

for the throne. Things got so bad that Elijah himself wrote a warning to Jehoram, but the king ignored the letter and contracted the illness Yahweh sent to punish his wickedness. Jehoram was such an appalling king that his people refused even to give him a royal funeral or bury him in the royal crypt.

All of Jehoram's sons but one—Ahaziah—had died in a Philistine attack. His mother, Athaliah, controlled Ahaziah's every move, and he would have been as poisonous a king as his father if Jehu had not killed him along with Joram when seizing the kingship of Israel.

When Athaliah saw that the Yahwists had killed both her nephew Joram and her son Ahaziah, she was ripe to fulfill her Viper Lord's scheme. She set about slaughtering every surviving person descended from David, including her own grandsons. When apparently all were dead, she proclaimed herself queen of Judah.

If Athaliah had succeeded, the Davidic lamp would have been extinguished and the kings of Israel would have claimed Judah when she died, since she was a daughter of an Israelite king. There would have been no son of David to fulfill the prophecies, and Israel would have been a united pagan nation.

But Athaliah's sister-in-law hid an infant son of Ahaziah. For six years a priest named Jehoiada nurtured the child, while Athaliah ruled. At last Jehoiada staged a quick coup and crowned Joash.

Joash ruled well until Jehoiada's death. And even though later he turned rotten and murdered Jehoiada's prophet-son for denouncing him, and even though his own officials eventually assassinated him in return, the house of David survived in his sons.

Enforcing the Covenant

2 Kings 13–17, Amos, Hosea, Jonah

Prophetic Portfolios

Yahweh gears His tactics to fit the situation. His use of prophets is a case in point.

David needed counselors who would guide and support him in his commitment to serve Yahweh. His Lord sent Gad and Nathan. Solomon wanted no prophets, and got none. When the nation split, the southern prophets continued to follow the pattern of Nathan to the degree that the kings imitated David. Prophets, priests, and kings worked together in the good times. In the bad times, the prophets were often silent, as under Solomon.

Things were different in the northern kingdom. The trouble there was not just a diluting of Yahweh-worship, but a total sellout to Baal or Jeroboam's state-run pseudo-Yahwism. The lines between good and evil were sharp. The Enemy's tactics included open witchcraft. Open supernatural assault demanded overt confrontation: the power encounters and miracles of Elijah/Elisha.

In the background, of course, there were always "the sons of the prophets," members of the prophetic communities who supported the plan through hidden intercession and who recorded

key events for posterity. Indeed, even Elijah and Elisha spent most of their ministries in this hiddenness.

But interestingly, Yahweh did not instruct the prophetic communities to collect the sermons of their leaders. We have few or no recorded public messages of the prophets from 1400 to 800 BC.

This pattern shifted around 800 BC. The biblical books from Joshua through 2 Kings (minus Ruth, which is a short story) are the Former Prophets—the history of Israel and Judah from a prophetic viewpoint. But the books from Isaiah to the end of the Old Testament (minus Daniel, something of a special case) are the Latter Prophets—collections of public prophecies delivered between about 760 and 460 BC.

Why the change? Why do we have the collected messages of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, but not those of great prophets like Samuel and Elijah? And why did the miracles fade out—the nature miracles like the preventing and bringing of rain, and the divine guidance for battle? (Isaiah did give one miraculous sign that was immediately fulfilled—Isaiah 38:7. But he was no Elisha.)

Public Notices

To understand what Yahweh was doing, we need to remember that the prophets were His ambassadors for covenant enforcement. They pointed out violations of the terms to which Israel had agreed under both Moses and Joshua. The prophets also notified the people about the consequences of their choices. Those consequences—blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience—had all been spelled out through Moses and accepted by the people. So there was nothing cruel about Yahweh letting them take effect.

Up until 760 BC, Yahweh was patient with generation after generation of treacherous, callous children. The prophets proclaimed only limited consequences for evildoing. There was no need to record their messages in detail; the gist sufficed to let later generations learn from what had happened.

But from 760 until 460 BC, Yahweh wanted a permanent record of His memoranda. This was not a time for power encounters through prophets (although angels were occasionally deployed),

but for a legal record of repeated warnings of covenant violation.

The reason was that Yahweh intended to unleash the full consequences for rebellion. He was going to obliterate the nation. As a just ruler, He wanted a permanent log that He had done everything possible to turn His people from their disastrous course. He wanted to leave later generations in no doubt of the lengths to which He had gone to restore His people.

The prophets' messages during these three centuries fell into two patterns:

MEMO

To: Israel/Judah
From: Yahweh
Subject: Covenant violations

You have violated our agreement at Sinai in the following ways: _____. As you recall, the consequences we agreed upon for such breach of contract were: _____. This note is to inform you that the consequences will be imposed if you do not change your attitude.

Yahweh sent this message repeatedly for fifty years before destroying Israel, then for another hundred before demolishing Judah. In the meantime, and even more after the destructions, He also addressed this to the destitute survivors:

MEMO

To: Israel/Judah
From: Yahweh
Subject: Pardon for covenant violations

Because I am a compassionate Father and I love you, I am going to forgive your crimes and restore you to a glory you can hardly imagine, as follows: _____.

Just two basic messages repeated over and over. Sounds simple—and boring. Yahweh knew His people wouldn't respond to dry memos, to some code-enforcer citing paragraph 9.5.1 of a

law book. And He had too much personality for that anyway. So instead, He sent His emissaries with ironic, scathing, lyric, funny, grieving poems to recite. Near Easterners were accustomed to hearing poetry—they found it more gripping and memorable than lectures. Like good songs, the prophecies would stick in the people's minds.

So each book of the Latter Prophets is a collection of poetic messages spoken by a prophet. In some cases, the oracles may have been collected, or even recorded, by the prophet's followers. Rarely do we know the exact circumstances in which the prophet delivered a given poem. Nor are we usually sure even where one prophecy ends and the next begins. Most modern translations guess at the divisions between oracles, but in the original Hebrew they are all run together. We have no way of knowing whether two adjacent messages were delivered days or years apart, or to the same or different audiences. It is clear from the few recorded dates that the collectors weren't concerned with putting the prophecies in chronological order.

Add these uncertainties to the fact that we aren't used to reading poetry much any more, and you can see why the prophets are hard to interpret. They use colorful, figurative language, jump from subject to subject, and don't even say whether they are talking about the present, the near future, or the far future. They can be talking about a situation in their own time, then shift without warning as they glimpse something in a distant century, for a prophet sees from Yahweh's perspective of eternity. It's like taking an aerial view of a highway rather than driving along it. Maybe we'd rather have memos.

But since we don't, we'll try to see what Yahweh was trying to get across to His people through each of the latter prophets. We'll begin with those in the northern kingdom because it lasted only until 721 BC.

A Bull Market in Israel

The prophets were quiet in Israel from the time Jehu became king in 841 BC until about 797 BC. During that time, the kings tolerated Jeroboam's fake religion, but Baal worship wasn't totally taking over as under Ahab. Yahweh let Syria gnaw at Israel until Syria

virtually took over. Not even this slow hemorrhage got the people's attention.

So Yahweh tried another tack. Assyria, far to the northeast of Syria, had been a looming threat since Ahab's day. (See map, page 342.) Jehu had had to pay Assyria tribute to keep his throne. But afterward Assyria fell on hard times internally. It barely managed to defeat Syria in 805 BC, but was exhausted in the effort. Assyria's weakness and Syria's defeat were crucial, for they left a power vacuum for Israel to fill. Around 795 BC, a prophet named Jonah foretold that Israel would soon retake all the territory that had been lost since the time of Solomon—quite a bit of real estate.

Jeroboam II inherited the crown of Israel in 793 and set about fulfilling Jonah's words. With both Syria and Assyria weak, and with Israel controlling the major north-south trade routes, the nation exploded into financial and military prosperity. But only the powerful profited. They became fabulously rich as merchants, then began to employ sharp lawyers to acquire the land of small farmers. They built huge houses, furnished them extravagantly, and held endless dinner and drinking parties. Those who lacked either the money, intellect, or connections to play legal hardball found themselves landless, destitute day laborers.

Worst of all, the wealthy attributed their success to Yahweh's favor. They reveled in being the chosen people, and business at the shrines of Bethel and Dan boomed. Worship services were packed. The prime topic of sermons was "when Yahweh has His day"—when He would come and permanently defeat Israel's enemies.

Business was also good at pagan shrines. As the nation grew increasingly secular and materialistic, it was easy for people to celebrate the festivals of both Yahweh and the other gods. Yahweh worship had never been too pure in Israel anyway. People liked to hear the old stories about Abraham and Jacob—the ones that made them feel important—but they also enjoyed the earthier pleasures of fertility rites.

Amos

It made Yahweh grind His teeth to be marketed. Israel had not learned to take Him seriously in the fireworks on Mount Carmel,

nor in oppression by Syria. He gave the nation about thirty-five years of prosperity under Jeroboam II to muster some gratitude, and when it was clear that nothing but smugness was forthcoming, He sent Amos.

Amos was in the livestock business a few miles south of Jerusalem. He was informed on the Law of Moses, as well as on international affairs. He had never been part of a prophetic community, but when Yahweh told him to take time off to carry a message to the northern kingdom, he consented.

Biting irony was the tone of the speeches Yahweh gave Amos. Amos would stand outside the shrine at Bethel, or in the thoroughfare of Samaria, and announce, "This is what Yahweh says: . . ." He caught the crowd's ear by declaring how Yahweh would judge the pagan nations for atrocities against Israel, then won applause by denouncing Judah, and finally zeroed in on his real target:

"For three sins of Israel,
even for four, I will not turn back my wrath.
They sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals.
They trample on the heads of the poor
as upon the dust of the ground
and deny justice to the oppressed. . . .
Now then, I will crush you
as a cart crushes when loaded with grain."
(Amos 2:6-7,13)

Was Israel Yahweh's chosen people? Undoubtedly. But election has a price:

"You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you for all your sins."
(Amos 3:2)

Amos got into big trouble with the authorities by comparing rich women lounging with chilled wine to Israel's top breed of cattle and for predicting that Assyria would soon chew Israel to

bits. But when threatened, Amos coolly informed his accuser of the fate he and his family would soon face for their vileness.

The prophet did not enjoy these hard words. Yahweh deliberately selected messengers who would grieve and pray for the wicked rather than revel in their destruction. But He who at Bethel had transformed deceitful Jacob into humble Israel could not tolerate Jacob's descendants celebrating at Bethel by transforming "justice into bitterness" (5:7). Pride and self-congratulating religion disgusted Him.

For nine chapters, Amos graphically detailed the obliteration Israel could expect. But in a final prophecy, Yahweh granted him a glimpse of hope:

"In that day I will restore David's fallen tent.
I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins,
and build it as it used to be." (9:11)

With Yahweh, even the end is not final because a promise is never broken.

Hosea

Israel's elite ignored Amos the doomsayer, so eventually Yahweh sent the prophet home to take care of his livelihood and collect his messages for posterity. Meanwhile, Yahweh was preparing a different stripe of man to present His plea in a startlingly different way.

Toward the end of Jeroboam's reign, Yahweh asked an ordinary Joe named Hosea to marry a woman he knew would be unfaithful. She bore him three children, and Yahweh gave each of them symbolic names: "God-Scatters," "Not-Loved," and "Not-My-People." (Imagine growing up with the name Not-Loved!) Then Hosea's wife ran off, became a hooker, and ended up a slave. And Yahweh told him to buy her back and love her as He loved the Israelites, even though they were prostituting themselves with fertility gods.

The whole wild scenario was an object lesson for Hosea's neighbors and a chance for him to truly share Yahweh's anguish at being jilted by the people to whom He had poured Himself

out. Like an enraptured husband, Yahweh had showered this nation in affluence. But she had seen it all as payment from her paramours, the gods of prosperity and power. Now, through the prophecies of a man who had been there, Yahweh could weep at how as a lover He had wooed Israel, how as a spurned husband He had let her chase her suitors and end up trapped in prostitution, and how incredibly He would allure her again when the consequences of her betrayal hit home. Not-Loved would become Loved, and Not-My-People would again become My People.

Hosea pulled no punches in cataloging Israel's whoredom:

"I will not punish your daughters
when they turn to prostitution,
nor your daughters-in-law
when they commit adultery,
because the men themselves consort with harlots
and sacrifice with shrine prostitutes –
a people without understanding will come to ruin!"
(Hosea 4:14)

He talked of marred ecology, drunkenness, debauchery, and unjust lawsuits. But he also affirmed Yahweh's mad passion even for such degenerates:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel? . . .
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused." (Hosea 11:8)

If His bride would only abandon her strategies for living without Him, Yahweh promised to forgive everything.

Hosea was from Israel, but his book is dated according to the reigns of Judah's kings. The dates show us that he suffered his marital troubles toward the end of Jeroboam II's reign, but that he addressed his adulterous country all the way to the end.

Jeroboam II ended a glorious forty-one-year rule in 753 BC. His son Zechariah succeeded him with all due pomp—it was still a bull market in Israel. Six months later, Zechariah lay dead

in a bloody public assassination. His killer held the throne for one month before another army officer, Menahem, murdered him in another coup. Menahem managed to hold the crown for ten years by paying off the king of Assyria with money from a tax that crippled Israel's upper class. A shrewd young king had led Assyria out of hibernation and into a series of well-executed military campaigns that led to Menahem's doorstep. Israel really had no choice but to buy Assyria off. (Other than casting itself on Yahweh's mercy—a plan which occurred to nobody but Hosea. He predicted that bribing Assyria would fail in the long run.)

There were those in Israel, however, who thought there ought to be a third alternative: tough it out against Assyria while ignoring Yahweh. An officer named Pekah set up a countergovernment in the part of Israel that lay east of the Jordan River. He led a civil war first against Menahem and then against his son Pekahiah, who kept up his father's pro-Assyrian policy for two years. At last Pekah managed to assassinate Pekahiah. Pekah promptly rebelled against Assyria, and (one didn't need to be a prophet to foresee it at this point) Assyria promptly overran Israel and conquered everything except the capital city and its environs. Captives were deported to other corners of the empire. To avert total disaster, an officer named Hoshea murdered Pekah, declared himself king, and surrendered to Assyria.

Hoshea lasted for nine years. But when Assyria discovered that he was secretly conspiring with Egypt to throw off the Assyrian yoke, the siege engines rolled again for the last time. After a hideous three-year siege, Assyria took Samaria and deported 27,290 people—virtually all who had failed to flee to Judah. Six kings, but only thirty-one years, had passed since Jeroboam II's death.

The prophet Hosea must have escaped, for his book was apparently compiled in Judah. He lived to see his mission fail utterly as Yahweh dealt with His whoring bride.

Jonah

Possibly there was one man who would have been more devastated by these events than Hosea. Back around 795 BC, young Jonah had predicted Jeroboam II's victories and the abundance

that would follow. Toward 750 BC, things were crumbling and Assyria was on the rise. And Yahweh gave this patriotic prophet an incredible assignment: "Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me" (Jonah 1:20). Now Nineveh was a major city of Assyria (soon to be its capital). If Jonah had believed that Yahweh was properly nationalistic and vindictive, he would have set off whistling. But Jonah knew that Yahweh could not be trusted. Nineveh was bound to repent, and Yahweh would forgive.

In Jonah's defense it should be noted that the Assyrians were not nice people. When they conquered an area, they demolished buildings, burned trees, slaughtered animals, skinned captives alive, impaled corpses on stakes, stacked heads in heaps, tortured and mutilated captured leaders, deported whole populations to other parts of their empire to discourage nationalist uprisings, and generally practiced rule by terror.

So in order to avoid giving the message that might cause Nineveh's repentance and deliverance, Jonah caught the first boat to the other end of the Mediterranean world. However, Yahweh sent a storm, Jonah let the sailors throw him overboard to save themselves, and Jonah spent three days in the belly of a large fish thinking things over. In the end he cried out to Yahweh, who had the fish vomit him onto land.

While inside the fish, Jonah wrote a poem of thanksgiving and resignation ending, "What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from [Yahweh]" (Jonah 2:9). Then he went to Nineveh, and sure enough, the Ninevites responded to his warning by instantly repenting. Jonah was furious. He accused Yahweh, "O [Yahweh], is this not what I said when I was still at home? That is why I was so quick to flee to Tarshish. I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (Jonah 4:2)!

So Yahweh gave him a little lesson in which he provided a vine to shade Jonah and then shriveled it with heat. When Jonah protested His harshness, Yahweh replied: "You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. . . . But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left,

and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?" (Jonah 4:10-11).

How it galled Jonah and grieved Yahweh that Assyria responded to a single message from a prophet, while Israel ignored the records of Moses, the miracles of Elijah, and the warnings of Amos and Hosea. It was unspeakable that repentant Nineveh became Yahweh's agent to destroy stubborn Israel. But while Yahweh had chosen Israel as His bride, He was not her national pet. He loved all nations—even wicked Assyria—and He wanted no one to forget the purpose of His covenant: "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you."