

Discovering or Rediscovering THE PROPHETS

Leonard S. Kenworthy

Quaker Publications
Box 726
Kennett Square, Pa. 19348

Copyright, 1991 Leonard Kenworthy

About the Author

Leonard Kenworthy is a birthright (and a convinced) Friend who was born in Richmond, Indiana. After attending public schools, he graduated from Westtown School. His A.B. degree was from Earlham College and his M.A. and Ed.D. degrees from Columbia University.

As a young man he taught at Friends Select School and Friends Central School—both in Philadelphia, and at the Brunswick School in Greenwich, Connecticut.

In 1940-1941 he was Director of the Quaker International Center in Berlin, Germany and during World War II he was in ten camps and units of the Civilian Public Service, including work with mentally defective children and participation in a human guinea pig experiment for hepatitis.

After three years as Director of the Division of Education for International Understanding at UNESCO in Paris, France, he returned to the United States, spending most of his professional life at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. There he specialized in curriculum, social studies, and international education—speaking and writing widely in those fields.

Throughout his life he has been active in various Quaker groups, including membership on the committees of three Quaker schools and work with the American Friends Service Committee, the Friends Council on Education, and the Friends World Committee. He has written or edited 13 books on Quakerism, plus many other publications in that field. He has also spoken widely to Friends here and abroad.

He now lives at the retirement community of Kendal-at-Longwood, near Kennett Square, Pennsylvania.

Leonard Kenworthy says that he is not a biblical scholar but is interested in encouraging people to discover or rediscover the Prophets. This is one of a series of pamphlets on various aspects of the Bible, religious life, and Quakerism.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. An Overview of the Prophets	2
3. Amos: Prophet of Justice	7
4. Hosea: Prophet of Long-Suffering Love	12
5. Isaiah of Jerusalem: Statesman and Radical	16
6. Micah: Champion of the Poor and Downtrodden	23
7. Jeremiah: That Very Human Prophet	26
8. Isaiah of Babylon: Herald of Hope	35
9. A Brief Reading List on the Prophets	38

1. Introduction

As a boy I was introduced to some of the Old Testament prophets and I knew I was supposed to be impressed by them. But I wasn't. In fact I thought they were conceited, churlish, and possibly a little crazy. Furthermore, the illustrations which accompanied the texts about them seemed to confirm my views as they were portrayed with their hair dishevelled, their eyes piercing the sky, and their clothes tattered and torn. They didn't just talk; they roared or thundered about bribery, corruption, deceit, debauchery, evil, licentiousness, sin, and punishment. I had a few ideas about sin and a little experience with punishment, but those other words were beyond my comprehension.

So I shunned those prophets for years. Most of my acquaintance with the Bible was with the New Testament, plus some of the Psalms, and a few other favorite sections scattered here and there.

Much older and possibly a little wiser, I have become curious recently about some of those long-neglected men. Consequently I have browsed in several books about them and re-read the stories by or about them in the Old Testament.

In the book of Genesis there is a reference to the fact that "there were giants on the earth in those days." There are accounts of several such giants in the Old Testament but I have selected six to write about: Amos, Hosea, Isaiah of Jerusalem, Micah, Jeremiah, and Isaiah of Babylon.

Since others may have had similar experiences to those of my boyhood, I have jotted down on the pages that follow some of my current reactions to those grand old men, hoping that others may become as fascinated by them as I have been.

Many books have been written about the prophets, collectively and/or individually—and many more will be written about them in the future. Such lengthy accounts can be

interesting and important. But I think a case can also be made for brevity. Hence this pamphlet. It is intended as an introduction to six prophets, as a collection of brief biographies or thumbnail sketches of them, or as a short guidebook to the portraits of six outstanding men in the Gallery of Prophets.

Having spent considerable time recently reading about those incredible individuals, listening to them, and learning from them, they are now my friends. I hope they are yours—or soon will be.

Those men bequeathed to the world several advanced concepts of God and of religion. Furthermore, they were among the great pioneers of social justice of all times and places and among those who strived most valiantly to bring the kingdom of heaven a little closer on earth.

However, they lived centuries ago and in a very different culture than ours. Hence they need to be viewed in terms of those times and places.

Nevertheless many of their messages were far ahead of their day. So they can still speak to us in this latter part of the 20th century and in the beginning of the 21st.

2. An Overview of the Prophets

In her short and superb volume on *Spokesmen for God*, Edith Hamilton asserts that:

There is nothing resembling the Old Testament prophets in all the literature of the world.

That is a sweeping statement but it certainly can be confirmed by knowledgeable authorities.

There are 16 such prophets, even though only six are considered in this pamphlet. They are fascinating indi-

viduals, similar to each other in some ways but different in other respects. No name is completely satisfactory in describing all of them; different terms may appeal to various readers: spiritual giants, mighty men of God, spokesmen for the Almighty, religious rebels or religious pioneers, social liberals or social pioneers—or just the short but powerful word—prophets.

Their writings or the writings about them constitute about a third of the Old Testament and provide considerable background for the teachings of Jesus.

Three major world religions draw upon the works of those prophets for spiritual sustenance and religious guidance—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, while many individuals of other faiths or of no religious affiliation consult them and are often aided by them.

Mention the word prophet to many people and their quick response will be to think of such synonyms as foretellers, seers, or magicians. Not so. Better words would be forerunners, interpreters, or transmitters.

Actually the word in Hebrew from which prophet is derived means to bubble, boil, or spring forth, whereas the word in Greek means to speak in place of or on behalf of. Perhaps the word *through* could be added.

One intriguing definition of that word comes to us from the Jewish Old Testament scholar Abraham H. J. Heschel in his volume called *The Prophets*. There he writes:

The prophet is a man who feels fiercely. God has thrust a burden on his soul and he is bowed and stunned at man's fierce greed. Frightful is the agony of man; no human voice can convey its full terror. Prophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world. It is a form of living, a crossing point of God and man. God is raging in the prophet's words.

Individuals, institutions, and movements need to be seen against the background of their time and place. For the prophets we are considering here it was approximately a 300 year period from 750 B.C. to 450 B.C.—a crucial era for the Hebrew people and for the known world of that time.

The place was a tiny area in what is now called The Middle East and in a backwash region of the great empires of the Assyrians, the Egyptians, and the Babylonians, followed by the Medes and Persians.

Ask people about the age of those men and they are likely to think of them as old. Actually they were almost all comparatively young men, certainly in their 30s and 40s. Some started their work as prophets in their late teens or early 20s. In addition, most of them did not live long; they were martyred or died early in life. But at least two of them—Isaiah and Jeremiah—carried on their work for 40 or more years.

Although those men occasionally predicted events in the future, they were primarily concerned with the present. As Stephen Winward says in *A Guide to the Prophets*, they were “forthtellers rather than foretellers.”

Most of them were speaking prophets rather than writing prophets. So far as scholars can ascertain, Jeremiah dictated to his scribe and friend Baruch, whereas authorities believe that the only one who actually wrote his messages was Isaiah of Babylon.

Obviously those men were highly imaginative individuals and courageous ones, withstanding condemnations, denunciations, imprisonment, and even death for their beliefs. Consequently they must have been lonely men with only God and a few friends and associates to help carry them through their trials and tribulations.

Of course most of the rulers and many of the common people considered them meddlers, interferers, and kill-joys. At times they were also accused of being unpatriotic, subversive, and even treacherous.

As pioneers they pitted themselves against the firmly-held and loudly-proclaimed beliefs and practices of their day—but they eventually nudged the world forward.

Negatively they scolded the priests for substituting ceremonies and ritual for the substance of religion. They inveighed against the astrologers and soothsayers. They confronted the rich and the powerful for their lavishness and their licentiousness. They challenged the rulers and the powerful with their arrogance and corruption. They chided the judges for their indulgence in bribery, chicanery, and unfairness. They warned the politicians against entangling alliances with foreign powers. And they threatened the rulers and the people with the wrath of God for their backsliding, double-dealing, and immorality. Do you wonder that they were unpopular most of the time?

Yet, positively speaking, they did much for their people. They promoted moral conduct. They comforted those who mourned and were subjected to unfairness and oppression. They encouraged the translation of God's will into day-to-day living. They protected the poor. They upheld increasingly high standards of human values. And they sometimes held up hope for a return of their people to the favor of God and their eventual return to The Promised Land. So they sometimes had friends and allies.

Above all they developed higher, deeper, and broader concepts of God and of religion. Those new concepts didn't appear overnight; they were hammered out over the decades and centuries.

Every one of our six prophets did not espouse all of those ideas but as a group they helped to produce a refined sense of religion and of God to which we are all heirs.

Thus they moved from a religion based largely on ceremonies and rituals to one of day-to-day righteous living. They moved from upholding some sacrifices to discarding all of them. They moved from seeing God as a Being filled with hate, wrath, anger, and punishment to one embracing

forgiveness, compassion, and love. They moved from considering their God supreme but permitting the worship of other gods to the worship of only one God—or monotheism. They moved from celebrating God as a tribal deity to that of a universal God. And they moved from a God who only spoke to the religious leaders to one who spoke to other human beings, too.

In his magnificent volume on *Understanding the Bible*, Harry Emerson Fosdick summarized many of those gains in these words:

From a local, tribal god they found their way through to the Sovereign Creator of the universe, in whose hands were the reins of all history, and from whose control no star and no nation could escape. From being a hard hater, their God became, in their imagination and belief, a merciful lover of his people, the depth of whose sacrificial compassions it strained their language to fathom. . . . A mountain God of war and storm they left behind to believe at last in a universal Spirit, everywhere available to the seeking soul, the one God of all mankind, who asks for his service only justice, mercy, and humility, and from whose presence there is no escape.

To see how those ideas appeared and were espoused by a few remarkable men, let us turn now to a description of the lives of six prophets.

3. Amos: Prophet of Justice

Nearly 2400 years ago a young man from a little town in Judea, known as Tekoa, left that community and set out on a journey to the Northern Kingdom. There he preached and prophesied powerfully against the decadence of the people and nations of that day, calling on them to repent their evil ways and become reconciled to God and each other.

Many of his messages were filled with gloom and doom. But he also championed righteous living, social justice, and international concern—centuries before that became common.

The little we know about that young man and his messages is recorded in the nine chapters of the brief book of Amos in the Old Testament. Nevertheless he is regarded as one of the great religious leaders of all times, ushering in a new era in human history.

Tekoa was an unlikely place to find a prophet. But wasn't that true of Jesus as people said, "What good can come out of Nazareth?"

Tekoa was called a village but it was merely a camping ground for a group of nomadic shepherds and their families, tucked into the region between the Jeshimon Mountains and the Dead Sea. It was a desert territory with a harsh environment. The pasture land was sparse; the water scarce.

Consequently Amos experienced its hot sandstorms, parching winds, devastating drought, and bitter-cold nights. He watched while locusts stripped the landscape and grasshoppers wrought havoc. Quite likely he knew about earthquakes first-hand and there is one description in the book of Amos of a total eclipse of the sun. Then, too, he knew well the terror of lions and other wild animals.

Educational and cultural opportunities were limited in Tekoa, too. There was no school and not even a synagogue. But he could learn about the history of his people from the

elders of the tribe and about the decadence, debauchery, and extravagant living in the cities in the north from passers-by.

But he must have had plenty of time to reflect on the meaning of life as he tended his sheep and sometimes sought shelter in the nearby caves.

Then one night something happened that changed his life radically—and consequently the life of the Hebrew people. A lion darted out of the darkness, seized one of his flock, and departed. He felt there was a message in that event. To him the lamb was the nation of Israel and the lion—God. Amos felt “called”:

And the Lord said to me,
“Go, prophesy to my people, Israel.”

Amos 7:15

When he shared his intentions with his family and friends, they discouraged him in his plans. To them his concern was foolish, undesirable, and dangerous. But to him it was necessary, ordained, and unavoidable.

So he packed his few possessions into a bundle and set off on a memorable journey which was to plunge him into the midst of turmoil and trouble and catapult him into history as a prophet.

There are various ways of dividing the account he or others wrote about his adventures. One way is suggested by Mariano DiGangi in *Twelve Prophetic Voices: Major Messages of the Minor Prophets*. He surmises that the story can best be told in three sections—Denouncing Sin, Pronouncing Sentence, and Announcing Salvation. I prefer the less theological and more dramatic approach of Rolland Emerson Wolfe in *Men of Prophetic Fire* who tells that tale as six episodes or acts in a play.

Passing through various towns, possibly including Jerusalem, Amos made his way to Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom.

Everywhere he went, he observed the people and their conditions. He talked with them and listened to them. What he learned was beyond belief, even worse than what he had suspected. Everywhere he found debauchery, deceit, drunkenness, immorality, corruption, the worship of idols, disregard for justice, and unthinkable poverty.

Some were rich because they had obtained their wealth through special privileges, such as bribes, chicanery, the seizure of land and other property, and even the sale of individuals into slavery. The Israelites often prayed to their God but also bowed down to the gods of other peoples. Debtors were pressed into slavery and the poor were neglected and impoverished.

Soon there was a national political gathering in Samaria with hundreds of people from all over the adjoining regions present. Seizing this opportunity to speak to his people and through them to the inhabitants of nearby nations, he mounted the platform before the scheduled events had begun. There he attacked the hated Syrians who had perpetrated ghastly deeds against the Hebrews. Amazed by his daring, the audience applauded. Then he attacked the Ammonites and the Moabites, describing vividly their sins. And the audience apparently went wild.

But Amos did not stop there. He hurried on to enumerate the sins of his own people, prostitution—even sacred prostitution, injustice in the courts, the seizure of land by the rulers, the forcing of debtors into slavery, and idolatry.

Despite the fact that they were the “chosen people,” Amos told them, that God was speaking to them, chastising them:

Hear this word which the Lord has spoken
Against you, O people of Israel:
“You only have I known
Of all the families of the earth.
Therefore I will punish you
For every one of your iniquities.”

Amos 3:1-2

Many of his listeners were surprised and shocked. Others may have been secretly excited and elated. Somehow Amos escaped that scene. Wolfe has said of that occasion and speech:

This was one of the great addresses in history.

Next Amos descended upon a gathering of fashionable women transported to a gathering place in sedan chairs borne by servants. The women were fat, as that was the accepted standard of the day, having gorged themselves to achieve that condition. Also they were saturated with perfume and decked out in finery and jewelry. Amos was agitated and spoke harshly to them. In fact biblical scholars believe that we read today the expurgated edition of what he said. He told them that as the favored few they were weakening the foundations of their nation and making it vulnerable to attack by outsiders. They were also weakening the structure of their country internally, creating a dispossessed and discontented citizenry.

Then Amos appeared in the court which was held outdoors at that time, probably near one of the gates of the city. Incensed by what he had learned about the degeneration of the judicial system through bribes, racketeering, and injustice, he spoke out against this travesty of law and order, saying:

For I know that your transgressions are many,
And your sins countless.
You who oppress the innocent, take bribes,
And thrust aside the needy at the gate.
Therefore he who is prudent will be silent at such
time;
For it will be an evil time.

Amos 5:12-13

But he did not end on that negative note; he counselled them to:

Seek good and not evil that you may live and that thus the Lord, the God of hosts, may be with you, . . . Hate evil and love good and establish justice at the gate.

Amos 5:14-15

His next appearance was in the market place. Having learned much about the defrauding of the people, he spoke out against the numerous ways in which individuals were cheated. He ended with this warning:

Hear this, you who trample upon the needy,
And would bring the poor of the land to an end.
Making the ephas small and the price great,
And falsifying the scales;
Buying the poor for silver,
And the needy in exchange for a pair of sandals.
The Lord has sworn by the pride of Jacob
“I will never forget all their deeds.”

Amos 8:4-5

Soon Amos left Samaria. Whether he was banished or left of his own accord, we do not know.

From there he went to Gilgal for a religious ceremony. He had been shocked that religion had become largely lip-service and rituals. He had been displeased that people sacrificed their choice animals to please God, something which the rich could do easily and the poor only at great pain. Of course people felt that the larger the bounty, the greater the blessing.

Protesting such practices, Amos declared:

I hate, I spurn your feasts,
And I take no pleasure in your festal gatherings.
Amos 5:21

Then, in a magnificent statement, he urged them to:

. . . let justice roll down like waters
And righteousness like a perennial stream.
Amos 5:24

Amos was propounding a new concept of God and of justice. Religion was not something for special times and places; it was a matter of rightful day-to-day living. Justice was not just for the rich; it was for everyone.

Finally his journey took him to Bethel, the religious capital of the Northern Kingdom, a place made sacred in the past by Abraham and Jacob. In that place a shrine had been built which rivalled that of the Temple in Jerusalem.

There Amos was met by the chief priest. Instead of being welcomed, Amos was denounced and barred from the sacred shrine. The chief priest had informed the king that Amos was plotting against him. Therefore he was told to leave and never return to Bethel.

Amos was crushed, pained, humiliated. So he retaliated by predicting that:

Your wife shall become a harlot in the city,
Your sons and daughters shall fall by the sword.
Your land shall be divided with a measuring line,
And you yourself shall die on ground that is unclean.
Amos 7:17

Obviously that was not Amos at his best.

It is better to remember him by four remarkable statements. One is about righteousness:

Seek the Lord that you may live.
Amos 5:4

The second is about justice, when the Lord declared:

Behold I am setting a plumb-line
In the midst of my people Israel.

Amos 7:8

The third is on Amos' belief that God's love encompassed not only Israelites, but others, including the dark-skinned inhabitants of Ethiopia. On that international theme he asserted:

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me,
O Israelites. . . .

Amos 9:7

The fourth is that despite the fact that he was deeply troubled by conditions in his day, he foresaw a time when his people would be reconciled with God. Hence he proclaimed:

Behold the days are coming. . . .
(when) I will restore the fortune of my people Israel.
So that they shall rebuild the ruined cities,
And dwell in them and plant vineyards,
And drink their wine.
And make gardens and eat their fruit.
And I will plant them upon their own soil,
And they shall never again be rooted up,
From off their soil which I have given them,
Says the Lord your God.

Amos 9:13-15

As Abraham J. Heschel declares in his book on *The Prophets*:

Indeed, the prophesy of Amos that began with a message of doom, concludes with a vision of hope.

4. Hosea: Prophet of Long-Suffering Love

A few years after Amos, another prophet appeared, named Hosea. That was somewhere between 745 and 735 B.C.

In some ways those two remarkable men were similar. But they were different, too. Amos tended to be dark and austere; Hosea hopeful and forbearing. Whereas Amos was a prophet of doom and gloom; Hosea was an exponent of repentance, return, reconciliation, reunion, and renewal. Amos underlined justice; Hosea accented love. Amos pictured God as a judge; Hosea portrayed God as a savior. Perhaps one could say that they complemented each other.

In the years following Amos, many of his predictions had come true. Assyria had become a middle eastern power by annexing the smaller and weaker nations around it by ruthless expeditions. Once a part of the Assyrian empire, they were plundered and forced to pay tribute. Some people were even taken as slaves.

Economically the rich became richer and the poor poorer. Politically there was widespread corruption, intrigue, and revolts. Morally and religiously the practice of idol-worship spread and sexually promiscuity was permitted and even sanctioned by some priests. Violence was common; poverty and suffering widespread.

Conditions in Isreal, the Northern Kingdom, or Ephraim—as Hosea referred to it—were not better. Some of the people sided with Assyria; others with Egypt. Intrigue was common; plots and counter-plots rife. Many of the priests were lax, protesting seldom against widespread immorality and sometimes taking part in it themselves. Meanwhile many of the worshippers resorted to bowing down before sacred trees or even wooden poles and embracing all kinds of superstitions and taboos.

Those were indeed troubled times.

It was in that disturbing period of history that Hosea appeared on the scene.

Most authorities believe he was born somewhere in the Plain of Esdraelon which lay in the heartland of the Northern Kingdom. Since it was a crossroads of nations, it was frequently the site of battles and continually a center of communications. Thus he was painfully aware of the conflicts of that time and place.

Apparently his family was comfortable or even relatively prosperous.

Some commentators claim that he was a baker, but most of the biblical scholars believe he was a farmer. If not, he certainly knew a great deal about farm life for the book of Hosea is peppered with references to grain, harrows, yokes, plows, bulls, heifers, vineyards and wine, fig trees, and comparable words.

The story of his life is strange—and sad. He married a woman named Gomer but she eventually became unfaithful, turning into an adultress and a harlot. Puzzled as to what he should do, he turned to God for guidance. According to Hosea, God advised him:

Bring back Gomer to your home, renew your love
for her, even as the Lord loves the people of Israel,
though they turn to other gods.

Hosea 3:1

So he did that, pleading with her to mend her ways. Later he enlisted their children in his entreaties, thinking they might have more effect upon their mother than he had. But that failed, too.

In those times it was an acceptable practice to turn such a wife over to the people. They would then strip her and pelt her to death with stones. For a long time he resisted that desperate action but he finally yielded to local pressures.

All this seems frightfully sad to us today but we need to bear in mind the fact that we are thinking about conditions well over 2000 years ago and in another part of the world. Perhaps we can absolve Hosea, remembering—that he was ready to forgive, that he tried every way he knew of bringing about a reconciliation with his wayward wife, and that he was long-suffering.

Meanwhile he had begun his ministry to the people of the Northern Kingdom or Ephraim.

Like many other lads of that time and place, Amos was his hero. How courageous that prophet had been! how important his attempts were to salvage his people from degredation and sin! Hosea resolved to pattern his life after that prophet.

One of his first acts was to name his first-born Jezreel. That was to be a constant reminder to people of the dastardly deeds done by the king who had gained control of that region by a coup d'etat. Then, in a despicable move, he had had the Queen run over by chariots and the heads of the sons of the previous ruler collected. Next he set about killing all the relatives of the royalty. Then, enticing the leaders of the religious opposition to an altar to Baal, he had them massacred. Since those and other similar events had taken place at Jezreel, his son was given that appellation.

Appalled by the corruption and immorality of the nation, he named his second child Lo-Ruhaman or the Uncompassionated. In that way he hoped to remind people that even God had limits of compassion for a people which had shunned him so drastically.

So it was with the third child. That child was born to Gomer but by some other man. Hence Hosea called him Lo-Ammi or Not-My-People. That was to signify that God, too, could disclaim his chosen people.

Throughout his trials and tribulations, Hosea sought meaning for his own unhappy life. He compared God to a father or to a husband always seeking ways to bring back

the wayward into his fold. Hosea believed God was pained by the transgressions of his people. He was constantly calling for their repentance, return, and renewal.

Even though Hosea pictured God as displeased with the worship of idols, the revelry at pagan festivals, the plots and intrigues, the licentiousness, and the petty bickerings, he also portrayed God as tender, compassionate, forgiving, loving. In one glorious passage Hosea reports that God said:

Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God;
For you have stumbled in your guilt.
Take with you words
And return to the Lord.

I will heal their backsliding,
I will love them voluntarily;
For my anger has turned away from them.

Hosea 14:1-2, 4

And, again, this much-quoted passage which Jesus referred to centuries later:

For I desire love and not sacrifice,
Attachment to God rather than burnt offerings.

Hosea 6:6

As Hosea wandered up and down the Northern Kingdom, he became a hated and despised figure. So it is with prophets who reveal the weaknesses of people and nations. They are not likely to be thanked; they are likely to be cursed.

We do not know what happened to Hosea. Perhaps he died a natural death; it is more likely that he died a martyr.

Sometimes he is called the prophet of sufferers. Surely he suffered. Yet, despite his own horrendous personal and family life and his rebuffs as a prophet, he maintained his absolute affection for God. Thereby he matured, demon-

strating that people can triumph over tragedy; they can grow through grief.

As Holland Emerson Wolfe said in his summary of Hosea:

His discovery of the fatherhood of God, the sonship of man, and the realization that God is a God of long-suffering love, establish Hosea in the front ranks of the world's religious geniuses.

5. Isaiah of Jerusalem: Statesman and Radical

Then along came a prophet named Isaiah of Jerusalem, thus designated because there was also an Isaiah of Babylon.

Although Isaiah resembled his predecessors in some ways, he was very different from them in several respects. Whereas people sometimes referred to Amos as an illiterate mountaineer and Hosea as a country bumpkin, Isaiah was well-known as an educated and cultured gentleman. Whereas Amos and Hosea were farmers or artisans, Isaiah was an aristocrat, with close ties to the royal family. Whereas Amos and Hosea were primarily interested in the Northern Kingdom, Isaiah was chiefly concerned with the Southern Kingdom or Judah. Whereas Amos and Hosea concentrated on a few areas of life, Isaiah ranged over a broad spectrum of subjects. Whereas Amos and Hosea preached and prophesied for short periods of time, Isaiah's activities were spread over approximately 40 years. And whereas Amos and Hosea were adept at speaking, and possibly writing, Isaiah was far more skilled as a speaker and writer.

With so many special qualities, Isaiah was probably the most prominent and the most influential of all the Old Testament prophets.

Before plunging into a more detailed account of the life of Isaiah, it might be helpful to readers for us to mention a few of the messages of this outstanding man of God to the people and nations of his day. He deplored the moral corruption of that period and place and was distressed by the rampant licentiousness. He was disgusted with the drunkenness of the people and even of the priests, and he railed against that social evil. He was displeased by the amassing of land and other property by the few and the parallel oppression and exploitation of the poor. He decried the political and military intrigues so prevalent in his time and warned against arms and alliances. Above all he denounced the many practices which made a mockery of religion and he called for worship that raised the level of daily living by all the people-rulers and the ruled.

That was an ambitious agenda of issues but it was persistently and powerfully presented by Isaiah over a long period of time.

Very little is known about Isaiah's personal background or his occupation. In Jewish tradition it is asserted that he was the nephew of King Amaziah (not to be confused with the priest who confronted Amos). If Isaiah was not a member of the royal family, he had access to the palace and possibly worked there. Hence it was almost unbelievable that a man with that background would become a prophet.

The political situation in that day was complex and confusing to us—and probably to the inhabitants of that time. The basic question certainly was whether the Northern and the Southern Kingdoms would side with Assyria or Egypt, or remain as neutral and independent as they could be in their situation.

In the Northern Kingdom there was confusion and eventually civil war as to what policy to pursue. Eventually it was taken over by the Assyrians as Amos and Hosea had predicted. But that king's son who had succeeded to the throne, was killed by pro-Egyptian forces and a ruler installed who was a puppet of the Egyptians. Immediately

he started to form an alliance against the Assyrians and asked the Southern Kingdom to join him. Isaiah was strongly opposed, thinking the coalition would fail. But the king moved into the Southern Kingdom. Eventually Jerusalem was unable to hold out against that force from the North and capitulated.

But Assyria won in the long run and the Northern Kingdom was destroyed, with the people of its ten tribes scattered, many of them taken into bondage as slaves. How they must have wished they had listened to their prophets.

The Southern Kingdom or Judah also gave in after a long period of indecision—and was saved. Then King Hezekiah began the onerous task of restoring the Temple and reorganizing the role of the priests and Levites.

Again there was a period of strength by the Egyptians, allied then with the Ethiopians. They pressed the Southern Kingdom to join with them. At that point Isaiah walked the streets of Jerusalem, clad as a slave, to symbolize what would happen if that proposed alliance was undertaken.

Again, when Babylon became a formidable power, Isaiah pled with his people and their rulers to resist the temptation to join that new ally. Then, when it seemed likely that the Southern Kingdom would again ally itself with Egypt, Isaiah protested.

But the Southern Kingdom was finally submerged and for three-quarters of a century was a vassal of its neighboring nation.

Even though Isaiah was intensely interested in politics early in his career and again toward the end of it, he was far more interested in the internal state of his country.

Let us backtrack for a few paragraphs and see what had happened to Isaiah as a prophet. How had he moved from a prominent position in the palace to that of a seer and religious leader?

We know that he had two sons and according to the tradition of his predecessors, he gave them symbolic names.

The first was called Shear-jeshaf—meaning “only a remnant shall remain,” referring to the fate about to befall the Northern Kingdom. The second son was named Maher-shalal-hash-baz, which means “the spoiler cometh quickly; the plundering is swift.”

So much for the connection between his family life and the political situation of that time and place.

The great holy place in Jerusalem was the Temple, built by Solomon with cedar and gold, with the sacred ark kept in the holy of holies. Probably Isaiah worshipped there frequently. But one day his worship was especially critical, changing his entire life. It was the day of the coronation of a new king and Isaiah was present for that special and splendid occasion. The new king moved into the crowded temple and the choir and congregation sang antiphonally:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts;
The whole earth is full of his glory.

Then the altar of incense was lighted and the smoke from it began to rise.

At that point Isaiah was transformed. He saw the new king not as the individual he had known, but as God, and the choir was not composed of earthly individuals but of angels. Then a piece of lighted wood from the altar seemed to be carried over to him and to touch his lips.

Suddenly he felt uplifted, cleansed. He was a new person. And he heard the Lord saying:

Whom shall I send and who will go for us?

Isaiah 6:5

His reply was:

Here am I. Send me.

Isaiah 6:8

That was a clear call from on high and because of it the whole course of his life would be changed. He would do for the Southern Kingdom what Amos and Hosea had done for the Northern Kingdom. Two tasks would be uppermost in his life—the avoidance of entangling alliances politically and the strengthening of the moral fiber of his people religiously. He was excited and humbled. He was inspired and energized. Life took on a new meaning for him.

Even though he cared about political conditions in his country, as we have indicated, he was even more concerned with its moral and religious health.

Let us look now at some of the scenes in the life of this grand old man as he wrestled with the evils of society in his time and warned the people about the consequences of their sinfulness.

The first scene is at the court just outside a city gate. There Isaiah presented an unusual case in an unusual manner. It concerned litigation over a vineyard—a strange topic for a court. It was presented by Isaiah himself rather than a lawyer—a rare approach. And it was narrated in poetry—an unheard of manner.

The judges were baffled by this case and did not know what to do about it. Isaiah solved the situation by proposing the sentence himself. The case was actually a parable. God was the owner and the vineyard was Israel. The moral was that the poor were being exploited by the wealthy and the fiber of the nation threatened. Conditions boded ill for the country. Indirectly Isaiah was criticizing the judicial system and its effect on the moral and political conditions of Israel.

Then, like Amos, he appeared at the women's club of Jerusalem, inveighing against their wantonness and gluttony, saying:

Instead of sweet perfumery—there shall be
rottenness,
Instead of a girdle—a rope,

Instead of permanent waves—baldness,
Instead of a robe—a girding of sackcloth,
Instead of beauty—a branding.

Isaiah 3:24

Thus, added to the corruption of the courts was the corruption of the women of Israel.

In the early days of Israel almost everyone lived on the land. But by the time of Isaiah much of the farming areas had been grabbed by the wealthy and many of the farmers driven off the land. Soon they moved to the cities, where many of them lived in slums. Against those who brought about such conditions, Isaiah inveighed, proclaiming:

Woe unto those
Who join house to house,
And who add field to field
Till there is no room,
And you are made to dwell propertyless
In the midst of the land.
Of a truth, many houses shall be desolate,
Even great and fair, without inhabitants.

Isaiah 5:8-9

In past times drunkenness was not a major problem in Israel, even though Amos had mentioned it as a minor vice. But as distilled liquors were introduced, it became a major cause of concern, including priests, prophets, and individuals in the higher social ranks. This was another practice which Isaiah condemned.

Added to these problems was the decline of the true worship in the Temple, That, too, bothered Isaiah. On one special occasion he entered that place of worship and compared Jerusalem to Sodom and Gomorrah, claiming that God was repulsed by the burnt offerings, incense, and feasts.

Then, in a magnificent statement about the essence of religion, he called upon his countrymen to:

Wash yourselves—make yourselves clean—
Put away the evil of your doings from before my eyes.
Cease to do evil, learn to do good,
Seek justice, relieve the oppressed,
Judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.

Isaiah 1:16-17

In his later years Isaiah returned to political affairs, urging the king not to ally himself with the Egyptians against the Assyrians. But the king rejected Isaiah's entreaties and turned Judah into an armed camp. Overrun by the Assyrians, even Jerusalem was threatened. Only an outbreak of a plague in the Assyrian camp saved the sacred city.

For a long period Judah had tolerated its contemporary prophet. But the patience of the people finally wore out. They considered him an agitator, a meddler, a spoilsman.

Jewish tradition states that they rose up against Isaiah, slipped him into a hollow log, and then sawed the log in two.

For 40 years he had helped to preserve his beloved land of Judah and its sacred city—Jerusalem. Usually following his advice about allying themselves with outside forces, Judah had been spared the fate of the Northern Kingdom. Now he was gone but his spirit and his messages lived on, especially through the 13 followers or prophets who carried on his tradition. Like so many other prophets, he has been honored more over the intervening centuries than in his own time.

In her book *The Prophets and the Common Reader*, Mary Ellen Chase said of Isaiah:

We can surely believe that his long ministry to his people was marked at its end as at its beginning by the strength and brilliance of his personality and by the unexcelled and various power of his literary art.

6. Micah: Champion of the Poor and Downtrodden

Around the same time, in the eighth century B.C., Micah appeared. In some respects he was a combination of Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, probably resembling Amos most closely.

Micah lived in a village called Moresheth, located in the southwestern part of Judea, near the border with Egypt. Hence it was threatened frequently when tensions were high between nations and occasionally subjected to warfare.

Moresheth was situated in a fertile area between the coastal plain of the Mediterranean and the central highlands. The region was known for its vineyards and olive groves, and farming was predominant.

No one knows what Micah did to earn a living but it is presumed that he was a farmer or an artisan.

Deeply disturbed by conditions in his own land and in the nearby nations, he determined to denounce the evils and wrong-doings of his time and to warn people and nations about the consequences of their sins. In his own words he said:

But I am full of power,
The spirit of the Lord, justice and strength,
To declare to Jacob his crimes,
And to Israel his sins.

Micah 3:8

Dressed in a loin-cloth, he set out on many journeys, carrying out what he felt was a mandate from on high.

In those denunciations, few were spared. He attacked the politicians, the rich, the so-called prophets of the temple, the judges, the priests, and the land-owners. He took on the vested interests wholesale and did not exempt even the common people when they erred, despite the fact that he identified closely with them.

The list of sins against which he spoke is long. It included the corruption of the politicians, the gouging of the poor by the rich, the injustices and bribery of the judges, the hypocrisy of the priests and prophets, and the idolatry even of his own people. Likewise he accused them of ingratitude for their delivery by God out of bondage in Egypt.

For the cities he predicted punishment. For the oppressing nations he foretold downfall. For the rich he envisioned retribution. For the judges, prophets, and priests he foresaw disaster. For the idolaters he proclaimed chastisement. For the sacred and therefore much-beloved city of Jerusalem, he saw destruction—and its eventual restoration.

Some of his denunciations were against the foreign oppressors. But most of his dirges were for the people of Israel. Typical of his predictions was this vivid description of what would come to pass:

For, lo, the Lord is coming forth from his place,
And he will descend and tread upon the heights of
the earth;
And the mountains shall melt under him,
And the valleys be split asunder,
Like wax before the fire,
Like waters poured down a precipice.

Micah 1:3-4

But Micah's messages were not concerned solely with negatives. He also preached positive ones. Although God's judgement was certain and his punishments predictable,

Micah maintained that the anger of God would pass and his faithfulness to his people would persist. God was a forgiving figure and when his worshippers repented, his love would pierce the darkness. Therefore a remnant of Israel would be saved.

In fact, Micah envisioned a golden age when:

. . . they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
And their spears into pruning-hooks.
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
Nor shall they learn war any more.

Micah 4:3

That is one of the glorious passages in Micah and in the entire Bible—and one of the most frequently quoted.

Equally arresting is Micah's description of true religion:

You have been told, O man, what is good,
And what the Lord requires of you.
Only to do justice, and to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God.

Micah 6:8

The book of Micah is brief; it has only seven chapters. Even so, biblical scholars contend that parts of it were not delivered by him. Commenting on that charge, Mary Ellen Chase said in her volume on *The Prophets for the Common Reader*:

If he did not himself speak them, they embody all his values; his fierce sense of justice; his scorn of hypocrisy, his care for the simple people among whom he lived and whose devoted friend he was; his honesty and humility; his entire lack of pretension.

Fortunately there is evidence that Micah's message was heard for some reforms in religious practices were carried

out by King Hezekiah. They included the destruction of pagan altars and cult paraphernalia and the demolition of idols.

Life for Micah, as for any prophet, must have been lonely. Surely he was shunned by his family and friends. But he was consoled by his belief in God and his contact with the Divine. In one passage in Micah this fact is attested to in these words:

But I shall wait confidently for the Lord;
I shall hope for the God of my deliverance;
My God will hear me.
Rejoice not, O my foe, over me!
Though I have fallen, I shall arise,
Though I sit in darkness,
The Lord will be my light.

Micah 7:7-8

Many adjectives can be applied to this faithful servant. Among them are: honest, simple, selfless, direct, courageous, foresighted.

7. Jeremiah: That Very Human Prophet

Approximately 70 years passed between the time of Isaiah and Micah and the appearance of a small group of seventh century prophets—Nahum, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah. With the exception of one period of reform and increased righteousness, those decades were decadent ones for Judah as that nation regressed into another time of corruption, immorality, and evil.

In the new era which was beginning to emerge, the outside world was still dominated by the Assyrians most of the time, frequently challenged by the Egyptians. But a new power—that of Babylon—was gaining strength in that region.

Inside Judah most people adjusted to the domination of outside forces, scrambled for riches—no matter how they were acquired, wallowed in all kinds of immoral practices, and increased their worship of pagan gods.

Onto that decadent and distressful scene strode Jeremiah. At first he was reluctant to assume the role of a prophet and many times throughout his life he questioned his ability to play that part. But he persisted.

Jeremiah was a man of contradictions. On one hand he was impatient, irritable, petulant, full of doubts, fears, and self-pity. But on the other hand he was humble, patient, long-suffering, faithful, hopeful, and bold. Perhaps the contradictions in his life make him seem very human, very much like us. In her volume on *The Prophets for the Common Reader*, Mary Ellen Chase calls him:

The most compassionate and companiable of the Prophets.

Jeremiah was a man of many qualities, characteristics, and accomplishments. Here are a few of them:

Despite his doubts and despair, he was a devoted and dedicated servant of God. And his concept of God was far more advanced than that of his contemporaries.

Often he chided Judah and its people for their evil ways and their sinfulness. Yet he had a strong and abiding love for it and for them.

Many people think of prophets as visionaries or impractical men. But that was not true of Jeremiah. He was wise in the ways of the world, full of common sense, and practical in his political advice to the rulers and to the ruled.

Disappointed in the alliances that were struck with foreign powers and dismayed by the low morality of his contemporaries, he was nevertheless filled with hope for the future of his country and its people.

Although he concentrated on his own nation, his concerns encompassed other countries and he should therefore be considered an early internationalist.

Whereas nearly all of the prophets were limited to speaking, his life and messages have come down to us directly in writing, undoubtedly recorded by his scribe and friend—Baruch.

Then, too, he was more successful than any of the other seers in achieving reforms, especially through the development of institutional changes which still exist in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Furthermore, he was able to preach, teach, prophesy, and promote reforms for a longer period of time than others; for over 40 years he was a significant factor in the life of Judah—and beyond.

In a splendid summary of the life of Jeremiah, Rolland Wolfe said in his volume on *Men of Prophetic Fire*:

When the whole picture is considered. . .including the length of service, the greatness of his effort, the vigor of his teaching, and the constancy and severity of the persecutions to which he was subjected, there can be little cause to dispute the judgement that he was the greatest of the pre-exile prophets.

Jeremiah was born in the village of Anaboth, located three or four miles north of Jerusalem. His people were descendants of the tribe of Benjamin and had lived previously in Israel or the Northern Kingdom. His father was a priest and the family was well-to-do. Hence Jeremiah was well-educated. Realizing the troubles that would befall him as a prophet, he apparently thought it unwise to marry.

Some say he substituted love of Judah for the love of his own family. He began to preach around 626 B.C.

To understand Jeremiah, we need to go back to the time of David. Escaping from the wrath of King Saul, David fled with a small band of his followers and friends. Reaching the settlement of Nob, they stopped and asked the local priests for bread and arms, which were granted.

But a local herdsman, loyal to the king, notified Saul of what he considered the subversive action of David and his friends. So all the local priests were summoned to the palace. Dissatisfied with their answers, Saul condemned them to death. But the local guards refused to kill them. Soon, however, all of them were destroyed and nearly all of the inhabitants of Nob were killed, too. One man, however, escaped. That individual, named Abiathan, eventually became the chief priest and adviser to David when he became king. Then, when Solomon became the ruler, Abiathan moved to the neighborhood of Nob and built a house in a settlement he called Anathoth. That was where Jeremiah was born.

That story, told and retold in his boyhood, must have made an indelible impression on him and contributed to his decision to become a prophet.

Unlike the other prophets, however, Jeremiah did not accept the call of God immediately. Three times and in three different ways he was invited or challenged to take up that role. But he resisted, protesting that he was but a child, as he was probably still in his teens at that time, or possibly in his early 20s. But a divine compulsion must have been at work and eventually he yielded to God's entreaties.

His lifetime work was really two-fold—to help destroy the rotten foundations of Judah and to help build new ones—to destruct and to construct.

When Jeremiah assumed this role as a prophet, Judah was in dire straits. After a glorious period under King Hezekiah, he had been succeeded by his 12-year-old son, Manasseh.

Shunning his father's ways and misled by unwise and unscrupulous advisers, he initiated a period of corruption and crude religious rites unparalleled in Hebrew history. Indicative of that situation was the restoration of human sacrifice, with the king offering his own son as an example to the people.

After the brief reign of Amon, Josiah came to the throne. Jeremiah regarded him as a reformer, but he was not in power very long. Succeeding him was Jehoikim—who disregarded Jeremiah's advice not to resist the rising power of Babylon. Jeremiah proved right and Judah was overrun and the armies of Nebuchadnezzar moved on into Egypt, conquering that country, too. Probably it was fortunate that Jehoikim died just before the invasion. So it was under his son, Jehoiachin, that 10,000 Judeans were taken into captivity in Babylon. Only the poor were left in Jerusalem and a few farmers on the land to plant, till, and harvest the crops.

Then came Zedekiah, a brother of Jehoikim. For several years he sought Jeremiah's advice and often heeded it. Then he stopped summoning him for counsel, aware that Jeremiah would oppose his plan to join a coalition against Babylon. Instead, Jeremiah was placed in a dungeon house and then in a deep water hole.

Throughout all these regimes Jeremiah was harsh in his condemnation of the malpractices of the mighty—including the use of unpaid labor to construct palaces and public buildings, the use of bribery and other forms of corruption, and the oppression of the poor and the landless. In a typical comment he proclaimed:

Woe unto him who builds his house on
unrighteousness,
And his chambers by injustice;
Who uses his neighbor's services without wages,
And gives him not his hire.

Jeremiah 22:13

But God called him to a larger task, too, involving other nations, saying:

See, this day I have set you
Over the nations and over the kingdoms;
To pluck up and to break down,
To destroy and to overthrow,
To build and to plant.

Jeremiah 1:10

Parallel with his interest in politics was his interest in religion. He wanted desperately to raise the level of living of his people—from the princes and priests to the common people. He wanted to destroy the worship of alien gods and remove all the vestiges of paganism and primitive rites.

And he wanted to instil in people a new and larger vision of God. To Jeremiah God was multifaceted.

First there was the God of wrath and punishment. God had guarded his chosen people for years, leading them eventually out of Egypt—the land of bondage. He had given them much and he expected much in return. When they disobeyed his commandments, he would punish them and when they sinned, he would chastise them. In his anger he might even bring famine, slaughter, earthquakes, fire and brimstone, and plagues. As Abraham Heshel has written in his volume on *The Prophets*:

Utterances denoting the wrath of God, the intent and threat of destruction, are found more frequently and expressed more strongly in Jeremiah than in any other prophet.

But to Jeremiah there was also the God of forgiveness, compassion, and love. Were not the Hebrews his chosen people? Had he not given them The Ten Commandments and the prophets? As Jeremiah quoted him as saying:

Behold I will refine them and test them,
For what else can I do because of my dear people?
Jeremiah 9:7

As a prophet and teacher Jeremiah was powerful. But as a preacher he was even more powerful. And he was dramatic, too. He knew how to challenge people with parables and how to stimulate their imagination through the use of dramatic scenes and visual aids.

On one occasion he delivered a sermon at Topheth, outside Jerusalem. That was where human sacrifices were made and extreme immoralities condoned. Before a group of elders and priests he spoke of the depravity and perversions of that period. Carrying with him a jar as he spoke, he dashed it to the ground at the height of his sermon, predicting that Judah would be splintered in the same way if it did not mend its ways.

At another time he began searching in every corner of Jerusalem. Thinking him blind or crazy, people asked him what he was looking for. After many such inquiries, he told them that he was searching for an upright man—and as yet had been unable to find one.

On more than one occasion he donned a yoke to represent what would happen if Judah teamed up with other small nations against the ruling military and political powers of those times. Once, when his wooden yoke was broken by those present, he set off for a nearby blacksmith shop to obtain one made of iron, which he then wore everywhere.

Perhaps these and other startling devices helped him succeed in bringing about reforms where most of the other prophets had failed. Rolland Emerson Wolfe points out in his volume on *Men of Prophetic Fire*,

Jeremiah succeeded in bringing about the greatest national reform in the history of the Jewish people.

For months, or possibly even years, he met in secret with a group of reformers, creating a charter of needed changes. Once completed, they placed their scroll in the collection box at the door of the Temple. There it was found and its contents were said to have been written by Moses. Therefore they were considered sacred.

Curious and alarmed by this discovery, the Temple officials took the scroll to King Josiah who forthwith declared a national emergency. Calling a great convocation, he read the scroll in its entirety and vowed he would implement it. Then the priests did the same, followed by all the people present.

First in Jerusalem and then in the countryside the pagan paraphernalia were removed. So were the horses and chariots used in sun worship. Also, the prostitutes were driven out of the courts. However, by making this movement compulsory, a strong opposition developed. As a result Jeremiah became increasingly unpopular as one of its strongest supporters.

Following this series of events, several reforms in the religious life of Judah were initiated. Thus Passover was instituted as a way of celebrating the escape of the Jews from Egypt and as a method of honoring God for his help. Formerly the new and full moons had been special times of celebrations; now the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days of each month were to be marked. As a result of a powerful sermon by Jeremiah at the gate of the Temple on the observance of the Sabbath, a special day was decreed. In more recent times Christians and Moslems have instituted a similar custom.

Moreover, the tone of personal morality was also raised somewhat.

Because of these and other similar events, some biblical authorities claim that what was hitherto called the Hebrew religion or the religion of Israel, should hereafter be referred to as Judaism.

From the beginning of his ministry, however, Jeremiah was criticized, scorned, and persecuted. It was particularly galling to him that the first strong opposition came from his native village where the merchants claimed that his attacks on priests had hurt their tourist trade. Then a strong movement against him gathered momentum. Fearing lest his death would make him a martyr, his enemies instituted a whispering campaign. Perplexed and troubled, Jeremiah wrote:

I have become but a laughing-stock all day long,
Everyone mocks me.
For as often as I speak and cry out,
Announcing violence and destruction;
Even though the word of the Lord is with me,
I am reproached and derided all day.

Jeremiah 20:7

His unpopularity rose, especially during the reign of King Jehoikim. At one point he was saved from the mob by the intervention of some of his friends in the royal palace. But soon he was placed in a dungeon, as indicated earlier in this account. There he dictated to Baruch as many of his sermons and public statements as he could remember. That scroll was taken to the king many months later and it was destroyed. Undaunted, he began his task again. Fortunately that edition was preserved and forms the first 20 chapters of the book of Jeremiah.

Then came his flight to Egypt and his last days there. Whether that consisted of a period of months or years we are not certain. According to Jewish tradition, he was stoned to death by angry Judeans. But not all biblical scholars concur with that conclusion.

What a life he had lived! What a tradition he had upheld! What a contribution he had made to the religious history of the world! No wonder he is known as one of the great religious leaders of all times.

8. Isaiah of Babylon: Herald of Hope

The scene now shifts to another spot—a refugee camp in Babylon. The stage is crowded with exiles from Judah and the star in the cast is called the second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon.

The individuals in this scene were all that survived the tortuous 600 mile journey on foot around the Arabian Desert from their homeland. When they were taken captive, they left behind their property and most of their personal possessions, many of their family members and friends, and their hopes and dreams of the future for themselves and their country.

Now they were refugees, exiles, slaves. Their lives had been shattered and their hopes dashed. Their spirits sagged and their courage was challenged. In addition, they were tormented and taunted by their captors; scoffed at and scorned by their Babylonian owners.

A few had brought their harps with them, but they had hung them on the willow trees. Now they were told to sing. The psalmist described the scene in this way:

By the rivers of Babylon,
There we sat down, yea, we wept
When we remembered Zion . . .
For they that carried us away captive
required of us a song . . .
How shall we sing the Lord's song
in a strange land?

Psalms 137:1-4

A few admitted their part in their downfall; others denied any role in what had come to pass, vociferously proclaiming their innocence and their righteousness.

Then a man appeared who was to buoy their spirits, present a new and refined concept of God, and bring hope to them for the future. We know almost nothing about that man—who he was, where he came from, what he had done—even his name. For centuries the account of his life and messages was hidden in the book of Isaiah. But biblical scholars are certain now from the accounts of Babylon and the style of the writer that Chapter 30 and Chapters 40-55 were written by someone other than Isaiah. For want of a name he is called the Second Isaiah or Isaiah of Babylon. Scholars also believe he was the first prophet to write his own narrative. Undoubtedly his name was kept a secret for his personal safety, and his writings distributed through an underground.

Although we know little directly about him, we can surmise that he was a young man and an exile. Certainly he was saturated in the history of his people and was a keen observer of nature and individuals. He was also an optimist and a lyrical poet—almost intoxicated with literary expressions. His messages were so uplifting and his style so beautiful that they have inspired many songs, hymns, cantatas, and oratorios over the succeeding centuries.

His messages were many, some of them expressing a more sensitive and refined concept of God and of religion than had been presented hitherto.

First there was his message about suffering, forgiveness, and comfort. Suffering, he said, was not just human; it was also divine. God suffered, too. His ways were often incomprehensible to human beings. As the Second Isaiah heard God speaking, he said:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
Neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heaven is higher than the earth,
So are my ways higher than your ways
And my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:8-9

An important aspect of his message of comfort was the forgiveness of God. Here is how he phrased that thought on God's part:

Comfort, comfort my people, says our God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.

Isaiah 40:1-2

The previous prophets had protected the sacrifice of vegetables, grains, and animals by immoral people as an atonement for their sins. Now the Second Isaiah protested all sacrifices as against God's will.

Up until that time the idea of one god had been implicit in the messages of the prophets; now the Second Isaiah made it explicit. There was one and only one God. Although attributed by many to Moses, many biblical scholars credit the Second Isaiah with highlighting the idea of monotheism.

But he went ever further. To him God was not the monopoly of the Hebrews; he was the God of all people. He was the head of a world-wide family; the shepherd of an enormous flock.

And the Second Isaiah was a prophet of hope for the future. The Babylonians would be defeated and the Hebrews would one day return to their native land. He even envisioned that return made easy, saying:

Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord,
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be filled in,
And every mountain and hill graded down;
Even the steep heights shall become level,
And the rough places, a plain.
So shall the glory of the Lord be revealed,

And all flesh shall see it together,
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

Isaiah 40:3-5

In one of his many bursts of enthusiasm for the future, he exclaimed:

Sing unto the Lord a new song
And his praise from the ends of the earth.

Isaiah 42:10

And in another place: God asserts:

For behold, I create a new heaven and a new earth.

Isaiah 65:17

As Mary Ellen Chase commented in her book on *The Prophets for the Common Reader*:

...this revelation of the vicarious nature of suffering, together with his teaching of complete monotheism, marks Isaiah of Babylon as the poet and prophet of a New Age for the people of Israel.

9. A Brief Reading List on the Prophets

Bailey, Moses *The Prophetic Word: Ancient and Modern*.
Philadelphia, Friends General Conference, 1968. 109 pp.

Chase, Mary Ellen *The Prophets for the Common Reader*.
New York, Norton, 1963. 183 pp.

- Davidson, Robert *Jeremiah: Volume I*. Philadelphia, Westminister Press, 1983. 166 pp.
- DiGangi, Mariano *Twelve Prophets: Major Messages from the Minor Prophets*. Wheaton, Illinois, Victor Books, 1989. 167 pp.
- Fosdick, Harry Emerson *A Guide to Understanding the Bible: The Development of Ideas Within the Old and New Testaments*. New York, Harper and Brothers, 1938. 348 pp.
- Hamilton, Edith *Spokesmen for God*. New York, Norton, 1962. 259 pp.
- Harrison, R. K. *Jeremiah and Lamentions: An Introduction and Commentary*. Downer's Grove, Illinois, Tyndale Press, 1973. 240 pp.
- Myers, Jacob M. *The Layman's Bible Commentary: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah*. Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1959. 176 pp.
- Robinson, H. Wheeler *The Cross in the Old Testament*. Philadelphia, Westminister Press, 1955. 192 pp.
- Sawyer, John F.A. *Isaiah: Volume II*. Philadelphia, Westminister Press, 1986. 224 pp.
- Taber, William *The Prophetic Stream*. Wallingford, Pa., Pendle Hill, 1984. 63 pp.
- Winward, Stephen *A Guide to the Prophets*. Richmond, Virginia, John Knox Press, 1968. 255 pp.