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

—Jeremiah 1:10

Prophets, many would say, are very uncomfortable people. No matter what the context, they claim to speak with an authority that tolerates no dissent. Their power and influence derive from their claims of special insight and "contact" with the divine. For this reason, they seem so sure of what they see, so certain that their perspective about the present or the future is the correct one, sometimes the only one. Perhaps we can say best what prophecy is by saying what it is not. First, prophets, and especially biblical prophets, are not crystal ball gazers peering into the abyss of things yet to be so that they might "foretell" the future. Prophets are concerned primarily with the present, not with the distant future. They speak about present realities, the implications of present actions, and their consequences in the immediate future. They read the "writing on the wall," the "signs of the times," and declare to others the certain consequences of their actions that they themselves seem not to see. Second, prophets are not lone, solitary figures but, rather, individuals who speak for and represent the concerns and perspectives of different groups in society.

Known by various names in different cultures both ancient and modern, prophets are a common phenomenon in societies, and they serve an essential social function. Some prophets claim a place in the mainstream as
spokespersons for the status quo. They lend so-called divine legitimization to the dominant social-political group. Their words lend affirmation and stability to those in power. Like the evangelistic preacher at a political prayer breakfast, such prophets are part of “the system.” There are other prophets, however, who stand on the margins of society, on the periphery, and speak words that are often “out of sync” with the mainstream. These are those women and men who dare to challenge the status quo and who serve as essential agents for social change. These are the voices of challenge and social critique. Insofar as their message threatens those in power, these prophets often suffer abuse, arrest, and ostracism at the hands of the system. The Indian activist Gandhi (1869–1948), the African American woman Rosa Parks (b. 1913), who refused to take a backseat in the bus because of the color of her skin, or Nelson Mandela (b. 1918), jailed for nearly thirty years in South Africa for his opposition to the racist policies of apartheid, are among the many, obvious contemporary examples of this type of prophet. Other persons will no doubt stand out for you as examples of modern-day prophets. It is important to keep these persons in mind as concrete examples of contemporary prophecy while we turn now to the biblical prophets.

The Twofold Character of Biblical Prophecy

Prophecy in ancient Israel is a complex and multifaceted dimension of biblical faith. Before exploring the individual prophetic figures who spoke YHWH’s message in diverse ways to Israel, it is important to review some of the elements that were common among the Israelite prophets. Taken together, the biblical prophets could be described as the custodians of the covenant dream. Again and again throughout Israel’s history, they were the ones who continually called the covenant people back to fidelity to YHWH. Often they challenged even the king himself and all the royal bureaucracy. Their mission, however, was always twofold: to challenge covenant violators and to nurture covenant faith. The account of the prophet Jeremiah’s call offers the consummate statement of the “agenda” of the prophet’s life:

> See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. (Jer 1:10)

The dual character of the prophetic task is more easily visible if we juxtapose the first and third cola (lines or phrases) in particular:

A— to pluck up and to pull down—B
B’— to build and to plant—A
The agricultural images of “plucking up and planting” are reinforced by the construction images of “pulling down and building” in an A–B–B–A pattern that rounds out its message and comes to a conclusion (inclusio) by coming full circle. The message is clear and by this structure and rhetorical form receives special emphasis. Prophets must both criticize and energize, denounce as well as announce hope for the covenant people. This dual role is not what we ordinarily associate with our image of the “prophet.” We tend to focus more on their role as social critics and forget that prophets also bear the awesome responsibility to speak words of hope in times of despair. Which is more difficult, we might ask, to be a social critic and prophet of doom or to summon the energy to hope in a time of hopelessness? The biblical prophets did both.

The faith of the prophets rests on their unshakeable conviction that God’s word had entered into and taken possession of them. They stood on “middle ground,” as it were, as the link between God and the people. On the one hand, they cried out to God on behalf of people; on the other, they pleaded with the people on behalf of God. Three Hebrew terms named these figures in ancient Israel: hozeh (visionary), roeh (seer), and nabi (prophet, one who announces, one who is called). These terms suggest that prophetic activity was characterized by both visionary and auditory experiences that provided access to the divine realm. These were figures of deep insight, fearless commitment, and unwavering fidelity to God’s powerful word.

“What Manner of [Person] Is the Prophet?”

When the great Jewish teacher of the last century, Rabbi Abraham Heschel (1907–1972), posed this question in 1962 in his now landmark book, The Prophets, he had in mind principally the prophet as the person on the margin, speaking a word from God to those in the center of society. Heschel tries to get inside the prophetic consciousness, to touch the prophet’s very soul. He succeeds with stirring power. Like the poets and artists in every age, the biblical prophets had a heightened sensitivity to evil. They had a “breathless impatience with injustice” that prompted them to speak out. The people’s idolatrous ways and failure to live the demands of their covenant identity horrified them. Jeremiah offers again the perfect example: “Be appalled, O heavens, at this, be shocked, be utterly desolate, says the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:12–13).

These prophets were consumed with indignation and moral outrage. They stood against the callous numbness of the people. They were convinced that even the “smallest” abuse of justice, the most minor violation of the
covenant bond, was an affront in the eyes of God: "The prophet's ear is attuned to a cry imperceptible to others. . . . The prophet's ear perceives the silent sigh." Others (especially those in power) are callous, unmoved by suffering or injustice, whereas the prophet, like YHWH, "hears the cry." Their mode of speech was often outrageous, desperate, or shocking. It is almost as if they try to take us by the shoulders and shake us into awareness of the horrors that they see. In words that we can barely stand to listen to, for example, the prophet Micah condemns the royal establishment of his day: "Listen, you heads of Jacob and rulers of the house of Israel! Should you not know justice?—you who hate the good and love the evil, who tear the skin off my people, and the flesh off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, flay their skin off them, break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a caldron" (Mic 3:1–3). These grotesque images cut like a sword and speak as strongly today of contemporary horrors—in Afghanistan, in the Gaza Strip, or in Belfast—as they did in Micah's Jerusalem.

Neither did the Israelite prophets spare the religious establishment of their day. Priest and "court prophet" alike (those figures who were part of the royal establishment and in collusion with the king), they believed, had abandoned their covenant responsibility and had subordinated justice to the practices of "empty religion." Again, both Hosea's and Jeremiah's words are chilling:

Yet let no one contend,
And let none accuse,
for with you is my contention, O priest.
They feed on the sin of my people;
they are greedy for their iniquity.
And it shall be like people, like priest;
I will punish them for their ways,
and repay them for their deeds. (Hos 4:4, 8–9)

For from the least to the greatest of them,
everyone is greedy for unjust gain;
and from prophet to priest,
everyone deals falsely.
They have treated the wound of my people carelessly,
saying, "Peace, peace,"
when there is no peace. (Jer 6:13–14)

This wholesale indictment of the establishment brought a harsh response from those in power. Consequently, another mark of prophets' lives is often loneliness, persecution at the hands of others, and mistrust of their own clar-
ity and vision. But their message keeps on—relentlessly—calling Israel back to the heart of its covenant bond. The prophet Hosea (ca. 750 B.C.E.) captured the essence of covenant faith in conveying YHWH’s words of love to a wayward people. Hosea sees that YHWH will once again lure the people into the wilderness and, there, will renew the covenant of love: “And I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness [sedeqah] and in justice [mispat], in steadfast love [hesed], and in mercy [rahamim]. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness [emeth]; and you shall know [daath YHWH] the LORD” (Hos 2:19–20, my translation). These six terms recur, almost monotonously, throughout the prophetic writings, and they encompass the core of Israel’s relationship with her God. These were the very attributes of the God who had rescued them; and these were to be the covenant commitments among God’s people. The prophets would not let Israel, nor do they let us, forget.

Prophetic Challenge and Vision

Though there were prophetic precursors before the eighth century B.C.E., like the fiery prophet Elijah who was taken up in the “chariot of fire,” the height of prophetic activity corresponds to the period from the eighth to the fifth century B.C.E. (see table 7.1). It was from this period that we have prophetic oracles that have been preserved in writing by the circle of those who heard and collected the words of the prophets. During these tumultuous times, the messages of the prophets called Israel back to the heart of its covenant bond.

Table 7.1. Prophetic Activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Israel—North</th>
<th>Judah—South</th>
<th>Exile (587–539 B.C.E.)</th>
<th>Postexilic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8th century B.C.E.</td>
<td>Amos</td>
<td>Isaiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hosea</td>
<td>Micah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>722 Fall of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Samaria</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th century B.C.E.</td>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jeremiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nahum</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th century B.C.E.</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exile 597/587–539</td>
<td>Obadiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th century B.C.E.</td>
<td>2nd Isaiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3rd Isaiah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zechariah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Malachi</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haggai</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jonah</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Joel</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
years of the monarchy and its aftermath, the covenant people saw the destruction, first, of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.E. and then of the Southern Kingdom of Judah, with its political and cultic center focused in the Temple in Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. They endured nearly fifty to sixty years of exile in Babylon, and when they returned to reestablish their life in the land, they were living as aliens under Persian rule. Through these years the words of the prophets kept their covenant vision alive. Let us listen now to some of these voices.

The Northern Kingdom of Israel: Amos and Hosea

Amos

Of all the prophets in ancient Israel, none was more fiercely committed to covenant justice than Amos. Amos, who was “among the shepherds of Tekoa” (Am 1:1), heard God’s call as he was about his business of “dressing his sycamore trees” (Am 7:14). The voice of the Lord said to him: “Go prophesy to my people Israel” (Am 7:15). As a southerner (from Judah) he was sent north to the prosperous kingdom of Israel under its King Jeroboam II. Though the hostile Assyrian Empire was poised to strike at Israel's borders, Jeroboam continued his luxurious excesses and empty religious practices. Amos’s vehement critique spared no one:

Thus says the LORD:

For three transgressions of Israel,
and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;
because they sell the righteous for silver,
and the needy for a pair of sandals—
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,
and push the afflicted out of the way;
father and son go in to the same girl,
so that my holy name is profaned. (Am 2:6-7)

YHWH's covenant promise that Israel would be a precious possession meant that they must live and conduct their lives in justice. Their failure to do so brought Amos's bitter condemnation:

Hear this word that the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel, against the whole family that I brought up out of the land of Egypt:

You only have I known
of all the families of the earth;
therefore I will punish you
for all your iniquities. (Am 3:1-2, emphasis added)
As we said earlier and Amos here makes clear, YHWH had rescued and chosen them for special responsibility, not for special privilege.

Amos regards the abuses of the powerful women of Bashan with particular disdain. Calling them the "cows of Bashan . . . who oppress the poor, who crush the needy" (Am 4:1), Amos also reserves for them a particularly horrible fate:

The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness:
   The time is surely coming upon you,
   when they shall take you away with hooks,
   even the last of you with fishhooks. (Am 4:2)

Again the grotesque images convey the prophet's rage. Elsewhere Amos resorts to biting irony when he mimics the poetic rhythm of the Hebrew funeral lament and sings a dirge for Israel's death:

Hear this word that I take up over you in lamentation, O house of Israel:
   Fallen, no more to rise,
   is maiden Israel;
   forsaken on her land,
   with no one to raise her up. (Am 5:1–2)

This would have the same effect in his day as it might have in ours if we were to sing solemnly to the tune of "Taps" or "We Shall Overcome." The cadence of the Hebrew lament meter would bring chills to those who heard it. Thus, the prophet would use any method available to move the hearts of his hearers.

The core of Amos's preaching can best be summarized in a final example that preserves the very heart of the covenant vision:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
   and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them;
   and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
   I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
   I will not listen to the melody of your harps.
But let justice roll down like waters,
   and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Am 5:21–24)

Burnt offerings, fatted calves, and noisy songs are all meaningless without the core covenant values lived among the people: justice and righteousness.
pouring down like water. “Woe to those,” Amos warns, “... Woe to those who are at ease in Zion, ... [Woe to those] who lie upon beds of ivory, ... [Woe to those] who eat lambs from the flock, who drink wine in bowls, and anoint themselves with finest oils, but who are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph!” (Am 6:1, 4, 6).

Such fierce words from the prophet bring fierce reprisals from the powerful elite: “Then Amaziah, the priest of Bethel, sent to King Jeroboam of Israel, saying, ‘Amos has conspired against you in the very center of the house of Israel; the land is not able to bear all his words.’ And Amaziah said to Amos, ‘O seer, go, flee away to the land of Judah, earn your bread there, and prophesy there; but never again prophesy at Bethel, for it is the king’s sanctuary, and it is a temple of the kingdom”’ (Am 7:10, 12–13). This exchange illustrates well the recurring struggle between the king, together with his priest who was part of the royal establishment, and the marginal prophet as guardian of the covenant.

Hosea

A very different prophetic voice in the Northern Kingdom came from the resident northerner Hosea, whose ministry spanned the years 750–724 B.C.E., ending just before the fall of the northern capital, Samaria, in 722 B.C.E. Unlike Amos’s, Hosea’s message balanced both words of disaster and words of hope. His oracles draw on the central image of marriage as a symbol of YHWH’s covenant relationship with the people. And just as infidelity destroys the marital bond, so Israel’s infidelity and idolatrous practices have threatened their covenant status. The key text quoted earlier, “I will betroth you to me forever...” (Hos 2:19), imagines that YHWH will again renew the covenant relationship in love after a time of purification in the wilderness. But first the truth must be told. Like a prosecuting attorney in the courtroom, Hosea levels God’s sweeping allegations against the people:

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, and murder, and stealing and adultery break out; bloodshed follows bloodshed. Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing. (Hos 4:1–3)
Even the land and sea suffer from Israel’s sin.

To a degree unparalleled in other prophets, Hosea seems to know the very heart of God and to be privy to the inner soliloquy within the divine psyche. His intimacy with this divine pathos produces some of the most profound passages in all of Scripture. Hosea imagines YHWH’s exasperated question, like that of a weary parent: “What shall I do with you, O Ephraim? What shall I do with you, O Judah? Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early” (Hos 6:4). Here, the prophet seems to have an ear on the very heart of God, listening to God’s own anguish over the foolishness of the people’s sin. Playing the harlot and seeking after other gods constitute one of their crimes. The monarchy itself seems to be another, as YHWH’s word contends: “They [Israel] made kings, but not through me; They set up princes, but without my knowledge. With silver and gold, they made idols for their own destruction” (Hos 8:4, emphasis added).

In another passage Hosea again voices God’s parental lament for these wayward children:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrificing to the Baals, and offering incense to idols. (Hos 11:1–2)

And yet, as Hosea knows, divine anger always gives way to divine compassion. This is the very character of the covenant God; it cannot be otherwise. As with the generation of Noah in the ancient past, so God’s fidelity is absolute. Therefore, the prophet consoles the people with assurances of God’s own anguish and yet God’s persistent determination to save and not to destroy:

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11:3–4)

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

Here, as elsewhere, God’s mother-love, God’s rahamim, “grows warm and tender.”

Hosea’s prophetic word ends in a great crescendo of hope: “I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely . . . I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily” (Hos 14:4–5). Despite the Assyrian threat that was soon to destroy the Northern Kingdom, the prophet affirms hope beyond defeat and destruction. But hope must be always grounded in a return to covenant fidelity, to intimate dependence on God:

They shall again live beneath my shadow,
they shall flourish as a garden;
they shall blossom like the vine,
their fragrance shall be like the wine of Lebanon.

O Ephraim, what have I to do with idols?
It is I who answer and look after you.
I am like an evergreen cypress;
your faithfulness comes from me. (Hos 14:7–8)

The Southern Kingdom of Judah: Micah and Isaiah

Micah

In the same turbulent eighth century B.C.E., while all of Palestine braced itself in the face of the threat of invasion and domination by the rising political power of the Assyrian Empire to the northeast, two prophets proclaimed a similar message in the heart of Jerusalem. Micah’s words mix accusation and hope as he tries to bring Jerusalem to its senses. His desperate urgency drove him to outrageous acts: “For this I will lament and wail; I will go barefoot and naked; I will make lamentation like the jackals . . . for her wound is incurable; it has come to Judah, it has reached the gate of my people, to Jerusalem” (Mic 1:8–9). Like his northern counterpart, Amos, Micah too leveled vehement criticism against those who violated covenant justice:
Alas for those who devise wickedness
and evil deeds on their beds!
When the morning dawns, they perform it,
because it is in their power.
They covet fields, and seize them;
houses, and take them away;
they oppress householder and house,
people and their inheritance. (Mic 2:1–2)

But even in the midst of international political upheaval and national violation of justice Micah finds the social imagination to dream of a different future. His familiar words, which are duplicated in Isaiah 2:2–4, envision a future time of peace. In our contemporary age of modern weapons and nuclear threats, they still resound in our ears but with an even greater urgency. Such is the power of the prophetic word, with its images that sear themselves on our souls:

He [YHWH] shall judge between many peoples,
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more;
but they shall all sit under their own vines
and under their own fig trees,
and no one shall make them afraid;
for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken. (Mic 4:3–4)

Micah also joins his prophetic voice to those who denounced empty and perfunctory worship devoid of covenantal living. Micah first poses the hypothetical question about proper worship and reverence of God: “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?” (Mic 6:6). Then, in escalating stair step fashion, Micah responds with five proposals only to reject them all in the climactic final verse. “Shall I come,” he asks, “with:

v7c—my first born, the fruit of my body?
v7b—ten thousand rivers of oil?
v7a—thousands of rams?
v6d—Calves a year old?
v6c—Burnt offerings?
Chapter Seven

Here, verses 6 and 7 each have separate phrases, labeled a, b, c, and d. Each phrase introduces a new thought in progressive steps, upping the ante each time. What does God require of us, what can we possibly give as propitiation for our failures and sin? What could be enough? Micah answers with a staggeringly simple response that encompasses the covenant demands completely:

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

It is not the excess of sacrificial cultic offerings. It is not 10,000 acts of ritual devotion. It is not even the “fruit of our bodies” that YHWH demands. Only this YHWH asks—to do justice (mispat), and to love kindness (hesed), and “to walk” (that is, to conduct one’s entire life) humbly with God. Here is the heart of the covenant—nothing more, nothing less.

Isaiah of Jerusalem

With the biblical book of Isaiah we have the proclamations and prophetic oracles not of a single prophet but, in fact, of several. These prophetic voices span the centuries from the eighth century B.C.E., in the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem, a contemporary of Micah, to an anonymous prophet writing toward the end of the exile (ca. 545), to the postexilic prophecies coming from the early Persian period (538–500 B.C.E.). An anonymous editor gathered these traditions together because they shared to some degree a common vocabulary and theological vision. Our biblical “book of Isaiah” comprises, then, First Isaiah (chaps. 1–39), Second Isaiah (chaps. 40–55), and Third Isaiah (chaps. 56–66). Because this work is so large we can at best only highlight some of the more significant passages, beginning here with First Isaiah.

In the case of First Isaiah of Jerusalem (ca. 742–705 B.C.E.) we can begin with a report of the prophet’s extraordinary experience of his call from God. Isaiah 6:1–8 describes this moment in some detail and brings to mind the call of Moses from Exodus 3. As Isaiah describes the moment, he was in the Temple of Jerusalem and, with the same suddenness as Moses had experienced, he had a vision of the Lord “sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up.” Above him there were seraphim (angelic beings), and they sang in chorus:

Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts;
the whole earth is full of his glory. (Isa 6:3)
Dramatic signs signaled the awesomeness of the moment. The foundations of the doors shook, and the Temple area was filled with smoke. Isaiah was astonished and said: “Woe is me for I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isa 6:5). These theophanies, these God experiences—whether those of Moses, of Isaiah, or of ourselves—are both humbling and overwhelming. God's majesty, holiness, mystery, exposes our littleness and the faults of our “unclean lips.” But YHWH's response to Isaiah comes swiftly through the aid of the seraphim: “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’ Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’” (Isa 6:6–8). A live coal sears Isaiah's tongue and so brands him for God's prophetic mission. This exchange, namely, of divine appearance, human reluctance, and divine empowerment, is the repetitive pattern we saw in the call of Moses and will see repeated in the call of Jeremiah. It signals for us an essential aspect of prophetic spirituality: the conviction that God not only calls but also sustains the messenger.

In Isaiah, we see the same fierce condemnations of injustice against the powerful royal establishment: “Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the orphan, and the widow's cause does not come to them” (Isa 1:23). In short, they fail in their covenant obligations. In Isaiah, too, we see vehement opposition to empty religious practice: “Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them” (Isa 1:14). Instead Isaiah blurts out in rapid-fire verse what the people must learn to do:

Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings
    from before my eyes;
cease to do evil,
learn to do good;
seek justice,
rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan,
plead for the widow. (Isa 1:16–17)

No matter how dire the circumstance, however, there is always the possibility of hope. Isaiah proclaims a hope grounded still in the Davidic monarchy...
and in YHWH’s presence in the Temple in Jerusalem. But he envisions a monarchy purified by God’s renewing Spirit:13

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. (Isa 11:1–3)

On the Eve of Destruction: Jeremiah and Habbakuk

Roughly a century later Jeremiah, another prophetic “giant,” emerged in Jerusalem in the days of King Josiah. Jeremiah is a towering figure in the history of Israel. If there were a competition for Israel’s greatest prophet, Jeremiah would surely be a semifinalist, at least. His book of fifty-two chapters is a disparate collection of prophetic oracles that span the years circa 630 B.C.E. down to the time of the Babylonian exile in 587 B.C.E. All this while the Babylonian Empire was gaining strength, ready to devour the other nations of the Near East. Meanwhile Jerusalem seemed oblivious to its certain fate and placed foolish confidence in its Temple and its king. The people had forgotten YHWH: “But my people have forgotten me; they burn offerings to a delusion, they have stumbled in their ways” (Jer 18:15). Against this sin, Jeremiah’s poetry is masterful, and he feels with such intensity that the pain of God can be heard in his message.

Jeremiah’s ancestry linked him with the priestly families who traced their lineage all the way back to Moses, and his account of his prophetic call is modeled exactly on that of Moses. Like Isaiah’s call in the Temple, Jeremiah too had an experience of God in which he “heard” God’s word speak to him: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer 1:5). Like Moses before him, Jeremiah replied with a reasonable objection: “Ah, LORD God! Truly I do not know how to speak, I am only a boy” (Jer 1:6). But once again God’s call could not, in the end, be resisted:

But the LORD said to me,  
“Do not say, ‘I am only a boy’;  
for you shall go to all to whom I send you,  
and you shall speak whatever I command you,  
and I will be with you.” (Jer 1:7–8)
Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD.”

Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me,

“Now I have put my words in your mouth.” (Jer 1:7–9)

We saw how the seraph had touched Isaiah’s tongue with a hot coal, purifying his speech. This image in Jeremiah is even more intimate. For the Lord’s own hand touches Jeremiah’s mouth and gives him the capacity, “though only a youth,” to speak God’s own words to the people. And like prophets before him Jeremiah’s message combined both harsh censure and confident hope. Again, a few examples will suffice.

Despite the efforts for religious reform instigated by King Josiah (639–609 B.C.E.), which included repairing the Temple in Jerusalem and destroying all other altars and places of sacrifice, Jeremiah was a strong critic of the monarchy, and, after the death of Josiah, his oracles against Josiah’s successors (Jehoiakim, 609–598 B.C.E.; Jehoiachin, 597–587 B.C.E.) contained bitter satire against the royal abuses. Against Jehoiakim’s palace renovations he cried out: “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice; who makes his neighbors work for nothing, and does not give them their wages; . . . Are you a king because you compete in cedar?” (Jer 22:13, 15). Then Jeremiah suggested that a most inglorious fate would be reserved for such a king: “With the burial of a donkey he shall be buried, dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem” (Jer 22:19).

Jeremiah’s accusations went to the very center of power—to the Temple itself, where the political and religious leaders had tried to convince the people that Jerusalem was invincible and that nothing could touch them—because they had the Temple of the Lord. To this foolish belief, Jeremiah replied by mocking their repeated claims:

Do not trust in these deceptive words: “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD.” For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly to one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever. (Jer 7:4–7)

Instead, he warned them to embrace the covenant demands for justice, especially for the poor and weak in their midst. Only then would YHWH preserve them in the land.
More than any other prophet's, Jeremiah's career gives us a rare glimpse into the prophet's own reflection on his prophetic ministry. Suffering, harassment, persecution, and loneliness marked his life, as well as self-doubt. He felt called by God to deny himself wife and children (Jer 16:1–4). He resorted to outrageous acts, like wearing an ox yoke around his neck as a symbol of Judah's impending captivity (Jer 27:1–28:17). He was beaten and thrown into a cistern (Jer 37:6). His so-called confessions reveal the soul of the prophet. One in particular shows the heart of a true prophetic spirituality:

O LORD, you have enticed [seduced] me,
and I was enticed [seduced];
you have overpowered me,
and you have prevailed.
I have become a laughingstock all day long;
everyone mocks me.
For whenever I speak, I must cry out,
I must shout, “Violence and destruction!”
For the word of the LORD has become for me
a reproach and derision all day long.
If I say, “I will not mention him,
or speak any more in his name,”
then within me there is something like a burning fire
shut up in my bones;
I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot. (Jer 20:7–9)

It is clear from this text that a prophet experiences an inner compulsion to speak the word of God—a fire—as Jeremiah says. Despite all obstacles and personal suffering, the fire remains and compels the prophet to speak. For the prophet, the word of God takes possession of his or her very soul. It cannot be contained. In another place, Jeremiah describes it this way: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart, for I am called by your name O LORD of hosts" (Jer 15:16).

This kind of confidence in YHWH's fidelity, both to the prophet and to the people as a whole, led Jeremiah to proclaim God's astonishing promise:

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I
will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my peo-
ple. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the
LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says
the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.
(Jer 31:31–34)

Certain that the “old” Sinai covenant had ceased to be effective, Jeremiah
proclaimed a *new* covenant, not written on tablets of stone but grafted onto
the heart of the covenant people. This was to be not simply a new printing
fixing minor errors; this would be a reinvigorated *new* edition. For Jeremiah,
God’s fidelity, therefore, was not a static presence but a dynamic one con-
tantly renewing itself in new and surprising ways among God’s people. Jere-
miah’s contemporary, the prophet Habakkuk, counseled the people never to
give up hope in this covenant vision. These are surely words that in our time
we still need to hear:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.
For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.
If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay. (Hab 2:2–3)

The disaster of the exile in Babylon would test this theological conviction as
nothing had ever before, and once again it would be the prophetic voices
that would show Israel the way.

**Singing the Lord’s Song in a
Foreign Land: Ezekiel and Second Isaiah**

One only has to read the plaintive cries of the book of Lamentations to
glimpse the horror and devastation suffered by the city of Jerusalem and its
inhabitants in the Babylonian destruction of 587 B.C.E.:

How lonely sits the city
that once was full of people!
How like a widow she has become,
she that was great among the nations!
She that was a princess among the provinces
has become a vassal. (Lam 1:1)
Jeremiah's repeated warnings had been to no avail, and the "foe from the north"—Nebuchadnezzar's armies from Babylon—razed the city to the ground and exiled the leadership of its people. Now, they had lost everything; now it was finished. They had lost the land. They had lost the Davidic dynasty that, God had promised and they had thought, was to be forever: "Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him [i.e., the king], and my covenant with him will stand firm. I will establish his line for ever and his throne as the heavens endure" (Ps 89:28–29). Worst of all, they had lost the Temple. The place of YHWH's holy dwelling in their midst, with its Ark of the Covenant (the portable box containing the tablets of the covenant) enshrined in the inner sanctum of the Temple, the Holy of Holies, was no more. Did that mean they had lost YHWH, their God, as well? Were the promises to Abraham now revoked? Had the savior "who brought them up out of the land of Egypt" now abandoned the people? Had the great dream of a covenant between God and a people crumbled? Was there any possibility of hope in a future beyond exile? These questions weighed heavily on their hearts.

As a people broken and exiled far from their homeland they cried out once again to their God in the midst of tears. In the words of the psalmist, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion" (Ps 137:1). As they had been in Egypt, so now they were strangers again in Babylon. "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land," they asked? Once more, a prophetic voice would provide the answer.

Ezekiel
By his own report, "the word of the LORD came to Ezekiel the priest, the son of Buzi, in the land of the Chaldeans by the river Chebar; and the hand of the LORD was upon him there" (Ezek 1:3).14 Probably, as a member of the priestly family of Buzi and most likely a priest himself, Ezekiel was among those Jerusalemites who were exiled to Babylon in the first wave of deportations in 597 B.C.E. Although Jerusalem "held on" for ten more years, it was, for all intents and purposes, a broken city that was finally razed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E. Ezekiel watched the catastrophe unfold and experienced the humiliation and despair of exile.

It is difficult for us to imagine the level of profound despair these events would have fostered in the exiled community. Only the horror of modern-day devastations of ethnic annihilations, or earthquake-ravaged cities, or thousands of people uprooted from their homes could compare with the desperation and hopelessness that must have been theirs. Then, by the river Chebar, Ezekiel saw a vision of Jerusalem. An angel took him by the
hair of his head and brought him to Jerusalem. There he watched as a great chariot descended and the presence of YHWH went out of the Temple in the form of a cloud, like the pillar of cloud that had symbolized YHWH’s presence with Moses and the people in the wilderness. And perhaps Ezekiel began to see and to understand that a new moment in their journey as a people was beginning.

Ezekiel saw that God had not given up on the people and they should not give up on God. There by the river Chebar, far from Jerusalem, Ezekiel began to understand that the God who had been with them in the wilderness was with them still—wherever they might be scattered throughout the world. God’s voice came to Ezekiel with these words: “Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: Though I removed them far away among the nations, and though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone” (Ezek 11:16).

But the prophet was convinced that God was calling them as a people to a new understanding of their covenant. Ezekiel believed that God would bring them back to the land where their family properties would be restored and where they would again live as God’s people. This new moment, however, required new energies and new imagination to live in a way that could survive disaster. It demanded that the people reexamine their priorities and theological convictions and that they recommit themselves to God’s ways. It required, in short, a new heart:

Therefore say: Thus says the Lord GOD: 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. When they come there, they will remove from it all its detestable things and all its abominations. I will give them one heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. (Ezek 11:17-20)

Only this divine “open heart surgery” could cure their hardness of heart. “Hardness of heart,” remember, had been the exact description of Pharaoh’s complicity with evil in the Exodus story. Here again we see the ongoing struggle with the “pharaoh inside them” and God’s determination to free them from that pharaoh by whatever means.

Like many prophets before him, Ezekiel laid the blame for the devastation of Jerusalem and for the exile of its people on the abuses of power carried out by the “shepherds of Israel”—the kings. And yet he still holds out hope for a
renewed monarchy in the Davidic line that would shepherd and feed the people in justice: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken" (Ezek 34:23-24).

Ezekiel's most famous and perhaps best-known vision (Ezek 37:1-14), however, concerns, as the wonderful spiritual sings, "Dem bones, dem bones, dem dry bones." The hand of the Lord brought Ezekiel to a great valley, "and it was full of bones" (Ezek 37:1), and they were very dry. As I read this text within an American cultural context, it is easy to imagine the stark paintings of Georgia O'Keefe's dry and brittle animal skulls laying about in the southwestern desert of New Mexico. For Ezekiel, the scene spoke only of death, corruption, and loss of hope. YHWH then asked Ezekiel: "Mortal, can these bones live?" I answered, 'O Lord GOD, you know'" (Ezek 37:3). The question begs for an answer and is a perennial question, not just for Ezekiel but for the spiritual life. In all those moments of our lives that seem to be filled with death, whether literal or figurative, we are drawn to ask the question: Will we survive? Is there any hope? How can we go on; how will we endure? Can these bones live?

Ezekiel's vision imagines nothing short of a new act of creation! As YHWH had fashioned adam out of the dry dust of the earth and breathed life into this creature, so YHWH would do again with these bones: "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall know that I am the LORD.' So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone" (Ezek 37:5-7). Bone by bone, with sinews, flesh, and God's own breath, these exiles would be re-created and called once more to be God's people. Ezekiel would prophesy their future restoration to the land with the Temple rebuilt as YHWH's eternal dwelling place among them (Ezek 40:1-48:35). His elaborate vision of the restored Temple imagined a great river flowing from the throne of God in the midst of the Holy of Holies (Ezek 47:1-12). The life-giving waters of this river would spill out from the Temple, flow out of its gates, and water the dry regions down even to the Dead Sea, restoring life to everything in its path. The desert would bloom; life would flourish, even as it had in the garden of Paradise. Many centuries later another visionary prophet would look to this text of Ezekiel for inspiration for his time. As we shall see in the final chapter, the seer John of Patmos would echo Ezekiel's words in his vision of the New Jerusalem that stands as the concluding word to the entire biblical story (Rev 21-22).
Second Isaiah

If Ezekiel proclaimed to the exiles a future restoration to the land, the anonymous prophet we call Second Isaiah would see that prophecy become reality in his day. Chapters 40–55 of the book of Isaiah contain the oracles of a prophet who, like Ezekiel, was with the exilic community in Babylon but at a time when Babylon’s power was beginning to decline and was being challenged by the Persian armies of Cyrus the Great (539–530 B.C.E.), who conquered Babylon in 539. With that dramatic turn of events, suddenly the Jewish exiles found themselves at the mercy of the Persian ruler. But unlike the Babylonians, Cyrus followed a policy of repatriating conquered peoples. And so he sent the exiles home. Some returned to Palestine to rebuild their lives and reclaim their properties. Many did not. Instead these Jews became part of the vast community of the “Diaspora,” the dispersed Jewish people living no longer in Palestine but in every conceivable part of the known world.

With his heightened prophetic insight, Second Isaiah “sees” this hopeful future about to unfold. He was convinced of YHWH’s enduring fidelity to the people and even saw Cyrus as an anointed instrument of God’s purposes to overthrow the Babylonian power. A central theme of this prophet would be the certainty that God had forgiven the people. And so, contrary to the pessimism of the book of Lamentation, which mourns that “[Jerusalem] has none to comfort her,” he can announce to the people profound words of comfort:

Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her

that she has served her term,

that her penalty is paid,

that she has received from the LORD’S hand
double for all her sins. (Isa 40:1–2)⁴

The prophet evoked ancient memories of God’s mighty deeds in their Exodus from Egypt and proclaimed an escape through the wilderness, with all the mountains flattened out, and all the valleys raised up, and a straight “highway for our God” (Isa 40:3) from Babylon to Jerusalem. Their time of exile was finished; they would be going home!

Second Isaiah reminded them again and again that there was no reason to fear, that God the Holy One would be with them. He was more convinced, in fact, than some of his predecessors that God’s word was immutable. In the face of the exigencies of life, only God could be relied on: “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (Isa 40:8).
If Jeremiah had seen the need for a new covenant, Second Isaiah proclaimed the eternal and effective character of God’s word:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:10–11)

This prophet, moreover, was one of the first to see that God’s message of life was intended for all the earth and that, because of Israel’s fidelity, the nations too would be drawn to God’s ways. Central to Second Isaiah’s message were his poetic visions of a “Servant of YHWH” who would be God’s beloved, God’s chosen one, on whom God’s own Spirit would rest (Isa 42:1). The sufferings of this servant would be redemptive for others (Isa 53:4–5). Interpretive problems abound with these texts (Isa 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, 52:13–53:12): questions about the identity of the “Servant,” whether prophet or king, an individual figure known or unknown, or a corporate personality representing the nation as a whole. Some see these songs as influenced by the prophetic career of Jeremiah, who suffered as God’s righteous servant. Others claim that the songs envision the idealized servant, and from that vantage point it is not difficult to see how, many years later, Christians would turn back again to these texts to try to understand the message and identity of Jesus.

The Decline of Prophecy

We have surveyed many, though not all, of the important prophetic voices of the preexilic and exilic times. These voices did not cease altogether once the people entered again into the land, but they competed with other leaders—priests and scribes—who saw the future of the covenant people in Palestine tied closely to the consolidation of their Torah teachings, the maintenance of cultic purity, the rejection of intermarriage with foreigners, and the rebuilding of the Temple. Other prophets continued to proclaim their visions of a new time when God’s blessings would be shared by all peoples, as Third Isaiah declares:
And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. (Isa 56:6–7)

The prophet Joel, writing in the late sixth or early fifth century B.C.E., saw a time when God's spirit would be poured out on "all flesh," and, although Joel was principally concerned with the Jewish community of his day, later generations saw in this text a promise of universal proportions, as Luke makes explicit in the Pentecost story of Acts 2:17–21. And so, as Habakkuk reminds us: "For there is still a vision for the appointed time. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay" (Hab 2:3).

Conclusion: Implications for Prophetic Spirituality

One thing especially should be clear from this long conversation with the prophets of ancient Israel. They were persons who had been touched by God in profoundly personal and intimate ways. They felt the coal sear their tongues (Isa 6:6), sensed God's hand touch their mouths (Jer 1:9), and felt the fire of God's word within them (Jer 20:9). They saw the world through God's eyes, felt its pain through God's heart, and challenged its abuses as if with God's mighty arm. Like YHWH, they could not be deaf to the cry of people in pain; their sensitivity to evil was raw and uncompromising. These were people who found the courage to hope beyond hope and who spent themselves to convey that hope in the face of despair. These were the poets and dreamers, the ones who could see beyond the surface of things into a deeper reality in the present and into a future time still to come. These were the faithful ones who endured affliction, distress, and persecution and who paid a heavy price for their courageous words.

What is the test of a "true" prophet? How do we distinguish between true and false prophets in our midst? These are questions asked in every age. Our biblical ancestors puzzled over these questions, too. The authors responsible for the book of Deuteronomy, for example, believed that the only "true"
prophets were "prophets like Moses" (Deut 18:18) who had received the heritage of their wilderness leader. Others seemed to say that a true prophet was manifest only in the "proof" of his or her words. If his or her prophecies came true, then the prophet was authentic. We might suggest some features of authentic prophecy by summarizing the characteristics that we have seen displayed in the biblical figures discussed in this chapter.

First, and perhaps most important, there is no such thing as a self-appointed prophet. Prophets experience a deep call from God that seems irresistible. Their words are not their own; they speak words that they believe are God's own words within them. These words possess an inner authority that moves the hearts of others—even if only a minority, and not the "establishment," heeds their message. There is always something striking about their person. They command attention, display amazing creativity and often astounding courage. Prophets are not solitary figures but people engaged with others in a common vision that goes to the "heart of the matter" in every age. They are in "for the long haul"; their commitment is steadfast. They are not necessarily saintly folks, and we would perhaps prefer not to live with them at all. But we know we need their message. True prophets are sometimes plagued by doubts and reluctance. And in every age, true prophets often pay a heavy price for their prophetic message.

Spirituality marked by this prophetic spirit is, first of all, relentless in its struggle for justice. We see it in women and men who shelter and defend the homeless, who refuse to pay their taxes that support war and destruction, and who advocate for prisoners wrongly accused. Prophets in our day protest in public arenas, write letters to Congress, and question Church policy. Just as the prophets of old, contemporary prophets awaken people to the truth that they see, even the hard truth. Their willingness to suffer for their beliefs and their selfless concern for the common good, and not just their own well-being, lend authenticity and credibility to their lives and message. Prophetic spirituality, in this pattern, therefore, moves us to take risks, to say the unwelcome word, to follow the certainties of our God-inspired hearts. Faced with apparently insurmountable odds, prophets dare to look in the face of evil and to say, "No!" This kind of prophetic spirituality requires uncommon integrity and deep rootedness in God. And it means most of all that we never, never give up hope in God's promise of a future still to be.

Questions for Reflection

1. Who are the prophets in our time? How do we recognize them? Who has inspired you with her or his words and actions? How have these prophets shaped your faith today?
2. What are the prophetic dimensions of your own life? What God-given convictions motivate your words and deeds to strengthen the common good?

3. How do we discern authentic prophecy today? What are the signs you look for, and why?

4. As you think about the lives of these biblical prophets, what do they tell you about the relationship between religion and politics?

5. In a time of great crisis and despair, where do you look to discover the prophetic voices of hope?

6. On what situations in our world, in our country, and in your own life does God need to perform "open heart surgery"?

Notes

1. On the social function of prophecy in ancient Israel, see especially Robert R. Wilson, Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980).


5. For all that follows, I rely closely on Heschel, The Prophets, 3–26.


8. Tekoa was a small Judean town just south of Jerusalem, between Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

9. Bashan is the region to the east of the Sea of Galilee.

10. "Joseph" here refers to the Northern Kingdom as a whole. The ancestor Joseph received the tribal lands in Samaria that were incorporated into the Northern Kingdom.

11. Admah and Zeboim were ancient cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah.

12. This oracle probably comes from the year 701 B.C.E. when, under King Hezekiah, the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib invaded Judah, leaving her in a state of vassalage.

13. Many think that Isaiah saw in the birth of the new king Hezekiah (727–698 B.C.E.) the possibility of a renewed and purified monarchy. This and other "messianic" prophecies from Isaiah became for Christians many centuries later the texts they turned to in order to interpret and describe Jesus' life and ministry.

14. Chaldea was the region in the southern Mesopotamian valley that became the center of the Babylonian Empire. The "land of the Chaldeans" is, therefore, Babylon.
The Chebar is a tributary canal that flowed into the Euphrates near ancient Babylon and Nippur.

15. The claims to reappropriation of ancestral properties by the returning exiles, however, would cause fierce animosities and further hostility once they returned to the land of Palestine in 538 B.C.E.

16. Once a student who was unfamiliar with the Bible, upon hearing these words, exclaimed, "I thought Handel wrote it!" referring to the composer's famous work, Messiah.