

Ethical Conduct

Cease to do evil; learn to do good.
(Isaiah 1:16b–17a)

As intermediaries, the prophets were responsible for making known to people God's commands and requirements. When people failed and fell into sin, infidelity, and idolatry, prophets were authorized to call people to account. In the same way that earlier prophets held kings accountable for their conduct (for example, Nathan's and David's sins of adultery and murder; Ahijah's and Jeroboam's idolatry; Elijah's and Ahab's acquisition of Naboth's vineyard), the latter prophets hold kings and the ruling class, the wealthy, priests, prophets and other leaders, as well as the entire populace responsible for their actions. As watchmen and guardians of Israel's moral life, prophets frequently warned the people that their conduct, if unchanged, would bring punishment. With alarming frequency, in great detail, and with striking inventiveness, the prophets denounced Israel's sinful conduct. The catalog of moral failure recorded by the prophets seems exhaustive, everything from murder to oppression, from social injustice to sexual misconduct, from religious impurity to breach of international treaties. The catalog of wrongdoing includes, but is not limited to, idolatry, murder, lying, robbery, extortion, violence, oppression, slavery, bribery, perjury, false witness, neglect of the poor, and maltreatment of orphans and widows. Some of the terms used to describe all this are *evil, wickedness, sin, iniquity, wrong, unrighteousness, defilement, rebellion, transgression, corruption, villainy*. These and other terms occur throughout the prophetic books and indicate the persistent prophetic concern for ethical conduct. At the same time that prophets denounced sin, they also prescribed right conduct, such as caring for orphans, widows, and the poor, feeding the hungry, and releasing those unjustly bound, to name a few (for example, Isa 1:17; 58:1–10).

A key prophetic insight is that ethical conduct is an integral part of authentic religion. While worship of God in the religious cult is important, it is not the only (or even the primary) measure of religious conduct. The prophet Samuel first announced this theme when he reminded King Saul that obedience to God's commands was more pleasing to God than sacrifice (1 Sam 15:22). Subsequent prophets, as spokesmen for God, called people to obedience and announced precisely how people should—and should not—treat one another.

The standards or norms for judging ethical behavior are not uniform in all the prophets. Some are covenant centered while others seem to have in mind basic standards of human decency. But as a group, the prophets testify to the centrality of ethical conduct as an essential component of

authentic religion. It is not enough to pray and worship—people must live and act ethically. Religious rites are no substitute for right conduct.

Justice

What does the LORD require of you but to do justice?
(Micah 6:8)

One of the key ethical demands is justice in the social realm. Prophetic concern for social justice derives from two sources. The first is a shared cultural expectation found throughout the ancient Near East. Reaching across the various cultures and time periods, justice was a requirement of kings and an expectation of the gods (see chapter 2, "Gods and Heavenly Rule," and "Kings and Earthly Rule"). It is classically phrased as care for the widow, the orphan, the alien, and the poor (for example, Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5; Jer 22:3; Ezek 22:7). Law codes in Egypt, Canaan, Assyria, and Babylonia all contain very explicit provisions in which care for the most vulnerable in society is codified. Israel was heir to this tradition.

The second source for Israel's concern for justice is its own history. As a people once oppressed as slaves in Egypt, God delivered them and freed them from oppression. As a consequence, they are to refrain from oppressing others: "You shall not oppress a resident alien; you know the heart of an alien, for **you were aliens** in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9). The LORD is the personal patron and protector of the vulnerable:

For **the LORD** your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who **executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers**, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut 10:17–19)

The conviction that justice is a constitutive element of authentic religion persists into the New Testament as well: "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world" (Jas 1:27). According to Jesus, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the imprisoned will be the criteria for judgment on the last day (Matt 25:31–46).

The Hebrew term for social justice is the expression "justice and righteousness." Readers should be alert to these combined terms, which sometimes appear as "righteousness and justice" or are divided between the two half-lines in poetry: