

Prophet-Mystic and Social Justice An Exploration¹

By

CARROLL STUHLMUELLER, CP

Over the last thirty years, scholars have been investigating both segments of the title of this article, "Prophet-Mystic"² and "Prophetic social justice."³ I hope, however, that some new avenues of study will open up: (1) by focusing upon the mystical or contemplative side of prophecy in relation to social justice; then by refining this relationship by investigating; (2) the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of prophecy; (3) the oracles against the nations; and finally (4) sickness, disability and healing.

This last item, in fact, helps to explain my own involvement with prophetic mysticism. Recent research on my part into the topic of sickness, disability and healing – as well as into another subject, world mission – has

¹The initial subtitle to this study was: "*Causae ad invicem Causae*," translated literally, "causes are causes to one another," meaning that important movements often impact and influence one another simultaneously. Each is a cause that produces an effect upon the other. This subtitle seemed more obfuscating than helpful, coming as it did from arcane medieval philosophy. The new subtitle acknowledges other difficulties and the many good suggestions from the two principal respondents, Pauline A. Viviano and Ralph W. Klein as well as from other participants in the centennial celebration of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research, April 20, 1991.

²See J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973); Thomas W. Overholt, *Channels of Prophecy. The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

³Robert R. Wilson, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980); Patrick D. Miller, Jr., *Sin and Judgment in the Prophets* (SBLMS 27; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1982); David L. Petersen, editor, *Prophecy in Israel* (IRT 10; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987); John F. A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Prophets of the Old Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); John Andrew Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth Century Prophets* (SBLDS 106; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

forced me to peer beyond the borders of traditional structures of torah or law whether in the Bible or in today's church. Some of the data from sickness and world mission⁴ challenges important theological positions in these religious establishments.⁵ This latter statement allows us to offer preliminary definition of mysticism: a state of mind, sustained over a long period of time, that reaches beyond normal biblical or church structures and vocabulary for contemplating and communicating God's active, redeeming presence in life.⁶ This mental attitude may be limited to one or several important areas of ministry. Otherwise the person fits well into the mainstream of religious action and thinking. As we study prophetic mysticism, we are forced to come up with further clarification in the question of true or false prophet, in the Bible as in Judaism and the Church.

A few contemporary "saints" have also pushed my biblical studies into uncharted areas. Extraordinary people like Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, or Ernesto Cardenal, heroically dedicated to social justice, show up as poets or contemplatives.⁷ Their intense concern for justice envelops them mystically within a dark night of the soul, feeling as keenly as they do: about the massive annihilation of young people through war without a wimp from government or media; about physically and mentally impaired persons, strapped in the dark or left to wander the streets homelessly; about women victimized into prostitution.⁸ In these unclean, no-god areas, contemporary mystics meet God beyond any form of exposition or structures acceptable to torah or church. These heroic people show how social justice and mysticism each impacts and sustains the other.

⁴Cf., Donald Senior & Carroll StuhlmueLLer, *The Biblical Foundations for Mission*. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1983.

⁵For churches like Roman Catholicism with a strong emphasis upon the sacraments, sickness and disability raise the question: is the church ready to ordain to priesthood a person completely mute who must consecrate bread and wine by sign language; or again, world mission in a land like the Philippines where grape wine was never indigenous and had to be brought across the ocean by the colonizers, forces such churches to face the question, would Jesus demand grape wine, or for that matter, bread, for the primary sacrament of these churches, the Eucharist?

⁶This statement will be nuanced, as there existed outside and within the Bible "normal" ways for ecstasies to express themselves while in a mystic state.

⁷Cf., Daniel Berrigan, *The Dark Night of Resistance* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1971); id., *To Dwell in Peace: An Autobiography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987); Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967); id., *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965); Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (New York: Harper, 1952); id., *Loaves and Fishes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); Ernesto Cardenal, *Apocalypse and Other Poems* (edited and selected by R. Pring-Mill & Donald D. Walsh; New York: New Directions, 1977); id., *Love*, preface by Thomas Merton (New York: Crossroad, 1981). The two great Spanish mystics, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, combined ecstasy and contemplation with a strong practical sense for life. See *John of the Cross, Selected Writings*. (editor, Kieran Kavanaugh; New York: Paulist Press, 1987); id., *Spiritual Canticle*, 3rd rev. ed. (translator & editor, E. Allison Peers; Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1961); Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, 4 ed (London: Thomas Baker, 1930).

⁸Cf., Edwina Gateley, *Psalms of a Laywoman* (Chicago: Claret Center for Resources in Spirituality, 1981); id., *I Hear A Seed Growing* (Trabuco Canyon CA: Source Books, 1990).

One final prefatory remark: in speaking of theological darkness, beyond the border of what is canonically established and acceptable in a religion's Torah or Law, the darkness generally becomes dirty, the morality snagged in outrage and rebellion, the language twisted and scrambled. The "purity" of such mystic moments with God does not come from orthodoxy but from the dark, tangled depths of compassion. We will touch base with this a-moral side of mysticism.

In testing the relation of mysticism and social justice in biblical prophecy, we will not normally delay over the historical setting but rather read the literature as representative of a long tradition of discipleship within the former prophetic books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as well as within the latter prophetic books of the three major and the twelve minor prophets.⁹ This literature represents key movements of pastoral activity and prophetic discipleship; whether northern or southern, Mosaic covenant oriented or Jerusalem, Davidic dynasty oriented, hieratic or popular.¹⁰

Part One: Prophet-Mystic: Who are You?

Mysticism, as already stated, is being initially understood as an overpowering experience that reaches beyond accepted religious structure¹¹ and explanations and therefore leaves the person alone in darkness, at least on one or several issues. Yet to abide in darkness presumes that the mystic does not form another structure of life, ritual and sacred literature but rather remains loyally within the original community of Israel. Paradoxically such prophet-mystics remain simultaneously at the heart and on the outer edge. They reach back to some aspects of the initial impulse of biblical religion and give these religious positions a central importance, overlooking others concerned with ritual which may be even more prominent in the Torah.¹² While still present in the central, authoritative area of Israelite life, especially in the Torah, prophets reach

⁹Cf. the method of canonical criticism: James A. Sanders, *Canon and Community* (Guides to Biblical Scholarship; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984; Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979); *id.*, "The Canonical Shape of the Prophetic Literature," *Interpreting the Prophets* (James Luther Mays & Paul J. Achtemeier, editors; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987) 41-49.

¹⁰These two major divisions of Israel's theology are developed by Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986.

¹¹The mysticism which we are discussing here is quite different from that induced by elaborate ritual, as in 1 Sam 10:5-9. This latter, but in its legitimate forms, is presented by John Eaton, *Vision in Worship. The Relation of Prophecy and Liturgy in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1981). See my review in *JBL* 103 (1984) 638-9.

¹²One of the early scholars to stress the close relation of prophecy to the Torah was Richard V. Bergren, *The Prophets and the Law* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1974). Two others have recently researched the presence of justice for the poor throughout the Hebrew Bible: Leslie J. Hoppe, O.F.M., *Being Poor. A Biblical Study* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1987); Norbert E. Lohfink, S.J., *Option for the Poor. The Basic Principle of Liberation Theology in the Light of the Bible* (Berkeley CA: BIBAL Press, 1987).

beyond many of the official representatives of Torah and add a new moral imperative to social justice.¹³

We approach an answer to our initial question, "Prophet-mystic: who are you?" from a position taken by Joseph Blenkinsopp, that prophets functioned at the periphery of society.¹⁴ This characterization, as Blenkinsopp admits, is difficult to determine. First, the office of prophet is peripheral to Israel in that it originated outside of Israel.¹⁵ Prophecy, moreover, unlike priesthood and royalty which also as institutions preexisted Israel, never reached an independent existence but was always *interacting* with other offices in Israel, condemning or supporting. Persons called prophets performed all kinds of duties, cultic ones at the temple or sanctuary, chaplains or advisors at court, isolated preachers or leaders of communities.¹⁶ Even the biblical titles for prophets, like *nābī'*, *rō'eh*, *hōzeh*, or *'is (hā)' elohīm*, fluctuated in their use,¹⁷ as the well-known passage of 1 Sa 9:9 shows:

For he who is now called prophet [*nābī'*] was formerly called seer [*rō'eh*].

Still other titles show up on occasion. While Deut 18:9-14 condemns many of these prophet-diviners or necromancers, prophetic literature is more cautious and critiques them for their motivation.¹⁸

While society by long experience determined "normal" ways of ecstatic behavior, as seen in the writing of Simon B. Parker¹⁹ and Robert R. Wilson,²⁰ biblical prophecy under consideration here never remained locked within these forms, principally because these prophets moved outside the sacred arena and worked for social justice. Their ecstatic experiences did not normally consist in trances or visions which rendered them incapable of interacting in human life on planet earth but rather in finding God and God's word, in an intense way, beyond the normal place and way for God's presence. For instance, what priests and temple prophets called blasphemy, Jeremiah called God's word (Jer 26). To remain with such a conviction, which Jer 7:5-7 connects with social justice,

¹³Concern for social justice often draws the line between genuine mysticism and false gnosticism, as for instance in the case of the 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kgs 18).

¹⁴Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983) 38-46.

¹⁵The first prominent prophetic notice highlighted the outsider Balaam (Num 22-24). Jo Ann Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir 'All* (HSM; Chico CA: Scholars Press, 1980) vouches for a long tradition behind this text and that of the Bible.

¹⁶John F. A. Sawyer, *op. cit.*, 18-23.

¹⁷This question has been explored and synthesized by David L. Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* (JSOTSup 17; University of Sheffield, 1981) chaps. 3-5.

¹⁸i.e., for acting for greed or in the name of foreign deities: cf., Isa 3:1-3; 44:25-26; Jer 27:9; Mic 3:11-12.

¹⁹Simon B. Parker, "Possession Trance and Prophecy in Pre-exilic Israel," VT 28 (1978) 271-285.

²⁰Robert R. Wilson, "Prophecy and Ecstasy," JBL 98 (1979) 321-7; later developed in his book, *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*.

could help to explain the confessions of Jeremiah, which leaves the prophet with more questions than answers and an ever greater demand for faith.²¹

Biblical prophecy, therefore, never arrived at a well defined, generally accepted job description. According to John Barton:

[prophets] fit no categories that were recognized even by very early readers of the . . . scriptures . . . They were individuals without a status, lone geniuses whom any generic title belittles.²²

Barton also wrote, even more pointedly:

. . . the classical prophets were eccentrics, strange, and alarming figures who broke the mould of accepted beliefs and values but who, in the process, changed those values and altered the national religion into something scarcely paralleled in the ancient world.²³

This status of lonely genius, on the outer edge of institutions, afforded the prophets an unique, absorbing awareness of God's presence and a literary style *sans précédent*.

Prophets, more so than priests or kings, sensed an immediacy of divine presence and divine command. Amos declared:

The lion roars –
who will not be afraid!
The Lord God speaks –
who will not prophesy!²⁴ (Amos 3:8, NAB)

Prophets moved to the outer edge in still other ways. Their interior agony for justice, as in Jer 4:19-21,²⁵ led "to emotional outbursts the diction of which²⁶ goes beyond anything preserved from contemporary or earlier prophets," what Gustav Hölscher described as "prophetic ecstasy."²⁷ In an example from the Isaiah tradition the rhetoric explodes with terror:

²¹Jer 12:1-5; 15:10-21; 17:14-18; 18:19-23; 20:7-18. Cf., Kathleen M. O'Connor, *The Confessions of Jeremiah: Their Interpretation and Role in Chapters 1-25* (SBLDS 94; Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1988); Mark S. Smith, *The Laments of Jeremiah and Their Contexts* (SBLMS 42; Atlanta GA: Scholars Press, 1990).

²²John Barton, *Oracles of God* (Oxford University Press: 1986) 272. He writes of prophets and their traditions as these were understood and edited in the postexilic age, similar to the approach which we are using.

²³Op. Cit., 269. These statements of Barton confirm our earlier position, that prophets remained staunchly loyal to Torah and Israelite religion, even if they drew some of its basic positions to conclusions beyond the range of acceptability by priests and many others.

²⁴It is interesting to note that the NAB, unlike the NJV, NIV, NRSV or NJB, uses exclamation marks here, not question marks. The fact is so certain that it startles one.

²⁵Cf. Guy P. Couturier, "Jeremiah", *NJBC*, 18:22, "Now [in chaps. 4-5] the stress is on morals, both social and personal."

²⁶William L. Holliday, *Jeremiah I* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 151; see also Herbert Marks, "On Prophetic Stammering," *The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory* (ed. Regina Schwartz; Cambridge MA: Blackwell, 1990) 60-80.

²⁷Cited by Holliday, *ibid*.

Oracle on the wastelands by the sea:
 Like whirlwinds, sweeping in waves through the Negeb,
 there comes from the desert,
 from the fearful land,
 A cruel sight, revealed to me:
 the traitor betrays,
 the despoiler spoils . . .
 Therefore my loins are filled with anguish, . . .
 I am too bewildered to hear,
 too dismayed to look.
 My mind reels,
 shuddering assails me;
 My yearning for twilight
 has turned into dread. (Isa 21:1-4)

This literary style may be found occasionally in Torah literature, quite frequently in prophecy. In this way many prophets keep contact with Israel's official religion, yet frequently reach beyond its style and vocabulary in ecstatic outbursts. These statements lead us to be more specific about two areas where prophets broke moulds and appeared as eccentrics: non-fulfillment of prophecy and failure in moral integrity.

Part Two: Prophet-Mystics and Non-Fulfillment of Prophecy

Fulfillment of prophecy turned into a major criterion for judging true from false prophecy.²⁸ Deuteronomy is quite clear about this norm:

If you say to yourselves, "How shall we recognize an oracle which the Lord has spoken?" know that . . . if the oracle is not fulfilled or verified, it is an oracle which the Lord did not speak. The prophet has spoken it presumptuously . . . (Deut 17:20-21).

The Deuteronomic history, in the words of Gerhard von Rad, turned prediction-fulfillment into a "system," so that the words of prophetic prediction became the words for narrating the later event.²⁹ Yet this norm, as R. E. Clements admits in his study, *Prophecy and Tradition*, is difficult to negotiate.³⁰ The criterion is

²⁸For this question. See James A. Sanders, "Hermeneutics in True and False Prophecy," *Canon and Authority*, (ed. George W. Coats and Burke O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) 21-41, who, rightly in my judgment, finds the key in pastoral effectiveness rather than in theological orthodoxy. Gerhard Munderlein, *Kriterien wahrer und falscher Prophetie* (Europäische Hochschulschriften, XIII/33; Bern/Frankfurt am Main/Las Vegas: Peter Lang, 1974; 2d ed., 1979), discusses only to reject most standard ways of determining true prophecy. See my review, *CBO* 42 (1980) 547-8. The pastoral interpretation within rabbinical tradition which can separate itself from the historical setting of a biblical text is discussed by Robert Goldenberg, "The Problem of False Prophecy: Talmudic Interpretations of Jeremiah 28 and 1 Kings 22," *The Biblical Mosaic* (ed. Robert Polzin and Eugene Rothman; Philadelphia: Fortress Press; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982) 87-103.

²⁹Cf., G. von Rad, "The Deuteronomic Theology of History in I and II Kings," *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1966) 208-211.

³⁰Cf. R. E. Clements, *Prophecy and Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) 52-54. Lack of fulfillment never collapsed a prophetic movement, as shown by Robert P. Carroll, *When Prophecy Failed. Cognitive Dissonance in the Prophetic Traditions of the Old Testament* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979).

helpful only if fulfillment is close in time, as we see in Jeremiah, chapter 28, with the death of the prophet Hananiah "that same year, in the seventh month," as announced by the prophet Jeremiah. At other times, however, as in Jeremiah, chapter 31, this criterion does not help at all. Jeremiah's prophecy about the return of the northern tribes never came true; the tears of Rachel, their mother, continue to flow.

The Isaiah tradition, especially in chaps. 41-48, deals extensively with this question of prophecy-fulfillment under the rubric of "former things," that is, prophecies already fulfilled, and "new things," that is, prophecies still awaiting fulfillment.³¹ In each case fulfillment contains an element of surprise. Deutero-Isaiah declared:

Things of the past I foretold long ago,
they went forth from my mouth, I made sure that you
heard them;
then *by surprise* I took action and they came to be. (Isa 48:3)

The key word, *Pit'ôm*, is best translated "by surprise" or "unexpectedly," as in Isa 47:11 or Mal 3:1. Prophecy prepares the way, but it never adequately nor completely enables the person to know exactly *when* or *how* the future will come. The other passage concerns "new things":

From now on I announce new things to you,
hidden events of which you knew not.
Now, not long ago, they are brought into being,
and before time you did not hear of them.
(Isa 48:6b-7a)

Again we meet the element of surprise: "hidden things of which you knew not."

This chapter 48 of Isaiah prepares the way for the second major section of Deutero-Isaiah, chapters 49-55, yet in ways never anticipated by the prophet. The earlier fate of Jerusalem, destroyed in 587 BCE, engulfed the Servant-Prophet who found himself like Jerusalem rejected and disgraced. The weariness of Jerusalem, expressed pathetically in Isa 40:27-31 and surprisingly felt even by God (43-24), creeps into the prophet's own bones.³² Within chapters 49-54 the agony of Jerusalem and of the servant-prophet crisscrosses and overlaps. The golden-tongued prophet becomes the silent servant, even anonymous in the central section of the fourth song, where the prophet is referred to simply as "he" or "him". David Clines writes eloquently here of the mystic

³¹For an elaborate attempt to organize Isa 40-48 around the theme of first and last: Rosario Pius Merendino, *Der Erste und der Letzte: Eine Untersuchung von Jes 40-48* (VTSup 31; Leiden: Brill, 1981). See my review, *CBO* 44 (1982) 487-490, and my own earlier attempt to explain this question, "First and Last' and 'Yahweh-Creator' in Deutero-Isaiah," *CBO* 29 (1967) 495-511.

³²Cf., Isa 40:27-31; 43:24. In fact, the theme of weariness becomes a key word in Isa 40-55: *yā'ap* in 40:30; 44:12; 50:4; *yāga'* in 40:30; 31; 43:22, 23, 24; 47:12, 15; 49:4; 57:10, 62:8, 65:23. Note that 65:23 contrasts with 49:4. Cf., P.-E. Bonnard. *Le second Isate* (ÉBiB; Paris: Gabalda, 1972) 103, n. 2.

experience of the prophet-servant, under the chapter heading, "The Unsaid: Enigma and Ambiguity."³³

Such unfulfilled fulfillment continued into the age of Trito-Isaiah. This prophet means about prophecies that are being fulfilled beyond, and completely different from, the expectation of the earlier prophet. The wondrous new exodus turned out to be abysmally bleak and disappointing. Trito-Isaiah's response, similar to Haggai's and First Zechariah's, looked towards the new temple, yet in ways completely at variance from these latter two prophets.³⁴ Trito-Isaiah is willing to bring shamed eunuchs into the temple and to allow unclean foreigners to function as priests (56:6-9; 66:18-21). For the sake of people despised and rejected, the prophet is reaching far beyond the rules of Leviticus and even beyond the otherwise compassionate position of Deuteronomy.³⁵ He will be anointed "to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and relief to the prisoners" (Isa 61:1). The bonding, therefore, is between social justice and mysticism – sustaining a pastoral position beyond the accepted norms of the Torah, yet professing loyalty to the Torah.³⁶

By this unfulfilled fulfillment Trito-Isaiah is swept into mystic prayer, as we read in chapter 63:

Too long have we been like those you do not rule,
 who do not know your name.
 Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down,
 with the mountains quaking before you . . .
 While you wrought awesome deeds we could not hope for,
 such as they had not heard of from of old.
 No ear has ever heard, no eye ever seen,
 any God but you
 doing such deeds for those who wait . . .
 Can you hold back, O Lord, after all this?
 Can you remain silent, and afflict us so severely?
 (Isa 63:19; 64:2-3, 11)

The prophet is being led by compassion for "the lowly and afflicted person who trembles at my word" (Isa 66:2), for those who are weeping (Isa 65:19), for

³³Cf., David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We & They* (JSOTsup, 1; University of Sheffield, 1976) chap. 2.

³⁴Cf., C. Stuhlmueller, "Deutero-Isaiah and Trito-Isaiah," *NJBC* (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990) 347, "This section [65:1-25] tends towards a protoapocalyptic composition as it sweeps beyond earthly politics and even Temple worship into a new heaven and new earth. It is different, therefore, from Hag 2:6-9 or even Zech 14. While the latter apocalyptic movement was located within loyalists to the Temple and its priests, that of Dt- and Tr-Isa perceived the Lord's presence extending beyond Jerusalem into the cosmos."

³⁵Deut 23:2-9 severely prohibits such "laxity."

³⁶Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God. Yahweh and other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990) 126-132, an excellent piece of research, nonetheless, erases too vigorously the difference between Torah or temple orthodoxy, on the one hand, and popular religious expressions at the sanctuaries or in the marketplace, on the other.

Israelites who are living in the dismal debris of a dilapidated homeland. A wide reach for social justice provided the background for struggling with non-fulfillment and sustained the prophet waiting and still waiting upon the Lord.³⁷

Another aspect of these chapters of Trito-Isaiah leads us into the other point to consider in evaluating prophetic mysticism and social justice: that of thinking and acting beyond the normal rules of morality.

Already Trito-Isaiah broke with orthodoxy, as enunciated in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, about the exclusiveness of levitical or zadokite priesthood which outlawed foreigners and some Jews...; he flies in the face of his own openness to gentiles and breaks with moral orthodoxy in a most violent statement against the Edomites. Trito-Isaiah declares in God's name:

I trod them in my anger,
and trampled them down in my wrath;
Their blood spurted on my garments;
all my apparel I stained. (Isa 63:3)³⁸

Other examples step forward for what we call the a-moral attitude of prophecy.³⁹ In the midst of loneliness, rejection and persecution, intensified by close involvement in the suffering of innocent people, with a heart on fire with passion (Jer 20:9) and a tongue sharpened with exceptional rhetorical skill (Isa 49:2; Hebr 4:12), amid people, as Barton wrote, who were "eccentric, strange and alarming," how can we expect a clean, calm moral response.⁴⁰

A few other examples may enable us to see other sides of this question of prophetic "a-morality." First we look at prophetic involvement in the choice of Israel's first king.⁴¹ We identify the passages by the presence of the verb for prophesying, **nāba'* in the niph'al and hithpael forms. In other words, *nābī* prophets functioned either in the passive or intensive, reflective state – ecstatically.

³⁷The word *gdwd* connotes strong, confident waiting, as it occurs here and elsewhere in moments of lament: 49:23; 59:9, 11; 60:9; cf., Isa 5:2, 4, 7; Lam 3:25; Pss 25:2; 27:14; 37:9; 40:2; 69:7; Job 7:2. Cf., Whybray, *op. cit.*, 59; Bonnard, *op. cit.*, 103, no. 4.

³⁸As mentioned earlier, we treat Isa 56-66 in its canonical shape, edited in the postexilic age. The oracles against the nations are treated more extensively in a later section of this study.

³⁹We are not speaking about immorality, a deliberate breach in what is clearly right and wrong, but of passionate agony and emotional excess beyond rules.

⁴⁰Perhaps an example will help: chaplains in the emergency room of hospitals will never follow all the rules of theologians who write from their quiet desk or who are officials in the chancery office of the church.

⁴¹We bypass the discussion of Saul as *nāqīd* rather than *melek*.

10:5, a band of prophets in a delirium or very excited state, *mithnabbè'im*.

18:10, "an evil spirit from God came upon Saul, and he raged," *vithnabbè'*.⁴²

19:20, Samuel was presiding over a band of prophets "in prophetic frenzy," *nibbè'im* and *yithnabbè'u*.

19:23, as the spirit of God came upon Saul, he continued in a prophetic state (*yithnabbè'*). In that condition he stripped off his clothes and lay naked⁴³ all that day and night.

The prophetic narrative makes no attempt to modify (as did the Targum) nor apologize for Saul's impropriety, nor to explain how an evil spirit of Yahweh came upon him.

Still other examples of prophetic a-morality come to mind. When Elisha cursed the forty-two boys who jeered at him as "baldy" and "she-wolves came out of the woods and tore [them] to pieces," the passage concludes that the prophet continued on his way to Mount Carmel and thence to Samaria. The redactor must have felt that Elisha could serenely go home and sleep peacefully, for prophets were above moral judgment by ordinary human standards.⁴⁴

Other instances occur which raise more moral eyebrow, like Jeremiah's prayer for revenge against his enemies in the final confession we well as his bleak despair, cursing the day of his birth (20:7-18).

Ecstatic experiences, born of intense concern for social justice, do not liberate prophets from, but even propel them into excesses that at best seem mad and senseless.⁴⁵ Prophetic words strike against accepted theological positions (as with Jeremiah's announcement of the temple's destruction in chaps. 7 & 26) and become cruel and revengeful (as in the quotation from Isa 63:1-6 or in the incident of the prophet Elisha).

To conclude this section: passionate concern for justice, the agony of its betrayal and the ineffectiveness of Israel traditional institutions push prophets

⁴²TM is more blunt than this NAB version: "an evil spirit of God rushed upon Saul," which the Targum Jonathan renders more discreetly: "an evil spirit from before the Lord" (Daniel J. Harrington and Anthony J. Saldarini, *Targum Jonathan of the Former Prophets* [Aramaic Bible, 10; Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1987] 137).

⁴³Targum Jonathan is again more discreet, using an Aramaic word which may mean "lay naked" but can also be translated "fell under those having power," *ibid*, 139.

⁴⁴If 2 Kgs 2:23 is read in conjunction with Num 16:35, where fire comes out to consume Korah, we find a repetition of two key words: "to come out," and the Hebrew word "baldy," *qereah*, very similar to the Hebrew spelling for Korah, i.e., "Qōrah." Perhaps, more is implied in 2 Kgs 2:23-24 than ridiculing a prophet.

⁴⁵As Hosea was accused in 9:7. The prophet is a fool, *'ēwīl*, word which in Ps 14 implies moral offense. Or the person of the spirit is *mad*, *mēwuggā'*; as in 2 Kgs 9:11 or Jer 24:26.

beyond the borders of orthodoxy, set up by religious authorities. They are not satisfied with any false or facile fulfillment but continue in a domain of non-fulfillment. Prophets, at least some of them, find an intense awareness of God in a dark no-God land, an awareness so intense at times as to plunge them into rhetorical and moral excesses. Ecstasies are only a razor-edge away from moral turpitude! At times, as in any human situation, the law of averages catches up and they collapse. Occasional lapses do not discredit prophecy.

Part Three: Prophetic-Mystic and the Oracles Against the Nations

The Oracles Against the Nations explode with fury and burn out of control. Contemporary mystics, to whom we referred earlier, pacifists like Dorothy Day and Thomas Gumbleton, may now part company with biblical prophets. Yet as Duane L. Christensen wrote in one of the most extensive investigations of the War Oracles, "No matter how uncomfortable the idea may be to men [and women] today, war and the sacred are integrally related, especially in the religion of ancient Israel."⁴⁶ R. E. Clements confirms this statement: "In fact, the threats of judgment upon nations who were at times enemies of Israel suggest that such foreign nation oracles were a conventional part of the established scope of prophecy in Israel."⁴⁷ Norman Gottwald considered these oracles "one of the earliest, if not the earliest, form of Hebrew prophecy."⁴⁸

For any number of reasons, the oracles against the nations quickly associate themselves with the ecstatic aspect of prophecy: passionate and explosive anger, dynamic rhetoric,⁴⁹ patriotic fever, especially in times of war with ultimate stakes of survival or death. Over fifty years ago Christian Schmerl commented on the "abrupt style" of speech in the use of verbal imperatives and concluded to the experience of ecstatic prophets.⁵⁰ T. R. Hobbs puts it realistically:

... through the use of words and language and symbolic action, the prophet confronts his audience with the awful, terrible reality of warfare. In stark contrast to the stereotyped, official accounts of battle on foreign soil found so frequently in the historical annals of the monarchy, the prophet presents the people with vivid, heartrending visions of a devastated land, a slaughtered and humiliated people, the sword, which reaches the very heart of Judah. It is in the prophetic books that we find poetic depictions of the

⁴⁶Duane L. Christensen, *Transformation of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy* (Missoula MN: Scholars Press, 1975) 17.

⁴⁷R. E. Clements, *op. cit.*, 66.

⁴⁸Norman Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964) 49, as quoted by Christensen, *op. cit.*, 5-6.

⁴⁹Cf., the earlier citation of Isa 21:1-4. This example of terrifying imagery, from a mystic or visionary experience, that reaches almost towards the apocalyptic, came from Isaiah's oracles against the nations.

⁵⁰Christian Schmerl, *Die Völkerorakel in den Prophetenbüchern des Alten Testaments* Würzburg: Richard Mayr, 1939), cited by Christensen, *op. cit.*, 3-4.

horrendous conditions of siege warfare . . . when bodies line and streets, people faint through lack of food, and the fear of the doomed inhabitants gives way to absolute despair.⁵¹

Prophecy, however, moved away from that point where most Israelites and certainly the rulers rallied with hatred against the nations. Many times prophets took up the oracles against the nations from the periphery of their society's attitude towards the nations. Prophets clashed with such central doctrines as the election of Israel and the non-election of the nations or the absolute, divine protection of Israel against the world. Prophets eventually dreamed the vision of a new Jerusalem, a symbolic center for gathering, not rejecting, the nations of the world.⁵²

The same prophetic interaction of ecstasy, international politics and social justice, appear at once with the first classical prophet, Amos. The first and longest single section of Amos' prophecy consists of Oracles against the Nations (1:3-2:16).⁵³

Already in Amos prophecy is transforming these oracles: first of all, isolating the major crimes as those of humanity against humanity, therefore those of social injustice. It is impossible to begin citing the many passages in Amos, defending poor and defenseless people against hardened, wealthy landlords. Amos transformed the oracles against the nations by leading up to a new type of climax, an oracle against *Israel*. T. R. Hobbs writes:

In the so-called "classical" tradition of prophecy, this was oracle is redirected against Israel on numerous occasions. In a clever fashion the opening chapters of Amos include Israel, and perhaps Judah in the universal judgment of God. The tradition continues in the pre-exilic prophets and a climax is reached in the prophecies of Jeremiah. Here Yahweh the warrior fights against His own people, and [in 32:28] eventually "hands over" Jerusalem and Judah into the control of the Babylonians.⁵⁴

The ecstatic element is evident in several ways: (1) in the possibility that Amos' visions, recorded in 7:1-9 and 8:1-3, constituted his initial call to

⁵¹T. R. Hobbs, *A Time for War. A Study of Warfare in the Old Testament* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989) 197.

⁵²Friedrich Huber, *Jahwe, Juda und die anderen Völker beim Propheten Jesaja* (BSAW 137; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1976) shows how Isaiah saw an ever more positive role for the nations. See my review, *CBQ* 39 (1977) 420-422.

⁵³The editor of the entire corpus of Amos' preaching must have seen the importance of the initial oracles against the nations, for he links the first two oracles, against Aram and Philistia, with the extraordinary verse in Amos 9:7. Here the exodus out of Egypt is reduced to a political act of fleeing for safety, something that happened equally as well, Amos declares, when the Philistines came from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir.

⁵⁴Cf., Hobbs, *op. cit.*, 196.

prophecy; (2) in the divine compulsion to prophesy (3:8; 7:15);⁵⁵ and continuously to detect God's intervention (3:3-8; 4:6-13); (3)⁵⁶ in the innovative way of transforming oracles against the nations to sermons for social justice against Israel. Ecstasy, that is, a sustained mental condition beyond what was normal and regular in Israel's religion, secured the prophet Amos in his quest for social justice.

What we have just seen in the prophecy of Amos, appears even more developed in the Isaiah tradition. Each element is more firmly in place: interact on with the foreign nations; defense of the poor; visionary or ecstatic person.⁵⁷ Together these aspects place Isaiah at the periphery of Israelite society.

Each major section of the prophecy (chapters 1-12, 13-23, 24-27, 28-33, 34-35, 36-39, 40-45, 55-66) ends with a favorable outreach towards the nations. In fact, within the oracles against the nations, chapters 13-23, there occurs one of the most radical, pro-nations statement in the entire Old Testament.⁵⁸ Egypt and Assyria are placed on a par with Israel:

Blessed be my people Egypt; and the work of my hands Assyria, and my inheritance Israel.

This statement was far too radical in its friendly outreach towards foreign nations for the Septuagint and Targum. Each made significant modifications. The Septuagint reads:

Blessed be my people who are in Egypt, and who are in Assyria, and my inheritance Israel.

The Targum modifies the statement still further:

Blessed be my people whom I brought forth from Egypt; because they sinned against me I exiled them to Assyria, and now that they repented they are called my people and my heritage Israel.⁵⁹

⁵⁵In Amos 7:15, "The Lord took me from following the flock, and said to me, "Go, prophesy to my people, Israel," the Hebrew word *lagah* can signify a dramatic intervention, as happened when Enoch and Elijah were taken from earth to be alive with God (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:12).

⁵⁶The second citation here ends with a hymn (4:13), most probably a later addition according to James L. Crenshaw, *Hymnic Affirmation of Divine Justice* (SBLDS 24; Missoula MN: Scholars Press, 1975). Yet the hymnic segments (4:13; 5:8; 9:5-6) have not only been carefully stitched into the structural patterns but they equally as well bring the thought of each section to a climax, that borrows an exalted or mystical tone from the cult.

⁵⁷The ecstatic element may be supported in the frequent use of *hāzā* Isa 1:1; 2:1; 13:1; 26:11 (2x); 30:10 (2x); 33:17; 33:20; 47:13; 48:6; 57:8. The term may show it to be a stereotypical formula for prophet in the southern Judahite area (cf., Petersen, *The Roles of Israel's Prophets*, 52-58. Its use in connection with the divine council (Petersen, 86) may be simply a metaphor drawn from the Jerusalem royal protocol or it may indicate an ecstatic invitation into the divine presence.

⁵⁸This distinction is shared with Amos. 9:7, cited above.

⁵⁹Bruce D. Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum* (Wilmington DE: Michael Glazier, 1987) 39.

The oracles against the nations also contain some blatant mythology. Here prophecy sweeps into a moral or unorthodox posture. The passage in 13:21-22 seems to be referring to lesser, alien deities inhabiting the deserted land of Babylon:

Wildcats shall rest there
 and owls shall fill the houses;
 There ostriches shall dwell,
 and satyrs shall dance.
 Desert beasts shall howl in her castles,
 and jackals in her luxurious palace. (Isa 13:21-22a)

Lev 17:7 forbids the worship of these satyrs. Isa 34:14 associates the wildcats and satyrs with the female deity Lilith.

Isa 14:12:23 is also important, for its mythological story, comparing Babylon to the fall of the morning star. The Vulgate calls this star *lucifer*. Jesus may be referring to this episode: "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky," in answering the disciples who declared to him: "Lord, even the demons are subject to us" (Luke 10:17-18). This pericope of Isaiah also braves the forbidden world beyond the grave and finds it peopled with many deceased persons who are active and conscious of one another and of what is happening on earth.

Justice towards the poor and downtrodden also shows up clearly throughout the Isaian oracles against the Nations. As with the other classical prophets, the major crime of the nation is idolatry but rather, first of all, their pride,⁶⁰ and secondly, their way of interfering with God's plans for Israel and the world.⁶¹ God's plan for persecuted, decimated people reaches beyond Israel; in 16:14 it includes Moab, called "a remnant small and weak – *miz'ār 'm'at sē'ār*. Yet Deut 23:4-7, as mentioned already, excludes the Moabites "even to the tenth generation [so that] Israel is never to promote their peace and prosperity [that is, make a treaty with them]." This plan for persecuted, decimated people is expanded to include Israel's future role of "remnant," symbolized by the name of the prophets elder son, Shear-jashub (Isa 7:3).

Finally, the ecstatic or mystical element in the oracles against the Nations appears in a passage which we already quoted for its rhetoric of fearful visions (Isa 21:1-4). One other passage deserves attention, not only for its visionary style but also for its influence upon the famous passage in Isa 37:36 in which an angel of the Lord went forth, early in the morning, to strike down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. R.C. Clements has traced the development of this tradition back to Isa 17:12-14, where this

⁶⁰Cf., Isa 14:12-23 against Babylon; Isa 16:6 against Moab; Isa 23:9 against Tyre.

⁶¹Cf., Huber, *op. cit.*

absorbing and terrifying vision is recounted:

Ah! the roaring of many peoples
 that roar like the roar of the seas!
 The surging of nations
 that surge like the surging of mighty waves!
 But God shall rebuke them,
 and they shall flee far away;
 Windswept, like chaff on the mountains,
 like tumbleweed in a storm.
 In the evening, they spread terror,
 before morning, they are gone!
 Such is the portion of those who despoil us,
 the lot of those who plunder us. (Isa 17:12-14)

The visionary or ecstatic aspect of the prophets Amos and Isaiah enabled them to stand up to world powers as well as to the religious and civil authorities in Israel. These prophets saw a plan of God at work in the nations for the sake of the poor and humble, for those who wait humbly upon the Lord, as in Isa 30:15-18. This last passage (twice with the use of *hāzā* or vision) leads to another expansion seen in the oracles against the nations: a movement towards pacifism in which God alone is to intervene in place of human military force. Here is the ultimate act of social justice for the poor and defenseless. Referring to this passage in Isaiah, chapter 30, as well as to Mic 5:10; Isa 43:15-17 and Zech 4:6, Walter Brueggemann recognizes the liberating power of God over all oppressive and unjust domination.⁶³

Part Four – Prophet-Mystic and Justice for Sick and Disabled Persons

Once again we search for the conjunction of prophetic mysticism and social justice, this time through the prophet's concern for sick and disabled persons. It has been marked several times that mysticism leads a person beyond the borders of orthodoxy, where God should not be present, yet in this "atheistic" or "agnostic" mist prophecy discovers an intense, overwhelming presence of God, at times without the proper language to express it, at other times defiant enough to speak out and so to be instrumental in opening and extending the borders.

We first look at the prophets' willingness to disregard rules of orthodoxy and to touch the dead; second, we observe the prophet's way of linking the cure of the sick with religious conversion, and the call of the sick to the eschatological reign of God.⁶⁴

⁶²R. C. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem* (JSOTSup 13; Sheffield: 1980) 46-47.

⁶³Walter Brueggemann, *Revelation and Violence. A Study in Contextualization* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1986) 50-51.

⁶⁴Ronald E. Clements, *Wisdom for a Changing World. Wisdom in Old Testament Theology* (Berkeley CA: BIBAL Press, 1990) chap. II, discusses "Death, Life and Healing" and the way in which wisdom offered an alternate response to sickness in place of priesthood and cultus. He admits "how

As a basis for our discussion, we note the Torah's position about ritual uncleanness connected with sickness, disablement and death.⁶⁵ Aspects of this topic already arose in discussing Trito-Isaiah's acceptance of eunuchs and gentiles into the service of the temple. Leviticus, chapter 21, is quite clear and prohibits any of its priests from functioning at the sanctuary, if they have become unclean through contact with persons seriously ill or dead, or if the priests show any physical "deformity." This question has been pursued by Mary Douglas with an update and refinement by Robert P. Carroll.⁶⁶ The same prohibition continues into the Second Temple Period, as we see in the prophecy of Ezekiel and Haggai, who decide that coming near or brushing against the sick or dead renders one unclean (Ezek 44:25; Hag 2:13).⁶⁷

The laws of Leviticus seek to preserve the holiness of the temple and its cultus, prohibiting sick and disabled people from entering and defiling the holy place, as is summed up towards the end of Lev 13-15:

You shall put the Israelites on guard against their uncleanness, lest they die through their uncleanness by defiling My Tabernacle which is among them. (JPSV)

Deuteronomy also viewed disease "as the primary means by which God manifests his wrath towards his people."⁶⁸

The early prophets seem to have completely disregarded these Torah rules about cleanness and uncleanness, at least judging from the accounts of Elijah and Elisha. Elijah not only touch but extended himself over deceased son of the

very minimal is the availability of any medical or pharmaceutical help from the cultus" (p. 43). In place of the priestly explanation of sickness as due to guilt, wisdom attributed sickness to folly and therefore wisdom advocated "a prudential looking to the consequences of actions," especially in the postexilic age when Jews of the diaspora had little access to the temple priesthood.

"Uncleanness, in Num 19:11-22, is incurred for touching (*nāga*) "a person who was killed (by the sword); or that died (naturally), or a human bone, or a grave"; in Lev 11:31-32, 39-40, for touching dead animals; in Lev 21:11; Num 6:6-9; Ezek 44:25 for coming near the dead (*bō*). Cf., Karl-Johan Illman, *Old Testament Formulas About Death* (Abo Akademi, 1979) 143-144. See the earlier reference to Mark S. Smith, *op. cit.*, 126-132, who discusses practices associated with the dead and the question of uncleanness or the Temple's acceptance of cultic acts to contact the dead.

"Mary Douglas, "The Abominations of Leviticus" (1966) and Michael P. Carroll, "One More Time Leviticus Revisited" (1978) in the collection, *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament*, edited by Bernhard Lang (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 100-116, 117-126; see also David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity* (SBLDS 101; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987).

"Similar to the situation in Haggai's time, Isa 53:8 may refer to some kind of excommunication from the religious assembly because of physical disfigurement:

For he was cut off from the land of the living
Through the sin of My people who deserved the punishment. (JPSV)

"It is possible that [the phrase, land of the living -*l'eres hayyim*, refers to the temple," with reference to 2 Chron 26:16-21 which has a very similar phraseology, except that "land of the living" in Isa 53:8 becomes "house of Yahweh" in 2 Chron. Cf., Michael L. Barré, "*rs (h)ymn* -- 'The Land of the Living'" *JSOT* 41 (1988) 49-50.

"Clements, *op. cit.*, 42, with a reference to Deut 28:21-24.

widow, three times, till "the life's breath returned to the child's body and the revived" (1 Kgs 17:22). In another example, a corpse was hurriedly buried in the grave of the prophet Elisha. Immediately upon touching the prophet's bones,⁶⁹ the dead person returns to life. Within the traditions of the former prophetic books, therefore, human bones were not contaminating but were, in fact, a means of marvelously restoring life. God was extraordinarily present where orthodoxy claimed divine absence.⁷⁰ The prophets were willing to disregard the rules of ritual cleanliness which separated them from the sanctuary and to plunge into the non-world of spirits and demons. He also sense a firm belief in conscious survival or life after death, a position unacceptable to the priesthood. Isa 14:12-21 and Ezek 28:11-19 combine most of these fearsome aspects of the netherworld.

Clearly associated with sickness and death is Yahweh's image as Lord of pestilence and death. Pestilence and death, indeed, were considered demi-gods that surrounded the throne of God, always at the divine beck and call.⁷¹ A series of passages in the psalms as well as in 1-2 Samuel, Amos, Hosea and Ezekiel, seems to support this position. For instance, in 2 Sam 24, the Lord sends pestilence, to punish David for a census which the Lord incited David to undertake. The passage in Ezek 5:11-17 echoes many words and ideas from 2 Sam 24. These passages manifest the a-moral aspect of divinity: unorthodox if judged humanly, but actually beyond the reach of religious tribunals.⁷²

The belief, not only that deceased persons remained alive but that they could be contacted through recromancers, is plainly evident in the episode of Saul's tryst at Endor. Here the mecromancer was able to summon Saul's ghost back to life. The text speaks of gods rising up from the earth (*'elōhīm 'ōlīm*), so that we are in the fearful realm of divine beings.⁷³

In these instances prophets were willing to wait beside those who mourned the dead, to enter the frightening realm of spirits and demi-gods, and to risk contamination and theological error, to provide protection against serious dangers, plagues and pestilences as well as to console sick, bereaved and disabled people.

⁶⁹The word, to touch-*naga* occurs several times in the prohibitions of Num 19. See fn 65.

⁷⁰If we associate with the grave the biblical literature on *sheol*, and the latter's association with the lifeless desert and the destructured sea - three non-world, according to J. Pedersen, *Israel* (Oxford University Press: 1926, rp 1964) 464 - a profound difference looms between the Priestly, Torah tradition and that of Prophecy and Psalms. See also J. L. McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965) 800-1 for a compact, complete coverage.

⁷¹For the development of monotheism is biblical religion and for the association of Yahweh with lesser deities, see Mark. S. Smith, *The Early History of God. Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990). See also John D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil. The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (HSM 39; Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1989).

⁷²See also Amos 4:10; Hos 13:14; Hab 3:5; Pss 78:49; 91:5-6.

⁷³Cf., Lewis, *op. cit.*, 104-117.

We consider two other ways by which prophet-mystics responded, still more positively and energetically: one, by bonding together healing and conversion; second, by summoning sick and disabled persons into the eschatological reign of God. In the latter case sick and disabled persons may have constituted a metaphor for helpless people, incapable of sustaining a full life, that was freed of suffering and oppression. Yet, the choice of such a metaphor is significant – as though one were to say today that AIDS patients constituted the core from which God reconstitutes the disciples of Jesus.

Prophets like Hosea and Jeremiah consistently united healing (*rāpā'*) and conversion (*sûb*).⁷⁴ Hos 5:13-14 admonishes the people for not going to Yahweh, when they were sick with oozing wounds. While the language is metaphorical, nonetheless, such metaphors presume Yahweh's willingness to receive sick and disabled persons – so different from the temple from which they were barred.

In Isaiah, God inflicts the country with multiple wounds, with welts and gaping gashes, not drained or bandaged, or eased with salve (Isa 1:5-6). Isaiah accepts the common understanding of the Torah that sickness was an apt symbol for a sinful nation. Yet the Lord is not acting to destroy but to move the people to repentance. In chapter 38, the prophet Isaiah has no problem whatsoever of being contaminated religiously by providing a healing remedy for the ailing King Hezekiah – even though here the more traditional theology persists, that there is not conscious, personal survival after death.

We turn now, as our last point, discussing prophetic concern for sick, disabled and dead people. Because of their mystical bent and religious courage prophets were willing to enter into the strange, dark area of sheol or the underworld. In these passages prophecy identifies the people, being called to the final, glorious triumph of God as sick and disabled persons, the very ones whom the Torah prevented from coming near the God of the living. The first passage to consider is from the prophecy of Micah:⁷⁵

On that day, says the Lord,
I will gather those who limp,
And I will assemble the outcasts,
and those whom I have afflicted.
I will make of the lame a remnant,
and of those driven far off a strong nation;
And the Lord shall be king over them on Mount Zion,
from now and forever. (Mic 4:6-7)

⁷⁴Cf., Hos 6:1-2; 7:1; 11:4; 14:5; Jer 3:22; 8:18-23; 30:12-17; 33:6.

⁷⁵Scholars differ whether or not this passage is genuine to the prophet Micah or was added later by the redactor: Hans Joachim Wolff, *Micah* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990) 123, decides for the redactor, but Delbert R. Hillers, *Micah* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 54-55, and Joan I. Alfaro, *Justice and Loyalty. Micah* (ITC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 50, are not willing to grant the passage to Micah. In any case we are within the prophetic tradition that extends into the postexilic age for editing.

Most interestingly, the sacred assembly on Mount Zion consists entirely of those whom the law declares ceremonially unclean and therefore forbidden to enter the sanctuary!

Zephaniah, likewise, continues in the same spirit, bringing lame people and outcasts into the temple. Zeph 3:19 shows literary bonds with Hosea and Jeremiah, combining the act of healing with that of conversion or restoration, as well as with Micah in using the rare Hebrew word, *sālac*, "to limp."⁷⁶

Last of all, one of the final editors of the Isaiah tradition acts upon the influence of Second and Third Isaiah, the former with the imagery of deserts and marshland where the glory of the Lord will appear (Isa 40), the latter with the explicit acceptance of disabled or mutilated persons into the temple (Isa 56). The passage reads:

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
Then will the lame leap like a stag,
and the tongue of the dumb will sing . . .
Those whom the Lord has ransomed will return
and enter Zion singing,
crowned with everlasting joy. (Isa 35:5-6, 10a)

This text unites ecstatic visions of the glory of God, a glory that reaches into unclean foreign lands⁷⁷ with a compassionate social concern for unclean disabled persons.

In conclusion to this fourth section of our investigation, we see the ability of prophecy to pass over the boundaries of the sacred into unclean or profane areas, inhabited by demi-gods, by sick, disabled and deceased persons. Here in this dark abyss according to the Torah, prophets discovered the glory of the Lord and heard the call to worship on Mount Zion. The mystic bent of prophecy allowed them to venture beyond the set categories of where God ought to be; their compassionate spirit for social justice led them to discover healing and salvation here for the religiously unclean.

In Conclusion

Biblical prophets were frequently mystics, gifted by a discovery of God beyond the borders of what was generally considered acceptable for God, as least as the Torah was being understood. In these instances prophets did not

⁷⁶The Hebrew word (*sāla'*) is found in only one other place, describing the condition of Jacob after wrestling with an angel/God and ending up with a limp thereafter (Gen 32:32).

⁷⁷Since the desert was the haunt of evil spirits, the passage of Isa 40, where the glory of the Lord appears in the "temple" of the foreign desert wilderness, becomes all the more startling.

have the language or the restraint, proper to orthodoxy, and so were swept by passion and rhetoric, even into a-moral situations. What moved prophecy outside Torah boundaries was a strong passion for justice among people who were ostracized.

While Torah, especially Deut 18, restricted the ranks of *genuine* prophets to those whose prophecies were authenticated in fulfillment, prophets, especially like Jeremiah and Isaiah, looked into the element of *surprise* and found fulfillment in seeming unfulfillment, that is, a fulfillment in continuity with tradition, yet beyond its comprehension by people at the time.

Two groups of people, isolated by Torah legislation, declared unclean and incapable of representing Yahweh, the God of life within the chosen people, were the foreign nations and sick or disabled persons. Prophets began a process of turning the oracles against the nations into messages of salvation for the nations. Prophets reached out to bond with sick and disabled persons, even if it meant at time dealing with demi-gods, and thought of the remnant summoned into the eschatological reign of God under the metaphor of being sick and disabled.

Prophet-mystic is the term we use to describe those areas and moments of prophetic thinking and preaching where they paradoxically reached to the depth of the covenant – faith in a God, compassionate towards the lowly, with steadfast love and fidelity – yet simultaneously looked beyond the ways in which the covenant was being understood and implemented. In each case prophets lived long and persevering by a faith which by its very nature a person without clear answers, in what later mystics called the dark night of the soul.

A strong concern for social justice kept the prophet down-to-earth, capable of interacting with practical demands of life. Prophets were genuinely part of Israel, and as just mentioned, linked with important aspects of the Torah, especially as found in Deuteronomy. Yet they emphasized aspects, which with the passage of time were underrated or overlooked by priests and levites. Prophets reacted strongly against some of the Torah prohibitions about clean and unclean. And in their reaction they became passionately involved, highly rhetorical, sternly and even stridently obedient. For these reasons we link them with modern prophets like Thomas Merton or Ernesto Cardenal, where poetry is translated into every day life, lived exaltedly, intensely, often in isolation, yet eventually claiming its place again in the daily life of Israel and the Church, by the reformation of Israel and the Church. □

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