

## JEREMIAH WAS A BULLDOG

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### *MISSING MIKE HUCKABEE*

Man, I'm still grieving the day when former Governor of Arkansas, Mike Huckabee, gave up the ghost and dropped out of the presidential race. The Governor was the last vestige of some *serious* sermon gold – the kind of sermon gold that doesn't often come around without the help of a big name preacher's fall from grace or a big-ego governor's blatant hypocrisy. It's been a bumper-crop primary season.

This long, measured-in-light-years presidential campaign has not been unique in its flag-waving, political mudslinging, backbiting and empty rhetoric. But, Saints be praised, it's been a veritable case study in political Jesus-flaunting. Remember Mormon Mitt? That cross...uh, shelf in Huckabee's Christmas ad? Hillary's distant-eyed stammer when prodded by her handlers to talk about her "faith"? Barak's picture in traditional, *decidedly non-Christian*, African garb? Friends and neighbors, that stuff was sermon gold. It ought to be illegal to snarf up that much top-shelf material in a single presidential campaign. It's been like shooting fish in a barrel, no limit.

But lately, not so much.

And so it is that I thank the gods of American politics for the Rev. Jeremiah Wright – you know, the former pastor to Democratic presidential candidate, Barak Obama – for injecting back into the campaign some serious religious mud-wrestling. Sure, it's been a couple of weeks now since Obama dismissed his fiery Black preacher as a kind of "old uncle". Sure, we've already moved on to should-Hillary-get-out and which-spring-chicken-should-McCain-tap-as-Vice President. But I say, not so fast, for the big kafuffle over the Rev. Wright's views on race and religion are of true biblical proportions. And that's not hyperbole, so similar is this Jeremiah to the one that took Israel to task some seven thousand years ago.

With apologies to the 60s band, Three Dog Night (and the now deceased writer of their biggest hit, Hoyt Axton), the Old Testament Jeremiah was a bulldog. And the old uncle, Jeremiah Wright, *is* a bulldog, for when Jeremiah Wright comes un-taped about the sorry state of race and religion in America, he sounds for all the world like his crusty Old Testament namesake.

### *PARALLELS*

Let's look at some of the parallels between these two figures. Recall that the prophet, Jeremiah, condemned ancient Israel for its tribal arrogance and callousness toward the marginalized. He implored his people, in no uncertain terms, to get it together lest God punish them with exile and slavery. Now, even though Jeremiah possessed some serious

prophetic mojo, the Israelites dissed him like, well...an old uncle. He was out of touch. Kooky. Demented. But it turned out that wacky old Jeremiah was not suffering dementia after all; he was doing his job as a prophet, speaking truth to power with love. And God had his back, after all. Israel was conquered and exiled.

And what did Jeremiah Wright say that got folks' religious and racial underpants in such a knot? You guessed it, something about tribal arrogance ("God damn America so long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme."), callousness toward the marginalized ("...God damn America. That's in the Bible. For killing innocent people, God Damn America. For treating our citizens as less than human..."). Furthermore, the Rev. Wright once suggested that the 9-11 attacks might have had something to do with a failed American Middle East policy. Yikes.

What a bulldog, that Uncle Jeremiah Wright.

It's downright spooky how similar are the messages of the two Jeremiahs, but I guess that just goes to show that nasty stuff happens in every age, everywhere. Arrogant, divine-right leaders are nothing new. Disenfranchising those without privilege is nothing new. And crafting a secular theology built on "traditional values" and blind patriotism is nothing new, either. But evidently time has a way of turning yesterday's goat into today's hero. Put prophetic words in the mouth of a murky character from ancient Israel, and its scripture. Put them in the mouth of a no-nonsense preacher from Chicago, and it's racist, irreverent and un-American.

#### *JEREMIAH AND ISRAEL*

The Hebrew Scriptures read like a series of wars. (Heck, get past Abraham and Sarah, and just about every other character in the Jewish Bible grew up with war.) Anyone who knows anything about Jewish history can tell you that it's a natural wonder that such a relatively weak band of tribes survived brutal battle after brutal battle. Truly, Judaism is a study in cultural, religious and *military* resilience.

Jeremiah grew up in one of the most conflict-plagued eras of Hebrew history, somewhere between the eighth- and sixth-century B.C.E. He was a child of war. During his childhood, Judah, the northern section of what can be loosely called the Jewish nation, was passed from conqueror to conqueror. While we can't be sure of the early forces that shaped his message of peace with justice, all indications are that Jeremiah was under age twenty when he began speaking out against the Jewish leadership and military, warning them not to enter into treaties with any surrounding power. (Like many Hebrew prophets and rulers, he was reluctant to cause waves in the community, but describes a sense of calling that overcame his reluctance.) Jeremiah counseled Judah to look after its people, trusting time and God to stamp out other nations' will to fight.

Being an Old Testament prophet was not a nine-to-five job. The pay was lousy and health insurance meant staying one step ahead of the powerful leaders he held most responsible for Israel's war and accompanying suffering. And the more he likened God to a scorned

lover, the more ostracized he became. When Babylon was threatening to occupy Israel, Jeremiah fled to Egypt with the rest of his people, but he continued to list the ways they had violated their promises to God. If nothing changed, he warned, the Babylonians would follow them into Egypt and force them into captivity in Babylon itself. Serious stuff.

Jeremiah means “God throws”, and that’s just what happened to the people of Judah: they bounced from exile in Egypt to slavery in Babylonia. But it wasn’t for lack of effort on Jeremiah’s part. He once wore an ox yoke around his neck as an example of what Judah would become unless the peace and compassion that God demanded were restored. When visiting a prominent family that had sworn off wine, he brought enough for everyone to get blind, stinking drunk. And he made a huge spectacle of buying title to his family’s former land, even while the Babylonians occupied it and he, himself, was in jail.

Lest we think Jeremiah was all about self-righteousness, recall that his writings indicate a sad and angry prophet. He seemed to hate his role – so much so that many biblical scholars have likened him to the reluctant Jesus – but it appears that he continued to hound Judah’s political and religious leaders for as long as he lived.

In light of modern scholarship, we have to keep in mind that Jeremiah’s story may not have gone down quite the way the narrative describes. Even more to the point, we can’t be absolutely certain he ever existed, at least not as portrayed in the scriptures. But even if the whole thing is more fiction than fact, the themes of the Book of Jeremiah are, in and of themselves, eternal and instructive. (Whatever the real scoop, there remains the story of the reluctant dissenter who, shaped by his times, will not be silent as his nation fights needless wars and neglects its own.) Serious stuff.

One final point before we turn to Jeremiah Wright: a leadership vacuum preceded him and a leadership vacuum followed him. Israel’s leaders had abdicated their role as the moral compass for the nation. Chronic war instead of thoughtful policy. Precious resources funneled away from domestic necessities. For neither the first, nor the last time, it took a prophet to fill Israel’s leadership vacuum.

#### *JEREMIAH WRIGHT*

When the news clips and YouTube features portraying Senator Obama’s former preacher first hit us, there was a great deal we didn’t know about the Rev. Jeremiah Wright: recently retired after nearly four decades of service with Chicago’s Trinity United Church of Christ, a mostly Black, South Side megachurch; a college student who gave up his deferment and became a Marine; a cardiopulmonary technician who was part of President Lyndon Johnson’s medical staff; holder of three academic degrees, including a Doctor of Ministry; seminary professor; Rockefeller Fellow; husband to a minister and father of five. We didn’t know that incensed Black preacher. We knew only that his fury and fire were such as to involve a Democratic frontrunner for the Presidency of the United States. Jeremiah Wright is a good deal easier to track than that other Jeremiah. He was born in Philadelphia on September 22, 1941. His father, Jeremiah Wright, Sr., was a pastor in the

American Baptist tradition, and his mother, Mary Henderson Wright, a Ph.D.-level educator and musician. His parents instilled in their son and daughter an appreciation of religion and pride in their identity as Black Americans.

The younger Rev. Wright came of age in the Civil Rights Era, but by the time he became pastor at Trinity UCC in 1972 the Freedom Rides and lunch counter sit-ins were long over; King was dead and the war he opposed was all but lost. The future of the future was uncertain for people of color; Watts and Detroit and the worst of the race riots were over, but disproportionate poverty, crime, hunger, unemployment and incarceration remained. And the then powers-to-be were in no condition or mood to do much for Black folks; Richard Nixon and his inexplicable paranoia were about to distract the nation and divide its political history into two eras: pre- and post-Watergate.

To reflect on Jeremiah Wright's early years at Trinity is to appreciate feel the profound uncertainty of Black leadership in the 1970s, in particular, the vacuum that M.L. King's death left among Black activist pastors. Many of them had put body, mind and spirit on the line in order to support him. A few had been among his closest allies and advisors. Articles from that period suggest what Jesus' disciples might have felt when their standard-bearer was murdered. What to do now?

This is the story of that cranky Black preacher in the sound bytes and video clips, and these are the times that shaped his ministry and message.

#### *PROPHECY IN A VACUUM*

Although their books are more or less clumped together, the major Hebrew prophets were actually few and far between. As with Jeremiah, whole decades could pass before another truth-teller would rouse Israel's moral conscience. Those long periods between prophets – times when leadership was lacking and hope was hard to come by – are key to understanding the urgency and passion with which the prophets spoke. (Injustice, oppression and neglect do not always lend themselves to kind, measured tones, especially when they've held sway for years at a time.)

But try to justify that urgent sense of mission to those who just a few weeks ago were making a political hot potato of Jeremiah Wright and his bold preaching. Do they not understand the leadership vacuum that began with a gunshot on a Memphis balcony forty years ago? Does the crowd that rushed to judge him factor for the historic role of prophetic Black preachers in breaching that gaping hole? And, to the shame of us all, does no one get it that by labeling him as an old uncle who says wild things, Senator Obama has reduced a prophet to the status of a scrambled-up relic from a distant age?

Perhaps our institutional (national?) memory of prophecy itself is lacking. Maybe we've forgotten that peace with justice almost always involves a paradigm shift. Maybe we've lost our taste for every-day women and men who step out on faith, accept the risks and call the moral balls and strikes as they see them. If so, we have helped sew the seeds of an ongoing American leadership vacuum.

In his 2003 book, “Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers and Religious Liberals”, former Unitarian Universalist Association president, John Buehrens, tells us that filling that kind of vacuum has something to do with protest, but also about love. When describing the Old Testament prophet, Buehrens believes that behind the fiery straight talk is an encounter with the holy:

*The only way to understand Jeremiah...is to read him as expressing an almost unendurable identification with rejected love, the sorrow and the anger of God when repeatedly rebuffed, ignored and rejected. This leads to tremendous inner tension. On the one hand, vivid expressions of despair and lamentation over an unrepentant people, along with thundering denunciations of them continuing in evil, faithless ways; on the other hand, the persistence of God's love, and the ever-present possibility of authentic repentance and redemption. Puritan sermons often has this character, and they were called jeremiads.*

My fellow religious humanists may have to make some adjustments to the biblical language in which Jeremiah’s story is couched, but that shouldn’t be license to dismiss what Buehrens is saying. If I may paraphrase, he’s saying that it’s possible that some among us have profound *personal experience* of profound *impersonal* (universal) *love* – experience and love that drives us to go where the proverbial angels fear to tread. I think this was the case when the Old Testament Jeremiah overcame his natural shyness and filled the leadership vacuum of his time. And, yes, I think that this was the case when Jeremiah Wright, like hundreds of Black preachers before, built his ministry as one man’s efforts to fill the leadership vacuum of *his* time. If I’m right, then an objective mind can no more blame Obama’s former pastor for speaking out than it can Israel’s former prophet.

#### **JEREMIAH WRIGHT: MAD-EYED FROM STATING THE OBVIOUS**

If you’ve endured enough of my preaching over the past nearly four years, you know that I’m a barnyard disciple of John Shelby Spong, for many years the Episcopal Bishop of the Diocese of New Jersey. In one of his earlier books, “Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism”, he makes some short observations that add to our understanding of the place of the prophet in ancient Israel, and, I would suggest, modern America:

*The second-biggest section [of the Old Testament] after the books of history in the Hebrew Scriptures was the work of the various prophets. They stood as giants speaking their messages at critical points in Jewish history. Contrary to the way the prophets were understood in early Christian history, they were not predictors of the future...*

*The prophetic movement was a Jewish gift to the world. It was in touch with the Elohist mentality that placed all things, **including temple and royal family** (emphasis, mine), under the judgment of the living God. It offered a divine challenge to the established Jewish priesthood. It was validated by no external authority. It stood or fell on the basis*

*of its participation in truth alone. It embodied many of the elements that later came to be seen as part of the emphasis of Protestantism* (emphasis, mine).

Permit me to go way off the beaten path here. Let me put into my own words that last passage from Spong, paraphrasing it so as to put into today's context what some call the incendiary remarks of the Rev. Jeremiah Wright:

The prophetic movement, although begun in ancient Israel, was a natural means by which African Americans framed their own experience of oppression. It has developed from a theology that sees God as an all-encompassing power – a power that sides with the oppressed despite the religion of the privileged and the government that too often exists to protect privilege itself. The Black prophetic tradition, as interpreted by the likes of Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, W.E.B. DuBois, Paul Robeson, Rosa Parks, Dr. King, Malcolm X, Eldridge Cleaver, Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, Alice Walker and, yes, Jeremiah Wright, does not seek the approval of White privilege before speaking the heart and mind of many Black Americans; the Black prophetic tradition stands or falls on its ability to give accurate witness to ongoing, *disproportionate*, suffering. And, ironically, it was the very Protestant tradition from which many of those who scorned Jeremiah come, that was the main conduit between the Old Testament Jeremiah and the Rev. Dr. Jeremiah Wright.

Bottom line, I see in Jeremiah Wright what Spong sees in the Hebrew prophet: a fire for justice that is one-part leader and one-part lover.

I want to close with a poem that John Buehrens included in “Understanding the Bible”. I’ll present it just as it appears in that book, beginning with his brief introduction:

*At the height of the Cold War and nuclear arms race, Richard Wilbur wrote a poem called “Advice to a Prophet.” It begins:*

*When you come, as soon you must, to the street of our city,  
Mad-eyed from stating the obvious,  
Not proclaiming our fall, but begging us  
In God’s name to have self-pity,  
Spare us all word of the weapons, their force and range...*

And it’s here that Buehrens breaks in with a brief preface to the rest of the poem:

*He [Richard Wilbur] says that the prophet must, in essence, also invoke the awesome beauty of creation itself, and ask:*

*What should we be without,  
The dolphin’s arc, the dove’s return  
These things in which we have seen ourselves  
And spoken?*

Jeremiah Wright is mad-eyed from stating the obvious, thus when he hit the news services and blogs many felt the sharpness of his words but not the steadfastness of his hope. Based on what we've since learned about him, there's a love of beauty behind his prophetic words and visage – a love of Life that we cannot destroy without destroying ourselves. For that alone he deserves a better fate than the prophet of old.