

## *The Power of the Prophets*

Worksheet for Week 4

### *The Death of Israel*

Last week, we began the story of the age of kings. We saw how the kingdom of Israel had split in two after the death of King Solomon, David's son. Recall that the stories of the two kingdoms, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, were largely stories of tragedy and decline. Bad king followed bad king as the people drifted further and further from God. We met Elijah and Elisha, both prophets to the northern kingdom of Israel, whose ministries were devoted to confrontation with those who would chase after false gods. Today, we enter the period of the "writing prophets," that is, those prophets whose story is told in the prophetic books of the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Israel Falls to the Assyrians*

In the eighth century BC, the Assyrian empire posed an ever-growing threat to Israel and Judah. Lying to their northeast, this pressure was most acute on Israel. Nonetheless, Israel enjoyed peace and prosperity at times. One of these periods was from about 785BC to 745BC under King Jeroboam. Despite this period of peace and the complacency it brought, twenty years or so after Jeroboam's death (722BC to be exact) the Assyrians overran the kingdom of Israel, wiping it from the map and exiling tens of thousands of the Israelites. The ten Israelite tribes that made up the northern kingdom would be "lost" forever, never again to be a national entity of any sort. These would be the lost tribes of Israel.

In the period of peace before the fall, Amos, a herdsman, brought God's word to the kingdom of Israel. Working some time around 760BC, Amos dared to use the language of a lament over a young person's death to describe the coming death of Israel. "Fallen, nor more to rise, is maiden Israel; forsaken on her land, with no one to raise her up" (Amos 5:1-2). For someone to die young and unmarried with no children to carry on the name was a source of deep sadness to the people of ancient Israel. You can imagine how well his message must have been received by the Israelites! Amos not only lamented the coming death of Israel, he used strong and original language to describe the coming exile: "Jeroboam shall die by the sword, and Israel must go into exile away from his land" (Amos 7:11).

Why would this happen to Israel? We could leave God out of our explanation entirely, noting that Assyria was powerful and simply could not be stopped from their aggression. But this is not the biblical understanding. For Amos, Israel was no better or no worse than their neighbors and that was precisely the problem. From Amos 3: "Hear this word that the Lord has spoken against you [Israel] . . . You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for your iniquities." Simply put, God expected more from his people. He held them to a higher standard, the standard of the covenant he had made with them. For Israel to be accused of oppressing the poor, as Amos accused them, was no small matter. In failing to care for the needy while resting in the luxuries of their own prosperity, Israel revealed the depth of their sin and the abandonment of their special relationship with Yahweh, their Lord and God. Such abandonment could lead only one place - to their destruction. Israel had forgotten that they were to care for the widow because God had cared for them. They had forgotten that they were to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24).

#### *What is happening in Judah?*

In the north, Amos and Hosea faced the end of the kingdom of Israel. The end came quickly. In the south, at about the same time, Micah and Isaiah faced the end of Judah. There was certainly every reason to expect that the Assyrians would also overrun Judah in the eighth century BC. But it didn't happen. Judah would not meet its final end until about 140 years after Israel! The book of Micah is a bit of a prophetic sampler. It contains a bit of everything found in other books: warning, lament, reminders, and even hope and forgiveness. "I must bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he takes my side . . . He will bring me out to the light; I shall see his vindication" (Micah 7:9). The book of Isaiah is the most complex of all the prophetic writings. Written and compiled over several centuries, Isaiah paints a compelling picture of three key events: the fall of the northern kingdom, the fall of Jerusalem, and the restoration of the Jews to the Promised Land after the exile in Babylonia. More than any other prophet, Isaiah's work was carried on by those who followed. We can think of Isaiah 1-39 as constituting First Isaiah, containing prophecy related to the death of Israel and of Judah. Isaiah 40-66 can be thought of as Second Isaiah, concentrating on the prophetic work after the Jews returned to the land of Judah. But that story is for week six!

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<sup>1</sup>A particularly helpful resource for me in writing these worksheets has been *Theology of the Prophetic Books: the death and resurrection of Israel*, by Donald E. Gowan, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998. Though I ended up a different place, his book got me started on the overall framework of this class.

## Bible Readings for Week 4

All the readings come from the story of Samuel. Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Amos 2:6-16 Amos brings a message (an oracle) against Israel. They have turned their backs on the oppressed.</p>	<p>Day 2 Hosea 1:1-10; 3:1-5 Hosea is to marry a whore, Gomer, and love her, just as God loves his people, Israel, who commit adultery with other gods, such as Baal.</p>
<p>Day 3 Micah 4:1-5 Peace and prosperity will come in the last days &amp; Micah 6:3-8 What God has done for the people and what he expects in return</p>	<p>Day 4 Isaiah 6:1-13 God calls Isaiah. What leads up to Isaiah's cry of "Here am I; send me!"?</p>
<p>Day 5 Isaiah 91:7 The light of a new king and the day of righteousness</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>