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1
The Iron Age, Imperialism, and the Prophets

Hebrew prophecy and much else in the Bible was a product of the two and a half centuries from 750 to 500 BCE,* the historical juncture when the center of civilization was about to be wrenched from the Near East to Europe. Hebrew prophecy is generally regarded as the greatest and most lasting and influential artistic creation of a powerful but dying near eastern civilization built upon imperialism and the newly harnessed technology of the Iron Age. We know of three major waves of Hebrew prophecy. Each accompanied a wave of imperial conquest, first by Assyria in the late eighth century, then by Babylonia in the late seventh and early sixth centuries, and finally by Persia in the mid-sixth century. Each empire had its own character and motives and stimulated a distinct wave of prophecy, led by Isaiah ben Amoz during the Assyrian heyday, by Jeremiah and Ezekiel at the time of Babylonian supremacy and by Second Isaiah (the anonymous poetry appended to the book of Isaiah) during the rise of Persian hegemony. While prophecy was not confined to Israel, the phenomenon of prophetic poetry as it developed in Israel was unique and without a real parallel elsewhere (Bright 1965, p. xix). It is one of the outstanding creative achievements in literary history and its impact on civilization is incalculable. It represents the triumph of the spiritual empire over the mortal empire; of the invisible God, king of the universe, over the human king of the civilized world; of losers over victors; of moral ideas over military force; and also, in a sense, of the creative imagination over historical facts. It is the only surviving body of poetry from the ancient Near East which, for the most part, belongs to a clearly defined historical period – 750–500 being the

* All dates referred to in Chapters 1 and 2 are BCE.

period marking the rise of the Assyrian empire until the restoration of the exiled Judeans to their land from Babylonia.

Although this poetry was written (or spoken) largely in response to the rise and fall of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires, it gives an extremely sketchy and misleading picture of the period. Judging from the prophets, Israel and Judah were central powers of the Fertile Crescent, equal in might and influence not just to the surrounding nations – Edom, Moab, Ammon, Philistia, Aram, and Phoenicia – but also to the Mesopotamian nations which posed a constant threat. The fall of the kingdom of Israel around 720 and of Judah just over a century later did not occur because they were tiny, mostly insignificant pawns in the politics and economics of the region. Their defeats were not inevitable consequences of military weakness, of geographic vulnerability, of unavoidably inferior manpower and resources. They fell because of moral backsliding: had they retained their faith in God and observed the Law, the prophets imply, they might have been victorious.

Historically (though not theologically), this biblical picture distorts the facts, as archaeologists and biblical scholars have discovered in the past 150 years.[1] Assyria, by the late eighth century, had built the most powerful empire in history to date, over a hundred times larger than Judah, with most of the population of the Near East under its rule. It had the strongest army ever to be assembled and pioneered revolutionary techniques of warfare, for example, in the use of cavalry and the implements of siege – these would be used for the next two and a half millennia. Its success was owed not just to its military power but also to a highly effective bureaucracy based in Assyria, with a network of administration and trade stretching from the Persian Gulf to the Egyptian border (by 663 the Assyrians had conquered Egypt, thus gaining control of the entire Fertile Crescent). In addition, Mesopotamia had a sophisticated civilization, was a leader in many of the arts and sciences and had an elaborate polytheistic religion with a remarkable mythology, traces of which survive in the Bible, especially in the opening chapters of the book of Genesis.

The true character and might of Mesopotamia do not emerge in the prophets. Assyria and Babylonia (like Persia after them) are depicted at best as agents of God's will, commanded to punish Israel and Judah for their sins, and at worst as tyrants and idol-worshippers doomed to extinction. And this image of the ancient empires came down in history because the Bible survived while Assyria and Babylonia vanished. Their superb temples and palaces, their art, language and literature were buried and obliterated. Whereas Jerusalem has been inhabited by Jews during most of its 3000-year history from biblical times until the

present, the great cities of Mesopotamia – Asshur, Calah, Khorsabad, Nineveh, Babylon – were so completely forgotten that their very sites were for the most part unknown prior to the nineteenth century. While Hebrew was venerated and studied as the word of God, Akkadian, the cuneiform language of Mesopotamia, was lost for well over 1500 years and deciphered only in the mid-nineteenth century.

If the Bible grossly misrepresents Mesopotamia, the hundreds of thousands of cuneiform tablets recovered in archaeological digs over the past 150 years yield little insight into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (Pritchard 1969). These kingdoms are mentioned rarely, almost invariably as minor participants in extensive military campaigns or swallowed up in long lists of nations forced to pay tribute. While some biblical kings appear – Jehu, Ahaz, and Hezekiah among them – no other biblical character, not even Isaiah ben Amoz or Jeremiah, has yet been identified in Mesopotamian writings. The destruction of the two kingdoms is given brief mention. The fact that they were, according to the Bible a unique monotheistic enclave (albeit a flawed monotheism) in a polytheistic world is passed over in silence. The extraordinary characters and literature of the Bible left no known mark on Mesopotamian culture.

However, in their most brilliant creative achievements, Mesopotamian and Israelite cultures were not dissimilar and have echoes to the present day: the toughness, violence, and emotiveness of prophetic poetry have their visual counterpart in the magnificent wall reliefs of war scenes and lion hunts which hung in the palaces of the Assyrian kings. The prophets rarely condemn the Mesopotamian empires for their barbarity – for flaying their enemies alive, chaining them in cages, immuring them, cutting out their tongues and eyes, cutting off their genitals and feeding them to dogs, burning, impaling, piling up their heads or corpses, as depicted in their inscriptions. Violence and cruelty were part of the biblical world. No peace was ever permanent. Passages from poems attributed to Moses and Deborah – both described as prophets – underline the violent thrust of biblical poetry. In the "Song of Moses", a bloodthirsty Yahweh thunders at his people for turning after strange gods of wood and stone, this being a frequent motif in prophetic invective:

> …fire burns in me, devouring
> the earth and its fruits, blasting the base
> of mountains, grasping out to hell –
> I'll heap misfortune on them, wasted with hunger,
> burnt-out by the plague of Meriri –
> fanged beasts I'll set on them, and maddened snakes.

> The sword will kill in the street …
> As I live forever –
> I will make sharp my lightning sword!
> I will make my arrows drunk
> with the blood of captive and slain!
> My flesh-devouring sword
> on the heads of the wild-haired foe!
> (Deuteronomy 32:22–5, 40–2)

If these lines were spoken not by God but by an Assyrian conqueror – Shalmaneser III or Sargon II, for example – they would be equally, if not more, convincing as the outburst of a king believed to have the authority of a god.

The "Song of Deborah", likewise, illustrates several features of the prophetic style, particularly in the rhetoric, the repetition, the imagery and the intense rhythmic excitement of Deborah's victory over the Canaanites:

> The kings came and fought.
> The kings of Canaan fought in Ta'anach
> by the waters of Megiddo –
> no silver spoil for them!
> The heavens fought,
> the stars fought Sisera in their orbits,
> the river Kishon swept them away,
> ancient river, river Kishon …
> (Judges 5:19–21)

Here again, the triumphant mood is not unlike that in Assyrian art, the Lachish reliefs, for example, and also, occasionally, in the annals of the kings. The touching vignette of Sisera's mother at the close of the poem also recalls the Assyrian engravings of their enemies in defeat and exile.

Each of the surviving three major waves of Hebrew prophecy came about in wartime, and war is the subject of, or background to, most of the prophetic poetry, even that depicting the golden age at the end of days when swords are beaten into ploughshares and the wolf lies down with the lamb: at that time Israel and Judah will gain resounding victories over their enemies (Isaiah 11). Only then will God be "king of the whole earth" (Zechariah 14:9), an image of imperial rule deeply influenced, no doubt, by the Mesopotamian kings who used an identical phrase to describe the extent of their power (e.g. Pritchard 1969, p. 297).[2]

Thus, by identifying itself with a spiritual empire, an immortal kingdom of God mirroring and rivalling Mesopotamian kingdoms with their feet of clay, Judah stretched the range of creative imagination and in doing so held on to its unique identity even, and perhaps especially, in exile.

While the prophets extol the virtues of submission, justice, kindness, and mercy, their strongest moods are of angry defiance, accusation, and bitter guilt; and this might be explained in the context of imperial expansion in the 200 years starting from the mid-eighth century. It cannot be accidental that the first written prophecies – of Isaiah ben Amoz, Hosea, Amos, and Micah – coincide with an astounding series of Assyrian conquests in the second half of the eighth century. During that time, hardly a year passed without a military campaign. The cataclysmic effect of these wars of expansion may be gauged in Isaiah's impassioned prophecies to surrounding nations – Egypt, Ethiopia, Arabia, Aram, Edom, Phoenicia, Philistia, as well as Assyria and Babylonia. These prophecies barely acknowledge Assyria as the main cause of upheaval, perhaps because this was self-evident or as a slap at Assyria by attributing its victories not to its superior power but to God. The prophecies to the nations in Isaiah and later prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel particularly – there are about three dozen such prophecies in all – chart the course and impact of imperial expansion and give a unique outsider's view of the great events of the age. The threat of being overrun and the experience of vassaldom contributed in bringing about an explosion of creativity in Judah starting from the mid-eighth century. Prophecy served to control and make sense of otherwise uncontrollable, incomprehensible, earth-shaking events, to create something of permanent theological and aesthetic value in the face of impending disaster.

To explore the meaning of this simultaneous growth of empire and prophecy, it is useful first to outline the extent of the Assyrian conquests and to offer some interpretation of Assyrian imperialism in the light of modern theories.

Tiglath Pileser III, a general who usurped the throne around 745, was chiefly responsible for Assyria's rise as the first extended empire in history: he conquered most of the Fertile Crescent, made the northern and eastern borders safe from marauding tribes, and divided the territory into administrative units designed to protect the trade routes and to collect taxes with maximum ease. To these ends, he built a network of roads – the finest prior to the Romans – together with a chain of resting posts and forts. To ensure the disorientation of his defeated enemies, to make use of them and, finally, to assimilate them into Assyrian cities,

he instituted a policy of deportation to the Mesopotamian heartland where the exiles were put to work on public building projects. This policy inadvertently had momentous consequences for civilization. It broke down ethnic barriers and opened the way for the future expansion of prophetic influence and of Judaism (and through Judaism, Hellenism and, later, Christianity and Islam) as a universal religion. But at the time, deportation was a catastrophe: Israel was exiled by the Assyrians and Judah by the Babylonians, and this policy was reversed only by the Persians in the late sixth century. The over-extension of the Assyrian empire, civil war in the time of Ashurbanipal and the natural hatred engendered by a tyrannical regime, weakened the empire. In the late seventh century it collapsed and disappeared.

The phenomenon of Assyrian imperialism is crucial in the poetry of the prophets. Why did the Assyrians build their empire? Why did it fall, while Judah, for all its insignificance, survived? Interpretations of imperialism have originated mostly since the late nineteenth century, based upon studies of modern empires. The word "imperialism" was originally used specifically to describe modern, not ancient, empires, and there is a view among some scholars that it should be confined to modern empires. However, scholars specializing in ancient Mesoptamian kingdoms agree almost unanimously that the word is applicable also to Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia in the prophetic age, inasmuch as the human forces underlying imperialism have not changed greatly and its means and ends remain fundamentally the same.

Historical and theoretical evidence suggests that imperialism results from diverse factors: nationalism and economic pressure; the drive for power and prestige; greed, cruelty, and raw energy; the struggle for security; and surprisingly, even humanitarianism and a desire to enlighten. Among these and other forces, the ones most obviously applicable to Mesopotamia are geography and economics, though religious motives are stressed in the ancient inscriptions ("The God Asshur, My Lord, commanded me to march…"). Geographically, Assyria had no clearly defined borders: it was surrounded by often-hostile nations and tribes. While it had much fertile land by the Tigris and its tributaries, which attracted invaders, Assyria had few raw materials and had to import wood, stone, bronze, copper, wool, flax, and, above all, iron. (This economic reality may have influenced the Mesopotamian worship of idols of wood and stone, which the prophets mock and condemn ceaselessly – such commodities, plentiful to the Judeans, were precious to the Assyrians.) A further destabilizing factor was the irregular rise and fall of the Tigris and Euphrates, which could lead to inadequate irrigation

one year and flooding the next, and which required an elaborate and not always effective network of dykes and canals. These conditions forced Assyria to maintain a strong army and to look beyond its borders, especially to the Mediterranean coast, for raw materials. The eighth century was a time of expanding Mediterranean trade, and one of Tiglath Pileser's chief military feats was the conquest of the east Mediterranean coast, with its trade routes and ports. His successors, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal, were largely successful in consolidating the empire and maintaining control over trade from Egypt to Persia and northwards to the Taurus mountains. The growth of international trade increased the strategic importance of Israel and Judah, straddling the land bridge between Asia and Africa. The prophets did not entirely exaggerate when they spoke of their land as central.

The picture of Assyria as the wolf come down on the sheep in the fold has blocked the impartial assessment of its campaigns for territorial expansion in the eighth century. Assyrian imperialism is easily condemned as a sport, motivated by the basest instincts which are never entirely absent in modern imperialism (or, for that matter, in human nature) – bloodlust, greed, power-hunger, sadism, and perverted sexuality:

> Foreign peoples were the favorite game and toward them the hunter's zeal assumed the forms of bitter national hatred and religious fanaticism. War and conquest were not means but ends. They were brutal, stark naked imperialism (Schumpeter 1951, p. 44).

Only in recent years, through evidence discovered in cuneiform, have scholars begun to regard Assyrian imperialism with any sympathy. If not for Assyria, Judah and Judaism might not have survived:

> Imperialism is not necessarily wrong: there are circumstances in which it might be both morally right and necessary. Such was the case in the Near East in the early first millennium. But for the Assyrian Empire the whole of the achievements of the previous 2000 years might have been lost in anarchy, as a host of tiny kingdoms (like Israel, Judah and Moab) played at war amongst themselves, or it might have been swamped under hordes of the savage peoples who were constantly attempting to push southwards from beyond the Caucasus (Saggs 1965, p. 118).

It is hard to see Tiglath Pileser III, Sargon II or Sennacherib as an unwitting savior of Judah, but there is reason to believe that this was so.

For in a sense, Assyrian imperialism forced upon Judah the discipline of monotheism and its teachers, the prophets. If left alone, Judah might have abandoned its faith and submitted to the paganism which dominated the Near East, making it far more vulnerable to assimilation and disappearance.

The discovery of the uses of iron – the greatest technological advance of the biblical era – made possible the type of imperialism created by Assyria as well as the defences against imperialism, the military ones and also, indirectly, the spiritual ones of the prophets. The Assyrians were the first to create a large iron weapons industry and, through the mass production of iron weapons, to put these instruments of destruction into the hands of sizeable armies. Iron changed forever the nature of warfare, travel and trade, all crucial to imperialism. The phenomenal Assyrian military successes of the late eighth century, news of which came to Europe via the Greek trading posts in the east Mediterranean, accelerated the growth of an iron-based urban economy in Europe, paving the way for the rise of the Greek and Roman empires. Assyrian improvements in the design of the bow, the quiver, the shield, body armor, and the chariot (making it heavier, strengthening the wheels), as well as increasingly effective battering rams to penetrate siege walls and city gates, were largely made possible by iron tools and materials (Yadin 1963). Iron played its part in military training and combat techniques, in the building of roads and new means of rapid, flexible deployment of troops, logistics, and administration. The poetry of the prophets echoes with iron: soldiers on the march, horses galloping, the glint of javelins, the thrust of swords, the clang of chariots.

While Assyria built the finest offensive army in history to date, Israel and Judah and other nations in the Near East developed some of the most sophisticated means of defense: walls, siege fortifications, gates, towers, and protective structures on the walls, and engineering, notably Hezekiah's 500-meter conduit hacked through the rock from the stream of Gihon into the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was never conquered by the Assyrians. Samaria, which in some places had walls 33 feet thick, resisted Assyrian siege for three years.

The prophets were part of these defenses, strengthening resolve against the moral "breach in the wall" (Isaiah 30:13), depicting God as the only king and warrior-protector – "shield", "wall", "bow-man", "chariot-driver" as well as a type of smith-creator, removing impurities, battering the heart of his people into new shape, using the prophets as tools and fortifications. The prophet Jeremiah, for example, is chosen by God to be a "bronze wall", an "iron pillar," and a "walled city"

protecting the faithful (Jeremiah 1:18, 15:20). Significant, too, is other prophetic imagery of iron: the iron axe wielded by God in leading the Assyrians to victory over his faithless people (Isaiah 10:34), the iron yoke made by God to symbolize the supremacy of Nebuchadrezzar (Jeremiah 28:14), the iron pen to inscribe the sins of Judah (*ibid.* 17:1). At the same time, the prophets denigrate the uses of iron in war as in idol-worship, and the iron-smith is the target of the most vituperative mockery in Second Isaiah.

While Assyria's imperial growth stiffened Judah's will to survive, it also led to the destruction of Assyria within a century. The cruel force needed to build and sustain the empire aroused violent hatred throughout the Fertile Crescent; it died, as Napoleon put it, of indigestion. Demographically weak, Assyria could not hold down its huge empire. At practically every opportunity, the subject nations, who provided much of the Assyrian military and administrative manpower, rebelled. Power was so centralized that the death of the king, who was believed to have divine authority, weakened the empire still further and often provided the best conditions for revolt. The seismic effects of the deaths of Assyrian kings are among the main events of the century preceding the annihilation of Assyria, and they decisively influenced the growth and character of prophetic poetry. After the death of Tiglath Pileser III in 727, Israel rebelled and was crushed and exiled. Against the background of revolt in the western provinces of the empire, Babylonia followed suit and waged a long and initially successful war against Assyria after the death of Shalmaneser V in 722. The death of Sargon in 705 led to widespread revolt in both the eastern and western sides of the empire. The death of Sennacherib in 689 again set off unrest which Assyria this time managed to contain rapidly. The death of Esarhaddon in 669 brought civil war and wars with Babylonia and Egypt. And finally, the death of Ashurbanipal in 627 triggered a massive revolt and the collapse and disappearance of Assyria. The prophets' response to Assyria was inherently ambivalent. On the one hand, Assyria was hated and feared as the piratical empire that had crushed Israel and came within a hairbreadth of doing the same to Judah. This empire had an enviably attractive polytheistic culture, needing little or no military coercion to impose it on subject nations: the people of Israel, for example, seem to have assimilated willingly, though they had fought hard to keep their independence, and their kingdom and faith were lost in exile. On the other hand, if monotheistic faith was to survive, the Judeans had to learn to accept Assyrian victory as the will of God. This may be why no extended prophecies against Assyria are found in the period of its greatest military

successes. Isaiah has no "burden of Asshur," neither does Micah or Hosea; and the prophecies against the nations which start the book of Amos do not include Assyria. The vivid memory of Israel's exile challenged the prophets: how to maintain a monotheistic faith strong enough to keep alive a national–religious identity in exile as well as the hope of return. The lack of unity which had led to Israel's split into two kingdoms in the tenth century was another force which, paradoxically, helped Judah to survive. For after Israel's fall, Judah had over a century to ready itself psychologically for the possibility of exile, to avoid being swallowed up like Israel. The threat of exile concentrates a nation's mind wonderfully, and the prophets' writings are the full creative flowering of this concentration.

The prophets, then, were leaders in a war against cultural imperialism, and perhaps this was initially the main reason for the writing and preservation of their teachings. Though they accepted submission to the superior military power as a condition of survival, they subverted imperial rule in a number of ways: in their attacks on the materialism and injustice which were inevitable consequences of imperialism; in their apparent lack of concern with economic realities, which may be seen as a backhanded attack on the very foundation of Assyrian expansionism; in their insistence that the divine word was not the monopoly of priest and king in the sanctuary, but could inspire the common man, even a shepherd such as Amos; in their undying hope for the ingathering of exiles, which ran directly counter to Assyrian and Babylonian policy; in their readiness to admit defeat, to depict it graphically and to accept it as the will of God; in maintaining belief in one omnipotent God in opposition to what they saw as the paltry polytheism of Mesopotamia. "The prophetic ideal was the kingdom of God, the kingdom of righteousness and justice. This was the basis of the first Isaiah's negation of war and of dominion acquired by warfare. This ideal implied the negation of world rule generally, of empire" (Kaufmann 1970, p. 117). The unique ferocity of the prophets' attacks on idols and idol-worship, while largely ignoring the rich mythology of pagan beliefs, might have been less a sign of hatred for idol-worship *per se* than of the empires which were odiously identified with the false gods and the magic and superstition associated with them.

The late eighth-century prophets were torn between detestation, hatred, and fear of Assyria and identification with Assyria as the rod of God's wrath. Consequently, their hatred of Assyria was shunted to a large extent onto various targets: idols, idol-worshipping nations, and Judeans who failed in moral self-discipline. But only with the fall of

Assyria could this hatred burst out freely and without terror of reprisal. Loathing and fear of Assyrian tyranny are spelt out in the relish and glee with which the prophet Nahum depicts the fall of Nineveh and of the Assyrian empire:

> Blasted, blank and bare:
> No end of the slain.
> Everywhere corpses strewn.
> Mountainous dead.
> Soldiers stumble on the bodies …
>
> How your shepherds slumber,
> king of Asshur!
> Your warriors lie in peace.
> Your people are scattered over the mountains –
> no one gathers them.
>
> There's no balm to ease your pain,
> the wound too deep:
> All who hear of it
> clap hands in glee …
> for over whom did your evil
> scourge not pass?
>
> (Nahum 2:11; 3:3, 18–19)

During the more stable period of the empire, from the middle of Sennacherib's rule until the death of Ashurbanipal, from about 700 to 627, there is no datable Hebrew prophecy. It is likely that Hebrew prophecy was suppressed, perhaps even by royal command, during this period. Manasseh, the Judean king for much of this time, reportedly spilt much blood, and the prophets might have been among his victims.

With the collapse of Assyria, Hebrew prophecy re-emerged and entered its second great period, against the background of Babylonian and Egyptian rivalry and the defeat and exile of Judah by the Babylonians. For a short time at the end of the seventh century, Judah seemed within reach of independence, but with the defeat of Josiah by Egypt in 609, it reverted to vassaldom. The motif of God's injustice – why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? – emerges in prophetic poetry at this time, as if in response to the death of the righteous Judean king and the failure to gain independence at a time of the breaking of nations. The Babylonian defeat of Egypt at Carchemish in 605 was a watershed which left a strong mark upon prophetic poetry.

With this victory, Babylonia took over the mantle of imperial conqueror left by Assyria. As in the previous century, Judah was caught up in the jockeying for power of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the prophets warning against alliances, especially with Egypt, which could lead to disaster. Jeremiah was jailed in besieged Jerusalem for his pro-Babylonian views and let go only after Nebuchadrezzar defeated Judah, burned down the Temple in Jerusalem and exiled most of its inhabitants.

Had the Babylonian empire survived for a century or two rather than a half-century, the Judean exiles might have assimilated into Babylonian society as the Israelites had in Assyria. The rise of the Persian empire saved Judah and, in effect, made possible the survival and growth of Judaism. Following his defeat of Babylon in 539, the Persian king Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews exiled by the Babylonians to go back to their homes in Judah. This act stimulated the third and final wave of biblical prophecy, dominated by Second Isaiah, which for the first time conveys the ecstasy of vindication, of having come through, the sheer relief of regaining the territorial homeland, and the gratitude to God and commitment to his Law.

The Jews, having survived, alone, as it turned out, among the minority peoples of the ancient Near East, felt an enormous sense of privilege, specialness, responsibility, and chosenness. In the course of a single lifetime, the two most powerful empires in history, Assyria and Babylonia, had disappeared, while Judah miraculously held on. From the ecstatic viewpoint of Second Isaiah and his contemporaries, the earlier prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah had been proved right: faith in the end was indeed stronger than military force. In their desperate search for defenses against imperialism, the prophets discovered an alternative to empire which became the basis of Judaism in exile and, later, of Christianity and Islam. Faith is independent of time and place – this was their discovery – and they prepared the way for what Isaiah Berlin called "a culture on wheels", a mobile culture built upon faith and viable in exile.

It is striking in the biblical account how the weakening of imperial rule both in the late eighth century and the late seventh century was accompanied by a turning back to Yahweh-worship and the destruction of idols, and how the discovery of the Book of the Law (believed to be Deuteronomy) occurred just when Assyria lost its military grip at the end of the seventh century. Most of the main elements of Judaism in exile appear to have crystallized into a religious way of life under Persian rule, at the tail end of the prophetic period (the prophets vanished, one feels, because their task was done): belief in one invisible universal God

and the total rejection of idols and magic; attachment to the memory of the Land of Israel; the introduction of synagogue worship as a substitute for Temple worship, and of prayer and study in place of the sacrifices; the repudiation of intermarriage; the invention of proselytization, this being almost a religious warfare equivalent to imperialism, and of the idea of martyrdom to defend the faith (as suggested in the book of Daniel which, although written much later, describes the Persian period), as well as the concept of the Messiah who would appear at the end of days and restore the Davidic kingdom of Judah. As indicated earlier, the exposure of the exiled Judeans to a kaleidoscopic group of other exiled peoples inclined them to develop their religion along far more universalistic lines than would have been possible in Judah. At the same time, it may be that the alienation and aggressiveness of some of the exiles aroused hatred, which was to develop into full-blown anti-Semitism during the Hellenistic period and after.

In condemning the greed and cruelty of imperial power, and in their creation of a spiritual alternative, the prophets became, in effect, the archetypal dissident artists, the most influential in history. The prophets are the voice of a minority society struggling to survive amid a dominant, often hostile, majority, and it is unlikely therefore that they will ever be passé. Every political and religious movement which stresses the value of social justice and compassion, opposes materialism and the unjust distribution of wealth, objects to ritual at the expense of spirituality and to the emphasis on the letter of the law rather than its spirit, and fights the abuse of power, owes something to the prophets. According to Weber (1961, p. 265), the prophets freed the world from magic, and in doing so created the rational basis for modern science and technology and for capitalism. However, from a creative standpoint the prophets' impact is most striking: all poets who write religious or political poetry, or in a rhetorical, confessional or lyrical mode are part of a tradition in which the prophets are among the prime movers, their taut, rhythmic, gritty Hebrew rich in imagery, contrasts and emotional range, of anger and tenderness, devastation and hope, vision and sarcasm.

The prophets, above all, helped transform Judaism from a national and parochial religion to a universal one, progenitor of Christianity and Islam. For all its bitterness, their poetry is remarkably hopeful and life-affirming, coming as it does from a people under constant threat of annihilation, whereas the outstanding Mesopotamian art is possessed by death. Death is the main subject of the finest poem of this civilization, the epic of Gilgamesh, which ends with Gilgamesh awaiting death by the magnificent city walls which he has built. Gilgamesh weeps to

Urshanabi, the ferryman across the waters of death: "O Urshanabi, was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this that I have wrung out my heart's blood?" (1960, p. 114). The most memorable representations in Assyrian art – the lions caged and trapped, pierced by arrows and spears, convulsed in dying agonies – may be taken in the end as a symbol of empire, violent and unloved, lacking spiritual direction, turning upon itself in a *Götterdämmerung* of despair.

The prophets, then, largely determined the character of the Jewish people and their faith and set the mold of Hebrew literature as a minority culture in an often-ambivalent relationship with dominant imperial cultures – the Greco-Roman, medieval Arab and Christian, and Tsarist Russian in particular – up to 1948. Since the time of the prophets, the Jews, even when they assimilated into other cultures, preserved the teachings of the prophets (without which Christianity and Islam would be hard to imagine) with its explosive revolutionary potential.

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