

The Eighth Century Prophets

by
Daniel J. Lewis

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The Eighth Century Prophets

In the eighth century BC, a quartet of prophets arose who produced a startling and powerful consensus about Israel's relationship with God. Their messages held religious, political and social implications, implications that retain a striking relevance for modern Christians. The eighth century prophets represent a new stage in the development of prophetic ministry. Earlier, a strain of prophets arose that bore a decidedly ecstatic character (1 Sa. 10:5-6; 19:19-21, 23-24). However, the appearance of prophets in the ancient Near East, particularly ecstatic prophets, was not peculiar to the Israelite peoples. In the ninth century BC, Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, imported some 450 such prophets of Ba'al and 400 prophets of Ba'al's consort, Asherah (1 Kg. 18:19). In opposition to the Ba'al threat and as a voice of judgment toward the religion and politics of Israel, God chose Elijah, Micaiah and Elisha to be his spokesmen. A century later, in the eighth century, the first of the writing prophets arose in the figures of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah. It is the Lord Jesus himself who gave us the mandate to study the prophets, and it is not without significance that the prophet he quotes in that context is one from the eighth century (Mt. 9:10-13; 12:1-8; cf. Ho. 6:6).

To be sure, the four prophets just mentioned may not have been the only voices in the eighth century. They are simply the four prophets who correlated their oracles with regnant kings whose eras can be fixed (Am. 1:1; Ho. 1:1; Is. 1:1; Mic. 1:1). The dating of prophets whose writings do not contain clear historical markers is problematic. Of them, two have the greatest likelihood of belonging to the eighth century, and though debatable, we will include them. They are Joel and Jonah.

The Stage Setting

Prior to the eighth century, the Israelites were primarily threatened by the Canaanite nations who were near them. The transition between the period of the judges and the monarchy also was attended by the Philistine threat, a non-Canaanite group from the Aegean who settled in the south coast of Palestine (1 Sa. 4:1-11; 10:5; 13:3, 19-22). David managed to subdue both the Canaanite and the Philistine threats (2 Sa. 8:1-14), and Solomon secured peace through intermarriage with local foreign princesses (1 Kg. 11:1-3). To be sure, shortly after Solomon's death, Shishak of Egypt raided Judah (1 Kg. 14:25-26; 2 Chr. 12:2-12), but while this was a blow, it was not a sustained campaign. Beginning in the ninth and eighth centuries, however, the Israelites began to face an external threat from a new

source, this time from the Mesopotamian empire-builder Assyria. Major developments of this new threat may be traced as early as Shalmaneser III's invasion of Palestine, where he fought a coalition of Canaanite kings, including Ahab of Israel, at the battle of Qarqar in 853 BC.¹ In yet another Assyrian record, the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser, Jehu of Israel is depicted as one of the Palestinian monarchs who paid tribute to the Assyrians. Though a century of respite following Shalmaneser's campaigns, allowing Israel and Judah to relish a golden age of unprecedented economic prosperity and political stability (cf. Am. 6:1-8; Is. 3:18-24), the Assyrian threat continued to loom as a dark cloud on the horizon.

In the mid-eighth century, the Assyrians began a new and aggressive expansionist effort. Under the dynamic leadership of Tiglath-Pileser III (745-727 BC), the Mesopotamian super-power began a westward move toward her ultimate goal, Egypt. Both Israel and Judah lay directly in the path (cf. 2 Kg. 15:19-20). To halt this advance, Israel joined Syria in a coalition, and together, the two nations attempted to intimidate Judah into joining them as well. When Judah refused, they turned on her (2 Kg. 15:37; 16:5; Is. 7:1). Ahaz, king of Judah, was badly frightened (Is. 7:2). It seemed the only thing to do was to appeal for help, and he appealed directly to Tiglath-pileser III. In spite of Isaiah's warning (Is. 7:3-9, 20), Ahaz sent tribute to the Assyrian monarch and implored his aid (2 Kg. 16:7-8). The Assyrian king was only too happy to respond (2 Kg. 16:9)!

Once the Assyrians gained a foothold in northern Palestine, there was no stopping them. Tiglath-pileser's death prompted Israel's king to suspend the annual tribute payment, but the next Assyrian ruler, Shalmaneser V, put Samaria under siege (2 Kg. 17:3-6). Even though Shalmaneser V died before the siege was complete, his successor, Sargon II, finished the conquest. Just as Isaiah had predicted, the northern nation went into exile (Is. 8:1-4; 2 Kg. 18:9-12).

The Assyrians were not content to stop with the conquest of Israel. Moving against Judah under Sennacherib, they exacted heavy tribute from Hezekiah (2 Kg. 18:13-16; Is. 36:1). They razed the region around Jerusalem so heavily that the capital city was left like a "hut in a field of melons" (Is. 1:7-9). However, at the encouragement of Isaiah, Hezekiah determined to suspend this outflow of funds to the northern super-power. In the face of a fearful threat, Hezekiah listened to the advice of Isaiah and stood his ground (2 Kg. 18:17—19:37//Is. 36:1—37:38). As Isaiah predicted, Yahweh saved a remnant of his people. Judah was not free,

¹ This battle is not recorded in the Bible, but it was recorded in Shalmaneser's own stela, where Ahab is credited with supplying 10,000 soldiers and 2,000 chariots, cf. J. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958) I.188-191.

however. The nation remained a vassal to the Assyrian empire.²

The background to the eighth century prophets was not merely political, however. The divided monarchy had produced two nations with two competing ideologies. When the northern nation seceded to form an independent nation, two distinct political and theological identities developed. The southern nation, Judah, remained loyal to the dynasty of David due to its faith in the covenant that Yahweh had made with him (Ps. 132:10-18). The northern nation, Israel, could hardly afford to allow its citizenry to travel to Jerusalem for worship at the Davidic shrine on Mt. Zion. Instead, alternative centers for worship were established that had no association with David but that recalled the worship centers of the northern nation's patriarchs, Jacob and Abraham (1 Kg. 12:26-33; Ge. 12:8; 28:10-19; 31:13; 35:1-3, 14-15). While Judah depended on God's anointing of a dynasty for political leadership, Israel depended heavily on the charismatic anointing of random individuals, such as had occurred in the period of the judges. While Judah staunchly defended the supremacy of the Davidic covenant, Israel maintained the sufficiency of the Mosaic covenant apart from the house of David.

The Lion's Roar

The political events of the eighth century would have made headlines had there been newspapers in ancient times. The prophets, however, were not newsmen. They were interpreters of the theological meaning of these political events. The fact that Ephraim and Judah were caught in the midst of historical and social forces beyond their control did not mean that God was oblivious. Rather, these very events were under the sovereign control of Yahweh. Yahweh was like a divine lion, and his prey was the Israelite people (Am. 1:2; 3:3-8, 12; 5:19; Ho. 5:14; 13:7-8).

The eighth century prophets who declared that the political events of the times were instruments in the hands of Yahweh against his own people were remarkably diverse. Amos was a shepherd and farm laborer from Judah, even though he preached in the northern nation (Am. 1:1; 7:14). Hosea was a citizen of the northern nation whose wife was a prostitute (Ho. 1:2-3). The names of his children became ominous portents of the future, especially the second and third children, who were named respectively "not pitied" and "not my people" (Ho. 1:6-

² Sennacherib's prism boasts of his conquest of forty-six fortress cities in Judah, but significantly, though he said he "shut up Hezekiah like a bird in a cage," he did not boast of destroying Jerusalem, cf. Pritchard, pp. 199-201. Later, in the annals of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, Judah's king is listed among those who supplied forced labor for Nineveh, the Assyrian capital, as well as other kinds of vassal assistance, cf. F. Bruce, *Israel and the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), pp. 74-75.

9). This debacle of family life became a living parable of Israel's tumultuous relationship with Yahweh. Isaiah, on the other hand, lived in Jerusalem in close contact with the royal family. He, too, named his children portentous names, Maher-shalal-hash-baz, meaning "the spoil hastens, the plunder comes quickly," and Shear-yashuv, meaning "a remnant will return". Little is known of Micah except that he came from the border town of Moresheth-gath in southwestern Judah near the Philistine country. Nevertheless, as diverse as they were, these voices created a remarkable resonance with each other.

The eighth century prophets were preachers of social justice, perceiving their society to be rife with social evils. They were not backward about pronouncing disaster as the divine judgment for such evils. Amos launched a devastating attack upon the north, its gross immorality, heartlessness and dishonesty (Am. 2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-13; 6:4-7; 8:4-6). His vocabulary used to describe the victims of power and greed was carefully chosen:

Tsaddiq (= the righteous, the one who has right on his/her side or the one who is in the right in a lawsuit)

'Evyon (= the needy, those who can offer no resistance, the powerless)

Dallim (= the poor, the helpless, the weak)

'Anawim (= the oppressed, the lowly, the underdog)

Hosea followed suit. The burden of his message arose out of his personal marriage trauma, and the broken marriage mirrored Israel's broken covenant with God (Ho. 2:2-13). One again, the social dimension of covenantal responsibility looms large. Israel's sins are summarized as a bankruptcy of inner goodness. The nation had no *'emeth* (= faithfulness, common honesty, or reliability), no *hesed* (= love, covenant loyalty, the loyal love that remains true to the covenant and binds a citizen both to Yahweh and to his fellow Israelite), no *da'ath Elohim* (= acknowledgement of God, to know God in a covenant relationship).³ Instead of *hesed*, Israel only offered God the externals of religion (Ho. 6:6-10). Dishonesty, thievery, adultery and drunkenness saturated the population from the highest levels down (7:1-5). When Yahweh looked for true penitence, he found only insincerity (7:13-16), and Israelite religion was such a sad mixture of Yahwehism and paganism (Ho. 8:2-6) that the nation was hardly more than a half-baptized pagan herself (Ho. 8:11). Down the road toward paganism Israel went, both her priests

³ This latter expression reflects the language of ancient Near Eastern treaties, where the idea of "knowing" means to recognize the authority of the suzerain, cf. J. Mays, *Hosea [OTL]* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), p. 64.

and citizens (Ho. 4:7-9). The whole nation had plunged into idolatry and sacred prostitution (Ho. 4:10-14; 5:3-4; 13:1-2). Bethel [= house of God] had become Beth Aven [= house of wickedness] (4:15; 5:8; 10:5).

To the south, Isaiah poignantly expressed Yahweh's grief with Judah for its brazen absence of social justice (Is. 1:17). Because of loyalty to the Zion covenant, the southern nation maintained the traditional worship forms, but Yahweh was not interested in professional religion (Is. 1:10-17). Magistrates were in cahoots with the thieves, taking kick-backs and bribes (Is. 5:23). Legislation was all to the advantage of the powerful (Is. 10:1-2). Land-grabbing, which stripped the dirt farmers of their properties, was rampant (Is. 5:8). Those in office ignored their responsibility to the helpless, the victims of society who were especially epitomized by the orphan and the widow—those disadvantaged people for whom God exhibited a special care (cf. Dt. 10:17-18; 14:28-29; 16:13-14; 24:17-22; 26:12; 27:19; Ps. 10:12-18; 68:4-5; Pro. 23:10-11). Decadence permeated the fabric of society with brazenness, excess, wild parties and drinking bouts (Is. 3:16-24; 5:11-12, 22). Because of their insensitivity, God determined to take his people to court and deliver upon her repeated blows of divine judgment that would shatter the nation (Is. 5:25; 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b).

Isaiah's contemporary, Micah, stood for the farmers against the powerful landlords, condemning the land-grabbing (Mic. 2:1-2), the bribes of public officials (Mic. 3:1-3), and the self-aggrandizement of the prophets and priests (Mic. 2:6, 11; 3:5, 11). He illustrated his prediction of doom for Judah by walking around naked and barefoot, a symbol of mourning for the dead (Mic. 1:8). As far as he was concerned, Judah was dead!

The Shock

In view of the social and religious disintegration, the eighth century prophets announced the near future in shocking terms. Something startling and new was shaping on the horizon of which the Israelites in Ephraim and Judah had never dreamed. The popular notion was that since they were God's chosen people, they had a divine guarantee of security and success, but the future would be radically different!

The illusion of security in the north was bound up in the ancestral shrines, each recalling important events in the lives of the patriarchs (Am. 5:4-6). Bethel, the place where God reaffirmed to Jacob the covenant of the land and the blessing of Abraham (Ge. 28:13-15), had been named *Be't El* by Jacob, that is, the "house of God." This was the place where later Jacob's name was changed to Israel (Ge.

35:6-15). Beersheba was Abraham's place of sojourn where a pagan king said to him, "God is with you in everything you do" (Ge. 21:22). Later, God gave to Isaac solemn promise, "I am with you", at Beersheba (Ge. 26:23-24), and much later, Jacob had a vision of God here with the divine promise, "I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will surely bring you back again" (Ge. 46:1-4). Gilgal was the camp to the west of Jordan where Joshua erected a memorial cairn representing the clans (Jos. 4:19-24) and where the ancient covenant had been renewed (Jos. 5:2-8). This was the battle headquarters for the conquest of Canaan (Jos. 9:6; 10:6, 7, 9, 15, 43; 14:6), the site where Saul, the first king, was confirmed (1 Sa. 11:14-15). Each of these places became a symbol of guaranteed security for the northern nation. Its citizens felt they had the right to appropriate for themselves the promises made here to their ancestors. It must have come as a brutal shock to hear the words of the farmer-prophet, "Do *not* seek Bethel, Gilgal and Beersheba" and "woe to you who long for the day of Yahweh" (Am. 5:4-6, 18-20). The security was a false one (Am. 6:1-2, 14; 9:10).

Judah, to the south, had its own brand of security tied inextricably to the family of David. Zion was regarded as eternally secure (Ps. 46:1-7; 125:1-2), a security firmly rooted in the covenant Yahweh had made with Judah's favorite son (Ps. 132:11-18). When Micah declared that disaster was near, the people simply could not believe it (Mic. 2:6-7; 3:11b). Hence, the prophet's oracles stung like fire. The time was ripe for judgment (Am. 8:1-3) to a northern nation that refused to measure up to God's requirements (Am. 7:7-9). The nation was as good as dead (Am. 5:1-3; 8:7-14), and there was no hiding place from God (Am. 9:1-4). The Assyrian onslaught would wreak havoc in the south, as well, progressing from city to city, village to village (Is. 10:28-32; Mic. 1:10-16).

It was important that neither nation misunderstand the meaning of the coming catastrophe. The disaster might come through the Assyrians, but they must make no mistake, the Assyrian overlord was no more than a tool in the hand of Yahweh (Is. 10:5-11). The strange languages of the Assyrian armies would replace the mimicking of the prophet's words, and in these foreign tongues would be the voice of Yahweh in judgment (Is. 28:7-13).⁴ The coming catastrophe would be a kind of divine therapy, Yahweh's "strange work" (Is. 28:21). Judah had made her bed, and now she must lie on it (Is. 28:18b-22). So also for Ephraim: because of her sins, Yahweh would destroy her like an attacking predator (Ho. 13:1-13). Catastrophe was near (Ho. 13:14b-16).

⁴ This remarkable passage describes the alcohol-befuddled leaders of Judah as they attempted to make out the prophet's words, which due to their dulled senses, sounded like gibberish (Is. 28:10). Accordingly, Isaiah announced that if they preferred gibberish, then Yahweh himself would speak to them in strange languages, the foreign tongues of the Assyrian invaders!

Turning

The prophetic predictions of disaster to Ephraim and Judah, as shocking as they were, aimed at producing repentance within the hearts of the people. The critical Hebrew word in this context is the verb **שׁוּב** (*shuv* = to turn, to return, go back, come back). It appears altogether more than a thousand times in the Hebrew Bible, and because of its rich nuances, its derivatives yield several kinds of meanings. For the eighth century prophets, the most important of these meanings are as follows.

They turn [from God]: The stubborn intent of Israel to turn away from God [*m'subah* = a turn away, faithlessness, defection, apostasy] (Ho. 11:7; 14:4)

Turn! [back to God]: The call of Yahweh in urging his people to repent (Ho. 12:6; 14:1-2; Is. 31:6-7)

They will not turn [back to God]: The lament of Yahweh that his people have not returned to him nor will they (Am. 4:6b, 8b, 9b, 10b, 11b; Ho. 5:4; 7:10, 16; 11:5; Is. 6:10; 9:13)

Yahweh's anger will not turn: The anger of Yahweh against his people that would itself not be turned away (Am. 2:4, 6; Is. 5:25; 9:12b, 17b, 21b; 10:4b; 14:27)

They will return [to slavery]: The return of God's people to slavery in exile (Ho. 8:13; 9:3; 11:5)

They will turn [back to God]: The prediction that ultimately God's people would respond to the therapy of catastrophe and turn to him (Ho. 3:5; Is. 10:20-21; 19:22)

God's anger will turn: The assurance that ultimately God's anger would be turned back (Ho. 14:4; Is. 12:1)

They will return [from exile]: The promise that a remnant would be restored (Am. 9:14; Is. 1:27 [lit., "the returning ones"]; 7:3; 10:22; 35:10; Mic. 5:3; 7:19 [lit., "he will return, he will have compassion on us"])

In the context of this intriguing interplay between God and his people, the stubbornness of the Israelites to persist in their sins is revealed in pathetic clarity.

Like a rebellious child, they were caught in the bondage of their own wills (Ho. 11:1-7; Is. 1:2-6; cf. Ho. 5:4; Is. 30:15-18).⁵ Ultimately, however, Yahweh did not give up on his people. The punishment he decreed for them was not merely retributive, but corrective (Is. 1:24-27). He determined to save them, and this salvation would come by divine initiative (Ho. 11:8-11; 14:1-9). Like the nation in the desert during the exodus, Yahweh determined to woo his people back to himself in the desert of their exilic experience (Ho. 2:14-23; 3:4-5). The coming catastrophe, however severe, was a controlled catastrophe; it would not annihilate the people of God (Am. 7:1-6; 9:8-9). Instead, regathering and restoration would be God's final action to his people (Am. 9:11-15; Mic. 2:12-13). The devastation of Mt. Zion would be so completely turned around that it would become the religious center of the world (Mic. 4:1-8). Once again, God's people would worship at the holy mountain (Is. 35:1-10). Yahweh's "strange work" was truly a divine scheme, a plan not understood by the nations (Mic. 4:9-13). His abandonment of Israel was temporary, for a divinely appointed deliverer ultimately would arise to restore her fortunes (Mic. 5:2-5a). Even though Israel's loyalty to Yahweh was fickle, Yahweh's loyalty to his people was steadfast (Mic. 7:8-20).

If indeed the sins of God's people were social injustice and religious syncretism, and if the tragedy of exile was a sort of divine therapy to turn the hearts of God's people back to himself, it remains to ask what God's ethical expectations were for a nation being disciplined so sternly. Several key expressions arise in the context of what Yahweh wanted from his people. These are well summarized in Micah 6:6-8, where Yahweh calls for *mishpat* (= justice), *hesed* (= loyal love) and humility. Justice, especially, concerns interpersonal relationships. Yahweh requires that humans treat each other in fairness and mutual esteem—in relationships that reflect his divine precepts. Closely associated with the idea of justice is the idea of righteousness, that is, living according to ethical norms in human relationships (Am. 5:24). The fruit of justice and righteousness—the outworking of ethical standards in the arena of life—was what Yahweh wanted (Is. 5:1-7). *Hesed*, first of all, is the quality of God's own loyal love and faithfulness in his covenant relationship with his people (cf. Ex. 34:6-7). It is the love that God requires, the kind of love that seeks to know God in a faithful relationship (Ho. 4:1; 6:6). Loyal love calls men and women to seek Yahweh himself (Am. 5:4, 6). He alone is the one to be trusted in the face of crisis (Is. 7:9; 30:15). Finally, the humility for which God called stood in sharp contrast to the national theology of unconditional security. In order to teach Israel humility, Yahweh would call upon her to learn from his divine therapy of exile (Mic. 6:9; Am. 3:1-2). In the end,

⁵B. Anderson, *The Eighth Century Prophets [PC]* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), pp.24-26.

Yahweh alone would be exalted (Is. 2:17; 5:13-16).

Waiting

If the therapy of exile was like a repetition of the Egyptian bondage (Ho. 8:13; 9:3; 11:5), the restoration from exile would be like a new exodus (Ho. 11:11). Isaiah had said that a remnant would return (10:20-22), hence, the exile itself would become a time of intense waiting (Ho. 12:6; Mic. 7:7; Is. 8:16-18; 26:8; 30:18). This time of waiting would be like sitting in thick darkness, particularly for those who refused to hear the prophetic word of explanation (Is. 8:19-22). Yet, the darkness would be pierced by the light of Yahweh's salvation (Is. 9:2-7).

In retrospect, the eighth century prophets conclude with an unfulfilled hope. This hope would not have its resolution until the coming of one who would embody within himself the fullness of explanation, when "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, [Jesus] explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk. 24:27).