

## JEREMIAH AND THE DIMENSIONS OF THE MORAL LIFE

DOUGLAS A. KNIGHT  
VANDERBILT DIVINITY SCHOOL, NASHVILLE, TN 37240

**I**N continuity with his prophetic predecessors, Jeremiah considered it one of his primary tasks to make the people of Judah aware of their faults. This is among the divine charges he receives:

I have made you an assayer of my people,  
that you should know and assay their conduct (*derek*). (Jer 6:27)

As a prophet of both the preexilic and exilic periods, Jeremiah felt compelled to speak out against the people's religious and moral practices, to declare God's imminent judgment against them if they did not repent and reform, eventually to announce that their failure so to reform meant that God's punishment no longer could be diverted, and then finally after the cataclysm to aid the people in understanding it and in preparing for the future. For him as for all the prophets the morality and religion of the people are intimately intertwined, with both subject to divine scrutiny according to the standards and expectations that have been made known to the people since ancient times. Jeremiah moves easily between the religious and moral spheres in his critique of Judah. The people's rebellion against God incorporates both, for each sphere is in essence rooted in the other.

It is common for us to differentiate between morality and religion, and this can be appropriate in our study of ancient Israel so long as we do not lose sight of their interdependence in the biblical view. We consider religion to encompass primarily those acts and attitudes ordered toward God, while morality consists of human behavior and postures ordered toward humanity. With morality we observe persons conducting themselves, either individually or in concert with others, according to value or right. The ethicist analyzes such activity while attempting to address especially three fundamental issues that recur throughout the long history

of the discipline: the nature and locus of the good; the nature of the moral agent; and the function of norms and principles in moral judgment.<sup>1</sup> As a part of this, it may be possible to construct a theory of moral agency, a systematic and ordered display of all aspects operating in the processes of the moral life. This would aim to clarify all dimensions of existence which impinge upon the process of moral acting.<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah himself has no interest in developing a theory of moral agency. His concerns are much more practical and direct: to bring the people's faults to their attention and to persuade them of the course of action which they should immediately adopt. Nonetheless, it is reasonable to assume that the prophet indeed had a clear conception of the moral nature of the people who deserved the divine judgment. Whether or not he would have been capable of consciously and systematically articulating the various elements of this conception as it relates to moral agency is of little concern to us. It is equally inappropriate for us to expect that Jeremiah, any more than any other individual, operated throughout his whole lifetime with a single and consistent view of the moral actors around him. As events moved closer to the fall of Jerusalem, the people's intransigence in the face of his calls for repentance evoked from Jeremiah an increasingly pessimistic evaluation of their capability for moral rectitude and religious loyalty to YHWH. His assessment may not even be radically reversed in his later pronouncements of hope and deliverance, as we shall see.

To gain an understanding of Jeremiah's view of the moral life, we need to examine in sequence six fundamental conditions of the moral agent. These are all elements that contribute to the makeup of human existence inasmuch as they characterize human nature and human community. As such, they bear on one's moral judgment and conduct. Our method involves an inductive approach to Jeremiah's conception of the moral life through an analysis of all possible texts which make some reference, however obliquely, to any of these conditions. The sources for this are thus the utterances generally recognized to be Jeremianic, together with, in a more cautious and critical fashion, the prose narratives that stem from Jeremiah's biographer. Deuteronomistic and other later additions to this collection are generally disregarded; they belong to the theology and ethics of the Book of Jeremiah, but less so to the theological anthropology of the historical Jeremiah.

### I. The Conditions of the Moral Agent

What is the nature of the moral agent according to Jeremiah? Are there human characteristics of a fundamental nature that affect one's moral

action? To what extent is the individual subject to influences from without? Is it indeed appropriate to hold the agent fully responsible for all actions and choices? To achieve resolution of these problems one needs to focus on several conditions of the moral agent. Such conditions are conceived here not as empirical components of life but as ideal types of various aspects of life as it is played out in the actual contexts of existence. Such typologies can aid us in illuminating the complexities of life, but it would be unwarranted to force these distinctions or to advocate the radical autonomy of any from the others. This is especially the case for Hebraic anthropology which does not strive for an ordered, segmented systematization of human life, but rather for an understanding of human existence.

### 1) Rationality

For Jeremiah, the moral agent's characteristics of rationality, volition, and affectivity are mentioned usually in his utterances directed to the people as a whole. However, he seems to consider them not as social attributes but as properties of the individual. It is not the corporate entity that is rational, volitional, or affective in the first instance. Rather, the persons comprising the society possess these characteristics as individuals. To be sure, they may be sharing them in common and are also affecting each other's moral qualities; this is the factor of sociality, to be addressed below, for which Jeremiah can pronounce judgment on the whole people. Yet with respect to the other three aspects he is speaking to Judah essentially as a collectivity of agents who each respectively demonstrates these certain traits. Only occasionally does he single out persons, primarily kings and prophets, for direct and specific comment.

Jeremiah's view of rationality is not dissimilar from that which is evident from other pages of the Hebrew Bible.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the heart figures prominently, especially in the Deuteronomistic passages, as the image for the intellectual and rational functions, including those that are categorized best as will, intentions, and conscience. Jeremiah recognizes fully the people's capacity to think, deliberate, and understand. For him the problem lies in their tendency to overlook or misunderstand evidence, especially relating to God's acts in the past, and to use their minds instead for ill.

For Jeremiah, the people's thinking is especially evident. He pictures them at several points deceiving their neighbors (9:5 [H 9:4]; 9:8 [H 9:7]; 17:9)—a deliberate act of the mind guided by hidden intentions of the will.<sup>4</sup> Some of this may indeed be well intentioned, as with those who counsel “*šālôm šālôm*” when there is no peace (6:13f.; 8:10f.; see also

23:16f.). At other points the people are scheming for their own self-interests, either to rid themselves of Jeremiah (11:19f.; 12:6) or to devise ways to benefit from exploiting others, as is stated in the utterance against Jehoiakim:

For your eyes and your heart (= mind) do not exist  
but for your own gain  
and for shedding innocent blood  
and for practicing oppression and maltreatment. (22:17)

Their calculating also takes the form of political machinations (2:18, 36f.; perhaps also 4:30). Only at one point does Jeremiah come close to accusing the people of irrationality or at least of mindless behavior, and that is when he compares their cultic loyalties to the aimless meanderings of a young female camel in heat (2:23f.). Yet in his preaching Jeremiah makes direct appeals to the people's reason in an attempt to get them to reform their ways (see especially 2:10-13; 10:1-10; 36:3; 44:15-23, perhaps Deuteronomistic).

While their minds remain active, the people seem to lack the proper understanding of the course of history and of God's demands, according to Jeremiah. They purport to be wise (8:8), but they do not give evidence of the quality of perception that results from receptive hearing of God's word (5:21-23; 6:10; and in more pronounced form in Deuteronomistic passages such as 11:8 and 32:33). Such perception may only come retrospectively, if not indeed eschatologically: "In the latter days you will understand this" (30:24b). In the meantime the people continue in their naïveté (4:22; 10:14; 3:4f.; also 7:9, the Deuteronomistic report of Jeremiah's "Temple Sermon").

This lack of proper understanding seems, according to Jeremiah, to be primarily due to the people's self-deception. In the face of flagrant oppression they avow their innocence and expect that YHWH's anger will be short-lived (2:34f.) or that YHWH<sup>5</sup> will not even be observing them (12:4). They even fail to have the necessary insight to perceive the corrective<sup>6</sup> purpose of God's punishment (2:30a; 5:3; 15:7; cf. 2:19; 6:8; 10:24; 31:18). Their misreading of the course of history and tradition is similar to their neighbors' unjustified trust in past securities: the Moabites' reliance on their works and treasures (48:7a); the Ammonites', on their supplies (49:4b); and the Edomites', on their reputation for causing calamity (49:8, 16). Yet Jeremiah is not willing to believe that the people are unaware of their guilt:

Judah's sin is written with an iron stylus,  
 with a diamond point it is engraved on the tablet of their heart  
 and on the horns of their altars. (17:1)

Such a phrase as "engraved on the tablet of their heart" refers to a condition of permanent consciousness concerning this matter;<sup>7</sup> the people are not able to ignore or forget their sin. In the same manner they should remember God's faithfulness and gracious acts for them (2:5-8), just as a young woman would give attention to her jewelry or a bride to her sash (girdle?) (2:32).

As disturbing as anything for Jeremiah is the sense of direction which the people have established in their minds. This is associated directly with their will, to be treated in the next section. Jeremiah observes the people in a state of continual revolt. Although once pure, they have turned away from God and stayed away (2:21; 8:4f.), and now no longer know how to do otherwise (4:22; 2:25). Morally, this is associated with their self-serving, oppressive inclinations (5:26-28; 6:6f., 13; 9:4-6 [H 9:3-5]; 22:17). The shift in direction can be seen both throughout the course of history (2:2-13) and in an individual case such as the Deuteronomistic description of the people's freeing their slaves and then forcing them back into their service (34:8-16).

Thus Jeremiah acknowledges fully the people's capacity for rational and intellectual functioning. They can think, plan, scheme, know, understand, have insight, be conscious of the surrounding state of affairs, remember, and set a direction for their lives. They are to be criticized, however, for the conclusions they draw on the basis of their interpretation of the evidence from history and tradition, for they do not seem to grasp that it is vitally important to follow the demands of God in order to receive his blessings. Above all, they have developed a stubbornness complementing their will and desires, and this accounts as much as anything for their repeated moral and religious faults. Yet fundamentally, the prophet—perhaps out of exasperation from having tried so long to reason with the people, yet also in good accord with the biblical stance (e.g., Prov 15:11; 24:12; Psa 44:21; 139:23)—acknowledges that only God can possibly examine the human mind (Jer 11:20; 12:3; 20:12) and understand it:

The mind (*lēb*) is more insidious than all things,  
 and incurably corrupt. Who understands it?  
 I YHWH search the mind (*lēb*)  
 and examine the affections (*kēlāyôt*),

in order to repay everyone according to one's conduct,  
according to the fruit of one's deeds. (17:9f.)

## 2) Volition

Jeremiah is more intensely critical of the aspects associated with the human will than with any other condition of the moral agent. We do not find him attacking the people for lack of will, i.e. for indifference, apathy, or even laziness. On the contrary, his primary concern is that they have developed a disposition, a willful purpose, and a preferred course of action that are all contrary to the will of YHWH. These are associated, of course, with choice, decision, and planning, parts of the process of moral acting. At this point we need to look more carefully at the nature of this will and of its consequences for moral action.

Hebraic thought does not differentiate sharply between understanding and will as human activities. They are closely related and interdependent inasmuch as the mind is capable of setting a direction for living while the will needs the rational capacities in order to plan and reach its desired end. This relationship between reason and will is seen clearly in the linguistic proximity between "perceiving" and "choosing" and between "hearing" and "obeying."<sup>8</sup> Similarly, stubbornness is seen as an intransigence of both the mind and the will. Nonetheless, the will can at times become so habitual and "second-nature" that the proclivity borders on ethical neutrality,<sup>9</sup> as Jeremiah seems to recognize in his quotation of his audience about their driving force:

No, it is hopeless!  
For I have loved strangers,  
and after them I must go. (2:25b)

This does not constitute a valid excuse for the people, according to Jeremiah. Rather, it is a subtle instance of the pernicious power of routinized sin, with the doer becoming the victim in the end. At any rate, the prophet certainly considers the will to be, as a rule, an expression of human choice,<sup>10</sup> even though in two instances the conquerors' will to destroy is explicitly attributed to YHWH (51:1, 11).

Jeremiah perceives both moral and religious dimensions of the people's will. Morally, they are greedy for dishonest gain (6:13; 8:10; Jehoiakim in 22:17; note also the proverb in 17:11). In order to achieve this they are willing to practice oppression (5:26; 6:6f.; 9:6 [H 9:5]; 21:12; 22:17), to deceive and deal treacherously (e.g., 5:27; 9:5f. [H 9:4f.]), and to subvert justice in the lawcourt (5:28; 21:12). Presumably these tactics could be

successfully accomplished only by a limited number within the society, as Jeremiah intimates in his reference to “the wicked ones among my people” (5:26). Yet at another point his search for “a doer of justice and a seeker of truth” turns up no one, neither among the poor nor among the great (5:1-5). The inclination toward pleasure and lust can certainly be commonly shared among all social levels, and Jeremiah observes it rampant (5:7f.). The moral will among the people is complemented by the religious will, and Jeremiah cannot speak forcefully and often enough about the dispositions of the people in this regard: apostasy, idolatry, rebellion against YHWH, and abandonment of the ancient covenantal devotion (e.g., 2:2).

As troublesome for Jeremiah as the objects of their will is the tenacity with which they adhere to their preferences. Whatever Jeremiah’s relation to the Josianic reform might have been—if he was even functioning as a prophet during it<sup>11</sup>—he was certainly struck by its superficial effect on the people. Even in the face of deteriorating political affairs in the two decades prior to the fall of Jerusalem, the Judahites are depicted by Jeremiah as refusing to turn from their willful course. This stubbornness becomes a recurring motif in the pronouncements of both Jeremiah (5:23; 6:28; 13:10; 23:17) and the Deuteronomists (7:24; 11:8; 16:12; 18:12; and perhaps also 3:17 and 9:14 [H 9:13]; cf. also Deut 29:19 [H 29:18]).<sup>12</sup> The typical expression for this conjoins “stubborn” with “heart,” and in these contexts the heart must be referring more to the human will than to the mind. The people refuse to listen to YHWH’s word (5:21; 6:10; 19:15; 36:24f.), to take correction (2:30; 5:3; 15:7), or to refrain from this injustice (9:6 [H 9:5]; cf. 22:16). Indeed, their conscience seems to have dulled in the process, for no one is troubled (12:11) or ashamed (3:3) because of their practices: “They do not even know how to blush!” (6:15; similarly 8:12).

It does not come as unexpected, then, that Jeremiah concludes that it will take a decisive, radical act to effect a change of the people’s will. Again envisioning the heart as the seat of the will, he challenges the people:

Circumcise yourselves to YHWH,  
and remove the foreskins of your hearts. (4:4)

When they fail to respond (9:25f.), there appears to be no other hope but that YHWH himself will act to change the people’s hearts (31:33). This is the expectation of Ezekiel also (Ezek 11:19 and 36:26; cf. 18:31), as well as of the Deuteronomistic redactors of the Book of Jeremiah (24:7; 32:39f.; cf. 3:10 and 29:13).

### 3) Affectivity

Mental life and activity are not restricted to rational, intellectual, and volitional functions. There exists also a range of feelings and moods that spring from the state of consciousness. These are commonly designated emotions and are to be distinguished from the purely physiological sensations of touch, contact, temperature, pressure, or physical pain or pleasure. Affectivity is a condition of the moral agent inasmuch as the emotions can have a direct as well as an indirect impact upon the choices and conduct of a person. It stands in dialectical relationship with the other conditions, with no necessary tyranny of one over the others. The emotions can serve as a goal in stimulating a project, just as they can at other points play a secondary or even insignificant role in favor of other functions of the mind. There has been, to be sure, considerable controversy in the disciplines, especially in psychology and ethics, about the relative ordering of the emotions to each other and about the relation of affectivity especially to rationality and volition. This is a philosophical problem which has not yet been resolved after more than two millennia of attention, and it is not our intent to take it up in this context. So far as the ancient Hebrews were concerned, it is possible to address the subject of emotions directly, yet these are not to be divorced radically from the other dimensions of life, all of which we are considering under the rubrics of conditions of the moral agent.

Jeremiah has frequent reference to affectivity in his analysis of the people's morality. For him the emotions displayed by them are entirely consistent with what he can determine about their reason and will. They fall roughly into two groupings: those associated with the period prior to the divine punishment and those connected with the time of doom.

Prior to the doom Jeremiah notes five primary emotions: lustful desire, greed, callous unconcern for others, pride, and a gullible love of security. The lustful desire is invariably linked to images of whoredom. Unfortunately, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether references to sexual lusts and prostitution are descriptions of actual harlotry or rather are figurative allusions to religious apostasy. One is tempted to see actual prostitution as the object of prophetic scorn in such passages as 2:25, 33; 4:30 (or are all three of these texts allusions to Judah's political machinations?); and 5:8—although two of these sayings (2:25; 5:8) are presently in contexts where worship of other gods is the issue. Apostasy is more clearly identified as harlotry in 2:20, while the whoring image is strong enough in 3:1f. as to make the interpretation somewhat uncertain. Yet whether actual or figurative, the practices are



for Jeremiah indicative of a determined striving and unlimited desire that have diverted the people from a course of action pleasing to YHWH. The same can be said of the greed which the people display, a lust for profit and for luxury (6:13 = 8:10; 5:26-28; 22:17, Jehoiakim) which they pursue with whatever deceit and treachery may be needed. This involves as well an habitual attitude of callousness, a self-serving complacency about the hurt that they might in the process be inflicting on others (5:3, 27f.; 6:7; 9:6 [H 9:5]; 12:11). Their obstinacy has indeed reached such a point of insensitivity that they can no longer even blush or be ashamed about their religious and moral behavior (3:3; 5:3; 6:15 = 8:12). The charge of pride is not levied often against Judah—explicitly only in 9:23 [H 9:22]; 13:9; and 13:15—although it may well be implicit in other utterances. Jeremiah refers to his insolent opponents who advocate flight to Egypt after the murder of Gedaliah (43:2), and beyond this it is arrogance and presumption that become major grounds for proclamations of doom against foreign nations: Moab (48:14-20, 26, 29f., 42), Edom (49:16), and Babylon (50:29, 31f.). The fifth emotion affecting the people's choices and behavior is a strong desire for security, a naïve optimism that prohibits them from coming to terms with the historical and theological realities that Jeremiah sees so clearly. This is especially associated with the message of the false prophets:

The prophets prophesy in deceit,  
and the priests rule on their own authority.  
My people love it like this.  
But what will you do when it ends? (5:31)

The people seem eager to hear the prophets and priests who preach peace and well-being before the catastrophe (5:12; 6:14 = 8:11; 14:13; 23:17) and early restoration or deliverance after the demise of Judah begins (chaps. 27-28; 37:9).<sup>13</sup>

Emotions associated with the doom itself and with its aftermath are virtually the reverse of those which had been dominant in the decades preceding. It is often difficult to determine whether these are actual exilic descriptions or rather are preexilic projections by Jeremiah, for many of his utterances about the judgment and also about hope for the future were quite possibly spoken earlier with the intention of dramatically informing the people about what they will experience—also emotionally—if they refuse to change their ways.<sup>14</sup>

Fear and despair characterize the people as the destruction approaches. In sharp contrast to the lust and greed that guided their previous behavior,

the people are now overwhelmed by an anguish that reaches to the foundation of their existence. At several points Jeremiah expresses this with the image of a woman in labor (4:31; 6:24; 13:21; 22:23; 30:6; cf. 15:8f.; 50:37), elsewhere with a direct reference to the failure of courage, especially among the rulers (4:9; 25:34; contrast this with the king's obstinate lack of fear in 36:24f.). The despair may be occasioned by the drought (14:1-6) or by the onslaught of the enemy (6:1-5; 18:22; 14:17-15:4, perhaps a community lament with Jeremiah as a participant).

The exilic situation itself elicits sorrow and longing. Again as with the fear, these emotions are depicted as being so great as virtually to overcome the people. Sorrow and weeping (cultic?) are associated with mourning (9:17-22 [H 9:16-21]; 22:10; 31:15), perhaps reminiscent of the grief expressed just prior to the fall of Jerusalem (30:12-15 in its independent form before it was conjoined to the "therefore" sentence in its present context). Concomitant with the sorrow is a longing to be restored to the land, a single-minded desire of the languishing soul (31:25; 50:19). Jeremiah responds with words of hope, but he also counsels them to learn to accept their punishment (30:11b $\beta$ ) and not to abandon the normal functions of life (29:4-7). In his pronouncements about the future restoration the prophet anticipates that the people's sorrow will be replaced with an equally overwhelming sense of joy (chaps. 30-31 passim; 33:9-11).

It is intriguing to observe that some of these same emotions characterizing the people in the later years are precisely the ones which mark Jeremiah himself in his earlier ministry: fear (implied in 1:17; in 37:20; and in several of the Confessions) and sorrow or grief (8:18-9:1 [H 8:18-23]; 13:17; 20:18), as well as indignation (15:17) and anger (especially in the Confessions). At the root of his ministry is the frustration of dealing with a people who no longer practice *hesed* (2:2), the fundamental posture of the covenantal people that necessarily integrates all of the conditions of the moral agent. Instead the people's state of being has become broken, with any of the conditions—including here affectivity—becoming distorted and dominant in an unacceptable fashion.

#### 4) Sociality

An additional condition of the moral agent is sociality, the natural tendency of individuals to bind themselves to others and in this shared context of existence to develop structures of meaning, understanding, interaction, and continuity.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes here we can distinguish between two aspects for our attention: the social character of human existence, and the community as moral agent.

The social character of human existence stipulates that persons cannot live out their lives atomistically, devoid of significant relationship with others. For moral agency this means that over a period of time people devise in concert—often unconsciously—coherent systems of values, codes of accepted behavior, meaning constructs, structures of responsibility and accountability, and patterns of affecting and reacting to each other. Jeremiah does not treat these matters explicitly, at least not as fundamental issues, but he refers enough to various types of social interaction to permit one to conclude that he is aware of the importance of sociality. He seems to assume a uniformity or commonality among the people, for his search for a just person turns up no one (5:1-5).<sup>16</sup> He is intensely critical of the effect that certain persons have over others, viz. the leaders (prophets, priests, rulers, scribes, and sages) in offering unfounded assurances that misguide the people (5:12, 31; 6:13f.; 8:8-11; 14:13; 23:9-32; 26:7-23; 28:1-4, 15). Jeremiah's repeated reference to the wickedness around him derives from the widespread faults associated with rationality, volition, and affectivity—values and behavioral patterns which are learned and reinforced in the social arena. The prophet appears to be condemning sociality as such in the proverb, "Cursed is the person who trusts in humanity" (17:5 $\alpha\alpha$ ), but the primary intention of this wisdom saying is not so much to comment on human community but rather to affirm the system of divine retribution (see also 12:1-4). Jeremiah, who felt compelled to sit alone (15:17; also 16:1-13, Deuteronomistic) when he might well have preferred otherwise, is not opposed to sociality—but to *his* society. Thus in response to the proverb about the eating of sour grapes (31:29f.), he does not advocate a radical individualism in which no single person is responsible to or for anyone else, but rather he offers a rebuttal against a fatalistic system in which a new generation, such as the exilic one, would necessarily have its existence determined exclusively by its predecessors. The community very much remains—indeed is presupposed—in this.

An additional dimension to sociality is the emergence of the corporate body as an entity itself. A society which exists over time and through social contract becomes more than the sum total of its members. It acquires a character and a direction, and thus may be considered a "moral agent" itself, albeit not with all of the above-mentioned conditions that mark the individual agent. For a society is not simply the individual writ large, although there will be some congruences. The Hebrew Bible typically stresses the important role of the community, both for its members and before God. Consequently, it is an especially serious flaw

for Jeremiah to observe that the fabric of the community has decayed (13:1-11). He sees neighbor deceiving neighbor (e.g., 9:4-8 [H 9:3-7]), wealthy and powerful oppressing the weak (2:34; 5:26-28), and their leaders taking them astray (see above paragraph). Thus the key indicators of the strength of a society—public interdependence, social justice, and political responsibility—are all sorely deficient. It comes as little surprise that the Deuteronomists select the Rechabites as a model of a social group that has an unwavering commitment to a set of values and to its own identity (chap. 35).

### 5) Temporality and Historicality

Of similar importance for an understanding of moral agency is the rootedness of persons in time and history.<sup>17</sup> No one is able to conduct life *solely* in relation to some principle of the good, or to some imperative of duty, or to some higher (e.g., ethereal) order of existence. The self is located in a certain present and with a specific as well as general past and future, contexts which can range from narrow to broad, even to the point finally of embracing the history of humanity. Who we are, how we view life, where our fundamental values lie, how we interpret and react to historical and natural stimuli—all of these are significantly influenced by our social as well as personal biography. This does not amount to a rigid determinism, however, for we retain the freedom to alter our place in this context through a new understanding of or response to it. Thus for the moral life we can ascertain three key dimensions of temporality and historicality: a sense of being in time; the interpretation of history; and the necessity of response.

The sense of being in time involves the agent's relation to past, present, and future. Each person typically has a primary orientation to the present. It is in the here and now that we experience routine and crisis, and to our present we subordinate our interest in both past and future. Consistent with the other prophets, Jeremiah focuses his attention above all on the contemporary situation of the people. The whole thrust of his message is to help his compatriots understand what is happening around them and what consequently is expected of them. This message changes as he perceives the events developing: from a cautious optimism that the people may reform, to a pessimism because of their intransigence, and finally to a realistic encouragement for them after the destruction and exile. His references to the past (e.g., the long history of rebellion, 2:5, 2:20, 23:27; or the good path that has been shown them, 6:16, 18:15, 22:15f.) or to the future (e.g., the repeated proclamations of doom) are not made for their

own sake but in order to enhance the understanding of the present, and in this sense past and future are primarily extensions of the present. This allows him to render fundamental evaluations of the people (e.g., 4:22; 8:5) and to find grounds for hope (e.g., the survival of a remnant in 4:27; 5:10; 30:11; 46:28).

Yet according to the Hebrew Bible the fundamental relation to time coheres with the relation to history, whereby both are viewed *sub specie divinitatis*. At this point the factor of interpretation becomes crucial. Of the two levels of interpretation, Jeremiah provides virtually no direct information about the first, viz. the manner in which each new generation and each individual receive from the past the symbolic and conceptual mechanisms of understanding, acting, and expressing. It may be implicit in his observations about the continuity throughout generations in the people's inclination to evil. But the second level of interpretation, involving the express attribution of meaning to significant occurrences or phenomena, receives direct attention. This constitutes in fact a point of conflict between the prophet and the people. In most cases the people interpret the past for their benefit, as a guarantee of their continued security and prosperity, while Jeremiah sees it as a threat that YHWH, in his freedom, will visit the people in terrifying ways because of their wrongs.<sup>18</sup> Such is the case for the saying, "Every jar will be filled with wine" (13:12-14); for the tradition about the inviolability of Zion (8:19f.); for the belief that God will not punish his people (5:12; 21:13); and for the discrepancy between the message of the false prophets and that of Jeremiah (chaps. 23 and 28). We see a graphic dispute over interpretation also in the largely Deuteronomistic account about the worship of the queen of heaven (44:15-28). Similarly, Jeremiah presents the people with a distinct interpretation of the current events which the people refuse to accept as foreboding disaster, and during the exile he presents them with hope and determination when the future looks bleak to them (e.g., chap. 29).

All of the dimensions of the moral life according to Jeremiah converge at this point to underscore the urgency of response. This is keyed to the events of the current situation, especially the crises which demand fitting responses if the people are to survive. The problem in this regard for Jeremiah lies in convincing the people of the presence of the crisis and of the appropriate way to react to it. It is to be noted that the response must be contextually determined, as is evident from Jeremiah's at one point pleading with the people to repent in order to divert disaster (3:12f., 22; 4:1-4, 14; 26:2-6, 13) and later advising surrender in order to preserve life

(speaking to King Zedekiah in 38:14-23; and to the people in 21:8-10, the latter being Deuteronomistic in revision but certainly Jeremianic in origin; 38:2 is a Deuteronomistic or later gloss).

#### 6) Moral Freedom

In light of the significance of the above five conditions, what remains of the human's ability to choose? Ethicists range between two poles in dealing with this issue of moral freedom: from considering the agent as a victim of any or all of these determinants, to regarding the person as essentially "self-made." Jeremiah, like other prophets, presupposes the moral freedom of humans. This scarcely appears as an explicit subject in his utterances, yet it is foundational to his ethic. The people act of their own accord and thus are to be held fully accountable for their choices. The Deuteronomists schematize this in terms of the need to decide between two paths, the one of obedience and the other of disobedience, and they make it clear that the people's decision will be the determining factor for their own fate (see, e.g., Jer 18:7-11; 21:8f.; 22:3-5; 25:5f.; 35:15). Jeremiah is close to such an either/or. His appeals to the people are tempered only by his realistic assessment of their fundamental characteristics, those discussed in the sections above. Yet for him such characteristics do not lessen the people's accountability—but only help to explain their repeated failure to respond appropriately to God's demands.

However, for Jeremiah this freedom to choose and act does not mean that the people possess an absolute independence from YHWH. In fact, he criticizes directly such a notion among the people with a word from YHWH:

Have I been a wilderness to Israel,  
or a land of deep darkness?  
Why then has my people said, "We are free (lit., we roam unbridled)!  
We will come to you no more." (2:31)

While the people have the right of choice, they cannot cancel the fact of their covenantal relationship with YHWH, and they will be punished if they so attempt. This status as God's people belongs to their very nature, and in one striking passage Jeremiah cannot fathom that they act contrary to their essence any more than that natural phenomena themselves would change (18:13-17, of which the key verse 14 is unfortunately quite corrupt; see also 8:7 and 2:10-12).

Jeremiah, then, adopts an equivocal position on the question of moral

freedom. The people are free to choose in the sense that there is nothing intrinsic to their nature or to their community that compels them, whether consciously or unconsciously, to a certain course of moral action. None of the above conditions is necessarily or uniformly deterministic in this sense. Yet on the other hand, according to Jeremiah, the people do not face a morally indifferent world. At this point theology converges on ethics. YHWH has long been related intimately to Israel, and the people refuse to honor the implications of this at their own peril. The concept of moral freedom thereby becomes substantially modified by the need for responsibility to a relationship. Jeremiah shares with the rest of the Hebrew Bible the essential position that such a responsibility does not lead to forfeiture of being but rather to fulfillment of life. Freedom and promise become juxtaposed, just as are value and obligation.

## II. The Ambiguity of Hope

The above conditions combine to constitute the moral agent. Without assigning priority to any one over the others, Jeremiah views human life as a confluence of all factors, each with its own importance and each in conformity with the others. He does not consider the possibility of a person divided within, e.g. torn between will and reason. The conditions reflect each other and contribute to each other.

For this reason Jeremiah finds it possible, having taken all conditions into consideration, to move to the point of rendering a fundamental evaluation of the people. We should emphasize, however, that this evaluation is neither unitary nor universal. In the first place, it can change as the political events develop and also as Jeremiah becomes increasingly aware of the people's intransigence. Certainly the exilic message is different at this point from the preexilic assessment. Secondly, Jeremiah is addressing *that* covenantal people at *that* time. We find no indication that he intends for his observations to apply to later generations of believers, much less to all of humanity—even though later persons may themselves be inclined to make such an application. Jeremiah is seeking to understand his consociates—the factors affecting their responses (i.e., all of the above conditions of the moral agent), the ways they relate to each other and to God, their fundamental values and loyalties—in short, the nature of their existence.

The most striking generalizations about the people stem from the pre-disaster years when Jeremiah has become convinced that the people are incorrigible: they are degenerate (2:21), shameless (3:3; 6:15 = 8:12), thoroughly wicked (3:5), foolish and stupid (4:22; 10:14), oppressive and

violent (2:34; 5:26-28), unreceptive (5:21), untrustworthy (9:4f. [H 9:3f.]), good for nothing (13:1-10), habitual in their ways (8:4-6; 13:23), corrupt (17:9), incurable (30:12-15). His earlier hope for their reform (e.g., 3:22; 4:1-4; 5:1-6) is thus replaced with a cynical conclusion:

Can the Ethiopian change his skin,  
or the leopard its spots?  
Then you also would be able to do good,  
who are trained in evil. (13:23)

They fail even to respond to chastisement (2:30; 5:3; 15:7). The picture of the repentant people especially in chaps. 30-31 is in marked contrast.

Inevitably, this raises a related question: What are the nature and locus of the good, and to what extent is the moral agent capable of knowing and doing the good? The former question would require prolonged attention if it is to be answered for Jeremiah and, beyond his utterances, for the Hebrew Bible on the whole. But the latter issue is more within our reach on the basis of the present analysis of Jeremiah's view of the moral agent. First, Jeremiah emphasizes that the good does not reside fundamentally within the human being (10:23). A person cannot know it immediately and alone; it is for God to assist in this knowing and doing. Second, the prophet affirms that the good has been experienced by the people in their past and that they can learn it now by examining their history (6:16; cf. 18:15). Third, the moral agent embraces the good only in the context of faithfulness to YHWH (2:19; 8:8f.; 17:5-8) and his law (2:8; 6:19; 8:7), a loyalty which finds expression through the maintenance of the community by means of practicing justice and truth (22:16; 9:3,6 [H 9:2,5]). Fourth, the good is not presented to humans as a vague, general value or obligation. Rather, people experience it in the concrete—in the affairs of normal life and in the crises of troubled times. Choice and decision are required, both over the prolonged period and at the crucial moments of tension. Fifth, because the good is present in the concrete, it does not have to be assigned to one of two typical poles: teleology or deontology. There is a conflation of end and ought in this ethic, with subjective, objective, and transcendental motivations<sup>19</sup> all potentially operative at different points in the moral process or in the moral life. For Jeremiah, then, people normally have the capacity to know and do the good. It was *his* generation that refused.

With this, his words of hope, especially those in chaps. 30-31, acquire a touch of irony and sadness. There appears to be no hope for reform so



long as the people do not receive the final, decisive punishment of conquest and exile. Only thereafter are they ready to weep and return to YHWH. These proclamations of deliverance are notably devoid of references to morality, although it is certainly implicit to the understanding of the restored community. Only 31:31-34 stands out in this regard,<sup>20</sup> with a theological anthropology which at its root may well be consistent with Jeremiah's pre-disaster evaluation of the moral agent. The prophet seems unwilling to expect that the people's loyalties and conduct can change without a direct incursion by God, parallel to his movement of political events from doom to deliverance. With the establishment of the new covenant, faithfulness to the law must become a part of human nature, grafted onto the mind and the will. Jeremiah is advocating the recovery of a moral sense, indeed of morality itself as well as religious faithfulness. Yet he remains realistic that the people will be incapable of effecting this permanently, independent of divine measures. The actual conditions of the moral agents will always be potentially problematical in this regard. To be sure, it is precisely this fact which contributes so substantially to the divine/human drama.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For a summary of these classical issues in ethics, see James M. Gustafson, *Christian Ethics and the Community* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1971), 84-100; and *Christ and the Moral Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 1-10.

<sup>2</sup>A theory of moral agency has not yet been fully attempted, although much of the groundwork for it has been laid. The present essay does not aim, in its limited scope, to construct such a theory. It represents, rather, a first attempt to develop rubrics for analyzing the structure of the moral agent and to apply these to Jeremiah's prophetic utterances.

<sup>3</sup>A discussion of the Hebrew understanding of rationality is available in Hans Walter Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 40-58.

<sup>4</sup>Interestingly, Jeremiah himself is willing to engage in deception at King Zedekiah's bidding (38:24-27), although this seems somewhat coordinated with the event described by his biographer in 37:20.

<sup>5</sup>The MT of 12:4 leaves some doubt whether the subject of *yīr'eh* is YHWH or Jeremiah. The LXX preserves the explicit mention of YHWH while also reading "ways" for "latter ends." See the commentaries, ad loc.

<sup>6</sup>Using the same word *ysr*, the Deuteronomists extend the sense of disciplining to instructing: 7:28; 17:23; 32:33; 35:13f.

<sup>7</sup>Wolff, *Anthropology*, 48.

<sup>8</sup>Wolff, *Anthropology*, 51.

<sup>9</sup>Wolff, *Anthropology*, 38.

<sup>10</sup>The Deuteronomists describe the free choice of slaves in 34:16.

<sup>11</sup>For arguments in favor of a low chronology for Jeremiah, see J. Philip Hyatt, introduction and exegesis on the Book of Jeremiah, *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 5 (New York/Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 778-80, 797-98; and William L. Holladay, "The Background of Jeremiah's Self-Understanding: Moses, Samuel, and Psalm 22", *JBL* 83 (1964) 153-64; and his *Jeremiah: Spokesman Out of Time* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1974).

<sup>12</sup>To express stubbornness the Deuteronomists invariably use *šrr* whereas Jeremiah employs *srr* in the first two texts mentioned and *šrr* in the latter two.

<sup>13</sup>In 4:10 Jeremiah charges YHWH with misleading the people with such comforting messages, although he does not at all clarify whether he has in mind the general promises of the past (e.g., Gen 12:1-3; 2 Sam 7:8-16) or the lying spirit sent to the false prophets (1 Kgs 22:22f.). Most commentators, perhaps disturbed by theological implications of this, prefer to emend the text to read, "and they will say." However, the text-critical evidence for this is insufficient, and the more difficult reading should be retained.

<sup>14</sup>This is not adequately considered by Raitt in his periodization of Jeremiah's oracles of doom and deliverance; Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile: Judgment/Deliverance in Jeremiah and Ezekiel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977).

<sup>15</sup>For detailed discussion of sociality, see especially Alfred Schutz, *The*

*Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1967; German edition, 1932); Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World* (Evanston: Northwestern University, 1973); Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966); and H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

<sup>16</sup>Such uniformity may indeed be expressed as a rhetorical device. An actual division among the people seems clear at least in 5:26a and in his references to a remnant (4:27; 5:10; 30:11; 46:28), although the latter are not pictured as deserving deliverance because of their faith or good deeds.

<sup>17</sup>For an analysis of the nature and importance of temporality and historicity, see especially the works cited in note 15 above.

<sup>18</sup>On this phenomenon of interpretation in the prophetic literature, see especially Walther Zimmerli, "Prophetic Proclamation and Reinterpretation," in *Tradition and Theology in the Old Testament*, ed. Douglas A. Knight (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 69-100.

<sup>19</sup>The various types of motivations are divided into these three categories in Heinz-Horst Schrey, *Einführung in die Ethik* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972).

<sup>20</sup>Date and authorship of 31:31-34, like most of chaps. 30-31, are contested. Rudolph considers that this material was proclaimed in the period of Josiah's reform and directed originally to the exiles of the Northern Kingdom, while Weiser sets it even earlier in the time before the reform; cf. Wilhelm Rudolph, *Jeremia*, 3rd ed., HAT 12 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1968), 188f., 201-04; Artur Weiser, *Das Buch Jeremia*, 6th ed., ATD 20-21 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969), 264-67, 285-88. E. W. Nicholson, on the other hand, considers it an exilic composition by the Deuteronomists; *Preaching to the Exiles: A Study of the Prose Tradition in the Book of Jeremiah* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1970), 82-84. The position taken here is that it is essentially Jeremianic and was originally intended by him for all exiles, both Israelites and Judahites, following the fall of Jerusalem. Its similarities to Deuteronomistic language and theology stem from its later revision by this group. Yet fundamentally it shares more with the view of the moral agent evident elsewhere in Jeremianic utterances.