

# SPECIAL STUDY ONE

## THE LITERARY GRANDEUR OF THE O.T. PROPHETS

by Janet McFarland

The prophet was a forth-teller, or interpreter, of the mind and will of God in reference to the past, the present, and future. Some names of prophets are *seer* (one who looks beyond carnal things to spiritual things), *Ish Haruach* (man of spirit or an inspired one), *man of God, servant of God, and shepherd or watchman*.

Zephaniah, Daniel, and Isaiah were of royal blood; Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Zechariah were of priestly rank; Amos was of the peasant class, and Hosea was of the middle class. The literary method of impartation of truth used by each of these men shows individuality. Their writings show evidences of heredity, environment, and training. These differences show in the patrician sublimity of style and majesty of thought of Isaiah, the sad spirit and general social atmosphere of Hosea, and the hatred of sham and an atmosphere of the trees and streams found in Amos.

There was one thing that made these men of varied gifts and backgrounds alike: It was the call of God to be his spokesmen:

and the Lord took me from following the flock,  
and the Lord said to me, "Go, prophesy to my  
people Israel."

Amos 7:15

Now the word of the Lord came to me saying,  
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
and before you were born I consecrated you;  
I appointed you a prophet to the nations."

Jeremiah 1:4,5

The first two chapters of Ezekiel and the sixth chapter of Isaiah tell how God called them. This is where they received their inspiration and authority. It is why they prefaced their messages with "Thus saith the Lord."

The book of *Isaiah* is the *prime example of the literary power of the Old Testament prophets*. *Unity of design, structure, and spirit* is one of the *necessary qualities of good literature*. The unity of style in the book of *Isaiah* is shown in the use of poetic embellishments. In chapters 9:8 to 10:4 there is a poem of four strophes, and each of these beautifully organized strophes is followed by the musical refrain

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"For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still." The same poetic mind is shown in the well-planned ode of chapter 49. There are some differences of style but not any more than would be expected from an author dealing with varying moods or different thoughts. The first poem is a song of sin and the second is a song of salvation, but in both the voice is the voice of Isaiah.

The literary *unity* and *organic wholeness* of Isaiah's prophecies are seen in the part of his work which is about the future. In chapters 24 to 27 there is a picture in the foreground in which there are blackness, darkness, and tempest. These are symbols of Jehovah's wrath that will be poured out without mixture upon an ungodly world. However in the background of that picture, above the clouds and breaking through, there are streaks of light which are messengers announcing to Israel the dawn of a brighter day of clear resplendent with heavenly light.

Among the book's other literary qualities is Isaiah's fine ability in *description*. The record of his call to service is unsurpassed in the sublime and beautifully poetic way it describes how God, His throne, and His angels look.

Isaiah's style is described by Dr. Robinson of Chicago as having *no superior or even a rival in versatility of expression and brilliancy of imagery*. Dr. Dillman, the noted German critic, asserts that *every word from Isaiah stirs and strikes the mark*. This is illustrated by Isaiah 32:1,2.

Behold, a king will reign in righteousness,  
and princes will rule in justice.  
Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind,  
a covert from the tempest,  
like streams of water in a dry place,  
like the shade of a great rock in a weary land.

Isaiah's *vocabulary*, though not extensive, is selective and characterized by universality of taste in the sources from which he got his words. A list of words and phrases taken at random show this. Though the prophet had a keen eye for the moral significance of events he was also interested in natural facts. The list includes: sand of the sea, stem of a tree, well of water, bird's nest, ox, wilderness rock, gold of Ophir, garden of cucumbers, plumb line, plow, bruised grain, threshing machine, overflowing stream, falling tower, devouring fire, tempest, hailstones, tabrets and harps, silver, horses, camels, lions, fruit, wilderness, locusts, lambs, goats, vines, fig trees, and mountains. All these words and others he places in well-ordered surroundings.

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The prophecy of Isaiah is made rich by an unusual *literary eloquence*. Isaiah was not an orator in the Greek sense. The eloquence of the prophet consists in the psychic power of the message, a power that makes the reader feel that the writer has put himself completely into his writing. The reader is convinced of an unexpressed and reserve power which distinguishes the man of eloquence from the man who is only a public speaker. From the beginning of his book to the end there is sustained power. There is no lowering of the grand, sublime style.

In all the prophetic writings there are certain qualities that make for good literature. Isaiah's book gives evidence of wide knowledge not only of Palestine but of the nations around it. All of the other prophets show knowledge in proportion to the major or minor nature of their works.

*Imagination* of a high order is also found in the prophetic writings. The strong glow of this creative faculty of the soul adds beauty. Isaiah takes some of the facts of an external nature and paints a picture of the wilderness transformed.

The imagination which produced this picture was powerfully influenced by environment, for the idea is borrowed from the topography of the country. He drew from the country the facts which his imagination needed.

Isaiah along with the writers of Hebrew poetry saw nature as the garment of deity. Through the world around him he saw God as though looking from an open window. All visible things were but a mist between them and the Invisible a rushing stream flowing from his hand. So Isaiah writes, "Break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest and every tree therein." In this way nature is regarded as a transparent medium which is consumed in the vision of deity and rolled away like a curtain. The glory of the visible world with its perfect balance and harmony is dwelled on and broadened so that a sense of the power and beauty of God is impressed on the reader.

The same author goes beyond the facts of nature and sees through to the place of the King who sits in the heavens. This is the poetry of the throne of God around which is a "rainbow . . . in sight like unto an emerald." This poet's patrician imagination lifts our thoughts from an earthly throne in the old Jerusalem to the heavenly throne in the New Jerusalem.

*Optimism* is another quality of the literature of the prophets. They believed that they could justify the ways of God to men. Their song was of sin, but it was also of salvation. They sang of the blackest sin of Israel and Judah, and they sang of the way out. They lifted their

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eyes to the hills to look for the first sunlight of the coming golden age. The Sun of Righteousness was already shining in their prophetic souls. "Arise shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of Jehovah is risen upon thee," Isaiah wrote. Isaiah was the most optimistic of the prophets. This may be due to the fact that he has the most complete view of the world and of the hand of God in history.

Linked with optimism is *emotionalism*. When the prophets express a belief in the ultimate triumph and glory of the Kingdom of God their belief goes out from them with a psychic power that stirs the souls of their readers. This psychic power is unique because it intensifies thought and makes it the literature of power.

This shows in Isaiah description of the majesty of God.

Have you not known? Have you not  
heard?  
The Lord is the everlasting God,  
the Creator of the ends of the earth.  
He does not faint or grow weary,  
his understanding is unsearchable.  
He gives power to the faint,  
and to him who has no might he increaseth strength.  
Even youths shall faint and be weary,  
and young men shall fall exhausted;  
but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,  
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,  
they shall run and not be weary,  
they shall walk and not faint.

Isaiah 40:28-31

It is also demonstrated in Habakkuk's picture of the majesty of God.

God came from Teman,  
and the Holy One from Mount Paran.  
His glory covered the heavens,  
and the earth was full of his praise.

Selah

His brightness was like the light,  
rays flashed from his hand;  
and there he veiled his power.  
Before him went pestilence,  
and plague followed close behind.

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He stood and measured the earth;  
He looked and shook the nations;  
then the eternal mountains were scattered,  
the everlasting hills sank low.  
His ways were as of old.

Habakkuk 3:3-6

When the Prophet Joel describes the on-coming of God's terrible judgments he becomes a tongue of poetic fire:

The earth quakes before them  
the heavens tremble.  
The sun and the moon are darkened,  
and the stars withdraw their shining.  
The Lord utters his voice  
before his army,  
for his host is exceedingly great;  
he that executes his word is powerful.  
For the day of the Lord is great and very terrible;  
who can endure it?

Joel 2:10,11

Another quality in the literature of prophecy is *spirituality* which is the expression of the fellowship which man holds with his Maker. This fellowship the inspired writers held with Jehovah. He was the point of departure and return in all their thinking. Ezekiel is so conscious of this intimacy with God that he says, "The word of Jehovah came unto me, saying," thirty-eight times and "Thus saith the Lord Jehovah," several times.

Isaiah speaks of the source of his authority by saying, "Thus saith the Lord." Jeremiah uses, "The word of Jehovah came unto me, saying," and "The word that came to Jeremiah from Jehovah, saying." All the prophets claim that their messages are God-breathed.

In the prophetic writings this spirituality is expressed in the author's belief in a personal God whose throne is in heaven, whose footstool is the earth and whose character is both Justice and Love.

The quality of spirituality in the writings of the prophets also appears in the belief in man's spiritual possibilities. Their chief aim is to bring Israel into spiritual fellowship with Jehovah and to promote this fellowship.

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Prophecy in one of its aspects may be described as the philosophy of history in the form of a drama. As one mode of conveying their conceptions the prophets display the incidents before our imagination working toward their goal with the realistic clearness of drama. When examined such prophetic compositions are found to go beyond the machinery of dramatic literature. They borrow from all other literary departments special modes of treatment and blend them together into the most highly wrought and spiritual of literary forms which is called the rhapsody. Chapters 44 to 66 in Isaiah is a rhapsody of Zion redeemed.

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## SPECIAL STUDY TWO INTERPRETING THE PROPHETS

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Prophetic writings constitute a very unique and important type of literature. Included in the canon of the Old Testament are seventeen books of prophecy. Five major books are separated because of their greater length, Isaiah being first and foremost. The shorter books compose the Jewish "Book of the Twelve", or the minor prophets. Any thorough study of God's word must make room for an examination of these books.