



# The Prophets and Social Justice: *A Conservative Agenda*

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**T**he prophetic word about social justice is often associated with liberal causes. Indeed, the prophets are sometimes depicted as if they were free-floating radicals from the '60s! This may in part explain the not uncommon negative reaction to discussions of social justice and related sociopolitical considerations in the church—especially in the sermon! In the face of such opinions, it must be emphasized: the prophets were fundamentally conservative (and public!) in their approach to these issues. The prophets discerned that social justice was a long-established value, richly embedded in the traditions they inherited, though often neglected. Generally speaking, the prophets were deeply indebted to their ethical and theological past, one key dimension of which had to do with social justice.<sup>1</sup>

This point is made convincingly in a somewhat neglected article by James Barr:

Certainly it is true that the prophets insisted on social justice, and they were not afraid in its name to challenge the established authorities of their time. But the prophets for the most part were not reformers, and they had no new insights into

<sup>1</sup>It should be made clear that the prophets seldom accuse Israel of breaking specific laws; rather, they “appeal to known norms of humane conduct, of ‘justice and righteousness,’ norms which are exemplified in the ‘apodictic law,’ but cannot be limited by it.” So Walter J. Houston, *Contending for Justice: Ideologies and Theologies of Social Justice in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2006) 70–71.

*In promoting social justice, the prophets were religious conservatives. They built on the ancient traditions of Israel and the central promises of God to call Israel to attend to issues of justice on behalf of the oppressed.*

the working of society to offer. Theirs was not a novel analysis, on the ground of which new perceptions of social need might arise, from which in turn demands for righteousness and mercy in new dimensions might be heard. On the contrary, in this respect *the social perspectives and perceptions of the prophets were essentially conservative*.... Their message was not a new morality.... In other words, the traditional liberal and reformist perception that the system is wrong and that the system has to be changed if justice is to be possible is lacking from the prophetic perspective. Practically never do we find the prophets putting forward any sort of practical suggestions for change in the structure of society.<sup>2</sup>

It is not that the prophets had nothing new to say about social justice, but their radicality consisted more in their rhetorical strategy than their ideas, in their forceful and intense way of speaking older understandings into a new time and place, and by the remarkable way in which they got “in your face” with respect to long-standing communal commitments. Listen to these texts:

And the LORD said to me....“Hear this, you that trample on the needy and bring to ruin the poor of the land!” (Amos 7:15; 8:4)

“What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?” Says the Lord GOD of hosts. (Isa 3:15)

“Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron.” (Mic 3:1–3)

“For scoundrels are found among my people; they take over the goods of others. Like fowlers they set a trap; they catch human beings.... They know no limits in deeds of wickedness; they do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper, and they do not defend the rights of the needy. Shall I not punish them for these things?” says the LORD. (Jer 5:26–29).<sup>3</sup>

Nothing fundamentally new is presented in these texts (see, e.g., Exod 22:21–24). But the remarkably uncompromising and “get under your skin” images of the writing prophets and the fervor and candor with which they address specific issues give them a new force. From another angle, unless these social justice concerns of the prophets were reasonably well known by their audiences (from whatever source), their message would have been obscure, even unintelligible, and they could be faulted for seeking to hold people responsible to unknown or little-known standards.

More generally, the prophets believed that issues of social justice were public

<sup>2</sup>James Barr, “The Bible as a Political Document,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 62 (1980) 278–279 (emphasis added). Without reference to Barr, J. David Pleins, *The Social Visions of the Hebrew Bible: A Theological Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), makes a related statement: “Indeed, the major drawback to adopting a so-called prophetic critique, as is so popular in some circles today, is that the prophetic literature often fails to advocate the kind of concrete mechanisms that would be necessary for the alleviation of poverty in society” (78).

<sup>3</sup>When I have read these texts out loud to students and others, the silence in the room is often palpable.

matters and they voiced these concerns in the public square to their “congregations”; these issues were not simply a matter of private morality. This approach was much disputed by the prophets’ audiences, who complained (in remarkably familiar language!): “Do not preach’—thus they preach—‘one should not preach of such things’”! (Mic 2:6).

The public character of their preaching is one of the distinguishing marks of the writing prophets (beginning with Amos) as over against their forebears (e.g., Nathan or Elijah): they addressed themselves publicly to the entire community, not just to individuals (usually kings). Moreover, these prophets believed that the future of their communities was at stake; *communal* judgment was commonly envisaged by them as a possibility or even a certainty.<sup>4</sup> Issues of social justice were understood to be very public matters in which the *community* must become deeply involved in seeking to resolve the issues raised or it would face a disastrous future (and, in fact, that often happened). To be true to the tradition they had inherited, they *must* preach it!

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If we were to seek to articulate this point in today’s terms, we could say something like the following: the concern for matters of social justice is deeply rooted in the biblical tradition (over six hundred texts could be cited).<sup>5</sup> Anyone who is committed to that tradition will be truly concerned about social justice and, in every age, will seek to address these issues anew with *communities* of faith in very public ways.<sup>6</sup> To be concerned about social justice in this way is then, basically, a conservative agenda. It could be said that anyone who does not attend carefully and explicitly and publicly to issues of social justice in our life together betrays the cause of conservatism.

<sup>4</sup>For an emphasis on community in considering these matters, see Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1991).

<sup>5</sup>For a recent, thorough study of poverty in the Bible, see William Robert Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God: The Social Construction of Poverty among Biblical Peasants* (New York: T&T Clark, 2007). A summary statement regarding the prophets is one not just of poverty, but of the oppression of the poor. The peasants of Israel are facing more than the simple struggle of peasants worldwide. They are facing a collapse of social structures with endemic oppression, violence and injustice” (22). See also David Pleins, *Social Visions*; Hemchand Gossai, *Justice, Righteousness, and the Social Critique of the Eighth-Century Prophets* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

<sup>6</sup>Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, makes a clear and helpful statement of the “dialectic” between the old and the new: “Calls for radical change apart from rootedness in the faith tradition are likely to express only our own desires and not the divine will. Preaching of our historic moral traditions as an end in itself robs us of participation in what God is doing anew in our time, and suggests that we do not believe in the power of God’s word to affect the course of history anew” (257). See also C. J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1995).

## GOD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND SALVATION

What are the sources of this pervasive and wide-ranging prophetic concern for social justice?<sup>7</sup> First and foremost, we must make reference to who God is and what *God* has done for Israel and continues to do.<sup>8</sup> The prime example of divine justice in the Old Testament is God's deliverance of Israel when they were enslaved in Egypt: "Israel knew well what social injustice was because it had been born in that condition" (see Exod 1:11–14).<sup>9</sup> The point is often repeated in the Old Testament: the Israelites were the helpless victims of abuse and exploitation at the hands of the most powerful nation of that age, and God, who identified *himself* as compassionate (Exod 22:27), delivered them.

The book of Exodus roots this divine deliverance deeply in the tradition, namely, "the covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exod 2:24); "covenant" in this context is to be equated with promise, an obligation that God takes upon himself.<sup>10</sup> The Israelites "groaned under their slavery, and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God" (Exod 2:23; cf. Judg 2:18). And God "heard" and "remembered his covenant" and "looked upon" them and "knew" what they were going through (Exod 2:24–25; see the similar string of verbs with God as subject in the divine word to Moses in Exod 3:7–8). A key point emerges here (and in Exod 6:4–8) with the use of the language of "covenant," which God "remembers" and to which God will be faithful: "I am the LORD, and I will free you from the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from slavery to them. I will redeem you" (Exod 6:6). God liberated the Israelites from sociopolitical bondage because God had *promised* to do so (see the divine promises to do so throughout Genesis, e.g., 15:12–16; 46:3–4; 28:15; 17:6–8; see also Deut 7:8).

This explicit link between divine promise and social justice should not be lost on modern readers. What God will do on behalf of an abused and oppressed people is made a matter of divine promise. And God's deliverance of the people of God from abuse and oppression in Egypt is believed to be the fulfillment of such a promise. That this divine action is called "salvation" in Exod 15:2 should expand our understanding of what salvation is all about; in a given context, salvation may include a sociopolitical dimension. What might it mean theologically that the language of salvation is associ-

<sup>7</sup>I cite texts from the Pentateuch and from a wide swath of Israel's history. Many of these texts originated in a time when the prophets had already been at work. At the same time, these passages are deeply rooted in *pre*-Israelite concerns for the poor and the needy (see below), are *canonically* presented as pre-prophetic (a point not often explored, but here assumed), and their basic orientation in terms of the exodus (and related) events suggests a concern to ground these understandings in Israel's early life, even if the particular formulations are much later. See also David Pleins, *Social Visions*, 75–81.

<sup>8</sup>See Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down*, 37–41. John Rogerson (*Theory and Practice in Old Testament Ethics* [London: T & T Clark, 2004]) claims that the purpose of the law was "to make a theological statement about the character of God" (26).

<sup>9</sup>Bruce V. Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible: What Is New and What Is Old* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996) 5. Malchow obscures this point by neglecting the fact that covenant with its associated promises *precedes* salvation in the canonical ordering.

<sup>10</sup>Unfortunately, much discussion seeking to relate the Pentateuch to the prophets considers only the Sinai covenant. To speak about divine liberation without promise is theologically shortsighted.

ated with the divine practice of social justice?<sup>11</sup> Might the *ongoing* practice of social justice be salvific in some basic sense? God's concern about matters of social justice was believed to be so strong and so pervasive that it was built into the very heart of the covenantal promises. And God was and will be faithful to such promises.

At a later time in Israel's history, when the sociopolitical context was exile, promise and social justice are brought together in a similar way: Israel's Lord is "a God of justice" (Isa 30:18), who "loves justice" (Isa 61:8) and "delights" in it (Jer 9:24). To the exiles comes this repeated word: God has chosen a suffering servant as a divine agent and has put God's "spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations...he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth" (Isa 42:1-4; see 32:16-17; 51:4; 9:7). And God was faithful to promises made as Israel is brought home from the oppression of exile. Notably, this justice is spelled out in very specific ways and is given to the servant as a vocation to be pursued: "to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness" (42:7; see Isa 11:1-5; 49:6; 61:1-11).

In both exodus and return from exile (see the justice connection in Jer 23:5-8 to both old and new) social justice is linked to divine promise; this linkage lies at the center of Israel's faith tradition from the beginnings of their existence as a community and moves into ever new moments. This divine action against social injustice on behalf of God's people in fulfillment of divine promise *twice* proves to be a constitutive and salvific event: without it, they would not be who they are. Return from exile, God's "new thing" (Isa 43:19), in some sense "replaces" the exodus in Israel's confession of faith in Jer 16:14-16; 23:7-8, but the continuity with the "old" is remarkably strong. In some basic sense, both of these events were to Israel what the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are to Christians.

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#### GOD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND LAW

The significance of these salvific traditions (especially the exodus) for issues of social justice is made evident in numerous texts. For example, observe the way in which texts such as Deut 10:17-19 move from God's action to Israel's action: "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords...who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them with food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." One might also note that the Ten Commandments are introduced by this

<sup>11</sup>For detail, see Terence Fretheim, "Salvation in the Bible vs. Salvation in the Church," *Word & World* 13/4 (1993) 363-372.

theme (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). The action of God in Israel's past history is to ground and shape Israel's own continuing action on behalf of those comparably abused and marginalized (it is a matter of continuing debate whether one can speak here and elsewhere of the "imitation of God"<sup>12</sup>).

This line of argument often appears in the tradition. I cite but four such texts here. In Exod 22:21 (see 23:9): "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." Indeed, "you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34). "If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them....I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Lev 25:35–38). "And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving him some of the bounty with which God has blessed you. Remember you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today" (Deut 15:13–15).

Texts such as these must be linked to the ancestral promises noted above; together they show that Israel's concern for the less fortunate is deeply grounded in God's concern to be faithful to promises made, which included social justice. That concern was not based on wise social planning, family values, or even existing laws. Such matters may be important, but they do not provide sufficient explanation for Israel's pervasive commitment to care for the disadvantaged. For Israel's tradition, caring for these needy ones was a *religious* matter grounded in a *theological* claim about God. The authority behind the concern for the less fortunate has to do with Israel's relationship with a God who makes promises, keeps them, and acts justly to that end again and again. The prophets were inheritors of this tradition regarding divine justice and divine promise, and such theological claims shaped their basic understandings of and commitments to human justice.

Whatever the prophets' specific dependence on such ancient traditions, from within Israel or from without, such concerns and understandings are evident from an early time in Israel when the basic structure of Israel's society was the family and the clan. Over the course of Israel's history this situation began to deteriorate, for several reasons: the effects of ongoing war, which yielded many widows, orphans, and refugees (hence the refrain, "alien, orphan, and widow," especially in Deuteronomy, e.g., 24:19–22); royal policies that ignored tradition; the growth of cities that broke down traditional family ties to the land, shifting the economic point of gravity, with wealth becoming more and more concentrated in the hands of a few (an ongoing story!). Old Testament literature reflects these socioeconomic changes, with considerable attention given to the less fortunate in text after text. Prophets from various historical settings become involved in these issues.

<sup>12</sup>See the brief discussion in John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics: Approaches and Explorations* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2003) 50–54. See also John Rogerson, *Theory and Practice*, 18–19, who speaks about a "morality of grace" and an "imperative which derives from God's salvation" (19, 25–28).

While the prophets do not often become involved in matters of social justice in the historical books, there are some notable exceptions, focused on individual cases. As an example, take the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21. In the face of demands by King Ahab to acquire his vineyard, Naboth responds: "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance" (1 Kings 21:3–4). Ahab honors this customary law of the ancestors, albeit sadly, for he knows that Naboth is legally right; such ancestral property must remain in the family in perpetuity (for a later formulation, see Lev 25:1–34). It is only when Jezebel becomes involved that this law is set aside and Naboth is killed, providing opportunity for Ahab's acquisition of the property. At this point the prophet Elijah becomes involved and passes judgment on the king, not on the basis of some new prophetic insight, but on the grounds of already existing custom and legislation. Elijah is a conservative.<sup>13</sup>

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Or, take the story of the ewe lamb, told by Nathan the prophet to David the king in the wake of his sins against Uriah (2 Sam 12). John Barton's language helps make our point: "David is properly furious at the case presented to him because it involves not simply theft but the exploitation of the poor man by his rich neighbor. The parable will work only if Nathan can take it for granted that the king...will be outraged by a man who has all he needs and yet exploits the poor."<sup>14</sup> Again, the assumption is that Nathan brings no new prophetic insight into this situation (nor does he cite a specific law); he works with existing understandings of human moral responsibility that he believed David would recognize and even honor, and he presses them home. In making charges of abuse against David, Nathan is dependent upon a long-standing tradition. The prophet is a conservative.

#### GOD, SOCIAL JUSTICE, AND CREATION

Casting the net more broadly, one can say that the lively concern for the underprivileged in the Old Testament has roots in Israel's larger world. One may speak both more generally of "natural law" and more explicitly of ways in which such ethical concerns found their way into ancient Near Eastern literature.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup>See the comments by Waldemar Janzen on this text (*Old Testament Ethics: A Paradigmatic Approach* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994]): "Thus a prophet acts properly as a prophet when he brings God's word to bear on the actions of persons (or groups) so as to judge (positively or negatively) such actions in terms of their own proper ethical paradigms, rather than according to a distinctive prophetic paradigm" (19). More generally he says that "the prophets did not promote an ethic of their own" (161) or "a new ethic for a new time" (169). He holds up a "familial paradigm," which highlights the key dimensions of life, land, and hospitality, as basic to the prophetic way of thinking (26–54).

<sup>14</sup>John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 5.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 32–44, 48–50, speaks of the importance of "natural law" for Israel, not least in the prophets (he speaks especially of Amos and Isaiah, 77–153).

Regarding the latter, one can discern an advocacy for matters of social justice in literature of the ancient world before there was an Israel (e.g., the Code of Hammurabi).<sup>16</sup> As Bruce Malchow puts it: “justice for the weak was a common concern throughout the Near East long before Israel existed,” even if it was not as heavily accented as in Israel.<sup>17</sup> He makes the point more explicitly: “Israel accepted its neighbors’ belief that justice was the responsibility of all of its citizens and especially of the ruler. It agreed that the special objects of social concern were the poor, widows, fatherless children, and sojourners.” It simply “adopted Near Eastern injunctions on just judgment of the weak, lack of partiality in lawsuits, refraining from bribery, just weights, not moving landmarks, and charity to the poor.”<sup>18</sup> In many other matters, Israel adapted such ideas in view of its particular faith convictions, but it is notable the extent to which Israel adopted such matters unchanged.

Regarding natural law, one might speak of the prophets’ appeal, not least in their oracles against the nations (e.g., Amos 1:3–2:5), to “a kind of conventional or customary law about international conduct.”<sup>19</sup> For example, John Barton speaks of the prophet Isaiah in these terms: “By far the greater part of Isaiah’s references to the people’s sin deals with matters which either were not in fact the subject of law (e.g., drunkenness) or could not be in the nature of the case” (e.g., excessive luxury).<sup>20</sup> Among Barton’s conclusions regarding Amos’s oracles against the nation is this: “no interpretation of the prophet can be correct which regards him as an innovator” with respect to foreign nations being subject to certain moral obligations.<sup>21</sup> Barton goes on to speak of “conventional morality” as a key factor among those leading to the prophetic indictment against abuse and oppression.<sup>22</sup>

In any case, these kinds of prophetic appeals do not constitute new directions with respect to matters of social justice; rather, they are reiterations of existing understandings of “natural law” in Israel and the larger cultural context. Again, this prophetic move, dependent as it is on existing standards, should be considered ba-

<sup>16</sup>For a convenient survey of these ancient Near Eastern roots, see Bruce Malchow, *Social Justice in the Hebrew Bible*, 1–4, 76–78. For an extensive treatment, see also William Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God*; Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). See also John Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 120–126.

<sup>17</sup>Bruce Malchow, *Social Justice*, 4. This has its modern counterpart, wherein the care of many a non-Christian for the less fortunate outshines that of Christians, sometimes far outshines them. God the Creator has long been at work far beyond the boundaries of Israel (or the church), and that creative work of God in the lives of people has had many salutary effects.

<sup>18</sup>Malchow, *Social Justice*, 76. He also includes Israelite adaptations of ancient Near Eastern practice.

<sup>19</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 78.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 36. Barton also importantly states: “Natural law and positive law, in classical theory, are two ways by which ethics flows from God: they are not to be opposed as respectively human and divine” (51). Nor are they to be opposed as scriptural and nonscriptural; natural law has a significant presence in the Scriptures themselves. See also James Barr, *Biblical Faith and Natural Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

<sup>21</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 80.

<sup>22</sup>John Rogerson, *Theory and Practice*, uses the phrase “natural morality” in this context and distinguishes it from “natural law” to refer to “a moral consensus common to sensitive and thoughtful people, religious and non-religious alike” (16). This is a phrase that Barton could accept (*Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 179, n. 16).



sically conservative, while articulating these concerns with a new intensity and fervor in view of their particular time and place. If one were to speak of the prophets' novelty, Barton suggests that it would consist in their "maintaining, against popular opinion, that social morality (understood as impartiality in justice and care for the rights of the helpless) is not a mere piece of arbitrary divine legislation, nor merely a human convention, but almost part of the order of nature—self-evident to any right-thinking person."<sup>23</sup> He adds: "Since the rightness of the obligations laid on Israel [by God] ought to be as obvious as if they were agreed on by everyone in the world, how much worse their guilt is when they also have the advantage of a special personal contact with God to endorse them!" (see Amos 3:2).

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In his discussion of Amos and Isaiah, John Barton allows that "natural law" appeals do not cover all of the prophets' references to the people's sin ("by far the greater part"). This suggests that one should be on the lookout for the occasional reference to Israelite law in the prophets, though, in the cases that follow, Israel is in turn dependent upon already existing Near Eastern law. At the same time, it seems to be the case that the prophets' sources are more comprehensive than the Torah's sources; as a result of this exposure, they "bring to light injustices left unaddressed in the Bible's legal traditions."<sup>24</sup>

Two examples may be illustrative. In Isa 3:13–15, God "argues his case" and "enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: It is you who have devoured the vineyard; the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" Isaiah almost certainly has reference to existing laws regarding the harvesting of crops, namely, that some of the crop must be left behind "for the alien, the orphan, and the widow" (so Deut 24:19–22; Lev 19:9–10; 23:22; cf. Exod 23:10–11 for a different formulation of the same concern).<sup>25</sup> This practice, which allows the poor to eat without having to beg for food, is well illustrated in the story of Ruth (2:1–10). But, Isaiah charges, the leaders of Israel have not done this; they have "devoured" the vineyard, that is, they have taken every last olive, sheaf, and grape out of their fields for themselves. They have left nothing for the poor, but instead have proceeded to fill their own pantries. Given the prevalence of this reference in both law and narrative, it is likely that

<sup>23</sup>Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 118.

<sup>24</sup>Pleins, *Social Visions*, 81.

<sup>25</sup>I recognize that there are issues of dating here; Isa 3 precedes Deuteronomy in its present form. At the same time, we do not know how old the roots of the deuteronomic formulations are, though they are likely pre-Isaianic, not least because such laws are present elsewhere in the ancient Near East (e.g., *Instruction of Amenemope*). See the discussion in Pleins, *Social Visions*, 75–81.

Isaiah is here not voicing a new concern, but is dependent upon existing tradition and law.<sup>26</sup>

Another example is Amos 8:4–7 (see also the parallels in Hos 12:7; Mic 6:10–11; Ezek 45:10–12), where God calls the people to account in these terms: “Hear this, you that...say, ‘When will the new moon be over that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale? We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances.’” This concern for proper weights and balances, scales that have been rigged in the merchant’s favor, does not originate with the prophets, but is dependent upon already existing tradition and law (see Deut 25:13–16; Lev 19:35–36, noting the reference to the exodus events).<sup>27</sup> Such concerns were widespread in the traditions inherited by the prophets and so their appeal to these matters is markedly conservative, but the intensity and frequency of their rhetoric sharpens the concern.

Among the implications of this discussion for a “prophetic ministry” today, let the words of Walter Brueggemann, who speaks of the “alternative community of Moses” and whose personal commitment to social justice is deep and broad, express a key point:

The church will not have power to act or believe until it recovers its tradition of faith and permits that tradition to be the primary way out of enculturation. That is not a cry for traditionalism but rather a judgment that the church has no business more pressing than the reappropriation of its memory in its full power and authenticity....The prophet is called to be a child of the tradition...who is so at home in that memory that the points of contact and incongruity with the situation of the church in culture can be discerned and articulated with proper urgency.<sup>28</sup> ⊕

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<sup>26</sup>For other points of dependence on the law, see, e.g., Isa 1:17, 21–23; 5:23; 10:1–2 (murder; theft; bribery; lack of justice in the courts; lack of care for the widow and the orphan). For a convenient outline of sins in Isaiah, see Barton, *Understanding Old Testament Ethics*, 134–135.

<sup>27</sup>See also the references in wisdom literature (e.g., Prov 11:1; 16:11; 20:10, 23).

<sup>28</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 2.