

James Luther Adams as Biblical Theologian

Patrick D. Miller

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To begin with a personal word, I would like to thank Stephen Mott for the invitation to give the annual lecture at the James Luther Adams Forum on Religion and Society. The invitation was as much a surprise to me as, I am sure, it was to many of you. Part of me is still wondering whether I should have taken it on, inasmuch as it has led me into what is not my usual working territory. Yet, while enmeshed in the study of such topics as Akkadian, Ugaritic, Syriac, and the like in my graduate studies at Harvard, I was fascinated from afar by this interesting person know as JLA. I felt his influence through such friends as Max Stackhouse, Don Shriver, and others who were working under him and talked to me about him. And on occasion I would hear him at some kind of presentation or would run into him walking around the Divinity School, bumping his briefcase against his knees. There was no time for any courses outside my own program, or so I thought, but the one teacher whose classroom enticed me was Prof. Adams. I regret that I never entered it.

I do remember purchasing and reading *Taking Time Seriously*, and even when, upon moving into retirement, I pared my library down by about two-thirds, that book went with me. Stephen Mott's invitation caught me off guard, but I think I accepted it primarily

because it would not only allow me but force me to become more familiar with Adams' work. And that has been indeed a welcome outcome of this assignment. I trust that you will understand I speak as a neophyte but one who is highly appreciative of the contribution of JLA to the church's thinking about theology and ethics.

I say "the church's thinking" because one of the things that has impressed me is the degree to which Adams was a churchman and the church is central to his thinking and his life. The primal reality that is the *ecclesia* is there in the New Testament community. If one asks where religion and society come together for Adams, it is not simply in the interaction of religious ideas and social structures, central as that is for his thinking; it is very much in the church.

Yet as central as the church is to Adams' thought, it is a reflection of a larger conviction that shaped his thinking from beginning to end. In the midst of all his writing, or at least as much as I have been able to read and absorb, one sentence stands out for me. In his essay on "The Love of God" he writes these words, which, in my judgment, encapsulate the whole of his thinking: "We belong to a cosmos that is social."¹ All parts of that sentence are important for Adams and are reflected again and again in his life and thought. Human existence is social and communal. All of our life, in all aspects is shaped by that reality-the relationship to God, human life lived from beginning to end in social contexts from family out to political party, from church to bridge club, book club, and play-reading group. One cannot, however, circumscribe that sociality and confine it to small or large structures of human existence. We live in a cosmos that is social. Adams recognized that all of the social structures in which we participate are a reflection of the large reality that all that is is social

in character. And the sense of belonging to a cosmos that is social is what it means to be human. Adams makes this point in so many ways, e.g. "The condition of being human-of *being made for community* (italics mine)-is a fact that we cannot elude"² or "Man is an associational being and his history is the history of his associations"³ These profound anthropological bases for Adams' life and thought are deeply rooted in Scripture and are anthropological formulations of the basic thesis: We belong to a cosmos that is social. It is there in the beginning in Genesis 2 when the Lord God says: "It is not good that the human creature (*ha 'adam*) should be alone" (Gen. 2: 18). James Weldon Johnson's great poetic sermon, "The Creation," places that aloneness much earlier in the creation process when he begins: "And God stepped out on space, And He looked around and said, "*I'm lonely- I'll make me a world* " Later in the poem God says, "I'm lonely still ... God thought and thought till he thought, "*I'll make me a man.*" The social character of the human creation in origin and being is very much there in the first creation account when we hear: "So God created humankind *in his image*, in the image of God he created *them; male and female* he created *them*" (Gen. 1 :27). The cosmos is social from the beginning.

The Political Character of Biblical Language and Thought

For Adams, however, the starting point is not anthropological. The notion of a social cosmos is profoundly theological. In his essay on "The Evolution of My Social Concern," he writes: "Quite decisive for me was the recognition of the *political* character of Biblical symbolism. As political, this symbolism, particularly in the Old Testament, expressed the sovereignty of God over all of life, including the institutional

structures."⁴ Like his colleague Paul Lehmann, Adams perceived this political symbolism as in some sense foundational not only for understanding the Scriptures but for shaping the life of the human creature. To some extent, everything else flows out of Adams' early and correct awareness of the political character of biblical symbolism, and it shapes all that I will speak about.

I. The One and the Many: From the Divine Council to the Trinity.

The particular aspect of Adams' insight on the political character of biblical symbolism with which I will start is a biblical image often ignored, but one whose significance Adams perceived: *the divine council*. The starting point of the social cosmos is the realm of the divine. Through the notion of the divine council, Adams perceived that the social character of the cosmos begins with the divine, with the realm of the gods, and that the social and political character of human existence flows from that. On several occasions he alludes to the work of Thorkild Jacobsen on "primitive democracy" as a feature of early Mesopotamian life, reflected in the divine world where the gods consulted together on actions they would take in a very democratic process that dealt with judicial matters, the granting of kingship, and going to war against opposing forces.⁵ Jacobsen saw this as a projection of an early democratic social system. While Adams' discussion of the Mesopotamian model of the divine assembly does not lead him into extended reference to the role of the divine assembly in Israelite thought and the Old Testament, he does not suggest that "In this ancient view of the divine power as *responsiveness in community*

(italics mine) one may see something of the biblical conception of the end of human life: to glorify God and to enjoy God in communion and community."⁶ The implication for the God of the Bible is further underscored when Adams suggests that with this concept one might identify a true god as one who attends to what other gods are saying in deciding about policy. Adams is on to something important here for the understanding of divine sovereignty and cosmology as we encounter it in Scripture. While he does not allude to the divine council in this context, he correctly sees rooted in this kind of polity basic notions of divine sovereignty and specifically the images of God as king, judge, and warrior.⁷ I was struck by his lifting up of these images, for their centrality is not always acknowledged, especially the image of God as warrior, which Adams refers to in other contexts.⁸ I have argued that each of these three images is a primal aspect of the presentation of God and divine rule in the Old Testament and each one has its connection to the functions of the divine council: 1) The divine council is the *court of the divine ruler* who governs the cosmos (see Isaiah 6). The divine ones render praise to the Lord here and elsewhere (see ending of Psalm 103). 2) In Psalm 82, the divine council is gathered as a *judicial assembly*, and God stands in the midst of the assembly as judge to announce judgment against the other gods because of their failure to care for the poor. 3) Many texts attest to the heavenly host as *the army of the Lord* in battle. Indeed that is the context of the most familiar Old Testament epithet: the Lord of hosts. The image of God as king is a claim that the cosmos is not a scene of chaos and disorder but the creation and subject of one who has power for the sake of rule and whose rule is possible because of the divine power. And that rule has a particular character to it. It is a

just rule, even to the extent that the whole divine world is condemned to death because of the absence of justice on the part of the gods (Ps. 82). And the image of warrior is a way of saying that the one who governs justly has the power to enact such rule in the cosmos.⁹

All of this is by way of trying to uncover what Adams sensed in this political imagery. And while he does not go in depth into the symbolism of the divine council in the Old Testament in his essays, there is an important anecdote told by Max Stackhouse in the introduction to *On Being Human Religiously* that shows he was well aware of the carry over of the Mesopotamian symbolism into the Old Testament. Max reports a classroom debate around the problem of the one and the many. He identifies a number of issues that were discussed, summarized in the sentence: "What is our basic situation: chaos needing order, or uniformity needing diversity." At that point, Adams points out that "the biblical authors knew that the Lord God speaks in a council. There is a center, but it is heard in the midst of diversity, and most clearly only in community." Here is his discernment that at the heart of reality, we do not choose between the one and the many. The center is heard in the midst of diversity; community has a center. The interaction of complexity and coherence, the individual and the communal, the personal and the social is a feature of the cosmos, reflected in the divine world and in all human endeavors and engagements. "We belong to a cosmos that is social"-beginning with its creator and ruler. I remember early on hearing that one of the interesting things about Adams was that he was a Trinitarian Unitarian. I do not know to what extent that is the case, but to the degree that it is true of his theological perspective, I am confident that it is rooted in this perception, for

the interaction of plurality and oneness is a feature of the divine reality from the beginning of Scripture to its end. I have called this faith of ours "a strange kind of monotheism."¹¹ For Adams it is not strange. As Max Stackhouse summarizes his perspective: "Adams often points out that any monolithic definition of reality is wrong, for it cannot take account of genuine diversity. A pluralistic definition is necessary, but it is suspect if offered dogmatically or if it provides no coherent center."¹² This is not for Adams simply a sociological insight. It has to do with reality from the top down (or from the bottom up if one wishes to be more inductive). As such, it is a basic contribution to biblical theology.

II. From Covenant to Voluntary Association

Seventy-five years ago this past summer, the Old Testament scholar Walther Eichrodt published his multi-volume *Theology of the Old Testament*, the much-debated heart of which was that the covenant between God and Israel occupied the "central position in the religious thinking of the OT" and that the structural unity of the OT message could be discerned by working out from this center. In one of his prefaces, Eichrodt wrote: "The actual term 'covenant' is, therefore, so to speak, only the code word for a much more far-reaching certainty, which formed the very deepest layer of the foundations of Israel's faith, and without which indeed Israel would not have been Israel at all."¹³ As yet, I have not spotted any allusions to Eichrodt's work by Adams, but no one that I have seen in the last 50 years outside of Old Testament scholarship has perceived as well Eichrodt's point both about the centrality of covenant for shaping the divine

human relationship, beginning with Israel, and about it being a concept that is rich and deep, effectively determining the character of biblical faith. Adams recognizes here a socio-political structure that operates as a kind of ordering principle in two senses: ordering of Israel/the people's life and providing a context for the institutionalization and rationalization of such things as prophecy, the law, leadership, and the like. While later Old Testament scholarship has not tended simply to buy into Eichrodt's claim, it has continued to underscore the centrality of the covenant for biblical theology. Adams' analysis and interpretation of the character and function of the covenant is a basic contribution of his work not only to ethics and liberal thinking but to the interpretation of scripture and especially its resonance with and effects on the way we live and function.¹⁴ Let me suggest some of the primary aspects of his interpretation of covenant.

1. Through the covenant, the meaning of life is found in the instigation and maintenance of "agreement that provides order and continuity in the society."¹⁵ Here he recognizes that *the heart of the matter is commitment, making and keeping promises*. "The bonding and binding quality of covenant, the ordering principle, is promises. God is the promise-making, promise-keeping reality upon which we ultimately depend Accordingly to be human is to be able to make a commitment in response to the divine promise." In various places we hear the covenantal claim: "I will be your God and you shall be my people" (Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 11 :4; 30:22; Ezek 36:28), a shared commitment. The most dramatic example of Adams' point is the "summary of the reciprocal vows that seal the covenantal relationship between the Lord and Israel" in Deuteronomy 26:19.¹⁷

Today you have obtained the LORD'S agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. ¹⁸ Today the LORD has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; ¹⁹ for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honor; and for you to be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised.

And more than once we hear that "God remembered his covenant" (e.g. Exod 2:24; 6:5). What Adams suggests is that this structure of reciprocal promise and agreement discerned from the biblical story is characteristic of our whole existence. Once more, it is cosmic in scope¹⁸ and is the conceptual context and theological reality in which all our structures for life are to be located---family, "the individual, the middle structures, the government, the society, and the divine creative ground of meaning" These are "held together by covenant." As a member of the Reformed tradition, I recognize that there are significant theological connections here.²⁰ Adams, however does not develop his interpretation as a Reformed theologian but as a biblical theologian. Without reference to the biblical story but in its light, he speaks of the promise-breaking creature and the divine reality that "makes new beginnings possible, and thus is the promise-renewing power in life."²¹ His move into the ethical, into the sociopolitical is immediate and direct: "This power is manifest not only in interpersonal relations; it can appear also in institutional behavior, even if only ambiguously and incompletely. The separation of powers in society makes possible intervention in the name of the

promises, intended to prevent bondage to any finite power. "²² In this covenantal reality and its commitments he sees the possibility of keeping the first and second commandments.

2. A key aspect of the covenantal structure for Adams is its character as a *voluntary association*. Participation in this social cosmos, characterized as covenant is not forced but voluntary. That means specifically that the human community consents to the reciprocal promise. It is not forced obedience. That point is evident in the covenantal narrative of Exodus 19 and following where the Commandments are spoken to the people. "So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the Lord had commanded him. The people all answered as one: 'Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do.' (Exod 19:7- 8). While the Commandments seem to belong to a divine command ethic-and indeed they may be so interpreted-if so that does not preclude voluntary consent. Adams appropriately draws on Whitehead here to lift up his emphasis on *persuasion* rather than coercion. He cites Whitehead's comment that "The creation of civilized order is the victory of persuasion over force."²³ That is specifically true of the covenant where proper participation is a matter of sensibility and very pragmatic. Keeping the agreement is something that both sides seek to persuade the other party of the covenant to do. This is evident especially in the prominence of motive clauses in the law by which again and again the law is rationalized and the community is encouraged to keep it for its good, because that makes sense and works out, because it produces good results. Such tools of persuasion are present in the statutes and ordinances of the Book of the Covenant, the Holiness

Code, and the Deuteronomic Code, which describe how Israel is to live in the covenant. But they are already very present in the Commandments. There are *sanctions* identified for disobedience "The Lord will not acquit anyone who abuses his name" (Third Commandment) and *promises* identified as growing out of obedience: "that your days may be long in the land" (Fifth Commandment). Reasons are given to indicate the *purpose* and *usefulness* of the command: "so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you" (Fourth Commandment). "The people are not simply told to obey. They are persuaded, by negative and positive means, by explanation and appeal to compassion, by rational argument and common sense."²⁴ This enactment by persuasion, however, is not a one way street. For the Old Testament is full of conversations and prayers on the part of persons addressing the deity in which they use all kinds of arguments and reasons to seek to persuade the other party in the covenant to remember and keep the promises "for your name's sake," for example. The voluntarism of the covenant is evident both in the presence of rationales and the need for them. Adams speaks of passive power as well as active power, citing Chester Barnard's interpretation of power as "requiring two-way communication, that is, as requiring the yielding to influence as well as the exercise of influence."²⁵ In the covenant, there is two-way communication, influence yielded to as well as exercised.

3. We note with Adams that the covenant *holds together the personal/individual and the communal or social*. "When the nation is unfaithful, God has a controversy with his people as a people [Mic 6:2; cf. Hos 4:1]. Thus their responsibility is for institutional as well

as for individual behavior. This ethos, however, is not a purely externalized, institutionalized one. It is rooted in inward commitment of the individual as a party to the covenant. It is significant that the Ten Commandments are couched in the second person singular."²⁶ This last observation is important, for the Commandments function as the basic guidelines or principles of the covenant relationship. And they are announced to the whole assembly of Israel, that is, to the corporate body. But in their formulation, they are, as Adams observes, set in the singular, so that they have to do with individual relationship with God and neighbor but as a community. Thus all the associations are in view, and that is evident as the Commandments and the statutes and ordinances that grow out of them have to do with family relations, offices and structures of the assembly, neighborhoods, owner and tenant, war procedures, the courts, and so on. While Weber differentiated the "natural community of the family" from the "politically organized or recognized powers" and saw them as involuntary associations in distinction from the voluntary ones,²⁷ Adams notes that even though one may recognize the family as such as one of the primary human associations and calls it a "domestic symbol" that "can point to a more intimate interpersonal cathexis than the political symbol (as, for example, in Hosea's use),"²⁸ the concept of covenant in the Bible "includes also the family."²⁹ Here he rightly recognizes that the biblical concept of covenant is both political and familial metaphor. Frank Cross has spoken of covenant as "kinship-in-law" and notes that "the language of kinship used in marriage, adoption, and covenants of individuals and groups is put to use even in parity treaties and

vassal treaties negotiated at the international level between independent states."³⁰ This is especially demonstrated in the covenant book *par excellence*, the Book of Deuteronomy, whose resonances with the Assyrian and other treaties has been long recognized. That same book sets much of its regulation and narrative in the context of the family, and the neighbor category is "brother" there, significantly sealing the family and neighborhood structures together. The neighbor in the covenant relationship is a member of the family.

4. Anyone familiar with Adams' work would be aware that among the primary themes are love, fellowship, power, and freedom.³¹ These are all interrelated in various ways, but I want in this context to pick up particularly his extensive emphasis on *freedom*, for it is rooted in the covenant structure and relationship. What Adams makes clear is that freedom is out of the power of God-so the Exodus-but the human being and especially the human community participates in that freedom-so the Commandments and the rest of the Torah. "It is response, as with Abraham and Moses, to a call, to a divine initiative."³² Freedom, however, is not just individual. Once again, it is collective and requires institutional framework or space. The community that is redeemed learns to live as not just a free people but a *freed* people. As Adams says, "freedom at its most profound levels is, ironically closer to responsibility and purpose than to license and anomie."³³

The image of *space* is central to Adams' understanding of freedom, and he is right. Space is in some ways the primary image for freedom in the Old Testament. First of all, it is particular space, that is, place. God's setting free a people involves and is not complete without the

provision of space for life, including institutional space. So much of the Old Testament story from Exodus onward is about this space and how it is that one is to live as a freed people and a free people in that space, that place. Second, the spatial image for freedom is not confined to the particular experience of Exodus, wilderness, and Promised Land. In the Psalms, one of the primary images of freedom is "a broad place," (e.g. 18:19; 37; 118:5; 119:45). For example, "You gave me room when I was in distress" (Ps 4:2), or, "He brought me out into a broad place; he delivered me ..." (Ps 18:19). Christoph Barth, in his treatment of the motif of deliverance from death in the Psalms, says that of the three groups of verbs that have to do with deliverance from death, the first and strongest and most frequent are those verbs that describe deliverance as a spatial movement.³⁴

Adams' treatment of covenant, power, and freedom enable us to ask and respond to the question as to whether covenant, discussed by him much as "symbol" and "political metaphor," is only to be regarded as figurative, to which present modes, institutions, and structures are analogous but only that. One may answer that question from various aspects of Adams' writing. I will cite one passage-leaving out some sentences and interspersing my own comment in brackets-that seems to me to be indicative of his approach:

"The power that is worthy of confidence, the power that alone is reliable, has a world-historical purpose, the achievement of righteousness and fellowship-[Note his use here of the word "fellowship." I don't think it is satisfactory to associate Adams with voluntary association without recognizing his weight upon *fellowship* or community]-through the loving [Here is one of his primary uses of

love.] obedience of its creatures The divine purpose is manifest not in abstract, timeless entities but rather in historical events and patterns of eventsIn the past God had chosen Israel and made a covenant in order to carry out his purpose in a special way. He had delivered Israel from bondage and slavery. Freedom from bondage is the working of a divine power, freedom from domination. But it brings with it the demand for a new commitment. The divine power, the reliable power in history, forms men into universal, righteous world community. [Clearly Adams is starting from and building on Israel's story, the covenant, and the giving of the law to create a righteous community. But it also is not simply the historic community of Israel in view. He goes on to say:] Where true community is being formed, there the divine power is working. Indeed this is a way in which we identify the divine power. [So the covenant is manifest and discernible in the world and reality as we encounter it. It is not simply a piece of the past or a figure of speech. Finally, he says here:] Prophetic religion is a historical religion not only in the sense that it is concerned with the struggle between good and evil in history but also in the sense that it looks toward the creation of a historical community of memory and hope with respect to God's working in history."³⁵ Covenant, therefore, is a combination of *history* (the story of Israel and the early church), *metaphor* (a complex and coherent figure by which we may probe into the character of human community and *association*), *present reality* (the continuing way of the divine reality at work in and through and with the human community), and *future hope*. I am not altogether sure what Adams' means when he talks, as he does several times, about "a/the covenant of B/being," but I think this is the point he is making. The covenant of Being has to do with "fundamental reality."³⁴

While such a covenant can be interpreted non-theistically, for Adams "the covenant is with the creative, sustaining, commanding, judging transforming Power."³⁷

5. A final word about Adams' repeated and careful delineation of the structure and use of covenant. It has to do with an apparent contradiction in his different formulation of his views, particularly the two places where he seeks in some detail to describe the main characteristics of covenant.³⁸ One of his primary claims is that "the covenant includes a rule of law." In one instance, however, he goes on to say "It is a legal covenant."³⁹ while in the other essay he says, "but it is not fundamentally a legal covenant"⁴⁰ One might simply assume he changed his mind, but the essays in which the contradicting formulations occur were published within a year of each other. And I think the later formulation is less clearly where Adams' thought ends up. On the one hand, the presence of law and thus a legal dimension at the heart of the covenant is both indisputable and very important for understanding the covenant structure. When, however, Adams says that "it is not fundamentally a legal concern," he clearly wants to resist a reductionism of the covenant to a legal phenomenon. For in both instances where he refers to the rule of law as being characteristic of covenant, he goes on to say that there is an affective dimension to covenant, the element of love and trust. In yet another formulation he makes this clear: "The covenant brought with it a law to be obeyed. Yet it was not a merely legalistic metaphor. Like the covenant, it was a gift from the mercy of God, engendering gratitude and trust. Violation of the covenant was not so much a legal crime as a betrayer of trust.

This aspect of the covenant introduces an affectional element."⁴¹ The affectional element is a dimension of the covenant that is being recovered. It is at the heart of the Shema: "Hear O Israel, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might." But most of us have ignored the affectional dimension here in favor of defining love as keeping the law. Indeed that is its manifestation, but to assume that there is not an affectional dimension to that kind of activity would be equivalent to saying that because a man does all the things that are proper to his relationship with his wife, his "love" of her is a matter of following rules. This is especially strange in a context like Deuteronomy, for example, where we hear twice that God "set his heart" upon Israel (Deut 7:7; 10:15), and not because of any characteristics but just "because the Lord loved you." What I think I hear in Adams' interpretation of law and covenant is that when we sing that old hymn "Trust and Obey," we are not speaking about two things but one inseparable way of living before God.⁴²

III. From Prophecy to Liberal Critique

For James Luther Adams, the connection between prophecy and covenant is an intimate one. Prophetic criticism is the producer of covenant. I would be inclined to reverse that sequence, for the prophetic criticism is deeply rooted in the teaching or law that is the substance of Israel's covenantal obedience. The radical social justice of the prophets is a call to the people to be faithful to the righteous and just ways that are defined by the Commandments and the statutes and ordinances that grow out from them. Adams is correct, however, that the line from the prophetic criticism of Scripture to the

liberal critique of the modern *ecclesia in ecclesiola* is a direct one. The prophetic criticism is a defense of the freedom wrought by the power of God and maintained in the human enactment of those modes that empower human beings to live as freed creatures. As his colleague, Paul Lehmann, put it in his last book on the Decalogue: "Seeing that you are who you are, where you are, and as you are, this is the way ahead, the way of being and living in the truth, the way of freedom."⁴³

There are two aspects to Adams' focus on prophetic criticism that perdure and are in no small way counter to how the prophets are often contemporized. The first, of course, is his insistence on the prophethood of all believers, a phrase that serves as the title of one of his collections of essays. Here Adams has perceived something in Scripture little noticed or emphasized, indicators that prophecy, largely understood as a very individual calling, as it often was, also was to be something toward which the whole community pressed. What Adams calls the radical laicism in the idea or doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is matched by the fact that all members of the church are as much members of the prophetic guild as they are of the priesthood.⁴⁴ The prophetic liberal church is meant to be an embodiment of this doctrine, the call of all its members to the radical critique of contemporary society in behalf of "human decency and justice"⁴⁵ In both narrative and prophetic oracle, we encounter a hope for the spirit of prophecy to come upon all God's people (Num 11:24-30; Joel 3:1-2 [Eng. 2:28-29]). Moses says to Joshua: "Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!" (Num 11 :29). The *community* of prophecy is well-known in the Bible in the form of the prophetic guilds, the "sons of the prophets," but we know little about how they function.

More important is the expressed hope and then the anticipated future of a time when the Spirit of God will come upon all God's people and they will prophesy. Adams has taken this note of Scripture, whose importance is evident in the quotation of Joel 3: 1 ff in the story of the beginning of the church in Acts 2, and recognized its determinative role in the formation of the Christian community. At the beginning was created the prophetic liberal church. Some of us may identify it with particular denominations, but Adams is after something deeper. The prophethood of all believers is the present form of the eschatological community-the community of those set free in God's activity in and through Israel and Jesus of Nazareth (see Luke 4: 16ff.).⁴⁶ "Every believer has the responsibility of achieving an explicit faith for free men," Adams writes. That does not preclude the specific call of anyone in our midst to be the bearer of the prophetic word, but that will always be part of the prophethood of *all* believers. What participation in that prophetic community may mean for any one of us always remains to be seen. We can turn to Elijah and Amos, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Luther King to get some idea of outcomes of that participation.

Finally, if the doctrine of the prophethood of all believers is this ethicist's contribution to a better understanding of biblical prophecy and from that the character of the covenant community, there is a feature of that prophethood that he lifts up in distinction from and over against most efforts to connect biblical prophetic activity with contemporary analogues or manifestations of the prophethood of believers. That is his insistence that "the prophets have been foretellers as well as forthtellers."⁴⁷ Most efforts to find a resonance in the contemporary world to biblical prophecy focus on the prophetic

critique, a matter of no small moment for Adams, and his own work is read with that emphasis in one of the introductions to one of his essay collections.⁴⁸ Adams, however, puts his weight down particularly on the responsibility "to interpret the signs of the times and to see into the future."⁴⁹ He sees in the great prophets a kind of epochal thinking, the power to see the beginning of a new age, a new pattern of life coming into being. Here he is deeply biblical in his perspective, for all the great prophets spoke of the future, of the former things and the latter things, of a future when God's redeeming work would create a new time when the days are surely coming when God will do a new thing.

Adams summed up his point well when he wrote: "Hope is a virtue, but only when it is accompanied by prediction and by the daring of new decisions, only where the prophethood of all believers creates epochal thinking." Adams was a great social ethicist. Here he is as much a biblical theologian, and indeed an exemplar of the prophethood of all believers.

Notes

¹ "The Love of God," in James Luther Adams, *On Being Human Religiously: Selected Essays in Religion and Society*, edited and introduced by Max Stackhouse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1976), 96.

² Ibid.

³ "The Voluntary Principle in the Forming of American Religion," in *Voluntary Associations*, edited by J. Ronald Engel (Chicago: The Exploration Press, 1986), 179.

⁴ "The Evolution of My Social Concern," in *Voluntary Associations*, 5. Cf. "Socialist Humanism and Religion: Karl Marx," in *On Being*

Human Religiously, 165-66.

⁵ See T. Jacobsen, "Primitive Democracy in Ancient Mesopotamia," in T. Jacobsen, *Toward the Image of Tammuz and Other Essays on Mesopotamian History and Culture*, edited by William L. Moran (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 157-70. For Adams' references to Jacobsen, see "The Chief End of Human Existence," in James Luther Adams, *An Examined Faith: Social Context and Religious Commitment*, edited and with an introduction by George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 187; and "Root Metaphors of Religious Social Thought," *ibid.*, 248; and "Mediating Structures and the Separation of Powers," in *Voluntary Associations*, 225.

⁶ "The Chief End of Human Existence," 187.

⁷ "Root Metaphors of Religious Social Thought," 249-50.

⁸ "The Use of Symbols," in *On Being Human Religiously*, 129

⁹ "The Sovereignty of God," in Patrick D. Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology* (JSOTS, 267; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 406-21.

¹⁰ "Editor's Introduction," in *On Being Human Religiously*, xvi.

¹¹ "A Strange Kind of Monotheism," in Patrick D. Miller, *Theology Today: Reflections on the Bible and Contemporary Life* (Louisville: Westminster Press, 2006), 44-46.

¹² "Editor's Introduction," in *On Being Human Religiously*, xvii.

¹³ *Theology of the Old Testament* (The Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 18.

¹⁴ Adams also draws on and develops the biblical symbol of the "kingdom of God." It is for him "like the concept of the covenant, a major integrating conception in the Bible and one of the most powerful in the Reformed tradition for the shaping of both

ecclesiological and political theory" ("Use of Symbols," 128). But his primary attention is directed toward its antecedent, the covenant.

¹⁵ "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern," in *An Examined Faith*, 239; cf. "From Cage to Covenant," in James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers*, edited by George K. Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 137.

¹⁶ "Mediating Structures and the Separation of Powers, 243.

¹⁷ S. Dean McBride, "Book of Deuteronomy," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2006), 2, I 09.

¹⁸ "Mediating Structures and the Separation of Powers," 243.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ For some of these connections, see Max L. Stackhouse, "The Moral Meaning of the Covenant," *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 1996, 249-64.

²¹ "Mediating Structures, 243.

²² Ibid.

²³ "The Lure of Persuasion: Some Themes from Whitehead," in *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 187.

²⁴ Patrick D. Miller, "Deuteronomy and Psalms: Evoking a Biblical Conversation," in Miller, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology*, 326.

²⁵ "Theological Bases of Social Action," in James Luther Adams, *Taking Time Seriously* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1957), 45.

²⁶ "Socialist Humanism and Religion: Karl Marx," in *On Being Human Religiously*, 165.

- ²⁷ "Voluntary Associations in Search of Identity," in *Voluntary Associations*, 161.
- ²⁸ "The Use of Symbols," in *On Being Human Religiously*, 129.
- ²⁹ "Socialist Humanism and Religion: Karl Marx," in *On Being Human Religiously*, 166.
- ³⁰ "Kinship and Covenant in Ancient Israel," in Frank Moore Cross, *From Epic to Canon: History and Literature in Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 10.
- ³¹ "Our Responsibility in Society," in *Taking Time Seriously*, 61, 71, etc. 22
- ³² "Art, Psyche, and Society," in *On Being Human Religiously*, 145. ³³ Ibid.
- ³⁴ Christoph Barth, *Die Erretung vom Tode: Leben und Tod in den Klage- und Dankliedern des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1997).
- ³⁵ "Theological Bases of Social Action," in *Taking Time Seriously*, 51-52.
- ³⁶ "Prophetic Judgment and Grace," in *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 59.
- ³⁷ "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern," 240.
- ³⁸ "From Cage to Covenant," 137-38; "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern, 240.
- ³⁹ "The Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern," 240.
- ⁴⁰ "From Cage to Covenant," 137-38.
- ⁴¹ "Root Metaphors of Religious Social Thought," 249.
- ⁴² While I would not expect Adams to have known of it, George Mendenhall, whose primary work on law and covenant was drawn upon

by Adams, set forth a careful list of distinctions between law and covenant, reflecting the perspective articulated by Adams. For example, with regard to the purpose of each, Mendenhall notes that law "presupposes a social order in which it serves as an instrument for maintaining an orderly freedom and security," while covenant "creates a community where none existed before, by establishing a common relationship to a common lord." The basis of law is "social fear: attempts to protect society from disruption and attack by threat of force," while the basis of covenant is "gratitude: response to benefits already received=Grace." The enactment of law is "by competent social authority. It is binding upon each individual by virtue of his status as a member of the social organization, usually by birth" whereas enactment of the covenant is "by voluntary act in which each individual willingly accepts the obligations presented" ("The Conflict between Value Systems and Social Control," in *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East*, edited by Hans Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts [The Johns Hopkins Near Eastern Studies; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975], 174-75).

⁴³ *The Decalogue and a Human Future: The Meaning of the Commandments for Making and Keeping Human Life Human* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 85.

⁴⁴ "The prophethood belongs not merely to the clergy. It belongs to the congregation and to the individuals in the congregation." ("Prophetic Judgment and Grace," in *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 59).

⁴⁵ "The Prophethood of All Believers," in *Taking Time Seriously*, 25.

⁴⁶ Note in Acts 2 the Septuagint translation begins in v. 17 with "in

the last days" and in verse 18 repeats the words "they shall prophesy" a second time.

⁴⁷ "The Prophethood of All Believers," 22.

⁴⁸ George K. Beach, "Introduction," in *The Prophethood of All Believers*, 5.

⁴⁹ "The Prophethood of All Believers," 22.

⁵⁰ "The Prophethood of All Believers," 25.