


# Going home? Exiles, inciles and refugees in the Book of Jeremiah

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Set against the backdrop of the Babylonian Invasion and Exile, the Book of Jeremiah represents a variety of different perspectives on how to survive imperial domination. This article explores three competing visions that can be described in terms of the tension that exists between the pro-golah group that propagated life in Babylon, the anti-golah group that saw the hope for the future back home and the group of refugees who in the aftermath of the Mizpah massacre found themselves fleeing to Egypt. In the current context of global migration, this article considers theological and ethical perspectives generated by the engagement with Jeremiah on home and homecoming in a context where there is no good option.

## Introduction

Going home  
Without my sorrow  
Going home  
Sometime tomorrow  
Going home  
To where it's better  
Than before. (Cohen 2012)

In Leonard Cohen's haunting song 'Going home', the refrain expresses the yearning of returning home, to a place where there is no sorrow; to a place where one can lay down one's burden; to a place where it is better than before. This song thus powerfully captures the deep longing for homecoming, for safety, security and belonging – all essential human needs.

In yet another poem with the title 'Home', Somali poet Warsan Shire compellingly shows how this desire for home is untenable for many people in the world today. She exposes the frightful reality of countless migrants who, under treacherous and often even deadly circumstances, seek to find a new home for themselves and their children because their home is no longer a place of safety, security and belonging, but rather a place of danger that threatens their well-being and life. As Shire writes: 'no one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark'. And further on in this poem, she implores her readers:

And you have to understand,  
no one puts their children in a boat  
unless the water is safer than the land.

Forbiddingly depicting the hardships experienced by refugees, the violence and the dangers enroute to a new place they can call home, Shire ends her poem with these words:

i want to go home,  
but home is the mouth of a shark  
home is the barrel of the gun  
and no one would leave home  
unless home chased you to the shore  
unless home tells you to  
leave what you could not behind,  
even if it was human.  
no one leaves home until home  
is a damp voice in your ear saying  
leave, run now, i don't know what  
i've become. (Warsan Shire, 'Home' 2015)

**Note:** The collection entitled 'Eben Scheffler Festschrift', sub-edited by Jurie H. le Roux (University of Pretoria) and Christo Lombaard (University of South Africa).

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Read together, these two poems reflect the very human desire for homecoming, that is, a place to belong and to live unfettered lives. Yet Shire's poem, which shows how home for many people today has become a place of danger and life-denying circumstances, captures something of the difficulty when it comes to speaking of home and homecoming for many immigrants and refugees today. Home for many indeed has become an untenable goal. Nevertheless, the yearning for 'going home' serves as the driving force for many migrants to get on a bus, on a boat, on a plane to journey home. A home that is often very far away from home.<sup>1</sup>

This contradiction by no means is new to our time. In the book of Jeremiah, one finds some fascinating perspectives regarding the yearning for home and homecoming, whilst depicting the complexity of living life in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion and exile that saw many individuals evicted from their homes. In this article, I will show how this ancient book contains some dramatically divergent views of how to survive amidst imperial domination that stand next to one another without having the tensions between these competing visions resolved.

In the next section, I will outline three such viewpoints that are found in the second half of the book of Jeremiah. Subsequently, I will offer some suggestions regarding a number of theological and ethical perspectives that emerge from the engagement with these ancient traditions as we, in our current context, are grappling with how to deal with the complexities of migration, both forced as well as seemingly voluntary.

## Different voices on surviving imperial domination

In the context of the terrible events associated with the mighty Babylonian empire sweeping through the land, destroying property and human lives, and forcefully removing a significant portion of the population into exile, one finds evidence of a number of divergent voices that exist during this time as to how to survive imperial domination. This is no more evident than in the vivid illustration used by the prophet of two baskets of figs in Jeremiah 24. The first basket is said to contain luscious figs, ready to be enjoyed, whilst the other basket contains inedible, very bad figs. Jeremiah holds up the very good figs as symbol for those exiles who inevitably find themselves in Babylon (Jr 24:5), the leaders of the people, who according to 2 Kings 24:14 is said to be 'all the officials, all the warriors ... all the artisans and the smiths'. Conversely, the basket of the very bad figs that Jeremiah saw in his vision in Jeremiah 24 represents those members of society who were left behind in the land, in addition to those who chose to flee to Egypt in order to find a safe haven (Jr 24:8).<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, the image of the good figs and the bad figs seems to be clear. Jeremiah clearly appears to be on the side

1. There has been an explosion of works in recent years on the theme of migration, both in the biblical traditions as well as in our current global context. Cf. e.g. Ahn 2011; Boda et al. 2015; Cruz 2014; Lim 2016; Rivera-Pagan 2012; Smith-Christopher 2002.

2. Stulman (2005:220) argues that 'the vision of baskets of figs is far more than a political tract that endorses one community, the Babylonian group, over rival communities in Judah and Egypt'. Stulman (2005:220) views this vision as 'an attempt to speak about God in a meaningful way in the midst of tragedy'.

of the exiles whom he regards as God's chosen ones, hence offering some harsh criticism of those who are staying behind in the land, when he calls them rotten figs. However, closer inspection of this image shows not only the variety of the impossible choices facing the victims of imperial invasion but also the complexities associated with each scenario. These different realities that are represented in the latter part of the Book of Jeremiah are as follows:

### Forced to go?

In the first instance, concerning the good figs of Jeremiah 24, scholars have suggested that this chapter seemingly has been written from what has been called a pro-golah perspective that characterises those who have gone into exile in Babylon as good figs (Sharp 2003:75; Stulman 2005:220). This view is also evident in Jeremiah 29 when the prophet, in a letter to the exiles, is seeking to convince the people to make a home in the heart of the Empire, in Babylon, as envisioned in the imperatives of building and planting, having children and celebrating weddings that are all seen as essential elements of making a home (Jr 29:5-6).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to Jeremiah 16:8-9, where normal human activities such as weddings and agricultural activities came to a complete standstill, there will now be a return to normal life, or as normal as could be whilst living as displaced exiles.

On the one hand, in terms of a pragmatic solution that accepts the inevitable, Jeremiah's letter to the exiles could be considered therapeutic in nature. It offers good advice, namely, that after a severe tragedy has struck, one should try and resume everyday activities again as soon as one is able to as a sure sign of reconnecting to life (Claassens 2014:73; Hermann 1997:3). Jeremiah's words offer the exiles a hopeful vision of the future especially when God declares that God intends 'welfare and not harm' for the people, 'a future with hope' (Jr 29:11). Jeremiah, however, insists that the exiles should not wait for this future in order to start living again. They have to live full lives in the here and now, in the houses that they have built, whilst they enjoy eating from the produce from the gardens they will plant and celebrate the joyful occasion of the weddings of their children and the birth of their grandchildren. As Stulman (2005:256) aptly describes Jeremiah's message to the exiles: 'put down roots, affirm the bonds of family, and work toward peace and community building in [your] own neighborhoods'.

Alternatively, Jeremiah's letter could also be read as imperialistic propaganda since, as in earlier chapters (Jr 24, 27), Jeremiah 29 centres on the principle to submit to imperial rule and to seek the welfare of the Empire's capital city. This principle is closely aligned with the people's own survival as individuals and a people as a whole and hence could be viewed as the best pragmatic solution in an impossible situation.<sup>4</sup>

3. Cf. also the prophetic dispute between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jr 28) according to which Jeremiah maintains that the exiles were going to be in Babylon for a very long time (Sharp 2003:77).

4. Stulman (2005:251) describes Jeremiah's advice of accommodation as a form of 'political realism, for it concedes that the future of the exiles is tied to the interests of their captors'. With regard to Jeremiah 21:1-10, Maier (2013:143-147) writes how the pro-golah perspective is focused on explaining surrender to the Babylonians as necessary for survival and also maintaining any measure of agency.

Jeremiah's call to the Babylonian exiles to be model immigrants in Jeremiah 29 calls to mind something of the ongoing quest of many immigrants to make a home in their adopted countries: to seek the welfare of the city; to do what you can to fit in, and under no circumstances to make any trouble. However, many immigrants today will tell you just how difficult this task proves to be, and how, despite one's best attempts to fit in, many immigrants still find themselves ostracised.<sup>5</sup>

When considering the reality of those who were forced to go, one also should take into consideration the matter of class. We know from history that it is the educated elite, the skilled workers, who ended up going into exile. Some of these exiles, we know, became very rich in their adopted countries, likely using their skills and education to not only survive but also thrive. One of the central questions facing not only these exiles but also many immigrants since is whether one is able to maintain one's identity far away from home, whether one still may be able to remember the songs of Zion whilst sitting next to the waters of Babylon (Psalm 137).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the sharp distinction that is drawn between those who are forced to go and those who cannot help but stay is shown to be not so clear-cut. For instance, as will be evident in the next section, the prophet Jeremiah himself who is propagating the good figs versus the bad figs scenario eventually ended up staying in the land, despite vigorously propagating the leave option (O'Connor 2011:128–130).

### Bound to stay?

In terms of the Jeremiah 24 analogy, the second option open to the survivors of the imperial invasion concerns what the prophet deemed to be inedible, bad figs, that is, those individuals, the poorest of the poor, who had no choice but to stay behind after the Babylonian army, to devastating effect, moved through the country. In the aftermath of the enemy's scorched earth policy that was responsible for large-scale food scarcity, these most vulnerable groups sought to rebuild a life amidst the rubble (O'Connor 2011:76).<sup>7</sup>

For instance, in the aftermath of the wide-scale destruction brought about by the invading Babylonian army, the appointed leader Gedaliah in Jeremiah 40:10–12 gathers the people of the land together and commands them to go on living again amidst the destruction and to rebuild their lives after the calamity. The first thing they are called upon

to do is to make sure that they have enough food for the winter. They are to gather and store wine, summer fruits and oil (Jr 40:10).<sup>8</sup>

This account expresses the amazing propensity for resilience amongst the survivors of the calamity, reflected in the resumption of agricultural activities, which expresses not only the basic human need to secure food for oneself and one's family but on a deeper level also the yearning for restoration and normalcy associated with homecoming. It is significant that in Jeremiah 40:12 it is said that the survivors have wine and summer fruit in great abundance. To once more have luscious fruit to eat and wine to drink is a striking symbol of survival and an indication of the return of festivity after the terrifying events they had lived through, which seems to be the hallmark of being able to make a home (Brueggeman 1998:283).

However, this fragile recovery is soon to be shattered when violence erupts once more. The newly appointed leader Gedaliah is assassinated by the renegade Ishmael during the so-called Mizpah massacre that saw the brutal killing of 70 of the 80 survivors from the Babylonian invasion who came to seek sanctuary at Mizpah, as well as the subsequent forced removal of the people of Mizpah to the Ammonites (Stulman 2005:321–322). In some sense, this renewed outbreak of violence is all the more troubling as a result of the fact that it occurs just as the survivors were starting to put the pieces of their fractured lives together. And this time the threat does not come from outside forces but from factions within, who in the leadership vacuum are vying for power.

Within the conflicted story of the people who are bound to stay behind in the land, the figure of Jeremiah offers an interesting way to consider the plight of this group of survivors. We find Jeremiah in Jeremiah 40 in chains, ready to be taken into exile by the Babylonian soldiers. Then suddenly, in a dramatic turn of events, the captain of the guard releases the prophet and gives Jeremiah a choice as to whether to stay in Jerusalem or go to Babylon.<sup>9</sup> Jeremiah's choice to stay with the group of survivors who remained in the land (Jr 40:4–6) serves as a profound act of solidarity with the poor – with the disenfranchised people of the land who have been left behind amidst the most difficult circumstances (Holt 2011:133).

The fact that Jeremiah stayed behind in the land moreover indicates just how ambiguous the prophetic word proves to be amidst these trying times. As noted in the previous section, the clear lines that are drawn between those who are compelled to go and those who are bound to stay is confounded when the prophet himself ends up staying in the land. Thus, despite launching a cutting attack against those who stayed behind in the land (Jr 29:17), calling them rotten figs and proclaiming God's punishment to befall upon them

5. For some of the challenges facing modern day migrants cf. Rivera-Pagan 2012: 579–580; Cruz 2014:17–20.

6. Compare though Stulman's (2005:256) position that the exiles are admonished by Jeremiah to 'become a viable sub-community within the Babylonian Empire. To do this they must abandon their identity as a national-cultic community and immerse themselves in another world'.

7. Davidson (2011:99) argues that Jeremiah's 'solidarity with the people left behind in the land can be read as strategic choices' in defiance of empire.

8. Biddle (2014:228–242) explores some intriguing links in terms of the figure of Gedaliah in Jeremiah 39–41 and the book of Nehemiah in which the governor serves as an integral part of the reconstruction process in a postwar society.

9. This measure of agency amidst the Occupation is quite remarkable and speaks to the high regard Jeremiah held in Babylonian circles (Davidson 2011:91).

in the form of sword, famine and pestilence (Jr 29:28), Jeremiah himself finds himself to be in the bad fig basket.

### Compelled to flee?

In yet a third option in the aftermath of the attacks against Jerusalem, we find another group of survivors who felt that conditions in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion had become so intolerable that they felt that they have no choice but to flee to Egypt (Stulman 2005:321–322).<sup>10</sup> The political turmoil leading to the assassination of the newly appointed governor and the events surrounding the Mizpah massacre caused the survivors of further violent events following on the heels of the devastating imperial violence to realise that home had become a dangerous place. Fearing for their safety, and for the safety of their families, they feel compelled to flee. They decide to go to Egypt, which is rather ironic given the connotations Egypt harbours in the biblical text. On the one hand, Egypt is indeed the place where refugees go; especially where people travel to escape famine (Gn 12:10; Gn 47:13–27) and persecution as in the case of baby Jesus in Matthew 2:13–15. However, Egypt is also remembered as a place of slavery and oppression (Ex 2:23) (Stulman 2005:343). Notwithstanding, the people led by Johanan are determined to flee. Any place is better than this place.<sup>11</sup>

An interesting perspective is that in Jeremiah 42:1, Johanan and the group of refugees who want to flee to Egypt approach Jeremiah and implore him to intercede on their behalf by praying to God. This remnant, who as they themselves acknowledge is made up of only a very few survivors, want to know from Jeremiah and God what they should do now? Even more pressing, they want to know where should they go (Jr 42:2–3)? Clearly, in the aftermath of the Babylonian invasion, no good options exist, which makes discerning exactly what the right thing is to do exceedingly difficult.

Jeremiah's prayers are met by silence. For 10 days, God does not answer, which quite likely caused even further anguish for an anguished people seeking to discern where to go and what to do. When God finally does answer, God offers a surprisingly different message than what Jeremiah had proclaimed all along. Whereas Jeremiah for the longest time had said that the best choice for the survivors was to submit to Babylonian rule and to go into exile to Babylon where they were to build a life for themselves, now the prophet maintains that God is telling them to remain in the land, where God will build them up instead of breaking them, and plant them instead of plucking them up (Jr 42:10).

10. Stulman (2005) describes the plight of the Judean survivors in terms of: communal life fall[ing] into a downward moral and religious spiral that reaches its lowest point. The social order is broken down, all forms of civility disappear, evildoers run rampant, and innocent people are butchered (p. 326).

11. In this text, Johanan thus serves as the great liberator when he frees all the people, the soldiers, women, children and eunuchs, who had been taken hostage by Ishmael, taking them to a safe haven in Egypt. This portrayal is rather ironic given that in the book of Exodus, the liberator Moses had led the people *out of* Egypt where they had experienced great oppression. Cf. Stulman (2005:345) who calls the story an 'inversion of the exodus story'. And Maier (2017:3) who speaks of this text as 'Exodus to Egypt'.

However, the survivors of the Mizpah massacre, who had been greatly traumatised by recent events, do not want to hear anything about staying in the land. They are afraid, and justifiably so because they have seen a lot of violence and evidently the threat still had not passed. In ironic fashion, they view Egypt as the Promised Land, where they believed they shall see war no more, nor ever experience hunger again (Jr 42:13–14). Desiring to leave their traumatic past behind, this group of survivors is determined to start a new life in Egypt (Maier 2017:1–13).

The prophetic rhetoric directed against this group is equally harsh than directed at the group who remained in the land as outlined in the previous section. Jeremiah proclaims that the same plight, and even worse, will follow these refugees into Egypt (Jr 42:16–17, 22) (Stulman 2005:329).<sup>12</sup> Terror indeed is all around. Nevertheless, in an exceedingly ironic fashion, Jeremiah, who is so critical about this option to flee to Egypt, incidentally will find himself taken along with the group of survivors who flee to Egypt (43:6), which once again obscures the boundaries of who exactly are considered to be the good and bad figs (Maier 2013:84–85).<sup>13</sup>

### Theological and ethical perspectives

From the various scenarios outlined above, it is evident that there are a variety of strongly divergent voices at work in this book.<sup>14</sup> These voices may be reflective of a later concern of just who exactly can claim to be the true Israel: those exiles who eventually will return from Babylon or the inciles who never left? Clearly pro-golah texts such as Jeremiah 24 and Jeremiah 29 can be read as propaganda for the eventual return of the Babylonian exiles and the ensuing power struggles that were to take place as the returning exiles fought with those left behind for positions of power. Particularly, given the fact that those who were taken into exile are likely the educated elite with ample financial resources and those who stayed behind were the poor of the land, these texts may be reflecting a class struggle that ought to be read critically in terms of the various ideologies it enforces.

However, beyond the reminder of the importance of ideological criticism that highlights issues such as power, class and influence when it comes to reading the book of Jeremiah, a number of theological and ethical perspectives emerge from our engagement with the various voices in the text that may help us face the complex challenges of migration and forced migration in our contemporary context.

12. Sharp (2003:76) contends that there are two competing perspectives at work in Jeremiah 44. On the one hand, one finds the perspective that the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem can be ascribed because of the sin of all, with not a single person surviving. On the other hand, one finds the competing perspective that it is because of the sin of the refugee community in Egypt, specifically their acts of worshipping the Queen of Heaven, that is responsible for God's pronouncement of judgement. These two perspectives, have in common though that the Babylonian diaspora group is left as the only group with a legitimate claim as God's people.

13. Maier (2013a) draws on the work of Carolyn Sharp who argues that: the competing ideologies in Jer 44, a Judean traditionalist perspective and a pro-Golah stance that sarcastically calls those who fled to Egypt to continue in their ideology, destabilize the text, and preclude a clear statement of who is right and who is wrong (Cf. Holt 2011:133; Sharp 2003:6980).

14. Cf. Sharp's (2003:79) compelling argument for what she calls 'multivocality in the Deutero-Jeremianic prose'.

Firstly, the existence of these sharply divergent voices in itself communicates the fact that when it comes to migration, then and now, things are complex. In many circumstances, there are no good options. Do you stay, do you go? Is there anything *but* forced migration? Do those who leave really have a choice? Or those who stay behind? Perhaps the choice of the descriptions of the three scenarios outlined in the previous section communicates something of this profound lack of options in the wake of the gross display of imperial force: 'Forced to go; Bound to stay; Compelled to flee'.<sup>15</sup> The realisation that those in the Book of Jeremiah had little choice whether they go or stay is perhaps a reality check also for us today to help us to have a bit more compassion regarding the difficult choices facing many people in desperate circumstances today. The yearning for home, for a place of one's own, for adequate food and shelter, and perhaps most importantly, for safety and opportunity for oneself and one's children are strong motivating factors. This is even more evident in light of the fact that in the book Jeremiah, one finds that it is dangerous everywhere. Whether one stays, leaves or flees to Egypt, the possibility for violence is ever present.

Nevertheless, in the second instance, it is indeed remarkable that in spite of the sharp divergence amongst the voices reflected in the book as to how to survive imperial domination, a unifying theme in Jeremiah is the fact that God is present everywhere. In war-torn Palestine. In the heart of the Empire in Babylon. Stulman (2005) says it well:

Though banished far from their country, God will watch over and care for them. Even in Babylon, perhaps the least likely place for the presence of God, the Jewish refugees are able to find God (24:7). (p. 220)

Also in Egypt, God is with the people. Regardless of God's sharp judgement, the prophetic word continues to follow the exiles, inciles and refugees wherever they will go. This particular point is vividly illustrated in the presence of the prophet who is closely with each of the three scenarios – writing to the exiles in Babylon and propagating a pro-golah perspective (Jr 24, 29); staying behind with the people left behind in Judah and buying land whilst in prison (Jr 32); and being taking along when the refugees flee to Egypt (Jr 43:5–7) (O'Connor 2011:76–79). An unceasing presence, the prophet amidst treacherous circumstances embodies something of God's presence who remains a constant factor no matter where the people may end up going.

Thirdly, a common feature amidst all three these divergent scenarios is the theme of building a life. To make a home whether by returning home, or by making a new home elsewhere is held up as an important truth within all three scenarios envisioned in this book. So we see already in

15.Ahn (2011:46–47) makes a distinction between 'derivative forced migration', 'purposive forced migration' and 'responsive forced migration'. For instance, the group of exiles who were forcefully taken into exile in Babylon after 587 BCE could be understood as 'purposive forced migration' who were forced to relocate by the invading army, while the group fleeing to Egypt as narrated in Jeremiah 40–43 as 'responsive forced migration'; thus, refugees were fleeing against their will to escape factors such as violence and the economic effects caused by the Babylonian invasion. Cf. also Lim 2016:7–8.

Jeremiah 32, how an incarcerated Jeremiah, when approached by his cousin, makes a bold decision to buy a plot of land that indeed may seem quite ludicrous given that it is located in a war-torn area (Stulman 2005:276). However, this act of agency of the prophet amidst very difficult circumstances serves as a powerful theological symbolic function to say that houses will once more be built again in this ravaged land.<sup>16</sup> This is further evident in the divine promise in Jeremiah 33:10–13 that cities will be rebuilt that will be repopulated once more with both humans and animals. And in Jeremiah 31:12, the resumption of agricultural activities that signals an end to war is celebrated:

They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the Lord,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall become like a watered garden,  
and they shall never languish again.

Also in Jeremiah 29:5–6, the people who find themselves in exile are also encouraged to have a life, to 'build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce'. These physical activities associated with making a home are coupled with the imperative to also build a house in another way, that is, to have children, and for your children to have children as well. Home is thus associated with family and building a future filled with wedding celebrations and the rituals marking the birth of children (e.g. circumcision and baptism).

And in Jeremiah 44, the women amongst the Egyptian refugees take the initiative in resuming the religious activities that they have engaged in before the war. In Jeremiah 44:17, it is the women who vow to once again:

make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out libations to her, just as we and our ancestors, our kings and our officials, used to do in the towns of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

In this act of agency by the female refugees, we see a continuation with their lives from before, doing whatever it takes to find meaning and significance in what had happened to them (cf. also Jr 44:19) (Maier 2017:8).

Finally, probably the most important insight regarding the variety of perspectives present in the second part of Jeremiah as to how to survive imperial invasion is that these divergences are not resolved, but rather that the contradictions stand. In this regard, Holt (2011:134) writes as follows about

16.Cf. Davidson (2011:87) who reads this text as a form of prophetic resistance that in the shadow of the empire seeks to 'preserve the subjectivity of the people and keeps a place for them in the world'. Cf. also Sharp's (2013:163) thoughtful analysis of the cost of this resistance and in particular the 'tremendous loss for Jeremiah and for God in this narrative's theologizing of the horrific experience of Judah's subjugation'.

17.According to the women, they ascribe their current misfortune to the fact that they had stopped bringing offerings to the queen of heaven. Cf. Jeremiah 44:17–18: 'We used to have plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no misfortune. But from the time we stopped making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out libations to her, we have lacked everything and have perished by the sword and by famine. Maier (2013b) writes that as a commentator concerned about discrimination at the intersection of gender, class, ethnicity and religion, I cannot perpetuate the polemic against the cult and any overt or hidden critique of women's idolatrous behaviour (p. 84).

the communicative strategy of multiple voices, both conjunctive and disjunctive that 'interact, interfere, ... intermingle, ... supplement and contradict each other' within the book of Jeremiah.<sup>18</sup>

In this situation of despair, a one-sided and narrow answer would not do any good. It would soon fall short in a complex situation, which demands complex answers. And complex answers is what we achieve in the book of Jeremiah (Holt 2011:134).

## Conclusion

In the song 'Going Home' with which this article started, Leonard Cohen steps forward in the figure of the prophet who is compelled by the Deity to speak the words of the refrain cited in the introduction. He reflects as follows on this call to speak:

But he does say what I tell him  
Even though it isn't welcome  
He just doesn't have the freedom  
To refuse  
He will speak these words of wisdom  
Like a sage, a man of vision  
Though he knows he's really nothing  
But the brief elaboration of a tube (Cohen 2012)

A prophet speaking words of wisdom – in the ancient book such as Jeremiah but also in contemporary times. What words of wisdom will be spoken in today's context? Particularly in a world where there is much folly, and an abundance of hate speech.

Perhaps the words of wisdom we need to hear is that things are more complex – even Jeremiah who in the harshest of terms condemned the refugees of his day, in the end found himself sharing the same fate. Jeremiah indeed felt on his own skin that the reality is more complicated. Ultimately, I am convinced that to read with compassion, hence comprehending and respecting the complexity and ambiguity in the text, is key to also living with compassion in a compound and ambiguous reality. It is precisely this point that leads me to dedicate this particular article to my colleague and friend, Prof. Eben Scheffler, who over the years have truly embraced reading and living with compassion.

18. In this regard, O'Connor (2011:134) argues that 'the book refuses to resolve the dispute'. In this fashion, the experiences of *all* survivors are honoured. And readers are invited to become interpreters themselves, turning them into 'moral agents' who seek to make sense of their world (O'Connor 2011:131).

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### Competing interests

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