

These various superpowers, which inflicted centuries of suffering upon the Jews and other conquered populations, became collectively known among the people of God as *Babylon*.

One of the most important questions facing the people who gave us the Bible was: *How do we resist Babylon, both as an exterior force that opposes the ways of God and an interior pull that tempts us with imitation and assimilation?* They answered with volumes of stories, poems, prophecies, and admonitions grappling with their identity as an exiled people, their anger at the forces that scattered and oppressed them, God's role in their exile and deliverance, and the ultimate hope that one day "Babylon, the jewel of kingdoms, the pride and glory of the Babylonians, will be overthrown by God" (Isaiah 13:19).

It is in this sense that much of Scripture qualifies as resistance literature. It defies the empire by subverting the notion that history will be written by the wealthy, powerful, and cruel, insisting instead that the God of the oppressed will have the final word.

As Pastor Rob Bell observed, "This is what we read, again and again in the pages of the Bible—fearless, pointed, courageous, subversive, poetic, sometimes sarcastic, other times angry, heartfelt, razor-sharp critique of people, nations, systems, and empires endlessly accumulating more at the expense of everybody they're stepping on along the way."³

The Bible's resistance stories include heartbreaking poems of lamentation and defiant songs of hope. They give us moments of stinging satire and moments of devastating self-criticism. There are tales of resilience and cleverness in which our heroes navigate everything from a lion's den to a beauty contest to a hostile Assyrian city, and there are highly symbolic visions of a future in which a valley of bones reanimates into an army and a seven-headed beast gets cast into a lake of fire. Resistance stories appear in various

forms throughout the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, sometimes overtly and sometimes with a subtlety that might be missed by the untrained eye. (Remember how the creation narrative of Genesis 1 is meant to stand in contrast to those Babylonian tales of warring gods and goddesses?) While themes of resistance are perhaps most concentrated in the lives and writings of the prophets, they appear anywhere in Scripture that, as Walter Brueggemann put it, "the mythic claims of the empire are ended by the disclosure of the alternate religion of the freedom of God"⁴—which is to say, everywhere.

Perhaps the most significant character in any story of resistance is the prophet. Biblically speaking, a prophet isn't a fortune-teller or soothsayer who predicts the future, but rather a truth-teller who sees things as they really are—past, present, and future—and who challenges their community to both accept that reality and imagine a better one.

"It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination," wrote Brueggemann in his landmark book, *The Prophetic Imagination*, "to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."⁵

This calling gives us some of Scripture's most memorable characters. Jeremiah, for example, wore an ox yoke around his neck to symbolize Israel's impending oppression under the Babylonian Empire. Ezekiel memorialized the fall of Jerusalem by building a model of the city and lying down next to it for over a year—390 days on his left side and 40 days on his right side—eating only bread cooked over cow dung at meals. When a group of teenage boys taunted the prophet Elisha's baldness, God sent two female bears to maul them to death. (My youth pastor liked to tease his students with that story when we commented on his receding hairline.) When Jonah tried to avoid God's call to preach in the dangerous Assyrian city of Nineveh,

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God sent a giant fish to swallow the prophet up for three days before spitting him out on the closest shoreline. Hosea married a prostitute to make a point. John the Baptist famously took to the wilderness, subsisting on locusts and honey and urging the people to “repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2).

In other words, the prophets are weirdos. More than anyone else in Scripture, they remind us that those odd ducks shouting from the margins of society may see things more clearly than the political and religious leaders with the inside track. We ignore them at our own peril.

The prophets, explained Brueggemann, “are moved the way every good poet is moved to have to describe the world differently according to the gifts of their insight. And, of course, in their own time and every time since, the people that control the power structure do not know what to make of them, so they characteristically try to silence them. What power people always discover is that you cannot finally silence poets.”⁶

Before the Babylonian exile, prophets like Samuel, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, and Huldah spoke out against the abuses of Israel’s priesthood and monarchy, warning that if the nation continued to indulge in immorality, idolatry, and injustice, God would hand the people over to their enemies. Sometimes the rulers listened to the prophets. King David famously repented after the prophet Nathan rebuked him for murdering Bathsheba’s husband, and King Josiah yielded to the prophetess Huldah’s authentication and interpretation of previously neglected Scripture. But most of the time, speaking truth to power put the prophets on the wrong side of the law. King Ahab called Elijah “you troubler of Israel” for speaking out against injustice and banished the prophet to the wilderness, where Elijah relied on ravens to bring him bread (1 Kings 18:17). Queen Jezebel sent hundreds of prophets into hiding for challenging her insatiable

greed (though the prophets got the last word on that one, as Jezebel was eventually thrown from a window and eaten by dogs). John the Baptist was beheaded by Herod Antipas, not for following Jesus, but for criticizing the noble family’s excess and lechery.

The prophets directed their most stinging critiques at the leaders of their own community. The violence and excess of the empire was a given, but when Israel itself indulged in greed and sexual exploitation, when it oppressed its workers and neglected the poor, the prophets got really angry. The prophet Ezekiel compared Israel’s sins to those of the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, noting, “Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy” (Ezekiel 16:49).

Even the religious elites were not exempt from prophetic critique. The prophet Amos was so enraged that Israel carried on with empty worship practices while exploiting the poor and oppressed, he channeled the wrath of God, declaring:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them. . . .
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

(AMOS 5:21–24)

Once the monarchy was destroyed and Jerusalem sacked, the prophets took on the role of public lamenters, filling pages and pages of Scripture with songs of mourning.

Some of the most vivid images come from Jeremiah, who sang, "Oh that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain daughter of my people!" (Jeremiah 9:1 ESV). Jeremiah's particular skill at lament often lends him the moniker "prophet of doom," though this articulation of the reality of suffering is a crucial part of both truth-telling and healthy grief.

Alongside these cries of anguish and anger, condemnation and critique, the prophets deliver what is perhaps the most subversive element of any resistance movement: *hope*. Employing language and imagery charged with theological meaning, the prophet asserted, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the God of Israel—the God of slaves and exiles and despised religious minorities—remains present and powerful, enthroned over all creation and above every empire.

In the book of Isaiah, an anonymous prophet, sometimes referred to as Second Isaiah, described in luscious detail the enthronement festival of the one true God.

See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power,
and he rules with a mighty arm. . . .
He tends his flock like a shepherd:
He gathers the lambs in his arms
and carries them close to his heart.

(ISAIAH 40:10–11)

"Take comfort, my people," the prophet essentially cried again and again, "I have good news and joyous tidings! Our God reigns, now and forever."

Second Isaiah even went so far as to mock the gods of Babylon whose images must be carried around on the backs of cattle, their weight a burden on man and beast alike. The poet-prophet

contrasted this with Yahweh, depicted in Isaiah 46 as a mother carrying the descendants of Jacob in her womb, speaking tenderly to them, as if in a lullaby, "I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you" (v. 4).

The book of Isaiah rings with some of the most beautiful poetry the Bible offers us. Even the most cynical reader can't help but soften at the image of a God who gathers his sheep in his arms like a shepherd, who carried her children in her womb like a mother, who will "swallow up death forever" and "wipe away the tears from all faces" (25:8). Is it any wonder the words of Isaiah appear so often in the preaching of John the Baptist and Martin Luther King Jr.? That sort of language has staying power.

In addition to the prophets, resistance literature recounts the stories of unlikely political dissidents, like Daniel, a noble Jew who masterfully negotiates life in the courts of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, keeping God's law amid temptation, calling pagan rulers to account, and surviving a night in a lions' den after his political rivals grow jealous. When Daniel's friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, refuse to bow to Nebuchadnezzar's golden statue during a state parade, they are thrown into a fiery furnace, where all three survive without a single singe. The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther recount the tenuous relationship between the Jews and the Persian Empire, which ranges from the empire's support for rebuilding Jerusalem's walls to a storied attempt at genocide (more on that story, and Queen Esther, later).

Throughout the Bible's resistance stories, we encounter examples of apocalyptic literature. The word *apocalypse* means "unveiling" or "disclosing." An apocalyptic event or vision, therefore, reveals things as they really are. It peels back the layers of pomp and pretense, fear and uncertainty, to expose the true forces at work in the world. Using highly symbolic, theologically charged language, the

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