

Visions of Justice

BY SCOTT HOEZE

Amos and Habakkuk's visions of justice—though worthy, in their surreal spookiness, of the imagination of Stephen King—challenge us to get away from selfishness to ponder not just how we are doing but how everyone is doing.

As the fires at Ground Zero smoldered until well into November, so also our hearts continued to reel from the entire tragedy of 9/11. Our military leaders, however, did more than grieve: they prepared to take action. And so somewhere in the midst of all that happened in the fall of 2001, the top brass at the wounded Pentagon drew up plans to go after Al Qaeda, announcing the name of their new military campaign in Afghanistan: "Operation Infinite Justice." However, not long after that announcement, that moniker was changed to "Operation Enduring Freedom." Why?—because Muslims pointed out to Donald Rumsfeld that only Allah can pursue justice on an infinite scale. The name of the new war was offensive to the same Muslims who were chagrined at being lumped together indiscriminately with the likes of bin Laden and company.

But as one commentator asked at the time, where was the Christian voice in all that? Why did Muslims make a theological point based on the Qur'an that Christians could just as easily have made based on the Bible? Why didn't the Pope say something, the National Association of Evangelicals, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches? Why did the Mosque point out something the Church seemed not to notice? Was it just that Muslims were already feeling persecuted and so were more attuned to other sources of potential difficulty? Probably. But could it also be that North American Christians just did not think that much about justice to begin with?

THE BIBLICAL VOCABULARY OF JUSTICE

Unhappily, in some evangelical circles a focus on justice is often derided as a liberal, left-wing concern, as something that does not rise very near the top of the Christian agenda. But since all Christians embrace the Hebrew

Scripture as part of their canon, that same portion of the Bible regularly challenges the idea that justice could ever be an ancillary concern for Christians. Amos and Habakkuk are fine examples. Of course, as we ponder their prophetic words, we do so with the up-front reminder that ancient Israel was a God-ordained theocracy in a way no nation today is. Israel was to be a holy nation, an elect people, whose society was centered on religion. Israel had no separation of church and state, religion and politics, because it simply *was* religious.

So Israel did not tolerate people of other faiths, could not abide a public (or even a private) plurality of lifestyle options, and so had no difficulty legislating people into being worshipers of Yahweh, Israel's true King. Virtually none of that applies to any country today such that it is both naive and dangerous to lift out specific Old Testament passages about Israelite society and then use them as a blueprint for the present.

Even so, there certainly are principles that emerge from ancient Israel that have great relevance for Christians today. We may not be citizens of a holy commonwealth on a par with ancient Israel, but as citizens of this nation who are simultaneously (and more importantly) citizens of God's Kingdom, there are practices and viewpoints we should follow based on what we discern are the matters nearest and dearest to the heart of God.

One big cue we can take from the Bible has to do with the vocabulary of justice. We tend to think that "justice" means jurisprudence – catching criminals, sending them through the court system with due process, and granting people legal representation and a jury of their peers. If all goes well, the guilty go to jail and the innocent go free. We have television shows on "the justice files," "criminal justice," "justice for all." But this jurisprudence sense of justice, though not absent from the Bible, is not central.

As Nicholas Wolterstorff once pointed out, when in his fifth chapter Amos declared, "Let justice roll down like a mighty stream," he did not mean, "Let police forces expand, let prisons proliferate, and let criminals get their just deserts." Justice in the Bible has less to do with the conviction of the guilty and more to do with the care of the innocent. C. S. Lewis once noted that we have an entire biblical book titled "Judges," and yet not one of those judges like Deborah, Barak, or Samson ever put on a robe, picked up a gavel, and presided over court cases argued by lawyers. No, judges in ancient Israel were champions for the oppressed, heroes who sallied forth into society to end oppression of the poor and who tried to vindicate God's way of doing things.

In fact, a key clue as to what justice means in the Old Testament can be found in a verbal triplet that pops up regularly whenever God or the prophets are talking about what constitutes a just society in Israel. Over and again God expresses his divine concern for "widows, orphans, and aliens." Women who had lost husbands, children who had lost parents, and foreigners who were not native Israelites were all highly vulnerable. Each had no reli-

able means of income. Each had at least the potential to be socially invisible and so marginalized (if not abused).

God had a soft spot in his holy heart for people like this. So it is no surprise to find laws bent toward giving these people some advantages. None of Israel's laws necessarily changed the social standing of these individuals. Rather, the law recognized that the needs of these folks might very well go on and on—they were poor and would likely remain at a modest financial level even if the law were followed. Still, because God desires to see all his image-bearers flourish, Yahweh commanded that Israelite society be a community of sharing, of compassion. Debts were not to remain forever, foreclosed property was eventually to get returned to the family that had to forfeit the land in the first place, and farmers were to be purposely a bit inefficient when harvesting grain so that gleaners could come through and find plenty of harvest leftovers with which to make the staff of life.

PROPHETIC VISIONS (AMOS 8:1-8 AND HABAKKUK 2:2-14)

However, many of us know Israel's story well enough to recall that as a society, they mostly failed. The rich got richer, the poor got poorer. Widows and orphans *were* marginalized, resident aliens *were* abused and ignored. The Jubilee year was not observed and so whole families became poor in perpetuity. Before Israel entered the Promised Land, Moses had given them a solemn warning: they were to remember that everything they had was God's gift. Moses warned them not to get arrogant, not to look at wealth as a product of their own strength and ingenuity but as the working of God first of all. They were to observe the Sabbath day once a week and the Sabbath year once every seven years as a calculated effort to recall that God was in charge.

But they forgot. Amos puts it pointedly when he pictures people twiddling their thumbs on the Sabbath. What a waste of time the Sabbath was! There was, after all, money to be made! And so they would sit in the Temple but their mind would not be on the worship. If they had had wristwatches, they would have been constantly checking them. They just couldn't abide holidays and holy days and sacred festivals. What they wanted to hear more than anything was not the sound of the shofar trumpet announcing Sabbath worship but the clang of the opening bell at the stock market! Only *then* did life begin again!

Not surprisingly, since money had come to assume such a very high profile in their lives, they also adopted an "Anything Goes" philosophy toward business. So Amos goes on sadly to note that the poor themselves were being bought and sold, cheated and mistreated. But God saw the inflated prices, the scales that had been miscalibrated, the policies and practices that shouldered out the lower class.

So Amos 8:1-2 employs a Hebrew pun. Yahweh asks Amos what he saw in this divine vision and Amos replies, "A basket of *qayitz*," which is the

Hebrew word for “fruit.” Yahweh then says, “Yes, it is now the *qetz* for Israel.” *Qetz* sounds almost identical to *qayitz*, but *qetz* means “the end.” A cornucopia of delicious, ripe, ready-to-eat fruit always looks inviting. Picture in your mind’s eye the produce section at a brand new grocery store: the apples shine, the citrus is so plump with juice, the deep-red strawberries almost cry to be eaten. It is the picture of goodness. Such a well-stocked produce section is a sign of prosperity.

A large display of fruit symbolizes a strong and healthy economy. It’s a good sign. But God makes a pun: what you think is a sign of life and vitality is to God a sign of death and the end. “You see *qayitz* but I see *qetz*,” God says. You see a strong economy where many are flying high, but I see injustice that is crashing many to the ground in spiraling poverty. In the heat of God’s judgment, all that good-looking fruit is quickly scorched, wilting and rotting into something decidedly inedible.

Habakkuk’s vision was similar. Those in Israel who were building their castles on the foundation of ill-gotten gain would find out soon enough they had built on Silly Putty. Habakkuk sees a great reversal coming in which those who were in debt would rise up against their extorting lenders. The prophet predicted that the nicely hewn stones and the finely crafted wooden beams in the homes of the ultra-rich would suddenly gain a voice and condemn those who got what they had through thievery. It is an almost bizarre image: just imagine some tycoon giving people a tour of his mansion when suddenly the house itself begins to talk, with oak beams crying out “Thief!” and the stone fireplace shouting, “Extortionist!” This may be Habakkuk but it sounds a bit like Stephen King!

FROM ANCIENT ISRAEL TO TODAY

I said earlier that biblical ideas of justice have less to do with punishing the guilty and more to do with preserving the innocent. However, when the innocent *were* exploited, then the same justice that was supposed to have protected those folks in the first place turns into a kind of retributive prosecuting of the guilty after all. But I also noted up front that the differences between Israel then and our situation now are sufficiently great as to make simple, one-to-one transfers from those laws to our laws dangerous and naive. So what are we to take away from all this to our context?

What is justice? It is seeing the vulnerable, the poor, and the marginalized not as people we simply cannot understand, not as the enemy, and not as fiscal losers, but as brothers and sisters who may need our help. Justice calls us to try to identify with the down-and-outers, to try to look them in the eye instead of observing them only from some great height of our supposed superiority.

Justice tries to create as level a “playing field” as possible such that if a given person wants to try to make a living, he or she will have a good chance to do so.

Third (and conversely), justice is rooting out those things that stack the deck in favor of some but not others. Clearly illegal practices like price-gouging would qualify, but maybe there are perfectly legal things that happen all the time that serve to prevent folks from getting daily necessities. For instance, do we know how difficult it can be for people without a car to get around town? Can we begin to sense how frightening it must be to have a sick child but no health insurance? Are we aware of such things? Can we become more aware of them?

In a world that has in some ways become a kind of global community, God's desire for everyone to help take care of everyone else becomes at once a much broader phenomenon and a more complex one, too. We end up confronting problems of poverty, hunger, and disease far from this place. For instance, in sub-Saharan Africa, the AIDS epidemic is so rampant as to defy comprehension. Of the nearly seventeen million people who have died of AIDS since 1993, fourteen million of them have been from Africa alone. Really to help stem this deadly tide with available drugs requires billions of dollars annually, yet that kind of money is available if other nations pool their resources. The question is whether we are willing to help these sick people in other lands. As it stands, however, a couple of years ago donor nations came up with only \$150 million dollars total for the year. As a nation, we will spend more than that on just one weekend when in July 2007 the next *Harry Potter* movie opens.

For most of us, though, the everyday situations where we encounter the possibility to act justly are not this staggering. The question we confront is whether we are able to see the people around us as worthy of help or not. Because if we lack a sense for God's kind of justice, if we lack God's vision of community sharing, fairness, generosity, compassion, and love, we won't be on the lookout to give *any* help in the first place.

The society of ancient Israel and our current society are not theological equivalents. Too much has changed to make neat and tidy transfers from then to now. However, what has not changed is the overarching idea that the marketplace, our view of money, and our treatment of neighbors are all areas of divine interest and concern. As in Amos 8, so perhaps even today: what we may regard as a wonderful sign of fruitfulness may look to God like the beginning of the end. Ultimately, Old Testament-style justice challenges us to get away from selfishness to ponder not just how we are doing but how everyone is doing.

Biblical justice is seeing the vulnerable, poor, and marginalized not as people we cannot understand, as the enemy, or as fiscal losers, but as brothers and sisters who need our help.

Some day, Habakkuk promises, the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God, with God's glory cascading forth like the waters of the sea. Some day. As we live in this day, however, our vocation is to make that knowledge and glory known in the way we treat those around us. Our task is to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with our God. If the Bible is any kind of guide, then it becomes clear that how well we walk with God depends in no small measure on how justly we walk with one another.



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