Lawrence E. Frizzell
Seton Hall University

COMMITMENT IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: MOSES, ELIJAH AND JEREMIAH

Religious commitment may be defined as "spiritual dedication on a permanent basis to a way of life that demands above-average generosity and requires more than ordinary grace of God."[1] Although we do not expect to find such a term in ancient literature, there are indeed examples of the reality underlying the concept. From early times people set ideals for themselves and their followers by presenting models for imitation. Popular culture may extol an outlaw or noncomformist, but the mature community will treasure the person who sacrificed self-interest for service of others. The individual who grapples with a crisis and sets an example of strength in adversity will be celebrated in epic and ballad. Thus the biblical tradition celebrates Joel and Dehorah, Gideon and Samson. It also commemorates those who maintained a firm grip on the helm in fair weather as well as foul. Does the strength manifested in a moment of danger have its counterpart in virtue governing the decisions of daily life? Therein lies the test of profound commitment to spiritual ideals.

1. Moses

Although the Hebrew Bible does not afford material for a proper biography of Moses, the traditions of the Pentateuch provide evidence of the tremendous impact of his leadership.[2] The earlier patriarchs continue to inspire the succeeding generations Israel because of their example of faith and obedience to the God who called them. However, it is Moses' genius which formed a group of clans sharing a common life of servitude into a people destined to have a land wherein they would be free to serve God alone.

In recording their national history, Israelite teachers and historians had the humility to record the failings and failures of their ancestors. The

1. J. A. Hardon, "Commitment", *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion* (editor Paul K. Meagher et al.) (Washington : Corpus Publications, 1979), p. 843.
2. Among recent works, see Daniel J. Silver, *Images of Moses*. New York : Basic Books, 1982; Aaron B. Wildavsky, *The Nursing Father : Moses as a Political Leader*, (Birmingham : University of Alabama Press, 1984).

familiar episode of the golden calf and its aftermath provide a fine example of Moses' total commitment to the service of both his God and his people.

The awesome setting of revelation a Mount Sinai is described in several ways, usually emphasizing the mediatory role of Moses and the distance of the people from the Lord. Thus, in Exodus 32, Moses lingers in communion with God on the mountain and the people beg his brother Aaron to make an idol, providing an alternative to Moses' liturgical worship (see 24 : 1–11).[3] The sacred author presents a dialogue that conveys that depth of Moses' commitment to his mission.

> "The Lord said to Moses: Go down, for *your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves... I have seen *this* people, and behold, it is stiff-necked people. Now let me alone, that my wrath may burn against them and I may consume them, but of you I will make a great nation" (32 : 7–10).

What can be more discouraging to the inspired political or religious leaders than to realize that his teaching has made little impact! Great moments of community sharing, even profound experiences that should be the basis for a lifetime of gratitude, have been forgotten. Even a leader whose maturity moves him to discount the importance of popular acclaim would be aghast that his instructions are thrust aside. Why not make a fresh start? Found a new community!

This is precisely the test that Moses undergoes. Like Noah and his immediate family, perhaps he should recognize the divine will in forming a new people. However, Moses has the humility and preseverance to set aside the temptation of an "easy way". His place is at the head of the people to whom he was sent. Now they need him more than ever.

> "O Lord, why does your wrath burn against *your* people, whom *you* have brought forth out of the land of Egypt... Why should the Egyptians says: "With evil intent he brought them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce wrath, and repent of this evil against *your* people..." (32 : 11–12).

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3. For our purpose of elucidating the text as it was read within the community that accepted its present form; it is not necessary to analyze every passage critically. See Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus : A Critical, Theological Commentary*, (Philadelphia : Westminster Press, 1974), for such a study.

Hebrew prayer is remarkable for its boldness; one is permitted to argue, to question God, as long as the creature closes the debate with a time of silence wherein the divine will may become manifest.[4] In this instance, Moses throws the responsibility for the Exodus and the creation of the people back to God, even pointing to the bad reputation that would follow annihilation of the people.

Moses continues by challenging God to remain faithful to the word he gave to the patriarchs of old. To be true to himself, God must have mercy on the wayward Israelites.

"Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said to them : 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they should inherit it for ever' " (32 : 13).

The argument is successful, and God relents (32 : 14); the psalmist rejoices in Moses as defender, standing in the breach before God to turn his wrath from destroying the people (Ps. 106 : 23). However, another tradition shows that Moses feels obliged to punish the idolators by an ordeal (Ex. 32 : 19-20) and by the sword of the Levites (32 : 25-29). Although the sin is not punished indiscriminately (as the sense of solidarity among the people might imply), it cannot be condoned.

When Moses again pleads for pardon, he receives this reply : "whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book" (32 : 33).

The gift of the covenant, whereby God commits himself irrevocably to his word and creates a people as his own, demands a total obedience in response. Two models from human society are used to instruct the people : the political allegiance of a vassal state to a great emperor and the fidelity of a woman to her husband. Any act of idolatry is considered to be treason and adultery, crimes deserving capital punishment.

Over the centuries the people of Israel developed a sensitivity to the value of each human life that led to severe strictures on courts regarding criminal cases. Capital punishment became virtually unknown, at least during the Roman period and later.[5]

4. This will be noted in *Numbers* 14 : 13-19; Jeremiah, Job and Luke 2 : 48-51.
5. This fact may coincide with the loss of sovereignty with regard to capital cases; however, Mishnah Sanhedrin IV : 5 bases the restriction on the uniqueness of each human.

The prophet Moses is presented as a model of courage in leadership, both in the face of human opponents such as the Pharaoh of Egypt (Ex. 4–14) and before God himself. As intercessor he identifies himself totally with his people and their lot (Ex. 32 : 32), yet he does not proudly usurp a role that is beyond him.[6] He knows that he is but a servant and that convenant has brought the community into union with God. Even should God seem to disown the people, Moses must stand before him on their behalf, exemplifying religious commitment as "above-average generosity".

2. Elijah[7]

Moses assured the people that "The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren--him shall you heed" (Deut. 18 : 15). Eventually this passage came to be associated with the eschatological age, but the hope for a prophet like Moses could have animated the faithful Israelites at times of crisis in their early history. The traditions recorded in the book of Deuteronomy, especially its code (ch. 12–26), are associated with the Northern Kingdom. Elijah, whose name "my God is Yah" signifies his mission, becomes the great defender of the Torah (God's "instructions" or "Law," revealed at Mount Sinai) in the ninth century B.C. His work was so upsetting that the wayward king gave him the title "troubler of Israel" (1 Kings 18 : 12). Elijah answered : "I have not troubled Israel, but you have--you and your father's house--because you have forsaken the commandments of the Lord and followed the Baals" (Canaanite gods). Ahab had bowed to his Canannite wife's insistence on having her priests and cult in the land of Israel. Elijah's obedience to the commandments of Sinai would not allow such a compromise. So he challenged these priests to a contest of faith (18 : 19–40). Like Moses (Lev. 9 : 24), Elijah called down fire from heaven as a seal of approval on his sacrificial offering. Were the Canaanite worshipers convinced of the truth of Elijah's claim? Conversion might have been a fitting end to the story. Howewer, it was an intolerant age and Elijah had the priests executed.

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6. See James Mullenburg, "The intercession of the covenant mediator (Exodus 33 : 1 **a**, 12–17)", *Words and Meanings : Essays Presented to David Winton Thomas.* Edited by Peter R. Ackroyd and Barnabas Lindars. (Cambridge University Press, 1968) p. 159–181.
7. See Michael De Goedt, "Elijah : A Victorious, persecuted, discouraged prophet -- first of a long line (1 Kings 17–19)," *SIDIC Review* (Rome) 17 (No. 2, 1984) p. 13–18. For the later periods, see my article "Elijah the peacemaker : Jewish and early Christian interpretations of Malachi 3 : 23–24," in the same issue, p. 19–25.

Queen Jezebel vowed vengeance and Elijah fled deep into the southern kingdom of Judah (19 : 1–3). Such was his sense of isolation that Elijah elicited a death-wish (19 : 4), but God nourished him and gave him strength to walk to Horeb (Sinai). He confesses to God that he feels alone in his fidelity to the convenant and in his zeal for God. Like Moses, he experiences awesome phenomena on Mount Sinai and then understands that God's presence is not found in loud and frightening signs but in "a still small voice" (19 : 9–12).

It would seem that Elijah needed "more than ordinary grace of God" to overcome despondency Returning to the source of Israel's convenant experience, Elijah was raised up, given new courage and learned that a remmant of seven thousand Israelites had remained faithful. How could he have doubted the efficacy of divine grace in the lives of those initiated into the covenant? Indeed, each person is fragile and election involves a risk, but one should be able to discern goodness in the human spirit. Perhaps it is necessary to seek a context for personal renewal so that discernment will be more mature and balanced. God's new commission includes the command to share the prophetic call with a disciple and successor. By enveloping Elisha in his cloak (19 : 19), the prophet follows the example of Moses, who rejoiced to share his gift (Num. 12 : 29; 27:18–23; Deut. 34 : 9).

Elijah matured from his early work as a judge against idolators and murderers (1 King 21) to a teacher who influenced many in the prophetic guild (2 King 2 : 7). "The sign that God never abandons his people lies in the fact that he never ceases to speak to them by the prophets who followed Elijah... There is still a voice which makes itself heard in the gentle breeze of the course of history, a voice which is only perceptible to those who listen..."[8]

Throughout his career, Elijah's vigorous fidelity to his prophetic vocation led him to accept deeds of violence. Ideally however, Torah observance should lead to life and *shalom*, the well-being and wholeness that constitute the gift of peace. After Malachi called his community to observe the Torah given through Moses, the text records God's promise to send Elijah the prophet to prepare people for the day of judgment. "He will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers"

8. De Goedt. p. 18.

(3:23). Peace begins with humae reconciliation so that the resulting solidarity in God's service will prepare them for eschatological communion.

In the political order of most societies peace is achieved most often through compromise. The story of Elijah stresses that the peace which is a divine gift must be grounded in faith and pursued with fidelity. This means that there are principles which cannot be neglected as people try to draw the best from the ambiguity of the human situation.

At least in theory, most modern cultures advocate sensitivity to the rights of dissenters. Our sense of human dignity and of the right of each person to follow the dictates of conscience lead to acceptance of pluralism in various areas of social existence.[9] However, we need to insist on a strong grasp of the individual's responsibilities toward God and society as we seek to move from terror, chaos and anarchy to a peaceful and ordered world with a place for everyone. Just as John the Baptist modeled his prophetic work on the role of Elijah the peace maker (Luke 1 : 15–17), so today's leaders should draw on principles that are rooted in a vision of society where mediation and arbitration rather than violence hold sway.

This commitment on the part of all types of leaders will not always produce tangible results. The temptation to solve problems by force can be overcome only by a silent reflection on means and ends as a situation changes. The sabbath withdrawal from daily activities and pressures permits the person to discern *whose* image is being imprinted on society and nature. Is it the extension of the divine image or is there a twisting of reality to serve self ? The latter is the worst and gentle power of God's gracious presence, human silence might once again open people to the creative word. As Elijah discovered a faithful community from which to draw disciples, contemporary leaders might find that subsidiarity and delegation in reaching for goals bring more wholesome results for all.

3. Jeremiah

A series of remarkable teachers rose in both Kingdoms during the centuries preceding the destruction of Samaria (721 B. C.) and the fall of Jerusalem (587 B.C.). Their main function was to challenge the community and especially its leaders to return to God by keeping the commandments.

9. See Eugene B. Borowitz, "The autonomous self and the commanding community," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984) p. 34–56.

Immediately before and during the Exile, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the disciples of Isaiah had the additional task of preparing the people for service of God outside the Land and apart from Temple worship.

Whereas Moses was called to his mission at the age of eighty, Jeremiah was but a youth when God's word came to him in 627 B.C.[10] His name means "*Yah* will be lifted up", yet he must have wondered at times how this would be accomplished. He was called during the reign of good king Josiah whose reform of the Kingdom of Judah was based on the code of Deuteronomy (see 2 Kings 22 : 3–20). These teachings influenced Jeremiah greatly as he tried to prepare the people for the impending destruction of Jerusalem. The initial words of God's call were an assurance that Jeremiah was known in the very depths of his being and consecrated to God even before his birth. His mission will reach the larger communities surrounding Israel (Jer. 1 : 5). Like others before him, Jeremiah senses his total inadequacy in regard to the task announced so globally. The challenge is placed more sharply :

"Do not say, 'I am only a youth',
for to all to whom I send you you shall go,
and whatever I command you you shall speak.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to deliver you, says the Lord" (1 : 7–8).

This mission will be feasible, not because Jeremiah will mature, but rather the confidence he should have is based on God's presence with him. The weakenesses will remain but this will only make the divine power more obvious.

". . . Behold, I have put my words in your mouth.
See, I have set you this day over nations and kingdoms,
to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow,
to build and to plant" (1 : 9–10)

The divine assurance that Jeremiah is the bearer of God's message seems to draw upon the second part of the promise to Moses of a successor.[11]

10. On these and related texts, see N. Habel, "Form and significance of call narrative," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965) p. 297–323; G. Meagher, "The prophetic call narrative", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 39 (1972) p. 164–177.

11. Even if Deut 18 : 15–18 is a later addition, there could still be a relationship between Moses and Jeremiah. "A pattern of placing the divine words in the prophet's mouth. . . represents the Deuteronomistic view of prophecy as the mediation of a divine word. . ." Robert P. Caroll, *The Book of Jeremiah*. (Philadelphia : Westminster, 1986) p. 99. If the promise of a new Moses were made during the Exile, then Elijah and Jeremiah could well have been the paradigms for future hope.

"I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brethren, and I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak them to all that I command him" (Deut 18 : 18).

The preaching and teaching of Jeremiah took many forms, and the order of the passages need not be chronological.[12] For example, one of the sermons at the Temple gate is recorded in 7 : 1–15 and in 26 : 2–5; only in the latter case is the violent reaction of "the priests, the prophets and all the people" noted (26 : 7–9).

In the face of such dangers he prayed :

> "The Lord made it known to me and I knew,
> then you showed me their evil deeds.
> But I was like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter,
> I did not know it was against me they devised schemes. . .
> But, O Lord of hosts, you judge righteously,
> Who try the heart and the mind;
> Let me see your vengeance upon them,
> for to you have I committed by cause" (11 : 18–20).

In life-threatening situations many Israelites had pleaded for deliverance, so Jeremiah could draw on the spiritual heritage preserved in the psalms. No other prophet left such a personal record of the impact that his mission and its rejection had on his life. These "confessions" of Jeremiah have been studied at length, and from several perspectives.[13] After the first lengthy complaint against the prosperity of the wicked, in which Jeremiah demands their elimination, he receives this reply :

> "If you have raced with men on foot
> and they have wearied you,
> how will you compete against horses?
> And if you are secure only in a peaceful land,
> how will you servive in the jungle of the Jordan?" (12 : 5).

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12. On the complex problems of the text and its transmission in Hebrew and in Greek, see P.M. Bogaert, "De Baruch à Jérémie : les deux redactions conservées du livre de Jérémie", *Le Livre de Jérémie* (ed. Bogaert). (Leuven University Press, 1981), p. 168–173.

13. See Norbert Ittmann, *Die Konfessionen Jeremias : Ihre Bedeutung für die Verkundigung des Propheten.* Neukirchener Verlag 1981; Timothy Polk, *The Prophetic Persona : Jeremiah and the Language of the Self.* Sheffield : Journal for the Study of the Old Testament (Supplement Series 32) 1984, p. 127–162.

Jeremiah challenged God in a way that was the opposite of Moses' identification with the Israelites in their sinfulness.

The pusillanimous prophet needed to be reminded of the divine promise to be with him to deliver him (1 : 8, 19). But rather than consoling, uplifting words, Jeremiah hears a rebuke. If there were difficulties in the past, they will be followed by even more trying circumstances!

The prayer in Jer. 15 : 10–21 reveals a man still pressured by those around him, yet he delights in the spiritual nourishment provided by God's word. However, he still blames his isolation on the heavy hand God has laid on him.

"Why is my pain unceasing, my wound uncurable,
refusing to be healed?
Will you be to me like a brook that fails,
like waters that are unreliable?" (15 : 18).

Again a reply is recorded. God tells the prophet that he has failed and calls for conversion. Then he will be truly a spokesman for God, a courageous champion who will triumph.

"If you return, I will restore you,
and you shall stand before me.
If you utter what is precious,
and not what is worthless,
You shall be as my mouth. . .
And I will make you to this people
a fortified wall of bronze;
they will fight against you,
but they will not prevail over you,
for I am with you to save and deliver you. . ." (15 : 19–20).

Just as the people at Mount Sinai had forgotten the experience of God's presence in the Exodus and needed to convert from idolatry, so Jeremiah had to re-evaluate his perception of God and turn back to his mission. At one moment he would rejoice in his personal communion with God's word (15 : 16), and then he could accuse God of being like a wadi that dries up during the hot summer, or perhaps of being on a mirrage on the horizon of a desert nomad's life. The spiritual life includes a series of divine constancy. It is our interaction with the outward pressures of life that causes vacillation. So, after being assured of healing and restoration. Jeremiah hears the refrain "I am with you. . ."

Religious commitment is a "dedication on a permanent basis to a way of life. . ." The example of Jeremiah points to the inner weakness even of one who has overcome external temptations, and has set aside the pursuit of wealth, pleasure and power. The prophet honestly faced his fears and doubts and formed them into a prayer that exposed him as vulnerable. This attitude need not be destructive, but is essential to the process of spiritual healing. Acknowledging the various ways in which one feels poor and emply, the individual then lets God be the foundation for the permanency in a life of service. Jeremiah was called again and again to his mission to the people of Judah. No assurance is given that their conversion would come as an immediate result of Jeremiah's work, but at least they would not prevail against him.[14]

The biblical heritage has much more to offer regarding the concept of religious commitment, but these reflections indicate that it invariably involves a response to God and a responsibility to the community in which the person lives. The experience of profound personal prayer leads to deeper faith in God's protective presence, and with community worship opens the individual to service of neighbour. This outgoing mission is accepted without thought of the precise spiritual gratifications it may bring. Indeed each of the great prophets suffered greatly at the hands of the people, yet each gathered a group of faithful followers who preserved his teaching for posterity. These words provide enrichment down through the ages, a permanency which speaks to the way of life to which they were committed.

14. A rich reflection on the spiritual implications of the confessions of Jeremiah is offered by G.M. Behler, "Vocation menacée et renouvelée," *La Vie Spirituelle* 120 (1969) p. 539–567. It is summarized as "Jeremiah's vocation crisis", *Theology Digest* 18 (1970) p. 114–121.