CHAPTER VI

The Babylonian Exile

and the Restoration of Judah

THE Babylonian Exile was a supreme test of Israel's vitality. The Judeans were the only people in ancient times known to have been taken wholesale into captivity and still to have retained their religious and social identity. The Exile proved that Israel—the spiritual community—could adapt itself to, and develop under, the most adverse conditions. In fact, the very adversity seems to have bred leaders whose religious experience climaxed the prophetic tradition. Many Judeans lost faith in God. According to the Covenant He was their infallible protector; but in the contest with the Babylonian gods, He obviously had been worsted. There were others, however, who believed, also on covenantal grounds, that the Lord had visited destruction on Judah as a punishment for its wickedness; and it was this idea which was championed by the prophetic movement.

The Exile, in addition, marked the beginning of a slow transition of Judaism to a form which was destined to evolve during the period of the Second Commonwealth
and set the pattern for Jewish life during the Diaspora, or great dispersion, which took place after the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Devastation in Judah

The land of Judah, itself, lay for a time inert, physically reduced, its remnants of population bereft of direction and spirit. Recent excavations at such sites as Lachish, Beth-shemesh, and Tell Beit Mirsim (perhaps Kiriat-sepher) bear eloquent testimony to the devastation wreaked on the rebellious kingdom of Judah by the forces of Chaldea. In 1935 a number of ostraca—potsherds used as writing material—were dug up at Lachish. Most of these appear to have been military dispatches written about 587 B.C. and record a determined struggle on the part of the Judean garrisons against the more powerful Babylonian enemy. The writer of Ostracon VI expressed deep concern about rumors of defeatism among the ruling class in Jerusalem: “And behold the words of the (princes) are not good, but to weaken our hands.” Significantly, these relics were found buried deep in ashes.

Many towns in Judah were so thoroughly leveled by the Babylonians that they never were restored. The Temple, and the central religious organization too, was totally destroyed. The normal leaders of the community—the well to do, the well educated, even the artisans—were either carried off to Babylon or fled to Transjordan and Egypt. Indeed, when Gedaliah was murdered, Jeremiah urged his fellow Judeans to remain in the land; but a group took Jeremiah forcibly with them into Egypt (Jeremiah 41-43).

As the Judean social order thus fell apart, the teachings of Moses and the sermons of the prophets were ignored and
gradually forgotten. Those few remaining members of society who might have provided a nucleus of the religious and cultural stability and continuity could accomplish almost nothing in the chaotic conditions which prevailed. Edomites, Ammonites, Moabites, and others from the neighboring regions—some of whom had previously been settled by Assyria in the territory of the northern kingdom—encroached more and more on the territory of Judah. Inevitably this infiltration led to intermarriage with these alien peoples and then indirectly to their gradually increasing influence upon the religious practices and daily life of the Israelites. Thus with the general tendency toward social and intellectual deterioration, assimilation and syncretism went on apace. Finally Judah, much reduced in territory, came under the control of a governor who resided in Samaria.

The Babylonian Captivity

In Babylonia, the exiled Jews found themselves in the midst of a flourishing and impressive civilization. The Chaldean regime of Nebuchadnezzar (605–562)—currently the greatest power in western Asia—had embarked on a tremendous building campaign for the glorification of the king, his capital, and his empire. Among the new structures were the terraces of Babylon, the so-called Hanging Gardens which the Greeks made famous as one of the seven wonders of the world. In actual fact, these masonry terraces were eclipsed by the Ishtar Gate and by the temple of Marduk built in stepped tiers like the towers of a modern skyscraper. To carry out these projects, artisans of all kinds were imported, both as captives and as highly paid skilled workers, as recorded in the Biblical statement: “And Nebu-
chadnezzar carried away . . . all the craftsmen and smiths” (II Kings 24:14).

The Judean exiles were treated no differently from the other captive peoples. The common folk were generally enslaved outright, and those of higher status were given limited freedom to earn a living and choose their abode. A number of the exiled Judeans even managed to live in their own homes in a special quarter of the city of Babylon.

Especially interesting is the manner in which the Biblical and the Babylonian texts confirm and clarify one another in their statements about the Babylonian treatment of King Jehoiachin and his household. The Biblical historian tells us:

And in the thirty-seventh year of the exile of Jehoiachin king of Judah . . . Evil-merodach king of Babylon, in the year that he began to reign, lifted up the head of Jehoiachin king of Judah from prison. And he spoke kindly to him, and gave him a seat above the seats of the kings who were with him in Babylon. And Jehoiachin put off his prison garments, and he ate regularly in the king’s presence all the days of his life. And for his allowance, a regular allowance was given him by the king, every day a portion, all the days of his life [II Kings 25:27–30].

Shortly after the beginning of the twentieth century, the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin received some three hundred cuneiform tablets which had been excavated by a German expedition near the Ishtar Gate in Babylon. These tablets lay for over three decades in the basement of the museum, uncleaned and undeciphered. Under the very thorough Nazi regime, the curator of the museum came upon the boxes of tablets and began to study them. He was astounded to discover that several of the tablets dealt
precisely with the same King Jehoiachin of Judah and his family in exile in Babylon, and that these texts not only substantiated but even filled in gaps in the Biblical account. It is unusual for archaeological discoveries to confirm a Biblical account so specifically.

Practically all the Judean exiles, except those who had been enslaved and brutalized by exhausting manual labor, longed for home. As time passed, however, and no immediate prospect of release developed, many were caught up in the colorful life of the Babylonian metropolis. These practical folk, recognizing that life went on in any case, made up their minds to "sing low in a bad tune" and to learn to adjust to Babylonian ways and customs according to the advice of Jeremiah:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have exiled from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build yourselves houses, and dwell in them, and plant gardens, and eat their fruit. Take yourselves wives and have sons and daughters; and take wives for your sons, and give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons and daughters; and multiply there and be not diminished. And seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you, and pray to the Lord for it; for in its welfare shall you have welfare [29:4 ff].

It should be noted in passing that Jeremiah did not give the Babylonians any credit for having overpowered Judah. The Lord, having condemned Judah, delivered her people to Babylon to serve out their sentence of exile. Thus, according to Jeremiah, the only thing to do was to endure the captivity and build up a record for good behavior.

By about the middle of the sixth century, after some three or four decades, two generations of Judeans had grown up in exile. Those born to families that had sought assimilation
had quite lost touch with Judah. For them the memory of Temple and Covenant had faded, and Jerusalem seemed remote and unimportant compared with mighty and cosmopolitan Babylon. Content to earn a living in peace, these people had no desire to return to the land of their fathers and grandfathers.

A minority of the exiles, however, did remain faithful. Consisting largely of priests, Levites, men of learning, landowners, functionaries of the royal administration, and the like, this group maintained the will to resist assimilation. They struggled to keep track of political developments in the world about them and to keep alive the dream of restoring the Temple and the nation of Judah. For them captivity was bitter frustration, and deliverance and return held the one great promise of life, a hope which they implanted and nursed in their children with religious fervor.

The voices of the prophets ceaselessly and tirelessly admonished the expatriates always to remember their origin, their faith, and their mission. These faithful few did not intermarry, or at least not in sufficient numbers to dilute their consciousness of kind. They studied the teachings of Moses and the prophets, and found in them not only the explanation of Judah’s defeat and exile, but also a program for salvation and redemption.

The Prophet Ezekiel

Among the Biblical writings which gave expression to this belief, the foremost were the books of Ezekiel and the so-called Second Isaiah. Ezekiel, the first prophet to receive the divine call outside the Holy Land, was visited by God Himself in a vision in Babylonia, and commanded to preach
that Judah and the Temple had been overcome not by the might of Babylon, but by the wickedness of Judah which had provoked God’s wrath.

Carrying on the great tradition of Jeremiah, Ezekiel contended that the God of Israel was still omnipotent and that Babylon was His mere instrument. Her pomp and might, her lion-guarded ways, her many gods who were “no-gods,” all these trappings and appurtenances of power would vanish like mist, once God’s anger had run its course. Ezekiel would tolerate no momentary doubt of the inflexible justice of his God, nor would he accept the possibility that God would allow the innocent among the exiled to languish forever and without hope in the same durance with the wicked. With the same fiery faith Ezekiel preached that this punishment that made the bad good, made the good better, and assured, at least ultimately, deliverance for all who obeyed the Lord, observed His Sabbath, and kept themselves from heathen idols and heathen ways.

Ezekiel propounded his basic convictions in the vision of the Valley of Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37), one of the most electrifying passages of the entire Bible. Israel—in this vision—had ceased to be a living nation. Her people had lost faith in God and in themselves. To dramatize their plight, Ezekiel likened them to scattered heaps of bleached bone, lying in a valley. But the Lord, who had brought this terrible curse on His people, promised to bring the dead bones to life, and to restore a unified Israel to its own land under a descendant of King David, saying:

And I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will establish them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst for
ever. . . . And the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst for ever” [verses 26–28].

Ezekiel, the first to prophesy after the destruction of Jerusalem, was obsessed by the need to rebuild the Temple. As the abode of the Divine Presence, it was the center of Israelite religious life, the true setting for sacrifice and prayer, for in antiquity no less than nowadays organized religion required a special place for the worship of the Deity. It was natural, therefore, that Ezekiel should also stress the preservation of a strict observance of the Temple ritual. In absolute accord with such exilic and postexilic prophets as the Second Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, not to mention his pre-exilic predecessors, Ezekiel warned that ritual laxity led to moral laxity. He and the other prophets of this later era were by no means men of coarser fiber; on the contrary, all of them believed—as firmly as their predecessors—that the efficacy of prayer and sacrifice depended on the worshipper’s religious integrity. Their insistence on sacred forms and symbols stemmed not from a willingness to substitute such external tokens for the deeper religious truths but—on the contrary—from their experience that it is infinitely difficult for ordinary men to maintain active religious belief by faith alone.

The Second Isaiah: Babylonian Decline

Ezekiel had never faltered in his convictions of deliverance even during the worst hours of the Exile, but he did not live to see his faith vindicated. Only a few decades after Ezekiel’s career came to a close, however, the Babylonian empire began to show great cracks and fissures and,
in shorter time than anyone would have believed possible, was on the brink of dissolution. The Persians and Medes had begun to take their place as major powers in the Mesopotamian region late in the seventh century. First the Medes helped the Babylonians crush Assyria and shared in the spoils. Then, about 545, Persia under Cyrus II (the Great) of the Achemenid dynasty absorbed Media, Lydia, and Ionian Greece in Asia Minor. Eventually the new power was to include territories extending all the way from the Indus to the Mediterranean and from the Caucasus to the Indian Ocean, a dominion beside which the conquests of earlier Near Eastern empires pale into insignificance.

During this turbulent period, a great prophet arose to proclaim to his fellow Jews in Babylon that they were entering a new epoch. He is called nowadays the "Second" Isaiah, to distinguish him from the namesake who prophesied in Jerusalem some two hundred years earlier; the writings of this exilic prophet are found in Chapters 40–66 of the Book of Isaiah. They are easily differentiated from those of the First Isaiah by virtue of literary style, historical perspective, and theological emphasis.

Having followed political developments closely, the Second Isaiah realized that even greater events were in the making, and in the swift rise of Persia he sensed the promise of imminent deliverance for Israel. In poetic sermons rarely equaled for pathos and lyricism, he compared the Babylonian Exile with Israel's bondage in Egypt and urged his conviction that even the Exodus would be surpassed by the new liberation and return, a triumph that would be consecrated in a new covenant between God and His people Israel. The one necessary condition, the unknown prophet of the Exile warned, was that the Judean exiles have
complete faith in the ability and desire of the Lord to accomplish the restoration.

More than any other prophet since the days of Elijah, the Second Isaiah emphasized and reiterated the uniqueness and omnipotence of the God of Israel. He set himself the task of convincing his fellow Jews that the Babylonians and their gods were not victors over the Judeans and the Lord their God, but that, on the contrary, the heathen were no more than the rod of His anger and chastisement. God was the one ruler in the entire universe, and there was no one else beside Him:

I am the Lord, that is My name,  
And My glory I will not give to another  
Nor My praise to graven images [42:8].

This concept of a universal and omnipotent God was new, of course, only in emphasis. It stemmed in direct line from the teachings of Elijah and Amos, and had been eloquently expressed by the otherwise unknown “man of God” who said to King Ahab of Israel (ninth century):

Thus says the Lord: Because the Arameans have said, “The Lord is a God of the mountains, but He is not a God of the valleys,” therefore I will deliver all this great multitude into your hand, and you shall know that I am the Lord [I Kings 20:18].

But as Ezekiel stressed the role of the lost Temple in the worship of the Lord and made its rebuilding a central object of faith, so the Second Isaiah emphasized the universal aspect of God, in his efforts to explain to his fellow Judeans their exile in the foreign land of a great empire which had destroyed the Temple of their God and carried them captive from His land.
The Second Isaiah, realizing that Babylonia was a mere shell of its former greatness, and that Persia was now the dominant power in the Near East, warned his listeners that they had little time to prepare themselves for the destruction of Babylon by God's "shepherd" and "anointed," Cyrus of Persia (Isaiah 44:28; 45:1), and for their liberation and return to Judah.

**Cyrus of Persia and the Edict of Liberation**

About 540 b.c., Babylonia fell like a ripe fruit into the hands of Persia's king. In his first regnal year (about 538) Cyrus issued the famous Edict of Liberation:

Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: All the kingdoms of the earth has the Lord, the God of heaven, given me; and He has charged me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whosoever there is among you of all His people—his God be with him—let him go up to Jerusalem" [Ezra 1:2-3; II Chronicles 36:22-23].

And he added:

Concerning the house of God at Jerusalem, let the house be built, the place where they offer sacrifices, and let its foundation be strongly laid. Its height shall be sixty cubits, and its width sixty cubits, with three rows of great stones and a row of new timber; and let the expenses be paid out of the king's house. And also let the gold and silver vessels of the house of God, which Nebuchadnezzar took out of the Temple which is in Jerusalem and brought to Babylon, be restored and brought back to the Temple which is in Jerusalem, every one to its place. And you shall put them in the house of God [Ezra 6:3-5].

Sheshbazzar, apparently of the family of King Jehoiachin of Judah, was appointed governor of Judah. Taking with
him the sacred vessels of the Temple, Sheshbazzar went to
Jerusalem to take up his post and prepared to lay the
foundations for the new Temple.

Developments in Judah

But the Judean homeland, devastated and impoverished
by Babylonia, was in no condition to support a significant
restoration. Many Judeans in Babylonia failed to take ad-
vantage of the new liberty to return to Judah. The ma-
jority, having adapted themselves well enough to their new
home, lacked the necessary incentive to start all over again
in a much poorer land. As for the many who had never
been forced into exile, few evinced any enthusiasm for
rebuilding the Temple and for recapturing a way of life
long since abandoned. Nearly twenty years after Cyrus’
edict, the prophet Haggai condemned the Judeans for their
inertia, saying bitterly, “Is it a time for you yourselves to
dwell in your paneled houses, while this House lies in ruins?”
(1:4). When drought and famine came upon the land,
Haggai insisted that the hardships were a manifestation of
God’s displeasure at the people’s failure to rebuild His
Temple. The prophet Zechariah, too, castigated the people
for their apathy.

The foreigners who had poured into Judah during the
Exile saw the restoration of the Temple as a threat to their
position and prosperity, and, accordingly, opposed it.
Among those of mixed marriages, the attitudes ranged from
complete indifference to a willingness to back the projects;
but when some of this mixed population, chiefly the
Samaritans, volunteered their assistance, their offer was
rejected and they were denounced as idolators (Ezra
4:1–4, 24; 5–6).
During this period, Zerubbabel, of the family of King Jehoiachin and the House of David, was the civil head of the community, and Joshua the high priest was recognized leader of the priestly group. Haggai and Zechariah had envisaged a restoration of Judah under a scion of the House of David, with a free priesthood in full charge of the Temple and religious matters.

It was, however, the representatives of the religious rather than the civil authority who finally came to power. Cambyses II, son and successor of Cyrus, committed suicide in 522 B.C., and for a brief interval the Persian empire faltered. During the confusion, several of the subject provinces revolted, creating the impression among some of the Judeans still at home—Haggai and Zechariah among them—that the end of the empire was at hand. Jumping at what they took to be a chance to restore Judah’s independence at one blow, they named Zerubbabel God’s chosen one, thus declaring independence of Persia (Haggai 2:20–23). The priestly group seems to have been more cautious. And their caution was rewarded when Darius I (522–486 B.C.), crushed the widespread rebellion and re-established the imperial rule.

Just how Zerubbabel and his backers fared during this troubled interlude is not known, but the movement is never heard of again. Led by Haggai and Joshua, however, the Judeans perserved in their efforts to rebuild the Temple. The Persian government, in accordance with its general policy of supporting local priesthoods, ignored the objections of its own governor, Tattenai, and of the anti-Jewish section of the population, and granted the Jews permission to continue with the work. About 516 B.C. the second Temple was dedicated, just seventy years after the
first had been destroyed. Judah now became a theocracy, under Persian rule, with Joshua the high priest at its head.

Little is known about the happenings in Judea during the earlier part of the fifth century. The Persian government continued its policy of granting its colonies, Judea included, a considerable degree of religious and cultural autonomy, keeping at the same time a firm hold on military, economic, and political affairs. The Jewish community in Judea grew in numbers and in prosperity only gradually, and while it seems to have taken good care of the Temple, it permitted the walls of Jerusalem, destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar's army, to remain in ruins. At the same time, intermarriage between the Judeans and the gentiles continued, and their assimilation progressed.

The Jewries of Egypt and Persia

Elsewhere in the Persian empire Jews were involved in two revealing incidents. It will be remembered that when Nebuchadnezzar's forces were overrunning Judah, and again when the Judeans revolted—to their sorrow—against Gedaliah, some of the populace sought asylum in Egypt. About sixty years later (c. 525 B.C.) the Persians incorporated Egypt in their empire, whereupon some of the expatriate Jews there volunteered for military service with the conqueror, and were assigned to garrison duty.

The sudden reappearance of Jews in Egyptian history is recorded by the Elephantine Papyri, ancient documents of a Jewish military colony at the city of Elephantine, just below the first cataract of the Nile. Written in Aramaic—the "language of diplomacy and trade throughout western Asia in the Persian period, and which was gradually replacing Hebrew as the everyday tongue of the Jewish
people not only abroad, but also at home in Palestine”—the Elephantine Papyri constitute a prime source for the reconstruction of Egyptian and Jewish history and throw important side lights on the colonial history of Persia as well. They indicate, for example, that the imperial rule of the Persian government was generally liberal, at least in comparison with the naked despotism of her predecessors, Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria.

The Jewish colony was allowed its own temple where sacrifices were regularly offered up to God and around which the colony’s activities revolved. The business contracts and other documents among the Papyri indicate that the Jews bought and sold land and houses, married and divorced, and, in general, lived a normal life. There is evidence that some Jews intermarried with the Egyptians and became more or less assimilated in the religious and social life of the country. The community as a whole, however, appears to have retained a distinct character. For one thing, it was organized along military lines, with Persians and Babylonians normally in command of the larger units. Then too, the Jews, unlike the native Egyptians, employed Aramaic as their official language. Finally the Jewish colonists, genuinely appreciative of the Persian colonial policy and their privileged position in the imperial organization, were the most loyal subjects that Persia had.

On several occasions the Egyptians revolted against their Persian conquerors. In one of these uprisings, during the reign of Darius II (about 410), a mob incited by the local priests and merchants attacked and looted the Jewish temple in the first anti-Jewish pogrom on record. The motivation behind this directed outburst of violence—which the Persian authorities quickly suppressed and punished—appears
to have been a combination of two related factors. First, the Egyptian upper classes sought to divert the social discontent among the general population against an alien religious group which could also be identified with Persian imperialism. Second, the Egyptian priests and merchants hoped to exploit the general social discontent to weaken and, if possible, to destroy their economic rivals in the Jewish community.

The Book of Esther describes a similar incident, this time at Susa, at the eastern end of the Persian empire. A certain Haman, the highest official in the regime of King Ahasuerus—perhaps one of the Xerxes kings—persuaded his master to hand over to him for destruction and spoil the Jews of Susa and of the empire. Haman pointed out that the Jews were unassimilable, and that “their laws are diverse from those of every people” (Esther 3:8). Indeed, Haman argued, it was “not to the king’s profit to tolerate them,” and for the privilege of stripping them—which would be a public service—he offered to pay ten thousand talents of silver. In spite of the extraordinary offer Haman was thwarted by Ahasuerus’ favorite, the Jewess Esther (Haddassah). Under the guidance of her wise cousin, Mordecai, she caused Haman to be hanged from his own gallows and his henchmen killed. But the Jews, in their turn, “did not stretch forth their hand to the spoil” of the Persians (3:11, 13; 9:15–16).

The Book of Esther, as so many critics have pointed out, is much too pat and wishfully contrived to be accepted as simple historical fact. Yet the account, however much idealized, follows closely, in essence, the objective chronicle of the Elephantine Papyri, and may therefore safely be considered as a reflection of fact. It seems more than likely
V. The restoration under Ezra and Nehemiah (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.).
that under the Achemenid regime expatriate Jews achieved positions of wealth and influence, not only in Egypt but throughout the Persian empire, and that this personal prosperity produced the usual inimical repercussions engendered by minority success—which would account for the story of Esther, or pogrom narrowly averted.

Among the Jews, the triumph of Esther came to be observed in the joyous feast of Purim, which recalls the days wherein the Jews had rest from their enemies, and the month was turned for them from sorrow to gladness, and from mourning to a good day; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, and of sending choice portions one to another, and gifts to the poor [9:22].

After the destruction of Judah and the Temple, and the subsequent exile, it was natural for a people to celebrate joyfully such a narrow and triumphant escape from great disaster.

_Ezra and Nehemiah_

To return to Judah—or Judea, to keep its new status clear—the decisive turn toward national as well as religious revival came about in the time of Ezra the Scribe and Nehemiah. Just when Ezra lived is unknown—even whether he preceded, was contemporary with, or followed Nehemiah. But their combined influence on the history of Judea during the latter half of the fifth and the first decades of the fourth centuries is made abundantly clear in the Biblical text.

An important person in the Jewish community of Babylon and highly regarded by the Persian government, Ezra, "the priest and scribe of the Law of the God of heaven," was authorized by King Artaxerxes to proceed to Jeru-
salem and there, with the assistance of the king's officials, to reorganize the entire Jewish community in accordance with the Law of Moses (Ezra 7:12–26).

Ezra brought back with him to Judea the various compilations which recorded the early traditions of the patriarchal and Mosaic period, substantially the Five Books of Moses as preserved today. Chapter 8 of Nehemiah describes the dramatic scene in Jerusalem when the entire adult Jewish population gathered to hear Ezra read and explain to them the text of the Torah, the Law of Moses. Rabbi Jose of Palestine (second century A.D.) justly expressed the importance of Ezra, even in comparison with Moses, in the establishment of the Torah as the basis of Judaism, when he said, "Ezra was worthy of having the Law given through him to Israel, had not Moses preceded him."

One of the important consequences of the official adoption of the Torah, in addition to the renewed observance of such holy days as the feasts of Tabernacles (Succoth) and Passover, was the decision of Ezra to order every Jew to divorce his gentile wife. This was a far-reaching decision, and not an easy one to carry out. Opposition to this move came from every walk of Jewish life, and it found expression in the Book of Ruth. The author of this beautiful little novel expressed the opinion that no gentile who became a sincere convert to Judaism, such as Ruth the Moabitess, should be cast out or denied.

This attitude would not ordinarily have been rejected; but in this period intermarriage had become so extensive, and the consequences so detrimental to the Jews as God's people, that Ezra and his followers could no longer accept the results in silence. It should be noted, in this connection, too, that the author of Ruth did not favor Judean missionary
activity among the gentiles. Biblical Israel was not evangel-
ical, and genuine voluntary conversion to Judaism was at
most condoned.

While maintaining the policy of continued loyalty to
Persia, Ezra led a social and religious revival in Judea. At
about this time some Jews began to rebuild the walls of
Jerusalem. This prompted the governor of Samaria, under
whose administration Judea lay, to notify King Artaxerxes
that the Jews were planning to revolt. The king at once
ordered the work stopped. Nehemiah, a loyal cup-bearer
in the royal court and an ardent supporter of the restora-
tion of Jerusalem as a religious symbol and center, hearing
of the order, pleaded to be allowed to supervise the work
himself, vowing that he would proceed in such a way that
the imperial interest would not be jeopardized. “If it
please the king,” he begged, “and if your servant has found
favor in your sight, send me to Judah, to the city of my
fathers’ sepulchres, that I may build it” (Nehemiah 2:5).

Artaxerxes was persuaded, and Nehemiah went to Judea
taking with him full credentials and authority. As would
be expected, Nehemiah’s extraordinary powers aroused bit-
ter opposition in Judea. Sanballat, governor of Samaria and
Nehemiah’s superior, and Tobiah, governor of Ammon,
accused Nehemiah of plotting a revolt against the king.
Geshem the Arab, perhaps the governor of Dedan in Arabia,
“whom it grieved greatly that someone had come to seek
the welfare of the children of Israel” (2:19), also took
umbrage. Geshem became embroiled in the Judean situation
because of his fear of a commercial revival to the north,
which would have put him back in the same disadvantageous
position that Arabia’s Queen of Sheba had occupied in
relation to Israel’s King Solomon.
Nehemiah, however, was not deterred, nor did the Persian central government withdraw its support. The walls of Jerusalem, the Bible tells us, were restored in fifty-two days of heroic effort, as Nehemiah had boasted would happen in his prophetic defiance: "The God of heaven will succeed for us; and we His servants, we will arise and we will build. And you will have no portion or right or memorial in Jerusalem" (2:20). The builders "did the work with one hand and held a weapon in the other," we are told in a passage (Nehemiah 4:11 ff.; 4:17 ff. in the English versions) that recalls the rebuilding of modern Israel.

As had so often happened before in Judea, improving fortune brought a corresponding increase of social inequity. Once again the upper-class Judeans enriched themselves at the expense of the poor. The moneylenders tightened their fists, the common folk began to lose their land and property, serfdom reappeared. "We are forcing our sons and daughters to become slaves," the people complained to Nehemiah: "Some of our daughters have been enslaved, and we cannot help it, for other men possess our fields and our vineyards" (5:1 ff.).

The heavy tribute paid to Persia by Judea further aggravated the situation because the well to do industriously foisted onto the common people as large a share as possible of this collective obligation. To correct the serious dislocation, Nehemiah attempted to force the rich to take an oath guaranteeing the return of mortgaged properties and goods held under pledge to their owners. This act of social justice, which may possibly have been a political move to win mass support for the theocratic party, provoked the Persian overseers to recall Nehemiah to Shushan.

During his absence, religious conditions in Jerusalem de-
Tobiah the Ammonite had set up living quarters in the court of the Temple. Many of the levitical and priestly workers had left the Temple because they were not being supported by its revenues. The Sabbath was being violated, by Jews as well as by local Tyrian merchants. Intermarriage between Jews and the gentile populations of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab again increased, and the children were being raised in ignorance of their Jewish faith and of the Hebrew language.

When the zealot, Nehemiah, finally returned to Jerusalem, he wasted no time in throwing out Tobiah. He appointed honest treasurers and restored the Temple staff to full complement. Breakers of the Sabbath laws were arrested and punished. And those who dared flout the ban on intermarriage were fined, cursed, and made to take an oath that never would they permit their issue to marry a gentile. Nehemiah ended his remarkable memoirs with the plea, "Remember me, O my God, for good."

*The Jewish Theocratic State*

The historical legacy of Ezra and Nehemiah was the theocratic state of Judea. The Persian Royal administration and the High Priest of Judah represented the upper class, the practical work of administration being done by the civil service, temple bureaucracies, and the judiciary. The urban and rural population, especially the peasantry, who supported the entire structure, accepted the Mosaic Law and priestly control, in the belief that their well-being was thus assured.

The Jewish theocratic state was strong enough to withstand the various forces of opposition, both domestic and international, which beset her. Thus Sanballat of Samaria
built a temple on Mount Gerizim for his son-in-law, Manasseh, grandson of Eliashib the high priest of Jerusalem. This Samaritan shrine and its adherents became in time a festering sore to the Jews of Judea.

The administrative and religious bureaucracies fought constantly for power. On one occasion (about 400), Bagoas, the governor of Judea, threatened to dismiss Jonathan, the high priest, in favor of the latter’s brother, Joshua. Jonathan murdered Joshua in the Temple, and Bagoas used this as a pretext to interfere with the Temple services and the priestly prerogatives.

A pattern of Judaism was being woven in Judea while the Persian empire at large was beginning to show signs of disintegration. The history of the Jewish people, shaped largely by the priests during the rest of the Persian period, was soon to enter a new stage, in the hellenistic period, when the theocratic state was replaced by a commonwealth, and when the Torah constitution was reinterpreted by the liberal Pharisees in accordance with the new conditions. The Judaism which the Pharisees developed maintained a profound influence on all phases of Jewish life during the more than two thousand years which followed and is a potent factor in Judaism and in Israel today.
CHAPTER VII

The Hebraic Spirit: The Prophetic Movement and Social Justice

THE prophetic movement forms the climax of Biblical history. Nothing comparable was produced by any of the other Near Eastern civilizations of antiquity. Its influence has followed the spread of, and dominated the development of, the three great world religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, to such extent that for twenty centuries, over nearly half the land surface of the globe, the consciences of civilized men have spoken with the accents of the prophets. The socialists of the nineteenth century, who scorned all revealed religion, acknowledged the prophets as the first social reformers and the source of their own new doctrine. Even rationalist and skeptical scholars of the period, who rejected nearly every part of the Bible as un-historical, recognized the greatness of the prophets, the validity of their teaching, and the power of their eloquence.

The Rise of the Prophetic Movement

The Hebrew word for “prophet” is nabi, but its original meaning is not known. It would seem that nabi in the Bible means approximately “spokesman,” as when the Lord told
Moses, “Aaron your brother shall be your spokesman (nabi)” (Exodus 7:1; compare “shall be your mouth” in 4:16). That is how the Jews themselves translated nabi—in the oldest Greek translation of the Pentateuch, the Septuagint, about 200 B.C.; and the Greek word which was there employed, prophetes, “declarer” or “interpreter,” is the source of the English word “prophet.” It even appears that the word “prophet” in English meant simply “forth-teller” or “preacher” as late as the time of Queen Elizabeth; the meaning “foretelling,” “predicting,” is a later development. The prophet spoke for God, and interpreted His word and will to his fellow Israelites.

The prophetic movement in Israel developed in two distinct stages. In the earlier phase, the Biblical prophets were essentially no different from the diviners common to the ancient Near East in general. In fact, the Bible itself states explicitly, in an editorial gloss at I Samuel 9:9, “Previously in Israel, when a person went to inquire of God, thus he said, ‘Come, let us go to the seer;’ for he who is now called a prophet was previously called a seer.” Samuel the prophet was called a “seer” and “a man of God.” And in II Samuel 24:11 we read that “the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David’s visionary [or, seer].”

Soothsayers, seers, miracle workers—that is, people who divined by magic formula, who gave out oracular utterances, who professed expertise in transmitting the supernatural—were a definite social group in the ancient civilizations of the Near East. Ecstasy, frenzy, the examination of the liver and entrails of animals, the flight of birds, the interpretation of dreams, astrology, the casting of lots, divination by water—all these were the property and trademark of the priestly and related guilds from the Euphrates
to the Nile. For the seers of antiquity were organized in guilds, which had set rules governing masters and apprentices, as surely as if they were stonemasons. These craftsmen in the supernatural worked both in groups and as individuals.

Cuneiform texts recently discovered at Mari, dating from the eighteenth century B.C., illustrate this earlier stage in Biblical prophecy. One describes how a deputation of priests advises the king to pay more attention to the gods that they represent and to the sanctuary that they make it their business to tend. Another text, this one from Egypt and dating back to about 1100 B.C., illustrates how holy men resorted to states of frenzy in order to "divine."

Such seizures and frenzies are reported of Biblical prophecy in its formative stage, often in a context which suggests the existence of recognized soothsayer or seer groups specializing in the invocation of hysterical trances. For example, shortly after Saul was anointed king by Samuel, he ran into a "band of prophets coming down from the shrine, led by harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre . . . and the spirit of God rushed upon him, and he prophesied among them" (I Samuel 10:5–12). In fact, it seems probable that the early prophets were all to some degree professional soothsayers. Several, Nathan, Gad, and Iddo, for example, were attached to the royal court, just as the priests, the tax-collectors, the commander-in-chief of the army, and other royal functionaries. Others, like Samuel of Ramah and Ahijah of Shiloh, were attached to sanctuaries outside of Jerusalem; and in this early stage, they frequently worked in groups. Samuel himself was head of such a "band of prophets" as Saul had met (19:20). In the days of Elijah and Elisha there is frequent mention of groups of
prophets of the Lord, among them the groups located at Jericho and Bethel. On another occasion four hundred "prophets of the Lord" were summoned by Jehoshaphat of Judah and the king of Israel to interpret God's will in regard to an attack on Ramoth-gilead (I Kings 22:6). This incident recalls the 450 prophets of Baal and the 400 prophets of Asherah who contested with Elijah's God on Mount Carmel (I Kings 18).

Among the earlier prophets, it was also characteristic to transmit the craft from generation to generation. Elijah trained Elisha and invested him as his successor (II Kings 2, a dramatic chapter), and before them, Jehu the prophet was the father of Hanani the seer (I Kings 16:1, 7; II Chronicles 16:7-10). Likewise, nearly all performed miracles, as Moses did before Pharaoh to convince him that the God of the Hebrews was supreme. Samuel was a seer; and the prophets Elijah and Elisha freely worked miracles of various kinds.

From Miracle to Rhapsody

In the eighth century, however, divination and miracle working were virtually eliminated from the prophetic tradition in Israel. Seers such as Samuel and miracle workers like Elijah and Elisha ceased to be the norm. The ecstatic element continued, but the prophets began to utilize and perfect another medium by which to convince their fellow Israelites of the truth of their teachings. To achieve this effect they began to rely more and more on the eloquence and logic of their literary compositions.

The development from the miracle-working to the rhapsodic stage of prophecy was not peaceful and evolutionary. The literary prophets were opposed to the prophetic
guilds, to the practice of prophecy as a craft, and to the idea that any person could be taught by the masters how to “prophesy.”

There is no evidence that any of the later literary prophets functioned in groups or that they were heads or members of guilds or that they trained disciples. They were not representatives of any court or sanctuary, nor did they practice prophecy as a regular occupation or as a way to earn a living. Instead, they felt themselves inspired directly by God, and only when God and the occasion demanded, as Amos insisted (in the eighth century): “For the Lord God does nothing without revealing His counsel to His servants the prophets. . . . The Lord God has spoken, who can help but prophesy!” (3:7–8). Thus when the chief priest at Bethel contemptuously dismissed Amos and told him to go back to his native Judah to make a living there from his craft, Amos was stung to protest, “I am not a [professional] prophet nor a member of a prophetic guild [literally, the son of a prophet]; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of sycamore trees” (7:12 ff.). In time, the literary prophets came to scorn the priests—who had become little more than functionaries of the royal court—and the various groups of prophets—whom they called “false prophets”—and they saw only themselves as the true spokesmen of God.

Although it should not be overlooked that several of the earlier prophets had produced important literary compositions, the later prophets fully merit the characterization of “literary” or “rhapsodic,” to distinguish them from their predecessors. This title, however, must not be allowed to obscure the far more important fact that this elevation of style reflects a sublimated moral and religious experience,
free from the least trace of magic. It is this elevated character which fundamentally distinguishes the "literary" prophets from their precursors.

*The Prophetic Concept of Social Justice: The Covenant and the Law*

The prophets, the earlier as well as the later, took their stand on two fundamental ideas: first, that there was a Covenant between God and His people Israel and, second, that this Covenant bound the Israelites to a just relationship one to the other. It will be recalled that the patriarchs, individually, had entered into the Covenant with God that they would worship Him alone and that He would protect them. This personal Covenant was broadened in the period of Moses, as a consequence of the Exodus from Egypt, so that the entire population of Israel became God's chosen people to recognize and serve Him as the only God in the world. This Covenant, it should be noted carefully, was voluntary on both sides. God elected Israel in His love and grace, and Israel freely undertook to carry out the will of God.

According to the prophets, God agreed, for His part, to reward His faithful people in the land of Israel with economic prosperity, good health, and peace from all enemies (*Deuteronomy* 7:12 ff.; and elsewhere). When Israel prospered, therefore, it could be assumed that her people had found favor in the sight of the Lord, and prophetic activity was consequently at a minimum. When, however, a difficulty arose or threatened to appear, it was a sure sign that Israel had transgressed against the Covenant and that God was punishing His people. It was in such times of
crisis and distress that the prophets undertook to determine and expound the reasons for God's anger and the ways by which the Covenant could be restored.

Since it was not possible for God Himself to transgress the Covenant, the prophets necessarily sought the causes of conflict in the actions of the people. When the leaders or the common folk had worshiped other gods, as in the case of King Manasseh (II Kings 21), the prophets denounced those who practiced or tolerated this abomination. Far more often, however, Israelites broke the Covenant in their relations one with another, and it was such lapses that most frequently provoked the prophets' wrath.

The first obligation laid on the Israelites by the Covenant and the Law was the worship of the Lord with prayer and sacrifice. The prophets deemed these formal aspects of worship both necessary and good, but they regarded them as valueless unless fraught with sincerity which found expression in daily conduct. Isaiah would not accept lip service as a substitute for active faith and an upright life. He warns on behalf of God in the majestic first chapter of his book:

Bring no more false offerings. Sacrifice is an abomination to Me. . . . I cannot endure iniquity along with the solemn assembly. . . . Even when you make many prayers, I will not hear. . . . Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away your evil doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good. Seek justice. Relieve the oppressed. Take up the case for the fatherless. Plead for the widow.

The prophets, from first to last, demanded with stubborn insistence that the people bring their practices to conform with their beliefs. The teachings of the Lord, epitomized in the Torah, the Law of Moses, did not lead to
salvation unless put into daily use. When Saul disobeyed God’s command to destroy all the flocks and herds of the Amalekites and instead offered up the choicest animals as a sacrifice, Samuel is reported to have rebuked him. Jeremiah denounced mere lip service and empty ritual time and time again, and on one occasion proclaimed:

Thus says the Lord of Hosts, the God of Israel: Add your burnt offerings to your sacrifices, and eat the flesh. For I did not speak to your fathers nor command them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this thing I commanded them, saying, “Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be My people, and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you” [7:21–23].

Nowhere else but in ancient Israel has there been found such persistent and insistent emphasis on doing, on carrying out, not merely on believing in, the teachings of God’s spokesmen. That is why Micah was able to put in so few words the essence of Biblical Judaism when he said:

It has been shown to you. O man, what is good
and what the Lord requires of you:
Only to do justice
and to love loyally
and to walk humbly with your God [6:8].

This basic principle, that the law had to be obeyed in spirit together with the letter, was summed up even more succinctly in Deuteronomy 16:20, in the three Hebrew words Tsédek tsédek tirdof, “Justice, justice shall you pursue.” Salvation by faith alone, or by deeds alone, was an unknown doctrine in the Bible; the letter was inseparable from the spirit, even as the act was inseparable from the
faith. The insistence on this point may well have arisen from the fact that, difficult as it is to judge the depth and sincerity of purely religious devotion, the justice of a man's acts to his fellows was immediately and inescapably apparent in the small tribal society within which the people of Israel lived. When a merchant was discovered cheating a customer in weighing or measuring, his act was regarded not merely as a civil offense against a fellow Israelite, but much worse as a breach of the Covenant and an abomination of the Lord (Deuteronomy 25:13–16; Leviticus 19:35–37). This sense of equality before the law, moreover, was so strong that a special warning had to be issued that care should be taken that a person not be favored in court merely because he was poor, any more than one be favored because of his wealth: “Justly shall you judge your neighbor” (Leviticus 19:15).

All the prophets considered all the Israelites to be equal before the Covenant and in the sight of God, be he king or priest, master or servant, rich or poor. This inherent equality imposed on everyone the personal and inescapable obligation to hear, understand, and obey the divine law. To the prophets, therefore, every act of injustice on the part of one Israelite to another, or of one group against another, was a transgression against the Covenant and necessarily brought on punishment. The function of the prophets was to discern such iniquities in whatever form, and to persuade the transgressors to repent their sins and to return to God. This equality before the Covenant raised all Israelites to the common dignity of participating in the Covenant with God.

The injunction upon each Israelite to deal justly with his fellows thereby became more than the defense of
rights of property or persons; it became a defense of human dignity. Thus, if a man was to be lashed in punishment for a crime, then the maximum number of stripes was to be forty, “lest, if he should continue to be struck many stripes above these, your brother should be degraded in your presence” (Deuteronomy 25:1–3). And if the law forbade the gleanings of the vineyard and commanded that “it should be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow,” it was expressly pointed out that God did so because He wanted the Israelites to remember that they too were once helpless slaves, in Egypt (24:21–22).

It has long been recognized that law played an extremely important part in the life of Israel, but even so, sufficient attention has not always been paid to the essential nature of Israel’s laws. They established not only the code of conduct for all Israelites in dealing one with another—and especially the relations between members of the ruling classes and the less powerful—but through this code gave expression to the obligation for just and righteous behavior inherent in the Covenant. The prophets, more than any other group, emphasized the fact that the laws expressed God’s will, as one Psalmist said in praise of God and His Covenant: “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne, steadfast love and truth go before You” (Psalm 89:15).

Although the prophets are now usually recognized as the greatest source of inspiration for doctrines of social reform, they were nevertheless reformers within, rather than of, their social system. They supported the existing order and concentrated all their magnificent indignation on the need to infuse the observance of ritual and legal regulations with spiritual integrity and a deep sense of moral
justice. It was this emphasis on the spirit of the law which at once provoked the prophets to their greatest denunciations and exhortations and at the same time brought them into conflict with the privileged members of their society. As has generally been the way of the rich and powerful, the privileged Israelites frequently succumbed to the temptation to use the law to their advantage; and while insisting most vehemently on the literal observance of ritual and legality, they often failed most significantly to live up to the highest standards implied in the Covenant. It was failings of this sort that provided the prophets with the texts for their most eloquent sermons.

Thus it was not social inequality but social injustice which they denounced, not the existence of rich and poor within the same society but the abuse of the poor by their richer brethren which they decried, not the creation of a new society but the infusion of the Israel they knew with a new spirit which they demanded. Their basic social philosophy rested on the conviction that if the people expressed their faith in God by obeying His commandments in their hearts as well as in their acts, the moral climate of Israel would be purified and the life of her society would be sound.

The alternative was clear. Transgression of justice and rejection of God's will were sure to be followed by swift and terrible punishment meted out by God Himself. Innumerable examples of this divine retribution are recorded in the Bible. Indeed, the frequency with which the prophetic warnings of doom were fulfilled revived, later on, the concept that God's spokesmen were foretellers or that they had the power to call down upon the hapless sinner the curse of heaven. To the prophets themselves, however, neither
attribution was justified. Punishment was ordained by God, and the recognition that it would follow injustice was not a secret to be divined by a seer but rather the inescapable conclusion of the Covenant.

The Fate of the Prophets and Their Teachings

It was the fate of the prophets, however, that even within this limited context their teachings were not put into practice. The majestic simplicity and vigor of their language, together with their unswerving concentration on the basic elements of the Hebrew faith and moral code, made it all but impossible for their exhortations to be ignored. When, however, a prophet's denunciation of wrongdoing too strongly swayed the oppressed—if not the oppressors—the ruling classes frequently were forced to pay lip service to the prophetic message in order to maintain or strengthen their hold on the people. Thus the writings of Amos were accepted, to become part of Holy Writ, and used by the secular and priestly rulers to strengthen the institutions of law and public worship. Similarly, the so-called Reformation of Josiah, which Jeremiah first supported enthusiastically, provided one more occasion for the use of prophetic teachings in the special interests of the monarchy and the priesthood of Jerusalem. Vehemently, as the prophets demanded the substance of justice for the orphan and the widow, for the weak and the oppressed, the laws of the kingdom continued to punish ritual transgression more regularly and more severely than moral injustice.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the prophets was the forthrightness and conviction with which they addressed themselves to those Israelites, without the least regard for their rank or power, who flouted or perverted
the law. Through this uncompromising vehemence, the prophets continually risked and sometimes suffered abuse and even death at the hands of those they attacked. Indeed, believing that all Israelites were equal before the Covenant and in the sight of the Lord, the prophets could hardly have done otherwise than denounce the iniquities of the strong with the same freedom and vigor as those of the weak, and when they suffered it was for their fierce love of the inexorable justice of their God.

Nathan did not hesitate to denounce David the mighty king for his murderous action against Uriah the Hittite (II Samuel 12). Elijah had to flee for his life because of his vehement denunciations of Ahab and Jezebel. Micaiah was hit on the cheek and thrown into prison (I Kings 22:24–27). Amos the Judean risked limb and life when he audaciously invaded the royal sanctuary at Bethel and told the royal house and its supporters what lay in store for them as retribution for their rebellion against the Lord. Because Jeremiah bitterly denounced the domestic and foreign policy of his government, his life was threatened, he was beaten, he was put in stocks, and he was thrown into a dungeon, so that he was constrained to cry out, “And I was like a docile lamb that is led to the slaughter” (11:19). The Second Isaiah echoed these words when he described himself “as a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that is dumb before her shearsers” (53:7). Ezekiel was told by God, “And you, son of man, be not afraid of them, neither be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns be with you and you dwell among scorpions” (Ezekiel 2:6). Uriah the prophet was killed by King Jehoiakim (Jeremiah 26:20–23), and the prophet Zechariah was stoned to death (II Chronicles 24:20–21).
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Read in a later time and under wholly altered circumstances, these sufferings were interpreted as expiatory sacrifices meekly accepted by the prophets to atone for the iniquities of their people, and the prophetic insistence on the equality of all before the Covenant was interpreted as belief in a universality encompassing not merely the children of Israel but all men of all nations.

In the great prophecies of doom one of the most common and impressive themes is the warning to the Israelites that unless they hearken to the word of the Lord they would suffer defeat and even conquest at the hands of their enemies. Thus in the reigns of Jehoiakim, Jehoiachin, and Zedekiah (about 608–586 B.C.), a powerful section of the Judean ruling class wanted to make a pact with Egypt and other countries against Babylonia. Jeremiah, however, condemned this move as contrary to the will of God and therefore a step toward certain disaster. Instead, he urged a policy of continued co-operation with Babylonia (e.g., Jeremiah 25–29).

The same pattern is evident over a century earlier, about 735 B.C., when Isaiah analyzed the efforts of King Pekah of Israel and King Rezin of Aram to force Judah into a coalition against the expanding Assyrian empire (Isaiah 7–8). The prophet advised Judah’s government to avoid any such alliance, warning that Israel and her Aramean ally would surely fall. “Behold,” he said,

a young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel. . . . And before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted” [7:14 ff.].

The historical context makes it clear that the prophets were, in fact, analyzing with extraordinary acumen the
balance of forces in the world of the Levant and urging their conclusions upon their fellow Israelites with the majestic eloquence of their tradition. Read in this light, the reference to the young woman and her child becomes nothing more than a dramatic measure of time, a warning that before the unborn child will be old enough to know the difference between good and evil, the Lord will bring devastation on Judah’s enemies (compare 8:1–4). Yet when passages of this sort were read in a later and wholly different set of conditions they laid the basis for the common belief that the prophets were foretellers and that their gift was based not merely on their power of analysis of an immediate situation, but was derived rather from divine inspiration and implied distant and mystical promises.

After the destruction of the Jewish state in 70 A.D., the post-Biblical Jews accepted this concept of prediction as the most significant aspect of prophetic literature. The scrupulous analysis of long-past political and military situations no longer concerned the heirs of the Biblical tradition. The literary power of the prophets was such that their works were still read and increasingly searched for meanings relevant to a new age and a new situation. Warnings of defeat and destruction were no longer meaningful after the Dispersion, and the temptation to find hidden promises of restoration and final triumph was overpowering.

Not only did the Jews of the first and second century A.D. read in the prophets a prediction of the new exile and a second restoration, but the early Christians found in the same source predictions of the coming of Jesus and his messianic role. But just as the dubious quality of prediction was only retroactively associated with the prophetic writ-
ings, so too was the concept of messianism improperly projected back into the prophetic writings.

It is true that the prophets believed that God would restore His people Israel to their country under the rule of a descendant of the house of David. Anyone who was chosen by the Lord through His prophets to be ruler of His people was regarded as “His messiah,” literally, “His anointed.” Thus Saul was the “Lord’s anointed” (I Samuel 24:7; and frequently), and so were David and Zedekiah (II Samuel 19:22; Lamentations 4:20). Even King Cyrus of Persia, whom the Second Isaiah recognized as God’s agent to destroy Babylonia and restore Israel, is described as “His anointed” (Isaiah 45:1). In every case throughout the Biblical period, the “anointed” person was a human being. And when the physical restoration of Israel was contemplated, it was a scion of David who was to be the ruler, the anointed of the Lord. Thus it was Zerubbabel, of the house of David, who led the Restoration of Judah after the Babylonian Exile.

The idea of a superhuman anointed leader, indeed, the very use of the term “Messiah” (with capital “M”), who would be sent down by God at some distant time to intervene directly in behalf of Israel against her oppressors, or in behalf of the righteous against the wicked, is a post-Biblical development in Jewish and Christian circles. Painfully aware that they were unable to cope with the might of Roman imperialism and casting about desperately for comfort and hope in this period of distress and despair, many Jews read back into the Biblical Books the idea and prediction of a superhuman Messiah who would bring deliverance to the Jews at the behest of God. To the Christians,
this Messiah was the Christ (from the Greek for “anointed”) and Isaiah’s young woman with child who would bear a son was the Virgin Mary.

Those who found in the great prophecies the promise of a Messiah tended also to find in the lives of the prophets, with their frequent sufferings, an anticipation of a later, primarily Christian, doctrine of atonement. It became widely assumed that the Second Isaiah, for example, accepted his undeserved suffering meekly and thereby succeeded in sparing his fellow Jews the punishment and doom which was their due for their transgressions against the law and the word of God. According to this doctrine the innocent prophets suffered for the iniquities committed by the people as a whole and served as a substitute for them. There is, however, no basis in the Bible for this principle. It is true that the wickedness of the people was followed by the appearance of the prophets, who as a consequence sometimes suffered abuse; but there is not to be found a single instance in the entire Hebrew Bible where the suffering of a prophet atoned for the sins of a group. Nothing could have been farther from the spirit of the prophetic teachings; that the just and faithful should suffer vicariously, that is, as a substitute, for the unjust and blasphemous, would have been the greatest injustice of all. The prophets insisted on breathing human warmth and understanding into the Law, but they never preached a doctrine which superseded the Covenant and which allowed the sacrifice—in any form—of the innocent in place of the guilty.

By the same canon of justice the prophets frequently found that Israel had suffered sufficient punishment for its sins. Repeated statements to this effect can be found in the Bible; the Second Isaiah himself, for example, far from har-
boring any notions of vicarious atonement, began his series of unsurpassed compositions to his fellow exiles with this tender consolation:

Comfort ye, comfort ye My people,
says your God,
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem
and proclaim unto her
That her hard service is completed,
that her punishment is accepted,
That she has received of the hand of the Lord
double for all her sins [40:1–2].

The concept of vicarious suffering and atonement, then, derives from and has meaning in post-Biblical times when the Jewish state was destroyed and many Jews exiled from the land by the Roman conqueror. It was then, in the rabbinic interpretation, that the “servant of the Lord” in Isaiah 52:13–53:12—who is none other than the prophet himself—came to be identified with the people Israel and Israel came to be regarded as God’s servant in suffering vicariously for the sins of the gentile world. Christianity, by contrast, identified the “servant of the Lord” with Jesus. Consequently, the Second Isaiah came to be regarded as the “suffering” servant of the Lord. In reality, he was no more a “suffering” servant than Elijah, or Jeremiah, or Uriah, or Ezekiel. The common term “suffering servant” is wholly unjustified and misleading in this context.

Particularism and Universality in the Teachings of the Prophets

Another, perhaps the most important, of the concepts anachronistically read back into the tradition of the prophets was the idea that their teachings broadened out until they
encompassed all humanity in a common brotherhood. One of the most frequently quoted, and erroneously interpreted, Bible texts is the well-known passage from Malachi: “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?” (2:10). But this verse has been wrested violently out of its original context when it is made to refer to all mankind. Actually, it charges that the Judean priests of God “have corrupted the Covenant” of the Lord (verses 1–9), that all Israel “has profaned the holiness of the Lord” (verse 11), and that the Lord will punish the transgressors. Malachi’s meaning is no different at this point than in the first chapter of his Book, where he proposes that the Lord will destroy Edom if they try to rebuild their land.

The prophetic tradition rests squarely on the idea of the Covenant between the Lord and His people Israel. The prophets were concerned directly and exclusively with this “chosen people,” and they took notice of other peoples and nations only when the latter came into contact—invariably for bad rather than good—with Judah and Israel. “Hear this word that the Lord has spoken concerning you,” Amos said. “You only, have I recognized of all the families of the earth” (3:1–2). The concept of equality between nations would have been incomprehensible to the prophets or their people. It was an idea which could develop only later and under wholly different circumstances and which, not surprisingly, was read back into the prophetic texts by both Jews and Christians when Rome forced the Jews into exile after A.D. 70 and they found themselves adrift in the vast reaches of the Empire.

The land of Israel which the prophets had known was geographically situated at the military crossroads of the ancient Near East. Its population was small and its pos-
sibilities of defense slight, with the result that it knew but few extended periods of peace or freedom from fear of Assyria, Aram, Egypt, and Babylonia. The greatest need and desire of Israel was for peace from her neighbors. Her people were not concerned with the international politics or the welfare of Egypt, Moab, Tyre, or Sidon. Their one concern was to be left alone, and it was this overwhelming desire that Isaiah (2:4) and Micah (4:3) expressed in the famous lines:

And [the Lord] shall judge between the nations,
and He shall decide for many peoples;
And they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks.
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.¹

Read wishfully, this majestic passage might be construed, as it so often has been, to imply a desire for the brotherhood of men and the universal peace on earth. In hard fact, the context excludes this sentimental interpretation. Isaiah and Micah rigidly predicate any such peace on the triumph of Israel. “Out of Zion shall go forth the law,” they say, “and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

The Second Isaiah, whose moral outlook is generally regarded as the least exclusivist, consistently proclaimed his strongly national point of view. He assures his fellow exiles:

Thus says the Lord God:
Behold I will lift up My hand to the nations,
and raise My ensign to the peoples;
And they shall bring your sons in their bosom,

¹ The prophet Joel (4:9 ff.; 3:9 ff. in the English versions), in keeping with the prophetic tradition, put this passage to equally nationalistic use.
and your daughters shall be carried upon their shoulders,
And kings shall be your foster-fathers
and their queens your nursing mothers.
With their face to the earth they shall bow down to you
and lick the dust of your feet.
And you shall know that I am the Lord [49:22–23].

In a germinal sense, in the sense that he was elementally responsive to the moods and emotions and sufferings of Israel, the Second Isaiah, as the other prophets, came to express many ideas that took on great meaning for later generations of Jews and Christians alike. Yet within his own historical setting these ideas applied only to his own people. “Awake, awake,” he says:

Put on your strength. O Zion,
Put on your glorious garments,
Jerusalem, Holy City!
For there shall no more enter you
the uncircumcised and the unclean [52:1].

So speaks the prophet that his own people knew and understood, as they had known and understood Amos, Jeremiah, and the rest before him.

At the same time it would be misleading to leave the impression that the prophets’ interest stopped short with their own people Israel and went no further. Israel, dwelling among other nations, was intimately and constantly affected by their actions, and the prophets’ attention was repeatedly called to include them. The position of their tiny nation in the midst of other, more powerful, nations led the prophets to an outlook that was universal in its ultimate implications. Believing firmly that their God, the only God in existence, would ultimately deliver them from all threats from other nations, so that no more wars would come upon them, consciously aware that the Torah, their religion, was the only
code of laws and life by which man could live, the prophets expressed the conviction that all the peoples of the universe, after they had been through stress and strain at the hands of each other through the will of God, would come to realize that Israel and her religion and her God and His abode on Zion—that these constituted the only proper way of life in the entire world. The gentile peoples of the world would then come streaming to the mountain of the Lord's house, to the house of the God of Jacob, in order that, in the words of Isaiah (2:3) and Micah (4:2):

He may teach us of His ways
and we may walk in His paths.
For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

While it was the civilization of Israel which the prophets would advocate for the other nations, and while nothing of the gentile cultures was considered worthy of incorporation into the Israelite way of life, the particularism of Israel and her prophetic spokesmen did lay the foundation for the later concept of universality. Gradually it came to be believed that all mankind, by adopting the principles of Israelite belief and practice—that is by accepting the obligations of the Covenant—might enjoy the fruits of God's bounty in the manner that God promised His own people Israel through His prophets. In this universalism, Biblical Israel and her prophets were unique in the Ancient Near East.

When the Jewish descendants of the prophets, during the hellenistic and especially the Roman periods, became more fully aware of living in a single great unified society that encompassed all of the known world, they drew upon and expanded the universalism of the prophets. The prophetic concept of the Covenant had aimed at making all men—of
the Israelite society, to be sure—equal in their essential human dignity. This concept, in turn, led to one much broader in scope, of the universality and inevitability of individual moral responsibility toward all men, not merely neighbors and fellow Israelites. It is recorded (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a) that during the first century B.C. a heathen converted by Hillel, the great exponent of liberalizing Pharisaism in the days of Herod the Great, asked him for a brief exposition of Judaism. Hillel is said to have replied, “What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow man. This is the whole Law. The rest is mere commentary.” Hillel recognized correctly the implication of the Biblical verse: “And you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:18). This precept was incorporated in Christianity and in the western tradition and transmitted from age to age with tremendous impact.

It is to the prophetic tradition more than any other source that western civilization owes its noblest concept of the moral and social obligations of the individual human being. Even if the prophets preached only to their fellow Israelites and saw justice only in the terms of their Covenant with their God, their ringing words have carried from age to age their belief that justice was for the weak as well as for the strong, that its fulfillment was as much a matter of the spirit as the letter of the law, that one could not serve God at the same time that he mistreated his fellow men, that to love God was to love justice, and that the love of justice placed within the conscience of each human being the ultimate inescapable obligation to denounce evil wherever he saw it, to defy a ruler who commanded him to break the Covenant, and to live in the law and the love of God no matter what the cost.