

September 21, Ordinary 25C (Jeremiah 8:18-9:1)

Jeremiah is the emo prophet.

by [Jon Mathieu](#) in the [September 2025](#) issue

I am sometimes teased by this magazine's managing editor, Steve Thorngate, for my taste in music. I really don't see how it's my fault that I came of age during a moment in evangelical subculture when the formative genres were pop-punk, ska, and emo. And as studies have shown as far back as 1989, when I was learning to tie my shoes, the music we listen to in our late teens and early 20s tends to stick with us and shape our preferences for the rest of our lives.

In case you're unfamiliar with emo music, *emo* is short for *emotional*. The genre actually developed from hardcore punk music, but as it rose in popularity during my teen years, it became more associated with the calmer sounds of alternative rock. Its lyrics are, as you'd expect, emotional—usually described with words like *introspective*, *confessional*, and *fraught*—and often about failed romance. The first stanza of one emo standard by Dashboard Confessional begins, "I'm missing your bed; I never sleep."

Jeremiah is the emo prophet. In this week's reading, he puts these bands to shame. Here's my paraphrase of the opening lines of chapter 9: *I wish my head would turn into a waterfall. Then you'd know how much and how often I cry for my people.*

So dramatic. And yet, before we chastise the crying lyricist, let's remember that he's not a jilted rock singer moping about an ex-girlfriend. He is a prophet in a country being politically and militarily crushed by its enemies. Along with these baseline fears of destruction, his people live under the weight of the knowledge that they are pawns. Caught in the vise between Egypt to the west and Assyria (then Babylon) to the east, Judah and its neighbors fight, haggle, capitulate, and compromise for every scrap of autonomy and independence they can get.

With the power imbalance between the Egyptian and Babylonian superpowers and the small countries located between them, "pawns" really does feel like the right metaphor. "Egypt's policies toward the Levant region were designed to use those countries as buffers against Babylon," writes Old Testament scholar James Nogalski. "By encouraging dissatisfaction with Babylonian rule, Egypt sought to weaken Babylon's ability to mount an effective campaign against its territory." I am an amateur chess enthusiast, and I would describe pawns in exactly the same way: buffers against an opponent's attacking pieces. Expendable buffers, so long as they sufficiently weaken the enemy's offensive while they're still on the board.

In chess, the pawns are only little pieces of wood or plastic. In the ancient Near East in the late seventh century BCE, the pawns were flesh-and-blood people: the residents of Judah, Edom, Philistia, and neighboring countries. This history—and the heartbreak of Jeremiah—invite us to consider who is being treated like a pawn today.

We might think of racialized pawns in the struggle between the Republican and Democratic Parties. Trans pawns in the culture wars that dominate cable news. Palestinian and Ukrainian civilian pawns dying in geopolitical conflicts they didn't choose and can't end. Refugee and immigrant pawns swept away by US executive orders.

To be clear, many of the people or groups we might include in a list like this are courageously acting for justice for themselves and for others in their respective societies. They do not necessarily accept pawn status with

meekness. Nonetheless, systems are in place that disenfranchise and disempower them, leaving them susceptible to harms inflicted at the whims of the privileged, who may dehumanize them and treat them like expendable buffers in some other conflict.

For those being moved about a chess board against their will, there is surely no correct way to feel or express emotions. But one option that strikes me as healthy, and sometimes necessary, is just letting it rip. Screaming, crying, yelling, sobbing. “O that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night!”

I’m not sure I’ve experienced anything like this in a church. In my experiences—in White churches, whether evangelical or mainline—we like to sing “There Is a Balm in Gilead” without really feeling the weight of Jeremiah’s torment: *Isn’t there a balm in Gilead? At least one doctor? I had thought so, but I’m looking around and everyone is sick and dying.*

But I was once invited by a rabbi friend to an outdoor shofar service with his small, progressive faith community. At one point we were all invited to yell as loud as we could together into the open air. I felt many emotions, my own and others’, as our voices rose discordantly. It was Jeremianic. It was emo.