

Reading the Prophets

BY MARK E. BIDDLE

The prophets of Israel spoke boldly and graphically to the moral issues of their day. How can we stand in this scriptural prophetic tradition, given the cultural distance between the prophets and us today? These books help us to appreciate the prophets and apply their message with critical discernment.

We rarely need to unscramble the prophets' stance on moral issues. They spoke boldly, emotionally, sometimes even graphically, confident of their status as God's messengers. This very forcefulness, however, often challenges us when we turn to the prophets as scripture and source for ethical reflection. The three books reviewed here grapple with various aspects of the problem of how best to stand in the scriptural prophetic tradition given the cultural distance between the prophets and us today.

A GOD OF JUSTICE, NOT A MERE PATRON

A first step in appropriating the prophetic tradition is to appreciate it on its own terms. The central message of the prophets, writes Abraham Joshua Heschel in *The Prophets* (Harper Perennial, 2001 [1969]; 704pp., \$19.95), reflects their understanding of the *divine pathos* evident in human history. This understanding of God, Heschel says, was not a "theory" deduced from first principles nor a "concept" abstracted from reflections on God's *being* and *attributes*, but an insight gained through encounter with God "in a personal and intimate relation to the world" (p. 288). Since, in the biblical view, God is so willing to become involved in human history, human actions may quite obviously "move [God], affect [God], grieve [God], or on the other hand, gladden and please [God]" (p. 289).

The Bible's many references to divine love and anger embarrass those

Jewish and Christian theologians who view God as an “Unmoved Mover,” or Perfect Being, who is beyond change or emotion. Their efforts to protect God from the perceived “indignity of passivity,” Heschel says, overlook God’s concern for humanity. He asks, “Is it more compatible with our conception of the grandeur of God to claim that [God] is emotionally blind to the misery of man rather than profoundly moved?” (p. 330). Heschel further observes that an impassive, abstract, First Cause “will never be open to human prayer...” (p. 333), and that “the Bible does not say how [God] is, but how [God] acts” (p. 339). The biblical God is known in relationship. Similarly, efforts to avoid anthropomorphism, or reducing God to human-like traits, fail to recognize implications of the Bible’s dual affirmations that God created humankind in God’s image and that God freely enters into relationship with humanity. “God’s unconditional concern for justice is not an anthropomorphism. Rather, man’s concern for justice is a theomorphism” (p. 349).

God’s eternal concern for the world, not some immutable moral principle superior even to God, is the basis for prophetic ethics. That is, “righteousness is not just a value; it is God’s part in human life, *God’s stake in human history*” (p. 283). This accounts for prophetic expressions of God’s anger at injustice and oppression. Since indifference to evil *is itself* evil, one should not be surprised that a God fully engaged in human history suffers pain and knows anger. Genteel sensibilities must not lead one to confuse mercy and forgiveness with indulgence and complacency.

Divine anger, however, is not an end unto itself. The prophets did not encounter an angry God intent upon destruction. Instead, the prophets understood God’s anger to be contingent (it is God’s reaction to wrong), instrumental (its “purpose is not to destroy but to purify,” p. 239), and non-final (in response to human repentance, it yields quickly to mercy and forgiveness). In Heschel’s view, the “Meaning and Mystery of Wrath” lies in the fact that “there is a cruelty which pardons, just as there is a pity which punishes. Severity must tame whom love cannot win” (p. 380).

POWER IN TRANSFORMATIVE LOVE

Our reclaiming the prophetic tradition will involve critical discernment, as Carol Dempsey’s *The Prophets: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Fortress Press, 2000; 211 pp., \$20.00) demonstrates in three ways. She is sensitive, first of all, to the effects of *power* in the prophetic writings, not just on human beings and human societies, but on the natural world as well. Second, she pays careful attention to their language that is “historically, socially, culturally and theologically conditioned,” (p. 2) especially with respect to metaphors describing God’s use of power in relation to the world and those depicting women in derogatory and demeaning ways. Third, and most significantly, she examines the role of power either to dominate or to liberate, and the shift from “power over” to “power with.” In essence, she

critiques the prophets' cultural patriarchal and hierarchical biases. While affirming the prophets' portrayal of God as insistent on justice, Dempsey rejects the implications of many of the prophetic metaphors employed to carry that message.

For example, Dempsey finds the prophets' insight that social sin causes degradation of the created order, to be a potential corrective to contemporary society's arrogant distance from the natural world. But the notion that God would *smite* the natural world *because of* human sin involves ascribing to God acts that are tantamount to "human projections," in her view (p. 5). Sometimes the prophetic tradition portrays God "[dealing] with injustice by 'conquering' the enemy, the perpetrator of injustice. This image of 'warrior god' and its association with the notion of power and having 'power over' is due, in large part, to a gender-specific portrayal of and metaphor for God." The danger inherent in such language, she fears, is that readers may assume that justice attained through violence is theologically legitimate. Not only do "gender-specific" masculine portrayals of the deity so distort that it becomes necessary "to liberate God from a humanly constructed identity" (p. 127), but they also function in a system of language that devalues women.

Dempsey finds within the corpus of prophetic literature, especially in Hosea and Second Isaiah, a movement away from the use of power to dominate toward the use of power to create mutuality, "to establish relationships between God, people, and the natural world that reflect harmony and interrelatedness" (p. 184). Whereas many prophetic texts depict God's intention to effect change in an evil and unjust world by means of coercive power, passages such as Hosea 2:14-23, which offers the divine promise to "abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land," and Hosea 11:1-11, with its description of the Divine Parent's love for Israel (see also 14:4-9), points to God's transformative love. Second Isaiah's "Suffering Servant" figure typifies this mission of transformation (see Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-7; 52:13-53:12; 61:1-4). God chooses to reconcile and restore, not just Israel, but the whole world, not by overt might, but by working *through the suffering* of this individual. In Dempsey's view, the transcendent vision of these texts "has the potential to awaken a new awareness, a new consciousness, and a deeper sense of responsibility" (p. 181).

PROPHETIC IMAGINATION TODAY

The key goal of reading the prophets, of course, is to appropriate the tradition for our world today. In contrast to Heschel, whose influence he acknowledges (p. xv), Walter Brueggemann seeks in his *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd edition; Fortress Press, 2001; 176 pp., \$16.00) not only to describe the phenomenon of biblical prophecy, but to use it as a model for outlining a prophetic ministry suited to contemporary society. The task of such a ministry as "to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and

perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture ..." (p. 3). Brueggemann sees his approach as combining the strengths of theological conservatism and liberalism while avoiding the pitfalls of each. Like liberalism, a truly prophetic ministry *criticizes* the dominant culture; like conservatism, it *energizes* individuals and communities by promising an alternative. Israel's Exodus experience is paradigmatic for Brueggemann. In it, Moses confronts status quo religion and exploitive politics with a vision of God's freedom to act for social justice. Moses' prophetic ministry arose from his awareness that YHWH "makes possible and requires an alternative theology and an alternative sociology" (p. 7).

King Solomon's reign constitutes a counter-narrative to the Exodus experience. Brueggemann portrays Solomon as the representative and proponent of the "royal consciousness," the dominant culture against which prophecy struggles. Solomon established a state following Egyptian patterns, replacing principles of economic equity with class and state affluence, social justice with an oppressive policy of conscripted labor in the service of the state, and an emphasis on God's freedom with institutionalized, state-sanctioned and state-sanctioning religion.

How does the church escape such "royal consciousness," the unthinking acceptance of the status quo? The first step of prophetic criticism, Brueggemann says, begins in grief over the wrongness of things; it embraces pathos, "the ultimate form of criticism." Prophets analyze and publicly expose our self-deception concerning the horrors of current reality. Brueggemann examines the message of Jeremiah, "the weeping prophet," as the model of

this type of prophetic sympathy. In Jeremiah's preaching, one hears the depth of grief, both the prophet's and God's, over Judah's denial of YHWH's covenant. When the truth about present conditions has been honestly faced, prophetic imagination can point to "the promise of newness ... at work in

our history with God." It can sing doxologies prompted by amazement at God's grace. Brueggemann points to Second Isaiah's rhapsodic proclamation of new life for the people of God as the penultimate example of this exercise of prophetic imagination.

Both aspects of prophetic ministry, criticism and energizing, find quintessential expression in the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. He wept at the

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death of his friend. He was angered by the exploitation of the poor in the very temple precincts. “[Jesus] is not the majestic, unmoved Lord, but rather the one with the passion who knows and shares in ... anguish ...” (p. 92). Indeed, he embraced pain and grief to the point of death. In that death, however, God revealed the impotence of death itself. God raised Jesus providing “the ultimate energizing for the new future” (p. 112).

In a preface to the revised edition, Brueggemann amplifies his original treatment by suggesting a strategy for the church’s exercise of prophetic ministry. Noting the increasing “disenfranchisement” of the mainline church, he suggests that a confrontational model, of prophet *versus* king or establishment, incorrectly assumes that the prophetic voice “has enough clout, either social or moral, to gain a hearing” (p. xi). As a result, Brueggemann observes, his original “accent on imagination has turned out to be exactly correct, for what is now required is that a relatively powerless prophetic voice must find imaginative ways that are rooted in the text but that freely and daringly move from the text toward concrete circumstances” (p. xi).

Contemporary readers interested in reconnecting with the prophetic tradition will find in these three works abundant stimulation for dealing with the abiding questions: Who is God? What does it mean that the God of the prophets, in whose image humankind is created, is personally, intimately involved in human affairs? How can the church best participate in God’s pain at human infidelity and cruelty, in God’s anger at injustice, in God’s love for God’s children? What is the proper mode for expressing God’s pathos without perpetuating dangerous metaphors or engaging in fruitless confrontation?



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