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Ezekiel 7:15, NRSV.

¹⁵ *The sword is outside, pestilence and famine are inside;
those in the field die by the sword;
those in the city—famine and pestilence devour them.*

Prophets and Plagues: *Intimidating Ourselves.*

The Prophets used multiple tools to encourage the Chosen People to return to their God and to stop adopting the corrupt ways of their many pagan neighbors.

We've talked a lot about the threat of foreign armies by the Prophets, the prophecies that God would use expansive empires like the Assyrians and the Babylonians to crush the wayward people. But the Prophets had other tools in their toolbox, and they especially took advantage of the fact that the Israelites were agrarian people who relied on successful crops for their survival. Thus, for two reasons, the works of the Hebrew Prophets are filled with warnings of plagues if the people of God do not return to God. First, readers of Hebrew Scripture were heavily impacted by this sort of threat because of the dramatic Torah-based story of the Exodus wherein God sent ten plagues upon Egypt to convince the Pharaoh to free the Hebrew people. These plagues were: turning

water to blood, a massive swarm of frogs, dust storms turning into vast clouds of tiny insects, hordes of swarming flies in the houses of Egyptians, pestilences killing Egyptian livestock, people and animals suffering painful boils, hail destroying crops and trees, massive swarms of locusts destroying crops, darkness covering Egypt for three days, and firstborn humans and livestock dying. But a second reason, and to us a less obvious reason why the threat of plagues was so powerful, is that plagues and infectious disease outbreaks were a constant, horrifying threat in the ancient Near East. Poor sanitation, living close to livestock, and the lack of medical technology made them vulnerable. The Israelites survived by subsistence farming. A single calamity could leave a nation starving. They also did not understand natural ecological cycles that involved red algae blooms that killed life, occasional seasons where insects multiplied out of control, and natural phenomena like dust storms and volcanic eruptions. They didn't understand the environmental factors that could turn normally passive grasshoppers into teeming masses of aggressive, destructive locusts.

They tended to view things like plagues from a theological perspective and didn't frame them in the scientific way we view them now. Thus, plagues were direct attacks by God against the evils of fake Egyptian gods, as well as wake-up calls for the Chosen People themselves when they wandered from their faith.

Plagues were both divine justice and an intimidation tactic that Prophets used to keep people in line. The major Prophet Jeremiah uses a repetitive threat of “the sword, famine, and pestilence” to describe God’s anger at the wayward people of Judah, the southern kingdom. In Chapter 14 the Prophet describes a deadly, punishing drought in Judah. It affects every level of society. Crops fail, the people gather at the great gates of the city to mourn, and both wild animals and livestock die from dehydration and abandon their young. Jeremiah gives this explanation:

¹⁰ *Thus says the LORD concerning this people:
Truly they have loved to wander,
they have not restrained their feet;
therefore the LORD does not accept them,
now he will remember their iniquity
and punish their sins.*

¹¹ *The LORD said to me: Do not pray for the welfare of this people.* ¹² *Although they fast, I do not hear their cry, and although they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I do not accept them; but by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence I consume them.*

Jeremiah tells the people that they must truly and sincerely repent. It is not enough to simply practice mechanical rituals. They must return to God.

The most famous plague described in the work of a minor Prophet is in Joel:

⁴ *What the cutting locust left,
the swarming locust has eaten.
What the swarming locust left,
the hopping locust has eaten,
and what the hopping locust left,
the destroying locust has eaten.*

Joel and the other Prophets who use plagues as a way of intimidating God's people were relying on not just the story of the Exodus and the plagues that haunted the Egyptians, but also on other parts of the Torah, the important first five books of what we call the Old Testament. This warning is from Deuteronomy where Moses is telling the Israelites before they enter Canaan what will happen if they do not obey God's commandments:

³⁸ You shall carry much seed into the field but shall gather little in, for the locust shall consume it. ³⁹ You shall plant vineyards and dress them, but you shall neither drink the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall eat them. ⁴⁰ You shall have olive trees throughout all your territory, but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. ⁴¹ You shall have sons and daughters, but they shall not remain yours, for they shall go into captivity. ⁴² All your trees and the fruit of your ground the cicada shall take over.

The Prophet Ezekiel predicts the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by the Babylonians. The people have been sinful. Ezekiel warns of a plague for Jerusalem, saying that the survivors will hide up in the inhospitable mountains:

*¹⁵ The sword is outside, pestilence and famine are inside;
those in the field die by the sword;
those in the city—famine and pestilence devour them.*

*¹⁶ If any survivors escape,
they shall be found on the mountains
like doves of the valleys,
all of them moaning over their iniquity.*

I've experienced three minor plagues in my lifetime. I'll describe two of them to you now, and the third one later. The first happened in Louisville a few

decades ago, when Wendy and I were living there. For some reason, the grasshopper population exploded. If you stepped outside our front or back door, you couldn't help but crush at least twenty grasshoppers with each step. They ate everything. The second one was far more localized and occurred some years ago when we were visiting two old friends of hers in Boston. This couple lived in an aged apartment. I was in the shower one morning, and suddenly the tile wall above the bathtub failed and fell away to my feet, releasing hundreds of cockroaches. It felt like hundreds of thousands. I jumped out of the tub. The first plague was gross, but it only lasted for days and did not impact us economically. It did not feel like God warning us about sin. The second one was more localized and only creeped me out for about thirty minutes. The point is that it's difficult for us to relate to the power of the plagues in the Hebrew Scriptures.

But consider this. The Prophets had mixed success in convincing people to turn away from their neighbors' pagan gods and corrupt ways. The people often punished the messengers, the Prophets themselves. Jeremiah was arrested, beaten, and then thrown into a cistern to starve, although he was rescued. Zechariah was stoned to death in the Temple courtyard. Although it is not in the Bible, it is believed that Isaiah was sawed in half. Zechariah was stoned to death. Their messages tended to be ignored in the short term, and the Prophets were

typically persecuted. But after the fact, their correct predictions tended to serve more as powerful historical proof that God does indeed punish the wicked.

There certainly were situations where the works of Prophets did impact the actions of the Israelites – and in fact, impacted history. We talked recently about Jonah, the reluctant Prophet who at first refused to serve and tried to flee across the Mediterranean to a faraway city. But he was swallowed by a whale, tossed into the sea by sailors, and saved by God. He then did serve – and as a result, the people of Nineveh, the capital city of the enemy empire of Assyria changed their ways. Of course, we don't know if this story is real. Moses faced down constant rebellion from his people as they wandered in the desert, and he successfully delivered his people to Canaan. Importantly, the story of Moses is arguably the most important of all the Prophet stories in the Bible. Without him, there would have been no Israel. Isaiah, whom we are confident did exist, is attributed with serving four kings, and most significantly, guided the fourth of those kings, Hezekiah, to a critical victory for Judah, the southern kingdom, against Assyria.

Then there is the minor Prophet Zephaniah. He served under King Josiah of Judah after the Assyrians had already conquered and permanently destroyed the Northern Kingdom, called Israel, with its ten tribes being forcibly absorbed into the Assyrian population and “lost” forever. There are three chapters in

Zephaniah. In the first, God, through Zephaniah, targets Judah for worshipping Canaanite gods, being inactive spiritually, and for corruption on the part of the powerful. In Chapter 2, the Prophet urges his people to seek the Lord and live righteously. He delivers oracles against surrounding hostile nations, like the Philistines, the Moabites, and Assyria. These nations are judged as evil for their arrogance and mistreatment of God's people. In the third chapter, he again rebukes Jerusalem, predicts that God will humble his people, and then at the end there is an uplifting song of joy as the Prophet promises that God will live among the humble remnant of his people. Here is a highly edited version of Chapter 4:

- ¹⁴ *Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!*
- ¹⁵ *The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.*
- ¹⁷ *The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
as on a day of festival.*
- ¹⁸ *And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.*
- ²⁰ *At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised*

*among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.*

Remember that Zephaniah served King Josiah. Josiah was a descendent of King David and his rule is described in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, two of the books that in large part tell us the story of the kings of Israel. Josiah became King as a boy. His father and the kings just before his father had been corrupt, wicked men. Josiah, however, is famous as the most faithful of all of Israel's kings. He lived a few hundred years after David. Josiah's great contribution was a vast overhaul of Israel's moral climate: he worked to end idolatry. Previous kings had allowed, even encouraged, the Israelites to worship not just God, but the gods of the Canaanites. After he had already begun his revival, an official in Josiah's court discovered a long-lost book of faith in the Temple. In 2nd Kings it is referred to as a "*Book of the Law*". It was apparently a version of the Book of Deuteronomy. You might remember that in Deuteronomy Moses reiterates to a new generation of Israelites - those largely born in the desert during forty years of wandering and who are about to enter the Promised Land - their moral code and history. The Israelites are encamped at Moab. They are waiting to cross the Jordan River and found Israel. Moses is going to die before entering Canaan and this is his opportunity to set them on the right spiritual track. The Book of Deuteronomy thus overviews for a naïve generation that has grown up in the desert

the laws that God wants the Chosen People to live by. When this Book of the Law is found in the Temple, King Josiah is greatly distressed. He realizes just how far the People of God have fallen morally. This is what the king declares:

“Great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book.”

Josiah orders his officials to destroy all altars and icons that have been erected to honor Baal and other pagan gods. He gathers the people of Israel and leads them in renewing their dedication to the one, true God. The Temple is cleansed of all that is pagan. He returns Passover to its original glory after previous generations have watered it down. It's believed that the *Book of the Law* that is found in the Temple contained roughly Chapters 5 to 26 and 28 of Deuteronomy. That would mean that the original *Book of the Law* was an early draft of Deuteronomy. Then, after Josiah's death, other people retargeted the book. Most likely, it was changed so that it would flow better with respect to the books that follow it, namely the history books of Joshua, Judges, the two Samuels, and the two Kings, which together with Deuteronomy are typically called the “Deuteronomistic History”. Many scholars believe that these books were edited together so that they would tell a focused story. Specifically, the person who put this series of books together, partly out of existing material, was trying to explain the reason for the Fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the

Babylonian exile. God punished the people of Israel for their lack of faith, their tendencies toward idolatry, and in general, the breaking of the Old Covenant.

There is a popular theory that the Prophet Zephaniah heavily influenced King Josiah, and that this in turn led to this major return to righteousness by the Chosen People. This possibly involved editing significant parts of Hebrew Scripture, which we inherit today. So, the prophecies of at least one Prophet, a little known one, Zechariah, apparently had a major impact on history.

The third plague I encountered in my life was the first that happened to me. I was sixteen and my parents had moved us from the coastal area of Ventura County inland to the edge of the Mojave Desert. We were in the first development there. All around us they were cutting into the hot dry dirt to level the ground and build new developments. One day, I was driving my '65 Pontiac GTO out of the neighborhood, past giant earth moving equipment. The workers disturbed thousands of what I believe now were tarantulas, very large spiders, that then began to move *en masse* across the street. I was not frightened by them. I had a great time driving back and forth, running over as many of them as I could. Later, my father would ask me what the hell was all over my tires.

Why am I talking about my three plagues? Plagues do not impact us emotionally as they did the Israelite people. And neither does the threat of

invading armies. We don't even have Prophets today; there is nobody to remind our society that there is a terrible price to be paid by living in immoral ways. The ancient Jews had a growing collection of Scriptural writings, filled with prophecies that came true. We don't have a collection of our own spiritual literature pointing out that in the past, arrogance, theft, bigotry, and a lack of empathy have led to terrible consequences. We don't have the complex legal code, that is, Mosaic law, to guide us each day and warn us if we are becoming immoral as a people and as individuals. All we have are the teachings of Jesus and our own minds and memories. It is up to us, in this deeply corrupt society, where we, like the Israelites, are surrounded by people with very limited moral codes, to live out our faith truthfully. We must stand guard and be aware. We must remember - on a daily basis - the rewards and joys of living the way Christ taught us. We have the Holy Spirit to guide us, but other than the presence of God in our lives, we are on our own. Prophets and plagues will not intimidate us. We must intimidate ourselves.