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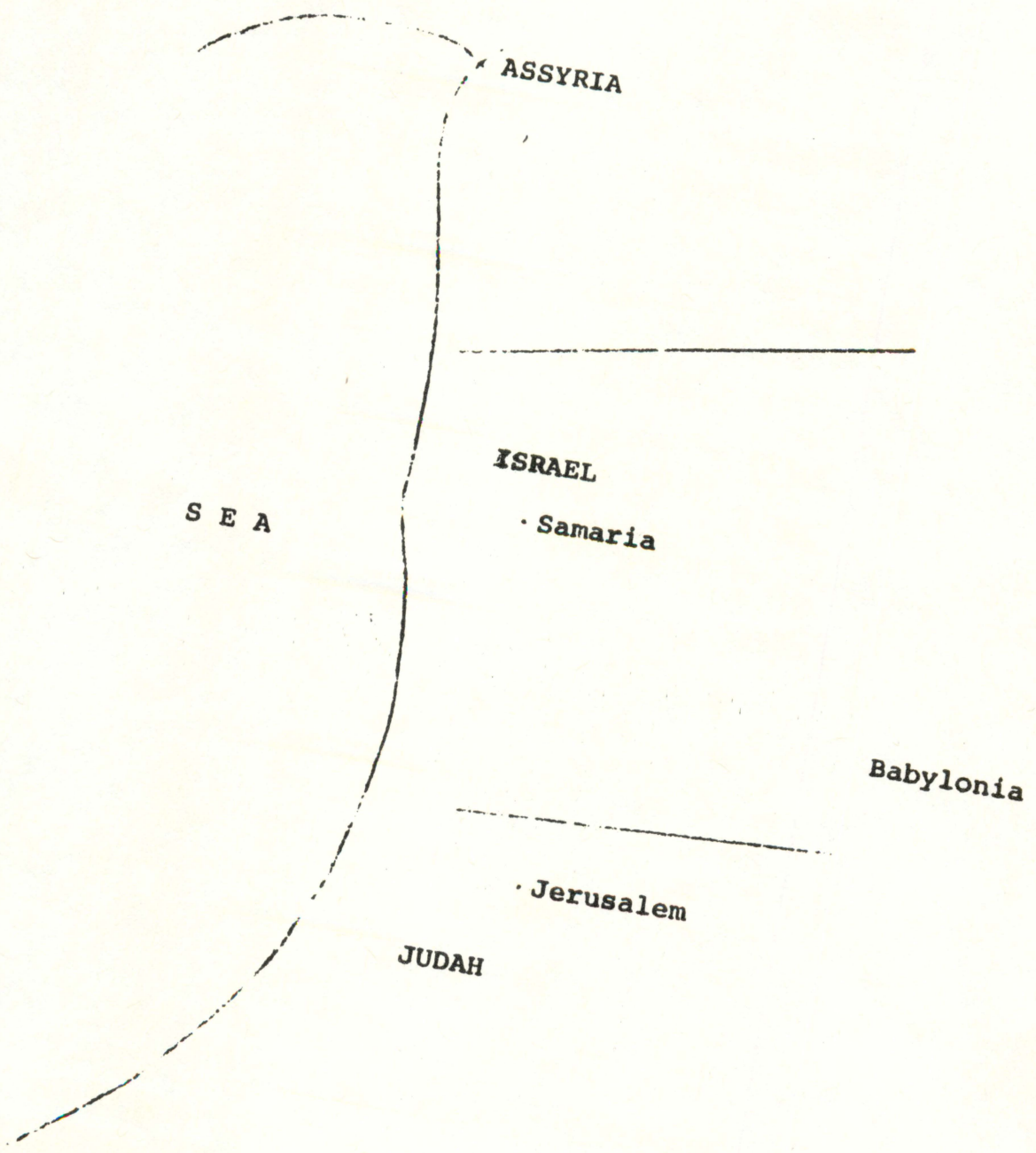
"G O D ' S S P O K E S M E N"
An Introduction To The Hebrew Prophets

Book ?

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M A P



ASSYRIA

ISRAEL

· Samaria

Babylonia

· Jerusalem

JUDAH

S E A

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I. Introduction

When I was in the United States Army, I attended Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, as part of a special school run by the Army. We were being trained to teach the officers and soldiers of the Army (men and women) the reasons why the U.S., as a democracy, was engaged in a war against Fascism. I still recall our first lecture when the President of the University, a man well educated in the classics, addressed us all and said, "The two greatest groups of men in all human history were the Greek philosophers and the Hebrew prophets". You and I are going to talk about one of the greatest groups of men in human history, the Hebrew prophets.

WHAT IS A PROPHET?

When most of us hear the word "prophet" we think of someone who foretells the future. We imagine that if we had the gift of prophecy we could tell when the stock market would go up or down (and make a million dollars). We imagine that a prophet is someone who can tell us in advance whether it will rain tomorrow or not, whether our favorite football team will win or lose, whether the new baby in the house will be a boy or girl. This may be what the word "prophet" implies today. But, this is not what an ancient Hebrew prophet was like. He was not a fortune-teller. He is not to be compared to a palm-reader or to a crystal ball gazer. He was something quite different. To be sure, the prophet dealt with the future, and he did have something to say about what might happen down the road of time, but he is as close to a fortune teller as the number one is to the number 100.

The English word "prophet" comes from the Greek "prophetes" which means "to declare". The Hebrew prophets were "declarers". What did they declare or proclaim? They proclaimed the "word" or "command", (Hebrew-davar) of God. The ancient Hebrews believed that while all people could know what God wanted them to do by studying the Torah, some few people, like the Prophets, were able to "talk" to God in more direct fashion and could reveal or declare to the people God's decision in a matter of current importance.

You can imagine that more than a few people declared themselves to be prophets in those days, each presenting himself (or herself) as God's true representative, but the Israelites had a preconceived idea of what a prophet ought to be, and they were not easily fooled by pretenders. We can come to understand the way the Israelite's tested their prophets through this story which appeared in our local newspaper. Recently, a man in San Francisco dreamed that God spoke to him in the middle of the night and told him to take a gun and kill the Secretary on the fourteenth floor of a certain office building. The man did as he imagined God wanted him to do and killed a secretary completely unknown to him. Did God really speak to this man in his dream? Do we not have certain standards today which we associate with God? Wouldn't we say that the man's actions show that God did NOT speak to him? On the other hand, if the man had said that God told him to

Who really hears God's voice?

Intro. 2

give charity to a poor widow, we might be inclined to think that he had heard God speaking. You see, we associate God with certain kinds of values and actions. We associate God with kindness and goodness, not with violence and murder. The ancient Israelites had similar ways of testing a true Prophet.

In many nations of the ancient Near East, people presented themselves as "prophets" or as someone who had a close relationship with the gods. There were forecasters who would tell you from the line of flight assumed by birds that the gods were saying this or that. There were forecasters in other nations who would cut out the liver of an animal and tell you by the shape of the liver what the gods were saying (as in Egypt). In Babylonia, astrology was developed for this purpose. The Babylonians did learn a great deal about the movement of the stars and the moon and the sun, and they built a whole religious science on the basis of their knowledge. The Babylonians taught, "The Gods speak through the stars. He who knows the language of the stars, knows what The Gods are saying". The Hebrew prophets, however, were opposed to all kinds of magical and pseudo-scientific "prophecy".

The Hebrew prophets did not use any of the magical devices used by the foretellers of other nations. They did not use the stars, or the liver of an animal, or the lot (a kind of dice), or a crystal ball. For them, what God would have to say in a particular matter was not a matter of chance, but almost predictable. For the prophets had a great library which told them what God had wanted in the past and what He very likely would want His people to do in the future. This library we know as the Torah, the collected and evolving laws of the Hebrew people. You might say that for the prophets, the Torah was the constitution of the nation, and, however else they might have "talked" to God before they made a declaration or prophecy, they first studied what the Torah or the tradition had to say in great detail. The prophet could not say anything that was far out of line with the Torah, for the simple reason that there were many people in the nation that knew the Torah, and they would have declared the prophet to be a fraud. (The Torah of their time was not exactly like the one we have today, but the core of moral teachings was already in existence. Some of it was written, and some was handed down orally).

TWO KINDS OF PROPHETS

There were, indeed, two main lines of prophets in ancient Israel who were often at odds with each other. On the one side were the royal prophets, that is, those who were on the payroll of the king and who, naturally enough, were persuaded in their declarations to say things that were pleasing to the king. If the prophet was the agent of God, speaking the message of God (he surely wasn't God himself), then the king could persuade God to speak as he, the king, wanted God to speak, so long as the king controlled the prophet".

*Other ways
of finding
out what
the "gods" are
saying*

There were some prophets, however, who were not controlled by the kings. They refused to "eat the king's bread" for the simple reason that they knew that if they received gifts from the king, they would be tempted to proclaim only those messages that the king would want to hear. But suppose that the king himself ~~was~~ not just? Suppose he was oppressing the poor, taxing them too much, or taking away their civil rights, shouldn't the king himself be opposed? Wouldn't God want the king to be criticized, perhaps even to surrender his throne? Indeed, that is what the Torah required of kings, that they follow the constitution as much as any ordinary person.

The great prophets of ancient Israel were men and women who did not accept employment in the king's palace. These proclaimers of God's commands were often the critics of kings, risking their life, to do so. Sometimes the prophet came from a very poor background, as did Amos. Sometimes the prophet came from a well-to-do background, as did Jeremiah. In either case, the real prophets of Israel were fearless men and women who did not hesitate to speak the words and commands of a God devoted to the poor and to the suffering.

Did the Prophets Really Talk to God

Did these prophets actually talk to God personally? Did they really get their messages directly from God? All we know is that the quality of their messages is consistent with those ideals and standards that were associated with the God of Israel. We know that the prophets sincerely believed themselves to be in direct relationship to God, as we can see by turning in the Bible to the Book of Jeremiah, Ch. 20:9:

"And if I say 'I will not make mention
of Him,
Nor speak any more in His name',
Then there is in my heart, as it
were, a burning fire
Shut up in my bones,
And I weary myself to hold it in,
But cannot."

One "TANACH" ⁷

If Jeremiah had this personal experience and then proceeded to live a life of cruelty, we would say that he really did not speak with God. From the sacrifices and heroism of Jeremiah's life in the service of his people, we can only conclude that his personal experience with God was real and true. This was a man bound up in God. To Jeremiah, God was closer than breathing. You and I can hear God speaking in Jeremiah's words and to many of the Judeans of Jeremiah's time, his words were like claps of thunder from above. They had no doubt that Jeremiah was the mouthpiece of God, and so long as a large number of people had this faith in Jeremiah, those leaders who abused the people had reason to fear the prophet.

God's Agent

The prophets were the agents or mediators of God's commands. The ancient Jews believed that when God spoke, the event He described was instantly in process of taking place. If God said, "Jerusalem will be captured by the Babylonians", instantly a series of small events started in process which would lead inevitably to the fall of Jerusalem. Sometimes the time span between the "Davar",

God's word or command, and the event itself was short indeed. God spoke and the result could be seen!

God needed a spokesman, however, to help proclaim His "Davar". This was the function of the prophets. We must understand that when the prophet (Hebrew, Nahvee) spoke God's command, it was as if God Himself had pronounced the fatal decision. The prophet spoke, and the event took place! A prophet, then, was one who helped to bring to reality God's desires. Perhaps, this is the meaning of the difficult word Nah-vee (prophet), one who brings (from the root L'ha-vee) the command of God.

No wonder then that those criticized by the prophet wanted his voice stilled. No wonder that they wanted to bribe him or kill him!

Other Exemias Of The Prophet

We are beginning to see now that the prophet had much more important things to say about the future than whether it would rain or not and whether the stock market would go up or down. The prophet was concerned with living social events. He was concerned with whether the poor had enough to eat, or whether the military engaged in unnecessary wars. The prophet was concerned about those who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem and whether they exercised their power in such a way that the rituals were tied to morality. The prophets were concerned about the courts and whether the judges twisted their decisions to favor the rich. The key word here is CONCERNED. The prophet cared about the people. As the spokesman for God, he properly exhibited those qualities the Israelites associated with their God. Like God, he could not tolerate injustice. Like God, he could not tolerate hypocrisy in the Priesthood. While the people could not see God, they could see something of what God was like by watching the actions of the true prophet.

Moses had come to understand that unlike the gods of the other peoples, the God of Israel was a God concerned with the suffering of the people. This God was a feeling God who "heard" the cries of His people and who could not stand idly by while they suffered. This was a God who had to act, and He did so, in the very least, by sending His messengers, his agents, to speak His command and to move the people to actions that would help solve their problems.

Conservative and Radical

We could say that the prophet was a radical conservative. To the king and High Priest and Chief of the Army, the prophet appeared to be a radical, for the prophet was a critic against the government in power. The prophet's job was to see to it that those holding power did so responsibly, mindful of the fact that their power was but lent to them by God. It has been said many times that "power corrupts". Those holding power have a tendency to believe that they hold this power for their own purpose. Over the course of time, they begin to use their power to increase their wealth and their ease. In all the other nations of the ancient near East, this kind of corruption was accepted as a matter

of course. When a similar kind of corruption began to develop in Israel, the representatives of God, the prophets, publicly challenged those in power.

In other nations in that part of the world, there was no real restraint on the leaders, but Israel (and Judea) had a built-in system of restraint. Theirs was a system based on a holy God who had a Torah rooted in morality. Israel had a constitution, unwritten at first, but well known to all. The counter-authority to the kings and priests was God and the Torah. All the latter needed was someone to represent them, for neither God nor the Torah could make a personal appearance in the royal court or in the Temple. The Prophet became the visible representative of God and Torah, and because he stood for justice under the law, the great mass of the people sided with him. So the stand-off in those days was those in power against the prophet and the people.

You can see that while the prophet seemed to the king, to be radical, he was actually a conservative, in the sense that he stood for the law rooted in the past. In recent years, America has had its problems with a President who thought himself above the law. America didn't need a prophet, because it has its own system of checks and balances where the courts and Congress can help to restrain a run-away President. America owes a great deal to ancient Israel, for it is from the Bible, the record of the Jews, that America first got the idea that no man, even the king or president, should be above the law.

early history }

What We're Going To Do In This Book

In this book, we are going to review some of the great stories concerning the prophets of ancient Israel. Through these stories which describe the historic events in our Bible, we will learn what a prophet was and how he lived. I am confident that before you are through you will learn to admire and love them. You will also come to have a new pride in your people Israel, and you will hopefully understand that, as a Jew, you must try to be like a prophet yourself, helping the poor and trying to restrain those who use their power selfishly. Like a prophet also, you will want to bind yourself to God and to Torah, for therein lies our strength and our glory.

II. WHOSE MESSENGERS WERE THEY? Moses and the Feeling God

Preface - There is a difference of opinion as to whether Moses was a prophet or not. He did speak to God; the tradition teaches that Moses spoke more directly to God than anyone ever did. He did proclaim God's commands, and he did oppose a king, but the king he opposed was not a king of Israel. The role of Moses was of a different stature than that of the rest of the prophets. They addressed themselves to resident kings, to kings of the Hebrew nation. Moses did battle with a foreign king, leader of the greatest empire in the world of that time.

However, we might classify Moses, one of the great events of his life help us to understand what it was like to speak to God and what was the kind of message that God delivered on these occasions. Perhaps the incident of the burning bush is all the more important because it helps us to understand the nature of this God who spoke to Moses and the prophets. For this reason, we are including this story in our book.

Read our rendering of the event, then turn to your Bibles and read the story directly from there in the Book of Exodus, Chapter three, verses 1-15.

-o-

After escaping from Egypt, Moses became a shepherd working for a man named Jethro in the wilderness of Midian. In time, Moses married one of Jethro's daughters. On a certain day, Moses was tending the sheep when something odd attracted his attention. He saw a bush that was burning. The unusual thing about this bush, however, was that it was never burned up. It just kept giving out that great light.

Moses was a lover of nature and a curious person. He said to himself, "I must turn aside, now, and view this truly unusual bush more closely". What Moses did not know was that God was using this bush to determine what kind of man he was. When God saw that Moses approached the bush, God called him by name, and He instructed Moses that he was on holy ground.

Moses realized now that he was participating in a truly unique religious experience, and he seemed to hear God say, "I am your father's God, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob". And Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look upon God.

Still the voice seemed to go on and said, "I have surely seen the affliction of My people in Egypt. I have heard their cry....I know their pain....and I have come to deliver them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land...."

Moses knew of the gods of the Egyptians. They were associated with magic and with magic cults. He had never heard of a God who heard the cry of the afflicted and shared the pain of the slave. But what did this God want of him, a poor shepherd? Moses did not have to wait long for his answer.

to his chosen messengers

The "Burning Bush"

The divine voice spoke: "Come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you may bring My people out of Egypt...."

And Moses said unto God, "Suppose the people ask me for Your name. How can I get them to believe me and to follow me unless I can tell them, at the very least, who sent me?" And God answered, "I Am that I Am. Tell them 'I Am' sent you." And God said further, "Tell them, the Lord, the God of your fathers sent you, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...".

Post-script to The Burning Bush story

As you read this story in the Bible, you will note that it develops dramatically and purposefully. This is a God different from all other known Gods; He is a feeling God, not removed from the suffering of human beings. Further, he is a God who commands His followers to help Him to relieve the suffering of the downcast and the lowly. If you are to be a worshipper of this God, you must serve Him by serving those in need. He requires action and sacrifice on your part,

In the little incident ^{concerning God's} of the name, we have something of great importance. In Egypt, the religious leaders, really magicians, would command (they believed) their gods to do whatever they wanted by proclaiming the secret and magical name of the god. The story in our Bible tells us that the God of Israel was not a God of magic. He would not respond to formulas and secret names. Indeed, He has no name! The "name" translated "I am what I am" can also be translated to mean, "I shall be what I wish to be", or simply "I am the one who is always present". At any rate, this part of the story teaches us that we are dealing with a God who is morally oriented and who calls us to help Him.

Note also that after giving Moses the first "name", God identifies himself as "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, etc.," that is, He is not simply the kind of God one invents or creates out of a sudden mystical experience, He is the God of history, about whom we learn progressively more as we learn more about the world and God's creation, including humankind.

When we talk about the prophets throughout this book, and about their relationship with God, it will help us to know that their experiences are with the same God who called Moses to the great task of freeing the Hebrew slaves.

Further, He will not serve as a genie doing what we want Him to do.

The secret name of God

on the other hand,

III. STEALING ANOTHER PERSON'S WIFE - Nathan

the Prophet

Preface -

David was but the second king of Israel. All the stories about David in our Bible tell us he was a man of the people. He was close to the people and to their needs, since he came from their ranks himself. He had been a poor shepherd boy, but when you make a shepherd boy into a king, it is not long before he develops kingly desires. In the story we are about to review, David oversteps his bounds, is challenged by a prophet, and then tries his best to make amends. As we read the story, we see David almost as much as the victim of his power as he is the beneficiary of kingly privilege.

*David
Bath-sheba*

After you read my account of the story, go to the Bible to read the story. It is best read in two parts. The first part is Two Samuel, Chapter 11:2-28. The second part of the story is found in Chapter 12:1-10 and 12:13-15.

One evening King David could not sleep and walked outside on the roof of the palace. From his high vantage point, he could see around the city, and he chanced to see a woman bathing. He was taken by her beauty. After an investigation, David discovered that the woman was Bath-sheba, the wife of Uriah, the Hittite, who was away at the battlefront. As kings often do, David sent his messengers for the woman, and he slept with her.

When Bath-sheba informed the king that she was pregnant, David knew that a great scandal might develop. If he were the king of another country, he would not have worried even the least bit, but in Israel, even a king was not supposed to take another man's wife to bed. Accordingly, David sent for Bath-sheba's husband and gave him a vacation from his army duties. David hoped that Uriah would sleep with his wife and claim the child to be born as his own.

Uriah, however, turned out to be too much of a patriot to help the king with his scheme. Even though he returned from the fighting front, Uriah would not sleep with his wife. He was a dedicated soldier, and he could not find it within himself to enjoy ordinary pleasures while his comrades were being killed at the front. Since Uriah would not cooperate, wittingly or unwittingly, the King had to face up to the possibility of the scandal or try something else. He tried something else. He sent a message to his field commander ordering him to place Uriah in the most dangerous part of the battle so that he might be killed.

When Bath-sheba heard her husband was dead, she mourned appropriately, and in due time, David took her as his wife, and she bore him a son.

This was not the kind of deed that could be tolerated by the God of Israel. He called Nathan His prophet and sent him to the king. Now the person who accused the king of a serious crime (even a small one) could easily be killed by the king, but Nathan had no option. God had commanded him to act.

Nathan decided that he would attempt to get David to try his own case by posing a similar case leaving out all names. Nathan said to the king, "Your majesty please, if you will, try this case and judge whether or not it violates the law of God. Once there was a poor man and a rich man. The rich man had a large flock and herd, but the poor man had only one little lamb which he loved dearly. The poor man raised this lamb from infancy, almost as he would a child, giving it to eat of his own food and holding it against his breast."

The king warmed to the story. He sensed that a riddle was in the making and Nathan was known for his wisdom.

The prophet continued, "Now the rich man had a guest, but he didn't want to serve any of the lambs from his own large flock, so he took the poor man's lamb and served it to his guest...". David did not even have to wait for the end of the story. He rose in righteous indignation and proclaimed, "I swear by God's name, that the man who has acted in this fashion will die, and he shall restore the lamb four-fold". Such was the heart of the king. He was a just man.

Even as the king enjoyed himself in making this noble declaration, he saw the prophet point a finger at him and say, "AHTAH HA-EESH, THOU ART THE MAN!" The prophet had tricked the king into sentencing himself to death!

As the prophet began to reveal God's sentence against the king, David, who knew well enough that he had done wrong and was truly sorry quickly said, "I have sinned against the Lord". Not beyond shaming himself publicly, the king tore off his clothes, put on sackcloth in their place, and exhibited himself in the public square as a repentent sinner. Whoever heard of such a thing, a king announcing to one and all, that even he was subject to the law that common men and women had to obey?

The story tells us that God was convinced that David's repentance was deep and sincere, so he lifted the sentence of death, but David was yet to pay a grievous penalty for his sin.

Stealing Another Man's Property - Elijah

Following the death of King Solomon, (David's son), the nation of Israel, which had had only three Kings, now split in two. The northern kingdom, with Samaria as its capital, continued to bear the name of Israel. The southern kingdom, with Jerusalem as its capital, bore the name of Judah. The split of the nation occurred about 935 BCE. Elijah, one of the most colorful prophets, lived around 850 BCE.

Unlike many of the later prophets, Elijah was a worker of miracles and seemed to rely upon his ability in this regard to command the respect of the people. Nonetheless, Elijah was as much a defender of moral values as any of the later Prophets. He did not hesitate to confront the power of King or Queen to challenge them when they acted in a way inconsistent with the Torah, the established law of God.

As we review the story which follows, let us remember that King Ahab had done a serious wrong in marrying Jezebel, a foreign princess, daughter of the king of Zidon. Jezebel was a worshipper of Baal, the chief Canaanite God, and Ahab built a house of worship for her in Samaria. It is important for us to know that Ahab, ^{who} still paid some allegiance to the God of Israel, was bound to a certain moral code (Torah). Jezebel, however, was not bound by this code. Her ethics were far looser, for her God did not stand for a moral code. Baal had long been tied to those rituals which help the land to produce crops. These rituals had nothing to do with morality.

With this background, let us go into our story which is to be found in the First Book of Kings, Chapter 21, verse one through twenty-three. After you read my description of the story, make sure you go back to the Bible and read it exactly as it is written there.

-o-

Near the palace of King Ahab in his capital city of Samaria, there was a certain piece of land which the King desired. Ahab went to the owner of the land, a man by the name of Naboth, and offered to pay him for the land or to give him another piece of land for it. Naboth, however, was a true believer in the God of Israel and a follower of His law. The old law stated quite clearly, "The land of a family may not be sold, but must forever be an inheritance within the family". This law was established so that poor people would not sell their land in a bad farming season and become tenant farmers or slaves to those who bought up their land. When the king made his offer, Naboth was forced to answer, "Under the laws of God, I am not able to sell my inheritance to you!".

Ahab was greatly upset by this turn of events. After all, he was the king. How could this man refuse him! Still, Ahab knew the old law associated with the God of Israel, and he was not prepared to go against it at this time.

Jezebel, however, had no regard for the God of Israel or for His law. As a Canaanite, she knew only that when a king wants something, he gets it. In her country of Zidon, her father, the king, was the law. He did not have to obey anyone nor could his power be limited. Bound by no moral restraints, Jezebel devised a plan to get Naboth's vineyard for her husband. (typed)

Jezebel arranged with two men to testify falsely in court that Naboth had committed an act of treason. On the day of the trial, Naboth sat powerless as each of the paid witnesses stood up before the people as jury and stated, "Naboth has cursed both God and the king". As a result, Naboth was punished by stoning, as was the custom of the day, and he died of his injuries.

The queen then went to her husband and said, "Do you still want the vineyard of Naboth? Then, go and take it for your own, for Naboth no longer lives".

Upon hearing these welcome words, the King, who was quite willing to take the land no matter how it had come to him, arose and went to survey the land that was newly his.

Meanwhile, Elijah the prophet was told of what had happened. To Elijah, God's command was clear. The old law had been disobeyed in the most criminal fashion. It did not matter to God or to Elijah that Ahab was the most powerful man in all of Israel. Indeed, for that very reason, Ahab should obey the law most closely. At God's command, Elijah rushed to meet with the king at the site of Naboth's vineyard. Seeing the king, Elijah did not hesitate to proclaim:

"Have you killed and also taken possession?

Thus, proclaims the Lord, 'In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs will lick your blood!'"

At first, Ahab was not overwhelmed by what the prophet had said. "Have you found me, oh my enemy?" asked the king. To which the prophet replied, "I have found you because you have given yourself over to that which is evil in the sight of the Lord".

Elijah went on to say in the name of God, "Behold, I will bring evil upon you and will utterly sweep you away and make an end to your descendents who might rule as king".

Then of Jezebel, the prophet said, "The dogs shall eat Jezebel in the moat of the valley of Jezreel".

When Ahab heard these words, he began to realize how far he had come from following the laws of the God of Israel. He was not ashamed to admit his error publicly. Even though he was King, and, even though he knew that kings of other lands did not have to apologize to anyone, Ahab confessed his sins before all the people. Following the custom of the

day, the King tore his clothes and put sackcloth on in their place, and he would not touch food. All Israel beheld the sight of a King who had humbled himself before God and the people. Ahab's repentance only achieved a delay in his punishment.

This story reinforces our understanding
that

the function of the prophet is
to be a restraint on the
power of the King,
to defend the ancient
(constitutional) law

V. FOLLOWING ANOTHER MORAL CODE - HOSEA

In order to understand the Prophet Hosea, we must remind ourselves of certain things that were going on in his country at that time. Following the death of King Solomon, the nation which had been known as Israel split up into two separate kingdoms. The northern kingdom was still called Israel, but it is referred to poetically in the Book of Hosea as "Ephraim", (one of the sons of Joseph). So when Hosea speaks of God's "son", Ephraim, he is speaking of the northern kingdom, Israel. The name of the southern kingdom, with its capital in Jerusalem, where the Temple was located, is Judah, (named for another of the sons of Joseph).

You can expect that the northern kingdom (Israel, Ephraim) had its own capital, Samaria, and some kind of great temple of its own. When Hosea speaks of the "calf of Samaria", he is speaking of the symbolic idol or animal which was associated with the temple in Samaria. As you know, the use of this symbol was a departure from pure Judaism and a move towards the religions of Israel's neighbors.

The name of the chief God of the Canaanites, the people who preceded the Hebrews in the land of Israel, is Baal, which means "Master" or "Owner". Some of the Israelites gave this name to the God of Israel; that is, they blended or fused together the identities of the Israelite God and the Canaanite God. In time, the prophets tell us, the Israelites worshipped more and more like the pagans or non-Jews.

What was the problem with this blending of identities and qualities? Well, along with each God went a standard of ethics and a way of life. The standards associated with the Baalim (plural for Baal, for each town had its own particular Baal which it worshipped along with the national Baal) were the standards of Canaanite life and had little to do with the moral discipline of the God of Israel. To worship another God, alongside the God of Israel, or substituting for the God of Israel, meant either a watering down of the ethical code (or Torah) of the God of Israel, or the casting off of that code. For this reason, "idolatry", the worshipping of a symbol or statue which stood for Baal or for another pagan God, was a terrible thing in the eyes of the prophets. It was not merely the emptiness of the statue that was the problem. Worshipping this idol meant that the moral standards of the God of Israel had been cast aside!

The prophet Hosea was greatly concerned about this problem. He, like the other prophets, called this religious mixing disloyalty or faithlessness. The God of Israel could not be worshipped along with other Gods. It was one God or the other. It was one standard of morality or the lack of morality. Hosea speaks of the God of Israel, not as a "Baal" or "Master" (who rules over slaves) but as an "Eesh" or "Husband" who has a partnership, an agreement (a covenant, brit) with his wife. The people of Israel (and Judah,) are God's wife. When they are disloyal to him, when they worship

other Gods, they are considered to be "harlots" or prostitutes. Indeed, God asks Hosea to marry a harlot just as He, God, is married to a harlot (Israel). Hosea is to try to forgive this harlot and to change her once more into a loyal woman, just as God will forgive His harlot and try to change her.

We see here the intensely personal relationship between God and Israel. God was not some "force" way out there on the horizon of the universe; He was as close as a husband, but unlike most husbands, he was ready to forgive even the worst kind of sin and disloyalty.

Let us read now some of the passages in Hosea and see if we can't get a feeling for this personal relationship and become a part of it. Let's begin with Chapter nine, verse one. The Prophet proclaims:

Rejoice not, O Israel,...
For you have gone astray from your God,
You have loved a harlot's hire upon every corn-floor. #

(We should know here that the Canaanites had idols of their Gods in the place where they made their corn into flour. Here in these very places, the Canaanites would have sexual intercourse (as a religious act) to seduce their God into giving them more corn. Apparently, some of the people of Israel had adopted this practice simply because they saw the Canaanites doing it and prospering.

The prophet then goes on to say that God first discovered the Hebrews in the wilderness in their purity, but now they have gone over to the Canaanite God and have fashioned themselves in the image of the Canaanite God, that is, they have become what that God is, someone without any moral standards.)

The text reads (Ch. 9:10):

I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness,
I saw your ancestors as the first-ripe figs of the
season;
But when they discovered Baal-peor (one of the
Canaanite gods)
They became devoted to this shameful thing
AND BECAME DETESTABLE LIKE THAT WHICH THEY LOVED.

(You will note that the prophet understood clearly that we become like the things we admire and worship. He wanted the people to become like the God of Israel, holy, just, merciful.

The corn-floor or Threshing floor is the place where Baal, the god of agriculture for the Pagans, is worshipped.

Hosea now attacks the people of the northern kingdom for accepting kings who were not dedicated to the Torah of the God of Israel. He sees clearly that this political deception was similar to the worshipping of idols like the calf of Samaria. The text reads (Ch.3:4-8):

They have set up kings, but not from Me,
They have made princes, and I knew it not;
Of their silver and gold have they made idols.
....

But your calf, Oh Samaria, will be cast off;
My anger is kindled against you...

....
The calf of Samaria will be broken into splinters
For they that sow the wind, shall reap the whirlwind.
....

Israel swallowed up;
Now they are become like the other nations
As a vessel which has no value.

(You can see that Hosea does not want Israel to be "like the other nations", for the other nations do not have the same God with the same moral values. Israel, then, must be different from the other nations. It must be set apart.

Hosea uses the imagery of God as husband and Israel as wife. Of course, he means this only symbolically. He also uses another image to make his point. God is the father. Israel is the child.

In Chapter One of the Book of Hosea, we are told that God commands Hosea to marry a harlot (1:2). The name of this harlot, now Hosea's wife, is Gomer (meaning "the end", i.e., the end of harlotry. The prophets always use names symbolically). Gomer has a baby and then another. The second child is a daughter whose name is "Lo-ruhamah", that is, "no mercy", for God wishes to tell the people THROUGH THE PERSONAL LIFE OF THE PROPHET that He will not have compassion on Israel any more (verse 6). Then, to make the decision more definite, Gomer bears another child to the prophet, a son, symbolically named "Lo-ammi", that is, "not My people" (v.8-9).

Hosea does not believe that God really wants to punish His people. He believes God to be merciful and forgiving, as indeed He is, for God quickly tells Hosea to proclaim that a time will come when the southern kingdom, Judah, will unite with the northern kingdom, Israel, to form one kingdom, and then it will be said "Ammi", my people, and "Ruchamah", ~~mercy~~ (Ch.2:1-3).

"That which is -15-
merciful"

TRULY

Returning to the imagery of husband and wife, the prophet, as God's spokesman, declares (Ch.3:18):)

And it shall be at that day, the Lord declares,
That you will call Me, Eeshi (my husband)
And, shalt call Me no more, Baali (my ~~master~~)

Thou

For I will take away the names of the Baalim out
of her mouth,
And they shall no more be mentioned by ^{those} ~~their~~ name^s.

And in that day I will make a covenant with them...
....

And I will wed myself to you forever
Yes, I will betroth you unto Me
in righteousness and in justice,
And in lovingkindness, and in mercy

And I will betroth you Unto Me
in faithfulness;
And you shall know the Lord.

(Let us look now at the other image that the prophet uses in talking about the relationship between God and Israel, the symbolism of father and child. The words seem to describe God as a father who simply cannot bring himself to punish a child that has disobeyed him in the most important of matters. How opposed this idea is to the pagan notion of God as an avenger who destroys those who do not do as the God wishes. See now Chapter 11:1ff:)

When Israel was a child, then I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called My son.

But the more I called My people, the more they went
away from Me.
They sacrificed (worshipped) unto the Baalim
And gave offerings to graven images

And I, I taught Ephraim (Israel) to walk,
Taking him by his arms
But he knew not that it was I who cared for him

I drew him with cords of a man,
With bands of love:

....
and I fed him gently.

....
....
But the Assyrians will conquer Israel
Because they would not return to Me.

(Hosea describes God as knowing that he must punish his child, Israel, and the punishment He has in store, as the God of history, is to have a nation from the north, Assyria, capture the northern kingdom, but the thought of seeing his "son" suffer is extremely painful for the God of Israel. See now Ch. 11:8ff:)

How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?
How shall I surrender thee, Israel

.....
My heart is turned within Me,
My compassions are kindled together.

And I will not execute the fierceness of My anger,
I will not destroy Ephraim again;
FOR I AM GOD, AND NOT MAN,
The Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in fury.

Hosea emphasized the forgiving nature of God, and from the Israelites and Judeans, he asked for "hesed", that is loyalty, faithfulness. Hosea, like Moses, spoke of a feeling God, of a God who had a deep love for His people and who suffered through the decisions He had to make about them.

VI. SEEKING THE LIFE OF PLEASURE - But Ignoring The
"Work of the Lord" - - - Isaiah

Preface - In any society injustices exist. The Hebrew nation began with a great emphasis on equality, witness the equal distribution of land to all families. Moses presented God's view, as expressed in the Torah, that where there is inequality in wealth, there is inequality in the law courts and in opportunity for development. The early Hebrew society had grand goals.

With the passage of time, however, the Hebrews demonstrated that they were like other human beings. The poor farmer began to sell his land so that he could buy seed to plant. The rich land-owner steadily accumulated more and more land, and sharp differences between Israelites began to develop. The prophets set out to remind the Israelites of their older and more ideal society and to try to bring about changes to reestablish the old order.

The prophets were particularly unhappy with those rich people who concentrated on having a good time and in enjoying the pleasures of the day, but who **did not** understand how the poor were suffering in their hunger and anguish. In this sense, the Israel and Judea of about 700-800 BCE was very much like America today. On the one hand there was the world of T.V, movies, expensive cars, big houses, swimming pools, and expensive vacations. On the other hand there was starvation and joblessness. The prophets heard God's indignation at this abuse of privilege.

Isaiah 4:14-15

The Lord will enter into judgment
With the elders, (Congress) of His people,
and the princes thereof:

It is you that have eaten up the vineyard;
The spoil of the poor is in your houses;

What mean you that you crush My people,
And grind the face of the poor?
Proclaims the Lord, the God of galaxies.

(Then Isaiah attacked the women of his day who worried more about fancy clothes and jewelry than about human suffering).

4:16-24

Moreover, the Lord proclaimed:
Because the daughters of Zion are haughty
And walk with stretched-forth necks
And wanton eyes,
Walking and mincing as they go,
And making a tinkling with their feet;

Therefore, the Lord will smite with a scab
The crown of the head of the daughters of Zion.....

In that day the Lord will take away the bravery
of their anklets,
and the fillets and the crescents
The pendants, and the bracelets, and the veils
The headtires, and the armllets, and the sashes,
and the corsets, and the amulets;
The rings, and the nose-jewels, the aprons, and
the mantelets, and the cloaks and the girdles....

And it shall come to pass that
Instead of sweet spices there shall be rottenness
And instead of a girdle rags;
And instead of curled hair baldness....
Instead of beauty branding

.....
And utterly bereft she shall sit upon the ground.

(Isaiah attacked the men also who lived only for
pleasure when they had the power to help the poor)

5:11-16

Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning
That they may follow strong drink;
They tarry late into the night,
Till wine enflame them

And the harp and the psaltery, the tabret and the
pipe, (all musical instruments)
And wine are in their banquets;
BUT THEY REGARD NOT THE WORK OF THE LORD.....

Therefore, My people have gone into captivity,
For want of knowledge

.....
And the eyes of the lofty are humbled,
But the Lord of galaxies is exalted through justice,
And God, the Holy One, is sanctified through
righteousness.

(Isaiah lived in a time when some people said the old
standards are no longer true. Many of the well-to-do
said, who is to decide what is right or wrong?)

5:20-14

Woe unto them that call evil good,
And good evil;
That change darkness into light,
And light into darkness;
That change bitter into sweet
and sweet into bitter!

Isaiah - p.3

Woe unto them that are wise in their own eyes

.....

because they have rejected the law of the Lord of
galaxies.

.....

VII. ABUSING ONE'S RESPONSIBILITY AS A LEADER

Part One - Jeremiah Visits the Temple in Jerusalem

Preface to Part One -

When Jeremiah was a prophet, the northern kingdom had already fallen to Assyria (721 BCE). Jeremiah was not from the poorer class of people in Judah. He was educated and trained to be a priest, but, apparently, he found his own group, charged with the responsibility of setting an example for others, to be more interested in their power than in their duty. Instead of aligning himself with those in power, Jeremiah set himself against them. He was an opponent of Priest and king; he was a thorn in the side of the rich and the military. It was only a matter of time before he was thrown into prison and sentenced to death. That he was not killed is a tribute to the strong conviction in Judah that a man of God had the right to speak the truth as God gave him to see it. In a country without a strong moral tradition, Jeremiah could not have survived.

In this first of two stories about Jeremiah, who prophesied from about 625BCE to about 575BCE, we find him challenging the leaders of his own profession, the Priesthood. You will find the story in Chapter Seven of the Book of Jeremiah. Be certain to read it in the Bible after you have read my version of the story.

To understand this story you must know that the Temple in Jerusalem was a much more important institution than your local temple. The Temple in Jerusalem, also known as the "House of the Lord, Beth Ahdonai" was the central place for worship in all of Judah. It was the only place in which it was possible to offer sacrifices in the whole country, and all Judeans were expected to worship in it for the major festivals of Passover, Sukkot, and Sh'vuot, at the very least. As those who controlled the rituals, the priests had great power, for the people believed them to be close to God. Jeremiah believed that the purpose of the Temple rituals was to inspire the people to practice the many rules of justice which were part of the Torah. The priests, however, did not seem to share Jeremiah's understanding.

Ch.7:1-15

And Jeremiah heard God say, "Stand at the entrance of the Lord's House and make this proclamation. Hear the command of the Lord, all you who enter at these gates to worship the Lord. This is His command:

Change your way of dealing with one another, and I will let you dwell in this land. Do not think that you can come into this Temple and say prayers and think you are doing what the Lord wants you to do. If your actions do not agree with your words, they are simply lies.

What God really wants you to do is to execute justice between one another. He wants you to uphold the defenseless like the stranger, the orphan, and the widow. God doesn't want you to worship other Gods and to follow their law code.

But you trust in lying words that can't help you. Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, and break your promises, and offer sacrifices unto foreign gods and then come and stand before Me in this house which bears My name and say, 'God loves us, we are saved from all evil?' Do you think God is going to spare you so that you can be free to commit all of these abominations?

Has this house which bears My name become a den of robbers in your eyes.? Go now to Shiloh, that city in which your brothers in the northern kingdom, built a temple, and see what I did to that temple. I destroyed that temple completely, and I will do the same to this one, if you don't change your ways."

Ch. 7:21

"Thus proclaims the Lord of galaxies, the God of Israel: You can multiply your ritualistic observance of sacrifices and burnt-offerings, but none of this will do you any good. For I never commanded your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt with respect to these rituals.

What I said to your ancestors is what I say to you today: Harken to My moral commands, and I will be your God and you will be My people."

Preface to Part Two - JEREMIAH, the King, and the Military

You can see that Jeremiah in the above incident was challenging the very structure of the Temple and the priesthood. Especially was he condemning the priests for misleading the people into thinking that if they gave their money to the Temple and brought the appropriate gifts that they were doing what God wanted them to do. This, said Jeremiah, was hypocrisy of the highest order and was not acceptable to God. Moreover, Jeremiah said all of this standing at the entrance of the Temple itself, where everyone heard him clearly.

If you will read Chapter 17: 19-27, you will see that Jeremiah stood in the public square used by the king to criticize the king in a similar manner. No wonder then that Jeremiah was placed in prison (Ch. 20: 1-6) by the chief officer of the Temple, Pashhur, who worked very closely with the King.

Later on, however, the king and priest were even more disturbed. A foreign army stood at the very gates of the city threatening to defeat it. Jeremiah had been telling the people not to fight in the king's army, because the king himself was evil and he did not follow God's law. Jeremiah hoped that the invaders, the Babylonians, would set up a different Judean king who would be more just than Zedekiah, the present ruler. Zedekiah and Pashhur realized that they couldn't hope to defend the country without Jeremiah's help, for he had the ear of the people and of God. Consequently, Zedekiah sent Pashhur and another messenger to Jeremiah to ask him to pray to God in their behalf that the country might be victorious over Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon. The answer that Jeremiah gives is one of high treason. He says in effect, "It is not a question of my country right or wrong. If my country is to have my loyalty, it must be right. This is God's wish and command". The story follows:

Ch. 21: 1 -

Now the armies of Nebuchadrezzar, king of Babylon surrounded the city of Jerusalem. King Zedekiah sent Pashhur and Zephaniah to Jeremiah, for they needed his help and the help of God. "Pray to God, they said to Jeremiah, that He will help us to defeat the Babylonians".

Then Jeremiah said unto the messengers. " This shall you say to Zedekiah:

"The God of Israel proclaims:

'Behold, I will turn back the weapons of war which you use against the Babylonians. They will kill you instead of your enemies. And I will gather your enemies into the city. And I myself will fight against you with an outstretched hand and with a strong arm....'

'And afterwards, God says, 'I will deliver Zedekiah, king of Judah, and his servants....into the hand of Nebuchadrezzar.' "

" Then God said to Jeremiah, "Say to the people of Judah, Behold I set before you this day the way of life and the way of death. If you give yourself up to the Babylonians you will live, but if you stay in the city and fight against the Babylonians, you will die....for I have given this city to the Babylonians, and they will burn it with fire." "

Postscript to Part Two:

You might well imagine that those in power did not want Jeremiah to spread this message around the city. He was imprisoned and a trial was held; ~~and~~ he was condemned to death (Ch.26:7-9). Fortunately, for Jeremiah, a second trial was held, and the decision was reversed. He was freed (Ch. 26:10-16) on the grounds that he was not just trying to stir up trouble, but he was actually proclaiming God's commands.

P.P.S. In 586 BCE, Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and the Temple was destroyed. The proud king of Judah and the wealthy land-owners who would not help the poor as Jeremiah directed were the first in line amongst the captives who were sent to Babylonia.

WHAT DOES GOD WANT US TO DO?

The prophet Micah lived in that time when the fall of Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom, was not far away. Like all the other prophets, he attacked the leaders of the people. He proclaimed in the name of God:

Micah 3: 1ff

And I said;
Hear, I pray you, ye rulers of Jacob
And leaders of the house of Israel:
Is it not for you to know justice?

You ^wWho hate the good, and love the evil,
Who rob the poor of their skin,
And their flesh from off their bones;...

.....

3:4

For this reason when they cry unto the Lord
He will not answer them;
Yes, He will hide His face from them at that time
Since they have done evil.

Micah cries out against the false prophets who eat at the king's table and say smooth things to the king, such as he wants to hear.

3:5

Thus proclaims the Lord concerning the prophets
that make my people to err:

That cry: 'Shalom, Peace', when their teeth
have anything to bite;
And if you do not feed them,
They prepare war against you:.....

3:5

.....

But I truly am full of power by the spirit of
the Lord,
And of justice...
To declare unto Jacob his transgression,
And to Israel his sin.

Micah then repeats the prophecy associated with Isaiah that the nations "shall beat their swords into plows....and learn war no more" (Ch. 4:3-4). Micah adds a phrase that was repeated by George Washington in a famous letter to the Jews in Newport, Rhode Island:

5:4

But they shall sit every man under his
own vine and fig-tree
And none shall make him afraid.....

v.5

For let all the peoples walk each one in the
name of its god,
But we will walk in the name of the Lord our
God forever.

Micah is most famous for his proclamation concerning that which God really wants His people to do. Does God really want the people to busy themselves with "burnt-offerings" (sacrifices in the Temple)?, with offerings of olive oil?, with the sacrifice of the first-born son?, or does God have other more important things he wants from His people?

Before we discuss this famous passage in the Book of Micah, we want to understand these traditional offerings. Some of the Canaanites observed the very ancient ceremony of sacrificing their first-born son to the God, Moloch. Ancient peoples believed that the first fruits of anything belonged to the gods, and the sacrifice of these first fruits, be they produce of the field or the human body, would stimulate the god to give more of these things to the worshipper. In spite of the Hebraic tradition, which was very strongly against human sacrifice, some of the Israelites and Judeans were attracted to this dramatic Canaanite ceremony. They watched the natives of the land (Canaanites) observe their practice, and they saw that the Canaanites had fertile crops and many children, so some of the Jews began to imitate the Canaanites. The prophets were appalled at this practice, and they proclaimed God's displeasure.

Animal sacrifice, of course, was part and parcel of all worship at this time. The sacrifice went this way: the worshipper brought his/her animal to the Temple. It was cooked by the priests and eaten as part of the worship service. The worship was like a communion, in this sense. Our Seder service is an example of a combination of eating and worshipping. The Christians still have communion, or a symbolic supper (the wafer and the wine), during their service.

The problem with the sacrifices, as the prophets saw it, and as God saw it, was that the people thought that there was some magic in it, that once they gave their offering and participated in the service, they were relieved of their sins, and could go about their lives, as usual. The prophets understood the Temple service as symbolic. Its purpose was to lead the people to higher ethical standards, as specified in the Torah.

Listen now to the Prophet:

6:6 'Wherewith shall I come before the Lord,
And bow myself before the high God?

Shall I come before Him with burnt-offerings,
With tender calves of a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
With ten thousands of rivers of oil?

Shall I give my first born for my transgression,
The fruit of my body for my personal sin:

It has been told you, Oh mankind, what is good,
And what the Lord does require of you:

Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to
walk humbly with your God.

It is interesting to see that Micah addresses himself to all mankind, not just to the Jews, for like all the prophets, he knows that ~~the Lord~~ ^{Adonai} is not only Israel's God. #

We want to note, however, that Micah is not just talking about vague and abstract justice and love as God's requirements. Judaism has always been a law-centered religion and it has never taught that people are free to set their own standards of good. To be sure, there are choices to make in any situation, but according to Judaism, these choices must be rooted in a standard which is holy, because it comes from God, and because it is the product of mankind's long experience of suffering and learning.

Look now at the key line in Micah's statement, 6:8,
"Only to do justly, etc." The Hebrew is:

Ki im ah-sot mish-pat, v'ahavat hesed, v'hatz-nay-ah
lechet im elo-heh-chah

But to do mishpat, the love of hesed, etc.

What is mishpat? Is it simply a general word for justice? On the contrary, it is a specific word for the WHOLE BODY OF SPECIFIC LEGISLATION WHICH IS PART OF THE TORAH.

IT means Hesed is translated frequently as mercy or as loving-kindness, or as covenant love. It's key meaning is loyalty to the covenant, i.e. doing one's duty by the agreement made between the people and God. 1) We might say that ahavat hesed means "the love of duty", 2) following the law because it gives you pleasure, not merely because you have to do it, performing the law because you understand its tremendous importance and appreciate that society cannot stand without it. Love of hesed can also mean doing more than the law requires as the phrase "gamilot hasadim" implies. Talmudic Jews were taught to perform g'milot hasadim, "deeds of kindness", or deeds which might not be prescribed by law, but which brighten the lives of men. *human beings*

- The sacrifice of the first-born son was such a deep part of the ancient world that the early Christians made it a central part of Christianity, i.e., God is said to have sacrificed His only-son or first-born son (Jesus) that others might be saved from their sins.

Micah - p.4

What does it mean to "walk humbly with God"? Here we are talking about a personal relationship with God, such as Abraham had. The Bible tells us that Abraham "walked" with God. Abraham did not know all of the laws that were revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai, but he was considered a faithful servant of God, because he "walked" with Him. The prophet Micah does not leave out the personal element that God seeks from us, but we must remember that MISHAPT AND HESED are also there in God's requirements. God wants the personal relationship, yes, but He also requires obedience to the standards of the Torah.

How to combine personal and traditional religion is one great task of the Jew.

IX - FAVORITISM AND RESPONSIBILITY - The Doctrine of
Chosenness - - - AMOS

Preface:

The prophet Amos was a herdsman and a trimmer of sycamore trees when he heard God ordering him to become a prophet. Amos was a great friend of the poor and a staunch opponent of the hypocritical priests, but he is perhaps best known for giving the prophetic understanding of the doctrine of chosenness.

In ancient times, in the Near East, all peoples believed that their God or Gods chose them. What was different about the Hebraic concept of chosenness from the beginning was that Abraham understood that the purpose of his being chosen involved not only good things for him and his descendents but good things for all other peoples. The Bible tells us that Abraham was told by God that he had the responsibility to be a "b'racha, a blessing" to others, and that "through you all the nations of the world will be blessed".

The narrow understanding of chosenness, of course, is that you are the favorite of God and you will receive special rewards. Amos puts that idea, held by some of the Israelites of his day, to rest. First of all, Amos declares, in the name of God, that God will punish all the nations that have sinned, but He will punish Israel more! The scripture reads:

-o-

Amos 3:1 Hear this command that the Lord hath spoken against you, Oh children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth;
Therefore, I will visit upon you all your sins.

(This is chosenness in a nut-shell, we should say in a vise. Because God had "known" Israel, that is lived intimately with them alone, Israel had to do better than other peoples or she would be punished more.) Amos carries the message further. God proclaims that the black people, the Ethiopians, are as precious to him as the Israelites; Israel's arch-enemy, the Philistines, are also part of His international family. God is not beyond punishing them, so, of course, He will punish Israel, when she doesn't follow the Torah. Let Israel be certain of that!)

Amos 9:7 "Are you not as the Ethiopians unto Me,
Oh, Children of Israel?, the Lord proclaims.
"Did not I bring Israel out of slavery in
the land of Egypt?
And did not I bring the Philistines out of
Caphtor
And the nation of Aram from Kir....."

(All of this talk about responsibility is based on the violation of specific laws in the Torah. Amos is concerned because the wealthy people are not mindful of the human misery in their midst. This was not to be tolerated by a just God).

Ch.6:1-7

Woe to them that are at ease in Zion (Judah)
And to them that are secure in the mountains
of Samaria, (Israel)
The notable men of the leaders of the nations

You that deny the reality of evil
And cause the seat of violence to come near;

Who lie upon beds of ivory,
And stretch yourselves upon your couches of luxury,
And eat the lambs out of the flock,
And the calves out of the midst of the stall;

That thrum on the psaltery,
That devise for themselves musical instruments,
like David;

That drink wine in bowls,
And annoint themselves with precious oil,
BUT ARE NOT GRIEVED FOR THE HURT OF THE PEOPLE!

Therefore, they shall go captive at the head of
the captives
And the joy of them that lie at ease shall pass away

The Lord God hath sworn...
I hate the ruler of Jacob
and I hate his palaces

And I will deliver up the city with all that is in it.

P.S. The Northern Kingdom fell to Assyria in
721 BCE.

X - WAR AS THE GREAT CURSE - Isaiah and the Vision of Peace

Preface - The prophets were particularists. That is to say that they were concerned about what happened in the particular situation on the current scene. They were concerned about those close to them, about their local community, about their people Israel above all peoples.

The prophets were not only particularists, however. It was they, more even than Abraham and Moses, who made it clear that God was the God of all nations. The prophets were the first great universalists.

The problem was how to reconcile both of these views. How could one be so involved with the present injustice in the local situation and still be deeply concerned about the future world order. The prophets saw no special difficulty in holding to these two views. For them, the one was part and parcel of the other.

The world will become truly universalistic, the prophets believed, when all humankind recognized that there is but one God and one Torah, one moral law to which all must give allegiance. Since the God of Israel was the only God concerned with morality and with all humankind, the prophets naturally thought that the future great international society would be anchored in Jerusalem and all humans would be servants of the true God.

Isaiah 2:1-4

The proclamation that Isaiah, the son of Amos, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem:

And it shall come to pass in the end of days,
That the mountain of the Lord's Temple shall be
established as the top of the mountains.
And it shall be exalted above the hills;
And all nations shall flow unto it.

And many peoples shall go and say;
Come, let us go up to the ~~Lord's~~ mountain,
To the Temple of Jacob's God;

Adonai's

And He will teach us of His ways,
And we will walk in His paths.

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
And the command of the Lord from Jerusalem.

And He shall judge between the nations,
And shall decide for many peoples;

And they shall beat their swords into plows,
And their spears into pruning-hooks;

Nations shall not lift up sword against nation,
Neither shall they learn war any more.

Isaiah p.2

in the garden

Post-script: The latter part of this prophesy is engraved on the so-called Isaiah Wall in front of the United Nations Building in New York City. It was a Jew who first gave this goal of God to the world. What responsibility do you think you have to see that this goal is realized?

XI - THE IDEAL OF THE RIGHTEOUS KING AND THE JUST COUNTRY

Preface -

The nation of Israel began as a very democratic nation based on equality. While the basic moral rules of the nation were rooted in the Torah, which came from God through Moses and the Elders (or Congress), later decisions were made by councils which consisted of representatives of families and tribes. Early America saw fit to borrow many of the democratic forms of Israel, and some of the colonial governments were directly modelled after the government of Moses.

When the Philistines invaded Israel, however, the loosely organized tribes thought they needed a more closely organized army. They asked Samuel, the Judge, to name a king who was to lead the defending army and to rule over the united tribes. Samuel reluctantly set up the monarchy. For a while, under David, the monarchy was a boon to the people, but under Solomon the people began to complain about the rigors of the king. The political revolt at the death of Solomon had a democratic base, but instead of getting better, things got worse, (especially in the northern kingdom.)

It wasn't that the kings of the northern kingdom were worse than the kings of Assyria, and Egypt, and Aram. On the contrary, the Israelite kings had been founded as a theocratic democracy with God as its leader and the Torah as its constitution. Memories of this old ideal would not vanish, and the prophets tried to keep these memories alive. A basic teaching of the prophets was that Israel had to be much better than the other nations. This was the meaning of chosenness. *They had to set an example.*

As the kings of the northern kingdom gradually imitated foreign kings, and as the kings of the southern kingdom gradually did likewise, the prophets created the ideal of "the righteous king." The righteous king was to rule as God wanted him to rule. He would restore simplicity to the country and would lead the people to follow the old morality with a true heart.

Let us look now at the words some of the prophets used to describe this righteous king. Remember now, he was to be a great man, but just a man. He was not to have divine powers such as were attributed to all the kings of the surrounding nations. He was, on the contrary, to be humble and not prideful. He was to be a man of the people. Let us begin with Jeremiah and his description of ~~the un-ideal,~~ the unjust king of his day.

Ch.22:13ff Ideal -p2

Woe unto him that builds his palace by unrighteousness
And his chambers by injustice;
That uses his neighbor's services without wages,
And gives him not his hire.

(Jeremiah is talking about the system of forced labor).

Woe unto him who says, I will build me a big house
....
with a spacious roof of cedar

Shall you reign because you strive to excel in cedar?
Did not your father live in comfort
and do justice and righteousness at the same time?
Then God was pleased with him.

Your father judged the cause of the poor and the
needy
Then God was pleased
Is not this to know Me, God asks?

(Then Jeremiah shifts to describing the ideal king
of the future).

Ch.23: 5ff.

Behold the days come, God proclaims
That I will cause the family of David to give
birth to a righteous plant
And he shall reign as king and prosper
And shall execute justice and righteousness in
the land.

In his days Judah shall be saved,
And Israel shall dwell safely

And this is the name whereby he shall be called,
The Lord is Our Righteousness.

(Note that the family of David is to give birth
to this good king, probably because David was
closest to the ideal in his life-time.
Note also the symbolic name for the king. This
name surely does not mean that the king is to BE
God himself, for it was a main point in the
history of the nation that the king in Israel was
not divine or God's "son" as in most of the
other nations).

Let us look now at Isaiah's prophecy of the
ideal king. Isaiah speaks also, as do all the
Prophets of a "shoot" or plant from David's family.
Sometime they speak of Jesse, who was David's
father.

ISAIAH
Ch. 11:lff

And there shall come forth a shoot out of the
stock of Jesse,
And a twig shall grow out of his roots.

And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him.
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
The spirit of counsel and might,
The spirit of knowledge and of fear of the Lord.

And his delight shall be in reverence for the Lord,
And he shall not judge after his own desires,
Nor render decisions based on his personal bias,

But with righteousness shall he judge the poor,
And decide with equity for the meek of the land.

.....

And the wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
....
They shall not hurt nor destroy
In all my holy mountain;
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge
of the Lord,
As the waters cover the sea.

As chapter eleven continues, Isaiah tells us that this righteous king will gather the exiles and the northern and southern kingdoms shall be joined together. While the prophecy is expressed in poetic terms with the use of symbolism, what the prophet desires is very practical results in this - worldly terms.

Post-script

In time, the prophecy of the coming of the righteous king came to be known as the prophecy of the "Messiah". Messiah is the Hebrew word for "annointed one". When a king was approved by God in ancient Israel, the prophet would pour the holy oil on his head as a sign of God's approval. The Messiah was to be such a king.

The requirements for the Messiah or righteous king were simple. He was to rule as God wished him to rule, righteously. He was to gather in from exile all Israelites and Judeans captured by conquering nations.

Of course, there could be no king of Israel unless the foreign power which controlled it was conquered and driven off. So the overthrow of the foreign ruler came to be a feature of the task to be performed by the Messiah.

The Prophets did not think it would be long before such a king would rule over Israel. They were wrong. As Israel's troubles continued into the centuries, the doctrine of the Messiah became diluted or broadened by legend and wishful thinking. Mystical Jews made of it something else again, and Christians, in time, gave the idea still another twist or two. Whatever the prophecy of the righteous king was to become in future generations, the prophecy associated with our great prophets, as originally proclaimed, was simple indeed.

What does the prophetic idea of the righteous king have to do with you? Be sure to study our chapter XV.

XII - THE SUFFERING SERVANT - ISAIAH

Preface:

We have seen that the Bible, frequently uses a singular word as a substitute for a plural meaning. For example, the word Zion is used (Zion is a hill in Jerusalem), when the text really means all of Jerusalem or all of Judah. Samaria, the capital city of Israel, is used when the text really means all of the northern kingdom. This is what we call symbolic or poetic usage. When God is quoted by Hosea as saying, "Out of Egypt I called my son", what is clearly implied by "son" is all of the children of Israel. In other words, the whole people of Israel is implied in a word which seems otherwise to have a singular meaning.

This is how we are to understand the use of the word "servant" in certain prophetic messages. The servant (Hebrew - eved) is not one person. The servant is the whole people of Israel. See now this text, in which the prophet (the so-called Second Isaiah) proclaims God's forgiveness and promise of a return to Israel to those Israelites who live in exile in Babylonia.

Isa. 41:3-10

But you Israel, My servant,
Jacob, whom I have chosen
The seed of Abraham, My friend;

You whom I have taken hold of from the ends
of the earth,
And called you from the farthest parts thereof,
And said unto you, 'You are MY servant,
I have chosen you and not cast you away';

Fear not, for I am with you,
Be not dismayed, for I am your God;
I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you;

(Now it is important that you notice the change in language in the next chapter, but obviously, God is still speaking of Israel as His servant. The task of the servant is to teach God's law to all the nations).

Isa. 42:1

Behold My servant, whom I uphold;
My elect, in whom My soul delights.

I have put My spirit upon him;
He shall make the right to go forth to the nations,
....a bruised reed shall he not break (He is so gentle)
....
He shall make the right to go forth according to
the truth.

He shall not fail nor be crushed,
Till he have set the right in the earth;
And the islands shall wait for his teaching.

(Note, it is Israel upon whom God has given His spirit and who will be the instructor to the nations. The next chapter reinforces this view.)

Isa. 43:1

But now proclaims the Lord who created you,
Oh Jacob,
And He that formed you, Oh Israel;
Fear not for I have redeemed you,
I have called you by your name, you are Mine.

Isaiah proclaimed God's intention that Israel bring His morality to all the world. The Exile, terrible as it was, had a positive twist, a benefit. Scattered amongst the nations, Israel could be a "light" to them, teaching them God's ways. The scripture reads:

Isa. 49:6

"It is too light a thing that **you** shouldst be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, And to restore the preserved of Israel: I will also give **you** for a light to the ~~Gentiles~~, (nations) And that **you** may be My salvation unto the end of the earth".

(Clearly God feels that the exiles in Babylonia and in Assyria have suffered enough and now what they need is comfort and inspiration. The text continues.)

Isa. 43:2-4

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you,
And through the rivers, they shall not engulf you;

When you walk through the fire, you shall not be burned,

Neither shall the flame consume you

For I am ^{Adonai} ~~the Lord~~ your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Saviour

.....You are precious in My sight and honorable,
And I have loved you....

- - - - -

V.10

You are My witnesses, the Lord proclaims,
And My servant whom I have chosen

(The text continues on the same theme. Israel, the Servant of God, has been down-trodden and despised, but now God will redeem (buy back) the Servant and bring him back in triumph to his land).

Servant p.3

Isa. 49:7 Thus proclaims the Lord,
The Redeemer of Israel, His Holy One,

To him who is despised of men,
To him who is abhorred of nations,
To a servant of rulers:

Kings shall see you and arise,
Princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;

Because of the Lord that is faithful,
Even the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.

(To this despised servant, in the sense that those defeated in war are always considered as slaves and worse, God says through His prophet....)

Isa. 51:7Fear ye not the taunt of men,
Neither be you dismayed at their scornful remarks,

For the moth shall eat them up like a garment,
And the worm shall eat them like wool;
But My favor shall be forever.

(Again, in chapter 52 the same theme continues....)

Isa. 52:11 Behold my servant shall prosper,
He shall be exalted and lifted up....

Just as many were appalled by you,
So marred was his face unlike that of a man,
And his form unlike that of the children of men,

So shall he startle many nations,
Kings shall shut their mouth because of him....

(Chapter 52 seems to be an introduction into Chapter 53 and the theme continues of this servant who has been pushed around in the past but who will soon be saved by His God. Throughout Chapter 53 the servant is spoken of as an individual, as in all the other chapters, but as in all the other chapters the servant is the people Israel, so He is Israel in this chapter. It is interesting that many Christians insist that in this chapter suddenly, Israel is displaced and Jesus is the suffering servant).

Isa. 53:3 He was despised and forsaken of men (see chapter 49.7)
A man of pains, acquainted with disease...

.....

He was despised and we esteemed him not

Surely our diseases he did bear, and our pains
he carried;

Whereas we did esteem him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted (how Israel had been
smitten of God!)

But he was wounded because of our transgressions,
He was crushed because of our iniquities:

....

And with his stripes we were healed.

!.....*Adonni*

And ~~the Lord~~ has made to light on him
The iniquity of us all (See now, Amos 3:2 and
Jeremiah 16:18).

(The prophets all said that God simply wanted the
people to repent of their errors and to change their
ways. The purpose of the punishment, the defeat in war
and the exile, was merely to have the people change their
ways and return to God. See now the text).

Isa. 53:10

Yet it pleased the Lord to crush him by disease;
To see if his soul would offer itself in restitution,
That he might see his seed, prolong his days,
And that the purpose of the Lord might prosper by
his hand.

(This chapter ends as all the others, indicating
that God will bring better things to ~~his~~ people).

53:12

Therefore, will I divide him a portion among the
great,
And he shall divide the spoil with the mighty;

(This 53rd chapter seems to be even more personal
in its approach to the servant than the other chapters, and
some scholars have looked for a person who it might be
describing, such as Jeremiah who suffered so much in God's
behalf. (See Jeremiah, ch.11:18-19; ch. 15:10,15,17,18;
ch.20:7-8). The ~~chapter~~ is definitely in the past tense, so
if it speaks of an individual, that individual lived before
the text was written, at least 450 years before Jesus. It
seems that the other chapters, Israel is the suffering servant.
It is a people that was no worse than any other, probably
better, yet they suffered more than the other peoples, and
bore the sins of many, just as the older child is punished
more than the younger children because "he ought to know
better). Truly the older child, expected to bear more

responsibility, carries the burdens of the younger children on his back. The idea of the suffering servant has been beclouded by reading back into it, 400 years after its creation, an event and concept which could not have been anticipated when it was written. The beauty of the chapter is diluted, as far as we Jews are concerned, when it is taken from us and made a part of another religion. It is ours, and it describes the suffering of God's servant, the Jewish people. The chapter tells us that God and prophet really think the people has suffered overmuch and now God wishes only to ease their burden and bring them back to their land in high favor.

In other ancient societies, when a nation was defeated in war, the people assumed that its God was not great enough to take care of it, so they simply cast off their old God and assumed the God of their conquerors. Never did a people say, "We lost this war because we have been unrighteous and our God is punishing us". Yet, this is exactly what the Israelites and Judeans said through their prophets. Since the God of Israel and Judea was also the God of humankind, the prophets taught, he merely used other nations like Babylonia or Assyria to punish Israel for her failure to follow the Torah. Through this doctrine, the Jews were able, in a manner of speaking, to "save the face" of their God. It was not He who was defeated in battle. It was He who used the other nations as His tools.

Only if we can grasp the radical nature of this twist can we realize the greatness of Judaism and the uniqueness of its God concept. Since the Jews knew that their God was superior to any other God in moral terms, they could not accept the common idea that He had been defeated in battle. The blame must not be attributed to Him. The people itself must accept the blame! Never before in human history had their been a people great enough to interpret its military defeat in ethical terms.

Was Israel so bad that it deserved to lose the battle and to be exiled? From all that we know of the history of the times, the moral level of Israel had declined from its original glory, but the people were hardly worse than their neighbors and probably much better, or they would not have tolerated the prophets.

Before the military losses, the prophets, in the name of God, called their people to change their ways, hoping that God would then choose not to use foreign armies as His tools to punish His people. Nonetheless, the prophets insisted that God would not hesitate to punish if the people would not change. Now that the people were suffering, the emphasis of the prophets swung the other way, to forgiveness and to mercy. As the prophet Isaiah said (25:8):

"He will swallow up death forever;
And the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces;
And the reproach of His people He will remove from the earth..."

There are different approaches to interpreting history. Today, historians tend to say that this nation conquered that one because it had more economic resources or a better army, etc. The Biblical interpretation has been that God is the Author of history and changes take place for moral reasons. The interpretation of Judaism is further complicated by the fact that God demands more of the Israelites than of other people.

Ezekiel

Preface - We have seen how the emphasis of each prophet was somewhat different. Part of the reason for this difference was the personality of the prophet. Sometimes the different emphasis was due to the particular historical situation. For example, Jeremiah was trying to get the Judeans to reform so that God would not have to carry out His threat to let the Babylonians conquer them. On the other hand, when Ezekiel prophesied, most of the educated and skilled population of Judea had been taken captive by the Babylonians and only the poor people were left in Judah, under the leadership of an appointed ruler. Ezekiel, then, had to talk to two populations at once. He had one kind of message for the Judeans still living in the land and another for the exiles in Babylonia. The exiles were depressed and suffering. They needed encouragement and hope. Meanwhile, "back at the ranch", in the land of Judah, the appointed ruler and the general population were playing some of the old games, ignoring the high ethical teaching of God (as people enjoying prosperity tend to do).

Similarly, the prophet known as the "First" Isaiah sounds like Jeremiah or Hosea in attacking the king and the wealthy, and, indeed, criticizing some of the general practices of the people themselves, but the "Second" Isaiah who lived in the time of the Babylonian exile has a message of comfort, and he talks about God forgiving His suffering people and raising them to their former status.

Many of the prophets, before the exile, attacked the priests for misusing the power God had given them as leaders of the religious establishment, but Ezekiel talks about the rebuilding of the Temple, which has been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BCE. Ezekiel understood that the Temple was important as a center for learning and for religious unity. When it was rebuilt, however, he hoped, as God hoped, that it would be run with an emphasis on morality and not on empty ritualistic forms.

Ch.11:16ff

Thus proclaims the Lord God: Although I have removed them far off among the nations, and although I have scattered them among the countries, yet have I been to them as a little sanctuary in the countries where they are come;

...Therefore, say to them:...I will gather you from the peoples, and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the land of Israel....And I will give you one heart, and I will put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the stony heart out of your flesh; so that you may walk in My statutes and keep My laws, and do them; and you shall be My people and I will be your God....

(This same theme is part of the well known vision of the "Valley of the Dry Bones" which has been made into a popular folk song. A description of the Biblical text, which you will want to read in its entirety, follows:)

-o-

Ch. 37: 1ff. The hand of the Lord was upon me, and the Lord carried me filled with the spirit and set down in the midst of the valley, and it was full of bones.... and they were very dry. And He said to me, 'Son of man, can these bones live?' And I answered: 'O, Lord God, You know.'

Then He said to me, 'Prophecy over these bones, and say to them: O, you dry bones, hear the command of the Lord:....Behold I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. And I will lay sinews upon you, and will bring flesh upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.'

So I prophesied as I was commanded, and as I spoke, there was a noise, and a great commotion, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And, behold, there were sinews upon them, and flesh came upon them, and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then the Lord said unto me: 'Prophecy unto the breath, son of man, and say: Come from the four winds, Oh breath, and breathe upon these slain that they may live.'

So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them and they lived, and stood up among their feet, an exceedingly great number.

Then the Lord said unto me: 'Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel: behold, they say: Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off. Therefore, say unto them: Thus proclaims the Lord: Behold, I will open your graves, and cause you to come up out of your graves, Oh, My people; and I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the Lord.... And I will put My spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land....'.

XV. THE PROPHETS, THE ROLE OF THE JEW, AND YOU

This book has been an attempt to introduce you to the Hebrew prophets, perhaps the greatest group of religious geniuses ever to live. Fortunately for us, the teachings and experiences of the prophets are rather well preserved in our Bible. We have seen that the prophets, as one historian has put it, were "God intoxicated", that is, they were "drunk, saturated" with the thought and feeling that the world must be as God wants it to be. Jeremiah said that when he tried not to hear what God was commanding him to do, "There was, as it were, a fire in my bones". Jeremiah could not help but proclaim God's message. He was consumed with the passion of God's righteousness, just as Hosea was filled with the passion of God's love and forgiveness.

Moses is quoted in the Bible as saying, "Would that all of God's children were prophets". This is the goal, but from all that we know of human history, such inspired human beings are rare indeed. They came in such abundance in ancient Israel and Judea only because the civilization and culture of our people reached its zenith then, and we were able to produce such great teachers as splendid products of their society. If there were only one great prophet of the dimensions of an Isaiah or Hosea, we could say that this was a matter of an individual raising himself above his society (or being raised), but here was a whole group of religious geniuses. Obviously, one taught the other, (these were actually schools of prophets), and obviously the society in which they lived, a Jewish society, was conditioned to receive them and to tolerate them.

If you and I can not be a prophet, at least we can try to be true to their teachings, and we can try to accomplish their dream for the Jewish people.

The prophets were universalists, teaching that God loves all human beings (Amos), but they did not make the mistake some modern universalists make. They didn't neglect their immediate family or their people because they loved humankind. They understood that unless you can love those nearest to you, you can't really love the world. Erich Fromm has written, "If someone tells you he loves roses but doesn't care for his garden, don't believe him". Our first task as descendents of the prophets, and as Jews, is to be just and loving human beings as God wishes us to be and as the Torah specifies for us. Our second task is to be contributing members of the Jewish people, helping it to become what the prophets wanted it to become, an "Ore l'goyim", a light unto the nations, an example for other peoples to follow. It is in this emphasis on the need for the good society that Judaism differs from most other religions. If we are to have more than an occasional and rare human being who lifts himself up by his own bootstraps, we must have the good society which will help shape many good individuals. The Torah is not meant just to teach individuals to be good. It is a blueprint for the just society. As Jews, we must make the Torah our blueprint.

After we have helped to develop our Jewish community to be a "holy" community, to be the "yeast in the dough", as one Jewish teacher said, we have a duty to the broader society, to our local government, to our national government, to the world. From the prophets we get the idea of the Messiah or ideal king who is to frame the ideal society, based on Torah. We Reform Jews believe that this is an ideal which emerged from the structure of the society of that day. The ancient Jewish government was a monarchy, hence the ideal of a just king. Modern Israel is a democracy. A king would not be welcome there. The just leader today would be a premier or prime minister. In any event, the ideal king or Messiah could not do today what ancient kings were able to do, so we need to alter our concept somewhat, do we not?

THE MESSIANIC DAY

Reform Judaism has developed the concept of the Messianic Day, that is a time when enough people will get together to create a world in which justice and peace will dominate. The responsibility here for the realization of this "Day" or era is not on one Messiah but on all of the people. It is a concept which belongs to a Democratic Era. This implies that all of us together make up the Messiah. There is a little bit of the Messiah in each of us, and we have to put all the pieces together to create this wonderful day.#

How do we do this? The notion of a better world, an ideal world, is a Jewish concept, a prophetic concept. What would be more natural than that those who create this goal should be the pacesetters, the leaders in achieving the goal. The role of the Jew in modern times is to show the way, to set an example, to organize others. This is your task-because you are a descendent of the prophets.

The idea that the Messiah would not initiate the good society but would come only after many people (the Jews) helped to create an ideal community developed in the Middle Ages in Europe and was part of Lurianic Kabbala. For centuries then, Jews have placed the emphasis for the realization of the Messianic Era on the Jewish Community and on the individual Jew.

XVI. THE INNER LIFE OF THE PROPHET

(or priest) The Hebraic concept of prophecy is that the prophet is the vessel of God. The spirit of God flows through him. The difference between this view of how God relates to mankind and, say, the ancient Egyptian view, is that the Egyptians taught that what the middle-man brought down from heaven (from God) was magic, while the Hebrew prophets brought only a message. The Egyptian middle-man was skilled in the arts of magic, and at times, the person who beheld his art could not distinguish between the middle-man (or magician) and the god. The average Egyptian of that day thought of the magician as a kind of god himself, for it was he who worked the magic.

The Hebrew prophets never claimed to be God or to be a part of God. They were just his spokesmen. When they spoke, the very words of God fell from their lips, with their awesome meaning and dramatic results, but, before and after they spoke, the prophets were just ordinary human beings.

OF OTHER NATIONS The Bible gives us some idea of how these ordinary human beings felt and thought. We see that most of them did not want to become prophets when they were "called". Moses said, "How can I speak your commands to Pharaoh when I can't even speak clearly", EX. 4:10-11. Jeremiah said, "How can I speak your commands when I am just a child?" (Jeremiah 1:6). You can begin to understand the kind of feeling the prophet had when he first learned of his appointment, if you imagine that you were suddenly asked to be President of the United States. Wouldn't you be afraid that you wouldn't know enough to do a good job, wouldn't you be afraid to stand up to the Russian leaders, and to make decisions about war and peace? The prophets had this same kind of fear when they thought about things like going to the court of the king to challenge him or standing in the Temple court and criticizing the priests. They knew that they could be killed or imprisoned, at the very least.

We know from the story of Moses that frequently the prophet was all alone, in the sense that he had to make a decision that would determine the fate of his entire people. Moses was in that position when he stood with the Hebrews at the edge of the Red Sea (Sea of Reeds), and the people cried out because the Egyptians were approaching in their war chariots. It seemed to Moses, then, that he had led his people to certain destruction.

Time and again, there were revolts against Moses, led first by Miriam and Aaron, then by a group of leaders under Korach, then by others. Sometimes, the people turned completely against the prophet as the story of the golden calf illustrates, and everything he had worked for seems to be trampled. All the prophets seem to have had similar experiences.

The prophets were truly in the middle. On the one hand, they tried to reason with God on behalf of their people. They knew the people had been evil, but had they been more evil than other peoples? Why couldn't God punish those people who had been worse than Israel? And so, Jeremiah, pleaded with God:

10:25 Pour out Your wrath upon the nations that
did not know You,
And upon the families that do not call on Your name,

For they have eaten up Jacob
....And have laid waste his dwelling place.

Jeremiah, and the other prophets, soon learned, however, that while it was not easy for God to punish His own people, how else was He to teach them that they must keep their promise and do their duty? God wrestled with Himself, Hosea teaches us, and had to force Himself to go ahead with His punishment. Hosea describes God's painful wrestling with Himself in this way:

11:8ff How shall I give you up, Ephraim:
How shall I surrender you, Israel?

....

My heart is turned within Me,
My compassions are kindled together.....

As God attempts to reason with His people to get them to change their way, so the prophet tries to persuade the people to follow the laws of the Torah ^{the Brit} (the Brit, the Torah). Unfortunately, it seems, the leaders of the people continue to go their own way, seeking life's pleasures and forgetting their responsibilities as God's shepherds. God and His prophets seem to have only one resort, to punish severely, but to leave room for a possible revival of the people with a "new heart" and a new beginning.

What was the price the prophet had to pay for standing against the leaders and the people? Jeremiah gives us an idea:

11:19 But I was like a docile lamb that is led to the
slaughter;
And I knew not that they had devised schemes against
me;
They said, 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit,
And let us cut him off from the land of the living,
That his name may be no more remembered.'

Compare this passage with the 53rd chapter of Isaiah, and see how that chapter describes the prophet as well as the people of Israel, after the exile.

Isa. 53:7 He was oppressed, though he humbled himself
And opened not his mouth ^{his}
As a lamb that is led to the slaughter,....

The record of the prophets shows us that the prophets lived a very difficult life. Not only did many of the people, as well as those in power, taunt the prophet, but the prophet suffered because he really didn't want to pronounce those commands that would result in harm for his people. As Jeremiah cried out:

4:19-21 My bowels, my bowels! I write ^h in pain!
The chambers of my heart!
My heart moans within me!
Yet I cannot hold my peace!
Because you have heard, Oh my soul, the sound of
the horn,
The alarm of war.

.....

How long shall I hear the sound of the horn?

At times the prophet complains to God. He speaks of the fact that he must live in loneliness and never rejoice. He criticizes God for promising him that he would not be overwhelmed by his enemies.

Jer.15:15-18

.....

Know that for Your sake I have suffered taunts.

.....

I sat not in the company of them that rejoice
I sat alone because of Your hand
For You have filled me with indignation.

Why is my pain perpetual
And my wound incurable,....?

Will You be to me as a deceitful brook,
As waters that fail?

Finally, Jeremiah despairs of the day he was born and wishes that he was not able to pronounce the words that God makes him declare.

20:14-18

Cursed be the day
Wherein I was born;
The day when my mother gave birth to me,
Let it not be blessed.

.....

For what reason did I emerge from my
mother's womb
To see suffering and sorrow
That my life should be spent in shame?

In spite of the suffering of the prophet, however, he proclaims God's words, because he can't hold them in. God has chosen him for this purpose and it is not possible to resist.

Jer. 20:9

And if I say: 'I will not make mention of Him,
Nor speak any more in His name',
Then there is in my heart, as it were, a
burning fire
Shut up in my bones,
And I struggle to hold it in,
But I cannot.

From these verses, we can conclude that it is not quite correct for us to say, "The prophet said", the prophet believed". It is God who spoke through the prophet and the mind and soul of the prophet are so bound up in God that the will of the prophet is submerged into the will and mind of God.

It is difficult for us in modern times to understand this combination of spirituality and morality. We hear today of people losing themselves in meditation with "Being", but this "Being", associated especially with the Far Eastern religions, does not command the person who experiences it to go forth and attack those who are evil. Resistance to evil is the hallmark of prophecy. The prophet is impelled to act. The Far Eastern religions, as they are classically presented, teach non-resistance and passiveness.

The difference between the spirituality of the prophet (and, therefore, of Judaism), and the spirituality of the yogi or guru is the difference between action and non-action, involvement and non-involvement. The present moment and its suffering is of tremendous importance to Judaism. The suffering must be relieved; the evil must be corrected. In this sense, we can say that Judaism is very much present-oriented (but not only present oriented). In Judaism, as in the prophet, the present is a cross-section of past and future, and all that was meaningful in the past and sacred in the future, is bound up in the event that is occurring today; therefore, the present is precious!

The Prayer of the Prophet

When, we speak of spirituality, we usually think of praying. The spiritual life we have been taught, is the prayerful life. This may be generally true for westerners, but Judaism understands prayer somewhat differently from other religions. The function of prayer in Judaism is to make whole our spirit so that it may dedicate itself to moral activity. Words with God are important so that there can be activity with God and in God's behalf.

As you read the lives of the prophets, you can see that they prayed regularly, but the prayer did not deal with abstract things. They weren't concerned with "heaven" and with the life to come, but with mercy and justice as expressed by human beings in the present. The prophets were people oriented, society oriented, this-worldly oriented. As Elijah was a friend to birds and children, to widows and orphans, so Elisha was a healer of the sick, and Amos was a friend of the poor.

For Judaism, the good man, the religious man, is ultimately the man of righteous action. This does not mean that prayer is unnecessary. On the contrary, prayer is needed as preparation for the battles of everyday life. Prayer is communion with God, and we need that, as we need to go to the "fountain of life", (Jeremiah's phrase), to be refreshed in body and spirit, to draw sustenance for whatever lies ahead of us. The prophet teaches us not to separate prayer and moral action (as the priests of their day did). The two are part and parcel of one another.