A Song of Sorrow and Praise: The Possible Role of Music in Jeremiah 20:7-13

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Scholars have long noted the wealth of biographical information contained in the Book of Jeremiah. From its superscription, the longest in the Bible, we learn that Jeremiah came from Anathoth, a town three miles north of Jerusalem in the territory of Benjamin, and that he was a descendent of the Elide priest Abiathar, who was expelled from the Temple when Solomon appointed Zadok as the sole high priest (1 Kings 2:26-27). His prophetic career is placed between the thirteenth year of Josiah's reign (627 BCE) and the eleventh year of King Zedekiah (586 BCE), when the Temple was destroyed. These four decades spanned Judah's most calamitous period, in which the nationalism, reform, expansion and prosperity experienced under Josiah gave way to a series of disasters.[1] Jeremiah entered this volatile climate as an "outsider" priest (1:1), reluctant prophet (1:4-10), condemner of "false prophets" (e.g., 23:9-40; 33:9-40), supporter of Babylonia when most others favored Egypt (e.g., 25:1-29:32), and disputatious witness to the fall of Judah and the exile that followed—all of which made him profoundly unpopular, bitter and resentful. Yet despite his perpetual cynicism and the many plots fashioned against him, he could not keep from proclaiming the word of God.

[1] See Christian E. Hauer and William A. Young, *An Introduction to the Bible: A Journey into Three Worlds*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 145.

The emotional content of Jeremiah's turbulent biography is expressed most vividly in his "confessions": first-person complaints addressed to God.[2] These passages combine to paint an intimate portrait of Jeremiah's personality and inner struggles.[3] Through them, we gain an understanding of how the prophet, whose message and character are constantly derided, comes to "incarnate in personal burden the perversity of a world in the wrong."[4] In both language and content, the confessions resemble the personal laments of the Psalter, which voice complaints of physical or mental anguish, protestations of innocence, and pleas for divine help.[5]

Because of their close similarity to these psalms, some scholars view Jeremiah's confessions as anonymous additions to the book.[6] But it is not surprising that he would choose to express himself in this traditional form. The lament psalm is the quintessential vehicle in the Bible for personal emotional expression, and it is fitting that Jeremiah's deepest sentiments and concerns are conveyed through this poetic form.[7] From a biographical standpoint, Jeremiah was a priest residing in Jerusalem, and probably sang psalms in the Temple choir.[8] This not only explains how he could have authored the

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[2] The confessions are usually identified as Jeremiah 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-12; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-13; and 20:14-18.
[3] John Arthur Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1980), 88.
[4] Kenneth Craig, *Weight of the Word: Prophethood, Biblical and Quranic* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 33.
[5] Nahum M. Sarna, "Book of Psalms," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 2007, vol. 16, 670. Sarna identifies 40 personal lament psalms in the Psalter.
[6] See, for instance, A. R. Diamond, *The Confessions of Jeremiah in Context: Scenes of a Prophetic Drama* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 124-5.
[7] See Kathleen O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).
[8] Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 862.

confessions, but also suggests that he was a skilled musician.[9] Just as scholars contend that the Bible's psalms and psalm-like passages were originally intended for musical presentation, there is a long-held contention that Jeremiah sang his confessions.[10] Importantly, musicologists have emphasized the role of Levites and other secondary priests as liturgical musicians, citing their indispensable function as leaders of responsorial and corporate song.[11] And Alfred Sendrey, in his classic study *Music in Ancient Israel*, pointed to the unparalleled ability of Temple singers to express "joy, grief, love, triumph, and the inexhaustible gamut of human emotions . . ."[12] Thus, when Jeremiah was compelled to pour forth his innermost feelings, he set his words to music, the "tonal analogue of emotive life."[13]

Jeremiah 20:7-13

The confession found in Jeremiah 20:7-13 is comprised of two parts: Jeremiah's resentment of the isolation and mockery he endures (7-10), and his confident proclamation of thanksgiving (11-13). This combination of lament and exultation follows the structure of several lament psalms, where words of anguish are resolved in a concluding statement of assurance and praise (e.g., Pss. 6; 13; 30; 31; 35). These so-

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[9] The likelihood of Jeremiah's musical proficiency was suggested to me by Marvin A. Sweeney, professor of religion at Claremont Graduate University.
[10] See, for instance, Enoch Hutchinson, *Music of the Bible* (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1864), 425; and George Campbell Morgan, *Studies in the Prophecy of Jeremiah* (London: Oliphants, 1955), 168.
[11] John Arthur Smith, "Musical Aspects of Old Testament Canticles in Their Biblical Setting," in *Early Music History: Vol. 17*, ed. I. Fenlow (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 221-64; and Joachim Braun, *Music in Ancient Israel/Palestine: Archaeological, Written and Comparative Sources*, trans. Douglas W. Scott (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 38-39. See also "Music and Musical Instruments," in J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, *NIV Compact Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 395-7.
[12] Alfred Sendrey, *Music in Ancient Israel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969), 159.
[13] Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 27.

called "dynamic psalms" are characterized by a marked shift from doubt to hope or petition to praise, regardless of whether or not this change reflects a renewed state coming later.[14] Jeremiah 20:7-13 fits neatly into this genre, and thus should be read as a singular composition. Its rhetorical movement is natural to biblical literature, and illustrates a major theme of the book: Jeremiah bemoans being chosen as a prophet and the suffering it entails, though he maintains a definite, if understated, joy in the word of God.[15]

20:7 begins with Jeremiah calling out accusatorially: "You enticed me, God, and I was enticed; You overpowered me and You prevailed." This piercing statement hearkens back to Jeremiah's commission, when he protests his appointment as a prophet (1:6). Like Moses in Exodus 3:11-12, Jeremiah contends that he is unfit for prophecy; and as with Moses, God assures him that He will be with him (1:8). Importantly, this verse gives Jeremiah's call the added dimension of seduction (*patah*, "entice") and physical conquest (*chazak*, "overpower"; *yachal*, "prevail"). According to Marvin Sweeney, this formulation suggests rape, and captures metaphorically the pain and humiliation Jeremiah is caused by God's word.[16] Traditional Jewish commentators overlooked this coercive

[14] Michael Fishbane, *Text and Texture: Close Readings of Selected Biblical Texts* (New York: Shocken Books, 1979), 74.
[15] John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 347. However, it should be noted that because 20:7-13 is the only one of Jeremiah's confessions to end with confident assurance, Lundbom argues that the discontinuity between the two parts "precludes there being a single composition, however dynamic." Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 863.
[16] Sweeney, "Jeremiah," 966-7.

connotation, finding instead that it was God's argument that overpowered Jeremiah's objections.[17]

In either case, it is clear that Jeremiah's prophetic career brought him much distress, as he continues in 20:7: "I have become a laughingstock all the day, everyone mocks me." This complaint ties in with the beginning of the chapter, where Passhur, a priest charged with keeping order at the Temple Mount,[18] has Jeremiah imprisoned and flogged for a day (20:1-2). Presumably, both during and after his imprisonment, Jeremiah is mocked for prophesying doom.[19] This would suggest that the confession took place during the reign of Jehoiakim between 609 and 605 BCE, as conditions in Jerusalem were favorable enough for the masses to scoff at Jeremiah's forecast of a Babylonian invasion, which did not begin until 604.[20] Walter Baumgartner has drawn a connection between the mockery Jeremiah describes in this verse and the several references to mockery in the psalms of lament.[21] The clearest example is found in Psalm 22:8: "All who see me mock me; they curl their lips, they shake their heads."

Psalm-like language also appears in 20:8, which begins: "For whenever I speak, I cry out; I cry out 'lawlessness and destruction!'" Baumgartner envisions Jeremiah declaiming these words as a cry for help, echoing the psalmist (e.g., Pss. 34:18; 77:2; 88:2).[22] Moreover, the phrase "lawlessness and destruction" (*chamas va-shod*) has

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[17] Rashi and Rabbi David Kimchi (Redak), cited in A. J. Rosenberg, *Jeremiah, Volume 1: A New English Translation of Text, Rashi, and Other Commentaries* (New York: Judaica Press, 1985), 167.
[18] Sweeney, "Jeremiah," 966.
[19] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 855.
[20] Ibid., 859.
[21] See, Pss. 22:8-9; 35:15-16; 40:16; 44:12-17; 69:11-13; 79:4. Walter Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988), 75.
[22] Baumgartner, *Jeremiah's Poems of Lament*, 75.

parallels in several psalm passages condemning rampant violence and injustice,[23] and as an idiom appears in Jeremiah 6:7, Amos 3:10, and Habakkuk 1:3.[24] This verse concludes with the wrenching statement, "For the word of the Lord is disgrace and scorn for me all day long," suggesting that Jeremiah is mocked each day he prophesies.[25] The words used to convey mockery—"disgrace" (*cherpah*) and "scorn" (*keles*)—appear either individually or as a pair in Psalms 22:7; 31:12; 39:9; 44:14; 69:11; 79:4; and 89:42.

Jeremiah next describes his inability to keep his prophecy silent. "I said to myself: 'I will not mention Him, and I will no longer speak His name.' But there is a raging fire in my heart, confined in my bones; I wearied to contain it, but I could not" (20:9). This language is mirrored in 23:9, when the prophet cries out that God's word is crushing his heart and making his bones tremble. All of the prophet's attempts to conceal his message cause him mental and physical pain. He must continue to prophesy, even as it makes him a laughingstock. This is also evident in 4:19: "My heart moans within me, I cannot keep silent"; and in 6:11, the prophet says the same thing about God's wrath: "I am filled with the wrath of the Lord, I cannot hold it in." Thus, as Isaac Rabinowitz points out, from the moment Jeremiah is called as a prophet, God's word wields tremendous power over him.[26]

20:10 begins with a verbatim quote from Psalm 31:14: "For I hear whispering in the crowd: 'Terror-all-around!'" Earlier in chapter 20, Jeremiah renames Passhur "Terror-all-around" *(Magor-missaviv*), indicating that Judah's enemies will destroy him

[23] Pss. 7:17; 11:5; 18:49; 25:19; 27:12; 35:11.
[24] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 856.
[25] Rosenberg, *Jeremiah, Volume 1*, 168.
[26] Isaac Rabinowitz, "'Word' and Literature in Ancient Israel," *New Literary History* 4 (1972-3): 130.

(20:3-4).[27] Here, Jeremiah's detractors use this phrase as a taunt against him, poking fun at his gloomy demeanor and predictions.[28] This is followed by further details of the crowd's activities: "'Inform! And let us inform about him!' And all my trusted friends watch for my fall." The people's anticipation of Jeremiah's demise bears a similarity to Psalm 56:7, where the psalmist protests, "They plot, they lie in ambush; they watch my every move, hoping for my death"; and Psalm 35:15 describes the enemies' glee as they watch a righteous man fall. By stating that even his close friends desire his undoing, Jeremiah brings to mind Micah 7:6: "a man's enemies are the men of his house."[29] This is especially striking as Jeremiah gives his friends the intentionally ironic label "my friends of peace" (*enosh sh'lomi*), suggesting that not only have his friends become his enemies, but are people of peace plotting violence.[30]

20:10 concludes with the crowd saying, "Perhaps he can be enticed, and we will prevail over him, and take our revenge on him." Jeremiah uses two verbs employed in the seduction imagery of 20:7, "entice"(*patah*) and "prevail" (*yachal*). However, as Jack Lundbom explains, few commentators interpret these verbs the same in both verses.[31] Here, they imply deception rather than a physical act, referring to the crowd's scheming to discredit Jeremiah and his message.

At this point, the confession shifts abruptly in tone from sorrow to praise. Read in the context of Jeremiah's release from Passhur's prison, this movement indicates an emotional change within the prophet, as he is alleviated temporarily of the burden of

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[27] Sweeney, "Jeremiah," 966.
[28] See Hubert Cunliffe-Jones, *The Book of Jeremiah* (New York: Macmillan, 1961).
[29] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 857.
[30] Ibid., 857.
[31] Ibid., 857.

persecution and humiliation. “But the Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; thus my pursuers will stumble and will not succeed. They are very ashamed because they did not succeed, with eternal reproach they will not be forgotten” (20:11). This expectation of deliverance from “my pursuers” (*rod’fai*) echoes the pleas voiced in Psalms 7:2 and 31:16, and the everlasting shame the prophet wishes upon them reflects his unwavering faith in divine justice. Even as Jeremiah’s friends and enemies join together in craving his downfall, the prophet remains confident that God is with him. Thus, while Jeremiah’s confession insinuates that God has abandoned him, this verse functions both as a reaffirmation of God’s power, and a reminder to God that He is to serve as the prophet’s protector.[32]

He continues: “Lord of Hosts, who tests the righteous and sees the kidneys and the heart, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to You I have confided my case” (20:12). It is clear that the prophet sees himself as a righteous man constantly tested by his detractors. This, he insists, is readily apparent to God, who understands deeply his emotions (kidneys), will (heart), and the “inner fire” that consumes him.[33] And by pleading that God take vengeance upon his enemies, Jeremiah alludes to Psalm 37, which counsels the righteous to wait for God to exact justice on their behalf.

20:13 brings Jeremiah’s confession to a climax: “Sing unto the Lord, praise the Lord, because he rescued the life of the needy from the hand of evildoers.” With these words, Jeremiah again recalls the Psalter, where the injunction to sing to God is

[32] Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 182.
[33] Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1-20*, 862.

formulaic.[34] Like the psalms Jeremiah would have sung in the Temple, this verse employs the plural command forms of the verbs "sing" (*shiru*) and "praise" (*hal'lu*). As such, the prophet appears to be assuming a sort of liturgical role, inviting the faithful among the crowd to join him in worshiping God. It is also apparent that Jeremiah sees himself as the needy man in this verse, who has received divine deliverance from his enemies. Again, this draws on a recurring theme of the lament psalms, as captured in Psalm 40:18: "But I am poor and needy; may the Lord devise for me. You are my help and my rescuer; my God, do not delay."[35]

A Singing Prophet

As this analysis shows, Jeremiah 20:7-13 resembles closely the biblical psalms of lament. It documents a profound shift from sorrow to praise, and portrays in strong language "a struggle, a movement, an active process occurring within a person."[36] But this inner transformation was probably not expressed through words alone. As mentioned, both the lament psalms and Jeremiah's confessions were most likely sung rather than merely spoken. For both the psalmist and Jeremiah, who composed his own psalms and was a priestly singer, the "whole worship, including the musical accompaniment of the praise or prayer, is conceived as an offering to God."[37]

The likelihood that Jeremiah sang his laments is supported by the long history of singing in the face of adversity. Communal and personal experiences of persecution,

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[34] Sweeney, "Jeremiah," 967. See, for instance, Pss. 33:3; 68:5; 98:1; 113:1; 135:1; 117:1; 148:1; 150:1.
[35] See also Pss. 9:19; 12:6; 35:10; 72:4, 13; 107:41; 132:15.
[36] Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Wisnton, 1966), 207.
[37] H. W. Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 263.

discrimination, conflict, and disaster have given rise to countless songs of witness and hope.[38] And while the musical tones of ancient Israel are irretrievably lost to history, it is safe to assume that they were capable of stirring basic human emotions. Historically and cross culturally, music's emotive potential is rooted primarily in its ability to communicate symbolically the movement from tension to release[39]—the same process that characterizes Jeremiah's confession. So, in order to further dramatize his already intense words, and to express sentiments that lie beyond the limits of language to convey, Jeremiah turned to the "heightened speech" of music.

There are several biblical accounts that show a powerful link between music and prophecy. The principle term the Bible uses for prophet is *navi*. Most scholars relate this word to the Akkadian root *nabu*, meaning roughly "one who has been called."[40] Significantly, 1 Chr. 25:1 uses this term in describing the Levitical singers: "David and the officers of the army set apart for service the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied (*niv'im*) to the accompaniment of lyres, harps, and symbols."[41] 1 Samuel 10:5-6 tells similarly of "a band of prophets (*n'vi'im*) coming down from the shrine, preceded by lyres, timbrels, flutes, and harps, and they will be prophesying (*mitnab'im*) in ecstasy." And when preparing to prophesy Elisha requires the assistance of a musician, whose playing invites the hand of God to come upon him (2 Kings. 3:14-

[38] Jerry Silverman, *The Undying Flame: Ballads and Songs of the Holocaust* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), xv.
[39] See Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).
[40] Brettler, *How to Read the Bible*, 141.
[41] See also 2 Chr. 29:25-30; 35:15.

16). These passages indicate that music helped prophets (and priests) enter into mystical states, where they were more receptive to divine messages.[42]

There is also an important connection between another biblical term for prophet, *chozeh*,[43] meaning "seer," and *chazzan*, a later rabbinic term for the individual who sings the liturgy in Jewish prayer services. The fact that they share a common root suggests a visionary dimension of the *chazzan*'s vocation, as he or she serves as a *sheliach tzibbur* ("messenger of the congregation"), sending the community's prayers toward the divine on the wings of song. As one man remarked after hearing the singing of famed *chazzan* Leib Glantz: "I felt that this man was actually talking to God with great passion! His voice commands its way to the heavens—to be heard and to be answered."[44] This reaction gives support to a point well established in the Bible, that "music [is] as nearly allied to prophecy as to poetry."[45] *Chazzanim* can thus be viewed as prophetic in the sense that they communicate directly with God through song, and transmit an awareness of the divine presence to the listeners. This is perhaps what Yiddish novelist Joseph Opatoshu had in mind when he wrote, "Through true song one may rise to the power of prophecy."[46]

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[42] John H. Walton, Victor Harold Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Biblcal Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InnerVarsity Press, 2000), 295.
[43] See, for instance, Amos 7:12.
[44] Jerry Glantz, "Introduction," in *Leib Glantz: The Man Who Spoke to God*, ed. Jerry Glantz (Tel Aviv: The Tel Aviv Institute for Jewish Liturgical Music, 2008), 3.
[45] Allatson Burgh, *Anecdotes of Music, Historical and Biographical* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1814), 23.
[46] Joseph Opatoshu, *In Polish Woods*, trans. Isaac Goldberg (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), 162.

In their influential study, "The Philosophy and Theory of Music in Judeo-Arabic Literature,"[47] Eric Werner and Isaiah Sonne delineated two ways music functions in the prophetic experience: allopathic and homeopathic. The allopathic use of music minimizes thoughts and feelings that make a prophetic state difficult to achieve (as in the Elisha example from 2 Kings. 3:14-16), while the homeopathic use amplifies the emotions already present in the prophet. Jeremiah 20:7-13 seems to exhibit this latter function. The humiliation, plots, and inner torment he endures are the impetus for this confession, and its words convey unequivocally both the tragedy and hope the prophet feels in his darkest hour. And by singing these words, Jeremiah allowed them to reach their highest emotive potential, and intensified his dialogue with God.

Summary

In this brief paper, I have argued for the use of music in Jeremiah 20:7-13. As a priest, Jeremiah was intimately familiar with the language, structure, and singing of the psalms, and used these conventions to frame his petition and praise. As a prophet, he likely employed music as a means of fostering and elevating a prophetic state, as well as a vehicle for communicating with the divine. When words proved inadequate, Jeremiah communicated his innermost thoughts and feelings through song. In this way, the prophet's confession gives evidence for the broader spiritual import of sacred song.

[47] Eric Werner and Isaiah Sonne, "The Philosophy and Theory of Music in Judeo-Arabic Literature," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 16 (1941): 251-319 and 17 (1942-43): 511-72.

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