

Chapter 12
"Is there Any Word from the Lord?"
The Era of the Prophets

For five and more centuries prophets were a part of the Israelite religious scene, and the contribution they made to the faith of Israel is matched nowhere else in the history of world religions.

How the movement began we do not know; its origins simply cannot be reconstructed on the basis of our present knowledge of Israel and the Mideast. Prophecy was a local phenomenon centering in Canaan and western Asia Minor, and it consisted of bands of ecstasies gathered around the shrines of local deities: the greater the frenzy the prophets could raise among their devotees, the more it was believed they were influenced by the spirit of their god. Israel had bands of prophets like these but somehow their great prophets took on a different vocation. They became public persons: their basic interest was not the private faith of individuals but the public faith of nations, and they directed their attention to public policy, attempting to influence it through their proclamations. In doing so, they spoke in behalf of the sacred traditions of Yahweh and called the people to be faithful to God who had been faithful to them on the mountain of Sinai and in the conquest of the land.

Later generations considered Moses the prototype prophet and he unquestionably set the patterns subsequent prophets followed; his covenant with God called Israel to be loyal to the loyal God, and his successful confrontations with Pharaoh gave others courage to stand up to the rulers of their day. Samuel the seer also has to be counted among the prophets of Israel. A participant in a prophetic community gathered around the shrine of Shiloh, and sharing their ecstatic nature, he transcended this limited heritage by his interventions into public affairs. Elijah provided an additional link: in the spirit of Moses, Elijah faced down King Ahab and called Israel to be faithful to Moses' God. Yet not even the presence of Elijah was able to reform the cults of ecstasies around the shrines of Israel; the bizarre actions of Elisha and his band continued to be the prevalent mode of prophesy in Israel.

Amos changed that. Neither a prophet nor a son of a prophet, Amos, a small-stock breeder from Tekoa in Judah who called himself a shepherd and lived on a diet of sycamore fruit, the food of the poor, appeared at the shrine of Bethel during an Israelite festival to proclaim the curse of God upon king and people. His appearance signaled the transformation of prophecy in Israel.

A crisis activated by the rising power of Assyria summoned Amos to his prophetic task. During the reign of Jeroboam II, northern Israel was in a period of unusual prosperity and it appeared to those who profited from it that the prosperity might last forever. It was even viewed by

religious people as a sign of God's favor to God's people. But Israel had failed to note that oppression had gone hand in hand with prosperity: the wealth of the rich was gained at the expense of the poor. Amos, the poor farmer, understood what was happening and realized that God might be using Assyria as a means of punishing the people of Israel for their injustices. So during one of the high feast days of Israel, Amos left his home in Tekoa, a few miles south of Jerusalem, and journeyed to Bethel, the ancient shrine located just a few miles north of the border between Judah and Israel, and there he delivered the message that God had laid upon him. He reminded the people that in the exodus Yahweh had chosen them to be his own, but Yahweh's choosing involved them in special responsibilities rather than special privileges. Fundamental to that responsibility was Yahweh's call to them to organize their national life around the justice of God put into effect of the day when the covenant was made in Sinai. Said Amos in his most famous utterance: "Let justice roll down as the waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream." Amos's attempt failed, of course; Israel did not change her ways. But Amos' prediction came true: Assyria did smite the tiny country and took her lands and kingdoms from her. Amos was able to articulate the basic prophetic message: God is acting in human affairs; what is the nation doing to shape its life to make an adequate response to his action?

The prophecy of the next prophet, Hosea, was also occasioned by the threat to Israel caused by the rise of Assyria. Whereas Amos proclaimed his message at the height of Jeroboam's prosperity, Hosea began his preaching at its end and continued his ministry in the unsettling years that followed the king's death. When Jeroboam died, political instability rocked the northern kingdom. His successor Zechariah was assassinated after only six months on the throne, and the assassin ruled only one month. Menahem who succeeded them ruled for ten bitter years, and Pekahiah for two. Pekah managed to last twenty years but that was the end for Israel. Hoshea, who murdered Pekah, died in Assyria in chains. Hosea was the prophet whose task it was to interpret to the people the meaning of these terrible events in the light of God's continuing rule over them.

He did so by means of what may have been a personal experience. He had married a wife, Gomer, who was constantly unfaithful to him. Hosea would have put her away in divorce but he still loved her and so continued to seek reconciliation with her. From his shattered marriage and the suffering arising from it, he had an insight into God's complex relationship with Israel, and he made an equation in his mind. As Hosea loved Gomer, so Yahweh loved Israel; and though Israel had gone whoring after other gods, Yahweh still worked for reconciliation with her. To understand what was happening in the present and the future, Hosea's mind reflected over Israel's past. He recalled that it was in the wilderness that God had first shown deep love for Israel and worked out a relationship with her. Now it appeared that Israel would be a wilderness again; Assyria was about to destroy her and turn her cultivated lands into a wilderness of destruction. Would that be all bad? In Hosea's eyes, it would not, for he made a second equation: in the first wilderness experience God had worked out his relationship of love with God's people, and now in the second wilderness experience God would work out God's relationship of forgiveness with them. Said the prophet:

Therefore, behold, I will allure her
and bring her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.
And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

Through her sin every aspect of Israel's life--political, economic, social, religious--had been tainted with false allegiances, misdirected wills, vicious behavior. But God, in punishing her, would work out new structures of responsibility to Godself, as God took Israel again into the wilderness and led her out to a new way of living with him.

The third prophet was Isaiah whose prophesying took place in the southern kingdom of Judah. In the years between Hosea and Isaiah the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyria, as Amos and Hosea had said it would be, and Judah was in jeopardy: would Assyria go aside into the mountains and do to Jerusalem what she had already done to Samaria? Ahaz, king of Judah, had to struggle with this question and to design policy to meet it. His overwhelming temptation was to do the prudent thing: join in alliances with other nations in the hope that the alliance would be able to stave off the onslaughts of the invader and assure the safety of his tiny kingdom. At this point Isaiah injected his prophecies into Judah's policy discussions.

Isaiah was a resident of the court, and he had access to the king's ear. Whereas Amos spoke from the tradition of the exodus, and Hosea found Israel's experience with God in the wilderness to be the primary interpretative event for his message. Isaiah discovered his key in the relationship between Yahweh and David. Jerusalem was the site of Yahweh's Temple and the seat of David's throne, and Yahweh had a special relationship with both.

Isaiah's prophetic message began in the Temple. There he had a vision of Yahweh as the true king of Judah. Judah's greatest king, Uzziah, had just died; and though he had been a faithful king, he had been punished by leprosy, and the whole land seemed unclean because of his disease. But Isaiah, in the Temple, had a cleansing vision of God. Yahweh had cleansed Judah of every past uncleanliness, and now, as the holy one, God was to lay renewed claim upon God's holy people. "I saw the Lord," said Isaiah, "high and lifted up, and his train filled the whole temple. And I cried out, 'Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.'" But the Lord cleansed his lips and sent him out to proclaim cleansing to the people.

It had to start with cleansing the nation from its alliances with other nations. To this end Isaiah sought an audience with Ahaz. Ahaz was new to the throne, and the task before him seemed to him to be beyond his capabilities. To win favor with God, he, regressing to the worst pagan practices, had sacrificed his own son in the Valley of Hinnom (the later Gehenna) in an attempt to stave off the Assyrian might. Now the king was out inspecting his battlements. Isaiah found him looking over the reservoir to see if the water supply of Jerusalem was sufficient to withstand a siege. Isaiah's counsel was abrupt, "Break off your relationships with other nations:

they will only pull you into battle and destroy you. Abandon human alliance and put your reliance upon Yahweh." The advice fell on deaf ears. Ahaz, confronted with his responsibilities as king, could not accept this political isolation, so he proceeded with his policy. Isaiah came back to him, this time not with a word but with a sign: "A prince is about to be born of your line," said the prophet, "of the lineage of David. And the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." In other words, God was not about to terminate the kingdom of Judah but was about to raise up a son of the Davidic line to ensure wisdom and power and justice and peace to God's people: they needed to trust in God not in alliances. Again Ahaz did not listen to him, and Isaiah withdrew from public affairs for a while. He lived among his prophetic disciples and tried to establish a "covenant remnant" in which the agreement with God could be truly kept.

Events turned out as Isaiah had said they would. The alliance Ahaz had so foolishly entered was broken, and Assyria did destroy the nations that were part of it; even some of Judah's lands were despoiled as Assyria wracked her punishment upon the offending kingdoms. Ahaz died shortly thereafter, and he was succeeded by Hezekiah, of whom it was said, there had been none like him since David himself. But the problem of Assyria had not departed, nor the problem of the interlacing alliances rising against her. Hezekiah began to align Judah with Egypt against Assyria and when the new Assyrian king Sennacherib moved through Judah toward Egypt, he captured forty-six of Hezekiah's fortified cities and placed the capital city under siege. Why it survived the siege we are not certain; but we are certain of Isaiah's response to the siege. He had by this time predicted that Judah and Jerusalem would not fall; Jerusalem was still the site of God's Temple and the seat of David's government, and Yahweh would come to protect Mount Zion. It happened precisely as Isaiah said it would happen. The city was spared and the kingdom lived.

Like the prophets before him, Isaiah demanded that Judah work out structures of governance that would permit God to govern them, through their legitimate king if possible and without their king if necessary. In the midst of the complex international situation in which he lived, which to the popular mind seemed beyond even the control of God, Isaiah declared that God was yet king, and would continue to rule through the line of David; God would not let God's people go but God would cleanse them so that a new and purified people would emerge.

Jeremiah prophesied in Jerusalem as Isaiah had done, though a century separated the ministries of the two men. Much had happened in those intervening years. Assyria had fallen and was replaced by Babylon. Judah had had a frantic life, as one king after another tried to shape policy to meet the danger from the east. Jeremiah's solution to the dilemma was simple but it was bitter: matters in Judah had come to such a turn that punishment was God's will for the nation. There was nothing to do to avoid it; therefore, do nothing.

With such a message to deliver, it is no wonder that Jeremiah was reluctant to preach it. A hundred years earlier when God had called Isaiah while he was worshipping in the Temple, he had replied: "Here am I, send me." Jeremiah gave no such ready response; in answer to God's call he protested, "Ah, Lord God! Behold, I do not know how to speak, for I am only a youth." His internal struggle with his unwelcome message evoked inward thrashings and doubts unparalleled in the Old Testament. His was a bitter proclamation, and the persons who heard him treated him with bitterness. The king refused to hear him and destroyed the scroll on which the message was written. Jeremiah was imprisoned. His own kinsmen disowned him. He was condemned as a traitor. He watched his beloved nation destroyed and its people taken to Babylon: he himself spent his last days as an exile in Egypt. But his message was not unrelieved doom. He expected that from the days of bitterness a new Israel would emerge:

"Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after these days, says the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts: and I will be their God and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of these to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." (Jeremiah 31:31-34.)

This magnificent prophecy brought together themes that had lain side by side in Israelite prophecy until Jeremiah united them in his own work. He stated accurately the old covenant. "I am your God, and you are my people," and he held Israel responsible for breaking this covenant. Above all, he promised a new covenant written not on stone but on the heart. The promise was made to both Israel and Judah, and this was an audacious note on Jeremiah's part since Israel had been destroyed 130 years before and Judah was facing the same fate. The exodus from Egypt under Moses helped to shape Jeremiah's thought about contemporary events, as did Hosea's claim that God was "husband to Israel". Jeremiah rejected Josiah's reform as too external to be successful; it was merely one more covenant "written on stone" and left the heart of the nation unchanged and unaffected. Above all, Jeremiah proclaimed God's forgiveness to God's people and anticipated the coming of a new community built upon this new covenant. Jeremiah brought together in his own life and ministry the best that Israel had thought about God.

The great prophet known to us only as Isaiah of Babylon picked up and amplified these themes. His prophecies were directed to the Jewish people living in exile in Babylon. When the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. they took the leading citizens of the city in captivity to Babylon, and there their condition seemed hopeless. Separated from their land; their Temple, homes and livelihood destroyed; even their God defeated, they had no hope upon which to rebuild their lives. Then, beginning near the year 539 B.C. the anonymous prophet of the exile, whose writings have come to us only because they were later attached to

the scrolls that contained the prophecies of Isaiah of Jerusalem, rose up to provide hope for his people.

He did so in response to an event that occurred in 540 B.C. In that year, Persia, under King Cyrus, replaced Babylon as ruler of the world, and hope surged anew through the oppressed peoples of the decaying Babylonian empire. Cyrus, instead of crushing national sentiment by brutality and deportation as the Assyrians and Babylonians had done, made it his policy to permit subject peoples, as far as possible, to enjoy cultural anatomy within the framework of empire; he preferred to respect the customs of his subjects, to protect and foster their religions, and, where possible, to entrust responsibilities for governing to native princes. Thus, in the first year of his reign in Babylon, in 538, Cyrus issued a decree ordering the restoration of the Jewish community back into Judah; copies of this decree are still extant. The second Isaiah's prophecies can be dated between these two times; he seemed to know of the rise of Cyrus as emperor, but he had not yet witnessed the beginning of the return of the people of Judah to their homeland.

His prophecies are distinctive from those of Isaiah of Jerusalem in important particulars. There are considerable stylistic differences between the two writers. Isaiah of Babylon is the finest stylist in the Old Testament. His use of parallelism, imagery, rhythm and meter mark him as its finest poet. There is a different historical context also. Isaiah of Jerusalem directed his message to the king of Judah whose land was under attack by Babylonians; Isaiah of Babylon was speaking to people who no longer had a king, who lived in exile, and who were waiting to be restored to their homeland. Furthermore, there is a unity to the latter Isaiah's prophecies that is lacking in most other prophetic utterances. The published work of the earlier prophets seem to be anthologies of their messages; a prophecy delivered at one time would be linked to another delivered years later. The writings of Isaiah of Babylon, however, have unity and continuity; his prophecy has a beginning, a development, and a conclusion; he weaves themes so inextricably together that anything excised from his work causes a noticeable loss. He wrote for a particular time, a particular place, a particular situation, and from a discernible theological point of view.

Isaiah began by emphasizing that God was the Creator. This statement is so commonplace in contemporary theology that it is hard to realize how novel the proclamation was when Isaiah made it. The J document now found in the second chapter of Genesis, had begun with a gentle and humane story of creation, but hardly any other writing or writer in Israel had stressed that aspect of God's work.

Isaiah did: "Have you not heard, have you not known? The Lord is the Everlasting God, Creator of the ends of the earth." What an amazing article of faith for his own desperate situation. This chief spokesman for a tiny group of exiles in an alien empire was proclaiming that it was their God who created the ends of the earth, that is, he owned it, the whole earth. Creation as Isaiah meant it was no speculative belief of scientific doctrine; it was a theological and ethical statement. To be the creator was to be the owner, and for Isaiah to assert that the God of Israel

was creator of the ends of the earth was to insist that he owned it, the lands, seas, skies, the nations, all people.

Israel's creator was also her redeemer, and Isaiah talked about Judah's redemption by means of a new exodus. The prophet, meditating upon what had happened in the time of Moses, remembered that God had redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and he extrapolated this act into Judah's imminent return to her homeland. God who had redeemed his people from Israel would do the same for the Judahites exiled in Babylon. The equation he worked out in his mind can be sketched this way:

Israel's condition	=	Slavery in Egypt	=	Exile in Babylon
God's action		God leads exodus		God restores Jews to Judah

Said Isaiah: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up and every mountain made low; the uneven ground will be made level and the rough places a plain." The imagery was drawn from the construction of a road. God was building a royal road from Babylon to Judah, said Isaiah, just as the kings of Assyria and Babylon had done beforehand in moving their armies to the west, and along this road God would lead God's people in triumphal return to their homeland, where they would be restored to their covenant relationship with God.

Isaiah's next thought derived from the former two. God, creator and redeemer, was concerned not only with Judah but with all nations and peoples. God would be a light to the Gentiles: Isaiah of Babylon spoke of no parochial event occurring to a parochial people but a redemption and return through which all peoples would witness the glory of God. Said the prophet: "All flesh shall see it together."

This led to his further thought: if God is to redeem everyone, God must be the one and only God. Israel had struggled with this question of the place of her God in the heavenly scheme of things. Firmly convinced that their God was the one God, the God above all gods, they were willing to recognize that other nations had gods who were different than Yahweh. Even the first commandment admitted to more than one God: "I am the Lord your God: . . . You shall have no other gods before me." Up to this point in their history, when they called him the One God, they were describing the integrity of God's action rather than excluding from consideration the gods of other nations; Israel's God was unique, not because he was the one and only God but because God was the only God who could consistently do what God said God would do. With Isaiah of Babylon, this changed. The one God "who could do what God would do" became "the only God." The others were imposters. Made by pagan hands of clay, stone, wood, and metal, they never became more than the mere properties that went into their making. "They are nothing," said Isaiah of Babylon. "There is one God only. God revealed God-self through Moses and speaks righteousness to God's people. God rules both Jews and Gentile, and God brings God's redeeming purpose to God's whole creation.

In describing the manner by which God performed God's redemption, Isaiah made God's most fundamental contribution to Jewish and Christian faith. Isaiah said that God redeems through God's servant. "Behold, my servant whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him," says the Lord. "He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." This first introduction to the servant comes in chapter 42; at the climax of his writing, in chapter 53, this more complete description of the Servant of God is offered: "Who had believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hid their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed."

Scholars have given at least seven possibilities as to the identity of the servant. Some say the nation of Judah was the sufferer in question. Others say it was an individual whom Isaiah knew but whom we can no longer identify; or a former prophet whose personal trauma fits the description; or Jeremiah who suffered appallingly for his people; or perhaps Isaiah was describing himself as the one despised and rejected. Others insist that this was a description of Moses, the great prophet, or the exiles in Babylon who through their own suffering had been purified and who were about to return to Jerusalem to bring God's redemption to all the land. Each theory has its own defenders, but we need not choose between them. The prophet's insight was sound: only through someone's suffering would God move to redeem God's people.

Following Isaiah of Babylon, other prophets were to rise in Judah: Ezekiel, priest of the exile; Zephaniah and Haggai of the homeland; Nahum, Habakkuk, and more. We cannot complete a survey of the prophets, however, until we consider the two prophets of the New Testament, John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth.

Prophecy had been gone from Israel for centuries when John the Baptist came. He was an enigmatic figure whom we see only through Christian eyes, and those eyes were not always friendly to him. Christians tended to see him primarily as the forerunner of Christ, but in his own day he was the central figure of a movement that had close relationships with that of Jesus but at the same time was in competition with it.

John modeled his ministry after that of Elijah. A man of the desert, he wore the clothes of the desert, a camel skin coat and a leather girdle around his waist; and he ate the food of the desert, the pods of the carob tree and wild honey. Like Elijah, he appeared and disappeared mysteriously; not even his disciples knew where he would surface next. Also, like Elijah, he

confronted the ruling authorities with his message. He accused King Herod, his antagonist, of divorcing his wife to marry the woman Herodias. John was not only upholding the sanctity of marriage with his proclamation; he was also protecting the safety of Judah. Herod's first wife had been the daughter of King Aretas of Nabatea, a powerful, though ephemeral, kingdom lying to the south of Judah in the Arabian desert; and when Herod's deposed wife, the king's daughter, went home in disgrace to tell her father what had happened, the king marched his army toward Judea and despoiled large parts of its territory. Herod's action had brought danger to the realm, and John was playing the part of a prophet in his protest against it. Like Elijah, he was single-minded in his loyalty to God, and he called his compatriots to repentance over their confused loyalties. John was so much like Elijah, in fact, that people began to question whether he might be the heavenly figure spoken of in Malachi, the "Elijah who was to come" immediately prior to the Messiah's appearing.

John's ministry was also modeled after that of Isaiah of Babylon. John's self-description was simple --"I am a voice crying": his location carefully selected--"in the wilderness": his task clear - "sent to prepare the way of the Lord." This was to fulfill the prophecy of Second Isaiah of Babylon, "I send my messenger before your face, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way of the Lord'."

Moreover, his ethic was straight-forward, modeled from the best traditions of the Old Testament prophets. To the tax collectors he said, "Collect no more than is appointed you": in other words, do not cheat the people. To the soldiers who were keeping the peace in Judea, he said, "Rob no one by violence, do not accuse them falsely, be content with your wages." To the multitude, he said, "If you have two cloaks, give to someone who had none; if you have food, give to those who do not." Even Amos could not have put the matter more exquisitely.

Another strand of his prophecy came from the apocalyptic movement. The word "apocalypse" derived from a Greek word which meant "to uncover, to reveal." Apocalyptic messages dealt with God's revealing himself at the end of history in a cataclysmic battle with the forces of evil and are found in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, and Daniel. This latter book portrays the battle between the Seleucid Empire and the Maccabean resisters not as a battle between human forces only, but as a cosmic struggle in which the power of God was called upon to defeat the forces of evil. In the period between the end of the Old Testament writings and the beginning of the New, a number of apocalyptic works were produced, and John the Baptist drew upon these ideas in expressing his own faith.

He seemed to picture the end of history as not far away. In the cataclysm that was about to occur, God would pour a river of fire upon the earth. The fire would burn and purify nations and peoples. From its refining processes, a purified humanity totally loyal to God would emerge. As a sign of one's willingness to accept such purification from God, John developed his act of baptism. In this act, he called upon people to baptize themselves in the river Jordan. This river, fast flowing in the spring when the floods of water from winter snows poured off Mount Hermon, was an earthly symbol of God's river of fire to come. The repentant were to cast themselves into its fierce

waters; those who emerge from the water would do so because they had been accepted by God. This was John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins": from it was to emerge a cleansed people directly accountable to God. In John's mind, this baptism fulfilled Amos's prophecy that the Day of the Lord was at hand, and that of Joel and Jeremiah that God's spirit would be poured upon all flesh. John's prophetic activity caused a stirring of hopes in Judea. Not for long centuries had such a prophet appeared in Israel.

Yet the prophetic work of John was only the prelude to the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, of Galilee, in whose ministry every prophetic theme we have considered came to focus and fulfillment.

Like Moses, Jesus spoke of God's covenant with God's people: God is your God and your God's people. In this new day, however, participation in the people of God came not by sharing in the Passover, the feast in celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, but by participation in the Lord's Supper, the feast in celebration of Christ's death and resurrection. As Moses joined God and people together in covenant by casting upon them the blood of a sacrificial bull, so Jesus joined God and people together in covenant by means of the sacrifice of his body and blood, his total life. As a people of God emerged from the exodus experience, so this new people of God was constituted by response to Christ's resurrection.

Jesus also carried on the work which Samuel had begun when he converted Israel from a scattering of tribes loosely bound in confederation to a kingdom whose ruler was God; Jesus came announcing the kingdom of God to a dispirited nation. His was the basic proclamation of Israel: God is king, and no one else or nothing else can claim the sovereign place in life that is demanded by God alone.

Like Elijah, he called Israel to renew its loyalty to God. "No man can serve two masters; you cannot serve God and mammon. Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness."

Like Amos, he issued a call for justice; the stringency of his call is seen in the words, "Your righteousness must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees." Righteousness as Jesus defined it insisted upon just dealings among peoples; yet his call transcends the narrow definitions given to justice, for the word means also "being on right terms with" Jesus called his followers to be on right terms with God, neighbor, self, with the world of nature and people around. Through such a call, he brought a new dimension to Elijah's call for loyalty to God and to Amos' plea to "let justice flow down as the waters and righteousness as a mighty stream."

Like Hosea, he went through the wilderness and came out prepared for his new task; and like him, he knew first-hand the

forgiving love of God which forgives us as we forgive one another.

Like Isaiah of Jerusalem, he stressed the holiness of God--"hallowed be thy name" he said in his most profound prayer--and he began to gather around him a remnant of the people to carry on his work. Isaiah withdrew from public affairs for awhile to prepare disciples who would be the purified remnant and who would deliver his message when he was gone. Jesus too, gathered disciples; they were his "holy people," that is, people sanctified by God for a particular task, whom he took with him into his public life as he worked out his ministry. He prepared them to carry on his ministry, and his "remnant" has grown into a church that not even Isaiah could have dreamed of.

Like Jeremiah, Jesus announced the coming of the new covenant. The terms of the covenant were still the same: God is our God, and we are God's people. But the obligations of the old covenant were no longer satisfactory. It was written on stone, and practice of it was too mechanical. So Jesus changed the obligations; You are my people of the new covenant as you love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength, and mind, and as you love your neighbor as yourself; you are my people of the new covenant if you are my people of the new covenant if you love one another as I have loved you.

Like Isaiah of Babylon, Jesus understood that God's redemption would work itself out through one who was God's servant who suffers: despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, who bears sin for all and by whose stripes we are healed. So he accepted the cross that God put before him and became the suffering servant through whom God redeemed all humankind.

Like John the Baptist, he knew that the Day of the Lord was at hand when God would pour out God's spirit upon all people. In his death and resurrection, that holy spirit was let loose upon the world and is available to continue his life and ministry, as his purified people extend to the ends of the earth.

Jesus was not merely a prophet. But he was at least a prophet; though even as we use that category of human experience to describe him, we recognize that he explodes the very category itself, for no human terminology can even begin to capture the fullness of his person. So in Jesus the prophetic movement which began with Moses came to climax and conclusion: for once Jesus the Christ is here, prophets are no longer necessary to proclaim God's word!