

HOPE WITHIN HISTORY

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*Blessed Are
the History-makers*

The historical process is mostly hidden and inscrutable. Enlightenment modes of understanding have led us to imagine that if we could investigate enough we would finally understand how the historical process works. The failure of the Enlightenment has forced us to ask in new ways how history is made. Candidates for history-makers are obvious and well known to us. The oldest candidate as the maker of history is God, and those of us who affirm something of God's sovereignty and providential rule hold to this in some form, even in the face of Enlightenment consciousness. But that is not the whole story. Other candidates for history-makers are expressed in nontheistic, secularized versions of God, whether we speak of the idea of progress, the "classless society," or "the Iron Law of the marketplace." Other candidates (out of the tradition of Carlyle) focus on great personalities, and even Scripture scholars delight to say that David is the first human history-maker. If one

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focuses on issues of freedom and justice and peace, the question of who makes history is an important and unresolved issue.

I

My interest in the question is both personal and professional. My personal interest was aroused about eight years ago when, as a good parent, I went to a PTA meeting. It was a special night of student performance. The central piece of exhibition was choric reading led by my son's favorite teacher. The reading consisted in various children, one at a time, giving one-liners about American history. They said such things as:

George Washington is the father of our country.

Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves and saved the Union.

After each such vignette, the entire fifth grade said in unison, "And America goes on forever." I thought at that moment, and continue to think, "What an odd notion of history and history-makers is being taught in the public schools in Webster Groves." First, I noticed that without exception the history-makers who were named in the one-liners were white, male American officeholders. My son was being taught official history of a highly selective kind.

Second, the refrain, "And America goes on forever," meant that my son was being instructed in ideological history, presuming the absoluteness of a historical institution and a political idea. The two statements—history is made by white male officeholders, and the key conclusion of these one-liners is American durability—together make a very reassuring notion of the historical process. The statements are not disinterested. They are an enormous cover-up in terms of what is left out and of the interests served by such a presentation of history.

Since that moment of awareness, I have had two other thoughts that persist. First, my son's history lesson drove me back to study my own public school history. I can remember what I was taught. I remember the charts I made in order to get it right. History, as I

learned it, consisted in the names of all of the American presidents, their parties, their states, and their religion, plus a list of the wars we had won and the territories we had acquired. I studied American history before the Vietnam War. That is, when we could still assert that we had won all our wars. After all, wars are for winning and territories are for taking. It took me a long time in my adult life to begin to see that the sequence of the presidents is not equivalent to history-makers. The list does include some history-makers, but it is difficult to argue that Millard Fillmore or James Buchanan (to name some at a safe distance, though some closer ones might be suggested) made any history that mattered. It was, thus, an important lesson for me to distinguish the official recital which must be learned from the actual history-makers. At many important points in our past the two scarcely overlap at all. In like manner, the mapping of different colors of territory gained (the Louisiana Purchase was always pink on our maps) gives little attention to the imperialism, the blood and oppression, that always goes with the gaining of territory. But I was not taught any of that. Indeed, my teacher did not know that either, because she also was schooled in the uncritical ideology that "America goes on forever."

The other reflective follow-up on the experience of the PTA meeting is more recent. It concerns the explosion of the oral history, tribal history, and folk history of all those groups who have no "recorded glory," which means they did not print the textbooks.¹ There are alternative histories of people who have *suffered* but who never held office and so never made the lists to be recited. We see this with particular reference to Blacks (thanks largely to the impetus of Alex Haley) and to women. There is a massive, variegated form of the history of suffering about which I was taught nothing. Indeed, my history classes and history books proceeded in complete ignorance of this history. About this I have three abiding amazements. First, I am amazed that there really were such histories, as people battled in bold and tough ways to break up power monopolies. That it even happened is remarkable. Second, I am amazed that these histories have been so fully silenced and excluded for such a long time from public awareness. Third, I am

amazed that, even with all the intentional and accidental censorship, these historical memories have survived with enormous power and credibility and now function as a critique, a corrective and even an alternative to our ideological history which keeps everything controlled. I have become aware that there is so much to the historical process which I have been denied by the dominant notions of history-making.

All three of these factors—the PTA meeting, my reflection on my education, and the surfacing of histories of hurt—make the question fresh and urgent: who are the history-makers? To what extent is the official tale really a make-believe story designed positively to protect the monopoly and negatively to make the pain less visible and less dangerous? Where the pain is visible, it becomes dangerous. I suspect that where the pain becomes visible, we are close to the history-making process.

II

This set of personal reflections is matched by a professional interest. I am a part of that generation under the influence of Gerhard von Rad² and George Ernest Wright,³ who taught that “God acts in history.” As James Barr,⁴ Brevard Childs,⁵ and many others have shown in retrospect, there are many serious problems with that notion, but the problem is not simply with that particular notion of theology. It really relates to the entire mode of historical-critical methods.⁶ I have thought, in that connection, “What have I learned and what have I taught as a scholar about the history-making process in ancient Israel?”

I want to take the period of 626–581 B.C.E. as a test case, with particular reference to Jeremiah. That is the pivotal period in the Old Testament, for in 587 B.C.E. Jerusalem was destroyed and “public history” in Judah came to an abrupt and disastrous end. For my purposes, as will be clear, it is also important that those dates are likely the dates for the prophet Jeremiah.⁷ I pose the question concretely: how do we understand and teach the history-making process in this period of Israel’s life that climaxed in the loss of temple and king?

I have discovered that what students learn about Judean history in this period consists in two things. Whether one follows Noth, Bright, Herrmann, Anderson, or any other,⁸ the first thing is to learn *the time-line*. The time-line is presented in all books on the subject, but our basic source is Second Kings, which in an odd way is a chronological presentation of the kings of Judah and Israel. For our period, one must learn five names in order to have a sense of the shape of history: *Josiah*, the great king who instituted an important reform and died an embarrassing death; his son, *Jehoahaz*, who lasted only three months and was deposed by the Egyptians; Josiah’s second son, *Jehoiachim*, who lasted eleven years and who, though he has been judged evil in the Bible, died a peaceful death; his son and Josiah’s grandson, *Jehoiachin*, who lasted on the throne only three months and entered a long exile in Babylon; and Josiah’s third son, *Zedekiah*, who reigned eleven years and was brutally taken away to Babylon. Now these five kings are useful names to know, along with the dates, in order to get a sense of the order of the period. Judean kings are nice to study, like the monarchs of England, because they all reigned in sequence, one at a time, and can be placed, therefore, on a single time-line. It would hardly be correct, however, to regard them uniformly as history-makers. First of all, two of them, Jehoahaz and Jehoiachin, lasted only three months each. Second, with the possible exception of Josiah, they were all weak kings who, at best, responded and reacted to the history-making that went on around them. They had neither the freedom nor the courage, neither the power nor the imagination, to be history-makers. At the most, they presided over empty forms of power, going through the motions of power without capacity to be history-makers.

Moreover, I suspect the Bible knows that the holders of formal power are not automatically history-makers. One has the sense in the narrative of the Second Kings that we are engaged in a historical process concerning Jerusalem that is a process of judgment in which the kings are almost spectators and not really participants. Learning the time-line of ancient Judah may help organize things, but it gives no clue about the history-makers. The time-line is a way to contain and organize data. I can just hear at a PTA meeting in suburban

Jerusalem, five years before the destruction of 587, children in the fifth grade reciting, "And Judah goes on forever." The time-line gives closure and summary, but it does not really show us the dynamics. I have thought that the books of Kings, which are our normative presentation, are engaged only in staging the sequencing and in debunking the royal process.⁹ It is as though the books themselves know that the real kings are not history-makers and thereby imply that the books should more properly be entitled "Kings?"

Another thing students of the Bible learn is the *headlines*, the ebb and flow of great public events. Headlines are at least as important as time-lines. Now by this I refer to the great movements of empires, the rise-and-fall of nations and kingdoms which is, in fact, simply the relative rearrangement of great masses of political, economic, and military power. These are the headlines that would make the newspapers in both Jerusalem and in Nineveh.

In terms of headlines our period of study is both busy and interesting. The generation of Jeremiah had the unusual opportunity to watch in its lifetime the complete rearrangement of imperial power in the Near East. On the one hand, this is the period of total Assyrian collapse. In 663 Assyrian power under Assurbanipal extends at its peak clear to Egypt and controls the entire Fertile Crescent. Who would have believed that in fifty years (612) the capital city of Nineveh would be terminated and that in 605 the mop-up of Carchemish would signal the end of the empire? Obviously the headline of the end of the empire is a stunning piece of history-making. On the other hand, who could have foreseen the emergence of imperial Babylon and its remarkable policy of expansionism to the Mediterranean Sea? Before 605 (or perhaps 609) Babylon was scarcely visible; yet by 605 Babylon is abruptly established as the dominant power. The change in the empires was and is news. It marks the end of certain policies and causes discontinuity in the management of power. Every such change brings hope that the new configuration of power will act more humanely.

One has the impression from this twofold headline concerning Assyria and Babylon that the Judean kings are utterly irrelevant.

History is being made elsewhere by other actors, to which the Judean kings have no real access. That must be learned when we are overly impressed with officeholders. So we have the sum of the critical understanding of Judean history for this period. Both *time-line* and *headline* are important. I do not treat either of these lightly. The time-line of Judean kings and the headline of imperial power matter greatly. They must be known in order to understand anything and they no doubt are shaping influences. I suspect that it is the kings in the time-line and the empires in the headline that organize and write the "PTA version" of history.

III

The Old Testament presents to us a very different characterization of history-making. Of course, it would be easy enough to say that it is Yahweh who is the decisive history-maker, and there is truth in that. Certainly the Old Testament centers on the conviction that Yahweh is the decisive history-maker, but Yahweh is not a history-maker in a "supernaturalist" sense. Yahweh's way of history-making is through the processes and agency of human interaction. More specifically, the history-making process in ancient Israel is done through *the voice of marginality* which is carried by prophetic figures and those with whom they make common cause.¹⁰ Two preliminary observations are in order. First, if we take the books of Kings as a clue for the history-making process as presented in ancient Israel, one is struck by two things.

(1) The name of this part of the canon may popularly be called "history," but in Jewish reckoning these are "former prophets." They are the books of prophetic voice. That is what gives shape and drive to historical action in Israel.

(2) The substance of the books of Kings is interesting. While the time-line scheme of the books concerns kings, one has the impression that this literature is not overly impressed with or seriously interested in the kings. The literature is willing to linger and violate the dating scheme by pausing with a prophet. This is evident with Isaiah (2 Kings 18—20), but more stunningly so with

Elijah, Elisha, and Micaiah, whose narratives occupy fully one-third of the corpus.

However, the second observation and the main one I want to make is that the period under study, the period of the five kings, according to the Bible, is dominated by the figure of Jeremiah. No doubt others could present this period without reference to Jeremiah, but not the Bible. My thesis, thus, is that *Jeremiah as a voice of marginality is a history-maker in the sense that the kings could not be*, though he stands outside the time-line and outside every headline.

The real dynamic of the historical process (which lies outside most historical-critical study and which lies outside Yahwistic supernaturalism) is this voice that keeps audible and powerful the hidden, personal, dangerous, subversive sounds that permit the historical process to operate. The official history expressed in the PTA meeting is a contrived history that is in fact ideology and wants to keep things *closed*. The real historical process, however, has as its function to *disclose*, to open, to reveal, to permit the exercise of free choice and the practice of new possibility—precisely the things excluded in the ideological account of time-line and headline. I make the bold proposal, therefore, that Jeremiah does not describe, participate in, or respond to history, but he *makes* history. In what does history consist in this view? In a rather heavy-handed way this is what is meant when we say that prophetic word gets actualized as a deed.¹¹ This assertion is not magic or supernaturalism but the recognition that when the human, public process is open, new possibilities are brought to light. History-makers thus have as a primary task the penetration of the official ideology that denies and covers over.

(1) What is *disclosed* by the prophetic history-maker always partakes of poetic playfulness and imaginative inventiveness. It violates in substance as well as in form the conventional and administrative categories by which the lid of the status quo is kept on historical vitality. The truth of this historical process is always much more raw, ragged, and ambiguous than official summaries and reports can acknowledge.

(2) This disclosed material of human hurt and suffering, human hope and amazement, is the stuff of history. One does not have genuine history in any human sense unless there is free play of such human ingredients, for those are the ingredients which make newness possible in the human community. It is clear, then, that the kings who are voices of certitude and who work to banish or deny the ambiguity are in fact not history-makers, but are history-preventers.

(3) In every generation, our own included, the people who make the time-line, the people who sponsor and benefit from the headline, want to manage the process, deny the hurt, eradicate the ambiguity. In a word, they badly want to nullify and silence the voice from outside which keeps calling attention to that for which the system cannot account. Thus, the conflict between king and prophet is not simply a conflict over ethical substance. It is also and primarily a conflict about processes of interaction, modes of communication, and judgments about what matters in the ordering of public life. The history-makers are those who have the capacity and courage to *disclose* the human processes. The dominant voices, however, are those which want to *close* the human process in the interest of order and the protection of a monopoly which always needs to be guarded. My preliminary judgment is that when the disclosing process is halted, history-making comes to an end. Where history-making ends, society is at the edge of losing its humanness. Thus, history-makers as I characterize them are always set in contexts where the agents of domination want to stop the free play of the historical process.

There are, of course, several ways to silence such voices of disclosure which keep history open. The silencing can happen by priestly control, by political intimidation, by theological orthodoxy, by economic oppression, and by technical reason. Every established power has a vested interest in stopping the historical process. The wonder is that in ancient Israel (and often since) the voices of disclosure are not silenced. The result is that imperial power is always in jeopardy. Somewhere, in a notice I cannot now locate, Karl Popper has said a remarkable thing about history-making—

namely, that all history is written by the winners, the people on top, with one exception. That exception, says Popper, is the history of Jesus and his community. I would extend Popper's observation to say it is the history of Yahweh and the community of Yahweh that writes history from underneath (cf. Ps. 82).

The makers of history in this understanding include *Yahweh* who is the God allied with the poor (cf. Jer. 2:34; 5:28; 22:16), *Jeremiah* the prophet who is allied with that underneath perception of historical reality, and the *outsiders* who perceive the world differently.¹² Notice that in such an understanding the people on the time-line and in the headline are not history-makers. If anything, they are the ones who want to stop the historical process, reduce the freedom of the historical process by reducing everything to a closed, fixed ideology. The very ones whom we may expect to make history are the ones who do not want history to happen, who fear history, because the historical process jeopardizes our control and calls into question present configurations of power and present arrangements of monopoly.

IV

Jeremiah and those linked to him are the history-makers. A study of the Jeremiah tradition suggests five factors that belong to the history-making process.

(1) Jeremiah experiences and articulates a profound sense of *anguish, pathos, and incongruity that touches him quite personally*. Recent scholarship may be correct in saying that we know very little about the personality of Jeremiah.¹³ It cannot be doubted, however, that this text is the peculiar voice of someone who lived close to, noticed, and took seriously the reality of life around him. The text of Jeremiah is no nameless oracle from God. It is the disclosure of God mediated through a self-knowing, self-caring agent. Such an agent has not succumbed to the dominant definitions of reality, to the conventional epistemology, or to the policies and values which tend to deny and cover up. This voice is from one who has noticed the odd, marginal realities that are not contained in or are nullified by the comprehensive claims of the regime. Said another way, this voice has kept enough distance from dominant definitions to be

able to say with a different voice precisely the things which are mostly denied. It is no wonder that such a history-maker as Jeremiah does and says things that are unsettling, even unacceptable, because such history-makers tend to destabilize by insisting on reality that has otherwise been declared to be unreality.

In the brief cry of woe in 15:10-12, Jeremiah has a sense about himself that he is forever an outsider in conflict, a stranger to dominant values: "Woe is me, my mother, that you bore me, a man of strife and contention to the whole land! I have not lent, nor have I borrowed, yet all of them curse me" (vs. 10). This is a cry of anguish about the shape and destiny of history-making. Why am I always in question, under assault, at risk? No answer is offered, but the allusion to "iron and bronze" in verse 12 at least hints that the reason is related to his calling, for in 1:18 it is he who is made to be iron and bronze for his vocation.

In 12:1, Jeremiah raises a famous question which lingers among us:

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all who are treacherous thrive?

This is the most explicit articulation of the theodicy question in Israel prior to Job.¹⁴ To raise the question of theodicy, the issue of God's justice, is to raise the issue about the essential arrangement of social power in the world. That is both theologically and sociologically a subversive question because it suggests that the system is not working in an acceptable way. In the case of Jeremiah it is especially noteworthy that the issue is not raised as a theoretical or speculative notion, as it is often portrayed. It is raised, rather, in relation to one's sense of being assaulted, abused, and treated unfairly (cf. 11:18-23). The general question grows out of a personal concern which is powerfully brought to speech.

This sense of personal anguish about the context in which Jeremiah lives is evident in the poem of 4:19-22. Jeremiah takes his listeners inside his own troubled awareness:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!

My heart is beating wildly;
 I cannot keep silent;
 for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
 the alarm of war.
 Disaster follows hard on disaster,
 the whole land is laid waste.
 Suddenly my tents are destroyed,
 my curtains in a moment.
 How long must I see the standard,
 and hear the sound of the trumpet?
 "For my people are foolish,
 they know me not;
 they are stupid children,
 they have no understanding.
 They are skilled in doing evil,
 but how to do good they know not."

The internal sense of a trembling body gripped in terror is linked to the external reality of an invading army. The poetry is not a trivial sharing of one's internal life, but a means to make a statement about the reality of public life for those who are able to notice. Jeremiah's twisting stomach is a source from which to announce that things are not well. The enemy is near, even if the powerful ones cannot notice. It makes the poet sick.

Finally, in addition to Jeremiah's cry of woe, his lingering question of theodicy, and his personal anguish, we may observe the abrasiveness and poignancy of Jeremiah's prayers, which are complaints addressed to God.¹⁵ As Jeremiah is restive about what is happening on earth, so he is restless in the face of heaven. As he refuses to accept the conventions of the human community, so he refuses to accept the conventional ways of God. He accuses God of not being equitable. He prays for vengeance upon the wrongdoers because he knows he is entitled to better than what he has received. In 20:14-18 Jeremiah pushes his sense of his historical location to the edge of what is acceptable by cursing his birth and wishing for his death. On all these counts Jeremiah is so much in touch with his own pain and the pain of his community that he dares to think the unthinkable, to utter the unutterable. That is a mark of a history-maker.

(2) Like every history-maker Jeremiah has confidence in the

moral coherence of the world. He believes passionately that there is a fiber of justice and righteousness that persists in the historical process and in public life, which finally cannot be violated, mocked, or nullified. It does seem in his time (as it often does) as though the world is ordered in other ways, as though the historical process is without moral significance, as though public life can be administered by might, technique, knowledge, control, intimidation, self-interest, brutality, pragmatism. It does seem so. Jeremiah did not have to look far to see that.

This, however, is not the way of history-makers. Such a way leads only to cynicism, resignation, and inhumanity. History-makers are of another kind. Jeremiah argues against such cynicism. On occasion he appeals for change:

"If you remove your abominations from my presence,
 and do not waver,
 and if you swear, 'As the Lord lives,'
 in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,
 then nations shall bless themselves in him,
 and in him shall they glory." (4:1-2)

"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly execute justice one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will let you dwell in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your fathers for ever." (7:5-7)

Both of these passages appeal for change. Both of them are presented in an "if-then" structure, indicating that human conduct matters decisively for the outcome of public life.

Most often, however, Jeremiah recommends no change. He simply exposes, condemns, and indicts. He is sure this community has chosen death:

"How can I pardon you?
 Your children have forsaken me,
 and have sworn by those who are no gods.
 When I fed them to the full,
 they committed adultery
 and trooped to the houses of harlots.

They were well-fed lusty stallions,
 each neighing for his neighbor's wife.
 Shall I not punish them for these things?
 says the Lord." (5:7-9)

Likely the poet here uses the imagery of harlotry both concretely and as a metaphor for self-sufficiency.

The condemnation falls heavily on unprincipled leadership which uses public office to bestow privilege on those who control the public monopoly:

"Every one is greedy for unjust gain,
 and from prophet to priest,
 every one deals falsely.

They have healed the wound of my people lightly,
 saying, 'peace, peace,'
 when there is no peace." (6:13-14)

The public leadership is engaged in policies which are a massive cover-up of social and moral reality. All of it is cosmetics. Then Jeremiah adds this poignant indictment:

"Were they ashamed when they committed abomination?
 No, they were not at all ashamed;
 they did not know how to blush.
 Therefore they shall fall among those who fall." (6:15)

When a society loses its capacity to blush, it indicates that all norms outside of self-interest have collapsed. Or again,

They bend their tongue like a bow,
 falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land;
 for they proceed from evil to evil,
 and they do not know me, says the Lord. (9:3)

The history-makers have always been those who could speak covenantal truth to power. The principalities and powers always manage to consolidate enough power, enough hardware, and enough ideology to imagine themselves immune to the battering, raging, and insistence of moral power. History-makers raise inescapable questions about the shapes of power and well-being in history. Did anyone imagine that power could save ancient

Jerusalem when the rottenness was so apparent? Does anyone imagine there are enough tanks in Poland finally to crush the dreams for equity? Does anyone imagine there are enough means for repression in South Africa to halt the moral power for justice among disinherited Blacks? Are there those who seriously think that the yearning of peasants for land in Central America will finally be stopped by United States' aid to unprincipled oligarchies? To some that will sound all too reductionist and simplistic, but history-makers are neither subtle nor impressed with moral waffling. They are able to spot precisely the point of moral failure and the corresponding point of moral possibility. Jeremiah is appalled at all the others who are so seduced that they do not see:

"For my people are foolish,
 they know me not;
 they are stupid children,
 they have no understanding.
 They are skilled in doing evil,
 but how to do good they know not." (4:22)

Where they do not know how to do good, they will be crushed by the moral power relentlessly at work in the historical process.

(3) Jeremiah, like other history-makers, asserts the raw rule of God in the historical process. There is a tendency for the rulers of this age to melt the reality of God down into the system of governance, so that the present order comes to be an embodiment of God's will, i.e., the created order. Cushman¹⁶ has traced this temptation in modern subjectivism, from the time of the Reformation until its sharp articulation in Feuerbach, that God is only our best projection.

More immediately, religion in our time tends to be reduced to privatism, personalism, and immanentism, so that God is remarkably congenial to the way things are. We have almost no language left and no space in which to speak about the freedom and abrasiveness of God, the judgment of God, or the notion that God has a will of God's own and a work to do that is not dependent on our efforts and policies (cf. Isa. 55:6-9). The history-makers do not appeal to such an anemic God. They insist that God has a purposeful and tenacious will that is being worked out in public

processes. This will of God is free and unfettered and will have its say as it moves in the direction of justice and humaneness.

God's free will is dangerous and threatening. Jeremiah must use dangerous speech and subversive images to shake the theological indifference of those who have domesticated God. To bring God to speech in this way is not, first of all, to argue a policy point. Much more, it is to reopen the field of public imagination so that policy formation is not one-dimensional. The poet speaks this way about the raw sovereignty:

"A lion has gone up from his thicket,
a destroyer of nations has set out;
he has gone forth from his place
to make your land a waste;
your cities will be ruins
without inhabitant.
For this gird you with sackcloth,
lament and wail;
for the fierce anger of the Lord
has not turned back from us." (4:7-8)

The "lion" here may indeed be mighty Babylon, but the end of the unit makes clear that the engine for the lion can only be Yahweh. Or consider this poem in which Yahweh is clearly intended as the subject:

Therefore a lion from the forest shall slay them,
a wolf from the desert shall destroy them,
A leopard is watching against their cities.
every one who goes out of them shall be torn in pieces;
because their transgressions are many,
their apostasies are great. (5:6)

The metaphorical power of the poem is enormous. The threat of God's intervention comes all at once as a lion, wolf, and leopard.

Alongside these images of dangerous beasts, Jeremiah makes use of the metaphor of illness, which he variously describes as heart trouble and sickness unto death (cf. 6:7; 8:18-22).¹⁷ The image of God as being sick with the sickness of Judah is a poetic attempt, not to link the reality of God to the dimensions of well-being and power as we are wont to do, but to lodge God precisely at the place society

wants to deny and cover up. God functions as a principle of savage honesty in a scheme of cover-up. This God is a God of distance, as well as one close at hand (23:23).¹⁸ This God is one who not only undergirds the present arrangement but also stands removed from it in order to assess and perhaps to assault.

The role of God in prophetic poetry is to function as a norm and agent for "deabsolutizing" the pretensions of the Jerusalem establishment. The tendency of every settled arrangement is to become permanent and absolute, beyond every criticism. Where God is kept rawly sovereign by the poets, however, one can deabsolutize. One becomes aware that, vis-à-vis the dangerous holiness of God, this present arrangement may not claim so much nor be taken so seriously.

The point of the argument is not that all history-makers are believers in our particular articulation of God. Where they are not believers, I submit that the serious history-makers must in each case appeal to something equivalent to this raw, undomesticated sovereignty of God as a principle from which to criticize the present order. This may take quite secular forms and indeed must take secular forms when God has been fully co-opted by those who want to halt history at a certain moment. What the history-makers face is not so much a genuine atheism as it is an idolatry in which the sovereign God is captive to schemes of social control.¹⁹ Against such idolatry one may either assert the dangerous sovereignty of God (as Jeremiah does) or deny the sovereignty of a god so easily co-opted.

(4) Thus far I have claimed that serious history-makers are passionate poets, moral energizers, and dangerous theologians. Now I submit that history-makers also *engage in discerning social analysis*. They may not have all the elitist tools of modern social theory, as we might expect or wish, but they are able to look at social policy and social crisis and read through them to see what in fact is going on. That is, they are peculiarly attentive to the work of social ideology, the self-deception of propaganda, the narcotic effect of religion, and the management of moral persuasion in the interest of social monopoly. These people, whom we call prophets in the Old Testament, are not ignorant rabble-rousers; rather they operate with a sophisticated sense of social reality. Bernard Lang

on Amos,²⁰ Hans Walter Wolff on Micah,²¹ and Robert Coote on Amos²² have shown the acute analysis of the issues that operate in those prophetic texts. I stress this point because it appears to me that, with our paranoia about Marxian analysis, Americans (and perhaps especially liberals) are incredibly uninformed and therefore naive. By denying ourselves some sense of social analysis, it becomes exceedingly difficult to recognize what is going on among us and to mount an alternative.

Three items from Jeremiah may be subsumed under this point. First, Jeremiah is relentlessly committed to the notion that God has given Judah over into the hands of Babylon (cf. 25:9; 27:6). This need not be read as a supernaturalism. One can also say that Jeremiah had discerned the sure flow of power toward that empire and that he discerned this general shift in world power to be resonant with God's sovereign purpose. This is not supernaturalism, but it also is not mere pragmatism. Jeremiah had concluded early on that resistance to Babylon was futile, precisely because it was in opposition to the will of God. History-makers have some sense of the flow of the historical process in the long haul and are very sure about where history is headed. They are able to see that direction in spite of the ideology which argues otherwise.

Second, in Jeremiah 27—28 the prophet has a rather extraordinary exchange and confrontation with Hananiah, another prophet. This confrontation illustrates a particular point. Hananiah has been judged by the canonical text to be false. That is how the Bible reads the matter. What Hananiah did was simply to assert that exile could not last long or be very serious because God loves Judah. Scholars are wont to say that Hananiah is simply asserting in his situation what Isaiah said earlier. The difference is that when Isaiah spoke the same message a century earlier, it was judged the true word of God. What makes the message of Hananiah false? In retrospect, what makes it false is that Hananiah was propounding a view of history that was not informed by what was in fact happening.²³ Jeremiah is "true" because he truly discerned that the great fact of his time was *an ending*, a serious disruption that would put chosen people into exile, off the land. Social analysis can penetrate old truth that subsequently turns out to be wishful thinking and ideology.

Third, in one of the most radical texts Jeremiah the history-maker poses the question: what is it that is definitional for kingship (22:13–17)? That is in fact a quite sophisticated theoretical question: what are the true marks of legitimate power?²⁴ He asks the question by appeal to two recent kings, Jehoiachin and his father, Josiah, who stand in total contrast. The rule of Jehoiachin offers this answer: kingship consists in spacious rooms, windows, cedar, vermillion. Kingship consists in economic luxury and the visible accoutrements of office. The issue is joined by the prophet's counterproposal based on Josiah: kingship is marked by justice and righteousness, by attending to the poor and needy. The contrast could not be sharper. The king may preside over prosperity, but that is not an adequate measure of legitimacy.

On all three counts—discernment of the Babylonian flow of power, the reality of an ending of an arrangement so long treasured, and the marks of legitimate power—we see that this poetic passion is under the discipline of and informed by a very serious and discerning social criticism. That kind of discipline is indispensable if the dominant ideology is to be seriously challenged. Passion without the tools of analysis and social criticism is an unreliable way to make history.

(5) Finally, history-makers have a *bold conviction about alternative possibilities which go under the name of hope*. While such history-makers may see clearly that things are deeply wrong, while they may not see how in any way a turn can happen, they are characteristically not voices of despair. History-makers and historical action do not proceed out of despair but out of hope that acts against the data at hand.

It is astonishing that Jeremiah can assert in so many ways that the sure end is coming upon Judah, temple, and kingship and yet can find ways to articulate a future precisely out of the failure.²⁵ This way of speaking is not simply pastoral consolation offered to exiles, though it is that.²⁶ It also is not simply social analysis, though that is involved. Rather, it is a sense that the failure of the order is not equivalent to or coterminal with the defeat of God. God's purpose abides in the midst of historical chaos and will finally work through the chaos to create a fresh social possibility (cf. Isa. 45:18–19).²⁷

Two such texts in the tradition of Jeremiah may be cited. In 29:4-9 the prophet sends a letter to the exiles. In it he counsels them to settle in and get used to exile. The displacement is real and serious and will last. They are to entertain no wishful thinking about its quick end and a "return to normalcy," as the royal ideologues suggested (among whom is Hananiah). Then in verses 10-14, in some of the most formidable language of the tradition, the oracle announces:

"I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you, says the Lord, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, says the Lord, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile."

The affirmation of exile is clear. Nothing painful is denied, but in the character and resolve of God, exile is no more the last word than is the old temple arrangement. There will be a new social possibility wrought not by political strategy but by God's free capacity to work beyond visible constructs.²⁸ It is that freedom of God which gives a future and a hope.

In 24:1-10 we are given what may be an even more daring act of hope. The vision the prophet sees concerns good figs and bad figs. These are taken as ciphers for elements of the Jewish community. What is unexpected is that the Jews left in the land are rejected, whereas the displaced ones in exile are taken as the wave of the future whom God will now plant and build. This assertion of God's fresh resolve, no doubt filtered through the interest of the exilic community, represents a radical move about the future, asserting that the community which seemed to be dead, punished, and devalued (exiled) is the community out of which Yahweh will begin again the historical process of community building.²⁹ The rejected, displaced ones are the ones out of which God's new age will be constructed.³⁰ This act of hope, so indispensable for history-makers, is a theological statement about God's resolve. It is at the same time a historical judgment about the materials (exiles) through which God's newness comes.

In sum, I propose that Jeremiah provides a paradigm for history-makers around these five items:

- (1) A profound sense of anguish, pathos, and incongruity that touches him personally.
- (2) Confidence in the moral coherence of the world.
- (3) Assertion of the raw sovereignty of God in the historical process.
- (4) Capacity for discerning social analysis and criticism.
- (5) Bold conviction about an alternative possibility that goes under the name of hope.

It will be clear that these elements are in fact and are regularly perceived to be subversive. History-making, as I understand it, is a process of subverting public and institutional forms of power that have become frozen and absolutized in favor of some at the expense of others. Jeremiah is subversive as a history-maker (38:4), even as his vivid language points to the transcendent history-maker who moves against every monopoly.

V

History-makers like Jeremiah (a) take the time-line and the headline seriously but not normatively; (b) maintain some critical distance from the dominant definitions in order to have space for alternative thinking and liberated imagination; (c) live at the edge of society where alternatives are thinkable and possible in terms of an imagination not yet co-opted. Their history-making process I characterize in this way: it is the free give-and-take of parties over new sets of power settlements that are made possible through honest, risky communication. That, of course, is not a conventional understanding of history which is preoccupied with lists of officials and celebrations of wars and defense of old spheres. My urging is that, from its basic premises on, the Bible offers us a very different notion of history, that history is the arena of the Holy One allied with the marginal people to create newness. That is why in the Old Testament it is the prophets who speak the history-creating word while kings are mostly left to preside over the shells of power. That is why in the New Testament Jesus is represented as the real

history-maker against those who manage the ceremonies (cf. Matt. 23:27) of what used to be. This way of understanding history-makers applies not only to such ancient poets as Jeremiah but also to people whom we may identify in our own cultural context, who make history and can be understood in the categories we have found in Jeremiah.

The kinds of history-makers who are blessed include such dangerous people as:

Rosa Parks, who in Montgomery refused to move to the back of the bus and changed the shape of our lives;

Lech Welesa, for whom there are not enough Polish tanks to stifle the dream of freedom;

Betty Williams, who with Mairead Corrigan has announced in Belfast, "It is enough";

Molly Blackburn, a white South African who lost her life because of her passion for racial justice.

These are outsiders who make history. They are in the company of Jesus and the "people" (as distinct from the "scribes and principal men" in Luke 19:47-48) who daily call them blessed.

If these, then, are the history-makers, who are the others? Who are the ones on the time-line and in the headline—to whom my son in grade school referred with the refrain "America goes on forever"? What are they up to? I submit that the dominant tendency of such voices is to be *history-stoppers*, not *history-makers*.³¹ That is, their goal is most often to stop the historical process, to end the give-and-take, to silence the power questions, to terminate the serious conversation, so that things can be frozen at a particular time and place for the benefit of some at the expense of others. The history-stoppers are noticed more often than the history-makers, for they command attention and seem important and powerful. It is an uneven match, but the bet of biblical faith is that the history-makers who seem so helpless will finally overcome the history-stoppers. The history-makers regularly experience crucifixion at the hands of the history-stoppers, but they are judged

blessed in the end, greeted in resurrection, for they shall see God.

Next to Disney World in Orlando, Florida, is Epcott, the "City of Tomorrow," a dazzling presentation of technological possibilities of extraordinary kinds. A friend of mine asked one of the management people, "Why, with all this technology, is there nothing in any of your exhibits about the politics of tomorrow? It is completely missing." The response was, "We don't want anything as complicated and messy as politics in our city of tomorrow, because we want it clean and simple." Precisely! The history-makers insist on the political process, messy as it is, as the only way to human newness. The history-stoppers want to invoke technique and call in the wisdom teachers,³² but where *history* is stopped by *technique* we are all diminished and left in despair.

In his eloquent Harvard commencement address, Carlos Fuentes³³ has made a plea that North Americans honor the history-making process now under way in Central America. He said, "The source of change in Latin America is not in Moscow or Havana; it is history."³⁴

Reality is not the product of an ideological phantasm. It is the result of history. And history is something we have created ourselves. We are thus responsible for our history. No one was present in the past. But there is no living present with a dead past. No one has been present in the future. But there is no living present without the imagination of a better world. We both made the history of this hemisphere. We must both remember it. We must both imagine it. We need your memory and your imagination or ours shall never be complete. You need our memory to redeem your past, and our imagination to complete your future. . . . Let us remember one another. Let us respect one another. Let us walk together outside the night of oppression and hunger and intervention.³⁵

History-makers dare to walk outside the night of repression and hunger. History-making looks to the time when "they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" (Jer. 31:34). History is the painful process of remembering, forgiving, forgetting, and moving on.³⁶