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The Old Testament Contribution to Evangelical Models for Public Theology

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SUMMARY

This article argues that the Old Testament has much to contribute to the current discussion about public theology, not least because in ancient Israel there was no segregation of public and private life. Rather than attempting to give specific answers, the article highlights the importance and meaning of core OT topics such as creation and its ethical consequences, God's lordship over history, idolatry, God's universal kingship, and the role of Israel's prophets vis-à-vis kings, the people and other nations. The reach of these topics is not limited to God's particular covenant with Israel so that they are universally applicable. They set Christians in a direction of critical engagement with society.

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Argumentation dieses Artikels lautet, das Alte Testament habe viel zur gegenwärtigen Diskussion über öffentliche Theologie beizutragen, nicht zuletzt deshalb, weil es im alten Israel keine Trennung zwischen öffentlichem und privatem Leben gab. Der Artikel versucht nicht, spezifische Antworten zu geben, sondern er betont die Wichtigkeit und Bedeutung von wesentlichen alttestamentlichen Themen wie Schöpfung und ihre ethischen Konsequenzen, Gottes Herrschaft über die Geschichte, Götzendienst, Gottes universelle Herrschaft und die Rolle der israelischen Propheten im Gegenüber zu Königen, dem Volk und anderen Nationen. Die Reichweite dieser Themen ist nicht auf Gottes besonderen Bund mit Israel beschränkt, so dass sie universal anwendbar sind. Sie weisen Christen in Richtung kritischer Auseinandersetzung mit der Gesellschaft.

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RÉSUMÉ

L'Ancien Testament apporte une contribution importante à l'éthique socio-politique, notamment parce qu'en Israël, il n'y avait pas de dichotomie entre la vie publique et la vie privée. L'auteur n'aborde pas des sujets spécifiques, mais s'attache à souligner l'importance et la signification de thèmes centraux de l'Ancien Testament comme la doctrine de la création et ses conséquences éthiques, la seigneurie de Dieu sur l' histoire, le rôle des prophètes israélites auprès des rois, du peuple de Dieu et des autres peuples. La portée de ces thèmes ne se limite pas au champ de l'alliance particulière de Dieu avec Israël mais elle est universelle. Ils invitent les chrétiens à un engagement critique dans la vie de la société.

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Introduction

It is not easy to define what 'public theology' is, but I take the definition from Robert Benne's study *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (Fortress, 1995):

> 'Public theology ... refers to the engagement of a living religious tradition with its public environment – the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life.'[1]

Several questions and thoughts immediately spring to mind on hearing this definition:

- The 'living religious tradition' in our case is

Christianity, more specifically Evangelicalism, and even more specifically European Evangelicalism. The fact that we live and work in Europe is essential here.

• The definition just mentioned implies that it is possible for a religious tradition, in this case Christianity, *not* to be engaged with its public environment. And indeed, here we trace one of the first problems.

• The fact that the Executive Committee of the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians has chosen this topic indicates that we sense there are problems here. These problems have to do with secularization. As we will see, in the days of ancient Israel there was no such thing as *public* theology as opposed to *private* religious life, since all theology was public theology. But the mere fact that FEET is discussing what role evangelicals should play in issues of public life suggests that it's not a natural or totally normal thing which is taken for granted by the average European person.

• I say 'European' because in other cultures the issue would be dealt with very differently. To many non-Western societies life is 'religious' anyway and there's no such thing as a 'private' life which would be totally disconnected from culture or politics and so forth.

• Now of course, some might say there's no need at all for reflecting on our engagement in society. After all, we are separate from the world, as Christians we don't belong to it, and we should not be engaged with public life, politics, economics, and military issues at all. I assume we will sooner or later deal with some of the models from church history which advocated this view. Some Christians say: don't speak about public theology at all, speak about people's individual response to the gospel of Jesus Christ – and build the church.

• Returning to the definition of public theology just given, we can say, however, that not being engaged in public life as Christians is influencing society as well. To keep silent is just as much a choice as to speak out. Living in this world always includes choices, one way or the other.

• As Evangelicals, we confess that the foundation of our thinking should be in Scripture. So whatever we choose, we want to look seriously at what the Bible says. Now all of us know this is not an easy task. Christians have defended war quoting Bible verses and they have opposed it with the same Bible. They have defended and opposed slavery, they have defended and opposed capitalism. The Bible is not an easy book as we all know. Yet there is also a very positive side to this: the Bible is a dynamic book, not just dropped down from heaven, but a book to engage in, to study, to receive corrections from, to be challenged by.

• So in studying the Old Testament on the issue of public theology, we need to take into account the dynamic character of the Bible. We search for answers, we discuss them together, we try to listen to God's voice as careful as possible and we try to bring into practice what we learn from all this.

What can the Old Testament contribute to our discussion about public theology?

I will focus on a few important issues in the Old Testament which may help us in discovering some guidelines for public theology. By reflecting on them, I try to give some basic biblical-theological principles which may guide us in making actual decisions. So this paper is not about those actual decisions, say about Old Testament and war, or Old Testament and the economy (etc.), it is meant to provide a sort of framework from which we may discuss our involvement in public life in more detail.

The basic principles I want to discuss are: Creation and the earliest history, kingship, prophets, the nations, and participation and intercession.

1. Creation and the earliest history

In the first place it is important to say that the Old Testament does not know the term 'public theology'. The definition above speaks about public theology as 'the engagement of a living religious tradition with its public environment – the economic, political, and cultural spheres of our common life'. Now the Old Testament as a whole is a religious book about a living religious tradition constantly involved with the economic, political and cultural spheres of common life. The Old Testament is not a private prayer book for a Sunday afternoon. It gives a thoroughly religious view of the world, the nations, society, nature and individuals. In the Old Testament there's no such thing as a 'non-engaged living religious tradition'. There's no history in the Old Testament apart from the religious history, the history of God and his people/his world.

It is true that historical-critical research has tried to find the 'facts of history' behind the 'biblical history', but in the first place no historical-critical research itself is objective, and in the second place because of the nature of the Old Testament mere history and God's history cannot be separated.

This is an important theological issue. The fact that Israel does not have a history book apart from the Old Testament is not due to the fact that all nations were religious in those days, so that it would be self-evident that the history of a nation was coloured spiritually, but it certainly has to do with the statements in the Old Testament about God being the Creator of the whole world and the Lord of all history. According to the Old Testament there is no history outside the sphere of God's influence and there is no world out of God's control. These are far reaching claims and they are made throughout the Old Testament, beginning in Genesis 1.

In the way of thinking of ancient Israel, no Israelite can so to speak step 'outside' God's world and say: Let's think about God. Or: Let's think if and how God plays a role in history or in politics or in public life. The overall assumption is that he does – the questions posed in the Old Testament relate to how he does. And related to this assumption is the question how *God's people* plays a role in this world – in God's name.

The confession that the God of Israel is the Creator of heaven and earth has many implications. Yet too often the issue of creation has been neglected in Old Testament theology because the story of the Exodus was considered to be of primary relevance, whereas Genesis 1 and 2 were 'only' thought to be the result of reflection in the days of the Babylonian exile and thereafter. Yet in the context of the Bible as a whole the fact that God created the earth, the animals and humankind is essential for understanding the rest of God's history with that same world. It is essential that biblical theology starts with God's creative work and reflects on the consequences of this confession. Too often Evangelical Christians have lost themselves in debates about 'whether it really happened in six days' or whatever else really happened – and that was the only way they looked at the story of creation – without realising the enormous theological claims that are made in Genesis 1 and 2: claims regarding God's creative power through his word, his majesty, his supremacy over the moon and the stars, etc.

When we consider the whole of the Bible we may say it to have a 'sandwich structure': it begins with the creation of heavens and earth in the Book of Genesis and it ends with the re-creation of heavens and earth in the Book of Revelation. This is the space and time in which salvation history takes place, in which everything which happens today takes place. This is the area in which 'public theology' takes place and where it should be searching for its foundation and its principles.

All this means that from the point of view of the Old Testament (and in fact, also from the New) the whole world is God's. All people are his creation, all nations are included from the beginning as they will be in the end (Rev. 21-22). God is above history and he was there before history began, before the days and the months and the years were created. So history is his. This is a basic confession throughout the Old Testament. The belief in God as Creator and in the world as being his creation is utilised in many different contexts in the Bible, not only in Genesis 1-2:

A. It is used in the context of ethics: my fellow men and women have been created in God's image and therefore should be treated with respect (Gen. 9:6; Prov. 14:31). This is the foundation of the universal rights of humankind. Care for the created world, for animals and the environment, is part of living before God. As Psalm 8:6-8 tells us, human beings were made co-regents of the Creator, whose name is majestic over all the earth! The language is 'royal language', referring to human beings who are 'crowned ... with glory and honour' (verse 5). We will come back to the issue of kingship below.

God's creative work is also mentioned as a motive for keeping the sabbath: 'For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy' (Ex. 20:11). So there are various implications for human behaviour which follow from the fact that God created the world.

B. The confession of creation is used in the context of the big questions in history: Is God still in control when his people are in exile in Babylon? What about the power of the gods of other nations? Have they conquered the God of Israel by taking his people into exile? What about God's promises to his own people? What about God's power? In this context the prophecies from the Book of Isaiah are very powerful:

> 'This is what the LORD says – your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
> "For your sake I will send to Babylon and bring down as fugitives all the Babylonians,
> in the ships in which they took pride.
> I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King."' (Is. 43:14-15)
>
> 'Why do you say, O Jacob, and complain, O Israel,
> "My way is hidden from the LORD; my cause

is disregarded by my God"?
Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.' (Is. 40:27-31)

The fact that God is the Creator implies that he has the power to rescue his people from their enemies and to do a wonderful work – to bring them back from exile and to make (create) a new beginning.

C. The idea of creation is used in the context of idolatry. The passages from Isaiah not only speak about God as Creator, but also emphasize that God is the One and Only God. This is a conviction which is deeply rooted in the Old Testament faith. As we read in Deuteronomy 6:4, the shema which is repeated by Jews each day, 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.'

God is the Creator and the only One. Sun, moon and stars were created by him and are therefore not divine. There are no other gods in the whole universe. Yet, idolatry was a constant threat to Israel. The world was full of belief in other gods and full of rituals resulting from that belief. And since the rituals in Canaan had to do with fertility, Baal worship turned out to be very attractive.

By way of summary we can say that the Old Testament makes very clear statements about God as the Creator of everything, as the LORD of everything (including history and other nations), and as the One and Only God. There is no 'theology', so to speak, or 'faith', separated from the sphere of life or history, including politics and the other nations.

We move on and come to the issue of the nations in Genesis 4-11. In these chapters it is made very clear that God is not only the God of Israel, but that all the nations are his and that they are therefore, so to speak, one big family. The table of nations in Genesis 10 makes this clear. It gives structure to the world of nations and clarifies the relationships between them. It is not about different nations, who live in the realms of different gods (as was believed in the Ancient Near East), it all happens under the control of God the Creator of heaven and earth. Neither is there anything 'mythical' about the origins of these peoples. This chapter is anything but 'boring' literature, it is far more than just an administrative document. It is highly important in the context of the Bible.

Genesis 11 follows this summary of nations. The essence of the story of the tower of Babel is verse 4:

'Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth."'

So the essence of the human plan is gaining power, a power which will touch on the divine. And at the centre of power are human beings themselves, who want to make a name for themselves. In this way a centre of power could originate without any God-based reality underlying it.[2] It is the same type of sin Adam and Eve were tempted to: the search for power and becoming 'as God'.

God's answer to the tower of Babel is that people were spread around the world and that the groups could not understand each other anymore. The other, positive, answer to the story is what follows in the next chapter with the calling of Abraham. There God says:

'I will make you into a great nation (...)
I will make your name great...' (Gen. 12:2)

That nation will be God-centred and therefore will be great in another sense than 'powerful in the eyes of the world'. God will make Abraham's name great.

It is important to realise that the essence of the call of Abraham is not that only one nation will benefit from God's blessings. It is through Abraham and his descendants that 'all peoples on earth will be blessed' (verse 3). As Dumbrell remarks[3], 'The Kingdom of God established in global terms is the goal of the Abrahamic covenant.'

2. Kingship

We've already touched on the concept of God as King in our discussion of Creation. As we read in Isaiah 43:15: 'I am the LORD, your Holy One, Israel's Creator, your King.' In this prophecy God's power to redeem his people is highlighted as the prophet reminds them of God's power as the Creator of Israel, as the Holy One, and as their King. Looking at the historical context, the last title is

a remarkable one, since at that time the people no longer had their own Davidic king ruling over them. It was the king of Babylon who seemed to be in control of the whole world.

Yet the statement that God is King, not just of his own people Israel, but of the whole universe, is very deeply rooted in the Old Testament. It is frequently combined with the theme of creation, for instance in Psalm 96: 4-6, 10, 13:

> 'For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens.
>
> Splendour and majesty are before him; strength and glory are in his sanctuary.'
>
> 'Say among the nations, "The LORD reigns.
>
> The world is firmly established, it cannot be moved;
>
> he will judge the peoples with equity."'
>
> '...for he comes, he comes to judge the earth.
>
> He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples in his truth.'

In these verses several highly important theological statements are made:

a. Contrary to the gods of other nations, called 'idols', God is the Creator.

b. He is the King of the whole world – 'The LORD reigns'.

c. As such he is the Judge of all nations. He will judge in righteousness and truth.

Another statement is made in Jeremiah 10, a chapter which deals with idols:

> But the LORD is the true God; he is the living God, the eternal King. (...)
>
> But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding. ...
>
> for he is the Maker of all things (verses 10, 12, 16).

The kingship of God is thus an all-embracing conviction which spans the universe, the history and all nations and so does the fact that he is the Creator. We will come back to the position of the nations below.

How did Israel live out these convictions?

In the first place, Israel was called to show in its whole life what it meant that God was their King, that they were his special people. As we saw in Genesis 12, in the calling of Abraham God did not exclude other nations but wanted to bless them through Abraham and his offspring. In the rest of the Torah, particularly in the Book of Deuteronomy, we can observe how this works out or is supposed to work in everyday life.

We can regard Israel as a paradigm, a 'model' of how God relates to people and how they should relate to each other. I take Chris Wright's definition of paradigm as given in *Living as the People of God*:

> 'A paradigm is something used as a model or example for other cases where a basic principle remains unchanged, though details differ.' 'A paradigm is not so much imitated as applied. It is assumed that cases will differ but, when necessary adjustments have been made, they will conform to the observable pattern of the paradigm.'[4]

In this context we can try to give an interpretation of many of the laws given to Israel. This is attempted in the work of Chris Wright and in my latest book *Celebrating the Law?*[5] from which I quote:

> 'In the commandments and laws of the Torah we discover what sort of life God wants people to live. Both in its stories and in its laws the Torah shows how God wants to relate to people as well as how God wants people to relate to him and to each other. The laws and commands show us what a life with God as King looks like. In such a life and in a land where people live according to God's will, there will be justice and mercy; God's presence will permeate everything. The other nations should see this difference and be attracted to the one God and Creator. Israel's example should draw others to follow God and his rules as well. Moses expresses the uniqueness of Israel and its commandments and the effect they may have on other nations:
>
> Observe them [the decrees and laws taught by Moses] carefully, for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." ... And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:6, 8)
>
> Israel is a *pars pro toto*, a part which represents the whole: in this land and among this people God's Kingship, which is a Kingship over all the earth, must become visible and effective.'[6]

In this paper I will not go into detail about particular ethical situations, some of which I covered in my book and many of which are also dealt with

by Chris Wright in his books on Old Testament Ethics. Instead I would like to look at one particular issue in Israel's 'public'/'political' life – the issue of human kingship.

I concentrate on it for two reasons: In the first place the Kingship of God has turned out to be very important in the Old Testament, as we saw, and we can ask how this relates to human kingship; in the second place in this area it will become clear how Israel is meant to be a paradigm in the world.

In the first place we notice that kingship in Israel is an arbitrary matter. It is not a natural thing, as it seems to be with other nations, who 'naturally' have a king to lead them in war and to establish order in society. Israel's history has known several periods without an earthly king. There was no king in the beginning, when God called Abraham. During their journey in the desert it was not a king, but a prophet who led them. Within the history of the Ancient Near East it is surprising how short the period was during which Israel had a real monarchy in the midst of all the surrounding kingdoms and powers: less than 500 years!

When Israel asks for a king, this is received by God and his prophet Samuel with considerable criticism. The idea of the people is: '...now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have' (1 Sam. 8:5). However, this was exactly what they should not be: like the other nations. The first answer they receive is therefore that they are different, because God is their King and they have rejected him by their request for an earthly king. The rest of the passage concentrates on the inequality which kingship will bring. One of the basic concepts in the laws of Moses was the idea of brotherhood and equality in the presence of God. The covenant was the leading principle which united all Israelites as equal people with equal responsibilities. No one was to rule over another – no king, no rich people.

At the end of 1 Samuel 8, God 'gives in', so to speak. And in the history of Israel he uses kingship to fulfil his plans anyway. But the Old Testament has critical reservations about kingship all the way through. And history itself proved the criticism of 1 Samuel 8 to be right: Kings were rulers who did exploit the people from time to time.

During the whole period of the monarchy, there has been this critical distance to the king. It was in particular embodied by the prophets. Next to king Saul there was the prophet Samuel, next to king David the prophet Nathan, next to Ahab Elijah, next to many later kings were the so called writing prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos. They were the 'opposition', so to speak, in the name of the Lord. We will come back to their role in Israel.

Before we do that, let us take a look at an important chapter about kingship which is Deuteronomy 17:14-20. This passage is usually read as retrospection from the time of Josiah, but I think it is from much earlier times, one of the reasons being that the view presented here is too critical of kingship to be from those days. And if Deuteronomy was written to legitimate Josiah's reform, as is often stated, it is surprising that the passage on the king is such a small part of the Book. In his Commentary on Deuteronomy, J.G. McConville states: 'Deuteronomy, or at least a form of it, is the document of a real political and religious constitution of Israel from the pre-monarchical period.'[7] Deuteronomy 16:18-18:22 gives laws governing administration, but the king does not have an essential place in it, argues McConville.[8] Others are responsible for legal and administrative duties.

Deuteronomy 17:14 begins with the statement that God has given the land to his people – it is not by the power of a human being (a king or a great army) that Israel was able to live in the promised land. If they ever want to have a king over them, the text says – so it is not an essential element of nationhood – he should be one 'from among your own brothers'. The king is my brother, and this fact alludes to the idea of equality as the covenant people of God.

The following verses tell us how different an Israelite king should be from the kings of other nations: No riches, no strong army, no worldly power, not many wives. That is what should not happen. What *should* happen, however, is that he writes 'for himself on a scroll a copy of this law... It is to be with him, and he is to read it all the days of his life so that

– he may learn to revere the LORD his God

– and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees

– and not consider himself better than his brothers

– and turn from the law to the right or to the left.' (verses 18-20)

In Mesopotamia kings were the law-givers themselves. A new king would introduce his own laws. The Babylonian king Hammurabi is a good example of this. In Israel it is the prophet Moses who is the ultimate lawgiver, and, as we believe, in the

name of God. The laws of Hammurabi are not religiously motivated, the laws of Moses are throughout. As McConville states: 'The programme of Deut. 16:18 – 18:22 is ... in direct opposition to the prevalent ANE royal-cultic ideology, in which the king is chief executive in cult and political administration...' 'If the rule of gods in Assyria was expressed by means of a king who dominated every sphere of the nation's life, Yahweh in contrast was the one who gave land, upheld justice and conducted wars.[9]

Visitors to the British Museum can be struck by the fact that there are few objects from Israel compared to Assyria and Egypt. This fact fits in with Deuteronomy 17, however. The artefacts of other nations are in most cases glorifications of kings and their victories, such as over other nations and over lions. The huge statues, the inscriptions, the records all try to convey the message that the king was an excellent king who was under the protection of the gods. Compared to that, the Old Testament is very sober. Of course, the making of images was forbidden. But also in its literature the Old Testament does not glorify the kings. It speaks of defeats, of disobedience to God, of sins and failures, even when it comes to the 'ideal' king David. The Old Testament dares to criticize its own kings because it is mainly a prophetic book – history, nations, kings are viewed from a prophetic perspective. We will come back to this.

Another aspect of human kingship is the fact that in a certain way *each human being* exercises 'royal duties'. Human beings receive great responsibilities:

> '...fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground' (Gen. 1:28).

Man and woman are created 'in his own image, in the image of God'. There has been much discussion about the significance of this verse[10], but one of the possibilities, which to me seems a plausible one, is that men and women represent God on earth. In other nations it is the king who is regarded as God's representative.

The role of humans in Psalm 8 is very different from the role the Babylonians ascribed to them. In the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish*, human beings and the earth were created out of chaos. The need for protection against chaos is an ongoing issue. Protection is guaranteed by means of a good structure in society, in particular through the building and fortification of the city of Babylon. The king was the 'god-king', the vice-regent of the god. In Psalm 8, however, every human being is seen as a 'vice-regent of God' and can rule over God's creation on his decree.[11]

G. J. Wenham remarks with regard to the *function* of creation in the image of God:

> ... it enables mankind to rule over the earth and the other creatures. In ancient oriental myth kings were made in the gods' image, but Genesis democratises the idea; every human being is a king and responsible for managing the world on God's behalf.[12]

So the Bible values human beings very highly. This is an essential element in our view of humankind.

We can say that, compared to other nations, the Old Testament has a profoundly different view of the political world. Basically, we can say it is a *prophetic* view, not based on human insights, not based on the principle of human power, but based on the confession of God's reign and his rule. Human kings play a limited role amongst the covenant people of Israel. They are always evaluated from a prophetic point of view, from the perspective of what they do with God's Torah.

3. Prophets and politics

Life in Israel was religious in all its aspects, as we can see in the laws of the Torah. Political life was not a separate area. This was illustrated by the law on kingship in Deuteronomy 17. The king's law book and daily literature was the Torah and not a secularized political manifesto.

That the public life was not separated from faith is also clear in the life and work of the prophets of Israel. Other nations also had prophets. However, the prophetic texts from other nations often, though not always, show that prophets and other religious leaders such as priests, were supposed to confirm what the king did and said. In other Ancient Near Eastern texts, like some of the treaties, we also find a great fear of criticism of the king, which might lead to rebellion or revolt.[13]

Kings in Israel, however, are constantly evaluated from the point of view of what they did with the Torah of God. And if they trespassed it, they were told so by prophets. Of course, there were court prophets as well, supportive of the king and his officials. The prophet Jeremiah was involved in a constant battle with them. But prophets like Elijah and Nathan, and the major writing proph-

ets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Amos were not the mouthpiece of the king or of the officials. These prophets were, so to speak, the 'conscience' of the king and the nation, the 'flee which was constantly buzzing around their head'. When Ahab has a walk in 'his' (actually, Nabot's garden), something he had desperately longed for, it is this annoying prophet Elijah who comes and disturbs his peace. In another story, in 1 Kings 22 Ahab gets irritated about another true prophet of God, Micaiah, and says: 'Didn't I tell you that he never prophesies anything good about me, but only bad?' In this chapter Ahab is not mentioned by name but constantly called 'the king of Israel'. Even 'the king of Israel' could not just do what he wished!

In the so called Writing Prophets, there is a clear connection between the Torah and the message of the prophets. It is to the two sides of the Great Commandment that they constantly refer: loving and obeying God and loving your neighbours. It is about social issues that they raise their voices but they also warn against idolatry and false forms of worshipping God. We cannot say that their message concerns the social *and* the religious, since religion was meant to be social and ethical rules were given by God. There simply was no contrast between religion and politics, or between private and public theology. All of life was meant to be God-centred. The prophets emphasize this again and again. It belongs to the heart of the covenant made at Sinai. A 'social' prophet like Amos, who says strong things about the rich, includes worship in his message of doom:

'You trample on the poor...
You oppress the righteous and take bribes
and you deprive the poor of justice in the courts.' (Amos 5:11-12)
'I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies...
Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!'
(Amos 5:21, 23-24)

This is a strong message. Imagine that God does not want us to sing any hymns anymore until we are doing justice to the poor...

If necessary the prophets would criticise individuals, the people as a whole, religious leaders like (false) prophets and priests, and political leaders. This could lead to much opposition from those addressed. When Amos proclaims doom on king Jeroboam, he is accused of a conspiracy against the king (Amos 7:10).

Probably the strongest example of opposition is found in the life of the prophet Jeremiah. He is persecuted by friends and family, and by kings. In particular king Jehoiakim reacts very strongly to Jeremiah's message: He burns the scroll with prophetic warnings (Jer. 36) and in this way he does exactly the opposite of what king Josiah does in 2 Kings 22. Jehoiakim is the opposite of the ideal Israelite king as described in Deuteronomy 17, for he neglects God's law and exploits his brothers to magnify his own glory (Jer. 22:13-17).

The prophetic books make it obvious that the prophets were not only sent to their own people, be it Israel or Judah. Many prophetic books also contain messages to other nations. At his call Jeremiah was commissioned as 'a prophet to the nations'. His mission was international. In the book of Jeremiah there are indeed many 'international' messages, so to say. Jeremiah was constantly involved in international politics. The world in which he lived was about to change after the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal had died in 630 BC. The Babylonians became ever stronger. Jeremiah's message involved strong political advice: the best thing to do was to surrender to the king of Babylon. That was his message to the last king, Zedekiah (Jer. 21, 27). The prophet even illustrated and enacted his message by sending yokes to the delegates of several nations who planned a revolt against Babylon (Jer. 27). Jeremiah gave political advice and this could be highly controversial and brought him in danger (Jer. 37-38).

4. The nations

Another feature of the book of Jeremiah is that beside the biographical passages about his interference with politics, it contains a large number of *oracles against the nations*. First, in Jeremiah 25 God is pictured as the One who makes all the nations drink the cup of the wine of his wrath. This chapter gives us, as it were, a look behind the scenes of God's intervention and his rule in the history of the world. The oracles against the nations in Jeremiah 46-51[14] cover many of the nations mentioned in chapter 25, the last one being Babylon, the strongest enemy in those days.

In the oracles against the nations it is not always made clear why a nation is judged and punished by God. Often pride is mentioned, nations are condemned because of challenging God.[15] In the case of Babylon there are several reasons: their pride,

their arrogance towards God, their humiliation of God's people, their idolatry, the profanation of God's holy temple.[16] Jeremiah 50:29 says: Babylon 'defied the LORD, the Holy One of Israel'. Pride is a recurring theme in the prophecies against the nations. We hear echoes here of the story of the tower of Babel.

The oracles against the nations may teach us several things:

- God is in control of history (the oracle against Babylon in Jer. 51 ends with: 'declares the King, whose name is the LORD Almighty'). God is King over the entire world. He rules, despite what nations and kings may be up to.
- God judges nations: 'For the LORD is a God of retribution...' (Jer. 51:56). This is also part of the message of Amos who proclaims God's judgement on the sins of other nations (Amos 1-2).
- God defends the powerless and will restore justice (Jer. 51:36: 'See, I will defend your cause...').
- When we look at other passages, foreign rulers are sometimes even called 'God's servant'[17] or his 'shepherd' and 'anointed' (Is. 44:28; 45:1). Though they are not worshippers of God and are, like Nebuchadnezzar, punished for what they did to Israel, the expression 'servant' makes clear that God uses them as his instruments to fulfil his plans. They may think they are independent kings who have authority over the whole world, in the end they are 'just' used by God. What they do is not beyond God's control.

The fact that prophets spoke to the nations is not a strange element in the Old Testament. As we saw above, from the beginning of Genesis it has been clear that God's concern is for the whole world. Genesis 10 summarizes the nations' origins under God's control. In the call of Abraham in Genesis 12 the nations are not excluded but included. In Deuteronomy 32, a covenant book which seems to concentrate largely on Israel, Moses says:

> 'When the Most High gave the nations their inheritance, when he divided all mankind, he set boundaries for the peoples according to the number of the sons of Israel' (Deut. 21:8).

The oracles against the nations are an essential element of the conviction that God is the only Creator and that he is the only God and King over all.

It is good to remark that not all prophecies against the nations are as negative as those against Babylon. There are messages of hope[18] and of course, there are visions of a future in which all the nations will go up to Jerusalem to worship the LORD.[19]

The oracles against the nations show that God is in control of history and that he fulfils his plans in his own way. This theme returns in the last book of the Bible. God's reign will be established forever and all anti-powers, like Babylon, will be destroyed. The Book of Revelation contains a large number of allusions to the Old Testament prophetic oracles against the nations.[20]

To sum up: the prophets of Israel clearly spoke out against kings, political and religious leaders, and other nations. The fact that they did was part of their commission. It was also based on the conviction that God is the LORD of history, the Creator and the One and Only God.

5. Examples of involvement in 'public life'

It is clear that the prophets were heavily involved in politics, either national or international. Their message varies from situation to situation and is therefore always relevant and up to date.

Isaiah warns king Ahaz not to give in to the threat of the enemy and not to surrender to Assyria (Is. 6), Jeremiah on the contrary urges king Zedekiah to surrender to Babylon. The same Jeremiah, in his letter to the exiles in chapter 29, gives advice to the exiles in Babylon to settle there, to live in the foreign land as if it were their home, even to pray for the enemy and to 'seek the peace and prosperity of the city' to which they have been exiled. Is this an acceptance of the status quo, an acceptance of the enemy's rule? Yes and no. In the following verses the promise of a return to the promised land is given. The perspective is one of hope of restoration under God's guidance. In the interim-period the people are required to live their normal life, to start families, to build and to plant – and to show a positive attitude towards the Babylonians who exiled them.

Elsewhere we see how believers seemingly adapt themselves to foreign rulers, in some cases enemies of Israel, by living in peace at their courts. I think of Joseph, Nehemiah, Esther and Daniel and his three friends. Yet, there is an independence in their behaviour which is clearly based on their belonging to the covenant people of God. They live their lives 'in exile', yet hold on to their own, God given principles.[21] And Daniel clearly sets limits to what kings may require of him, yet he is respected and attains a high position.

So when it comes to examples of participation in public life there is some variation in the Old Testa-

ment. Yet in every situation, whether that is in the promised land during the time of the monarchy, or whether it is in a foreign country in exile, there is a sort of critical distance, an evaluation of political affairs which is based on the faith that God is the ultimate Ruler and Creator of the world.

One more form of participation should be mentioned, last but definitely not least. That is *intercession*, of which the story of Abraham who pleads with God is one of the best examples (Gen. 18). Jeremiah urged the exiles to pray for Babylon. The people of God are called to pray for the welfare of those outside the covenant. That is part of their mission.

6. Some implications for Christians

This paper has concentrated on the Old Testament. Of course, as Christians we cannot read the Old Testament as if there was no New Testament. Yet the next paper will deal with that more extensively. I therefore confine myself to some concluding remarks which may be helpful for our discussion.

• The Old Testament provides us with a far reaching view of the world and the world's history. The conviction that God is the Creator and King of the whole world implies that as Christians we do not need to behave ourselves as if we are somewhere hidden in the corner with a faith which is just a personal, individual matter irrelevant to the rest of the world. Old Testament faith (and I believe New Testament faith as well) by its very nature focuses on the whole world. We have a world view which is all-embracing. It is not one that invites us to dominate the world as if it is our own 'name which we want to make great', as the people in the story of the tower of Babel, but it is God's salvation-history for the whole world. Christian involvement in public life has a strong foundation in God's position as Creator and in his Kingship. Admittedly, the church is not a theocracy like Israel and the Christian church is not defined by one people and one land either. Nonetheless, her message is worldwide. This is not only so because in the New Testament she was given a mission in Christ's name, but also because of the Old Testament view of the world and of history as God's world and God's history.

For this reason in this paper I have concentrated on universal themes like creation and kingship and hardly paid attention to God's particular covenant with Israel. I believe that the Old Testament world view, based on the conviction that God is the Creator and King of the whole world, gives us a firm foundation to speak out even in a non-Christian world.

• All too often attention is limited to the monarchy when the Old Testament is invited to speak about politics and public theology. But the Old Testament is not just about the period of the Israelite monarchy, it has a much wider vision in which the monarchy plays only one part.

• God is the One and Only God. Consequently Christians should be on the forefront to speak out against idolatry in whatever form, for example in the form of political ideologies or spiritual movements like New Age.

• Christians can have influence in this world because they were called to be a paradigm, in the same way as Israel was meant to be. This may be in deeds or in words. The laws of the Old Testament can provide a framework for knowing what is essential when it comes to justice, righteousness and holiness. I cannot deal with this topic extensively just now, but I refer to Chris Wright's *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* and to my own book *Celebrating the Law?*

• The concept of creation has many implications for ethics, such as the rights of human beings, the value of life, the care for the environment. We should not hesitate to bring these values into the public arena.

• The level and form of actual political involvement may vary from time to time and from place to place. Intercession for the world and the nations, however, should always be part of the ministry of the Church. Yet sometimes Christians may be able to speak out more clearly than at other times or in other places; remember the examples of Elijah, Amos and Daniel. The overall leading principle is that we continue to study the Scriptures and ask for God's guidance in order to have a prophetically critical view of the societies we live in. Too often studying the Bible has resulted in the affirmation of views which supported the status quo. In the way in which Deuteronomy 17 deals with kingship in contrast with other nations, Christians may find a guideline for a view of power which differs from that of the world around them, a view which is in line with Jesus' prayer: '*Thy* Kingdom come...'

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Notes

1 Paper presented at the 2004 FEET conference on 'public theology'.
2 W.J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation. A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids & Carlisle 1993) , p. 61.
3 Ibidem, p. 78.
4 C. J. H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester 1983), p. 43; published in the United States as *An Eye for an Eye: The Place of Old Testament Ethics Today* (Downers Grove 1983). A fully revised, updated and integrated edition of this book and *Walking in the Ways of the LORD* was published as *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (IVP 2004).
5 H. Lalleman-de Winkel, *Celebrating the Law? Rethinking Old Testament Ethics* (Paternoster, 2004).
6 *Celebrating*, pp. 24-25.
7 J.G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Apollos OT Commentary 5; IVP, 2002), p. 34.
8 Ibidem.
9 Ibidem, pp. 34-35.
10 See G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word; Waco 1987), pp. 29-32.
11 Lalleman, *Celebrating the Law?*, pp.17-18; E. Otto, *Theologische Ethik des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart etc. 1994), pp. 92-94.
12 G.J. Wenham, *Story as Torah. Reading the Old Testament ethically* (Edinburgh 2000), p. 25.
13 'Within the empire's provincial system, pacts of loyalty with the upper class and the Assyrian rank and file served as a means of protecting the king and his heir-designate against potential conspiracies and uprisings.' (S. Parpola, 'Neo-Assyrian Treaties from the Royal Archives of Nineveh', *JCS* 39 (1987), p. 161). One of the treaties Parpola deals with is Esarhaddon's Accession Treaty (7th Century) which reads: 'I swear that should I he[ar an ug]ly word about him ... I will go and tell it to Esarhaddon, my lord, [I swear] that I [will] be [his servant] and (only) speak good of him...'(p. 170f.).
14 The Septuagint put the oracles against the nations after 25:13a.
15 Moab (48:7, 15, 29), Ammon (49:4), Edom (49:7, 16).
16 Babylon's pride (50:31-32, 36; 51:25-26), their injustice and violence to others (end of 50:15, 29; 51:6), sins against God, his people and his temple (50:14, 24, 28, 29; 51:10-11, 24, 35-36, 49), their idolatry (50:2, 38; 51:17-18, 47, 52).
17 Even Nebukadnessar (Jer. 25:9; 27:6)!
18 Jeremiah 48:47; 49:6; 49:39; see also Isaiah 19:19-25.
19 Jeremiah 3:17; 12:15-16; 16:19; Isaiah 2:1-5; 11:10; 60:3; Micah 4:1f.
20 Revelation 14:8; 16:19; 17-19.
21 In the Book of Esther God is not mentioned, but I believe he is present on every page.