

## THE PROPHEPIC RESPONSE.

Following the division of Israel into northern and southern kingdoms, Israel and Judah respectively, the inhabitants of the promised land forgot their heritage, betrayed the covenant and sought strong alliances to protect them rather than looking to Yahweh to deliver them. The prophets that appear in the middle of the eighth and seventh centuries, chiefly Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, were the constant critics of a corrupt society and ambitious politicians willing to betray Israel's commitment to Yahweh in exchange for the appearance of political legitimacy and social prestige. The exodus paradigm and covenant obligations were the burden of their message. Though the Sinaitic covenant had long been forgotten as a source of social and moral obligations, the covenant ethic reappears in the social criticism of the prophets. The covenant took on a new dimension of divine vulnerability not associated with the vassal/suzerain treaty structure of an earlier period. The prophets gave new birth to the covenant demands, and rendered judgment in execution of its cursings. Tremendous disparities in wealth and poverty were both a cause and result of spiritual depravity and moral bankruptcy.<sup>1</sup> Corrupt judges of the Law and priests who offered sacrifices profaned Yahweh's justice and cheapened divine forgiveness and judgment. Yahweh had labored with the children of Israel long enough, and they had rejected him. Yahweh had labored with the children of Israel long enough, and they had

rejected him. The divine judgment, despite loving pleas and offers to grant redemption from the abyss of destruction, had been rendered and Israel was ripe for judgment which the prophets declared at their peril to Yahweh's own people.

In the middle of the eighth century, Amos received a call from Yahweh to declare Israel's impending doom. Amos was a shepherd who did not belong to the guild of the prophets. Amos's independence of the popular prophetic guild was essential because the priests of the cult and "state" prophets had largely been bought off by the crown in return for their silence. (Amos 7:10-16) Amos was an unsophisticated but gifted individual who had little knowledge of the technical language of the priestly cults, but was sure of his labor in the name of Yahweh. He warned that Israel had not reciprocated obedience for Yahweh's gracious deliverance in times past:

It was I who brought you out of the land of  
Egypt  
and for forty years led you through the  
wilderness  
to take possession of the Amorite's country.  
I raised up prophets from your sons  
and nazarites from your young men.  
Is this not true, son of Israel?  
- it is Yahweh who speaks.  
But you have forced the nazarites to drink  
wine  
and given orders to the prophets  
"Do not prophesy."  
See then how I am going to crush you into  
the ground as the threshing sledge crushes  
when clogged with straw.  
(Amos 2:10-13 Jerusalem Bible)

Amos addressed a society characterized by opulent living and callused disregard for the poor. A tremendous economic disparity developed in Israelite society as a result of state

domains which were owned and administered by state officials. The exploitation of the poor attacked by the prophets arose primarily from the extensive administrative structure of the state with its degrees of dependency. The administrative officials answered only to the royal decree. The apparatus of the state obliterated the tribal land ownership and placed the poor and dependent at the mercy of state officials. The unscrupulous upper class was able to line its pockets at the expense of the poor. The poor were simply at the mercy of the rich. When one of these dependent poor fell in arrears in payments, often forced by the corrupt administrators through dishonest measurement of the grain payments, foreclosure was simple. (Amos 4:1ff) Justice in the courts for such exploitation and dishonest dealing was impossible because the courts were accepting bribes and dispensing justice with a heart single to making a profit. (Amos 5:7,10) Amos attacked not only the dishonest means of gain, but the inordinate extravagance and lifestyle of the state officials and upper class. (Amos 2:6ff) Amos and Hosea, and later Isaiah and Micah, warned the people that their rottenness and moral decay, their corruption and heartlessness, would lead Israel to destruction in Yahweh's judgment. It is significant that the prophetic message was primarily an attack on social injustice.

The wealthy oppressed the poor and treated the ordinary people as mere objects to be bought and sold. (Amos 2:6-7; 4:1) The single-minded search for superfluous wealth caused the upper class to oppress and exploit the less fortunate, and the

economic and social equality that was the ideal of the earlier covenant society was forgotten. The moral resolve of the nation had been sapped by the dishonesty and irresponsible luxury of the rich who cared little of the consequences of their idle greed that made the burden of the disadvantaged much greater. (6:1-8) The priests who officiated in the cult centers offered sacrifices and observed the holy festivals hoping to curry the favor of Yahweh. They completely disregarded the moral obligations embodied in the ordinances, however, and thus profaned the ritual observance of the Law. (5:21-27) The religious life of Israel was decaying from within, infected by prosperity and material pride. Degenerate religious practices and rituals performed without repentance could not atone for the social injustices of Israel. Yahweh's final judgment was inevitable: "Now my eyes are turned on the sinful kingdom, to wipe it off the face of the earth." (9:7-8)

In times past Israel had been the special recipient of Yahweh's protection, but now Israel was peculiarly culpable because of her betrayal of Yahweh. Abandonment of the goal to achieve a holy people, a just society, was equated with idolatry and seeking other gods. (Amos 2:6-16) The exodus and election of Israel had been the greatest of blessings, but Israel would know utter destruction in punishment for her failure to acknowledge Yahweh: "Listen sons of Israel, to this oracle Yahweh speaks against you, against the whole family I brought out of the land of Egypt: You alone, of all the families of earth, have I acknowledged, therefore it is for all your sins that I mean to

punish you." (3:1-2) The exodus thus reemerged as the model of Yahweh's grace and judgment. Though the covenant stipulations are never mentioned in Amos, they were the ethical criteria by which Israel's actions were judged and found wanting. Yahweh had promised blessings at Sinai and national preservation to David, but his patience had been exhausted. Yahweh now promised only destruction:

I have made my decree and I will not relent:  
because they have rejected the Law of Yahweh  
and failed to keep his precepts,  
because the false gods which their ancestors  
followed have led them astray,  
I am going to hurl fire at Judah  
to burn up the palaces of Jerusalem.  
(Amos 2:4-5 Jerusalem Bible)

A very sensitive notion of covenant obligation and breach arose with Hosea, Amos's younger contemporary. Like Amos, Hosea was called to declare Israel's breach of the covenant obligation and to warn Israel of impending judgment. Like Amos, Hosea severely criticized the nobles and upper class for disregarding the poor and seeking riches in place of devotion to Yahweh. (Hosea 12:8-9) The pains suffered by the poor were in fact Yahweh's pains. (11:1-6) Hosea couched Israel's covenant with Yahweh in terms of the most intimate human relationship known to mortals. Yahweh was Israel's Father and Israel his infant child. Yahweh was Israel's husband and Israel his unfaithful bride. A notion of election to adoptive sonship had been present in the David covenant. (2 Sam. 7:14) But Hosea extended the sense of familial love embodied in the divine-human relationship and added a sense of excruciating divine pain. Hosea revealed a God who chose to manifest His divine

vulnerability by freely entering a relationship that entailed divine response to human commitment, and Yahweh's tremendous suffering because of Israel's rejection of the covenant-love relationship. Though clearly a development from earlier covenant notions, Hosea's poetic treatment of the covenant relationship marked a profound reinterpretation of the covenant. Hosea's metaphor of divine intimacy and revelation of Yahweh's personal involvement with Israel transferred the sphere of interpreting the covenant from the vassal/suzerain relationship, that of an overlord to a slave, to that of familial love:

When Israel was a child I love him,  
and I called my son out of Egypt.  
But the more I called to them, the further  
they went from me;  
They have offered sacrifices to the Baals  
and set their offerings smoking before idols.  
I myself taught Ephraim to walk,  
I took them in my arms;  
yet they have not understood that I was the  
one looking after them.  
I led them with reins of kindness,  
with leading strings of love.  
I was like someone who lifts an infant close  
against his cheek;  
stooping down to him I gave him his food.  
They will have to go back to Egypt,  
Assyria must be their king,  
because they have refused to return to me.  
(11:1-6)

Hosea echoed Yahweh's excruciating pain at Israel's rejection of his covenant. He applied the metaphor of a loving husband who remains faithful despite his wife's infidelities. Yahweh commanded Hosea to marry a prostitute. He was to heal her with redeeming love, a type of what Yahweh promised to do by covenant love with Israel. (Hos. 1:2) So Hosea married Gomer,

a prostitute, who bore him children, provided names by Yahweh to symbolize Isarel's infidelities to the covenant. Hosea's first son was named Jesrel, referring to the place where Jehu massacred the descendents of Omri. Hosea named his daughter "Unloved." Yehweh explained the meaning: "No more love shall the house of Israel have from me ... no further forgiveness." The next son was named "No-People-of-Mine," since Israel was "not my people and I am not your God." (Hos. 1:3-9 Jerusalem Bible) Gomer responded to Hosea's love and protection by returning to prostitution, seeking fulfillment in her lovers and their money (Hos. 2:5-10).

Yahweh, who had demonstrated his love for Israel as Hosea had for Gomer, withdrew his support and protection of Israel. He withdrew his corn, his wine, wool and flax "that were intended to cover her nakedness; so will I display her shame before her lovers' eyes." Yahweh would reveal the shame of Israel until she, like Gomer with Hosea, recognized that Yahweh was the source of Israel's support and protection. Just as the wife in the Hebrew family structure was totally dependent on the husband for sustenance and well-being, so Israel was dependent on Yahweh for protection from her enemies without and her moral well-being within (Hos. 2:9-15). Through unrequited love, Israel, like Gomer, would be wooed back to a faithful and honorable relationship (Hos. 2:14-18) "When that day comes -- it is Yahweh who speaks -- she will call me "My Husband." A faithful covenant of unbreakable love would be made between Isarel and Yahweh if Israel would return to a faithful relationship and

observe the obligations of the covenant. The covenant love would extend to all nature:

When that day comes I will make a treaty on her behalf with the would animals, with the birds of heaven and the creeping things of the earth; I will break the bow, sword and battle in the country, and make her sleep secure. I will betroth you to myself forever, betroth you with integrity and justice, with tenderness and love; I will betroth you to myself with faithfulness, and you will come to know Yahweh....I will love Unloved; I wills say to No-People-of-Mine, "You are my people," and he will answer, "You are my God." (Hos. 2:18-24)

Unlike Amos who thought that Israel's judgment and destruction were inevitable because of the breach of a faithful relationship with Yahweh, Hosea taught that there was still hope. Yahweh would willingly heal the maimed relationship if Israel would return in full fidelity to the covenant. As a type of Yahweh's long-suffering acceptance of Israel, Yahweh directed Hosea a second time to redeem Gomer from the slave market and once again to betroth her. Though she had profaned the sacred relationship and laid with other men, Gomer would be saved from a life of servitude. "Go a second time, give your love to a woman, loved by her husband but an adulteress in spite of it, just as Yahweh gives his love to the sons of Israel though they turn to other gods...." So Hosea purchased Gomer and he asked her to pledge fidelity. "For many days you must keep yourself quietly for me, not playing the whore and offering yourself to others, and I will do the same for you" -- just as Israel, who would wait long in exile without king or country, one day would be redeemed by her Messiah. (Hos. 3:1-5)



Hosea's warning was apparently unheeded. Hosea's preaching may have had some temporary effect on his hearers. The priests may have been moved to offer sacrifices to Yahweh, hoping to give an outward sign of the change of heart that never occurred, for the repentance was short lived and disingenuous. "This love of yours is like a morning cloud, like the dew that quickly disappears. This is why I have torn them to pieces by my prophets, why I slaughtered them with the words of my mouth, since what I want is love, not sacrifice; knowledge of God, not holocausts." (Hos. 6:4-6) Israel turned away from Yahweh's plea to a life of extravagance and disregard for the poor. (Hos. 8:14) Israel breached the covenant by seeking protection from foreign powers and well being in wealth. (Hos. 8:8-10) Israel had profaned the holy, disregarded her vows of faithfulness and sought well being in earthly treasures and might. Finally the time for repentance had passed.

I know all about Ephraim,  
Israel has no secrets from me;  
yes Ephraim, you have played the whore,  
Israel has defiled himself.  
Their deeds do not allow them to return to  
their God,  
since a prostituting spirit possesses them;  
they do not know Yahweh....  
They have proved unfaithful to Yahweh,  
they have fathered bastards,  
and now the destroyer will devour them.  
(Hos. 5:4-7)

Like his prophetic predecessors, Isaiah attacked the unscrupulous nobles and judges who had conspired to rob the poor and helpless of their rights. (e.g., 1:21-23; 3:12-15; 5:8; 10:1-4) He denounced the decadent upper class which, pampered and concerned only for material gain and venal pleasures, simply

devastated the lower classes. (3:16-4:1; 5:11-22) Israel was like a vineyard that should have brought forth good grapes, but had been consumed by briars and thistles because of her lavish rituals by which she hoped to placate Yahweh's demands (1:10-20) "What a harlot [Zion] has become, the faithful city" Yahweh proclaimed,

Zion, that was all justice!  
Once integrity lived there,  
but now assassins.  
Your silver has turned into dross,  
your wine is watered,  
Your princes are rebels,  
accomplices and thieves.  
All are greedy for profit  
and chase after bribes.  
They show no justice to the orphan,  
the cause of the widow is never heard.

The moral bankruptcy of Israel placed it in peril of Yahweh's judgment. By the year 745 Tiglath-pileser III had come to power to Assyria. The Assyrian army had been molded into a formidable force, one of the only standing armies in the region. Isaiah described this army, superior to Israel in implements, tactics and training. (Isa. 5:26-29) The Assyrian strength posed no small threat to Israel and Judah. In 733, Damascus attempted to liberate itself from Assyrian oppression and the state of Isreal, ruled by Pekah, joined in alliance with Damascus to insure its protection. Judah, however, did not join the alliance. Hence, Israel was forced to join forces with King Rezin of Damascus to lay siege of Jerusalem against King Ahaz. (II Kings 15:37; 16:5) Isaiah was called to oppose a national pride vested in military superiority and strong alliances. Isaiah first challenged Israel's foreign policy in 735 when the

Aramean-Israelite coalition came against Jerusalem to compel Judah's alliance against Assyria.

Isaiah sought out Ahaz to deliver Yahweh's message. Isaiah encountered Ahaz under what appear to be very trying circumstances; Ahaz was probably inspecting the defenses of the city which was then under attack. (7:1-4) Isaiah's message was simple, Yahweh promised that the rebels would fail in their purpose if Judah would trust in Yahweh rather than alliances; if not, Judah would fall:

Pay attention, keep calm, have no fear,  
do not let your heart sink  
because of these two smoldering stumps of  
firebrands (i.e., the kings of Damascus  
and Israel)  
or because Aram, Ephraim and the son of  
Ramaliah  
have plotted to ruin you, and have said:  
Let us invade Judah and terrorize it  
and seize it for ourselves,  
and set up a king there....  
The Lord Yahweh says this:  
It shall not come true; it shall not be...  
But if you do not stand by me,  
you will not stand at all. (7:5-9b)

What Isaiah had proposed likely seemed ludicrous to Ahaz, for Damascus and Israel formed a force clearly superior to Judah's meager army of conscripts. Ahaz had planned to appeal to Assyria for defense against Damascus and Israel. Assyria could ensure the continued rule of Ahaz, but Judah would have to surrender political independence. Isaiah opposed any alliance with Assyria, or surrender and entering alliance with Damascus and Israel. Ahaz likely understood Isaiah as leaving him no option - none but sheer trust in Yahweh. When Ahaz wavered against Isaiah's challenge, Isaiah offered the famous sign of

Immanuel: Yahweh remained with Judah and his promises are sure because a child would be born of the royal house of David, thus fulfilling Yahweh's promise to preserve Israel and eternal Davidic dynasty. (Isa. 7:14-16) Ahaz refused Isaiah's prophetic counsel, however, and he sent a tribute to Tiglath-pileser and surrendered Israel's independence in return for Assyria's protection in alliance - Judah was now Assyria's vassal. (Isa. 8:16-18; II Kings 16:7-9). Isaiah responded by prophesying the national destruction and captivity of Judah and Israel. (Isa. 8:5-8; 11-15)

Isaiah's message to Ahaz was an inexplicable renewal of the Sinaitic covenant notion of devotion to Yahweh. Treating Assyria as suzerain and accepting vassal obligations to one another than Yahweh was an offense against Yahweh and breach of the covenant - the ultimate idolatry. (1:2-9) Isaiah approached Ahaz in the very moment of battle and supreme danger with the simple message that preparation for battle was not the ultimate concern. (8:11-15) Commitment to Yahweh was supreme. Isaiah later opposed Israel's alliance with Egypt, this time an alliance against Assyria. It may have seemed to Ahaz that Isaiah simply could not be pleased. But Isaiah was not simply opposed to alliances with Assyria, or with Damascus and Israel, but with alliances per se. Isaiah insisted that Yahweh had founded Zion (Jerusalem), and he would defend Judah and overthrow Assyria in due time if Jerusalem would only wait. (Isa. 18-3-6) Isaiah, dressed in the attire of a war criminal to symbolize Judah's unfaithfulness to Yahweh's Law, walked through the streets of

Jerusalem to protest Judah's reliance on Egypt rather than Yahweh. (Isa. 20:1ff) Isaiah again predicted disaster for Israel's idolatrous reliance on armies and alliances with Egypt rather than waiting on Yahweh. (Isa. 28:14-22; 30:1-7; 31:1-3)

Isaiah taught that Israel's reliance upon weapons and the ways of war would bring utter destruction, not security. Peace and tranquility would come only through faith in Yahweh and righteousness. Isaiah reminded his people that Yahweh had delivered Israel from Egypt, the symbol of human strength through military might, but now Israel was an unrighteous as the idolatrous Egypt because of her reliance on weapons of war:

Woe to those who go down to Egypt to seek help there, who build their hopes on cavalry, who rely on the number of chariots and on the strength of mounted men, but never look to the Holy One of Israel not consult Yahweh....The Egyptian is a man, not a god, his horses are flesh, not spirit; Yahweh will stretch out his hand to make the protector stumble; the protected will fall and all will perish together. (31:1,3)

Isaiah was vindicated, however, when Hezekiah stood firm against the invasion of Judah about 688. Isaiah alone stood by his king in declaring that the Assyrian pride had exhausted the divine patience (Isa. 37:21-29) He promised that Yahweh would never allow Jerusalem to be taken by the blasphemous Assyria as long as Judah placed faith in Yahweh to deliver her (Isa. 29:5-8; 37:33-35) Hezekiah heeded Isaiah's counsel and the city successfully repelled the rebellion and outlasted the siege.

Isaiah apparently did not believe that his teachings could change such a spiritually corrupt people, for he was warned even at the time of his call that he would labor among a hardhearted

people who was beyond understanding. (6:9ff.) He did not give up hope, however, for his doctrine of God was too expansive for him to suppose that Israel's unfaithfulness could frustrate the divine purpose no matter how much it injured the divine love. Isarel's impending tragedy manifested the divine chastening of a people that would purge the dross and leave a purified people. (1:24-26; 4:2-6) Isaiah demonstrated characteristic hope in the face of tragedy. Isaiah gave his first son the ominous name of Shear-jashub (only a remnant shall return), emphasizing not the exile, but the remnant that would return. Thus, Isaiah turned to the future fulfillment of Yahweh's promises to provide Israel's hope.

Peace among nations and with all nature would eventually result from a virtuous king's judgment. The lamb would lie down with the lion, and the leopard with the kind, and the cow with the bear. (Isa. 11:6-9) Zion's defense would be the munitions of rocks and Jerusalem become a quiet habitation, a place of beautiful rivers and streams. (Isa. 33:16:20-21) Zion would be characterized by a love of peace and trust in Yahweh: "The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever. And my people shall dwell in a peaceable habitation, and in sure dwellings, and in quiet resting places." (32:15-18) This millennial transformation would be wrought through divine love -- Yahweh's fidelity to the covenant. As if living in the future, the prophet calls the exiles to return to Yahweh's love:

Do not be afraid, you will not be put to shame,  
do not be dismayed, you will not be disgraced;

for you will forget the shame of your youth  
and no longer remember the curse of your widowhood.  
For now your creator will be your husband,  
his name, Yahweh Sabaoth;  
your redeemer will be the Holy One of Israel,  
he is called the God of the whole earth.  
Yes, like a forsaken wife, distressed in spirit,  
Yahweh calls you back.  
Does a man cast off the wife of his youth?  
says your God.

I did forsake you for a brief moment,  
but with great love will I take you back.  
In excess of anger, for a brief moment  
I hid my face from you.  
But with everlasting love (hesed) I have taken pity on you,  
says Yahweh, your redeemer. (54:4-8)

At the day of final redemption and reconciliation, the goal of peace would finally be realized. The ways of war would be forgotten, the ideal of everlasting peace and brotherhood among nations would finally triumph over hatred and nationalism, over political differences and threats of total annihilation: "And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nations shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." (Isa. 2:4) No longer would individuals be allowed to amass power sufficient to threaten future generations and genocide. Yahweh would again become the loving sovereign seeking to dwell with his hold people. The madness of war and insanity of aggressive force would finally, at long last, be healed.

The hope of the future rested with the Servant of Yahweh. The Servant personified the sufferings of an entire nation in his pains, and the hopes of salvation individually and collectively would be reconciled in him. The Servant would be endowed with

Yahweh's spirit and declare the Law anew to the nations.  
(49:1-6\_ Though the Servant would eventually triumph and be exalted, (52:13) he would face awesome suffering, innocently and in silence, having a vicarious quality for atonement of sins.  
(53:1-7) The Servant and Israel were inextricably identified with one another, yet the Servant suffered on behalf of Israel, suffering outrageous injustices in her stead as an act of vicarious mercy. The Servant was the supreme manifestation of Yahweh's hesed, or faithful and intimate, redemptive covenant-love. Hesed was the basis for atonement of humankind and all creation, the healing of a relationship vital to human welfare or salvation. As the parent heals the child with unconditional love and the mate transforms the marriage partner with long-suffering and indiscriminate love and mercy, so the Servant, the expected Messiah, would reconcile Israel and all the world with their Father, amongst themselves, and within the cosmos of every person's soul.