

“They Have Made My Pleasant Portion a Wilderness”: The Prophetic Task of Shared Suffering in Jeremiah 11–12

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Abstract

The personification of the land mourning as a result of Judah’s unfaithfulness to their covenant with Yahweh is attested to in Jeremiah 11–12. In this first confession the prophet’s own lament portrays that of the land itself. The land shares with Judah the role of Yahweh’s “inheritance” or “heritage” and is portrayed in terms drawn from Judah’s covenant theology. The prophet does not simply personify the land but draws on an underlying understanding of the land as full covenant partner. In this context the exile serves to call both Judah and, through her, the nations back to covenant fidelity with both Yahweh and the land.

Keywords: Confessions; Jeremiah; lament; land; covenant; nations

Land and Torah Partnership

Abraham Heschel re-envisioned the prophetic task as not simply reporting a divine message, but as fully embodying that message by first sharing in and then expressing divine suffering resulting from Israel’s failure to keep the covenant.

An analysis of prophetic utterances shows that the fundamental experience of the prophet is fellowship with the feelings of God, a *sympathy with the divine pathos*, a communion with the divine consciousness which comes about through the prophet’s reflection of, or participation in, the divine pathos. (Heschel 2001, 31; original emphasis)

Exilic prophets, then, were charged with communicating not just the mind of God, but the heart of a God who was both committed to a relationship with Israel and who experienced profound suffering at the betrayal of that relationship. Jeremiah had the

ministry of sharing God's suffering and, as will be discussed below, his own expressions of suffering in the "Confessions" should not be seen simply as a personal aside (Cunliffe-Jones 1960, 105), but are integral to the prophetic message just as, for example, the sign acts that Ezekiel suffered, though often silently, provided the content of the prophetic word.

In considering the inability of Israel to fulfil her place in the Torah covenant community, Norman Habel argues for a broader covenant association that includes not simply Yahweh and the people of Israel, but also the land itself as a third partner in the relationship. He maintains that "the ideology of the book of Jeremiah promotes what might best be described as a symbiotic relationship between YHWH, his land, and his people" (Habel 1992, 14). Habel points out that both the land and the people are referred to as Yahweh's "inheritance" (*nahalah*) and that a prominent metaphor for the people is that of a vineyard planted in the good land, suggesting a close relationship between Israel and the land in their covenant with God. "Jeremiah's varied employment of this concept of the inalienable 'inheritance,'" Esther Menn suggests, "weaves YHWH, land, and people into a single fabric" (Menn 1992, 166). This observation carries with it the implication that the prophetic role is not limited simply to embracing and imparting God's experience of the fractured covenant relationship with Israel, but that that role also extends to the land, and that the land is seen by the prophet as more than simply a possession or inanimate benefit of that relationship, but as participating in some sense in it.

The land is more than simply a metaphor for blessing or a seal of the covenant but is personified as a victim of the people's sinfulness. "The real crime of which Israel here stands accused", Habel maintains,

is not first and foremost breach of covenant (cf 11:1-8) but the pollution of sacred land ... The polluted land is not merely some defiled object which can be discarded. Rather, the land is a victim who suffers as a result of the crime and punishment of Judah. The land is personified, not as a goddess or Mother Earth, but as a kind of personal extension of YHWH her lord. (Habel 1992, 16, 19)

This leads him to conclude that the prophet's task is not just to embody divine pathos, but also that of the land.

The prophet then explodes with anguish, almost as if he were YHWH himself suffering the devastation of his land: (4:19-20) The overwhelming pain of God's prophet is not focused on the fate of the "foolish" people who have provoked this disaster, but on the precious land of YHWH which suffers such ugly devastation. (Habel 1992, 20)

Jeremiah, then, represents both God's pathos and that of the land, because both have suffered as a direct result of the failure of the third partner in the triad.

Terence Fretheim emphasises God's relatedness to his creation and points out that the biblical text suggests an affiliation between God and the land distinct from his relationship with humanity or with Israel, so that God's involvement with and commitment to the land cannot be seen as derivative to the divine-human relationship.

Moreover, that the desolate land mourns *to* God (12:11; see also 4:28; 23:10; Joel 1:10,20) demonstrates that it has a relationship with God that is independent of God's relationship with the human (see Job 38-41; Pss 104:21,27; 145:15-16; 147-148). That God in turn addresses the land (16:19; see 22:29) also is evidence that such an independent relationship exists. (Fretheim 2000, 99)

The land, then, is not understood to be a possession provided for human use and abuse, but is rather a subject in relationship with God, a relationship that overlaps with, but is not simply subsumed under the divine-human affinity. As the result of Israel's sin and because the land is connected to both God and Israel, sharing in their relationship, Fretheim argues for a vocation given to the land by God, a "calling to suffer" as the result of Israel's unfaithfulness. The prophet's own laments, then, are joined to and are representative of not simply divine suffering at the hands of a faithless partner, but also of the suffering that creation herself experiences as the result of human sin.

In this reading, Jeremiah's personal situation is seen as part and parcel of the situation faced also by the land. Both mourn because of the fruits of the wicked. The mourning of the land in Jeremiah provides evidence for the principle of voice in this text; the earth, depicted as subject, mourns in Jeremiah. (Fretheim 2000, 104)

The personal laments of the prophet, far from interrupting or providing an aside to the prophet's "main message", join with and give voice to the suffering both of God and the land at Israel's hand.

Fretheim suggests, though, a degree of tension in Jeremiah's role as the prophet who also at times identifies with the land over against Yahweh, to the extent that the prophet's confessions press the theodicy question: "In essence, Jeremiah's charge is this: what kind of divine justice is evident here, that the wicked can have such effects on the land and apparently get away with it?" (Fretheim 2002, 193). Jeremiah's role is thus a complex one and his confessions embody the pathos experienced both by God and by Israel's partner, her "co-inheritance", by the land that is the embodiment of the people's covenant relationship with Yahweh. As such, land and prophet share Yahweh's pain and rejection. But that suffering is prolonged for all by Yahweh's unwillingness to dissolve the covenant and remove Israel from the land.

Giving the Land Back Her Voice

Central to the personification of the land in Jeremiah's first lament is the reference to the land mourning in 12:4. Frequently, commentators have viewed the characterisation of the land "mourning", though, to be little more than a metaphor for a natural or man-made disaster that befalls it. William Holladay, for example, notes that while the verb *'abal* can be translated either "to mourn" or "to be or become dry", its parallel relationship with *yabesh*, "to wither", in Jeremiah 12:4 requires the latter understanding (Holladay 1986, 378). The expression the "land mourns" is often reduced by commentators to little more than a metaphor for a drought (Brueggemann 1988, 113; Allen 2008, 149) and/or for the devastation resulting from military invasion (Carroll 1986, 286; Fretheim 2002, 194). The emphasis is placed on the physical condition of the land with little regard to the land's response to the forces that brought it to that state. But Fretheim also recognises that the metaphorical use of the term in 12:4 does not exhaust its meaning, so that Jeremiah can be understood to appropriate both senses of the term, that is, both that the land is devastated and that it voices the anguish that results from that devastation:

The translations of v. 4a vary in view of the fact that the same verbal root may mean both "mourn" and "dry up" (see Isa 24:4). But "mourn" is the usual focus of the verbal root and it clearly has that meaning with land as subject in 4:28, where it is parallel with the verb "grow black" (see Joel 1:9–10). Probably both meanings are in view. The verb may pertain concretely to drought and desertification (see the parallel with "wither," also in 23:10). Yet, that reference does not sufficiently attend to the land as a genuine subject in a larger lament-filled context. The land mourns not only because it is drying up, but also because it has been polluted by Israel's infidelities, devastated by foreign invasions, and forsaken by God. (Fretheim 2002, 194)

To assume that the writer of Jeremiah understood the verbalisation of the land's grief as nothing more than a poetic expression for the desiccated condition of an inanimate object is to take as a given the belief that the author shares with the modern reader elements of an Enlightenment worldview. And such an assumption downplays or misses altogether the people's responsibility and culpability for the condition of the land. The land is seen in Jeremiah not simply as a resource that has been poorly managed, but rather a partner in the nation's prosperity and health that has been betrayed.

Katherine Hayes has offered a close study of the voice given to the land's suffering by the prophets. She examines nine prophetic passages that speak of the earth "mourning" (Amos 1:2; Hos 4:1–3; Jer 4:23–28; 12:1–4, 7–13; 23:9–12; Isa 24:1–20; 33:7–9; and Joel 1:5–20). She concludes that there are enough similarities in phraseology, imagery, and theme between these to suggest an underlying tradition from which the prophets draw in adopting that image (Hayes 2002, 221). Hayes argues that the tradition in question is an expression of creation theology:

The interplay of human, natural, and divine personae presented in the nine prophetic passages image the relationship between God, human beings, and the earth in the accounts of the origins of the cosmos and of human life in Gen 1–11. The nine passages thus exhibit in skeletal form the broad schema of creation and decreation developed in detail in the narratives that make up the primeval history. (Hayes 2002, 242)

Menn sees a similar connection in Jeremiah’s prophetic portrayal of the land’s lament with the broader creation tradition, pointing to “Jeremiah’s portrayal of a return to primordial chaos, as God’s word of judgment reverses the creative word in the beginning, rendering the land once again ‘formless and void’ (4:23–28)” (Menn 2006, 168).

While links to creation and its reversal predominate in some portions of Jeremiah’s prophecy, such as chapter 4, supporting Hayes and Menn’s contention, in his first confession this association is replaced by a focus on the covenant relationship. In the present study I will consider links to covenant theology and I will argue that Jeremiah understands the land to be in covenant partnership with Yahweh and the people, and as such the land is both a participant in covenant and is impacted by Judah’s failure to adhere to the terms of that covenant. The desolation of the land, a central theme in Jeremiah 12, is not simply a punishment imposed by Yahweh, but is “created” by the people in much the same way that infidelity creates barrenness in the marriage relationship.

The writer of Jeremiah sees the land not as object, but as subject. He has, from the perspective of the modern reader, a re-sacralised understanding of the created world, not as a divine being alongside Yahweh, nor yet as a created and inanimate object, but, like the people of Israel, as one with whom the creator has relationship and with whom he shares experiences of suffering and loss.¹ In this broader understanding and application of the prophet’s account of the land’s pathos, her “mourning” is not simply an anthropomorphism, but is a clear expression of the land as a subject in relationship with its creator, so that both Israel and the land are Yahweh’s peculiar possession, his inheritance. This prophetic understanding of the land in relationship with God and as sharing his experience of covenant with his people suggests not simply a different understanding of Israel’s creation theology, but also, I would argue, of her covenant theology. Put differently, the prophetic tradition draws on an understanding of the land not merely as a seal and sign of God’s promise to Abram, but as a full partner in the

¹ “The land”, says Habel, “responds to the way it is treated as if it were a highly sensitive partner of both YHWH and Israel ... The anguish of the land is one with that of YHWH and Jeremiah. The land is not a passive object but an active partner living in close relationship with the people who dwell on this soil” (Habel 1995, 148).

Torah community created at Sinai. Land and people are united in covenant community with their creator.

Israel is never just “given” the land, as though it were merely a commodity (Lev 25:23), but they are to dwell in and with it as “aliens and tenants”. Nor is the land a dead object but a living and life-giving partner, “a land flowing with milk and honey”. As such the land’s life is tied to the people and that life can either flourish or diminish as a result of that relationship. As William Holladay notes, “[i]t is ironic that Yahweh originally brought the people out of a desert that had no inhabitants (2:6) into a land they could inhabit, but now, because of the evil of those inhabitants, the land is turned into a desert” (Holladay 1986, 379). The fate of land and people are bound together in covenant relatedness.

In the brief examination of Jeremiah 11–12 that follows, I will consider indications that Jeremiah understood the land to suffer not simply as the result of being in a non-specified “symbiotic relationship” with God and the people of Israel, but more particularly that the prophet understood the land to be in covenant partnership with Yahweh and the people. Thus, the promise made to Abram was for the blessing and prospering of various living communities: of descendants, of nations, and of the land. And Israel was not given the land as an object, but joined to it as a subject, as a covenant partner. As such, their covenant fidelity and infidelity impact the community as a whole. In the covenant community established at Sinai between Yahweh, the people, and the land, each partner affects and is affected by the others. The sins of the people diminish and bring suffering to the lives of all three covenant partners.

Jeremiah 11–12: The Land as Covenant Partner

Jeremiah 11–12 contains the first of Jeremiah’s confessions in which he takes up the lament of offended covenant partners. Yahweh laments elsewhere (4:19–21; 8:18–9:3; cf. 14:17–18) and that lament is linked with and on behalf of the land, as well as, at times, the people (4:23–28; 9:10–11,17–22).² Here, though, in Jeremiah’s first “confession”, it is the lament of the land rather than divine lament or that of the people that the prophet inhabits.

The controlling theme of Jeremiah’s oracle in chapters 11 and 12 is the covenant at Sinai.³ The people have failed to attend to the “words of this

² Though, as Fretheim correctly points out, the divine and prophetic voices are not always clearly distinguished: “Hence Jeremiah 12 – as is common elsewhere in Jeremiah (e.g. 8.18–9.3) – makes little effort to distinguish between the prophet’s words and God’s words (explicit only in 12.14); their voices tend to “bleed” into one another” (Fretheim 2000, 98).

³ Robert Murray has argued for traces of a “cosmic covenant” in the Hebrew Bible that, he argues, is maintained through the practice of cultic rituals. He does acknowledge, though, what he understands

covenant” (11:2, 3, 6, 8, 10), to “my words” (11:10), and to “the ways of my people” (12:16).⁴ Hillary Marlow has demonstrated that for Jeremiah in particular the terms of the covenant describe the place of humans and nature alike in that covenant: “Our close study of the texts suggests that both are true – God’s law is commanded at Sinai *and* written into the fabric of creation” (Marlow 2013, 660). Additionally, in this oracle the prophet is no longer taking up and sharing in the lament of the people of Judah, for “though they cry out to me, I will not listen to them” (11:11), says the Lord who then instructs the prophet, “As for you, do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble” (11:14). The focus, then, of Jeremiah’s first confession is a sharing of neither divine nor human suffering, but of that of the land.

Jeremiah uses language of being bound to the prosperity of the land in describing Judah’s lack of covenant faithfulness. As a term of the covenant they are given “a land flowing with milk and honey” (11:5). Jeremiah’s personification of the land, though, suggests more of a relational understanding of this gift, not as a commodity or possession, but more akin to the “giving” of a wife. In addition, Yahweh describes the fixing of his covenant relationship with the people with terms that tie them to the land. They are “a green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit” that the Lord “planted” (11:16–17; see Habel 1992, 15). But they sought the key to the fertility of the land and their own fertility elsewhere, outside of their covenant with Yahweh, “going after other gods”, “crying out to them” instead of to their covenant partner, and “making offerings to Baal” (11:10–13), with the result that their unfaithfulness to Yahweh was also a lack of fidelity to the land itself, which suffered as a result of that betrayal.

For Jeremiah, worshipping other gods is described in terms of sexual infidelity that pollutes not Yahweh, but the land herself: “God says, ‘If a husband divorces his wife and she goes from him and belongs to another man, will he still return to her? Will not that land be completely polluted? But you are a harlot with many lovers; Yet you turn

to be a late Deuteronomistic revision intended “to direct post-exilic Judaism towards a more person-centered and voluntaristic ethical system” (Murray 2007, 48). While it may be the case, as Murray argues, that the residue of an older emphasis on ritual and cultic maintenance may still be found in the Jeremiah’s understanding of covenant, the clear emphasis in chapter 12 is on the social ramifications of the Sinai covenant, maintained by the practice of justice as much as by that of ritual purity. Robert Carroll supports this latter view, arguing that the entire cycle of material in 11:1–13:27 presents Jeremiah as a “preacher of the covenant” (Carroll 1986, 267, 271).

⁴ Ronald Clements has suggested that this passage marks the end of the covenant and Jeremiah’s role as its mediator: “To this extent Jeremiah now appeared to stand outside all the covenant possibilities and to be the spokesman of a new and previously unforeseen situation” (Clements 1988, 79). This does not, however, give sufficient attention to the theme of Israel’s restoration to the land and the implied revitalisation of the Abrahamic promise and the Sinaitic covenant envisioned by the prophet (Jer 29:10). Jeremiah is called to “pluck up”, but also to “plant”, and the nation’s place in their own land is tied to their willingness to “diligently learn the ways of my people” (Jer 12:16).

to Me,' declares the LORD" (Jer 3:1; all quotations are from the *NRSV*. Cf. 2:7; 3:2, 9; 16:8; 23:10). In Jeremiah 2 in particular, Yahweh remembers Israel's devotion and love during their courtship, "how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (2:2). It was only once Israel consummated the marriage in a fertile land, though, that she played the harlot: "I brought you into a plentiful land to eat its fruits and its good things. But when you entered you defiled my land, and made my heritage an abomination" (2:7). The land is described by Jeremiah not as a possession given or even loaned, but rather as one betrothed to Israel, as though the people were married to, rather than simply possessing or administering, her. The tendency toward desacralising and objectifying land may reflect cultural assumptions, indeed a worldview, that are neither universal nor representative of the culture in which Jeremiah's prophecies were offered and preserved. Tembra Mafico, for example, asserts that the African understanding of the place of land in God's creation and in his relationship to people comes closer to that held by ancient Israel than does the Western understanding of land as possession: "The land was a divine gift given to a particular people to treasure it. To Africans and to the ancient Israelites, land was regarded as a woman who was like a mother" (Mafico 2011, 62). Thus, the concept of the gift of land in the promise made to Abram and the description of the land mourning in exilic prophecies can be understood in terms other than those of transaction and metaphor.

Just like Yahweh and the prophet, the land has become a victim of Judah's harlotry. "In this respect, the land is like the people; but it is even more like God. The land is like God: land and God do not deserve what has happened to them. The land shares with God the status of 'prey.' Land and God are also alike in that both mourn" (Fretheim 2000, 108). In sharing the fate of Yahweh who has been made a cuckold, the land shows herself to share fully in the covenant commitment to Israel.

As a result of the people's attempt to circumvent their obligation to Yahweh, the giver of covenant and the one who planted Israel, joining her to the land, Jeremiah has been given the calling "to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant". Israel's relationship with Yahweh, then, is expressed in terms of their dependence upon the land in which they were planted. The continued life of the nation is manifested directly through its connection with the land. As Habel has pointed out, both the people and the land are thought of as Yahweh's *nahalalah*, his inheritance, and so it is in Jeremiah 12 (Habel 1995, 33–35). God will forsake and abandon his inheritance, the people (12:7–8), and bring them again to that inheritance, the land, (12:14–15). Though they wander and are unfaithful, yet the people are not finally severed from either Yahweh or the land.⁵

⁵ Menn has pointed out that in Jeremiah's prophecy, Israel's temporary estrangement from the land as the result of her sin results in Yahweh also being temporarily homeless, sharing with the people the

Justice and wickedness, fidelity and betrayal are also expressed in terms of being bound to the health and productivity of the land. The people see Jeremiah's ministry in terms of its grounding.

Let us destroy the tree with its fruit

let us cut him off from the land of the living,

so that his name will no longer be remembered. (11:19)

The wicked themselves, even though they have been planted in a good land, a land "flowing with milk and honey", have nevertheless produced worthless fruit (an image that the prophet again takes up and develops more fully in chapter 24).

You plant them, and they take root;

they grow and bring forth fruit;

you are near in their mouths

yet far from their hearts. (12:2)

Covenant fidelity and faithlessness, then, are envisioned in terms of one's connectedness to the land. Both the prophet and the people are in a relationship with Yahweh and the land, but their fidelity to that relationship determines the fruitfulness that may be drawn from both.

Chapter 12 ends by addressing the enemies of Israel, those who have violated her marriage to the land, touching her *nahalah*, her inheritance. Yahweh will pluck up both the evil neighbour and Judah from among them in order to restore each to her own inheritance, "and after I have plucked them up, I will again have compassion on them, and I will bring them again to their heritage (*nahalah*) and to their land, every one of them" (v. 15). And the terms of this restoration, each to their own land and inheritance, is for everyone to "diligently learn the ways of my people", that is, to learn and observe the terms of the covenant. Land theology in Jeremiah, then, rests not exclusively or even primarily on an underlying creation theology, but rather on a theology of covenant

fruits of their infidelity that has threatened to dissolve the covenant between deity, people, and land: "In what had once been the most familiar and beloved of all places, the deity becomes a transient, wandering throughout the terrain 'like a stranger in the land, like a traveler turning aside for the night' (14:8)" (Menn 2006, 169). "Among Jeremiah's many portraits of divine suffering over the separation of people and land, his fleeting depiction of YHWH as a homeless wanderer, seeking nothing more than a place to rest for the night (14:8), lingers in memory. God does not ignore the refugee but joins their ranks by becoming one" (Menn 2006, 177).

relationship. For those who refuse Yahweh's teachings, though, the divorce from their land becomes final: "But if any nation will not listen, then I will completely uproot it and destroy it, says the LORD" (v. 17). By the end of the chapter, Israel's covenant marriage to Yahweh and to the land is thrown open to the nations, completing the promise made to Abram in Genesis 12 that his descendants would be given the land and that that blessing would extend to the nations.

Concluding Observations

In the context of his first confession, Jeremiah focuses on the suffering of the land resulting from Israel's betrayal. A number of observations can be made with regard to the prophet's understanding of land theology.

First, Jeremiah extends to the land the same ministry of shared suffering that he takes up on Yahweh's behalf. The wicked seek to destroy his connection to the land, to exclude his symbolic assertion that their actions have, in fact, polluted their marriage to the land. The prophet gives voice to a land shamed and defiled by her partner.

Second, while an underlying concept of a creation covenant may still be suggested in the text, the dominant imagery is provided by the covenant at Sinai, the fulfilment of Yahweh's promise to betroth to Israel a fertile partner. Thus, the claim made on Israel to love and care for the land in which they are planted is part of the very fabric of the Sinai covenant.

Third, the practice of desacralising and objectifying the land has led to a fundamental misunderstanding of the Abrahamic promise. The land is not a material commodity, a bestowal of wealth to be possessed, a wedding gift, but is rather a relationship that God shares with Israel. He created the land and, just as with Israel, speaks of it as his inheritance. The promise of land is thus an invitation to share in that which Yahweh cares for, cherishes, and will defend, a gift more aptly understood as betrothal than ownership.

Finally, this way of understanding God's gift of land is extended to the nations as their ability to maintain their own relationship to their inheritance is predicated on their adherence to the terms of the covenant, their keeping of Torah. Exile and the loss of land, which has the potential to become permanent, can be seen as a return to the courtship stage of the relationship, a plucking up with the prospect of being once more planted in the land that is each nation's inheritance. The desolation of the land through misuse holds for the nations both the warning of ultimate loss and the promise of renewal and restoration. Thus, the promise made to Abram is one of betrothal to the land that extends to the nations. Israel has "made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness", but the seeds of renewal yet remain. It is not too late for Israel and for the

nations to come to their senses, to heed the word of the Lord, and to be given once more a land restored to fertility, flowing with milk and honey.

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