

What Would the Prophets Say?



By Gregory Mobley

What do the Hebrew prophets have to say to us in these days of noisy and fascinatingly unpredictable politics? The 8th-century BCE religious geniuses whom we know as Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah had a brand in common, a phrase that would fit on a bumper sticker: mishpat u-tzedeqah, “justice and righteousness.”

Singly, these are cardinal virtues: “justice,” doing what’s fair, and “righteousness,” doing what’s right. Occasionally they could clash, as the early-bird workers in Jesus’ parable about the vineyard would tell you (Matthew 20:1-16). Though each word has its own depths, what is most interesting is their conjunction:

- Let *justice* roll down like waters, and *righteousness* like a mighty stream (Amos 5:24).
- Zion shall be redeemed by *justice*, and those in her who repent, by *righteousness* (Isaiah 1:27).

Hosea and Micah add a dose of love (*hesed*) to their phrases:

- Hold fast to love and *justice* (Hosea 12:6).
- Do *justice*, love kindness, and walk humbly before your God (Micah 6:8).

The political platform of these Classical Hebrew prophets emphasized the conjunction – “justice and righteousness,” a phrase that means “care for

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the poor,” as Israeli biblical scholar Moshe Weinfeld argues. For the prophets, the truest measure of societal health was, as their inspired heir put it in Matthew 25:45, the way it treated “the least of these,” the widow, the stranger, the orphan, the prisoner, the disabled. In the words of Abraham

Joshua Heschel, the prophet registered “the secret obscenity of sheer unfairness, the unnoticed malignancy of established patterns of indifference. ... The prophet’s ear perceive[d] the silent sigh.”¹

The prophets returned from the 8th-century Chamber of Commerce tour of Samaria and Jerusalem unimpressed. They advocated for those who didn’t have rich relations, social networks, or legacy admission status. So whatever US political party takes charge next (and by the way, say adios to the two major ones; the next generation will have no more use for them than morning newspapers, traditional denominations, or college hoops stars who stay all four years in school), the prophets would demand that our culture – any culture – make as its chief barometer of economic health the conditions of the least of these, not how many people buy shiny useless products the day after Thanksgiving.

World Wide Web

I am joining Yale Divinity School from Andover Newton Theological School, a seminary composed mainly of congregational communities of faith – the United Church of Christ, the American Baptists, and the Unitarian Universalists. The latter group’s seventh principle is “the interdependent web of all existence,” a phrase that captures the prophets’ view of the salvific destiny shared by humanity and nature.

For Hosea, the ritual and ethical corruptions of his 8th-century Ephraimite society were approaching a watershed: His indictment in Hosea 4:1-3 cites

violations of fully half of the Ten Commandments. The result?

“Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing.”

His society’s ethical failings, according to Hosea, endanger the entire created order. Faithlessness to Torah lead to the very undoing of nature.

A couple of centuries later, prophet Jeremiah contends that the Judahites’ wayward doings have caused creation to revert back to the primeval chaos.

“I looked on the earth and, lo, it was waste and void; and to the heavens, and they had no light. I looked on the mountains, and, lo, they were quaking, and all the hills moved to and fro. I looked and, lo, there was no one at all, and all the birds of the air had fled. I looked and, lo, the fruitful land was a desert, and all its cities were laid in ruins” (Jeremiah 4:23-26).

Jeremiah’s poem, composed at the time of the Babylonian assault on Judah and Jerusalem around 600 BCE, takes us through creation week, echoing and yet reversing Genesis, uncreating the world one day at a time. The disintegration continues until with the final line – “and all its cities were laid in ruins” – we are back before Enoch built the first city (Gen. 4:17).

Leviathan Redux

The author of Isaiah 24-27 begins along the same arc – sketching the undoing of creation that results from human trespass – but amps up the rhetorical intensity until his poem ends with the return of the chaos monster Leviathan. Once again, the entire cosmos, heavens and earth, hovers dangerously on the brink of the abyss because of violations of “the everlasting covenant.”

“Therefore a curse devours the earth, and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt; therefore the inhabitants of the earth dwindled, and few people are left (Isa. 24:6).”

It was Iron Age magical thinking that led the prophets to assume direct causality between ethical trespasses by humans and the suffering of the natural and geological world. That link is now based on scientific thinking. However, the pre-scientific words of the prophets captured an intuitive truth that has never been more timely in our day of polarization, terrorism, and climate change. In their late-Iron Age laboratories, the prophets made an amazing discovery: The universe is ultimately a unified cosmic field. It is uncanny how the ancient personification

of chaos, as Leviathan, has surfaced so vividly in the postmodern world of contemporary narrative: In our apocalyptic imaginations, everywhere zombies are on the loose.

But the question remains: By what sequence of phonemes should we address the One who demands justice and righteousness, and with what repertoire of symbols should we adorn the sanctuary of this One?

The prophets were dedicated to an austere Mosaic monotheism. Their critique of idolatry and their bloody-minded insistence on sole worship of the deity known by YHWH presents a problem for their heirs who treasure the religious pluralism of contemporary life. The Hebrew prophets could not imagine the kind of pluralism that characterizes our interconnected world. This is unfinished business – to find the Middle Way between the narrow particularity of our commitments and the full amplitude of the Creator of a universe light years across.

Theological DNA

The prophets would have fiercely opposed religious tolerance. They counted an ancient warrior named Jerubbaal as a hero and renamed him Hack (the Hebrew meaning of “Gideon”) because he demolished the temples of other peoples.

But it is not my purpose here to take issue with the ethical sensibilities of my spiritual ancestors who, when they weren’t bringing forth children in

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pain and eating bread by the sweat of their faces, bequeathed to us a literary legacy that can seem one moment so parochial and small-minded and in the next broad enough to bear our dreams. Thanks to their uncompromising convictions, their theological genes survived for us to critique.

If, if, if there is anything for us to honor in the prophetic devotion to the One and concomitant hatred – yes, hatred – for what they would call idolatry, it is this single-minded belief in the Creator and the ethical commands that go with it. The prophets condemned self-celebratory, self-centered worship in the strongest terms. As best we know, neither Ba’al nor Asherah demanded care for the poor.

I admit I have some sympathy for ancient idolators; it’s my own idolatries I loathe. Aaron and the camp did not wake up one morning on the Sinai

outback and fashion a golden calf just for fun; Moses was taking too damn long (Exod 32:1). Facing 30 percent infant mortality, who in Hosea's day

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would not offer a sacrifice to a fertility deity such as Ba'al or Asherah if that might help beat the odds? Modern idolators seek so much more – enhancements, enrichments, enlargements. Religion that doth not require of thee, that makes no demands, is idolatrous.

Yet prophecy is not the only current flowing through the river of Bible that we can draw on during the latest election cycle. In a political season of frenzied discourse, more than ever we need to hear another voice: Wisdom.

“Wisdom cries out in the street; in the squares she raises her voice. At the busiest corner she cries out, at the entrance of the city she speaks” (Proverbs 1:20).

Prophetic truth breaks in from the outside. The prophets claimed to have been in the heavenly throne room or on the very rock where Moses stood. Prophetic truth breaks in pointedly. Do or die, now or never: Act! The truth of wisdom flows from the inside out: Be patient, take a deep breath. If the prophets would have me hold tight, the voice of wisdom reminds me that there is a time under Heaven as well for letting go.

A Cry in the Street

Wisdom does not yield an answer quickly. “It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings to search them out,” says Proverbs 25:2. Yet when the truth comes, it arrives as something we already knew, something that had been in front of us the whole time: Consider the lilies. Or as the Preacher famously observes:

“What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, “See, this is new”? It has already been, in the ages before us” (Ecclesiastes 1:9-10).

The prophets frequently referred to the Day of the LORD, the Day of Judgment, the Day of Kingdom Come, the Day when the proud are abased and the humble exalted. Choose this day whom you will serve. Redeem the day. But in addition to marking the sun – don't let it set on your anger! –

we should consider the moon that the LORD also established. Prophecy lived in the day of the LORD. Wisdom took her sweet time and marked the lunar cycle, swaying to the tidal waltzing ebb and flow of seasons and forces beyond our control. In the wake of a historic election, let us welcome a Sabbath rest from problem-solving and control and knowing the answer. Just now, we need a Serenity-Prayer embrace both of prophecy and wisdom.

Gregory Mobley arrives this fall at YDS as Visiting Professor of Congregational Studies and Hebrew Bible. He is the author of The Return of the Chaos Monsters – and Other Backstories of the Bible (Eerdmans, 2012) and co-editor of My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation (Orbis, 2012). He graduated from Campbellsville College (B.A. 1979), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div. 1984), Harvard Divinity School (Th.M. 1986), and Harvard University (Ph.D. 1994).

Notes

- 1 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (Harper, 1962), p. 11.

“A DREAM DEFERRED”

Langston Hughes

By Charles H. Harper

Finally
exhausted

too broken to pursue
this way further

we burn
our old maps

begin again
at the beginning

our long deferred
journey

into the dream