

In the Beginning, the Prophet Was Poet

Long before the academics, Jewish prophets knew all about 'intertextuality'

What academics heralded not too long ago as "intertextuality"--an author's practice of alluding to older texts by engaging their original meaning, then placing them within a new context and endowing them with a renewed significance--has been the linchpin of Jewish literature since the writings of the prophets.

Consider, first, one of many modern examples. After World War II, Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein composed a poem, "Without Jews" ("On yidn"), where the intertextuality consists of nothing less than brazenly refashioning the voice of an ancient biblical prophet. The flashes of familiarity that Glatstein's poem allows--language and images of the Bible--train our attention on how revolutionary his prophecy is.

Here is a translation of parts of "Without Jews":

Without Jews, there will be no Jewish God.

If, heaven forbid, we should quit

This world, your poor tent's light

Would be stamped out.

Since Abraham knew you in a cloud

You have burned on all Jewish faces

And streamed from all Jewish eyes

And we formed you in our likeness:

And in every land, and every city,

You too were a stranger alongside us,

Oh, Jewish God. ...

Soon your reign will close.

Where Jews sowed,

A scorched waste. ...

Whole congregations sleep,

The babies, the women,

The young, old,

Even your pillars. Your rocks,

The tribe of your saints,

Sleep their dead

Eternal sleep.

Who will dream you?

Remember you?

Deny you?

Yearn after you? ...

Your tent void of light.

Flicker of the Jews' last hour.

Soon, Jewish God,

Your eclipse.

Glatstein turns the traditional prophetic rebuke of God's people on God. With chilling logic, he explains that the relationship between "Creator" and "created" is one of such mutual dependence that their roles are actually identical ("and we formed you in our likeness"). To emphasize this, the prophet's anger is lightly masked beneath a casual comportment (in the original Yiddish, he addresses God with the less formal

dikh

rather than

aykh

), and with an air of matter-of-factness he outlines God's doom.

The poem's central motif is the eternal flame of the Tent of Meeting (taken from the Book of Exodus), which was meant to symbolize God's enduring presence among the people, His enduring protection. Here, the poet/prophet throws God's words back in his face, reminding Him that the Jews' destruction means His own demise as well.

Poets throughout the centuries have adopted the voice of the prophet, seizing upon its authority and providing the reader with an instant frame of reference that assigns layers of meaning to their words. But in the beginning--before the poet was prophet--the prophet was poet. Ezekiel, whom we read this Sabbath, was perhaps the quintessential poetic prophet. He provides in his prophecy his own take on the history of the Jewish nation: It begins with the exile, to which he bears witness, and culminates in the people's restored glory in the Land of Israel. In this way, the Book of Ezekiel is generally understood as comprising two parts: God's rebuke, followed by God's consolation.

But in the following passage, rebuke and consolation mingle with subtlety and beauty: "And I shall give you a new heart and a new spirit shall I put within you; I shall remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And my spirit I shall put within you that shall cause you to go by my decrees and you shall dwell in the land that I gave your fathers; and you shall be to Me a people and I shall be your God" [vv. 26-29]. Here, God promises to alter the moral makeup of His people--to create them anew--in order for them not to sin in the future.

The poetic strength of Ezekiel lies in its allegory--a poetic device that barely surfaces in the undeviating narrative prose of the Five Books of Moses--and its intertextuality.

The rabbis were perhaps the first to fully appreciate the frequent use of intertextuality in the Prophets, when they determined the cycle of Torah portions read in synagogue. While we read the Five Books of Moses consecutively, the smaller helpings from the Prophets and Writings are linked to these portions according to these intertexts.

This week, for instance, the reading from Ezekiel adopts the language of Numbers, chapter 18--but with literary goals of its own. Numbers describes the ritual of purification that one must undergo after having contact with a corpse. It delineates how to mix the purification water and the ritual in which one uses it: "A pure man shall take hyssop and dip in the water, and sprinkle upon the contaminated person."

Improbable as it may seem, this passage was pure [inspiration](#) for Ezekiel. He couches his vision of Israel's [spiritual](#) reconstitution in the language of this purification ritual: "And I shall sprinkle water upon you that you be cleansed. From all your contamination and from all your filth I shall cleanse you" [v. 25]. He could not have expressed his repugnance for his people in more extreme terms.

The ritual of purification as described in Numbers was mostly defunct by the time Ezekiel was relaying his prophecy (most Jews were exiled to Babylonia and unable to partake in the pilgrimage to the Temple). Ezekiel restored its relevance, at least on a literary level, appropriating the language of physical contamination with which the Numbers passage is most concerned, using it to excoriate the Jews for their spiritual or moral contamination.

The good poet, just as the prophet in days gone by, speaks to us in a language that jolts our memory and challenges our power of self-perception and imagination. As long as the vocabulary remains constant--whether it is the eternal flame or the ritual of purification--the frame of reference is never broken, despite how radically different the application. The language of "purification" is the same, the frame of reference is God's relationship to his people. The message is that God will purify. God will renew. God will remain true to his covenant--only the means will change, that is the application--from the literal and ritualistic, linked with the temple, to the spiritual, a moral renewal.