PROPHET=MYSTIC AND SOCIAL JUSTICE: 
A RESPONSE

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Abstract

A response to the original draft of Professor Stuhlmueller's paper was presented on April 20, 1991; the following response was revised in June, 1991, to take account of the extensive revisions made by Professor Stuhlmueller.

What one would expect from Carroll Stuhlmueller for the centennial of our society we have received: a provocative essay on a central topic of biblical studies, that displays at once his mastery of the prophetic corpus and a novel thesis that flows, I take it, from the rich storehouse of his own spirituality.

The paper explores the implications of the prophet as mystic, focusing particularly on the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the prophetic word and on the moral excesses to which the prophets were at times driven in their passion for justice. The paper also discusses the dynamic interplay between the prophet and the nations both in the oracles against the nations and in the prophetic incorporation of the nations in an era of future blessing. Finally, it studies the prophet-mystic's advocacy for justice for those who are sick and disabled.

In his paper and person, Fr. Stuhlmueller presents himself in a role that has typified the collegiality of this society: reaching out for a new knowledge, opening oneself to the questions and comments of others, and sharing preliminary conclusions with the expectation and hope that the give and take of public discourse will strengthen the proposal and give it even greater cogency. It is in that spirit that I offer the comments that follow.

The definition of prophetic role has been a major concern of recent studies, and this paper contributes to that discussion. I am not sure after several readings of the paper, however, whether I fully understand what a prophet-mystic is. The essay employs a number of synonyms for mysticism that clarify the concept in pa’ť, but that also tend to confuse it. At times the following, somewhat incompatible words are used synonymously: mystic, contemplative, ecstatic, eccentric, peripheral, and visionary.
According to Fr. Stuhlmueller, the prophet we call Third Isaiah is swept into mystic prayer in Isa 63, a communal lament whose plea for God to act immediately (in both senses of the word immediately — right now and without agents) seems not well described by the term mystic.

A second term in need of careful consideration is the word orthodoxy. We are told that the prophets inhabited the outer edge of orthodox thinking and were prone to fall over that edge into mystic experiences. But one of the "orthodox" grounds for prophetic authority is that prophets like Micaiah and Jeremiah claimed to have listened in on the decisions of the divine council. Their "mysticism" was "orthodox." Jeremiah in fact makes this claim of access to the divine council a basic distinction between true and false prophecy. If Bernard Land and others are right that the prophets were members of the Yahweh-alone party, what is the sense of putting them on the edge of orthodoxy? At other times in this paper, the word orthodoxy is used of the normal rules of morality, and Third Isaiah is castigated for breaking with moral orthodoxy in his violent statement (in Yahweh's name) against the Edomites (Isa 63:3). In this case, I felt that the moral orthodoxy referred to might be our own rather than that of ancient Israel. While most of us are shocked when Elisha curses boys who jeered at his baldness and when she-wolves tear them to pieces, I doubt that the biblical redactor should be accused of amorality or of thinking that the prophets were above moral judgment. For him, no doubt, the issue was a moral one or respect for the divine word and the prophet who spoke it.

A third reference to orthodoxy speaks of the prophet's willingness to disregard rules of orthodoxy and to touch the dead, citing particularly the actions of Elijah and Elisha. The laws of Num 19 declare a person who touches the dead ritually unclean, but they surely do not prohibit people from touching the dead. After all, the dead can not really bury the dead. I'm not sure I agree with his assessment that human bones were not contaminating for prophecy, or when Stuhlmueller adds that God was extraordinarily present in such prophetic actions where orthodoxy claimed divine absence. After all, Ps 139 — orthodoxy? — confessed that if one made a bed in Sheol God would also be there. I have no doubt that Hosea and Jeremiah believed that Yahweh was willing to receive sick and disabled persons, or even a sick and disabled nation. Were such sick and disabled persons barred from the temple? Disabled persons, to be sure, were barred from the priesthood, but at least one probable worship setting for the many laments dealing with sickness was the temple itself, where the sick — or disabled? — psalmist could pray. Fr. Stuhlmueller rightly exults in the concern in late prophecy for unclean and disabled persons. But a passage like Isa 35 does not only receive such persons, it also
transforms them — the blind see, the lame leap, the dumb sing. Such eschatological reversal, in my judgment, has more to do with new creation or return to Edenic bliss than with mysticism.

How is the non-fulfillment of prophecy clarified by the term prophet-mystic? Stuhlmueller concentrates on the personal agony experienced by such prophets as "the servant" or Trito-Isaiah as they wrestled with the delay or non-fulfillment of the prophetic word. In response, Trito-Isaiah reached beyond the rules of Leviticus and Deuteronomy to incorporate eunuchs and foreigners into the community. I fail to see the alleged "bonding" between social justice and mysticism in this case. It seems to me that there are other reasons in Israelite tradition, such as the spirit behind the Jubilee year, that account for Trito-Isaiah's passionate break through.

Fr. Stuhlmueller detects an interaction between ecstasy, international politics, and social justice in Amos and anticipates that the reader might question the word ecstasy with regard to Amos by listing traces of the ecstatic element: the visions as his prophetic call, the divine compulsion to prophesy, and his innovative transformation of oracles against the nations into sermons against Israel. "Ecstasy," he argues, "secured the prophet Amos in his quest for social justice." I wonder about identifying the visions of Amos as his call and about the assertion that ecstasy "secured the prophet." In his dialogue with Amaziah, the prophet seems to me to refer to an experience of election or call — God took me from after the flock — and to a sense of authority quite different from mysticism — "And Yahweh said, Go prophesy to my people Israel." Do the prophetic formulae "Thus says Yahweh" and "oracle of Yahweh" point to mystical experiences?

I would like to state my own theory on two topics dear to this paper, the source of the prophetic outrage over social injustice and the implications of a canonical reading.

After more than 2700 years it is difficult for the modern interpreter to know the means by which Amos was able to say "Thus says Yahweh" or what he actually saw when Yahweh showed him this or that in the visions. In the Israel oracle at the end of his Oracles against the foreign nations, however, it is very clear that Amos detected total incompatibility between God's actions in the traditions of Exodus and conquest and the social and cultic sins of Amos's own contemporaries. While Amos broke with tradition on the negative implications of the day of Yahweh, on the significance of election, and on the uniqueness of the Exodus, he used that same Exodus tradition to indict Israel for its muzzling and misleading.
of prophets and Nazirites. How did he come to such judgments? I would argue that he operated with a passion for Israel's traditions and with a keen and courageous sensitivity to the moral implications inherent in them. What is gained by calling such passion and sensitivity mystic?

Read at the canonical level, the book of Amos helps us come to terms with what Stuhlmueller calls the moral excesses of the prophet. The prophet did not seem to operate according to what we might call pastoral restraint. After all, was the only future for the nation Israel's end, or did the moral failure of some of the prophet's contemporaries justify his denunciations against the whole people? Were there not 7,000 righteous also at his time? Brevard Childs has reminded us that Amos 9:11-15, while clearly secondary, provides a hermeneutical key for subsequent communities to appropriate this stirring and troublesome prophetic message. I would state this hermeneutical suggestion as follows: If you are willing to admit that God's final and ultimate word to his people is always yes, then feel free to speak with the passion and outrage of an Amos against the social injustices of your day. If, however, you are not willing to affirm that ultimate divine affirmation, then perhaps you, like Amos, are only a razor-edge away from moral turpitude.

A fine paper, like this one, forces the reader to rethink old positions, and it suggests, as George Mendenhall has often said, that our discipline is only in its infancy.

What a wonderful way to begin the second century of the Chicago Society of Biblical Research.
NOTES

1 Fr. Stuhlmueller used the comments of Professor Viviano and myself to make extensive revisions in his original manuscript. Consequently, many of the remarks made orally at the Centennial Meeting of the Society are no longer relevant.

2 In his earlier paper Fr. Stuhlmueller wrote: "Ecstasy, therefore, initiated and sustained the prophet Amos." In the final form of the paper we read: "The visionary or ecstatic aspect of the prophets Amos and Isaiah enabled [italics mine] them to stand up to world powers as well as to the religious and civil authorities." I do not see the necessary support for this assertion in the text.