

# THE PHILOSOPHICAL VARIATIONS OF THE MESSAGE OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY PROPHETS IN THE LIFE OF ANCIENT ISRAEL: LESSONS FOR CONTEMPORARY PROPHETS

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## ABSTRACT

*Prophetic ministry in ancient Israel witnessed a paradigm shift in the middle of the eighth century through the emergence of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah. Referred to as 'classical prophets', these prophets were unique in the sense that although they shared the same national religious traditions with their contemporaries, they differed in their interpretation and application of traditions. Amos and Hosea worked in the Northern Kingdom, while Isaiah and Micah worked in the Southern Kingdom with some overlaps. Using the historical-grammatical and contextual approaches, the paper examined the times - which include the historical, socio-economic, religious and political settings, the person, and the message of these men. The study reveals the prophets' boldness and stern use of words in passing judgment on Israel and Judah devoid of occultic antecedent; they exposed the twin nations' false hope which rested on false religion, false morality, and false national hope, among others. They presented Yahweh as the controller of history, who is merciful and will pardon if the people return to him.*

**Keywords:** *Philosophical variations, message, eighth century, prophets, ancient Israel*

## INTRODUCTION

What we know today as the Pre-exilic prophets is made up of a remarkable group of men whose words furnished a large portion of the text of the Hebrew Bible. These men arose in the Israelite kingdoms between the mid-eighth century and 500 B.C., and their unique phenomenon seems to defy historical explanation - basically because of the revolution their entrance brought into Israelite prophetic ministry. Tullock (1992) points out three striking characteristics of these men - Amos and Hosea, who preached in Israel in its last days and, Isaiah and Micah, who were active in the Southern Kingdom thus: (1) where previous prophets primarily had addressed their messages to kings, these men spoke to the people as a whole; (2) beginning with Amos, the prophets' messages were concerned with applying divine principles to the problems of the society, not just to royal personal and political failures; and (3) for the first time, these "oracles" spoken messages were written down.

Some scholars argue that the writing of these 'oracles' probably was done by disciples of the prophets who memorized them and then later committed them to writing (Isaiah 8:16). The collection of these oracles resulted in the books of the prophets, hence

the title Classical Prophets. Even though the prophets were 'unpopular' in their days, later generations realized the truth of what they had said and presented it.

### **THE PROPHETS FROM THE NORTHERN KINGDOM**

Of the pre-exilic prophets, two of them Amos and Hosea, preached in Israel in its last days. Amos brought the view point of an outsider while Hosea reveals the heartbreak of a native who saw his beloved country sliding toward the brink of destruction.

#### **PHILOSOPHICAL VARIATIONS OF THE EIGHTH CENTURY PROPHETS**

##### **AMOS: THE HERDSMAN FROM TEKOA**

*The Times:* Amos preached in Israel after Jeroboam II had completed wars of conquest. In spite of the silence of the Deuteronomistic historians, much detail has been revealed concerning the long reign of Jeroboam II, not only from the books of Amos and Hosea, but also from archaeological findings. Excavations at Meggido and Samaria, for instance, give a vivid picture of the material prosperity and cultural achievement that prompted Amos to denounce those who felt secured on the mountain of Samaria (Amos 6:1).

The nation was riding the crest of a superficial prosperity. There was a merchant class who shortchanged buyers at almost every transaction as short-weight; shoddy merchandise and inflated prices were the rule and not the exception. The farmers and peasants were subjected to intense deprivation. Love for one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18) was overtaken by greed for gain. On the other hand, religion was very popular and was characterized by intense reverence to the Lord. But for all their religiosity, it had little effect on dealings in the marketplace. The society was divided between the rich and the poor - where the rich were getting richer and the poor getting poorer. However, Yahwistic faith was not completely eradicated. While the atmosphere appeared peaceful at the domestic scene, things were beginning to change on the international front. Within a few years from the time of Amos' appearance at Bethel, Assyria would rouse itself and begin a westward march that would crush the small western kingdoms, including Israel.

*The Man:* Nothing is known of the first prophet whose words became an Old Testament book outside of writings. He was a native of Tekoa (1:1 cf. 2 Sam. 14:2; 2 Chron. 11:6), situated about 16km South of Jerusalem. A citizen of Judah sent North of Israel to bring God's warning in the days of Jeroboam. The surrounding countryside yielded pasture for the flocks to tend which was part of Amos' calling (1:1). In addition, he was a fig farmer. The significance of the foregoing is that Amos had no background in prophetic activity; he had not previously considered himself a prophet, nor was he trained in the prophetic schools (7:14 cf). There is no doubt the above profile has led to diverse conclusions on the authenticity of Amos' origin and his occupation. In all, Flanders and others argue that Amos was not merely a rustic shepherd. Though not wealthy, he was a man of substance who owned a flock, perhaps sold his own wool, and tendered his sycamore trees.

Amos lived during the reigns of Uzziah, king of Judah (779-740 BC) and Jeroboam II, king of Samaria (783-743 BC). A precise dating of his career is dependent upon an understanding of the meaning of the chronological reference "two years before the

earthquake" (Amos 1:1; compare Zech. 14:5). In any case, Amos was active in the Northern Kingdom during the height of the reign of Jeroboam II, sometime before Jeroboam's death (746 B.C.E.). A date of about 750 B.C.E. fits the conditions reflected in the book. A prose passage, Amos 7:10-15, gives a clearer picture of Amos's background. It records the dramatic encounter between Amos and Amaziah, chief priest of the Bethel temple, the royal sanctuary Jeroboam I had established as one of the national shrines of the Northern Kingdom. On the other hand, the appearance of this Southerner in the Northern Kingdom, scholars argue, discloses that the division between Israel and Judah was primarily political and that the two nations were actually bound together as one covenant people with a common religious tradition.

**The Book:** Amos was the first in an extraordinary sense of prophets whose oracles survived in written form. The works of preceding prophets like Elijah and Elisha are known only through oral tradition. The book records what Amos actually saw (Amos 1:1). Hence, scholars argue that the book is a corruption of little units of "oracles" spoken by the prophet on different occasions and compiled by Amos himself or by a circle of prophets who treasured them. Amos delivered these oracles over a fairly brief span of time during his preaching at Bethel (Amos 7:13) and possibly at Samaria (Amos 4:1). He directed his message primarily to the Northern Kingdom addressing the various conditions observed earlier - fake religion by the wealthy (4:4-5), undue economic exploitation of the poor (6:1-14), among others. But as a Southerner, he also had Judah in mind (6:1, 2, 8:14). In other words he was concerned about the whole family which YAHWEH brought out of Egypt (Amos 3:1). Scholars vary in their grouping of Amos' oracles. R. K. Harrison argues that:

*The prophecy falls into three important divisions (Amos 1:1-2:16), which consist of several brief 'oracles' against foreign peoples and one against Israel (Amos 3:1-6:14), a collection of short addresses pronouncing judgment against Israel (Amos 7:1-9:15), comprising a series of visions into which biographical materials concerning Amos was interpolated (Amos 7:10-17), along with an oracle denouncing wealthy merchants (Amos 8:4-7).*

In sum, as against the societal ills and religiosity prevalent in his time under the garb of supposed peace and prosperity, Amos fought to draw the attention of the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom that God is going to punish them- alongside other nations because of their unfaithfulness. He reminded them of the powerful way God delivered their fathers from Egypt and how they had broken the covenant relationship. He sang a funeral dirge over Israel (5:2) which signifies that the supposed peace, religiosity and wealth stand the risk of being wiped off through an impending catastrophe. Israel will be devastated in a short while. However, the prophet made a call for repentance. God is not interested in destroying His people but that they should repent and return to Him. A continuous refusal to return, according to Amos, was responsible for the calamities that have befallen Israel (4:6-12). And if Israel set in its rebellious ways, more terrible events lie ahead.

## THE PROPHECY OF HOSEA

**The Times:** While Amos preached during the days of Israel's glory, prophet Hosea, one of the eighth century prophets, came to the scene when the internal rottenness that Amos cried over had led to national crisis. Shortly after the death of Jeroboam II in 746 B.C.E., Tiglath-pileser II, whose official throne-name was Pulu ("Pul" in the biblical account), seized the Assyrian throne. Ending the fifty years of Assyrian lethargy, he set in motion a military programme that ultimately led to the conquest of Egypt. Tiglath-pileser lost no time in setting out on the path of conquest. After conquering Babylonia, he marched towards the Mediterranean, sending terror through all of Syria and Palestine - to the West. His introduction of a new military policy, shrewdly aimed at crushing nationalism and to hold captive countries firmly in control was overtly frightening. This policy entailed uprooting conquered populations from their homeland and exiling them to remote parts of the Assyrian empire. The homeland was resettled with foreign colonists and incorporated into the system of Assyrian provinces.

Consequently, Israel, like other small nations, was destined to learn by bitter experience the meaning of "exile". Significantly, neither the Northern Kingdom of Israel nor the Southern Kingdom of Judah could escape involvement in these political events - though Judah managed to maintain faster stability than Israel. Israel's political anxiety, Anderson and others argue, was reflected in the confused domestic events described briefly in 2 Kings 15 - with the usual Deuteronomistic flourishes. From Zechariah, the last king of the Jehu dynasty, to Hosea the last king of Israel, horror, death and political instability characterized the entire nation. Never before, in the history of the Northern Kingdom, had there been such a tangle of murder and intrigue. And upon such circumstance, Hosea, the prophet, came to the scene.

**The Man:** Unlike Amos, who came from outside Israel to pronounce judgment, Hosea was a native of the Northern kingdom. He was called to his ministry in the reign of Jeroboam II (782/81-753 B.C.). Although details of his personal life are rather scanty, it appears, Harrison argues, that his father was named Beerah (not the Reubenite prince of 1Chron. 5:6). The various agricultural allusions in the book suffice to assume that he was a farmer, although a peasant origin is not improbable in the light of his knowledge of history, his grasp of political affairs, and the elegant well-chosen imagery with which his style abounds. His wife Gomer was described as the daughter of Diblaim, who is otherwise unknown, and was the mother of three children.

Scholars differ in their submission on the dating of Hosea's ministry. However, the heading (Hosea 1:1), which in its present form comes upon a later Judean editor, states that Hosea prophesied "in the days of Jeroboam," and adds that his career embraced the reigns of four Judean kings, the last being Hezekiah (about 715-687). Anderson and others argue that the above position may be inaccurate, for it is doubtful whether Hosea was prophesying as late as the fall of the Northern kingdom (722/1 B.C.E.). Nevertheless, his career lasted at least ten years after Jeroboam's death, because the second section of the book (Hosea 4:1-14) reflects the turbulent conditions of that period. While his judgments were as severe as of Amos, they were spoken with tearful pleading instead of in a tone of

righteous indignation. The prophet had enough to make him emotional. Not only was his nation in a mess, but "his marriage" also was. Hence, his "marital problems" were used to present a unique view of the LORD'S relationship to Israel.

**The Book:** The Book of Hosea is divided into two equal parts: (1) Chapters 1-3, which captures sayings about the prophet's marriage and offspring, memorabilia of a sort, including a third-person account in chapter 1 and a first person account in chapter 3 which enclose assorted sayings in chapter 2 that use the husband-wife pairing as an extended metaphor for the tie between Yahweh and Israel; (2) Chapter 4-14, judgment and tempered salvation speeches which berate the occultic and political sins of Israel and hold forth the hope of renewal only after national destruction and purgation. The text of these passionate reports or speeches, Gottwald argues, is in a pool state, the meaning of many words, phrases, and whole lines hanging in doubt.

A major point of controversy is whether the marriage of the prophet Hosea, and Gomer was literal or metaphoric. While conservative authors like Tullock submit to a literal marriage between the prophet and Gomer, liberal scholars like Gottwald argue that it was only a metaphor used to describe Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh. For instance, in an oracle calling for his children to plead with their mother that she changes her ways, Hosea compares his relations with Gomer to the LORD'S relations with Israel. As Gomer had followed her lovers becoming unfaithful, so Israel had gone after the Baal cult and had forsaken the LORD. Israel praised Baal for making the land fruitful, when in reality; it was the LORD who had brought fertility to the land. Gottwald observes that Israel's spiritual degradation resulted into a thoroughgoing syncretism where the elements of Yahwism and Baalism were so fused that Hosea could describe the resulting cultic and socio-political situation as one of "no knowledge" (4:1-3; 5:3-4; 8:1-3).

The prophet lays responsibility of this betrayal of old Yahwism, at the door of shortsighted and self-serving leaders, especially priests, prophets, kings and officials (4:4-6; 5:1-2; 8:4-5). Hosea assesses the political situation of Israel and laments that alliances with Egypt and Assyria are futile since Yahweh will neutralize the strength of the ally or allow it to turn on Israel. In the meantime, the heavy drain in tribute (10:6) and in exports to allies (12:1) will deplete the economy. In spite of diverse interpretations of earlier times, modern scholars see obvious reasons to believe that against the anticipation that the prophecy ended in total despair, Hosea was hopeful that after the total political destruction of Israel and only after repentance and renewal of genuine faith in Yahweh, a new communal life would emerge. Like Hosea, Yahweh will win in His struggle to win the people by a love that would not forgo justice. Such hopeful restoration, Gottwald argues, ensues as "eschatological" thought when the history of ancient Israel is brought to the fore.

### **THE PROPHETS OF THE SOUTHERN KINGDOM**

During the chaotic latter half of the eighth century B.C.E., when Israel to the north was moving through her final days, two prophets were active in Judah. Isaiah of Jerusalem and Micah followed in the tradition established by Amos and Hosea in Israel. These remarkable men undoubtedly knew each other since they came from such a limited area, but neither

their writings nor the historical books give any indication of this fact, except for one 'oracle' common to both (Isa. 2:2-4; Micah 4:1-3). Each was unique and each in his ministry emphasized the important issues of the day.

### ISAIAH OF JERUSALEM

*The Times:* In contrast to the political restlessness and economic discontent manifested during the history of the Northern kingdom of Israel, the Southern kingdom of Judah achieved a remarkable degree of political and economic stability. A single dynasty, that of David, remained on the throne of Jerusalem throughout the whole period. But the sequence of northern Israelite kings was punctuated by intrigue and violence, as earlier observed in this work. Unlike the Northern kingdom, where swift economic changes led to an unstable social pyramid, the Southern kingdom moved fairly smoothly from the relative simplicity of the old tribal system to the more advanced economy of town life. It is worthy to note that the Northern kingdom had no monopoly on evil.

With time, Judean prophets saw plenty of evidence that rapacious landlords were swallowing up the holdings of small farmers (Isa. 5:8-10; Mic. 2:1-2), that the rich were skinning the backs of the poor (Isa. 10:1-2; Mic. 3:1-3), and that flagrant social injustices were coloured with the garb of religious piety (Isa. 1:1-17). Under Azariah (Uzziah 2 Chron. 26), Judah reached the peak of her economic and military power. The brief report in 2 Kings 15:1-7, supplemented by the longer account in 2 Chron. 26, gives us a picture of Uzziah's extraordinary accomplishments: modernization of the army, conquests in the Philistine plain that put him in control of the main commercial highways, commercial expansion into Arabic, and development of agriculture (we are told "he loved the soil" in 2 Chron. 26:10). To Judeans, the only disturbing event in Uzziah's reign occurred about 750 B.C.E., when their beloved king was stricken with leprosy and had to be confined to a separate house. His son Jotham, took over as regent-making public appearances, but not even this dreaded disease, which the Judean historians interpreted as a sign of God's disfavour eclipsed the glory and fame of Uzziah.

However, it appears that Uzziah became proud, which caused him to try to take over the priestly role. The leprosy came after he became angry with the priests. Above all, Judah, under Uzziah, rose to a position of power and influence second only to that of the era of David and Solomon. The only cloud on the horizon was the threat of Assyrian imperialism. When Tiglath-pileser III came to the throne, Judah at first tried the hero's role but soon decided that such was not a wise course of action. In 743 B.C.E., Judah, under Uzziah led a coalition of western states in opposition to Assyria that was unsuccessful in its attempts at stopping Tiglath-pileser. King Uzziah died in 742 B.C. but the Assyrian threat was no new development.

From the thirteenth century B.C.E. on, the dominant theme of international politics was the rise of Assyria and its ambition to establish an empire encompassing the whole Fertile Crescent. With the rise of Tiglath-pileser III, fair threat became an ominous reality. Once the Assyrian war machine was rolling, it did not stop until, under one of Tiglath-pileser's successors, it reached the Nile valley.

**The Man:** Isaiah was a man of Jerusalem, obviously from the upper classes of society. Some have even suggested that he might have been related to the royal family. In any case, he seemed to have an access to the royal court that few people enjoyed. He was a family man with a wife and at least two and perhaps three sons. His wife was referred to as the prophetess (Isa, 8:3). This may mean that she, too, functioned as a prophet; or it may mean simply that she was Mrs. Prophet Isaiah. Based on the internal evidences as found in the Isaiah tradition of 66 books, only Chapters 1-39 are assigned to the prophet, while scholars argue the rest of the materials were works of his disciples.

**The Book:** In the aforementioned time of political promise and international threat, Isaiah was called in 742 B.C. - the year king Uzziah died and Tiglath-pileser finished his siege of Arpad, the capital province of northern Syria. Many scholars, however, place the beginning of Isaiah's prophetic ministry at 740 B.C. Isaiah's prophetic career lasted more than forty years, during that time the political map of the world changed as crisis followed crisis. During his call, Isaiah beheld the glory of God while in the Temple. This theophany Tullock argues was, however, not a reference to the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) since such an idea was unknown in Isaiah's day (6:1-3). He was given a strange communion, to preach to people who would not pay attention to him. He was to preach until the land lay desolate, striped of its inhabitants. Only a remnant would remain.

The idea of holiness of God and the righteous remnant constitute a major theme. The first appearance of Isaiah as a prophet is described in chapter 7, when he met Ahaz in Jerusalem. He was with his son because the latter's name, Shean-jashub, represented a part of his father's message - "A remnant shall return." Ahaz was troubled by the threat of Syria and Israel. But Isaiah announced the promise of a child whose name would be Immanuel - "God with us" (7:1-14). This reminds Ahaz that what he needed to do was to trust in the LORD, not in Assyria. Isaiah 7:14 is one of the most controversial passages in all Scripture. Its details and scholars' views are not part of this work. Ahaz ignored the warnings, even though Isaiah continued to issue them. Such refusals, Isaiah warned Ahaz will result into bitter moments in the lands of the Assyrian.

Isaiah found a more receptive ear in Hezekiah (715-687/86 B.C.), who succeeded his father Ahaz. Isaiah was Hezekiah's friend and counselor in at least two major crises during his reign, the Ashdod Rebellion and the Invasion of Sennacherib. To ensure that Judah did not participate in the former (Ashdod rebellion against Assyria), the prophet embarked on a protest - all over Jerusalem - moving about naked and on bare foot. This he did to demonstrate an all-too-familiar sight to the Judeans, who had seen naked war captives paraded through the streets (Isa. 20:1-60). All through the various phases of Sennacherib's siege and invasion of Judah (2 Kings 18:13-19:36; 20:12-29), which led to some internal fortification of the city of Jerusalem and later the payment of heavy tribute to the Assyrians, Isaiah assured Hezekiah that Sennacherib would withdraw and would be killed in his own country (2 Kings 19:1-7; Isa. 37:1-7). In sum, Isaiah was no mere political analyst. In the historical arena, where nations vied for power, he discerned the activity of God, Sovereign of Israel.

## PROPHET MICAH

**The Times:** Micah prophesied in Judah under the reigns of three kings: Jotham 750-732 B.C, Ahaz 735-715 B.C, and Hezekiah 715-687 B.C. This would make Micah a contemporary of prophets Isaiah in the south and Hosea in the days north. George Folarin categorizes the reign of the three kings of Judah thus: "Under Jotham, Judah was powerful and wealthy. Under Ahaz, the country was at the peak of her apostasy and corruption. Under Hezekiah, there was revival of Yahwism in Judah." Micah prophesied at a time when the fortunes of Judah were bound together with those of Assyria, Syria, Egypt, and Israel. The socio-political situations applicable to the era of Isaiah are evident in the times of prophet Micah. As earlier observed, the three Assyrian kings Tiglath-pileser 111, Sargon 11, and Sennacherib played vital roles in the political fortunes of Palestine.

**The Man:** Unlike Amos and Hosea, Micah prophesied in Judah and to Israel. He was a contemporary of Isaiah; perhaps a younger prophet. Not a lot is known about him. His hometown was Moresheth-Gath, a town about twenty miles southwest of Jerusalem. He was a typical prophet in that his book contains the twin themes of judgment and hope. God was particularly angry with idolatry, shallow rituals, and injustice. There are strong resemblance between his messages and the works of Isaiah (Mic. 1:10-16 cf. Isa. 10:27cf; Mic. 2:1-5 cf. Isa. 5:8cf; Mic. 5:9-14 cf. Isa. 2:6cf). According to Jeremiah 26:18cf, the prophet Micah had preached a message of doom for Zion so effectively that his words were remembered in Jerusalem a century later, and this happy circumstance actually saved the life of Jeremiah on one notable occasion. Perhaps inspired by the example of Amos, Micah turned early in his ministry to Samaria, which to that point had managed to survive the military ambitions of Assyria. Micah saw clearly that the capital of the Northern kingdom could not withstand serious attack by the Assyrians, and in his utterances, he sought to awaken the Israelites to the reality of imminent destruction.

Turning his attention to the Southern kingdom, the prophet urged the inhabitants to take warning from the catastrophe that was to overtake Samaria. Unlike Isaiah, who was much more concerned with political issues, Micah had at heart the interests of the lonely peasants in the Judean countryside. Life as he had experienced it was very much like that which Amos had seen in the Northern kingdom. In the South, the rich were also oppressing the poor and reducing the peasant classes to the most impoverished of living conditions (Mic. 2:1f). Further, he castigated the religious leaders for condoning and even encouraging such immoral and depraved activity (Mic. 2:11). He was especially scathing in his renunciation of those who, while allegedly devoted to the upholding of the law, permitted gross miscarriages of justice to take place unchecked in the land (Mic. 3:10).

**The Book:** Like his contemporaries, Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, the prophet Micah emphasized righteousness and morality of the divine nature as essential. He was particularly concerned to point out that these qualities had immediate ethical implication for the life of the individual and the community alike. If the people of Israel and Judah were to take their covenant obligations at all seriously, the justice and morality that were so characteristic of the divine nature would necessarily be reflected correspondingly in the life and affairs of the people of God. Micah's denunciation of the ruling classes in Israel (Mic. 3:1-4) and the



false prophets (Mic. 3:5-8) contemplated the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem, since the state of corruption which they represented had permeated to the very core of national life. In sterling contrast however, the prophet also speaks of the Babylonian exile and how the Lord will restore His people from it. Under the Lord's plans, Israel will triumph over her enemies and live by the Lord's will (Mic. 4:1-5:15). What appears as the summary of the message of each of the three other eighth-century prophets is Micah's classic use of court language to resent the Lord's case against Israel (Mic.6:1-8). The essentials of a trial are: He has shown you, O' man what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God? (Mic. 6:8). In this verse, Micah sums up the teachings of the eighth-century prophets: Amos's theme of justice; Hosea's theme of love (kindness); and Isaiah's theme of the quiet, confident walk with the LORD. If Israel heeds to these virtues, God's impending judgments in the form of famine and desolation (6:9-16) will be overtaken and Israel will triumph over her enemies.

## CONCLUSION

The prophets of the eighth century of Israel and Judah - Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah - represent a remarkable flowering of religious genius. The only previous Israel prophet who could compare with them was Elijah. What that called for was not something new, however, but for the re-establishment of the old values of the Sinai Covenant. Their favourite watchword was "return". They called to a return to a whole-hearted commitment to "knowing the LORD" -and a return to the principles of justice in dealing with one another, tempered by a sense of mercy and compassion. The passion led them into playing significant roles in the twin kingdoms for not less than four decades, even when their lives were sometimes at stake. It is therefore the place of contemporary prophets to emulate the virtues of ancient prophets in their dealings with the people in the present day society.

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