

JEREMIAH'S LAST CONFESSION: STRUCTURE, IMAGE AND AMBIGUITY

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It is generally agreed that the passage seen as Jeremiah's final "Confession" (Jer 20:7-18) is made up of two sections: vv. 7-13, a "lament,"¹ analogous in form and language to those found in the Book of Psalms, and a "curse" (vv. 14-18). However, whereas the latter section is clearly an independent, self-contained unit, 7-13 can be subdivided in various ways: e.g., 7-10, 11-13, or as a unit from 7-11 with additional verses 12 and 13, or as a complete unit (Clines and Gunn, 1976a, pp. 394-397; Holladay, 1986, pp. 548-549).

It is, however, possible that the identification of vv. 7-13 as a "lament," based on form-critical criteria, has actually conditioned the way the text has been subsequently perceived, analyzed and interpreted. The problem has ceased to be: "how do we understand the disjunction that follows verse 11?" and has become instead, "given that the passage is a 'lament' how do we explain the features that do not quite fit?" So that, for example, Lewin (1985, p. 115) writes:

From a form-critical perspective, the exceptional feature of the lament is the appearance of an imperative "call to praise" (v. 13) in place of the expected first-person imperfect "vow of praise". Substitution of a later—if less conditional—formulation for a genuine prophetic word is unlikely. It is more reasonable to surmise that the peculiarity of this complaint is [*sic*] its original form was not that it turned to praise, but that it did not. The force of Jeremiah's lament was that it accomplished all the prescribed moves except the last, ending with a demand of revenge (Ps. 137) instead of a promise of praise. Seen as an interpolation, v. 13 supplies the lack but mitigates the force. However, in positing such an addition, one may credit the editor with more than a concern to assert Jeremiah's piety and the integrity of the form.

1. E.g., Thompson, 1980, p. 457; Lewin, 1985, p. 111. Clines and Gunn (1976a, p. 399) prefer the term "petition".

Lewin goes on to suggest that the verse may constitute an element in an argument about prophetic authority which is central to the problematic of the Book of Jeremiah, and may even be a "warning against a privatized reading" (1985, p. 116). However, once we have granted that v. 13 is an editorial addition with a variety of possible meanings and functions within the larger editorial unit, it ceases to be governed solely by the preceding "lament" and can no longer be taken as proof, one way or the other, that the preceding section was originally intended as a "lament."

More blunt on the subject is Holladay (1974, p. 103) who offers a variety of views:

About verse 13, I confess I am baffled. It is a genuine word from Jeremiah; it has all the marks of his choice of vocabulary. Now it may be a quite sincere word uttered on another occasion but inserted here by a later editor as a fit conclusion to verse 12. Or, on the other hand, it may be in Jeremiah's mind a continuation of verse 12 on a note of affirmation in just the way that Psalm 22:24 follows directly on Psalm 22:20-21. Or again it might be ironic, hysterical, or sarcastic, considering the material which both precedes and follows it. There is no way I can see to decide the matter.

THE PROBLEM OF VERSE 12

Clines and Gunn (1976a, p. 392) recognize a problem with verse 12 if it is to be classified as an individual lament. They list five elements that are typical of the lament form: (i) address (call to Yahweh), (ii) lament, (iii) confession of trust, or certainty of being heard, (iv) petition, and often (v) praise. In their scheme, 12a is the "confession of trust," 12b α is the "petition" and 12b β is also the "confession of trust." They add in a footnote:

Although it is more usual to find petition preceding certainty of being heard the order of the constituent parts is subject to considerable variation . . . moreover, there is in the certainty of being heard an element of motivation or argument linking it closely with confession of trust . . . which regularly precedes petition. It is therefore unnecessary to locate v. 12 *before* v. 11 (A. Weiser), or to interpret v. 12b as certainty of being heard (A. J. J. Gunneweg). The latter procedure suffers an added serious disadvantage in that it necessitates postulating Jer 20:7-13 as a psalm of individual lament with no petition (p. 392 n. 10).

Both of the above solutions have their merits. Nevertheless they do seem unduly colored by the need to fit the verses into a pre-existent scheme, and it is possible that a fresh examination that is not so

conditioned may yield different conclusions. For example, two elements raise questions about the way verse 12 relates to the preceding section.

First, the reason for Jeremiah's trust in God's requital of his enemies is his own experience of the dread power of God. As Clines and Gunn themselves express it (1976a, p. 397):

It is precisely because in the prophet's own experience Yahweh is an oppressive and irresistible God, who is stronger than his victim, prevails over him and commits violence and outrage against him (v. 7f), that he may be called on in turn to become the irresistible divine oppressor of the prophet's human oppressors (v. 11).

That is to say, there is a self-contained explanation within vv. 7–11 of Jeremiah's self-assurance that God will and can overcome the prophet's adversaries, that is based, albeit with bitter irony, on his own experience of God's power. Thus the additional idea, introduced in v. 12, that God, as a God who sees into the heart of the righteous, will bring requital upon the prophet's adversaries continues the theme of their inevitable punishment, adds a rationalization for it, but introduces an extraneous and in some ways redundant element. This view is reinforced when one recognizes the other elements within verses 7–11 that display a strong inner cohesion and suggest that these verses form a self-contained unit.

a. the key word *yākōl* 'to overcome' which appears four times (vv. 7, 9, 10, 11) (and additionally in the word play with *kalkēl*) applying to God, the enemies and the prophet;

b. as Clines and Gunn note (1976a, p. 397), the repetition of *pātāh* (v. 7), which "moreover, underlines this fundamental parallelism between Yahweh and the persecutors;"

c. the recurrent theme of mockery and shame, expressed through six different verbs—*lišhoq*, *lō'ēg* (v. 7); *lēherpāh*, *ûlēqeles* (v. 8); *bōšū*, *kēlimmat* (v. 11).

It is only the repetition of the verb *nāqam* (requite) in the quoted words of the prophet's enemies (v. 10) and in his hope for God's actions (v. 12) that provides a linguistic link between the latter verse and the former section. In fact, it could be argued that the assertion that God is a righteous examiner of human motivations and will therefore punish Jeremiah's enemies is a contradiction of the image of a violent and overwhelming, perhaps even arbitrary, God which is portrayed in the first five verses.

The second and related problem with v. 12 is the oft-noted fact that variations of it appear elsewhere in Jeremiah, most clearly in 11:20, but also in 17:10. Clines and Gunn are right in noting that our verse is not

identical with 11:20 so that it cannot be merely dismissed as a gloss, and also that the verse does have thematic and linguistic connections with what precedes (1976a, p. 397); nevertheless, they have not evaluated the role it plays in the other two locations.

In both situations (11:20 and 17:10) the context used by the prophet (or editor) actually contradicts the simple affirmation within the verse of God's certain intervention to save the righteous. Thompson (1980, p. 461) argues that "the verse repeats 11:20 with some variations as though deliberately to reaffirm once more what he had affirmed earlier." This may well be the case, but what precisely is Jeremiah affirming in 11:20? Though the statement is immediately followed by the confirmation that God will punish his enemies, the men of Anathot, the next section puts God on trial precisely because the wicked *do* flourish, despite the pious hope of 11:20, and God's righteous prophet suffers.

Indeed, there is a clear word play on the verse in question. God, who (*bōhēn kēlāyōt vālēb*) "examines the kidneys and heart" (11:20), is "near to their mouths but (*rāhōq mikkilyōtēhem*) far from their kidneys" (12:3). Similarly, the despairing prophet has to plead with God who has indeed "examined my heart" (*bāhantā libbî*) (12:3) to help him—only to be rebuffed (12:5–6). Thus 12:1–6 may be seen as a word for word commentary on, and critique of, the pious hope expressed in 11:20, as if testing out a theological proposition against human realities. Similarly, in chapter 17 comes an assertion that life goes badly with the one who puts God aside and well with the one who trusts in the Lord (vv. 5–8), followed by the affirmation that "I the Lord research the heart, examine the kidneys (*bōhēn kēlāyōt*), to give each man according to his way, according to the fruit of his doings" (v. 10). Yet this is followed by Jeremiah's complaint that God's word, which he has prophesied, has not come true and that he is constantly under attack.

That is to say, the two related verses belong in contexts where these pious affirmations about a causal relationship between obedience to God and reward are being attacked, this critique coming from the prophet's own experience that the world does not work that way at all, a problem which is at the heart of all the "confessions." It is therefore quite possible that in chapter 20, as well, the use of v. 12 is not merely or even primarily a confirmation of Jeremiah's faith in some inevitable requital by God of his enemies, but carries with it precisely that same ambiguity that it had in the other two "confessions." Indeed the verse may serve to confirm the continuity of argument that runs through them. Certainly that might help explain the despairing note that occurs in verses 14–18, i.e., they are not a sudden reversal of the affirmation of faith in the first section, but belong to part of a larger argument.

THE STRUCTURE OF VERSES 7-11

If we now return to verses 7-11, it is possible to see them not only as a thematic unit (to which verse 12 is an appendix), but also to recognize that the verses are organized in a concentric structure.² The outer frame is the one already indicated by Clines and Gunn, namely the power of God in overcoming the prophet (v. 7) and the corresponding power of God to overcome Jeremiah's enemies (v. 11). The same verses introduce the theme of "shame": the mockery experienced by the prophet every day as he speaks God's word (*lišhōq*, *lō'eg*), and the corresponding shame (*bōšū*, *kēlimmat*) to be felt by his enemies when they fail.

What links verses 8 and 10 is something of a different order, namely the myriad detached voices that are evoked by them.³ Whatever Jeremiah

2. Fishbane has also seen a "ring" structure in this section (1979, pp. 93-94), but he draws it over verses 7-12. His reading is strengthened by the perception that both v. 7 and v. 12 utilize direct speech of God ("You"), unlike the intervening verses which refer to God indirectly ("He"). His paper is generally very persuasive and valuable in its examination of the relationship of the section to other reference points in Jeremiah's life and in its literary analysis, which draws attention to elements such as alliteration. His structure is illustrated as follows (1979, p. 93):

- A stanza 1 (v. 7) direct speech to God ("You")
- B stanza 2 (vv. 8-9) self-reflection; indirect reference to God ("He")
- C stanza 3 (v. 10) recollection of enemies' plots against "him"
- B' stanza 4 (v. 11) self-reflection; indirect reference to "the Lord"
- A' stanza 5 (v. 12) direct speech to God ("You").

I would nevertheless quarrel with his division which makes verse 10 the center. He characterizes it as "recollection of enemies' plots against 'him'," which it is, but this hardly makes for a central climax that matches the significance of the surrounding matter or holds the overall structure together. Moreover his emphasis on the significance of *yākōl* which "underlines the thematic transformations and progressions in Jeremiah 20:7-12 as a whole" (1979, p. 101) ignores the fact that the verb is not present in v. 12. His general argument about the section containing vv. 11-12 would be equally valid if v. 12 were omitted. What he sees as a "closure" (1979, p. 101-102) in v. 12 can equally stand independently as an argument within the broader structure of vv. 7-18.

In the end one has to weigh the probabilities: the weakness of v. 10 compared to v. 9 as the center of the section; the significance of the second person address to God in v. 7 and v. 12 as opposed to the redundancy or even contrariness of v. 12; the sheer weight of repeated elements within v. 7-11 which mark it off as a unit. In making 7-11 the unit I am following the principle that Fishbane himself suggests: "What will be produced, by way of interpretation, is a reflex of the dialectical relationship between Jeremiah 20:7-12 and one reader" (1979, p. 93).

3. What features are required to indicate that two particular verses correspond to each other within a concentric structure? Most obviously and commonly it is the appearance in both of particular words or phrases. However, as in this case, it may also be factors like the use of explicit or implicit quoted statements within the corresponding verses that indicates their relationship. Most obviously in Amos 6:2, 13, but see also Isaiah 3:6-7, 10-11.

may be referring to when he calls out *ḥāmās vāšōd* ‘violence and destruction’ (the violence about him in his society, the violence threatened against the nation by God, or the violence perpetrated against him by God),⁴ we are given an impression of these words floating in the air whenever he opens his mouth. Similarly, v. 10 is full of such isolated phrases. The very disjointedness of the sentence, where some statements float without any introductory expression of speech, evokes the feeling of words attacking him from all sides: *māgôr miššābīb* ‘dread all around’; *haggîdû vĕnaggîdennû* ‘denounce him, denounce him!’ or ‘announce, yes, let us announce it!’ (Holladay, 1986, pp. 548, 556); *ʔūlay yĕputteh vĕnūklāh lô vĕniqĕhāh niqmātĕnû mimmennû* ‘perhaps he will be trapped and we will overcome him and have our revenge on him’. It is highly evocative of a state of mental disturbance, one which might be called “paranoid” were it not an accurate reflection of Jeremiah’s social and political isolation and persecution. But it also evokes the power of language and words themselves, those he utters in God’s name and those flung against him.

The structure of the section can be shown schematically as follows (Diagram I):

- v. 7 Power of God (*pātah, ḥāzaq, yākôl*)
Mockery/Shame (of Jeremiah) (*šāḥaq, lāʿag*)
- v. 8 Voices (*ḥāmās vāšōd*)
(Mockery/Shame (of Jeremiah) (*ḥerpāh, qeles*))
- v. 9 Jeremiah
- v. 10 Voices (*māgôr miššābīb, haggîdû vĕnaggîdennû, ʔūlay yĕputteh vĕnūklāh lô vĕniqĕhāh niqmātĕnû mimmennû*)
(Power (Enemies) (*pātāh, yākôl*))
- v. 11 Power of God (*gibbôr ʿārîš*)
Mockery/Shame (of Enemies) (*bûš, kĕlimmāh*)

There are thus three elements in these four outer verses—Power (of God, of Jeremiah’s enemies), Mockery/Shame (of Jeremiah and ultimately of his enemies), and Voices (Jeremiah’s own words and cries, the words of his enemies). They isolate the central verse (9) which we must now examine):

If I say/think “I will not mention Him/it, and no more speak in His name”, there is in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones and I am weary with holding it in but I cannot.

4. For a discussion see Clines and Gunn (1976b, pp. 24–27).

The prophet struggles with the two forces acting upon himself. The power of God (*yākôl*) demands that he speak; the power of his enemies outside (also represented by the root *yākôl*) demands that he be silent. But the power of God is greater and he “cannot” *lō' yūkāl*) hold the word in. He wishes neither to evoke God’s name (cf. Ps 20:6) nor to speak God’s words, but he is powerless to hold them in. All this despite God’s assertion when he was called, “behold I have put My words into your mouth” (1:9), and in bitter contrast to the enthusiasm expressed in another of his “confessions” when God’s word was something utterly different for him:

Your words were found and I devoured them, and Your words were to me a delight and a joy to my heart for Your name was called upon me, O Lord God of hosts! (15:16).

The very structure of this unit dramatizes the forces acting upon Jeremiah. For if we simplify Diagram I by highlighting the three “characters,” we see the following (Diagram II):

- v. 7 God
- v. 8 Enemies
- v. 9 Jeremiah
- v. 10 Enemies
- v. 11 God

Jeremiah (his personal assessment of his situation, v. 9) is geographically at the center, at a point of unstable equilibrium, between the pressures exerted by the enemies who are literally “all around” him and the greater controlling power of God that frames the whole structure.

But verse nine does more than merely express his despair; it touches upon a theme that runs throughout this section, namely the ambiguity of language itself and the treacherous nature of words. Virtually all the phrases evoked in verses 8 and 10 are either echoes, or perversions, of the words the prophet himself uses on behalf of God (cf. Fishbane, 1979, pp. 98–99):

hāmās vāshōd is a cry against the violence in his society (6:7) now transformed to express the violence used against the prophet, perhaps even by God. The mocking *māgôr missābīb* used against him is Jeremiah’s own phrase of warning used against Pashhur earlier in our chapter (20:3) and elsewhere in the Book (6:25; 46:5; 49:29). The verbs *pātāh* and *yākôl* which he has used of God’s power over him come to express the desire of his enemies to overcome the prophet. The *nēqāmāh* (just requital) which is seen below (v. 12) and elsewhere (17:10) as a divine prerogative (Ps 94:1) is here the expressed wish of his enemies against him.

These shouted voices that he hears are not only threats posed against his personal safety, they represent the fearful distortion of the word itself, the divine word that he must transmit in its purity and truth. The section evokes in addition the battle he has against the false prophets who pervert the word of God. Elsewhere he has even played with the terminology of prophecy to indicate how the false prophets pervert not only the context of prophecy but its very form: they “repeatedly say” (23:17); they “dream dreams” (23:25); they steal God’s words (23:30); they “oracularize oracles”—here a unique coinage where Jeremiah makes a verb of the noun, *nēʾûm* (cf. Thompson, 1980, p. 502) (23:31); they invent prophetic “burdens” (against other nations) (23:34). Thus this entire passage is a reflection upon the central issue of his vocation and task, its impossibility and the equal impossibility of desisting from it.

Yet there is a further dimension to this passage in the image of something shut up within the prophet that threatens to burst out of him, whatever he does to hold it in. Heschel (1962, pp. 113–114) suggested that the language of v. 7, particularly the use of *pātāh* and *hāzaq*, could imply seduction and rape:

The striking feature of the verse is the use of two verbs *pātāh* and *hāzaq*. The first term is used in the Bible and in the special sense of wrongfully inducing a woman to consent to prenuptial intercourse (Exod. 22:16 (H. 22:15); cf. Hos. 2:14 (H.2:16); Job 31:9). The second term denotes the violent forcing of a woman to submit to extranuptial intercourse, which is thus performed against her will (Deut. 22:15; cf. Judg. 19:25; II Sam. 13:11). The first denotes seduction or enticement; the second rape. Seduction is distinguished from rape in that it does not involve violence. The woman seduced has consented, although her consent may have been gained by allurements. The words used by Jeremiah to describe the impact of God upon his life are identical with the terms of seduction and rape in the legal terminology of the Bible.

Clines and Gunn (1976b, pp. 20–27) argue against this reading, pointing instead to other usages of the verb *pātāh*, and prefer the meaning “persuade.” They make the point (1976b, p. 21) that “to suppose that such a contextually determined usage (‘rape’ in Exod 22:15) carries overtones into other passages is to commit the error of ‘illegitimate totality transfer.’” That may well be a risk, but it does not *exclude* the possible meaning “rape” if the new context also allows for it (cf. Carroll, 1981, pp. 311–312, n. 46). Fishbane prefers to keep all the possible options available to Jeremiah: “Accordingly, on the basis of the implicit semantics of *pātāh*, the prophet is felt to be a person at once overwhelmed by God’s control and filled with an acute sense of having been duped by Him” (1979, p. 95).

Nevertheless the imagery of "rape" has a significant consequence within the section as a whole. For if the prophet has indeed been "raped" by God, then he can also become literally "pregnant" with the word of God which he must bring to birth whether he will or not; the word is the child he cannot hold in.⁵ Fishbane (1979, pp. 97–98) notes this possibility without recognizing how central it is to the whole structure:

Thus Jeremiah knew himself seduced and filled by divine words of fire (20:9). Much as his frequent wish that he had died unborn in his mother's womb (15:10; 20:14–18) is undisguised anger at the natural source of his destiny, his present attempt to stifle *the prophetic word incubating within him* (my italics) is, correspondingly, an attempt to act out his anger on his own body. Perhaps because of the prenatal (1:5) and adolescent (1:9; 5:14) factors in his prophetic biography, Jeremiah recurrently expressed his experiences with images of interiority (e.g., 4:19–20; 15:10, 15–16; 20:9, 14:18; 23:9).

Thus the language of seduction and overpowering is not merely "a startling image that is then dropped" (Lewin, 1985, p. 113), but is actually a precise description of the prophet's experience followed through to its logical conclusion.⁶

THE STRUCTURE OF VERSES 14–18

This latter section has received less attention than the former. Three major issues have been explored in recent scholarship:

5. The recognition of the birth imagery can already be found in Rabbinic midrash: The people would say to Jeremiah, "Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord" (11:21). And Jeremiah would answer, "I, too, do not wish to mention His name. But what can I do? It is in my heart like a burning fire. I am like a woman seated on her birthstool. If I say, 'I will not mention Him, and no more speak in His name,' there is in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones." The phrase "shut up" has reference to the tightness of the womb at giving birth as in the verse, "For the Lord had closely shut up all the wombs" (Gen 20:18). (*Pēsiktā Rabbātī* 27/28:1)
6. Indirect support for this view comes from the frequency with which Jeremiah uses images connected with "giving birth." They include his own birth (1:5; 15:10; 20:14–18) and the accusation that idol-worshippers say to a stone: "You gave me birth" (2:27). Frequently he uses the pain and fear of the moment of giving birth to illustrate the suffering experienced when being overcome by enemies and defeated: "the daughter of Zion" (6:24; 13:21), the king (22:23), other nations (48:41; 49:24). However most striking for our context is Jeremiah's portrait of the fear of Israel and Judah: "Thus says the Lord: We have heard a cry of panic, of terror and no peace. Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor?" (30:5–6).

a. the implications of the similarity of this section to Job 3:1–12—this either leads to speculation on the possible relationship between the two passages or the assumption that both are variations on a stereotyped language and imagery shaped by tradition (Clines and Gunn, 1976a, pp. 406–407; Lewin, 1985, p. 116; Carroll, 1981, p. 129).

b. the question of how far the passage is to be read as private or public material, i.e., for or against what Carroll (1981, p. 107) refers to as “the Skinnerian approach to Jeremiah as biographic portraiture.” Is this curse, together with the rest of the confession, to be seen as an expression of the prophet’s psychological state or is it instead (i) a conventional prophetic utterance of distress in the face of the coming destruction (Clines and Gunn, 1976a, p. 407); (ii) part of his public proclamation, a validation of his ministry, “a statement about what it means to be God’s prophet to Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century” (Lewin, 1985, p. 17) or (iii) a reflection of the exilic community’s suffering (Carroll, 1981, pp. 129–130)?

c. its function at this point within the book as “a transition from the personal experiences of the prophet (chs. 19–20) to the collective experience of the people (chs. 21–24) in which the prophet was involved” (Thompson, 1980, p. 463, based on Clines and Gunn, 1976a, pp. 405–408; cf. Polk, 1984, pp. 160–162).

Only Lewin (1985, p. 116) focuses on the actual content of the curse as being consistent with the theme of the prophetic word that runs throughout the confession:

His curse is less a prayer than a spell; no longer casting himself on God’s mercy, Jeremiah falls back on the effective power of the word he himself chooses to speak.

The power of the word is obliquely emphasised also in the content of the curse. Jeremiah curses the messenger who heralded his birth. The prophet who suffers so greatly in his role as messenger of doom portrays himself as “the bad news”.

Again it is revealing to examine the structure of the passage and note that it, too, has a simple concentric framework.

The outer “ring” is indicated by the word *yôm* ‘day: the “day” of his birth (v. 14) and the “days” of shame with which his life will end (v. 18). A “typical” day is also characterized in v. 16, here described in two component parts, “morning” and “noon.” The birth motif is likewise expressed in both verses: “cursed be the day I was born” and “why did I leave the womb.” Thus his birth and entire lifetime are to be contained within the section, a feature that sensitizes the reader to seek clues to the personal implications for the prophet of the material it contains.

Verses 15 and 17 focus on the activities of the man, the messenger, who is to be cursed. Why is he to be cursed? Two reasons are given, and not just the first one recorded in v. 15. Because of what he *did*—informing the father that a male child was born; and because of what he *did not do*—not killing the child in the womb of the mother. Thus the “man” who is to be cursed for performing a conventional task is also held accountable for failing to prevent the birth. Incidentally this enables both parents, father and mother, to be equally represented within these two related verses.

This isolates the central verse, 16, which describes the fate that Jeremiah wishes the man to suffer. Attention has been drawn to the conventional terminology of the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrah within this verse, as evidence of the stereotypical usage in such a “curse.” Nevertheless the second element of the curse, “let him hear a cry in the morning and an alarm at noon,” may have a more specific referent within Jeremiah’s own experience. Thus in 4:19–22 (cf. Holladay, 1976, p. 157) the prophet bewails his own experience, hearing the imminent sounds of warfare about to descend upon his people, a sound to which his contemporaries are utterly deaf. Let the man also experience the torment that Jeremiah himself had experienced. Thus in some sense Jeremiah *is* the man, and the curse is indeed a self-curse describing the suffering the prophet has experienced because of his vocation. The power of such a curse and the danger of it being somehow effective should the speaker be more explicit (cf. the fate of Hananiah 28:16–17) might be sufficient reason for using this elaborate substitution of “the man.”⁷

The view that Jeremiah is actually referring to himself throughout this passage is reinforced by the echo in v. 18 of his “call” (1:5), “before you came out from the womb I set you apart.” This link may be part of an overall *inclusio* across this entire section of the book (1:4–20:18) (Lewin, 1985, p. 106; Holladay, 1986, p. 563), so that what he is cursing is not only his life but his entire prophetic vocation and all its consequences.

7. The euphemistic substitution of another for oneself occurs when the speaker fears harm if he specifically names himself. For example, in Num 16:14 Dathan and Abiram are not worried about Moses putting out the eyes of “those men” but of themselves. Similarly David’s oath (1 Sam 25:22) is not directed against the “enemies of David” but against himself. The formula “may the Lord do so and more,” without specifying what the Lord might do is also a way of mitigating the danger of uttering a threatening word. For once such a word has been expressed it has independent power and may rebound on the speaker. I am indebted to Professor Raphael Loewe for the suggestion that when someone used this formula he may have made a hand gesture, like symbolically cutting his throat, so as to complete the oath without actually saying the dangerous words aloud.

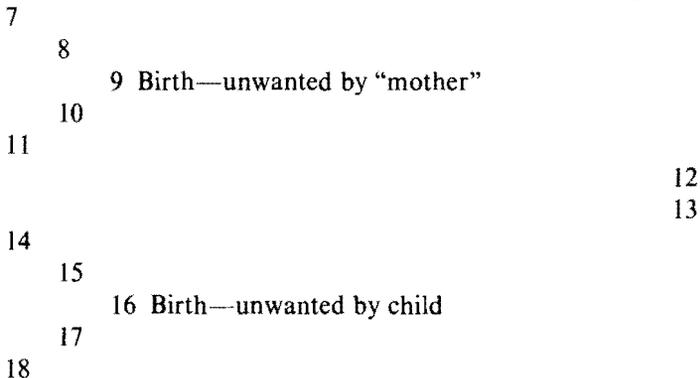
The structure can be schematized (Diagram III):

14. Curse the day of birth (Mother)
 15. What the man did (Birth)
 - Father
 16. Curse: Like cities overthrown
 - Hear sounds of war (all day)
 - (Jeremiah's experience 4:19-22)
 17. What the man did not do (Death)
 - Mother
18. Days (that are cursed) from birth till death
 - (Jeremiah's vocation 1:5)

This reading of the passage as a highly personal statement about the prophet's experience of his calling nevertheless does not exclude reading the same section as if the "I" of the prophet was somehow paradigmatic for the nation. In fact the central verse would reinforce the very ambiguity that allows for both readings, for if hearing the sounds of war is an echo of Jeremiah's actual personal experience, the curse that he "be like the cities the Lord overthrew without pity," with its echoes of Sodom and Gomorrah, would equally reflect the coming fate of Jerusalem and the people (cf. Isa 1:9-10).

THE STRUCTURE OF VERSES 7-18

The analysis of vv. 7-11 as an independent unit, concentric in structure, together with the similar assessment of vv. 14-18, leads to a different overview of the section. It is not a "lament" (vv. 7-13) followed by a "curse" (vv. 14-18), but two similar sections, both concentric, containing between them the different verses 12 and 13 (Diagram IV):



However, what emerges most powerfully and startlingly from this overview is the extent to which 7-11 and 14-18 are actually inverted images

of each other. In 7–11, Jeremiah is the ravished woman who must give birth to an unwanted child, and who struggles in vain to hold it in. In 14–18, Jeremiah himself is the “unwanted child” that tries to remain locked up, buried in the womb, never to come out. To give birth to the word leads to endless mockery and threat; to “be” the word is likewise to be torn by the tragic message it contains. However “public” the text here might also become, it remains intensely personal and idiosyncratic, the prophet’s own cry of bewilderment and despair.

Moreover, the sudden transition to hope and joy expressed by verses 12 and 13 which is then reversed by 14–18 becomes a more organic part of the dialectic of the passage if they are seen as at the center of the overall structure (as verses 9 and 16 are central to their particular units) and not just the “happy end” to the earlier “lament.”

It has already been suggested that v. 12 is not unambiguously optimistic. It reflects the ongoing argument within the “confessions” about the distance between pious affirmations about God’s providence protecting the righteous and the unpleasant realities of daily human experience. The argument is given added point by Jeremiah’s own suffering. The juxtaposition of verse 12 with the hymnic verse 13, which likewise asserts that God rescues the needy from the wicked, sets these two positive affirmations between the two units we have examined (vv. 7–11 and 14–18) which contradict them by illustrating Jeremiah’s own bitter experience. The overall structure is thus a further, perhaps final, dramatization of the same debate. Both views, the optimistic and the pessimistic are set side by side, utilizing the familiar concentric framework to give equal weight to both positions, those expressed by the outer frame and those expressed by the center. It is for the reader, aware of both sets of information, to decide which view is correct, or even to hold both at once as a genuine paradox of faith.

Is this too subtle a conclusion? The analysis of the structure stands, whatever the interpretation one derives from it. Nevertheless, it is worth recalling that central to Jeremiah’s own struggle is the inflated optimism of the false prophets with whom he had to struggle. Moreover, as episodes like the one with Hananiah in chapter 28 indicate, the entire people was faced with resolving the diametrically opposed views of two equally official “prophets” who had publicly debated before them. The issue of God’s providence was not only Jeremiah’s personal dilemma, it was also out in the market place. Only history vindicated his view, and even then, as the episode in 44:15–19 shows, the matter was not really settled for his contemporaries even after the destruction. So why should not the final confession continue the argument of the earlier ones so that

the readers of the book are themselves forced to enter the struggle alongside the prophet and not take any simple solution for granted?

The two images: of the child that must be born yet should not, and of the word that has to be spoken yet must not, themselves embody the paradox of faith—to trust in God's ultimate righteousness despite the daily assaults on this view in human experience. Jeremiah does both, he curses and he sings the praise of God, for only thus, like Job, can he do justice to faith and to reality, to the God of his confessions who "tests the righteous."

There is a remarkable parallel to Jeremiah's utterance in v. 9 in the words of a contemporary Jewish prophet, one who saw beneath the surface of European society, and who in his writings anticipated the destruction and dehumanization that the Nazi period ushered in. Perhaps Franz Kafka, who was a student of the Bible and a creator of his own "midrash," identified with this confession of Jeremiah. In his diary entry of 6/21/1912 he wrote the following words that express with equal power Jeremiah's dilemma:

The tremendous world I have in my head. But how can I release it and release myself without tearing myself apart? And it is a thousand times better to tear myself apart than to keep it in check or buried in me. That is what I am here for, of that I am quite clear (1964).

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