

The Prophetic Tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures

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Reading: “An Imaginative Portrait of Elijah” Frederick Buechner
(quoted in *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures* by Frank Frick)

In the contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal to see whose God was the real article, Elijah won the first round hands down. Starting out early in the morning on Mt. Carmel, the prophets of Baal pulled out all the stops to get their candidate to set fire to the sacrificial offering. They danced around the altar until their feet were sore. They made themselves hoarse shouting instructions and encouragement at the sky. They jabbed at themselves with knives thinking that the sight of blood would start things moving if anything would, but they might as well have saved themselves the trouble.

Although it was like beating a dead horse, Elijah couldn't resist getting in a few digs. “Maybe Baal's flown to Bermuda for the weekend,” he said. “Maybe he's taking a nap.” The prophets whipped themselves into greater and greater frenzies under his goading, but by mid-afternoon the sacrificial offering had begun to get a little high, and there was still no sign of fire from above. Then it was Elijah's turn to show what Yahweh could do.

He was like a magician getting ready to pull a rabbit out of a hat. First he had dug a trench around the altar and filled it with water. Then he got a bucket brigade going to give the offering a good dowsing too. Then as soon as they'd finished a third go-round, the whole place was awash, and Elijah looked as if he'd just finished swimming the channel. He then gave Yahweh the word to show his stuff and jumped back just in time.

Lightning flashed. The water in the trench fizzled like spit on a hot stove. Nothing was left of the offering but a pile of ashes and a smell like the Fourth of July. The onlookers were beside themselves with enthusiasm and at a signal from Elijah demolished the losing team down to the last prophet. Nobody could say whose victory had been greater, Yahweh's or Elijah's.

Sermon

As was mentioned in the Welcome this morning, our Living Tradition of Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources. Last year I did a series of sermons on “Wisdom from the world's religions,” in which we explored the contributions of several of the major religions of the world. This year I would like to do a series on another of our stated sources: “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transformative power of love.”

As part of this exploration, I'd like to begin by looking at some of the roots of the prophetic tradition that we carry on as a part of our religious life. Then, later this month, we'll take a look at how this tradition of prophetic witness and action has played out through the last two millennia of history, from the time of Jesus, right up through the civil rights movement of the last century. Finally, several future services will look at some present-day exemplars of the prophetic tradition.

The overarching theme of this series will be that the tradition is not dead. The words and deeds of prophetic women and men can continue to inspire us to be our best selves and to act for justice in an often unjust world.

Our search for the roots of the prophetic tradition takes us back nearly three thousand years to the world described in the Hebrew scriptures, also known as the Old Testament. The first prophets we read about in ancient Israel emerged in the context of the beginnings of monarchy. And, in fact, early on, prophets were often attached to the royal court as paid professional advisors.

Among the early prophets, in the ninth century B.C.E., was Elijah, whom we heard about in the reading this morning. Elijah is portrayed as one who intervenes in times of crisis, combating social ills by caring for the poor and punishing the unjust. The story of Elijah on Mount Carmel that I related earlier highlights his role as one who keeps the faith in a world that has sold out to idolatry. As spokesman and advocate for the one true God, Elijah calls into question the legitimacy of other lesser gods, and displays their ultimate impotence. But the key here is that Elijah is merely a channel through which the truth and power of God are expressed and displayed. Elijah is God's human representative.

While, as I mentioned, the early prophets were often embedded into the ruling establishment of their day, by the eighth century B.C.E that was no longer so much the case. A common feature of all the prophets was that, as spokesmen for God, they all denounced what they saw as concrete social and spiritual evils. The "Latter Prophets" such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah, to name just a few, came to challenge not only the personal shortcomings of their fellow citizens, but also to challenge and counterbalance the kings and priests.

One of my favorites of these prophets who had the courage to speak truth to power was Amos. Amos rose from humble beginnings, and came to challenge the complacency of the privileged. He lived in prosperous times, but times of wealth, pride, and corruption. The rich lived extravagantly. But at the same time, the poor were sorely afflicted and exploited. In fact, archaeological data support the assessment that during this period "the rich got richer and the poor got poorer." [Frank Frick, *A Journey Through the Hebrew Scriptures*, p.363]

In this context, Amos begins by calling to judgment surrounding nations for their transgressions against justice. But he doesn't stop there. He brings his – or rather God's – judgment closer to home, to his own nation of Israel. He confronts the priests. He calls the well-to-do women of the city "fat cows of Bashan." He doesn't pull his punches.

In one of my favorite passages of Amos, he critiques the outward trappings of the religious practices of the day, calling instead for a return to the core of basic values that should be at the heart of religious life. This passage comes from Amos 5: 21-24, in which Amos is directly quoting God:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and cereal offerings, I will not accept them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Amos is essentially telling his people – on behalf of God – to stop talking the talk and start walking the walk. That is a very typical prophetic message, one that is certainly appropriate in just about every age.

I first learned about Amos and the other prophets from Dr. Bruce Birch, my seminary Old Testament professor. Dr. Birch also wrote an excellent book, *Let Justice Roll Down*, from which I will draw in summing up the essential core of the early prophetic tradition. First, as Birch points out, “The prophets did not speak their own word to Israel, but spoke as the representatives of Yahweh, mediating a divine word to Israel.” In fact, “The prophetic literature is constantly punctuated with the phrase ‘Thus says the LORD’”, which is understood by biblical scholars as a standard messenger formula. From the standpoint of the prophets themselves, this formula could be seen as a way of giving their own words more clout. Presumably people would give more credence to the words of God than to those of Amos.

This notion that prophets are messengers of God, or spokespersons for God, has carried on through the centuries. But for many of us this notion may be problematic, along with the idea that the scriptures themselves are really the directly quoted words of God. However, such skepticism need not negate altogether the value of prophetic witness. As for me, I prefer to think of the prophets as speaking not on behalf of God so much as speaking on behalf of Truth. All of the issues about what exactly is truth, and where does it come from, are topics for another day, another sermon. So for now, I’ll leave it at that. Let’s just say that a genuine prophet is speaking for something greater than his or her own personal interests.

Another common feature of the prophetic message is the call for people to return to their best selves. To regain their fidelity to the basic core values which they espouse. In the religious language of the Hebrew scriptures, that message comes in the context of a covenantal relationship between the people and their God. In Birch’s words, “the prophetic message can be summarized as follows: God has been faithful to the relationship with Israel and has fulfilled the divine obligations within that relationship, but Israel has been unfaithful, has failed to carry out its obligations to the relationship.”

As for the prophets themselves, a common characteristic of many of them is a reluctance to take on that role. But there is a sense of vocation, of a “calling” from God that ultimately cannot be ignored or resisted. Several of the Old Testament prophets explicitly expressed feelings of unworthiness or inadequacy. And yet, they had the courage to take on the challenge and do what seemed right rather than what was comfortable.

So if you aspire to prophethood, I would encourage you to cultivate courage. People and institutions do not generally react positively to the hard truths of prophetic critique and judgment. Prophets are not usually all that popular, especially among those being called to judgment.

Another feature of the old prophets is that they were not given to abstract formulations of good and evil, but rather addressed themselves to concrete realities in the midst of history. I think one of the weaknesses of some bible study is to treat its messages as if they existed in a historical vacuum. But they don’t, and so some of the specific messages of the prophets, for instance, may not apply to our historical context. What does apply, however, is the importance of the prophetic voice as a means of calling

ourselves back to core values and ethical behavior. And what that points out for me is the essential importance of a new cadre of prophets in each age, in order to address the relevant issues of the day.

And although the messages of the prophets addressed specifics, there are some general concepts that can be traced through much of the prophetic literature. Birch discusses two of those concepts that he considers foundational for prophetic ethics. They are expressed by the Hebrew terms *mispat* and *sedaqah*, which can be translated as justice and righteousness. “Justice (*mispat*) relates to the claim to life and participation by all persons in the structures and dealings of the community.” It’s a matter of basic fairness and equity in societal life. “Righteousness (*sedaqah*), a more personal term, refers to the expectations in relationship for intentions and actions that make for wholeness in that relationship.” So essentially, righteousness has to do with ethical personal behavior, and justice has to do with ethical social structures.

It is when personal righteousness and social justice break down that prophets are called upon to provide the collective conscience and the inspiration to bring us back to those core values. The concrete ways in which justice and righteousness are violated in a given time may vary, as may the concrete ways in which they might be restored. And so it’s up to the prophets of each age to read the “signs of the times” and encourage us to do what needs to be done to restore wholeness to our lives and our communities.

One last point about the prophetic tradition has to do with the relationship between judgment and hope. Birch points out that in the Old Testament record, “the prophets for the most part believe that calls to repentance will not be heeded, and that admonitions to faithfulness will fall on deaf ears.” But, on the other hand, “There is some indication that the prophets held out some hope of repentance to avert or at least to survive the impending judgment.” That depends, to some extent, on the ability of the prophets to remain true to their vision, and to inspire people to appropriate action.

One of the prophets of the last century, Mohandas Gandhi, chose to take the optimistic view. In his words, “First they ignore you. Then they laugh at you. Next they fight you. Then you win.” But of course that requires a great deal of conviction, commitment, and perseverance, and there are never any guarantees. It’s a real challenge to persevere in doing what’s right, and not what’s easy or popular.

The Rev. William E. Gardner tells us that “We all have two religions: the religion we talk about and the religion we live. It is our task to make the difference between the two as small as possible.” And I would add that it is the role of the prophet to remind us of that task; to call us back to our best selves and inspire us to act accordingly.

So may it be.