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**THE  
ESSER  
PROPHETS**



**FATHER FELIX O.F.M. CAP. L.S.S.**

BAIBE AGA EUIAT GOMLUET NA FIRINNE CATHOLICE IHEIRIM



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## THE LESSER PROPHETS

The twelve Lesser Prophets are divided between the two kingdoms of Israel and Juda; they range from the eighth to the fifth centuries B.C.; they present a great variety of style and theme; and they furnish very interesting knowledge of social, political and religious conditions during these four centuries of turmoil and change.

But the Prophets must be read and studied above all for their *doctrinal* content. Everywhere they give testimony of the Messiah—the focal point of the world's history; their work was to prepare mankind for His coming. Ever conscious of their divine commission they faithfully preached and wrote to keep alive the true faith; to put down idolatry; to secure reverence in divine worship, and respect for the moral law. They were the defenders of the Chosen People from the corruption of heathen worship and morals.

The teaching of the Prophets was not in word only; their words were reinforced by the noble example of their virtuous lives—particularly by their patience in persecution. And their virtues were perfected and nourished by intimate converse with God in prayer. The prophet's most descriptive title was that of "*a man of God*" (4 Kings 1, 10); he was a conscious and a sympathetic agent of God. Indeed, the neglect in later times of the Books of the Prophets and of the spirit of the Prophets which these Books exhale is assigned as the cause of the cold, heartless formalism and legalism which Our Divine Lord censured so severely in the Scribes and Pharisees (St. Matthew 15, 2—9). (1)

Before 200 B.C. the twelve Lesser Prophets were collected into one volume; there was danger that some of them would be lost on account of their brevity. Ben Sirach speaks of them as a unity: "*And may the bones of the twelve prophets spring up out of their place: for they strengthened Jacob and redeemed themselves by strong faith* (Ecclesiasticus 49, 12). Four of them OSEE, AMOS, JONAS, NAHUM—preached in the Northern Kingdom, Israel; the remaining eight: JOEL, ABDIAS, MICHEAS, HABACUC, SOPHONIAS, AGGEUS, ZACHARIAS, MALACHIAS—preached in the Southern Kingdom, Juda.

(1) CHRISTUS: pages 951-952.



## (1) OSEE: 750-735 B.C.

Osee was a native of Israel—of what tribe it is not known—and to Israel his entire ministry was directed. It was a time of religious decay and moral corruption; while in the political sphere revolutions and assassinations had produced anarchy, and the Assyrians had complete mastery in the country. (1)

Like Jeremias later, Osee was a man of heart and sentiment; and his preaching is full of vehemence, pathos and deep feeling. He is forever tormented by the ingratitude of his people towards their loving God; by their crimes and the retribution which these crimes shall bring on the nation. His style is abrupt and unstudied; abounding in picturesque comparisons. His Book is proverbially obscure; but this is largely due to textual difficulties.

Osee bitterly laments the unhappy schism between Israel and Juda; and his sympathy is with Juda as against his own kingdom. The reigning dynasty—“*the house of Jehu*” (1, 4) is soon to perish for its crimes of bloodshed. He speaks of Israel as an adulterous wife unfaithful to Jahwe, her husband. (2) He looks forward with holy longing to the reunion of the whole nation under the benign rule of the Messiah, when after a long period of punishment “*the children of Israel . . . shall seek Jahwe their God, and David their king . . . in the last days*” (3,5).

These first three chapters are by way of introduction. The prophet (chapters 4—14) rebukes the people generally for the numerous crimes prevailing; complete lack of piety, charity, truth; widespread apostasy, perjury, murder, theft, adultery, violence, drunkenness. He then turns his invective on the king and the priests; and these he severely blames for neglect of their duty as watchmen of the people, and for the evil example which they are setting. God is about to abandon the nation; they have broken the covenant

(1) See No. 8 of this series: pages 9-10.

(2) God commanded Osee to marry a wife who would be unfaithful to him. Whether this is of a real, i.e. an actual, historical marriage; or an allegorical marriage, i.e. merely represented in vision—is a Scriptural question which has divided exegetes from the days of the Fathers of the Church. St. Jerome and St. Augustine held opposite views. The majority of modern commentators hold with St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas for a real marriage. But a notable exception is Van Hoonacker who favours the allegorical explanation of St. Jerome. (LES PROPHETES D'ISRAEL. Par Edouard Fobac. Vol. I., page 204).

of Mount Sinai; His word is gone forth. When they feel His anger they will repent indeed. But let it be a real repentance, not an external show; a complete turning away from all sin, not a temporary interruption: “*For it is mercy that I want and not sacrifice: and the (practical) knowledge of God rather than holocausts*” (6,6; St. Matthew 9, 13).

The cruelty of the future Assyrian conquest shall be such that the Israelites “*shall say to the mountains: Cover us; and to the hills: Fall upon us*” (10, 8; St. Luke 23, 30). God's fatherly care of the Chosen People has been requited with base ingratitude. This ingratitude shall be punished; but yet because of His divine mercy God will not exterminate them (chapters 11—12). The Book concludes with a terrifying description of God's vengeance: “*I will be to them (the apostate Israelites) as a lioness, as a leopard . . . I will meet them as a bear that is robbed of her whelps . . .*” (13, 7—8); and an exhortation to penance.

Eight times Osee is quoted in the New Testament.

## (2.) JOEL: about 800 B.C.

Nothing whatever is known of the history of the prophet Joel. His Book is remarkable for its clear style, elegant diction, sublime doctrine. From the references to the return of “*the captivity of Juda and Jerusalem*” (3,1), and to “*the children of the Greeks*” (3, 6) many modern commentators argue that Joel must have lived after the Exile. But the classical Hebrew of the Prophecy is a strong proof of the traditional view which places Joel at the junction of the eighth and ninth centuries before Christ.

In his first discourse (1, 1—2, 17) Joel gives a striking description of the destruction caused by a swarm of locusts: “*the land is a garden of Eden before it, and behind it a desolate wilderness*” (2,3). This desolation is a figure of “*the day of Jahwe*” (2, 1), i.e., of the avenging justice of God which will overwhelm the nation unless the divine mercy be secured by penance, fasting and prayer. All—priests and people, old and young—must unite in a national pilgrimage to the Temple; and their repentance must be sincere, not a mere external show. For this discourse Joel is called “*the Prophet of Judgment.*”

The people obeyed "*the word of Jahwe*" (1, 1); because the second discourse (2, 18—3, 21) speaks of blessings. The land which was devastated shall produce abundance of "*corn, and wine, and oil*" (2, 18). These temporal benefits are a figure of the greater benefits of the spiritual order which the Messiah, "*a teacher of justice*" (2, 23) shall bring to the whole human race. In a magnificent poem (for which Joel is called "*the Prophet of Pentecost*") are foretold the miracles which would follow the coming of the Holy Ghost in New Testament times:

... *I will pour out my spirit upon all men:*

*And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy:*

*Your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions . . .*" (2, 28 . . . ; quoted in Acts 2, 17. . . ).

The Book goes on to tell of the final judgment, when Jahwe "*will gather together all nations . . . into the valley of Josaphat . . .*" (3, 2). Then evil shall be ended, and the evil-doers punished; justice shall triumph; Jahwe shall be the eternal reward of His elect: "*Jahwe shall dwell in Sion*" (3, 21).

### (3.) AMOS: 760—750 B.C.

For his miraculous vocation to the prophetic ministry and for his strong personality Amos is the most interesting figure among the Lesser Prophets. He was a humble herdsman in Thecua (seven miles south of Jerusalem) when he was divinely chosen to preach in Israel. Amos resembles Isaias; always the moralist, cold, austere, detached. Singleminded and deeply religious, he has a clear sense of fundamentals; sound judgment; sympathy with the poor and oppressed; disgust for luxury and indolence; indignation against cruelty and slavery. In language of masterly clearness he speaks of the transcendent nature and of the universal Sovereignty of God. His reference to "*the law of Jahwe*" and to "*his commandments*" (2, 4); to the Exodus and to the forty years in the wilderness (2, 10); to the Nazarites (2, 11); to Sodom and Gomorrhah (4, 11); to the unity of the Sanctuary (5, 5)—argue strongly for the antiquity of the Pentateuch as against the theories of the "critics."

Amos denounces the crimes of Syria, Philistia, Phoenicia, Edom, Ammon, Moab. These heathen nations shall be

punished by Jahwe (1, 3—2, 3). The people of Juda do not observe the revealed law; they commit idolatry; they too shall be punished (2, 4—5). Then he turns to Israel; injustice, extortion, sexual crimes are frequent; divine worship as practised at Bethel and Dan is illegal and sacrilegious. Their punishment shall be all the more severe because the people of Israel are part of the Chosen People (2, 6—3, 15). Plagues of drought, blight, locusts and war, in which the Hand of God was plain to be seen, have reduced the nation; and yet those who remain, who are as it were "*a firebrand plucked out of the burning*" (4, 11), have not repented. He exhorts them to avert the doom that threatens by returning to God; otherwise they shall be conquered, and brought exiles to Assyria (4, 1—6, 15).

In a series of five visions Amos was shown in symbols the avenging power of God. Twice he interceded successfully for Israel; but punishment was only delayed, because the rulers and the priests would not listen to his inspired message. Despite opposition and insult he continued to fulfil his ministry. He denounced avarice and fraud; he condemned that foolish presumption by which the people deemed themselves secure from punishment because they were the Chosen People. They were chosen by the free grace of God without any merit of their own; they are individually responsible to God for their sins.

But the Prophecy ends on a note of hope: a residue of good and faithful souls shall return from exile; and the Messianic promises shall be gloriously fulfilled.

### (4.) ABDIAS: 844 B.C.

On the subject of Abdias history is completely silent; and his Prophecy furnishes no satisfactory clue to his epoch. A Hebrew tradition (of very doubtful value) identifies him with King Achab's steward (3 Kings 18, 3), thus making him the oldest of the twelve Lesser Prophets. His place (fourth in order) among these would argue for the eighth century B.C. (1) Others again (2) place him in the sixth century B.C.

The short Book of Abdias is directed against Edom. This country, at the south of the Dead Sea, was inhabited by the

(1) So Rudolf Cornely, S.J.: COMPENDIUM . . . page 453.

(2) E.g., A. Van. Hoonacker and Edouard Tobac.

descendants of Esau, brother of Jacob. But although the Hebrews and the Edomites had thus a common ancestor there was bitter enmity between the two nations, as is evidenced again in Psalm 136, 7—9.

Abdias dramatically represents Jahwe as sending an ambassador to rouse the nations against Edom. The Edomites consider themselves safe from attack by reason of their fortified cities. But they shall be humbled nonetheless: *"Though thou be exalted as an eagle, and thou set thy nest among the stars: thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord"* (1, 4).

The Edomites have deserved to be utterly deleted for their cruel treatment of the Chosen People. When Jerusalem was captured and looted by the barbarian hordes the Edomites gloated; jeered at the captives; aided in the massacre; handed up fugitives (1, 10—14). Those who place the Book in the ninth century or in the eighth understand this passage to refer to the defeat of King Joram of Juda in 845 B.C. (2 Paralipomenon 21, 16—17). (1)

But *"the day of Jahwe"* (1, 15) is approaching. All the gentiles, among them Edom, shall be punished. The heathens shall be completely destroyed; a remnant of the Chosen People shall be saved. The exiles of Jerusalem shall return triumphant over their enemies; they shall possess the world. Thus the divine plan of salvation shall be realised: *"and the kingdom shall be for the Lord"* (1, 21).

#### (5.) JONAS: 787—748 B.C.

The Book of Jonas contains not a summary of his preaching, but a record of facts. Yet it is rightly placed among the Prophets, for Jonas was a living prophecy of the Messiah. He is a figure of Christ for his mission to gentile Ninive; for his sacrifice of himself to appease the storm; and especially does his miraculous restoration from the fish after three days make Jonas a *"sign"* of the Redeemer's death and burial and resurrection (St. Matthew 12, 38—41; and 16, 1—4). *"The whole stupendous destiny of Jesus is pre-figured in the book, the person, and the mission of Jonas the Prophet."* (1)

(1) A. Van Roonacker, however, maintains that the reference is to the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.; the same reference, therefore, as is Psalm 136.

(2) JESUS CHRIST. By Leonce de Grandmaison, S.J. Translated from the French. London (Sheed & Ward), 1935. Vol. III., page 232.

Jonas, of the tribe of Zabulon, preached in Israel during the reign of Jeroboam II (4 Kings 14, 25). God commanded him to preach in Ninive, the capital of the Assyrian empire. For Jonas, patriot that he was, Assyria was the arch-enemy of Israel; and he saw only one result of such a mission, namely, that Assyria would be spared to become a greater menace than ever to his own country. So Jonas refused to go. At Joppe (modern Jaffa) he took passage in a Phoenician ship bound for Tarshish in southern Spain. A storm arose in the Mediterranean, and Jonas was compelled to admit that it was sent for his disobedience to God. With his own consent he was cast overboard; and then the storm ceased.

God had ready a monstrous fish which swallowed Jonas. In the fish the prophet remained unharmed for three days and nights. He prayed to God in words expressing perfect resignation (Canticle of Jonas: 2, 3—10); and the fish brought him safe to land.

Again he was ordered to go to Ninive; and this time he obeyed. At his preaching all the Ninivites, king and people, repented of their sins; the anger of God was averted; and the city was saved from destruction.

Jonas was now disturbed at the result of his preaching: Ninive remained a menace to Israel. So in a rebellious mood he left the city, and sat in the shade of an ivy plant which God had caused to grow miraculously for him. The next day God sent a worm which destroyed the plant, and a scorching wind which tormented the prophet. Jonas was angry and disappointed. Then God spoke to him and revealed the meaning of this miracle: *"Thou hast grieved for the ivy for which thou hast not laboured, nor made it grow, . . . and shall I not spare Ninive, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons that know not how to distinguish between their right hand and their left, and many beasts?"* (4, 10—11).

#### (6.) MICHEAS: 734—687 B.C.

Micheas, a native of Morasthi in the tribe of Juda, preached with great success in Jerusalem (Jeremias 26, 18—19). His zeal influenced the religious reform of King Ezechias who suppressed idolatry and superstition (4 Kings 18, 3—4). He resembles Amos; a man of the people, he burns

with indignation for the wrongs which they suffer, and he is trenchant in his denunciation of social evils. His eloquence is forceful without being ornate; vibrant with emotion and conviction. There are obscure passages due to the author's fondness for plays on words, and to corruption of text; but it is a beautiful Book, both for fine imagery and for clear prophetic vision. Micheas is the prophet of the Nativity:

*"And thou, Bethlehem Ephrata, art a little one among the thousands of Juda:*

*Out of thee shall come forth unto me that is to be the ruler of Israel. . ."* (5, 2; quoted in St. Matthew 2, 6).

And his very words are quoted by Our Divine Lord: ". . . a man's enemies are they of his own household" (7, 6; St. Matthew 10, 36). Rightly does Micheas say of himself:

*" . . . I am filled with the strength of the Spirit of the Lord, with judgment, and power:*

*To declare unto Jacob his wickedness, and to Israel his sin"* (3, 8).

The first section (chapters 1, 2, 3) dating prior to 722 B.C. foretells and describes the fall of Samaria in punishment for the idolatry of the northern kingdom. But Juda and its capital are threatened also. Avarice, violence, robbery will lead to loss of national independence and exile of the people; and the prophet laments his mission, so terrible is the truth of his inspired message. He condemns the venality of the princes and judges *"who have flayed the skin from off"* the people (3, 2); the cupidity of the priests who teach, and of the prophets who preach solely for lucre. Because of these *"Sion shall be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall be as a heap of stones"* (3, 12).

The second section (chapters 4—5) is in a very different tone; it speaks of victory, peace, prosperity. The zeal of Isaias and Micheas averted the conquest by Assyria which had menaced Juda in 722 B.C. Jerusalem, a figure of the Church of Christ, shall be the seat of true religion and perfect worship of Jahwe; the exiles restored from Babylon shall rule the nations; *"the remnant of Jacob"* (5, 7) shall be happy under the just reign of the Messias.

The third section (chapters 6 and 7) is written in the form of a dialogue. Jahwe pleads against Israel; His many favours have been requited only with sin and ingratitude.

What God requires first and before all else is *"to do judgment* (i. e. justice) *and to love mercy* (i. e. goodness), *and to walk solicitous with* (i. e. to act humbly towards) *thy God"* (6, 8). Instead there was injustice, fraud, deceit; hence the ruin of the northern kingdom. Then Israel speaks; humbly confessing its guilt, confident of obtaining pardon and restoration. The Messias will come to redeem and sanctify and re-unite the Chosen People; He will rule them and defend them; and the rich promises of divine mercy made to Abraham and Jacob shall be fulfilled.

(7.) NAHUM: about 640 B.C.

The little Book of Nahum is a literary masterpiece of perfect poetry in its freshness and purity of diction; its vivid, imaginative style; its descriptions, now picturesque, now pathetic; its arresting comparisons.

Nahum describes himself as *"the Elcesite"* (1, 1), i. e., of Elcesai (Elcosh—in Hebrew); a place which has been sought variously in Juda, in Israel, in Transjordan, in Assyria. Probably he was from Israel. His Book, *"the burden of Ninive"* (1, 1), is an oracle foretelling, for the consolation of Israel, the downfall of the Assyrian empire. But here, as frequently in Old Testament prophecy, the Assyrians are a symbol of the enemies of God.

The first chapter (1, 2—15) is a psalm; a splendid description of Jahwe coming to punish evil-doers:

*"The Lord's ways are in a tempest, and a whirlwind, and clouds are the dust of his feet"* (1, 3).

All creation trembles before its God. He is kind to those who hope in Him; terrible to His foes.

After this picture of the theophany the prophet addresses himself to Ninive (chapters 2 and 3). He gives a vivid description of the future siege; the enemy armies scaling the walls; the dismay of the besieged; the headlong flight of the defending forces; the jubilant conquerors plundering the gold and silver of the city; the din of horses and chariots; the ramparts piled with corpses. Ninive, so strongly fortified and so securely situated on the Tigris—Ninive, the centre of fashion and the terror of Asia, is reduced to a charred, shapeless ruin. Everywhere the word is noised

abroad: "*Ninive is laid waste*" (3, 7). Just as Thebes (1) was destroyed and its inhabitants slain or enslaved, so likewise Ninive, the "*city of blood, all full of lies and violence*" (3, 1), shall perish.

(8.) HABACUC: about 630 B.C.

Habacuc ranks high among the Hebrew prophets both as a poet and a seer. His Book is noted particularly for its daring originality of exposition; the mystery of God's universal Providence is conceived with a sureness of grasp and expressed with a fineness of touch worthy of Isaias.

Little is known of this prophet. He preached in Juda; probably he was a priest or a levite; it is far from certain that he is the same Habacuc who is mentioned in Daniel 14, 32—38. He has much in common with Nahum. He announces the doom of Babylon as Nahum had announced the doom of Ninive; and the two Books are very similar in form. The ardent, restless love of Habacuc for his people is a contrast to the calm and patient character of Jeremias—an interesting contrast, as showing that holiness, while always essentially the same, is variously expressed in the saints.

Habacuc (in dialogue form) proposes the theological problem: how is the success of evil-doers compatible with the good Providence of God? (2) The prophet pleads with Jahwe: apostates oppress the just in Juda; strife and contention are everywhere; the Law is paralysed (1, 2—4). God replies that this shall be punished by the Chaldeans (Babylonians) who by force of arms are about to conquer the world (1, 5—11). This, however, only complicates the problem; and Habacuc protests that God in His infinite holiness must not permit alien idolaters to take the place of native apostates, and thus confirm the power of wrong over right (1, 12—2, 1). To this impassioned appeal God replies

(1) Literally, No Amon—"the city of (the god) Amon." The reference is to the conquest of Thebes about 663 B.C. by Assurbanipal, king of Assyria. Thebes, on the Nile, was the capital of Egypt in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth dynasties; its conquest is recorded in an inscription of Assurbanipal. (AUTHORITY AND ARCHAEOLOGY. Essays edited by David G. Hogarth. London, 1899. 2 ed., pages 112-114).

(2) Failure of many non-Catholic writers to see this as the purpose of the Book is the cause of their "mutilation and dissection of this prophecy, which is a well articulated literary unity"—according to M. J. Grunthaner, S.J., in a fine study of the whole subject of Habacuc in BIBLICA. Vol. 8 (1927); pages 129-160 and 257-289.

in an oracle of such moment that Habacuc is to write it and engrave it so legibly "*that he that readeth it may run over it*" (2, 2). The oracle is: "*Behold he that is unbelieving, his soul shall not be right in himself: but the just shall live in his faith*" (2, 4). (1)

Habacuc develops the implications of this: the insatiable greed of the conqueror shall prove his undoing; five "*woes*" or maledictions are pronounced on those who, like the Chaldeans, build up empires in blood, violence and deceit; who live in luxury, and worship idols. Against such "*the stone shall cry out of the wall*" (2, 11)—their ill-gotten possessions shall condemn them. Jahwe is the Supreme Arbiter (2, 5—20).

The third chapter is a psalm. Habacuc describes Jahwe coming to punish: clouds and lightning accompany Him; calamity and plague go before Him; the earth trembles; nations quake with fear; a storm breaks; the sea roars; sun and moon are hidden; all nature feels the anger of the Just God Who comes to save His people and to condemn the wicked. The prophet is terrified by the theophany, but consoled at the thought of God's justice (3, 1—19).

(9) SOPHONIAS: about 630 B.C.

Sophonias is described as fourth in direct descent from Ezechias; probably King Ezechias of Juda. His Book is written in an easy, clear style; with no special literary excellence, and little originality. He frequently echoes the former prophets, Joel, Amos, Isaias; and his contemporary Jeremias.

The theme of Sophonias is "*the great day of Jahwe*" (1, 14) The idolatry, the superstition, the scepticism and pagan manners of Juda shall be punished soon and swiftly. God "*will search Jerusalem with lamps*" (1, 12); no sinner shall escape (1, 1—13).

Then the horizon of the prophet widens; he sees all nations summoned to justice on "*the day of Jahwe . . . a day of wrath, a day of tribulation and distress, a day of calamity and misery . . .*" (1, 15). So searching shall the divine judgment be that even the good are urged to "*seek the Lord*"

(1) In Hebrew: 'Behold, he dies who has not his soul right in him; while the just by his faith shall have life.' This principle is of very wide application. The second part: "**The just man liveth by faith**"—is quoted in Romans 1, 17 and Galatians 3, 11 as summarising the whole divine economy of salvation; in Hebrews 10, 38 as a motive for patience under persecution.

(2, 3)—to perfect themselves in meekness and justice (1, 14—2, 15).

He returns to the subject of Jerusalem—rejecting the prophets, heedless of God; Jerusalem, with her rapacious chiefs and judges, her lying prophets, her sinful priests. God will purify His Chosen People of these evil elements; He will crush the heathen kingdoms. Then through means of the restored "*remnant of Israel*" (3, 13) the gentiles shall be converted; and a humble and faithful humanity will give praise and glory to the Creator. The prophecy ends in an outburst of gladness at this happy prospect.

In Sophonias especially is seen the *obscurity* of Scriptural prophecy which arises from lack of the perspective of time. The four phases of the Messianic Kingdom are fused in one description: (1) the *preparation* in Old Testament times; (2) its *foundation* by Jesus Christ; (3) its *continuation* through time in the Church; (4) its final *perfection* at the end of time. This obscurity explains the difficulty which the Apostles and disciples experienced (e. g. in St. Luke 24, 26).

#### (10.) AGGEUS: 520 B.C.

Nothing is known of the personal history of Aggeus; he was probably one of the exiles of 586 B.C., repatriated in 538 B.C. His Prophecy is an epitome of four discourses of the second year of Darius I of Persia. Sixteen years earlier work on the Temple had been interrupted by the enemies of the Jews; but since the accession of Darius it could have been resumed. The Jews, however, pleaded their poverty as an excuse. Aggeus spoke frankly to the political and religious leaders—Zorobabel heir to the throne of Juda, and Jesus (or Josue) the high priest: the Jews cannot afford to build the House of God, yet they can build elegant houses for themselves; poverty does exist, but the bad harvests which have caused it are God's punishment for neglect of religion. He ordered them to work at once; and they obeyed (1, 1—14).

Twenty-three days later Aggeus again addressed the builders, speaking words of encouragement. This Temple of Zorobabel fell far short of Solomon's in structure and appearance. But he promised them on the word of God that the new Temple would surpass the old, for it would bring on divine worship to the Messianic era (2, 1—10).

Three months after this Aggeus assured the Jews that God

was pleased with their work for the Temple. They had had bad harvests because of their excessive interest in temporal things to the exclusion of religion; henceforth it would be otherwise; God would give them prosperity (2, 11—20). The same day Aggeus received a revelation concerning the Messiah; Zorobabel is the chosen servant, the signet ring of (i.e. most dear to) God. These qualities, imperfectly realised in Zorobabel, were perfectly realised in Jesus Christ of Whom Zorobabel was a figure.

#### (11.) ZACHARIAS: from 520 B.C.

Zacharias was associated with Aggeus in the building of the second Temple; but his preaching has a much wider scope than that of Aggeus. He worked for the restoration of religion among his compatriots, preaching penance; exhorting them to the practice of charity; consoling them in their difficulties by the promise of a great Messianic future. Jewish tradition has it that he and Aggeus reorganised divine worship in the second Temple.

The Book of Zacharias has for theme that the Messianic nation, now restored and reformed, shall last under the divine protection until the end of the world. It is thus a prophecy of the Church. It also foretells many traits of the Person and the work of Our Divine Lord, and it is frequently quoted in the Gospels. Zacharias is the prophet of Palm Sunday.

In the "Book of Visions" (chapters 1 to 6) are described eight ecstasies. Transported in spirit into the past the prophet saw in various symbols the end of the exile; the fall of Babylon; the material and political re-building of Jerusalem; the holiness of the priesthood restored; the civil and religious authorities (represented by Zorobabel and Jesus) working in harmony for the glory of the Creator; the country freed from thieves and perjurers; the impiety of the nation expiated by the exile; Cyrus conqueror of Babylon, and Zorobabel leader of the Chosen People.

In 518 B.C. it was revealed to Zacharias that the Jews should no longer observe the fasts on the anniversary days of the siege and capture of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, the murder of Godolias (chapters 7 and 8).

The "Book of Discourses" (chapters 9 to 14) is among the



most difficult parts of Holy Scripture; "a labyrinth of mysteries" is St. Jerome's description. The Messias-King enters Jerusalem to establish His peaceful rule. He is triumphant but meek: "*poor and riding upon an ass, and upon a colt the foal of an ass*" (9, 9; St. Matthew 21, 5). The mercenary shepherds of God's flock are punished; the Good Shepherd is priced at the paltry sum of "*thirty pieces of silver*" (11, 12; St. Matthew 27, 9). The final triumph of the Chosen People is assured; in Jerusalem shall be opened a fountain to cleanse away all sin; idolaters and false prophets shall not exist. After violent upheavals the nations of all the world shall come at last to adore Jahwe, the One True God; in the final Judgment God's enemies shall be vanquished, and His elect shall be brought in glory to the never ending brightness of eternal life.

(12.) MALACHIAS: 445 B.C.

Malachias, "the liturgical prophet," is known to us only from his beautiful Prophecy. He was a profoundly religious man; and his doctrine approaches very close to the Gospel. He begins by asserting God's love for the Chosen People. For proof he points to Edom, recently ravaged beyond recovery by the Arabs; while the Jews, despite similar invasions, remain a nation with a country and a national Sanctuary. Why then (the prophet asks for the sceptic of his time) do we suffer such hardship? He answers: because the Jews have been unfaithful to God. And this introduces the subject of his discourses (1, 1—5).

The priests are severely censured for their ignorance of the Law; for their sinful lives; for sacrilegious conduct of the divine worship. He foretells that the sacrifices of the Temple shall be replaced by the perfect sacrifice of the Messianic era (1). To the Jews in general he addresses a stern condemnation of intermarriage with heathens, and of divorce (1, 6—2, 16).

Then there were good people who in those bitter times were discouraged by the harsh rule of evil-doers. These asked

(1) The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is "that clean oblation, which cannot be defiled by the unworthiness or malice of the offerers, which the Lord through Malachias foretold would be offered a clean oblation in every place (Malachias 1, 11)." Council of Trent: Session XXII, chapter 1. (Denzinger-Bannwart No. 939).

themselves: if God really values virtue how does He grant prosperity to the wicked? For them the prophet has a message of hope and comfort. The Precursor will come soon to prepare the way for the Messias. The Messias Himself will come. Meantime every act of virtue is recorded for the just in God's "*book of remembrance*" (3, 16); at the Judgment the proud evil-doers shall be destroyed root and branch in the furnace of God's wrath (2, 17—4, 6).

At the beginning of the present century many rationalist writers, using the comparative method of studying the history of religion, attempted to find a common denominator for the prophets of the Old Testament and the soothsayers of the heathen world. But the resemblances between the Hebrew prophets and the heathen soothsayers are in accidentals; whereas the differences are in essentials. The heathens were sycophant slaves of human kings; the prophets of Jahwe were sent by Him and their mission was supernatural. Again, the prophets were men of heroic sanctity; they were "the public conscience of Israel; they came before kings and princes with the same courage as before the multitude. When the theocratic royalty forgot its duty they were the organ established by Providence to complete it." (1) Not only did they reap no temporal reward for their ministry, but contrariwise they were maltreated, imprisoned, some of them slain.

With personal holiness and strong conviction the prophets united sublime doctrinal and moral teaching. The soothsayers of the heathen thought and taught that the heavenly orbs, rivers, and even animals were gods. The Hebrew prophets inveigh against the folly of idolatry; the material creation for them is always the handiwork of Jahwe, feebly reflecting His infinite might and glory and goodness.

The prophets foretold the salient features of the Redeemer's character and career—His humility and royalty; His sufferings and triumph. Our Lord Himself explained this to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "*And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded to them in all the scriptures, the things that were concerning him*" (St. Luke 24, 26—27).

(1) Christus, page 933.



Lastly the contrast between the Hebrew prophecies and the heathen oracles is as apparent in their mode of expression as it is in their doctrine. The messages of the heathens were couched in enigmatic terms, purposely vague: "*pythons and diviners who cackle and mutter*" (Isaias 8, 19). At times they were meaningless jargon; at times they could bear contrary interpretations. As a result they made no contribution to literature. The Old Testament prophets, on the other hand, are a treasury of the greatest literary value: "None of the ancients ever approached the great Hebrew writers in spiritual elevation; none equalled them in poetic sublimity; and few if any surpassed them in keenness of observation, or in quick sympathy with every work of the Creator." (1)

(1) THE ASTRONOMY OF THE BIBLE. By E. Walter Maunder, F.R.A.S., 2nd ed., London, 1908. Page 8.

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