

Literary Prophecy: Hosea and Isaiah

Lecture 17 Transcript

<https://oyc.yale.edu/religious-studies/rlst-145/lecture-17>

Overview

The lecture focuses on the eighth-century northern prophet Hosea, a linguistically difficult book set against the backdrop of the expansionist Assyrian Empire. Hosea's marriage symbolizes Israel's relationship with God and serves to remind Israel of God's forbearance and Israel's obligations and pledge to loyalty under the covenant at Sinai. The second half of the lecture shifts to Isaiah and his emphasis on the Davidic Covenant, rather than the Mosaic one, a key distinction between him and Hosea. Themes in Isaiah include the salvation of a remnant, Israel's election to a mission and an eschatology that centers around a "messiah" (anointed) king of the house of David.

1. Historical Background for and Major Themes of the Book of Hosea

[1] *Professor Christine Hayes:* We're going to move on now to our second literary prophet and this is the prophet Hosea. He was a native of the northern kingdom. So Amos and Hosea you're going to associate with the Assyrian crisis and they are prophets of the northern kingdom of Israel. He's prophesying in the time of Jeroboam II. Jeroboam reigned until about 747. And then he continues to the last king who is, confusingly, named Hosea. So he prophesies in the 740s, '30s, '20s, somewhere in there. He doesn't seem to have seen the fall of Israel though. Now, Hosea is considered by many to be the most difficult of the prophetic books. The Hebrew is very difficult and it sometimes seems rather garbled. It's very hard to render it intelligibly.

[2] But structurally, we can divide the book into two main sections. Chapters 1 to 3 have a certain coherence to them, and then chapters 4 through 14. 1 to 3 tells of the prophet's marriage to a promiscuous woman named Gomer. His marriage is a metaphor for Israel's relationship with God. And these chapters also contain an indictment or a lawsuit. Remember this riv form, lawsuit form. We're going to see it both in Hosea and Isaiah today. Then chapters 4 through 14 contain oracles primarily, oracles against the nations but also against the Kingdom of Israel. We're going to be focusing primarily on chapters 1 to 3 since

these are so distinctive to Hosea and we'll refer occasionally to some of the other chapters where they might pronounce an important theme for Hosea.

[3] So again, the historical background for the Book of Hosea is the Assyrian threat. The Assyrians are wiping out a number of the smaller states in the Ancient Near East in the middle of the eighth century. And Israel obviously could not be far behind. The line that was taken by Hosea was to condemn the attempts that were made by various kings, by Israel's kings, to withstand defeat or to avoid defeat at the hands of Assyria. If Assyria was going to conquer Israel, Hosea said, then it was God's just punishment. And to fight against it, to fight against the inevitable was simply another kind of rejection of God, another rejection of his plans and purpose. It demonstrated a lack of trust or faith in the power of God. Hosea 10:13 spells out the disastrous consequences of trusting in human power or foreign alliances rather than trusting in God. And this is a theme that we'll see occurring again and again. Hosea 10:13, "You have plowed wickedness, / you have reaped iniquity — / [And] you shall eat the fruits of treachery — / Because you relied on your way, / On your host of warriors." He was suggesting inaction. Now, that surely would have been viewed by the king and the court as against all reason. But this was Hosea's insistence. Israel was faced with a choice. In whom should she

place her trust? In God, or in human leaders and their armies?

- [4] Hosea 1:7 goes so far as to suggest that actually the moment of decision has past for the northern kingdom. There's still some hope for the southern kingdom, but the northern kingdom has obviously made its choice and it was the wrong choice. Hosea says that God says,

“...I will no longer accept the house of Israel or pardon them. (But I will accept the House of Judah. And I will give them victory through the Lord their God;” — a victory through the Lord their God. “I will not give them victory with bow and sword and battle, by horses and riders.”

- [5] If you think that's what gives you victory you're mistaken. Some see that verse as perhaps a later interpolation into Hosea; it has such a positive assessment of the southern kingdom. But there is this sense of impending disaster that resonates throughout the Book of Hosea. Chapter 8:7, “They sow wind, / And they shall reap whirlwind — / Standing stalks devoid of ears / And yielding no flour. / If they do yield any, Strangers shall devour it. / Israel is bewildered;” So the catastrophe is unavoidable, and Hosea's often been described as painting a portrait of unrelieved gloom. He's very grim. He seems to hold out no real hope for Israel. She has to pay the price for her infidelity to God.

- [6] But we need to look a little more closely at some of the themes of the book before we accept that evaluation entirely. And I think the one overarching theme that helps us organize most of the material in the Book of Hosea, and one that shows its deep indebtedness to or interconnectedness with the Book of Deuteronomy, is the theme of covenant, particularly Deuteronomy's notion of covenant. So I put covenant at the top there and we see this theme being played out in several different ways.

- [7] The first I've just discussed: as Yahweh's covenant partner — as the vassal of the covenant partner, Yahweh, the sovereign — Israel should be placing her confidence entirely in Yahweh. Any foreign alliance, any alliance with Egypt against Assyria for example, is against the terms of that covenant, that

exclusive treaty between God and Israel. And she should not be relying on her military might, but relying on the sovereign, the suzerain. So anything short of complete trust in Yahweh's power to save the vassal Israel is a violation of the terms of the covenant. So we see it in the notion of its confidence, exclusive confidence and trust in God and his power.

- [8] A second way in which the theme of covenant is expressed is found in Hosea's denunciation of social injustice and moral decay, and of course this is a theme that's common to the prophets. Here he follows Amos. But he's now the first to couch his charge in the form of this formal rive, or lawsuit, in which God is said to bring a charge against Israel for violating the terms of the covenant, for breach of covenant. This happens in chapter 4, the first three verses of chapter 4 — Israel is charged. And Hosea employs language that deliberately invokes the Decalogue:

Hear the word of the Lord,

O people of Israel!

For the Lord has a case [=a lawsuit]

against the inhabitants of this land,

Because there is no honesty and no goodness

And no obedience to God in the land.

[False] swearing, dishonesty, and murder,

And theft and adultery are rife.

- [9] Picking out key terms from the Decalogue: false swearing; murder, theft and adultery, which of course occur in a threesome in the Decalogue. These things are rife. “Crime follows upon crime! / For that, the earth is withered: / Everything that dwells on it languishes — / Beasts of the field and birds of the sky — / Even the fish of the sea perish.”

- [10] Unlike Amos, Hosea also engages in a prolonged or sustained condemnation of Israel's religious faithlessness, which is figured in terms of adultery. And so here again, the theme of covenant is dominant and organizes the prophet's presentation. To represent Israel's faithlessness, he invokes other types of covenantal relationships as metaphors, most notably the metaphor of marriage. Marriage can be referred to as a brit, as a covenant

between a husband and wife, and so it's an appropriate metaphor. And we see it primarily in chapters 1 through 3. He addresses the relationship between Yahweh and Israel through the metaphor of marriage, and Israel is the unfaithful adulterous wife. He describes, in lurid terms, her lecherous addiction to images and idols, her adulterous worship of Baal. He points to the nation's leaders and their failures, the kings and the priests, their failure to prevent the peoples' waywardness, their debauchery.

[11] The first chapter is reported in the third person. And this contains God's command to Hosea to marry a promiscuous woman as a symbol of God's own marriage with a faithless wife, Israel. "Go, get yourself a wife of whoredom and children of whoredom; for the land will stray from following the Lord." (1:2) So he marries this woman named Gomer and she bears three children who have very inauspicious names. These names are symbolic of God's anger over Israel's religious infidelity: (1) Jezreel. Jezreel because God plans to punish Jehu for his slaughter of the house of Ahab. Even though Ahab was no favorite of God, you still should not raise your hand against the Lord's anointed. And so Jehu will have to be — Ahab will have to be avenged. Jehu will have to be punished at Jezreel, which is where the murder happened. (2) Lo-ruhamah, which means "not loved, not forgiven," because God will no longer love or forgive or pardon the House of Israel and (3) the third child's name is Lo-ammi, "not my people," a sign that God has dissolved the covenant bond. He's rejected Israel as his people — divorced Israel. There really could be no more stark and shocking denial of the covenant than this.

[12] 3 contains a first person (Hosea's first-person) account of God's command to him. There it's said that God commands him to befriend, although he seems to hire, a woman on condition that she not consort with others. The woman, again, symbolizes Israel, who's brought into an exclusive relationship that requires her to remain faithful to one party in contrast to her customary behavior. And then sandwiched between chapter 1 and chapter 3, both of which have the accounts of these relationships that are metaphors for God and Israel's relationship — sandwiched between them is the almost schizophrenic chapter 2. It contains, again, this sustained violent, very

violent account of the faithless wife, of faithless Israel and God's formal declaration of divorce. "She is not my wife and I am not her husband." This would effect a divorce, this statement uttered by a husband. We have that in verse 4. And yet, this chapter also contains a very gentle, very loving portrait of reconciliation.

[13] And it's in that portrait of reconciliation that we see another aspect of the covenant concept emerge. An aspect that was, again, most pronounced in the Book of Deuteronomy. As Israel's covenant partner God loves Israel and he actually longs for her faithfulness. This steadfast covenantal love — one of the words that's used repeatedly is *hesed*, but it refers to a special kind of steadfast love, loyal love — this covenantal love will reconcile God to wayward Israel just as Hosea is reunited or reconciled with his faithless wife. And the prophet imagines a return to the wilderness. God is imagining — it would be wonderful if we could return to the wilderness and covenant again, and this time it would even be a permanent, an eternal marriage. And the three children who were cast off at birth, they will be redeemed and accepted by their father. Those are some of the ideas contained in this passage. This is Hosea 2:16-25, the reconciliation:

Assuredly,

I will speak coaxingly to her

And lead her through the wilderness

And speak to her tenderly.

I will give her her vineyards from there

And the Valley of Achor as a plowland of hope.

There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,

When she came up from the land of Egypt.

[14] (So the period of the Exodus and wandering is romantically imagined as, this time, of a very good and close relationship between God and Israel.)

"And in that day you will call me Ishi and no more will you call me Baali."

[15] (This is a pun. Both of these words can mean my husband. Ishi is "my man," a male. And

Baali is “my Lord.” Women would have used both for their husbands. But Baal, obviously, has connotations with the god Baal. So instead of calling me Baali, “my Baal,” you will call me Ishi, “my husband” using a word that’s free of Baal connotations.)

“For I will remove the names of the Baalim from her mouth,

And they shall nevermore be mentioned by name. In that day I will make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; I will banish bow, sword, and war from the land. Thus, I will let them lie down in safety. And I will espouse you forever:” (back to the marriage metaphor.) ... “I will espouse you with righteousness and justice,

And with goodness and mercy,

And I will espouse you with faithfulness;

Then you shall be devoted to the Lord.

In that day,

I will respond — declares the Lord —

I will respond to the sky,

And it shall respond to the earth;

And the earth shall respond

With new grain and wine and oil,

And they shall respond to Jezreel.”

[the first of the children]. “I will sow her in the land as My own;”

[16] (Jezreel was a fertile valley not just a place of war and death.)

“And [I will] take Lo-ruhamah [not loved] back in favor;

And I will say to Lo-ammi, [not my people], “You are my people”

And he will respond,” [You are] my God.”

[17] So Hosea isn’t unrelievedly gloomy and grim. It does provide these images, these very stirring images of hope and consolation and reconciliation. Amos also held out hope in the form of a remnant that would survive the inevitable destruction. So we need to think about the two traditions that prophets like Amos and Hosea are drawing on in this

combined message of doom on the one hand, and hope on the other.

2. *Doom and Hope as Two Conceptions of Covenant*

[18] Really, what the prophets are doing is drawing on two conceptions of covenant: the two conceptions that we saw in our study of the Pentateuchal material and on into Samuel. On the one hand they recognize the unconditional and eternal, irrevocable covenant that God established with the patriarchs as well as the eternal covenant with David, with the House of David. Those covenants were the basis for the belief that God would never forsake his people. But on the other hand, of course, they place emphasis on the covenant at Sinai. It’s a conditional covenant. It requires the people’s obedience to moral, religious and civil laws in the covenant code. And it threatens punishment for their violation. So the prophets are playing with both of these themes. Israel has violated the Sinaitic Covenant and the curses that are stipulated by the covenant must follow: national destruction and even exile. They will follow; they have to. But alienation from God is not, and never will be, complete and irreparable because of the unconditional covenant, the covenant with the patriarchs, the covenant with the House of David. So Israel will be God’s people forever despite temporary alienation.

[19] The notion of election, an act of purely undeserved or unmerited favor and love on God’s part not due in any way to a special merit of the people undergirds the prophetic message of consolation. And Hosea paints a very poignant and moving portrait of this special and indissoluble love that God bears for Israel. And in doing so, he draws on a second metaphor. So we’ve had the metaphor of husband and wife, which is a kind of covenantal relationship. We also have the metaphor of parent-son, which can also be understood in terms of a covenant with obligations. The parent-son relationship entails loyalty and love, but also obligation. One of the obligations that is understood to fall on the parent is the obligation of disciplining a rebellious or ungrateful child, while never forsaking that child. So that’s a model that works very well with the prophetic message.

[20] Hosea 11:1-4, and then skipping to verses 8 through 9,

I fell in love with Israel
When he was still a child;
And I have called [him] My son
Ever since Egypt.
Thus were they called,
But they went their own way;
They sacrifice to Baalim
And offer to carved images.
I have pampered Ephraim,

[21] — another name for Israel, right? Ephraim —

Taking them in My arms;
But they have ignored
My healing care.
I drew them with human ties,
With cords of love;
But I seemed to them as one
Who imposed a yoke on their jaws,
Though I was offering them food... How
can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah,
Render you like Zeboiim?
[other foreign places]. I have had a change
of heart,
All my tenderness is stirred.
I will not act on My wrath,
Will not turn to destroy Ephraim.
For I am God, not man,
The Holy One in your midst:
I will not come in fury.

[22] You have these alternating passages of violent rejection and tender, tender love and reconciliation. And with these alternating passages, the prophet is able to capture or convey a passionate struggle taking place in the heart of God. They're giving us that passionate, emotional portrait of God. It's the struggle of a lover who's torn between his jealous wrath and

his undying love. And it's a struggle that is won ultimately by love because God cannot let Israel go.

[23] We're going to see that each of the prophets we'll look at holds these two covenantal ideas in tension, and they will emphasize one or the other depending on the particular situation, the particular historical situation. Sometimes when it's a time of relative ease or comfort, then the prophet emphasizes the violations of the Sinaitic covenant, the punishment that will inevitably come for these violations, and they'll downplay God's eternal commitment to his people. But in times of despair and suffering and destruction then the prophet may point out that violations of the covenant were the cause of the distress but they will emphasize God's undying love for Israel and hold out hope therefore for a better future.

3. Historical Background for and Structure of the Book of Isaiah

[24] Now, we're going to leave the northern prophets and move to southern prophets. Isaiah is the longest prophetic book. The interpretation of many passages in the book of Isaiah as symbolic references to Jesus make it one of the most quoted books of the Bible by Christians. Isaiah was a contemporary of Amos and Hosea. Second half of the eighth century. He was active for a little bit longer period. He was active into about the 690s, somewhere in there. But he prophesied in the southern kingdom of Judah when the Assyrian empire threatened and destroyed the northern kingdom (the northern kingdom falls in 722) and then of course was threatening Judah. So he's active for over 50 years and he counseled Judah's kings. He counsels them through two sieges. I've listed these for you: The siege of 734, where he counsels King Ahaz, and then the siege of 701, where he counsels his son, Hezekiah or Hizkiah, Hezekiah.

[25] I'll give you a little bit of historical background to these sieges so you understand them, but those are the main dates that can help orient your approach to Isaiah. We have excellent evidence, by the way, for all of these events in the Assyrian sources, and also archaeological finds. The archaeological finds show destruction by the Assyrians at the places that we believe were destroyed at the times they [the former] were destroyed. But this is what

happened. In 734, you have the Assyrians, who at this time are under Tiglath-Pileser, and they're extending their control through the region. So they're coming from the northeast. First they're going to hit Aram in Syria, and then advance on the northern kingdom of Israel. So Aram and Israel join together in an alliance. They were trying to resist the advancing Assyrians. Judah refused to join the alliance. The southern kingdom refused. So in anger, Aram and Israel moved south and lay siege to Jerusalem. So the first siege, the siege of 734 was actually a siege of Jerusalem by the northern kingdom of Israel in alliance with the Aramaeans. They were trying to force Judah's cooperation in standing against Assyria. King Ahaz of Judah decided to appeal to Assyria for help, to Tiglath-Pileser for help. He submits to the Assyrians as a vassal. He pays tribute. We have a record of the tribute that was paid in the Assyrian records, in 734. And this action is condemned by the biblical writers. The Deuteronomistic historian in Second Kings 16 condemns this action. Isaiah also condemns it.

demonstrable in the Book of Isaiah. I've put the basic structure up there for you. The first 11 chapters contain memoirs. Chapter 1 sets out some of the basic themes of Isaiah but we have a lot of first-person narrative. Then we have various oracles against Israel. Some of this material refers to the attacks on Jerusalem, especially the siege of 701. And there seems to be a kind of concluding hymn in chapter 12. We then have about 11 chapters of oracles against foreign nations (that's a form that we also saw in Amos and Hosea — denouncing foreign nations) from chapters 13 to 23. I'm skipping over chapters 24 to 27. They are a little apocalypse, a sort of mythological vision of the end of days, and that probably dates to a much later time, the sixth century. That was the time in which the apocalyptic genre was really developing. So we skip over that (we don't think of that as associated with the historical Isaiah) and move on to chapters 28 to 33. Here, we turn from oracles against foreign nations to oracles against Judah and Israel and the relationship with Egypt. This is a time when we're caught between these two powers — Egypt and Assyria. Judah is trying to figure out with whom to make alliances. Should she cast her lot with Egypt, and so on. And these are from a slightly later period down towards the siege of 701 and they include accounts of Isaiah's counsel to Hezekiah in 701. 34 and 35 we'll kind of skip over for now. These also are post-exilic insertions. And then chapters 36 to 39 — this is third-person, historical narrative and it is, in fact, 2 Kings chapters 18 to 20. That material has simply been inserted here. So, those three chapters appear here in Isaiah. It's the story of the invasion of Sennecharib and the interactions of Isaiah and Hezekiah during the siege in 701.

[26] So, Judah has made itself vassal to Assyria. And this is the case until Ahaz's son Hezekiah decides that he will assert the nation's independence. The Assyrians are angry about this. This is now after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrians are angry and under Sennecharib they attack. They devastate many of the cities in the countryside (and again archaeology confirms what we know from the Assyrian records) and they advance on Jerusalem and lay siege to Jerusalem in 701. And just as he had counseled King Ahaz, Isaiah now counsels Hezekiah. In the end Jerusalem wasn't destroyed. Heavy tribute was paid to the Assyrians but eventually the Assyrians did withdraw. They were overextended to a large degree.

[27] That's the general historic background. We'll come back to some of the details in a minute. But let me first give you a sense of the general structure of this very large book.

[28] The claim that the prophetic books are anthologies, anthologies of oracles and other materials compiled by the prophet or by his disciples, that is to say, schools that kept a set of prophecies and then added to those core prophecies because of their firm belief in their continuing relevance — that portrait of the anthological nature of prophetic books is really

[29] So I'm stopping at chapter 39 even though there are 66 chapters in the Book of Isaiah because most scholars agree, I think this is really a very strong consensus, that the remaining material is not the work of Isaiah of Jerusalem. It dates to a period long after Isaiah's lifetime. I've already mentioned the apocalypse which we think is probably from the sixth century. That's embedded in there, chapters 24 to 27. But the remaining material we speak of in two main sections. We refer to these as Second Isaiah and Third Isaiah. Chapters 40 to 55, which we refer to as Second Isaiah, assume a historical setting in which

Babylon is dominant, not Assyria. And so we see that as coming at a much later time. Chapters 56 to 66, we refer to as Third Isaiah. This material contains oracles that are spread throughout the eighth to the fifth centuries. So we'll consider those on another occasion, in their proper historical context. Right now we're looking at the material that is most likely attributable to First Isaiah, to Isaiah of Jerusalem.

[30] The book also contains material that is a repetition of material found elsewhere. I've already noted 2 Kings 18 to 20 appears here. But in addition, you have snatches of verses that appear in other places. So Isaiah 2:2-4, are found in Micah, the Book of Micah 4:1-4. Jeremiah 48 is essentially equivalent to Isaiah 15 and 16. So this kind of repetition among or between different books illustrates, again, the anthological nature of the prophetic corpus — that these were works that were compiled from material that sometimes circulated in more than one school.

4. *Emphasis on the Davidic Covenant*

[31] So if we turn now to the major themes of Isaiah, let's note first the common ground between Isaiah and the prophets Amos and Hosea that we've already discussed. Isaiah is consistent with Amos and Hosea in denouncing again the social injustice and moral decay, which is the cause of God's just and inevitable punishment. Isaiah 5 extracting from verses 8 through 24:

Ah,
Those who add house to house
And join field to field,
Till there is room for none but you
To dwell in the land!... Ah,
Those who chase liquor
From early in the morning,
And till late in the evening
Are inflamed by wine... Ah,
Those who... vindicate him who is in the wrong
In return for a bribe,
And withhold vindication
From him who is in the right.

[32] He joins Amos in the assertion that cultic practice without just behavior is anathema to God. Isaiah 1:10-17, "Hear the word of the Lord, / You chieftains of Sodom; / Give ear to our God's instruction, You folk of Gomorrah!" (So he's referring to his fellow countrymen as Sodomites, or people of Sodom and Gomorrah, who, of course, were the paragons of immoral behavior). [The text continues:]

"What need have I of all your sacrifices?"
Says the Lord.
"I am sated with burnt offering of rams,
And suet of fatlings,
And blood of bulls;
And I have no delight
In lambs and he-goats... Your new moons
and fixed seasons
Fill me with loathing;
They are become a burden to Me,
I cannot endure them.
And when you lift up your hands,
I will turn My eyes away from you;
Though you pray at length,
I will not listen.
Your hands are stained with crime —
Wash yourselves clean;
Put your evil doings
Away from my sight.
Cease to do evil;
Learn to do good. Devote yourselves to justice;
Aid the wronged.
Uphold the rights of the orphan;
Defend the cause of the widow.

[33] These are harsh and shocking words: I'm sick of sacrifices. I'm sick of your festivals and holidays as long as you are, of course, committing these terrible acts. And like Amos and Hosea, Isaiah asserts that morality is a decisive factor in the fate of the nation. Again, the passage that begins,

Ah,
Those who add house to house

And join field to field,
 ...In my hearing [said] the Lord of hosts;
 Surely, great houses
 Shall lie forlorn,
 Spacious and splendid ones
 Without occupants.
 ...Assuredly,
 My people will suffer exile
 For not giving heed,
 Its multitude victims of hunger
 And its masses parched with thirst.

who also has children with portentous names (this is a fad I guess among the prophets — his children’s names are: “only a remnant will survive,” and “hasten for spoil, hurry for plunder” which indicates the destruction and exile) — he goes to visit the king. And his advice to the king is: be quiet and do not fear (chapter 7:4). The crisis will pass. 7:9: “If you will not believe, surely you shall not be established.” [RSV; see note 1] This is an evocation of Zion theology. God is in the midst of the city. That means the Lord of Hosts is with the people. Isaiah then offers Ahaz a sign of the truth of his prophecy. And that is, namely, that a young woman who has conceived will bear a son and will call him Immanuel. It’s Hebrew Immanu el, “God is with us.” Immanu = “is with us”, El. So this woman who has conceived will bear a son and will call him Immanuel. This is in 7:14. Now, in the New Testament, Matthew, in chapter 1:22-23, takes this verse as a prophecy of the birth of Jesus. This is based on a Greek mistranslation of the word “young woman” as “virgin.” The Hebrew term that’s used is not in fact the term for virgin, but it was translated into the Greek with a term that can mean virgin. And moreover, the verb that’s used in the Hebrew is in the past tense. A woman has already conceived. The birth is pending. It is imminent. This child will be born. God will be with us.

[34] So there are, of course, commonalities but Isaiah differs from Amos and Hosea in this. He places far greater emphasis on the Davidic Covenant than on the Mosaic Covenant. This is a key feature of Isaiah. The wilderness tradition, the Exodus tradition, the covenant at Sinai, these are so important to Amos and Hosea and are referred to by Amos and Hosea, but they have less of an explicit influence on Isaiah’s prophecy. They’re not there. But they have less of an explicit influence. Instead, Isaiah has an overriding interest in Davidic theology, the royal ideology that centers on Zion, an ideology that we discussed earlier. So we see this in his riv, his covenant lawsuit, which focuses a little less on the violations of the nation than it does on the failure of the kings and the leaders who have misled the nation and who will now have to be punished as was stipulated in the Davidic Covenant.

[35] We also see it in his firm belief in the inviolability of Zion. This is a clear doctrine with Isaiah: the inviolability of Zion. Yahweh has a special relationship with the Davidic royal line and the Davidic capitol, Jerusalem or Zion, and he will not let either perish. And that belief undergirds and informs his consistent advice to the kings of Judah. Times of great danger are opportunities to demonstrate absolute trust in Yahweh’s covenant with the line of David, with the House of David. The king must rely exclusively on Yahweh and Yahweh’s promises to David and his city, and not on military might or diplomatic strategies.

[36] So if we look at Isaiah’s dealings with King Ahaz — the first siege in 734 — this is described in Isaiah, chapter 7 and 8. Isaiah,

[37] The identity of the woman that Isaiah is speaking about is a matter of some dispute. So some scholars take the verse as a reference to Isaiah’s own wife. She’s already had two children with portentous names and now she’s pregnant with a third. But the others take the verse as a reference to the king’s own wife, who will bear his son Hezekiah, King Hezekiah. There are some problems with chronology. It doesn’t quite work out that he would be the right age. But the fact is Hezekiah was a celebrated king. He did in fact manage to keep Judah intact against the Assyrian threat and kept Jerusalem from falling in the siege of 701. And 2 Kings, the Book of 2 Kings, chapter 18:7, says of Hezekiah, “The Lord was with him.” God was with him. Connecting it to the name Immanuel — God is with us. God is with him. Very similar, very, very similar in the Hebrew. In fact, [it] sounds the same. So in keeping with this interpretation — the idea that the child (who he says will be able, in a sense,

to save Judah) is the child of the king [yet] to be born, Hezekiah — in keeping with that, scholars see the famous verses in Isaiah 9 as praise of King Hezekiah. These verses are verses that announce, “for unto us a child is born” — a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, an everlasting father, a prince of peace, referring then to an unending peace in which David’s throne and kingdom are firmly established. And again, these verses have also been decontextualized and are utilized in Christian liturgies to this day, again, as if they refer to the future birth of Jesus.

[38] In any event, Ahaz doesn’t heed Isaiah’s call for inaction. He says he should be doing nothing. How could any king really follow such advice, to seek no political or military solution? And so he appeals to Assyria for help against Aram and the northern kingdom of Israel who are laying siege to him. And this is a disastrous development in Isaiah’s eyes.

[39] If we move to the second siege in 701, we see that Isaiah really takes a similar stance. Hezekiah tries to form an alliance with Egypt now to stave off the Assyrian threat. And Isaiah castigates the king and he castigates the king’s men for abandoning Yahweh and relying on the frail reed of Egypt. And we find here an example of the bizarre and demonstrative behavior of the prophet. We’ll see this in many of the prophets. We’ll see it particularly in the prophet Ezekiel, but we see it with others, where they would engage in these symbolic acts that were meant to shock and attract attention. Isaiah paraded naked through the streets of Jerusalem to illustrate the exile and the slavery that would follow from this mistaken reliance on Egypt. He denounces the political advisors who counsel the king to form an alliance with Egypt because they are simply trusting in horses and chariots rather than God. And Isaiah counsels differently. He says, “For the Egyptians are man, not God, / And their horses are flesh, not spirit” (31:3). The king should simply trust in God.

[40] In the narrative account that we have of the siege of 701 that’s found in chapters 36 and 38 — it’s also duplicated in 2 Kings — Isaiah counsels Hezekiah when the siege is underway not to capitulate to the Assyrians. This might seem to contradict his earlier message that Assyria was the rod of God’s anger and that Hezekiah should not resist. But in fact, there’s

a basic consistency to Isaiah’s counsel. Just as his earlier counsel to trust in God rather than Egypt was based on his trust in God’s promises to David, and the inviolability of the royal city, so now his counsel to resist, not to open the doors of the city to the Assyrians, is based on his belief that Yahweh could not possibly intend to destroy his royal city. Isaiah 37:33-35:

Assuredly, thus said the Lord concerning the king of Assyria:

He shall not enter this city;

He shall not shoot an arrow at it,

Or advance upon it with a shield,

Or pile up a siege mound against it.

He shall go back

By the way he came,

He shall not enter this city — declares the Lord;

I will protect and save the city for My sake

And for the sake of my servant David.

[41] Again, for the sake of the Davidic Covenant. And the fact that Jerusalem did in fact escape destruction after this terrifying siege by the Assyrians only fueled the belief — fueled the belief in the inviolability of David’s city, Zion.

5. Major Themes in the Book of Isaiah

[42] Isaiah 6 contains a striking account of the call of Isaiah. Many of the prophetic books will feature some passage which refers to the prophet’s initial call. And it’s something we might expect to find at the beginning of the book. So obviously, chronology is not the organizing principle in the Book of Isaiah. But I want to draw your attention to God’s extraordinary message to Isaiah at the time of his call or commission:

Go, say to that people: “Hear, indeed, but do not understand;

See, indeed, but do not grasp.”

Dull that people’s mind,

Stop its ears,

And seal its eyes —

Lest, seeing with its eyes

And hearing with its ears,
It also grasp with its mind,
And repent and save itself.

[43] Well, there's a nice literary chiasm (before we get to the substance of it) in the last line: you have "heart," "ears," and "eyes" and then these are repeated but in reverse order, eyes, ears and heart. But in this passage we return to the kind of bleakness that we saw in Hosea. Destruction is inevitable. God's message via his prophet will not be understood. And indeed, God will see to it that the people do not understand the message. They do not heed the call to repent, do not save themselves, and so do not escape God's just punishment.

[44] It's a fascinating, if theologically difficult, passage. God tells Isaiah to prevent the people from understanding, lest through their understanding they turn back to God and save themselves. And again, we see God, or perhaps his prophet, caught in the tension between God's justice and God's mercy. As a God of justice he must punish the sins of Israel with destruction. He indicated he would do so in the covenant and he must be faithful to those terms. But as a God of mercy he wishes to bring his people back. He wishes to send them a prophet to warn them of the impending doom and urge them to repent so that he can forgive them and announce his plan of destruction. Yet, how can he both punish Israel and so fulfill the demands of justice, and yet save Israel and so fulfill the demands of mercy and love? Verses 12 and 13 [correction: meant to say verses 11-13] in chapter 6 answer this question with an idea that we've seen a little in Amos and Hosea. When Isaiah asks how long the people will fail to hear, fail to understand, to turn back to God and save themselves, God replies,

Till towns lie waste without inhabitants
And houses without people,
And the ground lies waste and desolate —
For the Lord will banish the population —
And deserted sites are many
In the midst of the land.

But while a tenth part yet remains in it, it shall repent. It shall be ravaged like the terebinth and the oak, of which stumps are

left even when they are felled: its stump shall be a holy seed.

[45] So God will punish. God cannot not punish Israel. And so the demands of justice will be met, and God will have upheld the terms of the conditional Mosaic Covenant. But God will at the same time effect the salvation of his people in the future. He has sent a prophet with a call to return and in due time a remnant of the people — a tenth Isaiah says — will understand and heed that call. They will receive God's mercy and the covenant will be reestablished. And in this way the demands of love and mercy will be met, and God will have been faithful to his covenantal promise to the patriarchs and the royal House of David. The people's delayed comprehension of the prophet's message guarantees the operation of God's just punishment now and his merciful salvation later.

[46] While the notion of a remnant leads to the idea of a future hope, it wasn't a very consoling message at the time. Because the prophets were essentially saying that the current generation would all but cease to exist. Isaiah 10:21-23,

Only a remnant shall return,
Only a remnant of Jacob,
To Mighty God.
Even if your people, O Israel
Should be as the sands of the sea,
Only a remnant of it shall return.
Destruction is decreed;
Retribution comes like a flood!
For my Lord God of Hosts is carrying out
A decree of destruction upon all the land.

[47] Well, we've seen that the prophet's message of destruction and punishment and doom is very often accompanied by, often alternates with, a message of consolation and a promise of restoration, restoration of a purged or purified remnant in the land of Israel. This is where the prophets differ from the Deuteronomistic historian. The Deuteronomistic historian is more concerned with the justification of God's actions against Israel than with painting a vivid portrait of the time of a future restoration. But this period of restoration is elaborately

envisioned in some prophetic writings. And it even takes on an eschatological tenor. The word “eschatology” means an account of the end. So in some of them, this becomes an eschatological vision: that the restoration will happen at the end of days. And the restoration will bring about some sort of perfect end time.

[48] So in Isaiah, for example, the return will be a genuine, whole-hearted and permanent return to God. It will be the end of sin. It will be the end of idolatry. All the nations of the earth will recognize the Lord of history. A new epoch will open in world history. It’s an enormous transformation. And Isaiah is the first to envisage this kind of transformation, the end of the dominion of idolatrous nations. When God comes to Jerusalem to save the remnant of Israel and gather in the dispersed exiles it will be a theophany, a self-revelation of God, of worldwide scope. Isaiah 2:2-4, “In the days to come, / The Mount of the Lord’s House / Shall stand firm above the mountains / And tower above the hills;” So this little hill — if you’ve ever been there, it’s really not very big — that the temple stood on, will tower like some large impregnable mountain, over all other hills and mountains,

And all the nations
Shall gaze on it with joy.
And the many peoples shall go and say:
“Come,
Let us go up to the Mount of the Lord,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That He may instruct us in His ways,
And that we may walk in His paths.”
For instruction, [torah] will come forth from
Zion,
The word of the Lord from Jerusalem.
Thus He will judge among the nations
And arbitrate for the many peoples,
And they shall beat their swords into
plowshares
And their spears into pruning hooks:
Nation shall not take up
Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war.

[49] Note the direction that Israelite thought is taking. The J source in Genesis assumed that all humans had knowledge of Yahweh from the time of creation. And remember that that was one of the distinctive traits of J as opposed to P for example. They assume, however, that humans turned from Yahweh. So Yahweh selected one nation to know him and covenant with him. The Book of Deuteronomy accepts that Yahweh is Israel’s God. Other nations have been assigned to the worship of other gods and that’s just fine. But in classical prophecy, universal claims are made on behalf of Yahweh. According to the prophets, God will make himself known to all the nations, as he once did to Israel, and the universal worship or recognition of Yahweh will be established at the end of days. This is very different idea. And so as a consequence of this idea, the very notion of Israel’s election is transformed by the prophets. In the Torah books, the election of Israel means simply God’s undeserved choice of Israel as the nation to know him and bind itself in covenant to him.

[50] But in the prophetic literature, Israel’s election is an election to a mission. Israel was chosen so as to be the instrument of universal redemption, universal recognition of Yahweh. When God comes finally to rescue the Israelites he will simultaneously reveal himself to all of humankind. They’ll abandon their idols, they’ll return to him. A messianic period of peace will follow. And eventually, we’re going to see the idea that the mission for which Israel was elected was to become a “light unto the nations.” This is a phrase that we’re going to see in other parts of Isaiah, Isaiah 49, Isaiah 51, later.

[51] The royal ideology of Judah plays an important role in the eschatological vision of Isaiah because this new peaceful righteous kingdom is going to be restored by a Davidide. It’s going to be restored by a king from the Branch of Jesse. David’s father name was Jesse. So when you say the branch, or from the stump of Jesse, then you are referring to a Davidide. Isaiah 11 refers to the restoration of the Davidic line, which implies that it had been temporarily interrupted. So Isaiah 11 may be post-exilic. It may date from a time when people were hoping for a messiah to arise and restore the line of David.

[52] Isaiah 11:1-12, 16:

But a shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse,

A twig shall sprout from his stock.

The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him:

A spirit of wisdom and insight,

A spirit of counsel and valor,

A spirit of devotion and reverence for the Lord.

He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the Lord:

He shall not judge... by what his ears perceive.

Thus he shall judge the poor with equit

And decide with justice for the lowly of the land.

He shall strike down a land with the rod of his mouth

And slay the wicked with the breath of his lips.

Justice shall be the girdle of his loins,

And faithfulness the girdle of his waist.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,

The leopard lie down with the kid;

The calf, the beast of prey, and the fatling together,

With a little boy to herd them.

The cow and the bear shall graze.

[53] (I think the bear is vegetarian, not killing the cow but eating the grass with the cow.)

Their young shall lie down together;

And the lion, like the ox, shall eat straw.

A babe shall play

Over a viper's hole,

And an infant pass his hand

Over an adder's den.

[54] The hostility, the animosity between humans and serpents or snakes which was decreed at the fall, the expulsion from Eden, is reversed in this end-time. This is a return to the situation in paradise. [The text continues:]

In all of My sacred mount

Nothing evil or vile shall be done;

For the land shall be filled with devotion to the Lord

As water covers the sea.

In that day,

The stock of Jesse that has remained standing

Shall become a standard to peoples —

Nations shall seek his counsel

And his abode shall be honored.

In that day, my Lord will apply his hand again to redeeming the other part of his peoples from Assyria — as also from Egypt. Pathros, Nubia, Elam, Shinar, Hamath and the coastlands... Thus there shall be a highway for the other part of his people out of Assyria, such as there was for Israel when it left the land of Egypt.

[55] So this new ideal Davidic king will rule by wisdom and insight and the spirit of the Lord will "alight on him." That's a phrase that we saw being used in the case of judges and in the case of Saul or David. It doesn't refer to military might and strength here. It refers to counsel and a spirit of devotion to God. And this king's reign will begin an ingathering of the exiles of the nation and a transformed world order.

[56] So to conclude: Isaiah is typical of the prophetic reinterpretation of the ancient covenant promises, giving Israel a hope for a better, ideal future. And like the other prophets, he declared that the nation was in distress not because the promises weren't true but because they hadn't been believed. The nation's punishment was just a chastisement. It wasn't a revocation of the promises. The prophets pushed the fulfillment of the promises beyond the existing nation however. So only after suffering the punishment for the present failure would a future redemption be possible. So the national hope was maintained but pushed off to a future day. Alright, we'll deal with some more prophetic books when we come back. Please be sure to take the handouts in the box [refers to Halloween candy] at the side of the room.

[57] [end of transcript]

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[58] Notes

[59] 1. Quotations marked RSV are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

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[60] References

[61] Unless otherwise noted, all biblical citations have been quoted from “Tanakh: The New JPS

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