

Grounded: in the Body in Time & Place, in Scripture

Desert Spring, Dead Dog Waterhole, Disappointment Creek: Is the God of the Book of Jeremiah Bad for Women?

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Meet the author

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Chapter overview

Uncomplimentary feminine metaphors and depictions of masculine violence in the first half of Jeremiah are distressing to many readers, raising concerns about a contribution to present day misogyny, intimate partner violence, and weaponised rape. God presents himself as a reliable spring of living water (2:13) but the people of the book of Jeremiah trust in other sources of safety and life, including political alliances, worship of other deities, and the abuse of power and control. Understanding Jeremiah's use of metaphor, genre and the book's structure help us to see that God is not a poisoned waterhole nor an unreliable creek.

My chapter firstly explains prophecy as timefull, persuasive and complex, noting that Jeremiah was urgently warning Judah of dangers of the rise of Babylon. Jeremiah uses harsh caricature and gender reversal to challenge Judah's myopia, then seeks to elicit pity in describing a frightening dystopia of danger to 'daughter Zion.' In the second half of the book, Jeremiah presents comforting pictures of future flourishing for women and men in a utopian return to Zion (chapters 30–33), and reframes the exile in Babylon as a heterotopia, a rehabilitation facility in the safety of the eye of the storm. Women and men who remain in Judah are also invited to flourish, living in safety, eating summer fruits, and drinking wine.

General Study Questions

Question 1

What is your initial reaction to the harsh metaphors in Jeremiah (e.g., 2:20–25)?

Question 2

Have you heard of these kinds of images being used to demean women or condone violence?

Question 3 What questions arise for you about God and the book of Jeremiah as you encounter these uncomfortable feminine metaphors?

Question 4

Which of these ideas about prophecy (timefull, persuasive, complex, pages 122–124) is helpful to you in gaining a better understanding of the use of these metaphors? (e.g., Tim Winton’s portrayal of monstrous men is not misanthropy but has a persuasive intent, page 123).

Question 5

Do any of these parallels with modern literature help us to understand different genres and contexts in Jeremiah? How?

- **Myopia** addressed by caricature and gender reversal (pages 125–127). *Animal Farm* uses farmyard caricatures to make a clear point. Naomi Alderman calls out gender prejudice in *The Power* by making women the dominant group.
- **Dystopia** (pages 127–129) *The Handmaid’s Tale* and *The Hunger Games* present dystopias to invite reflection on social structures. George Orwell said about *1984* “I have tried to draw out these ideas to their logical consequences” (page 127).
- **Utopia** (pages 131–132) The negative portrayal of women is reversed in chapters 30–33. God desires women to thrive in the future return to Judah?
- **Heterotopia** (pages 132–133). Foucault’s heterotopias include any temporary space where the rules are different from everyday life (gardens, libraries, football games, holidays, honeymoons). The exile can be reframed as timeout, like Stephen King’s story in *On Writing*, or like the eye of the storm in a cyclone. The remnant in Judah is invited to a foretaste of the return, drinking wine and eating summer fruit in safety.

Question 3

Is the God of Jeremiah bad for women? What would you say if someone at your church asked you about these metaphors in the first half of the book?

- Pray for victims and survivors of intimate partner violence and weaponised rape.

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- Use lament, thanksgiving, and praise to respond to your reflections on the book of Jeremiah.

Academic Questions

Question 1

1. What is the value of understanding genres, use of metaphors, and the structure of Jeremiah in interpreting individual sections?

Question 2

What are some theological implications of the portrayal of women in the various sections of Jeremiah?

Question 3

Intimate partner Violence (pages 129–131): what other useful resources for reading these texts do you know about?