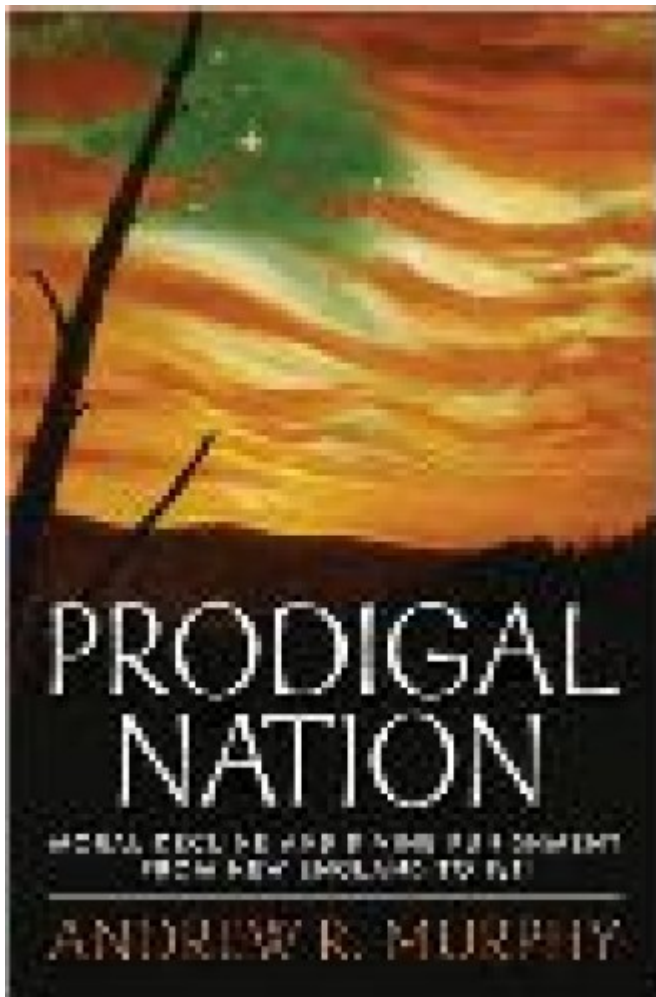


Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11

reviewed by [Christopher Benson](#) in the [May 19, 2009](#) issue

In Review



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Andrew R. Murphy

Michelangelo and Rembrandt depicted him bearded and robed, seated and downcast, absorbed with inexpressible grief. His hand cradles his face, wrinkled from a lonely and thankless vocation. He was threatened, put on trial, imprisoned, publicly humiliated and thrown into a pit. He is Jeremiah, “the weeping prophet,” who announced the Lord’s judgment on Judah and called on Hebrews to repent of their sins and renew their covenant with Yahweh.

The word *jeremiad* entered our lexicon in 1780, referring to a narrative of declension that, like the prophecies of Jeremiah, identifies symptoms of decline, contrasts the degenerate present with a virtuous past, and calls for reform and repentance. Other scholars have treated the jeremiad before; Andrew R. Murphy’s contribution here is to distinguish two types of American jeremiad: the traditionalist, which uses the past as a model, and the progressive, which uses the past as a promise and birthright. The former is based on empirical facts while the latter is based on ideals.

A professor of political science at Rutgers University, Murphy uses this typology to examine the speeches of Puritans (Increase Mather, William Stoughton), Civil War-era figures (Henry Ward Beecher, Frederick Douglass) and leaders of the Christian right (Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Richard John Neuhaus, Pat Buchanan). The jeremiads of all these figures share a dialectic of despair and hope; the goal of social, political and religious mobilization; and a belief that the United States is a chosen nation, blessed and burdened by its covenant with God. However troublesome biblically, the American jeremiad serves a critical function in our national identity. If the U.S. is a modern-day Israel, then when its people stray from “the path of rightly ordered politics and society, the consequences are not merely social and political but world-historical, even transcendent, in nature.”

We can no more rid ourselves of the jeremiad than we can rid ourselves of apple pie, baseball and jazz. But Murphy tries. He aims to demythologize the golden age of our founding period, to chasten “zealous nationalism” by offering “prophetic realism,” and to loosen the religious orthodoxy underwriting the entire narrative. In short, he elevates the progressive jeremiad—delivered by Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Martin Luther King, Bill Moyers and Jim Wallis—because the alternative’s “use of the past is too limiting, its view of the present too despairing, its vision for the future too divisive.” The traditionalist jeremiad, he says, “remains imprisoned in an exclusionary . . . white European Judeo-Christian paradigm.”

Murphy is not blinkered by his advocacy for the progressive jeremiad. He cautions the reader against “the impression that there is a ‘true’ narrative waiting to be discovered, a story that is more ‘authentic’ to the evidence of American history than that of its opponents.” Neither type of jeremiad has a complete narrative or privileged access to the past; they are both colored by their political agendas. “They tell us far more about the present situation in which their rhetoric is produced, deployed, and consumed than about the past that they supposedly describe and evoke,” Murphy writes.

Prodigal Nation sharpens our understanding of America’s narrative imagination and civil religion, giving proper historical scope to our narrow contemporaneity. Murphy’s fine analysis equipped me to recognize how President Obama’s victory speech in Chicago was tethered to the progressive jeremiad, with its sunny “Yes we can” optimism about the nation’s promise. “If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible,” Obama proclaimed, “who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time, who still questions the power of our democracy, tonight is your answer.” In his celebratory moment, Obama minimized his lament about the present in order to invoke “the enduring power of our ideals: democracy, liberty, opportunity and unyielding hope” and to call his listeners “to reclaim the American Dream and reaffirm that fundamental truth that out of many, we are one.”

Like all authors of progressive jeremiads, Obama showed “extraordinary confidence in the emancipatory potential of American ideals,” a confidence that may be misplaced—if not idolatrous, from a Christian perspective. Those of us who still believe in total depravity know that the Union is not perfectible because human nature is not perfectible. What a prodigal people need is not a redeemer nation, but a redeemer God. Eschatological skepticism is in order whenever a politician says, as Obama did, that we can put our “hands on the arc of history and bend it once more toward the hope of a better day.”

Murphy asks “just how capacious the progressive jeremiad can be, just how expansive its birthright, so long as it remains wedded to an image of the United States as God’s chosen nation.” But the problem is not so much that the progressive jeremiad is connected to the idea that the United States is a chosen nation as that it empties American exceptionalism of its theological content. The more pressing question, which Murphy leaves unexplored, is what happens when the providentialist context of our forebears is traded for the secularist context of present-day American

leaders. Jeremiah of a bygone era spoke about chosenness, sinfulness and redemption; Jeremiahs of today retain the idea of chosenness, but they omit the God who chooses, they soften sinfulness as “failings,” and they neutralize redemption as promise or destiny.

For a book that is subtitled *Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*, Murphy makes almost no mention of whether heaven frowns on our secular nation, except to highlight what he calls “the histrionic outbursts of marginalized extremists” (the post-9/11 remarks of Jerry Falwell and the post-Katrina remarks of New Orleans mayor Ray Nagin). But is the jeremiad even rhetorically intelligible or persuasive without divine punishment?