

Testing the Spirits

Jeremiah 28

by The Reverend Frances Taylor Gench

The New Testament presents the Holy Spirit as a gift of God to the Christian community and presupposes that all believers are spirit-filled. So, what are we to do when believers disagree about the Spirit's leading? When we find ourselves in conflict over our discernment of the will and work of God? Both the Old Testament and the New Testament wrestle with the question of testing or discernment of spirits.

In the Old Testament, we find an ongoing debate over the test of true and false prophets. The prophet Jeremiah, more than anyone else in the Old Testament, agonizes over rival readings of historical realities, each of which claims to represent the will and work of God.¹ Jeremiah 28, the classic account of conflict between true and false prophecy, has received more attention than any other chapter in the Old Testament in relation to questions about discernment and criteria for distinguishing between true and false words from the Lord.

It is important to attend to the context of the story as we engage it. The historical context is one of major geopolitical upheaval in the Ancient Near East. Assyria is on the wane, the Babylonian empire is on the rise, and two important dates need to be noted: 598 and 587 BCE. Babylon attacks Judah twice: once in 598, and then again, in devastating fashion, in 587, the year that marked the great crisis of Israel's history—the destruction of the Temple and exile of God's people. Jeremiah 28 is located *between* these two dates during the reign of Zedekiah, just after the first incursion of Babylonians into Jerusalem in 598 BCE. The first wave of Jewish exiles has been carried away, and the controversy engaged in Jeremiah 28 concerns how long the Exile will last—how long Yahweh will permit Babylon to exercise power against Jerusalem and its citizens.²

Literary context is also important, for Chapters 27 and 28 are closely related. Chapter 27 begins with a dramatic action on the part of the prophet Jeremiah, who takes a yoke worn by oxen and straps it to his neck. He does this to symbolize the submission of Judah and other nations to Babylon. Moreover, he insists that the yoke of Babylon is worn not at the command of Nebuchadnezzar, but at the command of Yahweh. The rest of Chapter 27 is a long speech explaining this striking act, in which Jeremiah makes four major points that can be summarized as follows³:

1. The Lord of Israel is in control of history;
2. At this point in time and history, the Lord is giving the nations, including Judah, over to Babylon. It is Yahweh's direct intent, and should not be challenged or resisted by the nations;

3. You are going to have to “serve” the king of Babylon. Failure to submit will lead to an even worse fate—total destruction;
4. Do not let false prophets seduce you into imagining a third alternative: resistance to the empire or miraculous rescue, for this is fantasy, massive denial. Jeremiah would agree with those prophets that the exile will not last forever, *but* it will last for a long time. He would agree that there will be restoration, *but* it will not be soon or easy. Things are going to get a lot worse before Judah’s fortunes change. Restoration does not negate exile. Prophecies of a future without judgment are lies.⁴

Chapter 28 then features a dramatic confrontation reflecting this dispute. It is the most direct, dramatic encounter between opposing prophets in the Old Testament, both of whom claim to be speaking the word of God. They present alternative, even contradictory, visions of what God was doing in their time, so it is an encounter that invites us to ponder how to distinguish among those who speak for God but do so in conflicting ways. The confrontation takes place in a very public forum—the temple courts—before a live audience. Jeremiah is still wearing the yoke that God commanded him to wear.

Dramatic reading

Begin with a dramatic reading of Jeremiah 28. Assign roles to a narrator, to Jeremiah, and to Hananiah. Ask the rest of the group to represent the people overhearing this exchange.

Questions for discussion and reflection

- First impressions: what struck you most as you heard this story? What questions does it raise for you?
- If you had been present, what do you think your reaction to these two different prophecies would have been?
- Notice: these two prophets look a lot alike in a lot of ways. What similarities do you observe?

It may be important to note that the text does not attack Hananiah’s character or associations. He is presented as a model of prophetic propriety. This makes discernment difficult! It may also be worth noting that Hananiah’s prophecy is risky, too. Neither Zedekiah, the current occupant of the throne, nor the Babylonians, are likely to warm to the news that King Jeconiah will return to Jerusalem and the Babylonian problem will come to an end. As one commentator avers, it is small wonder that Hananiah is dead by the end of this story!⁵

- How do you interpret Jeremiah’s response in verse 6?

- How do you imagine the tone of his voice? Is he bemused? Sarcastic, mocking? Anguished? Is he saying he is open to this possibility, or that his own wish and hope is for this positive outcome? How do you read this response?
- What do you make of Jeremiah's response in Verse 11: "At this, the prophet Jeremiah went his way"? How would you interpret this action?
- Does the text set out any suggestions or rudimentary norms for how to discern whose interpretation is truly from the Lord? How to distinguish between true and false prophecy?

Two norms may be worth noting in your discussion:

Prophetic tradition/received tradition: Pay attention to what past prophets have said. For the most part, God's prophets have announced not grace, but judgment, so Hananiah is noted as an exception to the norm. He is arguing against the mainstream, suspect because he does not say what prophets characteristically say. He neglects the importance of covenantal obedience. This is not an infallible norm, for prophets of the past spoke truly oracles of salvation or peace (Isaiah, for example, whose prophecy may have had an influence on Hananiah). So this norm is a statement of likelihood. But the suggestion is that "if we keep reading and listening to the prophetic voices of Scripture . . . we may have the resources at hand for discerning the voices of those who are 'truly sent' in our own time."⁶

Whether or not prophecy has come to pass: Look also at Deut. 18:21–22, the classic statement of this test. However, lack of success is not a sure sign either, as Jeremiah himself notes in 26:18–19: Micah prophesied devastation of Jerusalem and it did not come to pass. God's mind could "change" about a word of judgment. Deuteronomy also recognizes that false prophecies can be fulfilled. See Deut. 13:1–5, where a more basic criterion is noted: *loyalty to Yahweh* ("If prophets . . . say, 'Let us follow other gods . . . and let us serve them,' you must not heed the words of those prophets").

- Are these helpful criteria?
- Do you glean any other insights, suggestions, or norms about discernment from this story?
- Consider the following quotation from commentator John Bracke and discuss your responses to it:

"Understanding the basis of the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah may help us with the issue of how we might respond when persons who claim that they speak for God offer very different perspectives. We need to be careful about generalizing from the specific instance presented to us in Jeremiah 28. Like those who witnessed the conflict between Jeremiah and Hananiah, we need to decide in each situation, with all its complexity and uncertainty, who speaks for God. *Still,*

*Jeremiah 28 suggests to us that it is well to be suspicious of those who, like Hananiah, speak words of comfort and reassurance that we want to hear and that are easy for us. Rather, ‘from ancient times’ (v. 8) the persons more likely to have been sent by God are those whose message is *discomforting and disturbing*—‘war, famine, and pestilence’—like the hard words of Jeremiah who announced that God intended a long dominion for Babylon over Judah and the nations. *We, like the people of ancient Judah, are drawn to the assurance of the Hananiah’s among us. Jeremiah 28 claims that God is more likely to speak to us through the hard words of the Jeremiahs, who announce that God is disrupting and ending the world in which we are so comfortable.*”⁷*

- The relation between theology and politics in the prophecy of Jeremiah is striking. Consider the following two quotations on this connection⁸ from commentators Patrick D. Miller and Walter Brueggemann and discuss your responses to them:

“Theology and politics are once again joined in the prophecy of Jeremiah . . . there is an awareness that the realm of God’s work in the world is the affairs of people and nations, the politics of alliances and the rise and fall of empires . . . What is going on in history is fraught with human decisions, inclinations, evil, and good. It is all the context in which the Lord is working out the divine purposes, a context that itself is provided by the Creator. The politics of human communities are found to be in some fashion coterminus with the politics of God. That is not something we can always discern or make sense of, and there may be times when we have to call human evil simply that and make no more of it. But Jeremiah suggests that we think about what is going on in the world as God’s work, even with alien and strange instruments. (Patrick D. Miller)⁹

“The issue of truth and falsehood in theological discernment is not, in the book of Jeremiah, simply a matter of having right information or right discernment. It is, rather, an interpretive issue of recognizing that the transcendent will of Yahweh is completely coherent with socioeconomic, political processes. It is in, with, and under Babylon that God is at work. The falseness of Jeremiah’s opponents is not that they did not believe in and trust Yahweh, but that they tried to keep Yahweh apart from the world processes of their time.” (Walter Brueggemann)¹⁰

- What connections do you discern between this story and the struggles for discernment in which Presbyterians are currently engaged?
- What new insights have emerged for you from your discussion of this story? What questions linger?

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah: Exile and Homecoming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 247.

² Brueggemann, p. 241.

³ Patrick D. Miller, "Jeremiah," *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), pp. 782–83.

⁴ Brueggemann, p. 249.

⁵ Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster and London: SCM, 1986).

⁶ Miller, p. 788.

⁷ Italics mine. John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1–29*, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 219–20.

⁸ Miller, p. 787.

⁹ Brueggemann, p. 232.