

THE PROPHETS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION

To speak about God and to think about theology are wonderful pursuits, but the cause of theology is justice for human beings. Loving your neighbor is a sweet sentiment, but doing right by your neighbor will change the world. In this unit we will explore how the cause of justice is an essential message of the Biblical prophets.

I will begin this exploration with the greatest prophet of them all - Moses. Starting with Moses, we see that revelations to prophets often come when a new social reality has become necessary. Moses' message was a radical break with the social reality of Egypt. When God told Moses, "Let My people go!" the command was a deliberate subversion of a social order where the Pharaoh was thought of as a god and people could be bought and sold:

The Holy One said, "I have seen, surely seen, the fate of my people in Egypt and have heard them cry out because of their taskmasters, because I am aware of their pain. I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, one flowing with milk and honey, the place of the Canaanites at this very moment the cry of the children of Israel has reached Me, and I have also seen the way the Egyptians oppress them. Come, now, and I shall send you to Pharaoh; bring out my people, the children of Israel, from Egypt."¹

Judaism believes that there is one God Who is not restricted by other gods or the realm of fate. So God, Who has total freedom, sent Moses to free the people; just as God is free to act, so each person must be free to act. Just as God is not bound by the restrictions of other powers and is unique, so each individual should not be bound by other human beings and is unique.

God sent Moses to denounce the exploitation of people by demonstrating compassion, to oppose the static order and oppression of human empire with a dynamic act of God. The liberation from Egypt, as important as it was, should not be seen as a one-time event. It is an imperative, a directional sign of what we must strive for in every generation. It should undermine the false narratives and distorted social practices of human kingdoms. When God, through Moses, outperforms the Egyptian magicians by bringing the ten plagues, the point is that the real power is from God. No pharaoh or king or human political leader is God. No empire or state, ancient or modern, is God. God rules in freedom and all people must be free.

This is a powerful legacy for a people. God's self-identification, as we see in the first of the Ten Commandments,² is as the One Who brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Social justice, then, is not a goal that humans decide to strive for; it is the commandment of the Just God. God commanded the Israelites to create a society based on the values embodied in laws designed to ensure equality and fairness for all.

SOLOMON'S KINGDOM AND ITS INJUSTICE

The Exodus story is, in a sense, easy to embrace: the Israelites are the victimized good guys and Pharaoh and the Egyptians are the cruel bad guys. Moses leaves the palace of power to join with his oppressed brothers and sisters. God through Moses tells Pharaoh: "Let *My* people go!" The Israelites are God's people and the enemy king thinks he's God. The role of the prophet is to liberate those who have been crushed under the burdens of social injustice.

But let's move on now to a more complex story, in which the good guys and the bad guys are all Israelites, in which a prophet will have to denounce an Israelite king and the social injustice he has inflicted on his subjects. In order to understand the role of the prophets in the Bible, we will have to understand the historical background involved in each case. Biblical texts did not spring out of a vacuum, or as expressions of idealistic theories, but from the lives and experiences of real people.

¹ Exodus 3:7-10

² Exodus 20:2



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Fast forward three hundred years. Solomon is a powerful king who rules over a united kingdom of the Israelite tribes. He is a mighty monarch, known for his justice. Many of us know the famous story of the two prostitutes with one live and one dead baby, who come to their king for a decision as to whom the live baby belongs.³ Solomon, in threatening to kill the live baby, uncovers the identity of its true mother. The story is testimony to his wisdom and his fine sense of fairness. When offered any gift from God, Solomon requests wisdom so he can dispense justice to the people of the land.⁴ He is known as the wisest man in the world.⁵

Solomon created administrative districts in place of the old tribal territories, partly so the kingdom rather than the individual tribes would command the first loyalties of the people but partly in order to administrate the commandeering of the abundant provisions required for his sumptuous court life. He built up Jerusalem, the capital city conquered by his father David. He erected a great and beautiful temple to God. The kingdom knew unprecedented economic success: “Judah and Israel lived secure, each person under their own vine and fig tree, from Dan to Beersheba, all the days of Solomon.”⁶ This is a Messianic vision of equality. What a wonderful picture; it seemed as if nothing could be better!

But Solomon was not as wise and just as God wanted him to be. This beautiful picture was drawn with the tools of its own destruction. In explaining why the kingdom split into two parts, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah, after Solomon’s death, the Biblical account emphasizes Solomon’s apostasy, his worship of other gods. What leads directly to the break-up of the kingdom, however, has nothing to do with Solomon’s faith and everything to do with the injustices caused by his building projects. Solomon wanted to transform the united kingdom of Judah and Israel into a mighty empire, and change of these proportions was costly. Magnificent building projects required huge numbers of workers and tremendous amounts of money. Solomon forced first non-Israelites, and then Israelites from the north, from the area called Israel or the House of Joseph⁷ to engage in back-breaking, difficult labor.⁸

One imagines an Israelian saying, “I might as well be a slave to Pharaoh!” And so it is that Jeroboam, the young man that Solomon has placed over the corvée labor, becomes the leader of a rebellion against Solomon. Jeroboam seems to have spoken out from his position of responsibility and criticized the onerous burden that Solomon had placed on his people. It does not matter that we are speaking of an Israelite king. It does not matter that Solomon was the son of David, or the builder of the Temple, or a famous wise man. Injustice and inequality cannot be tolerated in any kingdom. Injustice perpetrated by Israelites is unacceptable to the God of Justice:

The Holy One said to Solomon, ‘Because of what you have done, that you have not kept My covenant and the laws which I commanded you, I shall tear, yes tear, the kingdom from you and give it to one of your servants ...’⁹

A prophet, Ahijah of Shiloh, a city prominent in the traditions of the old tribal league that David and Solomon had replaced with their federal kingdom, is called by God to symbolically present Jeroboam with the ten northern tribes that will constitute a second nation, the newly-founded Kingdom of Israel.

...Jeroboam left Jerusalem and the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh met him on the way. He was wearing a new robe and when only the two of them were in the open country, Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. “Take ten pieces,” he said to Jeroboam, “for this is what The Holy One, God of Israel has said: I am going to tear the kingdom out of Solomon’s hand, and I will give you the ten tribes...”¹⁰

The new kingdom announced by Ahijah, formed because of the injustices that had severed the united kingdom, now had to demonstrate that it could form a just society. Though created with the blessing of prophets, the same prophets would turn against their own creation if it did not bring justice to its new citizens.

³ *I Kings 3:16-28*

⁴ *I Kings 3:9, 11, 28*

⁵ *I Kings 10:23*

⁶ *I Kings 5:5. While it seems strange to our modern ears to hear that there were two Israelite kingdoms during one period of history, the northern Kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah co-existed for two centuries. Those unfamiliar with this historical fact have heard of ‘the Ten Lost Tribes’; these tribes constituted the northern Kingdom of Israel.*

⁷ *Israel is called the ‘House of Joseph’ because the prominent tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were descended from their father Joseph.*

⁸ *See, for example, I Kings 9:15-22 and I Kings 11:26-28.*

⁹ *I Kings 11:11*

¹⁰ *I Kings 11:29-31*



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NABOTH'S VINEYARD AND ITS SYMBOLISM¹¹

The Kingdom of Israel turned out to be a painful disappointment to God and the prophets; the very kind of injustices that led to the division of the United Kingdom became the unfortunate hallmark of the new kingdom as well. During this period of Israelite history, the population consisted of free Israelite slaves, resident aliens (*gerim*), and descendants of the Canaanites. Israelites might be enslaved for periods of time for debt but the permanent slave class was foreign, usually people who had been acquired by purchase or in war, or their descendants. While not slaves as such, poor Israelites and *gerim* possessed nothing but their ability to work. Most of the people were farmers, herdsman, fruit-growers, artisans, small merchants, unskilled wage-laborers and slaves.

To use a prominent sequence, the rich took the poor people's land, then the clothing off their backs, and finally owned and sold their very bodies. There were ways of legalizing such robbery. The most important biblical text concerning robbery of family lands is the story of Naboth's vineyard.¹² Naboth, the Jezreelite, owns a vineyard in Jezreel and King Ahab (869-850) wants to expand his estate. He offers a more-than-equitable price or exchange for the vineyard. Why doesn't Naboth agree? He cannot do so, because the land involved has been in his family for centuries, it is his patrimonial inheritance.

Ahab is so depressed by Naboth's response that he cannot eat. One assumes that he is not this upset over a vineyard. He feels that he is king but cannot make his subjects do his will. The old values, of family and inheritance, still supersede his power. He tells his wife Jezebel what has happened and she, who has been a princess of the kingdom of Tyre and who is an ardent worshipper of the pagan god Baal, promises him that she will procure the vineyard for him. She does not see this act as a mere attempt to expand her husband's estate. She says: "Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel."¹³ Jezebel wants the expanded power of the monarchy to displace the old ways.

Jezebel organizes a plot in which the judicial process will be manipulated to condemn Naboth to death. Established judicial procedures – the community acting as a jury – and laws concerning witnesses are followed in an evil and subversive way, with the result that Naboth is stoned to death.¹⁴ The murder of Naboth by Jezebel represents in broader terms the royal manipulation and violence that destroy law and religious observance, two important foundations of social stability.

God and the prophets cannot allow the murder of Naboth to go unpunished. Elijah is instructed to prophesy that in the very place where the dogs lapped up Naboth's blood, they will also lap up Ahab's – and indeed, that prophecy comes to pass, not only for Ahab but for Jezebel too.¹⁵

When Elijah stands up to Ahab, he symbolizes the prophetic cry against all of the rich who seized lands of the poor, lands that constituted their family inheritance. He was not the only prophet to do so – the great prophet Isaiah also highlighted the seizure of family lands,¹⁶ and the prophet Micah cried:

Ah, those who plot iniquity
And plan evil on their beds;
When morning dawns, they do it,
For they have great power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
Houses also, which they take away.
They defraud men of their houses,
And people of their family lands.¹⁷

¹¹ On Naboth's vineyard, see F. I. Andersen "The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident" *JBL* 85 46-57 1966; Jerome T. Walsh "Methods and Meaning: Multiple Studies of I Kings 21" *JBL* 11 ½ (1992) 193-211.

¹² I Kings 21

¹³ I Kings 21:7

¹⁴ I Kings 21:8-14

¹⁵ See I Kings 22:38 and II Kings 9:34-36

¹⁶ Isaiah 5:7-8. It is interesting that in this passage, Israel and Judah are described as God's vineyard.

¹⁷ Micah 2:1-2



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The prophets also criticized the existing social order because it did not embody the values of Israelite religion. The economic and political structure of the society must be based on ethical and religious standards. Instead, those who live in luxury do not worry about the destitute at their doors, land-owners are greedy, creditors are heartless, the rich in general are vain and irresponsible.¹⁸ Hosea speaks about murder,¹⁹ Jeremiah talks of the trapping of men like birds,²⁰ and Micah speaks of the ruling classes as cannibals who eat the flesh of those who are undernourished.²¹ All of this was denounced by the prophets in the strongest terms, but it continued anyway. And as it continued, God's anger, and the content of the prophetic denunciations, changed accordingly.

We fast forward again about one hundred years. The northern kingdom of Israel, under a king named Jeroboam II (786-746 BCE), is prosperous and powerful. And yet inside the fabric of success is rampant social injustice.

WHAT MADE AMOS FAMOUS

Picture a man standing on the steps of the temple in a foreign city, condemning the people of that country for injustices, predicting that they will face God's wrath and certain doom if they do not change their ways and correct the injustices that they perpetrate on the powerless:

This is what The Holy One has said:
For three transgressions of Israel,
For four, I will not call back the punishment:
Because they have sold the righteous for silver
And the poor for a pair of sandals.
They trample the heads of the poor
Into the dust of the earth
And pervert the course of the humble!
Father and son both go to the same girl,
So as to profane My holy name.
They lie perversely by every altar
On garments they took in pledge,
And in the House of their God
They drink wine bought with their fines.²²

The man on the steps, Amos, is not considered one of the major prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah or Ezekiel, but he left a powerful legacy for those who came after him. Amos preaches dire warnings: If the kingdom does not change for the better, it will face the worst consequences imaginable.

Note how concrete and specific the sins and crimes are. This is not just a set of blanket denunciations of sinfulness. Amos talks about robbery with violence²³ and commerce in human life.²⁴ People are so anxious to make money that they will take bribes, subvert justice, steal clothes and use unbalanced scales.

The Book of Amos brings us back to a wonderful period in the history of the northern kingdom. It is one thing to denounce a kingdom that is doing poorly and to criticize it for its failures. It is quite another to denounce a nation that is rich, successful and mighty.

In the reign of the powerful Jeroboam II, the nation of Israel was doing very well indeed. A famous prophet named Jonah son of Amittai promised that God would help the kingdom expand and Jeroboam II "restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-Hamath [in the north] to the sea of the Arabah [in the south]."²⁵ But increases in territory, population and prosperity also increased the gap between the elite of the urban centers and the common people of the villages.

¹⁸ Hosea 4:4-6; 5:1; Micah 3:5, 6, 11; Amos 4:1;
6:1-7; Isaiah 3:1-3, 13-15

¹⁹ Hosea 6:8, 9

²⁰ Jeremiah 5:26

²¹ Micah 3:1-3

²² Amos 2:6-8

²³ Amos 3:10

²⁴ Amos 2:6

²⁵ II Kings 14:25, cf. Amos 6:13, 14



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The powerful abused the poor by exploiting them, denying them compassion and through corruption denying them justice.

But it seems, as in the case of Solomon's kingdom, that it was Israel's success that brought social injustice with it. Who is to blame? The king, the priests and the professional prophets are responsible. What do those prophets want? They know that the world has changed. They do not think that the clock can be turned back. But they want the old traditions of the covenant to provide a context for the new socio-economic order. The prophets want the morality and ethics of God's words to remain the foundation of Israelite society.

And so Amos, a farmer from Judah, who says that he is un-schooled in prophetic traditions, feels so moved by the call of God that he travels to the north to bring a warning of doom if that nation does not change its behavior. We cannot be certain, but Amos may have been a wealthy man himself. The fact that he both raises herds and grows sycamore trees may indicate that he was a prosperous businessman. Indeed, Jewish tradition sees Amos as a landowner and a moderately rich owner of livestock. Amos is not against wealth but is vitally concerned with how one acquires and uses it. He does not see the poor as more righteous than the rich, only as innocent and powerless against the rich who exploit them.²⁶

Amos says, to paraphrase: "God brought you out of slavery in Egypt. Now look at what you're doing!" It is therefore fitting that God inflicts plagues on Israel such as pestilence and an earthquake (Amos 1:1). It may have been the occurrence of an earthquake after Amos' prediction that made Amos famous.

As we're reading the Book of Amos, those of us who know the history of the period might ask, "What did social injustice have to do with the Assyrian conquest?" For the truth, if we look through a historical lens, is that social injustice and God's warnings through Amos had nothing to do with the end of Israel. Instead, decades after Amos spoke, the Ten Tribes of Israel were transported into exile by the superpower Assyria (from modern-day Iraq) and assimilated into other peoples of that empire. This left one Israelite kingdom, Judah, which eventually gave its name to the Jewish people and its religion, Judaism. In which case, what message can we draw from Amos, or indeed from the other prophetic texts we have considered in this essay?

CONCLUSION

The prophets are saying to the people: God's protection is predicated on your keeping of the covenant. And part of the covenant is treating others well. If you are unjust, you break the covenant. The covenant is not just about ritual; what good is ritual, which is supposed to be directional toward the good, if one is evil towards one's fellow human being? Ritual teaches discipline by its very nature and serves to reinforce goodness. To perform rituals and then sin or commit crimes is an unbearable contradiction.

One can read through the prophetic books and think that the admonitions to be ethical are monotonous and boring. But the truth is that ethical behavior requires constant reminders and reinforcement. And so the prophets exhort the people to be charitable and merciful to the poor and to help those who were defenseless and needy, widows and orphans, oppressed people, strangers and those without legal rights. They stipulate impartiality in justice, and fairness. They insist on respecting the property of others. They demand respect for every human life.

²⁶ Amos 2:6, 5:12

