ANCIENT VOICES, ABIDING WORDS: LESSONS FROM THREE MINOR PROPHETS

What do the ancient prophets whose twelve little books come down to us have to say today? Like us, they lived in a violent and conflicted world. And like us, they longed for God's presence and human healing. Their words still speak across the centuries. Let us listen carefully!

Mark W. Hamilton

Ancient Voices, Abiding Words: Lessons from Three Eighth-Century Prophets

Lesson One – Who Were Hosea, Amos, and Micah?
Goals: *To lay the groundwork for the entire series by helping students understand what the prophets were about, how they did their work, and what their messages say about the justice and mercy of God.*

Lesson Two – Hosea's Two Love Affairs and their Uneasy Resolution
Goals*: to help readers understand how the whole book of Hosea fits together and to offer an opportunity to reflect on the book's exploration of the relationship between God and people as a love affair.*

Lesson Three – Amos: The Search for the Exodus People
Goals*: to understand Amos's call to live as exodus people who practice God's justice toward all and to identify ways in which we can grow into that vision.*

Lesson Four – Micah: What does God Require of Us?
Goals*: to help readers understand the search for true security through justice, to which God calls Israel and us, and to recommit ourselves to that pursuit.*

Lesson Five – Loyalty to God: Why Idolatry is a Problem and Monotheism is a Chore (Hosea 1-3)
Goals*: to understand better what loyalty to one God implies for faith and action, what false gods compete for our attention and commitments, and what changes we need to make to become faithful to the one true God; to foster willingness to renew our commitments so that we act as faithful people.*

Lesson Six – What are the Standards? (Amos 1-2 and Other Texts)
Goals*: to think through the aspects of God's call for just living as individuals and communities and to consider ways to answer that call in our own world.*

Lesson Seven – God's Struggle to balance Love and Justice (Hosea 11)
Goals*: to understand that God's profound love for people implies both agony because of our sin and hopefulness because of our capacity for goodness, and to find ways to choose hopefulness in our history and our future.*

Lesson Eight – What Counts as Worship? (The Focus on God)
Goals*: to evaluate our worship, not in terms of what we get out of it, but in terms of how it reflects awe with respect to God's generosity to us, as well as the call for us to be generous, respectful, and just people.*

Lesson Nine – Yet Again, What Counts as Worship? (The Focus on Community)
Goals*: to continue the conversation about worship and how our life together as community flows into our lives in the workplace, home, and other parts of life. Worship calls us to a new way of living.*

Lesson Ten – Exodus as Touchstone: Whose Story is it Anyway?
Goals: *to learn that our history, because it may be understood in multiple ways, and because how we understand it profoundly shapes us, needs to be interpreted as a reminder of what matters. For Israel, the story of the exodus called them to live lives of freedom that comes from virtuous life together in community.*

Lesson Eleven – The Prophet as Intercessor and Mediator (Amos 7:1-9)
Goals: *to find in the prophets' lives as a communicator of God's will to people and the people's aspirations and fears to God a model for the life of the church today as we work for the sake of the whole world in its longing for God.*

Lesson Twelve – The Fearlessness that Comes from Hope (Amos 7:10-17)
Goals: *to find models for living as a community in ways that help us respond fearlessly to the threats of the powerful and allow us to take responsibility for the welfare of those around us. All of us need models, and the prophets provide some valuable lessons for life today.*

Lesson Thirteen – Reclaiming the Future (Hosea 14; Amos 9; Micah 7)
Goals: *to move minds from visions of doom to visions of hope and to reclaim in our lives hopefulness as a basic strategy for living before God and with each other.*

Lesson One – Introduction: Who Were Hosea, Amos, and Micah?

Goals: *To lay the groundwork for the entire series by helping students understand what the prophets were about, how they did their work, and what their messages say about the justice and mercy of God.*

To make sense of the prophetic books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah, one must understand several things: the needs of their time and place; the ways in which prophets communicated; the processes by which their spoken words became written books; and the ways in which all those historical, theological, and literary elements interacted to give us something meaningful. Let us consider each element in turn.

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The prophets of Israel did not primarily engage in prediction of the long distant future. Rather, they spoke to their own era about its shortcomings and invited people to remember the majesty of their divine calling. The prophets were reformers and political thinkers (in the broad sense that they wanted to help people learn to live together in harmony and peace). They sought to call a whole community of people to live in solidarity with each other.

The three prophets we will consider in this series worked during the 8th century BC, mostly from the 760s to the 710s. At the beginning of that period, Israel and Judah were too small states along the Mediterranean coast, still fairly prosperous and politically independent. They jostled for power with other small states, dominating Moab, Edom, and Ammon, contesting ground with the Philistine and Phoenician city-states and especially Aram (capital: Damascus), but holding their own by and large. In the 740s, all this changed as the Assyrian empire in what is now northern Iraq and Syria, came to dominate the entire Middle East. Between 732 and 722, three successive Assyrian emperors invaded Israel, finally destroying that kingdom and deporting much of its population, replacing it with outsiders (see 2 Kings 17).

The books of Hosea, Amos, and Micah come mostly from just before the final destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The prophets thus speak mostly of internal issues, though they also step outside purely local concerns to talk about geopolitics. Because they saw the work of God everywhere, they could change their focus with ease. And, in doing so, they could help their hearers think deeply about their own place in the world and their own need to be just, righteous, and honorable people.

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How did they communicate such complex messages? To read any prophetic book, recognize that it consists of a series of short oracles woven together like a patchwork quilt. Each oracle is a self-contained message, but it gains further meaning by its proximity to other oracles. Also, recognize that most oracles are poems, meaning that the suggestions for reading poetry always apply. These include

1. What are the sections of the poet? Where does it start and stop?
2. How does the poem move? That is, what are its subsections, and how does it transition from one to the next?
3. What imagery, especially sensory words, does it employ?
4. What word choices are surprising?

5. In what voice does the poet speak (for example, third person detachment, or first person introspection)?
6. What implicit narrative lies behind the poem? How does the poem create characters and narrative tension?
7. What voices and viewpoints does the poem hint at or state overtly?
8. What words or phrases link the poem to other Old Testament texts? How does this linkage work?
9. What theological ideas are in play in the poem?
10. What clues can you identify regarding the possible worship setting of Israelite poetry (especially Psalms)?

In addition, in examining the oracles of the prophets, you might ask the following questions:

1. What view of God is in play here? What are the limits of such a view, and what are its strengths?
2. What elements of the oracle are rhetorically loaded? For example, the prophet, like any preacher, may resort to word play or understatement or exaggeration to make a serious point.
3. What view of human community lies beneath the oracle? What assumptions about the world of the audience is the prophet making?
4. Does the personal experience of the prophet bleed through? Does the absence of obvious personal experience have significance?
5. How do the oracles adjoining the one you are examining impinge on its meaning? Since the prophetic books are fairly carefully constructed, we should pay attention to how a particular oracle fits into the whole book.

Now I advise you to take an oracle or two and try out these questions!

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When you read the prophets' oracles carefully, you learn certain things. The prophets assume a basic social ethic in which humans respect each other, avoid hoarding their resources, and pay attention to the needs of the vulnerable. They recognize the ability of the powerful to take over religious language for their own ends, and they call upon the people of God to speak truth to power. The prophets' preaching inevitably calls us to protest the injustices of the world and to work to make them right. They identify otherworldliness as complicity with evil. And they invite us to a deeper vision of God and thus of ourselves. Studying and teaching their texts allow us to carry on their mission to a world in desperate need of healing.

The prophets' words hurt, but they also heal. These spokespersons for God want their audiences to experience the pain of injustice, as both God and their neighbors feel it. They want us also to feel the possibilities of joy that comes from true religion and generous life as community. They ask us to imagine the world that the sovereign Lord seeks to create and to join in that creation. Thus they do not state theology as a set of abstract principles or concrete applications. They want to stimulate imagination.

What do they want their audience to imagine? The answer lies in the structure of each prophetic book itself, as it moves from a mode of judgment, to one of hope, to one of implementation of hope. Words become realities, and realities give rise to new words. This

movement of the prophetic word forms an audience into a believing community, whether in antiquity or today.

So what about words of doom? Inevitably, contemporary Christians who recognize how often religion has served to justify violence and repression will be uncomfortable with some of the words of the prophetic books. But this very discomfort signals to us two truths. First, the world in which we live is full of violence and excuses for violence. Utopian fantasies that seek to pretend that away or reduce evil to merely bad thinking or psychological disturbances of some sort trivialize the problems we face and leave us vulnerable to their perpetuation. Truly, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

Second, the search for justice creates winners and losers. As the Magnificat says, "God has filled the poor with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). Yet the short-term losses of undeserved privilege and the disruption of a world in which some always command while others always obey will bring about a world in which all eventually succeed.

And there is a third truth. The theology of the Bible is not "purely local." No prophetic book came to be because a single author working for a short period of time wrote it. Instead, each one came to be because faithful people preserved the words of the prophets, augmented them with new prophetic words, and shaped them all to speak to new generations who face the challenge of being a moral, spiritual community in new environments. The creators of the prophetic books were deeply convinced that God continued to speak and to order their world so as to bring about justice, peace, and human happiness. Those goals are not confined to one time or place at all.

In short, then, the words of doom that appear throughout all the prophetic books are as revealing of the world that the prophet – and God – seek as the glorious visions that appear there and later. We must hear their voice, lest we be the people whose "hearts are full fat, who see but do not understand, who hear but do not discern" (Isaiah 6:10). The choice is ours, just as it was theirs.

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A note about the prophetic books: ancient Israel passed on to us four major prophetic works, all of about the same length. They are Isaiah (16,932 words), Jeremiah (21,835 words), Ezekiel (18,730 words), and the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets (14,355 words). The lessons in this series will come from the last of them, an anthology of the words of a dozen prophets living from the eighth to the fifth (or perhaps even fourth) century BC.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How should we Christians talk about justice among ourselves? How well are we doing in our commitment to being one with those who have less of the world's goods (whether economic or social goods such as respect or being listened to)?
2. What contributions do Christians need to make the larger community in America as it pursues justice and peace? Where do we need to challenge our culture? What can we learn from others?
3. Tell of a time when you have seen an injustice done to someone else. What did you do about it? What did you wish you could do?
4. The prophets speak in very artistic ways we would call poetry. In your experience, how can words and other artistic media (graphic arts or music, for example) help us see the world – both good and evil – better? How does art help us do better?

Lesson Two – Hosea: Two Love Affairs and their Uneasy Resolution

***Goals**: To help readers understand how the whole book of Hosea fits together and to offer an opportunity to reflect on the book's exploration of the relationship between God and people as a love affair.*

The book of Hosea opens the collection of the Minor Prophets with a story of a love affair gone awry, or rather, with two intertwined stories. The first is that of Hosea and Gomer. Whenever she began her sexual unfaithfulness, and however it played out over the course of their marriage, it was a source of great pain. But the story appears in the book primarily as a sort of parable for God's relationship with Israel, which is similarly painful because it is full of violations of trust. The book opens this way in order to arrest the reader's attention immediately with the gravity of the situation. We can feel the pain of the prophet in speaking of his own life and his community's life, and we can begin to think of God's relationship with us as one of pain and longing as well. The story of Gomer is thus Israel's story and, in fact, the story of all people who seek to be in a relationship with God but cannot seem to manage it.

The book begins with this story and then explores the theme of Israel's spiritual infidelity in a series of other texts (no stories, just oracles strung together). The book's basic organization moves from a story of brokenness to one of healing. One way to outline it would be

1:1-3:5	Hosea's Story of Failure and Hope Applied to Israel
4:1-14:1	Israel's Trial and Death
14:2-10	Israel's Resurrection

The long middle section takes a series of twists and turns as it describes God's internal battle between anger at injustice and love for the chosen people. At the end of the book, affection wins, though only after the horrors of war and exile. The book insists, therefore, that the final word from God is one of hope because judgment and mercy must find their ultimate reconciliation in the renewal of God's people for life in the covenant.

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To get to this point, Hosea has to work out some important ideas. The first is that God is a savior. The very nature of Israel's God, Yahweh, dictates that this God intervene in human affairs to redeem people from all forms of evil. The second idea is that Israel, God's covenant partner, needs this redemption because of human sinfulness and creatureliness. The third idea is that Israel's experience of redemption constitutes a story, centered on the exodus but continuing to the present as God continues to interact with men and women to draw them to lives of faith and goodness. Fourth, the story of salvation will continue into the future, but only after a catastrophe that leads to repentance and healing. The various parts of the book explore these basic ideas in order to allow the readers to understand God's work among them.

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In exploring these basic ideas, Hosea tells his audience a great deal about his major character, Yahweh, the God of Israel. Chapters 1-3 explore the theme of God as jilted lover, who nevertheless invites Israel back into the marriage, stating hopeful expectations that the nation will be faithful in the future.

Hosea 4:1-5:7 turns to the language of lawsuit, expanding on a theme in chapter 2, and charging the nation as a whole and especially its priestly leaders, with disrespect for God. Contrary to their understanding, God does not approve of sexual laxity. God is not a deity obsessed with human fertility, though human fertility does come from God's blessing.

Hosea 5:8-7:16 takes up the dance in which Israel and God have been engaged. Sometimes Israel tries to be faithful, sometimes not. God has sought to restore them by stopping their acts of oppression and by forgiving them after they suffer the due punishment for their sins. But still, there is deep concern that the reconciliation will not last.

Hosea 8:1-9:9 takes up Israel's (here called Ephraim's after the largest tribe) history of using religion to serve their own ends rather than engaging in the true worship of God. Such behavior has led to the loss of their political independence and an ever deepening decline in the ability of leaders to carry out justice.

The rest of chapter 9 calls on God to reject the people, an invitation that chapter 10 explains in two ways. Verses 1-8 explains that Israel has abandoned the cause of justice, while verses 9-15 add that, even though God has appealed to them to "sow the furrow of justice," such pleas fall on deaf ears. Thus their tragic fate is unavoidable.

Chapter 11, however, describes God's response to this tragedy, describing the pain occasioned by the decision to allow sin to lead to its due consequences. The soliloquy of God, which expresses a profound sorrow at the loss of the relationship with the people, is among the most touching texts in all of Scripture. Here we see a God who cares deeply enough for Israel to contemplate an ongoing relationship with a faithless people.

Chapters 12 and 13 expand on the theme of divine uncertainty about punishment by portraying God as continuing to think about the consequences and to consider alternatives that lead to redemption. At the same time, the prophet recognizes that salvation will not be easy, given the corruption of the nation.

The book ends in chapter 14 by claiming for Israel a victory in the saga of faith: God's mercy will triumph. The God who protects the orphan will save orphan Israel so that a new era of righteousness will dawn.

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A key verse of the book is the last one: who can understand how God balances justice and mercy? The close of the book is a commentary on the entire work. The wise reader must decide whether to follow the way of death or the way of life. God has made either possible, while strongly preferring to redeem the family of Israel and continue the covenantal relationship.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Hosea repeatedly uses the metaphor of sexual infidelity to describe Israel's behavior. Does this language of sin as betrayal of relationship make sense to you? In what senses can we either keep or betray our commitments to God?
2. Unlike Amos, Hosea focuses heavily on idolatry as a sin. What are ways in which we claim that realities that are not God are God? Be creative here.
3. What are ways in which God has redeemed us even in our imperfections? What obligations do we have to God and each other because of that redemptive work?

Lesson Three – Amos: The Search for the Exodus People

***Goals**: to understand Amos's call to live as exodus people who practice God's justice toward all and to identify ways in which we can grow into that vision.*

A book like Amos operates at several levels. It shifts from image to image, idea to idea, emotion to emotion. These movements interact with each other. Thus, although we may outline the book, we should not think of it as having a static structure that we can pry apart. Rather, it shows a careful orchestration of images, ideas, and emotions that, together, create an effect.

If this claim is true, then it should be possible to chart the shifting of images and emotions, as well as ideas or literary genres. As you will see, such a charting is possible.

Setting 1: The prophet Amos lived in the eighth century BCE (mid-700s), a time when Israel reached a zenith of prosperity and political independence, and then quickly fell to the advancing Assyrian empire. Chapter 7 dates his work to the reign of Jeroboam II (r. 786-746 BCE), but we cannot be sure of the dates of any given oracle. Amos foresaw the collapse of northern Israel.

Setting 2: Some students of his at an unknown date arranged his oracles into a book. The last unit (9:7-15) presumes a hopefulness that may point to a time during the return from Exile, hence after 539 BCE. But we cannot be sure of this. Amos himself or his immediate disciples may have organized much of the book as we have it.

Setting 3: At some point this book became part of the Book of the Twelve Minor Prophets, a collection that could only have been finished during the Persian period (539-334 BCE) or perhaps even later. In this setting, the book of Amos sits alongside Obadiah's oracle against the nation of Edom and Jonah's response, as well the messages of doom in Hosea and Joel.

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The book follows the following movements:

A. Superscription and motto (1:1-2)
B. Oracles against the nations, including Israel (1:3-2:16)
C. The Divine Witness Against Israel (3:1-6:14)
    1. Judgment on Samaria (3:1-15)
    2. Judgment on Elites (4:1-3)
    3. Judgment on Idolatry (4:4-13)
    4. A Funeral Dirge (5:1-17)
    5. A Response to the Dirge, re the "Day of the Lord" (5:18-20)
    6. Judgment on Elites (6:1-7)
    7. Judgment on Samaria (6:8-14)
D. Amos's Visions and Pleas for Israel (7:1-9)
E. Israel's Refusal to Repent (Played by Amaziah) (7:10-17)
F. The Doom of Israel (8:1-9:10)
G. A Promise of Restoration (9:11-15)

Cutting across this dramatic structure are a series of five visions in chapters 8-9. Note that part C takes the form of a semi-broken, or rather sophisticated, chiasmus (ABBA pattern), with Part 1 = Part 7 and Part 2 = Part 6. Parts 3-5 interrogate the nature of Israelite religion.

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To understand the drama, we can attend to the characters and their emotional lives. Amos forms a sort of drama in which three major characters speak: God, Israel, and Amos. The foreign nations constitute a fourth character, and the implied (postexilic) reader a fifth. Each of them stays in character, with Israel the rebellious one, Amos the pleading intermediary, and God the outraged judge. Even the final scene, a promise of renewed hope, does not take the characters out of their roles, though the effort at making God's actions internally consistent creates a theological problem. This problem, however, leads to the profoundest insights of the book, as we will see.

On a first reading, Amos seems emotionally limited, if intense. Outrage is the dominant emotion. Yet, on a closer reading, things become more complex. The book begins with a motto: "Yahweh has roared from Zion, given his voice from Jerusalem." At first, this seems to be a statement of national particularity, with Yahweh taking the side of Judah against Israel. But the next few verses quickly dissuade us from this view, as it becomes clear that God has judged all the nations for their iniquity, with the Israelite kingdoms coming in for the severest condemnation. By the end of the oracles against the nations, any sense of comfort has gone.

The next few chapters passionately dissect the anatomy of oppression in Israel. The prophet reasons with his hearers, mocks them, cajoles them, threatens them, and even (in chapter 5) offers a ray of hope. Rhetorically sophisticated, these chapters try to construct an argument from pathos for the audience so that they will feel, as well as think, their way into repentance.

Chapter 7 plays up the role of the prophet as mediator, allowing us to hear the pain in Amos as he watches his nation destroy itself. Here we see the preacher as mediator, as the one begging God to relent. We also see his indignation at other religious leaders who have sold themselves to obtain comfort and status.

Chapters 8 and 9 offers the wildest mood swing of all. Chapter 8 opens with a vision of divine outrage, final this time. The words of chapter 9 seem like a description of hell itself. They are designed to hurt, and they do. Then, at last, when we least expect it, comes the word of hope and reconciliation. Faintly at first and then resoundingly, the prophet calls upon God's deepest hopes for the human role and draws us into them, as if to hear the hope is to begin to make it a reality.

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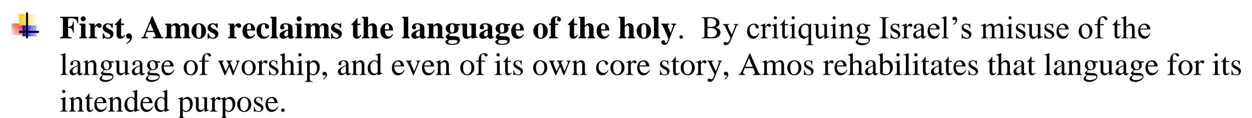
To study and teach Amos could mean several things: to be an expositor of various units in the book; to imitate the rich interplay of images and symbols working in the book's language; to engage the theology and ethics of the book; or to use the book as a resource for inviting our friends to imagine the better world Amos and his disciples, under God's instruction, imagined. Contemporary study of the book must do all these things.

What precisely is our goal in studying Amos? Surely it is to draw us all into communion with the just and life-giving God to whom Amos bears witness. The goal of prophetic preaching is thus to help the church become a prophetic church. To make this happen, we must help our hearers cultivate a theological imagination.

This imagination has several elements to which Amos can contribute.



- **First, Amos reclaims the language of the holy**. By critiquing Israel's misuse of the language of worship, and even of its own core story, Amos rehabilitates that language for its intended purpose.

- **Second, Amos sketches a vision of community**. Israel is to be a people in which relationships of reciprocity work. Power must be used with care. All must receive enough material and social goods to belong to the society.
- **Third, Amos draws his hearers into communion with God** by portraying God's pathos or emotional involvement with Israel. Amos, like all prophets, acts as a mediator between God and human beings, empathizing with both sides of the relationship and thus asking us to do the same.
- **Fourth, Amos calls his hearers to personal integrity and equity**. The focus is upon their use of resources of all sorts.

When we hear the prophets' messages, we enter into dialogue about our own relationships and use of economic and social resources. This is true at every level, whether in the life of an individual, a family, or a church. All Christians are practical theologians who need to ask questions about the goals of human life *in this world* and lead their congregations in the building of practices that make the realization of those goals possible. For Christians, the present age is to become in some measure, however imperfect, a parallel of the coming Kingdom of God. This means that we must identify those practices, values, and beliefs that undermine the transformation of ourselves and modify them.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Amos calls readers to see what is right in front of them. What injustices do we overlook? How can we see them better?
2. He also moves toward hope. What features of our world give you hope? Where do you see hope in your congregation? In your family? In your own life?
3. How do your interactions with other people draw you closer to God? Where do you see God in the lives of others?
4. Amos envisions a holy community. Where do you see your church becoming that? What are some growth areas?

Lesson Four – Micah: What does God Require of Us?

***Goals**: to help readers understand the search for true security through justice, to which God calls Israel and us, and to recommit ourselves to that pursuit.*

In Jeremiah 26:16-19, the prophet's hearers defend his frightening words from censorship by referring to Micah, who lived a century or so earlier. Micah, they recalled, had predicted the destruction of Jerusalem, an utterance that provoked the repentance of King Hezekiah and his subjects. The older prophet had become a hero because his tough words called the citizens of Judah to face reality, to amend their ways, and thus to find hope amid doom. This passage is interesting on many grounds, not least because it reminds us that prophetic words did not always find a ready audience, that their words were subject to change (repentance could cause God to relent), and that they were passed down orally from one generation to the next.

In any case, the concern with the fate of Jerusalem and the call for repentance that the contemporaries of Jeremiah attributed to Micah also figure prominently in the book bearing his name. Here we read of justice between individuals, between ruler and ruled, and between nations. The book of Micah calls the southern kingdom of Judah to turn from its evil ways and move toward a true security.

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The organization of the book can be understood in several ways. One of the most common is to see in it three major sections:

Oracles of doom (1:1-3:12)
Oracles of hope and doom tangled together (4:1-5:14)
Calls to action (6:1-7:20)

According to this outline, the book moves toward a call to faith, the proper response to which would undo the oracles of doom. Thus the hearer can decide whether the threats of God become realities. As with all the prophetic books, Micah contains texts with widely different moods, often side by side. To read it properly, you must identify where a given section starts and stops, discern its overall tone, and then move to the next section in order to see how two different moods might work together to create something larger than either of them.

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A brief commentary on the book: Chapter 1 opens Micah with a description of God's might appearance in judgment (1:1-4), the reasons for judgment (the sins of Jacob/Israel; 1:5-9), and then a call to sinners to pay attention and consider turning from sin (1:10-16). The third section of the chapter is particularly difficult. It is full of Hebrew word plays and obscure references, the overall tone of which is to point to the comprehensive nature of Israel's sinfulness – everyone is involved.

Chapter 2 also contains three sections. Verses 1-5 talk about the reversal of fortune awaiting those who scheme to line their own pockets at the expense of others. Verses 6-11 describe the evildoers' response to the prophets: "Stop preaching," they say. Micah describes what prophets always experience, opposition and disbelief. It is difficult for us to face up to our own faults, and the same was true of his audience. Verses 12-13 put a bow around the chapter

by describing exile and then the possibility of hope after that. The ones who are drawn through breaches in walls are victims of warfare, but their deliverance will come.

Chapter 3 turns to the leaders of the people, accusing the government officials (1-4), the prophets (5-8), and the officials again (9-12) of misleading, swindling, neglecting, and otherwise oppressing the people. Some of the language of the prophet is very graphic, as when he describes the leaders as cannibals (3:3), surely an exaggeration, but one making the serious point that those who should have cared for the vulnerable only used that vulnerability as an opportunity for gain. The failure of leadership has contributed mightily to the low morality and social debasement that Micah criticizes.

Chapter 4 opens in verses 1-8 with a vision of the future, almost word-for-word identical to that in Isaiah 2. This extraordinary vision imagines a time when the world will find hope in Israel's God, and thus when Israel will be a pioneer for everyone else. The chapter then turns to the hearer and answers his or her unstated objections, which must be something similar to those we see from other prophetic settings (for example, Isaiah 49), in which people who have given up hope can no longer believe in the possibility of redemption. Micah 4:9-14 promises that the present calamity (predicted by chapter 3) is not the last word, but merely an opportunity for God to save yet again.

Chapter 5 continues the words of hope but sets them in the context of exile. Judah will not avoid tragedy, but after the catastrophe of invasion and loss will come a new dawn of hope. Sin will be punished, but punishment is not the last word. Rather, the oppressive foreign nations will themselves be subject to God's rule, and thus peace will reign.

Chapter 6 is a speech for a lawsuit (a similar speech appears in Isaiah 1). The prophet, speaking for God, responds to Israel's complaints by reminding them of their history, in which God time and again provides leaders to bring them to a place of healing. Verses 6-7 imagine Israel's response: how can I approach God now? The answer comes in the rest of the chapter, in which Micah invites the people to live lives of justice, goodness, and wisdom. They must turn away from their sins and the due punishment of them (with sin and punishment reinforcing each other; Israel must break the cycle).

Finally, chapter 7 opens with Israel's (or perhaps the prophet's) lament for a lost world (verses 1-8). The book ends on a note of hope.

The sequence of oracles, again, may seem confusing, but the goal is to create a conversation between God and people about what makes a good community and good individuals in that community. The prophet wants the people to turn from the behaviors that led to catastrophe and seek a new way of life, that is, in fact, an old way of life, the one that God originated at the exodus. This series will explore the issues further as it progresses.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What does Micah think will bring about security for individuals and communities? Does your experience agree with his? What are sources for security or insecurity in your Christian experience?
2. How does leadership, good or bad, play a role in the well-being of a religious community? Do Micah's charges of corruption resonate with your experience of church? Why or why not?
3. What is the relationship between treating others justly and building security for oneself? Is there a relationship? How does it play out in your experience of the life of faith?

Lesson Five – Loyalty to God: Why Idolatry is a Problem and Monotheism is a Chore (Hosea 1-3)

Goals*: to understand better what loyalty to one God implies for faith and action, what false gods compete for our attention and commitments, and what changes we need to make to become faithful to the one true God; to foster willingness to renew our commitments so that we act as faithful people.*

Hosea 1-3 opens the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets with a story, framing the entire collection as a tale of woe, of unfaithfulness and treachery, but ultimately of reconciliation and hope. The story is puzzling in that it is not clear whether Gomer was a prostitute or merely and adulteress (that is, whether money changed hands), whether the children are Hosea's or not, or even where the biography of the prophet stops and its interpretation starts. The book uses his misfortune as a parable for God's frustration at Israel's betrayal.

Following the introduction to the book in 1:1, Hosea 1-3 consists of five sections. 1:2-9 introduces Hosea's family as a symbol of God's judgment. 2:1-3 refers to the great day of Jezreel, a model of judgment on Israel for its sins. Verses 4-17 extend the metaphor by talking about God's impending divorce from Israel, using the painful images of the end of marriage to speak of the end of God's saving work as far as Israel is concerned. Verses 18-25 speak, however, of a renewal of the covenant, a remarriage on better terms and under happier circumstances. Finally, chapter 3 envisions a time when all the frictions between God and humankind will be at an end, and when the work of salvation will bear fruit in the lives of men and women.

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Why does Hosea have to experience all this horror? Why does the book of the Twelve Minor Prophets begin with it? The two questions, one personal and psychological and the other literary, actually point to the same answer. The story of Hosea's mistreatment is analogous to God's mistreatment at the hands of Israel. The sort of radical commitment that marriage implies, in which one commits to love the other in difficulties and in good times, is parallel to that of religion. (Obviously the analogy breaks down at some point.) God has made an unshakable commitment to Israel, and Israel has promised to do so to God, but has not kept its end of the bargain.

Modern readers might be uncomfortable with seeing God as a perfect male spouse and Israel as an imperfect female spouse. But Hosea puts his story in the context of a long discussion on the incomparability of God. No metaphor can possibly do justice to God or the work of salvation. But one has to start somewhere, so Hosea starts with one of the most meaningful relationships human beings can have, and thus one of the deepest acts of betrayal humans can know.

But let's drop the analogy. Hosea is really talking about the nature of faith in God. How all-consuming is it? The answer to that question depends on what we think the nature of God is. For most ancient people, the godhead was plural. Polytheism allowed for many deities whom human beings accessed on an as-needed basis. Worshipers prayed to the deity who had a special competency the worshiper needed. If major challenges faced the person praying, he or she would ask a personal god to speak to one of the high gods for help, much as one would ask one's

local city counselor to talk to somebody in Congress. The gods looked much like human beings, only far more powerful.

Contrast this with the view in Israel, which was that Israel may worship only one God, but that this deity, Yahweh, was omnicompetent. No matter what your need or problem, no matter your social status, you addressed the same God as everyone else. This was a radical innovation in the ancient Near East. Moreover, according to the prophets, this God ruled the entire universe. It is a short step from such a view to what we would call "monotheism," the conviction that only one God exists, that the Godhead is singular. As Deuteronomy 6:4, the central confession of Judaism, puts it, "Hear O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One." Hosea does not quite take this last step, but he is on the path.

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Monotheism, in its Jewish or Christian form (or for that matter, even in its Muslim form), poses two major challenges. First, it says that God cannot be managed or manipulated by human beings. Only God is God. Only God has ultimate value or can command our full loyalty. All other beings, forces, ideas, values, or aspirations must be tested by the question of whether they reflect the will of God. Love for God becomes the highest value, obedience to God the highest action, friendship with God the highest dream. The difficulties of making all this a reality are obvious because we have difficulty allowing ourselves to be so vulnerable. We manage the claims of God by identifying lesser claims with them.

Second, monotheism should lead to a profound care for all God's creation, since all things are equally objects of God's care and subjects of God's rule. Contrast this idea to polytheism, which often pits the forces of existence off against each other. Biblical faith takes us in a different direction as it speaks of all things moving toward one end, union with the one God.

These basic convictions are challenging because they remind us that there are some things we cannot explain. A God who cannot be managed or manipulated also surpasses our comprehension. Humility is called for, yes, but so is an attitude of searching in the context of radical loyalty.

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Hosea's audience did not understand his call. They sought ways to manage God in order to gratify their own sexual fantasies, desires for material rewards, and so on. They could not envision a God who was approachable, benevolent, and able to do anything, all at the same time. They felt a need to choose among these attributes. Nor were they the last people to struggle with the demand to worship God alone.

For readers of Hosea, the call to spiritual fidelity is still a challenge. But the prophet gives us some of the resources we need for the journey.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Hosea's story includes a moment when his children's names are changed from Lo-ruhama ("not loved") to Ruhamah ("beloved") and from Lo-ammi ("not my people") to Ammi ("my people"). That is Israel will experience a conversion of status from sinner to redeemed. When does this experience happen in your experience? What is involved?
2. Where have you seen God's restorative power at work in individuals? In congregations?
3. What are ways we have of softening God's demands on ourselves? Give an example of when you've tried to do that. What happens we stop doing so?

Lesson Six – What are the Standards? (Amos 1-2 and Other Texts)

Goals*: to think through the aspects of God's call for just living as individuals and communities and to consider ways to answer that call in our own world.*

The prophets' vision of a well-functioning society assume that some things are right and others wrong, that people can know the difference, and that we can choose a lifestyle that leads to either good or evil. They do not imagine perfection as a possibility (who could?), but they do believe that it matters what we do.

Without considering all the ins and outs of the formation of ethical people, we should note that communal morality needs several ingredients: norms, structures of support and enforcement, mechanisms for education, and voices that will offer criticism in order to call people back to the original vision, among other possible elements. The prophets say important things about each of these elements.

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First consider norms. Amos 1-2 contains a series of oracles against various nations that explore some of the norms or standards of value. The oracles assume two levels of moral obligation: all human beings (represented by the Gentile nations surrounding Israel) are responsible for a basic code of behavior that forbids treating civilians as combatants or defiling nationally significant (sacred or quasi-sacred) objects such as the bones of a dead king.

The oracle against Israel in Amos 2:6-8 states a more profound standard for the covenant people. They must care for the vulnerable among them. They may not buy and sell people or even degrade or humiliate them. They may not treat sex as a commodity to be bought and sold.

Amos develops these norms in detail. Chapter 5 returns to the theme of abusing the poor in order to build grand houses (5:11), connecting it to abuses of power in the court system (5:12), while chapter 6 describes people who live in luxury but "are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph" (6:6). Amos 8:4-6 pushes the envelope even further by describing people who cannot stop their businesses long enough even to pretend to participate in the festivals and times of rest that make community bearable.

Micah similarly refers to dishonest business practices in 6:9-12, which connects the luxury of the rich to their swindling of others. Hosea 12:7-9 describes the same reality, adding the note that the cheaters deny any wrongdoing, claiming that they are innocent. However, the God who sees all sees through their claims.

Honesty in business is not the only norm, however. Hosea in particular takes Israel to task for its sexual laxness as well as for its obsession with warfare (10:13-15). Because they have lost a sense of their connection with God, they begin to pursue their own self-serving agendas. Violence is one aspect of their search for self-gratification.

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Second, in addition to norms, the prophets think of social structures. Thus they speak of the role of leaders (Hosea 5:1-7; Micah 6:16), and they assume the interconnectivity of everyone in the community of the redeemed. Structures matter because we influence each other. Good leaders can draw us into our deepest values, challenge our laziness or self-serving behavior, and thus point us to our better selves. Bad leaders do the opposite. And good leaders create good structures and are created by them.

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Third, several prophets are interested in educating their audiences. Their entire books reflect such a concern. More directly, a few texts point explicitly to the need to know. Thus Hosea 6:5-6 speaks powerfully of the need for knowledge and the cost of its absence: "I have hewn them by the prophets and killed them by the words of my mouth, and my judgment goes for as the light. For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." The first lines note that God's words, though uncomfortable and even lacerating, bring about knowledge. (Rather than attacking people with blows, God has used words.) The little meditation then ends by reminding Israel that God desires loyalty and knowledge. These two things fit together because one cannot know God without engaging the things of God deeply and persistently (loyally, in short), while this persistence leads us to the true knowledge, which is not about things belonging to God, but about God Himself. While the prophets do not explore the need for spiritual education in as much detail as, say, Deuteronomy 6, they do assume that the whole community needs to teach its members how to follow God.

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What should we do with the prophets' quest for justice. In our own time, the word has gotten tangled up in partisan politics, so that many Christians cannot use it at all. This state of affairs cannot continue, however, for the Bible does not accept our obsession with personal autonomy and self-determination as the end of the discussion, especially for people of faith. Rather, it insists that because of our history as liberated people, we have obligations to one another. Some of these are very basic, such as the need not to steal from others, the need for honesty in all our dealings, and so on. No economic or social system can long survive without such basic qualities. The alternative is a kind of feeding frenzy, an every person for himself state in which the powerful will soon run over the powerless. Other obligations are less easy to perceive, but perhaps even more profound for all that. The ultimate Christian ethical goal, of course, is love of the neighbor.

In his work, *Let Justice Roll Down*, Bruce Birch puts it this way: "Justice and righteousness are also the moral values which are to characterize covenant obedience. They are basic to the identity of the covenant community if it is to be faithful to its relationship with God…. But justice and righteousness in the prophets go beyond mere attention to the letter of the law. They are associated with the general moral task of doing good while turning from evil, and the measure is to be the welfare of the most vulnerable" (p. 260). In other words, the norms, practices, and structures of life together come out of who we are and help make us who we are. It's a circular process, much as life itself always is.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What are the key rules you try to live by in your life? Think about what you do, not just what you wish you did. Where are the gaps? What are you good at?
2. How do Christian communities work together to teach their basic values? Are we doing this well? What could we do better, and how could we do it?
3. Where do our values converge with the dominant values in our culture? Where do they diverge? (To answer this, you should think about what the dominant values in our culture are.)
4. The prophets focus on business and sexuality. What aspects of those areas of human existence do we need to talk about in church? Where are our blind spots?

Lesson Seven – God's Struggle to Balance Love and Justice (Hosea 11)

Goals*: to understand that God's profound love for people implies both agony because of our sin and hopefulness because of our capacity for goodness, and to find ways to choose hopefulness in our history and our future.*

A casual reader of the prophets might believe that their God is a wrathful, vengeful being out for blood. Such is the popular image of the "Old Testament God," whom even many Christians contrast unfavorably with the gentle savior of the New Testament. However, neither the contrast, nor the reading of the Old Testament on which it depends, stands up to scrutiny. On the contrary, the God whom the prophets portray exercises steadfast mercy and compassion. Behind the terrifying language of the prophets, which befits the difficulties of their times, lies an image of a benevolent deity.

One of the clearest texts on this point is Hosea 11, which takes the reader into the mind of God (so to speak) as God struggles with what to do about Israel. The soliloquy in this chapter shows the complexity of the problem as God seeks to balance justice (which would protect the vulnerable) with mercy (which would allow the oppressors to repent), as well as to allow the covenant to continue even when Israel has broken it.

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The chapter opens with God remembering the Exodus and contrasting that wonderful moment of grace and the free acceptance of grace with the later times of mutual hostility. Verse 1 may remember the beginnings of Israel's story with God through rose colored glasses, ignoring the various murmurings in the desert, but no matter. Compared to later events, that time was a honeymoon.

Verses 3-4 return to the theme of tender relations by speaking of Israel's early childhood when the loving parent taught the baby to walk and let it hold onto ropes (contrast them with the ropes that the Assyrians used to bind prisoners together as they were marched off to slave markets). The prophet here has dropped the imagery of marriage from chapters 1-3, turning to the next most intimate relationship, that of parents and children.

Verses 5-7 conclude the reminiscence by returning to the theme of verse 2, Israel's faithlessness. Does Hosea mean that their return to Egypt and Assyria was the punishment for their sins (refugees and deportees moving from their own land) or the sin itself (a nation making alliances with foreign powers to save its own skin). Or perhaps it is both. The main idea, in any case, is that Israel seeks help from other gods, forgetting its own story as a redeemed people.

Then comes the most extraordinary part of the chapter, in which God debates internally about whether to allow Israel to perish, concluding that nothing of the sort need happen. The key statement appears in verse 9, "For I am God, not a human being." Yahweh remembers what it means to be God – mercy can triumph over justice so as to restore and preserve the covenant relationships that will make justice possible. Only God can accomplish such a trick, and God must do so in order to remain true to the divine nature.

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This text begins with an accusation, much like a courtroom scene in which charges are pressed, and concludes with an offer of a settlement. Here God will bear the brunt of the settlement, recognizing that to wait for Israel to come to its senses may mean the end of

everything. Israel has long since lost the capacity to heal itself. Everything is up to God. Or rather, God must begin the process in order to make room for human growth and repentance.

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Since Admah and Zeboim were connected to Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 14, God in this text (verse 8) is reflecting on what future generations will say about this moment in Israel's history. Will Israel, like the cities of the plain, become a sort of watchword for the future, an illustration of how people with all the advantages in the world become so corrupt that they seal their own fate? Or will they avoid that tragedy? Who will decide? Though Israel did not yet seek to preserve its own reputation for future generations, God has begun to think in those terms.

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And another thing. This chapter reflects the Bible's deep interest in how God's love manifests itself in relationship with human beings. Several points deserve attention. (1) The covenant rests entirely on God's love. It is not just a contract or a legal agreement. (2) The divine love appears in the repeated attempts by God, through the prophets, to draw Israel back into its life of peace and justice through fidelity to the one true and living God. (3) This love will lead God at last to forgive, despite Israel's tragic inattention to its own nature and destiny.

Hosea 11, then, reveals a theme that appears in many other parts of the Bible. See, for example, Isaiah 5 and 40, Psalms 80 and 85, or Jeremiah 30-33. These texts and many others speak of what the modern hymn calls "love that will not let me go." Hosea may have been among the earliest to see this truth, but he was not the only person.

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For contemporary believers, the idea of a loving God also needs some reworking. Far from being an incidental doctrine or one that implies a sort of soft-headed, content-free relationship, the Bible's focus on God's love reminds us of the power of God to draw us into contemplation of the greatest being we can conceive of, and thus our opportunity to escape our destructive focus on ourselves. The road to true love of ourselves and each other is the same road that leads to love of God.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. When have you experienced God's love for yourself as an individual, for your family, or for your congregation? What changed for you because of that experience?
2. Can you tell the story of your congregation from the point of view of its experience of God's love? How do times of struggle or even sin figure into the story? What were the points of mercy?
3. In what areas do you need to grow in your love for God? With what do you struggle in your spiritual life in these regards?
4. How does love for God relate to obedience to God? Are they the same thing? In contrast with each other? Or is their relationship more complex? How do you decide?

Lesson Eight – What Counts as Worship? (The Focus on God)

***Goals**: to evaluate our worship, not in terms of what we get out of it, but in terms of how it reflects awe with respect to God's generosity to us, as well as the call for us to be generous, respectful, and just people.*

To think about worship is to think about many things, including time, space, matter and its uses, the importance of leaders, the relationships between attitudes and actions, and many others. Worship involves both external phenomena (such as movements and words) and internal realities (the inclinations, passions, longings, and perhaps even fears of the heart). To worship well is to receive God's gifts with gratitude and peace to offer to God, not our things or even our works, but our very beings. Worship is not a transaction or an exchange. It is our response to God's overwhelming love and mercy.

The Bible speaks of worship in many ways: response to God's creation (Job 38; Psalm 84), the response to God's justice (1 Corinthians 11:17-22), and so on. The Minor Prophets, in particular, take up two aspects of worship, its focus on the true and living God and its implications for the life of the community come together as one before that God. The next lesson will focus on the latter theme, and this one on the former.

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Like many Psalms and other biblical texts, the prophets call their audience to consider the majesty and generosity of God. Unlike texts such as Isaiah 40-41, which explore God's incomparability in detail, Hosea, Amos, and Micah praise God in incidental ways. Consider some examples.

Hosea talks often of the God who redeemed Israel in the exodus (Hosea 9:10; 11:1; 12:9; 13:4-5). This God calls human beings to lives of goodness and opposes evil (Hosea 4:1-3). God does not show favoritism or allow election to be an excuse for oppression and injustice. Such a God, therefore, cannot be represented by creations of human beings (idols), since any attempt to reduce God to something we understand denies the life-giving power of divine mercy (Hosea 14:8). Yahweh is worthy of Israel's worship because of His character.

Amos makes the grandeur of God even more explicit, not only by focusing on divine mercy toward all, by reminding his hearers of the language of the hymns they already know, which point toward divine power over creation and willingness to communicate intentions to human being. Thus in Amos 4:13, the prophet quotes a hymn that speaks of God's ability to create a beautiful world (compare Job 38 as well as Genesis 1) and then turns quickly to the phenomenon of prophecy ("and tells his thought to people"; see also Amos 3:7). It is interesting that prophecy and creation can be mentioned in the same breath, as though they are two examples of the same sort of thing. Prophecy – revelation of God's will to people and thus guidance in things that matter permanently – creates something new. In any case, the poem turns back to creation, speaking this time of God's ability to undo what we have come to expect as normal and use it for new purposes. The poem concludes with a reference to another of Yahweh's names, "the lord of hosts" or "armies," speaking of God's mastery of the angelic hosts and thus of a world in which human beings play only a small role.

Amos also contains a second hymn, 9:5-6, which speaks of God's incomparable power to reverse the normal flow of natural forces. What is at stake in such a view of God? Recall that the Bible does not celebrate power for its own sake, even God's power. Rather, it always speaks

of power as it is used for good ends. For example, kings use their ability to coerce others in order to end evil and bring about justice. Parents use their power to train children in the ways they should go. And God uses more or less unlimited power in order to draw human beings, and especially those in covenant, toward ethical, grace-filled lives. At the same time, Amos wants to remind his audience of God's majesty so that they will no longer ignore their commitments as though God were someone they could ignore or treat contemptuously.

Micah, meanwhile, offers many of the same visions of God as a majestic judge. Chapter 7 opens with a lament (verses 1-6) to which a pious speaker responds, "But as for me, I will look to the Lord, and I will wait for my saving God. My God will hear me." This God aids those who humbly wait for deliverance in a troubled time. Verses 8-13 respond to the lament in a different way by considering the possibility of a reversal of fortune for Israel, a time of healing and the rebuilding of community. Those who believe Israel's God cannot deliver the oppressed from their bonds will have a rude awakening. How, then, does verse 7 connect to what follows it? The answer seems to be that the book of Micah is designed to encourage the few who do hope in God to remember that God's power and graciousness are complementary realities. Power will be used for the good of humankind.

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Two reflections are in order at this point. First, notice that the prophets use an image of God with which many of us are very uncomfortable: God is judge. Our discomfort comes from the way the image has sometimes been used. Some Christians have made God into a judgmental figure, the "all-seeing eye watching you," who takes note of every infraction and punishes without fail. *This understanding of God as judge is not what the prophets have in mind*. Their image is of a God of supreme mercy whose indignation is at injustice, not at petty violations, but at gross abuses of power and mistreatment of the vulnerable. God the judge is God the vindicator: these are one and the same role.

Second, the prophets assume (as does the rest of the Bible) that those who are think deeply about the majesty of God will be better people than those who do not. Awe before God leads to humility, graciousness, forgiveness, generosity, and other virtues that profoundly shape a life. A vibrant, growing faith leads one to think of others as God's children and thus as objects of our care as well.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. What metaphors for God used in the Bible are especially meaningful to you? Which ones seem hard to understand or identify with? Why?
2. What metaphors for God used in church and in our worship (for example, in our hymns) are especially meaningful to you? Which do you struggle to identify with? Why?
3. How does God work to vindicate the righteous and protect the vulnerable? What does such a commitment say about the nature of God? About the nature of worship of such a God?
4. Part of our job is to rehabilitate the idea of God as judge so that we avoid human judgmentalism, on the one hand, or a view of God as a tyrant, on the other. One way to do so is to learn to hand over problems to God to solve. How have you learned to do this? How do you join God in the solution or follow God's leading?

Lesson Nine – Yet Again, What Counts as Worship? (The Focus on Community)

***Goals**: to continue the conversation about worship and how our life together as community flows into our lives in the workplace, home, and other parts of life. Worship thus calls us to a new way of living.*

As the prophets insist, because worship occurs in the community of the redeemed, it must reflect that community's story and build the relationships and structures of life that that story implies. In other words, the relationship between the worshiper and God also includes the relationship with other human beings. The person who pleases God must also seek the good of those around him or her.

The prophets express deep concern over Israel's failure to get this message. Thus Amos speaks of people who, in clear defiance of Torah, take the clothing of the very poor as payment on a defaulted loan or perhaps as collateral for the loan (Exodus 22:27; Deuteronomy 24:17; compare Deuteronomy 24:6 – a lender may not deprive a borrower of the necessities of life) and have the gall to wear it to worship before God (Amos 2:8). Micah speaks of rulers who take bribes and thus fail to defend wronged people (Micah 7:3), as well as people who cheat at business (Micah 6:10-12; also Amos 5:12) but then seek to lead the community. Hosea states the issue most succinctly when he says: "There is no faithfulness or fidelity, no knowledge of God in the land. Swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and adultery break out, with bloodshed on top of bloodshed" (Hosea 4:1-2). These very religious people simply do not see the connection between their statements of faith and their actions once they leave the sanctuaries and altars where they seek God.

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Two texts especially explore the issues of how worship relates to the rest of life.

Micah 6:6-8

This oracle figures as part of a series of statements about how God calls Israel to remember its own story (verses 3-5) in order to see the evil of unfair business practices and greed (verses 9-12) before the due punishment of social and political collapse comes upon them (verses 13-16). Micah's words challenge readers to remember the nature of authentic religion, which connects us to God and thus to each other.

Several points stand out. First, verse 6 opens with a question that invites us to think about the nature of religion and therefore the nature of God. What does God want from us? Micah describes heroic responses that would move our resources to God's possession in ways that would involve true loss to us. The approach to religion that Micah describes and rejects has in its favor that it costs the one practicing it a great deal. With such an approach, it is possible to feel noble and impressive. But merely giving up what we have is not what God seeks.

Second, God does seek our movement of resources, financial or otherwise, from ourselves to other people (verse 8). God does not need our rams or oil, but human beings might. Moreover, God cares about how we acquire those things, and God recognizes that often we acquire them in ways that are questionable, even when we deny doing so (verse 10).

Third, the religion that relates to justice involves our commitments and emotions. We are to *love* kindness, not merely practice it.

Fourth, unlike the false religion of dramatic display, the faith of Israel requires humble trust of God. As Jesus taught in the "Our Father," we pray for bread for the day, forgive those

who sin against us so that God can forgive us, and otherwise trust God in ways that make us something other than the center of attention.

Obscure points: Verse 7's "fruit of my body" describes human sacrifice, which, in the ancient world, was the supreme gift one could give a deity (see 2 Kings 3:27; compare Genesis 22:1-19). Micah does not endorse or, here, condemn human sacrifice. He does note that even the most demanding act of self-surrender will not suffice if we continue to mistreat other human beings.

Amos 5:21-24

The previous oracle (verses 18-20) had disabused those who eagerly awaited the Day of the Lord – the time when God would make all things right – of their false hopes. Since they were in the wrong, the process of making things right would put them in an uncomfortable position. Now Amos turns to the reason for Israel's hopeless position: they have turned their religion into a time of self-gratification that had no effect on how they lived day to day.

Verse 21 makes God's distaste for their religion shockingly clear. Amos then describes the features of Israel's religious practice: times of celebration, several types of sacrifices designed to remove different kinds of sin and to reconcile people to God (compare the thorough discussion in Leviticus 1-9), and music (as in the Psalms). Yahweh does not dislike these things on principle, but only when the worshipers engage in them without comprehending their true meaning as an avenue to the God who liberates people so that they can live in ways that benefit others and so spread the reality of redemption far and wide. Amos's hearers miss the point of worship. They believe it to be a purely vertical relationship with no human-to-human implications.

Verse 24, a text made famous in our own time when Martin Luther King quoted it in his "I Have a Dream" speech, invites Israel to pursue *mishpat* (justice, judgment, verdicts benefiting those who have been wronged) and *tsedaqah* (justice in relationship, loyalty to others). They will do so in ways that bring life to others, hence the reference to waters, the source of life and fertility. (This simile seems to have been especially meaningful to people living in the land of Israel, much of which is fairly arid.)

Thus Amos envisions worship that leads participants out of themselves and their own interior states to lives that help others. Such a vision makes worship no longer an experience to be judged as we would any other commodity we have purchased, but a commitment, not just to God but to each other.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. When have you found worship to challenge your behaviors in your business, family, or other aspects of life? What happened? If it never has done so, how do you account for that gap?
2. In addition to God, who has a stake in how the church worships? Are all the stakeholders' voices represented in our discussions? Why or why not? How could we broaden our reflections with the help of others?
3. In what areas of personal and corporate worship would you like to grow? What would it take for you to do so?

Lesson Ten – Exodus as Touchstone: Whose Story is it Anyway?

***Goals**: to learn that our history, because it may be understood in multiple ways and because how we understand it profoundly shapes us, needs to be interpreted as a reminder of what matters. For Israel, the story of the exodus called them to live lives of freedom that comes from virtuous life together in community.*

Every community has a key story, often of its founding, that tells it who it is and where it is going. Such key stories are told and retold in a thousand ways. References to them appear in all sorts of out-of-the-way places, often allowing the group to engage in moral reflection and even critique its present situation in light of the ideal past of the story.

Such stories exist because the groups telling them employs many mechanisms for making sure everyone knows them. The stories have keepers, those entrusted with passing them on and knowing when to trot them out to address current problems or opportunities. These keepers, because they have been entrusted with the community's memory, hold one of the keys to its future.

For ancient Israel, the central, determinative story was the exodus drama. The story appears not only in the book of Exodus, but all over the Bible (for example Psalms 78, 105, 135-136; Isaiah 40; and many other places). For Hosea, Amos, and Micah the story also was a touchstone because it highlighted the contrast between the flawed present and the ideal that God had sought to realize by liberating Israel from bondage so long ago.

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In addition to the treatment in Hosea 11, references to the exodus appear in Hosea 8:13; 9:3; 12:13; 13:4; Amos 2:9-11; 9:7-8; and Micah 6:3-5; 7:15-17, among other places. Most interesting are the references in Amos and Micah, which we will consider now.

First, Amos 2:9-11 refers back to the exodus as part of Amos's astonishment at Israel's behavior. God, he says, has shown great mercy to Israel, as proven by the gift of the land previously inhabited by a mighty (and apparently unjust) population, as well as by the gift of intermediaries who revealed God's will to people. Powerful Israelites have thanked God for these gifts with their words but then turned around and oppressed the poor, just as the Egyptians had before the time of Moses. Thus their actions betray the story they say they believe. It is curious, at first glance, that Amos should connect the exodus with the ongoing prophetic story (the reference to prophets and Nazirites), but if we remember that the prophets saw themselves as being in continuity with the ancient prophet Moses and thus as guardians of the exodus story, then the connection makes sense. It even seems obvious. But it was not obvious to the wicked Israelites Amos confronts.

The second Amos text, 9:7-8, raises the most frightening of possibilities, the repeal of the nation's foundation story. Amos questions the uniqueness of the exodus event, noting that other people groups have moved about, presumably with the knowledge of Israel's God. How, then, is Israel's migration different? Now, on a superficial level, Amos seems to contradict itself. In chapter 2 the story is unique and serves as a touchstone for Israel's reflections, while in chapter 9 it is not unique and therefore its importance is, frankly, overblown. But the contradiction lies at the surface level only. The reason the exodus story has become trivial is not because God intended it to be so, or because it is so in itself (whatever that would mean), but because Israel has trivialized it through its own actions.

Third, Micah 6:3-5 carries on a similar discussion. Micah 6 is in the form of a lawsuit, with God as the prosecuting attorney who begins arguments with an appeal to the witnesses in the created order – the forces of nature that have seen everything and thus are objective witnesses – and then proceeds to question Israel's behavior by exposing it as motivated by extreme ingratitude and self-absorption. The substance of the argument is that Israel and Judah have forgotten their own story. As verses 6-8 seem to imply, their forgetfulness has led them to lives of injustice and sham religiosity. Hence their need for an alternative. The story of the exodus and wilderness wanderings thus summarizes the saving acts of God, making room for both future saving acts (if the people repent) and the possibility of their ending (if they do not repent).

Finally, Micah 7:15-17 draws on some of the major exodus themes that were laid out as early as the great hymn in Exodus 15, the oldest text in the Bible. The hymn spoke of (1) God's saving work, (2) Israel's trip to God's mountain where it will live in communion with their Savior, and (3) the nations' hearing of the news. Micah picks up Themes 1 and 3 (and verse 14 may contain an echo of Theme 2, in a different way). Israel's story does not exist merely for its own edification, much less its comfort. It is not simply a tale for feeding nationalistic pride. Rather, it is a story that allows the outsiders also to consider the majesty and compassion of Israel's God.

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Any group, especially a religious group, must think about its own history, not merely as a matter of curiosity or to serve present leaders' political agendas, but as a way of understanding its deepest commitments, values, and hopes. We are where we come from. We cannot escape the past, nor we should ordinarily want to. Rather, we must engage it critically, examining the failures and triumphs of our predecessors, and how their decisions, right or wrong, affect us. To fail to do so is to allow ourselves to operate blindly. We cannot understand ourselves unless we know our own origins.

For Christians, the exodus event remains an important witness to the redemptive nature of God's work in the world. We too, as the Passover Seder says, were slaves in Egypt (see 1 Corinthians 10). Complementing this story, or rather bringing out its full richness with an even greater richness of its own, is the story of the life, death, resurrection, and glorification of Jesus Christ, our key story. Like the exodus, this story provides a litmus test for our actions, attitudes, relationships, commitments, and beliefs. Like Israel in its mistreatment of its central story, we can abandon our story by failing to live into it. To do so would be a great tragedy, as it was with the hearers of Amos and Micah.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. It is said that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. But what are the lessons of Israel's history? What are the lessons of ours as a religious heritage (Churches of Christ), as a congregation, or as individuals?
2. Who decides what your congregation's story of faith means? How is it talked about, ignored, or manipulated? How could it be told better?
3. The prophets are keepers of Israel's story. Who keeps the story of faith in your congregation? In your family? How can we keep that story better? How can we encourage those who keep the story for us?
4. What do you want future generations to know about you and your congregation? How will they know these things?

Lesson Eleven – The Prophet as Intercessor and Mediator (Amos 7:1-9)

Goals: *to find in the prophets' lives as a communicator of God's will to people and the people's aspirations and fears to God a model for the life of the church today as we work for the sake of the whole world in its longing for God.*

Whatever their other roles, the prophets were first and foremost mediators. They brought God's word to human beings, and prayed to God on behalf of those same people. They internalized both points of view, a difficult task that must have created serious cognitive dissonance for them, as it certainly did for their hearers. The mediatorial role figured prominently in Israel's stories about prophets. Think of the Sodom and Gomorrah story, in which Yahweh first decides to tell Abraham what is coming for those cities, and then Abraham proceeds to petition God for mercy, negotiating a cut-off line at a mere ten righteous people. Or consider Moses in Exodus 32-33, who pleads with God to preserve Israel after the Golden Calf incident and then to accompany them to the Promised Land. Or recall the miracle stories about Elijah and Elisha, who petition God to intervene in the illness of individuals. In all these cases, the prophet is a mediator.

It is instructive, then, that the book of Amos also contains a story of a mediator. Chapter 7 is positioned just after the oracles of doom in chapters 3-6. The story is thus a sort of answer to those oracles, a response in which the prophet begs God to relent. Why does the book tell this story? Surely there are several reasons. First, it does not want the reader to think that the hardship Israel faced was inevitable (and so we see a long period of delay during which Israel could repent) or gratuitous (and thus we will see Israel's extraordinary stubbornness even when people were working on their behalf). The story thus highlights Israel's sinfulness. Second, however, the story also provides us a model for imitation. Amos the man becomes an inspiration, not only for Amos the book, but for the book's readers.

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This story describes three encounters with God. Each follows essentially the same pattern:

- God reveals an impending tragedy, often in a highly memorable and evocative way
- Amos addresses God as "Lord Yahweh," showing great respect and calling to mind God's covenant name
- He then makes a request. The first time the request is "forgive" (Hebrew: *salach*) and the second time "stop, desist" (Hebrew: *chadal*)
- Then Amos offers two reasons why God should alter the plan for Israel's future. The first is that Judah cannot survive ("who of Judah will arise?") and the second is that the nation is too insignificant to merit such close attention ("for he is small"). These reasons are closely related, but not quite the same.
- The exchange ends when Yahweh relents. However, the relenting occurs only in the first two rounds. In the third, there are no grounds for pleading with God, because the intended punishment is not total destruction, but a very measured, carefully worked-out approach that will leave survivors but will destroy the power structures (see verse 9) and thus implicitly (though the text does not say so in so

many words) will allow room for a renewed commitment to the prophetic vision of peace and justice.

The pattern of the story speaks volumes about its intentions, namely to highlight both God's mercy (in spite of appearances to the contrary that the results of sin might indicate to the unstudied observer) and Amos's compassion and concern.

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Why does the text make Amos's intercessory work so important? Part of the answer must wait for the next lesson, which will talk about the prophet as a model. To anticipate the point there, however, note that the prophets were held up as models of sorts, not so much for direct imitation, as for admiration. Their lives pointed to the values that mattered to Israel when it got its story straight. What were those values?

First, the mediator must have a profound concern for the welfare of people, even while seeing their flaws. Amos certainly saw their sins for what they truly were, hence the book we have bearing his name. Yet in this story he did not point out such things to God, but rather highlighted the people's vulnerability. Whatever their problems, their status as human beings, as creatures, meant that they could hardly bear the brunt of the natural disasters God contemplated.

Second, this concern reflects a deep awareness of the importance of preserving the people so that their mission can continue. Not that they have been carrying out that mission, but still the tasks to which they have been called remained valid. Future generations might get it right, if they have the chance to do so. Hence the need to continue the story of Israel, even if several generations misunderstand it badly.

Third, the story reveals a God who will alter plans for the future simply because a righteous person asked for a change. The idea, which appears often in the Bible, is that the righteous may seek God's help even in the face of profound evil. Our task is to call upon God to be true to God's deepest nature as a merciful, compassionate, saving God. Only then are we doing our job.

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The church has a mediatorial role today. We pray for our communities, and when we do so in deep, sustained, time-consuming ways, we gain the strength and proper perspectives to work in those same communities for their betterment.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. When have you prayed for others and believed that God heard your prayer? When have others prayed for you? What were the reasons, and what were the results?
2. What do we need to grow in our lives as a community of prayer? What could be done to deepen our practices in this regard? What barriers to being a community at prayer exist? Note: by community of prayer, I do not mean simply the brief prayers in communal worship, but extended times of communal prayer.
3. What view of God's activity in the world do our prayer practices reflect? Does the God we imagine in our prayers look like the God of the Bible?
4. Amos prays for forgiveness and the avoidance of the inevitable consequences of sin. In what ways should we imitate his practice?

Lesson Twelve – The Fearlessness that Comes from Hope (Amos 7:10-17)

***Goals**: to find models for living as a community in ways that help us respond fearlessly to the threats of the powerful and allow us to take responsibility for the welfare of those around us. All of us need models, and the prophets provide some valuable lessons for life today.*

Human beings need models. The lives of illustrious persons, even the lives of ordinary folk who acted with honor and dignity in times of adversity, provide lessons for the rest of us as we seek to navigate the complexities of our existence. Without models, we would be at sea, lost in the huge gap between general principles of right and wrong and the extreme specificity of our own situations. Models help us close the gap by showing us how real people, like or unlike us, have acted in similar situations.

For the biblical tradition, the prophets were an important set of models, a group of men and women that deserved attention. Even though few people lived as prophets, and thus even though the prophets themselves could rarely be copied in detail, their lives reminded ancient Israelites and all subsequent readers of the Bible that a few persons could exercise courage in the face of persecution, that they remember what really counted as true and good, and that they could, even under duress, show deep and sustained compassion toward others. The challenge then becomes to learn from them without necessarily imitating them in detail. Some texts seek to do this. Hebrews 11, for example, calls its hearers to imitate the righteous in trusting God. Or Exodus, to take an even better example, portrays Moses, the greatest prophet, as one who moves from fear at his call to courage before Pharaoh to a capacity for joy (Exodus 15) to a willingness to challenge God when the lives of people are at stake. Such a model should orient anyone considering it to the deepest values, practices, and beliefs of the Israelite tradition.

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Amos 7:10-17 offers another model, this time of a prophet in controversy. The chief priest of the temple at Bethel, a royally sponsored sanctuary and thus a symbol of the unity of the nation under Jeroboam and his successors, has challenged Amos's message, labeling his work treason. Religion has become a threat to the political system because the political leaders have co-opted religious practices for their own ends. Or so Amaziah thinks.

Amos's defense against Amaziah's charges is worth noticing. First, he says that he is not a professional prophet. On the one hand, he does not receive his salary or sense of purpose from the royal court ("I am not a prophet"). On the other, his influence does not derive from participation in the old guilds of the prophets ("nor the son of a prophet"; the "sons of the prophets" were descendants of those who followed Elijah and Elisha – they seem to have hardened into a group that had lost its ability to speak truth to power in Amos's time). He is not just one of the good old boys aiming to keep things as they are.

Second, he says that his call has come from God. Thus his words cannot be tested by whether they fit the claims of the powerful, no matter how "sacred" those claims may be. Rather, his words can only be verified by (1) how they fit with Israel's key story of God (the exodus) and (2) the course of events as God continues to work. Thus the prophets speak to a wider audience than just those who have come to think of themselves as the keepers of the nation's self-understanding.

Third, he ends the defense by repeating what he has already said, if in a now even more intense and pointed way. He does not back down, and his courage serves as a model for all readers.

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Now what should we learn from Amos's story? Most of us will not be in his position since we have not been called to prophesy. Yet we may still draw some conclusions from his experiences.

First, we should come to grips with the fact that our culture may not accept our voice as true. Sometimes they are right. But sometimes the broader culture has accepted values and beliefs about the nature of reality that Christianity challenges. Sometimes we ourselves have accepted these worldly values which place military power, the acquisition of wealth, and the belief that individual self-fulfillment is the ultimate value.

Second, this fact means that the church must find the courage to look ourselves in the mirror and discern whether we are called by God to do what we do. Or do we do these things out of habit or because we have wrongly come to think of them as sacred? Amos challenged his hearers to ask themselves this question.

Third, to become such a community living in imitation of the prophets, we must grow in our passion for justice and love. Amos modeled such a commitment in his own life. Though the commitment is difficult, it leads to new discoveries of the joy of life in the presence of a generous God.

Fourth, we must be prepared to take the long view of our work. Faithfulness will not always lead to quick results easily measured and quantified in ways our culture finds acceptable. We may struggle a bit – or even a lot – if we hold up the life of love and justice before others. When these words become practices of life and not just sentimentalized buzzwords, those who believe in them must change and mature. Repentance becomes a way of life, not a one-time event.

So, is it worth imitating Amos? Yes, of course. To do so is to follow God.

Questions for Further Consideration

1. Where do you find models of courage, truth-telling, and love? Who are those models, and how do you choose them? How do you imitate them?
2. How can your congregation do a better job of training and encouraging men and women to be models? Are you doing well? Give success stories of those who have grown into models for others?
3. What truths do we need to speak to the power structures of our culture? What do we need to say to our culture that it is not saying to itself? How will we find the courage to do so?
4. How can we grow in our love for others as we become better truth-tellers for them?

Lesson Thirteen – Reclaiming the Future (Hosea 14; Amos 9; Micah 4)

***Goals**: to move minds from visions of doom to visions of hope and to reclaim in our lives hopefulness as a basic strategy for living before God and with each other.*

Each of the books we are considering ends with an oracle of hope. After the trials of cultural meltdown, Israel will experience, the prophets say, a renewal. Even those who must experience trials and tribulations may hope for such a time.

In this lesson, we might consider the concluding oracles in Hosea and Amos, as well as the famous one sitting in the middle of Micah. These texts depend for their force on the fact that the prophets do not seek to be harbingers of doom. They do not see the tragedy that follows from injustice and idolatry as the last word for Israel. Rather, they hold out the possibility of renewal. God's saving work will lead Israel to repent, a fact that will lead in turn to the flourishing of life under the covenant.

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Let us consider each text in turn.

Amos 9: 11-14

It makes sense to begin with Amos because the end of the book sets forth most of the major themes that are developed in greater detail by Hosea and Micah. After the bitter denunciations of the oppressive culture of Israel and the promise to end the relationship binding the nation to Yahweh, the book turns unexpectedly, startlingly to a word of hope. The vision of the future laid out begins by promising a new beginning of Israel's history, alluding to the restoration of the promise to David (curiously, not the exodus), though now in a more modest and more morally sustainable form (David's "booth," in contrast to the palaces that have caused so many problems). It then promises a peaceful relationship between Israel/Judah and the "nations called by God's name," meaning that in the future the God of the covenant will be the God of many other nations, all of whom will be loyal somehow to Israel. Then the prophet shifts to visions of resettlement and overwhelming fertility and sufficiency. No more empty mouths, no more suffering, no more haves and have-nots.

In the context of Amos, the final oracle is unexpected. It marks a total undoing of all that has come before, a final commitment by God to bring about the ideal world long promised, whether humans go along with it or not. As the final keeper of Israel's story, Yahweh can decide how it will end. For Amos, God has promised to let it end in triumph and human wholeness.

Hosea 14

Hosea ends in a very similar way, adding first of all an explicit call to repentance (verse 1), which in this case means a return to trust in God rather than specific actions. The actions will result from that trust. Then the oracle turns in verses 2-5 to a series of contrasts between false saviors and the one true saving God. In calling Israel to God, the prophet does not repeat the arguments of the previous thirteen chapters, but simply contrasts the life-giving power of Israel's covenant partner with the deadening influence of all the false partners Israel has hitherto pursued. Finally, Hosea returns to Amos's theme of fertility, but alters it in a new direction: rather than receive the benefits of agricultural bounty, Israel will be the source of bounty to others. Fertility becomes a metaphor for a wide range of blessings that Israel can bring to the world (compare Genesis 12).

Micah 4:1-4

Although Micah ends in a way much like the other eighth-century prophetic books do, we might benefit from studying a text in the middle of the book, a sort of pivot around which the book as a whole swings. This short vision of an ideal future has an almost word-for-word parallel in Isaiah 2. The oracle of hope seems to have been floating about in the eighth century. As it stands, Micah's vision picks several of Amos's themes, such as peace with the nations and agricultural bounty, but it also adds others.

The text also addresses several sub-themes:

- God cares about the welfare of all people, not just the chosen people. Note Micah 4:4, an addition to the basic oracle shared with Isaiah, in which the prophet promises that each will sit under his own vine and fig tree without fear. In a troubled world, such a promise means a great deal.
- God's care must translate into specific actions on the part of human beings.
- These actions include concrete steps to reduce conflict and a commitment to seek the highest thing to which humans can possibly have access, namely, God.
- This world of peace connects directly to the ongoing story of God's people. The fact that the nations will go to Jerusalem to learn God's instruction (Hebrew: *torah*) means that the thing that will support and sustain their search for well-being will be the faith of Israel. This fact also means that peace and justice are not an add-on to biblical faith, but an indispensable and significant part of it. As James will later say, "faith without works is dead." And Micah, as we have seen, looks for particular kinds of works.

Brief Notes by Way of Explanation

- The flight of nations to Jerusalem ordinarily is a cause for dismay in the Old Testament (see, for example, Psalm 2). Here, however, the text reverses the old motif of the nations at the holy city. Rather than being a threat, their movement has become a pilgrimage.
- Pruning hooks are metal-tipped poles used to trim vines in vineyards.

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Hope. There are few more important words in any language. Without hope, human beings realistically aware of the problems of the world and their own inability to fix them all, will perish in despair. With hope, we have the strength to persevere in our pursuit of goodness and our desire to be pleasing to God. Are there grounds for hope? The prophets believe that there are, and while their books seem at times despairing, even almost overwhelmingly discouraging, we may hear, if we listen closely, beneath their cries of anguish a quiet song of hope. This song will someday fill the world. For that day, we Christians work and pray.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. These texts speak of God's renewal of creation. In what sense do you see God renewing the world around you (human or otherwise)? How does renewal occur in your own life?
2. How does God care for the world, in your experience? Give specific examples about the human and non-human world.
3. Modern people often experience a great distance from the creation around them. How can we overcome that distance? What does it do to us to be so distant? Does this distance affect how we relate to God?
4. What difference does it make if I see the people around me as God's creation? How could such a realization change my behavior toward them?

5. If creation is an ongoing act, and if it is part and parcel of God’s redeeming of the human race, where do we see God working creatively today? In what ways does God still create?

Appendix: The People Who Wouldn't Understand
(Isaiah 1-39)

In addition to Hosea, Amos, and Micah, there is another book named for a prophet from the eighth century BCE. That book is Isaiah. The following brief essay considers that work's first thirty-nine chapters, which describe the same desperate situation to which the other prophets refer and, similarly, offers a promise of salvation.

Careful listening that leads to change – that rarest of human transactions is at once a gift and a challenge. It comes to the person heard as a gift from the hearer as they exchange their innermost dreams and fears. It challenges both hearer and speaker to accept vulnerability. Hence the rarity of the gift.

The opening chapters of Isaiah call Israel to listen carefully. They speak of a God who calls the people to repent, not of technical violations of rules of worship, but of fundamental violations of the dignity of other human beings. In order to listen, Israel must remember who speaks to them, the sovereign of the universe who graciously exercises dominion in order to revive the human race from its ignorance, despair, and violence.

In creating something to which Israel can listen, the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah weave together many threads – words of hope and doom, of expectation and loss – to create a sturdy fabric that should provide readers the shelter they need in a time of storm. The book seeks to explain why the people of God went into exile after the Babylonian invasion of 586 BCE. In this sense, it aims at the same goal as the books of Joshua-2 Kings (the Deuteronomistic History). But, like that great historical work, the homilies of Isaiah do not simply intone an obituary. Rather, the book offers a vision of what might have been, and, as readers who persist in it to its very end discover, what might be after all.

The Message of Isaiah 1-39

As we begin to savor the images of the first major section of the book of Isaiah and to try to accept its invitation to awareness of the world, we soon become aware of a broader question of interpretation. Since the words of the book speak to an ancient audience about the deep structures of human existence before God, we need to read Isaiah 1-39 both on its own as a self-contained unit, and as part of a larger whole that extends through chapter 66. We need to see how themes first set forth in the opening chapters play out in later ones so that we get a sense of the entire trajectory of the divine work of redemption with Israel. Then we can begin also to imagine how that same God works among us redemptively. But when we read chapters 1-39, what do we see? What effect does it have on the careful reader?

The answer can be summed up in three sentences: first, Isaiah 1-39 presents the choice that Israel must make if it is to flourish. Second, it offers alternative visions of reality to which the human choice must inevitably lead. And, third, the text also records the initial choice that Judah made in the lifetime of Isaiah of Jerusalem, and the disaster that inexorably followed.

Isaiah 1-39 thus moves along two planes at once: one is the level of Judah in the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem and a few generations later, that is, of people who took a path to destruction though they had opportunities to change. The second level is that of the readers of Isaiah, both those who encountered the book as a whole for the first time sometime during the Persian period, and then subsequent generations of interpreters who must learn from Judah's choice about their own. To appreciate the book properly, we must try to read it at both these levels simultaneously.

The book keeps open the reality of choice, as we have seen, by alternating different kinds of material with different points of view. Though the earliest readers of the book knew how the story ended – in devastation and exile – even they must have experienced the tension that comes from recognizing the points at which things might have gone differently, precisely because they knew that the story had not ended in the hot summer of 586 BCE, but had continued down to their own time. Balance, complementarity, and elegant style – these features of the text make it work.

So also does the structure of the first large thirty-nine chapters of the book. Chapters 1-5 form a sort of rolling introduction that states many, though not all, of the major themes of the entire work and already holds out the promise of forgiveness and worldwide peace, alongside the reality of present oppression and almost inevitable doom. Then, in what is undoubtedly the earliest part of the book, chapters 6-12 open with biography (a call narrative and a story of conflict with the king), on which we read extended meditations and even word-by-word commentary. Next, chapters 13-23 give a series of oracles against the nations, refocusing the gaze of the prophet and his audience on the whole ancient Near Eastern world and seeking to show that Yahweh wills peace and justice for all, not the unjust and warlike status quo of that, and almost every other, time.

Chapters 24-27 extend the breadth of the book's vision even further by looking toward future crises and resolutions, in a vein that scholars sometimes designate proto-apocalyptic because of the sense of universal catastrophe followed by universal salvation. Chapters 28-35 are a bit harder to understand, because they combine oracles of doom with counterbalancing oracles of hope, apparently to show how the prophetic word actually played out in the real events of the Assyrian invasions of the west.[1] Then, finally, chapters 36-39 quote extensively from 2 Kings to show a connection between the events of the eighth century and those of the sixth. "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme," as Mark Twain once said. The book of Isaiah would agree because it believes that the people of God confront the same reality again and again and must always choose how to respond to it.

The Challenge of Judgment

The primary response to this reality in Isaiah 1-39 is judgment. The book denounces kings for abusing power, priests for changing worship into a method of oppression, foreign rulers for committing crimes against humanity, and the people of God as a whole for cultivating an attitude of world-weary indifference to the suffering of others.

Modern readers of Isaiah 1-39 may find themselves dismayed at the reality of doom that the first part of Isaiah offers. We wish quickly to move toward the prettier words of chapters 40-66. There are good reasons for this anxiety. It certainly has precedent in the Christian tradition of reading the book itself, beginning in the New Testament's citations of Isaiah to promise the presence of Immanuel (Matthew 1) or the saving work of Christ, the bringer of sight to the blind and liberty to the captives (Luke 4). All of us love the opening aria of Handel's Messiah, "Comfort ye my people, saith your God," from Isaiah 40.

Moreover, those of us attuned to the critical reading of the Bible, even when we are able to bracket the questions of authorship and date and read Isaiah as a carefully constructed collection functioning in a larger canon, are accustomed to being troubled by its images of destruction. We can accept the claim that ancient prophets worked with theological materials from the ancient world, a world in which deities often led wars and wrought destruction. In theory, we can accept the notion that an Isaiah is insisting, not on the virtue of violence, but that Yahweh, rather than Assur or Marduk, was the sovereign of the universe. All theology is local.

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[1] For a discussion of the problem, see Brevard Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 199-200.

But of course, this is precisely the problem. If the theology of the book of Isaiah is purely local, how do we make use of it? We should be troubled by imagery of God as rapist or wreaker of havoc. The book itself may encourage this discomfort by using other images of males and females. As Gerlinde Baumann puts it in a brilliant study of images of violence against women in the prophets, the final editing of the book of Isaiah modifies images of violence: "The imagery has experienced a deep shattering through the circumstance that God can also be seen in female images."[2] We are supposed to question the claims of the book precisely so that we can do what it most wants us to do – to hear behind the words and images the voice of God.

So what about words of doom? Inevitably, contemporary Christians who recognize how often religion has served to justify violence and repression will be uncomfortable with some of the words of the book of Isaiah. But this very discomfort signals to us two truths. First, the world in which we live is full of violence and excuses for violence. Utopian fantasies that seek to pretend that away or reduce evil to merely bad thinking or psychological disturbances of some sort trivialize the problems we face and leave us vulnerable to their perpetuation.

Second, the search for justice creates winners and losers. As the Magnificat says, "God has filled the poor with good things and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:53). Yet the short-term losses of undeserved privilege and the disruption of a world in which some always command while others always obey will bring about a world in which all eventually succeed.

And there is a third truth. The theology of the Bible is not "purely local." A book like Isaiah did not come to be because a single author working for a short period of time wrote it. Instead, it came to be because faithful people preserved the words of the prophet Isaiah, augmented them with new prophetic words, and shaped them all to speak to new generations who face the challenge of being a moral, spiritual community in new environments. As we will see in chapters 40-55, the creators of this book were deeply convinced that God continued to speak and to order their world so as to bring about justice, peace, and human happiness. Those goals are not confined to one time or place at all.

In short, then, the words of doom that appear throughout Isaiah 1-39 are as revealing of the world that the prophet – and God – seek as the glorious visions that appear there and later. We must hear their voice, lest we be the people whose "hearts are full fat, who see but do not understand, who hear but do not discern" (Isaiah 6:10). The choice is ours, just as it was theirs.

[2] Gerlinde Baumann, *Love and Violence: Marriage as Metaphor for the Relationship between YHWH and Israel in the Prophetic Books* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2000), 201.