

## Chapter 3.02 Hebrews and Jews 2: Prophets

This chapter gives extracts from the prophets to show what they were like, to show their concern with social justice, and to stress that the Tanakh was more than just religious propaganda validating the power of the military and the priests and validating the right of Jews to dominate neighbors. Social justice was an integral part of God.

For legal reasons, these extracts are not taken from any current translation of the Tanakh. They are paraphrases that I made up out of several different translations. If any particular copyright holder thinks I have taken too much from his-her version, please contact me; likely I will retract this version from the Internet and redo it. Please consult your favorite translation of the Tanakh to make sure that I have not strayed too far.

Contrary to popular misunderstanding, a prophet was not a fortuneteller. Prophets were analysts of their socio-political-economic-religious situations. They were commentators on their times. They sought to guide politicians, soldiers, priests, and common people toward a better way of life more in tune with God's will. They sought to avoid the wrath of God. Sometimes to achieve their ends, they anticipated the future much as pundits on TV do today: "If you do not heed I what say, and do not heed God's will through my words, then a terrible disaster will befall you. If you do not repent, then Assyria will smite you and the Chinese will out-produce America. If you do heed me, then you will be saved and prosperity will return. If you heed me and do God's will by worshiping only in the temple of Jerusalem according to the correct rites, voting for the right party, using the right drugs, having the right sex, and watching the right movies, then the Babylonians and Romans will go away, the Pakistanis will become truly helpful, we will defeat Al Quaida, the stock market will climb, everybody will get a job, we will out produce China, and all ethnic groups will get along." I think most of the Biblical prophets were more astute and better people than most modern pundits.

Some prophets, or people that claimed to be prophets, did make predictions much like a fortuneteller. Some prophets made predictions designed to please the rich and powerful, such as predicting a military victory in the face of overwhelming odds. This was not so with the best prophets, what the Jews back then, and we today, would call "true" prophets.

Prophets had two major criticisms of current affairs. First, the people were not diligent enough in worshiping God. In particular, the people might worship other gods such as when men married a non-Jewish wife they might worship her gods in the house setting. Today, a Jew or a Christian might marry a Hindu woman and worship Vishnu at home with her and the children. Or a Hindu man might marry a Christian woman and go to church with her and the children.

Second, social injustice prevailed while state officials, the priesthood, the rich, and even the common people did nothing about it. The prophets were strong advocates of social justice. The prophets were strong critics of the rich and powerful. They could not see how to have correct worship of God without social justice. They took seriously the twin commands to love God and to love your neighbor.

My selections here from the prophets are not representative. They reflect my concerns, in particular social justice and individual responsibility. To get a better idea of the prophets, read them. I list the total chapter and verse before a quotation. I do not mark chapter and verse within a passage. Sometimes I provide a little background before giving the words of the prophet; my background selections do not begin with an asterisk (\*). Excerpts begin and end with an asterisk (\*). Usually the asterisk means the prophet is speaking directly and not quoting anybody right now. Double quotation marks (") within a passage can surround speech, usually the speech of God or of the prophet. Single quotation marks (') indicate a quotation within a speech; usually the prophet cites God or cites somebody else's words. Who speaks usually is clear from the passage. Sometimes it is not possible to clearly distinguish the voice of God from the voice of the prophet but I do not untangle them here. Three little dots (...) mark elisions, places where I left out words. My interject comments are in square brackets [].

*SECOND SAMUEL 11.26 to 12.14: David, Uriah, Bathsheba, and Nathan.*

Saul was the former king of Israel and Judah. David used to be his soldier, but Saul came to dislike David and wished to kill him. God rescued David from Saul and made David king in Saul's place. Nathan was the chief prophet of Israel. David had a skilled and faithful soldier named Uriah. Uriah's wife was Bathsheba. David and Bathsheba had an affair. To get free access to Bathsheba, David sent Uriah to the front lines to die. It was murder by proxy. At the end, God kills an innocent child so as to punish David and Bathsheba; I do not like this method of punishment. The line "You are that man!" is one of the most famous lines in the Tanakh and perhaps in all of literature. God is angry both because David disobeyed his commands (about honoring the roles of husband and wife) and because David did something intrinsically wrong.

\* When Bathsheba heard that Uriah was dead, she mourned for him. After the official time of mourning was over, David brought her to his palace. She became a wife and bore him a son.

But Yahweh was angry at David's conduct, and so Yahweh sent Nathan to David. Nathan told David a story: "Once two men lived nearby, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle but the poor man had only one little female ewe lamb [with which he hoped to start his own herd]. The poor man tended the lamb, and it grew up with his children. The lamb used to share the man's piece of bread, drink water from his cup, and sleep on his chest. It was like a daughter to him. One day the rich man had to entertain a guest but was too stingy to use any of his own sheep, so he illegally seized the poor man's lamb and had it grilled for the guest's meal." [Not only did the rich man take the poor man's only property, he took the poor man's love and his future].

David was furious. He said to Nathan, "As Yahweh lives, the rich man deserves to die. He showed no pity. He will pay four times the cost of the lamb." Nathan said straight to King David, "You are that man! Through me, Yahweh the God of Israel says: 'I rescued you from Saul the former king who wanted to kill you, and I made you king of Israel instead. I gave you Saul's house and wives. I gave you Israel and Judah. If that were not enough, I would have given you twice as much. Yet you were not satisfied but took what was not rightfully yours, and destroyed an innocent loyal man to do it [Uriah]. Why did you openly break God's command and did what makes him angry? You killed Uriah the Hittite, and you took Bathsheba his wife as your wife. Because of that, you will live always in fear of the sword and violence. I will bring disaster to you from within your own family. I will give your wives to another man right in front

of you, and he will have sex with them here in your palace. You acted secretly but I will do this openly for you to see and for all Israel to see in broad daylight.”

David said to Nathan, “My God! I am guilty before you.” Nathan replied to David, “[Because you accept responsibility and repent, and because God used to love you] God has partially forgiven you. You will not die. But because you insulted God by your acts, the first child born to you and Bathsheba will die.” \*

*EZEKIEL 18: 1 - 23. Personal Responsibility.*

Ezekiel lived during the “Babylonian Captivity” when many people of Judea and Israel were taken to Babylon. He had an intense imagination. His writing comes close to apocalyptic before the apocalyptic style became common after the Roman dominion.

Ezekiel made a clear move away from collective guilt, punishment, and reward toward assessing action according to individuals only. In agrarian and pastoral society, whole families or whole groups had to be responsible for the actions of their members. Children had to pay the debts of their parents. Israel had suffered and had been taken to Babylon because, in the past, the ancestors in Israel had not followed the Law well enough. The Jews in Babylon wondered if they could be forgiven and return to Israel if they followed the Law, despite what their elders had done. Ezekiel assured them they could be forgiven and that they would be judged on their own merits. Although the idea of individual responsibility originally applied to Jews in Babylon, I think we can safely generalize it to all individuals everywhere. Many ideas from the prophets originally applied only to the Jews but were correctly extended to everybody, including the idea of “love your neighbor”. The term “eaten on the mountains” means to have eaten the meat sacrificed to variants of El or Yahweh on the “high places” of the north, and thus to have committed idolatry in the eyes of the southern priests of Judea.

\* I felt God say to me: “What do you mean using within Israel this proverb: ‘Parents eat sour grapes yet their children’s teeth rot?’ I am the living God of life. This proverb will no longer be spoken among Israelites. All lives are mine to dispose of. I look over the life of the parent and the lives of the children. Only the person who sins will suffer. If a man is righteous and does what is just and right, if he does not eat on the mountains, raise his eyes to the idols that beset Israel, does not have sex with another man’s wife, does not have sex with a menstruating woman, has not wronged anyone, has returned the collateral for a loan, has not stolen anything or defrauded anyone, has given bread to the hungry and clothing to the poor, has not done anything wrong and has carried out true justice for all people, has acted honestly, has followed my laws and rules, then he is righteous. This kind of man will live fully.” That is what God said to me. ... God continues: “If a man has obeyed my rules and laws, he will not die for the wrong of his parents but will live his own life. Be clear that the father personally, because he defrauded, robbed his brother [fellow man], and bullied his kin, the father did die for that. But now you ask, ‘Why isn’t the son guilty too? Why shouldn’t the son be punished too?’ Because the son did what is right and just, and carefully kept all my laws. That is why. The son will live. The sinner alone will die. A child will not share a parent’s guilt or be punished for a parent’s crime. The goodness of a righteous person will go to him alone, and the evil of a bad person will go to him alone. If a bad person repents of all his sins, keeps my laws, and does right, then he will live. He will not die. None of his sins will be held against him. Because he repented and acted rightly, he will live. Do I really want a bad person to die right away? No. I would rather a wicked person repent and live.” \*

*AMOS 5, much of the chapter. Social Justice.*

The “gate” was the place in town where people went to seek public justice. It would be the county court in traditional America or England. Prominent people of the community kept court at the gate, and were expected to judge cases impartially there. If a person could not find justice on a personal level, the person would go to the gate. Poor people, widows, and orphans went to the gate because they had little other recourse. Anyone who could not find justice at the gate could only appeal to God. The warning to people that have built fine houses but will not be able to live in them now is particularly suited to the housing crisis of 2008 and after in America.

\* Listen you who pervert justice into bitter white powders

And stomp on righteousness!

Seek God.

Who made the stars and the star people?

Who blossoms dawn through the darkness

And folds the flower of daylight into night?

Who lifts the vapor out of the ocean

So that it will fall back as rain on the earth?

His name is Yahweh!

He overthrows London, Moscow, Peking, and Washington

So that world powers crumble into humble beggars.

Connivers hate plain justice at the gate

And despise an obvious just case.

Be sure of this:

Because you unfairly tax the poor,

Because you pass a sales tax on food [and clothing],

Even though you have built your Mc-mansion of stone,

You will not live in it.

You may travel to chic vineyards

But your guts will curdle on their wine.

Through me God sees your budding selfish crimes,

Sees how uncountable are your sins.

You are enemies of simple righteous people,

You take bribes in devious ways,

You subvert the simple justice at the gate of common sense,

You make more desperate the needy.

Alas in such a world and evil time

A prudent man shuts up to save his own skin.

Seek good and not evil

So you might live

And so that God, the commander of the armies of life,

Might really guide you.

Hate evil while loving good,

And give true simple justice to the weepers at the gate.  
Maybe then God, the commander of the armies of life,  
Will embrace again the remaining children of Joseph. ...

I detest and avoid your festivals,  
Your patriotic upsurges and days of commitment and remembrance.  
Your churches, congresses, and prayer meetings do not move me.  
You might offer me burnt offerings, meal offerings,  
Or any sacrifice;  
I refuse them all.  
I ignore your gifts of fatted cattle and public devotion.  
Spare me the hymns and fancy speeches.  
[Spare me your TV evangelists and mega-churches.]  
I cannot stand your grand chorales  
Or your religious pop songs.  
Instead let justice pour out into small glasses like cool water,  
And let righteousness be an unfailling cool stream to quench thirst. \*

*JONAH 3 and 4. Extending God's Domain.*

The book of Jonah is short. Most Christians know Jonah because he was carried inside a large fish for three days, which Christians take to be a sign of Jesus lying dead for three days before being resurrected. I think that is the least important part of Jonah and it is not a "pre-figuration" of Jesus at all. Jonah was a Jew. The Assyrians had just conquered Israel and destroyed the northern kingdom. Nineveh was their capital. God told Jonah to go preach in Nineveh. Jonah refused because, as a Jew, he hated all Assyrians. To keep God's grace from Assyrians was the greatest punishment Jonah could inflict on them, and to give them God's grace was the greatest reward. Jonah did not want to help Assyria. God forced Jonah to go to Assyria by punishing Jonah with the fish. Finally Jonah went, and what happened is as below. Jonah's story is a powerful statement of generalizing God beyond any immediate chosen people, or beyond any people who think they are the new chosen people such as some Christians in America; and a powerful statement of repentance and forgiveness.

\* Growing impatient, Yahweh said to Jonah for a second time: "Go right now to the world capital Nineveh (Washington, Peking, Moscow, Paris, or London), stand on street corners, and tell them what I have told you. So reluctantly Jonah went to Nineveh out of obedience to God's command...

After walking a day, Jonah set up in Nineveh and began to declare, "In only forty days, God will overthrow Nineveh". Amazingly, the people of Nineveh believed Jonah. In repentance, they declared a fast, and everybody put on sackcloth. The king too believed and joined the mourning, even taking off his robes and sprinkling ashes on himself. He sent criers throughout Nineveh saying: "The king declares that neither man nor beast will eat or drink. Animals will not graze or water. Men and beasts will put on sackcloth. People will pray loudly to God. Everyone must repent and quit doing evil and injustice. Maybe God will change his mind and relent. He might not punish us so that we might not all die."

God saw what they did, how they changed their hearts, and how they quit doing evil and injustice. God lifted the punishment and spared them.

Jonah was disappointed and angry at God. He prayed to Yahweh, saying, "O, Yahweh! Isn't this just what I said when I was still in Israel? That is why I ran away first to Tarshish and would not go to Nineveh. For I know that you are a compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, full of kindness, quick to lift punishment when people repent in their hearts. Please, Yahweh, kill me, for I would rather die than live to see the enemies of my people become good themselves, receive your grace, and have a relation with you." Yahweh replied, "Are you really so unhappy that my goodness might come to a people other than yours?" \*

God continued to educate Jonah and Israel but I do not relate the lessons here. Please read the short book of Jonah to see for yourself.

ISAIAH. More Social Justice.

Isaiah is probably the most influential prophet and the best-known prophet. As with other books of the Bible (including books in both the Tanakh and New Testament), the book of Isaiah was written by more than one person, in this case at least two people, and probably at least three. I do not go into whether this multiple authorship is a kind of "lying" and I do not go into implications for what is to count as the inspired word of God. People can select from Isaiah to support many points, some conflicting. I select to support the ideas that God wanted social justice, and that God would not accept any standard worship unless Israel had first achieved minimum standards of social justice. Doing the will of God through social justice is more important than correct worship. These topics are relevant to Jesus and to the modern world. The "mount" is where Jerusalem sits. The "house" is the temple and all that it symbolizes. The mount is called "Zion", which term also means Jerusalem, Israel, or the Hebrews. Isaiah addresses Israel as if it were Sodom and Gomorrah, that is, a bad and rebellious place; he does not literally mean Sodom and Gomorrah. Many images and phrases from Isaiah have become part of common speech without people knowing where they come from, much as with images and phrases from Shakespeare. I did these passages on Monday 29 September 2008, just as Congress approved the bailout for the financial crisis that was caused by government mismanagement and by the greed of financiers and house-buyers. The much shorter book of Micah also condemns greed and social injustice.

*Isaiah 1: 10 - 23.*

\* Hear the word of Yahweh,  
You leaders of Sodom.  
Hear God's teaching,  
You common folk of Gomorrah.  
Yahweh says,  
"Do you think I need all your sacrifices and outward piety?  
I am sick up to here with burnt offerings of rams,  
The suet of fatted animals,  
And the blood of bulls.  
I can't stand your lambs and billy goats.

Who asked you to present your face to me?  
Sully my courtyards no more.  
Your gifts are useless to me and to you.  
Your incense stinks.  
Your new moon and Sabbath festivals are  
So much clang and clatter to me.  
Pomp, ceremonies, and obligatory Congressional sessions that perpetrate official thievery,  
Sicken me.  
I can't stand them or you anymore.  
When you raise your hands to me  
I turn away my face.  
If you prayed for a week straight,  
I would not listen.  
Instead, destroy your evil instruments  
In my sight, Stop doing evil,  
Learn to do good,  
Devote yourselves to justice,  
Aid the needy and the victims,  
Support orphans, widows, [children, and the homeless]. “  
God invited the Israelites,  
“Come, let us understand each other”.  
“Even if your sins are red as blood,  
I can turn them white as snow.  
Even if they are as red as dyed wool,  
I can turn them back to natural fleece.  
If you agree and act sincerely,  
You will eat from all the goodness of the earth.  
But if you refuse and disobey,  
Violence will eat you inside and outside”.  
Those were the words of Yahweh.

“Jerusalem (Washington) has become like a cheap whore  
Where once she was like a faithful wife  
Full of judicious advice,  
A city where once lived good wise people  
But is now the hideout of murderers.  
Your shiny cars, shiny houses, and new streets  
Now are covered with rust, slime, and dust.  
Your wine is cut with water.  
Your leaders are gangsters  
Who cover up for thieves,  
Every one with a hand out for more  
And greedy for something under the table.  
They never bring aid to the orphan  
And the widow's cry never tingles their deaf ears. \*

*Isaiah 2: 2 - 4 .*

\* Someday and for ever after,  
The mountain of Yahweh's temple  
Will stand above all other mountains [nations]  
And above all other hills.  
All nations and peoples  
Will look on it with joy.  
The many various peoples will say:  
"Come together to the house of the God of Jacob  
Where he will teach us how to live  
And we will follow as he teaches."  
Teaching will come from Zion,  
A message from Yahweh out of Jerusalem.  
He will judge disputes among the nations.  
They will re-forge their spears into electronic games.  
No more will one nation aim a gun at another's heart.  
War will be forgotten forever.\*

*Isaiah 56: 6 - 8.*

\* Some foreigners  
Believe in Yahweh,  
Tend to his ceremonies,  
[Observe his Laws as they can],  
Serve him openly,  
Keep the Sabbath openly and do not conduct normal business on the Sabbath,  
And seek constantly a tight relation with him through his Covenant.  
"I will lead them to my sacred mountain,  
And let them join us in the joy of prayer.  
Their burnt offerings and sacrifices [Their donations of service and wealth]  
Will be welcome on My alter.  
People around the world will call My temple a house of prayer for all ethnicities [and religions]."

So spoke Yahweh.

"As many as the leaders of Israel gather back the dispersed people of Israel,  
As many or more will I add to what they gather." \*