

# Introduction

## Wounds without Words

I became a student of the book of Jeremiah because the prophet's first-person prayers, called the "confessions," touched something very deep within me. I had no words for that meeting of life and text then, but I continued to pursue this difficult work throughout my life as a teacher and interpreter. But despite my own involvement with the book, I found it harder and harder to teach it. In one class for pastors and ministers at Columbia Theological Seminary, I met strong resistance to Jeremiah even before we had studied five or six chapters of the book. These students found the prophet's angry, punishing God nearly unbearable. They said that Jeremiah's theology blamed the victims, was deeply sexist, and was not useful for their churches today. When their lives met the biblical text, the results of the encounter were toxic. Since I could discover little help for these theological and pastoral problems, I let the book lie fallow for a long time, at least in the classroom. Avoidance seemed a good, if temporary, solution.

Several years later, I taught Jeremiah again to a class of mixed degree students who had very different responses from the previous classes. This time, the book of Jeremiah called forth stories of their lives, stories of deep suffering only partially visible to them, of pain still alive within them. What had changed in the intervening years? What made it possible for this biblical book to connect with students' lives?

Perhaps the primary difference was that my perceptions of the book of Jeremiah had deepened. I began approaching it differently, teaching it from another angle, framing its confusions, conflicts, and harsh rhetoric within different frameworks—informed by my study of trauma and disaster. Rather than pursuing

matters of the history and origins of the book, I became interested in how the book addressed its readers as survivors of traumatic and disastrous historical events. Trauma and disaster studies help me to refocus my attention from questions of the book's creation—such as which words belonged to Jeremiah, which were words of later writers and editors—to the matter of why these words were kept alive at all. These studies, gathered from an interdisciplinary conversation about the impact of traumatic violence and catastrophe upon individuals and communities, enabled me to think about how the book may have helped the people of Judah after the Babylonian Empire destroyed the nation in the sixth century B.C.E.

## **Trauma and Disaster**

Trauma and disaster studies arose from the bloody smear that was the twentieth century. Central to these loosely connected investigations are the long lasting effects upon victims and their offspring of the Holocaust, or Shoah—the systematic destruction of European Jewry and others by the Nazis during the Second World War. But the list of modern disasters is broad and sweeping. It includes the Armenian genocide at the beginning of the century, two world wars, the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and numerous smaller devastations in Europe, Asia, and Central America, as well as bloodbaths in the Congo, Rwanda, and Bosnia, merely to begin the list that expands into the twenty-first century. Trauma studies, in particular, have led to the growing recognition that war, rape, and abuse inflict lingering consequences upon victims, even to the next generations.

This interdisciplinary conversation around the effects of trauma and disaster draws from diverse fields of study. They include cognitive psychology, counseling, sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism. The shared hope of these investigations is to gain further understanding of the life-destroying effects of violence upon people and ultimately to find processes that help people to endure, survive, and perhaps eventually thrive.

## **From Trauma to Disaster**

Trauma comes from the Greek word for “wound.” In classical medical language, trauma refers to the violence that inflicts injury, not to the injury itself.<sup>1</sup> To “be traumatized” is to receive a blow, to become the victim of sudden and perhaps repeated assaults in one form or another whether physical or emotional. To “be traumatized” is, by necessity, expressed in the passive voice because trauma reduces victims to a passive state. Victims are acted upon rather than actors who chose what happens to them. Injury from violence can afflict people in a

number of ways yet not traumatize them, but for most people, trauma inflicts wounds without words. Such wounds are often called today by the awkward title “post-traumatic stress disorder” (PTSD). Although I do not use this odd collection of adjectives and nouns, and I also avoid medical models of individual recovery related to PTSD, the study of individual trauma—and its next of kin, disaster—helps show how violence afflicts people and, in my work, how the book of Jeremiah addresses these wounds.

Trauma refers to the impact of violence upon individuals. But when traumatic violence reigns down upon a whole society, trauma becomes a public disaster. When suffering and loss heaped upon one person is no more than a minuscule moment in the massive destruction of a society and its habitat, violence magnifies its effects in uncountable ways. It creates a kind of mental vacuum. It so overwhelms the capacities of victims to take it in, that the violence cannot be absorbed as it is happening. Traumatic violence comes as a shocking blow, a terrifying disruption of normal mental processes, distorting reality, even as it becomes the only reality.

Disasters brought about by traumatic violence disturb what people think, feel, and believe. They distort perceptions and shut down ordinary life. Memories of the violence imprint themselves in the brain like a powerful ghost that returns again and again, repeatedly disordering daily life. Human beings cannot absorb extreme violence as it occurs; they simply cannot take it in. The consequence of this shutting down of the mind is that memories of traumatic events become fragmented, even as they take up residence in the mind where they have a life of their own. Contradictory though it may seem, these memories can be neither forgotten nor escaped, even though they exist as shattered moments of experience. They become what literary critic Cathy Caruth calls “unclaimed experience,” a hidden “story of a wound that cries out,” of a hurt that is not fully assimilated and that both demands our witness even as it defies the possibility of being witnessed.<sup>2</sup> The wounds are unspeakable.

The unutterable nature of the wounds is a second form of violence and related to fragmented memories. Often it is impossible for victims to tell what happened to them, to name their experiences, or to depict in words the terrors that have overwhelmed them.<sup>3</sup> Traumatic violence eludes expression in language; it is “unspeakable.”<sup>4</sup> Words to tell what happened, to set events into a story, and to explain why they happened simply disappear. “There are no words!” is the frequent cry of survivors of disasters as they try to report the cataclysm that has engulfed them. Trauma and disaster suppress language and can even bring people into a state of muteness.

A third effect of traumatic violence is that it automatically shuts down feelings and turns off human responses to overpowering shock.<sup>5</sup> And when emotions

and cognition turn off in the face of violent blows, when people lock violent experiences away in a form of self-protection, they also lose access to knowledge of their own pain, loss, and grief. They become stuck, unable to move toward recovery or to flourish as vital human beings. Life can continue but as a kind of half-life, a form of endurance in a barren, affectless landscape.

A fourth effect, equally serious for individuals and societies but less visible, is that trauma and disaster destroy or at least undermine trust in God, other people, and the world. Trauma and disaster can leave people feeling betrayed and God-forsaken.<sup>6</sup> Beliefs and traditions, what Louis Stulman might call the society's "symbolic tapestry,"<sup>7</sup> those interlocking ideas and institutions that once secured them firmly on the earth and kept them grounded in daily life and communal identity—these no longer seem reliable. After all, God did not protect them, nor did prayer comfort them, nor is worship any longer possible because the gods of chaos rule the cosmos. No longer is there a stable, secure foundation upon which to stand.

## Trauma and Jeremiah

When I began to apply insights from trauma and disaster studies such as these to the teaching of Jeremiah, what happened in the classroom, among church groups, and in my own perceptions of the book was astonishing. Not only was Jeremiah more accessible and acceptable to the students, it also elicited from them their own stories of violence and trauma. Many students related to passages from Jeremiah in visceral, personal ways. Here are a few of those stories, told with permission.

Walter Baer, an Episcopal priest from New Orleans, remembered taking a walk with relatives in Berne, Switzerland, where he came upon watermarks on the sides of buildings from a recent flood. It was that sight that catapulted him back into the tumult of life in New Orleans and its devastating waters after Hurricane Katrina many months earlier. Until that walk he had gone on without stop after the catastrophe, trying to help people in his community, cleaning up, trying to cope. His delayed reaction caught him by surprise.

Another student, Wylie Hughes, returned from a third tour of duty as a Marine in Iraq and attended a memorial service for one of his fellow soldiers, but few of his friends in the Corps were able to attend. They could not face the memories of violence and death they brought home with them. Wylie speaks of the moment when the vehicle in which he was travelling with other Marines hit a roadside bomb. His friend was sitting next to him when the explosion hurled them in opposite directions. His friend died and Wylie lived. Upon return to the base, the debriefing of the incident followed standard military protocols. Each

Marine retold events according to a kind of check list: what happened at impact, where each person's body, weapons, and equipment fell, what each saw, the estimated time each element of the violence took to unfold. Emotion was necessarily absent, discouraged, not permitted, probably not even yet available. After all, no matter how they felt, they had to get up and face the same terrors the next day.

During one class session, a third student, Yvonne Thurmond, remembered a painful incident from her childhood. I provoked the remembrance by my remark that a parent's inexplicable slapping of a small child was a "relatively small illustration" of the impact of violence on a life. Yvonne corrected me immediately, and she was right to do so. Such a blow is not small, not trivial. Its traces can follow one through life. I might have said more accurately that this scene could serve as a "common illustration" of the lasting pain of violence, not a trivial one. My example not only triggered gentle protest from Yvonne, it also created space for her story of being aggressively intimidated in childhood, a story she was able to piece together decades later to explain fears that lingered well into adulthood.

In the same Jeremiah class, Dan Jessop told about the shocking suicide of a teammate on his high school football squad. Dan has not been able to forget the event not only for the sadness that will not leave him but also because he continues to wonder what he might have done to prevent it.

These scattered accounts have in common the experience of varying degrees of traumatic violence, violence that inflicts bodily, emotional, and spiritual harm. Each of these people in my class has their suffering imbedded in their bodies. It is part of them, never to be forgotten and somehow to be assimilated into their larger lives. Now when I speak about and teach the book of Jeremiah, similar stories emerge without my asking, sometimes privately, sometimes shared with a larger group, always humbling, always a moment of human communion across differences.

As the class unfolded and the student's stories came out, I recognized something else about Jeremiah that before had been only an unarticulated hunch. The book did more than give voice to the afflicted. It was and is a most effective instrument of survival and healing. I know because I witnessed it working this way among my students in their encounter with the book.

Many scholarly interpreters of Jeremiah already know the profound devastation underlying the book and reflected in its pages, and many see the book's healing capacity in its potent rhetoric and lyrical appeal to readers. Trauma and disaster studies add to Jeremiah interpretation a recognition that the book's powers to lead toward rebirth of the shattered people of Judah lies in the very fire and brimstone that turned off my modern, ethically engaged students several years ago.

With my own eyes opened anew by these studies and moved by students' stories, I began to consider more deeply the original audience of Jeremiah's book and to wonder what stories they would tell, if they could narrate the historical events of the Babylonian invasions. I wanted to imagine what it would be like to live through the disaster and traumatic violence that produced the book of Jeremiah in the first place.

I tell those stories in the next chapter, where I attempt to set the prophet's work into its historical context, not to show how the book was composed but to imagine the destroyed world in which the book intervenes like a survival manual for people wavering between life and death. Then I tell more about the effects of trauma and disaster upon its victims in the third chapter. The fourth chapter and all the subsequent ones reflect on selected sections of Jeremiah, trying to show how the book seeks words for festering wounds for which there are no words.