

"The Problems of Prophets"

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If you need a visual of Jeremiah and almost all of the Prophets of Hebrew Scripture, it would be almost every disaster movie where early on, a scientist with glasses askew and bunch of papers bursts into the White House, shouting that a meteorite was coming, or dinosaurs, or something nearly mythical in proportion. The President, normally a sensible person, sees the scientist and thinks of the voting polls or the lobbyists and decides to ignore the facts, because profit and power are more important. The researcher is dragged down the hallway by the Secret Service, ranting and raving and ignored by everyone. The disaster happens, and the scientist can only feel pity that no one listened to them. That is basically Jeremiah.

The Prophet books are not a good way for us to learn how to be good people, they aren't terribly useful especially compared to the Sermon on the Mount, or the Book of Proverbs. But they are still some of the most important books we have, especially when we too live in a world that has been given a big kick.

The most important part of the prophet books is that, well, being a prophet is a crummy job. A prophet in Hebrew texts is someone who is called upon by God to tell the people, from the King on down, what God wants them to know. God doesn't do this in peaceful and calm times, God calls prophets when either the world is in the middle of a crisis, or God is able to let the crisis happen. God has spoken directly to people for a while now, including Moses, Noah, Jonah, etc., to get them to do something specific. God also speaks to the people through Jesus later on, and through the Holy Spirit. So the precedent is there for prophets and their work.

But the prophets are in a rough spot. After all, how do you prove a prophecy is real? The only way to prove it is to wait it out. If anyone is thinking it would be easy to be a prophet, ask your local meteorologist what the weather will be like in 2 weeks. Let alone months or years. Not everyone got to be Joseph, who was the dream interpreter for the pharaoh and be celebrated for keeping a kingdom from starving. And if it did come true, quite frequently it was years after the prophet had died. It would be quite common for people to claim to be prophets and wander

through the land, sharing God's word. Predictions and prophecies are difficult at best. If it didn't come true, the prophet was false, or most generously very mistaken in their interpretation.

A prophet's story arc was usually this- God calls the prophet to go speak to the people. The prophet rejects the offer, claiming they can't. God says "I say you can, so you can, quit fighting and go". Then the prophet goes off and tells others what God said. And the reactions were frankly predictable. Jeremiah was tasked by God around 620-580 BCE to tell the people of the kingdom of Israel that they had lost God's blessing. Remember this covenant with God was a two-way contract. If they worshipped this one God, and followed God's rules to the best of their ability, God would bless them and the land and keep them safe. But according to Jeremiah, they were not faithful to Elohim "the Great I Am". They worshipped other gods, and committed other sins. So, God said "you are on your own". Jeremiah had to preach this to everyone, to hope they would steer down the right path before it was too late.

His message was not liked. Even though they heard him, they also feared what he had to say. Other priests and political rivals plotted to assassinate him. He was chased out of town several times. King Zedichiah agreed to let his soldiers throw Jeremiah into a cistern for demoralizing the soldiers. Much like our scifi story, where the researcher is mocked, ignored, or fired, his warnings went unheeded and Israel fell into Babylon rule. For 5 kings, he would endure this rollercoaster of mistreatment.

All of this to say that while Jeremiah did not predict the future, when he was still a youth and hearing God speaking to him, I can imagine he was getting images of himself being harassed and threatened because he had to go to the people in power and tell them to change their ways. So I completely understand when Jeremiah looks at God, shakes his head, and says "nope, I am too young, please get literally anyone else".

God doesn't relent, but says that God will be with him, protecting him, and offering support. I am not sure if Jeremiah felt protected when he was tossed into a cistern, but he did live a long life so God was with him. God's presence is not a guarantee of a struggle-free life.

But he isn't alone. God is with him, offering support. And some do listen. Even millenia later, in our day and age, there are reminders of God's ability to call prophets who are reluctant and courageous across time and space. The two that come up most are MLK Jr., and Greta Thumberg. The courage you need to go to the most powerful people in the world and tell them to change their ways or else we are in trouble. They received, and still receive, threats of

violence, persecution, prosecution, and to be maligned by governments as terrorists. No one should want to be a prophet, because it means standing up to the most powerful people and telling them they are wrong, doing so loudly enough and boldly enough they can't be ignored.

We listen to people who claim prophecy all the time. Some will insist only THEY know the answer, and it involves your vote, your money, your implicit or explicit support for them to have power. But then there are others, ones who have listened to God through God's creation. They study the science and do the research. They dig through historical fact and fiction. They interview and listen carefully to people of all backgrounds. God may not touch their lips and said "Go forth to my people", but we are moved through poetry that cuts to the core. Through a painting that says more than words possibly could about the human condition. Through research about the deepest oceanic microbe and the furthest cosmic bodies. They speak of one message, one voice that cuts through the noise of those offering security while sacrificing compassion; this world is Mine, God says through them. I carved it from nothing but starlight and time. You are my children, stewards here. Take care of it, and each other. I will be with you forever and always, even beyond the bounds of death. I love you, and nothing will stop that love."

To be a prophet is a tough job. I would hate to do it. But I pray that the next time our own Jeremiah comes into town, telling me that we must hold oppressors to account, and denounce evil in our midst, that I have the courage to listen, and not to throw them into a cistern. Amen.