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Prophecy and International Politics



Abstract: This article focuses on the tension between kings and prophets with regard to what we now call “foreign policy.” The kings favored a policy based on prudence and calculation, while the prophets (most crucially Isaiah) argued that only faith in God was necessary and that any reliance on human means was a form of idolatry. I claim that the prophetic argument, which is antipolitical, is dominant in the Hebrew Bible.

I will try in this paper to describe three moments in the biblical discussion of war: the moment of kingship, the moment of empire, and the antipolitical moment—or the moment of silence. The first two come in chronological order; the third we might think of as a reiterated moment in the discourse of ancient Israel.

1. KINGSHIP

When the elders come to Samuel to ask for a king, they are concerned, above all, with the military threat from the Midianites and Philistines. They want a king who will “go out before us and fight our battles”¹—a strong warrior-king capable of defending their lives and their homes. Once he is established, this king will, of course, claim divine support, saying of God that

He teacheth my hand to war... a bow of steel is broken by mine arms.²

¹ I Samuel 8:20. I have used the King James translation throughout, for no reason other than the beauty of its English.

² Psalms 18:34.

At the same time, the king will seek the counsel of wise men who know something about affairs of state, and he will organize an army—or find generals like Abner and Joab to teach his (mostly hired) hands to fight.

Kingship was a form of self-reliance, and so it was a secular political regime. It constituted the state as the agent of its own destiny, or it put the state into the hands of its own agents—kings, counselors, ambassadors, soldiers. Everything depended on their insight and skill. *Almost* everything, at any rate, since prophets were sometimes consulted before Israel went to war to learn if God looked favorably on the battle plan. I don't think that Gerhard von Rad is right to claim that Israel under the monarchy had "written off" God as the determining force of its future³—though that is God's own suggestion, when he tells Samuel in I Samuel 8:7: "it is me they have rejected as their king." Saul and David and their successors certainly thought of themselves as God's allies, if not his adopted sons (as they are described in the royal psalms). But, at the same time, they made room for their own determinations.

And so long as the Israelite kingdoms were surrounded by kingdoms of roughly the same sort, with similar populations and resources, the politics of self-reliance worked fairly well. There were strong kings and weak kings, military victories and defeats, good treaties and bad treaties. The Deuteronomic historians regard all this as the product of divine reward and punishment, but it seems likely that the kings and their advisers had another, not implausible view: this was their own work. Though this latter view is never fully articulated in the biblical books, we need to assume its existence if we are to understand the great transformation wrought by the literary prophets.

Actually, it was the warrior-kings of Mesopotamia who brought about the material transformation of the world, for which the prophets provided a religious explanation. The Assyrian and Babylonian empires made Israelite kingship obsolete; self-reliance suddenly became a very dangerous business. No doubt, there were still important decisions to be made: to seek alliances with this or that imperial power, to resist an advancing army for as long as possible or surrender as soon as possible, to bargain for a greater or lesser tribute. But the time and space for maneuver were now determined, mostly, not in Samaria or Jerusalem but in capital cities far to the east. And the odds on any local determination's succeeding were not very good. Israel's fate was largely out of its hands.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, trans. D.M.G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 150–151.

2. EMPIRE

Whose hands, then, was it in? The prophets insist that Israel's fate, as always, is in God's hands. Once this was a merely local claim:

And the children of Israel did evil in the sight of the Lord. And the Lord delivered them into the hand of Midian seven years.⁴

Now, in an age of empire, the prophets describe God as a global ruler, controlling the entire course of international politics. He still uses other nations as the instruments of Israel's punishment, but now he enters into a steadily closer relationship with them. The king of Assyria is the "rod" of God's anger;⁵ the king of Babylon is God's "servant";⁶ the king of the Persians is his "shepherd" and even his "anointed."⁷

God's sovereignty now extends to the whole of world history, but the nature of this sovereignty isn't clear. God is a lawgiver to Israel, but none of the prophets describes him in a legislative role vis-à-vis any other nation. With regard to the others, he is first of all a judge and then the executive enforcer of his own decisions.

For the Lord hath a controversy with the nations; he will plead with all flesh.⁸

The Hebrew word translated here as "controversy" (*riv*) commonly implies litigation, and litigation takes place against a background of law. Israel's law is provided by the Sinai covenant; hence, God's "controversies" with Israel (such as in Micah 6:1–5) are called "covenant lawsuits" by modern scholars. Is there a covenant with the nations? Or does some universal law underlie God's judgments of their behavior? It appears that Israel's covenant is unique. But God's original judgment of the nations, manifest in the flood, suggests that there is indeed a universal law, though we are never told when it was revealed or how it is to be known (the rabbis later invented the Noahide code to deal with these questions). In any case, the nations are judged harshly, and not only for their crimes against Israel. The prophet Nahum pictures the whole world celebrating God's

⁴ Judges 6:1–2.

⁵ Isaiah 10:5.

⁶ Jeremiah 27:6–7.

⁷ Isaiah 44:28, 45:1.

⁸ Jeremiah 25:31.

destruction of the Assyrians—“for upon whom hath not [their] wickedness passed continually?”⁹

God is a universal judge. He judges the nations without their knowledge or consent, but Isaiah imagines a future age when they will come willingly to receive his judgments. The vision of Isaiah 2 (“and they shall beat their swords into plowshares”), probably the best known of prophetic texts, is read mostly as an expression of messianic hope. But it is also a first account, not wholly fantastic, of post-imperial international politics. The prophet envisages a federation of independent peoples, united only by their recognition of divine sovereignty. Though the law goes forth from Zion, there is no hint of Israelite political triumph, no new empire except the empire of God, who “shall judge among the nations.”¹⁰

The idea of a God in total control of world history opens the way for universalist visions of this sort. It doesn’t sever the connection between God and Israel, but it does lead the prophets to imagine additional connections. Indeed, there have to be such connections, since Israel, though central to the vision, is in no sense the agent of its realization. The federation of peoples who gather for judgment in Jerusalem is the end product of what can only be called a divine intention. It isn’t the result of a political program that Israel or anyone else has adopted.

What exactly is God’s intention? It seems that he wants what he has wanted ever since he confronted Pharaoh in Egypt: that the whole world see his power displayed, understand its awfulness, and accept his sovereignty. The prophets are certain that God will eventually get what he wants, fulfilling himself, as it were, in world history. He achieves universal recognition and obedience by subduing all the other rulers. A sovereign God “bringeth the princes to nothing,”¹¹ so that all of them, in the end, accept him as their sole judge.

The prophets do not believe that Israel is in any sense a political agent acting on its own or at God’s command among the nations. We find in the prophetic writings the first hints of an alternative conception: that Israel is a victim nation, always at the wrong end of someone else’s agency. And this victimization is politically managed by God himself, which makes an autonomous political response very hard to imagine. God’s “is the hand that is stretched out upon all the nations”¹²—and above all upon Israel. Even when it is stretched out not directly but only mediately,

⁹ Nahum 3:19.

¹⁰ Isaiah 2:4.

¹¹ Isaiah 40:23.

¹² Isaiah 14:26.

in the form of Assyrian or Babylonian armies, the resistance of Israel's kings seems morally and militarily senseless. These armies come at God's instance, though they attack Jerusalem itself, where his house stands and his anointed rules.

The point is difficult: The Assyrians and Babylonians are indeed sent by God; their world-historical role is written out by him. And yet, at the same time, they have their own willfulness; they come up against Israel freely. So Isaiah can say of Assyria that it is the "rod" of God's anger:

I do send him against a hypocritical nation.¹³

But he adds immediately that the king of Assyria does not know he has been sent:

Howbeit he meaneth not so; neither doth his heart think so; but it is in his heart to destroy, and to cut off nations not a few.¹⁴

And so the Assyrians, once they have served God's purposes by punishing Israel, will themselves be punished.

Why will they be punished? What is wrong with destroying nations that God wants destroyed? I have already suggested that Assyria never made a covenant with God, and we have no record of its reception of divine law. But if that is so, how can the Assyrians know that their conquests are wrong? As the rabbis would say, when were they warned? The prophets do not explicitly pose questions of this sort; perhaps they have in mind some version of a natural law doctrine that might provide answers. But the texts don't suggest that it is their cruelty that makes the Assyrians wicked. God's punishments require cruelty. According to Isaiah, God not only sends the Assyrians against Israel, but also explicitly authorizes their predictable behavior:

I do send him against a hypocritical nation, and against the people of my wrath do I give him a charge, to take the spoil, and to take the prey, and to tread them down like mire of the streets.¹⁵

The only crime of the Assyrian king is to do all this as if it were his own idea, "the fruit of [his] arrogant heart":¹⁶

¹³ Isaiah 10:5.

¹⁴ Isaiah 10:7.

¹⁵ Isaiah 10:6.

¹⁶ Isaiah 10:12.

For he hath said: By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom....¹⁷

The king claims to be an agent, and in some sense he is, for he plans his own conquests. And yet it is this very claim that displays his wickedness—and also his ignorance: he is like an axe that boasts itself self-moved against the hand that moves it.¹⁸

3. SILENCE

In international politics, agency is a sin. And if it is a sin for the Assyrians, it is an even greater sin for the Israelites, who know the truth about God's awesome power and his world-historical plan. For this reason, the prophets never express admiration for Israel's warriors, diplomats, or kings. They hope, sometimes, for a grand reversal of Israel's fortunes, and the resentment of the weak is by no means absent from their visions of future time. But the triumphs they look forward to are God's; the military or political efforts of Israel's kings seem entirely irrelevant. God has no need for their work, and if they do nothing at all they will come closest to what he wants.

Do nothing: this is the prophetic idea of a religious foreign policy, and this is the prophetic challenge to the kings of Israel and Judah, who were as likely as Assyrian kings to rely on the "strength" of their hands and the "wisdom" of their counselors. Stay out of international politics, which belongs to God alone and to his instruments—who are also, mysteriously, his enemies. Only he can oppose and overthrow them, in his own good time:

Then shall the Assyrian fall with the sword, not of man (*lo ish*).¹⁹

One might say of the prophets that they make a virtue of necessity—Israel's sword will never bring the Assyrians down—but this isn't the whole story of their new doctrine. For it would be a powerful counterargument that diplomacy, alliance, and (sometimes, very cautiously) war itself are necessary means of self-defense in an age of empire. Why not make a virtue of them? But the prophets see God's hand behind the empires, so they deny the value—indeed, the very possibility—of self-defense. The Assyrians and Babylonians misunderstand their agency; Israel must not even try to be an agent.

¹⁷ Isaiah 10:13.

¹⁸ Isaiah 10:15.

¹⁹ Isaiah 31:8.

This is not an argument against some Israelite king's improbable attempt to imitate Ashurbanipal or Nebuchadnezzar. It is an argument against the actual policies of Ahaz, Hezekiah, Manasseh, Josiah, and their successors. I want to examine this argument in detail. How should Israel act (or not act) in an age of empire?

In 735 B.C.E., only thirteen years before the Assyrian destruction of Samaria and the exile of the northern tribes, a coalition of Israel and Syria "went up toward Jerusalem to war against it."²⁰ Ahaz, king of Judah, mobilized to resist the attack and sent ambassadors to Assyria, asking for help—a dangerous but not irrational request. This is the moment that Isaiah chose for his first antipolitical intervention. He urges the king to give up the mobilization and the embassy:

Take heed, and be quiet (*hashket*); fear not, neither be faint-hearted...²¹

The plan of Ahaz's enemies "shall not stand, neither shall it come to pass,"²² so long as the king has faith in God's help and seeks no other help. The prophet's words are probably meant to recall the moment at the sea when Pharaoh's army drew near, and the people fearfully gathered around Moses (hence my claim that the moment of silence doesn't come at a particular time in Israel's history but is reiterated across time):

And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.²³

"Be quiet," "stand still"—the message is the same, and in both cases it represents a radical denial of the doctrine of self-help.

Commentators on Isaiah sometimes praise the prophet's shrewdness, as if political circumstances dictated his words. His arguments, say these commentators, were driven not only by religion but also by prudence and calculation. "Isaiah's main concern," writes Joseph Blenkinsopp, "was to dissuade the young king [Hezekiah; see below] from being drawn into an anti-Assyrian alliance that would predictably lead to disaster." Norman Gottwald is a little more cautious: Isaiah's advice to the king, he argues, was not "a narrowly religious judgment... [he] believed that what was religious requisite was also politically practical." The prophet was one

²⁰ Isaiah 7:1.

²¹ Isaiah 7:4.

²² Isaiah 7:7.

²³ Exodus 14:13.

more royal counselor, wiser than the others.²⁴ But we hardly know enough to make judgments of this sort. We cannot say what was in Ahaz's mind when he declined to "be quiet" or in Hezekiah's mind when he joined the alliance against Assyria. No doubt, they made their own calculations. Why should we assume that Isaiah was politically shrewder? It seems likely that his advice, as Weber argues, "was determined by purely religious motives"²⁵—which made prudence irrelevant. Indeed, Isaiah gives the same advice to successive kings, reiterating his views in different circumstances, taking no notice of the differences.

The most dramatic moment came in 701, when the Assyrian army was on the march, destroying the cities of Judea, nearing Jerusalem. King Hezekiah looked to Egypt for help, planning, as Isaiah says,

to strengthen [himself] in the strength of Pharaoh, and to trust in the shadow of Egypt.²⁶

The prophet argues against the alliance, denying the saving power of Egypt. But his denial is not based on any analysis of Egyptian strength relative to Assyrian strength. Indeed, if one counts horses and chariots, one might incline toward the Egyptians. But this would be a mistake:

Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen because they are very strong; but they look not unto the holy one of Israel, neither seek the Lord.²⁷

The Egyptians are men, not God; their horses flesh, not spirit.²⁸ For this reason the alliance should be rejected. But this is a reason for rejecting every conceivable alliance; it isn't only Egyptian horses that are made of flesh. What then should Hezekiah do?

Isaiah's argument in the year 701 is the same as it was in 735, expressed in the same words:

In sitting still and rest shall ye be saved; in quietness (*b'hashket*) and in confidence shall be your strength.²⁹

²⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (London: SPCK, 1984); p. 114; Norman Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), p. 379.

²⁵ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trans. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1952), p. 319.

²⁶ Isaiah 30:2.

²⁷ Isaiah 31:1.

²⁸ Isaiah 31:3.

²⁹ Isaiah 30:15.

Once again, *do nothing*, but what does this mean? What the prophet urges upon the king, according to Martin Buber, is “a special kind of politics, theopolitics.” This is a politics easier to explain negatively than positively; it requires the rejection of any alliance that “involves the people [Israel] in other nations’ wars of expansion.”³⁰ Thus, Buber. It doesn’t matter that these wars are planned by God; it is wrong for men to plan them and therefore wrong for Israel to associate itself with any of the imperial plans. Isaiah never quite says this, but it isn’t an entirely implausible account of his argument. *Do nothing* means at least this: do not participate in imperial politics or warfare.

But what follows from this refusal? Here is Buber’s positive account of Isaiah’s “theopolitics”:

He who has dealings with the powers renounces the power of powers... and loses its help; whereas he who confides and keeps still thereby gains the very political understanding and strength to hold his own.³¹

The expected parallelism is missing from the second clause here: he who confides and keeps still thereby gains the help of “the power of powers”—God’s help. Buber doesn’t want to assure his readers of divine help, but that is surely what Isaiah is doing. He is recommending not a new “political understanding,” but a radical withdrawal from politics:

For through the voice of the Lord shall the Assyrian be beaten down.³²

Buber’s argument is closer to that of contemporary pacifists, who claim that there is a non-standard, non-imperial, non-violent politics with which we can hold our ground. On this view, the prophet does not intend to criticize self-reliance but to give an alternative account of it—or, better, an alternative account of the “self” upon whom we can reasonably rely. The faithful Israelite is a person of inner strength, unwilling to fight but not necessarily unwilling to act politically, as in, for example, some ancient equivalent of civil disobedience. Perhaps this is also what Norman Gottwald has in mind when he says that Isaiah’s “be still” does not mean “to fold the hands and wait.”³³

³⁰ Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), p. 135.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

³² Isaiah 30:31.

³³ Norman Gottwald, *All the Kingdoms of the Earth: Israelite Prophecy and International Relations in the Ancient Near East* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1964), p. 372.

So far as foreign policy is concerned, however, that is exactly what Isaiah means, and the narrative account of the events of 701 is carefully shaped to vindicate this recommendation. It appears, indeed, that Hezekiah did not sit still but actively prepared Jerusalem for an Assyrian siege; the Siloam Tunnel that brought water into the walled city dates from this time; the king also broke down houses to fortify the walls. At the same time, according to the account in II Kings, Hezekiah negotiated with the Assyrians and paid a large tribute, stripping the gold from the Temple doors and pillars.³⁴ But these negotiations are omitted from the narrative in Isaiah, which otherwise follows II Kings closely. In the prophet's book, Hezekiah prays to God and does nothing else, and God sends a plague that destroys the Assyrian army.³⁵

A different version of the same events is suggested by the Assyrian chronicles, which describe the "reduction" of Judah. Hezekiah clearly remained a tributary, probably having negotiated a near surrender that saved his capital and kingdom. Perhaps it was the strength of Jerusalem's walls and the newly secured water supply that made the negotiations possible. But none of the prophets would have thought that foresight in preparing for a siege and diplomatic skill were things to boast about.

I imagine the elders of Israel (who asked for a king) saying that that's what kings are for; that is exactly what we want them to do; and if they do it, they can certainly boast about it. The prophets had a radically different view. These are two opposing voices in the biblical texts. A voice in defense of politics—that is, of prudence and calculation, these two embodied in the king and his counselors; and a voice against politics, describing self-help as a form of idolatry, which is represented in prophetic poetry. The second voice is greater than the first in the Bible, but never yet in the world.

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³⁴ II Kings 18:14–16.

³⁵ Isaiah 37:36.