

Predictors of the Future or Reminders of the Past? Israel's Prophetic Voices¹

Eighth Century

Amos (760-750 BCE): from Tekoa, probably an owner of livestock and orchards, prophesied in Bethel and Samaria

Message: spoke out against the growing separation between the rich and the poor, reminding the people that proper worship meant nothing without behavior that reflected the God they worshiped.

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. (Amos 5:21-24 NRSV)

Sample Text: Amos 1:1-2:16

Hosea (750-724 BCE): son of Beerai, prophesied to the Northern Kingdom

Message: declared that Israel had broken the covenant relationship with God (using the metaphor of an unfaithful spouse), which was reflected in the corruption of the religious cult (e.g., syncretism).

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. (Hosea 11:8-9 NRSV)

Sample Text: Hosea 1-3

Micah (circa 701 BCE): from Moresheth, prophesied to Jerusalem

Message: reminded the people of God's desire for justice and concern for the powerless, warning them that Jerusalem was not exempt from judgment. The LORD has told you, O Mortal, what is good and what the LORD

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requires of you: to make justice happen; to love passionately as God loves; and to remember that, although you are not God, you are God's very own. (Micah 6:8 Davison trans.)

Sample Text: Micah 6:1-8

Isaiah of Jerusalem (740-701 BCE): son of Amoz, married to a female prophet with 2 (or 3?) children, prophesied in Jerusalem

Message: reassured the people of God's trustworthiness, calling people to repentance and faith, reflected in righteous and just living.

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!" (Isaiah 6:8 NRSV)

Sample Text: Isaiah 7:10-17

Seventh & Sixth Centuries

Jeremiah (627-587 BCE): son of Hilkiyah, priestly lineage, from Anathoth, prophesied in Jerusalem and then fled to Egypt

Message: God knows, remembers, forgives, and forgets, but there will be consequences for actions, followed by a future of promise.

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 people. 34 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 31:33-34 NRSV)

Sample Text: Jeremiah 31

Zephaniah (628-622 BCE): son of Cushi, name means "the LORD protects", prophesied in Jerusalem

Message: God will destroy creation because of human sin, but a remnant will survive in Jerusalem to oversee a time of re-creation.

For I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD-- the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in

their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid. (Zeph 3:12-13 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Zeph 1:14-18 and Zeph 3:8-13

Nahum (circa 612 BCE): from Elkosh, name means “consolation”, prophesied in Judah

Message: God will destroy Nineveh because of their sin, but that fate could also be Judah’s if they do not repent. No enemy can destroy those who trust in God.

Look! On the mountains the feet of one who brings good tidings, who proclaims peace! Celebrate your festivals, O Judah, fulfill your vows, for never again shall the wicked invade you; they are utterly cut off. (Nahum 1:15 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Nah 1:1-15

Habakkuk (circa 610-600 BCE): no biographical information, probably prophesied in Jerusalem

Message: God is in control, despite the experience of unjust suffering and evil. Only inner commitment and the worship of God can bring joy and meaning in this senseless world.

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails, and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold, and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; the LORD makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights. (Hab 3:17-19)

Sample Texts: Hab 2:1-5 and 3:17-19

Ezekiel (593-571 BCE): son of Buzi, of a priestly lineage, widower, name means “God Strengthens”, part of 1st deportation to Babylon, prophesied to exiles in Babylon

Message: God has not abandoned the exiles, and after judging those still in Jerusalem, God will restore the Temple and the community. Emphasized individual responsibility as well as communal responsibility.

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be

careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezek 36:26-27 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Ezek 1:4-28; Ezek 18:1-32; and Ezek 37:1-14

Obadiah (587-538 BCE): no biographical information, name means “servant of the LORD”, believed to have been among those who were left in Jerusalem during the exile

Message: assured the people that the day is coming when God will judge Judah=s enemies, especially Edom, for their cruelties against Israel.

But on Mount Zion there shall be those that escape, and it shall be holy; and the house of Jacob shall take possession of those who dispossessed them. . . . Those who have been saved shall go up to Mount Zion to rule Mount Esau; and the kingdom shall be the LORD's. (Obad 1:17 & 21)

Sample Text: Obadiah 1

Isaiah of the Exile (540's BCE): no biographical information, prophesied to the exiles in Babylon

Message: spoke a word of hope to the exiles, assuring them that God was going to redeem the people and restore Jerusalem. All nations will know the LORD.

I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, 7 to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. (Isa 42:6-7 NRSV)

Sample Text: Isaiah 40:1-11

Isaiah of the Return (circa 538-520 BCE): no biographical information, prophesied in Jerusalem after the edict of Cyrus

Message: reassured the people that Jerusalem would be restored and that it would be a glorious day when this happens, emphasizing the universality of God's love for all peoples.

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

Sample Texts: Isaiah 61:1-4 and Isaiah 65:17-25

Haggai (520-518 BCE): name is related to the Hebrew word for “festival”, may have been among the first deportees to Babylon, prophesied in Jerusalem to Zerubbabel (governor) and Joshua (high priest)

Message: identified the sin of the people as their lack of commitment to rebuilding the Temple, punished by a drought and an economic downturn, and he inspired a renewed interest in finishing the Temple.

For thus says the LORD of hosts: Once again, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land; and I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor, says the LORD of hosts. (Hag 2:6-7 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Haggai 1:1-11 and Haggai 2:20-23

Zechariah (520-515 BCE): son of Berechiah (son of Iddo), spoke in Jerusalem, may have two voices (i.e., 1st Zech and 2nd Zech) with the later voice coming from the Hellenistic period (mid to late 5th century BCE)

Message: spoke of a coming time of peace, in which Jerusalem would have a central place and the righteous would be exalted.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. (Zech 8:7-8 NRSV)

Sample Text: Zech 8:1-8

Fifth & Fourth Centuries and Beyond

Joel (after 444 BCE): no biographical information, name means “the LORD is God”, prophesied in Jerusalem

Message: promised the people that God would punish the wicked and vindicate Israel, resulting in a coming “Golden Age” when God’s spirit will fall upon all people.

Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit. (Joel 2:28-29 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Joel 2:18-29 and Joel 3:17-21

Malachi (circa 400 BCE): no biographical information, name means “my messenger” (could be a title and not a proper name)

Message: reminded the people that God was in control, despite the current problems, and God demands the utmost devotion from the people

But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal 4:2-3 NRSV)

Sample Texts: Malachi 3:8-15 and Malachi 4:1-6

Jonah (sometime in the 4th century BCE but before 2nd century BCE): son of Amittai, name means “dove” and/or “son of faithfulness”, not the same “Jonah, son of Amittai” mentioned in 2 Kgs 14:25 (8th century BCE)

Message: challenged the “exclusivism/nationalism” that developed in post-exilic Jerusalem, prophesying that God’s mercy and love extend to everyone, even Israel’s worst enemies.

Jonah started out and made his way into the city the distance of one day's walk, and proclaimed: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" The people of Nineveh believed God. They proclaimed a fast, and great and small alike put on sackcloth. . . God saw what they did, how they were turning back from their evil ways. And God renounced the punishment God had planned to bring upon them, and did not carry it out. (Jonah 4-5 & 10 TaNaK)

Sample Texts: Jonah 2:1-10 and Jonah 4:1-11