

Prophetic Ethics

Christian Reflection

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These study guides are available by free download from our website www.ChristianEthics.ws. They integrate Bible study, prayer, worship, and reflection on themes in this issue.

JESUS AS A PROPHET

Jesus' teachings and actions, which can appear eccentric and mysterious to us, are often oracles and symbolic actions like those of Israel's prophets. How do Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection promise the return of prophetic guidance to God's people?

WOULD THAT ALL WERE PROPHETS

The New Testament, in addition to designating specific people as prophets, portrays the church as a prophetic voice to the world. What role should prophets play in the church's communal practice of moral discernment?

I AM ABOUT TO DO A NEW THING

God's power both comforts and confuses us. Some prophetic texts shock us with their brutality. Yet in the prophetic tradition there is a compelling vision of power that can transform the whole of creation, if only we have eyes to see and minds to perceive it.

PROPHECY FROM THE SIDELINES

Post-exilic prophets characterized the divine purpose differently when the governing power no longer was God's king, but a foreign ruler. What can these prophets teach us about God's work within a pluralist culture?

EXTREME VIRTUES

As disciples of Jesus, we are called to exhibit the extreme virtues which characterized the lives and teachings of Israel's prophets, such as justice, steadfast love, and humility.

THE PROPHET AS STORYTELLER

With stories, prophets can slip past our mental defenses, stimulate our moral imagination, and deliver unexpected emotional jolts. From the prophet Nathan to Flannery O'Connor, their storytelling reaches into our hearts, not just our heads.

THE SIGN OF JONAH

Jesus' mysterious invocation of "the sign of Jonah" became, for Christians facing persecution and death in the early third century, a promise of God's ultimate act of grace and deliverance: resurrection from the dead.

Introduction

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

Israel's prophets continue to challenge us through their disturbing preaching and bizarre behavior. These "Spirit-bearing people" model for the church what it means to become a prophetic voice to the world.

The prophets of Israel are enigmatic, eccentric characters, who shock us with their disturbing preaching and bizarre behavior. Eccentricities aside, we ought not to dismiss them or their message.

By consistently linking right worship with right living, Israel's prophets reminded the people of God that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable. Likewise, prophets in the church today enable us to recognize and resist the sinful defects of our society, and give us hope that we can live in authentic Christian community. Importantly, they also challenge our own sinfulness, when they spot the cultural distortions that crust our congregations.

Our contributors remind us that, in addition to designating specific people as prophets, the New Testament portrays the church as a prophetic voice to the world. When Paul said he would like to see all the Corinthians prophesy, Tracy Stout notes in *Would That All Were Prophets* (p. 9), he was echoing Moses' wish that all God's people be prophets.

As the church reclaims the prophetic tradition of confronting the sinful defects of society, we will need to 'unpack' carefully the prophets' kaleidoscopic portrait of God's power from the context of their ancient worldview. The prophets offer "a compelling vision of power that can be transformative for all creation," Carol Dempsey urges in *I Am About to Do a New Thing* (p. 16), "if only we have eyes to see and open minds to engage in wonder and critical theological reflection."

In *Prophecy from the Sidelines* (p. 24), Paul Redditt explores how five post-exilic prophets characterize the divine purpose when the governing power no longer is God's king but is a foreign ruler. What can these proph-

ets teach us, he wonders, about God's work within a pluralist culture? Their disagreements about the contours of Israel's future, he suggests, became a rich resource for the early Christians' proclamation of the good news: "In Jesus and the church, they declared, the longed-for restoration of Israel had occurred in the most unexpected way."

"Critics of the church, both within and outside, charge she is loudly silent on a host of [ethical] issues that are on the agenda of the world," Randall O'Brien laments in *The Church: A Non-Prophet Organization?* (p. 32). We misrepresent Christ when we proclaim cheap grace, grace that comes without repentance. "Do we not each stand in danger of judgment and in need of Christ's grace?" O'Brien asks. "The true prophet of God says so. Where have all the prophets gone?"

So, who are the prophets today? Who, by their prophetic action and teaching, help us discern the vision of God for our culture and inspire us to enter the works of God's kingdom? With her razor sharp and winsome sense of humor, Flannery O'Connor was one of America's finest prophets, suggests Christina Bieber in *The Prophet as Storyteller* (p. 75). "Like the prophet Nathan, who confronted King David through artful storytelling," Bieber says, "she understood the power of fiction to engage the ethical imagination and deliver a much-needed emotional jolt." In O'Connor, we meet a storyteller who shakes us out of our complacent self-assuredness and reveals God's judgment on our lives.

The words of Israel's prophets confront us in a service of worship by David Miller (p. 45). Miller leads us to seek the same Holy Spirit that inspired their oracles, praying: "Send your Spirit into eyes that will see visions of the people we should be, into hands that will help lead us back onto the path, into voices that will sing songs enticing us to holiness, and even into us, that we might grow to know your love." These prayers and readings are also suitable for personal and study-group devotion. Many of the suggested hymns may be found in several hymnals. A new hymn by Terry York with music by David Bolin, *In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing* (p. 51), echoes Bieber's insight and celebrates the prophetic potential of the Christian artist, "composer, painter, poet."

Heidi Hornik, in *The Sign of Jonah* (p. 54), explores the prophetic insight of a third-century artist who sculpted the remarkable "Jonah marbles." Drawing upon Christian, Jewish, and pagan sources, the sculptor depicted the prophet's story as a sign of the Christian gospel. Hornik observes, "Christians threatened by persecution and death in the Roman Empire found hope in the 'sign of Jonah,' which pointed toward the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the shepherd and savior of those who believe in him."

We continue to discern this rich interplay between the gospel and Israel's prophetic tradition. Lea Pardue Slaton, in *Lord, Have Mercy* (p. 71), opens the prophecy of Hosea to enrich our appreciation of grace. Through

oracle and example, the prophet urges us to “follow God’s lead in feeling others’ hurt, knowing their fears, and allowing them to become part of us and change our hearts.”

The prophets can help shape our character as disciples of Jesus in other ways, David Fillingim writes in *Extreme Virtues* (p. 63). We are called, as the prophet Micah teaches, “to live lives of extreme virtue, demonstrating justice, steadfast love, humility, and other godly traits in our attitudes and behaviors.”

In our worship, in various ways we gladly welcome the return of prophecy to God’s people through the Holy Spirit. Carol Younger suggests in *Swimming with the Prophets* (p. 68) that the water of our baptism embodies the prophet Joel’s report, “‘I will pour out my Spirit on them,’ declares the LORD.” The Holy Spirit that inspires prophecy can be unpredictable, rather more like a wild goose than a dove, the Celtic monks taught. In *The Wild Goose* (p. 40), Bob Kruschwitz recalls a church business meeting filled with dueling prophecies about a new sanctuary, which illustrated this Celtic insight! We ought not to reject prophecy, but to rely upon the church’s discernment of the truths within competing prophecies. This was symbolized, for Kruschwitz, when a cross was installed in the new sanctuary. “I am moved when I see that big cross, empty, for it proclaims the Son of Man is alive. It says, ‘The Wild Goose is loose in our world, forever and ever.’”

Given our great cultural distance from Israel’s prophets, how can we stand in this prophetic tradition and boldly face the moral issues of today? Abraham Joshua Heschel’s *The Prophets*, Carol Dempsey’s *The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading*, and Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination* help us to appreciate the prophets and apply their message with critical discernment. As Mark Biddle shows in his review, *Reading the Prophets* (p. 82), these books provide “abundant stimulation for dealing with the abiding questions: How can the church best participate in God’s pain at human infidelity and cruelty, in God’s anger at injustice, in God’s love for God’s children? What is the proper mode for expressing God’s pathos without perpetuating dangerous metaphors or engaging in fruitless confrontation?”

“How should the church maintain its prophetic, alien voice in our culture, given society’s significant commitment to liberal, capitalist democracy?” asks Keith Putt in *Rendering to Caesar, Surrendering to God* (p. 87). He guides us through the lively and crucial debate in Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon’s *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* and Robert P. Kraynak’s *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in a Fallen World*. “They write as prophets,” Putt observes, reminding us “that the church must be an engaged, counter-cultural organization that gives ultimate allegiance only to God as revealed in Christ and made known through the Spirit, and lives out the Christian narrative critically and compassionately within any and every form of government.” ☩

Would That All Were Prophets

BY TRACEY MARK STOUT

Israel's prophets are enigmatic, eccentric characters, who shock us with disturbing preaching and bizarre behavior. Eccentricities aside, we ought not to dismiss them or their message. By drawing on their tradition, today's prophets continue to build up the church to become a prophetic voice to the culture around it.

The prophets in the Old Testament are some of the more peculiar and fascinating biblical figures. With their preaching and bizarre behavior they hoped to jar and awaken their hearers. Isaiah walked around Jerusalem naked and barefoot to appear as a prisoner of war. Jeremiah bought a clay jug and, after gathering some elders and priests, he smashed the pot to the ground. This, he told them, is what God had in store for Judah. Ezekiel took prophetic strange actions to new heights, digging through the wall of his house and shaving off his hair and beard, piles of which he chopped or burned or threw to the winds.

It is doubtful that anyone asked a prophet home for supper more than once.¹ Not only the prophets' actions, but also their imagery was shocking. Amos angrily referred to the wealthy women of Israel as fat cows from the fertile region of Bashan. Micah called the leaders of Judah cannibals who stripped the bones and ate the flesh of their subjects. No wonder that many people see the biblical prophets as enigmatic, eccentric people. Yet, we should not let these curious actions and pronouncements cause us to dismiss the prophets who brought them. The church cannot afford to ignore the prophetic tradition in Israel.

MESSENGERS FOR GOD

The Old Testament prophets often are misunderstood to be tellers of the future, in a category with Nostradamus or Jean Dixon. Though they may seem cryptic, they were not primarily fore-tellers. The prophets were messengers who spoke for God; they brought a divine message to the people of Israel that was needed for a particular time. Since these histori-

The prophets consistently linked right worship with right living. They reminded the people of Israel that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable.

cally particular oracles have been accepted as authoritative Scripture, their messages have become prophecy to each new generation.

The prophets consistently linked right worship with right living, and idolatry with injustice. They reminded the people of Israel of their responsi-

bility under their covenant with God, that their religious observance and how they lived the 'rest' of their lives were inseparable. The words of the prophets echo the statement of Samuel to Saul: "Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Samuel 15:22). This statement encapsulates the heart of the prophetic tradition. God wants fidelity and obedience, not merely religious zeal to cover our mistakes and omissions. This insight into the relationship between what one worships and how one lives resounds throughout the prophetic books.

As a messenger for God, Hosea told the Israelites, "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). Amos's tirades against the apathy of the wealthy and the oppression of the poor are the epitome of the prophetic critique of a religiosity that has become an end in itself and disregards justice and righteousness. "I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:21-22a, 24). Micah warned that God does not require burnt offerings or rivers of oil, but "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:6-8). To the prophets, the religious life was inherently a moral life.

The righteous God of Israel expected righteousness from the people. God wanted Israel to form an egalitarian society, different from that of

the Egyptians or the Canaanites who had a monarchy that survived by the toil of the peasants. The law given with the covenant sought to prevent an accumulation of wealth and power by one group. When the people disregarded the intention of the covenant, their treatment of the poor and the powerless—the orphan, the widow, and the stranger—were indicators of the disease of their society.

The prophets used harsh imagery and bizarre actions to penetrate the numbness and satiation of the wealthy, comfortable members of society. Their critiques were biting and vehement when the obligations of the covenant were ignored.² Courageous prophets like Nathan and Elijah stood up to the royal families, insisting that even powerful kings like David and Ahab must obey the covenant.

The prophets, as Abraham Joshua Heschel has pointed out, were iconoclasts who challenged the comfortable beliefs and religious pretensions of the people.³ Jeremiah stood up in the Temple in Jerusalem and attacked the belief that it was inviolable. He spoke against the popular, cherished notion that nothing could happen to the Temple regardless of the people's unfaithfulness to God. The people adopted "The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord, The Temple of the Lord" as an invocation for their own safety (7:4); in another time they could have made "Temple of the Lord" bumper stickers or "TOTL" bracelets and t-shirts. Jeremiah was almost killed for crying out against these pretensions. Many prophets were lonely people who stood opposed to the kings, religious leaders, and sometimes the common people. Yet during the exile some biblical prophets brought a message of hope and comfort to war-torn and exiled Judah. When the need in Israel changed, the prophets modulated their tone.

We should remember that the prophets were representative of the task assigned to all Israelites, who, as God's people, were to be a kingdom of priests mediating between God and the rest of the world. The Book of Numbers contains an interesting account of seventy elders who were chosen to help Moses bear his burden of leadership over the Israelites. The people were complaining about their situation in the wilderness, particularly their boring and steady diet of manna. After the newly appointed elders received the divine spirit, they prophesied in the wilderness; two other men who were named as elders but remained in the camp also prophesied. Joshua urged Moses to rebuke them and retain a unique position as prophet or spokesperson for God, but Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them" (Numbers 11:29). Joshua was worried about Moses' leadership in the face of these others prophesying; Moses was concerned for the community's obedience to the Lord. Moses desired that all God's people be able to speak to one another regarding their obligations as people of the covenant.

JESUS AS A PROPHET

The Gospels present Jesus as the greatest of the prophets.⁴ Jesus is more than simply a prophet, of course, but he is nothing less. His critiques of the religious leaders of his day clearly reflect the prophetic tradition of Israel; he urged them to make their lives match their devotion to the Lord. Using strong imagery in the prophetic fashion, he called them “white-washed tombs” and “a brood of snakes.” Quoting Jeremiah, Jesus drove the merchants out of the outer court of the temple because they disrupted the Temple’s witness to the Gentiles (Mark 11:17). His prophetic stance against religious and political leaders resulted in his death.

Jesus’ teachings, too, were prophetic utterances. His vision of the kingdom of God, for instance, is grounded in the Old Testament prophetic vision of the restoration of creation. The book of Isaiah envisions a future time of peace and righteousness, when all creatures will be reconciled, at peace with one another and with God (Isaiah 11:1-10). Jesus likewise described the kingdom as a great reversal of rivalries—of great and small, rich and poor, and servants and masters. His was a prophetic vision of God’s future meant to speak to the present day.

The kingdom of God, Jesus announced, was close at hand for all the creation. Some in Jesus’ day expected one who, like a great Davidic king, would restore the nation of Israel, right the wrongs done to them, and establish a kingdom of justice and peace. Jesus accepted this messianic expectation, but gave it a new character. He preached peace rather than violent assault on his enemies. Often Jesus used images from the farm and home to describe the growth of God’s kingdom: it will be like a sprouting mustard seed, yeast that causes a loaf to rise, or seeds scattered on the arable ground. In these agrarian metaphors the kingdom comes by God’s mysterious working, and not through human improvements.

Jesus instituted a new social order. Those who follow him are to serve one another, and not to rule like the tyrants and lords of the Gentiles. To be great in the kingdom is to serve, not to dominate. As the greatest of the prophets Jesus revealed to us God’s intention for the formation of a new type of community.⁵ As a new Moses, Jesus instituted a new society; he placed high moral demands upon those in his new covenant, not in order to receive salvation, but to express the salvation they were receiving from God.

PROPHETS IN THE EARLY CHURCH

The apostle Paul includes prophecy with ministry, teaching, exhortation, leadership, giving, and compassion as spiritual gifts given by God to members in the church (Romans 12:4-8; compare 1 Corinthians 12:8-11). Just as the human body has many parts which function differently, all to achieve the health and well-being of the whole body, likewise the church, which is the body of Christ, has many members with varied gifts to build

up and keep the church healthy. A similar list in the book of Ephesians states that some people in the church are to be prophets (Ephesians 4:11-13). The saints must be equipped for their common ministry, and prophets are among those who work to achieve that end.

“Pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts,” Paul urges all of the church members at Corinth, “and especially that you may prophesy” (1 Corinthians 14:1). Prophets speak to the believing community for “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (14:3). Because prophecy is meant to edify the entire community, it is a greater gift than speaking in tongues, which is meant for individuals. Five intelligible words of upbuilding and encouragement are better for the community than ten thousand private words, Paul says, so church members should be eager to prophesy to one another.

What did these prophets say? Did they, like the Epistle of James, teach that pure religion in the sight of God is to visit orphans and widows and to keep oneself unstained by the world (1:27)? In James’ insistence that works must always accompany true faith we hear echoes of Amos’ and Jeremiah’s critiques of Israelite religion.

We can glimpse specific prophets’ roles within the early church in the story of Judas and Silas, who as prophets in the Antioch church “said much to encourage and strengthen the believers” (Acts 15:32). When another prophet, Agabus, warned them to prepare for a coming time of famine, the Antioch believers began

saving money to send to the Jerusalem church (11:28-30). These prophets, like those in the Old Testament, called their community to its mission and obligations as God’s people. Church members accepted them as authoritative voices as the church discerned how it should act as the body of Christ.

In addition to designating specific people as prophets, the New Testament also portrays the entire church as being a prophetic voice to the world.⁶ Paul, when he told the Corinthians that he would like to see all of them prophesy, was endorsing Moses’ wish that all God’s people be prophets. The recognition of particular individuals within the church who are gifted to serve as prophets should remind all church members of their calling to a prophetic ministry.

In addition to designating specific people as prophets, the New Testament portrays the church as a prophetic voice to the world.

When Paul says he would like to see all the Corinthians prophesy, he echoes Moses’ wish that all God’s people be prophets.

WHO ARE THE PROPHETS TODAY?

Are there people, either on the national scene or in local congregations, who are prophetic voices for the Christian community today? Who is calling the church to appraise the relationship between its worship and its life?

I am not identifying those who are the prophets in the church today, since that is something for congregations to discern within their life to-

As a provisional representation of God's kingdom, the church transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnicity. Christians are still learning that God's concerns cannot be identified with the concerns of any single nation.

gether. Christians are to "test the spirits," to examine in their communities each prophet's words (1 John 4:1; compare 1 Corinthians 14:29). We must listen to the voices we hear around us and search for those who have a finger on the pulse of the church, can read the signs of the times, and

will call them back to the God whom they met in Jesus Christ.

As we deliberate together in church about how to live, prophets call us to fidelity to Christ and keep us mindful of what he expects of his people as we make decisions and face difficulties. They shake us into wide-eyed awareness of the needs of the present hour. They question the religious pretensions that cloud our judgment and expose the idols that we place before God. Those with the gift of prophecy help us to understand our situation in light of God's new way in the world.

The prophets, as Paul emphasized, build up the entire church to become a prophetic voice to the culture around it. Jesus established and made possible, by his life, death, and resurrection, a new way of being in the world. With his life and his cross as our paradigm, the church lives in the Spirit, in the way of Jesus. Thus, the life of the church should serve as a prophetic word to the surrounding community.⁷

Though the Old Testament prophets spoke primarily to the Israelites, they also brought oracles against the surrounding nations for their sins. Yahweh is not simply a tribal deity, they claimed, but is the only true God of the universe. Likewise, Jesus depicted God's kingdom as made up of all nations, peoples, and tribes. As a provisional representation of that kingdom, the church is also to be one body which transcends the boundaries of nation and ethnicity. In our dispersed existence, Christians are still learning that God's concerns cannot be identified with the concerns of any single nation. Indeed, this is one reason that Christians in North America need to listen to the prophetic voices from the churches in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

With Moses and Paul, we yearn that all God's people be prophets. My Christian tradition speaks often of the priesthood of all believers, which means that all members are to intercede for and aid one another. We also should speak of the *prophethood* of all believers. All people in the church—whether pastors, deacons, or Sunday school teachers, grandmothers or youth, theologians or novelists—have opportunities for putting the church back on track when it wanders into peripheral paths and issues.

As believers, we should prophetically proclaim the truth in love and hold one another accountable to our obligations. Let our prayer be that all may be prophets, concerned for the life of the people of God as a witness to the world.

NOTES

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 73.

² Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 5-46.

³ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets: An Introduction*, volume 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 10-12.

⁴ Theologians speak of the three-fold offices of Christ. Jesus was prophet, priest, and king. Unfortunately Jesus as prophet is often overlooked out of the fear of implying "just" a prophet.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, revised edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), 52.

⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, volume 4, part 3.2, translated by G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 895-98.

⁷ Yoder, 185-87.



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I Am About To Do a New Thing

BY CAROL J. DEMPSEY, O.P.

The kaleidoscopic portrait of God's power in the prophets both comforts and confuses us. Yet within the biblical text there is a compelling vision of power that can transform the whole of creation, if only we have eyes to see and minds to engage it.

God's power both comforts and confuses us. We frequently wonder, "How are we to understand an 'all-powerful' God when there is so much pain and suffering in the world?" Related to this question is a second one, "Who and what is *empowered* by God?"

Like us, biblical people grappled with these questions as they made sense of the events of their day. Scripture captures their thought and provides us with a kaleidoscopic portrait of God's power. Like all artistic expressions, this portrait is historically, culturally, and theologically conditioned. So, we need to 'unpack,' from the context of their ancient worldview, the attribute of God's power, for it continues to have a tremendous impact on our lives today. Within the pages of the biblical text is a compelling vision of power that can be transformative for all creation, if only we have eyes to see and open minds to engage in wonder and critical theological reflection. Will we allow this biblical vision of God's power to move us forward as we, in turn, move the vision forward into a world that waits to be unfettered from its shackles? All creation is groaning, and the biblical vision of God's power calls out, prophetically and with urgency, to the human community.

POWER IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

Before Israel became a monarchal nation state, it was an agrarian, tribal

group of people residing in villages, assemblies, and households, whose primary concern and responsibility was the welfare and protection of their own members. Power rested within the community and was exercised on behalf of the community's common good. Four groups of people were recognized as community leaders: elders, judges, priests, and prophets. Each group had a specific role to fulfill within the community, and each role carried with it a certain amount of "power." The elders advised on community issues (Jeremiah 18:18; Ezekiel 7:26), hearing and trying legal cases (1 Samuel 16:4; Ruth 4:1-2; Jeremiah 26; Jeremiah 37:1-21), among other duties of administration. The judges came to the aid of the community in times of military threat from other peoples; God "raised them up" and was present with them (Judges 2:16-18). Unlike the elders, though, the judges were transitional leaders who paved the way for, and were replaced by, the next group of leaders, the kings. The priests had the tasks of serving God, caring for the sanctuary (see, e.g., 1 Samuel 1-3), performing cultic rituals and services (Exodus 24:5-9; 27:20-21; 30:7-9; Leviticus 25:5-9), caring for the community's physical infirmities (Leviticus 13-15), and, most especially, teaching the Torah (Deuteronomy 31:9-11). The prophets, imbued with the spirit of God, were the heralds of God's word to the community and intercessors to God on behalf of the community. Gifted with a sense of "double vision," they offered a word of hope and a word of judgment in their attempts to draw the people deeper into covenant relationship with God and with one another, and to call the community to ethical responsibility.

During Israel's early days the people thought variously of God as the creator of all (and later, as the wisdom behind creation); the liberator of their community from Egyptian bondage; the one whose love finds expression in the Law, given for the people's well being; and the one who blesses the obedient and curses the disobedient. Not until the rise of the monarchy did a royal theology take root in the life of ancient Israel

Gifted with a sense of "double vision," prophets offered words of hope and judgment to draw people deeper into covenant relationship with God and with one another, and to call the community to ethical responsibility.

(Deuteronomy 17:14-20; 1 Samuel 8:1-10:1; 16:1-13; 1 Kings 2:1-12; 3:1-15); the divine covenant made with David established a specific and personal relationship between God, David, and his descendants in the monarchy. This emerging royal theology, together with Israel's patriarchal tradition, shifted the main locus of power from groups within the community to the

kings governing “over” the newly formed “kingdom,” with God identified as the one “over” the king. In this shift, the term “dominion,” which once was associated with *keeping*, *tilling*, and *caring* in the creation accounts (Genesis 1-2; Psalms 104:1-30), took on new nuances of *power over*, *domination*, and *control*, especially as social classes and economic strata emerged in Israelite society and as kings abused royal power. For many Israelites, God became associated with the ruling male hierarchy of the day; the understanding of God and God’s power became likened to the king and the king’s power. This influenced the community’s religious imagination, how they viewed history and God through the eyes of faith.

Yet, the spirit of God—who created the world, blessed Abraham and made great promises to his sons Isaac and Ishmael alike, and liberated, forgave, and promised faithfulness to Israel—is the same spirit that calls into question this royal theology. This is the spirit who comes to rest upon Jesus, who not only embraced his tradition but also perfected it, leaving us with the gift of a renewed vision of God’s power.

THE OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS

Nowhere else in the Bible do we encounter such a vivid picture of God’s power as that depicted in the writings of the prophets. Here we discover varying examples of how power can be used to dominate, to liberate, and to engender harmonious relationships based on a non-violent vision of justice and righteousness. Let’s remember as we read these texts that besides having a royal theology as early as the tenth century B.C., Israel lived among warring countries. Thus, the ideologies of war shaped Israel’s theological imagination. God became “Lord Sabaoth,” the commander-in-chief of the “hosts,” just as the king was the commander-in-chief of the military forces. Also in the times of the prophets, particularly in the eighth century B.C., neighboring peoples worshipped the baals, or fertility gods. Israel came to experience its God as one greater than the baals (Hosea 2:16-23). For many members of the Israelite community, their sense of God evolved into “King of kings,” “Lord of lords,” “God of gods,” and “warrior God” as their lived experience and culture shaped their religious sensibility. Their God exercised justice and sovereignty “over all,” in the hierarchical manner of their later kings’ *domination* instead of the *dominion* associated with the creator God and King David. We see this sense of God’s use of power for the sake of domination in the book of Amos.

AMOS 1:3-2:16

POWER AND DOMINATION

Divine power is exercised on behalf of justice in the series of proclamations against Syria-Damascus in Amos 1:3-2:16, but *how* this power is exercised raises ethical questions for believers today. In each one of these proclamations, Amos highlights the various injustices of which the nations

are guilty: Damascus has launched a terrible military campaign against Gilead, one of Israel's wealthiest territories; Gaza is guilty of slave trade; Tyre has committed the same crime as Gaza; Edom pursues his brother with a sword and without pity; the Ammonites have ripped open pregnant women in Gilead to enlarge their own territory; Moab has desecrated and burned the royal bones of the king of Edom; Judah has rejected God's law and gone astray; and Israel is guilty of a number of injustices: some Israelites have exploited the righteous and needy (2:6), abused the poor (2:7a), denied the afflicted access to the court system and prohibited them from fair treatment, sexually exploited a maiden (2:7b), economically exploited poor men and widows (2:8a), drunk ill-gotten wine in holy places (2:8b), and made the Nazirites drink wine, an act that was against their vows of consecration (2:12; see Numbers 6:3-4; Judges 13:14). Clearly, the nations, including Judah and Israel, have heaped up injustice upon injustice. In each proclamation, the biblical text depicts God as intending to exercise power punitively and violently in response to the nation's transgressions: "I will send fire on the house of Hazeel" (1:4); "I will break the gate bars of Damascus" (1:5); "I will send a fire on the wall of Gaza ... Tyre ... Teman ... Rabbah ... Moab ... Judah" (see 1:7, 10, 12, 14; 2:2, 5); "I will press you down in your place" (2:13). In essence, God will not tolerate injustice.

The passage shows a hierarchy of power in the ancient biblical world, with Israel's God being the most powerful of all powers who could overtake even the strongest peoples. It is a clear example of *lex talionis*, an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The various groups have committed crimes; therefore, God will exercise divine power and chastise them with force.

For the community of believers today, this description of God asserting punitive, forceful power to correct injustice could be (and should be) a disconcerting text because it seems to sanction the use of violence to put an end to violence. Furthermore, the passage depicts God as the "God of the nations" whose power is similar to, but greater than any power on earth. It presents a vision of divine power being used to dominate others for the sake of ensuring future justice. We must remember, however, that

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the biblical poet's description of God's power has been shaped by the historical events of the eighth century B.C., along with the social, cultural, and theological perspectives of that time period. It reflects the embeddedness of these events and perspectives in the thought of an ancient people. When we read Amos 1:3-2:16 in the context of today's world, we ask, "Is not this

A magnificent vision of divine power is the messianic figure, the servant who is empowered by God's spirit to bring forth justice and righteousness by acting justly and with integrity.

sort of power present in our world today, particularly among some of our world leaders?" If we do not interpret this passage with a critical theological lens, then it might appear to sanction the use of punitive power to chastise and dominate other peoples; because, according to a flat reading of the

text, does not God exercise this kind of power? We turn now to a passage from the book of Jeremiah that offers a different view of divine power.

JEREMIAH 50:17-20

POWER, RESTORATION, AND LIBERATION

The northern kingdom Israel lost its land to the Assyrians around 721-722 B.C. and the southern kingdom Judah fell to the Babylonians in 587 B.C. These invading countries took advantage of social, political, and religious discord to conquer the Israelites' land. The prophets viewed this loss of land as God's "chastising" the people's wayward state of apostasy, idolatry, and other transgressions; losing the land reflected their loss of right relationship with God and one another. Assyria and Babylon were viewed as God's instruments of wrath.

Jeremiah 50:17-20 announces a word of hope to Israel in the midst of the peoples' desolate state of exile and perceived abandonment by God. Israel, "a hunted sheep driven away by lions" will be restored (17, 19); God is going to exert divine power "to punish the king of Babylon and his land" as God punished the king of Assyria (18). Israel's freedom from exile and restoration to the land comes, according to the biblical text, as a result of God exercising power punitively on behalf of Israel. Liberation and restoration will be welcomed gifts for Israel, but they come at a price to another country. Babylon will be decimated by God's divine power (50:21-51:58). The fall of corrupt Babylon was inevitable, and the biblical text records the prophet's interpretation of this event through the eyes of faith, a perspective which was conditioned by the culture and beliefs of his day.

This type of power asserted for the sake of restoration and liberation, which is described by Jeremiah, is present in our contemporary world.

When read in the light of Jeremiah 50:17-20, this type of power could be seen as “godly.” The question that arises, however, is: “How ethical or godly is this assertion of power when its effect is the devastation of another country?” A passage from the book of Isaiah turns the prophetic kaleidoscope to yet a third perspective on God’s power.

ISAIAH 11:1-9; 42:1-4

POWER, NON-VIOLENCE, AND RIGHT RELATIONSHIP

This model of divine power is found in the messianic figure, the servant who is empowered by God’s spirit to bring forth justice and righteousness by acting justly and with integrity. Isaiah 11:1-9 is a magnificent vision of this new leader who, filled with the spirit of God, will govern the people with justice and equity, and whose only sword will be his strong and powerful word. The effect of such wise and spirit-filled governance will be enduring peace, symbolized in the text by images and metaphorical language representative of the natural world.

In Isaiah 42:1-4 the prophet describes God’s servant as one filled with God’s spirit. This servant will persist in bringing forth justice to the nations, but with gentleness and compassion: “a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” Implied in the “bruised reed” image is the oppressor.

These passages speak of a new model of divine power: God’s spirit empowering human beings to govern justly, compassionately, and wisely (see also Isaiah 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-4). They suggest a model of leadership that is non-hierarchical, with the leader’s power rooted in and flowing from God’s spirit, the same spirit that rushed upon David at the time of his anointing (1 Samuel 16:13) and filled the prophet Micah (Micah 3:8). This leader will live out the eschatological vision of the prophets and usher in the hoped for reign of God, a time of non-violence, an enduring season of shalom (Isaiah 2:4; Micah 4:3).

JESUS THE MESSIAH

The prophets’ vision of the servant-leader, the one empowered by God, the one on whom God’s spirit rests, who exercises divine power with justice and compassion to liberate people from all sorts of suffering and oppression, including sin, comes to fruition in Jesus. He is the Messiah, son of David, son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1), whose mission and message of salvation is not only to Israel but also to the Gentiles, to all nations (Matthew 12:18-21; Luke 24:45-47).

Imbued with God’s spirit, which made prophets bold and sages wise, Jesus lived his entire life in the shadow of the Cross and allowed himself to experience a prophet’s reward and a criminal’s sentence: death on that cross. And it was through God’s power that he was liberated from death and raised to new life by the Author and Creator of life. Jesus’ entire mis-

sion, ministry, and life bears witness to God's divine power, to God's spirit, enfleshed. The divine power enabled him to seek reconciliation with those who betrayed him, pierced him, and strung him up on a cross to die: "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 22:34). It freed him to let go to God: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" (Luke 23:46). It is this power that willed him to live, in his resur-

God's power is to be understood as life-giving, liberating, transformative, and restorative for all. It is a blessing, a gift, at the heart of life, and one that has been poured out upon and entrusted to the community of believers.

rection, and that he passes on to generations down through the ages to the present time (Luke 24:49; John 20:22; Acts 1:8). This divine power and divine spirit are one and the same, and both are at the core of all being, all life, forever liberating and transforming until all creation reflects the oneness, goodness, wholeness, and holiness of God.

GOD'S POWER AND OUR CALLING

We can see that different biblical writers gave varied expressions to God's power, based on their perceptions, teachings of the day, and influences that shaped their thinking. In the writings of the prophets in particular, various passages speak of power as force for domination, power as force for liberation, and power as a divine gift that engenders peace and right relationships characterized by respect and integrity. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, particularly in the prophets, these varied expressions of power shift, interact, and intersect with one another. When interpreted together, these shifts reveal not only the human condition but also the divine vision of the goal of the created order, which is life lived freely, fully, and in peace with God, one another, and all creation.

Thus, God's power is to be understood as life-giving, liberating, transformative, and restorative for all. It is a blessing, a gift, at the heart of life, and one that has been poured out upon and entrusted to the community of believers. We, as members of this community living in a terrorist-torn and threatened world that totters on the brink of ecological disaster, are called to exercise this divine power, this divine spirit, and to help set it free with others as well.

With the prophets, we have an ethical responsibility to be astutely aware of the issues of our day, to search for truth in the midst of the issues, and to make known God and God's ways. With Jesus, we have a mission to be carried out and a baptism to be received. In this regard,

God's power is a curse because like Jeremiah and Jesus, we will have to go where we would rather not go, say what we would rather not say, and do what we would rather not do. We are the servants, the leaders of the new day spoken about by the prophets. The vision goes before us. It will cost us not less than everything, and although we will taste death, God's divine power assures us that, in the end, we will enjoy Life.



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Prophecy from the Sidelines

BY PAUL L. REDDITT

After the exile, the prophets of Israel had limited access to the real political powers of the day. Governed by distant Persian kings, they could not directly address their rulers. As spectators on the sidelines, not players on the field, they could cheer and boo, but not influence decisions in the clubhouse or the owner's office.

Isaiah was a major player in his society, with access to the king of Judah and the temple. He could speak to other major players as one of them. Jeremiah was not so fortunate; he was a Northerner living in the Southern kingdom of Judah and a member of a disenfranchised priestly family (Jeremiah 1:1). Even so, he was able at times to interact with the king of Judah and other leaders, though often as their adversary. With Ezekiel, prophecy entered a new phase, for he was a captive in a foreign land. Yet even he could look to Jehoiachin, a descendant of David who had ruled in Jerusalem briefly, as a companion in exile, though Ezekiel's vision for the future included a monarch with markedly less power than in pre-exilic days (Ezekiel 45:7-9).

After the period of the exile (586-539 B.C.), however, the prophets in Judah functioned under a foreign king, usually with no Davidic ruler present, even as a puppet. Unlike their predecessors, post-exilic prophets could not directly address their king, now the ruler of the Persian Empire. Priests and other leaders probably collaborated with Persian officials in order to maintain their stations, but such low-level patronage is quite different from facing an indigenous ruler directly. (In the early years after the exile, Jerusalem probably answered to provincial rulers in Samaria. Perhaps not until the career of Nehemiah did Jerusalem serve as a political center again, even for the tiny state of post-exilic Judah.) Thus the prophets after

the exile had limited access to the real political power. They constituted, as it were, spectators on the sidelines, not players on the field. They could cheer and boo, encourage or cajole local players, but they could not influence decisions in the clubhouse or the owner's office.

In that new situation, five post-exilic prophets proclaimed somewhat different messages. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for the restitution of the monarchy and urged the rebuilding of the temple. However, Malachi, Joel, and the anonymous speaker(s) in Zechariah 9-14 envisioned a different future: they agreed that the new day promised in Isaiah 40-55, Jeremiah 29-31, and Ezekiel 34-48 had not come to fruition because the local leaders and priests had been unfaithful to God, but they did not always agree in detail about what the future held for Israel or the other nations.

For the first Christians, this disagreement among post-exilic prophetic texts became a rich resource for proclaiming the good news. In Jesus and the church, they declared, the longed-for restoration of Israel had occurred in the most unexpected way.

HAGGAI'S HOPE FOR A NEW KINGDOM

Cyrus the Great, who founded the Persian Empire, captured Babylon in 539 B.C. The following year he allowed Jewish exiles to return to Canaan and authorized rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 (2 Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-4; 5:15b). Apparently, that first mission was led by Sheshbazzar (Ezra 5:16), who began to rebuild the temple, but did not complete it. Haggai and Zechariah urged a Davidic prince named Zerubbabel and a high priest named Joshua to take up the task again in the year 519 (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1:12-15). The Judean community finished the rebuilding in 515 (Ezra 6:14-15).

The prophet Haggai predicted the overthrow of the Persian Empire and the restoration of the Davidic monarchy in the person of Zerubbabel (2:20-23). God would make Zerubbabel "like a signet ring," reversing the rebuke of his grandfather, the sinful king Jehoiachin (or, Coniah), sent into exile in Babylon (Jeremiah 22:24-27).

Unfortunately, Zerubbabel's fate is unknown. Zechariah, who also predicted Zerubbabel would finish rebuilding the temple (4:6-10), called him a

Five post-exilic prophets proclaimed different messages. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for the restitution of the monarchy and rebuilding of the temple. Malachi, Zechariah 9-14, and Joel, however, envisioned a different future because the local leaders and priests had been unfaithful to God.

“governor,” though this may mean only that he was an important person. Otherwise there is no evidence that Zerubbabel actually ruled over Jerusalem and Judah. Haggai’s prediction proves only that the prophet anticipated that he would.

Haggai had no illusions about Judah’s puny power to improve its political situation. Rather, he foresaw such improvement as the work of God, as Israel rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem (1:2-11) and God adorned it with the wealth of the nations (2:6-9). Such thinking is often criticized as nationalistic and materialistic, and we must admit that the prophet portrayed God’s shaking the nations until their gold came to Jerusalem. On the other hand, Haggai did not portray mass destruction of the nations as some of the pre-exilic prophets had done. Further, the notion of God’s taking action to right wrongs and to return wealth to the temple plundered by other nations might seem to be justified restitution, even if God collected some interest in the transaction! In any case, we can scarcely accuse the prophet of promoting selfishness among his audience, when his stated agenda was to promote their generosity to the temple and to see God restore the beauty of that building beyond its former glory. In fact, we should probably read Haggai as a prophet concerned about the restitution of the God-ordained, pre-exilic institutions of monarchy and temple as guides for the behavior of the government and individuals of Judah.

KINGDOM HOPE IN ZECHARIAH 1-8

The first major section of the book of Zechariah offers a series of visions and exhortations to the exiles in Babylon, with three passages being added after the exile, dealing with Joshua the high priest (3:1-10; 6:11-13) and Zerubbabel (4:6b-10a). The purpose of these passages is to legitimate the status of the Zadokite priest Joshua as the new high priest in Jerusalem and Zerubbabel as the new David.¹ More importantly for us, however, they directly address the political situation of post-exilic Judah.

In 4:6b-10a the prophet insists that Zerubbabel has founded the temple (probably in a ceremonial ‘kick-off’) and will complete it. On the surface there is nothing political about this statement. Yet “founding” temples was a function of kings, and Zerubbabel was a descendant of King David. This statement may be a thinly disguised affirmation of Zechariah’s hope for Zerubbabel. The prophet called for the restoration of the pre-exilic monarchy and the high priest (3:1-10) as the means to restoring God’s people religiously as well as politically. Ironically, the building of the temple resulted in the subordination of the royalty to the priests. (One indicator of that change appears in 6:11b, where scholars have long argued that the name “Zerubbabel” originally stood instead of or alongside of the name “Joshua,” and was removed by a later editor.) In any case, neither Zechariah nor Haggai was prepared to color outside of the lines of pre-exilic institutions, and neither spoke of admitting the other nations to the temple.

Their agenda stands in contrast with the hopes expressed in Isaiah 56, which celebrates the sabbath and the temple by insisting that even foreigners will be welcome in the temple. God declares in 56:6-8:

“And the foreigners who join
themselves to the LORD,
to minister to him, to love the
name of the LORD,
and to be his servants,
every one who keeps the Sabbath,
and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
these will I bring to my holy mountain,
and make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer
for all peoples.
Thus says the LORD God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather yet others to him
beside those already gathered.”

Jesus embraced the radical theme that the temple “shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples” (Mark 11:17). The same sentiment appears again in Isaiah 60:1-14, coupled with the prediction that even the children of Israel’s conquerors would worship at the new temple, albeit in a role of subservience to Israel.²

MALACHI’S CRITIQUE OF ISRAEL

The hope for restitution of the monarchy, temple, and priesthood had taken quite a turn by about 450 B.C. Zerubbabel apparently never became king; a Persian-appointed “governor” handled secular affairs (Malachi 1:8) and the priests, led by the high priest, controlled the temple. The prophet condemned them for their lax observance of sacrifice, which revealed their contempt for God (1:12-13). He called the priests to observe God’s “covenant with Levi” and the people to observe the “covenant of the ancestors” (2:4-10). Rebuilding the temple had not ushered in the new kingdom, however, and Malachi explained why.

The priests had become functionaries (1:6, 12-14), giving little ritual or moral direction to the people. They had divorced their “companion and ... wife” under the covenant (2:14) and married “the daughter of a foreign god” (2:11).³ God’s punishment would be like a refiner’s fire or a fuller’s soap, ridding the “descendants of Levi,” the priests, of their sin (3:2b-3).

Once the priests were purified, God would turn to rid the people of

sins like sorcery, adultery, bearing false witness in court, making oaths and not keeping them, and oppressing the poor, the orphans, widows, and resident aliens (3:5). This list of sins recalls not only the Ten Commandments, but also prophetic injunctions against oppressing the poor—the people with no economic clout, and hence no political clout (cf., Isaiah 1:17). In pre-exilic times, the king especially was responsible for insuring that justice

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was done in the land (Jeremiah 22:3); in Malachi, God would take personal charge of that task!

God's relationship with Israel, Malachi says, is like a parent's relationship with her child. When the people sin against one another and God, therefore, they

do not simply behave badly; they repudiate their deepest familial obligations. More than violating covenant responsibilities conveyed at Sinai, their sin damages a relationship basic to life itself. No wonder the prophet chided the priests for conduct that would be offensive even to a governor (1:8) and for offering sacrifices even the gentiles could top (1:11). Since all people have the same father in their creator God, their false behavior toward one another was an affront to God as well (2:10-16). How dare they proclaim their innocence (2:17)? Most of all, how dare they question whether God was on the side of justice (2:17)?

Malachi famously called on the people to bring a "full tithe" of their produce to the temple for storage (3:10). During Nehemiah's first term of leadership in Jerusalem, the people pledged to bring "tithes from our soil" for the Levites, who would in turn give a tithe to the priests (Nehemiah 10:37-8). Since the priests also received a share of all the sacrifices, the tithe was far more important to the Levites.⁴ Between Nehemiah's two terms, the wealthy and influential Tobiad family apparently emptied the storage area, and forced the Levites to return to farming to eke out a living. Nehemiah remedied the situation during his second term (13:10-13). Malachi's complaint about the tithes, then, was a plea for justice toward the Levites.

REASSESSING PROPHETIC HOPES IN ZECHARIAH 9-14

The second major section of Zechariah repeats many of the hopes associated with the pre-exilic prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, including:

- ♦ the restoration of the land of Canaan to Israel (Zechariah 9:1-8; cf. Isaiah 44:24-28; Jeremiah 32; 30:18-20; 31:4-6; Ezekiel 36:7),
- ♦ the restitution of the monarchy (Zechariah 9:9-10; cf. Isaiah 3-5; Jeremiah 30:9, 21; Ezekiel 34:23-24; 37:24-25),

- ♦ the return of all the exiles (Zechariah 9:11-12; 10:8-12; cf. Isaiah 43:1-7; Jeremiah 30:10-11; 31:21-22; Ezekiel 36:8-12),
- ♦ the overthrow of foreign enemies (Zechariah 9:13-16; cf. Isaiah 45:1-4; 47:1-15; Jeremiah 30:11a; 50-51; Ezekiel 38-39), and
- ♦ the reunion of northern and southern Israel (Zechariah 10:6-7; cf. Jeremiah 31:15-20, 27-30; Ezekiel 37:15-27).

Amazingly, Zechariah 9-14 challenges many of these hopes, as if the prophet raised them in order to correct them. Before the monarchy could be restored, the Davidids, or house of David, would have to repent and be cleansed (12:10-13:1). The same held true for the priests (12:13-14) and the prophets (13:3-6). The exiles might return, but they could be “scattered” again (13:7-9). God had overthrown the Babylonians, but other enemies would attack in the future (12:1-6; 14:1-5, 12). The north and the south would not reunite (11:7-11), at least not as long as the current leaders (the shepherds of 10:1-3a; 11:4-17; 13:7-9) remained in control and unrepentant. The author apparently had struggled to understand why the glorious future the prophets had predicted and Judah had expected did not come to fruition and concluded that the fault lay with the leadership in Jerusalem, not with God and not even primarily with the populace as a whole. The “true” Israel that would reap the promises of God was not limited to those who returned from exile or who wielded power, perhaps because those people were thought to have “sold out” to the Persians. In contrast with the Zadokite view articulated by Ezekiel 40-43 and intimated in Second Zechariah’s inherited traditions in which Jerusalem stood as the holiest place in Palestine (12:5; 14:8, 10), the writer predicts that the holiness of the temple would extend throughout Judah, making every mere cooking pot sacred (cf. 12:7; 14:21). Furthermore, “in that day” all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship God—or else!

Zechariah predicts that the day is coming when the holiness of the temple would extend throughout Judah, making every mere cooking pot sacred. Furthermore, “in that day” all nations would come to Jerusalem to worship God.

JOEL’S INCLUSIVE VISION

The slightly earlier book of Joel challenged the priests of Jerusalem for abdicating their duty and predicted dire consequences if they did not lead Judah to repent.⁵ However, if the people were genuinely repentant (2:12-13), God would free them from foreign oppression (3:12-17, 21), restore fertility to the land of Israel (2:18-27; 3:18), and pour out God’s spirit upon all people: male and female, old and young, slave and free (2:28-29):

Then afterward

I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.

Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days, I will pour out my spirit.

This last promise is remarkable for its inclusiveness, embracing all classes and both genders of Judeans, though not foreigners. Though the nature of the people's sinfulness is not clear, the admonition to return to God with all their heart with fasting and mourning implies that there was ample sin among them.

Four centuries later, as the Apostle Simon Peter surveyed the mysterious events on the day of Pentecost, he discerned, "This is what was spoken through the prophet Joel" (Acts 2:16). In other words, the new age and the return of prophecy predicted in Joel 2:28-29 was coming to fruition in the church, beginning that day.

CONCLUSION

The post-exilic prophets had to rethink the future and their expectations for God's people in terms of accommodation to the political power of Persia. Haggai and Zechariah hoped for a restitution of pre-exilic institutions, particularly the monarchy, temple, and priesthood, but on terms God had laid down in the pre-exilic prophets. Malachi and Zechariah 9-14 dealt with the grim realities of post-exilic politics, in which priests, Davidids, and others seemed to have compromised too much with the Persians and to have lost their right to rule. Joel and Isaiah 56-66 foresaw a future with a more egalitarian society. Isaiah 56-66 and Zechariah 9-14 envisioned other

How much accommodation to foreign power was appropriate became the main point of contention within Judaism.

nations (with some exceptions like Edom) taking their places alongside Israel at the temple and thus sharing God's favor.

Some accommodations to foreign power seemed appropriate, even

necessary, in all these programs for the future. With the rise of the Greek Empire and particularly the rise of the ruler Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century, however, how much accommodation was possible became the point of contention within Judaism. This new concern produced diverse reactions, ranging from armed revolt by the Maccabees to the hope expressed in the book of Daniel that God would intervene directly through a Son of Man.

NOTES

1 For more on this, see my commentary *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi* (William B. Eerdmans, 1995), 38-42. The secondary nature of the Zerubbabel passage (4:6b-10a) and the second Joshua passage (6:11-13) is shown by the fact that they interrupt the flow of thought in their contexts. Scholars often distinguish First Zechariah (chapters 1-8) and Second Zechariah (chapters 9-14). Such a division in the book should not obscure the fact that in its present, canonical form, the whole of chapters 1-14 stands under the name Zechariah. Two recent works develop this point: R. David Moseman's "Reading the Two Zechariahs as One," *Review and Expositor* 97 (2000), 487-498, and Edgar W. Conrad's *Zechariah* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

2 Unfortunately, the soaring ecumenism of Isaiah 56 did not extend to all foreigners, particularly not to those who refused to serve Israel. Moreover, the author repudiated the Edomites in a gory depiction of their demise at the hands of God (63:1-6). The prophet's point is that God does not wink at evil deeds, but holds people accountable for them. Still, God's justice should be appropriate to the offense and tempered with mercy (Isaiah 63:7-9).

3 Some scholars understand this language to refer to idolatry, rather than divorce and remarriage. The latter view is a more defensible interpretation, however, especially if the remarriages were entered to advance the priests politically or economically. If so, Malachi 2:16 is the only passage in the Old Testament to object to divorce, and there the objection seems to be based on unfair treatment of the marriage partner.

4 The priests were a subgroup of the Levites. During the exile Ezekiel insisted that many Levites had squandered their right to be full priests through their sinfulness and were to be assistants only, whereas the Levites who were descendants of Zadok would be full priests, qualified to offer sacrifices and enter the holy of holies (Ezekiel 44:10-27). The compromise reached in the post-exilic period apparently was that all Levites would participate in the offerings, though the priests might well get the lion's share. The call for Israelites to bring the "full tithe" to the storehouse suggests that the group behind the book of Malachi was comprised of Levites more or less disenfranchised by the new state of affairs. They needed for the people to pay "all" the tithes, and not just bring sacrificial animals to the full priests. For more about this, see Redditt, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, 151-2 and "The Book of Malachi in Its Social Setting," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 240-255.

5 Joel, in its current form, probably originated between 515 and 445 B.C. (see Paul L. Redditt, "The Book of Joel and Peripheral Prophecy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 48 (1986) 225-40, especially 235). For the date of Zechariah 9-14 as soon after the career of Nehemiah (i.e., before 400 B.C.), see my "Nehemiah's First Mission and the Date of Zechariah 9-14," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 56 (1994) 664-78.



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The Church: A Non-Prophet Organization?

BY J. RANDALL O'BRIEN

From Jesus' teachings, where conventional wisdom is turned upside down, we glean unsettling lessons: alleged believers are not necessarily safe on the Day of Judgment, for genuine devotion to Christ lies in the practice of His lordship, not merely the profession of it. The church needs prophets of God to call people to repentance.

Lamenting liberal theology, Richard Niebuhr once issued the satirical critique, "A God without wrath brought man without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministration of a Christ without a cross." Anything goes; everything is beautiful; we'll all be with Jesus in the sweet bye-and-bye. Such thinking, which Niebuhr passionately ridiculed, runs blatantly counter to the teaching of Scripture.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name ...?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness'" (Matthew 7:21-23, NASB).¹

The Spirit moves beyond individuals to warn churches in The Revelation to John: "To the angel of the church in Sardis write, ... 'I know your works; you have a name of being alive, but you are dead.... Wake up, ... and repent. If you do not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you'" (3:1-3).

Among the many lessons that we may glean from these passages, several jump off the page. Conventional wisdom is turned upside down. Alleged believers in Christ are not necessarily safe and secure on Judgment Day. The proof of genuine devotion to Christ, furthermore, lies in the practice of His lordship, not merely the profession of it. Either the individual or the local church, or both, may be deemed false in the sight of God, who will hold them accountable.

How will churches, or true versus false believers, be identified? "You will know them by their fruits," Jesus explains. "Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?" he queries (Matthew 7:16). Yet, precisely what are the criteria by which judgment comes? "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.... You shall love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus admonishes, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:37-40). The writer of 1 John adds, "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars" (1 John 4:20).

In these verses the word translated "love" derives from the Greek verb *agapao*, which means to love without conditions. "Beloved, if God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:11). Judgment comes to those who sin by refusing to love God and neighbor unconditionally. Since indeed "a God with wrath brings humans with sin into judgment," the church needs prophets of God who will call people to repentance.

THE CHURCH'S CALLING

Although the day of Pentecost has been called the birthday of the church, her true beginnings must be traced to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. "We know that our old self was crucified with him.... Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:6 and 4).

Paul Minear identifies ninety-six analogies of the church in the New Testament, including these three major images: the people of God, the new creation, and the body of Christ.² As the *people of God*, the church is holy. Both Hebrew and Greek terms for holy mean "to be different," or "to be set apart." The church, as the people of God, is called to be different than the world; it is set apart *from* the world and *to* the work of God. The Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, means "called out" (or "called out ones"). The church consists of those called out of the world to serve Christ. These servants of Christ form a spiritual community dependent upon the Holy Spirit, as evidenced by the apostolic benediction, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the *communion* of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13). Communion (*koinonia*) here means fellowship or community. Elsewhere Paul would write of the "fellowship of His sufferings" (Philippians 3:10, NASB): the cross is the mode of fellowship and

the model of holiness in the community inhabited by the people of God. Jesus urged, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me" (Luke 9:23). The church is a cross community.

The holy people of God, in community, are a *new creation*. "So, if any one is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Interestingly, the Greek text contains neither subject nor verb before the phrase "new creation." A literal reading suggests, "If any one is in Christ, new creation!" As Richard B. Hays notes, the verse speaks of much more than an individual, subjective

The holy people of God, in community, are a new creation. The old world of sin has given way to a new world of life in Christ. This community is the church. As his body, it is the visual form of Christ in the world today.

conversion experience. Rather the old world of sin has given way to a new world of life in Christ. The believer has entered into a new creation community.³

The holy people of God are a new creation community constituting the *body of Christ*. "Now you are the body of Christ," Paul writes to the saints at Corinth, "and individually members of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27). Christ is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). Yet the church, as his body, is the visual form of Christ in the world today!

THE PROPHET'S ROLE

The Hebrew word for prophet, *Nabi'*, originally meant "to bubble forth," like a spring of water. The term appears 300 times in the Old Testament. Two other terms, which mean "to see," as in seer, occur a total of 23 times. A prophet might see a vision from God, and then relate it to the people; he or she would "bubble forth" on behalf of God.

Prophecy arose in Israel in conjunction with the monarchy. Unlike pagan prophets in neighboring nations, the Hebrew prophets usually held the king accountable for his actions. As Yahweh's representative ruler, the monarch was expected to insure justice and righteousness in the land, for the LORD is a God of justice (Isaiah 30:18). Failure to govern justly brought condemnation (Jeremiah 22:13, 15, 16). Prophets such as Micaiah ben Imlah (2 Chronicles 18:25-26), Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah fiercely cried out against abuses of power, social injustice, greed, idolatry, and other sins. They boldly critiqued king, society, and religion. Thus the role of the prophet was, and is, to speak for God. As Abraham Heschel explains, through the prophet the invisible God becomes audible.

THE 'NON-PROPHET' CHURCH

Bertrand Russell, the noted British philosopher and Nobel Prize winner for literature, famously observed, "The teaching of Christ, as it appears in the Gospels, has had extraordinarily little to do with the ethics of Christians." He lamented that instead of being delivered from evil, Christians frequently have been extremely wicked. He cited the Inquisition and witch burnings, then added, "You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world."⁴

Is Russell right? If so, where have all the prophets gone? Is there no Amos to condemn social injustice, widespread immorality, greed, and reliance upon military might? Is there no Hosea to rail against idolatry, the worship of false gods, and spiritual adultery? Is there no Micaiah ben Imlah to confront the highest political figures on the abomination of reliance upon force to solve conflict? Is there no Micah to prophesy of the hammering of swords into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, to cry out for the exercise of justice, mercy, and humility? Is there no Isaiah to dream of peace, when "the wolf shall dwell with the lamb?" Where have all the prophets gone?

The biblical story consists of four major movements: creation, corruption, correction, and consummation. God has created a good world; humans and spiritual powers have sinned, do sin, and will sin, thus making a mess of this world, now fallen; God entered into covenant with Israel to begin to correct this fallen world, whose correction ultimately occurs in and through the cross of Jesus Christ and the creation of the church; and the Bible promises in the eschatological vision of a new heaven and new earth that God's will prevails and becomes the final reality.

Here is the problem: the world supplies the corruption; the church, in Christ, provides the correction, allegedly. The rub comes when the witness of the church is like that of the world. As Billy Graham puts it, "It's okay for the boat to be in the water; but if the water gets in the boat, you've got a problem. The church should be in the world, not the reverse."

George Barna distinguishes among biblical, conventional, or cultural Christians.⁵ The first places total trust in Jesus Christ for salvation, desires

The role of the prophet was, and is, to speak for God. Through the prophet the invisible God becomes audible.

to grow spiritually, orders life according to faith principles, and holds to moral absolutes. The second variety trusts in Christ for salvation, only vaguely brings faith to bear on life issues, and views morality as relative. The third describes a person who is Christian in name and perhaps heritage only, and subscribes to moral relativism. Only ten percent of Americans classify themselves as biblical Christians. In light of this analysis of

**Why does the church suffer from laryngitis
in the face of a serpentine line of moral is-
sues confronting church and society?**

the church, one can easily see how “the water might get in the boat.”

The doctrine of the Fall is imperative in helping to define humankind and its institutions. Essentially put, God created

humankind good, but all have chosen to sin. As a result the world is sinful, broken, and fallen. Moreover, since sin is pervasive, institutions, as well as individuals, are fallen. There must be a new creation, which only Christ can bring about (2 Corinthians 5:17-19). Who will sound the call to repentance?

Of course, justification and sanctification are past, present, and future realities. A Christian has been justified (saved), is being justified, and ultimately will be justified. A believer has been sanctified (made holy, different), is being sanctified, and ultimately will be sanctified. In the meantime, the gulf between the ideal and the real is problematic. Dorothy Day, the Catholic social activist of yesteryear, complained that the clergy and church often are more like Cain than Abel, asking, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

Critics of the church, both within and outside, charge she is loudly silent on a host of issues that are on the agenda of the world: racism, materialism, sexism, militarism, homosexuality, abortion, doctor-assisted suicide, premarital sex, presidential ethics, capital punishment, homelessness, situational ethics, care for the poor, distributive justice, divorce, corporate corruption, drugs (including alcohol and tobacco), the lottery, nuclear weapons, war, medical ethics, greed, and many more. Where have all the prophets gone?

Consider just a few of the galaxy of issues facing the church and world today. According to a World Bank study, three billion people live on less than two dollars a day, while 1.3 billion of those exist on less than one dollar a day. A staggering 34,000 children die every day of hunger and preventable diseases.⁶ Should the church address this plague of death? Does God have anything to say to us?

The percentage of Americans viewing premarital sex as wrong dropped from 68% in 1969 to 39% in 1996, according to Gallup polls. In the 18-29 age group, 74% believe premarital sex is acceptable.⁷ Almost half of all babies

born in 1992 to Baby Busters (those born between 1965-1983) were to unmarried mothers.⁷ Should the church share a word from God regarding the gift of sexuality?

What might the Prince of Peace have to say about our determination to wage war? “WWJK?” – Who would Jesus kill? How are Christians to think about war, abortion, and capital punishment? What about gender equality? Will the church be the last bastion of male supremacy, as some predict? Why is 11:00 on Sunday morning the most segregated hour in America? Why does the church suffer from laryngitis in the face of a serpentine line of moral issues confronting church and society? Why are God’s speakers speechless? Do the people of God desire to hear from God, speak for God, live for God?

Isaiah declared of Judah, “They are a rebellious people ... who say to the seers, ‘Do not see’; and to the prophets, ‘Do not prophesy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophesy illusions’” (Isaiah 30:9-10). Micah accused the priests and prophets of being “prophets for profit.” Judah’s “priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money,” and they “cry ‘peace’ when they have something to eat” (Micah 3:5, 11). Jesus strongly denounced phony religion, crying, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe ... [but] have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith” (Matthew 23:23).

Amos mocked and condemned Israel: “Come to Bethel—and transgress ... for so you love to do, O people of Israel” (Amos 4:4-5). Bethel means “house of God.” Although we can draw parallels between eighth-century Israel and twenty-first-century America, the correct comparison lies with God’s people then and now. Amos believed Israel’s going to worship was going to sin! He accused Israel of caring more about rites than rights, more about religion than relationships. God despises worship, the prophet preached, unless it results in just and righteous treatment of others (Amos 5:21-24).

Jesus clearly taught that love of God and neighbor are required and will be judged; that whatever we do to each other, we do to him (Matthew 25). So with each of the moral issues of our day that center on our relationships with God and neighbor: should the church fall silent, or should she speak? Should our conduct, values, and witness be distinguishable or indistinguishable from the world? Clarence Jordan once grieved, “We will worship the hind legs off Jesus, then not lift a finger to do a single thing he says.” “Christianity must have a marvelous inherent power,” Leslie Weatherhead wrote, “or the churches would have killed it long ago.”

GOD’S GOAL FOR THE CHURCH

Salvation, guidance (on justice and love), judgment, repentance, grace, and hope must define the church. Persons must be *transformed* by Christ; believers must be *taught* God’s Word; *judgment* must be pronounced when-

ever persons sin against God and neighbor; *repentance* must be encouraged; *grace* from Jesus Christ must be offered; *hope* for God's Kingdom come must be embraced. The goal for the church is the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Life by God's design is to be lived in fellowship with God and in community with neighbor, wherein each person is regarded with dignity and fairness. Any diminution of dignity or respect for one created in the image of God counts as sin. To do justice as God commands is to make the needy

The church is what God is "up to" in our world. It is an eschatological beachhead which God establishes on our soil. It is a glimpse of what God has in mind for all of us.

whole, to bring the oppressed to dignified participation in the community (Deuteronomy 10:18; Proverbs 21:3; Isaiah 1:17, 56:1; Jeremiah 22:2-3, 15-16; Amos 5:21-24; Micah 6:8), and to live in a right relationship with God and neighbor.

Lewis Smedes argues that there are two moral absolutes: *justice* and *love*. By justice he means being fair; by love he means being helpful to one in need. The words echo throughout scripture, where justice is to the Old Testament what love is to the New: the standard for measuring God's rule in the hearts of God's people.

The church is what God is "up to" in our world. It is, as Hays claims, an eschatological beachhead, which God establishes on our soil. As such it is a glimpse of what God has in mind for all of us. *God is re-creating the world through Christ*. Therefore, the prophet today must call us to be who we are: a new creation! Here all baptized persons are one in Christ (Galatians 3:28). In this new creation, compassion replaces domination, love displaces evil, and Jesus—not Cain, Caesar, mammon, or self—is Lord!

What to do then with the haunting indictment, pronounced by Romano Guardini, "The church is the cross on which Christ is crucified?"

Surely Bonhoeffer is right. The last word with Christ, when He gets His way, is grace. Yet, as the twentieth-century martyr reminds us, we cannot speak the last word until we have spoken the next-to-last word. True, the last word is "grace." But the next-to-last word is "guilty." Are we not all guilty of misrepresenting Christ? Do we not each stand in danger of judgment and in need of Christ's grace? The true prophet of God says so. Where have all the prophets gone?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In thinking about the prophetic role of the church, I find Walter Rauschenbusch's work quite helpful: *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, and *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* and Walter Wink's *Engaging the*

Powers are both stimulating and provocative. Lewis Smedes is always worth reading; his *Mere Morality* and *Choices: Making Right Decisions in a Complex World* offer his usual lucid, logical insight. Abraham Heschel's two volume work, *The Prophets*, benefited me greatly.

NOTES

1 Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

2 Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (The Westminster Press, 1960).

3 Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 20.

4 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian, And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, edited by Paul Edwards (Simon & Schuster, 1957), 25 and 21-22.

5 George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Word Publishing, 1996), 124.

6 Ronald J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Word Publishing, 1997), 2.

7 George Gallup, Jr. and D. Michael Lindsay, *Surveying the Religious Landscape* (Morehouse Publishing, 1999), 101.

8 George Barna, *Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation* (Northfield Publishing, 1994), 122.



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The Wild Goose

BY ROBERT B. KRUSCHWITZ

The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of the return of the prophets, the “Spirit-bearing” men and women. Yet, sometimes church-life would be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.

Wild Goose Worship Group. What a wonderful name John Bell, Graham Maule, and others chose for their group formed in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1985 to sing and write new songs and hymns for the church.

The wild goose, in addition to the dove, is a Celtic Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes God’s Spirit hovers comfortingly like a dove. But the Spirit also surprises us and disturbs our plans. Like a wild and unpredictable goose, the Holy Spirit sweeps in unexpected, astonishing directions.

“We began singing and writing new songs not primarily because we were fed up with the old ones,” Bell and Maule explain, “but because others were and because we recognize that, in every era, Jesus looks for new bottles to hold his new wine.”¹ With their prophetic texts matched to glorious folk music drawn from African, Asian, Central American, and their own beloved Scottish traditions, the WGWG continues to enrich the worship of God’s people worldwide.



The prophets of Israel were “Spirit-bearing people,” in the Septuagint translation of Hosea 9:7. Most of them were of the wild-goose variety, I suspect, because the wayward Israelites were complaining, “The prophet is a fool, the Spirit-bearing person is mad.”

By the first century, among the Jewish leadership it was a widespread

opinion that the prophets were like spiritual dinosaurs, creatures of the past. The Jewish religious writing “from Artaxerxes [465-424 B.C.] to our time ... does not deserve the same credibility as the earlier work,” Josephus believed, “since the prophets have no true successors” (Against Apion 1:8). The Babylonian Talmud shares this view: “When Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the latter prophets, were dead, the Holy Spirit departed from Israel” (Sota 48b).

Perhaps we hear echoes of this view in the New Testament when the Apostle Paul and the Gospel writers use “the law and the prophets” as a short-hand phrase for all inspired Scripture. The “prophets,” like the law-giver Moses, lived long ago and now their piercing, holy words are available only in the Book.

Indeed, for a long time the rabbis had divided the Hebrew Scriptures into three parts: the law, the prophets, and the other writings. “Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them,” Ben Sirah’s grandson had explained confidently around 180 B.C., “and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom” (The Prologue to Sirach). Much later the rabbinic tradition would call scripture Tanak(h), which is simply an acronym for Torah (law), Nevi’im (prophets), and Ketubim (other writings).

The first Christians, as we shall see, rejected this all-the-prophets-are-dead-as-the-dinosaurs view. They, like many Jews in the first century, had been waiting anxiously for a fresh visitation of God’s Spirit. They recalled God’s promise to send a prophet before the restoration of Israel, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the LORD comes” (Malachi 4:5), and longed for a Spirit-bearing person to return to their land. Just listen to the early ‘buzz’ about Jesus: some said, “He is Elijah,” while others said, “He is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old;” and King Herod worried, “He’s a man raised from the dead” (Mark 6:14-15).

The wild goose, in addition to the dove, is a Celtic Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit. Sometimes God’s Spirit hovers comfortingly like a dove. But the Spirit also, like a wild and unpredictable goose, surprises us and disturbs our plans.



Sometimes church-life might be simpler without prophets and prophecy. One church business meeting, in particular, comes to mind.

As the moderator, I presided at the monthly meetings of the church. Actually, not much ‘moderating’ was required: if committee reports were

prepared carefully and the potential problems were addressed, folks were anxious to approve these reports and adjourn quickly. The Spirit was present like a dove.

In one business meeting, however, the Spirit was like a wild goose, or a whole flock of them! We were debating a committee's proposal to build a new sanctuary. One member stood up in the back and announced: "The Holy Spirit has told me this week that we should not build this sanctuary, for if we do, the church will grow and we will lose touch with one another. Our fellowship is too precious a gift to risk in this way." There was silence for half a minute. Then a member right in front rose to speak: "I've been praying about this decision too," she reported, "and the Holy Spirit has spoken clearly to me. We must build this sanctuary in order to extend our ministries to our growing town." Now everybody was talking at once. Several tried to speak to the entire group, while others seized this opportunity to convince a person sitting in the next chair. A few stood to be heard, and only managed to block others' view of the commotion. Visions of the dueling prophets and prophecies in the Corinthian church flashed across my mind.

I did not have a gavel, but fortunately I am equipped with a reasonably loud voice, so as loudly as I could I urged: "The Holy Spirit speaks to *us* collectively as a church, when we patiently listen to and carefully weigh these prophecies." Actually, we did need to hear both of these prophecies, for the church needed both to build more space and to heed the counsel to not mistake mere physical growth for spiritual vitality.

"The church is *not* a democracy," warned the first prophetess from the back of the room. "No," I replied, "it is the body of Christ. We are trying to listen to him."

A man who sang in the choir asked for the floor. "I just wish all of you could see what I see every Sunday," he began quietly. "While we are worshipping, some family or couple or local college student will come to the door and look in that big picture window at the back of the sanctuary. When they see all the chairs filled, they turn around and head back to their automobile. I wish you could see it. It would break your heart."

The church voted overwhelmingly to build the sanctuary, and the rest of the meeting dealt with important questions such as: Would the new sanctuary have lots of clear windows and wood finish like the old sanctuary? Would it have upholstered pews or chairs, carpeting or a concrete floor (for folks liked to hear themselves sing)? Would the big cross, a gift to our church from a former pastor, be moved to a foyer or placed in the new sanctuary?



The New Testament exudes a glad welcome of the return of prophecy, and especially in the writings of Luke. Jesus opened his public ministry by

selecting a prophet's call experience, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18; cf. Isaiah 61:1), and then promising, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." His ministry would mirror the work of Elijah and Elisha (4:25-27). Indeed, when Jesus raised a dead man, holy fear seized the crowd "and they glorified God, saying, 'A great prophet has risen among us!' and 'God has looked favorably on his people!'" (7:16).

Not everyone welcomes a prophet. When the political establishment, in the person of Herod Antipas, threatened him, Jesus shot back, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem'" (13:32-33). Earlier, at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had warned his closest disciples that before he came in his prophesied glory, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised" (9:22; cf. Matthew 16:21-23, Mark 8:31-33). Soon the point was driven home for Peter, John, and James, when they saw Moses and Elijah, respectively the founder and prophetic restorer of Israel, appear with Jesus, "speaking of his departure, which he was about to accomplish in Jerusalem" (9:31).

As Luke tells the story, the disciples fully understood that Jesus' death was a *prophesied action*

only after the Resurrection. The risen Jesus explained his suffering and death to the terrified disciples gathered on the Resurrection Sunday evening, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled" (24:44).

Not until the day of Pentecost, however, did Peter realize that Jesus' death also was the ultimate *prophetic action*, communicating God's intention to restore Israel and open the floodgate of prophecy. On that amazing day, Peter proclaimed, there finally happened "what was spoken through the prophet Joel: 'In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all

The disciples understood that Jesus' death was a "prophesied action" after the Resurrection. Not until the day of Pentecost, however, did Peter realize Jesus' death also was the ultimate "prophetic action," communicating God's intention to restore Israel and open the floodgate of prophecy.

flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams” (Acts 2:16-17). This powerful unleashing of the Spirit occurred, Peter concluded, because “God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (2:24).



The church compromised on the glass windows, wood finish, carpeting, and upholstered pews. However, everyone agreed that the big cross must be placed in the new sanctuary.

It was much too large for any one member to carry. So at a point during our first worship service in the new sanctuary, the youth group carried the big cross down the aisle, and then the choir passed it on to two church-member carpenters waiting in the baptistery.

We know the power of seeing the crucifix in worship, for the dying body of Jesus reminds us that he died a prophesied and prophetic death for our sin. But I also am moved when I see that big cross, *empty*, for it proclaims the Son of Man is alive. It says, “The Wild Goose is loose in our world, forever and ever.”



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Worship Service

BY DAVID G. MILLER

Readings from the Prophets:

Hear the words of God to the prophets:

Amos 8:1-7; 9:13-15

Hosea 14:1-9

Malachi 2:17-3:4

Joel 2:12-17, 28-32

All Readers: These are the words of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Hymn:

“Come, Holy Ghost, Our Hearts Inspire”

Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire,
let us Thine influence prove:
source of the old prophetic fire,
fountain of life and love.

Come, Holy Ghost, for moved by Thee
the prophets wrote and spoke;
unlock the truth, Thyself the key,
unseal the sacred book.

Expand Thy wings, celestial Dove,
brood o'er our nature's night;
on our disordered spirits move,
and let there now be light.

God, through Himself, we then shall know
if Thou within us shine,
and sound with all Thy saints below,
the depths of love divine.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)
Suggested tune: AZMON

Invocation:

**Come, Holy Lord, Fire and Fountain,
through the power of your Spirit:
help us to worship you in spirit and in truth,
help us to hear the words of truth,
help us to speak the words of love.
Inspire us, move us, shine within us.
We open ourselves to you;
you know all, see all, and love all.
Make us instruments of your peace. Amen.**

Hymn:

"In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing"

Terry W. York
(text and tune pp. 52-53 this volume)

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 12:4-13

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Prayer of Confession:

Leader: Hear, O Lord, our prayer of confession.

People: Lord, we confess to you
in the presence of our sisters and brothers
that we have sinned.
We have done things we ought not to have done.
We have left undone good things that should have been completed.
We are out of tune and out of focus.
Forgive us, Lord, for misusing your gifts, our talents and time,
to fulfill our own selfish ends.

Lord, we confess to you
that we would prefer not to confess.
We hide our sins from ourselves,
just as we hide them from each other.
Forgive us, Lord, for we have marred the picture of fellowship
and misheard the melody the would help us dance closer to you.

Lord, we confess to you
that we have not heeded your words.
We hear the prophetic call to return
to your ways of humbleness, generosity, and peace;
yet we turn to other voices that promise us
power, wealth, and control.
Forgive us, Lord, for our weakness when we are so easily tempted.

Lord, we pray that you would hear these words of confession.
Burn within us.
Send your Spirit
into eyes that will see visions of the people we should be,
into hands that will help lead us back onto the path,
into voices that will sing songs enticing us to holiness,
and even into us, that we might grow to know your love.
Amen.

Leader: Hear the words of assurance:

“If the confession ‘Jesus is Lord’ is on your lips, and the faith that God raised him from the dead is in your heart, you will find salvation. For faith in the heart leads to righteousness, and confession on the lips leads to salvation.”

Offering and Solo Meditation:

“The Day of the Lord is At Hand”

The day of the Lord is at hand, at hand;
its storms roll up the sky.
The nations sleep starving on heaps of gold;
all dreamers toss and sigh.
The night is darkest before the morn;
when the pain is sorest the child is born,
and the day of the Lord is at hand, at hand,
the day of the Lord is at hand.

Who would sit down and sigh for a lost age of gold,
while the Lord of all ages is here?
True hearts will leap at the trumpet of God,
and those who can suffer can dare.
Each old age of gold was an iron age, too,
and the meekest of saints may find stern work to do
in the day of the Lord at hand, at hand,
in the day of the Lord at hand.

Charles Kingsley (1819-1875)
Tune: REMEMBER THE POOR

Offering Response:

Today will be the Lord’s own day:
God’s power revealed, God’s word proclaimed,
God’s people loving, giving all—
We pledge to live into God’s call. Amen.

David G. Miller
Tune: OLD 100TH

The Gospel Reading: John 14:13-26

Reader: This is the word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

Sermon

Hymn of Response:

“Lord, Speak to Me, That I May Speak”
(verses 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7)

Lord, speak to me that I may speak
in living echoes of your tone;
as you have sought, so let me seek
your erring children lost, alone.

O lead me, Lord, that I may lead
the wandering and the wavering feet;
and feed me, Lord, that I may feed
your hungry ones with manna sweet.

O teach me, Lord, that I may teach
the precious things that you impart;
and wing my words, that they may reach
the hidden depths of many a heart.

O fill me with your fullness, Lord,
Until my heart shall overflow
In kindling thought and glowing word,
your love to tell, your praise to show.

O use me, Lord, use even me,
Just as you will, and when, and where,
Until your blessed face I see,
Your rest, your joy, your glory share.

Francis R. Havergal (1836-1879), alt.

Tune: CANONBURY

Benediction:

Leader: Let all who have ears to hear, hear.

People: We have heard the words of the prophets calling us back to
God's way.

Leader: Let all who have ears to hear, hear.

People: We have heard the words of Scripture, urging us to mend our lives.

Leader: Let all who have ears to hear, hear.

People: We have heard the words of the Gospel, promising us God's saving help.

Leader: Now that you have heard, what will you do?

**People: Challenged and changed, rebuked and restored, we go out
to live in God,
to be with God,
to love the world that God has loved.
Thanks be to God. Amen.**

Postlude



DAVID G. MILLER

is Associate Professor of English at Mississippi College and Liturgist at Northside Baptist Church in Clinton, Mississippi.

In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing

BY TERRY W. YORK

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, hear God's voice.
Why composer, painter, poet,
why the note and color choice?
God has whispered, granted glances,
to the prophets, who, then, show
that life's dirges and life's dances
harbor truth we need to know.

In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, prophets know
that their gifting has a calling;
through their living it must flow.
Ev'ry morning, in their waking,
prophets hear, as being taught,
words to bolster weak and weary;
often, words they have not sought.

Back to old days for the new days,
to the path from which we've strayed.
With the truth before them always,
preaching, painting, lest it fade.
Call us forward, to the morning,
lead us to God's promised day.
Through the darkness, from our wand'ring,
write and paint and sing the way.

In Their Speaking, Art, and Writing

TERRY W. YORK

C. DAVID BOLIN

The musical score is written in a three-part setting (Soprano, Alto, and Bass) in the key of B-flat major and common time (C). It consists of three systems of music. Each system includes a vocal line with lyrics, an alto line with chords, and a bass line with a bass line. The lyrics are: "In their speak-ing, art, and writ - ing, in their mu-sic, hear God's voice. Why com-po-ser, paint-er, po - et, why the note and col - or choice? God has whis-pered, grant-ed glan-ces, to the pro-phets, who then show".

In their speak-ing, art, and writ - ing, in their mu-sic, hear God's voice.

Why com-po-ser, paint-er, po - et, why the note and col - or choice?

God has whis-pered, grant-ed glan-ces, to the pro-phets, who then show

that life's dir-ges and life's dan-ces har-bor truth we need to know.

2. In their speaking, art, and writing,
in their music, prophets know
that their gifting has a calling;
through their living it must flow.
Ev'ry morning, in their waking,
prophets hear, as being taught,
words to bolster weak and weary;
often, words they have not sought.
3. Back to old days for the new days,
to the path from which we've strayed.
With the truth before them always,
preaching, painting, lest it fade.
Call us forward, to the morning,
lead us to God's promised day.
Through the darkness, from our wand'ring,
write and paint and sing the way.

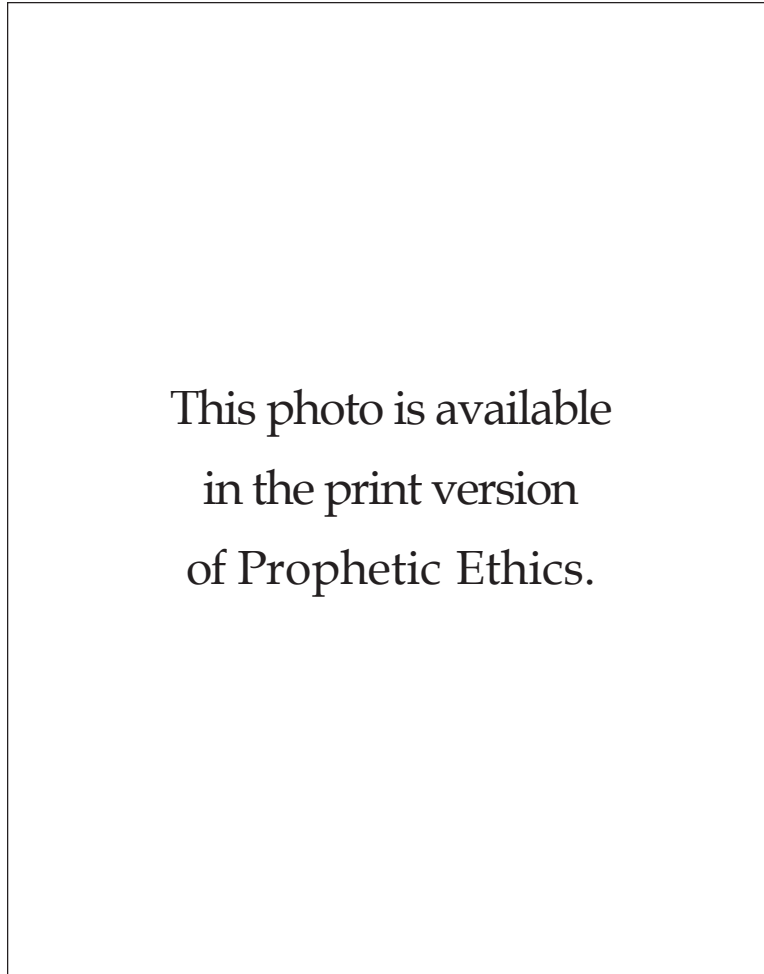


Figure 1. *Jonah Cast Up*. 40.65 x 21.6 x 37.6 cm.

In the Jonah marbles, we can glimpse into the hearts of Christians who found hope in the “sign of Jonah” as they faced persecution and death in the Roman Empire.

The Sign of Jonah

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The youngest of Christians learn and remember the story of Jonah. Whether it is Jonah being swallowed by a big fish, surviving within its belly, or being cast out and living to tell about it, Jonah's tale is memorable. Not only is the story of Jonah learned at an early age today, but it was also one of the very first narratives depicted in early Christian art. Jonah appeared on Christian sarcophagi and catacomb paintings in the fourth century.

The Jonah marbles usually are dated to the second half of the third century A.D. Four symbolic sculptures depict the events in the book of Jonah: *Jonah Swallowed*, *Jonah Praying*, *Jonah Cast Up*, and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*. In addition to these four, a well preserved *The Good Shepherd* sculpture completes the group. The Cleveland Museum of Art acquired these works in 1965. The five sculptures, ranging in height from 13 to 20½ inches, were carved from blocks of the same "white-grained, well-crystallized marble and are thought to have come from the same source in the eastern Mediterranean."¹ Recent analysis, according to the museum, identifies the Roman Imperial quarries at Docimium in ancient Phrygia (now central Turkey) as the source of the marble. These quarries supplied the Roman Empire with high-quality marble in the form of unfinished blocks that were used for sculpture, paving, and veneer. The location where the sculptures were originally found remains unknown. The entire group may have been unearthed together from a large pithos, or jar. All of the figures are finished, except for *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*.

We rarely find a group of free-standing sculptures like the Jonah marbles, which were probably meant to be seen in the round. And how do we explain the inclusion of the Christ figure, the Good Shepherd?

Early Christians interpreted Old Testament prophecies and events as announcing and prefiguring the ministry of Jesus or the church. Their interpretation of the book of Jonah was inspired by Jesus' mysterious rebuke of some religious leaders demanding a prophetic sign: "You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky," Jesus warned them, "but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah" (Matthew 16:4). In another passage, Jesus elaborates on this typology and identifies

his own ministry as the fulfillment of the sign of Jonah: “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster [Jonah 2:1], so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation

of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here!” (Matthew 12:40-41; cf. Luke 11:29-32).

The sculptor integrated motifs from pagan culture in order to supply a piece of Jonah’s prophetic message to Christians then and now. A source for *The Good Shepherd* (Figure 2) may be the pagan criophorus figure; often he was shown bringing an offering to the altar, and, by the third century A.D., he represented the ram bearer with its connotations of philanthropy and loving care.² The Cleveland sculpture is one of the best preserved of the twenty-six extant marbles depicting the Good Shepherd, who commonly is beardless and youthful, and carries a sheep draped over the shoulders. The artist also incorporated the *contrapposto* stance, made known by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos in the fifth century B.C., with one weight-bearing leg straight and the other bent naturally as the weight shifts.

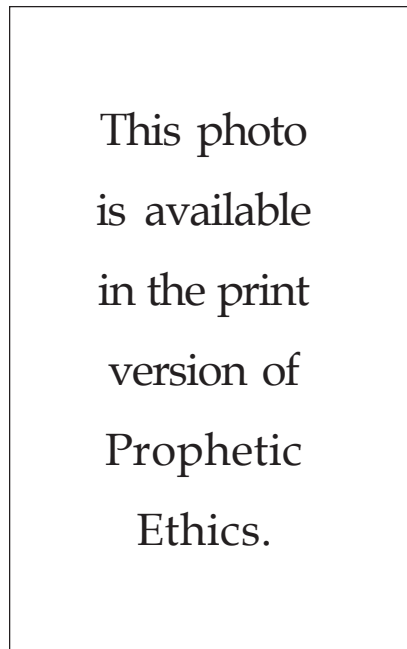


Figure 2. *The Good Shepherd*.
50 x 25.7 x 15.9 cm.

A visual representation of Christ as the Good Shepherd bore rich meaning for the early Christians during times of persecution because it symbolized a leader who would sacrifice his life for his flock; yet, as an already popular image among non-Christians as well, it did not draw attention to the persecuted believers. Later, after the peace brought by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 306, the Good Shepherd became the most popular symbol of Jesus Christ.

The rare qualities of this work include the use of a drill to add the contrast of light and dark in the hair. All of the Jonah marbles share this technical characteristic.

Jonah Swallowed (Figure 3) and *Jonah Cast Up* (Figure 1) are particularly dramatic representations in marble. They feature a *Ketos*, or Greek sea monster, that is part land animal and part fish. The early Christian artist likely borrowed from the *Ketea* found in Greek and Roman sculptures, wall

paintings, and mosaics, but found a new narrative in which the sea monster could function. The “large fish” (Jonah 1:17) is terrifying with such a monstrous body, recoiling back upon itself with its tail high above its head. This strong vertical representation, combined with the circularity of the two forms, helps us to identify the two figures as one.

Jonah within the belly of the fish is a far more difficult subject to depict. In *Jonah Praying* (Figure 4), the sculptor chose to show the sole figure of Jonah in the gesture of an orant, with arms outstretched and palms up, as he prays to God for deliverance. The bearded Jonah wears the same tunic as in the marble showing him under the gourd vine. The *contrapposto* stance, as seen in *The Good Shepherd* marble, invokes a figure at rest. These two pieces and *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5) convey a sense of relaxation, meditation, and prayer in contrast to the scenes with the fish that are heightened in drama and action. This alternation of action and calm reflects the biblical story and creates a narrative flow among the five marbles. Although they can be studied and understood as individual pieces, as a group they tell a dramatic story.

Jonah Cast Up (Figure 1) continues the drama of the story and repeats the bizarre form of the fish. The bearded Jonah emerges from the fish’s mouth with arms extended and with a strong upper body visible. The fish possesses the head of a boar, wings of a bird, and paws of a lion. Its tail wraps up and over itself, almost touching Jonah’s right hand. The mighty regurgitation of Jonah depicts the power of God as the prophet is expelled from inside this sea monster; its force is not that of Jonah or the fish alone, but rather God’s action in answering Jonah’s prayers.

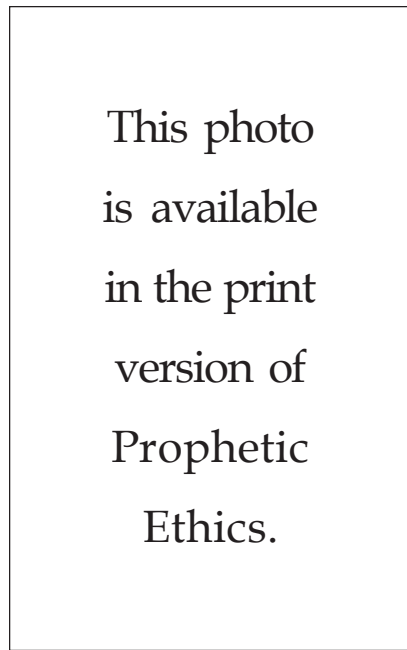
In *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (Figure 5), the prophet reclines and relaxes. He raises his right arm over his head. The body position recalls river god types known throughout the Greek and Roman world. The shepherd boy in Greek mythology, Endymion, who slept eternally underneath a tree, may be an inspiration for this depiction of Jonah. Endymion symbolized repose, peace, and well being; here Jonah has received peace and rests in the calm after the events of the story. Beneath a creeping gourd, which

This photo
is available
in the print
version of
Prophetic
Ethics.

Figure 3. *Jonah Swallowed*.
51.6 x 15.55 x 26.2 cm.

symbolized resurrection in Roman art, Jonah contemplates the miracle of his salvation.

In these Jonah marbles we can glimpse into Christian life before its official acceptance in the Roman Empire. When, during the third and early fourth centuries, Christians were threatened by persecution and death, they found hope in the “sign of Jonah” that promised life would follow



death. The parallels between the three day period of Jonah in the fish and Jesus in the tomb allowed these believers to understand the prophecy of Jonah in a new way, as pointing toward the resurrected Christ who is the shepherd and savior of those who believe in Him.

After Christianity became the official religion of the Empire by the Edict of Milan in 313, artists portrayed Christ less as the simple Good Shepherd and more like a Caesar, with royal attributes such as a halo, purple robe, and throne. A separation occurred between Jonah and Christ in the visual art and theology of Christianity. As Christ became more regal, the popularity of Jonah’s story decreased significantly. Perhaps the concerns of the Christians expanded from uncertainty about their own death, which had been a very real issue during the early centuries, to the eternal kingdom of God after resurrection. Jonah’s words were not less important to this

Figure 4. *Jonah Praying*.
47 x 14 x 20.6 cm.

next generation of Christians, but Christ’s triumphant rule over the powers became more prevalent.

Abraham Heschel has pointed out that Hebrew prophets were both *foretellers* and *forthtellers*; their prophetic ministry included both predicting what God would do in the future (foretelling) as well as exposing the injustices of society (forthtelling). Jonah was a reluctant prophet who initially rejected God’s command to be foreteller and forthteller to the people of Nineveh. His disobedience led him to spend three days in the belly of a fish before he half-heartedly agreed to deliver God’s message to those foreigners.

Jesus, the Son of God, brought God’s prophetic message to the residents of Galilee and Judea. Unlike Jonah, Jesus was fully obedient to God’s command; in the garden of Gethsemane he prayed, “Not my will but yours

be done" (Luke 22:42), and this obedience led him to spend three days in the "belly of Death." Jesus' message of God's redeeming love, like Jonah's, was intended to be inclusive, inviting Jew and non-Jew alike to become people of God's kingdom (Matthew 28:16-20).

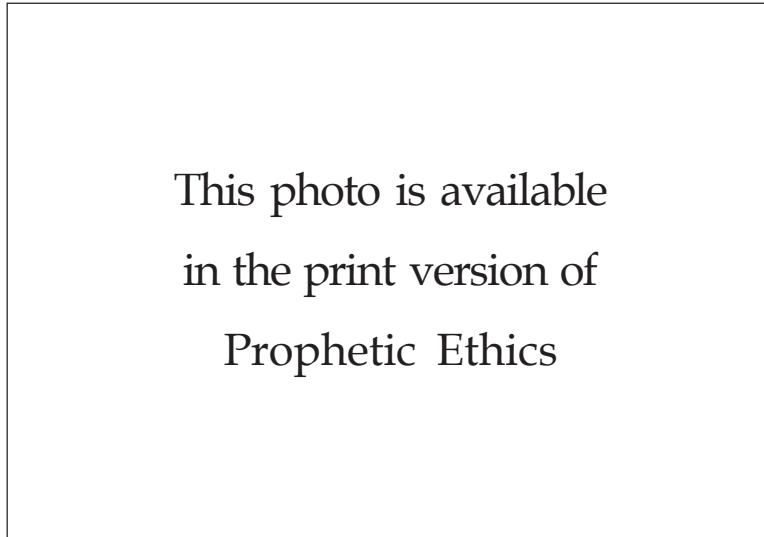


Figure 5. *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine*. 32.1 x 46.3 x 17.5 cm.

NOTES

1 William D. Wixom, "Early Christian Sculptures at Cleveland," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* (March 1967): 67-88k.

2 E. B. Lewis: 'Early Christian and Byzantine art, I, 2(i): Religious iconography, (a) Before c. 313', *The Grove Dictionary of Art Online*, ed. L. Macy (Accessed 5 November 2002), <http://www.groveart.com>

Jonah Swallowed (p. 57), *Jonah Cast Up* (p. 54), *Jonah Under the Gourd Vine* (p. 59), *Jonah Praying* (p. 58), and *The Good Shepherd* (p. 56). Asia Minor, probably Phrygia (central Turkey), Early Christian, c. 270-280. Marble. © The Cleveland Museum of Art, 2002. John L. Severance Fund, 1965.237-241.



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❖ Other Voices ❖

The situation of a person immersed in the prophets' words is one of being exposed to a ceaseless shattering of indifference, and one needs a skull of stone to remain callous to such blows.

ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL, *The Prophets*

The prophetic word ... has its origins in an impassioned dialogue; yet the dialogue never tries to climb into the realm of general religious truth, but instead uses even the most suspect means to tie the listening partner down to his particular time and place in order to make him understand his own situation before God. In order to reach this partner ... the prophets use every possible rhetorical device—they are not afraid to use extremely radical forms of expression or even caricature. With certain exceptions, their concern is not the objective proof of what was generally believed, but rather to be highly critical of Israel's religious traditions.

GERHARD VON RAD, *The Message of the Prophets*

Israel believes that God will always forgive her and act favorably toward her. She has merely to go through the motions of worship and of return, and God will come gently and lovingly to her aid

We see how very closely our lives parallel Israel's, for in our time, many believe that God no longer judges anyone. God is only loving, God is peaceable, God is always forgiving. Like Judah in the time of Jeremiah, we think we can break all the Ten Commandments and then go into the house of the Lord and declare, "We are delivered!"—only to go on doing all of our abominations. We believe we can go on sinning, in order that grace may abound.

ELIZABETH ACHEMEIER, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*

The prophet was an individual who said No to his society, condemning its habits and assumptions, its complacency, waywardness, and syncretism. He was often compelled to proclaim the very opposite of what his heart expected. His fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. Why do the two need reconciliation? Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history.

ABRAHAM J. HESCHEL, *The Prophets*

In the face of economic exploitation, maladministration of the legal system, corrupt and self-serving leadership, and an inward turning cultus, the most vulnerable members of Israelite society (the poor, the needy, the

widow, the orphan, the weak) were in need of advocates. The prophets became those advocates, and in so doing suggested that these most vulnerable and their welfare are the most adequate measure of justice and righteousness in the community. It is the task of covenant community to secure value and place for full life to those most unable to secure it for themselves. That Israel had failed to do this is the subject of some of the prophets' harshest indictment and most energetic advocacy.

BRUCE C. BIRCH, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*

Jesus regarded his ministry as in continuity with, and bringing to a climax, the work of the great prophets of the Old Testament This is how his contemporaries must have seen him, and did in fact see him. Like Elijah or Jeremiah, Jesus was proclaiming a message from the covenant god, and living it out with symbolic actions. He was confronting the people with the folly of their ways, summoning them to a different way, and expecting to take the consequences of doing so.

N. T. WRIGHT, *Jesus and the Victory of God*

The Bible knows so well the source of our sin—in our evil hearts.... Thus the prophets call for repentance, turning, change in our hearts.... The presupposition is that heart-rending repentance will lead to new action, that out of the heart there will flow goodness, kindness, peace, love, justice, and righteousness. For “to repent” in biblical thought is to turn around, to go in the opposite direction, to change the direction of one’s life-walk. And if the change has not been made, there has been no true repentance.

ELIZABETH ACHEMEIER, *Preaching from the Minor Prophets*

[Jesus’] social goal is utterly traditional: It is that of the Mosaic corpus, with its bias toward the sojourner, the widow, and the orphan. It is that of Isaiah and Micah, the vision of a world taught the arts of peacemaking It is the ingathering of the nations in the age of the anointing. What differs about Jesus is not a different goal: It is that he sees, for both himself and his disciples, a different mode of implementation. It is not the path of the quietists or of the Essenes, who went to the desert to wait for god to act, or of the Pharisees, who kept themselves pure within society, disavowing the present world’s structures, but leaving it to a future divine intervention to set them straight. It is not the path of Zealot presumption, claiming to be the party of righteousness authorized by God to trigger the coming of the new age through a paroxysm of righteous insurrection. Each of those standard type responses to “the mess the world is in” is a different answer to the question, “How do *we* get from here to there?” Jesus’ alternative is not to answer that question in a new way, but to renew, as the prophets had always been trying to do, the insistence that the question is how to get from there to here. How can the lordship of Yahweh, affirmed in principle

from all eternity, be worthily confessed as grace through faith? How can the present world be rendered transparent to the reality already there, that the sick are to be healed and the prisoners freed? We are not called to love our enemies in order to make them our friends. We are called to act out love for them because at the cross it has been effectively proclaimed from all eternity they were our brothers and sisters.

J O H N H O W A R D Y O D E R, “The Prophetic Task of Pastoral Ministry: The Gospels” in *The Pastor as Prophet*

Paul says [in 1 Corinthians 14:1] that prophecy is the highest gift after love because it is to the benefit and advantage of the church, since by it everybody learns the principles of God’s law.

A M B R O S I A S T E R (4th Century), *Commentary on Paul’s Epistle*

The true prophet speaks with the heart of a pastor and with the passion of one who has seen and felt the pain and suffering of the dispossessed, the helpless, and the disenfranchised. The true prophet’s denunciation has the force of righteousness to the extent that it is born out of care—both for the oppressed and for the oppressors.

R O N A L D H. S U N D E R L A N D and **E A R L E. S H E L P**, “Prophetic Ministry: An Introduction,” in *The Pastor as Prophet*

The dichotomy of prophetic and pastoral is a misunderstanding of both. I can think of no one in our tradition who is more intensely engaged in pastoral care than Elijah. He practices it with the widow by being present in her need. He practices it with the false prophets by exposing their fraud and permitting a faithful confession. He practices it with the king by telling the truth. And in each case, as Yahweh’s sovereignty is celebrated, the power for life is present—even to Ahab. The unleashing of the power for life in this world bent on death depends on pastoral work that is rigorous and prophetic work that is passionate. But such pastoral-prophetic work requires being fed by ravens, not at the king’s table.

W A L T E R B R U E G G E M A N N, *A Social Reading of the Old Testament*

Prophecy is no longer solely the role of specific individuals, although individual prophets will, I hope, still be present. It is the community itself that is now prophetic, for it is a community formed by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, which means that it cannot be what it is without understanding itself to be accountable to the great prophets of Israel.

S T A N L E Y H A U E R W A S, *Christian Existence Today*

The alternative community discharges a modeling mission. The church is called to be now what the world is called to be ultimately.... The church is thus not chaplain or priest to the powers running the world.

J O H N H O W A R D Y O D E R, *The Priestly Kingdom*

Extreme Virtues

BY DAVID FILLINGIM

“Extreme,” that buzzword of Generation X, is a good word for Christian discipleship. In their lives and teachings, the prophets of Israel show the extreme virtues of justice, steadfast love, and humility before God which we should exhibit as individuals and in our life together.

The word “extreme” is now a buzzword in our culture as “Generation X” has ascended to media prominence. In addition to *extreme* sports (accompanied, Madison Avenue tells us, by *extreme* thirst, which in turn requires an *extreme* sports drink), we have *extreme* fashion, *extreme* travel, *extreme* adventure, and *extreme* music.

“Extreme” is also a good word for Christian discipleship. No one wants to be what we disparagingly call “a religious extremist.” But the life to which God’s people are called is indeed an extreme commitment. How can we be extreme in our faith without being “extremists”? That’s where the prophets can help us.

The prophets of Israel were often extreme individuals. Consider the ecstatic frenzies of Elijah and Elisha, the harsh pronouncements of Amos and Micah, the strange marriage of Hosea, or the wild symbolic antics of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. If those prophets were alive today, they just might be more at home among the purple-haired and body-pierced than among the staunch, stolid, well-groomed churchgoing crowd. They were extreme in their commitment to the God who had called them, and they were extreme in presenting the message they had been given to proclaim.

In their lives and teachings, the prophets of Israel exhibit extreme virtues that combine to form a portrait of the kind of character that we, as God’s people, should exhibit as individuals and in our life together. That nutshell summary of the prophets’ message, Micah 6:8, calls for three virtues: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD

require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

JUSTICE

The first virtue in Micah’s list is justice, a central ethical demand of the prophets and all of Scripture. Amos was the first classical prophet to proclaim God’s demand for justice: “But let justice roll down like waters, and

Biblical justice is not merely an abstract ideal. It is a raging river, a force waiting to burst into concrete reality and overflow through God’s people into a world parched by injustice.

righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The situation that prompted Amos to demand justice was one of systematic mistreatment of the poor. The prophet catalogs the many ways God’s people have come to “trample on the poor” (5:12), thus violating God’s

covenant demands. Because of these injustices, God no longer accepts Israel’s worship; indeed, injustice has made their worship an annoyance to God (5:21-23). Justice requires fair treatment of the poor, the weak, and the marginalized; it means full inclusion of everyone in the life of the community. Amos proclaims that God demands justice in daily dealings, not shallow, meaningless piety in weekly worship.

As an ethical demand or principle, then, justice is about restoring the marginalized to their rightful place as full participants in the community. But what does it mean to claim that justice is an extreme *virtue* which God’s people should develop and embody in the way we live? For, indeed, biblical justice is not merely an abstract principle or ideal; it is a raging river (Amos 5:24), a force waiting to burst into concrete reality and overflow through God’s people into a world parched by injustice.

As an extreme virtue, justice means compassion for the poor. Such compassion will be embodied in our attitudes, actions, and relationships—not merely our personal relationships, but our social, professional, and economic relationships as well. How? We can begin developing habits of compassionate justice by taking small steps: Treat the low-wage service workers with whom we come into contact daily as persons whose dignity is equal to our own rather than as servants or as mere cogs in the economic machine. Avoid humor that dehumanizes groups of people. Vote for candidates whose policies resemble the biblical standard of justice as compassion for the poor instead of merely reflecting our own economic self-interest. When we learn of specific economic injustices, avoid supporting the businesses responsible. Volunteer at the local homeless shelter, food closet, or soup kitchen. Support charitable organizations that work on behalf of the

poor. While charity is no substitute for economic justice, charitable work is consistent with compassion for the poor. Support organizations that lobby for more just social policy. Teach our children the equality of all people. Combat materialism by buying second-hand goods. Through small steps such as these we can grow toward lives characterized by justice.

STEADFAST LOVE

The second virtue in Micah's list is *hesed*, which can be translated "mercy" (NRSV), "lovingkindness," "faithfulness," or "steadfast love." *Hesed* is God's covenant love, which is steadfast even when God's people waver in their love, devotion, and faithfulness. The prophet Hosea most clearly portrays God's demand that God's people demonstrate steadfast love. He presents a dialogue between God and God's people, on the nature of love and of God's demands. In this dialogue, the people speak first, expressing their intention to repent of their unfaithfulness and return to their God (Hosea 6:1, 3). But, surprisingly, God responds by rejecting their repentance:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
 What shall I do with you, O Judah?
 Your love is like a morning cloud,
 like the dew that goes away early.

Hosea 6:4

Wait a minute, God says. I've heard this song and dance before. I know you, and I know your ways. Your repentance is superficial. Your love is not a deep and abiding love. Your love is like the fog or the morning dew; it's refreshing while it lasts but it evaporates quickly in the heat of the day. Such love is not the love God demands: "For I desire steadfast love, and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings" (6:6).

God demands *hesed*. Remember that *hesed* is God's covenant love which is steadfast despite our unfaithfulness, a love that does not wane or waver when times or circumstances change. *Hesed* is the essence of God's own character and is expected of God's people. So here we have an important lesson about virtue in general and the virtue of steadfast love in particular: the people of God are to model their character after God's own character. God is faithful to them; therefore, they are to be steadfast in their devotion to God and merciful in their dealings with one another. This is *hesed*: mercy, faithfulness, lovingkindness, and steadfast love.

Because steadfast love is an abiding faithfulness, it is more than mere emotion. It is seen in the ability to make and keep commitments. When the prophets call for steadfast love, or when Jesus commands us to love our neighbor, they are not instructing us to have warm fuzzy feelings for one another. The feeling of love, like all feelings, is not completely reliable.

Feelings come and go; they can vary with changes in our external circumstances or in our body chemistry. God calls us to practice love, to do loving things consistently and habitually, whether or not the feeling of love is present. By practicing love, we become loving people.

We are to practice steadfast love in all our relationships. The implications may be clearest in intimate relationships such as marriage, parenting, or close friendship. But steadfast love means treating all people with kindness, mercy, and compassion, and showing integrity, loyalty, and dependability in all our interactions, regardless of whether we happen to like the people to whom we relate.

Most importantly, we are to practice steadfast love in our relationship to God. Steadfast love means continuing to practice devotion through the changeableness of religious feelings. We need to worship, pray, and read scripture faithfully, avoiding the temptation to let our spiritual discipline slide when we get too busy, or when things are going so well we don't see the need to take time to pray. We also must avoid the temptation to abandon our spiritual discipline in the darker times, when we feel that God is distant, when prayers seem to go unanswered, or when we are at the receiving end of the injustice that often characterizes life in a sinful and fallen world. There is room for us to be angry at God within the bounds of steadfast love. Like Jeremiah and Elijah, we can take our complaints to God rather than allowing them to become a wedge driven between us and our maker. Steadfast love is a matter of commitment, and a true commitment to God will endure through the emotion-laden ebb and flow in our spiritual life.

HUMILITY

To "walk humbly" with our God is the third virtue in Micah's list. In essence, humility is the attitude that makes justice and steadfast love possible. The injustice and unfaithfulness against which the prophets preach can be seen as failures of humility. Injustice obviously manifests a lack of humility, for when we oppress a neighbor we adopt a position of superiority over that person. Injustice is a failure to accept our true standing in relation to the God who is "exalted by justice" and before whom "the eyes of the haughty are humbled" (Isaiah 5:15-16).

Before we can appreciate the justice of God, we must acknowledge our spiritual poverty. We possess nothing with which we can make ourselves presentable to God. We fail to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbor as ourselves. As sinners, utterly impoverished before God, we cannot justify ourselves. So God provides a means for our justification; this is the gospel. What we cannot provide for ourselves, God provides for us. God's justice, therefore, means compassion for poor sinners.

When we fully appreciate God's justice in light of our own spiritual poverty, we realize that everything we have stems from God's compassion,

that we have not earned any of the things with which God has blessed us. Our talents, opportunities, material resources, and loved ones, are all gifts from God. Therefore, none of these things presents a basis for thinking of ourselves more highly than we think of others. For this is another aspect of our spiritual poverty: before an infinitely good God, all of us are equally impoverished. All children of dust are equally children of God.

To practice injustice toward another person is to fail to recognize our own spiritual poverty. It is colossal arrogance: putting ourselves in the place of God, acting as if we are the source of our own abilities, and lord-ing over others. Humility is the only effective antidote to injustice.

Unfaithfulness, which is our failure of steadfast love, often flows from a lack of humility, a spiritual blindness to our true standing before God. We act as if we are not dependent on God for our resources. "She did not know," God says of Israel through the prophet Hosea, "that it was I who gave her the grain, the wine, and the oil, who lavished upon her the silver and gold that they used for Baal" (Hosea 2:8). In our unfaithfulness we arrogantly take the gifts of God for granted or even credit other sources for God's blessings. We treat other things as more worthy of our attention and devotion than God. Once again, an appropriate humility that acknowledges God for who God is, can support our steadfast love and be a perfect remedy to unfaithfulness.

CONCLUSION

God's people are called not to moderation, but to an extreme commitment. We are called to live lives of extreme virtue, demonstrating justice, steadfast love, humility, and other godly traits in our attitudes and behaviors. The lives and teachings of the biblical prophets, those extreme servants of God, can help shape our character as disciples of Jesus.[†]

NOTE

[†]Thanks to the publisher for permission to use material from my forthcoming book, *Extreme Virtues: Living on the Prophetic Edge* (Herald Press, 2003).



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Swimming with the Prophets

BY CAROL YOUNGER

The baptismal waters call to mind the words of Joel,
“I will pour out my Spirit on them,’ declares the Lord.”
God offers ongoing opportunities to step into the River
of Life. Our baptism continues, as we learn to swim with
the Spirit into a life of deeper faithfulness.

To be joyful out on 70,000 fathoms of water, many, many miles from all human help—yes, that is something great! To swim in the shallows in the company of waders is not the religious.

Sören Kierkegaard

Four years ago our son asked, “When can I be baptized?” I started questioning: Was Graham ready to meet the waves of ethical dilemmas and tough questions that would wash over him after making his commitment? “When can I be baptized?” he asked, and I wanted to say, “Have you mastered the backstroke? Can you conquer an undertow?” I handed him sentences to learn, facts to memorize, and admonitions to follow, as though I could layer theological life jackets on him. I wanted him to show some expertise, some grasp of the Christian life before he stepped into the baptistery. I was suiting him in scuba gear before his first trip to the pool, enough to make a person cling to the side rather than dive in.

Then I remembered that the first step in swimming lessons is learning to love the water.

What he most needed to see was what I often overlook. The water poured into the baptistery embodies Joel’s words, “I will pour out my Spirit on them,’ declares the LORD” (see Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17). This water in which we joyfully splash is a Living Water, a gift poured out for us. “When can I be baptized?” my son continued to ask, and in his longing,

urgent tone, I heard myself long to touch Living Water, to be dipped again into Joel's vision of living with God: a vision of being drenched by a River of Life. I remembered the Holy Presence in the world, the Vision beyond our human selves, which leads us to this river. I saw how far I had moved from the waters of my own baptism, how dry the vision, now barely a trickle.

"When can I be baptized?" he repeated, and I responded, "Let's both get in the water. I'll go with you." So we went into the baptistery, Graham, his pastor father, and I. As my husband and I baptized our son together, I touched this River of Life again, reminded that it is not about words memorized, facts told, and admonitions given. This is swimming in the Spirit, loving the Water, and staying in until we can ride the current. The prophet's words, "I will pour out my Spirit on them," offer ongoing opportunities to step into this filled pool. Our baptism continues. We learn to swim with the Spirit. When are we ready for such an exercise? When we're ready to dream dreams, and see visions.

It has been a while since Graham first went into the water. Our swimming lessons continue. Familiar stories of Scripture become passages that challenge. We weave readings, sermons, reflections, and songs into rafts that we hope will keep us afloat in deeper waters. We ask questions we've not asked before. We try to share school, work, church, and daily routines with those whose heritage and lifestyles are different than our own.

"Love one another," Christ commanded and the apostles echoed to those early Christians learning to swim. My Fort Worth, Texas, church practices a weekly discipline of sharing a meal with people in our neighborhood. In serving folks

who rarely sit around a tablecloth with flowers in the center, we learn lessons in friendship. Sometimes it is our children, refilling iced tea glasses with kindness, who minister. When the strokes of hospitality grow tiresome, a person's story, a shared experience, or an expression of gratitude or grace reminds us how good it is to swim.

I wanted my son to show expertise in the Christian life before stepping into the baptistery. I was suiting him in scuba gear before his first trip to the pool, enough to make a person cling to the side rather than dive in.

Whenever we sit on the side for a while, or wade around too long, the prophets, our swimming instructors in the faith, remind us that it is time to head for deeper water. When our swimming lessons grow difficult, we must repeat them over and over. At times we are barely treading water. Often we choose the shallow end. We crowd into the wading area, and

grow annoyed. We're bumping into other frustrated swimmers, avoiding the exercise for which we were meant.

The prophets help us move toward the deeper end in our faithfulness. They show us strokes we must practice to move forward. To learn them, they say, we must welcome the lonely, the marginalized, the orphan, the foreigner. This practice will pull us out of the shallow area, they promise,

When we sit on the side for a while, or wade around too long in the shallows, the prophets, our swimming instructors in the faith, remind us that it is time to head for deeper water.

and move us firmly through the waves.

Suddenly the fellow waders who had annoyed us are a joy to have in the water. There is purpose and fellowship in the deep end. Still drenched by the waters of new life, our baptism continues.

The question is, will we stay in the river and learn to ride the current?

Like many who got into the water at age ten, Graham sometimes wonders if he was ready. If he had known how his love for Christ would lead him to question his use of money, his values and friendships, and the presence of the Spirit as a form of conscience in his life, would he have taken longer to step into the baptistery? He still maintains his love of the water. He keeps listening to the questions that his swim instructors ask: Will you follow if no one swims beside you? Will you forge through deep waters when some advise you to sit by the side and pull up a towel? Will you commit to go the distance, even when you don't yet know your endurance level? Will you find joy in this daily training? Will you trust the one who invited you into the water, even when the water is way over your head?

I no longer expect any certain level of expertise prior to my son's continuing adventure in the water. I just listen to hear the instructor call our names and remind us that it is time for our lessons. I just long for the willingness to understand that faith always leads us beyond where we are into new territory. We splash in this river together, learning to love the water and practicing our strokes, following the community that has gone before us, slowly moving towards the deeper waters of faith.



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Lord, Have Mercy

BY LEA PARDUE SLATON

Hosea paints the beautiful picture of a tenderhearted God who is full of mercy toward the children of Israel. More than mere pity or sympathy, mercy means that we follow God's lead in feeling others' hurt, knowing their fears, and allowing them to become part of us and change our hearts.

Lord, have mercy! I have heard my grandmother exclaim this on numerous occasions, usually in response to someone's foolishness, like her nephew, Jimmy, sticking a piece of chalk up his nose. Or in response to the Alabama Crimson Tide losing a game. Lord, have mercy. She meant that she loved these people no matter what their situation, and even if she couldn't forgive that fumble in overtime, God could! Have mercy.

Of course, mercy is about more than football games. It is much more than mere pity or sympathy, and even more than forgiveness. Mercy means that we make a compassionate connection with someone else. We understand their thoughts. We feel their hurt. We know their fears. They become part of us and something changes in our hearts.

The prophet Hosea paints the beautiful picture of a tenderhearted God who is full of mercy. The children of Israel, God's children, had repeatedly abandoned God, following instead the god *du jour*. They had forgotten their sacred, loving relationship with Yahweh. God, they believed, had every right to wipe them out completely, for such an act would have been entirely in keeping with the ancient law that allowed parents to have rebellious sons stoned to death. But God said:

I will not execute my fierce anger;
I will not again destroy Ephraim;

for I am God and no mortal,
the Holy One in your midst,
and I will not come in wrath.

Hosea 11:9

God felt compassion. It wasn't that God did not have the power to destroy. No, God simply did not have the heart for it. Have mercy.

**In the book of Hosea, God's heart aches, but
God doesn't stop there. God takes action.
Through the prophet, God calls the people
back and promises to heal their disloyalty.**

God's response says much more about the divine nature than the nature of the people. God sets the standard for mercy. We see that standard clearly in Jesus Christ, who was asked again and again to give some healing, blessing, or teaching—some

mercy. In Matthew, two blind men cry out, "Have mercy on us, Son of David" (9:27). Or hear the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, in Mark: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me" (10:47). Or in Luke, ten lepers plead, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us" (17:13). And, what does Jesus do? He follows God's lead. He sees people in terrible need and something stirs in his heart. Have mercy.

In the book of Hosea, God's heart aches, but God doesn't stop there. God takes action. Through the prophet, God calls the people back and promises to heal their disloyalty:

They shall again live beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom like the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

Hosea 14:7

God saw the people's brokenness and desperately wanted them to be reconciled and to flourish as a garden.

That's mercy for you! It is not based on our actions, thank God! Mercy is undeserved. And that's the whole point. God's mercy is for everybody, regardless.

We are called as God's children to be the hands and arms and faces of this mercy in our very unmerciful world. People can and do answer this call. Helen Prejean, the nun whose ministry was featured in the movie *Dead Man Walking*, comes to my mind. Sister Helen cares for the families of murder victims, as well as for the murderers themselves on death row. The movie tells about her work with Matthew Poncelet, who raped and killed

a teenage girl. She believes that, in spite of the terrible, cruel crime, he is still a child of God. Disrespectful, arrogant, and full of hate, Poncelet is not a likeable character. But, he finally confesses to her his responsibility in the murder. As he waits in his cell for the midnight of his execution to come, Sister Helen tells him: "I want the last face you see in this world to be the face of love, so you look at me when they do this thing. I'll be the face of love for you." That is mercy. When you can look in the eyes of a self-professed killer and be the face of love, that's God-given mercy.

Merciful living is God's standard, and so, especially today, it goes against the world's usual standards, which insist that we stand up for our rights, no matter what. The usual standards make us feel that by showing mercy, we show weakness. People will take advantage of us. Give them an inch, they'll take a mile. But, you know what? Most of the time, it is none of our business how someone responds. We do not hand out mercy with contingencies. That's between the other party and God. Our business as Christians is to live mercifully regardless of how someone responds.

By grace, we have received God's mercy ourselves. Through that grace, we are called to give freely of mercy because it has been freely given to us. God has withheld harsh judgment from us. Frederick Faber's hymn, *There's a Wideness in God's Mercy*, reminds us,

There is no place where Earth's sorrows
are more felt than up in heaven;
there is no place where Earth's failings
have such kindly judgment given."

That is mercy.

Mercy is work. It certainly doesn't come naturally to me. Sometimes when I read the newspaper, I wonder why I even bother to think about mercy in the midst of such overwhelming violence and just plain meanness. I bother because mercy is a grace that sets me free from anger, revenge, hatred, and bitterness. It reconnects me to God as well as other people. As one of God's children, I bother because I want to feel closer to God.

Like most of you, I received many emails after the horrible events of September 11. Mercy seemed far away and foolish in most of those notes, expressing our immediate, all-too-this-worldly reactions. But I received

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one prayer that opened my heart to the possibility that somehow, we can practice mercy even in such dire circumstances. Pray with me this prayer by an anonymous prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp at Ravensbruck:

Oh Lord, remember not only the men and women of goodwill but also those of ill will. But do not remember the suffering they have inflicted upon us; remember the fruits through which we brought thanks to this suffering, our comradeship, our loyalty, our humility, the courage, the generosity, the greatness of heart which has grown out of this; and when they come to judgment, let all the fruits that we have borne be their forgiveness.

Have mercy. Amen.



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The Prophet as Storyteller

BY CHRISTINA BIEBER

**With a razor sharp and winsome sense of humor,
Flannery O'Connor was one of America's finest prophets.
Like Nathan, who confronted King David through artful
storytelling, she understood the power of fiction to
engage the ethical imagination and deliver a much-
needed emotional jolt.**

You don't have to read too far into the book of Genesis to understand why the Puritans were so anxious about stories. Everything is going fine in the Garden of Eden until a crafty storyteller shows up. "Did God really say that you couldn't eat that fruit without dying? Well, you won't die; let me tell you how it will be. Taste that fruit and you will have a fantastic experience—your eyes will be opened and you will be like God!" The rest, as they say, is history.

Since the fall of man begins with a tall tale, it's no wonder that the Puritans equated storytelling with lying. The belief that fiction and poetry could only corrupt people was so pronounced that the British poet Sir Philip Sidney felt compelled to publish his famous "Apology for Poetry" in the late sixteenth century. Sidney defends the poet from the charge of lying, for he does not work to "tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be. And therefore, though he recount things not true, yet because he telleth them not for true, he lieth not—without which we will say that Nathan lied in his speech ... to David."¹

Whether you buy all of Sidney's reasoning here or not, his appeal to the Biblical account of the prophet Nathan is compelling. David had been deep in sin, covering up his adulterous affair with Bathsheba by plotting against her husband Uriah. Knowing that David would have to swallow his pride and admit to a lot, Nathan thought it best to take an indirect

approach in confronting David. He told a story. He told David about a rich man who had everything he could want but still stole a cherished lamb from a poor man. Nathan added some heart-wrenching detail, including the fact that this little lamb “used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him” (2 Samuel 12:3). You can imagine Nathan watching David and waiting for his story to engage David’s emotions and moral sensibility. It worked. The scriptures record that “David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die!’” (2 Samuel 12:5). After this pronouncement, there is nowhere for David to hide when Nathan makes the analogy complete by accusing him: “You are the man!”

Nathan knew more than the facts about David’s sin. He knew about human psychology – that something happens in a sinful heart and in a sinful world that makes people callous. We are good at lying to ourselves. We grow to accept what we have done, excuse it, make up new worlds of personal morality, and move through life as unconvicted as a stone. Nathan knew he had to do more than speak words that David could have twisted around and rejected. He had to give him a picture to show him that the moral truth he had violated is one that he would automatically and easily apply to everyone else’s case. In short, Nathan had to use his prophetic imagination in order to stimulate David’s moral imagination.

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann explains why the prophet needs more than knowledge of right and wrong. As individuals and a society we become numb to the bad choices we have made and are no longer able to see our sin. Prophets understand *how* people change. They understand “the possibility of change as linked to emotional extremities of life.”² In other words, prophets know that we do not need better understanding – we need a jolt. This is why Flannery O’Connor would have loved Brueggemann’s book. O’Connor, a twentieth century Catholic writer, was one of America’s finest storytelling prophets. She believed that fiction, because it engages the imagination, is the only way to penetrate into this deep numbness of society. Like biblical prophecy, her fiction worked on two levels: first, it illuminated the extent of the current social crisis via art’s most basic revelatory tool: defamiliarization. She used the grotesque to make what is truly perverse actually *appear* perverse. Second, O’Connor acted prophetically by telling one story more often than any other: a hardheaded, misguided character who makes the David-like discovery of “I am that man!” And she did it all with a razor sharp and winsome sense of humor.

O’Connor knew that America of the ‘40s and ‘50s, like today, was badly in need of a prophet. And the spiritual sickness she saw in secular America was of the same type that she saw in many of our mainline churches. In a letter O’Connor explained that “if you live today you

breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe."³ While American society kept the name of God, He was essentially co-opted, emptied of His powerful otherness, and denied His role as one who reveals. God was turned into a symbol of man's moral convictions and his imaginative power, and then ignored.

A trenchant and philosophically minded social critic, O'Connor traced the loss back at least as far as Ralph Waldo Emerson. She saw Emerson as America's best example of Protestantism run amuck. Son of a Boston minister and educated at Harvard, Emerson became a Unitarian minister and the leading voice for transcendentalism. He believed that humans could elevate themselves by the power of their imagination—that God *is* humanity, not essentially separate or other from us. In Emerson's famous "Divinity School Address" he argued that Jesus was just an example that we should follow (but not slavishly imitate) because he understood that "God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his World."⁴ In her critique of this shameless substitution of God with humanity, Flannery O'Connor focused on the moment in 1832 when Emerson decided to remove the bread and wine from the Eucharist because they were just symbols and unnecessary for true worship. When Emerson did this, O'Connor explained, "an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken."⁵

"Vaporization" is precisely the right word. What had been substantial—the historical incarnation of Christ, His death for our atonement, and His present work through the Church—dissolved into mere moral conviction. Jesus became a symbol. Without the core of right beliefs, the shell of right behavior cannot last long. And the proof is in the pudding: as the nineteenth century became the twentieth, America increasingly became a place where anything goes. Jesus became just another consumer option. And we had grown so used to worshiping ourselves instead of God that we could no longer see the degradation any more than we could see the air we breathe.

And so steps in the prophet. O'Connor used the force of her imagination to show a numbed America what it had become. Her most famous articulation of how the storyteller reveals these truths comes from her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country." She explains that the fiction

O'Connor knew that America was badly in need of a prophet. While it kept the name of God, He was essentially co-opted, emptied of His powerful otherness, and denied His role as one who reveals. God was turned into a symbol of man's moral convictions and his imaginative power, and then ignored.

writer has to shock her audience to make her vision apparent because “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures” (CW, 805-6). O’Connor’s first novella, *Wise Blood*, presents America in this startling way through the degraded city of the fictitious Taulkinham. In Taulkinham people act like animals, and the only thing they worship is their own desires as reflected in America’s newest God: capitalism. Jesus is sold on the streets as readily as automobiles and with the same flashy language of a peddler selling a worthless potato peeler. Onnie Jay Holy is one of these salesmen. For just a dollar you can join his church in which “you can absolutely trust” because, as Holy says, “‘it’s based on the Bible. Yes sir! It’s based on your own personal interpretation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpret your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted. That’s right,’ he said, ‘just the way Jesus would have done it’” (CW, 87). It’s easy to see O’Connor’s resounding critique of the excesses of Protestantism. When it becomes every person for him or herself in a consumer society, the crisis is at a height—even in the Church. It is the living death that, Brueggemann says, is “manifested in alienation, loss of patrimony, and questing for new satiations that can never satisfy, and we are driven to the ultimate consumerism of consuming each other.”⁶

To her prophetic rendering of America’s spiritual degradation in *Wise Blood*, O’Connor adds the comic drama of her protagonist, Hazel Motes. His name points to the story’s central themes; he has a mote in his eye, but his story will reveal the plank in our own. Haze grew up in a solidly Christian (if somewhat misguided) home, but now he wants to leave all that, become modern, and be rid of Jesus by living a life of sin. He wants to believe that he can live the consumer’s lie: that he can do whatever he wants without consequence. He hooks up with a prostitute (“What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts” [CW, 31]), shacks up with a hypocritical preacher’s daughter, and begins to proclaim the “Church Without Christ”—O’Connor’s jab at mainline Protestant denominations. But try as he might, Haze cannot accept a life of sin with the complacency with which everyone else accepts it. Haze is the first manifestation of a character type that O’Connor would turn to again: the reluctant prophet. In spite of himself, Haze can’t get rid of Jesus. Haze’s “wise blood” teaches him that how he lives and what he believes does matter, and that this is not a world where anything goes. But the numbness of consumer society is so pervasive that he needs something strong to snap him out of it. And we need something, too—an emotional jolt.

As often as not in O’Connor’s fiction, that jolt is the reality of death. As Brueggemann points out, since death is really what society numbs itself to, death is what the prophet must proclaim. The prophet must “*speaking metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us*, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the

candor born of anguish and passion.”⁷⁷ When Haze’s illicit lover cradles a shriveled mummified corpse known as the “new jesus” in her arms like a baby, the perversion of it all finally hits Haze. This real dead body and what it symbolizes connect for him, and hopefully, for us. In a moment of prophetic passion Haze takes the corpse and smashes it against the wall. You can imagine Haze saying to himself, “This world is not right! We are substituting man for God and death for life. This life is a living death! Man cannot save himself!” Haze finally loses the mote in his eye, and O’Connor hopes that we lose the plank in our own.

O’Connor’s use of narrative to illustrate what American society is actually worshipping was just one way that she hoped to open readers’ eyes. She also told and retold stories that featured people who made the same sort of personal discovery that David made when Nathan visited him. A typical hardheaded character that O’Connor created to be like David—and like us—is Ruby Turpin from the story “Revelation.” Ruby is a southern white landowner who is proud of her property and her social standing. Like David, Ruby has become so self-satisfied and self-serving that she cannot see anything wrong with herself but can easily dole out judgments on others.

The story begins in the waiting room of a doctor’s office. It is one of those places that should remind Ruby that the frailty of the body is one way in which all people are equal before God, and that she is decidedly *not* God and should not try to usurp Him. But Ruby misses that insight and begins mentally to put everyone in his or her “place.” She goes around the room and identifies a “white trash” woman, a pleasant woman, an ugly girl (who “acts ugly” which is even worse in her world), and “niggers.” She recalls how she would “occupy herself at night naming the classes of people” and imagine what she would have chosen to be if she weren’t herself. She even imagines a conversation with Jesus at her creation in which she smartes back at Him and demands the social rank she believes she deserves. If Jesus would have allowed her only two places, “nigger or white-trash,” she would have pleaded with Him for another option. When He refused, “she would have said, ‘All right, make me a nigger then—but that don’t mean a trashy one.’ And he would have made her a neat clean respectable Negro woman, herself but black” (CW, 636). Ruby Turpin’s imagination is clearly stunted. She cannot see herself clearly and, therefore, has no room in her tightly-constructed hierarchy for a true other to teach her anything. Like David who acted toward Uriah only to advance himself, Ruby goes about her business on her farms, never having a genuine thought about the “white-trash and common” who work for her. She is completely numb and needs someone to wake her up.

David had Nathan; Ruby Turpin gets an ugly girl symbolically named Mary Grace. Mary Grace is a disgruntled college student who is in the doctor’s waiting room with everyone else. She could not help but hear Ruby’s

assessment that the white-trash she knows are even a step below her *hogs* because “our hogs are not dirty and they don’t stink ... their feet never touch the ground” (CW, 638). Ruby clearly thinks that *her* feet never touch the ground. Hearing enough, Mary Grace explodes and hurls a book at Ruby, begins to choke her, and whispers, “Go back to hell where you came

The prophet’s primary role as storyteller is to displace us in order to put us in our place, to remind us that we are the created and not the Creator. This revelation of self must precede any revelation from (or of) God.

from, you old wart hog” (CW, 646). The words stick. The analogy penetrates. The proclamation has the same force upon her as Nathan’s had on David: “you are that man!” And in this outrageous confrontation from a total outsider Ruby recognizes that she, too, has

heard the voice of God. Back on her farm she begins to direct angry, but for the first time, authentic, questions at God. “What do you send me a message like that for? ... How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?” (CW, 652).

Flannery O’Connor knew that it is the unique province of the imagination to make us see by analogy who we truly are. The prophet’s primary role as storyteller is *to displace us in order to put us in our place*, to remind us that we are the *created* and not the *Creator*. The prophet knows that revelation of self must precede any revelation from (or of) God. O’Connor emphasizes this truth in “Revelation” by comparing Ruby’s self-revelation with Job’s. Job starts out blaming God and ends up with nothing to say. And so it is with Ruby Turpin, who also confronts God:

“Go on,” she yelled, “call me a hog! Call me a hog again. From hell. Call me a wart hog from hell. Put that bottom rail on the top. There’ll still be a top and bottom!”

A garbled echo returned to her.

A final surge of fury shook her and she roared, “Who do you think you are?”

The color of everything, field and crimson sky, burned for a moment with a transparent intensity. The question carried over the pasture and across the highway and the cotton field and returned to her clearly like an answer from beyond the wood.

She opened her mouth but no sound came out of it. (CW, 653)

When the question with which Ruby accuses God returns back to her—

"Who do you think *you* are?" –she is speechless. The large and mysterious otherness of God makes her own smallness all too apparent. For the first time in her life, Ruby sees herself put in *her* place.

The revelation continues as Ruby Turpin's correct self-estimation forces her to recognize that she is in no position to judge others. In the story's final scene she imagines a heavenly ascension that is ordered the reverse way from the way she would have ordered it. The "respectable" are going up last. And although her prejudices have not been completely removed from her, Ruby does see something entirely new: the virtues of the "respectable" are not virtues at all. "She could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away" (CW, 654). It is Ruby Turpin's face that is shocked and altered as her "virtues" burn away in the heat of this stunning revelation.

The prophet knows that stories have power. A story is an event that finds its way into our hearts and not just our heads. Because we inhabit stories, every now and then a crucial one can hit us—even when our backs are turned. O'Connor may have hoped for too much in hoping that we could see ourselves in her Ruby Turpins, but then again, prophets have a long history of being ignored. Thank God that fact has never stopped them before.

NOTES

1 Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," in *Critical Theory since Plato*, edited by Hazard Adams (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971), 168.

2 Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, second edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xxiii.

3 Flannery O'Connor, *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 949. I will refer to this volume by the abbreviation CW.

4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selected Essays*, edited by Larzer Ziff (New York: Penguin, 1982), 113.

5 Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1969), 161.

6 Brueggemann, 46.

7 Ibid.



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Reading the Prophets

BY MARK E. BIDDLE

The prophets of Israel spoke boldly and graphically to the moral issues of their day. How can we stand in this scriptural prophetic tradition, given the cultural distance between the prophets and us today? These books help us to appreciate the prophets and apply their message with critical discernment.

We rarely need to unscramble the prophets' stance on moral issues. They spoke boldly, emotionally, sometimes even graphically, confident of their status as God's messengers. This very forcefulness, however, often challenges us when we turn to the prophets as scripture and source for ethical reflection. The three books reviewed here grapple with various aspects of the problem of how best to stand in the scriptural prophetic tradition given the cultural distance between the prophets and us today.

A GOD OF JUSTICE, NOT A MERE PATRON

A first step in appropriating the prophetic tradition is to appreciate it on its own terms. The central message of the prophets, writes Abraham Joshua Heschel in *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial, 2001 [1969]; 704pp., \$19.95), reflects their understanding of the *divine pathos* evident in human history. This understanding of God, Heschel says, was not a "theory" deduced from first principles nor a "concept" abstracted from reflections on God's *being* and *attributes*, but an insight gained through encounter with God "in a personal and intimate relation to the world" (p. 288). Since, in the biblical view, God is so willing to become involved in human history, human actions may quite obviously "move [God], affect [God], grieve [God], or on the other hand, gladden and please [God]" (p. 289).

The Bible's many references to divine love and anger embarrass those

Jewish and Christian theologians who view God as an “Unmoved Mover,” or Perfect Being, who is beyond change or emotion. Their efforts to protect God from the perceived “indignity of passivity,” Heschel says, overlook God’s concern for humanity. He asks, “Is it more compatible with our conception of the grandeur of God to claim that [God] is emotionally blind to the misery of man rather than profoundly moved?” (p. 330). Heschel further observes that an impassive, abstract, First Cause “will never be open to human prayer...” (p. 333), and that “the Bible does not say how [God] is, but how [God] acts” (p. 339). The biblical God is known in relationship. Similarly, efforts to avoid anthropomorphism, or reducing God to human-like traits, fail to recognize implications of the Bible’s dual affirmations that God created humankind in God’s image and that God freely enters into relationship with humanity. “God’s unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man’s concern for justice is a theomorphism” (p. 349).

God’s eternal concern for the world, not some immutable moral principle superior even to God, is the basis for prophetic ethics. That is, “righteousness is not just a value; it is God’s part in human life, *God’s stake in human history*” (p. 283). This accounts for prophetic expressions of God’s anger at injustice and oppression. Since indifference to evil *is itself* evil, one should not be surprised that a God fully engaged in human history suffers pain and knows anger. Genteel sensibilities must not lead one to confuse mercy and forgiveness with indulgence and complacency.

Divine anger, however, is not an end unto itself. The prophets did not encounter an angry God intent upon destruction. Instead, the prophets understood God’s anger to be contingent (it is God’s reaction to wrong), instrumental (its “purpose is not to destroy but to purify,” p. 239), and non-final (in response to human repentance, it yields quickly to mercy and forgiveness). In Heschel’s view, the “Meaning and Mystery of Wrath” lies in the fact that “there is a cruelty which pardons, just as there is a pity which punishes. Severity must tame whom love cannot win” (p. 380).

POWER IN TRANSFORMATIVE LOVE

Our reclaiming the prophetic tradition will involve critical discernment, as Carol Dempsey’s *The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Fortress Press, 2000; 211 pp., \$20.00) demonstrates in three ways. She is sensitive, first of all, to the effects of *power* in the prophetic writings, not just on human beings and human societies, but on the natural world as well. Second, she pays careful attention to their language that is “historically, socially, culturally and theologically conditioned,” (p. 2) especially with respect to metaphors describing God’s use of power in relation to the world and those depicting women in derogatory and demeaning ways. Third, and most significantly, she examines the role of power either to dominate or to liberate, and the shift from “power over” to “power with.” In essence, she

critiques the prophets' cultural patriarchal and hierarchical biases. While affirming the prophets' portrayal of God as insistent on justice, Dempsey rejects the implications of many of the prophetic metaphors employed to carry that message.

For example, Dempsey finds the prophets' insight that social sin causes degradation of the created order, to be a potential corrective to contemporary society's arrogant distance from the natural world. But the notion that God would *smite* the natural world *because of* human sin involves ascribing to God acts that are tantamount to "human projections," in her view (p. 5). Sometimes the prophetic tradition portrays God "[dealing] with injustice by 'conquering' the enemy, the perpetrator of injustice. This image of 'warrior god' and its association with the notion of power and having 'power over' is due, in large part, to a gender-specific portrayal of and metaphor for God." The danger inherent in such language, she fears, is that readers may assume that justice attained through violence is theologically legitimate. Not only do "gender-specific" masculine portrayals of the deity so distort that it becomes necessary "to liberate God from a humanly constructed identity" (p. 127), but they also function in a system of language that devalues women.

Dempsey finds within the corpus of prophetic literature, especially in Hosea and Second Isaiah, a movement away from the use of power to dominate toward the use of power to create mutuality, "to establish relationships between God, people, and the natural world that reflect harmony and interrelatedness" (p. 184). Whereas many prophetic texts depict God's intention to effect change in an evil and unjust world by means of coercive power, passages such as Hosea 2:14-23, which offers the divine promise to "abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land," and Hosea 11:1-11, with its description of the Divine Parent's love for Israel (see also 14:4-9), points to God's transformative love. Second Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" figure typifies this mission of transformation (see Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-4). God chooses to reconcile and restore, not just Israel, but the whole world, not by overt might, but by working *through the suffering* of this individual. In Dempsey's view, the transcendent vision of these texts "has the potential to awaken a new awareness, a new consciousness, and a deeper sense of responsibility" (p. 181).

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION TODAY

The key goal of reading the prophets, of course, is to appropriate the tradition for our world today. In contrast to Heschel, whose influence he acknowledges (p. xv), Walter Brueggemann seeks in his *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd edition; Fortress Press, 2001; 176 pp., \$16.00) not only to describe the phenomenon of biblical prophecy, but to use it as a model for outlining a prophetic ministry suited to contemporary society. The task of such a ministry as "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and

perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture ..." (p. 3). Brueggemann sees his approach as combining the strengths of theological conservatism and liberalism while avoiding the pitfalls of each. Like liberalism, a truly prophetic ministry *criticizes* the dominant culture; like conservatism, it *energizes* individuals and communities by promising an alternative. Israel's Exodus experience is paradigmatic for Brueggemann. In it, Moses confronts status quo religion and exploitive politics with a vision of God's freedom to act for social justice. Moses' prophetic ministry arose from his awareness that YHWH "makes possible and requires an alternative theology and an alternative sociology" (p. 7).

King Solomon's reign constitutes a counter-narrative to the Exodus experience. Brueggemann portrays Solomon as the representative and proponent of the "royal consciousness," the dominant culture against which prophecy struggles. Solomon established a state following Egyptian patterns, replacing principles of economic equity with class and state affluence, social justice with an oppressive policy of conscripted labor in the service of the state, and an emphasis on God's freedom with institutionalized, state-sanctioned and state-sanctioning religion.

How does the church escape such "royal consciousness," the unthinking acceptance of the status quo? The first step of prophetic criticism, Brueggemann says, begins in grief over the wrongness of things; it embraces pathos, "the ultimate form of criticism." Prophets analyze and publicly expose our self-deception concerning the horrors of current reality. Brueggemann examines the message of Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet," as the model of

this type of prophetic sympathy. In Jeremiah's preaching, one hears the depth of grief, both the prophet's and God's, over Judah's denial of YHWH's covenant. When the truth about present conditions has been honestly faced, prophetic imagination can point to "the promise of newness ... at work in

our history with God." It can sing doxologies prompted by amazement at God's grace. Brueggemann points to Second Isaiah's rhapsodic proclamation of new life for the people of God as the penultimate example of this exercise of prophetic imagination.

Both aspects of prophetic ministry, criticism and energizing, find quintessential expression in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. He wept at the

The first step of prophetic criticism begins in grief over the wrongness of things; it embraces pathos. When the truth about present conditions has been honestly faced, prophetic imagination can point to "the promise of newness ... at work in our history with God."

death of his friend. He was angered by the exploitation of the poor in the very temple precincts. “[Jesus] is not the majestic, unmoved Lord, but rather the one with the passion who knows and shares in ... anguish ...” (p. 92). Indeed, he embraced pain and grief to the point of death. In that death, however, God revealed the impotence of death itself. God raised Jesus providing “the ultimate energizing for the new future” (p. 112).

In a preface to the revised edition, Brueggemann amplifies his original treatment by suggesting a strategy for the church’s exercise of prophetic ministry. Noting the increasing “disenfranchisement” of the mainline church, he suggests that a confrontational model, of prophet *versus* king or establishment, incorrectly assumes that the prophetic voice “has enough clout, either social or moral, to gain a hearing” (p. xi). As a result, Brueggemann observes, his original “accent on imagination has turned out to be exactly correct, for what is now required is that a relatively powerless prophetic voice must find imaginative ways that are rooted in the text but that freely and daringly move from the text toward concrete circumstances” (p. xi).

Contemporary readers interested in reconnecting with the prophetic tradition will find in these three works abundant stimulation for dealing with the abiding questions: Who is God? What does it mean that the God of the prophets, in whose image humankind is created, is personally, intimately involved in human affairs? How can the church best participate in God’s pain at human infidelity and cruelty, in God’s anger at injustice, in God’s love for God’s children? What is the proper mode for expressing God’s pathos without perpetuating dangerous metaphors or engaging in fruitless confrontation?



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Rendering to Caesar, Surrendering to God

BY KEITH PUTT

We cannot reduce Christian faithfulness to any political, cultural, or social program, since inevitably these fail to realize fully God's justice, grace, and promise. How should the church maintain its prophetic, alien voice in our culture, given society's significant commitment to liberal, capitalist democracy?

We must be wary of allying Christian faith too intimately with culture and politics. Our faithfulness should not be reduced to any particular political, cultural, or social program, since inevitably these will fail to realize fully God's justice, grace, and promise. As Christians we perennially struggle with the tension between relevance and identity. Christ placed the church *in* the world and commissioned it to go forth *into* the world in order to disseminate the good news of salvation; consequently, the church must strive to be relevant to whatever culture it inhabits so as to gain a hearing and, thereby, fulfill Christ's mission. Yet, in the need for relevancy, the church must never compromise its identity; it must distinguish itself as different from the world for the purpose of maintaining a prophetic or critical edge. For how can the church denounce any evil, violence, or oppression resident in society, if it is so immersed in the secular that its voice sounds like every other worldly voice? How can the church speak against sin, if it partners with those earthly principalities and powers that propagate sin?

In our culture many Christians have sought to correlate their biblical and theological traditions with a significant commitment to freedom, democracy, and capitalism. The two books reviewed here take different

approaches to this correlation and reach substantially different conclusions about the political implications for the church.

A PROPHEPIC, ALIEN VOICE

Consider the stir caused by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore when he placed a granite monument bearing the Ten Commandments in the lobby of the state judicial building. Is the Decalogue an abstract set of rational principles that gives direction for civil justice, or does it prescribe, and therefore promote, a particular religious tradition? I suspect that Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon would adopt the latter perspective; they would consider the judge's action to be not only unconstitutional, but also evangelically inappropriate. In *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989; 175 pp., \$14.00) they warn that the church has so assimilated itself into civil religiosity that it considers its purpose to be "assisting the secular state in its presumption to make a better world for its citizens" (156). In this accommodationist attitude toward modern, liberal democracy, the church has reduced its revolutionary narrative of Jesus Christ and his revelation of the Kingdom of God, to abstract, socio-politically prudent truisms. Judge Moore's action is surely an example of such a reduction, ripping the Decalogue out of its redemptive narrative of God's liberation of Israel and framing it on the court's wall as if the Commandments were merely ahistorical, commonsensical criteria for creating good citizens.

Such postings of the Decalogue are an instance of Christians leaning over to address the world, but falling into the world instead, as if into an abyss. Such actions soften, if not silence, the church's prophetic, alien voice, which was divinely intended to speak words of conviction and redemption to a world that operates consistently in an attitude of functional paganism (27). Christians in America have embraced a bourgeois ethic of autonomous individuality, tolerance, and inclusiveness, Hauerwas and Willimon write. In the process we have transformed the church, the "spiritual body of Christ," from an eschatological community of disciples living the Sermon on the Mount into just another "consumer-oriented organization, existing to encourage individual fulfillment" (33). Indeed the church, in both its politically liberal and conservative expressions, has deceived itself into thinking that it holds a divine mandate to promote American democracy. It engages in the politics of compromise, confusing and fusing the power of God with the power of Caesar; it reduces Christianity to a "public church" by enacting laws to ensure that Christian ethics no longer remains the sole responsibility of Jesus' disciples who live faithfully as a colony of the Kingdom of God, but becomes the ideological foundation for a civil religion. When it so totally invests itself in the economic and political markets of American Enlightenment culture, the church deteriorates into a "conspiracy of cordiality," given over to pacifying and not preaching (138).

Only the purifying power of the biblical narratives about the Kingdom of God, Hauerwas and Willimon argue, can wash away this stain of civil religion. The church must re-examine what story it should be telling and living, and thereby rethink its identity. It must recapture its character as a sojourning community, that is, as resident aliens in a “pagan” world. Christians should interpret themselves as a cadre of sojourning Kingdom dwellers, who manifest their commitment to Christ by living out his story through faithful obedience to the revolutionary ethics he personified and proclaimed (62). Instead of trying to pencil the church into the text of secular stories, we should inscribe the church clearly into the margins of those stories. We should critique and correct the world’s narratives of power by repeating in word and deed the revolutionary story of Jesus and his sacrifice—a story which is characterized not by triumphalism but engagement—through the non-coercive power of God’s grace and love.

THE GOSPEL AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

Robert P. Kraynak, in *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in a Fallen World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001, 334 pp., \$24.95), agrees that we should be wary of an artificial correlation between Christianity and contemporary liberal democracy (which, for Kraynak, encompasses politically conservative as well as liberal expressions that hold personal freedom as the highest good and see government as a protector of our individual visions of the good). He does not mean that Christians should encourage, or even passively endorse, an oppressive political process; but he does defend the controversial thesis that liberal democracy may not be the political system most consonant with the gospel.

Christianity does not need liberal democracy, Kraynak insists. Liberal democracy, however, needs Christianity. Here’s why: liberal democracy flourishes only when its citizens can ground their belief in universal human rights in some well-established, rich theory of

human dignity (18). Christianity provides that theory, because it says all human beings are created in God’s image. Ironically, liberal democracy, by itself, has not provided a satisfactory theory about human dignity, because it has depended on a secular philosophical perspective that promotes epistemological and moral relativism. In other words, it says that we cannot know, because there cannot be, any objective reality for any good, includ-

When the church, in both its politically liberal and conservative expressions, so totally invests itself in the economic and political structures of our culture, it deteriorates into a “conspiracy of cordiality,” given over to pacifying and not preaching.

ing human dignity. Just as people disagree about which art, music, or ideas are good, they disagree about which patterns of living are good, and there is no standard for deciding who is correct. Indeed, this is why art in a democratic society sinks to the lowest common denominator, resulting in a mediocre pop culture that replaces Mozart with the Beatles and Gregorian

Chant with folk music (27).

The church must be an engaged, counter-cultural organization that gives ultimate allegiance only to God as revealed in Christ and made known through the Spirit.

Our modern notion of liberal democracy, he suggests, is based on philosopher Immanuel Kant's model of personal freedom that skews and reduces the image of God to respect for inalienable human rights.

Yet, in both Scripture and

church tradition, the *imago Dei* has little, if anything, to do with human freedom, reason, or rights, but everything to do with duty to God, our dependence on revelation, the recognition of original sin, the superiority of the common good over individual rights, and the significance of Christian charity as sacrificial love (152-53). Kraynak prescribes a dose of biblical and historic Christian tradition as the only inoculation against this modern Kantian contamination of true Christian democracy.

If we swallowed the correct dosage of these traditions, what would our society be like? Surprisingly, Kraynak thinks it would not result in anything like Christian democracy. Biblical and historic Christianity, according to Kraynak, dictate the embracing of patriarchal and hierarchical forms of family and church (208). Consequently, the most suitable form of government would be constitutional monarchy. Admitting that the New Testament does not dictate a particular form of secular government, Kraynak claims that in both Scripture and the history of the church, there is much support for a monarchical government that gives political power to a wise emperor or king. Under such a regime, the spiritual realms of church, family, and Christian charities would be protected from oppression. Non-denominational prayer would be allowed in school; faith-based welfare programs would be favored; pro-life and pro-family legislation would promote monogamous, heterosexual marriages and establish serious obstacles to divorce; certain forms of feminism that lead to ordained women priests or women in combat might be curbed; and government would be "promoting orthodoxy" and perhaps a particular religious confession (223-24).

CONCLUSION

We do need to reevaluate the church's stance toward any socio-political structure, especially the predominant American structure of liberal, capitalist democracy. For too long, and with too much vigor, some Christian

groups have tried to collapse biblical Christianity into modern autonomous individualism and liberal free-market capitalism. These political and economic forms have much to commend them, and personally, I would not want to live within other structures. However, to identify them with the Kingdom of God is tantamount to idolatry, by raising what is merely good for a time and place to the level of what is ultimately good. Hauerwas, Willimon, and Kraynak write as prophets. They remind us that the church must be an engaged, counter-cultural organization that gives ultimate allegiance only to God as revealed in Christ and made known through the Spirit, and lives out the Christian narrative critically and compassionately within any and every form of government.

Precisely at this point, I am troubled by Kraynak's insistence that a monarchical form of government best allows the church to pursue its mission. Historically, the church sometimes has preferred hierarchical forms of government, but I question his interpretation of key scriptural texts used to support this preference for hierarchy. He correctly notes that the New Testament does not prescribe a specific political structure, but then he moves, somewhat unpredictably, to prescribe constitutional monarchy, which legislates politically conservative social positions and perhaps approves a specific confessional tradition.

Hauerwas and Willimon are the better guides here. They propose no specific political organization, but require only that the church remain committed to living out the narratives of Israel and Jesus. They, more than Kraynak, realize the impossibility of fully realizing God's Kingdom on earth, and maintain the tension between relevance and identity. They keep alive the prophetic insistence on God's justice and promise.



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