PROPHETIC DISCOURSE
DIALOGUE, DISASTER OR OPPORTUNITY?

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Abstract

Christian tradition has always idealized the 'writing prophets'. That view has, however, been undermined over the past two decades. We know very little about the origins of these books and even less about the origins of prophetic tradition. The article discusses the difficulties of assigning a social location to prophetic speech and assessing its effect. Perhaps the prophets were mere upper class 'public health physicians' who saw the coming downfall of their society and tried, without much success, to convince others of their views. Finally, a few suggestions are made for an imaginative reading of these texts that could enhance the present-day dialogue between theologians and society.

1. Introduction

Compared to the Jewish tradition the Christian church and Christian theology have always held the prophetic literature of the First Testament in higher esteem (Deist 1990). In speaking of its 'prophetic calling' in the world the established church has modelled itself on these figures, while 'prophetic theology' also plays a fundamental role in liberation theology. This 'modelling' function of prophetic literature rests on a fairly romantic view of the prophets as 'charismatic' figures and their role in society (see, for instance, Fohrer 1973:237-291; Schmidt 1975:220-234). Over the past two decades this romantic view has faded to such an extent that it would be legitimate to speak of a 'paradigm switch' in scholarly views (Deist 1989).

For instance, whereas older scholarly literature quite easily referred to a 'prophetic office', 'prophetic schools', and the like, it has emerged that the so-called writing prophets did not occupy any socially acknowledged religious 'office' at all,[1] but were at best freelance public speakers from various walks of life. Neither did they form 'schools' in the sense of a dedicated followers gathering and contemplating their words. On the contrary, they were most propbably called 'prophets' only much later.

From the perspective of dialogue at least three problems emerge from this switch of mind. Firstly, if one wants to understand prophetic speech as 'dialogue' one has to answer the question: who were the prophets, that is, what was their

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[1] According to Benjamin's interpretation (Benjamin 1991) prophetic power complimented royal power by serving the people with the same goal in mind, namely to provide food and protection, but differing about the means that would achieve this goal. While royal power opted for a centralized or surplus economy, the prophets opted for a decentralized or subsistence economy. Apart from the question whether the particular concept of 'power' underlying this interpretation really applies to ancient Israelite society, there is very little evidence (apart from the Elijah and Elisha legends) to support such an institutionalized view of the prophets.

social location? Secondly, one would have to evaluate the effectiveness of their speech in their own societies: how successful was their 'dialogue'? Thirdly, given the present view of 'Israelite prophecy', in what manner can the prophetic books assist contemporary dialogue between Christianity and secular society?

2. The social location of the prophets

2.1 Rupturers of the public transcript of power?[2]

What was the social location of the prophets? This is not a question that can be answered with much precision.

If the present text is anything to go by,[3] the prophets seem to have spoken out on behalf of, or at least for, the oppressed classes. The fact that, according to tradition, prophetic figures started emerging in the Ephraimite territory during the eighth century BCE may fit this interpretation. It was towards the end of the ninth and the beginning of the eighth century that the Israelite community of the northern kingdom came under mounting political, economic and social pressure. Because of the policy of especially the Omride dynasty Israelite farmers became increasingly marginalized and experienced a constantly harshening economic plight (Deist & Le Roux 1987:49-100). Even the simultaneous rise of monoyahwism as opposed to poly-yahwism and polytheism - one of the central topics of prophetic speech - might bear witness to a programmatic resistance against powerful people exploiting the poor. The picture would thus be one of individual figures (later called prophets) sharing in and promoting such resistance, especially since the present text[4] does indeed picture them as denouncing the upper classes for their oppressive actions.

Against this background it is tempting to interpret the prophets' role in society with reference to Scott's theory of the ongoing dialogue in oppressive societies between the upper class public transcript of social relations and the hidden transcript of the oppressed (Scott 1990).

In this theory oppressed communities only seemingly accept their plight. On the surface it looks like they act out the roles prescribed to them by the powerful. But this 'adaptation' is very deceptive. They act out their prescribed roles, not because they have obtained a false consciousness, but for their own benefit. On another level they share a sub-culture of resistance with its own hierarchy of power, disciplinary system, 'acrimonious dialogue' (Scott 1990:111) and a whole

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2 During the discussion of this paper at the workshop on 'dialogue' it was remarked that J C Scott's *Domination and the arts of resistance* (Scott 1990) could assist the social interpretation of the phenomenon of prophecy. I wish to thank Gerald West and Jim Cochrane for drawing my attention to this fascinating book.

3 See, in this regard, the discussion among Overholt (1990a; 1990b), Auld (1990) and Carroll (1990). While Overholt defends the idea that historical and social inferences may be made from the 'writing prophets', Auld would accept the historicity of the figures, but then not as prophets, but as poets. Carroll, however, holds that the prophetic books are fictional and cannot be convincingly related to any social reality of pre-exilic times.

4 Even though one has to be very cautious in using the present Hebrew text to deduce anything of historical nature about the individual figures it stands to reason that the tradition about them must have had some historical starting point. One of the recurring assumptions of these texts is that the prophets spoke in public.

arsenal of infrapolitics (a series of less and more visible acts of resistance - Scott 1990:187-197). Although the hidden transcript is unknown - or at least by and large unintelligible - to the upper classes, it does from time to time openly intrude on the public transcript, e.g. during festivities such as carnivals. But then, at an unpredictable point, the hidden transcript tears down its walls of secrecy and anonimity (Scott 1990:140), comes to the light through an act of overt resistance, and ruptures the public transcript to contradict 'the smooth surface of ... power' (Scott 1990:56). Such occasions may, but need not, ignite a revolution.

One of the ways in which such a rupture may take place is when a person verbalises *in public* (Scott 1990:63) the thoughts and secret talk of the oppressed ranks. What has been a 'politics of disguise and anonimity' (Scott 1990:19) suddenly becomes public knowledge and 'desacralizes the ceremonial reverence' the public transcript assigns to the powerful (Scott 1990:105). What has only existed as anonymous and secretive folk gossip, malediction, prayer, rumour, euphemism, grumbling, world-upside-down talk, subversive proverb, etc (Scott 1990:140-172) finds its way to the ears of the public, including the powerful.

If the present text does preserve something of the original prophetic style, it would be easy to imagine a link between their verbal abuses addressed to the powerful and the anger expressed in the hidden transcript. Typical of prophetic speech are satirical (Fishelov 1989), abusive addresses like 'you corrupt and evil people' (Isa 1:4), 'you, who behave like whores', 'you, rebels and friends of thieves, recievers of gifts and bribes' (Isa 2:21), 'drunken priests vomiting all over the tables', 'you arrogant men ruling over Jerusalem' (Isa 28:7-8, 14), 'you always flirting and proud women, walking with your noses in the air and taking dainty little steps' (Isa 3:16). These addresses were not ordinary abuses as we know them. They were social labels (Blumer 1969:2) giving expression to the social value of shame, like the labels David attached to Joab's household by calling its warriors, 'menstruating women, lepers, effimates, cowards, and beggars' (2 Sm 3:29). 'Honour,' Pilch (1991:53) says, is 'a person's or group's claim to worth accompanied by public, social, acknowledgement of that worth'.

According to certain folk sayings, probably expressing the public transcript,[5] the rich and well to do people (priests, prophets, scribes, kings, nobles and first ladies) of a city like Jerusalem had all the right to lay claim to honour, since 'It is the *blessing of the Lord* that makes you wealthy. Hard work can make you no richer' (Pr 10:22) and 'Fools should not live in luxury, and slaves should not rule over noblemen' (Pr 19:10). By attaching shaming social labels to the rich and powerful the prophets publically denied nobility its right to view themselves as 'blessed' and 'wise' and invited their public shaming. In that culture it would be a disaster for the powerful. 'Lose your honour,' says Proverbs 18:3, 'and you will get scorned in its place'.

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5   According to Scott (1990:18) the 'safest and most public form of political discourse is that which takes as its basis the flattering self-image of elites.' Scott (1990:68) also refers to Weber's observation that the privileged often uses religion to legitimize their position: a person who is happy desires more than a mere explanation for the experienced happiness, namely a reason for the right to happiness.

But there are also other aspects of prophetic activity that would fit the theory. Firstly, many of the prophetic accusations concerning socio-economic issues could easily be linked with the kind of grievances the oppressed of the time would have experienced and voiced in the hidden transcript. Secondly, many of these public accusations labelled the powerful as hipocrites, a typical strategy of the oppressed of judging the powerful by the standards of their (own) public transcript (according to which the powerful are merciful, kind, good masters, just, etc.). Thirdly, these accusations were launched at the powerful publically (on market squares, in the vicinity of temples, and during festivities). This would certainly have amounted to 'pulling down of carnival masks' (see Scott 1990:126) or 'throwing down of the gauntlet' that has been hiding the real meaning of the hidden transcript, and would have amounted to a 'symbolic declaration of war' (Scott 1990:203). Fourthly, the nature of the divine judgements announced to the powerful in the prophetic speeches would fit the 'fantasies of retaliation and revenge' normally circulating among the oppressed (Scott 1990:39, 42-44). Fifthly, like some 'rupturers' of the public transcript do, at least some of the prophets, for example Amos, appealed to divine visions. Certainly all of them claimed to have acted on divine command (cf Scott 1990: 125, 141). Sixthly, according to tradition, the relevant authorities took all the typical and trusted measures (Scott 1990:126)[6] to silence the prophets (cf Jr 26:11-16; Is 28:9-11; Am 7:12, etc).

Moreover, this theory does not need a Weberian definition of 'charisma' to account for the prophet's actions. For Scott (1990:221-224) 'charisma' is not a prior 'gift', but a product of a particular set of circumstances. If a person accurately articulates in public and at the right moment the experience of the oppressed, that person *becomes* a charismatic figure. The person expressing the anger of the oppressed need not have occupied a position of authority among the oppressed or have exhibited a gift of public speaking. It is the particular act of rupturing the public transcript that marks the speaker or actor as a charismatic. If prophetic action can indeed be understood in terms of the rupturing of the public transcript, the prophets thus need not have been 'charismatics' before their public appearances.

Explaining prophetic action in terms of Scott's theory on the dialogue between the public and hidden transcripts in oppressive societies and especially the notion of the 'rupture' of the public transcript through public charismatic acts of resistance is indeed appealing. If the mentioned (and other possible) similarities can warrant a link between the prophetic texts and Scott's theory it would be possible describe their action as enabling a *dialogue* between the two transcripts through the rupturing of the public transcript. And, given their role model function in the church, such a function would have consequences for the role of the church in society.

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6   Scott (1990:126) refers to the 'systematic attempt by ... authorities to sever the autonomous circuits of folk discourse and to deny this heterodox story any social site where it could be safely retold and interpreted', because 'each prophecy spilled beyond the sequestered confines of the hidden transcript to pose a direct threat to powerholders (Scott 1990:126 sic!)

But even though this theory might assist us in describing the *communicative function* of prophetic action, it would not necessarily enable us to answer the question on the *social location* of the prophets themselves. And if one takes into account what the prophetic texts themselves reveal about the social class of the prophets, it might even be difficult to explain prophetic action in this way.

2.2   Upper class negotiators?

Scholarly opinion seems to favour a generalization of Mosala's view of Micah (Mosala 1989:119-121) by viewing most of the prophets as upper class people. Isaiah, for example, seems to have been a scribe in the royal court, Jeremiah a fairly wealthy person (owning land and employing a private scribe), and Ezechiel a priest. Even a prophet like Amos, whom the text claims to have been a herdsman (Amos 7:14), seems to have occupied a fairly high social position (Heyns 1989), while Hosea could not have come from mean ranks either, since he seems to have had fairly detailed knowledge of political affairs and was, in the words of Mays (1969:2) 'even acquainted with occasional esoterica like the graveyard of Memphis (9.6)'.

Had these people indeed belonged to the upper classes, there are quite a few obstacles in the way of identifying them with Scott's 'rupturers' of the public transcript. Firstly, in Scott's theory it is a precondition for a charismatic rupturing of the public transcript that the speaker, in a quite literal sense, speaks *on behalf of* the oppressed (Scott 1990:222). To be effective, the phraseology of a verbal rupture *has* to derive from the hidden transcript itself. In fact, the verbal 'rupture' simply gives air to what has been practised many times off stage among the oppressed. This means that, to be legitimate and effective, the charismatic must derive from an equally *subordinate* group (Scott 1992:223). On the basis of present information this cannot be said of the prophets.

Were the prophets then perhaps renegade members of the upper classes? Although Scott (1990:124) acknowledges in passing the role Weber's 'pariah-intelligentsia', such as renegade lower clergy, would-be prophets, pilgrims, etc., may play in rupturing the public transcript, he focusses attention on the role of the oppressed themselves. He says, 'If formal political organization is the realm of the elite (for example, lawyers, polititians, revolutionaries,[7] political bosses), of written records ..., and of public action, infrapolitics is, by contrast, the realm of informal leadership and nonelites, of conversation and oral discourse, and of surreptitious resistance' (Scott 1990:200). The kind of resistance he has in mind is *confined* to 'the informal networks of kin, neighbors, friends, and community ...' (Scott 1990:200). The 'writing' prophets simply do *not* meet these requirements.

Thirdly, being a renegade in terms of one's own social class does not guarantee acceptance by the classes for whose sake one turned renegade. There is no evidence that biblical prophets (after Elijah) joined the lower ranks or were accepted by them. In terms of Scott's theory one may even conjecture that, since the hidden transcript is a means of survival and, for that reason, a well protected

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7   Although Scott is here referring to present-day revolutionaries, it remains instructive to note
     where he classifies them on the social ladder. For an interpretation of Micah as such a
     'revolutionary', see Pixley 1991.

secret, an undesired 'publication' of its contents would not be welcomed by the oppressed. Not only because that would 'rupture' the secrecy of their code, but also because somebody from the upper classes spoke out 'for' them. They would, consequently, not have recognized 'charisma' in such people. This may explain why ordinary people did not take the prophets seriously. Rather than explaining the social location of prophetic action, these arguments from silence seem to explain why Isaiah, for example, withdrew from society (Is 8:16-18), or the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance Carroll detects in prophetic behaviour.

Fourthly, one should not reduce prophetic talk to the verbal whipping of the powerful over oppressive socio-economic issues.[8] On the one hand they also (in some instances even mostly) spoke about things unrelated to social oppression, such as idolatry, negligence in promoting monoyahwism, or international affairs. Books like Obadiah, Habakkuk, and Nahum contain no references at all to social injustices in Israelite society. On the other hand they, at times, lashed our equally hard against the commoners.

These considerations seem to argue that, to identify the social location of the writing prophets as 'charismatic rupturers of the contemporary elite public transcript' would perhaps rupture the confinements of Scott's brilliantly conceived theory. At the most one could say that, *had* it been their intention to speak 'on behalf of' the oppressed, they were, in all probability, not very successful in doing so, and *had* the prophets intended to negotiate a dialogue between the public and hidden transcripts of their societies, this negotiation does not seem to have been particularly successful either.

2.3   Public health physicians?

A description from Scott's theory that would perhaps fit the prophetic role would be 'public health physicians' (Scott 1990:218). He explains this metaphor for 'social analysts' as follows, 'A public health physician may not be able to predict whether a particular individual will fall ill, but he or she may be able to say something useful about the conditions that may promote an epidemic. Epidemics of political courage, of public declarations of the hidden transcript do occur, and part of the explanation for them is entirely structural.'

From what we know about them the prophets' role would fit that of public health physicians - so that they acted in much the same way as academics, clergy people, social scientists or political analysts do today. This is not to suggest that there had been such a class of people in Israelite society but merely to draw an analogy between social roles. They could have been alert and informed members of the upper classes not necessarily bent on speaking 'for' or 'on behalf of' the oppressed, but people who saw a collapsing society and did what they could to make the rulers and poweful as well as powerless people aware of the 'state of the nation'. Matthews & Benjamin (1992) might just be right in their judgement that the prophets belonged to the 'loyal opposition to the king' that pointed out the

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8   Gross (1991) rightly warns against the tendency of picturing the prophets as though the were calling for the destruction of social structures and institutions. Although Gross's assessment does not rest on a social analysis it does what Carroll (1991) pleads for, namely to first take the *texts* seriously.

consequences of abusive policies (see, however, footnote 1). In doing so, some might have overstepped the mark by going public, thereby declaring themselves renegades. In troubled times renegades often pay the price. Tradition has it that, rather than having payed attention to what these prophets had to say, the powerful summarily chased away some of them (Am 7:12), while others were mocked (Is 28:9,13),[9] imprisoned (Jr 37-39) killed (Jr 26:20-23) or simply ignored. The question is, *why*?

Was it because they were viewed as liminals who overstepped the limits ascribed to them by the public transcript? This is improbable, since they were no liminal figures. A plausible reason for their 'failure of mission' could be traced to the style of their public speech that attached labels of shame to the powerful (see 2.1 above). 'Shamed households,' Matthews & Benjamin (1993:144) write, 'reacted to their label by either attempting to minimize its effect or by attempting to capitalize on its benefits... The rich ... generally appealed their label, while the poor more often accepted the label and tried to use it in their advantage'. Folk wisdom observed, 'Wealth protects the rich; poverty destroys the poor' (Pr 10:15).

One way to minimize the effects of public shaming was to show one's power over the scorner. While David had still been powerless after Absalom's coup, he accepted Shimei's scornful labels of 'Murderer' and 'Criminal' (2 Sm 16:7), but he made sure to instruct Solomon to restore the family's honour by punishing Shimei (1 Ki 2:8-9). That could be one of the reasons why some of the prophets were chased away, mocked, imprisoned or executed by their addressees. The success of such actions would - at least according to the public transcript and for the sake of their own safety! - convince bystanders of the 'foolishness' of the prophets, because folk wisdom taught them, 'A good man's words will benefit many people, but you can kill yourself with stupidity' (Pr 10:21), 'Be careful what you say and protect your life. A careless talker destroys himself' (Pr 13:3) and 'A fool does not care whether he understands a thing or not; all he wants to do is to show how clever he is' (Pr 18:2).

The success of the powerful audiences' reaction to the prophets might thus have publically labeled the 'physicians' themselves as fools. This would have removed any cause for people of standing to listen to what they had to any longer, while their fate would have discouraged the oppressed from rupturing the public transcript themselves.

4.   The effect of prophetic communication

4.1   The visible effect

If we ask, as we have already started doing, what the effect of prophetic action was, 'effect' should first be defined. The biblical text suggests that the intention of prophetic action was to persuade their audiences - whether from the upper or the lower classes - to *change* their economic, social, political and religious ways. The

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9   That is, on the interpretation that these words should be ascribed to the prophetic voice 'quoting' his opposition. See, however, Halpern (1986), according to whom these words were uttered by the prophetic voice itself and mocked the priests.

powerful was to be persuaded not to exploit and tread the powerless down, not to make treaties with foreign nations and to put their trust in Yahweh, while everybody was to stop serving foreign gods. The effect of the prophetic messages should thus, in a first movement at least, be judged by the measure in which these objectives had been obtained.

We noted already that the powerful do not seem to have cared very much about what the prophets had to say on 'home affairs'. Moreover, both communities, Ephraim as well as Judah, ended up in destruction, so that prophetic speech does not seem to have had much effect on political developments either. The same is true of economic developments. For over two centuries the prophets kept on saying more or less the same things about the oppression of the poor.[10] Even the Nimside dynasty, that came to power on the instigation of people like Elijah and Elisha and that subsequently introduced strict legislation regarding the treatment of poor and liminal people, was such a political and economic disaster that it was forced, under Jeroboam II, to revert to the policies followed by Ahab that had triggered the Jehu revolution in the first place - only to be confronted by another prophet, Amos, who was summarily chased away.

But what about the ordinary people? This is, of course, difficult to determine, since in the biblical text as we have it now not only women's voices (Exum 1989; see also Zakovitch 1990; Brenner & Van Dijk-Hemmes 1993), but also the voices of ordinary people have suffered a 'narrative death'. Even the Deuteronomistic History and Chronicles, both of which frequently mention prophetic activity, for some or other reason chose not to refer to the 'writing' prophets at all (for details, see Deist 1990) and are silent about any prophetic influence on ordinary people.

One may, however, infer relative failure in their case as well, since prophetic accusations against (at least) the religious behaviour of ordinary people remained very much the same for over two centuries. The ordinary folk seem to have kept on serving more Yahwehs or other gods. This inference is underscored by archaeological evidence from numerous high places and road side sanctuaries. It was only during and after the exile that monoyahwism and, finally, monotheism triumphed - although that triumph should perhaps not be attributed to the success of the prophets, but rather to the social triumph of *priestly* circles.

4.2   The invisible effect

4.2.1   On the positive side

Did the prophetic effort then have no effect at all? It is very difficult to say. There may be some indications of success. For one, the Deuteronomistic History not only pictures Elijah as a champion of the poor and oppressed but specifically links the revolution of Jehu to prophetic activity in the Elijah circle. But what kind of success was this? The revolution was extremely violent, in fact so bloody that it was denounced by another *prophet* (Hos 1:4). Nevertheless, the Nimside dynasty of Jehu seems to have reckoned with the power of prophetic insurrection, since it devoted a specific section of its legislation to prophets in order to curb their power

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10 See, for instance, Margeret Parker's insightful analysis of specific stereotype metaphors
     reoccurring in prophetic speech (Parker 1990).

(Dt 13). This might point to an acknowledgement of the success of prophetic influence, at least among the ruling classes.

Secondly, one might argue that prophetic traditions of resistance must have had some success, since not only had these traditions been handed down from generation to generation. They were also collected and edited. That is, after all, the reason why these books are now in the Hebrew Bible. At least some circles must have found the messages of these books relevant enough to preserve and edit them. The longivity of the tradition could be accounted for in terms of the success of prophetic actions.

Thirdly, there may, in spite of the arguments to the contrary presented above, be some sense in linking prophetic activity to Scott's model of the workings of resistance, perhaps not with a view to determining their social location, but to explain the longivity of their tradition. Renegade prophets might certainly have served in one way or another to 'publicize' the hidden transcript of resistance current among the oppressed, thereby rupturing the public transcript. Preserved folk wisdom does indeed contain proverbs that give an glympse of the 'hidden transcript' that circulated among the poor people of Israel and that might just be echoed in prophetic speech. Consider, for example (TEV), 'Those who are deceitful are hungry for violence' (Pr 13:2b); 'A rich man has to use his money to save his life, but no one threatens a poor man' (Pr 13:8); 'Unused fields could yield plenty of food for the poor, but unjust men keep them from being farmed' (13:23 - cf NIV); 'A good man's house will still be standing after an evil man's house has been destroyed' (Pr 14:11); 'The Lord will destroy the homes of arrogant men, but he will protect a widow's property' (Pr 15:25); etc. There is a distinct similarity between these folk sayings and the message of the prophets labelling the rich and powerful as sinners, perpetrators of violence, fools, and the like.

The fact that the prophets were mocked, chased away, detained and even killed by the powerful classes may, as hinted at earlier, be interpreted as typical of the reactions of powerful people to those who rupture the public transcript: power silences resisters. But although individual resisters might be silenced, resistance itself is not at all quenched by such acts. The tradition goes on and gathers momentum (the texts were enlarged and edited!). This notion could provide an explanation for the repeated appearance of prophetic voices of resistance for over two centuries as well as for the preservation of the tradition.

One could, finally, perhaps also argue with an eminent scholar like S R Driver (see Weinfeld 1972:293) that the Deuteronomic-Deuteronomistic movement with its strong emphasis on justice in social, economic and political life sprang from and continued the prophetic spirit of resistance to marginalization and oppression.[11] One might perhaps also argue that it was prophetic influence that caused the Deuteronomic code to go beyond the Covenant Code in its drive for social justice (see Weinfeld 1972:288-292). Moreover, the fact that at least a

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11 If such a link could be established it would, according to the analysis by Patricia Dutcher-Walls (1991), fit the picture of the higher social standing of the prophets. According to her the Deuteronomists were part of an elitist professional group in the heart of the struggle for power during the reign of Josiah.

prophet like Jeremiah could be cited as an example of a Deuteronomistically inspired prophecy and the fact that most pre-exilic prophetic books underwent an exilic Deuteronomistic redaction seem to favour such an interpretation.

However, before too hasty conclusions are drawn along these lines a few counter arguments should be considered.

4.2.2   On the negative side

The arguments that (a) the tradition of resistance could not be silenced by the power of the upper classes, and (b) the traditions about the prophets were collected, edited and passed on, could be countered by the question: what has that tradition, apart from having been passed on from generation to generation, achieved in *Israelite* society in which it supposedly occurred? Was that society so much better off than other near Eastern societies where renegade prophets did not operate? Further, can the 'humanistic' tendencies in Deuteronomic legislation really be ascribed to prophetic influence? Weinfeld (1972:293-297), for one, has made out a strong case that these tendencies derived from *wisdom* circles. Moreover, even if one would grant the improbable connection between prophecy and Deuteronomism, one is faced by an enigma: why would precisely the Deuteronomistic History - even though it often refers to prophetic predictions by otherwise unknown characters - remain silent not only about the activities of the 'writing' prophets themselves but also about prophetic involvement in resistance movements after Elijah? This fact makes it at least highly problematic to view the Deuteronomistic movement as a result of prophetic resistance.

What is more, a link between prophetic resistance and the Deuteronomistic movement would not be all that flattering for prophecy. Deuteronomy, often viewed as the book of social justice par excellence, is not really that innocent. There is an alarming (even dangerous) particularity about Deuteronomy's justice (see Deist 1994).

The society reflected in this book exhibits a sense of vulnerability and a great deal of internal anxiety (Stuhlman 1991). Its value system breathes a spirit of ethnocentrism and *Fremdenfeindlichkeit*, and overtly advocates iconoclasm - even ethnic cleansing. 'According to Deuteronomy,' Weinfeld (1972:229) observes, 'the laws of the Torah apply only to the true Israelites, that is members of the Israelite nation by blood and race, whereas the resident alien is not deemed to be a true Israelite ...'. While the priestly writers distinguished between 'natives' (everybody within the boundaries of Israel) and 'foreigners' (everyone outside the national borders), the social polarity in Deuteronomy is between 'brother' and 'foreigner' inside the national borders.

Moreover, Deuteronomy's special brand of social polarity allows for legal discrimination between 'brother' and 'foreigner'. It is, for instance, not permissible for a 'brother' to eat something that died of itself, but permissible to give such meat to the 'foreigner' (Deut. 14:21; compare, however, Lev. 17:15). Special provision is also made for the poor *Israelite* (Deut. 15:7-15). While the law allows for the charging of interest on loans to foreigners, it forbids the same to be done in the case of 'brothers' (Deut. 15:3; 23:19-20).

More than that, the book promotes exclusivism *within* the ethnic group. Deuteronomy, Stuhlman (1991) observes, attempted to produce a programme in which the integrity of Israel's inner boundaries is (re)established and clarified in order to protect insiders from potentially harmful outsiders, especially *indigenous* outsiders.

Were these really the values produced by the prophetic tradition? If so, how should one then judge the success of the movement?

5.   Conclusion

The 'writing prophets' of the First Testament comprise an enigmatic collection. We do not really know from where these books really originated. If they originated from real historical individuals - as the vast majority of scholars still holds - we know very little about them or their social location. Moreover - and this is crucial - we are ignorant of the effect of their speeches: was it beneficial or harmful? One therefore has to apply great caution in interpreting these texts.

That would, first of all, mean that one has to guard against an all too easy romantization of 'prophecy' or 'prophetic calling' simply because the texts, among other things, speak out against social injustice. To reduce these books to socio-economic talk would be to violate their literary integrity.

Secondly, our ignorance should warn against naive modern imitations of prophetic behaviour and rhetoric. Even if one accepts that what they did was to rupture the public transcript, we have to acknowledge that we simply do not know what the effect of such ruptures was, neither in the fold of the powerful nor for the oppressed people. It could thus be counterproductive to view them as 'rupturers' and to simply repeat their actions.

Thirdly, we should not rationalize about the 'essence of prophecy' to make these texts fit (and legitimize) our own programmes. They should at least be interpreted as products of a particular culture with its own codes and problems.

Nevertheless, our ignorance that gives rise to these uncertainties should not preclude an imaginative reading of the prophetic texts. Our knowledge of the problematic nature of interpreting them can, rather than forestalling interpretation, stimulate the imagination. For instance, if we for a moment accept the historicity of the prophetic figures and view them as mere upper or middle class 'public health physicians', their attempts at revealing hypocrisy, reminding the powerful of their accountability, and other acts of 'rupturing the public transcript' may show that even middle and upper class people can have a true consciousness and can give voice to that consciousness in public, where the oppressed dare not speak. What kind of action would such a realisation create in our case? Would we be put off by our inability to speak 'on behalf of' oppressed people? Would we keep silent because we cannot detect any real effect of prophetic action? How calculated should one's actions be?

If, on the other hand, these books are the creations of later poetic imagination, these poets would seem to have argued that, *had there been* public speakers like Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Jeremiah rupturing the public transcript, the disaster would probably not have occurred. This position suggests an interesting occasion for imaginative interpretation, since we may then use these texts in a

counterfactual argument: what if there had been timely prophets who would have said ...? Would what the poets let them say be the right things to say in those circumstances? What if such prophetic speech would indeed have succeeded in rupturing the public transcript? What if such a rupture had been untimely? What if the powerful had listened to the prophets? What if the oppressed would have rejected the 'physicians'?

Pondering such questions would already make us read these texts with greater care (in stead of reducing them to a few social criticisms that would justify our activism) and fascilitate a dialogue with them in their strangeness (in stead of the typical exgetical monologue forcing them into our grids). Through such a dialogue we might just be lured into another dialogue, that with our own context: What if we acted likewise in our situation? What if we remained silent too long? What, compared to that situation, would constitute *dialogue* in our social order? What would 'prophetic speech' look like in our changed world?

Already the fact that we, for a playful moment, come to *see* these texts as strange and problematic would break the hegemony of tradition on their meaning. Once they are recognized as foreign and strange, the possibility of *dialogue* is created. And the moment we take our different conflicting theories on these books seriously as intertexts they may come alive, stir the imagination and direct our actions.

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