

**A Prophetic Community Today:
Imaginary Visionaries and Social Actionaries for the Third Millennium**

By Zdravko Plantak

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A crisis comes when people least expect it. This this was such a moment. The people of Israel were getting into a serious crisis. It was the time of weeping and anger, of ‘hunger’ and overindulgence, or, as one commentator put it, ‘a tangled tale of manna and quails, greed and prophecy.’¹ Here, what was later to be known as Kibroth-hattaavah, or the Graves of Craving, Israelites wept and complained that the bread of angels was just too plain for them and that they were craving the Egyptian cuisine. The rabble or riffraff of their community had a strong craving for Egyptian fish, and the juicy cucumbers and melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. They complained because the sufficiency of God’s provisions was just too bland and ‘nothing at all but this manna to look at’ (Num 11:6).² This was crisis time for Moses, who ‘heard the people weeping throughout their clans, everyone at the door of his tent’ (vs 10). Crisis time for the people of Israel who wanted to go back into the slavery and bondage of hard labour in Egypt, in order to indulge in leeks and garlic. Crisis time even for God, as his anger was ‘kindled against the people’ and ‘blazed hotly’ (vs 33, 10.) Moses is actually so upset that he asks God to kill him on the spot (vs 15).

The key to this story of crisis is the double answer that God provides to their craving. First there is the angry answer which can be paraphrased as, ‘You want meat. I will give you meat until it comes out of your nostrils and makes you sick’ (vs 20). However, God’s second answer is even more puzzling and extravagant—and almost bizarre—nevertheless more kind. God poured out prophecy: a spirit of prophecy so abundant and unexpected that clergy and laity alike started speaking the word of the Lord. The flood of prophecy in different areas of the camp made Joshua

¹ Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*. (Cambridge, Boston, MA: Cowley Publications, 2001), 202.

² The translation used in this chapter, unless otherwise noted, is the English Standard Version (ESV).

uncomfortable and insecure, as he felt that God's pouring out of the Spirit of prophecy had to be 'administratively controlled'. And he cries to Moses, 'My Lord, Moses, *stop them!*'

But the first *nabhi*—the role model for all other prophets responds, 'Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!' (vs 29).

So, what is the connection between what happened and this outburst of prophecy? The basic function of these prophets, I imagine, is to give God's perspective on the situation. So here, at the Graves of Craving, prophets were trying to reroute the people from craving for meat to gratitude for manna.

But what does this have to do with us? At times we have had a few lonely prophetic voices in the Adventist community, calling us to more generous and giving spirit, to a greater awareness and concern for the poor and disadvantaged, for those 'have-nots' of society that we so easily forget in our craving and greed. And, at times, I hear the rest of the church and maybe some Joshuas among us come and say in a loud voice: 'Moses, my Lord, stop them!' (Num 11:28). But the right response must be the reply of Moses: 'I wish that *all* God's people were prophets.' We, Adventist believers, must call for a clearer prophetic attitude and prophetic vision and imagination than ever before, to accomplish our prophetic ministry and fulfill all necessary prophetic tasks before God will establish a new heaven and a new earth.

Jan Paulsen called for such prophetic in 1988 when I first heard him address the crucial issue of social and prophetic involvement in the world. He has repeated this in different forms and in different forums throughout his career:

There are certain vestiges of injustice, inequality, and deprivation in the world, expressions of the devil's work, which the church as community must expose and take part in discrediting. The evil which is alien to God's kingdom is under God's judgment. . . . God must be able to express himself through the church. Concerns which are God's must by definition be the church's.³

³ Jan Paulsen, 'Social Service/Social Action: Is That Also God's Mission?', (Presentation to the Institute of Missiology, Newbold College, Bracknell, 1988), 4-5. Also quoted in Zdravko Plantak, *The Silent Church: Human Rights and Adventist Social Ethics*, (Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan Press and St Martin's Press [now

Miguel de Cervantes' Don Quixote said to his friend: 'There are only two families in the whole world, my old grandmother used to say, the "haves" and the "have-nots"'.⁴ In addition to this timeless truth which, almost 400 years later, we must still seriously contemplate, I shall suggest that there are also only two ways to respond to this premise and that 'the greatest prophet of all times' addressed this most eloquently in his famous prophetic speech. But we shall not come to this 'prophet' until the end of this essay. Let's start from the beginning of what we know about prophets and about the prophetic role to which we are called at the end time.

It goes almost without saying that the Adventist understanding of the role of prophets and prophecies is primarily of a futuristic and apocalyptic nature. However, predicting the future through an eschatological emphasis was only a secondary role of the prophets of ancient Judaism. Their primary prophetic role was socio-ethical, as they were visionaries of what can be and should be. Since Adventists claim to constitute the prophetic minority at the end of world's history,⁵ we may learn from the prophets in Jewish society, whose role in the view of the biblical evidence was primarily that of social reformers and prophetic visionaries.

The Hebrew term *nabhi* comes from the root of Akkadian form *nabu*, which means 'to call', 'to announce'. The passive form of a noun *nabhi* and a verb *nabu* appears in Hemmurabi law, where *nabi* means 'called' —describing a person who received a divine call without any hereditary rights. In that very sense the Adventist movement and its pioneers were convinced that they received the prophetic calling to be a peculiar people: God's true kingdom in the last days of earth's history.

Nabhi is first used in connection with Abraham (Gen 20:7). However it becomes a popular term with Moses (Deut 34:10). Moses, as the provider of the moral law, becomes a standard of

Palgrave], 1998), 56. Later this presentation was published with the same title in *Adventist Mission Facing the 21st Century: A Reader*, edited by Hugh I. Dunton, et al., (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1990), 142-3.

⁴ Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, II, xx, (1615).

⁵ On Seventh-day Adventism's self-understanding as 'Prophetic Minority' see: Charles Teel, 'Withdrawing Sect, Accommodating Church, Prophesying Remnant: Dilemmas in the Institutionalization of Adventism', (unpublished manuscript of the presentation at the 1980 Theological Consultation for Seventh-day Adventist Administrators and Religion Scholars, Loma Linda University, 1980).

comparison for all other prophets (Deut 18:15ff). As Joseph Blenkinsopp in his remarkable study suggested, ‘prophets continue the role and activity of Moses the proto-prophet.’⁶

Enid Mellor rightly suggested that ‘the biblical prophets wrote about the times in which they lived, and that prediction was less important than warning and exhortations. They believed themselves to be commissioned and inspired by Yahweh, to speak his word to their contemporaries—to point them away from their foolish ways and to show them true religion and morality.’⁷ Mellor, like many modern students of prophetic literature, realizes that prophets had several roles. They were (1) social, political and religious leaders who proclaimed the law; (2) they guarded the spiritual life of the nation by being visionaries. They dared to imagine how life was supposed to be lived with, as the title of Walter Brueggeman’s famous book suggests: *Prophetic Imagination*.⁸ (3) The prophets mediated between the people and their God; and (4) they predicted future judgment, but also hope, that God would remember the most disenfranchised members of society. They were interested in international affairs and the future, as they counseled and influenced social structures of their own generation in their own locality. They may, therefore, be described as theological and social reformers and visionaries.

Elements of prophetic teaching

Four essential elements⁹ emerge from prophetic teachings. First, the warnings which prophets bring are always a *matter of life and death*. We see, for example, in Isaiah 40-55 the serious consequences that awaited Israel: captivity and exile. The prophets called Israel to reject evil and death, and choose God, moral behaviour and, consequently, life.¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30:15-20 provides a clear example of this.

The second element in prophetic teaching deals with *God's care for those who are without proper protection within the existing social structures (i.e. slaves, widows, orphans, debtors, the*

⁶ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 120.

⁷ Enid Mellor, ‘Reading the Prophets Today’, in *Prophets and Poets*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997).

⁸ Walter Brueggeman, *Prophetic Imagination*, (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1978).

⁹ For this division into four elements of prophetic ethics, I am indebted to Walter Harrelson. See his ‘Prophetic Ethics’, in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, (1986), 508-512.

¹⁰ As quoted in Paul Rogat Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living with Convictions in a Cynical Time*, (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1998), 14.

homeless, strangers, etc). Theologian and philosopher Cornel West suggested that a rich life is fundamentally a life of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. It echoes the words of Rabbi Hillel 2000 years ago: 'If I am not for myself, who will be for me? And if I am only for myself, what am I?'¹¹

The biblical law (Ex 23:3; Deut 16:19-20) requires that there should be no unjust differences between people. But in real life the economics of equality are exchanged for the economics of affluence. The prophetic alternative must mean, what Brueggeman calls, 'the primary prophetic agenda', which is the 'possibility of passion; . . . passion as the capacity and readiness to care, to suffer, to die, and to feel' for other people. Ultimately, God 'is one whose person is presented as passion and pathos, the power to care, the capacity to weep, the energy to grieve and to rejoice.' And prophets must think like God, 'not whether it is realistic or practical or viable but whether it is imaginable.'¹²

Furthermore, God promises to be a support and help to those who do not have anybody: he hears their cries, sees their suffering, and brings help when his human agents fail to do so. The prophets talk about alienation of those who grab land and 'add house to house and join field to field' until they become alone in the land (see Isa 5:8). This process of materialism, mirrored in our own time and expressed in the accumulation of material goods beyond the point of realistic needs, ends in isolation and existential alienation and in the loss of any meaningful human existence and relationship among people.

Thirdly, *God seeks obedience and justice rather than a formal worship or sacrifice*. The sacrificial system and religious festivals (including the observance of Sabbath) were important; but ethical behaviour springing from right motives was even more important ('doing the truth' instead of only 'having the truth'). The basic motive was love which responds to God's love, God's choice and God's calling (Deut 7:6-11). Therefore, the motive for ethical behaviour and social action is an answer to God's love, which he expressed in covenants with human beings (1 John 4:9.10). Philosopher Seneca's words echo this truth when he said, 'The real compensation

¹¹ Ibid.. 13.

¹² Ibid., 41. 42. 44.

of a right action is inherent in having performed it.’ The question that must be deeply relevant and ingrained in our Sabbath keeping consciousness how can we truly serve the Lord on the Sabbath in our worship and not be rejected as those legalistic Sabbath-keepers described in Amos 5:21-24:

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
And the peace offerings of your fattened animals,
I will not look upon them.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
To the melody of your harps I will not listen.
But let justice roll down like waters,
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

Lest we be unsure this is about true prophetically imagined Sabbath-keeping, Amos continues in the same breath, ‘Hear this, you who trample on the needy and bring the poor of the land to an end, saying, “When will the new moon be over, that we may sell grain? And the Sabbath, that we may offer wheat for sale, that we may make the ephah small and the shekel great and deal deceitfully with false balances, that we may buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals and sell the chaff of the wheat?”’ (Amos 8:4-6). Reading these and many similar passages in the prophetic rage against injustice should make us spend less time arguing what kind of music we should utilize in our worships on Sabbath morning, what instruments are acceptable or should be banned, and more on what kind of people we are and how we pursue a just and compassionate living among ourselves and whether we fight for such values that are close to God’s heart.

David Noel Freedman observed that ‘the characteristic way of a prophet in Israel is that of poetry and lyric. The prophet engages in future fantasy. The prophet does not ask if the vision can be implemented, for questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The imagination must come before the implementation.’¹³

¹³ Brueggemann, 44.

The fourth element of the prophetic role is *eschatological-apocalyptic*. In this element of prophetic teaching, the prophet goes outside his immediate domain and speaks about the global picture of human history. And, ultimately, the prophet speaks about *hope* that is so often non-existent among people who live their lives in a hopeless day-to-day survival mode. At its center, prophetic eschatology is an affirmation that God *will* succeed in his desire for his creation, that he shall win the battle between good and evil and inevitably bring salvation to his people both in a spiritual sense but also in the physical liberation from bondage of hopelessness, poverty and this earth's disadvantage and groaning.

‘It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one that the establishment of the day wants to urge as the only thinkable one.’¹⁴ The prophets are ultimately the seers and visionaries.¹⁵

Seventh-day Adventists have usually emphasized the fourth aspect of the prophetic role, especially in its evangelistic and theological sense. However, rather than portraying the theology of hope in the manner of Moltmann,¹⁶ we have made doom and gloom out of these eschatological prophetic deliberations, which is more concerned with frightening people than with the hope and encouragement that God is in control and will finally conquer evil and establish the good rule of his heavenly government. In its self-understanding as a 'prophetic movement', Adventism has usually been regarded as ‘a movement preoccupied with making predictions’ as well as ‘a movement with a special interest in studying and interpreting predictive prophecy.’¹⁷ But, as Jack Provonsha pointed out, Adventism as a prophetic movement should be defined more in terms of function and role; in other words we should think of ourselves as a people with a mission to the world.¹⁸ Therefore, we should also consider other aspects of prophetic ministry, if we desire to be faithful to our prophetic calling. One of these aspects, and perhaps the first one we should be more sensitive to, is the primary or socio-ethical role of prophets.

¹⁴ Ibid.. 45.

¹⁵ Cf. Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, (1995), 125.

¹⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, (London: SCM Press and New York: Harper and Row, 1967); N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, (New York, NY: HarperOne, Harper Collins Publishers, 2008).

¹⁷ Jack Provonsha, *A Remnant in Crisis*, (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1993), 50.

¹⁸ Ibid., 50-51.

When we begin the prophetic task of criticizing the present world order or the way injustice is committed through the economic globalization, criticism will certainly come. But in spite of this, we must refocus on the biblical and theological underpinnings and foundations.

Examples of the primary prophetic role

The prophets of the Old Testament did not invent new social, economic or moral responsibilities. They believed and affirmed that the ideal for Jewish society as a whole, and its people as individuals, was set in the legislation of *the covenant* between God and Israel. Justice, as a basis of the law and the pillar of society, was regarded by the prophets as binding for all ages. The guidance the prophets gave to Israel regarding social, ethical and economic relationships was clearly based on the Mosaic Law as expressed in the Ten Commandments.

The moral law, as an expression of the character of God and as God's desire for human fulfillment, was always high on the agenda of Adventist theology. For us the Decalogue is still the great moral guideline binding upon all people in every age who desire to live in harmony with God and with other human beings. It is not, and has never been, the means of salvation (Rom 4:1-3; Heb 11). However, the fruitage of salvation is obedience to these precepts that God himself gave to humanity (Ex 31:18).

For a full understanding of what God means by his moral law, a Christian must turn to the God Incarnate. Jesus, in his most remarkable sermon about the law,¹⁹ claimed that he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Mat 5:17). He stated: 'Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven' (Mat 5:19).

When challenged to give an account of what he thought was the most important commandment, Jesus did not allow himself to be drawn into making the mistake of selecting one and overemphasizing it. Rather, he summed up the law and the prophets into a remarkably concise

¹⁹ See, for example, C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law: Bampton Lectures in America*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 62-63.

but powerful phrase borrowed from Deuteronomy 6: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself' (Mat 22:37-39; cf. Deut 6:4-5). Asked at another occasion the question 'Who is my neighbor?', Jesus answered eloquently in a parable that our neighbour is everyone who is in need, regardless of race, nationality or caste (Lk 10:29-37).

The universality of the Old Testament account of the moral law (Ex 20:1-17 and Deut 5:1-22) and Jesus' elaboration of it (Mat 5-7) require from people respect for and guarding of human rights. Considering that God is interested in relationships between human beings, and that he demonstrated the desire to regulate these relationships with the last six commandments of the Decalogue and with the numerous sayings of Jesus, the body of Christ today (i.e. his embodied community) should uplift these regulations and apply them to every situation in life.

Thus Seventh-day Adventists, who desire to keep the commandments, should be the first to foster good relations with their neighbours. Whenever there is a violation of the love-principle in the world, they ought to be among the first to condemn it and to seek ways to eliminate injustice, inequality, bad relationships, and violation of human rights in general, in order to be true to their calling of the people of the law. However, at times we have made these wonderful divine instructions into limitations and burdens, that have oppressed rather than liberated people.

Though the theme of social concern is reflected throughout all prophets, three 'major' prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel) and seven 'minor' prophets (Hosea, Amos, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah and Malachi) illustrate this most emphatically. Of all these prophets dealing with social justice, Isaiah is a foremost example. It is essential to understand the primary social role of the prophets in order to become a twenty-first century prophetic voice and a true prophetic community. Therefore, let us briefly consider Isaiah's concerns and his invitation.

Isaiah marked the sins of God's people of his time as idolatry (2:8), injustice (5:7; 59:8), bloodshed (59:7), rebellion (1:5; 57:4), neglect of widows (1:23; 10:2), heavy drinking (5:11; 28:1-7) and oppression of the poor (3:14-15; 10:2). Again, like other prophets, Isaiah saw the

solution either in repentance and God's forgiveness, or in facing judgment, punishment and destruction. Inevitably, Isaiah emphasized, that the Messiah will come and establish social justice in his millennial kingdom.

Isaiah was a citizen of the vibrant city—Jerusalem. He lived in the eight century BC. He did not shy away from political involvement, or from getting involved with issues of justice and socio-economic evils of his day. He was probably an aristocrat and issues of state and national security greatly concerned him. He was active, charismatic and passionate. In Joseph Robinson's words, 'For [Isaiah] the integrity, more, the very existence of his faith, was dependent upon the decisions taken on political issues.'²⁰

The message tells of God's punishment of Israel, in particular the kingdom of Judah and of punishment of the nations, for their idolatry and injustice; and of God's subsequent redemption of the people of Israel. Both the punishment and redemption begin in Jerusalem/Zion, reaching from there to encompass the nations of the world. Although the message is universal in scope, it is never separated from its historic center—the people of Israel. James Ward in his book *Thus Says the Lord* emphasizes how the message of punishment and redemption is 'summarized in the first chapter, which thus serves as an introduction. The theme of Zion's eventual redemption, stated briefly in 1:26-27, is developed in 2:2-5; 4:2-6.'²¹ It is not until chapter 6 that the prophet gets his call and says, 'Send me!' Therefore, the first five chapters serve as a preliminary introduction. In particular, chapter 1 and 2 appear to be a resume of the collected oracles of the eighth century prophet, explaining why his call was needed and why he accepted that prophetic calling with the words: 'Here am I. Send me!' (Isa 6:6).

Isaiah's dramatic expression is full of expressive colours and shades, many levels and layers of meaning. For example, there are distinctions between the people of God, the remnant, the servants of the Lord. And yet these distinctions between the nations and other groups within Israel are not hard and fast. The divisions and distinctions are a major part of Isaiah's concern. And yet, as Peter Miscall put it, 'we cannot resolve Isaiah into a simple narrative, nor can we

²⁰ In *Prophets & Poets*, (Abingdon, 1997), 32.

²¹ James Ward, *Thus Says the Lord*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 40.

resolve it into a morality tale of good versus evil, with Israel good and the nations' evil. The story of sin, judgment (2:9-22) and restoration applies to all (2:2-4).²²

The richness is in the dramatic speeches in which the characters are not presented as distinct and historic individuals; they are constructs in the poetic form of Isaiah.²³ For example, Israel is masculine singular in 1:4, masculine plural in 1:5-7 and feminine singular in 1:21-26. Jerusalem is a woman, and the capital city a metonym for Israel. 'Israel is judged and condemned, desolate and devastated, and comforted and redeemed. . . . Generally male, God at times is female, whether as a woman and mother (42:14; 45:10; 66:9-13) or as mother nature (35:1-7; 41:18-19). God is powerful, judging and even savage; the chapters 34 and 63:1-6 contain some of the most unattractive descriptions of God in the Bible. He is also mild, forgiving and comforting. God is described in human, animate and even inanimate terms. He is a bull (1:24), a lion and birds (31:4-5), a gem (28:5), light and fire (10:17) and sun and the moon (60:19-20).'²⁴

As we turn to the first chapter, prophetic and pastoral concerns permeate this text. This passionate reflection breathes moral clear-sightedness and courage under the threat of disaster. Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on Isaiah, calls Isaiah's canonical method of treatment an 'open-ended' theological interpretation. Each subsection begins with a helpful geopolitical, historical, and theological summary, followed by a running commentary structured according to his outline. He generally assumes that historical contexts and theological meaning of the texts are often only loosely linked, due to the perceived, rigorous 'reshaping' of the historical material.²⁵

Stephen T. Hague stresses that the theological concerns of Isaiah take precedence over geopolitical concerns, the most important of which is the theme of judgment and hope that that judgment brings. It is also suggested that for us moderns, as in Isaiah's day, evils gone unnoticed may lead to 'a supernatural swoop of nullification directly from heaven.'²⁶

²² Peter Miscall, *Isaiah*, (JSOT Press, 1993; Sheffield Academic Press), 15.

²³ This section I owe to Miscall.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 15

²⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion 1 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

²⁶ Stephen T. Hague, Review of Walter Brueggemann's *Isaiah 1-39*, Westminster Bible Companion 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998).

Brueggemann rightly points out how Isaiah includes contemporary themes, such as consumerism, the 'wanton exhibitionism of the wealthy, 'shameless luxury,' exploitation of the vulnerable, the greed of 'avaricious landowners,' self indulgence, injustice, urban decline, hypocrisy, militarism, social exploitation, and geopolitics of superpowers. He uses modern language well to describe biblical realities: 'terrible againstness' for God's judgment, 'commodity fetishism' for the spiritual force of silver and gold that illustrates the self-deception that things can secure. In light of these themes, Brueggemann often writes as a preacher or prophet himself. So, for example, concerning the judgment announced in Isaiah 8, he says, 'We ourselves are now members of churches so secularized that Isaiah's rhetoric sounds obscurantist, if we hear it at all.'

Just scanning through selected verses of Isaiah 1 to 3, you will notice the strength of prophetic conviction. Isaiah is not timid; he speaks with full prophetic conviction and imagination when he declares,²⁷ 'Seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause. . . . The Lord will enter into judgment with the elders and princes of his people: 'It is you who have devoured the vineyard, the spoil of the poor is in your houses. What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor? Declares the Lord God of hosts' (Isa 1:17 and 3:14-15).

As Michael Ignatieff in his highly acclaimed book *The Needs of Strangers*, points out in commenting on Shakespeare's King Lear, 'the test of human respect is in life's hardest cases: not in one's neighbor, friend or relation, but the babbling stranger, the foul and inconsistent inhabitant of the back wards of the state hospitals, the Mongol child [the insane, the retarded, the deaf and dumb, the crippled and deranged].'²⁸ And the prophetic role calls us to see these, to get dirty in the trenches of human hubris, to imagine different options and to 'speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves' (Prov 31:6), and nurture the hopes of prophetic renewal.²⁹

The role of the New Testaments prophets

The role of the prophets in the New Testament was not very different from that in the Old Testament. John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest prophet of all times (Mat 11:9-11),

²⁷ Cf. Isa 1:11.13-17.21.23.; 2:3.4.7.10.19, and 3:14.15.

²⁸ Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, (New York: Picador USA, 2001), 44.

²⁹ See such significant occasions through the same passages, for example, in Isaiah 1: 18-19; 2:4.

invited the people of Israel to repent and to produce good fruit (Mat 3:2-10). After querying whether Jesus was the Messiah, he received a message from Jesus which he could understand, appreciate, and identify with. Jesus said: ‘Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor’ (Lk 7:22b). No doubt only a true prophet would recognize the Messiah in such a description. That is why Jesus used this approach in explaining his mission to the imprisoned prophet. Just imagine if people around us came and asked, ‘Are Seventh-day Adventists true representatives of Christ?’ ‘Are they true prophets?’ Would they be able to describe our mission in similar terms as Jesus used when describing his work?

John the Revelator was concerned about social as well as eschatological matters. Writing both about and to the Christian minority in a society that did not favour them a great deal, the writer of the book of Revelation was concerned for their safety, their well-being and their rights, which were being violated through persecution³⁰ (Rev 2:2, 9-10, 13, 21-22; 12:1-7; and 13:4, 15-16). He wrote about the new Jerusalem, which will serve prophetically for the healing of the nations in the new and just earth that God will establish on our planet as originally intended.

Jesus of Nazareth was greatly concerned with the social and economic justice of his time. In his inaugural speech he said that he came to proclaim freedom to the captives, to release the oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.³¹ However, Jesus did not only preach about issues of social concern, he also practiced his social beliefs. St. Augustine’s famous quote came from the observation of Jesus: ‘Fill yourselves first and then only will you be able to give to others’. (Read Matthew 4:23 and 15:30.) To use words of Meredith Gould from her book, *Deliberate Acts of Kindness*: ‘Compassion, [which is] the awareness of another suffering, [was] a quality-of-[his]-being.’³² He proved through his ministry that virtually nobody was outside of his interest. And he demanded nothing less from his followers. Even in the most famous of his eschatological discourses, when his closest followers asked him when his *parousia* would take

³⁰ Cf. Rev 2:2, 9-10, 13, 21-22.; 12:1-7.; and 13:4, 15-16.

³¹ Luke 4:18-21. Cf. Karl Barth, *Deliverance to the Captives*, translated by Marguerite Wieser with Preface by John Marsh (London: SCM Press, 1961).

³² Meredith Gould, *Deliberate Acts of Kindness: Service as a Spiritual Practice* (New York: Image Books/Doubleday, 2002), 13.

place, Jesus not only answered in terms of external events, but also in terms of what his followers must do as they ‘occupy until he comes again’ (Mat 24:1 - 25:46).

It is essential for us, who have always called upon Matthew 24 and its signs of the times, to connect Jesus’ sermon with his appeal to his disciples and followers to feed the hungry and to give drink to the thirsty, to welcome a foreigner and to dress those who have no means as if they were doing it directly to Jesus himself. Mother Theresa expressed this powerfully when she said, ‘Whoever the poorest of the poor are, they are Christ for us—Christ under the guise of human suffering.’³³ Again, Jan Paulsen calls for the same kind of lifestyle in a recent article on the meaning of the soon coming of the Lord: ‘I wait [for the second coming] with the conviction that how I live today matters, that, although I yearn for the moment of ultimate healing, God is calling me today to be a healer, and agent of transformation and renewal in society.’³⁴

Dietrich Bonhoeffer asked half a century ago a question that remains as urgent today as when it was first raised: ‘Who is Jesus Christ for us today?’ ‘The hungry need bread,’ he wrote in his book *Ethics* while he was in a Nazi camp awaiting execution, ‘and the homeless need a roof; the oppressed need justice and the lonely need fellowship; the undisciplined need order and the slave needs freedom. . . . Because Jesus had entered into our world of sorrows, and because he had taken up the cause of those in need, making their cause to be his own, to allow the hungry to remain hungry would be blasphemy against God and one’s neighbor, for what is nearest to God is precisely the need of one’s neighbor’³⁵

This is not that dissimilar to what our founder wrote: ‘Christ’s chief work was in ministering to the poor, the needy, and the ignorant. . . Christ’s life is an example to all His followers.’³⁶

Paulsen, on another recent occasion, spoke about the well documented ‘passion of early Adventist pioneers for causes such as the abolition of slavery, temperance, and religious liberty. . . They, too, struggled to know how they should relate to the civil realm. But, with the guidance

³³ Mother Theresa, *Mother Theresa: Her Essential Wisdom*, Edited by Carol Kelly Gangi, (New York: Fall River Press, 2006), 28.

³⁴ Jan Paulsen, ‘When Words are Not Enough,’ *Adventist World*, (July 2007), 9.

³⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 137.

³⁶ Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry*, 59

of Ellen White and other church leaders, concluded that inaction was not an option.³⁷ Then Paulsen quotes Ellen White from a 1914 *Review and Herald* article: ‘Many deplore the wrongs which they know exist, but consider themselves free from all responsibilities in the matter. This cannot be. Every individual exerts an influence in society.’³⁸

Parallel to proclaiming the gospel, the task of the church is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, be hospitable to the stranger, clothe the poor, visit the prisoner, and look after the sick. The social concern thus expressed is to be one of the primary tasks of the prophetic community awaiting the final realization of the kingdom of Jesus. It is living in two kingdoms, here and now and not yet, but nevertheless very soon.

In the middle of the nineteenth century most Christian scholars perceived the kingdom of God as the present kingdom that Christians should work towards and establish on earth. By contrast, the early Seventh-day Adventists initially interpreted the kingdom of God as the eschatological-apocalyptic kingdom established by God at the end of the millennium.³⁹ Because of Ellen White, this emphasis within Adventism shifted. Ellen White proposed the concepts of the ‘kingdom of grace’ and the ‘kingdom of glory’, and on this basis other Adventist thinkers further develop the idea. Initially in the 1950s, with the appearance of *Questions on Doctrines*, and especially in the last three decades, with a new generation of Adventist theologians and ethicists, Seventh-day Adventists placed a new emphasis on a number of issues and doctrines, including that of the kingdom of God. This time, the dual nature of the kingdom expressed as the two phases or stages not only affected the theological discussion of the timing of the kingdom, but also opened up a discussion about the moral and ethical effects of the kingdom of God. For the first time the doctrine of the kingdom of God resulted in considerations of a socio-ethical nature. And the conclusion was that ‘eschatology and ethics must go hand in hand’.⁴⁰

³⁷ Jan Paulsen, ‘Serving Our World, Serving Our Lord’, *Adventist World*, NAD Edition, (2007, v. 3., May 2007), 10.

³⁸ Ellen G. White, *Review and Herald*, (Oct 15, 1914).

³⁹ See for a more extensive discussion about the Kingdom of God concept and the Adventist contribution to this significant theological idea, Zdravko Plantak, *The Silent Church*.

⁴⁰ John Brunt, ‘Going About Our Daily Business’, in *Pilgrimage of Hope*, edited by Roy Branson, (Association of Adventist Forums, 1986), 28.

The ethical reasoning that springs from the concept of the kingdom of God must be taken very seriously. There is no doubt that Jesus, both in the Synoptic gospels and in the Gospel of John, reiterated the dual concept of the kingdom.⁴¹ While Jesus proclaimed that his kingdom would come with power and glory after he had gone to the Father, and while he taught the disciples to pray for this future kingdom and instructed them to wait for him, Jesus also encouraged them to proclaim that this same kingdom is within them, and that they needed to make a personal commitment in order to enter it.⁴² Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom included serious ethical implications: Preaching the good news to the poor, proclaiming the freedom for the prisoners, healing the sick, releasing the oppressed and proclaiming God's favour and the Jubilee Year (Lk 4:18-19).

Jesus' ethical implications of the kingdom are expressed in the most explicit way in the Sermon on the Mount. There, the inhabitants of the kingdom are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and those who thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the persecuted and the peacemakers. These are the true salt and light of the world (Mat 5:1-16). In order to enter the kingdom, Christians cannot just talk—they must do 'the will of my Father who is in heaven' (Matt 7:21). In such a way God's will was fully manifested in Jesus' life: the unselfish life for others in every moment of his earthly existence as he 'made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant' (Phil 2:7). Employing this kind of humility of Jesus, looking after the 'least of these brothers of mine', is the true Christian response to the message of the kingdom. For, as Brunt pointed out, 'how can we possibly be committed to the principles of God's kingdom without showing now that we accept and live by them?'⁴³

However, commitment to the principles of God's kingdom here and now, does not take away from the anticipation of the final fulfillment of the promises of the second phase of the same kingdom when Jesus comes. The 'kingdom of glory' is a biblical concept of the eschatological kingdom to be established by God in his own time. Jesus' command, 'Occupy till I come' has

⁴¹ Although written at different times and with very different standpoints, Synoptics and John give us the *ipsissima vox* of Jesus' sayings on the Kingdom of God.

⁴² Cf. Mk 14:23.; Matt 24:30-31.; Matt 10:7; Lk 10:9.; Matt 25:34,46.; Lk 11:2.; Lk 17:21.; Jn 3:3.5.; Jn 14:1-3.

⁴³ John Brunt, *Now and Not Yet: How Do people Waiting for the Second Coming Respond to Poverty, Lawsuits, Hunger, Political Oppression, Sexuality, and Sin?* (Washington, D. C.: Review and Herald, 1987), 73. See N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*.

ethical implications for human rights in the world we live in. For the contemporary Christian the ‘eschatological vision of our future hope actually contributes to the content or shape of our daily lives. It helps us see how we should live responsibly here and now.’⁴⁴ How we treat others in this world will not bring about the kingdom of God, but it should prove that this kingdom is in our hearts, that we are the new creatures who have entered the sphere of the kingdom of grace, and that we anticipate the fulfillment of promises of the kingdom of glory in the near future.

Applications to a modern prophetic community

Throughout our history we have concentrated on the prophets' eschatological role. However, in reality, this part of prophetic ministry is secondary to the prophets' role of calling the people back to the God-given socio-economic and ethical principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments and Jesus' elaboration in Matthew 5:17-48, and summarized in Luke 10:27. As a ‘prophetic movement’, we should balance the proclamation about future events and eschatological prediction with calling people back to God-given principles of socio-economic justice, Christian ethics and human rights, based on the moral law of the Old Testament and the explanation of it by the greatest of all Jewish prophets, and the founder of the Christian church—Jesus Christ. Not should we proclaim these principles, but we should embody them in our existence. And that is where imaginary visionaries and social actionaries of the contemporary prophetic community should find their proper and needed place. As O'Mahony rightly observed: ‘In biblical times justice needed a prophet. Today, as ever, prophets are needed. From its very beginnings, the Christian community had a prophetic role.’⁴⁵ We, as Seventh-day Adventist Christians, are called to fulfill this role in the contemporary world. Paulsen in his recent article ‘Serving Our World, Serving Our Lord’ in *Adventist World* rightly concluded:

There is a vast difference between seeking a voice in the public discourse, and seeking to wield political power. As a church – and individuals – we have not only the right but the obligation, to be a moral voice in society; to speak clearly and eloquently on that which touches our core values. Human rights, religious freedom, public health, poverty, and injustice—these are some of the areas in which we have a God-given responsibility to advocate for those who cannot speak for themselves. . . .

⁴⁴ Ibid., 16.

⁴⁵ O'Mahony. *The Fantasy of Human Rights* (1978), 139.

Through His words and actions, Christ continually reached out His hand to improve the quality of life—both spiritually and physically—of the people around Him. . . . In serving our neighbors with love and integrity, we also serve our Lord.⁴⁶

This finally brings us back to our initial story in Numbers 11, the story of the unbridled greed and free-flowing prophecy. The central message of the story lies in the connection between the apparent incompatibilities. This story is particularly pertinent to us living in the twenty-first century and, I suppose, especially to those who are on the cutting edge of dealing with poverty and human injustice. Greed is the governing attitude of our world. ‘Our craving for *more than enough* is the deadly sin that is already wrecking havoc on a global scale.’⁴⁷ Globalization of the world has meant that the greedy have more while there are many that have no other option but to die or fight back with undignified means. Taking Scripture seriously will enable us to see how our greed, like Israel’s, may result in devastating consequences. For that we just need to glance at verses 33 and 34.

That some of us have much more than we need is indisputable. At no times in the history of the world have people lived so much beyond the level of subsistence as we do today, and ‘there is no doubt that the earth cannot indefinitely sustain the burden that our accustomed lifestyle imposes on us.’⁴⁸ The Psalmist describes their problem in a poem (Ps 78:22-25):

. . . because they had no faith in God,
and did not trust his saving power
[though] he had opened the doors of heaven.
He had rained upon them manna to eat;
The grain of heaven he had given them.
Mortals ate bread of angels,
He sent food *enough*.

There was enough and the Psalmist is explaining that there should have been no craving for more, as there was sufficient provision from the hand of God as, with the daily dew, he sent them manna from heaven. But we often perceive emptiness where there is sufficient provision from the

⁴⁶ Jan Paulsen, ‘Serving Our World, Serving Our Lord’, *Adventist World*, NAD Edition, vol. 3., May 2007), 9-10.

⁴⁷ Davis, (2001), 203.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*.

hand of God. Greed, however, is simple but deadly: it kills by a kind of spiritual malnutrition. The psalmists, those brilliant spiritual diagnosticians, call it ‘leanness in the soul’ (Ps 106:15) ‘Sufficiency is one of the chief arts of spiritual life, so that we come to see the beauty of “enough” and actually prize it over “too much.”’⁴⁹

In Numbers 11, the greed of the Israelites quite literally killed them. When the meat they had craved ‘was still between their teeth, not yet chewed, they died and the place was called Graves of Craving’ (vs 33.) We have to learn this lesson, bearing in mind the needs of those who will come after us in this world and those who live in other parts and are already ‘have-nots’. ‘We make room for them by leaving the air and water as clean as we found them, by not taking more than our share of resources that can be depleted in a few generations but take geological ages to rebuild—like oil, coal, mineral deposits, or fertile soil. The motivation for voluntary simplicity is, of course, a hunger for justice: when a few have far too much, many have too little.’⁵⁰

This biblical story is quite disturbing, but it also contains an element of hope. One may ask how is this connected with the issue at hand—the prophetic role and what we could learn as a prophetic movement. In Numbers 11 the hope here lies in God’s second extravagant answer to Israel’s greed: a spirit of prophecy that fills the seventy officially appointed elders. And, subsequently, the overflow of prophetic activity runs out into the camp of ordinary Israelites, so that Eldad and Medad start speaking God’s truth. And when Joshua complains that things are getting out of hand, Moses replies in verse 29: ‘Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!’ As Ellen David put it in conclusion to the commentary on this passage:

Another [important] function of the biblical prophets is to speak on behalf of the poor: those people, generally invisible to us, who suffer because of our selfishness. If we read the daily news in the light of their prophecy, we will recognize with increasing clarity that our lifestyle extracts a price from people most of us will never see in person, at least this side of the Resurrection. Third World countries have little to sell on the global market but the bones of their land—its minerals and forests—and the cheap labor of their people. They are exchanging short-term gain forever deepening long-term poverty as their land is stripped and their water and air are polluted, in no small part by First World industries.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Ibid., 204.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 205.

⁵¹ Ibid., 202.

And Joshuas, even Christian contemporary Joshuas, dare, in their ignorance, to come and complain 'Stop them, make them shut up and quit prophesying! We should not be involved in such a prophetic task. The Lord will come and take care of this problem. Stop them!' But the proto-*nabhi* responds, 'What, are you jealous for me?' Do you think that there is no space for me, and for Eldad and Medad? 'If only all God's people were prophets!'

May God give us more Adventist prophets, with more moral prophetic imagination and more stamina for prophetic living and acting, daring to speak out for the poor, daring to challenge the powers of imperial selfishness and of globalized greed in this third millennium.