



“Minor” Prophets in the Midst of Pentecost*

MARK A. THRONTVEIT

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The Old Testament lessons for Pentecost 18, 19, and 20 are drawn from the works of two of the so-called minor prophets, Amos and Habakkuk. The lectionary couples Amos’ denunciations of the insensitivity of the wealthy with two Lukan parables beginning with “There was a rich man...” (Luke 16:1; 16:19); Habakkuk’s conversation with God concerning the delay of God’s justice is read with Jesus’ instructions to the disciples concerning duty (Luke 17:1-10). These combinations suggest the theme of social justice. On the other hand, the presence of Habakkuk 2:4—“but the righteous shall live by his faith” (or “faithfulness”)—invites an emphasis upon that doctrine by which the church stands or falls.

The apparent dichotomy between these two messages confronts us in ways that transcend the preacher’s standard dilemma of “What shall I preach?” In our first passage, Amos 8:4-7(8), the dichotomy of faith and life—compartmentalized religion that sees no reason to let the understandings and experiences of worship affect the activities of the rest of life—comes to the fore. Our second passage, Amos 6:1-7, depicts the incongruity of the way of the affluent: lolling around Samaria, totally oblivious to the “ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:6) or to the judgment that God will soon visit upon them by means of the Assyrians. Finally, in our third passage, Habakkuk 1:1-3; 2:1-4, the prophet laments the tension in speaking of a God who demands justice but seems to be doing nothing about it.

I. FORM CRITICISM AND PROPHETIC TEXTS

Perhaps nowhere else have the results of historical criticism altered the church’s appropriation of biblical material to the degree that this has oc-

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curred with prophetic texts. Earlier analysis tended to depict the prophets as poets, theologians amassing a storehouse of “timeless truths,” or predictors of the coming Messiah. These demonstrably inadequate interpretations soon gave way to a characterization of the prophets as preachers of repentance or social activists promulgating reform. But the paucity of repentance texts and the total lack of programs to institute change and reform in the texts themselves testify to the insufficiency of these models. In reaction to these characterizations, form critical analysis

has insisted that the prophets, while occasionally involved in such activities as prediction, mediating the earlier traditions of Israel, or calling for social reform or repentance, are basically to be understood as messengers, individuals called and commissioned by God to present the divine word to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time.

Form critical theory goes on to insist that the character of the prophetic message consists in announcement rather than prediction. Since the prophetic word comes from God it is inherently powerful and effective, not *revealing* the future but itself the catalyst that shapes the future:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and return not, but water the earth, causing it to bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish what I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10-11)

Thus, the prophets do not predict future events, they announce God's breaking into history. Nor do the prophets call for repentance—it is too late to repent—they announce the end, the coming of exile. The most that can be hoped for is that a few would understand the reasons for judgment and become a seed, a remnant, a core from which God could begin again. Even the hopeful ending to the book of Amos (whether from the prophet himself or from the final redactors) is addressed to people who have already experienced the judgment and speaks of the “repair...raising up...rebuilding...and restoration” of what was lost (Amos 9:11-15).

This announcement includes: (1) prophetic announcement of judgment, i.e., the coming crisis of God's intervention, and (2) reasons for judgment, i.e., the particular behavior of Israel that has precipitated the crisis; these are often coupled with the so-called messenger formula, “thus has Yahweh said.”

Interestingly, when salvation oracles are announced (especially in Second Isaiah, toward the close of the exile), no reasons for God's gracious activity are given apart from God's own desire to save. In the Amos texts under consideration, however, the reasons for the coming *judgment* are prominent.

In Amos 8:4-7(8), verses 4-6 list the reasons for God's displeasure in a quotation from the merchants of Samaria. This is followed by the announcement of God's judgment in verses 7-8. (The lectionary has only included the first half of the divine response, due to the obscurity of verse 8.)

In Amos 6:1-7, the reasons for God's displeasure are couched in a woe-oracle, a funeral lament spoken over the affluent of Samaria in verses 1-6. Again, this is followed by the announcement of God's judgment in verse 7.

Form criticism's insistence upon the prophetic pronouncement as an announcement of God's inevitable decision to act delivered to a particular people in a particular situation prohibits pastors from simplistically making the same announcement of God's judgment to the church or to the world. The addresses of the text do not include us in the same way that they included “the cows of Bashan” (Amos 4:1), “Israel” (Amos 2:6), or the surrounding nations (Amos 1:3-2:5),

neither have we as pastors stood in the heavenly court and received notification of God's imminent appearance. But then, what of prophetic preaching? Do we as pastors not need to preach repentance, or speak out against the moral and social decay so evident in our society? Do we as pastors not have a responsibility in this area? More pointedly, how do these prophetic texts speak *to us* and to our congregations?

II. BEYOND FORM CRITICISM

Without diminishing the value of form criticism's contribution to our understanding of the prophetic material, it must be said that such an approach might seem to drive a wedge between the message of the Bible and contemporary appropriation. Here, it first needs to be remembered that form criticism's concentration upon the original, oral proclamations of the prophets does not explicitly take into account the continued use of those messages. After the judgment of exile, the prophetic hope was fulfilled: a remnant of the people did come to realize the truth of the message. These people, who had experienced at first hand the inevitable consequences of pre-exilic Israel's failure and God's decision to wipe the slate clean, now were the recipients of a new prophetic message, announcing God's decision to bring exile to an end and to restore Israel. Now the prophetic message was heard with new understanding, and the earlier messages were collected and preserved in such a way that they might speak again, but with a difference. This time the demands of God were taken with a new seriousness; this time it was not too late—this was a new beginning, and repentance was possible; this time there were concomitant movements of reform both cultic and social.

Second, it needs to be remembered that if, as form criticism insists, it is important to recognize the addressees of the prophetic announcement, it is also important to recognize that the particular message will be heard in different ways by different people. God's word is always comprised of law *and* gospel, demand *and* promise. God's word of judgment upon the wealthy of Samaria is heard as a word of hope by the poor who suffer at their hands. Conversely, God's word of liberation to the oppressed is heard as judgment by those who are responsible for the oppression.

From a canonical perspective, the church finds itself in a similar situation. After the death and resurrection of Christ we can listen to the preaching of Amos and see clear indications of what behavior is pleasing or distressful to God. We can see that in our time reform and repentance are both possible and necessary and that God calls us to be about the task of proclaiming that message and working to those ends. In addition, we are

to see that we rarely, if ever, find ourselves as only oppressed or solely the oppressor. Our sensitivities need to be heightened that we might hear both the demand and the promise of these texts as they speak to us.

III. PROPHETIC MINISTRY: CRITICIZING AND ENERGIZING

In a very helpful piece (The Prophetic Imagination [(Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978)], Walter Brueggemann offers sound advice concerning the contemporary prophetic task. He sees this task as comprising two roles: criticizing and energizing.

The pressures of our society force us into adopting postures that it deems appropriate,

postures that we may realize are not conducive to the ultimate plan and direction that God envisions for us, but postures to which we conform nevertheless. In the prophetic role of critic, the pastor needs to point out the dangers that such conformity brings and illustrate the bondage that ensues when society determines the stance of the Christian.

Seen in this way, Amos 8:4-7(8), addressed to the oppressors, no longer portrays the dichotomy of faith and life, as is usually supposed. The problem Amos so keenly observes is not that the merchants have separated the two spheres of their existence into distinct, impervious compartments, but rather that one sphere of their existence—the wrong one, their unscrupulous practice in business—has infiltrated and infected the other and led them to treat the poor as commodities to be bought and sold; furthermore, it holds them in bondage so that worship is seen as something to be endured until they can resume their fraudulent dealings.

Similarly, the luxuriant life style of the affluent in Samaria, portrayed in Amos 6:1-7, has so permeated their being that they have become totally insensitive to the “ruin of Joseph” (v. 6b) that surrounds them. In both texts, Israel has failed to realize that security inheres in Yahweh, not in the fortunes of position and affluence. As Amos ironically puts it, those who are now *first* in the city will be the *first* to go into exile (Amos 6:1, 7).

On the other hand, our realization of the depth to which we conform to society’s view of the world often leaves us paralyzed in despair. Our experience of the complexity of the situation causes us to disavow our deep-seated understanding that change and repentance are called for and frustrates us with the pessimistic view that society cannot be changed. Here, the prophetic role of energizer comes on the scene with a message of hope that calls us to re-discover and affirm our suppressed longings for change and repentance in the face of our pessimistic contemporaries.

At this point, Habakkuk 1:1-3; 2:1-4, addressed to the oppressed, enters the conversation. In these two passages we hear the burden of Habakkuk’s struggle. Convinced that God is distressed by the injustice that surrounds him, he gives voice to his frustration and asks how long God will allow that injustice to continue (1:1-3). This is a bold move on the part of the prophet. Usually, a prophet is moved to confront Israel for not complying with the terms of the covenant. Here, in the manner of Job, it is God who is questioned with regard to covenantal obligation. But, unlike Job, Habakkuk is given a direct answer in the verses omitted in our lectionary (1:5-11).
God

will punish the wicked by raising up the Babylonians. This, however, only serves further to frustrate the prophet, who believes the “cure” of Babylonian invasion might be worse than the “disease” of Judaeen injustice (1:12-17). God’s response is that Habakkuk has not misread the situation; God is sovereign and will at the proper time and in his own way deal with the wicked. But for now, as always, “the righteous shall live by his (Habakkuk’s or God’s?) faithfulness” (2:2-4). (The LXX reads “*my* faithfulness.”) Habakkuk is encouraged to remain firm in his faith, waiting in patient assurance that God will do what he promised in verse 3.

This bi-polar model for contemporary prophetic ministry will help us appreciate the biblical view of justice. To the extent that we have been shaped by our society, we tend to think in terms of Roman jurisprudence, depicted in the statue of Blind Justice that adorns so many of our local courthouses. The essence of justice, in this conceptual framework, is, indeed, that

justice is blind, i.e., impartial, holding the scales of absolute fairness, adding just enough to one side to balance and equalize the other. Phrases such as “equal rights,” “equality under the law,” “all men are created equal,” “equal pay for equal work,” and “equal opportunity in employment, housing, etc.,” testify to the pervasive nature of this concept in our society.

But the biblical conception of justice, as depicted in Amos and the prophets—as well as Jesus and Paul—conceives of justice without blindfold or scales, with eyes wide open, passionately seeking out wrong and doing everything possible to make it right, unswervingly dedicated to the needs of others and especially to the needs of those trapped by the structures of society that make it impossible for them to care for themselves. Justice is not concerned with equality, but with need. It is not to be parsimoniously handed out in measured quantity but allowed to “roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24). The criticizing role of prophetic ministry needs to challenge our conformity to society at this point, without gainsaying the positive benefits that have accrued from society’s limited perspective. The energizing role needs to complement the good that has emerged from society’s equality model, based on parity, with the biblical model, grounded in grace, and, more importantly, encourage us to press on with the message of the gospel, that God goes way beyond equality in his dealings with us, that we might share with others the freedom that God has shared with us in Christ.