JEREMIAH AND HANANIAH:
A STUDY OF TRUE AND FALSE PROPHECY

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The confrontation between the prophets Jeremiah and Hananiah in Jeremiah 28 has been studied closely by biblical commentators and is seen as the locus in the attempt to distinguish between true and false prophecy.

Jeremiah is told by God to carry the thongs and bars of a yoke on his neck into the Temple in Jerusalem to symbolize the continued submission of Judah to Babylon (Jer. 27:2). In a dramatic encounter, the prophet Hananiah ben Azzur from Gibeon removes the bar from Jeremiah’s neck, claiming that Judah will be free of servitude to Babylon in two years. Hananiah seems to have the symbolic and rhetorical upper hand. Breaking the yoke (28:12), no pun intended, is a master stroke. God told Jeremiah to carry the bar in this dramatic symbolic action, and now Hananiah has broken the bar. Jeremiah does not know what to say or do and leaves the Temple: And the prophet Jeremiah went on his way (28:11).

Since both Jeremiah and Hananiah are both referred to repeatedly as prophets, scholars have studied this passage to determine the criteria for evaluating different prophets as either true or false.¹ The text never calls Hananiah a false prophet; commentators label him as such. Hananiah is not a false prophet like the prophets of Baal in other biblical passages. The English phrase “false prophet” comes from the Greek term pseudoprophètes. The problem with the term “false prophets” is that it may include complete liars, idolaters, people who have an ideology based on previous prophets, and people who may have a message from God.

One of Martin Buber’s elegant essays on the Bible is “False Prophets (Jeremiah 28).”² Buber says that Jeremiah goes off in silence because Hananiah “knows it all,” and Jeremiah knows what he does not know. Hananiah’s mistake is in thinking that he knows the Will of God based on historical experience, the perpetuation of the Davidic dynasty and the seeming inviolability of Jerusalem (Isa. 37:35), all as shown in Isaiah’s words and experience. In fact, in breaking Jeremiah’s bar symbolizing servitude to a foreign power,
Hananiah may be thinking about Isaiah 10:27 where the yoke of Asshur will be broken and drop from off the neck of God’s people. Hananiah does not understand, Buber says, that “history is a dynamic process, and history means that one hour is never like the one that has gone before.” Hananiah is one of the false prophets “who foster illusions, use the power of their wishful thinking” to persuade the people. As for Isaiah, Hananiah only popularizes the promise of Isaiah’s prophecy, not the conditions under which it would be true. Israel had to live up to its part of the covenant, and it has not. False prophets worship the god of “success.”

Buber is unfair to Hananiah in portraying him as an idol-worshipper of success. Hananiah is referred to by the narrator as the “Prophet Hananiah.” Hananiah does rely on the precedence of the past, as Overholt agrees: “Hananiah did not know that there was such a thing as a different historical juncture.” By focusing on what he describes as Hananiah’s faults, Buber does not penetrate Jeremiah’s agony or his sense of God’s immediate presence in the present situation.

Carroll presents a different thesis, that this is just a later story written about Jeremiah and Hananiah and should not be taken as a factual event. To find “a criteriology about true and false prophecy” here is impossible because it is just a tale; since Jeremiah is the true prophet, Hananiah is the false one.

That Jeremiah goes home or to some other private place, convinces me that this is not just a later story. Jeremiah is frozen. He does not know what to do or say. How very human and very real. A later story would have Jeremiah respond quickly with an appropriate rejoinder to Hananiah’s words and actions.

Néher states, ironically, “There have been occasional attempts in biblical history …to codify prophecy and to state a theory of false prophecy. But no one has even been able to establish the code of true prophecy.” Of course there is no code. A code is static, defined. The essence of prophecy is a pathos for God in a particular moment in time and expressing this in words that will impact people’s lives. Hananiah thinks that there is “The Word” of God, while Jeremiah understands that there are different Words at different times. Hananiah thinks that God works in a fixed, repetitive way, so if He saved Jerusalem in the time of Isaiah, He would save Jerusalem in his time as well. Jeremiah understands that this is not true.
This reading of the prophetic consciousness with its openness to the Voice of God and God’s role in history finds profound articulation and appreciation in Heschel’s *The Prophets*. I come to this statement not by seeing Heschel as a philosopher among philosophers (where he is not always highly respected), but from a close reading of biblical texts such as Jeremiah.

The rigid binary character of all the usual descriptions and theories about Jeremiah and Hananiah: true/false, truth/ideology, God/human, Judean/Babylonian, patriotism/treason, is all simplistic. As Heschel says: “This rigid either-or is replaced by a dynamic multiplicity of forms of relationship implied in pathos.” Heschel feels Jeremiah’s engagement: “Pathos…implies a constant concern and involvement; it is conceived as an emotional engagement.” As in any relationship, there are moods and vicissitudes. The prophets tried to bring God’s words to the people in a deep relationship with God as God was in an ever-changing relationship with his people.

What both the other would-be prophets and the modern critics lacked was the pathos that Heschel describes and the quality that the prophets of the Bible possessed. One wonders: Can a secular, non-believer read the Bible objectively? How can he/she relate to individuals who had a sense of the supernatural?

With these thoughts about prophetic pathos, we turn back to the confrontation between Jeremiah and Hananiah.

**WHEN JEREMIAH RETURNS TO THE COURT**

We left Jeremiah in lonely despair. When he is in private, Jeremiah hears the Voice of God, which restores him and gives him the new message to bring against Hananiah. Jeremiah feels the dynamism of God and opposes dogmatic and static thinking. God speaks to him: *Go say to Hananiah: This said the LORD: You broke bars of wood, but I will make bars of iron instead. For thus said the LORD of Hosts, the God of Israel: I have put an iron yoke upon the necks of all those nations, that they may serve King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon—and serve him they shall!* (28:13-14).

Jeremiah can now respond to Hananiah’s dramatic, symbolic action of removing and breaking the bar of Jeremiah’s yoke. Jeremiah wore a wooden yoke, Hananiah broke it, but now there will be iron bars to show God’s unbreakable will. Jeremiah returns to the court with a renewed sense of his pur-
pose. And the prophet Jeremiah said to the prophet Hananiah, “Listen, Hananiah! The LORD God did not send you, and you have given this people lying assurances. Assuredly, thus said the LORD: I am going to banish you from the earth. This year you shall die, for you have urged disloyalty to the LORD.” And the prophet Hananiah died that year, in the seventh month (Jer. 28:12-17).

The fact that Hananiah dies that year is clearly not a coincidence but a fulfillment of what Deuteronomy 13, the central text about false prophecy in the Torah, states: Follow none but the LORD your God, and revere none but Him, observe His commandments alone, and heed only His orders; worship none but Him, and hold fast to Him. As for that prophet or dream-diviner, he shall be put to death; for he urged disloyalty to the LORD your God . . . (Deut. 13:5-6).

Why does Hananiah deserve death? Is it because Jeremiah says that the Exile will last seventy years and Hananiah offers a definite prediction of a quick return to Judah? Jeremiah already has said that Hananiah’s prophecy will be proven or disproven in a relatively short time. As Deuteronomy 19:21-22 states, the validity of the prophecy will be known by whether it happens. Is the debate really about the timing of the end of Exile?

Moreover, Hananiah is not maliciously false. He does not encourage idol worship or straying to other gods. He is not criticized for the form in which his prophetic word supposedly comes. There is no insinuation that he is personally immoral (as Jeremiah will accuse the prophets Ahab and Zedekiah of being in Jeremiah 29:20-23).

What Hananiah lacks is what is essential to being a true prophet: Pathos. Pathos is to be in sync with what God really wants. What Jeremiah feels in his prophetic pathos and what Hananiah does not feel is that God is not interested in political power or the Temple rituals as an end in themselves. Hananiah thinks that there will be peace and protection through earthly forces, such as political allies who will join in a rebellion against Babylon. Such thinking creates a false sense of security.

Jeremiah, on the other hand, has pathos for what God wants, and what God wants cannot be achieved through politics, armed force or even Temple sacrifice. God is concerned with morality. God will fulfill His part of the Covenant if there is moral truth in the society. And such truth is nowhere to be
found, as Jeremiah states: *Roam the streets of Jerusalem, Search its squares, Look about and take note; You will not find a man, There is none who acts justly, Who seeks integrity-That I should pardon her. Even when they say, “As the LORD lives,” They are sure to be swearing falsely* (Jer. 5:1-2).12

Morality is what is missing in Judean society, and it is this lack that will bring the prolonged Exile that Jeremiah prophesizes and Hananiah denies.

In what way is Hananiah a false prophet? He gives the people a false sense of security. The people must protect the Temple and its rituals and its cultic center, but the Temple will not protect them. Jeremiah states that the only protection is a moral life in covenant with God.

Jeremiah understands all this in a visceral and immediate way. This pathos for and with God, like the pathos for and with the people, is what makes a true prophet.

NOTES
3. Is it possible that God gives prophets like Hananiah messages as He does with the other prophets in the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22, where a lying voice from Heaven leads the prophets to advise the kings to enter a battle where they will certainly be defeated? Could God use prophets to send the people down the wrong road as a function of His Will?
9. It is unfortunate that most Bible scholars do not know Heschel’s work or do not understand its importance. In G. L. Keown, P. J. Scalise, T. G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26-52* (WBC 27; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), Heschel’s *The Prophets* is cited only once and this is in the most perfunctory way possible in a bibliographical list in the Introduction on p. xxv with hundreds of other works. In L. C. Allen, *Jeremiah* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), Heschel is not even cited once.

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