

## The Hebrew Prophets: Spiritual or Political?

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The question of the day is: was the message of the Hebrew prophets “spiritual,” or “political?” Now, don't panic! I'm not going on a Trump-bashing rampage, nor will I be promoting or condemning—or even naming—any specific political party or politician. But, the truth is, the Hebrew prophets—including Jesus of Nazareth—were much more political than most people like to think.

Too often we want to separate religion and politics, while the biblical message seems to lead in the direction of separating religion from partisanism. The messengers in the Bible were, indeed, political; but, not in the way we normally think of politics.

First, let's define some terms. Spiritual. We typically assume spirit means the opposite of physical—beyond the five senses. You can't touch it, taste it, smell it, see it, or hear it. So, “spiritual” ends up being defined by each person in his or her own way—whatever makes him or her feel something emotionally.

The essential quality that defines “spiritual” is assimilation—that harmonizing quality that coordinates the physical, emotional, intellectual, relational, intuitional... Spirit emerges out of the energizing relationship between the human and the divine. Yes there is an other-worldly quality; but there's more.

There is a spiritual interaction within our body when we mow the lawn, within our mind when we read the newspaper or a novel or the Bible. There is a spiritual quality in our personal relationships, and in our vocation, and in our play. There is no human experience that is not spiritual. It integrates the whole of life.

Political: from the Greek word, “polis,” meaning “community.” Metropolitan: a specific, established, recognized community. Cosmopolitan: the universal community of humanity. This word, polis, identified the first human experiment in democracy: the Greek City-State; and so, by extension, the basic meaning of the word, “political” is the way the people related to the community.

Partisan politics was not known in the time of the Hebrew prophets. The politics they faced—and Jesus faced—was a monarchy. Their challenge was the injustice born out of a corrupt marriage between the Temple Priests and the Monarchy. With that in mind, let's look at today's Hebrew text from the Lectionary:

When Solomon died, his sons fought for the throne, and the kingdom was divided: a southern kingdom, called Judah or Judea, made up of the tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, and a northern kingdom called Israel, consisting of the remaining nine tribes.

The northern kingdom set up its capital in Bethel, and built their own temple there. In the southern kingdom, the priests were from the tribe of Levi, as Moses had established; but in the northern kingdom, the priesthood was a political

## appointment.

Amos 7:7-17 This is what he showed me: the Lord was standing beside a wall built with a plumb line, with a plumb line in his hand. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to me, "Amos, what do you see?" And I said, "A plumb line." Then the Lord said,

"See, I am setting a plumb line  
in the midst of my people Israel;  
I will never again pass them by;

<sup>9</sup>the high places of Isaac shall be made desolate,  
and the sanctuaries of Israel shall be laid waste,  
and I will rise against the house of Jeroboam with the sword."

<sup>10</sup>Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, "Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words. <sup>11</sup>For thus Amos has said,

'Jeroboam shall die by the sword,  
and Israel must go into exile  
away from his land.'

<sup>12</sup>And Amaziah said to Amos, "O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; <sup>13</sup>but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king's sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom."

<sup>14</sup>Then Amos answered Amaziah, "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees, <sup>15</sup>and the LORD took me from following the flock, and the LORD said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'

<sup>16</sup>"Now therefore hear the word of the LORD.

You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel,  
and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'

<sup>17</sup>Therefore thus says the LORD:

'Your wife shall become a prostitute in the city,  
and your sons and your daughters shall fall by the sword,  
and your land shall be parceled out by line;  
you yourself shall die in an unclean land,  
and Israel shall surely go into exile away from its land.'

Not political? The Jews had defined spiritual in terms of liturgy; faithfulness in terms of sacrifices and burnt offerings, and separated that liturgy from the life of the community. Over time that system became essentially a tax; indeed, there was a Temple Tax in addition to the requirements of sacrifice. It all was mandatory, and the Priests grew wealthy and kept raising the tax and increasing the requirements of sacrifice. And the people were suffering, especially the widows and their children, orphans, the aged and the sick.

So, Amos spoke for God:

Amos 5:21-24 I hate, I despise your festivals,  
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.

<sup>22</sup>Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,  
I will not accept them;  
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals  
I will not look upon.

<sup>23</sup>Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

<sup>24</sup>But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Pretty clear, and completely political.

130 years later, after the fall of the northern kingdom, Jeremiah faced almost identical circumstances down south. The end of Judah is in sight. Nebuchadnezzar's army was vastly superior; but, Israel kept assuming God would fight for them, so they doubled up on the sacrifices and offerings and Temple Taxes, which created more hunger and poverty. And Jeremiah spoke for God:

Jeremiah 5:26-29 For scoundrels are found among my people;  
they take over the goods of others.  
Like fowlers they set a trap;  
they catch human beings.  
<sup>27</sup> Like a cage full of birds,  
their houses are full of treachery;  
therefore they have become great and rich,  
<sup>28</sup> they have grown fat and sleek.  
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.  
<sup>29</sup> Shall I not punish them for these things?  
says the LORD,  
and shall I not bring retribution  
on a nation such as this?

I could bring in texts from virtually every Hebrew prophet, and the message is consistent: it's totally political—not necessarily in the sense of government; although the king is generally in the target area somewhere. The message is about the abuse of wealth and power, at the cost of the community, and especially at the cost of the poor and those who are too young or too old or too sick to be productive.

Jesus confronted the same kind of injustice, and his pronouncements were every bit as confrontational as the prophets before him.

Matthew 15:5-9 For God said, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must surely die.' <sup>5</sup> But you say that whoever tells father or mother, 'Whatever support you might have had from me is given to God,' then that person need not honor the father. <sup>6</sup> So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. <sup>7</sup> You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said:  
<sup>8</sup> This people honors me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me;  
<sup>9</sup> in vain do they worship me,  
teaching human precepts as doctrines."

Jesus spoke more about helping the poor than about prayer or personal morality: he refused to condemn a woman caught in the act of adultery, he forgave a thief on the cross, he ate with prostitutes and "sinners" and tax-collectors (and, believe me, in that culture tax collectors were hated even more than they are in the USA today!).

And he reserved his harshest criticism for those who had the means to help the poor but refused—those in authority who enacted policies that accrued benefit

to them, without any regard to the impact of those policies on the poor. In other words, he confronted the same source of injustice as did the prophets.

I'm not talking about redistribution of wealth. That's an after-the-fact thing. After the wealth has been accumulated. There are those who, due to circumstances beyond their control, have no realistic access to a decent, livable income. And there are others in a position to keep it that way. That was the situation Jesus confronted when he said, "The poor will always be with you."

OK. So what? Why do you need to hear this this morning? This church—you disciples, individually—have a history of generosity and compassion and involvement in ministries of service. My message to you this morning is a message of encouragement: "Keep up the good work!"

Beyond that, my message to you is a message of perseverance. The world is in a mess. It's easy to get discouraged; but, the prophetic message is essential to the salvation of the world. If you are unable to be directly involved in the prophetic ministry (and not everyone is. Not everyone has the gift of prophecy), then support those who are out front, speaking truth to power, speaking hope to the powerless, advocating for the helpless—because, friends, there are, and there have been since the time of the prophets, those who deny that helplessness is real; who believe all poverty and misfortune is self-inflicted—the result of laziness or irresponsibility. (And there is enough of that to keep the stereotype alive.)

And that perspective has had influence in the public life—the politics—of humanity since the time of the prophets: sometimes it has dominated, and sometimes it has lurked in the shadows. But it's always there.

And we inherit the prophetic call to be political—not in the sense of campaigning for or against Republican or Democrat or Independent or Libertarian candidates or platforms but, rather, in the sense of working through our own efforts (both individually and as a church) and within our sphere of influence to become a channel through which God answers the prayer we pray every Sunday: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Kingdom. That's political: it involves a community of people and their welfare.

Brueggemann: "We are the ones who cry out in hope and indignation, because the world is not right. The world in its desert hunger, its fearful injustice, its destabilizing storms of finance and sexuality, its captivity, its brutality, its inhumanity needs a voice for the cry of advocacy. And we are designated to be the ones who speak insistently to God on behalf of the world, that the world may be changed."