

Jeremiah: A Change Of Heart
An Exegesis of Jeremiah 12:5

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Introduction

As a young girl, I loved Sundays. They were the day for playing hide and seek in the fellowship room, eating snacks in my dad's pastoral office and singing energetically on stage. Although my Christian upbringing created a safe haven for me to grow up, it did little to prepare me for the pain and suffering, the questions and challenges I would face as a teenager. Knowing only a God who put rainbows in the sky and split seas, I was at a loss for how to process my intellectual questions and emotional burdens when I entered adult life. It would be years before I learned that God not only welcomed my questions, he could use them.

The prophet Jeremiah gives us an example of how God raises up people to face challenging times.¹ Jeremiah lived through one of the most tumultuous times in Israel's history and witnessed the reign of Judah's last kings. He was called to be God's prophet to this disobedient nation from a young age. He was reluctant to answer the call, citing his lack of skill and age, but God insisted and promised to "rescue" Jeremiah (Jer 1:8). From the beginning, Jeremiah knew this would be a difficult job, one that seemed to require more courage than he possessed. The book of Jeremiah is unique in that it reveals much about his personal relationship to God, through the inclusion of personal "confessions," which play a key role in our understanding of the book's message. Jeremiah 12:5 conveys an exchange between God and Jeremiah that reveals how God desires to shape his people through an ongoing process of preparation, guidance, coaching and challenging.

By conducting a thorough exegesis of Jeremiah 12:5 and examining its message in relationship in Old Testament theology, it is evident that God not only challenges his people to live by a different, higher standard, but he takes an active role in the transformation of his

¹ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 403.

people. This paper intends to demonstrate how God used Jeremiah to communicate the power of maintaining a personal, sovereign relationship with himself. The paper has three parts: part one will observe the relevant literary details of the pericope; part two will look at Jeremiah's life and relationship to God through narrative analysis; part three will draw out its biblical-theological significance and the role of lament in understanding this passage.

I. Literary Context & Analysis:

By studying the literary form of Jeremiah 12 and the rhetoric of our pericope, one can discern the impact and message of the text. On the surface, Jeremiah 12:1-13 appears to be a conversational exchange between a prophet and God, but exegesis reveals that much more: how God shapes Jeremiah through their personal relationship. La Sor, Hubbard and Bush point out that no other Old Testament prophet used a greater variety of literary forms or showed more artistic skill than Jeremiah.² Compared to other prophets he used literary patterns that were familiar to his listeners, but allowed for it to be heard with fresh ears.

A. The Form of Jeremiah 12: Poetry

The exchange between Jeremiah and God in 12:1-13 occurs in poetic form, so the meaning of the passage must be filtered through the structure and style of Hebrew poetry. 12:1-13 follow the Hebrew poetic form of parallelism, which involves a restatement in the second line of a couplet about what was already expressed in the first line, to balance out or expand on the thought of the previous point.³ Emblematic parallelism occurs when one line is meant to be interpreted literally but the second parallel is interpreted figuratively.⁴ The latter half

² La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, 418.

³ Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 299.

⁴ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 308.

of verse twelve (12:5b) can be said to be emblematic parallelism as the speaker, God, uses land as an analogy for hardship and struggle.

A literary analysis of the two couplets of poetry reveals a classic repetition with a significant omission. By looking at the NKJV translation, and using letters to highlight syntactical elements, a distinct pattern reveals itself. Though there is slight variation in the second couplet, quite common in Hebrew poetry, the general structure is the same.

“If you have run with the footmen, and they have wearied you,
 A B C
 Then how can you contend with horses?
 A B
 And if in the land of peace, In which you trusted, they wearied you,
 B A C
 Then how will you do in the floodplain of the Jordan? (NKJV)
 A B

Distilled into its distinct grammatical elements, a pattern is revealed:

Subject with verb + prepositional phrase = result	A + B = C
Subject with verb + prepositional phrase = ?	A + B = ?
Prepositional phrase + Subject with verb = result	B + A = C
Subject with verb + prepositional phrase = ?	A + B = ?

The result, “C”, was what happened to Jeremiah when he took the course of action in “A”. In both lines 1 and 3, Jeremiah is worn out, wearied or tired. Though different translations use different words, the concept conveyed in the “result” is the same: Jeremiah loses. In the second line of each couplet, the “C” element is missing, and the line is framed in the interrogative, not indicative. By examining the underlying structure, it’s clear that God left a space for Jeremiah to fill in the answer himself in lines 2 and 4. Deeper meaning is revealed in this when we look at Jeremiah’s use of rhetorical questions as a literary device

B. Literary Devices: Rhetorical Questions

Rhetorical questions were one of Jeremiah's favourite devices.⁵ In his reprimands to the people of Israel, he regularly posed questions where the answer should be obvious (2:32; 3:1; 18:14; 49:1).⁶ This literary device was used as “a method of entrapment” so that “these questions cause the hearers to condemn themselves.”⁷ By giving or alluding to the obvious answer, the hearer is forced to acknowledge that they have deliberately not behaved appropriately.

It's notable, then, that God responds to Jeremiah's lament with a rhetorical question. Jeremiah would have been forced to fill in the “result” in lines 2 and lines 4 of 12:5. In the first line, God shows him, A+ B has led you to C (being worn out), so what do you think A + B is going to lead you to next time? Jeremiah would have seen that if he doesn't want C, if he doesn't want to be worn out by his enemies again, he must change A + B. He must stop comparing himself to his peers and trying to compete with them. He must stop aligning himself with the world standards and use God's standards. He knows the obvious answer, yet he has acted in just the opposite manner. Upon hearing God's response to his personal complaints, Jeremiah likely would have felt convicted. God's questions opened the door for Jeremiah to rise to the challenge. The rest of the book of Jeremiah reveals how Jeremiah answered God's rhetorical question: he rose to the occasion and persevered through the struggles. Not only did God work through Jeremiah, he worked in him, a theme with colossal significance in the New Covenant that we will explore in part three.

⁵ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, 421.

⁶ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, 421.

⁷ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, 422.

C. The Rhetoric of Jeremiah 12:5

Having looked at the literary structure of our periscope, it is now essential to put the passage under a microscope and consider its details. In order to exegesis the text, I looked at eight translations of the verse (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, NIV, GNT, NARBE, NLT).

Some translations used “foot-runners,” “footman” and “men on foot,” and some reduce it to “people” or “runners.” Contrary to the simplified translations, the New International Bible Dictionary reveals an important meaning to “footman”: a footman was a member of the infantry military, distinguished and separate from the horseman and charioteers. Ancient armies were made up largely by footmen.⁸ God was not using the analogy of racing, as in modern times and even in Greek times. God was asking Jeremiah, “why was he trying to compete with the armies of enemy nations? Jeremiah uses war metaphors and imagery through his book to reference Israel’s enemies and 12:5 is consistent with this.

Another notable word is the verb used in the second question (Jer 12:5b). Most translations use words that signify a physical movement: “fall down” (NASB), “stumble” (NIV), and “can’t stand up” (GNT). However, the KJV, NKJV and NLT translations, use the verb “trust”. “And if in a safe land you are so trusting, what will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?” (Jer 12:5 NLT) This double meaning of fall down and trust is significant. God equates Jeremiah’s act of trust with falling down. God is saying, “Stop being so gullible. Don’t fall for what they believe.” Indeed in 12:6, God tells Jeremiah not to trust his own family for they are lying.⁹ In addition, the “thickets,” “jungle,” “swelling” or “floodplains” in 12:5b refer to the bottom of the

⁸ Douglas, Tenney, and Bruce, *The New International Bible Dictionary*, 359.

⁹ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 151.

Jordan river, which in ancient times was a marsh with wild animals (Jer 49:19).¹⁰ Evidently, the way forward will be difficult and filled with hazards.

The most significant key word in this verse is horses. Horses show up throughout Jeremiah's sermons, as an analogy for the enemy power and sin (5:8, 8:6). Moreover, the primary biblical association of horses is with warfare.¹¹ The Old Testament forbade Israel's king to "multiply horses" (Deut 17:14-16), which could be taken as a command against Israel building a military machine. In this way, God was commanding his people to depend on the Lord rather than their own strength. "Symbolically, the horses conveyed status, might and honour as they were reserved for kings, officials and military, the very things the Israelites coveted."¹² Thus, God was now using Jeremiah's analogy on him.

As a whole, it is clear that God was telling Jeremiah that he was measuring himself by the wrong standard: he wanted to win by the world's standard, instead of by God's standard. As Wright puts it, God does not take up Jeremiah's case posed in 12:1-4, but instead issues "an advisory brief."¹³ God says, in essence, 'It's only going to get harder. Toughen up, or you'll be crushed.' In light of this, God's response to Jeremiah in 12:5 can be viewed as a moment of shaping Jeremiah's attitude and emboldening his spirit.

III. Narrative Analysis: The Increasing Stakes

In order to fully understand the meaning of 12:5, it is important to examine it in light of the narrative of the book. If, as a young man Jeremiah was hesitant to answer God's call, how did he grow from that to one who would make a complete spectacle of himself and endanger his

¹⁰ Douglas, Tenney, and Bruce, *The New International Bible Dictionary*, 543.

¹¹ Fleming H. Revell Company, *The Revell Bible Dictionary*, 497.

¹² Fleming H. Revell Company, 497.

¹³ Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah*, 146.

own life for God's message? The answer can be seen in the short "confessions" included in his book.

The exchange between Jeremiah and God in 12:1-13 occurs right after Jeremiah discovers the plot against his life. He was totally oblivious to this scheme, comparing himself to a "like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (11:19). This is the first instance of personal attack on Jeremiah in the book. Prior to chapter 12, the book is mostly Jeremiah's sermons, messages with only a tiny sprinkling of his prayers. The biggest surprise to Jeremiah was that the threat came from his home village of Anathoth and family (11:21, 12:6). This shock leads to the first of what scholars call "The Confessions of Jeremiah."¹⁴ From here the confessions climax until he curses the day in which he was born, all the while still following the Lord commands (20:14-18). Despite his personal anguish, Jeremiah perseveres in his role as prophet.

Through chapters 1-25, the stakes are continually raised as Jeremiah faces greater external pressure from his city and its people, and internal pressure from God. What God asks Jeremiah to do following 12:5 grows in intensity and increases Jeremiah's suffering. Yet why does Jeremiah do it? I propose that a "divine exchange" happened in 12:5 whereby Jeremiah accepts this seeming rebuke by God and is emboldened by it. Through 12:5, God challenges Jeremiah to see his situation through spiritual eyes, not earthly eyes. Wright believes that God's warning "may have given Jeremiah some self-protective wisdom" that ultimately left Jeremiah with no choice but to lean on God's continuing promise of protection and rescue from 1:19.¹⁵

Prior to Chapter 12, Jeremiah is only asked to stand at the gate of the Lord's house to proclaim his message. (7:1). After Chapter 12, Jeremiah is asked to perform more and more physical and dangerous prophetic demonstrations. It should be mentioned here that although the

¹⁴ Wright, 146.

¹⁵ Wright, 151.

book is not necessarily in chronological order, scholars believe there is intention in how it's laid out.¹⁶ At first, God tells him not to trust anyone (12:6) and then later tells him not to get married. Jeremiah was deprived completely of the joys of marriage and fatherhood so that his life would symbolize the judgment for his people (16:1-13). Following the exchange between him and God in 12:1-13, Jeremiah is willing to put his life on the line for God's message (26:14-16). Jeremiah was asked to prophesy publicly with a yoke (27:2). Jeremiah must contend with false prophets (28:1-17). Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern (38:6). His words are burned by King Jehoiakim and he must dictate them again (36:1-23). His life is endangered, his message ignored, his joy denied, his dignity stripped, and yet he continues to serve God. In order to endure through these challenges, Jeremiah most certainly had to relinquish his desires for worldly comfort.

Although one does not hear Jeremiah's response to God's rhetorical questions in 12:5, Jeremiah's actions speak for themselves. La Sor posits that Jeremiah's personal fellowship with God gave him the strength and assurance to go on despite his own questions and fears.¹⁷ He learned to stop living by the standards of men and instead, accepted God's way of living: one that included great hardship but contained real hope. After receiving these words from God and filling in the answer to God's rhetorical questions, Jeremiah takes it to heart and charges on.

IV. Biblical-Theological Context : Jeremiah's Contributions:

This final section of analysis will serve to illuminate Jeremiah's contributions to Old Testament theology. In order to fully understand the meaning of 12:5, one must consider that it is God's response to Jeremiah's confession in 12:1-4. It is unlikely that Jeremiah's confessions were declared publicly; initially, they may have been revealed only to Baruch or only written.¹⁸

¹⁶ Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 29.

¹⁷ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 407.

¹⁸ Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*.

Scholars mostly agree that Jeremiah's personal experiences cannot be separated from his message.¹⁹ Compared to other prophets who delivered their oracles without disclosing much of their inner world, Jeremiah fully exposes his turbulent emotions.²⁰ Jeremiah's acute honesty is the key to a deeper understanding of God's gracious guidance, one that shaped him and would ultimately shape all of humanity.

A. Jeremiah From A Missional Hermeneutic

Christopher Wright argues that a missional hermeneutic, which views the whole Bible as the story of God's mission on earth, is a valid, coherent and appropriate way to read the Bible.²¹ As he points out, much of the Bible is narrative, poetry, prophecy, song, lament, visions, not imperative commands. They are all missional in nature and point to a God's universal mission for humanity.²² Wright argues that we must take the Old Testament's awkward questions and probing observations seriously, as they are "a rebuke to simplistic naivety" about how God works.²³ He writes, "Wisdom [literature] provides a license to think, to wrestle, to struggle, to protest and to argue."²⁴ For Wright, the voices that express doubt and question, such as Jeremiah's, compel us toward an honest faith, one that acknowledges human limitations.²⁵ As we saw the narrative analysis, it was Jeremiah's own questioning that led to God's response in 12:5, which eventually led to his strengthened faith and character. His lament forced him to acknowledge his limitations and surrender to God's sovereign hand. It is clear that God is at work, with a mission in Jeremiah's life and for his people.

¹⁹ La Sor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 426; Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 34.

²⁰ Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 34.

²¹ Wright, *The Mission of God*, 41.

²² Wright, 20.

²³ Wright, 452.

²⁴ Wright, 452.

²⁵ Wright, 450.

B. The Role Of Lamentations

Furthermore, the inclusion of Jeremiah's personal conversation with God in his writing alludes to the role of public lamentation. Public lamentation was common in Hebrew life, stimulated by events such as death, national calamity, war, plague.²⁶ In 36:4-32, Jeremiah's teachings were read out loud to the people during a time of fasting; Jeremiah's confessions, though personal in nature, were recorded for public use. He was aware that in giving voice to his personal confessions and laments, he gave voice to the people. His life modeled for them the appropriate posture to God.

Theologically, lamentations played a significant role in changing people's hearts.²⁷ They paved an avenue for Jews to work through their disasters emotionally as well as intellectually.²⁸ Laments helped people to acknowledge their failure and admit responsibility, so they could rebuild authentic confidence and hope in God.²⁹ Claus Westerman explains that the lamentation of the nation provided a space for people to acknowledge God's former activity, his present activity and to call forth God's past acts of salvation.³⁰ The lament is that it gives voice to suffering; it allows suffering to be brought before God. By its very expression, Jeremiah's private and public laments created a movement toward God.³¹ Thus, Jeremiah's inclusion of his personal confessions created a paradigm for how God wanted to work in his people in the new covenant.

²⁶ Fleming H. Revell Company, *The Revell Bible Dictionary*, 691.

²⁷ Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, 23.

²⁸ Fleming H. Revell Company, *The Revell Bible Dictionary*, 620.

²⁹ Fleming H. Revell Company, 620.

³⁰ Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology*, 31.

³¹ Westermann, 32.

C. New Covenant

In the development of the New Covenant, the book of Jeremiah offers important insights. According to Sandra L. Richter, God's original intent for humanity was "God's people dwelling in God's place with full access to his presence" and this intent can be seen from Genesis 1 through the Old Testament and into the New Testament. Richter explains that with the new covenant, the people of God would "no longer be defined as the biological offspring of Abraham but as anyone who calls upon the name of the Lord and endures to the end,"³² a description with a particular resonance in Jeremiah's life.

Much of Jeremiah's sermons rebuke Israel for being forsaking God. A glimmer of hope is offered in Jeremiah 31:31-33 when he describes a New Covenant, one would be more personal than the contract Israel had so miserably broken. The covenant would be written on the hearts of the people, and would result in the true knowledge of God. In the new covenant, through Jesus, the individual believer would become the temple of God and restored lives would be God's testimony to the nations.³³ In the exchange that happened in 12:1-5, and the subsequent events in Jeremiah's life, it is possible to say that Jeremiah experienced a taste of the new covenant. Richter explains that a "type is an event of person in one era of redemptive history that has a specific parallel in another era of redemptive history."³⁴ In looking at Jeremiah through the lense of typology, Jeremiah himself is a type for the new creation, one who has God's spirit working in him. Back by his personal, ongoing relationship with God, he went from a fearful boy, to a man who confronted kings.

³² Richter, 220.

³³ Richter, 222.

³⁴ Richter, *The Epic of Eden*, 178.

V. Conclusion:

Jeremiah himself demonstrated how God will work in people's hearts by showing how God worked on his own. His life, personal relationship and interactions with God are a part of his prophetic message. In examining the literary details of the periscope, it is clear that God wanted to shape Jeremiah, not through force but through his heart. The narrative analysis revealed that Jeremiah's personal relationship with God did indeed embolden and empower him to fulfill his calling. Finally, surveying Jeremiah in light of Old Testament theology reveals God's missional nature and his intentions in the new covenant. Jeremiah described the new covenant, but he also demonstrated it by the changing of his own heart. In God's mission to redeem his people, Jeremiah was his both spokesperson and his example.

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