

## The Old Testament: Part Ten

### Prophets – the Conscience of Israel

The prophets comprise the third major division of the books of the Old Testament. In this section of the Bible, we use the term prophet to refer to the *writing prophets*, whose message had been written down and compiled in a book that bears their names.

These prophets live and minister during a very turbulent time in their nation's history—between the eighth and fourth centuries B.C. They preach in both the northern and southern kingdoms—*before, during* and *after* the Babylonian exile. They are usually divided into two groups: four *major* prophets and twelve *minor* prophets. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel and Ezekiel are called the four major prophets *not* because their message is more important than the so-called twelve *minor* prophets, but simply because their writings are much longer.

***Prophets, men who spoke for God.*** The only thing the true prophets of Israel have in common is their God-given ability to speak on God's behalf. At some stage in their lives, they have had a deep encounter with God which has led to a deep friendship with him. They consult with God on various matters and then feel compelled to speak God's truth to the community. A phrase we will frequently come across in the prophetic books of the Bible is: "*The word of the Lord came to me*" or "*Thus says the Lord.*"

Frequently, the message prophets are called to give is one that neither the leaders nor the people are willing to hear. They reject the prophets' call to repentance. As a result, prophets are often rejected and persecuted.

***Message.*** All the prophets are *awakened* by God to see how the people have turned away from him, how their worship is merely lip service. The kings and leaders allow the worship of idols whilst the poor are neglected and abused. Hence, at the center of the prophets' message is a call to *repentance*, to turn them back to fidelity to Israel's Sinai covenant with God. The prophets constantly condemn their worship of false idols and their lack of concern for the poor. But because the prophets are usually not diplomatic in their preaching style, their homilies are often met with resistance, disdain and persecution. We can safely assume that if the prophets lived in our time, their message would surely be met with animosity. A case in point is the undeniable resistance to Martin Luther King's appeal to our nation to repent of the sin of racism. Another important part of the prophets' message is the call to trust in God, especially in

difficult times. Even though their message is often one of doom and gloom, they also seek to give the people hope even in the darkest times.

***Three groups of prophets.*** Chronologically, we speak of prophets in terms of three periods and according to their relationship to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century.

- ***Pre-exilic prophets:*** Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah (chs 1-39), Jeremiah, Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk
- ***Prophets of the exile:*** Ezekiel and Deutero- (or Second) Isaiah (chs 40-55). Lamentations probably has its setting around this time as well.
- ***Post-exilic prophets:*** Trito- (or Third) Isaiah (chs 56-66), Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Joel, Jonah, Baruch

You will notice that Daniel is not mentioned above. Nearly all scholars agree that the Book of Daniel does not belong among the prophets but more suitably corresponds to the same period as 1 and 2 Maccabees.

#### ***A look at some of the prophets and their message***

At the outset, it might be good to say that most of us will find reading the prophets a rather laborious task for several reasons, two of which are: 1) their message contains a huge amount of woes, and 2) there is for the most part no orderly flow to their message. The best we can do is look through the chapters of each book for the rich nuggets, some of which will hit us hard between the eyes.

#### **ISAIAH (Three books in one)**

Isaiah is the longest book of the prophetic writings, consisting of 66 chapters. Scholars have been able to discover that this book is the work of three authors spanning over three centuries. Three names have been assigned to the three collections of writings.

- ***First Isaiah*** or *Isaiah of Jerusalem* (chapters 1-39) addresses Jews living in Jerusalem prior to the Babylonian Exile (740-687 B.C.)
- ***Second*** or *Deutero-Isaiah* (chapters 40-55) addresses Jews from the southern kingdom who were taken into exile in Babylon (541-537 B.C.)
- ***Third*** or *Trito-Isaiah* (chapters 56-66) addresses Jews who had returned from the Babylonian Exile (587-538 B.C.)

Hence, the prophecies in this book cover Israel's history (largely about Judah, the southern kingdom) prior to the Babylonian exile, during the exile, and after the exile.

Fr. Peter Ellis writes: "*Isaiah, a statesman saint, he is the Thomas More of the Old Testament. Like More he is a family man, a counselor of kings, a skilled writer, an ardent defender of God's rights against royal self-will, and in the end a martyr for the faith at the hands of his king. His response to his call (6:8) shows a generous, spontaneous, and naturally courageous nature in contrast to Moses (Exod. 3:11) and Jeremiah (1:6-8). His poetry and preaching reflect a soul sensitive and refined and endowed with extraordinary power of expression.*"

**1:14-16.** Isaiah issues a call to repentance declaring that Israel's worship is useless because they fail to care for the widows and orphans.

*When you spread out your hands,  
I close my eyes to you;  
Though you pray the more,  
I will not listen.  
Your hands are full of blood!  
Wash yourselves clean!  
Put away your misdeeds from before my eyes;  
Cease doing evil; learn to do good.  
Make justice your aim: redress the wronged.  
Hear the orphan's plea, defend the widow.*

**Messianic texts.** More than any other prophet, Isaiah has passages that the early Christians saw as referring to the Messiah Jesus. That is why the first reading during the Advent Season is frequently from Isaiah. In 7:14 Isaiah says: "*The Lord himself will give you this sign: the virgin shall be with child and bear a son and his name shall be Immanuel.*"

**9:5-6.** The prophet says: "*For a child is born to us, a son is given to us; upon his shoulder dominion rests. They name him Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace. His dominion is vast and forever peaceful, from David's throne, and over his kingdom, which he confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever.*"

The above text is one of the best known messianic prophecies in the Old Testament. It is the first reading for our Christmas midnight Mass.

The ideal king shall possess the wisdom of Solomon, the courage of David and the religious virtues of the patriarchs and Moses. Christian tradition has seen in Christ the fulfillment of this prophecy (Matt 4:15-16).

(For more on *First Isaiah*, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 46-47.)

**Second Isaiah (Chapters 40-55).** Whereas the author of First Isaiah addresses the people of Judah (the southern kingdom) prior to the Babylonian exile, the author of Second Isaiah is an exile in Babylon in the sixth century B.C. addressing his fellow exiles seeking to give them hope and consolation during one of the darkest periods in their history. This anonymous prophet of the exile is considered to be the supreme poet of the Old Testament.

In contrast to many harsh words in First Isaiah, Second Isaiah opens with words of comfort and consolation. "*Comfort, give comfort to my people... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her service is at an end, her guilt expiated....*" (vv 1-2).

This prophet is raised up by God during the Babylonian exile to help the people to see that their exile is a punishment for their infidelities to God, but now that time of punishment and purification is about to end. God is about to bring about a new exodus which will restore the exiles to their land. "*See I am doing something new*" (43:19).

The second book of Isaiah also contains the so-called four 'servant songs' that we listen to during Holy Week.

*"Here is my servant whom I will uphold, my chosen one in whom I am well pleased, upon whom I will put my spirit...."*

*"The servant will be a light to the nations and will open the eyes of the blind...."* (42:1-7)

The authors of the gospels see the figure of the suffering Christ in these servant songs, especially in the fourth servant song which is read on Good Friday. "*Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured... He was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins...by his stripes we were healed*" (53:4-5).

Amazingly, the author sees into the future to behold a mysterious figure who will be victorious, not by military might but by suffering and humiliation. (For more on *Second Isaiah*, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 59.)

The other great prophet that preached during Israel's time in exile was Ezechiel, sometimes called the Pantomime Prophet because he not only spoke his message but also acted it out with symbolic actions. (For more on this prophet see my commentaries on the Old Testament articles 57 and 58.)

**Third Isaiah (Chapters 56-66).** Scholars believe that the last ten chapters of Isaiah were written by an Israelite who had returned to Jerusalem from exile. This author is addressing the exiles who have come back to a devastated homeland and have undertaken the difficult work of rebuilding the Temple. They are told that the Temple must be a house of prayer and that they as a people must be holy—with a holiness that expresses itself with true love for the poor. The dismal days of their return will pass and Israel will persevere. But in the trials of the present, there is no substitute for confident faith and genuine piety.

**Chapter 58** on the nature of true fasting is the best known text in Third Isaiah, which we hear during every Lenten season. *“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them; and not running your back on your own”* (vv 6-7).

**JEREMIAH** (Prophet whose human side we know more than any other person in the Bible)

Jeremiah, a quiet, peace-loving man, is called by God to be a prophet to his own people in the southern kingdom of Judah during its final turbulent years. Like Moses, Jeremiah does not want the job. But God prevails upon him, promising to give him the words to speak and to be his champion in tough times. The problem for Jeremiah is that the words that God places in his mouth are not words a quiet, peace-loving man would want to speak. He is called to rebuke royalty and to thunder warnings against his people, thereby drawing upon himself the scorn, contempt and hatred of everyone, even his own relatives. He suffers so much opposition that he is regarded as a type of the suffering Jesus. Also, like Jesus, he appears during his lifetime to be a total failure.

**The ‘confessions’ (lamentations) of Jeremiah.** Some of the best known and best loved passages in the Book of Jeremiah are his so-called ‘confessions’ which are also a form of lament—lament for his own situation, but even more so, for the situation of his people. It is very clear to Jeremiah that his people have abandoned their covenant with God. But the people cannot see their sin; hence, the clash when Jeremiah points out their sin. The five confession passages of Jeremiah are not about his sins but rather his “anguished conversations” with God concerning injustice, his relationship with God, and misgivings about his mission. In an age when leaders are always advised to

present themselves as strong and in charge, it is truly a gift to have one of Israel’s greatest prophets speak to us with such vulnerability. Below are Jeremiah’s five confessions (12:1-6, 15:10-21, 17:14-18, 18:18-23 and 20:7-8):

**Confession #1—12:1-6.** Jeremiah raises the age-old question: Why do godless or evil people seem to prosper? Then in true honesty, he asks God to destroy them. He says: *“Pick them like sheep for the slaughter, set them apart for the day of carnage.”* We should keep in mind that the prophets knew nothing of an after-life where evil people would receive justice. Justice had to be done in this life.

**Confession #2—15:10-21.** Jeremiah regrets being born. His fidelity to God only brings strife and pain. *“Why is my pain incurable, refusing to be healed?”* God calls for Jeremiah’s repentance for his whining. *“If you repent, I shall restore you. If you bring forth the precious without the vile, you shall be my mouthpiece.”*

**Confession #4—18:18-23.** Jeremiah is outraged at his enemies because they plot to destroy him. He reacts by saying a prayer of vengeance: *“Deliver their children to famine.... Let their wives be made childless and widows; let their men die of pestilence....”* (v.21). *Forgive not their crime...*” (v.23).

What are we to make of Jeremiah’s prayer? First, we might be grateful that it is recorded in Scripture. When our emotions swing from love to hate, we know we have a friend in Jeremiah. While Jeremiah has been compared to Jesus, we know he is not Jesus. Rather, he is a flawed human being like the rest of us. In his prayer, Jeremiah asks that his enemies’ sin *not* be forgiven (v.23). On the cross, Jesus pleads that his enemies be forgiven.

**Confession #5—20:7-18.** This is a very powerful confession or soul-conversation with God. Jeremiah accuses God of duping or seducing him into being his mouthpiece. Being God’s spokesperson brings him so much pain that he decides to quit. *“I say to myself I will speak his name no more.”* But then he says the word of God is so powerful within him (*“like a fire burning in my heart”*) that all efforts to contain it fail. *“I grow weary holding it in.”* Despite his “issues” with God, he experiences God as his “mighty champion.”

**Lesson for us.** Honesty with God about our thoughts and feelings is a super important ingredient of an effective relationship with God. Martin Luther once famously said: *“Don’t lie to God.”* Author John Shea once said: *“Unless the prayers we speak are tightly linked with the lives we lead, they will be babblings we*



*hide behind, rather than true speech which reveals who we are in relation to all that is."*

**Prophecy regarding a new covenant (31:31-34).** While the prophets mainly speak to the current circumstances of the community's life, God sometimes enables them to look into what he will do in the near future or the distant future. In 31:31-34, Jeremiah is given a glimpse into the distant future concerning the new covenant God will make with his people through Jesus. Jeremiah says: "*The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ....*"

The early Christians quickly see in these words a prophecy regarding the new covenant brought about by Jesus. (For more on Jeremiah, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Articles 49 and 50.)

#### **AMOS** (prophet of social justice)

Amos, a minder of sheep in a small town in the southern kingdom of Judah in the eighth century B.C., is called by God to go to the northern kingdom to preach a strong message against the rich who are becoming richer on the backs of the poor. He also condemns their worship because of its lack of connection with the rest of life.

**4:1-11.** Amos has some scathing words for the wealthy women of Samaria: "*Hear this word, women of Samaria, you cows of Bashan, you who oppress the weak and abuse the needy, who say to your lords, 'Bring drink for us.... The days are coming when they will drag you away with hooks...'—a reference to the upcoming exile for the people of Samaria.*

**8:4-6.** Amos harshly condemns the greedy rich who have no concern for the poor: "*Hear this you who trample upon the needy and destroy the poor of the land...who fix the scales for cheating...who say: 'We will buy the lowly man for silver...the days are coming when God will send a famine upon the land.'*"

When Amos preaches his tough word at Bethel, the "cathedral parish" of the northern kingdom, the local monsignor, Amaziah, runs him out of town (7:10-16). (For more on the prophet Amos, see my *Commentaries on the Books of the Old Testament*, Article 44.)

#### **BOOK OF LAMENTATIONS**

This book of the Bible is a collection of five poems "lamenting" the destruction of Jerusalem. The book was probably written during the Babylonian Exile by

one or more authors who likely witnessed the destruction of God's holy city.

Even though Lamentations is placed amongst the prophetic books, its form or makeup is more closely related to some of the psalms, especially the psalms of lament.

The Book of Lamentations reflects the prevalent theology of the time, namely, that God caused the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for sin. It could be said that the sins of the people had inevitably led to the ruin of Jerusalem and that God allowed this to happen. But Lamentations recognizes that the defeat of the Jews is not a defeat for God. It has given hope to the survivors that by repentance and trust in God, Israel can survive.

The book is divided into five poems of lamentations.

**First lamentation (Chapter 1):** The author expresses his grief as he looks upon a ruined city (vv 1-11). Then Jerusalem confesses her sins, her hopes and her anger against the enemy (vv 12-22).

**Second lamentation (Chapter 2):** The author continues his description of a destroyed city (vv 1-10). In vv 13-22, the poet addresses the city from the depths of compassion beginning with: "*To what can I liken or compare you, O daughter Jerusalem?*"

**Third lamentation (Chapter 3):** This lamentation is an individual cry of sorrow. While the poet delivers most of the poem, in verses 25-47 other voices emerge from a group of sages or wise persons and other friends who are baffled by the tragedy (vv 40-47). Despite the torture and misery conveyed in verses 1-24, the poem ultimately expresses deep faith in God's grace and power.

**Fourth lamentation (Chapter 4):** The fourth lamentation returns to the style and mood of the first two. The opening verses tell the end of nobles and children (vv 1-10), followed by a meditation on Jerusalem (v.11). After the responsibility is placed upon the religious leaders (vv 13-20), the poem ends with a curse upon the enemy (v.21).

**Fifth lamentation (Chapter 5):** This lamentation is often called "*The Prayer of Jeremiah*". This liturgical prayer sustains its beauty and serenity despite its topic of rejection and tragedy. It asks very little, only that the Lord remember.

Attentive readers will see subtle dramatic movements within each poem and between the poems. A range of emotions is fully expressed: grief, anger, near despair, glimmers of hope and joy, and the will to carry on.

## BOOK OF JONAH

While most scholars believe this book is not historical but more of a parable which was intended to show God's mercy even on very bad people after they repented, one can of course consider the book historical.

***Division of chapters.*** The book can be looked upon as a mini-play with four scenes or parts:

**Part 1:** Jonah's flight from God (Chapter 1)

**Part 2:** Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving (Chapter 2)

**Part 3:** Nineveh's repentance (Chapter 3)

**Part 4:** Jonah's struggles with God's mercy (Chapter 4)

**4:11.** *"Then the Lord commanded the fish to spew Jonah upon the shore."* In the Gospel, this part of the story came to be known as "the sign of Jonah." Just as Jonah will spend three days and nights in the belly of the fish, so too will the Son of Man spend three days and nights in the grave (Matt 12:39-40). Jonah's experience comes to symbolize the death and Resurrection of Christ as well as the baptismal life of the Christian. Jonah's time in the large fish in the depths of the ocean is a sort of baptism in which he dies to his old selfish self and rises to new life.