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The Bridge: A Yearbook of Judaeo-Christian  
Studies Vol. III

The Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies

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1958

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Frederick L. Moriarty, S.J.

## THE PROPHETS: BEARERS OF THE WORD

ISRAEL'S history is unintelligible apart from the work of her prophets. For it is a history which, if not decisively determined by their counsel, was enriched by the insight and inspiration of these men who, unswayed by immediate interests or party, spoke authoritatively in the name of God. Mediators in the agelong dialogue between God and the people of Israel, the prophets are that succession of extraordinary personalities who lived between 750 and 450 B.C. and whose enduring message has been preserved in the canonical books of the Prophets.

We must understand each individual book not as a coherent literary work but as a collection of sayings uttered at different times during a prophet's ministry and later published in an anthology either by himself or by one of his followers. Some of these sayings or poems may never have been delivered orally, just as some of his greatest sermons may never have found their way to the written page. What we have, then, is a residue or condensation of a larger body of teaching, a selection of prophetic utterances especially treasured in Israel's tradition. The prophetic books were not written at a single sitting; more often than not the dynamic, highly poetic statements of the prophets were transmitted orally for some time before being recorded on papyrus or potsherd. Later still, we can reasonably conjecture, one or more disciples would gather these sayings into a single collection, add some biographical details, and arrange the whole according to a plan which frequently escapes us.<sup>1</sup>

For these reasons we should not look for smooth, chronological precision in these compilations; only the most general outline of a prophet's career can be constructed from the sequence of his sayings. Indeed, it is only in rare cases, such as that of Jeremiah, that anything

1. See Edmund F. Sutcliffe, S.J., *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture* (London: Nelson, 1953), p. 536. His entire essay, "Prophetic Literature" (pp. 527-538), gives a concise survey of the meaning and function of the prophetic call.

like a satisfactory picture of the man emerges from his message; and we know of no other prophet who had a Baruch as secretary. Moreover, the religious thought of the prophets comes to us in the form and manner of ancient Near Eastern literature. A statement of their theology in modern and more familiar categories runs the risk of diminishing the impact of the prophets' ecstatic experiences and the consummate literary form in which they are set forth, but the risk does not dispense us from making their message available to our times. For that message is a mighty counterbalance to secularism, the modern idolatry of man and man-made institutions.

Describing secularism as a disease which has entered deep into the soul of modern man, Will Herberg writes:

Secularism is Man-without-God. It is man's conviction that he is the ultimate, the supreme power in the universe, entirely sufficient unto himself. It is his belief that he can fashion his own existence, that he can comprehend and fulfill himself, in exclusively human terms, without regard to anything above or beyond. He is bound by no law that is not of his own making. To him everything is permitted. There is nothing in the universe he need fear or respect—if only he has the power to work his will. It is the philosophy which Swinburne celebrated in his famous Hymn to Man—the hymn which climaxes in the enthusiastic couplet:

*Glory to Man in the highest,  
The Maker and Master of all.*<sup>2</sup>

Against this limp philosophy of life comes the challenge of the God-centered prophet summoning men to a life ruled by the will of Yahweh. His action in history, over which He has absolute dominion, discloses that His justice and mercy are its immutable support. And man's life has purpose only when he knows himself to be a creature of God, whose infinite wisdom and power are ever at work communicating to him a measure of divine goodness.

## ORIGINS OF PROPHECY

It is by now a commonplace that many of Israel's institutions appear relatively late in the history of the ancient Near East. In language,

2. Will Herberg, "Prophetic Faith in an Age of Crisis," *Judaism*, I, 3 (July 1952), p. 196.



cult, and kingship Israel shows considerable dependence on earlier models provided by the nations around her. To take but one example, kingship in Israel began in the eleventh century B.C., late indeed when we recall that the great states of Egypt and Mesopotamia had already known monarchs for almost two thousand years. The circumstances surrounding the beginning of kingship among the Hebrews are well known. Setbacks at the hands of tightly organized states that, like the Philistines, menaced the very existence of Israel, brought home the lesson that loose tribal federation could not long survive against peoples united under a king.<sup>3</sup> Little wonder, then, that the importunate elders of Israel addressed their petition to Samuel at Ramah, asking for a king to govern them, "as other nations have" (1 Kg 8:5). While warning them of the fateful consequences, Samuel complied: God, for His own purposes, would permit them to live under this human institution, long established in the ancient world but open to abuses whose full force Israel would soon feel.

Similarly, the religious-historical phenomenon of "prophecy" which meets us at various periods of Israel's history and under sharply differing forms is not altogether new. Unique though it is in important respects, it had its forerunners among the older civilizations. From Egypt, for instance, comes the delightful narrative of Wen-Amon who mentions a court attendant of Zakar-Baal, the prince of Byblos, seized by the spirit and prophesying in his frenzy. In hieroglyphic and picture writing there are signs attached to words to determine their meaning more definitely, and the translator of this narrative, John A. Wilson, notes that "the determinative of the word '(prophetically) possessed' shows a human figure in violent motion or epileptic convulsion."<sup>4</sup> The Old Testament too has left us a dramatic picture of the Canaanite prophets of Baal caught up in wild agitation as they lashed themselves with whips and cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out upon them (3 Kg 18:28). Against these representatives of pagan ecstaticism there rose up in challenge Elijah, firm, confident, bringing down fire from the Lord, wringing

3. For a picture of this critical situation in the history of Israel, see William F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1946), pp. 221-223. He cites this period, between 1200 and 900 B.C., as an illustration of Toynbee's principle of "Challenge-and-Response under the stimulus of blows."

4. See *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard (2nd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), p. 26.

from the frightened multitude on Carmel that cry of faith: "The Lord is God! The Lord is God!" (3 Kg 18:39).

Another example of pre-Hebrew prophecy comes from the clay tablets of Mari, a Mesopotamian city which flourished in the Patriarchal Age. The tablets contain several mentions of prophets, spokesmen of a god. These parallels from Mari are all the more significant when we recall that the Hebrews originally migrated from precisely this region bordering on the Syro-Palestinian desert. There is no need to insist on the familiar ring in some of these texts when a messenger receives his commission from a god. Dagan, for example, sends off his spokesman in these words: "Go, I send thee to Zimri-Lim; to him thou shalt say: Send me thy messengers, and lay all thy affairs before me."<sup>5</sup> The call of Jeremiah comes to mind, who is told to go to all to whom the Lord will send him, and to speak whatever He will command him to speak (1:7); or the commission of Ezekiel, who is sent on an errand to the exiles and is to say: "Thus says the Lord God" (2:4).

If these older cultures provide us with a background for Hebrew prophecy, it is especially in the manner of the prophetic action, with its ecstatic aspects, rather than in the content of the message, that the similarity lies. The messengers of the gods speak of trivial, ephemeral things, of political maneuvers, or of the proper cultic rites to placate an offended god. Israel alone heard men who spoke of divine judgment and blessing, of sin and its consequences, of the mysterious election of a people to a destiny beyond its deserts or comprehension. Martin Noth sums up the comparison between the prophets of Israel and those of Mari in these words:

When we come to the prophets of the prophetic books, any comparison of their content with the messages from God in the Mari texts is out of the question. The prophetic literature deals with guilt and punishment, reality and unreality, present and future of the Israelite people as chosen by God for a special and unique service, the declaration of the great and moving contemporary events in the world as part of a process which, together with the future issue of that process, is willed by God.<sup>6</sup>

5. Quoted from Martin Noth, "History and the Word of God in the Old Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XXXII, 2 (March 1950), p. 197.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 201.



## PROPHETS AND CULT

TO JUDGE by current writing on the subject, a problem of major interest is the link between prophet and cult, in particular the influence of cult on the formation and transmission of the prophetic books.<sup>7</sup> Putting the problem in a slightly different way: What was the attitude of the prophets to sacrifice? Scholars of an earlier period were wont to see a sharp contrast between what they called prophetic religion and priestly religion. This statement of Paul Volz may be taken as typical: "The Old Testament prophetic religion stands in the sharpest contrast to priestly religion, or Cult Religion. Priestly religion is the religion of sacrifice; the priest brings the gifts of men from below up to the Deity. Prophetic religion is the religion of the word; it brings the voice of God from above down to men."<sup>8</sup> The evidence for this opposition was taken to lie in certain passages of the canonical prophets in which they were thought to preach a religion of the spirit uncontaminated by external, ritual worship.<sup>9</sup> This supposed dichotomy between spokesman of Yahweh and sanctuary official has been challenged by numerous scholars who have rightly pointed out that a condemnation of ritual observances without devotion is not at all the same thing as a condemnation of the institution of sacrifice, which, the Law tells us, was a vehicle of divine blessing when offered with the proper dispositions.<sup>10</sup> At the same time these scholars have carefully avoided overlooking, for the sake of an artificial unity, the observable differences between the Law and the prophets.

Recently, through the influence of certain British and Scandinavian scholars, widely differing in their viewpoints, the prophet-priest relationship has been interpreted as one not of hostility but of closeness. One extreme view would regard all the prophets as cultic prophets and their compositions as cultic liturgies, usually reflecting, it is said, the ritual of the New Year enthronement festival. In support of this position, analogies are sought in the ideas, customs, and rites of the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia's guilds of diviners, evi-

7. For a discussion of this whole problem of prophet and ritual, with very valuable bibliography, see Harold H. Rowley, "Ritual and the Hebrew Prophets," *Journal of Semitic Studies*, I, 4 (October 1956), pp. 338-360.

8. Quoted from Rowley, *loc. cit.*, p. 342.

9. The more important of these texts are Is 1:10-15; Am 5:21-27; Os 6:6; Mic 6:6-8; Jer 7:22.

10. See Harold H. Rowley, *The Unity of the Bible* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), pp. 30-36.

dence for which can be found in Sumerian and Accadian texts. With regard to this modern trend to make cult associations the setting of the Hebrew prophets, even of the writing prophets, Otto Eissfeldt, dean of Old Testament critics, offers this cautious judgment:

As has been shown by one or two scholars, the new point of view has taken much too much upon itself, in regarding all the prophets without exception as cult prophets, and explaining as many as possible of their sayings and acts accordingly. Such exaggeration is doubly dangerous where recourse is had to methods which depend on general ancient oriental cult-myth "patterns." Lindblom's solemn warning against pursuing this false path farther, which was expressed in his contribution to the *Bertholet Festschrift* (pp. 325-327), has been only too fully justified.<sup>11</sup>

The truth seems to be somewhere between the extremes of denying all cultic influence in shaping the prophets' message and attributing everything to that influence. Suffice it to say that the prophet stood in a special relation to God and that he sometimes exercised his ministry at a cultic shrine, but just as often elsewhere. The presence of a prophet at a sacred place, as that of Amos at Bethel or of Isaiah and of Jeremiah in the Temple, does not constitute proof that the spokesman of God was officially attached to the shrine; rather the opposite in the case of Amos.

To sum up these general notions on prophecy: The essential element of the prophet's vocation is neither an ecstatic or supranormal experience nor attachment to shrine or Temple. What made him a prophet was the call he received from God, the bidding to speak His word which summons men to repentance and renewal, offers hope, and proclaims that He, the God of Israel, will be satisfied with nothing less than a life centered on Him.

*Go up upon a high mountain,  
Sion, herald of glad tidings;  
Cry out at the top of your voice,  
Jerusalem, herald of good news!  
Fear not to cry out  
and say to the cities of Judah:  
Here is your God!*

(Is 40:9)

11. See *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, ed. Harold H. Rowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1951), p. 159. See also James E. Coleran, "The Prophets and Sacrifice," *Theological Studies*, V (1944), 411-438.



## THE EARLY PROPHETS

BOTH etymology and function favor the definition of a prophet as "one called by God." The most common word for prophet, *nabi*, is one which occurs not only in Hebrew but in the much older Accadian language of Mesopotamia. There, the verb *nabu*, "to call," appears frequently in inscriptions and personal names from the middle of the third millennium to the latest periods. The verbal adjective, *nabi*, meaning "called," and virtually identical with the Hebrew word, turns up in the Code of Hammurabi around 1700 B.C.<sup>12</sup>

This highly probable etymology well fits the function of the prophet as described in the Old Testament. When Moses timidly drew back from the struggle with Pharaoh, Yahweh reassured him: "See! I have made you as God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother shall act as your prophet" (Ex 7:1). In an earlier scene Aaron's task as spokesman of the diffident lawgiver and, ultimately, of Yahweh is clearer still: "You (Moses) are to speak to him (Aaron) . . . and put the words in his mouth. I will assist both you and him in speaking (literally: I will be with your mouth and with his mouth) and will teach the two of you what you are to do. He shall speak to the people for you: he shall be your spokesman (literally: as a mouth for you), and you shall be as God to him" (Ex 4:15-16).

According to the Old Testament tradition, the institution of prophecy is traced to Mount Sinai, where God promised a succession of prophets who, like Moses, would be mediators and interpreters of the divine will (Deut 18:15-18).<sup>13</sup> The very structure of Deuteronomy,

12. See William F. Albright, "Archaeology and the Prophets," *The Journal of Bible and Religion*, VIII (1940), 133. Hebrew *nabi* is a noun form of the *qatil* type found frequently in adjectives used substantively with a passive meaning to denote duration in a state. Gesenius-Kautzsch, *Hebrew Grammar* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), p. 231, cites two examples: *'asir* (prisoner) and *mashiah* (anointed one), which offer good parallels to our word *nabi*. On this whole question, see the careful observations of Harold H. Rowley in *The Servant of the Lord* (London: Lutterworth, 1952), pp. 97-101.

13. In the Bible, the birth of prophecy is traced back to Abraham, writes Martin Buber. With a boldness unequalled in all Scripture, Abraham speaks on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, in the accounts of the seven revelations given to him, Abraham is uniquely portrayed as the one who is permitted to see: to see the land, to "see" even God. God sees Abraham as the righteous and "whole" man who walks before Him, and He and His way are seen by Abraham through his active surrender which reaches its apex on Mount Moriah. "If the gift of mediation between the above and the below, and between the below and the

built upon three addresses in which Moses pleaded with his people to respond in obedience and love to its Founder and Protector, places this work in the prophetic tradition; indeed, it provided subsequent spokesmen of Yahweh with some of their most powerful themes. Thus even the radical critic Marti could say of Moses: "He is only rightly understood when he is conceived as a prophet."<sup>14</sup>

It was in the eleventh century B.C., after more than a generation of sedentary life in Canaan, their new homeland, that a flourishing prophetic movement arose among the Hebrews. In 1 Kg 10:5 we find the first Old Testament reference to a "company of prophets," but from other, non-biblical sources we know that manifestations of group ecstasism were widespread at just about this time throughout the Mediterranean world. This is not to say that this early prophetic phenomenon in Israel was no different from pagan ecstatic movements elsewhere. Allowing for general similarities in external behavior, it is most likely that the prophetic bands in Israel arose as a protest against Canaanite ecstasism. The role of these prophets in the revolt engineered by Jehu (see 4 Kg 9) gives us a clue to their zeal for faith in Yahweh, a faith uncontaminated by idolatry; it is most probable that, from the beginning, these prophetic bands recoiled in horror before the orgiastic excesses of the Canaanite prophetic guilds.

There is a very clear picture of these roving bands of prophets in 1 Kg 10:5-12. In their presence Saul, the first king of Israel, threw off his usual reserve and, with the sound of their lyres and tambourines in his ears, joined in their wild enthusiasm, prophesying among them. "Is Saul also among the prophets?" asked his bewildered countrymen, and this became a proverb among them, so strange did this ecstatic behavior seem in the taciturn Benjaminite. If this early prophetic movement belongs predominantly to a type in which whole groups are caught up in the infectious excitement, it is wrong to conclude that all prophecy is "ecstatic" and that every prophetic saying is the result of some extraordinary psychic experience. A Nathan rebuking above is the one great attribute of the prophet," Buber sums up, "then such *Seeing* is the other." ("Abraham the Seer," *Judaism*, V, 4, Fall 1956, pp. 291-305.) Buber's observations are penetrating. Still, when in Gen 20:7 God reminds Abimelech that Abraham is a prophet, the insistence seems to be on the patriarch's intercessory power and perhaps on his gift of seeing, rather than on the full office of the prophet as His public spokesman.

14. Karl Marti, *The Religion of the Old Testament* (New York: Putnam, 1907), p. 63.



David for his sin shows no trace of having lost his normal powers of thought and volition. Incidentally, it is in Nathan, who with prophetic daring pointed the finger at his king: You are the man—you it is who defied the word of the Lord, and did evil in His sight (see 2 Kg 12:7-9), that we observe the important transition of the prophetic movement from purely religious revival to concern with the moral and social reform demanded by Yahweh.

From the time of Saul, the prophetic movement gained in strength, probably in direct proportion to the menace which the depraved Canaanite cults constituted for the austere, imageless worship of Yahweh. Whenever popular religion among the Hebrews degenerated into the nature-worship of their Canaanite neighbors, it degraded Yahweh to the level of one of the nature-gods. In Canaan, there were the myth and ritual of the "cosmic struggle": Year after year, the god of fertility died, gave way to the initial chaos, sprang up again to smite his enemies; with this re-enactment went orgiastic dancing, ritual prostitution, and child sacrifice—all of them abominations to the God of Israel. The first to see that the ways of the baalim and the way of Yahweh were mutually exclusive, the prophets waged unrelenting war against any attempt to absorb the Canaanite ritual with its repellent features into Israel's public worship.<sup>15</sup>

The threat of "baalization" was always present, but never more than in the ninth century B.C. when Jezebel, Princess of Tyre and Ahab's queen, tried to supplant the worship of Yahweh by the cult of the Tyrian baal. Against this danger of national apostasy stood the gaunt and terrifying Elijah. Because he roused the conscience of the people, he was dubbed by the king "Troubler of Israel" (see 3 Kg 18:17). He was a man in whom Moses lived again; for him the God who had delivered Israel from the Egyptian bondage was the Lord of transcendent majesty tolerating no rival.<sup>16</sup> "Jealous" was the word the Hebrews had used of God from earliest times, and Elijah, echoing the same truth, flung it out in a memorable challenge. Asking how long they would limp between two sides, he cried: "If the Lord is God, follow him; if baal, follow him" (3 Kg 18:21). In Elijah, the dour Tishbite, and in Elisha, his faithful disciple who prayed to in-

15. For a description of religious aberrations among certain elements of the Israelite populace, see John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), pp. 53-73.

16. See Jean Daniélou, "La Jalousie de Dieu," *Dieu Vivant*, XVI (1950), 63-73.

herit a double share of his master's spirit, a period which had begun with the ecstatic groups of Saul's time came to a climactic close.

The spirit of the Lord descended and took possession of many in Israel during those years; some were organized in groups, as the prophets of Yahweh whom Obadiah hid from the wrath of Jezebel (see 3 Kg 18:4); it was one of their number who anointed Jehu and set him on his way to exterminate the House of Omri. Others like Nathan, Micaiah the son of Imlah, Elijah, and Elisha stood apart in solitary greatness and fearlessly proclaimed the will of God to king and people. Sometimes they were opposed by false prophets who claimed, either through malice or self-deception, to speak in the name of Yahweh. But the words they uttered were not of God, rather of their own devising. The problem of false prophets arose early in Israel, and no easy criterion seems ever to have been found to separate the genuine from the spurious; for the discernment of spirits was as difficult then as it is now.

Jeremiah's indictment of the false prophets is the strongest in the Old Testament. He lashed out against those who so strengthened the hands of evildoers that none turned from his wicked ways (see 23:14). But he himself was made to appear a false prophet when Hananiah, who also claimed prophetic authority, broke the wooden yoke symbolizing the imminent Babylonian captivity. The Book of Deuteronomy twice raised the problem of the false prophet without leaving any universal norm for deciding who truly possessed the word of Yahweh. One test dealt with idolatry. The prophet who, no matter how many wonders he worked, urged the people to follow other gods was to be put to death (see Deut 13:1-5). In a second passage the proof of authenticity is the outcome of the event predicted. The verdict of history divides the true from the false prophet (see Deut 18:22). In the last analysis, whether he could establish it or not, the true prophet was the man who had received the word of the Lord, and of him who communicated the *debar Yahweh* no man could say that it was for evil he strove, that wrongdoing was his might (see Jer 23:10).

#### AGE OF THE CLASSICAL PROPHETS

IF ASKED why Elijah, Elisha, and other early religious leaders in Israel left nothing in writing, we can only answer that they were men of



deeds rather than words.<sup>17</sup> It is only in the eighth century B.C. that the literary prophets emerge, whose utterances are among the most beautiful examples of Hebrew poetry. Here we enter a new period dominated by religious, political, and social crises, but dominated also by men who, as spokesmen of Yahweh, called their fellow Israelites back to His service. They demanded that the people return to the Law of Moses. They were sent to reform rather than to innovate. Yet to those who heeded them they gave a deepened, more spiritual knowledge of God, so necessary in facing the catastrophes that lay ahead. To them history was not a superficial succession of cause and effect: History revealed the presence of God, and needed interpretation.<sup>18</sup>

But there is a puzzling element in the interpretation the prophets give: They speak of disaster and hope in almost the same breath. Some scholars have tried to solve the problem by claiming that the prophets were only foretellers of doom and that passages of hope in their writings are secondary. This solution, however, overlooks the profound prophetic intuition that saw Israel from two viewpoints. Of this double aspect Vriezen has said:

The task of the prophets has been to announce the downfall of the people of God, Israel, as it lived empirically, in order that in this way the people of Israel, which had been chosen by God, should fulfill its

17. On this whole question, see the remarks of Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 234. He distinguishes sharply between the prophets of whom we have been speaking and whose period ends in the ninth century, and the literary prophets who begin with Amos. But he is careful to point out the continuity between the two groups, the literary or rhapsodist prophets carrying on a religious movement begun by their forerunners. "If we want to know how Elijah and Elisha reacted to the evils of the ninth century," he writes, "we have only to read what Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah said in the eighth, though they may have expressed themselves differently."

18. This unshakable belief in the invasion of the divine into the temporal is an essential element in both the prophetic and the Christian view of history. "What distinguishes the Christian view of history from that of secular philosophy," writes Christopher Dawson, "is above all the belief in the divine government of the world and the intervention of the Spirit in history and in the power of man to resist or co-operate with this divine action. These conceptions are most clearly expressed in the prophets of Israel, who are in a special sense the bearers of the Sword of the Spirit. For the prophets not only give an interpretation of history in terms of the Kingdom of God and the divine judgment, they also show the power of God manifesting itself above all in the prophetic Word. In all the crises that changed the course of history they saw the hand of God, and for each crisis there was also a corresponding Word which it was the mission of the prophets to declare. If God withheld His Word, or if it was perverted by false prophets, the course of history ran blind." (*The Judgment of the Nations*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1942, pp. 151-152.)

calling. The secret of the prophetic activity is the double aspect of Israel: the empirical Israel as the people of God. And the error in many studies on the message of the prophets is that this point is not borne in mind sufficiently.<sup>19</sup>

Several approaches to what the prophets had to say are possible, but we cannot well separate theology from the man and his environment. Here message and personality are intertwined, and, consequently, a look at some of the representative prophets, their lives and objectives, may better acquaint us with their more important themes. If I treat of only a few, I do not wish to imply in the least that the others have little significance.

#### AMOS AND HOSEA

From the village of Tekoa, in the haggard wilderness of Judah, came the first of the prophets whose sayings, at least in part, have been preserved in writing. The Israel of his day, the middle of the eighth century, was enjoying a long "Victorian Era" of prosperity. The crowded sanctuaries were sign enough of an optimism which, identifying material success with God's favor, blinded so many to the reckoning which was not long in coming. During this century and the next, the awful might of Assyria was a constant threat to independent existence. How incredible, then, that a momentary respite from this threat could induce a wholly unjustified sense of security in the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah!

It was in such circumstances that Yahweh called Amos from the stony hills and tangled valleys of Judah and brought him twenty-five miles northward to the great sanctuary at Bethel. A herdsman, he was as austere in appearance as the forbidding hills from which he descended to deliver Yahweh's message. There at the shrine, well-fed men and women, who in everyday life mercilessly crushed the poor, swarmed about the altar of burnt-offering. Little need for interior reform, they thought, so long as the prescribed kind and number of gifts were brought to a God who cared more for holocausts than for justice and mercy. To the solitary figure from Tekoa, this misconception of God's nature and demands must have been singularly revolting. As if this were not enough, many looked forward to the Day of

19. Th. C. Vriezen, "Prophecy and Eschatology," *Supplements to Vetus Testamentum*, I (1953), 220.



the Lord as a day on which He would smite their enemies and uphold their own material prosperity, a prosperity which was the evil fruit of their extortion and injustice.<sup>20</sup> The Day of the Lord was indeed coming, Amos reminded them, but not in the way they imagined.

*Woe to those who yearn for the day of the Lord!  
What will this day of the Lord mean for you?  
Darkness and not light!  
As if a man were to flee from a lion,  
and a bear should meet him;  
Or as if on entering his house  
he were to rest his hand against the wall,  
and a serpent should bite him.  
Will not the day of the Lord be darkness and not light,  
gloomy, without any brightness?*

(5:18-20)

Amos was the voice of the violently oppressed, the victims of injustice, yet he was no social reformer; he offered no plan of social betterment in the modern sense. The enduring value of his message lies elsewhere: in his sure grasp of a transcendent God who makes moral demands on men. He saw injustice in the mirror of the divine sovereignty beside which the strivings of men were futile. His uncompromising condemnation of wrongdoing was not the protest of an altruist; it was a revelation of the real nature of sin as an offense against God. Hence the doom which hung over the corrupt Northern Kingdom was not simply the result of the play of human forces, but a divine judgment on a nation that had forgotten the holiness of God and man's relation to Him.

There can be no doubt that the times called for a fearless spokesman who, without thought of personal consequences, would tell a sinful people that they were a nation under judgment. Still, it would be entirely false to see in Amos nothing but a prophet of doom—a prophet without love. Severe though he was, he pleaded with God to be merciful with His people. How could the little creature that it was

20. See Fernand Couturier, "Le Jour de Yahve dans l'Ancien Testament," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa* (April-June 1954), pp. 193-217. It is interesting to observe how the idea of a Day of Yahweh outgrew the historical limits proper to the actual prophetic situation and reappeared in the apocalyptic movement, thus developing from a national to a world eschatology.

survive, how could it be raised up, he asked of the Lord, unless He showed pity (see 7:1-6)?<sup>21</sup>

Some twenty years after Amos, another prophet, this time from the north, looked upon the same wayward Israel as did the man from Tekoa, but he saw Israel's religious crisis through the prism of a deep personal tragedy: his marriage with Gomer.<sup>22</sup> The faithlessness of Hosea's spouse and his own striving to bring her back to the freshness of their first love became a symbol of Yahweh's dealing with Israel. Hosea could aptly describe the people as a half-baked cake, as a silly dove flitting now to Egypt, now to Assyria. But her foolish policies of expediency, her frantically sought alliances with foreign nations, would turn out to be only entangling snares leading to her destruction. Like Gomer, Israel had gone after false lovers and deserted Yahweh. This was indeed bold symbolism and there might have been, in the climate of Canaanite religious practices, some danger of abusing it, but the fact is that Hosea, describing the covenant union between Yahweh and His people, compared it to the most intimate of relationships—that between husband and wife. Human love is a reflection of God's love for Israel. The sin of the people, then, was a failure to be true to the covenant, to echo His love in her own. Thus Hosea saw punishment as inevitable. Still, the covenant love of Yahweh was so deep that He would call her again into the wilderness; a punishment it would be and a remedy as well, a hard road and a passageway to hope, when the song of her youth would be again on her lips (see 2:14-15). Great was God's yearning for His faithless bride:

21. See J. Philip Hyatt, "The Translation and Meaning of Amos 5:23-4," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, LXVIII (1956), 17-24. He proposes an interpretation of these verses which, if correct, puts the salvific will of Yahweh in a new and stronger light. The prophet would be telling the Israelites that they must put aside their formalistic piety which is an obstacle to the divine purpose of sending deliverance (*mishpat*) and salvation (*zedaka*).

22. Rowley has recently given us a thorough survey of the problems connected with Hosea's marriage to Gomer in "The Marriage of Hosea," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XXXIX (September 1956), 200-233. He takes chapters 1 and 3 as history, not as allegory. Hosea was commanded to marry a woman who had already sinned; she later left him for other lovers, fell into slavery and was finally redeemed by purchase. Hosea brought her home after disciplining her for a time. This factual situation thus served as a symbol of God's relation then to Israel. As to the relation between prophetic call and poignant experience, Professor Rowley believes Hosea's call was a sustained one, "beginning in a moment before his marriage with Gomer indeed, but growing clearer and deeper through the experiences that followed until at last he perceived the full message entrusted to him."



*How could I give you up, O Ephraim,  
or deliver you up, O Israel?  
How could I treat you as Adama,  
or make you like Seboim?  
My heart is overwhelmed,  
my pity is stirred.  
I will not give vent to my blazing anger  
I will not destroy Ephraim again;  
For I am God and not man,  
the Holy One present among you;  
I will not let the flames consume you.*  
(11:8-9)<sup>23</sup>

Hosea, as we noted, spoke to the same people whom Amos had upbraided for their crookedness, land-grabbing, and sinful luxury. The distinctive feature of Hosea's protest is in his denunciation of idolatry and of the fornication found at the sanctuaries of false gods. Such apostasy or, as he called it, such adultery was the most brutal rending of the bond which existed between God and Israel. Hosea did not stop at this. He saw beneath that wantonness an "inner alienation,"<sup>24</sup> the hidden source of Israel's visible estrangement from God.

*They consult their piece of wood,  
and their wand makes pronouncements for them;  
For the spirit of harlotry has led them astray;  
they commit harlotry, forsaking God.*  
(4:12)

23. This revelation of the unmerited love and mercy of God is undoubtedly one of the theological peaks of the Old Testament. Even though God must punish, His love does not cease; it is continuing and indestructible. If this is so, it will not rest until all Israel is in harmony with Him. The eleventh chapter of Romans, in which Paul reflects on the mysterious destiny of Israel, as the first to be chosen, is closely related to these verses. Abraham Heschel has written a sensitive essay, "The Divine Pathos," *Judaism*, II (January 1953), 61-67, in which he speaks of God's revelation of Himself as being in a personal and intimate relation to the world. Describing this as a basic category of prophetic theology, Professor Heschel writes: "The prophets are familiar with various forms of the divine *pathos*: love and anger, mercy and indignation, kindness and wrath. But what is, so to speak, the intrinsic property of the divine *pathos*? In every one of its forms, the divine *pathos* points to a connection between God and man—a connection which originates with God. God 'looks at' the world and its events. He experiences and judges them; this means that He is concerned with man and is somehow related to His people. The basic feature of the divine *pathos* is God's transcendental attention to man."

24. H. Wheeler Robinson, *Two Hebrew Prophets* (London: Lutterworth, 1948), p. 36.

*Their deeds do not allow them  
to return to their God;  
For the spirit of harlotry is in them,  
and they do not recognize the Lord.*  
(5:4)

This inner alienation was both a source of evil deeds and a consequence. Here Hosea laid his finger on one of the most terrifying fruits of sin: atrophy of the will sapping the strength of men until they are hardened. Of such men could it be said that they knew not the Lord. Knowledge of God was for the ancient Hebrew no speculation on His existence or attributes: To "know" God was to confess that He alone was God, that He was holy and transcendent, that He had chosen one nation and intended to realize through it a mysterious plan. Knowing God meant trusting in Him, doing His will, being aware of His demands, and responding to them by complete dedication.<sup>25</sup>

This knowledge was impossible so long as Israel allowed the evil of idolatry to eat away the sense of right and truth, just as the sin of Gomer, her spirit of harlotry, had for a time erased her sense of moral values. Hosea's love for her, even in her sin, would not let him abandon her; rather did it teach him stratagems to win back her love and obedience. So, in his last prophecy, an invitation to Israel to come back, there was the assurance that divine grace would triumph over her waywardness. Israel's *hesed*, her "covenant love," may have been as ephemeral as a morning cloud, but the power of divine love supplied for her weakness, enabling her to repent and to return. Hosea is the preacher of the transforming power of God's love, which prevails over human perversity and is our only hope of salvation.

Martin Buber has rightly observed that God's anger and His apparent withdrawal are but part of His love for man. God wishes to draw man into dialogue with Him, but He will not force him. Consequently there is no opposition between His mercy and His justice. His wrath is the anger of a father toward his disobedient child whom he does not cease to love. So Hosea became the bearer of God's merciful promise:

25. See John L. McKenzie, S.J., "Knowledge of God in Hosea," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1955), pp. 22-27.



*I will heal their defection,  
I will love them freely;  
for my wrath is turned away from them.  
I will be like the dew to Israel:  
he shall blossom like a lily;  
He shall strike root like the Lebanon cedar,  
and put forth his shoots.*

(14:5-6)<sup>26</sup>

## ISAIAH AND JEREMIAH

Towering above the prophets of the eighth century is Isaiah, whose ministry to the kingdom of Judah spanned the reigns of three kings: Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah. These last forty years of the century saw the westward expansion of the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah was also witness of the events which preceded and accompanied the destruction of Samaria in 721 B.C. He responded to the divine summons with full awareness that his mission would only seal the impenitence of his people with exile and desolation (see 6:9-13). It was Yahweh Himself who had loosed the Assyrian flood and summoned from a distant land the swift horsemen and the deadly archers.

*He will give a signal to a far-off nation,  
and whistle to them from the ends of the earth;  
speedily and promptly will they come.  
None of them will stumble with weariness,  
none will slumber and none will sleep.  
None will have his waist belt loose,  
nor the thong of his sandals broken.  
Their arrows are sharp,  
and all their bows are bent.  
The hoofs of their horses seem like flint,  
and their chariot wheels like the hurricane.*

(5:26-28)

But even the most terrible war machine of the ancient world could not shake the prophet's conviction that world events served the will of

26. See Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), p. 139. When Buber contrasts, however, the Old Testament vision of God's wrath with that of St. Paul, for whom the divine anger is supposed to be "almost a force of demonic power"—the phrase is Wetter's but quoted approvingly by Buber (*ibid.*, p. 140)—one cannot go along with him. To see how he misjudges the Apostle, one needs to recall, out of many pertinent sayings, only this one: "God has shut up all in unbelief, that He may have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32).

Yahweh. No power on earth, however cruel or mighty, could frustrate the plans of God for His people.

Therefore thus says the Lord, the God of hosts: O my people, who dwell in Sion, do not fear the Assyrian, though he strike you with a rod and raise his staff against you. For only a brief moment more, and my anger shall be over; but them will I destroy in wrath.

(10:24-25)

Most of Isaiah's ruling ideas are not essentially different from those of Amos and Hosea, his contemporaries. All three perceived that God's judgment upon the sins of the nation was inevitable, yet they knew that punishment was not the last word of Yahweh to His people. But there is something highly distinctive in the work and message of Isaiah, which is due to the overwhelming experience of his call and its abiding influence on the rest of his life.

The Temple vision, which inaugurated Isaiah's ministry and which is described in the sixth chapter of the book, brings home in every detail the glorious transcendence of Yahweh, in whose awful presence no sinful mortal can stand.<sup>27</sup> The throne, high and lofty, is a reminder that He is King, but not the King of Israel alone. His sovereignty is universal, absolute, extending over the entire earth, which is but the reflection of His glory. Seraphim veil their gaze before Him, and the hymn of praise ascending constantly from their lips expresses their awe before His holy and incomparable majesty. "Holiness" in Isaiah conveys much more than the common Near Eastern idea of the distance separating God and man. For him it is no abstract quality shared by the divinities of other peoples; it is the complete expression of God's "otherness," of His purity, which will not tolerate sin in any form. Before such holiness the prophet trembled:

Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!

(6:5)

The counterpart of this revelation was the prophet's vision of a land full of silver and gold that had purchased its prosperity at the expense of the poor. And this nation, steeped in avarice and religious

27. See Edward J. Kissane, *The Book of Isaiah* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1941), I, 74-75.



formalism, stood in special covenant relation with Yahweh! He was the "Holy One of Israel"; He had planted a vineyard, but its yield had been the bitter grapes of oppression and cruelty. Isaiah's indictment of the nation constantly returned to this fundamental antithesis between the holy purposes of Yahweh and the moral degradation he saw all about him. As if this were not enough, his very preaching would only harden hearts that had come to love darkness rather than light. Amos spoke of a "famine of the word of the Lord" as a great misfortune; Isaiah saw the profound paradox that the outpouring of that word would only stiffen his countrymen, and that their guilt would grow with each new revelation of the divine will.

Yet from the stump of the fallen tree a shoot would come forth, the perfect ruler of the Davidic line, gathering together the faithful remnant. In 2:2-4, 9:1-7, 11:1-9, and 32:1-8 the thought moves beyond the Day of the Lord, that bitter day of reckoning, to a messianic age of peace and justice, idealized as another reign of David or as a return to the Garden of Eden. The new kingdom will be made up of that consistent element of Isaiah's teaching, the purified remnant which, having survived the divine judgment, will enter the final, eschatological age. Neither Isaiah nor any other prophet knew the precise hour of this new era, nor the manner of its coming. But they pictured this future as the culmination of a divine plan, with which Israel, in spite of her sins, was capable of co-operating. The children of Israel, the prophets said, were not to be dismayed by the signs of the times, nor were they to despair in defeat and national disaster. For theirs were not the ways of the Gentiles, who were the slaves of their own handiwork—the gods of wood and stone destined to perish in the time of visitation. Not like these lifeless lumps is He who is the portion of Jacob.

To faith in this God Isaiah called his countrymen. For only by faithfulness and patient waiting could Israel become the remnant. In three great statements on faith, 7:9, 28:16, and 30:15, Isaiah did not play the pacifist before the crises facing the state, but demanded that his people recognize a power greater than man's, submit their wills to His, and leave off their feverish attempts to buy support from Egypt or Assyria. Faith was the measuring rod of ruler and people, the indispensable condition of national salvation.

Time and again the people refused that trust, hence the catastrophe

was inevitable. The doom hanging like a cloud over the sayings of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah was realized in the first quarter of the sixth century B.C. At that time, and just before it, the word of the Lord had come to another prophet, who was destined to be witness of the end and architect of the future. He is Jeremiah of Anathoth, by divine grace made a "fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze . . . against Judah's kings" (1:18). From his mother's womb he was consecrated and predestined to the prophetic office; his own reminiscence underlines the inescapability of his election. From the moment of his actual call to the end of his days—a period of over forty years—co-operation with the will of God, even when repugnant to his sensitive nature, was to be his rule of life. One cannot stress enough the great significance of the prophet's vision of the Lord stretching forth His hand and touching the mouth which still stammers unfitness for the call: "That experience takes us to the heart of both the weakness and the strength of Jeremiah. . . . He never loses the sense of his own insufficiency, but again and again he is brought back to the sufficiency of God. The center of gravity is transferred from his own heart to God's; the consciousness of dependence is this prophet's strength to a unique degree."<sup>28</sup>

The key to the understanding of this delicate and complex personality is a tension, an inner struggle. He felt isolated and lonely, and on occasion burst out in bitter reproach to God.<sup>29</sup> Instead of bowing to Him, the Transcendent, in adoration and awe, Jeremiah wrestled with Him, and in his agony of soul even blurted out protest and defiance. But faith in the power and goodness of God always triumphed and gave him the courage to face the many trials of his vocation.

Not only did Jeremiah have to attack the flood of idolatry which the reform of Josiah had failed to hold back; he had the even more thankless task of telling the people that there was no hope for them

28. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 156.

29. No other prophet has left us so adequate a picture of interior struggle as Jeremiah. In his "Confessions"—11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:9-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18—we are given an unusual insight into the alternating states of exaltation and rebellion, fed by his inner tensions. It may come as a surprise that Jeremiah is the first to raise the problem of innocent suffering (see 12:1) around which the author of the Book of Job built what is probably the masterpiece of Old Testament literature.



—no hope, at least, in the things in which they placed their hope. A pro-Egyptian party in the capital looked westward to the Nile for salvation. Others put their trust in the eventual collapse of Babylon. To all these, priest, prophet, king, common man, Jeremiah hurled a message terse and shocking: Surrender! Submit to Babylon! This was no cowardly counsel of expediency, and it shows little insight to question his patriotism, as did some of his countrymen. His advice was only an inference from his deeply felt conviction that the patience of the Lord was exhausted. The sins of Judah had filled the cup of Yahweh's wrath (see 25:15-18), and Jeremiah had to hold it to the lips of the people as they drank of it. Some, with an appearance of piety, considered City and Temple a pledge of God's protection, no matter how often they violated His laws. Thus in the courtyard of the Temple Jeremiah told the throngs: "Trust not in deceitful words: 'This is the Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord! The Temple of the Lord!'" (7:4). These incantations, in the repetition of which the people must have seen some efficacy, were powerless to deliver them from judgment. Nor were those better off who listened to the soothing words of the false prophets. If their leader, Hananiah, broke the wooden yoke-bars Jeremiah symbolically carried about his neck, these would be replaced by bars of iron (see 28:12-14).

As a spokesman of Yahweh, Jeremiah found no peace. Questions went unanswered and the mystery of evil remained. God would answer his perplexities only with another question:

*If running against men has wearied you  
how will you race against horses?  
If you lack confidence in a peaceful land,  
what will you do in the thickets of the Jordan?  
(12:5)*

The worst was yet to come—and Jeremiah would have to live through it, never ceasing to preach the word.<sup>30</sup>

Often it is darkest just before the dawn: Out of the imminent catastrophe, a nightmare of silence, darkness, and death, Jeremiah reached the climax of his prophetic teaching in the vision of a new covenant. The clay vessel which was the nation would be crushed by

30. For a short but incisive analysis of Jeremiah's vocation, see Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956), pp. 482-488.

the Potter because it failed to realize His purpose. But from that destruction would rise, eventually, a new covenant relation between Yahweh and Israel. The heart of this prophecy is found in 31:31-34, verses which describe how Yahweh, working within man, will produce a new and effective knowledge of God among men. The Old Covenant was a contract established by divine initiative (see Deut 7:6), and so would be the new covenant Jeremiah envisioned. In it, too, Yahweh will take the first step. Continuity with the past will be unimpaired. The stern moral demands of the former covenant will remain, but there will be development in three directions:

1. The service of God will be deepened, the law written on hearts and not on tables of stone. The "law within" is the mystery of grace abounding; it is analogous to the "law of Christ" of which Paul speaks in 1 Cor 9:21.

2. In the new ideal community, all men will know God. Their knowledge will be total response to God's initiative, complete surrender to His will. In foretelling a divine intervention to bring men into conformity with God's will, Jeremiah prepared the way, as the New Testament writers recognized, for that definitive covenant of love established by Him who is the Son of God. (See Mt 26:28; Lk 22:20; Rom 11:27; Heb 8:8-12.)

3. Forgiveness of sins, but not sinlessness, will be the mark of this new relationship. Though still a covenant with the house of Israel, this interior reconciliation with God will go beyond any legal purification.

All this is not to say that the New Covenant established by Christ is adequately expressed in this passage. Nevertheless, Jeremiah's teaching marked a great advance in the theology of the Old Testament and had enormous influence on the formulation of the blessings offered to man through Christ.

Jeremiah, more than any other prophet, exemplifies God-centered faith which stands against the idols of the world, a faith which holds that, come what may, the Lord presides over history, and history must serve His hidden purpose.<sup>31</sup> Not a matter of endlessly recurring cycles

31. In his essay "Prophecy, Apocalyptic, and the Historical Hour," Martin Buber maintains that the task of the true prophet is not to foretell, but to confront men with the alternative of grace or doom, with the need for decision for or against God. He gives as example Jeremiah's frequent plea with the people to turn from their wicked ways that God might let them dwell in the land He gave them, and



nor of unilinear and automatic progress, history is the work of God, forever contending with the perverse will of man. This is the prophetic faith of which Will Herberg has well said that it "carries us beyond tragedy and despair. It gives us the vision and the courage to work for the glory of God and the welfare of our fellowman, while realizing that it is not in the time of man or by his hand that the work can be completed. We live our lives in and through history, but life possesses a dimension above and beyond it. It is to this dimension that prophetic faith bears witness."<sup>32</sup>

#### EZEKIEL AND SECOND ISAIAH

In March of 597 B.C., the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar, having learned that his vassal state of Judah was planning revolt, laid siege against Jerusalem and deported to Babylon many of its leading citizens, including the young king Jehoiachin. Among these exiles was Ezekiel, a member of the priestly family of the Zadokites, who was no doubt the outstanding spiritual figure of Israel during the Exile. To him belongs the distinction of having been Israel's only prophet to receive the divine call outside the Holy Land.<sup>33</sup> So far as we can

that He may abide in their midst. If those appealed to continue to resist, then the alternative ceases and the approaching catastrophe is proclaimed as an inevitable fate. Even then, the portal of grace for man's inner turning is left ajar; even then, no end is put to the real power of the dialogue relationship between God and man, in which divine mercy responds to human turning. For man is created as a being mighty to choose between the ways, to choose again and again—only such a being is fit to be God's partner in history. The future is not determined; rather does God want man to come to Him in all freedom, to turn to Him out of utter ruin. This, then, is the prophetic message: Man was made the "surprise-center" of creation; because there is man, and as long as there is man, the world can always turn, no matter how late the hour, from perdition to salvation. (See Buber, *Pointing the Way*, trans. Maurice Friedman; New York: Harper, 1957, pp. 196-198.) Not to deal here with that one-sided approach to the prophets which sees in them only forth-tellers and not also foretellers, Buber has certainly seen the wonder of choice, but seems to have overlooked God's sovereignty. He has hardly done justice to the mysterious interplay of divine grace and human freedom. The prophetic message cannot be fully understood unless one remembers the plea Jeremiah puts on the lips of Ephraim, a young bullock not yet broken to the yoke, that God in His power convert him. In Buber's translation the plea (31:18) reads: *Kehren lasse mich nun, dass ich umkehren kann, Du bist ja mein Gott!* "Let me turn that I may be able to turn, for you are the Lord my God!" (See Buber, *Die Schrift*, XI: *Das Buch Jeremias*, Berlin: L. Schneider, n.d., p. 175.)

32. Herberg, *loc. cit.*, p. 201.

33. On this matter, see Harry M. Orlinsky, "Where Did Ezechiel Receive the Call to Prophecy?" *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, CXXII (April 1951), 34-36.

determine, he never returned to his native land, remaining with his exiled countrymen as a source of strength and preparing them for the future, for the tasks of the community restored. Bypassing the endless and often bitter disputes over the literary composition of the Book of Ezekiel,<sup>34</sup> we will do better to examine some of the chief ideas of the work, which may be divided into three sections: First, the judgment on Judah and particularly on the Temple of Jerusalem (chaps. 1-24); second, the predictions of doom against Tyre, Egypt, and other neighboring gentile nations (chaps. 25-32); third, the return of the people and an apocalyptic vision of the restored community in which everything converges on the new Temple (chaps. 33-48).

There have been attempts to psychoanalyze Ezekiel, only leading to bizarre results. To pass judgment on the psychological state of a man and, for that matter, on that of a figure of the distant past without sufficient evidence, is hardly scientific. That Ezekiel's experiences, visions, and symbolic actions were strange even to his contemporaries admits of no doubt. But this is not the same as saying that he was abnormal, that he had lost contact with reality. Before concluding that the chariot of his introductory vision was the "influencing machine" of modern psychiatry or that he was ever in a catatonic state, we should try to see him as an extraordinary man on whom the hand of the Lord rested.<sup>35</sup> A spirit acutely affected by the misery he saw,

34. For a summary of modern critical opinion, see Harold Rowley, "The Book of Ezekiel in Modern Study," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XXXVI (September 1953), 146-190.

35. In his introduction to the Ezekiel volume of the Jerusalem Bible, P. Auvray makes some significant observations on the prophet's temperament. Not only the pages which contain his great visions, but others, "less striking and less known: the allegory of the lioness and her cubs (chap. 19), for instance, or that of the barren vine (chap. 15), the symbolic pictures that retrace Israel's history (chaps. 16 and 23), are so many more proofs of how dominant was his imagination. A trifle suffices to set his talent as a symbolist going. A proverb repeated around him (11:3, 24:1-14), some verses of Jeremiah (3:6-8; Ez 16), daily events observed in the street, a watchman mounting guard (3:17-21), walls being built (13:10-16), immediately turn for him into parables or poetic allegories. Further, driven by an interior grace, Ezekiel quite naturally interprets his own experiences as a prophetic lesson. . . . The most painful trials of his life, his wife's death (24:15-24), a mysterious and prolonged sickness (4:4-17), and the loss of speech with which he seems at times afflicted (3:26, 24:27, 33:22), all these become for him a supernatural lesson and an occasion for one of Yahweh's oracles. For a prophet there is no commonplace experience. His person, his whole life, is a 'sign' (12:6, 24:24-27)." (See "Ezéchiél," *La Sainte Bible*, trans. P. Auvray; Paris: Cerf, 1957, pp. 12-13.)



he was charged with the task of leading a people which had arrived at a crossroad of its history. One who knows the conditions of life in sixth-century Babylon, the critical religious situation of the exiles, the temptations to which they were exposed, their dejection at the news of Jerusalem's fall, and their growing despair at what they believed to be an inescapable doom, will find it hard to assume that Ezekiel, Israel's watchman, ever lost sight of reality.

To the Judaeans who had come with Ezekiel in the first deportation of 597 B.C. and who tenaciously clung to a false belief in the inviolability of the Temple, Ezekiel was obliged to announce that the glory of Yahweh had left the Holy City and that its streets would soon be filled with unnumbered slain. He strengthened his words by vivid actions, such as incising a picture of Jerusalem under siege on a sun-dried brick.

Son of man, take a brick and, putting it in front of you, sketch on it a city [Jerusalem]. Throw up trenches and build siegeworks against it, cast up a mound and pitch troops against it, and set up battering-rams around it. Then take an iron griddle and use it as an iron wall between you and the city, as you glare steadfastly against it. Thus will the city be in a state of siege, as you beleaguer it. This symbolic action concerns the house of Israel.

(4:1-3)

The purpose of a prophetic symbol like this was didactic; though a superstitious element of the people may well have attributed to it magical influence, such a symbol was not meant to cause what it signified. It was not at all in the manner of the Egyptian execration texts on pottery, the breaking of which was held to cause the defeat of Egypt's enemies. The catastrophe which lay ahead of Judah was not the result of the prophet's mimic dramatization: It was the doing of the Lord, who had revealed His word to the prophet.

Precisely when Ezekiel's message changed from judgment to promise is difficult to say, but it was certainly after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. In his collected sayings the note of hope predominates from the moment the image of Yahweh as the good shepherd is introduced, the shepherd protecting the poor scattered sheep led astray by venal leaders. There is hope, then, and thus consolation, mounting to the expectation of a Davidic leader and of a new covenant bringing peace and security:

Over them I will appoint a single shepherd to rule them, that is, my servant David; he it is who will rule them; he will be their shepherd. I, the Lord, will be their God, and my servant David will be the prince among them; I, the Lord, have spoken. . . . They will know that I, the Lord, their God, am with them, and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, says the Lord God. You, you are my sheep, and I am your God, says the Lord God.

(34:23-24, 30-31)

The book reaches a climax with chapter 37, the vision of the valley of dry bones resurrected to new life by the vivifying spirit of Yahweh, the same spirit that had breathed life into the first man. The dry bones are the Israelites in exile, and the resurrection is their return to the land of the fathers, where He shall dwell in their midst, He, the Sanctifier of Israel (see 37:27-28).

The victories of Cyrus stirred up the subject peoples who chafed under the yoke of Babylon. To the children of Israel, whose eyes were turned toward Jerusalem, the Persian successes enkindled anew the hope raised by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. With the collapse of the short-lived Neo-Babylonian Empire, the last of the great prophets, whose work has been incorporated in the Book of Isaiah, speaks in words of unmatched eloquence to his fellow Jews in exile. Chapters 40-55 of Isaiah, often called the Book of Consolation, are today commonly attributed to an anonymous prophet of the Exile. The reason is not that it would have been impossible for Isaiah in the eighth century to see beyond his own day, but if we were to assign these chapters to Isaiah, we would have to interpret them against a sixth-century background. Such a position would seem a *tour de force*, however, and not in keeping with the character of Hebrew prophecy. For the sayings of Israel's inspired spokesmen, even when they point far ahead, are ordinarily related to the concerns and interests of the day in which a prophet is at work. In other words, the prophet always speaks to the men of his time. If we ask, then, why the later, anonymously written Book of Consolation appears as part of the Book of Isaiah, the answer seems to be that these poems were written in the spirit of the great eighth-century prophet and probably by one who belonged to the Isaian school. The least we can say is that in both vocabulary and ideas he was profoundly influenced by Isaiah.



"Comfort, give comfort to my people," strikes the keynote of his prophecies and again emphasizes the deep and affective relationship between Yahweh and His people. He will not only come to release Israel from the bondage of exile, but will do so with tenderness and compassion.

*Here comes with power  
the Lord God,  
who rules by His strong arm;  
Here is His reward with Him,  
His recompense before Him.  
Like a shepherd He feeds His flock;  
in His arms He gathers the lambs,  
Carrying them in His bosom,  
and leading the ewes with care.*  
(40:10-11)

Israel might find herself in a bleak world, but Yahweh was the Lord of that world, the prophet proclaimed. Sometimes, in moments of despair, the exiles had turned away from God, thinking that their way was hid from Him, and that He had forsaken them. Then the great poet-prophet gently chided them for their lack of faith and sang of Yahweh's power to redeem. Israel should know better than to put any stock in idols of stone or wood. Yahweh is one and He will not surrender His glory to another (see 42:8). The theology of Second Isaiah is a powerful recapitulation of what the prophets had been saying since the time of Amos, and before. Like them, he stood in awe before the living God, in whose holy presence nothing impure can survive. Like them, he poured scorn on the false gods of the nations and ridiculed their images as so many dumb sticks of wood.

But he went beyond them when he left us the unforgettable portrait of that mysterious figure known as the "Servant of Yahweh." The Servant has a singular vocation—to suffer for the redemption of mankind. In meekness and self-effacement he goes about his work of expiation, though his destiny is pain; and by his atoning death sinful man is reconciled to God. The innocent victim offers intercession for his brethren and in the end looks upon the fruits of his vicarious suffering:

*Because of his affliction  
he shall see the light in the fullness of days.*

*Through his suffering my servant shall justify many,  
and their guilt he shall bear.  
Therefore I will give him his portion among the great,  
and he shall divide the spoils with the mighty,  
Because he surrendered himself to death  
and was counted among the wicked;  
And he shall take away the sins of many  
and implore pardon for their offenses.*

(53:11-12)

There is no unanimity of opinion as to the identity of the Servant in these songs.<sup>36</sup> While Jewish scholars have ordinarily interpreted the Servant as a personification of the people of Israel or as a historical person known to the prophet,<sup>37</sup> Catholics have stressed fulfillment of these songs in Jesus, as the New Testament unequivocally teaches.

36. Rowley, *The Servant of the Lord*, pp. 3-57, gives a thorough survey of the work done on the Servant Songs over the past thirty years.

37. In an interesting study on the thought of the prophets, Rabbi Israel I. Mattuck, the leader of liberal Judaism in England, maintains that "scholars do not interpret these poems with anything near unanimity, except to reject the theological view which found in them a description of the future Messiah." Here a liberal bias seems to have led Dr. Mattuck to mistake the position of those who think like him for that of all scholars. He himself sees in the Servant poems a parable illustrating "the moral that the service of God may entail suffering." In his opinion, they explain the general suffering of the Jews in exile, and at the same time the special suffering of the pious ones among them. Their situation is "like that of a prophet who had to endure ignominy, pain, and martyrdom," who "by his life and death 'justified many'—that is, made them realise their sinfulness," who "had to suffer to impress his instruction on others [and so] promoted the true religion." (See *The Thought of the Prophets*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1953, pp. 132-133.) Here the fire of the Servant Songs is quenched, the justification of the sinner reduced to a mere realization of his frailty, and the Suffering Servant—the Victim smitten for our sakes—diminished to a successful teacher. This, I fear, does violence to the Isaian text.

Buber's interpretation of the Suffering Servant is perhaps the deepest in contemporary Jewish exegesis. He holds the Servant to be "more than a single human person," one who takes shape in various ways and in many likenesses, "the bearers of which are identical in their innermost essence" (see *The Prophetic Faith*, New York: Macmillan, 1949, p. 229). Thus the role of the Servant is a hidden one. His destiny, Buber is never tired of repeating, is that of an arrow remaining within its quiver. Unless I misunderstand him, the Suffering Servant is like a portrait that must forever remain unfinished. Here, according to Buber, is a task ever to be tried, but never to be realized; a hope ever to be entertained, but never to be fulfilled; a redemptive suffering ever to be accepted, but never to be accomplished. It goes without saying that this approach to the Servant theme is not Christian, but I wonder whether what seems to me a notion of non-fulfillment, of lasting suspension, really has its roots in the Bible.



Indeed, Christ is the ideal Israel, summing up in His Person the destiny of His people. As one scholar has recently put it:

Jesus alone came and said: Take up your cross. If you wish to live, die. If you wish to find joy, suffer. He did not make evil easy to understand or easy to bear; but He showed that it is possible to live heroically with it and do nothing about it except to suffer it. This is the mystery of the Servant, the mystery of the life and death of Jesus, that it is in becoming the victim of evil that man has his only hope of overcoming it. And by the solidarity which links the Son of God with all men and all men with each other, this victory over evil can be communicated to others who are ignorant of what happens on their behalf.<sup>38</sup>

The full fury of sin, all its evil and senselessness, was turned loose on Him, the uncomplaining Victim. And in His passion and death the sinless Christ not only permitted sin to work its might upon Him, He taught us that there is more than one way to meet evil. We can flee from it in terror, we can fight it with every ounce of our strength, or we can bear it, as He bore our sins.

Unique and revolutionary though Christ's advent is, the Suffering Servant theme firmly links His coming with the history of God's chosen people. Moreover, in Him, many sketches drawn by the prophets of the One to redeem Israel and the nations are brought together in one distinct image. For a Christian, He is the consummation and the reward of Israel's mighty hope, nurtured by the spokesmen of Yahweh.

#### BEARERS OF THE WORD

IN CONCLUSION, I should like to look once more at all the prophets together. There is one short phrase that is repeated throughout their writings; it appears about four hundred times.<sup>39</sup> Whether their words are of warning or comfort, whether they announce judgment or redemption, they are generally prefaced by a determined "Thus says the Lord." This is the way ambassadors of old would deliver the proclamations of their kings, and Israel's prophets knew themselves

to be *shluhim*, messengers of Yahweh (see Mal 3:1), sent to make public His will. Bearers of His word, they would have considered themselves liars had they spoken in their own name. So convinced were they of being inspired that it was not enough for them to introduce their utterances with the incisive "Thus says the Lord," but often they ended them with the final acknowledgment "Says the Lord" or "Utterance of the Lord" (see Am 1:5; 2:16). And because they were certain they were inspired, chosen, indeed "possessed" by Him, they lost all fear of men; or, rather, their fear was ever dissolved into faith in God, their Deliverer (see Jer 1:8). All they feared was to be untrue to Him and His charge.

While pagan literature often flatters the strong and mighty, the books of the prophets abound with concern for the poor, the weak—a concern that could not have sprung from the selfishness of the human heart. Having a source of strength that was outside themselves, they did not yield to the temptation to say what they liked to say or what their listeners liked to hear. Never pleasing themselves, never pleasing their own people or its rulers, they are therefore one of Israel's everlasting glories. For where is there a people which has preserved the sayings of men who relentlessly castigated its sins and yet lovingly held out hope, hope not only for their own, but—in the days when prophecy in Israel reached its climax—also for all the ends of the earth?

38. John L. McKenzie, S.J., *The Two-Edged Sword* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1956), p. 244.

39. See Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (3rd ed.; Tübingen: Mohr, 1953), pp. 13, 90, and 233, n. 17.