

LISTENING TO JEREMIAH

THE PATHOS OF THE PROPHETS AND THE PATHOS OF GOD

Jeremiah does not stand alone among the prophets. His life must be viewed in the larger context of the body of divine spokesmen who lived and ministered to an incorrigible people. Jesus would put it bluntly, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing” (Mt. 23:37). The lives and ministries of the prophets were filled with pathos. Their preaching was fierce, visceral, passionate, and direct. The world in which they ministered, much like our own, was filled with citizens who believed they had a corner on a progressive economy, upward mobility, the benefits of leisure, and the pursuit of personal happiness. The prophets, to the contrary, saw vividly the human will to power, unmitigated greed, self-aggrandizement, and wholesale deceit. In a word, they were scandalized.



*Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt,
a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption.
They have forsaken the LORD;
they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.*
Isa. 1:4

*...the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed.
They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets;
but they do not realize that I remember their evil deeds.
Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.*
Hos. 7:1-2

What is most important is to see that the pathos of the prophets reflected the pathos of God. Abraham Heschel has aptly stated, “God is raging in the prophet’s words.”¹ If the prophets tell us anything, they tell us that God is not aloof from the trauma caused by his wayward creatures in the world. God is indignant, offended, and betrayed by his own people, and the explosive messages of his spokesmen document that hurt and indignation.

¹ A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1999), 2.viii p. 5.

THE METAPHORICAL LANGUAGE OF THE PROPHETS

If the pathos of the prophet is the pathos of Yahweh, the vehicle expressing that pathos is the language of metaphor. Metaphor (and by metaphor we speak broadly, including a wide range of figures of speech, such as, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, euphemism, irony and so forth) communicates not merely facts but passion. It employs extreme language, both exultant and raw, to impart to the listeners the way they should feel about things as well as the way they should think about things.

The oracles of the prophets are filled with such metaphors. Formally, metaphors are a manner of communication in which figurative language directly compares two things, defining one thing in light of another. Metaphors often use two nouns not normally associated together but joined by a linking verb (e.g., “that man is a thorn in my side”).

Because of their intense visual capacity, metaphors increase memorability. They have incredible capacity for conveying abstract ideas. They offer literary elegance and express thoughts and feelings as well as describe concrete objects. At a rhetorical level, they increase persuasive power. At the same time, because they are more ambiguous than literal descriptions, they invite conceptual interaction between the speaker and listener. It is to the point that metaphorical language is very often not intended to be taken too literally. When Joel, for instance, says that the mountains will “drip with new wine” and the hills will “flow with milk” (Jl. 3:18), it is hardly that we are to take this language at face value. Especially in the language of wrath and curses as well as the language of love and blessing, metaphor expresses the powerful emotive aspect of God’s perspective as much as a literal description of what actually will take place.

*I reared up children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner’s manger,
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*

Isa. 1:2b-3

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, ‘We are safe’—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

Jer. 7:9-11

These images of betrayal burst from the prophets’ lips as though they gushed from the very heart of the Almighty! When Hosea’s wife deserted him to become a prostitute, her faithless desertion matched the northern nation’s abandonment of God himself (Hos. 1:2; 2:2). When Ezekiel’s wife died on the day that Jerusalem fell, the stoic desolation of the prophet, who lost “the delight of his eyes,” mirrored the desolation of God (Eze. 24:15-27; 33:21-22). The weeping of Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1) was nothing less than the weeping of God (Jer. 14:17). The anguish of shattered relationship—husband and wife, parent and child—was like a haunting cry in the night.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals*

*and they burned incense to images.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;
But they did not realize
it was I who healed them.*

Hos. 11:1-3

Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'live!' I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointment on you. But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.

Eze. 16:6, 9, 15

TALKING POINTS

- *Do you think God feels emotion? Some theologians speak of the "impassibility of God," by which it is meant that God does not experience involuntary changes of state. Other theologians argue that this can be taken to an extreme whereby God is distant and unconcerned.*
- *How would you compare the metaphors of the prophets with the preaching of Jesus?*

MORAL CONSCIENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE PROPHETS

Judah's leaders were passive. Both priest and court prophet, wise man and ruler, raised no serious objection to the moral disintegration of the nation (Jer. 5:31; 6:13-14; 8:9-11), and worse, the leaders joined the melee to seek their own advantage.

Against this malaise, prophets like Jeremiah shouted the declarations of Yahweh, earning them the scorn of their peers. They were ridiculed as madmen (Jer. 29:26), dismissed as fools (Hos. 9:7), jailed as traitors (Jer. 37:16; 38:6-13), and banned from the court (Jer. 36:5; Am. 7:12-13). This alienation isolated the prophets and relegated them to a life of social misery. They endured hatred (Am. 5:10), rejection (Jer. 25:3), misery (Mic. 7:1), and despair (Jer. 20:14-18). Still, the scorn heaped upon the prophets was no more than the scorn heaped upon God. The prophets lived out on earth what God was, so to speak, living out in heaven. God was not merely a spectator but a participant with his people. Yahweh suffered profound disappointment (Isa. 5:1-7) and the wrenching pain of betrayal (Isa. 2:11-13, 20-25). When his people sinned, they were not merely breaking laws, but breaking their relationship with him!

If God's mixture of divine anger and parental grief made his discipline of Israel visceral (Isa. 1:5-6; Hos. 11:8-11), his divine compassion was equally compelling. The pathos of God is not only to judge but also to restore (Hos. 14:1-4). After his wife played the harlot, God commanded Hosea to buy her back. He was to "love her as the LORD loves the Israelites" (Hos. 3:1). Judgment was hardly ever the prophets' final word. Rather, redemption and restoration lay on the far side of judgment.

I will show my love to the one I called, 'Not my loved one.'

*I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';
and they will say, 'You are my God.'*

Hos. 2:23

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Eze. 36:25-27

God's eagerness for this new relationship was so profound, so urgent, that he describes himself as "gasping and panting" like a mother on the verge of giving birth (Isa. 42:14). On the far side of judgment lay a new covenant. Unlike the old one, it would not be characterized by retributive justice, but rather, forgiveness and mercy (Jer. 31:31-34). Hence, while the prophet bore the agony of watching the destruction of his own nation, he also was called upon to await the majesty of a future justice (Hab. 2:2-3). In the meantime, he was called to live by faith (Hab. 2:4b). The distresses of the present were to be carried patiently (Hab. 3:16), and though the evidence of God's future mercy might not be immediately apparent, the joy of God's sure promise would become the force that held him steady (Hab. 3:17-19).

Jeremiah, for his part, was heartsick over the plight of his people (8:18; 9:1), and he keenly felt the sting of their corruption (8:21). Understandably, he was tempted with escapism (9:2). Like a betrayed lover (9:2b) or a yearning parent (10:20b), he stood by helplessly while the nation plunged toward its death. The pathos of Jeremiah, then, reflects the pathos of God. Like a collapsed tent, this pathos engulfed him and reduced him to personal devastation (10:19-20).

Jeremiah closes the poetic section of Chapter 10 with a reflective prayer reminiscent of Job. The historical processes by which God deals with human life are inscrutable (10:23). The seeming totality of divine judgment upon Judah was almost more than Jeremiah could bear, and he begged for God's mercy (10:24). His final words call for divine wrath to be poured out upon the superpowers who would come to destroy his people (10:25).²

TALKING POINTS

- *Is there a place for prophets in the church today, which is to say, voices that call God's people back to himself?*
- *What is your own response to the prophets' powerful images of betrayal, marital unfaithfulness, divorce court, and prodigal children?*
- *How is similar imagery present in Jesus' parables of the tenant farmers (Mt. 21:33-44) and the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32)?*

²This passage also appears in Ps. 79:6-7. Psalm 79 is a lament over the exile, and it is possible that the psalmist deliberately quoted Jeremiah, cf. A. Anderson, *Psalms 73-150 [NCBC]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 578.