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# The social teaching of the eighth century prophets

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The Social Teaching of the  
Eighth Century Prophets.

Graduation Thesis in the Old Testament Department  
Boston University School of Theology.

Submitted

by

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## I. Introduction.

It is true that the history of the progress of certain periods in the world's history is inseparably bound up with the lives and work of certain men whose influence was exerted in a powerful way upon the nation or world at the time in which they lived. The progress which the religion of Israel made in the eighth century is thus bound up with the personal experiences and thoughts of the four men to whom we give the title, "Eighth Century Prophets". These men are Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah. These names are as securely linked to the progress of their age as are the names of Bell, Marconi, Roosevelt, and others to the progress of modern times.

## II.

A Short Resume of the International Political Situation at the Time of these men.

Let us review for a moment the events and conditions of their times that we may secure for ourselves a background against which we may observe more carefully the lives and teachings of these men. Truly the times must have been "out of joint" to call forth the stinging

rebukes and the great moral and social pronouncements that fell from their lips.

First, as to the outside affairs. Assyria and Babylon, great and mighty empires of the east, were aggressors in a severe and continual attack upon the life of Israel and of her God. The little Jewish states had for years been in a delicate and compressed and forced position between the immense empires of Egypt and the far east. By succeeding westward moving waves of embodied militarism the life of the Jewish nation was made miserable. By throwing their patronage first to the east and then to the south, they had managed in the past to ward off the dangers that threatened. But with the dawning of the eighth century they began to realize they could no longer hope to escape by their policy of diplomacy and humble subjection.

### III.

A Description of the Internal Political Situation and Decay of the Social Order.

Internal affairs were in the same state of uncertainty and disorder. The period preceding had been a long record of murder and anarchy. King after king had

come to the throne of the northern nation, generally by violence, only to be done to death in turn by a leader or captain of the army, and the usurper was in turn despatched in like manner. It was an age of antitheses, of contraries; both decline and progress marked it. Society was slowly and painfully passing through a period of corruption and decay. Morality was at a low ebb; indeed, it had almost ebbed away. The public officials and the aristocracy were corrupt; the judges and priests were mercenary and ready to sell their decisions to the highest bidder. The landed proprietors were hungry for more land, and had no scruples or qualms of conscience over the way they got it, while the rich were oppressive and cruel. It was an age in which moral iniquity was mixed with religious scepticism. Those who had any tremblings of conscience or misgivings at all made attempts to appease the wrath of Yahweh by offering frequent and costly sacrifices. These then were the facts of the condition in which these men found the state when they came upon the scene. They were times of great ferment and unrest, and out of them came a new social conscience.

It is not difficult to understand why conditions should be such. Elisha had been dead only about forty years when Amos came upon the scene, and during those years Israel was rising gradually to a higher stage of

culture. Whereas formerly she had been a kingdom of fighting husbandmen, city life now developed, and "civilization in the proper sense of the word appeared". In such a step, naturally the greatest dangers lurked. "There were all the temptations of rapid wealth, all the dangers of an equally increasing poverty". With comfort came thoughtlessness and cruelty. A great gulf opened between the rich and poor, so that the former could no longer sympathize with or even feel the burden that fell upon the backs of the latter. Let us quote from George Adam Smith a passage which Samuel E. Keeble says is probably the one most nearly priceless for the proper understanding of the prophets of Israel and for gauging their contribution to the study of this problem. "There was a well-fed and sanguine *upper class* but at the expense of indifference to social sin and want. Religious zeal and liberality increased, but they were coupled with all the proud's misunderstanding of God: an optimist faith without moral insight or sympathy".<sup>\*</sup>

\*"Social Teaching of the Bible" Warburton Lewis.  
Edited by S.E. Keeble. p. 52.

IV.

Something of the Religious Message of these Prophets.

There is no mistaking the religious message which they bring to us. It was they who though few in number gave direction and character to the religion of Israel; it was they who ripened the harvest after the seed had been sown by Moses, and the ground watered by Samuel and the others. They moralized religion, that is, they definitely connected it with the practice of morality. It was made an ethical thing. They purified the conception of Yahweh as a God of righteousness; to them Yahweh's moral attributes were co-extensive with His nature. It was Amos who first brought to the nation the dynamic message that God is a God of the moral law. To him, to seek Yahweh meant to seek good. Hosea, in his message, proclaimed Yahweh as being pre-eminently love. Montefiore makes the assertion, "Never has the eternal antagonism of spirit to letter, substance to shadow, been more magnificently declared". The religious contribution of Isaiah was the great doctrine of faith as the condition of salvation. It has been said that Micah was pre-eminently the prophet of the poor. He was absolutely fearless when he faced wickedness in high places. He had a great passion

for justice, and his spirit moved with indignation when he beheld the injustice of the rich oppressors.

V.

The Social Content.

It is practically an unanimous opinion of scholars that there is social content in the words of the men whom we are discussing. In these days of stress and trial, when the world seems to be outgrowing the customs of the past, men have examined the teachings of the past more critically in the hope that something will be found there to justify the diverging views of the present, and to bring forth something upon which to base their authority for insisting upon and furthering plans which would change greatly the present social system. The radical element openly voices the belief that its supporters are the descendants of the eighth century prophets and that the mantle which the latter wore has fallen upon the shoulders of the former. Rauschenbusch says, "The social ideas drawn from the Old Testament have been powerful factors in all attempts of Christianity to influence social and political life".\* Kautsch says, "Since Amos it has been the \*Christianity and the Social Crisis" p. 2.

alpha and omega of prophetic preaching to insist on right and justice, to warn against the oppression of the poor and helpless".

It is true that the prophets tried to get the people to know Yahweh, but their principle<sup>1</sup> aim was justice. They endeavored to teach men about Yahweh because they believed that to know God would be instrumental in realizing justice. They dwelt long upon that idea. Amos exhorts, "Let justice roll down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream"<sup>1</sup>; Hosea laments that "Ephraim is crushed in judgment"<sup>2</sup>; Micah gives expression to the idea when he uttered the passage commonly known as the greatest saying in the Old Testament, "What doth Jehovah require of thee, but to do justly, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God"<sup>3</sup>; Isaiah proclaims that the country is desolate, the cities burned, and the land devoured by strangers, because of the absence of a social conscience on the part of the people,<sup>4</sup> and elsewhere he writes that "Jehovah is a God of justice"<sup>5</sup>. Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Ezekiel, and others speak in the same strain about the supreme demand of judgment.

It is to be noted that many of the passages con-

1. 5:24

3. 6:8

5. 30:18.

2. 5:11

4. 1:7

tain the word "judgment" instead of "justice". However, both mean fundamentally the same. Concerning the word Wallis has the following to say, " The word 'mishpat' occurs in t e Bible in a great variety of connections, and is variously translated according to the shade of meaning. It is rendered not only by the words justice and judgment, but also by law, legal right, custom, manner, ordering, etc. It points to the 'social arrangements' or 'institutions' that bind people together in groups like the family, the clan, and the nation". May we not say then that the aim of the prophets was the establishment of 'mishpat'- i.e. the social arrangements or institutions that had been associated with the worship of Yahweh as over against the 'mishpat' associated with the Baal of the Amorites, with whom the Israelites were fusing?

One thing we must remember in studying the work of the prophets is the fact that if we expect to find in their words absolute justice and truth we are due to be disappointed. They were products of the times in which they lived, and in comparison with our ideals of justice and right in the twentieth century A.D. they might seem to fall far short. In spite of their demand for justice in the clear, ringing cry which reached high and low alike they did not condemn polygamy unless it transgressed the

rights of others. Neither did they utter any protest to the custom of holding foreigners as slaves, and Wallis asserts that they were never concerned about abstract or ideal justice. So far from setting an absolute standard, each makes an addition to the body of truth that had existed before his time. There is a progression. It is ever thus; no one age can claim to know the last word in matters of morals or religion or science, but each succeeding age makes its contribution to what has gone before.

One very fundamental contribution these men made; it is the fact that they put a premium upon personality. The thing to be safeguarded and protected, as they saw it, was not property, cold, inert, unfeeling, and soulless, but the individual, personality. It was divine to them; it had a sacred meaning. Our great industries and the men who control them today might well learn this lesson from the teachers of long ago. It is the condemnation of modern system that individuals are allowed to be assimilated by the mills, the factories, and the sweat-shops as they are. Personalities, full of life, hope, promise are drawn into the yawning maw of these institutions of "big business", much as needles are drawn to a powerful magnet, and then after a short period of time are cast forth upon the rubbish heap of life, deprived of God-given powers of body,

mind, and soul.

Then too, the prophets insisted upon equality. They protested the lack of equal opportunities for rich and poor. They deemed it the inalienable right of every individual to realize the best that was in him. It is true that they did not look for an ideal state when men were fed physically only. The radicals of the present have fallen into that error, but not these wise men of old. The prophets conceived Yahweh as the special Vindicator of the voiceless classes, which was only another way of saying that it the chief duty in religion and morality to stand for the rights of the helpless. Amos, the first of these prophets, was from the common people himself, and it was only natural that he should feel in a peculiar way the burdens of the poor. He looked upon the social evils of his day and grew sick at heart. It was no wonder that he condemned his own nation along with the others that felt the sting of his lash. He felt that it was forever their condemnation that they had "sold the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes, that they pant after the dust of the earth on the head of the poor".\* This insistence upon right and justice was one of the fundamental ideas of Amos, who felt that a society founded

\* Amos 2:6.

upon injustice could not endure. He does not express the inevitableness of Israel's collapse, however, in terms of the operation of social forces as we would explain it today, for the Hebrew thought of God as dealing directly with the nation.

The land hunger of the landed aristocracy was bitterly condemned. The ownership of land is the fundamental economic fact in all communities. Unequal distribution of the land and an hereditary aristocracy have always been inseparable facts. Approximately equal distribution of the land is the necessary basis for political and social democracy. Isaiah's "Woe unto them that join house to house, that lay field to field, till there be no room",<sup>1</sup> and the prejudice of the other great prophets before the exile toward the wealthy would seem to be reflected in the teachings of the synoptic writers in such passages as, "Blessed are ye poor",<sup>2</sup> "Woe unto you that are rich",<sup>3</sup> "Go sell whatsoever thou hast",<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are ye that hunger now",<sup>5</sup> and all of chapter 23 of Matthew. "There was always a tendency among the Jews to identify the wealthy and priestly classes, and merge them in a single body opposed to the interests of the common man!"<sup>6</sup>

1. Isaiah 5:8

3. Luke 6:24

5. Luke 6:21

2. Luke 6:20

4. Mark 10:21

6. Wallis-"Sociological Study of the Bible"

In a study of the prophets it is always questioned whether they identified themselves with concrete issues of the day. A thorough study will undoubtedly develop the fact that they did. Such was the policy of these leaders all along. We know how Nathan took issue with David, how Elijah boldly faced the arch-criminals Ahab and Jezebel and denounced them, how Jehu was supported by Elisha, and how Isaiah opposed definite political policies of the rulers in his day. Some argue that it was this very fact that gave to the prophets their power and influence. Certainly the Christian church of modern times could well sit at the feet of these men and receive instruction in this matter. Generalization is all right, but when concrete issues present themselves the church ought to drop its policy of generalizing and begin to hammer unitedly upon the point in issue. Here we have the Christian church present in every locality of our great nation, teaching, comforting, and standing for principles, and yet when these great issues come before the public we find the opinion and wish of the morally and spiritually wholesome class overridden by the great Juggernaut of political selfishness and moral leprosy. I think a fair example of this sort of thing is the late presidential election, and another is the issue on the League of

Nations.

The attitude of the prophets may be determined by reference to their position on some of the practices and institutions of the day. They were absolutely fearless in their treatment of the social sores that met their gaze. In great burning words Isaiah condemns the luxury, drunkenness, splendid banquets, and finery of the voluptuous ladies\*, and Amos pronounced judicial sentence against those who were extravagant and took part in debauching banquets,<sup>1</sup> and censured the loose and extravagant women.<sup>2</sup> They confronted sensuality in all its shamelessness.<sup>3</sup> Here we evidently have a class of people similar to the modern idle rich who are wallowing in a refined sensuality. By an ethical appeal the prophets attempted to eliminate this sensuality, and to eliminate also the system that invited it or made it necessary.

Contrasted with this extravagant sensuality and looseness of the rich was the abject poverty of the poor and oppressed. It was by no means an uncommon thing for them to sell themselves into slavery to obtain wearing apparel,<sup>4</sup> and worse still was the fact that in court the poor did not have an equal chance with the rich. The former too, were often compelled to borrow money at such ex-

\* 3:16f; 5:11f. 1. 3:12; 6:4-6. 2. 4:1. 3. Hosea 4:13.

4. Amos 6:2

orbitant rates of interest that it meant practically selling themselves to the money lender. Thus was forced upon them economic dependence with its attendant social deprivation. Rauschenbusch says that these evils so affected their moral sensibility that "it reacted on their theology, so that it became one of the fundamental attributes of their God that He was the husband of the widow, the father of the orphan, and the protector of the stranger. The widows and the fatherless were those who had no concrete power to back their claims, no 'influence', no 'financial interest', no 'pull' with the police judge and aldermen of that time!"

It was only natural then that the prophets should attack the institutions that permitted and furthered these evil and spirit-killing practices. What were these institutions? One was the professional soldiery. Wallis mentions the fact that the prophets hurled their invectives against the class of people known in the Hebrew as the "gibborim" or "mighty men".\* The rulers evidently used these professional soldiers to smother all discontent and to nip in the bud any tendency toward revolution. This class of soldiery is mentioned often in the records of the kings, where they are always surrounded with the halo of a hero, and where much is made of their individual ex-

\*"Sociological Study of the Bible".

exploits. Demands for justice directed against the ruling classes were met by the arms of professional soldiers. These soldiers maintained the "status quo" no matter how unjust it might have been. The prophets recognized the difficulty of changing the social order with such a system prevailing. Hence the "gibborim" were denounced as a political institution.

But it would be absolutely false presumption to suppose that they denounced all soldiers. They were keenly interested in just wars. We cannot doubt that if there is such a thing as a "just" war, those who fight it cannot justly be condemned for the part they take in it. However, what the prophets condemned was the fact that the professional soldiery of their time carried arms, not because there was a righteous cause to sustain, but because they coveted the pay-envelope and the privileges and glamour which that life insured. Certainly the prophets would condemn most roundly a despotic twentieth-century militarism.

The ruling aristocracy also came in for their share of criticism. It was not the purpose of the prophets to destroy it and do away with it, but to modify and purify it. Amos gives much space to the duty of rulers and rich toward the poor; the corrupt rulers are

denounced by Isaiah<sup>1</sup>; Micah enumerates the existing evil conditions and indicates the duty of the rulers.<sup>2</sup> It is because of this moral lesion in the body politic that Zion is to be "ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps"<sup>3</sup>. Zephaniah in his message says the civil and religious rulers are "roaring lions" and "evening wolves",<sup>4</sup> and are not to be trusted. The prophets all agree that the government reeks with injustice. Even at that far distant time these men asserted that it was not power that gave divine sanction to their sovereignty, but that it was service, and only the ruler who served had divine sanction. To rule was a responsibility not a privilege. This sounds very much like the convictions of the thinking classes today. The prophets were handicapped in one way in that, although they realized the ruling classes ought to be checked, they knew not how it ought to be done. Methods came later.

The judiciary was also involved in this arraignment. The courts of justice in those times must have been very much like courts of justice today. The judges were unfair, bribing was the general practice, money could always win a decision regardless of the merits or demerits of the facts in the case. There was a double standard

1. 1:21-23.

2. 3:1-3; 3:9-11.

3. Micah 3:12.

4. 3:3,4.

for rich and poor. Class legislation and political corruption are scored by Isaiah<sup>1</sup>. There was probably a greater tendency for wealth and mighty fortunes then to dictate decisions than at present, due to the lack of safeguards and restraining policy. That, however, is not belittling the same tendency today. Great wealth always seems to have its evil spell cast over justice.

The religious field was not neglected by the prophets, as we have stated at the beginning of this paper. Even here were corrupting influences. Some of them were found in the practices followed in the worship of Baal. To place their religion upon an ethical and monotheistic basis would help matters greatly. This was more or less accomplished in the Deuteronomic Reform. To lift the religion out of the pit of ceremonialism was also the task of the prophets. Amos makes Yahweh say, "I hate, I despise your feasts, and I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies"<sup>2</sup>. Even the priests themselves are abominably corrupt; they "murder in the way toward Shechem"<sup>3</sup>.

We have mentioned the land situation above. This was evidently the outstanding problem with which the prophets were called upon to deal, and Isaiah and Micah probably have more to say upon this subject than the other two. We must remember that the population of the nation

1. 5:23; 10:1-4.      2. 5:21.      3. Hosea 6:9.

was increasing rapidly, and that Palestine at best was but a small state. The land question was bound to become acute. Isaiah condemns the land-grabbers;<sup>1</sup> Micah eloquently flays them, and Ezekiel demands that the princes should not cast out the people from their lands.<sup>2</sup> Wallis says, "the book of Deuteronomy---- curses the removal of the landmarks".

The prophets were not "Communists", however. They simply protested against the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. This is serious when we remember that in those early times land was the only property worth mentioning. Doubtless the prophets, could they be called upon today to make their comments upon this late civilization, would just as strongly condemn the amassing of great hoards of gold and silver in the hands of a very few. Men want wealth because it brings with it better homes, culture, education, as well as economic and political power. And as these things increased for this class, they decrease for the more unfortunate class of society. Micah and Isaiah would not countenance easily the making of a score or more of new millionaires during the three years that the United States was in the Great War. The prophets wanted each family to receive something near the same opportunities possessed by every other family, and

1. 5:8-10

2. 46:18.

each child to receive equal consideration and equipment for the battle of life.

We must marvel today at the remarkable balance of mind among the prophets. They had to feel their way along. They remained in touch with actual life. They had a program but did not allow it to control and bind them. Their consistency is remarkable.

There is but one thing in which they seemed to be somewhat weak; that was their idea of a world catastrophe, which is intertwined throughout all their work. It is this which causes some to charge that they were too pessimistic. We have outgrown the idea of a world catastrophe; it looks childish and absolutely incompatible with the character of God. And we wonder why it was that, if the prophets believed God was to intervene in a great cataclysm, they should still hold to a plan whereby they and man generally were to better the world. It may be that they started out with great hopes of a speedy settlement of all the problems which perplexed them and the nation, but when they saw the inherent difficulties of the situation and were brought face to face with the selfishness of their brother man and felt the strength with which he resisted every attempt to better the social condition and realize in some degree the ideal state of which they dreamed, their confidence decreased,

and their philosophy of life was gradually forced to make a place for such a cataclysm as the only way in which it would be possible for the better and nobler things of life to find realization and expression. Many people today are faced with the same problem. Despairing of any progress as social institutions are built today their faith cracks and they are forced to resort to such a world catastrophe as a final method.

We may ask, "Why the interest of the prophets in social justice?" The answer is two-fold. First, The people clung to the nobler conceptions of justice even in the face of distorted social conditions. Second, The Hebrews had no belief in a future life and rewards. If he lost his opportunities and happiness and goods here he lost all. Therefore the prophets determined to make the life and lot of their fellowmen as happy and peaceful as possible.

#### Conclusion.

We have discovered then that there is a great deal of social content in the messages of these men who have been the subject of our study. It is true that the records are only meagre and that there is much to be implied and supplied if we were to make a complete restoration of the life and thought of these prophets, but with what we have we can see that they touched upon many of the sources of discontent and social unrest of their times. Nothing was sheltered from them, and with a wise, discerning, and piercing gaze that could penetrate to the very roots of the conditions which they analysed

they tore the mask from evil so that men could see its real nature. No offender, petty or great, was immune. These men touched upon every phase of life as it had to do with relations between man and man. They denied the right of a sentiment that is expressed in the words of another, "My country right or wrong". "The specific demands of the prophets for justice", says Rauschenbusch, "were reinforced by the conviction that these were at the same time an approximation to that wider national regeneration, and a condition of its final completion". They took no vindictive pleasure in prophesying evil. Their attacks upon existing evils often brought attacks upon them in return. Rauschenbusch is correct when he says that they "shared the fate of all leaders who are far ahead of their times".<sup>#</sup>

\* "Christianity and the Social Crisis" p 32.

# Ditto. p 40.

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