

# THE PROPHETS OF ISRAEL: SPOKESPERSONS FOR JUSTICE

Excerpted & adapted from: Walter Brueggemann. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

## **Changing Contexts: The Emergence of the Prophets**

In the Exodus event, the people of Israel were not merely liberated *from* oppression and suffering. They were likewise liberated *for* community and mutual responsibility. Because they had experienced deliverance, they sought to establish an alternative community that would mirror the demands of the covenant they had entered into with their God. Such an alternative community was founded on:

- an economics of equality (Ex. 16:13-18; Deut. 15:4-5, 7-8, 10-11; Deut. 23:24-25; Deut. 14:28-29; Ex. 22:25-27; Sabbath year legislation in Deut. 15:1-2, 12-15; Jubilee year legislation in Lev. 25 and Lev. 27).
- a politics of justice (Deut. 16:18-20; Lev. 19:15; Ex. 18:21; Ex. 23:8)
- a religion based on God's freedom, compassion and fidelity (Ex. 19:4-6; Ex. 33:19; Ex. 3:7-8; cf. Ps 136 for God's *hesed/steadfast* love)

In time, however, such an ideal slowly gave way to the return of injustice and oppression under Israel's kings (36-37):

- from an economics of equality to an economics of privilege (1 Kgs 4:22-23, 26-27)
- from a politics of justice to a politics of oppression (1 Kgs 5:13-14; 1 Kgs 9:15)
- from a religion based on God's freedom, compassion and fidelity to a domestication of God and the use of religion to legitimize injustice (1 Kgs 11:1-8; 1 Kgs 8:12-13)

It is within such a changed context that the prophetic message arose.

## **What Manner of Person Is the Prophet?**

The prophet's authority is rooted in an experience of being called (cf. Isaiah 6:1-13; Jeremiah 1:4-9; Ezekiel 1-3). The prophet speaks, not only on behalf of Yahweh, but on behalf of those who have no voice as well.

The prophet speaks not in prose but in poetry and lyric. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one. (45)

The core of the prophetic experience is that the prophet shares the divine pathos. The prophet does not speak out of a patriotic or moral passion but with an intimate knowledge and deep sympathy for God who suffers because God is a compassionate God. The prophet's words are charged with the feelings of God.

## **The Task of Prophetic Ministry**

The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us. (13)

The alternative consciousness to be nurtured, on the one hand, serves to *criticize* in dismantling the dominant consciousness. On the other hand, that alternative consciousness to be nurtured

serves to *energize* persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move. (13)

The functional qualifiers, *critical* and *energizing*, are important. I suggest that the dominant culture, now and in every time, is grossly uncritical, cannot tolerate serious and fundamental criticism, and will go to great lengths to stop it. Conversely, the dominant culture is a wearied culture, nearly unable to be seriously energized to new promises from God. The task of prophetic ministry is to hold together criticism and energizing, for I should urge that either by itself is not faithful to our best tradition. Our faith tradition understands that it is precisely the dialectic of criticizing and energizing which can let us be seriously faithful to God. (14)

### **Prophetic Criticizing and the Embrace of Pathos** (44-61)

The characteristic way of a prophet in Israel is that of poetry and lyric . . . It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the **ministry of imagination**, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one . . . The same realities are at work in every family and every marriage and every community. In our achieved satiation **we have neither the wits nor the energy nor the courage** to think freely about imagined alternative futures. When we think "prophetic" we need not always think grandly about public tasks. The prophetic task needs to be done wherever there are men and women who will yield to the managed prose future offered them by the king. (45)

The task of prophetic imagination is to **cut through the numbness**, to penetrate the self-deception, so that the God of endings is confessed as Lord . . . The prophet brings to public expression the dread of endings, the collapse of our self-madness, the barriers and pecking orders that secure us at each other's expense, and the fearful practice of eating off the table of a hungry brother or sister. It is the task of the prophet to invite the king to experience what he must experience, what he most needs to experience and most fears to experience, namely, that the end of the royal fantasy is very near . . . [T]he proper idiom for the prophet in cutting through the royal numbness and denial is the **language of grief** . . . [for] grief and mourning, that crying in pathos, is the ultimate form of criticism, for it announces the sure end of the whole royal arrangement. (49-51)

The prophet is not addressing behavioral problems. He is not even pressing for repentance. He has only the hope that the *ache* of God could penetrate the *numbness* of history. He engages not in scare or threat but only in a yearning that grows with and out of pain . . . Why all this grief? . . . We do from our own pain and hurt and loneliness that tears break barriers like no harshness or anger. Tears are a way of solidarity in pain when no other form of solidarity remains . . . The riddle and insight of biblical faith is the awareness that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings. (59-60)

### **Prophetic Energizing and the Emergence of Amazement** (62-79)

The alternative prophetic community is concerned both with criticizing and energizing. On the one hand, it is to show that the dominant consciousness will indeed end and that it has no final claim upon us. On the other hand, it is the task of the alternative prophetic community to present an alternative consciousness that can energize the community to fresh forms of faithfulness and vitality. I now turn to the second function of prophecy, to energize. I propose this hypothesis: *The royal consciousness leads people to despair about the power to new life. It is the task of*

*prophetic imagination and ministry to bring people to engage the promise of newness that is at work in our history with God. (62-63)*

The prophet engages this promise of newness in three ways:

1. The *offering of symbols* that are adequate to contradict a situation of hopelessness in which newness is unthinkable. This cannot be done by inventing new symbols for that is wishful thinking. Rather, it means to move back **into the deepest memories of this community** and activate those very symbols that have always been the basis for contradicting the regnant consciousness. Therefore the symbols of hope cannot be general and universal but must be those that have been known concretely in this particular history. Thus, the prophet has two tasks: to **mine the memory of this people** and educate them to use the tools of hope, and also to recognize how singularly words, speech, language, and phrase shape consciousness and define reality. (66-67)
2. The task of prophetic imagination and ministry is to *bring to public expression those very hopes and yearnings* that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we no longer know they are there. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which the majority opinion; and one does that only at a great political and existential risk. On the other hand, hope is subversive, for it limits the grandiose pretension of the present, daring to announce that the present to which we have all made commitments is now called into question. Speech about hope cannot be explanatory and scientifically argumentative; rather, it must be lyrical in the sense that it touches the hopeless person at many different points. More than that, however, speech about hope must be primarily theological, which is to say that it must be in the language of covenant between a personal God and a community. Promise belongs to the world of trusting speech and faithful listening. (67-69)
3. The prophet must *speak metaphorically about hope but concretely about the real newness that comes to us and redefines our situation*. Talk about newness in exile comes not from a happy piety or from a hatred of Babylon but from the enduring jealousy of Yahweh for his people. This jealousy, so alien to our perceptual world, includes rejection of his people, which sends them and even Yahweh himself into exile. It is a jealousy that stays with his people, making their anguish his anguish and his future their future. The hope that must be spoken is hope rooted in the assurance that God does not quit even when the evidence warrants his quitting . . . [and] rooted in God's ability to utilize even the folly of Israel. (69)

The prophet thus seeks to ignite the imagination of his people, and that in itself turns despair into energy . . . Their art and calling is only with words that evoke alternatives, and reshaped hardware will not overcome despair in any case. That will only come with the recognition that life has not been fully consigned to us and that there is another who reserved for himself his sovereign freedom from us and for us . . . The newness from God is the only serious source of energy . . . The prophet must not underestimate his or her urgent calling, for there are not other sources of newness . . . Exiles must learn that our hope is never generated among us but always given to us. And whenever it is given we are amazed. (77-79)

## **Alternative Community of Moses: Examples from Scripture**

### **I. Economics of Equality**

Ex 16:13-18

In the evening quail came up and covered the camp. In the morning a dew lay all about the camp, and when the dew evaporated, there on the surface of the desert were fine flakes like hoarfrost on the ground. On seeing it, the Israelites asked one another, "What is this?" for they did not know what it was. But Moses told them, "This is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. "Now, this is what the LORD has commanded. So gather it that everyone has enough to eat, an omer for each person, as many of you as there are, each man providing for those of his own tent." The Israelites did so. Some gathered a large and some a small amount. But when they measured it out by the omer, he who had gathered a large amount did not have too much, and he who had gathered a small amount did not have too little. They so gathered that everyone had enough to eat.

Ex 22:25-27

If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before sunset; for this cloak of his is the only covering he has for his body. What else has he to sleep in? If he cries out to me, I will hear him; for I am compassionate. "You shall not revile God, nor curse a prince of your people.

Dt 15: 4-5, 7-8, 10-11

Nay, more! since the LORD, your God, will bless you abundantly in the land he will give you to occupy as your heritage, there should be no one of you in need. If you but heed the voice of the LORD, your God, and carefully observe all these commandments which I enjoin on you today . . . If one of your kinsmen in any community is in need in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand to him in his need. Instead, you shall open your hand to him and freely lend him enough to meet his need . . . When you give to him, give freely and not with ill will; for the LORD, your God, will bless you for this in all your works and undertakings. The needy will never be lacking in the land; that is why I command you to open your hand to your poor and needy kinsman in your country.

Dt 23:24-25

But you must keep your solemn word and fulfill the votive offering you have freely promised to the LORD. "When you go through your neighbor's vineyard, you may eat as many of his grapes as you wish, but do not put them in your basket.

Dt 14: 28-29

At the end of every third year you shall bring out all the tithes of your produce for that year and deposit them in community stores, that the Levite who has no share in the heritage with you, and also the alien, the orphan and the widow who belong to your community, may come and eat their fill; so that the LORD, your God, may bless you in all that you undertake.

Dt 15: 1-2

At the end of every seven-year period you shall have a relaxation of debts, which shall be observed as follows. Every creditor shall relax his claim on what he has loaned his neighbor; he must not press his neighbor, his kinsman, because a relaxation in honor of the LORD has been proclaimed.

Dt 15: 12-15

If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, sells himself to you, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year you shall dismiss him from your service, a free man. When you do so, you shall not send him away empty-handed, but shall weight him down with gifts from your flock and threshing floor and wine press, in proportion to the blessing the LORD, your God, has bestowed on you. For remember that you too were once slaves in the land of Egypt, and the LORD, your God, ransomed you. That is why I am giving you this command today.

## **II. Politics of Justice**

Deut. 16:18-20

You shall appoint judges and officials throughout your tribes to administer true justice for the people in all the communities which the LORD, your God, is giving you. You shall not distort justice; you must be impartial. You shall not take a bribe; for a bribe blinds the eyes even of the wise and twists the words even of the just. Justice and justice alone shall be your aim, that you may have life and may possess the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you.

Lev. 19:15

You shall not act dishonestly in rendering judgment. Show neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the mighty, but judge your fellow men justly.

Ex. 18:21

But you should also look among all the people for able and God-fearing men, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain, and set them as officers over groups of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.

Ex. 23:8

Never take a bribe, for a bribe blinds even the most clear-sighted and twists the words even of the just.

## **III. Religion based on God's Freedom, Compassion and Fidelity**

Ex. 19:4-6

You have seen for yourselves how I treated the Egyptians and how I bore you up on eagle wings and brought you here to myself. Therefore, if you hearken to my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my special possession, dearer to me than all other people, though all the earth is mine. You shall be to me a kingdom of priests, a holy nation. That is what you must tell the Israelites.

Ex. 33:19;

He answered, "I will make all my beauty pass before you, and in your presence I will pronounce my name, 'LORD'; I who show favors to whom I will, I who grant mercy to whom I will."

Ex. 3:7-8

But the LORD said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites.

cf. Ps 136

Psalm of memory (a series of statements followed by “God’s love endures forever”)

### **Economics of equality to an Economics of privilege**

1 Kgs 4:22-23, 26-27

Solomon's provision for one day was thirty cors of choice flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, one hundred sheep, besides deer, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl . . . Solomon also had forty thousand stalls of horses for his chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen. Those officials supplied provisions for King Solomon and for all who came to King Solomon's table, each one in his month; they let nothing be lacking.

### **Politics of justice to a Politics of oppression**

1 Kgs 5:13-14

King Solomon conscripted forced labor out of all Israel; the levy numbered thirty thousand men. He sent them to the Lebanon, ten thousand a month in shifts; they would be a month in the Lebanon and two months at home; Adoniram was in charge of the forced labor.

1 Kgs 9:15

This is an account of the forced labor which King Solomon levied in order to build the temple of the LORD, his palace, Millo, the wall of Jerusalem, Hazor, Megiddo, Gezer

### **Religion based on God's freedom, compassion and fidelity to a domestication of God and the use of religion to legitimize injustice**

1 Kgs 11:1-8

King Solomon loved many foreign women along with the daughter of Pharaoh: Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women, from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the Israelites, "You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you; for they will surely incline your heart to follow their gods"; Solomon clung to these in love. Among his wives were seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods; and his heart was not true to the Lord his God, as was the heart of his father David. For Solomon followed Astarte the goddess of the Sidonians, and Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. So Solomon did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and did not completely follow the Lord, as his father David had done. Then Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the abomination of Moab, and for Molech the abomination of the Ammonites, on the mountain east of Jerusalem. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who offered incense and sacrificed to their gods.

1 Kgs 8:12-13

Then Solomon said, "The Lord has said that he would dwell in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to dwell in forever."

## Texts on Prophetic Criticizing and the Embrace of Pathos:

1. Thus says the Lord:  
For three transgressions of Israel,  
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
and the needy for a pair of sandals –  
they who trample the head of the poor  
into the dust of the earth,  
and push the afflicted out of the way. (Amos 2:6-7a)
2. Ah, you who join house to house,  
who add field to field,  
until there is room for no one but you,  
and you are left to live along  
in the midst of the land!  
The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing:  
Surely many houses, without inhabitant.  
For ten acres of vineyard shall yield but one bath,  
and a homer of seed shall yield a mere ephah. (Isaiah 5:8-10)
3. Hear this word, you cows of Bashan  
who are on Mount Samaria,  
who oppress the poor, who crush the needy,  
who say to their husbands, ‘Bring something to drink!’  
The LORD GOD has sworn by his holiness:  
The time is surely coming upon you,  
when they shall take you away with hooks,  
even the last of you with fish-hooks.  
Through breaches in the wall you shall leave,  
each one straight ahead;  
and you shall be flung out into Harmon, says the Lord.  
(Amos 4:1-3)
4. ‘Do not preach’—thus they preach--  
‘one should not preach of such things;  
disgrace will not overtake us.’  
Should this be said, O house of Jacob?  
Is the LORD’s patience exhausted?  
Are these his doings?  
Do not my words do good to one who walks uprightly?  
But you rise up against my people as an enemy;  
you strip the from the peaceful,  
from those who pass by trustingly with no thought of war.  
The women of my people you drive out  
from their pleasant houses;  
from their young children you take away my glory  
forever.  
Arise and go, for this is no place to rest,  
because of uncleanness that destroys  
with a grievous destruction.  
If someone were to go about uttering empty falsehoods,  
saying, ‘I will preach to you of wine and strong drink’,  
such a one would be the preacher for this people!  
(Micah 2:6-11)
5. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood,  
and bring righteousness to the ground!  
They hate the one who reproves in the gate,  
and they abhor the one who speaks the truth.  
Therefore, because you trample on the poor  
and take away from them levels 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.  
For I know how many are your transgressions,  
and how great are your sins—  
you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe,  
and push aside the needy in the gate.  
Therefore the prudent will keep silent in such a time;  
for it is an evil time. (Amos 5:7, 10-13)
6. Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,  
who write oppressive statutes,  
to turn aside the needy from justice  
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,  
that widows may be your spoil,  
and that you may make the orphans your prey!  
What will you do on the day of punishment,  
in the calamity that will come far away?  
To whom will you flee for help,  
and where will you leave your wealth,  
so as not to crouch among prisoners  
or fall among the slain?  
For all this, his anger has not turned away;  
his hand is stretched out still. (Isaiah 10:1-4)
7. I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt-offerings and grain-offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.  
(Amos 5:21-24)
8. Is not this the fast that I choose:  
to loose the bonds of injustice,  
to undo the thongs of the yoke,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
and to break every yoke?  
Is it not 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 to hide yourself from your own kin?  
(Isaiah 58:6-7)

## Texts on Prophetic Energizing and the Emergence of Amazement:

- A. 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. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: 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. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the LORD’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34)
- B. 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.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp;  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of knowledge of the LORD  
as the waters cover the sea. (Isaiah 11:6-9)
- C. Listen to me, O Coastlands,  
pay attention, you peoples far away!  
The LORD called me before I was born,  
while I was in my mother’s womb he named me.  
He made my mouth like a sharp sword,  
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;  
he made me a polished arrow,  
in his quiver he hid me away.  
And he said to me, ‘You are my servant,  
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’  
But I said, ‘I have labored in vain,  
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;  
yet surely my cause is with the LORD,  
and my reward with my God.’  
  
And now the LORD says,  
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,  
to bring Jacob back to him,  
and that Israel might be gathered to him,  
for I am honored in the sight of the LORD,  
and my God has become my strength—  
he says,  
‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant  
to raise up the tribes of Jacob  
and to restore the survivors of Israel;  
I will give you as a light to the nations,  
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.’  
(Isaiah 49:1-6)
- D. A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the gear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins. (Isaiah 11:1-5)
- E. Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (Isaiah 42:1-4)
- F. The LORD GOD has given me,  
the tongue of a teacher,  
that I may know how to sustain  
the weary with a word.  
Morning by morning he awakens –  
wakens my ear  
to listen as those who are taught.  
the LORD GOD has opened my ear,  
and I was not rebellious,  
I did not give backwards.  
I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face  
from insult and spitting.  
  
The LORD GOD helps me;  
therefore I have not been disgraced;  
therefore I have set my face like flint,  
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;  
he who vindicates me is near.  
Who will contend with me?  
Let us stand up together.  
Who are my adversaries?  
Let them confront me.  
It is the LORD GOD who helps me;  
who will declare me guilty?  
All of them will wear out like a garment;  
the moth will eat them up. (Isaiah 50:4-9)