

Joel, Obadiah, and Micah
FACING THE STORM





Yaakov Beasley

יואל, עובדיה,
וּמִיכָה

JOEL, OBADIAH,
AND MICAH

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Joel, Obadiah, and Micah
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Chaim Yaakov Weisz ז"ל

*who had a deep love of Torah learning,
Yiddishkeit, and Israel.*

*By his daughter and son-in-law
Vivian & Lewis Dubrofsky
and their children
Yehuda, Akiva,
and Hadassa & Miles Peller*



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Preface

“Those who don’t study history are doomed to repeat it.”¹

And the few that do study it are depressed as they watch others make the same mistakes over and over.

“We need our prophets back!” It was two weeks after the holiday of Purim, 2020. The holiday itself was a joyous affair – raucous and boisterous dancing in the streets combined with family get-togethers and festive meals. Then, suddenly, Israel shut down. COVID-19 hit the country with a vengeance, as it did worldwide. Schools were shuttered, businesses closed. My overseas students had less than a week to evacuate the country, and my wife’s place of employment suddenly fired more than half of its staff, including her. Faces disappeared, covered instead by paper masks; papers told of ever-rising numbers of sick and dying. No one knew what was happening, or why. My wife Devorah and I were walking (within 100 meters radius from our house, as far as we were permitted go). Trying to make sense of the upheaval, Devorah suggested the obvious: “We need our prophets back!”

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1. Generally attributed to philosopher George Santayana, as paraphrased by Winston Churchill in an address to the House of Commons in 1948. Mark Twain’s variant reads “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme” (<https://bigthink.com/culture-religion/those-who-do-not-learn-history-doomed-to-repeat-it-really/>).

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I immediately understood her sentiments. After all, we were always taught that the prophets were nothing less than conduits of the divine word, making order of chaos and providing answers to life's mysteries. Obviously, their guidance championed the path of morality and righteousness. Yet, a question remained: "Why didn't the Jewish people ever listen to them?" To this, I know of several partial answers: The powers that be did not wish to lose their authority/wealth. False prophets misled the populace. The people were too attached to idol worship/immorality/generic sin to consider change willingly.

All these answers are accurate. Yet, I always felt that another missing factor contributed to the difficulties the biblical prophets faced, and why their books are often overlooked even today. The more I studied, an insight began to crystalize in my mind. My teachers had always emphasized the timelessness of the prophets' eternal message. However, I was never taught how their message was timely to their listeners as well. Prophets spoke to real people, struggling with the vicissitudes and challenges of daily living.² Emphasis on the prophets' literary skills without context is a study of their poetry, not their passion. More importantly, understanding their history helps make the prophets' message relevant to our own. Which alliances should Israel pursue? How should we react to the growing inequality in income distribution in Western society? What exemplifies the truly religious personality that we should aspire to? The prophets addressed these issues in their time, yet the same challenges and issues reappear again and again. Hopefully, through properly studying the prophets and internalizing their message, we will find the relevant answers and begin to break the cycle.

This volume is my second study on the Twelve Minor Prophets (Trei Asar). My first book investigated the messages of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah. In addition to the literary and moral messages they contained, the work emphasized the history of their time, focusing on how their surroundings inspired and formed their messages. These

2. Therefore, we begin with a fictional narrative illustrating the thoughts of the average citizen during the period described.

three prophets lived during the seventh century BCE, facing challenges unimaginable to the modern-day listener. In their time, the average Judean would have likely spent his entire life under Assyrian rule (ruthlessly administered by Judah's idolatrous puppet king, Manasseh), with no hope or expectation of a change for the better. Prophets who dared speak about upcoming upheavals and revolutions were not only foolhardy but suicidal.³ Additionally, after the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 721 BCE and the near obliteration of the Kingdom of Judah in 701 BCE, the average citizen would have likely doubted that God still cared for His people. Indeed, they probably believed that God had been defeated by Ashur, the Assyrian god, decades before. These three prophets had to use God's words to rebuild a people, physically and spiritually. Many readers responded that this was the most meaningful section of the book, opening their eyes to a time that they had not known existed.

The three prophets in this volume – Joel, Obadiah, and Micah – faced different challenges. However, they all had one thing in common. All three prophesied not after a calamity struck but right before or during a potential crisis. Facing potential catastrophe, the Jewish people

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3. And yet, they persevered – compelled by their message. As Maimonides writes in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (2:37):

It is further the nature of this element in man that he who possesses an additional degree of that influence is compelled to address his fellowmen, under all circumstances, whether he is listened to or not, even if he injures himself thereby. Thus we find prophets that did not leave off speaking to the people until they were slain; it is this divine influence that moves them, that does not allow them to rest in any way, though they might bring upon themselves great evils by their action. E.g., when Jeremiah was despised, like other teachers and scholars of his age, he could not, though he desired it, withhold his prophecy, or cease from reminding the people of the truths which they rejected. "For whenever I speak prophecy, I shout; I call out, Injustice! Violence! The Lord's word has brought upon me derision and scorn all day long. I said to myself: I will not make mention of it. I will no longer speak in His name. But it resides within me like a flaming fire, locked into my bones. I wearied of holding it back. I could not" (Jer. 20:8–9). This is also the meaning of the words of another prophet (Amos 3:8), "A lion roars; who would not fear? The Lord God speaks; who would not prophesy?" (Friedländer tr. [1904], at <https://www.sacred-texts.com/jud/gfp/gfp124.htm>)

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had to decide where their loyalties lay and had to demonstrate that they understood their moral and ethical responsibilities. To be successful, our prophets had to persuade the people to abandon decades of habitual behavior and indifferent attitudes towards God and towards each other. At least two, Joel and Micah, successfully effected change among their listeners, and this work will investigate how this was achieved.

It is impossible to state with certainty that Joel, Obadiah, and Micah were contemporaries. Micah's years are the easiest to determine; he lived during the second half of the eighth century BCE (approx. 750–700 BCE). Though most scholars place Obadiah in the time of the First Temple's destruction in 586 BCE, we argue that Obadiah was contemporary with Micah. Joel represents the greatest enigma regarding the years in which he prophesied. Scholars have offered dates ranging from before Saul in the eleventh century BCE to after the rebuilding of the Second Temple almost seven centuries later. One rabbinic tradition dates Joel to the second half of the eighth century BCE as well (we recognize that this is only speculation and is not relevant to his message). During this period, the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah underwent irreversible transformations. In 750 BCE, they were prosperous, powerful, and at peace. Half a century and three devastating wars later, the Northern Kingdom had been erased from history, crushed by the ruthless Assyrian military machine. In Judah, only Jerusalem remained – Sennacherib's armies had razed the rest of the country.

The prophets, however, are not passive onlookers, content to chronicle the people's tribulations and sufferings. To the contrary, they confidently outline the people's moral failings and faults that allowed this catastrophe to happen. Joel attempts to shake a lethargic people out of its slumber while facing an existential threat; Obadiah describes the immoral behavior of Israel's neighbors during the crisis that led to their downfall; Micah protests the social inequities and corruption that plagued Judah. A hardened reader may mock the prophets' obsession with improving the behavior of the Jewish people: Could two minuscule nations have stood a chance against the Assyrian behemoth that enveloped the ancient world? Yet, at its core, Joel, Obadiah, and Micah's message empowers. Small acts of kindness and simple acts of justice can withstand the force of the mightiest empires. Sincere prayer can

avert catastrophe. Though we live in a world where chaos runs amok and might makes right, the Jewish people can still guide humanity to a world in which morality reigns supreme. This volume contains their message. And yes – we need our prophets back today, and their message is as relevant as ever.

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Many people have taken the time to contact me after the publication of the first volume, *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Maggid, 2020), with comments, thoughts, questions (and more than a few criticisms). I thank each one of you and welcome all continued communication to discuss ideas found in this work.

In the previous volume, I noted that the book you hold in your hands is not my work alone. While I bear sole responsibility for the material presented within, this book would not have come to fruition without the support and encouragement of many people along the way. First and foremost, I thank Matthew Miller, publisher, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and his wonderful and professional team at Maggid Books, including Caryn Meltz, Ita Olesker, Rachelle Emanuel, and Ruth Pepperman. Thanks to their continuous publication of intelligent and

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thought-provoking Torah literature, the English-speaking Torah world is enriched beyond measure. Personally, Rabbi Ziegler has not only pushed me forward professionally at many key junctures but has also been a dear friend and colleague.

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Preface

the strength to persevere and complete this work. Recently, we lost two valued family members. Two years ago, my mother-in-law Matilde Nowosiolski passed away, and her absence and caring is still felt by everyone who knew and loved her. To my father-in-law Alberto Nowosiolski: I wish you many years of enjoyment from all your grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Recently, my mother Adela Zur lost her husband Zwi Zur, a Holocaust survivor whose pure appreciation for living brought cheer to everyone. Ima, I wish you many more years of health and happiness. To my amazing and generous siblings, Dr. Kenneth and Laura Beasley, Steven and Natalie Beasley, Sara Beasley, and Scott and Leah Leckie – many years more of happiness, health, and shared *semaḥot*. To my incredible children, Mordechai, Shabtai, Michaya, Yair, and Yoshiyahu, and my amazing daughters-in-law, Noa, Sara Leeba, and Tamar – may God fulfill all the requests of your hearts – so ask for the sky! To our newest members, little Ari Oz and Uriel Natan – welcome to the family. Discussions around the Shabbat table inevitably revolve around the Tanakh, and you'll get used to the noise quickly! I look forward to learning with you as soon as you are ready!

Finally, to my wife, Devorah: Without your love and faith, this book would never have come into being. I only hope that I continue to be worthy of being together with you and deserving of your love for many decades to come.

Yaakov Beasley
Alon Shevut
25 Elul, 5783



Methodology¹

“They [the prophets] have a queer way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next so that you cannot make heads or tails of them or see what they are getting at.”²

For most modern readers, the prophetic books are among the difficult works to approach. They are rarely taught as whole entities in most schools; at best, for regular synagogue attendees, they hear several verses as part of the *haftara* reading after the recital of the weekly Torah portion. We can point to three intimidating obstacles that stand between today’s readers and the prophets: (1) a faulty understanding of the purpose of the prophets and their works, (2) the historical distance between their time and ours, and (3) a lack of knowledge

1. In *Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah: Lights in the Valley* (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020), pp. xiii–xviii, we have already discussed the general approach by which we study prophetic literature, emphasizing knowledge of the historical background, literary, and rhetorical techniques, as well as clarifying the prophet’s moral and religious message. However, we wish to emphasize certain issues that reappear in this volume, with emphasis on the challenges faced by the reader as well as the literary issues that will arise.
2. Gerhard von Rad quoting Martin Luther, in *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 2:33n1.

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of the literary devices and spoken techniques the prophets used to convince their listeners.

First, many people approach prophetic books with an inaccurate understanding of the words “prophet” and “prophecy,” and thereby don’t understand the nature of the texts they are reading. In English, the word prophet connotes one who foretells the future, and the dominant image is one of a seer immersed in predicting acts and events in the far distance. However, while the prophets did indeed announce the future, they generally described the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations. As noted above, their message was both timeless and timely. More importantly, seeing the prophets as primarily predictors of future events misses their primary function, which was, in fact, to speak for God to their contemporaries. This function is clear from Rashi’s understanding of the Hebrew word for prophet (*navi*, נביא):

“[And Aaron] will be your spokesman (*nevi’ekha*): [We should understand this word] like the Targum: your interpreter. Every appearance of *nevua* (prophecy) [in the Tanakh] denotes a man who publicly announces to the people words of reproof. It is derived from the root of “I form the speech (*niv*) of the lips” (Is. 57:19); “speaks (*yanuv*) wisdom” (Prov. 10:31); “and he [Samuel] finished prophesying (*mehitnavut*)” (I Sam. 10:13). (Rashi on Ex. 7:1)

The Ibn Ezra advances a different understanding of the word *navi*. Unlike Rashi, whose understanding of *navi* deriving from the word for speech (Heb., *niv*) ignores the letter *alef*, Ibn Ezra prefers inferring the meaning of the word from its context in Amos 3:7, which states that God does not act with revealing “his secret to His servants, the *nevi’im*.” Ibn Ezra deduces that a *navi* is someone who is the recipient of God’s secrets.

Modern interpretations connect the word *navi* to similar words in Akkadian (and other Semitic languages e.g., the Akkadian *nabu* [to call, announce, proclaim], Arabic *naba’a* [he uttered with a low voice, announced], *nab’ah* [a low sound]). There the root word connotes “to

call” – so a *navi* is someone who is either called (appointed) or calls to the people.³

What connects all these interpretations is that they avoid connotations of predicting the future and focus the meaning of being called or appointed to deliver God’s message to his people. Reading prophetic texts as primarily prognosticators of future events misses their primary function, that of delivering God’s message to their listeners. Many of their grim predictions are meant to serve to warn the people of the consequences of continuing in the wrong direction, not as guarantees of a dire future. Similarly, many of the positive promises given to Israel were meant to inspire; but if the people of the prophet’s time failed to seize the opportunity presented to them, the visions of redemption and hope would not come to pass, to be delayed until a later generation would aspire to live according to the moral and ethical standards God demanded of them.⁴

3. Summarized from Mitchell First’s article “What Is the Meaning of the Word Navi?” available online at <https://jewishlink.news/features/26051-what-is-the-meaning-of-the-word-navi>.
4. This principle explains many of the difficult passages in the prophets that describe glorious periods of peace and prosperity that did not materialize in the time of their listeners, whether Isaiah’s vision of the messianic era where “the wolf will lie down beside the lamb, the leopard will lie beside the young goat. ... There will be no wrong or violence on all My holy mountain, for knowledge of the Lord will fill the earth” (Is. 11:6–9), or Haggai’s promise to the original settlers during the period of the return to Judah regarding the Second Temple that “the glory of this latter House will be greater than the glory of the first, says the Lord of Hosts, and I will bestow peace upon this place” (Hag. 2:9). While earlier commentators debate whether the prophets directed these prophecies to their contemporaries or towards future generations, the Malbim in both places notes the prophecies were given conditionally, dependent on the people’s behavior:

With the proper outlook, we find in these matters a powerful principle, that from the moment of the first exile in Sennacherib’s time, began the time of redemption... from that time, prophets began to prophesy that there would come a redeemer who would gather these exiles from the four corners of the earth. The potential for redemption based on good deeds and repentance already began in Hezekiah’s time. This is what [the Sages] said... that “the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to appoint Hezekiah as the Messiah, and Sennacherib as Gog and Magog, except that a sin interfered” (Sanhedrin 94a). They intended to teach that *had they merited, Hezekiah himself would have been that redeemer,*

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The second issue that complicates comprehending the prophetic books is the problem of historical distance. At first glance, our world is too far removed from the religious, historical, and cultural life of ancient Israel. We lack the context of the prophet's world, and therefore, their words lack relevance for ours (at first glance). Therefore, this volume contains a brief introduction to the history of Israel and Judah in the eighth century, focusing on the political, social, and religious challenges facing the Jewish people at that time. These years were years of unprecedented upheaval, as long-standing political boundaries, economic standards, and religious behaviors would change irrevocably within the space of a few decades. The prophet's words provided an anchor to a people adrift in these stormy seas. Therefore, with continued study and reflection, the parallels and relevance of our prophets to our time will grow clearer and clearer.

The final difficulty faced by the reader is a lack of knowledge of the literary devices and spoken techniques used. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that though the prophecies are before us in written form, most of them were first delivered orally as speeches. As such, they differ from the stories of the prophets that appear in the narrative histories of the Tanakh (i.e., Elijah and Elisha in the book of Kings), where what they did becomes much more significant than what they said. In contrast, the prophetic books contain prophecies, but generally do not discuss the prophets who uttered them. Joel, Obadiah, Nahum,

and all these futuristic prophecies would have been fulfilled in his day. Since they did not merit [that redemption] the prophecy remains suspended and in its potential state until its proper time. (Malbim's commentary on Isaiah 11:1)

[Haggai calls this building, the Second Temple,] "the last house," for it destined not to be destroyed and there would be peace, [should there not be] baseless hatred [among Jews towards each other] which was the cause of its destruction – for the entire prophecy was conditional... [however] once the condition was not fulfilled, for they did not honor the covenant and did not behave peacefully toward each other, resulting in the proliferation of sects and baseless hatred, this destiny disappeared until a later generation would fulfill the conditions necessary to rebuild it. (Malbim's commentary on Haggai 2:8)

For further discussion and sources regarding this issue, see Hayyim Angel, "Prophecy as Potential: The Consolations of Isaiah 1–12 in Context," first appearing in *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 37:1 (2009): 3–10.

Habakkuk, and Malachi are only names in a book. This results in the difficulty of locating the prophecies within their historical context, with few exceptions. (Isaiah contains several prophecies that stem from specific situations faced by kings Ahaz and Hezekiah. Similarly, Jeremiah and Ezekiel date several of their prophecies, as do Haggai and Zechariah in the first half of his book.) Additionally, as the prophetic books are collections of spoken oracles, they generally do not appear in the original chronological sequence by when they were first proclaimed, as other factors may have played a role in their compilation into book form.⁵ Therefore, the first step is identifying the individual speeches within the overall structure, and when possible, locating the individual speeches in their historical context.

Locating the individual units within the prophetic work is a difficult task, as many sections do not contain clear markers that delineate where one oracle ends, and another begins. In the introduction to each prophet's book, we attempt to identify the various discourses and speeches as originally uttered by the prophets. To do so, we have noted both literary markers (the call to "Hear" in Micah 1:2, 3:1, 6:1), changes in speaker (the shift in Joel 2:18 and 2:19 when God addresses the people), and thematic shifts (the shift in Obadiah 1:9 and 1:10 from Edom's pride to its betrayal of brotherly bonds); as well as the appearance of several literary forms that can signify the beginning of a new discourse: formulaic phrases ("so says the Lord"), commands to the audience, imperatives, changes in time, etc. Additionally, dividing the text into its original speeches requires noting shifts or discontinuities with respect to form (e.g., a shift to direct speech), content (e.g., a new topic), function (e.g., an example given to illustrate a prior exposition), and genre (the shift

5. For example, in the book of Micah, several scholars suggest an overall literary structure of three alternating sections of prophecies of doom and judgment with prophecies of redemption and hope – 1:1–2:13, 3:1–5:15, and 6:1–7:20, which they argue is an editorial decision made in the text's compilation despite the individual units emanating from different time periods (J. T. Willis, quoted by Bruce Waltke, *A Commentary of Micah* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 13–15). Closer investigation of the sections, however, reveals that the artificial attempt to create larger thematic units fails to account for the changes in topic, audience, and style of the individual speeches, as will be demonstrated.

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from the “lawsuit oracle” form in Micah 6 to the individual laments and tribulations of the abandoned prophet in Micah 7).

Among the rhetorical devices the prophet uses to convey his message are specific discourse genres that their audiences would readily recognize. Several of the most common forms in prophetic literature include announcements of judgment and/or salvation, the messenger speech, the lawsuit oracle, vision reports, symbolic acts, and woe oracles. The most common, announcements of judgment and salvation, almost always include the reason for the judgment to come, and then an announcement of judgment. As noted above, these proclamations were rarely irrevocable; the people’s repentance (or backsliding) could overturn the divine decree. For example, Amos declares:

[You] who lie on beds of ivory, lounge upon your couches, feasting on the choicest of sheep and calves taken from their feeding stalls, who play the harp – with instruments they think themselves like David – who guzzle wine from bowls, anoint yourselves with the finest of oils, but are not heartsick over Joseph’s ruin – therefore, you will now be the first of exiles, a coterie of loungers removed, the Lord God swears by Himself; the Lord, God of Hosts, has spoken. (Amos 6:4–7)

The prophetic messenger speech is possibly modelled after diplomatic messages sent from one king or prince to another, and it serves to add authority to the prophet, who does not act on his own accord, but solely as God’s dispassionate messenger. Obadiah begins as follows: “So says the Lord God to Edom – we have heard tidings from the Lord: and an envoy has been sent among the nations, ‘Come, let us rise up in battle against her.’”

In the lawsuit oracle, the prophet portrays God and the people as antagonists in a courtroom. Rhetorically, this allows the prophet to provide a third person portrayal of the Divine decision making, beginning with the outlining of the charges against the people, a listing of the charges and evidence for and against, concluding with a Divine verdict. In many of the texts, the Hebrew word for lawsuit, *riv*

(Heb., ציג) appears (e.g., Is. 3, Jer. 2, Hos. 4, 12, and Mic. 6). The commentary to Micah 6 provides a full explanation of the lawsuit oracle. To appreciate its effectiveness, Isaiah's attack on Judah's corrupt leadership and their wives provides an excellent example:

The Lord is ready for His case (ציג) to be heard: He stands up now to judge nations. The Lord is coming to trial with His people's elders, its princes: "It is you who ravaged the vineyard; the plunder of the poor is in your homes. By what right do you crush My people, grinding the faces of the poor?" So speaks the Lord God of Hosts. . . . Because the daughters of Zion are proud, walking with their heads poised, casting their eyes around them, walking their dainty walk, their feet ringing with anklets – the Lord will scab over the skulls of the daughters of Zion; the Lord will lay their heads bare. (Is. 3:13–17)

Two final factors complicate the reader's task – the abundance of poetic techniques and devices within the prophecies, and a lack of familiarity with the earlier biblical texts that the prophets allude to in order to strengthen their message. All prophetic books contain a substantial amount of poetry; several are exclusively poetic. Several scholars estimate that poetry comprises almost one-third of the Tanakh text.⁶ As expected, the prophet chooses poetic imagery in order to stir his listeners' emotions. We will investigate the many devices used by the prophet to engage his audience's imagination, including similes, metaphor, personification, alliteration and assonance, symbolism, and wordplay. These devices serve to make the prophet's message easier to remember. Underlying of almost all prophetic poetry lies parallelism⁷ – where two or more successive lines strengthen, reinforce, and develop each other. The prophets employ several forms of parallelism: synonymous

6. J. B. Gabel and C. B. Wheeler, *The Bible as Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37 and 293.

7. James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981); Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic Books, 1984), 103.

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parallelism, antithetical (contrasting) parallelism, and synthetic parallelism, and we shall endeavor to identify them in the text.⁸

Finally, we shall attempt to locate the textual parallels, echoes, and allusions to previous sources found within our books. As master rhetoricians, our prophets clearly drew upon previous texts and traditions to formulate their message. In doing so, they are able to evoke the ideas and emotions that their listeners would associate with these recognizable passages; on occasion, the prophet makes subtle changes in the earlier text to create a sense of dissonance in his listeners. Joel's constant references to the Exodus from Egypt clearly intends to create hope in his listeners that a redemption of historical dimensions will surely come; his declaration that a time is coming when people would "Beat [their] plowshares into swords and [their] pruning hooks into spears" would clearly shock them. At the conclusion of his book, Micah's call for God's mercy cleverly intertwines allusions from both the familiar and expected Thirteen Attributes of Mercy with an unexpected source, the triumphant Song of the Sea which the Jewish people sang at the Red Sea. Throughout the work, we shall identify the biblical antecedents for the prophets' words.

8. In synonymous parallelism, the second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line:

Hear the Lord's word, you rulers of Sodom!
Listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah! (Is. 1:10)
I have swept your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist. (Is. 44:22)
Then I shall turn your festivals into mourning
And all your songs into lamentation. (Amos 8:10).

In contrast, antithetical parallelism occurs when where the second or subsequent line contrasts or negates the previous idea:

They do not cry out to me from their hearts,
but wail upon their beds. (Hos. 7:14)
A wise man's mind is to his right,
as the mind of a fool is to his left. (Eccl. 10:2)

Finally, in synthetic parallelism, related thoughts are brought together to emphasize similarities, contrasts, or correlations of degree:

Acquiring wisdom is much better than refined gold;
acquiring understanding is superior to silver. (Prov. 16:16)
It is better to heed the rebuke of the wise
than to hear the song of fools. (Eccl. 7:5)

Prologue

“Coming, coming...” As heavy rain pounded the roof, Yeter stumbled over the sparse wooden furniture in his stone hut and opened the door. Three dark silhouettes, two large and one small, stood on the threshold. “What do you want?”

“Please,” two voices begged. “We need a place for the night. Can you help?”

“Come in,” responded Yeter instinctively, standing aside to allow the three to pass. They entered his hut quickly, and Yeter shut the door to the howling winds and raging storm outside. “What are you doing outside in the rain? No one wanders around these hills at nighttime, especially in this weather.” He turned around to greet his guests and gasped. “But you’re...you’re...”

“Yes. We are from Manasseh,” answered the tallest figure, an elderly gentleman carrying a bent walking staff. The colors on the guests’ garments were faded, torn, and covered with mud, but still noticeably not a southern weave. “I am Yishi, this is my daughter Shua, and the boy is Asrael.” He looked up and noticed that Yeter had turned his eyes away. “Thank you for letting us in. I know this cannot be easy for you. We have been walking for days, maybe weeks. Most people that we met turn us away.”

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“Nonsense,” interrupted She’erah, Yeter’s wife, emerging from the corner where a pot hung over a small fire. “In the rain and the wind at night, with no place for shelter. Would leaving you outside be appropriate for the children of Abraham and Sarah?”

“Children of Abraham and Sarah? Was it appropriate for children of Abraham and Sarah to invade our lands, burn our cities, and take our people captive?” blurted out Yeter. “Their twisted worship of our God, golden calves and clay figures, and doing who knows what. If it weren’t for the weather, you’d be out in the mud already!” He turned away, and an uncomfortable pause filled the air. Suddenly, the room became much smaller. Only She’erah remained unperturbed, and she began to ladle stew into small bowls.

“You will have to forgive my husband, Yeter. When your King Pekah invaded, two of his brothers were killed, and the Edomites took several of my cousins captive.” She instinctively spat on the grounds when she uttered the king’s name. “Only last year,” she continued, all the while efficiently bringing dry garments to the bewildered guests, “Philistine raiding parties came within two hilltops of our village, Mareisha. Our two children have had to leave because we can barely get by. Hezekiah drafted one, and he is now in Lakhish. The other works as a laborer digging wells near Jerusalem. But don’t worry,” she smiled, “we have enough for tonight, thank God. And with God’s help, we will have for tomorrow as well. Come and sit. We have enough.”

The two families sat together quietly for several minutes, awkwardly picking at the simple meal she placed in front of them. The boy Asrael barely raised his eyes – but it was clear that he had seen horrors beyond his years. Finally, Shua spoke. “I’m sorry for your loss. Many of us in Samaria did not want Pekah to attack. We were once one family. But Pekah told us that it was necessary – if Judah didn’t join us to fight Assyria, both Israel and Judah would die. He promised that people in Judah would stand up against your young king, Ahaz, and that replacing him would be a mere formality. You know, when Pekah took Judeans captive, our prophets stood up against him. No one expected Ahaz to surrender to Assyria instead. When we heard that he had placed an altar to Ashur in the Temple courtyard, we realized that in the end Pekah was right about one thing: Without Judah’s help, we would fall to the

Assyrians. And we did. My husband died last year while defending our capital, Samaria, waiting for the Egyptians to come. Fortunately for him, he died in battle. The survivors suffered much worse. The Assyrians took most of my family northwards; I don't know to where. We only found out later. We lived in the hills some distance away – the Assyrians did not bother coming after us after they torched the city. I guess they don't consider us farmers important enough to take.”

“If you're a farming family, you won't get much justice in Judah either,” Yeter mumbled bitterly, his voice echoing off the mud walls. “For years, Jerusalem's rich have been slowly driving up the price of grain. When family farmers like us need to buy goods, they advance us money in exchange for the next year's crops – and many have had to mortgage family lands to do so. Whether the harvest is good or bad, they always get paid first. If you don't pay, the judges are no use. Who wants to listen to a poor country worker, standing covered in dirt and sweat and rags, when his silk-clad noble buddy stands opposite him?”

“The same thing happened to us!” Yishi exclaimed. “Samaria's palaces were a sight to behold. The pride of Israel, we called them. I could never look at those atrocities, though, built on the blood and sweat of honest workers like ourselves.”

“And now rumors have it that Hezekiah is planning to shake the Assyrian lion's tail. We hear that he is seeing Babylonian envoys for that purpose!” Yeter was warming up – no matter who his audience was, he always enjoyed being allowed to rail against life's injustices. “It was nice to eat a proper Pesah offering again, and he did good by removing that despicable altar from the Temple once and for all. Now Jerusalem is overrun by northerners. If war with Assyria is coming, Hezekiah will build new walls, store rations, buy arms. And when the rich plan war, the poor pay the price. First, they raise taxes, and then they draft an army. Of course, it's our boys who serve on the front line, not the rich kids. That means fewer people working the field, less harvest brought in, and again, it's the rich that profit in the end.” Yeter paused, and for a minute, the table was still.

“You know,” Yishi continued quietly, “you Judeans did try to warn us. That shepherd from Tekoa ... What was his name? Amos. My father told me how he came into the city center and threatened us that God

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would destroy Samaria if we didn't change. But everyone only laughed. We accused him of being a rabble-rouser, a populist, a southern collaborator." Yishi shook his head. "We should have listened when we had the chance."

"Our neighbor does the same thing!" exclaimed She'erah. "Micah. He has been traveling around the cities in Judah, speaking to anyone, anywhere. Sometimes they laugh, one or two listen – but most times, people turn away. I asked his wife Ahlai how he continues, day after day. Wouldn't he do better at home, bringing in a crop or working a craft? She just smiled and said that Micah told her that his strength was not his own. It was a gift from God. Yeter doesn't believe in that," she added, glancing at her husband. "He says, 'Just be a good person, just, kind, and humble – that's all you need.' Not to worry about God – leave that to the priests."

"God hasn't been too interested in us these days," Yeter growled. "Besides, I don't trust voices when I can't see the speaker."

"I do!" piped up Asrael. Everyone turned to look at the gaunt young boy, whose face had lit up for the first time since entering the house. "When Moses went up to Mount Sinai to receive the commandments, no one saw God then – yet we heard him. Micah always says that God will remember us and that some of us will always survive. And when God wants, we will be saved – you wait and see."

Silence fell over the table. Suddenly, Yeter began to chuckle, and Yishi quickly joined in. "Look at us, a couple of wise old men, yet it is the young one who speaks clearly. Maybe there is hope for us after all."

Introduction

A Brief History of Israel and Judah

Because the prophets' messages are timeless, they have fascinated and inspired humanity for almost three thousand years. Challenges of social justice and religious integrity, of maintaining optimism in the darkest times, of ethics and morality – all these speak as powerfully to us as they did to struggling farmers eking out a living in the Judean mountains during the eighth century BCE. Yet, as timeless as the prophets' words are, they were always timely as well. We argued in the preface that to fully appreciate a prophet, we must understand his *Sitz im Leben*. This includes the setting when he spoke, the various forces at play during his career, including political maneuvering (internal and external), the competing religious trends and beliefs, and the socio-economic condition of the nation. These factors constitute the unwritten background for the prophet's words.

We must remember that no matter how powerful or persuasive his message, a prophet could only do so much. The prophets were not the leaders, making the decisions that affected the kingdom. That role was the province of the kings. Like monarchs everywhere, the kings of Israel

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and Judah faced tremendous challenges. They had to meet the needs and desires of the populace, maintain good relations with neighboring countries, prepare for future threats, select between different policies and potential alliances – all the while attempting to ensure that their behavior was acceptable to God. Unlike other ancient empires, where the religious establishment was subservient to the ruling polity and existed to strengthen the existing institutions, the Jewish king was subservient to God; and true prophets of God were not obedient lackeys. No foreign prophet in ancient times could have rebuked his sovereign so fearlessly and harshly as Nathan spoke to David after the Bathsheba affair. Therefore, despite their lack of political power, the prophets played a crucial role in guiding the nation. Sometimes they were court insiders, sometimes charismatic outsiders, and sometimes a lonely voice in the desert.¹ Whatever role they played, it was their voice that provided the spiritual direction and guidance for the king and the people, according to the needs of their times. We begin our study by summarizing the turbulent history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and how the almost fifty years from 745 BCE to 701 BCE led to calamities and upheavals from which the Jewish people never recovered.

In 750 BCE, the Jewish people found themselves paradoxically in both their strongest yet weakest state ever.² Having enjoyed over a half-century of peace and prosperity, they were fractured and fragmented

1. For scholarly discussion and different understandings of the prophets' roles, see Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962); Norman Podhoretz, *The Prophets: Who They Were, What They Are* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002); Brad E. Kelle, "Ancient Israelite Prophets and Greek Political Orators: Analogies for the Prophets and Their Implications for Historical Reconstruction," in *Israel's Prophets and Israel's Past: Essays on the Relationship of Prophetic Texts and Israelite History*, ed. Brad E. Kelle and Megan Moore (New York: T&T Clark International, 2006), 57–82; J. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 40–64; J. H. Hayes, "Prophecy and Prophets, Hebrew Bible," in D. L. Petersen, *The Prophetic Literature: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 215–38.
2. Here is historian John Bright's concise evaluation: "The eighth century in Israel reached its mid-point on a note of hideous dissonance. The state of Israel, externally strong, prosperous, and confident of the future, was inwardly rotten and sick past curing.... It was thanks primarily to the prophets that, as the northern state went to her grave... Israel's faith received a new access of life" (*A History of Israel* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000], 266).

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instead of unified. They were divided geographically and politically into two small kingdoms. They were divided religiously between Judah's pure worship of God and the northern tribes' syncretic approach, which combined worship of God with the local deities. They were divided politically between differing factions bickering over how to deal with a new threat – the steady encroachment of Assyria, whose borders were becoming ever closer. Most crucially, to the prophets, the people were divided socially, as the traditional gap between urban and rural dwellers grew into an economic chasm. How did this situation develop? We begin with the formation of the twin kingdoms of Israel and Judah. We continue through alternating periods of war and peace, poverty and prosperity, until we arrive at the end of the eighth century BCE, a period of destruction and tragedy unparalleled until then in Tanakh. When the dust settled in the year 700 BCE, the former mighty Kingdom of Israel was no longer, her inhabitants exiled forever. Judah barely fared better, having been reduced to Jerusalem and its immediate surroundings. As Isaiah plaintively describes, “Your land is laid waste, your towns burned up in fire; your own land – before your eyes strangers consume it – laid waste: a vision of strangers’ overturning. Only daughter Zion stands like the watchman’s shack in a vineyard, like the hut in a cucumber field – a town besieged” (Is. 1:7–8).

FROM TRIBES TO KINGDOMS

Kingship first appeared in Israel in the tenth century BCE, when the people demanded a king from Samuel. The nation was weary of the instability that characterized the tumultuous rule of the judges during the previous centuries. They needed protection, so Samuel appointed Saul of Benjamin to lead them. However, only under his successor David of Judah did the new kingdom grow in power and prestige. David's son Solomon would enjoy a lengthy period of peace and prosperity, which allowed him to complete the First Temple's building and develop Jerusalem into a cosmopolitan, international city. However, at the beginning of the reign of his son Rehoboam in 931 BCE, ancient fissures between the tribes split the kingdom apart into two separate entities. Ten northern tribes united and formed the Kingdom of Israel under Jeroboam son of Nebat, with only the tribe of Judah remaining loyal to David's grandchild Rehoboam.

**THE EARLY DIVIDED KINGDOM:
REHOBAM UNTIL JEHU**

The Kingdom of Israel struggled to find its footing during the first century after the schism, despite being the stronger and more prosperous of the two nations. The primary reason was its inability to maintain political stability. While Asa (912–871 BCE) reigned over Judah in the south, seven kings sat on Israel's throne.³ Coups were frequent; so much so, that the name of one would-be northern conspirator, Zimri, became a synonym for assassin (II Kings 9:27). Both kingdoms, however, remained vulnerable to attack and extortion by external enemies – from the Egyptian empire in the south to Aram (modern-day Syria) and Assyria in the northeast. The constant worries of invasion and instability were probable factors in Omri's eventual decision to ally himself with the Phoenicians and marry his son Ahab to the Sidonian princess Jezebel. The alliance brought Israel temporary stability, but at the expense of religious fidelity to God. During Ahab's reign (874–853), Israel became a regional superpower. At the same time, marriage between the children of Ahab and King Jehoshaphat of Judah temporarily allied the two kingdoms and led to a period of relative quiet for the two countries.

The Tanakh remembers Ahab's reign for his never-ending clashes with the prophet Elijah. At stake was nothing less than the allegiance of the people. Were they loyal to God, or would they serve Ahab and Jezebel's new gods? Due to Ahab's religious infidelity and social abuses, God decreed that his reign would end. Nevertheless, Ahab repented and humbled himself after Elijah confronted him in the vineyard of Naboth, and God chose to suspend His sentence of destruction. Once Ahab's children returned to idol worship, Elijah's disciple Elisha inspired Jehu to seize power in a bloody coup, wiping out all of Ahab's descendants. Ahab's daughter Athaliah attempted to seize the throne in Judah, slaughtering all her grandchildren. A quick-thinking girl spirited one baby away, and the people would rebel against Athaliah and restore the Davidic dynasty.

3. Jeroboam I, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, Omri, and Ahab (as listed in I Kings 13–16).

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List of Kings from the Mid-Eighth Century⁴

Year	King of Israel	King of Judah	Prophet	King of Assyria Who Threatens Israel or Judah
840	Jehu	[Athaliah]	Elisha	
835	843–814	Joash 836–797		
830				
825				
820				
815				
810	Jehoahaz	Amaziah 797–768		
805	814–798			
800				
795	Jehoash	Azariah (Uzziah) ⁵	Jonah	
790	798–782			
785				
780	Jeroboam II	793–742		
775	793–753			

4. Questions abound regarding the exact years when the kings reigned, both from textual inconsistencies in the book of Kings and attempts to synchronize these dates with the available outside evidence. The appendix to this book is dedicated to outlining the various issues and suggesting solutions. In the main body of this work we maintain the accepted historical chronology.
5. As we shall explain in the appendix, most of Uzziah's reign overlaps with either his father's or his children's. Regarding the two names for Uzziah (Azariah in Kings, Uzziah in Chronicles), one popular explanation is that the book of Chronicles consistently uses "Uzziah" to distinguish the king Azariah from the high priest Azariah (II Chr. 26:17, 20). A scholarly discussion of the differing names Azariah and Uzziah, which regards one as a birth name and the other as a throne name taken at the time of his accession, can be found in A. Honeyman, "The Evidence for Regnal Names among the Hebrews," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 67 (1948): 13–25. Other possible examples of dual names in the Tanakh include the cases of Shallum-Jehoahaz (Jer. 22:11), Eliakim-Jehoiakim (II Kings 23:34), and Mattaniah-Zedekiah (II Kings 24:17).

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Year	King of Israel	King of Judah	Prophet	King of Assyria Who Threatens Israel or Judah
770			Amos	
765				
760				
755				
750				
745	Final years of strife and instability – six kings reign	Jotham 752–736	Isaiah Hosea Micah	Tiglath-Pileser III
740		Ahaz 742–727		
735				
730				
725		Hezekiah 727–698		
720	Downfall and exile			Salmanazar V
715				Sargon II
710				
705				
700				Sennacherib

THE LATER DIVIDED KINGDOM: STABILITY AND STRENGTH

Starting with the mid-ninth century BCE, however, both Israel and Judah enjoyed a period of relative tranquility. This “silver age” lasted almost a century, from 843 BCE until 745 BCE. Two new kings appeared. In Judah, Jehoash concentrated on the rebuilding of the Temple. Jehu and his descendants would rule for almost a century in the north, becoming Israel’s longest unchallenged dynasty. However, recovery from the upheavals extracted a high cost. Jehu’s killing of Jezebel meant that Israel renounced its alliance with the Phoenicians and forced Jehu to conclude an alliance with Assyria, just as Assyrian power waned.⁶ Israel would suffer

6. As recorded on the Black Obelisk of Salmanazar III, on display in the British museum today. It bears the inscription concerning “the tribute of Jehu, son of Omri: I received

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many defeats at the hand of Aram during the following years,⁷ while Judah suffered losses to Edom and the Philistines in the south. Under Elisha's patient guidance, however, Israel managed to regain its former prosperity while the boy king, Jehoash, slowly rebuilt Judah. External threats from neighboring countries began to dwindle. Egypt to the south was no longer a danger. Both the Philistine coastal cities and the desert kingdoms of Ammon, Moab, and Edom to the east slowly diminished in strength. The leaders rebuilt the tattered relationships with the Phoenicians, and they became valued trading partners, bringing new riches into the cities.

Most importantly, Aram in the north turned its attentions elsewhere, facing the growing threat of the Assyrian Empire to the east. The

from him silver, gold, a golden bowl, a golden vase with pointed bottom, golden tumblers, golden buckets, tin, a staff for a king [and] spears." In addition, one panel, the Jehu Relief panel, contains the earliest surviving representation of a biblical character, with "a bearded Semite in royal attire bowing with his face to the ground before King Salmanazar III, with Hebrew servants standing behind him bearing gifts." For further information, see <http://www.bible-history.com/black-obelisk/what-is-the-black-obelisk.html>.



Black Obelisk relief showing a prostrate King Jehu offering tribute to Assyria

7. Archaeological evidence of which was discovered in 1993 with the discovery in Tel Dan of a stele belonging to Hazael, king of Aram. In its text, he boasts of having killed two kings, the rulers of Israel and of Judah. Since he had apparently defeated Jehu, conquering territory in the process, he appropriated for himself Jehu's accomplishments!

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one blemish in this period was a foolhardy attempt by Amaziah son of Jehoash of Judah to invade Israel (II Kings 14). Some suggest that this was an attempt to remove Judah's status as the lesser kingdom; however, it nearly led to the Southern Kingdom's collapse. Amaziah was deposed, and both countries enjoyed an extended period of tranquility and prosperity under the lengthy reigns of Azariah (Uzziah) in the south (fifty-two years) and Jeroboam II in the north (forty-one years). With a favorable international political situation, the disappearance of external threats and conflicts, Israel and Judah enjoyed a mini golden age, unseen since the days of David and Solomon. Both kings expanded their borders considerably (II Kings 14; II Chr. 26) and established political hegemony in the region. With control of the major trade routes spanning the Transjordan and northern Arabia, the coastal plains, and the Phoenician ports, both countries could generate considerable wealth and tremendous economic prosperity.⁸ Amos describes Samaria's fortified cities, vacation homes, luxury homes, vast vineyards, and elaborately catered feasts.⁹ Isaiah similarly



Line 6: of my kings. And I killed two [power]ful kin[gs], who harnessed two thou[sand cha-]
 Line 7: riots and two thousand horsemen. [I killed Jo]ram son of [Ahab]
 Line 8: king of Israel, and I killed [Achaz]yahu son of [Joram kin]g
 Line 9: of the House of David

8. John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 258.
 9. Amos 3:11, 15; 5:11; 6:4-7.

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mocks the opulence of Judah's upper class. However, these new riches created a sharp social divide between the city-dwelling urban elite and the rural residents of the countryside. With the quickly growing gap between the economic elite and the farming poor, the Jewish people faced an existential peril, not from external enemies but from inside their own borders.

SOCIAL DIVIDE

In the eyes of the eighth-century prophets, the growing chasm between Israel and Judah's rich and poor represented a vital threat that would lead the kingdoms to ruin.¹⁰ Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah critiqued not the riches but the covetousness and selfishness of the beneficiaries of the economic upheaval. Prosperity and affluence do not automatically lead to economic injustice unless the newfound gains occur through the exploitation of others. Recent scholarship suggests that in addition to the ever-present factors of human avarice and greed, the prophets were railing against larger economic structural forces that inevitably led to economic inequality. For example, Marvin Chaney argues that the very institution of the monarchy with its accompanying centralized government set in motion forces that led to the schism between the urban elite and the rural peasants.¹¹ Other social scientists who study the modern effects of urbanization on highly rural, agrarian communities argue, with

10. Summarized nicely by Samuel Yeivin in "The Divided Kingdom: Rehoboam-Ahaz/Jeroboam-Pekah," in *The World History of the Jewish People*, vol. 4:1: *The Age of Monarchies: Political History*, ed. A. Malamat and I. Ephcal (Jerusalem: Masada Press, 1979), 126–78: Prosperity brought in its wake a much more acute differentiation between the agricultural population, which became more and more landless, and the nouveaux-riche absentee landlords, living in cities as large dealers and high-grade bureaucrats exploiting their privileged economic position to the detriment of the population as a whole.
11. Marvin Chaney writes:
The full-blown monarchy from the Solomonic reign down to the ninth and eighth century put severe pressure on peasants when a subsistence economy [transformed] into a market economy to serve the lifestyle of the local elite and export to other neighboring countries as well. Peasants were forced into debt slavery when natural disaster like famine and drought struck them. The unfortunate situation was followed by the process of foreclosure and land acquisition, which was accelerated by a corrupted court system, and ultimately led to the process of latifundialisation. ("Systemic Study of the Israelite Monarchy," *Semeia* 37 [1986]: 72)

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some possible merit, that the same economic forces of wealth concentration were at play during this period in eighth-century Israel and Judah. Oswald Lorezt suggests that “rent-capitalism,” where moneylenders ultimately reduced the helpless peasants into bonded laborers, was the primary factor behind the increasing gulf between the upper and lower classes.¹² Similarly, D. N. Premnath suggests that a process of latifundialisation occurred (defined as the accumulation of land in the hands of a wealthy minority elite). Based on the insights derived from social anthropology, Bernhard Lang compares ancient Israel to modern “peasant societies.” These societies consist of two different social classes: peasants who maintain themselves on a subsistence economy and a propertied, merchant elite who live in cities and control public affairs. Occasional periods of poor climate and resulting crop failures often compel peasants to borrow from urban lenders, causing farmers to gradually fall into debt.¹³ Forced to sell off their ancestral holdings to cover their debts, the farmers became bonded laborers to absentee urban landowners, tilling land they once owned. Other forces accelerated the impoverishment of the rural farmers: the growth of urban centers, taxation, luxurious lifestyles, and the elite’s control over both trade and commerce and courts.¹⁴

In chapters 7 and 8 of *Peasants, Prophets, & Political Economy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017), Chaney argues that the intensification of agriculture that occurred during the reigns of Jeroboam II and Uzziah, increasing their participation in international trade, was the main factor behind the social crisis encountered by the prophets.

12. O. Lorezt, “Die prophetische Kritik des Rentenkapitalismus,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 7 (1975): 271–78.
13. B. Lang, “The Social Organization of Peasant Poverty in Biblical Israel,” in *Anthropological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 83ff.
14. D. N. Premnath, *Eighth Century Prophets: A Social Analysis* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003). Recent archaeological discoveries generally affirm these descriptions of the social situation in eighth-century BCE Judah and Israel. Excavations at Samaria reveal that houses of the tenth century were of uniform size throughout the city. By the mid-eighth century, the size of the residences varied widely, and larger houses became a distinctive feature of Israelite lifestyle (see D. N. Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* [New York: Doubleday, 1992], s.v. “Amos, Book of”). Additionally, archaeologists have noticed changes in the sizes of storage pots and jars dated to the eighth century. Storage containers from earlier periods would vary greatly in size and shape. When the agricultural economies of Israel and Judah only functioned at subsistence level, and foodstuffs were stored and consumed close to where they were

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As noted above, the prophets do not attack wealth per se, but rather the self-indulgence of the affluent and their expressed indifference towards the plight of the nation's poor. In doing so, they ignored traditional Jewish values of community and interdependence and a fundamental sense of compassion for others. Whether the underlying corruption stems from human nature or economic structures, it is clear from a quick overview of the prophets' critiques, as seen in the table below, that systematic corruption and social injustice prevailed in Israel and Judah at this time.

Verse	Phenomenon Described by the Prophet
“Woe to those who add house to house, join field to field until no space is left; you are settled there alone on the face of the land.” Isaiah 5:8	Isaiah is referring to the large-scale accumulation of lands in the hands of a limited group of people that deprived the common populace, or the formation of large, cultivated estates by absorbing neighboring property, or the intentional buying up of fields, thereby crowding out smaller farmers.
“The princes of Judah have become like those who move back the boundary stones; upon them I will pour out My wrath like water.” Hosea 5:10	The Torah forbids removing the landmarks that delineated the boundaries between people (Deut. 19:14) and curses them in Deut. 27:17. Proverbs also warns, “Do not remove an ancient boundary that your forefathers set.” Hosea emphasizes how the powerful were able to enlarge their properties at the expense of others.

grown, there was no need for storage jars to be identical in volume. However, finds dated to the eighth century show a standardization of sizes and shapes, reflecting the demands of interregional trade and economic efficiency. However, see recent critiques by Philippe Guillaume in *Land, Credit and Crisis: Agrarian Finance in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2012); Walter J. Houston, “Was There a Social Crisis in the Eighth Century?” *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 406 (2004), 130–49; Houston, “Exit the Oppressed Peasant? Rethinking the Background of Social Criticism in the Prophets,” in John Day, ed., *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 101–16.

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Verse	Phenomenon Described by the Prophet
<p>“Hear this, O cows of the Bashan who are on Mount Shomron, who oppress the poor, who break the poverty stricken, who say to their masters, ‘Bring wine and let us drink.’” Amos 4:1</p>	<p>Amos berates the wives of the elites for their materialistic lifestyle, which led them to pressure their husbands to make even more massive profits to satisfy them without being concerned about the effects of their demands on the oppressed poor whose labor they exploited.</p>
<p>“Woe to those who plot wicked deeds, who plan evildoing from their beds; come morning light they carry it out merely because they have the power. They lust for others’ fields and seize them, eye others’ homes and assume them as theirs; they exploit men and their households, both man and his estate.” Micah 2:1–2</p>	<p>Like Isaiah above, Micah decries the behavior of the rich who plotted and planned on how they could expand their estates by depriving the legitimate owners of their ancestral homes and fields. That they acted at dawn, in the morning, is significant because it was at this time that the courts traditionally met to decide legal disputes. The control the wealthy exercised over the judicial system ensured that their greedy schemes would receive stamps of approval from the legal establishment.</p>
<p>“Your ministers are wayward, friends to thieves, loving corruption, all of them, chasing bribes. They do not judge an orphan’s case; a widow’s claim does not even come before them.” Isaiah 1:23</p>	<p>Corruption was endemic, permeating all layers of society. Both the government (the princes) and the judicial system functioned only with bribes and kickbacks, and no one represented the interests or protects society’s weaker elements.</p>
<p>“Who lie on beds of ivory, lounge upon your couches, feasting on the choicest of sheep and calves taken from their feeding stalls, who play the harp – with instruments they think themselves like David – who guzzle wine from bowls, anoint yourselves with the finest of oils, but are not heartsick over Yosef’s ruin.” Amos 6:4–6</p>	<p>The saying “eat, drink, and be merry” summarizes Amos’s description of Samaria’s elite citizens, who enjoyed a luxurious and opulent lifestyle while the poor suffered.</p>

Introduction: A Brief History of Israel and Judah

The relative calm enjoyed by Israel and Judah would end in 745 BCE when Tiglath-Pileser III (called Pul in II Kings 15:19) took the Assyrian throne. Capable and ruthless, he turned Assyria into the most powerful empire the Middle East had ever known, and for the first time, Israel and Judah were facing an existential threat.



The two kingdoms at the height of their dominion

THE ASSYRIANS – THE WORLD SUDDENLY CHANGES

Though Assyria existed as an independent (and often powerful entity) since the third millennium BCE, the rise to power of King Adad Nirari II (912–891 BCE) signifies the beginning of the neo-Assyrian Empire. Under Adad Nirari II and his successors, Assyria managed to expand its borders, from Babylon in the east to modern-day Turkey in the west. A century later, Shalmaneser III would expand the empire even further, eventually reaching the Mediterranean and receiving tribute from the wealthy Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. Simultaneously, the Assyrians built numerous highways across the Middle East, equipping them with supply centers and granaries. These technological advancements enabled their armies to travel long distances without needing to replenish their supplies. More importantly, they were able to engage in their favorite