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# James Baldwin & The Hebrew Prophets:

# An Examination of Prophetic Theology, Rhetoric, & Poetry

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**Abstract**

This thesis paper puts the Hebrew Prophets in conversation with the work of James Baldwin in three areas: an exploration of the theological underpinnings that guide their prophetic voice; an examination of their rhetorical strategies, including their ability to make change in their societies; and a comparison of their use of poetic elements. In particular, Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Micah will be put into conversation with several of Baldwin's books, examining various aspects of their contexts, experiences, and messages. Each section will include aspects of the biography of Baldwin and the historical and religious context of the relevant prophets, as well as direct textual analysis and interpretation. Finally, this thesis paper explores the significance of the relationship between Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets for the Jewish people and world in the 21st century.

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"I've been here 350 years but you've never seen me."

James Baldwin

"...that they may know that a prophet was among them."

Ezekiel 2:5

"This is the secret of the prophet's style: his life and soul are at stake in what he says and in what is going to happen to what he says. It is an involvement that echoes on."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

"I am putting my words into your mouth as fire…"

Jeremiah 5:14

"Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced."

James Baldwin

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Hebrew Prophets were dramatic and inspiring figures who preached the word of God in hopes that the people around them, the Children of Israel, would change their ways and act with goodness, piety, and justice. Although "prophet" is their main title, they fulfill multiple roles and purposes throughout their work. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel notes, "The prophet is not only a prophet. He is also poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, moralist."[1] Operating in each of these areas of work, the Hebrew Prophets ultimately sought a people and world redeemed, living in peace by choosing, succinctly, in the words of the Hebrew Prophet Micah, to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."[2] That larger hope remains, thousands of years later, an inspiring and worthwhile goal for our times, especially in moments of immense turmoil.

Although many contemporary Jews take inspiration from their calls for justice, mercy, compassion, truth, and peace, the Hebrew Prophets are challenging to fully understand. Their language is soaring and elevated, yet also yet complicated, incisive, and implicating. Concerning their language, Heschel notes, "The prophets do not offer reflections about ideas in general. Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith to account, questioning prudence and impartiality."[3] One strategy for more fully comprehending the message and impact of the Hebrew Prophets is to read them in relationship with another, more contemporary prophetic figure. In this instance, James Baldwin, the Black writer, poet, and activist, represents a helpful analog through which to understand the Hebrew Prophets, and vice-versa.

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[1] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1963) p. xxii.
[2] Micah 6:8 (My Translation; Assistance from Revised JPS 2023 Translation).
[3] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. xxvi.

It is impossible to adequately tell the story of African-Americans in the United States, or of the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-twentieth century, without James Baldwin. Born in Harlem in 1924, Baldwin witnessed the enormous violence of that time period; and in witnessing those horrors, chose to reveal their hideous impact to the world. Through works of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, Baldwin exposed the cruelty and hypocrisy of racism. As one of few visibly queer Black men in the United States, he pushed back on a homophobia that ran deep throughout American society. Baldwin was clear-eyed in his critiques, expressing a plain kind of fury with the character of the United States and the world, and constantly choosing, amidst intense and violent racism and homophobia, to speak his truth. At the core of his writing is a religiously influenced, prophetic necessity to identify injustice and then preach a different, better vision of the world.

This thesis paper will put the Hebrew Prophets in conversation with the work of James Baldwin in three areas: an exploration of the theological underpinnings that guide their prophetic voice; an examination of their rhetorical strategies, including their ability to make change in their societies; and a comparison of their use of poetic elements to most fully express themselves and convey their prophetic words. In particular, Isaiah, 2nd Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Micah will be put into conversation with Baldwin, examining various aspects of their contexts, experiences, and messages, and exploring their relevance for Jews and all people in the world today.

## Hebrew Prophets

### Isaiah

The Book of Isaiah contains two distinct narratives from two entirely different time periods. The Prophet Isaiah that preached in Chapters 1-39 lived during the 8th century BCE in

Jerusalem. During this era, the Assyrian Empire gained power throughout the region and put pressure upon Judah and Israel; this pressure forced the leaders of these countries to consider the ways in which they might placate or revolt against this growing power. As leaders engaged the Assyrian Empire, or allied themselves with other nations to prepare for an upcoming battle, Isaiah preached God's fury toward the people for forgetting about their covenant with God and the ways in which God alone can protect them from other nations if they followed God's laws.[4]

Another theme for Isaiah is preaching forcefully against the massive accumulation of wealth. Isaiah lived during a time of growing excess for aristocrats in Judah, leading to economic exploitation of poor people. Isaiah saw this empowerment of the rich in society as dehumanizing toward individuals, and an affront to God's power. Finally, even amidst rising threats from other nations, Isaiah believed that Jerusalem would be protected by God. Each of these themes demonstrate Isaiah's enormous reliance upon God, and his insistence that if the people would follow God's commandments, that all would be right with the world. As the Jewish Study Bible notes,

> "Common to all these ideas is Isaiah's stress that only God can be great; all other haughty things (whether rich people, large empires, or high mountains) would be reduced to their proper place at the end of days. All sin, for Isaiah, stems from the failure to recognize that God alone can be exalted."[5]

Isaiah features many familiar texts from rabbinic literature and liturgy, including, "And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks: nation shall not take

[4] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Editors; Michael Fishbane, Consulting Editor. *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 763-766.
[5] Ibid, p. 764.

up sword against nation; they shall never again know war"[6], "Holy, holy, holy!"[7], and "For the work of righteousness shall be peace."[8] Isaiah's emphasis on holiness, righteousness, and peace make his prophetic voice relevant for us today.

**2nd Isaiah**

2nd Isaiah, or Deutero-Isaiah, the Hebrew Prophet that preached in Isaiah Chapters 40-66, lived during the 6th century BCE, two centuries after the prophecies of Isaiah. Following the Babylonian destruction of Judah and exile of the people, 2nd Isaiah focused on consoling and comforting the people during their time of exile.[9] For example, he exclaimed, "Comfort, oh comfort My people, says your God."[10] Once Cyrus allowed for the people to return to their land, 2nd Isaiah seemed to be back in the land as well and shifted his preaching toward challenging the people to act in accordance with God's commandments in the future. Similar to Isaiah's emphasis on protecting Jerusalem and following his call for people to act in alignment with God, 2nd Isaiah offered sweeping imagery concerning the future redemption of the people and the land. For example, following 2nd Isaiah's famous call for the people to uphold the true purpose of their fasting in Isaiah 58:6, the prophet then promised future prosperity for the people based upon their actions: "Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, you shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called 'repairer of fallen walls, restorer of lanes of habitation.'"[11] The Jewish Study Bible comments further, noting the distinct nature of 2nd Isaiah's prophecies for redemption:

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[6] Isaiah 2:2-4
[7] Isaiah 6:3
[8] Isaiah 32:17
[9] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, pp. 763-766.
[10] 2nd Isaiah 40:1
[11] 2nd Isaiah 58:12

> "Like (First) Isaiah, Deutero-Isaiah looks forward to the dawn of a new era, but no mention is made of the expectation that a descendant of King David (or any other human being, for that matter) will reign as king in the rebuilt Jerusalem. Rather, God alone will rule over all creation in that day. Thus Deutero-Isaiah believes in a messianic era, but not in a personal Messiah."[12]

2nd Isaiah believed deeply in God and God's power to bring the people back to their Promised Land and provide them with a path toward redemption.

**Jeremiah**

Jeremiah lived in the 6th-7th century BCE, prophesying during the Babylonian Empire's increase in power throughout the region and eventual attack upon Jerusalem. Jeremiah preached forcefully to the kings who lived during this time period, and implored them to act in accordance with God's commandments.[13] For speaking the word of God, Jeremiah was persecuted, physically attacked, and imprisoned:

> "Thus said God of Hosts, the God of Israel: 'I am going to bring upon this city and upon all its villages all the disaster that I have declared against it, for they have stiffened their necks and refused to listen to my words.' Paschur son of Immer, who was the chief officer of the house of God, heard Jeremiah prophesy these things. Paschur then struck Jeremiah the Prophet and put him in the prison house at the Upper Benjamin Gate at the House of God."[14]

This is a pattern throughout the Book of Jeremiah, but "every time he mysteriously escapes death. The cause of each arrest is his prophecy, but the suffering also embodies Judah's suffering

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[12] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, p. 766.
[13] Ibid, pp. 901-906.
[14] Jeremiah 19:15-20:2

under Babylonian domination."[15] Jeremiah's suffering as a prophet aligns with the people's impending suffering. As Heschel notes, "Jeremiah's was a soul in pain, stern with gloom. To his wistful eye the city's walls seemed to reel. The days that were to come would be dreadful. He called, he urged his people to repent - and he failed. He screamed, wept, moaned - and was left with a terror in his soul."[16]

Among all of the Hebrew Prophets, Jeremiah is the most visibly tormented in his role as a prophet. In this way, as will be examined later in this chapter, Jeremiah and Baldwin demonstrate similar characteristics and biographies. In a passage that demonstrates his inner torment, Jeremiah cries out to God:

"Accursed be the day
That I was born
Let not the day be blessed
When my mother bore me…

Why did I ever come out of the womb
To see misery and woe
To spend all my days in shame!"[17]

In this passage, Jeremiah is struggling so immensely with his role as a prophet, witnessing so much "misery and woe", that he wishes that he was never born. During a time period of immense turmoil for the people, Jeremiah embodies that turmoil, continuing to serve God to lead the people through impending destruction, decimation of their holy land, and ultimately redemption.

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[15] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain & Promise* (Minneapolis, 2011), p. 74.
[16] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 133-134.
[17] Jeremiah 20:14, 18

**Ezekiel**

The prophecies of Ezekiel span from 593-571 BCE, a period that witnessed the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the people to Babylonia where they created another community in exile.[18] Similar to the other Hebrew Prophets, Ezekiel exhibits dramatic language to describe the failings of the people and their impending doom as punishment for their actions. For example, Ezekiel exclaims God's fury toward the people: "I will also act in fury, I will show no pity or compassion; though they cry aloud greatly to Me, I will not listen to them."[19] However, after the destruction of the Temple and exile of the people, Ezekiel shows more compassion. As the Jewish Study Bible notes, "Although other biblical passages…relate to the period of exile (586-538 BCE), Ezekiel differs from them in one major respect: they speak about the events of the destruction from within the land of Israel, while Ezekiel delivered his prophecies in the Babylonian exile."[20] This shift in perspective allows for Ezekiel's more caring and compassionate prophecies to come to light, showing God's commitment to returning the people to their covenantal land. For example, Ezekiel demonstrates God's promise to the people:

> "But you, mountains of Israel, shall yield your produce and bear your fruit for My people Israel, for their return is coming. For I will be here for you, I will turn to you, and you shall be served and sown. I will settle a large population on you, the whole House of Israel; the towns shall be resettled, and the destroyed places rebuilt."[21]

Following this passage, Ezekiel prophecies concerning the "dry bones" that God will bring back to life, symbolizing the revival of the people coming back to their land.

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[18] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, pp. 1033-1037.
[19] Ezekiel 8:18
[20] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, p. 1033.
[21] Ezekiel 36:8-10

Similarly to Jeremiah, Ezekiel also has a dramatic relationship with God, although less tormented. Ezekiel first perceives the presence of God during a storm in which God is seated on a throne and surrounded by divine creatures. God's spirit enters Ezekiel's body and compels him to serve as a prophet by having him ingest a scroll that will allow him to preach forcefully to the people. Ezekiel is most consumed with holiness and purity, attempting to bring the people toward these ideals in their lives. However, "in order to attain their sanctity, the people must be purified and all impurity must be removed from the land upon their return, the Temple must be built according to an entirely new model, and only after the ingathering of the people in their land will the divine name be sanctified."[22] Ezekiel is with the people throughout this traumatic experience, preaching words of holiness and a future redemption in their land.

**Amos**

Amos, similar to the other Hebrew Prophets, is shocked when he receives the call from God to engage in the work of prophecy and leave behind his work as an overseer of shepherds. By the 8th century BCE, the Kingdom of Israel had become wealthy because of the weaknesses of other nations; this compels Amos, a Hebrew Prophet obsessed with justice, dignity, and righteousness, to preach his message of humility and justice. In their lavish lifestyles and unjust treatment of the poor, the people have neglected their obligations to support one another and they have neglected God's commands on how to uphold the dignity of other people.[23] For example, Amos calls out their unjust actions: "Ah, you who crush the heads of the poor/Into the dust of the earth/And make the humble walk a crooked path."[24] Additionally, Amos demonstrates the unique expectations that God has placed upon the people: "Hate evil and love good/And establish justice

[22] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, p. 1035.
[23] Ibid, p. 1165
[24] Amos 2:7

in gate/Perhaps Adonai, God of Hosts/Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph."[25] As Heschel notes about the role of the prophet, "They had to remind the people that chosenness must not be mistaken as divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement, but on the contrary, that it meant being more seriously exposed to divine judgment and chastisement."[26]

The intense focus on economic equality and social justice allow for the words of Amos to be easily translated and utilized in modern contexts. The Jewish Study Bible notes several ways in which Amos has been adapted in the twentieth century:

> "For instance, Labor/socialist parties in the first decades of the State of Israel and its leaders (e.g., David Ben Gurion) considered Amos a source of inspiration, and it is quoted (Amos 5.24) in Martin Luther King Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech. Some advocates of 'liberation theology' in Latin America see the book as a source of support for their theological and social positions."[27]

For as much as Amos is focused on criticizing the people for their unjust actions, Amos still holds out hope for a future redemption of the people in which they correct the inequality that exists in society and create a world in which justice and righteousness prevail throughout the entire land.

**Micah**

Micah is a contemporary of Isaiah, preaching to the kings and people of Jerusalem and Samaria (the Kingdom of Judah) during the 8th century BCE. Micah's prophecies are focused on a variety of prophetic themes, including economic inequality, holding onto a pure relationship with God, and the pursuit of peace. Amidst his dramatic descriptions of the ways in which God

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[25] Amos 5:15
[26] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 39.
[27] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, p. 1165.

will wreak havoc upon the people for their corrupt and unjust actions, Micah persists in promising that God will not completely abandon the people in the future. Heschel makes this point clear:

> "Among the great insights Micah has bequeathed to us is how to accept and to bear the anger of God. The strength of acceptance comes from the awareness that we have sinned against Him and from the certainty that anger does not mean God's abandonment of man forever. His anger passes, His faithfulness goes on forever."[28]

As explored later in this thesis paper, Micah and other Hebrew Prophets preach both doom and destruction with the promise of true redemption.

As part of this overall strategy, Micah features several recognizable passages that are featured prominently throughout Jewish liturgy and practice. For example, Micah exclaims, "You have been told, O human, what is good; and what does God require of you? Only to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Then your name will achieve wisdom."[29] Additionally, as seen in our Torah service, Micah proclaims: "For instruction shall come forth from Zion/The word of Adonai from Jerusalem."[30] Directly following that verse is Micah's call for peace: And they shall beat their swords into plowshares/And their spears into pruning hooks/Nation shall not take up/Sword against nation/They shall never again know war."[31] (This exact call for peace is featured in Isaiah 2:4) Micah, similarly to the other Hebrew Prophets, uses rhetoric and poetry to hopefully inspire the people toward changing their actions and receiving that promised future redemption.

**James Baldwin**

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[28] Heschel, *The Prophets*, pp. 128-129.
[29] Micah 6:8
[30] Micah 4:2
[31] Micah 4:3

Through his writing, speaking, and activism during the mid-twentieth century, a time of enormous turmoil, strife, and change in the United States, James Baldwin became a modern-day prophet. Like the Hebrew Prophets, he wrote and spoke with clarity, passion, and forcefulness, and did so with a dramatic flair that would draw attention. Stemming from a call to do something special with his life, Baldwin sought to remake American society and the world to be rooted in the values of justice, truth, love, and peace. As Gwendolyn Brooks spoke of Baldwin in 1986 at the Library of Congress, she noted the ways in which Baldwin embodied the prophetic voice:

> "Many have been called prophets, but here is a bona fide prophet. Long ago, he guaranteed 'the fire next time.' .. Virtually the following day, we, smelling smoke, looked up and found ourselves surrounded by leering, singeing fire... And no, James Baldwin did not start the fire—he foretold its coming."[32]

James Baldwin was born on August 2, 1924 in Harlem, an historically Black neighborhood in New York City and raised by his mother, Berdis Jones, and stepfather, David Baldwin; his biological father was not present throughout his life, including at his birth. Baldwin's stepfather, a preacher, was a terrifying and abusive man. Baldwin's chosen biographer, David Leeming, comments on the significance of this relationship:

> "Rising out of Harlem, James Baldwin used the mystery of his parentage and his humble birth, and the ineffectualness of his stepfather, as starting points for a lifelong witnessing of the moral failure of the American nation-and of Western civilization in general-and the power of love to revive it."[33]

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[32] Greg Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us About Life, Love, & Identity* (New York, 2023) p. 20.
[33] David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, 1994), p. 4.

Although scared of his stepfather, Baldwin followed him into the church, becoming a child preacher for several years. However, as he became more attuned to his sexuality and understood the hypocrisy of the church, Baldwin left it all behind, describing an intense alienation: "I was lonelier and more vulnerable than I had been before. And the blood of the Lamb had not cleansed me in any way whatever. I was just as black as I had been the day that I was born."[34] In leaving the church, he turned to writing, specifically about his experiences and the state of the world. Baldwin was seen as "lesser-than" by many people because of his race and sexuality throughout his whole lifetime, and at least during his childhood and early adulthood, his low socioeconomic status. For example, Baldwin describes two interactions, in which he was othered, persecuted, and assaulted as a child by the police:

> "I was thirteen and was crossing Fifth Avenue on my way to the Forty-second Street library, and the cop in the middle of the street muttered as I passed him, 'Why don't you niggers stay uptown where you belong?' When I was ten, and didn't look, certainly, any older, two policemen amused themselves with me by frisking me, making comic (and terrifying) speculations concerning my ancestry and probable sexual prowess, and for good measure, leaving me flat on my back in one of Harlem's empty lots."[35]

Baldwin took those experiences, and he chose to write. He wrote for his school newspaper, and as a graduating senior in high school, his yearbook quote described him as a "novelist-playwright." As Baldwin would later reflect, "... I had never really intended to become a writer but had only been trying to be safe."[36] However, in seeking this safety, Baldwin sought the safety of others as well. Over the next decade, until publishing his first book in 1953, Baldwin

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[34] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), p. 38.
[35] Ibid, pp. 19-20.
[36] James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner* (New York, 1954), p. xiii.

developed the skills and focused his passion to write his way into the core conversations of the United States during his lifetime, including racism, homophobia, and civil rights.

As his career progressed, Baldwin became increasingly unafraid to address these most serious topics, use his voice to advocate for change, and engage with other leaders from across the movement for justice and equality. As Baldwin progressed in his career of prophetically writing and speaking, he drew increased attention and persecution. Perhaps most consequentially, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) followed Baldwin's activities for decades, evidently seeing his work fighting racism as a threat to the national security of the country. According to William J. Maxwell, a writer who obtained Baldwin's FBI file through the Freedom of Information Act, the tracking of Baldwin's advocacy, writing, and speaking was extensive:

> "The FBI file excerpted and reproduced in this book contains no evidence that J. Edgar Hoover ever remarked on Baldwin's generous sentence lengths. But this same file, absorbing paperwork generated from 1958 (perhaps even 1944) to 1974 and topping out at 1,884 pages, stands as the longest yet extracted on an African American author active during Hoover's five decades as a Bureau executive."[37]

It is unclear the extent that Baldwin knew that the FBI was tracking his movements and work, but I do not imagine that he would be surprised. Baldwin knew that his prophetic work would, of course, cause concern among those in government. Additionally, he saw several of his closest friends in the work - Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr. - killed for their activism. Although Baldwin was not surprised by this level of persecution, it remained a looming, dangerous presence throughout his life.

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[37] William J. Maxwell, *James Baldwin: The FBI File* (New York, 2017), p. 7.

Baldwin also experiences an incredible loneliness throughout his life, and is filled with grief for the treatment of Black people in the United States, and the country as a whole. As a writer, Baldwin noted that "by both temperament and experience, I tend to work alone…"[38] Additionally, later in his life, Baldwin reflected upon the fact that, "In America, I was free only in battle, never free to rest - and he who finds no way to rest cannot long survive the battle."[39] These reflections from Baldwin paint the picture of a passionate writer and advocate, committed to his deeply held belief of seeking justice, love, truth, and peace, but one that also struggled with loneliness, grief, and the overall intensity of his work and the causes he championed. For both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, there was a price to pay for continuing to subscribe to their theology and fulfill their prophetic calling.

In addition to several secondary sources examining Baldwin's works, this thesis paper will utilize five Baldwin works as the core texts to be put in conversation together with the books of the Hebrew Prophets explained earlier. Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, was published in 1953. It is explicitly fiction, but Baldwin acknowledges the ways in which much of it is based on his own life experience. In this book, the main character, John Grimes, is a teenage Black boy in Harlem grappling with his family dynamic, his sexuality, and role of the church in his life. *The Amen Corner*, a play published in 1954, has a similar theme, with the main character, Margaret, the church pastor, contending with her son, David, and the challenges that arise from her small congregation questioning her leadership. Both books demonstrate Baldwin's complicated relationship with the church and religion overall.

Perhaps Baldwin's most famous book, *The Fire Next Time*, was published in 1963. A compilation of two essays, Baldwin explores the raging issues of that moment and challenges the

[38] James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, (New York, 1972), p. 150.
[39] Ibid, p. 126.

reader to fight for equality and justice for Black people in the United States. If *The Fire Next Time* is Baldwin's full throated call to action, *No Name in the Street*, published in 1972, is his contemplative reflection upon the successes and failures of the civil rights movement. Named for a passage in the Book of Job, Baldwin grapples with his fame, trying to free a wrongfully imprisoned friend from jail, the murders of several of his friends, and the overall state of the country. The final core text for this thesis paper is *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, published in 1983, which demonstrates a reflective, spiritual Baldwin towards the end of his life. Baldwin died on December 1, 1987. During his funeral in Harlem, the Black writer Amiri Baraka lovingly described Baldwin as "God's black revolutionary mouth."[40] It was a fitting way to say goodbye to the prophet.

**Conclusion**

As briefly mentioned above, this thesis paper is divided into three main topics that will be used to explore the prophetic voice and work of the Hebrew Prophets and James Baldwin. The first topic, theology, will include an examination of the theological underpinnings that guide the prophetic voices of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets. Understanding their theology will include exploring their unique relationship with God and the ways in which that relationship inspired their prophetic work. The second topic, rhetoric, notes the ways in which Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets use rhetorical strategy to most effectively communicate their prophecies to their audiences. This includes an examination of the strategies of truth-telling, moral reckoning, and articulating a strong vision for the future. The third topic, poetry, will explore the use of poetry by both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets to most eloquently and fully express themselves through poetic elements and strategies. These topics were chosen to illuminate the

[40] Amiri Baraka, *We Carry Him As Us* (New York Times, December 20, 1987). https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/29/specials/baldwin-baraka.html.

ways in which Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets most effectively accomplish their prophetic work, as well as demonstrate similarities and differences in their strategies.

Despite being written millennia apart, the prophetic words of the Hebrew Prophets and James Baldwin are deeply intertwined. Their words are passionate, alluring, and dramatic; they echo across the centuries, calling upon us to heed their call and establish a world rooted in love, truth, justice, and peace. They are words desperately needed for our time, a period filled with hatred, bigotry, degradation, and widening systemic oppressions. In putting these figures in conversation together, my hope is that they create a vortex of prophetic wisdom and insight that speaks to us and inspires us to something more, something better in our world.

## Chapter 2: Theology

### Introduction

A thorough exploration of the Hebrew Prophets necessitates an examination of their theology, or an understanding of their conception of God, because of their unique relationship that they held with God. For the purpose of this thesis, theology can be defined as the exploration of God's attributes and God's relationship to individuals and the broader world. The Hebrew Prophets each had an unique, intimate, and complex relationship with God, being called to serve both God and the people around them. As Heschel notes, "The prophet feels both the attraction and the coercion of God, the appeal and the pressure, the charm and the stress. He is conscious of both voluntary identification and forced capitulation."[41] The Hebrew Prophets would not struggle under the stress and trauma of their role without having a strong theological force challenging them to do, say, and witness more. Additionally, the forms of their prophetic words in rhetoric and poetry (the focus of the next two chapters of this thesis) are inspired by their theological connections: "But because this evocation is worked out through the medium of biblical verse, there is a way in which the medium begins to take over, or, at any rate, there is a merging of the logic of the medium with the prophet/poet's own spiritual and political insight."[42] For the Hebrew Prophets featured in this thesis, there are similarities and differences in their conceptions, relationships, and language about God, creating a venn diagram of their theologies.

Similarly, Baldwin demonstrates an intense and complicated theological understanding throughout his works and public commentary. In an interview in 1965, Baldwin remarked that he would "much rather die than become that kind of theologian", discussing the Nation of Islam and

[41] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1963) p. 145.
[42] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 2011), p. 189.

their anti-White theological views.[43] This statement raises a potential self-disclosure on Baldwin's part; if Baldwin did not want to become *that* kind of theologian, perhaps he had ideas of what kind of theologian he *did* want to become in his life. If Baldwin ever did construct a more full idea of his theology, he did so without strong formal connections to the Black church: "While he left the church, while he constantly identified himself as a person outside any formal tradition of Christianity, he continued to use the language of church, the Bible, and theology."[44] This language is featured prominently throughout Baldwin's fiction, particularly *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner*. Although pieces of fiction, both of these works draw closely upon Baldwin's background, providing insight into his religious and spiritual upbringing and his complex and challenging connection to Christianity throughout his life.

This chapter will focus on the theological underpinnings that guided the prophetic voices of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets in several key areas: the experience of receiving God's call; detailed descriptions of God and God's likeness; confronting the hypocrisy of other so-called prophets in order to protect their special relationship with God; and, envisioning a future redemption in the form of a "New Jerusalem" as the purpose of their work.

**Receiving God's Call**

The "call narrative" for each of the Hebrew Prophets is "a 'conversation' between the deity and the prophet that appears to depict the prophet's initiation into that role. However, these texts are not biography but instead highly theologized accounts, each one influenced by imagery and ideas important to the prophetic book of which it is a part…"[45] The call narrative serves both

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[43] James Mossman, "Race, Hate, Sex, and Colour: A Conversation with James Baldwin and Colin MacInnes," in *Conversations with James Baldwin*, ed. Fred L. Standley and Louis H. Pratt (Jackson, 1989), p. 48.
[44] Greg Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us About Life, Love, & Identity* (New York, 2023) p. 59.
[45] David L. Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville, 2002), p. 20.

as a record of this initial, holy interaction with God, but also demonstrates part of their role and task in serving as a prophet. For the Hebrew Prophets featured in this thesis, there are two main ways in which they received God's call to prophesy to the people. They either, in the first form, received God's call before they were born, demonstrating a form of predestination in their status as prophet; Jeremiah and Isaiah are examples of this form of the call narrative. Or, in the second form, they received God's call while they were living their typical, everyday lives and were pulled away to serve in this new, divinely inspired role; Ezekiel and Amos are examples of this form of the call narrative.

For example, here are several verses describing Jeremiah's call narrative:

"The word of God came to me:

Before I created you in the womb, I knew you.

Before you came out of the womb, I consecrated you.

I appointed you a prophet to the nations…"

"See I appoint you this day

Over nations and kingdoms

To pull up and to pull down

To destroy and to break down

To build and to plant."[46]

In this passage, Jeremiah receives a call from God declaring that God had selected Jeremiah to be a "prophet to the nations" before he was even born. God "knew" and "consecrated" Jeremiah before he was born, creating a special relationship that requires God to protect Jeremiah

[46] Jeremiah 1:4-5, 10 (My Translation; Assistance from Revised JPS 2023 Translation).

throughout his life so that he may fulfill God's plan for him. In this form of receiving God's call, Jeremiah's entire life purpose is to serve God by prophesying to the people. Additionally, the passage reveals aspects of Jeremiah's task as a prophet, including destroying the current world order and building something new for the future.

Similarly, 2nd Isaiah details the ways in which God called him to the work of prophecy before being born and how God continues to guide him:

"Alas, listen to me coastlands
And pay attention people from afar
God called out to me from the womb
Recording my name while in my mother's belly.

My mouth was made to be like a single sword,
While I was hidden in the hand of God
I was made like a polished arrow
Concealed in God's quiver

And God said to me, 'You are my servant
Israel, in whom I glorify.'

And I said, 'I have toiled in vain
I used my strength for empty breath.'
But now my judgment is with Adonai
My recompense is with my God.

"And now God,

The one who created me in the womb to be of service to them,

Has declared

To bring back Jacob

And restore Israel to God.

I have been honored in the sight of God

My God has been my strength."[47]

In these verses from 2nd Isaiah's call narrative, 2nd Isaiah is formed in his mother's womb by God, in order to be a servant to God throughout his life. 2nd Isaiah makes this proclamation to "people from afar", demonstrating the impact that he will have upon people around the world. 2nd Isaiah's task of preaching the word to God is enabled because he was created "like a polished arrow" and God created his mouth "like a single sword", demonstrating the forcefulness of his words. By serving as God's servant, 2nd Isaiah will help to bring about an end to the exile in Babylon and work to "bring back Jacob" to their homeland so that they may be reunited with God. Similar to Jeremiah, God has a vested interest in protecting 2nd Isaiah and giving him the abilities to fulfill his role and task as a prophet. Most importantly, this passage foreshadows 2nd Isaiah's role in redemption.

The second form of call narrative features Hebrew Prophets who receive God's call while already adults and who were then brought away from their lives to serve in this new role. For example, here is a passage describing Amos's call narrative in the form of a conversation with King Amazaiah:

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[47] 2nd Isaiah 49:1-5

> "And Amos answered Amaziah, saying: 'I am not a prophet, and I am not a son of a prophet. I am a herdsman and I am a tender of sycamore trees. But God took me away from looking after the flock and said to me, 'Go, prophesy to my people Israel.'"[48]

In this passage, Amos shares his background, serving as a "herdsman" and a "tender of sycamore trees." This unremarkable lifestyle is then contrasted with the sudden call from God to serve as a prophet to the people. God is forceful in this call narrative, directly commanding Amos to serve as a prophet after recognizing his humble background as a valuable backstory for a prophet who would preach against extreme wealth and inequality. Although not forced to carry the burden of being a prophet his entire life, Amos must confront the trauma of the surprise that comes with God's sudden call to prophecy. Additionally, Amos notes that God "took me away", implying that Amos had no choice but to set out on this new, divinely inspired role. In suddenly taking on this mantle, Amos leaves behind the life he has known to fulfill this new task from God in the world.

Similarly, there are two passages that detail Ezekiel's call narrative during adulthood and the swiftness of God's actions in calling him to prophecy:

> "In the thirtieth year, on the fifth day of the fourth month, when I was amongst the exiles by the Chebar Canal, the heavens opened up and I saw visions of God."[49]

> "And God said to me, 'Oh human, stand up on your feet so that I may speak to you.' As God spoke to me, a spirit entered into me and set me upon my feet, and I heard what was being spoken to me. God said to me, 'Oh human, I am sending you to the children of

[48] Amos 7:14-15
[49] Ezekiel 1:1

Israel, that nation of rebels that have rebelled against me. They and their ancestors have transgressed against me until this very day.'"[50]

Ezekiel, known for having intense descriptions in his prophecies, details how the "heavens opened up" in order for him to see "visions of God." After seeing God (and other heavenly creatures), Ezekiel then details how a "spirit entered him" in order to "set me upon my feet" and be ready to fully receive the call from God to prophesy to the people. The final verse of this passage notes that God's reason for sending Ezekiel to prophesy is that Israel, God's people, have continuously rebelled against God and perhaps Ezekiel is the prophet to make them stop and to act in accordance with God's ways. The spiritual forcefulness of God's call to Ezekiel perhaps demonstrates God's hopes for the people, in which Ezekiel's words enter them in a form of spiritual renewal and they change their actions.

Not surprisingly, Baldwin did not consider himself to be directly called by God to serve a prophetic role from before he was born. There are no self-descriptions of Baldwin identifying with that kind of call narrative, and none of his fictional characters feature that story. However, the second form of call narrative featured amongst the Hebrew Prophets, in which people during adulthood are called to serve God, seems to resonate with Baldwin's own spiritual journey, as well as the stories of some of his fiction characters.

For example, in a passage of Baldwin's poem *Christmas carol*, he echoes Ezekiel's call narrative and the purpose for Ezekiel's prophetic work:

"...and I will rise

out of the camel piss

which stings my eyes

[50] Ezekiel 2:1-3

into a revelation

concerning this doomed nation.

From which I am, henceforth,

Divorced forever!

Set me upon my feet,

my Lord…"[51]

The main focus of this poem is Saul turning into Paul, an important character in the Christian Bible. However, Baldwin uses this character to express his own deeply held thoughts and beliefs, similar to his works of fiction. In rising "out of the camel piss", Baldwin describes the main character as being so lowly in stature that they are underneath camels. Perhaps seeing himself in a similar position in the world, Baldwin sees this low stature as an attribute that allows them to be the right person to eventually rise up, with the help of God, and preach to the people.

In this passage, Baldwin also uses language similar to that of Ezekiel, asking for God to "set me upon my feet." Despite the language being similar, God sends a spirit to enter into Ezekiel that made him rise onto his feet, whereas in this passage, Baldwin is asking for God to "set me upon my feet." Additionally, both Baldwin and Ezekiel understand the purpose of God making them stand is to prophesy to a "doomed nation"; for Ezekiel, this is the people Israel, and for Baldwin it is the United States during the twentieth century. This prayer from Baldwin to God, asking for God to guide his steps forward in his work, is emboldened by a later passage that affirms Baldwin's prophetic connection to God:

"And don't let nobody

[51] James Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems* (Boston, 2014), p. 48.

turn you around.

Nobody will: for they see, too,

how the hand of the Lord has been laid on you."[52]

Baldwin articulates the strength and invincibility that he longs for through his connection to God, able to move past obstacles in his way once "the hand of the Lord has been laid" upon him. Additionally, the first part of the passage echoes a famous song from the Civil Rights Movement titled, "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," demonstrating Baldwin's deep connection to that movement and its leaders and the spiritual nature of their organizing.

In his first novel, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, Baldwin describes an intense scene in which John Grimes, a Black teenage boy modeled on Baldwin's own life, experiences a form of religious revival:

> "He was like a rock, a dead man's body, a dying bird, fallen from an awful height; something that had no power of itself, any more, to turn. And something moved in John's body which was not John. He was invaded, set at naught, possessed. This power had struck John, in the head or in the heart; and, in a moment, wholly, fling him with an anguish that he could never in his life have imagined, that he surely could not endure, that even now he could not believe, had opened him up; had cracked him open, as wood beneath the axe cracks down the middle, as rocks break up…"[53]

This passage is the beginning of the final sequence of John's religious revival. In the beginning, John is like a "dead man's body", unable to move and filled with spiritual nothingness. Similar to Ezekiel's call narrative in which a spirit from God goes into Ezekiel's body, "something moved

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[52] Ibid, p. 49.
[53] James Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain* (New York, 1952), pp. 195-196.

in John's body which was not John." This "something" is powerfully invasive and foreign to John, moving him in unfamiliar and uncomfortable ways. Just as John is described "like a rock" in the beginning of the passage, this force comes down upon John "as rocks break up." This demonstrates a significant opening up, but also potentially, a destruction. As examined below, this opening and destruction is similar to Baldwin's own religious experiences as a teenager.

Following this passage, John grapples with his past sins and place within the church community, reciting various verses from the Bible. Eventually, with the threats from his father and encouragement from others, John emerges from his religious revival:

> "Rise up, Johnny," said Elisha, again. "Are you saved, boy?"
>
> "Yes," said John, "oh, yes!" And the words came upward, it seemed, of themselves, in the new voice God had given him. Elisha stretched out his hand, and John took the hand, and stood so suddenly, and so strangely, and with such wonder!-once more on his feet.
>
> *"Lord, I ain't*
>
> *No stranger now!"*
>
> Yes, the night had passed, the powers of darkness had been beaten back. He moved among the saints, he, John, who had come home, who was one of their company now; weeping, he yet could find no words to speak of his great gladness; and he scarcely knew how he moved, for his hands were new, and his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air."[54]

[54] Ibid, p. 209.

At the end of this religious revival, John is "saved" and has a reaffirmed relationship with God that echoes several aspects of the relationship between God and the Hebrew Prophets. First, in John's response to Elisha, "the words came upward, it seemed of themselves", demonstrating God speaking through his new prophet, John; this is similar to the prophets serving as a "mouthpiece" for God's instructions. Second, John speaks those words "in the new voice God had given him." God is not only giving John words to speak, but a particular voice through which to express these words. Finally, Baldwin again echoes Ezekiel's call narrative of God directing his body by John noticing that "his feet were new, and he moved in a new and Heaven-bright air." For Baldwin, there was a force in the universe moving him toward acting in righteousness (these righteous actions would eventually lead Baldwin away from the hypocrisy of the church). Baldwin reflects upon this spiritual calling toward responsibility and obligation in an interview with Studs Terkel on December 29, 1961:

> "My responsibility to them is to try to tell the truth as I see it—not so much about my private life, as about their private lives. So that there is in the world a standard, you know, for all of us, which will get you through your troubles. Your troubles are always coming. And Cadillacs don't get you through. And neither do psychiatrists, incidentally. All that gets you through it, really, is some faith in life, which is not so easy to achieve."[55]

In writing this religious revival scene that draws many similarities to the call narratives of the Hebrew Prophets, Baldwin clearly identifies with the idea of God instilling someone, including himself, with direction, spiritual strength, and a sense of responsibility or obligation to act with goodness and righteousness in the world.

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[55] Studs Terkel, "An Interview with James Baldwin" in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview & Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, 2014), p. 29.

**Descriptions of God**

Alongside the call narratives of the Hebrew Prophets, their detailed descriptions of God and God's likeness is an important element to examine in ascertaining the theological underpinnings that guide their prophetic voices. Heschel notes the unique nature of how the Hebrew Prophets describe God:

> "The prophets had no theory or 'idea' of God. What they had was an understanding. Their God-understanding was not the result of a theoretical inquiry, of a groping in the midst of alternatives about the being and attributes of God. To the prophets, God was overwhelmingly real and shatteringly present. They never spoke of Him as from a distance. They lived as witnesses, struck by the words of God…"[56]

These descriptions take a variety of forms, commenting on various aspects of God's appearance, sound, ability, and overall presence in the world. Additionally, other divine figures, such as angels or seraphim, and other objects, including thrones or components of nature, figure their way into these descriptions as the Hebrew Prophets attempt to put to words their divine encounters with God.

For example, Isaiah describes God as a ruler seated on a majestic and mighty throne: "In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the skirt of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs stood before God, each with six wings, six wings per seraph - two covering the face, two covering the body, and two to fly."[57] Similarly, Ezekiel also describes God on a throne: "Above the expanse over their heads was the vision of a throne, in an appearance like sapphire; and on top, upon this vision of a throne, there was the vision of a

[56] Heschel, *The Prophets,* pp. 285-286.
[57] Isaiah 6:1-2

human form."[58] In describing God on a throne, Isaiah and Ezekiel are expressing their understanding of God's immense power and might throughout the world. This depiction of God also affirms God's view of Godself as the one true ruler over all creatures in the world. In serving as this only authentic ruler, God supersedes mortal forms of royalty; these figures are also the people that God sends the Hebrew Prophets to prophesy against, claiming their destruction. In these descriptions of God on a throne, the Hebrew Prophets make a positional claim that God is above and beyond all humans, including royalty.

In terms of abilities and power in the world, all of the Hebrew Prophets depict God as having an enormous amount of latitude to act in the world. In comparing God to a potter that holds the fate of the people in God's hands, Jeremiah describes God's sheer power: "At one moment I can decree that a nation or kingdom will be uprooted, pulled down, and destroyed. But if that nation that I made the decree about turns back from wickedness, I can change my mind about what I will do to it."[59] Jeremiah's description affirms that God has the ability to determine the fate of all of humanity. However, this passage also demonstrates that God has the capacity to change God's mind, changing a certain decision based upon new evidence. This discerning ability is a key reason God summons the Hebrew Prophets to call upon the people to change their behaviors; a change in their actions would lead to God changing God's proclamation against them. In this way, the Hebrew Prophets depict God as holding many roles and abilities in the world, including sovereign, judge, comforter, punisher, and redeemer.

Baldwin's understanding of God does not include physical representations, but focuses more on the attributes and abilities, or inabilities, of God in the world. For example, it is clear from Baldwin's fictional works that the God of his childhood in the church was an all-powerful

[58] Ezekiel 1:26
[59] Jeremiah 18:7

and passionately loving God. For example, *The Amen Corner* features several church hymn lyrics that express the saving power of God: "Jesus got His arms wrapped around me/No evil thoughts can harm me…"[60]; "I got the holy spirit/To help me run this race…"[61]; "What a wonder, what a marvel/And I'm glad that I can tell/That the Lord saved me and He set me free/He endowered me with power/And gave me the victory."[62] The power of God that is depicted in these hymns is similar to God's abilities in *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, in which John has a religious revival experience in Part Three that is influenced by God working through him and eventually "saving" him.

Despite growing up believing in God's powerful and wide-ranging ability to act in the world, Baldwin's decision to leave the organized church was influenced by his grappling with his theology and the true ability and purpose of God. In particular, one question that Baldwin asks in *The Fire Next Time* sums up his overall theological grappling during his adulthood: "And if his love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far? Why?"[63] In this question, Baldwin expresses the ability for God to love, and potentially for God to differentiate God's love and treatment for different people. Additionally, this question seems to imply that Baldwin attempts to believe that God acts throughout history and in the present day. However, this belief that God has the ability to act in the world makes Baldwin's theological struggle even more challenging. This central question, expressed in the middle of his career, would lead Baldwin through much theological grappling, asking many more questions such as: Does God not have power in the world? Does this mean that God hates Black people? What should we, Black people, do with God if God is not liberating us? Baldwin's exploration of

[60] James Baldwin, *The Amen Corner* (New York, 1968), p. 6.
[61] Ibid, p. 10.
[62] Ibid, p. 51.
[63] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 31.

God and theology, and his tentative descriptions of God's abilities, shifted throughout his life, creating an elaborate and incomplete portrait. For both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, these unique descriptions of God demonstrate theological connections between themselves and God that are active and alive, even though sometimes confusing and challenging to fully explicate.

**Confronting Hypocrisy**

One of the key ways in which the Hebrew Prophets fulfilled their call to serve God was through confronting the hypocrisy that existed throughout society, especially among other religious leaders. As demonstrated in an earlier section of this chapter, God is particular and has high standards for those who God deems to be appropriate and compelling to serve as a prophet. Additionally, God's hatred of those who act hypocritically, including God's own people, is primarily expressed through the Hebrew Prophets. As Heschel notes about the role of the prophet, "His fundamental objective was to reconcile man and God. Why do the two need reconciliation? Perhaps it is due to man's false sense of sovereignty, to his abuse of freedom, to his aggressive, sprawling pride, resenting God's involvement in history."[64] During the period of the Hebrew Prophets, certain individuals attempted to rise up above others due to this "false sense of sovereignty." Inspired by their call from God, the Hebrew Prophets directed their fury against the leaders and institutions of their people, as well as other people they deemed false prophets for the ways in which by flaunting themselves they deny the power of God. In this way, confronting hypocrisy is a strategy to uphold their theological beliefs, fulfill their duty to God, and ensure an alignment of theological beliefs and actions among the people.

For example, Micah confronts the hypocritical leaders of Israel who say that they act in accordance with God's laws, but actually do the opposite:

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[64] Heschel, *The Prophets,* Pg. xxix.

"Nevertheless,

I am filled with strength by the spirit of God

And with justice and courage

To declare to Jacob his transgression

And to Israel his sin.

Hear this, rulers of the house of Jacob

Chiefs of the house of Israel

Who abhor justice

And make crooked all that is straight

Who build Zion with crime

Jerusalem with iniquity."[65]

In this passage, Micah is "filled with strength by the spirit of God", demonstrating Micah's connection to and support from God in his work of confronting the "transgression" and "sin" of the leaders of "Jacob" and "Israel." Instead of focusing on the people as a whole, Micah concentrates his rebuke for the leaders who initiate these destructive actions throughout the land. Instead of "doing justice" (as later described in Micah 6:8), these leaders "abhor justice." Instead of "the Mount of God's house standing firm on the mountain (as later described in Micah 4:1), these leaders "build Zion with crime, Jerusalem with iniquity." In rejecting the "straight" path that God has called upon them to follow, these leaders, and therefore their institutions, act hypocritically and "make crooked" the path that God has given them. This passage also

[65] Micah 3:8-10

demonstrates that Micah perceives God to be obsessed with justice prevailing throughout the world, but especially among religious leaders, whom others trust and respect. God's emphasis on justice requires that God find and empower non-hypocritical individuals, such as the Hebrew Prophets, to preach to the people.

Similar to Micah and the Hebrew Prophets, Baldwin confronted the hypocrisy of the Christian leaders and institutions that he experienced most directly as a child, but also throughout his life. Baldwin deeply felt this hypocrisy, receiving positive messages about the church from the adults around him, but then experiencing the opposite. For example, in *The Fire Next Time* he writes about the hypocritical principles of the church:

> "The principles were Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror, the first principle necessarily and actively cultivated in order to deny the two others. I would love to believe that the principles were Faith, Hope, and Charity, but this is clearly not so for most Christians, or for what we call the Christian world."[66]

In this passage, Baldwin explains what he would consider to be the principles for the church ("Faith, Hope, and Charity") because that was how adults around him talked about the community and how he believed God would want their community to act. However, it became clear to Baldwin that the church was acting hypocritically, stating that these positive values were the most animating features of the church, but in reality practicing the values of "Blindness, Loneliness, and Terror." This hypocrisy would lead Baldwin to leave the organized church because of its acting against God, but, characteristically for a prophet, he continued to speak out against the hypocrisy that drove him away.

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[66] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), p. 31.

In the final official interview of his life, Baldwin spoke with Quincy Troupe about his experience leaving the church because of its hypocrisy:

> Baldwin: "I didn't believe in the Christian Church anymore, not the way I had; I no longer believed in its spirituality, its healing powers."
>
> Troupe: "Oh? Was it the Christian Church that disturbed you?"
>
> Baldwin: "The way people treated each other. In the Church and outside, but especially in the Church."
>
> Troupe: "How did they treat each other?"
>
> Baldwin: Well, they were self-righteous. They didn't come with real deep love, for example. The people in the Church were very cruel about many things."[67]

This passage further illuminates Baldwin's decision to leave the church, identifying, like Micah, the ways in which the institution was bringing forth more harm than good. In particular, the leaders of the church being "self-righteous" and "very cruel" is a consistent theme for Baldwin in his writing. For example, in Go Tell It On the Mountain, John's stepfather, Gabriel, is a leader in the church; however, throughout his life, he has acted recklessly and caused harm to many people. Towards the end of the book, as Florence reveals that she knows about Gabriel's past indiscretions, she calls out his hypocrisy as a supposed leader of the church:

> "If you done caused souls right and left to stumble and fall, and lose their happiness, and lose their souls? What then, prophet? What then, the Lord's anointed? Ain't no reckoning going to be called of *you*? What you going to say when the wagon comes?"[68]

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[67] Quincy Troupe, "Interview by Quincy Troupe" in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview & Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, 2014), p. 95.
[68] Baldwin, *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, p. 217.

This theme of confronting the hypocrisy of leaders and institutions is at the very center of *The Amen Corner*, in which members of the church regularly question the morals and leadership of one another, but especially those of Sister Margaret, the preacher of the church. In conversation, the characters say to one another several phrases that indicate the supposed reverence they have for the truth: "You's liars, everyone of you, and the truth's not in you!"[69]; "God don't like liars"[70]; and, "But we's supposed to bear witness, amen, to the truth."[71] Additionally, the consequence for going against God's will, as demonstrated in a hymn during Act Two and repeated another time in Act Three is that "God Almighty's gonna cut you down."[72] This form of intense punishment from God is a core feature of the rhetoric of the Hebrew Prophets, and Baldwin uses it to describe his own feelings, through the characters in *The Amen Corner*, about how to deal with hypocritical leaders and institutions.

In addition to taking aim at the leaders and institutions of the people, the Hebrew Prophets specifically focused their prophetic fury toward people God deemed to be "false prophets." As I will demonstrate in the examples below, false prophets can be described as individuals who took up the mantle of prophecy and called themselves a prophet without being genuinely called upon to do so by God. These individuals made the work of the Hebrew Prophets more difficult by confusing the people, leading them to not take seriously the words of the actual prophets designated by God. Theologically, the Hebrew Prophets sought to discredit these false prophets to protect their own divinely inspired relationship with God and help the people genuinely connect with God. This focus on disproving these false prophets also demonstrates

[69] Baldwin, *The Amen Corner*, p. 38.
[70] Ibid, p. 27.
[71] Ibid, p. 35.
[72] Ibid, pp. 50, 72.

God's high standards for those who God deems to be the right people to serve as a prophet and preach justice and righteousness throughout the world.

For example, Micah directly addresses these false prophets and details the ways in which God will deal with them:

"Thus said God to the prophets
Who lead my people astray
Who bite with their teeth
But cry, 'Peace!'
And launch a war against
Those who do not fill their [the "false prophets"] mouths.

Surely, it will be night for you
So you cannot prophesy
And it will be dark for you
So you cannot divine
The sun will set on the prophets
And the day will be dark for them

The seers will be shamed
And the diviners confounded
They will all cover their upper lips in mourning
Because no response comes from God."[73]

[73] Micah 3:5-7

This passage begins by God directly confronting these "prophets" because they have intentionally misguided the people. The main charge that Micah brings against these prophets is that they are prophesying in a way that benefits themselves. By only crying "Peace!" when they "bite with their teeth", and then punishing those "who do not fill their mouths", these prophets base the content of their prophecies on the failure of the people and their treatment of the Hebrew Prophets, not on the word of God. As the commentary of the Jewish Study Bible Notes, "these prophets shaped or announced their prophecies to please their clients, so as to increase the gifts they received from them. By doing so they perverted their office (and the Lord's trust) for material gain."[74] The passage goes on to detail the ways in which God will punish these false prophets: by making the day "dark for them", keeping them from the ability to prophesy; they will be "shamed" and "confounded", the opposite of skills needed to prophesy; and finally, they will be sent into mourning because God will not communicate with them. God is furious with these false prophets and chooses to intensely punish them because God wants the people to take God's calls to change their actions seriously. In preaching without God's consent, these false prophets threaten the power and influence that God seeks to maintain over the people and throughout the world. In not only calling out, but punishing these false prophets, Micah solidifies his own theological understanding by holding onto his genuine, somewhat exclusive and special relationship with God.

In another example of the Hebrew Prophets confronting false prophets, Jeremiah exclaims God's utter disdain for these individuals prophesying to the people:

> "I said, 'Ah, my Lord God! Here the prophets are saying to them, 'You will not see the sword, and famine will not come upon you, for I will give you true peace in this place.'

[74] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, editors; Michael Fishbane, consulting editor. *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation.* (Oxford, New York, 2004). p. 1198.

> God replied: 'It is a lie what the prophets prophesy in my name. I have not sent them, I have not commanded them, I have not spoken to them. A lying vision, a worthless divination, a fraud of their own - that is what they prophesy to you! Surely, God said concerning the prophets who prophesy in my name although I have not sent them, and who say, 'Sword and famine shall not befall this land'; those prophets will perish by sword and famine."[75]

Speaking the words of God, Jeremiah does not hold back against these false prophets, denying completely the validity of their words. This passage raises a consequential aspect of these prophets' behavior: prophesying as if they themselves have the powers of God. Instead of relying upon God, these prophets tell the people to rely upon them for protection against "the sword" and "famine." This is an unforgivable theological break for Jeremiah and the other Hebrew Prophets, who rely exclusively upon God for their prophecies and ways to act in the world. Similar to the earlier passage from Micah, this passage demonstrates God's rage against these false prophets because they are usurping God's power and influence by speaking in God's name even though God has not sent them. God expresses God's anger through a violently ironic twist in the story: Jeremiah prophesies that "those prophets will perish by sword and famine"; this prophecy later comes true when Jeremiah confronts the prophet Hananiah and he dies for his false prophecies.[76] Similar to Micah, Jeremiah confronts and punishes false prophets, solidifying his own belief in God's ultimate might, and upholding God's own desire to maintain God's power and influence in the world.

Echoing the strategies of the Hebrew Prophets, Baldwin also reserved special attention for confronting individuals who he deemed to be false prophets, people who were wrongfully,

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[75] Jeremiah 14:15-17
[76] Jeremiah 28

dangerously influencing others to act against the values of love, justice, righteousness, and truth. For example, Baldwin provides a detailed account of his visit with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam during the mid-twentieth century and the proclaimed "prophet" of Allah. Although Baldwin examines some positive aspects of their commitment to supporting and empowering Black people in the United States, Baldwin challenges Muhammad's false prophecies and emphasis on building up his own institutions instead of serving God and humanity as a whole:

> "We were offered, as Nation of Islam doctrine, historical and divine proof that all white people are cursed, and are devils, and are about to be brought down…The white man's rule will be ended forever in ten or fifteen years…as theology goes, it was no more indigestible than the more familiar brand asserting that there is a curse on the sons of Ham. No more, and no less, and it had been designed for the same purpose; namely, the sanctification of power."[77]

Baldwin's critiques of this false prophet are similar to those of Micah and Jeremiah, noting the ways in which the prophet's work is centered on building up their reputation and institutions that best serve them, not necessarily God or the people they are supposed to be serving. Additionally, at the core of the theology of the Nation of Islam is an explicit denigration of White people, further spreading division, hatred, and bigotry in the United States. Ultimately, as Baldwin notes at the end of the passage, this false prophet is focused more on the consolidation and "sanctification of power" than true progress for Black people in the United States and world.

In another example of Baldwin confronting a false prophet, Baldwin directly compares himself, in a rare instance, to one of the Hebrew Prophets. In 1965 at Cambridge University,

[77] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time,* pp. 49-50.

Baldwin debated the conservative commentator William F. Buckley on the topic, "The American Dream: Is it at the expense of the American Negro." At the time, Buckley was considered a leading voice on conservative politics, including opposing civil rights legislation that would have brought equality to Black people in the United States. For example, in this debate Buckley places the onus to defeat racism at the feet of Baldwin and Black people in a section discussing the number of Black doctors in the United States: "Is this because there were no opportunities? No, they say. There are a great many medical schools which by no means practice discrimination. It is because the Negro's particular energy is not directed toward that goal."[78] Additionally, Buckley defends the overall thrust and progress of the United States, shielding criticism of its racism: "For one thing I believe - that the fundamental trend in the United States is to the good nature, the generosity and good wishes, the decency that do lie in the spirit of the American people."[79] In direct confrontation with Buckley's ideas, Baldwin begins his speech by declaring, "I find myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah."[80] In this comparison, Baldwin finds himself, "not for the first time", in the role of speaking truth to power and directly confronting a dangerous, so-called prophetic figure. Similar to the Hebrew Prophets, Baldwin sought to combat these false prophets in order to preserve their own prophetic voice and influence, leading the people toward a more loving, truthful, justice-filled path.

**Envisioning A New Jerusalem**

In an interview toward the end of his life with Richard Goldstein in 1984, Baldwin expressed his feelings about some of his "good fantasies" for the future:

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[78] James Baldwin & William F. Buckley, "The American Dream" in New York Times Archive, March 7, 1965. https://www.nytimes.com/images/blogs/papercuts/baldwin-and-buckley.pdf.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

> "Oh, that I am working toward the New Jerusalem. That's true, I'm not joking. I won't live to see it but I do believe in it. I think we're going to be better than we are."[81]

Baldwin uses the phrase "New Jerusalem" throughout his career to describe his future hopes and dreams for the world. Undoubtedly, this phrase came from Baldwin's intimate knowledge of and engagement with the words of the Hebrew Prophets and their own visions for a redeemed future. Although none of the Hebrew Prophets use the exact language of "New Jerusalem", many of them speak of a transformed and renewed city of Jerusalem. Peterson notes this pattern among the Hebrew Prophets:

> "It is striking that Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve all acknowledge that the future will see a renaming of Jerusalem. The city that for many prophets personified all that was wrong with Israel… will undergo the same sort of transformation as did Jacob, who became Israel…."[82]

In this way, the Hebrew Prophets held onto their theological beliefs and trusted in God to ultimately lead the people out of death and destruction toward a future redemption.

For example, the final prophecy of Ezekiel specifies how the people should construct gates around the city of Jerusalem: "The circumference should be 18,000 cubits; and the name of the city from that day on shall be 'God is there.'"[83] In this verse, Ezekiel renames Jerusalem, infusing its name with the spirit of God. Similarly, Jeremiah also proclaims a new name for the city: "At that time, they shall call Jerusalem 'God's throne' and all nations will assemble there, in Jerusalem, in the name of God. They shall no longer follow the hardness of their evil hearts."[84]

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[81] Richard Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats" in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview & Other Conversations*, (Brooklyn, 2014), p. 73.
[82] David L. Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville, 2002), p. 42.
[83] Ezekiel 48:35
[84] Jeremiah 3:17

Again, Jeremiah changes the name of Jerusalem and gives God a "throne", a physical place to inhabit and where God can dwell among the people into the future. According to these two examples, this reinvigorated Jerusalem is a place where God is extremely present and reigns supreme, a confirmation of the theology of Ezekiel and Jeremiah.

Despite not changing the name of Jerusalem to signify their redemption prophecy, other Hebrew Prophets depicted sweeping visions of redemption that would lead to an ambitious renewal of the city. For example, the final prophecy of Amos proclaims an everlasting return to the precious land of Israel:

> "I will restore the captives, my people Israel
> They shall rebuild ruined cities and inhabit them;
> They shall plant vineyards and drink their wine;
> They shall work gardens and eat their fruits.
>
> And I will plant them upon their land,
> Never again to be uprooted
> From the land I have given them
> said Adonai your God."[85]

In this passage, Amos preaches about a restoration of God's people to their land, including Jerusalem. By replanting and working the "vineyards" and "gardens", the people will flourish in this newly revived land. Additionally, this passage features God reasserting God's compassion for the people, promising to never "uproot" the people from this land. Similarly, in 2nd Isaiah's final prophecy, he expresses immense joy for the renewal of Jerusalem:

[85] Amos 9:15

For thus said God:

I will extend to her

Peace like a stream,

The honor of nations

Like a stream in flood

And you shall drink of it.

You shall be carried on shoulders

And delight upon knees

Like someone who a mother comforts.

So I will comfort you

You shall find comfort in Jerusalem."[86]

Whereas Amos focuses on the environment of this redeemed city, 2nd Isaiah uses the metaphor of a child being cared for by a mother to express the ways in which the people will be supported and "find comfort" in the future version of Jerusalem. With God providing for them in this future reality, God again shows compassion and love toward the people and will ensure that they experience "peace", "honor", and "delight." Despite not using the exact language of Baldwin's "New Jerusalem", or sometimes not even renaming the city, the Hebrew Prophets embody this sense of renewal in their prophecies about a future city of Jerusalem that experiences redemption.

[86] 2nd Isaiah 66:12-13

As examined above, Baldwin uses the phrase "New Jerusalem" to describe his vision for a better world, a world redeemed of hatred and bigotry. In an essay in 1964, Baldwin expresses this vision for the future:

> "One day, perhaps unimaginable generations hence, we will evolve into the knowledge that human beings are more important than real estate and will permit this knowledge to become the ruling principle of our lives. For I do not for an instant doubt, and I will go to my grave believing that we can build Jerusalem, if we will."[87]

For Baldwin, our ability to "build Jerusalem" is about something more than simply building a better world. By using this particular language connected to the Hebrew Prophets, God, and religious and spiritual ideals, Baldwin expresses a deep belief in the power of humanity to address our wrongs, rebuild what is broken, and create a society filled with everlasting justice, mercy, love, and peace. As Greg Garrett notes, Baldwin's New Jerusalem concerns "the fulfillment of God's promises for humanity…But that New Jerusalem does not come on its own."[88] Additionally, as Eddie Glaude Jr. notes, this call from Baldwin was audacious and sought to create something beyond only the United States:

> "Baldwin did not call for a third American founding. Instead, he worked tirelessly for what he called the New Jerusalem. To my mind, there is little difference between the two. Both call for a world and a society that reflect the value that all human life, no matter the color of your skin, your zip code, your gender, or who you love, is sacred."[89]

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[87] James Baldwin, *Nothing Personal* (New York, 1964), p. 44.
[88] Greg Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us About Life, Love, & Identity* (New York, 2023) p. 140.
[89] Eddie Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York, 2020), p. 206.

For Baldwin, building the New Jerusalem was about putting holiness, sacredness, and love at the center of our politics and of our lives. Amidst enormous personal challenges and consequences, including witnessing friends be assassinated and confronting racism and homophobia, Baldwin kept his vision of the New Jerusalem alive during his life. In this way, Baldwin continues to engage in his spiritual relationship with God, envisioning God as an entity that can provide comfort and vision in his life, even as he believes that human beings must be the ones to create a better world. Baldwin's call from God, and the call of the Hebrew Prophets, is for us, in today's world, to continue to envision and work toward this New Jerusalem.

**Conclusion**

In the 21st century, expressing one's belief in God can be quickly dismissed as naive, including in social justice movements. However, the Hebrew Prophets and Baldwin demonstrate how a deep and abiding connection to God can inspire language and actions that lead to the construction of a "New Jerusalem", a world order rooted in justice, love, truth, and peace. After receiving a form of spiritual calling from God, the Hebrew Prophets and Baldwin then set out to fulfill their obligations to God and the people, including by calling out hypocritical actions that threatened their own theology and relationship with God. For this work, they were ignored, questioned, and persecuted by others. The hard work of bearing witness to death and destruction also took its toll, leading to mental and spiritual breakdowns. However, throughout it all, both the Hebrew Prophets and Baldwin sought to lead the people toward a new, brighter dawn that would bring out the best in humanity.

Invoking the intense theological stakes that come with this prophetic work, Baldwin writes in *The Fire Next Time*:

> "It is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being (and let us not ask whether or not this is possible; I think we must believe that it is possible) must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church. If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God cannot do this, then it is time we got rid of Him."[90]

For Baldwin, God was not only an inspiring presence in his life, but a presence that called us toward something better for ourselves, our communities, and the entire world. Individuals or Institutions that threatened this vision of God were self-serving and hypocritical, according to Baldwin, and ought to be avoided at all costs. Baldwin sought the purest form of God, a God rooted in love.

As I write this chapter, Donald J. Trump will officially become President of the United States for the second time. As more information is released about Trump's intentions during his term - mass deportations, attacks on trans people, cancelling of environmental protections, increased militarization, and more - it is clear that the path toward building the "New Jerusalem" is long and winding. Eddie Glaude Jr. wrote *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* during the first Trump administration and he offers the following advice for us, rooted in Baldwin:

> "If we, and I mean all of us who are committed to a new America, organize and fight with every ounce of energy we have to found an America free from the categories that bind our feet, implement policies that remedy generations-old injustices, and demonstrate

[90] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 47.

> in our living and political arrangements the value that every human being is sacred, we can build a New Jerusalem where the value gap cannot breathe."[91]

The prophetic call of Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets echoes out to us today. It's time to strategize, mobilize, and organize to build the "New Jerusalem", one step at a time.

[91] Eddie Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, p. 206.

## Chapter 3: Rhetoric

### Introduction

At the center of the work of the Hebrew Prophets is their unique and incisive use of rhetoric to express themselves. Rhetoric here can be defined as the art of speaking or writing in order to persuade others toward understanding an idea or taking an action. As Heschel notes, "The prophets do not offer reflections about ideas in general. Their words are onslaughts, scuttling illusions of false security, challenging evasions, calling faith to account, questioning prudence and impartiality."[92] This language is in response to the immense weight upon their shoulders, carrying the responsibility to serve both God and the people during existential situations. This chapter will explore this language, examining the rhetorical strategies of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, including the parallels that exist between particular passages. Following the examination of these strategies and parallels, I will then further examine these rhetorical elements in three main thematic areas: truth-telling, moral reckoning, and vision for the future.

### On Rhetoric

The Hebrew Prophets "functioned as intermediaries between the human and the divine worlds…Prophets were truly boundary figures, standing between the world of the sacred and the secular."[93] In this role, they relied upon rhetoric in their proclamations in order to make this translation, helping their audience understand ideas from God about humanity and persuade them to act differently. Changing the register of their words was the Hebrew Prophets' attempt to raise the stakes of the situation and draw people toward the word of God. For example, Micah uses

[92] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1963) p. xxvi.
[93] David L. Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville, 2002), p. 7.

intense language to demonstrate the gap between the espoused beliefs of the people and their detrimental actions:

> "Her rulers judge for bribes, her priests give rulings for a price, and her prophets prophesy for pay. Yet they rely upon Adonai, saying, 'God is in our midst, nothing evil will come upon us.' Therefore, because of you, Zion will be plowed like a field, Jerusalem will become a heap of ruins, and the Temple Mount a high place in the woods."[94]

In this passage, Micah uses the actions of the rulers, priests, and prophets, all typically positions of respect and authority, to demonstrate the hypocrisy embedded in society. Additionally, these leaders "rely upon Adonai", but fail to follow God's commandments in the world by perpetuating more injustice from their offices of power. The consequences for these actions are Zion, Jerusalem, and Temple Mount, all places that are spoken of in terms of highness and grandeur and in the world of the holy, brought low to the world of the mundane. These hypocritical contrasts in behavior are given as the reason for the impending destruction.

This form of intense, cutting rhetoric is also a hallmark of Baldwin's writing, particularly his essays addressing the issues of racism, discrimination, and capitalism in the United States. For example, Baldwin notes the poor "spiritual state" of the United States, including its impact on individuals, the country, and the world:

> "We are controlled here by our confusion, far more than we know, and the American dream has therefore become something much more closely resembling a nightmare, on the private, domestic, and international levels. Privately, we cannot stand our lives and dare not examine them; domestically, we take no responsibility for (and no pride in) what

[94] Micah 3:11-12 (My Translation; Assistance from Revised JPS 2023 Translation).

> goes on in our country; and internationally, for many millions of people, we are an unmitigated disaster."[95]

In his dichotomy between the American "dream" and the unfolding American "nightmare", Baldwin demonstrates the prophet's emphasis on vivid, intense rhetoric in order to hopefully persuade his audience, White people in the United States, to understand new ways of living and acting. In parallel to Micah, Baldwin is also criticizing the leadership of the United States for acting in a destructive, unjust manner.

For both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, the themes of justice and righteousness are a core component of their rhetoric, demonstrating their passion for protecting the most marginalized in society. For the Hebrew Prophets, the most marginalized would have included the poor, widows, and orphans, classes of people who struggle to take care of themselves in society and require the support of others in the community. For Baldwin, writing during the mid-twentieth century in the United States, he was most concerned with protecting Black people, People of Color, and poor people. This concern was born out of his own life experience:

> "Baldwin also talks about how he became aware from early life that the color of his skin meant certain things about his reality: that he was imprisoned in a ghetto, that he had comparatively limited opportunities for education and later advancement, that representatives of the law took an especial interest in him despite his innocence."[96]

Baldwin also included queer folks in his analysis of the most marginalized people in society. Although Baldwin was not explicit about his own sexuality as a queer man until later in his career, he featured queer men in several of his novels, and *Go Tell It On The Mountain* features a

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[95] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), p. 89.
[96] Greg Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us About Life, Love, & Identity* (New York, 2023), p. 114.

young boy, inspired by Baldwin, subtly grappling with his sexuality. In an interview in 1984, Baldwin speaks openly about the dynamics of race and sexuality:

> "A black gay person who is a sexual conundrum to society is already, long before the question of sexuality comes into it, menaced and marked because he's black or she's black. The sexual question comes after the question of color; it's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live."[97]

For Baldwin, race and sexuality were interconnected with one another and they both, alongside his direct life experiences as a queer Black man in the mid-twentieth century, directly informed his rhetoric toward society. Both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets view their work protecting the most marginalized people in their respective societies as an existential demonstration of their commitment to bringing the ideals of justice and righteousness into reality. Heschel rightly explains this dynamic: "To us a single act of injustice - cheating in business, exploitation of the poor - is slight; to the prophets, a disaster. To us injustice is injurious to the welfare of the people; to the prophets it is a deathblow to existence: to us, an episode; to them, a catastrophe, a threat to the world."[98]

Using language contemporary to their periods, both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets employ a similar rhetorical strategy to make their proclamations to their audiences in hopes of persuading them to understand an idea or take an action. Their rhetorical strategy is as follows: First, they describe the beliefs and actions of the people in great detail. This language is sharp, incisive, descriptive, and immensely clear. Second, they expose how those beliefs and actions are in contrast to either their espoused values or God's espoused values. This component of the

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[97] Richard Goldstein, "Go the Way Your Blood Beats" in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview & Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, 2014), p. 66-67.
[98] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 4.

strategy requires demonstrating the gap between the values expressed, either by the people or God, and the beliefs or actions actually upheld. Third, they prophesy about potential consequences or rewards for the people if they do or do not change their beliefs and actions, essentially describing a choice between the people receiving blessings or curses for their behavior. Understanding that their audiences may not comprehend the magnitude of their actions, this component features intensely soaring language, meant to either shock or inspire their audience toward changing their ways. There is also an implicit hope for a better future that is completely unwavering, even while using the other intense, challenging language of the rhetorical strategy.

In summary, Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets describe, expose, and prophesy in their attempt to persuade their audience to understand an idea or take an action. This rhetorical strategy grounds both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets in the reality of their current situation, while making proclamations that echo throughout the centuries, well beyond their context. In examining their language, it is important to note that not every passage explicitly includes all three of these aspects of the rhetorical strategy; however, usage of various components of the strategy feature in much of their rhetorical language.

In a famous example, 2nd Isaiah employs this rhetorical strategy, answering the Israelites' question of why their fasts haven't gained attention and appreciation from God:

> "Because on your fast days, you see to your delights and you oppress your workers. Behold, you fast in strife and contention, and you strike with a wicked fist. Your fasting is not such that it will make your voice heard on high. Is this the fast that I have chosen? A day for people to starve their bodies? Is it bowing your head like a reed, and lying in sackcloth and ashes? Do you call that a fast, a day when God is called favorable? No, this

> is the fast that I choose: To unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the bands of the yoke. Yes, it is to distribute your bread to the hungry, and to bring the wretched poor into your house. When you see a naked person, clothe them, and do not hide yourself from your own flesh. Then, your light shall break through like dawn, and your restoration shall quickly come about. Your vindication shall march out before you, the glory of Adonai shall bring up your rear."[99]

This passage from 2nd Isaiah describes the heretical actions of the people and then exposes the hypocrisy of their actions. In this instance, they "observe rituals such as fasting, but they do so only for their own benefit, not out of true devotion."[100] In addition to only practicing the ritual of fasting for their own credit, the prophet exclaims, in clear detail, the actions that the people should be doing in order to truly demonstrate their devotion to God. Finally, 2nd Isaiah ends the passage with a promise of future redemption; however, this promise only comes with the people changing their ways and committing themselves to enacting true justice and compassion throughout society.

This detailed rhetorical strategy from 2nd Isaiah, aiming to challenge the people to change their actions, draws parallels in strategy and themes in a passage from Baldwin describing the most marginalized in United States society:

> "But the system works as it works, and it attracts the people it attracts. The poor, the black, and the ignorant become the stepping stones of careers; for the people who make up this remarkable club are judged by their number of arrests and convictions. These

[99] 2nd Isaiah 58:3-8

[100] Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, Editors; Michael Fishbane, Consulting Editor. *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition* (Oxford, 2004), p. 881

> matter far more than justice, if justice can be said to matter at all…In my experience, the defenders of the public peace do not care who is guilty."[101]

In this passage, Baldwin describes the wretchedness of the carceral system in the United States and the impact it has on the most marginalized in society. He then exposes the hypocrisy of the system, with the "defenders of the public peace" caring more about their careers than the actual enactment of justice in the country. 2nd Isaiah notes that the people care more about the ritual of fasting than they do about bringing justice and compassion to society; Baldwin notes that the people in charge of the carceral system care more about the ritual of "arrests and convictions" than they do about bringing justice and compassion to society. For both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, hypocrisy lies at the center of their critique of society, with people not acting in alignment with their expressed values.

In another famous example of this rhetorical strategy being used to challenge people to change their actions, Micah proclaims to the people how they need to act in the world in order to fulfill their covenant with God:

> "With what shall I come before Adonai, bow down to God on high? Shall I come before with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Would Adonai be pleased with a thousand rams, with ten thousand streams of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for my sins? You have been told, O human, what is good; and what does God require of you? Only to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Then your name will achieve wisdom."[102]

Micah begins by describing the current actions of the people, including their attempts to please God through sacrifices. In using questions, Micah is challenging the people to actually

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[101] James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street* (New York, 1972), pp. 143-144.
[102] Micah 6:8

contemplate their beliefs and actions. In response to these posed questions, "The answer is communicated through the prophetic message. These are things that you choose to do. What God demands of you is to fulfill the requirements of justice, be faithful to commitments, and live your life in humble and attentive openness to God."[103] Additionally, "the text here does not communicate a rejection of Temple offerings; rather it expresses the common biblical and ancient Near Eastern concept of the primacy of morality over sacrifices."[104] After drawing this contrast, Micah provides a simple prophecy of future blessing: "Then your name will achieve wisdom." Although not explicitly mentioned, the implication is that if the people do not follow the things that God requires of them, they will not receive this reward and be cursed to live without God's wisdom in the world.

Probably having read Micah's proclamation during his lifetime, Baldwin seems to echo this passage in describing the ways in which the United States acts in the exact opposite way of Micah's prophecy:

> "Well, if one really wishes to know how justice is administered in a country, one does not question the policemen, the lawyers, the judges, or the protected members of the middle class. One goes to the unprotected - those, precisely, who need the law's protection most! - and listens to their testimony. Ask any Mexican, any Puerto Rican, any black man, any poor person - ask the wretched how they fare in the halls of justice, and then you will know, not whether or not the country is just, but whether or not it has any love for justice, or any concept of it. It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have."[105]

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[103] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, 1996), p. 97.
[104] Berlin, Brettler; Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Second Edition*, p. 1203.
[105] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 149.

Although Baldwin does not use direct questions, he calls upon his audience to "question" the people most impacted by injustice in society. Noting that the most powerful will have different answers on the state of justice in the country from the most marginalized, Baldwin uses this contrast to demonstrate the hypocrisy concerning justice in the United States. Additionally, similar to Micah, Baldwin challenges his audience to understand the ideals of justice and compassion conceptually, incorporating them into their own lives and the whole of society. Both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets sought to use this rhetorical strategy of describing, exposing, and prophesying in order to challenge their audiences to understand an idea or take an action. The following sections will explore several additional areas of rhetoric that both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets utilized within this rhetorical strategy in order to achieve their goals. These additional areas, truth-telling, moral reckoning, and vision for the future, expand upon the overall rhetorical strategy of Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets.

**Truth-Telling, Moral Reckoning, & Vision for the Future**

Truth-telling can be defined as the act of proclaiming truths to society in order to challenge them to change their actions. For the Hebrew Prophets, truth-telling was at the core of their purpose in the world, heeding the word of God and communicating it to the people in order to hopefully save them from chaos and destruction. As Heschel notes, "The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden upon his soul…"[106] Although some of the Hebrew Prophets struggle under the weight of this responsibility, the stakes of each situation are so enormous that they dare not shirk their role in society. Speaking the truth, no matter the consequences, made the Hebrew Prophets unpopular figures. The people did not want to hear their proclamations because of the ways in which hearing the truth would indict them for their

[106] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 5.

past actions and potentially make them change their actions in the future. For example, Isaiah declares: "Who said to the seers, 'Do not see'; to the prophets, 'Do not prophesy truth to us'; speak to us falsehoods, prophesy delusions."[107] Additionally, Amos makes a similar declaration toward the people: "'And I raised up prophets from your sons, and nazarites from your young men. Is that not so, children of Israel?' Says God. 'But you made the nazarites drink wine, and commanded the prophets not to prophecy.'"[108] In this instance, and perhaps in many instances, the people would rather ignore reality in order to avoid grappling with their behavior and understanding of the world. This dynamic did not prevent the Hebrew Prophets from truth-telling, but underscores the importance of using their rhetorical strategy to attempt to call the people toward justice and righteousness in society.

Within his own context, Baldwin understood this dynamic of truth-telling intimately. Many White people in the United States during the mid-twentieth century refused to hear the truth that Black people were preaching during this time: that racism was immoral and that all people should have equal rights regardless of their skin color. Among the many Black people making this argument, Baldwin was one of the most poignant and precise, utilizing his strong rhetorical strategy to proclaim this truth and denigrate the lies that had been constructed in society to maintain White supremacy. Baldwin does this most effectively by noting the ways in which accepting this truth, that all people are created equal, indicts the beliefs and way of life for White people. For example, Baldwin notes how this denial of truth has disastrous consequences, especially for Black people in the United States:

> "White America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves

[107] Isaiah 30:10
[108] Amos 2:11-12

> and their country; and the effect of this massive and hostile incomprehension is to increase the danger in which all black people live here, especially the young."[109]

Similar to the Hebrew Prophets, Baldwin is also concerned with the truth because of its possibility to free not only a segment of the population, but provide liberation to the whole of society, no matter their background:

> "Actually, black people have known the truth about white people for a long time, but now there is no longer any way for the truth to be hidden. The whole world knows it. The truth which frees black people will also free white people, but this is a truth which white people find very difficult to swallow."[110]

This emphasis on collective liberation, that all people, including White people oppressing Black people, have an obligation to hear the truth about society makes Baldwin unique among the Black writers and leaders of that time period. Unlike some other Black leaders during the mid-twentieth century, Baldwin professes his truth to everyone in the United States. Those groups of people include White people complicit in individual and systemic racism; Black people who are in need of support and guidance in claiming their humanity; and even Black Muslims, including the leader of the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad, who denigrate the existence of White people overall. Baldwin's rhetorical strategy of truth-telling, similar to that of the Hebrew Prophets, emphasizes the truth over everything else and demonstrates their commitment to exposing the hypocrisy of society in order to change beliefs and actions.

Although Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets operate similarly in their rhetorical strategy, there are important contextual distinctions between them, especially on the theme of truth-telling. Baldwin articulates the truth because the consequences were enormous; like the Hebrew

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[109] Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, p. 165.
[110] Ibid, p. 129.

Prophets, he cannot in good conscience stay silent. For Baldwin, staying silent meant tormenting himself by not speaking his truth and destroying his commitment to Black people. This is clearly demonstrated by his decision to ultimately leave France in 1957, a place that brought him more safety and security than in the United States during the mid-twentieth century. After witnessing the horrific treatment of Dorothy Counts, a Black teenager who helped to desegregate schools in North Carolina the year before, Baldwin notes:

> "It made me furious, it filled me with both hatred and pity, and it made me ashamed. Some one of us should have been there with her! I dawdled in Europe for nearly yet another year, held by my private life and my attempt to finish a novel, but it was on that bright afternoon that I knew I was leaving France. I could, simply, no longer sit around in Paris discussing the Algerian and the black American problem. Everybody else was paying their dues, and it was time I went home and paid mine."[111]

Baldwin felt compelled to "pay his dues" by speaking his truth about the viciousness of racism in the United States. In the mid-twentieth century, Baldwin lived during a time of intense racist violence, especially for those Black people who chose to challenge the racial hierarchy during this time period, including teenagers such as Dorothy Counts. Much of *No Name In The Street* is a reflection on Baldwin's relationships with famous Black men who also challenged the racial hierarchy during this time and who were killed during their work in the Civil Rights Movement, including Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

While the Hebrew Prophets exclaimed about God's wrath coming to inflict the Israelites because of their own beliefs, decisions, and actions, Baldwin confronted the wrath that undoubtedly came down upon Black people because of the interpersonal and systemic racism of

[111] Ibid, p. 50.

White people, not the actions of Black people themselves. Commenting on the very nature of the United States, Baldwin notes:

> "Blacks have never been free in this country, never was it intended that they should be free, and the spectre of so dreadful a freedom - the idea of a license so bloody and abandoned - conjures up another, unimaginable country, a country in which no decent, God-fearing white man or woman can live. A civilized country is, by definition, a country dominated by whites, in which blacks clearly know their place."[112]

In an important distinction in terms of their truth-telling strategy, the Hebrew Prophets felt they had the direct support of God, even though they were not always protected. Baldwin, for as much as he felt called to speak his truth and mimicked the language of God as expressed through the Hebrew Prophets, did not hold any allusions that he would be directly protected by God from the racist violence and vitriol that exuded throughout the United States.

Following truth-telling, the rhetorical strategy of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets progresses to moral reckoning, the process of challenging people to understand their past actions and explore how to address those actions in the present and future. In the work of moral reckoning, providing intense criticism and a thorough understanding of the stakes of the actions of the people are two key elements. Additionally, people are forced to reckon with their actions when they are challenged to more fully understand the impact of their actions upon the present, and most importantly upon the future. This reckoning is most effective when done on both personal and societal levels, raising the stakes among the people. For example, Micah begins his prophecy by exclaiming how the peoples' actions have led to God inflicting devastating consequences upon the entire earth:

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[112] Ibid, p. 177.

> "The mountains shall melt underfoot and the valleys shall burst open - like wax before fire, like water pouring down a slope. All of this is for the transgression of Jacob, and for the sins of the House of Israel."[113]

Isaiah makes a similar proclamation, noting how the actions of the people have led to the entire earth being impacted:

> "For the earth was defiled under its inhabitants because they passed over Torah, violated laws, and broke the ancient covenant. That is why a curse consumes the earth, and its inhabitants pay the price. That is why earth's dwellers have dwindled, but few people are left."[114]

In these examples, there is an emphasis on the earth; this focus is perhaps due to the universal nature of the critique, with most people understanding the consequences through a visual representation of impending destruction that will directly impact everything around them. The Hebrew Prophets prophesy about both the present and future of their societies, demonstrating the impact that peoples' actions have upon themselves, their community, and the entire world.

Baldwin takes the work of moral reckoning seriously, striving to use his rhetorical strategy to challenge American society in the mid-twentieth century to address its deep-seated racism and change its course for the future. The final passage of *The Fire Next Time*, draws on the story of Noah (Genesis 6:9-10:32) in which God floods the entire earth because of the intransigence and wickedness of human beings. Baldwin ends the book with an implicit divine threat that demonstrates the stakes that he has identified for the pursuit of racial justice in the United States:

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[113] Micah 1:4-5
[114] Isaiah 24:5-6

> "If we - and now I mean the relatively conscious whites and the relatively conscious blacks, who must, like lovers, insist on, or create, the consciousness of the others - do not falter in our duty now, we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, and achieve our country, and change the history of the world. If we do not now dare everything, the fulfillment of that prophecy, re-created from the Bible in a song by a slave, is upon us: *God gave Noah the rainbow sign, No more water, the fire next time!*"[115]

In closing the book this way, Baldwin's form of moral reckoning ascends to new heights, raising the stakes of the moment and imploring society to shift in order to avoid a catastrophic ending that has already happened once before in the Hebrew Bible. To avoid this consequence, Baldwin clearly demonstrates the need for the "relatively conscious", people who are aware of the racial nightmare in the United States, to come together to address the systemic challenges that exist and build a society rooted in justice, love, truth, and peace.

In *No Name in the Street*, Baldwin ends the books on a similar, ominous note, although lacking the direct biblical reference:

> "Whoever is part of whatever civilization helplessly loves some aspects of it, and some of the people in it. A person does not lightly elect to oppose his society. One would much rather be at home among one's compatriots than be mocked and detested by them. And there is a level on which the mockery of the people, even their hatred, is moving because it is so blind: it is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction. I think black people have always felt this about America, and Americans, and have always seen, spinning above the thoughtless American head, the shape of the wrath to come."[116]

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[115] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 105-106.
[116] Baldwin, *No Name in the Stree*t, pp. 194-195.

For Baldwin, the "wrath to come" is directly connected to the actions of White people in the United States. Black people in the United States do not control this wrath, but rather, are able to see clearly, from their own experiences, the shape and character of this impending punishment. Although Baldwin ends both books on extremely penetrating and ominous notes, he is still committed to creating opportunities for people to change the course of the United States and the world. Ultimately, Baldwin's emphasis on moral reckoning is about challenging people to change and not merely punishing them for their past actions that have harmed people: "This is what Baldwin, with all of his talk of claiming and repenting of our history, his lamenting of white innocence and wishful naivete, also wants, what in fact the Bible prophets called for: turn from evil and do good."[117]

Following truth-telling and moral reckoning, the Hebrew Prophets progress to also demonstrate a commitment to providing a vivid depiction of a better, more perfect future, similar to earlier descriptions of a reconstituted Jerusalem. This commitment to articulating this vision is rooted in the Hebrew Prophets' care for the people: "The words of the prophet are stern, sour, stinging. But behind his austerity is love and compassion for mankind."[118] This care and compassion is most explicitly seen in redemptive passages of the Hebrew Prophets. For example, 2nd Isaiah notes that the people "shall leave in joy and be led home in wholeness. Before you, mountains and hills will burst forth in joy, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."[119] Similarly, Amos ends his prophecy exclaiming future success for the people: "I will restore my people Israel. They shall rebuild desolate cities and live in them; they shall plant vineyards and drink their wine; they shall till gardens and eat their fruits."[120]

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[117] Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin*, p. 137.
[118] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 14.
[119] 2nd Isaiah 55:12
[120] Amos 9:14

Holding a similar love and hope for humanity, Baldwin expresses a deep commitment to peoples' ability to change, grow, and develop:

> "I think that people can be better than that, and I know that people can be better than they are. We are capable of bearing a great burden, once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is."[121]

For Baldwin, this belief in peoples' ability to change was in tension with his need to address their wrongs in society: "I knew the tension in me between love and power, between pain and rage, and the curious, the grinding way I remained extended between these poles - perpetually attempting to choose the better rather than the worse."[122] This tension, between caring for and showing disdain for the people, is present throughout much of Baldwin's works.

The prophecies of Micah further demonstrate this strategy of providing a vision for the future, as "together with the word of doom, Micah proclaims the vision of redemption."[123] After proclaiming all of the ways in which the Israelites are not acting in alignment with the values imparted upon them by God, Micah also provides a sparkling and grand vision for their future redemption:

> "'Come, let us go up to the Mount of Adonai, to the House of the God of Jacob, that we may be cast in God's ways, and that we may walk in godly paths.' For instruction shall come forth from Zion, the word of God from Jerusalem. And they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation; they shall never again study war. But every person shall sit under their

[121] Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 91.
[122] Ibid, p. 60.
[123] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 128.

> own vine and fig tree, and no one there to disturb them, for it was the God of Hosts who spoke."[124]

The vision articulated by Micah holds several important components. First, this vision of the future imagines the people in deep, abiding relationship with God by acting in accordance with Micah's proclamation and following God's commandments in the world. Secondly, there is a future without any knowledge or threat of war; peace reigns supreme throughout the world. And finally, after articulating a universal vision, Micah becomes more personal, with each and every person surrounded by prosperous vegetation and living a life of tranquility. Each of these components paint a beautiful, serene picture of a redeemed future for the people.

Similar to Micah's demand for moral reckoning, but also a vision for the future, "Isaiah knew that disaster was bound to come, but also that a remnant would survive…Isaiah never predicted the destruction of Jerusalem."[125]After castigating the Israelites for their actions through many prophecies, 2nd Isaiah reminds them of the perilous episode of Noah and the flood, but then provides them with reassurance for a better future:

> "For me, this is like the waters of Noah: As I swore that the waters of Noah would never flood the earth, so I swear that I will not be angry with you or rebuke you. For the mountains may move and the hills may shake, but my faithfulness shall never move from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be shaken - said God, who loves you."[126]

In this passage, 2nd Isaiah does the opposite of Baldwin in his reference to Noah. Instead of Baldwin's strategy of using the story of the flood in Genesis to make an implicit threat about the future of the world, 2nd Isaiah uses the story to demonstrate God's promise and commitment to

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[124] Micah 4:2-4
[125] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 120.
[126] 2nd Isaiah 54:9-10

never fully rebuking the people. This passage also puts forward a vision of the future in which God loves the people, and is committed to upholding a "covenant of peace" that will support them for generations to come.

On this particular theme, Baldwin deviates from the main rhetorical strategy of the Hebrew Prophets by not always providing a clear vision for redemption in the future. Although Baldwin witnessed important victories in the fight against racism during his lifetime, it seems that he felt the persistent and intractable sting of racism, both personal and systemic, until his death in 1987. Unlike 2nd Isaiah, Baldwin's destructive moral reckoning that he warned of in *The Fire Next Time* has not occurred; for every ounce of anti-racist progress, there are a slew of policies that attempt, and in many ways succeed, to maintain the racial caste system in the United States. Even following what many described as the "racial reckoning" of 2020, following the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, it is clear that Baldwin's moral reckoning that would destroy all pieces of racism and injustice has not happened yet in the United States or around the world. Even with his hopes of building a "New Jerusalem", without this moral reckoning occurring in this country, Baldwin cannot in good conscience articulate a gleaming, shining vision for the future that the Hebrew Prophets were able to articulate.

**Conclusion**

Heschel notes that "The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered, and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions."[127] Through their rhetorical strategies and focus on the themes of truth-telling, moral reckoning, and vision for the future, both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets fulfill this iconoclastic description. However, being in the position of an

[127] Heschel, *The Prophets,* p. 12.

iconoclast made Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets unpopular figures during their lifetimes. Their work, as Baldwin notes on the nature of "witnessing", was also incredibly exhausting:

> "Witness to whence I came, where I am. Witness to what I've seen and the possibilities that I think I see...I don't think I ever resented it, but it exhausted me. I didn't resent it because it was an obligation that was impossible to fulfill."[128]

Additionally, the effective use of rhetorical strategies did not automatically lead to their audiences understanding different ideas or changing their actions. This raises an important reality: neither Baldwin or the Hebrew Prophets were wildly successful in their calls for radically reordering society rooted in justice and righteousness. This is, in part, why their prophetic language continues to echo throughout the generations until today - there is still more work to be done to experience true liberation and redemption. It is clear that their words are still needed.

It is important to note that the early ideas for this thesis were born out of specifically the rhetoric (as opposed to the fiction or poetry) of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets. Upon finishing *The Fire Next Time*, with its dizzyingly haunting ending that invokes the Noah story from Genesis, I became fascinated by Baldwin's religious and spiritual background. Several years later, studying the Hebrew Prophets with Dr. Adriane Leveen (my advisor for this thesis) at HUC-JIR sparked a passion for further understanding these prophets. Growing up in the Reform Jewish movement, the Hebrew Prophets were quoted time and time again, and I took much inspiration from their relentless pursuit of justice. However, studying their words more deeply made me want to understand prophetic voice in our modern context. Which brought me back to Baldwin, whose incisive, poignant words continue to inspire and ignite movements for justice - precisely because there is still so much work to be done. In a world filled with incredible

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[128]Julius Lester, "James Baldwin - Reflections of a Maverick" in *James Baldwin: The Last Interview & Other Conversations* (Brooklyn, 2014), p. 43.

challenges - entrenched systemic racism, a deepening climate crisis, unstoppable violence in Israel/Palestine, and so much more - the rhetoric of Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets fills me, and so many other people, with hope that we can build the world as it should be, a world gleaming with justice, compassion, and peace for all people.

## Chapter 4: Poetry

### Introduction

One of the core components of the work of the Hebrew Prophets is their creative and sweeping use of poetry to express themselves and prophesy to the people. In this instance, poetry can be defined as a literary form that gives special emphasis to the expression of feelings and ideas through a particular style and rhythm. As Barbara Herrnstein Smith elaborates, "As soon as we perceive that a verbal sequence has a sustained rhythm, that it is formally structured according to a continuously operating principle of organization, we know that we are in the presence of poetry…"[129] Adding more to this definition of poetry, Heschel notes that "the prophet's use of emotional and imaginative language, concrete in diction, rhythmical in movement, artistic in form, marks his style as poetic."[130] The Hebrew Prophets use this language in an attempt to adequately express the power, majesty, and consequentialism of their prophecies. They do not use elements of poetry to sound more flowery. Rather, they use poetry to more fully express their feelings and enhance the force of message they are delivering to their audiences. This elevated form of speech also attempts to correspond to the immense majesty, wonder, and power of God's speech.

This chapter will explore the importance, meaning, and impact of utilizing elements of poetry for both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets. Following an examination of their choice to use elements of poetry in their works, I will then further explore these aspects of poetry through their technical components, analyzing, in particular, their use of parallelism, intensification, and repetition. Finally, this chapter will explore how the use of poetry allowed both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets to most fully express themselves and prophesy to their audiences.

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[129] Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago, 1968) pp. 23-24.
[130] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York, 1963) p. 7.

**On Poetry**

The Hebrew Prophets were presented with a challenging situation: how were they to simultaneously express the enormity of the word of God, persuade the people to truly listen and change their ways, and hold onto their own humanity in the process? In many instances, they chose to use poetic devices to achieve all three of these goals. Alter notes that "since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it makes sense that divine speech should be represented as poetry."[131] The sheer immensity and magnitude of the word of God required a language and form that was creative and bold enough to fully express its power and majesty, as well as describe the impact of these words on the Hebrew Prophets themselves.

For example, Ezekiel describes, with a sense of shock and awe, the experience of first receiving the word of God:

> "Like the appearance of the rainbow that shines in the clouds on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the surrounding brightness/radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the splendor of Adonai. When I beheld it, I flung myself down on my face. And I heard the Voice speaking."[132]

In this passage, Ezekiel's use of the poetic device of repetition, which will be explored in the next section of this chapter, draws attention to the magnificence of this moment of Ezekiel and God coming together to be in relationship. In describing the sudden "appearance" of God before him, Ezekiel speaks as if he almost cannot believe what he is experiencing in that moment. Additionally, just like a "rainbow that shines in the cloud on a rainy day", Ezekiel experiences

[131] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York, 2011), p. 176.
[132] Ezekiel 1:28 (My Translation; Assistance from Revised JPS 2023 Translation).

the suddenness of God's appearance as a comforting experience, both for that moment in Ezekiel's life, but also perhaps as a sign of comfort and "splendor" in the future.

As detailed in the previous chapter, the Hebrew Prophets were intensely focused on their audience, prophesying for a particular people so that they might avoid an impending catastrophe caused by God as a consequence for their actions. Alter notes that "prophetic poetry…is devised as a form of direct address to a historically real audience."[133] In addressing their audience, the Hebrew Prophets chose to use poetic elements and forms because they thought that this strategy would initially gain the attention of the people, calling them to truly listen to the word of God. Once the people were paying attention, the Hebrew Prophets sought to use poetry to allow for the details and consequences of these prophecies to be most fully understood by the people in hopes that they would change their ways.

For example, Amos expresses God's wrath against the people because of their horrendous and detrimental actions:

> "I will turn your festivals into mourning
> And all your songs into dirges;
> I will put sackcloth on all loins
> And baldness on every head.
> I will make the earth mourn as for an only child,
> All of it as on a bitter day.
> A time is coming—declares the Lord God—when I will send a famine upon the land: not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of Adonai."[134]

[133] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 175.
[134] Amos 8:10-11

This passage demonstrates Amos expressing, forcefully, the consequences that God is threatening upon the people because of their previous actions. Amos's use of parallelism, an important poetic device in Biblical Hebrew that will be explored in the next section of this chapter, compares positive aspects of life ("festivals" and "songs") to negative aspects ("mourning" and "dirges"), ultimately resulting in a "famine" of God's voice and presence in the world; the "sackcloth" and "baldness" will be clear evidence of that mourning. In addition to Amos's audience mourning and directly experiencing the impact of God's wrath, God "will make the earth mourn", bringing all of humanity into this time of punishment. Overall, each line of the passage serves to strengthen God's claim of destruction and the impact of the impending doom coming to the people.

Finally, in using poetry to express the word of God, the Hebrew Prophets sought to maintain their own humanity. As will be demonstrated further in a later section of this chapter, the poetry of the Hebrew Prophets features elements of personal expression and reflection that show them wrestling with their own humanity. For example, Isaiah shows enormous reverence for God: "I will wait for God, whose face is hidden from the house of Jacob, and in whom I hope."[135] In this passage, Isaiah articulates God as having human features, providing for a more recognizable understanding of God. Through this deeply personal reflection, Isaiah demonstrates his intimate connection to God during a tumultuous time of delivering God's word to the people, and during which God is withholding God's face from the "house of Jacob." In Isaiah holding out "hope" in God, we witness a statement similar to a prayer, with Isaiah expressing his innermost yearning for a better future for himself, the people, and the entire world. For Isaiah and the other Hebrew Prophets, poetry gave them a fullness of language to attempt to adequately

[135] Isaiah 8:17

express the word of God, effectively address the people and deliver prophecy to them, and hold onto their humanity throughout the entire process, including the choice to "wait for" and "hope" in God.

Baldwin holds many similarities to the Hebrew Prophets in terms of his own use of poetry throughout his career. According to the poet Nikki Finney, "Baldwin wrote poetry because he felt close to this particular form and this particular way of saying. Poetry helped thread his ideas from the essays, to the novels, to the love letters, to the book reviews, stitching images and feeling into music, back to his imagination."[136] I imagine that Baldwin felt close to poetry because it allowed for his "imagination" and very essence to shine through, stripping away his lengthy analysis about the world and its troubles, and presenting the most spiritual version of himself. Baldwin's poetry is vulnerable, uncovering aspects of his innermost life and presenting them in a form that is the closest Baldwin would ever get to a formal prayer. Even his use of language is unique, combining his identity and experiences to express something new: "With prophetic understanding, harmony, and swing, creating his own style and using his own gauges to navigate the journey, Baldwin often wrote counter-metrically, reflecting his African, Southern, Harlem, and Paris roots."[137] This uniquely inspired language brings forth a slowness in Baldwin's poetry, forcing the reader to methodically contemplate the deeply personal, historical, and societal messages embedded within each of the words, phrases, and stanzas of his works. In uncovering his most spiritual self and using poetry as prayer, "James Baldwin, as a poet, never forgot…to remember where one came from."[138]

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[136] Nikky Finney, "Introduction" of *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems* (Boston, 2014), p. xvi.
[137] Ibid, p. xv.
[138] Ibid, p. xiii.

Throughout his poetry, Baldwin also includes a wide variety of direct and indirect Biblical references. For example, he explores the very beginning of the universe in Genesis by mentioning "Flowers fresher than Eden" and "...baby, find another Eden, another apple tree…"[139] He references one of Jesus's early disciples by asking the question, "Saul, how does it feel to be Paul?"[140] He places himself within the context of biblical stories: "You forget/that I remember an Egypt/where I was worshipped/where I was loved."[141] He also frequently puts himself or others in the place of Job by asking "why/does lightning strike this house" and claiming "the lightning has no choice/the whirlwind has one voice."[142] Baldwin's ability to stitch these direct and indirect religious references together with modern day topics demonstrates his ability and passion for using poetry to explore the deepest components of himself and our society, while also connecting him to his childhood that featured an intense relationship to Christianity and the Bible. For Baldwin, perhaps because he used poetry so rarely throughout his career, it stands out as a powerful way to articulate his unique and compelling reflections to the world.

Similar to the Hebrew Prophets using poetry to prophecy to their audience in hopes of changing their behavior, Baldwin used poetry to most boldly and explicitly articulate his deeply held beliefs about the United States and the wider world so that people would listen and commit to changing themselves in the future. For example, at the end of his epic poem *Staggerlee wonders* (a poem that will be featured in several instances throughout this chapter because of its length and richness of poetic elements), Baldwin explores Black people resisting racism by

[139] James Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, (Boston, 2014), pp. 17-18.
[140] Ibid, p. 46.
[141] Ibid, p. 62.
[142] Ibid, pp. 44-45.

attempting, and ultimately failing, to convince White people of the seriousness of their inhuman and racist actions:

> During this long travail
> our ancestors spoke to us, and we listened,
> and we tried to make you hear life in our song
> but now it matters not at all to me
> whether you know what I am talking about - or not:
> I know why we are not blinded
> by your brightness, are able to see you,
> who cannot see us. I know
> why we are still here.
>
> Godspeed.
> The niggers are calculating,
> from day to day, life everlasting,
> and wish you well:
> but decline to imitate the Son of the Morning,
> and rule in Hell.[143]

In this poem, Baldwin poetically, prophetically, lays out the stakes for this moment in the United States, and around the world. He describes the way in which Black people have tried to politely help White people address their racism and dehumanization; however, the rejection of this guidance has led Baldwin and other Black people to throw up their hands, quit their apparently

[143] Ibid, p. 19.

futile efforts, and "wish them well" in the future. Calling upon Isaiah 14:12 and its reference to "Lucifer, Son of Morning", Baldwin finishes the poem by promising that Black people will not become an evil devil that plans on antagonizing White people for their racist actions, even though White people probably deserve some form of punishment for their continuance of systemic racism in the United States.[144] In this instance, Baldwin uses poetic form, and a direct biblical reference to Isaiah, to prophetically raise the stakes of his analysis and hopefully lead to people changing their actions in the future.

In examining the poetry of both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, it is important to note that there are sometimes "serious questions as to where the line breaks should come and, especially in some of the Prophets, ambiguities about the boundaries between prose and poetic passages."[145] This chapter will limit its exploration of the poetry of the Hebrew Prophets to certain passages constructed (in both Hebrew and English) in typical poetic form. Baldwin only had one published work of poetry (*Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*) among his many other forms of writing. Baldwin's use of poetic elements is clear throughout his many varied works, creating a lyrical style to his prose and rhetorical pieces of writing; however, to narrow the focus of this examination, this chapter will focus exclusively on Baldwin's works explicitly written in poetic form because they feature more direct attempts by Baldwin to express himself through this medium. The following section will explore several of these poetic devices that both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets used to achieve their prophetic goals.

**Poetic Devices**

[144] Isaiah 14:12 (My Translation; Assisted by King James Version of the Bible). Note: The King James Version of the Bible was used in this translation because of its explicit reference to "Lucifer", an important component of Baldwin's understanding of the concept of hell and the devil that is present in this poem.
[145] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 3.

Among the many poetic devices within the literary category of poetry, both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets use parallelism, intensification, and repetition to prophesy to their particular audiences and most fully express themselves. In this way, "poetic form acts in these cases as a kind of magnifying glass, concentrating on the rays of meaning to a white-hot point."[146] The first poetic device to be examined, parallelism, usually features two (sometimes three) lines of poetry put in relationship with one another through the second line complementing the language and meaning of the first line by using pairs that build upon one another. In this way, parallelism strengthens the understanding and impact of the message of the lines through their similarities or differences. For example, Isaiah proclaims impending doom for Babylon:

"And I will requite to the world its evil
And to the wicked their iniquity
I will put an end to the pride of the arrogant
And humble the majesty of the mighty

I will make people more prized than gold
Mortals (more prized) than gold of Ophir

Therefore I will make the heavens tremble
And the earth shake from out of its place
At the fury of the Lord of Hosts
On the day of God's burning wrath."[147]

[146] Ibid, p. 76.
[147] Isaiah 13:11-13

In this passage, Isaiah uses parallelism to strengthen God's claim of future destruction. Both the "arrogant" and the "mighty", people who have benefited from and perpetuated injustice in society, will be brought low from their places of importance. Additionally, both "the earth" and "the heavens" will "tremble" and "shake", symbolizing the enormous disruption that will take place throughout the entire universe. The parallel nature of these lines create an effect of building upon one another to embolden Isaiah's prophecy of the impending doom coming to Babylon as part of a series of pronouncements of destruction that eventually will include the Israelites.

In a related example, both in poetic device and theme, Baldwin uses parallelism to strengthen his already piercing language as he describes the viciousness of capitalism and racism in the United States in a passage from the middle of his poem, *Staggerlee wonders*:

> The sons of greed, the heirs of plunder,
> are approaching the end of their journey:
> it is amazing that they approach without wonder,
> as though they have, themselves become
> that scorched and blasphemed earth,
> the stricken buffalo, the slaughtered tribes,
> the endless, virgin, bloodsoaked plain,
> the famine, the silence, the children's eyes,
> murder masquerading as salvation, seducing
> every democratic eye,
> the mouths of truth and anguish choked with cotton…"[148]

[148] Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, p. 13-14.

This passage of the poem features an example of parallelism in the first line, in which both "sons" and "heirs" embody "greed" and "plunder", two hallmarks of the racism and capitalism that Baldwin is expressing anger towards throughout the poem. Using the language of "sons" and "heirs" demonstrates this is an injustice built upon generations of injustice and cruelty. Additionally, the "earth" is "scorched and blasphemed", while the "plain" is "endless, virgin, bloodsoaked", demonstrating the comprehensive defilement of the world. By beginning with individuals who are so complicit in these wrongs that they seem to embody their very nature, Baldwin creates the connection between individual and societal actions and argues that this shared complicity, from generation to generation, leads to perpetually entrenched chaos, injustice, and destruction.

Intensification, the second poetic device to be examined in this chapter, accomplishes a similar goal as parallelism, using the language of succeeding lines of a section to build upon one another and intensify the message of the passage as a whole. Alter notes that "the very prosodic conventions on which the lines of biblical poetry were shaped led poets to a focusing of a statement and a heightening of emphasis, they were repeatedly drawn to articulating whole poems and segments within poems as pronounced, often continuous progressions of mounting intensities."[149]

For example, in Micah's final pronouncement to the people, he proclaims the coming disappearance of goodness and righteousness throughout the land:

Woe is me!

I have become like gatherings of a summer harvest

Like gleanings after vintage

[149] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 102.

There is not a cluster to eat

Not a ripe fig that my being desires

The faithful have vanished from the land

There are no upright among the people

All lie in wait to commit blood crimes

Every person traps their brother in a net

They rejoice in doing evil

The official makes demands

And the judge takes bribes

The rich make a crooked plea from their soul

And they are granted it

The best of them is like a prickly shrub

The most upright is an obstructing hedge

On the day you watched closely, your doom has come

Now their perplexity shall come to pass[150]

Within this passage, there are several components that convey intensification, leading to an increase in the seriousness and scope of Micah's pronouncement. The beginning of the passage is in the feminine, perhaps leading us to understand that Samaria is describing her own suffering that is occurring because of God's wrath. A key word in intensification is "become", noting that

[150] Micah 7:1-4

something has changed from the past. In this instance, Samaria has "become" like abandoned fruit after their ripeness has passed. Each line builds upon one another, describing first the crookedness (opposite of "upright") of the people, then their eagerness to "commit blood crimes", then their joy in "doing evil" throughout the land. There is also an intensification in the people themselves, moving from people broadly to particular leaders in the community to, ultimately, "the best of them" also committing evil. Although this move toward wrong and evil is comprehensive and intentional, the people are still somehow exhibiting "perplexity" when they experience God's wrath, implying they are trying to hide their intentions and actions. By constructing verses that build upon one another, Micah uses intensification to strengthen his prophetic message.

Similar to Micah, in both poetic device and topic, Baldwin uses intensification to strengthen the meaning, scope, and seriousness of his own claims within his poetry. In another passage from the beginning of *Staggerlee wonders*, Baldwin names the complicity of White people in bringing about the "wrath of God" because of their inability, and more specifically their unwillingness, to see their destructiveness in the world:

> Then, perhaps they imagine
> that their crimes are not crimes?
>
> Perhaps.
> Perhaps that is why they cannot repent,
> why there is no possibility of repentance.
> Manifest Destiny is a hymn of madness,
> feeding on itself, ending

(when it ends) in madness:
the action is blindness and pain,
pain bringing a torpor so deep
that every act is willed,
is desperately forced,
is willed to be a blow:
the hand becomes a fist,
the prick becomes a club,
the womb a dangerous swamp,
the hope, and fear, of love
is acid in the marrow of the bone.
No, their fire is not quenched,
nor can be: the oil feeding the flames
being the unadmitted terror of the wrath of God.[151]

Comparable to the people experiencing "perplexity" in Micah 7:4, Baldwin describes White people having an imagination that absolves them of their crimes; this absolution destroys any possibility of true repentance, ultimately leading to ruin. This notion, that White people must confront their detrimental actions in order for any justice or peace to come about in the United States, is a recurring theme for Baldwin throughout his works. As he described in *No Name In The Street*, "People who treat other people as less than human must not be surprised when the bread they have cast on the waters comes floating back to them, poisoned."[152]

[151] Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, pp. 9-10.
[152] James Baldwin, *No Name In The Street* (New York, 1972), p. 192.

As he describes in this particular poem, this cycle of racist vitriol is "madness" with systemic implications. This passage exhibits intensification as each line builds upon one another, creating a running list of individual actions that increase in violence. The use of "become" also intensifies the passage, moving from a somewhat benign "hand" and "prick" to a more dangerous "fist" and "club." In this rendering of society, the joyful, future-looking "womb" is a "dangerous swamp" that destroys life. Similarly, the power of "love" is poisoned by "acid in the marrow of the bone." The passage ultimately builds to an explosive explanation: the "fire" that is encompassing the world was created by White people, and cannot be "quenched" because the "wrath of God" is the "oil feeding the flames." In this way, Baldwin seems to be articulating a form of divine punishment that is only experienced as punishment because of the actions of White people in the United States. Although this passage of *Staggerlee wonders* feels comparable to one of Baldwin's rhetorical passages, his use of intensification in the poetic form makes this passage unique and allows for it to grow in seriousness and power that challenges the reader to confront their own complicity in these societal crimes that have brought forward, comparable to the Hebrew Prophets, the wrath of God upon the earth.

The third poetic device to be examined in this chapter, repetition, accentuates the meaning and purpose of the key word by repeating it throughout a passage. As Alter notes, "If we are rigorous about the way poems articulate meanings, we will have to conclude that the repeated word or phrase in anaphora never means exactly the same thing twice, that in each occurrence it takes on a certain coloration from the surrounding semantic material and from its position in the series."[153] In an examination of repetition within poetry, each repeated word has a unique definition and purpose within the poem that is enhanced by its particular placement

[153] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, p. 78.

within the poem. In attempting to express the power and majesty of the word of God, the Hebrew Prophets used repetition to call explicit attention to the repeated word, pleading with their audiences to understand this word, and its purpose, more deeply.

For example, Isaiah describes a vision that he had of seraphim surrounding God seated on a majestic throne:

> In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, and the skirt of God's robe filled the temple. Seraphs stood before God, each with six wings, six wings per seraph - two covering the face, two covering the body, and two to fly.
>
> And one would call to the other,
> "Holy, holy, holy!
> God of hosts
> Whose presence fills the whole earth!"
>
> The doorposts would shake at the sound of the one who called, and the whole House would fill with smoke.
>
> I said, "Woe is me! I am cut off.
> For I am a man of impure lips
> And I am in the midst of people
> With impure lips
> Yet my eyes have seen

The Sovereign Adonai of Hosts.[154]

Before exploring the repetition in Verse 3 and Verse 5, it is important to note the shift in form present in this passage. Verses 1, 2, and 4 are in prose form to describe the contours of Isaiah's vision, but Verse 3 switches to poetic form when the seraphim would call out to one another. In addition to extenuating the speaking part of this passage, Verse 3 being in poetic form also emphasizes the repetition of "holy, holy, holy." By repeating "holy" three times, Isaiah increases the meaning and purpose of the word, describing an immaculately special and blessed being. Each "holy" builds upon the one before, corresponding then with God's presence filling not only the "throne" or "Temple", but the "whole earth" with their holiness. In Verse 5, Isaiah describes his own "impure lips", and then the "impure lips" of the people around him. This repetition directs attention to the ways in which people speak being a significant reason God has called Isaiah to prophecy to the people. Through repetition, Isaiah strongly reaffirms the permanence and power of God in the world and the pervasiveness of God's holiness.

In a related passage, both in terms of content and poetic device, Baldwin uses repetition in a small passage from the middle of his poem *Song (for Skip)*:

Our children are.

Our children are.

Our children are:

which means that we must be

the pillar of cloud by day

and of fire by night:

the guiding star.[155]

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[154] Isaiah 6:1-5

[155] Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, p. 22.

Unlike the repetition of a single word in Isaiah 6:3, Baldwin uses repetition with a phrase that, on its own, is an incomplete sentence. Upon initially reading this poem, the reader might feel invited, even urged, to fill in the rest of the sentence: "Our children are…" However, by repeating the phrase, Baldwin makes a declarative statement, similar to saying, "Our children are here" or "Our children exist" or "Our children matter." Only through repetition does Baldwin's incomplete phrase become a declarative statement.

The rest of this passage from *Song (for Skip)* then affirms the importance of adults in caring for children and ensuring their safety and protection. This theme aligns with the focus of the first essay in *The Fire Next Time*, in which Baldwin expresses enormous love for his nephew and hopes for his future, as well as future generations:

> "I know how black it looks today, for you. It looked bad that day, too, yes, we were trembling. We have not stopped trembling yet, but if we had not loved each other none of us would have survived. And now you must survive because we love you, and for the sake of your children and your children's children."[156]

Baldwin makes this affirmation through a direct allusion to God protecting the Israelites upon first leaving Egypt:

> "And Adonai went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the path, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so they may walk day and night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people."[157]

In making this comparison to God protecting the Israelites, Baldwin expresses how necessary and holy it is to care for, support, and guide children throughout the world. In this instance,

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[156] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), p. 7.
[157] Exodus 13:21-22

taking care of children is akin to serving God, and serving as a form of God to them. Baldwin's use of repetition in the poetic form accentuates this passionate claim, and demonstrates his clear commitment to ensuring that adults do everything in their power to support children in having hope for their future and ultimately thriving in this world.

Both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets utilize the poetic devices of parallelism, intensification, and repetition to strengthen the impact of their language and further their prophetic work in the world. These poetic devices expand the bounds of prophecy, accentuating particular ideas, creating new connections, and ultimately raising the importance of these prophetic ideas. The following section will continue to explore the ways in which Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets utilized these poetic devices and other poetic elements and strategies to personally express themselves and engage in the difficult, challenging, and often confusing work of prophecy.

**Personal Expression**

The Hebrew Prophets, as portrayed in Tanakh, were individuals, attempting to fulfill their duty to God and to the people around them. As Heschel notes, "The prophet is not a mouthpiece, but a person; not an instrument, but a partner, an associate of God."[158] As demonstrated in the focus on theology in Chapter 2, it is essential to explore the ways in which the Hebrew Prophets grappled with their relationship with God as individuals. Poetry needs to be extensive and comprehensive in this exploration, as Peterson notes: "A poetics of prophetic literature must take into account character and speech, prophetic person and divine world, account and saying."[159] Throughout their intense work of prophecy, the Hebrew Prophets relied upon poetry to

[158] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 30.
[159] David Peterson, *The Prophetic Literature* (Louisville, 2002), pp. 32-33.

personally express themselves, articulating the meaning of their work and understanding, in conversation with God, about what it means to be a prophetic figure in the world.

For example, in the midst of God's proclamations of destruction coming upon the people, Jeremiah cries out to God to remember him and all that he has done to serve God:

> You know well, Adonai -
> Remember me and look after me,
> Avenge those who persecute me.
> Do not yield to your patience,
> Do not take me away.
> Know that I have been reproached
> On your account.
>
> When Your words were offered, I devoured them
> Your word brought me joy and gladness to my soul
> For it is proclaimed that Your name is attached upon me
> Adonai, God of Hosts
>
> I have not sat in the assembly of revelers
> And rejoiced
> Because of Your hand upon me, I have sat lonely
> For You have filled me with indignation
>
> Why must my pain be endless

My wound incurable

Resistant to healing

You have been to me like a deceptive spring

Like waters that cannot be faithful.[160]

In this passage, Jeremiah cries out to God in hopes that God will understand all that the Prophet has been through because of God's calling upon him to prophesy to the people. In this instance, after following God's commands and preaching to the people, Jeremiah's pain grows through the use of intensification in the passage, moving from emotional worry and isolation, to spiritual concern, eventually concluding by disclosing a physical wound. After serving as the mouthpiece for God's prophecies, "Jeremiah speaks to God in his own voice in the confessions, as an 'I' besieged by doubt and desperate in the face of all he is suffering."[161] Jeremiah uses poetic form and devices to draw attention to each word of the passage, and compel the reader to take his words seriously. In this way, Jeremiah personally expresses himself and his feelings to God, bringing to light a new element of his experience as a prophet.

In another example, in the midst of pronouncing more destruction upon Jerusalem, Isaiah expresses his intense heartache:

"Your commanders have all departed

Your survivors were all taken captive

Taken captive far from their bows.

That is why I said, 'Let me be

I will weep bitterly.

[160] Jeremiah 15:15-18

[161] Kathleen O'Connor, *Jeremiah: Pain & Promise* (Minneapolis, 2011), p. 81.

Do not hasten to comfort me

For my people are ruined."[162]

In this passage, Isaiah seems to be crying out directly to both God and the people. Despite being responsible for proclaiming the destruction that God is going to bring upon the people and the earth, Isaiah refuses to do so stoically; instead Isaiah "will weep bitterly." Amidst this emotional moment for Isaiah, he still maintains the isolation and loneliness that is essential to the role of the Hebrew Prophets and wards off attempts to console or comfort him during this moment. In this way, Isaiah uses poetry to personally express himself and his feelings to God and the people, deepening our understanding of the experience of a Hebrew Prophet.

Similar to the Hebrew Prophets using poetry to more fully express themselves, Baldwin's use of poetry exhibits honesty and truth, as well as an articulation of Baldwin's personal relationship with religion and God. Finney also believes that "Baldwin saw himself more poet than anything else: The way he cared about language. The way he believed language should work."[163] It is perhaps the slowness of poetry, forcing the reader to stop and contemplate the meaning of each word and line, that drew Baldwin to using poetry to most fully express himself. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, despite leaving the organized Black church in his teenage years, Baldwin held onto much of his knowledge of the Bible, especially in the early part of his career. In these poetic religious references, Baldwin seems to be at his most honest, expressing spiritual desires and frustrations with the state of the world.

For example, in the very last passage of the poem *Confession*, Baldwin directly addresses God, expressing his beliefs concerning the similarities and differences in the abilities of God and humans in the world:

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[162] Isaiah 22:3-4

[163] Finney, "Introduction" of *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, p. xvi.

"My Lord,

Author of the whirlwind,

and the rainbow,

Co-author of death,

giver and taker of breath

(Yes, every knee must bow),

I understand it

*now*:

the why is not the how."[164]

In directly addressing God in this poem, Baldwin demonstrates that he still maintains some form of spiritual relationship with God, even though he is distanced from any religious institution; perhaps the italicized "now" is Baldwin recognizing his eventual discovery of this balancing act. This poem also demonstrates Baldwin's belief in the abilities of God, initially noting God's ability to control the "whirlwind", conveying destruction and confusion, and the "rainbow", conveying comfort and reassurance. Baldwin then describes God as the "Co-author of death" who is the "giver and taker of breath", attributing God with enormous responsibility for the ability of humans to live in the world. Throughout his writings, Baldwin deeply implicates people, especially White people in the United States, in the cruelty, hatred, and bigotry that exists in the world and leads to death. In this passage, if God is one "Co-author of death", then it is clear that Baldwin considers humans to be the other "Co-author of death." It is in these literal life or death roles that humans and God are intertwined in the world.

[164] Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, p. 39.

In another example, *Untitled*, Baldwin, in a similar fashion to Jeremiah, directly addresses God and asks for God's consideration and protection:

"Lord,

when you send the rain,

think about it, please,

a little?

Do

not get carried away

by the sound of falling water,

the marvelous light

on the falling water.

I

am beneath that water.

It falls with great force

and the light

Blinds

me to the light."[165]

Similar to the previous poem, Baldwin again directly addresses God and uses the title of "Lord" in this prayer-like poem. Although he shows reverence toward God, Baldwin also challenges God, asking them to be more considerate. Instead of self-congratulation, Baldwin wants God to more intentionally look out for Baldwin's well-being, and keep him from drowning by water or being blinded by the light that comes with the rain. This is similar to the passage above in which

[165] Baldwin, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*, p. 91.

Jeremiah exclaims that God is being "like a deceptive spring/Like waters that cannot be faithful."[166] In noticing the ways in which God has some control over his life, Baldwin demonstrates a certain level of vulnerability about his place and role in the world. In only a few poetic lines, Baldwin conveys a spiritually powerful message. Baldwin's honesty and directness, a hallmark of his career of writing, is brought out in full strength through his poetry.

Throughout the intense work of preaching to their audiences in their respective contexts, both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets relied upon poetry to more fully personally express themselves. As Heschel notes, "The prophet was filled with a passion which demanded release; if he tried to contain it, its flame burned within him like a fever."[167] In using poetry, both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets found a sustainable, creative, and meaningful way to continue their prophetic work while maintaining their humanity. In personalizing their message, they strived to more effectively connect with their audience so that they might better identify with their message and change their ways. By involving themselves as human beings, they were able to more clearly articulate the meaning of their work and their understanding of what it means to be a prophetic figure in the world.

**Conclusion**

It was not until after identifying the early ideas for this thesis that I discovered Baldwin's poetry collection, *Jimmy's Blues & Other Poems*. Alongside many other readers, I was initially drawn to Baldwin for his soaring, incisive, and extremely relevant rhetoric. However, reading his poetry has opened up a new understanding of Baldwin and the way that he understood his life, his relationship to God, and the world around us. It is his slow, methodical, creative use of language and poetic devices that draws me into each poem, curious for what commentary I will

[166] Jeremiah 15:18
[167] Heschel, *The Prophets*, p. 148.

find hidden beneath his allusions, phrases, and crafted passages. Similarly, the Hebrew Prophets provide us with wildly imaginative poetry that invites us to envision the wide state of the world and the consequences or possibilities that come with their prophecy. It is clear that Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets needed poetry in order to most effectively express their feelings and enhance the force and power of their holy and significant message they are delivering to their audiences. It is through poetry that the message remains eternal. As Alter notes, "Such speech is directed to the concrete situation of a historical audience, but the form of the speech exhibits the historical indeterminacy of the language of poetry, which helps explain why these discourses have touched the lives of millions of readers far removed in time, space, and political predicament…"[168] It is through poetry that the messages from Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets remain relevant, meaningful, and eternal.

I am writing the conclusion for this chapter only a few weeks after the 2024 United States Election in which Donald Trump was reelected President. The injustice and cruelty that his administration will unleash upon the United States and the world will be terrifying for many people, especially the most vulnerable among us. Over the past several weeks, I have heard a comforting refrain from friends and community members: "Among many things, we're going to need more poetry over the next four years." I completely agree. All of the aspects of poetry that Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets provide for us - warnings of future consequences, visions of a world redeemed, ways of personally expressing our pain and anguish - we will need each of these ways of writing and speaking to navigate treacherous and uncertain times. As Alter notes, "In this fashion, a set of messages framed for a particular audience of the eighth century B.C.E. is not just the transcription of a historical document but continues to speak age after age, inviting

[168] Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry,* p. 176.

members of otherwise very different societies to read themselves into the text."[169] We will certainly need more poetry in the weeks, months, and years to come. Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets offer an excellent and inspiring place to begin.

[169] Ibid, p. 183.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Each chapter of this thesis paper has attempted to explore the passion, meaning, and wisdom of the voices of the Hebrew Prophets and James Baldwin. Their unique theologies demonstrate the necessity of a relationship with God, inspiring and guiding their prophetic work throughout their lives. These theological underpinnings bolstered their spirits as they navigated challenges from other hypocritical leaders and institutions. Their theology was also a crucial component of being able to boldly, emphatically declare the building of the "New Jerusalem", a future redemption for all the world. Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets relied heavily on rhetorical strategies to most effectively communicate with their audiences. By focusing on the combination of truth-telling, moral reckoning, and articulating a vision for the future, they held people to account while offering a way forward in the world. Alongside rhetoric, Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets used poetry, including technical poetic elements, to most fully express themselves and connect with their audiences on a deeper, more spiritual level. Each chapter demonstrates the many ways in which Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets hold similarities in their thinking, strategies, and words, but also the ways in which they differ. Although not a comprehensive examination, these areas of exploration offer a meaningful starting point for understanding these prophetic figures.

As mentioned in Chapter 3: Rhetoric, I found the inspiration for this thesis paper upon reading *The Fire Next Time* and Baldwin's terrifyingly honest commentary on the Noah story. From that moment, I was fascinated with Baldwin's background and his perceived role as a prophet in the United States. I wanted to put Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets in conversation together and understand the nature of their relationship. David Leeming, Baldwin's chosen

biographer, saw this connection as well and notes the ways in which they are inherently in relationship:

> "Baldwin was a prophet not so much in the tradition of foreseeing events—although The Fire Next Time bears witness to the fact that he sometimes did precisely that as in the tradition of the Old Testament. Like Ezekiel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Samuel, whose words and agonies he knew from his days as a child preacher in Harlem, he understood that as a witness he must often stand alone in anger against a nation that seemed intent on not "keeping the faith." He knew that his childhood "salvation" on the threshing floor of his church was but the preface to a life of searching on the universal threshing floor of personal and societal pain."[170] (xiii)

From their writings, I knew there was a connection between Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, but I did not know the extent to which this was true. I had known that Baldwin was religious as a child, but reading *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and *The Amen Corner* demonstrated the depth of his knowledge and personal experience in Black Christian settings. Both books are filled with direct quotes from the Bible, including from the Hebrew Prophets, and indirect Biblical references. However, as I examined his nonfiction works, it became clear that Baldwin not only knew the Bible well, but that he saw himself in the mold of the Hebrew Prophets - tortuously bearing witness to the death and destruction around him, and attempting to persuade people to change their ways and work toward a blossoming redemption for all people. And their strategies? Both Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets used rhetoric to persuade the people and poetry to most fully express themselves, keeping themselves as whole as possible while engaging in the difficult work of prophecy. After exploring these areas and the relationship between

[170] David Leeming, *James Baldwin* (New York, 1994), p. xiii.

Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets, there is one thing that is abundantly clear: Reading the Hebrew Prophets, featured in this thesis paper and the others, is enhanced by pairing it with the works of Baldwin. And, vice-versa - reading Baldwin, the works featured in this thesis paper as well as his many other essays, novels, and plays, is enhanced by pairing it with the texts of the Hebrew Prophets.

In less than three months, I will become ordained as a rabbi, one of few African-American rabbis in the United States. In preparing for ordination, it has been incredibly rewarding to write a thesis paper that engages both my Jewish and African-American identities and brings them together. In the future, whether it is Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets or other combinations, I hope to continue to find ways to bring these components together, strengthening the understanding of one by examining the other and vice-versa.

At the end of this thesis paper, there is one question that remains for me: What did all of their prophetic work do? One consistent critique of the Hebrew Prophets is that they were ineffective in getting the people to change their behavior; an expulsion from the land is a consequence of that inability to change. Similarly, although Baldwin saw some successes during his lifetime, the United States had not yet built a "New Jerusalem" by the time he died in 1987. However, for all of their challenges and failures, both the Hebrew Prophets and Baldwin articulated critiques and new ways of living that value justice, love, truth, and peace. In decrying the world as it was during their time, and expressing beautiful visions of the world as it should be, Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets created language that continues to echo throughout the generations. In the Haftarah reading every Shabbat, Jews read the words of the Hebrew Prophets, bringing them into conversation with the Torah portion and the events of the current day. About Baldwin, Greg Garrett notes his continuing influence:

> "James Baldwin is as alive in this moment as he has ever been, his voice as clear and measured. And what does he have to teach us? It is nothing less than a commitment to being fully alive, a way to be fully human, an awareness that love, freedom, and justice are the universal desires of every single human being. It is a commitment to look at our world and at our lives and to strive to tell nothing but the truth."[171]

In our modern day, if we are to succeed in our endeavors in bringing more justice, love, truth, and peace to the world, our job is to keep the words and wisdom of Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets alive. Their work did not solve all the challenges of the world. They did not fulfill their vision of "the wolf dwelling with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid" or the creation of a "New Jerusalem."[172] But they did start an echo of profound wisdom, an unrelenting call toward all that is right and good in the world; we must continue to reverberate the echo of that call in our day and for generations to come.

As I have progressed in the writing of this thesis paper, the world around me has continued to shift and change. Now, as I write the conclusion of this thesis paper, Donald Trump has officially assumed the presidency of the United States for the second time. In the course of mere weeks, he has sown chaos and destruction. Through a number of executive orders and public comments, he has begun the process of mass deportations of immigrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, threatened the wellbeing of trans children and adults, decimated any potential action to address the climate crisis, slashed international development programs, allowed unelected officials to control the Treasury Department, and has proposed ethnically cleansing Palestinians from Gaza. In his attempts to "flood the zone" with policies and comments that

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[171] Greg Garrett, *The Gospel According to James Baldwin: What America's Great Prophet Can Teach Us About Life, Love, & Identity* (New York, 2023), p. 18.
[172] Isaiah 11:6 (My Translation; Assistance from Revised JPS 2023 Translation).

attempt to overwhelm people of conscience, he is succeeding. It feels hard to identify how to respond with meaning and force. Many people are filled with despair at this moment right now. It is for moments such as this that the dramatic, bold, morally uncompromising words of Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets are most desperately needed. Their incisive, cutting words get to the heart of every issue and moment. Their words are filled with the moral clarity needed to respond to the immoral chaos of this moment. I remind myself of Baldwin daring us, people of conscience, to "dare everything" to address the intense nightmares of the day.[173] And I remind myself of Micah, with his clarity for how to live in the world: "You have been told, O human, what is good; and what does God require of you? Only to do justice, love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God. Then your name will achieve wisdom."[174] These texts and others from Baldwin and the Hebrew Prophets are my guides, and perhaps they can be all of our guides in this moment as we seek justice, love, truth, and peace in our day and for years to come.

[173] James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York, 1963), pp. 105-106.
[174] Micah 6:8

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