

The Divided Monarchy

1 Kings and 2 Kings

Tensions between the tribe of Judah and the remaining tribes had already surfaced during the reign of David (2 Samuel 20:1-2). David understood that for a tribe to accept someone not of its own members as king required a decision of the elders and had twice waited to be invited to become the leader of the northern tribes (2 Samuel 5:1-3; 19:41-43). After the death of Solomon, his son Rehoboam fatally mismanaged the meeting of Israel's elders and lost their support (1 Kings 12:1-19). From then on only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained loyal to David's dynasty and the ten northern tribes went their own way, forming the nation of Israel.

While Judah's kings followed in hereditary succession, Israel was ruled by four dynasties, those of Jeroboam I, Baash, Omri and Jehu. Jeroboam established two royal shrines at Bethel and Dan in opposition to Jerusalem (1 Kings 12:26-end) and set up his capital first at Shechem and then at Tirzah (1 Kings 12:25; 14:17). Later Omri established a new capital city at Samaria (1 Kings 16:24). Although occasionally co-operating, the kingdoms of Judah and Israel spent much of the next two hundred years at war with one another. The power and wealth of Solomon's empire soon disappeared and much of the territory over which he had ruled was lost.

The melancholy history of decline and eventual defeat and exile is told in the books of 1 and 2 Kings, which were compiled from court records and other sources during the reign of Josiah of Judah (640-609 B.C.) and shortly after the exile of Judah (587 B.C.). The purpose of the books was to teach Israel the consequences of ignoring the Law, worshipping the gods of the Canaanites and failing to heed the prophets (2 Kings 17:7-14). Each king is judged as to whether or not he was faithful to the Lord and the consequences for the nation as a whole spelled out.

During this period, the prophets steadily increased in importance, chiefly as opponents of those kings whose policies were based more on political realism and calculation than trust in the Lord. Elijah, the greatest of them all, prophesied in Israel during the reign of Ahab (869-850 B.C.), while the 8th century saw the rise of the first of the "writing prophets", Amos and Hosea in Israel, Micah and Isaiah in Judah.

In the readings which follow, we shall trace the history of the divided monarchy down to the defeat and exile of Samaria at the hands of the Assyrians in 722 B.C. and the reign of Hezekiah in Judah (715-687 B.C.).

Day 116. Psalm 99; 1 Kings 9 - 11

Solomon's Apostasy

Psalm 99

The awesome holiness of God.

1 Kings 9 - 11

Although God accepted and consecrated the Temple as the centre of Israel's worship (9:3), its presence did not automatically confer blessing. Unless Israel and her kings remained faithful to the Lord, the Temple itself would be destroyed. In fact, 9:8 was fulfilled when Jerusalem was captured by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 586 B.C. and reduced to ruins (2 Kings 25:9,13-15).

The blessings which God lavished upon Solomon contained the seeds of his downfall. He became so powerful that he was able to reduce all the old Canaanite inhabitants to slavery (9:20-21); and made alliances with the surrounding nations, including Egypt, the greatest power in the world at that time. He amassed great wealth by exploiting Israel's position on the major trade routes of the time and the period of peace and stability which followed David's conquest of the land (10:14-15,23-end). He lived in incredible luxury and splendour (10:4-7,11-12,18-22). But with the blessings came temptations to sin: pride, complacency, hardness of heart toward suffering, and independence of God (compare 10:23-end with Deuteronomy 17:14-end).

By his apostasy Solomon forfeited the Lord's blessing. The story the Bible tells is almost incredible in its honesty and directness. At the height of his power, with every conceivable blessing available, Solomon was disloyal. To take many wives and concubines was a recognised means of cementing alliances with surrounding nations and also demonstrating one's power and potency as king. But this practice, although recognised in pagan diplomacy, was at odds with the tradition of Israel, including its respect for women. It also carried the danger of unfaithfulness. By setting up idols for the convenience of his wives, Solomon allowed the worship of foreign gods in by the back door, and he himself was one of the first to succumb to the attractions of paganism.

When Solomon abandoned the Lord, the Lord began to abandon him. At this time, Syria was not even a nation; within a generation it became Israel's major opponent in the north. In the south Edom regained its independence and became an implacable enemy to Judah as a result of its humiliation by David and Joab. Within Israel's borders there was discontent both over the forced labour system (12:1-4) and among the prophetic groups (11:29-39) because Solomon was worshipping foreign gods.

Death of Solomon: 922 B.C

Day 117. Psalm 82; 1 Kings 12:1 - 14:20

Jeroboam

Psalm 82

God announces judgement on rebellious rulers, both earthly and spiritual. The image of the divine council occurs in the story of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:19-23 and the call of Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-8. In Deuteronomy 32:8 each of the "gods" is allocated to a nation. In this psalm the gods in the council are responsible for the evil on earth. Later these "gods" became "angels" or "heavenly beings", God's servants or messengers (Job 1:6; 2:1; 4:18).

1 Kings 12:1 - 14:20

The division between Israel and Judah, which had appeared in David's early years, persisted. Rehoboam was ruler of Judah by virtue of his birth. To become ruler of Israel, he had to be accepted by the elders (compare 2 Samuel 5:1-3; 19:8b-10,41-43).

In chapter 3, Solomon had prayed for a wise and discerning heart, in order to rule God's people justly. His prayer was not for himself but for the people. In a similar way, the elders advised Rehoboam to be a servant to his people (12:7). But Rehoboam would naturally have felt insecure, taking over from such a famous father, and afraid of being dominated by his father's advisers. Instead he turned to the advice of his own contemporaries. Their experience of kingship, in the later years of Solomon, was of arbitrary power verging on tyranny (12:4). Afraid to appear weak, Rehoboam opted for the use of power, and as a result he forfeited the loyalty of the ten tribes of Israel. Christian leaders are taught to follow the example of Jesus and to be servants to those whom they lead (Mark 10:42-44).

By establishing Jerusalem as the main centre of worship for the whole of Israel, David's plan was to promote the unity of the nation. For Jeroboam, the place of Jerusalem as the central place of worship was a problem. Setting up the golden calves in Bethel and Dan was a political move, designed to provide a counter-attraction and prevent people going to Jerusalem. Although he had been appointed king by the Lord through the words and actions of the prophets, Jeroboam failed to trust the Lord to

maintain his rule. These idols provoked the intense hostility of the prophetic party, and this hostility is reflected in the books of Kings. They epitomised disloyalty to the Lord and his covenant. After all, the ark of the covenant was kept in the Temple at Jerusalem. Loyalty to Jerusalem and the suppression of idols was for them a crucial test of faithfulness to the Lord for the kings of both Israel and Judah (see 14:22; 15:1-3,9-14,25-26).

The prophets Samuel, Nathan and Gad had acted as royal advisers as long as the kings were willing to listen. From the reigns of Rehoboam and Jeroboam, the prophets became a centre of opposition to kings who were unfaithful. Ahijah was the first of several to instigate a rebellion (see 19:15-17 and 2 Kings 9:1-3). However, the prophets were not always united. The old prophet (13:11) came from Bethel, which would have benefited considerably from Jeroboam's shrine, while the man of God who condemned Jeroboam and the altar (13:1-2) came from Judah. In order to hear the word of the Lord and give it with power, the prophets were required to be obedient; in this story, the old prophet set out to undermine his rival's obedience by falsely claiming inspiration from the Lord. It is a confusing story, but the fact that the lion, having mauled the prophet, then ignored both his body and the live donkey demonstrates that the prophet's death was a sign from the Lord and confirms the truth of his words. The struggle between true and false prophets and the problem of discerning which was which is illustrated in 1 Kings 22 and Jeremiah 28.

From the earliest days of Jeroboam's apostasy, Israel was on the road to ruin and the prophets foretold her eventual exile and Josiah's defilement of the shrine at Bethel (13:2-3, 14:14-16; 2 Kings 17:1-6, 23:15-18).

Reign of Jeroboam: 922 - 901 B.C

Day 118. Psalm 11; 1 Kings 14:21 - 16:28

The Two Kingdoms

Psalm 11

On earth it may seem that God's will is ignored, but in heaven he still reigns and will judge the wicked when the right time comes.

1 Kings 14:21 - 16:28

The chapters of 1 Kings and 2 Kings recording the reigns of the various monarchs are selections from more extensive royal archives and prophetic records (14:29; 15:23,31; 16:5,14,20,27). Within the stereotyped form, the compilers have selected what they believe are the most significant events of the reign and made a judgement on each king as to their faithfulness or otherwise to the Lord (14:22; 15:3,11,14,26,30,34; 16:7,13,19,25-26). Despite the unfaithfulness of some of her kings, Judah was more favoured because her kings were descended from David and reigned in Jerusalem (14:21, 15:4-5). Interspersed in the records of the kings are accounts of the activities of some of the prophets, of whom Elijah and Elisha are the dominant figures.

The speed of the lapse into paganism (14:22-24) was matched by equally speedy political collapse. The division of Israel into the two kingdoms of Israel in the north and Judah in the south gave the king of Egypt the opportunity he had probably been waiting for to clip the wings of his powerful neighbour (14:25-26; Pharaoh had also harboured Hadad of Edom and Jeroboam, 11:14-22,40). With Egypt's reassertion of control, in particular over the trade routes, the wealth of Solomon soon disappeared (compare 14:27 with 10:21). In the north, a weakened Israel was unable to prevent the rise of Syria in what had previously been territory controlled by Solomon. Syria was further strengthened by the opportunities arising from Israel's periodic wars with Judah (15:16-20).

While Judah's kings followed in succession from David, Israel had a series of dynasties, each of which brutally suppressed the previous one (15:29, 16:11). Although little is recorded about him in the Bible, Omri was probably one of the strongest of Israel's kings. It was he who established the new capital city at Samaria, doing for Israel what David had done for

the whole kingdom by setting up his capital at Jerusalem. In the records of the Assyrian empire, the kingdom of Israel is always referred to as "the house of Omri".

There is a mistake in 15:10. Either Asa was the brother of Abijam or Maacah was Asa's grandmother. N.I.V. resolves this difficulty by translating "mother" as "grandmother".

Judah: Rehoboam 922-915; Abijam 915-913; Asa 913-873 B.C.

Israel: Jeroboam 922-901; Nadab 901-900; Baasha 900-877;

Elah 877-876; Zimri 876; Omri 876-869; Ahab 869-850.

Day 119. Psalm 12; 1 Kings 16:29 - 18:end

The Contest on Mount Carmel

Psalm 12

A prayer that God would bring down the wicked.

1 Kings 16:29 - 18:end

Ahab was able and politically astute, but he did not follow the Lord. He made plans and carried out his policies according to political calculation (see 20:31-34,41-43; 22:1-8). The purpose of the alliance with Sidon was to counteract the influence of Israel's other northern neighbour, Syria. But political alliance meant also religious alliance. In marrying his son into the Sidonian royal family, Omri would also have had to agree to adopt the worship of the Sidonian god, Baal-Melkart. In the politics of those times it was easy for Israel to have two religions side by side. Baal was a god of fertility; Israel could thus look to Baal to ensure good crops while relying on Yahweh for victory in battle.

These careful calculations were thrown into disarray by the opposition of prophets like Elijah. Not surprisingly, Ahab saw Elijah only as a "troubler of Israel" (18:17). But the drought was to demonstrate that it was the Lord and not Baal who controlled the weather and thus the crops.

Elijah was not a super-hero, but an ordinary man given over to God's service (see James 5:16-20). During the time he was hiding from Ahab, God was gradually building up Elijah's faith while he waited until the right time to confront Ahab. First he showed him that he was able to provide oil and grain, even on Sidonian territory, to keep the widow, her son and Elijah alive. Then came the miracle of resurrection. In near eastern mythology, Baal had once died and risen from the dead. The coming of rains each year to give the land fertility were a sign of his rising. But here was Israel's God giving real life from the dead.

When Elijah's turn came to make his sacrifice, everything he did had significance. He did not build a new altar, but rebuilt an old one, calling the people back to their old loyalty (18:30). The altar had twelve stones, reminding them that God's people included all twelve tribes, not simply the nation of Israel (18:31). The sacrifice was made at God's time, the time of

the regular evening sacrifice (18:36). Everything was done to show that it was The Lord and not Elijah who was in control. Only when the people acknowledged The Lord as God did the rains come (18:39,41).

The Law prescribed the death penalty for a prophet who led God's people astray to serve other gods (Deuteronomy 13:1-5).

Day 120. Psalm 13; 1 Kings 19 - 20

Elijah at Horeb

Psalm 13

The plea for rescue from an oppressing enemy expresses anguish and fear. But having given vent to fears and frustration, the writer comes to a place of trust.

1 Kings 19

By temperament, Elijah was a loner, who operated without the support of the bands of prophets, such as those to whom Obadiah had given refuge (18:4). This gave him the strength to stand up to Ahab and Jezebel even though the rest of Israel wavered. But after the excitement of Carmel, reaction set in. The determination to carry out his task and expectation of success, bolstered by faith in God, gave way to depression and fear on finding that Jezebel's power was still in place and her determination still strong.

Faced with the need to recover his strength and rekindle his vision, Elijah went to the source of Israel's faith, the mountain of God, here called Horeb, where the demand for exclusive allegiance to the Lord had first been revealed. Here he learned something new, which became the foundation for the ministry of the later prophets. Horeb/Sinai was associated with "theophany" in which God is revealed in the spectacular forces of nature, earthquake, wind and fire (Exodus 19:16-19; Judges 5:4-5; Psalm 68:7-8). Here, where it all began, and where Moses was commissioned by God in the burning bush, Elijah perceives the Lord in a gentle whisper, an intelligible voice whose message is that God is active in history. From Elijah's time, the great prophets still had the task of maintaining the faithfulness of Israel to the Lord, but they also became more and more interpreters of history, those who discerned the actions of God in the ordinary political events of their times.

The Lord also revealed to Elijah the existence of a faithful remnant. Amongst the many who had gone along with the policies of Ahab and Jezebel and given allegiance to Baal were 7,000 who had refused to do so. The theme of the faithful remnant, whom the Lord will rescue from the

judgement coming on his people and through whom he will begin again, is a recurring one in Israel's history (Isaiah 10:20-27; Amos 9:8-12; Jeremiah 24:4-10).

1 Kings 20

With the prophets of Baal put to death and Israel returning to its allegiance to the Lord, the alliance between Ahab and Sidon was bound to be affected and Benhadad of Syria sensed an opportunity to attack. In response, the Lord impresses Ahab through the prophets, with his reliability and power. But what Ahab and Israel had failed to learn from Elijah was that obedience to the Lord must be absolute and his demands were uncompromising. In the moment of victory, Ahab fell back on political calculation, instead of trust in the Lord. He attempted to replace the alliance with Sidon with a new one with Syria.

Day 121. Psalm 14; 1 Kings 21:1 - 22:50

Naboth's Vineyard; Micaiah's Prediction

Psalm 14

"Practical atheism", behaving as if there were no God, is a major problem in today's society. The result is corruption, in which standards of right and wrong give way to expediency; and dread, in which people avoid mention of God or contact with him, aware that their deeds are evil.

1 Kings 21

In Israel's Law, her land was the property of the Lord, and entrusted to families. Thus, for Naboth, his vineyard was not his to sell as he pleased. It was the "inheritance of my fathers" (21:3-4). Moreover, the king was charged with the upholding of the Law and could not change it simply to suit himself (Leviticus 25:8-13; Deuteronomy 17:14-end).

But Jezebel came from Canaanite culture. In her mind the king was above the Law. She, moreover, had no scruples about perverting the law in order to get her own way. So once again, Elijah is called to stand up for Israel's ancient ways against foreign intrusion. Here he puts into practice the lesson of Horeb. Not only does he bring the Lord's perspective to bear on Ahab's act of political expediency, but he does so through the power of the spoken word. Elijah's message to the king in 21:19 is a perfect example of the pattern used by later prophets in their messages to Israel as a whole: first the accusation, then the formula, "Therefore, thus says the Lord," followed by the announcement of punishment (eg. Amos 7:16-17; Isaiah 1:21-26; Jeremiah 2:4-13).

1 Kings 22:1-50

After the execution of the Baal prophets, the prophets of the Lord had emerged from hiding and been accepted back to court and here Ahab calls for their advice as to whether or not to go to war against Ramoth Gilead. These prophets are the ecstatic kind familiar from 1 Samuel 10:5-11, and their prophesying probably involved a good deal of music and clamour as well as symbolic action such as that of Zedekiah.

But there is another single figure, comparable to Elijah, who distances himself from the prophetic group and their antics, Micaiah son of Imlah. Like Elijah at Naboth's vineyard, he gives his message not in spectacular actions but in word. The competition between prophets was already leading to the problem which, by the time of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, was to become acute: that of discerning true from false prophecy. The book of Deuteronomy makes an attempt to deal with it on the basis of whether or not the prophecy is fulfilled (Deuteronomy 13:1-5; 18:15-22) and this appears to be the test to which Micaiah appeals in 22:28. But the answer given here and later by Jeremiah is more profound: the true prophet is the one who, like Micaiah, has been in the Lord's council, where he decides his actions in the presence of the heavenly beings (22:19-23; Isaiah 6:1-6; Jeremiah 23:16-18,21-22).

Day 122. Psalm 9:1-8; 1 Kings 22:51-end, 2 Kings 1 – 3

Elisha Succeeds Elijah

Psalm 9:1-8

Praise to the Lord, who judges righteously

1 Kings 22:51-end; 2 Kings 1

The new king, Ahaziah, immediately reverted to the policy of his father by consulting gods other than the Lord. Again Elijah stood uncompromisingly against him. The first two officers sent to Elijah from the king evidently put the king's word above that of the Lord. The penalty upon them and their men was severe, but has to be seen in the context of a life and death struggle. Through his servants, the Lord was fighting for recognition as Israel's God and the only source of her life. Israel was surrounded by nations each worshipping a different god and undermined internally by the politics of compromise. The alternative to this kind of severity in particular cases was judgement on a large scale - something which came about a hundred years or so later.

2 Kings 2 - 3

While Elijah was a loner who distanced himself from the bands of ecstatic prophets, Elisha was frequently a member of the prophetic groups (4:1-7; 6:1-7; 9:1-3). His style was closer to that of the ecstatic prophets than that of Elijah, involving music and trance (3:15), clairvoyance (6:8-17) elements of imitative magic (13:14-19) and many miracles. The rise to prominence of pure prophets of the word (such as Micaiah), although foreshadowed in Elijah's experience at Horeb, would have to wait until a later generation.

As a character, Elisha was if anything more black and white than Elijah, calling down a curse on the gang of youths who mocked him (2:23-25), and in politics some of the actions which he sanctioned were condemned by later generations: the ruining of Moab is outlawed by the law of Deuteronomy 20:10-20 and Jehu's rebellion, which Elisha instigated, was condemned for its bloodthirstiness by Hosea.

But Elisha was a man of his age, faithful to his calling to promote the exclusive worship of the Lord as Israel's God. In the minds of most

Israelites, Chemosh the god of Moab was a reality with similar power and nature to that of the Lord. Not only was human sacrifice accepted, but its result was "fury" upon Israel (3:27). Perhaps the dismay of the Israelites at the spectacle was interpreted by the narrator as the anger of Chemosh, but whatever the explanation, the text is an indication of the actual beliefs of the time. Even the ministry of Elijah had not convinced ordinary Israelites that the Lord was more powerful than the gods of other nations.

The difference between 1:17 and 3:1 may be accounted for by a discrepancy in the sources or because Jehoram of Judah reigned jointly with his father for a few years.

Judah: Jehoshaphat, 873-849; Jehoram, 849-843

Israel: Ahab, 869-850; Ahaziah 850-849;

Jehoram (Joram) 849-842

Day 123. Psalm 116; 2 Kings 4:1 - 6:7

Elisha's Miracles

Psalm 116

The writer has been gravely ill and near death (v.3-4) but he has prayed to the Lord and been healed. Now in the Temple he presents a sacrifice and thanks God in a formal way for his recovery.

2 Kings 4:1 - 6:7

As prophet, Elisha inherited a "double portion" of the spirit of Elijah (2:9), which means the portion of the first-born or rightful inheritor. But Elisha was a man of a very different type. Where Elijah was a loner who seemed to have avoided the company of the prophetic groups and was seldom seen at court, Elisha was much more gregarious, spending time in company and at court. He also appears to have had much greater natural self-confidence than Elijah and of course he inherited the situation brought about by Elijah in which prophets of the Lord were again allowed to operate in public and were accepted at court.

As a result, whereas the miracles by and for Elijah have a strategic purpose in keeping the prophet alive or bringing Israel back to the Lord, Elisha's miracles appear almost common-place. Some of them foreshadow those of Jesus, which may be why many of his contemporaries thought of Jesus as one of the prophets. Examples are 4:18-37 with the raising of Jairus's daughter and 4:42-44 with the feeding of the five thousand.

New moon and Sabbath (4:23) were the usual times for consulting the prophets, who were to be found at the shrines where people came to sacrifice. The Shunnamite's husband displays his lack of concern for his wife's grief as well as his lack of faith in Elisha's ability to cure his son. Greetings on the road (4:29) were likely to be lengthy. Gehazi is told that the importance of his errand overrides conventional politeness.

The healing of Naaman the Aramean is comparable in some ways with that of the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matthew 15:21-28). Someone from outside Israel has to acknowledge the God of Israel before receiving healing. Naaman had to learn first that there was "a prophet in Israel" (5:8), despite the unbelief of the king. He had to accept cleansing in Israel's river

Jordan rather than those of Damascus. Above all, he had to swallow his pride and with it the expectation that the miracle of cleansing would be performed on his own terms with a spectacular display (5:11) and be paid for by his wealth (5:15-16).

Naaman's reaction to his cure is far in advance of the conventional beliefs of his time (and those of both the writer and compiler of this story). Most people believed that each nation had its own god and few thought it important even to keep strictly to the worship of one god. But Naaman will worship none but the Lord. He even wishes to distance himself from the worship of his own national god, Rimmon (5:18). The request for two mule-loads of earth, however, reflects the belief that a territorial god could only be worshipped on his own territory (5:17). Naaman wanted to take some of Israel to Syria with him in order to worship Israel's God there.

Day 124. Psalm 52; 2 Kings 6:8 - 8:15

Elisha and Aram

Psalm 52

God protects the righteous against the wicked.

1 Kings 6:8 - 8:15

Aram was the country north of Israel with its capital at Damascus, the territory of modern Syria. Elisha was conscious of God's power protecting Israel in a way others were not. In two of the incidents recorded here, God allowed the situation to become apparently hopeless before intervening. Surrounded by the Arameans in Dothan, it appeared to Elisha's servant as if he was certain to be captured. But Elisha was aware of the hosts of heaven surrounding and protecting him (6:8-17). With the famine in Samaria at its height, the king was ready to give up reliance on the Lord and have Elisha executed. As the man of God, he shouldered the blame for the Lord's apparent inability or refusal to protect the city. And as prophet, Elisha could have been expected to be interceding for the city. Again, Elisha himself was confident of relief (6:24 - 7:1).

In this respect, there are close parallels between his situation and that of Isaiah in Jerusalem about a century later. In the reign of Ahaz, Jerusalem faced attack from an alliance of Israel and Aram and in the reign of Hezekiah it faced the might of the Assyrian empire. On both occasions, Isaiah urged the kings and rulers to trust in the Lord and wait for deliverance.

The king's officer on whose arm the king leaned held the same position in Israel as had Naaman in Syria (5:18; 7:2). But whereas Naaman demonstrated his faith in the Lord, the king's officer in Israel instead expressed his unbelief. And while Naaman went home in peace and to continuing victory, the Israelite officer saw only defeat and eventual judgment (7:2,17-20).

Because of his confidence in the Lord's protection, Elisha also saw the grace of God extending to the enemy. He was not weighed down by fear and mistrust and could afford to treat them generously (6:21-22). As a result, he was given respect as a "man of God" even among the enemy (8:7-8).

There is no record of either Elijah or Elisha actually anointing Hazael, despite the words of 1 Kings 19:15-16. Elisha himself was not anointed but called by the action of Elijah in throwing his mantle over him (1 Kings 19:19-21). Here, Hazael is "called" by the prophecy of Elisha, from which he takes his cue to murder his master (8:10-15).

Death of Benhadad: 842 B.C.

Day 125. Psalm 58; 2 Kings 8:16 - 10:end

Jehu's rebellion

Psalm 58

A prayer for judgment on the wicked. The psalm's zeal for righteousness reflects the spirit of Jehu's purge of Baal worship, but is mixed with the vindictiveness that led to a bloodbath.

1 Kings 8:16 - 10:end

For most of his reign, Jehoram or Joram was joint ruler with his father, Jehoshaphat. During it, Judah suffered further losses, with the revolt of Edom and loss of Libnah. A more detailed account of Jehoram's reign is given in 2 Chronicles 21.

The confrontation between Elijah and Ahab on Mount Carmel had saved the worship of the Lord from extinction in Israel but had not put an end to the worship of Baal or to the pagan practices which went with it (9:22). To achieve that, even more drastic measures proved to be necessary. Jehu's rebellion was inspired by the prophetic party, of whom Elisha was the chief spokesman. It was the culmination of Elijah's work and the narrator points out the fulfilment of Elijah's words in 9:25-26 and 34-37. The comments of the army generals in 9:11-13 give an insight into the way the prophets were seen by the leading citizens. Their behaviour gave them a reputation as "madmen" but their words and actions nevertheless had power to inspire the coup.

In 9:31, Jezebel recalls the similar coup of Zimri against Baasha's son Elah in 885 B.C. Zimri had reigned only a short time before defeat by her father-in-law Omri (1 Kings 16:8-20). Now the house of Omri was to meet its own fate.

The Rechabites, of whom Jehonadab was the founder, were a fanatical sect who rejected all the trappings of the settled agricultural life of Canaan along with its religion. They refused to build houses, sow crops, tend vineyards or drink wine, preferring to continue to live as nomads and remain faithful to the worship of Yahweh as brought into Israel from the wilderness. Over 200 years later the sect still existed in Jerusalem (Jeremiah

35). It was from such people as well as the prophetic party that Jehu drew his support.

But Jehu's "zeal for the Lord" (10:16) led him into extreme bloodthirstiness and deceit (10:9,18-19), even the pretence of sacrificing to Baal (10:24). A century later, these extremes were condemned in their turn by the prophet Hosea (Hosea 1:4). The judgement of both the narrator and the editor are favourable towards Jehu insofar as he exterminated all those involved with the worship of Baal, pointing out only that he continued to worship the Lord outside Jerusalem. It fits with the spirit of Psalm 58, with its prayer for vengeance. As an historical judgment, it may well be that such measures were necessary in their time to preserve the worship of the Lord. But in the light of the New Testament, our own judgment will be coloured by the love for enemies which Jesus both taught and displayed.

Judah: Jehoram (Joram) 849-843, Ahaziah 842;

Jehu's rebellion 842

Day 126. Psalm 63; 2 Kings 11 - 14

Jehu to Jeroboam II

Psalm 63

A prayer, perhaps of the king, for the presence and help of God.

2 Kings 11 - 14

These chapters cover some 60 years in the history of Judah and nearly a century in the history of Israel, from Jehu's rebellion in 842 to the death of Amaziah in 783 and that of Jeroboam II in 746. In the first half of this period both Judah and Israel were severely weakened and Israel in particular suffered at the hands of Aram (or Syria) under Hazael, which became the dominant power at that time (12:17-18; 13:3,7). It is not surprising that Israel should have become so weak, with her ruling house and most of her leading people slaughtered by Jehu. In fact, Jehu survived by paying tribute to the Assyrian emperor, although this ensured the intense hostility of Hazael.

In Judah, Athaliah the daughter of Jezebel, tried to use the opportunity of her son's death to promote the worship of Baal in Jerusalem, but she was foiled by the party loyal to the Lord under the leadership of the high priest Jehoiada. The coronation ceremony of Judah included a reminder of the covenant between the Lord and the royal house (11:12) whose substance is found in Nathan's message in 2 Samuel 7 (see also Psalm 132:12, where the king has certain obligations to perform). To this traditional element Jehoiada added something new: a covenant between the Lord and the king and people and one between the king and the people (11:17). Of these, the first would have been an echo of the traditions of Sinai in which Israel became Yahweh's people. Joash and his son Amaziah do not appear to have been particularly faithful to the Lord or to have inspired loyalty in the kingdom. More detail of the reason for their assassinations is given in 2 Chronicles 24 and 25.

From the turn of the century Israel began to increase in power relative to Syria, as foretold by Elisha. The scene at Elisha's deathbed contains strong elements of sympathetic magic, to which king Jehoash was at best indifferent (13:14-19). The reason behind the decline of Syria at this time

was the activity of Assyria, which was beginning to expand eastwards under Adad-nirari III, who may be the "deliverer" mentioned in 13:5. In 805, Syria was defeated and virtually destroyed, but preoccupations elsewhere in the empire prevented this victory from being followed up and Israel escaped. With Syria weakened, Jeroboam II was able to incorporate its territory into Israel once again, thus restoring the boundary to the full extent of Solomon's kingdom (14:25). 14:28 is difficult, Damascus and Hamath having never belonged to Judah. It is probable that the text is corrupt.

Little detail of Jeroboam's reign is given, since it breaks the pattern which the editor wishes to demonstrate. Despite his infidelity, Jeroboam's reign was a time of immense prosperity and power for Israel. But her new-found wealth was not shared among her citizens. Instead there were vast differences between rich and poor, as hinted at in 14:26. The injustice and oppression, a complete departure from the standards given in the Law, are pictured in Amos 4:1; 5:11-12; 6:1-6; 8:4-6.

Judah: Athaliah 842-836; Joash 836-800; Amaziah 800-783; Azariah (Uzziah) 783-742.

Israel: Jehu 842-815; Jehoahaz 815-801; Jehoash (Joash) 801-786; Jeroboam II 786-746.

The Eighth Century Prophets

Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah

A generation separates Amos, the earliest of the eighth century prophets, whose ministry began in about 760 B.C., from Elisha, who died in the 790s, early in the reign of Jehoash. In their work, the process which began with Elijah's experience on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:8-18) came to fruition. They were "prophets of the word," whose task was to discern and make their contemporaries aware of the attitude of God to their situation and the way he was working through history.

All these prophets distanced themselves from the "shrine prophets," those who earned their living providing oracles for worshippers at Jerusalem and the various high places of Judah and Israel. In Amos 7:10-end, Amos is accosted by Amaziah, the priest of Bethel and told to go elsewhere because his message is unacceptable. In reply, he insists that he is not one of the professional "prophets-for-hire". He has a unique personal calling from the Lord and a message directly from him. In the same passage, Amaziah calls Amos a "seer", recognising the difference between him and the prophetic bands based at the shrines, but the passage also shows how the term "prophet" was coming to be applied to men like Amos (see also Isaiah 30:10, where "seer" and "prophet" are parallel terms).

The middle of the eighth century was a time of prosperity for both Israel and Judah, and it was easy for the nobility and the rich generally to assume that the situation was a sign of the Lord's favour. The message of the prophets, however, was precisely the opposite. All four saw the wealth of the upper classes based on unjust exploitation of the poor, a symptom of contempt for the Law of Moses. The priests and court prophets, who should have been upholding the Law, ignored it, with the result that God's people were left in ignorance of his demands. They were ignoring the requirements of his covenant and, unless the king and his court changed their ways, judgement was sure to follow.

The prophets spoke in the style of a messenger. In an oral society, where few could read or write, messengers were trained to remember a message and repeat it verbatim. The message would be framed in the first person, as if it were spoken directly by the sender. Examples in everyday life can be

found in Genesis 32:3-5 and Numbers 22:15-17. Like a messenger, the prophets began, "Thus says the Lord," and then spoke the words he gave them. More often than not these would be in poetry, making use of striking metaphors, vivid images and word-plays, all to give the message impact and make it memorable. Each oracle would be relatively short, no more than a few verses long, but on the occasion it was spoken there might have been a lengthy introduction, argument or discussion between the prophet and his hearers. Thus, for example, Isaiah 1:2-3 is a self-contained oracle, which would probably have been delivered on a separate occasion from the following oracle, 1:4-9, and that in turn separate from the next, 1:10-17.

Although originally spoken, the prophets' messages were eventually written down and collected. Sometimes it was the prophet himself who took the initiative in preserving the message. There are indications of this in Isaiah 8:16-18 and 30:8, where Isaiah instructs his followers to preserve his words to be published at a future date; Hosea 3, which was apparently written by the prophet himself; and Amos 7:1-9, where again it appears that the prophet himself has recorded three of his visions.

However, much of the work of collection and editing would have been done by the prophet's disciples. In the books they collected, the messages originally spoken on separate occasions are now grouped by themes or linked together by key words. It is clear, too, that later generations felt free to rearrange the original collections and add new oracles to bring the work of the original prophet up to date and apply his words to new situations.

Day 127. Psalm 94; Amos 1 - 3

The Prophetic Word

Psalm 94

A prayer to the Lord, the righteous judge. It is he who gives all mankind standards of right and wrong, and will punish those who disregard justice.

Amos 1 - 3

Amos's ministry is dated "two years before the earthquake" (1:1), which suggests that it was not very long, but although he was not the only prophet of his time (2:11) he is one of the few whose words have survived, probably because they were written down and taken to Judah, where the book which bears his name would have been put together. That the book was produced in Judah is the reason for the mention of King Uzziah in 1:1, despite the fact that nearly all Amos' words apply to the northern kingdom.

With his special call (7:14-15), Amos was directly aware of the power of the Lord's word. He likened it to thunder, or like a lion's roar (1:2, 3:8). When the Lord speaks a word of judgement, disaster follows. This word is entrusted to the prophets, who have the special task of proclaiming it to the people (3:3-8).

The first oracles in the collection are directed against the sins of the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. Although they did not have the Law, they did have the natural sense of justice which God has implanted in human beings and it was for ignoring this universal knowledge of right and wrong that Amos condemned them. Killing pregnant women in order to kill their babies (1:13), desecration of graves for political purposes (2:1), faithlessness and ruthlessness (1:9,11) are sins of this kind.

In contrast Judah and Israel were to be punished for specific sins against the revealed Law (2:4,6-8). The main target was the nation of Israel. 2:6-8 links injustice and idolatry together, since both arise from contempt for the Law. The girls with whom both father and son had sexual intercourse were the shrine prostitutes dedicated to the service of the god Baal and the goddess Ashtart. To use garments taken in pledge for this purpose added to the wrong because if their owners were poor such garments were

supposed to be returned to them at night, in order to give them something to wrap themselves for sleep (Deuteronomy 24:12-13).

From the other nations, the Lord expected fidelity to universal standards of justice, from Israel he expects exclusive worship and knowledge of his Law. The core of this opening section of the book is found in 3:2. One of the foundations of Israel's faith was that they were the chosen people, whom the Lord had brought up from Egypt. However, Amos turned this back on them: because they were the Lord's chosen more was expected of them, and because the Lord did not find it their punishment would be all the more severe.

But when this punishment comes a small number from Israel, a remnant, will be saved (3:12). This theme of a faithful remnant from whom the Lord would start again was first revealed to Elijah (1 Kings 19:18) and occurs frequently in the prophets (e.g. Isaiah 1:9, 10:20-23; Jeremiah 24:1-7).

Day 128. Psalm 62; Amos 4 - 6

The Demand for Justice

Psalm 62

Trust in the Lord is a surer refuge than trust in riches.

Amos 4 - 6

Amos' task was to bring a wealthy, confident, complacent society to a sense of its danger and the threat of divine judgement. References to the luxurious style of living of the wealthy elite abound (3:15; 4:1; 5:11; 6:4-6). As well as their wealth, Israel's leaders could bask in their victories, which would have been taken as a sign of God's favour (6:13; 2 Kings 14:25) and the popularity of religious observance at shrines such as Bethel and Gilgal (4:4-5).

But Amos saw things quite differently. Beneath the exterior signs of success lay neglect of the justice demanded by the Law. While the rich enjoyed their wealth the poor were neglected and oppressed (2:6-8; 4:1; 5:10-13; 8:4-6). As long as this state of affairs continued, Amos declared, the Lord would refuse to accept the worship of the shrines, however impressive it might seem (4:4-5; 5:4-6,21-24).

The "Day of the Lord" (5:18) was another of the foundation beliefs of Israel. They looked forward to a day when the Lord would intervene to inflict decisive defeat on their enemies and restore the pre-eminence of Israel. One feature of the expected Day was darkness and supernatural signs, which would throw the enemy into confusion. But Amos warned that instead of victory the Day of the Lord would bring on Israel the darkness of disaster. (The theme of the Day of the Lord is found frequently in prophecy and like Amos several of the prophets predict darkness on Israel rather than her enemies; see Isaiah 13:6-11; Ezekiel 30:3; Joel 2:1-2,10; Zephaniah 1:14-18).

The warning signs were there for all to read if they would. Israel had already experienced judgement on a small scale (4:6-12); surrounding nations had been destroyed and exiled by Egypt or Assyria (6:2); and the same would happen to Israel (3:9-11; 4:2-3; 5:27; 6:14) and Judah too (6:1). So the prophet took up a lament over Israel (5:1) and issued a "woe" (5:18) treating the nation as if it were already dead.

Where churches are growing and worship becoming attractive, enjoyable and even fashionable, church leaders must beware of neglecting the demands of justice in both Church and nation.

Day 129. Psalm 2; Amos 7 - 9

Israel Shall Not Escape

Psalm 2

A warning to the nations to take heed of the God of Israel. A promise of blessing and dominion for the king who sits on David's throne.

Amos 7:1-9

The "word" of God might come to the prophet in a vision (In Isaiah 1:1 the heading to Isaiah's words is "the vision" and in 2:1 "The word which Isaiah saw."). The visions of Amos show how vulnerable Israel really was, confounding the proud confidence of her rulers. His response was to intercede for the nation. Intercession was one of the most important tasks of the prophets, who had to be not only the Lord's spokesmen to the people, but stand for the people before the Lord (In 1 Samuel 12:23 Samuel admits that it would be a sin for him to stop praying for Israel; in Jeremiah 14:11-12 the Lord forbids Jeremiah to intercede for Judah). Although his prayer was successful after the first two visions, the third left no room for relenting.

Amos 7:10-end

By the time of Amos the bands of prophets were usually to be found at the shrines under the discipline of the priests, one of whose tasks was to ensure that they followed a certain political line. Like Micaiah, however (1 Kings 22), Amos was not content to prophesy only what was acceptable to those in power, and this brought him into direct confrontation with the authorities, a fate suffered by several of his fellow prophets (Jeremiah 20:1-6; 26:20-23).

Amos 8 - 9

In Hebrew, the word for "summer fruit" sounds like the word for "end". So for Amos a vision of summer fruit suggested the message that the "end" had come for Israel (N.I.V. expresses the word play by translating "ripe fruit"). The Lord would no longer spare them. The Day of the Lord would come, bringing with it darkness and mourning for the end of all hope (8:9-10). Warnings through the prophets would cease (8:11-12, although in fact Hosea was active until almost the fall of Samaria).

9:7 intentionally reverses Israel's foundation faith and contrasts with 3:2. There, the fact that Israel was specially chosen means that she will be more severely punished. Now the prophet said the Lord would treat Israel just like any other nation; no longer was she to be special to him. But a remnant will be saved (9:8 as in 3:12). The coming judgement will destroy the nation but it will also sift out the righteous from the sinful.

The oracle of doom in 9:7-10 are the last words from Amos and the culmination of his message, but a later editor has added two oracles of salvation to make the book conform to the pattern of judgement followed by salvation found in most of the prophetic literature. That these oracles are much later is shown by the fact that they assume that the dynasty of David has fallen (9:11) and that Israel is in exile (9:14). The first oracle begins with the formula, "In that day," the second with the words, "The days are coming." Both are widely used in later prophecy to look forward to a time of eventual salvation.

Day 130. Psalm 78:1-8; Hosea 1 - 3

The Unfaithful Wife

Psalm 78:1-8

The history of Israel is retold from generation to generation as the story of God's mighty deeds of salvation, so that each new generation learns to put their trust in him.

Hosea 1 - 3

Hosea began his ministry in Israel about the year 750 B.C. towards the end of Jeroboam's reign, and continued to prophesy until 722 B.C. shortly before the fall of Samaria. His call came with the instruction from the Lord to take an "adulterous wife". The history of Hosea's family life is very important because it gave him the insight into the heart of God on which his message is based. But the precise course of events is not clear from the book and has to be reconstructed.

Probably, Gomer was one of the shrine prostitutes available at the shrine of Baal for sexual intercourse as part of the ritual intended to ensure fertility. Despite the work of Elijah and the prophets who succeeded him, the worship of Baal was flourishing once again. In the time of Hosea, it did not threaten to oust the worship of the Lord completely, but provided an alternative focus of devotion. Israel had forgotten that it was the Lord who had brought them into the land of Canaan, thus providing the grain, wine, oil, wool and flax they needed for food and clothing (2:5,8,9,12,13). Instead they attributed these to Baal and engaged in the sexual and magical rituals designed to appease the god and ensure good crops.

Hosea saw the casual sex involved in Baal worship as adultery and went on to use this image to describe Israel's abandonment of their exclusive loyalty to the Lord. He pictures Israel as an adulterous wife, loved by her husband despite her many infidelities. The names given to his children and the prophecies recorded in chapter 2 told his fellow-Israelites what the Lord was going to do in response to their unfaithfulness. The name of his first son, Jezreel (1:4), was to be understood as an announcement of judgment on the house of Jehu, of which Jeroboam was the fourth in line, because of the bloodthirstiness of Jehu's rebellion (see notes on 2 Kings 9 - 10). The

name of his daughter (1:6) signifies the refusal of a parent to provide ordinary love and care. The name of the second son (1:9) announces the abrogation of the covenant under which Israel was to be peculiarly God's people. There is a link with Amos 9:7, where the prophet declares that Israel is to be treated just like any other nation.

In the prophetic oracles collected in chapter 2 the children (Israel as individuals) are called upon to judge the conduct of their mother (Israel as a whole) and distance themselves from her. The lawsuit of a husband against his unfaithful wife pictures the Lord's indictment against Israel and the action he proposes to take. He will stop providing clothes, food and water (2:3). The land will become barren. Thorn bushes will grow instead of crops and the lack of fertility will eventually stop the Israelites from resorting to Baal (2:6-7). The festivals of Baal will cease (2:11-13) because the land will become a desert. Agriculture will become impossible and Israel will return to the state of affairs in the wilderness, which Hosea sees as a honeymoon, a time of faithfulness (2:14-15) before Israel came into contact with the agricultural society of Canaan and its fertility religions.

The purpose of such punishment is to bring Israel to her senses, to detach her from the worship of Baal and to bring her to a new and heartfelt devotion, matching the Lord's heartfelt love for Israel. When that happens, Hosea sees an age of peace, prosperity and harmony with nature (2:16-18). When the Lord marries Israel again (as he had bought back his own wife in 3:1) he will give as a bride-price the qualities he looks for in his covenant people - righteousness, justice, steadfast love, compassion, faithfulness and knowledge of the Lord (2:19-20).

Eventually, Gomer probably left Hosea, since chapter 3 gives his own account of the buying back of an unfaithful woman (N.I.V.'s "your wife" is not strictly in the Hebrew text). On the Lord's instructions he scraped together all he had to buy her back, either because she had fallen into slavery or from the shrine to which she had returned (3:1-2). He then made her live with him but without enjoying any sexual relations as a prophecy of the exile which was to follow the end of the kingdom (1:4-5), during which there would be no king and no worship (3:4-5). Perhaps it is the coming exile rather than simply the loss of the fertility of the land which, in Hosea's mind, was to constitute the second wilderness experience of 2:14-15.

Day 131. Psalm 78:9-16; Hosea 4 - 7

The Broken Covenant

Psalm 78:9-16

The failure of Ephraim (the nation of Israel) is likened to the unfaithfulness of their ancestors in the wilderness.

Hosea 4 - 7

As God's chosen people, the covenant entailed on Israel's part not only obedience to specific commandments but certain attitudes of heart, the ones listed in 2:19-20. But Hosea finds none of these attitudes (4:1). Instead almost all of the Ten Commandments have been broken (4:2,12,17). The priests, who should have been teaching the people God's requirements, were just as corrupt as the rest (4:4-9). The covenant itself had been broken (6:7; 8:1) which is why Hosea could say that Israel were no longer the Lord's people (1:9).

After 5:7 most of the oracles come from a time after Jeroboam's reign when peace and order in Israel had begun to break down. 5:8 - 6:6 is a collection from the time of the Syro-Ephraimite war in 733 B.C. when Pekah of Israel and Rezin of Aram allied to try to force Judah into an alliance against Assyria by deposing king Ahaz of Judah (see also the notes on Isaiah 7). Ahaz turned to Assyria itself for help (2 Kings 16:5-9) and Tiglath-Pileser attacked both Aram and Israel, virtually destroying Israel and reducing it to a small amount of territory surrounding Samaria. In the face of defeat, Pekah was assassinated and in 732 B.C. Hoshea took the throne and came to terms with Assyria.

5:8-9 is a warning against the Judean counterattack, 5:10-12 a comment on the treachery between sister nations involved in the war. 5:13-15 is a later word of judgment on Hoshea's policy of appeasing Assyria. In 5:15 the Lord waits for Israel to turn back to him and in the next chapter they appear to be doing so. 6:1-3 is a "liturgy of penitence" in which Israel turns to the Lord. But their "repentance" is only skin deep. The worshippers expect that a few brief words will bring them quick relief. "Three days" (6:2) means a very short time as "forty days" meant a long time. 6:4-6 is a divine oracle in reply to these words. In contrast to the showers of blessing they

expect from the Lord (6:3), Israel's love is like dew which soon evaporates (6:4). The dawn they hoped for (6:3) will turn out to be the light of the Lord's judgement (6:5). They think that sacrifices can atone for their sin, but what they really need is a complete change of heart (6:6).

Chapter 7 contains more political comment. In 7:3 the king (probably Hoshea) celebrates his accession to the throne with his nobles, the ones who have conspired against his predecessor. By 732 four kings had been assassinated in less than 12 years. The "heat" of the political class (7:4-7) devours their rulers. In 7:8-end, Hosea mocks the policy of shifting alliances, now with Egypt now with Assyria (7:11) and their reliance on Baal. "Gashing themselves" (7:14) was part of the ritual of Baal worship (1 Kings 18:28). Neither politics nor idolatry will do Israel any good, insists Hosea. Only the Lord can save them (7:13-16).

Day 132. Psalm 78:17-39; Hosea 8 - 10

Israel Swallowed Up

Psalm 78:17-39

God's people remember his faithfulness in the desert, despite their waywardness. Israel had broken the covenant and their professed devotion was little more than lip-service.

Hosea 8 - 10

Amos had seen that God's covenant with Israel imposed on her greater obligations than on those of the surrounding nations (Amos 3:2). God's purpose was to use Israel to bless all the nations. If Israel were faithful to him and kept the law she would display God's truth in a world of confusion and God's love in a world full of selfishness and conflict (Deuteronomy 4:5-8). But by forgetting God's special call, abandoning the covenant and failing to keep the law, Israel became useless for this purpose. Instead of blessing them, God had to punish them in order to display to the nations his implacable hostility to sin.

According to Hosea, Israel's national life demonstrated complete disregard for her covenant with the Lord. (8:1). At the time Hosea spoke, Israel had had a number of kings in quick succession. Hosea saw this as a sign that these were not kings the Lord had given (8:4). Perhaps he was sceptical about the value of having kings at all, seeing the request for a king in the first place as an act of rebellion like the later author of 1 Samuel 8 and 12 (see also 13:9-11). In fact, Israel paid little regard to the authority of the kings, as the increasing number of private law-suits testified (10:3-4). They also made idols, contrary to the law (8:4,11-12), sought alliances with foreign nations instead of relying on the Lord (8:9-10) and the words of the prophets went unheeded (9:7-8).

Because she had failed to keep the covenant, Israel was no longer fit for the purpose for which the Lord had chosen her (8:8,14). Not only would she lose the protection the Lord had promised under the covenant, but he himself would be the one to bring about her destruction (10:10;15; 12:14; 13:9). Hosea had prophesied that Israel would have to live for a time without a king and without a system of worship (3:4-5). The oracles of these

chapters repeat this message in more detail. The calf of Samaria would be broken in pieces; the calf of Bethel (Beth Aven means "house of wickedness") would be taken away as tribute to Assyria (8:6; 9:4; 10:5-8). By relying on her own strength, Israel had "sown the wind" and would soon "reap the whirlwind" (8:7). The nations to which she has turned would soon swallow her up (8:11-14; 9:17; 10:7-15).

The references to "Gibeah" in 9:9 and 10:9 refer to the events of Judges 19 and 20, which Hosea used as a byword for corruption. The event at Beth Arbel referred to in 10:14 is otherwise unknown, but the killing of women and children and pregnant mothers was a common atrocity whose purpose was to devastate whole populations (13:16; 2 Kings 8:12; Amos 1:13; Nahum 3:10; Psalm 137:8-9).

Day 133. Psalm 78:40-55; Hosea 11 - 14

A History of Faithlessness

Psalm 78:40-55

Israel forgets the goodness of God, who set them free from Egypt and looked after them in the desert like a shepherd.

Hosea 11 - 14

Like all the prophets, Hosea was thoroughly schooled in the traditions of Israel's history, and drew freely on the lessons of history to interpret her present state. In these chapters he refers particularly to the traditions of Jacob, Israel's ancestor (12:2-6,12), the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the Lord's care for them in the desert (11:1-4; 12:9-11,13; 13:4-6). Some of the oracles are fragmentary, the extent of each separate saying unclear and the translation uncertain, but the general gist of Hosea's message is clear: the contrast between the Lord's faithfulness to his people and their fickleness and the destruction which is coming as a result.

11:1-11 brings together Israel's history and Hosea's experience of family life. Whereas in chapters 1 - 3 the Lord's love for his people is compared to that of a husband and Israel to an unfaithful wife, here the Lord is compared to a parent and Israel an erring child. It was the Lord who tenderly cared for Israel in their infancy, the wanderings in the desert, but when they arrived in Canaan they soon forgot him and began sacrificing to the Baals. As a result they will become slaves again ("return to Egypt") but this time it is Assyria who will become their master. But just as in chapters 1 - 3, Hosea sees both sides of God's heart. The need to discipline Israel by punishment in order to wean them back from Baal worship competes with the strong compassion he feels for them. He may punish but he will not completely destroy them (Admah and Zeboiim are the cities destroyed with Sodom and Gomorrah: Deuteronomy 29:23). Three times in 11:9 Hosea stresses that when God acts it will not be in wrath, but in mercy. Eventually Israel will return to him (11:10-11). In this oracle with its insight into the mercy of God it is possible to find a model for Jesus' story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-end).

In the oracle in 12:2-6, Hosea compares Israel with the patriarch Jacob, using the traditions of Jacob's birth (Genesis 25:21-26), his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:11-end) and his wrestle with God at the Jabbok (Genesis 32:22-end). Like Jacob, Israel is unreliable, given to lies and fraud. Like Jacob, Israel is struggling with God; in their worship they try to force him to do what they want, treating the Lord just the same as Baal. But Jacob eventually submitted to God and repented, and like him Israel should do the same.

The oracles collected in chapter 13 announce the final doom of the nation of Israel. The Lord who has been Israel's shepherd will become instead a predatory beast (13:4-8). The one who is their helper (13:9; see Psalm 121) will become their destroyer. 13:12-16 are difficult to translate. It is probably best to take them as spoken during the siege of Samaria itself and to take the first two sentences of verse 14 as questions (as in R.S.V. and N.R.S.V. The Good News Bible is even more explicit). The Lord asks himself whether he is to be merciful to Israel or not and decides against it. Death is to come, bringing plague and destruction. Samaria must bear its guilt and its people will be destroyed. These are probably the last words the prophet spoke. He himself may have been killed in the final Assyrian assault, or he may have escaped to Judah where his words were preserved and eventually edited to form the present book.

The words in chapter 14 are placed here in order that the book ends with an oracle of salvation. Hosea exhorts the people to "return" to the Lord and gives them a liturgy of penitence to make as their prayer. This time, unlike 6:1-3, their words are to be genuine and this time the Lord will answer in mercy (14:4-8). However, by the time of the siege of Samaria and the words of 13:9-14 it was too late.

14:9 are a much later comment on the whole book from a scribe writing in the wisdom tradition.

Day 134. Psalm 78:56-end; 2 Kings 15 - 17

The Fall of Samaria

Psalm 78:56-end

The psalmist remembers how Israel continued to rebel against the Lord after their entry to the promised land. The destruction of the tabernacle at Shiloh, which probably took place when the ark was captured by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4), became the prelude to the establishment of the Temple at Jerusalem. The ten tribes, of which Ephraim was predominant, had abandoned the Temple and the psalmist sees their defeat as just retribution, whereas Judah, which remained faithful, continued in peace under the dynasty of David.

2 Kings 15:1-7

The reign of Azariah (also known as Uzziah) came at the same time as that of Jeroboam II in the north. Like his and for the same reasons, Uzziah's reign was a long and prosperous one. With Assyria relatively weak, Uzziah too took the opportunity to build up his strength. More details are given in 2 Chronicles 26. The prophet Isaiah dates his call from God "in the year that king Uzziah died" (Isaiah 6:1). For the young prophet, there may well have been a sense of the end of an era when the old king died.

2 Kings 15:8 - 16:9

As Hosea had foretold, the house of Jehu came to a swift and bloody end, with Jeroboam's son, Zechariah, assassinated after only a six months reign and Menahem beginning his reign in particularly bloody fashion (15:16). Thus began the period of political instability which led inexorably to defeat at the hands of Assyria (see Hosea 8:4-10; 13:9-11).

The Syro-Ephraimite war is mentioned in 15:29 and 16:5-7. Menahem had begun the policy of buying Assyrian support (15:19) but Pekah, who deposed Menahem's son, reversed his policy and formed an anti-Assyrian coalition with Rezin of Aram. Rezin and Pekah were trying either to force Ahaz to join this coalition or depose him. But Ahaz in his turn appealed to Assyria and when Tiglath-Pileser invaded Aram was destroyed and Israel reduced to a rump (see Hosea 5:8-14; Isaiah 7).

2 Kings 16:10 - 17:6

Help from Assyria had its political and religious cost. Not only did Ahaz have to pay tribute, but he also had to adopt Assyrian gods and worship (16:18). Meanwhile in Israel, Hoshea, who had replaced Pekah in time to stave off complete defeat, began in his turn to try to free himself from Assyria. The policy of vacillating alliances is ridiculed in Hosea 7:11 and led directly to the overthrow of Samaria in 721 B.C.

2 Kings 17:7-end

A long passage written by the editors of the Deuteronomistic History to explain why God should reject some of his people. The reasons given are that Israel had worshipped idols and failed to keep the Law. Failure to keep the Law might include the rampant injustice against which Amos and to a lesser extent Hosea had protested, but this aspect of their disobedience is not given a great deal of attention in the historical books. Here, the weight is all on idolatry and worship at high places. Kings are judged according to their faithfulness or otherwise to the Temple at Jerusalem and all the kings of Israel condemned for following "the sins of Jeroboam", tolerating the worship of the two calf idols at Bethel and Dan. Probably, this passage was originally written before the fall of Jerusalem (only the exile of Israel is mentioned in 17:23), with 17:19-20 added later when Judah had suffered the same fate as her northern neighbour.

Another long passage (17:24-end) gives a hostile account of the origin of the Samaritans, the people who occupied the area around Samaria in Jesus' day and with whom the Jews did not associate (John 4:9).

Judah: Azariah (Uzziah) 783-742; Jotham (co-regent) 756-742; Ahaz (co-regent) 742-735; Ahaz (sole ruler) 735-715; Hezekiah 715-687

Israel: Zechariah 746-745; Shallum 745; Menahem 745-737; Pekahiah 737-736; Pekah 736-732; Hoshea 732-722; Fall of Samaria 722

Day 135. Psalm 56; Micah 1 - 3

The Sin of Jerusalem

Psalm 56

The prayer of someone unjustly pursued by enemies.

Micah 1 - 3

Micah is the third of the eighth century prophets, beginning his ministry slightly later than Hosea. While Amos and Hosea directed their message almost exclusively against the northern kingdom, Micah's concern was Judah. Despite the long reign of the righteous Uzziah and his son Jotham, all was not well. Micah saw the rich taking advantage of the poor (2:1-5,9) and the priests and prophets acquiescing in their injustice (3:5-7,11). Because of these sins, the core of Micah's message is that Jerusalem will suffer the same punishment as Samaria (1:6; 3:12).

The message begins with the coming of the Lord to judge the sins of Israel. But the shock for the inhabitants of Judah is to find that "Israel" includes themselves. Jerusalem is just as guilty as Samaria. In fact, its Temple is no better than a high place (1:5); the real "temple" is the dwelling-place of Yahweh in heaven (1:2-3). The towns of Judah are called to begin rituals of mourning because the fate of Samaria will soon overtake them (1:8-end).

The reason for the Lord's coming is now given in more detail (2:1-5). The Jerusalem elite have been getting rich by injustice. They have been taking over the land of the poor, presumably by foreclosing on loans made to them, with the result that they are driven from the land which had been their family inheritance. But while they plot evil against the poor (2:1), the Lord plans disaster against them (2:3). When Jerusalem is overthrown, they in turn will be driven from their homes and when the time comes for the land to be apportioned by lot, they will have no family member to claim even their own (2:4-5). A similar message of judgment is given in 3:1-4.

Not surprisingly, Micah's message did not go down well with those in power, and just as the press can be used today to mobilise opinion against those who are perceived as a threat to the status quo, Micah found himself becoming a target for the professional shrine prophets and the priests (2:6-11). His answer was to pronounce an end to the inspiration of the false

prophets who spoke only what was expedient (3:5-7). In contrast, his inspiration comes from the Spirit of the Lord, a spirit of justice to discern and declare sin (3:8). Despite the confidence of Jerusalem, it will fall because they fail to take heed of the message.

Chapters 4 - 7 of Micah have been added at a later period and are included in "Word of Life" part 4.

The Book of Isaiah

Isaiah has the most complex history of any prophetic book. Isaiah of Jerusalem lived during the reigns of Uzziah (783-742 B.C.), Jotham (742-735), Ahaz (735-715) and Hezekiah (715-687). From references in 8:16 and 30:8 it is clear that his words were already written down during his lifetime. After his death, they became the foundation of a tradition. Not only were his sayings preserved but they inspired later generations of prophets, and the words of these later generations have been preserved along with those of Isaiah, while Isaiah's own prophecies have been edited and re-edited to suit the needs and interests of succeeding periods. This process of editing and re-editing helps to explain, for example, why the call of Isaiah is recorded in chapter 6 rather than at the beginning of the book, why chapter 1 forms a collection all on its own and why words of Isaiah and those of his later interpreters are found interspersed throughout the book.

One major edition of the book took shape during the reign of Josiah (640-609), when the Assyrian threat, which had dominated the politics of Isaiah's day, was almost at an end. In this period of spiritual renewal, Isaiah's confidence in the Lord's ability to deal with Judah's enemies unaided became a source of inspiration. Later, during the exile and afterwards, his insistence on the Lord's undying love for Jerusalem became a source of hope for the eventual return of all the exiles.

Most important of all, chapters 40 - 55 were spoken by an unknown prophet in Babylon about the year 538, who looked back to Isaiah's sense of the holiness of the Lord and his purpose to reveal his glory through the political history of Israel. The fact that these words were added to the scroll of Isaiah is a recognition of the close links between the thought of the two prophets. Later still, chapters 56 - 66 were composed by the successors of this prophet of the exile.

In the next few readings, we will look mainly at the life and work of Isaiah of Jerusalem, although because of the complex nature of the book, it has also been necessary to include quite a considerable amount from later periods. However, most of the later additions to Isaiah will be dealt with at a later stage in "Word of Life."

Day 136. Psalm 93; Isaiah 6; 1; 2

The Call of Isaiah

Psalm 93

The Lord is King and rules securely over his rebellious creation.

Isaiah 6

From the location of his call in the Temple, his ready access to the highest in the land, including the king, his insider's knowledge of the intricacies of political affairs and the superiority of his poetic style, it appears that Isaiah was a resident of Jerusalem and a member of the educated elite.

Like Micaiah son of Imlah (1 Kings 22), Isaiah's call included a vision of the Lord's Council. Standing in the Temple, he caught a glimpse of the worship of heaven. The song of the angels expresses the transcendence and immanence of God. He is "holy", utterly separate and removed, yet his glory, that is his honour and power, is found throughout the world. Isaiah was overwhelmed by the holiness of God in contrast to his own and the people's uncleanness. His characteristic title for the Lord was "the Holy One of Israel."

With the death of King Uzziah very much in his mind, Isaiah recognised the Lord as King above all kings. Throughout his prophecies he saw the Lord as sovereign over all the political events of his day, even those that resulted in defeat and disaster for his own people. From this vision came the conviction that the only means of security for Israel's kings was trust in the power of the Lord to save them.

However, from the start he was warned that the prophetic word he was to give would have the effect of hardening the hearts of those who heard it. By taking no notice they would bring God's judgement on themselves (6:9-11). In fact the period of Isaiah's ministry co-incided with the decline of Judah from a position of relative power to a tiny rump of territory under the domination of Assyria.

Isaiah 1

Chapter 1 is a collection of Isaiah's oracles, put together as a preface to the whole book and intended as a summary of the major thrust of his

preaching. It begins with a lament for the sin of God's people who have turned their backs on him (1:2-4). God has punished them by sending a series of disasters, but instead of turning away from sin Israel has persisted and her predicament has gone from bad to worse. 1:8 reflects the situation at the end of the reign of Hezekiah, when all that was left to Judah was the city of Jerusalem and a small amount of territory surrounding it.

The rest of the chapter concentrates on the Lord's demand for justice. It is not sacrificial worship the Lord requires but obedience to his requirements, and in particular care for those who have no one to provide for them like the fatherless and the widows. However, God's judgement when it comes is intended not to destroy the city but to purge it of sin in order to restore its righteousness (1:18,24-26).

Isaiah 2

Before chapter 1 was added as a preface, the words of Isaiah began at 2:1. To the beginning of this collection a later scribe has added the vision of Jerusalem as the centre of worship for the whole world (2:2-5). The connection of this hope with that of 1:26 is clear. Isaiah hoped for a restoration of the holiness of Jerusalem, which never came in his lifetime. But the hope persisted and many of the later additions to the book express it. This oracle also occurs in Micah 4:1-4 and has been added there for the same reason.

Another characteristic of Isaiah was his hatred of arrogance of any sort. In his vision in the Temple he had seen the glory of the Lord, in comparison to which the most powerful ruler was insignificant. However, the wealth of Judah had made its nobles arrogant and complacent and was going to lead to their downfall (2:12-end).

Day 137. Psalm 96; Isaiah 3 - 5

The Holiness of God and the Sin of Jerusalem

Psalm 96

The psalm celebrates the glory and holiness, righteousness and justice of God. The people of Isaiah's day failed to recognise or live up to any of them.

Isaiah 3:1 - 4:1

Observing the outward manner and inward mindset of the political class in Jerusalem, Isaiah predicts the downfall of the system as a result of its own corruption and of the judgement of God (3:8-9,13-15). The city of Jerusalem depended on the surrounding countryside for supplies of food and water. The failure of these supplies would precipitate a crisis because there would be no one with sufficient will or authority to deal with the situation (3:1-7). In particular Isaiah condemned the influence of wealthy women with no sense of political responsibility, motivated solely by their desire for ever-increasing luxury, and foretold for them the disaster of defeat and exile (3:16-17,24-26).

Isaiah 4:2-end

The later additions in chapters 3 and 4 can be identified by the introductory, "In that day." 4:2-6 balances Isaiah's prediction of doom on Jerusalem with the hope for a glorious future, when the remnant who survive will be holy, the women will be cleansed and the glory of the Lord will be visible just as it was in the wilderness in the pillar of cloud and fire (see Exodus 14:19,24). The 'Shekinah', or cloud of God's glorious presence, was a major theme of Isaiah's vision of God.

Isaiah 5

Chapter 5 begins with an oracle in the form of a popular love song. But having captured his audience's attention by announcing the theme of love, Isaiah moves the focus step by step to the judgement coming on Jerusalem. First, he makes the vineyard rather than his beloved his main theme. Then when the crop fails he introduces a court scene in which the beloved invites the audience to be the jury. As he announces the judgement, Isaiah takes a

further step by hinting that his beloved can control the weather, thus giving a hint of what is to come in verse 7. The beloved is God himself, the vineyard Judah and the prospects for God's people bleak.

The reason for God's judgment is the failure of righteousness and justice (5:7). The woes which follow expand the demand for justice and the failure of the rulers of Judah to provide it. Many of Isaiah's strictures echo those of Amos in the northern kingdom some years earlier. Compare 3:15 with Amos 5:11; 3:16-17 with Amos 4:1-3; 5:11-13 with Amos 6:4-7; 5:16 with Amos 5:24. Instead of justice, Jerusalem's leaders are given to luxury, drunkenness and self-indulgence. The result will be defeat and exile (5:26-end).

The series of woes in chapter 5 continues briefly in 10:1-4. The reason chapters 6 - 9 have been inserted in between is explained in the next reading.

Day 138. Psalm 97; Isaiah 7:1 - 10:4

The Syro-Ephraimite War

Psalm 97

The glory of the Lord, who rules in righteousness and justice.

Isaiah 7:1 - 10:4

In 735 B.C., a year after the death of Uzziah, Judah was invaded by the coalition of Aram and Israel under kings Rezin and Pekah, attempting to force Ahaz to join their anti-Assyrian coalition. In response Ahaz sought help from Assyria itself (2 Kings 16:5-9). Although Judah was initially successful in resisting the invasion, the appeal meant that in 732 an Assyrian army invaded Aram and Israel and captured Damascus. Samaria was only saved because Pekah was assassinated and replaced by Hoshea who came to terms with Assyria and agreed to pay tribute. In the meantime Ahaz had also become a vassal of Assyria, paying tribute and adopting the worship of Assyrian gods (2 Kings 16:10-18).

As prophet, Isaiah's message was straightforward: Ahaz should rely on the Lord alone for deliverance and resist the temptation to seek Assyrian help. To submit to Assyria would only lead to disaster in the long run. Like Hosea shortly before him Isaiah used the names of his children as prophetic signs, and chapters 7 and 8 contain the record of these three signs. Assuming that the eldest was already born by the time of the invasion, the middle child would have been conceived and born while the war was in progress and the youngest was announced but not necessarily conceived before the defeat of Israel and Aram.

Shear-Jashub means "a remnant will return" and his presence with Isaiah at his first meeting with the king (7:3) would have strengthened the message that the invading army would be defeated and put to flight. The short oracle from the Lord is preserved in 7:7-9. Its thrust is that Ahaz should stand firm or Judah too will be destroyed. The second meeting with Ahaz probably took place some time later, after Ahaz had made terms with Assyria. N.I.V. translates the prophecy of 7:14 so as to bring it into line with Matthew's gospel. In fact, the young woman (probably Isaiah's wife, the prophetess) was already pregnant. Isaiah announced that the child's name

would be Immanuel, to signify that by the time he or she is born, the threat of Aram and Israel would have been removed. However, a far greater threat awaited, that from Assyria. A third time Isaiah uses his children's names as a prophetic sign. In 8:1-4 the child is not yet conceived, but Isaiah records before witnesses the name Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz: "quick to the plunder, swift to the spoil". Both Damascus and Samaria were soon to be destroyed.

But Ahaz and his principal supporters did not heed Isaiah's warnings, so Isaiah devised a further sign. He recorded his prophecies in a scroll and entrusted it to witnesses (8:16) so that when everything predicted took place it would be seen that the Lord had brought it about. The "testimony" probably included Isaiah's account of his call in chapter 6 and the prophecies relating to the Syro-Ephraimite invasion (7:1-17; 8:1-8,11-18). It represents a very early example of a prophet taking care that his message would survive. The testimony has been incorporated by the editor into the larger book, with some additions relating to the outcome of the crisis and some from a later time.

Of these the most important is 9:1-7, the enthronement oracle for a new king. Disappointed in Ahaz, Isaiah looked to his son, Hezekiah, to fulfil the God-appointed destiny of David's house, uniting Israel and Judah and ruling with righteousness and justice. Israel, ravaged after defeat by Assyria will be incorporated into a united nation (9:3), the Assyrian yoke removed (9:4), the debris of battle cleared away (9:5) and "shalom" restored (9:7). Unfortunately, the hopes Isaiah placed in Hezekiah were also doomed to disappointment, but the prophecy played an important part after the exile of Judah in kindling hopes of a new king in David's line who would restore God's people.

9:8-end is another short collection of oracles of Isaiah against the rump state of Israel which remained after the Assyrian devastation. Instead of turning back to the Lord they arrogantly set about rebuilding (9:9-10). Isaiah sees no escape from Assyria's might, or from God's anger. 10:1-4 is an oracle displaced here from the series in chapter 5 in order to link those in chapter 9 to the "Woe" against Assyria in 10:5.

Hezekiah 715 - 687 B.C.

2 Kings 18-20; 2 Chronicles 31-32

Hezekiah reversed the policy of Ahaz and embarked on a vigorous programme of reforms which won the praise of the Deuteronomic historian (2 Kings 18:5). The new atmosphere seems also to have brought Isaiah back into public life after the long silence hinted at in 8:16-22. During the reign, a renewed Egyptian dynasty began stirring up rebellion against Assyria. Isaiah vigorously denounced the idea of joining in (18:1-6; 20:3-end; 30:1-7; 31:1-3). In the end, though, Hezekiah did refuse tribute to Assyria (2 Kings 18:7) and Sennacherib duly set about the invasion. His progress is graphically described in Isaiah 10:27b-32 and its results in Isaiah 36:1 and 1:7-8. Assyria took forty-six Judean cities, leaving only Jerusalem which was subjected to a long siege. At this stage, Isaiah began to counsel against surrender. The siege, though, was eventually lifted, perhaps after Hezekiah capitulated and agreed to pay tribute (2 Kings 18:14-16); possibly after the Assyrian camp was struck with disease (2 Kings 19:35-end).

The account of Hezekiah's reign is found in 2 Kings 18 - 20, which we will use to begin a later series of readings.

Day 139. Psalm 47; Isaiah 10:5 - 12:end

Exile and Return

Psalm 47

A vision of Israel victorious over the nations and the God of Israel himself enthroned and reigning over all the world.

Isaiah 10:5-27a

These verses were inspired by the advance of the Assyrian army on Jerusalem either in 722 or 701 B.C. They introduce a major theme of the Bible, taken up later by Habakkuk, Second Isaiah, Daniel, Jesus and the author of Revelation: that God is in control of political affairs and uses human government to achieve his own purposes. Assyria is the "rod of his

anger", to be used to punish Judah, "a godless people". But all this is accomplished without any reduction of the free will of those involved. The Assyrian king does it all for his own purposes, and, because his motives include pride and contempt for the Lord, Assyria in its own turn will be judged.

The three oracles from 10:16-27a fill in the details. In the first, Isaiah foresees the Assyrian army struck by disease (10:16-19). The second looks like a later addition, since God's people are in exile. The scattered exiles put their trust in the Lord once again (10:20) and begin to return from exile (10:20-23). The name of Isaiah's son, "a remnant shall return" (7:3) is given a new meaning. Finally, God's anger against Judah will end and be turned against Assyria instead (10:24-27a).

Isaiah 10:27b - 12:end

A second group of prophecies begins with 10:27b. Once more we are back with the Assyrian army, advancing against Jerusalem as it did in 701 B.C. when Hezekiah attempted to revolt. As the invaders come in sight, Jerusalem braces herself to meet her fate (10:32-34).

But suddenly the mood changes. Out of disaster comes salvation, not just for Judah but for the whole world. As the Holy Spirit came upon David from the time of his anointing (1 Samuel 16:13) the Spirit will rest on Israel's ruler. As Solomon was given wisdom to rule God's people well (1 Kings 3:11-12) he will have wisdom and understanding. Like Solomon, he will give judgements with discernment, using true standards of righteousness and giving justice for the poor, thus fulfilling the hopes of Psalm 72. The iron sceptre of Psalm 2:9 will be the rod of his word (11:4) with which he will rule the nations. As a result of his righteous rule, not only political and social harmony but harmony with the environment will be achieved and the knowledge of the Lord shared by all nations (11:6-9), fulfilling the dream of "shalom" ("peace") as it was in the Garden of Eden.

The oracles from 11:10 onwards express the hopes of the people of Jerusalem for a return of the exiles. The anger of God against his people has given way to comfort (12:1; see Isaiah 40:1-2). The people of Israel, now united (11:13), trust in the Lord once again (12:2) and their territory is restored (11:14). The return of the exiles is compared with the exodus from Egypt (11:16), the song of the returnees echoes that of Miriam at the Red Sea (12:2,5; see Exodus 15:1-2). The Lord is present among his people and all nations give him glory (12:4-5), fulfilling the hope of Emmanuel (12:6).

Day 140. Psalm 9; Isaiah 13:1 - 14:23; 21; 23

The Fall of Babylon and Tyre

Psalm 9

Rejoicing in Israel over the judgement of the nations.

Isaiah 13:1 - 14:23

Because the political life of Israel and Judah was intertwined with her neighbours, most of the prophets delivered oracles about the nations. We have already seen how the book of Amos opens with a series against the nations immediately surrounding Israel. In Isaiah, the oracles against the nations are collected in chapters 13 - 23, where they have been arranged by later editors. An original nucleus of sayings of Isaiah has been augmented, reapplied and rearranged over the next few hundred years, and the arrangement now reflects the preoccupations of later times. The editor's introduction in 13:1 applies the whole collection from 13:2 to 14:23 to Babylon, the major world power of a century or more later than Isaiah. But Babylon itself is not mentioned in 13:1-16 or 14:4b-23. The themes of these oracles are much wider than one particular nation. They have been applied specifically to Babylon because that nation represented the powerful enemy of God's people.

It is God who controls the destinies of the nations (13:2-5). The Day of the Lord, when it comes, will begin with ordinary human battle but take on cosmic dimensions (13:10; these words are used by Jesus in Mark 13:24 as a way of telling his hearers that he is referring to the "Day of the Lord"). His anger will be directed not against one nation only but against all sin (13:11-

13). But out of the destruction, God's people will emerge secure to rule over the nations (14:1-2).

The magnificent taunt-song of 14:4b-21, now applied to Babylon, could be taken as a comment on political pride generally. It celebrates the downfall of a tyrannical world ruler. As he descends to the underworld, the spirits of the dead come to greet him. From his pre-eminent position in the world he has now become no more than one of them. 14:12-14 draw on a legend of the first man also used in Ezekiel 28:12-15, where it has features in common with the story of Eden in Genesis 2. Set by God in Paradise he becomes proud and wants to be the equal of God, so he is cast down. In 14:12 the Authorised Version translates "morning star" by the name "Lucifer" with the result that this passage has often been taken as a description of the fall of Satan. But as its use in Ezekiel shows, the pattern of overweening pride followed by destruction is a recurring theme in political life.

For the early Church, "Babylon" was the epitome of the luxurious, immoral and oppressive world-system under which they lived (see 1 Peter 5:13 and Revelation 17:5-6,18, where "Babylon" refers to Rome). The description of the fall of Babylon in Revelation 18 also uses images from Isaiah 23 and Ezekiel 27 on the judgement of Tyre, the trading city. These cities and the judgement on them stand for God's hatred of human pride in all periods of history.

Isaiah 21, 23

Oracles against Babylon, Edom, Arabia and Tyre

Day 141. Psalm 10; Isaiah 14:24 - 19:end

The God of the Whole Earth

Psalm 10

This psalm is linked to Psalm 9 by the refrain in 10:18 which echoes that in 9:20. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, they constitute one psalm. Although the theme of Psalm 10 is the oppression of arrogant men, there is a hint in 10:16 that these particular oppressors are the nations surrounding Israel, just as in Psalm 9. Israel prays for deliverance from them.

Isaiah 14:24 - 19:end

During the upheavals of his lifetime, Isaiah's eyes were on the political situation of the whole Near East and the words which the Lord gave him applied to Judah's neighbours and her enemies as well as her own rulers and people. Here are collected some of Isaiah's oracles about these nations. We hear him warning them of defeats to come at the hand of Assyria (14:28-end; 15:1-end; 16:6-12; 17:1-6; 18:1-6; 19:1-15). We hear him denouncing the various alliances in which Judah was tempted to become involved (14:32; 18:1-2; see also 30:1-7, 31:1-3). Rather, it is better to wait quietly and rely on the Lord to save his people (14:32; 17:10; see 7:9, 8:5-8, 30:15-17, 31:1).

To the words of Isaiah have been added a series of oracles from later times. First, in 14:24-27, God's people constitute a stumbling block for the oppressor. Significantly, their judgement is triggered by an attack on God's people. This is a theme taken up in Joel, Ezekiel and Zechariah in relation to the coming last battle with which this age will end.

In other places, God's people are a place of refuge for the oppressed from all the nations (14:32; 16:1-5; 17:7-8). And finally, in the future to come, all nations will acknowledge the sovereignty of Israel's God (18:7; 19:19-end). It is not only for God's people that judgement leads to salvation, but for the nations also. In the time of peace which is to come, even former enemies will acknowledge the Lord and he will truly be the God of the whole earth.

Day 142. Psalm 66; Isaiah 28 - 29

Against Ignorance and Complacency

Psalm 66

God protects his people and saves them from affliction.

Isaiah 28 - 29

The main theme of the oracles in these chapters is the ignorance and complacency of God's people. The blindness of those who should have been teaching the people God's ways was such that they could not see the disaster threatening. The drunkenness of festival time vividly illustrates the irresponsibility of the leaders of God's people and their slowness to heed the warnings Isaiah was giving them. First he sees Samaria, the "crown" of Israel as nothing more than a drunkard's wreath, found the morning after limp and bedraggled and trampled underfoot (28:1-4) But Jerusalem is no better. Even her prophets and priests join in the carousing, mocking Isaiah as the purveyor of nonsense (28:7-10). The Hebrew of verse 10 probably refers to the monotonous sounds made by children as they learn the alphabet by rote. So Isaiah replies, it will be by people making strange sounds (the Assyrians) that Judah will be taught their lesson (28:11-13).

These warnings of the threat from Assyria date from the time of Hezekiah's attempt to break free from Assyrian control by forming an alliance (covenant) with Egypt. Jerusalem's rulers boasted of this treaty as a "covenant with death" (28:14-15; see also 30:1-5). According to Isaiah, what they should be doing instead is trusting the Lord alone (28:16) and ruling in justice and righteousness (28:17). Reliance on Egypt will not save them; instead Isaiah foresees overwhelming defeat (28:21) on the scale of David against the Philistines at Perazim (2 Samuel 5:17-25) or Joshua at Gibeon (Joshua 10:10-15), but this time God's people will be on the losing side.

Then in 28:23 the tone of the sayings changes. 28:23-end is a wisdom saying whose meaning is that just as the farmer knows exactly how to get the best from his land, God will do exactly what is needed to teach his people their lesson. Isaiah saw clearly what the rulers of his day did not, that God's "work" (28:21) was to exalt his righteousness and see it displayed in the life of his people (see 5:16). If it could not be displayed by their willing

obedience it would be displayed by means of purifying judgement in which God would thresh his people to remove the cross.

Isaiah also looked forward to a time when this purifying judgement would have succeeded. Whereas in 28:9-13 the priests and prophets reject Isaiah's message as meaningless rubbish, by 29:24 the ignorant and wayward are ready to accept instruction, while the thresher, Assyria, is judged in its turn (29:5-7). In chapter 29 the warnings of doom and condemnations of ignorance (29:1-4,13-16) are balanced by promises of help and visions of a time when Jerusalem's enemies disappear and her people are ready to hear God's word and learn from it (29:17-end).

Day 143. Psalm 33; Isaiah 20; 30; 22

False Confidence and True Faith

Psalm 33

The Lord rules by his word over both nature and political life. Military strength is of no consideration in his sight; his people are saved by trust in him.

Isaiah 20; 30; 22

In these chapters, Isaiah denounces the confidence of Judah's leaders in worldly strength, a confidence which eventually failed them. They put their trust in alliance with Egypt (30:1-7; 20:3-end), military preparations (22:8b-11; 30:16), or, in the case of Shebna, wealth and prestige (22:15-18). All this seemed to Isaiah a mad rush to avoid trusting in the Lord. His message was that only the Lord could save; Judah's rulers should place their confidence in him. The Lord was waiting for them to turn to him in order to demonstrate his power to save, but so long as they ignored him, disaster was sure to follow (30:15-18).

Isaiah 20

Between 713 and 711, Isaiah had walked about Jerusalem dressed as a prisoner of war as a warning of the fate of Ashdod, which was indeed sacked by the Assyrians. When Hezekiah began to intrigue with Egypt, the sign was recalled as a similar warning to Judah that Egypt was powerless to help.

Isaiah 30

Again, the prophet warns against alliance with Egypt (30:1-7), but the people of Jerusalem refuse to listen to him, so he writes his prediction on a scroll to act as a witness for future generations that the disaster to come was the result of their rebellion (30:8-11). Despite the Lord's desire to have mercy, destruction is the only possible outcome of their disobedience (30:12-17).

But the compassion of the Lord means that even though punished, his will for the salvation of his people will eventually prevail. Later generations

look forward to the eventual restoration of Jerusalem and downfall of her enemies (30:18-end).

Isaiah 22:1-14

In 701, as a result of Hezekiah's intrigues with Egypt, The Assyrians invaded Judah, laid waste the countryside and captured all her cities. Jerusalem alone withstood siege for some time. The situation is graphically portrayed in 1:5-8. Eventually, her military commanders deserted their posts (22:3) and Hezekiah was forced to capitulate (2 Kings 18:13-16). When the Assyrian army eventually withdrew the people of the city took to the housetops to celebrate their deliverance (22:1-2,13). Bitterly disappointed, Isaiah condemns their complacency. Not even near-defeat had brought them to their senses. Next time, there would be no reprieve (22:12-14).

Isaiah 22:15-end

Isaiah had a particular hatred for arrogance and self-seeking (2:12-18; 3:16-end; 5:8-13). Here he denounces the worldly Shebna for keeping an ostentatious chariot and having a magnificent tomb carved for himself in Jerusalem. He will die in exile and the tomb will go unused (22:15-18). A further oracle introduces Eliakim, Shebna's successor, who seemed the ideal man for the job (22:19-23), but still later Eliakim's reputation was sullied by the members of his family he had placed in positions of power, and the metaphor of a secure peg (22:23) was taken up and turned against him (22:24-25).

Day 144. Psalm 48; Isaiah 31 - 33

Promise of Restoration

Psalm 48

The Lord delivers Jerusalem from attack by her enemies and makes her people secure.

Isaiah 31 - 33

Despite the wickedness of its rulers, Isaiah believed that the Lord would rescue and restore Jerusalem. In these chapters he dreams of a glorious future the other side of judgement. In 31:1-3, he warns of the folly of the Egyptian alliance. Why trust in Egypt when they could be trusting in the Lord? As a result of their lack of faith, not only will Egypt be destroyed but Judah also, the one who helps and the one who is helped together.

But after a single prophecy of judgement, the mood changes abruptly to one of hope. The Lord will shield Jerusalem as he shielded the Israelites on the night of the Passover (31:5), and by attacking God's people, Assyria will have brought her fate upon herself (31:8-end; see 14:24-27; 29:5-8; 30:27-end).

After the defeat of the enemy comes the fulfilment of Isaiah's hopes. In place of the vacillating and unfaithful kings of his day, the Lord gives the king for whom Israel prays in Psalm 72. The injustice which Isaiah saw so rampant in his day gives way to righteousness and justice (32:1-2; see 9:2-7; 11:1-5). In place of wilful ignorance, the Lord gives wisdom and knowledge (32:3-8; see 28:7-13, 29:9-14). The women of Jerusalem, who in Isaiah's time had eyes only for the latest fashions (3:16-end), are now called to see the restoration of the nation (32:9-end): the fertility of the land, justice and righteousness, and finally the confidence and trust which had been missing in the time of crisis (30:15; 32:17). As in Joel 2:18-end, this blessing includes the outpouring of the Spirit (32:15).

Chapter 33 begins again with the destruction of the destroyer, while the fear of the Lord unlocks a treasure chest of wisdom and knowledge (33:6), the treasure God's people today find in Jesus (Colossians 2:2-3). Out of the humiliation of defeat the Lord gives security and prosperity (33:7-9,18-19).

Day 145. Psalm 46; Isaiah 36 - 37

The Lord will Defend Zion

Psalm 46

This psalm reflects the confidence of Isaiah that "God is with us" and will defend his city.

Isaiah 36 - 37

It is very uncertain how the events of these chapters relate to the siege of Jerusalem recorded in 1 Kings 18:13-16. From Assyrian sources the invasion of Judah during which all its cities were taken and the siege of Jerusalem which followed can be dated to 701 B.C. Although the city held out for a time, Hezekiah was eventually forced to capitulate, perhaps when the officers in charge of the defence deserted their posts (Isaiah 22:3). The problem is that there appear to be two sieges, one in which Hezekiah capitulates and one in which he holds out. In addition, there are two accounts of the reason for the eventual withdrawal of Assyrian troops, once because of a rumour from Lachish (37:8-9) and once because of a terrible plague (37:36). Here and in 2 Kings 18 all these events have been run together into one story and it is not easy to sort them out.

The story as told in these chapters expresses a remarkable faith in the control of political events by Israel's God. Human rulers may carry out plans of their own, but it is God who is ultimately in control (37:26; see Psalms 46:1-3,6 and 76:10 where human wrath is bent to God's control and brings him praise). Judah's enemies may think they can overcome her, but God defends Jerusalem for his own sake and the sake of his promises to his people (37:33-35; see 14:24-28; also Psalm 46:5-7; 48:4-8; 76:1-9). Then follows the Lord's reign of peace, ruling over his enemies from Jerusalem (Psalm 46:8-10). Zion becomes a source of blessing for the whole world (Isaiah 2:2-4; 4:5-6; Psalms 46:10; 76:9). Psalm 46:4 speaks of the river which flows from Zion and makes her people glad in contrast to the unruly waters of the sea which God has conquered, but there may also be an echo here of Hezekiah's tunnel, built to help withstand the siege, which brought water from the spring of Gihon into the heart of the city (see Isaiah 22:9-11). This river occurs again in Ezekiel 47:1-12 and Revelation 22:1-2 as a symbol of blessing for all nations.

The story may also have given rise to a confidence in the invulnerability of Jerusalem which fuelled the complacency of its citizens in Jeremiah's time (see Jeremiah 7:1-8). The faith of one generation can become the false confidence of the next unless each generation examines its faith anew and asks what God is looking for in its own time.
