

REVIEW

KUNG FU KENNY: A MODERN-DAY PROPHET MIRRORING JONAH

In the article "Kung Fu Kenny: a Modern-Day Prophet Mirroring Jonah," the author examines possible sources for the character of Kendrick Lamar's alter ego "Kung Fu Kenny" on his record *DAMN*. The author believes that Lamar has modeled Kenny specifically off of the figure of Jonah, and that the story of the album should be understood in light of Jonah's character and story.

To bolster this argument, the author draws out similarities between Kung Fu Kenny and Jonah. Both characters are prophets called to proclaim a message from God, and both flee from their duty. Both Jonah and Kenny choose to follow their own desires rather than doing God's will. And both prophets, when they finally (if grudgingly) do their jobs, grudgingly deliver a brief message: either "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4) or "B****, sit down, be humble." (Kendrick Lamar, *HUMBLE*.)

However, this is where the similarities between Kenny and Jonah end. The author believes this to be deliberate on the artist's part, arguing that Lamar's juxtaposition of his alter ego with Jonah serves to highlight one principal difference between the two: Kung Fu Kenny repents from his rejection of his prophetic calling and returns to faithful service of the LORD, while Jonah does not.

Examining the prophetic character of *DAMN* is a highly original and interesting idea. The use of biblical ideas and imagery in Lamar's work is an area worth exploring, and the idea of the character of Kung Fu Kenny as a prophet is a compelling and convincing idea. However, evidence that Lamar specifically used the character of Jonah as the model for Kenny seems wanting.

The author cites Kenny's refusal to follow God's call on *DNA*, and Kenny's stated intention to flee to Cuba (like Jonah to Tarshish?) on *ELEMENT*, as points of contact between Lamar's character and Jonah. This is certainly reasonable, but it should be noted that Jonah is not the only Hebrew prophet with whom parallels with Kenny could be drawn. Many prophets protest their God-given tasks. Elijah, when he has reached the end of his strength, asks the LORD to end his life rather

than to make him to continue to serve.¹ Ezekiel, in a different time and place, balks when the LORD directs him to eat bread baked over human dung as part of a sign-act directed at the people of Jerusalem.²

However, the prophet which Kung Fu Kenny most resembles is Jeremiah, whose prophetic duty leads him again and again into mortal danger and drives him into a few mental breakdowns.³

While he rails against God several times during the course of the book,⁴ it is his gasping outburst in chapter 20 which bears mention:

O LORD, you have deceived me...

You are stronger than I,

and you have prevailed...

If I say, "I will not mention him,

or speak any more in his name,

there is in my heart as it were a burning fire

shut up in my bones,

and I am weary with holding it in...

Why did I come out from the womb

to see toil and sorrow

and spend my days in shame? (Jeremiah 20:7, 9, 18, ESV)

¹ Cf. 1 Kings 19:4.

² Cf. Ezekiel 4:14. Interestingly, one could also make a connection between Ezekiel's and Kenny's messages. Compare Ezekiel 24:6: "...Woe to the bloody city, to the pot whose corrosion is in it, and whose corrosion has not gone out of it!" with Lamar's *XXX*: "Is America honest, or do we bask in sin? / Pass the gin, I mix it with American blood."

³ Kung Fu Kenny's similarity to Jeremiah is recognized in Rodney Carmichael, "The Prophetic Struggle Of Kendrick Lamar's 'DAMN.'," *NPR Music*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/2017/12/12/568748405/the-prophetic-struggle-of-kendrick-lamars-damn>.

⁴ Cf. Jeremiah 12:1; 15:10, among others.

More could be said about potential connections of Kung Fu Kenny to Jeremiah and to other prophets, but they would be better pursued elsewhere. The point here is that at least as strong a case could be made of Kenny's being based on Jeremiah as it could for Jonah. But it is important to be careful not to read a characterization which is unintended by Lamar into his work. That Kung Fu Kenny is intended to be a prophetic figure is undeniable. But is Kenny modeled off of any single Hebrew prophet? It is difficult to say.

In this article, the author has brought up some intriguing parallels between Kung Fu Kenny and the Hebrew prophets. Fruitful for further research would be further examination of similarities between prophetic *dicta* in the Hebrew Bible and Lamar's work, as well as exploration of the way in which the two alternate track orders of *DAMN*. affect the story of the prophetic ministry of Kung Fu Kenny.⁵

⁵ Carmichael, "Prophetic Struggle,".

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