



“A people, a name, a praise, and a glory”: False and True Faith in Jeremiah

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In a world of conflicting truths, how does one know which truth to trust? Living in the aftermath of the cultural hegemony of Christendom, the consensus truth of modernity, and the visceral body blow of September 11, we are witnesses to the rapid deconstruction—even demolition—of the old, solid, foundational truths. In the face of this smoldering rubble pile of certitude, the stable assumptions of our once modern world seem already, strangely, ancient. What we tentatively name postmodernity is, at the least, a hotly contested conversation about what is the truth. When truth is in question so is falsehood.¹ Which decision is true to God’s calling? What future trajectory tells a lie about God’s intent? How will we know the truth when we see it? Jeremiah enters the epistemological courtroom, stands in the witness box, and gives daring testimony. He offers no half-truths, no spin doctoring, no soft soap. Jeremiah names suspects, exposes lies, neutralizes counter-testimony, competes with adversaries, and calls for a hearing.

¹So, of 111 uses of the word שקר (lie, falsehood, deception) in the Old Testament, 36 are found in the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah bears witness to a truth that matters—a hard truth for individuals and for nations. We too are addressed by God’s word of truth, called to take up our own risky witness to Jesus in a world of conflicting truths.

**“THE WISE SHALL BE PUT TO SHAME”: NAMING THE FOLLY OF
CONVENTIONAL WISDOM (JER 8:8-12)**

Jeremiah names the court’s expert witnesses as perjurers. He swears under oath that the scribes have made the truth “into a lie” (8:8). His is a rude challenge to the common sense of conventional wisdom. We hope that Jeremiah is a “mad-man who plays the prophet” (29:26) and so will be quickly discredited under cross-examination. But his testimony is substantial.

Jeremiah charges the legal, religious, and intellectual establishment—the scribes, priests, and prophets (8:8, 10)—with rejecting the very law that they claim to represent. These purveyors of morality and ethics have twisted the good until it is arranged for their own benefit. When lived faithfully, the blessed Torah-way of God makes “wise the simple” (Ps 19:7). Ironically, by leading the community into abandoning its ways, the wise have been made into simpletons.

In the first place, the wisdom of the wise has cultivated a corrupt society: “From the least to the greatest everyone is greedy for unjust gain; from prophet to priest everyone deals falsely” (8:10). This is a culture in which all are schooled in self-interest and in which no one can be trusted. Everyone is out to make a buck. Survival in this Torah-less land means everyone, from school children to grandmothers, will take advantage of you if given the opportunity.

What is worse, these wise ones carelessly use pathetic little band-aids to treat the deep “wound of my people...saying, ‘Peace, peace’ when there is no peace” (8:11). Faced with flagrant evidence of the ravages of poverty these wise ones pull out their charts and forecasts and statistics to show that all is well. They cannot see what is so obvious to Yahweh: “As a well keeps its water fresh, so she keeps fresh her wickedness; violence and destruction are heard within her; sickness and wounds are ever before me” (6:7). Together, these multiple wounds in broken lives and in the fractured relationships of families, villages, and cities become a life-threatening “wound of my people.” Everyone is implicated in the wounding. Everyone is afflicted with the wound.

Jeremiah notes the smirks on the faces of his wise adversaries. They sit in the courtroom, snickering at his seeming hyperbole. Turning from their bemused folly, Jeremiah says to the jury, “They acted shamefully, they committed abomination; yet they were not at all ashamed, they did not know how to blush” (8:12). The leaders of a people who are covenanted to the ways of Yahweh have so thoroughly lost their way that they do not even know they have strayed. Juries know that one who refuses to admit to being ashamed still cannot help but go red in the face. Yet these people do not even so much as blush.

Therefore, judges Jeremiah, “The wise shall be put to shame” (8:9). Their packaged conventional wisdom will be seen for what it is—a lie. More than that, the nation will lose its fertility and creativity (8:10). No more possibility of growth or productivity. Instead, the “wise” will “fall” and “be overthrown” (8:12), be “dismayed and taken” (8:9). No more future for a culture that calls a lie the truth and

the truth a lie. This is the necessary judgment of God, the one who is courageously enmeshed in the creative act of overcoming the injustice and unrighteousness of chaotic evil in order that the world may yet be called good (Gen 1; Jer 1:10).

“WE ARE SAFE!”: EXPOSING THE SHAM OF NATIONAL SECURITY (JER 7:1-15)

At the temple, heart and soul of the nation’s existence, Jeremiah exposes the charade of the nation’s misplaced trust. Judah is squeezed by the great powers. Its elite grows frantic, its public senses the impending terror. The people flock to join the great congregation singing the national song of assurance: “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD” (7:4). They are like a

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frightened nation that ceaselessly reminds itself: “God bless America, God bless America, God bless America” (or, perhaps, like a northern land in its self-righteousness: “We are not Americans, we are not Americans, we are not Americans”). Standing in the doorway of Judah’s beloved symbol of national security and moral purity, Jeremiah dares to preach against patriotic fervor, saying: “Do not trust in these deceptive words” (7:4).

The people rush to trust in the unconditional love of Yahweh. They wrap themselves in a flag of denial, imagining that their way of life cannot crumble. Jeremiah begs to differ. He proclaims a gospel of amended “ways” and “doings” (7:3, 5), a promise of God’s active presence in a community that keeps Torah with the odd foreigners, unwanted children, and abandoned elderly who live within its bounds (Jer 7:6; Deut 10:18). Jeremiah recalls the Decalogue, taken to heart in Judah’s youth and rediscovered by King Josiah (Jer 7:9; Deut 10:1-4). And Jeremiah sees a nation whose attention span is painfully short. A place and a slogan now replace a way and a life as the secure ground on which the nation stands. The focus has moved from living rightly to the unquestioned rightness of its cause.

Jeremiah speaks here in the measured prose of the Deuteronomistic school, rehearsing the old story after being “cast out” (7:15) to Babylon. In the aftermath of the demolition of the once indestructible temple these brave hopers wrestle a future out of the rubble. Jeremiah’s once offensive claim that the established structures are a living lie is now self-evident. Repentant return to the covenant “ways” and “doings” of Yahweh is the only way home to the dwelling place of the Lord. In the same way, the contemporary church in North America finds itself rehearsing the old story as its trusted structures, established ways, and convenient ideologies are ruined. Jesus’ temple sermon (Mark 11:15-19) reverberates afresh with memory of Jeremiah and of a newborn exilic community on the other side of collapse. In the endings of our age an alternative movement is called into being.

“SCARECROWS IN A CUCUMBER FIELD”: NEUTRALIZING THE IDOLIZED
(JER 10:1-16)

Standing at the confluence of Judah’s rural and urban economy, Jeremiah recites a new poem:

For the customs of the people are false....
Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field....
Do not be afraid of them, for they cannot do evil.

Chorus: There is none like you, O LORD.

They are both stupid and foolish;
the instruction given by idols is no better than wood!...
They are all the products of skilled workers.

Chorus: But the LORD is the true God. (10:3-10, selected)

Jeremiah knows that the idolized are powerful, so powerful that the responsive chorus of the praise of Yahweh returns four times in his lyric so that it can be believed. Wonders of technological wizardry—“the product of skilled workers” (10:9)—tantalize with their illusory power. But these so-called gods have no more power to cure what ails than do “scarecrows in a cucumber field” (10:5). Crows may fear such fakes, but they need not. The nation lives in fear of these fakes, but it need not.

Jeremiah’s rhetorical strategy is to neutralize—to neuter—the idolized. He intends to empty these powers of their phony power. These gods (small “g”!) are no gods at all. They “cannot move,” “cannot walk,” “cannot speak,” “cannot do evil,” and “there is no breath in them” (10:4, 5, 14). The things that we worship and adore—celebrity, comfort, status, security—and the forces that we endue with generative power—potent weaponry, economic engines, technological gadgetry, and educational know-how—cannot create life. They are eunuchs, infertile, barren. These seemingly potent idols do not even breathe.

Jeremiah testifies, literally staking his virility on the truth of his claims,² that Yahweh is the “true God; he is the living God and the everlasting King” (10:10). This is the drama of the Sunday liturgy. The church bell rings a warning that God’s contest with the idolized is about to be joined. We easily imagine worship to be one more consumer activity. We have largely forgotten the dangerous drama of contesting truths that we enter when we dare to sing together: “Praise, my soul, the King of heaven.” Such praise has, itself, been neutralized—neutered—by the idolatries around which we organize our lives. We forget that to praise God as the “King of heaven” is to make impotent the powers that have usurped the authority to rule our lives. They are revealed for what they are: “scarecrows in a cucumber field” (10:5).

²“Testimony” from the Latin “testis” meaning both “witness” and “testicle”—a reminder of the ancient practice of swearing a truth-telling oath on one’s testes and, literally, putting one’s virility on the line. This is the bottom line of epistemology. In the final analysis we bet the future of our grandchildren on the truths we trust with our lives.

“AMEN”: COMPETING WITH THE TRUTH (JER 28:1-17)

At the beginning of the end for the Judean monarchy Jeremiah competes for truth with the truth. In his sortie with Hananiah we witness the perplexing epistemological dilemma of discerning the truth in the midst of conflicting testimony. Here we relearn rules of engagement when “the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel” is heard to speak in contradictory voices (28:2, 13). Prophet Jeremiah wears a symbolic yoke—the depressing prediction of humiliating servitude to Babylon (27:21-22). Prophet Hananiah speaks for “the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel” (28:2) when he announces that a return to the “good old days” is at hand.

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The first word from the mouth of the prophet who is known for his raging jeremiads is: “Amen”—literally, “true” (28:6). Jeremiah, the prophet of bad news, prays that his own hard truth is false and that Hananiah’s pleasant word is the truth. Then he counsels caution, reminding that the burden of proof rests on the one with the sweet message. After all, many preachers are only too happy to offer up candied sermonettes that have all the sustaining power of an innocuous greeting card in the face of raw grief. In reply, prophet Hananiah offers credibility. He stakes his life on the word that he claims to have heard from the Lord. Jeremiah’s answer to the credibility of Hananiah’s alternative truth is to say, “Wait and see.”

The truth-telling debate takes place in full view of “the priests and all the people” (28:1, 5, 7, 11) until Jeremiah turns the dialogue into a confidential matter. The priests and the people are not privy to Jeremiah’s sharp critique or curse from the Lord. When Hananiah dies we expect that Jeremiah’s truth has triumphed for all to see. But the text does not permit such a conclusion. Only Jeremiah and Hananiah know the truth of the matter. The priests and the people are left in the dark. They still do not know which of their many prophets tell the truth.

This is how it is with us. In the face of conflicting testimony about the causes of fundamentalist terror or global warming or a spouse’s depression we do not know which prophetic expert is telling the truth. All of them claim knowledge. What is the truth of the matter? None of us knows. We bet our energies and days on the word we hear from the Lord. Then we “wait and see.”

“CLING TO ME”: LISTENING TRUTH TO LIFE (JER 13:1-11)

Jeremiah argues that the truth is finally told by a people that is known for the accuracy of its careful listening. A truthful hermeneutic of the story of what Yahweh is up to is always the gossiped life of a people (Isa 40:9-11, 28-31). In order to be formed by the potter of heaven and earth, the clay that is the waiting community must, necessarily, shut up so that it can hear (Deut 6:4-6).

The vision of a community that listens Yahweh's truth to life in its faithful practice of the Torah propels the curious narrative of Jeremiah's parable of the linen loincloth (13:1-11). The return of the loincloth from hiding in Babylon as a ruined garment that is "good for nothing" (13:7) reinforces Jeremiah's contention that exiled King Jehoiachin will not return to the throne. Even this royal linen remnant that is in exile will rot and no longer be of use to God. But the parable is more than a tale of judgment on Judah's misplaced hopes for an easy restoration of the status quo. This parable offers a glimpse of God's true intentions for the future of a people whose ways have been judged false. The lie that Judah has lived is its misplaced pride (13:8-10). Judah's ultimate confidence in its autonomous ability to chart its own course leaves it tattered, rotted, and ruined. A people that is sure that God intended peace even when its way of life created deep, incurable wounding has been humbled and humiliated. Yahweh will not be mocked.

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Then God lets slip what this people is for: "For as the loincloth clings to one's loins, so I made the whole house of Israel and the whole house of Judah cling to me" (13:11). This coded speech offers a vision of a future for an exiled people who return to the Lord's ways. The true purpose of God's own people, says Yahweh, is not to stand proudly on its own among the nations but, instead, to "cling to me." All this, "says the LORD, in order that they might be for me a people, a name, a praise, and a glory" (13: 11).

Notice that Yahweh intends *a people* that is made up of two peoples: a relentless sibling rivalry—a bicultural nation—that involves endlessly provisional political arrangements. The descendants of Jacob and Esau must cling to Yahweh together or not at all. The true community of Yahweh is constituted by a problematic confederation of fundamentalists and revisionists, liberals and conservatives, contemplatives and activists. Its contested struggle to cling to the Lord is integral to its identity.

And this dialogical community does not cling to the Lord in the easy embrace of an affirming hug. Yahweh remembers that God's own people has, long ago, been given *a name*: "Israel"—"one who wrestles with God" (Gen 32:28). This people's identity is known by its courageous determination to wrest a blessing from Yahweh even as it tells the truth about the divine presence and absence.

This penchant for "honest to God" truth telling is possible because, at the same time, the people is a living doxology—a *praise* ("Judah"; Gen 29:35)—offered to Yahweh. The family comprises siblings Israel and Judah—"God Wrestler" and "Praisers." It is an odd couple that offers the promise of a bilingual confederation

whose endless praise never allows for forgetfulness about the seductions of idolatry and whose brutal candor never lets God forget the promise to keep the faith.

Finally, the people are *a glory* to Yahweh since, unless it clings to the Lord, God walks naked in the heavenly council. Without a faithful people clinging close, God must bear the shame of standing naked before the gods who surely remark with sarcasm: “Look, Yahweh... ‘in all his glory!’” Yahweh needs a people who cling closely so that the Lord will not be mocked or humiliated. Yahweh creates the people “for my glory” (Isa 43:7), so that when Yahweh gathers “all nations and tongues... they shall come and see my glory” (Isa 66:18; cf. Jer 33:9).

Yahweh’s shame is echoed by the humiliation of Jesus when disciples who promise to cling to him (Mark 14:31) have “deserted and fled” (Mark 14:50). In that panic of abandonment we glimpse a strangely familiar parabolic event: “A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked” (Mark 14:51). Now Jesus is alone in the face of proud and autonomous terror. On the cross, the Lord is mocked by the powers that be. There is no one giving glory to God on that dark Friday, nor on the Saturday that follows. Aching questions about the truth of the matter hang in the air, waiting for a truthful answer.

The disciples assume that their abandonment of the Messiah assures his abandonment of them. Like them, exiled Judah longs for a chance to listen once more. It imagines itself back in the wilderness, saying to Moses: “Then tell us everything that the LORD our God tells you, and we will listen and do it” (Deut 5:27). To their utter astonishment, these exiles and disciples are addressed once more by the voice of the living Lord, who invites them to turn and—in turning—to listen truth to life. We now share their deep longing, experience their utter astonishment, and take up their risky witness in a world of conflicting truths witnessing to the truth. This is the unfolding drama of the North American church that is being called into existence by a word that sounds surprisingly new. This potent word whispers in the ear of a once proud church as it risks confronting its shame and loss. Listening in amazement, a lost people turns to the One who speaks. In that turn the truth is told once more. ⊕

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