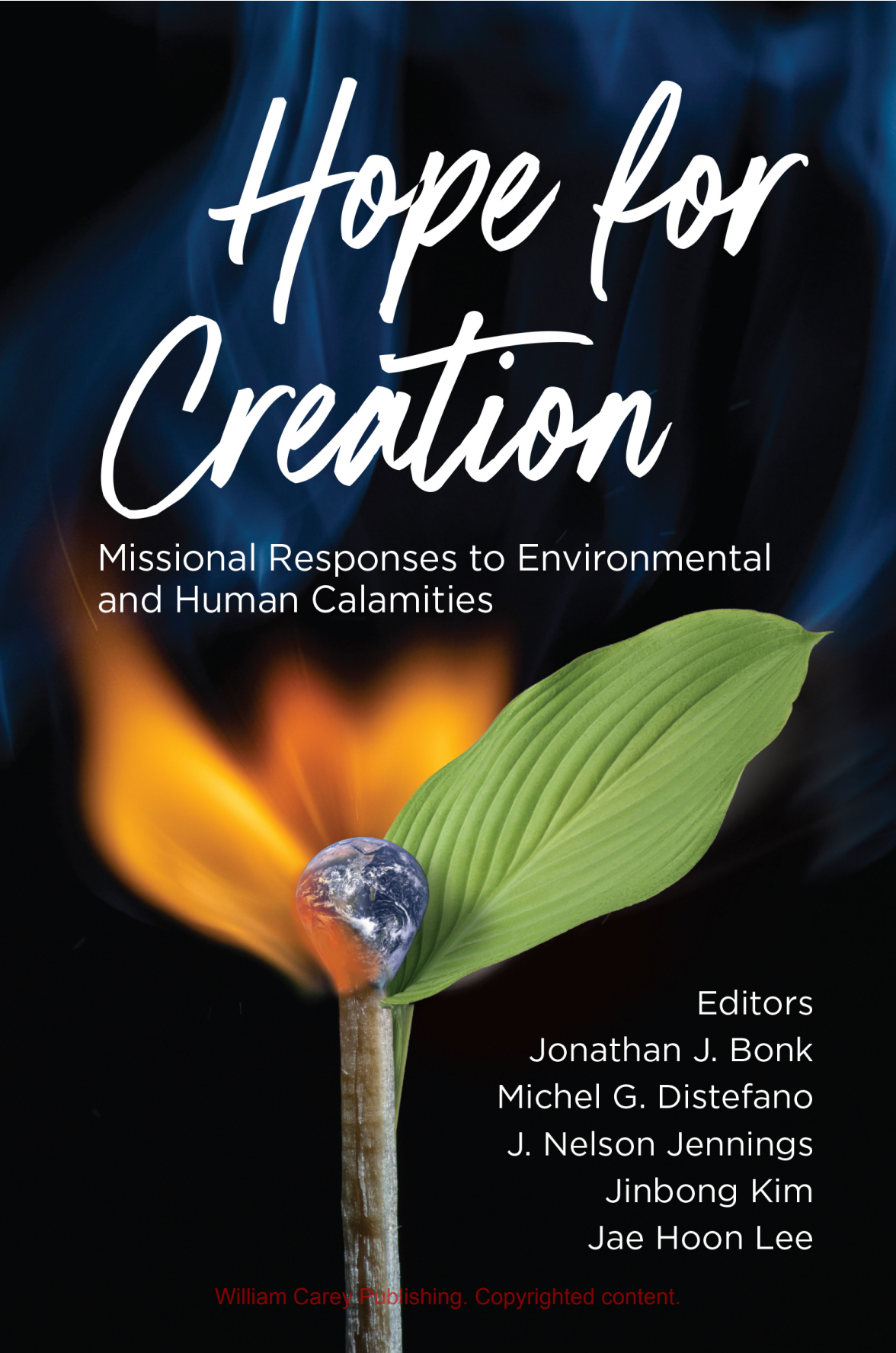
Hope for Creation

Missional Responses to Environmental and Human Calamities



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Published by William Carey Publishing | 10 W. Dry Creek Cir | Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

William Carey Publishing is a ministry of Frontier Ventures | Pasadena, CA | www.frontierventures.org

Cover and Interior Designer: Mike Riester
Copyeditor: Michel G. Distefano
Indexer: Michel G. Distefano
Translators: Gihong Park and Youngmi Shin

ISBNs: 978-1-64508-558-4 (paperback), 978-1-64508-560-7 (epub)

Printed Worldwide 28 27 26 25 24 1 2 3 4 5 IN

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024933046

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CHAPTER 1

God's Word to a Nation in Denial and Rebellion

Jeremiah 1

by Christopher J. H. Wright

What's it like to be a preacher, or a pastor, or a missionary in times like these? In a world where, in some cultures, there is deep rooted skepticism about any claims or assumptions. There may be "your truth" and "my truth" and "his or her truth," but nobody can claim to have or know "the truth." That kind of relativism used to be confined to matters of opinion or religious faith, but now is rampant even in the so-called "real world" of "facts" and "alternative facts." Not even science is trusted by large swathes of people, as the anti-vax and conspiracy theories that flourished during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated.

And in some other cultures, of course, there is only one permitted truth—whatever the state dictates, whether in the form of extreme religious fundamentalism or of totalitarian tyranny by a single party or single strongman leader.

Meanwhile, we live with diabolically obscene inequality, between galactic-scale wealth and gutter-level destitution—a disparity that used to be mapped globally between wealthy countries and poverty-stricken ones, but is now devastating and shameful within the wealthiest countries as well. Corruption and greed stalk the land, adding to the pain and anger of mass poverty.

And all the while, the existential threat of climate chaos, whose deadly consequences are already making life unsustainable in some places, confronts the planet as a whole—"undeniable and irreversible" as the latest IPCC report told us. Undeniable, perhaps, now, but very deniable for the past half century by those whose vested interests were threatened by revealing the truth they already knew.

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For at least forty years the warnings have been there from reputable and international climate scientists. But skepticism, confected confusion, and political inertia seem to be driving us headlong toward a global calamity. Forty years. That was approximately the length of time between the day when God called a young lad called Jeremiah to warn Judah of a coming calamity and the day it actually happened at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylonian army. By "hands" read "swords," "spears," "chains," "flames," and "rape and "pillage," as Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 BC and the people carried off in exile to an unclean land.

What was it like to be a preacher in times like that—for forty years! Forty years of warnings that went unheeded by most of the population—such was the depth of skepticism, denial, and rebellion in Judah by that late stage of their long history of unfaithfulness to their God. Well, Jeremiah tells us very bluntly what it was like. Here is a selective catalog of the culture of Judah in Jeremiah's day—it is only a sampling of the early chapters of the book. It doesn't take much imagination to see abundant echoes and parallels with what we still see in some of our societies today.

Marks of a Skeptical Society

They place a high value on things that are of no real value, but are instead utterly worthless and empty.

This is what the LORD says:
"What fault did your ancestors find in me,
that they strayed so far from me?
They followed worthless idols
and became worthless themselves."
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 2:5

They have no sense of guilt—repeatedly protesting their innocence; theirs is a culture of moral denial.

On your clothes is found
the lifeblood of the innocent poor … .
Yet in spite of all this you say,
"I am innocent;
he is not angry with me."
But I will pass judgment on you
because you say, "I have not sinned."
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 2:34–35

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They are skilled and practiced in evil, not in doing good.

My people are fools;
  they do not know me.
They are senseless children;
  they have no understanding.
They are skilled in doing evil;
  they know not how to do good.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 4:22

And this has become so ingrained as to be incorrigible—they are unable to change.

Can an Ethiopian change his skin
  or a leopard its spots?
Neither can you do good
  who are accustomed to doing evil.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 13:23

There is a complete loss of truth, honesty, and integrity.

Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem,
  look around and consider,
  search through her squares.
If you can find but one person
  who deals honestly and seeks the truth,
  I will forgive this city.
Although they say,
"As surely as the LORD lives,"
  still they are swearing falsely.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 5:1–2

They treat "God" as irrelevant and blind.

They have lied about the LORD; they said,
  "He will do nothing!
No harm will come to us;
  we will never see sword or famine."
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 5:12

The people are characterized as foolish, senseless, stubborn, and rebellious.

Hear this, you foolish and senseless people,
  who have eyes but do not see,
  who have ears but do not hear … .
But these people have stubborn and rebellious hearts;
  they have turned aside and gone away.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 5:21, 23

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There is wealth for some, but no concern for the poor; injustice reigns.

They have become rich and powerful
and have grown fat and sleek.
Their evil deeds have no limit;
they do not seek justice.
They do not promote the case of the fatherless;
they do not defend the just cause of the poor.
—*Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 5:27–28*

They hate and ridicule the Scriptures.

Their ears are closed
so they cannot hear.
The word of the LORD is offensive to them;
they find no pleasure in it.
—*Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 6:10*

The popular pundits and commentators peddle a superficial, shallow optimism.

They dress the wound of my people
as though it were not serious.
"Peace, peace," they say,
when there is no peace.
—*Word of Yahweh*, *Jeremiah 6:14*

And they do it with shamelessness, advanced hardness that cannot even blush over wrongdoing.

Are they ashamed of their detestable conduct?
No, they have no shame at all;
they do not even know how to blush.
—*Word of Yahweh*, *Jeremiah 6:15*

There is a culture of self-deceiving intellectual arrogance, which is tantamount to lying.

How can you say, "We are wise,
for we have the law of the LORD,"
when actually the lying pen of the scribes
has handled it falsely?
The wise will be put to shame;
they will be dismayed and trapped.
Since they have rejected the word of the LORD,
what kind of wisdom do they have?
—*Word of Yahweh*, *Jeremiah 8:8–9*

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There is loss of social integrity. Deception is rife; trust nobody!

Beware of your friends;
do not trust anyone in your clan.
For every one of them is a deceiver,
and every friend a slanderer.
Friend deceives friend,
and no one speaks the truth.
They have taught their tongues to lie;
they weary themselves with sinning.
You live in the midst of deception.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 9:4–6

But ironically, they trust in any false gods that are around!

You have forgotten me and trusted in false gods.
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 13:25

And there is an accumulating pile of wickedness from one generation to the next. Things are going from bad to worse.

When you tell these people all this and they ask you,
"Why has the LORD decreed such a great disaster against us?
What wrong have we done?
What sin have we committed against the LORD our God?"
then say to them,
"It is because your ancestors forsook me,"
declares the LORD,
"and followed other gods and served and worshiped them.
They forsook me and did not keep my law.
But you have behaved more wickedly than your ancestors.
See how all of you are following the stubbornness of your
evil hearts
instead of obeying me."
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 16:10–12

And behind all of the above, and accounting for them, they had become a nation that no longer listened to the voice of God.

Therefore say to them,
"This is the nation that has not obeyed
[listened to the voice of] the LORD its God
or responded to correction.
Truth has perished; it has vanished from their lips."
—Word of Yahweh, Jeremiah 7:28

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