God Will Restore the Fortunes of Judah and Israel (33:1-13)
The setting in the “court of the guard” (33:1; see also 32:2) ties chapter 33 to the preceding one. Jeremiah is still under house arrest in the palace precincts when the word of Yahweh comes to him a second time (33:1-3). Yahweh invites the prophet to discover certain mysteries through prayer. “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known” (33:3). Presumably, the oracles to follow disclose these secrets. The first oracle begins by echoing a theme found throughout the book (33:4-13): Babylon is going to inflict an enormous toll on Jerusalem. The description of the carnage is terse but striking (33:5-6). Dead bodies will line the streets, turning the city of God into a place for the dead. To fend off the enemy’s siege ramps, the people of Judah tear down houses including those of the kings of Judah. Such efforts, however, are useless for “Yahweh has hidden his face” from the city because of its wickedness. The Hebrew idiom “to hide one’s face” often denotes turning away from an undesirable situation. When Yahweh hides his face, Yahweh withdraws divine presence. As a result, chaos and disarray ensue and hope for salvation vanishes (see Deut 31:17; Pss 30:7; 143:7).

This somber tone is suddenly interrupted and an unexpected turnaround occurs. Whereas verses 4-5 assert that God has abandoned the city, verses 6-9 announce the city’s healing and restoration. God will again inhabit Jerusalem. The One who had plucked up and pulled down now promises to reestablish and rebuild the people “as they were at first.” The God who had earlier “hidden his face” here decides to cleanse the guilty and forgive the rebellious. As is true elsewhere in the Book of Consolation, mercy not only tempers judgment, but eclipses it. The reserve of first-person pronouns reveals God’s gracious intent to heal, restore, rebuild, cleanse, and forgive. In response, the inhabitants of Jerusalem stand amazed, trembling not out of fear but in delight at the cascade of divine goodness and peace showered upon them. God turns the city of ruins into a city of joy and renown (33:9). Uninhabited Jerusalem rediscovers the sounds of joyous celebrations (33:10-11). The desolate places now overflow with flocks and pasture.

The Restoration of King and Priest (33:14-26)
The final oracle in the Book of Consolation uses both traditional and innovative imagery to depict the re-establishment of king and priest (33:14-26). To start with, it envisions a society ruled by a royal savior from the house of David (see also 23:5-6). A scion will spring up from the line of David who will finally do what kings were supposed to do all along: execute justice and save their people from threatening foes. Under the leadership of the promised ruler, Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will be called “[Yahweh] is our righteousness,” a title previously bestowed on the king (Jer 23:6). In addition, Levitical priests will play a dominant role in this vision of the community (see
also Deut 18:1-5). They will resume their role as mediators between God and the people, presenting to God burnt offerings, grain offerings, and sacrifices. Since self-absorbed priests and mercenary shepherds failed so miserably during the preexilic world, it is necessary that their sacred duties be fulfilled in the ideal world order. Thus, God authorizes the future status of king and priest and expresses a lasting commitment to them. God’s faithful pledge to the Davidic ruler and the Levites is based on the unchanging order of creation—"my covenant with the day and my covenant with the night"—and on the ancestral promise of progeny (33:19-22; cf. Gen 15:5; 22:17). Hereafter, creation itself along with God’s trustworthy promise to Abraham and Sarah testify to their enduring place in the life of the community.

Jeremiah 33:23-26 refutes the contention that God has rejected the people of Judah and Israel. To be sure, Jeremiah has done much to encourage such an inference. The prophet has proclaimed that Judah's disobedience and unfaithfulness have jeopardized its relationship with God. He has even dared to imagine the annulment of Judah's special claim as God's people and insisted that the election of Judah would not shelter the nation from impending harm. Notwithstanding these troubling prophecies, the final oracle in the Book of Consolation is adamant that the status of God's people is a "family matter" which is off-limits to others. Outsiders have no right to butt in and ridicule. To counter their attacks, Yahweh pledges enduring support for the offspring of Jacob and the descendants of David. While the election of Israel and Judah may once have been in doubt, it is now rooted in the basic order of existence, Yahweh's "covenant with day and night," and in the boundless mercy of God.

**Theological and Ethical Analysis**

The Book of Comfort represents the most sustained treatment of hope in Jeremiah. Its vision is not seamless or comprehensive, but it does render an impressive portrait of Israel’s charter of salvation. In the first place, Jer 30–33 unites all expressions of hope with suffering and marginality (Clements 1988, 180). The very starting point for a hopeful future is the acknowledgment of brokenness, loss, refugee status, and massive upheaval. Accordingly, the text is beset with images of siege and military assault (30:4-7), abandonment and oppression (30:12-17), communal devastation and despair (30:18-24). Almost every articulation of hope is located against the background of exile and death. Consequently, there is no ecstasy without mourning, no homecoming without exile, no salvation without judgment, no joyous celebrations without the scars of survival. For Jeremiah any vision of the future that avoids the real world of human suffering makes a travesty of the past and can never deal with the emotional and symbolic pain of exile. It is therefore no accident that the Book of Comfort depicts the people of God as "survivors." They have endured war, amputated hopes, splintered families, and the travail of a shattered world. Now, by the power of the word, God empowers these broken and shipwrecked people to imagine a future when none seemed possible.

According to the Book of Comfort, hope requires a genuine break from the old world. There is a powerful temptation during times of fear and uncertainty to cling to the past. We have seen this propensity in prophets, priests, and kings who live as though their
crisis were only a momentary disruption. For dear life, they hang on to familiar categories confident of their return. But Judah cannot return to its life before exile. The old world and the old scripts are forever gone. Only when one recognizes this reality can hope begin to take shape.

A daring expression of the text’s radical break with the past is its treatment of the temple and the dynasty, as well as its construal of community life and the divine-human relationship. First, Jeremiah no longer envisions the temple and its systems of worship as the foundation of Israel. Although some scholars overstate the case when they argue that Jeremiah advocates the idea of a spiritual cult, devoid of public rites (Lindblom 1962, 373), Israel’s future pilgrimage to Zion is often to a place without temple and offerings (Jer 31:6, 12; cf. 33:11, 18). In a number of places, the restored people of God receive forgiveness of sins without priestly mediation or sacrificial system (31:34; 33:8; see, however, 33:18).

Israel’s new piety thus shows far less reverence for the Jerusalem temple and its ceremonies. These definitive components of the past are relegated to, at best, a secondary role in the life of the community.

Second, the Davidic ruler of the restored Israel represents a fundamental departure from earlier monarchical systems of governance, which the text considers partially responsible for the downfall of the nation. The newly imagined leader is no longer one who wields interminable military authority. The promised king does not rule God’s people with an iron fist; nor does he lead a great and powerful nation into battle. Judah’s king does not rape and plunder, like the rulers of other nations (see 1 Sam 8:5, 20). Instead, the descendant of David envisioned by Jeremiah is a just and righteous upholder of the social and judicial order without the traditional pomp and circumstance. The royal savior of Israel is committed to preserving justice and peace within the community (see 30:9, 21; cf. 33:14-26).

Third, in support of this simpler way of life, Jeremiah advocates the notion of community as inclusive and unified. Israel’s homecoming, for example, includes the northern and southern kingdoms. The scattered people of Judah and Israel one day return to the land of promise. All God’s people are invited to the banquet, especially the most vulnerable and needy (31:7-9). The knowledge of God is available to all persons, often without priestly mediation (31:34); and God bestows joy and dignity on everyone (e.g., 30:18-19; 31:1-6; 32:36-41). Hierarchical arrangements of community life, while not abandoned, are diminished in the text.

Fourth, the restoration of the loving relationship between Israel and Yahweh is not a replication from the past. The spirituality of the new world has a profoundly “personal” texture. While the text does not promote a piety that divorces the individual from the group (which is clearly a modern notion), it does envisage a community in which individuals enjoy a close relationship with God, where people’s lives and personal affairs matter to God. The “new” relation, described in one place as a “new covenant” (31:31-34) and in another place as an “everlasting covenant” (32:36-44), carries with it
the assurance of full forgiveness (31:34; 33:6-8), divine favor and protection (30:10-11; 32:36-44; 33:1-9), deliverance from captivity (30:10-11, 18-21; 31:7-14, 23-25), joy (30:18-19; 31:3-6), and inner transformation (31:33; 32:39-40). Unlike the old piety, which emphasized Israel’s responsibility in the divine-human relationship, this new spirituality depends far more on the extraordinary workings of God. The “if” of the divine-human relation takes a backseat to the declarative speech and the gracious activity of God. In other words, God assumes the responsibility for creating the “new Israel” and the humane conditions of the new world order.

All told, while the Book of Comfort employs beliefs, practices and memories of the past to describe the “world-to-come,” its new spirituality and social structure represent a deep and penetrating break from the old systems. The temple and its forms of worship, the king as traditionally understood, and the royal city— the major symbols for and evidence of God’s presence in the life of Israel—no longer enjoy their central place in the new epoch. Governing assumptions of the dismantled world, such as covenant and election, are now reconfigured. Israel’s “new covenant,” inaugurated because the “old” Sinai covenant has been broken (31:32), involves a radical transformation of the community life. Israel’s election, forfeited in the old epoch, is reconfigured and enjoys a more firm and enduring foundation (33:23-26). This reconstructed world represents a new mode of action, a new narrative, and a new program by which God can succeed in fulfilling the divine purposes.

The Book of Comfort sees all expressions of hope as grounded in God’s mercy, love, and sovereignty. Hope is not the result of human virtue, human ingenuity, human grit, or human imagination. Nor does it derive from success, military might, technological prowess, or even the elimination of scars and memories of loss. Hope is God’s gracious gift to suffering people who are at their breaking point. It is the promise of life when none is expected.