Jeremiah and the False Prophets

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Jeremiah began his prophetic career in 627 BCE, and gained national notoriety when he first prophesied the destruction of the Temple during the wicked King Jehoiakim's reign in 609 BCE. He warned that if the Judeans would not improve their religious behavior, the destruction of the Temple and exile would follow. Unwilling to listen, the wicked king, the nobility, and the priesthood persecuted Jeremiah and attempted to have him executed.

After the traumatic exile of Jehoiachin (Jehoiakim's son) and 10,000 other leading Judeans twelve years later, there was widespread concern. Suddenly, Jeremiah's bleak prophecies appeared to be materializing. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonia was rapidly conquering the world, and the tiny nation of Judah was extremely vulnerable. However, a group of false prophets arose in Judah who predicted a miraculous downfall of Babylonia followed by the return of Jehoiachin and the other exiles.

On the political front, Egypt fanned the flames of revolt against Babylonia. This led King Zedekiah to host an international summit in 593 BCE to discuss the formation of an anti-Babylonian coalition. The religious and political establishments opposed Jeremiah's message of submission.

Jeremiah appeared at Zedekiah's summit wearing a yoke, symbolizing that all the nations should submit to the yoke of Babylonia:

> Thus said the Lord to me: Make for yourself thongs and bars of a yoke, and put them on your neck. And send them to the king of Edom, the king of Moab, the king of the Ammonites, the king of Tyre,

> and the king of Sidon, by envoys who have come to King Zedekiah of Judah in Jerusalem…The nation or kingdom that does not serve him—King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and does not put its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, that nation I will visit—declares the Lord —with sword, famine, and pestilence, until I have destroyed it by his hands. As for you, give no heed to your prophets, augurs, dreamers, diviners, and sorcerers, who say to you, “Do not serve the king of Babylon.” For they prophesy falsely to you—with the result that you shall be banished from your land; I will drive you out and you shall perish. But the nation that puts its neck under the yoke of the king of Babylon, and serves him, will be left by Me on its own soil—declares the Lord—to till it and dwell on it (Jeremiah 27:2-11).

After Jeremiah’s dramatic presentation, the false prophet Hananiah son of Azzur publicly confronted Jeremiah, breaking his yoke and announcing that Babylonia would fall in two years (Jeremiah chapter 28). Of course, we are privy to the course of history. Jeremiah was indeed the true prophet, and Hananiah was false.

However, in the real time of the story, one must ask: How were the people—even the most sincerely religious ones—to distinguish between true and false prophets? This question was not merely a matter of academic interest. Jeremiah’s forecast of seventy years of Babylonian rule (Jeremiah 25:10-11; 29:10) came with political ramifications: remain faithful to Babylonia or they will destroy the country. By predicting the miraculous demise of Babylonia, the false prophets supported revolt against Babylonia. These debates were a matter of national policy and survival.

Some false prophets were easier to detect than others. Their flagrant disregard for the Torah discredited them as true prophets—at least for God-fearing individuals who were confused as to whom they should follow. However, Hananiah son of Azzur and Shemaiah the Nehelamite (Jeremiah 29:24-32) both sounded righteous. Neither preached idolatry or laxity in Torah observance, and both spoke in the name of God. After each prophet made his case, Jeremiah “went on his way” (Jeremiah 28:11). There was no way for the people to know who was right, and therefore the nation would have to wait to see whose prediction would be fulfilled. Waiting, however, was not a helpful option. The false prophets were calling for revolt now, and Jeremiah was calling for loyalty to Babylonia now.

Elsewhere, Jeremiah bemoaned the mockery he endured for the non-fulfillment of his own predictions: “See, they say to me: ‘Where is the prediction of the Lord? Let it come to pass!’” (Jeremiah 17:15). Although Jeremiah ultimately was vindicated by the destruction, the prediction test of prophetic veracity was difficult to apply.

To address these difficulties, Jeremiah presented alternative criteria by which to ascertain false prophets. He staked his argument in the Torah’s assertion that a wonder worker who preaches idolatry is a false prophet regardless of successful predictions or signs:

> As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death; for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*)—who freed you from the land of Egypt and who redeemed you from the house of bondage—to make you stray from the path that the Lord your God commanded you to follow. Thus you will sweep out evil from your midst (Deuteronomy 13:6).

Strikingly, Jeremiah extended the Torah’s example of idolatry to include anyone who did not actively promote repentance. Since the false prophets predicted the unconditional downfall of Babylonia irrespective of any repentance on Israel’s part, they must be fraudulent:

> In the prophets of Samaria I saw a repulsive thing (*tiflah*): They prophesied by Baal and led My people Israel astray. But what I see in the prophets of Jerusalem is something horrifying (*sha’arurah*): adultery and false dealing. They encourage evildoers, so that no one turns back from his wickedness. To Me they are all like Sodom, and [all] its inhabitants like Gomorrah (Jeremiah 23:13-14).

More subtly, the Torah uses the expression, “for he urged disloyalty to the Lord your God” (*ki dibber sarah al A-donai Elohekhem*). This phraseology is used to refer to specific prophets only twice in Tanakh—when Jeremiah censured Hananiah and Shemaiah, the two false prophets who appeared the most righteous:

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to banish you from off the earth. This year you shall die, for you have urged disloyalty to the Lord (*ki sarah dibbarta el A-donai*) (Jeremiah 28:16).

> Assuredly, thus said the Lord: I am going to punish Shemaiah the Nehelamite and his offspring. There shall be no man of his line dwelling among this people or seeing the good things I am going to do for My people—declares the Lord—for he has urged disloyalty toward the Lord (*ki sarah dibber al A-donai*) (Jeremiah 29:32).

Thus Jeremiah singled out the most undetectable false prophets so that those who genuinely wanted to follow God's word would understand that they were as good as idolaters as they led the nation away from God by predicting unconditional salvation for undeserving people.

Hananiah and Shemaiah may have been sincere dreamers who loved Israel. However, they were not driven to improve their society, and therefore necessarily were false prophets. In the end, their feel-good predictions contributed directly to the nation's doom. King Zedekiah eventually capitulated to his nobles' demands and revolted against the Babylonians, bringing about the destruction of the Temple and exile of the nation. During the final siege of Jerusalem, Jeremiah scolded Zedekiah for having ignored his counsel:

> And Jeremiah said to King Zedekiah, "What wrong have I done to you, to your courtiers, and to this people, that you have put me in jail? And where are those prophets of yours who prophesied to you that the king of Babylon would never move against you and against this land?" (Jeremiah 37:18-19).

Though some false prophets may have been sincere, there possibly also was some deficiency in that sincerity. While condemning false prophets, Jeremiah urged the Jews not to listen to them:

> For thus said the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Let not the prophets and diviners in your midst deceive you, and pay no heed to the dreams they [Heb. “you”] dream (*ve-al tishme’u el halomotekhem asher attem mahlemim*) (Jeremiah 29:8).

The expression at the end of the verse is difficult to interpret, as is evidenced in the NJPS translation above. Radak submits the following:

> *Mahlemim*: this means that they cause them to dream … i.e., you [the people] cause [the false prophets] to dream, for if you did not listen to their dreams, they would not dream these things (Radak on Jeremiah 29:8).

Following Radak’s interpretation, Jeremiah’s critique of the false prophets includes an accusation of their being at least partially driven by a desire to please the people. A vicious cycle was created between the false prophets, the political leadership, and the masses. In contrast, Jeremiah was committed to God’s word no matter how unpopular that made him.

Tragically, the Judeans failed to listen to Jeremiah, did not improve their religious behavior, and rebelled against Babylonia. Although he failed during his lifetime, Jeremiah’s staggering prophetic integrity, pitted against every echelon of society, remains immortalized in Tanakh as a shining model of standing against immorality and tyranny.