

## **Reclaiming Prophetic Leadership\***

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Leadership is a current topic of great interest. Bookstores have entire sections devoted to the topic. The selections reflect the many contexts where issues of effective leadership have become crucially important. Corporate, governmental, and academic concerns for leadership have now been followed by the development of an extensive literature on church leadership. All are concerned with the formation of leaders and a deeper understanding of the roles and practices of leadership that might make leaders more effective.

The church, of course, is concerned to develop and encourage leadership informed by perspectives from its own biblical and historical traditions, and committed to the mission of the church. It cannot simply transfer corporate or governmental models of leadership to use in the church, although it can learn from these. The church requires the development of a theology of leadership.<sup>1</sup>

In the present world, the need for justice is often seen as an area desperate for renewed and effective leadership, both in church and secular contexts. Justice often seems ignored or corrupted in our time, whether we look to the multiple contexts wracked by violence and hostility in our world, or the growing economic disparities and dislocations, or the moral failure of present leadership in government, corporation and church, or the continued dislocations created by our fear of the other. We long for voices of wisdom and passion to help us find just and equitable paths into the future.

For many biblically grounded Christians this makes us think of the prophet. Who and where are the prophets of our time? It is undeniably true that justice is a major part of the prophet's preaching and practice in ancient Israel. The books that collect the prophetic tradition are filled with references to justice and its centrality for God's people. Yet, in the contemporary setting the image of the prophet is stereotypically some kind of confrontational gadfly. People think of a prophet as a somewhat counter-cultural anti-establishment figure who might play an important role as an advocate of justice but is not a model for what we seek in church leadership in general. Thinking about church leadership is more likely to draw on the biblical roles of priest, king, or wise teacher to inform present day understandings of effective ministry. Since it is undeniably true that the prophets of ancient Israel spoke often and passionately about justice, the effect is to marginalize the biblical mandate for justice. It becomes the province of single issue advocates or a narrow group of social activists in the denominational ranks.

The contention of this paper is that we need a larger context within which to understand both the biblical mandate for justice and the role of the prophet as a model for leadership in the community of faith. The role of the prophet and the place of justice within the prophetic message are not marginal matters for God's people, but central to the life and leadership of the community. We must reclaim prophetic leadership if we are to shape an adequate theology of leadership. In so doing, we will give the claims of justice a wider and more central context in the mission and ministry of the church.

### ***Justice as a Covenantal Mandate***

The concept of justice finds its context in the Old Testament in the testimony to God's initiative of a covenant relationship with Israel at Mt. Sinai. The God who

delivered Israel out of bondage in Egypt initiates a relationship with Israel embodied in the making of a covenant with moral obligations for both partners, God and God's people.

“I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians.” (Ex 6:7)

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possessions out of all the peoples.” (Ex 19:4-5)

God does give the law (*torah*), expressed in commandments and statutes as a way of defining Israel's obligation in covenant relationship, but covenant commitment is also expressed in a key vocabulary of theological and moral concepts that God models in the divine self and then expects of Israel. The nature of covenant claim is a kind of *imitatio dei*.<sup>2</sup> This terminology is rooted in the character of God but defines the entire covenant relationship. The most important of these terms descriptive of divine character are holiness, steadfast love, justice, righteousness, faithfulness and compassion. These aspects of divine character are relational and define not only the identity and action of God but the expected character of Israel as covenant partner.

Most of the contexts within which this set of terms appear have their context in the relationship of covenant between God and God's people. The prophets and other witnesses who draw on this set of covenant concepts do so over a long period of time with their own distinct emphases. Individual prophets may stress some terms over others,

and some texts may reserve some terms more often for referencing divine activity (particularly *hesed*, steadfast love) and others for the covenant people and their obligation.

Justice was understood in some of Israel's most ancient texts as a chief attribute of God's character and activity.

“The Rock, his work is perfect,  
and all his ways are just.

A faithful God, without deceit,  
just and upright is he.”

(Song of Moses, Deut 32:4)

God does not act with justice out of some legal norm to be administered. The context is God's covenant commitment to care for the well being of the covenant partner, to act with equity in the wider world over which God is sovereign, and to hold accountable those who break the wholeness (*shalom*) God intends. God is the source of care for the claims of every person to equity, and God is the giver of the law that seeks to embody that equity in structures and processes of faithful community on the part of the covenant partner. “The Lord of Hosts is exalted by justice” (Isa 5:16).

For Israel, God's people, justice often has something of a forensic meaning in many of its uses.<sup>3</sup> The noun *mishpat* can be translated as “justice” or “judgment” and comes from a root meaning “judge, render judgment.” The term can also refer to a law or statute and its plural indicates a body or code of law. It can refer to judicial activity in the community at every level, but its meaning is not limited to this judicial context. The term encompasses activity which might precede or follow a judicial process. Particularly as

used by the prophets the term indicates a moral claim on covenant people to live and behave with a regard to the claim of the neighbor to well being as well as their own. Such a moral category gives the prophets a basis for upholding the claims of those exploited and denied well being and for confronting those who violate the legitimate claims of others. Thus the term itself might be translated as “justice” or “judgment” depending on who is addressed.

Justice is, for the prophets, first and foremost a theological term. Human claims for justice are rooted in the character of God who is just and requires justice of God’s covenant people. Psalm 82 enacts a drama whereby Israel’s God is distinguished from other so-called gods by the demand and enactment of justice. It was not simply an abstract ideal but a demand for action and embodiment in moral behavior by individuals and communities. It chooses good over evil and life over death, thus, to some degree it becomes visible in moral outcomes.<sup>4</sup> “What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

However, it is in the common connection of the terms “justice” and “righteousness” that we more closely approximate the broad moral meanings associated with justice in ethical discourse today. It is clear that Israel understood justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*sedeq*, masc.; *sedeqah*, fem.) as closely associated; they appear together often throughout the canon. Both are aspects of the character of God. “But the Lord of Hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness” (Isa 5:16). “I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight” (Jer 9:24). Because God is just and righteous, Israel as covenant partner is to be just and righteous.

Righteousness, understood by much popular religious tradition as legalistic, is often characterized incorrectly( as indicative of a kind of works righteousness. Elizabeth Achtemeier helpfully sweeps aside some misconceptions and points us in the direction of most recent work on the concept of righteousness in the Old Testament.

In the OT it is not behavior in accordance with an ethical, legal, psychological, religious, or spiritual norm. It is not conduct which is dictated by either human or divine nature, no matter how undefiled. It is not an action appropriate to the attainment of a specific goal. It is not an impartial ministry to one's fellow man. It is not equivalent to giving every man his just due... Righteousness is in the OT the fulfillment of the demands of a relationship, whether that relationship be with men or with God.<sup>5</sup>

Righteousness does not have reference to an abstract norm but expresses the covenant obligation to measure behavior by fidelity to specific relationships in which one must prove true in seeking the well being of the partner. For God, righteousness points to God's faithfulness in seeking the well being of Israel as covenant partner. God's righteousness seeks the well being of all who make up Israel and is therefore, active in seeking to restore those exploited or denied well being in the community.

Taken together, justice and righteousness, define a comprehensive moral claim on God's people to seek the same restoration of wholeness that God desires when some in the community are denied that wholeness. The prophets often single out justice and righteousness as especially defining of covenant claims on Israel in light of the oppression and exploitation of the weak and vulnerable. "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." (Amos 5:24).

## **The Practices of Prophetic Leadership**

Justice and righteousness did not affect the moral life of ancient Israel merely as abstract concepts or covenant ideals. Community requires leaders who promote and embody the foundational concepts. Although justice and righteousness appear widely in the texts of ancient Israel, I would claim that the prophets most embody leadership in Israel committed to these concepts as a part of a larger commitment to the claims of covenant partnership with God. If we are interested in recovering foundational biblical understandings of justice and righteousness for the life of the church today, then we must reclaim the role of prophet as a more central part of our own theology of church leadership. We must reclaim the centrality of the prophetic role in the life of the community and seek to more fully understand the nature of prophetic identity and practice.

It is my contention that, of all the leadership roles in ancient Israel, the role of prophet is most unique and distinctive of Israel as God's covenant people. All other ancient cultures have priests, kings, and sages, and much of the practice of these roles in Israel reflects common ancient near eastern practice even if stamped with Israel's unique theological understandings. But the ancient parallels adduced for the prophetic role are pale, remote and unconvincing. They focus on some elements of ecstatic behavior and speaking for others in authority. Yet, none of these parallels suggest a role of authority alongside those of priest, king and sage like the Israelite prophets, and there is no parallel to the extensive and varied themes of prophetic message that are now embodied in an entire segment of the Hebrew canon.

Since Jesus also appeals to prophetic roles and themes for his own authority,<sup>6</sup> it seems necessary for the church to give prophetic role more than a gadfly part in its own theologies of leadership and ministry. Our intent in the balance of this paper is to highlight some elements of prophetic identity, practice and message that could play a role in reclaiming prophetic leadership.

### 1. *Call and vocation.*

“The prophets are clear that they come to their task not out of personal initiative or by virtue of institutional office. They have been called by God, indeed, often compelled by God into the vocation of speaking God’s word.”<sup>7</sup> The prophets show a passionate commitment to something outside of themselves, a vocation that has seized them. They have not simply made a carefully considered career choice. “The Lord took me from following the flock, and the Lord said to me, ‘Go, prophesy to my people Israel’” (Amos 7:15). This does not always fit easily into today’s tendency to speak of job descriptions, professional tracks, and career choices even when speaking of the church’s ministries. Many recent voices have suggested that the church has let the culture of the call wane and failed to encourage the voicing and hearing of God’s call.

Far from being a comfortable fit the call to prophetic vocation pushed persons into risk and vulnerability. In many instances, the prophet’s first response in the biblical narratives of God’s call was to refuse it.<sup>8</sup> Isaiah felt unworthy (Isa 6); Jeremiah thought himself too young (Jer 1); Ezekiel claimed he had no adequate words (Ezek 2), and the prophet of the exile had nothing to cry out because he saw nothing enduring (Isa 40:6-8). But in every instance, the prophet is reminded that this vocation is initiated by God and not dependent on inner resources alone. The visionary experiences that accompany many

narratives of prophetic call serve to underline the divine origins of role and message. Such revelatory experience is never an end in itself or a proof of authority apart from the speaking and enacting of God's word. "I have heard what the prophets have said who prophesy lies in my name, saying, 'I have dreamed, I have dreamed!'... Let the prophet who has a dream tell the dream, but let the one who has my word speak my word faithfully" (Jer 24:25, 28)).

## 2. *Representatives of God*

The prophets understood that their call focused not on their own self-fulfillment or their own urgent analysis of their context but on what God was doing in Israel and the wider world. The demand upon them was to become a part of God's project in the ongoing drama stretching from creation to redemption.

It has been widely recognized that the prophets considered themselves to be representatives of God and the divine mission in the world. This, of course, entailed the speaking of God's Word. Many prophetic oracles begin with the formula "Thus says the Lord..." and proceed to speak in the first person as if God is directly addressing the people through the prophet as mouthpiece. This has been properly identified as the style of a messenger in the ancient near east<sup>9</sup> and "Thus says the Lord..." has been christened the messenger formula.

Although the prophet's sometimes spoke in their own voice the message they proclaimed was understood as the Word of God. The role of prophet was not a self-centered exercise in analysis and commentary. The prophet's speaking rooted in discernment and speaking of a word whose authority rests in God and not in the prophet himself. The prophet's proclamation is often made against the backdrop of an acute

recognition that human resources alone provide no basis for a meaningful word. In the midst of Babylonian exile the prophet we call Deutero-Isaiah answers the summons to “Cry out!” with the helpless response “What shall I cry?” He sees nothing around him that endures any more than the withering grass and flowers. But he is reminded that “the Word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:6-8) and God’s Word that “goes out from my mouth...shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it” (Isa 55:11). Look only to our own human resources and there is little enough reason to proclaim God’s possibilities for the future of Israel or our own future today. But look at what God’s Word has done and yet can do and there is reason enough for prophetic proclamation.

It is important to recognize that the Hebrew concept of God’s Word is not limited in its reference to speech. One can do God’s Word, and the prophet is called not only to proclaim but to embody and enact that Word. Amos is required to confront the priest of the king’s own shrine at Bethel; Hosea is commanded to marry a woman of questionable reputation; Isaiah and Jeremiah engaged in dramatic and symbolic actions and engaged in the political struggles of their own times; Ezekiel acts in bizarre and visionary ways to underscore his preaching; Isaiah and Hosea have symbolically named children. To both speak and live God’s word often placed prophets in tension with the prevailing patterns, attitudes and practices of their own times in both cultic and socio-political terms. Walter Brueggemann suggests that the prophet’s call to represent God, in Israel or the present, is usually a commitment to a consciousness alternative to the dominant cultural consciousness.

*The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us.... The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness.... On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured serves to energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move.*<sup>10</sup>

To answer the call to represent God's purposes in word and deed may be exercised within (Nathan, Isaiah) or outside of the power structures (Elijah, Jeremiah) but in either case will entail risk and vulnerability.

### 3. *Memory and Vision*

The prophets carried out their calling with a sense of standing in the dynamic tension between memory and vision.<sup>11</sup> On the one hand they had an acute sense of *what God had done* in the life of Israel. They drew on the traditions of Israel's faith story and assumed God's special relationship with Israel as a covenant partner. They reflected their contexts, thus, Amos and Hosea preaching in the north used images and themes drawn from the Mosaic/Sinai tradition while Isaiah in Jerusalem drew upon the Davidic tradition. In contrast to earlier views of the prophets as radical innovators, most would now see the prophets as deeply rooted in the religious memory of Israel, seeking to renew the claims of that faith tradition on their own generations. The prophets call the people to remember and respond in celebration, praise, recital and proclamation of the God known to Israel in its own story of promise, deliverance, covenant-making, and community building in the land. Such remembering allowed the affirmation of God's faithfulness

and served as the basis to call Israel to renew their own commitment to the obligations of partnership in God's covenant—a commitment that included the claims of justice and righteousness.

On the other hand, the prophets also possessed a vision of *what God yet can do* beyond the challenges, limitations, and circumstances of their own time. God's faithfulness in commitment to Israel does not reside in the past. God is sovereign over all of history, therefore is active to open new possibilities to Israel for its own future and that of all the nations. The prophets can dare to dream dreams and see visions and their message challenged Israel to new possibilities in renewed partnership with God who resides not simply in Israel's past but goes before them to create new futures. Rich and imaginative images envision God's future for Israel and even all humankind—from peaceable kingdom (Isaiah) to new covenant written on the heart (Jeremiah) to dry bones that may live again (Ezekiel) to the appearance of God's anointed one once again (Isaiah, Zechariah, Malachi).

One of the best examples of the prophetic use of this creative tension between memory and vision is the message of the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile, often referred to as Deutero-Isaiah, whose message is preserved in Isaiah 40-55. The exile context for this prophet's preaching might be helpfully envisioned through Psalm 137. "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept..." The community has hung up its instruments; its captors mockingly require them to sing songs of Zion. The psalm bitterly laments, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?" The implied answer is that they cannot. They are the community of the non-singers in Babylonian captivity.

Into the midst of this despairing community comes the prophet who urges “Sing to the Lord a new song.” (Isa 42:10). His message is entirely devoted to hope and renewal and in form his preaching is more like the hymns of praise in the psalter than the classical forms of prophetic speech. He might be thought of as a singer in the midst of the non-singers.

Part of what enables this prophet of the exile to sing hopefully in the midst of a broken community is his use of the creative tension between memory and vision. In Isa 51:1-2 he issues this summons:

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn,  
and to the quarry from which you were dug.

Look to Abraham your father  
and to Sarah who bore you.”

He calls the exiles to remember the story of what God has done and begins with the promise to Abraham and Sarah. Elsewhere this prophet draws upon images of creation, exodus, wilderness wanderings, Noah, and David. If God has brought us through crises and challenges before cannot God do it again? But memory alone can easily become nostalgia.

Thus, the prophet couples his call to memory with a summons to claim a vision for the future in what God yet can do.

“See, the former things have come to pass,  
and new things I now declare;  
before they spring forth,  
I tell you of them.” (Isa 42:9)

“I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not see it?” (Isa 43:19)

The non-singers in Babylon are called to anticipate that God is sovereign over their future and does not reside in memory alone. He boldly holds before them images of a new future:

“For you shall go out in joy,

and be led back in peace;

the mountains and hills before you shall burst into song,

and the trees of the field will clap their hands.” (Isa 55:12)

The prophet proclaims that exiles have a future and not just a past, and both are the gift of God. Dreams and visions must be rooted in inherited faith identity or they become wishes, fads and daydreams.

The prophet stands in the tension between memory and vision, tradition and creativity. These are not either/or choices. The prophet sees clearly that it is the ability of God’s people to claim a historic faith memory on the one hand and to trust daring new visions of God’s future on the other hand that frees the community from the tyranny of the present. They can face the present realities of exile without being paralyzed by them. The prophet rejects a style of leadership so preoccupied with the crises of the present that it fails to draw on the richness of received tradition or to trust in the power of God to open new possibilities. Only such a stance does justice to the notion of a living God whose sovereignty encompasses all times and places.

“Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God,

the Creator of the ends of the earth...  
 but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
 they shall run and not be weary,  
 they shall walk and not faint.” (Isa 40:28, 31)

Although we illustrated this dynamic tension between memory and vision with the prophet of the exile, this same dynamic is visible in whole or in part in virtually all of the prophetic books.

#### 4. *Context of Community*

In spite of a frequently held caricature, the prophets were not isolated individuals, standing alone against injustice—voices crying in the wilderness. They were a part of the Israelite covenant community in concrete social and historical contexts in the life of that community. The prophets had followers and supporters, and some were members of prophetic communities. Inner circles of followers are probably responsible for the recording and preservation of their message. Some prophets had the ear of kings and gave advice. Many, of course, were unpopular with Israel’s political and religious leaders, but even they often had support among the people of the land. All of the prophets understood their proclamation of God’s Word in the context of the traditions of covenant community. They were interpreter’s of the community faith traditions and sought their renewal in concern for love of God and neighbor. In short, the prophets model a pattern of leadership that finds its authority in God but its context in God’s people.<sup>12</sup> They often wept and interceded for the very people who sometimes rejected them and failed to heed God’s Word.

The prophets were not given to moral abstractions separated from the realities of community experience, of which they were a part. Amos cries out “Hate evil and love good,” then quickly adds “and establish justice in the gate.” (Amos 5:15a) Their preaching abounds with references to concrete community contexts where attention to moral mandates such as justice and righteousness find concrete reality—the welfare of the most vulnerable, the integrity of cultic life, the structures of economic life, the practices of the courts, and the political motives and actions of leaders and nations.

The prophets not only saw themselves as part of the covenant community and not individuals isolated from it, they addressed Israel as a community social reality and not as a collection of individuals. The prophets operate out of a sense of corporate solidarity and consciousness often observed as a feature of ancient Israel overlooked and undervalued in the individualized society of our day. Thomas Ogletree finds in this area one of the Old Testament’s most distinctive contributions to ethics:

According to Israelite understandings, it is not as isolated individuals, but as members of a community that we realize our being...Consequently, our wholeness as moral beings cannot be abstracted from the moral soundness of the community to which we belong. The moral soundness of the community, moreover, is most clearly manifest in its treatment of its most vulnerable members....Individual responsibility is not ruled out by this sense of solidarity; yet it gains an essentially social meaning. I act not simply for myself, but for the well-being of the whole people. I am answerable not simply to myself and my own principles, but to the whole people and its foundational principles.<sup>13</sup>

We cannot isolate the prophet's championing of justice and righteousness as an individualistic enterprise. The prophets teach us that leadership for even the most noble principles cannot be pursued for individual goals and purposes. It is undertaken in solidarity with the whole of the covenant people and in the concrete contexts of the concrete social, historical, and religious realities of their lives.

### 5. *Message of Judgment and Hope*

In another context I offered the following summary of the prophetic message:

“At the risk of oversimplification the prophetic message can be summarized as follows: God has been faithful to the relationship with Israel and has fulfilled the divine obligation within that relationship, but Israel has been unfaithful, has failed to carry out its obligations to the relationship. The relationship is now broken and the prophets announce God's necessary judgment on Israel's sin. Yet, relationship is not ended. Beyond judgment still lies hope for future restored relationship... God continues faithful to that relationship in spite of Israel's sin and will act to renew it.”<sup>14</sup>

The wide variety of historical circumstances and the rich range of poetic images reflected in the prophets' expression of this basic message is what has made their message enduring and effective. Our treatment here can only suggest this range and cannot discuss the particularity of expression in the separate prophetic books.

*God's faithfulness* to the relationship with Israel is rooted in the understanding of mutual obligation and commitment in the covenant at Sinai. The moral vocabulary of covenant finds its initial reality in the character and action of God.

“Let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord” (Jer 9:24).

God’s faithfulness is manifest in the events of Israel’s own salvation story to which the prophets often refer (Amos 3:1-2; Micah 6:3-4; Hosea 11:1-2). A wide variety of metaphors for the relationship of God to Israel are used—legal partners in covenant, husband/wife, parent/child. In each instance, God has fulfilled the demands of the divine role.

*Israel’s obligations* are rooted in the same moral qualities modeled by God, particularly the pair we have previously discussed, justice and righteousness. God has shown these qualities toward Israel and expects them to be reflected in the life of God’s people, but they are not. It is part of the prophet’s task to announce this reality.

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts  
                   is the house of Israel,  
 and the people of Judah  
                   are his pleasant planting;  
 he expected justice,  
                   but saw bloodshed  
 righteousness,  
                   but heard a cry! (Isa. 5:7)

The prophets announce that covenant obligations have not been fulfilled. Formal legal expressions of foundational obligation such as the Decalogue have been ignored (Hosea

4:2; Jer 7:9-10). Even more fundamentally, general moral regard for good and opposition to evil as reflected in the well being of the most vulnerable has been disregarded.

Cease to do evil,  
     learn to do good;  
 seek justice,  
     rescue the oppressed,  
 defend the orphan,  
     plead for the widow. (Isa 1:17)

As previously noted, the prophets were very concrete in terms of the social realities that reflected the brokenness of covenant. These fall into several broad categories none of which can be discussed in detail in this brief paper. At this point we will simply enumerate the broad outlines of *the prophetic indictment* without an effort at full discussion or illustration.

- Economic issues: The prophets saw a great disparity between the ideals of covenant for equitable distribution of basic resources and the brokenness and dislocation that characterized the economic sphere in their own contexts. The underlying structural issue was the shift in ownership of the land. The covenant ideal was that land should be held in families and clans as inheritance (*nahalah*) and passed on through the generations. Ownership resided with God. The development of kingship in Israel introduced systems of royal patrimony and the accumulation of land to a rising wealthy class. James L. Mays describes the change as “the shift of the primary social good, land from the function of support to that of

capital; the reorientation of social goals from personal values to economic profit; the subordination of judicial process to the interests of the entrepreneur.”<sup>15</sup> The prophets decried this structural shift as fundamentally in tension with the ideals of covenant community.

“Alas for those who devise wickedness  
and evil deeds on their beds!  
When the morning dawns, they perform it,  
because it is in their power.  
They covet fields, and seize them;  
houses and take them away;  
they oppress householder and house,  
people and their inheritance. (Micah 2:1-2; cf. also Isa. 5:8)

The prophets were particularly distressed at the effect of such shifts in land ownership and accumulation of wealth on the plight of the poor and vulnerable. Such distress was rooted in covenant traditions of God’s special concern for the dispossessed.

“For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way.” (Amos 2:6-7a)

“The Lord enters into judgment

with the elders and princes of his people:

It is you who have devoured the vineyard;

The spoil of the poor is in your houses.” (Isa 3:14)

The prophets had harsh word for those who defraud by corrupt business practices or perversion of judicial processes in favor of the wealthy (Amos 8:4-6; Micah 6:11-12). They also condemned those who simply enjoyed their own wealth and luxury while remaining indifferent to the poor and oppressed in their midst (Amos 6:4-6).

- Sociopolitical Issues: The prophets were clear in their indictment that economic exploitation was only possible because Israel’s leaders had corrupted the sociopolitical structures of community and disregarded the covenant principles that should guide them. At every level the prophets saw leaders who had failed in their roles to serve God’s covenant people and pursued their own self-serving interests for power and gain. This included those in official roles as priest and prophet (Isa 30:10; Jer 6:14; 8:11; Hos 4:6). It included the class of people regarded as rulers and chiefs among the people. It included the corruption of the justice system itself (Isa 5:22-23; Amos 5:7, 12; Micah 7:3; Isa 1:21-26); Ezek 22:12. Finally it includes the kings who are more interested in their own power and wealth and trust military might and diplomacy more than the Lord (Hos 10:13-14; Isa 31:1). Micah’s sweeping indictment in 3:1-12 is representative of the harshness of prophetic invective against Israel’s leadership.

“Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,  
 its priests teach for a price,  
 its prophets give oracles for money;  
 yet they lean upon the Lord and say,  
 ‘Surely the Lord is with us!  
 No harm shall come upon us.’” (Micah 3:10-11)

In general, leaders were not governed by covenant principles and the well being of the entire people of God. Ezekiel’s indictment of the kings and rulers of Judah as failed shepherds is representative.

“You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.” (Ezek 34:4)

- Cultic Issues: The most obvious issue in the prophetic indictment of the cult is idolatry because it is a fundamental violation of the covenantal demand for sole loyalty to the Lord. Worship of other gods, whether the Baals of the eighth century or the lure of Babylonian religion during exile, was not only an abandonment of Israel’s own covenant God but is regarded by the prophets as a folly since these were all false gods—not gods at all.

“My people consult a piece of wood,  
 and their divining rod gives them oracles.  
 For a spirit of whoredom has led them astray,

and they have played the whore, forsaking their God.”

(Hos 4:12; cf. also Isa 44:9-20; Jer 10:1-10)

But the cultic indictment of the prophets included more than idolatry. It was concerned with the hypocrisy of pious practices in the absence of covenant obedience, especially as marked by a lack of justice and righteousness (Amos 5:21-24; Hos 6:6; Isa 1:12-17; Jer 6:20). Attention to covenant integrity in the cult was the special responsibility of the priests so the prophets often had harsh words for their failures to maintain covenant loyalty and obedience. “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge; because you have rejected knowledge, I reject you from being a priest to me” (Hos 4:6; cf. Micah 3:11). Even the temple or the royal sanctuaries fall under indictment if its practices reflect service to royal power and the privileges of wealth (Jer. 7; Micah 3:12).

Beyond judgment the prophets also had an extensive *message of hope and renewal*. God remains faithful to the covenant, and will not abandon the covenant partner in spite of Israel’s sin and its consequences. Any appropriation of prophetic models of leadership must include the prophetic proclamation of God’s fidelity to the community beyond and in spite of judgment on its failings (see Hos 11:8-9).

In some of the prophets there is a message of repentance as a possible path for averting the judgment and correcting the course of disobedience. Repentance in the Hebrew concept is a turning to take another direction.

“If you return, O Israel, says the Lord,  
if you return to me,

if you remove your abominations from my presence,  
 and do not waver,  
 and if you swear, “As the Lord lives!”  
 in truth, in justice, and in uprightness,  
 then nations shall be blessed by him... (Jer 4:1-2)

Even if God’s people do not choose repentance, the prophets are clear that God’s love and compassion speak the final word. God does not give up on the covenant relationship and the prophets articulate the hope for a restored community truly governed by covenant principles. It is eschatological in character but as in much of the prophetic message rooted in the trust that this hope will find expression in concrete historical realities.

“Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,  
 and righteousness abide in the fruitful field.  
 The effect of righteousness will be peace,  
 and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.  
 My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,  
 in secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.  
 (Isa 32:16-18; see also the peaceable kingdom in 11:6-9)

The prophets of the exile, Ezekiel and Deutero-Isaiah, move entirely to themes of hope and renewal because in their context the brokenness of judgment has already been experienced. Hopeful themes continue in the prophetic voices following exile against the backdrop of struggles to restore Jerusalem and faithful life in the returned community.

The development of these hope-filled eschatological visions in prophetic leadership are significant for claiming God's fidelity to visions of justice and righteousness even when human community falters in its covenant faithfulness. Hope is possible because the future does not depend on human efforts alone, but the future is under God's sovereign rule.

“It summons the community to a quality of life appropriate to the coming of God's kingdom, perhaps even contributing to the movement of God toward its realization. Justice and righteousness are the pathways of those who live toward this vision even when the prevailing society around them refuses it... It is the articulation of hopeful vision that makes faithful endurance possible, and enables the faithful community of God's people to choose qualities of moral life which are not characteristic of other communities.”<sup>16</sup>

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The prophet was but one office of leadership in ancient Israel, but it was in its full expression in the Hebrew canon, the most unique to Israel and the most directly related to the covenant foundations of community as the people of God. New Testament explorations have documented a strong role for this prophetic tradition in the life, teachings and ministry of Jesus. To reclaim prophetic leadership as a central element in the church's theology of leadership and ministry is to give it the place suggested by its role in the canon rather than the fringe role, however respected, that the role of prophet seems to play in the practice of the church's ministries. This would, by the very nature of prophetic commitment to covenant values, place leadership in behalf of justice more prominently on the agenda of the church's leaders.

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### Endnotes

\*Special note: This paper will appear in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Ex Auditu*, 2007.

<sup>1</sup> See Lewis A Parks and Bruce C. Birch, *Ducking Spears, Dancing Madly: A Biblical Model of Church Leadership*, Abingdon, 2005, and Lovett H. Weems, Jr., *Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church*, Abingdon, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Imitation of God as a basis for ethics in the Old Testament has been given recent attention by a growing number of scholars: Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*, Westminster/John Knox, 1991, pp. 38-39, 125-126 (hereafter LJRJ); John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations*, Westminster/John Knox, 2003, pp. 29-30, 50-54; Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible*, Harper & Row, 1986, pp. 30-34; Harry P. Nasuti, "Identity, Identification, and Imitation: The Narrative Hermeneutic of Biblical Law," *Journal of Law and Religion*, 4(1986), 16-18.

<sup>3</sup> A comprehensive bibliography and history of research on both justice and righteousness in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East can be found in Leon Epsztein, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible*, SCM Press, 1986. See also on justice, Birch, *LJRJ*, pp. 155-156; Stephen Charles Mott, "Justice," *Harper Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier, Harper & Row, 1985, pp. 519-520; Christopher J. H. Wright, *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today*, InterVarsity Press, 1983, pp. 133-135.

<sup>4</sup> James Luther Mays, "Justice: Perspectives From the Prophets," *Prophecy in Israel*, ed. D. Petersen, Fortress Press, 1987, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth R. Achtemeier, "Righteousness in the Old Testament," *IDB*, vol. 4, Abingdon, 1962, p. 80.

<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship on Jesus has placed new emphasis on his role as a prophet and his use of prophetic themes in his teaching. For a detailed discussion see William Herzog, *Jesus, Justice and the Reign of God*, Westminster/John Knox, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Birch, *LJRJ*, 254.

<sup>8</sup> On prophetic call and vocation see esp. Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, Harper & Row, 1967, pp. 30-49 and Norman Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *ZAW* 77 (1965), 297-323.

<sup>9</sup> Ludwig Koehler, "Der Botenspruch," *Kleine Lichten*, Zwingli Bucherei 47, Zwingli Verlag, 1945, pp. 13-17 first identified this phrase as a messenger formula. Claus

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Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. H. C. White, Westminster, 1967 (German edition 1960) used the messenger identification as a key element in his discussion and James F. Ross, "The Prophet as Yahweh's Messenger," *Israel's Prophetic Heritage: Essays in Honor of James Muilenburg*, ed. B. Anderson and W. Harrelson, Harper & Row, 1962, pp. 98-107, developed the implications of this form critical work into a full treatment of the prophet as divine representative.

<sup>10</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Fortress, 1978, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> Birch, *LJRD*, pp. 293-295. For an application of this same dynamic to congregational life, see Bruce C. Birch, "Memory in Congregational Life," *Congregations: Their Power to Form and Transform*, ed. C. Ellis Nelson, John Knox, 1988, pp. 20-47.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce C. Birch, "Moral Agency, Community, and the Character of God in the Hebrew Bible," *Semeia* 66(1995), 23-42.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics*, Fortress, p. 80. See also Gene M. Tucker, "The Role of the Prophets and the Role of the Church," *Prophecy in Israel*, ed. David L. Petersen, Fortress, 1987, p. 165.

<sup>14</sup> Birch, *LJRD*, 247.

<sup>15</sup> Mays, "Justice: Perspectives From the Prophetic Tradition," p. 148.

<sup>16</sup> Birch, *LJRD*. pp. 272-273.

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