Hosea, Amos, and Micah: Three Important Minor Prophets

Introduction

The series of “little prophetic books” that runs from Hosea through Malachi we dub “the Twelve Minor Prophets.” When we call them by this name, we mean that they are small pieces of literature when contrasted with the “big books” of the “Major” Prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. There is a danger, however, that naming these books based on their size might lead some to an unwitting judgment that they are “minor” in their import and message. There is nothing “minor” about the message of the prophetic books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah, even if they fill less pages than other books. These three prophets are commonly included when we speak of “the prophetic tradition”; they figure along with Isaiah and Jeremiah as the ones to which we most regularly refer.

Each Prophet and His Tradition

We know only a little about the persons of these prophets and only a little more about the traditions in which they are embedded.

Amos

Amos, commonly reckoned to be the earliest of the three Minor Prophets, was a Judean who made his proclamation in the north, and so collided with the priest of the royal shrine in Bethel (7:10–17). A case has been made, though not proven, that Amos is especially informed by the old traditions of folk wisdom. In that perspective, it was steadily observed that deeds have consequences that are entirely predictable. And the deeds of Israel would lead, he said, to dire outcomes.

Against such a dominant economic assumption, the prophets urged an alternative practice that was grounded in neighborly solidarity.

The best known words from Amos are in 5:24, a text now utilized at the memorial for Martin Luther King Jr. in Montgomery:

But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In prophetic tradition, the word pair, “righteousness and justice,” is a call for transformative investment in the common good that inevitably includes the vulnerable and the disenfranchised (see Isa. 5:5; 9:7).

But of course that verse of summons is preceded in the same chapter by two accent points. On the one hand Amos reprimands Israel for the dearth of justice and righteousness in Israel (5:7; see 6:12) and identifies the economic abuse of the poor that will have a bad outcome for the exploiters:

Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine (5:11).
On the other hand, by a series of imperatives—“seek me,” “seek the Lord,” “seek good,” “hate evil and love good,” “establish justice”—Amos makes clear that engagement with YHWH, the God of Israel, is an equivalent to the practice of economic justice. The verses preceding 5:24 articulate a divine rejection of cultic practices (vv. 21–23); Israel’s liturgies had become a narcotic that screened out the economic realities of life.

Hosea

Hosea belongs roughly to the same cultural-historical context of Northern Israel as does Amos. He reports that his passion for prophetic utterance has grown out of his anguished personal experience of a vexed and scandalous marriage. Out of that personal disaster Hosea is able to speak about the alienation that is coming between YHWH and Israel, a “break up” that will end in suffering, displacement, and wretchedness. The exact linkage between the personal and the prophetic is a bit elusive, but it is not doubted that this poet is propelled, like every poet, out of his lived reality. It is evident that Hosea arose from the covenantal circles of Deuteronomy that were deeply committed to the Sinai covenant with its rigorous commandments and its inescapable sanctions of blessing and curse. Indeed, in 4:2, Hosea specifically cites the commandments of Sinai.

The best-known text of Hosea, in Christian usage, is verse 6:6, which is twice quoted by Jesus (Matt. 9:12–13; 12:7):

For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

As we have seen in Amos 5:21–23, this prophet also looks askance at worship practices that function in Israel, as they often do, to legitimate worship as a substitute for covenantal activity. The pairing of “steadfast love” and “knowledge of God” refers to covenantal practices. In the tradition of Deuteronomy, those covenantal practices pertain to neighborly generosity and solidarity with a special regard for the poor, widows, orphans, and immigrants (see Deut. 14:28; 24:19–22). Thus Hosea links the reality of YHWH, the Lord of the covenant, to concern for the neighborhood.

Beyond that, the oracle of Hosea 4:1–3 claims that violation of covenantal command will disrupt creation. In verse 2, Hosea uses a version of the pairing in 6:6, the pairing twice quoted by Jesus: “loyalty . . . knowledge of God.” He lists the offenses of Israel related to Sinai—swearing, lying, murder, stealing, committing adultery. But then, remarkably, he dares to assert in verse 3 that such disregard of the covenant will cause a drought that will trouble creation and devastate populations of animals, birds, and fish; the violation of covenant leads to environmental crisis!

Micah

Micah is a bit later than Amos and Hosea, and is located in the south, in Judah, in the village of Moresheth to the southwest of Jerusalem. He is likely a village elder who championed the peasant farmers who were regularly exploited by the urban entrepreneurs in Jerusalem. His best-known verse is 6:8:

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the LORD require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?

This verse comes at the end of a poem that articulates the way in which the life of Judah deeply contradicted the intent of YHWH. His summons to be attentive to YHWH uses the pairing of justice and covenantal loyalty, the latter of which is translated in Hosea as “loyalty.” The third element in his imperative, “walk humbly with your God,” is not an invitation to meekness but rather a readiness to submit one’s self willingly to God’s purpose for the world. As in Amos and Hosea, this covenantal summons is contrasted in verses 6–7 with cultic sacrifices presided over by priests that are an enactment of ideology and have nothing to do with neighborly reality.

Their Message

These prophets derive from somewhat different circles of tradition. Nonetheless they all address a common socioeconomic reality. Our attention to accent points among these poets yields a cluster of familiar terms:

- Amos: justice and righteousness (5:24)
- Hosea: steadfast love and knowledge of God (6:6)
- Micah: justice and kindness (6:8)

Among these terms there are, to be sure, variations in nuance. But in sum, all of these terms point to the same single covenantal mandate of solidarity between powerful people and the vulnerable people upon whom they prey. In self-justifying ideology the privileged regarded
the vulnerable poor as if they were fitting material for exploitation and cheap labor. Against such a dominant economic assumption, the prophets urged an alternative practice that was grounded in neighborly solidarity. They spoke with zeal against the way their society was ordered. It was a society in which the powerful and the clever exploited every economic possibility against the vulnerable so that the weaker members of the economy had no chance for well-being. The exploiters were variously allied with and benefitted from the governance of the elite: the kings, priests, and scribes. Thus Amos collided with the high priest of Bethel. Hosea warns against a powerful hierarchy of power that was not authorized by YHWH:

They made kings, but not through me;
they set up princes, but without my knowledge.
With their silver and gold they made idols
for their own destruction. (8:4)

The Message for Today

It is our wont to read the prophetic texts, more than any other biblical texts, as contemporary to our own time, place, and circumstance. It is important to remember that these are ancient texts that cannot easily be read in contemporary ways. But such texts do indeed feed our imagination and sometimes embolden us in our own social circumstance. In the instances I have cited from these three “major Minors,” we may participate in a second wave of “prophetic imagination.” The first level of such imagination is that these poets imagined that their particular social contexts were answerable to the will of the covenantal God. This was itself a major act of imagination that violated the more pragmatic assumptions of the “money men” who dominated that urban culture. They imagined that the economy was answerable to God!

Now as then, prophetic imagination is to see that our present power arrangements and practices work against neighborly well-being.

And Micah assaults the acquisitiveness of his contemporaries; all of this will come to a sorry end. Most poignant is the critique by Micah of the elites who exploit:

Hear this, you rulers of the house of Jacob
and chiefs of the house of Israel,
who abhor justice
and pervert all equity,
who build Zion with blood
and Jerusalem with wrong!
Its rulers give judgment for a bribe,
its priests teach for a price,
its prophets give oracles for money;
yet they lean upon the LORD and say,
“Surely the LORD is with us!
No harm shall come upon us.” (3:9–11)

The future holds no good for them, he asserts:

Therefore because of you
Zion shall be plowed as a field;
Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins,
and the mountain of the house a wooded height.
(v. 12)

This latter verse is of special importance because it is quoted a century later in defense of Jeremiah, who had critiqued the Jerusalem establishment (Jer. 26:18). The text serves to authorize and legitimate criticism of the Jerusalem establishment that is, in Yahwistic perception, not immune to criticism.

Our appropriation of these texts for our own circumstance requires a second act of prophetic imagination whereby the imagination of these ancient texts speaks an important word in our midst. There is no doubt that our political economy is quite like that found by the prophets, only on a larger scale. On that larger scale we can readily identify a political economy that exploits the economically vulnerable. This is accomplished legally through manipulation of tax and credit laws, deregulation of protective measures, maintenance of an unlivable minimum wage (not to mention wage theft), and the endless circles of advantage whereby the well-connected prosper at the expense of everyone else. Therefore, prophetic imagination requires an acute social analysis, and this exactly in a privileged, entitled community of the well-off that is so fully conformed to the tune of civil religion that it willfully lacks the categories for such social analysis. Now as then, prophetic imagination is to see that our present power arrangements and practices work against neighborly well-being.

But prophetic imagination as exhibited by these three major Minors not only offers social analysis; it has two
other truths as well. One is to connect the outcomes of such predatory gain to the rule of YHWH. These prophets are not predictors. But they can anticipate that no good can finally come from such policies and practices. They are certain that a sorry end is in store for such a society that violates the will and purpose of God. Amos therefore can lament an end that is sure to come for such a societal arrangement:

“The end has come upon my people Israel; I will never again pass them by. The songs of the temple shall become wailing in that day,” says the Lord God; “the dead bodies shall be many, cast out in every place. Be silent!” (8:2–3)

Thus Hosea can imagine the rejection of Israel by God:

Then the Lord said, “Name him Lo-ammi, for you are not my people and I am not your God.” (1:8)

Thus Micah can imagine such a systemic failure of the economy:

On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you, and wail with bitter lamentation, and say, “We are utterly ruined; the Lord alters the inheritance of my people; how he removes it from me! Among our captors he parcels out our fields.” (2:4)

These prophetic scenarios run well ahead of the facts on the ground; but the prophets know, given their focus on covenantal reality, that the purposes of God cannot be outflanked, not even by the clever and powerful.

The other truth of prophetic imagination that continues to be operative is the envisioning of an alternative alignment of the political economy. That is what the cluster of covenantal words entails: justice, righteousness, steadfast love, knowledge of God. It was, in that ancient context, difficult to construe reality outside the blueprints that had been constructed by the powerful. That construed reality, blessed by establishment religion, assured itself of an entitlement by God as God’s chosen people that could count on security and certainty with no serious threat or vulnerability. But these prophets knew that that claim was not a given grounded in God; it was a self-serving construction by those who controlled the media.

Prophetic imagination has the task of thinking and speaking, analyzing and anticipating out beyond such “settled reality.” Of course the powerful elite wanted and welcomed no such “outside the box” utterance; one signal about its resistance to such dangerous rhetoric is the narrative concerning the expulsion of Amos by the priest at Bethel: “. . . never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom (7:13).”

**Hope for the Future**

It is the case that each of these three prophetic books, perhaps in belated development, turns toward a good outcome for Israel. After the coming catastrophe of which they are certain, these prophetic witnesses imagine a new scenario of well-being for Israel. Amos can imagine a recovery of the Davidic dynasty after its fall, a recovery of prosperous agriculture after the plundering of an invading army, and the “restored future” of a safe, prosperous life:

On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old.

The time is surely coming, says the Lord, when the one who plows shall overtake the one who reaps, and the treader of grapes the one who sows the seed; the mountains shall drip sweet wine, and all the hills shall flow with it. I will restore the fortunes of my people Israel, and they shall rebuild the ruined cities and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine, and they shall make gardens and eat their fruit. I will plant them in their land, and they shall never again be plucked up out of the land that I have given them, says the Lord our God. (Amos 9:11–15)

Hosea can imagine a revivified agriculture after a season of radical negation:

On that day I will answer, says the Lord, I will answer the heavens and they shall answer the earth; and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil,

And I will have pity on Lo-ru-hamah, and I will say to Lo-ammi, “You are my people”; and he shall say, “You are my God.” (2:21–23)
And Micah will witness to God’s readiness to forgive with compassion, faithfulness, and loyalty:

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over the transgression of the remnant of your possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in showing clemency. He will again have compassion upon us; he will tread our iniquities under foot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. You will show faithfulness to Jacob and unswerving loyalty to Abraham, as you have sworn to our ancestors from days of old. (7:18–20)

Such promises do not come, in prophetic imagination, too soon. They come after the disaster. If they arrive too soon, they serve only to support the illusions of the present arrangements.

Conclusion

In these three major Minors we may find a script for truth telling among us, the truth that our present life contradicts God’s purposes and cannot be sustained, the truth that such a contradiction will have sorry outcomes, and the truth that God intends well-being for a post-disaster community. This is a very different script of social reality from the dominant script among us. But of course it was back then as well!

About the Writer

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