CHAPTER SEVEN
FROM PRAISE TO ‘CURSE’: THE TENSION BETWEEN LAMENT AND PRAISE IN JER 20:7–18

7.1 INTRODUCTION

We continue our study on the ‘uncertainty of a hearing’ in the individual lament psalms by exploring passages outside the Psalter containing tension between lament and praise.¹ Here we focus on Jer 20:7–18. This passage is significant because of its affinity with the individual lament psalms. O’Connor considers the first part of Jeremiah 20 (vv. 7–13) as the closest to the individual lament psalms among the passages known as the ‘Confessions of Jeremiah’, of which these verses are a part.²

It follows the classic form-critical structure of the individual lament: invocation (7a), description of the predicament of the speaker (7–10), confession of confidence (11), petition (12) and command to praise (v. 13).³ More significantly for the present study, Jeremiah 20 contains a sudden shift from praise (v. 13) to a section cursing the day of one’s birth (14–18)! We have in vv. 14–18 a return to the element of lament after praise—a feature I have tried to highlight in the Psalms. This further shows that the reverse movement praise-lament is not confined to the Psalms but can also be found in comparable materials like the

¹ In the previous chapters, we have examined psalms which move from lament to praise (Psalms 3, 6, 13), juxtapose lament and praise (Psalms 22), move from praise to lament (9/10, 27, 40), return to lament after the movement to praise (Psalms 12, 28) and alternate between lament and praise (Psalms 31, 35).
² Kathleen M. O’Connor, The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1–25 (SBL Diss Series 94; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 66. The passages commonly called the ‘Confessions of Jeremiah’ are: Jer 11:18–23; 12:1–6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; 20:7–13 and 14–18. It should be noted, however, that O’Connor does not include vv. 14–18 in her list of the ‘Confessions’. She argues that as one reads through the confessions in Jeremiah 11–20, one observes a heightening, a movement towards more confidence until one reaches the peak, which is Jer 20:7–13—a confession ending in praise. It is for this reason that Jer 20:14–18 is excluded from the ‘Confessions’. See further below.

one we have in Jeremiah 20. Conversely, because this passage consists of a return to lament, it provides a good way of demonstrating how an understanding of the individual lament psalms, which takes into account its dynamic movements, can be of immense value for the interpretation of Jer 20:7–18. For as will be seen below, most of the approaches to this passage have been limited by the form-critical view of the lament psalms—a view which only sees a one-way movement from lament to praise. As a result, just as in the case of the psalms containing the other movements (from praise to lament, return to lament after praise and alternation between the two), these approaches have failed to understand and appreciate the dynamic movements of lament and praise in Jeremiah 20.

In this chapter, I hope to be able to: 1) strengthen my thesis on the ‘uncertainty of a hearing’ by showing that such a feature occurs in Jeremiah as well—a book whose indebtedness to the lament psalms is widely acknowledged; 2) demonstrate how the form-critical understanding of the lament psalms has led towards a failure to understand and appreciate Jer 20:7–18; 3) show how a view which considers the dynamic movements of lament and praise in the lament psalms can help us understand the movement from praise to lament in Jeremiah 20 and; 4) look into possible ways of how Jer 20:7–18 can contribute towards our understanding of the psalms which contain a movement from praise to lament.

### 7.2 Structural Analysis of Jer 20:7–18: Juxtaposition of Praise and Lament

#### 7.2.1 The Question Concerning the Unity of the passage

The composition and division of Jer 20:7–18 have been variously construed by scholars. These verses are part of what is known as the ‘Confessions of Jeremiah’. But whether the whole passage belongs to this group is a matter of debate. Some consider vv. 7–18 as one con-