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Recommended Citation

Glanz, Oliver, "Serving God Across the Divide: A Lesson from Jeremiah" (2022). *Faculty Publications*. 4588.

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Serving God across the divide:

A lesson from Jeremiah

While my family and I were driving home from church one Sabbath, my daughter asked, “Daddy, was the pastor not preaching a conspiracy theory?”

“It’s very good that you listen so carefully,” I answered. “You may be correct.”

“Why go to this church if the pastor preaches conspiracy theories?” she responded.

Conflict exhaustion

In my conversations with colleagues and friends, one thing becomes clear again and again. COVID-19, politics, racism, sexual orientation debates, and the conflict in Ukraine have taken a toll on all of us. We are exhausted by the conflict, ideological warfare, and radicalization we are experiencing in society. We constantly are asked to state our views or to associate with positions we do not identify with. I am tired. Such exhaustion can lead to withdrawing, becoming silent about everything, and watching the world around us apathetically. As Adventist educators and pastors, how can we educate across the many divides we find in our schools and congregations? Perhaps Jeremiah, the great prophet and educator, could provide a biblical perspective on the challenging question before us.

A biblical perspective

Few have found themselves in such vast and varied conflict as the prophet who lived through the fall of Jerusalem. He saw at least three types of conflict:

- *Conflict of social hierarchies* in which the elite of the aristocracy economically and legally exploited the mass of the socially disadvantaged (Jer. 7, etc.). In several passages, Jeremiah presents prophetic oracles that could make him sound like a Marxist today (Jer. 2:34, 35; 5:4, 5a; 10 [religious critique]; 22:13–19). But

then, he appears again with oracles that condemn the proletariat and its morals, equating them with the corruption of the power elites (e.g., Jer. 5:4, 5; 40–43¹).

- *Ethnic conflicts* in which envy, jealousy, and xenophobia were palpable daily. The masses of refugees that had come decades earlier from the fallen northern empire to Jerusalem and the south were not well integrated. The “natives,” who themselves had long ago arrived as strangers, regarded the refugees as a threat to the job market.²
- *Geopolitical conflicts* between the pro-Egyptian and pro-Babylonian politicians. While King Josiah was pro-Babylonian, King Jehoiakim was pro-Egyptian. Although Jehoiachin surrenders to the Babylonians, his uncle Zedekiah fights until the end. Such conflicts echo those we encounter daily in the media. Jeremiah, however, always positioned himself clearly: Babylon would win the struggle between the great powers.

Did Jeremiah’s position make him a liberal who questioned the eternal covenant of God with the Davidic throne? The religious elite and leading politicians thought so and wanted the death penalty for him because of treason and being a religious heretic.

But is Jeremiah a supporter of the pro-Babylonian party? When Nebuchadnezzar conquers the city and seeks to honor the prophet, he declines. He

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wants to stay with the left-behind Judeans despite all the suffering, hatred, and misunderstanding he has received from them (Jer. 39:11–14; 40:4–6). Clearly, Jeremiah is not a party member of the pro-Babylonians!

The prophet takes clear positions while not fitting into any political pigeonhole or into any social-critical theory. Jeremiah waves none of the popular banners but criticizes each flag or keeps quiet about them to avoid further damage.

But while the prophet deconstructs, he also has a clear ethical compass.

He both disappoints all expectations and exceeds them at the same time. No religious-political alliances can be forged with him. His language reveals that he is a Deuteronomist and under Deuteronomy's influence like no other prophet.

Personal versus professional

Jeremiah's friend King Josiah was known for his major religious reform in the kingdom of Judah. The king and the prophet advocate the same theology, and both strive for spiritual reformation among the people. But despite such similarities, nowhere does the book of Jeremiah mention that the prophet ever collaborated with Josiah. For all the similarities, the book knows nothing of the prophet's political or religious support of the king.³ Why?

Josiah combines his religious reformation with political reformation. He accompanied his call to return to God with a desire to reestablish the old borders of the Davidic kingdom. His spiritual reformation was also part of his political ambition: restoring, through prayer and the sword, God's everlasting covenant with David. That is precisely why Jeremiah will never be found on a political campaign bus with Josiah. He carries out his prophetic office as if the king did not exist. Privately, however, he remains a friend. On a personal level, he

values the king, even if he cannot in any way support him in his mingling of faith and power. At Josiah's tomb, Jeremiah weeps for the loss of his good friend (2 Chron. 35:25).

To learn at the feet of Jeremiah is to discover that social-critical theory, popular categories, political parties, and social media culture often only lead to polarization and violence.

Overcoming

What is needed is an overcoming of antithetical tensions. But where does the spirit that makes such overcoming possible derive from? It originates in the ethos of prophecy. Only in the radical love for God first and then for the individual human being, whether it is the church, nation, or fellow human, can arise the possibility—beyond any theory and political attitude—of seeing the fear, longing, and life situations of others and then connecting with them. Precisely here is the essence of the school of the prophets. Jeremiah lives it. The prophet is never just only on the side of God (e.g., Jer. 12:1–3), and he is never only committed to the truth (Jer. 17:16).

In the end, a true prophet stands up for his people. Like Moses, he continues to intercede for them even after God declares that there is no hope for them anymore. He remains the advocate of his people despite their unruliness, being corrupt, fragmented, narrow-minded, and self-absorbed. Like God Himself, he seeks to intercede, save, and bring together.

Dogged determination

And so, Jeremiah finds himself threatened with death by the godless rulers of religious categories and political positions (e.g., Jer. 37ff.). And on the other side, God, recognizing the futility of Jeremiah's intercessory prayer, requests him three times to finally stop interceding for his people (Jer. 7:16; 11:14; 14:11). But Jeremiah will not. According to tradition, Jeremiah is the author of Lamentations, in which he will continue to weep and plead for his people even after they have been sent into the divine judgment of exile.

Such prophetic ethos is, on its most foundational level, free from any loyalty to human political parties, religious institutions, or national myths. The prophetic ministry is driven by an almost impossible sympathy for God and people.

You will probably think to yourself, *Did Jeremiah ever manage to achieve national unity, social justice, and religious-ideological peace?* Unfortunately, we find no record of it in Scripture. Tradition tells us

that he was stoned to death in Egypt by his own countrymen.⁴ He may not have belonged to any party, but all parties certainly hated him!

Positive teachings

Jeremiah's life also had its positive fruits. As a prophet and good educator, he not only was a master of deconstruction but also had a clear vision of what God sought to do by his presentation of the "new covenant" (Jer. 31:31). Yet, sadly, only with Jesus did Jeremiah's nonpartisan outlook become discussable, thinkable, and experienceable (cf. 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24).

When Jeremiah teaches how to find national healing and restore Judah's unity, he emphasizes that such healing can occur only when we do not focus on rebuilding the Davidic throne or Solomonic temple. In fact, he claims that such political and religious institutions contributed to Judah's fragmentation and led to toxic myths of national and religious identity (cf. the temple sermon in Jer. 7 [v. 4]). Consequently, the prophet shows how attempts at religious reforms sadly coincided with moral decline (e.g., Jer. 34:8–11).

In his vision of educating across the divide, he sees a fascinating, enormous building project that we can all become part of. In his book of consolation (Jer. 30–33), in which we find the "new covenant" text (Jer. 31:31), he uses the word "to build" (בנה) more than any other prophet. But nowhere will we find physical buildings, palaces, temples, city walls, or streets being rebuilt by God. Instead, Jeremiah's vision only knows of the rebuilding of people, the rebuilding of families, and the rebuilding of men and women (Jer. 31:4, 28; 33:7).⁵ People are in focus, not institutions. Of course, organized communities have their justification, but that is secondary to the purpose of Jeremiah's education across the divide.

Application

Although Adventist educators and pastors might see their mission as a possible deathtrap, it is really a summons to service and sacrifice, a call to be just like Jesus. Our loyalty belongs to Jesus and the individuals we teach and engage in our sanctuaries and classrooms. When our passion and sympathy are not ultimately driven by loyalties toward hierarchies of powers, paychecks, and church politics but by loyalty only to God and the individuals we are to serve as teachers and pastors, we will find ourselves nearly torn apart—our life dangerously stretched thin between heaven and Earth. But it is only by such thin threads

that the fabric of restoration is woven. Jeremiah's education across the divide was ultimately not a deathtrap but the seed by which the healing of fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, peoples and nations found their beginnings.

Returning to my daughter's question, I told her, "You observed well. Always be discerning

regarding what your teachers, your pastors, and even your parents say."

"So why do we stay?" she asked. "Isn't it dangerous?"

"It's our family. And because we decided that this is our family, let us hope they will be kind to us when we are wrong."



- 1 In these chapters, we see that the Judean remnant, consisting mostly of the "poor" (cf. Jer. 40:7; 52:16), were as unfaithful, immoral, and unjust as the aristocracy that was exiled. A low social status does not make one less immoral than someone from a strong socioeconomic status. The only difference is that immorality gets realized according to the conditions in which one finds oneself. After the fall of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah, the narrator regularly mentions specific social classes that were involved in the rejection of Jeremiah's prophecy ("princes and all the people," Jer. 42:1, 8; 43:4). Both the "princes/leaders" (שָׂרֵי), composing the aristocracy, and "all the people" (כָּל-הָעָם), representing the poor and uneducated, are accused of being rebellious (Jer. 43:4–7).
- 2 Several scholars have argued that the theology of *ger* (Hebrew for "foreigner") was particularly highlighted and developed in the aftermath of the fall of Samaria, when multitudes of refugees entered Judah and Jerusalem. A good overview of the discussion on the topic of the OT "foreigner" (*ger*) appears in Hans-Georg Wuench, "The Stranger in God's Land—Foreigner, Stranger, Guest: What Can We Learn From Israel's Attitude Towards Strangers?" *Old Testament Essays* 27, no. 3 (2014): 1129–1154. See also Georg Steins, "Fremde

sind wir ...' Zur Wahrnehmung des Fremdseins und zur Sorge für die Fremden in alttestamentlicher Perspektive," *Jahrbuch für Christliche Sozialwissenschaften* 35 (1994): 133–150.

- 3 For a good summary of the scholarly debate about Jeremiah's silence on Josiah's reform, see Siegfried Herrmann, *Jeremia: Der Prophet und das Buch*, *Erträge der Forschung* 271 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1990).
- 4 In the traditions that informed the work of Tertullian (*Adversus Gnosticos*, chap. 8, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 2, col. 137) and Jerome (*Adversus Jovinianum*, 2:37, *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 23, col. 335), Jeremiah was stoned. Pseudo-Epiphanius (*De vitis Prophetarum*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 43, col. 400) and Isidorius Hispalensis (*De Ortu et Obitu Patrum*, chap. 38, in *Patrologia Latina*, vol. 83, col. 142) go as far as to locate the stoning at Egypt's Tahpanhes.
- 5 While the word "to build" (בָּנָה) also appears in Jeremiah 30:18 and Jeremiah 31:38 with the city as the object of building, the verbal forms appear in passive (nifal) and do not have YHWH as logical subject. Where YHWH appears as subject of בָּנָה He always and only builds people—not buildings.

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