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## Temporality, Dispossession and the Search for the Good: Interpreting the Book of Jeremiah with the Jesuit Refugee Service

**Abstract:** This article seeks to explore the potential connections between the experience of contemporary forced migrants subject to destitution and detention policies in the UK and readings of the biblical text, including the Book of Jeremiah. Drawing from fieldwork interviews it notes the significance of Jeremiah 29 and the interpretations of the texts offered by interviewees. In dialogue with other articles in this volume, and based on the insights of those interviewed for this project, the text moves to consider the figure of Jeremiah himself as a critical figure in any debate about forced migration and the Book of Jeremiah. The article concludes with a proposal for a way of connecting the narratives of contemporary forced migrants, readings of the text of Jeremiah [and](#) the work of Simone Weil.

**Keywords:** Jeremiah, forced migration, Simone Weil

*The essential contradiction of the human condition is that man is subject to force, and craves for justice. He is subject to necessity, and craves for the good. It is not his body alone that is thus subject, but all his thoughts as well; and yet man's very being consists in straining towards the good. That is why we all believe that there is a unity between necessity and the good.<sup>1</sup> (Simone Weil)*

During the summer of 2017 I spent a period of several months conducting fieldwork with destitute asylum seekers who are supported by – and in some instances volunteer for – the Jesuit Refugee Service in the East End of London.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the research, conducted at the request of the Jesuit Refugee Service, was to learn more about the impact on those seeking asylum of public policies that enact destitution as a form of border control. Key to this research was a desire to understand and represent the strategies of resistance and survival employed by asylum seekers in the face of this reality. This work offers

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<sup>1</sup> Simone Weil, 'Fragments, London 1943' in *Oppression and Liberty*, (London: Routledge, 1965), 150. (I am grateful to Lyndsey Stonebridge for originally bringing this passage to my attention).

<sup>2</sup> [www.jrsuk.net](http://www.jrsuk.net). JRS is a Catholic faith-based [organization](#) that operates both internationally and as part of the mission of the Jesuits in the UK. It works with destitute migrants (judged destitute by reference to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation criteria for destitution) and with those detained and formerly detained and now destitute. Its provision is universal and not based on faith identity; nonetheless, the majority of its beneficiaries identify as Christian, with a minority identifying as Muslim or another religious or non-religious belief. Interviewees were not selected according to faith identity, but all interviewees chose to freely discuss their faith identity in interview. The balance of Christian to Muslim interviewees was broadly in line with the overall balance of the beneficiaries within the wider [organization](#). The themes I use to [analyze](#) interviewee experience in this article have been presented to my participants and to staff of JRS for comment and discussion.

an empirical extension to earlier theoretical work in which I have proposed a reworking of Augustinian virtue ethics as a framework for thinking about the agency of both state actors or agencies and forced migrants.<sup>3</sup>

My intention had been to explore the question of “the good” as it arose in the discourse of forced migrants and to bring this into conversation with a reading of Augustine.<sup>4</sup> However, during the course of the interviews it became clear that participants wished to raise religious belief and personal faith as a central reality in their experience of forced migration and exile. This included a willingness to discuss particular texts and dogmas that had been important to them. The religious text most often referenced in these conversations was the Book of Jeremiah, typically the so-called letter to the exiles in chapter 29. The Book of Jeremiah is a notoriously complex text and, listening to interviewees, I was quickly struck by the interesting tensions and resonances between their interpretative focus and that of recent biblical scholars discussing migration themes in Jeremiah. This unexpected turn in my interview data has led to this paper, which seeks to explore elements of my initial thesis about the discourses of the good which might pertain to a critical evaluation of contemporary forced migrant experience and also to attend to the [interpretation of biblical texts amongst](#) those I interviewed. Therefore, in this article I make several moves. First, I outline some of the political theological themes explored by my research participants and relate these thematically to a political theology of the good. Second, I attend to the emergence of unexpected biblical themes in my interviews and correlate these with wider scholarly discussion of migration as a theme in Jeremiah. Third, I move beyond the interview data to suggest that one way to mediate these interpretative readings is through a return to the figure

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<sup>3</sup> See [A. Rowlands](#), ‘Against the Manichees: Immigration Detention and the Theopolitical Imagination’ in *Religion in the European Refugee Crisis*, ed. Ulrich Schmiedel and Graeme Smith (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The theoretical groundwork for this paper is worked out in the book chapter noted in the previous footnote. There is also overlap between the account offered here and [A. Rowlands](#), ‘On the Promise of Politics and the Limits of Politics: Faith-based responses to asylum seeking’ in *Fortress Britain: Ethical Responses to Immigration in Post-Brexit Britain*, ed. Ben Ryan (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2018), [which is focused more on the Augustinian ethics of the good and evil as privation of the good](#).

and location of Jeremiah himself.<sup>5</sup> I mediate this return to the text via Simone Weil's writing on the *Iliad* as a poem of force.<sup>6</sup>

### **Context: Jesuit Refugee Service**

The purpose of my fieldwork with the Jesuit Refugee Service was to understand the position of asylum seekers who experience destitution and detention during, and in some instances following, their course of seeking legal recognition in the UK and to reflect on the role of faith-based organisations in offering material, emotional and spiritual support in this context. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) is an international Catholic [organization](#) with a mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. JRS in the UK has a ministry to those who find themselves destitute as a consequence of government immigration policies and those detained for the administration of immigration procedures. JRS UK runs a day [center](#), various educational, cultural and spiritual activities, a hosting scheme to provide accommodation for up to three months (*At Home*), and detention outreach services to Heathrow [Immigration Removal Centre](#).

My fieldwork, conducted during 2017, involved several months of visits to the Jesuit Refugee Service [center](#) in Wapping, East London. I spent a week participating in the work of the [center](#), including the focal point of the week – a day [center](#) that provides for around 100 men and women living in destitution. I undertook three further visits during which I conducted [25](#) semi-structured interviews and six unstructured staff conversations. [The interviews were balanced between male and female participants. In the case of refugee interviewees, the majority identified as Christian, with four identifying as Muslim. No other faith traditions were represented. Refugee interviewees were from West, Central and East Africa, Asia and the Middle East.](#) A further four interviews were conducted with sector policy experts. The aim of these

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<sup>5</sup> In the preparation of this text I am very grateful to my friends / colleagues Dr Andrew Mein and Professor Walter Moberly for extremely helpful discussion of this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force' in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 182-215.

interviews was to understand how people become destitute and how those refused asylum negotiate the process of living in constant interaction with the idea and concrete reality of the border. For some this meant lives lived in and out of immigration detention, for others lengthy periods of street homelessness and instability.

Castles and Miller define an asylum seeker as a person who 'has crossed an international border in search of protection, but whose claim for refugee status has not yet been decided.'<sup>7</sup> This is a sociological not a legal category; nonetheless, its creation reinforces the transitory state experienced by forced migrants. By definition "asylum seeker" is a transitional category, conveying a condition of impermanence and the notion of a process of contestation, or claim and potential counter-claim. Well over half of those who claim asylum are rejected at the point of making a first claim. Having been issued with a refusal, those claiming asylum lose access to accommodation and are required to leave the UK within twenty-one days, or risk forced removal. The high rate of successful appeals gives some clue as to the inherent problems with the claims process as it currently stands. Many remain trapped within an extended period of waiting, either between or beyond various stages of the legal process.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation defines destitution as follows: 'lacking the means to meet the basic needs of shelter, warmth, food, water and health.'<sup>8</sup> The literature on destitution makes clear that asylum destitution is a condition that is consciously created by the state as part of its border management and deterrence strategy. Withdrawal of accommodation and privation of welfare support, refusal of work and detention are used as deliberate methods of deterrence and expulsion or of border control. Destitution amongst asylum seekers is largely driven by the following factors: the low level of initial successful applications for asylum at first hearing, resulting in protracted appeals processes; the prohibition on paid work during a claim or appeals

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen B. Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 189.

<sup>8</sup> See Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on destitution <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/destitution-uk>. Accessed October 2017.

process, and the lack of access to reliable legal support. Policies of detention and dispersal also feed into dynamics that facilitate social isolation, increase – some would argue manufacture – vulnerability, and therefore increase the risk of destitution and magnify its impact. The interviewees in my study also identified poor casework and a disjointed and bureaucratic system that defies comprehension as contributing or aggravating factors. JRS identifies the housing rules that prevent asylum seekers being able to live in permanent non-rented or independently-rented accommodation and apply for subsistence, the perverse incentives of [accommodation requirements](#), and difficulties in accessing healthcare as further factors in the production of destitution. For the research participants, destitution is enacted as a deliberate policy agenda; it is not an accidental, chosen or simply tragic status.

For those living through stages of refusal in an asylum application, survival happens through a variety of routes: civil society [organizations](#) that provide day [centers](#), night shelters, hosting schemes, legal services, toiletries and other essential provisions, [as well as](#) reliance on informal arrangements for accommodation with friends or acquaintances, sometimes (out of desperation) [obtained](#) in exchange for childcare or sexual or other domestic services. My research highlighted strongly gendered dynamics [of](#) survival in this situation, with women feeling especially vulnerable in public spaces and placing greatest emphasis on the impact of unstable housing and reliance on a variety of ‘hosting’ arrangements. Spending the night moving between long distance night buses as places of perceived relative safety, one female interviewee described her choices carefully: “I choose between two or three different night buses that go a long distance so I can sleep for an hour or so at a time, but going to destinations that I think are safer areas for changing buses... [You](#) feel worthless and unwanted...but the bus feels safer to me as a woman than the streets.” Just as unsatisfactory as sleeping on the street were some forms of hospitality offered by friends or associates, with various forms of exploitation or indignity being described. In this context the night shelters and hosting schemes offered by (often but not always) faith-based [organizations](#) are seen as a welcome, if far from ideal, option.

## Temporality, dispossession, and hopelessness in the asylum system

Mary Mills, to whom we will return, writes of the importance of attending to the moral worlds that emerge in narrative form through accounts of pain, suffering or loss.<sup>9</sup> In the sections that follow I aim to outline central, recurring themes concerning the privation of the good discernable in the interview narratives. These themes center on the distortion of the experience of time, the dispossession of the self, and the generation of hopelessness.

One of the central moral insights to emerge across all interviews concerned the impact of destitution and detention on the way my participants experienced time. I was told repeatedly that the system creates a disciplinary culture that leads to unhealthy and distorted experiences of temporality. In the case of immigration detention, this relates to the indeterminate nature of detention without time limit and to the enforced idleness that accompanies detention. Time becomes both compressed and yet something you become acutely and agonisingly aware of as it passes. For those experiencing destitution it is the passing of time felt as the wasting of time that caused most distress: “Waiting, reporting, not working, the manner of treatment – sometimes in charities as well as by the Home Office or lawyers – dehumanizes. It destroys us. Destitution makes us go mad... Without structure you become susceptible to lots of things: isolation, criminality, addiction, mental and physical illnesses.” Others used the striking and disturbing image of physical decomposition to express their experience of destitution: “I feel as if I am degrading.”

These insights correlate with those from testimony given to a recent cross-party parliamentary inquiry into detention practices in the UK. One detainee described the extreme distorting effect detention has on perceptions of time: “In prison you count your days down, but in detention you count your days up.”<sup>10</sup> A

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Mills, *Alterity, Pain and Suffering in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*, (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Independent cross party parliamentary report examining immigration detention: <https://detentioninquiry.com>, 18.

medical doctor who frequently visits detention facilities describes this same phenomenon:

By being detained indefinitely, without knowing how long for and with the continual possibility of both immanent release and removal, detainees worry that detention will continue forever and also that it will end in unexpected deportation the next morning. They have the simultaneous concern both that there will be sudden change and never-ending stasis. It is the lack of temporal predictability that prevents ... individuals not only from being able to plan for the future, but also from having the ability of knowing that the present will remain uncertain for a protracted length of time.<sup>11</sup>

The compression of time and sense of decomposition in time, the generation of fear, and the atomization of social experience are all hallmarks of detention. In my conversations at JRS a visceral fear of detention marked the interviews, both with those who had been detained and with those who had not, but felt they lived in its disciplinary shadow nonetheless. For those who had been detained, the experience was marked by a sense of dispossession and loss – a permanent diminution. One former detainee who now works professionally to support other detainees remarked: “Detention finishes people off. It’s a form of mental trauma that takes away skill and capacity. We see this in people who have been highly skilled before – doctors, dentists, nurses, university teachers, but who can’t function in these roles even when they later achieve status, because they never fully recover from the trauma of detention.”

In all interviews the trauma of detention was connected to the use of force, the absence of a time limit and the mimicking of a criminal justice process that conveys the idea of a criminal act or intent that detainees cannot internalize or own as a self-identity. One former male detainee noted: “Detention is a context that denies love. Staff can be nice but the problem is the use of force, which shapes the whole reality. The system tells you (in all its actions) that you are an identity that you cannot accept.” He continued: “You know you are there because you aren’t believed. The culture of disbelief re-traumatizes already traumatized people....When we know that there are alternatives, we know it is wrong.”

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 19.

The theme of love denial was also central to the experience of other detainees. A young former detainee (he had been detained twice, the first time for a year aged 19, the second aged 21 for a period of months) described the ways in which micro-interactions in detention had changed his character. He explained that in order to get access to basic things (e.g. a toothbrush and razor) he felt that you had to demand, to become rude and even aggressive. He also described experiences recounted by other former detainees: of being taunted by removal escorts in a failed removal attempt and of information about legal decisions being withheld within the detention center to prevent the lodging of a Judicial Review. Most strikingly, he noted the sense of self-loathing he felt at the realization that, following two periods of detention, he no longer felt a naturally empathetic reaction to the suffering of others. He explained that this was a result of the despair and isolation he felt in detention and the change in his character he felt it had brought about. He described the process of trying to re-learn these instincts.

It is also striking that in two instances former detainees narrated to me experiences of saving the lives of fellow detainees whilst in detention. In one case a young detainee, who had just received his own removal papers for the following day, witnessed an older man he knew well tying a self-made noose round his neck and jumping from a chair. He dropped his papers and ran to catch the man's body, raising the alarm with staff and saving his life. The man told him he was to be returned to his country of origin the following day and wished to die under his own control rather than via torture at the hands of others - and that this way his body would be returned to his family for burial. In the second case the interviewee persuaded a fellow detainee not to take a stash of pills he had been saving up for an overdose. In both cases the suicidal detainees were later released and achieved refugee status. Both experiences left profound marks on these interviewees.

Interviewees also described what they felt to be the "ripple effects" of the so-called hostile environment "messaging". Almost all interviewees talked about the

**Commented [Anon1]:** Should the order of these be the other way around?

**Commented [AR 2]:** No. Released and then make fresh claim and gain status.

acute anxiety experienced when reporting at Home Office facilities. “Every time I went to report I felt sick. You know you might not come out again.” In the hosting scheme one religious sister noted that she was shocked to discover that their destitute guest carried a packed bag with all her belongings with her each time she left the house, in case she was detained. One interviewee used military language to describe how he saw the “messaging” of reporting and detention: “It’s shock and awe tactics. It’s about the message of fear, that all is but a stay of execution – the sudden detention of one person is meant as a message to the rest of us... It’s about fear and power. It aims to maximize your sense of insecurity and fear. I think the Home Office know what they are doing.”

Commented [Anon3]: Is this correct?

Commented [AR 4]: Its correct in the sense that its what the interviewee said...

A repeated insight was that the experience of destitution and its attendant stresses had led to a permanent loss of skills and capacity and thus a fundamental loss of both physical wellbeing and of a deeper sense of selfhood – a form of dispossession that many felt to be permanent. One woman who had been a nurse in her country of origin said “Previously I was a nurse. But the asylum process traumatized me. I’m not the same person now. So much time was killed. I can’t go back to what I did before. I suffer with heart problems now. I never had those before I came here, even with all the trauma that happened to me back home.” Referring with distress to a friend I was told, “He was a [health care professional] in his country. But he will never be able to function again like this here I don’t think. He has waited too long. He is too unwell now.” Another woman who spent many months sleeping on night buses explained that the chronic sleep deprivation meant that she could feel a sense of her capacity drain away; “My ability is already not the same. I could have done so much in this country before. But now? I’m trying so hard to be normal.” This woman, a 40-year-old survivor of sexual violence and torture, notes how, in living so many years waiting for an outcome and without access to resources, “the two halves of life come to feel like they repeat the same thing.” Another woman explained the impact of the lack of nutritious food available to her: “There are no nutritious things going inside me. The doctor told me he was fed up of seeing me coming in with food poisoning from the effects of eating food that had gone out of date. The system shapes everything. My dream is stability and study to be a midwife but I don’t think my

brain could take in the study now. Even things I could do before, I am too tired to do.” In one instance I was told that the system had both reduced a sense of capacity and skill but that my interviewee had [also](#) given up the dream of becoming an engineer partly as an act of protest and resistance: [“I do not wish to give my skills to this country when they have treated me like this. I will keep them within myself.”](#)

Repeatedly I was told that the system generates hopelessness. On the one hand, this hopelessness relates to the stasis of the system and [to](#) its non-responsiveness. On the other hand, it relates to what a number of interviewees describe as the disciplinary structure of the system. One interviewee described the way that the system feels like it quite deliberately aims to foster a self-identity in the asylum claimant that is the opposite to those [characteristics](#) that enabled flight: “fleeing takes enterprise, courage, determination, judgement. We see ourselves as having these characteristics. But the system creates a sense of ourselves as the opposite of these things.” [He](#) continued: “The system makes us in its own image.” Equally, the desire to be settled is perceived [as](#) continually frustrated by the constant micro-mobilities demanded by the insecurity generated by the asylum system: moving between insecure accommodation, relocation within country, journeys to report and to submit evidence, journeys to secure charity and find community. This gap between the enterprise and necessity of flight and the enforced dependence of the system creates an acute sense of affliction.

Interviewees described [d](#) the sense that the system increases rather than limits [one’s](#) sense of dependence on others [and](#) the sense that one [is](#) vulnerable and a drain on other people. [One interviewee echoed the feelings of several others saying, “Where else in the policy system would such non-preventative policies be enacted?”](#) With some anger, another asylum seeker argued: “You want to make a particular kind of community, with asylum seekers shaped in that image. The limits you place on us – on pursuing what is important to us, to being human – are about seeking to destroy something...[The system shapes your life –](#)

especially as a woman - in such a way that it means you live with no love, no life. Relationships require stability. The system ensures that I have no stability.”

For others it is important that [both asylum seeker and “host” communities](#) reflect on the social and economic context of enforced destitution policies. One interviewee expressed his case as follows: “A capitalist system values the idea of contribution. You need to contribute to get something out – when you are not contributing (in the way society understands contribution) you don’t feel like a member of society. This is deliberate, they [the Home Office] know what they are doing.” He continued: “This isn’t just a form of social death, but also intellectually you suffer and die, because you can’t engage, participate or contribute. People don’t take this into account when thinking about destitution and what the asylum system sets out to do, but it’s crucial to understand.” A sector specialist talked of the ways that asylum policy acts as a complex form of social communication: “The hostile environment functions not by being enforceable but by sending a message. Whether it’s sending a message to the electorate, to the media, or actually to migrants themselves is unclear...but the messaging of it is where the power lies...”

### **Narratives of the good: beyond the story of the suffering victim**

Understanding the impact of the asylum system should not lead us to conclude that passive suffering defines all that might be said about the experience of my interviewees. I note this for two reasons. First, my interviews demonstrate that suffering emerges in many instances from the frustration of the search for social goods – to be settled, safe, able to enact skill and capacity, free to associate, create, produce, and to give and receive in relations of love and friendship. The aspiration for certain goods and the deprivation of these goods through mechanistic processes of border management and the actions of office holders is a fundamental part of the experience of contemporary British asylum seeking. Second, a different kind of narrative of the good irrupts into the experience of asylum seeking: those negotiating lives lived along an [ever-present](#) border speak of spaces and places that have been surprisingly transformative. They

narrate fragments of experiences that constitute the *re-membering* of dismembered time.

In all but one of my interviews, participants spoke of faith or religious belief and practice as a vital – typically *the* vital – place of transformation and source of resilience. Interviewees saw themselves as interpreters of their religious traditions in the light of their migratory experience. Three things were immediately striking about the manner in which faith emerged in these conversations. First, most research participants understood faith not simply as personal belief but through the lens of a politics of membership. Participants imagined themselves as members of simultaneously trans-national and local communities of thought and practice. Second, in my formal interview questions I asked no direct question about religion or faith – nonetheless, all but one interviewee told me that faith had been the major sustaining factor for them; to understand how they had survived, I needed to grasp the role that faith had played. Third, when describing sacred texts that had been important to them, participants tended to focus on Old Testament texts. Of these Old Testament texts, a selection of individual Psalms and the Book of Jeremiah were the most frequently discussed.

Before focusing on a more detailed critical engagement with Jeremiah, it is worth noting some of the wider theological themes that emerged from my conversations. To be clear, interview participants stated that faith had been a site of struggle as much as a source of resilience, consolation and resistance. Faith exists within the nexus of immanent force experienced by someone seeking asylum, as much as a source beyond this reality. Whilst it is tempting to posit that faith traditions mark alternative performances and create counter-cultures for migrants outwith practices and narratives of force, the testimonies of those who migrate confirm the complex interconnections of such political and theological performances. Making a complex and interesting connection between personal belief and public religion, one interviewee noted: “People assume coming from outside the UK that the justice system in the UK is based on Christian values. The Queen is the head of the Church of England and swearing

oaths on the Bible etc... But the way that you experience the system doesn't feel like this. [it's] confusing and this can have an impact on your faith too. The system is seen by people like me as a faith-based system that has let them down. In a Christian society, why a system that is so unjust?"

By contrast, in a number of instances the experience of life inside the asylum system had led to quite dramatic conversion experiences to Christianity – either from Islam or from more syncretistic forms of traditional African religious beliefs and practices. These conversions had typically taken place in prison or detention facilities and were connected to the influence of individual Christians they had met and come to admire and who had appeared as impressive moral examples and / or encouraged them to read the Bible. One interviewee explained to me that he had encountered the writings of St Paul as well as the Book of Jeremiah and that this had helped him “keep his mind” in detention. He drew for me a diagram as a way of explaining that he thought Paul’s teaching had given him a method of self-preservation and “new life” whilst incarcerated. He felt that the spirit is renewed by the word and so the flesh dies to worldly concerns. The “unfree” body is cut off from what is happening to it. The word of God bombards the person and “tilts you towards the Spirit...The Home Office can’t capture the spirit...It is the devil who tilts you towards the stuff of the flesh...makes you think there is no hope.” Explaining that what he had received in detention was a revelation of who he was in Christ, he told me that in the Scriptures he had seen a message centered on the importance of knowledge and understanding: “the righteous are delivered through knowledge”, he emphasized. Talking of the prevalence of depression and self-harm in detention, the same interviewee said he felt that “we are doomed without this vision.” He explained that this teaching is rooted also in the Book of Jeremiah, which he sees as central to his ability to maintain hope in a context of uncertainty: “God says, there are plans I have for you; he says, the plan I have for you is for unexpected ends.” This interviewee proposed an interconnected reading of Jeremiah and Paul, arguing that together these writings work to keep one focused on the possibility of the good in a context where you do not know the ending to your story. “This keeps us calm.” “This makes me feel ‘be anxious for nothing.’” Reading these texts in detention

**Commented [Anon5]:** Thoughts on these internal quotes? Okay if not in favour

**Commented [AR 6]:** I think better without given its not a literal quote from scripture text but rather paraphrase?

had made him feel “armed with information” and “that this knowledge is just more powerful,” making a contrast between the power of the Home Office and the power he felt in Christ.

The way in which this framework had changed my interviewee’s mind-set was illustrated through his interpretation of the story of Abraham, which he told next. Explaining that lots of people think that the problem with detention is that it wastes time, he noted: “Not time but promise matters.” “It’s about unmerited grace.” This was not an attempt to suggest that the experience of detention had not been very difficult – when asked what changes he would like to see, he was very clear that he would close detention centers and focus on alternative, community-based measures – but his point was to offer a more consciously theological interpretation of his experience. He continued: “Look at the promise to Abraham. It’s seemingly impossible. Sarah is looking in the time realm, and time is running out for her [to have a child]. God goes the extra mile and fulfils his promise to her when time seems to have run out... Grace transforms how we experience time.” Connecting this with his experience of detention and the relationship he was able to build with other detainees, he asked: “What is two years to me? A suicidal man changed his mind because I was able to preach.” “Now he is alive and in Liverpool and has his status.”

Explaining that he had seen both “a beautiful and a terrible side to life in the UK”, another interviewee narrated his experiences of working illegally without legitimate papers, of arrest, and a prison sentence during which he attended an Alpha course. This was followed by nearly four years in detention, spread over four different periods of time ranging from two weeks to two years. The Alpha course he participated in whilst in prison and the community he felt he was part of in the detention center were major turning points for him. He told me that he realized during the course of this time that “we all deserve to live a good life. I realized I had a love in me... I asked for God’s mercy. I realized I was motivated by love and that I could use it to reach out to other people. If you are open to love it brings peace... I read that Abraham was a migrant and he was used by God. This gives encouragement... Reading Romans 8:28, that ‘all things work together

for those who love God...’ this helped me to focus on God.” Reading Pauline and [Iohannine](#) themes together, he introduced his reading of Jeremiah: “The idea that there is a good plan for each of us... that we are all here to be players in our divine assignment... In detention I was [recognized](#) as a pastor and I preached my first sermon. My main hope became to have a legacy of love... Love through works... Life is about encouragement.” He contrasted [this](#) with the structures of detention itself: “Detention is not a context of love. Staff can be nice but the problem is the way of [arrest...](#) the use of force and [chaining...](#) The system tells you [\[that\]](#) you are an identity you can’t accept.”

One interviewee, a former academic from West Africa who has experienced periods of significant physical ill health during his asylum claim, explained [that](#) his resilience comes from reading the Scriptures. The most important text for him was “Jeremiah 29: verse 11. God says ‘I have a plan for you which is a good plan.’” He reads this alongside Hebrews 11: “Faith is being sure of what you want and what you can see. God gives us examples to help – Abraham, Noah, Rahab. We receive through faith... Sometimes I want to give up, I’m tired, it is enough. Then I remember the Cross of Jesus. He went to the Cross. I think, [don’t](#) be undermined by each difficult situation. You have to overcome. Because of God’s presence you don’t give up... I give thanks for each time when I see I have something, a bed, food. I remember Romans: ‘all things for our good... My vocation is to follow this plan of God.’” He spoke movingly of the way in which he discerned that cooperating with God’s plan for the good meant that he now needed to see himself as a recipient of hospitality, rather than simply someone who offered it to others. He described with pride the way that his family in West Africa had hosted displaced persons and his total disbelief that he himself would ever be in a situation like this. He said that he believed that through receiving hospitality [=](#) something he found hard to do [=](#) God was “preparing me now for what I can do in the future.”

For others, the Scriptures – in particular the [psalms](#) - had offered a language through which to make sense of the contradictions of their experience: “[Like](#) the [psalms](#) say, I have walked through the valley of death and I know what it is like,

but I also know that God was with me. This was my experience.... death and life, evil and protection...like the psalms say...both things are true." My interviewees chose psalms that expressed themes of trust, promise, protection and security, praying psalms 23 and 125 in particular. Whilst other psalms might strike scholars as more obviously juridical or political in character, we should not overlook the interplay of the transcendent theological categories that shape these psalms and the formal, normative political categories deployed in secular form by state asylum systems. It is striking that the psalms chosen concern the transcendent promises of Law: divine sovereignty, security and protection. This is especially the case in a context where the immanent legal forms of such promises – deploying the same language - are perceived as withheld, fragile and frequently broken offerings. One interviewee noted the singular importance to her of psalm 40:1-8. A number of interviewees expressed the view that the psalms were helpful partly because they provided a language for naming the realities of good and evil experience as part of the migration journey and because they also named the paradox of "disaster and healing."

### **Narratives of the good: turning to the figure of Jeremiah via Simone Weil**

All of this prompts the question: what kind of scriptural readers and theological interpreters are my interviewees, and how might political theologians and biblical scholars engage with and respond to such a community of readers, writers, and interpreters? The final two sections of this article explore these questions. In making this move I am moving beyond the narratives provided by my interviewees and attempting to sketch the outlines of one possible constructive theological response.

In his writings on Jeremiah and prophecy, Walter Brueggemann argues that the Book of Jeremiah functions as both as an explicitly theological account of exile and as a critique of ideology.<sup>12</sup> In this article I seek to follow Brueggemann in

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<sup>12</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *To Pluck and to Tear Down: Jeremiah 1-25*, (Haddington: Handsel Press, 1989); Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination: Prophetic Voices in Exile*, (Philadelphia: Augsburg Press, 1986); Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2001).

both regards. In doing so I also aim to write in appreciative dialogue with Steed Davidson's wonderfully – and disturbingly – suggestive reading of empire and power in Jeremiah which is included in this volume. In the context of a wider analysis of the imperialistic overtones of the text, most evident in the oracles against the nations, Davidson argues for the political-theological significance of the distinction between those forced migrants named in the text as *galut* (24:5) and those named *she'erith* (24:8), mapping these identities onto the good and bad figs of chapter 24. Whilst the *galut* go without external resistance into Babylonian exile and thus co-operate with the plan for eventual divine restoration to the land, the *she'erith* make their own path, fleeing to Egypt. In doing so they are understood to have cut across the immanent and transcendent religious and political narratives of judgement, restoration and promise, becoming subject to conflict and difficulty in the land of refuge and losing the promise of divine protection. Davidson suggests that this group bear the hallmarks of Agamben's description of human life as "bare life." However, Davidson also notes that these distinctions about place and space are significant in immanent and divine terms, narrated in the context of YHWH's sovereignty and the global reach of his plan. He also notes that the *she'erith* bear a close resemblance to contemporary refugee populations. On a first reading of the material drawn from my fieldwork it will be evident that, in the public imagination, the research participants bear a strong resemblance to Davidson's / Jeremiah's *she'erith*. Interviewees experience themselves as stripped of social function and identity, facing hostility and living outside of normal categories of protection. They also perceive themselves as people who have taken initiative in complex situations and understand that for these and other reasons they are perceived as disturbers of neo-nativist narratives, unsettlers of contemporary, socially-conditioned norms about movement and borders. On a second reading, however, Davidson's binary distinction between *galut* and *she'erith* is disrupted by the presence of a third resonant narrative: that provided by the figure of Jeremiah himself, who transcends and disturbs this binary. I read the position and experience of these contemporary interviewees alongside the narrative frame of Jeremiah as well as in the resonant context of Davidson's discussion of the *she'erith*.

Writing on themes of pain, suffering and loss in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, Mary Mills talks of the need to pay attention to the 'symbolic moral worlds' depicted by these biblical texts.<sup>13</sup> Favoring narrative and spatial readings, Mills asks: what kind of moral vision emerges when we pay attention to the 'dignity of being for those for whom pain cannot be avoided'?<sup>14</sup> Throughout this phrase allows Mills to posit the reality of pain and dislocation, without succumbing to a portrait of the uprooted person as simply a suffering victim. She frames her moral assessment of pain and loss in Jeremiah according to a concern for narratives of the good. Quoting Charles Taylor's assertion that the desire to make sense of one's life story is a necessary rather than optional feature of human life, she notes that '[m]oral meanings emerge from the kind of stories one tells for oneself/ourselves.'<sup>15</sup> These moral narratives forge analogical connections between body and world. Deploying an analogical reading of the text of Jeremiah, Mills argues for attention to the embodied experience of Jeremiah as an analogy for, and participation in, the experience of the social whole. Mills connects Jeremiah's narrative of mental pain and suffering with the loss of place and the devastation of the city. Such connections are already consciously political-theological: 'concepts of body and landscape can overlap in terms of their relationship to spatiality, for these prophetic bodies act as sites which map religious politics and political theology – in the mute tongue, shorn head and mind confused and uncertain.'<sup>16</sup>

It is striking that the moral vision of the world that emerges from my interviews repeatedly evokes the question of 'ends'. On the one hand the question of ends emerges as a teleological and anthropological question. Interviewees repeatedly stressed the paradox evoked in Simone Weil's presentation (with which I opened this article) of the relation between subjection to force and craving for justice and the good. A dual anthropology emerged as the basis of an articulation of the

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Mills, *Alterity, Pain and Suffering in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel*. (London: T&T Clark, 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Mills, *Alterity, Pain and Suffering*, viii.

<sup>15</sup> Mills, p16. See Kathleen O'Connor, *Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> Mills, *Alterity, Pain and Suffering*, 28.

good in the face of force, expressed as the need to [recognize](#) an inherent drive towards relationality – social exchange and mutual recognition and obligation – as well as the necessity of respect for self-determination. In both the general discussion about what interviewees hoped for and in their account of their experience of the asylum process they returned to these questions of the good. Understandings of the good emerged as coterminous with the possibility of spending time gainfully through paid work, mutual service through public and private friendships, [and](#) the possibility of forming and maintaining families.

Such a contributive ethic is close to the vision of the life YHWH sets forth for the exiles in Babylon and which Casey Strine [emphasizes](#) in his cosmopolitan reading of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles in this volume. Strine focuses on the letter to the exiles in Jeremiah 29 and draws out three principles for Christian theological responses to the politics of migration. Strine's interpretation focuses on the life of the community in Babylon – on the span of one lifetime, the 70 years that the exiles believe they will endure away from the land. [My](#) interviewees put flesh on the bones of this vision of a life lived in exile, [on](#) the conditions which build flourishing; [they](#) note the tensions [involved](#) in seeking to [realize](#) this vision – between the reality of living in a 'host nation' context and the experience of hospitable action. To state the obvious plainly: 'host' countries and localities are not necessarily hospitable contexts. [Experiences](#) of force [combine with](#) a determined, coercive denial of the contributive and participative goods of human nature [to produce an](#) experience of inhospitable living.

[Yet](#), a second, related evocation of the idea of 'ends' [also](#) emerges in my interview material. Interviewees – especially in descriptions of their [reliance on](#) the text of Jeremiah – [emphasize](#) ends as [they](#) relate to the mystery and paradox of what can and cannot be known. This knowing and not-knowing (and sometimes unknowing) plays out against a divine and immanent horizon. Given that most of my interviewees existed with little immediate hope of case resolution, [and](#) yet with constant fears of territorial incarceration or expulsion, it is perhaps unsurprising that what was judged most resonant in the text of Jeremiah 29 was less [its](#) teaching on integration and more [its](#) call for moral openness to the

manifestation of unexpected endings; indeed a requirement that we be open to a plan for the good that contains unexpected endings. Suspending a desire to know - or suspending the temptation to *foreclose* the question of endings - becomes part of the vision of ethical life. A distinction emerged between a sharp, practical knowledge of the conditions necessary for life to go on - for communities to be formed and law to function well - and the limitations on knowledge about the origins of the disorder they were experiencing, the eventual destination they might reach, or how healing or justice might become possible within the context of trauma. This healing pertained to both individual lives and the bodies politic from which they had been exiled and in which they currently resided. Jeremiah 29 was interpreted as a passage concerned with this question of individual and social moral ends. God makes a way where there is no way and overcomes a theoretical and practical *aporia* that results from fallen human action and the messy complexity of life. Openness to this divine possibility requires a certain ethical predisposition within the self. Interviewees suggested that we are given hints as to how to be human participants in God's mysterious redemptive process enacted in time when there seems to be no path: Abraham, Sarah, Rahab, and Ruth were named as inspiring examples. Each shows how the *aporias* of migration might be negotiated and help make the contradictions of the system meaningful. The contradictions remain unresolved, but the agency of a divine actor breaks into this reality to open up what appears to be closed down.

Interviewees talk of this process of knowing and not knowing being held not simply as a vertical tension between God and the individual self, but as a more relational, immanent process of performance, enacted as a drama through communal prayer and worship. One woman, seeking status in the UK for 19 years, says that prayer and liturgy held value because they taught her "maybe there is another side to your story that you don't know." "I often feel discouraged. Like it's all taking too long. But if I am still here now it's because there is a God. It's the only way I can explain still being sane. God has a hand on me. It's a fantastic hope, it means things are not only what we see with our eyes... It means there are still things for me to discover about the world." In one sense, my interviewees lack the tense and disturbing imperialistic presentation of the

text that marks Davidson's reading - but my readers echo his emphasis on the question of ends as a significant moral theme. It does not seem too much to claim that my interviewees insert themselves as careful readers of a text marked by chaos, disaster, a degree of unreadability, and uncertainty of ends.

Where might such readings take us, as we seek to forge connections between an ancient biblical text of significant narrative complexity and the contemporary experience of a small group of forced migrants? To answer this question properly would require a hermeneutical analysis that is beyond the scope of this paper and would require more extensive fieldwork. However, I intend to make a beginning by way of conclusion, tentatively and provisionally returning the reader to the text of Jeremiah via the figure of Jeremiah himself.

Given the emphasis I have placed thus far on attending to the narratives and experiences of destitute and previously detained asylum seekers, a return to the figure of Jeremiah requires some explanation and contextualization. Interviewees clearly noted the importance of Jeremiah as a text, but their primary hermeneutic focus was on a specific set of verses and on what Jeremiah's prophecy revealed about the action of YHWH in history. Whilst the experience of a cloud of biblical witnesses was invoked, Jeremiah himself was not. What I propose in what follows is a response to what I have heard from interviewees, rather than simply an interpretation of their words. This involves a two-fold movement between text and (plural) communities of interpretation. The first movement takes the form of a proposition: that a normative political-theological response might be made to interviewees by proposing further resonant connections between the experiences of those seeking asylum and the text of Jeremiah, via the figure of Jeremiah as well as questions concerning the authorial coherence of the text. The second movement: that political theological and biblical scholarship can further the dialogue between migrants and the text and that, in return, the insights offered by interviewees into the realities of space, place and time might enable the wider community of scholars and interpreters to return to the interpretation of Jeremiah with fresh perspective. This is both to deepen the connections already suggested by interviewees and to extend beyond

them. In no sense is [this](#) work imagined as an attempt to out-narrate other interpretations of the text, but rather to re-imagine what political theologians might usefully contribute to multi-dimensional readings of the biblical text and to [the](#) recent movement within biblical studies to re-engage migrant experience with readings of the text of Jeremiah.

In choosing to name the Book of Jeremiah as a resonant resource, my interviewees strikingly overlook what is surely an obvious connection between their own experience and the text: that Jeremiah himself is one of – if not the – most extensively narrated ‘detained’ character in the Old Testament. The prophet’s broken and difficult-to-decipher narrative emerges from a context of mental pain [connected in part with his repeated incarceration and being taken into Egypt](#). This agony is expressed as a doggedly-articulated set of goods and a lament at their loss, is framed by both the devastation of the city and the experience of subjection to political and military force. Jeremiah is of interest not because he has an identical experience to my interviewees, but because he performs a wider ethical role within the biblical text in the context of forced displacement. Arguably, rather than reinforcing the experiential binary of exile / non-exile, Jeremiah’s position relativizes such an absolute binary: he both remains in Jerusalem and is also subject to displacement and force. Jeremiah cannot be described as a figure marginal to the exercise of power – he has access to rulers and to powerful public spaces and is under divine command to deliver his message in these contexts. Yet, whilst he has access to such power, Jeremiah remains dependent on failing systems of elite governance and power and is repeatedly subject to forms of force that diminish, disorientate, and [terrorize](#). Jeremiah’s life is lived in a threshold space that exists within the frame of the court space. His dependence on power has both immanent and transcendent dimensions; if we are to describe his position as a [“border existence.”](#) then this border is primarily conceived as existence along a ‘border between human society and divine transcendence’.<sup>17</sup> Mills argues that Jeremiah’s ‘border existence’ emerges from grief, as his own position becomes increasingly [agonized](#). Jeremiah’s resulting fraught state is portrayed by Mills as intellectual

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<sup>17</sup> Mills, p110.

and emotional, working analogically to mirror and precede the 'coming fragmentation and collapse of his community.'<sup>18</sup> Mills argues that Jeremiah comes to adopt a pathetic identity: Jeremiah allows himself to experience the grief that comes from standing in between his community and the divine as a form of pathos. The liminality of Jeremiah results not from his marginality from power, but from his experience of dispossession as he seeks to negotiate a divine vision of ethical life and from the resulting acceptance that he is probably destined not to survive - which in turn acts as an analogy for the dispossession and trauma of the community that is to come.<sup>19</sup> Mills argues that this experience of trauma and loss resulting from the interweaving of the trauma of the soul and the city indelibly marks the text - that 'the prophetic persona can be described as one traumatised by the role of messenger'.<sup>20</sup>

Brueggemann's work on Jeremiah echoes this sentiment: 'the proper idiom for the prophet ... is the language of grief, the rhetoric that engages the community in mourning for a funeral they do not want to admit. That grief and mourning, that crying in pathos, is the ultimate form of criticism.'<sup>21</sup> This work of pathos is presented as the moral work of living with contradiction, under the authority of YHWH and as a member of the body politic. Jeremiah, standing for the whole, enacts the call to justice and repentance that belongs as a practice to the just city and to YHWH. Deploying Terry Eagleton's literary theory, Mills argues that the goal of dramatized pain is the enactment of a process through which we might come to terms with our histories of brutality and fear: the 'goal of prophetic pathos is political'.<sup>22</sup> What matters, ethically speaking, is not Jeremiah's moral innocence - he is an active, disturbing and powerful announcer of ethical failure rather than simply a passive or tragic sign of it - but rather his complex role as a cultural agent within and outside of his own nation and social order.

Mills and Brueggemann each take up the question of trauma, resistance and imagination in the experience of Jeremiah. Brueggemann argues that Jeremiah's

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p 110.

<sup>19</sup> Mills, p112.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p111.

<sup>21</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*, p51. Quoted in Mills, p115.

<sup>22</sup> Mills, p118.

'freedom of liberated, faithful speech anticipates and evokes a new public reality', a reality dependent on its coming into being through the performance of such speech.<sup>23</sup> Jeremiah is to be read as an imaginative theo-political construct. Mills places more emphasis on the difficulty, mental pain and loss that accompany the act of uttering such public speech in the context of displacement. She refuses to heal the broken middle of the prophet's speech, inviting us to see that in attending to the experience of Jeremiah the 'reader is invited to share the prophet's hearing of hostile voices whispering in corners and in spaces vacated by the prophetic body and thus engage with the prophet's sense of alienation and otherness.'<sup>24</sup> The articulation of the vision is inseparable from the complex analogical and agonistic relation of the soul, the city and the sacred that structures the whole book.

Such an analysis echoes the work of Simone Weil on the *Iliad* as a poem of force, a quotation from which [appeared](#) at the opening of this article.<sup>25</sup> Treating the *Iliad* as exilic writing, Weil presents an extraordinary meditation on force – the 'very centre of human history' – as a process through which those subjected to it are turned into a 'thing', literal and metaphorical corpses. [Several lines of argument in Weil's essay are](#) of particular interest and help to deepen the engagement proposed in this article.<sup>26</sup>

First, echoing both my interviewees' perceptions of the indignities of detention, the use of sudden immigration raids, and hostile environment policies, as well as Jeremiah's own subjection to ridicule and persecution, Weil notes that force seeks its recognition as a form of public spectacle. The exercise of force, through which a sense of public identity and imagination is formed and reformed,

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<sup>23</sup> Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination*.

<sup>24</sup> Mills, p9.

<sup>25</sup> Simone Weil, 'The Iliad or The Poem of Force' in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, (London: Penguin, 2005.)

<sup>26</sup> The sections of the text of Jeremiah to which the insights below most obviously pertain are the confessions [in](#) chapters 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18 [and](#) the narratives of detention offered in 20:1-6 (Pashhur); 26.1-24; 32.1-33.26; 37.1-38.28 ([Jeremiah's imprisonment by Zedekiah](#)); chs 32-33 (which seem to be reports of oracles delivered during the period of incarceration described in chs 37-38); 39:11-14, (15-18); 40.1-6 (Jeremiah's release); [and ch. 43](#) (Jeremiah taken to Egypt).

becomes a form of difficult self-relation precisely because it is enacted as an annunciation of a form of social relation. This is a complex argument to make in the case of immigration detention, because in one sense it is the invisibility, hiddenness and secrecy of the system that defines its character. However, this turn towards the hidden is arguably a deliberately and irreducibly *public* act, akin in this sense to state policies of disappearance and torture where the act itself is intended both as an action to isolate the victim and as an action that shapes the imagination of the body politic. Similarly, Weil notes that the experience of negotiating necessity as one deals with the consequent disjuncture of being both subject to force and seeking one's good shapes the experience of both the soul and the city; it is a move which is felt by the person to be simultaneously intensely personal and inherently social. This negotiation of complexity and contradiction indelibly shapes the person. For my interviewees the impact of this reality is clear. It remains an open question as to how such insights might lead us to re-read the text of Jeremiah.

From this point of departure Weil makes two further observations: first, that force makes victims out of those who possess it as well as those victim to it and, second, that it takes a miracle to escape the 'petrification of force'. Weil argues that 'force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims; the second it crushes, the first it intoxicates. The truth is nobody really possesses it.'<sup>27</sup> Extending her analysis of force as social relation, Weil drives home her view that political-theological attention to the history of force is vital - for the human spirit is endlessly subject to, and modified by, its relations with force in *both* its exercise and reception. The miracle, for Weil, is the possibility of a more truly human(e) moment in the intoxicating exercise of force - the interposing of an interval of reflection, a moment in which the hand that wields the sword is steadied. This is a movement of ethical life that Jeremiah himself appears to embody and his leaders generally lack. It is also a sentiment echoed in the most ordinary and direct terms by those I interviewed. A young Congolese man, detained and released twice in his early twenties, told me that if he could address the culture of the Home Office he would plead with them to

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<sup>27</sup> Weil, p191.

pause, having made a decision, and to consider “whether there was anything they might have missed.” He did not mean an extension in the duration of a claim, but rather the insertion of an interval of self-examination.

Weil connects this to the possibility of love and justice. Because the exercise of force is a defining and constant social relation, she does not imagine a binary opposition between the pursuit of the good and force, but rather the inevitable negotiation of goods within the endless reinvention of relations of force, where what is possible is the irruption of intervals of love and justice. Confronting the history of force and its misery is a ‘precondition of justice and love.’ This is not to make evil ontologically prior to the good, but to understand how the good abides - how the soul returns to itself. She describes the existence of a few luminous moments in the *Iliad*

in which man possesses his soul. The soul that awakes then, to live for an instant only and be lost almost at once in force’s vast kingdom, awakes pure and whole; it contains no ambiguities, nothing complicated or turbid; it has no room for anything but courage and love. Sometimes it is in the course of inner deliberation that a man finds his soul: he meets it like Hector before Troy, as he tried to face destiny on his own terms, without the help of gods and men. At other times, it is in a moment of love that men discover their souls... The tradition of hospitality persists, even through several generations, to dispel the blindness of combat.’<sup>28</sup>

What is worthy of respect is this counter-history of love and justice. For this reason, counterintuitively, we stare first at the dominion of force: ‘only he who has measured the dominion of force, and knows how not to respect it, is capable of love and justice.’<sup>29</sup>

Weil returns us to the text of Jeremiah with new eyes, to view the significance of the narratives of force. Whilst Jeremiah’s situation is not exceptional in the context of a wider biblical trope of prophetic experience of annunciation, denunciation, incarceration, and persecution, both Mills and Mary Callaway note

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<sup>28</sup> Weil, p206.

<sup>29</sup> Weil, p212.

that what is distinct in the Book of Jeremiah is the numerous quite specific references to places, experiences, and responses to being detained, tortured, and displaced. Jeremiah's terror in the face of such experiences is extensively related in both poetry and prose. Whilst Mills notes the mockery, scorn, rejection, and hostility faced by Jeremiah, more might be made of the extent to which incarceration<sup>s</sup> mark key shifts in the text itself, moving the text between its poetic and prosaic forms. In chapter 20 we encounter the bewildering breakdown of meaning Jeremiah experiences following persecution and - for the first time in the text - incarceration. Language of displacement and suffering attaches specifically to the context of incarceration. Jeremiah 20:7-18 displays the typical elements of a lament, including a turn to confidence in God. Like them, it offers a vision of a traumatized prophet, who appears no longer to know the purpose of his trials as a participation in the good and who rails at both YHWH and at his persecutors. Unlike them, it follows on from the first account of Jeremiah's conflict with authority and detention.

Noting the striking use of detail and technical vocabulary concerning locations of prophecy and detention, Mary Callaway argues that there is much to indicate an eye-witness account.<sup>30</sup> However, she notes also that the book's confused chronology and narrative inconsistencies suggest a more complex authorial process, in which we are simultaneously invited to engage in a historical reading of the text and frustrated in realizing such a reading in equal measure:

'As many readers ancient and modern have recognized, these chapters [referring to meetings between Jeremiah and Zedekiah] are made up of episodes which do not all follow smoothly upon each other, but are temporally and spatially disorientating. The narrative jumps backwards and forwards in time, and moves in and out of a variety of prisons and dungeons.'<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Mary Chilton Callaway, 'Black Fire on White Fire: Historical Context and Literary Subtext in Jeremiah 37-38' in *Jeremiah (Dis)placed: New Directions in Writing/Reading Jeremiah*, ed. A.R. Pete Diamond and Louis Stulman (London: T&T Clark, 2011), pp171-178.

<sup>31</sup> Callaway, p172.

She draws two significant points from these observations. First, we might view the rough texture of the text as a result of the process of writing and redaction at the hands authors and editors representing different, competing versions of a Jeremianic 'exilic' narrative – that this, that the text itself represents a plural, contested political history. Scholars attribute an earlier version of this narrative to scribes who remained in the land under the rule of Gedaliah during the last days of Jerusalem, and the final version to those who acquiesce to exile in Babylon. In the light of Davidson's account, we ought perhaps to note that missing from this authorial process are the voices of the *she'erith*, who are (unsurprisingly) most marginal in the text and – of the exiles – most negatively portrayed. What is of most interest, however, is the suggestion that the Book of Jeremiah represents the writings of those under occupation and those in exile, narrating their contemporary experience of exile. Mastering the text becomes less a problem of internal coherence and more a narrative paradox made meaningful by the contested, orienting and disorientating experience of migration – both Jeremiah's own and that of the scribes and exiles who formulated the text.

Turning now to my second movement, we note that the primary insights of my interviewees into the moral performance of the asylum system concerned the intersecting experiences of space, place, and temporality. My suggestion here is that attention to the contemporary experience of detention and destitution might have something to offer to our reading of the text of Jeremiah, most particularly to passages representing ing speech in contexts of incarceration and the use of force. Such consideration is not entirely absent from contemporary Jeremiah scholarship. In developing her account of the Book of Jeremiah's 'symbolic moral worlds', Mills argues for analysis attentive to how space is experienced and focused on 'synchronicity of action with a given spatial setting.'<sup>32</sup> She gives the example of land as a theme that can be read variously in spatial or temporal terms. She argues: 'since... spatiality is durative, a timeless quality is imparted to the enduring experiences of such suffering and devastation

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<sup>32</sup> Mills, p11.

in its own right.<sup>33</sup> In this she reacts against a tendency to focus on questions of time, temporality and chronology as the ordering categories that unlock the text. Whilst supportive of Mills' attention tion to the spatial, my interviewees prompt us to wonder whether an either/or account helps us in reading the text. Recent studies of forced migration, including my own interviews, suggest that the imperative is less to choose *between* space and time as categories for analysis and more to understand how these become mutually constituted phenomenon for forced migrants. Palestinian poet Yousif M. Qasmiyeh writes of the space of the camp (a context in which he himself was raised) as an experience of the "crucifixion of time".<sup>34</sup> My interviewees speak of the spatial practices of destitution and immigration detention as producing an experience of the 'degrading of time'. To understand forced migration and exile is to posit deep connections between space, place and time, not to reify one category over the other.

The text of Jeremiah hints at the connections between experiences of time and the ordering and disordering of space. It seems important in the letter to the exiles that exile is measured as the span of a lifetime, with normal markers of time made impossible for those caught in the devastation of the city: marriage and children in particular. We might, in this light, read the command to settle in the land, marry and have children and to seek the welfare of the city issued by YHWH through Jeremiah in the letter to the exiles as a prophetic teaching concerning resistance and restoration of right relation.

## Conclusion

This article began life as the result of a set of both anticipated and unanticipated conversations. I constructed my research questions as an intentional challenge to accounts of forced migrants as either suffering victims or as individualized 'good' or 'bad' immigrants. I sought to engage with but also reshape such discourses through the introduction of an Augustinian-Thomist virtue ethics capable of

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p9.

<sup>34</sup> Yousif M. Qasmiyeh, The Camp, accessible <https://refugeehosts.org/2017/02/24/qa-with-yousif-m-qasmiyeh/> (December 2017).

viewing questions of the good – and its privation - as an inherently social matter: a question of shared ethical life. In this sense it represented a normative theological undertaking. What was unexpected was the insistence of research participants on framing their experience in terms of specific biblical texts and traditions. I make no argument that these texts hold a universal key to the interpretation of forced migrants' religious experience. Rather, I have sought simply to attend carefully to the material each person shared with me. One outcome of the research has thus been the need to respond to this community of biblical interpreters and to generate tentative political-theological connections in light of such conversations. As an initial response to this task, this article does little more than to set out the challenge, asking whether contemporary 'exilic' interpretation of the text can return us to the text in new, dialogical ways. To do so is to reposition the Book of Jeremiah within a wider historical and theological tradition of exilic or refugee writing and to suggest that it might be opened up to new perspectives through attention to contemporary refugees and exiles, whose experience mirrors aspects of the text and who therefore approach the text with a deep sense of its historical and contemporary resonance.