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Proposal Title: The Minister and the Mother Wound: Trauma Conversations Between Jeremiah 13 and 31

Proposal Abstract: Trauma-informed readings of hard texts in the Bible have opened invaluable avenues toward meaning-making models for women and other marginal people who are violated by religious systems and ministers in power. This paper attempts to read two texts in the book of Jeremiah that stand at the outer ends of the prophetic message to the exilic community of Judah through the lens of feminist and intersectional trauma. The first text is about Jeremiah’s disturbing sign act of the dirty and ruined loincloth (Jeremiah 13:1–11) in reference to the priests and the religious community gathered in a detention camp before being deported to Babylon. The second is from Jeremiah’s Book of Consolation about the inconsolable Rachel weeping for her children albeit the divine heralding of the children’s return from Babylon (Jeremiah 31:15–22). To read the two texts in conversation with each other highlights the crisis and exposes the traumatic experiences of both figures—the naked priest and the grieving mother. The religious system that undermines transparency and accountability continues to violate women and others on the margins and injures its entire community. The violated carry their suffering in their bodies for centuries to come. Reading through the lens of trauma shatters established hermeneutical frameworks and dares the theologian to engage in the enterprise of meaning-making and remaking in the face of recurring manifestations of the haunting event.

Introduction

Three students have impacted my way of teaching the Bible, particularly the book of Jeremiah, these past two years. Each in their own way the students touched something very deep within me. In times when class meetings happened on screens and behind masked faces, I was allowed into some of the most intimate and vulnerable moments of young peoples’ lives. The students asked for more than well-thought-out interpretations. Rational and coherent

theology was not a good-enough answer to questions coming out of solitary places, from messy bedrooms, long nights spent under stuffy blankets, questions and thoughts twisted in moments of loss and bouts of anxiety. Unorganized and incoherent essays popped up on my screen and I stared at them bewildered and crushed, and for that I am immensely grateful today.

It is for the students who pulled me in to their brilliant minds and wounded lives challenging me to sit down with both, the ancient prophet and his androcentric imagination, and with the visibly distraught young woman in front of me. I stood with Jeremiah in the Temple Gate listening to his sermon calling for radical change (Jer 7), when I learned of the student's despair about "the curse of living in an environment where borderline sexism is written on the walls of the dorm, where the seemingly blind belief in interpretations made a hundred years ago . . . is suffocating." I heard the prophet complain about his lonely life without a wife and children (Jer 16), while the young woman could not even fathom to be with a man ever. I visited Jeremiah in prison when he cursed the day he was born, crying out how God had enticed and abused him (Jer 20), and the young woman's violated body froze.

The students refused to "passively go along and accept atrocities because 'they're part of God's plan.'" Each of the students had experienced the pain of being rejected and humiliated for who they were—women or queer. Their pain had pushed them to the edge. Their agony became provocative to others. Pain caused them to ask fundamental questions and not allow for shallow answers. "Pain," writes Barbara Brown Taylor, "makes theologians of all of us."¹ The students were the theologians in my class, and they begged to be heard. And so, it became my

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 157.

duty to sit and listen, and cease all claims about God, all doctrinal statements, for they might cause greater damage when poured into open wounds.

The Prophet and His Loincloth in Jeremiah 13:1–11

Let me introduce Jeremiah and his God as they both are in a most vulnerable moment together, both wearing a linen loincloth that is going to fall apart, both left naked (Jeremiah 13:1–11). Abraham Joshua Heschel in his profound masterpiece, *The Prophets* has insightfully expanded on the symbiotic element of prophetic vulnerability, the very element which seems to mysteriously bind the man to his God. “The prophet lives not only his personal life, but also the life of God.”² The prophet is not a mouthpiece, as it is so often said, he is not a broadcaster announcing breaking news from another world. The prophet, Heschel insists, “dwells upon God’s inner motives, not only upon His historical decisions. He discloses a divine pathos, not just a divine judgment.” Divine pathos is the key to prophetic sympathy, which “is not, like love, an attraction to the divine Being, but the assimilation of the prophet’s emotional life to the divine, an assimilation of function, not of being.”³

With Heschel’s expositions in mind about the intimate bond between the prophet and his God it is fascinating to analyze the linen loincloth Jeremiah was asked to wear without washing it, the journey he went on to bury it under a rock, then after a long while he returned and retrieved a ruined piece (Jer 13:1–11). The message that goes along with the prophet’s sign act is coherent and heartbreaking at the same time:

“Thus said the LORD: So will I ruin the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.

² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (First Perennial Classics ed.; New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), 29.

³ *Idem.*, 30.

This evil people who refuse to heed My words, . . . they shall be like the loincloth that is not good for anything. For as the loincloth clings to a man's loins, so have I made all the house of Israel and all the house of Judah cling to Me, to be a people for Me, and for fame and for praise and for splendor, but they did not heed.
(Jeremiah 13:9–11)

Commentators disagree over the linen loincloth.⁴ Was it a belt girdling the waist of the prophet holding his garments together? Was it a fancy colorful sash to be seen and admired by the people on the road? Would they ask about the belt after Jeremiah stopped wearing it, and would the prophet then have the chance to preach the message to them? Was the sign act a public display of the message, something of a show-and-tell?

What if the linen loincloth was not meant to be on display but should be worn underneath his garments similar to a priest's underwear with the explicit instruction for linen and not wool so not to sweat (Ezek 44:18), and not become exposed (cf. Exod 28:42, 43; 39:28; Lev 6:3[10]; 16:4).

Robert Alter translates the Hebrew phrase *ezor pishtim* in Jer 13:1 as "loincloth of linen" and recognizes Jeremiah's performative act as a dramatic visual illustration of the people's exile to Babylon as a deeply shameful event. "A loincloth that has fallen apart, . . . exposes the genitals, and in the poetic prophecy that follows this prose prophecy, the skirts of the personified people will be hitched up to expose her shame."⁵

There is another ambiguous element in the prophet's sign act. The place he is told to go and bury the linen loincloth, and then after "many days" go back to retrieve it is called *Perath*

⁴ Larry R. Helyer, *The Life and Witness of Jeremiah: A Prophet for Today* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), 41–44; Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Message of Jeremiah: Against Wind and Tide* (The Bible Speaks Today; Series editor, Alec Motyer (OT); Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 156–58; J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 363.

⁵ See footnote on Jer 13:1 in Robert Alter, *Prophets: A Translation with Commentary* (The Hebrew Bible, vol. 2; New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), 904.

(4x in Jer 13:4–7). All major English translations identify *Perath* with the Euphrates River in western Mesopotamia (KJV, NKJV, NIV, NRSV, NASB). The prophet would have to travel four times some 500 miles between his home in Anathot and the Euphrates. However, the fact that out of the nineteen references of *Perath* in the Hebrew Bible only the four in Jer 13:4–7 lack the qualifiers that identify *Perath* as the Euphrates River.⁶ This provides a signal for us to consider a different route for the prophet. Alter identifies the place where Jeremiah is to bury the linen loincloth as the wadi *Perath* just about two miles away from Anathot,⁷ which would considerably shorten the travel time for a man who is walking on the road in his dirty underwear. It may be uncomfortable but still possible. In the end, the loincloth is ruined and completely unusable, and Jeremiah becomes a minister without underwear.

I suggest, it is this situation of the naked body under the ministerial garb when the message about the loincloth that is to “cling” or “stick” (*davaq*; cf., Gen 2:24; Deut 10:20; 11:22; 30:20) to a man’s loins becomes more compelling than the belt worn over the garment. The show-and-tell turns into a private affair between the prophet and his God. The prophet is to feel the close-fitting, body-hugging attachment that God feels even when wearing dirty underwear. He becomes intimately acquainted with the divine predicament of a vulnerable and “naked God.”

My students were all in on the theology of a prophet and his God whose desire is for a close and intimate relationship with people, even with flawed people. It seemed attractive and speak well of “the God of the Old Testament.” They did giggle a bit when imagining people

⁶ Note the difference in terminology between *perath* in Jer 13:4–7 and the identification of *perath* as the great river of Babylon in these texts, Gen 2:14; 15:18; Deut 1:7; 11:24; Josh 1:4; 2 Sam 8:3; 2 Kings 23:29; 24:7; Jer 46:2, 6, 10; Jer 51:63; 1 Chron 5:9; 18:3; 2 Chron 35:20.

⁷ Alter, *Prophets*, 904.

holding on tight to God’s “lower body parts.” They struggled with the language of divine disappointment, but they did feel sorry for God. It was in the second part of Jeremiah 13, in the poetry section, when everything turned around, and noble theology lost its appeal to them.

Female Metaphors and Violence in Jeremiah 13:22–26

Before going into the poetry of Jeremiah 13, it is good to understand that the entire book Jeremiah is a composition of fragmented recollections of violence and catastrophic events. There is little coherency and structure, for the prophet himself is a deeply traumatized person. Gabor Maté, the sought-after expert in trauma, addiction, and childhood development, explains trauma in this way,

“The origin of the word ‘trauma’ is the Greek for ‘wound’. . . . Trauma is a psychic wound that hardens you psychologically that then interferes with your ability to grow and develop. . . . Trauma is not what happens to you, it’s what happens inside you as a result of what happened to you. Trauma is that scarring that makes you less flexible, more rigid, less feeling.”⁸

The second part of Jeremiah 13 is poetry filled with remarkably harsh and demeaning language in its use of female imagery. In verses 22 and 26, we hear about the rape of woman Jerusalem, the city also called Daughter of Zion (Jer 4:31; 6:2, 23). In verse 20, God calls on woman Jerusalem, “Raise your eyes and see the ones coming from the north.” When she asks, “Why do these things befall me?” she is told, “It is for your many crimes your skirts were stripped, your heels ripped back” (v. 22). The stripping of the skirts seems euphemistic language for rape, but when “your heels are violated” the language is explicit. Her face is covered by her

⁸ Gabor Maté in interviews about trauma, <https://thecreativemind.net/6786/understand-and-heal-from-emotional-wounds-the-wisdom-of-trauma-series/> accessed November 15, 2022.

own hitched up skirts, her entire naked body is exposed, and the woman is about to be raped.⁹ The Hebrew verbs used here are in a passive voice (*nifal*), and since Jeremiah’s warnings are about the Babylonian siege and victory over Judah, interpreters are led to assume the rapists are the Babylonian soldiers. In addition, the poem proclaims that the woman brought this fate upon herself, and she is to be blamed for it.

Female rape is a familiar metaphor for war in the Hebrew Bible and a common weapon of war throughout history. A recent UN report provides horrifying accounts of rape committed by Russian troops on Ukrainian women ranged in age from 4 years to over 80 years old.¹⁰ In November 2021, the World Health Organization named gender-based violence a public health issue especially for women and people identifying as women.¹¹ In August 2022, the World Council of Churches (WCC) released a statement issued by the global movement, Thursdays in Black, addressing the hard-won women’s rights that are currently reversed and patriarchal values re-asserted. The leaders of Thursdays in Black write,

In this global context, one reality shocks us to the core: the abuse carried out within our faith communities and the consistent silence and denial by local, national and global leadership that has permitted it to take place.

We cannot be silent in the knowledge that some in our faith communities choose to use their power and authority to protect the institution, and at times the perpetrators, rather than seek justice for victims and survivors of gender-based violence, sexual abuse and harassment.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Amanda Macias, “UN report details horrifying Ukrainian accounts of rape, torture and executions by Russian troops,” <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/28/russia-ukraine-war-un-report-details-accounts-of-rape-torture-and-executions.html>, accessed, November 15, 2022.

¹¹ “GBV has significant and long-lasting impacts on physical and mental health including injury, unintended pregnancy and pregnancy complications, sexually transmitted infections, HIV, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and even death,” in “Gender-based violence is a public health issue: using a health systems approach,” World Health Organization, accessed November 7, 2020, <https://www.who.int/news/item/25-11-2021-gender-based-violence-is-a-public-health-issue-using-a-health-systems-approach>.

¹² For the full text of the “Joint Message of Thursdays in Black Ambassadors on Gender-based Violence, Sexual Abuse, and Faith Communities” go to, <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/joint-message-of-thursdays-in-black-ambassadors-on-gender-based-violence-sexual-abuse-and-faith-communities>, accessed November 7, 2022.

Rape brutalizes in the most intimate of ways. The violator humiliates her, hurts her, and turns her into a bleeding victim, gasping for life. When the stripping of the skirts is repeated in Jeremiah 13, the verb *chasaf*, “strip off,” speaks loud and clear, and this time in an active voice, “I stripped back your skirts over your face” (v. 26). The violator is revealed: God is the rapist.

The imagery in which God inflicts sexual violence seems beyond the theological pale. To speak of God as a rapist says God is violent and condones male violence against women. While commentators are uncomfortable with the poem and what it provokes, they still tend to tolerate the description of God punishing Jerusalem with sexual violence.¹³ Others are disturbed by the depiction of God as a sexually violent retaliator and treat Jeremiah’s poem critically.¹⁴ Kathleen O’Connor speaks in favor of condemning the text “for its dangerous reinforcement of male supremacy and female victimhood.”¹⁵ At the same time, she argues for Jeremiah 13 as a “text of terror”¹⁶ that is central to defending God against the Babylonian deities. O’Connor says, “To make God the active agent of Judah’s humiliation is to insist that Babylonian deities have not triumphed, nor has ungoverned Fate propelled events.”¹⁷ Working within the framework of trauma informed readings on sexual violence, O’Connor suggests it is important to retain the language of rape for it describes and makes vivid the suffering of the

¹³ Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women’s Hebrew Bible: Feminism, Gender Justice, and the Study of the Old Testament* (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 101–104; Robert P. Carroll, *The Book of Jeremiah: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 304; R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 88.

¹⁴ Gracia Fay Ellwood, “Rape and Judgment,” *Daughters of Sarah* 11 (1985): 13; Mary E. Shields, “Multiple Exposures: Body Rhetoric and Gender in Ezekiel 16,” in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *Prophets and Daniel: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Second Series; New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 140; L. Julianna Claassens, “Not Being Content with God: Contestation and Contradiction in Communities under Duress,” *OTE* 30/3 (2017): 609–629.

¹⁵ Kathleen O’Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 55.

¹⁶ The phrase was coined by Phyllis Trible in her challenging work, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

community. “To eradicate the language would be to deny the physical, emotional, and theological disruption and humiliation at the center of Judah’s experience in this historical period.”¹⁸

Christian teachings and the Church have contributed little to the elimination of sexual violence against. Interpretations of the “texts of terror” are steeped in age-old patriarchal ideology ignoring the traumatic implications such readings have on women who have experienced sexual violence and sit in our classrooms and church pews. Emily Joy Allison, author of *#ChurchToo*, writes, “When we talk about #ChurchToo, it’s very important to include Christian colleges in the analysis. Christian colleges are the breeding grounds for the theologies that eventually become sacrosanct in our churches, and abuse and its mismanagement do not only occur out of ignorance.”¹⁹ My three students couldn’t agree more.

Rachel Weeping in Ramah in Jeremiah 31

Turning the pages to Jeremiah 31, we meet Jeremiah and his God again as they witness a strange phenomenon. “We heard a voice of terror, of trembling and no peace” (Jer 30:5 my translation). And then they become aware of a group of males, strong men, with pale faces who held their hands on their loins as if they were about to give birth (Jer 30:6). In a world with neatly fixed gender categories, men in distress portray themselves as women in childbirth. Julianna Claassens points out that the distinctly rich female metaphor of the Woman in Labor is appropriated by the men when they are humiliated and shamed at the hand of their captors.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Emily Joy Allison, *#ChurchToo: How Purity Culture Upholds Abuse and How to Find Healing* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Broadleaf Books, 2021), 70.

²⁰ Claassens, “The Rhetorical Function of the Woman in Labor Metaphor in Jeremiah 30-31: Trauma, Gender and Postcolonial Perspectives,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 150 (November 2014), 74.

The location of this incident would be one of the holding camps in the wadi for Judeans who were penned in before they were put on the long march to Babylon by the soldiers.

Walking a little further up the road to Ramah the prophet and his God hear another voice lamenting and weeping bitterly,

A voice on a height!
Lamentation can be heard,
Weeping most bitter.
Rachel is weeping for her sons,
Refusing to be consoled for her sons,
“Oh, not one here!”²¹
(Jeremiah 31:15)

Rachel is inconsolable. She is the Woman in Labor, she does not need to pretend. She died on the side of the road and was buried there quickly perhaps because of the state of her impurity from giving birth, which might have been perceived as a great danger and therefore her body was not carried to the family tomb in Machpelah.²² In the English translation, Rachel is weeping but is not given words to speak. She may have at least a few in the Hebrew text, *ki enennu* (“not one”). These two words belong to an enduring voice. “Directed to no one in particular, and hence to all who may hear, the voice of Rachel travels across the land and through the ages to permeate existence with a suffering that not even death can relieve (cf. Matt 2:18).”²³ “Not one” she cries out as she watches her children taken away from the camp in Ramah. Even Jeremiah is among them but will be given the opportunity to stay with the poor people left in the land (Jer 39:11; 40:1). All others will be carried away.

²¹ See translation with notes in Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 40.

²² Benjamin D. Cox and Susan Ackerman, “Rachel’s Tomb,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128/1 (2009): 135–148.

²³ Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 40.

My students wondered if God would be there too with Jeremiah in the camp since they had been together from the beginning of their travels. Did they still hang out without underwear? Why did you think it was a good idea, Jeremiah, to use the violated woman in the camp for your appalling metaphor about people in distress waiting to be deported? How did the portrayal of God as a sexually violent punisher come about? The students searched for possible ways out, solutions that would not let the male figure of the hook and neither for a metaphor in which God does the wounding of women.

A glimmer seemed to appear in the text, when the LORD for the first time turned away from the prophet and toward the wounded mother. Addressing her directly with a feminine-singular imperative, “Keep your voice from weeping, and your eyes from tears” (Jer 31:16) and then making a pledge to her, with the formula “oracle of YHWH” (*ne’um* YHWH) or “so declares the LORD” to reinforce the promise to Rachel,

For there is a reward for your work—
Oracle of YHWH—
They shall return from the land of the enemy.
And there is a hope for your future—
Oracle of YHWH—
Sons shall return to their borders.
(Jeremiah 31:16, 17)

God makes the pledge twice, “they shall return.” Repetition stresses its importance without drawing attention to the divine self. At least once in every line, possessive pronouns address her, Mother Rachel: your voice, your eyes, your work, your future. She dominates in the promise up until her children are considered, named, and quoted. Ephraim is the center in the poem: “Truly I have heard Ephraim rocking in grief” (Jer 31:20). YHWH becomes Mother Rachel. As Rachel cared for and mourned the loss of the fruit of her womb, so the LORD, from the

divine womb, mourns the same child. Yet there is a difference. The human mother refuses consolation; the divine mother changes grief into grace. Here is Phyllis Trible's translation:

Is Ephraim my dear son? my darling child?
For the more I speak of him,
the more I do remember him.
Therefore, my womb trembles for him;
I will truly show motherly-compassion upon him.
Oracle of Yahweh.
(Jeremiah 31:20)

The language of the divine womb is motherly compassion, which means "suffering together." The entire poem with its drama of voices—Rachel's inconsolable weeping, Ephraim's cry for help, and YHWH's promises spoken tenderly out of a trembling, open womb of God—introduces Jeremiah's book of Consolation. The newness of this book offers a never-before seen element; it is so radical that commentators puzzle over its terminology and significance.

How long will you slip away,
rebellious daughter?
For the LORD has created a new thing on earth—
the female goes round the male.
(Jeremiah 31:22)

Trible notes that the colon in this verse moves between mystery and meaning with all new words in a new land.²⁴ The "female" (*neqevah*) of the world "created" (*bara*) anew resonates with the "female" (*neqevah*) God "created" (*bara*) first (Gen 1:27). In the new land, she "surrounds" (*tesovev*) "man" (*geber*) in radical reversal.²⁵ In the echoes of these words the

²⁴ *Idem.*, 47.

²⁵ Alter notes, *the female goes round the male*. This is the literal sense of the Hebrew, and the claim of some scholars that the verb here means "protect" is dubious. Following the castigation of the young woman as a "rebellious daughter" who "slips away," the clause might be sarcastic: it is the way of the world for the male to court the female, but in this case of the wayward daughter the roles are scandalously reversed. Alter, *Prophets*, 965.

world turns upside down. A “new covenant” birthed from YHWH’s divine womb, embedded in motherly compassion, will be placed into a soft and receptive heart. Rachel shall be restored.

For I satisfy the soul of the exhausted woman,
and I fill the soul of every woman who fainted.
(Jeremiah 31:25, my translation)

A more poignant announcement can hardly be imagined for a grieving mother.

Behold, days are coming,
Declares the LORD,
I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah,
...
This is the covenant which I will make,
declares the LORD,
I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it;
And I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother,
saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me,
from the least of them to the greatest of them,
declares the LORD,
for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.
(Jeremiah 31:31, 33, 34)

This is too good to be true, the students said. They knew the world we live in does not look like this, at least not now. This compelled us to turn the pages of the book until we heard the weeping again. “There is never an ideal time to be a mother,” one said, “certainly not a mother on her way to Bethlehem.” According to the Gospel of Matthew, Rachel’s voice is still heard from her grave (Matt 2:18). How would she not cry? As long as there are wounds and wombs bleeding, she will weep.