

...And Finally: Biblical Hebrew Prophets as Journalists

Post-Referendum we've seen political correspondents taking the limelight. They dare to comment and question interviewees, society, and situation alike. Heeded by politicians and the general populace, at home and abroad, they speak to both the powerful and the powerless. Different news corporations inevitably affect which communities individual journalists reach, but what is without doubt is that a modern political commentator has a considerable audience and influence. Journalists are used by politicians calling press conferences; and they represent unheard voices in media-led investigations. Moreover, recent events have shown that – sometimes – an insightful journalist or commentator has made a prediction which turns out to be spot on.

Biblical Hebrew prophets were “forth-tellers” even more than they were “fore-tellers”. Like journalists, they spoke out. They addressed those in power and challenged where challenge was due, sometimes from within the corridors of power. Not only did they address political concerns but they gave voice to matters of social justice.

Consider the prophet Isaiah, some of whose pronouncements touched on the so-called “Syro-Ephraimite Crisis” of the 730s BCE. There is both prediction of the outcome, and advice given, from the prophet Isaiah to King Ahaz of Judah. One reading of Chapters 7 and 8 is that Isaiah's analysis was a correct fore-telling of events and consequent sage counsel to do nothing. The threatening forces would deal with one another, taking military pressure off Judah – this is what happened; but Isaiah's advice to Ahaz not to pay a tribute went unheeded and so Judah's pre-emptive tribute payment was probably unnecessarily costly. Journalists today impact Westminster as well as the voting public. Recent events testify that press conferences are widely regarded as instruments of power. “Doom-mongering” and varieties of predictions from all sorts of people were features of the EU Referendum debate. A “little apocalypse”. Remind you of anything?

As for social justice, another eight-century prophet, Amos, spoke out against oppression, greed, and pitilessness, both within his people and beyond. He proclaimed God's punishment on officials for financially benefitting themselves at the expense of the righteous, the poor and afflicted. Today's journalists hit back hard at rich individuals or companies whom they accuse of tax-evasion, or the personal or corporate profit of those in the financial sector. Newspaper investigations can help reveal instances of neglect or poor performance from those who are in trusted positions of responsibility.

Both biblical prophets and journalists today occupy the place of the “social critic”. Accessing the sometimes alien landscape of prophecy in the biblical Hebrew world through the lens of the journalist of our world can help the biblical expositor's task; approaching the swiftly-changing political situation of our contemporary world can be illuminated by the similarities between biblical prophetic voices and present-day correspondents.

And finally, considering whether ancient Hebrew texts have had many more centuries of pruning, polishing, and editing than today's instant culture allows to contemporary journalists might counterbalance the healthy scepticism that commentators of our age are truly as insightful as a Hebrew prophet.