pss 25:6–7; 74:2, 18, 22). He is under attack by enemies and wants a speedy deliverance. If Yahweh delays, Jeremiah may become a casualty. Jeremiah also asks Yahweh to take vengeance on his pursuers (Deut 32:35).

Jeremiah goes on to recall his joy at the finding of the Temple law-book in 622, which he consumed with joy. On this scroll were the words Yahweh promised to put into his mouth (1:9), and Jeremiah was thus able to accept the call to be Yahweh's prophet. He spent time alone, not joining in with merry-makers at the festival of covenant renewal and Passover, for Yahweh had filled him with indignation. Now he is filled with pain, continual pain,

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and the prophet wants to know why. The tone has changed, from joyful recollection to bitter anger—an anger now directed towards Yahweh. The prophet becomes intense and bold as in some other confessions (12:1–3; 20:7–10, 14–18). Is Yahweh being to him a dried-up brook, without any water? Reckless talk! Jeremiah knows better than to ask such a question, for he himself has confessed Yahweh to be the “spring of living water” (2:13).

THE PROPHET IS TOLD TO RETURN

Yahweh gives this confession a robust answer, ringing the changes once again on the verb *shub* in the opening verse: “If you *return* (= *repent*), then I will let you *return* . . . They, they will *turn* to you, but you will not *turn* to them”:

¹⁹Therefore thus said Yahweh:

If you return, then I will let you return
before me you shall stand

And if you bring forth what is more precious than trash
as my mouth you will be

They, they will turn to you
but you, you will not turn to them

²⁰And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze

They will fight against you
but will not overcome you

For with you am I
to save you and rescue you
—oracle of Yahweh. (15:19–20)

A message preached to others is now being preached to the prophet himself. Jeremiah is told that he must return (= repent), which means he must stop speaking the worthless trash Yahweh has been hearing. Then, once again, he can stand before Yahweh and be Yahweh’s mouth, which is what he was called to be (1:9). We cannot be sure what the “worthless trash” consisted of, but whatever it was, Yahweh will have none of it. Jeremiah may have been preaching peace and giving people assurances of deliverance, which is what other prophets were doing, but these were not the messages Yahweh wanted delivered (cf. 4:10; 17:16). Early in his career, Jeremiah appears to have been preaching deliverance and wellbeing to Northern Israel (chapters 30–31). But this preaching cannot be the “worthless trash”;

nevertheless, it does indicate that Jeremiah was not always indicting people and preaching judgment to them. Or it could be that Yahweh was censuring him for words just spoken in the prophet's depressed state. Jeremiah was certainly remiss in asking if Yahweh was a "deceptive stream" (= a dried-up water bed). In any case, Jeremiah must repent of something he has said, and then he can return to being Yahweh's mouth.

Yahweh then repeats to Jeremiah promises given to him when he learned of his call and was commissioned for public ministry, i.e., that he would be a "wall of bronze" against all comers (1:18), and that Yahweh would deliver him (1:8, 19). Yahweh also gives Jeremiah in this concluding word the great "I am with you" promise. Jeremiah may want more, but this will be enough. Yahweh's answer reverses the change in tone of Jeremiah's confession: He begins with an angry or near-angry response (v. 19ab), and then ends with affirmation and a promise of deliverance (vv. 19c–20). Verse 21, which more or less repeats v. 20, is a later add-on.

If Jeremiah returned to Yahweh, which we assume happened, he showed himself capable of doing precisely what the people as a whole were incapable of doing. Reporting a repentance of his own comes close to carrying out a symbolic action. And by putting his own unfaithfulness before the people, the prophet stands more chance of convicting them of sin than if he had elevated himself above them.