

KUNG FU KENNY: A MODERN-DAY PROPHET

MIRRORING JONAH

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In the last ten years, Kendrick Lamar has cemented himself as one of the greatest hip/hop artists in the game. Audiences thoroughly enjoy the construction of his beats and the quality of his flow. However, upon a deeper investigation of his lyricism and album construction, the listener finds a foundational undercurrent of faith as well as an imaginative interaction with Biblical imagery. This short essay will trace the narrative of Kendrick Lamar's Pulitzer prize-winning *DAMN.* and show how the character "Kung Fu Kenny"¹ is initially patterned on the prophet Jonah in order to imagine a modern-day prophet of God.²

A quick survey of Lamar's discography is necessary to set the stage for *DAMN.* On his second studio album, *Good Kid, M.A.A.D City*, Lamar lays out a narrative that concludes in his salvation through Christ and his parents instructing him, saying, "realness is God" and "the best way to give back to your city is to tell your story to these kids just like you."³ In his next album, *To Pimp A Butterfly*, Lamar outlines his struggles with materialism, depression, and Lucifer as he attempts to fulfill his parents' calling. By the end of the album, Lamar triumphantly accepts his role as a prophet to his people. However, on the closing track, a conversation with famed rapper, Tupac, leaves the listener wondering what kind of prophet Lamar will be: One that promotes strength and violence? Or one that uses talent and music to affect change? *DAMN.* picks up from the end of this album and finds Lamar imagining what kind of prophet he might be. To do this, he imagines the character Kung Fu Kenny in order to meditate on the themes of the album in a removed reality. This essay will systematically walk through the album and highlight particularly how Jonah is utilized as a narrative guide for KFK throughout *DAMN.* The opening track, "BLOOD," begins with the lines, "is it wickedness? / is it weakness? / you decide." This is the central dichotomy of *DAMN.* and foreshadows the two different prophetic paths presented to KFK. In "DNA," Kung Fu Kenny is described as both "Yeshua's new weapon," and "the prophet [that] speaks."

¹ For the rest of this essay, Kung Fu Kenny will be shortened to KFK for brevity.

² The inspiration for this idea, and several of the points of comparison are owed to Cole Cuchna's podcast, Dissect, specifically season 5 which focuses on the album *DAMN.*

³ Lamar, Kendrick. "Real." Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2013.

Furthermore, during a rage-filled tirade against his enemies, Lamar raps “Level number 9 / Look up in the sky, 10 is on the way / Sentence on the way, killings on the way.” This cleverly alludes to the ten plagues that Moses prophesied against Egypt⁴ and firmly establishes the album within prophetic imagery.

The next track “YAH” further describes this prophet characterized in “DNA.” “New Kung Fu Kenny” specifically identifies as “an Israelite,” who knows that “God walks the earth.”⁵ The chorus then finds God calling KFK’s phone. The first half of God’s name, Yahweh, is hypnotically repeated (“Yah Yah, Yah Yah”) and sounds like a ringtone buzzing in the background. But, as “DNA” said, “his phone isn’t on and he doesn’t conversate,” so KFK ignores God’s call. The best biblical example of a prophet ignoring God’s call is Jonah who fled from the command of God to go to Nineveh.⁶ After ignoring God’s call, the following song, “ELEMENT,” finds KFK choosing to fall back into ‘wickedness’ which materializes in the vices of violence and sex. Near the end of the song, KFK says he will fake his death and flee to Cuba. This furthers the allusive comparison of KFK and Jonah, the latter of which also ignored God’s call, and fled in the opposite direction.⁷

In “FEEL,” KFK is overtaken by a storm of feelings on account of the traumatic content expressed in “ELEMENT.” The audience finds him questioning what he knows and the choices he has made. Again, the comparison with Jonah is brought to the forefront because he too, after choosing to ignore God’s call, is overtaken by a storm and forced to reconsider his choices.⁸ As KFK continues rapping, he speaks of the world ending, boxing demons, false prophets scheming, and the Loch Ness monster (which could be a subtle nod to the whale in Jonah⁹). These stanzas call to mind Biblical apocalyptic visions, further proof that the character of KFK is meant to be understood as a prophet.¹⁰ On the next track “LOYALTY,” KFK questions the loyalty of all those around him and, in a quiet moment of admission, recognizes that God has been truly loyal.

⁴ Exodus 7-12

⁵ Genesis 5 & 6 along with Malachi 2 all speak of God walking on earth. This also refers to Jesus.

⁶ Jonah 1:3

⁷ Jonah 1:3

⁸ This storm alludes to the storm that threatens Jonah and the sailors in Jonah 1:4.

⁹ Jonah 1:17. It also alludes to the chaos monster, Leviathan, from Revelations 12:3.

¹⁰ Daniel 7-12; Jude; Revelations 18:2 are several examples of apocalyptic writing in the Bible.

This small recognition of God's loyalty sparks the prophet's confession of his failings and desire for a better world; this occurs on the seventh track of the album, "PRIDE." The interesting nature of this song is that it is titled "PRIDE" but in reality, KFK acts humbly by admitting his failures and wishing for a better world. In the closing lines of the song, KFK admits that "we ain't shit, but he's been perfect." Here the listener finds KFK admitting that Christ is the only one who has been perfect. This song interestingly positions KFK directly opposite Jonah. Firstly, KFK is humble and "willing to show empathy" whereas Jonah is neither of these things. Secondly, KFK openly admits his shortcomings and claims that no one can be perfect, except Christ. Jonah, on the other hand, is full of pride and contempt for the sinful city of Nineveh. He claims that the very reason he fled toward Tarshish is that he knew that God would show mercy, and, according to Jonah's unempathetic logic, they deserved none.¹¹

In a *glaring* contrast to "PRIDE," "HUMBLE" finds KFK abandoning his previous stance of faithful humility and reverting to extreme materialism, pride, and braggadocio. KFK ironically commands his audience to be humble while he raps about how superior he is. Interestingly, KFK's message to his audience in "HUMBLE" strikingly resembles the comically short message that Jonah delivers to Nineveh.¹² In fact, both messages consist of just five words. Jonah's message literally translates, "yet, forty days [and] Nineveh [will be] overthrown."¹³ The chorus of "HUMBLE," which stands as KFK's message to his audience, is "Bitch, sit down, be humble." Both prophets seem to speak from a place of contempt and judgement; they have little to no care for their audience and can barely spare the time to say anything more than five words. The two tracks, "PRIDE" and "HUMBLE," are the heart of *DAMN*. and it is no coincidence that they lie at the center of the album. These two traits, pride and humility, represent the central dichotomy of wickedness vs. weakness as was introduced at the beginning of the album. In "PRIDE," a humble prophet confesses his shortcomings and points toward Christ, yet in "HUMBLE," a prideful prophet denounces all his enemies with threats and material flexing. The parallel with Jonah's story becomes clear here because Jonah is the prime example of a prophet who does not do God's will. In *DAMN*, KFK's actions mirror those of Jonah when he lets pride reign and walks in the way of wickedness. Alternatively, when KFK is walking in the way of weakness and choosing humility, his

¹¹ Jonah 4:1-3

¹² Jonah 3:4

¹³ The words in parentheses are added to make sense in english. (עוד ארבעים יום ויגונה נהפכת)

actions are juxtaposed to those of Jonah. The tracks “PRIDE” and “HUMBLE” stand as the lynchpin of KFK’s prophetic identity precisely because the choice between pride and humility determines the type of prophet that KFK will be.

The first six tracks of the album primarily describe KFK descending into pride and weakness, however, after the two central songs, “PRIDE” and “HUMBLE,” KFK slowly rises from the way of wickedness and begins to pursue humility. From here on, the comparison between KFK and Jonah disappears precisely because KFK begins to walk on a new path. The following songs oppose KFK’s previous message on “HUMBLE,” and begin to function as a new message to his audience. For instance, “LUST” is an elaborate critique of how many cultural/artistic leaders encourage the lustful tendencies of their audiences. Moreover, “LOVE,” intentionally contrasts “LUST” by beginning with the quote “love or lust, all of us.” Together, these songs add another level to the ‘wickedness vs. weakness’ dichotomy of the album while also communicating that this key choice is not just one that KFK has to make, but one that the audience faces as well.

On the track “XXX,” KFK explores the dark side of love and the violent lengths that he’d go to defend the ones he loves. This transitions into a critique of America where KFK says that the violence within himself is the product of American culture. Next, “FEAR” describes how the most prominent fruit of “poverty’s paradise” is fear itself. In the last verse of the song, KFK admits that fear is the foundation for the internal struggles played out on this album. He fears that he has lost humility, love, loyalty and he fears that his “DNA won’t let him involve in the light of God.”¹⁴ KFK continues, saying that he knows all these feelings are at war within him, and he is “searching for resolutions until somebody get back” i.e. when Jesus returns.

The penultimate track of the album, “GOD,” shows that the prophet has finally chosen the way of God and the way of weakness, not wickedness. This stands in stark contrast to Jonah’s story which abruptly ends with an argument between God and the prophet.¹⁵ In the final track, “DUCKWORTH,” Lamar steps away from the narrative of KFK and tells the true story wherein his survival in Compton, California and subsequent success as an artist was contingent upon several

¹⁴ The idea that flesh/sin withholds mankind from participation in God’s light is an important aspect of the message of the prophets, the history of Israel, and a pivotal tenet of the New Testament as well.

¹⁵ Jonah 4:9-11

acts of kindness. Had the ‘way of weakness’ not been pursued in this story, Lamar claims that he would have died in a gunfight as a teenager.

The story of Kung Fu Kenny in *DAMN.* is one of a prophet who abandons God’s call due to internal fear and pride. However, as the album progresses, the prophet begins to lament the error of his ways and slowly turns to pursue the way of God. Lamar cleverly utilizes the prophet Jonah as a guide to imagine how the prophet KFK walks in the way of wickedness. At the heart of that choice lies the two paths of pride and humility. According to the prophet, Kung Fu Kenny, the way of kindness, humility, and love, is superior to the way of violence, pride, and lust. The story of Jonah is utilized in an effort to imagine how an Israelite prophet, in the modern-day, could be led into pride and wickedness. However, unlike Jonah’s story, KFK’s story doesn’t end there; he turns back to humility and eventually brings the word of the Lord to modern-day listeners. Kung Fu Kenny is truly “Yeshua’s new weapon,” aimed directly at contemporary society. His message to the audience, much like his journey throughout *DAMN.*, is that they, too, face a choice between pride and humility, wickedness or weakness... “You decide.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Lamar, Kendrick. “BLOOD.” *Aftermath*/Interscope Records (TDE), 2017.

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