

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

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(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 Hazeal" (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 assert-

ing 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

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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-

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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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