Tanner-McMurrin Lectures on the History and Philosophy of Religion

April 2, 2009

BIBLICAL POLITICS: THE ROLE OF THE PROPHETS

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I

The prophets are most commonly read as moral teachers and, read that way, their books (or selected parts of their books) are the biblical texts most accessible to contemporary men and women. For us, the prophets are poets of social justice, utopian visionaries. I don't mean to dispute that reading here, only to complicate it. For prophecy was a political role in ancient Israel, and the importance of the role has to do as much with the way it was played as with the lines delivered by the players—though there are many wonderful lines. I want to consider the audience of the prophets and the public spaces in which they spoke and, above all, the very important fact that they spoke in public, to an audience.

In a recent book about political morality, the philosopher Stuart Hampshire argued that a certain kind of public speech is a universal feature of human societies:

Wherever and whenever human societies exist,
whether they are primitive or technologically
advanced, issues of policy will be debated in some
assembly of chosen persons....The institution
of articulating and reviewing contrary opinions
on policy is of necessity species-wide.

What Hampshire is describing here is deliberation, practical
reasoning, the essence of politics according to the Greeks, though the phrase
"political activity" refers more often among us to the efforts of rival
individuals to join the "assembly of chosen persons" than to the things they
say once they get there. Is there anything like deliberation in the bible?
Certainly the kings of Israel and Judah had advisors, but we are told very
little about what the advisors said or how they spoke. Mostly, the search for
knowledge of God's will replaces discussions about human policy; oracle
replaces argument. The Greeks also consulted oracles, but this was
secondary to the processes of public debate and decision. I assume that there
was debate and decision in ancient Israel too--"of necessity," as Hampshire
says--but we get only glimpses of the process in the biblical texts. The
author of the post-biblical First Maccabees expresses admiration for the
Roman republic where "every day three hundred and twenty senators
constantly deliberate concerning the people..." (8:15). Perhaps he hoped to
see a similar regime established in Jerusalem. But nothing like "constant"
deliberation is described for the previous thousand years. Samuel argues with the elders about the advantages and disadvantages of kingship, Absalom consults his advisors on the strategies of rebellion, Rehoboam receives the conflicting advice of the old men and the young men. There aren't many other examples. At best, this sort of thing is simply taken for granted by biblical writers, a background politics that doesn't arouse their interest. What is up front is very different.

We read almost nothing in the bible about assemblies and councils, though both clearly existed, and there must have been conventions about the forms of speech appropriate within them. No doubt, the elders of Israel spoke to one another; what they said, however, doesn't seem to have been recorded. We find instead a typically one-sided discourse that has its origin in divine revelation: God speaking at Sinai, Moses's orations in Deuteronomy, prophetic declamation. Abraham and Moses talk back to God, arguing against his destructive fury, Abraham for the sake of the people of Sodom, Moses for the sake of Israel itself. Amos, reporting a vision (7:1-6), claims briefly to have played Moses's part. No one else attempts a similar argument. When the prophets plead Israel's cause, they don't do so in a dialogue with God; nor do they speak independently of his instigation. Their claim to be heard derives from a previous claim, that they speak "the word
of the Lord."

The prophetic books, nonetheless, provide some of the most interesting examples of dialogue in the bible: Samuel and Saul, Nathan and David, Elijah and Ahab, Amos and Amaziah, Jeremiah and Hananiah, Jeremiah and Zedekiah, Haggai and the priests. And much more of what the prophets say, though not deliberative in character, is certainly argumentative; we can readily imagine what the text rarely provides: the opposing positions, the word that is not "the word of the Lord." In the case of Moses, who is called the first prophet, the opposing positions (the "murmuring" of the people, Korah's challenge) are actually recorded in the text; it is Moses' arguments that are mostly missing; since he can call for miracles and terrible punishments, he doesn't need to argue. Later prophets have no such intimate connection with God and so lack anything like Moses' authority. They are commonly resisted, disputed, denied their title. And the prophet's title can only be vindicated by his words. Though other tests are proposed, as we will see, the true test is this: by his words shall you know him—by his rhetoric, eloquence, poetic power, argumentative skill. In the prophetic books we find the most important forms of public speech in ancient Israel. But is this political speech?
II

Excluding Moses, whose position is unique in biblical history, the prophet as a political figure first appears together with the king. We can think of the two as a double replacement for the charismatic judges. Kings take on the military and judicial roles of the judges, though in a more institutionalized way. They hire mercenaries and create standing armies; and though they don't often sit in judgment themselves, they seem to appoint or confirm the men, increasingly likely to be professionals, who do. Prophets take on (most of) the charisma of the judges, the immediate divine connection. They are "raised up" by God, while kings, after David, are born to their tasks, raised at court. (In the northern kingdom, where dynastic rule was never firmly established, new kings were anointed by prophets, or they were usurpers, without legitimacy). There is a striking similarity in the appointment of David the king and Amos the prophet:

I took thee from the sheepfold,
from following the sheep, to
be ruler over my people...

(II Samuel 7:8)

And the Lord took me as I followed
the flock and...said unto me,

Go, prophecy unto my people...

(Amos 8:15)

But David is the last king so "taken," while Amos is only the first of a series of prophets who have left a written record of the moment when they were called by God.

Though there were court and temple prophets, prophecy is not an office but a calling. Each prophet is individually called; there is no prophetic covenant like the priestly covenant with Aaron or the royal covenant with David. Hence there are no prophetic genealogies (the only exception is made for Zephaniah, who is traced back to a possibly royal great, great grandfather; but there are no prophets in his past). Mostly, we are given only a father's name, sometimes only a place: "Amos, who was among the herdsmen of Tekoa" or "Micah the Morasthite." Elijah is the only prophet to appoint a successor. Among the literary prophets, there are no authorized successions. If there were prophetic schools or circles, if prophets had followers, they had no heirs--at least, no heirs with names. No prophet after Elisha was the disciple of another prophet. Kings and priests were uniformly members of a ruling or an upper class (the new kings of the northern kingdom were not taken from the sheepfold; they were royal
officials or military commanders). Prophets, by contrast, were drawn from every social strata; the social range of prophecy was determined by the radical inclusiveness of the national covenant. Hence the divine call could come, unexpectedly, to anyone (even to women, who rarely take public roles in the bible: there were no female priests and no queens except the usurper Athaliah, but women were called as judges and prophets). This means, of course, that anyone could claim that he (or she) had been called. It also means that any claim could be disputed.

But what were the stakes in the dispute? The prophets of Israel made no claim to rule; nor did they ever organize anything remotely resembling a political party or movement or even a sect. When power is at stake, strict standards of legitimacy are normally worked out: so kingship and priesthood were subject, at least in principle, to genealogical proof. The standards were looser for prophets, no doubt because the stakes were lower. The prophets demanded only to be heard, and there is no reason to doubt that significant numbers of them were "heard"—listened to though not necessarily hearkened to—in the centuries that stretch from Samuel's time to Malachi's. Kings, no doubt, chose their favorite prophets, in much the same way that presidents and prime ministers choose their academic advisors today. The kings wanted favorable forecasts, just as their contemporary
counterparts do, and this seems to be what prophets had to offer. The crucial asset that they derive from their calling is the ability to read the future. And so, if they cannot make policy, they are indispensable advisors to policy makers. But their advice, again, is always disputed.

Deuteronomy 18:20 provides the official standard by which all these disputes, about callings and foretellings, are to be resolved—and it is the obvious standard:

When a prophet speaketh in the name of the Lord, if the thing follow not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the Lord hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously.

This isn't much help at the moment of prophecy, but I suppose that, in an age of almost continual warfare, prophets might acquire a reputation for accurate military forecasts (or for inaccuracy and "presumption"). But long-term prophecies, dealing with the future of the dynasty or the kingdom, are essentially untestable by this standard. Prophecies of disaster, of course, have a way of being fulfilled if one waits long enough, and it may be that prophets like Amos were remembered, their words preserved and then
finally canonized, because of fulfillments of this sort. I suspect, however, that the Deuteronomic test worked only in the short run and was probably over-ridden even there, often enough, by the king's preference for favorable oracles.

There were certainly prophets ready to provide what the king preferred. Consider the story in I Kings 22 about Ahab and his 400 prophets, all of whom recited in unison whatever the king wanted to hear. King Jehoshafat of Judah, Ahab's ally in a war against the Syrians, was skeptical, apparently, about such recitations, and asked for one more prophet, a second opinion. "There is yet one man," replied Ahab, "Micaiah the son of Imlah, by whom we may inquire of the Lord: but I hate him; for he doth not prophecy good concerning me, but evil." Micaiah is called and prophecies defeat at the hands of the Syrians; the kings march into battle anyway and are indeed defeated. From this case the rabbis derived another standard of prophetic reliability: the authentic prophet speaks in his own voice and his own manner. Beware the multitude of prophets, all of whom say the same thing! Unanimity is the mark of inauthenticity.

But this standard is best applied to prophets who speak at length and in public. Micaiah himself, like other war prophets, has very little to say and nothing at all of larger political significance. What makes prophecy truly
significant is not the oracle or military forecast, but the moral admonition. The two are connected, for admonitions can be understood as conditional oracles: you (the king) will lose the war or your dynasty will fall or your kingdom will be destroyed--so speaks the prophet in God's name--unless you repent for this or that sinful action and cleave henceforth to the covenantal law. Now the prophet is less foreteller than critic. He will have to speak in his own voice, for the critical role requires courage, which most of his fellow prophets, like Ahab's 400, clearly lack. And since the people he is criticizing won't want to listen, he will have to insist upon his calling and find some way to vindicate it. But there is no way to prove that his words are divine except to speak them divinely: the prophet is in practice dependent upon his eloquence.

We can see this even in the case of court prophecy, which can be dramatic and powerful at the same time as it is brief and unelaborated: thus the parable that Nathan uses to condemn David after the seduction of Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, culminating in the line (decoding the parable) "Thou art the man!" or Elijah's confrontation with Ahab after the murder of Naboth and the seizure of his vineyard: "Hast thou killed, and also taken possession?" (II Samuel 12:7 and I Kings 21:19). But eloquence rises to its occasions, and the decisive occasions come when the prophet
leaves the relative privacy of the royal court and speaks at large to the people. The great poetry of the prophetic books is all of it spoken in public. The books themselves were probably added to and revised in the course of oral or written transmission (and some of the specific foretellings may have been amended so as to meet the Deuteronomic test). But even today, when many of the references are unknown and many lines obscure, the prophetic writings are best read out loud.

At the time they were spoken, they were also contested out loud, in public, by other prophets, by royal officials, and even by ordinary Israelites. Some of the contestations are recorded or described in the prophetic books; only occasionally, however, do we hear two or more voices, the priest Amaziah as well as Amos (7:10-17), the enemies of Jeremiah as well as the prophet himself (26:7-19). More often, we have only one-sided denunciations of other prophets, who are called conformists, flatterers, and time servers. They speak the "smooth words" that, says Isaiah (30:10), the people want to hear. Since the "smooth words" also, sometimes, come true—as in the victories of Jereboam II, foretold by Jonah the son of Amitai, a contemporary and presumably an opponent of Amos—their speakers were not without credibility as prophets. At the same time, the cacophony of prophetic voices must have generated a considerable distrust, so that our
prophets, the authors of the biblical books, repeatedly dissociate themselves from the whole enterprise. "I was no prophet," says Amos (7:14), "neither was I a prophet's son [the member of a prophetic school]; but I was a herdsman...etc." These words from the first of the literary prophets are echoed by one of the very last, Second Zechariah, who seems to warn his listeners against Amos' strategy of dissociation.

And it shall come to pass in
that day, that the prophets shall
be ashamed every one of his vision
...But he shall say, I am no
prophet, I am a husband man:
for man taught me to keep cattle
from my youth" (13:4-5).

Exactly what prompted these last words, we can only imagine; they come at the end of a long history of acrimonious and often ad hominen arguments between "true" and "false" prophets. But a few recorded instances of argument ease the way for our imaginations. What these texts suggest is something rather different from Hampshire's review of policy options. Though policy was at stake--mostly foreign policy: whether to march to war or join a military alliance or negotiate a surrender--the
immediate focus was on the prophet's credentials, his divine authorization. For if he really spoke in God's name, there was no point in arguing with him or soliciting other opinions. But could someone who prophesied disaster for God's people possibly be speaking in God's name? This is the form the arguments commonly took--public speech, certainly, but a very indirect kind of deliberation. The authors of the prophetic books were fully engaged in these arguments, and there is no evidence (except for the preservation of their books) that the strategy of dissociation, the denial that they were prophets, worked. They were undoubtedly prophets, a small group among the hundreds (or thousands) of others; they spoke more truthfully, perhaps, or more eloquently, but they were of the same kind. Together with their opponents, they made the northern shrines and the streets and courtyards of Jerusalem lively, if not yet genuinely political, places.

III

We don't know precisely when the prophets left the royal court and moved into the public spaces of Israel's cities and towns. Elijah and Elisha travel around the country, but they are more like miracle workers--legendary heroes, the disarmed successors of the warrior-judges--than public speakers. At least, we have no record of their speeches. Amos is the first prophet of
whom we can say with certainty that he delivered his prophecies to a
general audience—at the shrine in Beth El. But he refers to earlier figures,
unnamed, who tried to do the same thing and were silenced: "But
ye...commanded the prophets, saying, Prophecy not" (2:12). His
contemporaries, Jonah son of Amitai in the north and an earlier Zechariah in
the south, were still courtiers, speaking (so far as we know) only to kings.
Later prophets still had court connections: Isaiah advised King Hezekiah;
Jeremiah, who had friends among royal officials, was consulted at the very
end, but not heeded, by Zedekiah. But these two, and all the others now, had
another place:

Run ye to and fro through
the streets of Jerusalem...

(Jeremiah 5:1).

Stand in the gate of the Lord's
house and proclaim there

his word...

(Jeremiah 7:2).

Shrine and city, the street, the gate, even the temple court: the
importance of these new locations cannot be overemphasized. When he
spoke only to the king, the prophet was working, presumably, on the
assumption that the king's decision was the only one that counted. The
history books seem still to reflect this view: the fate of Israel as a whole is
tied, relentlessly, to the failures of its kings. But when the prophet speaks in
public, the working assumption shifts. Now it appears to matter that
ordinary men and women think this way or that way, live or don't live in
accordance with the law. For if they have no part to play, no responsibility
for the policies of the kingdom, why is the prophet commanded to speak to
them? From Amos on, the prophets have less and less to say about the sins
of particular kings. They address the whole society, though they always
recognize its hierarchical character: some of the people are more responsible
than others.

Amos denounces the rich, with their summer houses and winter
houses, couches of ivory, wines and perfumes: they take interest from their
brethren, falsify weights and measures, bribe the judges, and sell the poor
into debt slavery. Isaiah and Jeremiah refer more directly but also more
obscurely to the political power structure. We have a picture in our mind of
the people, or the sort of people, described by Amos. They are, so to speak,
the local bourgeoisie. But when Isaiah says that

The Lord will bring this charge

against the elders and officers of

his people:
It is you who have ravaged the

vineyard (3:13-14),

we are on less familiar territory. The elders and the officers are men of the
state, not men of the market, and how the state functioned, how its
functionaries were selected, exactly what their functions were, we know
only in a rough way. Here the biblical texts provide fewer details, an
imagery far less rich—as if the writers and speakers were uninterested in the
textures of political life or were relying on the all-too-intimate
understanding of their audience. In any case, the crucial point is this: all
these people, the rich and the powerful, are denounced in the hearing of the
others, the poor, the weak, the needy.

Not that the others are exonerated. Jeremiah leaves no one out, from
the top to the bottom of the political hierarchy, when he foretells the
destruction of Jerusalem—

because of all the evil...

which they have done to provoke

me, they, their kings, their

princes [or officers], their

priests, and their prophets, and

the men of Judah; and the
inhabitants of Jerusalem (32:32).

And in the standard prophetic trope of the divine law suit, it is Israel as a whole that sits in the dock, charged with violating covenant law.

For the Lord has a case against his people,

He has a suit against Israel

(Micah 6:2).

But the prophets never call upon ordinary Israelites to act politically, actually to take responsibility for public policy. All that their indictment requires is a moral reformation: an end to idolatrous worship, fair dealing in the marketplace, Sabbath observance, compassion for the poor. The demands made on the powerful are of a kind that leave them in place and in power: honest law enforcement from royal officials, justice from judges, pious instruction from priests...truth from prophets. What is subversive in the prophetic books is not most immediately the message but the speaking of the message--and, of course, the person of the messenger, the divinely called, self-appointed prophet, the embodiment of charisma without power, always a threat to power without charisma.
But the threat went both ways, and it seems likely that (true) prophets were as much threatened as threatening. We can get some sense of their political impact, or lack of it, by looking closely at two recorded confrontations, outside the royal court, between prophecy and authority. The first brings Amos face-to-face with the priest Amaziah at the shrine in Beth-el. Amos takes the initiative, uninvited, prophesying the destruction of the northern kingdom; the priest responds in what is to us an all-too-familiar way:

Then Amaziah the priest of
Beth-el sent to Jereboam king
of Israel, saying, Amos hath conspired
against thee in the midst
of the house of Israel: the land
is not able to bear all his words.
For thus Amos saith, Jereboam shall
die by the sword, and Israel
shall surely be led away captive out
of their own land. Also Amaziah said unto Amos, O thou seer, go
flee away into the land of Judah,
and there eat bread and prophecy
there. But prophecy not again any
more at Beth-el: for it is the
king's chapel and it is the king's
court  (7:10-13).

Amos answers Amaziah with the lines I have already quoted, denying that
he is one of the prophets (that's not the way he earns his bread). Then,
defying the ban, he prophecies once more in Beth-el, foretelling the
destruction of the priest and all his family, and leaves the shrine, or is
forcibly removed--at least, he is not reported there again.

Amaziah's conspiracy charge was, almost certainly, false; nothing in
Amos's book, or in any other of the prophetic books, suggests so forward a
political move. In any case, Amos is acting publicly, not secretly, "in the
midst of the house of Israel." Presumably, what really worried the priest was
the possible effect of Amos's oracles and admonitions on the listening
people. But this worry, too, may have been misplaced; the land seems to
have borne the prophetic words easily enough. We are not told how the
actual worshippers at Beth-el responded to Amos; they did not at any rate
rally to his defense or protest his banishment; nor does he, responding to
Amaziah, make any appeal to the people. Amos is not a popular tribune, like
the Grachii in Rome, even though, more than any of the other prophets, he
speaks out of a deep sympathy for the oppressed. He is God's representative,
o no one else's, and had God sent him back to Beth-el, he would have returned
and accepted whatever punishment the king ordained. But "conspiracy" was
someone else's business.

Actually, there were prophets who conspired against kings. Ahijah
had a role in the rebellion of the first Jeroboam against Solomon's son, and
Elisha sent one of his followers, an unnamed prophet, to anoint Jehu and
perhaps also to plan his coup d'état (I Kings 11:29-39 and II Kings 9:1-10).
But these were not speaking prophets; in neither case, in fact, did they warn
the king against whom they plotted, and they seem to have had no concern
at all with the sins of elders, officers, priests, or people. In Amos's case,
given his account of Israel's condition, it would hardly have helped much to
anoint a new king. What was necessary was moral reform and--though he
never says so--social transformation, and for this Amos had no agents or, at
least, no new agents. He relied on the very people he condemned.

The second confrontation is sometimes called the "trial" of Jeremiah,
though what is reported (chapter 26) is something less than a formal judicial
procedure. The prophet, standing in the temple court, delivered a prophecy
of doom for the shrine and the city—holding open, however, the possibility that God would "repent" if the people "hearken and turn every man from his evil way." As soon as he finished, "the priests and the prophets and all the people took him, saying, Thou shalt surely die." Jeremiah's crime, they believed (or hoped), was false prophecy. The princes or officers of Judah, hearing of the incident, came from the palace to the temple "and sat down [in judgment?] in the entry of the new gate." The priests and prophets repeated their charge, the people now among the listeners: "This man is worthy to die, for he hath prophesied against this city." Jeremiah in turn repeats his (conditional) prophecy, addressing himself, too, to officers and people. "As for me, behold, I am in your hand: do with me as seemeth good...unto you"—though if they kill him, he says, they will kill an innocent man, "for of a truth, the Lord hath sent me." The officers and people now supported Jeremiah against the priests and prophets, and additional support came from "certain of the elders of the land," who reminded the "assembly" that the prophet Micah had also prophesied doom for Jerusalem and had not been put to death by King Hezekiah (Micah is actually quoted, the only instance of explicit inter-prophetic citation in the bible). But then another case is brought, that of a prophet named Urijah, who prophesied "according to all the words of Jeremiah" and who was "fetched forth out of Egypt,"
where he had fled, and killed by King Jehoiakim. At this point, the narrative breaks off with a summary note that is not quite the report of a verdict:

"Nevertheless, the hand of Ahikam the son of Shaphan was with Jeremiah, that they should not give him into the hands of the people to put him to death."

An extraordinary story, whose exact meaning has been the subject of much scholarly debate. I want to make only one point: that, though the prophet's speech is taken very seriously by all the parties who join in the discussion, his call for a "turning" away from evil is never discussed. The question of interest is whether this man, Jeremiah, speaks in God's name. The political question, What ought to be done? doesn't arise. We can guess that it did in fact arise from the involvement of Ahikam, who was one of the reforming officials in Josiah's court and must have had a lively interest in policy matters. But even in Josiah's time, all that we are told about Ahikam is that he, together with some other royal officials, carried the newly discovered "book of the law" to the prophet Hulda for authentification. The question of interest then was whether this was God's book, not whether its "laws" made political or moral sense. Still, Ahikam must have been engaged in answering the latter question too, and he must have been, with Jeremiah, an advocate of reform, in opposition, perhaps, to the priests and prophets of
the temple.

But from which evil ways, precisely, did Israel have to "turn" in order to escape God's anger? The prophets offer a full catalogue of possibilities, and we can read their lists as programs, therefore as political arguments of a sort. But they don't suggest priorities or propose a strategic ranking. What the royal reformers finally chose, very late in the day, with the Babylonian army nearing Jerusalem, was a turning away from oppression, a release of debt slaves. The release was accomplished, interestingly, by a covenant rather than a decree: "then king Zedekiah made a covenant with all the people...to proclaim liberty..." (Jeremiah 34:8). So Israel "turned" or returned to the codes of Exodus and Deuteronomy, apparently long neglected. When the Babylonian army was diverted by an Egyptian attack, the covenant was broken and the former slaves forced back into servitude. Jeremiah immediately protested, and his words suggest that he was one of the instigators of the reform (34:13-18). But how the choice was made, who opposed it (apart from the slaveholders) and who supported it, what they said at the necessary meetings--all this is concealed from view. The "trial" is reported, the deliberations not.

V
The prophets were social critics, perhaps the first social critics in the recorded history of the West. Though the attention of the biblical writers is focused unwaveringly on their authority, or lack of it, the texts also provide, at great length, their arguments: invocations of Israel's history, references to the law codes, descriptions and indictments of current practices, including ritual practices (the province of the priests) and legal practices (the province of royal officials), and sharp attacks on the foreign policies of both northern and southern kings. I can't address the substance of these arguments here; I only want to insist that the substance must also have been debated by the prophet's contemporaries in some institutional setting—and also in city streets and temple courtyards. For the authority question—did the prophet speak "the word of the Lord"?—was never settled and, indeed, could not have been settled. It isn't only that religious charisma breaks through all authority structures and calls into question all processes of authorization; equally important is the fact that social criticism can never be authoritative. Once the prophet is in the streets, all we can do is listen to whatever he has to say and judge its value for ourselves.

Court and temple prophets speak with the authority of court and temple, which reinforces and, so we are likely to think, constrains their divine calling. But the streets and the gates and the courtyards add no
authority; now the prophet is on his own. He has to convince us that his words are God's, that his indictments are true, and that his reforms will work. I have already said that the prophet is known by his eloquence. But by eloquence here I don't mean merely his choice of words or the rhythm of his sentences. He has to use language in a way that engages the mind and touches the heart of his listeners; he has to remind them of what they know, evoke their own historical memories, play on the nerves of their commitment, their guilt, their hopes for the future. Eloquence is a cultural, not only, not even primarily, a linguistic phenomenon.

But the culture on which the prophets drew, whose resources they deployed, was a religious (and a legal), not a political culture. When kings and prophets divided the functions of the charismatic judges, the kings took on the political work, for which there was very little cultural support. Even David and Solomon are celebrated more for writing psalms, cultivating wisdom, building the temple, than for organizing, expanding, and running the state. The prophets became the representatives of God in the world, with no practical tasks except criticism. They spoke for the tradition: a history of miraculous interventions, a covenantal law divinely revealed. The more they stressed the miracles and the revelations, the less value there appeared to be in the work of kings. A royal reformer might be welcomed by the prophets
(though Jeremiah seems to have been skeptical of the Josianic reformation), but a serious alliance was unlikely; no prophet, once prophecy had emerged from the court into the streets, showed any interest in the politics of reform or any readiness for the compromises this might require. Their unreadiness, indeed, was what made them so radical. But theirs was a fiercely anti-political radicalism. Prophecy was a kind of public speech that militated against deliberation. God's message overrode the wisdom of men.

"They speak words," declared Hosea scornfully, referring to the politic speech of the rulers of Israel and their courtly advisors. "They swear falsely, they make covenants, and judgment springeth up like a poisonous weed in the furrows of the field" (10:4). The judgments of the prophets, or at least of the true prophets, were entirely different. But if anything is to come of those judgments, we must "speak words" about them, and make arguments, and listen to counter-arguments, and work toward "covenants" or agreements, even if they require compromise and accommodation. Politics lies just beyond prophecy and, though the biblical prophets did not go there, we have to go there.