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Does Jeremiah Confess, Lament, or Complain?

Three Attitudes towards Wrong

Tim Bulkeley

The claim by Shakespeare's Juliette "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet" is often quoted to claim that naming is arbitrary. Yet what we call things matters. For our classifying, and hence our naming, in part defines what we can and will perceive. This chapter investigates three approaches to naming the genre present in the speeches commonly known as "the confessions of Jeremiah" in order to uncover three responses to the dark times. While these are different they also often coincide and collaborate as our spirits respond to disaster and hopelessness. I will also suggest that to read these "confessions of Jeremiah" we need to move beyond any of these neat descriptors, and perceive the interweaving of the attitudes they represent in the narrative unfolded by these texts. In doing this we will distinguish not only the literary shape or form of the texts we discuss, but also their attitude to the "wrongs" to which they respond.

Lament expresses sorrow, mourning, or regret. Such expressions are a universal response to events or situations that seem, to the speaker, wrong. The connection of this response with "mourning" is appropriate, for death and bereavement are an extreme and irreversible form of "wrongness" in our world. Furthermore (at least in the cultures that

produced the texts collected in the Hebrew Bible), expressions of lament in other contexts often borrow language and imagery from the realm of death and bereavement. In particular the individual laments in the Psalter often express the psalmist's trouble as bringing them near to death.

Laments are not merely the commonest genre of psalm in the book of Psalms, but elements of lamentation are also found widely in the prophetic books. Westermann, in his study of the basic forms of speech found in the prophets, noted the "death lament over Israel" in Amos 5:1–3 to be a classic example of a form that was widespread in the prophets and particularly developed in Jeremiah.[1] Indeed, he drew attention later to the way the corpus of the Latter Prophets begins with Yhwh lamenting (in the opening chapter of Isaiah).[2] Such laments were a way of formulating an announcement of judgment. They picture the future state of the people or state being discussed as if they were dead. There are also often in these books texts that lament in ways that Dobbs-Allsopp suggests reflect the Mesopotamian genre of "city-lament" (such city-lament material is found in both the oracles against nations and against Israel and Judah in the prophetic books and most notably in Lamentations).[3] Such speech reflects the sadness of an afflicted people, rather than that of the deity witnessing the decline and punishment of a chosen people. These two movements, while both lament or mourn a loss, make use of the lament in quite different ways. In the first case the intent is to accuse, while the second is more like the psalms and appeals for divine aid in redressing the wrong.

In making this move to seeking redress of the "wrongness" this second use of lament in the prophets, like most "lament psalms," begins to move to the second of our attitudes. For in order to appeal for help and redress one must, at least by implication complain about the state of affairs to be redressed. Indeed "complaint" is one of the standard components of a lament psalm.

Within discussion of the genres of psalms often two related moves are made which recognize another attitude to disaster, very different from lament, yet closely related to it—complaint. Like lament, complaint recognizes that something is wrong, but instead of merely recognizing

1. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, 202.

2. Ibid., 279.

3. On the prophets, see Dobbs-Allsopp, *Weep, O Daughter of Zion*, 97–153; and concerning Lamentations in particular Dobbs-Allsopp, *Lamentations*, 6–12.

and bewailing that fact, complaint goes on to lay blame, and even by implication at least to appeal for redress.

Sweeney, in his summary of the genres found in prophetic literature following standard form-critical categories, distinguishes "Communal Complaint Songs (*Volksklagelied*, *Klagelied des Volkes*)"[4] and "Lamentation (*Volksklage*, *Untergangsklage*, *Klaglied*, *Klage*)."[5] As this approach presents things, in complaints the calamity is still in prospect, thus here a plea for help is a dominant feature, while laments express sadness after the event and the plea is either subdued or absent.[6] While this before and after distinction seems to make good *a priori* sense, I want to argue that the fundamental difference between the two genres, whether in the prophets or elsewhere, is not timing but *attitude*.

The German expressions *Klage* (complaint, lament) and *Anklage* (charge, accusation or reproach) perhaps sound more similar than the words we might use in English. Indeed the German nouns are close in meaning. However, the *verbs* suggest different attitudes: *klagen* (moan, wail, or complain) suggests different mental states from *anklagen* (charge, accuse or protest). Since in this chapter I am more interested in the *functional* or attitudinal difference than the formal ones, this potentially significant difference in the German terms is of interest. For here as in most form-critically originated discussion much terminology traces itself back to German originals (as the FOTL series in which both Gerstenberger's and Sweeney's work appeared makes clear by using both German and English names for the genres discussed).

So, in contrast to this form-critically derived distinction I want to use a different one which focuses on the attitude towards the "wrong" which is expressed by the text. In this optic a lament bewails a situation that is past or more often present (as in many psalms, e.g., Pss 4–6 and some prophetic texts, e.g., Mic 7:1ff.), or one that is foreseen as a future danger (as in at least some prophetic laments, e.g., Amos 5:1–3 or appeals to lament, e.g., Jer 9:10, 17–22) whether or not that danger can potentially be averted. Again, focusing on the question of attitude, complaint suggests that the speaker believes that the one addressed has the capacity to alleviate the situation being described and (at least by implication) is appealing that they should do so. Thus Ps 80 complains that Yhwh is

4. Sweeney, *Isaiah 1–39*, 517.

5. The Earth Bible Team, "The Voice of the Earth More Than a Metaphor," 523.

6. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 10–14 is typical form-critical forerunner of this distinction (also in the FOTL series).

failing to act to protect or restore Israel when enemies have invaded and destroyed, much as does the psalm in Hab 3.

The third term that is important for us here, "confession," has mainly been used to describe a series of passages in Jeremiah (Jer 11:18–20; 12:1–6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13). These have at least since the late nineteenth century been known collectively as "the confessions of Jeremiah."[7] Since Baumgartner they have been recognized as similar in content and expression to individual lament psalms,[8] though perhaps the Babylonian work known as a *Man and his God* might offer an even stronger parallel.[9] This recognition in itself suggests that to call these texts laments is to over-simplify.

However, the traditional designation, confession, suggests yet a third and quite different attitude in response to a time of "wrong," that is an expression of trust in the one who has the capacity to right the wrong. Such confessions of trust are a commonly recognized feature of complaint psalms.[10] By "confession" in this context of literary and/or prayerful responses to times when things are "wrong" I mean the attitude which affirms or confesses confidence and trust in God despite the circumstances.[11] For in both psalms and prophets a part of the varied human response to a world out of joint has been to confess trust in God that this situation is temporary or aberrant in some way.

Although these three—lament, complaint, and confession—may well find expression together in the same piece, they represent fundamentally different stances with respect to the "wrong." Lament merely announces the wrong as wrong, complaint moves to a hope that the

7. This list is widely accepted and discussed, though some scholars add individual items (Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context*, 193; von Rad, "Die Konfessionen Jeremias," 227 (8:18–23); Hyatt, *Jeremiah, Prophet of Courage and Hope*, 782 (10:23–24; 17:9–10); Bright, *Jeremiah*, LXVI (4:19–21; 5:3–5; 8:18–23); Berridge, *Prophet, People and the Word of Yahweh*, 114 n. 1 (9:1–8); Holladay, *The Architecture of Jeremiah* 1–20, 152 (17:5–8, 9–10); Thompson, *Book of Jeremiah*, 88 (4:19–21; 5:3–5; 8:18–23).

8. Baumgartner, *Die Klagegedichte Jeremias und die Klagenpsalmen*.

9. Lambert, "A Further Attempt at the Babylonian 'Man and His God'."

10. See, e.g., the list in Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 12.

11. It is true that "confession" has been used mainly in Hebrew Bible studies to speak of psalms in which the psalmist's sin is acknowledged, however (at least since von Rad's influential work) the other meaning of "confess" to declare faith and trust in a divine being (which is the sense I intend) has been in use von Rad, *Das Formgeschichtliche Problem des Hexateuchs*.

wrong might be righted in some way, while confession moves beyond this again to a place of trust and affirmation of God even amid the wrong and even though it might not be righted.

Brueggemann offered a functional (rather than formal) classification of psalms which is widely appreciated for its pastoral and theological power. In some ways this threefold description of the attitudes expressed in texts dealing with times when life seems "wrong" is similar. It focuses on function not form, there is a measure of progression between categories.[12] The key element in the proposed classification is the attitude expressed. In "lament" mourning, sadness, regret are to the fore, while in "complaint" protest, reproach, and even accusation are the focus, and in "confession" (perhaps despite the circumstances described and even the reproachful content of the speech) trust in the one addressed or spoken about is prominent.

Turning to the "confessions of Jeremiah" and their relationship to the eponymous prophet, until the rise of form criticism and the recognition of customary elements in their expression, most studies of Jeremiah's confessions read them as outpourings of a troubled soul, and used them to reconstruct Jeremiah's thoughts and personality. Then the recognition of the conventional and social nature of "laments" suggested thinking of these texts in different ways. However, reading the book of Jeremiah as a complete and unified work and therefore reading these passages both together with each other, and also in what presents itself as in some sense a "portrait of a prophet,"[13] one is likely to perceive a narrative thread in these passages taken as a group.

This narrative thread traces a developing relationship between the speaker, Jeremiah,[14] his God, Yhwh, as well as a collection of opponents, first the men of Anathoth, later a less specific "they."

A number of features of these passages suggest their (quasi)narrative effect. The opening passage in 11:18—12:6 offers a strong narrative frame. Several features give the reader a set to understand the passage as

12. While Brueggemann's categories form a natural biographical progression the same is less true of the proposed categories of response to wrongness. While one might progress between them they each might be encountered alone, or often they succeed each other within a short composition.

13. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 27–35.

14. Unless some mention in my text makes clear that "Jeremiah" refers to a putative person in Iron Age Jerusalem the term means either the book commonly known by that name, or the literary character that the book presents as its main "speaker." I am not interested in this chapter in historical reconstructions.

concerning an interaction between Yhwh (as source of revelation) and the speaker. The words "Yhwh caused me to know and I knew" suggest Jeremiah's reflection upon a past experience, while the double use of ידע also lays stress on knowing. That Yhwh is the first word of the speech is emphatic.

In the light of this set, the deictic particle אז, giving a relative time situation, reinforces sense of a narration, while the remainder of the text introduces the other parties to this story, the as yet unnamed "they." Before specifying the identity and actions of this third party, Jeremiah contrasts himself with them, note the emphatic ואני (v. 19). In likening himself to a helpless animal victim in this verse the speaker echoes a common trope of laments. By referring back to the prominent verb of the previous verse, ידע, the flashback effect is highlighted, Yhwh has caused me to know (v. 18) but back then I did not know (v. 19), further situating this text as a narration. There is no quotation formula in the middle of this verse but translators supply one, revealing that the opponents' thoughts and plans are recounted to us by Jeremiah (rather than by the narrator of the book), forming part of this narrative quasi-soliloquy.

In verse 20, however, the almost-soliloquy turns to something else. Yhwh is addressed in the second person, and thus God becomes the addressee or conversation partner in this narrative. As part of this move suddenly we are in a narrative present (rather than past) frame.

In 11:21 things become more complex, the speech is introduced by a messenger formula, and Jeremiah becomes "you" and is thus evidently a character in this unfolding conversation, rather than merely a soliloquist. The opponents are now spoken of in the present, and identified (as the men of Anathoth) and quoted. A second messenger formula (11:22) marks a change of focus in Yhwh's speech, now speaking about these men, rather than to Jeremiah directly. Despite their clear identification, as has often been noted, the contents of their judgment is surprisingly general and vague. (Perhaps a hint that in this narrative they stand as representatives of the whole nation addressed by the book in which the narrative itself stands?)

The direct address to Yhwh at the start of 12:1 marks a new beginning. However, if we read 11:18ff. as a dialogue between Jeremiah and Yhwh concerning the opponents (identified eventually as men of Anathoth) then this direct address to Yhwh seems reasonably to continue that conversation.

The next "confession," in 15:10–21, is also a dialogue with speech by Jeremiah in the first person addressed to Yhwh alternating with speech attributed to Yhwh (by messenger formulae אמר יהוה in 15:11 and לכן כה־אמר יהוה in 15:19). It has a less strongly marked narrative character but dialogue form in itself is not common in Psalms, despite claims that lament and complaint psalms might have received responses in the form of prophetic oracles. Thus the presentation here does continue the narrative thread.

The next (in 17:14–18) is the most straightforward example of the lament form, and can only be considered as part of a narrative sequence if it is considered as part of a coherent collection "the confessions of Jeremiah."

By contrast 18:18–23 begins with the marker ויאמרו (introducing words of someone else). These reported, third person, words provide a frame for the passage that follows where Jeremiah narrates his experience with opponents, and argues with Yhwh. Despite the absence of a marker in 18:19, this direct appeal to God, presented as Jeremiah's speech therefore continues the dialogue about the opponents, with this time those opponents being first given voice. On this occasion however there is no reply from Yhwh.

The final "confession" begins (20:7) with a second person masculine singular verb followed by a proper noun, clearly this serves as a vocative, and thus this passage also presents itself as a conversation. This is of course the standard form of the lament psalm and the quotation of the opponents' speech is also typical of these psalms. There is little question that in terms of form this passage is such a psalm. However, read in the context of the earlier "confessions" the narrative character implicit in these psalms becomes more evident. So how do these "confessions" trace a relationship?

In the first of Jeremiah's confessions (11:18–23) we discovered psalm-like elements encased in a narrative framework which changed the literary and rhetorical functioning of the words. So verses 19–20 with their animal comparisons, enemies who plot, threat of the speaker being removed from the land of the living, and then appeal to God (as just judge to exercise vengeance), echo the language and thought of these psalms. However verse 18 affirming that Yhwh has made the speaker (Jeremiah) aware of what an unspecified group (they) were doing, provided a narrative frame. Verse 21 provides further details, while 22–23 affirm in

Yhwh's name that he will indeed perform this vengeance. This is like the oracle of weal that is presumed to follow the complaint in the psalms.

The effect here is that, rather than merely reporting a lament or complaint, Jeremiah is confessing the God who is his redeemer-kinsman. Thus as well as changing the genre the narrative frame also changes the function and attitude of the piece. Jeremiah is the recipient of (presumably privileged) divine information (11:18), note that his dominant attribute in the book (especially in its Hebrew form) is as "Jeremiah the prophet." Through this retrospective presentation of the opponents' plans he presents himself as a harmless animal led to the butchers, or a tree to be destroyed. This imagery, and indeed all the language in 11:19–20, is thoroughly conventional and so paints Jeremiah as a "righteous sufferer." In 11:21 Yhwh's response makes all this specific, mentioning of Anathoth (known from 1:1 as Jeremiah's home) and reports his opponents' speech using an aggressive double negative: "do not prophesy in the name of Yhwh and you will not die by our hands!"

The second "confession" follows immediately (in 12:1–6) so we read it as part of the same speech. The actual complaint begins in general terms (1b–2) but in verse 3 focuses on the particular case of the speaker, who asserts faithfulness and requests vengeance (cf. 11:20, 21). Those against whom the complaint is made are simply identified as "them" and either assumed to be the guilty and treacherous people of verse 1, or the prophet's opponents in Anathoth from 11:21. The reversal of the tree motif (of 11:19b in 12:2) and application of the sheep motif to Jeremiah's opponents (from 11:19a in 12:3) together suggest strongly that these two speeches should indeed be read as one. Since 12:4 speaks in general terms of the land which is despoiled because of the wickedness of its inhabitants we assume that these local opponents of Jeremiah typify unfaithful Judah and Jerusalem.

Yhwh's answer (12:5ff.) to the prophet's plaintive questions is a sharp challenge. In terms of the envisaged oracle of weal that might have been expected to follow a lament or complaint this comes as a shock, and thus heightens the narrative drama of the passage. At first this response seems to avoid the issue by merely attacking the complainant:

> If you have raced with foot-runners and they have wearied you,
> how will you compete with horses?
> And if in a safe land you fall down,
> how will you fare in the thickets of the Jordan?

The wording here in Hebrew suggests a military and not an athletic contest: רגלי usually implied foot-soldiers, and horses are most often mentioned in military contexts. This attack suggests Yhwh has become frustrated by the complaints and lack of action of his prophet.

The next verse mentions "your brothers" and even those of your home household (בית־אב) thus linking this threatening response to the situation described in 11:21 and more directly to Jeremiah's complaint in 12:4. In doing so, since there the full weight of the military might Yhwh can command was declared against the men of Anathoth, the rhetorical questions (12:5), which seemed a threat to Jeremiah, are revealed as containing an implicit promise. How will you stand? Through my intervention! Also by linking this threat to the men of Anathoth with the blighted land of 12:4 the representative character of these opponents is underscored.

So, now reading this section as a whole, does 11:18—12:6 lament, complain, or confess? The dominant tone is clearly complaint rather than lamentation (though note 12:4 where lament predominates), but the confessional element is strong, Jeremiah both complains to Yhwh and confesses his trust that his God will redeem him. The divine response is interestingly and strangely different in the two parts. In the first it echoes Jeremiah's request and fills out details, while the second challenges Jeremiah and ends on a warning note, revealing that the God whom Jeremiah confesses is not a puppet of his spokesman, but an agent who can act independently of his prophet's wishes!

So, this passage is not a simple lament, complaint, or confession, but rather blends these three modes of speech into a developing "story" that explores theological themes in more complex ways. The section 11:18–23 on its own is coordinated against Jeremiah's opponents in Anathoth, however the more general complaint in 12:1–4 begins to give Job-like flavor to the speech and Jeremiah presents himself as a righteous sufferer. The concluding response from Yhwh comes as a correction to his prophet as well as an implied promise. Having earlier (11:21ff.) promised an appropriate end for Jeremiah's opponents, Yhwh seems to expect Jeremiah to buckle down, get on with the job, and cease whining. As with the divine speech from the whirlwind in Job 40:6ff. this is an unsympathetic response, yet if one follows the logic of the book of Jeremiah this apparent harshness of response is necessary. For 12:7ff. provide the reasons for the response, if the narrative thread is not restricted to modern scholarship's confession/lament. Admittedly, the tradition recognized a break between

12:6 and 7, however, in the language itself there is no marker, e.g., no introductory formula or other indication that something new begins, and the speaker is presumed to be the same (Yhwh).

The next "confession," in 15:10–21, is also complex. It starts straightforwardly, in verse 10, a very brief lament that the speaker has been born and an implied complaint about the monotone nature of the message he is required to deliver, with an assertion of his righteousness in fiscal matters added this reads like a (brief) typical lament psalm. However, Yhwh's response in verses 11–14, although it perhaps at first addresses Jeremiah's complaint,[15] segues into a warning to the land and its people. As in the previous text here also the prophet and the fate of the nation are linked. Together these cues suggest that these "confessions" are not meant to be read as merely personal dialogues with God, but as part of the larger theological and political picture of the book.

After divine response, the speaker then pleads to be spared this general disaster, claiming to be a faithful messenger (vv. 15–16) and to have endured trouble and pain as a result (vv. 17–18a), indeed complaining by contrast that Yhwh has been unfaithful to him! Jeremiah then calls Yhwh a liar and compares him to "waters that fail," calling to mind the "cracked cisterns" that Judah had resorted to in 2:13. The beginning of divine reply to this diatribe might sound like a call to Judah:

> If you return, I will return you to my presence and you will stand,
> if you distinguish what is precious from what is worthless.

However, the end of the short speech contrasting "you" and "them," makes clear that it applies to Jeremiah.

Once again note that the destinies of prophet and nation intertwined. The tone of Yhwh's reply to Jeremiah's protestations seems to imply that his earlier complaints were a dereliction of duty (v. 19).

Yet verses 20–21 echo the promises of Jeremiah's call and add a promise that if he does "return" then Yhwh will strengthen him and even deliver him from his enemies (v. 20). In this case the end of the passage is clearly marked by the opening of the next which is contrastive "The word of Yhwh came to me again . . ." (16:1).

Again in terms of our three modes of speech the overall impact of the dialogue is confession, yet the rhetorical stance of the speaker is complaining! Again the interplay of speakers and attitudes is complex, and the rhetorical effect may not simply reproduce the attitude attributed by

15 However, it is interesting that NET needed to address these words to "Jerusalem."

the writer to the implied speaker of the prophet's part ("Jeremiah"). For Yhwh's words must carry more weight than those of his prophet!

The "confession" in 17:14–18 illustrates how these texts are linked to each other and also into the book as a whole. The preceding verse, ending an oracle, makes reference to Yhwh as "fountain of living waters," echoing Jeremiah's complaint of 15:18. As the passage returns to the prophet's opponents (vv. 14–15a), linking his reliability with Yhwh's (v. 15b), Jeremiah's speech here compares and contrasts the three characters "them," "me," and "you." "They" are implying that the disasters Jeremiah ("I") threatened have not happened; but Jeremiah has not requested these, he has merely spoken "rightly," indeed saying what "you" (Yhwh) required (vv. 15–16). This emphasis on speaking what was known and approved by Yhwh suggests that this speech replies to 15:19, the divine appeal in the previous "confession" for Jeremiah to return to uttering what is precious and serving as Yhwh's mouth. Verse 17 then confesses Yhwh as savior, and the next verse requests disaster for his opponents (v. 18).

The tone of confession at the start, the presence of opponents, and the implications of Jeremiah's final request suggest the mood of complaint, with no real lamenting anywhere in this text. Unlike the previous passages this is a monologue (with the partial exception of the quoted words of the opponents in verse 15).

The fourth "confession" in 18:18–23 then echoes this beginning by quoting the opponents (v. 18) and the prophet's reply to them (v. 19ff.), which follows a typical complaint/lament psalm pattern:

- verses 19–20 *appeal* to God (to listen and to notice the injustice of the opponents' actions)
- verses 21–22 request *vengeance*
- verse 23 claims this punishment is just and appeals to God not to turn a blind eye to their crimes.

This is a straightforward complaint. Thus, this is the first of these poetic passages to contain simply complaint, though still perhaps in a narrative frame. Notice the opening word in verse 18 (a *vayyiqtol* introducing quoted speech "and they said")[16] has a narrative feel, also the 3mp of this verb does not obviously refer to the preceding text, so perhaps draws the

16. This form occurs frequently in narrative books and sections, but rarely elsewhere, e.g., it occurs fourteen times in Exodus 1–19, but only eight in the rest of the book, even though the legal material there is framed by narrative.

hearer's mind to previous quotations of the prophet's opponents. Previous occurrences of the quotation formula וַיֹּאמְרוּ in Jeremiah may suggest this: there is perhaps an ironic contrast between "their" planning against Jeremiah in verse 18 and Yhwh's previously announced planning against them (18:8, 11). Other verbal links to earlier "confessions" include the only use of the verb חשׁב (plan) earlier in the book was at 11:19 in the first "confession." This passage develops the "storyline," for while in previous confessions Jeremiah claimed that he had not desired the woeful day (17:16) now he expresses this desire clearly (18:21–23). This monologue marks a further step in Jeremiah hardening his heart against Judah.

The final text, in 20:7–13, begins with a complaint, addressed to Yhwh, not about the actions of other humans, or about Yhwh's inaction, but rather that God has "seduced" his own prophet (vv. 7–8). This develops into a sort of soliloquy exploring Jeremiah's reaction to these things (v. 9) and reporting the threats from his enemies (v. 10). The final three verses sandwich a plea (v. 12) between two segments in which Jeremiah confesses Yhwh as his savior.

So, again while there is no explicit narrative frame, and perhaps by its form the piece fits the genre of lament psalm best, this very form with its expressed addressee (Yhwh) and quotation (v. 10) from the opponents, together with the hypothetical character of verse 9, make it a quasi-soliloquy with the feel of listening to the prophet talk to himself (and his God). This nudges the reader to exercise a narrative imagination.

Jeremiah's complaint that Yhwh has seduced him is doubly ironic as he goes on to quote his opponents' hope that he might be seduced (cf. 20:7, 10), but the biggest change is more subtle, at the start Jeremiah addresses Yhwh in the second person even while accusing God of seduction, but by verse 9 he uses third person, speaking about (rather than to) his God. This adds emotional power and poignancy to his confession in verse 11 and the subsequent return to second person address in 20:12.

Traditional readings close the "lament" with the third person hymn in 20:13, but the text continues in verse 14 with a return to the motif of wishing never to have been born. Since we saw this motif in 15:10 it might well make an appropriate (if discouraging) ending here.

So in the light of this, how might the composer(s) of the book have thought of these texts? If they were "complaints" then they would function differently than if they were thought of as "laments," or if they were used as "confessions." Was Jeremiah (the eponymous character in the book, not the putative sixth/fifth century person) lamenting something,

complaining to God, or confessing Yhwh to his audience in these passages?

In the light of the presentation above there is evidence in parts of these texts of each of these activities. Yet overall none of the passages really seems to fit neatly into just one of the three attitudes. Rather, each passage separately and even more all of them cumulatively seem to work best (and in most cases when each is read in their context in the book also) when read as a narrative text which portrays characters in tension. While the prophet, Jeremiah, is the primary speaker, and clearly narrates his opponents, it is less clear that "he" is narrating Yhwh. Indeed one senses that the responses of Yhwh are a challenge, and even sometimes unwelcome to "Jeremiah." In support of this I note particularly the seduction language in the last text. Thus the overall effect of the passages is not at all merely to lament or complain, but neither do they univocally confess, rather they dynamically explore the interrelationship of the three characters they present.

In view of the ways in which most of these passages are tied to their surrounding texts it seems inappropriate in fact to deal with them (as I have here) as almost isolated texts, rather perhaps they form part of a book which works in this way. Jeremiah (the book) is, in that case, closer in its poetics to Job than to a collection of "sayings." As with more obviously narrative texts the meaning is not on the surface, but in the interactions of the characters and in our responses to their "story."

These texts focus their lamenting and/or complaining primarily on the prophet and on opponents (especially the "men of Anathoth") yet even with this focus, which has been powerfully noticed by the psychologizing readers, they continually link this private personal world to the larger story of Judah and Jerusalem before their destruction by the Neo-Babylonian empire. Thus, in this larger sense, the narrated drama of Jeremiah, his opponents and his God serves to explore theological responses to this disaster, and thus serves similar functions to the lament psalms.