

BIBLICAL PROPHETS WERE CRITICS, NOT FLATTERERS

As a general rule of thumb, national archives tend to collect documents which make the country look good. The Smithsonian Institute, for example, puts things like the Declaration of Independence, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and the World War II Japanese surrender documents on public display. All are impressive papers which show Americans at their best.

Examples of underhanded dealings or tainted morals tend to get stuck in forgotten files and lost to history. You have to hunt to find documents from the tawdry Mexican-American War of 1847 or the sleazy dealings that accompanied the Vietnam conflict.

Naturally, what gets preserved in most cultures? Documents which make people look good, not snapshots of them at their worst.

But there's at least one major exception to the rule. The ancient Israelite kingdom did it backwards. While the Assyrian and Egyptian and Babylonian and Persian empires were counting their successes, the Hebrew people were logging their failures.

The proof the pudding is that part of the Hebrew scriptures which is composed of the prophets. The striking thing is that every prophet whose sermons were recorded and preserved was critical of his own people!

Consider just the big three, the trio of prophets whose oracles take up the most space.

There was Isaiah, who did his work about the time the northern Kingdom of Israel was wiped out by the Assyrians.

He is convinced that whatever happens to his nation, it is white own fault. He recognizes that the southern Kingdom of Judah might escape the Assyrian debacle, but only for a while.

If his people could avoid defeat this round, they would get punched out in round two. Because they had been faithful to the Lord. A good example of Isaiah's style is in the 5th chapter of his book.

He compares the people of Israel to a fertile vineyard which the Lord had planted and cultivated. Any farmer worth his salt expects his land to produce. And if it's a carefully tended vineyard, he expects to harvest a cellar full of vintage wine. Or he'll plow the whole thing under and try again with potatoes.

So, according to Isaiah 5:7, the Lord has taken scrupulous care of his people. He expects

them to live fairly and kindly with each other. But when he goes looking for justice, what he finds are greed, perjury and murder in the streets. In a word, Isaiah's message is hyper-critical of his own nation.

And so is Jeremiah's, a century later. Jeremiah was no bullfrog croaking in a pond. He was the original wet blanket.

As far as he is concerned, nothing the Judean nation can do will reverse God's decision to humiliate them. Naturally his sermons didn't go over too well, especially with the royal functionaries. In fact, on one occasion they even tried to get rid of him by dumping him into an abandoned cistern.

And no wonder. "The king will be buried like a dead ass," was the sort of thing he would preach (Jeremiah 1:19). "This immoral country has gone down the tubes," was his message. "The Babylonians will invade and cart us off."

Jeremiah was right. And the third of the Major Prophets, Ezekiel, was in the first batch of deportees. But apparently even his fellow exiles didn't get the hint. They assumed Jerusalem would be spared and that they would soon make the round trip back home.

So Ezekiel went on scolding them. Typical was his vision of the scorched pot in the 24th chapter of his book. He compares Jerusalem with a cauldron of stew. The Babylonians, he predicts, will gobble up the whole meal—meat, broth and bones. Then they will keep on burning the kettle until it is singed clean.

What we have here is a remarkable turn of events. Most people put their most flattering photo in the family album. But when the Jewish people got around to compiling their official collection, what they kept was a rather unflattering series of carping sermons.

The result is that by including those critical prophets, the Jewish scriptures turn out to be surprisingly honest. Perhaps that's why the Bible is such an interesting book even for 21st century readers.

It doesn't soft-soap the religion business. It doesn't turn history into self-aggrandizing propaganda. On the contrary, its critical realism invites present-day readers to take a more honest look at their own personal and national lives.