

FROM JUDGMENT  
TO HOPE

*A Study on the Prophets*

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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 **imagers**. 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.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

## 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<sup>1</sup> 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.

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**SOME PAGES HAVE BEEN  
REMOVED FROM CHAPTER ONE  
FOR THIS PREVIEW; IT  
CONTINUES BELOW**

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#### 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?