



Haunting Book—Haunted People* (Jeremiah 36; Luke 4:16-30)

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We are, all of us, children of the biblical text. We have been conceived and birthed, generated and summoned, given life, by this text and none other. This text keeps having its say among us, by translation and interpretation, by commentary and proclamation, by study and enactment. We must always again, always afresh in every circumstance, come to terms with it. We spend our life struggling with this text, sometimes struggling for the text, sometimes struggling against the text. The text always has its say among us; it will not go away. Its voice is a haunting one, sounding promises, uttering commands, voicing stories, proclaiming oracles, ejaculating pain, authoring hope. The voice of the text haunts us because we know very well it is a human text filled with endless critical problems—and yet we hear in it the very voice of God: majestic sovereignty, awesome holiness, passionate grace, weakness made strong. Because of this text, which will not go away or finally keep silent, we live haunted lives, filled with yearnings for what is not in hand, promises not yet filled, commands not yet obeyed, desires not yet granted, neighbors not yet loved. The old text becomes new text; old story becomes new song. For all those reasons, in gratitude and awe and fresh resolve, we celebrate the new, revised translation, made freshly aware by it that we are indeed haunted children of this haunting text. And because the text will not go away or be silent, we are destined to be endlessly haunted, uneasy, restless, and on the way.

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I. THERE WAS A TIME... THE EMERGENCE OF A TEXT

There was a time before which we were not children of this biblical text. There was a time when our Jewish fathers and mothers had no text. It seems most likely that our Jewish parents became children of this authorized, authorizing text only somewhere in the seventh or sixth centuries B.C.E., a happening linked to the reform of Deuteronomy, to the disaster of 587, and to the danger of exile. It is in times of reform, disaster, and exile (times not unlike our own), that this community first was seized by the text, and in such times is always again seized by the text, for such times are primal times for retextualization.

I have chosen for this occasion a very early textual moment, perhaps the earliest. Jeremiah 36 is indeed the only clear account in the Old Testament of how the text came to be. Earlier, there were powerful oral traditions, and later there was canon. But in this text we are at the pivotal moment between oral tradition and settled canon. There is an awesome moment of redefinition. In this awesome moment of text-making, we have the intrusion of heavenly holiness

into a region that would so much like to be immune to the haunting. This pivotal invasion happened in the career of the subversive Jeremiah. I shall trace the emergence of this dangerous text in six moments, perhaps the same six moves always enacted when we rehear the text and accept its haunting.

1. *The text is **initiated by God***; it intends always to *evoke drastic change* (vv. 1-3). It is God who initiates the notion of a scroll, which Jeremiah perhaps would not have thought of or have risked. It is the speech of God and the passion of God and the purpose of God that are the driving forces of this event. It is as though Jeremiah is a passive receiver who can exercise no choice in the matter. The Lord says to Jeremiah:

Take a scroll and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel and Judah and all the nations from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah until today. (v. 2)

The scroll initiated by God constitutes a threat, for it is three times “against”—against Israel, against Judah, against the nations. The speech-scroll of God casts God’s terrible rule against the orders of the day.

The purpose of that dangerous, holy scroll wrought from heaven is to evoke in the listeners massive, drastic change:

It may be that when the house of Judah hears of all the disasters that I intend to do to them, all of them may turn from their evil ways, so that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin. (v. 3)

“It may be...” Perhaps. The scroll is God’s risk. It may be that the listeners will hear and turn from their deathliness. It may be that the conditions for God’s forgiveness will be established. It may be that the scroll will set in motion the required gestures, permitting reconciliation and new life. It may be. The scroll is a chance God will take. And whenever heard, the scroll invites to such life-giving change.

2. *The scroll is **wrought in and through human fidelity***. The fidelity and risk of Jeremiah is enormous in fashioning this scroll, and the fidelity and risk of Baruch is even greater. The biblical text, human in its articulation, is not an easy or obvious

enterprise, but a dangerous political act, committed in utter obedience and at high risk. That is how this text is always formed. This community which holds the text in its hands, holds the outcome of a long history of risk-taking obedience:

Then Jeremiah called Baruch son of Neriah, and Baruch wrote on a scroll at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of the Lord that he had spoken to him. And Jeremiah ordered Baruch, saying, “I am prevented from entering the house of the Lord; so you go yourself, and on a fast day in the hearing of the people in the Lord’s house you shall read the words of the Lord from the scroll that you have written at my dictation. (vv. 4-6a)

Jeremiah is no coward. He knows, however, that his reading will get no hearing. Jeremiah knows that the scroll stands in deep otherness and deep over-againstness. The text is a danger and would evoke resistance. It requires careful human strategy in order to gain a hearing.

The passion for the scroll in this narrative is undiminished. That passion is as deep with Jeremiah as with God, as freighted on earth as in heaven. Everything rides now on the text. The scroll stands outside the human enterprise with the great “perhaps” of God now sounded again. Jeremiah says to Baruch:

It may be that their plea will come before the Lord...for great is the anger and wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people. (v. 7)

The scroll which is threat is in fact an act of grace. The scroll lives in the terrible anger and fury of God, and seeks a way of survival and well-being in the face of God’s majesty. The scroll struggles with the definitional fact that this people is enroute to death in the face of the reality of God. It is as though this scroll, now rooted in these two daring men of faith, is not a carrier of God’s anger, but a modest provision for escape. It authorizes and permits a return to God and an embrace of life. Around the text, human persons do offer the chance of life to each other.

3. *The scroll is a public question*, taking place in the public square. There is here no private religion, no pious oasis, no sectarian retreat. The public square is not naked. The rhetoric of faith will have its say and create its own listeners. Baruch, at the behest of Jeremiah, runs the risk, all the way to the temple. The temple is the place of public hearing; it is also, however, the royal chapel, the king’s media center, the central shrine of civil religion, the engine of dominant ideology. The temple may be hospital for the safe prophets of *Shalom*, but this terrible scroll of ominous possibility pushes its way into the arena of settled, safe religion:

Baruch the son of Neriah did all that the prophet Jeremiah ordered him about reading from the scroll the words of the Lord in the Lord’s house....Then, in the hearing of all the people, Baruch read the words of Jeremiah from the scroll in the house of the Lord, in the chamber of Gemariah son of Shaphan the secretary. (vv. 8, 10)

Right there in downtown political Jerusalem, we hear the scroll of “perhaps”; the scroll makes no accommodation to settled civic reality, no adjustment to dominant ideology. The scroll contains “all the words,” the words of “plucking up and tearing down, of destroying and overthrowing” (cf. 1:10). Truth is indeed uttered in the face of power! And power must willy-nilly heed.

4. *The dangerous scroll receives a positive hearing* from some folk in high places. In all our accent on “over-againstness” and the inherent resistance to the summons of the scroll, this point should not be missed. After the first reading in the public

square, Micaiah, the grandson of Shaphan, reports the reading to the cabinet of the government (vv. 11-14). Micaiah immediately recognizes that this scroll is not only dangerous, but warrants a hearing. He knows at first hearing that this scroll which will become Scripture is as big a deal as the Pentagon Papers. This civil authority recognizes the validity and urgency of the scroll, and is

sympathetic to it. The cabinet of scribes and royal officers want to hear the scroll. There is a second reading of the scroll (v. 15). Now the action has moved from temple to cabinet room. The text, with its dangerous say, moves toward the center of power and ideology where the haunting voice of God speaks its rule in the face of all other rulers:

They said to him, "Sit down and read it to us." So Baruch read it to them. (v. 15)

Remarkably, or perhaps predictably, the text evokes a response. The "perhaps" of God is promptly answered:

When they heard all the words, they turned to one another in alarm, and said to Baruch, "We certainly must report all these words to the king." (v. 16)

The response is of two kinds. First, they are afraid! The scroll attests on its own terms to its heavenly authority. Without being form critics or doing Carbon-14 dating, the cabinet knows as they listen that this is true stuff and therefore dangerous stuff. The long history of this text, all the way up until this revision of the RSV, is that the biblical text has its say. The rulers of this age (including us) have not been able to nullify or restrain its dangerous voicing of another reality.

Their second response is, "We will surely tell the king." That response may be filled with such fear they want to hand the "hot potato" of the text over to somebody else, get it out of their presence and off their desks. More likely, the listeners in the cabinet room are sympathetic to the scroll. Some of them had long believed that current royal policy was suicidal, but they lacked leverage to resist the king. Now they have a voice other than their own over against dominant policy. These leaders know that Jerusalem must host a deep sovereignty in its otherness, a sovereignty which speaks their only chance for life. They have this dangerous scroll in their hands. Like any careful official, they receive secret documents from odd sources only gingerly; they investigate its provenance: "From where did you get this scroll?" (v. 17). Baruch answers: "He dictated all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink on the scroll" (v. 18).

The response is immediate and clear: "Go and hide, you and Jeremiah" (v. 19). Go hide, because you are in big trouble. Go hide, because the scroll is so subversive and its authors are so vulnerable against the terrible ruthless power of an unprincipled state. Go hide and do not tell us where you hide. This is on a "need to know" basis. The scroll has located its faithful constituency even in a high place. The scroll is not in the end welcome, but in every dangerous context, it is matched by a responsive remnant that acknowledges its terrible authority. So the scroll is at last on its way to meet the local Pharaoh, the one who tolerates no scroll, no voice other than his own.

5. *Royal power can indeed eliminate the text.* Whenever established power is threatened, it eliminates the text:

As Jehudi read three or four columns, the king would cut them off with a pen knife and throw them into the fire in the brazier, until the entire scroll was consumed in the fire that was in the brazier. (v. 23)

The king cannot tolerate the threat of the text. The king wants an unhaunted life and so must banish the haunting text. He can and he does. This is a very early example of shredding documents. The powerful of the world, and we with them, often prefer a textless existence. We may use somewhat less violent strategies to banish the text, like scholastic theology, or liberal ideology, or “higher criticism,” or pious neo-conservatism. There are endless ways to silence the text. In the end, all the ways aim at one outcome, a life untroubled and uninterrupted by this dangerous scroll.

The king was indeed not interrupted by the text:

Yet neither the king, nor any of his servants who heard all these words was alarmed, nor did they tear their garments. Even when Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah urged the king not to burn the scroll, he would not listen. (vv. 24-25)

He was not alarmed. He did not tear his garments. He did not hear the urgent summons. He continued, as he had power to do, to manage his regime on its deathly path.

But of course such a continuation of an untroubled regime, personal or public, in the face of this text, evokes a terrible uneasiness. It requires endless vigilance, alertness to conspiracy, and defensiveness that culminates in isolation and violence. The last action of Jehoiakim in this text, not surprisingly, is this:

The king commanded Jerahmeel the king’s son and Seraiah son of Azriel and Shelemiah son of Abdeel to arrest the secretary Baruch and the prophet Jeremiah. (v. 26)

All the energy of the king was devoted to stopping and silencing the dangerous text. Intransigent *status quo*, public or personal, private or corporate, liberal or conservative, seeks finally to end this haunting scroll, because a haunted life is too demanding, too restless, too costly. Dreams must be killed, promises stifled, commands explained away. In the end, the scroll is savaged, the authors made fugitives, and the king still in charge.

6. *There is, however, an odd addendum* to this royal episode, an addendum the king little anticipated, but which is the key point of the entire narrative. The authors are kept safely: “But the Lord hid them” (v. 26). And then the text continues:

Now, after the king had burned the scroll with the words that Baruch wrote at Jeremiah’s dictation, the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: Take another scroll and write on it all the former words that were in the first scroll which King Jehoiachim of Judah has burned....Then Jeremiah took another scroll and gave it to the secretary Baruch son of Neriah, who wrote on it at Jeremiah’s dictation all the words of the scroll that Jehoiachim of Judah had burned in the fire; and many similar words were added to them. (vv. 27-28, 32)

The scroll is not defeated. The scroll will prevail. The scroll is not finished or closed. It contains new and added words in its power and resilience. The scroll makes its continuing claim.

But there is also a counter theme which concerns the royal resister to the scroll:

Concerning King Jehoiachim of Judah you shall say; thus says the Lord, you have dared to burn this scroll....Therefore...He shall have no one to sit upon the throne of David....they would not listen. (vv. 29-31)

In the end, self-serving power evaporates before the truth of this uttered disclosure

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of holiness, an utterance undiminished, unbanished, relentless, resilient, fashioning another existence in the world, the only viable one.

II. HAUNTED BY THIS TEXT... LIFE WITH THE HOLY ONE

We are, all of us, children of the text, awed and not self-congratulatory. These are not words said to comfort. I do not suggest that we are positioned as friends of the text against all others who are wrong. Rather I suggest that this text in its dangerous offer of life stands over against us all—liberal and conservative, dove and hawk, pro-choice and pro-life—with its radical invitation, its severe warning, and its uncommon possibility. We are not the pets of this text, but we are the community which accepts the burden of struggling with this text on behalf of all humanity, sometimes struggling on behalf of the text, sometimes against it.

So what did the scroll of Jeremiah voice that the king could not tolerate? Not just right policy, crucial as it is. Not just right morality, urgent as it is. Not just right doctrine, decisive as it is. In and around and behind right policy and right morality and right doctrine, the text fashions a life with the holy one, a life of terrible freedom, a life of savage commitment and rigorous demand, a life of magisterial hope that refuses present despair. In this scroll, Jeremiah sketches out a character and a drama much too large for the king's timid royal horizon. Indeed, that large drama that stands over against the king has a haunting, cunning dimension that is endlessly unnerving and destabilizing. This haunted God, carried by the haunting of the text, is like a beloved husband in the wilderness (Jer 2:2), like a well of living water (2:13), like a weatherman who withholds showers (3:3), like a shepherd who scatters and gathers (23:1-4), like a leopard ready to spring (5:6), like a suffering, adoring mother (31:20), like a terrible seducer (20:7)—keeping the drama open, keeping the king off balance, keeping the future well beyond the reach of royal control.

If we move beyond Jeremiah's scroll to the larger biblical text, the same God who stalked the slave camp at night for freedom (Exod 11:4-7) is the God who sent lying spirits to destroy King Ahab (1 Kings 22:19-23). The same God who raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24) is the God who told Samuel to lie enroute to Bethlehem (1 Sam 16:2). The same God who birthed the baby to the old lady (Gen 21:1-7) is the one who scandalized the virgin with a pregnancy (Matt 1:18-25). The same God whose summons is to leave everything and follow (Mark 10:17-22) is the one who sent bread to the hungry (Exod 16:15; Mark 6:30-44). Israel and the church have on their hands a haunting text, filled with dark shadows and an inscrutable presence, not predictable, not held in our ideology, not confined to our familiar worlds. This haunting text, which always surprises us at the edge of reality, is inhabited by the holy one who makes a restless home in the text. The text is a haunted place like the old houses we used to fear to visit as a child. And like

those old houses, we mostly go by quickly at a distance, not wanting to come into serious contact, because whenever we do, our prefab world is put at risk.

It matters that this haunted text is not reduced by any of our passions or ideologies to flat, predictable, manageable, usable proportion. Because this text is finally not reduced, we remain a haunted people, haunted with severe duty and ecstatic delight, haunted with heavy truth and free compassion, haunted with freedom and courage, energy and hope. This haunting text haunts us. As a result we are never so sure as to have a single settled story, even the one we like, because

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there are many stories told toward us. When haunted, we are not so trivial in our morality as to voice one tired, relentless proposal. Instead, we confess utterances like “Go to a new land,” “He is risen,” “We are forgiven,” “It is finished,” “Comfort my people.”

The text is characteristically somewhat remote, not obvious and available. It is more a night creature, never quite in our grasp or fully focused in our vision. We hear the haunting sounds of God’s “otherness”; we find our principal delight in our uneasiness. If perchance you think this a terrible overstatement, think where we would be without this text. We might then only be good liberal do-gooders or the self-assured guardians of order we cherish too much. Or we would be frightened and in control like Jehoiakim, contemptuously burning the scroll and sending out search parties, fearful, frozen, failed, and dying.

But we have this text; better, the text has us, and we are being endlessly haunted beyond ourselves. So we pause in our weary ideologies when this text speaks. We remember that the world is more open and more at risk than we usually imagine. We are grateful that in our trembling, God has authorized a text, and a text, and another text, to which “more words were added.”

In beginning his ministry, Jesus came to the synagogue, i.e., the place of the text (Luke 4:16). He unrolled a scroll (v. 17). He read it (vv. 18-19) and commented on it (vv. 21, 24-27). He showed how dangerous and contemporary the text is. The scroll in its danger almost got him lynched (vv. 28-29). He took a scroll and jarred all settled reality. What else could he have taken? What indeed would you have taken in such a crisis, except a scroll?