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Prophet of Consumerism

Aaron Baart

Dordt College, aaron.baart@dordt.edu

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Recommended Citation

Baart, Aaron, "Prophet of Consumerism" (2017). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. 726.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/726

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Prophet of Consumerism

Abstract

"How can you let the Bible *read you* today, rather than merely the other way around? Read slower. Way slower. Read for transformation, not for information."

Posting about how consumerism affects the way we read the Bible from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<http://inallthings.org/the-prophet-of-consumerism/>

Keywords

In All Things, lectionary, consumerism, biblical interpretation

Disciplines

Christianity

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

The Prophet of Consumerism

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May 26, 2017

Aaron Baart

Daily Scripture Texts

[Psalm 93](#)

[2 Kings 2:1-12](#)

[Ephesians 2:1-7](#)

When my wife's grandmother was still alive, there were a good number of memorable axioms she lived by. My personal favorite was, "If a little bit of sugar is good, a lot must be better." It was one of my favorites for obvious reasons—I was often the beneficiary of her promiscuous baking.

My saintly grandmother's baking principle aside, and more seriously now, this same axiom (more is always better) is the underlying, operating principle behind our economic world of capitalism, isn't it? If something is good, we should have more of it. That would definitely be better. In fact, in many ways, contentment is the enemy of capitalism. After all, if everyone in our country were to decide overnight that we all have attained enough, bought enough, and consumed enough, our economy would be in peril because it depends entirely on the underlying assumption that we should each be striving for more tomorrow than we have today. Capitalism depends on discontentment.

It has become increasingly (and painfully) obvious to me that in the West we read our Bibles and filter our Christian faith through very consumeristic and capitalistic lenses. It's what Biblical scholars call, *eisegesis*—reading something *into* the text. In reality though, we all do this, myself included. Our family upbringing, formal education, life experiences, and broader culture shape us in profound and even unrecognizable ways. As a result, no one person can read the Bible (or anything for that matter!) with complete objectivity. Perhaps that's why the Incarnation was such a gift, because God didn't ask us to rise impossibly above ourselves. Instead he came—and always comes—to meet us where we are.

Our consumerism affects our reading of Scripture too. For example, as long as I can remember, I've always read the Old Testament story (see below) of Elisha's request of Elijah—that he would receive a double portion of his spirit—as a wise, courageous, and properly capitalistic request. Elijah his predecessor was good. So why not strive to be greater? But the truth is that in ancient times, it was typical of any firstborn male heir to receive a double portion of his father's inheritance. "Elisha then requests what an eldest son would expect of a father as an inheritance: a double portion (cf. [Deuteronomy 21:15-17](#)). In this case it is not land that he has in mind, but spirit, for Elisha had already left normal life and normal rules of land inheritance behind (cf. [1 Kings 19:19-21](#))." ¹

In other words, Elisha considered Elijah to be like his father. He readily acknowledged that he had already traded in the economy of this world for the economy of God's Kingdom. So essentially, he was using the common language and practices of his day and adapting them to the prophetic life. This is so important to the passage because it means that he wasn't actually requesting to become *greater*; in many ways he was actually asking to become *less*. He wasn't seeking more influence, more power, and more miracles; he was seeking more glory for God, more self-denial, and more of God's Kingdom come. He wanted a greater fear of God, and a lesser fear of man. These are things that the Spirit of God enables within a prophet.

I have no experience other than my own. I can never be from anywhere other than where I am from. And I have no eyes other than the ones in my head. So the practice of eisegesis will always affect my reading of Scripture. But acknowledging that these influences are there also grants me a greater likelihood to be able to read the Bible on its own terms. It allows the text to read me and not simply me to read the text. This is so key to Scriptural understanding. Otherwise, I can only ever see in the text what I already believe and what I already know. When this

happens, growth not only becomes difficult; it becomes almost impossible.

How can you let the Bible *read you* today, rather than merely the other way around? Read slower. Way slower. Read for transformation, not for information. Ask the text lots of questions. Hard questions. Imagine readers of different times, places, cultures, and socio-economic standings, and then attempt a re-reading of the same passage through their eyes. Approach the text from a different angle. You might just notice the light hitting it a little differently. And that, in turn, might just illuminate something you've never seen before.

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel.

The company of the prophets at Bethel came out to Elisha and asked, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," Elisha replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here, Elisha; the Lord has sent me to Jericho."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went to Jericho.

The company of the prophets at Jericho went up to Elisha and asked him, "Do you know that the Lord is going to take your master from you today?"

"Yes, I know," he replied, "so be quiet."

Then Elijah said to him, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to the Jordan."

And he replied, "As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So the two of them walked on.

Fifty men from the company of the prophets went and stood at a distance, facing the place where Elijah and Elisha had stopped at the Jordan. Elijah took his cloak, rolled it up and struck the water with it. The water divided to the right and to the left, and the two of them crossed over on dry ground.

When they had crossed, Elijah said to Elisha, "Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?"

"Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit," Elisha replied.

"You have asked a difficult thing," Elijah said, "yet if you see me when I am taken from you, it will be yours—otherwise, it will not."

As they were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw this and cried out, "My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!" And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his garment and tore it in two.

Footnotes

1. Iain Provan, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Kings* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.), 173. ↩