CHAPTER

10 The Prophetic Literature I

An Introduction to Prophetic Literature and the Book of Isaiah

Timeline

735 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Ahaz and the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis
715 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Hezekiah
701 B.C.E. Sannacherib's invasion
700 B.C.E. Approximate beginning of the rise of the Babylonian Empire
640 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Josiah
612 B.C.E. Fall of Ninevah
605 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon
597 B.C.E. First Deportation of Judahites to Babylon
586 B.C.E. Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians

Chapter Outline

I. An Introduction to Prophetic Literature
II. Introduction to the Book of Isaiah
III. A Survey of the Contents of the Book of Isaiah
IV. Summary of Isaiah

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter begins the discussion of a new kind of literature, so it opens with an introduction to Prophetic Literature, dealing with what it is, where it came from, and how it is related to the persons we refer to as *prophets*. A general introduction to the first prophetic book in the canon, Isaiah, will identify issues specifically related to this example of prophetic literature. This introduction is followed by a more detailed survey of the contents of this sixty-six chapter book. The survey will describe the individual components of the book and attempt to evaluate how they fit into the whole book. The position taken here is that the book of Isaiah is the product of many writers over a period of two to three centuries. This is part of what provides the book such a complex nature. At the same time, there is a sense that the finished form of the book of Isaiah as we have received it is about something, and we will search for the answer to the question, "What is the book of Isaiah about?" even if our answers to this question can only be partial and provisional.

AN INTRODUCTION TO PROPHETIC LITERATURE

Definition

Judaism uses the terms *Prophets* to designate the entire second division of the canon. The eight books in this section are then divided into the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings) and the Later Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve). For those accustomed to reading the Bible within the Christian tradition, these designations can cause some confusion. Although books like Samuel and Kings have characters designated as prophets within them, Christianity has more often referred to the "Prophetic Literature" as the books that have the names of specific prophets attached to them, beginning with the book of Isaiah, and continuing through the book of Malachi. The Christian Old Testament also places two books that are not prophetic literature, Lamentations and Daniel, within this sequence of books. This chapter and the next two in this book will examine the fifteen books that fit into this category because they have the name of a prophetic figure attached to them and they are composed primarily of the work and words that emerged from the traditions surrounding these prophetic figures.

Historical Context

These books designated as the Prophetic Literature were generated during a period of about three hundred years, from the middle of the eighth century to the middle of the fifth century B.C.E. This time period is framed by what are often understood as the three major crises in Israel's story. Previous chapters have dealt with these crises as they appear within the narrative accounts of books like Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The Prophetic Literature might best be understood as a particular kind of response to this part of Israel's story. Although these books are complete literary works in their own right, knowing the historical background that gave rise to them will assist our understanding.

The three major crises can all be portrayed as periods of several decades surrounding a focal event. Here is one scheme for doing that:

> ***The Assyrian Crisis***—approximately 740–710 B.C.E. with the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom in 722 as its focal point.
>
> ***The Babylonian Crisis***—approximately 610–550 B.C.E. with the Babylonian destruction of Judah in 586 as its focal point.

The Restoration Crisis—approximately 530–450 B.C.E. with the rebuilding of the temple in 520 as its focal point.

All of the books that fall into the category of prophetic literature are responses to one or more of these crises. A few of the persons whose names are attached to them, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Haggai, and Zechariah, appear as characters in the narratives we have been examining as the story of Israel, while others we know only from the books that have their names.

Prophetic Figures and Prophetic Scrolls

The prophetic books have been handed down in tradition to us in four large, complex scrolls, each of which contains many different types of literary units. The primary type is the prophetic speech or utterance most often called an **oracle**. These fall into two primary types, salvation oracles and judgment oracles, but there are others that do not fit easily into these categories. Some of the prophetic books present only these speeches, but others include various amounts of narrative material about the prophets themselves. One common type is the **call narrative**, which, usually in first-person address, tells about the prophet's initial experience in which God assigned him with a task and a message. There are also narratives about prophets performing symbolic actions, rather than speaking in oracles, and stories about the prophets interacting with their audiences.

Because of this mixture of literary types, the relationships between the prophets as people and the books that have their names on them varies, and can be the source of confusion. When we say "Isaiah," for example, are we talking about the person named Isaiah or the book called Isaiah? Isaiah appears as a character only in a few places within the book that shares his name, in Chapters 6–8, 20, and 36–39. Jeremiah, on the other hand, appears as a character frequently throughout almost the entire book of Jeremiah. The book of Joel consists entirely of poetic oracles, and there is no character named Joel present at all in it. This is not the only way that the prophetic books extend beyond the persons with the same name. Many of these books show signs of continued development long past the physical life of the person they are named for. The book of Isaiah, for example, seems to have been written over a period of nearly three centuries. Parts of the book relate to all three of the Israelite crises listed above. Thus, the person named Isaiah, who lived in Jerusalem in the eighth century, is the beginning point of this great scroll and its tradition rather than the author of the finished product.[1] Isaiah 8:16 indicates that Isaiah had disciples who preserved and continued his work, likely continuing to edit and expand the book of Isaiah for a long time until it reached the form in which we have it. The book of Jeremiah is now present in two quite different forms, indicating that perhaps two separate groups continued to develop and expand this scroll after the person called Jeremiah was gone.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The Scope of the Book

The book of Isaiah is a massive scroll, consisting of sixty-six chapters as they are now numbered. The composite nature of this work is evident in many ways. Isaiah 36–39 is an adapted edition of II Kings 18–20. In Isaiah 6, the prophet reports in first-person language about a divine encounter, a **theophany**, in which he was called to be a prophet, while Isaiah 7 is a story about a meeting between Isaiah and King Ahaz in the eighth century, and it refers to the prophet in the third-person. The person named Isaiah is never mentioned again after Chapter 39, and Isaiah 45 speaks about Cyrus, the king of Persia in the sixth century. These observations, among many others, lead most

scholars to the conclusion that the book of Isaiah was produced by many people over a period of about three centuries. The greatest challenge may be how to read this book in its finished form as a unified work of literature.

It has been common practice to divide the book of Isaiah into three parts. Some interpreters go as far as to call these parts First Isaiah (ch. 1–39), Second Isaiah (ch. 40–55), and Third Isaiah (ch. 56–66). The focus here will be on reading Isaiah as a unified work, but the observations that have led to these divisions can still prove helpful. Much of Isaiah 1–39 seems to have the Assyrian Crisis of the eighth century as its background, and the prophet named Isaiah, who lived in the eighth century, appears as a character in this part of the book. The experience of the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century seems to be the background for most of Isaiah 40–55, in which Cyrus, the Persian king who released the Israelites from this captivity, appears. Finally, the restoration of worship in the second temple during the fifth century seems to be the most likely background for the final section of the book. The simplistic idea of three separate sections of the book from different time periods laid end to end does not work well, however. Chapters 13, 20, and 33–34 seem more closely associated with the middle section of 40–55, and Chapters 1–2 and 24–27 have strong connections to 56–66. This situation is better explained by the proposal that an original core of material closely associated with the prophet Isaiah underwent a series of major and minor revisions over a long period of time, resulting in the massive work we now have. The

Summary of Arguments on Authorship of Isaiah

Single Author

1. The oldest form of the book, the Dead Sea Scrolls manuscript, has the entire sixty-six chapters, much as it stands today.
2. The primary emphasis in prophecy was on prediction. God enabled the prophets to see what would happen hundreds of years in the future.
3. The author of the whole book, therefore, was Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century B.C.E.

Multiple Authors

1. The prophets primarily spoke for their own time. The future they were most concerned with was the immediate future.[2]
2. Isaiah 1–39 and 40–66 are different in a number of ways:
   a. They differ in historical background: 1–39 was set in an eighth-century background, while 40–66 was set in the sixth and fifth centuries.
   b. They differ in style: 1–39 is narrative and constitutes typical prophetic oracles, while 40–66 is very elaborate poetry.
   c. They differ in their view of God: 1–39 speaks of the holiness of God, while 40–66 speaks of God as Creator.
   d. They differ in speaking of God's representative: 1–39 speaks of the Messiah, while 40–66 speaks of the Suffering Servant.
3. Isaiah 45:1 specifically mentions Cyrus, who was the king of Persia in the sixth century B.C.E.
4. The most obvious explanation for these observations is that the book was produced by multiple people over a long period of time.

best strategy for reading the book of Isaiah includes the awareness that it is a composite work, the pieces of which have different historical contexts, but that the finished book is a deliberate work of literary art, which also has a context and a purpose. An additional benefit of this approach is that every generation needs to do the work of examining this prophetic tradition and using it to engage the critical issues of our own context.

Some Major Components of the Book

The book of Isaiah begins with a **superscription** in 1:1 that introduces the prophet and places him in Jerusalem during the eighth century. A second, briefer superscription appears in 2:1, raising questions about whether the original superscription, which speaks of the "**vision** of Isaiah," applies to the entire book or just the first chapter. Isaiah's **call narrative** appears in chapter 6, an odd placement, considering that call narratives in other prophetic books tend to appear at the very beginning. There are two sets of stories about Isaiah's interactions with two of Judah's kings in Isaiah 7 (Ahaz) and Isaiah 36–39 (Hezekiah). Isaiah 2–5 and 9–12 contain numerous **judgment oracles**, but oracles that seem to speak of salvation are also present. Isaiah 13–23 is a large collection of judgment oracles directed at other countries, such as Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, Moab, and Ammon, a collection often called the **Oracles against the Nations**. In Isaiah 24–27 the language and perspective of the book change significantly, prompting many interpreters to refer to this section as the **Isaian Apocalypse**. The voice of the book shifts significantly in Isaiah 40 and the chapters following this are dominated by **salvation oracles**. Mixed in with these oracles about the salvation or redemption of Israel is a set of poems that refer to an unnamed figure as God's servant. These **Servant Songs** are typically identified at 42:1–4, 39:1–6, 50:4–9, and 52:13–53:12.

Once again, observations about these diverse components of the book highlight its composite nature, but they should also prompt us to ask, "What is the book of Isaiah about?" A more extensive survey of the book's contents may enable us to return to this question at the end of the chapter.

A SURVEY OF THE CONTENTS OF THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

Isaiah 1–12

Chapters 1–12 of Isaiah reflect the changing historical situations and the prophet's reactions to those changes. There seems to be no pattern by which they are arranged, except for certain catchwords that sometimes cause two oracles to be thrown together. For instance, Isaiah 1:9 mentions Sodom and Gomorrah, using those cities to show the devastation that has come to the cities of Judah because of the sins of the people. The oracle, which begins in 1:2, is an oracle lamenting Israel's unfaithfulness:

> Your country lies desolate,
> your cities are burned with fire;
> in your very presence
> aliens devour your land;
> it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners. (1:7)

Such a description fits well into the context of Sennacherib's invasion of Judah in 701 B.C.E., when he captured city after city and laid siege to Jerusalem. The prophet's only consolation is that

> if the LORD of hosts
> had not left us a few survivors,
> we should have been like Sodom,
> and become like Gomorrah. (1:9)

The Literary Structure of Isaiah

The unity of the book of Isaiah is a much-debated issue. As the treatment of Isaiah in this book indicates, it falls rather easily into two sections, based upon the historical contexts assumed. Chapters 1–39 address the eighth century and the Assyrian crisis, and these chapters involve the personal activity of Isaiah himself. Chapters 40–66 seem to address the sixth and fifth centuries in Israel, which were dominated by the Babylonian crisis and the crisis of Restoration that followed the Exile. Thus, these sections have sometimes been labeled as *First Isaiah* and *Second Isaiah*. Some analyses further separate Isaiah 56–66 from the rest of the book and label it *Third Isaiah*.

The argument that the book of Isaiah is the product of a process of composition lasting two or three centuries and involving a large number of individuals is almost certainly correct, but in recent years more attention has been given to the final form of the book of Isaiah. This approach has raised, and attempted to answer, questions about the literary design of the whole book, regardless of the process of composition that produced it. This work is still in progress, but some preliminary results are beginning to emerge. The gap between Chapters 39 and 40 is still significant, but rather than using this realization to divide Isaiah into two books, it may be appropriate to ask how and why this material has been arranged in this way. Isaiah 36–39 becomes an important point of transition rather than a conclusion to the original book of Isaiah. The stories of Hezekiah's obedience and God's deliverance in those chapters point back to the reluctance and disobedience of his father, Ahaz, in Isaiah 7–8. They also point forward to the deliverance of the exiles in Isaiah 40–55, and further still to a future deliverance of Jerusalem that reflects its experience of salvation in the past.[3]

The character named Isaiah does not appear often in the book, but the narratives that portray this individual in Chapters 6–8, 20, and 37–39 serve as important cohesive elements in the first half of the book. Likewise, the character that the book of Isaiah refers to as the *servant*, who appears in four poems in 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–11, and 52:13–53:12, helps hold together the central section of the book in Chapters 40–55. An oracle against Babylon in Chapter 13 begins the long section of Oracles against the Nations in Chapters 13–23 and points forward to the defeat of Babylon highlighted in the poem about Cyrus in 45:1–8. Many other features of the book of Isaiah serve to hold together this seemingly disparate collection of material.

Like several other large books in the Old Testament, Isaiah demonstrates a sense of polarity. The majority of the first half of the book is negative in tone. Its contents are dominated by oracles of judgment, yet words of salvation are present. In the same way, the second half of the book is dominated by positive oracles of salvation, with words of judgment playing a minor role. Thus, the overall movement of the book is from a negative to a positive tone. It is disturbing, in light of this general observation, that the final verse of the book of Isaiah (66:24) is so harsh. The Jewish tradition of reading of this text copes with this harshness by repeating the penultimate verse (66:23) after the conclusion of Chapter 66, so the book ends on a more positive note.

Some interpreters see the final form of the book of Isaiah as a context for the reading of older traditions that come from Isaiah the prophet. Edgar W. Conrad has identified Isaiah 6–39 as the "vision of Isaiah," which was "bound up and sealed" (according to Isaiah 8:16–20) until a later point when it could become a coherent prophetic message. The book of Isaiah forms the context for this coherence. Isaiah 40:6 commands that this new reading of the old vision take place in a new social context.[4]

Thus, the book of Isaiah is a large prophetic complex that tells a continuous story. This story is about Israel's past, present, and future. Each of these facets influences the others. The past provides a program for the present and a vision for the future. The needs of the present and the future shape the presentation of the past. The book of Isaiah moves through all of these parts of Israel's story, offering a message of judgment, destruction, salvation, and hope.

The oracle that follows this one also mentions Sodom and Gomorrah, yet the historical situation is radically different. The people are so prosperous that they bring "multitudes of sacrifices" (1:11). Their worship is not lacking in quantity; instead, it is woefully lacking in quality. In this case, Sodom and Gomorrah are examples of decadence, not destruction. Hands spread in prayerful supplication condemn the worshiper because "your hands are full of blood" (1:15).

Another vivid oracle deals with the humiliation of the upper-class women of Jerusalem who

walk with outstretched necks,
    glancing wantonly with their eyes,
    . . .
Instead of perfume there will be a stench
    . . .
    instead of beauty, shame. (3:16, 24)

A series of judgment oracles in 5:8–23 catalogs the sins of a prosperous society: covetousness (5:8–10); drunkenness (5:11–12); failure to know the LORD (5:13–17); cynicism (5:18–19); glorifying evil instead of right (5:20); conceit (5:21); and judges who accept bribes (5:22–23).

One of the most unusual oracles is the Song of the Vineyard (5:1–7). It is in the form of a wedding song, but Isaiah used it to develop an allegory about Israel and Judah. A farmer plants the finest grapes after carefully preparing the soil. But, to his despair and disgust, what he thought were fine grapes actually were wild sour grapes, worthless for his purposes. In anger, he destroys the vineyard. The meaning of the allegory is then explained:

For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts
    is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah
    are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice,
    but saw bloodshed;
righteousness,
    but heard a cry! (5:7)

Isaiah did not view the situation as hopeless. The people must turn to the LORD in true repentance by ceasing to do evil and learning to do good, meaning, specifically:

seek justice,
    rescue the oppressed,
defend the fatherless,
    plead for the widow. (1:17)
    . . .
    if you are willing and obedient,
you shall eat the good of the land;
    but if you refuse and rebel,
you shall be devoured by the sword;
    for the mouth of the LORD has spoken. (1:19–20)

Or again:

Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
    and those in her who repent by righteousness.

But rebels and sinners shall be destroyed together,
and those who forsake the LORD shall be consumed. (1:27–28)

Christian tradition, beginning with the New Testament, has often made extensive use of passages from this part of Isaiah in constructing understandings of the identity of Jesus. Two such passages are oracles that seem to depict an ideal king figure. The first of these (9:2–7) would fit well into the early years of Isaiah's ministry. The Assyrian hordes had overrun the Northern Kingdom, while making Ahaz pay a terrible price for the safety of his kingdom. Such a time would have made anyone long for the blessings of peace. The occasion for the oracle may have been the birth of a royal child.[5] Ahaz's rejection of Isaiah's advice on other occasions gave no basis for hope for a sensible response from Ahaz this time. Thus, Isaiah had reasons to yearn for a leader who would be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace," whose kingdom would be one in which justice and righteousness would be the hallmarks. When no contemporary king arose who fulfilled this dream, its projection to a future time was not difficult.

The other oracle in this category is found in 11:1–9. Some would argue that, because reference is made to "a shoot . . . from the stump of Jesse" (11:1), this oracle comes from a later time when the monarchy no longer existed. Although this is a significant argument for such a view, the figure of the stump also appeared in the call narrative (6:13). As the figure of speech is not strange to Isaiah, this oracle could well be from him. Whatever the case, whether from Isaiah or a later disciple, the ideal ruler will be one who will possess

the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. (11:2)

A substantial block of mostly narrative material sits in the middle of this section, occupying most of Isaiah 6–8. It begins with Isaiah's own account of his prophetic calling. Isaiah was a citizen of Jerusalem, perhaps from the upper classes of society. Some have even suggested that he might have been related to the royal family. He had access to the royal court and functioned as an advisor to at least two of the kings of Judah. The book of Isaiah identifies two of his sons by name, Shear-jashub in 7:3 and Maher-shalal-hash-baz in 8:3. The mother of this second son is referred to as the *prophetess.* This person is never mentioned again in the book of Isaiah, so her identity and function are uncertain. She is often presumed to be Isaiah's wife, but this is only an assumption based on the report that they had one child together. Her designation here raises the possibility that the group of prophetic disciples around Isaiah included female members. In what way this specific person may have functioned as a prophet is not mentioned.

Isaiah's call came in the year of King Uzziah's death. The young Isaiah was in the Temple, possibly watching the pomp and pageantry surrounding the coronation of Jotham, Uzziah's son. The king was supposed to be God's representative on earth. But Isaiah saw more than the earthly representative of God; it was the LORD sitting on the throne. In his **vision,** the LORD was flanked by two bright six-winged creatures called *seraphs* (NRSV) or *flaming creatures* (Today's English Version), who called out,

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory. (6:3)

The formula "Holy, holy, holy" was the Hebrew way of saying, "the most holy" or "holiest of all," because repeating the adjective took the place of the comparative and superlative degrees (holy, holier, holiest). This was not a reference to the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), as such an idea was unknown in Isaiah's day (6:1–3).

The Temple foundations shook under Isaiah's feet, and smoke rising from the altar gave an eerie appearance. The vision of the holy God overwhelmed the young man with a sense of sin and guilt. In

his spiritual agony, he cried out in a confession of sins: "Woe is me! I am lost" (6:4–5). In his vision, Isaiah saw one of the flying creatures take a fiery coal from the altar and touch his lips, symbolic of the cleansing power of the LORD in forgiveness. Then he heard a call, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us?" Isaiah's response was "Here am I; send me!" (6:6–8). Then Isaiah was given a strange commission: He was told to go preach to people who would pay no attention to him. When he questioned how long he was to preach, he was told to preach until the land lay desolate, stripped of its inhabitants. Only a remnant would remain. In short, Isaiah was called to be faithful, not successful (6:9–13).

Chapter 6 contains two unique features of Isaiah's preaching. Like the other prophets, before and afterward, he would be a prophet of judgment and doom. But among the things that were different about his preaching were the ideas concerning the holiness of God and the righteous remnant of Israel.[6] The importance and meaning of these ideas will be discussed later.

The first appearance of Isaiah as a prophet is described in Chapter 7. Isaiah and his son Shear-jashub met Ahaz in Jerusalem. The son was taken along because his name represented a part of his father's message. The name was symbolic of Isaiah's doctrine of the remnant. It meant "A remnant shall return." As such, it reflected a hopeful theme in Isaiah's preaching (7:1–4). Ahaz was troubled by the threat of Syria and Israel. Isaiah gave him a message from the LORD to ignore the threats. Instead, he counseled, "Take heed, be quiet, do not fear," for the little tyrants threatening him would soon vanish. The prophet showed his contempt for King Pekah (I) by referring to him only as the "son of Remaliah" (7:5–9). Isaiah challenged Ahaz to ask for a sign from the LORD that what he was saying was true (7:11). Ahaz refused to do so (7:12). Isaiah then said that the LORD would give a sign anyway. That sign was that a young woman would have a child whose name would be Immanuel, a name that meant "God with us" (7:14). It was in keeping with the earlier promise to Ahaz that what he needed to do was to trust in the LORD, not in Assyria.

Ways of Reading Isaiah 7:14

Isaiah 7:14 is a verse that illustrates some of the difficulties and controversies involved in interpreting texts from the prophetic literature. In the Christian tradition, the problems with this verse stem from its use in the New Testament in Matthew 1:22–23. The writer of this gospel claims that in some way the birth of Jesus "fulfills" the statement in Isaiah 7:14. Understanding this issue should begin with an examination of translation problems. The New Revised Standard Version of Isaiah 7:14 says:

> Therefore the LORD himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

This seems significantly different from the King James Version, with which many readers are more familiar:

> Therefore the LORD himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The major differences that affect the interpretation of this verse are the translation of the word "*Look/Behold*," the tense of the verb in "is with child/shall conceive," and the translation of the words *young woman/virgin*.

There are three basic understandings of this verse in Isaiah:

1. Isaiah is pointing to a pregnant woman in the presence of Ahaz and indicating that the child she will give birth to is a sign of God's presence with Ahaz and Israel in the eighth century B.C.E. Most likely, it refers to Ahaz's son Hezekiah, who succeeded him as king of Judah.

2. Isaiah is stating that at some time in the future, a miraculously conceived child will be born and this child will represent the presence of God. Many Christian interpreters understand this predicted child to be Jesus specifically and therefore the "virgin" is Mary.
3. The statement of Isaiah functions on two levels, one that addresses the situation in the eighth century B.C.E. and a child who was born then, and another that addresses the future, perhaps including the birth of Jesus in the first century C.E.

The first interpretation fits better with the *NRSV* translation and the second with the KJV translation. This is a good example of how translation and interpretation are necessarily linked.

The situation is complicated further by the ancient translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. The Hebrew word in Isaiah 7:14 is clearly a general word for *young woman*. There is another Hebrew word that specifically means *virgin*, which is used elsewhere in Isaiah but not in this case. The oldest existing copies of the Greek translation of Isaiah, however, contain a word that specifically means *virgin,* and it is the same word that appears in the Greek New Testament in Matthew 1:23. These best copies, however, are from the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. and are Christian documents, so nobody can say for certain what word was present in the original Greek translation produced by Jews six or seven centuries earlier.

Those who argue for the first interpretation above insist that Isaiah's statement to Ahaz must be meaningful within the context of the Syro-Ephraimitic War of the eighth century B.C.E. and the threat it posed to Judah. A statement about a child to be born 800 years later would have no meaning in that context. Some of these interpreters would also argue that when the gospel of Matthew says that the birth of Jesus "fulfills" this text, it means something other than that Isaiah 7:14 was a specific prediction about a future event and that the birth of Jesus is this future event. Those who argue for the second interpretation seem most often to be interested in some kind of tangible proof that Jesus is the Messiah. The third interpretation is attractive to many readers because it seems to resolve the dilemma posed by the first two, but others respond that this is not a resolution at all but an evasion of the difficulties of this passage and the tough choices they require.

Who was the original child? Some believe that it was Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, who would become one of Judah's most devout and able kings. Another possibility was that the child was Isaiah's own son. This conclusion is supported by the fact that the two other children mentioned in this passage (7:1–8:15) are Isaiah's children.[7]

Isaiah 13–23

A feature common to all of the prophetic scrolls in the Old Testament is a collection of judgment oracles against other nations. These oracles were directed against those nations that in one way or another offended the prophet's sense of justice, particularly regarding that nation's attitude toward Israel.

In the book of Isaiah, there is a greater variety of oracles than in other books. Other materials have been introduced, which, at first glance, would seem to be out of place. For example, in Isaiah 20 is the story of Isaiah's symbolic action to protest Hezekiah's possible involvement in the Ashdod rebellion. Because Egypt was one of the instigators of this rebellion, this probably explains its inclusion here.

Less easy to understand is an oracle directed against an individual, Shebna, an official in Hezekiah's court. There, the answer may lie in the suggestion that he may have been a promoter of the same rebellion, an action that Isaiah strongly opposed.

Oracles against Foreign Nations (Isa. 13:1–23:18)

1. Against Babylon (13:1–14:23)
2. Against Assyria (14:24–27)
3. Against Philistia (14:28–32)
4. Against Moab (15:1–16:14)
5. Against Damascus (Syria) and Israel (Ephraim) (17:1–6)
6. Against idols (17:7–14)
7. Against Egypt (18:1–20:6)
8. Against Babylon again (21:1–10)
9. Against Dumah (Edom) (21:11–12)
10. Against Arabia (21:13–17)
11. Against Jerusalem (22:1–14)
12. Against Shebna (22:15–25)
13. Against Tyre and Sidon (23:1–18)

The two oracles against Babylon (13:1–14:23) may well be from Isaiah's later disciples. One's view of the relationship of Isaiah and such disciples is the crucial point in this conclusion. If one takes what seem to be clear historical references—the overall assumption that Babylon is the dominant world power; the reference to the rise of the Medes (13:17); and the mention of the oracle against the king of Babylon (14:3–23)—the conclusion could be reached that these oracles came from the sixth century B.C.E. If, on the other hand, one assumes that the prophet's primary function was long-range prediction, a different conclusion would be reached as to the source of these two oracles.

The oracle against the king of Babylon (14:3–23) is a good example of a biblical passage that often is misinterpreted. This is a dirge directed against a tyrant who has exalted himself against God (14:13–14). Now he will be brought down to the "depths of the pit" (death) and his power will vanish (14:15). That such tyrants are satanic in their abuse of power does not justify interpreting this passage as describing the fall of Satan. To do so is to *eisegete* (read a meaning into a passage) rather than to *exegete* (let the passage say what it says).

Not all these oracles were *against* foreign nations. In the Moab oracle (15:1–16:14), the prophet urges the people to give refuge to fugitives from Moab, even though he does regard Moab's troubles as a just punishment (16:5–7).

Egypt was a major object in Isaiah's foreign oracles (18:1–20:6). It was pressuring Hezekiah to rebel against the Assyrians. The prophet constantly warned the king to avoid such entanglements, advice that Hezekiah heeded in 714–711 B.C.E. (the Ashdod rebellion). Later, however, Hezekiah would not be so wise, thus provoking Sennacherib's 701 B.C.E. invasion.

Isaiah 24–27

Isaiah 24–27 is often called **apocalyptic** literature because these chapters share some characteristics with such books as Daniel and Revelation. Apocalyptic literature differed from prophetic literature in a number of ways, which are summarized in the box below. These chapters in Isaiah do not represent as clear an example of apocalyptic literature as later books both inside and outside of the Bible, but they may represent a transition between prophetic and apocalyptic literature.

Characteristics of Apocalyptic Literature

1. It aimed at encouraging the faithful of the LORD's people in a time of trouble instead of telling sinners among the LORD's people that judgment was coming.
2. It usually was written first and read later instead of being spoken first and written later.
3. It used unusual imagery and numbers to create a coded language. The readers for whom it was intended understood this language, but outsiders could not understand it.
4. It spoke of God being directly involved in conflict with the earthly enemy. This differed from the common Old Testament idea of God working through human and natural means.
5. It was concerned with the triumph of God over the forces of evil in the universe. This was a cosmic struggle.
6. The author usually was anonymous, because he did the work under the name of a famous person.

Like apocalyptic literature, they speak of the earth and the universe being in turmoil, while they alternate prophetic words of judgment with apocalyptic words of comfort for the faithful. The LORD is at work in the universe to bring deliverance to the faithful.

The authorship of this material usually is assigned to a later time. The first oracle depicts the earth in turmoil:

> The earth lies polluted
> under its inhabitants;
> . . .
> Therefore a curse devours the earth
> and its inhabitants suffer for their guilt. (24:5, 6)

Yet, the words of judgment are balanced by words of praise (24:14–16a) and promise (25:1–5). The righteous will be preserved in the midst of judgment (26:1–19). This section closes with the promise of a return of the exiles (27:12–13).

Isaiah 28–35

The final group of oracles from Isaiah 1–39, those found in chapters 28–35, is varied in time and context. For example, Isaiah 28:14–22 blasts cynical leaders who have "made a covenant with death" (28:15b) and thus expect it to pass them by. Instead, they will find that they are not immune to God's wrath (28:17–22). The prophet's indignation over Hezekiah's flirtation with the Egyptians likely created friction between him and the king (30:8–11). His feelings were aptly expressed in a scathing oracle in 30:1–7. He points out that

> Egypt's help is worthless and empty,
> therefore I have called her,
> "Rahab who sits still." (30:7)

Instead, Hezekiah is admonished to remember that

> In returning and rest you shall be saved;
> in quietness and trust shall be your strength. (30:15)

Failure to give heed will result in Judah being left

> like a flagstaff on top of a mountain,
> like a signal on a hill. (30:17)

On the other hand, because they have themes that sound like Isaiah 40–66, the oracles in chapters 34 and 35 usually are assigned to the period of the Exile. The subject of 34:1–17 is the LORD's warfare against the nations that oppose Him. The LORD is spoken of as a dread warrior whose sword "is sated with blood . . . is gorged with fat" (34:6). The expression "the day of the LORD's vengeance" (34:8) was used in primitive justice and meant "the day when the LORD sets things right." *Vengeance,* in the biblical sense, meant "bringing back to even keel things that were uneven" or "balancing what was unbalanced" (34:1–8).

Edom was used as an example of those nations that opposed the LORD and thus opposed Judah. There seems to have been a particularly strong hatred between the Edomites and Israel, because Edom took every opportunity to strike at Israel when it was weak. Thus, the LORD's enemies will be left as desolate as Edom (34:9–17).

The other side of the LORD's judgment upon the nations would be the restoration and prosperity of Israel in the land. This is why vengeance and salvation are mentioned together in 35:4:

> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
> . . .
> Here is your God,
> He will come with vengeance,
> with terrible recompense.
> He will come and save you.

As a result,

> the ransomed of the LORD shall return,
> and come to Zion with singing;
> everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
> they shall obtain joy and gladness,
> and sorrow and sighing shall flee away. (35:10)

Isaiah 36–39

The **royal narrative** reporting Isaiah's interaction with King Hezekiah was already described in chapter 8 of this book, because it is such a close parallel to II Kings 18–20. Two comments may be important, however, about the salient role these texts play in the book of Isaiah. First, because only the book of Isaiah reports on Isaiah's interactions with Ahaz, the father of Hezekiah, it may be important to compare the two. Most significantly, although Ahaz resists receiving a sign of God's deliverance from Isaiah in 7:12, Hezekiah requested such a sign himself in 38:22. Hezekiah may be perceived as a more humble and faithful leader than his father. Second, the brief and puzzling Chapter 39 is placed at an important boundary in the book of Isaiah. Chapters 36–38 report Judah's survival of the Assyrian Crisis, and 40–55 rejoice over the end of the Babylonian captivity. The only thing filling this 150-year gap is the strange little story of the Babylonian envoys coming to Jerusalem and taking a tour of city. This is Isaiah's veiled view of the horrors of the Babylonian invasion.

Comfort to Israel (Isa. 40–55)

The prophet's call (40:1–11). It is quite possible to read the opening verse of Isaiah 40 as a second call narrative in the book, but neither the prophet nor the narrator provide an identity for this person. This is why interpreters who want to speak clearly of an individual behind the prophetic voice in this section often use the name "Second-Isaiah," a name that others use just to identify this section of the book. The keynote of Isaiah 40–55 was reassurance to a nation that had been trampled underfoot by Babylon, reviled and scoffed at by its neighbors, and exiled in a distant land. Rebuke enough had been flung at them. The LORD, through the prophet, sent a word of comfort:

> Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
> and cry to her
> that she has served her term,
> that her penalty is paid,
> that she has received from the LORD's hand
> double for all her sins. (40:2)

Such a condition could have existed only after the fall of Jerusalem. Only then could it be said, "She has received from the LORD's hand double (punishment) for all her sins" (40:2).

A dialogue follows the opening lines. It seems to be the prophet's unique way of describing the LORD's call to him. He was told to be like a king's herald, going through the land announcing the king's imminent appearance. He was to see that the bumps in the road were smoothed down and the holes filled in. The LORD's overpowering presence was about to make itself known in the midst of the people as they would be led in a new exodus back to Palestine (40:3–5). A command came to "cry" or preach. When the prophet-to-be asked what the nature of His message would be, he was told to proclaim that, like the grass and the flower, everything would pass away except the enduring word of God (40:6–8). He was to herald the good tidings to Jerusalem from the high mountains that the LORD was about to return to rule the land with strength, justice, and compassion:

> He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
> he will gather the lambs in his arms,
> and carry them in his bosom,
> and gently lead the mother sheep. (40:11)

In Praise of the LORD, the Creator (40:12–32). The prophet's job was not an easy one. He faced the questions of the cynics who said, "My way is hidden from the LORD, and my right is disregarded by my God" (40:27). They could understand punishment for their sins, but what had happened to them seemed to have gone beyond the punishment they deserved. The prophet's answer was a magnificent poem on the LORD as Creator.

The poem consisted largely of rhetorical questions—that is, questions whose answers were already known both to the one asking and to the one of whom they were asked. By those questions, he pointed out that the LORD had created the universe (the waters, the heavens, and the earth). The LORD consulted no one, for the nations were as nothing to Him (40:12–17). The LORD could not be compared to idols, for they were only wooden gods created by a puny man:

> Have you not known? Have you not heard?
> Has it not been told you from the beginning?

Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing. (40:21–23)

A king scarcely was seated on his throne before he passed away, and his place was taken by another (40:24).

There was no one to whom the LORD could be compared; He had created the universe, giving each heavenly body its name and placing it in the created order (40:25–26). His people, therefore, had no reason to question His concern for them, for

The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. (40:28bcde)

The LORD gives power to persons of every age:

those who wait for the LORD
shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint. (40:31)

The message is that young children can reach their full potential ("mount up like eagles"); young people can still reach high goals ("run and not be weary"); and the elderly can still have a meaningful life ("walk and not faint") (40:29–31).

The Nations on Trial (41:1–29). The LORD was calling the nations to judgment, when they would have a chance to defend themselves (41:1). Although Cyrus was not named, the prophet described the rapid advances he was making. But Cyrus was the LORD's agent:

Who has performed and done this,
calling the generations from the beginning?
I, the LORD, am first,
and will be with the last. (41:4)

The nations were trembling at the news of the Persian advances. The idol makers were trying to encourage one another, hoping their idols would save them. But the LORD had taken Israel from the ends of the earth. Israel was the LORD's servant and could be assured of the LORD's presence and help (42:2–10). Israel's enemies would be put to shame, for the LORD would help Israel triumph over them (41:11–16). The desert, furthermore, would bloom for Israel as evidence that "the hand of the LORD has done this" (41:17–21).

The false gods were challenged, therefore, to submit evidence of their ability to produce results. They could not, of course, as they were nothing. Only the LORD had the power to move nations and men at His command. The coming of Cyrus (still not named) had been announced to Israel. When one looked to the idols for any help, one found nothing (41:22–29).

The Servant Songs

INTRODUCTION. One of the unique features of Second Isaiah is the *Servant Songs.* There are four poems (42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12). They are called the Servant Songs because they introduce a figure referred to as the **Suffering Servant.** Each poem adds more information about the Servant, with the climax coming in 52:13–53:12, where the Servant's trial and death are described.

Numerous questions are raised about the poems, especially in two major areas: (1) What is their relationship to the rest of 40–55? Did they originate separately from 40–55 or as a part of it? (2) Who was the Servant?

As for the first question, whether they originated separately or not, they are so skillfully blended into the rest of the material that they do not seriously interrupt it. The first poem, for example, climaxes the section on the LORD's judgment of the nations. The Servant is portrayed as the instrument of that judgment. These four poems serve as a literary thread that ties together 40–55 the way the occasional presence of Isaiah, son of Amoz, tied together 1–39.

The question of the Servant's identity will be left until the last poem is discussed.

THE FIRST SERVANT SONG: THE SERVANT'S MISSION (42:1–4). In this poem, the LORD describes the mission of the Servant, who would "bring justice to the nations" (42:1). Unlike military conquerors, he would do his work quietly, but his gentle manner would not deter him in his object:

> He will not faint or be crushed
> until he has established justice in the earth;
> and the coastlands wait for his teaching. (42:4)

I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD (42:5–46:13). Oracles in these chapters constantly return to a single theme: "I am the LORD your God." Like the theme notes of a symphony, they recur time and time again. Different subjects are discussed—idols and idol makers, Cyrus, the restoration of Israel—but all come back to the foregoing theme. God created heaven and earth with all of its inhabitants. His Servant had been given to bring light to the people. He alone would do it, for no idol could share his glory (42:5–9). The prophet broke out in a hymn of praise, calling on the whole of creation to praise God for His fight against His foes (42:10–13). In the battle, the people would be helped, even though they were blind to what God was doing for them. Even so, the LORD would keep His promises (42:14–17).

Unfortunately, all that Israel had seen was meaningless to the people. The LORD had wanted to save them, but they had been led from the land. They had been given over to the enemy because they had sinned against the LORD. They had learned nothing from their experience (42:18–25).

Yet, the LORD would rescue His people, because they were His.

> When you pass through the waters I will be with you;
> and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
> when you walk through the fire you shall not be burned,
> and the flame shall not consume you.
> For I am the LORD your God,
> the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (43:2–3ab)

Others would be given in exchange for Israel. A new exodus would take place, bringing the people back to the land; they were the LORD's people, created for His glory (43:1–7).

In using the figure of a trial again, the prophet portrayed God as summoning the nations to demonstrate that He was God above all others. No god was formed before Him; none would be formed after Him. They were witnesses to that fact. The LORD had saved Israel before any other God

came along. He alone could deliver them now (43:8–13). To prove His power, He was sending an army to conquer Babylon. Many years before, the LORD had led the nation in the first exodus from Egypt. Now a new thing was about to happen—a new exodus was about to take place (43:14–21).

Israel had sinned against God by failing to worship properly. Yet, He would not hold their sins against them. They were challenged to bring witnesses to court to prove that God had wronged them (43:22–28). He had created Israel. Israel was His servant, the people whom He loved. He would bless them so that they would thrive like plants that had plenty of water. Gradually they would come to recognize that He was the first, the last, the only God (44:1–8). In a scathing satire on idols (44:9–20), the prophet concludes that both idols and idol makers are nothing. After all, a man chooses a tree or metal and fashions it with his hand to make it look like himself. The maker of wooden idols took a tree, burned part of it to cook his food and to warm himself, and then used the other part to make a god to worship. Such a person was stupid. "He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself and say, 'Is not this thing in my right hand a fraud?'" (44:20).

The LORD had swept away Israel's "transgressions like a cloud" (44:21–22). The prophet broke out in song at the prospect of the LORD's redemption of the people. He who was doing this had created heaven and earth, had confounded the wisdom of men, and had promised that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. He was the One, furthermore, who raised up Cyrus the Persian to be His servant who would rebuild Jerusalem (44:31–28). In an address to Cyrus (45:1–7), the LORD promised to go before him and prepare the way for his conquests. What Cyrus was about to do was for the sake of the LORD's people. He had been chosen as the LORD's servant.

I call you [Cyrus] by your name,
    I surname you, though you do not know me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other;
    besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
    . . .
I form light and create darkness,
    I make weal and create woe;
I the LORD do all these things. (45:4b–5, 7)

Using a figure from Jeremiah, the prophet pronounces woe on one who strives against his maker, like a pot against the potter (Jer. 18). The created ones cannot question the Creator's actions. The man Cyrus was created to do the LORD's work in freeing Israel. The nations would acknowledge that Israel's God was supreme. He was the Creator, and He spoke the truth. No idol could take His place. The judicial decision must be made, therefore. Who was the Creator? Who is the only true God? Who could save the people? The LORD, the God of Israel. In Him alone is salvation, for to Him, "every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall swear" (45:8–25).

Look at the gods of Babylon. They had to be carried on donkeys' backs, because they could not go from place to place, much less create anything. They were dependent on their makers to move them. They could even be captured and carried away. Yet, the LORD had cared for Jacob from the beginning, and He would be with them to the end. Could the LORD be compared, then, to a god made of gold by a human craftsman? An idol that had to be carried on men's shoulders? Absolutely not! He was the One who would soon deliver Israel (46:1–13).

for I am God, and there is no other;
    I am God, and there is no one like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
    and from ancient times things not yet done. (46:9–10)

Sing a Sad Song for Babylon (47:1–15). The prophet sang a lament for Babylon. It would be reduced to slavery. Even though the LORD had permitted it to take Israel into exile, it had been proud. It thought it would rule forever, but its end would come (47:1–7). Although it thought it would never be like a childless widow, it would be (47:8–9). It thought it could do evil and no one would notice, but ruin would come quickly (47:10–11). Its sorcerers and wise men, who claimed they could save it, were like stubble and would fail because they could not deliver it (47:12–15).

You Have Heard, Now See All This (48:1–22). The prophet sums up in this chapter what he had said in Chapters 40–47. Chapter 48 marks the dividing point within chapters 40–55. In it, the LORD reminded the people that He had revealed the past to them long ago. Now, He was about to reveal new things to them—things they did not know. These things had been kept from Israel because of its previous inclination toward unfaithfulness. Because of that record, what the LORD was about to do was for His own sake. He would not give His glory to anyone else. It was the LORD who had created the heavens and the earth (48:1–13).

No one would have predicted that Cyrus would have attacked Babylon; yet the LORD had been behind the success of Cyrus. The prophet adds a note of reminder to his audience: "And now the LORD God has sent me and his spirit" (48:16). If the people had followed the LORD,

> Then your prosperity would have been like a river,
> . . .
> your offspring would have been like the sand,
> and your descendants like its grains;
> their name would never be cut off
> or destroyed from before me. (48:18–19)

The oracle ends with the prophet urging the people to begin the new exodus, to shout it to the ends of the earth: "The LORD has redeemed His servant Jacob." The LORD would lead them through the desert, making water flow from the rocks (48:14–22).

THE SECOND SERVANT SONG: THE SERVANT'S RESPONSIBILITY (49:1–6). The second Servant Song goes further than the first in describing the Servant and his role in the world. Notice that it is linked to the first Servant Song by the word *coastlands* in 49:1, which also appears in 42:4. Instead of being written in the third person, this poem was written in the first person. In it, the Servant described his call from God. Like Jeremiah, he felt that from birth he had been chosen by the LORD for his role. The LORD spoke of him as being like a secret weapon (49:1–2).

The first suggestion of the Servant's identity is in this oracle: "He said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified'" (49:3). The Servant protested that he had worked, but his strength was wasted. He realized that the LORD had his reward (49:3–4). After the identification in verse 3, verses 5 and 6 take away some of the certainty. After restating that he was "formed from the womb to be his servant," the LORD went on to state that one of the Servant's responsibilities would be to bring Jacob and Israel back to the LORD. But that was not a big enough job. The Servant was also given the responsibility of being "a light to the nations" so that the LORD's salvation might "reach to the ends of the earth" (49:4–6). Because verse 7 also refers to "the servant (*slave* NRSV) of rulers," some take it also to be a part of the second Servant Song. According to verse 7, the roles would be reversed, the kings serving those who had once been their servants.

The Return of the People (49:7–13). This seems, with verse 7, to be a response to the second Servant Song. The reference to "you" seems to refer to the Servant, who has been helped by the LORD and given "as a covenant to the people." They were called upon to come forth, as the LORD

would lead them from exile, seeing to their physical needs along the way (49:8–12). The prophet interrupted to sing a song of praise because the LORD comforted the people (49:13).

Zion Shall Be Comforted (49:14–50:3). This is the first of what are sometimes called the *Zion poems*, which make up much of chapters 50–55. They deal with the restoration of Jerusalem, frequently called *Zion* in the Old Testament. This poem begins as a charge by Zion (as though it was a person), claiming that she had been forgotten by the LORD. The response was that the LORD could no more forget Zion than a mother could forget her suckling child (49:15). Indeed, His plans were for her rebuilding, her enemies becoming as ornaments for a bridal dress (49:14–18).

The time would come when the land would not hold the people. Then the people would have to live in other kingdoms simply because there would not be enough room in Palestine. No power, however, could keep the LORD's people captive; the LORD would take the side of Israel in court and win the case. The opponent would be punished by death (49:19–25).

> Then all flesh shall know
> that I am the LORD your Savior,
> and your Redeemer, the Mighty
> One of Jacob. (49:26)

Some would think that because the LORD had divorced His bride (Israel), this meant that He could not redeem her again. Such was Israel's law of divorce (Deut. 24:1–4). But He was God, not man. He could forgive sin, and He could redeem what had been put away. After all, Creation did His bidding (50:1–3).

THE THIRD SERVANT SONG: THE SERVANT'S SUBMISSION (50:4–11). The Servant again spoke, as in the second Song. He spoke of his God-given ability to comfort and encourage the weary and downtrodden. He was also open to the teaching that the LORD gave him day by day. But his work aroused opposition. He faced it with courage (50:4–5).

> I gave my back to those who struck me,
> and my cheeks to those who pulled my beard;
> I did not hide my face
> from insult and spitting. (50:6)

With God's help, he had not been discouraged by the insults and persecution. He depended upon God, who would stand up for him in court. No one could bring a charge against him when the Supreme Judge of all the universe was on his side. His opponents would wear out before they would be successful (50:7–9).

He urged all who feared God to keep up their courage. Those who were trying to plot against others ("lighters of firebrands") would answer to the LORD in the end (50:10–11).

Joy for Jerusalem and Beyond (51:1–52:12). Those who wanted the LORD's salvation only had to be reminded of how Abraham had been blessed. When it seemed that there was no hope, Isaac, his son and heir, was born. The LORD would bring joy and gladness to Jerusalem. It would become a new Garden of Eden (51:1–3). But that would not be all. The LORD would extend His teaching and His rule to the nations. The heavens would disappear, but the LORD's deliverance would last forever. Thus, the one who was in the right should endure taunts and insults because the LORD's deliverance would be everlasting (51:4–8). Verses 9–11 call for the LORD to wake up and deliver His people as He had done in the Exodus from Egypt. If He would do so, those who were traveling back to Jerusalem would reach it with singing and everlasting joy.

The LORD responded by assuring them that He was the same one who had created the heavens and the earth. Yet, they lived in constant fear of the Babylonians, from whom they had been freed. He was the Creator and Jerusalem's inhabitants were His people, whom He would teach and protect (51:12–16). Jerusalem was called upon to awaken. Its punishment was over, for it had experienced the double disaster of war and hunger. The anguish of the last days of Jerusalem would now be visited upon those who had caused it (51:17–23). Because Jerusalem's days of sadness and oppression were over, it was time to put on its most beautiful garments, for

> How beautiful upon the mountains,
> are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
> who announces salvation,
> who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (52:7)

Watchmen, who usually raised their voices in alarm, were to "sing for joy" as they watched "the return of the LORD to Zion" (52:8). Even the waste places would break forth in singing, for the LORD had redeemed His people. Then the ends of the earth would see the LORD's salvation. In preparation for the return, the people were to purify themselves. They did not have to leave Babylon in a hurry. They were not fugitives; instead, they were a people led and guarded by the LORD (52:1–12).

THE FOURTH SERVANT SONG: THE SERVANT'S TRIAL AND DEATH (52:13–53:12). With this poem, the Servant Songs reach their climax. Unlike poem 1, in which the LORD was the speaker; poem 2, in which the Servant describes his call from the LORD; and poem 3, in which the Servant talks of his initial suffering, poem 4 has at least two different speakers: God and a narrator. Nevertheless, the final poem speaks of the Servant in the third person, matching the first poem and bracketing the first-person speech of the Servant in the middle two poems.

The poem is divided into five stanzas of three verses each: 52:13–15; 53:1–3; 53:4–6; 53:7–9; and 53:10–12. In stanza 1, the LORD speaks about the Servant, while in stanzas 2–5, another speaks about the Servant.

1. ***The appearance of the Servant (52:13–15).*** The LORD introduced the Servant as one who had been given a high place, yet his physical appearance was shocking because he had been disfigured. When the kings of the earth saw him, they were astonished. Somehow, all of this seems to tie in to the Servant's commission to "be a light to the nations" (49:6).

2. ***The rejection of the Servant (53:1–3).*** The things reported about the Servant were unbelievable, especially as the LORD's power was said to have been revealed through him. He was like a dried-up, scrubby desert plant.[8] People were not attracted to him, for he was not compelling in his manner. In fact, he was hated and shunned—a lonely man who knew great sorrow.

3. ***The Servant suffering for others (52:4–6).*** The narrator became personally involved as he described the Servant's suffering for "us." This kind of suffering, in which an innocent person suffers for another, is called *vicarious* suffering. In this section, the personal pronouns *we*, *us*, and *our* are used ten times to emphasize that the Servant suffered for the narrator and those with him.

> ***All we like sheep have gone astray;***
> ***we have all turned to our own way,***
> ***and the LORD has laid on him***
> ***the iniquity of us all. (53:6)***

4. ***The death and burial of the Servant (53:7–9).*** The Servant was like a lamb about to be slaughtered or a sheep about to be sheared. The sheep is not noted for its intelligence. It will stand still and mute as it is being killed. So, the Servant offered no defense as he was unjustly condemned to death. He was "cut off from the land of the living." When he died, he was buried along with the wicked (which he was not) and the rich (which he was not).

5. ***The vindication of the Servant 20 (53:10–12).***[9] The LORD had permitted the Servant's suffering on behalf of the sins of others. The Servant would see his reward because his action would lead to many being counted as righteous. Instead of physical children, he would have children of righteousness—those who owed their right relationship to God to him. Then an astonishing thing would happen. Because of the unselfish act he had done for others, the one who was despised and rejected would be classed with the great and the strong.

Israel Is Assured (54:1–17). This song of assurance reminds one of the picture of the "lonely widow" of Lamentations 1, who had lost her children but who now was assured that she would have more children than others who were married. It was a time to make plans for enlargement, for prosperity was just around the corner (54:1–3).

Who Was the Servant?[10]

This is a problem that has intrigued interpreters for centuries. The answers can be divided into two groups: (1) those who identify the Servant in a group or collective sense and (2) those who identify the Servant as an individual.

Those who argue for the first option point out that the Old Testament frequently spoke of a group as an individual. Throughout Second Isaiah, as well as the books of the other prophets, all the people of Israel were spoken of as Israel, Jacob, Jerusalem, or Zion. Israel (the nation), furthermore, is identified as the Servant in 49:3, as well as in several other places in Second Isaiah (41:9, 43:10, 44:1). Both Jewish and non-Jewish interpreters argue for Israel as the Servant. But, even among these interpreters, there is a distinction between those who see the reference to Israel as a whole and others who argue that the remnant (or ideal) Israel is meant. The Servant would not be Israel as it was but Israel as it ought to be.

Many are convinced that the fourth song indicates that the servant had to be an individual. A number of historical persons have been suggested—Jeremiah, or King Jehoiachin, or even Moses, because the prophet speaks of a new exodus.[11]

Just as there are those who identify the Servant with the ideal Israel, there are those who identify with an ideal person. Such a person would show Israel the revolutionary idea that, through suffering, the guilty could repent and enjoy the LORD's salvation.[12]

Christian interpreters, beginning with the early church, have looked upon the Servant as Jesus Christ. There can be little doubt that Jesus interpreted his own life in terms of the Servant, more than he did in terms of the kingly Messiah of Isaiah 9 and 11. When one does this, however, one must realize that, as a Christian, one is looking at the Servant Songs through Christian eyes. If such a person had been in the position of Second Isaiah, would that person have been so positive in his or her identification? Perhaps the safer estimate is that found in the following statement: "The Servant is the climactic figure in the prophetic line, who will proclaim the way of salvation and be himself the medium of salvation."[13]

The prophet goes back to the familiar husband–wife figure to speak of how the LORD had gone away from Israel for a while because of her unfaithfulness. But now, she had been taken back because of the LORD's great love for her (54:4–8).

It was like Noah's time, when God had destroyed the earth. Just as Noah was promised that the earth would not be destroyed again, a covenant was made with Israel that "shall not be removed" (54:9–10).

The new Jerusalem would be built, many sons would be born, and enemies would be defeated. Because the LORD made the weapon makers, He would see that no weapon would be made that could destroy Israel (54:11–17).

The Great Invitation (55:1–13). The climax of Isaiah 40–55 comes in an invitation for all to come and accept the LORD's free banquet. The LORD would make an everlasting covenant, for this banquet would be a covenant-making meal. Israel would call nations that did not know the LORD. They would come to "the LORD your God . . . the Holy One of Israel" (55:1–5). The invitation was to

> Seek the LORD while he may be found,
> call upon him while he is near,
> let the wicked forsake their way,
> and the unrighteous their thoughts;
> let them return to the LORD, that
> he may have mercy on them,
> and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (55:6–7)

Because God's ways of thinking and doing things are far superior to those of people, His word would accomplish its purpose when it was sent out. Thus, Israel would "go out in joy" and "be led back in peace" (55:12). As a sign of the LORD's doings, trees would grow where once only thorns grew (55:8–13).

ORACLES OF A RESTORED PEOPLE (56:1–57:24). These oracles no longer had the unbroken note of comfort found in Isaiah 40–55. Instead, there were mingled notes of comfort and rebuke, suggesting that the ideal conditions and conduct anticipated by the prophet had given way to the harsh realities of living once more in the land. When the exiles returned, they were confronted by at least two major problems: (1) Most of them were not prepared for the barrenness of the land compared to the lush, well-watered valleys along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers; and (2) they encountered the people who had remained (or who had moved in), who (a) looked upon the land as theirs by right of possession and (b) looked upon themselves as still being true followers of the God of Israel. The returning exiles were not willing to agree on either point, thus setting up a troublesome conflict that would continue for a long time. It is likely that the conflict was intensified by priests from families who stayed behind in Palestine and still saw themselves as authentic representatives of the LORD, clashing with priests of the Zadokite line who accompanied the returning exiles. Growing out of this conflict would be a rival Temple that eventually would be built on Mount Gilboa in the territory of the old Northern Kingdom. In the post-Exilic period, the Zadokite priests gained control in Jerusalem.

Was There a Third Prophet? The source of this material is in question. Some argue for a third prophet, designated as *Trito-Isaiah*,[14] while others see these oracles as coming from the same person who was responsible for writing chapters 40–55. It has been suggested that the differences arise from the fact that chapters 40–55 are a unified composition, while chapters 56–66 consist of spoken oracles that were collected and written down later.[15] The changed circumstances of the

returnees and language similarities also would seem to be sufficient to attribute these oracles to Deutero-Isaiah. An outline of the oracles follows:

1. The LORD's salvation is for all (56:1–8).
2. The beast and bad leaders (56:9–12).
3. The idol worshipers are back (57:1–13).
4. Peace to all but the wicked (57:14–21).
5. Holy day religion (58:1–14).
6. A call to repentance (59:1–21).
7. Poems about Zion (60:1–62:12).
   a. Jerusalem's glorious future (60:1–22).
   b. Good tidings to the lowly of Zion (61:1–11).
   c. New days and new names for Jerusalem (62:1–12).
8. The day of the LORD's vengeance (63:1–6).
9. A prayer and its answer (63:7–65:25).
10. The final words (66:1–24).

The LORD's Salvation Is for All (56:1–8). In the light of a later movement in Judaism known as *particularism*, which rigidly held that the Jews were the only people of the LORD, and in keeping with Isaiah 40–55, this oracle that extended the LORD's salvation and deliverance to such outcasts as eunuchs and foreigners showed a universal spirit. The eunuch, a man who had been castrated and thus had lost his ability to function sexually, was forbidden by law to ever be a part of the congregation of Israel. The book of Deuteronomy required kind treatment for foreigners, but it did not include them in the congregation of Israel. The prophet foresaw, however, a time when even the most extreme outcasts would be received by the LORD on the basis of their faithfulness to Him.

Holy Day Religion (58:1–14). The LORD could not fault the people for their Temple attendance. They were conscientious in keeping the law, sacrificing, and fasting. But it did not affect their relations with their workers or their neighbors. Kindness and justice did not increase when worship increased. The hungry were still just as hungry, and the naked still had no clothes. When the worship was translated into action, then the presence of the LORD would be near (58:1–9). Only then would God's blessing flow like a spring of cold water and the cities be rebuilt. Worship and service were twins—one must accompany the other (58:10–14).

A Call to Repentance (59:1–21). This oracle complains about a lack of justice in the land. For this reason, a wall separated God and the people. It was not the LORD's ability to save that had created the situation; rather, it was the people's sin (59:1–13).

> Justice is turned back,
> and righteousness stands at a distance;
> for truth stumbles in the public square,
> and uprightness cannot enter. (59:14)

God would give justice, both to the just and to the unjust. He would subdue the enemy and redeem His people. His spirit would come upon them and upon their children to follow them (59:15–21).

Poems about Zion (60:1–62:12)

1. ***Jerusalem's glorious future (60:1–22).*** Jerusalem had been in darkness for many years, but now the light of the LORD would once more shine in it as His presence was felt. Its people

would return, along with the nations bringing gifts to the LORD from the desert countries and from the Mediterranean countries. Jerusalem would be open to all nations as the Temple would arise in new splendor.

> The sun shall no longer be your light by day,
> nor for brightness shall the moon
> give light to you by night,
> but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
> and your God will be your glory. (60:19)

2. ***Good tidings to the lowly of Zion (61:1–11).*** This oracle, made even more famous by Luke's account of Jesus' sermon at Nazareth (Luke 4:16–39), originally was a word of assurance to the poor and oppressed of the land of Palestine. The poor rarely had a champion, one who would protect their rights. The reference to "the day of vengeance of our God" meant the day when God would right those things that were wrong. The mourners would become rejoicers. The nation that had been poor and oppressed would be restored. Those who had mistreated the people would know the sting of justice, while Zion would know the joy of justice. This would come because the LORD loved justice and hated wrong (61:1–9). The oracle ends with a call to praise God (61:10–11).

3. ***New days and new names for Jerusalem (62:1–12).*** Jerusalem's restoration would not only bring a new day, but also new names for its changed condition. Before, it had been called "Forsaken" and "Desolate" (62:4); but now it would be called Hephzibah ("my delight is in her") and Beulah ("married"). It would be like a newly married woman.

The responsibility of the city's watchmen would be to remind the LORD of the LORD's obligations to Jerusalem until all that was promised was done. Among those promises was that hunger would no longer be a problem (62:6–9).

Jerusalem was also under an obligation to prepare the way for the returning exiles. They, too, would share in the new names, being called "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the LORD," "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken" (62:10–12).

A Prayer and Its Answer (63:7–65:25). As a sort of prologue to the prayer that follows, the prophet reminded the people of the LORD's past blessings as opposed to the people's failures. They were reminded once again how the LORD had led the patriarchs in their wanderings and the Hebrews in the Exodus (63:7–14).

The prophet then prayed, addressing the LORD as "our father; our Redeemer from of old" (63:16). He asked for help to keep from erring. He prayed that the LORD would give aid against Israel's enemies. He was unlike any God man had seen. He helped the good and punished evil men. Israel had come to Him polluted, and He had hidden His face from them (63:15–64:7).

He pleaded that the LORD not be angry, for He was their Father. Their land was a wilderness, their Temple was burned, and the beautiful places were ruined (64:8–12).

In reply, the LORD said He was ready to answer prayer, but no one sought him. While He waited, they had rebelled against Him by sacrificing to pagan gods. They pretended to be so holy that others could not touch them, but the One who was really holy was angry at their lack of holiness. They would be punished as they deserved. They would not be destroyed, however, for the tribe of Judah would be chosen to receive the LORD's blessings. As examples of these blessings, the Plain of Sharon, formerly unusable to Israel because it was covered with forests, would become a pasture for sheep. The Valley of Achor, symbol of everything bad because of the incident involving Achan (Josh. 7), would be a place of rest for flocks (65:1–11).

Because of the evil they had done, those who were rebellious would be destined for the sword—nothing would turn out right for them. In contrast, the LORD's servants would prosper in everything. The rebellious would be under the curse, while the chosen would know the blessing of the LORD (65:12–16).

An ideal age with a new heaven and a new earth would come to be (this is an apocalyptic idea). Jerusalem and its inhabitants would prosper with long, good lives filled with prosperity and peace (65:17–25).

> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
> the lion shall eat straw with the ox;
> but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
> They shall not hurt or destroy
> on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (65:25)

The Final Words (66:1–24). The LORD, who had His throne in heaven and earth as His footstool, had no need of a house built by people. What the LORD looked for were people who were "humble and contrite in spirit" and who trembled at the LORD's will. Sacrifices made by people who did not do the LORD's will were an insult. Such false religion would be punished (66:1–6).

Even though it did not seem possible, Jerusalem would be reborn because the LORD would do it. Those who loved it could rejoice with it. They could be nourished by it as a mother cared for and fed her children (66:7–12). It would carry them around like a baby on its hip. They would be comforted by the LORD and would prosper like grass in a rainy time.

However, the LORD would come in judgment upon those who defiled the land with idol worship. The survivors would be scattered to the nations of the world. They would carry the message of what the LORD had done. The people of Israel would be gathered, coming to Jerusalem by every means of transportation. As the new heaven and the new earth would remain, so the people of Israel would remain before the LORD, while the rebels would die (66:13–24).

SUMMARY OF ISAIAH

A book as long and complex as Isaiah resists a simple, synthetic description at the end. This book retells and responds to a long portion of the story of Judah and Jerusalem, and it does so using a wide variety of literary materials. Some interpreters have likened it more to a work of art than a historical document, comparing it to an oratorio or a mural. The book of Isaiah expresses trust in YHWH's compassion for Israel, but it struggles to hold that conviction together with the horrifying experience of suffering that Israel has endured. It blends examples from the past of obedience and disobedience, punishment and forgiveness, blessing and curse, and justice and injustice to help the Judah of the future chart a path toward redemption. The "new heavens and new earth" in 66:22 may be a final acknowledgment that Isaiah's vision cannot be fully realized in the midst of this creation.

Key Terms

Apocalyptic, *218*
Call Narrative, *210*
Isaian Apocalypse, *212*
Judgment Oracles, *212*
Oracle, *210*
Oracles against the Nations, *212*
Royal Narrative, *220*
Salvation Oracles, *212*
Servant Songs, *212*
Suffering Servant, *223*
Theophany, *210*
Vision, *212*

Study Questions

1. Why is it difficult to describe the relationship between individuals who were prophets and prophetic books that are named for them?
2. What were the three major crises in Israel that the prophetic literature responds to?
3. What was the nature of Isaiah's call to be a prophet?
4. What was Isaiah's relationship to Ahaz? to Hezekiah?
5. Do you think Isaiah's advice to Ahaz in the Syro-Ephraimitic crisis was sound? Explain your answer.
6. What was the significance of the names Isaiah and his wife gave their children?
7. Why do you think Isaiah advised Hezekiah as he did concerning the Ashdod rebellion?
8. How did Hezekiah prepare for a possible invasion by the Assyrians during Sennacherib's reign?
9. What possible physical evidence has been found to confirm Hezekiah's reform?
10. Why do some interpreters think Sennacherib may have invaded Judah twice?
11. What are the arguments supporting the single- and multiple-authorship views of the book of Isaiah?
12. What are the five major sections into which Isaiah 1–39 can be divided, and what is the central idea in each part?
13. How is Isaiah 40–66 related to Isaiah 1–39?
14. What are the major themes of Isaiah 40–55?
15. What are the Servant Songs?
16. How has the Suffering Servant been identified?
17. How do the oracles in Isaiah 56–66 differ from those in 40–55?

Endnotes

1. David L. Petersen has summarized well the various ways of understanding the relationship between the prophets as individual persons and the prophetic books that have their names on them. He has proposed the "generative answer" as the best way to think about this problem. The traditions found in these books grew out of the work of these prophets, although the books typically reached their final forms long after the lives of these individuals. See David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 2002), 1–4.
2. As far as the writer of this text is concerned, the point at issue in this statement for either view is not God's ability to do what He willed with the prophet. The central question was "What *did* God do?" not "What *could* God do?" I believe that the prophets spoke primarily about their own times and circumstances.
3. This understanding has been developed in the work of Christopher Seitz, *Zion's Final Destiny: The Development of the Book of Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 193–208.
4. See Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 155–156.
5. For a discussion of this possibility, see Sigmund Mowinckel, *He That Cometh* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), 104f. For a differing interpretation, see John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah: The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Time and His Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980), 180ff.
6. From now on, *Israel* will be used in the older sense of all the Hebrew people, not just those of the northern portion of the country.
7. For a fuller discussion of the proposed identities of both mother and child, see John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine, *Isaiah: The Eighth-Century Prophet, His Times and His Teaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 135f.
8. John L. McKenzie, "Second Isaiah," *AB* 20 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 131.
9. I owe the basic idea for this outline to J. Leo Green, Professor of Old Testament, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.
10. An excellent discussion of this problem can be found in McKenzie, "Second Isaiah," xxxviii–lv.
11. Ibid., xlvii.
12. Ibid., liv–lv.
13. Ibid., lv.
14. George A. F. Knight, "Isaiah 56–66: The New Israel," *ITC,* xi–xvii, argues for such a view.
15. James D. Smart, *History and Theology in Second Isaiah: A Commentary on Isaiah 35, 40–66* (London: Epworth, 1970), 231, makes this argument.

CHAPTER

11 The Prophetic Literature II

The Scrolls of Jeremiah and Ezekiel

Timeline

640 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Josiah
612 B.C.E. Fall of Ninevah
605 B.C.E. Beginning of the reign of Nebuchadnezzar in Babylon
597 B.C.E. First deportation of Judahites to Babylon
586 B.C.E. Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians
586 B.C.E. Destruction of Jerusalem and second deportation of Judahites
573 B.C.E. Approximate end of Ezekiel's prophetic career
538 B.C.E. Decree of Cyrus releases Israelites to return to Jerusalem

Chapter Outline

I. Introduction to the Book of Jeremiah
II. Survey of the Book of Jeremiah
III. Introduction to the Book of Ezekiel
IV. Survey of the Book of Ezekiel

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

There are two more large prophetic scrolls following Isaiah that are also designated with the name of a single prophet, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. These two prophets both lived and worked during the Babylonian crisis, which included the experience of exile, and these books are primarily concerned with understanding the destruction of Judah and finding a new way forward in the aftermath of this tragedy. This chapter will examine both of these books, seeking to describe individual texts within each of them and construct a portrait of the whole book. Attention will be given to observations that point to how, when, and why these scrolls developed, but the final form of each book, which we possess, will be the primary emphasis. These books share many features in common with Isaiah and with each other, so their distinctive features will be highlighted. The most distinctive feature of Jeremiah is a series of poems within Jeremiah 11–20 in which the prophet confesses and laments his personal struggles related to his work as a prophet. The book of Ezekiel stands out from other prophetic literature because the book is framed by reports of four elaborate visions that the prophet describes in intricate detail.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

The book of Jeremiah is much more than a record of the prophetic ministry of the person named Jeremiah, but there is a greater coherence in this case than with Isaiah and his book. The book of Jeremiah begins with the passage that is typically identified as his call narrative. Whereas Isaiah appeared only sporadically in his book, Jeremiah appears frequently as a character. Jeremiah's name appears 131 times in the book, compared to only 16 uses of Isaiah's name in the book of Isaiah. The book of Jeremiah does not specifically report the death of the prophet, but chapter 43 does tell of his departure from Judah to Egypt, where tradition holds that he died.

The book of Jeremiah, like Isaiah, appears to be the product of a long and complex development of traditions generated by the prophet named Jeremiah. In this case, one of the disciples of Jeremiah who played a significant role in writing down and preserving some of the oracles and sermons of Jeremiah and stories about him is identified and named. The character called **Baruch** son of Neriah is first mentioned in Jeremiah 32:12, and 36:4 specifically reports that he wrote the words of Jeremiah on a scroll. This would have happened in the early part of the sixth century B.C.E., and such an event may represent the beginning of the production of the book of Jeremiah, but the entire process likely lasted another century, long past the lives and Jeremiah and Baruch.

The book of Jeremiah is unique among prophetic books because it exists in two significantly different forms. The book of Jeremiah that is in all English versions of the Bible is a translation of the form that is in the standard Hebrew text of the Bible, the Masoretic Text represented in the Leningrad Codex. The Greek version of the Old Testament, commonly referred to as the Septuagint, contains a book of Jeremiah that is about twelve percent shorter than the Hebrew version and has the chapters in a different order. The "Oracles against the Nations" that appear in Jeremiah 45–51 in the Hebrew version of the book are in Chapters 25–31 in the Greek version. When the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the 1940s and 1950s, scholars were very excited to find among them two substantial scrolls of the book of Jeremiah. Because these scrolls are 400 years older than our oldest complete text of the Greek Bible, and 1000 years older than our oldest complete text of the Hebrew Bible, the expectation was that these scrolls would reveal which version of the book of Jeremiah was more like the original. To their astonishment, when the archaeologists unrolled these scrolls, a long a painstaking process, they discovered that one matched each of

the two versions of Jeremiah. The existence of two different ways to present the Jeremiah tradition went back at least 2000 years, and it is possible that there never was a single authoritative way to produce this prophetic book, although the majority of opinion among scholars today is that the shorter text represented by the current Greek version was translated from a Hebrew version of the book that was closer to the "original" text.

Another indicator of a complex process of development is the presence of "doublets," occurrences of the same text in two different places, sometimes in slightly different form and sometimes identical. Jeremiah 10:12–16 and 51:15–19 is a good example of this phenomenon.[1] In other cases, two different kinds of accounts of the same event may be present in the book. For example, Jeremiah 7 provides the text of Jeremiah's famous "**Temple Sermon**," while the story in Jeremiah 26 seems to be the public reaction to the sermon, and the sermon is only summarized there.

The final form of the book of Jeremiah has a sense of movement similar to what was demonstrated in the book of Isaiah in the previous chapter. The first half of the book is largely negative, focusing on Jeremiah's proclamation of God's impending judgment on Judah and Jerusalem. A shift in tone takes place around the middle of the book. In a dramatic letter to the captives in Babylon, Jeremiah explains that the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem must be completed and that they must serve the seventy years of their punishment (29:10), but the letter assures them that this will come to an end and that YHWH will eventually restore Judah. From this point on the book is much more positive, speaking more often of comfort and redemption than of punishment and destruction.

SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF JEREMIAH

Jeremiah's Context and Call (Jer. 1:1–19)

Jeremiah was from a priestly family that lived in Anathoth. This was the village to which Abiathar, David's friend, who supported Adonijah as David's successor, had been exiled. Jeremiah may have been a descendant of Abiathar, but even if he was not a direct descendent, this "outsider" tradition was likely an important component of his identity. The superscription in 1:1–3 places Jeremiah's prophetic activity in the reigns of Josiah, Jehoiakim, and Zedekiah, and it continued until he was taken to Egypt by a group of rebels in 582 B.C.E., where traditions outside of the Bible report that he died.

The traditional date for the call of Jeremiah as a prophet is 626 B.C.E. This is based on the superscription in Jeremiah 1:2, which says, "To whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah . . . in the thirteenth year of his reign." This date is problematic, however, because of the reference to the threat of a northern enemy against Palestine (1:13–19). Strict supporters of the 626 B.C.E. date argue that Jeremiah's "foe from the north" was the Scythian army. Little is known of the Scythians, a group of people from east of the Persian Gulf who gave Assyria increasing problems as its empire declined. If they did invade as far west as Palestine, as the Greek historian Herodotus says, it would have been about the time that Jeremiah was called. There is little hard evidence, however, that such an invasion took place, or that this is the group to which Jeremiah refers.[2]

The more realistic threat from the north was the Babylonians. For this reason, some interpreters date Jeremiah's call experience a decade later, in 616 B.C.E. These interpreters argue that the Babylonians were the real "foe from the north," an identification that fits much better with the primary concerns of the entire book. The chronological note that places the beginning of Jeremiah's ministry in "the thirteenth year of Josiah" can be explained as a scribal mistake that should read "the twenty-third year of Josiah." This concern of modern interpreters with

The Literary Structure of Jeremiah

Like the first large book within the prophetic literature, Isaiah, the book of Jeremiah shows evidence of a process of collection of materials and growth of traditions around a particular prophet and his followers over a long period of time, although the time period for the production of Jeremiah is probably closer to one century than to two or three. One place to look for help in understanding the structure of Jeremiah is the book of Isaiah. This observation proves to be quite instructive, because, like Isaiah, Jeremiah focuses on the tension between judgment and salvation, with a significant turn away from the former and toward the latter as the book progresses. Nevertheless, such comparisons should probably be kept at a very general level, and the book of Jeremiah should be allowed to demonstrate its own sense of literary development. A discussion of the structure of Jeremiah must acknowledge an awareness that the Greek version of the book presents the material in a different order. The Oracles against the Nations found at the end of Jeremiah in the Hebrew text tradition are found nearer the middle of the Greek text. Therefore, even in ancient times, Jeremiah had more than one literary structure. It appears likely that the middle of the book, as in the Greek text, is the earlier location, and that the Hebrew text has moved these oracles, perhaps to place the promise of the destruction of Babylon near the end of the book and adjacent to the story of the destruction of Jerusalem.

The book of Jeremiah is engaged in two key tasks—telling the story of Jeremiah's ministry as a prophet and reporting the words of Jeremiah's prophecies. Jeremiah is a much more prominent narrative character than Isaiah. The oracles of Jeremiah are the primary content of the first twenty-five chapters of the book, and most of the narrative material about his life is found in Jeremiah 26–45, then chapters 46–51 return to primarily oracular material. Thus, the life of Jeremiah is essentially framed by his words.

A number of interpreters have noticed an important set of phrases that is repeated at two key points in the book of Jeremiah.[3] In 1:16 God says to Jeremiah:

> See, today, I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms,
> to pluck up and to pull down,
> to destroy and to overthrow,
> to build and to plant.

The first half of the book of Jeremiah focuses upon the negative aspects of this saying and its realization in the Babylonian destruction of Judah. In Jeremiah 31:28, these words are revised in a saying of God through Jeremiah:

> And just as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, says the LORD.

The focus turns to God's salvation for Israel in this portion of the book, which tells the story of Jeremiah and holds him up as a model of faithfulness to God. Those in exile who choose to see the situation as Jeremiah did are offered hope for deliverance.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of the book of Jeremiah is the sequence of poems spread throughout chapters 11–20, and commonly known as either the "Confessions" or "Laments" of Jeremiah. These poetic expressions of the prophet's difficulty, typically expressed to God, offer an intimate, internal view of his life and thought that is unusual within the prophetic literature. The conversations between God and Jonah in Jonah 2 and 4 offer the closest parallels to these texts.

The Oracles against the Nations are presented in Jeremiah 46–51 as an aspect of God's deliverance of Israel. This section ends with a lengthy condemnation of Babylon. In the final chapter, the story of the destruction of Jerusalem is remembered, but appended to it in the closing verses is the story of the release of King Jehoiachin from prison in Babylon. The first step toward release from captivity is taken. It is up to those who read Jeremiah to choose to be part of this process of salvation.

chronological precision may not have been a concern of those who constructed the book of Jeremiah.

Jeremiah's career is comparable to Isaiah's in length, especially if his call came in 626 B.C.E. It extended over part or all of the reigns of five kings, as well as the rule of Gedeliah, the governor of the Babylonian province that included Judah. His influence, both positive and negative, extended across all lines of society and even across national boundaries. In the call of Jeremiah, several interesting features appear:

1. He felt that the LORD had destined him to be a prophet even before he was born (1:5ab).
2. He was called to minister beyond national boundaries (1:5c).
3. He was still quite young when he became conscious of his call (1:6).
4. The LORD assured Jeremiah that He would be with him and take care of him (1:7–8).
5. Jeremiah was called to be a prophet to the nations. His message, while one of judgment, would lead to a positive result (1:9–10).

Two visions were part of the **Call Narrative** of Jeremiah: the vision of the almond tree and the vision of the boiling pot. Jeremiah's visions involved ordinary things that took on much greater significance in the midst of his social and political context. These are not elaborate visions like we will encounter with Ezekiel later in this chapter. It is possible to understand them in a way that is not supernatural at all. The vision of the almond tree (1:11–12) involves a **wordplay**, using the noun *shaqed*, which in Hebrew meant "almond tree," while the verb "to watch" was *shoqed.* Jeremiah said, "I see a rod of almond (*shaqed*)." The LORD answered:

> "You have seen well, for I am watching (*shoqed*) over my word to perform it." (1:12)

The point was that the LORD would perform as promised, and the almond tree would remind Jeremiah of that assurance.

What did Jeremiah think of the reform under Josiah? This is one of the mysteries surrounding the book of Jeremiah. Whether Jeremiah preached at all during Josiah's reign is uncertain. His positive evaluation of Josiah appears in 22:15–16, which compares Josiah and Jehoiakim:

> Are you a king because you compete in cedar?
> Did not your father eat and drink
> and do justice and righteousness?
> Then it was well with him.
> He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
> then it was well.
> Is not this to know me?
> says the LORD.[4]

The scroll of Jeremiah, however, was composed well after the ultimate collapse of Josiah's reform movement, so any enthusiasm the prophet may have had initially would have been reevaluated and reformulated by then.

The book of Jeremiah likely continued to grow and develop after the death of Jeremiah himself, as the prophetic tradition he began was continued by others who would have understood themselves to be his followers. More about the literary features and design of the book appears in the box titled "The Literary Structure of Jeremiah." The discussion below attempts to follow the prose sections of the book chronologically, based on the dates reported in them. The poetic, oracular portions of the book do not have such dates and will be discussed after the prose sections.

Jeremiah and the Final Leaders of Judah

If Jeremiah admired Josiah, his admiration did not carry over to his son, Jehoiakim. From the beginning of Jehoiakim's reign, he and Jeremiah were in conflict, and Jeremiah's prophetic work would face opposition from royal and religious power.

THE TEMPLE SERMON (JER. 7:1–15; 26:1–24). In 609 B.C.E., Jehoiakim was placed on the throne of Judah by Pharaoh Neco of Egypt. In that same year, Jeremiah appeared in the Temple during a festival to preach a scathing sermon. Its theme was as follows:

> Amend your ways and your doings, and let me dwell with you in this place. Do not trust in these deceptive words: "This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD." (7:3–4)

Versions of this sermon appear in both Jeremiah 7 and 26. Chapter 7 contains a fuller version of the sermon. It attacked the popular notion that the LORD would not permit Jerusalem to be destroyed because the Temple was located there. Instead, the people's only hope was a return to the great moral principles of the Sinai covenant. If the people did not change their ways, Jerusalem's fate would be the same as Shiloh's, one of Israel's earliest shrines. It had been destroyed by the Philistines in 1050 B.C.E. (7:5–15; 26:2–6).

If Jeremiah hoped to move the people to action, he was not disappointed. The action, however, was directed toward him. He was seized and threatened with death (26:7–9). Word got to the community leaders about the commotion in the Temple. Jeremiah was saved from lynching, but he was put on trial for his life on the charge of blasphemy—that is, cursing the Temple, which was the LORD's dwelling place. This meant that he was cursing the LORD.

A formal trial followed. First, the evidence against Jeremiah was presented (26:10–11). Then, Jeremiah spoke in his own defense. He admitted saying what he had said and even repeated the essentials of his sermon (26:12–13). Having done that, he threw himself on the mercy of the court, but not without warning that if he were put to death, an innocent man would die (26:14–15). When the verdict came, Jeremiah was declared "not guilty." The judges cited Micah 3:12, in which Micah had also predicted Jerusalem's destruction. They pointed out that Hezekiah did not put Micah to death; therefore, Jeremiah should be freed (26:16–19).

Another prophet, Uriah, who made a similar prophecy, was not so fortunate. He fled to Egypt, but Jehoiakim brought him back and put him to death (26:20–23). Jeremiah still had powerful friends who protected him (26:24).

JEREMIAH'S CONFLICT WITH JEHOIAKIM. By 605 B.C.E., Jeremiah was in trouble with **Jehoiakim.** In a symbolic action that involved burying a linen waistcloth on the banks of the Euphrates River, he criticized Jehoiakim for submitting to the Babylonians. When he dug it up later, it was soiled. Judah's relations to Babylon would cause it to be as soiled and useless as the waistcloth (13:1–11).

Another action that aroused Jehoiakim's ire came when Jeremiah and a group of his supporters went to the Valley of Hinnom. There, Jehoiakim had set up altars to Baal and had practiced child sacrifice. Jeremiah condemned the pagan cults. He smashed a flask to symbolize how the LORD would smash Jerusalem and its inhabitants for following false gods (19:1–15).

Jeremiah was arrested by Pashhur, a Temple official. He was beaten and placed in the stocks for public ridicule. When he was released the next day, Jeremiah denounced Pashhur and repeated his warning, with a private word of judgment for Pashhur (20:1–6). This may have been the action that resulted in Jeremiah's being barred from the Temple. This would have

occurred at the time when Baruch became his secretary and wrote what may have been the first edition of his book.

Finally, Jeremiah warned Jehoiakim that Babylon would destroy Judah. This warning may have come after the battle of Carchemish in 605 B.C.E. or it could have been a warning that preceded the Babylonian invasion of 598 B.C.E., which led to the first fall of Jerusalem. In any case, Jeremiah saw it as the certain judgment on Jerusalem for the people's failure to follow the law of the LORD (25:1–14).

JEREMIAH AND JEHOIACHIN. **Jehoiachin's** reign (598–597 B.C.E.) was so brief that Jeremiah said little about him. In an oracle in 22:24–30, he spoke of Jehoiachin (whom he called *Coniah*) as being like "a despised broken pot." He was to be considered childless, because none of his children would ever succeed him as king of Judah (22:30).

JEREMIAH AND ZEDEKIAH. Jeremiah's and **Zedekiah's** relationship was most unusual. When Jerusalem fell in 597 B.C.E., Zedekiah was put on the throne by the Babylonians. He was the son of Josiah and thus the uncle of the previous king. The Babylonians seem not to have deported all the leadership in 597 B.C.E. but rather to have left those they thought would be loyal to them. Their loyalty was short-lived. Soon a powerful group was pressuring Zedekiah to declare his independence from Babylon or to switch his loyalties to Egypt. A group of "righteous ones," probably led by some of the prophets, kept insisting that the LORD had permitted the Exile only as a temporary punishment. It would end in a year or so with a dramatic deliverance of the people. Zedekiah seems to have responded to whichever group was exerting the most pressure. He respected Jeremiah enough to ask him for advice, but he was too weak to carry out the advice he received.

Jeremiah's opinion of the **Exiles,** compared with those left in the land, is shown by the vision of the figs. To steal some lines from a nursery rhyme, the figs could be described as follows:

> The basket that was good was very, very good,
> but the one that was bad was horrid.

For Jeremiah, the good figs represented those taken into exile; the bad figs were those who had been left behind.

Pressure began to mount on Zedekiah to break away from Babylon as soon as **Nebuchadnezzar,** the Babylonian king, lessened the pressure on Jerusalem after its capture. Two things had led to this situation: (1) a revolt in Babylon involving some of Nebuchadnezzar's army—some of the Jews who were in exile may also have been involved; (2) the ascension of a new king, Psammethicus II (594–589 B.C.E.), to the throne of Egypt. He and his successor, Hophra (589–570 B.C.E.), both encouraged rebellion against Babylon.[5] The court prophets encouraged Judah to join the revolt, preaching that the LORD was about to deliver the exiles and bring them home. Those who opposed them were branded as traitors and unbelievers.

Jeremiah aroused the ire of the "superpatriots" by consistently insisting that Judah's only hope of survival lay in being loyal subjects of Nebuchadnezzar. To emphasize his point, he made a wooden yoke like that used to hitch oxen to a plow and wore it on his neck. This object lesson was to emphasize the wisdom of Judah's wearing the yoke of Babylon (27:1–22).

Hananiah, a leader of the superpatriots and a prophet from Gibeon, grabbed Jeremiah's wooden yoke and broke it. The LORD, he said, had broken Babylon's yoke and would return the exiles to the land in two years. Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), furthermore, would be restored to his rightful place as king (28:1–4; 10–11).

Jeremiah replied that he hoped Hananiah was right, but that the real proof would be whether his words came true (28:5–9). Later, Jeremiah came back with yoke bars made of iron. He told Hananiah that not only would Babylon's yoke not be broken, but that Hananiah himself would die (28:12–16). In that same year, in the seventh month, Hananiah died (28:17).

About 593 B.C.E., to help defuse the situation in Babylon and to help the exiles achieve a stronger hold on reality, Jeremiah wrote a letter. He made four major points:

1. Live as normally as possible. Do those things that would be done if you were at home and the country were at peace (29:4–6).
2. Be good citizens. What is good for Babylon is good for the exiles, for "in its welfare you will find your welfare" (29:7).
3. Pay no attention to the superpatriots and false prophets. They are just trying to deceive you. The LORD did not send them (29:8–9).
4. When the time is right, the LORD will bring you home (29:10–14). This is the meaning of the phrase *when seventy years are completed for Babylon.* In the same connection, Ezekiel would use forty years as his symbol for a complete period (Ezek. 4:6).

Jeremiah specifically named two prophets who were stirring up trouble—Ahab and Zedekiah. Nebuchadnezzar would soon snuff out their lives, for they were nothing but liars and deceivers (29:15–23). He had a further word for Shemaiah, who had written to Zephaniah, a Jerusalem priest, telling him to arrest Jeremiah and put him in the stocks. Zephaniah was Jeremiah's friend, however, and shared the letter with him. When he heard it, Jeremiah predicted the doom of Shemaiah (29:24–32).

Zedekiah's rebellion brought disaster. Jeremiah warned him that his only hope for a peaceful death with a proper burial was to surrender to Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylonia. By early 588 B.C.E., all the cities of Judah had fallen, except Jerusalem, Lachish, and Azekah (34:1–7). The Lachish letters, found in the ruins of that city a few years ago, describe the desperate situation. As a significant passage from one of the letters says:

> We are watching for the signals of Lachish, according to all the indications which my LORD has given, for we cannot see Azekah.[6]

This letter, written to the commander of the garrison at Lachish, indicated that Azekah had fallen and it would only be a matter of time until Jerusalem and Lachish also fell. There may also be a reference to Uriah, the prophet mentioned in Jeremiah 26:20–24, or a reference to Jeremiah himself in the letters, but this is uncertain.

The situation became so desperate in Jerusalem that Zedekiah was willing to do almost anything to improve it. One of the things he did was to persuade the people to free all their Israelite slaves. Such people usually were slaves because they were unable to pay debts they owed. The law provided, however, that they would never be held in bondage for more than six years against their will (Exod. 21:1–6; Deut. 15:12–18). It seems that by Jeremiah's time, this law was largely ignored. Thus, Zedekiah was reviving an ancient religious practice, thereby invoking divine favor. From a practical standpoint, the freed slaves would be more likely to fight for the city. Then, too, their owners would no longer be responsible for feeding them at a time when food was becoming increasingly scarce.

Scarcely had the action been taken when it was withdrawn and the freed people were once more enslaved. The probable cause of this reversal was the lifting of the siege of Jerusalem when the Egyptians marched out to oppose the Babylonians. Feeling that the threat was removed from the city, the wealthy men seized their former slaves and enslaved them again. Jeremiah warned

that because of the dishonesty of the wealthy, the LORD would grant a release to them of "liberty to the sword, to pestilence and to famine" (34:17). The destruction of the city and its leaders was a foregone conclusion (34:11–22).

Jeremiah warned Zedekiah that the Babylonian withdrawal was temporary (37:6–10). Although the siege was lifted, Jeremiah sought to leave the city for a trip to Anathoth to inspect some property. Thinking that he was deserting to the Babylonians, an overzealous guard arrested him and brought him before the city leaders. They had him beaten and thrown into the dungeon (37:11–15).

Finally, Zedekiah ordered that Jeremiah be brought out secretly so that he could consult with him. When he asked Jeremiah if there was any word from the LORD, Jeremiah told him that there was—the same word of judgment that he had pronounced before. Then Jeremiah, weakened by the prison experience, begged Zedekiah not to return him to the dungeon. Zedekiah protected him for a time and saw that he got whatever food was available (37:16–21). This probably is the time when Jeremiah bought some ancestral property from his cousin Hanamel, as both 32:2 and 37:21 speak of Jeremiah being imprisoned in the "court of the guard."

The LORD told Jeremiah that his cousin Hanamel wanted to sell a field at Anathoth to him and that he was to buy it. Hanamel was following the law of redemption of property. That law provided that if any property was for sale, it had to be offered to one's nearest kin—brothers, uncles, and then cousins, in that order (Lev. 25:25–28).

When Hanamel came, Jeremiah bought the property and received a proper deed for it. The deed consisted of two copies, one that was kept sealed and another that could be opened for public inspection (32:1–15).[7] Hanamel's purpose in selling the field was to get money, which could be more easily held if the city fell. On the other hand, Jeremiah purchased the field to show his confidence that the people would survive the coming exile and would once more live in the land (32:16–44). In that sense, his purchase was carrying out the positive aspect of his call "to build and to plant." It illustrates quite vividly the prophetic view of judgment as redemptive and cleansing rather than annihilating—completely wiping out the people.

Meanwhile, the siege tightened and, as the food supply sank lower and lower, other conditions within the city worsened. Lamentations 4 describes in gruesome detail the effects of the food shortage: the dry, shriveled skin of people who once were sleek and healthy (Lam. 4:8); mothers resorting to cannibalism, eating their own children (Lam. 4:10); and the danger of walking in the streets for fear of being killed for food (Lam. 4:18).

Jeremiah's enemies were persistent, to say the least. When they found that Zedekiah had rescued Jeremiah from the dungeon, they pressured Zedekiah to turn the prophet over to them. Again, Zedekiah yielded, and once more, Jeremiah was in the hands of his enemies.

The next place where Jeremiah found himself was in a cistern. Cisterns are underground containers for water hewn out of the rock. They varied in size from those that held a few thousand gallons of water to others that held tremendous amounts. Jeremiah was thrown into a small cistern partially filled with mud that had been washed in. He sank into the mire, and had he not been rescued by one of Zedekiah's servants, he probably would have died there (38:1–13).

Once again, Jeremiah came before Zedekiah. Once again, Zedekiah asked the prophet if there was any message for him from the LORD. Once again, Jeremiah told Zedekiah that his only hope was to surrender to the Babylonians. Otherwise, death and destruction awaited him and the inhabitants of Jerusalem (38:14–23). But in contrast to their previous meeting, when Jeremiah pleaded for his life (37:20), Zedekiah was now pleading with Jeremiah not to let the leaders know Zedekiah had consulted him. If he did so, the leaders would kill Jeremiah. He assured Zedekiah that he would only tell them that he was pleading for his life. In exchange, Zedekiah kept him in prison in the royal quarters (38:24–28).

Famine, pestilence, and the Babylonian army finally prevailed. Jerusalem fell, probably in the year 587 B.C.E., although some date the fall to 586 B.C.E. Ancient armies won more battles by patiently waiting for their enemy to starve than they did by direct assault. For almost two years, Nebuchadnezzar's army had cut off the inhabitants of Jerusalem from any source of food other than what had been stored in the city. Because there was no room within the city walls to grow food, the people inevitably faced the choice of surrender or starvation if the siege could not be lifted by other means. The Babylonians had battering rams to break down the walls, but Jerusalem had strong fortifications that enabled it to hold out until starvation and disease took their toll on the defenders of the city (39:1–2).

Zedekiah, realizing that further resistance was futile, fled the city at night. He was captured near Jericho, however, and carried before Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah of Hamath in northern Syria. He was condemned to watch the slaughter of his sons and his chief officials. Then his own eyes were punched out, and he was taken to Babylon as a prisoner (39:3–7).

Meanwhile, Jerusalem was burned—including the palace complex and the Temple. The walls were broken down, and most of the talented inhabitants were taken to Babylon. The Babylonians sought to ensure the loyalty of the poor people by giving them land (39:8–10).

Jeremiah, still in prison as a result of his problems during the siege, was brought out and released. At first, it seems that he had been included among those to be taken to Babylon. Later, when given the choice of remaining in the land, he chose to do so. He was put into the custody of Gedaliah, an official of Zedekiah's court who had been appointed governor by the Babylonians.

After the Fall of Jerusalem (Jer. 40:7–44:30)

THE MURDER OF GEDALIAH (2 KINGS 25:22–26; JER. 40:7–41:18). The land was in ruins. The dream of independence was shattered, and the people were left beaten and disillusioned. The Babylonians appointed Gedaliah as governor over the Babylonian province of which Judah was now a part. The seat of government was moved to Mizpah, as Jerusalem was only a heap of blackened rubble (Jer. 40:7–8).

Gedaliah urged the people to serve the Babylonians (Chaldeans) and to gather what food they could from the vines and trees. People who had fled to Transjordan returned to their homes when they heard that the land was once more at peace. Fortunately for them, the fruit crops were abundant (40:9–12). Unfortunately, at the urging of the Ammonite king named Baalis,[8] Ishmael, who claimed descent from David, plotted against Gedaliah. Although warned of the plot, Gedaliah ignored it, to his own downfall. In 582 B.C.E., Ishmael killed not only Gedaliah but also a large number of Jews and a contingent of Chaldean soldiers. Among those he attacked were eighty men from Shechem, Shiloh, and Samaria who seemingly had come to the site of the ruined Temple to offer a sacrifice on that sacred spot. This would indicate that even though the Temple was destroyed, worship of a sort was still carried on there. Ishmael killed all but ten of the worshipers, who bought their lives with promises of food for Ishmael and his men. Ishmael also took captive the remaining inhabitants of Mizpah (41:1–10).

Johanan, a leader who had supported Gedaliah, soon raised a force to fight Ishmael. When the fight came, many of the people from Mizpah whom Ishmael had taken captive fled to join Johanan. Ishmael beat a hasty retreat to the other side of the Jordan (41:11–18).

THE FLIGHT TO EGYPT. Johanan, fearing that he would be blamed for Gedaliah's death, fled to Egypt. Jeremiah tried to persuade him not to do it, but Johanan did not heed Jeremiah's advice. Instead, Jeremiah was forced to go along (42:1–43:7). The last words of Jeremiah were

predictions of doom for Egypt and for those who had fled to it for protection. Only Baruch, Jeremiah's faithful disciple, would escape with his life (43:8–45:5). As far as is known, Jeremiah died in Egypt.

The Oracles of Jeremiah[9]

The oracles of Jeremiah are scattered throughout the book. Those found in chapters 2–6, 8–20, 30–31, and 46–52 will be examined, emphasizing prominent themes found in them.

EARLY AND MIXED ORACLES

Early oracles (Jer. 2:1–6:30)

1. Remembering better days (2:1–3).
2. Israel has been unfaithful (2:4–37).
3. Repent, O Israel (3:1–4:4).
4. Beware the foe from the north (4:5–31).
5. Judah is hopelessly immoral (5:1–6:30).

Mixed oracles (Jer. 8:4–10:25)

1. The people have shown incredible stupidity (8:4–17).
2. The heartsick prophet (8:18–9:1).
3. Beware of your neighbor's tongue (9:2–9).
4. Cry for Zion (9:10–22).
5. The glory in serving the LORD (9:23–26).
6. Idols and those who make them (10:1–25).

These two groups of oracles are discussed together because they share some common themes.

Israel, the Unfaithful Wife. In the oracles of Jeremiah, one hears echoes of earlier prophets, especially Hosea. In 2:2–3. Jeremiah introduces the bride figure:

> I remember the devotion of your youth,
> your love as a bride,
> how you followed in the wilderness,
> in a land not sown. (2:2)

He continues this theme in an oracle found in 3:1, where he asks whether a woman, once divorced and remarried, can return to her original husband. Israel has known many lovers and wants to return to the LORD (3:1), but she has so polluted herself with Baalism that the land is filled "with your vile harlotry" (3:2). Still the LORD pleads for the people to return (3:12, 14, 22; 4:1).

The Worship of Idols. The prophet was perplexed over the people's fascination with idols. Idols, as such, were not seen as actual gods; rather, the deity was thought to be present in an image that was properly clothed and cared for.[10] How the people could be drawn away from the living LORD mystified the prophet:

> What wrong did your ancestors find in me
> that they went far from me
> and went after worthless things,
> and became worthless themselves? (2:5)
> . . .
> Has a nation changed its gods,
> even though they are not gods? (2:11)
> . . .

for my people have committed two evils;
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and dug out cisterns for themselves,
cracked cisterns
that can hold no water. (2:13)

Jeremiah's most extended polemic against idols is found in 10:1–25. He observes:

Their idols are like scarecrows in a
cucumber field,
and they cannot speak;
they have to be carried
for they cannot walk.
Do not be afraid of them,
for they cannot do evil,
nor is it in them to do good. (10:5)

The Foe from the North. A much-discussed theme from Jeremiah deals with oracles about a "foe from the north." In addition to the initial vision of the boiling pot (1:13–19), the prophet takes up the subject in other oracles. A series of such oracles is to be found in Jeremiah 4:5–31. Some of the prophet's most vivid language is used to describe this threat:

Blow the trumpet through the land;
shout aloud and say,
"Gather together, and let us go
into the fortified cities!"
. . .
for I am bringing evil from the north,
and a great destruction. (4:5, 6)

Later in the chapter, the devastation is described:

I looked on the earth, and lo, it was
waste and void:
and to the heavens, and they
had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo
they were quaking,
and all the hills moved to and fro.
. . .
I looked, and lo, the fruitful land
was a desert,
and all its cities were laid in ruins
before the LORD, before his fierce anger. (4:23–26)

The Prophet's Responsibility. Jeremiah, like other prophets, was particularly disturbed by those religious leaders, both priest and prophet, whose main concern was to curry favor with the rich and powerful. He speaks of those who

have treated the wound of my people
carelessly,

saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace.
They acted shamefully, they
committed abomination;
yet they are not ashamed,
they did not know how to blush. (6:14–15; 8:11–12)

The responsible prophet would warn the people of the dangers they faced (28:8). Jeremiah was a realist who tested the people the way an assayer would test ore to determine its metal content (6:27–30).

THE CONFESSIONS AND OTHER ORACLES (JER. 11:1–20:18)

1. The broken covenant (11:1–17).
2. The first confession: Save me from those who would kill me, O LORD!
3. The LORD's lament (12:7–13).
4. The fate of Judah's neighbors (12:14–17).
5. The spoiled loincloth (13:1–11).
6. The wine jar (13:12–14).
7. The fate of Judah and the shame of Jerusalem (13:15–17).
8. Oracles during a drought (14:1–16).
9. The certainty of calamity (14:17–15:9).
10. The second confession: Why do you treat me this way, LORD? (15:10–21).
11. No wife for Jeremiah (16:1–9).
12. Mixed oracles (16:10–17:4).
13. The proverbs of Jeremiah (17:5–13).
14. The third confession: Heal me, O LORD (17:14–18).
15. A trip to the potter's house (18:1–17).
16. The fourth confession: Let them have it, LORD! (18:18–23).
17. The message of the shattered flask (19:1–20:6).
18. The fifth confession: You have made a fool of me, LORD (20:7–13).
19. The sixth confession: Why was I ever born, LORD? (20:14–18).

The Prophet's Frustrations: The Denial of Family Life. The primary personal aim of every normal Israelite male was to marry and to have children. In pre-Exilic times, a doctrine of life after death had not developed. As a result, a man thought of living beyond his life in terms of living through his children. If he did not marry, then he could not legitimately fulfill this basic desire. Or, if his marriage produced no children, the desire was frustrated. This was why barren women were portrayed in the Old Testament as being persons who made great efforts to become pregnant. That the man might be the one who was to blame seems never to have entered their thinking.

Jeremiah was told not to marry because to do so would only bring tragedy to him. He was better off without any family rather than seeing his family destroyed by the war (16:1–4).

In addition, he was to avoid the normal social functions. These included funerals, parties, and weddings—three of the chief social functions of his day (16:5–9).

The Prophet's Frustrations: The Confessions. One of the unique features of the book of Jeremiah is a series of oracles called the ***confessions*** *of Jeremiah*. They are found in 11:18–12:6, 15:10–21, 17:14–18, 18:18–23, 20:1–13, and 20:14–18. These confessions give us a window on Jeremiah's inner struggles as he tries to carry out his prophetic ministry. Because of their importance, they will be discussed individually.

The First Confession: Save Me from Those Who Would Kill Me, O LORD! (11:18–12:6). The first **confession** follows a sermon in which Jeremiah spoke of being told to pronounce judgment upon those who refused to follow the covenant. He was even told not to pray for them because of the vileness of their sins (11:1–17).

Such sermons did not earn Jeremiah the "Favorite Prophet of the Year" award from the board of trustees of the Jerusalem Temple. Instead of repentance, their reaction took the form of threats of violence. When Jeremiah heard of their threats, he did not say, "O LORD, forgive them." Instead, he asked the LORD to protect him from those who would kill him (11:18–20).

To make matters worse, Jeremiah was told that the leaders among the plotters were his own kinfolk, "the men of Anathoth" (11:21). Again, he pleaded for the LORD to come to his rescue. He could not understand how such wicked men could prosper (12:1–4).

The answer was not encouraging. The LORD said, in effect, "Jeremiah, if you think things are bad now, cheer up—they will get much worse!" (12:5–6).

The Second Confession: Why Do You Treat Me This Way, LORD? (15:10–21). Following another oracle that continues the theme of Judah's doom, Jeremiah's second confession begins. In words that echo Job's lament (Job 3:1–10), Jeremiah bemoaned his fate. Nothing he did pleased men, even though he had pleaded with the LORD on their behalf. The assurance came to him that the doom of the sinners was certain (15:10–14). Jeremiah recalled the circumstances of his call to be a prophet:

> Your words were found and I ate them,
> and your words became to me a joy
> and the delight of my heart;
> for I am called by your name,
> O LORD, God of hosts. (15:16)

He had shunned the society of others, especially places of merrymaking, because he was so moved by indignation over the conditions in the country. But that had only brought him pain. Like a wet-weather spring that promised water all year long but dried up when the rains ceased, the LORD had deceived him (15:15–18).

After that outburst, a word of assurance came to Jeremiah. If he faithfully preached the LORD's words he would still have enemies, but they would not overcome him. The LORD would be with him to deliver him out of the hands of those who would harm him (15:19–21).

The Third Confession: Heal Me, O LORD (17:14–18). This confession was a prayer for healing and salvation. Jeremiah's enemies were cynics who would not believe him. He declared that he had not prayed for disaster for his enemies. If he had not before, he did then. He called for them to be destroyed with "double destruction!" (17:18).

The Fourth Confession: Let Them Have It, LORD! (18:18–23). This confession is introduced by a report of the plots against Jeremiah. What is of particular interest is the mention of the three major classes of religious leaders—the priests, the wise men, and the prophets. This is one of the few places where the wise men are classed with the priests and prophets as leaders of the religious community. The wise men were particularly concerned with the practical matters of how to get along in human society. They were the "school men" or teachers of the young. Their major interest was the day-to-day existence of humanity (18:18).

Jeremiah's enemies ganged up to counteract anything he said about them. They decided to "bring charges against him." In desperation, the prophet turned to the LORD to plead his case

once again. Reminding the LORD how he had pleaded for those who were abusing him, Jeremiah appealed for justice for himself. In a scathing tirade against his enemies, he asked that the worst of calamities befall them and their families because of their plots against him (18:19–23).

The Fifth Confession: You Have Made a Fool of Me, LORD (20:7–13). This confession reflects the prophet's increasing sense of frustration as he tried to minister to the people of Jerusalem. The LORD had deceived him into being a prophet with promises of His presence. But the life of a prophet, even with the LORD's presence, was more than Jeremiah had bargained for. He got so tired of preaching about violence and destruction that he decided to quit. Instead, the urge from the LORD was so strong that he found himself preaching again in spite of his resolutions not to do so. Because even his closest friends were trying to destroy him, he did not need enemies (20:1–10).

Suddenly, his mood shifted. As he realized that the LORD would take care of his enemies, his complaints changed to praise (20:11–13).

The Sixth Confession: Why Was I Ever Born, LORD? (20:14–18). The final confession probes the depths of the prophet's misery. Like Job (Job 3), he curses the day he was born: "Why did I come forth from the womb to see toil and sorrow and spend my days in shame?" (20:18).

The Significance of Jeremiah's Confessions. In the confessions, the agony of Jeremiah's inner struggles is revealed. Here was an honest man whose faith in the justice of God led him to put aside all pretense in his prayers. He survived those horrible times because he was able to purge himself of his inner conflicts through prayer to the One whom he experienced as the personal LORD.

The Prophet's Image of Hope: The Parable of the Potter (18:1–7). Although this incident ends with a rather negative conclusion, it does have a positive premise, namely, that at the time the prophet spoke, the situation of Judah was not hopeless. Were the people willing to submit to the LORD's direction, salvation was still possible. Their stubbornness, however, negated that hope.

The Prophet's Words of Hope: The Oracles of Consolation (30:1–32:40). These oracles expressed the positive side of Jeremiah's call to prophesy. Judgment on Judah was not the final act of God. It was a cleansing fire designed to burn away the impurities. The LORD would restore the purified people to the land (30:1–3). Although there are **salvation** oracles that emphasize the Restoration, the most noted passage in this section is 31:23–40 and the incident involving the purchase of the field. As the LORD had watched over the people (1:12) to "pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring evil" (31:28; see also 1:10), so the LORD would now "watch over them to build and to plant" (31:28).

In earlier times, the emphasis had been on how the sins of one affected his whole family, so much so that a common proverb said, "The parents have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (31:29). This would no longer be so. The responsibility for acts of sin rested upon the one who committed them. This concept of individual responsibility introduced by Jeremiah was one of his distinct contributions to biblical theology. Ezekiel would take this idea and expand on it (Ezek. 18, 33).

An idea growing out of Jeremiah's teaching about individual responsibility was that of the new covenant (31:31–34). The old covenant had been written on stone tablets and, more often than not, had failed to make the transition from written principle to living practice. The principles had not become personal guidelines for life. Jeremiah looked for a day when the LORD's law would be the normal way of life. Each person would "know the LORD" and live by that knowledge. Jeremiah illustrated the LORD's relationship to Israel by comparing it to the fixed order of nature (31:35–37). Jerusalem would be rebuilt and become the LORD's sacred city again (31:38–40).

ORACLES AGAINST FOREIGN NATIONS (JER. 46:1–51:64). The Oracles against Foreign Nations was standard for many of the prophets.[11] Many of Jeremiah's oracles were dated to a specific time and situation, whereas other prophets' oracles had less specific dates.

1. Against Egypt (46:2–28)
2. Against Philistia (47:1–7)
3. Against Moab (48:1–47)
4. Against Ammon (49:1–6)
5. Against Edom (49:7–22)
6. Against Syria (49:23–27)
7. Against Kedar and Hazor (49:28–33)
8. Against Elam (49:34–39)
9. Against Babylon (50:1–51:64)

Sign-Acts in the Prophetic Books

Along with their oracles (prophetic speeches), the prophets of Israel sometimes performed symbolic actions to communicate a message. Such acts are performed by several prophets, but Ezekiel is the most prolific performer. Below is a list of **sign-acts** in the prophetic literature.

Text	Action
Isaiah 8:1–3	Isaiah writes a cryptic message on a tablet and then visits a "prophetess." They conceive a child and give him a name related to this message.
Isaiah 20:1–4	Isaiah walks naked for three years, symbolizing the taking of captives.
Jeremiah 13:1–7	Jeremiah buys a new waistcloth, wears it, buries it by the Euphrates River, returns later to dig it up, and finds it ruined.
Jeremiah 16:1–5	Jeremiah remains celibate, not marrying or having children.
Jeremiah 19:1–13	Jeremiah smashes a clay jug as part of a prophetic speech.
Jeremiah 27–28	Jeremiah wears a wooden yoke symbolizing captivity. The yoke is smashed by another prophet, Hananiah, so Jeremiah replaces it with an iron yoke.
Ezekiel 4:1–3	Ezekiel builds a mode of Jerusalem and the Babylonian equipment that will be used in the siege of the city.
Ezekiel 4:4–8	Ezekiel lies on his right side for 390 days and his left side for 40 days to symbolize the length of Israel's punishment.
Ezekiel 4:9–5	Ezekiel is commanded by God to eat bread baked over a fire made from human dung. When he protests, God allows him to use cow dung.
Ezekiel 5	Ezekiel shave all the hair off his body and divides it into thirds. He then burns a third, chops a third with a sword, and scatters a third in the wind to symbolize what will happen to Israel.
Ezekiel 12	Ezekiel packs luggage and departs Jerusalem through a hole he digs in the wall, symbolizing Judah going into exile.
Hosea 1:2–8	Hosea marries a prostitute, has three children with her, and gives them names symbolizing Israel's future punishment.
Hosea 3:1–5	Hosea purchases a woman who is an "adulteress."

It is rarely clear who the audience of such actions is and whether they understand the meaning of the performance. At this point, these sign-acts exist as written descriptions that are part of prophetic books, so they have literary contexts, which are quite different from the historical context of the events described.

Four of these oracles will be discussed.

Against Egypt (46:2–28). These two oracles, the first of which is dated to 605 B.C.E., taunted Egypt because of its defeat at Carchemish in northern Mesopotamia by the armies of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. Jeremiah saw it as a day when the LORD brought a well-deserved punishment to Egypt. No amount of medicine would heal its wounds (46:2–12).

The second oracle referred to one of the times when Babylon met Egypt on its own territory. This was either in 605 or 601 B.C.E., when Jehoiakim switched his loyalties to Egypt after the two armies fought each other to a standstill. Jeremiah foresaw the eventual destruction of Egypt by the Mesopotamian power (46:13–26). The LORD's people would survive, even though they had to face judgment for their sins (46:27–28).

Against Philistia (47:1–7). This brief oracle describes the march of invading armies down the coast, isolating the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, then moving down the coastal highway to knock out the main Philistine cities of Gaza and Ashkelon.

Against Moab (48:1–47). To read the oracle against Moab with real understanding, one needs a Bible atlas with detailed maps. It was a travelogue of Moabite territory, listing most, if not all, of its major cities. Although it speaks of Moab's destruction, it ends with a promise of restoration of Moab "in the latter days." This reflected the fact that the Moabites and Israelites were not so antagonistic toward each other as Israel had been toward others of its neighbors. The story of Ruth, told to support the claim that David had a Moabite grandmother, gave an indication of the relatively friendly relations between the two peoples.

Against Babylon (50:1–51:64). The oracles of Jeremiah conclude with a series of oracles against Babylon, as it was Israel's chief foreign enemy. There was a constant shifting of persons spoken of in these oracles. The oracles began with the LORD announcing to the nations that Babylon has been taken (5:2–3). The people of Judah would return to the LORD, asking the way to Zion (50:4–5). They had been like lost sheep attacked by wild animals (50:6–7).

The LORD addressed the people and told them to flee from the land of the Chaldeans (Babylon), for invaders were coming who would destroy everything in their path (50:8–10). Babylon was told that its doom was sure. It would be hissed at by all who passed it (50:11–13). Its enemies were invited to attack it, for they would be carrying out the LORD's vengeance against it (50:14–16).

Attention then shifted to Israel, which was compared to a sheep hunted by lions. Assyria, then Babylon, had attacked Israel. Now the tables would be turned. Israel would be restored as Babylon was destroyed (50:17–20).

There follows a series of oracles describing the destruction of Babylon. The hammer that had broken many was now broken (50:21–28). The archers were summoned to bend their bows at it. Fire would burn its cities (50:29–32); the LORD would redeem Israel, but the sword would devour Babylon (50:33–38); unrest would upset its inhabitants (50:39–40). As it had come from the north to devastate Palestine, so a northern foe would devastate it. Its king would be helpless, for the enemy would be like a lion in a sheepfold (50:41–46).

Jeremiah 51 continues the theme of Babylon's destruction. It would be winnowed as a farmer winnowed grain (51:1–7), and no balm could heal its great wounds (51:8–10). The enemy was summoned to prepare its weapons and to mount an assault against the city, for the LORD had promised victory (51:11–14).

FIGURE 11-1 "Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and all his army came against Jerusalem and besieged it; in the eleventh year of Zedekiah, in the fourth month, on the ninth day of the month, a breach was made in the city" (Jer. 39:1–2). These are the ruins of a seventh-century B.C.E. wall that was destroyed by the Babylonian invaders.

In the midst of the oracles of doom, there is a hymn-like section describing the LORD's power in nature. In contrast to that power, the idol was the powerless product of stupid men. It could not compare to the God of Jacob (51:15–19). In 51:20–23, there is the oracle of the hammer. Babylon had been a hammer by which the LORD had meted out punishment to those who had sinned against Him. Now, however, the destroyer would be destroyed. The LORD summoned the nations to make war against it, to make it a land of desolation and waste (51:24–33). What Nebuchadnezzar had done to Jerusalem would be done to Babylon (51:34–37). It would be like a land awash with the waves of the sea (51:38–44). Judah was warned to flee, for the LORD's wrath would be poured out on the land (51:45–46). Babylon's fall would come because of what it had done to Israel (51:47–51). The LORD, the God of Justice, would see to it that Babylon was laid waste (51:52–58).

According to 51:50–64, Jeremiah wrote on a scroll all the oracles against Babylon. He sent it to Babylon by Seraiah, the quartermaster of Zedekiah's court. Seraiah was told to read the oracles in Babylon. Having done that, he was to tie a stone to the scroll and throw it into the Euphrates. Just as the scroll would sink in the river, so Babylon would sink—to rise no more.

THE IMPORTANCE OF JEREMIAH 52. This chapter, which briefly summarizes Zedekiah's reign (52:1–3a), is concerned mainly with the details of Jerusalem's capture by the Babylonians. After duplicating 39:1–12, it gives additional details. That the Babylonians took some of the poor people as captives is unusual, because such people usually were passed over (52:15). The final note about King Jehoiachin (52:31–34), found also in 2 Kings 25:27–30, indicates that the book of

Jeremiah did not reach its final form until some time after 560 B.C.E., the year that Jehoiachin was released from prison. Actual records of the allowances given for the king and his family have been found among Babylonian archives.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Jeremiah had done his part to prepare the people for the Exile, as well as to help those who were in exile to take a realistic view of their situation. Even so, religiously, the Exile was a shock, as the book of Lamentations so vividly illustrates. The inevitable question "Why did it happen to us?" must have been asked of the religious leaders in the Exilic community. Some wanted to believe the predictions of the false prophets that the Exile would end soon, when the LORD would bring about a miraculous overthrow of the Babylonians. In line with that belief, indications are that a number of people plotted to overthrow the Babylonian government and were executed. It was to counter such false optimism that Jeremiah's letter to the exiles had been written (Jer. 29). Others in the community were not willing to accept any explanations and gave up any idea of God. For a third group, two prophetic traditions made sense and enabled them to survive the Exile with a faith grounded in a deeper understanding of the presence of the LORD, the God of Israel. The book of Ezekiel presents one of these traditions, while the other is found in the second half of the book of Isaiah.

The Character Named Ezekiel

Ezekiel 1:1 reports that Ezekiel was a priest before he became a prophet, and that his father was Buzi, who is not mentioned anywhere else in the Bible. We know Ezekiel was married, because Ezekiel 24:15–18 tells of the death of his wife. From the first chapter of his book, it is evident that he was a most unusual man, who had fabulous visionary experiences, acted out many of his messages to the people instead of delivering them orally, and had a mathematician's delight in precise detail. Ezekiel had been taken to Babylon in the deportation of 597 B.C.E., when he was still a priest. In 593 B.C.E., he experienced a call of the LORD to be a prophet, and for the next twenty years or so, he performed that role.

All his ministry was among the exiles, doing in Babylon what Jeremiah was trying to do in Jerusalem—that is, (1) trying to prepare the people for the inevitable fall of Jerusalem and (2) trying to put a damper on the false hopes for an immediate return to Palestine, which some of the prophets were promoting. Once Jerusalem fell in 587/586 B.C.E., however, Ezekiel became a prophet of hope, trying to prepare the people for their return to the land. He laid out a blueprint for a restored Temple and worship system.

The Book

The book of Ezekiel is much more closely connected to the person it is named for than the book of Isaiah. The books of Isaiah and Jeremiah both contained some material reported in first-person speech, but the book of Ezekiel is composed entirely of first-person reporting, so it is the voice of the prophet speaking to the reader throughout the book. Ezekiel's name appears rarely in the book, because he refers to himself using the first-person pronoun, and God consistently refers to Ezekiel using the enigmatic designation, *ben-adam*. This phrase literally means "son of a human being." One common contemporary translation, is "mortal," which understands this not a name or title, but a constant reminder of Ezekiel's humanness.

The book of Ezekiel has the most precisely dated oracles of any of the large prophetic scrolls, but they are not always presented in chronological order. This reflects a general sense in which chronology does not function as the book's organizational principle. Two features of the book provide its macrostructure. First, it falls naturally into three major divisions: Chapters 1–24, oracles against Jerusalem; Chapters 25–32, oracles against foreign nations; and Chapters 33–48, oracles of restoration. The resulting movement from negative to positive is similar to that found in Isaiah and Jeremiah. The unique structural feature is the presence of four great visions that form a framework for the whole book. Unlike the simple visions or sights in Jeremiah, however, these visions of Ezekiel are clearly supernatural and they serve as a reminder that although the person named Ezekiel is physically located in Babylon, the setting of his prophetic activity is not limited to that place.

The Literary Structure of Ezekiel

Ezekiel is the third of the large prophetic scrolls in the Old Testament. It is difficult to read this book without Isaiah and Jeremiah forming part of our frame of reference. The book of Ezekiel contains familiar types of material: call narrative, judgment oracles, visions, stories about the prophet. It also manifests the familiar sense of movement from a focus on judgment at the beginning to a focus on deliverance and salvation at the end. In Isaiah and Jeremiah, first-person reporting by the central prophetic character was rare, but in Ezekiel it is present throughout the book.

Certain features point to possible ways of thinking about the structure of the book of Ezekiel. The most striking of these is the sequence of four grand **visions** that are spread throughout the book. The beginning of each of these visions is signaled by the statement that the Hand of YHWH was on the prophet (1:3, 8:1, 37:1, and 40:1). Ezekiel's first vision fills Chapters 1–3. In this first-person account, the prophet records his initial encounter with God while living by the river Chebar in Babylon. This vision serves as Ezekiel's call narrative and presents him with his task.

The second vision is in Ezekiel 8–11. This experience places Ezekiel in Jerusalem, where he witnesses a sequence of events culminating in the departure of God's glory from the Temple. This vision is presented in the midst of a long sequence of judgment oracles against Judah in Ezekiel 4–24 and dramatically portrays the ultimate result of Judah's disobedience. God's departure makes way for the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

The third vision is the best known of the four. The "valley of the dry bones" in Ezekiel 37 depicts the skeletons of Israel's defeated army. Ezekiel sees the army restored. At the end of the vision, the soldiers stand up, ready to fight. The vision stands in the midst of a collection of prophetic messages in Ezekiel 33–39 that focus on the restoration of Israel. These predominantly positive chapters are the turning point of the book of Ezekiel. Like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Book of the Twelve, the book of Ezekiel moves from a mostly negative tone in the first half of the book to a mostly positive tone in the second half.

The final vision in the book of Ezekiel is the prophet's preview of the reconstructed Temple after the end of the Exile in Chapters 40–48. This vision frames the book at the end and ties together themes from the other visions. Ezekiel has completed his prophetic task, the temple is restored, and God's glory returns to dwell in the reconstructed temple in Jerusalem.

SURVEY OF THE BOOK OF EZEKIEL

Oracles against Jerusalem (Ezek. 1–24)

1. ***The call of Ezekiel (1:1–3:27).*** The call of Ezekiel was similar to that of earlier prophets, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah, in that visions were associated with it. It was different in the nature and extent of the visions.

a. ***The prophet called (1:1–28).*** Ezekiel was by the river Chebar, which actually was a major irrigation canal on the Euphrates River (1:1).[12] The young priest probably was in a meditative mood when the dark clouds of an approaching thunderstorm caught his attention (1:4). The mention of "brightness around it," "fire flashing forth continually," and the reference to "gleaming amber" (1:4) all suggest a particularly violent thunderstorm, with much lightning and possible hail associated with it. Up to that point, Ezekiel's description would fit any violent summer storm.

From then on, the storm forms the backdrop for an astounding vision, which, for Ezekiel, seems to be normal. Unlike Amos, who saw messages from the LORD in ordinary events, Ezekiel saw extraordinary sights that became bearers of the Divine message.

First, there were the creatures of the vision. They had four faces, four wings, and the legs of bovine animals with hooves like calves (1:5–7). Under the wings were human arms and hands. The faces were those of an eagle, an ox, a lion, and a man. The eagle suggested mobility, the ox suggested strength, the lion suggested lordliness, and the human face suggested intelligence. The number 4 denotes that the power of God stretches to the four corners of the earth.[13] Their wings permitted them to fly in any direction without turning around. Fire (lightning?) was in the midst of the creatures, symbolic of the cleansing power of the LORD (1:11–14).

The creatures were accompanied by wheels arranged somewhat like a gyroscope. In other words, there were two wheels, one of which was arranged at a 90° angle from the other. Or they were like a ball with quarter sections cut out, except for a small band of material. This permitted them to roll in any of the four major directions (1:15–17). The eyes that decorated the rims were suggestive of the all-knowingness, or *omniscience,* of God. Wherever the living creatures went, so did the wheels (1:18–21).

Above the creatures—symbols of all living creation at the service of the LORD—and the wheels, Ezekiel saw a vision of the LORD sitting on a throne, just as Isaiah did (Isa. 6). The creatures covered their bodies with two wings in the LORD's presence (1:22–23; see Isa. 6:2). As they flew, the sound of the wings was like the thunder of the storm. When they came into the LORD's presence, they stopped flying (1:24–25).

The prophet-to-be saw the LORD from the waist down. The upper part of the body was obscured by fire, the brightness of which reminded him of the rainbow that followed the Flood (1:26–28). "This was the appearance of the glory of the LORD" (1:28). The word *glory* as used here might also be translated as the "overwhelming presence" of the LORD.

What the first chapter describes is basically the same thing Isaiah describes—that is, a theophany or appearance of the LORD to the one who was being called. Behind all of the elaborate symbolism was the prophet's basic conviction that the LORD who had called him to be a prophet was master of the universe and not just master of a narrow little strip of land called Palestine. As such, the LORD could be anywhere, even among the forlorn exiles by the river Chebar in Babylon.

b. ***The prophet commissioned (2:1–3:27).*** Ezekiel, who had fallen on his face when he realized he was in the LORD's presence, was commanded to stand. He was addressed as

"son of man" ("O mortal," NRSV), which, for Ezekiel, emphasized the difference between himself and the exalted LORD (2:1–3). "I am sending you" expresses a standard formula that appeared in prophetic calls (cf. Jer. 1:7).[14] He was given a fivefold commission:

1. ***As a prophet to a rebellious people (2:1–3:3).*** They were an "impudent and stubborn" people (2:4), but he was not to let that stop him from doing his job. In an action symbolizing the receiving of the LORD's message of lamentation, mourning, and woe, Ezekiel ate a papyrus scroll that tasted as sweet as honey. He would enjoy speaking the LORD's message.
2. ***As a prophet to a stubborn people (3:4–9).*** Although the word was sweet to Ezekiel, it would be distasteful to those to whom it would be preached. Their failure to understand would not be because of a language difference, but because of a lack of willingness to hear.
3. ***As a prophet to the exiles (3:10–15).*** Ezekiel's mission was directed to the people who were in exile, more specifically to the exiles at Tel-abib (from which the modern Israeli city of Tel Aviv derives its name) on the Chebar canal. Ezekiel went there and sat silently in the midst of the community for seven days.
4. ***As a watchman for the house of Israel (3:16–21).*** The emphasis in this commission laid the responsibility upon Ezekiel to carry out his call as a prophet. Like Isaiah, he was called to be faithful whether or not he was successful (Isa. 6:11–13).
5. ***As a portrayer of the LORD's judgment (3:22–27).*** Ezekiel, more than any other prophet, was the master of symbolic action. By such pantomimes, he acted out what was about to happen rather than describing with words the Lord's impending judgment. As part of this phase of his ministry, he was to remain silent until the Lord told him to speak.

2. ***The prophet in action (4:1–5:17).*** Almost immediately, it seems, Ezekiel began to prophesy by pantomime. The symbolic performances of Ezekiel are often called *sign-acts*.

   a. ***Let's play war (4:1–3).*** First, he played war. Using a large sun-dried brick as a symbol for Jerusalem, he set up miniature camps and siege lines around it, built dirt ramps up to it, and made miniature battering rams as if to knock down the imaginary walls. He took a small piece of iron to make a movable shield like those used by attacking armies as they tried to get near city walls to attack them. Then, he enthusiastically played war.
   b. ***The long rest (4:4–8).*** Next, Ezekiel was commanded to lie on his side for 390 days as a sign of the length of Israel's punishment. For Judah's punishment, he was to lie on his side for forty days. While each day was to indicate a year's exile, the significance of the numbers is not explained further. The period of 390 years may simply indicate that Israel's exile would go on indefinitely; forty years would seem to indicate for Ezekiel what seventy years represented for Jeremiah—a symbol of the completion of the LORD's time. When things were right, the exiles would return.
   c. ***Food is scarce (4:9–17).*** A third action involved the mixing of various grains, beans, and peas to make flour for bread. Under ordinary circumstances, such a thing was not done; but when a siege was on, one ate anything available. The command to cook the food over dried human manure was too much for Ezekiel's priestly instincts. When he pleaded for an exception, the LORD permitted the use of dried cow manure for the cooking fires. All this demonstrated the extreme conditions that existed during the siege of Jerusalem.
   d. ***The prophet's haircut (5:1–17).*** A man's hair was his pride. The prophet got a lesson in humility when he was told to cut his hair like a captive of war. Then he took the hair from his shorn head and divided it into three parts. One-third was burned, one-third

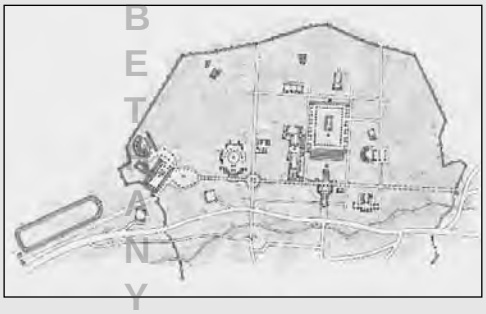
was chopped to pieces with the sword, and one-third was scattered to the wind. A few hairs left clinging to his garments were divided in the same manner. In the explanations that followed, the symbolism of this action was explained. Like the prophet's hair, the inhabitants of Jerusalem would be divided:

> One-third of you shall die of pestilence or be consumed by famine among you; one-third shall fall by the sword around you; and one-third I will scatter to every wind and I will unsheathe the sword after them. (5:12)

Although the LORD had made Jerusalem the center of the universe, it was doomed (5:5).

3. ***The prophet preaching (6:1–7:27).*** A spoken sermon follows the descriptions of the pantomimed sermons. Its title might be "Judgment on the Mountains." The sermon was directed against the mountains on which the Baal cults had their worship centers. The sermon had four

The Bizarre Behavior of Ezekiel



Prophets encountered in the Bible before Ezekiel sometimes performed actions that were intended to communicate a message. These *sign-acts* sometimes involved standard elements of their lives, such as Hosea's marriage and naming of children in Hosea 1 or Jeremiah's purchase of a field in Jeremiah 32. Other sign-acts were symbolic performances, such as Isaiah walking around naked in Isaiah 20 or Jeremiah walking into town wearing a yoke in Jeremiah 27.

Ezekiel took the performance of sign-acts to a new level. In Ezekiel 4:1–3 he builds a small model of Jerusalem and an invading army laying siege to the city. This is intended to portray the coming invasion of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army. In 4:4–8, he lies on his left side for 390 days and then on his right side for forty days to symbolize the length of punishment for Israel and Judah. God commands Ezekiel in 4:9–15 to eat bread baked over a fire made with human dung. At this point, the prophet protests because this method of cooking would render the food unclean. God gives in and allows Ezekiel to use cow dung to build his cooking fire. This unusual means of cooking is also meant to portray the desperate condition Judah will find itself in when it is invaded. Ezekiel 5 describes an elaborate performance in which Ezekiel shaves all the hair off of his body and then carefully separates it into three equal measures. He burns one-third of his hair, hacks another third with a sword, and scatters the final third in the wind. He retains only a small amount of his hair, which he sews into the hem of his robe. The different bunches of hair are meant to represent the fate of different groups of Judahites. Some would be killed by the sword during the attack, others would be killed in the ensuing fire, and those left alive would be scattered. Only a small remnant would be saved, like the hairs in the hem of Ezekiel's robe.

In Ezekiel 12, the prophet symbolically enacts the Exile itself. He packs and prepares baggage like someone who is being exiled and carries it out of Jerusalem. He exits the city by digging a hole in the wall to portray a desperate, secret escape from the invading army. The book of Ezekiel typically presents these sign-acts in the words of God's commands to Ezekiel. The actual performance of the acts is not described. Thus, we do not know if many people watched the performances or if the prophet explained his actions in words, or whether the people were left to interpret them on their own. Did the people of Jerusalem recognize Ezekiel as a prophet and his actions as a portrayal of their own fate, or did he appear to be a deranged lunatic?

parts, each closed by the refrain "I am the LORD." The first division was spoken to the mountains as if they were living persons, describing how the pagan altars, designed to celebrate life and fertility, would be the scene of death and barrenness (6:1–7).

The second part spoke of the scattering of the people into foreign lands. They would remember how they had grieved the LORD and would realize that His threats had not been in vain (6:8–10).

The third division called for mourning to take place because men would die of pestilence and famine. When corpses were found on the altars, the high hills, and every place they worshiped god, when the land was made desolate, then "they shall know that I am the LORD" (6:11–14). The sermon closes with oracles of doom for the land (7:1–27).

4. ***Heresy in the Temple (8:1–11:25)***

   a. ***Those abominable idols (8:1–18; 11:1–21).*** Pages have been written about the visions of Ezekiel found in Chapters 8–11. One of the major questions relates to whether they were really visions or whether Ezekiel actually was present in Jerusalem to witness the things he described. Travel back and forth to Jerusalem from Babylon was not unknown. Ezekiel's intimate knowledge of the Temple, growing out of his training as a priest, however, would explain his detailed descriptions. His powers of discernment and previous visionary experiences, furthermore, would seem to argue for these being visions on the order of extrasensory perception.

   As Ezekiel described it, he was transported to Jerusalem by a hand that held him by a lock of hair. He was brought in vision to the northern gateway of the inner court, where there seemed to be some sort of pagan image. Immediately, he was aware of the overpowering presence of the God of Israel (8:1–4).

   After the pagan image and the ceremonies were pointed out to him (8:5–6), he was shown a hole in the wall. Following instructions, he dug into the hole and found a door. Entering the door, he saw seventy of Judah's leaders, led by a Temple official, worshiping pictures of animals drawn on the walls (8:7–13). They may have been evidence of the worship of Egyptian deities.[15]

   Going to the north gate of the Temple, Ezekiel found women weeping for Tammuz, the Babylonian god of vegetation (8:14–15).[16] Next, he went to the east side of the Temple, where he found twenty-five men worshiping the rising sun. Thus, in the house in which the LORD alone was to be worshiped, all sorts of services to pagan gods were being carried out (8:16–18). Jerusalem's doom was certain:

   > Therefore I will act in my wrath; my eye will not spare, nor will I have pity; and though they cry in my hearing with a loud voice, I will not listen to them. (8:18)

   This passage seems to be continued in 11:1–21. There, specific people who were leaders in the worship of pagan deities are named. In his vision, Ezekiel saw one of them, Pelatiah, the son of Benaiah, die. The hope for a righteous remnant was mentioned, along with certain judgment for the sinners of Jerusalem.

   b. ***Marked for destruction (9:1–11).*** The LORD called for the executioners to make ready. Six men, prepared to act as the LORD's executioners, stepped up with their weapons ready. A seventh man with a writing case was with them (9:1–2). The LORD instructed the seventh man to go through the city and put a mark on the foreheads of those who were disturbed by the abominations that were being practiced in the Temple. They were the righteous who would survive the siege. This was in keeping with a commonly held theological view that the righteous would enjoy blessings and a long life, while sinners would die young. Ezekiel would have said that those who died during the siege were sinners (9:3–4).

Once the righteous were marked, the executioners were ordered to do their job. As Ezekiel experienced this vision, he, like Amos, prayed to the LORD, asking Him if He was going to destroy all the people. The LORD answered that the guilty would not be spared. The scribe reported that he had done as the LORD had commanded him (9:5–11).

c. ***No more glory in the Temple (10:1–22; 11:22–25).*** When Ezekiel looked, he saw a repeat of the vision by the river Chebar with the LORD on His throne, the winged creatures (now called *cherubim*), and the wheels. The LORD commanded the scribe to take fire from among the cherubim, which was done. The fire was scattered over the city to burn it (10:1–8).

In 11:22–25, the glory of the LORD (the overpowering presence) left the Temple, accompanied by the cherubim and the wheels. This was Ezekiel's way of saying to the exiles that the Temple and Jerusalem could no longer claim the LORD's protective presence. Thus the vision ended. The time was 592 B.C.E., only five years before Jerusalem was destroyed.

5. ***In action again (12:1–20).*** In an activity closely related to this word about the withdrawal of the presence of the LORD from Jerusalem, Ezekiel acted out before the people what would happen to the survivors in Jerusalem. Like one who was going into exile, he gathered up his portable possessions. He dug through the mud wall of his house at night and crawled through the hole, taking his baggage with him (12:1–7). He was then instructed to tell the people that his action symbolized what King Zedekiah was attempting to do to escape from Jerusalem. Zedekiah would not be successful, however. He would be captured, blinded, and taken to Babylon as a captive (12:8–16).

Ezekiel then drank water and ate, quaking and trembling like one who was mortally afraid. This would be the condition of the people in Jerusalem as they awaited the fall of the land (12:8–16).

6. ***Hard words for false prophets and unfaithful people (12:21–14:23)***

a. ***The LORD will vindicate Ezekiel (12:21–28).*** Some people made fun of Ezekiel, saying that he kept predicting doom but it never came. He was told to warn the people that judgment no longer would be delayed. His words were not for the sweet by-and-by; they were about a harsh here-and-now (12:21–28).

b. ***The fate of false prophets (13:1–16).*** The prophets of popular religion were not concerned with the LORD's message. Instead, they were busy thinking up messages that would soothe the people and cause them to react favorably to the messenger. Instead of building a wall of truth behind which Israel could be secure, they built a faulty wall. Then they covered their mistakes with whitewash. When the flood of judgment came, the whitewash would not hold the wall together. The prophets who kept on crying peace when war was unavoidable would be destroyed like the faulty wall.

c. ***The fate of fickle women (13:17–23).*** Ezekiel condemned women "who sew bands on all wrists, and make veils for all persons of every height" (13:18). This referred to some sort of witchcraft or magical practice that was condemned in Israel in the time of the early monarchy (1 Sam. 28:3). These women had led righteous people astray. As a consequence, the judgment upon them would be severe. Ezekiel closes the oracle with a favorite theme: "Then you will know that I am the LORD" (13:20–23).

d. ***The fate of idol worshipers (14:1–23).*** When certain leaders of the people came to Ezekiel, it was revealed to him that they were idol worshipers. The LORD would not permit such a person to receive a correct message from the prophet because of that person's

false worship (14:1–5). The only hope for the idol worshiper was to repent and put away his idols. Idol worshipers would be cut off even if they tried to appear righteous by consulting a prophet. Both the idol worshiper and the prophet he consulted would be false and would face the LORD's judgment (14:6–11).

Such unfaithfulness would condemn the land. Even if Noah, Daniel, and Job still lived in the land, their righteousness would save them but not others (14:12–20). (This idea of individual responsibility was further discussed by Ezekiel in Chapters 18 and 33.) Jerusalem was about to face four severe acts of judgment—"sword, famine, wild animals, and pestilence, to cut off humans and animals from it!" (14:21). Any survivors would testify that the LORD's action was just (14:22–23).

7. ***The prophet and his allegories (15:1–17:24).*** Ezekiel was particularly fond of allegories—that is, stories in which an actual person or event is represented by a symbol.

a. ***Jerusalem, the grapevine (15:1–8).*** Here, Jerusalem is represented by a grapevine. The grapevine's main function is to act as a fruit-bearing plant. Because its wood was useless as lumber, it could only be burned. So, Jerusalem was like a dead grapevine, ready to be burned.

b. ***Jerusalem, the faithless wife (16:1–63).*** Next, Jerusalem was like an unfaithful wife. Ezekiel suggested that the racial background of the Jews was mixed: "Your father was an Amorite and your mother was a Hittite." The LORD found her (the people of Israel) when she had been abandoned to die at birth, and He brought her up. When she was a grown woman, He wooed her and won her as His bride. He gave her all the luxuries that a beautiful woman desired (16:1–14).

Unfortunately, she became a harlot, selling her favors to anyone who passed by. She gave to others the blessing the LORD (her husband) had given her. She even sacrificed her children to her lovers. Egypt and Assyria had been her lovers, but she had been so lustful that she had paid them to take her favors instead of them paying her (16:15–34).

Her days were numbered. She would be stripped naked before the world and held up to shame. Her land and possessions would be given to others. She would be cut to pieces by the swords of those who had patronized her (16:35–43). Samaria and Sodom had been her sisters. They had been bad, but not nearly so bad as Jerusalem. She had used Sodom as a byword in the days when things had been going well for her. Now Jerusalem would be like Sodom (16:44–58).

The LORD would restore Jerusalem. The very act of restoration would cause her to blush in shame when she remembered how she had acted in the past (16:59–63).

c. ***The great eagles (17:1–24).*** This **allegory** of the eagles concerned the royal house of Judah and its attempts to play one power off against another. The first eagle represented Babylon, which took Jehoiachin to Babylon and set Zedekiah in his place. But Zedekiah—instead of doing as the Babylonians wanted and, in so doing, preserving the lives of the people—sent envoys to Egypt (the second eagle). The result would be the destruction of the kingdom and Zedekiah's deportation. This allegory applied to the intrigues that led to the second Babylonian invasion of Palestine in 589 B.C.E.

8. ***The soul that sins shall die (18:1–32).*** One of the new features of Ezekiel's theology was his doctrine of individual responsibility. The dominant view in Israel was the idea of corporate responsibility. In this view, the emphasis was on the group rather than the individual. Out of it grew the concept that a child could suffer for the parent's sins or vice versa. This was expressed in

a common proverb: "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." It was also enshrined in the law in Exodus 20:5, where it says that the children would be punished "for the iniquity of the parents, to the third and the fourth generation." Now things had changed. The new rule was this: "The person who sins shall die" (18:1–4).

The remainder of the chapter was spent illustrating that basic point. A righteous man who kept the covenant provisions would live. If he had a son who broke every law in the book (of the covenant), the son would die for his sins but the father would be blameless (18:5–13).

The reverse of that situation was also true. The righteous son of a covenant-breaking father would live, but the unrighteous father would die for his own sins. If the sinner turned to righteousness or the righteous man turned to sin, he who turned to righteousness would gain life, while he who turned to wrong would lose it. Some were saying that the LORD was not doing right, but they were the ones who were wrong. The LORD was the judge, who preferred to give life rather than death. What they must do is turn from their sins so that the LORD could give them life (18:14–32).

9. ***Two poetic allegories (19:1–14).*** Reverting to the allegorical form again, Ezekiel combined it with the lament, or dirge, rhythm. The allegory was of a lion with two cubs that she raised in proper "lion fashion" to adulthood. One (Jehoahaz, Josiah's successor) was captured and taken to Egypt. The second was either Jehoiachin (598–597 B.C.E.) or Zedekiah (597–587/586 B.C.E.), both of whom were taken as prisoners to Babylon (19:9).

10. ***Three sermons (20:1–22:31)***

a. ***The will of God (20:1–49).*** In 590 B.C.E., some of the community leaders came to Ezekiel to ask him what the LORD's will was for the people. Undoubtedly, this was a perplexing question, because they had been getting advice from the other prophets of the community. This contradicted the advice given them by Ezekiel and by Jeremiah in his letter to the exiles (Jer. 29). In answer to their questions, they were reminded of the long and sordid history of disobedience of their forefathers. Time after time, the LORD had affirmed and reaffirmed the covenant to be their God and to lead them to a good life on the condition that they put aside other gods and worship the LORD only. They had violated this covenant and gone after other gods in Egypt. Yet, the LORD had delivered them (20:1–9).

Both in the desert and in the land that the LORD had promised to give them, they had been given the LORD's laws and the sabbath as the sign of the covenant (20:10–30). Still, they turned to the worship of other gods. The LORD was disgusted with such behavior. The present generation was committing the same sins that its fathers had committed, in its desire to be like "the nations" (20:30–32).

The LORD was determined to weed out the sinners from among the people. Only the righteous would be allowed to return to Palestine. If they were going to serve idols, they had better do it while they could. This would not be allowed when the return came. They would worship the LORD only. The LORD was acting to protect His honor. For that reason, the people's wickedness would not be dealt with as severely as it deserved (20:33–44).

The sermon ends with a short oracle about a fire in the south. Judah (the Southern Kingdom) would be devoured by a northern fire. Instructed to deliver this warning, the prophet protested against having to speak in riddles (20:45–49).

b. ***The sword of the LORD (21:1–32).*** The sense of urgency that frequently appeared in Jeremiah's prophecies as Judah's end neared can also be seen in these oracles on the sword. As one of the common weapons of war, the sword symbolized death and destruction. The LORD is spoken of as drawing a sword to kill the people of Jerusalem (21:1–4). The prophet was told to groan and to cry out in despair. When the people asked why he was

groaning, he was to tell them what was to happen. The news was about a sword, sharpened and polished for the battle, ready to slaughter whoever got in the way (21:5–13). The prophet was to act as a soldier, using his sword in battle to bring home the truth of his message (20:14–17).

The prophet then was told to draw a map of the roads from Mesopotamia to the west. There was a fork in the road—the west fork leading to Jerusalem and the east fork leading to Rabbah, the capital of Ammon. The king of Babylon was described as standing at the fork, consulting his gods about which city to strike. Taking a handful of arrows, he shook them and threw them down. He hoped that the pattern they made would indicate which road he should take. By means of divination or casting lots, he consulted his gods and examined an animal's liver, another mode of divination. The arrows pointed to Jerusalem (21:18–22).

This would shock the people of Jerusalem, who had made treaties with Babylon but had forgotten how they sinned against the LORD. They were guilty, and Babylon was the sword of the LORD's righteous anger. The rulers would be exiled, and the land would be given to the poor. Ruin! Ruin! This would be the fate of Jerusalem (21:23–27).

Although the Ammonites had been spared, they had no reason to gloat. Their day was coming. The sword and the fire would destroy them in their own land (21:28–32).

c. ***The sins of Jerusalem (22:1–13).*** This sermon contains a laundry list of the sins of Jerusalem. The commandment said, "You shall not murder," but they were murderers (22:1–4a). The commandment said, "You shall make no graven images," but they worshiped idols (22:36). The commandment said, "Honor your father and mother," but they dishonored their parents (22:7a). The commandment said, "You shall not steal," but they stole from foreigners, widows, and orphans (22:7b). The commandment said, "Remember the sabbath," but they did not keep the sabbath, and they desecrated holy things (22:8). The commandment said, "You shall not lie," but now they faced the death penalty for lying about one another (22:9a). The commandment said, "You shall not commit adultery." Not only had they committed adultery, they also had committed incest (22:9b–11). Beyond the Ten Commandments, they loaned money at interest and took bribes to murder. They had forgotten the LORD (22:1–12).

Those sinners would not go unpunished. They would be scattered among the nations as evidence that the LORD was the ruler (22:13–16). Ezekiel compared what would happen to the people to refining metal. The impure metal is put into a hot furnace, where the heat is used to separate the pure metal from the waste, or *slag.* The people of Jerusalem would be refined in the fires of the Exile as sinners would be separated out for destruction (22:17–22; cf. Jer. 6:27–30).

The major problem was the leaders of the land: the upper classes, the priests, and the prophets. They were like voracious animals, seizing by force things that were not theirs. The priests had become so materially minded that spiritual things were meaningless to them. The rulers had become thieves, while the prophets had become purveyors of false oracles. The people had followed the examples of their leaders. They were extortioners and robbers. The LORD had looked for someone to stem the tide of corruption, but he had found no one. Judgment was certain (22:23–31).

11. ***Those wild, wild sisters (23:1–49).*** In this allegory Samaria and Jerusalem are represented as two sisters, Oholah and Oholibah. Together, they represented all of the Israelite people, both north and south. They had already been guilty of sexual immorality in Egypt. Just as the prophet Hosea took Gomer as his wife, they, too, had become the LORD's wives, despite their

previous record of sexual looseness. Children were born, but the sisters would not stay away from other men. First, it had been Egypt and Assyria. Oholah (Samaria) became a victim of Assyria, who had disgraced her and then killed her (23:1–10).

Oholibah (Jerusalem) was even wilder. She cavorted with Assyria and Babylon. She was especially attracted to the Babylonian officials. But, as was generally the rule, they abused her so much that she sought other lovers. She became even more immoral, offering herself to any who would take her (23:11–21).

Her former lovers, the Babylonians, would be her executioners. Their well-equipped armies would pour down the northern invasion routes and rape the land. She would be handed over to people who hated her. Soon her fate would be like that of her sister Oholah (Samaria) (23:22–35).

The oracles close with a restatement of what had been said previously, repeating the theme "You shall know that I am the LORD God" (23:36–39).

12. ***The rusty pot (24:1–14).*** The allegory of the rusty pot was dated to January 588 B.C.E. as Nebuchadnezzar's army laid siege to Jerusalem. Ezekiel was using this figure to say that Jerusalem's "goose was cooked"—that is, its fate was sealed. Because of the bloody atrocities they had committed that had gone unpunished, Jerusalem's inhabitants would be destroyed. The reference to blood poured out on a rock (24:7) comes from the idea that one's life was in the blood. If blood was shed, as in a murder, the victim usually was left unburied. The ancients believed that the spilled blood cried out to God for the murderer to be punished. Blood poured on a rock would be especially conspicuous, because it would stain the rock and thus would be hard to wash out. The rusty pot spoke of the filthiness of Israel's sin. The only way to get rid of it was to burn it out, so the destruction of Jerusalem was part of the cleansing process (24:1–14).

13. ***The prophet's wife dies (24:15–18; 33:21–22).*** Ezekiel's final oracle of doom was the most difficult of all. It was an acted oracle. He was told that his wife would die and that when she did, instead of following the usual customs of wailing, going without a turban, going barefoot, having the mouth covered, and eating only "the bread of mourners" (24:17), he was to act as if nothing had happened (24:15–18).

After his wife's death, the people asked the reason for his strange and unconventional behavior. He told them, as instructed, that the news of Jerusalem's fall would soon reach them. When it did, they were to take no special note of it. Instead, they were to go on with life as usual. As Ezekiel had done when his wife died, so they were to do when Jerusalem died (24:19–24).

Ezekiel was told that when a fugitive came to bring the news of Jerusalem's fall, a new phase of his ministry would begin (24:25–27). The sequel to this passage appears in Ezekiel 33:21–22. In January 586 B.C.E.,[17] a messenger arrived in Babylon, bringing news of Jerusalem's fall. Ezekiel had been silent since the evening before, but when the news came, he began to proclaim a new message.

Oracles against Foreign Nations (25:1–32:32)

As was standard, at least among the more prominent prophets, Ezekiel had a fairly long section on oracles against foreign nations. At times, his arrangement of oracles suggests the influence of the Amos traditions, about which Ezekiel undoubtedly knew. Ezekiel's oracles were confined to the nations immediately surrounding Israel and to Egypt. Notably absent were oracles against Babylon and Syria. Syria probably was omitted because it had long since ceased to be a threat to Judah.

1. A roll call of the neighbors (25:1–17).
2. Many words against Tyre and the Phoenicians (26:1–28:19).
3. A short word about Sidon (28:20–23).

4. Blessings on you, Israel (28:24–26).
5. The fall of Egypt (29:1–32:32).
   a. The Egyptian crocodile (29:1–16).
   b. Egypt is given to Nebuchadnezzar (29:17–21).
   c. Egypt is doomed (30:1–19).
   d. Oracles against the Pharaoh (30:20–32:32).

MANY WORDS AGAINST TYRE AND THE PHOENICIANS (26:1–28:19). Ezekiel had a multitude of oracles against Tyre. The Phoenicians, for whom Tyre was the most representative city, had played an important role in the history of the Israelite people. Although the fact is not mentioned in biblical history, the Phoenicians had a vital impact on the language and thought of the Hebrews. During the Israelite monarchy, furthermore, Tyre was an important ally of the Israelites. For David and Solomon, as well as for Omri and Ahab at a later time, the Phoenicians furnished building materials and expert help to carry out the huge building programs of those kings. They also provided a sea arm for those Israelite kingdoms. Because Israel had no suitable ports, their alliance with the Phoenicians served Israel well. Throughout most of their history, the Phoenician and Israelite kingdoms were united by covenants. There is no mention of any warfare between the two peoples.

Despite their previous history of peaceful relations, Ezekiel said that Tyre had tried to profit from Jerusalem's troubles. As a result, its people would feel the hand of judgment and "They will know that I am the LORD" (26:1–6). Nebuchadnezzar would besiege the city for thirteen years. Finally, its surrender to him would bring an end to Phoenician life. It would finally be joined to the mainland by a causeway built by Alexander the Great in his conquest of the city in 333 B.C.E. It continued to exist as an important city down to the New Testament era.[18]

Ezekiel saw the LORD's punishment for Tyre growing out of its gloating over Jerusalem's fall (26:2). He went on to describe in vivid detail what would happen to the city and especially to cities on the coast around Tyre. All this was to demonstrate the LORD's power (26:7–21).

Chapter 27 was a lament or funeral song for Tyre. A description of its ships—the vehicles of commerce that made it a great trading center—is found in 27:1–9. Its armies were mercenaries, soldiers hired from other nations (27:10–11). A directory of goods, services, and clients gives an insight into the wide range of Tyre's merchant ships (27:12–24). A funeral song would be sung, while shocked mourners would stare in disbelief at the fate of the great merchant city (27:25–36).

Ezekiel then turned his attention to the king of Tyre. The king was pictured as being puffed up with pride, ripe for the calamity that was about to befall him (28:1–10). No matter how rich and handsome he was, his evil conduct would be his undoing. He would be hurled to the ground and his city destroyed (28:11–19).

THE FALL OF EGYPT (29:1–32:32). These chapters contain a number of oracles about Egypt dating from 587 to 571 B.C.E.

1. ***The Egyptian crocodile (29:1–16).*** Egypt was like a giant crocodile, lying in the Nile River and waiting for a victim to come within its range. The LORD was going to take a large hook and catch the crocodile. Then it would be thrown, covered with fishes, into the desert to die (29:1–6a).

Israel had gone to Egypt for support, but it was attacked instead. The LORD was going to make Egypt a wasteland because of the way Israel had been treated. Its people would be scattered, and only a weak kingdom would continue to exist there (29:6b–16).

2. ***Egypt is given to Nebuchadnezzar (29:17–21).*** This oracle, dated 571 B.C.E., was the last dated oracle of the prophet Ezekiel. Nebuchadnezzar had laid siege to Tyre in 585 B.C.E. After thirteen

years, Tyre surrendered; but it was a hollow victory for Nebuchadnezzar, as what he gained was not worth the cost.[19] Ezekiel, whose earlier oracles had spoken of the devastation that was coming upon Tyre at Nebuchadnezzar's hand (26:17–21), spoke this oracle that recognized the realities of the situation regarding Tyre. Nebuchadnezzar's army had fought hard, so much so that "every head was made bald and every shoulder was rubbed bare" (29:18). Because he had failed at Tyre, he was given Egypt as his pay for hard work against Tyre (29:20).

3. ***Egypt is doomed (30:1–19).*** Continuing the theme of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Egypt, Ezekiel compares it to the "day of the LORD" (Amos 5:18). Egypt and all its allies would fall (30:1–9). Nebuchadnezzar was about to carry off all of Egypt's wealth and devastate the land (30:10–12). Along with the other destruction would come the destruction of Egypt's idols. Its strong cities would no longer protect it. From one end of the land to the other, devastation would come (30:13–19).

4. ***Oracles against the Pharaoh (30:20–32:32).*** Turning from the land in general, the oracles were directed toward the ruler of Egypt, Pharaoh Apries, otherwise known as Hophra (589–570 B.C.E.). In 587 B.C.E., Ezekiel said that the LORD would weaken the king of Egypt ("break his arms," 30:22) and strengthen the king of Babylon (30:20–26).

In an allegory of the cedar tree, Pharaoh Hophra was compared to a cedar in Lebanon. In that country, cedars grew to magnificent size, making the country famous for that particular wood. In the allegory, one particular tree outgrew all the rest because it had more water (the Nile River). It was so big that it towered over the other trees. Even the trees of the Garden of Eden could not match it (31:1–9). But the woodcutter came (Babylon). The tree was cut down and left. Its valuable wood became nothing more than a brush pile in which the birds nested. That would be Pharaoh Hophra's fate. He would die and go to Sheol (the grave), where all men went. Hophra was assassinated in 570 B.C.E. (31:10–18).[20] A lament was sung for Pharaoh Hophra (32:1–16). He had been a lion among the nations, but God would throw a net over him and cast him to the ground. His body would become food for the birds. Babylon would come with the sword and make the land of Egypt desolate. The prophet pictured Egypt in the grave with the other nations that had perished—Assyria, Elam, Meshech and Tubal, Edom and the Sidonians. The Pharaoh might not like it, but that would be his end (32:17–32).

Hope for a Better Day (33:1–48:35)

From Chapter 33 on, the oracles of Ezekiel were directed toward encouraging the people to plan for the future, when they would be restored to the land of Palestine. Chapters 33–39 deal with oracles of **restoration,** while Chapters 40–48 deal with rebuilding the Temple and the restoration of worship.

Oracles of Restoration (33:1–39:29)

1. ***The watchman's responsibility (33:1–20).*** This oracle took a principle and illustrated it by a number of examples. The principle was that a watchman bore the responsibility to warn the community of danger. If he did his job well and the community failed to heed his warning, then the community as a whole bore the blame for whatever happened. If, however, the watchman failed to be alert and to warn the community of imminent danger, when they had to suffer because of his failure, the watchman also shared in the suffering (33:1–6).

So it was with people and their sins. If the prophet warned them, then only the people were responsible for their sins. If the prophet failed to warn them, then the prophet had to share the responsibility (33:7–20; see also Chapter 18).

2. ***Oracle against the inhabitants of the land (33:23–29).*** The people who had been left in the land had claimed the abandoned properties for themselves. But that would not be so, because they had sinned by continuing to act the way they had before the exiles had been taken away.

3. ***They don't believe you, Ezekiel (33:30–33).*** The people were listening to Ezekiel, but they took him no more seriously than they would an entertainer who sang songs to them.

4. ***The responsibility of shepherds (34:1–31).*** Shepherds who enjoyed all the benefits derived from their flocks but failed to take care of them soon would lose them. So it was with the spiritual shepherds of Israel. In looking out for themselves first, they had lost their flocks (34:1–10).

In contrast, the LORD would go out and search for the lost sheep until they were found. He would bring them back and care for them—caring for the sick, separating the good from the bad, and protecting the poor and mistreated from the strong who would oppress them. A Davidic king would be restored to the throne, and Jerusalem would prosper once more. By this they would know the LORD (34:11–31).

5. ***You are going to get it, Edom (35:1–15).*** This sounds like a misplaced oracle against a foreign nation. At the least, it indicates the depth of the antagonism between the Israelites and the Edomites. This was true especially after the Edomites seemed to have taken advantage of Judah during the Babylonian war. Edom was accused of saying that it would rule Judah and Israel (35:10), but the LORD would ensure that Edom was left desolate (35:15).

6. ***Blessings on you, Israel (36:1–38).*** This is a continuation of the oracle against Edom. The nations surrounding Israel had mocked it in its time of calamity. The situation was about to change, however. Israel would prosper, while they would be humiliated. Israel's cities would be rebuilt when the people returned to Palestine. The land had devoured them before, but that would no longer happen (36:1–15).

When the Israelites had lived in Palestine before the Exile, they had defiled it. They had disgraced the name of God. What the LORD was about to do, then, was for the sake of the Divine name and reputation. The implication was that this was an act of grace toward Israel, something it did not really deserve:

> A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances . . . you shall be my people and I will be your God. (36:26–28)

7. ***O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD (37:1–14).*** Perhaps the most famous of Ezekiel's visions was the vision of the dry bones. The prophet, either physically or in a vision, was taken to a battlefield. The corpses of the slain had been left to rot in the sun or to be devoured by animals. As a result, bones were scattered everywhere. The prophet was commanded to preach to the bleached bones. As he preached, the bones came together. When the bones were connected into a skeleton, the prophet was told:

> ***Prophesy to the breath [ruach] . . . and say to the breath [ruach] . . . Come from the four winds [ruachoth], O breath [ruach], and breathe upon these slain. (37:9)***

As can be seen by the words in brackets, there is a play on words (pun) here. The point of the whole oracle was to continue to express the idea that the Jews would be restored. The nation that was dead and scattered, like the bones, would be resurrected by the LORD's action.

8. ***The two shall be one (37:15–28).*** The prophet was told to take two sticks and to write the word *Judah* on one and *Israel* on the other. Then, he was to hold them in his hand as though they were one. His action would symbolize the reunion of the two parts of the nation under one king.

9. ***The LORD and Gog of Magog (38:1–39:29).*** With these oracles, Ezekiel moves into the realm of the apocalyptic. Instead of pronouncing judgment on Israel for its sins, the LORD promises to intervene from heaven to overthrow the forces of evil arrayed against Israel. Not all the apocalyptic elements are present here, but these oracles carry out the major theme of the triumph of the LORD over those who would destroy Israel.

Attempts have been made to identify Gog of Magog (38:2) with some ruler of Ezekiel's time. The best that can be said is that, with our present knowledge, no satisfactory identification is possible. This has led to numerous attempts over the centuries to identify Gog with rulers of various nations by those who see these oracles purely in a futuristic sense, with unfortunate results. Perhaps the best that can be said is that Gog was representative of those forces that have opposed, and will continue to oppose, the LORD's rule in the world. This would seem to be supported by the fact that the descriptions of Israel (which Gog was to invade) was an idealized description that had not existed before Ezekiel's time, nor has it since. Ezekiel expected it in the near future.

The invasion would be the signal for the LORD to intervene by unleashing the forces of nature against Gog—"Then they shall know that I am the LORD" (38:23). The devastation of the armies of Gog would be so great that Israel would be burning abandoned weapons (those with wooden handles) as firewood, thus saving its own trees (an early form of recycling?). As the Israelites attempt to clean up the land, it would take them seven months to bury all of Gog's dead soldiers (39:1–20). That Ezekiel was talking about something in the near future would seem to be indicated by the closing part of the oracle, in which once again he spoke of Israel's restoration to the land. This would be done to show the LORD's holiness—"Then they shall know that I am the LORD" (39:21–29).

THE RESTORATION OF THE TEMPLE (40:1–48:35). The remainder of the book of Ezekiel deals with the rebuilding of the Temple and its related buildings, along with the altar for sacrifices (40:1–43:27); the priests (44:1–31); the division of the country (45:1–8); the prince's lands and the rules of conduct (45:9–46:18); the priest's quarters (46:19–24); the Temple foundations (47:1–12); the division of the land (47:13–48:29); and the names of the gates of Jerusalem (48:30–35).

This interest in priestly things was in keeping with Ezekiel's interest in the priesthood. He of all the prophets would be the most likely to try to transform into practical activities the principles preached by the prophets. For him, this would include not only social action, but also worship activity. The Temple would continue to be the center of such worship activity in the restored community. Thus, the vision of the Temple, with details of its dimensions, would be of interest to Ezekiel. He, a former priest, would be receptive to such a vision (40:1–42:20). As he envisioned the overpowering presence of the LORD leave the Temple (11:22–25), so he envisioned its return to the restored community and the rebuilt Temple. It was to be a new day when the people with new hearts of flesh would be obedient to the LORD's commands (36:26), would be ashamed of their old ways, and would serve the LORD alone in faithfulness (43:1–12). The responsibility of priestly service would be limited to those priests who were the descendants of Zadok. All other Levites would serve as helpers, but because of their unfaithfulness, they would not be allowed to serve as priests (44:10–31).

Special lands were to be set aside for the LORD, including the area around the Temple (45:1–6). The ruler, now called the *prince* instead of the *king*, was also allotted certain territory, but he was given severe warnings about his conduct toward the people (45:7–9). Instructions were given about what the prince was to receive in offerings from the people. He, in turn, was to furnish animals and materials for national offerings during important festivals and other holy days (45:10–46:15).

Among the unusual features of this series of visions was the description of a stream of water flowing from the base of the Temple toward the Jordan Rift and the Dead Sea. The further it flowed, the deeper the stream was. When it reached the Dead Sea, the Dead Sea's stagnant waters came to life with all kinds of animals and fish. One of the features of the Garden of Eden was that it was well watered. To people who lived in a dry land, a stream of fresh water was priceless. For Ezekiel in his idealized vision of the restored land, the "LORD in his holy Temple" would be the source of life for a land and a people who had been to the grave of exile but had returned from the dead. Even the Dead Sea would come alive in that time (47:1–12).

Key Terms and Names

Allegory, *259*
Baruch, *235*
Call Narrative, *238*
Confessions, *246*
Exiles, *240*
Jehoiachin, *240*
Jehoiakim, *239*
Nebuchadnezzar, *240*
Sign Act, *249*
Temple Sermon, *236*
Vision, *253*
Wordplay, *238*
Zedekiah, *240*

Study Questions

1. What is unusual about Jeremiah's call to be a prophet?
2. What was the meaning of the two visions associated with Jeremiah's call?
3. How did Jeremiah compare Josiah and Jehoiakim?
4. What was the Temple Sermon, and what were its results?
5. Describe Jeremiah's dealing with King Zedekiah.
6. What advice did Jeremiah give the exiles, and why did he feel it necessary to give such advice?
7. What act of Jeremiah demonstrated his faith in the future of the nation?
8. Why was Jeremiah considered a traitor by many of the people of Jerusalem?
9. What happened to Jeremiah when Jerusalem fell?
10. Why is there disagreement about the identity of the "foe from the north?" What are the arguments for the differing positions?
11. What were some of the factors that created the sense of frustration that Jeremiah expresses in the confessions?
12. What are the points of connection between the work of Ezekiel in exile and the work of Jeremiah in Jerusalem?
13. What appears to be Ezekiel's understanding of his call experience?
14. What symbolic actions did Ezekiel perform, and what was their significance?
15. What symbolized for Ezekiel the inevitable doom of Jerusalem?
16. Compare Ezekiel's view of individual responsibility to that of Jeremiah.
17. Why did Ezekiel not mourn his wife's death?
18. Name four allegories that Ezekiel used.
19. What was the meaning of Ezekiel's vision in the valley of dry bones?
20. What was the basic message of the Gog of Magog oracles?
21. What is the overall theme of Ezekiel 40–48?
22. How are Ezekiel 11:22–25 and 43:1–4 related to the two divisions in which they appear, 1–24 and 33–48?

Endnotes

1. For a more complete list and discussion the occurrences of this phenomenon, see Rainer Albertz, *Israel in Exile*, 304–305.
2. See Karen S. Rubinson, "Scythians," in *ABD*, vol. 5, 1056–1057.
3. For example, see Walter Bruggemann, *To Pluck Up, to Tear Down: A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. C. Eerdman, 1988), 9–10.
4. On Jeremiah's evaluation of Josiah in this passage, see Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 613.
5. Bustenay Oded, "Zedekiah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 21 (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage, 2006), 487–489.
6. J. B. Pritchard, *ANET,* 213.
7. Such deeds were found in recent years among the Bar Kochba letters. Yigael Yadin, *Bar Kochba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Second Jewish Revolt Against Rome* (New York: Random House, 1971), 229ff.
8. The official seal of "Milkom'ur, servant of Baalyasha (Baalis)" has been found, confirming the historicity of this Ammonite king. See Larry G. Herr, "Whatever Became of the Ammonites?" *BAR,* XIX, 6 (November–December, 1993), 33f.
9. For a look at the oracles of Jeremiah 1–20 in the light of rhetorical criticism, see Jack R. Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *AB* 21A, particularly 68–85.
10. Philip J. King, "Jeremiah's Polemic Against Idols: What Archaeology Can Teach Us," *BR,* X, 6 (December 1994), 23–29.
11. See Amos 1–2; Isaiah 13–23; Ezekiel 25–32; Zephaniah 2:4–15.
12. Walter Eichrodt, "Ezekiel," *OTL* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 52.
13. Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, *HER* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 120.
14. Ibid., 132.
15. See note on Ezekiel 8:10, *NOAB, NRSV*.
16. Pritchard, *ANE*, 76–79.
17. According the *NOAB, NRSV* note on Ezekiel 33:21.
18. A. S. Kapelrud, "Tyre," *IDB*, IV, 721–723.
19. For a fascinating article on Tyre and Phoenicia, see S. W. Matthews, "The Phoenicians: Sea Lords of Antiquity," *National Geographic,* 146 (1978), 149–189.
20. Donald B. Redford, "Hophrah," in *ABD*, vol. 3, 286–287.

CHAPTER

12 The Prophetic Literature III

The Book of the Twelve and the Continuation of the Prophetic Tradition

Timeline

745 B.C.E. Approximate date of the beginning of Hosea's prophetic career
722 B.C.E. Fall of Samaria to the Assyrian Empire
700 B.C.E. Approximate beginning of the rise of the Babylonian Empire
612 B.C.E. Fall of Ninevah
597 B.C.E. First deportation of Judahites to Babylon
586 B.C.E. Destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians
550 B.C.E. Rise of the Persian Empire
538 B.C.E. Decree of Cyrus releases Israelites to return to Jerusalem
515 B.C.E. Completion of the Second Temple

Chapter Outline

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The Book of the Twelve, like Isaiah, has a historical background that spans about three centuries. The historical background for this collection of prophetic literature is found in chapters 7, 8, and 9 of this book. This chapter will give primary attention to the contents of these books and will do so in two interdependent ways. Each of the smaller works within the Book of the Twelve has its own structure and content, but each one also participates in the larger scroll, both giving and receiving meaning. The components of the Twelve will be treated in four groups. The context, size, and significance of the books known as Amos and Hosea sets them, and the small book of Joel that lies between them, apart as an opening sequence. Continued emphasis on the Assyrian Empire and its effect on Israel makes it convenient to put the books called Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, and Nahum together. Habakkuk and Zephaniah are the two books in the collection that have the Babylonian crisis as their primary subject. Finally, the last three books, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, close the collection and focus attention on the restoration of Judah, Jerusalem, and the Temple.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

The collection of twelve prophetic "books" from Hosea to Malachi is placed at the end of all Christian canons, and they are typically considered individually by Christian readers. Jewish tradition more often views these small works together as "the Twelve," and there are important reasons to look at them collectively, while also allowing each of the twelve parts to have some individual identity as well.[1]

There is no simple reason why the Book of the Twelve is organized in the order in which we typically find it, but it is obvious that chronology was one important factor in its formation. Nine of the twelve books can be connected to one of the three major crises that shaped the life of Israel during the eighth to fifth centuries and generated the prophetic literature, as described in chapter 10 of this book. Hosea, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, and Micah are related to Assyria in various ways, Habakkuk and Zephaniah to Babylon, and Haggai and Zechariah to the Restoration. This leaves Joel, Nahum, and Malachi without clear connections to the historical sequence. These observations do not mean that these respective time periods in the eight to fifth centuries are necessarily the time periods in which the books were written. Some, such as Amos, show internal signs of multiple revisions over a long period of time. The story of Jonah is closely connected to Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian Empire, but its language and theological concerns likely place its writing much later than the eighth century. Still, the order of these books is shaped to some degree by this chronological sequence, and the chronological scope of the Twelve is roughly the same as that of the book of Isaiah.[2]

Another important feature that deserves attention at the beginning of the discussion is the development of the idea of "the **Day** of the YHWH" in the Book of the Twelve. This phrase has already appeared twice in Isaiah and twice in Ezekiel, but the highly concentrated four appearances in the little book of Joel are most striking and they make this idea the central theme of that book. Furthermore, it may explain why this little book with no discernable historical connections to any specific time period is commonly placed second within the Twelve. The full phrase appears five more times, and numerous, shortened uses of "the day" seem to address the same idea. Some interpreters consider this phrase a unifying theme for the entire Book of the Twelve.[3]

The Book of the Twelve contains all of the types of literary units that have been on display throughout the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. There are oracles of salvation and judgment,

call narratives, sign-acts, and visions. The books of Amos and Obadiah contain "oracles against the nations," and their placement within the Book of the Twelve puts this feature in a position similar to that found in Isaiah, Ezekiel, and the Greek version of Jeremiah. Some of the prophets in this collection, such as Hosea, Jonah, and Haggai, appear prominently as narrative characters, while others are completely absent. The relative concentrations of words of judgment and redemption give the Twelve the same kind of polarity and negative to positive movement seen in the other prophetic scrolls. When viewed in full, the Book of the Twelve looks a lot like the Book of Isaiah, although it is impossible to say whether one served as a model for the other. This sense of a "plot" in the book is perhaps the greatest benefit that comes from considering the Twelve as a somewhat unified work of literature.

THE OPENING SEQUENCE: HOSEA, JOEL, AND AMOS

Two of the prophets, Amos and Hosea, preached in the northern nation of Israel in its last days. Hosea revealed the heartbreak of an insider, who saw his beloved country sliding toward the brink of destruction, while Amos came up from the south to preach to Israel from an outsider's perspective. Between these two books sits the enigmatic Joel whose vivid references to locust plagues and severe weather have often fascinated readers.

Hosea: The Prophet with a Broken Heart

When Jeroboam died in 746 B.C.E., the government that had seen forty years of stability and progress fell apart like a sand castle before the ocean waves. The causes were both internal and external. Just as Amos had seen the internal rottenness, which had created a situation that made it impossible for the kingdom to last much longer, **Hosea** was the witness to the disintegration of the kingdom brought on by that rottenness. If that was not enough, the giant who had been sleeping between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers woke up hungry and began to look in all directions for victims to gobble up. The nightmare the prophets had been talking about was on its way to becoming a frightening reality.

THE EXTERNAL HISTORICAL CONTEXT. Assyria, the Mesopotamian state, had overrun the small west Asian countries before, but had not been able to maintain its hold on them. Now it had a new and vigorous king, Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.E.). He had an empire as his goal, and he set out to get it. His armies went in all directions, conquering as they marched. He first conquered his neighbors, the Babylonians, and took the name Pulu (or Pul, as the Old Testament calls him). More important to this story, he moved westward in 743 B.C.E., invading the Syrian city-states. It seems that Uzziah of Judah led the opposition to Tiglath-pileser but was unable to deter him. By 738 B.C.E., the northern Syrian states were paying heavy tribute to him.

But money was not the only price Tiglath-pileser demanded of his victims. Determined to crush rebellion before it started, he had a policy of taking all the survivors in the upper levels of society, along with the skilled workers, and moving them to other parts of his empire. This was particularly true in Galilee, where resistance had been strong. There the land was left barren. In other areas, where resistance had been less severe, the land was repopulated by bringing in peoples from other captured lands. This policy was also followed by the next king, Sargon II, who even incorporated Israelite troops into his army. Of the original population, only the poor people, the elderly, and the sick were left behind—none of whom were able to provide leadership for a rebellion.[5]

The Literary Structure of the Book of the Twelve

The books most often designated as the *Minor Prophets* are often discussed independently, particularly by Christian interpreters. Explanations of their structure and content typically appear at the points where they fit within the story of Israel. Amos and Hosea seem to have been prophets in the northern nation of Israel in the eighth century; Micah was likely a prophet in Judah in the eighth century; Zephaniah, Habakkuk, and Nahum in the seventh century; Haggai and Zechariah in the sixth century; and Obadiah, Malachi, Zechariah (9–14), Jonah, and Joel are more difficult to place chronologically.

These books are more properly described, however, as the *Book of the Twelve*. They appear in both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Old Testament in this order: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Notice that this order is similar, but not identical, to the assumed historical order above. The work of the prophets can be understood as responses to crises in Israel's story. It is possible to identify three major crises—the Assyrian (eighth century) crisis, the Babylonian crisis (late seventh and early sixth centuries), and the crisis of the Restoration (late sixth and early fifth centuries) within this story. The general trend within the Book of the Twelve is for the books near the beginning to address the Assyrian crisis, those in the middle the Babylonian crisis, and those at the end the crisis of Restoration. That this is just a general trend and is not followed precisely indicates that this cannot be the only factor determining the order of the books. But this factor does begin to point to the possibility that the structure of the Book of the Twelve reflects that of the book of Isaiah, which also seems to address all three of these crises in the same order. This realization leads to the recognition that other possible factors related to the book of Isaiah may be in play in the organization of the Book of the Twelve.

The material in Isaiah 13–23 is often designated as the *Oracles against the Nations*. The other two big prophetic books, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, also have similar sections. Oracles against the Nations aptly describes much of the books of Joel, Amos, Nahum, and Obadiah, so the Book of the Twelve has material similar to Isaiah in a similar position. We noticed earlier that the character named Isaiah does not show up often in the book of Isaiah, but his appearances in chapters 6–8, 20, and 37–39 help to hold the first half of the book together. Likewise, there is relatively little narrative material presenting the prophets as characters in the Book of the Twelve. The most prominent places where these characters do appear are in the books of Hosea, Jonah, and Haggai—the first, fifth, and tenth books of the scroll. The use of prophetic characters in narratives in the Book of the Twelve at least resembles the situation in Isaiah. The latter half of the book of Isaiah focuses on salvation, God's universal concern for humanity, and the requirements of proper worship. These themes are also central to the books that come later in the Book of the Twelve, especially Jonah, Micah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, we observed a sense of polarity; that is, the first half of each of these books is dominated by judgment oracles with a primarily negative tone, while the second half of each is dominated by salvation oracles with an overall positive tone. Again, the Book of the Twelve displays a similar literary pattern. It seems quite possible that these twelve smaller prophetic books were formed into a single scroll with many of the same ideas that shaped the three large prophetic books, particularly Isaiah, serving as a model.

The second section of the Hebrew canon is called the *Prophets*, and it has traditionally been divided into two groups: the Former Prophets and the Latter Prophets. The Former Prophets contains four scrolls—Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. The Latter Prophets also contains four scrolls—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. So, in addition to producing a large scroll that functions like the other prophetic scrolls, the combination of these twelve books also provides a sense of balance and symmetry to the middle portion of the canon. There may be some evidence within the Book of the Twelve itself of attempts to tie these books together. Scholars have noticed

that the last poem in a book often contains a significant number of words that also appear in the first poem of the next book. For example, Micah 7:8–20 and Nahum 1:1–8 both include the words *anger*, *dust*, *enemy*, *darkness*, *day*, *river*, *mountain*, *inhabitants*, *Carmel*, and *Bashan*. The ability to observe this *catchword phenomenon* in English will depend on the translation you are using.[4] There are multiple explanations for these observations. It could be a coincidence, or the books may have been placed in order based on this common vocabulary at the beginnings and ends, or beginning and ending poems may have been added to each book by the person who actually compiled the twelve smaller books into one large one. It is impossible to prove whether all of these observations about the Book of the Twelve correspond to the intentions of those who designed the canon, but the attempt to perceive the Book of the Twelve as a unified literary work has been fruitful in understanding how the messages of these prophets were used within early Judaism. This approach to the Book of the Twelve will likely continue and deserves the attention of those who wish to read these books and understand them to their fullest extent.

THE CHARACTER NAMED HOSEA. Hosea was a native of the Northern Kingdom, whose judgments were severe, but they were spoken with a tone of tearful pleading instead of righteous indignation. The book of Hosea is one of the most difficult Old Testament books to translate from Hebrew. Some interpreters relate this to the highly emotional nature of the prophet. It is also apparent that the book has been poorly transmitted through the centuries, which may also be partly the result of its many theological tensions.

One important aspect that contributes to the emotionally charged nature of the book is the connection it makes between God's struggles with Israel and Hosea's own family. The use of marriage as a metaphor for the relationship between YHWH and Israel first came into clear view in Jeremiah 2. This image seems very useful in terms of grabbing the attention of the audience, but it creates two significant problems as well. First, the situations in which it is used always involve Israel's disloyalty to YHWH, so the wife in the metaphorical image is always portrayed as unfaithful, while the husband is always faithful. Second, this metaphor is used in conjunction with the theological idea that the destruction of Israel is God's punishment for Israel's disobedience. In the context of the marriage metaphor, this punishment is, therefore, portrayed as physical abuse of the wife by the husband, and, in these cases, the abuse is always portrayed as justified. In the case of Hosea, we are not quite sure how to understand the portrayal of his family. If Gomer was actually his wife, and Jezreel, Lo-ruhama, and Lo-ammi were really children, then these are actual human beings whose lives were more than mere object lessons for Hosea's audience. These are important issues for us to keep in mind as we explore the contents of the book of Hosea.

THE BOOK OF HOSEA

Setting, Marriage, and Family (Hos. 1:1–2:1). The introductory verse suggests that the time of Hosea was after 750 B.C.E. to the downfall of Israel in 722/722 B.C.E. This superscription looks very much like the one found at the beginning of the book of Isaiah. It is possible that this similarity is a factor contributing to the placement of Hosea in the first position in the Book of the Twelve. Very quickly, though, the book of Hosea moves in a different direction. The prophet as a character and the members of his family are in view from the beginning. On the LORD's command, Hosea married Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim:

> Go, take for yourself a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom, for the land commits great whoredom by forsaking the LORD. (1:2)

Did the LORD actually command his prophet to marry a common prostitute? This question has been answered in several ways:

1. The LORD actually commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute, which he did.
2. Gomer was not a prostitute physically. Instead, she was a Baal worshiper and, as such, was spiritually unfaithful. Whether she was physically unfaithful is unimportant.
3. Gomer was a virgin when Hosea married her, but she became unfaithful after marriage. Later, when Hosea looked back upon the experience, he realized that she already had this tendency when he married her.
4. The whole story is an allegory, which has no real relationship to Gomer's morals.

Hosea and Gomer

The lives of the prophets and the messages they are commanded to communicate often become intertwined. Isaiah, for example, gives his children names that have symbolic meaning and, on at least one occasion, takes one of these children with him to perform a prophetic task (Isaiah 7:3). The most troubling instance of this kind of impingement upon the life of the prophet occurs in the book of Hosea. At the beginning of the book, Hosea is commanded to "take a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom." The "whoredom" within Hosea's family is supposed to represent the idolatrous religious practices of Israel. As a result of God's command, Hosea marries a woman named Gomer and has children to whom he gives names that mean "God sows," "No mercy," and "Not my people." Hosea 1:3 introduces Gomer but says little about her other than her name and the name of her father. Gomer may have been a prostitute. Women in ancient Israel were typically forced into prostitution out of economic necessity. They may have been widows or those considered ineligible for marriage for a variety of reasons.

Although this marriage symbolizes something negative, the birth of many children also would have appeared to be a blessing. At the same time, we may raise serious questions about children being given negative names in order to make a point. Many interpreters deal with the troubling aspects of this story by supposing that it is just an allegory that has little or nothing to do with the actual lives of the prophet and his family. Others argue that such interpretation is just a way of evading difficult questions and that there is no reason not to take the biblical text at face value.

After a sequence of prophetic speeches in Hosea 2 that often draws upon the symbolism of Hosea's family, the prophet is commanded in 3:1 to "Go, love a woman who has a lover and is an adulteress." Hosea purchases this woman and takes her. The text does not say whether this is Gomer again or some other woman. Hosea's ownership of this woman and her commanded abstinence from sexual intercourse are presented as a symbol of Israel's political and religious situation. The remainder of the book of Hosea consists entirely of prophetic speech. The prophet and his family members do not enter the book as characters again, so their story is incomplete. Metaphors drawing on images of marriage and family do continue to appear frequently in the book of Hosea, however. There may have been a more complete story of Hosea and Gomer, but the book of Hosea has only revealed fragments of that story as a framework for its message.

The first three possibilities are the ones most often advanced. The fourth is usually rejected on the grounds that, if it were not true, no self-respecting prophet would tell such a story about his wife. If he did, he surely would have trouble at home!

Hosea's children not only had to bear the burden of their mother's disgraceful conduct, but their names became part of their father's sermon illustrations. The firstborn, Jezreel, or "God Sows," reflected Hosea's opinion of Jehu's bloody purge, which had been commissioned by the prophet Elisha. Because Jeroboam was of the Jehu dynasty, Hosea saw the LORD's judgment coming upon Israel because of Jehu's indiscriminate slaughter of people (1:3–5).

The second child was a daughter, Lo-ruhama, or "No mercy." This meant that judgment would come upon the sinful nation and no pity would be shown by the conquerors (1:6–7).

The third child's name may have a double meaning. It was a son named Lo-ammi, or "Not my people." Primarily, the name was meant to say that Israel could no longer claim to be a nation of the LORD's people. It may also reflect Hosea's suspicions about his wife's indiscretions by saying, "This one is not mine!" (1:8–9).

In 1:10–2:1, the prophet spoke a word of hope that the day would come when the message of the children's names would be changed. On that day, instead of the LORD saying to Israel, "You are not my people," they would be called "sons of the living God." Lack of pity would give way to pity, and Jezreel would be a place of joy, not destruction.

Unfaithful Wife—Unfaithful People (Hos. 2:2–23). In an oracle calling for his children to plead with their mother to change her ways, Hosea compared his relations with Gomer to the LORD's relations with Israel. Just as Gomer had followed her lovers and had been unfaithful to Hosea, so Israel had gone after the Baal cult and had forsaken the LORD. Israel praised Baal for making the land fruitful when, in reality, it was the LORD who had brought fertility to the land. The LORD would punish Israel, therefore, for its unfaithfulness (2:2–13).

But punishment was not all. Once Israel had been punished, it would be wooed by the LORD as it had been when it came from Egypt to the wilderness, in hopes of bringing back the love of its youthful days. Again, a play on the names of Hosea's children was used to emphasize the LORD's hope for his people (2:14–23). Recent interpreters have brought to light some significant problems with this metaphor. Along with these passages in Hosea 1–3, there are also prominent passages that use this metaphor in Jeremiah 2–3, Ezekiel 16 and 23, and other prophetic texts. Within this marriage metaphor, it is always the woman who is unfaithful and the violent response of the husband is often portrayed as an acceptable reaction. The accumulated weight of the uses of these metaphors of marriage, infidelity, and violent response raises troubling questions about the character of God. They also can be perceived as supportive of violent reactions to unfaithfulness and suspected unfaithfulness in human marriages.[6,7]

The Purchase (Hos. 3:1–5). Whereas chapter 1 tells Hosea's and Gomer's story in the third person, chapter 3 tells how the story ended in the words of the prophet himself. Few details are given, but it can be assumed that, because she had been abandoned by her lovers, Gomer probably was being sold as a slave. Hosea bought her for the price of a slave—fifteen shekels of silver and about ten bushels of barley. He did not restore her immediately to the place of a wife, however. She had to undergo a period of probation before that could happen. In like manner, the LORD would do the same for Israel. It, too, would be bought back, but not without penalty on its part (3:1–5).

1. *The LORD's lawsuit (Hos. 4:1–3).* The prophets often used the language of the court to give their message of judgment. This is usually indicated in English translations by the terms *controversy* or *contention*. This is not just an argument—it is a legal charge. Three key terms stand out in the

accusation in 4:1: "There is no *faithfulness,* or *loyalty* or *knowledge of God* in the land." The lack of these three qualities was the basis for all the other failures of the people. Faithfulness meant carrying out the promises that were made. Loyalty had about it the sense of "steadfast love," because the Hebrew word used here is most often translated in that way. It included a sense of compassion that had depth and meaning. Knowledge referred to an intimate, personal kind of knowing, such as was shared by husband and wife, and the word was used for this kind of relationship. These terms recur frequently in the oracles of Hosea and are the key to understanding the book.

The lack of these qualities had caused

> Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out;
> bloodshed follows bloodshed. (4:2)

2. ***The guilt of the religious leaders (Hos. 4:4–10).*** The first ones indicted in the LORD's lawsuit were corrupt priests and prophets. They were dispensers of the knowledge of God, so vital to the survival of the people. As a result of their failure, the people were being destroyed because of their lack of knowledge (4:4–6).

Religious prosperity had brought increased sin. More priests and prophets meant more leaders to lead the people astray, because the people followed their leaders. The LORD's priests had led the people to the worship of Baal (4:7–10).

3. ***The harlotry of the people (Hos. 4:11–5:2).*** Baalism had the people in its grip. They worshiped the wooden poles, phallic symbols of Baal. The young women of Israel, married and unmarried, became involved in the sexual rites at the shrines (4:11–13) with the knowledge and approval of the men of the family (4:14). As a result, worship at the traditional shrines was a mockery. They paid no attention to the LORD and stubbornly went their own way (4:15–19). False leaders had brought them to destruction and punishment (5:1–2).

4. ***The result of idolatry (Hos. 5:3–7).*** Israel had become so mired in the muck of Baal worship that the people could no longer find their way back to the LORD. Even though they might seek the LORD, it would be in vain. The LORD had withdrawn from them because of their sin.

5. ***War on the horizon (Hos. 5:8–14).*** Another device of the prophet was to speak of the approach of an invading army, announcing its progress from town to town (5:8). Judah and Ephraim, the two strongest tribes, symbolized for Hosea the two kingdoms. They sought the aid of the great powers when they were in trouble, but they ignored the LORD, who would turn from healer to destroyer. The only hope was that their suffering would bring them to their senses (5:9–14).

6. ***False repentance (Hos. 5:15–7:2).*** Even though Israel repented, it was a false repentance. It had no more permanence than a fog in the morning (5:15–6:4). The key verse in Hosea is as follows:

> For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
> the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. (6:6)

As was true of Amos, Hosea's understanding of the LORD's demands was that acts of worship alone were not enough to please Him. Sacrifice as an attempt to bribe the LORD was useless, for the LORD would not be bribed. Only a commitment of love whose endurance was based on knowing and doing what the LORD demanded was satisfactory.

Instead of steadfast love and the knowledge of God, Israel's worship was a flagrant violation of everything good. At every shrine, sin was multiplied. At Adam, the covenant was broken; at Gilead, there was bloodshed; even the priests at Shechem were murderers, and harlotry was accepted (6:7–10). Every time the LORD blessed Ephraim, there was more evidence of corruption uncovered (6:11–7:2).

7. ***Anarchy in the country (Hos. 7:3–7).*** This passage reflects the period when the kings came and went in rapid succession. There were plots and counterplots in the palace, and one king had hardly taken the throne when he was murdered and another took his place. Hosea compares the plotting to an oven filled with hot coals ready to burst into flame when they get sufficient oxygen (7:3–7).

8. ***Ephraim is a half-baked cake (Hos. 7:8–16).*** Here, Hosea shows his mastery of figures of speech. Bakers had to turn the flat, thin pieces of bread for them to cook properly. Israel was like a cake unfit to eat—left unturned, it burned on one side and was doughy on the other. Again, Israel was like a dove, a bird easily snared in a net. So Israel had fallen into the trap of its powerful enemies by trying to play the game of international politics. In religion, the people turned to Baal, even though the LORD was the one to whom they owed their blessings (7:8–16).

9. ***False worship and false friends (Hos. 8:1–14).*** The enemy was hovering over Israel like a bird of prey. The kings it had chosen were not the LORD's choice. The idols the people worshiped were false gods. They had sown "the wind and they [would] reap the whirlwind" (8:7). The friends they had tried to buy were false. The numerous altars they had built were for sinning, not for worshiping. They sacrificed so as to gorge themselves on meat, not to truly worship the LORD. Israel and Judah both faced the LORD's judgment (8:1–14).

10. ***The judgment to come (Hos. 9:1–17).*** Because Israel had forsaken its God and had been a harlot for Baal, Egypt and Assyria would destroy it (9:1–3). All worship would end and would be replaced by mourning. The days of punishment had arrived. Even the prophet, who was supposed to be the LORD's spokesman, was listened to no longer. The people called him a fool and tried to destroy him. But God would bring judgment upon them (9:4–9).

Israel had once been faithful. When it entered Canaan, however, it took up Baal worship. Now barrenness would afflict Israel. "No birth, no pregnancy, no conception" would be the rule (9:11). Baal could not make Israel fertile. Even when women did give birth, the children would die in infancy or be slaughtered by the invaders (9:10–17).

11. ***Increased altars—increased sin (Hos. 10:1–8).*** Like a grapevine heavy with grapes, Israel was filled with places of worship, but these would be destroyed (10:1–2). The people were liars, making covenants with no intention of keeping them. Their major concern was to preserve their licentious worship, but it would be destroyed by the armies of Assyria (10:3–6). There would be no place to hide when judgment came (10:7–8).

12. ***Judgment must come (Hos. 10:9–15).*** Hosea refers to the atrocity of the Benjaminites at Gibeah (Judg. 19) as the kind of sin that was still present in Israel. The LORD was pleading with them to sow good things—righteousness and steadfast love—and seek Him (10:9–12). Instead, they were sowing iniquity and reaping injustice. They were trusting in military power and not in the LORD. They would have war, but they would suffer destruction instead of enjoying victory (10:3–15).

13. ***The LORD still loves Israel (Hos. 11:1–11).*** Despite its sins, the Lord still loved Israel.

> When Israel was a child, I loved him
> and out of Egypt I called my son.
> The more I called them,
> the more they went from me;
> . . .
> Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
> I took them up in my arms;
> but they did not know that I healed them.
> I drew them with cords of human kindness,
> with bands of love. (11:1–4)

Despite the LORD's love, Israel turned away. Now, it faced judgment at the hand of Assyria. Those people who escaped Assyria's clutches would flee to Egypt (11:5–6). But this was not what the LORD wanted:

> How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
> How can I hand you over, O Israel?
> How can I make you like Admah?
> How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
> My heart recoils within me,
> my compassion grows warm and tender.
> I will not execute my fierce anger,
> I will not again destroy Ephraim:
> for I am God and no mortal,
> the Holy One in your midst,
> and I will not come in wrath. (11:8–9)

Hosea had hope for the survival of the nation despite the fact that it had to go through judgment. This applied to the people as a whole, including Judah (11:10–12).

14. ***Judgment must come (Hos. 12:1–13:16).*** Judgment had to come. The people had sinned too much to avoid it. From Jacob's deception to the prophet's day, the record was one of sin and broken promises (12:1–6). There was cheating in the marketplace (12:7–9); there was no attention paid to the warnings of the prophets—they were all to no avail. Even though a prophet (Moses) brought them out of Egypt, the people turned away from God (12:10–14). Idols were made in abundance, and sin was piled on top of sin (13:1–2). Because of this, the nation would vanish like the morning mist or like the chaff of wheat before the wind (13:3).

The LORD, who wanted to be Israel's savior, had to be its destroyer instead. Like the beast of prey when it is provoked, he would destroy Israel. No king could save it, for kings, too, would be destroyed (13:4–11). Only the LORD had power to defeat even death and the power of Sheol (the grave). But, because of Ephraim's sin, it would not be done (13:12–16). The writer assumes that the destruction of Israel is God's direct judgment. The prevailing worldview of that day would probably not have permitted any other assumption.

15. ***A plea to return (Hos. 14:1–8).*** Hosea made one last plea to the people to put their trust in the LORD and not in Assyria. Only the LORD could heal them of their wickedness. Only the LORD would be to them like water to thirsty plants, like a tree under whose shade they could dwell.

16. ***A wisdom saying (Hos. 14:9).*** Hosea closes with a word of wisdom:

> Those who are wise understand these things;
> those who are discerning know them.
> For the ways of the LORD are right,
> and the upright walk in them,
> but transgressors stumble in them.

The Book of Joel

As the introduction to this chapter mentioned, the book of Joel does not have clear historical indicators. One benefit of this absence is that it makes the book and its message extremely flexible. Perhaps two aspects make the book stand out most. One is its powerful use of destructive images of nature. Earthquakes, locust swarms, fires, and storms all come into play in Joel. All of these

forces contribute to a sense of destruction, which ultimately focuses on "the Day of YHWH," a phrase and concept that Joel introduces to the Book of the Twelve, and that will continue to be present throughout the collection.

The Locusts Are Coming! (Joel 1:1–2:27).[8] The prophet was "**Joel**, the son of Pethuel" (1:1). Beyond that, nothing personal is known about him. The outstanding feature of the book is its vivid description of one of the most frightening plagues known to ancient peoples—the locusts. Locusts are large, voracious grasshoppers, destructive beyond description (1:4). When they descended by the millions on an area, they literally devoured every living plant.

It [the locust] has laid waste my vines,
and splintered my fig trees;
it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down;
their branches have turned white. (1:7)

But the locust plague was only a way for Joel to introduce a bigger and more important idea—the day of the LORD (see Amos 5:18).

Alas for the day!
For the day of the LORD is near,
and as destruction from the Almighty it comes.
Is not the food cut off from your eyes,
joy and gladness from the house of God? (1:15–16)

Using words that sounded as if they were borrowed directly from the prophet Amos, Joel spoke of the day of the LORD as a "day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness" (2:2). The locusts, which were the LORD's agents for bringing in the great day of the LORD, were like a conquering army sweeping over the land:

Like warriors they charge,
like soldiers they scale the wall.
Each one keeps to its own course,
they do not swerve from their paths. (2:7)

The locusts were everywhere, even in the houses of the people.

The whole universe got involved. There was an earthquake, the sun and moon could not be seen, and the stars disappeared (2:10–11). The LORD called on the people to repent and return to him. As in times of calamity, a solemn fast was observed, during which all the people came together. The priest led the people in prayer for a lifting of the plague (2:12–17).

The LORD heard and would return his blessing to the land. Peace and prosperity would follow. Food would be plentiful, peace would prevail, and the LORD would rule the people (2:18–27).

THE GREAT DAY OF THE LORD (JOEL 2:28–3:21). Part of this passage (2:28–32) is well known to Christians because it is quoted in Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:17–21). It shows the characteristics of apocalyptic judgment in its references to the darkening of the sun and the moon turning to blood as signs of its approach. Now the other nations would be subject to judgment, but Judah and Jerusalem would be restored to a place of glory. Tyre, Sidon, and Philistia were used as examples of cities that oppressed Judah. The reference to the Greeks (3:6) seems to give a hint about the time of the prophet's work. If so, it was sometime in the fifth or fourth centuries B.C.E. (3:1–8).

The nations would be called to judgment in the valley of Jehoshaphat, whose name meant "the LORD judges." Like a farmer harvesting grain, the nations would be cut down. It would be a time of decision with the multitudes gathered (3:9–15). The words of Amos were quoted:

> The LORD roars from Zion,
> and utters his voice from Jerusalem,
> and the heavens and the earth shake. (Amos 1:2)
> But the LORD is a refuge for his people,
> a stronghold for the people of Israel. (Amos 3:16)

For Judah and Jerusalem, the day of the LORD promised a time of unparalleled prosperity. For Egypt and Edom, which had long been thorns in Judah's side, the day would mean drought and desolation for crimes committed against Judah. The LORD would see that justice was done (3:17–21).

Amos

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AMOS. **Amos** preached in Israel after Jeroboam II had completed his wars of conquest. The nation was riding the crest of a superficial prosperity. There was a merchant class whose motto must have been "Buyer, beware!" Short-weight, shoddy merchandise and inflated prices were the rule and not the exception. The small farmer was cheated when the merchants bought his surplus grain. They used oversized measures when buying and weighed out the farmer's money on rigged scales. When they, in turn, sold grain to common people, they used a substandard measure and charged an inflated price. The grain, furthermore, was rotten and full of trash. The demand of the law, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18), was forgotten in their greed for gain.

Religion was very popular. The shrines were filled with worshipers, and feast days were numerous. The king had his personal shrine at Bethel. Sacrifices were offered in abundance, and many people even slept near the altar at night to demonstrate their devotion to the LORD. But all their religiosity had little effect on dealings in the marketplace.

Society was divided into the haves and the have-nots. The rich were getting richer, and the poor were becoming poorer. The rich cared nothing about the poor. Harsh debt laws not only permitted the rich to take a person's property if one could not pay the debt, but also allowed enslavement of members of one's family. If the poor starved to death, it would just decrease the surplus population.[9]

While things were tranquil on the domestic scene, they were beginning to change on the international front. Within a few years of the time Amos appeared at Bethel, Assyria would rouse itself and begin a westward march that would crush the small western kingdoms, including Israel.

THE CHARACTER NAMED AMOS. There has been much discussion about Amos. After all, he was the first prophet whose words became an Old Testament book. Nothing is known about his family or whether he even had one. He was a Judean, a native of Tekoa, a small village about twelve miles south of Jerusalem in the hill country.

Amos was a shepherd. Much of the debate about Amos is over the Hebrew term used to describe him, as it is not the usual word for shepherd. The only other time the word is used in the Hebrew Bible is in 2 Kings 3:4, where Mesha, king of Moab, was described as a "sheep breeder" (Amos 1:1). Amos also described himself as a "dresser of sycamore trees" (7:14). The sycamore was a kind of low-quality fig used for food for both cattle and poor people. To "dress a sycamore tree" seemed to

involve pinching or puncturing its fruit to hasten its ripening. The sycamore did not grow at Tekoa, so Amos had to go either to Jericho or westward to the Shepelah (foothills) to do that job.

Opposite conclusions have been drawn from these known facts about Amos. Either (1) he was a poor man who had to have two jobs to make a living or (2) he owned flocks and lands that others looked after, freeing him to take wool from his flocks to Bethel and Samaria, where there were more traders and prices were better.

Whatever the truth was, he did go north, and what he saw provoked his imagination. He was a passionate believer in the LORD, the God of Israel. What he saw taking place in the cities of Israel did not agree with what he knew of the requirements of the covenant the LORD made with his people at Sinai. He went to preach not because he wanted to, but because he felt compelled by the LORD: "The LORD *took* me . . . and the LORD said to me, '*Go,* prophesy to my people Israel' " (7:15) [emphasis added].

THE BOOK OF AMOS. Although the book of Amos, as it stands, probably was put in its final form during the Babylonian Exile, many of the messages were likely spoken sometime in the middle of the eighth century B.C.E.

The Introduction (Amos 1:1–2). After an introduction that is somewhat standard for the prophets, the theme of the book, "the LORD roars from Zion," emphasizes the source of the prophet's message.

Look at What the Neighbors Are Doing (Amos 1:3–2:5). Amos' sermon started out by painting a lurid picture of the sins of Israel's neighbors. Syria had committed unspeakable atrocities in war by tearing captives to pieces under iron threshing sledges (1:3–5); the Philistines were slave traders (1:6–8); the Phoenicians also traded in slaves and were covenant breakers (1:9–11); Edom had maintained an undying hatred for Israel (1:11–12); the Ammonites had mercilessly ripped open the stomachs of pregnant women (1:13–15); Moab had desecrated the bones of the Edomite king (2:1–3); and Judah had rejected the law of the LORD (2:4–5). Each section opens with "For three transgressions of—and for four, I will not revoke the punishment" and ends with "I will send a fire. . . ."

You Are Even Worse, Israel (Amos 2:6–16). Amos charged Israel's neighbors with one major sin, but the charges against Israel were many. The rich enslaved the poor for the least of debts (2:6). They pushed the poor down at every opportunity (2:7a). Father and son patronized the same prostitute at the shrine where the LORD supposedly was worshiped (2:7b). In violation of Israelite law, they took a man's only garment and kept it overnight (Deut. 24:13), with the excuse that they needed it for religious purposes (2:8a). The priests and their friends used religious funds to buy wine for drinking parties (2:8b).

They did these things despite the LORD's blessing upon them (2:9–11). In fact, they went even further. They demanded that the prophets not prophesy and tried to get Nazirites to violate their vow not to drink wine (2:12). Because of these sins, judgment would be swift and certain (2:13–16).

Hear This Word (Amos 3:1–5:17). These chapters contain three sections, introduced by the phrase "Hear this word." In chapter 3, the theme is "privilege brings responsibility." The reason for the severity of Israel's punishment was that it had been blessed more than any other people by being chosen by the LORD (3:1–2). As a result, the LORD God was bringing a judgment that would destroy shrine and altar, winter house and summer house (3:3–15).

Chapter 4 was directed to the women of Samaria. Amos compared them to the fat, sleek cows of the pastures of Bashan. They, like their husbands, were greedy drunkards concerned only with their own desires. When the invader came, instead of being given an honorable burial, their

dead bodies would be speared with hooks and dragged through the broken city walls to be cast out for the animals to devour (4:1–3).

Religion had become sin because it was false worship (4:4–5). The LORD had warned the people by famine (4:6), drought (4:7–8), blight and locusts (4:9), war (4:10), and natural catastrophe (4:11), but none of these had turned the people back to the LORD. Thus, judgment was certain (4:12). In 4:13, there is a hymn to the power of the LORD:

> For lo, the one who forms the mountains, creates the wind,
> reveals his thoughts to mortals,
> makes the morning darkness, and treads on the heights
> of the earth—
> the LORD, the God of hosts, is his name.

The prophet set before Israel the alternatives in 5:1–17—death or life. He sang a funeral song in the limping, halting rhythm of the dirge:

> Fallen no more to rise
> is the maiden Israel;
> forsaken on her land,
> with no one to raise her up. (5:2)

Israel's only hope for life was to seek the LORD, for life could be found in Him (5:4, 6, 14). Otherwise, judgment would be so severe that farmers would have to be pressed into service as wailers, because there would not be enough professional wailers to meet the need (5:16–17).

The Day of the LORD Is Upon You (Amos 5:18–27). In some of the most vivid imagery found in prophetic literature, Amos described the day of the LORD. In popular thought, the day of the LORD was to be a day of triumph and celebration when the LORD would give Israel victory over its enemies (5:18). Not so, said Amos. It would be a day of

> . . . darkness, not light;
> as if someone fled from a lion,
> and was met by a bear;
> or went into the house and
> rested a hand against the wall,
> and was bitten by a snake.

The Israelites' religious services were such farces that they had no effect on the way people lived. The only thing that could satisfy the LORD was to

> . . . let justice roll down like waters,
> and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (5:24)

This verse sums up the major theme of the preaching of Amos—that a righteous God demanded right living to accompany sincere worship. Right living involved giving every man his due. When viewed from the standpoint of mercy, justice can have an almost negative quality; mercy means that personal merit does not come into consideration. So the rich men of Israel preferred mercy. The poor, however, looked at justice as a positive quality. They had never rated that high on the scale of human values. When a person suffering injustice achieves justice, it is a blessing.

Amos also raised the question of the value of sacrifice (5:25). What he seemed to say was that what was wrong with the system was not sacrifice so much as the sacrificer. A wrong attitude changes worship of any kind into blasphemy.

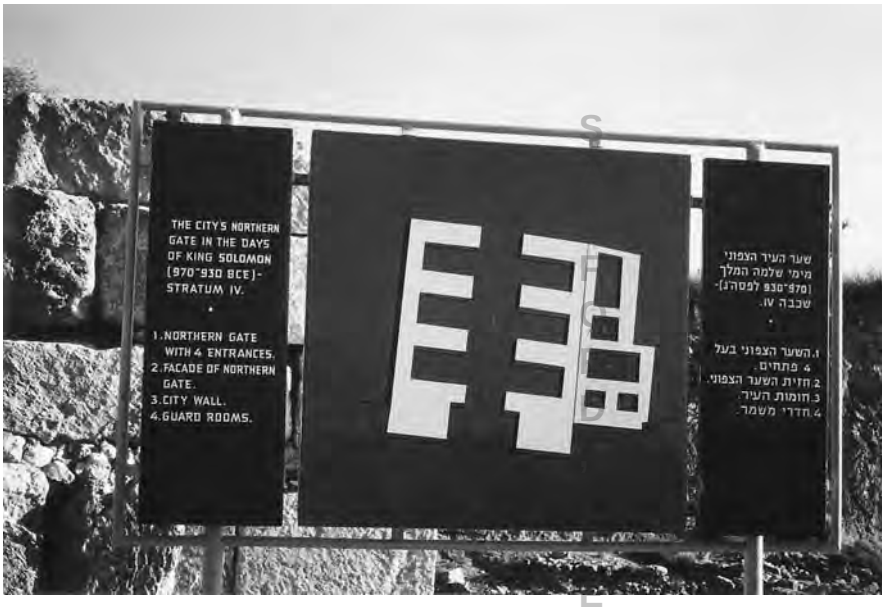


FIGURE 12–1 "Hate evil, and love good, and establish justice in the gate" (Amos 5:15). The city gate, shown in the plan of the gate at Megiddo, was the courthouse in ancient Israel. The city elders met in the alcoves to conduct the business of the city, which included trials.

Woe to the Wealthy (6:1–14). Amos saw pride and self-indulgence as major problems in Israel. Because of the nation's military successes, its leaders pictured themselves as the great leaders of the world. But the LORD had brought down other nations, so Israel should not think that it could not fall (6:1–3).

The upper classes spent time in drunken carousing, bragging about their greatness, and caring nothing for their fellow Israelites. The term Amos used to describe their rites, *marzeah*, may have involved ceremonies memorializing the dead and most likely included sexual orgies performed in the name of worship. They were celebrating while their ship was sinking, unaware of the danger around them (6:4–7). Because of their pride, judgment was inevitable.[10]

The Visions of Amos (7:1–9:14). The visions of the prophets were a major part of the prophetic experiences. Five visions are described in the book of Amos: (1) the locust plague, (2) the judgment by fire, (3) the plumb line, (4) the basket of summer fruit, and (5) the LORD by the altar.

What was the nature of these visions? The visions of Amos—as well as those of later prophets, especially Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel—seemed to begin with some ordinary circumstance of the prophet's life. But in a particular situation, the ordinary event took on extraordinary meaning and significance for the prophet. He drew from it a lesson that had an application to the situation with which he was dealing. This could mean that the prophet never went through any trancelike state or extreme emotional condition, as the ecstatics did. Rather, it may well be that the vision was played out in a sort of glorified imagination. Ezekiel's visions by the River Chebar (Ezek. 1) would seem to be the exception. Even so, those visions, strange as they were, began when Ezekiel observed the approach of a thunderstorm (Ezek. 1:4).

The first two visions of Amos were different from the other three. They threatened judgment, but when the prophet pleaded for the people, judgment was suspended (7:1–6). With the

vision of the plumb line, there was no suspension of judgment—it was inevitable. These visions may indicate something of the stages of Amos's thinking about Israel. For a time, he had hope. As time went by, however, he became convinced that there was no hope—judgment had to come.

The account of the visions is interrupted by a prose description of a confrontation between Amos and Amaziah, the head priest of the king's shrine at Bethel. Amos was told to go back to Judah and mind his own business. Amos replied, in effect, that he was minding the LORD's business and that Amaziah would not escape judgment, even though he was a religious leader (7:10–17).

The fourth vision (8:1–3) contains a pun or **wordplay.** Written Hebrew words contained only consonants. The consonants for "summer fruit" and "the end" are *qts,* though the two words, respectively, are *qayits* and *qets.* So when Amos was asked, "What do you see?" he replied, "A basket of *qayits* (summer fruit)." The LORD said, "The *qets* has come upon my people Israel." This word of judgment formed the text for a sermon of judgment on those who could not worship because they were thinking of how they could cheat their neighbors in the market when the religious holiday was over. For such people, judgment would include famine for those who were gluttons. There would be a famine, furthermore, of the word of the LORD when people wanted most to hear it (8:4–14).

The final vision spoke of judgment coming upon the religious shrine. Amos probably saw a priest standing by the altar, and that scene led to the vision of the LORD standing by the altar calling for judgment (9:1). No matter how men tried to escape, there would be, in the words of the spiritual, "No hiding place down here" (9:2–4). Following another hymn (9:5–6) comes one of the most remarkable statements in the book:

> "Are you not like the Ethiopians to me
> O people of Israel?" says the LORD.
> "Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt,
> and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?" (9:7)

This question attacked a commonly held view among the Israelites—that the LORD was their God alone and was not concerned with any other people. Other people had their own gods. A conflict between two nations meant a conflict between the respective deities of those nations. But, both here and in the opening words of judgment on Israel's neighbors, Amos was saying that the LORD, the God of Israel, was God of all nations. Because of that, the LORD was concerned not only about the Israelites, but about other peoples as well.

A Better Day (Amos 9:11–15). The book of Amos ends with a hopeful note that may have been added by a Judean editor during the dark days of the Babylonian Exile (9:11–15). By that time, the judgments spoken of by Amos were a reality, and the role of the prophets had changed from pronouncing doom to holding out hope for the future. None of the earlier prophets, however, had seen God's judgment as the complete destruction of the people. Instead, they saw it as a means whereby the nation would be cleansed of its corruption and purified for a new and better day.

JERUSALEM AND NINEVEH: OBADIAH, JONAH, MICAH, AND NAHUM

The next sequence of books is not easy to characterize as a group. The strongest connections are the references to Assyria and the Assyrian crisis in the books of Jonah, Micah, and Nahum, but later events and issues are also in view. Regardless of time and context, these books bring the attention of the Twelve back to Jerusalem, and away from the northern focus present in Hosea and Amos.

Obadiah

Nothing is known about the author of this short book. The name means "the LORD's servant," which may not be a name, but just a title. Part of the book almost duplicates sections of Jeremiah (verses 1–9 are quite similar to Jer. 49:7–22).

The biblical stories of conflicts between Jacob and Esau found in Genesis 25–36 reflect a long-standing animosity between the Israelites and the Edomites. The time of these oracles could be almost any period of Israelite history, but recent archaeological findings indicate Edomite intrusions into Judah's Negev territory just before or after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.[11] This date would disrupt the chronological scheme of the Twelve, and make the placement of **Obadiah** somewhat puzzling. Perhaps the explicit reference to "the Day of YHWH" in 1:15 and the constant presence in the background of the entire poem help explain this placement.

The theme of the book was that **Edom** was doomed. Petra (or Sela), its capital, was so secure that the prophet compared it to an eagle's nest built on a lofty peak. But, nevertheless, the LORD would bring it down (1:1–4). Just as Edom had gloated over the rape and pillage of Jerusalem, the Jews would have the opportunity to gloat over the ruin of Edom. The day of the LORD would be directed toward the enemy, and these people would receive just punishment for their sins. When the LORD's kingdom was created, the Jews would be triumphant over such enemies as Edom and Philistia (1:5–21).

Jonah

The tragedy of the book of Jonah is that a great missionary plea is known largely as a fish tale. The fish was not a major character—it only played a supporting role!

The historical character **Jonah** was a fiercely nationalistic prophet who lived in the days of Jeroboam II (2 Kings 14:25). The book that bears his name is *about* Jonah, not by him. Unlike the other prophetic books that contain the oracles of the prophet, the book contains only one oracle of Jonah, which consists of only five Hebrew words.

The importance of this book did not lie in what the prophet said. Instead, the important thing was what the book said. Arguments about whether a man could survive for three days in the belly of a fish, while they may be interesting, miss the point. It is tragic that most people are so fascinated by the story of the fish that they never get to chapter 4, where the real purpose of the book unfolds.

1. ***Jonah, the stubborn prophet (1:1–17).*** There are interesting parallels between Jonah and Israel. In chapter 1, Jonah, called by God to go to Nineveh, was stubborn and rebellious. He decided to do things his way, so he went down to Joppa to board a ship to Tarshish (probably Spain), exactly the opposite direction from which Jonah was supposed to be going. The next thing he knew, a storm was tossing the ship. Jonah ended up being tossed into the sea, where a great fish swallowed him. As it was with Jonah, so it had been with Israel. Its prophets constantly had called on it to do the LORD's will, but Israel had been stubborn and rebellious. The Babylonians, to use Isaiah's figure of speech about the Assyrians (Isa. 8:7), had overflowed the land. Israel had been swallowed up in the Exile.
2. ***Jonah, the prophet in the depths (2:1–10).*** To symbolize Jonah's despair over his condition, a psalm of lament comprises Jonah 2. Such psalms undoubtedly were common in the Exile as the Israelites poured out their feelings of despair. These psalms often ended on a note of renewed commitment and praise to the LORD. As Jonah came out of the depths, so Israel came out of Babylon.
3. ***Jonah, the reluctant prophet (3:1–10).*** When Jonah finally decided to do what he was called to do, he achieved unusual success. The king ordered that even the animals should

wear sackcloth as a symbol of mourning and repentance. With high hopes, Israel had returned to the land. The people of the land offered to join with them to rebuild the Temple, but the particularistic Jews had rejected all such offers. They did not want to contaminate their faith, which had been purified by the Exile in Babylon.

4. ***Jonah, the angry prophet (4:1–11).*** God's failure to destroy Nineveh was frustrating to Jonah. He wanted his problem solved by the annihilation of Nineveh, not by its transformation by God. Many Israelites, like most other people, wanted their enemies wiped out rather than taken in by God's grace.

There was a stinging satire in the description of Jonah's vigil on the hill overlooking Nineveh as he waited for its hoped-for destruction. The LORD, who had already "provided a great fish to swallow up Jonah" (1:17), now "appointed a bush" to shade Jonah's head (4:6). Just as Jonah was beginning to relax in its shade, "God appointed a worm" that attacked the bush and caused it to wither (4:7). If that was not enough, God "prepared a sultry east wind," which combined with the sun beaming down on his head, adding to his exterior discomfort and his inner turmoil. Jonah begged to die so as to end his misery (4:8). In return, the LORD chided Jonah for being more concerned with plants than with people, even the hated Ninevehites.

Those favoring a more inclusive understanding of God's grace felt that the more exclusive Israelites were more concerned with their own "plants" than with people, the most important of God's living creatures. They could not be "a light to the nations" using Jonah's method. Instead, they had to be concerned enough about other people to gladly carry the word to them. In short, the book of Jonah was a missionary tract that proclaimed the views of post-Exilic Jews who believed that they had to provide active examples in a non-Jewish world.

Micah: An Anti-Establishment Prophet in Jerusalem

While Isaiah was counselor to the kings of Judah during the second half of the eighth century, a prophet from the country village of Moresheth-gath in the Philistine territory was also preaching the word of the LORD in Jerusalem. It is difficult not to wonder whether these two prophets were aware of each other and, if so, what they thought of each other's messages, which are not always in harmony.

The small book that bears Micah's name falls into four parts: oracles against Jerusalem (1:1–3:12), a new day for Israel (4:1–5:15), oracles against Israel (6:1–7:7), and Israel restored (7:8–20). This book is part of the Book of the Twelve.

Micah preached before the Northern Kingdom had fallen, so part of his preaching was directed toward Samaria and its sins. But the main use of Samaria and its sins was to say that Jerusalem was just like it. Just as the LORD's judgment was coming on Samaria, so it would come on Jerusalem (1:1–9).

Micah, like the other prophets, enjoyed using puns. In a series of puns in Hebrew, which are not easily translated into English, he described the destruction of the small cities in the path of the invaders (1:10–16).

Micah reserved his most scathing comments for the upper classes of society. He accused them of lying awake, plotting to steal from the common man (2:1–5). They tried to stop the prophets of the LORD from prophesying the truth, preferring that a prophet would

> go about uttering empty falsehoods,
> saying, "I will preach to you of wine and strong drink,"
> such a one would be the preacher for this people! (2:11)

The oracle was softened by a later addition that spoke of the righteous remnant (2:12–13).

Particularly biting was an oracle about the leaders of Judah. They hated good and loved evil. They were like cannibals,

> who tear the skin off my people,
> and the flesh off their bones;
> who eat the flesh of my people,
> flay their skin off them,
> break their bones in pieces,
> and chop them up like meat in a kettle,
> like flesh in a caldron. (3:2–3)

The LORD would not hear them on the Day of Judgment (3:1–4).

Prophets, too, felt the lash of Micah's tongue, especially those prophets who curried the favor of the rich. They would be disgraced, but the true prophet would be vindicated (3:5–7). Micah, of course, considered himself to be a true prophet:

> But as for me, I am filled with power,
> with the spirit of the LORD,
> and with justice and might,
> to declare to Jacob his transgression
> and to Israel his sin. (3:8)

Whereas Isaiah had said that Jerusalem would not fall to the armies of Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E., Micah had no such faith in the future. The sins of the city's leaders were sure to bring doom. He foresaw a day when Zion would "be plowed like a field" and Jerusalem's hills would be covered with trees instead of houses (3:9–12).

In startling contrast to chapters 1–3, this section of Micah speaks of restoration and a glorious future, leading many interpreters to say that another prophet of a later time was responsible for it. The first passage (4:1–3), in particular, has been questioned because it also appears in Isaiah 2:2–4. It speaks of a time of universal peace when all nations would come to worship the LORD, the God of Israel. It would be a time when weapons of war would be turned into instruments of peace and safety (4:1–5). The crippled and rejected peoples of the earth would receive special attention from the LORD (4:6–8). The next oracle speaks of the Babylonian Exile and how the LORD will rescue His people from it. Under the LORD's plans, Israel will triumph over its enemies and live by the LORD's will. The present condition, however, is an enemy siege (4:9–5:1).

One of Micah's most famous sayings was the Bethlehem oracle (5:2–6). Because the messianic concept was connected with the Davidic monarchy, it would be quite natural to expect the birth of the future king to be connected to David's city, Bethlehem. This was quoted in the New Testament as a messianic prophecy (Matt. 2:6). The remainder of chapter 5 deals with the defeat of the Assyrian army and the restoration of the remnant of Jacob, who will be scattered "like dew from the LORD." The remnant would be purified from its worship of idols (5:7–15).

If only one sermon from Micah had survived, Micah 6:1–8 would be sufficient to rank him among the great prophets of Israel. In this oracle, he managed to sum up the important point of the message of each of the three other eighth-century prophets. The oracle is a classic example of the use of court language by the prophet to present the LORD's case against Israel. The essentials of a trial are present:

1. ***The court is called to order (6:1–2).*** The LORD, who is judge, jury, and prosecuting attorney, calls on the mountains and hills to be spectators at the trial and announces that the court is in session.

2. ***The indictment and the evidence all presented (6:3–5).*** The indictment is presented in a series of questions (6:3) charging the people with being tired of the LORD. The LORD's past dealings with Israel are recalled to show that Israel has no right to complain.
3. ***The defense pleads its case (6:6–7).*** Protesting their innocence, the people ask, "What more can we do? Does the LORD require more offerings?" If so, they would be willing to sacrifice even their firstborn children.
4. ***The verdict is delivered (6:8).*** What the defense had said was that whatever bribe the LORD demanded, the people would pay. But that is the heart of the matter. Material offerings, even firstborn children, are meaningless when that is all that is offered.

> He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
> and what does the LORD require of you
> but to do justice, and to love kindness,
> and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)

In this verse, Micah sets forth Amos's theme of justice, Hosea's theme of love (kindness), and Isaiah's theme of the quiet, confident walk with God.

Following this oracle, Micah spoke against cheating in the marketplace and oppression of the poor by the rich. These sins would bring the LORD's judgment in the form of famine and desolation (6:9–16). He lamented the fact that good men had perished and that the ungodly seemed to be everywhere, ready to murder at every opportunity. Bribery was rampant, no one could be trusted, and children were disobedient to their parents. In such an evil time, the only hope was to look to the LORD for salvation (7:1–7). Israel would not always be under the enemy's heel. The time would come when the LORD would deliver Israel, and the enemy would be destroyed (7:8–10). The nations that despised Israel would be drawn to it (7:11–13). Micah 7:14 is a prayer to the LORD as a shepherd to his flock; a response from the LORD follows in 7:15–17, promising a repeat of the marvels of the Exodus days. The nations will be subject to Israel instead of the reverse.

Finally, the book closes with a short psalm of praise to God:

> He will again have compassion upon us;
> he will tread our iniquities under foot.
> You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.
> You will show faithfulness to Jacob,
> and unswerving loyalty to Abraham,
> as you have sworn to our ancestors
> from the days of old. (7:19–20)

Nahum: An Oracle against Nineveh

Almost nothing is known of **Nahum.** He is called *Nahum of Elkosh* in 1:1. Speculation about the location of Elkosh suggests that it was either in Judah, the Galilee region, or Mesopotamia. The name of the city of Capernaum, famous in the New Testament, literally means "village of Na(h)um." This probably is the basis of the belief that Elkosh was located in Galilee. The only thing that can be said with certainty about Nahum is that he hated the Assyrians. The book of Nahum dates from about 612 B.C.E. It mentions the plunder of Thebes (Nah. 3:8), which took place in 663 B.C.E. and thus could not be earlier than that date. Because **Nineveh** was destroyed in 612 B.C.E., that would seem to be the latest year to which one should date the book.

THE LORD IS A JEALOUS GOD (NAH. 1:1–11). The book starts with an ancient poem of the LORD as an avenging God. It is an acrostic—that is, different letters of the alphabet start each line. Because not all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are used, it is an incomplete acrostic. The poem may be original with Nahum, or he may be quoting it from some other source.

The LORD punishes those who have set themselves against Him (1:2–3a), using the forces of nature to carry out the judgment (1:3b–5). No one can endure the wrath of the LORD, for

> He will make a full end to his adversaries,
> and will pursue his enemies into darkness.

Behind this concept of the LORD as the avenger is the basic idea that the LORD is the God of justice, the one who can set things right in the universe. The LORD's enemies are those who would destroy the principle of justice on earth, but things will be set right. The LORD's vengeance is directed toward punishing the guilty and righting things that have been made wrong.

YOU ARE DOOMED, NINEVEH (NAH. 1:12–3:19). In what is absolutely the most powerful poetry in the Bible, Nahum describes the fate of Nineveh, the capital of the hated Assyrian Empire. There is little that is positive in the poem, except the words of assurance to Judah in 1:12–13 and 1:15, in which Judah was told that it would be delivered from the Assyrian threats. Between these words of assurance were words of doom for Assyria (1:14).

In vivid language, Nahum described the fall of the doomed city. First came the warning of the approaching armies (2:1), followed by a description of the invaders. The scarlet-clad soldiers were accompanied by the gleaming metal war chariots that flashed like torches under the dazzling Mesopotamian sun (2:3–4). The defenders of the city were caught unprepared for the attack. They rushed about in confusion, trying to organize the defense, but it was all in vain (2:5). The invaders were already inside the city walls, even in the king's palace, carrying off the queen. To describe the fall of the city, the poet used the image of a dam breaking, releasing the waters of a pool (2:6–8). As a result,

> Devastation, desolation, and destruction!
> Hearts faint and knees tremble,
> all loins quake, all faces grow pale! (2:10)

In another powerful poem (3:1–19), one hears the sound of the pounding horse's hooves and the rumble of chariots on cobblestone streets (3:1–3). Nineveh was like a harlot who had lost her allure, who now would be stripped naked and assaulted with manure. She was now viewed with contempt (3:4–7). Nineveh was no better than other great cities that had fallen, such as Thebes, the ancient capital of Egypt. No matter how strong Nineveh's defenses might be or how large its population, it was doomed. Its unceasing evil would soon end, and it would be wiped from the face of the earth (3:18–19).

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO BABYLON: HABAKKUK AND ZEPHANIAH

Habakkuk: The Philosopher Prophet

If philosophers are people who ask important questions, then **Habakkuk** must be called a philosopher. While most prophets said, "Thus says the LORD" or "Thus the LORD is about to do," Habakkuk asked, "Why, LORD, are you about to do what you are about to do?" Nothing personal is known

about Habakkuk. Unlike other prophets, no mention is made of his family or birthplace. Other than a brief reference in a book of the Apocrypha, no other mention is made of him in any Jewish religious literature. What can be learned of him has to come from the way he approached his work as the LORD's spokesman. Living at a time when the Babylonians were threatening to overrun Judah, Habakkuk raised some searching questions about the meaning of God's activity in the events of his day, the period from about 609 to 597 B.C.E. The writers of the Dead Sea Scrolls interpreted the prophet's words as bearing directly on their own situation (165 B.C.E.–70 C.E.). A Scrolls commentary on Habakkuk 1–2 interprets the reference to the Chaldeans as meaning the Romans. The book falls naturally into three sections: 1:1–2:5, Habakkuk's questions; 2:6–20, woes; and 3:1–19, a psalm entitled *Habakkuk's prayer.* This book also is part of the Book of the Twelve.

HABAKKUK'S QUESTIONS (HAB. 1:1–2:5). The first question was this: "LORD, how long must this flouting of your will go on?" Who was flouting the LORD's will? Was it the people of Judah? Or was it the Babylonians? Habakkuk probably was referring to the situation in Judah that developed after Josiah's death.

The answer to the question came: The Chaldeans (Babylonians) were being sent to punish the Judeans for disobeying the will of the LORD (1:2–11).

That answer shocked Habakkuk and brought forth a second question: "LORD, how can you punish us with people who are more unrighteous than we are?" After all, the Babylonians were cruel and merciless pagans who were catching small nations in their nets as fishermen catch fish (1:12–17).

As the answer did not come immediately, the prophet mounted a watchtower to see what the LORD would do (2:1). Then the answer came: The LORD did things in His own good time. The person who would survive and live was the person who was faithful to the LORD. The great Christian apostle Paul quoted Habakkuk 2:4 in his letter to the Galatians (3:11): "The just shall live by faith." Later, in the sixteenth century C.E., this verse was instrumental in setting Martin Luther on his way to the beginning of the Protestant Reformation.

"WOE TO HIM" (HAB. 2:6–20). The woes, a common feature of prophetic oracles, are directed to five groups: (1) Woe to him whose greed drove him to plunder to get riches, (2) woe to the violent man, (3) woe to the bloody man, (4) woe to the drunkard, and (5) woe to the idol maker.

HABAKKUK'S PRAYER (HAB. 3:1–19). The psalm has the name of a tune by which it was to be sung, indicating that it was used in the worship services of the Temple. It was used to praise the LORD's mighty works (3:1–15). The Exodus events are described in highly figurative language:

> The mountain saw you, and writhed:
> a torrent of water swept by;
> . . .
> In fury you trod the earth,
> in anger you trampled nations.
> . . .
> You trampled the sea with your horses,
> churning the mighty waters. (3:10, 12, 15)

The psalmist was overcome by what he had seen of the LORD's activity and waited expectantly for what he would do to the invaders (3:16). This caused the psalmist to rejoice, even though all else failed around him, for

> God, the LORD, is my strength;
> he makes my feet like the feet of the deer,
> and makes me tread upon the heights. (3:19)

Zephaniah

HIS LIFE. Before Josiah's reform made too much headway, the prophet **Zephaniah** seems to have been active. Little is known about Zephaniah, except that his ancestry was traced back to Hezekiah. It probably is safe to assume that this was King Hezekiah. This would mean that Zephaniah was related to the royal family. Although he preached during Josiah's reign (1:1), the nature of his preaching would indicate that his ministry took in the early years of Josiah, perhaps from 640 to 630 B.C.E.

THE BOOK. The major idea in the book of Zephaniah is the day of the LORD, which indicates that the traditions about Amos had had significant influence on him. Many of the phrases in Zephaniah's description of the day of the LORD are almost direct quotes from Amos, especially Amos 5:18–20 and 8:9–14.

The LORD's Sweeping Judgment (Zeph. 1:2–6). The LORD's judgment would devastate land and sea. The special object of that judgment would be Judah's idols and those who worshiped them—the Baalites; the worshipers of the heavenly bodies; the followers of Milcom, an Ammonite deity; and any others who had turned from the LORD.

The High and the Mighty of Jerusalem (Zeph. 1:7–13). Judgment would begin at the top, where responsibility was greatest. It was Judah's leaders who had led the people astray, and judgment would reach even to the royal family itself. Among the pagan practices they observed was the custom of leaping over the threshold or doorsill because they believed a demon lived there. If one stepped on it, evil would result. The custom of carrying the bride over the threshold may have had its origin in a similar belief (1:7–9).

From the palace, the judgment would sweep on through the city, where the merchants hawked their wares. The LORD is pictured as going though the city with a lamp, searching every nook and cranny, trying to find the cynical men of Judah who had said that He would not do anything to them. These men were compared to wine that had become thick and useless because the lees—small sandlike particles—settled to the bottom of the wineskins as the wine aged (1:10–13).

The Great Day of the LORD (Zeph. 1:14–18). In tones like those of Amos, Zephaniah described the day of the LORD that was rapidly approaching. It would be a day of wrath,

> a day of distress and anguish,
> a day of ruin and devastation,
> a day of darkness and gloom,
> a day of clouds and thick darkness,
> a day of trumpet blast and battle cry
> against the fortified cities
> and against the lofty battlements. (1:15–16)

Hope for the Righteous (Zeph. 2:1–3). Zephaniah did see hope for the humble people of the land, who would come to the LORD and "seek righteousness" and "seek humility."

Devastation on the Nations (Zeph. 2:4–15). As was common among the prophets, Zephaniah did not see the day of the LORD's judgment as being limited to Judah. Judgment would come as well on Judah's enemies, for they too were rebels against the LORD. The Philistines (2:4–7), Moab and Ammon (2:8–11), Ethiopia (Egypt) (2:12), and Assyria (2:13–15) would know the wrath of the LORD. Of Assyria he said:

> Herds shall lie down in it,
> . . .

the owl shall hoot at the window,
the raven croak on the threshold;
for its cedarwork will be laid bare.
. . .
What a desolation it has become,
a lair for wild animals!
Everyone who passes by it
hisses and shakes the fist. (2:14–15)

Woe to Jerusalem (Zeph. 3:1–7). Having pronounced the LORD's judgment on Judah's enemies, Zephaniah once more turned to Jerusalem and its officials. He compared its officials to beasts of prey (the lion and the wolf). Its prophets were immoral men, disgraces to the name of the One whom they claimed to represent. The LORD alone was concerned with justice; there was no responsible human representative to see that it was done.

A Better Day Is Coming (Zeph. 3:8–13). The net effect of the LORD's judgment would be to cleanse the earth. The defiled speech that began with man's rebellion at the Tower of Babel would be purified when the people were brought back to the land (3:8–10). Sins would be forgiven, and pride would be no more. In its place, the people would be humble and lowly, teachable and truthful (3:11–13).

Jerusalem Shall Be Restored (Zeph. 3:14–20). The climax of the new day would be the restoration of Jerusalem. Judgment would achieve its purpose of cleansing the nation. When the people were once more gathered in the land, days of mourning would become festival days.

THE PROPHETS OF RESTORATION: HAGGAI, ZECHARIAH, AND MALACHI

Haggai: Promoter of Temple Building

In four oracles dated to 520 B.C.E., **Haggai** challenged the people to get on with the job of rebuilding the Temple. This event places the book of Haggai in the Restoration period, along with Zechariah and Malachi. Together, these three books bring the Book of the Twelve to a close.

If You Expect The LORD's Blessings, Then Do the LORD's Will (1:1–15). In reaction to the people's excuse that the time had not "yet come to rebuild the LORD's house" (1:2), Haggai reminded them that they had not let anything stop them from building their own homes. Yet, despite all efforts to meet their own needs, they still were not prosperous. Their efforts in agriculture had brought little produce, and they never seemed to have enough to eat and drink. Inflation also had taken its toll. Haggai's picturesque way of saying it was that "you that earn wages earn wages to put them into a bag with holes" (1:6). They needed to rebuild the Temple if they expected the LORD to bless them. Otherwise, drought would continue to devastate their crops (1:1–15).

There Will Be a Greater Temple Than Solomon's (2:1–9). To encourage the builders, the prophet asked if there was anyone who remembered Solomon's Temple. As there must have been some who did, the prophet went on to assure them that, regardless of the unpromising beginnings of the second Temple, "the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former." This promise would be kept many centuries later, when Herod the Great rebuilt the Temple for the second time.

If the Temple Is Built, You Will Prosper (2:10–19). Haggai pointed out once more what their lot had been since they returned to Palestine. If they wanted to prosper, the Temple had to be completed.

Zerubbabel, You Are the Chosen One (2:20–23). The uproar in the Persian Empire undoubtedly caused Haggai's enthusiasm to outrun his judgment. In reference to the problems of Darius I, Haggai promised that this meant that Israel would be freed and Zerubbabel would be the Messiah.

Zechariah: Man of Visions

The book of Zechariah is a sudden surprise in the Book of the Twelve. As the scroll nears its end, the books seem to be getting short, then Zachariah appears with its fourteen chapters. This book is often treated in two separate sections. Zechariah 1–8, which opens with a sequence of visions and closes with oracles or restoration, is closely connected to the preceding book of Haggai. Zechariah 9–14 is a distinct set of oracles that some interpreters refer to as "Second Zechariah." This section seems more closely related the book of Malachi, which follows it. What most distinguishes the two parts is that Zechariah 1–8 seems to speak about the rebuilding of the temple as if it has not happened, or at least is not finished, yet. Zechariah 9–14 presumes a completed second temple. Still, there are unifying factors, and it seems likely that 9–14 was deliberately written to revise and reapply 1–8.

Zechariah was the second prophet who helped stir up the people to work on the Temple. His messages were different from those of Haggai, however. Haggai dealt with bread-and-butter issues; that is, he saw completing the Temple as a necessary condition for receiving the LORD's blessings in a practical form, such as food, clothing, and an improved standard of living. Only briefly did he mention the possibility of the coming of a messianic age.

Not so with Zechariah. First of all, the form of his messages was radically different. Instead of oracles like those of Haggai and most of the pre-Exilic prophets, he, like Ezekiel, experienced numerous visions. Second, those visions dealt almost exclusively with the coming of the messianic age. This means that Zechariah was as much an apocalyptist as he was a prophet. He delivered messages like a prophet; their content was apocalyptic. He preached to encourage the people as they tried to do a hard job in a difficult time. That he and Haggai succeeded in inspiring the people to rebuild their ruined house of worship is a tribute to their faith and perseverance. They were not among the greatest prophets of Israel, but they served a useful function in their own day.

The oracles in chapters 1–8 are to be dated from 520 to 518 B.C.E. Many interpreters believe these chapters contain the genuine materials from Zechariah. Chapters 9–14 are also apocalyptic, but the internal historical references indicate that they originated in the Greek period.

Return from Your Evil Ways (1:1–6). Like those of the earlier prophets, this first oracle was a call to repentance: "Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds" (1:4). From this point on, however, Zechariah's visions, similar to Ezekiel's allegories, follow. The vision is presented and is then followed by an explanation, the meaning of which, unfortunately, is not always clear.

The First Vision: The Four Horsemen (1:7–17). In this vision, a man was seen riding a red horse, accompanied by three others riding red, sorrel, and white horses. They were sent out by the LORD to patrol the earth to check on conditions. The earth was at peace, but Jerusalem still lay in ruins. The LORD promised that the city and the Temple would be rebuilt.

The Second Vision: The Four Horns and the Four Smiths (1:18–21). The horn was used throughout the Old Testament as a symbol of strength and power. In this vision, the four horns stood for the four great powers that had great influence on the destiny of the Israelite peoples: Assyria, Media and its ally Babylon, plus the Persians. The smiths were metalworkers who made the weapons that gave the strong nations their power. Because they could give power, they could also take it away.

The Third Vision: The Man with the Measuring Line (2:1–5). In modern society, such a man would be called a surveyor. He was marking out property lines, a practice only appropriate for land that was about to be occupied. The vision meant that Jerusalem's population would increase so that it would spill over any walls built around the city.

A Call to Flee from Babylon (2:6–13). Many Jews remained in Babylon. The prophet said that the LORD would allow Babylon be plundered. Many nations would be drawn to the LORD and His people. Here was a prophet proclaiming the day of the LORD like the popular view in the time of Amos. Zechariah assumed that the Jews' day of judgment was over and their time of glory was about to begin.

The Fourth Vision: The Accuser and Joshua (3:1–10). In one of the three places (the others are 1 Chron. 21:1 and Job 1–2) in the Old Testament where most English translations use the proper noun *Satan*, this adversarial figure stood up at the right hand of God to make an accusation against Joshua, the High Priest.[12] Obviously, there were those who tried to discredit Joshua as High Priest, because he is pictured as wearing dirty clothes. In the prophet's mind, this was the work of Satan. The LORD knew the truth and changed Joshua's dirty clothes for clean clothes (3:1–5).

Joshua was promised that if he followed the LORD wholeheartedly, he would "rule my house and have charge of my courts" (3:6). The LORD, furthermore, would bring His servant "the Branch." This probably refers to Zerubbabel. When this happened, "You shall invite each other to come under your vine and your fig tree" (3:10).

The Fifth Vision: The Gold Lamp Stand and the Two Olive Trees (4:1–14). This vision of a gold lamp stand with branches for seven lamps represented the presence of God. The lamps were small clay lamps containing olive oil and a string that served as a wick. In later Judaism, the seven-branched lamp stand became a seven-branched candlestick. It is called a *menorah* and is still a common Jewish religious symbol. The light of the gold lamp stand and the number 7 all represented attributes of God (4:1–5; 10–14).

On either side were two olive trees representing Joshua as spiritual leader and Zerubbabel as the messiah figure. There followed a word of assurance to Zerubbabel that he would be successful in completing the Temple. It would happen "not by might or power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD" (4:6).

The Sixth Vision: The Flying Scroll (5:1–4). The flying scroll was a written curse that would afflict thieves and those who took false oaths. This reflects the commonly held belief that a curse had the power to destroy whatever or whoever it was directed toward. It was not a flying saucer!

The Seventh Vision: The Woman in an Ephah (5:5–11). The ephah was an object similar to a wicker basket. This particular basket had a lead cover on it so that the contents could not escape easily. A woman whose name was "Wickedness" was in the basket. Two winged women carried her off to Shinar (Babylon), the sin city of Zechariah's day. This wickedness was removed from the land in preparation for the messianic kingdom.

The Eighth Vision: The Four Chariots (6:1–8). The final vision was of four chariots pulled by red, black, white, and gray horses. They were sent out to the "four winds of heaven," although only three directions were mentioned (north, south, and west). The vision seems to be incomplete, because no explanation was given. It undoubtedly had something to do with the announcement of the coming of the messianic kingdom.

Concluding Oracles (7:1–8:23). Zechariah was approached by some northerners who had been observing a fast commemorating the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. They asked if they should

continue to observe such fasts. Zechariah gave a response raising questions about the purposes of fasting during times of mourning and celebrating feasts during times of prosperity. Like the earlier prophets, he called upon the people to

> Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (7:9–10)

Failure to live by these principles had brought on the Exile in the first place (7:1–14). In the closing oracle, Zechariah saw Jerusalem restored and prosperous, a city in which the elderly could live in peace and children could play in freedom. The exiles in every land would be returned, the Temple would be rebuilt, and the Jews would no longer be the doormats of their enemies (8:1–13).

Although the LORD had good purposes in mind for Jerusalem, the Jewish people were not to forget the basic rules of justice and love for one another. The fasts once had been for mourning; the fasts of Jerusalem would become feasts of joy and celebration. The nations of the world would be drawn to the Jews, whose LORD had blessed them (8:14–23).

The Apocalyptic Writers

Joel marked the transition from prophetic to apocalyptic oracles. Discouraging times produced such men, whose purpose was to give the people hope when the situation seemed hopeless.

ZECHARIAH 9–14. This part of the book of Zechariah differs radically in form from the rest of the work. While chapters 1–8 consist of a series of visionary experiences in which Zechariah plays a major role, no mention is made of him in these chapters. The mention of the Greeks, furthermore, suggests a later time than that of the prophet Zechariah. These matters have led to the conclusion that chapters 9–14 of this book were from someone other than Zechariah, sometime before the Greek or **Hellenistic** period of Judah's existence (332–63 B.C.E.), as Tyre was still not captured (9:3–4). Tyre fell to Alexander in 333 B.C.E. after a seven-month siege.

The Day of the LORD Means New Life for Israel (Zech. 9:1–11:17). With the boundaries of Israel in the days of David and Solomon in mind, the writer envisioned the triumph of the LORD over Israel's enemies. The restored kingdom would stretch from northern Syria to the southernmost borders of David's kingdom (9:1–8). Yet, its king would not be warlike. He would ride a small burro, the symbol of peace, instead of the prancing stallion of a warlord (9:9–10).

The Jews would be gathered from the ends of the earth. Judah would even be triumphant over powerful Greece (9:11–13). The reason for this turn of events would be the LORD's leadership:

> Then the LORD will appear over them,
> and his arrow go forth like lightning;
> the LORD God will sound the trumpet,
> and march forth in the whirlwinds of the south. (9:14)

The people would be saved and would prosper in a well-watered land. The idols, on the other hand, and their prophets would be powerless to deliver on their promises. God's anger would be directed toward such false leaders (9:6–10:5). But the LORD would raise up leaders for Judah:

> Out of them shall come the cornerstone,
> out of them the tent peg,
> out of them the battle bow,
> out of them every commander. (10:4)

Israel would be strong once again because the LORD would gather the people from among the nations to which they had scattered. Egypt and Assyria, representative of the nations that had scattered the LORD's people, would be burnt out like a fire raging in the forest (10:6–11:3).

As the shepherd had life-and-death control over his sheep, so the Jews' rulers had life-and-death control over them. The prophet, acting for the LORD, took the role of the shepherd of the people. Symbolizing their former condition as a united people (Israel and Judah), he took two shepherd's staffs and held them together as one. Three rulers (shepherds) came and went in rapid succession. To express the LORD's unhappiness at the situation, the staff named *Grace* was broken. As a wage, the prophet was given thirty shekels of silver for being the shepherd. These he gave to the Temple treasury. Then the second staff (*Union*) was broken, symbolizing the separation of Israel from Judah. The LORD was going to raise up a shepherd (leader) who did not care for the people (11:4–17).

The Day of the LORD and the Triumph of Jerusalem (Zech. 12:1–14:21). As part of the apocalyptic vision of the day of the LORD, Jerusalem and the cities of Judah would be attacked by their enemies. But they would fail, for Jerusalem would be like an immovable rock straining the back of anyone who tried to lift it. While Jerusalem's people stayed safely within the city, the tide of battle would turn, with Judah's clans destroying the enemy (12:1–6).

Because the descendants of David were among Jerusalem's citizens, Judah's warfare on their behalf ensured that all Judah, not just Jerusalem, would receive praise for their success. Any nation that tried to attack Jerusalem would be destroyed. Its defense would be led by the descendants of David. The Jerusalemites and David's descendants would also take on a new spirit of mercy and prayer. They would mourn someone whom they had stabbed to death, possibly because they realized too late that he did not deserve such severe punishment. It would be like Baal worshipers mourning during the annual fertility rites in Megiddo. All the Jerusalem families would be in mourning (12:7–14).

In the day of the LORD, idols would be banished and false prophets sent out to do useful work, such as farming. Even their former friends would attack them if they tried to prophesy again. To purify the land, the people who were false would be destroyed (13:1–9).

But Jerusalem's troubles would not be over. Its enemies would attack again, and Jerusalem would fall. Then the LORD Himself would intervene. He would stand on the Mount of Olives, east of the city. A great earthquake would cleave an east–west valley through the mountain. The LORD with His angels would come, bringing in the ideal age (14:1–5).

The age would bring marvelous changes. There would be ideal weather (twenty-four-hour sunshine) and perpetual rivers flowing east and west from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and the Mediterranean. Over this, the LORD would reign in triumph (14:6–9).

To the south, the land would become a plain, with only Jerusalem on a hill, dominating the land. Jerusalem's enemies would suffer horrible diseases. Judah would loot its enemies, becoming immensely wealthy. The enemy would realize that the God of the Jews was to be the LORD of all and would come to worship Him in Jerusalem each year during the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. Those who refused would be wiped out in an epidemic.

Everything would be dedicated to the LORD, even the harnesses of the horses. Jerusalem would become one big worship center, with every pot in town set apart for the services of sacrifice (14:10–21).

Malachi: The LORD Questions the Community

Because none of the Israelites' historical material mentions **Malachi,** nor does the book give any sort of biographical information, this prophet, like Obadiah, is anonymous. The name means "my messenger." Malachi 1:1 could be translated as "The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by my messenger." The content of the book suggests a time not far removed from that of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Many of the problems were the same concerns with which Ezra and Nehemiah had had to deal. It was a time when the hopes of the returned exiles had turned bitter. The people had become cynical and were careless in their acts of worship. The prophet was trying to arouse a disillusioned community grown cynical with the continued delay of the glorious future Deutero–Isaiah had talked about.

The nature of the book is that of a dialogue. The LORD, through the prophet, made a statement. The statement provoked a question that, in turn, was answered by the LORD:

1. THE STATEMENT: "I have loved you."
THE QUESTION: "How have you loved us?"
THE ANSWER: "I chose Jacob instead of Esau to be my people. The Edomites (Esau) will be punished" (1:1–5).

2. THE STATEMENT: "You have not shown proper respect for me."
THE QUESTION: "How have we disrespected you?"
THE ANSWER: "By offering blemished animals. The priests have failed in their responsibilities to see that proper kinds of sacrifices were made" (1:6–2:9).

3. THE STATEMENT: "The LORD no longer accepts your offerings."
THE QUESTION: "Why does He not?"
THE ANSWER: "Because you have been faithless to your wives, as you have been faithless to the LORD's covenant. The LORD hates divorce" (2:10–16).

4. THE STATEMENT: "You have wearied me with your words."
THE QUESTION: "How have we wearied you?"
THE ANSWER: "By saying that God is unjust. The LORD is coming in judgment upon such sinners" (2:17–3:5).

5. THE STATEMENT: "Return to me, and I will return to you."
THE QUESTION: "How shall we return?"
THE STATEMENT: "You are robbing me."
THE QUESTION: "How are we robbing you?"
THE ANSWER: "In tithes and offerings."

[This series of questions and answers suggests something of the same kind of situation Nehemiah found at the beginning of his second term as governor of Judah (3:6–12).]

6. THE STATEMENT: "You have spoken harsh words against me."
THE QUESTION: "How have we spoken against you?"
THE ANSWER: "By saying, 'It is vain to serve God. Evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test, they escape.' But the LORD keeps a record of the righteous and will reward them according to their righteous deeds. In the judgment, evildoers will be punished" (3:13–4:4).

The book closes with a promise to send the LORD's messenger before the day when the LORD comes to call people to repentance (4:5–6).

THE END OF PROPHECY?

It is not possible to date with much certainty the last prophetic books in the Old Testament. It is probably safe to say that they had all been produced by about 300 B.C.E., and that any editing that took place after that, as these books moved toward canonical status, was minor. Often it is

assumed that because there were no more prophetic books produced that entered the canon after this time, prophecy came to an end in Israel. Such a conclusion is probably too dependent upon an argument from silence. Another possibility is that prophetic activity moved away from the production of such literature. A new kind of literature, called *apocalyptic,* appeared and grew in influence as the production of prophetic literature faded away. Both Judaism and Christianity, when it began to form its New Testament canon, seemed reluctant to canonize apocalyptic literature. Whether the prophetic tradition was directly adapted by apocalyptic literature is a matter of dispute. The presence of early forms of apocalyptic literature in parts of prophetic books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah provides some support for this argument, but apocalyptic literature also appears to be connected to the wisdom tradition in books like Daniel and The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.[13] The tradition we identify as "wisdom" was in some ways a competitor to the prophetic tradition, but it also seems to have contributed something to the emerging apocalyptic tradition. The frequent identification of John the Baptist (Matt. 11:9) and Jesus (Mark 8:28) as prophets by people in the New Testament seems to indicate that at least some people believed prophets were still around. All we can say for sure is that the production of canonical prophetic literature stopped. Of course, the production of all canonical literature stopped at about that time, although some other literary forms were produced that gained "deutero-canonical" status.

Key Terms and Names

Amos, *280*
Day of YHWH, *270*
Edom, *286*
Habakkuk, *289*
Haggai, *292*
Hosea, *271*
Joel, *279*
Jonah, *285*
Malachi, *296*
Micah, *286*
Nahum, *288*
Nineveh, *288*
Obadiah, *285*
Zechariah, *293*
Zephaniah, *291*

Study Questions

1. Why should Hosea's attitude toward Israel have differed from that of Amos?
2. What problems are raised by God's command to Hosea to marry a prostitute? How do different biblical interpreters address this problem?
3. How did Hosea relate his marriage and the naming of his children to his message for Israel?
4. What images of nature does Joel use to describe the God's judgment?
5. How did Hosea make use of legal terms and forms to present his case against Israel?
6. What conditions gave rise to the ministry of Amos?
7. What do the Oracles Against the Nations (Amos 1:3–2:5) say about Amos's doctrine of God?
8. What were the major themes in the preaching of Amos?
9. What were the five visions of Amos? Where do they appear in the book, and how are they presented?
10. Compare Isaiah's attitude toward Jerusalem with that of Micah.
11. What did Micah see as the evils of Israelite society?
12. How does Micah 6:1–8 reflect the procedures of an ancient law court?
13. How does the book of Zephaniah reflect the influence of Amos?
14. What elements of the story of Jonah cause some readers to view it as a type of literature other than a straightforward historical report?
15. What was the book of Jonah designed to say?
16. How does one deal with the attitude of vengeance expressed in the book of Nahum?
17. What is the source of Obadiah's intense hatred of the Edomites?
18. Why might Habakkuk be considered an early Jewish philosopher?

19. What did Haggai's ministry to the Palestinian post-Exilic Jewish community help to accomplish?
20. What was the purpose of Zechariah's visions? What role did the idea of a messianic age play in them?
21. How does Zechariah 9–14 differ from Zechariah 1–8? What are some possible explanations for these differences?
22. What is unique about the form of the book of Malachi?
23. What does the book of Malachi tell us about the conditions at the time of its formation?
24. How does the Book of Twelve function as a single book made up of twelve little books?

Endnotes

1. For a fuller discussion, see Mavin A. Sweeney, *The Twelve Prophets*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), xv–xvi.
2. Sweeney provides a fuller discussion of the role of chronology in the determination of the order of the Twelve. Ibid., xvi–xix.
3. Ibid., xxix–xxxv.
4. This catchword idea has been developed most fully in James Nogalski, *Literary Precursors to the Book of the Twelve* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1993). Its validity has been questioned by others. See David L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster–John Knox Press, 2002), 175.
5. On the attraction that the western lands had for the Mesopotamian rulers, see Noth, *The History of Israel,* 253–254, and on population deportations, see K. Lawson Younger, Jr., "The Deportations of the Israelites," *JBL,* 117, 2 (Summer 1998), 201–227.
6. This metaphor and the problems associated with it have received a great deal of attention. Two representative works are Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), and Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003).
7. John C. H. Laughlin, "Sargon," *MDB,* 797.
8. For an excellent discussion of the implications of a locust plague, see Harold Brodsky, "An Enormous Horde Arrayed for Battle—Locusts in the Book of Joel," *BR,* VI, 4 (August 1990), 32–39.
9. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion,* 160.
10. Philip J. King, "Using Archaeology to Interpret a Biblical Text: The Marzeah Amos Denounces," *BAR,* XV, 4 (July–August 1988), 34–44. Also see Eleanor Ferris Beach, "The Samaria Ivories, Marzeah, and Biblical Text," *BA,* 56, 2 (June 1993), 96 (inset).
11. Itzhaq Biet-Arieh, "New Light on the Edomites," *Bar XIV,* 2 (March–April 1988), 41.
12. In this text and throughout Job 1–2, the Hebrew text includes a definite article on this word, which is not typically done with a proper noun. It probably would be more accurate to translate the phrase as "the Accuser" (*NRSV* footnote) or "the Adversary."
13. See the introduction to this literary genre and its setting in John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. C. Eerdmans, 1998), 1–42.