

Living in Times of Uncertainty – Word from a Prophet and His Scribe: Baruch /Letter of Jeremiah – Summary from Session Four

In Session Four, we discuss the Letter of Jeremiah written to Judeans who were about to be taken into exile, warning them of the dangers of false gods. How do today's false gods promise to deliver us from the COVID-19 pandemic? One of every hundred people in the United States has now been tested for novel coronavirus, and there are currently about 30,000 new confirmed cases every day. One of every seven members of the workforce is now unemployed. Yet there is cause for hope. How can we know and follow the one true God and not be led astray by idols and other shiny objects?

– Charlie Walden (April 16, 2020)

Review

In the first three sessions we discussed the book of *Baruch*. The author introduced himself as Baruch, the scribe of Jeremiah writing five years after the destruction of Jerusalem. He had read his book to the community of exiles in Babylon, who asked that the book be sent to the priests in Jerusalem to be read aloud following the celebration of a liturgy. The second section is a *Prayer of Repentance* which concluded with a *Cry for Mercy* asking that God no longer punish Israel for the sins of their ancestors and past rulers. *Baruch* 3:9 – 4:4 is a *Wisdom Poem*. We are told that wisdom is hidden. Neither the powerful rulers in other lands, nor the giants have wisdom. But God has offered Wisdom to Jacob and to Israel through the law and the commandments. Israel has only to follow those laws and walk in the path of wisdom.

Session three was a *Poem of Consolation*. The author introduces Jerusalem as the daughter of Zion who was once a princess, but is now a forsaken grieving widow, whose children have been stolen from her. Jerusalem sings her song, first to her neighbors, then to her lost children – the exiles, whom she admonishes to “Take courage”. The exiles are told to return to God, for God’s salvation is coming. In the end Jerusalem is told to “look to the east” to see her returning children. Jerusalem’s new name is “Righteous Peace, Godly Glory”. *For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.*

Finding Letter of Jeremiah

Most of us can find *Genesis* without too much effort in just about any bible we pick up, but it may take a few moments to track down *Zephaniah*. All copies of the Old Testament do not have books in the same order. They don’t even necessarily have the same books or the same names for the books they do have. *Song of Solomon* is also known as *Song of Songs* or *Canticle of Canticles*. *Letter of Jeremiah* can be a little bit tougher to find than most, depending on which bible we consult.

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) is divided into three main sections: The **Torah** (The Law); **Nevi'im** (Prophets); and **Kethuvim** (Writings). *Letter of Jeremiah* is not in the Hebrew Bible.

The books in the Old Testament in Christian (Protestant) Bibles are the same as the ones in the Hebrew Bible, but some are in a different order, some combined differently, and some with different names. The standard Protestant bible has four main sections: **Torah**, **Historical**, **Wisdom and Poetic** and **Prophetic**. *Letter of Jeremiah* is not in the standard Protestant Christian Bible.

However, the Old Testament in Roman Catholic Bibles has some additions not found in Protestant Bibles. *Tobit*, *Judith*, *I Maccabees* and *II Maccabees* are included in the **Historical** section. *Wisdom (of Solomon)* and *Ecclesiasticus or The Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach* are added to the **Wisdom and Poetic** section; and *Baruch* is added to the **Prophetic** section. These additions are all from the Apocrypha. (*Esther* and *Daniel* each have some additional material in the Roman Catholic Bible.) *Letter of Jeremiah* is not listed in the table of contents in Catholic bibles.

So, where can we find the *Letter of Jeremiah*?

One can purchase bibles that include a section sandwiched between the Old Testament and the New Testament that is labeled *The Apocrypha*, that contains all the books of the *Apocrypha* including the *Letter of Jeremiah*. The *Common English Bible* (CEB), *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV), *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*, *The Good News Bible*, *The New English Bible* and others have versions that include a separate *Apocrypha* section. Usually "with Apocrypha" will be stamped or printed on the front cover. They are available to order online from Cokesbury (and other online booksellers) and can be found occasionally in brick & mortar bookstores (e.g. Barnes & Nobel or Mardel). One can also purchase stand-alone copies of the *Apocrypha* in the same way. Be aware that some translations (e.g. NIV) may not have a version that includes the Apocrypha.

The *Letter of Jeremiah* is generally included as a separate book in these bibles that include the Apocrypha as a separate section. In the CEB, *Letter of Jeremiah* starts on page 127 of the Apocrypha section with verse one. It is just one chapter, so there are no numbered chapters. In the *New Oxford Annotated Apocrypha* (NRSV), it is a separate book but begins with verse one of Chapter 6. In Roman Catholic Bibles (e.g. *The New American Bible*), *Letter of Jeremiah* is Chapter 6 of *Baruch*. (in the Greek *Septuagint*, the *Letter of Jeremiah* is separated from *Baruch* by the Book of *Lamentations*.)

Online, you can type in "Letter of Jeremiah" for example on biblegateway.com and it will take you to the right place. The website biblia.com works the same way. Typing in "Baruch 6:1" will also normally take you to *Letter of Jeremiah* in online bible websites.

For this summary, the verse numbering system used will correspond to that of the *New Revised Standard Version* (which matches that of the *King James Version*). Other translations (e.g. – *Common English Bible*) do not match up exactly.

Letter of Jeramiah

The *Letter of Jeremiah* claims to be a copy of a letter written by Jeremiah for Judeans about to be exiled to Babylon in 597 b.c.e. However, the letter does not give the impression that the siege of Jerusalem and the exile happened recently (as in the last few years). The letter

appears to have been inspired by *Jeremiah* 29. It was probably written much later than the exilic period. The letter utilizes work from second *Isaiah* (44:9 – 20, 60:5 – 7), placing its writing after 540. Like *Baruch*, it appears to have been written in the Second Temple Period. It is not however, close enough in style or structure or content to believe it was written by the same individual or individuals who wrote the book of *Baruch*.

Another book from the *Apocrypha*, *2 Maccabees* 2:1 – 3 refers to the *Letter of Jeremiah*. Since *2 Maccabees* concludes with defeat of the Seleucid empire general Nicanor in 161 b.c.e., *Letter of Jeremiah* would have of necessity been written prior to the writing of that book, generally believed to be around 124 b.c.e. A fragment of papyrus from cave 7 of Qumran has a portion of *Letter of Jeremiah* 43 – 44. These scrolls were thought to be written prior to 100 b.c.e. again indicating that *Letter of Jeremiah* must also have been written prior to 100 b.c.e. Many scholars suggest that it was written in the fourth century b.c.e., but there is no conclusive evidence.

The oldest copies of the manuscript are Greek, but there are indications that it was originally written in Hebrew and translated to Greek. It is placed in the Roman Catholic Bible between *Lamentations* and *Ezekiel* as the sixth chapter of the book of *Baruch*.

The book is intended to reinforce beliefs and values already held by its Jewish audience, especially those related to idol worship. As such, it included ten warnings against idols. While it is easy to be sympathetic to the author's objective, the repetition, satire, and imaginative examples he provides make the letter feel like a parody by the time it reaches its conclusion. "Jeremiah" demonstrates no sensitivity or intent to try to understand the religious symbols of another culture. It is as though he has thoroughly blocked out the icons of his own religion. The letter works from stereotypes and should not be read as an accurate depiction of the way in which pagans in Babylonia understood their own religious practices. While there is much in this letter that can help us engage with God, we might also have opportunity to ask ourselves if there are things that we see as [frivolous or disparaging of others simply because they are different from us](#).

In his introduction (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:1 – 7) the author tells us that this is a copy of a letter written to people *about to be taken* into exile. The proposed model for this letter, *Jeremiah* 29, by contrast, was a letter written to people who *were already* in exile. Notwithstanding, the unlikelihood of being able to identify and gather a group of people in Jerusalem, who were **about** to be taken into exile, sending a letter from Mizpah or Egypt in time to reach them before they left seems totally implausible. This wasn't a military draft, where people were given thirty days to report to the embarking station. Once you were selected to go, you were on your way.

The plausibility of this particular situation, however, is irrelevant. This was a letter, from a different time, applied to a different, but unknown situation, in which the author was concerned about Jews, probably in the diaspora, who were drifting away from Judaism. A dissertation on the evils of idol worship may have been entirely appropriate. The exile was perhaps a metaphor for the actual environment these people faced.

The author tells us it would be seven generations (140 years) before Israel was allowed to return to their homeland. In verse 4, the reader is warned about gods made of silver and gold and wood which people carry on their shoulders.

Today, we see the same phenomena during the Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico where a statue of the virgin Mary is carried on shoulders during a parade.

The difference is that we know these people are not worshipping the statue being carried on people's shoulders. The statue is a symbol. The holiday marks the date, December 12, 1531, when the Virgin Mary purportedly appeared to a Mexican peasant near present day Mexico City. They do not worship the statue. They worship God. The statues of many pagan religions during the period of the exile represented gods, but it is not always evident that people thought the statues *were* gods.



Feast of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Mexico)

At the same time, this does not mean that idol worship did not exist in the early sixth century b.c.e. Nor does it mean that idol worship does not exist today. What we will see is that the writer of *Letter of Jeremiah* appears to have oversimplified what he considers the practice of idol worship.

There is a history of idol worship in the Old Testament. While Moses was on top of Mt. Sinai waiting for God to carve the Ten Commandments onto stone tablets, Aaron was down below

molding *golden calves* for the people to worship. God threatened to destroy the people for worshipping these *golden calf idols* until Moses interceded.

Several hundred years later, in the northern Kingdom of Israel, King Jeroboam had *golden calves* created for the religious centers at Dan and Beth-El, in theory, to serve as the throne for God during the sacrifice. Meanwhile, two *winged cherubs*, made of wood, covered in gold, hovered over the Ark inside the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem to serve as God's throne in the southern Kingdom of Judah. Were these idols to be worshiped, or simply statues that represented something of religious value?

Israel and Judah both were under the influence of Assyria, Egypt or the Babylonians at various times. They were often required to keep statues of pagan gods at their places of worship. King Hezekiah of Judah (715 – 686 b.c.e.) was a reform ruler known for breaking idols and cleansing the Temple of foreign statues, but he also destroyed places of sacrifice to YHWH beyond the walls of Jerusalem and the Temple, to force Judeans to come to Jerusalem to make their sacrifices. Hezekiah's son and grandson, perhaps because of pressure from the Assyrians, reintroduced pagan worship in Judah, including pagan statues in the Temple. King Josiah (640 – 609), the great-grandson of Hezekiah, unlike his immediate predecessors, was a reformer. Josiah smashed idols and destroyed statues in the Temple. Josiah also destroyed the altar at Beth-El, where one of King Jeroboam's golden calves once stood. Jeremiah, whose prophecy began during Josiah's reign, spoke often against false idols.

In verses 5 – 7 of the *Letter*, Jeremiah warns the future exiles about becoming like the foreigners that they would encounter. They must remember to worship only the Lord whose angel will be with them and looking over their lives.

From this point onward, Jeremiah provides a list of warnings against idolatry. The first of these is about the helplessness of idols (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:8 – 16). The idols cannot actually do anything – can't even wipe the dust off their own face. In verse 8, he describes the idols with "*tongues smoothed by the carpenter*", but of course, the tongues cannot speak – even if they are covered with silver and gold. Jeremiah repeatedly uses the terms gold and silver which signify power. These images are designed by the idol's creators to fascinate people and have to be demystified by Jeremiah. What is seen is deceiving. These are powerful images, yet the tongues cannot actually speak. The author is mocking these foreign idols.

Verse 12 says, "... cannot save themselves from rust and **corrosion**. ..." Some Greek manuscripts use either "food", "rotting food", or "meat" instead of "*corrosion*". This is most likely a mistranslation of a Hebrew word for "moth". (The *King James Version* actually uses "moth", which, in this context makes little sense.) This is an indication that the *Letter of Jeremiah* was originally written in Hebrew, then translated into Greek. Most of the books of the *Apocrypha*, by contrast, were originally written in Greek.

Jeremiah's second warning is about the uselessness of idols and cult statues placement in a temple (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:17 – 23). In verse 19, the reader is told that even though they light lamps for them, they still cannot see. The smoke of the lamps darkens their gold faces, but they do not notice. In verse 20, because they are made of wood – they are subject to

decay. Here we have images of decaying and death in the temple, which would certainly be an issue for the temple priests. (By Jewish law, priests are not allowed to touch corpses or be in places of death.) From today's perspective, from the Christian perspective, this may not present the same type of problem. We might ask is the decay and death an issue about worshipping idols, or an issue of differing religious customs?

The third warning on the lifelessness of idols (*Letter of Jeremiah 6:24 – 29*) again discusses how the statues must be carried around and are unable to move themselves. If they fall, they cannot get up by themselves. Gifts placed before them may as well be placed before the dead. In this section there is also criticism of the cultic practice of the Babylonians. Women serve meals for gods of silver and wood, even if the women are in their period or following childbirth. (Jewish women during and immediately after menstruation and after childbirth were not allowed to participate in worship.) You know by these things that they are not gods. As with many of these warnings, Jeremiah ends with “*do not fear them*”.

The fourth warning was about the powerlessness of idols (*Letter of Jeremiah 30 – 40a*). The first concern is that women are serving the gods – making the sacrifice, while in Judaism, only male priests can make the sacrifice in the Temple in Jerusalem. He complains that the priests have their heads and beards shaved and their heads uncovered in their temples – all things that would be unthinkable for a Jewish priest but were part of a of ritual mourning ceremony in Mesopotamia. Real gods would not allow it.

The fifth warning was on the folly of revering idols (*Letter of Jeremiah 6:40b – 44*). Here the author describes the practice of bringing *Bel* (the image of Marduk, the patron god of the city of Babylon) to someone who cannot speak, with the expectation that the mute may then be able to speak. Obviously, this is folly. The icon won't be able to make the mute speak. (*Chaldeans*, which appears in verse 40b in some translations, is a synonym for “Babylonians”.) These gods are clearly not effective at doing what they are supposed to do, so how can we call them gods?

Idol worship became a concern during the early stages of the Protestant Reformation in England. Henry VIII wanted a divorce from Katherine of Aragon so that he could marry Ann Boleyn – a divorce that the Pope refused to grant. In response to the Roman Catholic Pope's rejection, Henry created his own religion, which ultimately became the Church of England. The split from the Roman Catholic Church was not an easy transition.

Beginning in the 1530's in England traditional Roman Catholic religious images thought to be idols were removed from churches and destroyed. Peter Ackroyd writes, “*In the Autumn of 1533 it was reported that statues were being thrown out of churches as mere 'stocks and stones'; the citizens and their wives pierced them with their bodkins 'to see whether they will bleed or no.'*” Following his death in 1547, Henry VIII was succeeded on the throne by his son Edward VI, who extended his father's purge of Roman Catholicism. That year, “*a set of injunctions was issued for the general purification of the churches. Every picture was to be removed from the walls and every image of saint or apostle was to be put away, so there should remain no memory of the same.*” Use of rosaries was forbidden. Edward VI (Jane Seymour's son) outlawed the crucifix (a cross with figure of Jesus) which he considered to be an idol.

Edward VI was succeeded on his death in 1553, by his half-sister Mary, the daughter of Katherine of Aragon. Mary, like her mother, and grandfather, King Ferdinand II of Spain was a Roman Catholic. Known as “Bloody Mary”, she reversed course and persecuted Protestant heretics, whom she burned at the stake by the hundreds. Upon Mary’s death in 1558, her half-sister Elizabeth I (Ann Boleyn’s daughter) ascended the throne. Elizabeth, who had been imprisoned by Mary for about a year on suspicion of supporting Protestant rebels, reversed course again and began persecuting Roman Catholics and removing pictures and icons from the churches. In her forty-five-year reign, Elizabeth chopped off fewer heads and burned fewer people at the stake than her half-sister, but she could be ruthless when necessary. She was more moderate on religious issues than her father and half-siblings, but certainly did not open the door very widely for alternative religious views.

The sixth warning (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:45 – 52) suggested that idols are not divine but the work of human hands. Like much of the *Letter of Jeremiah*, this warning borrowed extensively from other books of the Bible (*Isaiah* 40:15; *Jeremiah* 10:9; and *Psalms* 115:4, 135:15). These idols are crafted by carpenters and goldsmiths who live no longer than other normal people. How can they make gods? (The Babylonians would have argued that the gods themselves inspire the artisans who create them.) When war comes, the priests don’t expect these gods to protect them. The gods must be hidden, because they cannot even protect themselves.

The seventh warning was on the impotence of idols (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:53 – 56). This passage framed by the word “king”. Verse 53 states that they cannot establish a **king** over a country (the way YHWH set up Saul and David over Israel). In verse 56, we are told that the idols cannot resist a **king** or enemy. In a fire, when the priests flee, the idols will burn up and the gold covering will melt. Why would anyone think they are gods?

As the author continues with his warnings, the examples he uses seem to become more and more absurd. We understand by now that a statue is not an animate being, yet he continues to provide more examples. The eighth warning describes the helplessness and uselessness of idols (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:57 – 59). *Gods made of wood and overlaid with silver and gold are unable to save themselves from thieves and robbers.* Verse 59 provides a list of comparisons – a wooden door does its job of protection better than a wooden false god. A wooden pillar can hold up a roof, while a wooden god can do nothing. God controls the natural world and idols do not (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:60 – 63). The sun, moon, stars and lightning are under God’s command. The idols are no comparison. Therefore, one cannot think they are gods or call them gods, since they cannot decide anything or do anyone any good (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:64 – 65). Do not fear them.

The ninth warning tells the reader that idols cannot do what God can do. Wild animals can do more than they can do (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:66 – 69). They cannot curse or bless kings, show signs, or give light like the moon. Wild animals can at least flee to shelter to help themselves. The idols are not gods. Do not fear them.

Finally, in the tenth warning – idols are compared to a scarecrow, a thorn bush and a corpse (*Letter of Jeremiah* 6:70 – 73). Like a scarecrow in a cucumber bed, which guards nothing, or a corpse thrown out in the darkness, these gods are worthless.

The *Letter of Jeremiah* can be a powerful rhetorical demystification of cults that rely on physical icons. Its satirical mood fits that message: Cultic assimilation is stupid because there are no gods but one God. The satire and repetition easily make the point. The only difficulty, from our current perspective, is that the letter ridicules cultic practices that do not actually correspond to the Babylonian culture's practices or beliefs. The Babylonians did not necessarily believe that these icons or statues were in fact gods. Mostly they believed that the statues *represented* gods.

Do Christians worship crosses, or stained-glass windows? Should we throw out all of our bright shiny objects? How do we visualize cultures and religions that are different than ours?

The four-week study of *Baruch* and *Letter of Jeremiah* offered insights into one of the most critical periods in the history of Judaism. While most of us may find it difficult to imagine the trauma related to destruction of our homes, loss of loved ones, and exile to a strange city far from our homeland, there is much in these pages that still speaks to us. We know we have failed to listen to our God and our prophets. We have not done what we should have done, so there is reason for us to repent. Yet there is also hope held out for us. Though we know we can be held accountable for our past actions, we can still step up to take responsibility for those actions. Even today we can move into the *light of his glory, with mercy and righteousness that come from him*.

Coronavirus vs. the Great Influenza

In mid-September 1918, Paul Lewis, a medical scientist assigned to the Navy, was called to a Navy hospital ward filled with sailors who either had nose bleeds, were coughing up blood, or had blood coming from their ears. According to John M. Barry, "*Some coughed so hard that autopsies would later show they had torn apart abdominal muscles and rib cartilage. And some of the men writhed in agony or delirium; nearly all those able to communicate complained of headache, as if someone were hammering a wedge into their skulls just behind the eyes, and body aches so intense they felt like bones breaking. A few were vomiting. Finally the skin of some of the sailors had turned unusual colors; some showed just a tinge of blue around their lips or fingertips, but a few looked so dark one could not tell easily if they were Caucasian or Negro. They looked almost black.*"

In 1908, working with his mentor, Lewis had proved that a virus caused polio, and in 1916 developed a vaccine for polio that prevented polio in monkeys. It was not until 1954 that Jonas Salk developed a polio vaccine that was effective for humans. In his book, *The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History*, John Barry recounts the story of the development of medicine as a science in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The book follows Paul Lewis and others in trying to discover the source of this disease that seemed to

spread rapidly and ultimately killed many of its victims. Spanish Flu, as it was ultimately identified, was caused by the H1N1 influenza virus (the same source as for swine flu in 2009).

“Epidemiologists today estimate that influenza likely caused at least fifty million deaths worldwide, and possibly as many as one hundred million” during the period from September 1918 through the end of 1920. This is a lower percentage of the world’s population than the Black Death of the 1300’s, but probably a larger number of people. Two thirds of the deaths from Spanish flu occurred in a 24-week period. More than half those deaths occurred between mid-September and early December 1918.

Boston and Philadelphia were hit hard early in the pandemic, but it ultimately spread through most of the U.S. as well as much of the world. In Philadelphia, steam shovels were used to dig mass graves where people were buried without coffins. *“... priests would drive horse-drawn wagons down the streets, calling upon those behind doors shut tight in terror to bring out the dead ... In the week ending October 16, 1918, the disease killed 4,597 people (in Philadelphia).”*

“Normally influenza chiefly kills the elderly and infants, but in the 1918 pandemic roughly half of those who died were young men and women in the prime of their life, in their twenties and thirties. ... if the upper estimate of the death toll is true as many as 8 to 10 percent of all young adults then living may have been killed by the virus.”

The flu pandemic hit during the later stages of World War I. The virus swept first through military bases, where men were jammed together despite the objections of the Army Surgeon General. Public officials did their best to downplay the severity or extent of the disease because the U.S was in the middle of a war. *“To maintain morale, World War I censors minimized early reports of illness and mortality in Germany, the United Kingdom, France, and the United States ...”*

Barry concludes that during the second wave of the virus, whoever held power, city government or private gathering of locals *“generally failed to keep the community together. They failed because they lost trust. They lost trust because they lied. And they lied for the war effort, for the propaganda machine that Wilson had created ... It is impossible to quantify how many young men died because the army refused to follow the advice of its own surgeon general. ... those in authority were reassuring people that this was influenza, only influenza, nothing different from ordinary ‘la grippe’...”*

On March 23, the day the first of these Baruch/Letter of Jeremiah summaries was published, there were 43,600 novel coronavirus cases in the United States and there had been 550 deaths. Today, there are nearly 700,000 cases and there have been 34,000 deaths. There are more than two million confirmed cases of coronavirus in the world with over 143,000 deaths. We are told we are close to the peak of the curve, but we know we are not at the end of the pandemic.

Twenty-two million people have become unemployed in the past month in the U.S and the number of businesses shutting down continues to rise. With the flattening of the curve

there is pressure to “reopen business”. But we do have some general guidelines about what needs to happen before we can end the “shelter-in-place” mode. Dr. Anthony Fauci tells us that the U.S. needs to develop its capacity for widespread testing, contact tracing, and case isolation. The U.S currently has the ability to test 150,000 people per day for COVID-19. At that rate, it would take six years to test everyone in the United States. So, we know we need to greatly expand testing capability.

There is currently no proven effective treatment for COVID-19. We are only beginning to do antibody testing to determine immunity levels for people who have already recovered from the virus. When finally, we do cautiously move away from our homes and into the community, we will probably be wearing masks and social distancing for some time.

There is currently no proven vaccine for COVID-19, and probably will not be one available until at least early 2021. Things cannot return totally back to “normal” until there is an effective vaccine *and* the vast majority of population has been immunized.

In 1918, “*San Francisco had confronted the fall wave most honestly and efficiently.*” Their first case was reported September 23. They did everything right. Within weeks they closed schools and public places, recommended that church services be discontinued, and required people to wear masks. By the end of October over 1,000 deaths had been reported in San Francisco. But the number of cases rapidly declined and by November 21 people were allowed to take off their masks. *Two weeks later the third wave struck.* By February 1919, there had been 45,000 cases of influenza in San Francisco and 3,000 deaths.

What lessons can we learn from the *Letter of Jeremiah* that can help us today?

- *First, Jeremiah asks us to challenge the bright and shiny gods placed before us. With gold and silver tongues, do these gods have anything to say? Can they only seem to function when propped up on someone else’s shoulders? When the prophets shine light, can these gods see the truth, or are they blinded by their own fantasies? When threatened by fire, do they accept the responsibility of fighting the fire, or do these gods cower under the skirts of the priest and blame the wind for fanning the flames? Do they proclaim absolute power, then shrivel when it is clear they cannot do anything? Are they like a thorn bush in a garden with its counterfeit thorns upon which every bird perches?*

Who are our bright and shiny gods, and how can we identify them?

Who are the braggart gods whose bluff and bluster we should ignore, lest they lead us further into the mire?

Who are our prophets today whose words will lead us through the difficult times that lay ahead?

- *Secondly, the Letter of Jeremiah also challenges us to examine how we see other religions and cultures that are different than ours:*

Can you be a committed Christian without having to condemn or convert people of other faiths?

Is it possible to affirm other religious traditions without watering down your own?

Laughter is one of the ways we cope with the discrepancies of our lives. There is a dream we all have for this world, and then there is, well, this world. There are expectations we have of our religions, and then there are our religions ... Our capacity to love God, ourselves, people, and all of life grows with our capacity to laugh. We are ridiculous, and not to laugh at our religions, our worldviews, our philosophies (that is, ourselves), would be a false witness ... This ability to laugh in the midst of our imperfections in the presence of God is what we call grace.

– Samir Selmanovic (*It's Really All About God: How Islam, Atheism, and Judaism Made Me a Better Christian*)

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