

1-2010

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Citation: Pilot Scholars Version (Modified MLA Style)

Dempsey, Carol, "Prophets, Creation, and Sacramentality" (2010). *Theology Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 18.
http://pilotscholars.up.edu/the_facpubs/18

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Prophets, Creation, and Sacramentality

Carol J. Dempsey, OP

Centuries ago ancient Israelite writers wrote stories and poems rich with symbols, metaphorical images, and colorful characters to try to capture the wonder, the beauty, the holiness of God and God's relationship to and with creation. For the Israelite people God is the creator of all. Everything that exists comes into being through this God's dynamic and fecund Spirit that once hovered over primordial waters (Gen 1:1–2:25). This God not only creates everything but also sustains everything and entrusts the task of sustainability to the human community (Gen 2:15). In the eyes of Israel's God, all of creation is "good," in fact, "very good" (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). Thus the creation story of Genesis 1–2 becomes foundational for understanding sacramentality from a biblical perspective. Read as a single unit, Genesis 1–2 offers a vision of wholeness and interconnectedness, both of which are characteristics of sacramentality. Creation includes not only the natural world and all its elements and communities of life but also the human community. Human beings are called to be "holy" (Lev 11:45) because God is holy, and humankind has been fashioned in God's image, according to God's likeness (Gen 1:27). Creation becomes a visible sign and instrument of the invisible presence and activity of God. Creation *is* sacramental.

In the book of Isaiah, the seraphs call out to one another:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
The whole earth is filled with [God's] glory. (Isa 6:3)

For the ancient Israelite community, creation is seen as "holy," filled with God's glory, fashioned by their God who becomes known as the "Holy One" (Isa 41:14, 16, 20; 43:3). Within the Bible the texts of the prophets give clear expression to the sacramental nature of creation.



The Prophet and Prophetic Word As Sacramental

Israel's poets tell us that the prophets were oftentimes raised up or "called" by God. One clear example is Jeremiah:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jer 1:5)

Similarly, Isaiah was commissioned by God to be a prophet (Isa 6:5-9). The prophets became signs of God's presence working within the Israelite community and among the peoples of other nations. They tried to liberate people from the shackles that bound them, that caused them to act with aggression, to commit injustices, and to live lives that violated covenant fidelity with God and with one another. Israel's prophets were filled with the Spirit of God that was the source of their power (Mic 3:8).

The prophets' words were their greatest tools for trying to bring about change in their societies. The writers of the ancient prophetic texts understood the prophets' words to be gifts given to them by their God (Jer 1:4, 6-7, 9; 11:1; 16:1; 18:1; Hos 1:1; Joel 1:1; Mic 1:1). With their words the prophets confronted those guilty of injustices (Mic 3:1-12), gave voice to God's anguish over the people's waywardness (Hos 6:4-6; cf. 11:1-7), and even delivered divine threats (Amos 1:2-16). In times of utter despair and desolation, especially after the Exile, the prophets became a sign of hope, and their words reminded the people of God's sacred presence among them, especially when the people felt that they had been abandoned by their God in the wake of the destruction of their temple, the loss of their land, the fall of their holy city Jerusalem, and the collapse of their monarchy. During these times the persons of the prophets, as well as their deeds and words, taught the people that the presence of God is not limited to tangible edifices and institutions such as a temple, a city, or a monarchy. In the midst of great loss the prophets stood among the people, became a sign of God's faithful love for them, and proclaimed:

But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine. (Isa 43:1)

As preachers, the prophets used words and images that were harsh and biting at times, but always their words could be considered words of grace

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that gave hope not only to those who were suffering injustice but to those who caused injustice:

Turn to me and be saved,
all the ends of the earth!
For I am God, and there is no other. (Isa 45:22)

Thus Israel's prophets pointed the way to God through their lives, (e.g., Jer 1:4-10), their words (e.g., Hos 14:1-3), their actions (e.g., Jer 32:1-15), and their visions (e.g., Isa 1:1ff). Although they were oftentimes not welcomed among their own people and suffered threats to their lives (see, e.g., Jer 11:18-20; 20:7-18), they remained faithful to their God and to God's people (e.g., Jer 17:16). As key players within the created world, the prophets and their words brought people face to face with God who is, ultimately, a God of compassion (Mic 7:18-20). Thus the prophets and their words *are* sacramental.

The Prophets' Natural World As Sacramental

In addition to the prophets and the prophetic word being sacramental, the natural world of the prophets is sacramental. Images from the natural world are a predominant feature in the proclamations of Israel's prophets. For example, Hosea describes Israel as a luxuriant vine (Hos 10:1), Ephraim as a "trained heifer" (Hos 10:11), and God as a lion (Hos 5:14; 11:10; 13:7-8). Figs serve as the main symbol in Jeremiah's preaching concerning the fate of the exiles (good figs) and of King Zedekiah, his officials, and the remnant of Jerusalem who remained in the land (bad figs) (Jer 24:1-10). Ezekiel uses a great eagle to depict metaphorically the king of Babylon and the fate of Jerusalem and its leaders. Joel describes a series of natural disasters—plagues, earthquakes, floods, marauding armies of locusts—that would destroy all the land's vegetation on account of the people's stubbornness of heart and their refusal to repent and turn back to God. Such disasters became the impetus for lamentation because these forces of nature would devastate the natural world, causing the Israelite community to suffer religiously, economically, and socially (Joel 1:8-12). This devastation, however, is not permanent. To the soil and the animal, the prophet delivers a word of comfort. The pastures will once again be green, the tree will bear its fruit, and the vine and the fig tree will give their full yield (Joel 2:21-22). Here the renewal of the natural world becomes a sign of renewed hope.

The prophet Isaiah uses creation as a sign and symbol of God's grace. For Isaiah, the transformation of the natural world and of humankind are intricately linked together. Creation, then, becomes a matrix for revelation, revealing to listeners then and now something about God and God's vision for all life. One such text that speaks of God's vision for all life is Isaiah 2:2-4. Here the prophet offers a magnificent vision of unity. The image of

the mountain is central to the poem. The "mountain" becomes the locus for God's house (cf. Ps 43:3; Isa 24:23), and as such this "mountain" will be the highest of all mountains, raised above all the other hills. In the ancient world mountains were the typical place for encountering the Holy One (cf. Mount Sinai/Horeb; Mount Carmel; Mount Zion; Mount Tabor; the Mount of Olives). The mountains were places for vision (Deut 34:1-4; Rev 21:10) and proclamation (Isa 40:9; 52:7; Matt 5:1). Thus the prophet paints for all peoples a glorious portrait of what God envisions for the entire world, and has used a significant image from the natural world to communicate his vision. Later this same "mountain" becomes a place for celebration where the Lord of hosts will spread out a rich banquet for all the peoples (see Isa 25:1-12, especially vv. 6-8).

God's continuing creative power is transformative.

The image of unity continues in Isaiah 11:1-9, where the prophet presents a marvelous picture of a new creation that comes to birth through the exercise of justice and righteousness. Composed of two subunits (vv. 1-5 and vv. 6-9), the poem describes a new leader empowered by God's Spirit who will carry out decisions with power but without physical violence (v. 4). The new leader will be personally espoused to justice and righteousness (v. 5). Because of the good governance of the new leader, a new world order will be ushered in, one of peace and harmonious relationships, idyllically symbolized by animals in the natural world and the presence of a child among them.

Verses 6-9 describe a grand pastoral picture in which domestic animals—the "lamb" (v. 6), the "kid" (v. 6), the "calf" (v. 6), the "fatling" (v. 6), the "cow" (v. 7), and the "ox" (v. 7)—together with the wild animals—the "wolf" (v. 6), the "leopard" (v. 6), the "lion" (v. 6), and the "bear" (v. 6)—and human beings—symbolized by a "little child" (v. 6), a "nursing child" (v. 8), and a "weaned child" (v. 8)—all live peacefully and securely on God's holy mountain (v. 9a). This peace will come when "the earth [is] full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9b).

The child who led God's people into the way of peace portrayed in Isaiah 9:6 will now lead the rest of creation into peace (Isa 11:6). Isaiah has shown us that God's power will be transformative, exercised with justice, marked by peace and not violence, and characterized by assertiveness and not aggression. Images from the human and natural world hint at the relationship that is possible between the human species and other species that inhabit the planet. Such a relationship can only exist, however, when it is supported and nurtured by just and righteous leadership that strives to

establish peace in the land, which in turn will give birth to peace among all of the land's inhabitants. Though idyllic in its portrait, Isaiah 11:1-9 offers a word of hope and a sense of direction to the human community entrusted with the task of creating a climate for right relationship so that all life may flourish. Once again Isaiah has used creation imagery, and specifically the image of God's holy mountain, to provide his listeners with a vision of "the good life" for "the common good." This natural world portrait is also revelatory insofar as it shows Isaiah's audience then and now what, ultimately, is the divine vision for all life on the planet. The new kind of leader about which Isaiah speaks is indeed a symbol and sign of divine graciousness that will grace all life into the experience of joyous peace that is the hope and desire of all who live life today.

In conclusion, we can say that the biblical prophets have offered their audiences a rich portrait of both sacramentality and Israel's God, whose transformative grace is at work in the midst of all creation, redeeming it from the bondage and effects of injustice. The poets call their listeners to ponder the interrelatedness of life and to appreciate the significant role the natural world plays in the sacred vision for all life. The poets also remind the human community that redemption is ongoing and that all ecosystems are invited to participate in it, beginning with human beings who stand in need of redemption of and from social and ecological injustices. As we, the human community, work to embrace and give flesh to the sacred vision for all life, may we one day be able to follow the lead of the prophet who calls all creation to celebrate the wondrous work of God who waits to dwell in all fullness among us:

Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it;
shout, O depths of the earth;
break forth into singing, O mountains,
O forest, and every tree in it!
For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
and will be glorified in Israel. (Isa 44:23)

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