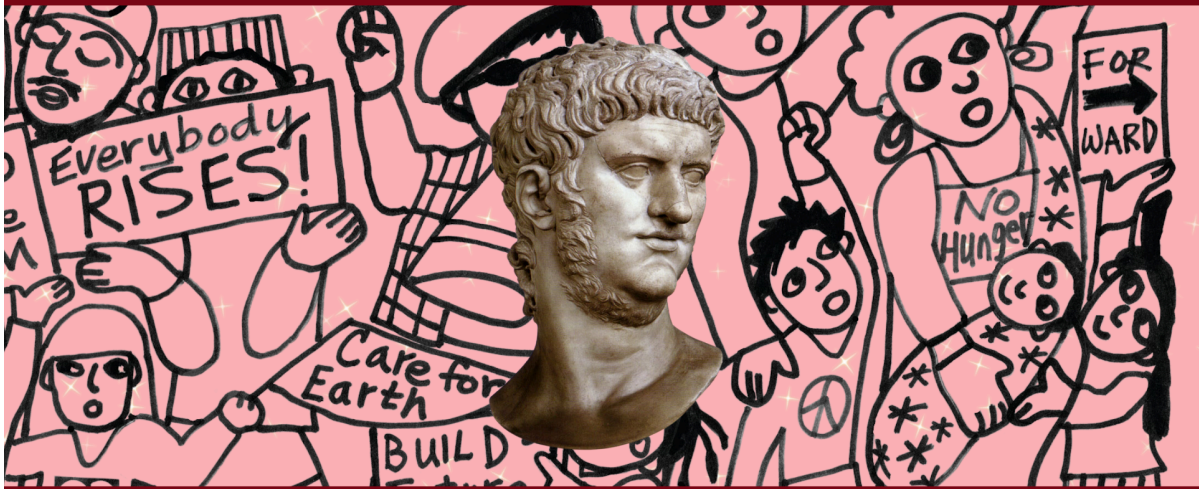


WHO ARE OUR LEADERS? WHAT THE BIBLE SAYS ABOUT KINGS



Freedom Church
of the Poor

Freedom Shul
of the Poor

Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings *Bible Study*

The God of the Hebrew Bible is a God who is found, and whose will is revealed and served, in the struggle of poor and oppressed people to overthrow the unjust kingdoms of landlords and creditors. This God is one who accompanies and guides poor and oppressed people as palaces and temples are torn down, and as the armies of the rich and powerful are cast down to the bottom of the sea. Again and again, this God calls prophets to denounce and undermine kingdoms of exploitation - of hoarded wealth and organized brutality. This God doesn't dwell in luxurious temples, but alongside the movements of the outcast and discarded, the debtors and the impoverished, as they struggle to remake the whole of society into a home humane enough to allow the divine presence within it.

This Bible study series traces that experience of God as it finds expression in the books of the Hebrew Bible that deal most closely with the emergence of the revolutionary Israelite movement, the reaction and counter-revolution of the Israelite kingdoms, and the determined opposition of the early prophets. The focus is especially on Exodus, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and the prophets of the 8th century BCE (Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Hosea).

The study group met throughout the Fall of 2024, during the height of the US presidential election, and this resource guide is being published in January 2025, just before the second inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. This meant that as we were

studying the Bible, and studying its ancient historical context, we were also of necessity studying our own economic and political realities today.

The struggle at the heart of the Biblical stories we were reading was over the question of who would dictate society's priorities: landlords, creditors, bureaucrats, and generals; or communities of farmers, shepherds, and manual laborers. The struggle waged by the ancient prophetic movements against the monarchies of Israel and Judah was over the basic question of how land and labor and the earth's abundance would be used: to feed and clothe and house and care for people, or to build palaces and temples, mansions and military garrisons for the elite. It was a struggle between forces in society with fundamentally different ideas of where God dwells, and whose side God is on: Does God bless injustice, and the hoarding of wealth, and dispossession, and narrow nationalistic militarism? Or does God command us to break every yoke of oppression, and care for one another, and give special concern to the poorest among us?

The struggle today is over similar questions: will society be led - and led to its destruction - by financiers, energy executives, speculators, war-mongers, and tech magnates, or will it be saved by the world's poor and increasingly economically outcast majority?

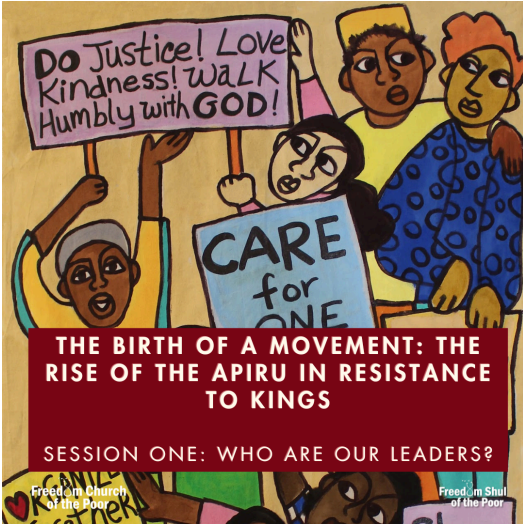
Kings of old and new, especially in times of profound crisis, have often put forward the most barefaced, self-serving, and extremist answers to these kinds of questions. Blasphemously, they claim divine support today for their plans to make the rich richer and to grind the faces of the poor into the dirt by attacking wages and health care, by making being poor a crime, along with waging political struggle, by carrying out mass deportations, and by denying the rights and the very existence of LGBTQ+ people. They claim a divine mandate to drive the nation and the planet onward into the catastrophes of climate crisis and world war.

The sacred texts highlighted in this study series expose the reality that these plans and policies - many of which have been pursued by Republicans and Democrats alike - are entirely contrary to God's will and God's teaching as laid out in the Bible. This is not the way laid out for us by the God who led the Israelites out of bondage, the God who called Elijah and Elisha, Isaiah, Micah and Amos. That God demands that we free those who are in chains, rather than fastening them more tightly.

As a new king is anointed in Washington, D.C. to reign over a society groaning under the weight of its own injustices, these stories from the Hebrew Bible provide us with comfort, and the confidence that comes with connecting ourselves to a legacy of struggle that stretches back over thousands of years. But they also provide us with warnings - we can lose, and we can fail. They provide us with a breadth of moral and political vision: we are not fighting against one individual, or political party, but against an entire edifice of injustice that has to be dismantled and reconstructed on new foundations. And they provide us with instruction and guidance on how to organize ourselves, on where and how to build power and strength, on where to find God and how to walk with God toward freedom.

Daniel Jones, Freedom Shul of the Poor

Links to Each Session



Do Justice! Love Kindness! Walk Humbly with GOD!

CARE for ONE

THE BIRTH OF A MOVEMENT: THE RISE OF THE APIRU IN RESISTANCE TO KINGS

SESSION ONE: WHO ARE OUR LEADERS?

Freedom Church of the Poor

Freedom Shul of the Poor



SONGS OF FREEDOM: POOR PEOPLE'S PRAYERS, SONGS, AND STRUGGLES IN RESISTANCE TO KINGS

SESSION TWO: WHO ARE OUR LEADERS?

Freedom Church of the Poor

Freedom Shul of the Poor

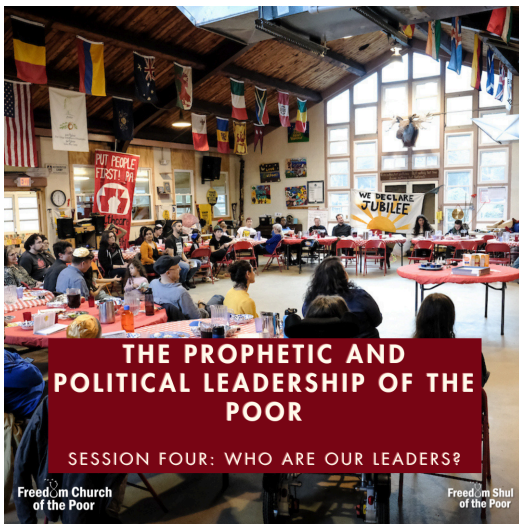


ESTABLISHING THE KINGDOM: WHO IS THE TEMPLE FOR?

SESSION FOUR: WHO ARE OUR LEADERS?

Freedom Church of the Poor

Freedom Shul of the Poor

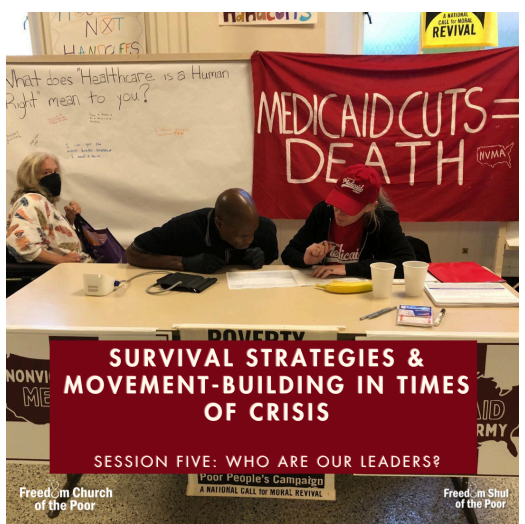


THE PROPHETIC AND POLITICAL LEADERSHIP OF THE POOR

SESSION FOUR: WHO ARE OUR LEADERS?

Freedom Church of the Poor

Freedom Shul of the Poor



What does Healthcare as a Human Right mean to you?

POVERTY

SURVIVAL STRATEGIES & MOVEMENT-BUILDING IN TIMES OF CRISIS

SESSION FIVE: WHO ARE OUR LEADERS?

Freedom Church of the Poor

Poor People's Campaign

A NATIONAL CALL FOR MORAL REVIVAL

Freedom Shul of the Poor

Session 1: The Birth of a Movement: The Rise of the Apiru in Resistance to Kings

Session 2: Poor People's Prayers, Songs, and Struggles in Resistance to Kings

Session 3: Establishing the Kingdom: Who is the Temple for?

Session 4: The Prophetic and Political Leadership of the Poor

Session 5: Survival Strategies & Movement-Building in Time of Crisis



Freedom Shul of the Poor Passover 2023 by Steve Pavey

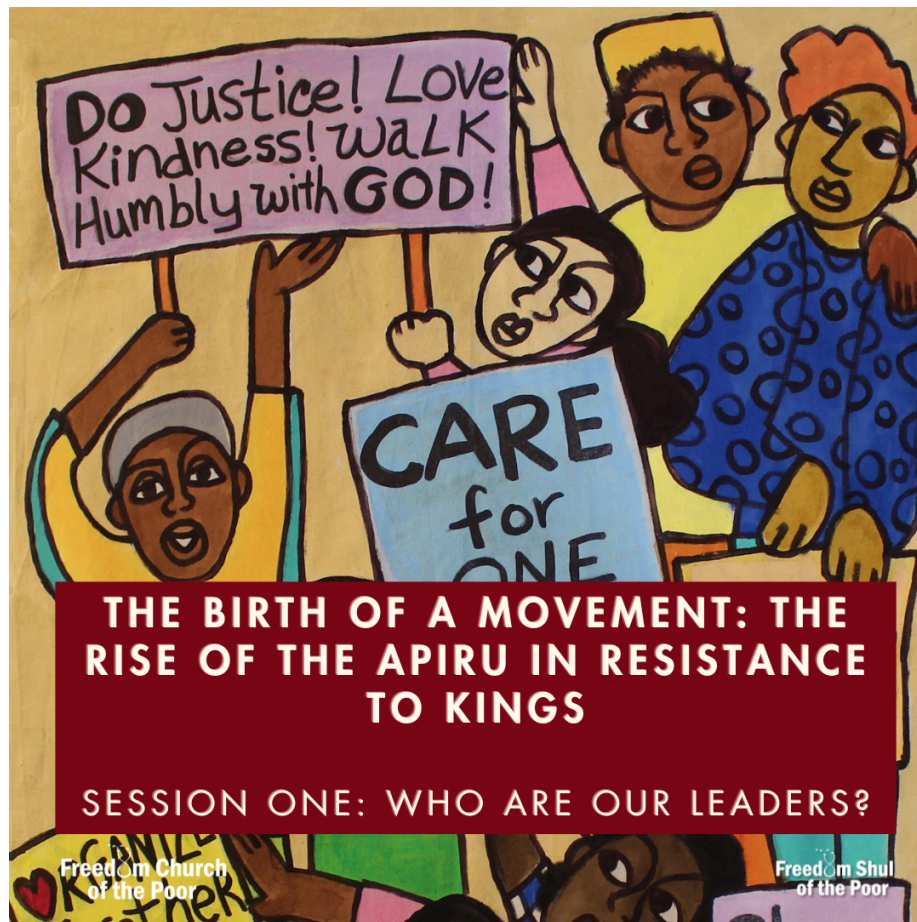
Freedom Church of the Poor **Freedom Shul of the Poor**

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Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings

The Birth of a Movement: The Rise of the Apiru in Resistance to Kings



Artwork by Anni Brink

[Link to Presentation Slides](#)

[Overview & Themes](#)

[Textual Tools](#)

[Cultural Tools](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Edited Transcript for Session One](#)

Overview & Themes

“The dispossessed of this nation — the poor, both white and Negro — live in a cruelly unjust society. They must organize a revolution against the injustice, not against the lives of the persons who are their fellow citizens, but against the structures through which the society is refusing to take means which have been called for, and which are at hand, to lift the load of poverty. There are millions of poor people in this country who have very little, or even nothing, to lose. If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life...”

– MLK, Massey Lectures (1967)



Anni Brink's artwork beautifully illustrates the love, community, and power that happens when people come together to fight for a revolutionary change in society. Here, a community of leaders has come together to raise their voices and unite their struggles against a cruel, unjust, empire. This painting is a beautiful grounding to kick off this series of Bible Studies, where we will see how the political and prophetic leadership of the poor is ingrained in our deepest moral and spiritual traditions. In this first session, we begin discussing the conditions of Ancient Israel and get introduced to the historical emergence of the *apiru*, or groups of rebels and outlaws who resisted oppressive systems, out of necessity and in order to survive. This session draws primarily from the narratives of Samuel and Kings, alongside making connections to the Abolition Movement and the Seminole Resistance in the United States. This session shows us

the traditions of what is possible when people come together across lines of division, and become a “[new and unsettling force](#).”

Themes

The role of Kings in our Biblical + historical traditions (i.e. how kings hoard wealth/keep things for themselves)

Historical Overview of the conditions of the emergence of the Israelite movement.

Resistance of poor people/peasants

The Rise of the *apiru* - movements of peasants that resisted the unjust and oppressive conditions of empire throughout the late Bronze Age in Southwest Asia.

Textual Tools

Note: Bible texts are taken from the JPS translation. All texts and excerpts can be found in the slideshow linked above.

1 Samuel 8

Exodus 15

1 Samuel 10:17-20

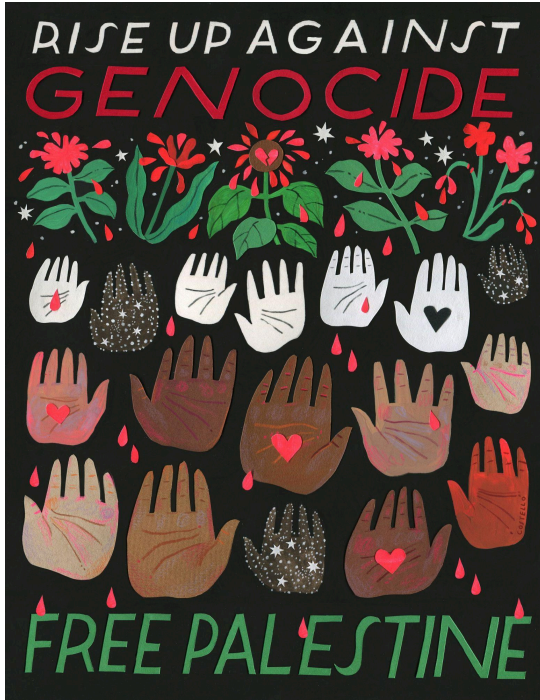
Letters from Rib-Haddi, King of Byblos to Pharaoh, c. 1350 B.C.E.

Merneptah Stele (1208 BCE)

The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction by Norman K. Gottwald

Cultural Tools

[New Unsettling Force Melody with Songs in the Key of Resistance](#)



Rise Up for Palestine by Olly Costello

"Me Única" - The Peace Poets



Unite the Poor by Steve Pavey

"We Belong Together" by Anu Yadav



Union de Vecinos - Stop Gentrifying Los Angeles!

Discussion Questions

If you've read the texts discussed before: What were some ideas, themes, or lessons you've heard about the Kings narratives? How did this session make you think about Kings narratives?

If this is your first time reading the text: What were your initial reactions, questions, or thoughts about the texts discussed?

In this lesson, we draw parallels from the *apiru* movement and fear of the Rib-Haddi, a King of Bylos to Pharaoh to the fear of Andrew Jackson about the Seminole Movement in the US. Where else do we see the ruling class fear the rise of a poor people's movement?

In your organizing, when have you seen those in power in fear of your organizing? What did they do when they were afraid, and how did you respond to it?

What do you think the Bible says about kingship? What do you think the Bible says about the leadership of the poor?

Edited Transcript for Session One

1 Samuel 8

1 When Samuel grew old, he appointed his sons as Israel's leaders.[a] 2 The name of his firstborn was Joel and the name of his second was Abijah, and they served at Beersheba. 3 But his sons did not follow his ways. They turned aside after dishonest gain and accepted bribes and perverted justice.

4 So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not follow your ways; now appoint a king to lead[b] us, such as all the other nations have."

6 But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. 7 And the Lord told him: "Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. 9 Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights."

10 Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, "This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 12 Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 16 Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle[c] and donkeys he will take for his own use. 17 He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 18 When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the Lord will not answer you in that day."

19 But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. 20 Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

21 When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. 22 The Lord answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."

Then Samuel said to the Israelites, "Everyone go back to your own town."

Textual Discussion

1 Samuel 8, highlights the people's request for a king and Samuel's warnings and God's warning about the danger of having a King.

This is the beginning. This is the starting point of the whole narrative of Saul and David and Solomon. It is the beginning of the stories of the monarchies in ancient Israel.

People look to other nations that have strong kings and dominate other nations as the model of prosperity, even though they have a different model for prosperity that God has shared.

What we're talking about with these texts is establishing a state power in a society that didn't have one. An official apparatus and structure of violence exercised through a standing army, through courts, through a bureaucracy, through systems of forced labor, systems of diplomacy and tribute. The justification (to this day) for doing this is always to aim that violence externally, at external threats. The justification here (in 1 Samuel 8) is that we have to wage war and we need a new, more intense system for waging war against our external threats. And what Samuel is raising through his conversation with God is that violence is going to be aimed at you all, at your families and that your children, that's where that violence is going to be. State power is not going to be used to protect you, even though you think it will.

And to the point that these people who Samuel is addressing have slaves. He (Samuel) is speaking to an assembly of the already recognized leadership of the community. This indicates that there were already structures of debt, bondage, and slavery. There were also structures of debt forgiveness and of liberating bond servants and slaves as well, so that that doesn't become a permanent condition. But there was clearly inequality of wealth. And what these people are saying is, "we want a state power to protect our wealth!" They want to be allowed to freely accumulate more wealth and strength. And Samuel is even warning those people. He's saying, once you set up this state in the end you will basically have a landlord's state. That's what the monarchy ends up being set up to protect. It's a machine for the suppression of a rural, agricultural populace by a group of landlords, and big farmers. That's what the ancient Israelite monarchy states are designed for. But he's warning them, this is going to come for you too, that this kind of society cannibalizes its itself and isn't safe for anybody.

This is not some amazing foresight act of prophecy, of telling the future. These stories are probably written three or four times over the course of five or 600 years before we get the text that we have now. The best we can guess is that this episode in I Samuel probably takes place around 1000 BCE. This is a time of transition between the Bronze Age and the Iron Age in Southwest Asia (Southwest Asia, that's the archeological preferred term for the region). In this part of the world states and kingdoms probably arise around 3500 BCE. And so by the time of I Samuel people have already had more than 2000 years of experience with kings and exactly what kings are all about and what kings do. And so this is about predicting the future, it's just looking at the immediate history that people have been grappling with and what people had actually just organized themselves to overthrow.

Conditions in Ancient Israel and the Emergence of the Apiru



The above image is a bevel rimmed bowl. It represents a couple of things. One, it's from about 3500 BCE, so it's about 5500 years old and it's the first thing in this part of the world that was mass produced. When archeologists dig around in this layer of history in Iraq and Syria and this part of the world, three quarters of what they find are bevel rimmed bowls. Its purpose in society was to pay wages. It was the ration for unfree workers, workers who had been dispossessed of their own land and were being compelled to go work on somebody else's plantation or somebody else's small manufacturing center. And again, it's from 3500 BCE, it's over 5000 years old and 2000 years before we get to this episode in Samuel. This illustrates how familiar the people in this society would have been with the feeling and the reality and the experience of oppression and exploitation. There were masses of people for 1000s of years under these Bronze Age kingdoms, for whom this was the immediate formational experience - being compelled to work and produce wealth for somebody else and what they received in exchange was what looks like a recycled Chipotle bowl that was just filled with grain. That was their ration to take care of themselves and their families. It wasn't a wage labor system, it was really different in a lot of ways from what we have today, but the basic point is that it was unfree labor, working to produce wealth from somebody else and receiving a bullshit ration in exchange for that labor was an experience of lots and lots of people in this part of the world for 1000s of years. This helps to set the stage a bit and give a sense of the context of I Samuel 8. People didn't have to guess what life under a king was going to be like. They were deeply familiar with it.

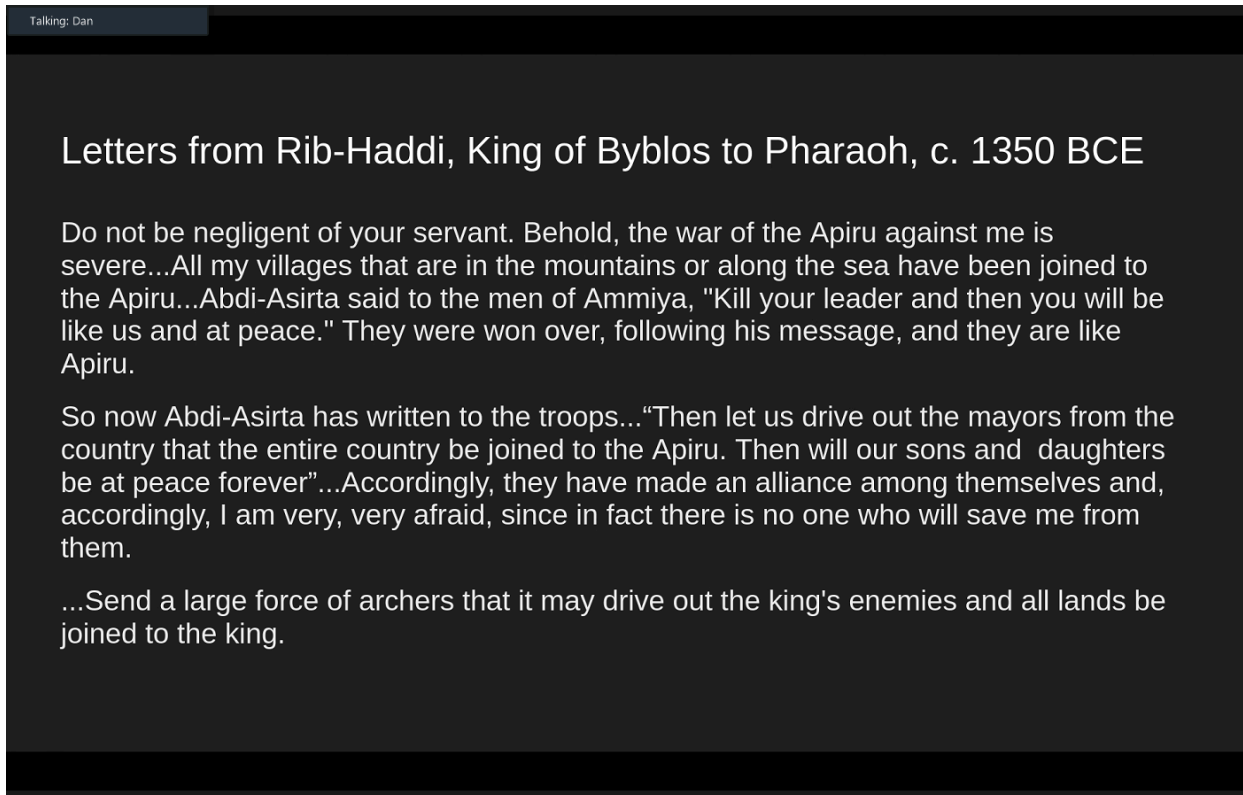


This is a map of some of the major kingdoms that existed in the late Bronze age, roughly 1400 BCE until 1200 BCE. It shows the trade network that existed between these kingdoms. There was a trade and tribute and diplomacy network between all of these kingdoms. This is central to understanding the story in Samuel and Kings. You've got Mycenaean Greece, and those city states and trade networks in Crete, and you've got the Hittite Empire, and what is now mainly Turkey, and you've got the Egyptian kingdom under Pharaoh. And then over here Palestine, which is used as a straight up buffer zone for the Egyptian kingdom against its main kind of frenemy, the Hittite Empire to the north.

This was a highly complex society with really deep networks and extensive networks of tribute and trade and diplomacy and connection among these different kingdoms. Some people talk about this as a kind of first age of globalization. Canaan serves as a buffer zone for Egypt, an early warning system. If the Hittite Empire seems to be making a move, and remember it's mainly ruled by these smaller kingdoms that have a patron-client relationship with the Egyptian pharaoh. They're smaller kingdoms with their own little palaces, their own little temples with plantations on them, with forced, unfree labor where folks are pushed into debt bondage. Or you have villages that are a little bit farther out where people are mainly organizing production collectively, but are still required to pay a tax in the form of labor to the nearest palace or a temple, maybe to work on some kind of project for them, or help with the harvest, or whatever it is. And then the kings in those areas take all that surplus wealth that's produced by the mass of the population who are agricultural workers with different relationships to land, some of them look more like sharecroppers, all of that wealth that's produced is taken and used to pay tribute to, the center, to Pharaoh.

So in that society the vast majority of people are feeling a constant pressure to be sharing from the very little produce that they're able to pull out of the land, or their labor, to create wealth for somebody else. And in that context people will have had enough at a certain point. And so in this context of oppression all throughout these Bronze Age kingdoms you start to see the emergence of these groups referred to as the **apiru**.

Around 1350 BC there is a collection of letters called the Amarna letters, which is a bunch of correspondence that we have between Pharaoh and these Canaanite kings and princes. A lot of them are talking about these problems with apiru.



Talking: Dan

Letters from Rib-Haddi, King of Byblos to Pharaoh, c. 1350 BCE

Do not be negligent of your servant. Behold, the war of the Apiru against me is severe...All my villages that are in the mountains or along the sea have been joined to the Apiru...Abdi-Asirta said to the men of Ammiya, "Kill your leader and then you will be like us and at peace." They were won over, following his message, and they are like Apiru.

So now Abdi-Asirta has written to the troops..."Then let us drive out the mayors from the country that the entire country be joined to the Apiru. Then will our sons and daughters be at peace forever"...Accordingly, they have made an alliance among themselves and, accordingly, I am very, very afraid, since in fact there is no one who will save me from them.

...Send a large force of archers that it may drive out the king's enemies and all lands be joined to the king.

I find this letter deeply heartwarming. Essentially what is happening here is that one of these small kings is saying the peasants are revolting and have organized themselves and are going from town to town and saying get rid of your representatives of the royal authority and join this movement. They're saying we don't need to be working on their plantations anymore. We don't need to be feeding their priests and courts anymore and we need to be taking care of each other. And they also go to the troops, to the armed forces and say you should actually come over onto our side and help us get rid of these people.

The apiru is not an ethnic designation. They appear to be basically Land Pirates, just people from anywhere in this late bronze age society who have had enough of the oppression and exploitation they've been living under and have decided to organize themselves to both be outside of the reach of that system and to fight against it and attack it. We don't want to overstate this as some militant, politically conscious, movement. This is a spontaneous


response to the horrors of life under these kings and empires. Apiru is used to designate this kind of response and movement against those empires of the day.

What do they have to do with the Hebrew Bible and with ancient Israel? This comes through a little bit in this next slide. This is a big piece of rock with some words carved on it from ancient Egypt from around 1200 BCE, so 150 years later, but the Apiru are still a problem.

Talking: Dan

Merneptah Stele (1208 BCE)

The princes are prostrate, saying 'Peace!
Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.
Desolation is for Tjehenu;
Hatti is pacified;
Plundered is Pa-Canaan with every evil;
Carried off is Ashkelon;
Seized upon is Gezer;
Yanoam is made non-existent;
Israel is laid waste—its seed is no more;
Kharru has become a widow because of Egypt.
All lands together are pacified.
Everyone who was restless has been bound.

The image shows the Merneptah Stele, a large black granite monument. At the top, there is a relief of the pharaoh Merneptah standing with his bow drawn, flanked by his family. Below the relief, the entire surface of the stele is covered in hieroglyphs. The stele is displayed in a museum setting, with a wooden chair visible to the right.

What it's describing is essentially a counterinsurgency campaign by Pharaoh's army in Canaan. It's the first time that we have a written reference to some historical entity called Israel. It says Israel is laid to waste. Its seed is no more. And I think that "seed" is literal, as in they took all of their grain stores and burned them up. It's describing this counterinsurgency campaign all throughout Canaan that was aimed both at some of these small kings and princes who are trying to go independent, but also against these Apiru groups and movements and Israel is listed among them. The way that Israel is written in this artifact denotes not a state, not a settled population with its own king, temple and whatever, but just a group of people. So Israel is not a geographic location or anything like this, but a group of pretty mobile people. This is not describing some Israelite Kingdom, but something that looks more like a movement of the people.

And so the basic argument is that ancient Israel was part of this broad movement of poor and dispossessed people against the kingdoms and empires of the day and that it was forged in opposition to those ideologies, to those political powers and structures. This is the foundational formational historical experience of this society, which emerges in the Canaanite Highlands

around 1200/1100 BCE. It also means that the ancient Israelite religion was the conscious reflection of that movement of people, these are its roots. You have these peasants who have been moving up into the highlands, up into the hills and the mountains around Jerusalem and these other places are. They do this in part because all of the advanced military technology of the day, the chariots and these other kinds of things, just don't work that well on hilly, rocky terrain. So they're able to move up there and fight an armed struggle and try to establish a different way of living together. This isn't some utopian, perfect, society, but it was a movement against a highly exploitative, highly oppressive society of the time, at a time when that society was in profound crisis.

Discussion

In hearing this the importance of the Exodus story makes a lot more sense - the organized resistance and this story of coming out of Egypt..

Yes. This is why when God says to Sameul, "don't take it personally, this is what the people have done ever since I brought them out of Egypt." It is a reminder about what they've done and the God that they discovered through struggle. God is saying, "we just did this together. You found me!" This group of people in motion against these armies, against these courts, against these palaces, found this God, kind of llying around in the religious material available to them at that time. They found this God and worked with this God to overthrow those structures and literally drown that army in the sea. God is saying, "we just did this and now you want to set up that oppression against yourselves again?!"

I kept thinking about how we, the peasants, always rise up at one point in time. I was thinking about the Bolsheviks and also drawing parallels to our continued struggle against the rulers as oppressed peoples to continue to rise up in armed struggles by any means possible.

Similarly, I was also thinking of another historical comparison that we just studied about the Abolition movement in the US and how the Underground Railroad was actually stealing wealth, like 13 billion or whatever the number was. And thinking about these Apiru, Land Pirates, who were resisting and taking the wealth of the empire back.

I think one of the best relatively recent parallels that you can draw is from Florida among the emergence of the Seminoles in Northern and Central Florida, which is the southern route of the Underground Railroad for a time. There's this letter from Andrew Jackson to The Secretary of War from that time calling for the destruction of a village that had been set up right among a kind of growing unity of self emancipated black formerly enslaved workers and indigenous people who had been displaced and were building something together outside of the reach of the plantation structures in in Georgia. This letter from Andrew Jackson sounds exactly like this letter from this Canaanite prince to Pharaoh. The parallel is really striking, including this point that the apiru were religiously and ethnically and linguistically diverse. So when you have different groups of oppressed people in the society, folks are able to navigate a way with those differences in diversity and find unity in their resistance to the structure. That's the thing that's

most threatening. That's some of what was threatening about the apiru. They couldn't be sort of split up along those lines.

There are a number of us who really have had no idea about this history and context, the way the ruling class always treats us and tries to make invisible and and unavailable any knowledge about our history, the histories of resistance in this country. I'm just really grateful that we're getting a chance to learn some of this history, because it makes such a difference. There's a similar history in Lesotho in the 1800s when people of various backgrounds and languages were fleeing the dominance of the Zulu kingdom of Shaka Zulu and they came together in the mountains of Lesotho where the the Zulu tribes couldn't actually access them very well and formed one nation out of a lot of different people groups who all had a similar experience of oppression. So this seems to be a very frequent experience that oppressed people have in trying to free themselves.

1 Samuel 8

⁶ But when they said, “Give us a king to lead us,” this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. ⁷ And the LORD told him: “Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. ⁸ As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. ⁹ Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will claim as his rights.”

¹⁰ Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. ¹¹ He said, “This is what the king who will reign over you will claim as his rights: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. ¹² Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. ¹³ He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴ He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants.

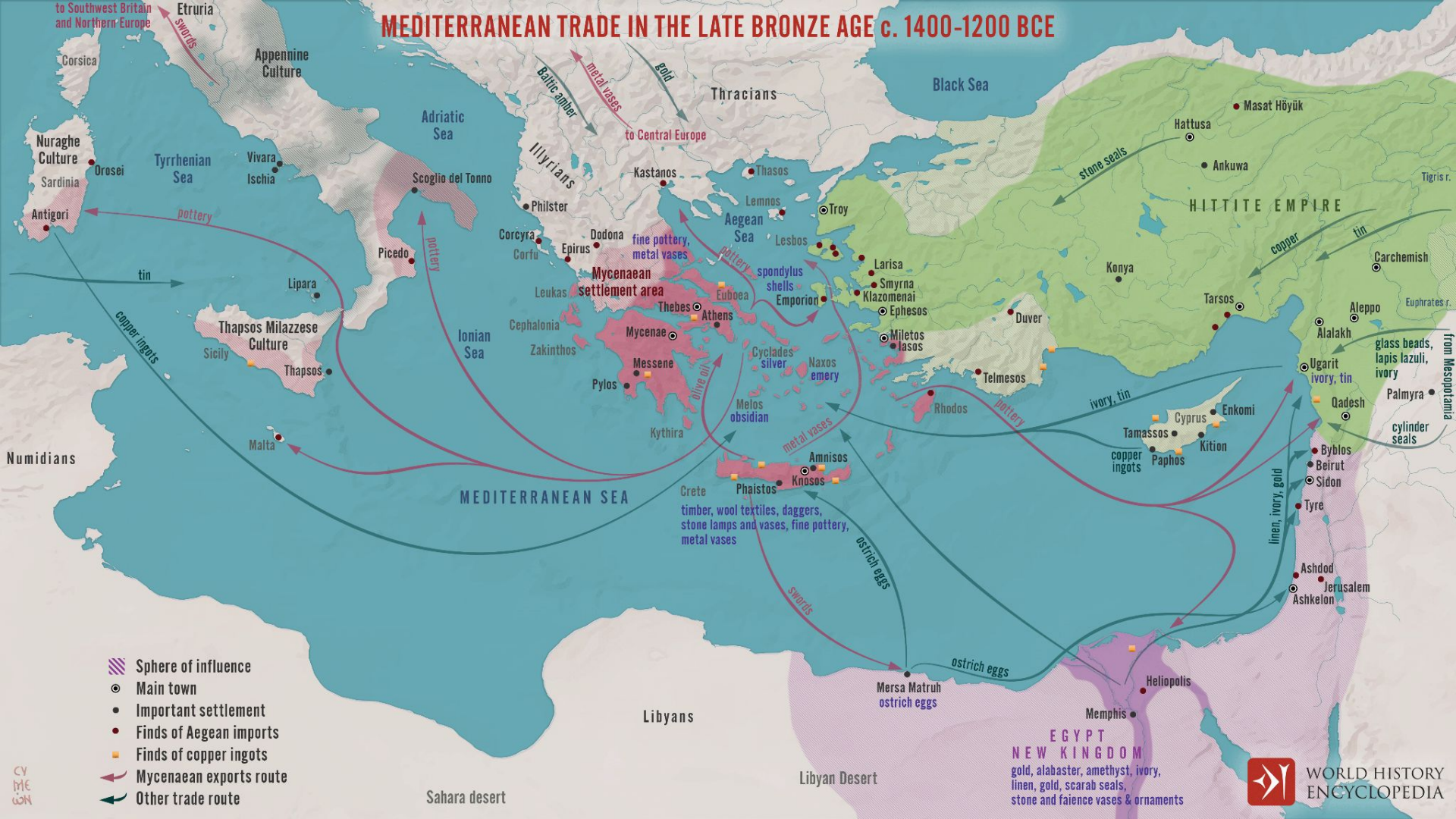
¹⁵ He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. ¹⁶ Your male and female servants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. ¹⁷ He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. ¹⁸ When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, but the LORD will not answer you in that day.”

¹⁹ But the people refused to listen to Samuel. “No!” they said. “We want a king over us. ²⁰ Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.”

²¹ When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. ²² The LORD answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.” Samuel then said to the representatives of Israel, “All of you go home.”



MEDITERRANEAN TRADE IN THE LATE BRONZE AGE c. 1400-1200 BCE



-  Sphere of influence
-  Main town
-  Important settlement
-  Finds of Aegean imports
-  Finds of copper ingots
-  Mycenaean exports route
-  Other trade route

Letters from Rib-Haddi, King of Byblos to Pharaoh, c. 1350 BCE

Do not be negligent of your servant. Behold, the war of the Apiru against me is severe...All my villages that are in the mountains or along the sea have been joined to the Apiru...Abdi-Asirta said to the men of Ammiya, "Kill your leader and then you will be like us and at peace." They were won over, following his message, and they are like Apiru.

So now Abdi-Asirta has written to the troops...“Then let us drive out the mayors from the country that the entire country be joined to the Apiru. Then will our sons and daughters be at peace forever”...Accordingly, they have made an alliance among themselves and, accordingly, I am very, very afraid, since in fact there is no one who will save me from them.

...Send a large force of archers that it may drive out the king's enemies and all lands be joined to the king.

Merneptah Stele (1208 BCE)

The princes are prostrate, saying 'Peace!'
Not one raises his head among the Nine Bows.
Desolation is for Tjehenu;
Hatti is pacified;
Plundered is Pa-Canaan with every evil;
Carried off is Ashkelon;
Seized upon is Gezer;
Yanoam is made non-existent;
Israel is laid waste—its seed is no more;
Kharru has become a widow because of Egypt.
All lands together are pacified.
Everyone who was restless has been bound.



The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction - Norman K. Gottwald

Israel burst into history as an ethnically and socioeconomically mixed coalition composed of a majority of tribally organized peasants, along with lesser numbers of pastoral nomads, mercenaries and freebooters, assorted craftsmen, and renegade priests. These sectors of the indigenous populace joined in a combined sociopolitical and religious revolution against the imperial and hierarchic tribute-imposing structures of Egyptian-dominated Canaan.

Exodus 15

Song of the Sea

1 Samuel 10:17-20

Samuel summoned the people to GOD at Mizpah

and said to them, “Thus said the ETERNAL, the God of Israel: ‘I brought Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and of all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’

But today you have rejected your God who delivered you from all your troubles and calamities. For you said, ‘No, set up a king over us!’ Now station yourselves before GOD, by your tribes and clans.”

Layers of history

1800 BCE - 1200 BCE - Late Bronze Age, Canaanite-Egyptian rule

1200 BC - 1000 BCE - Bronze Age

“Collapse” & Emergence of Ancient Israel - No state power (Joshua-Judges)

1000 BCE - 721 BCE - Little kingdoms in Israel & Judah (“First Temple” period)

721 BCE - 587 BCE - Little kingdom in Judah (Israel destroyed by Assyrian Empire)

587 BCE - 537 BCE - Babylonian exile

537 BCE - 330 BCE - Persian/Achaemenid rule (“Second Temple” period begins)

330 BCE - 296 BCE - Alexander the Great/Macedonian rule

296 BCE - 201 BCE - Ptolemaic rule

200 BCE - 104 BCE - Seleucid rule

104 BCE - 64 BCE - Hasmonean rule (Maccabees)

64 BCE - Roman rule

Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings

Songs of Freedom: Poor People's Prayers, Songs, and Struggles
in Resistance to Kings



Hope in Focus by Steve Pavey

[Link to Presentation Slides](#)

[Overview & Themes](#)

[Textual Tools](#)

[Cultural Tools](#)

[Discussion Questions](#)

[Edited Transcript for Session Two](#)

Overview & Themes

"Something you gotta understand about poor people's organizing is that it's spiritual. Death stalks constantly. We as poor people are in touch with our mortality. We as poor people are forced to see the stark truth behind so many hypocrisies propping up this society. We as poor people survive on the joyful grit and militant tenderness that keeps us finding beauty, laughter, and lifelines amid the wreckage of daily apocalypses. Being spiritual doesn't mean poor people trust religious institutions or even God... Spirituality is not just an idea or a theory. Nor is spirituality a warm, comforting feeling. Spirituality is your hungry, grieving, dopesick body and mind deciding to get up and live another day. Faith is deciding that you deserve life when the powers and principalities of this world tell you every fucking second of every day that you do not. Religion is a moral code, a moral habit that sits deeper in you than all your other habits, and by this definition of it, a lot of poor folks put nice, respectable-looking church people to shame..."

Hope is not optimism. Hope is something we have to go out and build, in concrete and material ways. Hope is food. Hope is sanctuary. Hope is Narcan. Hope, for poor people, is inseparable from life and inseparable from power."

Bring Back Your People: Ten Ways Regular Folks Can Put a Dent in White Christian Nationalism
Aaron Scott



*Charon Hribar, Pauline Pisano, and Ciara Taylor at the 2024 Minister's Commissioning in
Kansas City
[by Steve Pavey](#)*

At the [2024 Minister's Training Commissioning](#), Freedom Church Ministers from across the country came together to honor their commitment to this growing church and movement. After the commissioning, the newly commissioned ministers, and their families, and friends, gathered in a circle, holding hands to sing "[Comrade](#)" by [Johnathan Lykes](#). These moments of deep connection through culture are crucial to our movements and to our organizing. It helps us connect to our hearts and bodies, and heal from the constant attacks under a cruel and unjust system. Singing as a form of celebration, community, and commitment has always been a part of our spiritual traditions, as we learn in this session. In this session, we go deeper in our understanding of the political and social context of ancient Israel, particularly the role of the land pirates (apiru) and their struggle against royal authority. We do this by studying several songs throughout the Bible, including the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), and the Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2). Through understanding these songs in their political and social context, we understand how arts and culture can be a powerful tool for both the oppressor and the oppressed.

Themes

Understanding historical contexts such as the collapse of the Bronze Age, and what that can teach us about the Kings narratives

How the Bible shows how songs and prayers have helped communities of resistance celebrate, mourn, and connect with each other and God

The strategies of poor people's movements in the Bible and in history to resist empire

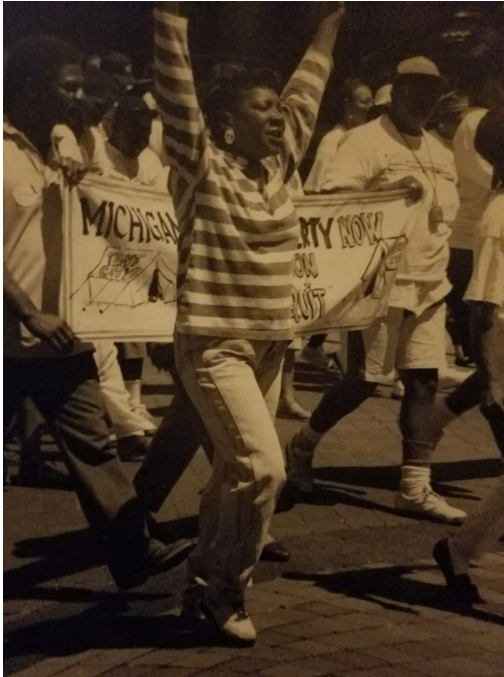
Textual Tools

Note: Bible texts are taken from the JPS translation. All texts and excerpts can be found in the slideshow linked above.

1 Samuel 2:4-5; 7-8; 10 (Hannah's Song) | 10:17-20
Judges 5:13; 19-21 | 5:24-27 | 9:7-15 (Deborah's Song)
Exodus 15:4-5, 15:14-16, 15:19-21 (Miriam's Song)

Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel by Roland Boer

Cultural Tools



Michigan Welfare Rights Organization - Up and Out of Poverty Now!

[Songs in the Key of Resistance Title Song](#)

[Songs in the Keys of Resistance: A Movement Songbook](#)

In August 2024, participants from across the nation gathered at the Bethany Arts Community for a transformative cultural organizing retreat hosted by the Kairos Center for Religions, Rights, and Social Justice and the NYS Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival. This powerful retreat brought together song leaders, musicians, organizers, and media makers from the Kairos Center, NYS Poor People's Campaign, Highlander Research & Education Center, Dream Defenders, the SSING Network, Black Youth Project 100, and the NYS Media Team, all united in the shared vision of social justice and collective action.

These are two pieces that came out of this retreat:

[Ella's Song](#)

[Voices of Resistance in Solidarity with Palestine](#)

[Comrade by Jonathan Lykes with Songs in the Key of Resistance](#)

[Dancers for the PPC](#)

[We Rise - Batya Levine & Avra Shapiro - Freedom Shul of the Poor Passover Seder 2024](#)



We Are the Change by Nando Álvarez

Discussion Questions

If you've read the texts discussed before: What were some ideas, themes, or lessons you've heard about the Kings narratives? How did this session make you think about Kings narratives?

If this is your first time reading the text: What were your initial reactions, questions, or thoughts about the texts discussed?

What role do prophecies, songs, and prayers play in the Bible and in the tradition of the *apiru*? How have prophecies, songs, and prayers been used and misused, then and today?

Based on the Biblical text and content of the session, what were some of the strategies of those in the Bible and *the apiru* to resist empire and those in power? What can we learn from them?

How have arts and culture played a role in your organizing? How have you experienced how those in power use arts and culture?

What would a culture of the poor and dispossessed feel and look like, and how can we fight for that?

Edited Transcript for Session Two

Song of the Sea (Exodus 15)

It's really good to be with you all again. Today we are going to read some 3000 year old poetry about overthrowing kingdoms and tossing armies into oceans and rivers and letting them sink down to the depths. We'll also talk a little bit about the context, the traditions that this poetry comes out of, and then a little bit about how those same traditions are then taken up and appropriated and used by new kingdoms that emerge among this Israelite movement.

Then Moses did sing, and all the Israelites with him,
this song to the LORD, and they said, saying:

Let me sing to the LORD for He surged, O surged—
Horse and its rider He hurled into the sea.
My strength and my power is Yah,
and He became my deliverance.
This is my God—I extol Him.
God of my fathers—I exalt Him.
The LORD is a man of war,
the LORD is his name.
Pharaoh's chariots and his force
He pitched into the sea
and the pick of his captains
were drowned in the Reed Sea.
The depths did cover them over,
down they went in the deep like a stone.
Your right hand, O LORD, is mighty in power
Your right hand, O LORD, smashes the enemy.
In your great surging You wreck those against you
You send forth Your wrath, it consumes them like straw.
And with the breath of Your nostrils waters heaped up,
streams stood up like a mound.

the depths congealed in the heart of the sea.
The enemy said:
 'I'll pursue, overtake, divide up the loot,
 my gullet will fill with them, I'll bare my sword, my hand despoil them.'
You blew with Your breath—the sea covered them over.
 They sank like lead in the mighty waters:
Who is like You among the gods, O LORD,
 Who is like You, mighty in holiness?
 Fearsome in praise, worker of wonders.
You stretched out Your hand—
 earth swallowed them up.
You led forth in Your kindness
 this people that You redeemed.
 You guided them in Your strength to Your holy abode
Peoples heard, they quaked,
 trembling seized Philistia's kings
Then were the chieftains of Edom dismayed,
 the dukes of Moab, shuddering seized them,
 all the rulers of Canaan quailed.
Terror and fear did fall upon them,
 as Your arm loomed big, they were like a stone.

Who is like You among the gods, O LORD,
 Who is like You, mighty in holiness?
 Fearsome in praise, worker of wonders.
You stretched out Your hand—
 earth swallowed them up.
You led forth in Your kindness
 this people that You redeemed.
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Peoples heard, they quaked,
 trembling seized Philistia's kings
Then were the chieftains of Edom dismayed,
 the dukes of Moab, shuddering seized them,
 all the rulers of Canaan quailed.
Terror and fear did fall upon them,
 as Your arm loomed big, they were like a stone.
When Your people crossed over, O Lord,
 when the people You made Yours crossed over.
You'll bring them, you'll plant them, on the mount of Your estate,
 a firm place for Your dwelling You wrought, O LORD
 the sanctum, O Sovereign, Your hands firmly founded.
The LORD shall be king for all time!

Discussion

I love the language and the remembrance of how they received their liberation, but it's fascinating because we still sing these songs today. I also am reflecting on how quick they forgot about all this. It doesn't take them very long for them (and for us) to be like, "What have you done for me lately?"

One of the things I noticed in reading it last night in the new Revised Standard Version is that while I've always thought this was the song of Miriam the very first verse of chapter 15 does not attribute it to Miriam, and at the end of it, it just says, "and so then Miriam sang the same song."

I know the Mi Camocha so well, but it's only the one section in the center of (Exodus 15), the part about, "Who is like you?" I grew up in a reform school, a pretty orthodox one, and never really knew the context for this song, not singing it, not knowing the whole song, but just lifting up that one section.

Yes, the song Mi Camocha, which means, "Who is like you?" is taken directly from the middle section and it's mostly just the lines, "who is like you among workers of wonders?" We sing this all the time in the Jewish tradition, but there's not always a lot of discussion, except maybe around Passover.

So, first on this question about Miriam. There's this initial version that's attributed to Moses and then once you get to Exodus 15:19-21 there's this truncated version, which reiterates that Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, and the Lord brought the waters back over them, and the Israelites walked through on dry ground. And it goes on to talk about how then Miriam, the prophet Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them, saying to the Lord, for He is highly exalted, both horse and driver. He is hurled into the sea.

There are a couple of theories about what is happening in the text here.

One of the theories here that our friend Norman Gottwald has is that there's a tendency at work here and in other places throughout the Hebrew Bible.

As a hymn there is the thought that it was composed for use in celebration and that it isn't something that's written to be put in a book. We know that this is how things work sometimes. This may have been composed for people to sing together, to celebrate, their freedom and their life and their way of being together, and in remembrance of an experience that they went through. Then somebody else takes this song and decides to put it into a text that becomes the Bible, which has the effect of hiding the context in which it was composed. Norman Gottwald has this theory that there is a tendency to take these kinds of traditions, like this hymn about the destruction of Pharaoh's army, and take it out of the mouth of somebody who those editors might think is less significant and instead attribute it to somebody who they think is more significant. You can see support for his theory in the text here because the story that introduces Miriam's version of the song has so much more texture to it. It has all of this about the musical instruments and the dancing and there's just more going on. It suggests that this is a tradition that was associated with Miriam, but later writers may have thought this couldn't be done by a woman, that it had to have been Moses who sang this song. When they're actually putting this text together they move it from Miriam over to Moses,

One of the things that I think is worth noticing here and that we will take note of throughout what we read today, is the question of, who is the enemy? Who is set up as God's enemy and as the Israelites enemy?

Exodus 15:14-16

Peoples heard, they quaked,
trembling seized Philistia's kings
Then were the chieftains of Edom dismayed,
the dukes of Moab, shuddering seized them,
all the rulers of Canaan quailed.
Terror and fear did fall upon them,
as Your arm loomed big, they were like a stone.
When Your people crossed over, O Lord,
when the people You made Yours crossed over.

Pharaoh's chariots and his force
He pitched into the sea
and the pick of his captains
were drowned in the Reed Sea.
The depths did cover them over,
down they went in the deep like a stone.

So who are the enemies in these passages?

Chieftains and dukes and the rulers, Pharaoh.

Yes. And also chariots! The Israelites really don't like chariots.

Chariots were advanced military technology of the time. And they were totally ineffective up in the hills and Highlands, which is where the Israelite movement makes its home base and its struggle against these ruling authorities of the day. What gives them somewhat of an edge in this conflict with the ruling powers is that this very effective military technology of the chariot, just doesn't work on the terrain where they apiru resist. The enemy that's identified here is also Pharaoh, is royal armies, is the functionaries of those armies, is kings, chieftains, dukes, rulers, but it is important to note one of the translation issues here.

And I think this gets to an important question about some of the problems that lots of people have with the whole Joshua/Judges narrative. In some translations it is not translated as “rulers,” but just as “inhabitants” or “dwellers.” And the word that is being translated there is, is this word *yoshev*, which is translated as “seat.” Some translations take that as just the people who are settled there. I've seen very convincing arguments looking at the other uses of that term to say that it has more of a resonance with thrones and royal authority and sovereignty. The reason I bring this up is because it's a basic question for the whole Joshua/Judges narrative. That narrative is sometimes understood as an ethno-religious conflict, which is very troubling and makes it pretty hard to root for the Israelites. However, interpreting this term as ruler changes how we see it to more of a class struggle. It is not just against all Canaanite people, but against the ruling Canaanite authorities as a violent, exploitative, oppressive force in the life of this people that is rising up. I think the evidence is pretty strong, both within the text itself, and if you look at some of the context.

(discussion) Yes, thanks Dan. I think that's a really convincing argument. I was raised in a tradition that understands this is all to be literal/historical. The Song of is set during the time right after they made it across the Red Sea and yet a lot of the pieces of the poem you're talking about right now are definitely references to things that historically they wouldn't have encountered yet. They wouldn't have encountered Edom or Moab and so clearly there's something going on in the poem that's about the time in which they were written, rather than the time in which it was set.

I'm assuming there is a relationship between Pharaoh, Egypt, and these other rulers in other places. What is that like? Are they like client rulers for Egypt?

I think this is a really important point and I'm really glad you raised it. This (Song of the Sea) is supposedly a hymn celebrating the defeat of Pharaoh, but then all of a sudden we have introduced into the mix Edom and Canaan and Moab and all these other places. This is really telling in terms of the actual historical experience at the root of this. There is evidence to support the claim that it was a kind of client-tributary relationship between Egypt and these other smaller kingdoms. The whole region of the Southern Levant, including Canaan, is a buffer region between Pharaoh's kingdom and a rival Empire, the Hittite Empire to the North, and they're constantly sort of fighting over it. The correspondence that we have, the Amarna letters from a little bit earlier in this period, suggested that these small Canaanite kings mostly had control of one city with a palace and a temple and some surrounding areas and they would send luxury goods and other stuff to Pharaoh. In exchange, Pharaoh provided security, those chariots, and an army and would have military garrisons and supply depots and things like that in Canaan to back up the authority of those kings, against the Apiru, against each other, against the Hittite Empire, against whatever force was threatening Pharaoh's rule. This helps clarify the relationship and define what the Israelite movement is, who they are in struggle against and it locates them in Canaan, and not as some external invading force, which historically has been the dominant historical interpretation. It seems that they (the early Israelite community) are actually part of an indigenous population that's rising up.

1 Samuel 10:17-20

We were just talking about this experience of liberation from Pharaoh's rule, and Pharaoh's rule exercised as well through the authority of these petty Canaanite kings. Now we will read something that also references that same experience in a different way. This comes a few chapters after Samuel's initial warning about kings. It comes when Samuel has finally been strong-armed by the people at the end and God is like, ok give them a king, but instead Samuel tells everybody go home. In this next part God pressures Samuel into actually naming a king over the Israelites and so he's gathered them for this assembly.

1 Samuel 10:17-20

Samuel summoned the people to GOD at Mizpah

and said to them, "Thus said the ETERNAL, the God of Israel: 'I brought Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and of all the kingdoms that oppressed you.'

But today you have rejected your God who delivered you from all your troubles and calamities. For you said, 'No, set up a king over us!' Now station yourselves before GOD, by your tribes and clans."

Here we have reference to the Egyptians and of all the kingdoms that oppressed the people. This is a network of power and authority that exists in the region. Essentially what Samuel and God are saying is your desire to set up a kingdom again is a total betrayal of the experience of liberation from Pharaoh and from Pharaoh's armies. You've rejected your God who delivered you from your troubles and calamities, by saying, set a king over us. The whole rest of the Bible asserts that kings and kingdoms and royal authority are bad not just because authority is bad, but because of what kings do. They conscript people into armies and take and take and take and exploit and oppress.

There's another warning against kings that comes even earlier in the story. This is from Judges 9. This is in a period before the monarchy, but it's part of the story about Gideon or Jerubaal, who is a very effective militia leader in the ongoing struggle against these Canaanite kingdoms that are hanging on. One of his sons decides that he doesn't just want to be a leader of a community, he wants to be a king ruling over a community and so he murders all of his brothers. He's got something like 70 brothers. He murders all of them, except for one who escapes, Jotham. In this passage Jotham is in a fight against the setting up of this kingdom.

Judges 9:7-15

When Jotham was informed, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and called out to them in a loud voice. "Citizens of Shechem!" he cried, "Listen to me, that God may listen to you.

"Once the trees went to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, 'Reign over us.' But the olive tree replied, 'Have I, through whom God and humans are honored, stopped yielding my rich oil, that I should go and wave above the trees?'

So the trees said to the fig tree, 'You come and reign over us.'

But the fig tree replied, 'Have I stopped yielding my sweetness, my delicious fruit, that I should go and wave above the trees?'

So the trees said to the vine, 'You come and reign over us.'

But the vine replied, 'Have I stopped yielding my new wine, which gladdens God and humans, that I should go and wave above the trees?'

Then all the trees said to the thornbush, 'You come and reign over us.'

And the thornbush said to the trees, 'If you are acting honorably in anointing me king over you, come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, may fire issue from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!'

What's what's going on here? What's the view of kingship? And it is not just Kingship that is being discussed, it's the whole institution and authority of the palace and the temple. They are all part of a whole system for organizing the life of society, which in part is based on widespread forced labor on plantations to produce goods for kings and priests. This allows the elite to both live a high life and gives them tools to use in this kind of web of diplomacy and tribute and trade that only benefits a tiny minority. There's a running conflict between a rural, communally organized populace to produce and share things together and set aside a little bit for the lean years and this attempt by the Royal authorities to force everybody onto plantations to be producing wealth for them and their interests.

So with this context, what do we think this passage (Judges 9:7-15) is saying?

The trees and the vine produce something that people need and use and they refuse to be a king over the trees. However the thornbush, which doesn't produce anything that is helpful and is probably hurtful, kind of agrees.

Yes, I think that's exactly right. The thornbush is saying, "I'll be your king, come give me a hug." It's sort of sarcastic. The thornbush says, "come rest in my shade," when all the thorn bush offers is the possibility of calamity and conflagration when it goes up in flames. I just point this out, to highlight the conflict between use value and exchange value; the production of goods to meet human needs versus the imposition of royal authority to exploit that production for its own gain.

There's another important lesson here about our mental terrain. We are told that the rise of civilization is a result of there being some people who are more clever or smarter and they end up accumulating a little bit more wealth and responsibility and eventually just kind of transition into being kings who are running palaces and temples. The argument is that it's just the biggest

assholes who will win, never the people who deserve it or are doing anything useful for people, but always the folks who are interested in using violence to hurt others who assume royal authority.

Late Bronze Age Collapse

Now we will look at a quote from the Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel, by Roland Bohr. I want to raise it in relation to the Song of the Sea and the experience of the Exodus, the liberation from Pharaoh and from the petty Canaanite kingdoms. Biblical historians and archeologists who are interested in understanding the Bible link the Exodus experience and the Joshua and Judges narratives to a period of history known as the Bronze Age collapse, or the late Bronze Age collapse.

Recall the map we looked at last time, which showed all of these kingdoms and this network and web of trade among Mycenaean Greece and the Hittite Empire (in the area where Turkey is today) and also these Canaanite kingdoms and Egypt, and how these trade networks extended all the way to Western Europe in the West and all the way East into Afghanistan, which was a major source for the tin used to produce bronze. In this extensive network of trade and tribute, which is all based on extremely widespread exploitative, unfree labor, on plantations, and also on the extraction of a labor tax, where nominally free villagers were compelled to do work on different projects for the temple and Palace authorities at the time.

In this period of the Late Bronze Age there is evidence of widespread destruction of urban centers, especially of palaces and temples and other symbols of royal authority, which are just getting burned to the ground all over the place in the region. In this period there is also a marked decline in the networks of trade and tribute. The Late Bronze Age Collapse was estimated to be around 1200 BCE until 1000 or 900 BCE. During this time we see the destruction of these urban centers and less monument building and less production of skilled handicraft or high-end luxury pottery. You also have less trade in luxury goods, but one thing to note is that in this same period we see a total explosion and thriving of a population in the highlands in Canaan, which is right in the area that becomes the heart of the later Israelite kingdoms. So, the general agreement is that this period of the so-called Bronze Age Collapse was also the emergence and flourishing and thriving of a people who sometimes are called the "proto-Israelites." Again, this isn't some utopian society, but they aren't going around building palaces at that time. The buildings are much closer to the same size and there isn't evidence of intensive mono crop agriculture, but there is evidence of a much more egalitarian, communal, village based society with a really different approach to life together, such that there's actually, depending on who you ask, somewhere between a three and eight fold increase of population and of settlements in that region in this period. Historians describe this as a collapse, but for whom is it a collapse?

Bronze Age “Collapse” - from *Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*

...Collapse for whom? From the perspective of the ruling class, it is indeed collapse, and the ensuing period is a prolonged time of crisis. The sources of wealth have been removed, the palaces and temples destroyed, the estate system of patterns of tribute and exchange have been dismantled, and power has been lost...Yet from the perspective of the village communes, of the subsistence and estate laborers, of socially determining clan households, a “collapse” actually means a blessed relief from the various means of extraction. We can hardly expect the peasants, laborers, and common people to sit back and wait for such much-desired collapses to happen. From the Habiru through to archaeological signals of urban destruction by the town's own exploited class, they were more than keen to hasten the demise.

We can surely see parallels to the crisis of the world order today. I also want to point out the reality that only a society in profound crisis is positioned for fundamental transformation. This isn't a fun or easy process. It is an extremely painful and violent and devastating one, but it's also the truth of things. If folks have been to our (Freedom Shul of the Poor) Passover Seders, this is one of the basic lessons we take from the plagues narrative in the Exodus tradition. Crisis is hardest on the poor and it's the only thing that produces the objective conditions that make it possible for the poor to take power, to do something different with the world. This comes through here in this text. It shows the basic posture of the earliest Israelite tradition to temples and palaces was not just obeying or worshiping them as temples and palaces, but understanding them to be the institutions that exist to support the power of landlords. They are the institutions in which landlords have organized themselves to exploit the labor of the vast majority of the rest of the population.

There are other insights from this late bronze age collapse that I find very encouraging. For example, there is one line of thinking that suggests the tribe of Dan, one of the tribes of Israel, were originally part of a group of Mycenaean Greek refugees who go to Egypt end up being sent by Egypt as a military garrison to keep Canaan under control. At a certain point they switch sides and join the Israelite movement instead. Or, there is broader evidence of the burning of Egyptian military garrisons in some of these towns and supply depots and in some cases it seems that Egypt just abandons and withdraws from these positions.

When you look at some of the pottery that shows up in some of these Israelite settlements around this period it looks like it was probably this ration pottery that Egypt sent with their mercenaries who were supposed to keep Canaan under control. But then it turns up in Israelite households up in the highlands. And so this could indicate that there are more soldiers just switching sides and deciding to get with the Israelite movement against Egypt.

Song of Deborah

Judges 5:13; 19-21

Then was the remnant made victor over the mighty,
GOD's people won my victory over the warriors...
Then the kings came, they fought:
The kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach, by Megiddo's waters—
They got no spoil of silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent Kishon swept them away,
The raging torrent, the torrent Kishon.

Judges 5:24-27

Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents.
He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him
curds.

Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin,
Her right for the workmen's hammer.
She struck Sisera, crushed his head,
Smashed and pierced his temple.
At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,
At her feet he sank, lay still;
Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed.

[Link to the full text of the Song of Deborah](#)

Discussion

Who are the Kenites?

So the Kenites are absolutely fascinating. First of all, they seem to be a group that exists outside of the structures of temple and Palace authority in Canaan. Some theories assert that they were some kind of itinerant metalworker-type people. They are not fully integrated into the preferred structures of production and the economy of the temple and Palace authorities. We

see them come up in the story here when this general or King, after suffering this terrible defeat at the hands of the Israelites, goes to a Kenite tent and he thinks it will be safe there, because these aren't Israelites, but then he gets a tent spike to the head. I've used this story sometimes in discussions about the role of the US South. When the ruling class needed to shore up support for itself it looked to the South as that kind of refuge when faced with potential defeats, seeing it as a kind of political reserve for itself. And then to imagine turning the South into Yael's tent, transforming the place where they think they're going to go and be safe and instead what they get is a tent spike to the head. This feels like a very important organizing task for today. There are also some theories that the particular deity of Yahweh emerges at this point from some Kenite worldview. A copper mine was discovered that has one of the first attestations of a deity called Yahweh and that has been associated with the Kenites.

In this part of the Song of Deborah we have this royal army with chariots being swept away in a body of water. First the Red Sea and then this river, Kishon. In a lot of mythologies, including in ancient Near East, but also in Genesis, water is a symbol of chaos and disorder, which is then tamed by God's power and authority. And then this power and authority are vested in Temple and Palace authorities. Water is the symbol of unorganized chaos in the world that has to be conquered by royal authority. However, in this text we get a glimpse of where the Israelite movement is coming from. They use water to drown and get rid of royal authority, which is a reversal of this other way of understanding authority and power. In the Genesis origin story, which is written by a priestly class, we have this story of water covering the world. This scary and chaotic image of water is controlled when water is separated from land. However, in the actual origin story of the Israelite movement, which we find in Exodus and in Deborah, water becomes this power on the side of the poor and oppressed to wipe away that kind of temple and Palace authority.

When they chose new gods,
Was there a fighter then in the gates?
No shield or spear was seen
Among forty thousand in Israel!
My heart is with Israel's leaders,
With the dedicated of the people—
Bless GOD!

You riders on tawny jennies,
You who sit on saddle rugs,
And you wayfarers, declare it!
Louder than the sound of archers,
There among the watering places
Let them chant GOD's gracious acts—
The gracious deliverance of Israel.
Then did GOD's people
March down to the gates!
Awake, awake, O Deborah!
Awake, awake, strike up the chant!
Arise, O Barak;

Another important part of this text is when Deborah goes through a list, not a complete list, of a bunch of the tribes and says who is good and who didn't come to help when it was needed. This shows the differences between the Israelite movement and these kingdoms in terms of state organization and military organization. These kingdoms have standing professional armies, again, with chariots. And the people in these armies don't get to decide whether or not they're going to war. In this text there is the indication that this Israelite movement is organized along very different lines, more as a kind of popular militia. There is no centralized royal authority here that gets to command everybody to go to war. Instead, you've got a generally armed populace that has to get organized under the leadership of prophets and judges to defend its freedom and fight for a more egalitarian way of organizing life. This shows the distinction and the hostility between this Israelite movement and the ways that the Temple and Palace organizes society and organizes violence and so-called security and self defense. The victory here is God's people won victory over the warriors that are part of an army, a more professional standing army.

From Ephraim came they whose roots are in Amalek;
After you, your kin Benjamin;
From Machir came down leaders,
From Zebulun such as hold the marshal's staff.
And Issachar's chiefs were with Deborah;
As Barak, so was Issachar—
Rushing after him into the valley.
Among the clans of Reuben
Were great decisions of heart.
Why then did you stay among the sheepfolds
And listen as they pipe for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben
Were great searchings of heart!
Gilead tarried beyond the Jordan;
And Dan—why did he linger by the ships?
Asher remained at the seacoast
And tarried at his landings.
Zebulun is a people that mocked at death,
Naphtali—on the open heights.

Another thing that I want to point out here in the Song of Deborah. Did folks notice how Yael kills Sisera with a workman's hammer? The word for 'workman's hammer,' is always associated with questions of toil and hard work. So in this scene we have a powerful reversal. He just asked for water, but she brought him milk. He doesn't deserve just water, he should get milk in a princely bowl. And then she lulls him to sleep and grabs this symbol of the working class of the time, and a tent pin. Now tents represent a kind of unsettled, mobile population that is not under the thumb of these royal authorities who want everybody where they are so they can count them and make sure they're paying their taxes. So Deborah grabs these two symbols of life outside of and against royal authority and she uses them to kill Sisera.

Through the window peered Sisera's mother,
Behind the lattice she whined:
"Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?"
The wisest of her ladies give answer;
She, too, replies to herself:
"They must be dividing the spoil they have found:
A woman or two for each man,
Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera,
Spoil of embroidered cloths,
A couple of embroidered cloths
Round every neck as spoil."

So may all Your enemies perish, O GOD!
But may Your friends be as the sun rising in might!
And the land was tranquil forty years.

At the end of the story you get this cut to Sisera's mom who is waiting for him to come back and they are getting impatient, but assume that it is taking so long because there is so much plunder to divide up. But then there is this reversal where while she (Sisere's mother) is assuming that they are using sexual violence as a part of war actually he's just been murdered by this woman. The Song of Deborah reflects a fundamental hatred and disdain for kings and kingdoms and temple and Palace authority.

Discussion

When we look at all of these poems/songs as a whole the consensus is that all three were written very early and composed separately for the use of people to pray and sing together to celebrate God's victory. This is what all of them have in common. They are hymns to God, who is victorious over the mighty and who casts down the mighty. And all three were inserted into the narrative of Kings and Judges and Samuel later by the redactors, the compilers of the Torah.

This is something that I've never paid any attention to before, the power of song and poetry and I would extend it to dance. All of these are powerful forms of not just communication but collaboration. I'm seeing here how these songs that people sing together can be really more than just entertainment, but catalysts for change.

Songs and Prayer Uniting a Movement

This is a really important point. It makes me think of one other related thing that ties these songs together. One of Gottwald's (Tribes of Yaweh, etc.) theories is that Israelite tradition represented

a consciousness that was among the suppressed population that was adequate to the conditions of the day and the day and the opportunity and possibility for fundamental change. The way that consciousness expresses itself is through these songs and group prayer. This is what a movement is composed of. An extremely diverse group of people who didn't worship the same God when they found each other, but they built and constructed a new vision of God together, through discovering a shared identity. And they did this through songs like these, Song of the Sea, Song of Deborah. This point about collaboration is important. The songs are inviting folk to be part of things.

Song of Hannah

1 Samuel 2:4-5; 7-8

The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.
The sated are hired out for bread;
The starving hunger no more...
GOD makes poor and makes rich,
Casts down, and also lifts high—
Raising the poor from the dust,
Lifting up the needy from the dump pile,
To set them with nobles,
Granting them sovereign authority.
For the pillars of the earth belong to GOD,
Who has set the world upon them.

1 Samuel 2:10

Those who contend with the Lord will be terrified;
Against them He will thunder in the heavens,
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
And He will give strength to His king,
And will exalt the horn of His anointed.”

I'm struck by the character of God portrayed here. God is a god of justice. This becomes so clear when we read this from the perspective of the poor. When we read it this way we hear how the Pillars of the Earth belong to that force that will never allow life to be trampled in the dust or thrown to the dump pile. And the faith of a people that are experiencing the violence of these kings know that this will not be the end, this is not God's will.

I've always loved both this and the Magnificat for the really clear picture of leveling that they give. This time in reading this it is also just jumping out to me that it's not just a leveling on a material level, where everybody who didn't have something is going to have not be hungry, but it is also granting them sovereign authority. This is an explicit statement of governance that the poor will lead society with the power of a sovereign government behind them.

I'm glad you raised that. There is another important translation question here. Many translations give this sense of setting them (the poor) with nobles, making a seat of glory for their inheritance, or something like that. However if you look at the word for 'seat,' it's actually different from the yeshiv seat it's the same word used to describe the place where Pharaoh sits. In other places this word is used to describe just a place to sit, but the evidence all throughout the Tanakh is that this word, this idea, it's a Kavod, it's a heavy seat. This is describing a throne. The poor are being put in control of society, in a position of direction and leadership there. And it is important to contrast this with this dump pile that's referenced before. The dump pile is this area outside the city gates where you would leave all your garbage and set it on fire. It is a place not just for discarded things, but also people that have been cast out.

Appropriation of the Culture and Tradition of Liberation by the Ruling Class

What is going on in this line at the end (1 Samuel 2:10) about giving strength to his king, and how “we'll exalt the horn of his anointed”? This seems to fly in the face of the whole rest of what

we just read. You know, you know, We just said we're gonna put the poor on the throne and now there's a king and and a Messiah anointed?

There are a couple of theories here about this. And this is key to how I want to lead us through the rest of this study. One of the theories is that this line is so incongruent with everything before it that it must be added later. You could also see it as there being an insertion of a powerful liberation hymn into a story whose whole purpose is to justify the existence of a new oppressive Kingdom among the Israelites.

Similarly, if you think about the later kings Hezekiah, or Josiah, and how they use the Exodus tradition and Passover celebrations as a means to get everybody ready for a nationalist War of expansion of their kingdom North into some of the area that had been the northern Israelite kingdom. They take these traditions and incorporate them into the drive for royal authority.

The general consensus about who decided how to put these traditions together is that this happens under the leadership of the Southern Kingdom, the kingdom of Judah. This is one group of people who are assigned not necessarily authorship, but editorship, redaction of a bunch of what eventually comes to us as the Hebrew Bible.

And then there is a second round of editing in exile. The same elite who are now in exile in Babylon after the destruction of the southern kingdom of Judah. Then there is a third round of editing by the inheritors of that same elite when they return to Jerusalem under the authority of the Persians.

I just want to underscore this common practice of the powerful where they take traditions and history and song and culture that comes out of a movement of poor and oppressed people for freedom and then they incorporate it into traditions that support an ideology and a political project that's about reinforcing oppression and dispossession. The people who did the editing and the compiling are not our people, but they were compelled to use traditions that do come from our people. As we are reading this it is important to keep in mind what the purpose of this document is? Who it was written for? This was written by an Iron Age ruling class to justify an Iron Age ruling class, and then the ruling class in exile to justify their own position and to prepare an ideological and political program for their return to power as well.

And so what they're doing is they're changing the fundamental revolutionary story. They're taking a story that's meant to culminate in God's casting down of the mighty and of kingdoms, and they're saying that actually, the whole point of that was the reestablishment of David's kingdom. But we should be reassured that this was their addition. That's not what is anticipated in these songs and poems and prayers. That's not what's sought for in the song of Deborah, or in the Song of the Sea, or even in the song of Hannah

1 Samuel 10:17-20

Samuel summoned the people to GOD at Mizpah

and said to them, “Thus said the ETERNAL, the God of Israel: ‘I brought Israel out of Egypt, and I delivered you from the hands of the Egyptians and of all the kingdoms that oppressed you.’

But today you have rejected your God who delivered you from all your troubles and calamities. For you said, ‘No, set up a king over us!’ Now station yourselves before GOD, by your tribes and clans.”

Judges 9:7-15

When Jotham was informed, he went and stood on top of Mount Gerizim and called out to them in a loud voice. “Citizens of Shechem!” he cried, “Listen to me, that God may listen to you.

“Once the trees went to anoint a king over themselves. They said to the olive tree, ‘Reign over us.’ But the olive tree replied, ‘Have I, through whom God and humans are honored, stopped yielding my rich oil, that I should go and wave above the trees?’

So the trees said to the fig tree, ‘You come and reign over us.’ But the fig tree replied, ‘Have I stopped yielding my sweetness, my delicious fruit, that I should go and wave above the trees?’

So the trees said to the vine, ‘You come and reign over us.’

But the vine replied, ‘Have I stopped yielding my new wine, which gladdens God and humans, that I should go and wave above the trees?’

Then all the trees said to the thornbush, ‘You come and reign over us.’

And the thornbush said to the trees, ‘If you are acting honorably in anointing me king over you, come and take shelter in my shade; but if not, may fire issue from the thornbush and consume the cedars of Lebanon!’

Bronze Age “Collapse” - from *Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*

...Collapse for whom? From the perspective of the ruling class, it is indeed collapse, and the ensuing period is a prolonged time of crisis. The sources of wealth have been removed, the palaces and temples destroyed, the estate system of patterns of tribute and exchange have been dismantled, and power has been lost... Yet from the perspective of the village communes, of the subsistence and estate laborers, of socially determining clan households, a “collapse” actually means a blessed relief from the various means of extraction. We can hardly expect the peasants, laborers, and common people to sit back and wait for such much-desired collapses to happen. From the Habiru through to archaeological signals of urban destruction by the town’s own exploited class, they were more than keen to hasten the demise.

Miriam's Song (Exodus 15:19-21)

When Pharaoh's horses, chariots and horsemen went into the sea, the Lord brought the waters of the sea back over them, but the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. ²⁰ Then Miriam the prophet, Aaron's sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. ²¹ Miriam sang to them:

“Sing to the Lord,
for he is highly exalted.
Both horse and driver
he has hurled into the sea.”

Exodus 15:4-5

Pharaoh's chariots and his force

He pitched into the sea

and the pick of his captains

were drowned in the Reed Sea.

The depths did cover them over,

down they went in the deep like a stone.

Exodus 15:14-16

Peoples heard, they quaked,
trembling seized Philistia's kings
Then were the chieftains of Edom dismayed,
the dukes of Moab, shuddering seized them,
all the rulers of Canaan quailed.
Terror and fear did fall upon them,
as Your arm loomed big, they were like a stone.
When Your people crossed over, O Lord,
when the people You made Yours crossed over.

Judges 5:13; 19-21

Then was the remnant made victor over the mighty,
GOD's people won my victory over the warriors...

Then the kings came, they fought:

The kings of Canaan fought

At Taanach, by Megiddo's waters—

They got no spoil of silver.

The stars fought from heaven,

From their courses they fought against Sisera.

The torrent Kishon swept them away,

The raging torrent, the torrent Kishon.

Judges 5:24-27

Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents.
He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him
curds.

Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin,
Her right for the workmen's hammer.
She struck Sisera, crushed his head,
Smashed and pierced his temple.
At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,
At her feet he sank, lay still;
Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed.

1 Samuel 2:4-5; 7-8

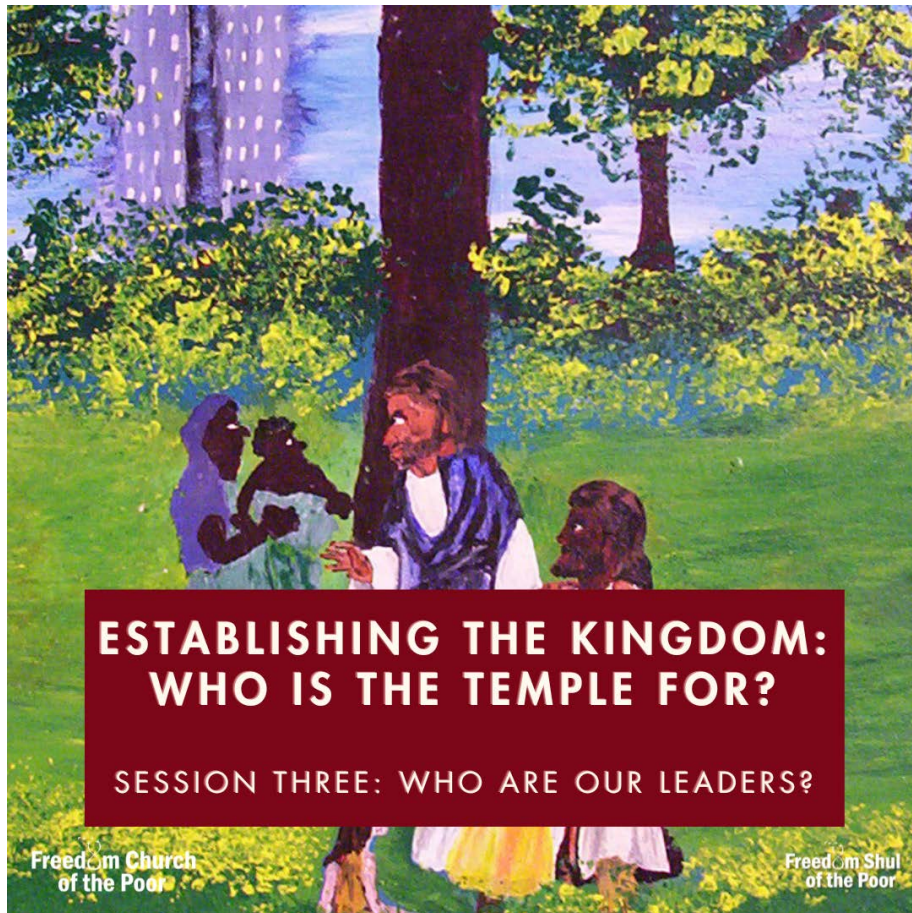
The bows of the mighty are broken,
And the faltering are girded with strength.
The sated are hired out for bread;
The starving hunger no more...
GOD makes poor and makes rich,
Casts down, and also lifts high—
Raising the poor from the dust,
Lifting up the needy from the dump pile,
To set them with nobles,
Granting them sovereign authority.
For the pillars of the earth belong to GOD,
Who has set the world upon them.

1 Samuel 2:10

Those who contend with the Lord will be terrified;
Against them He will thunder in the heavens,
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
And He will give strength to His king,
And will exalt the horn of His anointed.”

Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings

Establishing the Kingdom: Who is the Temple for?



Suffer the Children Unto Me by Ron Casanova

[Link to Presentation Slides](#)

[Overview & Themes](#)

[Textual Tools](#)

[Cultural Tools](#)

Discussion Questions

Overview & Themes

“Today, untold thousands of people in the United States are asking: ‘Where do we go?’ In Aberdeen, Washington, people camping along the Chehalis River were given just 30 days to leave or face fines and arrests.

Eventually, Americans will undoubtedly be forced to grapple with the unequal distribution of land in this country and its dire consequences for so many millions of us. Sooner or later, as Indigenous people and tribal nations fight for their sovereignty and as poor people struggle to survive a growing housing crisis, the tides are likely to shift. In the West, we would do well to consider places like Brazil in developing a strategy to start down the path to ending homelessness here and we would do well to consider the power of the 8 to 11 million unhoused people who know what they need and are finally beginning to organize for their future. They may have lost this time around, but if history teaches us anything, they will find justice sooner or later.”

- Cedar Monroe & Rev. Liz Theoharis, [“Where Can We Live?”](#)



In his painting *“Suffer the Children Unto Me,”* National Union of the Homeless Organizer Ron Casanova depicts the story of Jesus calling the children towards him, “for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these” (Matthew 19:14). Our movement follows a deep history of calling on the Kingdom of God to be spread amongst all of us, not just a

wealthy few. We can see Freedom Church Prophet and Minister Ron Casanova [taking over empty HUD homes](#) with the National Union of the Homeless in the 1980s in the ancient prophetic tradition of Amos and Micah. Amos and Micah, two early prophets who preached at a time of increased debt bondage and the intensification of the estate system in Ancient Israel, cried out in the face of injustice, empire, and danger. Through understanding the establishment of a temple and ruling elite in Ancient Israel and the great prophetic tradition that followed, this Bible Study explores how although those in power have always tried to justify their oppression, there have always been movements of resistance, courage, and power by the poor and dispossessed. Today, the organizing of the National Union of the Homeless continues, picking up the legacy of past prophets and developing new ones. In the wake of cruel legislation such as [Grants Pass vs. Johnson](#), the National Union of the Homeless has organized [People's Hearings](#), [Freedom Church services](#) for the Advent of a Revolution and Birth of a Movement season, and [organizing tent cities and shelters](#) to fight back against unjust laws.

Themes

The building of a temple and establishing of a ruling elite in Ancient Israel

The historical and current justification of oppression by those in power

The prophetic tradition of the leadership of the poor

Charity instead of systemic and structural changes

Textual Tools

Note: Bible texts are taken from the JPS translation. All texts and excerpts can be found in the slideshow linked above.

Exodus 9:18-19

Leviticus 25:9-10

2 Samuel 7:6-8

Amos 5:21-25

Micah 6:6-8

Jeremiah 7:4-10

Isaiah 66

1 Kings 8

Mourner's Kaddish

Excerpts from *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* by Roland Boer

Cultural Tools



David Solnit "Debt Relief" Poster

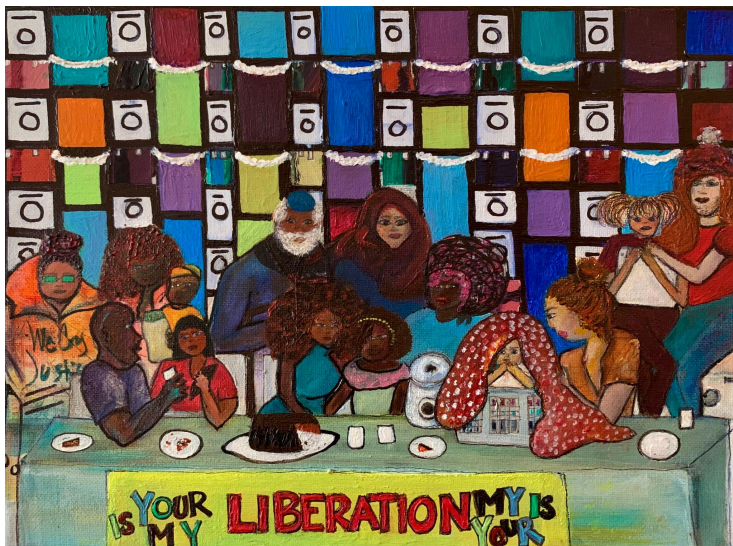
[*Ain't Going to Let Nobody - Avery Book \(VT\)*](#)

[*Orgal History of Rich Man's House \(Song\)*](#)



Palestine Will Be Free by Kate DeCiccio

[The Virtual Ofrenda from our 2024 All Saints Day / Día de los Muertos service](#)



"Your Liberation is My Liberation" by Ciara Taylor

Discussion Questions

If you've read the texts discussed before: What are some previous teachings you have had about the establishment of a Temple, or the Ark of the Covenant? How did this session make you think about Kings narratives?

If this is your first time reading the text: What were your initial reactions, questions, or thoughts about the texts discussed?

Re-read 2 Samuel 7:6-8. Then, re-read Amos 5:21-25, Micah 6:6-8, Jeremiah 7:4-10, and Isaiah 66. Based on the context offered in the session, how can we understand the contradictions between these sets of texts?

In your organizing, how have you seen those in power justify their oppression? How have you seen those in power offer concessions without practicing justice?

What do the prophetic texts of Amos, Micah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah teach us about the leadership of the poor and dispossessed?

Edited Transcription for Session 3

Overview

This session returns to the themes of kingship, sovereignty, and the role of temples. This session references prophetic texts and voices like Amos, Micah, and Jeremiah, which critique the practice of offering sacrifices without practicing justice. We look more at the historical context of temples and how they serve as instruments of exploitation. We also compare and contrast the theological teachings of these texts with modern perspectives on social justice.

Introduction

Shana Tova everybody! Today is day two of Rosh Hashanah, and what better way to spend it here together in community and study. I'm going to take a little license and talk about Rosh Hashanah later, in part because, we're here talking about kings and states and palaces and the whole thing with Rosh Hashanah is that it's a celebration of the annual re-enthroning of God as sovereign.

Let's go over a bit of context just as a refresher. In Second Samuel we are just coming off of a pretty protracted armed conflict between the emerging Israelite state and surrounding powers, especially the Philistines and also between David and Saul for kingship and leadership over the Israelite people. For a brief moment David was at peace and had defeated all of his enemies. Everything was relatively peaceful and David started wondering to himself, Why am I living in this really nice house, but God is still going around in a tent? Then in 2 Samuel chapter 7, David decides that he's going to go and build a splendid house for God and this is God's response.

2 Samuel 7:6-8

Thus saith the LORD: Shalt thou build Me a house for Me to dwell in? for I have not dwelt in a house since the day that I brought up the children of Israel out of Egypt, even to this day, but have walked in a tent and in a tabernacle. In all places wherein I have walked among all the children of Israel, spoke I a word with any of the tribes of Israel, whom I commanded to feed My people Israel, saying: Why have ye not built Me a house of cedar?

This seems like a very clear statement against the building and establishment of a temple. Remember from our discussion the last couple of weeks, the role of the temple in most ancient Near Eastern societies in this period (Bronze Age and into the Iron Age) was as a source of legitimacy for the ruling class. The temple itself was a major player in the exploitation, in the unfree labor arrangements of the time. The temple had estates and plantations. The Temple made loans and people became enslaved, part of the system of taxation, and of taking from the bulk of the population to put in the hands of a really small elite. This is what the temple represented in the earlier period of struggle of the Israelite movement against the Bronze Age kingdoms. And so here, God's answer to all of this is, **Why on earth would you build a temple for me? You all found me in your struggle against the temples and against the palaces. That's where we found each other.** After this statement there's this whole really long discourse about how God supposedly says to David, "it's not you who's going to build me a temple, but you're going to have this amazing son, and he's going to build me a temple. And your line are going to be kings of Israel forever, because you're really special." Later on in this chapter after this seemingly very clear statement about God not wanting a temple God, not wanting the Israelites to reestablish the old forms of control and exploitation that they emerged from and struggled against - you have a very clear statement of what we might call a "royal theology."

Let's read from some of the prophets here.

Amos 5:21-25

*I hate, I despise your feasts,
And I will take no delight in your solemn assemblies.*

*Yea, though ye offer me burnt-offerings and your meal-offerings,
I will not accept them;
Neither will I regard the peace-offerings of your fat beasts.*

*Take thou away from Me the noise of thy songs;
And let Me not hear the melody of thy psalteries.*

*But let justice well up as waters,
And righteousness as a mighty stream.*

Did ye bring unto Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?

Micah 6:6-8

*'Wherewith shall I come before the LORD,
And bow myself before God on high?*

*Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings,
With calves of a year old?*

*Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
With ten thousands of rivers of oil?*

*Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'*

*It hath been told thee, O man, what is good,
And what the LORD doth require of thee:*

Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

Jeremiah 7:4-10

Trust ye not in lying words, saying: 'The temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, are these.' Nay, but if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings; if ye thoroughly execute justice between a man and his neighbour; if ye oppress not the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and shed not innocent blood in this place, neither walk after other gods to your hurt; then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, for ever and ever. Behold, ye trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will ye steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and offer unto Baal, and walk after other gods whom ye have not known, and come and stand before Me in this house, whereupon My name is called, and say: 'We are delivered', that ye may do all these abominations?

Isaiah 66

*Thus saith the LORD:
The heaven is My throne,
And the earth is My footstool;
Where is the house that ye may build unto Me?
And where is the place that may be My resting-place?
For all these things hath My hand made,
And so all these things came to be,
Saith the LORD;
But on this man will I look,
Even on him that is poor and of a contrite spirit,
And trembleth at My word.*

Discussion

When we started back at 2 Samuel 7, God rebuked David for thinking of trying to build an earthly house, a temple. He then promises David that one of his children will be the ones to build this magnificent temple. Eventually we get around to 1 Kings 8, which is when Solomon then builds that temple. This is part of an extended scene where Solomon completed building and then dedicated the temple. Here is what Solomon says:

1 Kings 8:13

*The LORD hath said that He would dwell in the thick darkness.
I have surely built Thee a house of habitation,
A place for Thee to dwell in for ever.*

My very first thought reading this was, you cannot put God in a box.

These prophetic verses that we read are very popular in the Christian tradition, especially among supposedly justice-minded Christians. But rarely do we read and hear them as about a fundamental fight around idolatry and worshipping Empire. Most of the way that we talk about, “let justice run down water” and these other texts are always so small and individualized, not appreciating how they are calling for these deep transformative changes.

This idea of putting God somewhere. Reading this text it is very explicit. Where God is put is with the ruling class. This box/temple is not just a generically small idea of God, but it is also a god in the image of the ruling class.

I wanted to follow up on what was said about the Christian interpretation of these texts. Especially in Revelation there is all of this talk of God being on a throne in heaven. This has bothered me more and more, because I don't think of God as a person for one thing and not on a throne. Jesus says the birds have nests that they live in and the animals have holes in the ground they live in, and the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. So, I don't think of Jesus as sitting on a throne either. For me Micah 6:8 is the final word. It's what we do, how we act and how we create justice for people, that's what God wants from us, not the rest of the fancy or the offerings.

On this question about where do you put God when you make a place for God to live. It raises other questions of idolatry and worshipping empire. It reminds me of the episode of the golden calf in the wilderness. In particular, right after the golden calf is created and people are bowing down and worshipping it, there is a cleansing that happens pretty brutally and violently. Afterwards God says continue your going out of Egypt, continue the process of liberation, and I will drive out the the kings and the temples and the palaces that you're going to encounter. God says go on to this land flowing with milk and honey, but I can't go with you right now, because you are a stiff necked people, and I might destroy you along the way. At this point everybody is distressed and they start to mourn and they take off all their jewelry and fancy clothes to offer to

God. And God tells them you all are stubborn and stiff necked and if I were to be among you, if I were to dwell among you even for a second, I might destroy you. After that the Tent where the Ark of the Covenant is has to be way outside of camp for a while because God literally can't dwell among a people that would be worshipping wealth and organizing their society around wealth in that kind of way.

The whole concern of the Torah and the Tanakh is the building of a society that's fit for God to dwell in. And this relates to this point where God says to David, "Who are you to build me a house? I'm here trying to give you the teaching and instruction. You need to organize your society in a way where people are free and aren't being exploited and can care for one another. I'm trying to build you a house and a home to live in, and if you do that, then I'll be able to dwell and to stay among you." "You don't need to build me a house. I help you build a firm foundation for your society in the form of a social structure, an organization that's based in justice and love and righteousness."

When we get into 1 Kings and Solomon's dedication of the temple where Solomon says, "I've built you a firm place for your dwelling forever," that's a direct reference and pulls the vocabulary directly from the Song by the Sea in Exodus. This liberation song, where God says, "I will establish for you a firm place for your dwelling forever." We can see how the royal theology and religion is a complete inversion of some of the liberation promises. The idea of creating a home for God among the ruling class rather than the creation of a just society that can be a fit home for everybody, including a place where God is able to dwell. I think it is also a reminder of the difficulty of the plagues tradition, where God tells the people that if you call my name and ask me to dwell among you in your sick, broken, unjust society, I'm going to destroy it and tear it down, because that's what God does. This is also the message we get in some of the other prophetic texts where God says, "Why are you acting and talking like you're hungry for the day of the Lord? Why do you think, given the society that you've created, that the day of the Lord is going to be a day of rejoicing for you, you ruling classes of Judah and Israel?"

Historical Context

We are going to read a little about the role of temples and priests in Ancient Near Eastern states, kingdoms, and empires of this time period, dating back to some of the early Bronze Age societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt. This is from Roland Bohr's book, "The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel."

The various priests and their officers do no productive work of their own, so they need others to do so. The recipients of that produce justify such extraction through increasingly elaborate theological systems that assert the supreme importance of their activities for the welfare of the whole community, the viability of agricultural produce, of the rivers rising or the rains falling, the avoidance of pests and invitations of the staying of disease, All such rely upon the goodwill of capricious gods, they must be appeased to keep the system running with sacrifices offered to the gods instituted as a primary task."

In this section of the book, Roland Bohr is referencing the long history of the role of temples and temple complexes in the historical setting and traditions and heritage that the ancient Israelite kingdoms were drawing on and building off of. You can see some parallels here in the contending approaches to the sacred and what it means to serve God. You can also see it in some of the traditions about the priests and the Levites, not having any work to do, but being fed off of tithing or taxation of the rest of the population, because their work is so important to be keeping God happy through ritual sacrifices. This is what it meant to serve God. The priests keep God happy and that keeps the rain falling and the crops growing. So we can see an association here between the obsession with sacrifice and sacrifices and correct Temple cult procedure. That whole ideology and approach to religion is really tied to using God as a justification for extraction and exploitation by the ruling class of everybody else.

Again from Roland Bohr's book...

"Political myth appears when the temple is absorbed by the palace are in the same precinct and dominated by the palace. They may take the form of claims that the monarchs in question are then descended from the gods, usually in the form of genealogies with timescales in the tens of thousands of years, or they may involve complex narratives that include theogonic, cosmogonic and anthroponic elements, such as the Enuma Elish, the Babylonian creation story, or the narrative from Genesis to Joshua in the Hebrew Bible."

This is talking about the temples as justifying the exploitation of some people, the labor of the majority of society and the turning of most people's work into something that's about making somebody else wealthy, which I think we can relate to today. The justification of that set of economic arrangements and economic exploitation is the use of religion to bless the existing political order and the state that is set up in order to defend the rights of some people to exploit other people. Let's turn for a minute to these terms that Bohr uses, theogonic, cosmogonic and anthropogenic. Theogonic is a story about who God is and where God comes from. The cosmogonic is about a story about where the world and the earth and the planets and the stars and everything else comes from - the origins of the cosmos. Anthroponic is the origin of humanity and where human beings come from over time. Roland Bohr is saying that in a lot of ways the Hebrew Bible, and especially some of these narratives in Samuel and Kings, are not that special. They are not that distinctive in terms of ancient Near Eastern literature produced by and organized by the ruling classes of the day. This includes these narratives about god and the universe, which are there to bless and justify the temple and the palace and their role in that society and the privileged position of elites. Much of what's there or is trying to be set up by the people who canonized these texts and framed it and redacted them, all the literature was produced by a ruling elite trying to justify its position in society, economically and politically.

Also, to this point about the temple being absorbed by the palace in the same precinct and dominated by the palace, this describes Jerusalem and the seat of power in the ancient Judahite kingdom very well. We read about how Solomon goes and dedicates the temple and sets up a priesthood. Clearly the temple is being set as a subordinate power to the power of the

king, regardless of what is said elsewhere. The temple is being used as a kind of instrument and tool and arm of that state authority, which is really just set up to ensure and facilitate the kind of exploitation of an extraction from the majority of the population there.

It is true that the Hebrew Bible is largely the product of a ruling elite trying to justify itself and, at the same time, the whole of the Hebrew Bible is an indictment of societies based on a concentration of wealth for the few and poverty for the masses. It is also a call to fundamentally transform the world that we live in. Both of those things can be true.

Let's read another section of Solomon's dedication of the temple, keeping in mind the texts from Roland Bohr.

1 Kings 8

13-16

The LORD hath said that He would dwell in the thick darkness.

*I have surely built Thee a house of habitation,
A place for Thee to dwell in for ever.*

And the king turned his face about, and blessed all the congregation of Israel; and all the congregation of Israel stood. And he said: 'Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who spoke with His mouth unto David my father, and hath with His hand fulfilled it, saying: Since the day that I brought forth My people Israel out of Egypt, I chose no city out of all the tribes of Israel to build a house, that My name might be there; but I chose David to be over My people Israel.

27-28

"But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their uttermost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this House that I have built!

Yet turn, my ETERNAL God, to the prayer and supplication of Your servant, and hear the cry and prayer that Your servant offers before You this day.

33-38

"Should Your people Israel be routed by an enemy because they have sinned against You, and then turn back to You and acknowledge Your name, and they offer prayer and supplication to You in this House,

oh, hear in heaven and pardon the sin of Your people Israel, and restore them to the land that You gave to their ancestors.

"Should the heavens be shut up and there be no rain, because they have sinned against You, and then they pray toward this place and acknowledge Your name and repent of their sins, when You answer them,

oh, hear in heaven and pardon the sin of Your servants, Your people Israel, after You have shown them the proper way in which they are to walk; and send down rain upon the land that.

“In any plague and in any disease, so, too, if there is a famine in the land, if there is pestilence, blight, mildew, locusts or caterpillars, or if an enemy oppresses them in any of the settlements of the land. In any prayer or supplication offered by any person among all Your people Israel—each of whom knows their own affliction—when they spread their palms toward this House,

63

Solomon offered 22,000 oxen and 120,000 sheep as sacrifices of well-being to GOD. Thus the king and all the Israelites dedicated the House of GOD.

Discussion

What do we make of this?

I hear JD Vance saying, “if you want cleaner air, more homes, you need more energy. You need more oil, you need more.” Instead of sheep, it's oil. But they didn't need more sheep, more oxen to worship God, or more oil and wealth to worship God. God has said, don't bring burnt sacrifices before me. Just act justly, love, mercy, and walk humbly.

I had never really thought about the idea that it was the elitists writing these stories to try and legitimize their own position. It's really clear here, if you don't have 120,000 sheep to bring to our sacrifice then you probably don't matter.

There are so many of our heroes from the movement that we're learning about now that we never learned about in school. And it's fascinating to think about how that vein (of powerful leaders) has existed throughout time. There has to be folks who stood up and resisted way back then who we've never heard of.

The Ark of the Covenant

Maybe this doesn't fit here, but I just keep thinking about Exodus and all the chapters on building the ark of the covenant - all the gold and detail it gets into. I'm curious how that fits into things.

These instructions come right after the golden calf episode. If you read it carefully you'll see the Ark is just the temple. They are the same instructions in extreme detail that we get later when the temple is described. This fits well with Roland Bohr's point that what you have here is the working in of older traditions from this Israelite movement to create a story that culminates in the establishment of this palace and this temple, and that blesses and justifies that order. It takes the liberation experience, the struggle against Pharaoh and Pharaoh's army and the wandering in the desert period before a state is organized and they are still tribally organized. Then into this they injecting this description of the Ark as something that anticipates what the ruling class wants it to anticipate, namely the establishment of their rule and their order. They're trying to

take the temple and put it back into the period of struggles against temples and palaces. They're just trying to set it up so that everything is anticipated this way. Even the creation of the world you find parallels the Genesis creation story, which comes out of a priestly tradition and the instructions for the building of the tent of meeting and the Ark and later the Temple. It's setting up a narrative where the whole history of humanity and of the universe from Genesis through the wandering in the desert all culminate in the building of this temple in this palace and placing God there. So that's why you get the same set of instructions twice.

The Prophets and Resistance

To find resistance to all of this we only have to go to the prophets who were alive at the time. We read Amos and Micah, who are both relatively early prophets, they're writing in the 700s BCE, at height of these kingdoms, in some ways at their greatest extent of power. It was a period of great intensification of the debt bondage system and the estate system in these two kingdoms. When they are talking about justice and righteousness and criticizing a narrow approach to religion, it is not a general critique. They're calling for a specific and concrete transformation of society and the removal of a specific ruling class of that day, and of their ruling ideology and theology. It is these kingdoms that are being described in Kings.

The other place to look is in 1 Kings and 2 Kings and the stories of Elijah and Elisha. Their stories give us a sense of what those kinds of resistance and campaigns and movements would have looked like, how they were organized into these schools of different prophets. There is very little evidence to support the idea that the whole people, Israel, in these two kingdoms, ever fully bought into a kind of monotheistic religion. The creation of monotheism is something that happens in this Second Temple period. People had other theologies. What we get in the text is mostly Royal theology and cultic practice. But again, even that royal theology, the traditions it has, have to draw on these earlier experiences and so the traditions that we still get are the traditions that emerge from the experience of this earlier liberation struggle and movement. Try as they might to take those traditions and refashion them and repurpose them into a royal ideology, that's just not what they are and that comes through all the way until today.

120,000 sheep?

I want to point out something funny in all of this. In one of the texts that we were just reading, Micah 6, the prophet asks, "is the Lord pleased with 1000s of rams?" And the answer is, "no!" But then when Solomon is dedicating the temple he's offering 120,000 sheep and 1000s of rams like, etc. Micah is a direct response to this. If you want to find the leaders of these resistance struggle you find them in Amos and in Micah and in Hosea.

1200 - 700 BCE Liberation Struggles

What are these different time periods that end up producing the texts and the traditions that we have? In this period between 1200 to 1000 BCE is an incredibly tumultuous period of the liberation struggles against the late Bronze Age powers and the emergence of ancient Israel. At this time, among the Israelites, there's no state, there are no kingdoms or palaces. There is a growing movement and shared consciousness that things don't have to be the way they are, that people can live together differently. There is a development of people's self organization

into a movement that is capable of fighting for and defending and securing the freedom to live in a way that allows people to treat each other better and that removes the temple and Palace exploitation from people's lives.

This is captured mainly in the Joshua and Judges narratives where we have these kingdoms in Israel and Judah from around 1000-721 BCE and then around 721 BCE the Northern kingdom, called Israel, is totally destroyed and liquidated by the Assyrian Empire. What remains is this little kingdom in Judah, centered on Jerusalem, which is mainly a tributary state of Assyria. It was not fully destroyed and dismantled, but mainly at this point exists to pump wealth from the population of Judah into the pockets of the Assyrian elite, with some remaining for the local ruling class as well.

First Temple / Second Temple

We also have the destruction of that Southern Kingdom by the Babylonians and the rise of the Babylonian Empire. This period of exile lasts about 50 years after which we have the return. And remember, in that exile it was mainly the elite and ruling class who were exiled. When you read Lamentations, or other texts around the exile, mostly it's the Judahite ruling elite who are sent into exile. Most of the rest of the population remains in Judah under Babylonian rule. The Babylonian Empire is overthrown by the Persian Empire in 500 BCE. Their approach to Empire is a little bit different than the Babylonians. The Persians sent the elite back to Judah to help set it up as a province of the Persian Empire. They have the Temple rebuilt, not out of some sense of reverence for the Israelite God, but as an outpost of Persian control. This approach of the Persian Empire was designed to allow each province to have its own God and laws and culture as long as tribute kept flowing and taxes kept flowing to the heart of the Persian Empire.

I put the Babylonian exile and the period of the Second Temple under Persian rule in bold, because these are generally agreed to be the time periods in which the Tanakh really forms into something like what we'd recognize today. That's when the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament is brought together by the Judahite elite in exile and by their restored power under Persian rule a little bit later on.

The main reason I raised all of that is to underscore this point that where these traditions are gathered and put together and turned into the text that we have today is, first, by the royal and temple elite in the Southern kingdom and then by the elite in exile in Babylon. Then again by the elite who are trying to re-establish themselves under this semi-restoration of their authority in Judah under the patronage of the Persian ruling elite.

What is distinctive about these writings and tradition

All of this type of literature that we find in the Hebrew Bible is not that distinctive or unique among ancient Near Eastern literature with two really important exceptions. One is that nowhere else do we really get the positive traditions and spin on life before the rise of the king and the priests. Most of this other literature we find is about the evils and horror and chaos and disorganization before the king arose. We can see a little bit of that in the way that Solomon talks about himself and David, but the heart of the tradition is the Exodus story, which has

nothing to do with kings and priests. It is all about people and the struggle for liberation against kings and priests. You don't find this kind of narrative in any of the other literatures of the period.

Then the other distinctive element is this strong prophetic tradition of criticism of the palace and the temple authorities. It is really remarkable and unique for these things to be preserved: writings and culture and poetry and songs and history of the movements against kings and against priests and for the transformation and reorganization of society under God's authority in a more egalitarian and communal and not exploitative way of living together. The reasons why it is preserved are a little complicated. Basically it rests in the fact that they were being pulled together in a time where there isn't an independent state and when people are trying to figure out what went wrong and why these once prosperous kingdoms are destroyed and brought down. The prophetic traditions are both trying to recreate those kingdoms in some ways, eg., the obsession with David, but they also are able to take and see some use and value in what Amos and Micah and Isaiah say.

We know of other literature that was produced from different societies in this time period and earlier, and those literary traditions are much older than the Hebrew Bible. The authors and writers of the Hebrew Bible are drawing on those writings, poetry, prophetic pronouncements, etc.. All of the literary forms that they're using are much older than the Hebrew Bible. There's very little that's innovative in the Hebrew Bible in terms of the types of writing and culture. If you look at the content of those traditions that we have from Assyria or Babylonia or Egypt or these other places, which have extremely rich literary and cultural traditions, what you read are justifications of the kings of the day. At best, if there is criticism of a king, it's because this new king is better. The king comes in and saves the world from chaos. This is the main storyline. What is truly distinctive about the Israelite literature and why I think it remains so useful to us today, is that it preserves a tradition that actually looks really favorably on life in a movement to overthrow palace and temple authorities, that remains skeptical of and hostile to the abuses of power that come from Temple and Palace authorities. This is a strain of profound revolutionary social criticism that's preserved in these texts and traditions. If this existed in other cultures (which they probably did) they were lost.

This underscored how the Israelite kingdoms themselves and the societies themselves were not particularly distinctive. Israel and Judah were one of many pretty small, middling powers and kingdoms in that part of the world at that time. Their religion, their way of organizing society, their economy, none of that was particularly distinctive or unique for that time period. There's nothing distinctive or unique or special about them compared to Moab or Edom or even Assyria. To me, what this suggests is that there must have been similar kinds of resistance and movements and theologies all over these kingdoms.

Another way in which these kingdoms were not at all distinctive was in the ways that they were all part of the interstate/international politics and economy of the time - the networks of trade and tribute and political intrigue. We see this for example in 1 Kings 8 where they are dedicating the temple and this holy place to God. Immediately after this we read about the forced labor that Solomon used to build the temple. Solomon gave away 20 towns in Galilee to the North to the

king of Sidon in exchange for the luxury goods that he needed to build the temple and just put these other towns under the rule of another king. Solomon was kind of a petty tyrant like any other king in the region. He was much more interested in wheeling and dealing with other kings and kingdoms to acquire luxury goods and maintain his power and set up the symbol of his authority and his place where God could come and live with him. He was much more interested in that than in creating an Israelite society that was actually fit for God to live in.

Rosh Hashanah

What is the shofar and why is it a big deal that we blow it on Rosh Hashanah? How does it relate to this question of royal theology and ideology? In the Exodus story right before the 10 Commandments are given it says,

“Mount Sinai was all in smoke for the Lord had come down upon it in fire. The smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the shofar grew louder and louder as Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder.”

Here we see the shofar being used to announce God's presence and God's sovereignty. On Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we blow the shofar we're announcing the presence of the Divine sovereign. Remember, the first thing that God does after the announcement of God's sovereignty here on Mount Sinai, is give these Ten Commandments. And these commandments are all not about narrow individual sin, but are, in fact, indictments of an unjust, exploitative ruling class. This is the character and content of God's sovereignty.

One of the other places where the shofar shows up is in Leviticus in the discussion of the Jubilee Year. In the description of the Jubilee Year in Leviticus, it says,

“Then you shall sound the shofar loud in the seventh month, on the 10th day of the month, the day of atonement, you shall have the shofar sounded throughout your land, and you shall hallow the 50th year. You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants, it shall be a jubilee for you. Each of you shall return to his holding, and each of you shall return to his family.”

This line, “you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants,” is probably familiar. It is what's written on the Liberty Bell. It probably translates more closely to “release” - a release from debt bondage and unfree labor, or release from the necessity of working to make somebody else wealthy. The shofar is announcing that the content of God's rule in the world is freedom from exploitation. That when you announce the presence and kingship of God by blowing the shofar you're announcing freedom and release for all people from the chains that are holding them.

Another thing that's not actually distinctive about ancient Israelite texts or traditions is debt forgiveness. Jubilee release or debt forgiveness was something used in ancient Near Eastern Kingdoms for as long as we have records, from as early as 3000 BCE. Debt release was something that kings do when they come to power on the throne to show their graciousness. They also did it to stabilize society and any economic crisis. If too many people are debt slaves they're not available for military conscription and service, or for building public buildings and

other kinds of corvee-forced labor to the state. It also undermines too much of the kind of subsistence survival networks in the villages if too many people are being forced to work on plantations and estates. What becomes so amazing and beautiful and powerful about the Israelite debt forgiveness tradition is that it's not placed in the hands of human kings. Solomon doesn't announce a debt forgiveness or release. None of those kings do. It's placed in the hands and the sovereignty of God. This is an amazing reworking of this tradition where every year on Rosh Hashanah what we are doing when we're blowing the shofar (which we do a lot - 100 times each day) is re-enthroning God in the world. It's the new year. We're renewing the world. We say today the world is born. And what we say is that today the world is born and reborn in a state of freedom for all people. One of the traditional readings for Rosh Hashanah is Hannah's song, "God casts down the mighty, lifts up the lowly." The shofar is also connected to the song of Deborah. One of the patterns of the shofar blast, and one of the names for Rosh Hashanah in the Bible, is *teruah*. This word in turn is connected to the one used to describe the weeping of Sisera's mother. Sisera is the general of the Canaanite army who gets bonked on the head by Yael. It is powerful to imagine the sound of the shofar trumpet blowing as the sound of some weeping and sobbing there. I take it as a reminder of the story of the plague and how the process of freedom and liberation is not always easy and happy and joyous. It is painful and difficult as well.

2 Samuel 7:6-8

Thus says the LORD: Is it you who would build Me a house for Me to dwell in? I have dwelled in no house from the day I brought up the Israelites out of Egypt until this day, but I have gone about in tent and tabernacle. Wherever I went about among all the Israelite, did I speak a word with any of the tribal chiefs of Israel whom I charged to shepherd My people Israel, saying, “Why did you not build me a cedarwood house?”

Amos 5:21-25

I hate, I spurn your festivals
and smell no fragrance in your convocations
Should you offer up to Me burnt offerings
or grain offerings, I will not accept them;
nor will I look on the well-being sacrifice of your fatter
calves

Take away from me the noise of your singers,
nor will I listen to the melody of your lutes.

But let justice well up like water

And righteousness like a steady stream.

Did you bring Me sacrifices and grain offering
in the wilderness forty years, house of Israel?

Micah 6:6-8

With what shall I come before the LORD
bow to the most high God?

Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
with yearling calves?

Is the LORD pleased with thousands of rams,
myriads of streams of oil?

Shall I give Him my firstborn for my trespass,
the fruit of my loins for my offense?

It was told to you, man, what is good
and what the LORD demands of you--
only doing justice and loving kindness
and walking humbly with your God

Jeremiah 7:4-10

Do not put your trust in lying words, saying: “The LORD’s temple, the LORD’s temple, the LORD’s temple are these.” Rather, if you truly make your ways and your acts good, if you truly do justice between a man and his fellow, if you do not oppress orphan and widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place nor go after other gods to your own harm, I will have you dwell in this place in the land that I gave to your fathers for all time. Look, you put your trust in lying words that cannot avail. Would you steal and murder and commit adultery and swear by a lie and burn incense to Baal and go after other gods that you did not know, and come and stand before Me in this house upon which My name has been called and say, “We are saved,” only to do all these abominations? Has this house, on which My name has been called, become an outlaw’s cave in your eyes?

Isaiah 66

Thus said the LORD:

The heavens are My throne
and the earth is My footstool.

What house would you build for Me
and what place for My resting,
when all these My hand has made
and Mine all these are? —
said the Lord

But to this I look, to the poor man
and to the broken of spirit who trembles at My word

1 Kings 8:13 - Solomon Dedicates the Temple

“The LORD meant to abide in thick fog.
I indeed have built You a lofty house,
a firm place for Your dwelling forever.”

from *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*

...[T]he various priests and their offshoots do no productive work of their own, so they need others to do so. Yet the recipients of that produce justify such extraction through increasingly elaborate theological systems that assert the supreme importance of their activities for the welfare of the whole community. The viability of agricultural produce, of the river's rising or the rain's falling, of the avoidance of pests and invasions, of the staying of disease—all such rely upon the goodwill of capricious gods. They must be appeased to keep the system running, with sacrifices offered to the gods instituted as a primary task.

from *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel*

[P]olitical myth appears when the temple is absorbed by the palace, when both are in the same precinct and dominated by the palace...They may take the form of claims that the monarchs in question are then descended from the gods, usually in the form of genealogies with timescales in the tens of thousands of years. Or they may involve complex narratives that include theogonic, cosmogonic, and anthropogonic elements, such as the *Enuma Elish* [Babylonian creation story] or the narrative from Genesis to Joshua in the Hebrew Bible.

1 Kings 8 - Solomon Dedicates the Temple

“The LORD meant to abide in thick fog.
I indeed have built You a lofty house,
a firm place for Your dwelling forever.”

And the king turned his face and blessed all the assembly of Israel with all the assembly of Israel standing. And he said “Blessed is the LORD God of Israel Who spoke with His own mouth to David my father, and with His own hand fulfilled it, saying, ‘From the day I brought out My people Israel from Egypt, I have not chosen a town from all the tribes of Israel to build a house for My name to be there, but I chose David to be over My people Israel.’”

1 Kings 8 - Solomon Dedicates the Temple

But can God really dwell on earth? Look, the heavens and the heavens beyond the heavens cannot contain You. How much less this house that I have built. Yet turn to the prayer of Your servant and to his plea, LORD God of Israel...When Your people Israel are routed by an enemy, for they will offend You, and they come to You and acclaim Your name and pray and plead to You in this house, You will hearken in the heavens and forgive the offense of Your people Israel, and bring them back to the land that You gave to their fathers.

1 Kings 8 - Solomon Dedicates the Temple

When the heavens are shut up and there is no rain, for the Israelites will have offended against You, and they pray in this place and acclaim Your name, You shall forgive the offense of Your servants...and You will give rain upon Your land... Should there be famine in the land, should there be plague, blight, mildew, locusts, caterpillars, should his enemy besiege him in the gates of his land, any affliction, any disease, any prayer, any plea that any man have in all Your people Israel, that every man know his heart's affliction, he shall spread out his palms in this house...

...And the king and all Israel with him were offering sacrifice before the LORD. And Solomon offered up the well-being sacrifices that he sacrificed to the LORD, twenty-two thousands oxen and a hundred twenty thousand sheep. And the king and all the Israelites dedicated the house of the LORD.

Layers of history

1800 BCE - 1200 BCE - Late Bronze Age, Canaanite-Egyptian rule

1200 BC - 1000 BCE - Bronze Age

“Collapse” & Emergence of Ancient Israel - No state power (Joshua-Judges)

1000 BCE - 721 BCE - Little kingdoms in Israel & Judah (“First Temple” period)

721 BCE - 587 BCE - Little kingdom in Judah (Israel destroyed by Assyrian Empire)

587 BCE - 537 BCE - Babylonian exile

537 BCE - 330 BCE - Persian/Achaemenid rule (“Second Temple” period begins)

330 BCE - 296 BCE - Alexander the Great/Macedonian rule

296 BCE - 201 BCE - Ptolemaic rule

200 BCE - 104 BCE - Seleucid rule

104 BCE - 64 BCE - Hasmonean rule (Maccabees)

64 BCE - Roman rule

Exodus 19:18-19

Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the LORD had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The blare of the shofar grew louder and louder. As Moses spoken God answered him in thunder.

Leviticus 25:9-10

Then you shall sound the shofar loud; in the seventh month, on the tenth day of the month - the Day of Atonement - you shall have the shofar sounded throughout your land and you shall hallow the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to his holding and each of you shall return to his family.

Mourner's Kaddish

Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will.

May He establish His kingdom in your lifetime and during your days, and within the life of the entire House of Israel, speedily and soon; and say, Amen.

May His great name be blessed forever and to all eternity.

Blessed and praised, glorified and exalted, extolled and honored, adored and lauded be the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, beyond all the blessings and hymns, praises and consolations that are ever spoken in the world; and say, Amen.

May there be abundant peace from heaven, and life, for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

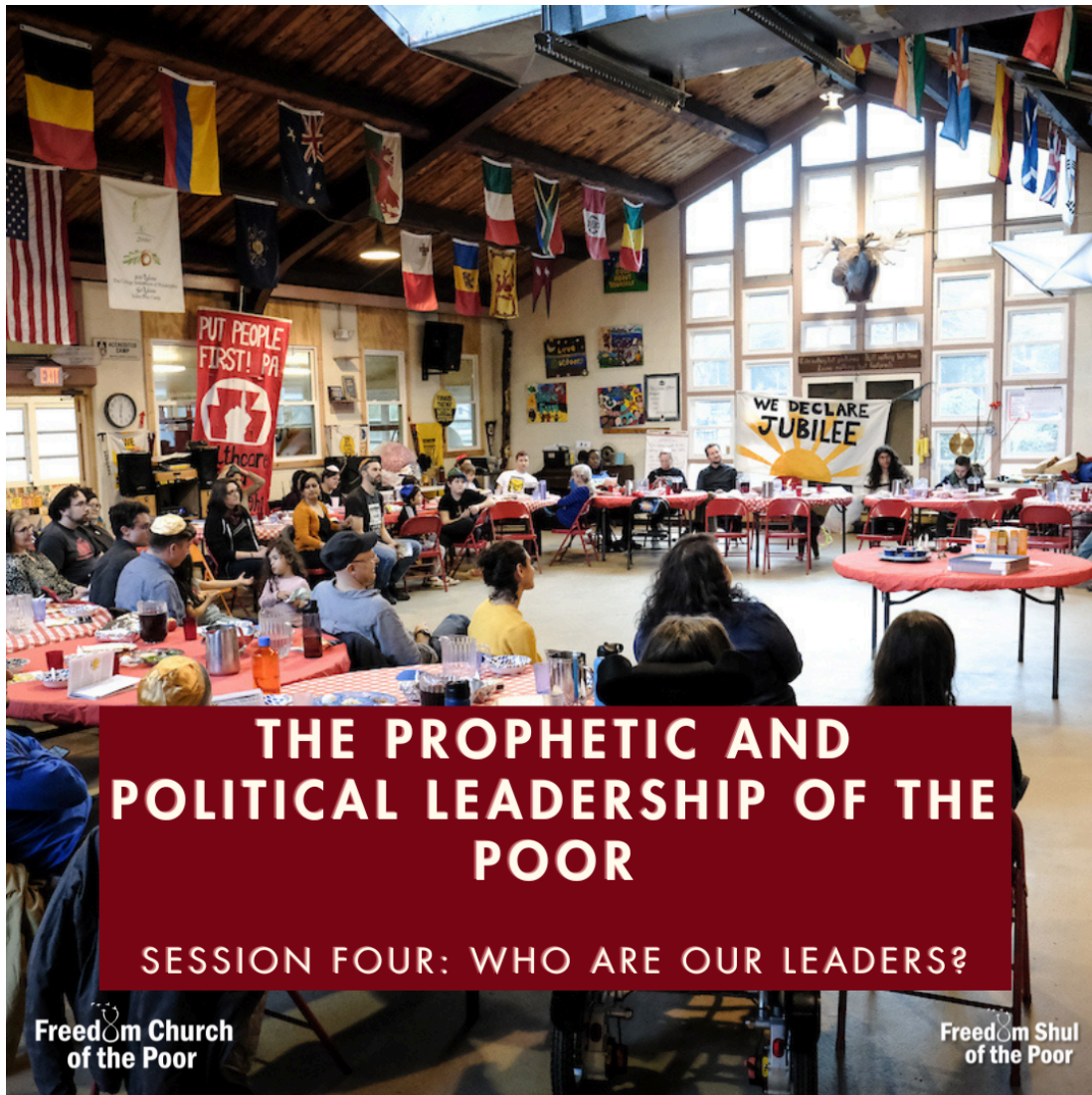
He who creates peace in His celestial heights, may He create peace for us and for all Israel; and say, Amen.

God does not stand apart from humanity and issue commands to people. God's presence is evidenced in those qualities of the human personality and of society by which the evils of life are overcome, and latent good brought to realization. By ascribing primacy to these qualities we acclaim the sovereignty of God.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan

Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings

The Prophetic and Political Leadership of the Poor



Freedom Shul of the Poor Passover Seder 2023 by Steve Pavey

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Overview & Themes

“It’s worth taking a moment to remind ourselves who Elijah was. He wasn’t simply a pious messenger of God. He was a peasant revolutionary who stood up to the wicked rule of an ancient King and exposed the rampant injustice that threatened to destroy his people. He was a leader who understood that his society needed to undergo a radical revolution of values. When we understand the Prophet Elijah for who he was, we see the coming of the Messiah in an entirely new light. Every year, we open our doors and hope Elijah will be there to announce an ending and a new beginning. But every year we discover that he hasn’t come just yet. Not until we’re ready. Not until we’ve followed Elijah’s example and taken the steps that lead to freedom. Not until we’ve cried out, gotten organized, and moved forward together.” [-Freedom Shul of the Poor Passover Haggadah 2024](#)



In this session, we continue to read stories of prophetic and political leaders and organizers in Ancient Israel, paying special attention to the organizing and leadership of Elisha and Elijah. With a grounding in the economic and political conditions of Ancient Israel, we understand that Elisha and Elijah were not just great spiritual leaders, but

were political organizers trying to change society from the bottom-up. Concerned with matters of the scarcity of food, shelter, and tools, Elisha, Elijah, and other prophets of the time went face-to-face with those in power to demand a different kind of vision of God's Kingdom here on earth.

The photo above is from the 2023 Freedom of the Shul Passover, where Freedom Shul of the Poor gathered leaders from across the country to celebrate Passover together. As is tradition in Passover Seders, a seat was left open for Prophet Elijah's return, and during the seder a door was opened to see if the Prophet Elijah had arrived. When we opened the doors and saw that the Prophet Elijah hadn't arrived yet, we wrestled with questions about our organizing. Why hadn't Elijah arrived? What do we do now? And how do we bring closer the day when Elijah and other prophets of our movement will see their work revealed? Our movement is made up of our leaders, and our primary task is to seek out and develop today's leaders and prophets to bring about the revolution of values our country desperately needs. What are we doing to find and organize them?

Themes

Historical, political, and social context of Ancient Israel

The political leadership of Elisha, Elijah, and other prophets in ancient poor people's movements

The connection of ancient prophetic political movements to our current organizing

Textual Tools

Note: Bible texts are taken from the JPS translation. All texts and excerpts can be found in the slideshow linked above.

1 Kings 5:21-27; 9:11-16; 11:28-31;16:30

Elijah/Elisha stories: 1 Kings 17; 1 Kings 18; 1 Kings 19; 1 Kings 21: 2 Kings 2; 2 Kings 4

Malachi 3:22-24

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a

Merneptah Stele (1208 BCE)

The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction by Norman K. Gottwald

Cultural Tools

[“Go Down Moses” with Steff Reed, FCOP x Black August SKOR Service](#)



Chaplains On the Harbor - Aberdeen, WA

[Testimonies from the National Nonviolent Medicaid Army](#)



Budget Hearing by Steve Pavey

[Everybody Rises - Matthew David Morris](#)



Reveal the Truth, Transform the Nation

Discussion Questions

What were the political, economic, and social conditions of Ancient Israel that movements were organizing in? What are the political, economic, and social conditions that we are organizing in now?

Re-read the three Elijah and Elisha stories: 1 Kings 18:16-48, 1 Kings 19, 1 Kings 21. In these texts, what does the Bible say about kingship and the leadership of the poor?

What are the roles of prophets and messiahs in the Bible? What are the roles of prophets and messiahs in our movement?

Who are some historical and current prophets in our movement? What do they teach us about faith and organizing?

How are you working to find, develop, and organize leaders in this movement?

Why hasn't Elijah arrived yet? And what can we do to realize the kind of society he fought for?

Edited Transcript for Session Four

Overview

This session we look at the prophetic messages of Elijah and Elisha, emphasizing their role as leaders and organizers against oppressive royal authorities.

Elijah and Elisha as Political Leaders and Organizers of a Movement

Today we are going to read some of my favorite stories in the whole Bible. Elijah and Elisha are my favorite for lots of reasons, but mainly how they help us see that there is so much more to what it means to take up prophetic leadership. Rather than just a book of pronouncements we see Elijah and Elisha as real organizers and political leaders. This helps us when we read some of the other prophets who we may not have the same kind of records of their life to think about them, because in all likelihood they were similar types of leaders.

Last week we were discussing the Temple under Solomon as this palace of luxury to house God on Earth. We also noted how in the context of the ancient Near East it wasn't just about rebuilding this structure, but putting back in place these social structures of exploitation and domination and oppression and violence. It was about the reestablishment of an elite, which looked a lot like the same elite that the Israelite movement came into being by overthrowing. This period of reaction or counter-revolution is what is captured in the experience of David and especially of Solomon. Their court is the one that really produces and shapes the basic narrative structure of the Tanakh and the Hebrew Bible. At the same time we have preserved the heart of the common Israelite experience, which was one of struggle against oppression and against monarchies and empires. We still have these texts that are deeply hostile to oppressive royal authority, deeply hostile to temple and palace, and are really trying to promote a more egalitarian, more caring way of living together.

We left off around this section of Kings where Solomon is giving a grand speech, this sort of ribbon cutting for the temple (which we read was built with a lot of forced labor.)

We'll start with a story in 1 Kings about Elijah and Elisha that gives a little bit of the context for them as leaders, which was under the rule of Ahab in the Northern Kingdom, which was called Israel at this time.

1 Kings 16:30

Ahab son of Omri did what was displeasing to GOD, more than all who preceded him. Not content to follow the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar to Baal in the temple of Baal that he built in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred post. Ahab did more to provoke the anger of the ETERNAL, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who preceded him.

During his reign, Hiel the Bethelite fortified Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Abiram his first-born, and set its gates in place at the cost of Segub, his youngest, in accordance with the words that GOD had spoken through Joshua son of Nun.

Discussion

What stands out?

It seems that part of what Ahab did that was displeasing to God was marry Jezebel and started worshipping Baal rather than God.

Yes. This is an indictment that the prophets make about a lot of the kings. Solomon is also indicted in this way earlier on - marrying foreign wives and worshipping other gods.

What is the "sacred post"?

It comes up later in the confrontation between Elijah and the priests or prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. This phrase about the "sacred post" seems random and I think potentially it is a later addition to the text. We know that Baal worship is associated with the state authorities and kingdoms in Phoenicia. And we also know there are these other gods that are worshipped as part of a royal theology and ideology and politics of these surrounding, exploitative, oppressive, violent kingdoms. The people who shape this theology are referred to by scholars as the Deuteronomist school, but basically they are a group within the court of the late Judahite kingdom (Southern kingdom before its destruction) who are very interested in centralizing worship and pushing against popular religion of the time. At the time this included worship of the Lord, but also of some of these other gods and goddesses, including Asherah, who's listed in some places as the Lord's consort. When the authors are criticizing these "other" gods they will often add in some attacks on Asherah as well. The sacred post would have been one of these open air symbols of worship, practiced by the majority of the Israelite population.

There are two main things that I wanted to raise here. The first is that the problem is not just giving God the wrong name, although clearly that's part of the problem. If you're changing God's name and how you think about God to being a landowner (which is one way to translate Baal), clearly this changes the way that you approach the rest of society, but it's isn't just about a name or the wrong kind of cultic worship. It also isn't that Ahab fell in love with Jezebel because she's not an Israelite. The practice of exchanging daughters between kings is a very common way to establish political and military alliances and sustain ruling class internationalism and solidarity. God's anger at Ahab is not about a wrong marriage or narrow form of worship. The problem is that Ahab is allying himself with the oppressive ruling authorities of the day who are replicating the exact same kinds of violence and exploitation that the whole Israelite movement emerged in opposition to.

A lot of the different indictments and judgments and prophetic speech are signifiers of a deeper kind of change that is called for. This point is underscored in the part about Jericho. This is one of the high points of the Israelite insurgency against the kingdoms of the day. The Israelite insurgency tears down the walls of Jericho in this amazing, miraculous way. They do it by finding God and with God's help. Then there's a pronouncement, "Don't rebuild these fortifications." Don't rebuild this society that you just tore down in exactly the same way that it had existed before. It wasn't that just building walls was bad (and doing it with child sacrifice), it was a warning against counter-revolution. It shows how far Ahab and Ahab's Kingdom has taken this society backward, but also forward into this new world of royal authority and palace and temple oppression and exploitation. This is the context then for Elijah's opposition.

So this is 1 Kings 16, let's move all the way back to 1 Kings 5, which is describing the process of building the temple.

1 Kings 5:21-27

When Hiram heard Solomon's message, he was overjoyed. "Praised be the LORD this day," he said, "for granting David a wise son to govern this great people." So Hiram sent word to Solomon: "I have your message; I will supply all the cedar logs you require... You, in turn, will supply the food I require for my household." So Hiram kept Solomon provided with all the cedar and cypress wood he required, and Solomon delivered to Hiram 20,000 kors of wheat as provisions for his household and 20 kors of beaten oil. Such was Solomon's annual payment to Hiram...

King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel; the levy came to 30,000 men. He sent them to Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would spend one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of forced labor. Solomon also had 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers in the hills, apart from Solomon's 3,300 officials who were in charge of the work and supervised the gangs doing the work.

Solomon reaches out to Hiram, a king of Lebanon and says I'm going to build a temple, and it's going to be massive and I need your help, so let's trade. Let's establish a trading relationship that could be beneficial for both of us. You can send me lots of luxury woods and timber and things like that and I'll send you stuff you need. Hiram is happy with this. I don't think it was the intent, but I read this as kind of sarcastic. Hiram probably isn't thrilled about this project of building a temple. Hiram responds and says he will trade the cedars of Lebanon for food for his household. His household is, of course, not a small group, it's his whole court and group of retainers and other dependents, priests and others. And so the trade happens. Solomon delivered to Hiram 20,000 kors of wheat. Of course, Solomon isn't the person who grew this wheat. This is state funds gained through extraction and exploitation, either directly on state plantations or through taxation of the village communes at the time. Again, what we're seeing here is a reintegrating of the Israelite elite, not as part of an Israelite community, but as a ruling class over and above and against the rest of the Israelite community and in solidarity with the ruling class of other states of the time. The text goes on to say that King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel. The levy came to 30,000 men. He sent them to Lebanon to work cutting down these trees and doing these other kinds of things. He established a commander of the forced labor force and had all these people also doing rock quarrying and carrying heavy loads up in the hills. And there's 3300 officials who were in charge of the work and supervised the gangs doing the work. All of this gives a sense of the level of state organized and directed exploitation going on as part of this monumental building program, which is not exceptional at all for the time period. This is just one of the things that kings do.

1 Kings 9:11-16

...King Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty towns in the region of Galilee...

This was the purpose of the forced labor which Solomon imposed: It was to build the House of the LORD, his own place, the Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and to fortify Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Pharaoh king of Egypt had come up and captured Gezer; he destroyed it by fire, killed the Canaanites who dwelt in the town, and gave it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife.

Moving forward to 1 Kings 9. This is immediately after Solomon's grand speech at the ribbon cutting for the temple. It says that King Solomon gave Hiram 20 towns in the region of Galilee, another example of how the land and the people and God's abundance are treated. The whole point of the covenant agreement and promise to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob and the covenant at Sinai or at Horeb was that people would enjoy the good things of the world and share them together. It was to be that the land belonged to God and there was this sacred relationship between the Earth and God and the people. Instead, Solomon is here treating it as an exchangeable commodity.

It goes on to say that the purpose of the forced labor which Solomon imposed was to build the house of the Lord. It was to build Solomon's own palace. It was to build a fortification, the wall of Jerusalem and to fortify these other towns. It talks about how Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had come up and captured Gezer. He had destroyed it by fire, killed the Canaanites who dwelt in the town, and gave it his dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife. Here is another reference to foreign wives demonstrating again the anger of God with Ahab and Jezebel is not about people sticking to their own kind or anything. These marriage relationships are about the inter-relationships of oppressive states and their treating of the Earth and of people and of the Earth's abundance as tradable commodities - as things to be bought and sold.

1 Kings 11:28-21

This Jeroboam was an able man, and when Solomon saw that the young man was a capable worker, he appointed him over all the forced labor of the House of Joseph. During that time Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem and the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh met him on the way. He had put on a new robe; and when the two were alone in the open country, Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. "Take ten pieces," he said to Jeroboam. "For thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: I am about to tear the kingdom out of Solomon's hands, and I will give you ten tribes..."

This is the description of how the challenger to Solomon's authority is raised up. We raise it to learn more about who prophets were and how they functioned as political and spiritual leaders. The prophet Ahijah is named here and he isn't really named anywhere else. This prophet, Ahijah, meets Jeroboam and anoints him, not with oil, but by organizing him and recruiting him to lead this struggle against Solomon. Later there's an armed revolt against Solomon's authority and Solomon's officials and representatives of his state power and eventually the separation into these two kingdoms.

Discussion

In the Tanakh there are these big groupings of texts into the Torah, history, and prophets. But these stories of these other prophets doing all of this organizing and resistance, infusing critiques of power, they don't really get their own books like Isaiah, Micah. Are there different levels or types of prophets?

A lot of this has to do with what gets written down and preserved, but I do think it's helpful to look at both of them together. When we meet this prophet Ahijah and we see that what a prophet does is actively plot and work towards the downfall of unjust rulers and ruling systems, that's valuable to know. Ahijah is out there finding potential leaders for this process, he ends up being mistaken in terms of what Jeroboam is up for as we'll see later, but it's really important to look at that alongside just kind of the prophets as writers.

In reading these texts with people at our Church I'm struck by how people connect to Solomon. They focus on Solomon as this worthy person who deserves God's forgiveness. They see Solomon as this example of God's endless grace and God's endless forgiveness and mercy. I see this as a contradiction to what you are sharing and to what seems most important, but it's what folks see this whole story is about.

For what is worth, in the end God has had enough with Solomon and there's no forgiveness at the very end for Solomon.

Elijah

We meet Elijah in **1 Kings 17:1**

Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead, said to Ahab, "As the ETERNAL lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding."

Elijah is really clear that he serves the God of Israel. There's a critique there of how Ahab has been serving other gods in the pursuit of wealth and power and not the flourishing of the whole community. Elijah announces that, as a result of Ahab worshipping this other God there's going to be crisis heaped on top of crisis. Immediately after saying this Elijah runs away. We won't go through the whole story, but I do want to say a bit more about the significance of Elijah and of Elisha too

This is from Norman Gottwald's book, *The Hebrew Bible, A Socio-literary Introduction*. It is from a section where he introduces the cycle of Elijah and Elisha stories. Gottwald points out that the picture we get of Elijah and Elisha is that prophets are in an ongoing struggle against kings, **sometimes working with them when there's something to support, but more often at odds with them when they're not walking in the paths that they're supposed to walk in, and building the kind of society that God has called the people to build.** Prophets represent an authority, grounded in the people and in the organized grassroots that is able to be mobilized

against the Temple and Palace authorities. They have a kind of political and theological independence about them.

The Hebrew Bible, A Socio-Literary Introduction

The Elisha stories have to do with scarcity of food, shelter, and tools, both among prophetic communities and the rural populace at large. The elaborated legend of 2 Kings 4:11-37; 8:1-6 implies that the prophetic miracles were performed on behalf of weak and endangered members of prophetic groups and their supporters in cases where no juridical relief from king or law courts was forthcoming...

From this angle the bearers of the Elijah-Elisha stories look like religious formations at the lower fringes of society that functioned as rescue stations and advocacy groups. The underside of Israelite life, away from the "history-making" royal court, was filling up with more and more people pushed out of the old protective tribal structures by political centralization and social stratification.

This part is talking about Elisha, but I think it's valid for Elijah as well. It says the Elisha stories often focus on a scarcity of food, shelter, and tools, both among prophetic communities and the rural populace at large. This implies that the prophetic miracles were performed on behalf of weak and endangered members of prophetic groups and their supporters in cases where no juridical relief from the King or law courts was forthcoming. From this angle, the bearers of the Elijah and Elisha stories look like religious formations at the lower fringes of society that functioned as rescue stations and advocacy groups. They represented the underside of Israelite life away from the history-making royal court. Society was filling up with more and more people pushed out of the old protective tribal structures by political centralization and social stratification. It means that there is resistance to this process of rebuilding temples and palaces and of rebuilding the walls of Jericho and of this whole process direction that the powerful want to bring things. The argument is that where you see this resistance rooted and organized is among and around the prophets. We see this much more clearly in the cycle of Elijah and Elisha stories, but it is probably true for all of the prophets. They were organizing both by directly confronting and protesting and calling out the sins and the transgressions of these royal authorities and their supporters, but also through going and working and organizing among the poor and building what we might call projects of survival where they are helping people to survive and weather the crises caused not only by natural famine or disasters. People didn't have anything with which to weather these disasters because it had been claimed and taken as taxes and forced labor by the royal and temple authorities. Helping people to survive and organize. You'll hear this phrase, "sons of the prophets", or "acolyte prophets" or "disciples of the prophets," which all refer to the group of people around Elijah and Elisha. I would really encourage people not to think of this in an abstract academic sense, but to see it as a group of leaders who were building organization among the people. Folks are maybe more familiar with thinking about the Jesus movement and the disciples in this way. These prophets and the people around them are not just some obscure scholastic sect in the wilderness, studying esoteric theology or something. This is an underground, grassroots organization building among the poorest strata of the population who are trying to survive and help their people through disasters and hard times.

When you read Amos, Micah or Isaiah, or especially the prophets from before the exile we should think of them in that context. We know that preserving the written word is not an easy thing at this time. The fact that we have these prophetic writings at all suggests that they weren't on their own. Their prophetic message often suggests that they felt alone and isolated in this fight, but somebody was there to write this and then to continue building on that message over a course of hundreds of years. There's a level of organization implied here,

Now let us discuss Elijah in Jewish tradition, which I think is tied to the way that Elijah shows up in Christian tradition as well. This next text is from the very last of the prophets, Malachi. If you're reading a Christian Bible the verses are different. They put this in its own section in chapter four, but in a Jewish Bible, it's the end of chapter three.

Malachi 3:22-24

Be mindful of the Teaching of my servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel.

Behold, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.

In the Jewish tradition Elijah returns to announce the coming of the Messiah. Anybody who's familiar with Reverend Liz's work will know what that "messiah" really signifies and means. This isn't some magic person. It is more about the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. It is about the turning of things upside down so that they can be right side up. Elijah is who comes to prepare the world, to prepare us, and to announce the coming of God's judgment and to prepare our society so that God's judgment can have an element of mercy and renewal to it. This isn't the source of that tradition, but it reflects the fact that the tradition was already in place in 300-400 BCE,

If you've been to any of our Freedom Shul of the Poor Seders you will know this text, which comes from the Talmud. It's about one of the teachers whose teachings are preserved in the Talmud and his encounter with Elijah, or the spirit of Elijah, at the cave where another teacher (rabbi) is buried.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked Elijah, "When will the messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go ask him yourself." "And where does he dwell?" asked Joshua. "At the gates of Rome," Elijah replied. "And by what sign will I recognize him?" Joshua asked. And Elijah answered, "He is sitting among the poor lepers. All of them untie their bandages at once and replace them together, but the messiah unties and replaces his bandages one by one. For he thinks, 'If I should be wanted, I must not be delayed.'"

So, Rabbi Joshua went and greeted the messiah at the entrance of Rome. Peace be upon you, my master and teacher—he said. "Peace be upon you, O son of Levi," the messiah replied.

"When will you come, master?" Joshua asked. And the messiah said, "Today."

He returned to Elijah and said, "The messiah lied to me! He said he would come 'today,' but he did not come." Elijah answered him, "This is what he said to you: 'Today ... if you will hear his voice' (Psalm 95:7)."

Folks may know that there's this tradition to pour an extra cup of wine at the Passover table during the Seder for Elijah. Part of the tradition is to take a moment during the Seder where you actually go and open the door in the hope that Elijah will be there to come and join your table and announce the coming of the Messiah. There are a lot of parallels between Elijah's story, the Exodus, and the story of the giving of the Law at Sinai or at Horeb. The association we see here in the texts is not accidental. However, it is at the time where we are celebrating the foundational story of our tradition (Exodus), which is about the liberation from oppression, it is this time when we hope Elijah will come back and be part of our liberation once again. At the end of every Shabbat during what's called the Havdalah service, which is the service that marks the separation of the holy from the profane - Shabbat from the rest of the week - we sing a song to Elijah. The Sabbath represents a taste of the world to come again. This is not to be understood in an abstract sense, but as a taste of a world that's really possible if we organize it around the enjoyment of God's abundance for everybody.

Read and Reflect - Elijah Stories

1 Kings 18:16-46, Confrontation at Mount Carmel with the prophets of Baal and the end of the drought https://www.sefaria.org/1_Kings.18?lang=bi

In this story the people are building idols for two gods and Elijah tells them I spoke with God and God said they will light your idol on fire. The true God will light it on fire. There had to be some kind of movement behind Elijah, because some of the ways that he was throwing down were pretty bold and something that you could only really do if you had people behind you that were backing you up. This indicates to me some level of organization and power. Also, in the Christian tradition Elijah appears to Jesus and we were thinking about how we understand that the prophets are representative of movements and not necessarily just individuals. That kind of relationship between Elijah and Jesus speaks to how they are connected by a common social/political struggle, part of the same movement. Jesus learned a lot from Elijah in terms of raising hell and confronting power in these ruling class spaces.

This really parallels what we do in our movements. We're talking about resurrecting the 1968 movement of Martin Luther King Jr., the Poor People's Campaign, and also going back to older movements too, like the Abolitionist movement. There is this connection across generations, many generations, from Elijah to Jesus, etc., this lineage is the core spiritual practice of the movements that we inherit today.

In reading this I could taste the dust from the days of the Union of the Homeless when we were marching and advocating and raising our fist to the rulers. There was such a showdown and a challenge from Elijah, as he confronted King Ahab about leading the people into idolatry. The prophets, like Paul, they just went crazy, they were doing all sorts of things, even injuring themselves. They went mad here trying to prove or win this contest about who is the true God.

1 Kings 19, Events immediately after Jezebel threatens to murder Elijah. Elijah encounters God at Horeb (Sinai) and God directs Elijah. https://www.sefaria.org/I_Kings.19.2?lang=bi

In this story Elijah is on the run after doing battle with these false prophets. Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah and so he takes off into the wilderness where he is given food and rest by angels (We were interpreting these angels as fellow supporters of Elijah's cause and the resistance). God then sends Elijah on his way to Mount Horeb God communicates with Elijah,, not in an earthquake or fire or in wind, but in a soft quiet breath. After this encounter Elijah continues to anoint/appoint other folks as leaders. We were reading this story almost as a lesson about regrouping with leaders. The texts speaks of the 7000 who haven't bowed down the Baal. Also important to note how God appears in this very small, unexpected and tender way.

1 Kings 21 - Naboth's Vineyard https://www.sefaria.org/I_Kings.21?lang=bi

I think it is notable how after all that has happened before this it is only after Naboth is killed and his land is taken dead that Elijah shows up to Ahab and delivers God's judgment. That was some kind of limit or line that Ahab crossed.

Naboth was honoring God and respecting the God of Moses by standing up to this ruler and reminding the ruler that God had provided the land of his vineyard to his forefathers and he wasn't free to just hand it over in exchange for money or some other piece of land that wasn't his. God wants us to nurture and steward the land. It was brave of Naboth to stand up in this way.

All of this ties into criticism of idolatry, which is this basic idea that you make something with your hands and then you turn around and worship it. That you give these idols ears and eyes, but they can't hear and they can't see and it's because it's not the product of the living force of justice in the world.

One point I wanted to return to was this point that was raised about how remarkable it is that the place that Elijah flees to with all of this trouble coming down on him is Sidon, which is where Jezebel comes from. I think this is significant for several reasons.

This notion of God as having a unique and special relationship with Israel comes out of the experience of social/political movement, of the resistance of people, who are called Israel. And this emerges among a group of ethnically and linguistically and culturally and theologically diverse poor people in the context of the power of Late Bronze age empires. This was

understood as the Israelite movement. That's the name that they had for themselves. It represented a kind of shared heritage that they found for themselves. Then over time this was contained and put in a box, sometimes literally put in a box, like with the Ark of the Covenant, but also in a bigger box in terms of the Temple authority and theology. In this narrow way it justifies the establishment of something that goes against everything that people had been taught and taught each other about the encounter with God as part of this movement.

The struggle these prophets help lead against an Israelite ruling class compels things back toward a broader view of God. This becomes the ideological and political basis for resisting ruling class solidarity, which also gets expressed as ruling class internationalism, as we saw in the relationship between Ahab and the king of Sidon and Jezebel. So when Elijah flees to Sidon we could see it as the need to immediately counter that power and alliance with working class international solidarity, by linking up with this poor widow in Sidon. This helps us see how these prophets understood the need and were trying to organize a broader movement and not keeping things just limited to some made up ethnic group of Israelites. The prophets are preserving this tradition that it's everybody who's being oppressed by the palaces and the temples, regardless of what name people try to put on those palaces and temples. All of us have this relationship with God. We are all chosen and selected by God. It's a powerful message to send right at the beginning of the Elijah story,

1 Kings 16:30

Ahab son of Omri did what was displeasing to the LORD, more than all who preceded him. Not content to follow the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, he took as wife Jezebel daughter of King Ethbaal of the Phoenicians, and he went and served Baal and worshiped him. He erected an altar to Baal in the temple of Baal which he built in Samaria. Ahab also made a sacred post. Ahab did more to vex the LORD, the God of Israel, than all the kings of Israel who preceded him.

During his reign, Hiel the Bethelite fortified Jericho. He laid its foundations at the cost of Abiram his first-born, and set its gates in the place at the cost of Segub his youngest, in accordance with the words that the LORD had spoken through Joshua son of Nun.

1 Kings 5:21-27

When Hiram heard Solomon's message, he was overjoyed. "Praised be the LORD this day," he said, "for granting David a wise son to govern this great people." So Hiram sent word to Solomon: "I have your message; I will supply all the cedar logs you require... You, in turn, will supply the food I require for my household." So Hiram kept Solomon provided with all the cedar and cypress wood he required, and Solomon delivered to Hiram 20,000 kors of wheat as provisions for his household and 20 kors of beaten oil. Such was Solomon's annual payment to Hiram...

King Solomon imposed forced labor on all Israel; the levy came to 30,000 men. He sent them to Lebanon in shifts of 10,000 a month: they would spend one month in Lebanon and two months at home. Adoniram was in charge of forced labor. Solomon also had 70,000 porters and 80,000 quarriers in the hills, apart from Solomon's 3,300 officials who were in charge of the work and supervised the gangs doing the work.

1 Kings 9:11-16

...King Solomon in turn gave Hiram twenty towns in the region of Galilee...

This was the purpose of the forced labor which Solomon imposed: It was to build the House of the LORD, his own place, the Millo, and the wall of Jerusalem, and to fortify Hazor, Megiddo, and Gezer. Pharaoh king of Egypt had come up and captured Gezer; he destroyed it by fire, killed the Canaanites who dwelt in the town, and gave it as dowry to his daughter, Solomon's wife.

1 Kings 11:28-21

This Jeroboam was an able man, and when Solomon saw that the young man was a capable worker, he appointed him over all the forced labor of the House of Joseph. During that time Jeroboam went out of Jerusalem and the prophet Ahijah of Shiloh met him on the way. He had put on a new robe; and when the two were alone in the open country, Ahijah took hold of the new robe he was wearing and tore it into twelve pieces. “Take ten pieces,” he said to Jeroboam. “For thus said the LORD, the God of Israel: I am about to tear the kingdom out of Solomon’s hands, and I will give you ten tribes...”

1 Kings 17

Elijah the Tishbite, an inhabitant of Gilead, said to Ahab, “As the LORD lives, the God of Israel whom I serve, there will be no dew or rain except at my bidding.”

The Hebrew Bible, A Socio-Literary Introduction

The Elisha stories have to do with scarcity of food, shelter, and tools, both among prophetic communities and the rural populace at large. The elaborated legend of 2 Kings 4:11-37; 8:1-6 implies that the prophetic miracles were performed on behalf of weak and endangered members of prophetic groups and their supporters in cases where no juridical relief from king or law courts was forthcoming...

From this angle the bearers of the Elijah-Elisha stories look like religious formations at the lower fringes of society that functioned as rescue stations and advocacy groups. The underside of Israelite life, away from the "history-making" royal court, was filling up with more and more people pushed out of the old protective tribal structures by political centralization and social stratification.

Malachi 3:22-24

Be mindful of the Teaching of my servant Moses, whom I charged at Horeb with laws and rules for all Israel.

Behold, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the coming of the awesome, fearful day of the LORD. He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents, so that, when I come, I do not strike the whole land with utter destruction.

Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 98a

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi asked Elijah, “When will the messiah come?” Elijah replied, “Go ask him yourself.” “And where does he dwell?” asked Joshua. “At the gates of Rome,” Elijah replied. “And by what sign will I recognize him?” Joshua asked. And Elijah answered, “He is sitting among the poor lepers. All of them untie their bandages at once and replace them together, but the messiah unties and replaces his bandages one by one. For he thinks, ‘If I should be wanted, I must not be delayed.’”

So, Rabbi Joshua went and greeted the messiah at the entrance of Rome. Peace be upon you, my master and teacher—he said. “Peace be upon you, O son of Levi,” the messiah replied.

“When will you come, master?” Joshua asked. And the messiah said, “Today.”

He returned to Elijah and said, “The messiah lied to me! He said he would come ‘today,’ but he did not come.” Elijah answered him, “This is what he said to you: ‘Today ... if you will hear his voice’ (Psalm 95:7).”

1 Kings 17: Elijah announces drought, hides. Fed by ravens. Flees to Sidon and miracle of the poor widow. Resurrection of her child.

1 Kings 18: Return to announce end of the drought. Confrontation at Mount Carmel (16-46)

1 Kings 19: Flees from Jezebel. Theophany at Horeb/Sinai. Anointing new king of Damascus, Israel, and succession. Meeting Elisha.

1 Kings 21: Naboth's vineyard (1-24)

2 Kings 2: Elijah ascends, Elisha takes up the mantle.

2 Kings 4: Widow and miracle of the oil (1-7); Shunammite resurrection (8-37); Curing the stew (38-41); Miracle of bread (42-44)

2 Kings 2:11-12

As they kept on walking and talking, a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind. Elisha saw it, and he cried out, “Oh father, father! Israel’s chariots and horsemen!” When he could no longer see him, he grasped his garments and rent them in two.

2 Kings 4:1-7

A certain woman, the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets, cried out to Elisha: “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know how your servant revered GOD. And now a creditor is coming to seize my two children as slaves.”

Elisha said to her, “What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house?” She replied, “Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house, except a jug of oil.”

“Go,” he said, “and borrow vessels outside, from all your neighbors, empty vessels, as many as you can. Then go in and shut the door behind you and your children, and pour oil into all those vessels, removing each one as it is filled.”

She went away and shut the door behind her and her children. They kept bringing vessels to her and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” He answered her, “There are no more vessels”; and the oil stopped.

She came and told the agent of God, and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest.”

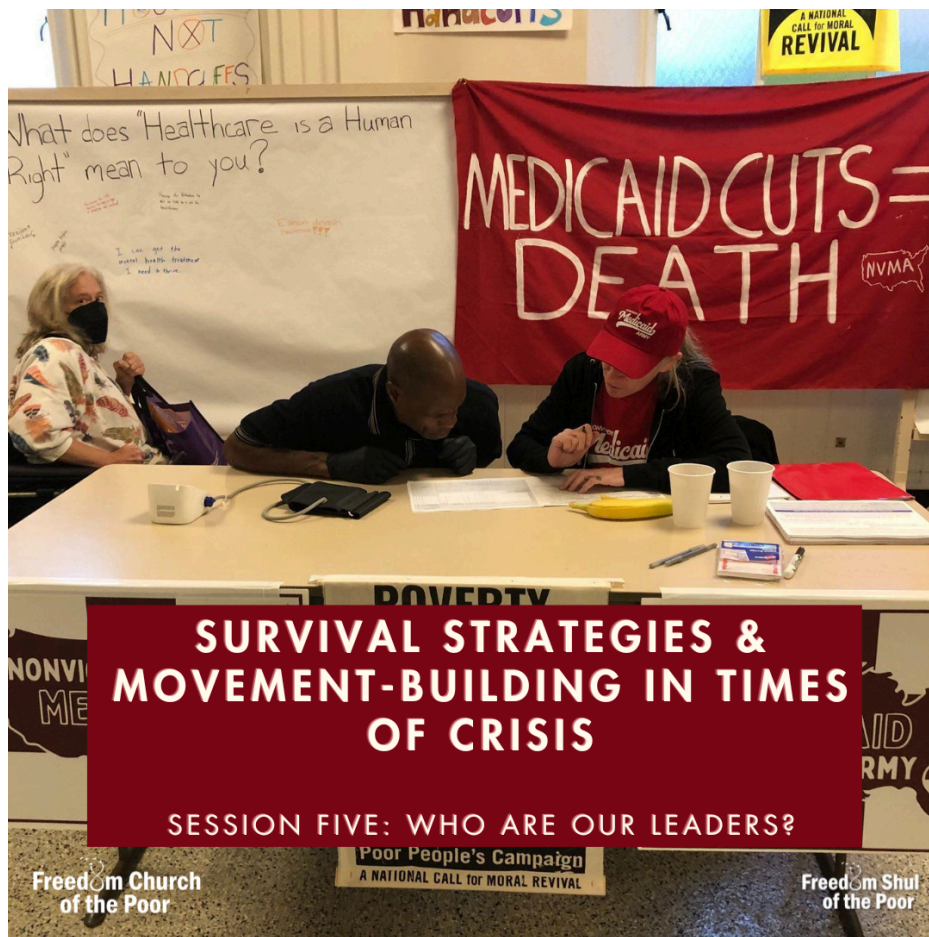
2 Kings 4:42-44

A man came from Baal-shalishah and he brought the agent of God some bread of the first reaping—twenty loaves of barley bread, and some fresh grain in his sack. And [Elisha] said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.”

His attendant replied, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” But he said, “Give it to the people and let them eat. For thus said GOD: They shall eat and have some left over.” So he set it before them; and when they had eaten, they had some left over, as GOD had said.

Who Are Our Leaders? What the Bible Says About Kings

Survival Strategies & Movement-Building in Time of Crisis



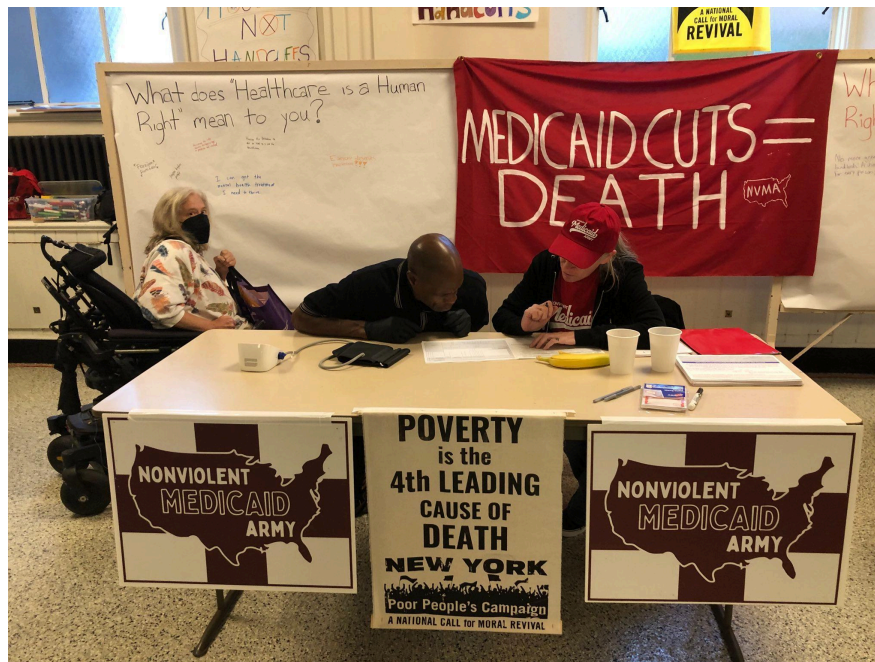
The New York State Nonviolent Medicaid Army's (NVMA) Project of Survival during the 2024 NVMA Week of Action

[Link to Presentation Slides](#)

Overview & Themes

“Unfortunately, our systems of care in the United States need serious attention. So many people go without adequate medical care because of high bills and the tenuous nature of Medicaid and health care. Families have difficulty securing food, housing, and clean water. The system stresses personal responsibility more than the need for public assistance or the consequences of corporate irresponsibility. In these ways and more, they fly in the face of the system of care that God set in motion in the beginning. These are not fruitful systems. They do not multiply, add to, or sustain life; they end it. So they must be re-created.”

- *“In The Beginning, There Was Care” by Solita Alexander Riley, from We Cried Justice*



During the New York State Nonviolent Medicaid Army Week of Action ([part of the National Week of Action](#)), organizers held a People’s Clinic as a project of survival amidst Medicaid Cut-offs across the country. Projects of survival are critical in our organizing – these projects help people meet their basic needs, such as food assistance, signing up for benefits, or free health screenings, while also bringing them into connection with organizers who can help them make sense of the current conditions. Projects of Survival have a long and rich history in our network, such as in the 1970s when the Black Panther Party fed and cared for the people through their Free Breakfast Program and their Free Health Clinics. We can also find Projects of Survival throughout our spiritual and moral traditions, especially in prophets such as Elisha, Elijah, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. In this session, we learn about how ancient prophets and organizers helped people meet their needs amidst deep raging dispossession and poverty, and helped them to understand that a different way of life is possible. We also pay special attention to the Sabbath, and the important message that it offers us: no one should have to work themselves to death in order to earn their god-given rights such as food, water, and shelter.

The conditions around us are scary and dangerous, and we cannot get through on our own. We need to care for one another, while also politicizing this care so we understand that life does not have to be this way, and that God has willed a different kind of society where all of our needs are met. But while we organize towards that, we must care for one another.

Themes

Political, social, and economic context of Ancient Israel and the origins of the early Israelite movement

Class struggle in Ancient Israel

Projects of Survival in the Bible

The Sabbath and God's will for jubilee, debt forgiveness, and rest

Textual Tools

Note: Bible texts are taken from the JPS translation. All texts and excerpts can be found in the slideshow linked above.

2 Kings 4:1-7, 42-44

Exodus 20

Deuteronomy 5

Amos 8; 2:6-13; 5:10-12, 21-25

Micah 2:1-2; 3:1-5

Isaiah 1:11-17, 31; 2:7-9, 3:14-15; 5:8-10;

Excerpts from *Peasants, Prophets, and Political Economy* by Marvin Chaney

Excerpts from *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel

Cultural Tools



Fed Up! (part of NC Raise Up!) by Tom Simon

[Projects of Survival: The Miracle of Abundance, Closing Song: Our Hands, NYSPPC 7/28/24](#)

[Movement-Building in a Time of Crisis : The Survival Summits Cultural Playlist](#)

In 2024, the Kairos Center brought together experts on the economy, militarism, the rise of authoritarianism and Project 2025, alongside religious leaders and organizers, to offer a concrete analysis of our current context and how our movements and organizations are responding. Join us as we discuss the challenges and opportunities of this “kairos moment” and how we can build on lessons from the pandemic era to build up powerful movements for the long haul.



“God’s Eye Bakery” Temporary Art Installation at Resurrection City 1968 by Walt Reynolds

[Community Care is Resistance to Empire, Song: "Walk It With You", Adam Theisen, IL PPC 7/14/24](#)

[In the Wound is the Medicine by Anu Yadav](#)

[I’m Gonna Lift My Sister Up](#)



People's Free Food Program, one of the Panthers' survival programs in Palo Alto, California 1972 by Stephen Shames

Discussion Questions

If you've read the texts discussed before: What were some ideas, themes, or lessons you've heard about the Kings narratives? How did these five sessions impact that thinking?

If this is your first time reading the text: What was your experience reading these texts for the first time throughout these sessions, and what did you learn?

Re-read 2 Kings 4:1-7 and 2 Kings 4:42-44. Describe these projects of survival. Where else in the Bible or in our moral and spiritual traditions do we see projects of survival? How are projects of survival different from the acts of charity or empty sacrifices critiqued by the prophets?

What is the Sabbath? What do prophets Amos, Micah, and Isaiah say about the Sabbath? How does this understanding of the sabbath impact our organizing?

What role have projects of survival played in your organizing? How are you staying inseparably connected to the communities you are organizing?

What do you think the Bible says about kingship? What do you think the Bible says about the leadership of the poor?

Edited Transcript for Session Five

Overview

Today we will get into some of the later Elisha stories and also look more at the 8th century prophets. These are the earliest prophetic writings we have and they have gone through multiple layers of editing across many centuries. We'll look at three of these four: Isaiah, Amos, Micah and Hosea. All have at least a layer in them from this very early period in the 700's BCE. Isaiah is a complicated case. The Isaiah texts are usually broken into three parts by scholars. There's proto-Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah and 3rd (Trito) Isaiah. 3rd or Trito Isaiah texts represent a continuation of a sort of school of prophets in the Isaiah tradition. It's generally thought that the first set (first 25 chapters or so) are from this earlier period before the exile. We'll look at a lot of these texts together today.

Last week we focused on the Elijah and the Elisha stories. These are taking place in the 9th century BCE in the Northern Kingdom (Israel). What has begun to happen in this period is that the Kings in the Northern Kingdom have begun to reconstruct the society that had been liberated from the palace and temple regimes of the Bronze Age. Those regimes had been very focused on exploitation of the agricultural population and on the disintegration of tight knit village communities. Their intention was to transform land and labor into sources of wealth for a tiny few instead of a means of cultivating and sharing the natural abundance of creation with each other. This included the rebuilding of monumental palaces and structures, the building of large standing armies, the reintroduction of forced labor, and the use of various kinds of debt and foreclosure to further appropriate wealth. It also included work on plantations and the re-integration of the ruling class of Israel into the wider regional/international ruling class of the day.

They were building closer solidarity within the wealthy/ruling class internationally and in the process cutting off their responsibilities to the rest of the community - the agricultural/peasant majority of the Israelite kingdom.

In this context of growing violence and exploitation and oppression this prophetic tradition emerges, in some ways beginning with Elijah, that resists the counter-revolution and reaction of the ruling class. The early Israelite movement was a revolutionary movement to reconstruct

society along more egalitarian lines in the midst of a period of social crisis and opportunity. With the rise of the Davidic monarchy and especially under Solomon, and then again after the split of the kingdoms under these two kingdoms, it is essentially a period of reaction and counter-revolution and the re-establishment of these incredibly violent and harmful forms of organizing society.

The prophets were very much organizers and leaders, in addition to thinkers and writers. They were building schools of prophets that looked more like networks of leaders, rooted deeply among the peasants, who themselves were engaged in organizing survival projects. The prophets were also going around and directly confronting false prophets and priests and chaplains of these reemerging empires.

We are going to read some of the Elisha stories now, which I think are really wonderful and fantastic. This one from 2 Kings is particularly interesting because of the role that a similar story has played in our thinking about this methodology of reading the Bible with the poor and some of the work that Rev. Liz has done on the passage from the New Testament, "The poor will be with you always."

2 Kings 4:1-7

A certain woman, the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets, cried out to Elisha: "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know how your servant revered GOD. And now a creditor is coming to seize my two children as slaves."

Elisha said to her, "What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house?" She replied, "Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house, except a jug of oil."

"Go," he said, "and borrow vessels outside, from all your neighbors, empty vessels, as many as you can. Then go in and shut the door behind you and your children, and pour oil into all those vessels, removing each one as it is filled."

She went away and shut the door behind her and her children. They kept bringing vessels to her and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, "Bring me another vessel." He answered her, "There are no more vessels"; and the oil stopped. She came and told the agent of God, and he said, "Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest."

Discussion

I hear echoes of the woman who brought oil to anoint Jesus.

Right! Folks might be familiar with the passage from Matthew 26 that Rev. Liz has written so much about.

The story tells about an unnamed woman who anoints Jesus with expensive oil. The disciples around Jesus are shocked at what they perceive to be wastefulness.

Rev. Liz's book, "Always With Us: what Jesus really said about the poor," takes on this very misused and abused line of Jesus' that says the poor will always be with us. In the Matthew version of the story they are at the house of Simon, the leper, and this woman comes and pours this very valuable oil on Jesus and anoints him for burial and there is also this association with him being anointed as a king. The disciples get mad because they think it was a waste of resources that could have been used to help the poor, but Jesus rebukes them and says this is an amazing thing that she has done. He goes on to say that wherever people are continuing this movement they are going to remember and talk about this moment and what she did for us and for our movement. It is a critique of charity. Jesus' call is to build a movement not just tinker on the edges of alleviating poverty, but to abolish it entirely.

Elisha and Projects of Survival

In this story about Elisha he is with somebody who is in crisis, which indicates very clearly where the prophets were rooted. They are with the poor in their struggle against the creditors, against the usurers and money lenders and their backers, and against the palaces and temples. In this story the woman's husband, who was part of the struggle, has died and she has had to take on debts and survival loans to be able to live while being part of this movement. Part of this meant putting up members of your family as collateral. If you're not able to pay your debt, creditors will take your children or your dependents and put them into forced labor until your debts are paid off. The whole purpose of these loans was not to get interest payments, they knew they wouldn't get those, it was more to get control of somebody's labor or land. In the story the woman is pleading with Elisha saying that these creditors are going to come and take her children and Elisha's response is to find this solution, this hustle, where she can sell oil and make ends meet. This is not charity in a narrow sense. This is more about finding ways to sustain a movement and to sustain the people who are leaders in a movement. There is a strong connection and contrast between this story in 2 Kings where Elisha is encouraging a widow in crisis to sell this oil for money to pay off debts and to care for the family versus Jesus' rebuking of the disciples for wanting to sell the oil instead of using it to anoint and sanctify a movement.

Discussion

It is almost like the neighbors were crowdfunding, bringing the woman empty vessels to fill up the oil.

Yeah, and it could have been that the vessels they brought weren't empty.

There also seems to be a similarity with the story of the loaves and fishes in the New Testament. The woman seems to pour out much more oil than she actually had, judging by the description of the vessel. It's like the oil just keeps on coming until she has enough to sell to pay off her debt. A lot of people, certainly Christians, think the prophets just sat around predicting the future, but they were also strategizing ways for their people to survive and to build a movement.

This story of the oil also reminds me of a parable that Jesus tells about a woman waiting for a bridegroom to arrive for a wedding. Each of these women have carried oil in their lamps

because it's nighttime, and five of the women run out of oil and ask to borrow from the other five women. The five women who have enough oil to last through the night tell the others they don't have any to share and that they should go into town and get more. Those women leave and while they're gone the bridegroom arrives. The women who had enough oil go into the wedding, but the ones who come back later are shut out because they didn't have enough oil. I'm not sure what the oil signifies, but clearly it's got some kind of meaning beyond just physical oil.

We will talk a little bit about the economic and social significance of oil, at least in the 8th century context, a little later, maybe that can help shed some light on this.

In this next story they are on the road, hungry because they don't have anything to eat, and they decide to go and forage, but end up accidentally putting some poisonous gourds into their camp meal. Elisha magically fixes it by throwing some flour into it. This and others like it have the feel of popular folk tales that tell of survival under these extremely difficult conditions.

2 Kings 4:42-44

A man came from Baal-shalishah and he brought the agent of God some bread of the first reaping—twenty loaves of barley bread, and some fresh grain in his sack. And [Elisha] said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.”

His attendant replied, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” But he said, “Give it to the people and let them eat. For thus said GOD: They shall eat and have some left over.” So he set it before them; and when they had eaten, they had some left over, as GOD had said.

Discussion

We can see the obvious parallels with the loaves and fishes story here. And I think we should read it in a similar way to how we read that story, that people are just kind of digging in their pockets for what they had to share and that's how there's a miracle, that's why it turned out to be enough for everyone.

In our history we have been really good at thanking the “sky grandpa” (God) instead of recognizing the power of the people to be able to do all of these “miracles.” In these Christian Nationalist spaces there is an assertion that Jesus was the only one that did any of this stuff. I don't think many people even recognize how many of these kinds of stories are in the Old Testament (Hebrew Scriptures).

In reading this story I am thinking about scarcity and abundance. It wasn't just that people's needs were met, there was more than enough. It resonates for me with the New Testament

stories of Jesus when people are coming to hear him and the disciples want to send him away and Jesus says no we're going to keep teaching and feed them with what we've got. We all work together, there's more than enough for everyone, and yet we are constantly told this story of scarcity. That story of scarcity comes from those who actually have so much.

In the movement over the last few years we've been talking a lot about the Jesus movement and the way that Jesus is organizing poor people and organizing against oppression. It is wonderful to see how the stories that have been preserved about Jesus are directly connected to stories that go back into the history of the people that he comes from.

In these stories there is a direct appeal to the authority and presence of God *in the world*, as opposed to the powers in the temples and palaces. It is very important to be clear who is the agent of God. It is not those who most loudly claim to be, like the priests. It is not the sycophantic false prophets who also claim this agency.

Scarcity and abundance

At this time the oil, which we read about in the first story, and the grain from this second story, were both under immense pressure to be turned into commodities. The Temple and Palace elites were trying to concentrate these resources as part of their tribute and exchange system with the ruling class of other neighboring societies. They would use this wealth to acquire luxury goods and weapons and other things to help maintain their power. These stories of Elisha and Elijah are about the people transforming these products of the land back into means of survival and as a means of organizing the poor. This helps to resist the idea of false scarcity that emerges through the process of taxation and tribute and land concentration and gives a sharp political edge to these survival programs and projects.

First Fruits Offering

In this story from 2 Kings 4:42-44 it describes a man who just shows up with what he has and offers it to help others out. It says specifically that he had some bread of the "first reaping." This is significant for a couple of reasons. In part because during Passover. The Passover tradition likely emerges from an agricultural festival celebrating the beginning of the first barley harvest. Part of the tradition included a first fruits offering where the people take a bunch of the first of their harvest and bring it to the temple and give it to the priest as a tithe. It is really significant that in this story instead of taking that grain and giving it to the temple authorities of the period this man brings it to where God actually is among this movement of the poor to feed and sustain it. **In unjust societies survival is made illegal in all kinds of ways.**

Social and Economic Conditions of 8th Century Israel

Peasants, Prophets, and Political Economy - Marvin Chaney

Eighth-century Israel and Judah saw an increase in international trade, in which their leaders imported luxury goods, military *materiel*, and the whereiwthal of monumental architecture. To pay for these imports, foodstuffs - particularly the triad of wheat, olive oil, and wine - were exported. Imports mostly benefited an elite minority, while the exports necessary to procure them cut deeply into the subsistence of the peasant majority...Villagers' traditional priorities for the long-term sufficiency of mixed, subsistence agriculture and its penchant for risk spreading were overwhelmed by these pressures, and land consolidation proceeded apace

Peasants, Prophets, and Political Economy - Marvin Chaney

Many peasants were left no alternative to survival loans at de facto interest rates usurious by any standards. Foreclosure upon family land and family members pledged as collateral was often at the discretion of the creditor. The courts of law called upon to process such foreclosure proceedings increasingly came under the control of the urban elites who had initiated the agricultural intensification. These courts gave a facade of legality to foreclosures regarded as illegal by most peasants and their prophetic defenders. The prophets declared that actions by Yahweh's court of last resort had vindicated the poor peasants' cause and had found the urban elites guilty...

The argument that Chaney makes, which is backed up by the archeological scholarship, is that the middle of the 8th Century BCE is a high point of power for both the Northern Kingdom (Israel) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). This included a centrally directed drive towards agricultural intensification, which involved raising taxes and mandated tribute. It involved trying to consolidate land into fewer and fewer hands to have larger plantations and it also involved this effort to create specialization in agricultural production. Traditionally peasant communities would be growing a little bit of everything. They would have some flocks of different types of cattle and other animals and would be growing various things. It was a resilient mixed system, but it was highly inefficient. It wasn't maximizing what could be produced. Instead they would produce whatever they could in each individual micro climate. Up in the hills or down in the plains or wherever it was best suited to grow. They might have few trees for olive oil, some vines

for wine, a little bit of wheat, some sheep and goats, and everything was just all over. The drive toward specialization meant that instead you started to have these giant wine presses and vast areas designated for grape vines or huge wheat fields.

This created widespread dispossession, foreclosure and debt but it is written about as a golden age for these kingdoms when they were at the height of their power and prosperity. In reality that wealth and power was built on and meant the continuation and growth of widespread poverty, immiseration and dislocation for the vast majority of the population. People were subjected to intense violence and economic pressures, including forced labor and situations where people were working land that had been their family's for generations, but now they were paid a shitty little wage to work it for someone else. The whole order was being blessed by the temples in Jerusalem by these groups of priests and prophets around them. Marvin Chaney's argument is that if you're trying to understand Amos and Micah and Hosea and Isaiah you've got to understand that this is the context that they're responding to. They are judging and denouncing the ruling classes of these societies. It isn't some just a general moralizing about how societies have become corrupted and immoral and people aren't doing right. It is this particular set of practices by the ruling class of these particular societies. The reality is that the whole society suffers because of these unjust practices and these policies that put society on the edge of disaster. They leave it extremely fragile, which leads to war and international entanglements where everybody suffers. These judgment oracles are not just about how the ruling class is going to get theirs. That's not the truth of how things happen historically. Everybody, and especially the poor, suffer in those scenarios. However, in the destruction and downfall of those societies, in their crumbling under the weight of their own injustice, there is a possibility for renewal from the bottom. One can discern a kind of Biblical theory of social change that traces back to the plagues tradition, which was what finally allowed the Israelites to grow free from slavery in Egypt. And this goes all the way up through the prophetic tradition.

Discussion

I want to point out that this is exactly what Thomas Jefferson and William Henry Harrison did to Native Americans up until and beyond the war of 1812. They wanted Native Americans to start growing things even though many tribes believed it to be blasphemous. It ended up creating a situation where they had to buy from a company store. On top of it they were introduced to and sold alcohol, which only intensified the indebtedness and misery of the people.

I see a parallel here to a story in the New Testament about Jesus and people fishing the Sea of Galilee. Not too long ago they discovered a fishing boat from the Sea of Galilee. It was the first of its kind to be discovered and apparently it was just barely hanging on. It had all kinds of different wood and patches on it and it looks like it was likely sunk when it just couldn't be repaired anymore. Finding this boat helped support and clarify how hard it was for small subsistence fishermen at that time. Antipas, the Roman client ruler of the region around Galilee decided to move his capital to the shores of the sea of Galilee and start commercializing the fishing. The idea was that it would increase the tax base and overall wealth and thereby improve his favor with Rome and power in the region. It meant that formerly independent subsistence fishermen with these barely hanging on boats were taxed on their boats and their catch and

made even more indebted and dependent on the elite. This seems very similar to the stories from prophets. One can also understand why Jesus was there organizing and why people were so ready to throw down their fishing nets and join the movement.

This reminds me of when Elijah recruits Elisha. Elisha is out driving a bunch of oxen and Elijah says you should come with me and with no hesitation Elisha agrees. He abandons the equipment and just says bye to his parents and takes off.

I hope that this all is helpful context reading Amos, Micah, Hoseah, Isaiah or really all the other prophets in their tradition. These prophetic voices aren't just bland general calls for people to be nice to each other. There is a specific context of intensifying class struggle and conflict and an attempt by a ruling class of the period to really deepen and expand their control over the rest of the society, over people's bodies, over labor, over wealth, over natural produce. They wanted to break apart traditional ways that people organize themselves in this harsh, hostile environment, and instead devote everything to the to the production of wealth for a tiny few,

Amos 8

We're going to take a quick detour to Amos 8. Amos is one of the 8th century prophets, but to get there we'll first talk about the Sabbath by looking at this text from Exodus.

Exodus 20

God spoke all these words, saying:

I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage...

...Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements.

For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

There are a couple of things to point out here. Of course, this is one of the texts where we get the 10 Commandments. It takes place on Sinai. Shabbat is one of the commandments. In a future study we can spend more time talking about the social nature of the 10 commandments and how they are used as part of a denunciation of an unjust ruling class. Here I more wanted to flag how this is one instance where God introduces Godself as, “the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.” That is God’s full name. We can't

understand anything that God says, or know God, without understanding the fact that where the Israelites found God was in the struggle for freedom and in the struggle against Pharaoh and palaces and temples. In these actions and these struggles that is where this particular God comes into being. That is the starting point for understanding everything God says and does and commands. It is how we should understand Sabbath. Here, in Exodus, the explanation for the Sabbath is around the creation story. In Deuteronomy (below), the explanation for the Sabbath is around this experience of struggle against Pharaoh and against forced labor in all of its manifestations.

Deuteronomy 5

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.

Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath of your the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your ass, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do.

Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

It is tied to the idea that the society we are building is a society where nobody has the right to work anybody else to death. This is the basic proposition of the Sabbath. The society that we're building is a society where people can't be compelled to work to make somebody else rich. It reinforces the belief that we must not recreate the society that we struggled to tear down and replace with something better and kinder and more humane and more divine. Sabbath legislation is to set up as a barrier against reaction and against counter-revolution of that kind.

Amos 8 (~750 BCE)

Listen to this, you who on every new moon devour the needy, and on every sabbath the humble of the land, saying, "If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale...tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals."

God swears by the Pride of Jacob: "I will never forget any of their doings."

Here in Amos we read how the Sabbath is not a set of narrow prohibitions or attempts to shame people for working every day. The Sabbath very clearly exists to limit the power and the privilege of the wealthy, of the ruling class. The violation of the Sabbath here is linked to all of these violations of God's social program and vision. Amos specifically links compelling people to work all week long and all day long, and the treatment of wheat and other material sources of survival as just a means to make profit. Amos also connects sabbath to this perversion of courts and the tilting of they scales - not paying people essentially a fair wage. The reference to, "buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals," is a direct reference to dispossession via bad loans, essentially predatory loans.

These texts help distill some of the fundamental criticisms and demands of the prophets and the prophetic movement of the 8th century just kind of all in one place. It helps us see Sabbath in a new light. Not as this narrow prohibition for working, but as a key to understanding the whole way that God calls on society to be organized and reorganized.

What is meant by the specific phrase, "the humble of the land"? I remember there's a few places in Leviticus, Joshua, Second Chronicles, that all make explicit references to the land needing to be paid a Sabbath or else she's going to come get it herself. In Joshua 11 there's this reference to how at the end of war the land lays in desolation and the text says that until she was paid back all the Sabbaths that you stole from her it would remain that way.

The phrase, "humble of the land" is a way of referring to the poor and poverty. It has its root in the Hebrew word for bowing down or being afflicted, or pressed down, almost as if your face is literally pressed into the dirt. This is similar to the Greek words for the poor in the New Testament, which has this sense of one who has been put in a position of poverty, somebody who's been impoverished.

The link between Sabbath for people and Sabbath for the land is really powerful. It offers a way to think about the relationship between class struggle and ecological catastrophe. This idea shows up in Deuteronomy in the discussion of the Shemitah year and how every seventh year

you let the land rest. In periods of intense production of agricultural goods as commodities to be exported and sold as a profit there is a drive to exhaust and use up the fertility of the soil. We know that if you plant the same crop year after year in the same place without any break or rest you're going to literally exhaust the soil and you won't be able to grow anything. There's a prophetic judgment coming here that says if you're organizing your society around this endless exploitation of human beings and of the land then you've just created a fundamentally weak and fragile society that's ripe for destruction at any moment.

The Sabbath - Abraham Joshua Heschel

To the biblical mind...labor is the means toward an end, and the Sabbath as a day of rest, as a day of abstaining from toil, is not for the purpose of recovering one's lost strength and becoming fit for the forthcoming labor. The Sabbath is a day for the sake of life. Man is not a beast of burden, and the Sabbath is not for the purpose of enhancing the efficiency of his work. "Last in creation, first in intention," the Sabbath is "the end of the creation of heaven and earth." **The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of the Sabbath.**

This passage helps understand two fundamentally different visions of how to organize society. The way the prophets talk about the Sabbath and violations of the of the Sabbath, or the way that Isaiah talks about the Yom Kippur fast, contrast with the religious hypocrisy that view Shabbat as this short little break required so that you can get back to work for the rest of the week producing wealth for somebody else. The idea of Sabbath is that we work together to produce the good things of this world for each other, and we have time then set aside just to enjoy those things together. **The purpose of work is for people to live and rest. It is not that the purpose of rest is to help people get back to work.** The prophets are kind of denouncing an approach to society and social life that is all about agricultural intensification and production of commodities and of wealth for a small few.

Isaiah

Isaiah 5:8-10

Ah,
Those who add house to house
And join field to field,
Till there is room for none but you
To dwell in the land!
In my hearing [said] GOD of Hosts:
Surely, great houses
Shall lie forlorn,
Spacious and splendid ones
Without occupants.
For ten acres of vineyard
Shall yield just one bath,
And a field sown with a homer of seed
Shall yield a mere ephah.

I really love this passage from Isaiah. I use it all the time in the context of the housing crisis that the poor are living through today. When you have private equity companies buying up single family homes and building up apartment buildings and turning them into pure means of profit-making, as part of an asset portfolio, and giving no regard to the existence of these as potential homes for human beings. This passage I think speaks so clearly to this kind of injustice.

I also want to draw attention to the piece at the end, (I take this from Marvin Chaney's book) "For 10 acres of vineyard you will yield one bath, and for a field sown with a homer of seed, shall yield a mere ephah." The word for an "acre" and the word for a "homer of seed" are both conventional measures. An acre is the amount of land that you could do some work on over the course of a day. The homer of seed is literally just an "ass-load." It's how much stuff you could put on your donkey. The "bath" and the "ephah" are standardized units of measurement for packing up commodities for sale and export. What is being said at the end of this passage from Isaiah is that because you have compelled the destruction of the traditional, resilient, subsistent and communal mode of life and of managing the land, and because instead you have compelled everybody to produce the things we need to survive as commodities for trade and export and profit, this is going to lead to the downfall of this society. You are creating a false scarcity for the poor and that is going to lead to a social crisis, which will create scarcity for everybody. On top of that you're going to exhaust the soil and then all of these fields that you have been using and exploiting will withhold their produce. This will all happen as a result of the injustice of what you've been doing; as a result of the illegal foreclosures that you've been carrying out; as a result of the predatory lending that you've been doing. All of the wealth that you accumulated over that period isn't going to protect you from anything of what's coming in God's judgment.

This takes us to another favorite line from Isaiah, from the first chapter of Isaiah.

Isaiah 1:31

Stored wealth shall become as tow,
And he who amassed it a spark;
And the two shall burn together,
With none to quench.

I think this is a really amazing and true and beautiful way of describing what happens when you have a small few in society hoarding and accumulating all of the wealth and insisting on an endless exploitation of people and of the land. What happens is that all of this wealth that they stored up and they thought was going to serve them well, is actually leading them and the whole society to ruin, and not just ruin, but to the potential for fundamental change and transformation. We see this in lots of ways today. In the way that we have this endless piling up of excess wealth that the ruling class just doesn't totally know what to do with. This leads to a deep economic crisis for most of us and, thankfully, it ultimately leads to a crisis for the ruling class as well.

This passage from Isaiah is a very direct and clear understanding of what idolatry is and means.

Isaiah 2:7-9

Their land is full of silver and gold,
There is no limit to their treasures;
Their land is full of horses,
There is no limit to their chariots.
And their land is full of idols;
They bow down to the work of their hands,
To what their own fingers have wrought.
But human shall be humbled,
And mortal brought low—
Oh, do not forgive them

There's no limit to their treasures. Their land is full of horses...

One of the ways that I think you see this show up today is in how the economy is treated as some kind of force out there in the world that we have no control over. There's a bowing down and a worshipping, not just of wealth, but of economics as some mystified science. They hide behind these theories and claim that we aren't able to end poverty today because it would cause inflation or something. When really these theories amount to not fundamentally understanding that the economy is a product of the work of our own hands. We can take hold of it with those hands and transform it into something that serves everybody, and not just a few.

This next one is from the first chapter of Isaiah...

Isaiah 1:11-17

"What need have I of all your sacrifices?"

Says GOD.

"I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,

And suet of fatlings,

And blood of bulls;

And I have no delight

In lambs and he-goats.

That you come to appear before Me—

Who asked that of you?

Trample My courts

no more;

Bringing oblations is futile,

Incense is offensive to Me.

New moon and sabbath,

Proclaiming of solemnities,

Assemblies with iniquity

I cannot abide

Your new moons and fixed seasons

Fill Me with loathing;

Here again we have bold criticism of religious hypocrisy, and specifically of the crimes which the priests of that day and the temples of that day were complicit in and carrying out. It is a rejection of the false piety and solemnities that are being carried out by an institution that is directly tied to mass dispossession and impoverishment.

2 Kings 4:1-7

A certain woman, the wife of one of the disciples of the prophets, cried out to Elisha: “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know how your servant revered GOD. And now a creditor is coming to seize my two children as slaves.”

Elisha said to her, “What can I do for you? Tell me, what have you in the house?” She replied, “Your maidservant has nothing at all in the house, except a jug of oil.”

“Go,” he said, “and borrow vessels outside, from all your neighbors, empty vessels, as many as you can. Then go in and shut the door behind you and your children, and pour oil into all those vessels, removing each one as it is filled.”

She went away and shut the door behind her and her children. They kept bringing vessels to her and she kept pouring. When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” He answered her, “There are no more vessels”; and the oil stopped.

She came and told the agent of God, and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debt, and you and your children can live on the rest.”

2 Kings 4:42-44

A man came from Baal-shalishah and he brought the agent of God some bread of the first reaping—twenty loaves of barley bread, and some fresh grain in his sack. And [Elisha] said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.”

His attendant replied, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” But he said, “Give it to the people and let them eat. For thus said GOD: They shall eat and have some left over.” So he set it before them; and when they had eaten, they had some left over, as GOD had said.

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Peasants, Prophets, and Political Economy - Marvin Chaney

Eighth-century Israel and Judah saw an increase in international trade, in which their leaders imported luxury goods, military *materiel*, and the wherewithal of monumental architecture. To pay for these imports, foodstuffs - particularly the triad of wheat, olive oil, and wine - were exported. Imports mostly benefited an elite minority, while the exports necessary to procure them cut deeply into the subsistence of the peasant majority...Villagers' traditional priorities for the long-term sufficiency of mixed, subsistence agriculture and its penchant for risk spreading were overwhelmed by these pressures, and land consolidation proceeded apace

Peasants, Prophets, and Political Economy - Marvin Chaney

Many peasants were left no alternative to survival loans at de facto interest rates usurious by any standards. Foreclosure upon family land and family members pledged as collateral was often at the discretion of the creditor. The courts of law called upon to process such foreclosure proceedings increasingly came under the control of the urban elites who had initiated the agricultural intensification. These courts gave a facade of legality to foreclosures regarded as illegal by most peasants and their prophetic defenders. The prophets declared that actions by Yahweh's court of last resort had vindicated the poor peasants' cause and had found the urban elites guilty...

Exodus 20

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For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea—and all that is in them—and then rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

Deuteronomy 5

Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you.

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Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the LORD your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the sabbath day.

Amos 8 (~750 BCE)

Listen to this, you who on every new moon devour the needy, and on every sabbath the humble of the land, saying, “If only the new moon were over, so that we could sell grain; the sabbath, so that we could offer wheat for sale...tilting a dishonest scale, and selling grain refuse as grain! We will buy the poor for silver, the needy for a pair of sandals.”

God swears by the Pride of Jacob: “I will never forget any of their doings.”

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Amos 2:6-13

...I will not revoke the decree:
Because they have sold for silver
Those whose cause was just,
And the needy for a pair of sandals.
You who trample the heads of the poor
Into the dust of the ground,
And make the humble walk a twisted course!
Father and son go to the same woman,
And thereby profane My holy name.
They recline by every altar
On garments taken in pledge,
And drink in the House of their God
Wine bought with fines they imposed.

Amos 2:6-13

Yet I

Destroyed the Amorite before them,
Whose stature was like the cedar's
And who was stout as the oak,
Destroying his boughs above
And his trunk below!

And I brought you up from the land of Egypt
And led you through the wilderness forty years,
To possess the land of the Amorite!
And I raised up prophets from among your sons
And nazirites from among your young men.
Is that not so, O people of Israel?
—says GOD.

But you made the nazirites drink wine
And ordered the prophets not to prophesy.
Ah, I will slow your movements
As a wagon is slowed
When it is full of cut grain.

Amos 5:10-12

They hate the arbiter in the gate,
And detest the one whose plea is just.
Assuredly,
Because you impose a tax on the poor
And exact from them a levy of grain,
You have built houses of hewn stone,
But you shall not live in them;
You have planted delightful vineyards,
But shall not drink their wine.
For I have noted how many are your crimes,
And how countless your sins—
You enemies of the righteous,
You takers of bribes,
You who subvert in the gate
The cause of the needy!

Amos 5:21-25

I loathe, I spurn your festivals,
I am not appeased by your solemn assemblies.
If you offer Me burnt offerings—or your grain offerings—
I will not accept them;
I will pay no heed
To your gifts of fatlings.
Spare Me the sound of your hymns,
And let Me not hear the music of your lutes.
But let justice well up like water,
Righteousness like an unfailing stream.
Did you offer sacrifice and oblation to Me
Those forty years in the wilderness,
O House of Israel?

Micah 2:1-2

Ah, those who plan iniquity
And design evil on their beds;
When morning dawns, they do it,
For they have the power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
Houses, and take them away.
They defraud men of their homes,
And people of their land.

Micah 3:1-5

I said:

Listen, you rulers of Jacob,

You chiefs of the House of Israel!

For you ought to know what is right,

But you hate good and love evil.

You have devoured My people's flesh;

You have flayed the skin off them,

And their flesh off their bones.

And after tearing their skins off them,

And their flesh off their bones,

And breaking their bones to bits,

You have cut it up as into a pot,

Like meat in a cauldron.

Micah 3:1-5

Someday they shall cry out to GOD,
But they will not be answered;
At that time the divine face will be hidden,
In accordance with the wrongs they have done.
Thus said GOD to the prophets
Who lead My people astray,
Who cry “Peace!”
When they have something to chew,
But launch a war on those
Who fail to fill their mouths:

Isaiah 1:11-17

“What need have I of all your sacrifices?”

Says GOD.

“I am sated with burnt offerings of rams,

And suet of fatlings,

And blood of bulls;

And I have no delight

In lambs and he-goats.

That you come to appear before Me—

Who asked that of you?

Trample My courts

no more;

Bringing oblations is futile,

Incense is offensive to Me.

New moon and sabbath,

Proclaiming of solemnities,

Assemblies with iniquity

I cannot abide

Your new moons and fixed seasons

Fill Me with loathing;

Isaiah 1:11-17

They are become a burden to Me,
I cannot endure them.

And when you lift up your hands,
I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.

Your hands are stained with crime—

Wash yourselves clean;

Put your evil doings
Away from My sight.

Cease to do evil;

Learn to do good.

Devote yourselves to justice;

Aid the wronged.

Uphold the rights of the orphan;

Defend the cause of the widow.

Isaiah 1:31

Stored wealth shall become as tow,
And he who amassed it a spark;
And the two shall burn together,
With none to quench.

Isaiah 2:7-9

Their land is full of silver and gold,
There is no limit to their treasures;
Their land is full of horses,
There is no limit to their chariots.
And their land is full of idols;
They bow down to the work of their hands,
To what their own fingers have wrought.
But human shall be humbled,
And mortal brought low—
Oh, do not forgive them

Isaiah 3:14-15

GOD will bring this charge

Against the elders and officers of this covenanted people:

“It is you who have ravaged the vineyard;

That which was robbed from the poor is in your houses.

How dare you crush My people

And grind the faces of the poor?”

—says my Sovereign GOD of Hosts.

Isaiah 5:8-10

Ah,
Those who add house to house
And join field to field,
Till there is room for none but you
To dwell in the land!
In my hearing [said] GOD of Hosts:
Surely, great houses
Shall lie forlorn,
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