Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy:  
Reading the Scriptures   
through the Jubilee Year of Mercy

An exchange with

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The Prophets and Mercy

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The role of the prophet in Israel and Judah

* The English word “prophet” often translates one of three Hebrew terms:
  + *ro’eh* (רֹאֶה): one who has visions; a seer
  + *hozeh* (חֹזֶה): perhaps originally, a stargazer; later, an advisor
  + *nabi’* (נָבִיא): one who speaks on behalf of another; spokesperson
* Israelite prophets were mediating figures
  + they represented God to the community
  + they represented the community to God
* They often served as advisors to (and sometimes adversaries of) the king

The Golden Age

* 8th century BCE (799-700 BCE)
* Isaiah (active ca. 740 – 680 BCE) from Jerusalem
* Hosea (*ca*. 780 – 720 BCE) from the Northern Kingdom
* Amos (active 750 BCE) from Tekoa in Judah, but prophesied in Bethel, in the Northern Kingdom
* Micah (active 737 – 696 BCE) from Moresheth, in Judah

The Silver Age

* 6th century BCE (599 – 500 BCE)
* Jeremiah
* Ezekiel
* Both prophets are priests
* Both prophets are Judahites
* Both prophets have to deal with (the threat of) the Exile

Themes in the prophetic literature

* Fidelity to Yahweh
* Concern for justice and mercy, especially to the widow and the orphan
* Opposition to idolatry

Hosea

* *ca*. 780 – 720 BCE
* From the Northern Kingdom (Israel)
* Married to Gomer, who might have been a temple prostitute, but who was certainly unfaithful to him (see Hosea 1:2-3)
* He saw in his complicated relationship with his wife a reflection of the complicated relationship between Israel and the Lord

Israel and Infidelity

* Hosea is the prophet who first equates idolatry and adultery
* In effect, he conflates the demands of the first commandment (“Have no other gods before me”) with the sixth commandment (“You shall not commit adultery”)
* But what were the temptations to idolatry in ancient Israel?

Monotheism *v*. popular religiosity in ancient Israel

* True monotheism was rare in antiquity
* A distinction must be made between “official religion” and “popular religion” in ancient Israel
* In Israel, YHWH may have been popularly regarded (merely) as a national or war deity
* In an agrarian society, fertility gods commanded the most attention from the population
* Prosperity was thought to be the result of a bargain between the believer and the fertility deity
* The farmer would engage in sexual intercourse with the temple prostitute (representing the fertility god) in order to secure fertility for his crops and flocks

Archaeological Evidence:  
*Asherah* figurines

* Such artifacts are typically made from terra cotta
* They represented a goddess of fertility
* Some inscriptions seem to speak of the *asherah* as a consort of YHWH

The *asherah* and the prophets

* 8th century prophets, including Hosea, are unrelentingly hostile to the *asherah*
* “… the guilt of Jacob will be expiated, and this will be the full fruit of the removal of his sin: when he makes all the stones of the altars like chalkstones crushed to pieces. No *asherim* or incense altars will remain standing.” (Isaiah 27:9)
* “ … I will cut off your images and your pillars from among you, and you shall bow down no more to the work of your hands; and I will uproot your *asherim* from among you and destroy your towns. And in anger and wrath I will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.” (Micah 5:13-15)

Hosea and the *hesed* that God gives

“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and in justice, in *hesed* and in compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness and you will acknowledge the Lord” (Hosea 2:20)

* Divine *hesed* in Hosea is restorative
* The mercy of God reestablishes right relationship
* The mercy of God transforms the ones who receive it

Hosea and the *hesed* that God wants

“For I desire *hesed*, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6)

* Apparently there was a tendency to think that penitential pilgrimage to a temple or shrine would somehow mitigate the offence of adultery/idolatry
* Here *hesed* seems to mean something like loyalty or unswerving allegiance to God
* Ritual observance is no substitute for the *hesed* God requires of the people

Micah and *Hesed*

* He served as a prophet during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah (*ca*. 737 – 696 BCE)
* Like Hosea, he was disturbed by widespread idolatry; like Amos, he was disturbed by widespread injustice
* For Micah, *hesed* is essential to the covenant relationship

Micah and the mercy that God wants

“For what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, and to love *hesed*, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8)

* Here, *hesed* seems to mean the mercy that one bestows upon others, especially those who are otherwise helpless
* Acting justly, loving *hesed*, and walking humbly with God are parallel virtues in Micah’s view
* The works of justice and mercy are a more than adequate substitute for elaborate sacrifices (see Micah 6:6-7)

Isaiah of Jerusalem

* His name (יְשַׁעְיָהוּ Y*eshayahu*) means “Yahweh is salvation”
* He was a priest: see Is 6:1
* His prophetic ministry seems to have begun with the death of Uzziah, king of Judah (*ca*. 742 BCE): see Is 6:1-9
* He was married to “the prophetess:” see Is 8:3
* They had two sons:
  + Shear-Jashub (“A remnant shall return”): see Is 7:3
  + Maher-shalal-hash-baz (“Spoil quickly, plunder speedily”): see Is 8:3B
* He had easy access to the palace (Is 7:3), and may have been a member of the royal family

Isaiah and *hesed*

* Precisely because he had easy access to the palace, many of his oracles are concerned with kingship
  + Isaiah 9:2-7
  + Isaiah 11:1-9
* In Isaiah, *hesed* refers to the set of obligations that a ruler has with respect to the people

Isaiah and the *Hesed* of Kingship

“In *hesed*, a throne shall be established; in faithfulness a man shall sit on it – one from the House of David – one who in judging seeks justice, and speeds the cause of righteousness” (Isaiah 16:5)

* Note the use of the divine passive (“shall be established”)
* Mercy, justice, and righteousness are parallel here, and signify right rule
* The merciful ruler is a sign of divine mercy

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