

## **Messages from the Ancient Prophets: Lessons for Today**

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### **Abstract**

*Most Americans feel that America is not on the right track and that our future is bleak. Much of this feeling is due to the belief that our entire political system is paralyzed and under the control of big money. America is not the first great empire to be in danger of collapse; numerous ancient empires failed. Many, especially ancient Israel, were warned by the prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah, Amos, Micah, Ezekiel, and others that they were heading for disaster. This paper demonstrates that the message of the prophets is as relevant today as it was more than 2,500 years ago. Perhaps if we heed the words of the ancient prophets, America's confidence and leadership can be restored.*

Americans are demoralized. In fact, in a recent poll, 64% of respondents believed that America was on the wrong track; apparently, Americans have little confidence in how the country is being run (Holland, 2011). America's confidence in Congress is at an all-time low – 12% (Newport, 2011). Much of this feeling is due to the belief that our entire political system is under the control of big money. Wall Street, which is largely to blame for the financial meltdown, paid very little for almost destroying the financial system. In fact, corporate profits hit a record high and the financial sector receives more than 25% of all American business profits (Rich, 2010). The wealthiest Americans are becoming even wealthier. Meanwhile, the rest of America is watching their incomes shrink and their jobs disappear. According to Lawrence Katz, Harvard University economist, “This is the first time in memory that an entire decade has produced essentially no economic growth for the typical American household” (Eckholm, 2010). The unemployment rate, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (<http://www.bls.gov/data/>) may be 9.2% but the underemployment rate (this includes people who have given up finding a job and those who are forced to work fewer hours than they would actually prefer) is 22.5% (Kelley, 2010).

The middle class is indeed shrinking and income inequality keeps getting worse: the bottom 50% of U.S. income earners own less than 1% of America's wealth. The top 1%, on the other hand, currently owns almost double what they had 15 years ago. The wealthiest 1% of Americans own about 43% of the financial wealth of the United States (Domhoff, 2010). In 1950, the average executive's paycheck to average employee's paycheck ratio was 30:1; today it is between 300 and 500 to 1 (Snyder, 2010). The media pay for CEOs in 2010 at 200 large firms was \$10.8 million; an increase of 26% from 2009 (Davidoff, 2011). Between 1979 and 2007, the tax rate for the top 1% fell by 20%; it only dropped by 8% for the average American (Blow, 2011) During the past several decades, several crises have buffeted the United States economy. The savings and loan debacle of the 1980s and 1990s, which cost American taxpayers \$124 billion and led to the failure of more than one thousand banks, was followed by numerous corporate scandals at such firms as Enron, Adelphia, Global Crossing, WorldCom, and Tyco International, involving accounting fraud and financial irregularities.

The Sarbanes Oxley Act of 2002 was enacted as a reaction to these problems and to restore confidence in our economic system. In 2008, the largest Ponzi scheme in history, perpetrated by Bernard Madoff, made it apparent that our financial system was still not being monitored properly. Only 2% of Americans feel that Fortune 500 CEOs are “very trustworthy” (Deutsch, 2005); the overwhelming majority (72%) believe that “wrongdoing” is widespread in the business world. Indeed, Robert S. Miller, CEO of Delphi, declares: “Society has come to believe that the term ‘crooked CEO’ is redundant” (Deutsch, 2005). The above crises are nothing compared to the mega-crisis the United States is still dealing with today, i.e., the Great Recession which started in December 2007. The financial debacle has cost millions of jobs and trillions in assets. It will take years for the United States — and much of the world — to recover completely from this financial crisis. Our two-party system appears to be dysfunctional and the public feels that no one seems to know what to do to solve our problems.

There is a huge amount of anger, fear, frustration, and resentment among Americans and the Tea Party is tapping into this. The unthinkable almost happened and the United States almost went into default in August 2011. A catastrophe was averted at the last minute on August 2, 2011 and the debt ceiling was raised. However, the deal was seen as a capitulation to extremists on the right and included about a trillion dollars in cuts over 10 years in the first round but no new taxes on the wealthy. In the second round, in November, a special bipartisan super committee will look for another \$1.2 to \$1.5 trillion over 10 years to cut. Nocera (2011) believes that this deal will indeed reduce the deficit but will make the unemployment situation much worse. Nocera asserts that the extremists on the right “have waged jihad on the American people” and were ready to destroy America’s most important asset, “its full faith and credit.” The taxes opposed by some politicians include loopholes for the super rich. One particular egregious tax break is the “carried interest” loophole. It benefits managers of hedge funds and other types of funds, individuals who are already extremely wealthy. It allows them to pay a 15% capital gains rate on performance bonuses rather than the personal income tax rate of 35% (Kristof, 2011).

This paper will examine the prophets of the past and show how their messages to the ancient empires of the past, especially Israel, are valuable messages for everyone, including Americans of today. One ancient prophet actually succeeded in changing one ancient empire. Jonah’s prophecy was quite simplistic (Jonah 3: 4): “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” He made the people believe that if they did not change their ways they were doomed. He was instrumental in getting the people of Nineveh to repent and change their actions. The verse states (Jonah 3: 10): “God saw their deeds, that they returned from their evil ways, and God relented...” The ancient prophets made great sacrifices for their vision. Elijah had to flee for his life, Hosea was instructed to marry a prostitute and beget children of questionable legitimacy, and Jeremiah was thrown into a pit. Prophesying death and destruction and criticizing kings, idolaters, and false prophets does not make one popular and is dangerous. Isaiah, for example, did not only rail against the people. He also prophesied against the nobility. He referred to them as (Isaiah 1: 10): “chiefs of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah.” This is not a way to make friends and influence people. As we shall see, the message of the prophets is as relevant today as it was more than 2,500 years ago. Perhaps if we heed the words of the ancient prophets today, America’s confidence and leadership can be restored.

### ***(1) Caring for the Helpless of Society***

One of the major messages of the prophets dealt with taking care of the weak and needy. A society that is indifferent to the plight of the helpless does not deserve to survive. Malachi said (2:10): “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously every man against his brother...? Human dignity is based on the belief that we were all created in the image of God. The principle of “And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord” is mentioned numerous times in Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:18; Deuteronomy 12:28). Soerens and Hwang (2009) make the point that God throughout the Bible is very much concerned about the *ger*. The Hebrew work *ger* is usually translated as stranger or alien and clearly refers to the immigrant (as well as the proselyte). God demanded that the Israelites provide the immigrants in their society with the same privileges, rights, and benefits as the native-born. The Torah requires that the stranger not be wronged in any way. In addition, we are told: “you shall love him as you love yourself” (Leviticus 19:33-34). There is supposed to be one law for both the native born and the *ger* who resides among you (Numbers 15:15). Soerens and Hwang feel very strongly that the Bible demands that we be concerned with social justice and do everything in our power to ensure that immigrants are treated with compassion by our legal system.

The prophet Amos (4:11) also compared ancient Israel to Sodom and described the various transgressions of the Israelites. Amos (5: 11-12) rebuked the ancient Israelites for “trampling upon the poor,” “oppressing the righteous,” “taking bribes,” and “[openly] victimizing the destitute by the gate.” Amos (4:1) referred to the overindulgent, extravagant women of Israel that lived in his generation as the “[fat] cows of Bashan ... who defraud the poor, who rob the needy; who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, and let’s carouse.’” He blamed the indolent wives of the nobility since they indirectly caused the “oppression of the poor” and the “crushing of the needy” by asking their husbands to provide them with every luxury. The prophet Ezekiel (16:49) excoriated ancient Israel for being as bad as Sodom: “Behold, this was the sin of your sister Sodom: She and her daughters had pride, plenty of bread, and untroubled tranquility; yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.” Sodom was a place where strangers were not welcome. When the Sodomites heard that Lot had shown hospitality to two visitors, they converged on his house, “from young to old,” and wanted to rape the guests (Genesis 19: 4).

Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by heavenly sulfur and fire that rained down upon them as divine punishment (Genesis 19:24). Ezekiel (22:29) asserted: "The people of the land have perpetrated oppression and committed robbery; they have wronged the poor and the needy and oppressed the stranger without justice." The "stranger" referred to here was the immigrant who came from another town or country. The "pride," referred to by Ezekiel, which destroyed the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah resembles contemporary xenophobia and racial intolerance. Residents of Sodom and Gomorrah viewed themselves as superior to outsiders and were afraid that helping poor immigrants would diminish their own wealth. The Psalmist declares (Psalms 82:3): "do justice to the needy and the orphan; deal righteously with the poor and the impoverished; rescue the needy and the destitute and save them from the hand of the wicked." Job described the way a person with means is supposed to live his/her life. Job was a person who treated all with dignity, even his servants (Job 31: 13); Job took care of the poor, the needy, the orphan and the widow (Job 31: 16-21). Job was not materialistic and he declares that he never "made gold my hope" or "rejoiced because my wealth was great" (Job 31: 24-25).

Jonathan Sacks, the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, sees the Bible as "God's call to human responsibility" (Sacks 2005:28). In fact, he argues that responsibility is its "greatest overarching theme" (Sacks 2005:135). As noted above, prophets such as Isaiah (1:17) stressed that humanity should "learn to do good." The Bible demands that our entire economic system be built on a foundation of social responsibility. Attacking the stranger and ignoring the plight of the poor and needy are a sure way to ensure that America will not continue to lead the world.

Research by Galea, et al. (2011) demonstrates that poverty does considerably more than contribute to poor health. They examined six social factors in order to determine the number of deaths attributable to each. They found that, in the year 2000, low levels of education were responsible for about 245,000 deaths; racial segregation was responsible for 176,000 deaths; low social support for 162,000 deaths; individual-level poverty for 133,000 deaths, income inequality for 119,000 deaths; and area-level poverty for 39,000 deaths. Overall, poverty was responsible for 4.5% of deaths in the United States. One might surmise that the prophets would not be happy with these statistics. The Great Recession hit minorities, especially Hispanics and African Americans, the hardest. The median wealth of Hispanics plummeted by 66% from 2005 to 2009. In fact, approximately one-third of all Hispanics had net worth of zero or less in 2009 (23% in 2005). The numbers for African Americans are only slightly better; their median wealth plunged by 53% (Tavernise, 2011).

## ***(2) Pursuit of Truth and Justice***

The importance of justice is stressed throughout the Torah. In fact, Abraham, while arguing with God, has the temerity to say (Genesis 18:25): "Shall the Judge of the whole world not act justly?" The importance of justice is another overarching theme of the Bible. God makes it clear that he has chosen Abraham so that that "he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18: 19). This verse in Deuteronomy (16:20) says it all: "Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue, so that you will live and possess the land which the Lord your God is giving you." Pursuit of truth and justice also includes business ethics. Running a business in an unethical manner is an injustice to customers. Friedman (2000) demonstrates how business ethics has its roots in the Torah. After all, more than 100 of the 613 precepts of the Torah deal directly with it. The Torah is concerned with such issues as ensuring accuracy in weights and measures, environmentalism, paying wages and rent on time, providing fringe benefits for employees and treating them fairly, providing an honest day's work, caring for the poor, and not discriminating against the stranger. Friedman (2000) concludes that Scripture makes it apparent that ethical organizations are ensured ultimate success.

Isaiah criticized ancient Israel which had become like Sodom. He declared (Isaiah 1:21-22):

How the faithful city has become a harlot! Once it was full of justice and righteousness lodged in it, but now — murderers! Your silver has become dross, your wine diluted with water. "Your rulers are rebels and associates of thieves; each of them loves a bribe and chases after rewards.

Isaiah (5:7) notes: "And He looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress." Isaiah was especially concerned about injustices committed against the poor:

Woe to those who make unjust laws and who issue oppressive documents, to deprive the destitute of their rights and to rob of their rights the needy of My people, making widows their prey and orphans their booty. What will you do on the day of reckoning, when the calamity comes from afar? To whom will you flee for help? Where will you leave your wealth? [There will be nothing to do] except cringe among the captives or fall among the slain. (Isaiah 10: 1-4)

Isaiah observed (Isaiah 1:27): "Zion will be redeemed through justice."

Jeremiah (9:22-23) declared: "Let not the mighty man glory in his might; Let not the rich man glory in his riches." What matters to the prophet is "loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth. Jeremiah (22: 13) affirmed: "Woe to him who builds his house without righteousness and his upper rooms without justice; who uses his neighbor's services without payment and does not give him his wages." Jeremiah (22:16) makes it clear what God demands of humanity: "He gave justice to the poor and destitute, then it is good. Isn't that what it means to know me?" says the Lord."

Micah (6:8) reduced the obligations of humankind to three major principles: "What does the Lord require of you: only to do justice, to love acts of kindness, and to walk discreetly before your God." Amos' solution was (5:24): "Let justice well up like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."

The prophet Amos (8: 5-6) was concerned with various ways the poor were exploited by business such as hoarding food in order to resell it at exorbitant prices, tampering with weights and measures, and raising prices unjustly: "Listen to this, you who devour the needy, annihilating the poor of the land, saying when will the month pass, so that we can sell grain; the Sabbatical year, so that we can open the stores of grain; using an *ephah* that is too small and a *shekel* that is too large, and distorting dishonest scales. To purchase the poor with silver and the destitute for shoes, and selling the refuse of grain as grain." The Lord swears that He will never forget their deeds (Amos 8:7).

Zechariah was concerned about truth and honesty in business. He declared (8: 16-17): "These are the things that you are to do: Speak the truth every man with his fellow; with truth, justice and peace, judge in your gates. And let none of you contrive evil in your hearts against one another and do not love false oaths; because all these are things that I hate, declares the Lord."

Ezekiel avowed (22: 29, 31): "The people of the land have perpetrated fraud and committed robbery; they have wronged the poor and needy and defrauded the stranger without redress...I have therefore poured out My wrath over them and consumed them with My fire of fury"

One injustice that was done to Americans was by Wall Street and the banking industry. Many Americans were enticed by bankers and mortgage brokers to obtain mortgages that they could not afford. These adjustable rate mortgages (ARMS) involved very low initial payments that mushroomed after a few years. The people obtaining these mortgages did not understand what they were getting into and many families have lost their homes. Many Americans had their homes foreclosed (a large number of homes are still in danger of foreclosure), but African Americans suffered more than other groups. African American home ownership was 50% in 2004 and dropped to 45% in 2011. Approximately 8% of blacks who purchased homes between 2005 and 2008 had their homes foreclosed (Ruark, 2011).

Banks all over the country, that used to be quite conservative in their mortgage loans, were giving out NINJA ("No Income, No Job or Assets") on the basis of unsubstantiated income claims by either the applicant or the mortgage broker or both. By securitizing the subprime mortgages, the risk was shifted to others, even to foreign banks and foreign countries. They relied on the ratings these securities were given by the credit ratings companies, not realizing that the conflict of interest present in the ratings made them worthless. The rating agencies ingratiated themselves with clients by providing AAA ratings to extremely risky securities consisting of subprime mortgages. The rating agencies made considerably more in fees by providing ratings for complex financial securities than for simple bonds. To steer more business to themselves, they provided the high ratings desired by clients (Friedman and Friedman, 2008).

There are approximately 90 lawsuits in progress now -- the amount in question is at least \$197 billion -- that relate to the fact that investors believe that they were deceived by the banks regarding the riskiness of securities sold to them during the housing boom. Recently, AIG also decided to sue Bank of America for selling them mortgage securities of dubious quality (Story and Morgenson, 2011). Krugman (2011) notes the irony that Standard & Poor's (S&P) is the rating agency that just downgraded the debt of the United States. S&P is the same firm that shares a great deal of the responsibility in causing the financial crisis that hurt the American economy by providing AAA ratings to mortgage-backed securities that were toxic. Moreover, S&P made a \$2 trillion error in their analyses justifying the downgrade. Morgenson and Rosner (2011) studied the horrific financial crisis of 2008 in order to see who was responsible for it and found that quite a few individuals shared responsibility.

However, one individual stood out from the rest: James A. Johnson, CEO of Fannie Mae from 1991-1998. Johnson personally made approximately \$100 million while heading Fannie Mae; his successor, Franklin D. Raines also did quite well for himself. The root of the crisis started with the Clinton administration. In an attempt to encourage home ownership, the administration developed a partnership with Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Fannie and Freddie used the government backing to underwrite more and more loans. They worked with Countrywide Financial, a company that eventually become the largest mortgage lender in the United States. Countrywide provided loans to individuals with very limited means and made a fortune for its CEO, Angelo R. Mozilo. Mortgage loans were given to individuals without verification of income. Many bankers emulated Johnson and also provided extremely risky loans with little or no income verification. Wall Street made a great deal of money underwriting securities consisting of bundled mortgages of dubious quality. The riskiness of the mortgages kept increasing but so did the bonuses of the executives. Eventually, the whole house of cards came tumbling down. Johnson did not actually commit any crimes but was engaged in behavior that was highly unethical. The same can be said of many bankers and Wall Street executives. Goldman Sachs made money betting against the bundled mortgage securities they were encouraging customers to buy.

The revolving door connecting Washington D.C. with Wall Street allowed many of the above-mentioned shenanigans to occur. Robert Rubin, Secretary of the Treasury, and former CEO of Goldman Sachs, pushed for the repeal of the Glass-Steagal Act. This act passed in 1933 during the Great Depression did not permit commercial banks from participating in investment banking. The purpose of this act was to ensure that banks did not engage in risky security transactions. The repeal of this Act in 1999 enabled Citibank to merge with Traveler's Group and become Citigroup. After Robert Rubin left Washington, he joined Citigroup as a member of the board. Citigroup, of course, ultimately needed billions in bailout money to rescue it from bankruptcy that resulted from taking on so much risk (Morgenson and Rosner, 2011).

Alas, we have no prophets today to cry about a faithful country that has allowed so many injustices to occur in numerous industries. Accounting fraud and financial irregularities have become so commonplace that it is difficult to trust any organization's financial statements. It is quite possible that the pension plans of several states are in effect bankrupt. New Jersey was accused by Federal regulators of fraud for claiming that the pension funds of state employees are adequately funded (Walsh, 2010). Using financial resources to influence legislation has made it virtually impossible to govern honestly. Westen (2011) observes: "those who can afford to buy influence are rewriting the rules so that they can cut themselves progressively larger slices of the American pie while paying less of their fair share for it." For example, it recently came to light that the United States Chamber of Commerce was given \$86 million in contributions from the insurance lobby to fight President Obama's health care bill (Rich, 2010).

### ***(3) Leaders with Integrity***

Feiler (2010) feels that Moses is an American icon. Many great Americans, including Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., have compared themselves and been compared to him. According to Feiler, Moses represents "the ideals of American justice" and reminds us that "a moral society is one that embraces the outsider and uplifts the downtrodden." In addition, Moses is an exemplar of a true leader, a servant leader who cared more for the people than for himself. Moses had clean hands and was able to say to God (Numbers 16:15): "I have not even taken a single donkey of theirs, nor have I wronged even one of them." How many politicians and CEOs can make this claim? Moses dies alone on Mount Nebo and is buried by God. The Bible (Deuteronomy 34:5) describes him in the simplest terms as the "servant of God." There is no higher praise for a leader. Unfortunately, many of our leaders can be described as the "servant of special interest groups."

King Solomon's story in the Hebrew Bible is an important lesson for all leaders. God appeared to him in a dream and offered him anything that he wanted (I Kings 3). Rather than asking for wealth, power, or longevity, Solomon asked for the following (I Kings 3: 9): "Give therefore your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and bad; for who is able to judge this great people of Yours." Solomon understood what a leader needs to be successful: wisdom, a passion for justice and concern for people. The Psalmist (Psalms 15) describes some of the attributes of a virtuous individual. These attributes are just as important for leaders and organizations: "One who walks in total integrity, deals righteously, and speaks the truth from his heart. One who has no slander on his tongue, who has done his fellow human no evil nor cast disgrace upon his close one... Whoever does these things shall never falter." Micah rebuked leaders who did not concern themselves with justice and oppressed the people.

These were leaders “who hate good and love evil; who rob the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones” (Micah 3:2).

He concludes (Micah 3: 9-12):

Listen to my message, you leaders of the House of Jacob, you chiefs of the House of Israel, who abhor justice and who twist all that is straight, who build Zion with blood and Jerusalem with iniquity. Her leaders judge for bribes and her priests give rulings for a fee, and her prophets divine for pay... Therefore, because of you, Zion shall be plowed over as a field; Jerusalem shall become a heap of rubble and the Temple Mount will become like a stone heap in the forest.

Isaiah (1:10) rebuked the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem and called them “chiefs of Sodom” They were criticized for not pursuing justice and taking care of the unfortunates of society. All they cared about was their own personal aggrandizement.

The Bible uses the metaphor of shepherd to indicate a leader (Numbers 27:17). This metaphor is also used by Ezekiel in Chapter 34. When leaders did not help the people but enriched themselves at their expense, the prophet Ezekiel exclaimed (34: 2-4):

Woe unto the shepherds of Israel that have tended themselves [and not tended their flock]! Should not the shepherds tend the sheep? You eat their fat and you wear their wool; you slaughter the healthy ones; but you tend not the sheep. The frail you have not strengthened; neither have you healed that which was sick; neither have you bound up those who were broken; neither have you brought back those who strayed or searched for those that were lost; instead, you ruled over them with force and rigor.

One king who was punished for flaunting his wealth was King Hezekiah. He flaunted the great wealth in his treasuries to Merodakh-Baladan, son of Baladan, the King of Babylonia. Isaiah said to Hezekiah (Isaiah 39:6): “Behold, a time is coming when everything in your palace and what your forefathers have accumulated to this day will be carried off to Babylonia; nothing shall remain, says the Lord.” Hezekiah’s sin was in taking too much pride in his worldly possessions and showing them off. A leader’s job is to serve the people, not to accumulate personal wealth.

Regrettably, the political leaders and business leaders are more interested in helping themselves than doing what is best for the country. The mark of a great leader is encouraging people to make sacrifices in order to benefit future generations as well as the helpless. It seems that we have become a greedy society that is unwilling to make sacrifices. In fact, Standard & Poor’s lowered the credit rating of the United States and we are no longer a “risk-free borrower.” They stated: “The downgrade reflects our view that the effectiveness, stability, and predictability of American policymaking and political institutions have weakened at a time of ongoing fiscal and economic challenge” (Applebaum and Dash, 2011). It is obvious that an honest solution requires that federal spending grow slower than the economy as a whole. Without raising taxes and reducing earmarks and entitlements, the Federal debt will shortly exceed 100% of GDP, an amount of debt that is too high (Applebaum, 2011). Bowles and Simpson (2011), co-chairmen of the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, a bipartisan group that tried to deal with debt reduction last year, also emphasize that the current deal is only a small step forward, not a solution. They make it clear that if we do not slow the rapid increase in health care costs, the United States will be bankrupted. If Social Security is not fixed, an “undue burden” will be placed on future generations. The tax code needs an overhaul to remove \$1 trillion in annual tax breaks.

#### ***(4) Making the World a Better Place for All: A World of Full Employment, Social Justice, and Peace***

A core value of the Bible is to help the unfortunates of society but at the same time ensure that people have meaningful, productive work. There is an obligation on government, business, and individuals to take care of the needs of society’s unfortunates. However, government should encourage people to be industrious. Rae (2004) states: “God, in His providence, works through our occupations to accomplish His work in the world.” He notes that God placed Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15) “to work it and protect it” even before he and Eve sinned. Work was always part of the divine plan for humankind. God also is presented in the Bible as possessing what Rae calls “entrepreneurial” traits. In Genesis, we see God as being productive, innovative, and imaginative in creating the world. Humankind is told to emulate God and do as He did, work for six days and rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9-11). Humankind, which has an obligation to imitate God (Leviticus 19:2), was given dominion over the entire earth (Genesis 1:26) for a reason.

We are the caretakers of this planet and have to continue God's work of creation by improving the world. Businesspeople have an important role in this and industriousness is praised by Scripture. The verse in Proverbs (22:29) states: "Do you see a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before insignificant men." Scripture asserts that hard work and assiduousness are important for people. The Psalmist declares (128:2): "When you eat the labor of your hands, you shall be happy, and it shall be well with you." The verse in Proverbs (22:29) states: "Do you see a man diligent in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before insignificant men." Humankind is told to learn about productivity from the ant (Proverbs 6:6): "Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise." In Genesis, we see God as being productive, innovative, and imaginative in creating the world. Humankind is told to emulate God and do as He did, work for six days and rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:9-11). Humankind, which has an obligation to imitate God (Leviticus 19:2), was given dominion over the entire earth (Genesis 1:26) for a reason. We are the caretakers of this planet and have to continue God's work of creation by improving the world. Businesspeople have an important role in this and industriousness is praised by Scripture.

Yuengert (2004), expressing the Catholic view, also feels that humankind has been given an important job to do: work as God's stewards in "co-creating" the world. He asserts:

Our created nature as responsible stewards is what is behind John Paul II's emphasis on the right of economic initiative in *Centesimus Annus*. Widespread abridgement of this right which happened under communism, leads not only to economic stagnation, but to a moral sickness, a sort of despair among those who are not allowed or able to take responsibility for their own development.

The messianic vision of Isaiah is one of world peace. This cannot happen unless there is truth and justice for all. Rae (2004) notes that the messianic vision of Isaiah (2:4) in which nations will "beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks" is one in which there is world peace and in which humankind works with its tools, plowshares and pruning hooks. Humankind works to improve the world and make it a better place for everyone. It is a world of full employment where able people who want jobs will find them. Those who are unable to work will be provided with assistance. This will allow Isaiah's vision of a future with all of humanity living in an idyllic, rustic, spiritual world filled with beauty and peace:

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf, the lion cub, and the fatling [will feed] together, and a small child will lead them. A cow and bear will graze together and their young will lie down together. The lion will eat straw like the cattle. An infant will play over a viper's hole, and a newly weaned child will stretch forth his hand over an adder's den. They will do no harm or damage anywhere in all of My holy mountain; for the earth will be filled with knowledge of God, as water covers the sea (Isaiah 11:6-9).

Amos' (9: 13-14) vision of Messianic times where "the plowman shall overtake the reaper, and the treader of the grapes the one who sows the seed" is also one where people are building and planting. It is virtually the same as Micah's (4: 3-4) vision of the Messianic future in which swords are beaten into plowshares, nations will be at peace, and every person will sit under his vine and fig tree and not be afraid. The "Woman of Valor" hymn in Proverbs (31: 10-31) describes the attributes of the perfect wife. What is fascinating about it is that it describes an entrepreneurial woman. The following are the traits of this ideal woman:

She is industrious: "She seeks out wool and flax, and works with her hands willingly. She stretches out her hands onto the distaff, and her palms support the spindle. She arises while it is yet night, and gives food to her household and a portion to her maidservants. She does not eat the bread of idleness." She is entrepreneurial: "She considers a field and buys it; from the fruit of her handiwork she plants a vineyard. She makes a cloak and sells it, and supplies aprons to the merchant." She is honest: "She knows that her merchandise is good."

She is charitable: "She spreads out her palm to the poor; and extends her hand to the needy. The lesson of kindness is on her tongue." Lamentably, Congress provided us with a debt solution that simply postponed the financial crisis. The real work will have to be done by a bipartisan committee. Otherwise, the United States will become bankrupt. Reducing debt, however, is only a partial solution. Jobs must be created to help Americans that seek employment to find it. Can America remain a great country with millions of people unemployed or underemployed? The economic and social problems that can be attributed to unemployment include suicide, mental illness / depression, crime, divorce, loss of homes, loss of skills, reduced health, and more.

Is this the kind of society we want to be? What would the prophets say about a society that is indifferent to helping those that desperately seek work? Nearly 15% of Americans are now on food stamps (Ellis, 2011).

### **Conclusion**

The Bible has little to say about the ideal economic system or about free markets and competition. It does have a great deal to say about an economic system shows little compassion for the powerless and that encourages fraud and injustices in the marketplace. It also has a great deal to say about a political system in which special interest groups use their affluence to control government. Isaiah criticized the leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, prior to the destruction of the First Temple, and referred to them as the “chiefs of Sodom” (Isaiah 1:10). He provided the solution (Isaiah 1:17): “Learn to do good; seek justice, and support the oppressed. Defend the orphan, and plead for the widow.” The prophets warned ancient Israel as well as other world powers such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia that they would not be around forever.

Approximately 2,000 years ago, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, a grandson of Hillel, who lived right before the destruction of the Second Temple, said: “The world is established on three principles: truth, justice, and peace.” It appears that he realized that ancient Israel was plunging into destruction. He based his opinion on what Zechariah stated (8:16): “with truth, justice and peace, judge in your gates.” America’s political parties have to work together to restore truth, justice, and peace. Ignoring the message of the ancient prophets will cause us to sink deeper and deeper into depression, despondency, and despair. It will not only our debt that will be downgraded but everything positive that we stand for. Hopefully, the day will never come when people will exclaim: “See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She was once full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her, but now murderers” (Isaiah 1: 21). This change led to the destruction of ancient Israel by the Babylonians and the prophet cried: “She who was once the greatest among nations, the princess among provinces, has become a tributary.” (Lamentations 1:1).

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