

PROPHETIC ATTITUDES TOWARD VIOLENCE IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

EDWIN C. HOSTETTER
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD 21218

Violence is currently much on the mind of the public in the United States. This is due at least partially to the rapid increase in the amount of violent crime committed by juveniles. Other violent acts, such as the recent bombings of buildings, also fuel fear among American citizens.

When we think of violence today, we usually conceive of some form of physical assault:¹ for example, beatings, murder, rape, rioting, robbery, and terrorism. The Hebrew prophets employed terms for violence in order to describe that kind of behavior as well.

"deeds of violence (חַמָּס [h₁amas]) are in their hands . . . they rush to shed innocent blood . . . desolation (דָּשׁ [sod]) and destruction are in their high-ways" (Isa 59:6-7)²

"violence (חַמָּס) and destruction (דָּשׁ) are heard within her" (Jer 6:7)

"the land is full of bloody crimes; the city is full of violence (חַמָּס)" (Ezek 7:23)

"those who store up violence (חַמָּס) and robbery (דָּשׁ) in their strongholds" (Amos 3:10)

"cry to you 'Violence!' (חַמָּס) . . . destruction (דָּשׁ) and violence (חַמָּס) are before me" (Hab 1:2-3)

In addition, however, the classical prophets used words for violence while writing about a different sort of abuse of power.

"the scant measure that is accursed. . . wicked scales and a bag of dishonest weights? Your wealthy are full of violence (חַמָּס)" (Mic 6:10-12)

¹ Cf. I. Swart, "In Search of the Meaning of Hamas: Studying an Old Testament Word in Context," *Journal for Semitics* 3 (1991) 161-62.

² All Scripture quotations come from the NRSV, unless otherwise indicated.

"who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages. . . your eyes and heart are only on your dishonest gain, for shedding innocent blood, and for practicing oppression (עֲשֵׂק [‘oseq]) and violence (מֵרָצָה [merusa])" (Jer 22: 13-17)³

"put away violence (מִסָּוֵה) and oppression (דָּש) . . . cease your evictions of my people. . . you shall have honest balances, an honest ephah, and an honest bath" (Ezek 45:9-12)

The following paragraphs will analyze these so-called white-collar crimes, which the prophets nevertheless considered to be violent, under three headings: namely, confiscation, fraud, and injustice. This explanatory but not exhaustive article examines the passage above from Micah 6, Jeremiah 22, and Ezekiel 45 as well as other verses associated thematically and terminologically.

Confiscation

In Ezek 45:9, portions of which have already been cited, Yahweh commanded Israel's rulers to stop evicting his people from their land and confiscating it. Those leaders were supposed to avoid exercising their power in such a violent (מִסָּוֵה) and oppressive (דָּש) manner. Compare v 8: "my princes shall no longer oppress (יָנִי [yana]) my people; but they shall let the house of Israel have the land according to their tribes." (Vv 10-12 go on to exhort honest measurements--and give a preview of the next section, on fraud, in this paper. God's messenger considered the utilization of unjust and inaccurate scales and standards of measure also to be violent and oppressive.)

Rulers are the group addressed again in Ezek 46:18. Yahweh did not permit them to commit the violence of alienating other people's property: "the prince shall not take any of the inheritance of the people, thrusting (יָנִי) them out of their holding. . . so that none of my people shall be dispossessed of their holding." Ezekiel 22:25 shifts from the prescriptive to the descriptive but continues to speak about the violent actions of rulers. The prophet deplored the fact that "they have taken treasure and precious things." Private property was not immune from the ravages of these lion-like princes. It has been suggested that they led citizens blindly into situations (battle, rebellion, etc.) that brought death and confiscation.⁴

Isaiah lent his voice to deprecating the abuse of power by rulers and described their violence this way: "It is you who have devoured the

³ Presumably "oppression" (‘oseq) corresponds with "dishonest gain; and "violence" (merusa) with "shedding innocent blood."

⁴ R. H. Alexander, "Ezekiel," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (12 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6.849.

vineyard; the spoil (גְזֵלָה [gezela]) of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?" (3:14-15). It may be that the poor were compelled to turn their small share of the harvest over to the leaders, or perhaps real estate belonging to peasants was being forcefully snatched by the elite.⁵

In Mic 2:1-2, 9 the focus is no longer on the rulers but on other members of society. The verses refer to those with sufficient economic, judicial, or political influence to have accomplished the goals of a blatant land-grabbing policy (note v 1--"it is in their power"). With a violent disregard for justice, they greedily plotted shady tricks and schemed exploitative business dealings in order to commandeer and misappropriate property: "They covet fields, and seize (גָזַל [gazal]) them; houses, and take them away; they oppress (עָשָׂה [asaq]) householder and house, people and their inheritance. . . . The women of my people you drive out from their pleasant houses; from their young children you take away my glory forever." The weak were cruelly and forcibly deprived of a share in their beautiful heritage by the strong. Through misuse of power the rapacious owned much land which was not rightly theirs, even if legally secured.⁶

The final pair of passages in this section on confiscation is less straightforward: "deliver from the hand of the oppressor (עֲשׂוּק/עָשָׂה [asoq]) anyone who has been robbed (גָזַל)" (Jer 21:12; 22:3). It does seem likely, however, that the oppressor's robbery mentioned here was a property crime and not a personal crime--that is, not larceny from the person or presence of another, rather theft of a type such as embezzlement or burglary. The misdeeds characterized would then not have involved physical assault. The pericope's horizons are certainly expanded toward other forms of abuse of power by Jeremiah's further order in v 3 to the king to "do no wrong (יָדָה) or violence (עָשָׂה) to the alien, the orphan, and the widow." (They are commonly named among those whose rights were easily disregarded because they could not defend themselves against an oppressor.) Yet the remainder of v 3 returns from specifying the ill treatment and violation of the defenseless to describing physical assault--namely, the shedding of innocent blood.

Fraud

Micah 6:10-12 introduces us to the "violence" (עָשָׂה) of swindling. Verse 10 names the scant or short measure; v 11 identifies wicked or

⁵ Respectively, J. D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 1-33* (WBC 24; Waco: Word, 1985) 43; and D. N. Premnath, "Comparative and Historical Sociology in Old Testament Research: A Study of Isaiah 3:12-15," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 17 (1985) 33-34.

⁶ W. Brueggemann, "Land: Fertility and Justice," *Theology of the Land* (B. F. Evans and G. D. Cusack, eds.; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1987) 53.

misleading scales as well as dishonest or fraudulent weights. The unscrupulous elite in their aggressive greed have cheated their kindred human beings. The "lies" and "deceit" of v 12 might, in fact, suggest that the powerful deprived their social inferiors of legal rights and abused the poor and powerless through bending the law to their own advantage.⁷ (If so, we receive a foretaste of the article's final section on injustice in the courtroom.) In any case, the passage definitely depicts the making of a dishonest penny by riding roughshod over others--especially the downtrodden.

Similar sentiments are expressed in Amos 8:4-6. Businesspersons paid no heed to the concerns of the peasant population but exploited them. This is the violence of gain at any cost. "We will make the ephah small and the shekel great, and practice deceit with false balances . . . selling the sweepings of the wheat" (vv 5, 6). Such is called trampling on the needy and bringing the poor of the land to ruin in v 4. It ultimately resulted in their enslavement (v 6; compare the slavery of 2:6-7). The scenario probably unfolded in the following way: the poor could not pay for grain bought to consume or sow; they ran into debt, piled up due interest payments, and had to sell themselves into bondage to work off their liabilities.⁸

Likewise, the prophet Hosea preached against unholy commerce: "A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress (קִשְׁפָּה)" (12:7 [MT = 12:8]). Yahweh considered the use of false scales to be oppressive and violent. It distressed him to see the crushing of the needy (note Amos 4:1, with קִשְׁפָּה and רָצַח (*rasas*) or the extortion of neighbors (note Ezek 22:12, with קִשְׁפָּה) through force or through fraud.

Malachi 3:5 switches gears slightly. The economic corruption reported there is that done by "those who oppress קִשְׁפָּה) the hired workers in their wages." Whether the laborers were merely underpaid or whether their wages were actually held back is unclear.⁹ The verse goes on to associate the hired workers with widows and orphans as well as aliens--the last three of which we encountered earlier. They often suffered underhanded dealings (e.g., Jer 7:6, with קִשְׁפָּה; Ezek 22:7;

⁷ L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) 378; and D. W. Baker, T. D. Alexander, and B. K. Waltke, *Obadiah, Jonah, Micah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 23a; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1988) 197.

⁸ B. Lang, "The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel," *JSOT* 24 (1982) 56-57.

⁹ J. G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries 24; n.p.: InterVarsity, 1972) 244. P. A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987) 293-94, opted for the latter.

with עֲשֵׂק and נִנְה), in particular because of their "relatively insecure relational environment."¹⁰

In the oracle at Jer 22:13-17, the big-shot builder might not have been a king¹¹ but was clearly building like one. The rights of others in the community were violated since the guilty party made neighbors work for nothing, i.e., he did not give them their wages (v 13). It could even be that they were enslaved;¹² this would presuppose a monarch as builder, who was disrupting the well-being of the whole people. Such callous exploitation of workers for dishonest gain is lumped together in v 17 with shedding innocent blood and with practicing oppression (עֲשֵׂק) and violence (מְרוֹצָה). (The recollection that justice and fairness had been administered appropriately by the builder's "father" on behalf of the lowly and needy [vv 15-16] leads directly toward the next section of this essay.)

Injustice

Originally the words intended by "these" in Zech 7:7 may have been the saying of vv 9-10: "Render true judgments . . . do not oppress (עֲשֵׂק) the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor." The verses would then have summed up the message of the preexilic prophets. As things now stand, however, Zechariah preaches this to his hearers as a fresh set of instructions from Yahweh.¹³ Judgments in the courts were supposed to be consistent with the facts of the case and faithful to the stipulations of the law. The system should honor due process. It could be that the exhortation about administering justice was meant to apply particularly to the widows, orphans, resident aliens, and indigents.¹⁴ Fairness ought not be denied them even though they did not have enough prestige to insist upon it. Their precarious societal status made them an easy mark for those violent decision makers whose consciences did not bother them. Deciding against the powerful in favor of the widow, orphan, or alien at court required extraordinary scrupulousness. Yet Yahweh called for exactly that.

¹⁰ M. Schluter, "Relational Justice," seminar conducted at the Fifth Triennial Convocation of Prison Fellowship International, Arlington, VA, 7-12 August 1995.

¹¹ See R P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 427-28.

¹² W. J. Wessels, "Towards a Historical-Ideological Understanding of Jeremiah 22:13-19; *Old Testament Essays* (Pretoria) 2 (1984) 72.

¹³ P. J. Scalise, "An Exegesis of Zechariah 7:4-14 in Its Canonical Context," *Faith and Mission* 3 (1986) 62.

¹⁴ So D. E. Gowan, "Wealth and Poverty in the Old Testament: The Case of the Widow, the Orphan, and the Sojourner," *Int* 41 (1987) 347, 350.

Other passages in this section make explicit what Zech 7:9-10 leave implicit at best. Isaiah 1:23 declares concerning the princes: "Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come before them." These weak, underprivileged, and defenseless members of the community were deprived of the justice due them in legal assemblies. The court officials who were expected to prevent such infringement were the very ones who accepted bribes from the rich as an inducement to render unjust verdicts.¹⁵ In 10:1-2, the prophet condemned the violence of individuals "who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob (לָרָב) the poor of my people of their right." He had in mind both the enacting of oppressive laws against the helpless--widows and orphans are identified in v 2--and the returning of unjust decisions based on existing laws. Again, according to Jer 5:28 there were scoundrels who "do not judge with justice the cause of the orphan. . . they do not defend the rights of the needy." If the REB is correct, then an earlier clause in the verse speaks of lies that were told in the court but overlooked by the judge (perhaps for a fee) so that justice was subverted by the powerful: "they turn a blind eye to wickedness."

Amos railed against the violence of courts which defrauded poor people by declaring their cases against rich folks to be without merit or by preferring a rich plaintiff over a poor defendant: "you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy at the gate" (5:12). Compare v 7; "you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!" (This same text also criticizes confiscation: i.e., charging tenant farmers too much for use of the land¹⁶--"you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain" [v 11.] Similarly, Isaiah voiced a dire warning for policy makers "who cause a person to lose a lawsuit, who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate, and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right" (29:21). Yahweh abhorred those with political and juridical authority who used their power to prey on the innocent. In fact, he placed whoever perpetrates injustice (v 21) in the same class with whoever perpetrates violence (v 20).¹⁷

¹⁵ E. W Davies, *Prophecy and Ethics: Isaiah and the Ethical Traditions of Israel* (JSOTSup 16; Sheffield; JSOT, 1981) 93-94, 110. "

¹⁶ D. A Hubbard, *Joel and Amos: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries; Leicester: InterVarsity, 1989) 172.

¹⁷ W. A M. Beuken, "Isa 29;15-24: Perversion Reverted," *The Scriptures and the Scrolls: Studies in Honour of A. s. van der Woude on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday* (F: Garcia Martinez, A Hilhorst, and C. J. Labuschagne, eds.; VTSup 49; Leiden: Brill, 1992) 50 & 55.

Conclusion

Trustfully this study has helped us to become cognizant of and concerned about the violence inherent in white-collar crimes. Unrighteousness in the political, judicial, and economic areas of society is just as serious as are so-called "street crimes." The person who practices abuse of power (e.g., confiscation, fraud, injustice) deserves as much reproach as the one who practices physical assault (e.g., robbery or murder).¹⁸

¹⁸ H. Zehr, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1990) 137; 153.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College
4010 Gaston Ave.
Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu