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Ellen F. Davis and Sarah Musser

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Ellen F. Davis and Sarah Musser

Prophetic figures and words are evoked throughout the Old and the New Testaments, from Genesis to Revelation, and they are a foundational resource for liturgy and theology in both Jewish and Christian traditions. The prophets' most important role, performed in the public eye and sometimes in the presence of kings, is to interpret their own culture and historical moment from the perspective of the divine. Very often these prophetic acts of interpretation issue in social criticism, as prophets proclaim God's judgment against king and/or people. This article does not attempt to provide a full overview of the phenomenon of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Rather, after a brief overview of the prophetic literature and role, it focuses on the complex relationships between prophecy, interpretation, and social criticism.

This article looks at various aspects of prophetic texts in both Former and Latter Prophets, first in the context of the social structures and agrarian economy of ancient Israel, and secondarily with concern for how those ancient texts may speak to contemporary social situations around the globe. These narratives and poetic oracles of doom and hope put in prophetic perspective the complex ways that religious leaders may interact with those who hold, and often abuse, political and economic power. The prophetic books are to a great extent trauma literature, reflecting the harsh realities of war and exile, unjust land appropriation, famine, and devastating drought. The prophetic message may speak most directly to the current historical moment as it highlights the God-given integrity and flourishing of the created order and how that integrity is disrupted through human misconduct. Although the Prophets are unsparing in their exposure of sin, the whole prophetic canon is editorially shaped to point toward hope for the restoration of Israel and Judah, with the royal house of David as a focal point of radical hope.

Keywords: Prophet, Prophecy, Old Testament, Interpretation, Trauma, Power, Creation, Hope, Justice, Economics, Social criticism, Bible

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1 Introduction

1.1 Prophets in the biblical canon

Prophetic figures, their words and actions, as well as their enduring memory, run throughout the Christian Bible – starting with Abraham, the first person whom God names as a prophet (Gen 20:7) and continuing through to the book of Revelation, called 'this prophecy' by its author (Rev 1:3). Both testaments represent Moses as the paradigmatic prophet, the first among equals (e.g. Deut 18:15–18; Jer 15:1; Matt 17:3; Luke 16:29). His story, as told in Exodus through Deuteronomy, is the authoritative account of what it is to be a prophet over the long haul of forty years (the biblical round number for a very long time), with its moments of victory and peculiar divine favour, and also of divine chastisement and bitter loss. The traditional designation for the books that follow Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy) is 'Former Prophets', a more accurate description than 'the historical books', as modern readers often identify Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings. The traditional title reflects the fact that the extended narratives in these books feature important prophets: Deborah, Nathan, Elijah, Elisha, as well as lesser-known figures, as they enter into the national story of Northern Israel and Judah. According to a Talmudic reckoning, a total of forty-eight men and seven women prophesied for the sake of Israel (*b. Meg. 14a*). In the Jewish ordering of the canon, the Former Prophets lead directly into the so-called Latter Prophets, the fifteen books each bearing the name of a prophet, Isaiah to Malachi. Thus about two-thirds of Israel's scriptures highlight prophets, their insights into the will and ways of God and their perspectives on human history, and the New Testament writers honour that scriptural legacy.

While the books that constitute the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament are nearly identical (in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, the Old Testament also includes the books that Protestants call the Apocryphal or deuterocanonical books), these two versions of the canon differ in their placement of the corpus of Latter Prophets, and this difference has some bearing on how the books may be understood (cf. Barton 2019: 24–27). As noted, in the Jewish canon, both Former and Latter Prophets follow immediately after Torah, where the theological centre of gravity resides. Thus the prophetic texts are read (in the liturgy and more generally) as a kind of narrative commentary upon Torah. They amplify Moses' teaching from Sinai and the wilderness in the context of Israel's ongoing life as a nation among other nations, which nonetheless must remain distinct in its covenant commitment to God. In the Christian canon, the corpus of Latter Prophets appears at the very end of the Old Testament, where it offers a point of entry into the New Testament. From that perspective, Jesus is manifestly the child from the house of David and also the suffering servant of whom the 'evangelical prophet' Isaiah speaks (Isa 9:2–7; 52:13–53:12). Moreover, the closing words of Latter Prophets, uttered through

Malachi – ‘I am about to send to you Elijah the prophet, before the coming of the day of YHWH, great and awesome’ (Mal 3:23 MT, 4:5 Eng.; all biblical translations are the authors’ own) – foreshadow the role of the New Testament prophet, John the Baptist (see Matt 11:14).

1.2 Prophetic activity in Israel

The biblical writers were well aware of the existence and practices of religious intermediaries of various kinds: diviners and soothsayers, those who cast spells, conjure up ghosts and familiar spirits, or seek oracles from the dead. All these practices are expressly banned by the Deuteronomistic theologians (see Deut 18:9–13) who played a major role in shaping the prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible. Prohibition is a sure sign that such practices were extant and probably widespread in Israel (e.g. 1 Sam 28:3–25), as in other parts of the ancient Near East. Prophecy, too – understood here as the practice of receiving and transmitting messages from a deity, sometimes with accompanying physical actions – was deeply embedded in the culture of the region, especially the Levant and Mesopotamia, in the early part of the second millennium BCE (Stökl 2012; Nissinen 2017). This is at least a millennium before the rise of so-called classical prophecy in eighth-century Israel and Judah, when Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah began to declaim oracles that were remembered, repeated, and shaped by skilled scribal hands over generations and centuries into the prophetic corpus we read today. It is likely that the final redaction (editing) of the corpus occurred around the beginning of the second century BCE (Blenkinsopp 1996: 233).

Comparing Israelite prophecy to prophetic practices and texts in other ancient societies is uncertain work, because what we know of the latter is limited to the archaeological record, to oracles preserved in archives of palace and temple. Such official records tend to show cultic and court personnel, both women and men, transmitting messages from a deity to the royal house. In some contrast, the Bible attests to a wide range of social settings for prophetic action and speech. An oracle might be addressed directly to the king, whether or not he had sought an oracle, to religious leaders in official sanctuaries, to the people of Jerusalem and Judah, the house of Israel as a whole, or the remnant of the people in Babylonian deportation camps. The diversity and vastness of the prophetic corpus, which was not buried in the archive of a ruined palace but preserved in both living memory and writing by countless anonymous people, confirms that, while prophecy had a long history in the ancient Near East, in Israel and Judah it emerged as an influential and often controversial social force and also an important literary genre, both oral and written.

2 Prophecy and interpretation

2.1 The essential nature of biblical prophecy

What is the essential nature of biblical prophecy, and what was the role of the prophet in ancient Israel? For centuries the answer most often offered by Christians was that prophets are those to whom the divine plan for history has been revealed; they see and disclose the mysteries of God, especially the mystery of the future. The prophet is an inspired *foreteller*, Isaiah's prophecies centred on the house of David being a banner instance (see section 7). While this view is still current, especially among charismatic and evangelical Christians, another perspective on the nature of prophecy is emphasized by those who see social justice as a vital part of the Christian witness, namely the prophets as *forth-tellers*, speaking truth to power, as Moses confronted Pharaoh (cf. O'Brien 2022). It is neither necessary nor accurate to choose between the two roles; both are well represented in most of the prophetic books of the Bible, sometimes in a single speech. Moreover, these two modes, while significant, do not cover the full range of prophetic address. Here we introduce a third model that touches on both and is more comprehensive than either, namely the prophets as *interpreters* of their own culture and historical moment as well as of the religious tradition, including the written tradition of prophecy itself (Davis 2014: 1–21). It is because some Israelite prophets performed this role that their own words eventually became part of the scriptural tradition, subject to interpretation by countless generations since.

2.2 Key texts: 2 Kings 22, Ezekiel, Isaiah 40–66

The first clear exemplar of the prophetic interpreter within the canon is Huldah of Jerusalem, a prophet known to courtiers of Josiah, king of Judah (640–609 BCE); her husband himself was keeper of the royal wardrobe. Josiah sent them to seek an oracle from God about a scroll of divine teaching (*torah*, 2 Kgs 22:11) found during a temple renovation project. Possibly an early version of the book of Deuteronomy, the scroll frightened the king with its threats to those who did not 'act in accordance with all that is written concerning us' (v. 13). When Huldah herself had read it, she sent the king this message from YHWH: 'I am about to bring evil to this place and upon its inhabitants – and the words of the book that the king of Judah read – because they abandoned me and burned incense to other gods […]' (vv. 16–17). That prophecy was ultimately fulfilled when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian army (586 BCE), and the kingdom of Judah came to an end. Some scholars think that the scroll story is a pious fiction created to underwrite Josiah's program of cultic reform. However that may be, it highlights Huldah's role as prophetic interpreter. This is the first clear account of someone who encounters God's word in written form and recognizes how it speaks to present circumstances (Davis 2014: 2–5). Further, although Huldah is not herself a court prophet (a position that may not have been open to women), from her position at the edge of the circle of power, she prompts major change in religious practice. Indeed, she is one of the few biblical prophets to experience such success.

Huldah's story comes from the circle of Deuteronomistic theologians and editors who shaped the corpus of Former Prophets (aka the Deuteronomistic History) and some of Latter Prophets – especially the book of Jeremiah, Huldah's contemporary, who himself dictated a scroll of the words he had heard from YHWH, to be preserved for the future (Jer 36). Thus these two prophets stand together as liminal figures, at the threshold between the age of the great prophets and the age of scribal interpretation.

Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the Judean state, writing became an increasingly important medium for prophetic communication, for reasons both practical and theological. Now writing was an essential practical means for reaching a people largely in diaspora, scattered from the Levant east to Mesopotamia and south to Egypt, and eventually north to Asia Minor. Further, written prophecy provided a crucial means for prophetic theologians to offer a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of the sacred traditions in the wake of loss so catastrophic that it seemed to annul any divine promises on which Israel's faith rested. It is notable that Israel is the only ancient people whose ancestral religion survived the wreckage of their capital city, the chief temple, and the royal house, as well as dispersion of a large portion of the skilled population. Surely the work of the exilic prophets in developing a sophisticated literary idiom for prophecy was indispensable to Israel's religious survival, and likewise to their endurance as a people living without the apparatus of national institutions (Davis 1989). Ezekiel is the prophet who 'swallowed a scroll' and found it sweet as honey (Ezek 2:8–3:3), a powerful image for internalizing the sacred story and being nurtured by it. As the first Israelite prophet outside the land of Israel, his task was first to reread the whole tradition, from Egypt to destruction, in order to render intelligible disaster on a scale that had previously been unthinkable, and then to frame a powerful vision of restoration for the 'dry bones' of the house of Israel (Ezek 37:1–14), with a detailed blueprint of restoration for land, city, and temple (Ezek 40–48). In the generations that followed, other prophet-authors, known to many modern scholars as Second Isaiah (Isa 40–55) and Third Isaiah (Isa 56–66), would continue the work of probing ancient stories and earlier prophecies in order to find hope and offer direction to a bewildered people, both in diaspora and in the ravaged homeland (Sommer 1998; Stromberg 2011).

2.3 Implications for contemporary communities

What might be the role of the prophetic interpreter today? Ancient Israel began the work of interpreting the prophetic word, and that literary corpus continues to play an important role in the liturgy and theology of Judaism (Heschel 2001; Fishbane 2002). For Christians, prophetic interpretation is a christological enterprise fundamentally related to the church's calling to be the body of Christ, as the church holds Jesus to be the living Word of God. Like Ezekiel, Jesus internalized and reinterpreted Israel's story, but he also revealed the truth and fullness of God's redeeming purposes for Israel and the world. The church is

prophetic to the extent that it understands itself to be formed by the life and death of Jesus of Nazareth and thus to be 'accountable to the great prophets of Israel' (Hauerwas 2010: 170). The prophetic vocation is performed through Christian discipleship. In seeking to conform their lives to Jesus, disciples engage in a profound act of interpretation; prophetic figures are those who hold the church to this standard through their words and actions.

3 Prophecy and the critique of power

3.1 The social location of prophets

Biblical prophets regularly inveigh against abuses of power by kings, and likewise against their support structure: a greedy aristocracy, corrupt priests at state-sponsored sanctuaries, venal judges, and prophets who lie in God's name in order to please the powerful. A tiny elite class maintained a tight grip on their economic privilege and likewise their control over subsistence farmers who were the vast majority in Iron-Age Israel and Judah, the so-called 'poor and vulnerable' (e.g. Isa 25:4, 41:17; Jer 22:16; Ezek 16:49). The biblical prophets consistently portray them as the special focus of God's concern, but that does not mean that the prophets themselves were completely on the social margins. Probably most of them exercised influence within local communities; thus their words gained an immediate audience and a hold on the memory of a circle that widened over time. Amos, the earliest of the so-called writing prophets (i.e. those whose oracles are anthologized in a book), declares emphatically that he was not an official cult prophet (Amos 7:14). Yet neither was Amos a simple field hand; the editorial preface to the book identifies him as a *noqed* (Amos 1:1), an animal breeder or rancher from the rural township of Tekoa (cf. Cook, Strong and Tuell 2022: 307). He composed elegant poetic oracles that bespeak both education (formal or informal) and a broad international purview (see Amos 1–2).

Two centuries later, Jeremiah, a Levitical priest from a village near Jerusalem (Jer 1:1), was a recognized figure at the temple and in the royal court, where he had both enemies and admirers, as well as those who feared what he had to say (Jer 36–38). Some few prophets, such as Huldah, lived safely in close proximity to the nerve-centre of the kingdom. Nathan was David's closest advisor throughout his reign and from that position of intimacy delivered an incisive denunciation of David's sin in taking Bathsheba and murdering her husband Uriah (2 Sam 12:1–14). Similarly, the eighth-century Isaiah is portrayed as having direct access to two kings, Ahaz and his son Hezekiah; in times of acute national crisis he challenged them to trust in God rather than armies and the conventional wisdom of *realpolitik* (2 Kgs 19; see also Isa 7 and section 7 below).

3.2 Key texts: 1 Samuel 2:1–10 and Micah 1, 3

Prophets who function close to or even within elite circles are not the biblical norm. It is telling that a proclamatory prayer ascribed to a peasant woman sets the reader's perspective on the deeply critical account of kings and the exercise of power in Former Prophets (1 and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings). Hannah is not explicitly named a prophet in the Bible, but in Orthodox Christianity the Holy Prophetess Hannah is commemorated with a feast day (December 9). Hannah's song of exultation (1 Sam 2:1–10) is a psalm bursting from the lips of this formerly barren woman who has just birthed the boy Samuel; he will grow up to lead Israel and anoint its first kings. The focus of her prayer is God's propensity to overturn what appear to be settled social facts, whether that be the disadvantage of the childless woman in a kinship-based society (2:5), seemingly unopposable military dominance (2:4), or economic disparity and fixed locations on the social ladder (2:7–8). This is praise for a 'knowing God' (2:3), who rules wisely to 'the ends of the earth' and grants power to 'his king' (2:10) – that is, to an earthly ruler who bows to the divine disruption of conventional power structures. In the New Testament, the brave young Mary echoes that same theme of divine disruption of human power structures in her song of thanksgiving for the unlikely favour shown her by God (Luke 1:46–55).

The eighth-century BCE prophet Micah was contemporary with the Jerusalem-based prophet Isaiah, but he viewed the capital city from a distance (see Smith-Christopher 2015). His home was Moresheth-Gath (Mic 1:1) in the Shephelah, the agricultural district at the edge of the Philistine plain, important both militarily and economically to the small kingdoms of Israel and Judah and likewise to their most dreaded enemy, the powerful Assyrian Empire, then extending its reach westward to the Mediterranean. Contrary to the prophets who profited from reassuring oracles of peace (Mic 3:5), Micah saw not only that disaster was imminent, but that it would come from YHWH (1:12), as judgment upon those

> […] chiefs of the House of Israel who abhor justice and twist everything that is straight,
> building Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with abuse.
> […]
> Therefore because of you, Zion will be ploughed as a field,
> and Jerusalem be ruins, and the temple mount become a forested shrine. (Mic 3:9–10, 12)

Although Micah may never have addressed the Jerusalem elite directly, his words found their target and stuck, at least in the minds of some. More than a century later, when the prophet Jeremiah was on trial for the capital crime of preaching oracles of doom against Judah and Jerusalem, certain influential elders rose to his defence, citing Micah's oracle as a precedent. These very words, spoken to 'all the people of Judah' (Jer 26:18), were remembered as the turning point for King Hezekiah, who made a sincere appeal to God, and thus the city was saved. The story in the book of Jeremiah suggests that Micah's words had entered into the corporate memory of the people and were now seen as speaking God's truth to a later generation at another critical juncture of history. This

moment might mark an early stage in the canonization process for the oracles of Micah and other early prophets.

3.3 Implications for contemporary communities

African theologians have given particular attention to prophetic texts in dealing with political issues. Peter Storey of South Africa, a leader in the struggle against apartheid, stresses the importance of 'prophetic distance' so that the church is not co-opted by the state but rather is able to love the country 'enough to hold it accountable to God's demands for justice and compassionate fair-dealing, calling out its leaders when they stray from those priorities' (Storey 2022: 229). Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi of the Democratic Republic of Congo draws upon the story of Solomon's ruthless rise to kingship in order to explore possibilities for prophetic ministry in the face of violent transitions of power in his own context. He too advocates that religious leaders should keep a certain distance from ruling elites and provide an 'alternative vision' to the ideology of violence (2020: 81). Maintaining distance is important because it 'can allow the prophet to interpret the word of God in a way that heals society and gives it new energy' (Onyumbe Wenyi 2020: 96). Through his examination of the calculating role Nathan plays in Solomon's succession, Onyumbe highlights how even true prophets can succumb to the allure of power, inaugurating political violence rather than national flourishing.

4 Prophecy and economic justice

4.1 Land loss and the rise of the prophetic movement

Within the space of a few decades in the eighth century, four remarkable poetic voices emerged in Israel and Judah. Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah mark the beginning of a distinctive social movement and articulation of reality that proved to be unforgettable. Eventually the prophetic *movement* yielded prophetic *texts*, each a literary reflection of a living message delivered in God's name, now in the form of a book designed to convey that message forward into new times and circumstances. Initially, however, these four foundational prophets illumined for their contemporaries the human suffering resulting from a massive economic shift that affected virtually every Israelite. In that land of subsistence-level farming villages, the royal house was tightening its grip, breaking the established culture of regional economies in favour of a crown-controlled system of commodity production. Small farmers were heavily taxed in grain, wine, and oil, with much of their crop going into royal storehouses, to support the national apparatus of palace, central sanctuaries, and aristocracy, as well as the standing army and bureaucratic structure all this required. Farmers who could not pay their taxes lost their land and with it, freedom over their own bodies and labour, and a hopeful future for their children (Davis 2009: 121–125; Cook 2004: 67–120).

One ancient title for a prophet is *ḥozeh*, 'seer' (e.g. Hos 7:12; Mic 3:8; cf. Isa 1:1), and these seminal prophets saw a rupture in the economic order so profound as to compel geophysical response: the earth itself convulsing (Amos 8:8), withering, with creatures of both land and sea languishing (Hos 4:3). But human response was also required, and these four, who may have been completely unaware of each other, shared a vocabulary for articulating the way of being in the world that YHWH requires. They spoke of truth and 'covenant-loyalty' (*ḥesed*, traditionally 'steadfast love') to God and neighbour (e.g. Hos 4:1). A single word, *mishpat*, denotes the indivisible concepts of justice and (divine) judgment, as in Isaiah's striking description of God as 'towering high in *mishpat*' (Isa 5:16), with both aspects implied. Moreover, in the prophets' vocabulary, *mishpat* is itself inseparable from *tsedaqah*, 'righteousness', a relational term for the ordering of the social and created order in accordance with God's will (e.g. Isa 5:16; Amos 5:24; cf. Weinfeld 1992 on the word pair). It is notable that the prophets' covenantal vocabulary appears with peculiar density also in the Psalms, the other major corpus of lyrical poetry in the Bible. Far from being distant from cultic (organized) worship, as many modern scholars have assumed, the biblical prophets share with the psalmists a conviction that true worship and just conduct in the social sphere are mutually enforcing (e.g. Ps 15:1–5, 24:3–4; Mic 6:8).

4.2 Key texts: 1 Kings 18 and 21; Micah 2:1–5

The prophets often combine an emphasis on the enactment of justice within Israel with a focus on YHWH's demand for exclusive worship. This combination comes to the fore in the saga of Elijah in the ninth century (1 Kgs 17:1–2 Kgs 2:11). In the reign of Ahab of Israel (c. 871–853 BCE), Elijah humiliated the prophets of the Canaanite gods Baal and Asherah, patronized by Ahab and his Phoenician queen Jezebel, in a famous confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18). Although Elijah's memory is associated with the insistence on worshipping YHWH alone (Lang 1983), his opposition to the royal house equally concerned YHWH's abhorrence of economic injustice. Notably, the account of Elijah's career climaxes with his denunciation of an act of rank abuse of the Israelite farmer Naboth (1 Kgs 21). When he refused to cede to the king a piece of his own ancestral land, namely a vineyard adjacent to the palace, Jezebel arranged for Naboth's legalized murder, and Ahab appropriated his valuable land. Naboth's pious refusal – 'It would be profanation before God for me to give my ancestral land to you!' (1 Kgs 21:3) – is an assertion of Israel's covenantal ideal: economically independent farming communities, with families settled on small plots of arable land in perpetuity. Land is not a commodity to be traded but an intergenerational trust, granted by God as a permanent protection against impoverishment, displacement, and enslavement (see Lev 25). In assaulting the life-giving link between people and land, Ahab the king 'sold himself' (1 Kgs 21:20, 25); he forfeited his own ancestral inheritance, the kingship, just as an impoverished peasant might sell

his body into debt slavery. Thus Ahab doomed his own royal house to its extinction (1 Kgs 21:22; Davis 2009: 111–114).

The extended narrative of the royal land grab in the Elijah saga provides the literary background for understanding Micah's brief sketch of a land grab by the powerful, those who 'plot crime and work evil while on their beds' (Mic 1:1; cf. 1 Kgs 21:4; Isa 5:8–10):

> They covet fields and seize them; houses, and appropriate them.
> They deprive a landowner of his home, a person of his ancestral land.
> Therefore, thus says YHWH,
> Look, I am plotting evil against this family,
> and you will not be able to free your necks from it,
> nor walk tall, for it is an evil time. (Mic 2:2–3)

There is a sharp irony in the reference to 'this family', because the leisure-class crime of land theft is aimed precisely at destroying the kinship-based social and economic system of pre-monarchic Israel and replacing it with a centralized and economically stratified society that benefits the few at the expense of the vast majority of 'poor and vulnerable'.

4.3 Implications for contemporary communities

The same shift that led to the demise of small farmers in eighth-century BCE Israel and Judah – and thus to the rise of the prophetic movement – has now occurred across the globe. With the ascendancy of agricultural technology and global market pressures to produce cash crops, small family farms have been overtaken by agribusiness (Vidal 2014). Not surprisingly, many of today's small farmers are suffering similar consequences: economic impoverishment, destruction of local agricultural communities, and environmental rupture and rebellion. Many churches have responded to this crisis through various programs and practices. Pleasant Hope Baptist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, has not only developed a thriving community garden on its church property, but it has also created the 'Black Church Food Security Network' that helps other churches establish gardens and host farmers markets that support an expansive regional network of Black farmers. This initiative promotes community-wide flourishing through access to healthy food, economic empowerment of Black farmers and congregations, increased social and environmental justice awareness and activism, and spiritual growth. In doing so, this ministry enacts righteousness and covenant-loyalty, rejecting and reversing covetous practices of land appropriation whereby neighbourhoods lose life-giving resources. It has created what the Rev. Dr Heber M. Brown III calls 'an ecosystem for spiritual joy and social justice' and has increased the participants' self-respect (Gross 2019). In cultivating land and community, Pleasant Hope Baptist Church witnesses to the right ordering proclaimed by the prophets, and, in turn, has been transformed into a people of blessing able to 'walk tall' (Mic 2:3).

5 Prophecy in a hostile world

5.1 Visions of war, glimpses of peace

Prophetic critique is never without consequences, and the most common judgment the prophets threaten is war. The reality of war and national disaster is keenly felt in almost every prophetic book. This is unsurprising, as one important function of professional prophets in the ancient Near East was to deliver oracles to kings before they went to war, with the expectation that they would promise success. Such oracles were indeed delivered in Israel and Judah (see 1 Kgs 22:5–6), but the biblical writers view them with a deep scepticism. Notably, all the war oracles that were preserved at length – the inscribed national memory – either forecast doom or lament the destruction and exile that have already happened. Amos prophesied during the prosperous reign of Jeroboam II (c. 786–746 BCE), and yet he declared as a certainty what few of his contemporaries could have believed:

> By the sword Jeroboam will die,
> and Israel will surely be deported, away from its fertile soil. (Amos 7:11)

The prophetic corpus is to a great extent trauma literature, composed for and by those living on the cusp, in the midst or in the wake of massive disasters. It is an artful representation and interpretation of harrowing events, created for the sake of survival and recovery, both moral and spiritual (Stulman and Kim 2010). These penetrating words emerge from the underside of history, sometimes in the form of vengeful visions of enemy states, all those who had preyed upon Israel – especially the vast empires of Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, which were all but unopposable in human terms – brought down by YHWH (e.g. Isa 17–23, 47–48; Jer 46–51; Ezek 25–32; Amos 1–2). These lengthy and unsparing 'Oracles against the Nations' are boring and distasteful to some modern readers, but viewed in historical context, they serve a crucial function in sustaining faith. For a people chronically tempted by their own comparative weakness and finally total defeat to embrace the gods of their conquerors, the Oracles against the Nations are a declaration of YHWH's covenant faithfulness, indeed a harsh proclamation of hope to Israel and Judah.

Occasionally hope for Israel's place among the nations takes a different and wholly positive form, likewise grounded in YHWH's faithfulness. Narrative and poetic representations of peace between Israel and its neighbours appear within both Former and Latter Prophets. Most famously, the pacific vision of swords beaten into ploughshares, nations streaming to Zion for divine instruction and peoples 'study[ing] war no more' is doubly preserved, in the Isaiah and the Micah traditions (Isa 2:1–4; Mic 4:1–5). In the sixth century, Jeremiah writes to the exiles in Babylon to 'seek the *shalom* [wellbeing] of the city' of their exile, and 'pray to YHWH on its behalf, for with its *shalom* lies your *shalom*' (Jer

29:7). The editors of the book of Jeremiah saw no need to reconcile the apparent conflict with the furious oracle against Babylon with which the book ends. Both messages were trusted as true words spoken for different moments in the life of the people, and in fact both proved to be true: a few generations later, Babylon's power was broken (539 BCE), and yet the Judean (Jewish) community flourished in Babylon for many centuries. The Babylonian Talmud, produced a millennium after the exile, is along with the Bible the greatest work of Jewish literature.

5.2 Key texts: Jonah and Nahum

The Assyrian Empire terrorized and dominated Israel and Judah for more than a century, from the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, until Assyria itself fell to the rising Babylonian Empire in 612 BCE. Accordingly, two prophetic books, Nahum and Jonah, are in their entirety responses to the Assyrian threat, which they interpret in drastically different ways. The lyric poetry of Nahum is a pure outpouring of rage, a celebration of YHWH as 'a passionate God who seeks vengeance' (1:2). The whole book is an extended oracle of doom, announcing to Judah the good news: 'That good-for-nothing will not again invade you; it is utterly exterminated' (2:1).

The rhetoric becomes savage; Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, is feminized – 'Look, your people are women!' (3:13) – and imaged as a rape victim or sexual slave, with the gates 'wide open to your enemies' (3:13). While there is nothing obviously edifying about the poetry of vengeance, Martin Luther defends its place in scripture: 'The book teaches us to trust God and to believe, especially when we despair of all human help, human powers, and counsel, that the Lord […] shields His own against all attacks of the enemy, be they ever so powerful' (Maier 1959: 86).

No less unsettling than Nahum's rage is the satirical tone of the book of Jonah, which reads more like a short story than a prophetic oracle, and may have been written long after Assyria's fall. The anonymous author of the tale of Jonah dares to make the pouting prophet look silly and likewise Assyria, when the king, the people, and even their animals pray and fast in sackcloth in response to Jonah's reluctant warning: 'Another forty days, and Nineveh will be turned upside down!' (Jonah 3:4–9). In a sense, that prophecy came true with Nineveh's dramatic repentance, an event for which there is no extra-biblical evidence. Jonah is a rare biblical instance of a prophet whose word was heeded and as a result the doom he foretold was averted, contrary to Jonah's personal hope. As an interpreter of Israel's theological tradition, he cites YHWH's legendary compassion and patience, revealed long ago at Sinai, as a charge *against* the Deity (Jonah 4:23; cf. Exod 34:6–7). In Egypt, YHWH's compassion was demonstrated in delivering Israel from bondage, but now the situation is reversed: God has spared the powerful oppressor, the destroyer of the northern kingdom of Israel. Although warfare is not explicitly mentioned

in Jonah's story, YHWH's generosity toward Nineveh, the epitome of ruthless aggression, is profoundly disturbing. Can God still be trusted as the deliverer and defender of Israel? That question is not explicitly posed or answered, but the book ends with YHWH's own question, which points to an aspect of divine compassion that may not be considered by those who pray to God for the destruction of their enemies (including a number of prophets and psalmists). 'And what about me – should I not be protective of the great city of Nineveh, which has more than 120,000 people, who don't know their right from their left, and much livestock?' (Jonah 4:11). The Ninevites and their cattle all exist in the sphere marked out for divine protection, which is to say, in the sphere of creation (Davis 2019: 248–255). As a number of the prophetic texts attest, the scope of prophecy parallels the scope of divine concern, which is the whole created order.

5.3 Implications for contemporary communities

Unlike Jonah, selections from the book of Nahum never appear in the three-year cycle of readings in the Revised Common Lectionary, and thus many congregations rarely, if ever, engage with this prophetic text. Luther's assertion of Nahum's value finds contemporary affirmation in the work of Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi, who argues that the violent depictions of war in Nahum can be a vehicle for healing and reconciliation for Congolese victims who have suffered extreme violence. Drawing upon trauma studies and literary analysis, Onyumbe suggests that the lyric poetry in Nahum evokes memories of war for its audience, thus allowing victims to name and confront the tragic events of their past (2021: 175–176). Rather than commending specific actions or easy solutions, the prophetic poetry creates a space where traumatized victims can vent their anger and imagine God acting on their behalf. In social contexts where there is rampant injustice and no human accountability, Nahum's image of God as avenger may paradoxically be a source of hope for the victims of violence, reassuring them that God has not forgotten their cause.

6 Prophecy and the created order

6.1 The covenantal structure of creation

One area where prophetic social criticism and prophetic interpretation of tradition work most closely together is the prophets' covenantal understanding of creation. Indeed, the prophetic message may speak most directly to the current historical moment as it highlights the God-given integrity and flourishing of the created order and how that integrity is disrupted through human misconduct. Consistently the prophets share with other biblical writers the view evident already in the first chapter of the Bible, as well as numerous psalms (e.g. Ps 65; 96; 148) that the earth is a sentient being, responsive to the will of its Creator. Because it is attuned to the covenantal structure of created life, the earth is touched and harmed when humans, and Israel in particular, fail to practice a whole-hearted response to God's covenantal initiative toward the created order (cf. Gen 9:8–17):

> There is no truthfulness and no covenant-loyalty,
> and no knowledge of God in the land [or, 'on the earth'].
> […] Therefore the land/earth mourns and all who dwell upon it languish. (Hos 4:1, 3)

Further, the earth (or the land of Israel) participates in the exercise of God's *mishpat* – both justice and judgment. It is telling that immediately following Amos' ringing denunciation of those who 'buy the destitute for silver and the needy in exchange for sandals' (8:6), YHWH declares:

> I will never forget all their doings.
> Is it not for this that the land/earth shakes and all who dwell in it mourn,
> and it rises like the Nile, all at once, and churns and sinks like the Nile of Egypt? (Amos 8:7–8)

The land or earth is not merely the arena in which YHWH enacts *mishpat*, nor an inert instrument of judgment. Rather, it is a moral agent, acting in sympathetic partnership with God (cf. Loya 2008).

The geophysical and moral orders are finally inseparable in the covenantal structure of the living world, and likewise the fate of human and nonhuman creatures. Accordingly, the biblical writers represent the suffering of the earth itself as a primary indicator of rupture within the relationship between humans and YHWH, beginning already with the first trespass in Eden, when God says to Adam: 'Cursed is the fertile soil on your account' (Gen 3:17). Centuries later, that same insight finds expression in the Apostle Paul's image of the groaning creation, waiting with holy impatience for humans to begin to act as the responsible children of God (Rom 8:19–23).

6.2 Key texts: Hosea 2:18–25 MT (2:16–23 Eng.); Jeremiah 14

The visionary prophet Hosea powerfully – even mystically – evokes the profound intimacy of the bond between God and all living creatures, including the earth, in a vision of the covenant God will surely make in the indefinite future, 'in that day' (Hos 2:18 MT, 2:16 Eng.). The promised covenant has the same scope as the first covenant made after the flood, encompassing all living things of field and sky and soil, a covenant that marks the end of violence on the earth (2:20 MT, 2:18 Eng.). Characteristically for this prophet, the governing metaphor is marital (un)faithfulness (cf. Hos 1–3). 'I will betroth you to myself forever', YHWH pledges to an unnamed bride, who might be the people of Israel or the personified land. The dowry bestowed comprises all the things now missing in that place (cf. 4:1):

> I will betroth you to myself with righteousness and with justice

> and with covenant-loyalty and with compassion. (Hos 2:21 MT, 2:19 Eng.)

The vision then turns distinctly agrarian, as the fruitfulness of the earth testifies to the fruitfulness of the marriage and the responsiveness of the divine 'husband' (in the agricultural as well as the marital sense of that English word), who declares:

> I will answer the skies, and they will answer the earth.
> And the earth will answer the grain, and the new wine and the oil –
> and they will answer 'Jezreel' ['God sows'].
> I will sow it as my own in the earth. (Hos 2:23–25 MT, 2:21–23 Eng.)

Jezreel is the name of the valley in northern Israel, the richest agricultural region in the land.

Hosea's vision of righteousness (*tsedeq*) manifested in the fertility of the soil supports Margaret Barker's suggestion that the Hebrew term denoting right relations within the created order often carries a sense close to our contemporary notion of sustainability (Barker 2010: 144).

The interpenetration of the moral and geophysical orders is evident also in Jeremiah's extended oracle 'on the occasion of the drought' (Jer 14:1) that drove the cities of Judah into mourning (14:2). A striking feature of the poem is the language of shame that punctuates it. Servants sent to the water holes return with empty vessels, 'ashamed and humiliated' (14:3); likewise the agricultural workers cover their heads in shame 'on account of the shattered soil' (14:4). A poet keenly attuned to the language of Israel's creation stories (see the vision of a land rendered 'formless and void', Jer 4:23–28), Jeremiah is reflecting the primeval history of the soil. Once it was afflicted with God's curse 'on account of' the errant humans (Gen 3:17; cf. Jer 23:10), and now those most sensitive to the soil, the peasant farmers (*ikarim*) whose work largely profits the wealthy, feel the shame of its abuse. In modern society, insurance companies may refer to weather disasters as 'acts of God', but Jeremiah seeks to awaken the people to the harsh reality of that fact and the need to turn back to YHWH in sincere repentance: 'For our backslidings are many; against you we have sinned' (14:7).

6.3 Implications for contemporary communities

When humans pursue our own ends, heedless of God, we violate the conditions under which all life can flourish. Hosea and Jeremiah recognize that Israel's disobedience generated droughts, and likewise our rapacious economic appetites in the twenty-first century have inaugurated multiple global catastrophes: climate change, mass extinction of species, and pervasive chemical pollution that threatens the stability of the world's ecosystems (Carrington 2022). For Jews and Christians, environmental degradation is

not primarily a technological or a scientific issue but a theological one (see articles on Ecotheology and Ecological Ethics). Noted economist Jeffrey Sachs argues that, in light of the widespread destruction enabled by modern global capitalism, the Western world needs a fundamental change in values focusing on the wellbeing rather than the wealth of nations, in line with what the Orthodox Church has been advocating in recent decades (2021). In a historic effort to call humanity to pursue the common good of the earth and all its inhabitants, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the Pope of Rome, and the Archbishop of Canterbury have issued a 'Joint Message for the Protection of Creation'. Highlighting scripture's command to '[c]hoose life, so that you and your children might live' (Deut 30:19), they implore everyone to 'listen to the cry of the earth and of people who are poor, examining their behaviour and pledging meaningful sacrifices for the sake of the earth which God has given us' (2021).

7 Prophecy and hope

7.1 Restoration of Israel and the royal house of David

Starting with Amos and continuing through the centuries, Israel's prophets were unsparing in their denunciation of sins – especially those of kings and sycophantic prophets and priests – that alienated the people from YHWH and thus led inexorably to the successive destruction of the Northern (722 BCE) and Southern kingdoms (586 BCE). Nonetheless the scribal successors of prophetic interpreters shaped the whole prophetic canon editorially to point toward hope for the restoration of Israel and Judah, and in both Former and Latter Prophets the royal house of David is a key focus of hope. Oracles of hope appear in nearly every book of the Latter Prophets; less overtly, there is an intimation of hope for the house of David in the final shaping of the history of kingship in Samuel and Kings.

In the context of Israel's scriptures, the turn toward hope is an act of daring interpretation; an affirmation of the consistency of God's character, expressed in faithfulness to the Sinai covenant and also to the covenant with David and his seed (2 Sam 7), despite the repeated provocation of unfaithfulness from Israel and its leadership. The hope that lies with the house of David has particular importance for the New Testament evangelists and hence for all subsequent Christian interpretation of the prophetic corpus.

The history of kingship depicts the weakness, self-serving, and cruelty that distorts God's intentions for kingship in Israel from the very beginning, with the choice of Saul and David; it concludes with the fall of Jerusalem and the throne of David (2 Kgs 24–25). Yet the lengthy account of national collapse and exile ends with a glimmer of hope: Jehoiachin, the last legitimate king, is released from a Babylonian prison and granted the place of honour among all the vassal monarchs in exile there (2 Kgs 25:27–30; Von Rad 1966: 205–221).

Even more dramatic is the shift toward hope that concludes the book of Amos. A final denunciation reinterprets even the treasured memory of the exodus as marking the special relationship between YHWH and Israel:

> Did I not bring up Israel from the land of Egypt,
> and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir?
> Look, the eyes of the Lord YHWH are upon the sinful kingdom,
> and I will wipe it away from the face of the soil! (Amos 9:7–8)

But that fierce repudiation does not stand as the last divine word. It is followed immediately by an equally strong assertion:

> On that day I will erect the fallen booth of David
> and repair its breaches and erect its ruins and build it as in days of old. (Amos 9:11)

This final oracle is anachronistic; the 'booth' of David did not fall for another two centuries after Amos' own castigating prophecy against the northern kingdom of Israel. The firm assurance of an enduring future for the people 'on the soil which I gave to them' (9:15) comes from an exilic or post-exilic poet and scribe, who preserves the tradition of the venerable prophet and yet boldly reinterprets it, as Amos himself had once offered his own bold interpretations of God's action in history.

7.2 Key texts: Isaiah 7–8; 9:1–6 MT (9:2–7 Eng.); 11:1–9

Positioned as the first of the Latter Prophets, the book of Isaiah is the strongest biblical witness to the hope that rests in God's ever-renewed faithfulness to Israel, and particularly the hope that attaches to the house of David. This is the aspect of the prophetic canon on which the New Testament evangelists concentrate attention; hence Isaiah's language and imagery inform the faith of every subsequent generation of Christian believers.

The royal house comes to the fore through a rare narrative (Isa 7) in this book that is otherwise almost entirely composed of poetic oracles. Here 'the house of David' is instantiated in the person of Ahaz king of Judah (7:1–2), in a moment when Jerusalem is besieged (literally) by a coalition of neighbouring states pressuring him to ally with them to throw off the yoke of Assyria. Although it is common prophetic practice to encourage a monarchy with a favourable oracle of war, Isaiah does the opposite, challenging the king to eschew military action and put his trust exclusively in the God who once made a covenantal commitment to David and his descendants (cf. 2 Sam 7:11–16). He gives the reluctant Ahaz a sign pointing to YHWH's imminent intervention in the business of nations:

> Look, a certain young woman (*almah*) is pregnant and is soon to bear a son; let her name him *Immanu-El* [God-with-us]. (Isa 7:14)

In its immediate literary context, the *Immanu-El* sign does not portend a miraculous birth, such as Sarah birthing Isaac (Gen 21:1–7). (The word *almah* denotes a young woman of child-bearing age, regardless of her marital status or sexual history.) Rather, the point here is a temporal one: while the child is still very young, a drastic change will occur in the political situation. The good news is that Judah's immediate neighbours will cease to be a threat; the bad news is that because Judah 'despised' the security of YHWH's presence, the irresistible power of Assyria will be unleashed:

> Outspread will be his wings,
> filling the breadth of your land – *Immanu-El*! (Isa 8:6, 8)

The *Immanu-El* sign thus epitomizes the two sides of divine speech throughout the prophetic corpus; God's very closeness to Israel and Judah conveys both danger to the faithless (7:9) and hope-filled promise (Davis 2019: 259–264).

In the editorial shaping of the book, the narrative of Isaiah and Ahaz is an important part of the background for interpreting two poetic oracles concerning the house of David that follow (9:1–6 MT, 9:2–7 Eng.; 11:1–9). However, in contrast to the prose narrative, the poetic language stretches the imagination beyond the bounds of any immediate historical and political situation. The first heralds the coming birth of a remarkable child, who will bear the royal titles 'Planner of Wonders, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace' (9:5 MT, 9:6 Eng.). His throne will be established

> in just-judgment [*mishpat*] and in righteousness,
> from now and forevermore.
> The passionate-commitment of YHWH of Hosts will accomplish this. (Isa 9:6 MT, Isa 9:7 Eng.)

While the hyperbolic language does have strong parallels in Egyptian coronation liturgies, it is crucial to note that nowhere in the prophetic canon is such language applied to even the most admired human king. Brevard Childs observes, '[t]he language is not just of a wishful thinking for a better time, but the confession of Israel's belief in a divine ruler who will replace once and for all the unfaithful reign of kings like Ahaz' (2001: 81).

In the second poetic oracle, the scope of the vision of justice and peace that will obtain when 'a shoot comes forth from the stump of Jesse' (11:1) is both more humble and more extensive. The stump of the ruined kingdom does not intimate that the royal house will be reestablished in any ordinary sense; rather, the root-stock of Jesse evokes David's

agrarian origin. But the social order will be transformed through the practice of equity; even the order of nonhuman creatures will assume a completely new form:

> Wolf will dwell with lamb and leopard lie down with kid,
> calf and lion and fatling together, with a small child leading them. (Isa 11:6)

The vision is evangelical and global:

> For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of YHWH as waters cover the sea. (Isa 11:9)

Neither vision has any chronological markers or clear geographical boundaries. The prophetic imagination is reaching out into the indefinite future, inviting new interpretations, and that is exactly how they have been received by those who find in Jesus hope of their realization.

7.3 Implications for contemporary communities

In Isaiah's extravagant messianic visions, the prophet-poet challenges the faithful imagination to embrace the real hope that God holds out to and for contemporary communities, without succumbing to merely wishful thinking. Because hope is always culturally situated, practices of realistic hope differ across the globe.

In June 2004, in Khartoum, Sudan, Archbishop Daniel Deng Bul Yak delivered an address to mark the signing of preliminary peace accords ending twenty-one years of genocidal warfare perpetrated by the Government of Sudan on the largely Christian population of Southern Sudan. Citing Isaiah's vision of the birth of a child 'whose name is Peace' (cf. Isa 9:5 MT, 9:6 Eng.), he called upon his audience of political, military, and religious leaders, both Muslims and Christians, to join him in caring for the newborn child, so that 'Peace' might grow up strong and healthy. That ancient vision spoke with fresh urgency in a land filled with millions of war orphans, the 'Lost Boys and Girls' of Sudan. And like many of the biblical prophets, the Archbishop articulated a vision that has not been swiftly realized.

Many contemporary Christians hear Isaiah's agrarian vision of a peace among all creatures as either fanciful or dismissive of the need for human action to heal broken ecological systems. In this area also, Sudanese interpreters challenge Western scepticism and complacency both. Bringing Isaiah's prophecy home to his own community in the Nile Valley, one theologian posed this question in direct response: 'During the war, when we were helpless in the bush, we often experienced that the animals would leave us alone. But now we are back in our villages and towns, and so I ask you, What do we do with the Nile leopard?' – that beautiful, endangered, and yet dangerous creature of God. By contrast, Christian climate activists in the urbanized cultures of Europe and North America may practice hope through street marches and policy making, in labs, at computers, in

pulpits and classrooms, claiming ‘the possibility that through truth-telling and holy action, we might turn back to God’ (Bigelow and Lamb 2021).

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