



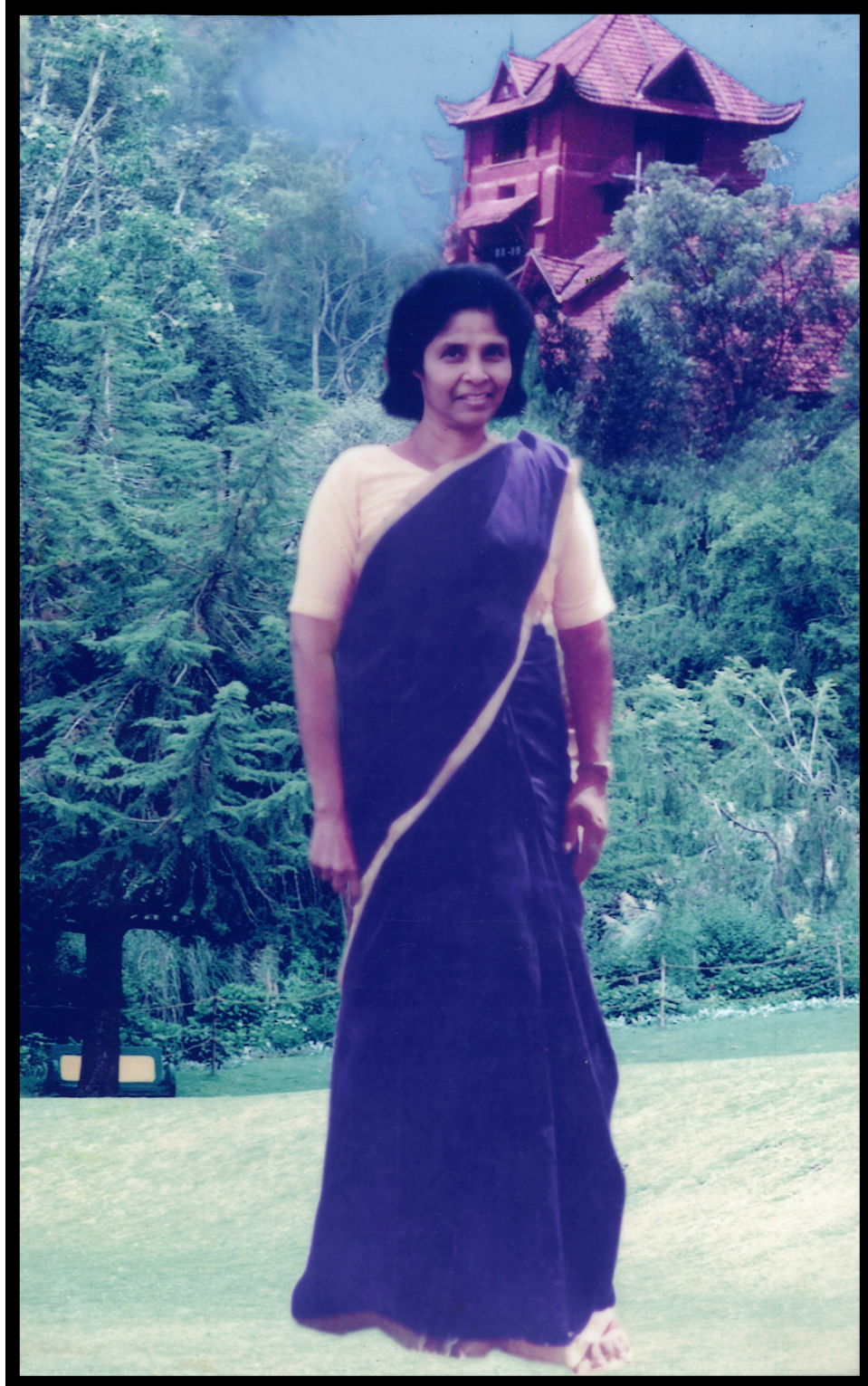
Prophecy



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In the Summer of 2017, Salma traveled to Italy and stayed in Rome, near the Vatican. She presented her scholarly husband's books and writings to the Vatican Library. In September of 2017 she received a thank you letter from Pope Francis expressing appreciation, acknowledging the gift of inscribed copies of Dr. Ben Michael Carter's writings with his personal photo with the Papal seal.



Prophecy

Introduction

In Acts 8:26 - 39 we read how Philip going into the desert of the Gaza found a eunuch from Ethiopia studying Isaiah. The two men began to discuss the text and in the course of the conversation the eunuch stepped from his chariot and asked Phillip to baptize him. In the first centuries of the church people often came to faith in Christ by reading the prophets. One of the most famous of those so converted was Justin Martyr, the great second century Christian apologist. Justine was student of philosophy and an ardent seeker of truth. In the course of his studies Justin met an old man who suggested that he might find in the Hebrew prophets the kind of insight he sought. Following the advice of the old man, Justin turned from the Greeks and began to read those ancient Jewish scrolls, and as he pondered them they kindled faith in him even as they had in the Ethiopian eunuch.

Today few people come to faith by reading the prophets. Instead for most people who read them, faith is a prerequisite. But sadly many who read the prophets from within the circle of faith misread them not only because they read them ignorant of their historical setting, but also because the prophets, with their strange images and their unfamiliar thought patterns, are very difficult to understand. It is our conviction that misreading the prophets, like misreading any other books of scripture, constitutes a serious problem for the church. It is our prayer that this course will make the prophets more accessible to you and as they become more accessible to you, you can make them more accessible to your congregations.

In this lecture we will be asking three basic questions: who were the prophets? What themes provided the substructures for their messages? How did they fit within the power structure of ancient kingdoms of Israel?

Who were the prophets?

Two types of prophets have been preserved for us. These two types of prophets are commonly designated as the speaking prophets and the writing prophets. We encounter the speaking prophets primarily in the histories of Israel and Judah. Examples would be David's prophet Nathan or Ahab's nemesis Elijah. We find the writing prophets in the Old Testament books of the prophets. The writing prophets are divided into two types. Three of these (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel) are designated as the major prophets. The rest are termed minor prophets. But whether they spoke or wrote, the true prophets were people chosen by and directly inspired by God, and God's choice was understood as final (Numbers 11:25 - 29).

The prophets spoke or wrote on behalf of God for the purpose of guiding the people of God. Toward this end, they served two principal functions. First, prophets revealed the current spiritual state of God's people. Thus they spoke to God's people within a particular historical context. And because God's people were identified as God's people by means of a covenant, the prophets addressed God's people against the background of a covenant. This covenant was presumed to be adequately understood by both God and God's people and entailed mutual obligations between God and God's people, obligations that were couched in the form of conditional promises. These conditional promises were described in terms of blessings and curses contingent on the obedience or disobedience of God's people. If God's people obeyed God and fulfilled their obligations, God was under a self-imposed stipulation to bless them. If they disobeyed God and failed to fulfill their obligations, God was under a self-imposed stipulation to curse them. These stipulations expressed both the justice of God and the moral agency of God's people. However, the mutual obligations operated against the background of God's mercy. God's involvement in his¹ creation is an expression of his graciousness. God was not obligated to become involved with what he

¹ Feminists and their sympathizers have been very critical of masculine imagery for depicting God. Such imagery, they argue, causes women to feel excluded from full participation in the church, from fully sharing in salvation, and even from full identity with their humanity. Hence a campaign has been launched to feminize images of God, often by using non-gender specific (i.e., "inclusive") language about God

created. God's choice not to be indifferent, to establish a covenant, was a gracious choice expressing his mercy. And because God is merciful, God's justice could be delayed so that his people could have time to amend their behavior and benefit from the blessings of the covenant rather than enduring its curses. Hence, prophecy involves *forthtelling*. The prophets expounded the immediate condition of God's people in a way they could understand, warned them of God's pending judgment, and called them to repentance.

Second, prophecy is *foretelling* the future. (Isaiah 41:22-24; 42:9; 46:10; Romans 4:17) Foretelling the future is possible because of God's omniscience which would include God's foreknowledge, and because of God's authority over creation. The universe, as a creation of God, reveals things about God and is under God's command. Hence, the universe responds as God dictates. This is the point of miracles. Miracles are immediate creative acts of God. Because God created the universe, God, working through his prophets, could underline their authority by working miracles through them, that is he could perform immediate creative acts using his prophets as intermediaries. Miracles illustrate not only God's creative power but his direct control over events. Of course God may not always act directly. God may choose to control events indirectly. But God's power to control events indirectly is predicated upon God's power to control them directly. In this way God controls the future. God not only knows what is going on at any given moment, God knows the end from the beginning and can intervene at any given moment to arrange

whenever possible. Because the feminist interpretation of language can make the prophets sound like agents of an emerging and soon to be oppressive patriarchy, it is incumbent upon us to spend a few moments addressing this issue.

The prophet's use of masculine images for God has nothing to do with current social structures and everything to do with doctrines of God's personhood and creative capacity. The prophets' language must be understood against the background of the prophets' own world, a world in which polytheism with its masculine and feminine deities was the dominate religious model.

God was free to choose any people or culture through which to reveal himself. He chose a culture which had a system of masculine symbols for deity strongly in place, then strengthened those symbols leading up to the birth of the man Jesus of Nazareth. Part of this strengthening was consequent to God's insistence that he was absolutely unique. While many Israelites might have believed that Yahweh had a consort, Deuteronomy explicitly negates such a belief (Deuteronomy 4:39; 6:4). And the prophets proclaimed with Deuteronomy that there was no other besides God (Isaiah 44:6, 8; 45:5-6; 47:8, 10). Interestingly such an affirmation did not end with an assertion of divine androgyny. There are at least four reasons for this.

First, assigning God a sexual identity humanized God, stressed God's personhood and underlined the important principle that one could have an intense and intimate relationship with God.

Second, God's masculine nature served to distance God from creation. Had God selected a feminine image, the distinction between God and creation could easily have become blurred. A goddess could be imagined as creating the universe out of her own body and hence as being intimately identified with the universe. While masculine symbols distance God from creation, God imagined as father affirms God's nurturing role. Masculine symbols for God also serve to accentuate the miracle of the incarnation. Were God through the act of creation already identified with the world, the incarnation would have been mere redundancy. Hindu faiths, for example, believe in many divine incarnations.

Third, masculine symbols serve to stress the miraculous quality of creation. They demonstrate without equivocation the absence of any human parallel for comprehending that act.

Fourth, masculine symbols tend to underline the love element in both the act of creation and the sex act. Had God chosen to portray himself as having a consort at the time of creation, sex and creativity would have merged and God's creation of the universe could have been understood not as an act of love itself but as the act of desire between deities. And because God creates without sex, sex itself is liberated from being merely reproductive. Furthermore, Christ's crucifixion is highlighted. It reveals the full nature of the love God expressed by creating the universe. The willingness to die, not the desire to procreate, is the highest act of love. Hence the creative masculine God who is then willing to die for his creation expresses miracle and love more purely than a goddess could have expressed it.

Consequently, this study will make no use of feminist language theory. This is not to say that such theorizing has no value in the larger social discourse. It is only to say that in the present context such theorizing is wrongheaded.

things according to his will. Thus the future is securely in God's hands, and prophets when they speak for God can reveal future events.

However, prophets, when they foretold the future, did not always use the same literary or rhetorical devices. Let us look at three sets of passages to get a sense of what this foretelling of the future is like. First, prophecy can be very clear and specific. See I Kings 13:1-6 and II Kings 23:15-18. Second, prophecy can be highly symbolic. See Joel 2:28-32 and Acts 2:1-21. Third, prophecy that has yet to be fulfilled might look as though it has been fulfilled. See Jeremiah 31:15-17 and Matthew 2:16-18.

Because it can take several forms and because the form of any given prophecy is not immediately apparent, prophecy usually requires interpretation, that is elucidation or explication.² It is important to remember that genuine prophecy is given by the Spirit (Deuteronomy 18: 20-22) and its interpretation, its elucidation or explication, is also given by the Spirit (Genesis 40:8; 41:15-16).³

The Scriptures designate precisely how true prophets can be known. First, a true prophet will speak in the name of God. Prophets who do not speak in the name of God are not true prophets, even if they accurately foretell the future or perform miracles (Deuteronomy 13:1 - 5; Revelation 13:14; 16:14; 19:20). Second, the prophet shall speak the truth and accurately foretell the future (Deuteronomy 18:20 - 22; Jeremiah 28:9; Zechariah 13:3). Note in these passages that the penalty for false prophecy is death by stoning. The Jews understood Stephen to be a false prophet. Hence, they stoned him.

The two great themes of the prophets

Prophecy is informed by two great themes: the judgment of the nations and the restoration of Israel. Let us look briefly at each of these.

The Judgment of the Nations: the central point the prophets make is that God is God over all nations, not only over Israel. To grasp something of what is going on here, let us consider briefly the various ways in which God might be conceptualized. Concepts of God can be expressed in terms of existence (theism) or non-existence (atheism). If God exists, we can speak of God in terms of the one (monotheism) or of the many (polytheism or henotheism).⁴ If one selects a monotheistic paradigm, one can speak of God's relationship to the universe in terms of non-involvement (deism) or in terms of identification (pantheism). And in the attempt to explain the hows of this relationship between God and the universe, one discovers that there are multiple possibilities which take one back and forth between issues involving philosophical questions of the one (implicit in absolutist paradigms which identify God with the world) and issues involving philosophical questions of the many (implicit in relativistic paradigms which posit a God distinct from the world). It is also true that absolutist paradigms which identify God with the world (that is paradigms which see God as immanent) tend to stress God's power while relativistic paradigms which distinguish between God and the world (that is paradigms which see God as transcendent) tend to stress God's righteousness.

² While interpretation and translation can be used in a general way as synonyms, the words when used more precisely refer to somewhat different linguistic functions. Translation involves an equivalent transference of meaning from one language to another. *Gato*, for example, is translated as *cat*. But interpretation can involve an explication of the meaning of a text even when translation is not required as in literature when readers may debate an author's intent even though they speak the same language as the author.

³ One might argue there that Joseph is speaking only of dreams, but the dreams in question have a symbolic and prophetic dimension, so it does not seem to me that one is taking undue liberty if one expands the principle slightly and applies it to all prophecy.

⁴ Polytheism and henotheism express the idea that there are many gods, but henotheism, a more specific form of polytheism, concentrates on the existence of national gods. Henotheism assumes that each nation or people has its specific deity and that the status of that deity can be gauged by the fortunes of the people it represents. If the nation is growing more prosperous and dominate, it is because the lord of that nation is growing more powerful. If a nation is in decline, their decline reflects the waning power of their deity.

The prophets were theists as were those to whom they spoke.⁵ However, as theists they were monotheistic tradition which makes them rather unique. Most of those to whom they prophesied, even among the Israelites themselves, were polytheists or henotheists.

To understand what the problem in Israel (and also in Judah if archeological discoveries of a vast number of Asherah figurines are reliable indicators) was, we need to understand what a *bamah* or high place was. As we begin this discussion, we must remember that Israel was a theocracy, a reality underlined from the time of David and Solomon when the ark of the covenant was moved from Shiloh to Jerusalem and the temple was built. We should also be aware that the Israelites did not distinguish between sacred and secular as we do today. For them, as for most ancient peoples, the whole world was sacred. This meant that the Israelites thought of their nation as sacred and understood Jerusalem to be the Holy City, the nation's center and the place where Yahweh was worshipped. Israel's focus on Jerusalem as the sacred center of the nation was the culmination of the emergence of Israel as a self-recognized unity. This self-recognition began with or immediately preceded the kingship of Saul and culminated with the reign of Solomon.

During earlier centuries when the judges ruled and Israel was a collection of loosely affiliated tribes, worship was largely provincial. Such provincial worship encouraged the elevation of local fertility deities who rivaled Yahweh as the focus of people's attention. To comprehend more fully how the people themselves probably understood the situation, we may think of them as acknowledging the power they believed local deities exercised while they acknowledged Yahweh, the cult deity of the royal household, as the national god. Yahweh, worshipped (albeit inconsistently) by Israel's kings, secured political and military advantages for the people while the *baals* secured favorable weather and productive fields and herds.

⁵ Atheism or antitheism seems to be a fairly late cultural development and appears to emerge as a self-conscious entity during the seventh through the fifth centuries BC among the Greeks, the Chinese, and the Indians. During these centuries a religious revolution swept the world from Greece through China. Prior to this time a religious perception that seems to have been global celebrated the efficacy of ritualized blood sacrifice for normalizing the relationship between the holy and the polluted. The origins of this system of belief are unknown, but because it is global, one may suppose it is very ancient indeed. The sacrificial cultus centered in Jerusalem was a divinely inspired variation of this global perspective. However during the seventh and sixth centuries apparently spontaneous reform movements rose to challenge this ancient belief.

In the early seventh and late sixth century in the Middle East Zoroaster established the faith that still bears his name. In Greece during the same period Thales, as he pondered the question of origins, rejected the many creation traditions he knew and resolved to consider such evidence as could be found in the earth itself. His inquiry marks the beginning of Greek philosophy. In sixth century China Lao-tzu born at the beginning of the seventh century BC composed the eighty-one poems that would become the core of Taoism. In India Siddhartha Gautama in the sixth century BC rejected the sacrificial system practiced by the Brahmins and began to teach a way of enlightenment that was to multiply into the many forms of Buddhism we know today. Also in India during the same century Jainism, tracing its doctrines through a succession of 24 Tirthankaras or saints, was founded by Vardhamana, while back in China at the beginning of the sixth century and the end of the fifth century Confucius formulated his doctrine. Each of these movements was distinct, but they had this in common: each involved at least in part an attempt to substitute some kind of ethical system in place of ritualized blood sacrifice, and together they constituted one of the most far-reaching and radical religious reformations of all time. This extraordinary development was heralded by the prophets of Israel whose vision during the Babylonian exile of the sixth and fifth centuries would be configured as Judaism, a restructured version of the Israelites' original faith. Across a great swath of the world a transformed ethics rather than ritual was beginning to be appreciated as a means of relating to the ultimate however that ultimate was conceived.

Atheism emerged as part of this larger revolution and seems to have grown in influence as human beings have put themselves at the center of value systems. The conceit that humans are the subjects, the source and the primary object of values is a prerequisite for atheism.

Bamot (the plural form of *bamah*, that is the high places or shrines, local places of worship) trace their origin to the time of the judges. *Bamot* varied considerably, implying that the worship performed there may have been equally idiosyncratic, but the archeological record reflects increasing uniformity among the *bamot* during the time of David and Solomon. Interestingly enough this uniformity seems to have been maintained even after the kingdom divided into northern and southern parts, suggesting an effort by the monarchy of both kingdoms to enforce some kind of order at the local shrines, to incorporate them within the royal cult, and to undermine their provincial side. Yet the prophets tell us and archeology confirms that these *bamot* remained sites where the *baals* were worshipped. It is reasonable then to assume that the Levites, who were chosen by Yahweh to officiate at his worship, must have regularly connived with the people in the debased worship at the *bamot*.⁶ Remember that the Israelites believed debased worship had provoked God to drive the Canaanites from the land (Genesis 15:16; Leviticus 18:27; 20:22 - 23).

As the tribes of Israel were in a covenant relationship with God and as this covenant relationship was understood in terms very like marriage, such worship of other gods looked very much like marital unfaithfulness, and it was against such “whoring” that Hosea and later the other writing prophets inveighed. The use of “whoring” imagery underlines the prophets’ concern for righteousness. Because God is righteous, God’s people were expected to behave righteously as defined by the terms of the covenant. But God, because he was judge of all the nations, was revealed not only as righteous but as powerful. This movement between God as transcendent (relative and righteous) and immanent (absolutist and powerful) is an early precursor of the doctrine of the Trinity.

This was the background against which the prophets proclaimed God as ruler – and judge – of the nations. They stressed monotheism, righteousness understood within terms of covenant, God’s providence since God was interested in human affairs and acted with purpose in those affairs, and God’s compassion and mercy as evidence not only by God’s judgment but by his promise to restore after judgment was rendered.

The Restoration of Israel: Israel like the other nations was to be judged, but unlike the other nations God promised Israel through the prophets that Israel’s judgment would be followed by Israel’s restoration.

The prophets proclaimed God’s justice against the background of a covenant what was in effect a codification of conditional promises. God promised to bless obedience and punish disobedience. Indeed, punishment for disobedience was so severe that it could result ultimately in Israel being ejected from the land as happened first with the northern kingdom and later with the southern kingdom. However, operating in tandem with the Mosaic covenant which defined God’s relationship with the nation were a series of promises God made to individuals: Abraham and David. Unlike the conditional promises of the Mosaic covenant, the promises to Abraham and David were unconditional. First, God promised Abraham that Abraham would become a great nation, that he would be blessed, and that through him the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1 - 3), that his numerous descendants would possess the land of Palestine (Genesis 13:14 - 17), and that God himself would protect Abraham and give him a son as an heir through whom he would have many descendants (Genesis 15:1 - 5). Because Abraham believed this final promise, God counted him as righteous (Genesis 15:6). Second, through the prophet Nathan God promised David that God would never withdraw his mercy from David’s son and that because God’s mercy would never be withdrawn, David’s house, kingdom, and throne would be established forever (II Samuel 7:12 - 16). Unlike the conditional promises of God’s covenant with the nation that expressed God’s justice, the unconditional promises God made to Abraham and David expressed God’s mercy. Although the Mosaic covenant made provisions for Israel’s restoration, those provisions were contingent on Israel’s repentance (Deuteronomy 30:1 - 10). Israel’s final restoration was predicated on the unconditional promises God made to Abraham and David, that is it was based solely on God’s mercy.

Because the restoration of Israel came to be associated with the idea of a messiah, it is appropriate at this time to say a few words about the messianic hope. Messiah is a hellenized transliteration of the

⁶ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, May/June 1994, “What’s a Bamah? How Sacred Space Functioned in Ancient Israel” by Beth Alpert Nakhai, pp. 18 - 29

Aramaic *mesiha* which means anointed. The Greek translation of this word is *christos* from which we get our word christ. Hence Jesus Christ means Jesus the Anointed One. Messiah or Christ is not a name so much as it is a title. As the Anointed One, Christians believe that Jesus fulfills the promises and hopes of the Old Testament revelation and that to interpret the Old Testament accurately one must interpret it christocentrically. This realization that Jesus was central to a correct interpretation of the Old Testament was a primary reason why the early gentile church elected to retain the Old Testament among its canon.

The Hebrew word for anoint was *mashach* which usually meant to smear with oil. When a person was selected by God for a special task, it was traditional to pour oil over the person as a sign that they had been set apart for a purpose. However, oil did not always have to be applied. It was sufficient if a prophet proclaimed one as anointed. Also one anointed for God's purposes did not need to be one of God's people. For example the Lord commanded Elijah to anoint (*mashach*) Hazael king over Syria (I Kings 19:15),⁷ and Cyrus, the king of Persia, is designated by Isaiah as God's *mashiyach* or anointed one (Isaiah 45:1).⁸ God might even be angry with his anointed one (Psalm 89:38 – again the word here is *mashiyach*). The basic idea was that the anointed one was special only insofar as he had divine authority to perform a certain task or set of tasks.

Messiah as a formal title does not occur in the Old Testament with the possible exception of Daniel 9:25 where the passage can be translated as “the Messiah” but is probably more accurately rendered as “a messiah,” and its use in intertestamental literature is rare. Where it does occur it may refer to a descendant of David, of Levi, of Joseph, or of Ephraim. Qumran community expected two messiahs: the messiah of Aaron and the messiah of Israel. From this rather diffuse milieu two messianic concepts began to emerge. In one the messiah was expected to be a national figure, a specially chosen man who would deliver Judah from those who oppressed it. In the other the messiah was a semi-divine being from heaven who would establish God's kingdom over the entire earth. However, in the popular Jewish mind these two expectations were not mutually exclusive but tended to compliment and reinforce one another.

How did the prophets fit within the political power structure of Israel?

Before we close, we should address the issue of the political power of the prophets in ancient Israel. Although it had a human king, Israel's ideal was theocracy. God was ultimately sovereign. Consequently Israel's priests because they mediated between God and the Israelites enjoyed a great deal of power. This power became accentuated from the time of Solomon when the seat of government and the temple were constructed in the same city: Jerusalem.

However, as we have seen, the terms defining the precise nature of the Israelites' special status before God were explained in a legal code God had given to the Israelites. This legal code was in the form of a contract which stipulated that if the Israelites adhered to the provisions of the law, they would prosper, but if they failed to adhere to those provisions, they would be punished. The prosperity was alluring, the punishments severe.

The threat of punishment increased the power of the priests since much of what they did was believed to deflect God's anger should individuals under terms of the contract violate its provisions. The threat of punishment also created another center of power within Israel. Because God loved the Israelites, he did not seek to punish them before giving them sufficient warning so they would have an opportunity to

⁷ He also tells Elijah to anoint Jehu king over Israel and to anoint Elisha as his own successor (I Kings 19:16). It is worth noting here that Elijah anoints neither Hazael or Jehu. Instead he anoints Elisha not with oil or water but by casting his mantel over him (I Kings 19:19). After Elijah's death, Elisha counsels Hazael to lie to Benhadad (II Kings 8:10) and then proclaims to Hazael that he shall be king (II Kings 8:13). There is no indication here that Elisha applied any liquid to Hazael unless we are to understand Elisha's tears as an anointing fluid. Later Elisha sends one of the children of the prophets to anoint Jehu with a box of oil (II Kings 9:1 - 6).

⁸ There is no indication that Cyrus was formally anointed. The proclamation of Isaiah seems to have been sufficient.

correct their behavior or at least understand why they were being punished. To this end God called a group of men and women out of a group of already recognized religious professionals: the prophets.

Prophets had well-established roles in many religious traditions during this period. They were believed to reveal God's will for people, to have the power to curse or bless in God's name, and to foretell the future. Many people believed that some of the more powerful prophets could control the weather or find lost items.

But in the theocracy that was Israel, those God called out to be prophets had a new role: they warned the Israelites of God's impending judgment. They reminded people of their frequent failures to obey all the terms to which God's covenant obligated them, and they told the people that because of this God was angry and would punish them, something God had a perfect legal right to do.

One problem according to the prophets was the old problem that had plagued the Canaanites: corrupted worship. Although the people would go to the temple and offer sacrifices to God, they tended to understand God in very limited terms. God was in their mind the god of the nation, but they also believed the land itself was populated with gods who predated the arrival of Israel's national god, and that these gods also had to be propitiated. Hence the people not only sacrificed at the temple, they also sacrificed at local shrines where the gods of the land, the *baals*, were worshipped. The people intended in this way to keep all the gods happy, their own national god as well as the gods of the land. It did not occur to them that their national god was God. And as we have seen, the priests were complicit in this corrupt worship.

These special prophets often acted outside the company of the traditional prophets. Some of their prophecies were recorded, some were not. But whether or not the prophecies were written down, it was not easy for those in the presence of such prophets to forget their words. These prophets, because they announced God's judgment, often sounded harsh, and they occasionally behaved in bizarre ways. Many of those who heard them thought such prophets were trouble-makers, or mad, or worse. After all, these skeptics reasoned, the temple of God was in Jerusalem and the priests served in that temple day and night. As the temple was the center of Jerusalem, so Jerusalem was the center of the world. These skeptics knew that God had often intervened to deliver his people from their enemies or from natural disasters, and they knew that such interventions glorified God himself. They also knew that God's faithfulness was rooted in God's very character. Hence, they believed that to suggest, as these harsh-sounding prophets did, that God would abandon his temple simply because some Israelites had failed to live up to their end of the bargain, was to cast doubt on the integrity and faithfulness of God.

We should not assume by this that such skeptics were ignorant of the terms of the covenant. They knew that God had promised that if the Israelites were disobedient, they would "be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth" (Deuteronomy 28:25), a promise that the nation would not automatically prevail and implying the temple could fall. But surely, such people reasoned, the nation of Israel had not been sufficiently disobedient to deserve such harsh punishment. One need only look at how the other nations behaved to see how much better Israel was than they were. Would God really use less righteous people to punish the more righteous? Would it not make more sense for God to continue to exalt Israel as a witness to the benefits of even a substandard righteousness and of course to glorify himself?

To threaten the temple was a serious matter. Even after the destruction of the first temple, the one built by Solomon, charges that Jesus had said he would destroy the temple built by Herod were enough to get him arraigned before the Sanhedrin (Matthew 26:61). Indeed, the Jews during the first centuries BC and AD considered actions against the temple to be a form of blasphemy. So it is not hard to understand why prophets preaching during the first kingdom period that God would destroy his temple and send his chosen people into exile failed to gain a receptive audience.

But after the Babylonians destroyed the temple in 586 BC, the Israelites, who had by this time begun to think of themselves as Jews or descendants of Judah, the largest of the surviving tribes, pondered the catastrophe and began to realize that the harsh-sounding prophets had been the true prophets after all. Therefore they kept those harsh-sounding prophecies that had been written down and interpreted their

history in terms of the insights they gained from those prophecies. This is the origin of the Old Testament and marks beginnings of Judaism, a faith that expresses a higher theological truth than the one embraced by the earlier Hebrews.

The Historical Background

Since the third millennium BC Egypt had controlled the Levant.⁹ We see evidence of this in Genesis in a rather indirect way. Compared to the rest of Old Testament history, the stories in Genesis seem almost pastoral. Save for an occasional tribal raid like the one involving Lot and Abraham, there is little fighting in Genesis. Instead we encounter herders, traders, and agriculture, and we frequently see important figures journeying to Egypt. This suggested stability probably reflects the presence of imperial Egypt. But by the beginning of the book of Exodus the Egyptian presence in Sinai seems to have weakened considerably. Instead of Egyptian power, one sees fortified cities. And throughout the books of Joshua and Judges Egypt is not present at all. We see instead a collection of smaller regional powers. This dovetails remarkably well with what we know of Egyptian history from other sources. The twentieth dynasty founded by Setnakht in 1200 BC saw the beginning of Egypt's decline, a decline from which it was never to fully recover. During the reigns of Ramses IV and V (1166-1156 BC), Egypt lost her Asian empire, and by 1140 BC and the reign of Ramses IX economically distressed Egyptians were pillaging tombs. Although Egypt remained a power to be reckoned with, she was no longer able to enforce her will in the Levant as she once had. Egypt's decline allowed for among other things the rise of Israel. It also created a power vacuum Assyria and Babylon would find irresistible.

Having established themselves in Canaan, the Israelites were often at war with surrounding kingdoms. Philistia hugging the Mediterranean on the west, Syria (also known as Aram) bordering Galilee and Bashan on the north, and Moab and Ammon to the east were the proximate enemies of the Israelites. But the kings of Israel and later Israel and Judah were able to dominate or stalemate these rivals through their own power or through the power of shifting alliances. It was Assyria and Babylon which proved to be the nemeses of the Israelites. Since the writing prophets came later than those who left no written records, and since Assyria and Babylon threatened the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah during those later years, the writing prophets were primarily though not exclusively concerned with these two great powers.

Assyria traces its roots to Ashur, a small city-state on the upper Tigris River. Its rise to greatness began around 1300 BC when under Shalmaneser I and his successors the Assyrians struggled to secure their frontiers against the Mitannians, the Urartu, the Kassites, and the Elamite tribes. Under Tiglath-pileser I (*circa.* 1113-1074) Assyria captured, then lost, Babylon, and expanded its influence in Syria and Phoenicia, but by the reign of Ashur-rabi (*circa.* 1012-975) pressure from advancing Aramean tribes, who were migrating into the region from the west, cost the Assyrians the territory they had occupied along the Euphrates River. This loss of territory was for Assyria the beginning of two centuries of turmoil following the death of Tiglath-pileser I.

Ashurnasirpal II (883-859) oversaw the beginning of the rise of what historians today call the Neo-Assyrian empire (Assyria in most English translations of the Bible). Moving the capital of Assyria to Nimrud (also known as Calah), he began to initiate trading contacts along the Mediterranean. His son Ashurbanipal III (*circa.* 884-860) sent his armies to secure these commercial contacts and organized Assyria's administrative structures along imperial lines. Ashurbanipal III was succeeded by Shalmaneser III (859-824) who captured cities north of Karkar and in 853 BC defeated a coalition of kings at that site. Although the battle of Karkar is not referred to in Scripture, we know from inscriptions on the Kurkh Monolith, discovered Kurkh on the upper Tigris River near the northern border of Shalmaneser III's empire, that Ahab, king of the Northern Kingdom of Israel,

⁹ In compiling this history, I have used a variety of source. However for many of the dates, especially the more specific ones, I relied upon the third edition of Samuel J. Schultz's *The Old Testament Speaks* (New York, Harper & Row, 1980).

contributed 2000 chariots and 10,000 infantry to a coalition of kings in an effort to stop Shalmaneser III. While the accuracy of the figures describing the contribution of Ahab and the other defeated kings may be disputed, the battle itself and their participation in it is considered reliable history.¹⁰

As Karkar is northwest of Hamath (modern Hamah) on the Orontes River, one might have expected Shalmaneser III to press his advantage and attack Hamath immediately, but either the battle of Karkar had weakened his forces significantly or the Assyrian army had yet to reach that level of proficiency that characterized it later. Whatever the reason, Shalmaneser III did not press his advantage until 848/47.

Between 841 and 837 BC Shalmaneser III in an unsuccessful effort to capture Damascus attacked the Syrian king Hazael five times before turning his attention to campaigns in the north.

Ahamshi-adad V assumed the throne in 823 BC and reigned until 811. He spent much of his rule suppressing revolts. Adadnirari III (810-783) and Ashurnirari (754-745) were able to maintain Assyria as an important regional power but were not able to lead its armies on campaigns of conquest. It was during this period when Assyria was relatively quiescent that Hosea and Amos began to prophesy.

The murder of Sennacherib at the hands of his two sons in 681 BC heralded no reversal in Assyria's fortunes. Sennacherib's successor Esarhaddon (681 - 669 BC) not only marched into Egypt to defeat Taharka but also rebuilt Babylon, the city Sargon had subdued and Sennacherib had destroyed. Some historians have suggested that Esarhaddon's wife may have been Babylonian, a circumstance that, if true, could explain his desire to preserve that rival city. Whatever the reason for his interest in Babylon, Esarhaddon put Samassumukin, one of his sons, in charge of the province, and sent Manasseh there as a captive (II Chronicles 33:10 - 13). Then, while with his army in Egypt, Esarhaddon died at Harran in December 669 BC.

He was succeeded by Ashurbanipal (668 - 630) under whom Assyria reached the pinnacle of its power and glory. Ashurbanipal captured Thebes, the capital of Upper Egypt, in 663 BC. This was a severe blow to Judah since Judah had sought an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. Following his conquest of Thebes, Ashurbanipal put down a revolt by his brother Samassumukin, burning Babylon in 648 BC after famine had driven the city's defenders to cannibalism. As the city was in flames, Samassumukin immolated himself and possibly his family, though there is a tradition that his family escaped. But Ashurbanipal was more than a victorious military leader, he also had a keen interest in learning and amassed a great library at Nineveh, the first of its kind in the ancient Near East, thus helping to secure the city as a center of culture.

It was during the reign of Ashurbanipal or immediately following it, that is, during the height of Assyria's period of dominance, that Nahum (the name means "consolation" or "comfort" and is probably a contraction of a longer Hebrew term meaning "Yahweh is a comforter") prophesied Nineveh's destruction. Almost nothing is known of Nahum's life beyond that he was from Elkosh (Nahum 1:1), a settlement of uncertain location. There is a tradition that he lived in exile and prophesied in the vicinity of Nineveh but this is doubtful. It is more likely that Elkosh was in Galilee, that Nahum lived there during the Assyrian invasions of Samaria, and that, perhaps because of those invasions, he migrated to Judea where he lived at the time he prophesied. Such paucity of biographical material for contributors to Scripture is not unusual. They focus not on themselves but on their message.

¹⁰ Discussing the Kurkh Monolith and the famous Black Obelisk discovered at Nimrud by Sir Austin Henry Layard in 1846, Tammi Schneider argues in "Did King Jehu Kill His Own Family" (*Biblical Archaeology Review*, January/February 1995, Volume 21, Number 1) that Jehu who appears on the Black Obelisk as "Jehu, son of Omri" was indeed a descendent of that polygamous king.

Babylon is first mentioned around 2300 BC when it served as a provincial center under the third dynasty of Ur. In 1894 BC it became the capital of a small kingdom set up by an Amorite monarch named Sumuabum. Hammurabi (1792 - 1750 BC) made the city the seat of an empire that covered southern Mesopotamia and what is now northern Iraq. Babylon was conquered by the Kassites in 1595 BC and, though briefly held by Tukulti-Ninurta I of Assyria in 1234, was controlled by the Kassites until 1158 BC when it was sacked by the Elamites. Like Hammurabi, Nebuchadnezzar I (1124 - 1103 BC) exercised dominion from Babylon, but from the ninth to the seventh centuries BC the city became, as we have seen, part of the Assyrian empire. However, by the middle of the seventh century, Babylon, conscious of its own imperial past under Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar I, was becoming restive, and, as Egypt under Psammetichus I broke free of Assyrian control in 654, that restiveness looked likely to bear fruit. The Assyrians certainly had their hands full during the seventh century. In addition to rebellions, the nomadic and warlike Scythians, outstanding horsemen whose homeland was on the northern shores of the Black Sea, invaded Assyria, raiding as far south as Palestine.

With Samassumukin, Ashurbanipal's brother, as its leader, Babylon revolted against Assyria, as we saw in the last chapter, and was burned in 648 BC. After Ashurbanipal's death in 630, the city rebelled again in 627 under Samassumukin's successor Kandalanu, but Babylon's independence was not finally secured until Nabopolassar successfully met an Assyrian force marching to the Assyrian city of Nippur located between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers sixty miles southeast of Babylon. As a consequence of his victory he was recognized as king of Babylon on November 22 -23, 626 BC.

Four years later in 622 Nabopolassar conquered Nippur and from the city was able to control river traffic that connected major Assyrian cities like Carchemish, Haran, Ashur, Nimrud, and Nineveh itself to the Persian Gulf. In 616 BC he renewed his pressure on the Assyrians, pushing them as far north as Haran, a city east of the Euphrates. In response the Assyrians forged an alliance with Egypt but despite this alliance, the Median ruler Cyaxares, aided by the Babylonians, captured the Assyrian city Ashur in 614 BC. This victory led to a formal Medo-Babylonian alliance that was sealed by a marriage.

After Nineveh and Nimrud fell in 612, Ashurballit, the new Assyrian king, reorganized his forces at Haran. In 609 BC Nabopolassar with the assistance of Umman-manda troops (identified by some historians with the Scythians, by others with the Medes) defeated a combination of Egyptian forces led by Necho and Assyrian forces led by Ashurballit at Haran. The Egyptians withdrew to Carchemish and Ashurballit pulled back to the west bank of the Euphrates. Failing in his attempt to recapture Haran, Ashurballit retreated north to Urartu, one of the first regions conquered by Assyria, and the remnants of the once mighty Assyria empire faded from history.

In 607 BC Nabopolassar resumed his attack on the Egyptian forces stationed on the upper Euphrates, conducting several raids against them until 605 BC when he turned the command of his army over to his son Nebuchadnezzar II. Nebuchadnezzar II captured Carchemish in the early summer of 605, then again defeated the Egyptians at Hamath as they retreated. By August he was in control of Syria and Palestine, having driven the Egyptians back to Egypt. On August 15/16 Nabopolassar died and Nebuchadnezzar hurried to Babylon where he was crowned on September 6/7, the same day he arrived. Under his rule, which lasted until 562, Babylon became a major imperial power.

At approximately the time Nabopolassar was winning Babylon's independence, two prophets in Judah were proclaiming God's word to a people who would watch and later experience the turbulence as one imperial power died and another was born. Those prophets were Zephaniah and Habakkuk.

Assyria had destroyed Israel. Babylon would conquer Judah and sack Jerusalem.

The Fall of Jerusalem

Jerusalem had fallen before. Shishak of Egypt pillaged the city while Solomon's son Rehoboam sat on the throne (I King 14:25 - 28). During the reign of Jehoram the Philistines in league with the Arabians broke into the city "and carried away all the substance that was found in the king's house, and his sons and his wives" (II Chronicles 21:16 - 17). And Israel led by king Jehoash also looted the holy city (II Kings 14:13 - 14). The temple had been defiled and stripped of its precious metals on at least two of those occasions, but the temple had never before been destroyed nor had so many among the Jewish leaders been brought into bondage. When in 722/21 BC a similar catastrophe befell Israel, and Samaria after a three year siege was captured (II Kings 17:5), the ten tribes dwelling in the Northern Kingdom never recovered. Indeed, those remaining in the land lost their identity as Israelites and were called Samaritans (II Kings 17:29). Therefore it should come as no surprise that the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and their exile in Babylon left the Jews disorganized and fragmented. What is surprising is that they were not destroyed by the experience. Instead, as we noted earlier, they were transformed. They showed that they could maintain their identity as a people apart from the land, and could retain their religious identity without the temple or the tabernacle, both of which had loomed large in their theological universe. During the years of exile, the first rabbis and synagogues began to appear; prayer, pious works, and study of the sacred texts became practical substitutes for the sacrificial cultus; circumcision and the Sabbath assumed an importance they had not had before; and the Jews, reflecting upon their history in the light of the vindication of the harsh sounding prophets, wrote the books of Samuel and the Kings. Even the Hebrew script in which they were written was transformed. The flowing strokes of Old Hebrew were replaced by the block letters in which Hebrew is still written today.¹¹

One might have expected such a fertile period of religious ferment to have inspired intense prophetic activity, but that does not seem to have been the case. Instead we know of only two prophets dating from this time: Obadiah whose prophecy is directed not against Babylon but against Edom, and Joel whose prophecy is occasioned by a plague of grasshoppers. While the book of Daniel, a combination of history, biography, and apocalyptic visions which the Jews themselves included among the Kethuvim or Writings rather than among the prophets, also relates to the captivity, we shall not be considering it here. Its form places it somewhat outside the purview of the prophesies we are considering in this study.

The Babylonian exile, or the Babylonian captivity as it is often called, is dated between 586 BC when the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed and 516 BC when it was rebuilt, thus lasting the seventy years Jeremiah had prophesied.

And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

Jeremiah 25:11 (see, too, Daniel 9:2 and Zechariah 7:5)

Nebuchadnezzar II died in 562 BC. Under him Babylon had become a great power, but with his death, the glory that was Babylon began to fade. Awel-Marduk, also known as Evil-Merodach, Nebuchadnezzar's successor, ruled from 562 until 560 when he was murdered by Neriglissar, probably the same man referred to in Jeremiah 39:3 and 39:13 as Nergal-sharezer, the "Rab-mag" (KJV, ASV), "Rabmag" (RSV), or "a high official" (NIV) who released Jeremiah after the fall of Jerusalem. Rab-mag is an interesting word appearing only in those two passages of Scripture. It is probably coined by combining *magi*, a Persian loan word describing a class of Zoroastrian priests, and *rab* a Hebrew word indicating abundant rank. It is possible that Neriglissar murdered Awel-

¹¹ *Biblical Archaeology Review*, March/April 1997, "Defusing Pseudo-Scholarship: the Siloam Inscriptions Ain't Hasmonian", see especially Jo Ann Hackett's article "Spelling Differences and Letter Shapes Are Telltale Signs", pp. 42 - 44

Marduk as part of a revolution that had the support of both the priests and the army and then assumed the throne as the husband of Nebuchadnezzar's daughter.

In 557 BC Neriglissar decisively repelled an invasion by the forces of king Appuasu of Cilicia (what is now southern Turkey), a nation that had won its independence from Assyria after the death of Ashurbanipal, and then conquered the island of Pitusu. Having demonstrated his military skill on both land and sea, Neriglissar returned home triumphantly in February - March 556 and died the same year.

His young son Labashi-Marduk ruled for a few months before he was murdered by Nabonidus, one of his courtiers, who then seized the throne. Nabonidus ruled until 539. He was the last king of Babylon.

Nabonidus was a very religious man. While Marduk was the god of Babylon and the head of the pantheon during the period of the Babylonian empire, Nabonidus was devoted to Sin, the moon-god worshipped by his parents at Haran. The temple of Sin at Haran had been destroyed in 610 BC by the Medes and not restored, so when Cyprus rebelled against the Medes, Nabonidus made a treaty with Cyprus and was able to reinstate the cult of Sin. So absorbed did he become in promoting the cult of Sin that he neglected the city of Babylon which was of course associated with Marduk. However, he continued to oversee his empire and in 554 and 553 conducted successful military campaigns against Syria and Edom. Finally, in 548 he moved to the city of Tema in Arabia and between 549 and 545 turned governing authority in Babylon over to Belshazzar.

The Rise of Persia

Meanwhile a new power was making itself felt in the region. Cyrus the Great of Persia came to the throne in 559 as a vassal of Media. Taking advantage of the weak rule of Astyages, the ruler of Media since 585, Cyrus made an alliance with Babylon, then moved against Astyages. Faced with the Persian threat Astyages' own army rebelled against him and turned him over to Cyrus in 550. Deeply concerned, Nabonidus, Croesus of Lydia (a kingdom in what is now northwestern Turkey), and Amasis of Egypt who was nominally under Nabonidus' control, concluded an alliance, but when Cyrus attacked Croesus at Cappadocia in 547, neither Nabonidus or Amasis moved to help him. The battle was indecisive, giving Croesus room to withdraw to Sardis where he hoped to winter, rebuild his army, and, with the help of his allies, repel Cyrus the following spring. But Cyrus in a surprise campaign struck at Sardis and, using camels to panic the horses in the superior cavalry of Croesus, captured both Sardis and Miletus. This checked the Greeks in the west and left Cyrus free to campaign in the east.

Interpreting these events as a sign of divine dissatisfaction with his effort to reinstate the cult of Sin, Nabonidus, in an attempt to restore the worship of Marduk, Nebo, and other neglected gods, left Tema and return to Babylon. But his reception by the priests was unenthusiastic and the general population was dissatisfied with the belated reforms. Therefore when Cyrus invaded the Babylonian empire in 539 he was hailed as a liberator. Ur, Larsa, Erech, Kish, and finally Sippar surrendered with token resistance or none at all. Then on October 13, 539 BC, Gobryas of Susa in Elam east of the Tigris, one of Cyrus' commanders, captured Babylon itself. Belshazzar was killed but Nabonidus escaped, was captured, and treated favorably after his release.

So it was that the Jews then lived under Babylonian rule for 47 of the 70 years that elapsed between the destruction of Solomon's temple and the construction of the second temple, and under Persian rule until 332 BC when Alexander the Great moved against Darius III and Palestine was occupied by Alexander's armies. Although Persian rule does not seem to have been particularly harsh, the Jews apparently celebrated Alexander as a liberator, for according to legend the High Priest of Jerusalem at the head of a formal procession welcomed him to the city.

While empires like Assyria and Babylon had relocated their subject peoples in an effort to undermine and discourage revolt, Persia allowed those dispersed populations to return to their native lands. Reestablishing defeated nations in their homelands and allowing them to worship their own deities in their own temples there may have been an effort on the part of Cyrus to restore order to a cosmos badly disrupted by the Assyrians and Babylonians. Certainly, as we saw, Nabonidus by the end of his reign had come to believe that his problems were the result of his neglect of the gods and that some form of earlier worship needed to be restored, and just as certainly Cyrus claimed to be an agent of the gods, although this was a common claim at the time, rather like people today who believe themselves to be agents of history. Whatever their rational for it, both Cyrus and Darius I were very serious about the policy. Darius pursued it even though the early part of his reign was disrupted by widespread rebellions, and Cyrus began his reign by initiating the new program. In his first year in what would have been in 538 BC, Cyrus issued a proclamation allowing the Jews to return to Israel (Ezra 1:1).

The Return of the Jews

The return of the Jews took place in three or four waves: the first immediately following Cyrus' decree was led by Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah (Ezra 1:8, 11). His was a Babylonian name. During the exile it was common for Jews to take or be given Babylonian names. See Daniel 1:7. Zerubbabel, one of these returning Jews, was named governor of Judah (Haggai 2:21). Jeshua or Joshua, the high priest, also accompanied these returnees. The first wave began to rebuild the temple, but, encountering local opposition, abandoned the project for fifteen to eighteen years before being spurred by Zechariah and Haggai to finish it during the reign of Darius I (521 - 485). Some scholars suggest that Zerubbabel and Jeshua may have been part of a migration of Jews who resettled in Palestine during the early years of Darius I and that Zechariah and Haggai also arrived with this wave. If that were the case, there would have been four waves of immigrants instead of three.

The second wave (or the third) was led by Nehemiah who under Artaxerxes I (464 - 423) built the walls of Jerusalem. During the building of the wall the Samaritans led by Sanballat (Nehemiah, chapter 4) created a great deal of trouble for the returning Jews. Nehemiah through the course of these years made two trips to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 2:11 and 13:6 - 7), finishing the wall on his first visit and cleansing the temple during his second.

The third wave (or the fourth) was led by Ezra himself under the reign of Artaxerxes II (404 - 358). Ezra renewed worship and brought the Mosaic law (Ezra 7:10), although passages he quotes (Ezra 9:11 - 12 and Nehemiah 8:14 - 15) are not in the version of the Pentateuch we possess. We should note here that some scholars believe Ezra may have returned under Artaxerxes I prior to Nehemiah's first journey (contrast Ezra 7:7 with Nehemiah 2:1 - the Artaxerxes in question is not identified as I or II) but the construction that posits Ezra's return as occurring under Artaxerxes II seems to make better sense of the account. Malachi probably prophesied sometime during this wave or the one prior to it. Scholars generally date his book anywhere from 500 to 400 BC.

The years wrap us unevenly
In their variegated textures.
For time unfolds according to its order.
But we get old a piece at a time.
A string of gray surrounds us.
A persistent stiffness,
A crumb of decay, a sudden splinter of pain.
Old age comes unevenly.
Rapping at us like a woodpecker.

Dr. Ben Michael Carter



Mike's library is available for viewing at 2505 W. Northgate Drive in Irving Texas.



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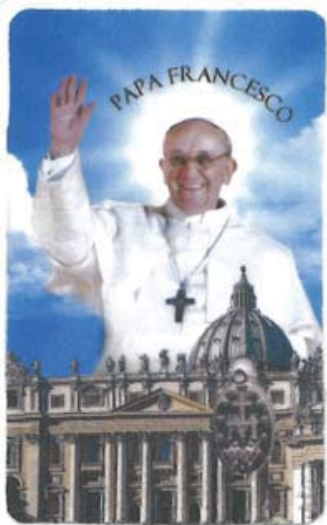
FIRST SECTION - GENERAL AFFAIRS

From the Vatican, 19 September 2017

Dear Ms Carter,

I am writing to acknowledge the gift of inscribed copies of Dr Ben Michael Carter's writings, which you presented to His Holiness Pope Francis.

In expressing appreciation for this kind gesture, I am pleased to assure you of His Holiness's prayers for your late husband and for you and your intentions.

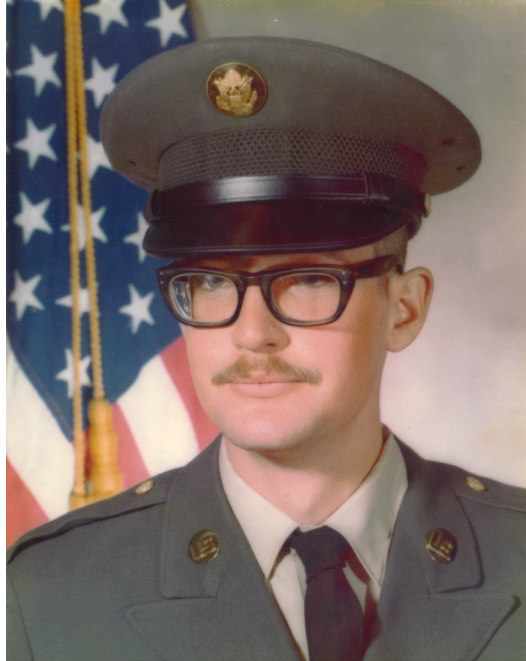


Yours sincerely,

Monsignor Paolo Borgia
Assessor

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Ben Michael “Mike” Carter was a Renaissance man who loved writing. He authored six theology books and a novel. He also wrote for magazines, journals and newspapers, as well as poetry reviews. He earned a B.A. in Economic History from the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, an MA in theological studies from Wheaton College, Illinois, an M.Th. from the University of Aberdeen in Scotland, U.K., and a Ph.D. in History of Christianity in the non-western world from the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, United Kingdom. He was a member of the Irving chapter of the Texas Poetry Society, the American Scientific Affiliation, and the Evangelical Theological Society. He was married to Salma Carunia from Dohnavur Fellowship, Tirunelvel, South India.