



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.¹

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.²

But burning books is not a new thing.

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

² <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.³

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

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Alexandria

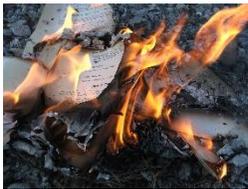
in an effort to distort reality and control information.
Chinese dictator Mao Zedong
burned thousands of books and propaganda
that didn't agree with his cultural revolution.⁴

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?”⁵

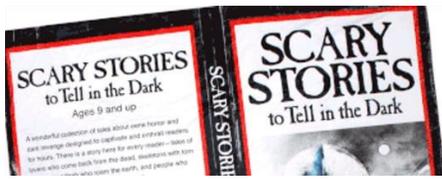
How many bibliophiles—book lovers—
are there, right now,
twitching and cringing?



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.

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

⁵ 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.”⁶

Books are powerful tools.

⁶ 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.”⁷

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.”⁸

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

⁷ 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>

⁸ 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.”⁹

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.

⁹ 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.”¹⁰

Woooo.

¹⁰ <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."¹¹

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:

¹¹ 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.”¹²

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?

¹² 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 fall¹³
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.

¹³ 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.¹⁴



This becomes the groundwork for theology.

¹⁴ 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”¹⁵
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.

¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶

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

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