



# BEAUTIFUL LOSERS

Louis Stulman, Ph.D., admitted he has always been a sucker for the underdog. No wonder he reads the Bible as the literary legacy of a tiny country repeatedly invaded and occupied by the great empires of the ancient Near East.

“There’s no getting around it: the people of Israel were the ‘historical losers,’ footnotes in our current history books,” Stulman said.

In fact, his extensive studies in prophetic literature have resulted in his respected status as an internationally recognized authority on the Book of Jeremiah, which is considered one of the harshest hard luck cases in the Old Testament.

Since the 1970s, Stulman, a University of Findlay professor of religion, has been scrutinizing Jeremiah’s troubles and gleaning timeless meaning from them. His contention is that Jeremiah and other biblical sufferers have just as much, if not more, to teach us than those who have achieved and enjoyed success.

“Some people think the Bible is a story of the winners,” Stulman said. “But in reality it is the story of those on the margins, dislocated yet defiant, vulnerable yet resilient, survivors against all odds. This idiom of loss, not triumph, gives the Bible its distinctive character. And this sense of loss and dislocation unites us across time and space with our wounded selves and our wounded world,” he said.



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Marked by loss from the beginning to the end, the Book of Jeremiah is not an easy read. Constructed from poetic and prose elements, its initial intended audience was comprised of Jews in Babylonian exile. The story bears witness to a disaster so massive that it is spoken of as the end of Judah’s world: the destruction of Jerusalem, the burning of the Temple, the normalization of diaspora. And Jeremiah, God’s prophet, was caught in the crossfire. His multifaceted suffering, precipitated by his courage and faithfulness to God, is presented as both performance art and complaint. While attempting to convince people to abide by the word of God, Jeremiah walks the streets with a yoke around his neck, is mercilessly taunted and tortured, is tossed into jail, and at one point is thrown into a pit to die.

## EDGY AND INTIMATE

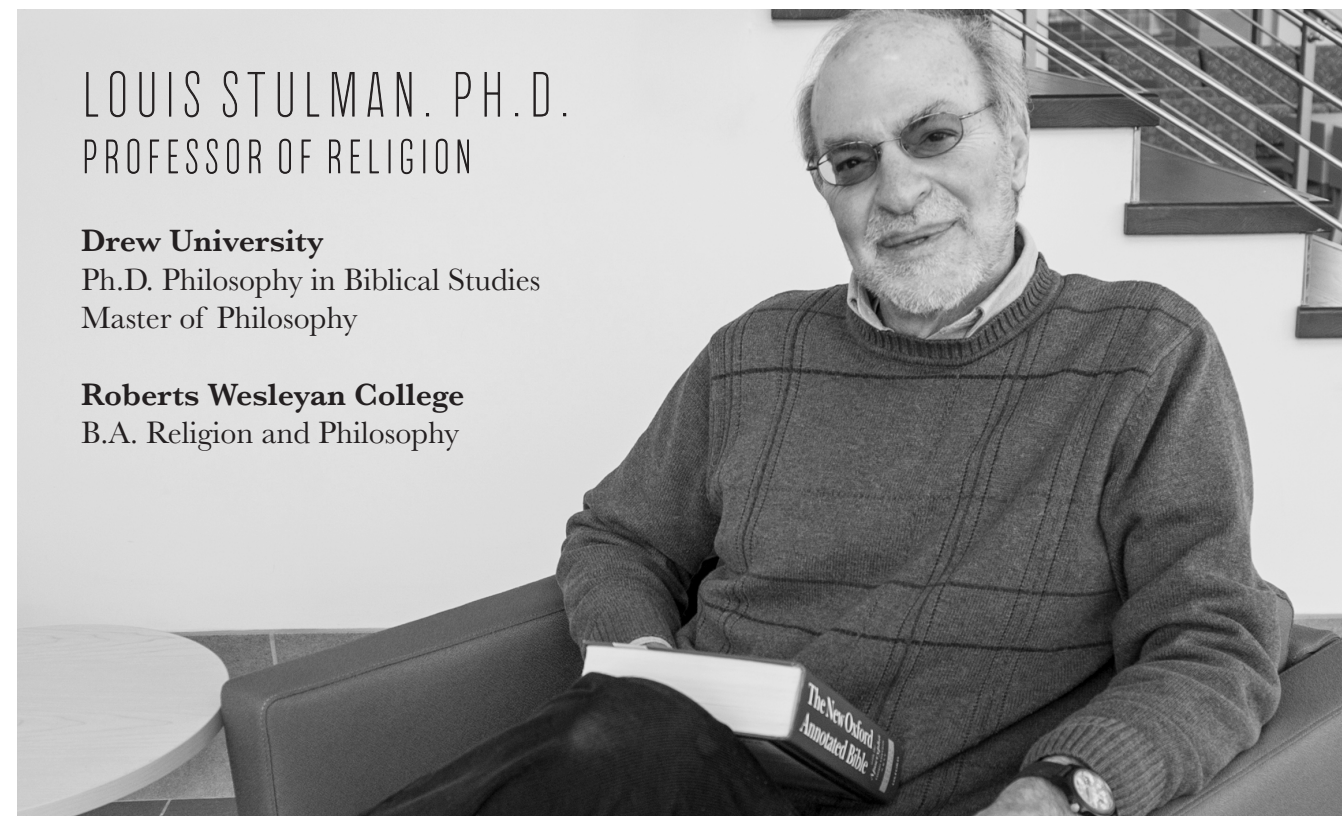
Stulman said he was initially captivated by the many differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Book of Jeremiah. “The other thing that fascinated me about Jeremiah was its raw character,” he said. “It’s so authentic, it’s so candid. It has a palpable sense of disjunction that no other writing in the Bible has. It is just such a remarkable book. It was autobiographical before Augustine’s confessions, which most people don’t realize. Jeremiah is right in God’s face, so to speak. He takes God to court for injustice; he accuses God of deceiving him. I mean, this language is so edgy, so intimate. It’s amazing,” Stulman said.

For the latest version of the Oxford Annotated Bible, due to be published around the same time as this Faculty Focus issue, Stulman was asked to write interpretive notes for the Book of Jeremiah. In his submission, he emphasized how the Book “is known for its discordant character, its temporal disjunctions, its literary fractures and its incongruous theological claims. While some see this as a problem, others see it as an expression of the incomprehensibility of trauma.”

“Who thinks of trauma as coherent?” Stulman recently pointed out. “Profound loss is unwieldy and chaotic. It feels random and disjointed. And so it is with the Book of Jeremiah,” he said. Interpreters have long tried to bring order to the book’s chaos. “But maybe Jeremiah’s lack of order is the intent all along,” Stulman argues. “Maybe one discovers the true meaning of the book in its lack of structure.”

Stulman has reflected long and hard on the Jeremiah “problem” in books such as “Jeremiah (Dis)Placed: New Directions in Writing/Reading Jeremiah” and “Troubling Jeremiah,” both of which Stulman co-edited; along with “Order Amid Chaos: Jeremiah As Symbolic Tapestry,” which he wrote, and “You are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature,” which he co-wrote with Hyun Chul Paul Kim.

Many of Stulman’s writings about the prophets contain common threads of disaster and despair that morph into hope and liberation. Resilience and survival are laden with post-structuralist meaning amidst our ongoing contempo-



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rary challenges that are upending social, political and emotional stability, he said.

The prophets, Stulman noted, “were social reformers, iconoclasts and messengers of God” who provided spiritual meaning to those whose worlds had been shattered. Their words continue to provide meaning to us today, he said. He mentioned Martin Luther King Jr., who depended on the words of the prophets to deliver his messages of social justice and racial equality.

## LIFELONG LENS

Professionally and personally, Stulman has been influenced by the works of the late Trappist monk Thomas Merton, who was an American Catholic theologian, writer and mystic; and by Abraham Heschel, a Polish-born American rabbi and one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century. Both were social activists who advocated nonviolent practices as a means to an end. Additionally, time and circumstances have naturally and predictably caused Stulman’s studies and considerations of the Bible to evolve.

“I have always been committed to issues of social justice and compassion to those who are most vulnerable,” he said. “I’ve learned a lot about candor and honesty in my own life from the laments in the Psalter, and I suppose more recently about the importance of loss and how loss connects us to others. Some of these things you internalize over the years. You’re not just reading a book, even if it’s a sacred book; you’re also reading yourself. It’s a lens through which you see your life, too.”

Most recently, Stulman said he has been “taken by the Torah” and its mandate to be open and welcoming to others. The word “stranger,” he said, “also translates to immigrant,” which makes the gospel particularly relevant today, he noted.

As an esteemed instructor and scholar at the University of Findlay for 22 years, Stulman said he has found enormous fulfillment in the classroom, where the grand ideas from the prophets are lived out in his daily interaction with students. Since 1982 he has also devoted much time to colleagues at the Society of Biblical Literature meetings. In 1991 Stulman, Kathleen O’Connor and Pete Diamond established the Society of Biblical Literature’s New Readings in the Book of Jeremiah Consultation. The group ultimately produced a book of essays

titled “Troubling Jeremiah.” Since then, the group reconstituted as the Writing/Reading Jeremiah section, which has become far more multigenerational, with younger scholars taking the helm.”

“Recent scholars in prophetic literature, especially the Book of Jeremiah, have done some really innovative things,” Stulman said. “They’re so smart, interdisciplinary, immersed in theory and practice, from all over the world,” he maintained. “They are not only wonderful colleagues, many of them are dear friends.”

Stulman predicts he will never get bored with the prophets, nor the Bible as a whole. As a scholar, “you hope you don’t stop learning,” he said. “I started as a grad student in 1978, and I do see my own evolution. You’re not working on the same things. You change. The world changes. But I still read the Bible as a person of faith. For me, that means whether I like it or not, I am confronted by this text that’s a radical text which speaks with such clarity about these issues we face today,” he said.