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# Social Ethics in the Prophets

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## The Prophets

In the Hebrew canon of Scripture, the collection of books called The Prophets includes the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel, and 1-2 Kings (the Former Prophets). However, when we speak of the Prophets we are usually referring to the Latter Prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve (the Minor Prophets). Even though included with the prophets in the Christian canon of the Old Testament, Daniel is often considered devotional literature and not a prophetic book.

Perhaps we also ought to establish what we mean by "prophets." Obviously, we are talking about a collection of biblical texts. But how we think about the role of a prophet in Israelite religion and culture may influence how we think about what they have to say about social ethics. There is not enough time to explore this. So, let me just make two statements about prophets.

First, prophets were **not** predictors of the future. They talked a lot about the future, but their task was not to predict the historical future. It was much later Christian tradition that made this a central feature of Old Testament prophecy.

Second, the prophets' primary task was to call the people as a community to accountability and responsibility in their relationship with God. If we use the metaphor of covenant to describe that relationship between the people of Israel and God, then the prophets were **mediators of the covenant**. They helped the people understand what was expected of them in that relationship. In doing so, they often interpreted history, the flow of events, in light of relationship with God. They tried to understand how God was at work in certain historical events, and how the people should respond to those events. That meant that frequently the prophets were very much concerned about the present, and how the people should live in the present as God's people. Even when they spoke about the future, it was for the purpose of calling people to be responsible before God in the present.

## Theological Foundation

A title like "Social Ethics in the Prophets" might suggest that we can talk about ethics in the Prophets in isolation from the other books or traditions of the Old Testament. It might imply that there is an ethic in the Prophets that is different or

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perhaps better than ethics in other books. This idea was actually made popular in the nineteenth century in Old Testament scholarship. Working from a purely historical perspective, scholars of that era assumed an evolutionary development in Old Testament religion. The sequence ran from the "law" or *torah* (Heb: "instruction") of Moses in the earlier tribal periods, to the Prophets during the monarchy, to the era of priestly leadership after the exile.

The Prophets were seen as the high point of Old Testament Faith. They saw the early emphasis on law as rooted in tribal culture and mixed with polytheism and Ba'al worship. They thought the prophets were the first to express clearly a true monotheism that focused on accountability to God rather than on the magic that lay behind Ba'al worship. The post-exilic emphasis on the Temple and the priesthood they understood to be a deterioration, even a corruption, of the high ideals of the prophetic period.

However, scholars later came to decide that this was much too narrow a view. It was tied much too closely to certain evolutionary assumptions about history and development of ideas within history. Today, we understand that the *torah* and the prophetic traditions existed side by side in Israel's religious life. They were both expressions of what the people had come to understand about God and how they should respond to God. Both *torah* and prophets were closely related not only historically but theologically as well. Likewise, the later priestly emphasis was not a deterioration of an ideal, but simply the application of the same perspectives into a different historical situation. That suggests that there is a close relationship between all the biblical traditions, even though they are applied differently in different circumstances. That does not mean they all say the same thing, but it does say there is more continuity than previous perspectives have allowed us to see.

The social ethics of the prophets was thoroughly grounded theologically in Israel's historical experience of God. It was also grounded in the ongoing struggle to come to terms with how that experience should work out in the life of the people. For Israel, social ethics was related to their understanding of what it meant to be God's people and how they should live in the world as God's people. Both for the Prophets and for the *torah* traditions, that understanding was theological anchored in the exodus.

There have been various scholarly debates about the historical relationship between the traditions concerning the exodus from Egypt and the traditions of the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. But in terms of the Old Testament faith confession, theologically there is no doubt about the relationship. The exodus and Sinai stories together are the narrative confession of what is often expressed in the phrase "I will be your God (exodus) and you shall be my people (Sinai)." This phrase, sometimes called the **covenant formula**, is the essential Old Testament theological confession of the relationship between God and the people. I would suggest that this idea is not only the basis of much of the *torah*, it is also the basis of the social ethics of the prophets.

Of course, the Israelites had to come to an understanding of both parts of that concept. What does it mean for God to be God? And what does it mean to be his people? The exodus provided the Israelites the most basic understanding of the nature of God. He was the kind of God who heard the cries of oppressed slaves, and entered human history to bring deliverance and freedom. "I will be your God" was an idea defined by the exodus (Exod 6:7, Lev 26:12-13). It would take many years, even centuries for them to understand all the implications of that act of grace. But their understanding of a God of love and grace and mercy began on the banks of the Sea of Reeds as recounted in Exodus 14. They learned that this God was concerned with the helpless and hopeless of humanity, with those who had no power to affect their own future.

The exodus told about God and his self-revelation in history. The Sinai narratives are rooted in that historical deliverance and encounter, but *focus on how the*

*people are to respond to that revelation.* The introductory speech to the Sinai narratives helps us understand this relationship between God's grace and the people's response to grace (Exod 19:4-6; see [Torah As Holiness: Old Testament "Law" as Response to Divine Grace](#)):

You have all seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself ["I will be your God," exodus]. So now [Sinai], if you will truly hear my voice and keep my covenant, then you shall become my own possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall become my kingdom of priests and a holy nation ["you shall be my people"].

The giving of *torah* at Sinai was placed against the background of the exodus. Its purpose was to call the people to a continual and unique relationship with the God of the exodus, a God who had been experienced as the initiator of the divine-human encounter. The Sinai narratives relate the proper response of the people to God's grace in the exodus. At Sinai, God gave the people his instruction (Heb: *torah*) for living in the world as his people. Everything that Israel understood God to require of the people was anchored in the exodus and expressed at Sinai. Sinai and the *torah* became a way to define what it meant to be his people. It was not so much that they had to obey a certain set of laws, although culturally and historically that was part of their response. But the focus was on living a certain way, a way that reflected who they were as people delivered from slavery by God.

Here is the significance of the covenant formula. "I will be your God" expresses God's acts of grace and mercy. "You shall be my people" calls the people to live in the world with that action and understanding of God's grace as the guiding principle of their lives. The fact that *torah* contains guidelines for social interaction as well as religious instruction indicates that it places every facet of life under faithful response to God. Law codes existed long before Israel emerged as a people, and many of the Israelite social laws were shared with surrounding peoples. But there is a uniqueness to Israelite laws. It lies in the uniqueness of the God in whom these laws are grounded; it is Yahweh's *torah*. Being God's people in the world meant to reflect in every action and circumstance the very nature of this God of grace and love and mercy that they had experienced in the exodus.

So, for example, Israelites could keep slaves. That was no different than surrounding peoples. But they could do so only under strict guidelines, could not mistreat them, and could not enslave fellow Israelites. -1- These parameters are all grounded in the historical reality that once they themselves had been slaves in Egypt, but God brought them out. God is the kind of God who heard (hears) the cries of oppressed slaves. And so they must respond to God on that basis, because if he had heard their cries, he would also hear the cries of those whom they had oppressed.-2- They experienced a historical encounter with God that resulted in their deliverance from slavery. And so they were called to live (walk, keep, do *torah*) in light of that encounter with God. This community was called to function in ordinary, day to day existence as the chosen people of God. So, the governing of social actions, from borrowing a neighbor's ox to horrible crimes against him, became an expression of faith in, and response to, God's grace.

## Social Ethics

The covenant formula occasionally occurs in the Prophetic traditions. But the prophets used the concept slightly differently than the narrative torah traditions. That is an important clue to the emphasis of the prophets. In the Pentateuch, the idea usually pointed to God's grace in the Exodus. In the prophets, the focus is more often on the faithfulness of the people in doing *torah*, in living out their response to God's grace in life.-3-

However, the prophets make full use of the theological foundation of the covenant formula even without using the exact words. The prophets were not as concerned with pointing to the great acts of God in the past as they were using those acts of God as a basis for calling people to responsibility in the present. They did that in various ways, one of which was in the pairing of the concepts of **righteousness** and **justice**. For the prophets, the covenant concept of "I will be your God" was expressed in the idea of **righteousness**, and the response of "You shall be my people" was expressed in the idea of **justice**.

Righteousness was a way to describe how God acted in the world (*e.g.*, Jer 9:23-24). But it was more than that. Righteousness was what the people were to be and to do because of God and in relation to God. Righteousness meant to be in the right relationship with God, and to act accordingly in the world based on that right relationship. The exilic prophet in the Isaiah tradition made the connection in this way (51:7; cf. Jer 20:12): "Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts." To be righteous was to have the teaching of God in one's heart, to know and to understand the things of God. While the term could be used to describe ethical actions in the world, the primary focus of righteousness was toward God, what the people were in relation to God. Righteousness was the people's relationship to God based on the fact that "I am your God."

Justice, on the other hand, described how the people were to live in the world in relation to each other and to other people. They were to practice justice toward others. Justice in this sense does not carry the legal meaning sometimes attached to it. It is not making sure that everyone gets exactly what they deserve based on law. There is some dimension of that in other traditions where justice is what God brings to those who violate his torah. But in the prophets justice means to practice grace and mercy towards those who have no power to secure it for themselves. It means to protect and defend those who are helpless and powerless.

One of the most powerful passages about justice comes from Isaiah of Jerusalem as a condemnation of the city of Jerusalem (1:21-27):

How the faithful city has become a prostitute! She that was full of justice, righteousness lodged in her-- but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine is mixed with water. Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them. . . . I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. . . . Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.

Note two things in this passage. First, that righteousness and justice are closely linked. Second, that justice is absent when corruption, bribery, failure to defend the orphan and plead the widows' cause are the social norm. In the patriarchal social structure of Israel, those without family to care for them, widows and orphans, were the most vulnerable people in society. And corruption in leadership most often preys on those who depend the most on that very leadership for equity and fairness, usually those without other resources to seek it. Here justice is the failure to function socially in a way that respects others and defends the weak and powerless of society.

Jeremiah 150 years later still saw the mistreatment of the powerless and defenseless people in society as one of the primary evidences of unrighteousness and sin. He had especially harsh words for Judah's king, Jehoiakim (Jer 22:3, 13-17; cf. 21:11-12, Mic 3:9-10):

Thus says the LORD: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do not

wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place. . . . Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages . . . Are you a king because you compete in cedar? Did not your father eat and drink and do justice and righteousness? Then it was well with him. He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the LORD. But your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression and violence.

In Hebrew, to "know" someone was a way to describe the most personal and intimate relationship between persons. Here, knowing God is equated with concrete social actions for the poor and needy. In fact, in these verses compassion and justice for the powerless is what defines the role of a king, not how great his buildings are.

The Isaiah tradition carried through this concern with corrupt leaders who pervert justice. Corrupt leaders were continually identified as a major cause of problems in the nations. So, there was the growing vision of a new righteous leader whom God would raise up for the nation. The establishment of justice as evidence of his righteousness would mark his reign (9:7).

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

This vision continued to be expressed throughout the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC as the people longed for leaders who would reflect in the life of the nation what they had come to understand about the compassion and grace of God (Isa 32:1, 16-17, 33:5).

The exilic prophet of the Isaiah traditions moved the idea from a dream about leaders to the entire nation. He understood social justice to be part of the mission to the world of the restored people of God (42:6-7):

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; 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 who sit in darkness.

While this passage may be more specifically about return from exile, the later Isaiah traditions picked up this theme and clearly expressed it in terms of Israel's mission to the world. The people were focusing on keeping the legal demands of the law, things like sacrificing and fasting. But the prophet rejected the rituals of religion as an inadequate response to God's grace. Faithful response to God would not be found in the external rituals or even in internal piety. The people could go through all the motions of external obedience and still not fulfill the demand of justice (58:2-4).

Day after day they seek me and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that practiced righteousness and did not forsake the ordinance of their God . . . "Why do we fast, but you do not see? Why humble ourselves, but you do not notice?" Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day, and oppress all your workers. . . . Such fasting as you do today will not make your voice heard on high.

And then the prophet expressed in clear terms what God really expects from the people as a demonstration of their righteousness (58:6-7):

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?

The prophet went on to express again Israel's mission to the world in the metaphor of light to the nations. Here, as in other places, Israel's own well being finally depends on how she treats other people (58:8-11):

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am. If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil, if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday. The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.

The prophets did not just condemn leaders for lack of justice or see it as a future dream for the people. From the earliest days of the writing prophets, they linked social justice with righteousness as God's people. They called for both righteousness and justice to be a present reality among God's people. Amos was perhaps the earliest of these calls to the people to be sensitive to social justice. He denounced the habit of cheating the poor, bribery, corruption, and the arrogance of the rich who took advantage of the poor and helpless in society. Like other prophets after him, he denounced the people who would perform religious rituals in a false pretense of righteousness, and then oppress the helpless. He concluded with the well known injunction (Am 5:24): *Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream.*

Not long after Amos, in the Southern Kingdom of Judah the prophet Micah said the same thing. He faced much the same problems of dishonesty and oppression by those in power, and by a general practice of taking advantage of those who could not defend themselves. Micah denounced the practice of religion that was not marked by a concern for the welfare of those helpless members of society (Am 5:7, 6:12). Again, in a well known passage, Micah rejected elaborate rituals and reduced the requirements of God to the basic issues of righteousness and justice (Mic 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 mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Isaiah of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Micah, likewise challenged the people for the same offenses against society. Isaiah declared that God had rejected their worship as insincere and flawed. He would no longer even hear their prayers because they stood guilty before God of oppressing the helpless. The remedy for their sin was to change their behavior toward those in society whom they had been oppressing (1:16-17):

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

There are other dimensions that need to be considered here with which Isaiah does not deal, such as an emphasis on God's grace. Still, it is clear from Amos, Micah and Isaiah, as well as Hosea and Jeremiah, that social ethics was a crucial indicator of righteousness. If there was righteousness, that is a proper relationship expressed

toward God, then there should be justice expressed toward others, especially those who had no power in society. Likewise, if there was oppression against those powerless people, if social ethics were perverted, the prophets saw it as an indication that the people were not really righteous, no matter what the external forms of religion they claimed.

## Conclusion

There are many other facets of this topic that could and should be considered. But the following points seem to be at the center of any consideration of social ethics in the prophets.

First, the prophets share with the *torah* a concern that social ethics be grounded in the historical revelation of God in Israel's history, especially in the exodus. The Israelites were to live out in the world being God's people in ways that reflected the kind of God whom they served. They had once been slaves and knew what it meant to be powerless and oppressed. And yet God delivered them from that oppression. That deliverance, that encounter with God, must forever change how they lived in the world. They were called to defend the powerless of society because they were God's people in the world. They were given identity as God's people by the very character of God in creating them as his people. As God's people, they were expected to act as God himself would act.

This same theological perspective is expressed in the New Testament parable of the servant who was forgiven a huge debt by his master (Matt 18:23-35). But then he imprisoned a fellow servant for not repaying a very small amount of money. The master could not understand how someone who had so generously received mercy could so easily withhold it from someone else: "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" (v.33). Everything that is said in terms of social ethics in the prophets is grounded in this principle. It is also this same principle that calls us to model our lives in everyday living after the same God revealed in Jesus Christ. For Christians, the same principle governs social ethics today.

Second, two dimensions characterize being God's people: **righteousness** and **justice**. Righteousness is what we owe God because we are the recipients of his grace and mercy. True righteousness is a relationship with God that transforms who we are. We will know God, establishing a relationship with God by his grace that defines who we are. As a result of that relationship, our response will be one of justice toward others. There cannot be righteousness without justice. And justice without righteousness is not really justice because it is self-serving part from God. Exactly how that justice will work out in the world cannot be adequately defined by law simply because it is grounded in a relationship, not in legality. It cannot be reduced to performance of law; it can only be lived from the dynamic basis of relationship with God.

Jesus was once asked to summarize what God required of human beings. Even though he did not use the same words, he responded with this same two-fold principle: "Love the lord your God with all your heart, and your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:36-40, parallels). To love God with all your heart is the principle of righteousness, the response back to God for his grace. The second is closely related, because to love God with all your heart, to be righteous, will inevitably lead to loving your neighbor as yourself, the principle of justice. As Jesus says, on these two principles hang all the law and the prophets.

In Luke's Gospel (10:29), some responded to these principles by asking Jesus: Who is my neighbor? Jesus then told the parable of the Good Samaritan. In telling that story, Jesus illustrated how justice might work out in caring for and meeting the needs of those who are helpless and powerless. He called us to love and care for those in need, to meet their needs, even though they might be an enemy or

someone we have reason to hate. Jesus concluded that parable with the command, "Go and do likewise."

The Prophets dealt with the practical application of social ethics in community. They took their identity as God's people and asked tough questions about how to live that out in terms of righteousness and justice. The principles of the prophets still stand today, reaffirmed by Jesus in the New Testament. We still have to ask the tough questions of how to live out being God's people today. If we do not, we will have failed to fulfill the biblical principles of justice and righteousness to which the prophets, and Jesus, call us.

### Footnotes

1. There are a variety of laws covering slavery from various periods of Israel's history. For example, Exodus 21:2-11 seems to allow Israelite slaves (Cf. 2 Kings 4:1), while in the priestly laws of the Holiness Code (Lev 25:38-55) Israelites could only work as hired servants not as slaves. The Deuteronomist seems to fall somewhere in between with the laws allowing Israelite slaves, but requiring they be released at the end of six years with some payment (Deut 15:12-18).
2. It is significant that the priestly regulations concerning slaves (Lev 25:38-55) are bracketed by references to God's deliverance from Egypt: v. 38, I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God.; v. 55, For to me the people of Israel are slaves, they are my slaves whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your God. The laws concerning the year of release that canceled debts every seven years was a rather radical application of this principle, a working out of a social vision grounded in the reality of God who would not settle for conventional structures of power (Deut 15:1-11).
3. Jer 7:23, 31:33, Eze 37:24-27, Hos 2:23, indirectly in Joel 2:27; Hosea (1:9) could even use the concept negatively. He named one of his children, *Lo-Ammi*, "Not my People," and warned that if they would not let God be their God, they would no longer be his people. Given the conditions in the post-exilic community, Zech (8:8, 9:16, 10:6) returns to an earlier emphasis on God's acts in history.

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