



PRODIGAL NATION

MORAL DECLINE AND DIVINE PUNISHMENT
FROM NEW ENGLAND TO 9/11

ANDREW R. MURPHY

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Acknowledgments

IN SOME WAYS, *Prodigal Nation* looks quite different from the project—then entitled “Narratives of Decline in the History of Political Thought”—that the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded a Summer Stipend nearly ten years ago. Nonetheless, this book grew (more or less) organically out of those early inquiries. It began to assume its present form during a 2000–2002 visiting fellowship at the Martin Marty Center of the University of Chicago Divinity School. At the Marty Center, I was fortunate to participate in seminars coordinated by Professors Clark Gilpin, Frank Reynolds, and William Schweiker, and what had been a relatively wide-ranging series of explorations in the rhetoric of decline across time and place began to take shape as a more focused account of a specifically *American* way of talking about such issues. Needless to say, the events of September 11, 2001, which fell almost exactly at the halfway point of my time at Chicago, certainly influenced the casting of this project in American terms, and led me to focus more specifically on the jeremiad and its importance to the American experience.

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Contents

ONE	The American Jeremiad	3
PART ONE	THREE AMERICAN JEREMIADS	15
TWO	Puritan New England and the Foundations of the American Jeremiad	17
THREE	Decline, Slavery, and War: The Jeremiad in Antebellum and Civil War America	44
FOUR	Taking America Back: The Christian Right Jeremiad	77
PART TWO	THE JEREMIAD IN AMERICAN CULTURE	107
FIVE	Competing Jeremiads	109
SIX	Constructing a Usable Past	125
SEVEN	The Jeremiad and the Culture Wars	142
EIGHT	The Past, Present, and Future of the American Jeremiad	156
	<i>Notes</i>	173
	<i>Bibliography</i>	199
	<i>Index</i>	223

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ONE



The American Jeremiad

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father; and would not turn from following me. Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel, says the Lord. A voice on the bare heights is heard, the plaintive weeping of Israel's children, because they have perverted their way, they have forgotten the Lord their God: Return, O faithless children, I will heal your faithlessness....

*They do not say to themselves, "Let us fear the LORD our God, who gives autumn and spring rains in season, who assures us of the regular weeks of harvest." Your wrongdoings have kept these away; your sins have deprived you of good. "Among my people are the wicked who lie in wait like those who snare birds and like those who set traps to catch people. Like cages full of birds, their houses are full of deceit; they have become rich and powerful, and have grown fat and sleek. Their evil deeds have no limit; they do not seek justice. They do not promote the case of the fatherless; they do not defend the just cause of the poor. Should I not punish them for this?" declares the LORD. "Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?"*¹

IN THE MIDST of calamities and momentous events of all sorts—hurricanes, floods, war—Americans have historically pulled together, emphasizing national unity and calling for a commitment to the common good. After September 11, Americans lined up to donate money, goods, and even blood far in excess of actual need. Several years later, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina prompted a similar outpouring of generosity, as did the South Asian tsunami half-way around the world.

But in the midst of these emphases on unity, Americans have also heard some rather different voices, seeking to assign responsibility for such events. Often, such voices use specifically religious language.

Just days after the September 11 attacks, appearing on Pat Robertson's television program *The 700 Club*, Jerry Falwell pointed out that "the Lord has protected us so wonderfully these 225 years," but that

what we saw on [September 11], as terrible as it is, could be miniscule if, in fact—if, in fact—God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve. . . . The ACLU's got to take a lot of blame for this. . . . The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. . . . [along with] the pagans . . . and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way . . .

Ever the agreeable host, Robertson added, "Well, I totally concur, and the problem is we have adopted that agenda at the highest levels of our government. And so we're responsible as a free society for what the top people do. And, the top people, of course, is the court system." Falwell concluded his remarks with a call for national repentance: "when the nation is on its knees, the only normal and natural and spiritual thing to do is what we ought to be doing all the time—calling upon God." In the following days, as he attempted to quell the furor that had resulted from his remarks, Falwell returned to the language of repentance and revival:

I had no intention of being divisive. I was sharing my burden for revival in America on a Christian TV program, intending to speak to a Christian audience from a theological perspective about the need for national repentance. . . . [I] was asking a Christian audience on a Christian TV program to claim II Chronicles 7:14 and repent. . . . I was blaming no one but the terrorists for the terror, but I was chastising us, the Church, for a generation of departure from God. I was doing what I have done for nearly 50 years in the pulpit—confronting the culture and calling for national revival.²

Hurricane Katrina's destruction occasioned similar outcries, often from voices theologically, if not politically, allied with Robertson, Falwell, and the Christian Right. But the language of divine punishment can come from other, surprising sources as well. Six months after Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin looked back at the recovery effort in his city:

And as we think about rebuilding New Orleans, surely God is mad at America, he's sending hurricane after hurricane after hurricane and it's

destroying and putting stress on this country. Surely he's not approving of us being in Iraq under false pretense. But surely he's upset at black America, also. We're not taking care of ourselves. We're not taking care of our women. And we're not taking care of our children when you have a community where 70 percent of its children are being born to one parent.

Nagin went on to call for a unified reconstruction effort in keeping with the city's racial heritage: "It's time for us to rebuild New Orleans—the one that should be a chocolate New Orleans.... This city will be a majority African American city. It's the way God wants it to be."³

Like latter-day Louis Renaults, Americans from across the political spectrum professed themselves shocked—shocked!—when Falwell and Robertson interpreted the events of September 11 as evidence of divine displeasure at the growing ungodliness of American society; or when Mayor Nagin made his remarks about Hurricane Katrina. The response to Falwell and Robertson, not surprisingly, was swift, negative, and virtually unanimous. How could anyone—clergy, no less—hold such callous views, ascribing the deaths of thousands to God's socially conservative politics? What sort of theology saw catastrophe and barbarism as the punishment of a loving God upon innocent civilians? How could anyone conceivably connect the devastation of Katrina with the invasion of Iraq more than two years earlier, or the thirty-year tradition of legalized abortion in the United States, or the forty-year-old decision to remove prayer and Bible reading from the nation's public schools?

The standard response to such charges is to dismiss them as the histrionic outbursts of marginalized extremists, and in many cases such a response is probably appropriate. But when we look more closely, we see that there is much more to these sorts of narratives of American decline and punishment than the mere ranting of disaffected fringe groups. There is the long tradition of the American jeremiad, a far more mainstream and deeply American way of thinking about the nation's past, present, and future. In their appropriation of the language of divine punishment for national offenses, in their lament over a perceived decline from America's virtuous origins, and in their marshaling of claims about the past in search of an understanding of the present and future, the comments of Robertson, Falwell, and Nagin—not to mention Cotton Mather, Frederick Douglass, and countless others throughout American history—fit squarely within the tradition of the American jeremiad.

DEFINING TERMS: THE AMERICAN JEREMIAD

Although the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term *jeremiad* back only to the writer and philanthropist Hannah More in 1780, certainly the tendency to lament the present and admire a more virtuous past long predates the eighteenth century. Jeremiah was only one in a long line of prophets who, driven by a sense of crisis and a deep anxiety about their community, lamented Israel's violation of its covenant with God as a story of decline that invited God's punishment.⁴ Although ruling elites often assumed that God would never forsake His chosen people, notes Walter Bruegemann, Jeremiah

sound[ed] a counteropinion . . . that there is no such thing as "guaranteed shalom." *All shalom* is conditional, and Jerusalem has failed to qualify for Yahweh's *shalom* precisely because of ethical misconduct. . . . Very often, the rhetoric moves in the direction of termination because this sovereign God will not be mocked.

Addressing the Jews after the destruction of Jerusalem and their subsequent exile in Babylon, Jeremiah's critique provided a rationale for the misfortunes that the community was experiencing. They had abandoned the covenant sworn at Sinai, and thus God had allowed or even recruited Babylon to serve as the instrument of His chastisement. But the prophet also held out the hope of restoration and forgiveness if the community repented and returned to obedience.⁵ Though the time was late, a prodigal people might yet be redeemed.

Despite this connection with the Hebraic tradition, the jeremiad is not the unique property of any particular culture. Narratives of decline, chastisement, and renewal appear across time, culture, religion, and geography, from classical Asian and Western cultures to yesterday's news. The sacred texts of many religious traditions lament declining moral and spiritual standards, and hold out hope for renewal and revival, if only the community will see the error of its ways. The Protestant Reformation, for example, was driven in large part by the search for a lost pristine, uncorrupted church. And a variety of social movements depend upon sharp contrasts between a degenerate present and a glorious past.⁶

Yet this book is about America, where the jeremiad continues to cast a long shadow over American public debate, framing Americans' understanding of their past, present, and future.

So what makes a jeremiad?

1. *Jeremiads identify problems that show a decline vis-à-vis the past.* Jeremiads claim that their contemporaries have gone badly wrong, and offer vivid examples or statistics to back up these claims. After all, the Prodigal Son needed to acknowledge his lamentable state before he could even think of returning to his father's house. A prodigal nation is no different. Public figures on the right such as Pat Buchanan, Rush Limbaugh, and Bill O'Reilly propound a critique that is surely familiar to anyone who has followed American politics over the past forty years: due to an increasingly permissive and hedonistic public morality—exemplified by (but by no means limited to) Supreme Court rulings on public school prayer, displays of religious symbols on public property, and human sexuality—the nation has abandoned its moral and spiritual moorings. The consequences of this abandonment (divorce, abortion, violence, sagging public spirit, sexual promiscuity, the decline of individual responsibility) provide evidence of a moral and spiritual decline that threatens the very core of American life.⁷

And narratives of decline aren't limited to the political right. Progressives and liberals also see declines in social connectedness, and lament the perceived retreat from such American values as egalitarianism, community, and the common good due to an ever-increasing collusion of the American government with big business.⁸ Perhaps the most prominent recent example of this type of jeremiad was Robert Putnam's best-selling book *Bowling Alone: The Decline and Renewal of American Community*, which marshaled an impressive body of statistical data to argue that late-twentieth-century Americans were not as civically engaged as their parents and grandparents had been. But Putnam's account, though statistically rich, was hardly new. Fifteen years before Putnam's book, another best seller, *Habits of the Heart*, put forward a similar argument about the rise of individualism in American culture and the consequent decline in biblical and republican languages of commitment and responsibility.⁹

2. *Jeremiads identify turning points.* Arresting portraits of a world sinking into decadence lie at the heart of the jeremiad, but they are only the beginning. In addition to explaining what is wrong, the jeremiad must also explain "Why *this* decline? Why *these* events? When and why did the nation begin to go so wrong?" Jeremiads usually propose a specific time in the past when the destructive ideas or practices first appeared, and trace their effects over subsequent years. Falwell's comments about September 11 offer a good example. His critique, and the Christian Right narrative of American decline more generally, ties together a series of legal decisions and political developments into a

narrative of growing departure from traditional Judeo-Christian public piety. Important components of this narrative include the Supreme Court decisions striking down public school prayer; the increasing social radicalism of the 1960s; the *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion; and the growth of feminism and gay rights since the 1970s. For example, during confirmation hearings in 2006, Focus on the Family asked its members to support Judge Samuel Alito's nomination to the Supreme Court as a way to "return to the Christian heritage upon which this nation was founded" in the hope that "prayer will be allowed in public schools and that the Ten Commandments will be displayed proudly on public property." "This," they wrote, "may be the year our country's secular trends will begin to be reversed."¹⁰

Many contemporary jeremiads point to the turbulent years of the 1960s as the key to understanding the civic, moral, and political decline that, in their view, afflicts the nation. Of course, different Jeremiahs interpret those years quite differently. Traditionalists like Pat Buchanan and Jerry Falwell blame twenty-first-century social ills on the rebellion against traditional authorities and the triumph of relativistic individualism, while progressives lament missed opportunities to overcome continuing large-scale social problems involving race, poverty, and gender.¹¹

Of course, an account of what has gone wrong must be accompanied by an account of what previous generations did right. American Jeremiahs argue that our virtuous ancestors had it right; departure from their ways is the beginning of error. Since it anchors itself so deeply in founding virtues, the jeremiad can often claim, with good reason, to represent the most loyal patriotism even while engaging in the most strident dissent. Consider Martin Luther King's speech at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. In King's telling of the American story, African-Americans

have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The civil rights movement, in King's account, had gathered in Washington in order to insist that Americans honor this check.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this

sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check—a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice.

King’s imagery affirms the fundamental value of an original American promise regarding human liberty and equality; while his “refus[al] to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt” skillfully blends an endorsement of fundamental American ideals with a lament over the realities of American life. King had no illusions about social realities at the time of the founding, but he located the power of the “check” in the American ideals of liberty and justice for all, in the radical potential of the American founding. Passing civil rights and voting rights legislation would represent a *vindication* of those founding promises. King’s vision continues to animate many progressive political movements in America, but their political opponents display an equally fervent commitment to the founders. For example, David Barton’s WallBuilders movement, dedicated to emphasizing the religious nature of the American founding and the dangerous shift in recent years to a secular public sphere, evokes the founding as well.

Thus, implicit in the American jeremiad is the nation’s particular devotion to—one might say an obsession with—the founders. Be they first-generation New England Puritans or national figures like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams, these virtuous founders are crucial to the narrative power of the jeremiad. They provide concrete examples of individuals for whom religious or civic virtue trumped (or at least moderated) self-interest, and they represent a standing reproach to degenerate present-day Americans. This unfavorable contrast between the ills of times present and the glories of times past represents one of the keys to the jeremiad’s rhetorical power.

3. *Jeremiads call for reform, repentance, or renewal.* Hand in hand with a narrative of decline and punishment come claims about what must be done—politically, right now—to set the nation on the right path. More was required of the Prodigal Son, of course, than simply a recognition of his folly: he had to take action, turn himself around, and approach his father’s house once again. New England and Civil War jeremiads, often delivered in times of deep social conflict or distress, concluded with exhortations to their audiences to recapture the founding promise of their societies, and to do so with a specific set of political actions—

free the slaves, honor the Sabbath, refrain from ostentatious displays of wealth, and so on. The twenty-first century is no different. Today's jeremiads are almost always enmeshed in concrete political debates: about sexual morality, school prayer, protection of the environment, immigration, or the appropriate scope of government. In all of these cases, the jeremiad seeks to use political power to intervene on one side of a divisive cultural or political issue. And yet, given the long-term vision of the jeremiad, reform is never simply about a mundane set of policy proposals, but a vindication of the American past and the virtues of previous generations.

American Jeremiad

But there is much more to the American jeremiad than a simple narrative of decline from founding virtues and a call for political reform. What makes the American jeremiad American is its connection to a larger, sacred story tied intimately to the particularities of the nation's origins and development. In this sense, the jeremiad is part and parcel of what Robert Bellah and others call American "civil religion": "religious dimension, found . . . in the religious life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in light of transcendent reality." English Protestants, after all—many of whom saw themselves, and America, as "chosen," with a special relationship to the Creator—were responsible for much early American colonization. Such a view had its origins in John Winthrop's evocation of New England as a "city on a hill," and the more general Puritan tendency to draw parallels between themselves and the ancient Israelites. These presuppositions were deepened and strengthened by the events of the 1770s and 1780s, in which the notion of an American Israel throwing off oppression in order to take up its national mission settled ever more deeply into American public rhetoric. This link was only strengthened by the Revolutionary experience, the great evangelical revivals of the early nineteenth century, and the nation's first movements westward.¹²

If the people of this "Chosen Nation" have strayed from the path of rightly ordered politics and society, the consequences are not merely social and political but world-historical, even transcendent, in nature. In other words, the American jeremiad is not just a historical or political argument but a theological, even a cosmological, one. Images of American chosenness were reinforced by a widespread interest in millennialism, the notion that Christ will return for a thousand-year reign on Earth, and that America (later, the United States) had a special role

to play in God's plans for the end times. Historian Terrie Dopp Aamodt explains that in nineteenth-century America, apocalypticism "had come to mean an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God would destroy the ruling powers of evil and raise the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom. . . . Because the apocalypse is so closely tied to the concept of the Last Judgment, it is related to jeremiad rhetoric, with its tendency to call for repentance and to predict dire consequences if the warning is ignored."¹³

Thus the story of the jeremiad in America is the story of Americans' faith in God's providential oversight of human affairs, and more particularly of American affairs. Nicholas Guyatt has shown that although belief in providence is not uniquely American, it nonetheless played an important role in the formation of an American identity. As Guyatt notes—and as we shall see throughout this book—providential claims are "*arguments*: efforts to explain God's purpose in the world that were harnessed to political goals in the present."¹⁴

So although the American jeremiad so often laments a perceived decline from founding ideals, we should not view it as inherently pessimistic. The nation may be prodigal, to be sure, but even the Prodigal Son had a forgiving father. Current decline notwithstanding, adherents of the narrative of America as Chosen Nation generally saw a crucial role for the United States in preparing the way for God's reign on earth. Indeed, such a role explained both the promise of the American nation *and* the bitter trials through which it was currently passing. In the words of historian James Moorhead, "The millennium . . . was viewed simultaneously as a promise and a threat: a specific mission awaited the redeemer nation, but it would suffer wrath if it proved false to its vocation."¹⁵ The rhetorical power of the American jeremiad lies in this perennial and dynamic tension between perceived national decline and enduring national promise.

Of course, not every jeremiad presented in this book will present a clear and overt example of each of these elements. Some jeremiads lean heavily on imagery of chosenness and sinfulness; others offer a detailed time line of the nation's descent into moral and spiritual decline. In the real world of politics and social conflict, we are dealing with variations on this theme, as critics present their diagnoses of the contemporary scene in particular ways for particular audiences and occasions.

Prodigal Nation offers an exploration of the American jeremiad as it has appeared across American history, from seventeenth-century New England to the events of September 11. I focus most closely on early

New England, the Civil War, and the rise of the Christian Right. Of course these examples do not *exhaust* the many ways in which such rhetoric has appeared throughout American history, and I touch on others as I proceed. But if the jeremiad is as ubiquitous as I have claimed, why focus on these three?

The three episodes most closely examined in this book are singularly important if we want to understand the development of religious and political discourse in American life. New England Puritans, who raised the political sermon to an art form, viewed their colonizing endeavor as part of the westward progress of the Gospel, and they placed each crop failure, calamity, or Indian attack—as well as their good fortunes—firmly into this providentialist context. More than 200 years after the first settlements in Massachusetts Bay, the great national tragedy that took over 600,000 lives produced an explosion of national soul-searching. Civil War Jeremiahs repeatedly looked to the founders for ways to understand what was happening all around them. Lincoln's Second Inaugural—a tentative jeremiad if there ever was one—phrased the issue of God's judgments on American slavery rather obliquely, but many of his contemporaries were not so shy and linked the war's carnage (and the ultimate Union victory) directly to God's purposes. And the notion that the United States has a unique historical mission to uphold Judeo-Christian values and to combat godless communism fired the Christian Right's entry into American electoral politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Though often perceived as a "conservative" trope, especially when used by the Christian Right, the idea of American messianism has never been the sole possession of one political party. Robert Kennedy was as comfortable using the jeremiad as was Jerry Falwell.¹⁶

THE JEREMIAD'S RHETORICAL POWER: HOPE AND DESPAIR IN TENSION

The jeremiad's political and rhetorical power, its ability to move Americans to social and political action, lies in its ability to evoke a dynamic tension between despair and hope. Not simply a lament over American decline, nor merely a celebration of the Chosen Nation, the jeremiad combines these two fundamental American ideas into a powerful narrative of imperiled national promise and a yearning for national renewal. This weaving together of these two strands of rhetoric distinguishes the jeremiad from both the doom-and-gloom rantings of nostalgics