

CHAPTER 23

The Eighth Century

BEFORE the eighth century dawned, then, prophecy in Judah and more particularly in Israel had already had a long and impressive history. But had prophecy died out with Elisha, we should be very much the poorer, and so would the Old Testament, because a large portion of it bears the names, and offers us the teachings, of the so-called "writing" prophets, none of whom appeared before the eighth century B.C. Four of them are very frequently bracketed together as "the eighth-century prophets" — Amos and Hosea, in the North, Isaiah and Micah in Judah. (This listing of the four names may serve to make the point that the prophetic books of the Old Testament are not altogether in chronological order, as we have them.)

As it happens, however, there was a fifth eighth-century prophet, earlier in point of time than any of the others: Jonah ben Amittai. The Book of Jonah and the story of Jonah, however, are both so unique that one would not readily bracket man or book with the other four men and books. The Book of Jonah gives not the slightest indication as to the date of the prophet, except that his ministry was prior to the fall of Nineveh (612 B.C.), but a brief reference to him in 2 Kings 14:25 dates him securely in the reign of Jeroboam II (782-753). Even if the book of Jonah be taken as a historical document (and in fact very few scholars do so take it),¹ we know singularly little of the prophet's ministry to his contemporaries; according to 2 Kings 14:25 he predicted some Israelite victories, and according to Jonah 3:4 he prophesied disaster for the Assyrians, and

1. For a discussion of the meaning and interpretation of the book of Jonah, cf. R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (London, 1970), pp. 904-918; H. L. Ellison, *The Prophets of Israel* (Exeter, 1969) chapter 8; G. A. F. Knight, *Ruth and Jonah*² (TBC: London, 1966), pp. 49-58; L. C. Allen, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah and Micah* (NICOT: Grand Rapids, 1976), pp. 175-194.

that is the sum total of our knowledge of his message. Both elements in it were the sort of things his countrymen would have enjoyed hearing (the second element was not uttered in their hearing, of course).

These twin aspects of Jonah's message serve as an excellent introduction to the more detailed prophecies of Amos, a little later in the same reign.² "In forty days Nineveh shall be overthrown!" is the wording of the one and only prophetic oracle in the Book of Jonah; Amos began his preaching in a not dissimilar vein — "For crime after crime of Damascus I will grant them no reprieve" (Amos 1:3). No Israelite, with bitter memories of the days of Syrian supremacy, would have disapproved of that oracle. "For crime after crime of Gaza I will grant them no reprieve", the prophet continued (1:6), turning his attention to the Philistines, and his denunciations, all spoken in the name of Yahweh, went on to embrace Tyrians, Edomites, Ammonites and Moabites, thus including virtually every neighbour (and erstwhile enemy) of Israel. He gave examples of their "crimes" which must have been familiar to his audience, and predicted defeat, exile and destruction for one nation after the other. Such oracles of judgement against foreign enemies were the very stuff of prophecy, and one can readily imagine the nods of approval and the murmurs of assent from his hearers, even though none of these neighbours posed any threat to Israel at this date. Amos did not specify the source of the military disasters he predicted, but since his first denunciation prophesied for the Damascenes exile to Kir, in far-off Mesopotamia, nobody could doubt that the Assyrians must be, in the prophet's mind, the agents of the forthcoming disasters for the Syrian kingdoms. As Amos's list of denunciations proceeded to embrace nations lying to the south of Israel, the most thoughtful of his listeners might have begun to wonder how Israel was going to fare while the Assyrian armies were rampaging through neighbouring regions.

Even the least intelligent of his audience will have been startled by his seventh denunciation: "For crime after crime of Judah I will grant them no reprieve" (2:4). Possibly some listeners welcomed even that statement, for not so many years earlier Judah, under King Amaziah, had provoked an entirely unnecessary war with Israel;³ but it is highly unlikely that many Israelites would have harboured seriously hostile feelings towards Judah. Besides, Amos himself came from Judah — from Tekoa, some 10 miles south of Jerusalem — and no doubt his regional accent betrayed him as clearly as Simon Peter's Galilean one did, centuries later.⁴ What was

2. By general consent, between 763 and 750 B.C. Cf. H. L. Ellison, *op. cit.*, pp. 62, 71.

3. See above, p. 92.

4. Cf. Matthew 26:73.

this Judaeen doing, cursing his own homeland? The initial pleasurable impact of the prophet's words must have given place to surprise and wonderment; certainly none of the audience was bored! To our twentieth century generation, the prophetic books often make difficult and dull reading; but recent research has emphasized the brilliance and skill with which the prophets addressed their own contemporaries.⁵ They knew how to hold an audience spell-bound, chiefly by taking a stereotyped and traditional form of language and filling it with new, startling and sometimes very incongruous content — much as if, sitting back in our comfortable church pew, we were to hear the vicar parody our favourite hymn. Perhaps the clearest example for modern readers is to be found in Isaiah 5. The prophet began to intone a charming love-poem:

I will sing for my beloved
 my love-song about his vineyard;
 My beloved had a vineyard
 high up on a fertile hill-side.
 He trenched it and cleared it of stones
 and planted it with red vines;
 he built a watch-tower in the middle
 and then hewed out a winepress in it.
 He looked for it to yield grapes . . .

All very idyllic; the beauty of the language would lull the ear, and no doubt Isaiah's original audience will have expected him to continue in terms of rich harvests and joyful merrymaking, like the "mellow fruitfulness" and "maturing sun" of John Keats. But the prophet continued, ". . . but it yielded wild grapes", and the poem proceeds, getting more blunt and pointed and hard-hitting as verse succeeds verse. Of course, our modern poets too have used incongruity and anticlimax for effect; one thinks of T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men* and its startling conclusion: "*This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the world ends/ This is the way the world ends/ Not with a bang but a whimper.*" But literary men of our modern era, if they often succeed in making thoughtful men think, rarely convey a note of authoritative truth to the ordinary man in the street. Israel's ancient prophets' thunderous "Thus saith the LORD!" was a different matter; nobody, however simple or illiterate, could fail to understand their message, or to be affected by it.

But to return to Amos: his sudden denunciation of his own native Judah will have caused his listeners to ask themselves why: Amos

5. The familiar sonorous cadences and archaic vocabulary of the AV will often have the effect of reducing for present-day readers the original impact of the prophets' words. Who but a prophet would have dared to describe God as "a festering sore" and as "dry-rot" (Hosea 5:12, NEB and J. B. Phillips)?

had listed various anti-social "crimes" of Damascus and the other nations, to explain the reason for their impending punishment; what similar international misdeeds had Judah perpetrated? The prophet broke in on their thoughts — "because they have spurned the law of the LORD and have not observed his decrees, and have been led astray by the false gods that their fathers followed" (2:4). In short, their crimes were not international but religious; they had flouted the covenant, notably by their idolatry. Amos's primary concern, like that of so many of his predecessors, was with the covenant of Yahweh, established at Sinai long ago.

Bethel, where Amos was preaching (cf. 7:12f.), was no great distance from the borders of Judah, and conceivably some of his listeners had seen for themselves signs of idol-worship in Judah; others will have accepted that if a Judaeon said so, it was so. But again the more thoughtful people in his audience will have started to ask themselves whether Israel's observance of the Sinai covenant had been any more punctilious than Judah's; or whether there was any less idolatry in Israel than in Judah. Why, it was well known that a goddess was worshipped in the capital, Samaria, itself — as Amos was aware (cf. 8:14) (he had probably visited the city). If Amos was right to pronounce doom on Judah, he was logically bound to do the same for Israel.⁶

"For crime after crime of Israel I will grant them no reprieve" (2:6). So the pronouncement of the divine verdict upon Israel was uttered; and those who have eagerly listened to the prophet's initial words, so like Jonah's in tone and character, were now hearing a very different story, which must have brought dismay to every man of them. Even now Amos had a surprise to spring on them; presumably they all expected him to launch into an immediate diatribe against the idolatries of the Northern Kingdom, but on that score he chose to say very little! Nor did he immediately explain what the divine punishment in store for Israel was to be, as he had done in each of his previous denunciations; Amos well knew how to build up suspense, and hold an audience.

The prophet's first diatribe against Israel shows us, if we read between the lines, that he was addressing a well-ordered, religious society, where "proper" legal and religious ceremonies were dutifully observed. It was a prosperous society and a complacent society — or rather, the upper classes were; but Amos had eyes to see the great rift between rich and poor, between upper classes and

6. This discussion of the oracle against Judah assumes that it was an original part of Amos's first sermon, rather than a later editorial addition, as many scholars have held. J. L. Mays in his commentary on Amos outlines the arguments for viewing this oracle as secondary, but they are far from being conclusive. Cf. J. L. Mays, *Amos* (OTL: London, 1969), pp. 40ff.

lower classes, and the fact that the function of due legal process was all too often to aid the rich and defraud the poor. Israel was riddled with legalized immorality — and with prostituted religion. Under the veneer of law and equity, everything conspired against the poor man. If his case were good, the judge could easily be bribed to declare against him (“They sell the innocent for silver”, 2:6); he could be fined and have his property seized; and finally he would have no option but to sell himself into slavery, when his debts became too heavy.

This was the immediate indictment Amos brought against Israel; later on he was even more explicit about the courts: “You that turn justice upside down and bring righteousness to the ground, you that hate a man who brings the wrong-doer to court, and loathe him who speaks the whole truth . . . you levy taxes on the poor and extort a tribute of grain from them . . . you . . . persecute the guiltless, hold men to ransom and thrust the destitute out of court” (5:7-12). The poverty of Israel had been very much aggravated by the depredations of the Syrian armies at the end of the ninth century; but clearly in the more prosperous days of the early eighth century, nothing was done to ensure an even distribution of the prosperity; on the contrary, the poor seemed to be worse off, not better.

The prosperity of the upper classes is outlined equally vividly in Amos 6:4ff.:

You who loll on beds inlaid with ivory
and sprawl over your couches,
feasting on lambs from the flock
and fatted calves,
you who pluck the strings of the lute
and invent musical instruments like David,
you who drink wine by the bowlful
and lard yourselves with the richest of oils.

In a famous phrase, the prophet contemptuously dismissed the society women of the capital as “you cows of Bashan who live on the hill of Samaria” (4:1). Amos was not attacking wealth as such, but wealth based on social injustices; for him, the society of Israel was deeply guilty of wholesale breaches of the covenant laws, and as such warranted punishment on a national level. There is evidence that although the law of the day was (at least outwardly) adhered to, some ancient laws protecting the rights of ordinary citizens had been allowed to lapse; one example is the law of the pledged garment, as a comparison of Exodus 22:26f. with Amos 2:8 will show.

The new element in the preaching of Amos was the denunciation of a whole society. Elijah had indicted the royal court of his day, and had prophesied its downfall; Amos now pronounced a whole



13. Assyrian cavalrymen

14. Assyrian infantry



guilty of breach of the covenant with Yahweh, and pronounced doom accordingly. The book of Amos time and time again returns to the theme of national disaster to come — death and destruction and “exile beyond Damascus” (5:27).

Thus the book of Amos gives us a picture of Israel in the eighth century of which the historical books of the Old Testament give little hint. The old tribal ideal, cemented in the covenant laws, of a closely knit community caring for all its members, had by now broken down; now the nation consisted of two classes, one of which had every reason to be resentful of its lot. We cannot be surprised that the well-to-do, represented by the priest Amaziah at Bethel, hastily drove Amos out of the kingdom, back to his native Judah. Quite apart from the general alarm and despondency his threats might engender, there will have been fears that his denunciation of social oppression might lead to seditious feelings and actions among the under-privileged.

Amos was more concerned with hypocritical worship at shrines to Israel's God than he was with idolatry as such. He made just one or two brief references to such false worship (cf. 5:26, 8:14); and if we had had only Amos as a guide to the Northern Kingdom, we might well have jumped to the conclusion that idolatry was no great problem there. Hosea, however, makes it clear how false such a conclusion would have been.

Hosea's ministry seems to have covered a period of about a quarter of a century, from shortly after 750 B.C. until the eve of the fall of Samaria (c. 722 B.C.). His first recorded prediction was that the dynasty of Jehu would fall (1:4), a prophecy fulfilled in 752 B.C. By now the Assyrian threat was looming large, and the Israelite prosperity which Amos had observed was fast ebbing away. Hosea says nothing of the luxuries enjoyed by the society women, for instance.

Hosea, victim of a bitterly unhappy marriage,⁷ was particularly interested in the question of the relationship of Israel to God. He saw Israel as the unfaithful spouse of a loving and tender God. He recalled the very start of their covenant relationship: “I have been the LORD your God since your days in Egypt, when you knew no other saviour than me, no god but me. I cared for you in the wilderness, in a land of burning heat, as if you were in pasture.” But in response the Israelites “were filled, and being filled, grew proud; and so they forgot me” (13:4ff.). In Hosea's own day, they were demonstrating their abandonment of their God by turning to idolatry. God had so recently granted them new prosperity, in “corn, new wine, and oil”; but the “silver and gold” he lavished upon

7. See especially H. L. Ellison, *op. cit.* chapter 11; H. H. Rowley, *Men of God* (London, 1963) chapter 3.

them, "they spent on the Baal" (2:8). At other times the prophet inveighed against "the calf-gods" of Samaria and Bethel (8:5; 10:5). For this state of affairs, which distressed him greatly, Hosea could only blame the religious leaders, in bitter invective: "Priest? By day and night you blunder on, you and the prophet with you" (4:5). And he warned them in God's name that "people and priest shall be treated alike. I will punish them for their conduct and repay them for their deeds" (4:9). Hosea, like Amos, recognized that physically the altars and shrines of Yahweh had not been neglected. He saw the crowds of worshippers with their sacrifices of sheep and cattle on their way "to seek the LORD" (5:6); but he also saw only too clearly that two vital aspects of a true relationship with God had long since been forgotten: "Faithful love" and "personal knowledge of God". These two concepts are none too easy to translate into English, but they dominate Hosea's thought; 6:6 is the key verse — "It is true love that I have wanted, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt-offerings" (J. B. Phillips).⁸ The first concept, embodied in the Hebrew word *chesed*, denotes the requisite fidelity to the marriage bond and all that springs from it; the other has been summed up thus: "To know God is to respond to him in faithful love and to have the whole of life determined by the understanding of oneself and one's fellow men that becomes possible in this relation".⁹

So Hosea could but prophesy divine punishment, even while he appealed to his fellow-countrymen to "return to the LORD" (6:1). He could look beyond to a brighter future, but meanwhile he depicts in brief remarks the anarchy and the hopelessness of Israel's last years as a kingdom. "King after king falls from power, but not one of them calls upon me" (7:7). "Ephraim is a silly senseless pigeon, now calling upon Egypt, now turning to Assyria for help" (7:11). "There is nothing but talk, imposing of oaths and making of treaties, all to no purpose; and litigation spreads like a poisonous weed along the furrows of the fields" (10:4). The end of it all was the day when, as Hosea predicted, "Samaria and her king are swept away like flotsam on the water; the hill-shrines of Aven (i.e. Bethel) are wiped out, the shrines where Israel sinned; thorns and thistles grow over her altars" (10:7f.).

One of the most traumatic events for Hosea occurred *c.* 735 B.C., when the kingdom of Israel, in league with Damascus, tried to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. Ahaz of Judah wisely refused, and in consequence found his kingdom attacked and his capital besieged. But when the confederate forces beat a hasty retreat, in face of the Assyrian threat from the north, it appears that Ahaz

8. J. B. Phillips, *Four Prophets* (London, 1963).

9. J. D. Smart, *IDB* ii. p. 652.

seized the opportunity to appropriate some Israelite territory. Such internecine strife, as stupid as it was unjust, elicited Hosea's swift rebuke:

On the tribes of Israel I have proclaimed this unalterable doom:
 on the day of punishment Ephraim shall be laid waste.
 The rulers of Judah act like men who move their neighbour's boundary;
 on them will I pour out my wrath like a flood.
 Ephraim is an oppressor trampling on justice,
 doggedly pursuing what is worthless.

(5:9ff.)

Judah ought not to have taken revenge, despite the provocation, but it was Ephraim who had been the real aggressor, and for her Hosea predicted the more severe punishment.

And what of Judah? Both Amos and Hosea threw out asides about Judah, but it was left to two other prophets to state more directly and more thoroughly Yahweh's indictment of the Southern Kingdom. They were Micah and Isaiah, both of whom were contemporaries of Hosea, though both survived the northern prophet by a number of years. They lived to see the momentous events which destroyed the Northern Kingdom, and which nearly overwhelmed Judah too twenty years later, when Sennacherib ravaged Hezekiah's kingdom and all but captured Jerusalem. Such was the political background to their ministry; but both of them viewed these events as Yahweh's hand in history, punishing his people for their many breaches of the covenant faith.

Micah's home was in the Shephelah, the lowland area separating the hills of Judah from the coastal plain occupied by the Philistines. His hometown, Moresheth-gath, was not so far from the Philistine city of Gath; and it lay equally close to the Judaeen fortress city of Lachish. It was precisely in this region that the spear-head of the Assyrian invasion of 701 B.C. was launched against Judah and her allies; and the first chapter of Micah's prophecy lists some of the towns and cities, both Philistine and Judaeen, which suffered the full force of Sennacherib's assault. His own town was among them.¹⁰ The enemy's troops went on to besiege Jerusalem, and Micah summed up the situation thus: "disaster has come down from the LORD to the very gate of Jerusalem" (1:12).

As a countryman, Micah could see good reason why the God of Israel should bring such disaster on His people. To him, Jerusalem represented not so much the centre of Israel's faith, the abode on earth of Yahweh himself, as the centre of oppression and the abode of rich property-grabbers. The big land-owners, in their fine homes in the capital, were exploiting the country farmers in exactly the

10. See map 154 in *MBA*.

same way that the wealthy classes of Samaria had been oppressing the poor of Israel. Micah addressed them thus:

Shame on those who lie in bed planning evil and wicked deeds
and rise at daybreak to do them,
knowing that they have the power!
They covet land and take it by force;
if they want a house they seize it;
they rob a man of his home
and steal every man's inheritance.

(2:1f.)

The traders were no better than the landowners; God's challenge to the dishonest traders is thus stated in Micah 6:10ff.:

Hark, the LORD, the fear of whose name brings success,
the LORD calls to the city.
Listen, O tribe of Judah and citizens in assembly,
can I overlook the infamous false measure,
the accursed short bushel?
Can I connive at false scales or a bag of light weights?
Your rich men are steeped in violence,
your townsmen are all liars,
and their tongues frame deceit.

Nor could members of other professions in the capital be exonerated: "Her (Jerusalem's) rulers sell justice, her priests give direction in return for a bribe, her prophets take money for their divination" (3:11). Micah was particularly angered by the arrogant and immoral attitudes of the false prophets, whom he describes as leading God's people astray, "who promise prosperity in return for a morsel of food, who proclaim a holy war against them if they put nothing in their mouths" (3:5). Such was the Jerusalem Micah saw, and he could see no hope for it; God's righteous anger was such that inevitably "Zion shall become a ploughed field, Jerusalem a heap of ruins, and the temple hill rough heath" (3:12). In fact, of course, Jerusalem survived the Assyrian onslaught, as Isaiah predicted it would; are we then to say that Micah was the false prophet?

We find a most interesting historical commentary on this prediction of Micah's recorded in another prophetic book — in Jeremiah 26:17ff. Far from being forgotten, Micah's unfulfilled prophecy was recalled word for word a century later, by some of the elders of Judah, who went on to ask:

Did King Hezekiah and all Judah put him to death? Did not the king show reverence for the LORD and seek to placate him? Then the LORD relented and revoked the disaster with which he had threatened them.

(26:19)

In other words, the fulfilment of the prophecy depended on the response it evoked from the people to whom it was directed. It is clear that there were those in Judah who had fully appreciated the conditional nature of prophetic promises and threats and warnings.

A more recent commentator may also be quoted with profit: "The city of Jerusalem was miraculously delivered, and the Assyrians returned speedily to their own land. This unexpected turn of events may have discredited the ministry of Micah in the eyes of his contemporaries. He had predicted the destruction of the city 'built with wrong' — and Jerusalem had survived intact. 'The mills of God grind slowly.' If to his contemporaries of short sight he appeared mistaken, nevertheless the words of Micah were treasured by his disciples, and in the long run were vindicated by history, when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 B.C." 11

Meanwhile in Jerusalem itself, in the very city whose ruling classes Micah could vividly describe as butchers (3:2f.), lived the prophet Isaiah. Called to exercise a prophetic ministry in 742 B.C., the year that Uzziah's long, peaceful and prosperous reign ended, he advised the kings of Judah and warned their subjects through the vicissitudes of the rest of the century, down to Jerusalem's darkest hour in 701 B.C. It is clear that he had access to the royal court; that fact, and the interest he exhibited in political affairs, have often resulted in his being called a "statesman-prophet". The description is not inapt, but it should be borne in mind that many of the prophets, from Nathan to Jeremiah, were in a position to discuss political issues with the king, and did so.

It has been remarked that all the important aspects of Isaiah's teachings can be found in germ in chapter 6, the account of his call. His vision of God impressed on him deeply the divine lordship of history, and the "awful purity" which is God's nature as well as his requirement in his people. The other side of the coin was the sinful and obstinate condition of the people of Judah, to whom Isaiah was called to preach — in an exasperating ministry to deaf ears — so long as any people remained in the land. These things he learned at the very start of his ministry, and like St. Paul long centuries later, he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

Isaiah's awareness of the gulf between his God's purity and his fellow-citizens' immoralities is shown in his denunciations of Judah in the early chapters of the book: "O sinful nation, people loaded with iniquity, race of evildoers, wanton destructive children who have deserted the LORD, spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned your backs on him" (1:4). Like his contemporary prophets, he insisted that moral behaviour and religious observances could not be divorced; God, he declared, was "sated with whole-offerings of

11. S. F. Winward, *A guide to the Prophets* (London, 1968), p. 65.

rams and the fat of buffaloes", could not endure the feasts and festivals, and would listen no longer to countless prayers. God's requirement was thus: "Cease to do evil and learn to do right, pursue justice and champion the oppressed; give the orphan his rights, plead the widow's cause" (1:11-17). Isaiah saw the social evils of Jerusalem just as clearly as did Micah; and just as Amos had drawn attention to the ill-gotten luxuries enjoyed in Samaria, so Isaiah poured contempt upon the fineries of the ladies of Jerusalem, in a passage which gives us a great deal of detail about the fashions of the day:

In that day the Lord will take away all finery: anklets, discs, crescents, pendants, bangles, coronets, head-bands, armlets, necklaces, lockets, charms, signets, nose-rings, fine dresses, mantles, cloaks, flounced skirts, scarves of gauze, kerchiefs of linen, turbans, and flowing veils.
(3:18-23)

As the political scene steadily darkened in the forty years or so that he prophesied, Isaiah put out plea after plea for his people to listen — or reap the bitter consequences.

Isaiah's interest in, and attempts to influence, international diplomacy, have been touched on earlier in this book.¹² In this sphere too, he believed firmly that it was quite wrong to divorce one's religious faith from ordinary day-to-day concerns and conduct. He stood out against foreign alliances of any sort, since he was convinced that God was sufficient to look after Israel's needs as a nation. In this respect too, we see how the prophet was motivated by his concern for the covenant. If Yahweh had declared that Israel was his people, his own nation, then he would be true to his covenant bond. Nor had Isaiah the slightest doubt that Yahweh was able to keep his bond; weaker souls might fear that other nations had more powerful deities, but not Isaiah. His conviction was summarized in one sentence he addressed to King Ahaz: "Have firm faith, or you will not stand firm" (7:9).

After King Ahaz had declined to accept Isaiah's wise advice, and had concluded an alliance with Assyria, the prophet seems to have withdrawn from public life for a number of years, during which time he probably banded round him a number of disciples (cf. 8:16ff.). Once Hezekiah came to the throne, however, he resumed his ministry at the royal court. Since Isaiah had previously counselled against the alliance with Assyria, Hezekiah might have expected the prophet to welcome a renunciation of that alliance; but on the contrary, Isaiah opposed any such move, especially since its success depended on yet more foreign alliances. The king gave indifferent

12. See above, p. 99.

heed to the prophet's advice, so Isaiah resorted to the startling device of walking about the streets naked and barefoot, for three full years, as a symbol of the destitution which Egypt — Hezekiah's strongest ally against Assyria — would suffer at the hands of the Assyrians (chapter 20).

Micah, we have seen, could predict nothing good for a corrupt city like Jerusalem; and Isaiah agreed with his strictures. However, Isaiah's vision took in a far wider compass; almost the whole of chapters 13-23 consists of his oracles about foreign nations, and a perusal of his words makes it clear that he had no illusions about them. He castigated one after the other "for their offences against the moral law and against neighbourly obligations as they knew them".¹³ In particular, he recognized that Assyria, though raised up by God as the rod of his anger (10:5), was arrogant, cruel and rapacious. He therefore prophesied:

When the Lord has finished all that he means to do
on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem,
he will punish the king of Assyria
for this fruit of his pride and for his arrogance
and vainglory, because he said:
By my own might I have acted
and in my wisdom I have laid my schemes;
I have removed the frontiers of nations
and plundered their treasures,
like a bull I have trampled on their inhabitants.
My hand has found its way to the wealth of nations,
and, as a man takes the eggs from a deserted nest,
so have I taken every land;
not a wing fluttered,
not a beak gaped, no chirp was heard.

(10:12ff.)

This is the background to Isaiah's conviction that Jerusalem would finally be spared and the Assyrians discomfited. Jerusalem had this one virtue, that though full of idols (10:10f.), she also housed the temple, which bore the divine oracle, "I will shield this city to deliver it, for my own sake" (37:35). The deliverance would also be "for the sake of my servant David"; we may see this as a sign that Hezekiah, for all his faults and mistakes, sincerely worshipped God and turned to his prophet for guidance, or else we may think that the phrase related to the future. Isaiah certainly anticipated a much greater son of David than Hezekiah proved to be, a king who should be called "in purpose wonderful, in battle God-like, Father for all

time, Prince of peace'' (9:6). But this is a theme to which we must return.

The man who succeeded Hezekiah was not remotely like the king depicted in Isaiah 9:6; he was Manasseh, one of the most wicked of all Judah's monarchs, and during his long reign it appears that the voice of prophecy was silenced. But Isaiah, like Amos, had predicted the survival of a "remnant"; indeed, he had named one of his sons Shear-jashub, "a remnant will return". The name had once served as a warning, to indicate that *only* a remnant would escape Judah's well-deserved punishment; but during Manasseh's reign the word adequately describes those who, like Elijah's remnant, did not in any sense bow the knee to Baal (cf. 1 Kings 19:18). The fact that Isaiah's teachings were preserved, no doubt by his disciples, and Micah's sermons remembered, in itself shows that the Judah of Manasseh's reign was not wholly given over to false religion.