

The Prophet Jeremiah, Aung San Suu Kyi, and U2's *All That You Can't Leave Behind*

On Listening to Bono's Jeremiad

Michael J. Gilmour, Providence College, Canada¹

Abstract

U2's recent *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (2000) is rich with biblical imagery and outspoken in its concern for human rights and social justice. This article explores how these two themes are creatively brought together in this collection of songs. A reference to the prophet Jeremiah on the album cover suggests this is an important source for the lyrics. Further, Burmese author and human rights activist Aung San Suu Kyi is mentioned two times in the album's liner notes. It is argued that Bono, principal songwriter for U2, observed parallels between Jeremiah and Aung San Suu Kyi, and used the ancient story to help make sense of the modern one.

[1] There is nothing remarkable about finding traces of biblical imagery and motifs in popular culture. What is less commonplace are examples of secular "texts" offering thoughtful readings and applications of Scripture. U2's recent album *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (2000) does just this, cleverly using various media - photographs, written text (non-lyric liner notes), appeals for participation in human rights organizations, and the songs themselves - to illustrate how Scripture can speak meaningfully to the needs of our world. The album tells a sad story of personal and corporate angst, yet one hopeful that there will be a happy ending - someday. But this is not uncontested faith and a pervasive ambivalence is hard to miss. One moment the songwriter has enough confidence to pray ("Jesus . . . throw a drowning man a line" ["Peace On Earth"]), but at another confesses he "can't wait any longer" for the answer to that prayer, troubled by a world full of chaos and "everyone . . . walking lame" ("When I Look At The World"). Moments of despair are sandwiched by notes of joy as the album opens with the triumphal "Beautiful Day" and closes with the words "Grace makes beauty out of ugly things" ("Grace").² The songs acknowledge the presence of pain and injustice, yet offer words of comfort to the broken hearted and hold out the promise of hope. How do they do this?

[2] Throughout its career U2's message has had a political edge. Systemic injustice is an evil to be confronted.³ Political oppression is part of the "darkness" (see lyrics to "Walk On") that

¹ Help on this paper was received from a Burmese friend who kindly answered various questions about Burma and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and offered helpful comments on an earlier draft. Unfortunately, being sympathetic to Aung San Suu Kyi and the values she stands for can be dangerous as the deadly riots of spring 2003 attest. I was asked, therefore, not to mention this person's name in print. Thanks for your help my friend, and please "stay safe tonight."

² This contrast between ugliness and beauty recalls, and may be influenced by, Aung San Suu Kyi's writing (see 1997a: 87-89). She will be introduced below.

³ This need not be exclusively political. Salman Rushdie offers some interesting reflections on his relationship with U2, including the following: "I think . . . the band's involvement in religion - as inescapable a subject in Ireland as it is in India - gave us, when we first met, a subject, and an enemy (fanaticism) in common" (95).

brings despair to the innocent. However, we are reminded that relief comes in two forms. Activism is encouraged in the liner notes to *All That You Can't Leave Behind* (specific human rights groups are named) and there is also an expectation that the prayers of the needy will be heard (e.g., "Reach me, I know I'm not a helpless case" ["Beautiful Day"⁴]). These weapons in the struggle for justice - nonviolent, grassroots, political action (activism) and religious hope (prayer) - are held together beautifully in Bono's writing⁵ and he has captured the tension between faith and doubt experienced by all who have uttered prayer for deliverance from desperate situations (cf. Mark 9:24). Quite subtly, he has supplied two important clues that point us toward these themes.

Who Was Jeremiah?

[3] The first of these clues is found on the album cover. A number of years ago Bob Dylan cited Jeremiah (31:31) in the liner notes to his 1980 album *Saved* and by all appearances U2 has done the same on *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. The black and white picture shows the band standing in a nearly empty airport. A mother and child are walking in the blurred background near two other people standing at a counter. On what looks like a sign above the band members' heads we read "J33-3□" which is clearly a biblical reference - Jeremiah 33:3:

Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known (all biblical quotations are from the NRSV).

One biographer notes that during the 1970s "some members of charismatic prayer groups used those figures as a code for prayer, based on Jeremiah 33:3 . . . Confronted with this discovery by a journalist, Bono responded sheepishly, 'Yeah. It's, like, God's phone number'" (Powell: 983).

[4] The Hebrew prophet Jeremiah was active in the late seventh and early sixth centuries B.C.E., a period of dramatic political change that culminated with the fall of Jerusalem in 586. His unpopular message of Judah's demise brought him into conflict with the political establishment that rejected his prophetic pronouncements (e.g., 36:17-32) and frequently imprisoned him (20:1-2; 32:2-3; 36:26; 37:11-21; 38:6-13, 28).

[5] But the picture of Jeremiah that emerges from the pages of the Bible is more than one of a strong, courageous prophet who carried out God's work without care for his own personal safety and well-being. He candidly reports an emotional frailty that sets him apart from other biblical characters. He seems to have wrestled with timidity (1:6), especially when opponents to his message threatened his life (11:18-12:4). We even catch glimpses of extreme internal anguish (4:19; 9:1; 10:19-20; 23:9):

O that my head were a spring of water,
and my eyes a fountain of tears,
so that I might weep day and night
for the slain of my poor people! (Jeremiah 9:1)

⁴ "Beautiful Day" includes an unambiguous biblical allusion: "See the bird with a leaf in her mouth / After the flood" (cf. Gen 8:6-12). This provides some warrant for reading the words "Reach me" as a prayer.

⁵ Bono is the principal songwriter for U2. On three songs ("Stuck In A Moment You Can't Get Out Of"; "Kite"; "When I Look At The World") the lyrics were co-written by Bono and The Edge.

But despite the pain and sorrows he experienced and the doubts about his ability to complete his work (1:6), this weeping prophet never lost sight of his divinely appointed role (1:4-5, 17-19) - "These tears are going nowhere, baby" ("Stuck In A Moment You Can't Get Out Of").

Who is Aung San Suu Kyi?

[6] The second clue helping us understand *All That You Can't Leave Behind* is the name Aung San Suu Kyi, mentioned two times in the liner notes.⁶ Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is an author and one of the world's most famous political and social activists. She was the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991, has fought tirelessly for human rights and the restoration of democracy in Myanmar (formerly Burma) through non-violent activism, and founded the National League for Democracy (NLD). Her struggle has frequently raised the ire of the military government of Myanmar which placed her under house arrest at various times from 1989 through to the present day.⁷

[7] Although Aung San Suu Kyi was given opportunity to leave Burma on the condition she agree never to return, she refused, choosing rather to remain in her homeland - "A singing bird in an open cage / Who will only fly, only fly for freedom" ("Walk On").⁸ This is an intriguing metaphor, and I wonder if Bono is here adapting words from Aung San Suu Kyi's own writing:

[The children of prisoners] have known what it is like to be young birds fluttering helplessly outside the cages that shut their parents away from them. They know that there will be no security for their families as long as freedom of thought and freedom of political action are not guaranteed by the law of the land (1997a: 25).

In U2's *All That You Can't Leave Behind* listeners are asked in the liner notes to "Remember Aung San Suu Kyi, under virtual house arrest in Burma since 1989" and are encouraged to "Take Action!" on behalf of her country by contacting The Burma Campaign (the address and website are provided). She is also mentioned after the lyrics to "Walk On," a song "Dedicated to Aung San Suu Kyi." I will argue in what follows that the relationship of these two clues - the biblical prophet Jeremiah and this modern day political "prophet" and social activist - is significant for understanding *All That You Can't Leave Behind*.⁹

⁶ During three songs on the *Elevation 2001 / U2 Live From Boston* DVD ("Gone," "Wake Up Dead Man" and "Walk On"), Bono wears a button on his guitar strap with a picture of Aung San Suu Kyi. There is also a photograph in U2's *The Best of 1990-2000 & B-Sides* (2002) showing Bono wearing a t-shirt with her name and picture on it.

⁷ She was released on May 6, 2002 but was incarcerated again on May 30, 2003 following bloody clashes between NLD and government supporters. Four people were killed and many more injured during the most recent violence according to Myanmar's military.

⁸ Alan Clements: "The [State Law and Order Restoration Council] offered you freedom to leave the country if you wanted on the condition that you remain in exile, but obviously you had a deeper conviction in staying in Burma to further the struggle for freedom." Aung San Suu Kyi: "I never forget that my colleagues who are in prison suffer not only physically, but mentally for their families who have no security outside - in the larger prison of Burma under authoritarian rule. Prisoners know their families have no security at all. The authorities could take action against their families at any time. Because their sacrifices are so much bigger than mine I cannot think of mine as a sacrifice. I think of it as a choice. Obviously, it is not a choice that I made happily, but one that I made without any reservations or hesitation. But I would much rather not have missed all those years of my children's lives" (taken from Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997b: 132-33).

⁹ The arrow on the album cover symbol ("J33-3□ ") is taken here to be the equivalent of "and following" (i.e., it is not just Jeremiah 33:3 but Jeremiah 33:3 and the wider context of that passage).

How are Aung San Suu Kyi and Jeremiah Alike?

[8] Parallels between Jeremiah and Aung San Suu Kyi's careers can be observed and I suggest that Bono was well aware of them. By incorporating the biblical text into the lyrics he was able to allow it to speak to a modern context. At least three similarities between these two prophets can be observed.

[9] First, both Jeremiah and Aung San Suu Kyi announced political change to the consternation of the establishment. For Jeremiah, this meant especially the reigns of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah during the latter part of his prophetic activity (ca.609-586 B.C.E.). For Aung San Suu Kyi it was the military regime in Burma which commenced in March of 1962 following a military coup under the leadership of General Ne Win, "a xenophobic, eccentric and ruthless dictator" (Alan Clements, in Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997b: 10; the struggle for democracy in Burma continues to this day). The consequence for both was imprisonment. In Jeremiah 32:3-5 we read that King Zedekiah of Judah imprisoned the prophet because of his announcement that Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians, would overtake Jerusalem and take the Judahite king into captivity (this eventually happened; see 39:4-7). Captivity is a recurring theme in the Book of Jeremiah. We have already seen that the prophet himself was frequently imprisoned and along with its king, the people of Judah were warned that captivity and exile awaited them (e.g., 10:17-18). This too eventually came to pass (39:9). I suspect one reason Bono was drawn to the Book of Jeremiah for inspiration, and that he (or the band as a whole) flagged the significance of this text on the album's cover, was this recurring motif.¹⁰

[10] Second, both prophets were active during their respective imprisonments. Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest on various occasions, though this did not put an end to her activities. She led the NLD to electoral victory in 1990 (though they were not allowed to take office) and her work continued to be published (e.g., her *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings* [1991; revised 1995]), despite the fact that she admitted in an interview that she wrote little during her incarceration: "I didn't see the point in writing unless I could get my writing out to be published" (1997b: 146).¹¹ Similarly, arrest by the political establishment could not silence Jeremiah. The key chapter of his book (for Bono) begins with the reception of a revelation during the prophet's imprisonment: "The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah a second time, *while* he was still confined in the court of the guard" (Jeremiah 33:1; italics added). Again in 39:15: "The word of the LORD came to Jeremiah *while* he was confined in the court of the guard" (italics added). Significant for the album's message is that both prophets continued their work despite the deprivations and humiliation that come with imprisonment.

[11] Related to this point, we note that in both cases the captive "prophets" addressed the needs of their "captive" audiences. Aung San Suu Kyi once said, "we are . . . prisoners in our own country" (1997b: 36; see too note 8). Much of Jeremiah's message was concerned to assure the

¹⁰ The band has taken up the cause of prisoners' rights and again, in the liner notes, invites fans to get involved: "Take a step to stamp out torture - Join Amnesty International" (addresses are provided).

¹¹ One exception was a lecture titled "Towards a True Refuge," composed during her house arrest and presented as the Eighth Joyce Pearce Memorial Lecture on May 19, 1993 at Oxford University. Her husband, the late Dr. Michael Aris of Oxford University, delivered the lecture on her behalf (1997b: 146n.). This lecture is included in the 1995 revision of *Freedom From Fear*.

soon-to-be captives of Judah that God would restore them following their own captivity (33:7, 11, 26).¹² The words *of captives*, addressed *to captives*.

[12] Third, we have already commented on Jeremiah's emotional state. Bono's description of Aung San Suu Kyi suggests that she too (not surprisingly) experienced great anguish in her service to the cause of freedom. There are several touching phrases in "Walk On" which hint at the heroine's emotions. She is said to have a "glass heart" that might crack, and the songwriter knows that it aches and breaks "And [she] can only take so much" (repeated two times).¹³ The extraordinary cost of her service to her people is frequently recognized:

Here is a woman who has already made some of the toughest decisions imaginable. At any time since her house arrest she could have taken an easy way out and left Burma to live in England with her husband and sons. Instead she made a painful personal sacrifice, placing her belief in freedom and the love of her country first (Fergal Keane, "Introduction," to Aung San Suu Kyi, 1997a: xi).

When Jeremiah was decrying the ills of his own homeland, he lamented, "My heart is crushed within me" (23:9). Both prophets receive words of consolation and encouragement to press on with their missions. For Jeremiah, this is provided by God (1:18-19; 6:27; 15:20). For Aung San Suu Kyi, this support is offered by U2's songs and the ideal audience to its album. This audience would not only echo the sentiments of the song but also - as required by the imperatives in the liner notes - "Remember" her and "Take Action!" in the fight for Burma's freedom.

Why Does Bono Use Jeremiah to Tell Aung San Suu Kyi's Story?

[13] Bono stated that "J33-3" was linked to prayer (see above), but it is much more than this as the Book of Jeremiah provides some of the backdrop for *All That You Can't Leave Behind*.¹⁴ Why then did Bono use Jeremiah to tell Aung San Suu Kyi's story? One possibility is that for Bono Jeremiah spoke words of comfort that modern day victims of injustice need to hear. For example, in the key chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet announces that "Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (33:16) and "[God] will restore their fortunes, and will have mercy upon them" (33:26).¹⁵

¹² Cf. Jeremiah 29:14: "I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

¹³ Cf. e.g., Alan Clements: "How would you characterize yourself as a person?" Aung San Suu Kyi: "Well, I see myself sometimes quite differently from how other people see me. For example, all this business about my being so brave . . . I had never thought of myself as a particularly brave person at all" (1997b: 67).

¹⁴ Edge, guitar player for U2, once described an album as "not just . . . a few songs you might have hanging around. For us in particular it's a collection that adds up to something more than just a few songs. It needs to have an overall logic that connects and complements and maybe not *resolves*, but has a beginning, middle, and end" (taken from Flanagan: 270; italics original). It seems reasonable, given this approach to preparing albums, to look for recurring themes.

¹⁵ It needs to be remembered that the Christian perspective of U2's lyrics would not correspond theologically with Aung San Suu Kyi's Buddhist worldview. The point here is that Jeremiah describes a future correction to a present day crisis and this general message of hope could be transferred meaningfully (in Bono's opinion) to the situation in Burma.

[14] Further, we note that most songs on *All That You Can't Leave Behind* involve some kind of travel motif.¹⁶ In addition to the lyrics, the travel motif is unmistakable on the album cover (the band in an airport with suitcases) and various pictures in the liner notes (a suitcase with a heart on the side [inside front cover], the space shuttle orbiting the earth [with the lyrics to “Beautiful Day”], a kite [with the lyrics to “Kite”], and a dove flying downward [with the lyrics to “Grace”]).¹⁷ This travel theme may be significant as Jeremiah frequently speaks of journeys the people of Judah would (and eventually did) embark on. They would travel to Babylon in captivity but would eventually make their way back to their homeland. Bono appears to liken the experiences of modern day prisoners, like Aung San Suu Kyi, with the experience of the Israelites whose captivity was brought to an end. The situation is desperate in the present time, Bono is saying, but a time of peace and restoration is on the horizon.

[15] The Book of Jeremiah also includes stories and language useful for the songwriter who has in mind the plight of political prisoners. Pre-exilic Israel and modern day Burma attest to the willingness of governments to silence dissidents. The clearest picture of this found in Jeremiah's writing is the occasion when he was literally thrown into a hole:

So they took Jeremiah and threw him into [a] cistern . . . letting Jeremiah down by ropes. Now there was no water in the cistern, but only mud, and Jeremiah sank in the mud (Jeremiah 38:6).

Bono's language in “Elevation” picks up on this. The singer describes himself as a “mole, living in a hole” who needs the one addressed “to elevate” him and “lift me out of these blues.” The first person, prayer-like lyrics suggest that God is the one addressed; the needy narrator is speaking to “I and I in the sky” (cf. Exodus 3:13-14¹⁸) and calls to “Love” to lift the singer out of his despair and speak words of truth. The image of someone in a hole is also found in the Psalms:

For without cause they hid their net for me;
without cause they dug a pit for my life (Psalm 35:7).

He drew me up from the desolate pit,
out of the miry bog,
and set my feet upon a rock,
making my steps secure (Psalm 40:2).

Bono's choice of imagery not only recalls biblical poetry, it again echoes Aung San Suu Kyi's writing in which the metaphor of rising out of painful circumstances can be found. For example,

¹⁶ For example: being on a road (“Beautiful Day”); flying (“Elevation”); walking (“Walk On”); being carried by the wind (“Kite”); a promise from someone absent that he will arrive soon (“In A Little While”); swinging from trees (“Wild Honey”); the movement of immigrants (“New York”). The title of the album itself may be a play on Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse which urge followers to flee Jerusalem when calamity strikes, taking nothing with them (Matthew 24:16-18; Mark 13:14-16; cf. Luke 21:21; the crisis he describes is the fall of the city to the Romans in 70 C.E.). The album title makes it clear that some things (or something) cannot be left behind. This, we are told in “Walk On,” is love, the “only baggage you can bring” and a possession that cannot be stolen, denied, sold, or bought.

¹⁷ A descending dove is a symbol of the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:22). Both the suitcase and the dove appear on the packaging of the 2001 DVD *Elevation 2001: U2 Live From Boston* (the tour that followed the release of *All That You Can't Leave Behind*) as well.

¹⁸ There may also be an allusion here to Bob Dylan's song “I and I” from the album *Infidels* (1983).

in her essay “In Quest of Democracy” she describes the negative impact of authoritarianism on the spirit of the Burmese people:

Intimidation and propaganda work in a duet of oppression, while the people, lapped in fear and distrust, learn to dissemble and to keep silent. And all the time the desire grows for a system which will *lift them* from the position of “rice-eating robots” to the status of human beings who can think and speak freely and hold their heads high in the security of their rights (1995: 175; italics added).

Elsewhere, she speaks of the individual’s efforts to transcend painful situations:

. . . even under the most crushing state machinery courage *rises up* again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man. . . . At the root of human responsibility is the concept of perfection, the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path towards it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end at least the distance needed to *rise above* individual limitations and environmental impediments (1995: 184-85; italics added).

This language of rising up or being lifted out of a hole well describes the plight of weak and powerless individuals. It was used effectively in ancient Hebrew literature and also in descriptions of the situation facing victims of an unjust regime in Myanmar.¹⁹

[16] The parallel Bono has created between Jeremiah and Aung San Suu Kyi serves to elevate the latter to the status of prophet. Both spoke out against the weaknesses of their political contemporaries and offered the promise of better times.²⁰ Further, if Aung San Suu Kyi is a prophet like Jeremiah, then those who oppress(ed) her - and by extension those who oppress others represented by the humanitarian organizations listed in the liner notes: Amnesty International, War Child, Jubilee 2000 Coalition, and The Burma Campaign - are equated with the unrepentant establishment which opposed Jeremiah, and the pagan armies of Babylon which took the Judahites into captivity.

[17] Finally, in answer to the question why Bono used Jeremiah this way, it was a means of taking this ancient message of comfort addressed to Israel’s captives and “recycling” them for a

¹⁹ I’m not suggesting Aung San Suu Kyi influenced Bono here, just that the notion of rising up out of pain is a universal way of expressing hope for a better future, as is the travel motif discussed above.

²⁰ Aung San Suu Kyi’s *Letters from Burma* includes short introductions of fellow members of the NLD who have suffered for the cause of freedom. One of these individuals is *Hsaya* (teacher) Maung Thaw Ka who was, among other things, a poet who not only wrote original pieces but translated English poems into Burmese. She provides an example of the latter, part of William Cowper’s “The Solitude of Alexander Selkirk,” which includes the following lines:

But the seafowl is gone to her nest,
The beast is laid down in his lair:
Even here is a season of rest,
And I to my cabin repair.
There is mercy in every place, And mercy, encouraging thought!
Gives affliction a grace
And reconciles man to his lot (1997a: 153).

I call attention to this because it suggests that mercy is present everywhere, whether nest, lair, or “[mole’s] hole.” *All That You Can’t Leave Behind*’s message of hope includes the theme that there is goodness in unexpected places (see e.g., the lyrics to “Grace”).

modern context. Difficult times are temporary, Jeremiah assures his readers (e.g., 25:11) and deliverance and justice will come (e.g., 25:12-14; 33:6-14). According to the ancient text (Jeremiah), this restoration is brought about by God. In U2's retelling of that message, restoration comes both through humanitarian efforts and divine intervention.²¹ The promise and hope of both is that all will "live in safety" (Jeremiah 33:16). Remember Aung San Suu Kyi.²²

Bibliography

Aung San Suu Kyi

- 1995 *Freedom From Fear and Other Writings*. Revised Edition. Edited by Michael Aris. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 1997a *Letters From Burma*. London: Penguin.
- 1997b *The Voice of Hope: Conversations with Alan Clements*. New York: Seven Stories.

Flanagan, Bill

- 1995 *U2 at the End of the World*. New York: Delta.

Powell, Mark Allan

- 2002 "U2." Pp. 978-983 in *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Christian Music*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Rushdie, Salman

- 2002 "U2." In *Step Across This Line: Collected Nonfiction 1992-2002*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf.

U2

- 2000 *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. Universal International Music.

²¹ The lyrics to "Peace On Earth" and "Grace" are especially of interest on this point of divine intervention. U2's song lyrics are available at <http://www.U2.com>.

²² For more information on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and up-to date news, see <http://www.dassk.com>.