

CHAPTER 21

The Enemy Within: False Religion

THE influences upon ancient Israel were many and various, and we cannot fairly blame the Canaanites for all the facets of Israelite life which attracted the rebukes of the prophets. It is a remarkable fact that some of the bitterest enemies who ever confronted the Old Testament prophets were not priests and worshippers of Baal but other prophets of Yahweh. The Israelite faith was by no means monolithic in character; there was "official" religion, to be found among the priests, "prophetic" religion as evidenced in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, and no doubt a great deal of "popular" religion as well. While recognizing the differences, we must not on the other hand draw too sweeping contrasts between them. It is notoriously difficult to find appropriate terminology to distinguish the Old Testament prophets from their prophetic opponents. The latter no doubt came from the ranks of cult-prophets, that is to say the prophets who were closely associated with the sanctuaries, and who therefore depended on the "official" religion for their livelihood. The "writing prophets" of the Old Testament, on the other hand, seem to have been altogether more independent, although it has been conjectured that some of them too may have been attached to sanctuaries. One thing that seems to have marked them out is their "vocation", their personal experience of a call from Yahweh to the prophetic office.

The Old Testament prophets who received the most significant attention from "false prophets" were Micaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. The issue was simple enough in the first case: Micaiah's fellow prophets were assuring King Ahab that he would achieve unqualified military success in his campaign at Ramoth-gilead, whereas Micaiah himself was convinced that Ahab was going to his death (1 Kings 22). Events swiftly proved Micaiah in the right of it.

His opponents were proven false by the mere fact that their predictions were not fulfilled; this is the test of false prophecy offered by Deuteronomy 18:21f. They were not telling deliberate lies, however; they spoke out of conviction, and were most indignant at Micaiah's allegation that their oracles were false. Micaiah's own description of the scene in the heavenly court in itself implies that the other prophets did not know they were being deceived. No doubt they were convinced of the righteousness of Ahab's cause — did not Ramoth-gilead legitimately belong to Israel?

When we turn to the Book of Micah, we find that the false prophets of Judah a century after Micaiah's time were equally sincere in their convictions, and indeed held to a coherent theology. To be sure, Micah accused them of promising prosperity "in return for a morsel of food" (3:5); but a careful study of the text of the Book of Micah reveals that whatever their motives they based their comforting predictions on solid religious beliefs. This fact has recently been clarified by a penetrating exegesis of relevant sections of the book by Professor A. S. van der Woude of Groningen.¹ Passages which had previously puzzled readers because of their rapid alternation between promises and threats can now be seen as disputes between Micah and the false prophets: the warnings are his, the specious optimism theirs. We must therefore place quotation marks against certain verses in Micah; similarly St. Paul in Colossians 2:21 was not counselling a policy of "Do not handle this, do not taste that, do not touch the other", but quoting his opponents' advice — in order to refute it.

In Micah 3:11 there is not the slightest doubt that the false prophets are the speakers. " 'Is not the LORD among us?' they say; 'then no disaster can befall us'." The ground of their optimism was their certainty of Yahweh's presence in their midst; was not the temple at Jerusalem his throne?

In Micah 2:7 we hear their voice again — "ranting", Micah tells us in the preceding verse. " 'Is the LORD's patience truly at an end? Are these his deeds? Does not good come of the LORD's words? He is the upright man's best friend'." Micah had been solemnly warning his fellow-citizens that the Assyrian army's approach heralded utter disaster for Judah, a fact which should have been obvious to any realist. The false prophets' reply was to the effect that God could not possibly lose patience with his own "upright" people, and since God controlled history, the Assyrian menace was negligible. Therefore they could accuse Micah of heartless cruelty, deliberately causing distress of mind to good folk who had nothing really to worry about. His gloomy prognostications, they claimed, amounted to stripping "the cloak from him that was

1. Cf. A. S. van der Woude, "Micah in dispute with the pseudo-prophets", *VT* 19 (1969), pp. 244-260.

12. Ashurbanipal and his queen





safe", and taking away "the confidence of returning warriors" (verse 8).

But in point of fact Sennacherib's army caused havoc to the cities of Judah, and went on to invest Jerusalem. Would not these grim realities silence the optimists once and for all? Not a bit of it! They had their answer ready, probably even beforehand:

I will assemble you, the whole house of Jacob:

I will gather together those that are left in Israel.

I will herd them like sheep in a fold,

like a grazing flock which stampedes at the sight of a man.

So their leader breaks out before them,

and they all break through the gate and escape,

and their king goes before them,

and their king goes before them,

and the LORD leads the way.

(Micah 2:12f.)

Nor was it merely orderly escape they predicted; their ideas, as enunciated in the next chapter, were even more grandiose:

Now many nations are massed against you;

they say, "Let her suffer outrage,

let us gloat over Zion."

But they do not know the LORD's thoughts

nor understand his purpose;

for he has gathered them like sheaves to the threshing-floor.

Start your threshing, daughter of Zion;

for I will make your horns of iron,

your hooves will I make of bronze,

and you shall crush many peoples.

You shall devote their ill-gotten gain to the Lord,

their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.

(Micah 4:11ff.)

These hopeful prophets, then, in terms reminiscent of Micaiah's rivals' false promises to Ahab, maintained that the people of Jerusalem would sally forth from their beleaguered city and utterly crush the foe. In point of fact, the siege was lifted, and Jerusalem did escape Sennacherib's wrath; but Judah gained no military glory whatever in the process.²

These men's promises were hollow, as events soon proved; but a little reflection will show that their confidence in God, and their convictions as to what he would do, could be paralleled more than once in canonical Scripture. Ezekiel 38f., for instance, portrays the utter defeat in Palestine of the heathen nations, led by Gog; but of course

2. See above, pp. 110ff.

those chapters were written long after Micah's day. Where did the false prophets and their followers find the promises they abrogated to themselves? The answer seems to be, above all, in the liturgy of the temple. That liturgy, so far as we are acquainted with it at all, is embedded in the Book of Psalms, much of which seems to have formed part of "the hymn-book of the first temple" (just as much as of the second, postexilic temple).

In Christian circles we are familiar with the fact that a considerable number of Psalms are not only prophetic in character, but find their fulfilment very adequately in the work of Christ; indeed, the New Testament supports such an interpretation. Psalm 2, for example, has often been called a "Messianic psalm"; and it is associated plainly with our Lord in several places in the New Testament.³ Psalm 110, again, which links God's king with that ancient king of Jerusalem, Melchizedek, is thoroughly discussed in the Epistle to the Hebrews, and invariably in terms of the person of Christ. But we should not suppose that such Psalms were intended as a sort of pen-portrait, in order that contemporaries of Jesus of Nazareth should be able to recognize in him their Messiah; rather, they set out the pattern of what the ideal king in Jerusalem ought to be like — and when Jesus at last came, the first Christians realized that he, and only he, lived up to the pattern. If, however, we study the individual statements in such Psalms, we can see that many of them could have been true of the kings of Judah; indeed, most of them are fair descriptions of the founder of the dynasty: David himself. God did undeniably enthrone David as his king on Zion (cf. Psalm 2:6), where he did in a sense take up the succession of Melchizedek (cf. Psalm 110:4); David was undoubtedly enabled to break his foes with a rod of iron, shattering them like a clay pot (cf. Psalm 2:9), and to take over foreign nations as his inheritance (cf. Psalm 2:8). There are dimensions, to be sure, greater than those applicable (in a literal fashion, at any rate) to David; Jesus was Son of God in a way that David never was. It is undeniable that the Davidic king was styled the son of God, however, for 2 Samuel 7:12ff. predicates precisely that title of Solomon. Psalm 2, then, we may well suppose, formed part of the coronation liturgy for each successor on David's throne, if the sentence "This day I become your father" (verse 7) offers any clue.⁴

Nathan's prophecy to David, recorded in 2 Samuel 7, indicates that from the very beginning of the dynasty God made wonderful promises to the king, promises which linked together the future of the Jerusalem sanctuary and of the line of David. A single sentence (in verse 14) warned that if a Davidic king did wrong, God would

3. Acts 4:25f., 13:33; Hebrews 1:5, 5:5; 2 Peter 1:17; Revelation 2:26f.

4. Cf. J. H. Eaton, *Psalms: introduction and commentary* (TBC: London, 1967), pp. 31-34.

punish him; the promises, accordingly, though they never failed to point ahead, were conditional to the extent that they might be reversed in any particular generation. The promises were the stipulations of one Party in a covenant the existence of which is evidenced in 2 Samuel 23:5; for his part, the Davidic king must have taken upon himself strict obligations both to obey God's decrees and to serve the interests of God's people. We may make a shrewd guess that the covenant obligations of the king included the duty of maintaining the laws laid down at Sinai, and that thus the Davidic covenant was in some way firmly attached to the Sinai covenant.

The beginning of each reign, therefore, will have seemed a time of high promise, to king and people alike: the option was open to the new king to fulfil his side of the covenant, and then God would surely fulfil his covenanted obligations. Perhaps — or so it is widely conjectured — there was an annual ceremony in which the divine promises were rehearsed in liturgical fashion and claimed afresh. We can understand how it happened that in the process of time the divine promises became more and more emphasized, but the royal obligations more and more muted. Very few men in public life even in our own enlightened times are prepared to admit openly even to errors and mistakes, let alone to total failure to fulfil specific obligations; we have all become somewhat cynical regarding election promises. What king of ancient Judah, then, was going to admit that he had departed from his covenant obligations? And what courtier or priest was going to have the courage to tell the king the truth? All too few, evidently. The great prophets had the perspicacity to see through the facade; but the great majority of the cult-prophets, that is to say those who depended for their livelihood on the whole royally-patronized machinery of temple and sanctuary, conveniently shut their eyes to breaches of the ancient covenant traditions and laws, and pinned their faith on the divine promises they saw written large in the temple liturgies.

The temple rites thus had the effect of bolstering up a partial truth which amounted to a lie.⁵ If we today read Psalm 2, for example, as the Word of God, with Christ in our mind's eye, our faith in Christ is stimulated; but if an ancient Judaeen priest, prophet or worshipper recited it, equally convinced that it was the Word of God, but applying it automatically to the monarch of his own day, his faith was stimulated in quite the wrong direction, and he became dogmatically convinced that God would grant miraculous victory to Judah in the immediate future. He certainly became blind to political realities, and indeed historical realities too.

5. Did the ritual, as it developed under the monarchy, gradually play down the king's responsibilities? Psalm 89, at least, would suggest otherwise — note verses 30ff. in particular. This psalm was probably composed in consequence of some national disaster, however.

The temple cult, therefore, in some sense became the target of attack for several of the Old Testament prophets. Its foundation was sound, and its liturgy was sacred; but in practice it was proving a hindrance to true religion, despite the ethical instruction it undoubtedly incorporated. They saw too that since Nathan's prophecy had linked the continuance of the temple with the continuance of the royal line and also of the nation, there was a widespread popular conviction that so long as the prescribed sacrifices and rites continued, all was automatically well with the nation and its rulers. Ritual had taken over the place of religion. Hence the outspoken words of several prophets in criticism or condemnation of the ritual; of course, their words became doubly vehement when that ritual was visibly contaminated by Canaanite practices into the bargain, as was particularly the case in the Northern Kingdom. Thus Hosea 2:11ff. reads: "I (the LORD) will put a stop to her merrymaking, her pilgrimages and new moons, her sabbaths and festivals . . . I will punish her for the holy days when she burnt sacrifices to the Baalim." Isaiah said no word about Baal-worship in this context, but the tone is the same:

Your countless sacrifices, what are they to me?
 says the LORD.
 I am sated with whole-offerings of rams,
 and the fat of buffaloes;
 I have no desire for the blood of bulls,
 of sheep and of he-goats.
 Whenever you come to enter my presence —
 who asked you for this?
 No more shall you trample my courts.
 The offer of your gifts is useless,
 the reek of sacrifice is abhorrent to me.
 New moons and sabbaths and assemblies,
 sacred seasons and ceremonies, I cannot endure.
 I cannot tolerate your new moons and your festivals;
 they have become a burden to me,
 and I can put up with them no longer.
 When you lift your hands outspread in prayer,
 I will hide my eyes from you.
 Though you offer countless prayers,
 I will not listen.

(Isaiah 1:11ff.)

Several other prophetic passages deplore the elaboration of cultic practices which had gradually taken place, and recall with nostalgia the simplicity of worship which had characterized the era of Moses.⁶

6. Cf. Jeremiah 7:21ff.; Amos 5:21-25. On the vexed question of the interpretation of such passages, see especially D. E. Cowan, "Prophets, Deuteronomy and the syncretistic cult in Israel" in J. C. Rylaarsdam (ed.), *Transitions in Biblical Scholarship* (Chicago, 1968), pp. 93-112.

After the division of Solomon's kingdom, the Northern Kingdom did not of course look to David's line for salvation, but nevertheless a very similar theology of hope developed there. The monarchy was no very stable institution in the North, but there too sanctuary and king were firmly bound together, as we can see from the interesting altercation between the prophet Amos and the priest Amaziah at Bethel, recorded in Amos 7. Amos predicted doom for sanctuary and king alike; and in angry reply, Amaziah told him, "Be off, you seer! Off with you to Judah! . . . But never prophesy again at Bethel, for this is the king's sanctuary."

That the same theologically motivated political optimism was to be found in the Northern Kingdom is evidenced by Amos, again. Evidently there existed a popular expectation of "the day of the LORD" (cf. Amos 5:18). Such an expectation runs through the Old Testament and on into the New; but what did it signify for the eighth century citizen of Israel? Whatever precisely he expected, there is no doubt that it was an optimistic anticipation, in view of Amos's warning that the day of Yahweh would in fact mean darkness and gloom. The origins and content of this item of Israelite belief have been much discussed and debated, but it seems not improbable that the background to it was provided by ancient days of battle, when Yahweh had given his people victory over their enemies, especially perhaps under the heroes of the Book of Judges.⁷ If this be so, then once again we can see how political optimism grew out of faith in Yahweh; what he had done for Israel long before, through the leadership of a Deborah or a Gideon, he would surely do again through the medium of the present king in Samaria. If some realists pointed out that Israel's armies were puny compared with the mighty Assyrian war machine, the ready reply — so convincingly theological! — was that Gideon had won the day against Midian with a mere 300 men in the face of a colossal army.

By the year 721 B.C., the Day of the Lord had indeed dawned for the Northern Kingdom — and it had proved to be utter darkness and unrelieved gloom for Israel, as Amos had predicted. The Assyrians swept away the monarchy, and any Israelite false hopes attached to the person of the king were for ever crushed. Twenty years later Judah almost suffered the same fate, but not quite. Jerusalem, almost alone of the cities of Judah, escaped the ravages of the Assyrian soldiery, and King Hezekiah managed to retain his throne. From our standpoint in history, we can see that both Micah and Isaiah were vindicated, ultimately; the latter had prophesied that Jerusalem would not fall, since the temple still symbolized the reality of Yahweh's presence in it, whereas Micah had prophesied that Jerusalem's days were numbered, and that its wickedness inevitably

7. On the Day of Yahweh, see especially G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (ET Edinburgh and London, 1962-5), vol. ii, p. 119-125.

presaged its fall. Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled in 701 B.C.; Micah's had to wait a full century more for its fulfilment. "The mills of God grind slowly." But all too many citizens of Judah in 700 B.C. and the century that followed refused to believe that Micah had been a true prophet;⁸ on the contrary, they turned Isaiah's prediction into a dogma that would hold true for all time and in all circumstances. God, they were convinced, would *never* let Jerusalem fall into enemy hands; the enemy would always be defeated, if only at the very gates. Jerusalem had never once fallen since David had captured it some 300 years before, and the very passage of time increased their convictions. But Isaiah's words of moral condemnation were conveniently forgotten.

Not even Nebuchadrezzar's capture of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. provided a challenge to such dogmas; the Babylonian conqueror left the city and the temple standing, and did not even put an end to the Davidic dynasty, although he did deport King Jehoiachin. It would even seem that this event, political disaster though it was, was hailed as yet another triumph for the dogma! It is undoubtedly true that Jeremiah, both before and after 597 B.C., was confronted by arrogant false prophets to an unprecedented extent.⁹ He, more than any of his predecessors, felt the menace of false religion, the threat of "falsehood" (Hebrew *sheqer*), as a recent book, more literally, describes it.¹⁰

Jeremiah's response to this situation enables us to discern the general tenor of his opponents' teaching; and we sometimes read their statements *expressis verbis*. One of their catchwords was evidently "This place is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD."¹¹ Another favourite phrase, as they stood in the fancied security of the temple courts, was "We are safe", or (more literally) "We are delivered" (Jeremiah 7:10). Jeremiah's bitter commentary on this dictum was that (for the moment!) they *were* "safe" — safe to proceed with all the immoral and unethical behaviour to which they were addicted, which he represents as oppression of the poor, repeated breaches of the covenant laws, and of course idolatrous practices into the bargain.

Secure in unshakeable dogma and the stout temple walls, one prophet, Hananiah by name, only a few months after the débâcle of 597, confidently predicted that within two years all would be well — the exile over, King Jehoiachin home again, and the yoke of Babylon broken. History records that Hananiah died two months later —

8. See below, pp. 243ff.

9. See below, p. 256.

10. T. W. Overholt, *The threat of falsehood: a study in the theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (SBT ii, 16: London, 1970).

11. Jeremiah 7:4. One is inevitably reminded of our Lord's words about "vain repetition" (Matthew 6:7).

an event which in itself vindicated Jeremiah's more sombre prophecies — but also that it was not until the much more crushing national disaster of 587 B.C. that the voice of false prophecy was finally stilled.¹²

One significant insight of Jeremiah's into the nature and character of this false religion is recorded in Jeremiah 7:8ff. Shrines like the Jerusalem temple had long been the places to which those guilty of homicide might flee for refuge; if their deed had been accidental manslaughter, the sanctuary proved to be a sanctuary indeed, but if murder were proven, then the slayer must be taken from the altar and handed over to the avenger of blood. Jeremiah claimed that the complacent Jerusalem populace was in effect gaining unlawful asylum from the penalty of their deliberately evil deeds by resorting to the Jerusalem temple. The temple, therefore, had become "a robbers' cave".¹³ The logic of his position was of course that the guilty must be, and would inevitably be, dragged from the sanctuary to which they had resorted. The temple of Yahweh gave shelter only to those who deserved asylum.

We may allow the prophets to draw our attention to another area of ancient Israel's life and thought which sometimes tends to be forgotten. In a critique of false religion, Isaiah 29:13f. enunciates Yahweh's view of Judah thus:

Because this people approach me with their mouths
and honour me with their lips
while their hearts are far from me,
and their religion is but a precept of men, learnt by rote,
therefore I will yet again shock this people,
adding shock to shock:
and the wisdom of their wise men shall vanish
and the discernment of the discerning shall be lost.

Jeremiah also had a word for the wise (Jeremiah 8:9f.):

The wise are put to shame, they are dismayed and have lost their wits.
They have spurned the word of the LORD, and what sort of wisdom is theirs? . . . Prophets and priests are frauds, every one of them.

These passages show that the Old Testament prophets had their criticisms of a professional group who stood outside the more religious and cultic circles of priests and prophets. The term "wise" and "wise men" (Hebrew *chakham*, *chakhamim*) do not always in the Old Testament designate a profession, but very often they refer

12. Jeremiah 28 describes the events outlined in this paragraph.

13. Cf. T. W. Overholt, *op. cit.*, pp. 17f.

specifically to what we may call the administrative class in the kingdom — the circles which provided the king with his advisers and ministers of state. These circles also had some educational functions, though we are ill informed as to the exact nature of the educational system. Perhaps the nearest equivalent in English to the Hebrew *chakhamim* is the word “intelligentsia”, which suggests not only people occupying intellectually demanding positions in society but also those who take a certain pride in the fact. Without doubt book learning was much prized in the ancient world, and the “wise” were the men who both studied books and produced them. In Judah (as often elsewhere) the king was their patron. The Book of Proverbs testifies to the patronage of both Solomon and Hezekiah, and also to the involvement of the professional “wise men” in the collection and publication of proverbial material.¹⁴ It is interesting, moreover, that Proverbs 30f. offers material which is associated with non-Israelites. In fact, the wisdom movement in Judah and Israel was simply part of a much more widespread phenomenon of the ancient world. We may observe that the fullest biblical description of the equipment of the professional wise man occurs in the context of a foreign court (although the wise men happened to be Jewish). Daniel and his companions at the Babylonian court are described as “at home in all branches of knowledge, well-informed, intelligent, and fit for the service in the royal court”; they were to be instructed “in the literature and language of the Chaldaeans”, and “their training was to last for three years” (Daniel 1:4f.).

The international character of wisdom circles is fairly obvious simply from a perusal of the Book of Proverbs. Many individual proverbs could be shared with virtually any nation of any period of history — they frequently offer advice of a timeless and universal character. Much of the material is purely secular in character, although a verse at the beginning of the book indicates that the essential basis of wisdom and wise conduct is true religion: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge” (1:7). Apart from a certain amount of material which mentions Yahweh by name, much of Proverbs could be paralleled from a variety of ancient wisdom documents from Mesopotamia and Egypt.¹⁵ But we must not suppose that a fair quantity of “secular” content and of “pagan” affinities renders such literature of little or no religious value — Proverbs is in the canon of Holy Scripture, and rightly so. The prophets certainly did not attack the practice of wisdom as such; on the contrary, they made use of its methods on occasions, and very effectively: see for instance Isaiah 28:23-29 and Jeremiah 17:5-11,

14. Cf. Proverbs 1:1, 22:17, 24:23, 25:1.

15. See E. Jones, *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes: introduction and commentary* (TBC: London, 1961), pp. 32-41, for a list of examples of kindred material.

passages which would be equally at home in the Book of Proverbs. Amos's condemnation of the nations begins with a phraseology borrowed from proverbial material: "For three transgressions . . . and for four . . ." (Amos 1:3, 6, 9 etc.).¹⁶ Psalm 1 can well be described as a "wisdom psalm"; which fact shows that wisdom concepts and techniques found their way (by whatever route) into the temple liturgy too. We may next instance the Book of Judges as a whole; which is the product of a wise man, that is to say a man who studied the facts of his country's earlier history, observed that there was a recurring pattern in it, and accordingly offered a philosophy of that history; the Book of Judges is an expanded proverb. Finally, even the Old Testament law-code explicitly speaks of wisdom, thus:

You must observe (God's statutes and laws) carefully, and thereby you will display your wisdom and understanding to other peoples. When they hear about these statutes, they will say, 'What a wise and understanding people this great nation is!'

(Deuteronomy 4:6)

There can be no denying that human wisdom, that is to say the careful, deliberate use of the rational powers of observation and deduction which God has given men, is viewed throughout the Bible as one important medium of divine revelation.

Why then, did an Isaiah and a Jeremiah choose to criticize the professional wise men of their day? The prophets did not attack the office in itself, any more than they attacked the priestly and prophetic offices as such. They recognized that the ordinary citizen could not do without the guidance of the priests, the oracles of the prophets, and the advice of the wise men (cf. Jeremiah 18:18). The wise man's special commodity, this verse shows, was "advice" (Hebrew *etsah*); thus, no less than priests and prophets, he took the future into account, presuming to tell his clients what was likely to happen and how they might best cope with the situation in which they found themselves. We can appreciate, therefore, that the Old Testament prophets observed that too often the wise men were just as guilty as the cultic prophets and the priests of uttering complacent reassurances instead of urgent warnings, and predicting a rosy and unrealistic future.

The potential conflict between the prophetic word from God and the wise man's "advice" can be illustrated from Isaiah's career. When the armies of Israel and Damascus descended upon Judah and besieged Jerusalem, King Ahaz in fright sought advice from his professional counsellors and also from Isaiah. "Do nothing — except trust in God" was the gist of the prophet's advice (Isaiah 7).

16. The NEB rendering obscures the numerical phraseology, for which cf. Proverbs 30:15-31.

But the political savants of the day saw salvation in an appeal to Assyria for help; they knew on rational grounds that this policy would work, and indeed it did, though at no little cost for Judah. They provided reasoning where Isaiah offered signs; and Ahaz preferred the former. The fact is that no man can absolutely predict the future on the basis of reason; there is always the unpredictable element, the incalculable factor. The prophets objected, therefore, to any suggested policy which did not take God into account. Human reasoning was in itself good and necessary; but it must not be divorced from submission to the will and purposes of God, or it would inevitably fail.

In other words, the prophets found a certain arrogance in contemporary wisdom — always a characteristic of the intelligentsia in society, the more so when they have official, in this case royal, patronage. The prophets could be particularly scathing about the wise men of other nations. Edom was renowned for sagacity; but Jeremiah could say of it: “Is wisdom no longer to be found in Teman? Have her sages no skill in counsel? Has their wisdom decayed?” (49:7). The diplomats and politicians of Edom were in fact helpless in the face of imminent disaster; Jeremiah described the fate in store for them, and added, “Listen to the LORD’s whole purpose against Edom and all his plans against the people of Teman” (verse 20). The policies which count in history, said Jeremiah, are those of God, not man.

The arrogance of some of Judah’s wise men is rebuked in Isaiah 5:21: “Shame on you! You who are wise in your own eyes and prudent in your own esteem.” At the personal level, we can see in the Book of Job how cruel and immoral an arrogant wisdom can be. One wonders how many a good man’s reputation has been permanently injured by the mechanical application of proverbs like “There’s no smoke without fire”.

Reverting to the case of Ahaz and Isaiah, we observe that the policy of Ahaz was permitted to be put into effect, even though it was a foolish and ill-advised stratagem. Much earlier, in David’s reign, there is an interesting story of a piece of brilliant strategy which was overruled by sheer folly. Absalom needed advice how to achieve full victory and to secure his newly-won throne, and he turned to a man whose wisdom was comparable with the oracles of Yahweh themselves (2 Samuel 16:23). Ahithophel as usual proffered sound strategy; but Absalom, not content, sought further counsel, this time from his father’s loyal adviser, and heard a different story. As we study Hushai’s words (17:7ff.), we find a skilful mixture of emotive language, exaggeration and flattery — and it found a ready ear. Why? “It was the LORD’s purpose to frustrate Ahithophel’s good advice and so bring disaster upon Absalom” (17:14).

King Rehoboam was another man who could not tell good advice

from bad, and it cost him more than half his kingdom (1 Kings 12:1-17); again the historian tells us "the LORD had given this turn to the affair" (verse 15). Israel and Judah might have learned several lessons from such episodes. First, that since Yahweh controlled their history, his revealed word — through his prophets, those who were prophets by vocation rather than profession — was the only sure pointer to the future. Secondly, the wise men could only extrapolate from past and present, and therefore their predictions should always be presented with due modesty and heeded with caution. Thirdly, the very patrons of wisdom — and even Solomon himself — were capable of the most egregious follies. The first king of Israel once confessed, "I have been a fool, I have been sadly in the wrong" (1 Samuel 26:21). Even David, whose shrewdness was second to none, was once told to his face, "Your majesty is as wise as the angel of God" — by a woman who had just made a complete fool of him (2 Samuel 14:20).

The presumptuous wordly-wise politician was therefore not only the target for the strictures of Isaiah and Jeremiah, but also the living proof of the folly of kings (and few were as weak and/or foolish as the last three kings of Judah). No wonder the prophets sighed for a king who should be victorious in battle, a model of equitable precept and practice, but first and foremost, "in purpose wonderful", a "wonderful counsellor", a "Wonder-Counsellor" (as various modern versions render a familiar phrase from Isaiah 9:6).

We are now in a position to offer some analysis of the false religion which was the chief enemy of the Hebrew monarchy. Basically it consisted in breach of promise, coupled with an untroubled conscience. All the great pre-exilic prophets were deeply conscious of the extent to which their contemporaries in Israel and Judah alike were guilty of breaking their covenanted vows to God. Yet the people's consciences were being dulled by the scrupulous exercise of religious practices. Evil deeds were being hidden under a veneer of piety, and indeed sheltered and thus encouraged by the official religion of the day.

That the people censured by the prophets had "faith" is undeniable; but it was a misplaced faith. To begin with, it represented faith in buildings and rituals rather than in the God whom such buildings and rituals were designed to honour. It was thus a faith in externals; ritual confessions of sin, and the sacrifices prescribed for sin, took the place of sincere self-examination and repentance. Secondly, it consisted of a faith in certain parts of Holy Writ (as it came to be) to the detriment of others; Psalm 2 with all its promise was proudly claimed and appropriated, whereas the Ten Commandments were recited (no doubt) but quietly set aside; Isaiah's prophecies about the temple were on every lip, but his description of his people as a "sinful nation"; a "people loaded with

iniquity" whose sins were "scarlet" (Isaiah 1:4, 18) was treated lightly, ignored if not forgotten. All too many people made the false assumption that to possess the Law of God was automatically to honour and obey it (cf. Jeremiah 8:8f.).

The false religion also comprised an uncritical acceptance of dogma. Those who believed that Jerusalem and the temple would never fall could find ancient and genuine prophecies to support their viewpoint; but — as Jeremiah pointed out — the dogma failed the acid test of history, since Shiloh, formerly just as central and sacred to Israel as Jerusalem had now become, lay in ruins for anyone to see (Jeremiah 7:11f.). Even the very Word of God can become false if it is treated as a collection of slogans (political or otherwise) to be employed like magical charms. Jeremiah himself showed a better way; when Hananiah in the name of Yahweh contradicted Jeremiah's predictions and proffered his own instead, the startled Jeremiah did *not* immediately resort to clichés and dogmatic utterances, but on the contrary went away to think the matter over, and did not come back until he had a fresh message from God (Jeremiah 28).

Perhaps most important of all, the type of religion which the prophets repudiated was centred on a false theology, a wrong view of God, a view which probably owed more than was imagined to Canaanite ways of thinking. The Canaanites' concept of deity was cyclic, governed by the seasons of the year but not by the passage of history; thus in a sense it was static, almost timeless. The Old Testament writers insist repeatedly, however, that the God of Israel is the Lord of history and of the whole historical process. This outlook is nowhere more startlingly expressed than in Isaiah 43:16ff., where the prophet first makes reference to the Exodus, that unforgettable event way back in Israel's history, still lovingly and proudly remembered in every Jewish Passover celebration to this day, and having called it to mind, dismisses it thus: "Cease to dwell on days gone by and to brood over past history. Here and now I will do a new thing". The challenge follows — "Can you not perceive it?" It was this dynamic view of God which characterized the Old Testament prophets; hence they can unblushingly talk of God's "changing his mind" or "repenting". If God wished to spare the Jerusalem of Isaiah's day, he was not in consequence bound to do the same in Jeremiah's era. "God is not slavishly bound by his own decisions," writes H. W. Hertzberg, "but is almighty to such an extent that he is Lord even of them. Just as he takes the action of men into consideration in his decisions, so that omnipotence never means that man is deprived of his responsibility, so, too, the election of the king (Saul) is not irrevocable."¹⁷

17. H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: a commentary* (OTL: London, 1964), p. 126.

But the election of Jerusalem and of the house of David *was* irrevocable, was it not? The Old Testament prophet did not challenge the abiding truth of such divine promises; but he insisted that God could certainly set them aside for so long as he chose to do so, or even transmute them along new channels. So one prophet could predict an exile from the Promised Land of fully seventy years (Jeremiah 29:10), while another could speak of the transfer of the royal covenant promises from David's line to the nation as a whole (Isaiah 55:3ff.).¹⁸ (From the Christian standpoint, we should wish to add that this transfer was again only a temporary measure in God's plans.)

Finally, we can probably deduce from the fact that the Old Testament prophets bracketed "the wise" with priests and false prophets that they were aware of a secularized religion, which operated too much on slogans and mechanical formulae, and which made expediency its god. Anything which took to itself the name of Yahweh but which patently breached the ethic taught in his covenant laws became the target of prophetic denunciation.

The Old Testament prophetic literature is our primary sourcebook for information on the false religion which we have described as the worst enemy of Israel and Judah during the period of the monarchy. Priestly intercession, prophetic forecasts, and the skillfully devised policies of trained diplomats alike failed to divert God's chosen people from the collision course on which they were set. The true prophets did what they could to expose the false religion for what it was, and hence have left on record for posterity an adequate description of it. But in investigating this topic we have, necessarily, looked at the prophets' words in a purely negative way, seeking to find out what they denied, not what they affirmed. They deserve more than that; and we must now make some endeavour to study these unique individuals in their own right, against the background of the history of their times.

18. This seems to be the most natural interpretation of the passage. Cf. C. R. North, *The Second Isaiah* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 257f.