

The Hebrew Prophets: Architects of a Moral Universe

Mark N. ZION

Abstract

Seeing the prophets on their own terms and in their own historical context is daunting (often we lack the reference points for such a journey). Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (1962) and Norman Podhoretz *The Prophets* (2002), are two valiant attempts and through them we see our shortcomings in understanding the prophets. Heschel, a liberal, emphasized the prophets' stand on social justice issues, especially toward the most vulnerable in society (as I will do below), a position that animates modern progressives. Podhoretz, a social conservative, saw the prophets as more concerned with preserving traditional culture, especially the Temple system. Above all, the prophets, according to him, sought to root out all vestiges of idolatry. Both works are immensely valuable, since the prophets are broad enough and sweeping enough to accommodate many modern interpretations. Taking the prophets out of the Early Iron Age and transplanting them in our time, though, to reinforce a current political perspective, is similar to taming a beautiful, wild bird. Our concerns, values, and perspectives color all efforts, however sincere. Yet the prophets continue to speak to the modern world and people continue to listen. Are we that different from the Hebrew prophets and their culture? I will discuss the value system that nurtured these remarkable individuals and inspired their messages. Though these powerful voices come from what is for us a murky, distant past, we know more about their cultural context than ever before.

Key Words

Moses, the Levites, the Documentary Hypothesis, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, the Bronze Age, monotheism, henotheism, the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets.

1. Introduction
2. Moses, prophet of God
3. Levites, priests of God
4. Israel forms
5. Prophets overview
6. Social justice
7. Conclusion

1. Introduction

The Hebrew prophets haunt the modern imagination, and not only in positive ways. As a group, to borrow from Hamlet on conscience, “[They] make cowards of us all.” They indict complacency. Is the goal of life personal happiness and material fulfillment? The prophets would have averred, declaring instead that through force of will one must strive to make the world a more just place. Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) was as stubbornly “against the grain” as the prophets were and he suffered the consequences, imprisoned for twenty-seven years (conversely, the prophets were never members of an oppressed group — they were sometimes from the elite). Fortunately, Mandela was able to fulfill his vision of a democratic South Africa. We recognize this as among the highest virtues, to sacrifice all that one has, even one’s life, for an ideal that will benefit all, not just the few.

What group of wordsmiths, in all of history, has tenaciously sided with the lowly of society against its rulers? What group of artists has chosen to be outsiders? Among great writers in more recent times only William Blake (1757-1827) and Walt Whitman (1819-1892) have taken on prophetic roles as outsiders — both were ostracized as a consequence.

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), who often looked at the world through ancient archetypes, referred to the Hebrew prophets as those who *transvalued* “good” and “evil.” That is to say, they tipped over accepted reference points. These shrill voices shattered the Hero/Warrior ethic, which had defined what “good” meant, toward something altogether different. When Nietzsche wrote about “the Jews,” which I will quote below, he meant the Hebrew prophets during the Assyrian (eight-century BCE) and Babylonian (sixth-century BCE) invasions (Holub 2013:xvi):

It was the Jews who, in opposition to the aristocratic equation... ventured, with awesome consistency, to suggest the contrary equation... namely, ‘the wretched are alone the good; the poor, the weak, the lowly are alone the good; the suffering, the needy, the sick, the loathsome are the only ones who are pious, the only ones who are blessed, salvation is for them alone — but you, on the other hand, you aristocrats, you men of power, you are for all eternity the evil, the horrible, the covetous, the insatiate, the godless; eternally also shall you be the wretched, the cursed, the damned!

Nietzsche was clearly repulsed by aspects of the Judeo-Christian ethic, which he felt subverted what makes people truly human. If the poor are affirmed by heaven, then certainly the wealthy and the upper classes are forever cursed. Yet, he also recognized that this shift created “modern consciousness,” toward something more reflective and introspective.¹⁾

The Hebrew prophets endure in ways that are often unnoticed (Ward-Lev 2019:161-162): The countless charitable organizations devoted to lifting the poor, the social workers, the volunteer doctors, the soup kitchens, social movements for equality, protest movements, workers’ rights movements — the lone voices that challenge corrupt systems — are part of their lasting legacies. When Christianity incorporated the Hebrew Bible as its Old Testament, it unwittingly lugged along this powerful group of spokesmen and women, fusing them with the Jesus of Nazareth. Needless to say, the world has not

quite known how to interpret them or how to assimilate them, yet Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount* (Matthew 5-7) begins with the words that are straight from the classical prophets: "Blessed are the poor," a rephrasing of Leviticus 19. The prophets, in contrast to Jesus, did not speak about forgiveness: They wanted accountability and justice for the poor.

In all of world literature the prophets are without peers in their castigating of rulers and the upper classes (Gottwald 2016:1:64). The fact that their oracles were treated as sacred and carefully preserved shows they inspired large numbers of people within their own culture, and this inspiration continues today. Ralph Bunche Park, built in 1948 in front of the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, has an inscription from Isaiah, the eight-century BCE Judean prophet (Isaiah 2:4) (King James Version):²⁾

*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 any more.*

I will touch on two "ethics" that became part of early Judaism and which the Hebrew prophets harked back to. The first, though not so easily confirmed by archeologists, is foundational in the Hebrew Bible: the fleeing from Egyptian slavery for personal autonomy in the Promised Land. This is most clearly seen in Moses himself, the first prophet, and in one group in particular, the Levites. The second is an egalitarian ideal. Archeology has shown how nascent Israel formed before the collapse of the Bronze Age (1177 BCE). The early settlers in the Judean highlands created a communal way of life, one of utmost simplicity and they overtly rejected the hierarchical Canaanite city-states systems that flourished from 1500 to 1200 BCE;³⁾ they saw them as abominable, evil, oppressive, and cruel — where most of society lived as virtual slaves. From this the early Hebrews articulated a powerful ethic: Do not repeat the injustices done to you, but work for a more just society. This is Hebrew genius, summed up by Rabbi Hillel (c. 110 BCE-10 CE): "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow: this is the whole Torah; the rest is explanation; go and learn."

The earliest known injunction in world literature to "love your neighbor as yourself" is from the Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Bible, written as early as twenty-seven hundred years ago but no doubt part of a tradition that stretched back many more centuries. The person who put knife to parchment was a Levite priest, whom I identify below as "P," living in Jerusalem during the reign of King Hezekiah (715 to 686 BCE) (Leviticus 19:35):

When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

In my comments below, I will defer more to Bible scholars than to archeologists. Some will wonder at

my comment, yet the tug of war over crucial features of Israel's origins is palpable and one is virtually forced to choose which to accept, if one is not a Bible scholar or an archeologist. Bible scholars place the texts of the Hebrew Bible about two hundred years earlier than archeologists do. Whom to believe? Even the renowned archeologist William Dever, whose work I will make ample use of below, acknowledges the reason Bible scholars enjoy a privileged perspective (Dever 2003:74):⁴⁾

As leading American archaeologist Lewis Binford once remarked, “archaeologists are poorly equipped to be paleo-psychologists.” We can dig up things people made; and we can usually ascertain how these things were made and how they were used, discarded, and reused. But rarely can we know what people thought, what really “made them tick.”

2. Moses, prophet of God

Moses is the great mystery of the Hebrew Bible for those trying to uncover the historical underlay of the legends. In the earliest story by “J,” writing in the tenth-century BCE, Moses is a Hebrew born into slavery who later became an Egyptian prince. The Pharaoh had commanded that all Hebrew male babies be killed (Exodus 1:15-22). Moses’ mother hid him in a basket and floated him to where an Egyptian princess was bathing, while Miriam, Moses’ sister, remained to watch. Upon finding the basket, the delighted princess promptly adopted him and named him: “And she called his name Moses, and she said, ‘because I drew him out of the water’” (Exodus 2:10). The magnificent “J,” one of the great literary giants of all time (and perhaps a woman), used the Hebrew word *mosheh* “draw” as the origin of Moses’ name (Friedman 2017:34). Miriam, observing the scene, spoke up to say she knew a woman who could take care of Moses: Moses’ own mother! Moses, who grew up in wealth and privilege, fled to Midian after killing an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave (Exodus 2:11-15). In Midian, probably in the northwest Arabian Peninsula along the Gulf of Aqaba, he lived a quiet life as a shepherd and had a family. All seemed idyllic until Yahweh appeared to him in a burning bush.

The story is jarring. Why would anyone create a national epic with his or her ancestors, and its greatest prophet, born as slaves? Slavery is not usually something one is proud of. Moses’ adoption into royal household is less credible (only “J” writes of this — and I will say more on this below), but his sojourn in Midian has an aura of authenticity. Moses also married a non-Hebrew woman in Midian, Zipporah, the daughter of a priest of its religion, Jethro (a religion unconnected with the Hebrew religion) — Moses had two sons, Gershom and Eliezer. Again, mixed marriages are usually not mentioned if the goal were merely ethnic glorification.

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) — his last book before his death — speculated on the true identity of Moses. He began writing it in Austria, admitting that despite his age the topic had gripped him so completely that he could not shake loose from it. He finished it in England, where he had fled after the Nazis took over Austria in 1938 (Freud must have felt a kinship with Moses, the exile, and his new start in life at an advanced age).

Bible scholars of the time treated Freud’s work with disdain. “What can an MD teach us about the Bible?” they asked. The answer, of course, is: A great deal, if the MD is Sigmund Freud. Scholars criticized him in particular for lacking any historical method (Friedman 2017:134). Yet Freud, a deep

reader of the Hebrew Bible, had greater insight than many biblical scholars of the time. Freud had also read deeply among the biblical scholars of Germany, particularly those who articulated the Documentary Hypothesis (1886) (that I am using here), the culmination of over a century of scholarship and one that still informs all biblical studies today.

German Protestant scholars were first to unravel the various writers of the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, by how each identified “God.” Four different writers composed their versions of Israel’s origins, beginning in the tenth-century BCE, each with a separate account, and these were chopped up and pasted together by an editor in the fifth-century BCE — probably by Ezra the Scribe (c. 480-440 BCE) (Friedman 1987:136).⁵ These scholars used alphabetical designations, which may be confusing for those first encountering the scholarship: “J” (922-900 BCE) for the writer who used *Yahweh* for the divine; “E” (850-800 BCE) for the writer who used *Elohim*; “P” (722-690 BCE) who wrote of *Priestly* concerns, of a mediated religion (many of the holiness codes and ritual practices may have been added after the Babylonian Exile, c. 515 BCE). “J,” “E,” and “P” together composed the first four books of the Bible; and “D” (625-587 BCE) who wrote most of the Book of Deuteronomy, the fifth book of the Hebrew Bible.⁶ Ezra, identified in Jewish tradition the Second Lawgiver, is called “R” for *Redactor*.

Incidentally, the writers “E” and “P” only used the term *Elohim* (Divine Beings) until God appeared to Moses in a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4:17) to reveal his true name: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh* “I Am That I Am,” shortened to YHWH.⁷ Thereafter, both used only YHWH — not *Elohim* — as did “D.”

Freud saw the connection with Moses both in Egypt and in Midian, before the trek across the desert of today’s Sinai (Freud 1939:31). In fact, he was among the first to recognize that this was the key to understanding the origins of monotheism.⁸ Today many give Freud the nod for making these remarkable observations. Freud also believed that an historical Exodus from slavery from Egypt through Midian on the way to the Promised Land had in fact occurred (something not so accepted even today), since its memory had been so thoroughly seared into the imagination of a people — its religion, ethics, and sense of origins. Some incredible event must have happened, Freud thought (*ibid*, 30). *Moses and Monotheism* is neither a work of history nor of scholarship but an artistic portrait of a people’s origins — and it was more accurate than many could accept at the time. As usual, Freud here is on the frontier between imagination and rationality, in a kind of fantasia.

Scholarly consensus today *tends* to say that the Exodus never happened. Rather, it is metaphorical of the early Israelites who were subjected to the Canaanite city-state system that Egypt controlled, with its harsh demands for tribute, which Judean highlanders broke free from (Gottwald 2016:2:46):

We might say then that, although the stories of bondage in and deliverance from the land of Egypt were largely — or even entirely — a fictional invention, the motif itself points to the reality of Israelite escape from Egyptian-Canaanite political and military domination in the Palestinian highlands. The fictional element is the geographical placement of the motif; the realistic element is the socio-political content of the motif.

Yet, the Exodus story, and the Passover that commemorates it, cannot be dismissed so easily. It is

central to Western religious consciousness, of the divine as a liberator, with the Passover itself remaining the longest continuing religious observance in the world today. All four Torah writers refer to the journey from Egypt, including one of the earliest poems in Hebrew, the Song of Sea (Exodus 15), that praised the divine for his miraculous liberation (Exodus 15:21): “Horse and driver has He hurled into the sea.”

Historians for centuries have known that “Moses” is an Egyptian name (meaning “son”) so why did scholars *not* make the connection that Moses was also of Egyptian origin? No one before Freud dared say anything. Christian interpretations of the biblical narratives, since they deeply informed mass perspectives, had very firm boundaries and one did not rush to question them. Freud opened up the topic to more critical analysis of Moses (Kaufmann 1960:224):

The spiritual revolution, that gave historic moment to these ideas, must have been like all similar events in history, the working of creative genius and leader of men. Following the biblical saga, we call this pioneering creative spirit by the name of Moses.

Freud believed monotheism was a fundamental shift in mass perception, under-appreciated today since it is so pervasive, with over sixty percent of the world’s population living in societies informed by “ethical monotheism.” Essentially, monotheism centers on the direct entrance of the divine in history, with prescribed morals, and is a purely spiritual presence. In 1350 BCE these ideas may not have seemed so radical, but as other divine spokespeople appeared, namely Zoroaster, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus, and Mohammad, the concept created a revolution all its own (Freud 1939:115):

For it signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over the senses; strictly speaking, a renunciation of instinct with its psychologically necessary effect.

Freud felt two Moses figures might have been fused into one, one an Egyptian priest and the other a Midianite priest (ibid, 32-33).⁹⁾ It is clear that the early Hebrews understood that the birth of their religion was not only from Abraham (c. 2200 BCE) but also from Egypt and Midian through Moses and the Levites.

Some bible scholars and archeologists today believe that complete monotheism came late in Israel’s history, only in the late sixth-century BCE, after the Exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple (Friedman 2017:150), but this ignores the already fully formed concept beginning with the earliest writer of length, the writer “J,” along with the earliest passages in Hebrew: The Song of Deborah and the Song of Miriam — all are thoroughly monotheistic. Henotheism, the belief in one great God among many others, some scholars say, is only halfway to monotheism. But is this true? Is it not monotheistic when people believe the one God created the other gods as assistants?

Other gods *did* exist, the early Hebrews believed (the gods other nations had were legitimate). In the first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis, God addresses an audience of other divine beings three times: at the creation (Genesis 1:26-28), after the first man and woman ate the forbidden fruit

(Genesis 3:22), and at the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:7), using the term “We” (all these passages were written by “J”). The divine had created other gods with jurisdiction over other nations, with the creator God in sole charge of the people of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:8). After Genesis eleven, however, the divine no longer addresses them. Why not? The other gods had ceased to exist, condemned to die a mortal death because they had not upheld justice (Psalm 82:1-6).¹⁰

*God stands in the divine assembly;
Among the divine beings He pronounces judgment.
How long will you judge perversely,
showing favor to the wicked?*

*Judge the wretched and the orphan
vindicate the lowly and the poor,
rescue the wretched and the needy;
save them from the hand of the wicked.*

*I had taken you for divine beings,
sons of the Most High, all of you;
but you shall die as men do,
fall like any prince.*

Freud was on track with the origins of monotheism and Judaism in Egypt and Midian, where the four writers of the Torah (“J,” “E,” “P,” and “D”) collectively also place Moses. The Exodus is the beginning of monotheism in practice, as Freud recognized. The Yahweh of the Levites, which I will refer to in more detail below, merged with El, the Canaanite name for God of the Judean highlanders, early, at the very origins of the culture; this created the Big Bang of Western religious consciousness (Friedman 2017:146): “The bottom line, though, one way or another, is that the Levites had spent time in both Egypt and Midian, their God was Yahweh, and they came to Israel.” Could monotheism have developed independently in Egypt and in Midian and in the Judean highlands? Whatever the answer to this may be, fusing the two separate Gods was a giant creative leap that gave birth to monotheism (ibid, 15):

But perhaps most civilization-changing of all: it means an early birth of monotheism in Israel (and, at some point, in Judah). From wherever it came, this impulse toward one God was present in the very early stage of Israel’s history, before Israel and Judah even had their first kings.

Those who transported the idiosyncratic religious orientations, now associated with monotheism, are more easily identified. They brought some of their mystical orientations, along with their own spiritual experiences in their journey from Egypt and Midian: the stories of the Passover, the opening of the

reed sea, the wandering in the wilderness for a generation, the manna from heaven, Moses' receiving the Ten Commandments on a sacred mountain, the concept of a High Priest leading a priesthood, the true name of God, the seeing-stones (the Urim and the Thummim worn by the High Priest), among many other elements. Eventually, they became known as "the Levites."

3. Levites, priests of God

To gain one's bearing in the vastness of the Hebrew Bible, and particularly of its ethical origins that animated the prophets, one needs to consider the Levites. The Torah writers, "E," "P," and "D," with the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were Levites. It is they, more than any others, who wrote the origins that highlight the Exodus story. Could it be that only the Levites, alone among the early Hebrews, were slaves in Egypt and had fled for freedom to the Promised Land?

"Levite" may mean "attached person" or "resident alien" and conveys the idea of a "slave," or at least one without personal self-determination (William Propp cited in Friedman 2017:212). It was certainly not a word of esteem, at least not at its origins. Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Exodus: How it Happened and Why it Matters* (2017), wrote that the Levites' alien status was not only in Egypt but also in Israel, where they later migrated (Friedman 2017:63-64).

The Levites, then, as a group of migrants, were not part of the original tribes (or confederacy); early Hebrew society adopted and assimilated them through its stories of Levi, as the third son of Jacob (after Rueben and Simeon), stories that retrospectively made their grafting complete (Genesis 49:5-7).¹¹ If this is case, it shows the power of narratives to center a culture. With this grafting also came a unique ethic of acceptance, a great generosity of spirit that would eventually give the world the Bible. Having once been a slave and an alien is at the heart of the Torah: Through compassion and empathy you not only remember your own origins but you also fulfill the Law (Deuteronomy 23:8): "You shall not abhor an Egyptian because you were an alien in his land."

The Amarna Letters, a total of three hundred eighty-two tablets discovered in El Amarna, Egypt in 1887, of the Pharaoh's communications with other countries (c. 1350 to 1330 BCE), give remarkable insight into life of the Late Bronze Age of the Eastern Mediterranean. They show that many Semitic peoples lived in Egypt as migrant workers. In fact one dynasty, known as the Hyksos, was a Semitic group (foreigners) that ruled Egypt for about one hundred years (c. 1650 to 1550 BCE).

Two of the Amarna inscriptions identify a group called the "Shasu of YHWH," the first known reference of the divine name outside the biblical narrative (Friedman 2017:122); they lived in an area that became known as Midian. The Levite "E" writer stated that Abraham had six sons with a concubine, Keturah, and one of the sons was Midian (Genesis 25:1-6), the founder of the country; the Midianites, then, were also descendants of Abraham. "E" also began his story of Moses in Midian, not in Egypt. If one read only this story, which had been cut up and pasted with two other writers, one would think that Moses himself was a Midianite — "E" introduces Moses with one line (Exodus 3:1): "And Moses had been shepherding the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian." Even the "J" writer, who was not a Levite, portrayed Moses' first encounter with the divine in Midian rather than in Egypt (Exodus 6:2).

Archeologists who deny the Exodus point out that no excavation bears any witness to a large

number of people — over a million people (some say three million) — trekking from Egypt to Canaan. The question one asks in all this: What did the archeologists expect to find? Further, the harsh Sinai Peninsula, they say, simply could not support that number of people. Nor have any Egyptian artifacts been found in Israel proper among the early settlements (a smaller group, however, would easily have escaped the archeologists' surveys, minimal as they have been, since the desert would have swallowed up all traces of them shortly after the journey). Others say that since no Pharaoh's name is mentioned in the Exodus narrative, the Exodus cannot have any basis in history. Did the biblical writers refrain from using any of those Pharaohs' names because they saw them as villains? The names of two cities where the Hebrews worked, written of by "J," are mentioned: Pithom and Ramses (Exodus 1:11). Perhaps unsurprisingly, "J" names two midwives — the contribution of women is a special focus for "J" — Shifra and Puah (Exodus 1:15-21), making the narrative even more convincing.

The link between Egyptian religious practices and Judaism (through the Levites) is incontestable, however: Circumcision, the Ark of the Covenant (the Egyptians used a Bark or Boat to parade around, which, like the Ark, was never used in water), and the Tent holding the Ark are Egyptian in origin (Friedman 2017:53-57). These practices and artifacts tell us that a group first lived in Egypt, where they adopted the practices, lived for a time in Midian, where they learned the name of God, before journeying to the Judean highlands, for them the Promised Land (because a group of warm-hearted, egalitarian people lived there). Throughout the experience (however long it took — the Bible says forty years), the Levites refined their practices. This migration from Egypt must have taken place very early, long before the collapse of the Bronze Age in 1177 BCE (Scott Noegal, quoted by Friedman 2017:51): "The Late Bronze Age...was a formative and flexible period in the history of the Israelite religion as it also saw the gradual fusion of the Canaanite god El with Yahweh."¹²

The Song of Deborah, one of the literary splendors from the ancient world, written in some of the Bible's earliest Hebrew, recognizes that Yahweh, the Levites' name for the divine, came from Midian (Judges 5:4-5):¹³

*O LORD (Yahweh), when You came forth from Seir (in Midian),
Advanced from the country of Edom,
The earth trembled;
The heavens dripped water,
The mountains quaked —
Before the LORD, Him of Sinai,
Before the LORD, God of Israel.*

Two further points lend credence to the Levites' later arrival from Egypt: First, they were the only tribe *not* to have land (Deuteronomy 18:1-5): "The Levitical priests, the whole of the tribe of Levi, shall have no territorial portion with Israel. They shall only live off the LORD's offerings by fire as their portion, and shall have no portion among their brother tribes: the LORD is their portion, as He promised them." Second, only Levites have Egyptian names (Redford 1992:418-419): Hophni, Hur, Phinehas, Merari, Mushi, Pashbur, and Moses. The fact that the population supported the Levites as their

priests, no doubt a large group, reinforced a powerful community ethic of shared responsibility that prophetic messengers would later internalize (Gottwald 2016:2:14; 16-17):

Priests were similarly recompensed for their services.... Given the harshness of terrain and climate, Israelite producers did not have an easy life, but, compared to peasants subject to the control of state and empire, they were advantaged and, at the same time, inspired with a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Moreover, it is my judgment that the early communitarian life of Israel was responsible for shaping the subsequent course of the Israelite and Jewish peoples in profound ways.... [It] lent strength to the later prophetic movement by providing a template of just community that sharply challenged the gross abuses of the monarchy and the ostentatious greed of the client classes of big landowners and merchants...

The study of these origins is the study of the origins of civilization — its value system — and perhaps also of humanity's future, if humanity can relearn the concept of community. We find that the spiritual impulse toward monotheism developed early, and this was fused with the desire to determine one's own destiny and of mutual responsibility among community members. Freud believed that monotheism advanced civilization. Is this true? Only when people accept the entire package and all that it means (Friedman 2017:206):

People sometimes have thought that monotheism promoted exclusivism and prejudice: if there is only one God, then it is our God, then others must be wrong, foolish, in need of correction. But there is another side to this as well: the birth of monotheism was paralleled with the birth of love of neighbors, even alien neighbors. The exodus led both to monotheism and to the exceptional attitude toward others.

4. Israel forms

The name, "Israel," means something like "To strive with the Almighty" (Bloom 2019:29), from Jacob's wrestling with the angel (Genesis 32:22-32); "Hebrew," means "To cross over" (Dever 2003:73-74), possibly from the epic of Abraham leaving Mesopotamia or even of the Levites crossing over the Jordan River to the Promised Land. Archeologists tell us that the early Hebrews formed in the thirteen-century BCE out of what *may* be identified as a peasants' revolt, as they fled the crumbling city-states of the Late Bronze Age. Out of this collapse of the Bronze Age came democracy from Greece and monotheism from Israel (Cline 2014:147-148):

Some scholars have suggested that internal rebellions may have contributed to the turmoil at the end of the Late Bronze Age. Such revolts could have been triggered by famine, whether caused by drought or otherwise, or earthquakes or other natural disasters, or even a cutting of the international trade routes, any and all of which could have dramatically impacted the economy in the

affected areas and led dissatisfied peasants or the lower classes to rebel against the ruling class, in a revolution akin to that in 1917 czarist Russia.

Here I will make use of the groundbreaking ideas of Norman Gottwald and George Mendenhall (1916-2016) to gain insight into what made Israel unique. Gottwald's *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E* (1979) shocked the world of biblical scholarship when it first appeared, with its Marxist analysis to understand the dynamics of ancient Israel's formation, born out of reactions to elites (Gottwald 1979:199-203). During the height of the Cold War (1946-1990), when even scholarship was divided East from West, few in the West could accept it. Western scholars also scoffed at the notion that the origins of their religion and sacred narratives were part of a peasants' revolt (which Gottwald called "a withdrawal") and that the communities they created were egalitarian, with more similarities to socialist societies than to capitalist ones (Gottwald 2016:1:19).¹⁴⁾

The biblical premise of the primacy of communal welfare over individual achievement is much closer to the premises of socialism than to those of capitalism.

Gottwald was among the first to state that the ancient Israelites were indigenous peoples to the region; Hebrew is, after all, a Canaanite language. This was a remarkable insight, underappreciated even today (most had believed the biblical accounts of Abraham and Joshua coming from *outside* the land of Canaan). Gottwald's work has only grown in esteem, since he answered an essential question: "How" the Hebrew prophets acquired their ethic of social justice.

Only about fifty thousand people living in a communal setting during the Early Iron Age (Dever 2003:97-99) in the dry hill country of Judea, then, are responsible for shaping world religious consciousness. What was it that sparked such innovation? The Bible describes the early Hebrews as a "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38). No doubt the diversity that these factions brought together was explosive (Dever 2003:185); archeologists and scholars speculate that at least four separate groups were involved: an association of refugee farmers fleeing the collapsing city-states (making up the vast majority), the Apiru or Habiru (commonly called "bandits" by the Amarna Letters), the Shasu (a nomadic people originating in Midian) (Redford 1992:257-280), and a group of Semites escaping slavery in Egypt (identified here as the Levites) (Dever 2003:181-182).

It was part of the genius of the people who would eventually write the Bible to form new patterns of behavior out of the crucible of mistreatment. Psychologists tell us that people who bully are most likely to have been bullied. What if those bullied decide they will not participate in this chain of behavior but instead treat others with kindness and understanding? This is exactly what happened, as seen from the Torah — and I quote only one verse that relates to this theme (Deuteronomy 24:17-18):

You shall not be in judgment of an alien.... You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and Yahweh, your God, redeemed you from there. On account of this, I command you to do this thing.

The Book of Joshua, one of the most bloody chronicles to come down to us from ancient times, as

bloody as the Iliad (c. eighth-century BCE) by Homer, shows the deep contempt the early Israelites held toward the city-state system, reflected in flights of fantasy of their true feelings, in destruction after destruction of these cities, where no living thing was left alive. No real evidence exists that these early settlers waged war on the city-states, or even that they had armies of any kind (Gottwald 2018:3:92), but the city of Hazor shows clear signs of a revolt from within, where the idol gods of the city were purposely disfigured, based on the excavations and conclusions by Sharon Zukerman (Cline 2014:147). The hatred is tangible, yet if it had stopped there, the early Israelites would have been no different from any other peoples nursing deep bitterness and grudges. Somehow, they lifted their vision to imagine a society that no longer created this kind of oppression.

From numerous excavations in the Jordan Valley and in the highlands over the past fifty years, archeologists have found remains of settled communities that had great skills for mastering the harsh dry environment — they invented “terraced irrigation,” still visible today (Dever 2017:397). They identify their special type of houses and often they call them “Israelite Houses,” which only appear in these areas from the thirteenth-century (Dever 2003:27; Dever 2017:161-167) — these show an unmistakable egalitarian lifestyle. Already early Israelites had identifiable cultural characteristics — they eschewed pork (hardly any pig bones have been found among their settlements) (Dever 2003:108).

Egypt had earlier controlled the region and dominated the Canaanite city-states as vassals, which had to pay a high tribute to Egypt. The ruling classes squeezed the lower classes for the tribute to Egypt and for taxes to support themselves — a memory of abuse the prophets would keep alive (Gottwald 2016:1:17):

Early Israel was a socioreligious movement confronting and challenging this tributary system with a communitarian mode of production that renounced statehood and retained economic power in the hands of free agrarians.

The Book of Judges and the Book of First Samuel, of the early history of Israel before it became a monarchy, are part of what scholars call the Deuteronomy History: Joshua, Judges, First Samuel, Second Samuel, First Kings, and Second Kings (also known as the Former Prophets). Many were based on oral traditions. These early texts show a deep ambivalence toward monarchy, their experience of it now over two hundred years in the past. The prophet and Levite Samuel (c. 1070-1012 BCE), and de facto ruler of Israel, warns the nation not to ask for a king (First Samuel 8:10-18):

This will be the practice of the king who will rule over you: He will take your sons and appoint them as his charioteers and horsemen, and they will serve as out-runners for his chariots. He will appoint them as his chiefs of thousands and of fifties; or they will have to plow his fields, reap his harvest, and make his weapons and the equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters as perfumers, cooks, and bakers. He will seize your choice fields, vineyards, and olive groves, and give them to his courtiers. He will take a tenth part of your grain and vintage and give it to his eunuchs and courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, your choice young men, and your asses, and put them to work for him. He will take a tenth part of your flocks, and you shall become his

slaves.

Here is the tip of an underlying ethic among the local folk as the culture formed — a deep aversion toward hierarchy and its potential for abuse. Yet the nation, as it continued to grow, needed protection from invading armies and only a more strict social formation could provide it; they understood, however, what the cost would be (Gottwald 2018:3:92). They would surrender, on some level, communal and personal autonomy for the survival of their society.¹⁵ The question that had to be answered again and again: Was this worth the cost?¹⁶ It no doubt was a painful choice.

The prophets who preached social justice — Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah — harked back to this more egalitarian time, where the poor, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows were cared for (Micah 2:2; 5:8); (Dever 2003:186). Their demands for social justice centered on the land; after all, it is called the Promised Land. The God of Israel had given them this land and they were merely caretakers of it, since all belongs to God. The tiny community had formed with the concept, then, of protection of private property, that it should remain within families; the people had forsaken this ideal and the prophets would not let them off the hook for supporting an abusive hierarchy; they pointed out their mutual responsibility for altering the social structure toward monarchy that led to more exploitation of the vulnerable (Gottwald 2016:1:65):

Furthermore, in their identification with Israelite underclasses, the prophets understand the abusive behavior of the upperclasses not simply as the deeds of single individuals... Prophets tirelessly flay the hegemonic practices of Israelite leaders fueled and justified by an ideology that brazenly grounds their privilege not only pragmatically but also in the ultimate sanctions of religion.

Land ownership was held by families, generation after generation. King Ahab's (c. 935-852 BCE) taking of Naboth's land (Dever 2003:187) is a sign, according to the prophet Micah, of how far Israel had descended into moral decadence (Micah 2:2). In First Kings 21:1-16, Queen Jezebel, King Ahab's wife, arranged to have Naboth murdered because her husband wanted his vineyard. Naboth had inherited this land from his father and had refused to sell it (the inheritance law prohibited him from selling it). The prophet Micah, as just one example, reminded the people of their communal origins (Micah 4:4): "Everyman shall dwell under his own fig tree and grape vine."

5. Prophets overview

Early Israel was not unique in respecting the poor. Honor for the vulnerable in society — the orphans, the widows, and the foreigners — has a long history in the Near Middle East, back to the very origins of civilization, as we see in the prelude to the Code of Hammurabi (c. 1792-1750) (quoted by Malchow 1996:2):

*Anum and Enlil named me
to promote the welfare of the people,*

*me, Hammurabi, the devout, god-fearing prince,
to cause justice to prevail in the land,
to destroy the wicked and the evil
that the strong might not oppress the weak.*

*I sheltered them [the peoples of the land] in my wisdom.
In order that the strong might not oppress the weak,
That justice might be dealt the orphan (and) the widow.*

The uniqueness of Israel and Judah, then, is that they internalized this ethic of communal responsibility as an absolute.

As we look back through the prism of our own cultural sensibilities (Gottwald 2016:1:64) the Hebrew prophets have grown in stature internationally since the American Revolution (1765-1783) and French Revolution (1789-1799) — and wherever social equality, as articulated by these early pioneers of social justice, is a goal. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1969), in his speech *I Have a Dream* (1963) quoted or paraphrased from Amos 5:24 “Let justice roll like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream” and Isaiah 40:4-5 “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain shall be made low.” Nowhere in the ancient world has a group so vociferously and consistently challenged centralized authority and elites (Gottwald 2016:1:64):

Given the continuum of socioeconomic conditions in the ancient Near East, it is nonetheless striking that in its ideological tendencies the prophetic corps of Israel stands in sharp contrast to the literature that has survived from those kingdoms. Elsewhere, the criticism of dominant elites is absent or muted; in Israelite prophecy the criticism of abusive leaders is loud and clear.

Nāvī, translated as “Prophet,” means a “Seer” or someone with a special vision. The Talmud records fifty-five prophets and seven of these are women (Podhoretz 2002:20). Deborah (c. 1200-1124 BCE), who was both a prophetess and a judge (political leader), is the most famous female prophet and she is among the earliest. The Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2-31), composed in perhaps the most archaic Hebrew of the Bible, may date back close to the culture’s origins in the thirteenth-century BCE (Bloom 2019:38), first as a poem passed down until penned in an early Hebrew script in the eleventh-century BCE.

The Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections: the *Torah* (the Teaching — the first five books, also called the Books of Moses), the *Kituvim* (the Writings — these include the Psalms and the Book of Job), and the *Nevi'im* (the Prophets). The Prophets are divided into two sections: the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Latter Prophets (the Major Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, with “the Twelve” or the Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi). The Former Prophets, of Samuel, Elijah, and Elisha, among many others, are told in story form. The Latter Prophets (fifteen of them), also called the “classical prophets,” have careers spanning over three hundred years. The Christian Old Testa-

ment exalts Daniel a major prophet,¹⁷ but Daniel is not a prophet in the Hebrew Bible — rather he is placed in the Writings.

All the Latter Prophets wrote in poetry, except for Ezekiel, the prophet of the Exile in Babylon, who chose to write in prose (Podhoretz 2002:258). All are written as oracles or messages, except for the Book of Jonah, which is in a story form and where it is obvious that Jonah himself did not compose the work. At least two prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are Levites, descended from Moses and Aaron respectively (as I discussed above);¹⁸ two are nationalistic (or socially conservative): Haggai and Zechariah, the prophets of post-Exilic Israel (fifth-century BCE) (Matthews 2012:184), called by some “hierocrats,” or believers in hierarchy (Podhoretz 2002:293). Jonah began as something of a nationalist, but was forced to raise his vision after he called the wicked city of Nineveh to repentance, and repent it did (Jonah 3:8-10), to the chagrin of the prophet himself, who said to Yahweh after Nineveh repented: “I would rather die than live” (Jonah 4:9).

When one reads the Greek philosophers, who as a group exceed Hebrew prophetic influence, since they form foundation of modern education, one enters an eternal realm uncorrupted by the mundane. We see this especially in Socrates (c. 470-399 BCE), Plato (c. 428-348 BCE), and Aristotle (c. 384-322 BCE). The prophets, by contrast, zero in on the mundane as a goal, as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it (Heschel 1962:10):

A student of philosophy who turns from the discourses of the great metaphysicians to the orations of the prophets may feel as if he were going from the realm of the sublime to an area of trivialities. Instead of dealing with the timeless issues of being and becoming, of matter and form, of definitions and demonstrations, he is thrown into orations about widows and orphans, about the corruption of judges and affairs of the market place.

By and large the Greek philosophers came *after* the Hebrew prophets — the earliest Greek philosopher, Thales of Miletus (c. 624-545 BCE), was a contemporary of the Ezekiel, however. The classical prophets ended in about 450 BCE, near the time when classical philosophy began in Greece. One wonders what the civilized Greeks would have thought of the more crude prophets, who often gave their messages in strange object lessons, rather than in lectures or discourses: Hosea married a prostitute, Gomer, and she never repented (Hosea 1); Isaiah walked naked and barefoot for three years (Isaiah 20:2-4); Jeremiah wore a cattle yoke as he gave his oracles; (Jeremiah 27:2-7); Ezekiel was rendered mute and lay on one side for three-hundred and ninety days, repeating this on his other side, while eating baked cow manure (Ezekiel 4). No doubt the sophisticated Greeks would have seen the prophets as country bumpkins.

As one can imagine, the prophets were not usually accepted by the rulers, at least not in their lifetimes; they called them “trouble makers” (1 Kings 17:17), “conspirators” (Amos 7:10), “madmen” (Jeremiah 29:26), with some even attempting “pay off” the prophets to keep them quiet (1 Kings 13) (it did not work). The prophets have more in common today with subversive revolutionaries, absolutely pure toward higher principles, than with modern poets or writers — though the prophets were poets, too. The prophets, in contrast to many of today’s writers, had little respect for the system, except for two

of the post-Exile. King Ahab (c. 871-852 BCE), when he confronted the prophet Elijah, asked, “Is it you, you troubler of Israel?” Elijah’s response was not comforting: “I have not troubled Israel; but you have, you and your father’s house” (1 Kings 17:17). Elijah himself is an object lesson of monotheism, for his name combines the Canaanite God “El” with the Midianite God “Yahweh;” Elijah means “El is Yahweh.”

Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah (chapters one through forty) all eight-century prophets, from their emphasis on social justice, have grown in the modern imagination. Amos, the first of the Latter Prophets, a Judean who journeyed north to Israel, seemed fully formed and confident as he launched out to condemn the political elite for its abuse of the poor. It is obvious that Amos was acting on a long tradition already in the culture, perhaps dating back four hundred years, of individuals challenging unjust rulers and the society itself which condoned it — even with silence (Gottwald 2016:2:65):

Furthermore, in their identification with Israelite underclasses, the prophets understand the abusive behavior of the upperclasses not simply as the deeds of single individuals. They identify the abuses as group behavior backed by a group ethos that functions to protect group interests.

Scholars today have made division after division of the books of the Latter Prophets, saying there are two writers of Hosea, perhaps three of Isaiah, and many of the others — only Jeremiah and Ezekiel seem to have escaped the scholarly knife and are considered complete works by those authors. It is clear that chapters one through forty of Isaiah, though, which mentioned the Judean kings Ahaz (fl. 732-716 BCE) and Hezekiah (c. 739-687 BCE) (Isaiah 7-9; Isaiah 36-37) were probably written two hundred years before chapters forty-one to sixty-six, where the king of Persia Cyrus (601-530 BCE) (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 13), who gave the order for the Jews in Exile in Babylon to return to their homeland (538 BCE), is written of with esteem.

The prophets were not acting on their own; they were chosen for a particular mission, similar in ways to Moses, when YHWH appeared to him in a burning bush — their words were also their way of life (Heschel 1962:xxii):

The prophet is a person, not a microphone. He is endowed with a mission, with the power of a word not his own that accounts for his greatness — but also with temperament, concern, character, and individuality. As there was no resisting the impact of divine inspiration, so at times there was no resisting the vortex of his own temperament. The word of God reverberated in the voice of man.

The prophet’s task is to convey a divine view, yet as a person he *is* a point of view. He speaks from the perspective of God as perceived from the perspective of his own situation.

In reading the Hebrew Bible one wonders if God’s calling for a mission is in fact a positive event. Some (perhaps all?) resisted this calling, which was not a cause for celebration: Isaiah had to have a burning coal from the altar placed on his lips to purge his uncleanness (Isaiah 6:6); Jeremiah, after refusing to cooperate, was touched by the divine on his mouth (Jeremiah 1:6-9); Ezekiel was forced to eat a scroll

(Ezekiel 3:3). The YHWH of Genesis, as articulated by the writer “J,” is something of a dangerous bumbler, where with nearly every intervention he wreaks great havoc, destroying civilizations and confounding languages. Even Amos recognized the divine’s calling as a mixed blessing at best, from a purely material point of view (Amos 5:18-20):

Ah, you who wish for the day of the LORD! Why should you want the day of the LORD? It shall be darkness, not light! — As if a man should run from a lion and be attacked by a bear; or if he got indoors, should lean his hand on the wall and be bitten by a snake! Surely the day of the LORD shall be not light, but darkness, blackest night without a glimmer.

6. Social justice

All of the ferment I referred to above during Israel’s formation led to a concrete articulation of justice that centered the society. The two that I will touch on below are from sections known as the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:33) and the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 12-26) (I will cross-reference the ideas with the Book of Leviticus). Though written in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, by “P” and “D” respectively, both are part of traditions that go back to the origins of the culture (Malchow 1996:22-26). Mesopotamian and Egyptian codes had also made reference to justice for the poor, as I mentioned regarding the Code of Hammurabi, but it was the cultures of Israel and Judah that made these a social priority — as the very basis of society. The Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age used different language from our own, of course; it centered on protection of land ownership, yet their sense of social justice is not so different from ours today, affirming Nietzsche’s contention of a complete transvaluation that continues to inform society, or at least, as Abraham Lincoln put it, “the higher angels of our nature.” Certainly, the “spirit” that animates these goals remains the basis for social justice today.

The classical prophets began in the eighth-century, a time, archeologists tell us, when these societies became more connected with international trade. Luxury goods have been found showing clearly that a wealthy class had emerged (Dever 2017:461-481); the widows, the fatherless, and the foreigners — therefore, became more vulnerable. Although the prophets did not offer any practical blueprints for the creation of a new society, with the possible exceptions of Ezekiel (40-48) and (second) Isaiah (41-66), they did not need to. *That* society had already been created in the past: It only needed to follow the Law more carefully.

The themes in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Code overlap and I will summarize them:

- 1) *Protection for the most vulnerable in society* — widows, the fatherless, and foreigners (Deuteronomy 10:18);
- 2) *Fair treatment of workers and debtors* — prohibitions against collecting interest from the poor (Exodus 22:25) and that any pledge (collateral) on a loan (usually it was a piece of clothing) had to be returned by sundown (Exodus 22:26; Deuteronomy 24:7) (no doubt because the person needed the clothing to keep warm) and wages had to be paid to workers daily, before sunset

(Deuteronomy 24:15);

- 3) *Protection of property* — commands that a landmark determining a border not be moved (Leviticus 19:14; 27:17);
- 4) *Equality before a court of law* — with a condemnation of a “false witness” (Exodus 23:1-23) and firm injunctions that the foreigner be treated equally before the law (Exodus 12:48-49): “You shall have one standard for the stranger and citizen alike: for I am the LORD your God.”
- 5) *Generosity toward the poor* — lending without interest or without expecting the loan to be returned (Deuteronomy 15:14-17), with instructions for farmers *not* to harvest the edges of their fields but to leave them for the poor to glean (Leviticus 19:9-10; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-22);
- 6) *Protection of privacy* — with creditors barred from entering the house of a debtor (Deuteronomy 24:10): “When you make a loan of any sort, you must not enter his house to seize his pledge. You must remain outside...”

A “rest for the land,” absolutely unique to ancient Israel, takes on new meanings in light of the Covenant and Code I quoted above: It ensures a more equitable society. Farmers were required to leave their farmland fallow for one year every seven years, called a Sabbatical Year (*Shmita*) — so the poor could use it (Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25:2-7). The Jubilee (*Yobel*), where every fifty years the land returned to the original owners and all debts were canceled, protected the vulnerable from abuse, especially from theft (Leviticus 25:1-4, 8-10). Justice for the poor meant a healthy society, a vision that echoed from its origins (Gottwald 2016:1:17):

The dominant voices in biblical economic ethics are emphatically communitarian, resolutely critiquing tributary power, upbraiding ruthless exploiters, and speaking to the collective religious conscience of a people with a communitarian premise at its base. Above all, it is this protracted conflict between tributary and communitarian understandings of economics that gives biblical economic ethics such a strident voice. It is the stridency of people who know of a “beginning” in community and seek for an “end” in community that has been thrown into jeopardy by the sacrifice of communal welfare to private indulgence and profit.

I will close with the first of the classical prophets, Amos, to illustrate something of prophetic oratory power and sense of mission that Amos may have in fact inaugurated. We have very little biographical information of the prophets themselves — The Book of Amos, however, composed by Amos himself, offers an historical context, scanty though it might be. He is from Tekoa, just south of Jerusalem, in the independent Kingdom of Judah, but he ventured north, to Israel, to give his oracles (the “social justice” prophets of the eight-century BCE — including Amos — Hosea, Micah, and (first) Isaiah were also Judean). Though Israel and Judah shared a culture, history, religion, and language, they had been divided into separate kingdoms since 922 BCE, after the death of King Solomon (991-932 BCE), by Amos’ time for over one hundred and fifty years. Sometimes the two nations were on friendly terms — sometimes they were not.

Beginning in about 801 BCE, after King Shalmaneser III (c. 859-824 BCE) of Assyria conquered

Damascus, their chief rival, both Israel and Judah enjoyed decades of peace and prosperity (Matthews 2012:79). Israel was larger, more populous, and more prosperous, with a long coastline along the Mediterranean and excellent harbors for international trade. Judah was landlocked, with a great deal of the land too dry for farming (it bordered the Dead Sea, too salty even for fish to live) and its trade routes had to be overland; it was considered a backwater by the great empires, the reason the tiny kingdom survived for nearly five hundred years. Judah, astonishingly, is largely responsible for creating the Bible.

Amos delivered his oracles over about five years, from 760 to 755 BCE, although some say it was for only a year (Newsome 1984:17); he identified King Uzziah of Judah (c. 783-742 BCE) and King Jeroboam II of Israel (c. 786-746 BCE) as the kings of the time he introduced his oracles. Why Amos went to Israel is a bit of a mystery. Was Israel wickeder than Judah? Was his audience larger in Israel? Amos, though, condemned both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah, though all these condemnations were given in Israel. Since prophets are seen as divine emissaries, the fact that Amos carried out his mission casts a spotlight on divine priorities (Heschel 1962:38-39):

There is a living God who cares. Justice is more than an idea or a norm. Justice is a divine concern. What [stands], between God and His people, is not only a covenant of mutual obligations, but also a relationship of mutual concern. The message of God is not an impersonal accusation...

Amos may have been a wealthy person. He identified himself as a sheep-breeder (1:1) — a vocation that not only required a great deal of land but also hired help. He was also a farmer who grew Sycamore figs (7:14). The area south of Jerusalem is too dry for farming, so Amos must have owned land in a more fertile area. From the text, too, it is clear that Amos was a literary genius, highly educated in his religious traditions and in rhetoric. Though he lived before the Book of Deuteronomy was set down in its final form, Amos was fully aware of the traditions of justice for the poor that it highlighted. Amos first went to the sacred shrine at Bethel, and then to the political capital of Samaria (7:19); his pronouncements are startling in their clarity, with condemnations of moneygrubbers, who cannot wait until the requirements of religious observance are over to line their pockets in any dishonest way they can, especially at the expense of the poor (Amos 8:4-7):

Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying "If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the Sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale, using an ephah that is too small, and a shekel that is too big, tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals." The LORD swears by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget any of your doings."

It is easy to empathize with Amos. How many of us can be truth-bearers to people who may be able to hurt us? Amos knew he would face rejection and ridicule but he continued nonetheless; the priest of Bethel, Amaziah, delivered King Jeroboam II's message (Amos 7:12): "Seer, off with you to the land of Judah! Earn your living there... But don't ever prophesy again at Bethel; for it is a king's sanctuary

and a royal palace.”

Amos’ originality was in tying individual shortcomings in fulfilling the Law to the future health of the society. Amos also made “morality,” rather than ritual sacrifice, an absolute and even a higher good — since people cloak their deceitfulness behind ritual practice (Kaufmann 1960:376):

Morality, on the other hand, is an absolute value, for it is divine in essence... Moral goodness makes man share, as it were, in the divine nature; both cult (ritual temple practice) and morality are God’s command and part of his covenant, and both are expressions of the “knowledge of God.” But while cult is sacred only as a symbol, morality is essentially godlike, being a reflection of the qualities of God.

Amos, the first in a prophetic line that stretched over three hundred years, set incredibly high standards on a purely literary level. Later prophets, with Amos as the standard bearer, created one of the richest literary cultures in world history. Amos ends his book with a future of reconciliation, where the land is sacred and where it is protected so people can enjoy the fruits of their labors, a vision people continue to hope for (Amos 9:13-15):

*A time is coming — declares the Lord —
When the plowman shall meet the reaper,
Him who holds the [bag of] seed;
When mountains shall drip wine
And all the hills shall wave [with grain].
I will restore My people Israel.
They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit
Them;
They shall till gardens and eat their fruits.
And I will plant them upon their soil,
Nevermore to be uprooted
From the soil I have given them
— said the LORD your God.*

7. Conclusion

The fusion of El with Yahweh created Judaism, a religion of memory and thanksgiving. It held as a central ethic kind treatment and respect for the disabled, the poor, the orphans, the widows, and aliens. It created a social cohesion by requiring community responsibility to support the Levites. Fair treatment of aliens is demanded fifty-two times by the biblical Levite writers “E,” “P,” and “D.” Whatever the spiritual heights of the Exodus, it had a very practical application — as long as the poor were among them, the work of creating a just society was unfinished. The prophets continually reminded the people of this and the people kept those prophetic oracles as part of their sacred literature. It is a message that strikes a cord today.

Would the world be so different today without the Hebrew prophets? We can ask the same question of Greek philosophy: Would it be so different without Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle? The prophets have taught the world “what made people of the time tick” and they touched a universal nerve for living a higher life. Ancient records invariably are only from the elite; the prophets are the voices of the common people and they speak “for” the people. They took more abstract principles and rules and showed their applications in daily life, closing the gap a bit between the ideal and the possible. Yes, they were shaped by their culture and its unique value system, which I have attempted to outline, but they also shaped that culture in fresh ways and put the course of history on a higher trajectory. The prophets did not need an audience, but we in modern life need them: Without compassion, civilization is not possible.

Notes

- 1) Neo-Conservatives today have brought Nietzsche back, though in different terms and with a weak misreading in such works as *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) by Ayn Rand, who showed the rich, the true foundation of a prosperous society, were victimized by labor unions and people’s movements.
- 2) All quotations from the Bible, unless otherwise noted, are from the Jewish Publication Society 2003.
- 3) Eleven of Canaanite city-states are mentioned in Genesis 10. The most famous are Gezer, Hazor, Hebron, Jericho, Megiddo, and Shechem.
- 4) The Hebrew Bible, itself, tells us when it was written through its idioms and grammar and the style in which it was written. Scholars can accurately determine this to within about fifty years of when a piece of writing was set down, and they can tell which is an earlier form of the language. This is more evident over a longer period of time, say, one hundred years. Still, a great deal of the vocabulary in fashion during the nineteen-sixties is no longer in use today. If someone were to leap from the nineteen-sixties to our time, he or she would not understand our idioms, especially those related to technology. Archeologists usually use olive seeds (and other forms of organic matter) for radiocarbon dating (before carbon dating archeologists used the styles of pottery to anchor the date, which is still used and which is also felt to be accurate to within fifty years). What it cannot determine, however, is *when* the person was eating those olives at that particular site. Most archeologists associate the olive seeds with the builders of a particular building — yet they could have been left much later.
- 5) Friedman 1987:136: “And so [Ezra] shaped his history of his people around the themes of (1) fidelity to Yahweh, (2) the Davidic covenant, (3) the centralization of religion at the Temple in Jerusalem, and (4) the Torah. And then he interpreted the major events of history in light of these factors.”
- 6) Please see Richard Elliot Friedman: *Who Wrote the Bible?* (1987).
- 7) Because the divine name is considered sacred, it is not pronounced by most Jews today, but is used with Adonai (LORD), and with only the consonants (YHWH). Also, Jews today use the word *Ha-Shem*, “the Name,” to identify the divine.
- 8) Scholars tend to look at influences and believe that there is little originality — all ideas derive from somewhere else. Yet why would Moses *not* be the originator, or at least the one who gave monotheism fresh applications, since the Semitic peoples must have had legends of their ancestor, Abraham, worshiping the one God? Moses himself, since monotheism was in the air, may have brought it together, giving the belief system his own original spin.
- 9) Freud also speculated that Moses had been a priest under Akhenaten (fl. 1353-1334 BCE), the Pharaoh who instituted the world’s first known monotheism. After Akhenaten’s death, Moses, who had lost his position among the priesthood, taught the Semitic immigrants in Egypt monotheism (Freud 1939:20-22). The Hebrew

Bible, however, does not sustain this interpretation.

- 10) The early Hebrews also had an attachment to a feminine deity, an Asherah (Goddess), common in the Near Middle East of the time, a consort of Yahweh, called pejoratively in the Bible “the Queen of Heaven.” Archeologists have uncovered truckloads of goddess figurines (Dever 2017:595-600), which the prophet Jeremiah had castigated the people for having (Jeremiah 7:16–18; 44:17-19, 25). One may readily understand this, since it fulfills an honest urge for a divine feminine presence. Today’s Judaism has incorporated it (without any images, of course): the Torah is seen as a Queen (female) and from early Kabbalah the divine presence that fills the world during the Sabbath, the Shekhinah, is female. Archeologists agree, however, that during the Second Temple period, beginning in 515 BCE, no figurines were present in Israel. Only Yahweh was worshiped.
- 11) The Merneptah Stele, discovered in Thebes, Egypt in 1896 (the first known mention of an ethnic group called “Israel,” dated to around 1207 BCE), today is used to date a possible Exodus and some scholars put the date at 1270 BCE (they say it took a generation or so for the nation to settle and form). This speculation regarding the Stele is irrelevant, though, if only one, much smaller group made the Exodus journey.
- 12) The Semitic group that made the Exodus may not have been known as the “tribe of Levi” before they migrated to Egypt (the Bible says they were there for four hundred years), but early in their history the Judean highlanders may have conferred this name on them when they adopted the group.
- 13) Strangely, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5:2-31) does not mention “Levi” and the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18) does not mention “Israel” (Friedman 2017:144). These are the most ancient verses in the Hebrew Bible.
- 14) Gottwald 2016:1:3: “Hermeneutically, the United States most reassembles the major empires (e.g. Assyria), not Israel and Judah, while Cuba, Nicaragua, and West Bank Palestinians most resemble ancient Israel.”
- 15) The leaders (royalty) of the ancient world were the deities of the country, culture, or empire and worshiped as such (Schwartz 2018:33). But the early Hebrews had refused this ancient formulation, based on their own early experience as descendants of commoners (and bandits). Was it the egalitarianism among the Judean highlanders, their refusal of a monarch, which led to monotheism, of one God over a people united in equal standing?
- 16) Potentially, then, as a social group, the people would begin to participate in exploitation because the social structure itself supported an exploitative system that led to manifold injustices.
- 17) Christians have seen the Book of Daniel predicting both the coming of the Messiah and the end of time. Needless to say, Jewish tradition avers on this point.
- 18) Two families among the Levites vied for religious influence: the descendants of Moses and the descendants of Aaron, Moses’ older brother. Deep readers of the Hebrew Bible see the conflict played out between these two priestly families over the sole right to serve as priests. Sometimes the monarchies favored the descendants of Moses and at other times the descendants of Aaron. Moses’ descendants tended to be in Israel and those of Aaron in Judah. So, for the Temple functions in Jerusalem, the descendants of Aaron were favored, but not always. After the Second Temple was built in 515 BCE, the descendants of Aaron alone had the sole right to serve as priests.

References

- Bloom, Harold (2019) *Possessed by Memory: The Inward Light of Criticism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Cline, Eric H. (2014) *1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Dever, William G. (2017) *Beyond the Texts: An Archaeological Portrait of Ancient Israel and Judah*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press.
- Dever, William G. (2003) *Who Were the Early Israelites and Where Did They Come From?* Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Freud, Sigmund (1939) *Moses and Monotheism*: New Literal Translation by R.J. Koret.
- Friedman, Richard Elliot (2017) *The Exodus: How it Happened and Why it Matters*. New York: HarperCollins.

- Friedman, Richard Elliot (1987) *Who Wrote The Bible?* New York: HarperCollins.
- Gottwald, Norman K. (2016) *Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible: Volume One*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Gottwald, Norman K. (2016) *Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible: Volume Two*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Gottwald, Norman K. (2018) *Social Justice and the Hebrew Bible: Volume Three*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.
- Gottwald, Norman K. (1979) *The Tribes of Yahweh: A Sociology of the Religion of Liberated Israel, 1250-1050 B.C.E.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books.
- Heschel, Abraham J. (1962) *The Prophets*. New York: First Perennial Classics (2001).
- Kaufmann, Yehezkel (1960) *The Religion of Israel*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Malchow, Bruce V. (1996) *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Order of Saint Benedict.
- Matthews, Victor H. (2012) *The Hebrew Prophets and Their Social World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group.
- Newsome, James D., Jr. (1984) *The Hebrew Prophets*. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich (1887) *On the Genealogy of Morals: A Polemic*. (translation by Michael A. Scarpitti and introduction by Robert C. Holub). New York: Penguin Books (2013).
- Podhoretz, Norman (2002) *The Prophets: Who They Were, Where They Are*. New York: The Free Press.
- Redford, Donald B. (1992) *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Schwartz, Barry L. (2018) *Path of the Prophets: The Ethics-Driven Life*. Philadelphia, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Tanakh (2003) *The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society.
- Ward-Lev, Nahum (2019) *The Liberating Path of the Hebrew Prophets: Then and Now*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Press.