

# Reading *Raids*: From a Biblical/Prophetic Perspective

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*Well, Raids, you've grown up now. It is time for you to go out and meet people as the other books have done. They have usually managed pretty well on their own. They were, for the most part, good mannered. Some of them were even fairly Devout. As for you, you may need special advice. I must say you have proven yourself to be a little unusual. It's your poetic temperament.*

Thomas Merton expected trouble. He anticipated that his 1966 publication of *Raids on the Unspeakable* would not be well-received. In the creative and imaginative prologue to *Raids* (see above), Merton addressed himself to his own book and told *Raids* 'you have proven yourself to be a little unusual.' Unlike many of his earlier works which were 'good mannered'

and 'fairly devout,' *Raids* was different—it was confrontational and had a sharp edge.<sup>1</sup>

Merton attributed *Raids*' problematic nature to its 'poetic temperament.'<sup>2</sup> But it seems to be much more than that. *Raids* also had a 'prophetic temperament.' Like the prophets of ancient Israel, it became a 'troubler' of the people, of the nations. With prophetic fervor,

*Raids* railed against social injustice and numerous forms of idolatry.

In *Raids*, Merton denounced 'dehumanization'—in what he considered as 'the most inhuman of ages.'<sup>3</sup> Again, like the biblical prophets before him, he called for a return to the living God in whose image we are all made. He spoke out as a guardian of the dignity and worth of every human being. Neither the state, nor any other kind of collective, had the right—in any way—to diminish the hidden glory of God in each person.

Thomas Merton had found his prophetic voice in *Raids*. Indeed, by the time of *Raids*, the contemplative Merton had also become the prophetic Merton.<sup>4</sup> The prophetic mantle and the monastic cowl were joined in a remarkable way.

By reading *Raids* from a biblical/prophetic perspective, we can clearly behold a contemplative who had developed a prophetic consciousness. Our task in this essay is to listen for Merton's prophetic voice in *Raids* and hear as well the echo of the biblical/prophetic tradition. If we are truly attentive, we may also hear Merton's prophetic word for us today.

## 1. Merton's prophetic consciousness

Before examining three different and distinct pieces of Merton's writings in *Raids*, we need to say a bit more about the foundations of Merton's prophetic consciousness. As the late Robert Daggy has sug-

gested, no matter what aspect of Merton's life and writings we study, there are multiple sources to be considered.<sup>5</sup> This is certainly true for the subject at hand. Nonetheless, no source for understanding Merton as prophet is more important than his own personal encounter with scripture. Without Merton engaging the Bible in depth, there could not have been a prophetic Merton.

Ironically, Merton was the first to admit that he was slow in coming to Scripture. In *The Sign of Jonas* (1952), he acknowledged a lack of biblical literacy which ran throughout his early monastic years. 'How little scripture I used to read in the novitiate,' Merton confessed.<sup>6</sup> According to Br. Patrick Hart, Merton began to discover the Bible in greater depth by reading the early church fathers and the works from the men and women of early desert monasticism.<sup>7</sup> Still, this remained something of an indirect exposure to scripture.

Merton's daily singing of the Psalms in choir, of course, was a constant engagement with the Bible. However, his monastic assignments as teacher of scholastics, and last as novice master, caused him to do a more systematic study of the Bible. Simultaneously, Scripture began to break open for Merton personally.

Although Merton in *The Sign of Jonas* expressed his regrets for his slow start into scripture, he also celebrates there his awakening to

scripture. In a most beautiful passage, he writes:

By the reading of scripture I am so renewed that all nature seems renewed around us and within me. The sky seems to be a pure, a cooler blue, the trees a deeper green, light is sharper on the outline of the forest and the hills and the whole world is changed with the glory of God and I feel fire and music in the earth under my feet.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the comfort and renewal Merton found in the Scripture, he was also confronted by its challenges—especially in reading the words of the prophets. His interfaith friend Abraham Joshua Heschel brought this reality home to him. In fact, Rabbi Heschel was instrumental in shaping much of Merton's biblical/prophetic perspective. *God in Search of Man*, identified by Merton as his favorite of Heschel's books, presented the leitmotif of Heschel's biblical witness for peace and justice.

Heschel insisted that at the center of biblical faith and action was the epic story of God's search for us, not our search for God. According to Heschel:

When Adam and Eve hid from His [God's] presence, the Lord called: *Where art Thou* (Genesis 3:9). It is a call that goes out again and

again. It is a still small echo of a still small voice, not uttered in words, not conveyed in categories of the mind, but as ineffable and mysterious as the glory of God that fills the whole world.<sup>9</sup>

This biblical approach to reality appealed to both Merton's contemplative and prophetic sensibilities. It was true to his own experience.

Merton, like Heschel, believed we are all called forth by the living God. But if this be so, why do so many of us not hear this calling? Both would respond in the same way. The primary problem is that we are not attentive. God is there for us, the problem is that we are not there for God. The Bible's main question is *where art thou*. It is God's question for each of us. This too is the prophetic question. Speaking 'the word of the Lord,' this is the question the prophets put before us. Heschel and Merton both knew if this question is not heard, then there could be no prophetic consciousness.

In the biblical/prophetic outlook, the Bible questions us, as much or more, than we question the Bible. Late in his life, Merton described the Bible as a 'dangerous book.'<sup>10</sup> Nothing is more unsettling than having the tables turned on us. We thought we were in charge, that we were asking the questions—and to some extent we are. But the bigger questions are asked of us.

This is what the Bible does. And

so does *Raids*. Here is what makes *Raids* so biblical and prophetic. Like the biblical prophet, Merton in *Raids* intends to question us. This makes its readers uncomfortable. Prophets do that!

## 2. Prophetic Prologue

Our first example of *Raids'* prophetic voice is its fascinating prologue. Indeed, by the time the Prologue has ended, the voice of the prophetic Merton has been heard. In speaking to his own work, he counsels *Raids*, 'your main interest is not in formal answers or accurate definitions, but in difficult insights at a moment of human crisis.'<sup>11</sup> In the tradition of the prophets, Merton eschews official answers given by apologists for state and religion. He prefers instead to dissent and speak truth to power. Such truth he writes, '...can hardly be either comforting or well defined.'<sup>12</sup>

Like the prophet Jeremiah, Merton also wanted to speak a word of hope in a time of despair. It is not a form of wishful thinking but a hope against hope—a God-given hope that arrives when all human hope is lost. For Merton, this represents a 'Christian hope' which '...begins where every other hope stands frozen stiff before the face of the Unspeakable.'<sup>13</sup> As in Jeremiah's case, Merton laments with *Raids* and tells his book, '...you will not find too many agreeing with you...' <sup>14</sup>

In his well-known words from the Prologue, Merton admits to *Raids*:

You are not big enough to accuse the whole age effectively, but let us say you are in dissent. You are in no position to issue commands, but you can speak words of hope. Shall this be the substance of your message? Be human in this most inhuman of ages; guard the image of man for it is the image of God. You agree? Good.<sup>15</sup>

This eschatological message had little chance of being received and acted upon in the present. Yet, again like Jeremiah's purchase of a small parcel of useless Jerusalem property while it was under siege, Merton knows his little message of hope has no chance of realization in his own day. But he is not without hope. Sometime in the future, the 'land' will be inhabitable once again, and the 'deed purchased' (his message) will be good. Of this, the prophetic Merton is certain.

## 3. The Rhinoceros and Elijah

The essay 'Rain and the Rhinoceros' included at the beginning of *Raids*, is one of the finest essays ever written by Merton. It is also one of his best prophetic essays. One crucial element in this multi-layered essay involves Merton's use of Ionesco's play 'Rhinoceros' from the theatre of the absurd. The problem of Berger (the play's main character) writes Merton, '...is the problem of the human person stranded and alone in what threatens to become

a society of monsters.<sup>16</sup>

As the story unfolds, Berenger finds himself to be the last human left in a rhinoceros herd. Other humans have all been transformed into rhinoceros, and Berenger is truly alone. The temptation for him to run with the herd, and thus become a rhinoceros is almost irresistible.

The prophetic Merton is concerned about Berenger's well-being. How can he preserve his humanity and resist running with the herd? Elijah's contest with the 450 prophets of Baal is quite similar. He is the only prophet of Yahweh remaining. Nonetheless, Elijah says an emphatic 'no' to the herd of Baal's prophets, and he stands alone in a contest against all the false prophets of his time (I Kings 18:1-40).

In the middle of the twentieth century, Merton too rejects any 'herd mentality.' He cautions against running with the herd—to conforming to materialism, to the facile notion of consumerism, to the new forms of totalitarianism whether in the east or west. Merton, like the prophet he is, joins the biblical prophets in calling each individual to stand on his or her own, and promote freedom over slavery, peace over war, faithfulness over idolatry.

#### 4. The Poet and Amos

The prophetic issue of dehumanization also appears in Merton's 'Message to Poets' found at the end

of *Raids*. Once again, we are dealing with one of Merton's finest essays, and most prophetic. The essay, in its origin, derives from a message Merton sent from Gethsemani to a meeting of young Latin American poets gathered in Mexico City in February of 1964.

It was the kind of meeting Merton cherished—not highly organized or financed by any official body. It was spontaneous and inspired, a gathering of free spirits. And it had the potential to be prophetic. The meeting was unencumbered and without institutional controls. The heavy-hand of church and state were absent.

Merton suggested to the young poets that they should share in fidelity to *life* rather than in commitments to artificial systems.<sup>17</sup> This fidelity to *life* can create an essential solidarity among poets. Merton wrote:

The solidarity of poets is an elemental fact like sunlight, like the seasons, like the rain. It is something that cannot be organized, it can only happen. It can only be 'received.' It is a gift to which we must remain open. No man can plan to make the sun rise or the rain fall.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the vocation of the poet itself is a gift. This was much akin to the prophet's vocation. Both understand all too well that their calling could no more be planned than

a sun rise or a rainfall.

The poet, like the prophet, was a free spirit. The gift they carried made them different. They were free people with a life-affirming message. But they will not be supported or understood by many.

Like a prophet, the young poets stood up against all those who would try to dictate what should be thought or said. Merton knew from experience that others were always prepared to control or discredit him. Nevertheless, like the Hebrew prophets, he and the young poets must continue to speak truth to power. They must witness against all those who would act unjustly or seek to destroy rather than build up.

It was as if Merton took a page from the book of the prophet Amos in his advice to the young poets of Latin America. Amos, like the young poets, was discredited and alone. He was a poor 'dresser of sycamore trees' without status or position. As with Merton's young poets, Amos had absolutely no earthly authority.

All Amos had was 'a word from the Lord.' All the young poets had was their poetry of *life*. And neither could remain silent. In powerful poetic prose, Amos declared, 'Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness as an ever flowing stream' (Amos 5:24). The young poets live on in the spirit of the prophets. They too must be true to the message gifted to them. They too must 'let justice roll down like

water and righteousness as an ever flowing stream.' In sum, Merton's closing words to the young poets form a fitting benediction for my paper.

When the poet (or prophet) puts his foot in that ever-moving river, poetry (prophecy) is born out of the flashing waters...No one can come near the river wearing the garments of public and collective ideas. He must feel the water on his skin...Come dervishes: here is the water of life. Dance in it.<sup>19</sup>

Dance poets. Dance prophets. Dance Merton. Dance all who love justice and peace. Let us dance with God...dance, dance, dance.

#### Notes

1. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, Thomas Merton, (New York: New Directions, 1966), p.1. Also published in 1966 was another book by Merton which proved 'to be a little unusual' and not especially 'good mannered,' *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.
2. *ibid*, p.1.
3. *ibid*, p.6.
4. 'Mystic as Prophet', William Apel (*The Merton Annual*, Volume 16) pp.172-187.
5. This valuable lesson was learned from Robert Daggy as I consulted with him in my earliest research on Merton in the mid 1980s.
6. *The Sign of Jonas*, Thomas Mer-

ton, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1953), p.212.

7. This information was gathered from an oral interview with Brother Patrick Hart at Gethsemani, April 1997.

8. *The Sign of Jonas*, p.212.

9. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, (New York: Harper and Row, 1955), p.137.

10. *Opening the Bible*, Thomas Merton, (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1970), p.8.

11. *Raids on the Unspeakable*, p.6.

12. *ibid*, p.2.

13. *ibid*, p.5.

14. *ibid*, p.5.

15. *ibid*, p.15.

16. *ibid*, p.19.

17. *ibid*, p.156.

18. *ibid*, pp.156-7.

19. *ibid*, p.161.

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