

INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS

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Troy, Michigan
United States of America

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INTRODUCTION TO THE PROPHETS: SPOKESPERSONS FOR YAHWEH

What Is a Prophet?

For the modern person, the word prophet falls almost entirely within the realm of prognostication. Names like Nostradamus and Jeanne Dixon, among others, come to mind—folk who claim (or the claim is made by others) that they can foresee the future. Prophets in the Bible do not fit neatly into this narrow category. To be sure, they made predictions, many of them quite striking. Nonetheless, their material was so diverse and wide-ranging that prognostication is too confining a term.

So, what is a prophet, and more to the point, what is a biblical prophet? The linguistic meaning of the Hebrew word נָבִי (nabi' = prophet) does not offer much help. It may be related to the Akkadian word *nabi'um*, a passive form that means “the called one”, but other than the idea of commissioning, this meaning is mostly a bone without flesh. The real meaning of prophethood must be traced not so much in etymology as in the literary context of the documents of the Hebrew Bible where the designation is to be found.¹

That prophets were mediums of direct communication between God and humans seems clear enough from the Old Testament. They were individuals to whom God spoke directly and who in turn were able to interact with God in ways that were not open to the average person. This seems to be the fundamental meaning of the single occasion of the word in Genesis, where Abraham is described as a prophet (Ge. 20:7). When Ahimelech, king of Gerar, attempted to add Sarah to his harem, God spoke to him in a dream, instructing him to return Sarah to Abraham and adding that Abraham would pray for his life, for, as God said of Abraham, “He is a prophet.” The idea of mediation equally is present when God designated Aaron to be Moses’ prophet (Ex. 7:1).

For the Israelites, the form of prophetic mediation could be widely varied. Among the Hebrew prophets were poets, preachers, patriots, priests, statesmen, social critics and moralists. Yet, as Heschel has pointed out, the meaning of prophethood can hardly be neatly categorized by such confining descriptions.² Prophets almost always escape conventional pigeonholes.

¹ J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), pp. 36-37.

² A. Heschel, *The Prophets* (rpt. Peabody, MA: Hendricksen, 1999), 2.viii.

The classic text with regard to prophets as mediators was made to Miriam and Aaron when they criticized their brother for his marriage to an African woman (Nu. 12:1-8). In distinguishing Moses from the ordinary prophet, Yahweh said,

*When a prophet of Yahweh is among you,
I reveal myself to him in visions,
I speak to him in dreams.*

Of course, Moses himself was designated as a prophet, but it is clear that he was a prophet *par excellence*, and therefore, belonged in a category by himself (Dt. 34:10-12). In fact, no other prophet of the magnitude of Moses could be expected until some future, unknown time (Dt. 18:18-19). This expectation of the eschatological “prophet like Moses” was still being anticipated in the time of John the Baptist, when representatives of the temple asked John directly, “Are you *the* Prophet” (Jn. 1:21)?

That no such eschatological prophet had arisen since Moses, however, did not eliminate the coming of other, intermediary prophets. In fact, the Deuteronomic code offers a rule for prophecy, a way to distinguish between false and true prophets by the test of faithfulness to the Torah and the accuracy of the prophet’s predictions about the future (Dt. 13:1-5; 18:20-22). The legitimacy of the prophet was not to be reckoned on the basis of the miraculous, but rather, on the prophet’s faithfulness to Yahweh and his covenant.

Prophets in the Ancient Near East

The category of the prophet was not in itself unique to Israel. Prophecy was a widespread ancient Near Eastern phenomenon. Various ancient texts from Syria-Palestine, Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Egypt demonstrate that belief in inspired speech at the initiative of a divine being was widely accepted in the ancient Near East (cf. Je. 27:1-15).³ The prophet Balaam from Mesopotamia, who attempted to curse Israel (Nu. 22-24), offers insight into such prophets outside the normal Israelite framework. That Balaam ben Beor was more-or-less a typical Mesopotamian diviner seems apparent.⁴ He agreed to prophesy for “a fee” (Nu. 22:7, 16).⁵ In the

³ For more detail, see M. Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).

⁴ That Balaam had high standing as a prophet in the ancient world is demonstrated by the plaster inscription discovered in 1967 at Tell Deir ‘Alla east of the Jordan and dating to about the 8th century BC. This inscription directly names Balaam son of Beor and describes him as a “seer of the gods.” While no mention

end, he resorted to sorcery (Nu. 24:1), one of the detestable practices forbidden in Israel (Nu. 23:23; Dt. 18:10). That he stood outside and against Israel rather than within Israel is also apparent, since his name appears repeatedly in contexts that forbid foreigners from entering the congregation (cf. Dt. 23:3-8; Jos. 24:9-10, 14-15; Ne. 13:1-3).

So, why did this Mesopotamian prophet hear from God? There is an intentional irony woven throughout the narrative—an irony that even though God speaks to Balaam (Nu. 22:9-12, 20; 23:16), he also considers him less spiritually perceptive than an ass (Nu. 22:21-35). God’s willingness to use the donkey to speak to Balaam (Nu. 22:28) parallels God’s willingness to use Balaam to pronounce blessing upon Israel. The voice of the donkey was not a sign of the animal’s moral quality, and the oracles of Balaam were not a sign of his right standing with Yahweh. God uses whom he chooses, and donkeys and pagan prophets are lumped together.

Prophets in the ancient Near East served sometimes as “critics of society”, sometimes as “announcers of the future”, and sometimes as “charismatically authorized messengers”.⁶ That their mediation between humans and the divine could take the form of ecstasy is indicated by some Akkadian vocabulary. At Mari, for instance, the most common title for a prophet means “to become ecstatic.” The behavior of ancient Near Eastern prophets when in ecstasy could extend even to self-inflicted wounds. A text from Ugarit speaks of ecstatics who “bathe with their own blood.”⁷ The ritual action of the Canaanite prophets of Ba’al at Carmel is a parallel biblical example (1 Kg. 18:25-29). Such ecstasy might include fits or violent trances, leaping, contortions, wild dancing, constriction of the muscles, and unintelligible utterances.⁸

Were the Prophets of Israel Ecstatics?

It is not entirely clear how much the prophetic ecstasy typical in the ancient Near East was also reproduced among Israel’s prophets. Several passages in the Old Testament might seem to suggest that prophecy in Israel was not substantially different than prophecy in the surrounding culture. One

of Yahweh appears in the inscription, various other deities are mentioned, cf. A. Lemaire, “Fragments from the Book of Balaam Found at Deir Alla,” *BAR* (Sep/Oct 1985), pp. 26-39.

⁵ His protestations about saying only what God gave him to say may have been more of an artifice to help negotiate the fee and reinforce his claim to inspiration rather than a demonstration of moral integrity, cf. G. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction & Commentary [TOTC]* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1981), pp. 166-168.

⁶ H. Huffmon, “Prophecy (ANE),” *ABD* (1992), 5.477-482.

⁷ Huffmon, pp. 478-479.

⁸ H. Robinson, ed., *Record and Revelation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938), p. 31 and J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962), p. 31.

is the description of the 70 elders of Israel who prophesied when the Spirit came upon them (Nu. 11:24-30). When Yahweh descended in the cloud and shared the Holy Spirit that was upon Moses with the 70 elders of Israel, the entire group began to prophesy so that Moses later said, “I wish that all the LORD’s people were prophets!” Some interpreters suggest that they voiced some sort of unintelligible ecstatic utterance, sort of an Old Testament equivalent to the New Testament’s speaking in tongues.⁹

Another incident was when Saul, the first king, encountered a group of prophets descending from a (presumably) Canaanite high place. The Spirit of God came upon him, and he joined in their prophesying (1 Sa. 10:5-7, 10-11).

Yet a third example also concerns Saul as well as Samuel and others in a prophetic guild. All of them were prophesying, and Saul, also, was overwhelmed by the Spirit of God and walked along prophesying with them, stripping off his robes and lying unclothed until the next day (1 Sa. 19:18-24).¹⁰ In addition to these biblical descriptions, there are several other passages that describe prophecy as some sort of raving (1 Sa. 18:10; 1 Kg. 18:29; 1 Kg. 22:10-12). Finally, there are passages that associate prophecy with madness (2 Kg. 9:1-12; Je. 29:26; Ho. 9:7). Based on 1 Samuel 9:9, some have attempted to distinguish between the more primitive state of prophecy, which featured “seers” presumed to be more ecstatic, and the later classical state of prophecy, which featured “prophets” (presumed to be less ecstatic).

What should be made of such descriptions? Those who view Israel’s faith as evolutionary (i.e., the human search for God rather than God’s revelation to humans), tend to view prophecy in Israel as a humanly contrived psychological phenomenon. Israel was one of many people groups in the ancient world, and Israelite religion and prophetic expression was similar to that of other cultures. Hence, Israel’s prophets were ecstatics, just as were the prophets of her neighbors.

Other interpreters, however, are less confident about this charge of wholesale borrowed ecstasy.¹¹ While, to be sure, there are biblical examples that to greater or lesser degrees seem to parallel some expressions of ecstasy, it is far too simplistic to categorize Israel’s prophets as typical ancient Near Eastern ecstatics. At the very least it must be conceded that ecstasy never

⁹ Wenham, p. 109.

¹⁰ The NIV, possibly following S. R. Driver’s interpretation that this was his outer robe only, omits a definitive translation for the Hebrew עָרַם (= naked), but most translators understand it to mean naked (so RSV, AB, NEB, KJV, NASB, ASV, NAB, etc.).

¹¹ R. Harrison, *Numbers [WEC]* (Chicago: Moody, 1990), pp. 188-189 and L. Wood, *The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), pp. 93, 100, 107; also, *ISBE* (1986) 3.995-996.

held the same prominence among Israel's prophets as it did among the prophets of Israel's neighbors. Further, as Lindblom has pointed out, most prophetic revelations are not "visions", but rather, sermons given with acute mental awareness. True, prophets like Jeremiah might confess to powerful feelings accompanying their revelations, but it was the content of the revelation itself, not psychical experience, that prompted these feelings.¹² In addition, passages like 1 Chronicles 25:1-3 that use the verb "to prophesy" may mean only "praising the Lord", not a suspended psychological state of ecstasy as was common among the pagan nations.¹³ In fact, Luke in the New Testament seems to have understood prophecy in this way, also. When Zechariah, John's father, was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied, there is no description of ecstasy, but rather, a cogent praise to God for fulfilling his ancient promises (Lk. 1:67ff.). Paul's extended discussion of prophecy likewise focuses on the intelligible content, not the ecstatic form (1 Co. 14:1-5, 18, 22-25, 29-33). Of course, one cannot prove by a New Testament practice what might have been the case many centuries earlier. Still, it is not without substance that some interpreters urge that the ministry of Israel's prophets was unique, not merely a copying of the patterns of others. Finally, the true mark of a prophet of Israel, in the end, was not ecstasy but fulfillment, as Kenneth Kitchen has urged.¹⁴ This could be no more clearly stated than Micaiah's retort to Ahab, who ordered that the prophet be kept on bread and water until the king returned from his battle. Micaiah shot back, "If you ever return safely, Yahweh has not spoken through me" (1 Kg. 22:28)!

Heschel warns against what he calls the tendency toward "pan-psychology," that is, the reduction of Israel's prophets to some sort of subjective personal phenomena.¹⁵ Similarly, Helmer Ringgren, while recognizing points of similarity between some of the Old Testament passages described above and the prophetic patterns in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, also urges that an important difference be recognized. For other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the possession of the Spirit generally resulted in the prophet not remembering what happened while in an ecstatic trance. For Israel's prophets, they were "fully conscious of the message they had received."¹⁶ Certainly it was the communication of God's message itself that was paramount for Israel's prophets, not the phenomena of mysticism.

¹² See the whole discussion in Lindblom, pp. 47-219, but especially, his conclusions, pp. 216-219.

¹³ Wood, pp. 110-112.

¹⁴ K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 386.

¹⁵ Heschel, p. vii.

¹⁶ Helmer Ringgren, "Ecstasy," *ABD* (1992), II.280.

By the 8th century, the content of the oracles of Israel's prophets were so central that the prophets began recording them in poetry and prose, which in turn demonstrates intelligible intent!

Amos, as one example, distanced himself from the prophetic culture of the ancient Near East that surrounded him. He declared bluntly, "I was neither a prophet nor a prophet's son" (Am. 7:14). Many if not most interpreters have taken this disclaimer as referring to some sort of prophetic office within the community of Israel.¹⁷ While such an interpretation is possible, it seems equally possible that Amos was separating himself from the general prophetic culture of the ancient Near East, especially since the northern cult at Bethel seemed so susceptible to religious syncretism. Amos was not part of the prophetic tradition nor the ancient Near Eastern institution. Isaiah, similarly, ridicules the prophets who are non-cognitive and whose oracles amount to little more than baby talk (Is. 28:7-10). The antagonism shown by Jeremiah and Ezekiel toward questionable prophetic practices (Je. 23:9-40; Eze. 13:1-13), especially the techniques so commonly used by other ancient Near Eastern prophets, argue against the charge of wholesale borrowing. While Israel's prophets were passionate, while sometimes they used striking metaphors, vivid parables and bizarre pantomimes, they did not display the non-cognitive mysticism that was characteristic of their Canaanite neighbors. The few unusual passages in the Hebrew Bible that may not entirely be explained cannot be used to overpower the overwhelming preponderance of passages showing Israel's prophets to be intelligent and intelligible spokespersons for Yahweh. It was the Word of Yahweh that most characterized the prophets of Israel.

Speaking for God

The summary statement in 2 Peter regarding the prophets was that "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pe. 1:21). This New Testament summary agrees with the character of Israel's prophets. They were men and women who proclaimed the word of Yahweh. Just as Aaron was the spokesman for Moses, so the prophets were spokespersons for Yahweh (Ex. 4:14-16; 7:1). The prophet, then, is one who speaks "in the name of Yahweh". To speak presumptuously was a heinous crime and worthy of death (Dt. 18:20, 22). In fact, the commandment forbidding the misuse of Yahweh's name holds true for false prophecy as much as for false oaths (Ex. 20:7; Dt. 5:11). If the third commandment aims at prohibiting the use of God's name for a worthless purpose—the attempt to

¹⁷ James Luther Mays can be taken as representative, cf. J. Mays, *Amos [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), pp. 137-139.

“harness God’s power for personal ends”¹⁸—then to speak in Yahweh’s name when Yahweh himself had not spoken was serious indeed!

Everywhere, the standard formula for prophetic calling was “the word of Yahweh came to _____”.¹⁹ When the word of Yahweh so came, his spokesperson was overpowered by that word. Jeremiah, due to the prevailing opposition, once contemplated giving up his prophetic mission, but in his own words he was “overpowered.” (Je. 20:7-8). In spite of the insults and reproaches of his detractors, any effort to restrict the prophetic word by holding it back was met with the irresistible and compelling force of the divine message, so that containment was impossible (Je. 20:9; 23:9). When the divine lion roared, his prophet was compelled to speak (Am. 3:8)!

The standard response to “the word of Yahweh came to _____” was obedience to the divine mission. Only in the case of Jonah is there an exception (Jonah 1:1-3), and the exception was so remarkable that it formed the frame around which the plot of the book revolves. Even here, however, Jonah eventually obeyed. Yahweh would not let his prophet off the hook, and after a series of devastating events, the word of Yahweh came to Jonah a second time; this time, Jonah “obeyed” (Jonah 3:1-3)!

If the prophets were individuals of “the word of Yahweh,” it remains to clarify the form that their preaching took. A popular but overstated perception is that the prophets primarily were foretellers of the future. So accepted is this viewpoint that many Christians only think of the prophets in terms of their messianic expectations and predictions about the end of the world. To be sure, prophets did indeed sometimes foretell the future. Especially, they were concerned about the devastating judgments within history that would soon overtake the northern and southern nations at the hands of the Mesopotamian empire-builders. Also, they offered long range visions about the far side of judgment, and within these visions there is a messianic consciousness. Nevertheless, Ellison is right to say that foretelling is secondary, not primary.²⁰ Primarily, the prophets spoke to their communities in the context of their own times. Any serious reading of the prophets will demonstrate that thesis effectively. The prophets were preachers more than they were prognosticators. When they did predict the future, those predictions served as moral stimuli for the present. They were hardly the idle speculation of curiosity seeking.

¹⁸ P. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy [NICOT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 155-156.

¹⁹ Je. 1:2, 4, 11, 13; 2:1; 11:1; 13:3, 8; 16:1; 18:5; 24:4; 28:12; 32:6; 33:1, 19, 23; 34:12; 36:27; 39:15; 49:34; Eze. 1:3; 3:16; 6:1; 7:1; 11:14; 12:1, 17, 21, 26; 13:1; 14:2, 12; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1; 20:45; 21:1, 8, 18; 22:1, 17; 23; 23:1; 24:1, 15, 20; 25:1; 26:1; 27:1; 28:1, 11; 20; 29:1, 17; 30:1, 20; 31:1; 32:1, 17; 33:1, 23; 34:1; 35:1; 36:16; 37:15; 38:1; Jonah 1:1; Hg. 2:20; Zec. 4:8; cf. Is. 2:1

²⁰ H. Ellison, *Men Spoke from God*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 14.

Who Has Stood in the Council of Yahweh?

Because the prophets were spokespersons for Yahweh, they were considered privileged insiders to the council of God. Various Old Testament passages depict God as presiding over a heavenly council of “holy ones”, presumably supernatural beings (Dt. 33:2; Ps. 82:1; 89:5-7; 148:1-2; Job 1:6-7; 2:1-2; 15:8). True prophets were privileged to have “stood in the council of Yahweh”, where they heard his words, while false prophets simply spoke out of their own imaginations (Je.23:16-18, 21-22, 25-32; Eze. 13:2-7, 17). The strange story of the prophet Micaiah who confronted Ahab has this heavenly council as its background (1 Kg. 22:19-23).

The experiences of several prophets who were elevated into this more direct encounter with God are described in some detail. Isaiah was privileged to view the divine throne surrounded by seraphim (Is. 6:1-7). Ezekiel saw the chariot-throne of Yahweh supported by the cherubim (Eze. 1:4-28; 10:1-22). At the conclusion of his ministry, Elijah was caught up into the heavens by a whirlwind and chariot of fire (2 Kg. 2:1-11). Habakkuk was privileged to see a theophany of God (Hb. 3:3ff.). Zechariah’s visions were interpreted by an angelic messenger (Zec. 1:9, etc.). While such heavenly encounters are not described in conjunction with all the prophets, Jeremiah’s question, “Who has stood in the council of Yahweh,” assumes such encounters to be typical rather than exceptional.

The Role of the Prophet

Prophets functioned within Israel alongside other spiritual leaders. By the 7th century, these leaders were recognized in three important categories, priests who taught the Torah, wise persons or elders who gave counsel, and prophets whose focus was “the word” (Je. 18:18; cf. Eze. 7:26). The two categories of priest and prophet appear together most often, representing both the codified word of Yahweh [the law] and the immediate word of Yahweh [the oracle] (Je. 14:18; 23:11, 33-34; La. 2:20).

The Former Prophets

The three collections of canonical Hebrew Scriptures are the **תורה** (Torah), the **נבאים** (Prophets) and the **כתובים** (Writings). This tripartite division is at least as old as the Hellenistic Period, since it is mentioned in the Prologue to Sirach, Flavius Josephus and Philo.²¹ Within the middle collection are two smaller designations, the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. This latter designation is not so old, going back only to the Middle Ages, though the reference in Zechariah to “the former prophets” offers biblical warrant for the phrase (Zec. 1:4; 7:7).²² Each was composed of four scrolls, the Former Prophets including Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings and the Latter Prophets including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and The Twelve.

In the tradition of the English Bible, the Latter Prophets are clearly recognized as prophets, but the scrolls of the Former Prophets came to be designated as “historical books” and were lumped together with several other books from the Writings.²³ This restructuring of the earlier canonical order had the disadvantage of obscuring the ancient Hebrew designation of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings as books of prophets. To be sure, these books are largely historical, and unlike the scrolls of the latter prophets, which contain mostly oracles and a minimum of narrative, these books contain mostly narratives. Still, the importance of these books as prophetic should not be lost. It probably is fair to say that the significance of these books is not so much a record of history *per se*, but rather, the working out of God’s prophetic word within the history of the nation. The various prophets offered not merely an account of Israel’s history and future, but more importantly, the meaning of that history and future in light of the

²¹ B. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), p. 230.

²² Childs, p. 230.

²³ A. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), p. 221.

covenant. The prophets were the ones who warned about the theological reasons for the looming exile (Je. 7:25-26; 25:4-7; 26:4-7; 35:15; 44:4-6) and explained its theological meaning when it happened (2 Kg. 17:13ff.). They also were the ones to look beyond exile toward restoration.

The mention of such prophets begins rather early. Against the background of repeated violations of the covenant (cf. Jg. 2), the first clearly designated prophet after the time of Moses and Miriam (cf. Ex. 15:20) was Deborah (Jg. 4:4). In the Gideon narratives, when the Israelies were oppressed by Midian, God sent them a prophet, warning them that their oppression was the result of covenant violation (Jg. 6:7-10). By the time of Samuel, the role of the prophet had become widely recognized (1 Sa. 3:19-21). Samuel was a man to whom Yahweh revealed himself “through his word”. The vocabulary of “seer” speaks to the prophet’s role as one who is privileged with spiritual vision others did not have (1 Sa. 9:9). Furthermore, Samuel is accompanied by a guild of prophetic understudies, later to be designated as the “sons of the prophets” (1 Sa. 10:5, 10-11; 19:20; 1 Kg. 20:35; 2 Kg. 2:3, 5, 7, 15; 5:22; 6:1; 9:1).²⁴ As the narratives about the monarchy progress, the mention of prophets becomes increasingly frequent, including names like Nathan, Gad, Ahijah, Shemaiah, Jehu, Iddo, Azariah, Micaiah and Huldah, and especially, Elijah and Elisha. Some are named, and some are not, simply designated by the ambiguous “man of God” or “a prophet” (1 Kg. 13:1ff.; 20:13ff.). If the people of Israel were called to a national life of holiness (cf. Ex. 19:6; 22:31a; Lv. 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7-8, 26; Dt. 7:6; 14:2; 16:18-19), then the prophets were called to exhort and warn both leader and people concerning this mission.

The Prophets as a Balance of Moral Power

From the earliest times, a central role of the prophet was to be a balance of moral power. Often, this meant that prophets were cast in opposition to other leaders, including kings, priests, wise men and even other prophets. When other leaders defaulted, became preoccupied with their own power base, or even worse, went in a direction that strayed from the pure worship of Yahweh, the prophets arose to correct them, oppose them, and in extreme cases, pronounce disaster upon them.

The earliest of such confrontations must surely lie with Samuel, who came to prominence during the low spiritual ebb of Eli’s high priesthood. While Eli himself seems to have been a man of personal integrity, he allowed his sons to contaminate the office of the priesthood through bribery and sexual

²⁴ The NIV interprets the Hebrew idiom “sons of the prophets” as simply “company of the prophets.” The idiomatic “son of” is a Semitism denoting association, not necessarily heredity.

exploitation (1 Sa. 2:12-17, 22-25). The righteous voice against this apostasy was the prophet. Beginning with Samuel, the appearance of prophets was to become a regular and powerful moral force. Because of Eli's ineffective moral presence, Yahweh revealed through an unnamed prophet that the high priesthood of Eli's family would be wiped out (1 Sa. 2:27-36; cf. 3:11-14).

Seven important prophetic figures appear from the 11th to the 9th centuries. It is suggestive that these figures arose at the same time that the moral force of the priesthood was diminishing. Furthermore, it is clear that the role of the prophet sharpened in the face of moral degeneracy during the monarchy. The first of these figures, Samuel, was undoubtedly the strongest moral force of his time. During his lifetime, Israel demanded a king, and they were given one (1 Sa. 8-11). However, Samuel's role as a prophet who fearlessly called into moral accountability his own king became programmatic for the future. He rebuked Saul for his usurpation of the priestly role (1 Sa. 13:8-14). He later denounced Saul for violating the Deuteronomic code of Yahweh War (1 Sa. 15:10-29). Only in Israel could a prophet beard the king in his own den and escape with his life!

The pattern of prophet against king is a repeating one. Nathan was the mediator through whom Yahweh established his covenant with David, but later, he bluntly confronted David over his adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sa. 12). Gad pronounced sentence upon David for his sin in taking an inappropriate military census (2 Sa. 24:10-14). Ahijah announced the rupture of the monarchy during the moral demise of Solomon (1 Kg. 11:29-39), and later, pronounced a sentence of doom upon Jeroboam I because of his covenant violations (1 Kg. 14:1-16). A "man of God from Judah" railed against Jeroboam's shrine at Bethel (1 Kg. 13:1-3). Both Elijah and Micaiah arose to contend with the flagrant covenant-breaking ways of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kg. 17-19, 21-22). Elijah also pronounced judgment upon King Ahaziah, because he consulted the Philistine god Baal-Zebub (2 Kg. 1:1-17). Elisha announced the annihilation of Ahab's dynasty by Jehu (2 Kg. 9:1-13).

Besides these better known prophets, of course, there were others. Some, like Shemaiah, gave the judgment that the division of the nation under Rehoboam was irreversible (1 Kg. 12:22-24). Others, such as, Jehu ben-Hanani, denounced the sins of Baasha (1 Kg. 16:7, 12-13). Huldah, during the kingship of Josiah, warned the king that the sworn curses in the newly rediscovered Torah scroll (probably the scroll of Deuteronomy) would surely be carried out as a judgment for covenant violation. National disaster loomed on the horizon, and though Josiah would escape it in his own lifetime, the future after him was grim (2 Kg. 22:14-20; cf. 2 Chr. 34:22-28). Belonging to the same general period, but described in the Chronicler's record rather than

that of the Former Prophets, are Iddo and Azariah (2 Chr. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22; 15:1-8).

Of the 8th and 7th century writing prophets, the narratives of the Former Prophets only mentions Isaiah, during the kingship of Hezekiah (2 Kg. 19-20), and Jonah, during the kingship of Jeroboam II (2 Kg. 14:25). Still, the pattern of prophet versus king or prophet versus people as a balance of moral power carries through in the written oracles of the Latter Prophets. The 8th century prophets in the north, Amos and Hosea, bitterly denounced the covenant violations of the nation. Isaiah and Micah followed the same course in the south. Later, this same pattern is clearly discernable in the writings of Zephaniah and Jeremiah in Jerusalem after the north had gone into exile.

It should be observed, of course, that the office of prophet, like the offices of king and priest, could be exploited. The deceitful prophet of Bethel indirectly caused the death of the prophet from Judah in the days of Jeroboam I (1 Kg. 13:7-32). Similarly, during the kingship of Jehoshaphat, Micaiah stood alone against a coterie of court prophets who were no more than "yes" men to Ahab (1 Kg. 22). Particularly in the latter narrative, the test of genuine prophecy as given in Torah (cf. Dt. 18:21-22) was vindicated in the outcome of Ahab and Jehoshaphat's war.²⁵ Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel contended with other prophets, whose oracles conflicted with the true word of Yahweh (Je. 2:8; 4:9; 5:12-13, 30-31; 6:13-14; 14:13-15; 23:9-40; 27:9-10, 14-18; 28:1-17; 37:19; Eze. 13:1-23; 22:28).

The Latter Prophets

In the 8th century BC, a new feature developed among the prophets, and it is this feature that is the most prominent distinction between the Former and the Latter Prophets, and indeed, between Israel's writing prophets and any other sort of prophet in the ancient Near East. This new feature was the committing of the prophetic oracles to writing. Whereas in the Former Prophets the nature of the prophetic oracle was bound tightly to the context of historical narrative, in the Latter Prophets the prophetic oracles were less dependent upon narrative contexts. To be sure, there are some narratives in the Latter Prophets, but for the most part, the reader is left to discover the historical context on his or her own. Furthermore, whereas in the Former Prophets the oracles were delivered primarily to individuals, such as, Elijah to Ahab or Elisha to Jehu, in the Latter Prophets the oracles, with some notable exceptions, are directed toward the entire community.

²⁵S. DeVries, *Prophet Against Prophet* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), pp. 142-144.

The process by which the prophetic oracles were encoded is only occasionally described. In the case of Jeremiah, the prophet dictated some of his oracles to his scribe Baruch (Je. 36:1-4). Later, when this scroll had been rejected and destroyed by Jehoiakim, Jeremiah was compelled to dictate them again, this time expanding the original edition (Je. 36:32; 45:1). Another of Jeremiah's oracles was originally produced in the form of a letter (Je. 29:1). Isaiah on one occasion recorded an oracle on a clay tablet (Is. 30:8), and so did Habakkuk (Ha. 2:2). Occasional references to scrolls appear in the Latter Prophets (Is. 8:1; Je. 30:2; 51:60), but these are more the exception than the norm. For the most part, the reader is not enlightened as to the method of recording, whether by the prophet himself or by a scribe, and further, whether later editing was performed by the prophet or by others.²⁶

In general, one should assume that the author of a given prophetic book is the prophet whose name prefaces the collection of oracles. There are some collections in which scholars debate whether there may be one or more voices speaking in the oracles. The two most debated of these collections is Isaiah and Zechariah, and many if not most scholars divide them into two or more authors.²⁷ Also, it is unclear if the name Malachi is a proper name or simply a designation (it means "my messenger").

Dating the prophetic works is equally complicated. While a number of the prophets date their oracles, usually with respect to the regnal years of particular kings of Israel and Judah, at least six of them offer no clear historical markers. For these latter prophets, their historical contexts must be calculated by correlating internal evidences in their sermons with what is known of ancient Near Eastern history, and of course, such a process is considerably more subjective and has led to scholarly differences. Following are the prophets who date their oracles by correlating them with known historical figures:

8th Century BC

Amos (during the reigns of Uzziah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel, cf. 1:1)

²⁶ It has been the general assumption of many scholars that the process of encoding the prophetic oracles had a long literary tradition, moving from oral tradition to codification, with subsequent editorial revisions by circles of disciples, and the final form and collection of the oracles being accomplished later still. It may be that disciples of the prophets memorized their sayings and perhaps even assisted in editing them. They may have added introductory formulae, incorporated historical narratives, and produced explanatory transitions to assist later readers. Still, such suggestions are largely hypothetical, and while they may be plausible, they should not be taken as certainties, cf. G. Smith, "The Prophets," *ISBE* (1986) 3.998-999.

²⁷ The details of these debates will be taken up when addressing the individual books.

Hosea (during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah and Jeroboam II of Israel, 1:1)

Isaiah (during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah, cf. 1:1)

Micah (during the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah of Judah, 1:1)

7th Century BC

Zephaniah (during the reign of Josiah of Judah, cf. 1:1)

Jeremiah (during the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah of Judah, 1:2-3)

6th Century BC

Ezekiel (during the exile of Jehoiachin of Judah, cf. 1:2)

Post-exile, 6th and 5th centuries BC

Haggai (during the reign of Darius I of Persia, 1:1)

Zechariah (during the reign of Darius I of Persia, 1:1)

Some prophets are very specific in their dating. Ezekiel, for instance, offers not only the general reference to regnal kings, but also records the day, month and year of many of his oracles based on the exile of Jehoiachin (Eze. 1:2). Haggai and Zechariah do the same. Most of the prophets are less precise, however, and simply give more general parameters.

For those prophets who do not give any clear time references, a variety of internal evidence is weighed to give approximate dates. Some of these projected dates are more solid than others. For instance, the Book of Nahum specifically anticipates the destruction of Nineveh, so it must predate 612 BC, when Nineveh fell (1:1). On the other hand, the same oracles mention the Assyrian attack upon Thebes, which is known to have occurred in 653 BC (cf. 3:8-10). Hence, it must be later than this event. Assuming that Jonah in the book of his name is the same as the Jonah mentioned in 2 Kings 14:25, one can place Jonah in the 8th century BC. Obadiah reflects upon the Edomites' scorn at the fall of Jerusalem (11-14), and if this mockery refers to the Babylonian destruction of the city, it must be dated after 587 BC. Habakkuk anticipates the Babylonian invasion of Judah (1:5-11), so his ministry must have been prior to 587 BC, though how much earlier is unclear. Joel, also, anticipates an invader from the north, but unfortunately, he does not name the aggressor. Is it Assyria (for an earlier date)? Is it Babylon (for a later date)? Is it Greece (for a much later date)? In the

Hebrew canon, the rabbis placed Joel after Hosea, implying an earlier date. However, the enigmatic reference to the Greeks (3:6) has led many scholars to date it much later. Finally, the work of Malachi must lie after the construction of the second temple (1:10; 3:1, 10) during the Persian Period,²⁸ but how much later is again unclear. Hence, the best that can be offered are approximations for these remaining six prophets.

Jonah (probably in the 8th century)
Joel (possibly in the 8th century, but perhaps later)
Nahum (probably the late 7th century)
Habakkuk (probably the late 7th century)
Obadiah (probably the mid-6th century)
Malachi (probably the mid-5th century)

The Pathos of the Prophets and the Pathos of God

The lives and ministries of the prophets were filled with pathos. Their preaching was fierce, visceral, passionate and direct. The world in which they preached, much like our own, was filled with citizens who believed they had a corner on a progressive economy, upward mobility, the benefits of leisure and the pursuit of beauty and happiness. The prophets, to the contrary, saw vividly the human will to power, unmitigated greed, self-aggrandizement and wholesale deceit. In a word, they were scandalized.

*Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt,
 a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption.
 They have forsaken the LORD;
 they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him.*
 Isa. 1:4

*...the sins of Ephraim are exposed and the crimes of Samaria revealed.
 They practice deceit, thieves break into houses, bandits rob in the streets;
 but they do not realize that I remember their evil deeds.
 Their sins engulf them; they are always before me.*

Ho. 7:1-2

What is most important is to see that the pathos of the prophets reflected the pathos of God himself. Heschel has aptly stated, “God is raging in the prophet’s words.”²⁹ If the prophets tell us anything, they tell us that God is not aloof from the trauma caused by his wayward creatures in the world.

²⁸ The use of the term *pehah* in 1:8 (= governor) is a Persian title.

²⁹ Heschel, p. 5.

God is indignant, offended and betrayed by his own people, and the explosive messages of his spokesmen document that hurt and indignation.

*I reared up children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.
The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger,
but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.*

Isa. 1:2b-3

Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'—safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the LORD.

Jer. 7:9-11

The images of betrayal burst from the prophets lips as though they gushed from the very heart of the Almighty! When Hosea's wife deserted him to become a prostitute, her faithless desertion matched the northern nation's abandonment of God himself (Ho. 1:2; 2:2). When Ezekiel's wife died on the day that Jerusalem fell, the stoic desolation of the prophet, who lost "the delight of his eyes", mirrored the desolation of God (Eze. 24:15-27; 33:21-22). The weeping of Jeremiah (Je. 9:1) was nothing less than the weeping of God (Je. 14:17). The anguish of shattered relationship—husband and wife, parent and child—was like a haunting cry in the night.

*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me.
They sacrificed to the Baals
and they burned incense to images.
It was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
taking them by the arms;
But they did not realize
it was I who healed them.*

Ho. 11:1-3

Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, 'live!' I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointment on you. But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his.

Eze. 16:6, 9, 15

Worse, Judah's leaders were passive. Both priest and court prophet, wise man and ruler, raised no serious objection (Je. 5:31; 6:13-14; 8:9-11; Eze.

22:6, 25-30), and worse, the leaders joined the melee to seek their own advantage.

Against this malaise, the prophets shouted the declarations of Yahweh, earning them the scorn of their peers. They were ridiculed as madmen (Je. 29:26), dismissed as fools (Ho. 9:7), jailed as traitors (Je. 37:16; 38:6-13), and banned from the court (Am. 7:12-13; Je. 36:5). This alienation isolated the prophets and relegated them to a life of social misery. They endured hatred (Am. 5:10) and rejection (Je. 25:3), misery (Mic. 7:1) and despair (Je. 20:14-18). Still, the scorn heaped upon the prophets was no more than the scorn heaped upon God. The prophets lived out on earth what God was, so to speak, living out in the heavens. God was not merely a spectator but a participant with his people. Yahweh suffered profound disappointment (Is. 5:1-7) and the wrenching pain of betrayal (Is. 2:11-13, 20-25). When his people sinned, they are not merely breaking laws, but relationships! If God's mixture of divine anger and parental grief made his discipline of Israel visceral (Is. 1:5-6; Ho. 11:8-11), his divine compassion was equally compelling. The pathos of God is not only to judge but also to restore (Ho. 14:1-4). After his wife played the harlot, God commanded Hosea to buy her back. He was to "love her as the LORD loves the Israelites" (Ho. 3:1). Judgment was never the prophets' final word. Rather, redemption and restoration lay on the far side of judgment.

I will show my love to the one I called, 'Not my loved one.'

I will say to those called 'Not my people,' 'You are my people';
and they will say, 'You are my God.'

Ho. 2:23

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

Eze. 36:25-27

God's eagerness for this new relationship was so profound, so urgent, that he describes himself as "gasping and panting" like a mother on the verge of giving birth (Is. 42:14). The zeal of Yahweh for restoration along with his anger at the nations for destroying Jerusalem fueled his mercy (Zec. 1:14-17). On the far side of judgment lay a new covenant. Unlike the old one, it would not be characterized by retributive justice, but rather, forgiveness and mercy (Je. 31:31-34). Hence, while the prophet bore the agony of watching the destruction of his own nation, he also was called upon to await the majesty of a future justice (Ha. 2:2-3). In the meantime, he was called to live

by faith (Ha. 2:4b). The distresses of the present were to be carried patiently (Ha. 3:16), and though the evidence of God's future mercy might be anything but apparent, the joy of God's sure promise would become the force that held him steady (Ha. 3:17-19).

Did the Prophets Intend to Subvert the Temple Cult?

The relationship of the prophets to the sacrificial system and the temple cult bears closer scrutiny. The institutions of temple and priesthood were very old, going back to Moses' construction of the Tabernacle as the worship center (Ex. 25-40) and God's choice of Aaron and his posterity as priests (Ex. 28-29; Lv. 8-10). To be sure, there were developments along the way. The Tabernacle in the desert gave way to the more permanent temple constructed by Solomon on Mt. Zion (1 Kg. 5-6; 2 Chr. 2-7). The line of high priests after the debacle of Eli's administration was narrowed to the Zadokite branch (1 Sa. 2:27-36; 2 Sa. 15:24-37; 1 Kg. 1:22-39; 2:35; 4:2; 1 Chr. 16:39-41; 2 Chr. 31:10; Eze. 40:46; 43:19; 44:15-16; 48:11). Still, both temple and priesthood served the Israelites as fundamental religious structures derived from antiquity.

In view of the antiquity of these fundamental structures, it comes as something of a shock to hear the prophets railing against the temple and its services.

*I hate, I despise your religious feasts;
I cannot stand your assemblies.
Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.
Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.*
Amos 5:21-22

*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgement of God rather than burnt offerings.*

Hosea 6:6

*'The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?' says the LORD.
I have more than enough of burnt offerings,
of rams and the fat of fattened animals;
I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.
When you come to meet with me, who has asked this of you,
this trampling of my courts?
Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me.
New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your evil assemblies.
Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts my soul hates.
They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them.*

Isaiah 1:11-14

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has showed you, O man, what is good.

And what does the LORD require of you?

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:6-8

Such diatribes have led some interpreters to conclude that the prophets were anti-temple and anti-priesthood. In fact, within some streams of Jewish thinking this perceived subversion of the temple is believed to have been a first step toward the eventual emergence of Judaism *sans* temple and *sans* priesthood.³⁰

In both contemporary Judaism and Christianity, there are pockets of theological resistance to the notion of blood atonement on the grounds that it is barbarous, sadistic, cruel, too accepting of the concept of divine appeasement and too incompatible with divine love. The prophetic attacks on the temple and priesthood are used as support for such conclusions. For those within Judaism, the ability to practice faith outside the traditional cult, which became a temporary expedient during the Babylonian exile, became an ongoing necessity for the survivors of the Jewish revolt after 70 AD, when the second temple was destroyed. For post-Enlightenment Protestant liberals, the notion of substitutionary atonement could be safely set aside in view of the writing prophets' message of social and moral reform. The ministry of Jesus, in a similar fashion, could be viewed along social and moral lines rather than sacrificial lines.

Such a construction is far too sweeping. Such oracles against the temple and priesthood, as blistering as they were, aimed at reinvigorating the sacrificial system by a deep moral transformation of society and a heartfelt return to the covenant ideals.³¹ This second position seems most viable in the larger context of the oracles of the prophets. In the first place, some prophets, such as Jeremiah and Ezekiel, were themselves priests (cf. Je. 1:1; Eze. 1:3).

While both leveled criticisms at Israelite worshipers who were inclined to embrace both the temple and paganism (Je. 7, 26; Eze. 8:1—11:25), neither seem to have condemned temple worship in principle, but rather, the careless form to which it had been reduced. To be sure, the first temple would suffer

³⁰ M. Cohen, "The Prophets as Revolutionaries: A Sociopolitical Analysis," *BAR* (May/June 1979), pp. 12-19.

³¹ Cohen, p. 14.

God's judgment because of the sins of the nation, but Jeremiah clearly envisioned the restoration of Mt. Zion as the center of worship (Je. 31:6, 12, 23). Ezekiel is even more specific, for he offers an expansive vision of a future temple, complete with the entire sacrificial system (Eze. 40-48). This could hardly have been the case if Ezekiel was anti-temple in principle. Isaiah, though not a priest, nevertheless received his call in the context of temple worship (Is. 6). He does not seem to flinch at the idea that Yahweh dwells on Mt. Zion in the temple (Is. 8:18). His oracles are replete with references to the future exaltation of Mt. Zion (Is. 1:27; 2:1-5; 12:6; 14:32; 18:7; 24:23; 28:16; 33:5, 20-22; 35:10). By the time one reaches the oracles in Isaiah 40-66, the vision of the restoration of Zion reaches a veritable crescendo (Is. 40:9ff.; 44:28; 46:13; 51:3; 52:1-12; 56:4-7; 60:7, 14; 62:1ff.; 66:19-21). Micah pictures God's judgment as coming from the temple (Mic. 1:2), and in the restoration, he echoes Isaiah that the "mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains" (Mic. 4:2; cf. Is. 2:2). It would be from Mt. Zion that Yahweh's law would go forth! Habakkuk's declaration that since Yahweh was in his holy temple, the whole earth should keep silence before him can hardly be taken as anti-temple in principle (Ha. 2:20). Joel's urging of the priests to intercede between the porch and the altar certainly is a trenchant call, but not anti-temple (Jl. 2:1, 15-17). In fact, his vision for the future includes the enthronement of Yahweh on Mt. Zion (Jl. 3:17, 21). Zephaniah, also, envisions a future restoration of Zion (Zep. 3:14-17). Even in the belly of the fish, Jonah prayed "facing" the temple (Jonah 2:4, 7). Thus, by the time one reaches the post-exilic prophets, this vision of a restored temple on Mt. Zion took historical shape in the building of the second temple as especially urged by Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1-2; 6:14; Hg. 1:2, 9, 13-15; 2:6-9; Zec. 4:8-9; 6:12-15; 8:9). The ideal was not to eradicate temple worship, but to raise the quality of its service to true holiness.

Conditional and Unconditional Prophecy

The law of the prophet was severe! If a prophet gave a prediction that did not happen, he spoke presumptuously and was liable to the ultimate penalty (Dt. 18:20-22). A striking example of this law in action occurred during the lifetime of Jeremiah. After the early deportation of exiles from Jerusalem to Babylon, Hananiah, a court prophet, predicted that the yoke of Babylon would be broken and the exiles would be headed home within two years (Je. 28:1-4). In rebuttal, the word of Yahweh came to Jeremiah announcing that things would get significantly worse before they were

better, and in fact, Hananiah himself would die under the judgment of God (Je. 28:12-16). That very year, Hananiah died (Je. 28:17).

This law notwithstanding, the nature of predictive prophecy was more complex than simply prediction and historical fulfillment. For one thing, the sermons of the prophets aimed at reforming the wayward hearts of their constituency. Consequently, their warnings about future judgments sometimes were couched in conditional language or at least were conditional by implication. “If” clauses are conditional by definition.

*If you are willing and obedient,
you will eat the best from the land;
But if you resist and rebel,
you will be devoured by the sword.’
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

Isa. 1:19

If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless.

Jer. 7:5-8

The conditional nature of such prophecy directly parallels the reciprocity of the Deuteronomic code. The sworn curses of the covenant for disobedience are the obverse of the blessings for obedience (Dt. 27:15-26; 28:1-68; Lv. 26:1-39). In this sense, all the prophets, more or less, were Deuteronomic, that is, they preached out of an acute awareness of the covenant blessings and cursings.

Two passages, especially, describe this reciprocity. Jeremiah’s visit to the potter’s house, where he watched a potter working at the wheel, demonstrated the effect repentance had on a prophetic announcement of doom:

If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

Jer. 18:7-10

Similarly, Ezekiel' s answer to a misleading proverb from his community prompted him to say:

But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?

But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed he will die.

Eze. 18:21-24

Again and again this reciprocity is demonstrated. Probably the most well-known case is the prediction by Jonah that within 40 days Nineveh of Assyria would be destroyed (Jon. 3:4). In fact, the city was not destroyed, because its citizens repented (Jon. 3:5-10). Joel, similarly, preached that if the nation's citizens would turn to God sincerely—rending their hearts and not merely their garments—God would be gracious and compassionate. “Who knows,” Joel said, “but that God may turn and have pity and leave behind a blessing” (Jl. 2:12-14). Still, such repentance must be more than lip service. Hosea complained that the northern nation offered plenty of wailing but insincerely (Ho. 7:14). The people's commitment was as ephemeral as mist and dew (Ho. 7:4). Jeremiah, similarly, accused Judah of insincere repentance (Je. 3:10). Sometimes a prediction of judgment, while not cancelled, could be temporarily suspended, as in the case of Josiah. Josiah's father, Manasseh, so terribly led the nation to violate the covenant that God's prophetic word was the total destruction of Jerusalem and Judah (2 Kg. 21:10-16). At Josiah's ascension, however, the new king began sweeping reforms, and after the discovery of a lost Torah scroll (probably Deuteronomy), he so completely humbled himself in repentance over the rampant covenant violations that the prophetess Huldah declared divine judgment had been temporarily suspended until after Josiah's lifetime (2 Kg. 22:14-20//2 Chr. 34:22-28).

On the other hand, some predictions of judgment were considered to be irrevocable. They would not be suspended for any reason. Samuel's word to Saul after he had violated the rules of holy war were terse: “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he

should change his mind” (1 Sa. 15:29). Jeremiah preached that even if Moses and Samuel, two of the greatest intercessors in Israelite history (cf. Ex. 32:30-32; Nu. 14:11-20; 1 Sa. 7:5-10), prayed for a reprieve, it would be futile (Je. 15:1). Ezekiel, along the same lines, declared that even if Noah, Daniel and Job were alive, the unfaithfulness of the people was so severe that these three famous righteous men would be able to save only themselves (Eze. 14:12-20). When Zedekiah asked Jeremiah if there might not be a last minute reprieve for Jerusalem, the prophet said the only hope to save lives was to surrender immediately to the Babylonians; otherwise, the city would be burned and the king’s own life would end (Je. 38:1-23).

The upshot of all this suggests that prophecy is never to be considered merely as a mechanical device. Instead, prophecy is relational, because it concerns God’s relationship with his people. Relationships ebb and flow, and prophecy ebbs and flows as well, depending upon how people respond to God. It may be too much to say that all prophecy is conditional, even if the condition is not expressed, but certainly it would be just as much a distortion to think of prophecy as always fixed.

The Living Parables, Mimes and Signs of the Prophets

The prophets not only spoke words, they communicated their messages in powerful, living metaphors. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were masters of acted out messages, but they did not stand alone. One of the earliest was Hosea, whom Yahweh commanded to marry a prostitute (Ho. 1:2). Gomer’s unfaithfulness to Hosea mirrored Israel’s unfaithfulness to God (Ho. 2). The three children in this ruptured marriage became potent symbols, and each of their names carried an ominous message. The oldest, named after the place-name Jezreel, recalled the extermination of Ahab and Jezebel’s family (Ho. 1:4; 1 Kg. 21:23-24; 22:38; 2 Kg. 9:32-37). The second and third, named respectively “Not Loved” and “Not Mine”, reflected the divine rejection of the northern nation (Ho. 1:6, 8-9).

Another prophet using names to symbolize prophetic truths was Isaiah. His sons, named “Quick to the Plunder, Swift to the Spoil” and “A Remnant Will Return”, pointed vividly to the terrible invasion by the northern empire-builders, the consequent exile and the eventual return from exile (Is. 7:3; 8:1-4, 18). Micah, at about that same time, took to walking about town barefoot and naked, howling at the top of his lungs, actions that normally would accompany the ritual mourning for the dead (Mic. 1:8). Samaria, the capital of the north, was marked for death, and the putrefaction of her death wound had infected Judah, also (Mic. 1:9). The entire story of

Jonah is a living parable about those who loved to hate their enemies, and Jonah was the primary exhibit.

It is in the 7th century, however, that two prophets developed to a higher level the prophetic action accompanying the prophetic word. One was Jeremiah of Jerusalem, the other Ezekiel among the early exiles deported to Babylon. Both prophets contended with a community that believed the worst was over and relief was in the wings. Both strenuously sought to convince their peers that such optimism was hopelessly unfounded.

Again and again Jeremiah supplemented his oracles with strange actions. When he was forbidden by God to launder his loincloth, later to bury it near the Euphrates River, and still later to recover it after it had deteriorated beyond usage, his strange parable pointed to the spoiling of Judah (Je. 13:1-11). Smashing pottery symbolized the downfall of David's dynasty and kingdom (Je. 13:12-14; 19:1, 10-11). While terra cotta was soft and malleable, a potter could make and even remake a vessel (Je. 18:1-6), but the people of Judah had become like hardened clay, and no chance remained for reclamation (Je. 18:11-12). In contrast to Hosea and Isaiah, whose marriage and children became signs of exile, Jeremiah's unmarried and childless existence pointed to the coming devastation (Je. 16:1-4). His emotionless stoicism in the face of death or even celebration symbolized the withdrawal of God's compassion from the nation (Je. 16:5-9). Whereas Amos saw a visionary basket of ripe fruit representing the readiness of the northern nation for judgment (Am. 8:1-2), Jeremiah saw two actual baskets of figs, the good figs representing those already in exile and the bad ones symbolizing the citizens of Jerusalem who would yet go into exile (Je. 24:1-10). When Jeremiah began to go about the city with a ox yoke tied on his neck, his actions pointed to Nebuchadnezzar's coming subjugation of Judah (Je. 27:1-7). Similarly, when Jeremiah bought a field in Anathoth during the final siege of Jerusalem, his purchase pointed to the restoration after exile (Je. 32:6-15). Virtually all these living parables were intended to express the certainty of the coming exile to a citizenry who did not believe such a thing could possibly happen to Jerusalem, God's chosen city.

Ezekiel, also, contended with similar sentiments among the exiles of the early deportation. Though they now lived in Babylon, their belief was that the exile was only a temporary setback. In fact, in Jerusalem false prophets were predicting that within a couple years everyone would be home again (Je. 28:1-4)! Those in exile simply could not believe that Jerusalem would actually fall. After all, had not God guaranteed the safety of the city through the covenant of David? Ezekiel, therefore, set about building a model representing Jerusalem's coming siege, complete with siege ramps, a

sword, rations and deprivation (Eze. 4-5). He mimed the attempted escape of Zekekiah through a hole in the wall and the deportation of Jerusalem's citizens when the city would fall (Eze. 12:3-16; cf. 2 Kg. 25:4-7). Sitting at his table, he mimicked the shuddering terror of exile (Eze. 12:17-20). The death of his wife on the very day Jerusalem fell served as the final sign of the death of the city (Eze. 24:15-24). Even though in Babylon no one could have known the day of Jerusalem's fall, Ezekiel marked the day by the death of his wife. Months later, when the report of Jerusalem's fall came through a refugee, the exiles were able to compare the dates (Eze. 24:25-27; 33:21). As with Jeremiah, Ezekiel's task was to announce the coming judgment of God to a community who did not want to believe him. His parables, actions, mimes and signs were directed to this single end.

Written Oracles

The development of writing in the ancient world carried implications for the writing prophets who began recording their oracles in the 8th century BC. This is especially important, since the fundamental transfer of information from one person to another before that time was oral.

The Development of Literacy in the Ancient Near East

Widespread literacy did not begin until approximately the 8th century BC. To be sure, writing was hardly invented in the 8th century. It was known, in one form or another, since about 3000 BC. However, writing in the earliest periods of human civilization was primarily the provenance of the state, the activity of specialists in administration and high culture. Writing was expensive and required the support of the state. Its use by the state gave rise to a special class, the royal scribes. The public, by contrast, was essentially non-literate. Public written documents were not for “reading,” but served as displays of royal power and authority, especially for super-powers in Mesopotamia and Egypt.³²

With the development of the Israelite monarchy, writing became important to the states of Israel and Judah as well. Still, Israelite society was essentially an oral society. While the act of writing is sometimes described in the early documentation of Israelite history (i.e., Moses, Joshua, etc.), many of the references are to monumental inscriptions (Ex. 34:1, 27-28; Nu. 17:2; Dt. 6:9; 17:18; 27:2-3; 31:24-26). Such inscriptions emphasized the mystery and power of the leaders, but they were hardly material for literary consumption by the general public. However, the development of the Semitic alphabet was a long step toward the eventual literacy of the people, and it is to the point that this development occurred within the culture of Syria-Palestine. Certain functions of writing became standardized, such as, horizontal writing from right to left and the stabilization of the alphabet to 22 letters around the beginning of the Iron Age (approximately 12th century BC). The Phoenicians, the Aramaeans, the Ammonites, the Edomites, the Moabites and the Israelites all adopted this Canaanite alphabet, and from about the 10th century BC, Hebrew was written in what is classified as paleo-Hebrew script.³³

³² W. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book: The Textualization of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), pp. 35-63.

³³ J. Barrera, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), pp. 83-84 and W. Whitt, “The Story of the Semitic Alphabet,” *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. Sasson (Peabody, MA: Hendriksen, 2000), IV.2379-2397.

From Oral Tradition to Codification

The emergence of biblical Hebrew out of the mix of ancient Near Eastern northwest Semitic languages was an oral process before it was a written process. Biblical Hebrew has close connections with Ugaritic, Phoenician, Moabitish, and Edomitish, and all these languages went through similar processes of development. By the time of Israel's monarchy, scribes had become a necessary part of the royal court of the Israelite kings. Still, writing was primarily under the patronage of the state and primarily for administrative record keeping. The "average" Israelite would not have been literate, though occasionally there were exceptions (cf. Jg. 8:14).

To a large degree, the increase in literacy from the 9th to the 8th centuries must be credited to the impact of the Assyrian Empire, the first of the great Mesopotamian Empires that controlled substantial portions of the Levant. As Assyria moved westward in its conquests, it brought with it one polity, one economy and one language (Aramaic).

Peoples of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech...I made them of one mouth. (Dur-Sharrukin cylinder)

The period of Hezekiah saw an increased emphasis on written texts. Collection and codification of wisdom literature began (Pro. 25:1). With the exile of Israel in the north, refugees swelled Jerusalem to quadruple its former size. In turn, increased writing became part of the urban infrastructure. Archaeologically, an explosion of writing on ostraca and pots, in tombs, and graffiti on walls occurred over much of the Levant, signaling a sudden growth of literacy generally. In Judah, for instance, *lemelek* stamps (= belonging to the king), the Siloam inscription (describing the construction of Hezekiah's tunnel in 701 BC), the Lachish Letters (correspondence between military officers during the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem), and the collection of sermons by the 8th century prophets (the beginning of the writing prophets) are part of this literary explosion. Hezekiah communicated to outlying areas of his kingdom by written documents (2 Chr. 30:1). Almost every major city of the Neo-Assyrian Empire built and maintained libraries and archives, and Hezekiah's "men" in Jerusalem were part of this wider movement. The period of Josiah, especially, was marked by extensive religious reform spurred by the discovery of a text of the Torah (2 Kg. 22//2 Chr. 34).

As a result of Assyrian encroachment, urbanization increased dramatically. In the previous period, Sennacherib had destroyed most of the

major outlying cities and villages in Judah. Archaeologists estimate an approximate 70% decrease in outlying populated areas of Judah following his invasion. With increased urbanization, bureaucracy and literacy increased in direct proportion. The simplification of language through the development of the alphabet fostered wider literacy. At Arad, a fortress in southern Judah, no less than 88 ostraca were uncovered from this period concerning military and government activities. With the discovery of the Torah scroll in the temple, a scribe read it to Josiah, Judah's king, who may not himself have been literate.³⁴ Still, the power of the written word could not be denied.

All this foregoing development precedes and accompanies the codification of the oracles of the writing prophets. It is difficult to assess whether the writing prophets began recording their sermons for personal record-keeping or public consumption. Presumably their sermons were given orally. Nonetheless, the codification of these sermons become the definitive aspect of what distinguishes the Former Prophets from the Latter Prophets in the Hebrew Bible. Initially, there may have been some tension between the living voice of oral tradition and the codification of material in texts (Je. 8:8). Still, at Yahweh's word Jeremiah dictated his oracles to his scribe Baruch (cf. Je. 36). In the end, the oracles of the writing prophets have come down to us in four large scrolls, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve.

The Metaphorical Language of the Prophets

If the pathos of the prophet is the pathos of Yahweh, the vehicle of that pathos is the language of metaphor. Metaphor (and by metaphor we speak broadly, including a wide range of figures of speech, such as, simile, synecdoche, metonymy, personification, hyperbole, euphemism, irony and so forth) communicates not merely facts but passion. It employs extreme language, both exultant and raw, to impart to the listeners the way they should feel about things as well as the way they should think about things.

The oracles of the prophets are filled with metaphors. Formally, metaphors are a manner of communication in which figurative language directly compares two things without the use of "as" or "like", defining one thing in light of another. Metaphors often use two nouns not normally associated together but joined by a linking verb (e.g., "that man is a thorn in my side").

The house of Israel has become dross to me; all of them are copper, tin, iron and lead left inside a furnace. (Eze. 22:18)

³⁴ Schniedewind, pp. 64-114.

Usually, metaphors are picturesque, expressing ideas in visual images. Such images carry poetic character whether or not they are expressed in formal poetic lines.

You stumble day and night, and the prophets stumble with you. So, I will destroy your mother. (Ho. 4:5)

Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and compassionate. (Jl. 2:13)

Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness. (Is. 45:8)

Often enough, this manner of expression begins with something non-figurative and makes it figurative.

I will rebuke your offspring and spread dung on your faces, and I will put you out of my presence. (Mal. 2:3)

Circumcise yourselves to the Lord; remove the foreskin of your heart. (Je. 4:4)

Because of their intense visual capacity, metaphors increase memorability. They have incredible capacity for conveying abstract ideas. They offer literary elegance and express thoughts and feelings as well as describe concrete objects. At a rhetorical level, they increase persuasive power. At the same time, because they are more ambiguous than literal descriptions, they invite interaction between the speaker and listener. It is to the point that metaphorical language is very often not intended to be taken too literally. When Joel, for instance, says that the mountains will “drip with new wine” and the hills will “flow with milk” (Jl. 3:18), it is hardly that we are to take this language at face value. Especially in the language of wrath and curses as well as the language of love and blessing, metaphor expresses the powerful emotive aspect of God’s perspective as much as a literal description of what actually will take place.³⁵

Because God is himself mystery, the language of metaphor is used by the prophets to describe the ineffable. Human language is too limited to describe an unlimited God. Therefore, metaphors regarding God often are

³⁵ For a much fuller treatment of prophetic metaphor, see the excellent work by D. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 19-102.

extreme, containing hyperbole. God's curses and statements of wrath as well as his expressions of love and promises of blessing are cases in point:

I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh; they will be drunk on their own blood, as with wine. (Is. 49:26)

Though they hide from me at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent to bite them (Am. 9:3)

You will drink the milk of nations and be nursed at royal breasts. (Is. 60:16)

I will make streams flow down the slopes...I will turn the desert into a pool of water. (Is. 41:18)

While the genre of apocalyptic largely belongs to a later time, the roots of apocalyptic lie in the prophets as well. Apocalyptic language is visionary and fantastic, describing the world, history and figures in figurative, graphic and bizarre ways. It calls upon the reader to enter a world of imaginative metaphor in order to address a serious crisis of faith: if God is truly in control, why are things so bad? The answer is that God will intervene radically and unexpectedly to resolve the crisis. Apocalyptic calls for worship of the one, true God who can be counted on. It offers insight into cosmic issues and hope for the persecuted. It urges purity among God's people, and it gives assurance of God's victory. Because apocalyptic uses extreme metaphors, the ambiguity of precise meanings is increased. Apocalyptic is like a soft-focus lens—more translucent than transparent. It is more like impressionism than realism. Specific details are often unclear and unintended. The primary purpose is not merely to impart "factual" information, but rather, to call for commitment to God in the midst of evil times.³⁶

In that day the LORD will thresh from the flowing Euphrates to the Wadi of Egypt, and you, O Israelites, will be gathered up one by one. (Is. 27:12)

So I took the cup from the LORD's hand and made all the nations to whom he sent me drink it. (Je. 25:17)

Then the LORD showed me four craftsmen. I asked, "What are these coming to do?" He answered, "These are the horns that scattered Judah so that no one could raise his head, but the craftsmen have come to terrify

³⁶ For an extensive treatment of apocalyptic metaphor, see Sandy, pp. 103-210.

them and throw down these horns of the nations who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter its people. (Zec. 1:20-21)

Poetry and Prose

Literature in the writing prophets appears in both poetry and prose. While this difference was not well understood in the older translations of the English Bible (which tended to print all sections of the Bible as prose), today virtually all translations offer biblical texts with a clear recognition of poetic forms where they occur. Because ancient Near Eastern poetry has a distinctive character, the interpreter of the prophets must know something of these dynamics to fully appreciate how they affect the meaning.

It is universally recognized that poetry in the ancient Near East, Hebrew included, is most clearly identified by parallel lines that bear a thought relationship to each other, either of similarity, contrast or some other type of development. In addition, Hebrew poetry contains rhythm or meter, the recurring pattern of sounds. The first feature, parallelism, can to a large degree be replicated in translation, since it does not depend upon phonetics, but rather, the parallelism of ideas. The second feature, rhythm and meter, cannot easily be reproduced in a second language.³⁷ Hence, English translations of the Bible can set forth the prophetic poems in lines that aid the reader in discerning the parallel thoughts, but one must be conversant in the Hebrew text of the Bible to discern phonetic rhythms.

The earliest types of parallelism recognized were synonymous or congruent (where parallel lines express the same thought in different words), antithetic (where parallel lines express contrasting thoughts), and synthetic (where succeeding parallel lines in some way develop the idea presented in the first line). In time, other forms were discovered, including chiasmic structures (where parallel ideas are presented in inverted patterns) and staircase or climactic parallelism (a step-like pattern in which elements from the first line are repeated in succeeding lines).³⁸ Following are representative examples of the above types.

Synonymous or Congruent Parallelism (A₁,A₂,A₃// A₁,A₂,A₃ , etc.)

*For I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings (Ho. 6:6)*

*The shields of the soldiers are red;
the warriors are clad in scarlet. (Na. 2:3a)*

³⁷ To explore meter in the Hebrew language, see W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1986), pp. 87-113.

³⁸ A. Berlin, "Parallelism," *ABD* (1992) V.156-157.

Antithetic Parallelism (A₁,A₂,A₃// -A₁,-A₂,-A₃ , etc.)

*You do not stay angry forever,
but delight to show mercy. (Mic. 7:18b)*

*They do not cry out to me from their hearts,
but wail upon their beds. (Ho. 7:14a)*

Synthetic Parallelism (A_b,B_c,C_d, etc.)

*What the locust swarm has left,
the great locusts have eaten;
what the great locusts have left,
the young locusts have eaten;
what the young locusts have left,
the other locusts have eaten. (Jl. 1:4)*

Chiasm (AB//BA, ABCBA, ABCCBA, etc.)

*Announce
in Judah,
and in Jerusalem
proclaim. (Je. 4:5a)³⁹*

*See, he is puffed up;
his desires are not upright—
but the righteous will live by his faith—
indeed, wine betrays him;
he is arrogant and never at rest. (Ha. 2:4-5a)*

*Make the heart of this people calloused;
make their ears dull
and close their eyes.
Otherwise they might see with their eyes,
hear with their ears,
understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed. (Is. 6:10)*

Staircase or Climactic

*Return, O Virgin Israel,
return to your towns. (Je. 31:21b)*

*Were you angry with the rivers, O LORD?
Was your wrath against the streams?
Did you rage against the sea? (Ha. 3:8a)*

³⁹ Unfortunately, the NIV did not follow the word order of the Hebrew text, and thereby destroyed the chiastic structure.

Various other types of parallelisms have also been explored, such as, word pairs, the use of metaphor and simile in parallelism, and so forth. Linguistic attention to grammatical, semantical, lexical and phonological issues, well beyond the scope of this study, also have become part of the advanced study of Hebrew poetry.⁴⁰

While the average reader of the prophets may not be able to follow up on all these features of Hebrew poetry, an awareness of at least the basic feature of parallelism is indispensable.

Theories of Editing

With the now standard historical-critical assumptions about sources underlying the present form of the Pentateuch, it is hardly surprising that scholarly works about the prophets have extended the same discipline toward finding sources underlying the collected works of the prophets.⁴¹ We know, for instance, that the final form of Jeremiah's work seems to have derived from pre-existing smaller collections of oracles by the prophet. His earlier works were dictated to his scribe during the reign of Jehoiakim (Je. 36:1-4), and after these had been destroyed by the king (Je. 36:23), a new edition was produced that included expansions (Je. 36:27-28, 32). In addition, Jeremiah composed a letter to the exiles already in Babylon (Je. 29:1) as well as other oracles on scrolls (Je. 30:2). These indications account for the collection of Jeremiah's early oracles, but they do not account for what he composed later during the reign of Zedekiah. Hence, the final form of Jeremiah must be credited, at the very least, to the bringing together (or expansion) of his oracles from more than one period of his life and ministry.

Source criticism did not stop here, however. Scholars began working with the assumption that since the oracles of the prophets were regional, that is, since they were given in particular circumstances rather than as universal messages, their collection and redaction included a de-politicizing and de-historicizing of their sermons in order to make them more applicable to a wider audience and for concerns other than the original. Scholars assumed that in addition to the core of authentic prophecies from Isaiah, Jeremiah,

⁴⁰ To explore these aspects of Hebrew poetry, see Watson and Berlin, cited above, as well as N. Ridderbos and H. Wolf, *ISBE* (1986) 3.891-898.

⁴¹ Of course, the past two centuries of Pentateuchal criticism has seen considerable modifications, but while the model has been revised in various ways, the basic approach has not been abandoned. Modern scholars still generally recognize sources underlying the present form of the Pentateuch. While more recently the classical paradigm has been challenged, no new consensus has arisen to decisively replace the traditional approach. For a brief review of this history, see A. Campbell & M. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1992), pp. 1-20 and B. Arnold, "Pentateuchal Criticism, History of," *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), pp. 622-631.

Ezekiel and others, the original oracles had been edited and expanded by prophetic “schools”, disciples or admirers of the prophet who came later. Hence, one could speak of an “Isaianic school” or an “Ezekiel school”.⁴² For some scholars, it was axiomatic that tension existed between the words of the prophets in their original context and the shape given to these oracles by later editors, since it was conjectured that editorial revisions were conducted in the interests of later generations.⁴³ Of course, such an approach was highly speculative, but it became fashionable and offered a whole new range of interpretive options.

More recently, this approach has come under justifiable criticism. For one thing, the wider phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East demonstrates that accuracy of wording and speedy reporting of prophetic oracles, especially to the king, was the order of the day. Such oracles were archived verbatim. There is no hard evidence whatsoever of redacted versions of, say, the oracles recorded in the Mari archives from the 18th century BC or the Assyrian archives in the 7th century BC. The notion of later editing is simply not part of the general ancient Near Eastern picture. Further, as Kenneth Kitchen has observed, “For the mass of highly ingenious guesswork and scholarly imagination along these lines, poured out by the presses for over a century now, and never more than in the recent decades, there is not one respectable scintilla of solid, firsthand evidence. Not one.”⁴⁴

Probably the two prophetic books that have received the most concentrated attention in this regard have been Isaiah and Zechariah. For a long time, the unity of Isaiah has been rejected by historical-critical scholars, who have divided it into either 1 and 2 Isaiah (chapters 1-39 and 40-66 respectively) or 1 and 2 and 3 Isaiah (1-39, 40-55, 56-66, each section reflecting a different time period and/or geographical milieu). It is fair to say that the case for dividing Isaiah is the strongest of any of the prophets, since a new orientation is clearly present beginning in chapter 40. Chapters 1-39 are oriented toward Jerusalem in the 8th century BC, while chapters 40 and afterward are oriented toward the exile and hope beyond exile in the 6th century BC (for more details on this, see the later section on the Book of Consolation). Still, unless one wishes to discard out of hand the notion of predictive prophecy (which many historical-critical scholars, in fact, do discard), there is nothing inherently impossible in a single voice offering oracles that address two different situations. This is not to deny out of hand

⁴² The various essays in R. Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996) may be taken as representative samples.

⁴³ J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 286.

⁴⁴ K. Kitchen, p. 392.

that the latter sections of Isaiah could not have been composed later than the 8th century and appended to the book that bears his name, but at the very least, the confident way in which this theory is asserted calls for moderation. There is, and never has been, any hard textual evidence of this supposed split.

Zechariah, similarly, is split by historical-critical scholars into chapters 1-8 and chapters 9-14, the first section composed by Zechariah in the context of the building of the second temple and the final section by an unknown Jewish writer whose context is no longer known. Differences in style, contents and vocabulary, which clearly are present, are the primary issues.⁴⁵ As with Isaiah, while the possibility certainly cannot be dismissed that some anonymous but genuine prophetic oracles may have been attached to the end of the original Zechariah, it still remains that there is no hard textual evidence of such an expansion. Every text of Zechariah handed down to us contains no break between chapters 8 and 9, and this includes the fragments discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴⁶ While John Collins can assert that chapters 9-14 have been classified as part of the book since the Middle Ages, which implies that it might have been otherwise earlier, surely the unbroken textual tradition that extends backward as far as the pre-Christian era must be acknowledged.⁴⁷ As for the others prophets, the reasons for reading into them interpolations, expansions, and other theories of redaction are even more subjective. Could there have been such expansions by later “disciples” of the prophets? Possibly. We know, for instance, that even the Torah had some such expansions, even if one does not follow the scholarly conventions of the documentary hypothesis (cf. Jos. 24:25-26). Still, it seems more profitable to read the prophet’s oracles as they were handed down, considering them to be largely if not entirely the work of the prophet whose name prefaces the collection. While speculative questions about later editing may be explored, there are no “assured results” of such redactional theories.

⁴⁵ For a history of critical studies in Zechariah, see O. Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. P. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), pp. 434-440.

⁴⁶ 4Q80XII^e is the oldest witness to this text, cf. R. Fuller, “Minor Prophets,” *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. Schiffman and J. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000) I.557.

⁴⁷ Collins, p. 411. Collins makes this statement because some early Christians, based upon Matthew’s quotation of Zec. 9:12-13 which was attributed to Jeremiah, contended that either Zec. 9-11 or 9-14 were composed by Jeremiah, not Zechariah.

The Political Background of the Prophets

Before the Divided Monarchy

The further one moves back into antiquity, the more questions arise with only partial answers and less hard data. For many centuries, the biblical accounts were almost the only ones available for studying this ancient past. In the past century and a half, a growing body of archaeological, literary and inscriptional evidence has come to light to inform us and fill in many of the details not addressed in the biblical documents. Of course, such discoveries have not been entirely even. While some discoveries have tended to confirm or at least enlighten biblical accounts, others have raised additional questions, especially where the descriptions in the Bible can be difficult to reconcile with the evidence uncovered by the spade. It is far beyond the scope of this work to address this scholarly debate here.⁴⁸ Still, it should be observed that there is currently an academic “tug-of-war” between what are called “minimalists” and “maximalists”, minimalists being those scholars who are skeptical of the historical accounts in the Bible and accept them only if they can be verified by independent evidence, and maximalists being those scholars who generally accept the historical integrity of the Bible and are unafraid to reconcile its accounts with known external data.⁴⁹ This work cheerfully fits into the latter category. Hence, its view of history, while not depending upon the Bible alone, see broad harmonies between biblical history and the known external history of the ancient Near East.

Our present state of knowledge about the politics of the Levant before the time of the divided monarchy is fragmentary. The earliest external mention of the people of Israel (apart from the Bible) comes from the Merneptah Stela, erected in Thebes by Pharaoh Merneptah in about 1209 BC (his fifth regnal year). It is a poetic eulogy of his victories, and included

⁴⁸ For an important recent treatment, however, see K. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁴⁹ The terms “minimalist” and “maximalist” were introduced into the historical discussion by William Hallo of Yale University in the hopes of offering less pejorative terms to describe polarized scholars, though by his own admission, the terms have themselves become the new pejorative epithets, cf. R. Hendel, W. Hallo and K. Kitchen, “The Kitchen Debate,” *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2005), p.50. For some insight into the debate, see the series of articles: P. Davies, “What Separates a Minimalist from a Maximalist,” W. Dever, “Save Us from Postmodern Malarkey,” T. Thompson, “Can You Understand This?,” *BAR* (Mar/Apr 2000), pp. 22-37. Also, see, J. Hackett, et al., “Defusing Pseudo-Scholarship: The Siloam Inscription Ain’t Hasmonian,” *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1997), pp. 41ff.; H. Shanks, “Face to Face: Biblical Minimalists Meet Their Challengers,” *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1997), pp. 26ff.; A. Millard, “How Reliable is the Exodus?,” *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2000), pp. 50ff.

among his named conquests over various Canaanite entities are Ashkelon, Gezer and Israel.⁵⁰ The emergence of Israel in the central hill-lands of Canaan is marked by the veritable explosion of new settlements at about the transition between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I.⁵¹ The intermediate period between the conquest of Canaan and the beginning of the monarchy, when the Israelites were clinging to a marginal and tenuous existence among various Canaanite city-states, contains only a couple references to prophets, Deborah, the prophetess from the central hill-lands who led Israel's war against Jabin, and Sisera (Jg. 4:4), and an unnamed prophet who reprimanded the Israelites for worshipping in the Amorite cult (Jg. 6:7-10). By the end of this period, Samuel was attested as a prophet, and his career was copiously detailed (cf. 1 Sa. 3:20). He became the central figure in the transition from the period of the tribal confederacy to the monarchy.

The politics of this period left Canaan more or less without serious threat from the great empire builders to the north and south. The Assyrians from Mesopotamia had not yet begun their aggressive expansion. Before 935 BC all the way back to Tukulti-Ninurta I (1245-1208), very few Assyrian kings made it as far west as Syria. In Egypt from the time of Ramesses III (ca. 1175) the imperial campaigns stopped until Siamun (ca. 970-960 BC) and Shoshenq I, who invaded Judah about 926/925 BC.⁵² The ancient Hittite Empire from Anatolia was also in decline, augmented by internal problems much closer to home as well as external threats.⁵³ Hence, the development of the Israelite monarchy occurred largely without long-range interference. Closer to home, of course, were threats from various Canaanite entities, the most serious being the Philistines, one of the groups of Sea Peoples who invaded Egypt and the Levant from the Aegean at about the beginning of the 12th century BC. In the period from about 1150-1000BC, the Philistines were Israel's primary enemy, and in the biblical record they figure prominently during the periods of Samuel, Saul and David.⁵⁴ However, when David successfully confined the Philistines to the south coastal plain and consolidated the Israelite nation around his new capital in Jerusalem, he was able to establish Israel as a mini-empire similar to other mini-empires of the period, such as, Carchemish (northern Syria), Tarhuntassa (southeast Asia

⁵⁰ J. Pritchard, *ANET* (1969) p. 378.

⁵¹ A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), pp. 334-338.

⁵² Kitchen, pp. 88-91.

⁵³ H. Hoffner, Jr., "Hittites," *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. H. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 130-131.

⁵⁴ D. Howard, Jr., "Philistines," *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. H. Hoerth, G. Mattingly and E. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), pp. 231-241.

Minor) and Aram-Zobah (southern Syria).⁵⁵ It was during the development of the monarchy that the role of the prophet as a divine spokesman who opposed deviating leaders became prominent. Samuel opposed Saul (1 Sa. 13:8-14; 15:10-29), Nathan and Gad opposed David (2 Sa. 12:1-14; 24:11-14), and Ahijah opposed Solomon (1 Kg. 11:29-39). Of course, prophets could be supportive of kings as well (i.e., 1 Sa. 22:5; 2 Sa. 7:3ff.), but their more obvious role was to oppose their kings' improprieties, Saul for violations in Yahweh War, David for adultery and military arrogance, and Solomon for allowing pagan religion a foothold in Jerusalem.

The Division of the Monarchy

When the monarchy ruptured upon the death of Solomon, the mini-empire established by David dissolved into two smaller kingdoms, both second-rate states. The biblical record in 1 and 2 Kings traces the history of both, while the later Chronicler's record follows only the southern kingdom. We may assume that with the collapse of the mini-empire, and the consequent drying up of foreign tribute, sea trade and caravan routes, all of which had been lucrative ventures for Solomon, the economy of both kingdoms suffered greatly. Further, the beginning of Egyptian encroachment posed an outside threat.

The first biblical mention of Shoshenq I (ca. 945-924 BC), founder of the 22nd dynasty in Egypt, arises as one who harbored Jeroboam, Solomon's corvée master, when he fled from Solomon (1 Kg. 11:28, 40).⁵⁶ After Solomon's death, Shoshenq I invaded Palestine, an event described in the Bible (1 Kg. 14:25-26//2 Chr. 12:2-9) but also attested in the monuments erected in the Karnak temple at Thebes as well as by cartouches of Shoshenq unearthed at Megiddo.⁵⁷ Only by offering an exorbitant tribute was Rehoboam of Judah able to induce the Egyptian army to withdraw (cf. 1 Kg. 14:25-26). The interpretation of this invasion by the prophet Shemaiah was that Yahweh was punishing Judah for unfaithfulness (2 Chr. 12:5-8). Shemaiah did not stand alone in his reprimand of Israelite kings. An unnamed prophet from Judah censured Jeroboam I, the northern king, for building a cult center at Bethel (1 Kg. 13:1-10), and Baasha, who gained the throne by assassinating Nadab, Jeroboam's son, was sternly reprimanded by Jehu ben Hanani (1 Kg. 16:1-4, 7). Sectional war between the two states flared up sporadically, with neither kingdom gaining a significant advantage. Judah temporarily annexed several Israelite cities near the border (cf. 2 Chr.

⁵⁵ Kitchen, pp. 98-101.

⁵⁶ Shishak is a variant spelling for Shoshenq, cf. D. Redford, *ABD* (1992) V.1221.

⁵⁷ K. Kitchen, "Shishak's Military Campaign in Israel Confirmed," *BAR* (May/June 1989), pp. 32-33.

13:2bff., see especially 13:19). Later, Baasha conducted raids into Judah (1 Kg. 15:16-22), and in retaliation, Asa of Judah courted Ben-hadad of Damascus, hoping by treaty to build a threat on Israel's northern border (1 Kg. 15:18ff.). Sporadic invasions into Judah from Egypt continued as well (cf. 2 Chr. 13:9ff.).

The political fortunes of the northern nation took a turn for expansion under the Omride dynasty. Omri moved the northern capital from Tirzah to Samaria (1 Kg. 16:24), and excavations indicate that his son, Ahab, heavily fortified it along with several other important cities. Ahab also defeated Ben-hadad of Damascus, leading to Israelite market expansion in the north (1 Kg. 20, see especially 20:34). He participated in a military coalition opposing the Assyrians at the Battle of Qarqar, supplying a chariot corps of 2000, more than any other member of the supporting kings, plus 10,000 infantry troops.⁵⁸ Mesha of Moab in the transjordan was put to tribute during the reigns of Omri and Ahab, but when Ahab died, Mesha threw off the Israelite yoke, reclaiming his territories. The account of this reversal is described at length in the famous Moabite Stone.⁵⁹ The biblical record offers information about the aftermath of this reversal, noting that Joram, Ahab's successor, while trying to reclaim what had been lost, was put off by the grisly public sacrifice of Mesha's own son on top of the city wall in full view of the Israelite army (2 Kg. 3:26-27).⁶⁰ It was during the reign of Ahab that the prophet Elijah emerged as the prototype "troubler" (to use Ahab's term) of Israel and its monarch. He predicted the dire purge of the house of Omri (1 Kg. 19:16-17; 21:17-24), a purge carried out vigorously by Jehu after he was anointed to be the avenger by the word of Elisha (2 Kg. 9:1-10, 14ff.). In the bloody purge that followed, both the kings of Israel and Judah were killed, as well as the queen mother, Jezebel (2 Kg. 9:21-33) and all Ahab's grandsons along with any remaining relatives (2 Kg. 10:1-17).

The aftermath of Jehu's purge was severe. The economic progress under the Omrides collapsed, and Jehu soon found himself unable to defend his northern borders. External evidence suggests that Jehu became a vassal of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III.⁶¹ Hazael of Damascus annexed the

⁵⁸ This action is not recorded in the Bible, but an Assyrian inscription offers a rather detailed account of the conflict, citing Ahab by name and detailing his contribution, cf. J. Pritchard, *ANET* (1978) pp. 279.

⁵⁹ J. Pritchard, *ANET* (1969) pp. 320-321.

⁶⁰ Apparently, the sacrifice of one's son had long-standing precedent within the ancient Canaanite laws of holy war, cf. B. Margalit, "Why King Mesha of Moab Sacrificed His Oldest Son," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1986), pp. 62-63, 76.

⁶¹ One of the registers on the limestone Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BC) shows an Israelite king bringing tribute to Shalmaneser and specifically names Jehu. There is no biblical record of Jehu's tribute, but virtually no scholar questions the legitimacy of the register, cf. W. Hallo, ed., *The Context of Scripture: Monumental Inscriptions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2.270. Oddly enough,

whole transjordan south to the Arnon Gorge (2 Kg. 10:32-33). Jehoahaz, Jehu's son, was so reduced by Hazael that he was only allowed a bodyguard of ten chariots, fifty cavalry and a modest corps of infantry (2 Kg. 13:7).⁶²

The Rise of the Assyrian Threat

If Jehu became an Assyrian tributary, he was only the first in a long line of such vassals. Within less than a century, virtually every king in Israel and Judah would be compelled to address Assyrian encroachment in one way or another. Still, for the time being, both Israel and Judah experienced an economic resurgence, and both temporarily escaped the Assyrian juggernaut. According to Assyrian sources, Adad-nirari III (811-784 BC) put Israel under tribute for a time,⁶³ but subsequent Assyrian rulers were preoccupied by internal affairs. Their troubles nearer home afforded Israel and Judah a brief reprieve during which Jeroboam II and Uzziah led their respective kingdoms to affluence (2 Kg. 14:23—15:7//2 Chr. 26:1-15). They extended their borders, annexed neighboring territories, and brought in a level of "prosperity such as no living Israelite could remember."⁶⁴

It was during these prosperous times of the eighth century that the first of Israel's classical prophets arose. Amos and Hosea in the north, and Isaiah and Micah in the south preached that economic prosperity notwithstanding, there was a deep and debilitating internal sickness in both nations. If they did not correct their courses in terms of the ancient Mosaic covenant, both could expect harsh reprisals from Yahweh. By the third quarter of the eighth century, the prophets' dire predictions began to materialize.

When Jeroboam II died, the kingdom of Israel erupted into anarchy at the very time it needed stability to face a revived Assyrian threat. A series of assassinations and coups finally left Menahem on the throne in Samaria (2 Kg. 15:8-16), but any celebration of his newly acquired power was cut short when the Assyrian ruler, Tiglath-pileser III (the biblical Pul), forced him into

the inscription lists Jehu as a son of Omri. While this does not necessarily mean Jehu was literally Omri's son, it might well mean that he was a son through a different family line than was Ahab, cf. T. Schneider, "Did King Jehu Kill His Own Family?", *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1995), pp. 26-33, 80.

⁶² Independent attestation to this encroachment by Aram-Damascus has recently come to light in the excavations at Tel Dan. A basalt stela with a monumental inscription seems to commemorate a victory by an Aramaean king over the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. The "king of Israel" and the "house of David" are specifically mentioned, cf. A. Biran, "'David' Found at Dan," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1994), pp. 38-39. While Hazael is not mentioned specifically, most scholars date the inscription to the second half of the 9th century BC and assign it to Hazael, cf. D. Ilan, "Dan," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East*, ed. E. Meyers (Oxford: Oxford University, 1997), 2.110.

⁶³ More than one Assyrian inscription attests to this tribute, the Calah Orthostat Slab, which mentions the "land of Israel", and the Tell Al Rimah Stela, which specifically cites King Je[ho]ash of Samaria, cf. Hallo, 2.275-276.

⁶⁴ J. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), p. 255.

tribute (2 Kg. 15:19-20).⁶⁵ Early on, Uzziah (Azariah) of Judah may have opposed the Assyrians, but if so the king of Judah's effort fell far short of stemming the Assyrian tide.⁶⁶ Pekahiah, Menahem's son, was assassinated by one of his own officers after a short two year reign, and Pekah, the upstart successor, was subjected to the first massive deportation of Israelite citizens to Assyria (2 Kg. 15:29). Still, Pekah seemed determined to rally a resistance effort. Along with Rezin of Damascus, he invited (extorted) Ahaz of Judah to join them in a coalition to oppose the Assyrians (2 Kg. 16:5//2Chr. 28:5-8; Is. 7:1-2). When Ahaz hesitated, Pekah and Rezin attacked Jerusalem, trying to bring him to heel. They even deported some of Judah's citizens, but the prophet Oded sternly rebuked them for this outrage (2 Chr. 28:9-11).

Meanwhile, Ahaz of Judah, fearful of Pekah's and Rezin's extortion, determined that his only option was to appeal directly to Tiglath-pileser III. He voluntarily subjected himself as an Assyrian vassal and sent in advance a rich tribute stripped from the temple and the national treasury in turn for Assyrian protection (2 Kg. 16:7-8). Tiglath-pileser III was only too happy to comply. He crushed Aram and invaded Israel (2 Kg. 16:9//2 Chr. 28:16).⁶⁷ After some citizens allied with Hoshea to assassinate Pekah, Hoshea immediately surrendered to Assyria, and Tiglath-pileser III installed him as a puppet king.⁶⁸

Meanwhile in the south, Isaiah had warned Ahaz of the dire consequences to Judah if he pursued the reckless course of buying the protection of the Assyrian lion (Is. 7:7-9, 16-17), but Ahaz ignored the word of Yahweh to his own chagrin (2 Chr. 28:20-21). Judah may have been spared destruction, but the nation now served as a vassal to Assyria, which repeatedly sucked Judah's wealth into the great Assyrian vortex.⁶⁹

Hoshea of Samaria, who probably only submitted to Assyria because he had no choice and planned to defect as soon as possible, thought he saw his chance at the death of Tiglath-pileser III. He made overtures to Egypt and stopped paying Assyrian tribute (2 Kg. 17:3-4). This was little more

⁶⁵ This tribute is independently verified in the Calah Annals and the Iran Stela of Tiglath-pileser III, where "Menahem the Samarian" is cited by name, cf. Hallo, 2.285, 287.

⁶⁶ It is currently unclear if references to *Yaudi* (Judah) in the Calah Annals and to *Azriyau* (Azariah) in another fragment should be joined. This is one of three possible proposals, cf. Hallo, 2.285 (note 10).

⁶⁷ Assyrian records are fragmentary at this point, but they show that Tiglath-pileser III captured Rezin and invaded Galilee and Gilead, cf. Hallo, 2.286.

⁶⁸ The assassination of Pekah is recorded both in the Bible (2 Kg. 15:30) and in the Assyrian record, but it is the Assyrian record that informs us that Hoshea was installed by the Assyrian monarch after exacting tribute, cf. Hallo, 2.288, 289, 292.

⁶⁹ From the time of Ahaz, Judah is named in Assyrian records as a tributary, cf. Hallo, 2.289. In Summary Inscription 7, "Jeho-ahaz, the Judahite" refers to Ahaz. By the time of Shalmaneser V and Sargon II, Judah still remained on the tributary list, cf. Hallo, 2.298.

than political suicide. Tiglath-pileser's son, Shalmaneser V, soon discovered the treachery and invaded Israel (2 Kg. 17:5), and Samaria fell in 721 BC (2 Kg. 17:6). Its citizens were deported to upper Mesopotamia, and the northern nation of Israel would never rise again (2 Kg. 17).⁷⁰ So, as the compiler of the Kings records indicates, the prophets had been right! The demise of Israel was the judgment of God, and Assyria was his war club (2 Kg. 17:13-23; Is. 10:5).

Now that the buffer countries to the north were gone, Judah stood alone, an uneasy vassal with a wandering eye. Hezekiah, Ahaz' son, may have inherited vassal status from his father, but he was determined to break this subjugation at his first opportunity. Sargon II, the new Assyrian ruler who took the throne in 721 BC, immediately faced threats from Babylon on his eastern flank. With the help of Elam, the Babylonians threw off the Assyrian yoke for about a dozen years. Sargon II also was compelled to quash a rebellion by Midas in Asia Minor. He fought with the Urartu and Cimmerians as well from the Caucasus. All these diversions probably convinced Hezekiah that Assyria could be challenged, especially with the revival of Egypt under Piankhy, founder of the Twenty-fifth Dynasty, who promised aid to Judah (cf. Is. 18, 20). Other Palestinian kingdoms, like Ashdod, were revolting,⁷¹ so why not Judah? Isaiah, of course, warned that help from Egypt was not to be counted on (Is. 20:5-6), but patriotic fervor must surely have emboldened the citizens of Jerusalem. When Sargon died, Hezekiah made his break (2 Kg. 18:7)! He sent envoys to Egypt to negotiate a treaty of support (Is. 30:1-7; 31:1-3), and he began extensive defense preparations to meet the onslaught of Assyrian reprisal that would surely come (2 Kg. 20:20; 2 Chr. 32:2-5, 30; Is. 22:8-11).⁷²

The new Assyrian ruler, Sennacherib, could hardly leave such rebellion unchallenged, and by 701 BC he was marching toward Palestine to punish his wayward vassals. Three biblical accounts describe in considerable detail Sennacherib's attack upon Judah (2 Kg. 18:13—19:36; Is. 36-37; 2

⁷⁰ The fall of Samaria and the deportation of its citizens also are attested in Assyrian annals, cf. Hallo, 2.293, 297, 298. Sargon II, who succeeded Shalmaneser V, claimed as booty 27,290 deportees, cf. Hallo, 2.296. The plight of deported Israelites can be traced minimally in surviving references in Assyrian records. Most of them probably served in agricultural labor and eventually were assimilated into Assyrian culture, cf. R. Younger, Jr., "Israelites in Exile," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2003), pp. 36-45, 65-66.

⁷¹ Assyrian records describe Ashdod's revolt and subsequent Assyrian reprisals, cf. Hallo, 2.296, 297, 298, 300.

⁷² One of the most famous water installations in antiquity is credited to Hezekiah, who dug a tunnel beneath the Hill of Ophel to bring water to the western side of Jerusalem. He also constructed a massive stone wall (now excavated in the Jewish quarter of Jerusalem) designed to withstand the Assyrian battering rams (cf. Is. 22:10), cf. Mazar, pp. 419-423, 483-485.

Chr. 32:1-22).⁷³ The biblical accounts are corroborated by Sennacherib's own records,⁷⁴ especially the large bas-reliefs depicting his siege and conquest of Lachish.⁷⁵ The successful Assyrian siege at Lachish, one of the most important fortified cities guarding the approach to Jerusalem, must have convinced Hezekiah that to continue his defiance of Sennacherib would be a death wish. He sent an extravagant gift to the Assyrian monarch at Lachish, most of it by stripping the temple, hoping to buy off the inevitable (2 Kg. 18:14-16).⁷⁶ Sennacherib's account mentions that the tribute included royal daughters, palace women and male and female singers.⁷⁷ Still, Sennacherib was not the ultimate winner, for both the biblical accounts (2 Kg. 19:37; Is. 37:38) and the Assyrian record agree that when he returned to Nineveh, he was murdered by two of his own sons.⁷⁸

Hezekiah died shortly thereafter (ca. 687/6 BC), and under the reign of his son, Manasseh, the courageous attempt at independence collapsed altogether. Sennacherib was succeeded by Esarhaddon (680-669), and Esarhaddon lists Manasseh among the tributaries who supplied materials for the state building projects.⁷⁹ How Manasseh incurred the suspicions of his Assyrian overlord, we are not told, but when the Assyrians showed up in Judah again, Manasseh was himself deported (2 Chr. 33:11)!

The Demise of Assyria and the Rise of Babylon

Assyria reached the height of its power under Ashurbanipal, but paradoxically, it was the beginning of the end. Assyria was considerably

⁷³ In fact, Assyrian lists of officials contains titles of two of the Assyrian spokesmen mentioned in the biblical accounts (2 Kg. 18:17; Is. 36:2), the Tartan (*tartanu*) and the Rabshakeh (*rabsaqe*).

⁷⁴ The Prism of Sennacherib (now in the British Museum) claims the destruction of forty-six of Judah's fortified cities and the deportation of 200,150 citizens. While Sennacherib does not claim to have destroyed Jerusalem, he does claim to have locked up Hezekiah "like a bird in a cage", cf. Hallo, 2.303.

⁷⁵ Lachish, judging by the extensive bas-relief portrayal of its fall in his palace at Nineveh, was one Sennacherib's most impressive victories, and excavations at Lachish bear out that his boast was not empty, cf. D. Ussishkin, "Answers at Lachish," *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1979), pp. 16-39; H. Shanks, "Destruction of Judean Fortress Portrayed in Dramatic Eight-Century B.C. Pictures," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1984), pp. 48-65; D. Ussishkin, "Defense Judean Counter-Ramp Found at Lachish in 1983 Season," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1984), pp. 66-73; Y. Yadin, "The Mystery of the Unexplained Chain," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 1984), pp. 65-67.

⁷⁶ There exists within the biblical record a tension, long recognized, but not entirely resolved. On the one hand, Hezekiah seems to have "bought off" Sennacherib (2 Kg. 18:14-16), and on the other, Sennacherib put Jerusalem to siege only to have Isaiah advise Hezekiah to stand his ground with the result that the Assyrian army was destroyed by a divine miracle (2 Kg. 19:1-7, 20-37; 2 Chr. 32:20-21; Is. 36:1-7, 21-37). One plausible explanation is that Sennacherib attacked Judah twice, once in 701 BC and again in 688 BC, cf. W. Shea, "Jerusalem Under Siege: Did Sennacherib Attack Twice?", *BAR* (Nov/Dec 1999), pp. 36-44, 64. If so, then the chronology of events would be stretched over a dozen years rather than collapsed into a single Assyrian campaign.

⁷⁷ Sennacherib's account of Hezekiah's tribute does not exactly tally with the biblical account, but there is no reason to doubt that it was an expensive buyoff, cf. Hallo, 2.303!

⁷⁸ *ANET* (1969) 289-290.

⁷⁹ *ANET* (1969) 291.

overextended, and even though the army and navy ranged as far as Thebes down the Nile, which they sacked (an event mentioned by the prophet Nahum, cf. 3:8-10),⁸⁰ fissures in the Assyrian superstructure were now beginning to show. Though Judah was still a tributary,⁸¹ her allegiance to Assyria would soon shift due to the break-up of the empire. Records of the latter years of Ashurbanipal (after 639 BC) have not survived, but internal affairs were apparently chaotic, and under the reign of Sin-sar-iskun, the empire fell apart. Nebopolasar of Babylon managed to break free of Assyrian dominance by 620 BC, and he followed up his advantage by invading the Assyrian heartland. Asshur, the southern capital, fell in 614 BC. Nineveh, the northern capital, fell in 612 BC. A refugee government tried to hold out in Haran of northwest Mesopotamia under Assur-uballit II, but by 609 BC he was killed as well. In 605 BC, Egypt, the last supporter of the Assyrian hegemony, was defeated at Carchemish.⁸²

Years earlier, Isaiah had warned Hezekiah about the rise of Babylon when the king entertained envoys from Merodach-Baladan and rashly showed them his national treasury (Is. 39). At the time, a threat from Babylon, which was even further east than Assyria, might have seemed rather remote. But the Babylonians would not forget the treasures in Jerusalem, and Isaiah's prediction was exactly on target!

The last gasp of Assyria came during the reign of Josiah of Judah. Josiah had come to the throne as only a boy, probably under the tutelage of anti-Assyrian members of Judah's court. His father has been assassinated only a couple years after the death of his grandfather, Manasseh (2 Kg. 21:19-26//2 Chr. 33:21-25). The biblical accounts focus upon Josiah's religious reforms, but while the details are not given, it is apparent that he also made a clean break with Assyrian domination as the Assyrian Empire tottered toward extinction. In fact, the young Jeremiah seems to have encouraged independence (cf. Je. 2:18). Josiah's religious reform included purging the nation of Assyrian religion, such as, astral worship (2 Kg. 23:4-5, 11-12, 19). The fact that he carried his reforms as far north as the former territory of Israel (cf. 2 Chr. 34:6) implied his political independence.

Two prophets, in particular, augmented this reorientation, Zephaniah and Jeremiah. Both asserted that Judah was a kingdom under judgement, and in fact, was courting a divine reckoning, religious reforms notwithstanding.

⁸⁰ For the Assyrian texts, see *ANET* (1969) p. 294-296.

⁸¹ In Assyrian records, Manasseh (*Mi-in-si-e*) of Judah is named, among others, as tributaries to Ashurbanipal, and some of Judah's armies may have been compelled to accompany Ashurbanipal on his campaign against Egypt, cf. *ANET* (1969) p. 294.

⁸² For a summary of this history, see *ISBE* (1979) 1.337-338.

Jeremiah's call to ministry in the year of Ashurbanipal's death, 627 BC (Je. 1:2), was in itself a sign that boded ill for the future. Assyria might be dying, but another superpower was coming! The reforms, necessary as they were, were too little, too late.

Josiah's death occurred while the last vestige of Assyrian refugee government was fighting for survival in northwest Mesopotamia. Egypt, which had been Assyria's ally, sent a large army under Neco II to Carchemish on the Euphrates to assist Asshur-uballit in a last ditch effort to retake Haran from the Babylonians.⁸³ Josiah seems to have believed that however bad the Babylonians might be, they had to be better than the Assyrians. In any case, he fielded the Judean army at Megiddo in an effort to stop the Egyptian forces from joining with the Assyrians. In this effort he lost his life (2 Kg. 23:29-30//2 Chr. 35:20-24). Jeremiah was left to compose funeral dirges for his beloved king (2 Chr. 35:25). Though the Egyptians made it to the Euphrates River to join the Assyrians in attacking Haran, the effort ended in failure. The Babylonians were firmly entrenched, Asshur-uballit fled, and the Assyrian Empire vanished from the pages of Mesopotamian history.

Neco II of Egypt now began to secure his holdings west and south of the Euphrates, and to this end he brought Palestine and Syria into his orbit. Though the campaign at Carchemish had failed, his efforts to establish Syria and Palestine as a buffer to the aggressive Babylonians succeeded for a few years. Neco II deposed Jehoahaz, Josiah's son, after only a three month reign. He deported him to Egypt and installed in his place his brother, Jehoiakim (formerly named Eliakim), while imposing on Judah a heavy tribute (2 Kg. 23:31-35//2 Chr. 36:2-4).⁸⁴ Ezekiel's metaphor of the lion cub trapped and taken to Egypt refers to Jehoahaz' deportation (Eze. 19:3-4), while Jeremiah's prediction was blunt: "He [Jehoahaz] will never return" (Je. 22:11-12). Jehoiakim, meanwhile, exploited his newly acquired position to begin building himself a lavish palace using forced labor, a self-aggrandizing project that scandalized Jeremiah (Je. 22:13-17)!

Jehoiakim's vassalship to Egypt did not last long. By 605 BC, Nebuchadnezzar had rallied his troops and invaded northwest Mesopotamia, crushing the Egyptian forces at Carchemish. Jehoiakim, ever the opportunist,

⁸³ Older English translations (KJV) took the Hebrew of 2 Kg. 23:29 (lit., "Pharaoh Neco, king of Egypt, went up to the king of Assyria") to mean that Neco fought *against* the Assyrians, but this, clearly, was a misunderstanding of the idiom. The NKJB has corrected this error and reads, "to the aid of", as do all other current English translations.

⁸⁴ The Babylonian Chronicle indicates that the armies of Egypt and Babylon clashed, and the Babylonian army was compelled to withdraw and reconstitute itself, cf. Kitchen, p. 44.

changed his fealty to Babylon (2 Kg. 24:1a).⁸⁵ It was an uneasy alliance, and when Nebuchadnezzar faced Neco II of Egypt in 601 BC without a decisive victory (both sides suffered considerably damage), Jehoiakim changed his mind again (2 Kg. 24:1b). Perhaps he thought Egypt's fortunes had turned for the better, but in any case, his decision was a disaster! In the immediate future, Nebuchadnezzar sent against Judah various guerilla bands from neighboring nations loyal to him (2 Kg. 24:2; Je. 35:11), and by 598 BC, Nebuchadnezzar's armies had returned to the Levant. When Jehoiakim died that year before full reprisals were meted out (2 Kg. 24:6, 8, 10),⁸⁶ he left his son Jehoiachin to face the music, who quickly surrendered Jerusalem (2 Kg. 24:11-12).⁸⁷ A major deportation to Babylon of Judah's citizens left the county depopulated and economically marginal (2 Kg. 24:16).

Zedekiah's vassal kingship over Judah lingered on for nearly a dozen years, but it was hardly impressive. For one thing, many in Judah as well as the Babylonians themselves seemed to have regarded Jehoiachin as the true king, even though he was in exile.⁸⁸ Though some of the remaining citizens in Judah thought of themselves as the "meat in the stew" (Eze. 11:3), and probably hoped that Zedekiah's line would be the beginning of a new dynasty, their hopes were badly misplaced. Some patriots even predicted the imminent return of Jehoiachin and the Judean deportees within a couple of years (Je. 28:2-4, 10-11), but Jeremiah scorned such rash prognostications as empty hopes and scurrilous lies (Je. 28:12-16). In the end, Zedekiah was swayed by the misplaced patriotism of his advisors and rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kg. 24:20b//2 Chr. 36:13). Though he consulted with Jeremiah repeatedly (cf. Je. 21:1-10; 37:3-10, 17; 38:14-23), the prophet was

⁸⁵ This change in fealty is the background for an early deportation of Judean nobles to Babylon, probably a sort of "good faith" demonstration of Jehoiakim's new loyalty to Babylon (Da. 1:1-2).

⁸⁶ There is some ambiguity about Jehoiakim's fate. The Chronicler indicates that he was shackled for deportation to Babylon (2 Chr. 36:6), but Jeremiah's oracles suggest that he died shamefully in Jerusalem (Je. 22:18-19). The Kings record says he was "buried with his fathers" (2 Kg. 24:6), a phrase that normally suggests a traditional burial. The Babylonian record does not offer any help in reconciling these three accounts or providing additional information about Jehoiakim's end. Perhaps his deportation was imminent but he expired (or was executed) before deportation, though any solution is bound to be speculative in the absence of data.

⁸⁷ The Babylonian Chronicle states that Nebuchadnezzar "set his camp against the city of Judah [*Ya-a-hu-du*] and on 2nd Adar he took the city and captured the king. He appointed a king of his choosing there, took heavy tribute and returned to Babylon", cf. Hallo, 1.468. The captured king doubtless was Jehoiachin, who was deported to Babylon (2 Kg. 24:12b, 15//2 Chr. 36:10a), the heavy tribute was stripped from the temple and the palace (2 Kg. 24:13//2 Chr. 36:10b), and the newly-installed puppet king was Zedekiah (formerly named Mattaniah, cf. 2 Kg. 24:17//2 Chr. 36:10c). Ezekiel would date all his oracles from the date of Jehoiachin's deportation.

⁸⁸ Babylonian administrative documents list the "King of Judah" [Jehoiachin], among others, as receiving subsidies of oil in Babylon after his deportation, cf. *ANET* (1969) p. 308. If Ezekiel represents the Babylonian contingent of Jews, the dating of his oracles following Jehoiachin's regnal years certainly suggests that he considered Jehoiachin to be the legitimate king.

recalcitrant. This time there was no hope for a reprieve! Egypt would be no help (cf. Je. 37:7). “Even if you were to defeat the entire Babylonian army...and only wounded men were left...they [still] would come out and burn this city down” (Je. 37:10)! When Zedekiah asked, “Is there a word from the LORD?”, Jeremiah replied, “Yes! You will be handed over to the king of Babylon” (Je. 37:17)! So, as the Chronicler reflected, “...he [Zedekiah] did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet, who spoke the word of the LORD” (2 Chr. 36:12). The fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the deportation of its citizens is well-documented in the biblical texts (2 Kg. 25; 2 Chr. 36:15-21; Je. 39, 52).

From Babylon to Persia

Whether or not the Babylonians occupied Judah after the fall of Jerusalem is debated,⁸⁹ but there can be no doubt about the devastating effects of Nebuchadnezzar’s army, which left its mark in the massive destruction levels in many places. Our evidence for what happened in the next half century in Judah is sparse. Some refugees who had escaped to neighboring areas may have slipped back when it seemed safe to do so, as indicated by Jeremiah (cf. Je. 40:11-12). Some, especially the dirt-farmers, were left by the Babylonians to eke out an existence as best they could (2 Kg. 24:14b; 25:12; Je. 52:16). The biblical record indicates that Gedaliah, a temporary governor, was installed (2 Kg. 25:22-24; Je. 40:5), but he was murdered in a plot by a Jewish patriot (2 Kg. 25:25; Je. 40:7—41:15). Some Jews fled to Egypt after this debacle, fearing Babylonian reprisal, and they took Jeremiah with them (2 Kg. 25:25; Je. 41:16—42:7). Soon, yet another deportation of citizens to Babylon occurred, perhaps a punishment for the assassination of the Babylonian governor (Je. 52:30).

In Babylon, the exiles were allowed to settle in a community of their own (Eze. 3:15). Earlier, even before Jerusalem collapsed, Jeremiah had written to the exiles already in Babylon, urging them settle themselves there and find ways of making a living (Je. 29). He clearly considered them to be the nucleus for the Jewish future (Je. 24). Jehoiachin remained as a prisoner of the state until the death of Nebuchadnezzar, but the new Babylonian ruler pensioned him for the remainder of his life (2 Kg. 25:27-30). Little is known of the Jewish community in Babylon until its fall to Persia, when some Jews

⁸⁹ For instance, unlike for the Assyrians, there are no surviving Babylonian documents implying an imperial administration in Palestine, cf. E. Stern, “The Babylonian Gap,” *BAR* (Nov/Dec 2000), pp. 45-51, 76. Some scholars argue, on the basis of archaeological evidence, that the devastation was not so total and that the Babylonians may have taken over the Assyrian provincial system, but the evidence is still sufficiently unclear so as to leave a division of opinions, cf. J. Blenkinsopp and E. Stern, “The Babylonian Gap Revisited,” *BAR* (May/June 2002), pp. 36-39, 55.

elected to take advantage of a new ruler's edict and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and temple.

As great as Babylon seemed, its infrastructure became increasingly weaker. Nebuchadnezzar was succeeded by a series of weak rulers culminating with Nabonidus. In the meantime, Media, Lydia and Persia all were on the rise. Exacerbated by the absence of Nabonidus who skirmished for several years in northern Arabia, a ruler whom Cyrus would describe as "an incompetent",⁹⁰ the capital itself was left in the hands of Belshazzar, the prince-regent, who was perhaps even more incompetent.⁹¹ Though Nabonidus returned, his return was too little, too late. The capital fell to Cyrus of Persia in 539 BC, as attested by the Cyrus Cylinder as well as the Babylonian Chronicle.⁹² Later, the Greek historian Herodotus would explain that Cyrus' armies diverted the Euphrates River, and when the water level dropped, the Medo-Persian troops waded in at night to take the city by total surprise.⁹³

One of Cyrus' first acts of state after the fall of Babylon was to issue an edict of religious toleration, allowing displaced peoples to return to their homelands and rebuild their temples. This edict is given in the Old Testament in both Hebrew (; 2 Chr. 36:23; Ezra 1:1-4) and Aramaic (Ezra 6:3-5) as well as attested in the Cyrus Cylinder.⁹⁴ It became the impetus for the Jewish return from exile, the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and the construction of the second temple. The return of many Jews to Palestine did not exempt them from Persian hegemony, and in fact, they would still remain as Persian subjects in the trans-Euphrates region. Jerusalem and Judah would become the province of Yehud. Nonetheless, a sizeable reconstruction of Jerusalem was accomplished (though the population remained relatively small) along with a modest temple.⁹⁵

⁹⁰ The Cyrus Cylinder, cf. Hallo, 2.315.

⁹¹ Our knowledge of Belshazzar was for a long time confined only to the Book of Daniel (Da. 5). More recently, however, his name has surfaced in a number of contract tablets and letters, R. Sack, *ABD* (1992)1.661.

⁹² Hallo, 1.468 and 2.315.

⁹³ M. Komroff, ed., *The History of Herodotus*, trans. G. Rawlinson (rpt. New York: Tudor, 1956), pp. 71-72.

⁹⁴ Hallo, 2.315.

⁹⁵ On the debate between minimalists and maximalists concerning the post-exilic Jerusalem, see D. Ussishkin, "Big City, Few People," *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2005), pp. 26-35.