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"The Lord is a God of Justice" (Isaiah 30:18): The Prophetic Insistence on Justice in Social Context

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“The LORD is a God of justice” (Isaiah 30:18): The Prophetic Insistence on Justice in Social Context

ROLF A. JACOBSON

The biblical prophet Amos, along with Isaiah and Micah, famously insisted that God desires justice:

Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:23–24)

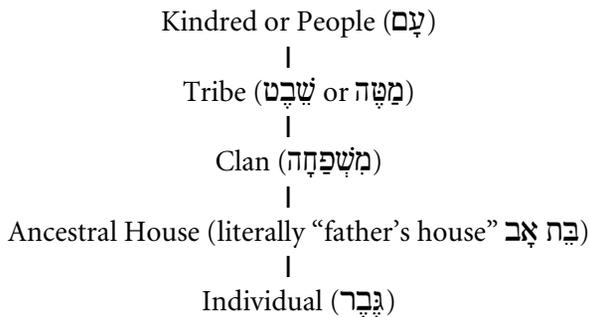
Justice is a social concept. It has to do with the order of society and how that order shapes or fails to shape human relationships with one another. A society that is “more just” is one in which the social order allows life to thrive to a greater degree. A society that is “less just” is one in which the social order prevents life from thriving to a greater degree. Often today, however, when the ancient heralds of justice are quoted, inadequate appreciation is given to the social contexts out of which the prophets spoke and which they were addressing. Especially when modern ecclesial champions of justice address economic issues—and make no mistake, the prophetic insistence on justice does touch intimately on economic issues—the

The prophets insisted on economic justice because they understood the Lord to be “a God of justice.” If justice is part of the very character of God, God’s people must also embody justice.

social context whence the prophets spoke is insufficiently considered. The present essay aims to speak a very small word in that direction, in order that some may have ears to hear the prophets better.

ISRAEL'S SOCIAL STRUCTURE: KINSHIP SOCIETY

Because justice is a social concept, in order to understand the prophet's cry for justice better, a fine place to start is with a description of the prophet's social world. Israel was a *kinship society*, in which the basic unit of society was the *ancestral house*—usually a three-, to four-generation family unit that lived together and to which one's life was devoted.¹ This differs from modern, Western society, in which the individual is the basic unit of society, the biological or nuclear family is the basic familial unit, and the nation/state is the level where laws and norms are mediated. Israelite society had a multitiered structure:



Within this structure, according to Philip King and Lawrence Stager, "the extended or joint family [three generations, including adult children], not the biological family [two generations, not including adult children], was most important."² As the term "father's house" indicates, this family unit was governed patriarchally. The patriarch had authority over the household; each of its members had accountability to and responsibility for the survival of the household. Property was held in common under the titular authority of the patriarch.

The physical architecture of the typical Israelite "house" is instructive, because the large number of Iron Age Israelite houses that have been excavated reveal a common design and thus reflect common social patterns.³ Most of these houses were roughly the same size and were three-storied affairs (although, over time, the society developed larger houses, see below). From the archaeology of these typical houses, scholars have deduced that not only did each household provide the primary identity for its members, it was also the basic economic unit. As John S. Hol-

¹See Philip King and Lawrence Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), especially 36–84; Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family in Ancient Israel," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 260 (1985) 1–35; Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

²King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 36.

³Stager, "The Archaeology of the Family."

laday, Jr., has written, “The Israelite house serves as our single best resource for understanding the economic role of the family in Israelite society.”⁴ Each house was basically an independent economic engine. It provided the means of agricultural production, product storage, and preparation facilities for life’s necessities. The ground floor was devoted to storage of food and supplies (preserved milk products, dried fruits, grains, oil, wine), nighttime quarters for livestock, and work areas for the family (a fire pit or hearth has often been found in the central room of the ground floor). The second story and roof (which was open-air, but surrounded by a parapet; cf. Deut 22:8) were the living quarters, where people slept but also where familial religious rituals could take place (cf. Jer 19:13).

By briefly exploring a few terms, we can gain a further understanding of the social architecture of the Israelite house. These terms are the *kinsman-redeemer* (גֹּאֵל), the *sojourner/resident-alien* (גֵּר or תוֹשָׁב), the *widow* (אַלְמָנָה), and the *orphan* (יָתוּם).

the kinsman-redeemer was a relative within the clan system whose responsibility it was to act on behalf of the extended-family system and to “vindicate” a relative who was in some sort of need

The first concept, *kinsman-redeemer*, is related to a Hebrew term that is often translated as “redeemer” (Job 19:25; Ps 19:14). The term is related to a verb (גָּאַל) that might be better translated as “fulfill family responsibility.”⁵ The kinsman-redeemer was a relative within the clan (בְּיָדָה) system whose responsibility it was to act on behalf of the extended-family system and to “vindicate” (for lack of a better term) a relative who was in some sort of need. The type of vindication that a relative required changed, based on the type of need. In addition, which relative was designated as the kinsman-redeemer would likely have changed based on the type of need. If a person has been harmed, the vindication may come in the form of taking vengeance (Num 35:19–27).⁶ If a woman’s husband died before providing her with children, a relative of the deceased husband was required to act as kinsman-redeemer by conceiving a child with her, a child who would inherit the dead husband’s name and provide for the widow (cf. Ruth 3:9–13). If a person was forced to sell property, a kinsman-redeemer was required to buy the property in order to keep it in the clan (cf. Lev 25:25–33; Jer 32:1–15). If a person fell into debt such that he or she was forced to be sold into slavery (particularly to a foreigner), the kinsman-

⁴John S. Holladay, Jr., “The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah: Political and Economic Centralization in the Iron IIA-B (ca. 1000–750 BCE),” in *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land*, ed. T. E. Levy (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1995) 387.

⁵See Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 4.

⁶Although this social practice may seem to perpetuate the cycle of violence, it should be noted that assigning the task of vengeance to one clan member actually has the potential to delimit the cycle of violence by proscribing other clan members from taking to violence.

redeemer was to “redeem” the clan member by paying the debt and purchasing his or her freedom (Lev 25:47–55). Each of these roles of the kinsman-redeemer is attested in Scripture. One can speculate that there were other responsibilities based on other crises—perhaps if a person was ill or injured a kinsman-redeemer was required to provide care or income; perhaps if a person could not offer a tithe, due to some calamity, a kinsman-redeemer was required to make the gift; and so on.

The ancestral house and the clan provided the social safety net for anyone who was injured, ill, or threatened. The sojourner, the widow, and the orphan were the people who did not have a household or a clan that would be their social safety net.

The other terms that can help us understand the social structure of the ancient household are the *sojourner/resident-alien*, the *widow*, and the *orphan*. The two words that are usually translated as “sojourner” and “resident alien” can best be defined as a “clanless person.” To put it another way, in a kinship-based society, a sojourner was a person who was not a member of any tribe, clan, or “father’s house.” Such people had no supporting social structure that could provide identity, a social safety net, or a job (because each household was its own economic unit). Who were the sojourners? They could be foreigners who were displaced by famine, war, economic disruptions, or marriage—such as Ruth the Moabite. They could be Israelites, such as Joseph the son of Isaac or Jotham the brother of Abimelech, whose families had done violence to them. In this context, note that in Gen 12:1 God calls Abraham to leave “your country and your kindred and your father’s house”—that is, Abraham is invited willingly to become a sojourner in order to follow God. And Abraham did! The widow and the orphan occupied similar “placeless places” in Israelite society. The widow was a woman who had married into a family but then had her place in that family put at risk when her husband died. (Israelite marriage practiced what is called *patrilocality*, meaning women moved in with and joined the households of their husbands.⁷) The most prominent such widow in the Bible is Tamar (Gen 38). The orphan, similarly, was a minor child in a household where all the adult members had died. The risks to anyone who was an orphan or a widow should be apparent.

As noted above, the ancestral household was the basic unit that provided both personal identity and also was the basic economic unit of society. As the exploration of terms indicates, the ancestral house and the clan also provided the social safety net for anyone who was injured, ill, or threatened. The sojourner, the widow, and the orphan were the people who did not have a household or a clan that would be their social safety net. In short, they were the most vulnerable people in a kinship-based society. They were the citizens who could most easily fall through society’s cracks. The duty that society owed to these, according to both the

⁷King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 38.

Bible's legal and prophetic material, was hospitality. Although there is no single Hebrew term for *hospitality*, the term nevertheless defines the obligation that God places on all of society with reference to those who have no household, clan, or tribe: "The alien (גֵּר) who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Lev 19:34). Other protected classes, according to Lev 19, were the elderly, the handicapped, the day laborer, and the destitute. It is against this background that Isaiah's prophetic call should be heard: "Learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa 1:17).

ISRAEL'S ECONOMIC SYSTEM

There are a number of significant studies on ancient Israel's economy that help inform prophetic speeches that bear on economic issues and justice.⁸ Here, only the briefest sketch of the economic realities and assumptions that existed in ancient Israel can be provided.

An Agropastoralist Economy

The Israelite economy was an agropastoralist economy that was marginally above subsistence level. That is, the economy revolved around agriculture—the cultivation of crops, the husbandry of animals, and the industry and commerce closely related to these (such as production of pottery, basic metallurgy and trading, and so on). Since the economy operated above subsistence level—if marginally—it was capable, over the course of years and decades, not merely of supporting life, but of generating a limited amount of wealth.⁹

The degree to which agriculture dominated Israelite life is reflected in one of the oldest known Hebrew inscriptions, the Gezer calendar (a tenth-century B.C.E. limestone tablet):

Two months of (autumn) harvest,
Two months of planting,
Two months of late planting,
A month of hoeing flax,
A month of barley harvest,
A month of harvest and feasting,
Two months of pruning,
A month of late fruit.¹⁰

⁸Some helpful studies are: Holladay, "The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah"; Holladay, "Hezekiah's Tribute, Long Distance Trade, and the Wealth of Nations ca. 1000–600 BC: A New Perspective," in *Confronting the Past: Archaeological and Historical Essays on Ancient Israel in Honor of William G. Dever*, ed. S. Gitin, J. E. Wright, and J. P. Dessel (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006) 309–331; Oded Borowski, *Daily Life in Biblical Times* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003); Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997); J. David Schloen, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol: Patrimonialism in Ugarit and the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2001).

⁹"[W]e see a pattern of accumulation of agricultural surplus on considerably more than a 'subsistence' basis." Holladay, "The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah," 378.

¹⁰My translation.

This inscription, which describes the Israelite year, shows how the entire year was dominated by the cycle of planting and cultivation. The rest of Israelite life, including its economic life, was similarly dominated by agriculture. In terms of the economy, the primacy of agriculture manifested itself in several ways. First, the most important assets that a family had were those that facilitated agricultural production—the land, the ox and ass (which were the commercial “engines” of the day and, thus, are frequently mentioned in biblical law), and produce. Second, what wealth an Israelite household was able to amass began with agricultural surplus—as family households managed to store excess grain, olive oil, wine, and the like for barter, to pay taxes (tithes), and for trade. Third, agricultural products were the form of payments that people used for exchange—tithes (both offerings and taxes) were paid in kind; one good was exchanged for another (barter); payments such as fines, dowries, and interest were primarily paid in kind; and so on. Fourth, the subsidiary industries that developed were outgrowths of agriculture—pottery for storage and transport of goods, weaving and tanning for secondary use of animal hair and skin, metallurgy primarily for support of agricultural work, trade for the export of agricultural surplus.

although the basic means of exchange throughout this period was barter, payment by means of a system of weights and measurements augmented barter and increased in frequency as time passed

Exchange

For most of the monarchical period, Israel’s economy was a precurrency economy. Coinage was not developed until after the return from exile and was not minted in Palestine until about 400 B.C.E.¹¹ Although the basic means of exchange throughout this period was barter, payment by means of a system of weights and measurements augmented barter and increased in frequency as time passed. In this sort of exchange, scrap bits of precious metal—copper, gold, and silver—were weighed out and exchanged. This sort of exchange is an evolutionary step along the transition from a barter economy to a currency economy—the primary impetus to mint coins was to verify the weight of the coin. The first coins were marked with a royal seal certifying their weight (for example, one shekel). Exchange by weights and measures is fraught with both fraud and inaccuracy. In terms of the inaccuracy, most modern people do not realize the complexity of the challenge of creating a uniform system of weights and measures. It was not, in fact, until very recent centuries that a uniform and basically trustworthy system of weights and measures was established in the Western world.¹² The shekel was a basic unit of weight, the term

¹¹John W. Betlyon, “Coinage,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1076–1089.

¹²For a survey of the challenge, see Andro Linklater, *Measuring America: How an Untamed Wilderness Shaped America and Fulfilled the Promise of Democracy* (New York: Walker, 2002), especially chapters 1–2.

deriving from the word שָׁקַל, “to weigh.” The homer was a basic unit of volume, meaning “a donkey load,” deriving from חֲמֹר, “donkey.” But the precise amount of a shekel or a homer might differ in Jerusalem, Samaria, Hazor, or Damascus. A merchant who traded in both Jerusalem and Damascus, for example, might need to have a set of weights for each city. Deuteronomy 25:13 mandates: “You shall not have in your bag two kinds of weights, [one set] large and [one set] small.” The reason for the prohibition is clearly that a merchant would be tempted to use the “small set” when weighing out debits, but the “large set” when weighing out credits. Amos accuses some merchants of succumbing to this temptation: “We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances, buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, and selling the sweepings of the wheat” (8:5–6). It may not be a coincidence that weights that were inscribed with their value—such as a shekel, or a בַּקֶּלֶט (half shekel; cf. Gen 24:22)—show up in the archaeological witness at the time of Isaiah, and just after Amos and Hosea. Maybe the prophetic calls for trustworthy measures and practices made a difference!¹³ A letter written on behalf of a poor Israelite man dating to this period has been recovered. In the letter, the man complains:

Your servant is a reaper working in Hazar-asam. Your servant finished his harvest and stored it a few days before stopping. After your servant had finished storing the harvest a few days ago, Hoshayahu son of Shobay came and took your servant’s garment. After I finished my harvesting a few days ago, he took your servant’s garment....[So please return] my garment. If the governor does not consider it his obligation to have [your servant’s garment] sent back, [do] it out of pity!¹⁴

Interpretations of the document vary, but one view is that

the garment of a corvée worker [a conscripted worker] was impounded by his supervisor Hashavyahu, who charged that he had failed to deliver the requisite quota of reaped grain to the granary. Insisting he had complied by delivering the full amount, the worker wanted a recount, that is, verification by weighing or measuring. The dispute arose because of the variation between the weights or vessels of the supervisor and those of the worker.¹⁵

Especially note the dual features of this interpretation that the fine for the worker was paid in kind by confiscating his garment and that the dispute arose because of nonuniform measures. It is not hard to imagine how very tempting it was for merchants and other officials to manipulate a system of weights and measures in order to cheat the common person. Given that basically all commoners were illiterate, they

¹³See Robert B. Y. Scott, “Weights and Measures of the Bible,” *Biblical Archaeology* 22 (1959) 22–40; King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 195–198.

¹⁴James M. Lindenberger, “A Judicial Petition: Mezad Hashavyahu Ostrakon (IM 60–67),” in *Ancient Aramaic and Hebrew Letters*, 2nd ed., ed. Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003) 109–110.

¹⁵Stager and King, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 196–197; cf. Shemaryahu Talmon, “The New Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C. in Historical Perspective,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 176 (1964) 29–38.

were often at the mercy of officials who collected their taxes and tithes or merchants who ran the markets. Since these markets and the sanctuaries where the commoners paid their tithes were located in cities, it is also easy to understand the scornful condemnations that the prophets had for the cities:

The voice of the LORD cries to the city...
 Hear, O tribe and assembly of the city!
 Can I forget the treasures of wickedness in the house of the wicked,
 and the scant measure that is accursed?
 Can I tolerate wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights?

 For you have kept the statutes of Omri
 And all the works of the house of Ahab,
 And you have followed their counsels. (Mic 6:9–11, 16a)

It is worth emphasizing that the royal administration—including the religious leaders—were expected to play a role in establishing and maintaining uniform and trustworthy weights and measures. The biblical text refers twenty-five times to “the sanctuary shekel” (שֶׁקֶל הַקְּדֹשׁ) and once to the “shekels by the king’s weight” (אֶבְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ). Both of these terms indicate that the royal administration, especially through its religious extension in the temple and royal sanctuaries (cf. Amos 7:13), was to establish just norms. Omri and Ahab, mentioned above by Micah, were rulers of the northern kingdom. The constant prophetic critique of the king and his administration by prophets such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah leads one to conclude that the government participated fully in the injustice that so easily thrives in a weights-and-measures exchange system.

Surplus, Trade, and Specialization

As mentioned above, the preexilic Israelite economy was more than merely a subsistence-level affair. The economy was able, over the course of years and decades, to build up enough of a surplus that some wealth accumulated. This accumulation of wealth brought with it both positive and negative aspects. One positive aspect was that Israelite society achieved a degree of internal professional specialization—professions such as potters, weavers, tanners, bakers, scribes, and the like developed. This specialization occurred both at the village level, where certain villages specialized in the production of one crop or product (for example, highland villages could concentrate on producing a surplus of grapes that could be stored and traded as wine), and also in the cities, where individuals could specialize in one profession (such as a potter, soldier, or scribe—the book of Jeremiah refers to the “potter’s house” [18:2] and the “bakers’ street” [37:21]). Specialization is valuable for a society because it allows for improved quality and quantity of production as well as greater knowledge.

A second positive that came with the accumulation of agricultural surplus was that some of the surplus was able to be exported for trade, which introduced greater diversity of food and products into Israelite life. The two most important

goods that Israel exported were olive oil and wine. Israel was located midway between two great imperial regions—Egypt and Mesopotamia—that could not produce grapes or olives.¹⁶ This was a happy occurrence for Israel, since both crops flourished there to a relative degree. At first, Israel had to rely on foreign agents in its trade, as the Hebrew term *כנעני*, literally “Canaanite,” in Hos 12:7 indicates. The Old Testament reflects a cautious or even suspicious attitude toward trade. This can be attributed partly to xenophobia and to fear of innovation. But it also can be attributed to resentment of new internal disparities in wealth that trade generated. Amos condemned “those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall....but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (6:4, 6). As archaeologists have confirmed, the “beds of ivory” were wooden bed frames with ivory inlays—luxuries in an era in which most people slept on straw mats. The “lambs” and “calves” refer to lamb and veal, luxury fare in any era, let alone in an era in which most people ate meat only very rarely.

“We see individuals accumulating wealth, almost certainly (given the comparative ethnographic materials) on the basis of being able to coerce, without remuneration, the work of others.”

A final reason for the prophetic critique of the new differentiations in wealth has been explored by John Holladay. On the basis of comparative ethnographic studies, Holladay has demonstrated that, in a developing society such as ancient Israel, “We see individuals accumulating wealth, almost certainly (given the comparative ethnographic materials) on the basis of being able to coerce, without remuneration, the work of others.”¹⁷ The chieftains who were able to accumulate wealth in these ways controlled not only the means of coercing labor, but also the legal system (what the prophet Amos calls the meetings “in the gate,” 5:10). Note how Amos admonished those who both control the labor of others and deny legal recourse to the same: “They hate the one who reproves in the gate, and they abhor the one who speaks the truth. Therefore because you trample on the poor and take away from them levies of grain...you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.” (5:10–12). The frequent prophetic complaints against rulers accepting bribes (cf. Isa 1:23; Amos 5:12) indicates the longing for a trustworthy legal system.

The same chieftains also controlled the land. In Israel, the land was, in principle, owned by the Lord, who allotted residence on various parcels to particular tribes (cf. Lev 25:23). According to pentateuchal law, this residence was intended to be inalienable. But Isaiah condemns people “who join house to house, who add field to field” (5:8a), and Micah admonishes those who “covet fields and seize them; houses, and take them away; who defraud a man of his home, an individual

¹⁶King and Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*, 95, 98.

¹⁷Holladay, “The Kingdoms of Israel and Judah,” 378.

of his inheritance” (2:2; my translation). Isaiah and Micah are referring to those who broke biblical law by accumulating land illegally, and, in the process, alienated the populace from the lands.

THE PROPHETS AS EQUAL-OPPORTUNITY SAVAGERS

On the basis of comparative ethnographic studies, Holladay calls those who perpetrated these injustices “chieftains.”¹⁸ But who were they precisely in ancient Israel? The prophets Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea offer more precise names. They were “the elders and princes of his people” (Isa 3:14); “the daughters of Zion” and the wealthy women of Samaria (Isa 3:16; Amos 4:1); the scribes “who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes” (Isa 10:1); the “prophet” and “priest” who profit from injustice (Hos 4:4–5); the soldiers who “have ripped open pregnant women” (Amos 1:13); and the merchant “in whose hands are false balances, [who] loves to oppress” (Hos 12:7). They were those who were responsible for creating a more just social structure, but who were instead exploiting the social structure for their own gain, and—this is important—at their neighbor’s expense.

In short, Amos, Isaiah, Micah, and Hosea were equal-opportunity savagers. They were against “big business” (which cheated the poor and accumulated land). They were also against “big government” (which grew fat off of unjustly high taxes and conscripted labor). They were against “big religion” (which colluded with both big government and big business). They were against “big law” (which jobbed the legal system to play favorites).

They insisted on this because God is a God of justice. As Isaiah said, “the LORD is a God of justice” (30:18). They insisted that justice comes from the heart of God, because it is part of the very character of God. And because God has chosen to cause his name to dwell in Jerusalem and given his name to the people of Israel, the chosen people must also embody justice. ⊕

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¹⁸Ibid., 379.