



In 2012 Abdel Kader Haidara became a hero.

At the time, an Islamic extremist group  
formed a coalition

to take over the ancient city of Timbuktu.

The terrorist group instituted a brutal regime,  
committing war crimes against anyone  
they considered non-believers  
and destroying holy sites  
they saw as blasphemous.<sup>1</sup>

Haidara and a small team of men,

rescued and smuggled

over 350,000 books and manuscripts

from libraries across their country

from being destroyed by the Taliban.

The jihadists had set its sights  
on destroying these medieval works  
and men like Haidara  
risked their lives to save them.<sup>2</sup>

But burning books is not a new thing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/timbuktu-mali-war-crimes-trial/a-54164862>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-book-burning-printing-press-internet-archives-180964697/>



In ancient times, book burnings  
were often the result of conquest.  
Take the renowned library in Alexandria, Egypt.  
It was one of the most significant  
repositories of literature  
in the ancient world.

It has been burned many times:  
in 48 BCE, it was caught in the crossfire of war  
between Ceasar, Pompey and Ptolemy.  
Several hundred years later,  
in 640 CE Caliph Omar,  
wanting complete control  
and demanding conversion,  
called for the library's destruction.<sup>3</sup>

The printing press, in 1440  
meant books could be readily available  
and information became readily available.  
Literacy grew as did the sciences and arts.  
Which meant knowledge grew.  
In the War of 1812,  
the US Library of Congress was burned.



And think of the libraries across Europe  
that were destroyed during World War II.  
Hitler's Nazis burned millions of books

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<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library\\_of\\_Alexandria](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Alexandria)

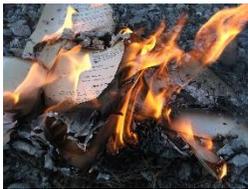
in an effort to distort reality and control information.  
Chinese dictator Mao Zedong  
burned thousands of books and propaganda  
that didn't agree with his cultural revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Books, manuscripts, scrolls, papyrus  
—these were luxuries  
of the powerful, the wealthy, the privileged.  
Only in modern times  
have books been available  
and affordable to the masses.

Author Rebecca Knuth, who has written  
several books on book burnings explains,  
“People [see] knowledge  
as a way to change themselves, and the world,  
and so, it became a far more dangerous commodity,  
no longer controlled exclusively by the elite.

What better way  
to reshape the balance of power  
and send a message at the same time  
than by burning books?”<sup>5</sup>

How many bibliophiles—book lovers—  
are there, right now,  
twitching and cringing?

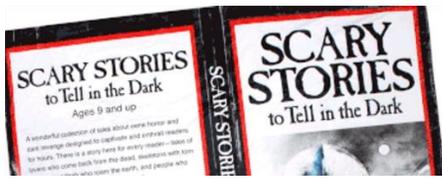


Some of you remember book banning  
if not, book burning.  
Tripp and I watched a mini-documentary  
on Alvin Shwartz,  
who compiled folk stories, ghost stories, legends and such  
to publish, Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-book-burning-printing-press-internet-archives-180964697/>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*



If you were an 80's or 90's kid,  
you remember these books  
and might even remember the controversy.  
Lots of school libraries and PTAs banned the books,  
fearing the stories were too scary,  
and illustrations too graphic—  
they were too much for young readers.  
But I snuck around and read these books and loved them.



Control, power, and knowledge  
go hand in hand.  
And if you can control the information and knowledge  
—then you're suddenly  
in a place of real power.  
Controlling what information is communicated  
borders on dangerous.

Again, Rebecca Knuth argues  
that the core motivations for book burning,  
in whatever form the act takes,  
remain the same:  
prioritizing one type of information over another.  
“That’s why power is so scary,” Knuth says.  
“Because power allows you  
to put into effect  
the logic of your own beliefs.”<sup>6</sup>

Books are powerful tools.

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<sup>6</sup> ibid

They change us,  
they influence our ideals and culture.  
They communicate and teach.  
Banning and burning books  
sends a powerful message—something written down  
inside these pages  
could incite,  
ignite,  
provoke,  
threaten  
and challenge;

and this story in Jeremiah,  
“...is one of the earliest recorded narratives  
of “book burning”  
to suppress an ideology.”<sup>7</sup>

It is 604 BCE and Israel’s King Jehoiakim  
is facing increasing pressure  
as the Babylonian army gets closer.

A fast proclaimed in Judah.  
People from all over the countryside  
will crowd into the city and Temple.  
“A ‘fast day’ was always a sign  
of some crisis in the community,  
a crisis in which an appeal  
[will be] made to God for help.”<sup>8</sup>

You see the situation  
with Babylon is dire.  
The Babylonian army has laid waste  
to territories around Judah.

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<sup>7</sup> Roger Nam, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/a-new-covenant-promised/commentary-on-jeremiah-361-8-21-23-27-28-then-3131-34>

<sup>8</sup> Robert Davidson, The Daily Study Bible Series, Jeremiah, and Lamentations: Vol. 2 (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1985) pg. 114

The people fear for their future  
and want to hear  
a reassuring word  
from those in charge and the Lord.

Enter Jeremiah.

Or rather, enter Baruch—  
because Jeremiah  
has been banned from the Temple.  
It was likely his fiery temple sermon from chapter 7  
—remember all those verbs we talked about—  
that landed him barred  
from the holiest site in Israel.



So, Baruch reads the words of the scroll  
“in the secretary’s room  
in the upper court  
overlooking the outer courtyard  
where the people would have assembled.”

And hearing the stir the reading creates  
the court officials, the high priest,  
the officers and princes  
ask Baruch to come into their chambers  
and read the scroll aloud to them.

Shocked and alarmed  
they tell the king.  
We don’t know what the scroll said,  
but given their alarm,  
it must have been inflammatory and anti-government.”<sup>9</sup>

As they take Baruch and the scroll to the king,  
the text tells us twice,  
that it is the ninth month,  
meaning it is December.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, pg. 115

“Now the king was sitting  
in his winter apartment  
(it was the ninth month)  
and there was a fire  
burning before him in the brazier.”  
(Jer. 36:22)

So, while the Babylonian army advances,  
while the people are fearful and fasting,  
the king is in his winter apartment  
warming himself by an open blazing fire.  
This verse reeks of privilege, control, power.

We don't find the king in sackcloth at the fast.  
We don't find the king his palace  
strategizing a military move.  
We don't find him asking for a prophet's presence  
so that he can inquire a word from the Lord.  
We find him reclining in his winter apartment  
warmed by a fire.



Hebrew Bible professor, Roger Nam claims,  
“[this verse] offers a biting indictment  
of those of us who enjoy privilege  
...If we enjoy positions of power  
in regard to our gender, ethnicity,  
class, marital status, etc.,  
we must take care that such privilege  
does not overshadow our own ability  
to listen to God's Word.”<sup>10</sup>

Woooo.

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/a-new-covenant-promised/commentary-on-jeremiah-361-8-21-23-27-28-then-3131-34>

As the scroll is read,  
as the word of the Lord is delivered,  
the king takes a penknife  
and cuts the scroll into pieces  
and throws it into his fire.  
If you don't like the information,  
throw it away.  
If the word of the Lord is too much,  
simply burn it.

In a verse 25,  
the king's officials ask and beg him,  
not to burn the scroll.  
"The core motivations for book burning,  
in whatever form the act takes,  
remain the same:  
prioritizing one type of information over another  
...power allows you  
to put into effect  
the logic of your own beliefs."<sup>11</sup>

An official attempt at censorship.

Burning books  
won't make them go away.  
It doesn't destroy  
ideas or eliminate knowledge.  
It is simply a tactic to keeping control.  
And trying to control  
a word of God is doomed from the start.



Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian  
who suffered state censorship,  
said in his Nobel Lecture on literature:

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<sup>11</sup> Repeated from <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/brief-history-book-burning-printing-press-internet-archives-180964697/>

“Literature, together with language,  
protects the soul of the nation...  
But woe to the nation  
whose literature is disturbed  
by the intervention of power.  
Because this is not just a violation  
of ‘the freedom of the press’,  
it is a closing down  
of the heart of the nation,  
a slashing to pieces of the memory.”<sup>12</sup>

The whole point of Jeremiah’s scroll,  
the whole message of the word of the Lord,  
was aimed at the heart of the nation  
—a plea to its people,  
to turn from their evil ways and repent.  
For Jehoiakim to cut into pieces and burn the scroll  
is to rob the nation as Solzhenitsyn claims,  
to slash to pieces the memory  
of God’s plea  
for the people to return to the covenant.

Imagine in the aftermath  
of the destruction and devastation  
—of the Temple, where God dwells—  
imagine in that kind of aftermath,  
having no record  
of God’s wanting you  
to make things right.

What would feel about God?  
What would you infer  
about God’s character and promise  
if there was no scroll,  
no record?

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Davidson, *The Daily Study Bible Series, Jeremiah, and Lamentations: Vol. 2* (Westminster John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1985) pg. 116-7

God in no way,  
wanted Jerusalem to fall<sup>13</sup>  
and the beginning of this story tells us that  
what God's hope was:  
"It may be  
that when the house of Judah  
hears of all the disasters  
that I intend to do to them,  
all of them may turn from their evil ways  
so that I may forgive their iniquity  
and their sin."

Imagine if such callous censorship  
had been used on God's word throughout history  
—what would we think about God?

Here's what strikes me as profound.  
This is on one level a story about a king and a prophet.  
A story of the censorship  
of challenging ideals.

It is the story of a king  
who refuses to listen to God's word  
and a people who do not repent.

It is a story of a careless king  
who intended to do away  
with the prophet's words,  
and thereby,  
God's words.

On another level  
this story as tells us something  
about the power of the written word.

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<sup>13</sup> R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah, Interpretation Series: A Bible-Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (John Knox Press, Atlanta, GA 1988) pg. 212.

Prophecy in Israel,  
and many ancient Near Eastern cultures  
was prophecy birthed  
in proclamation.

It was prophecy declared, spoken—  
to specific people,  
in specific place and time—  
and while this prophecy is proclaimed  
what this story tells us,  
is that the power of the prophetic word  
**was also written down.**

Scrolls of prophecy were penned  
so that future generations  
could hear them read  
and reflect on what God had done,  
what God hoped for and wanted for God's people,  
and how history,  
*their history,*  
had played out.

This writing down of the prophetic word  
preserved it for future generations of God's people.  
As prophecy was preserved  
—even years later—  
the writing and scribal tradition  
of these prophetic works,  
we are able to put together  
the pieces of God's character,  
God's very nature and being.<sup>14</sup>



This becomes the groundwork for theology.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, pg. 214

This means while this story  
was proclaimed for a people in time,  
and meant for a people in the future  
to be able to look back on,  
it is also a story that would never have imagined  
its reach and scope  
as the beginning of a theological thought.

This written and preserved prophetic work  
retains a relevance  
far wider than its original intent.  
Theology is,  
at its simplest,  
words about God.

What was written  
for a small number of people in 604 BCE  
and those suffering in exile  
after Jerusalem had fallen,  
has now been read and interpreted  
for thousands of years  
by more people than we can count.  
Which is quite amazing.  
And perhaps divinely serendipitous.

The beauty is,  
“prophecy took on new power  
and new vitality in written form.  
Far from destroying the word of God”<sup>15</sup>  
the **praxis** of theology,  
the faithful study of God’s nature and being,  
spread like an uncontrollable fire,  
burning in the hearts of believers  
for generations to come.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pg. 214

One of my favorite theologians  
is an Irish guy, Pete Rollins.  
He understands that language and ideas,  
even stories and theologies  
all fall short of ever being able  
to fully capture God's nature  
or a full understanding of God's being.

Theology is always an attempt  
to capture what can't be fully known.  
But even within those limitations he says this:

“God which we cannot speak of  
(meaning the failure of our theological language  
to adequately describe God  
who is both knowable  
but also shrouded in mystery)

Rollins says,  
“God which cannot speak of  
is the one thing  
about whom we must never  
stop speaking.”<sup>16</sup>

Do you know where I got that from?  
A book.

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<sup>16</sup> Paraphrase of Pete Rollins, How (Not) To Speak of God (Paraclete Press, 2012) introduction.