



TIMOTHY R. GAINES

WALKING *the*
THEOLOGICAL
Life

DISCOVERING METHOD FOR
THEOLOGY IN THE LIVES OF
BIBLICAL CHARACTERS



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Jeremiah

ON NOT KNOWING HOW TO SPEAK

THE WORD OF GOD CAME TO a young man, living somewhere among the flatlands north of Jerusalem: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you” (Jer 1:5). It is an odd way to begin a prophetic epic. There are no specific commands, no calls to action. Rather, it is this: “I know you. I have always known you.” It is a God-breathed message in the form of an anticipatory pause. Jeremiah is about to be called to speak profound and challenging news.

When we find him, Jeremiah is poised to be launched into an active prophetic life: proclaiming a burning message he cannot hold inside, calling his people to reverse course on their path to destruction, being thrust into the middle of controversy and intrigue when confronting false prophets, and passionately weeping over a people he loved. On top of that, he is young and untested. The wisdom of years has not yet been formed in him. If there is anything he knows with certainty, it is that he is utterly unqualified to speak for God. Humility undoubtedly characterizes him, and not the type that has been cultivated in his character over decades. No, this is the kind of humility that bursts out of the raw reality that Jeremiah has no training or experience in calling a people to turn away from destruction or confronting those who fancy themselves religious leaders. He is young, underqualified, and untested—a good friend to any of us who take the first halting and uneven steps toward

walking the theological life, knowing deep in our bones that we simply are not prepared for any of this.

Before the prophetic confrontations begin, however, there is a cherished moment of silence, where a simple, profound reminder establishes everything that will transpire: God *knows* Jeremiah. Oh, I am sure God knows *about* Jeremiah, too, in the sense of knowing what he likes to eat and the color of his eyes, but that is not what God is trying to relay to this young prophet-to-be. The divine voice speaks of intimate, deep, personal knowledge, the kind that has the capacity to see beyond the color of Jeremiah's eyes into the depths of his motivations, fears, and desires. This is the kind of knowledge reserved for parents and the children who make their every need known, spousal lovers of fifty years, childhood friends who now share stories about their grandchildren, and the God who lovingly breathed life into the lungs of each person who has been created. Jeremiah, a young man who is about to take on an active and harried ministry of preaching and proclamation in the midst of a messy and complex world is, quietly, deeply, and truly, known by God.

KNOWN TO KNOW

From the beginning, I cannot resist doing a little theology here. What kind of a God is this who would begin a conversation not with a command but with a reminder of the relationship? *Before* I formed you in the womb, I knew you. We could easily move into all kinds of theological speculation about things like divine foreknowledge and predestination at this point. We could spend a long time debating the theological merits of describing a God who could somehow know a not-yet-existent Jeremiah and who had charted a path before the young man had emerged from the womb. But the text does not ask us to go there, and if we did I fear we would be stretching it further than it asks us to. It does seem to say, however, something about the way God confronts with a call to speak a divine message. Jeremiah's response can teach us about the theological virtue of being known by God. We could say that Jeremiah exhibits a general virtue of humility, because he proceeds not by reaching

out for knowledge but by acknowledging that he is known by God. But Jeremiah exhibits a more specific *theological* virtue because he is known by *God*, and Jeremiah's knowledge will humbly progress from that point. Even his knowledge is a response to God's intimate act of knowing Jeremiah. From the beginning, this is a God who *knows* us.

Knowing like this, though, situates the theologian oddly in our world that seeks to know. We live and move and have our being in a world of -ologies, those branches of scientific exploration that have as their mission to know more about the things they study. Is theology any different? At first glance, it may seem the most natural thing in the world for a theologian to study God the way a biologist studies a plant, because of the way we have come to think about *knowing* in the modern world.

The world you and I inhabit is the kind that has been built on the structures of the Enlightenment. Granted, some approaches to theology are happy to adopt these structures and continue to build the project, and others are reacting against it, but whether for it or against it, the Enlightenment looms large. While I am admittedly reaching for a broad brush in the depiction of the Enlightenment I am about to offer, there is an enduring theme—even a type of modern virtue—to the Enlightenment's ways of *knowing*.

The Enlightenment was itself a reaction against the perception that the ways of knowing that characterized the Middle Ages were lodged in superstition and claims about the truth of things that were not accessible to all people. But what if there was some kind of truth that all people could access? Or better yet, what if we could finally verify that there was one, single, objective truth that holds all things together under our watchful gaze? What if we were able to move beyond the enchanted and fantastic tales of some people sensing a divine presence while others were left unaffected? After all, what good is a truth if only a few people have access to it?

The proponents of Enlightenment thought came to affirm that we humans could begin to use our senses to verify the way things are in the world. In other words, we could *know* through our powers of observation.

And power is precisely what observation afforded us. Once we had enough people who could observe the same thing, a confidence began to grow in the Enlightenment mind that at long last, we were gaining access to verified, cold, hard truth, free from the whims of subjectivity and superstition. Ways of knowing—such as the scientific method—came to be associated with *objectivity*, and with objectivity came the notion that we could finally eliminate the persistent and mysterious unknowns about our world. Objectivity, unaffected by personal desire or whim, was now a virtue of modernity.

Imagine a person attempting to know something about the way a bird flies. When our eye beholds a winged creature, gracefully held aloft by some invisible force, there is more than a bit of mystery involved. As we make reasoned observations, however, we might finally come to observe that the way a bird flies on a windy day may differ from a day when the winds are calm. We might look at the shape of a bird's wing and observe how similar shapes act in the air. Step by observable step, we strip away the mysteries of a bird's flight to *know* how they are able to take to the skies. At the same time, we can finally put to rest the pesky debate our pre-Enlightenment ancestors might have had about whether birds are kept in flight by, say, a magical force they each possess in their bellies, or whether an invisible angel carries each bird from place to place.

There are obviously a multitude of benefits that have come about as a result of this kind of knowing. Knowing how birds fly inspired the innovations that allowed humans to take to the skies, for example. Nearly every scientific discovery made in the past few centuries sought to know by stripping away the shroud of mystery so that we might make use of newfound knowledge. Once we understand the physical forces of pressure that form above and below a bird's wing, for example, we *have* that knowledge, and now we can do something with it. The mystery of flight was finally pressed into giving up its secrets to the inquiring mind that came to know it. In this dynamic, the modern mind tends to take possession of a thing by knowing it, to assert the knower over the thing known. When we have erased the mystery, we have become the master.

So, the Enlightenment project continues to be built, often by those who gain knowledge through studies—even earning *master's* degrees along the way.

What if theologians approach knowledge differently, though? Put another way, what if theology's methods do not share the same goal as those of our colleagues in physics, biology, chemistry, or the social sciences? What if the theologian maintained a distinctive approach that did not seek to strip away mystery for the sake of mastery but to plunge headlong into the mystery—not in hopes of stripping the mystery away so that we might master it but by surrendering into it, deferring, being known by it? What if we approached the work of theology by acknowledging the reality that the God we want to know is the one who knows us first? How might adjusting our way of knowing from first being a knower to being known shape the kind of theology we do? Theology has the capacity to celebrate scientific discovery, learn from our partners in the social sciences, and foster deep appreciation and conversation from those in other fields, even as it recognizes that the nature of our quest is not to take knowledge in hand, for the one we seek to know has known us first.

Young Jeremiah's prophetic proclamations issue a cautionary and liberating word to those of us who unwittingly attempt to know God inside of the Enlightenment's project. This is not only because any knowledge we master will, by definition, be limited and thus incomplete, but because such ways of knowing distance us from the stunning beauty that is theology's own: God knows us. For those who seek to unravel the mysteries of the divine for the sake of finally grasping it in hand, Jeremiah's liberating message also comes to us: before you go about the task of attempting to know God, know that you are first known by God.

The opening lines of Jeremiah's prophecy are a birthing suite for the virtuous work of knowing and being known in the task of theology. What is born out of his words is not an attempt to know for the sake of mastering but an invitation to first be known by God. As Jeremiah has it, the beauty of God is no set of hidden facts that, once unveiled through inquiry and observation, can be held in our hands as we would possess an

idol of wood or bronze. We are known, rather, by a *living* God. We might be able to know the equations that describe how lift, drag, thrust, and weight function in lifting a bird aloft, but we cannot be *known by* those forces. Before we speak about God, before we put pen to paper or utter a single word, there is this: we are known by God. We could say it another way: before theologians set out to know God, they are known by God.

On its face, a claim such as this may come off as if we are casting being known by God in a spiritual light, while knowing God remains in the dusty and dull domain of theology. Jeremiah did not see these as opposing realities, though, and we would do well to follow Jeremiah's lead here, because the implications for the way we do theology are revolutionary. The weight of knowing shifts from whatever kind of knowledge we can derive about the divine to being known by God. We are known by God before we have the capacity to know anything about God. Contingent and wispy are all our attempts at knowing. God has known us first, even before we could know back. Rather than serving as a way of ordering the world under our mastered knowledge, our knowing orders us as creatures lovingly known by God.

The beginning of the theologian's quest to know God is in being known by God, placing all of us in a posture of epistemic humility and prayerful wonder. For the theologian, this posture even gestures to the beginning of a method. We begin by acknowledging that God knows us. We sit with that, we wonder at that, and it begins to suggest to us a way of doing our work. We are searched and known, to borrow the language of the psalmist (Ps 139:1). Our motivations, our gifts, our biases, our fears, our anxieties, hidden and unveiled, bravely acknowledged or naively undetected—all of that is taken up in the way God encounters us, *knowing* us. How might this shape the kind of theology we do? How might this move theology from the quest to acquire information about God for the sake of having answers and reorient it toward a kind of awareness that we are known by God first and beginning from there?

For the theologian, all of who we are is brought to the work of theology. A biologist may be able to check their personhood at the door, and

the physicist may even be encouraged to do so. *Who* they are should not shape the results of their work, we are told. They are to be objective observers for the sake of unveiling knowledge. But theologians assume a different kind of posture. The beginning of our work is to be known by God, to open ourselves to the mystery that God has known *us*. Before we speak, we are known by God.

KNOWING AND SPEAKING

Perhaps there was wisdom in young Jeremiah's response, then. "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak" (Jer 1:6 NRSV). In hope that you will afford me a moment of personal catharsis: I have been doing the work of theology in the church, university, and seminary for most of my life, and oh, what I would give for theologians who were aware that they did not know how to speak. In all of those arenas, there is an impulse, a driving temptation, even, to speak as if we know—and know rightly!—before we are content to be known. Could it be that the one who is least aware of the reality that they are known by God is the one who most often wishes to speak first? The wisdom of Jeremiah, I think, is here: When you become aware that you are known by God, it is not wrong to confess, "I don't know how to speak." In his response, we detect no hint of bloviating self-confidence, no agenda-driven argument, no epistemic arrogance that somehow Jeremiah will be able to craft any words worth uttering. The word of the Lord has come to him. It has made him aware that he is known by God, and he is beautifully aware that he has nothing to say in response.

Straightforwardly, the word of God comes to young Jeremiah, and his response is simply, "I don't know how to speak!" In my estimation, the most faithful theology begins here, in the encounter between a God who has known us, who has called us, and our confession that we really do not have anything to say in response. Jeremiah's first words are his confession that he has no words. Yes, the words will come. How could one remain silent in the sustaining knowledge that one is known by the living God? But for now, and right here at the beginning, Jeremiah's theological

work is his brave confession: “I don’t have anything of my own to say. I have no words.” There is something of virtue here.

“I AM ONLY . . .”

Jeremiah’s accompanying confession, “I am only a boy!” carries a certain kind of cultural baggage (Jer 1:6 NRSV). In his tribe, at that time, humans became more important with age. Gray hair was a crown of glory; wisdom came with years. It is what Jeremiah lacked that fascinates me most. “I am only . . .” has me thinking about the way that theology is so often treated in places such as universities and seminaries. We construct grand buildings and invite those who hold grand titles to help us talk about God, and for many of us this is the beginning point of theology. For many of us, our confession of “I am only . . .” describes a lack of capacity, an absence. For Jeremiah (and I can only hope for the work of theology), it is a mark of theological virtue. It is a signal to the reality that he presents no credibility based on his mission of discovery, nor exhibits his self-made capacity to speak for God. “I am only . . .” This is the first step in walking the theological life virtuously.

For all of us who come to the task of theology with Jeremiah’s words on our lips, or at least that kind of humility in our hearts, I say, “Well done.” To those who begin a theological journey with a sense of trepidation and uncertainty, I say, “You are in the right place.” To those who come to the task of theology full of confidence, I offer this observation: Jeremiah’s “I am only . . .” is a wise response to the one whose very name is “I AM.” The virtue on offer in Jeremiah’s example is not to begin with confidence in what we know but in awe of the reality that we are *known*. That is why, year after year, I have the joyful task of gently reminding those who come to the work of theology afraid that they do not know enough—that they are not confident enough in their knowledge—that they are likely tapping into a cardinal virtue of the theological life. We theologians do our work in response to I AM, and I know no other way to begin my response than by responding, “I am only . . .”

KNOWN TO SPEAK

In the gracious exchange that unfolds with young Jeremiah, though, it is the I AM who responds, “Do not say ‘I am only a boy,’ for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you” (Jer 1:7 NRSV). Confessionally, my temptation as a theologian is to skip right to the speaking. In all this talk about having words and not having words, I want to get to the point where I have something to say. That is why it is good for me to see the construction of these verses in Jeremiah 1. I am sent to a people, and then I am given words to speak. The work of theology happens in the dynamic of being known by God, situated among a people, and speaking what has been passed on to us. After an awareness of being known by God, we are sent to speak God-words *among a people*. We are sent first. The speaking comes later.

When that speaking does come, then, it is in response to God and in God’s very presence. The work of theology is joyful work, precisely because it sets itself up to be known by God and listen well for the words we are to speak. Christian theology is not an exercise in impressive speculation, of dazzling one another with the most novel ideas and propositions about some figure called “God” and that figure’s relation to the world. The work of theology is better understood in terms of being known, being sent to a people, listening for the word of the Lord, knowing that the Lord is with us, and then speaking that word.

“I am with you and will rescue you,” the Lord says to Jeremiah (Jer 1:8), reminding us that this God is no senseless plant to study or voiceless rock formation, as interesting and beautiful as those are. This is a living God who traverses faithfully with those who are known by God. When we speak for God as theologians, when we say words about God, they are words spoken in God’s presence. Theology does not happen as if the subject we are describing were sitting idly by. The work we undertake as theologians is responsive to God. We do not simply say what we hope to be true and move on. When we speak, we do so in a way that is influenced by and immediately responsive to God’s own presence, so that when the lines begin to blur between the word-work of explicating some

point of doctrine and the prayerful adoration rendered by one who is known by God, theology is probably happening.

“I HAVE PUT MY WORDS IN YOUR MOUTH”

Finally, something needs to be said about the grand promises that conclude this passage. God appoints Jeremiah over the nations and the kingdoms. There may be more going on here than an ambitious young man hearing the voice of God exalt him to such a high and lofty place. There is a very real sense that the one who speaks for God is going to speak to the nations, but using a logic that does not belong to the nations. The words in Jeremiah’s mouth are gifts from the God who knows him. So, Jeremiah’s speech will not placate the nations. It will speak truthfully.

Around the time universities began to form and theology found a place in them, an odd way of describing theology’s function also rose. In attempting to work out the way these academic disciplines, which had never thought of themselves as separate enterprises before, came to work together, theology took on the moniker “the queen of the sciences.” An ostentatious title, to be sure, it was a kind of homage to the notion that theology was the study that held all other studies together in this universe that God had created. If the vocation of a *university* was to explore the world, theology was the discipline that was supposed to breathe life into all of those wings of scientific exploration that were meant to tell us the truth about God’s world. Mathematics, physics, political science, and the social sciences were all assumed to be in service to unveiling the truth of God’s good universe.

There are, of course, numerous reasons this kind of thinking has tended to fall to the wayside in a modern world, and why we should be wary of it. Whether it is our culture’s dismissal of the shared belief in God or in any story that links all things together in one overarching truth, or even our modern proclivity to relegate religion to a separate and privatized sphere of the human existence, you just do not hear many folks talking like this anymore. My point here is not to try to claw back the

social and intellectual power necessary to re-enthone theology as the queen of the sciences, especially if its royal objective is to lay intellectual siege to the world. It is, rather, to take a page from Jeremiah, who understood that God-talk could not be relegated to one discipline among others. Nor can the work of God-talk fit neatly inside one of the other disciplines. Because theology concerns itself with the Word of God and our words of response, it will not be satisfied to be a self-contained discipline, speaking only to itself. It will speak to God's world freely.

When God appoints Jeremiah “over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant” (Jer 1:10), it is precisely because God-talk is not relegated to an isolated sphere of the religious. Theology will speak to the nations and kingdoms, sometimes pulling them down, sometimes building new structures and planting new possibilities. It will speak into situations that may not be overtly theological, diligently reflecting on how talk of the God who is lovingly making all things new influences in *this* situation.

Theologians cannot arrogantly assume that their study gives them expertise in all matters, but it does give a sense of freedom that there is no place where the Word of God does not belong. Whether you want to go with the notion that theology is the queen of the sciences or not, the methodological reality remains: God does not call the theologian to do the kind of work that fits neatly into the preestablished categories. The kind of work theology does is big enough to pluck up a nation, to reduce it to rubble, and to plant something new. Theology cannot be beholden to preconceptions, no matter how comforting or natural those preconceptions may be to us. If it fits nicely into a given category, it is probably not theology. Theology is social, but it is not social talk. Theology is scientific, but it is not science talk. Theology is political, but it is not political talk. Theology is God-talk. Because it is God-talk, it will not and cannot be beholden to anything less than God. So, the theologian speaks with words that are gifted by God. Of course, this only happens long after the theologian comes to terms with being known by God.

Theology is powerful. It is granted the capacity to speak in a way that critiques nations and kingdoms, to pull down the structures of old creation and to plant something new. This is why the work of theology needs to be entrusted to those whose virtuous first instinct is to say, “I am only . . .” This is why it is work for those who know first that they are known by God. I am far too tempted to speak as a theologian in a way that would benefit my preconceptions, to take hold of the knowledge of God and use it to carve out a world to my particular benefit. I am far too tempted to let my theology work as if I were the only one who matters and my perspective is the only one that could possibly be right. I am tempted to do my work as a theologian in a way that benefits me and operates in the comfortable categories that will not leave my life plucked up and torn down. But then, I would be no theologian. I may use words about God, but it is likely that it is not the word of the Lord. That is why I need Jeremiah’s virtue: I do not know what to say! I might know how to string a few words together, but that does not mean that I necessarily know how to speak in the prose of faithful response to the divine. Learning to speak theologically means coming to the humble knowledge that I am known by God, that “I am only . . .,” that I am sent to speak among a people, and that what I speak is a gift from God. As a theologian, I do not shrink back from the prophetic truth-telling, but I proceed recognizing that a virtue of the theological life is being known, and the words I proclaim are not mine alone. Beginning with being known helps me assume a posture of receiving and passing on, of locating myself within a long tradition of those who have done the work of passing on what was passed to me (1 Cor 11:23).

The work of theology can never be reduced to support for anything other than God’s purposes, and if theology is the work of God’s purposes, it may topple nations, kingdoms, or faulty ideas I have held for a long time about God. It may, in fact, topple kingdoms that have been built in the name of theology. But we rejoice at that, because while theology can dismantle, it also builds and plants. Theology is nurturing work, passing on the gospel and giving careful attention to how we can do so faithfully.

It seeks in all times and places to tell the truth about God, God's world, and God's work in the world, so that in all it says, it is proclaiming the good news of the gospel. Theology is not banter about ideas that do not matter; it is serious attention being given to be sure that what we are saying is faithfully nurturing the church in its mission. Indeed, theology can root out, but that is always for the sake of nurturing the people of God. Like good gardeners, the work of theologians is to weed out whatever hinders the people of God from speaking and living the good news that the world is being made new in Jesus Christ. It is bold work, but disconnected from the virtue of Jeremiah, such boldness runs the risk of wrecking the garden.

So, like Jeremiah, we stand in relation to the God who knows, we turn our attention to the way God is addressing us. As we prepare to do our work, our first response is nothing other than, "Ah, Lord God! Truly, I do not know how to speak, for I am only . . ."

PRAYER

You have searched me and known me, gracious God.

Before I spoke a word, you were speaking to me, calling me to life by
your Word.

You have known me before I have known a word about you.

In your mercy, grant that I may find you as I'm being found by you.
May the sufficiency of your divine presence meet the insufficiency
of my preparation.

Remind me that your Word is cruciformly powerful, and teach me
how to speak it faithfully.

In the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ, form in me a spirit of humility,
That I might nurture your holy people as I am nurtured by
your holy presence.

To your glory, now and forever.

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OR REFLECTION

1. Think for a moment about *how* you know God. What people, events, stories, or life experiences have shaped your knowledge?
2. How and when have you come to know that God knows *you*? In what ways has the awareness of being known by God influenced your theological knowledge of God, or not? (If it is difficult to identify experiences of being known by God, conversation with a seasoned guide such as a spiritual director may be helpful.)
3. Consider the relationship between knowledge and speaking in Jeremiah's life. What kind of theology might be done by those who are known by God first and speak of God second? What would this look like in your own life?

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