I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
— Romans 12:1
Introduction

While the phrase “prophetic imagination” never occurs in the text of scripture, these two words provide a critical key for understanding the message of scripture.

Imagination

We often think of imagination as a form of fantasy, as fanciful thoughts or mental constructs which contrast with the actual realities which frame our lives. We imagine ourselves to be rich, famous, or exciting in contrast with our actual ordinariness. We imagine ourselves to be healthy as we struggle against illness. We imagine loved ones who have died to be alive even as we stand at their graves. We imagine the world to be a better place, where poverty and war aren’t so pervasive and people aren’t so selfish. We usually regard these imagined thoughts as mere wishful thinking which offers momentary escape from cold, hard reality.

In the Bible and in the histories linked to the biblical texts, however, imagination is more than wishful thinking and other than momentary escape. In scripture imagination is generative, perceiving reality differently from the dominant perception and inspiring behavior accordingly. In the Bible imagination is the portal for seeing the hand of God, the means for hearing the word of God, and the link between our deepest selves and our eternal destinies.

Without divinely inspired imagination, there is no seeing, hearing, or conceptualizing the Reign of God, only the flat reality of the world as given. The Bible challenges the usual distinction between imagination and reality with the view that reality as we know it is in fact the struggle between competing imaginations—between Pharaoh and Moses, between unfaithful Hebrew royalty and the eighth-century prophets, between Babylonian captors and the prophets of the Exile, and between the politico-religious establishment of the first-century and Jesus of Nazareth.¹

Prophecy

While often construed in futuristic terms, biblical prophecy is not primarily foretelling, although the future remains an important frame of reference for all of the prophets. Nor is prophecy simply forth-telling, focused on specific issues or immediate crises. Over and above specific public crises, the prophets address the enduring crisis of the subjugation of the people of God to the dominant culture. Even as the prophets identify specific issues like the oppression of the poor, their central focus is the loss of faithful identity which underlies these issues.

The central task of prophetic ministry is to evoke and nurture a faithful consciousness which is alternative to the dominant culture which surrounds us.² In doing so, the prophets criticize the dominant culture and energize the people of God to live in faithful covenant, which the alternative consciousness allows us to imagine and to experience.³

The Alternative Community of Moses

The prophetic tradition in scripture is rooted in the story of Moses, which ultimately depicts the contest between the divinely inspired alternative consciousness of Moses and the royal consciousness of Pharaoh, who personifies the dominant culture. The story begins in earnest in the Midianite wilderness with God’s appearance to Moses in the burning bush and the report of cries and groaning:

I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians. . . . I have seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt. (Exod. 3:7-10)

The alternative consciousness imagined here is that slaves can and will be freed and delivered to a promised land “flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:8). At this point in the story, the alternative consciousness exists only in God’s imagination. Moses is exiled in Midian, and the people cannot see beyond the imperial reality which holds them hostage:

[The Egyptians] made the people of Israel serve with rigor, and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field; in all their work they made them serve with rigor. (Exod. 1:13-14)

The dramatic events which follow tell the story of Moses and the children of Israel being liberated from the royal consciousness of Pharaoh and claimed by the alternative consciousness of God. Like the Exodus narrative itself, their transformation is halting, uneven, and full of dramatic twists and turns. The hold of the royal consciousness on its subjects is not easily displaced, even if the alternative consciousness promises freedom in a land flowing with milk and honey. The promise seems too good to be true, and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob appears no match for the empire or its gods. Seeking credentials and authority for an impossible task, Moses asks God’s name but receives only the enigmatic reply, “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be,” the four Hebrew letters rendered in English, “Yahweh” (Exod. 3:13-14).

Walter Brueggemann, one of the foremost biblical scholars of our time, authored The Prophetic Imagination in 1978, and a revised second edition was published by Fortress Press in 2001. Because of the enduring power and influence of Dr. Brueggemann’s central thesis on biblical studies and biblical ethics over the course of thirty-plus years, we attempt in the following text to summarize and interpret faithfully the leading ideas and themes of The Prophetic Imagination for our current context with the hope that readers who have never read the full text will take the opportunity to do so. (Cover art: Arthur Boyd, Moses Leading the People) H. Joseph Haag

¹ In doing so, the prophets energize the people of God to live in faithful covenant, which the alternative consciousness allows us to imagine and to experience.³

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After Moses and Aaron present signs to the elders, the people begin to trust the messenger and the One who promises deliverance. Trust wanes when Moses’ first confrontation with Pharaoh only intensifies their hardship and oppression. God reaffirms the promise, and when Moses and Aaron are 80 and 83 years old respectively, they confront Pharaoh again and demand the release of the Israelites. After the magicians of Pharaoh match the first two signs Moses offers to demonstrate Yahweh’s power, devastating plagues assault the Nile, the land, and the first-born of the Egyptians. Only then does Pharaoh relent and grant freedom to the captives, who are prepared for deliverance with the institution of the Passover.

The familiar story summarized so briefly here encompasses over one-third of the Book of Exodus and constitutes the heart and soul of Hebrew history and theology. It is not an overstatement to say that everything prior to the Exodus in Hebrew scripture looks forward and everything after the Exodus looks back. In several ways, this crucial narrative describes the birth and meaning of the prophetic imagination.

First, the break between the prophetic imagination and the royal conscious in the story of the Exodus is fully two-dimensional; it has a theological cause and addresses a socio-political reality. Focusing on one or the other dimension misconstrues both the story and prophetic tradition. Yahweh, absolutely free and beholden to no other, hears the cries and groans of slaves and calls Moses to deliver them from their oppression and bondage. No power in heaven and earth could thwart God’s intercession in behalf of these slaves. Oppression and exploitation evokes a redemptive response, and this response proves to be characteristic of Yahweh. The theological cause and the socio-political reality are inextricably yoked, and in this story which epitomizes Hebrew scripture, one cannot be comprehended apart from the other.

Moses dismantles the religious claims of the royal consciousness by exposing the gods that protect Pharaoh’s prerogatives are nothing more than impotent imperial creations. They cannot protect the Nile, the land, or the lives of Egyptian royalty. Each plague demonstrates that they have no power and are not gods. At the same time, the politics of oppression and exploitation are countered by the politics of justice and compassion. Slaves are freed and delivered to a promised land, and all of the theologically sanctioned might of the empire cannot prevent their deliverance. In the end, Pharaoh’s hosts, chariots, and horsemen are trapped in the marsh mud of the Nile delta as the freed slaves escape to the Sinai wilderness. As Brueggemann puts it,

Moses introduced not just the new free God and not just a message of social liberation. Rather, his work came precisely at the engagement of the religion of God’s freedom with the politics of human justice.

Second, the triumph of the prophetic imagination over the royal consciousness in the story of the Exodus is, humanly speaking, completely unanticipated and wholly unlikely. Against overwhelming odds and a social reality which appears to be their destiny, neither Moses nor the Hebrew slaves are able to contemplate freedom or deliverance. The empire is impervious to change, and the imperial gods and military exist to protect royal power and privilege. Bricks have to be made; slaves exist to make them; and the dominant culture serves to enforce the status quo. Protesting this given order is heretical and evokes swift and certain retribution. Who is Moses to say otherwise? Until Someone Else says otherwise, the royal consciousness is reality, fixed and immovable. Only when Yahweh’s voice is uttered and heard could an alternative reality be imagined, and only when this voice persists through darkness and struggle is the royal consciousness
revealed to be presumptive fiction. The triumph of the prophetic imagination in the Exodus is an act of sheer and amazing grace.

Third, the triumph of the prophetic imagination over the royal consciousness in the story of Moses moves forward through criticizing and energizing. The dominant culture is uncritical, defensive, and resistant to change. Change must come from the outside, from the critical voice of prophet. Beginning in lament with the groans and cries of the slaves before God, the prophetic voice rises in Moses’ protests before Pharaoh and reaches a crescendo in the plagues’ deconstruction of the empire.

Yet real transformation requires more than criticizing alone. Even with the empire on its heels and even when Pharaoh relents, the people have to be energized to escape the chains of their own inertia. Energizing is closely related to hope, specifically, to the hope that something new is at hand. In the story of the Exodus, energizing and hope arise from the embrace of an inscrutable darkness, in that wilderness moment when Moses sees the burning bush and hears the voice. Without this holy intrusion in the darkness and Moses’ willing response to that which he cannot understand, control, or name, the Hebrew slaves remain slaves. Energizing comes when the prophet discerns that Someone is on the move in the darkness who is invisible to the empire and who is more powerful than the gods who pretend to rule the light. For Moses and Israel, energizing comes not out of social strategy or political planning, but out the willing embrace of God’s freedom to redeem and to save.6

This is the amazing, good news of the prophetic imagination: God is for us, even if and because we are enslaved to apparently indomitable powers. Regarding the birth and meaning of the prophetic imagination, the story of Moses embodies several important truths:

- God is able to raise up prophets as they respond to God’s voice in the darkness, in those critical junctures in which all hope seems to be lost.
- Prophets instill an alternative consciousness by reclaiming specific memories. In the story of the Exodus, Moses and his alternative community come to believe that the God who promised deliverance from Egypt is none other than the God who made promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The alternative community is reconstituted through faithful memory, and memory leads to hope.
- The experience of God in the darkness and the reclaiming of faithful memory become the engines for criticizing and energizing, for breaking with the dominant culture and finding an alternative consciousness which is rooted in living covenant with God. In this transformation the twin pillars of the royal consciousness, static religion and the politics of oppression and exploitation, are displaced by the corresponding pillars of the prophetic imagination, the religion of the freedom God and the politics of compassion and justice.7

**The Royal Consciousness in Israel**

The alternative community of Moses lasted for about 250 years. While this period was tumultuous, marked by wilderness wanderings, fitful entry into the promised land, and halting settlement into tribal groups in Canaan, the Hebrew confederation by and large reflected the essential elements of the prophetic imagination which had propelled it into being. The overriding story of this period is that the people remain secure in the promises of God when they respect their covenant with God. The politics of justice and compassion, learned in slavery and ensconced in the law and commandments, provided the frame for community life. Crises arose and covenant transgressions occurred, but through it all, the community embodied and perpetuated the prophetic tradition.

This brief history of the confederacy prefaces the emergence of a radical shift of the foundations of Israel’s life and faith around 962 B.C. While no doubt begun and encouraged by David, evidence of the shift is unambiguously clear during the reign of Solomon. Solomon’s program of state-sponsored syncretism spelled the steady abandonment of Moses’ radical vision, as evidenced by the following developments:

- A harem, which served not only to facilitate political marriages, but also to enhance the fertility of the dynasty (I Kings 11:1-8).
- A system of tax districts which made state control more effective by displacing and diminishing the identity of clans and tribes and by facilitating a shift from local and domestic economies to the political economy of the state (I Kings 4:7-19).
- An elaborate bureaucracy, which imitated larger empires and institutionalized forms of technical reason that served to protect state interests and to deflect questions of justice and compassion (I Kings 4:1-6; 9:23).
- A standing army which had the effect that armaments no longer depended on public opinion, authentic community interests, and the rush of God’s Spirit (I Kings 4:4; 9:22; 10:26).
- A fascination with wisdom, which imitated larger empires and attempted to rationalize reality by packaging it in manageable portions (I Kings 4:29-34; 10:1-5, 23-25; Prov. 1:1; 10:1).8

While these developments from other perspectives can and have been characterized as progress, from the standpoint of Moses’ prophetic imagination they represent a distinct regression to pre-Mosaic, pre-prophetic imperial reality. Solomon’s regime became resistant to change and inhospitable to the prophetic notions of...
alternative consciousness, criticizing, and energizing. The corrective possibilities of faithful memory and an imaginative future gave way to a static present in which everything was already given. This fundamental shift featured three characteristic dimensions: affluence, oppressive social policy, and static religion.

Affluence

Solomon’s reign was characterized by unprecedented affluence:

Judah and Israel were as many as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy. Solomon ruled over all the kingdoms from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt; they brought tribute and served Solomon all the days of his life. Solomon’s provision for one day was thirty cors of fine flour, and sixty cors of meal, ten fat oxen, and twenty pasture-fed cattle, a hundred sheep, besides harts, gazelles, roebucks, and fatted fowl. (1 Kings 4:20-23)

By contrast, the alternative community of Moses—whether in Egypt, the wilderness, or the early confederation—was characterized by various degrees of scarcity and uncertainty. The affluence depicted here was unparalleled and served to insulate the regime from criticism and change. Even though Israel’s wealth was unevenly distributed, it was enjoyed by enough citizens who mattered so as to stifle questions of justice and compassion. Solomon knew what kings have always known, that satiation mutes discontent and that consumerism trumps covenanting.9

Oppressive Social Policy

Affluence during Solomon’s regime was made possible in part by oppressive social policy, and fundamental to this policy was the practice of forced labor. Whether conscription into forced labor applied to Israelites and non-Israelites alike is not clear (cf. 1 Kings 5:13-18; 9:22), but it was unmistakably the regime’s policy to mobilize and claim workers in service of the court and its extravagant needs. For Solomon, the order of the state had become the prevailing agenda to which questions of justice and freedom were systematically subordinated. Tellingly, oppressive social policy was central to the dispute between Solomon’s rival successors (1 Kings 12:4).10

Static Religion

Affluence and oppressive social policy during Solomon’s reign were complemented by a static religion in which the sovereignty of God became subordinate to the purposes of the king. The elaborate construction of the Jerusalem temple, made possible by forced labor, images and symbolizes this development. While there is always a tension in scripture between God’s freedom and accessibility, with Solomon the tension was resolved in the interest of accessibility. Domiciled in the temple, God became accessible to the king and those to whom the king granted access. This arrangement served the interlocking functions of sanctioning the king’s agenda and making sure that no marginal person could approach God except on the king’s terms. Solomon never doubted the importance of religion, but his was a religion in which there was vanishing appeal for the marginalized against the dominant culture.

In Solomon, the royal consciousness methodically countered the prophetic imagination of Moses:

- The economics of affluence countered the economics of equality. The depiction of affluence cited in 1 Kings 4:20-23 contrasts sharply with the gathering of manna in the wilderness: “He that gathered much had nothing over, and he that gathered little had no lack; each gathered according to what he could eat” (Exod. 16:18).
- The politics of oppression counters the politics of justice: “And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. . . . For they are my servants, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves” (Lev. 25:35-42).
- The religion of God’s accessibility countered the religion of God’s freedom: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But . . . you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live” (Exod. 33:19-20).

Ironically, Solomon had effected a remarkable continuity with the very Egyptian reality that Moses had sought to counter. It is as though tenth-century Jerusalem was able to forget that the revolution and social experiment of the Exodus had ever happened.11

Jeremiah: Prophetic Criticizing and the Embrace of Pathos

The first question posed by the prophet is not whether an alternative consciousness is realistic, practical, or viable, but whether it is imaginable. Because we are all children of the royal consciousness and in many ways
invested in maintaining the status quo, the first task of the prophetic imagination is simply to imagine, to think a new thought, to allow ourselves to be inspired not by the God domiciled to protect our interests, but by the free God who hears groans and makes promises.

While we often think of the prophets as grim bearers of bad news, it is important to remember that the primary literary form of the prophetic text is poetry rather than prose. The prophets do criticize the dominant culture which co-opts us all, but they do so in the imagined hope of entering God’s alternative future. Whether this future is imminent or distant, the prophets engage in a form of lyrical fantasy which is rooted in the faithful memories of what God has already done and what God is always about. These poetic texts are generative because they envision the end of the dominant culture and the beginning of a more real, substantial, and faithful alternative reality.

The poetry of Jeremiah classically embraces this primary prophetic task. Writing at the end of the seventh and beginning of the sixth centuries B.C., Jeremiah envisions the end of the hollow remains of the Hebrew monarchy and the beginning of Israel’s captivity in Babylonian exile. As stated above, criticizing begins with lament, and Jeremiah laments the end of Israel as the Israelites had known it with unbridled intensity:

My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain!
Oh, the walls of my heart!
My heart is beating wildly;
I cannot keep silent;
for I hear the sound of the trumpet,
the alarm of war.
Disaster follows hard on disaster,
the whole land is laid waste. (Jer. 4:19-20)

Through poetry and symbol, Jeremiah penetrates through the numb denial of the royal consciousness. The king cannot envision the end of the monarchy, the loss of the land, the captivity of the people, or the approach of the Babylonians. In oracle after oracle, Jeremiah recounts centuries of covenant failure and announces the arrival of Nebuchadnezzar. He wears the yoke of captivity (27:1-11), tells the allegory of the potter (18:1-12), and shares the grief of loss even though he knows the end of the dominant culture is richly deserved. Without shrillness, chiding, or reprimanding, Jeremiah engages the community through the language of grief and pathos in mourning their own funeral.

As the end of the Solomonic legacy grew near, denial, pain, and regret prevented any new movement; the covenant was frozen until the numbness was broken. Jeremiah understood that the embrace of endings allows beginnings. In Babylonian exile, the community turned with renewed vigor to the study of the Torah and witnessed the rise of the rabbinic movement, the development of the synagogue, and the eventual completion of the Babylonian Talmud. They left Jerusalem in the shock and awe of the destruction of Solomon’s temple, wondering if it would ever be possible to sing the Lord’s song in a new land and found themselves reinvented decades later in the emergence of Diaspora Judaism. The riddle and insight of biblical faith which comes to life in the prophetic imagination is “that only anguish leads to life, only grieving leads to joy, and only embraced endings permit new beginnings.”

Second Isaiah: Prophetic Energizing and the Emergence of Amazement

If the first task of the prophet is to criticize the dominant culture, the second is to energize the people toward an alternate consciousness. While the ministry of Jeremiah cut through the numb denial of endings, the ministry of Isaiah of Babylon energized the community to new and hopeful beginnings.

Excluding hope is a fundamental characteristic of the royal consciousness, and this exclusion happens on two fronts. First, for those who are denied entry into prosperity by the dominant culture, hopelessness develops because there seems to be little or no prospect for change. The prosperity achieved by Solomon was increasingly closed to large numbers of Israelites, a social issue which looms large in the oracles of the eighth-century prophets (cf. Isa. 1:12-17; Amos 5:10-24). Second, even those who have entry to power and prosperity are denied hope. As Brueggemann explains,

The royal consciousness means to overcome history, and therefore by design the future loses
its vitality and authority. The present ordering, and by derivation the present regime, claims to be the full and final ordering. That claim means there can be no future that either calls the present into question or promises a way out of it. Thus the fulsome claim of the present arrangement is premised on hopelessness. This insidious form of realized eschatology requires persons to live without hope.

As the hosts of Nebuchadnezzar decimated the temple and the capital city in the fall of 587 B.C., the very leaders of the community who were targeted by their conquerors for forced exile found themselves in utter despair:

By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung our lyres. . . . How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? (Ps. 137:1, 2, 4)

The same royal consciousness that could not imagine endings in Jerusalem cannot imagine beginnings in Babylon. The task of prophetic imagination and ministry during the later decades of the exile was to counter despair by means of hopeful and energizing proclamation. This task was embraced with extraordinary lyrical splendor and theological power by the prophet known to biblical scholarship as Second Isaiah (or Isaiah of Babylon). His writings, almost all of which are poetic, are reflected in the canonical text of Isaiah 40-55.

The context of the prophet’s work was the replacement of one dominant culture by another. The Jerusalem regime which had largely forgotten and abandoned the covenant with Yahweh had been replaced by a Babylonian regime for which such covenanting was completely alien. Since neither regime could imagine a future which diminished its own prerogatives, both excluded any hope of change. Isaiah faced the daunting task of instilling energizing hope in a community bereft of hope.

Energizing started with Isaiah’s insightful reading the times. Babylon was on the decline, Persia was on the rise, and the prophet recognized a moment of opportunity to mine of Israel’s memory in several critical ways. First, he makes a stunning announcement:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD’s hand double pardon for all her sins. (Isa. 40:1-2)

The covenant infidelity which had pervaded Israel’s royal consciousness and which Jeremiah insisted had led to destruction and exile is forgiven! The decades-long sense of bewilderment and guilt in Babylon, said the prophet, must give way to God’s amazing capacity to forgive. This theological conviction was not plucked from thin air but recalled from Israel’s deep memories of the One who had heard the cries of slaves in Egypt, who had kept covenant promises, and who had forgiven Israel repeatedly through its entire history as a people.

Second, Isaiah announces that God is at the very center of the landscape from which the exiled community presumed he had fled. Even though it was absurd (because Israel remains in exile) and subversive (because Babylon remains in control) to say so, the prophet declares that the One who seemed to be absent and powerless sits on the throne even while Israel remains in exile and right under the nose of the Babylonians. Once again, the prophet mines Israel’s memory, this time to recollect the enthronement festival which had become an annual ritual during the monarchy. As many of the Psalms bear testimony, the enduring purpose of the festival was to remind the people that Yahweh alone was their rightful king. While the sitting monarch played a central role in the festival and no doubt used it to enlist God for his own purposes, the faithful memory of the ceremony is not lost on Isaiah. No matter who appears to be in control, let there be no doubt about the One who is really in control:

To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness will you compare with him? The idol! A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. . . . Have you not known? Have you not heard? . . . It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; . . . who brings the princes to nought, and makes the riders of the earth as nothing. (Isa. 40:18-19, 21-23)

The hope offered by the prophet has power because it returns the community to its single legitimate reference point, the sovereign faithfulness of God. Only this return is able to expose the closed world of royal definition as fraudulent and to instill amazement in the hearts and minds of those exiled in darkness. The Babylonian gods are the fabrications of the royal consciousness, but Yahweh tirelessly carries the exiles to freedom:

He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable. He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. (Isa 40:30-31)
The Prophetic Imagination
and Jesus of Nazareth

No single description captures the historical or theological reality of Jesus, and orthodox Christians have never understood him simply as a prophet. In the christology of theologian Karl Barth, for example, he is prophet, priest, and king—that and much more in Trinitarian meaning. With this confessional foundation in place, let it be said that the gospels are literally brimming with elements of the prophetic imagination. In his birth, life, death, and resurrection, Jesus embodies the ultimate criticizing of the dominant culture and energizing toward the alternate consciousness of the Kingdom of God.

Birth

In Matthew's account of his birth, Herod's homicidal rage is juxtaposed against the Jeremiah's lamentation: 

Rachel weeping for her children,” (Matt. 2:18, cf. Jer. 31:15). The king who cannot abide change rightly construes the visit from the Magi as threatening and acts heinously to protect his sovereignty. In Luke's account, Mary joyously responds to the visits of Gabriel and Elizabeth by recalling the prophetic overtones of Hannah's prayer:

He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the
imagination of their hearts,
he has put down the mighty
from their thrones,
and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.
(Luke 1:51-53; cf. I Sam. 2:1-10)

Luke also gives us the hopeful poetry of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79) and the story of peasant shepherds blessed with the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth and seeking him out in a Bethlehem stable (Luke 2:1-20). While Caesar Augustus issues a degree and the empire performs a census, the angels sing songs audible only to shepherds.

Matthew emphasizes criticizing in the form of grief, and Luke focuses on energizing through the politics of compassion and justice. Together, both narratives bear witness to an alternative consciousness which gains traction along the margins of society in critical tension with the dominant culture. This tension is reflected in the broad range of emotions which flow through the birth narratives—fear, paranoia, grief, brooding, joy, and amazement.19

The Words and Works of the Kingdom of God

The alternative consciousness of Jesus is the Kingdom of God, the prophetic vision of God's rightful rule marked by covenant fidelity, justice, and compassion. In the gospels the rule of God is invested with a distinct eschatological dimension and carries with it the urgent expectation of endings and beginnings. This sense of urgency is palpable in Mark's use of Second Isaiah (“Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,” Mark 1:3, cf. Isa. 40:3) to interpret John the Baptist's preaching of a baptism of repentance traditionally reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. It appears as well in Mark's summary of Jesus' preaching (“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the gospel,” Mark 1:15) and the blinding pace of Mark's entire narrative. Most notably it appears in Luke's account of Jesus' interpretative reading of the text of Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the acceptable year

Jesus' closing remark is telling: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing,” (Luke 4:21). Clearly something new was at hand which fulfilled ancient expectations and hopes. Deeply embedded in the Torah's concern for the marginalized and consistently leveraged by the prophets against the royal consciousness, the politics of compassion and justice ring loudly through each poetic line and provide an interpretive frame for Jesus' entire ministry.

Just three chapters later in Luke's gospel, the themes of prophetic expectation, compassion, and justice appear again in Jesus' reply to John the Baptist's question, “Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?” (Luke 7:19):

Go tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have
good news preached to them. (Luke 7:22-23)

In his reply Jesus elaborates the message of the synagogue sermon and responds specifically to the messianic reference in the phrase “he who is to come.” The inauguration of the Kingdom of God in the ministry of Jesus was subversive not only to the dominant culture but also to contemporary messianic expectation. Hence the warning to John and to all who witness the Christ event: “And blessed is he who takes no offense at me” (Luke 7:23).

As prophetic criticizing and energizing, Jesus’ teaching and actions can be summarized into several representative categories:

✓ **Forgiveness**—Jesus’ readiness to forgive sin evokes both amazement and resentment (Mark 2:1-11). The people are amazed that he lifted burdens of guilt independently of the socio-religious apparatus which managed forgiveness. The religious authorities’ resentful charge of blasphemy against Jesus for forgiving sins masks a deeper grievance; they were deprived of the enormous social control the apparatus afforded them.

✓ **Sabbath**—Sabbath observance had become a sacred symbol of social settlement and another means of social control for those who managed the detailed array of Sabbath rules. On a number of occasions, Jesus responds to genuine needs on the Sabbath (gathering grain, Mark 2:23-28; healing, Mark 3:1-6) and thus challenges the rules and the rule keepers. The threat Jesus’ poses can be measured by the intensity of the reaction: “The Pharisees went out, and immediately held counsel with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him” (Mark 3:6).

✓ **Table Fellowship**—Jesus’ willingness to eat with social outcasts calls into question the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable and thus between inclusion and exclusion from the dominant social order. Sitting at table with sinners and tax collectors is understood as an expression of welcome and mercy by the outcasts and as a form of criticism by the religious establishment which presided over social stratifications (Mark 2:15-17).

✓ **Healing and Exorcism**—In healing the disabled, the sick, and the demon possessed, Jesus touches those the dominant culture had judged to be untouchable and crosses the boundary between clean and unclean. The threat posed by this boundary violation should be read in the light of stories about Elijah and Elisha (I Kings 17-II Kings 10) in which similar boundaries are crossed in the context of the abuse of royal power and the disenfranchisement of the marginalized.

✓ **Women**—Jesus’ public association with women who were not his kin represented a scandalous breach of contemporary gender boundaries. References in the gospels are numerous. He allows a woman “who was a sinner” to anoint his feet with costly ointment (Luke 7:36-50). He has a long conversation with a Samaritan woman at a public gathering place (John 4:1-26). He seeks out and heals the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25-34). Women are conspicuously included among the traveling companions who witness his public ministry and who eventually become the nucleus of the alternative community of the Kingdom of God (Luke 15:40-41).

✓ **Law**—The opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount frame Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Torah: “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt. 5:17). With unprecedented authority (“You have heard that it was said, . . . but I say to you . . .”), Jesus presses home the true meaning of the commandments and in so doing becomes the new law giver around whom the alternative community of the Kingdom of God is formed (Matt. 5:17-48). Jesus’ reinterpretation was not simply an attack on legalism but also on the self-aggrandizing...
means religious leaders employed to enforce legal observance (Matt. 23:1-36).

- Temple—A defining act of Jesus’ prophetic criticism of the dominant culture was the cleansing of the Temple, one of the few events reported in all four gospels. Management of cultic practice in the Temple was one of the Sanhedrin’s most powerful expressions of social and economic power, and Jesus’ forcible removal of the money changers and vendors struck a deep symbolic and economic blow: “And the chief priests and the scribes heard it and sought a way to destroy him; for they feared him, because all the multitude was astonished at his teaching” (Mark 11:18).

The combined impact of Jesus’ words and works was thus polarized between the authorities and the people. The authorities were threatened; the people were amazed and astonished.20

Compassion

References to Jesus’ compassion permeate the entire gospel tradition. When Jesus feeds the multitude, Mark says that “he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mark 6:34). When still another mass feeding is reported later in Mark’s narrative, Jesus says, “I have compassion on the crowd because they have been with me now for three days, and have nothing to eat” (Mark 8:2). When he sees a widow who had lost her only son, “he had compassion on her . . . and said, ‘Young man, I say to you, arise.’ . . . and the dead man sat up and began to speak” (Luke 7:13-15). Traveling through the cities and villages of Galilee, “healing every disease and every infirmity, . . . saw the crowds, [and] had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless” (Matt. 35-36). Jesus’ best known parables—the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32)—center on extravagant displays of compassion by an outsider and a grieving father. In the encounter with Mary and Martha after Lazarus’ death, “Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews gathered her brood under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken and desolate.” (Matt. 23:37-38)

But he does something else. He announces the necessity of his own death:

- And he began to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. (Mark 8:31)

This prediction is repeated in three consecutive chapters of Mark’s central narrative, and all three predictions are reported by Matthew and Luke. Clearly, the gospel writers and the early church were convinced that Jesus’ self-understanding included this conviction regarding the necessity of his own death. As is the case with the Christ event as a whole, Jesus’ voluntary death has been understood by Christians in manifold ways over the centuries, but in this context we focus on its significance with regard to the prophetic imagination.

In disparate circumstances and with varying degrees of pathos, all prophets declare the demise of the dominant culture and the emergence of an alternative consciousness inspired by God. But here, as Brueggemann frames it, something more is at hand:
Rather, we might see in the crucifixion of Jesus the ultimate act of prophetic criticism in which Jesus announces the end of a world of death . . . and takes the death into his own person. Therefore we say that the ultimate criticism is that God embraces the death that God’s people must die.22

Like the disciples, we are not sure we want any part of this death, for it means that insofar as we have a stake in the survival of the royal consciousness, as we surely all do, we too must die. In this way we can more fully understand Peter’s rebuke of Jesus after the first passion prediction and Jesus’ sharp response (Mark 8:32-33) and also the disciples’ argument about greatness which followed the third prediction (Mark 10:35-45). The way of the cross—the image of life in the shape of death and power in the form of the suffering servant—is foreign to the dominant culture, and to the extent we imbibe in the royal consciousness, alien to us all.

The long tradition of prophetic criticism finds its ultimate fulfillment in this story of fullness through self-emptying and dominion through the yielding of dominion. The way of the cross is God’s antithesis to the dominant culture’s thesis, the very thing the free God does that kings cannot do.23

**Resurrection**

The resurrection is God’s “yes” to Jesus, but in making even this straightforward claim, language fails Trinitarian reality, for we must also say with Paul, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor. 5:19). From the standpoint of the prophetic imagination, the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate act of prophetic energizing in which the apparent triumph of the royal consciousness over the alternative consciousness of Jesus is revealed to be specious and ironic. The disciples who were cowed, defeated, and scattered by Jesus’ death are empowered and reunited by his resurrection. The powers who seemed in total control throughout Jesus’ arrest, humiliation, and crucifixion are shown to be God’s unwitting instruments in the light of his resurrection. In resurrection, the slain Lamb reigns over a new Kingdom which comes in power on the winds of Pentecost.

Led by the Spirit, the early church captured the radical alternative consciousness of Jesus in the words of a hymn: “Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, . . . and being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross . . . Therefore God has highly exalted him . . . that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, . . . and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:5-11). In this ancient doxology, the prophetic imagination comes alive and the Church finds its true identity.24

**Conclusions**

First, the embodiment of the prophetic imagination in the lives of heroic figures in scripture might be taken to mean that prophetic ministry finds its primary expression in the stories of famous saints and social movements. While the witness of Dietrich Bonhoeffer against the Third Reich and of Martin Luther King, Jr. against racism are indeed exemplary, prophetic ministry is not well understood in the genre of the extraordinary. Rather, the prophetic imagination is a mindset which perceives and responds to the movement of God at all times and in all places. This is to say that the heart of the prophetic imagination resides in small, faithful steps which are punctuated in real time by doubt, apprehension, and uncertainty. This is also to say that prophetic ministry is not limited to those specific ministries which penetrate the community with God’s compassion and justice but extends to every aspect of ministry and life—preaching, teaching, evangelism, discipleship, and budget planning.

Second, prophetic ministry counters the numbness of the dominant culture to pain and suffering through grief and lament. Because we are to varying degrees invested in the dominant culture, we grieve not only for those who suffer but also for the death of our own complicit lives. While almost no one in a feel-good, consumer-driven age embraces grief and lament, the ministries of the biblical prophets remind us that loss is the prerequisite of hope and that the language of grief and lament prepares us for the language of amazement and joy.
Third, the limits to prophetic ministry are not set by our lack of understanding or even by the dominant culture’s opposition. The real limits are set by our own complicity in the dominant culture, by our failure to believe the very truth we proclaim, and by our stubborn participation in the very evils we oppose.  

As Walter Brueggemann observes, it takes little imagination to locate ourselves in the dominant culture:

Ourselves in an economics of affluence in which we are so well off that pain is not noticed and we can eat our way around it;

Ourselves in a politics of oppression in which the cries of the marginal are not heard or are dismissed as the noises of kooks and traitors;

Ourselves in a religion of immanence and accessibility, in which God is so present to us that his abrasiveness, his absence, his banishment are not noticed. . . .

Perhaps you are like me, so enmeshed in this reality that another way is nearly unthinkable. The dominant history . . . of our own time consists in briefcases and limousines and press conferences and quotas and new weaponry systems. . . . In the imperial world of Pharaoh and Solomon, the prophetic alternative is a bad joke either to be squelched by force or ignored in satiation. But we are a haunted people because we believe the bad joke is rooted in the character of God himself, a God who is not the reflection of Pharaoh or of Solomon. He is a God with a name of his own, which cannot be uttered by anyone but him. He is not the reflection of any, for he has his own person and retains that all to himself. He is a God uncredentialed in the empire, unknown in the courts, unwelcome in the temple. And his history begins in his attentiveness to the cries to the marginal ones. He, unlike his royal regents, is one whose person is presented as passion and pathos, the power to care, the capacity to weep, the energy to grieve and then to rejoice. The prophets after Moses know that his caring, weeping, grieving, and rejoicing will not be outflanked by royal hardware or royal immunity because this one is indeed God.

If we are to be prophetic, we must acknowledge and admit that we bear a conflicted message and engage in a conflicted ministry. In so doing, we are reminded that the radical faith necessary for prophetic ministry is not an achievement but a gift for which we must wait, watch, and pray.

Notes


2 Ibid., p. 3.
3 Ibid., pp. 1-6.
4 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
5 Ibid., p. 7.
6 Ibid., pp. 9-16.
7 Ibid., p. 19.
8 Ibid., pp. 22-24.
9 Ibid., pp. 26-27.
10 Ibid., pp. 27-28.
11 Ibid., pp. 28-32.
12 Ibid., pp. 39-41.
13 Ibid., pp. 45-48, 56.
14 Ibid., p. 56.
15 Ibid., pp. 59-63.
16 Ibid., p. 60.