

# THE PROPHETIC COMBAT FOR PEACE

## STRUGGLING IN THE NAME OF A COMPASSIONATE GOD

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**P**EACE AND WAR in Old Testament history cannot be reduced to a simple formula that war is always ungodly because peace is always the divine ideal. Neither can the prophetic statements of Isaiah contain the entire message: 'They shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks' (Isai 2,4). Several centuries later another prophet, Joel, quoted this same line only to reverse its meaning. Isaiah's idyllic vision of peace now reads: 'Beat your ploughshares back into swords, and your pruning hooks back into spears' (Joel 4 [3],10).

### *A time of war and a time of peace*

We are reminded of a statement from Ecclesiastes, the cynical, wise person of the wisdom tradition: 'There is an appointed time for everything . . . under the heavens. . . . A time to love, and a time to hate; a time of war, and a time of peace' (Qoh 3,1.8).

The seemingly contradictory positions of prophet Isaiah and prophet Joel cannot be solved by explaining Joel metaphorically. Isaiah himself was also writing of what 'he saw in vision', as the hebrew introduction (2,1) clearly states, and the poetic language of Isaiah's vision is quite symbolic: 'The mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills' (2,2). God never intended to accumulate more rocks on top of Mount Zion 'in the [eschatological] days to come' (2,2). Both prophets then were writing metaphorically, and behind the metaphors there lies a different attitude and a different judgment about war and peace.

A comparison of these two texts from Isaiah and Joel indicates at

once that the Old Testament is ensnared in a long, complex history, and within that larger history, prophecy, for its part, had its own tangled evolution. This one example, drawn from Isaiah who prophesied in pre-exilic times between 740 and 690 B.C. and from Joel who ministered to Israel in the post-exilic age somewhere between 500 and 450 B.C., shows that prophecy was not a single, monolithic movement. Yet even in an article as short as this one, the prospects of clear directions, even moral imperatives for peace and justice are not hopeless. If, however, we have pointed out the difficulties of Old Testament history and prophecy, then a signal has been flashed across the bow of our ship of state today, advising us of troubled waters ahead. There is no quick, easy application of biblical texts to the current moral quest for peace and justice. The task, indeed, is difficult and involved, but not impossible.

In order to clarify the prophetic combat for peace, we will first isolate several key religious or moral positions which dominated the origins of the mosaic covenant, formed its core or heart and were sustained throughout its long course. Whenever they were seriously endangered by compromise or denial, prophets rose to their defence.

*Yahweh, champion of the poor*

Old Testament religion, as is becoming ever clearer from contemporary sociological studies by scholars like George Mendenhall, Norman Gottwald, Frank Frick and Walter Brueggemann, was rooted in a people who could claim no distinctive point of origin, whether national, racial, geographical or cultural. Several phrases in the *Torah* summarize this idea very strikingly: e.g., Israel was 'a crowd of mixed ancestry' (Exod 12,38). Ezekiel was even more graphic: 'By origin and birth you are of the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite' (Ezek 16,3). These facts show how the pieces within the jigsaw puzzle of israelite history turned out weird and awkward.

In its first several hundred years of existence, from the patriarchs around 1850 B.C. all the way to David and Solomon at the turn of the millenium, Israelites possessed only one common trait, their scrambled insignificance. They were a mixed gathering of dispossessed people, former slaves and indentured servants, mercenary troops, resident aliens, migrant workers, refugees. This sociological condition was due to mammoth international upheavals, the collapse and rise of empires and kingdoms which forced people to

migrate or flee for protection, livelihood and basic human dignity. Part of this flotsam on the disturbed ocean waters of the ancient near east gathered to become 'Israel'. As mentioned already, not till the dynamic age of Kings David and Solomon did this 'crowd of mixed ancestry' coalesce into a closely knit, twelve-tribe system. Later during the royal period when low-born Israel began to strut with artificial pomp and to disdain or take advantage of the powerless, the prophetic combat began.

One piece of literature, prophetic in its coloration and influence, was Deuteronomy. Here Israel was reminded:

It was not because you are the largest of all nations that the Lord set his heart on you and chose you, for you are really the smallest of all nations. It was because the Lord loved you and because of his fidelity to the oath he had sworn to your ancestors, that he brought you out with his strong hand from the place of slavery (Deut 7,7-8).

The deuteronomic rendition of the Decalogue echoed this same attitude. It listed the following reason for excusing slaves from work on the sabbath:

Remember that you too were once slaves in Egypt, and the Lord, your God, brought you from there with his strong hand and outstretched arm (Deut 5,15).

One essential side of biblical religion was its sense of humble, 'mixed-up' origins which gradually developed into a theology of election or special choice by God. As Deuteronomy stated very bluntly, this choice could be explained only by Yahweh's love and fidelity for 'the smallest of all nations'. Yahweh, therefore, became known in the Bible primarily as a compassionate God who — as stated in an early, foundational chapter of Exodus — has 'witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering' (Exod 3,7). God, therefore, was not intuited first of all as world creator, omnipotent and supremely one, but rather as he himself declared to Moses from a cloud on Mount Sinai:

The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless (Exod 34,6-7).

This theophany was granted as Moses stood on Mount Sinai with 'the two stone tablets' of the law in his hands. Here then was the context for interpreting and implementing the *Torah*.

The other key aspects of mosaic religion can be simply mentioned in passing: (1) earthly life is an 'exodus' towards a promised land that always seems to elude Israel, at least in its full promise and hope; and (2) during the exodus, an heroic response can be expected, not daily, of course, but at serious, transitional moments. When Israel, however, found land and prosperity, these turned out to be more than fulfilment; they were as much a risk and a threat, as Walter Brueggemann explains in his book, *The Land*. It is always difficult for a prosperous people to walk humbly before their God and their neighbour and be compassionate towards the poor. At such times prophets summoned Israel heroically upon a new exodus.

This basic thrust of mosaic religion — a poor, dispossessed people, chosen by God to manifest his compassionate love, continually called onward in its exodus towards the promised future, and summoned occasionally even to heroic response — imparts a unique quality to the biblical quest for peace. It does not seem to be peace at any cost, but peace with human dignity and future hopes for all God's people, particularly the poor. Everyone must remember their origins in poverty and weakness. If this essential quality of biblical peace was compromised, then Yahweh became a warrior or as the Hebrew expressed it in Exod 15,3, '*ishmilhamah*, 'a man of war'. One of the psalmist's refrains re-expressed the divine epithet thus: 'Who is this king of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle' (Ps 24,8). There is, indeed, 'a time of war' as there is also 'a time of peace' (Qoh 3,8).

*Another kind of war — the combat for peace*

The prophets generally remained with the poor. I say generally, because they too had their own convoluted history, in which one group wandered from their initial call and turned their popularity to self-serving purposes. Then another type of prophet emerged. We can only trace the main lines of this new combat for peace in the name of the poor.

We first meet prophets in biblical literature that developed initially in the northern part of the country; later the group showed up in the southern traditions at Jerusalem. These 'guild prophets' generally lived in communities, near important shrines like Gilgal

(2 Kg 4,38), Ramah (1 Sam 19,22-24; 25,1), Bethel (2 Kg 2,2-3), Jericho (2 Kg 2,5,15) and Gibeath-elohim (1 Sam 10,5). We find them close to the people, sharing their needs and simple joys. The stories in 1 Kings (2-6) for instance, which grew up around these prophetic communities read like the *legenda sanctorum*, the ancient lives of the saints in church history. Miracles abounded, but always the popular kind from everyday life — providing food or cooking-oil, finding a lost axe-head, restoring to life the dead son of a widow, striking the enemy soldiers blind. These are poor people's miracles, evoked out of compassion and achieved with little or no ostentation!

The hearts of these prophets were soft towards the poor and often tinged with a touch of humour. The aramean soldiers who attacked the Israelites at Dothan were not slaughtered but temporarily blinded, and so they lost their way and wandered into the city of Samaria, there to be captured by the Israelites. The prophet Elisha, who directed 'operation blindness', then ordered food and drink for them! (2 Kg 6,8-23). Yet humour ceased when the rights of the poor were compromised, their property stolen and their sturdy morals endangered. At this moment prophets stopped at nothing, not even at executions and collapse of dynasties.

With his own hands, we are told, Elijah slit the throats of the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal for attempting to corrupt the family life with fertility rites and sacred prostitution (1 Kg 18,40). When King Ahab and Queen Jezebel schemed the death of innocent Naboth, who refused to forfeit his ancestral lands for the embellishment of the royal gardens, Elijah announced the violent end of the entire royal family, even *this* dynasty famous for its exploits like the construction of the magnificent capital city of Samaria (1 Kg 16,24; ch 21).

The prophet Elisha assured the fulfilment of this prophecy by charging one of the guild prophets to anoint a new king, the military commander Jehu. Jehu then proceeded to kill the kings of both Samaria and Jerusalem, to order Queen Jezebel to be thrown to her death from a palace window, and to demand the heads of seventy princes 'in baskets'! (2 Kg 10,7). The account reeks with so much cruelty that the author could hardly be judged approving these events. Yet the guild prophets set the action in motion! The prophetic combat for peace had turned into a war for elementary justice.

Throughout other northern traditions, like the 'elohist' and the 'deuteronomist' accounts in the *Torah*, prophets were intercessors

for needy people (Gen 20,7; Num 11,25), warriors in defence of the weak and oppressed (Jg 4,4-5), but most of all men and women who preserved and defended the spirit of Moses within the religion and lives of the people (Deut 18, 15-20; 34,10). This spirit, as we have seen, gathered together a dispossessed people and united them around the Lord's compassionate and gracious love. This concern for justice and peace moved them at times to heroic deeds. To assure the presence of this spirit, prophets lived close to the people, at peace with their everyday lives and solicitous about their basic needs of food, land and self-respect. Like anyone who loves dearly, these prophets summoned all of life's energies to defend these God-given rights and human needs: even to the point of unleashing the forces of violence. These summons were not a call to international war, nor to militarization, not even to a posture of continued readiness for conflict. The guild prophets were reacting to individual cases of serious abuse of human rights where other remedies had failed. In desperate moments, prophets did not consider peace a substitute for justice!

Prophecy, as we mentioned above, had a long and complicated history. Unfortunately, the descendants of Samuel, Elijah and Elisha, allowed popularity, prestige and 'clout' to go to their head. The guild prophets became fixtures at the royal court (2 Sam 7,2) and entered fully into palace intrigues (2 Kg 1,11; Jer 23,9-40). They quarrelled among themselves, so that kings could pit one group of prophets against another group and so be in the comfortable position of choosing the most convenient prophecy (1 Kg 22). The collapse of prophecy was so complete, that the prophetic word depended on the quality and quantity of food placed in their mouth. According to the Book of Micah:

... regarding the prophets who lead my people astray; who, when their teeth have something to bite, announce peace, but when one fails to put something in their mouth, sanctify a war against that one (Mic 3,5).

The 'classical' prophets — individuals like Micah who eventually had books to their name — considered it an insult to be associated with the guild prophets. With fire flashing from his eyes and sarcasm spitting from his mouth, Amos retorted: 'I am no prophet, nor do I belong to any company of prophets. I am a shepherd and a dresser of sycamore trees' (Amos 7,14). The bitter barb in Amos's voice was

not lost on Amaziah the high priest. Amos was saying: I am no prophet. I work for a living! A new type of prophet was needed to challenge prophecy. The older type had itself become oppressive of the poor.

*Another kind of prophecy — the moral imperative of peace*

We centre attention upon the prince of classical prophets, Isaiah ben Amoz, and specifically upon the famous Immanuel prophecy in chapters 7-11.

In several important ways Isaiah advanced beyond the mosaic covenant. Themes like exodus and sinaitic covenant drifted out of consciousness; Isaiah, instead, gravitated towards davidic covenant, the holy city Jerusalem and its temple. Yet Isaiah remained completely committed to the heart of the mosaic covenant, the cause of the poor and the needy. In order to correct liturgical abuses, the prophet challenged the people to: 'Make justice your aim: redress the wronged, hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow' (Isai 1,16). If the city 'has turned adulteress', housing a pack of 'murderers', where 'each one of them loves a bribe' (Isai 1,21), these and other crimes are summarized in the statement where widow and orphan have become symbolic of all the poor: 'The fatherless they defend not, and the widow's plea does not reach them' (Isai 1,23). Isaiah, therefore, maintained the most essential quality of mosaic religion, the Lord's compassionate concern for the oppressed.

Isaiah realized that whether the people were wealthy or poor, they were all in danger of being betrayed by King Ahaz in B.C. 736. The armies of Israel and Syria were invading the kingdom of Judah, intent on replacing the davidic dynasty with 'the son of Tabeel' (Isai 7,6). King Ahaz realized that he could not defeat the invaders on the field of battle, so in panic he decided to declare Judah a vassal of Assyria in return for assyrian military protection.

Without discussing the details, we can agree with scholarly consensus that Ahaz's action was not only cowardly and selfish (he was acting solely for the preservation of the royal family), but it was also useless (for Assyria would intervene only at its pleasure and advantage) and totally immoral (Judah would lose independence, dignity and eventually moral will-power to resist corruption). Isaiah's answer was clear and blunt, 'Do nothing!' — every option was immoral — only trust in God! He declared: 'Take care and be tranquil, do not fear, nor lose courage' (Isai 7,4). 'Unless your faith

is firm, you will never be confirmed' (Isai 7,9). Samuel Terrien translated the latter two lines succinctly: 'No faith, no staith!'

Isaiah (30,15-18) wrote his own commentary on this heroic stance of faith. We quote the opening lines:

For thus said the Lord God,  
the Holy One of Israel:  
By waiting and by calm you shall be saved,  
in quiet and in trust your strength lies.  
But this you did not wish.

King Ahaz would not be swayed from his decision of making Judah a vassal of Assyria. Judah was now dragged into the international cauldron of intrigue, distrust, greed, cruelty and escalating military adventures. Eventually, Assyria invaded Judah; the erstwhile protector was now wreaking revenge for Judah's failure to pay proper tribute. Isaiah saw in this military expedition of Assyria the chastising, purifying hand of God. The prophet used the image of water. Because Israel had rejected faith in God, symbolized by 'the waters of Shiloah that flow gently', God in turn 'raises against them the waters of the river, great and mighty, the king of Assyria'. Yet, in these destructive flood-waters, Isaiah perceived the presence of 'Immanuel — God with us'.

When these distant lands armed themselves insolently, formed plans against God and resolved to alter God's designs for Israel, they would be crushed and thwarted, and their plan 'shall not be carried out, for Immanuel — is God with us' (Isai 8,5-10). When Assyria boasted, 'by my own power I have done it', God replied through the prophet, 'will the axe boast against the one who hews with it?' (Isai 10,13,15). God would save the poor and humble 'remnant of Israel, the survivors of the house of Jacob' (Isai 10,20). The Book of Immanuel (Isai 7-11) ends with the glorious vision of peace for the once poor and lowly servants of God:

For the Lord shall judge the poor with justice,  
and decide aright for the land's afflicted.  
He shall strike the ruthless with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked. . . .  
Then the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb,  
and the leopard shall lie down with the kid.  
The calf and the young lion shall browse together,  
with a little child to guide them (Isai 11,4-6).



Prophetically, there are crucial moments when no political or military option is morally acceptable. One must take shelter in one's interior conviction of God's concern for the poor and oppressed. The prophetic combat for peace has turned profoundly interior. There are other prophetic moments when God's purifying hand is seen in the reality of military invasion, yet even this insight concludes with God's reducing the insolent invader to an 'axe that dared to boast against the one who hews with it'. No one may tamper with God's ultimate and central concern for the poor and oppressed.

*History continues*

Prophetically, then, there is 'a time of war, and a time of peace'. Such is the way that the sage Ecclesiastes summed it up after long reflection. In the Old Testament the major question is not so much one of peace at all costs, and it is certainly not one of war if other measures fail. Prophets went to war, and prophets on other occasions condemned war and military alliances. Mosaic religion centred in Yahweh's compassion for the poor and the defenceless and in the Lord's determination to lead the people to a promised land of human dignity and social justice. Only under these conditions could Israel offer acceptable sacrifice in the temple and hurry the day of the Messiah. Yet this day would be carried away in violence (cf Mt 11,12).

The anointed saviour's name will be 'The Lord our justice' (Jer 23,6). If we obey 'what you have been told . . . and what the Lord requires of you', namely: 'Only to do the right and to love goodness, and to walk humbly with your God' (Mic 6,8), then the Messiah from lowly Bethlehem 'shall be [our] peace' (Mic 5,4).