YHVH’S RELATIONSHIP TO THE NATIONS
IN THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION

Scholars have long acknowledged that the Biblical prophets play the role of “covenant lawyers”, prosecuting the people of God for their failure to fulfill their covenant agreement with YHVH.¹ The covenant is often cited as constituting the basis of God’s unique relationship to Israel among all the nations of the earth. Yet the prophets also indict the nations for their sinfulness and implicitly call them to repentance as well. This raises the question of what relationship the prophets understood YHVH to have to the Gentiles. Clearly it went beyond a mere providential ordering of history, and this paper will not consider the passages that simply speak of God’s sovereignty over world affairs; there must be a kind of relationship which places moral obligations on the nations which they have failed to fulfill, which has some sort of analogy to the covenant at Sinai. Although it is never explicitly stated, it seems that in these prophetic texts we have the seeds of St. Paul’s teaching in Romans 1-2 that the nations have the law of God written in their consciences, which the Church later fleshed out in its reflections on natural law, and that they can therefore be chastised for failing to live in accordance with the law of God.

This paper will not cover study every example of YHVH punishing the nations, but it will examine some key texts to indicate what function these punishments have within their relationship to God.

¹ See, for example, Birch, 46.
Amos begins his book (1:3-2:5) with a litany of denouncements against the nations around Israel for their various “transgressions” (a word which will be examined momentarily). Thus, the opening words of what was probably the first prophetic book begin with a message from the prophet to the nations.² This sequence takes a surprising turn when it concludes with oracles against Israel itself (2:6-16). This would no doubt be jarring to Amos’ hearers, as it seems to regard Israel as being just as culpable and just as subject to God’s wrath as any of its hated neighbours. This seems like an assault on “Hebrew particularism”, suggesting that Israel has no special status before God. In fact, the contrary is true: 3:1-2 informs the “family” of Israel that God “brought of Egypt” that it is because “you only have I known of all the families of the earth” that they will be punished; they are uniquely and especially culpable for their sins because of their special relationship to YHVH.³ (Notice that this “knowledge” is linked to the Exodus, a point that will become important later.)

Actually, the opposite seems to be the case: In criticizing the nations alongside Israel, Amos subtly seems to ennoble the status of the nations, implying that they, too, have a relationship with God, albeit not one as deep as the “knowledge” of 3:1-2. This is seen in the fact that Amos charges them with “transgressions”. The Hebrew word is pasha, meaning “disobedience”, a “word indicating that the peoples in question are in a

² Where and how Amos delivered these oracles is an area of some speculation. Martin-Achard imagines Amos to have delivered these speeches in the marketplace of the capital city, surrounded by delegates and representatives of the nations (16-17).

³ The reference to the nations, including Israel, as “families”, is intriguing given that Amos singles out Tyre for condemnation because they violated “the covenant of brotherhood” in selling the inhabitants of an unidentified nation with whom they had entered into a treaty into slavery (1:9). VanDrunen suggests that Amos is especially repulsed by this since YHVH governs the world by means of covenant, as seen in the Noahic story, and “it is appropriate for his image-bearers, commissioned to administer justice in the world under him, to order their mutual affairs by means of covenant as well” (170).
state of rebellion vis-à-vis the God of Israel”—you can only disobey Someone you are supposed to obey. Micah 5:15 also promises (after predicting a Davidic figure who will reign “to the ends of the earth” and who will rout the Assyrians in verses 4-6) that YHVH “will execute vengeance on the nations that did not obey.” How can the nations be said to be in disobedience to YHVH? Hubbard suggests that “Amos has chosen to indict these specific neighbours because they were all at one time under the hegemony of David and thus were viewed as part of a greater Israel believed to be especially accountable to the Lord.” But this seems unlikely, not only because the idea of a “greater Israel” seems to have no analogy elsewhere in the Old Testament, but also because of 9:7, which also seems to undermine Israelite particularism: “Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? Says the LORD. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?” Here, the Exodus, wherein God’s unique covenant with Israel began—where, in a sense, Israel was created—is compared to the migrations of the Ethiopians, and even of the hated Philistines. Blenkinsopp believes that this “strong saying putting Israelites on the same level in the eyes of God as Nubians and Philistines has been radically modified by a later editor who…was not prepared to accept the verdict” that Amos pronounced on Israel, hence the subsequent sayings about the remnant being preserved (9:10). Yet Martin Buber sees

4 Achard-Martin, 15.
5 In this connection, Nahum 3:4-12 mocks Nineveh for assuming her own security. “Are you better than Thebes that sat by the Nile, with water around her, her rampart a sea, water her wall? Ethiopia was her strength, Egypt too, and that without limit; Put and the Libyans were her helpers. Yet she became an exile, she went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; lots were cast for her nobles, all her dignitaries were bound in fetters. You also will be drunken, you will go into hiding…” Nineveh is compared to a prostitute whom God promises to expose in front of the nations and throw dirt upon. This ridicule of Nineveh’s belief in her own “particularism” sounds uncannily like the way the prophets threaten God’s people.
6 Hubbard, 133-4.
7 Blenkinsopp, 92.
this exclamation of Amos’ as simply the development of a theme seen throughout Genesis: That the chief gods of the peoples are really the same “unknown God” who revealed Himself to Abraham (see, for example, the dual description of “the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor” in Genesis 31:53). This is how they can be “disobedient” to Him. Thus we have a foreshadowing of what St. Paul will tell his audience gathered at Mars Hill in Acts 17, and Motyer ties this to Paul’s teaching in Romans that the Gentiles are in historical relationship to God and have His law in their conscience.

Hosea, of course, deals specifically with YHVH’s covenant relationship to Israel, and only refers to the nations as her partners in committing adultery. Yet there are two points of note in chapter 6. One are the words of repentance the prophet offers to Israel: “Come, let us return to the LORD; for it is he who has torn, and he will heal us; he has struck down, and he will bind us up…” (6:1). This language will recur in an interesting way in Proto-Isaiah.

Secondly, verse 7 contains this fascinating description: “But like/at Adam they transgressed the covenant: there they dealt faithlessly with me.” Scholars have debated how exactly to translate these lines. On the one hand, Adam was the name of a town (Joshua 3:16), and Hosea is cataloging the sins of Israel in different locations (Gilead and Shechem are also mentioned); on the other hand, we have no record of any act of bloodshed or idolatry at the site called Adam. Simundson, pointing out that the Hebrew is literally “like Adam” (Young’s Literal Translation is “as Adam”), suggests that this is

---

8 “He is the tribal god, the national god, the leader god of each one of them. And because of this He is, according to the fundamental ancient Semitic conception, the people’s judge. The national gods, the leader and judge gods of all the peoples, are here shown to be identical” (Buber, 97).

9 Motyer, 36.
actually a reference to Adam’s covenant-betrayal in Eden, and Hosea is comparing their transgression to the “original sin”. He observes that it could also be translated “like men” or “like humanity”, suggesting that humanity in general breaks its covenant. Since the covenant in question is obviously in partnership with God, this suggests that all of humanity is in covenant with God and continually break this covenant.\(^\text{10}\) This intuition may be the same one that prompts Amos to accuse the nations of “disloyalty”, and the story of the Fall may have been written precisely to put mythic flesh on these intuitive prophetic bones—the idea that all humanity is in a relationship to YHVH which puts moral obligations upon it.

This principle can be seen implicitly, for example, in Obadiah 1:15, which declares after predicting doom upon Edom (much of it borrowed from Jeremiah 49) that “the day of the LORD is near against all the nations. As you have done, it shall be done to you; your deeds shall return on your own head.” In describing the notorious judgment of the nations in the valley of Megiddo, Joel warns those who have persecuted the Jews that “I will avenge their blood, and I will not clear the guilty, for the LORD dwells in Zion” (3:21).\(^\text{11}\) These and similar passages promise that the nations will be punished in according to their deeds. This reminds us of the principle of lex talonis, an eye for an eye, which does not begin with the Mosaic covenant but instead with the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:5-6). Whether or not the prophets had this specifically in mind, these Scriptures each express the notion that all people are bound by a covenant

---

\(^{10}\) Simundson, 62. "If the Masoretic text of Hosea 6:7 is taken at face value, it seems to imply that the failure of Israel's role as another Adam was doomed from the garden of Eden because all are somehow involved in Adam's covenant breaking" (Gentry and Wellum, 219).

\(^{11}\) The reference to “not clearing the guilty” recalls Moses’ description of YHVH in Exodus 34, which will be quoted again in Jonah, as seen later in this paper.
obligation to God which is violated by bloodshed and which is rectified with the blood of the murderer.

Proto-Isaiah is, like its two successors, full of prophecies about the Messianic golden age of restoration. The prophets are full of descriptions of God’s people, and the Messianic figure, ruling the world and the nations, and this paper will not take time to consider each of those passages. Isaiah does give us a sense of what exactly is being predicted, however. 2:2-4 contains the famous prophecy of the mountain of the LORD to which the nations will pour. 12 Micah contains almost an identical prophecy, but adds a different ending: “For all the peoples walk, each in the name of its god, but we will walk in the name of the LORD our God forever and ever” (4:5). Buber sees this as Micah being “nationalistic” and “weakening substantially the universal element in” the prophecy. 13 “Over against this is the consistent view of Isaiah that, together with the ‘ways’, the ‘name’ of God too is become the possession of all.” 14 We should remember, however, that Micah is consistent with the overall prophetic hatred of the false idols worshipped by the nations. The prophets despise syncretism and the identification of YHvh with Ba’al. Saying that YHvh has a relationship to the nations is not to say that all their gods are simply equivalent to YHvh; it does mean that Israel has a missionary function (demonstrated in the stories of Daniel “evangelizing” Nebuchadnezzar and Darius) to enlighten them about the law and identity of YHvh. Right now, they do

---

12 Deutero-Isaiah is surely meditating on this prophecy in 56:1-8, when foreigners who join themselves to the LORD are invited to the holy mountain.

13 Buber, 150.

14 Ibid., 151. Deutero-Isaiah does depict Cyrus, not merely as God’s “instrument”, the way that Isaiah 10 depicts Assyria or Habakkuk depicts the Chaldeans, but as His “anointed”, or “Messiah”, suggesting a level of intimacy with certain Gentiles that would no doubt be scandalous to many Jewish minds.
follow their own gods, rather than obey YHVH, but the mountain of the LORD will end that someday.

Isaiah goes on to explain more specifically what the status of the nations will be in that day. 14:24-27 begins an Amos-like series of denouncements against the nations: First He will punish Assyria, then Philistia, then Moab…it continues on this way until Egypt in chapter 19. The list of nations is bookended with Assyria and Egypt, suggesting that Assyria and Egypt stand in for all the other nations Isaiah has address. Yet after this series of doom-ridden proclamations, Isaiah suddenly prophesies using the formula “in that day”: Cities in the land of Egypt will “speak the language of Canaan” and worship YHVH, there will be an altar to YHVH in the centre of Egypt; Egypt will cry out to YHVH for deliverance from their oppressors, He will answer, and they will offer thanksgiving sacrifices. Miscall makes the point that the obscure reference to the language of Canaan being spoken “recall(s) the time before Babel when one language was spoken”, and observes that, stunningly, the language of the Exodus is used to describe Egypt: Now they are the oppressed, their cry will be heard by God, they will be delivered. Isaiah goes on to predict a highway linking Egypt to Assyria, which will be traveled by Assyrians and Egyptians so that they can worship together. “This is similar to the nations flowing to the Lord’s mountain without the people Israel as mediator and to humanity recognizing their maker (17.7-8).”

Indeed, Isaiah proclaims: “The LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing; they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their supplications and heal them” (19:22).

15 “Egypt and Assyria symbolize the whole world” (Mischall, 58).
16 “In 19-22, however, the prophet portrays the Lord and the Egyptians in a relationship exactly like that of the Lord and Israel; the account, and its specific words, reads like a summary of the Exodus and Israel’s history in the land…At the close of ch. 11, the highway led from Assyria to Israel as it had from Egypt to Israel; now Israel is left out since Egyptians and Assyrians come together to worship.” (Ibid.)
This directly recalls Hosea 6:1, in which God promised to strike Israel only to heal her.\(^{17}\)

This suggests that YHVH uses punishments against the nations for roughly the same reason He uses them against Israel: To ultimately bring them back to Himself. This often takes the form of being ruled over by Israel in the eschatological age in the predictions of the prophets, and this vision depicts the worldwide reign of God’s people as a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that his seed would bring blessing to the nations. “On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, ‘Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage’” (19:24). This is strongly on display in the book of Jonah: the threat of punishment serves to draw the Ninevites to repentance, and Jonah knows that God will forgive them because He is “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abundant in mercy” (4:2), language directly borrowed from Moses’ description of YHVH at the exact moment that the covenant with Israel is forged (Exodus 34:6-7). God is disposed towards Nineveh, that ghastly city depicted in Nahum, in the same way He is towards Israel according to this beautiful “fish story”; it may be that YHVH uses a gourd to symbolize Nineveh to Jonah because He has so frequent used the image of plants and vineyards to portray the Jewish people through his prophets. It is not difficult to see how much of the missionary activity in the Book of Acts could have received its mandate from the global vision of the prophets.

The final thing to consider is whether the prophets only saw the nations as having a positive relationship to YHVH in the eschatological age or whether the nations were able to legitimately worship Him in their day. Proto-Isaiah predicts an altar in Egypt, but

\(^{17}\) Mauchline, 160.
the image of legitimate sacrifices existing, not only outside of the Temple, but even in foreign nations, recurs in Malachi 1:11: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts.” There is a parallel to Deutero-Isaiah’s prophecy that, through the work of the pagan but anointed king, Cyrus, the “kings” and “nations” (45:1) will “know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me” (45:6). There is debate about whether Malachi is describing the situation of his day or whether he is prophesying about the Day of the Lord; should the verse be translated in the present or the future tense? If it is to be understood as present tense, what worship is being referred to? Petersen is uncertain whether Malachi was aware of “Yahwhistic shrines at Elephantine, Leontopolis, Samaria, [and] in the Transjordan”19, but the parallel to Deutero-Isaiah perhaps suggests that the emphasis is on the worship of YHVH by the nations, not simply among the nations (though verse 14 does refer to YHVH’s name being “reverenced among the nations”). Rodas raises, though he seems unconvinced by, the possibility that Malachi is expressing “a recognition of a growing monotheism among the nations (note ‘the God of heaven’ in the Persian edicts of Ezra 5-7)”20, which, if correct, would strongly corroborate Buber’s thesis that the prophets interpreted the chief tribal gods of the nations to be dim perceptions by the Gentiles of YHVH, Who was involved with their history. Perhaps the ambiguity in Malachi’s language reflects an ambiguity in the prophetic faith: The nations, in some sense, already have a semi-covenant relationship to YHVH, but will not really be in communion with Him until the Messianic age.

18 Wolf, 73.
19 Petersen, 184.
20 Rodas, 732.
Bibliography


The Prophetic Imagination is one such instance; ultimately, it is an attempt to create a new future for Christianity as host for divine possibilities in a cultural context that is dominated by unacknowledged anxiety that issues in anti-neighborly resentment, aggression, and worse. Of course, mainstream Christianity has often, unfortunately, contributed to that toxic context, but Brueggemann’s wager is that the prophetic tradition is like a foreign body within that toxicity inside the church and out that is capable of eroding it and constructing an alternative. The Prophetic Imagination is a survey of the deeper role of the prophetic voice found in the leadership, action, and teaching of the key protagonists in the biblical stories of Moses, Jeremiah, and Jesus. As Brueggemann describes it in his original preface, this small book is an attempt to understand what the prophets were up to, if we can be freed from our usual stereotypes of foretellers or social protestors (page xxiii). Brueggemann thus dismisses the two most common approaches to the prophetic voice among Bible readers, instead seeking a deeper reading than that often adopted in conversa Through grief and the language of amazement, the prophetic imagination can penetrate despair and numbness of royal consciousness in order to bring about the alternative of YHWH’s love (originally created by Moses). Food for Thought. Prophetic Energizing. Has a royal consciousness led us to complacency, numbness and despair? Have we lost our theological identity and allowed injustice and destruction of hope in the process? When will the political become radical enough to become theological? What is your opinion on the role of prophet as whistle blower - Snowden case? The task of prophecy is to Today, the prophetic imagination of Walter Brueggemann. Ms. Tippett: If I asked you this way: In terms of your image of God, are there metaphors that have spoken to you across time or that speak to you now that didn’t before? Are there metaphors that have come to you in your life as a human being and in your study as a scholar and your work as a preacher to be more and more meaningful?