



The Book of Jeremiah Jeremiah, Part 2

Prophetic Speech and Speaking Truth to Power

As a multi-faceted text, the Book of Jeremiah contains and reflects many of the traditional Biblical components of prophetic speech. However, one of those key tenets is often highly disputed as it relates to Jeremiah's prophetic career: does he actually speak truth to power? We find oracles against other nations, a feature common across many biblical prophetic texts, and even the rhetorical shift into oracles against Israel and Judah, all of which often constitute valid centers of power that prophets speak against. The prophet Amos, for example, tells those in power exactly what they're doing wrong, and how they're failing their people.

However, in the Book of Jeremiah, we've seen that the geopolitical landscape is much more complicated, and ultimately the problem is that there are too many powers one could speak against. Jeremiah can and does speak doom and gloom against Israel, Judah, and their leaders, but at the end of the day, those leaders are not the real power centers. In Jeremiah's day, Babylonia is the clear and present site of power in the region. Yet, does Jeremiah levy the same message of doom and gloom against the leaders of Babylonia, even if those leaders might never read or hear his words? Categorically, he does not. In fact, Jeremiah's message regarding Babylon and its leaders is that this foreign power is an empire sent by YHWH himself, and it is the duty of all Judahites/Israelites to not fight back against them. His message is that this is God's will, and the people should simply receive it.

An Unpopular Message

What is the theological message of Jeremiah's prophetic word? In some sense, it is ultimately that the Babylonian danger is the direct reproof or punishment from God, and the people should simply accept it with the hopes of some future generation eventually renewing itself. It is ironic that the prophet Jeremiah is also considered to be the author of Lamentations, which in the Christian Old Testament immediately follows Jeremiah. In Lamentations, the whole message is that the punishment is too great - yes Israel messed up, and yes justice is warranted, but the conquest and exile at the hands of the Babylonians is too much. Yet in Jeremiah, we see an author who not only asserts that Israel has messed up, and deserves punishment, but that the conquest and exile at the hands of the Babylonians is exactly what is deserved and should be expected.

Other prophets such as Isaiah have a similar message, but it is softened with other messages of consolation, and even the prospect of future hope. Jeremiah has no consolation for the audience of

his message, and we can perhaps see the backlash against such a hopeless message within the book itself. In Chapter 26, from verse 8 onwards, we see the anger and violent reaction from the people against Jeremiah for his words.

In light of how unpopular Jeremiah's message was, it might seem strange that this is a work which is preserved for future audiences to read. This message was clearly reviled at the time, and it clearly goes against the sole sufficiency of the centralization of the cult and elimination of alien cult practices as a way to rectify the covenant connection between YHWH and his people. Why was this message preserved?

True Prophecy vs. False

Ultimately, what saves and justifies Jeremiah's message is that he turns out to be correct. One of the central themes in this prophetic work is the difference between true and false prophecy, and that, crucially, one can tell a true prophet by the things they predict coming to pass. Jeremiah's correct predictions are alloyed by the fact that he was deeply involved in the politics of his day - his assessment is not ahistorical but rooted firmly in his social and political context. This is someone who saw the Babylonians coming and spoke out against all the other prophets whose messages encouraged resistance, and instead insisted that the people fall in line and obey. Jeremiah was so vocal in this regard that when the Babylonians finally arrived, they respected him and offered him more freedom than we might expect - they love this Judean prophet who has essentially been on their side the whole time. It is not outrageous to think of Jeremiah as a collaborator with this foreign imperial power.

This political reality highlights the complications that arise from the way prophets like Jeremiah theologize history. On one hand, the large imperial conquerors become the hands of God; on the other, if Judah had fought back against Babylonia, this written material may never have survived, and all the records that many now consider Scripture may have been destroyed. So, in the end, Jeremiah is right to warn against resisting the Babylonian empire, but in doing so he isn't really speaking truth to power as we might expect; rather, he is welcoming in that power.

The Role of the Human Prophet in the Face of Divine Power

Jeremiah very clearly struggles with the position of the prophet as a mortal in relation to the power and authority of the divine. This is especially relevant in light of the Deuteronomic reform as instituted by Josiah, and outlined in Deuteronomy 12-28, which is explicitly about the limitations of offices and institutions that are occupied by humans. Jeremiah often reads as if he is attempting to justify his individual actions and speech as a divine proxy, as opposed to simply being a product of his own human ingenuity and power.

Indeed, if we were to remove the prophetic component of Jeremiah's message, it is easy to see him simply as a human detractor; thus, we can also see why he tries so hard to state that his message is a divine one. This is very clearly one person trying to work within the limitations of a human office while also attempting to take upon himself the grandeur, and legitimacy, of the divine word. Jeremiah claims he was ordained from the womb, and frequently rails at the idea that people might not listen to him and take his message seriously. This stands in stark contrast to other prophets such

as Amos, who do not claim to be prophets or descend from prophetic families at all, but who are simply compelled to deliver a message that will largely benefit everyone in the nation. Jeremiah writes with a sense of entitlement that is often absent from other prophetic writers.

All of this is to say that Jeremiah is a complicated figure, and often not a very likeable one. But this raises important questions about the nature of prophets and prophecy: do prophets need to be likeable? Do their messages need to be likeable? Do we find Jeremiah and his message more palatable now because, with the hindsight of history, we can see his predictions actually came to pass? Do prophetic messages need to also contain themes of consolation, like Isaiah and Ezekiel, or can they be only doom and condemnation, like Jeremiah?