Interpretive Leadership During Social Dislocation: Jeremiah and Social Imaginary

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Abstract: The prophet Jeremiah worked at the intersection of the seventh and sixth centuries BC. Various empires were reshaping the options available to Judah, and as a series of Judah's kings and counselors made decisions, Jeremiah challenged the hermeneutics of their situation and choices. Mark Lau Branson works with the Jeremiah text and context, creating an interplay with contemporary matters of social dislocation, church leadership, and the more specific work on interpretive leadership. He works with the social and communication theories of Jürgen Habermas and recent leadership frameworks of Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky.

Introduction

Practical theology requires work at the interface of current on-the-ground realities and the embedded theoretical constructs with the texts of our faith traditions. Those texts give us access to earlier on-the-ground situations and their own theoretical resources. When a culture or community experiences major societal shifts that bear on their identity and agency, leadership functions need to adapt or the group's identity is at risk. I believe that North American churches and their leaders need to name and interpret our current social dislocation and the accompanying disorienting challenges. It is expected that leaders might instead work to avoid such challenges, pretend to provide expert fixes, or mangle the tradition in efforts to deflect responsibility. I have found that Jeremiah offers an alternative. Jeremiah consulted neither Ronald Heifetz nor Jürgen Habermas. I enjoy my work in practical theology because I can bring them into

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conversations. I propose that the disorienting context at the cusp of the Babylonian exile can, with Jeremiah's help, give us access to the challenges we face and the leadership required. I will work with the leadership frameworks of Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky and the philosophical and communicative frameworks of Jürgen Habermas, with the hope of increasing our interpretive skills and broadening our imaginative resources.

Definitions

Elsewhere I have proposed a leadership triad that provides a framework that includes the spheres of relational leadership, implemental leadership, and interpretive leadership.[1] *Relational leadership* concerns attention and activity patterns that discover, initiate, nurture, and sanction the human connections that comprise a social entity. For example, a church leadership team participates in and fosters the connections among persons and groups that serve covenanted missional life. A major goal of attending to relationships is the distribution of leadership. This includes intergenerational and intercultural relationships, peacemaking and conflict management, attention to opportunities for mentoring, the care-giving initiatives of prayer and healing, and numerous modes of accountability and encouragement. Connective vocabulary includes love, peace, justice, kindness, truth, hospitality, partnership, and several words concerning sending and commissioning. We are a people who are called and sent, specifically to be sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Reign of God. So relational leadership attends to the on-the-ground work of shaping and nourishing the human connections that serve our identity and agency.

Implemental leadership concerns the experiments, systems, and practices by which we live out our identity

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[1] See Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church," in *The Missional Church in Context*, ed. Craig Van Gelder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) and "Forming God's People," in *Leadership in Congregations,* ed. Richard Bass (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2007), 20.

and agency. While our lives include some very fluid activities that require little structure, there are numerous ways in which we organize our common life—schedules for a single event (a wedding) or a series of gatherings (worship or study). Some decision making will always be immediate and on-the-go, but we also embed corporate decision making in the activities and documents of governance. Much Christian formation is spontaneous, but we also shape catechesis and seminars. These systems and structures require a variety of competencies and skills in the sphere of implemental leadership. Further, such competencies should give a priority to creating contexts and resources so more persons can be involved in leadership activities.

Interpretive leadership is the work of shaping and resourcing a community of interpreters.[2] This is the continuous work of hermeneutics—giving attention to texts and context as meanings are discovered and made. Interpretive leaders in Christian organizations are responsive to the written texts of scripture and tradition; they attend to events that shape texts; they bring to consciousness the events and texts that have shaped the interpretive community (socio-cultural factors, personal journeys, congregational narratives); and they also lead the community of interpreters in attending to the presence and activities of the Trinity. This work includes shaping environments in which a community can attend to texts and context—creating and supporting study, research, and conversations, thus providing the means for a new social imaginary[3] that lures the community to participate with God, on the ground, in the church's engagement with the powers and peoples of its context. In this essay, I will focus on biblical resources behind this concept of interpretive leadership.

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[2] Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

[3] Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

Epistemologies and Leadership

Any church or organization operates within the framework of certain epistemologies—the knowledge and frameworks and interpretations that are shared by the group. Jürgen Habermas's concept of "lifeworlds" includes the conceptual background, the assumptions, the linguistic fields, and the social imaginaries within which persons live.[4] These structures of meanings are assumed and largely unconscious, yet they are the basis of any efforts at communication and cooperative activities. For example, persons can talk about "calories" without being explicit about how this measure is based on calculations concerning heat and water. Likewise, church members can use the word "pastor" yet be unaware that they are assuming theoretical constructs from modern management theory or from therapeutic schools. Unless this background is surfaced for consideration, perhaps by circumstances or, one hopes, by interpretive leaders, there are profound limits on what is socially possible.[5] Paulo Freire refers to this consideration as "problematized."[6]

If the background realities are to be problematized, a social group will be well-served if communication assets are strong. Habermas provides a useful means for sorting a group's communication. He specifies three *worlds* within which we all live and speak; each world has its own subject matter and standards for integrity.[7] According to Habermas, when we describe external events, texts, and objects, and make truth claims, it is the "objective lifeworld" about which we are building a body of shared

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[4] Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 2: Lifeworld and System,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston, Beacon, 1987).

[5] Senge's "mental models" help with this process of assisting others to see and enter into new practices. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990).

[6] Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).

[7] It should be noted that Habermas explicitly worked within the structures of modernity and was dismissive of exponents of post-modernism. He believed that modernity could deliver more if we attended to communication and hermeneutics.

knowledge, and our communication is held to the measure of truth. Our communications about our personal, inward experiences deal with the "subjective lifeworld," so we use expressive, affective speech that is subject to the measure of honesty so that trust can be nurtured. As groups, we form and reform ways of living together in our "social lifeworld." We talk about norms regarding regulations and intentions, and the measures are those of justice and love. Interpretive leadership fosters communicative integrity in all three worlds, shaping the interpretive community with attention to the adequacy of its perceptions, hermeneutics, and norms.

Expectations and scenarios for leadership are significantly different when the social group faces discontinuous changes in its context (external) or in its own makeup and experiences (internal). When a group faces discontinuous change, which requires a reconsideration and reformation of basic beliefs, values, and practices (an "adaptive challenge" according to Ronald Heifetz), leadership must provide (1) reality testing; (2) a reconsideration of values and priorities with clarity about trade-offs; and (3) an environment in which an increasing number of participants are mobilized for shaping new social arrangements.[8] In addition to the challenges presented in such discontinuous environments, there are also contexts of change that are *continuous* but of such pervasiveness and depth that adaptive work is needed.

A significant part of the work is the forming of a new social imaginary that can provide cultural coherence as reshaped meanings and practices are tested and owned.[9] Charles Taylor notes that we also live in the midst of false imaginaries that are "full of false consciousness."[10] One cause of such false consciousness is a group's tendency to conjure continuity even when it is not

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[8] Ronald A. Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22-27.
[9] Taylor, 23-30.
[10] Taylor, 183.

present.[11] The adaptive challenge of interpretive leadership is to discover and explore texts old and new; as noted by Taylor, "the background that makes sense of any given act is thus deep and wide."[12] So during transitions, "people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices" in a way that background meanings and the current context are mutually reinterpreted; "new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before."[13] Heifetz, who posits that leadership is not primarily about character traits and positional authority but rather about actions that certain persons take,[14] explains how leaders can create an environment—through their practices and words—that makes innovation possible by giving the adaptive work to a larger group of participants.[15] This is not the vision of strategy, command, or control, but rather interpretive work that connects with the background, distributes leadership, and experimentally innovates a way into the new realities of a different context.

Working within his lifeworlds model and the requirements for integrity in communication, Habermas examines the fluctuations and threats of crises. For example, a culture (with its assumed body of knowledge, interpretations, and practices) must be able to reproduce itself as new situations arise, or it will cease to exist. The culture must secure "a *continuity* of tradition and *coherence* of knowledge sufficient for daily practice."[16] Disturbances can lead to the loss of meanings and an extensive crisis in the culture's epistemologies and reproduction. When Habermas looks at related situations with societies and with individuals, such disturbances include the instability

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[11] Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 9ff.

[12] Taylor, 28.

[13] Taylor, 29.

[14] Heifetz, 20.

[15] Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 123ff.

[16] Habermas, 140. The italics are in the original.

of collective identity, the rupture of tradition, personal alienation, crises of legitimation, the loss of motivation for persons to adhere to the culture, and societal anomie.[17] If the culture is to be renewed through the situational challenge, communicative action must include the "transmission, critique, acquisition of cultural knowledge," a "coordination of actions via intersubjectively recognized validity claims," and avenues for persons to participate in identity formation within the cultural semantics.[18]

Jeremiah and Interpretive Leadership

The prophet Jeremiah can help us see and interpret discontinuous challenges, and learn how new social imaginaries might be formed. Those who had positions of authority around Jeremiah—the royal household, the priests, the court prophets—worked with the covenant and their context in certain ways. They made assumptions about God, goals, neighbors, actions, and what it meant to be God's chosen people. This was the shape of their lifeworld—the assumptions that they brought to bear on how they exercised authority—how they as authorities interpreted their historical context, how they interpreted their texts and traditions, and how they prescribed their community's response. They described *reality* based on their perceptions and biases, and they prescribed (and enforced) norms. Jeremiah's interpretive leadership, from within an alternative lifeworld, countered these assumptions and prescriptions. He interpreted texts and context differently, so he promoted an alternative social imaginary (and sought the implementation of that alternative in particular actions and practices).

During the 620s BC, a century after Israel (the northern tribes) fell to Assyria, King Josiah had in effect gained independence for Judah as Assyria waned. With the fall of Nineveh (612) and Haran (610), Assyria was defeated by the Babylonian forces. Judah then began

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[17] Habermas, 143.
[18] Habermas, 144.

several years of tightrope-walking between the Egyptian and Babylonian empires. As the Babylonians secured territories east and north of the Euphrates (directed by Nabopolassar and his son Nebuchadnezzar), Egypt held sway over Palestine and Syria.[19] Jeremiah speaks against Josiah's son King Jehoiakim, a vassal of Egypt, saying, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness ... who makes his neighbors work for nothing ... paneling it with cedar.... Did not your father eat and drink and do justice...?" (22:13-15).[20]

Can Jeremiah use speech to change the conversations in Judah? Everyone sees the objective lifeworld that now includes not only a level of national autonomy but also an upscale new palace. However, some other observations (forced labor, cedar), once uttered, create a new interpretive situation. Jeremiah is working to shift the social lifeworld of the people. He works with historical texts and recent memory in order to compare Jehoiakim with Jehoiakim's father, Josiah, "Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness?... He judged the cause of the poor and needy. Is not this to know me? says the Lord" (22:15-16). This reference to the Josiah narrative connects the hearers with the ancient covenants; the discovery of Deuteronomic texts during Josiah's reign had prompted new initiatives of faithfulness (2 Kings 22 and 23). So while Jehoiakim interprets the times (the defeat of Assyria) as an opportunity for palace construction, perhaps in imitation of Egyptian opulence, in complete disregard for basic kingly obligations (righteousness, including economic justice and care for the poor, as noted in the sharp denunciation in Jer. 5:27-29), Jeremiah's interpretive leadership attends differently to texts and times. He challenges the dependence on a military coalition (with Egypt) for protection from Babylon, and the practices of maldistribution of resources. Jeremiah's interpretation

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[19] John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 143.

[20] All biblical quotes are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

of Hebrew texts and the chaotic context, an interpretation he accredits to God, makes the claim that God has chosen Babylon as a temporary power; the national authorities should reject counterviolence and military coalitions.

My reference to Jeremiah's leadership prompts the question, "In what manner is Jeremiah a leader?" There are references to a relational connection to his society's authority structures ("...son of Hilkiah, of the priests who were in Anathoth" 1:1) and he apparently has some level of access to palace authorities. But Jeremiah is obviously without a recognized portfolio; he has no levers on governing structures; he is not managing a workforce. But, per Heifetz, leadership is about actions. If, as Heifetz suggests, leadership has to do with actions that shape the meanings of a people as they move through significant challenges, then Jeremiah is engaged in such activities. However, if leadership effectiveness is measured according to the influence of Jeremiah's interpretations on people and authorities in Jerusalem just prior to the Babylonian conquest, the effect appears to be limited to a fairly small circle. Only a more long-term perspective, which will receive attention below, allows for a reevaluation of his effectiveness.

Living on a strip of land between continents, in the midst of regional tribes and between superpowers, the kings of Israel and Judah were constantly weighing political, economic, and military options, usually in conversations with prophets, who claimed to speak for God. This is the life they chose when they sought God for a human king (1 Sam. 8) because they envied other nations. Although there were texts that peoples and authorities interpreted to mean that God would sustain them as a national institution, the fall of Israel and the Babylonian threat to Judah's survival were casting doubt on these interpretations. This is Jeremiah's environment, a context of discontinuous change in which the usual approaches to anticipation and prediction do not work. Change factors included not only the more recent defeat of Assyria and the inflamed context between the

neo-Babylonian empire and Egypt, but also the internal disruption due to the loss of traditions, the seeming minimal presence of texts (except for the partial renewal under Josiah), and the multivalent voices of prophets.

However, Jerusalem authorities clung to the predictions of continuing institutional existence, and they sought the protection from Egypt in case Yahweh was not providing the needed initiative. As already noted, Habermas addresses the relationships among culture, society, and the person, and notes the impact of disruptions in the fabric of society. Not only is collective identity at stake in the affected culture ("who are we? to whom do we belong?"), but traditions are ruptured, key standards and values are lost, and psychological pathologies appear.[21] All of these elements are noted in the Book of Jeremiah; he interprets the situation (leaders and people have deserted traditions, lived and worshiped wrongly, and ignored the warnings of previous prophets) as their anger becomes fixated on the truthful messenger. "I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (11:19).[22]

Walter Brueggemann emphasizes the point that without proper utterance, Israel loses its identity, and its existence is threatened.[23] There are utterances, but they fail to adequately connect with historical texts and what God is doing on the ground. This is background to interpretive leadership, namely, the primary stories, frameworks, and imaginations of a people, along with personal, family, and community testimonies and discourse. This common heritage grounds identity and agency in common understandings, shapes current cooperative practices and explanations, and generates visions of futures that belong in the story. If, in the midst of Israel's choices, any aspect of the utterance is lost— the historical, current, or future use of the pronoun "we"

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[21] Habermas, 143.
[22] Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky attend to this in *Leadership On the Line*, but I doubt if reading that book would have done much for Jeremiah.
[23] Walter Brueggemann, *Texts That Linger, Words That Explode* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 2.

—then identity and agency are endangered. Jeremiah's generation, like those previous ones, failed to give an account of Yahweh's life with them, and that failure "leads to a sense of autonomy, a life without Yahweh."[24] Without true accounts, with only the palace-sanctioned interpretations, God's saving words were without welcome, and Israel attended to "things that do not profit" (2:8). An interpretive community[25] with its plural leaders needs to recall and recite stories, meditate on and discern the presence and priorities of God in the narratives, and then test the discovered meanings in their current context. This process makes obvious that interpretive leadership as utterance is essential but incomplete; rather, meanings arise from activities as words are enacted, and the experiences reshape the words. We create knowledge, we really learn, in this iterative process of personal and corporate praxis, which is the cumulative, mutually correcting and reinforcing cycle of study/reflection and engagement/action.[26]

One place to begin such testing of utterance is the repeated list of basic practices connected to God and neighbor: hospitality, witness, love expressed in deeds, attention to orphans, foreigners, and the poor. For example, in a church that has developed habits and practices around institutional behavior but not around testimony and witness, the numerous biblical narratives, paralleled with stories about contemporary norms for sharing stories among friends, can retrieve testimony from the dismissal it has suffered in churches. In my own church, we had just completed a year in which we taught and preached through the large, whole biblical story. We were continually observing that, in scripture, everyday

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[24] Brueggemann, 3.

[25] In addition to Royce, this is the framework for Robert Bellah et al. concerning "communities of memory." Robert N. Bellah and others, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

[26] Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (London: Continuum, 1974). See Mark Lau Branson, "Ecclesiology and Leadership for the Missional Church," 115ff.

people, old and young, Jews and Gentiles, freely told their stories even when they lacked philosophical or theological sophistication. Storytelling is human, but we've become hesitant concerning stories about faith and God and salvation and healing. So we noted such biblical stories in sermons, in study, and at meetings. We were aware that these story-telling behaviors are not strange in our everyday lives—around meals, at home or in a school cafeteria, in passing, on the phone, we tell stories. When we cease telling stories, we told the congregation, we forget who we are. This focus on story-telling stirred imaginations and led to some experiments.

Elsewhere I wrote a narrative about this church using Appreciative Inquiry as a way to nurture stories that speak to church identity and agency.[27] Following that initial experience, those who led worship created a sanctuary environment that included a trellis. This was the "green growing season" of Ordinary Time.[28] They asked some of the older members for faith stories, often sitting with them over tea and transcribing or outlining the stories in order to ease the public event. When members brought stories, they were invited to bring something to hang on the trellis. We saw a photo of a favorite, faithful aunt, a cane from one whose walking was restored, and onions in memory of parents who farmed as they also gave pastoral care. We heard amazing stories, often continued after the benediction, which in turn encouraged other storytellers. Our utterance about the necessity of testimony, and witness during the worship experiment, began reshaping the way we live with each other and among neighbors.

With the Babylonian victory over Egyptian forces at Carchemish (605), Judah felt the increasing threat.

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[27] Mark Lau Branson, *Memories, Hopes, and Conversations: Appreciative Inquiry and Congregational Change* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2004).

[28] This is terminology that our children (and some of their parents) were learning through the Montessori-styled "Godly Play" approach to Christian formation of children. Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Nebuchadnezzar returned to Babylon upon the death of Nabopolassar (604), creating a brief sense of relief, but he soon resumed his southern march. As Babylonian victories increased, Jehoiakim proclaimed a fast. This is the occasion in which Yahweh directed Jeremiah, with the assistance of Baruch, to commit his oracles to writing. The messages repeated throughout the book (e.g. Jer. 21) were probably the essence of the scroll: Judah, like Israel earlier, has betrayed the covenant; Babylon is God's tool for judgment; Judah should surrender to Nebuchadnezzar in order to preserve lives and options. After the scroll worked its way up through some trusted palace contacts, who arranged for Jeremiah and Baruch to be safely in hiding, a reading was arranged for Jehoiakim. (This indicates the importance of relationships and leaves us curious concerning the nature and history of these who value Jeremiah's words. Leadership needs to be alert to kin and neighbors who are trustworthy and to those who are deceitful [9:4-6].) Then, in the midst of the protests of several officials, "As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut off (qara') with a penknife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed" (36:23). This is in contrast to the reception Josiah provided when a Deuteronomic scroll was found in temple excavations—he tore (qara') his clothes and deepened his leadership toward faithfulness (2 Kings 22.11). The Jeremiah text notes that "neither the king, nor any of his servants..., was alarmed, nor did they tear (qara') their garments" (Jer. 36.24). This text makes it clear that all fasting is not equal. "Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I do not accept them...." (14:12). Fasting is not a technology for controlling supernatural powers; rather it is intended as a means of deepening attentiveness, perception, and cooperation with Yahweh. As a practice of the faith community, fasting serves interpretive work. God's grace through Jeremiah, Baruch, and numerous contacts was the provision of a text. Jehoiakim's rejection was consistent with the nation's enduring trends toward

alienation from Yahweh. Had Jehoiakim forgotten that God had supplied provisions and protection even when Israel was not a sovereign nation, for instance in the clan life of the patriarchs, during the desert sojourn, and in the decades of the Judges? Evidently, having lost that imagination, Jehoiakim had no capacity to receive Jeremiah's words. Jeremiah's interpretive leadership remained within small boundaries, a very limited community in a dangerous environment. However, this episode of the narrative indicates how Jeremiah's hermeneutics would eventually shape a much larger community.

Interpretive leadership includes not only preserving, reading, and interpreting a community's texts but also creating them. This was an appropriate time to increase the diffusion of particular words, so the oracles of Jeremiah were collected and transcribed and sent. Technology and social networks make access possible. As the scroll was relayed, leaders connected with Jeremiah and Baruch properly interpreted the signs of danger and decided to protect God's intermediaries prior to the royal audience. They were preserved, but the scroll was not. The text was a means for creating an alternative reality, offering an option to Jehoiakim other than a doomed coalition with Egypt or the full and total destruction of Jerusalem. It was Jehoiakim's job to receive the text and live into the alternative, but he stopped the text's intent and even sought to stop any chance that the text would shape Judah's reality.

> The prophetic tradition provides something like a scripting of reality, not in totalitarian ways, but in ways that seed and authorize an alternative imagination.... This textual tradition, over time, has provided the endless authorization of a counterexistence in the world. … It is now clear that written utterance has a kind of freedom from context that spoken utterance does not. And this

written utterance explodes always again in odd, energetic, and transformative ways.[29]

After the first scroll was destroyed, Yahweh prompted the creation of a second and longer scroll (36:32) that was likely the basis of the collection we read over two millennia later.

The pressures on Jehoiakim (externally from Babylon, internally from the dominant pro-Egypt party) made him resist the thorough-going adaptive change proposed by Jeremiah. He could not fathom a message that included the end of Judah as a nation, even if compromised, and he clung to a belief that cooperation with Egypt would allow Judah's continued existence. Heifetz's perspective on work avoidance is telling:

> …people fail to adapt because of the distress provoked by the problem and the changes it demands. They resist the pain, anxiety, or conflict that accompanies a sustained interaction with the situation. Holding on to past assumptions, blaming authority, scapegoating, externalizing the enemy, denying the problem, jumping to conclusions, or finding a distracting issue may restore stability and feel less stressful than facing and taking responsibility for a complex challenge.[30]

Jehoiakim was in denial concerning the contingencies of Yahweh's covenant; the stress level created by Jeremiah's alternative (surrender to Babylon) was too high. In this way, Jehoiakim was clutching past assumptions that desperately needed new theological work. But it was too easy to use Jeremiah as a scapegoat ("Jeremiah is causing trouble") and too hard to embrace the change that would allow a degree of protection (surrender).

By 603 Jehoiakim had become an unwilling subject of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar's southern drive was initially successful, but after intense and indeterminate battles in 601, Nebuchadnezzar returned home. The assault was reengaged in 598, probably resulting in Jehoiakim's death.

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[29] Brueggemann, 9.

[30] Heifetz, *Leadership Without Easy Answers*, 37.

His son Jehoiachin was on the throne for only three months before he surrendered in 597 (2 Kings 24.8), leading to the first deportation of thousands of officials and citizens to Babylon. Zedekiah (another son of Josiah) was installed as Babylon's vassal while some assumed that exiled Jehoiakim was still king.[31] The prophet Hananiah provided Zedekiah with his interpretation of these events and the expected outcome (Jer. 28). Prophets are to serve the king and the nation by providing a word from Yahweh; Hananiah's claim "thus says the Lord of Israel" was consistent with this job description but contradicted by Jeremiah and by events. Notably in the Book of Jeremiah, prophets were usually lumped with priests and seen as part of the problem, "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely" (6:13 and elsewhere). Hananiah claimed that the deportation was a temporary setback. Claiming to speak for God, he predicted, "Within two years I will bring back to this place all the vessels of the Lord's house... and all the exiles" (28:3-4). In Heifetz's explanations, this was work avoidance: "the pain will go away." Jeremiah admitted that he wished it were true, and then he departed the conversation. But later God sent Jeremiah to address Hananiah, again emphasizing that he (Yahweh) was behind Nebuchadnezzar's lengthier reign. Then it got personal: "Listen, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you made this people trust in a lie." Hananiah's demise is predicted and realized within a few months. (28:12-17). Hananiah could not see beyond the political imaginary of relative national autonomy, the maintenance of those with Jerusalem portfolios, and a textual rendering that required Yahweh to always serve those ends. Only a more thorough and less self-interested look at the texts could provide a new imaginary.[32]

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[31] Bright, 328.

[32] The texts embraced by Josiah and the prophetic tradition were available to Hananiah and Zedekiah, but they chose to stay inside a narrative that proved to be false.

The grieving and restive exiles, deported in 597, were dealing with conflicting interpretations of their situation. Babylonian documents indicate that Jehoiachin was identified as king even though he was part of the exile community; Zedekiah's claim to legitimacy was apparently challenged (and seen as temporary at best). The words of exiled prophets, including Hananiah's colleagues Ahab and Zedekiah, predicted a brief exile and quick return. Jeremiah countered with a letter to the exile community, "Thus says the Lord of hosts ... (they) are prophesying a lie to you in my name" (29:21). God's role was interpreted as a partnership with Nebuchadnezzar (!), "Thus says ...the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile" (29:4). The exiled prophets who prompted a revolt against Babylon were quickly squashed (29:21). Instead of revolting, or just hunkering down in enemy territory in expectation of a quick, violent rescue by God, the exiles were instructed by Jeremiah's letter to "Build houses ... plant gardens ... take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters" (29:5-6). This does not fit the expectation of an immediate rescue. The enemy and this city of exile were being interpreted in ways that were profoundly disorienting.

Not only were the exiles to settle in for a few generations, their relationship with this new context was beyond their imagination, "seek the *shalom* of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its *shalom* you will find your *shalom*" (29:7). In Habermas' terms, their lifeworld (the Davidic paradigm) in which they had been formed was profoundly contradicted by the Babylonian conquest; as the social world (of obligations and norms) was reordered they also became aware of how their objective world (what is true about God and God's handling of reality) had to be reconceived. This disruption created a space in which an alternative lifeworld could emerge, one that might provide a way to reconnect with Yahweh and thereby allow a pathway toward a new imaginary

(in which their objective, social, and internal worlds cohere). John Yoder describes the shift, "Babylon itself very soon became the cultural center of world Jewry, from the age of Jeremiah until ... the Middle Ages. The people who recolonized the 'Land of Israel' ... were supported financially and educationally from Babylon, and in lesser ways from the rest of the diaspora."[33] In this way, the faith community gained a new way of life, based in texts, with distributed leadership, gathered into synagogues for recitation, singing, varied cultic activities, and support for life among the nations.[34]

The innovative and jarring work of creating a new social imaginary will challenge the best leadership. The depth of the contextual discontinuous change can serve a community's availability to God's continual priority on shaping a faithful shalom community as a light to the nations, although such situations will also surface reactionary forces. As victims of a violent empire, and as a community with a poor track record of attending to God's words, the exiles did not recall interpretive resources concerning goodwill for an enemy as a mode of social resistance. As noted, they could be encouraged toward violent rebellion, and probably even thought this might bring God's participation. But Jeremiah provided a different interpretive grid for texts and contexts, along with practices concerning life together and life with neighbors. These two elements—texts for reflection, practices for engagement—become mutually interpretive. As noted earlier, this is Paulo Freire's emphasis concerning praxis: an action-reflection cycle that leads to a genuine learning community.

When churches face major challenges, whether brought by the accumulation of incremental changes or by more rapid discontinuous change, resistance is often embedded in the behaviors noted by Heifetz, above.

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[33] John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Evangelical and Public* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 57.
[34] Yoder, 71-73. This missional life, according to Yoder, uniquely shaped Jewry for life among the nations.

Common approaches employ top-down work on vision statements, large strategies, and programmatic answers. Instead Heifetz emphasizes the need to give the work to the people. Roxburgh and Romanuk propose four steps for this process of helping a people reimagine their relationship with God and God's mission: "Fostering a missional imagination among the people themselves; cultivating growth through specific practices and habits of Christian life; enabling people to understand and engage the multiple changes they face in their lives; creating a coalition of interest, dialogue, energy and experimentation among the people."[35] Leadership is dispersed as learning teams engage God and neighbors; a new imaginary emerges as congregational conversations help reshape meanings and practices.

While Jeremiah had significant problems creating a learning community in Palestine, it can be argued that such a community took root in Babylon. In this letter (ch. 29), Jeremiah drew on the Torah to reinterpret how they were to relate to this city, its peoples, and its normative violence. Three specific topics are noteworthy: houses, gardens, and marriage. These community-building activities are cited in Deuteronomy as restrictions on soldiering (Deut. 20); thus it can be argued that Yahweh is prompting the creation of a non-violent community that can survive, increase, and be prepared for their eventual return as a faith community giving witness to a God of shalom. So texts and context were given new meanings, and familiar practices were commended in an unexpected way.[36] At issue here is that Jeremiah was shaping an interpretive community that began to live in a reality that did not exist until his words arrived; without a new social imaginary, this was just a barrio on enemy turf, awaiting God's violent rescue. After these words

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[35] Alan J. Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church To Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 146.
[36] Daniel L. Smith, "Jeremiah as Prophet of Nonviolent Resistance," *JSOT* 43 (1989): 95-107; and Daniel L. Smith-Christopher, *A Biblical Theology of Exile* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

they had neighbors with whom they could seek shalom, and a future in which God's ways were embedded in their hearts and therefore in their practices (31:33). The "holding environment," per Heifetz, creates an opportunity for generativity. As the new community absorbed Jeremiah's words and entered into these practices, creating an environment for interpretive work concerning God, their own texts were seen from a new context. When avoidance is no longer an option, the old mental models are discredited. A new mental model was required, and the events as interpreted by Jeremiah, given time in the practices he prescribed, were recast as the people engaged their daily work and their reflective work.

So the texts of Jeremiah, and probably much of what we call the Old Testament, began to receive renewed attention in Babylon, which led to editorial work and preservation. There was serious theological work to do, and such work required an interpretive community that became freed from the partisan fights of their generation and from the despair of their situation. Somehow they found and created laments, the Torah came alive, they attended with reformed knowledge to prophets past and present, and in life with each other and with neighbors they lived through probably the most important interpretive work the community had ever experienced. Brueggemann emphasizes this phenomenon: "Exile did not lead Jews in the Old Testament to abandon faith or to settle for abdicating despair, nor to retreat to privatistic religion. On the contrary, exile evoked the most brilliant literature and most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament."[37] This is what I refer to as Jeremiah's interpretive leadership: his corpus, picked up by a community that was being formed in the hermeneutical space created by the letter and its practices, funded the larger work of a community that

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[37] Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 3.

was re-thinking, re-imagining, and praying its way into a transformed identity and agency.

Jeremiah and Our Social Dislocation

The activities of an interpretive leader during discontinuous change must be rooted in attention to the powers that have shaped\are shaping the situation. In the U.S. context, if we are to work by analogies,[38] is our work closer to that of Jehoiakim and Hananiah (maintaining the recent interpretive paradigms and securing the prerogatives of institutionalized power) or that of Jeremiah and Baruch (drawing on older texts to reinterpret the current situation)? The former option could be framed in a more positive light by asking if our situation (and leadership priorities) are more like David's and Hezekiah's, in which the leadership framework is that of stewarding a governing institution in a context with fewer discontinuous challenges. In what ways is the gospel story, the church's story, available and formative and powerful for us, and in what ways (per Jeremiah) have we lost essential narratives and meanings? Habermas notes that a social entity may have imaginations that are colonized, and that communicative action (rather that strategic planning) holds promise. I believe this framework could be generative for us. The work that Jeremiah began under protest and duress in Jerusalem became uniquely powerful in Babylon. The small learning community, gathered around the texts of Jeremiah and Baruch, became more substantive in the relocation, and their interpretive activities gained a larger hearing. Conversations and other activities evidently brought Jeremiah's texts and their background into the community's identity and imagination; our Old Testament (even its very existence) bears witness to the new hermeneutics that preserved the ancient texts. Even

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[38] This mode of working analogically between texts and contemporary community is served well by Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

Jesus' call for a non-governing community of faith, giving witness to God in our lives and words, is funded by Jeremiah's message.

Israel faced (as must we) primary questions about God's life among us and the vocation we thereby receive. Do we know God better when we give up national governance and military options? Is the reign of God better understood if we are taking initiatives concerning the shalom of the *other*? How can we shift our attention from security and acquisition toward humility and the provisions of God? The chaos of discontinuous change is an opportunity, and the disruption brought about by ecclesial disestablishment is such for us. We also can adopt basic practices of loving God and neighbor, of studying and praying with texts, and of meals and communal labors. Then we can enter demanding work of hermeneutics—concerning context, texts, and our own social agency—and find a provocative and empowering source in the gifts of Jeremiah.[39]