

THE UNHOLY TRIO OF MONEY, SEX, AND POWER IN ISRAEL'S 8TH-CENTURY BCE PROPHETS

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The eighth century BCE prophets—Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah—came from a variety of times and locations. Hosea was a northern prophet who ministered among his own people in Samaria, Amos was originally from the south but traveled north to prophesy in Samaria, Micah shared Amos' concern for social injustice but ministered to the southern kingdom of Judah, while Isaiah was based in Jerusalem and criticized a broad range of sins there.¹ Despite such diversity in their settings, these prophets and the books associated with

¹ There is a consensus among OT scholars that the core of the books of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah derive from the eighth century BCE, though they differ on the extent of the work done by redactors and editors. In any case, the debate over the dating of the final form of these books is irrelevant here since my analysis focuses on passages that are generally attributed to the eighth century.

them shared the purpose of warning against the idolatry, injustice, and immorality (i.e., "the three I's") which characterized an increasingly prosperous and urbanizing society. The prophetic strictures against these vices resonate deeply with modern entanglements between God's people and money, sex, and power.

Social analysis of the eighth century prophets can provide fruit for theological reflection when confronting the same cluster of sins in today's globalized world. As will be shown below, the urgency of reexamining the eighth century prophets is heightened by the modern tendency to analyze idolatry too narrowly in only individual rather than also systemic terms. Contemporary studies of idolatry also commit the opposite error of reconceiving idolatry so broadly that it lacks a solid biblical-theological foundation. Thus I will move from a social analysis of the eighth century BCE to an engagement with recent proposals to redefine idolatry in sociological terms, notably by Walter Wink and Jacques Ellul.

I. The Social Situation of the Eighth Century BCE

The reigns of Kings David and Solomon (c. 1010–930 BCE) began a shift in Israel from an economy based on subsistence farming to one that specialized in providing goods and services for the central government in Jerusalem.² In particular, Solomon consolidated power in Jerusalem through his policies of taxing the twelve tribes (1Ki 4:7, 21-24; 12:4), military buildup (1Ki 10:26), conscripted labor (1 Ki 5:13-15; 2Ch 2:17-18), and foreign trade (1Ki 10:14-29). The population of Jerusalem and the surrounding areas grew quickly as a

² Keith W. Whitelam, "King and Kingship," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:40.

result of these initiatives.³ Though the kingdom of Israel split in two after the death of Solomon, royal consolidation of power continued in the divided monarchy, especially during the times of the Omride dynasty in the northern kingdom of Samaria (c. 885–853) and King Jehoshaphat in Judah (c. 873–848).⁴ But as in David's ongoing conflicts with the Philistines, Samaria and Judah were mostly thwarted in their territorial aspirations during the ninth century by the hegemony of foreign kingdoms.

The situation changed drastically in the first half of the eighth century with the decline of traditional powers such as Egypt, Aram, and Assyria.⁵ Until the balance of power shifted again in 745 BCE with the ascension of the powerful Assyrian ruler Tiglath-Pileser III, the kings of Samaria and Judah took full advantage of this window of time for resuming their expansionist agendas. The weakness of other ancient Near Eastern empires thereby coincided with an extended period of prosperity and stability in Samaria and Judah.

Archaeological findings indicate that the reigns of Jeroboam II in Samaria (c. 793–753) and Uzziah in Judah (c. 792–740) oversaw the development of a large market for agricultural goods such as olive oil, wine, and grain.⁶ Each of these items was produced by

³ Magen Broshi and Israel Finkelstein, "The Population of Palestine in Iron Age II," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 287 (1992): 47–60.

⁴ For example, the Assyrian annals of Shalmaneser III attribute 10,000 foot soldiers and 2,000 chariots to King Ahab during the pivotal battle of Qarqar ("Kurkh Monolith," trans. K. Lawson Younger, Jr. [*Context of Scripture* 2.113A:263]).

⁵ See the historical overview of the eighth century BCE by John Bright, *A History of Israel* 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 255–59.

⁶ For example, the Samarian Ostraca from King Ahab's time record large shipments of oil and wine to the palace at Samaria. A similar and contemporaneous phenomenon in Judah is the preponderance of jar handles bearing the stamp *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). These jars likely stored the agricultural products of royal estates, such as wine. Both the Samarian Ostraca and the *lmlk* seal impressions date via epigraphic analysis to the eighth century BCE.

the rural majority for consumption by the urban minority or for the purposes of international trade. As demand for such commodities increased during the eighth century, it was inevitable that land itself became a commodity which was manipulated by power brokers to maximize production for their cash crops of choice. This transition from a subsistence economy to a market economy soon resulted in the consolidation of land ownership in the hands of a few.⁷ In place of the clan-based system of land tenure that had long characterized Israel, the agrarian elite frequently conspired with government officials in exploiting the peasant class (Am 2:7; 5:11; cf. 1Sa 8:14-15) or seizing ancestral lands (Isa 3:14-15; Mic 2:1-2, 9; cf. Hos 7:1).⁸ As a result, subsistence farmers who formerly owned the land upon which they worked were relegated to tenant farmers at best and debt slaves at worst.

1. Injustice and Idolatry

To analyze the eighth century BCE using only the socioeconomic terms of class warfare, however, would fail to do justice to the symbiotic character of injustice and idolatry during this time.⁹ The economically driven character of idolatry becomes clear when the OT prophets repeatedly link the unrestrained pursuit of prosperity with the practice of Canaanite fertility religion, a holistic worldview which encompasses the spiritual and material spheres. Among numerous

⁷ See the analysis of such "latifundialization" in the eighth century BCE by Marvin L. Chaney, "Bitter Bounty: The Dynamics of Political Economy Critiqued by the Eighth-Century Prophets," in *Reformed Faith and Economics*, ed. Robert L. Stivers (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1989), 15-30.

⁸ John Andrew Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets*, SBL Dissertation Series 106 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 132-33.

⁹ Compare the primarily socioeconomic analysis of D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

examples that could be adduced, Hosea 2:5[MT 7] accuses the people of Israel of consorting with "my lovers who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink." This list of goods to be sought from "lovers" not only reflects the most valuable commodities in Israel from the tenth century BCE onwards (1Ki 5:11; 2Ch 2:10, 15; Eze 27:17), but also evokes the Ugaritic depictions of Baal as the guarantor of oil, wine, and grain to those who worship him.¹⁰ The ambiguity of the "lovers" metaphor in suggesting both foreign trade partners as well as Canaanite fertility deities suggests that economics and religion cannot be easily separated in the eighth-century BCE.¹¹ Any consideration of the social injustices resulting from economic disparities during this period must therefore consider the related issue of idolatry.

Later in Hosea 2, the synergy of economics and religion becomes explicit when Yahweh asserts his superiority to Baal: "I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—*which they used for Baal*" (Hos 2:8[MT 10]). The Israelites had evidently erred in attributing the material blessings given by Yahweh to the hand of Baal. Here it is noteworthy that the book of Hosea undermines Canaanite fertility religion, not by attacking Baal directly or by denying his existence (cf. Dt 4:35, 39), but by portraying Yahweh as the usurper of Baal's economic functions. The battle between Yahweh and Baal is portrayed as an economic contest between gods who each promise to provide material goods rather than

¹⁰ John Day, "Hosea and the Baal Cult," in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John Day; Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 531 (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 205-6.

¹¹ Cf. Marvin L. Chaney, "Accusing Whom of What? Hosea's Rhetoric of Promiscuity," in *Distant Voices Drawing Near: Essays in Honor of Antoinette Clark Wire*, ed. Marvin L. Chaney et al (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2004), 100.

a theological contrast between transcendent Yahwism and immanent fertility religion.¹² Thus the philosophical debate over whether Yahweh and Baal possess any objective ontological existence is largely irrelevant for the eighth-century prophets, who instead argue in the functional terms of emphasizing that Yahweh is the real source of the agricultural riches which the Israelites had sought to gain through fertility religion.

The sacral character of economics in the eighth century BCE is also reflected in the transformation of the epithet "Baal" into a metaphor for the market economy of that time. Formal worship of Baal-Hadad, the Syro-Phoenician god of the storm, had already been eradicated by King Jehu of Israel in the ninth century BCE through his deception of the prophets of Baal and burning them to death at Jezreel (2Ki 10:18-28). That the brutal actions of Jehu stand in the background of Hosea is clear through Yahweh's declaration, "I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed at Jezreel." (Hos 1:4) This flashback to the ninth century indicates that Hosea's subsequent references to "Baal(s)" (Hos 2:8[10], 13[15], 16[18], 17[19]; 11:2; 13:1) could not refer to the official cult of Baal introduced by Ahab.¹³ Archaeological and inscriptional evidence also supports the likelihood that centralized worship of Baal had faded by the beginning of the eighth century, though some veneration of Baal may have remained at the popular level.¹⁴ Thus the figure of "Baal" in Hosea and the other

¹² Cf. John N. Oswalt, *The Bible Among The Myths: Unique Or Just Different?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 2009, who argues that Israel's faith is distinct in the ANE because of its transcendent view of deity. This is undoubtedly true to some degree, but such an approach tends to overlook how the OT also portrays Yahweh's immanence as being superior to Baal's (e.g., 1Ki 18).

¹³ Graham I. Davies, *Hosea*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 41.

¹⁴ See the summary by Brad E. Kelle, *Hosea 2: Rhetoric and Metaphor in Historical Perspective*, SBL Academia Biblica 20 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 148-52.

eighth-century prophets must denote something more (though not less) than the figure of Baal who dominated the religious scene in the ninth century.

In this vein, Jörg Jeremias has shown that Hosea's usage of the term "Baal" has expanded beyond the deity by this name to include all manner of heterodox practices.¹⁵ The behaviors condemned in Hosea under the rubric of Baal worship include rites at the high places (Hos 4:13; 10:8) as well the cultic use of sacred pillars (3:4; 10:1-2), divining rods (4:12), and images such as calf icons (8:5-6; 10:5; 13:2). But since Baal was also the deity invoked by the leaders who controlled the commodity trade (2:5[7], 17[19]), a growing number of scholars regard the figure of Baal as a metaphor for the injustices resulting from the socioeconomic upheavals of the eighth century BCE.¹⁶ These scholars conclude that the "lovers" (2:5[7], 7[9], 10[12], 12[14], 13[15]) to whom Samaria offers agricultural goods would be its international trading partners such as Egypt and Assyria (cf. Hos 5:13; 7:11; 12:1; Jer 3:1; Ezek 16:33-41).

The application of the Baal metaphor to the economic realm is only partially correct, however. In the conceptual world of this metaphor, it is crucial to note that "Baal" never signifies anything less than the Syro-Canaanite god of fertility and the various religious practices associated with him. The metaphor of Baal demands both a concrete referent to the fertility god as well as expanding its semantic

¹⁵ Jörg Jeremias, "Der Begriff 'Baal' im Hoseabuch und seine Wirkungsgeschichte," in *Ein Gott Allein? JHWH-Verehrung und biblischer Monotheismus im Kontext der israelitischen und altorientalischen Religionsgeschichte*, Orbis biblicus et orientalis 139 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994), 441-62; cf. Lyn Bechtel, "The Metaphors of 'Canaanite' and 'Baal' in Hosea," in *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon*, JSOT Supplement Series 372 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 205-6.

¹⁶ E.g., Kelle, *Hosea 2*; Alice A. Keefe, *Woman's Body and the Social Body in Hosea 1-2*, JSOTSup 338 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001).

domain to include something more abstract, namely, the personification of relentless materialism.¹⁷ This use of "Baal" to symbolize the ethos of economic growth at all costs anticipates the Apostle Paul's equation of greed with idolatry (Eph 5:5; Col 3:5).¹⁸

2. Immorality and Idolatry

The prominence of Canaanite fertility religion in Samaria and Judah also has significant implications for sexual immorality. Worship of fertility gods and goddesses in the ancient world typically involved sexual promiscuity or perhaps even "sacred prostitution," also known as "cultic prostitution." This concept is defined by Karel van der Toorn as "religiously legitimated intercourse with strangers in or in the vicinity of the sanctuary. It had a ritual character and was organized or at least condoned by the priesthood, as a means to increase fecundity and fertility."¹⁹ Van der Toorn's definition leans toward assigning a literal referent for OT descriptions of sacred prostitution.

As with veneration of Baal, however, the references to promiscuous sexual behavior in the OT prophets function at more

¹⁷ The view that Baal is "just a metaphor" for international trade draws too sharp a dichotomy between literal and figurative referents for "Baal." Paul Ricoeur has noted that metaphor, especially in poetic genres, operates at the intersection of figurative and literal sense in creating a "split reference" between both senses (*The Rule of Metaphor*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello, SJ [London: Routledge Classics, 2003], 353, 370, *passim*). Along similar lines, Janet Martin Soskice notes that metaphor is not simply a comparison between concrete and abstract things, but always functions at both levels (*Metaphor and Religious Language* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985], 43-51). Thus the metaphor of Baal in the OT prophetic literature functions simultaneously on two planes: 1) literally as the fertility god; and 2) figuratively as the pursuit of agricultural intensification which enables international trade.

¹⁸ Brian S. Rosner, *Greed As Idolatry: The Origin and Meaning of a Pauline Metaphor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 164, mentions Baal worship with respect to Judges 10 but unfortunately not to Hosea.

¹⁹ Karel van der Toorn, "Prostitution (Cultic)," *ABD* 5:510.

(though not less) than the literal level. In Hosea 1:2, for example, the book opens by drawing a parallel between the literal "harlotry" (*zenunim*) in Hosea's family-to-be and the figurative sin in which "the land has committed flagrant harlotry" (*zonah tizneh haarets*). The ambiguous term "land" indicates both the religious sins and the land-based abuses of economic injustice in the eighth century BCE.²⁰

A similar wordplay between literal and figurative senses is found throughout chapter 2 and climaxes in Hosea 4:10–19, a rather dense passage in which the metaphor of harlotry is systematically explored through the multifaceted senses of the Hebrew root *znh* ("to commit harlotry, be promiscuous").²¹ The literal character of such "harlotry" is evident through the expose of such behavior on "the hills ... under oak, poplar, and terebinth." These can only be actual places at which "your daughters turn to prostitution and your daughters-in-law to adultery." (4:13; cf. 2Ki 17:8-11; 2Ch 28:3-4) The subsequent reference to Israelite men who "consort with harlots and sacrifice with temple prostitutes" (4:14; cf. Dt 23:17) shows that both genders are involved and the offenses are sexual in nature.²² Nonetheless a figurative sense for the root *znh* remains present through Hosea's attribution of the apostasy of the people to a "spirit of prostitution" (4:12) within them. The apathy engendered by such a "spirit of prostitution" is later contrasted with true knowledge of Yahweh (5:4). Such a contrast raises the intriguing possibility that this "spirit" (Heb.

²⁰ Cf. Klaus Koch, *The Prophets*, 2 vols., trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 1:81.

²¹ My analysis here draws on Göran Eidevall, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea 4–14*, Coniectanea biblica: Old Testament Series 43 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996), 58-67.

²² J. Andrew Dearman, *Hosea*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 165-66.

ruach) may be a supernatural being which is opposed to God rather than the psychological state of apostasy.²³

The multivalent character of sexual metaphors in the OT prophets, and especially in Hosea, has led to much disagreement over the extent of sacred prostitution in Israel.²⁴ Yet among feminist scholars who have a vested interest in denying that sacred prostitution was ever practiced, due to its cruelty toward women, one frequently encounters the concession that cultic places in Israel were the site of promiscuous behavior.²⁵ The Hebrew root *znh* is used in too many different ways in Hosea and the rest of the OT prophets to be merely figurative. Thus it is likely that *znh* is an intentional pun which denotes all kinds of harlotry.²⁶

From the condemnations issued by the eighth-century prophets, it can be surmised that the literal form of harlotry entailed female

²³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 146.

²⁴ See the recent overview by John Day, "Does the Old Testament Refer to Sacred Prostitution and Did It Actually Exist in Ancient Israel?," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Essays: Studies in Honour of Kevin J. Cathcart*, ed. Carmel McCarthy and John F. Healey, JSOTSup 375 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2004), 3-21.

²⁵ E.g. Phyllis A. Bird, "To Play the Harlot: An Inquiry into an Old Testament Metaphor," in *Missing Persons and Mistaken Identities: Women and Gender in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 219-36; Mayer I. Gruber, "Hebrew Qedesah and Her Canaanite and Akkadian Cognates," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 18 (1986): 133-48. See the most recent debate over whether the prostitution language in Hosea is purely metaphorical (James E. Miller, "A Critical Response to Karin Adams' Reinterpretation of Hosea 4:13-14," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 128 (2009): 503-506; Karin Adams, "Metaphor and Dissonance: A Reinterpretation of Hosea 4:13-14," *JBL* 127 [2008]: 291-305).

²⁶ The combination of literal and figurative uses of *znh* is already present in the passage describing Israel's sin with the Moabite women at Baal-Peor (Nu 25:1-15). This incident furnishes the background for Hosea's accusation that "they [Israel] came to Baal-Peor and devoted themselves to shame." (Hos 9:10)

functionaries serving male worshipers at places associated with nature such as the "high places" (Hos 10:8; Am 7:9; cf. 2 Ki 17:9) or sacred trees (Hos 4:13; cf. Dt 12:2). Wages from such sexual services were then dedicated to maintaining the cult of the fertility deity (Isa 23:17; Mic 1:7; cf. Dt 23:17-18). The abundance of wine, one of Baal's key gifts to his people, undoubtedly encouraged the lack of inhibition among those participating (Hos 4:11; 9:1-2).²⁷ Through the offering of sacrifices and burning incense to fertility deities (Hos 4:13; cf. 2:13[15]; Isa 17:8), figurative harlotry in the form of apostasy from Yahweh accompanied the sexual activity which took place at these shrines.

This convergence of vices in Canaanite fertility religion, both literal and figurative, can hardly be accidental. Much as "Baal" functions as a metaphor for economic growth in the eighth century BCE, the sexualized forms of fertility religion in the eighth century BCE have become a utilitarian expression of lust in the service of nature deities. In their seminal book on idolatry in the Hebrew Bible, Halbertal and Margalit rightly observe that the ontology of fertility deities remains subordinate to their function: "The attraction of idolatry is embedded either in the erotic temptation of idolatry itself, or in the lifestyle accompanying idolatry. *The decision to worship idols reflects a way of life rather than a particular metaphysical worldview.*"²⁸ Thus adherents of fertility religion were driven by debauchery more than the philosophical question of whether Baal, Asherah, or other fertility deities had any objective existence in reality. The addictive character of such promiscuity ensured that literal and figurative harlotries always became intertwined.

²⁷ Van der Toorn, "Prostitution (Cultic)," *ABD* 5:510-11.

²⁸ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, trans. Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 24, emphasis added.

3. Canaanite Fertility Religion at the Intersection of "The Three I's"

Having observed the multifaceted character of fertility religion in the eighth century, it is necessary to provide a more comprehensive description of how idolatry, injustice, and immorality frequently clustered together in Israel's societal structures to form an unholy trio. The task of exposing the systemic nature of sin is necessary because of the tendency for modern interpreters of the eighth-century prophets to categorize these "three I's" as mutually exclusive. In a standard introduction on the OT prophets, for example, David Petersen repeats the oft-heard caricature that Amos and Hosea deal with entirely different spheres of life: "Amos inveighs against *social and economic practices* in the northern kingdom, whereas Hosea focuses on *religious and political misdeeds*."²⁹ This dichotomy between secular and sacred realms imposes distinctions which fail to describe how ancient, not to mention modern, peoples think about their world.³⁰ In what follows, I aim to provide an account of how the "three I's" became embedded in one another's systems in the eighth century BCE and thereby reinforced one another. The interrelated nature of social systems means that the presence of one vice would eventually give rise to the other two.

The links among idolatry, injustice, and immorality come into focus when we consider the wider implications of the loss of patrimonial lands. Land was not merely an issue of property for ancient Israelites in the eighth century BCE, for a clan-based economy centered on land represented various embodiments of *shalom*. The

²⁹ David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 10, emphasis added.

³⁰ The persistence of the sacred in the supposedly secular West is well-noted by Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor, 1967).

presence of multiple generations of a family on the same plot of ancestral land ensured that the "house of the father" (Heb. *beth ab*) stood at the center of religious, social, and economic life.³¹ Local ownership of lands enabled families to diversify their annual planting in order to provide for their own needs as well as being insulated from lean years in any given crop. From their harvest they would then give tithes to Yahweh (Dt 26:1-11). The poor and Levite also received their share from these offerings (Dt 26:12-15).

This vision of communal life in the land is what drives the eighth-century prophets to anticipate the eschaton as an alternative to the socioeconomic disparities of the present time. In contrast to the *shalom* that Israel had lost, Micah portrays the Israel of the restoration as a society without any gap between rich and poor, a time when farmers will worship God together while enjoying the fruits of their land: "Each of them will sit under his own vine and under his own fig tree, with no one to make them afraid ... we will walk in the name of YHWH our God forever and ever" (Mic 4:4-5; cf. Hos 14:5-7).

But as patrimonial lands were confiscated and absorbed into large cash-crop plantations (Isa 5:8-10; Mic 2:1-2), the *shalom* of the subsistence economy was overturned in two major ways. Firstly, Israelite families were forced into debt by the need to cover their losses during growing seasons in which their cash crops did poorly. The problem of debt was not only one of producing enough during each year, for farmers needed to pay exorbitant rents or bribes (Am 5:11-12; Mic 3:11; 7:3) just for the chance to continue farming the land on which they lived and worked. In the inevitable absence of payment, creditors could take bankrupt farmers into debt slavery

³¹ Philip J. King and Lawrence J. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 39-40.

or seize personal property as collateral (Am 2:6, 8; Mic 2:8-9).³² These social conditions created a market rife for exploitation by moneylenders (Isa 3:12),³³ who much like modern loan sharks, drove the rural poor into an ever-deepening cycle of destitution through their predatory practices.

Secondly, normal participation in the rhythms of cultic life became impossible since distribution of agricultural goods was fully controlled by the state.³⁴ Farmers were not free to give offerings from their produce since their everyday subsistence had to be purchased back on the open market at inflated prices (Am 8:4-6), often from merchants who used false weights or other exploitative means (Hos 12:7; Am 8:5; Mic 6:11). The eighth-century prophets indicate that cultic observance, rather than inviting participation from the agrarian poor, was instead dominated by rich urbanites who showcased the agricultural goods that they had confiscated from the lower class (Am 2:8) or otherwise engaged in extravagant feasting (Isa 1:10-15).³⁵

When the agrarian poor did manage to participate in cultic observance, it is important to note that the religious and economic realms were thoroughly controlled in the eighth century by the sinful alliance of king, prophet, and priest. As Gale Yee has observed, "Royal bureaucracy and ideology were not only legitimated by cult, but the cult itself functioned as an organ of the state. Sanctuaries were established by kings not only as religious centers, but also as

³² Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets*, 19-25, 48-51.

³³ See Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets*, 166-68, for the argument that Isa 3:12 refers to moneylenders rather than "oppressors" in general.

³⁴ Dearman, *Property Rights in the Eighth-Century Prophets*, 40-41.

³⁵ Rainer Albertz, *A History of Religion in the Old Testament Period*, trans. John Bowden, 2 vols., Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 1:171.

sites of administrative and economic activity."³⁶ In such a reciprocal arrangement, the priests occupied a dual role as caretakers of an apostate cult as well as being those who channeled agricultural goods to the upper class for consumption or use in foreign trade.³⁷

Thus it is natural to find religious leaders indicted along with economic and political leaders for their shared sins, as in the poetic parallelism of Micah 3: "Now hear this, *heads of the house of Jacob*, and *rulers of the house of Israel*, who abhor justice and twist everything that is straight, who build Zion with bloodshed and Jerusalem with violent injustice/*Her leaders* pronounce judgment for a bribe, *her priests* instruct for a price, and her prophets divine for money" (Mic 3:9-11). The parallelism of these verses in mentioning various leaders indicates that they each have a share in one another's sins. Such a confluence of religious, political, and economic sins is confirmed in other biblical passages when the prophets criticize the trade of agricultural goods for gold and silver (Hos 2:5[7], 8[10]; 12:1), for these precious metals are in turn used to make more idols for the local sanctuaries (Isa 2:6-8, 20; Hos 8:4). Idolatry thus feeds into unjust practices while itself being perpetuated by injustice.

The breakdown of traditional family and religious structures, coupled with the crushing problem of debt, created a social environment ripe for the joining of injustice with immorality in the eighth century BCE. As links to orthodox worship of Yahweh were severed and families accumulated debts beyond their ability to pay, disenfranchised men and women engaged sexually in the Canaanite fertility cults not only for religious reasons (Hos 4:13-14), but also for

³⁶ Gale A. Yee, "She Is Not My Wife and I Am Not Her Husband': A Materialist Analysis of Hosea 1-2," *Biblical Interpretation* 9 (2001): 345-83, here 359.

³⁷ Yee, "She Is Not My Wife," 360; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious & Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 152.

the more practical purpose of generating income to repay creditors (Am 2:7).³⁸ The wages from prostitution could be used to maintain cultic worship as an act of homage to the gods (e.g., Isa 23:17; Mic 1:7), or for the keeping of vows by those who had no other means of making money (Dt 23:17-18; cf. Pr 7:14).³⁹

Since prostitution through human history has generally been an occupation of last resort, it is crucial to observe that the practice of prostitution is frequently imposed by larger societal systems upon those who lack economic opportunity. This is not to deny that prostitution is a form of sexual immorality, but rather to recognize that prostitution should not be viewed as an unambiguous moral choice made by willing individuals. Similarly, recourse to prostitution and other forms of sexual immorality during the eighth century was at least partially impelled by social injustices which in turn derived from idolatry. Such a clustering of "the three I's" in OT times exemplifies how a vice may become embedded in larger social systems so that a given vice may function as both an enabler and the result of other vices.⁴⁰

II. The Eighth Century Prophets and Modern Idolatries

These observations about the systemic nature of idolatry in the eighth century BCE invite a conversation with modern thinkers who assert that idols are still found today in the guise of macroscopic

³⁸ Rainer Kessler, *The Social History of Ancient Israel: An Introduction*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 109, notes that the woman in Am 2:7 who is exploited by both father and son is probably a sex slave.

³⁹ Van der Toorn, "Prostitution (Cultic)," *ABD* 5:510-11.

⁴⁰ A point incisively made by Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 52-77.

human entities such as government, the worldwide financial system, or the sex trade. In response to the post-Enlightenment tendency to demythologize the spiritual realm,⁴¹ these thinkers attempt in various ways to "remythologize" the notion of idolatry for the modern world by linking idols with the unseen dimensions of sinful human systems. The most notable such proposals are offered by the NT scholar Walter Wink and the French sociologist Jacques Ellul. Though major differences can be found in their writings, Wink and Ellul hold in common the view that modern idolatries are to be located in the everyday abuses of money, sex, and power rather than in the religious realm with deities such as Baal.

This renewed emphasis on the functional more than the ontological dimensions of idolatry has numerous points of contact with my social analysis of Hosea, Amos, Micah, and Isaiah. What follows, then, is an attempt to use "the three I's" in the eighth century BCE as an interpretive lens to critique the contemporary recasting of idolatry in the abstract categories of money, sex, and power.⁴² The need for making intentional connections between the OT prophets and the modern world is heightened by the fact that most such sociological proposals, such as those of Walter Wink and Jacques Ellul, fail to treat the eighth-century prophets in any detail. This oversight leads to significant weaknesses in their conception of how idolatry functions today.

⁴¹ On which see Peter T. O' Brien, "Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church," in *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text & Context* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), 110-50.

⁴² For example, Premnath (*Eighth Century Prophets*, 181) makes passing comments about how agricultural intensification in the eighth century BCE is analogous to modern mechanization of farming, but otherwise devotes little attention to the present.

1. Walter Wink on Modern Idolatries

Walter Wink has been the most influential scholar to argue against the rationalist tendency to demythologize the terminology of idolatry in the NT.⁴³ The contemporary thrust of his "remythologization" of the category of idolatry is clear when he asserts that "[f]idelity to the gospel lies not in repeating its slogans but in plunging the prevailing idolatries into its corrosive acids."⁴⁴ For Wink, however, the NT does not describe the "powers" (e.g. Ro 8:38; Eph 6:12) as invisible supernatural entities but as "*simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power ...* Instead of the old dualism of matter and spirit, we can now regard matter and spirit as united in one indivisible reality, distinguishable in two discrete but interrelated manifestations."⁴⁵

Space precludes a detailed critique of Wink's trilogy of books,⁴⁶ for my interest lies instead in Wink's account of the relationship between Baal and modern idols. Particularly interesting in this regard is Wink's chapter on "The Gods" in volume two of the trilogy, *Unmasking the Powers*. In this chapter, Wink's account of Baal falls back into the dichotomy between ontology and function against which he militates elsewhere. On the one hand, Wink asserts that Israel tended to suppress worship of Baal by emphasizing the uniqueness of Yahweh.⁴⁷ The problem with worship of Baal, in

⁴³ See the famous trilogy of Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992).

⁴⁴ Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 111.

⁴⁵ Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 107, italics original.

⁴⁶ Cf. Marva J. Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 12-19; Clinton J. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 48-51.

⁴⁷ Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 109.

Wink's understanding, lies in attributing to Baal the same sort of divine ontology as Yahweh. On the other hand, Wink posits that the functional aspects of divinity in Israel are represented not by Yahweh, but by a host of lesser gods which were taken over from the surrounding nations. This henotheistic portrayal of the pantheon effectively removes Yahweh from the functional realm of human existence.⁴⁸ Thus it is unsurprising to find that Wink advocates a limited recovery of Aphrodite worship, for example, since it is only in worshipping the Greek goddess of love and sex that modern believers can overcome the fact that "[t]here is no way of speaking of Yahweh ... as involved in the positive aspects of sexuality."⁴⁹

Wink's account of modern idolatry is problematic for caricaturing both Yahweh and Baal as deities who only occupy a transcendent ontological realm. In doing so, Wink has overlooked the OT prophetic portrayal of Yahweh as a god who defeats Baal on his own turf as a nature deity (cf. Hos 2:8[10]). This error also reflects the inability to appreciate why Baalism was popular in ancient Israel as a holistic worldview which sought to meet people's daily needs and thereby resulted in large-scale economic and ethical systems. By inadvertently reopening a theological chasm between ontology and function, Wink's proposal has sawn off the branch on which he stands and thereby becomes reductionistic in describing how spiritual and material dimensions are interwoven in contemporary forms of idolatry.

2. Jacques Ellul on Modern Idolatries

In contrast to Wink, Jacques Ellul's attempt to remythologize the physical world sees significant parallels between Israelite worship of Baal and the modern idols of money, sex, and power. Firstly,

⁴⁸ Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 110-11.

⁴⁹ Wink, *Unmasking the Powers*, 123.

Ellul argues in his book *Money and Power* that every failure to acknowledge God as the source of all wealth is in reality a capitulation to worship of Baal. This choice between allegiances is nothing short of absolute, for Ellul avers that "to reject God's lordship is, without any other possibility or third option, to submit this wealth to the Baal of this world, to the power of Satan."⁵⁰ Ellul notes in passing that the OT sometimes portrays wealth as a gift of God, while also insisting that Jesus' description of Mammon as a spiritual being in competition with God (Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13) comes nearer the mark in describing reality.⁵¹ For Ellul, the sacral character of wealth is evidenced by its peculiar ability to dictate the behavior of both buyers and sellers, often in irrational ways. The result of money's unyielding grip on people is a worldwide financial system which assigns monetary value to all forms of human effort and resources.⁵² The pursuit of Mammon therefore stands in the sharpest possible antithesis to receiving the free grace of God.⁵³

In his book *The Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul offers a parallel analysis about the domains of power and sex. In contrast to the liberty that emanates from knowing and worshiping a transcendent God, Ellul views "every manifestation of power [as] an expression of the might of Satan ... Satan controls this power and he grants it in order that men should subjugate one another. The granting of this power entails either explicit, or more often, implicit *worship of Baal Zebub*."⁵⁴ In such an account of idolatry as bondage, the pursuit of power functions

⁵⁰ Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power*, trans. LaVonne Neff (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 44.

⁵¹ Ellul, *Money and Power*, 43-77.

⁵² Ellul, *Money and Power*, 77-85.

⁵³ Ellul, *Money and Power*, 88.

⁵⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 55, emphasis added.

as an idol from which monotheistic faith in Yahweh is designed to bring liberation. Ellul asserts that people can experience freedom from slavery once they stop worshipping the works of their hands, whether political, religious, or financial.⁵⁵ The "freedom" engendered by the sexual revolution of the 1960's actually resulted in new forms of enslavement to sexual desire and a flourishing sex trade, both of which paradoxically engender an ever-increasing dissatisfaction with sex among "liberated" moderns.⁵⁶

Ellul has helpfully recognized the numerous ways in which the OT portrays idolatry as part of a larger tapestry which is interlaced with economic and ethical threads. Yet there remain two significant weaknesses in his analysis. The first is that Ellul, much like the post-Enlightenment approach of Wink, excludes the possibility that personal spiritual beings are in any way responsible for modern idolatry in its various forms.⁵⁷ While the OT is less than explicit on this point, the NT clearly affirms the existence of demons which are able to inhabit human institutions and work through fallen people.⁵⁸ As the cultural anthropologist Paul Hiebert has influentially argued, the Western tendency to reject the existence of an unseen spiritual realm has more in common with Platonic naturalism than with the biblical worldview.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 97.

⁵⁶ Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 482-95.

⁵⁷ See discussion by Andrew Goddard, "Jacques Ellul on Idolatry," in *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 231-33; cf. Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, 152-53, 160.

⁵⁸ Clinton J. Arnold, *Powers of Darkness* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992), 55-74, 183-93.

⁵⁹ Paul G. Hiebert, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (1982): 35-47.

For our purposes, the second and more serious problem is that Ellul fails to consider the nuances of the biblical portrayal of money and power. The Bible affirms that wealth and kingship can both be blessed by God as well as suffering distortion, because of human sinfulness, into oppressors that enslave people.⁶⁰ But if one were to accept Ellul's portrait of money and power as overwhelmingly negative, it becomes difficult to explain why the OT and NT repeatedly describe God as the divine King (e.g. Jer 10:10; Ps 93:1; Rev 15:3) who owns all things (e.g. Ex 19:5; Dt 10:14; Ps 50:12) and gives them as gifts to be enjoyed by His children (e.g. Dt 8:7-9; Jaes 1:17). Somewhat differently than Wink, Ellul has overlooked how the spheres of money and power are precisely where Yahweh has often chosen to overwhelm the gods of the age. Ellul's fixation on divine transcendence thus leaves him unable to recognize God's immanent actions in the world, in contrast to the eighth century prophets who assert that God is superior to the idols by virtue of being both transcendent and immanent.

III. Conclusion

The strengths and weaknesses of Wink and Ellul's account of idolatry reveal how much biblical-theological work remains to be done in tracing analogues between "the three I's" in the eighth-century prophets and modern vices such as money, sex, and power. Theologians have usually asserted that the Bible adheres to a strict monotheism, a tendency which largely overlooks how the eighth-

⁶⁰ On the ambiguity of kingship in the OT, see Jerry Hwang, "Poetic Mishpat in Israel's Kingship: A Reassessment of 1 Samuel 8-12," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73 (2011): 341-62. On the ambiguity of wealth, see J. Gordon McConville, "The Old Testament and the Enjoyment of Wealth," in *Christ and Consumerism: A Critical Analysis of the Spirit of the Age*, ed. Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 34-53.

century prophets often granted the position of functional monolatry in order to defeat the gods of the age on their own turf.⁶¹ A failure among God's people to appropriate this rhetorical strategy in the Bible will result in a posture of ignorance or disengagement toward a globalized world in which several sins have already become intertwined: unrestrained economic development and its insatiable need for more resources, both human and natural; the exploitation and abuse of workers who lack basic human rights; rapid urbanization and the inability of new arrivals in the city to escape the cycle of debt and depravity; participation in the sex trade by the economically desperate; and a gap between rich and poor as wide as it is unbridgeable.

In light of these current socioeconomic realities, a recovery of the creative polemical methods of the eighth-century prophets could chart new avenues for theological reflection on idolatry, injustice, and immorality as interwoven sins whose corrupting presence must be opposed both at systemic as well as individual levels. Such an awareness of how worship of "Baal" and other deities continues to operate in systemic clusters of sin might also shed light on why Baal-Zebub, a local Baal manifestation in the Philistine city of Ekron (2Ki 1:1-16), eventually developed in Jewish and Christian tradition into the most powerful "Baal" deity of all, Beelzebul the prince of the demons (Mt 12:24; Mk 3:22; Lk 11:18-19).⁶² In every area of life today, in both seen and unseen dimensions of reality, but in more ways that modern people have come to expect, the devil still "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1Pe 5:8)

⁶¹ See Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of "Monotheism"* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 5-52, on the anachronism and unsuitability of the category "monotheism" to describe the OT conception of deity.

⁶² Cf. Bradley L. Stein, "Who the Devil is Beelzebul?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 13 (1997): 43-45, 48; Theodore J. Lewis, "Beelzebul," *ABD* 1:638-41.

ABSTRACT

This article examines the historical and literary interconnections among idolatry, injustice, and immorality in several eighth century BCE prophetic books: Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, and Micah. A social analysis of the eighth century prophets reveals that Baal worship and other forms of Canaanite fertility religion carried significant economic and ethical implications. Any discussion of economics and ethics must therefore take Israel's idolatrous worship into account. The interconnections among the "unholy trio" of idolatry, injustice, and immorality became entrenched in the aftermath of the socioeconomic reforms begun by David and Solomon in the tenth century BCE. By the prosperous times of the eighth century, there existed a widening gap between rich and poor due to the consolidation of land and power in the hands of the agrarian elite (Am 2:7; 5:11; Isa 3:14-15; 5:8-10; Mic 2:1-2, 9).

This paper also offers a constructive engagement with Walter Wink and Jacques Ellul, two scholars who have attempted to reframe the Old Testament's descriptions of idolatry, injustice, and idolatry in the modern categories of money, sex, and power. Though the proposals of Wink and Ellul are found wanting in certain respects, the need for socially informed interpretations of the eighth century prophets persists today. The phenomenon of globalization means that the unholy trio of idolatry, injustice, and immorality continue to cluster together in contemporary society and must be combatted by confronting sin in its systemic manifestations, as modeled for us by the eighth century prophets.

撮 要

本文探討了偶像崇拜，社會不公以及道德墮落三者在主前八世紀的先知書中所呈現的歷史和文學關聯，這些書卷包括以賽亞書、何西阿書、阿摩司書和彌迦書。從社會角度分析主前八世紀的先知書，揭示了巴力崇拜和其他形式的迦南生殖崇拜有着顯著的經濟和倫理功能。因此，任何對於經濟和倫理的探討必須同時對以色列的偶像崇拜加以研究。而偶像崇拜、社會不公以及道德墮落三者的關聯成為了在主前十世紀大衛和所羅門社會經濟改革後仍然遺留下來的問題。直到主前八世紀的繁榮時期，由於農業精英手中的土地和權力得到鞏固，貧富差距不斷加大。（摩二7，五11；賽三14~15，五8~10；彌二1~2、9）

本文也與溫克（Walter Wink）以及依路（Jacques Ellul）有建設性的互動，這兩位學者嘗試將舊約中對偶像崇拜和社會不公的描述用金錢、性和權力這些當代範疇重新構建。雖然溫克和依路提出的詮釋在一些方面有待完善，但今天仍然有需要從社會的角度對主前八世紀的先知書進行詮釋。全球化現象代表着偶像崇拜、社會不公和道德墮落這三者集中體現在當代社會中，正如主前八世紀先知書中的示範，我們所對抗的必須是罪有系統的表現形態。