Prophets beyond Activism

Rethinking the Prophetic Roots of Social Justice

Julia M. O'Brien

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and staff who have engaged diversity and sought justice

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Introduction

The assumption that the prophets of ancient Israel were primarily concerned about social justice runs throughout the thinking and the discourse of progressive Christianity. On the websites of progressive denominations, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah are elevated as the paragons of those who critique greedy leaders, shortsighted politicians, and the coldhearted wealthy. Internet searches of "social justice" and "prophets" return dozens of articles, blogs, books, news reports, and even music that define prophets as justice warriors. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is a "prophet" and a "prophetic voice," as are leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Closely linked with this portrayal of the Hebrew prophets is the insistence that Jesus of Nazareth was an agent of social change. According to progressives, Jesus taught and lived out a mission focused not on atonement for sin or individual piety but on uplifting the differently abled, women, queer folk, the poor, and the stranger. They depict Jesus as the successor to and ultimate realization of the prophets; the prophetic Jesus calls his followers today to be "prophetic" as well, taking up the work of the Hebrew prophets to critique the injustices of the present.

Running through such progressive descriptions of the prophets is the conviction that the true prophet stands in opposition to and apart from unjust systems of power. Prophets not only oppose kings and political officials but also priests—religious professionals who serve as gatekeepers of stifling traditions and hold fast to their own power. Unlike priests, prophets are envisioned as charismatic and often lonely individuals who courageously resist the establishment to advocate for the marginalized and critique empty religious ritual. The prophet alone stands up for justice, and "prophetic preaching" follows the lead

of Amos and Jesus to address social issues and adopt a countercultural stance (Turner 2008, 101; Tisdale 2010, 10–12; Ferguson 2022).

This understanding of the prophets is so common and unquestioned that I will call it an "orthodoxy"—an unquestioned and irrefutable set of beliefs whose acceptance becomes a litmus test of accurate knowledge and legitimate faith. Despite a long Christian tradition of valuing the Hebrew prophets as having predicted the coming of Jesus and despite the testimony of modern charismatics that God continues to grant special knowledge through the spiritual gifts, progressives insist that the prophets were decidedly not "foretellers" of the future with supernaturally given knowledge but rather "forthtellers" of truth that can be discerned through human, rational means. Progressives are certain not only about who the prophets *were* but also who they were obviously *not*.

This progressive orthodoxy about the prophets is a foundational assumption in myriad academic resources. Textbooks assigned in Introduction to the Hebrew Bible courses in mainline seminaries regularly instruct students that prophets did not predict the future but instead addressed "social, political, and religious circumstances in ancient Israel and Judah" (McKenzie 2009, 67). Biblical texts that *do* depict prophets as predicting the future are explained as the impositions of later editors who sought to tame the radical social justice message of the prophets (Blenkinsopp 2006, xvii–xviii, 5). Historians of early and medieval Christianity often echo this interpretation, implicitly and even explicitly "explaining" that earlier periods did not share our more enlightened views of prophets. Official church opposition to the female prophets of the second century CE Montanist movement is seen as yet another example of hierarchies silencing alternative voices (Trevett 1996), and resistance to Pentecostalism within mainline Christianity is attributed to the perennial tension between those inside and outside of institutions (Burgess 2011). These ideas have also found their way into secular sociology, as seen in descriptions of religious movements as always initiated by charismatic prophetic figures but then made rigid and bureaucratic in the second or third generations.

I am a progressive Christian. In many ways I am a rationalist, discerning truth alongside the latest advances in psychology, sociology, neuroscience, astronomy, and climate science. As a biblical scholar, I interpret biblical literature as the varied productions of human authors and attempt to understand each of the diverse testimonies within the Bible within its literary, historical, and modern contexts. And, perhaps most important to stress here, I am passionately committed to social change and critiquing systems of power. I have devoted much of my life to challenging sexism and heterosexism, and I am increasingly devoting my energies to addressing racial and environmental injustice. My progressive credentials and intentions are strong.

Yet as a scholar I am surprised by the uncontested authority of this orthodoxy as an interpretive model. Having spent my career in biblical studies, I am deeply aware of the complexity of biblical texts, the complications of reconstructing the history behind them, and the radically different conclusions that scholars can reach about them. Having studied prophetic movements from diverse times and places—from the second-century Montanists to Pentecostalism in modern Ukraine—I also have seen that responses to prophecy (as well as its very definition) vary widely. Why then is one single interpretation so widespread, treated as common knowledge, and regularly asserted without explanation or argumentation?

I am not only surprised by this interpretive orthodoxy, however. I also find it problematic. While it has inspired good work, it is neither honest nor constructive. It fails to take into consideration careful attention to the prophetic literature itself and the important modern scholarship that has illumined its origins and complications. But, more importantly, it serves to silence the voices of diverse people, too often perpetuating injustice in the name of social justice.

WHAT'S AT STAKE?

Throughout this volume, I underscore the problems with the progressive orthodoxy that the Hebrew prophets were primarily concerned with social justice.

It relies on a highly selective reading of biblical texts.

This interpretation, like all orthodoxies, prioritizes some texts over others and reads individual texts in selective ways. Regularly, for example, progressives explain that Amos and Micah count as true (classical) prophets, while Obadiah and Nahum were vengeful anonymous writers masquerading as prophets. Hosea's depiction of YHWH's love (Hos. 1) expresses a universal truth, while Hosea's description of sexual assault is mere metaphor (Hos. 2). Beloved "social justice" passages such as Amos's call to "let justice roll down like water" (Amos 5:24) and Micah's call to "do justice" (Mic. 6:8) are read as self-evident mandates for modern action, even though these texts actually say both more and less than advocates suggest. When these verses are read in their larger literary and historical contexts, they are best understood as about something quite different than modern social activists suggest.

It too often fails to consider whose justice these prophetic texts actually promote.

While they do speak of justice, prophetic texts (as all biblical texts) also are deeply embedded in the logics of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, and ableism. To simply repeat their call for justice while overlooking their

problematic ideologies serves to support structures of oppression. The voices of feminists, womanists, and those in postcolonial contexts challenge the view that the prophets were ethically superior forthtellers of truth, and they point to the ways in which prophetic literature casts "others" as object lessons rather than true subjects.

It emerged from a particular social and cultural context.

Despite its self-presentation as a scholarly and scientific viewpoint, the "prophets as social activists" characterization was constructed in a particular time and place for a particular set of reasons. While it rests on earlier assumptions, it congealed in nineteenth-century Germany and was popularized in the twentieth century in Great Britain and the United States. The reason that it is so ubiquitous is not that it is factually more true but because it has been advanced by "scientific" scholars and popularized by those who value those scholars. Its continued academic dominance is, in part, a reflection of the dominance of Eurocentric models of thought. Even though its language and worldview has been embraced by liberation movements in Latin America and by Black liberation theology (today in the Black Lives Matter movement), its legacy of Enlightenment rationalism and inherent racism continues to permeate its usage. Without knowing where these ideas come from, why they were formulated, and the problems they caused in the past, we ignore these legacies and, at times, perpetuate them.

It is "insider speech."

The assumption that everyone understands the discourse used by progressives is woefully misguided. For almost thirty years, I taught in an intentionally ecumenical seminary, spoken (and listened) to diverse congregations and denominational groups, and stayed current with modern religious discourse. I can confidently report that not everyone agrees on what the word "prophetic" means. When I speak about the prophets in diverse settings, I must always begin with a cross-cultural translation: explaining to those coming out of Pentecostal and related traditions what progressives are talking about, and explaining to progressives that for other streams of Christianity, "prophetic" means something quite different. In my Introduction to the Hebrew Bible classroom, this translation exercise has always been met with genuine shock. Students who thought they knew one another incredulously ask: Really? You really believe that? Even among students who share a commitment to social justice, the word "prophetic" varies in meaning.

It is intellectually arrogant.

Like any orthodoxy, the progressive orthodoxy about the prophets too easily dismisses other legitimate perspectives. It casts Pentecostals who understand

prophecy as a gift of the spirit and traditionalists who define prophecy as prediction as superstitious, charlatans, mentally ill, or (using the ultimate liberal criticism) "uneducated." In some periods, it's been described as "scientific." Such dogmatism doesn't provide a helpful framework for responding to the incredibly diverse ways that prophecy is being described in various movements today, and at a more individual level, its either/or thinking often makes it difficult for people to recognize the complexity of the actual process they themselves use in evaluating the truth of competing claims about God's intention for the world.

It promotes progressive biblical ventriloquism.

One of the biggest criticisms that progressives make against conservatives is that "they" invoke the authority of the Bible for their own agendas. After working for almost forty years in progressive circles, I can affirm that progressives do the same, though with a different agenda. When the prophets are characterized as "just like" the modern social activist, the implied authority of the Bible serves to bolster one's own authority (even if implicitly). I call this tendency "biblical ventriloquism," a phrase I adapted from Craig Martin, who describes the ways that such projecting of one's values onto the Bible "exploits this authority to further various social agendas, and in doing so, maintains and reinforces that very authority" (Martin 2009, 6.8).

It promotes cognitive dissonance.

Many progressives who have been taught that the Hebrew prophets were paragons of social justice also participate in religious traditions that frame the prophetic tradition in other ways. This is particularly true for Christian bodies that observe liturgical seasons such as Advent and Lent, when lectionaries and musical selections frame the prophets as predicters of the future. In Advent, for example, the First Readings outlined in the Revised Common Lectionary for all three liturgical cycles (Years A, B, and C) are taken from the prophetic literature, often paired with Gospel texts that invite a prediction-fulfillment interpretation, such as the textual resonances between Isaiah 40:1–11 and Mark 1:1–8 that mention a voice in the wilderness in the Second Sunday of Advent in Year B. The orthodoxy that the prophets were social activists often fades away when the faithful are faced with the lectionary and the hymns of the season such as "O Come, O Come Emmanuel."

As I explore more fully in my discussion of Jeremiah in chapter 8, readers face a different kind of cognitive dissonance when they read extended passages of prophetic books rather than carefully curated selections such as in the lectionary. The progressive orthodoxy ill prepares readers to engage the violence and misogyny of prophetic rhetoric.

It hinders us from engaging the prophetic literature in more life-giving and justice-promoting ways.

Beyond critiquing the dominant progressive paradigm about the prophets, my goal is to suggest alternative ways that reading the prophetic texts can advance the work of justice. When we stop insisting that the prophets were transparent advocates for social justice, we can be open to the range of possibilities that they offer for modern advocacy. Those who care about a world rife with renewed attacks on the dignity of women and transgender persons, violent racism being given rhetorical and legal legitimacy, and the destruction of our planet now underway due to environmental harm caused by humans can no longer rely on outdated progressive tropes. We need to engage our biblical traditions fearlessly and humbly, seeking resources and inspiration as we face the present crises of our world.

To borrow the words of Second Isaiah, it is time to allow God to work in us to do "a new thing" (Isa. 43:19). I firmly believe the Bible can be a valuable companion and resource for helping humanity adapt and thrive within a future that will not look like the past—but only if we interpret it in a way that speaks the truth about biblical texts and requires us to speak in our own voices.

I intend this exploration to challenge academics and religious progressives to recognize our role in receiving and perpetuating common knowledge rather than using the text or "science" to amplify our own voices. I hope this study also spurs nonreligious folks to get honest about their own assumptions and the ways in which they cross the very boundaries used to deny other people's claims of truth. By engaging the biblical prophets in a way that goes beyond categorical and often condescending characterizations of the Hebrew prophets and the prophetic Jesus as "just like us," I seek to promote greater justice for these texts and for the inhabitants of Earth.

MAPPING THE WORK AHEAD

The book is organized into two main parts. In part 1, four chapters advance my argument that the characterization of the Hebrew prophets as social activists is not the most obvious, or even most honest, interpretation of the texts we have. Focusing on historical context, chapter 1 explores recent scholarship on the history of prophets and the prophetic books, particularly newer studies of ancient Near Eastern prophecy and of the complex layers of editing by which the prophetic books were produced. This scholarship suggests the various roles that ancient prophets played in their own settings, including the role as predicters of what YHWH intended for the future, and it underscores that editors have crafted the portrait of the prophets in ways that supported

their own rhetorical goals. Chapter 2 explores just how complicated it is to understand and discern what these books actually say. When read carefully, the meaning of much prophetic poetry is obscure; when read alongside interpreters of diverse racial, gender, and other social locations, its message is not transparently one of liberatory justice for all.

Chapter 3 traces the origins and popularization of the "prophets as social critics" orthodoxy through the Enlightenment, German biblical scholarship, Romanticism, the Social Gospel, and twentieth-century liberation movements. Rather than an objective articulation of who the prophets really were, the perception that the Hebrew prophets were primarily agents of social change was created in a particular theological, intellectual, and cultural matrix. Chapter 4 draws together my conclusions from part 1 and names what I see as the dangers of the progressive insistence that the prophets were the spokespersons for social change. Failing to take seriously the complexity of these books and the characters they describe not only serves to appropriate biblical authority for one's own cause but also obscures the dynamics of power that silences other voices.

In part 2, I offer alternative readings of the Prophets for the sake of justice. Relying on the grounding in part 1, each chapter addresses a dimension of social justice and then offers case studies of key prophetic texts most commonly cited in support. In choosing the case studies, I've prioritized passages found in the Revised Common Lectionary, which I note, and I often explain how the lectionary handles these passages. After demonstrating the shortcomings of forcing these texts into the social justice mold, each chapter then suggests alternative ways of engaging the Prophets in the cause of justice while acknowledging their (and our) shortcomings. These texts do not have to be mirrors of our own views to enrich our justice engagements in the present. We can avoid biblical ventriloquism without abandoning our own commitments.

The chapters in part 2 are intentionally sequenced but may be read in any order. Chapter 5 focuses on economic justice, using Amos 8:4–7 and Micah 2:1–5 as case studies. Far from clarion calls to address poverty and economic inequality, these passages are open to diverse interpretations and diverse evaluations by readers. Chapter 6 takes up the assumption that the prophets mirrored the modern progressive concern with structural change, in conversation with the beloved passages of Amos 5:21–24 and Micah 6:1–8. It suggests ways that we can value the inspirational value of prophetic rhetoric despite its failure to chart a path of systemic reform. Chapter 7 raises questions about the inclusivity of the prophetic visions of justice, turning to Isaiah 2, Isaiah 58, and Isaiah 61 (with a nod to Luke 4). Recognizing whose needs and aspirations are ignored in these hopes for the future invites investigation of who is excluded from modern progressive justice campaigns. In chapter 8, the

progressive valorization of the lone prophetic voice comes face-to-face with the details of the book of Jeremiah (especially Jer. 1:4–10 and 8:18–9:1). In this powerful yet troublesome book, we hear less the courageous countercultural voice of an individual than the theological wrestling of a traumatized community. Chapter 9 addresses climate justice throughout an engagement of the creation theology of Second Isaiah (with some attention to Gen. 1–3 and Isa. 6). Given the precarious fate of human and nonhuman life on this planet, an in-depth and honest reading of the ways in which the Bible addresses Earth and its underlying ideologies is desperately needed. No simplistic appeal to the beauty of creation and nature is adequate in our current situation of planetary devastation. The words of judgment may be more relevant in the present than paeans to the beauty of nature. In the book's conclusion, I draw together the threads of the volume and share my hopes for the future.

A few explanations are in order. Unless otherwise noted, direct citations from the Bible are from the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVue), including its references to the deity as LORD. When describing the deity apart from citations, I have tried to balance an accurate reflection of the ideology reflected in biblical texts with an attempt to avoid perpetuating gendered stereotypes. In paraphrases of biblical passages, I tend to use YHWH for the god of ancient Israel, retaining the related masculine pronouns when they are needed to underscore the text's perspective. My choice not to smooth out the ancient divine name by adding vowels, I hope, leaves the name a little jarring—as a reminder of the distance between ancient and modern understandings of the Divine. When I speak more generally about the One whom modern Christians profess, I refer to God in gender-inclusive ways.

I am deeply aware that the discourse about prophecy that I explore is not exclusive to Christians but shared by many progressive Jews. For example, the documentary *Spiritual Audacity* showcases the life and work of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a profound scholar of the Prophets and deeply engaged social activist (Doblmeier 2021). In describing Heschel's bold confrontation of racism, anti-Semitism, and militarism, the commentators being interviewed repeatedly describe him as "prophetic" and "a prophet," without explaining their own definition of those terms. But because I am deeply, though of course never adequately, sensitive to Christian anti-Judaism, I have chosen in this volume to speak primarily from within the Christian tradition. The Jewish use of these terms and motifs is not mine to critique. For similar reasons, I refer to the Hebrew Bible when describing the sacred texts that Christians and Jews share, though when talking about Christian attitudes toward the material, I may call it the Old Testament.

Similarly, I have chosen not to critique other orthodoxies about the prophets, which come with their own internal contradictions and problematic

discourse. Parallel studies of the discourse of prophecy in Pentecostalism, global charismatic movements, and political parties might also explore their dynamics, dangers, and shortcomings. My work here is to challenge my own tradition and to engage a conversation that helps it move forward. I am a progressive talking to progressives about what we can do better.

This is a wide-ranging volume. It interweaves careful readings of biblical texts within their literary and historical contexts; gives attention to the voices of feminist, womanist, and postcolonial voices; and engages with contemporary thought, such as trauma theory and intersectional analysis of the climate crisis. It is not a comprehensive study but one that seeks out broad sources of wisdom. I've attempted to share not only my own insights but also to provide readers an accessible way to learn what the technical studies of others are teaching us. In this moment of human and nonhuman suffering, the world needs all the knowledge and humility that we collectively can muster. In what follows, I offer my contribution, even as I trust that others will add their wisdom for the sake of the future.

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