Theology of the Prophetic Books

The Death and Resurrection of Israel

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THE PROPHETS AS THEOLOGIANS

This is a study of a unique group of books that came into existence because of the destruction of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah and the beginning of the restoration of Judeans to their homeland. They are works of theology, in that they claim to be able to explain what Yahweh, God of Israel and Judah, was doing in the midst of those events, and this book focuses exclusively on that theological explanation. It thus differs from most books on the Old Testament prophets. It does not deal with the general phenomenon of “prophecy,” so will devote little attention to the psychology of propheticism or to the roles played by the prophets in their society, subjects that have been extensively discussed in recent literature.\(^1\) This study confines itself to the messages of the canonical prophets (formerly called writing prophets): Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve.\(^2\) Their messages have, of course, been expounded many times over, and yet there is a way of looking at this corpus of literature which has not been overworked, and indeed has not been recognized as the unifying factor that explains why this collection of books was made. A brief survey of the ways the prophets have been understood should be useful to the reader as a way of locating what this book attempts to do, in comparison with the long history of interpretation.

1.1 Approaches to the Prophets

In postexilic Judaism the term “prophet” came to be used eventually of any inspired person. The origins of this usage may be found already in the Old Testament, where Abraham (Gen. 20:7) and Moses (Deut. 34:10) are so designated. In the New Testament, John the Baptist (Matt. 21:26) and Jesus (Matt. 21:11) are called prophets, so it is clear that by the New Testament period the term had come to be used in ways not necessarily defined by those books we now call the canonical prophets. John Barton provides an extensive study of the various uses of the concept of prophet in this period.\(^3\) The canonical prophets themselves had been cast in the roles of martyrs, in keeping with the need for examples of faithfulness in the midst of suffering brought about by the persecutions of both Jews and Christians (cf. Matt. 5:12; 13:57; 23:30–31, 37; Acts 7:52; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15; James 5:10; Rev. 16:6). The noncanonical work Lives of the Prophets (first century
C.E.) would more accurately have been called "deaths of the prophets," for it considered them all to have been martyrs, and the legendary material which it adds to what is known from the Bible deals mostly with their deaths.

Through much of Christian history, the prophetic books have been read primarily as sources of predictions of the coming of Christ, and of the eschaton. In contrast, Judaism has understood the prophets to be teachers of the Torah. The historical and biographical interests that came to dominate nineteenth-century biblical scholarship led to a greater interest in the prophets as individuals, and efforts began to reconstruct the backgrounds, religious experiences, and distinctive theologies of each of them. The traditional understanding of prophets as people inspired by God tended to be transmuted into a picture of them as great, creative religious thinkers. The opinions of influential German scholars such as Ewald, Wellhausen, and Duhm have tended to be echoed in scholarship as a whole throughout the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, and their definition of "prophet" has widely influenced the way prophets are viewed in the church, as well. To "prophesy" is still regularly used to mean "predict the future," but to be "prophetic" now means to take a lonely stance for truth and justice, against popular opinion. This corresponds with the scholarly understanding of the canonical prophets as the virtual creators of ethical monotheism, lonely individualists who stood for spiritual religion and against organized religion's ritualistic observances, which were devoid of concern for justice. Thinking of the prophets as individualists led to the effort to learn as much about their lives as possible. The Old Testament shows little interest in that subject, so the efforts to reconstruct their biographies inevitably led to a considerable exercise of the imagination. For example, the location of Amos's home, Tekoa, on the edge of the Judean wilderness, and his reference to himself as a herdsman, could produce a rather romantic picture of one whose religious experience had been shaped by the severity of life in the desert. The fact is, we do not know whether Amos spent any time in the Judean wilderness, let alone whether he had any religious experiences there.

This biographical interest took a new turn early in the twentieth century, when Gustav Hölscher and others began to emphasize the psychological aspects of prophetic experience, as they are recorded in the accounts of visions and other paranormal phenomena, and eventually a full account of the "ecstatic personality" was produced by Johannes Lindblom. Some have tried to confine these phenomena to the kind of prophet mentioned in the books of Samuel and Kings, claiming they were not important aspects of canonical prophecy, but Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and others do claim to have seen visions, and it seems most likely that Israelites identified people as nebi'im, "prophets," because they were known to have had ecstatic experiences of this kind.

By the middle of the twentieth century, a reaction to the claim that the prophets rejected ritual in favor of a spiritual religion had set in. Numerous studies showed that the prophets all used cultic materials extensively, mostly in positive ways, and some even concluded that many, if not all, the canonical prophets were in fact employed at the Israelite sanctuaries. That theory has gained few adherents, but the study of the use of cultic forms showed at least that the prophets were well acquainted with the religious life of their day and that they used the materials of their faith to foster faith. This move away from the prophetic rejection of ritual in favor of a spiritual religion took place after the prophets of the covenant had rejected the covenant itself. The period of the prophetic movement in the late eighteenth century, however, has been well explored in recent years, and the idea that the prophets rejected ritual in favor of a spiritual religion has been rejected.

Another possible contribution to the study of prophetic literature is the consideration of the role of the prophet in society. For example, Hasidic thought was particularly interested in the role of the prophet and the organization of society around the prophet. Further, the idea of a "prophetic" role for the Old Testament prophet is often used by contemporary Israelites and cultic materials to emphasize the relationship between the individual and society.

Late in the twentieth century, the role of the prophet became increasingly important in the study of the Old Testament. At the ancient sanctuaries, for example, the Old Testament prophet was often seen as the leader of the community, running the temple and the worship services. This role is still an important part of the study of the Old Testament today.

Contemporary scholarship on the prophet is continuing to grow. These discussions have been led by scholars such as Lester Grabbe and John Stambaugh. Grabbe is known for his unique approach to the study of the prophet, the prophet as a bridge between the personal and the religious lives of individuals from other times and places. Stambaugh is known for his work on the role of the prophet in the Old Testament and the ways in which the prophet is used in contemporary Jewish thought.

The fact is, the role of the prophet is still a subject of much debate and discussion among scholars. The study of the prophet is a rich and complex field, and there is much more to be learned about the role of the prophet in society and in the religious life of the Israelites.
of the prophets," for it contains material which it adds to their number.

books have been read primarily as a unit, and the eschaton. In a great twentieth-century biblical scholarship, as individuals, and efforts to interpret their experiences, and distinctive theologies of prophets as people interpreted of them as great, creative figures. Scholars such as Ewald, Gunkel, and von Rad scholarship as a whole in the twentieth century, and their definition of prophecy was one of the church, as "to predict the future," but to be judged by the will and justice, against popularizing a rather romantic picture created by the severity of life in the Old Testament, and in the Old Testament wilderness, a picture of the heroic individual. The psychological aspects of the ecstatic personality" and other phenomena to confine these phenomena to the prophetic books of the Bible, but Amos, Isaiah, Ezekiel, and other books. It is most likely that Israelites and prophets were known to have had ecstatic experiences.

to the claim that the prophets were lonely individuals. Numerous studies showed that the prophets were mostly in positive ways, and sometimes in negative ways. Individual prophets were in fact esteemed by the peoples among them few adherents, but the role of the prophetic leaders was well appreciated by the people.

quainted with the language of worship of their people, and by no means were starting afresh with a new vocabulary and new concepts.7

This move away from seeing them as individuals largely isolated from their community took another form in the writings of those who stressed the centrality of the covenant life of the prophets. Even though the word "covenant" seldom appears in the prophetic books earlier than Jeremiah and Ezekiel, other forms associated with the covenant were identified, and the picture of prophets filling a formal office in Israel, exercising God's covenant rights against his people, was created. Thus their oracles of judgment were claimed not to be original creations, after all, but part of Israel's worship.8 Recent studies of the history of the covenant have questioned whether the covenant concept in Israel was even as early as the period of the prophets, and although that seems to be hyper-skeptical, the evidence to support the idea that they were "covenant-officials" is largely lacking.9

Another possible source for the prophets' teaching was located in the wisdom literature. Attention was drawn to the presence of certain genres, vocabulary, and ideas typical of the wisdom books, especially in Amos, Isaiah, and Habakkuk.10 For example, Hans Walter Wolff's commentary on Amos takes the position that his thought was profoundly influenced by his "intellectual home," which was tribal wisdom. Further studies showed that wisdom influence is widespread throughout the Old Testament, so it seems better to think of the prophets as using both wisdom and cultic materials known to everyone, without assuming that gave them a special relationship to either aspect of Israel's institutional life.

Late in the twentieth century, efforts were made to shed additional light on the roles Israelite prophets may have played in their society by comparing them with figures in other, better-known cultures who are thought to have been similar to the Old Testament characters.11 Comparisons with the texts produced by oracle givers at the ancient Syrian city of Mari have been of interest, although they are dated long before the prophetic period in Israel. The efforts to interpret the roles of Israelite prophets by studying the activities of shamans in contemporary cultures have raised the possibility of a natural reason for prophecy, however, for the criteria for choosing individuals from other cultures must be drawn from one's preconceptions of what the Old Testament prophets were really like.12

Contemporary studies have thus moved significantly away from the earlier picture of the prophets as highly creative individuals, who produced something truly new.13 These trends may lead to the extreme represented by these sentences from Lester Grabbe's book: "The contents of the prophetic books are certainly not unique in the Bible." "The differences between the pre-classical seer, the classical prophet, the post-exilic prophet, and the apocalyptic visionary dwindle at most to matters of degree rather than kind." At another extreme, a study of the Old Testament uses of the word nabî', traditionally translated "prophet," has suggested that Amos and the others associated with the "prophetic books" were probably never called by that title in the postexilic period, and it was given to them only much later.15 What then remains of those noble figures, martyrs, mystics, reformers, heroes of the faith, that earlier readers thought they had found in their books?

The fact is that there is not enough evidence about the biographies of the
prophets or about the social setting of the words in these books to make any of the reconstructions just cited demonstrable. A great deal of extrapolation has been used in every case, and that explains why such a wide variety of pictures of who the prophets really were is possible. These efforts were probably inevitable, for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a strong historical and biographical interest. The search for the historical Jesus was accompanied by these searches for the historical prophets. Late-twentieth-century scholarship has been strongly influenced by materialist approaches to history, with religion itself to be accounted for by social and political factors, and so the study of the prophets has now been made to conform with those interests. But the variety of results is not due solely to presuppositions; it is also, and primarily, due to the scarcity of evidence of the kind being sought. Israel clearly had little or no interest in the kinds of questions being asked by modern readers, for they preserved very little evidence of the sort needed to answer these questions. We know nothing about Obadiah and Habakkuk except their names, and only the name and place of residence of Nahum. We know Amos’s hometown, occupation, and one incident from his life, and that is more than we know about the other minor prophets. There is more information about Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, but not enough to write the life story of any of them. Jeremiah’s book does contain a series of stories about his later years, but the chapter on Jeremiah in this book will claim that was not an early effort at biography. The incidents from the lives of the prophets which are contained in the canonical books quite clearly have been preserved because they have within them a message from God to Israel, and not because the prophets lived such interesting lives. This book will follow Israel’s lead, and will claim that our inability to reconstruct biography or social location is not a serious defect. These efforts to get at the “historical Amos (or Isaiah, etc.)” certainly involve questions of great interest to us, and we cannot avoid asking them, but since the lives, religious experiences, and social status of those responsible for these books seem to have been of little or no interest to the Israelites who collected and produced the final editions of the material, this book will not attempt to get beyond what we have, written in the prophetic books, and will take them as Israel’s testimony to what the prophets meant to them, a subject of sufficient interest in its own right.

1.2 Ways of Reading the Prophetic Books

The prophets have been compared with shamans, with Nostradamus, with one’s favorite reformer, or one’s favorite evangelist, et al., but the books ascribed to them have no truly close parallels anywhere else in literature. The uniqueness of this collection will provide a starting point for our work in the theology of the books, but before moving in that direction some reflection on scholarly approaches to the books themselves will be helpful. For centuries the prophets were thought of as authors, so they were designated writing prophets to distinguish them from Nathan, Elijah, and the others in the books of Samuel and Kings. With the application of form criticism to these books, the homiletical nature of their words was noticed, and they were recognized to have been preachers whose work was originally oral
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In these books, we find a wide variety of pictures of who the prophets were: perhaps they were prophets by their own initiative, possibly by divine inspiration, or perhaps by the will of a group of people to whom they were assigned. Whatever the case, the Prophet's work was probably inevitable, for the strong historical and biographical data that accompanied these works suggests that scholarship has been strongly involved in the history of religion itself to be accounted for. The study of the prophets has now been accompanied by many results, and the variety of results is due solely to the scarcity of evidence of the sort that would not do any of the writing. The prophet himself did not say everything in the book ascribed to him. Given the nineteenth century's strong interest in the prophet as an individual, with the assumption that he was a great, creative, religious genius, it then became important to know which words came from the original corruptions and which were the work of lesser minds. Source criticism, which had succeeded in answering many of the questions about the composition of the Pentateuch, was applied to the prophetic books in the effort to determine what was "authentic." Serious efforts were made to find objective criteria for making such decisions, but the enterprise inevitably had a strong subjective element. How does one decide where to begin? Which are the authentic words with which to compare all the rest? Consequently, the results have varied widely from commentator to commentator.

More recently, redaction criticism has worked with the prophetic books, using similar analytical methods, but with interest not just in recovering the authentic words of the prophet himself, but with an almost equal interest in the assumed levels of redaction of the book. There is evidence that the books took shape in several stages, with material being added to an original collection of oracles, and the redaction critic not only attempts to dissect the book into its various levels, but then tries to locate the historical setting for each of them. This method depends just as much on subjective elements as source criticism, however, with the result that no two redaction critics have produced results that agree. This book will take the position that there certainly is evidence for redaction, but that we do not have adequate evidence to enable us to identify the original words of the prophet with any hope of certainty, and neither is it possible to determine in detail the process by which it has taken its present form.

Recently it has been claimed that nothing in these books came from the eighth and seventh centuries and that the prophets are fictional characters created by post-exilic authors who produced an imaginative history for the Jewish community of their time. It is said that scribes produced the prophetic books in order to create messages that would correspond to the picture of the prophets found in the Deuteronomic Historical Work (Joshua through 2 Kings). They appeal to the great interest the Historian shows in prophecy (e.g., 2 Kings 17:13; chs. 18—19; 21:10—15), but in fact the History has a very different understanding of prophecy from that found in the prophetic books. For the Historian the prophets were preachers of repentance, but exhortations to change accompanied by promises of reward for it are extremely rare in the prophetic books. The difference between the messages of the canonical prophets and the picture of prophet in the History is the likely explanation for the fact that the History mentions only one canonical prophet by name (Isaiah; although there is also a Jonah in 2 Kings 14:25), and does not quote anything from the prophetic books. Those books in no way reflect the post-exilic view of prophecy as it is found in the Deuteronomic literature and Chronicles, but contain a quite different message from that assumed to be
“prophetic” in later times. Only the obviously Deuteronomistic materials in Jeremiah (e.g., Jer. 7:5–7; 22:1–5) correspond to the outlook of the Historian, and this may be what has led to the notion that the other books also reflect the Deuteronomistic point of view. Even the claims that the prophetic corpus has undergone extensive Deuteronomistic editing are now being shown to be unlikely on the basis of careful reevaluation. The judgmental parts of the books traditionally dated in the preexilic period are so shockingly thoroughgoing that it is hard to imagine why any postexilic author would have thought to create them, for they do not correspond to anything we find in the later parts of the Old Testament or the intertestamental literature.

Another approach is the “canonical” reading of a prophetic book, as advocated by Brevard Childs. It does not deny that the book contains early material and has been formed by a process of redaction, but considers its history of composition to be of no great interest to the interpreter. It is the final, “canonical” form that has influenced the history and faith of synagogue and church, and his approach focuses on the message of that form, no matter how many authors or periods may be represented in it. My approach will also find it important to consider the final form of each book as postexilic Judaism’s mature reflection on the exile/restoration experience, but it will also attempt to identify material contemporary with the disasters that befell the two kingdoms. I give the benefit of the doubt to passages that show no obvious indications of being addressed to a later audience, and find that large portions of the books attributed to preexilic prophets betray no evidence of awareness of the exile or postexilic situation. The sections on many of the books to be discussed, then, will deal with two levels of theology: words that appear to be contemporary with the events surrounding the demise of Israel and Judah, interpreting what is happening and is about to happen; and the book in its final form, reflecting exilic or postexilic interpretations of what did happen and what that means for the community which now accepts these books as definitive for their faith and life.

1.3 The Uniqueness of the Prophetic Books

Grabbe’s sociohistorical study of prophecy led him to the conclusion (noted above) that the differences between the canonical prophets and preclassical prophets, postexilic prophets and apocalyptic visionaries are matters of degree rather than kind, and that the contents of these books are not unique in the Bible. His approach may have led him to consider unimportant two facts that raise questions about each of those conclusions: facts that will be of great importance for a theological reading of the prophetic books. As a challenge to his first conclusion: Only these prophets are credited with an extensive written collection of their words. There are no true parallels to the corpus composed of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve. This is more than a difference of degree. As to the second conclusion: These books contain a message that is not ascribed to prophets elsewhere, one that appears elsewhere in the Old Testament only as a result of the influence of these books, and in mitigated forms. The message is, as Amos put it: the characteristic messianic, no special purpose, no special call for reform; it is the message why it must come to pass, which is reason it is acceptable to God. This follows it made not the new law, but away from it, as punishment.

The new law, was written, was given; the [new covenant] sentence was given: “The one who is faithful and finds mercy in the eyes of the Lord shall be the one to enter the new covenant.”

So that the history of the community and reading of canonical books.

This is the distinctive character of the prophets from the mid-eighth century onward. This kind of thinking the book of Amos shows that is clear. The book of Hosea, shortly after Amos, ceased to acknowledge a continuing inspiration and authority from him, whereas the continuing source material shows that kind of thinking. Instead, the book of Amos (Zech.

Since we speak in a certain sense, no one prophesying, there are to those men that tell collections of traditions concerning the life and words of Jesus were called.
Amos put it: “The end has come upon my people Israel” (Amos 8:2). The characteristic message of the pre-exilic, canonical prophets contains no calls for repentance, no specifications of what the people must do to avoid disaster, no program for reform; it is an announcement that disaster is at hand, with an explanation of why it must come. This has been recognized for some time, but there is still resistance to accepting it in some quarters. It will be of such importance for what follows that it may be worth quoting the various ways recent scholars have stated it:

the new discovery of the pre-exilic prophets . . . was that Israel had fallen away from Yahweh, her God, had been rejected as a nation and would be punished.  

the new feature in their preaching, and the one which shocked their hearers, was the message that Yahweh was summoning Israel before his judgment seat, and that he had in fact already pronounced sentence upon her:

“The end has come upon my people Israel” (Am. VII.2).  

The new feature that came into prophecy with Amos was the foretelling of the end of Yahweh’s covenant relationship to Israel, and it was especially on this account that his oracles were preserved and ultimately given canonical status.  

So that is the new, hard message of the classical prophets. God’s great history of salvation with Israel, which began with the Exodus from Egypt and received a final seal in the election of Jerusalem, will be pushed inexorably to its end.  

This is the one element that clearly distinguishes the work of the canonical prophets from their predecessors, and it most likely accounts for the fact that in the mid-eighth century the words of certain prophets began to be collected in books. This kind of prophecy has a beginning and an end, marked by the books now called Latter Prophets in the Hebrew Bible.  

The beginning is sharply delineated; it is the book of Amos. The end cannot be dated with any definiteness, and the reason for that is clear. The last of these prophets dealt with restoration, and restoration began shortly after 538, but was a continuing matter. Eventually the Jewish community ceased to acknowledge persons who may have claimed to be speaking under divine inspiration as having the same stature and authority as those who had preceded them, whose words were already collected in books and were being used as a continuing source of guidance. So, they spoke of prophecy coming to an end—meaning that kind of prophecy—even though they also used the word “prophet” in other ways (Zech. 1:4; 7:7; 12:13; 15:1; Prayer of Azariah 15; 1 Macc. 4:46; 9:27; 14:41).  

Since we no longer think of the pre-exilic prophets as authors in the modern sense, no one accounts for the existence of Amos and Hosea in the Bible by thinking those men decided to write a book. We understand the books to be anthologies, collections of oracles that were mostly oral in their original form. The question concerning the existence of these books is thus, Why did someone begin to collect the words of just these prophets, and preserve them long enough that they eventually became a part of the collection of books considered to be definitive for the
Table 2
The Old Testament Prophets and the Three Key Moments in Israel’s History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year B.C.E.</th>
<th>Prophets</th>
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<tr>
<td>800 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Amos</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hosea</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Micah</td>
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<td>722 B.C.E.</td>
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<tr>
<td>700 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Nahum</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
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<tr>
<td>600 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Ezekiel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>587 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>538 B.C.E.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Isaiah 40—55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Haggai and Zechariah</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isaiah 56—66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Malachi</td>
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Jewish faith? Why?—when the words of Amos and Hosea were so unacceptable; the announcement that one’s national existence was soon to come to an end. The chronology of these books affords an answer. Table 2 makes the answer visible. There is a clustering of books, according to the way they are normally dated, and the clustering corresponds to the major emphasis of the message of each of them, and to a key date in history. Four books, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah 1—39, are dated from the middle to the end of the eighth century. Samaria, capital of the Northern Kingdom, fell to the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E., bringing the history of that kingdom to an end. Judah survived as a vassal to the Assyrians until shortly before the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C.E. There were prophets in Judah during that period (2 Kings 21:10—15), but no collections of prophetic messages were made (or at least preserved) until near the end of the Southern Kingdom. Another cluster surrounds the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E.: Zephaniah, Nahum, Habakkuk (perhaps

Obadiah), Jeremiah, and Haggai and Zechariah. If one insists, 538, restoration promise began with the first reference to the king of Persia—Persia—God’s promised kingdom of Israel, thus the prophetic, then.

There is little evidence for thinking the three turns or these three turns of the collection of prophetic books are unified in one story; rather, it is a story of God’s treatment of Jerusalem through the fallen empires of Israel, and the fall of Jerusalem, and the end of the days of the kingdom of Israel. The story leads to 37:1—14, as the end of the days of the kingdom of Israel. The story leads to the end of the days of the kingdom of Israel.
Moments in Israel’s History

Amos
Hosea
Micah
Zephaniah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Ezekiel
Isaiah 40—55
Haggai and Zechariah
Isaiah 56—66
Malachi
Obadiah), Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. After a generation, with the decree of Cyrus in 538, restoration to Judah became possible, and collections of prophetic words of promise began to be produced, beginning with Isaiah 40—55 and continuing with Isaiah 56—66, Haggai, Zechariah, and (probably in the next century) Malachi. There is little evidence to enable us to date Jonah and Joel, but there are reasons for thinking they belong with this group. The simple matter of dating suggests that these three turning points in Israel’s history account for the existence of just this collection of prophetic words. Whether the clustering means any more than that will depend on the success of the approach taken here, which is to show that these books are unified by the prophets’ intention to explain what God was doing in the midst of these events, and that the unifying theme can be identified, with Ezek. 37:1–14, as the death and resurrection of Israel.

1.4 The Three Key Moments, and a Theology of the Prophetic Books

If one insists, it could be claimed that judgment prophecy in the Old Testament was produced after Samaria and Jerusalem fell, and was a simple application of retribution theology in the effort to account for these disasters; namely, God must have been punishing us for something.30 As a writer of theology, however, I am willing to allow for the possibility of divine inspiration, and to take these works as more than just human ingenuity at explaining the unacceptable. At the purely human level, an approach found in many books on the prophets, one may see them as keen observers of what was developing in international affairs, recognizing the danger to the continuing freedom of their nation before many others did, or in the cases of Isaiah and Jeremiah, showing more political skill than their rulers possessed. As is typical, they may also be credited with a heightened ethical sensibility which enabled them to diagnose their people as a sick society, without the moral strength to enable them to withstand a severe time of tribulation. Without denying the elements of truth in these approaches, this is a work of theology, and the theologian will dare to claim that God has been involved in all of this, both at the level of communication with certain chosen individuals, and at the level of actual participation in the events of world history.31

A theological explanation of the existence of the prophetic books may put it this way: God had called a people into a special relationship with himself, giving them a land of their own, addressing them in their cultic ceremonies with the assurance that he had made a covenant with them, and defining their character as his people in terms of a law. He had given them priests to instruct them, kings to maintain justice, sages to guide them, and prophets to warn and exhort them when they forgot who they were. It had not worked. Neither Israel’s worship nor daily life was truly distinct from their neighbors. They were no true witness to the nations concerning the character of their God, and the fate of widow, orphan, immigrant, and the poor in their midst was no better than in other countries. With the rise of the great empire builders in the Middle East—Assyria, followed by Babylon and Persia—God determined to do a new thing, in effect to start over. The little kingdoms of Israel and Judah would lose their political existence forever, but out of the
death of Judah, God would raise up a new people, who would understand about God what most of their preexilic ancestors had never been able to comprehend, and who would commit themselves to obeying his will to an extent their ancestors had never done. The first step in making that happen was to raise up a series of prophets, messengers of God, whose responsibility was straightforward. They were no reformers; it was too late for that. They were to announce what was about to happen, to insist that it would not happen because God could not protect them from their enemies, but that God intended to use the disaster for his own purposes. They were also preachers of the law; the standards of behavior which, if obeyed, would produce a community of peace and harmony in which all would benefit. The standards had failed, so far, but when the disaster came, and all was lost, the words of the prophets were remembered. Other prophets began to explain that God had a future in mind for a renewed people, and the combined message of judgment and promise was finally taken with the utmost seriousness by the exiles in Babylonia. If there was to be a future for them as the people of Yahweh, they had better pay attention, and they did, for out of the exile experience did come a new people. Once the new community, Judaism, had begun to be formed there was no more need for divine messengers of that kind, and eventually the Jews recognized they were no longer being addressed in that way. The more normal attributes of religion—organized worship and instruction in faith and ethics—were working with this transformed people as they had not worked with Israel prior to the exile. The kind of prophet represented in the canonical books is thus the one who appears when God determines that a radical change in human history must come about.

The preceding paragraph is in effect a synopsis of the book that follows. It remains now to show how each of the prophetic books contributes to the drama of the death and resurrection of the people of God.

1.5 The Reality of Exile

... for there is nothing dearer to a man than his own country and his parents, and however splendid a home he may have in a foreign country, if it be far from father or mother, he does not care about it.

(Homer, Odyssey, Book IX, Butler's translation, lines 34–36)

Exile and restoration became theological topics for the prophets, the basis for reflection on human nature and the character and purpose of God. Because of that, exile is likely to become an abstraction for us, if we have not experienced anything like it. This section will thus be devoted to the attempt to re-create what it was like for individuals in Israel and Judah to be forcibly deported from their homeland. Unfortunately, the Neo-Babylonian records from the early sixth century provide little information of this kind, but Nebuchadnezzar was continuing (with variations) a policy developed by the Assyrians, and from Assyrian records we can learn a good deal about what it was like to become an exile during the sixth centuries.

The twentieth century has been called the century of the refugee. The term “displaced person” came into common use to describe one of the major effects of World War II. But exile is a common and ancient human experience. Often it involves terrible physical distress and ignominy, as is involved, for what anguish of being set adrift from adequate historic truths and of the experience of certain human beings.

The causes have been, and continue to be, large groups of people being driven out of their homes in order to be forced to leave because of invading armies, or to be forced to leave tremendous numbers of persons back onto the land. The experience of the Babylonians was unique, however, so it will be important to let us begin to understand of exile in its different implications.

In the days of Ahaz king of Judah, came into the land of Judah and captured the city of Galilee, all the Samaria, and all the city of Assyria. (2 Kings 16:9)

The people of Judah did not depart from their evil ways, even though they had spoken against the Lord and his servants. Therefore the Lord carried away Judah out of his own land, and exiled them into exile out of their own land.

He carried away captive out of Jerusalem ten thousand men, five thousand women, and ten thousand young men of valor, ten thousand virgins, who remained, exiled into exile out of their own land.

From the annals of the exile we read that their palaces depopulated, their cities desolate, their palaces depopulated, they departed their homes, and their cities were to be used by a powerful people as if they were threats of this kind, the Lord so filled your people to become exiles, no one was able for rebellion with the Lord. Long: “On their return, from Babylon, alive in the days of the Lord, and before me. I tied him to another, and I put a mark on him and marked on him and I rubbed his face with the powder of the minnows. The Lord’s anger was upon Israel, and I rubbed them with the powder of the minnows.”
riable physical distress, sometimes not, but in every case a special kind of suffering is involved, for what each experience has in common with the next is the peculiar anguish of being separated from one’s homeland. “This is the worst violation of historic truths and of the rights of man: when the right to their homeland is denied to certain human beings so that they are forced to leave their homesteads.”

The causes have been various (and here we are concerned with the deportation of large groups of people rather than with individual exiles). Groups have fled or been driven out of their homeland because they were out of favor politically, or have left more voluntarily in order to seek better lives elsewhere. Others have been forced to leave because of their religion. The Nazis uprooted millions from their homes in order to murder them. Refugees have fled in large numbers before invading armies, or to escape internal conflict. The Soviet Union under Stalin moved tremendous numbers of their own citizens from their homes into forced labor camps. The experiences of those who became the victims of the Assyrians and Babylonians were not quite the same as any of the groups just mentioned, however, so it will be important not to project what is known about later displaced persons back onto the data from the eighth to sixth centuries.

The Old Testament authors wrote of the fate of the exiles in the briefest of terms, so most of what is available may be quoted here, as the first step in our reconstruction. The details of the history of Israel and Judah, as they are relevant to the understanding of exile in the prophetic books, will be provided later, where appropriate.

In the days of Pekah king of Israel Tiglath-pileser king of Assyria came and captured Ijon, Abelbethmaacah, Janoah, Kedesh, Hazor, Gilgal, and Galilee, all the land of Naphtali; and he carried the people captive to Assyria. (2 Kings 15:29, rsv)

The people of Israel walked in all the sins which Jeroboam did; they did not depart from them, until the Lord removed Israel out of his sight, as he had spoken by all his servants the prophets. So Israel was exiled from their own land to Assyria until this day. (2 Kings 17:22–23, rsv)

He carried away all Jerusalem, and all the princes, and all the mighty men of valor, ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and the smiths; none remained, except the poorest people of the land. . . . So Judah was taken into exile out of its land. (2 Kings 24:14, 25:21b, rsv)

From the annals of the Neo-Assyrian kings, from letters, and from the reliefs in their palaces depicting their campaigns we can learn more about why and how they deported thousands of conquered people from their homelands. Exile could be used by a powerful king as a punishment for an unruly vassal. Treaties included threats of this kind: “May Melqart and Eshmun deliver your land to destruction, your people to be deported.” The Assyrian kings usually treated those responsible for rebellion with utmost brutality, however, and they probably did not live long: “On their return (march) they (lit., their hands) seized Shaziblu, king of Babylon, alive in open battle. They threw him fettered into a cage and brought him before me. I tied him up in the middle city gate of Nineveh, like a pig.”
The deportation of large numbers of conquered people was ordinarily not for punishment but for various practical purposes as the emperors sought to add to the security and prosperity of the empire. There had been occasional forced movements of populations earlier than the eighth century, but it became a regular part of Assyrian policy from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 B.C.E.). It was a large enterprise, moving hundreds or thousands of people for many miles, sometimes from one side of the empire to the other, keeping them fed and as healthy as possible, since they were intended to be useful to the empire in their new location. The relics show lines of captives leaving their city after defeat, their status made evident by guards with upraised clubs or spears. The male captives might have their hands bound, but the women walked freely, and sometimes rode with children in carts. The women are typically shown carrying sacks over one shoulder, with a small container in the other hand. An Assyrian scribe, with clay tablet and stylus, and an Aramaic scribe, with scroll and stylus, are shown making records of what has been captured. Letters indicate the responsibility laid upon those in charge of the deportation:

The people and the large cattle which they bring to me from the city of Gozan, I went forth to the city of Shabirishu to meet. I was prospered. I met them. I caused them to take shelter for inspection on the spot. Kina the kelek boatman (lacked) three persons; Sandapi the gardener, three persons; Huli the irrigator, five persons; Kuza the officer, the scribe of his hands, four persons—a total of fifteen persons are lacking according to my invoice. I sent back after them, from the city of Shabirishu to the city of Gozan, a member of the body-guard, saying, "Go bring the rest of the people with you." In order to keep the people alive, provisions had to be made available at regular intervals along the route, and the letters also show how difficult that was at times:

In the midst of the month Adar, this is my course: I will certainly go up, that the face of the king my lord I may see; and the prisoners, that are a thousand in number, whom I have captured, I shall bring up with me; and many fugitives have taken refuge with me, and the king my lord knows that there are no provisions in the land. Grain and dates for money, from the Pukaidi, I might purchase and distribute to them. Behold now I am bringing them up with me. Let the king of kings my lord send a body-guard official and let him furnish provisions for the prisoners on the journey.

These records help bring to life the brief description of the treatment of Judeans by Nebuchadnezzar after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., for the Neo-Babylonians seem to have borrowed the practice of deportation from the Assyrians:

The king of Babylon slaughtered the sons of Zedekiah at Riblah before his eyes; also the king of Babylon slaughtered all the nobles of Judah. He put out the eyes of Zedekiah, and bound him in fetters to take him to Babylon. The Chaldeans burned the king’s house and the houses of the people, and broke down the guard exiled to those who had not obeyed the captain of the guard who owned not. (Jer. 39:6-10)

The Old Testament also tells of the deportation of the people of Judah to Babylon and the construction of the Tower of Babel. The king of Babylon, Nebuchadnezzar, is credited with the construction of the tower, and the people of Judah were among those forcibly relocated. The Tower of Babel is mentioned in the Book of Genesis, and its construction is believed to have been a sign of God's displeasure with the human race for its ambition to build a city with a tower reaching to heaven. Nebuchadnezzar's conquest of Babylon and the subsequent deportations represented a significant event in the history of the ancient Near East, marking a pivotal moment in the narrative of the Bible and shaping the course of world history.
quered people was ordinarily not for the emperors sought to add to the had been occasional forced movement, but it became a regular part as-pileser III on (745–727 B.C.E.). It thousands of people for many miles, the other, keeping them fed and as to be useful to the empire in their places leaving their city after defeat, their clubs or spears. The male captives who walked freely, and sometimes rode actually shown carrying sacks over one hand. An Assyrian scribe, with clay scroll and brush, are shown making to indicate the responsibility laid upon they bring to me from the city of Pishishu to meet. I was prospered. I for inspection on the spot. Kina sandapi the gardener, three peraza the officer, the sinew of his persons are lacking according to the city of Shabirishu to the city saying, “Go bring the rest of the positions had to be made available at regular also show how difficult that was at any course: I will certainly go up, see; and the prisoners, that are a lord, I shall bring up with me; and the king, my lord knows Grain and dates for money, from bute to them. Behold now I am lord send a body-guard for the prisoners on the journey.45 description of the treatment of Judeans by in 587 B.C.E., for the Neo-Babylonianation from the Assyrians: sons of Zedekiah at Rihlah before his all the nobles of Judah. He put in fetters to take him to Babylon. and the houses of the people, and broke down the walls of Jerusalem. Then Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard exiled to Babylon the rest of the people who were left in the city, those who had deserted to him, and the people who remained. Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard left in the land of Judah some of the poor people who owned nothing, and gave them vineyards and fields at the same time. (Jer. 39:6–10)

The Old Testament mentions several places where the exiles from the Northern Kingdom were settled: Halah, on the [river] Habur, the river of Gozan, and in the cities of the Medes (2 Kings 17:6; 18:11). The first three places can be located in northern Mesopotamia, along the upper Euphrates, and the cities of the Medes were probably Harhar and neighboring townships west of the Hamadan-Kirmanshah line (in what is now Iran). Several new cities were built by the Assyrian kings during the height of their power (eighth to seventh centuries), and sometimes exiled people were brought in to form part of the new population. After defeating Abdi-Milki of Sidon, Esarhaddon (680–669 B.C.E.) reported:

His people, from far and near (lit., widespread), which were countless, (with their) cattle, flocks and asses, I deported to Assyria. I gathered together the kings of the Hitite-land (i.e., Syria) and of the seacoast, all of them; I built a city in another place and called its name Kar-Assur-abiddina (Esarhaddonburg). Conquered people (lit., peoples, the conquest of my bow) from the mountains and sea of the east (rising sun) I settled therein. My official I set over them as governor.46

Old cities were rebuilt, as well, in the effort to enrich Assyria by bringing in booty and people. The annals of Tiglath-pileser III and of other kings contain records such as: “Nikur, together with the cities of its environs, I rebuilt. People of the lands my hands had conquered I settled therein.”47 Other exiles were settled in border areas, such as the “cities of the Medes” mentioned in 2 Kings 17:6. It is thought that because these displaced persons would realize their safety and well-being in these potentially troubled areas depended on the Assyrians, their loyalty could be expected.48 The soldiers of conquered armies were actually conscripted into the Assyrian army, on numerous occasions. The Old Testament alludes to it, in 2 Kings 24:16 (ASV): “And the king of Babylon brought captive to Babylon all the men of valor, seven thousand, and the craftsmen and the smiths, one thousand, all of them strong and fit for war.” Earlier, Sargon II had enlarged his army with conscripts from the Northern Kingdom:

I fought with them (the Samarians) and I counted as spoil 27,280 people who lived therein, with their chariots and the Gods of their trust. 200 chariots for my royal bodyguard I mustered from among them, and the rest of them I settled in the midst of Assyria.49

After conquering Hamath, “300 chariots, 600 cavalry, bearers of shield and lance, I selected from among them and added them to my royal host.”50 Sometimes the exiles would be put to forced labor in construction projects,51 but the deportations recorded during this period seem not ordinarily to have led to the
permanent enslavement of the captives. Most of them were settled in new areas and put to work at their old trades, it would seem. Skilled labor was especially desired. 2 Kings 24:16 mentions craftsmen and smiths, and Sennacherib specifically lists musicians as one of the prizes he took from Judah after his invasion of 701 B.C.E.³⁰ Most seem to have been settled as farmers, in order to add to the productivity of the land. Jeremiah's advice to the Babylonian exiles, to "build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce" (Jer. 29:5), is not unrealistic in the light of earlier Assyrian records that exiles were given plots of land, and were identified as farmers, gardeners, or shepherds.³¹ Ezekiel seems to have lived in a relatively self-contained Jewish community with its own elders, on the canal Chebar, near Nippur (Ezek. 1:1–3; 3:15; 14:1; 20:1). Records from Nippur, later in the Persian period, show that people with Jewish names owned or rented fields and canals, and held minor administrative positions.³² It would thus appear that once resettled, it was possible for most of the exiles to lead their own lives, with certain restrictions—they could not return home. The Assyrian kings regularly made the deportees, "With the people of Assyria I counted them. Dues and service, as of the Assyrians, I laid upon them."³³ By the time of Ezra, in the fifth century, there were communities of the descendants of the Judean exiles in Telmelah, Telharsha, Cherub, Addan, Immer (Ezra 2:59), Casiphia, and near the river Ahava (Ezra 8:17, 21, 31), and some of them, at least, seem to have been fairly well-to-do. Most of them did not return to Judea, when the Persians made it possible to do so, for they evidently had made good lives for themselves, and this was the land in which they had been born. By the Roman period, there is evidence for Jewish communities throughout the Tigris-Euphrates river valleys, and eastward into Persia.³⁴ This remarkable increase and dispersion of the Jewish population has yet to be explained, for there are no early records of these communities, but it is evident enough that those few thousands of displaced persons from earlier centuries had prospered, maintaining their ethnic and religious identity. It may be that some of those living in the heart of what had once been Assyria were the descendants of the exiles from the Northern Kingdom. That was thought to be the case by Jews in Palestine in the Roman period (Tobit 1:1–2; As. Mos. 3:5–14; 2 Esd. 13:39–50; Mishnah, Sanh. 10:3), but it cannot be demonstrated from the evidence presently available.

"When two elephants fight, it is the grass that gets hurt" (African proverb). Few of the exiles may have been enslaved, and many of them may eventually have been able to build houses and plant gardens, as Jeremiah advised, making reasonably comfortable lives for themselves, but they could not have predicted that during those terrible days after they lost the war. They had survived fighting, burning, rape, and brutal slaughter. Neighbors and loved ones were dead or lost. Those who left Jerusalem to go into exile in 597 and 587 had walked about seven hundred miles by the time they reached Babylon. The records of warfare, in the Old Testament and in the official documents of the ancient Near East, tell us nothing of how all this affected the people who were its victims, but other parts of the Old Testament do so. There was cynical bitterness: What have we done to deserve this? "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ezek. 18:2). There was hatred:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, and we wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there they that carried us away captive asked us with their eyes, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How can we sing the song of Zion, in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its cunning. Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember, O Lord, the destiny of your people; look on your holy temple that is desolate. O daughter of Babylon, happy shall the one who repays you for what you have done to me; happy shall the one who snatches your spoil and dashes your vessels to the ground. There was grief:

Edom hath devoured her pastures; Jacob is by his tents. The country of Judah is left desolate, forsaken, with no one to till the land. A city which was built as a city ofus was a ruin; the city which was full of people is now as a desert. The root of the righteous is in the land; the children's children will return to their own borders. And there was no hand to help them off completely" (Isaiah 1:17).
By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy. Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem’s fall, how they said, “Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations!” O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! (Psalm 137)

There was grief:

Judah has gone into exile with suffering and hard servitude; she lives now among the nations, and finds no resting place; her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. . . . Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger. (Lam. 1:3, 12)

And there was despair: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely” (Ezek. 37:11). Israel is dead, Ezekiel heard his fellow exiles saying, and that was in fact what the prophets beginning with Amos had said would
happen. The forceable loss of one’s homeland, in the midst of the terror and suffering inflicted by those enemy armies, must have been a profoundly shattering experience for all those displaced persons of the eighth to sixth centuries, but for Israel and Judah it struck at the very heart of their religion. They believed in a God who had promised them that land, and now they had lost it. Before beginning to consider what the prophets said about the death of Israel, it will be helpful to look at those divine promises, and to attempt to determine whether the thought of losing the promised land may ever have been taken seriously by Israelites before it actually happened.

1.6 Land and Covenant Outside the Prophetic Books

People need land—a place with the resources to enable life to continue, and ideally to live safely and comfortably. The land is the source of almost every resource we use, and so real property has been coveted and fought over for millennia of human existence. Animals also sense the same need, for they mark and defend their territories. From the family with its home, to the tribe with its territory, to the nation with its strictly regulated boundaries, the stability, security, and prosperity of groups of humans are normally inseparable from the possession of land. So Israel associated becoming a people (as against forever being strangers in another’s land—Egypt) with the promise of a land to be their own possession (e.g., Exod. 3:7–8; 6:8). When they were forced to consider the possibility that they might lose that land, the thought was at first inevitably the same as thinking of their death, as a people. In fact, however, the Jews who survived the loss of their land have become one of the most remarkable people on earth. They did cease to exist as a nation, but unlike others who have suffered the same fate, they did not lose their identity. They have continued to exist—and to thrive—as a congregation and as an ethnos, within the territories of other nations. That anticipates the end of the prophets’ story, however. The story must begin with the theology of the land in the Old Testament, for the death of Israel which the prophets find they must announce is directly associated with the loss of the land.

Most of the peoples of the ancient Near East, with the exception of the Israelites, seem to have taken for granted their association with their land, for it is only in the Old Testament, among the ancient literatures available to us, that possession of, conditions for living in, and the possibility of losing one’s homeland play a prominent role. The theology of the land in the Old Testament had not attracted much attention among scholars until fairly recently, but its importance is now widely recognized. It would be most helpful for the purposes of this study if we could determine with some certainty which of the various ideas concerning possession of the land were present in the minds of Israelites prior to the work of the canonical prophets, and which must be dated later, showing the influence of the experiences of exile and restoration. Unfortunately, many of the generally accepted bases for dating Old Testament material are now being challenged, so it seems best at this time to present various points of view without claiming certainty about their chronological relationship, unless the evidence is very explicit.

An Unconditional Covenant

Some Old Testament scholars have suggested that the covenant from Yahweh to Israel was unqualified, unqualified in the ways that the ancestors, are mentioned (e.g., Gen 12:1–3), and qualified by a burial plot in Canaan for Abraham and his descendants (e.g., Gen 46:2–4, 7, and Deuteronomy, 23:15). The promise not to be a vine promise not to be a shepherd (cf. Gen 4:30–31), for land (cf. Exod 6:4; 7:12–13), to speak of that covenant.

The references to Abraham do not suggest that the covenant itself was unqualified or unconditional, to be as certain as the covenants of later Judaism, has conditioned (cf., e.g., Exod. 19:5), but never to arrogate it. Certain aspects of the covenants, with the golden calf, the insecurity, solely by abounding in steadfastness, the book of Exodus contains statements of potential insecurity,

Warnings

A group of six warning verses is by God’s gift to Israel. It is clear from references to the conditional nature of the covenant, that the remnant of those who lived in Canaan expressed in a curse verse 27, the word is mōqesh, “soured.”

You shall not sow your land with mixed seeds;
New Testament: you are going to eat the result of mixed crops.

The Sinai covenant with God that might involve repentance.

Warnings
An Unconditional Covenant

Some Old Testament authors speak of Canaan as an eternal and irrevocable gift from Yahweh to Israel. This point of view appears primarily in the promise to the ancestors, beginning with Gen. 12:7, continuing throughout Genesis, reappearing occasionally in Exodus-Numbers, and prominently in Deuteronomy, but seldom occurring in the rest of the Old Testament.57 Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants, are remembered as moving about in a country not their own, living mostly at peace with the owners of the land, and dying without owning more than a burial plot in Canaan (Gen. 23). But Yahweh had taken an oath to give that land to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 13:15; 17:8), or more often, just to his descendants (e.g., Gen. 12:7; 15:18). Three times in Genesis, once each in Exodus and Deuteronomy, and eight times elsewhere possession of the land is said to be “forever” (‘ad-‘olam, le‘olam, once kol-hayyamim). Associated with this is the divine promise not to forget the covenant with the ancestors (Lev. 26:40–45; Deut. 4:30–31), for land and the covenant with Abraham are inseparable (Gen. 17:7–8; Exod. 6:4; 7:12–13; Judg. 2:1–2; Neh. 9:8). The Priestly source in Genesis also speaks of that covenant as an eternal one (Gen. 17:7, 13, 19; cf. Ps. 105:8–11).

The references to the land in the passages that speak of the covenant with Abraham do not suggest that possession of it can be jeopardized in any way. The covenant itself was unconditional, and the promise of the land thus would appear to be as certain as Yahweh is faithful.58 The Sinai covenant, as described in Exodus, has conditions attached to it (“if you obey my voice and keep my covenant,” Exod. 19:5), but nothing is said about any circumstance that would lead God to abrogate it.59 Certainly the possibility is broached in Exodus 32, as a result of the sin with the golden calf, but the covenant remained in effect in spite of Israel’s faithlessness, solely because Yahweh is “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Exod. 34:6; cf. Exod. 32:13). The book of Exodus contains no threat of loss of the land, but only two warnings of potential insecurity, if Israel adopts the ways of the Canaanites.

Warnings

A group of six closely related passages shows an awareness of a tension created by God’s gift to Israel of a land already occupied by other people. They combine references to the expulsion of those people with warnings not to associate with the remnant of those who continue to live in the land.60 The threat in these passages is expressed in a curiously cryptic way. The central term in all but one (Num. 33:55) is moqesh, “snare.”

You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. They shall not live in your land, or they will make you sin against me; for if you worship their gods, it will surely be a snare to you. (Exod. 23:32-33)

Take care not to make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land to which you are going, or it will become a snare among you. (Exod. 34:12)

The Sinai covenant thus forbade the making of any other covenant, which might involve recognizing other gods. The consequences of doing so are remark-
ably vague, in Exodus and the parallel passages (Deut. 7:16; Judg. 2:3; Josh. 23:13), as compared with what we shall see in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. The word translated “snare” may be either a trap, that is, the trouble itself that will result from going wrong, or the bait, the enticement to go wrong (as in Exod. 10:7; Judg. 8:27; 1 Sam. 18:21). In Josh. 23:12–13, however, the warning is expanded to make it clear that the “snare” is a punishment for wrongdoing:

For if you turn back, and join the survivors of these nations left here among you, and intermarry with them, so that you marry their women and they yours, know assuredly that the Lord your God will not continue to drive out these nations before you; but they shall be a snare (pah) and a trap (muqesh) for you, a scourge (shotei) on your sides, and thorns (tsinimin) in your eyes, until you perish (abad) from this good land that the Lord your God has given you.62

The Joshua text has added an element not found in the other warnings, which seems to suggest that involvement with the Canaanites and their religion may lead to very serious jeopardy. Joshua 23 adds “until you perish from this good land,” an expression that is the result of the combining of two traditions—the Sinai tradition of the book of Exodus (warning of the “snare”) and the plains of Moab tradition of Deuteronomy.63 For the book of Deuteronomy and a few other texts clearly dependent on it do confront the reader with the possibility of losing the land and of dying in it or somewhere in exile. These are the only texts outside the prophetic books that consider this unacceptable idea, but in contrast with the prophets, the Deuteronomic material contains some remarkable ambiguities that need to be taken seriously. These passages have for a long time been assigned to the period after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E., but here it will be suggested that some of them may have originated after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C.E.

The Reaction to 722 B.C.E. in Deuteronomy and Related Texts

The framework to Deuteronomy (chs. 4—11 and 28—30) makes the covenant relationship conditional to an extent not found anywhere in Exodus. Threats of destruction and/or exile appear with remarkable frequency, but there is a strange ambiguity about those that are the most developed. For example:

When you have had children and children’s children, and become complacent in the land, if you act corruptly by making an idol in the form of anything, thus doing what is evil in the sight of the Lord your God, and provoking him to anger, I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that you will soon utterly perish (abad) from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to occupy; you will not live long on it, but will be utterly destroyed (shomad). (Deut. 4:25–26)

That would seem to be the end of it, but it is not. There will be survivors, who will be exiled:

The Lord will not leave among you the other gods which you have made, seeing, nor hear, or see, nor they hear, until he has destroyed them from your midst. (Deut. 7:2)

From there you will seek them out and ask after them, asking how these things happened to you. (Deut. 16:21)

And his covenant with them will be a covenant which he will make with them. (Deut. 28:64)

For some reason, after such a long passage of some going into exile, the Lord will not speak explicitly against your enemies until after 29:18–28, threatening once again the form of warnings that seeks to assure:

If you do forget the Lord your God and worship them... (abad). Like the nations, you perish, be destroyed (Deut. 8:19–20).

The curses in Deuteronomy are complete destruction and destruction:

The Lord will make you diseases, and none will know how they are ailing or how they come by it, until he has destroyed you. (Deut. 28:59)

Because you will use his name in vain and provoke the Lord your God to anger, enemies will come against you from round about, and your king and your acquaintance shall find no person to be of service to you. (Deut. 28:14–15)

The Lord will bring you to the land of your enemies, and there he will afflict you and perplex you. (Deut. 28:61)

He will bring you into a land of nations other than yours, and there you shall be divided into small groups among the nations you have not known. (Deut. 28:63)

They will heap mistreatment upon you, persecuting you. (Deut. 28:65)

They shall be in distress and in anguish because of the sword. (Deut. 28:66)
The Lord will scatter you among the peoples; only a few of you will be left among the nations where the Lord will lead you. There you will serve other gods made by human hands, objects of wood and stone that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell. (Deut. 4:27–28)

What had been their sin—idolatry—will next be part of their punishment, it would seem. But Deuteronomy understands this to be a corrective punishment:

From there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find him if you search after him with all your heart and soul. In your distress, when all these things have happened to you in time to come, you will return to the Lord your God and heed him. Because the Lord your God is a merciful God, he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them. (Deut. 4:29–31)

For some reason, the author wants to speak both of being “utterly destroyed” and of some going into exile. Unlike the prophets, this author’s promise of return to the land. A similar prediction appears in Deut. 29:18–28, threatening exile but without any reference to promise. Other texts take the form of warnings, which would seem to make the best sense in a reforming document that seeks to avoid this terrible fate (thus perhaps to be dated earlier than 587):

If you do forget the Lord your God, and follow other gods to serve and worship them, I solemnly warn you today that you shall surely perish (‘abid). Like the nations that the Lord is destroying before you, so shall you perish, because you would not obey the voice of the Lord your God. (Deut. 8:19–20; cf. 6:15; 7:4; 11:17; 30:18)

The curses in Deuteronomy 28 are like 4:25–31 in that they threaten both complete destruction and exile, but they elaborate on what exile will be like:

The Lord will bring you, and the king whom you set over you, to a nation that neither you nor your ancestors have known, where you shall serve other gods, of wood and stone. You shall become an object of horror, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples where the Lord will lead you. (Deut. 28:36–37)

Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and with gladness of heart for the abundance of everything, therefore shall you serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness and lack of everything. He will put an iron yoke on your neck until he has destroyed (‘ishnād) you. (Deut. 28:47–48)

The Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; and there shall serve other gods, of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known. And among these nations you shall find no case, and there shall be no rest for the sole of your foot; but the Lord will give you there a trembling heart, and failing eyes, and a languishing soul; your life shall hang in doubt before you; night and day you shall be in dread, and have no assurance of your life. In the morning you...
shall say, "Would it were evening!" and at evening you shall say, "Would it were morning!" because of the dread which your heart shall fear, and the sights which your eyes shall see. And the Lord will bring you back in ships to Egypt, a journey which I promised that you should never make again; and there you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no man will buy you. (Deut. 28:64–68)

Some of these details leave the impression that the author is imagining what exile will be like, without any firsthand knowledge. All these passages have been dated in the Babylonian exile, but they show little awareness of the actual experiences of those exiles, as we learn of them from the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and show little evidence of being influenced by the language and theology of the prophets. Deuteronomy's favorite verbs, 'abad "perish," and shanad, "destroy," are seldom used in the prophetic books to refer to the fate of Israel, and the author never uses the root galah of exile, as the Deuteronomic Historian does, fifteen times in 2 Kings. 63 The book shows no awareness of the prophets' promises of eventual restoration to the promised land, except for ch. 30, which contains an outlook on the future like that in the prophetic books and significantly different from the rest of Deuteronomy.

There is strong evidence for locating the formation of the original book of Deuteronomy in the Northern Kingdom, late in the eighth century B.C.E. 64 Although the texts just discussed have regularly been dated in the Babylonian exile, it may well be that, with the exception of ch. 30, these rather ambiguous threats of complete destruction, mixed with descriptions of exile, are the result of the exile of northern Israelites in the eighth century. Deuteronomy contains a program for reform, combining dire threats for faithlessness to Yahweh with a course of behavior which if followed will lead to abundant blessings for Israel. If its earliest form was produced in the Northern Kingdom, then it was apparently taken to Judah and reworked there (perhaps less than is usually proposed) as a message intended to save Judeans from the fate of their neighbors.

A few echoes of the language of Deuteronomy appear in Joshua–Kings. In Josh. 23:13–16, both 'abad and shanad are used. Joshua 24:20 contains the same idea, but uses the root kalah (piel) "consume." Elsewhere in the Deuteronomistic Historical Work, the root 'abad is used once in this way, to speak of the destruction of Judah (2 Kings 24:2). The Historian has also inserted at appropriate places three predictions of exile, using vocabulary different from that found in Deuteronomy: 1 Kings 9:6–7; 14:15–16; and 2 Kings 21:14. The content of these texts rather clearly indicates that they are to be dated in the exilic period.

One more text outside the prophetic books speaks of the destruction and exiling of Israel, with significant parallels to Deuteronomy 4 and 28, but with its own unique interest in the land. Leviticus 26 contains a series of blessings and curses reminiscent of Deuteronomy 28, and concluding with the threat of exile, as the former text does. If Israel insists on continuing in rebellion against Yahweh, the land will be devastated (Lev. 26:32–33) and the people scattered among the nations (cf. Deut. 4:27, although the vocabulary is different). Whereas Deut. 4:26 has the people utterly perish ('abad) from off the land, Lev. 26:38 uses the same verb for what will happen to the exiles of Leviticus does:

Like Deut. 4:29–31, the part of future exiles must not forget the covenant made with them. Deuteronomy elaborates the same idea that occurs now and will remember also at the end of the land, and I will remember for them. (Deut. 26:44–45)

Yet for all that they were set among the heathen, and provoked me to anger with their images, wherewith they provoked me to anger: I was angry with them, and left them in their afflictions; and the heathen deposed them from their heritor, and put the strangers in their sanctuaries. For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and it shall burn it self unto judgment; mine anger shall be kindled against them, and I will visit their sins in the plagues of Egypt. (Deut. 4:31–33)

The land has been under foreign domination since the destruction of Jerusalem. Everyone knew the history of the exiles, so perhaps that is not made clear, even except for the unique passage from the exilic period. Yet the message of hope for the people of Israel is not lost, but like Deuteronomy it insists on the destruction and the destruction of the nation. It may be that Deuteronomy is a promise of salvation of Israel that attempts to save Jerusalem as best it can. This is the end of the Northern Kingdom. Although the end of the Northern Kingdom, although the end of the Northern Kingdom,
The author is imagining what he will happen to the exiles among the nations. But, as in Deuteronomy 4, the author of Leviticus does not really mean total annihilation by this verb, since the wretched fate of those who survive is described in v. 39. There is a greatly increased interest in the land itself in Leviticus. The law of the sabbatical year had been elaborated in Lev. 25:1–6, and now exile (thought to be the complete depopulating of the country, contrary to what actually happened) is explained as God’s way of giving the land its right to rest every seven years (26:34–35, 43). This is an idea that occurs nowhere else in scripture.

Like Deut. 4:29–30, Lev. 26:40–41 introduces the possibility of repentance on the part of future exiles, leading to God’s mercy, based on the covenant with Abraham. Deuteronomy says, “he will neither abandon you nor destroy you; he will not forget the covenant with your ancestors that he swore to them” (4:31). Leviticus elaborates the same promise: “Then will I remember my covenant with Jacob; I will remember also my covenant with Isaac and also my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land” (26:42). Note the emphasis on the land, again. The passage ends with the promise reaffirmed:

Yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not spurn them, or abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the LORD their God; but I will remember in their favor the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be their God: I am the LORD. (Lev. 26:44–45)

The land has been emphasized here more than in any other text of this type, and everyone knew the covenant with Abraham included the promise of the land to his descendants, so perhaps restoration from exile is implicit here, but it is striking that it is not made explicit, either here or in any of the texts in Deuteronomy, except for the unique passage, ch. 30. Leviticus 26 in its present form may well come from the exilic period, as is usually claimed, with these final verses intended as a message of hope for exiles, based on the promises of the covenant with Abraham, but like Deuteronomy it shows little evidence of being influenced by the restoration promises of the prophets, and seems to belong to a different line of tradition. It may be that Deuteronomy and Leviticus 26 represent a trajectory of thought in Israel that attempted to hold to the belief in the unconditional covenant with Abraham as best it could, while at the same time being influenced by the shock of the end of the Northern Kingdom, which had led to the exiling of parts of its population. Although they use the strong verbs of destruction, ‘abhad and sh'amad, they find various ways to mitigate those threats, and never speak in the radical way that Amos and his successors do, announcing the impending death of Israel.