
Planted by Water: The Legacy of May Burt Persaud

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As a professor of New Testament, I find fewer opportunities to explore the Hebrew Bible than I used to, but I always have a peaceful, blessed feeling when I do. This is probably the legacy of learning Hebrew at the feet of May Persaud. Studying any language as an adult can be anxiety-producing and ancient languages add a level of complexity, but studying with May was pure joy for me. The passages came alive as the class worked on them together with her. We watched the verses unfold and picked up profound insights along the way. May brought innovative techniques into her teaching as she continued actively learning them; we sang the paradigms, and she created and shared her own teaching notes with us as well as her very helpful irregular noun and verb charts. She taught us to use the available resources such as the Index to the Brown Driver Briggs lexicon. I still have these materials and use them when I study echoes of the Old Testament in the New.

Studying Jeremiah

I have a particularly strong memory of translating Jeremiah 17:5–8. I am not sure why it stands out to me, but I still have my translation with multiple notes from May discussing the structure, other possible references, and questions raised by the passage. I include my own somewhat wooden student translation, with no correction for inclusive language, below:

⁵Thus says the Lord;

“Cursed is the young man who trusts in humans
and makes flesh his power,
and away from the Lord turns his heart.

⁶He is like a juniper in the desert
and he will not see when good comes
and he will dwell in stoney deserts in the wilderness,
a land of salt and uninhabited,

⁷Blessed is the young man who trusts the Lord,
the Lord is his confidence.

⁸He is like a tree planted by waters and by a canal,
he sends out his roots
and he will not fear when the heat comes
and his leaves will be luxuriant,
and in a year of drought he will not worry, nor does
he stop producing fruit.

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This passage came alive for me in a new way when I was blessed to travel to Israel-Palestine the following year with Professor Ann Fritschel and a group of other Wartburg students. At least one truth of this saying was visually evident in the landscape around us. We passed junipers in the wilderness, barely clinging to life next to dry wadis, and we passed verdant trees growing near the Ein Gedi Spring and along the Jordan river. The harsh difficulty of a life lived in pursuit of human power, turned away from God, in contrast with the blessed life of one who flourishes because their heart trusts in the Lord was displayed across the landscape that we traversed; a landscape that Jeremiah, and the people to whom he cried out, dwelled in until they were taken away.

I never did an in-depth study of Jeremiah when I was in seminary. I remember that Dr. Fritschel taught a course while I was there, but for some reason I was unable to take it. I do remember that the students found it difficult to sit with Jeremiah for a whole semester. So much frustration, anger, and agony are expressed in the book that bears his name, by the people, by the prophet, and by God. Looking into it now, I feel that Jeremiah is a book for our time. In the United States, and worldwide, human trust in human power is rampant, and the powerless are suffering greatly because of it. People who declare allegiance both to the God of Israel and to the God revealed in Jesus Christ, whether they understand them to be the same or not, are twisting and misusing the teachings of Scripture for their own ends, allowing greed, racism, violence, and misogyny to make alarming headway in cultures around the world.

There is a flagrant disregard for the environment in the United States, even as the effects of global climate change are becoming increasingly evident. Violence and hate crimes are on the rise as harmful rhetoric from governments invade cultures and trickle down into willing minds. Truth is under siege and getting harder to agree on and even to discover. It is increasingly apparent to me that the God of the Bible cannot look with favor upon the way people are turning away from God and toward their own desires. We are like the people of Jeremiah's time. We hear "the sound of the neighing of their stallions" (Jeremiah 8:16b)¹ and know that some sort of judgment is inevitable, but we are collectively incapable of turning away from the pursuit of human power and wealth. I believe we are called, then, to think again about what the blessing and, particularly, the curse that the Lord pronounces here in Jeremiah 17:5–8 might point to now.

Walter Brueggeman describes Jeremiah as "a piercing theological meditation on the abyss of Jerusalem," an abyss in which all the forms of faith of the time were put in jeopardy.² The book is a profoundly unsettling text that conveys the conflict, fear, and hatred that surrounded the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem during the Babylonian conquest, but it also holds onto the hope that God remains faithful to God's promises beyond immediate judgment.

Jeremiah 17:5–8 falls within what Terence Fretheim describes as the first half of Jeremiah, the judgment of Israel.³ While the structure of the book is very complex, Fretheim notes that Chapter 25 functions as a hinge for the book, with the first half dealing with Israel and the second half the nations. This arrangement suggests that God's judgment does not end with Israel but includes the nations that surround her. As God's wrath is played out in the commerce and conflict between nations, no one nation is innocent; all are judged. If Babylon is God's instrument of judgment against Israel, so Babylon will be judged in turn.

Jeremiah and other texts

Jeremiah 17:5–8 is notably similar to Psalm 1. Jeremiah's relationship with the Psalter is complicated. Brueggeman, following Baumgartner, notes that Jeremiah knows the psalms well and creatively follows their structure in his prophetic work. Brueggeman suggests that Jeremiah opposes those psalms that reinforce the ideology of the Temple and portray God as the patron of the city, with subsequent assurances of its safety in the face of all threats. Jeremiah 17:5–8, like Psalm 1, seems to fit into the Hebrew Bible wisdom tradition. Jeremiah 17:5–8 does not support Temple ideology, nor does it seem to lament,⁴ though Jeremiah does often use the pattern of the psalms of lament.⁵ Depending on how one

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dates Psalm 1, Jeremiah may be the earlier text. In the context of the first half of Jeremiah, this passage provides support for the judgment of Israel, indicating both where they have strayed and what the consequences of that straying are.

Jeff Anderson describes a number of possible social functions of curses in the ancient world including: 1) as a scapegoat mechanism, where a curse is used as a possible explanation for unfortunate events; 2) as a tool of social control, where people are more likely to follow societal norms if they fear curses; 3) as a way to teach societal values since they point out behaviors to be avoided; 4) as a way for the marginalized to gain some measure of power over those who might want to abuse them; 5) as a quasi-judicial tool, the curse could serve as judge, jury, and executioner, particularly in cases where an offense was impossible to prove; 6) as a way to define the interactions between differing nations or ethnicities;⁶ and 7) as a rhetorical device and means of divine persuasion, again to serve as a deterrent.⁷

It appears that in the Hebrew Bible, curses were more often used as warnings than as an explanation of harmful events, and that the responsibility for negative results is most often placed squarely on those bearing the curse.⁸ Mary Willson notes a pattern in the use of curses in contrast with blessings in Deuteronomy. In stating the blessings and curses, Moses makes the people's choices apparent and clear to them: "Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live" (Deut 30:19). The curse does not bring about the negative outcome; rather the transgressor has chosen the curse.⁹

There are only five places in Jeremiah where רָעָה ("curse") is used: Jeremiah 11:3, 17:5, 20:14, 20:15, and 48:10. Because of

1. All Scripture quotations except for my translation are from the NRSVue.

2. Walter Brueggeman, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 187.

3. Terence E. Fretheim, *Jeremiah* (Smith & Helwys, 2002), 18.

4. Brueggeman, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 162.

5. Brueggeman, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 163.

6. Jeff S. Anderson, "The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 110, no. 2, (1998), 224.

7. Anderson, "The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible," 227.

8. Anderson, "The Social Function of Curses in the Hebrew Bible," 225.

9. Mary A. Willson, "'Cursed is Everyone Who is Hanged on a Tree': Paul's Citation of Deut. 21:23 in Gal. 3:13," *Trinity Journal*, (Fall 2015), 221.

space considerations, I will consider the first three only, since they fall into the first half of Jeremiah, Fretheim's "judgment of Israel" section.¹⁰ The first instance, Jeremiah 11:3, is in a prose oracle that appears to be a sort of covenant renewal, where God reminds the people of the commandments given at Sinai and the promise that Israel would be God's covenant people. The curse is pronounced on anyone who does not heed the words of the covenant. Jeremiah responds, "So be it Lord" (Jeremiah 11:5).

The second "curse" is Jeremiah 17:5, the one under our specific consideration. This instance does perhaps follow the pattern of curse contrasted with blessing in Deuteronomy as described by Willson. Its purpose could be rhetorical, as God's attempt to persuade the people to turn away from trusting in their own strength or that of other humans, back toward their God. This curse can, I think, imply that the negative outcomes of trust in human strength express the curse. It is not a curse that causes such a one to "dwell in stony deserts in the wilderness, a land of salt and uninhabited," rather they dwell there by choice, they have chosen the curse.

Scholarly resources

Some scholars look for concrete events that underly the curse in Jeremiah 17:5. Suggestions include Jehoikim's disastrous revolt against Babylon (2 Kings 24:1–7), Zedekiah's pro-Egyptian stance (Jeremiah 21:1–10; 34:1–7; 37:3–10, 11–21; 38:1–23), or Josiah's politically motivated expansions at the time of his reforms (2 Kings 23:2ff).¹¹ All of these suggestions might be applicable in this first half of Jeremiah, which deals with judgment on Israel and Judah. Jack Lundblom suggests that the curse might refer back to Jeremiah's own spiritual doubt as expressed in Jeremiah 15:19–21.¹²

Andrea Weiss presents a detailed analysis of the structure of Jeremiah 17:5–8, noting the strong parallels between the curse and the blessing, both in language and construction, but also noting some striking differences. Her examination shows that the differences between those cursed and those blessed are not in their outward circumstances, as even those whose trust is the Lord will experience drought and heat. The promise is that those who trust in the Lord will always have the resources to survive, even thrive, in these circumstances. Those described as cursed will not. Weiss¹³ and Gracians Chittilappilly¹⁴ indicate that Jeremiah is transformed in his process of confronting God and God's rebellious people. In the first half of the book, he protests bitterly, even accusing God of treachery. But the dialogue moves him to a new place. The second

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half of the book shows that Jeremiah remains faithful to his call as a prophet, and, though his difficulties never end, Jeremiah is given the resources to endure his sufferings and continue to prophesy despite the traumatic circumstances of his life.

The final two "curses" in the first half of Jeremiah are found in Jeremiah 20:14–15. This passage is one of Jeremiah's "confessions" or laments. (Kathleen O'Connor lists Jeremiah's confessions as 11:18–12:6; 15:1–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23, 20:7–13, 14–18).¹⁵ In Jeremiah's agony over his rejection and persecution by the people of Judah and his compulsion by God to continue to speak the words that anger even his close friends, Jeremiah curses his own life through cursing the day of his birth and cursing the man who announced it. These curses are a cry to God. There is a formal pattern to lament. In the Psalms, and here in Jeremiah, the main components of lament are invocation, complaint, petition, vow and thanksgiving,¹⁶ though O'Connor notes that only Jeremiah's final lament in 20:7–13 offers a complete cycle.¹⁷

It is interesting that in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Hebrew texts older than the Masoretic text, Jeremiah 17:5 does not contain the formulaic introduction "Thus says the Lord."¹⁸ In this older version of Jeremiah, the curse is perhaps not spoken by God, but by the prophet himself. If this is the case, then Jeremiah's confession, traditionally identified in 17:14–18, could begin with Jeremiah 17:5. It could be Jeremiah's cry to God against the wickedness of the people, based on the prose judgment oracle in 17:1–4 and Jeremiah's prayer to God to right the situation where the people practice worship of other gods. The voice of the Lord breaks in at 17:10, but the rest of the passage could be the voice of Jeremiah.

10. Fretheim, *Jeremiah*, 18.

11. R. Davidson "The Interpretation of Jeremiah XVII 5–8." *Vetus Testamentum*, 9, 2 (April 1958), 203–204.

12. Jack R. Lundblom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible, 1999. Theology and Religion Online, pp. 1–54.

13. Andrea L. Weiss, "Jeremiah 17:5–8 and the Teaching of the Trees," *The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, (Summer 2018), 9.

14. Gracians Chittilappilly, "The Agony of Jeremiah: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Jeremiah 20:14–18," academia.edu, (Accessed 10/9/2025), 23.

15. Kathleen O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," *Interpretation*, 62, 1 (January 2008), 34.

16. Chittilappilly, "The Agony of Jeremiah," 4.

17. O'Connor, "Lamenting Back to Life," 46.

18. Lundblom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 1–54.

Restorative justice

Christopher Marshall describes lament as a paradigm for restorative justice. When relationships are broken, particularly through criminal activity, all parties involved suffer: victims, offenders, and the surrounding community.¹⁹ Lament is a way to bring such harm before God. Marshall describes Jesus' use of lament, but we can see this same pattern in Jeremiah. Throughout the book that bears his name, and particularly in his confessions, Jeremiah brings before God the voices of all those impacted by the tragic destruction of Jerusalem and the people of Judah. Jeremiah cries on behalf of himself as his vocation causes his rejection both by the powerful and by his friends. He cries out with the voice of the people as well. He defends God, by acknowledging the peoples' wickedness and failure, but he also accuses God of brutality and injustice, of wavering and causing innocent suffering, including his own. Jeremiah's laments demonstrate a dialogue, and it is dialogue between victim, offender, and community that restores right relationship and brings healing. Jeremiah experiences this healing at the close of his lament in 20:7–13. His complaints disappear in the second half of the book. While Jeremiah continues to suffer, as do the people of Judah, Jeremiah has found in God the resources that he needs to survive the heat and drought, and so perhaps have at least some of the remnant of his people in Babylon, enough to continue their wrestling with God.

Many scholars have noted the Deuteronomic tendencies of Jeremiah and yet they also note how Jeremiah finds the categories of “do good blessed, do evil be cursed” to be insufficient. The “causation-explanation” scenario, while it may be a survivor's coping technique, is “neither satisfying nor correct.”²⁰ While Jeremiah 17:5–8 may seem to fit the Deuteronomic worldview, a deeper look is worth the effort.

For me, as a follower of Christ, the arc of the book of Jeremiah along with that of the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ are best described by the pattern of restorative justice. Justice can never be achieved until the breach is acknowledged — what has gone wrong must be named to all stakeholders, victim, perpetrator, and community. Only then can these stakeholders move on to newness of life. God's judgment and wrath involve naming all the pain of what has gone wrong, to the oppressed, to the oppressors, to the bystanders caught up in the conflict, and to God. God can be both accuser and accused. However, following this judgment comes the faithful never-ending power of God to bring life out of death; joy out of pain; newness out of crisis, defeat, and despair.

I think Jeremiah, as one whose trust was in the Lord, ultimately felt like a tree planted by water. Jeremiah was caught up into the life of God in a particular way. His book shows us that he spoke God's words as well as his own, felt God's feelings as

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well as his own. There is a visceral, bodily quality to Jeremiah's — and thus God's — experience that makes this book so moving and troubling. But 17:7–8, as Wiess demonstrates, clearly shows that trust in God does not prevent one from feeling heat or experiencing drought. God doesn't magically remove the sources of trouble, but, as the follower trusts, God steadily supplies the resources needed to face the situation. The book of Jeremiah demonstrates that Jeremiah never gave up on the God of Israel, despite his agony. Instead, he continued to provide words of both judgment and hope.

I think those of us who follow Christ find some foreshadowing of Jesus' own experience in Jeremiah. In Jesus we can see God's feelings as he encounters the rejection of the world. Humans seem to always turn to their own ways, follow their own desires, seek their safety or their pleasure as a first priority at the expense of others. God's judgment, God's wrath, appears to manifest itself in God leaving humans to follow their own ways to their own barrenness and destruction. And because of the interconnected, tightly entwined nature of all that God has made, when some act out, all suffer. We see God's willingness to fully engage in relationship with God's people in Jeremiah and God's willingness to enter the suffering creation in Jesus Christ. Both took on all the hatred and rejection that humanity heaped upon them. Jesus let himself be under the power of humankind to the point of death on a cross. Jeremiah most likely would not have lived to see it, but the Bible tells us of the restoration of Judah following her destruction by Babylon. The Bible tells us of the in-breaking of the commonwealth of God in Christ Jesus' incarnation, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. God in God's love and wisdom seems to think the joy of the new creation is worth the pain of the present creation for both all that have lived and for God in God's self.

I think we can say that May Persaud and her husband, Winston, were indeed planted by streams of water and received the blessings of God even in times of heat and drought. And that the two of them faithfully carried out their God-given work of planting others as well. I am deeply grateful for the fruit of the God-given gifts that May shared with me and my classmates, and I pray that these gifts are bearing God's fruit for our suffering world.

19. Christopher D. Marshall, *All Things Reconciled: Essays on Restorative Justice, Religious Violence, and the Interpretation of Scripture* (Cascade, 2018), 80–81.

20. Brueggeman, *The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah*, 193.