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## Israel's Life in Prophecy and Song

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**Abstract:** This article discusses music and prophecy in ancient Israel.

# Israel's Life in PROPHECY AND SONG

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*Of the First Council of the Seventy*

The Bible has suffered at the hands of those whom it has sought to help, when they have refused to read its teachings through to the closing sentences, with an intelligent thoroughness. They have made selections according to their inclinations and dispositions and have missed its spirit, and the steady trend of its instruction, the glorious uplift of its truths.

—Alexander McKenzie.

**H**ISTORY knows no more magnificent line of men than the prophets of Israel. "They were idealists through and through. They lived in the very air of the City of God." They grappled with the problems which their own troublous times presented, for they lived when the nations beyond the confines of Israel waged war against small nations and peaceful people. The Israelites were constantly beset by foes, and it was the sublime faith of the prophets through hundreds of years of history who kept "aglow the heavenly light," who made the invisible, visible. Throughout ancient Israel's time, the prophets stood against the world for righteousness and truth, and the necessity for righteous living was more truly theirs than any other people's. The sense of sin, the need of redemption, the lawlessness of human nature when it is not under subjection to the laws of God, the necessity for restraint of even natural powers and impulses are all postulates of the writings of the prophets. To this day, Hebraism stands for high moral discipline.

"Learn to do well; seek judgment, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow," says Isaiah. (Isa. 1:17.)

And Ezekiel writes:

Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die. But if a man be just, and do that which is lawful and right, And hath not eaten upon the mountains, neither hath lifted up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel . . . hath spoiled none by violence, hath given his bread to the hungry, and hath covered the naked with a garment; . . . he is just, he shall surely live, saith the Lord God. (Ezekiel 18:4-9.)

The prophets were divinely commissioned to communicate the words of Jehovah, the revelations of his will to the people. They received their messages direct from God, and they were careful to state the circumstances of their call. "They possessed a character

## THE GLORY THAT WAS BABYLON

The man on the left, near the gate Ishtar (adorned with reliefs of bulls and dragons) is standing on the ruins of the ancient paved street named after Daniel, who himself, no doubt, walked its length many times.

—Underwood &  
Underwood  
Photo



so closely assimilated to the divine holiness that they were profoundly unified in consciousness with God." The prophets were concerned with the growth of the spiritual life of the people and were holy in heart and conduct. They not only sought to realize this in the days in which they lived; but in the darkest times, they pointed forward with hope to a coming era when this consummation for which they lived and labored should be accomplished. The "Word of God" was of permanent importance to them, and deep significance was attached to the "Word," for they had the inward assurance that they were divinely authorized to speak the Word. Though they ever kept in mind the past times of divine interposition and revelation, yet the "golden age of the nation" was yet to come. The kingdom of God and of righteousness was to be set up, and all people were to turn to their Maker.

It was, however, in the school of adversity and suffering that the prophetic insight was trained and purified. The goal of the prophets was not to be attained through a path of triumph over earthly foes, but through humiliation, chastening, and suffering. Among the more spiritually minded Israelites, the revelation of a Messiah who would redeem his people dawned in the prophetic mind, as it dawned in the mind of the prophet Isaiah and Elijah, ages before.

**T**HE prophets of the Old Testament, because of their nearness to God in spirit, received from him the supreme moral laws which to this day have remained the foundation of the highest ethical life of man. Moses communed with God, knew his presence, gained

his instructions, heard his commands. He did not fear to deliver his people from the hands of Pharaoh. It was Moses' greatness that heard such words, and had need to hear them always. Israel was brought forth from Egypt under a leadership, which would not only conduct the people through the desert, but lead them upwards toward righteousness, through a fuller understanding of God. His greatness lay in the intensity of his realization of Jehovah's nearness to his people. The experience of the Exodus and the thought of the sole leadership of God, made all the people one, and they never felt God so near as when they were in the wilderness. A prophet had risen, and his glory lay in his faith. He was an instrument in the hands of God. The conception of God is the conception which had come from Israel's ancestors, enlarged, raised, and inspired by Israel's circumstances and by the revelation of God's relations to her through the great mind and heart of Moses. Thus was Moses to receive in the Ten Commandments one of the noblest foundations for the moral life ever given to man. (See Exodus 20:1, 3-17; Deuteronomy 6:4-7.)

## PURE RELIGION EXPRESSED BY MUSIC

The ancient Israelites were a music-loving people. Ordinary everyday experiences moved them to give expression to their feelings in poetry and music. Marriage and death, planting and harvest, festival and feast were celebrated in song. A general returning from war was followed by the people who danced to the music of stringed instruments. When Deborah won the battle which freed Israel from the power of the Canaanites, she commemorated

her victory in the stirring song which bears her name, and which has made her and her act immortal. Nothing in all history shows the courage of woman more than the story of Deborah as given in the fourth and fifth chapters of Judges. In words that are majestic, she closes her song:

So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord:  
but let them that love him be as the sun  
when he goeth forth in his might.  
(Judges 6:31)

After the fall of Saul and Jonathan upon the battlefield of Mount Gilboa, David lamented over them in song, as written in II Samuel, 1:17 ff. The dirge ends in words which afford a striking testimony to David's genius and magnanimity, and to his unfortunate rival's fame:

Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided: they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions.

Ye daughters of Israel, weep over Saul, who clothed you in scarlet, with other delights, who put on ornaments of gold upon your apparel.

How are the mighty fallen in the midst of the battle! O Jonathan, thou wast slain in thine high places.

I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women.

How are the mighty fallen, and the weapons of war perished!

These examples show how popular the ballad must have been in ancient Israel. Says Dr. Kittell of the University of Leipzig:

We certainly shall not be wrong if we assume that the private and wandering minstrel or storyteller was regarded as an indispensable member of society, and his position one of honor in Israel. At sacred festivals, in fairs and markets, at every meeting place of men, at the table of the king, in the banquets of the great, the minstrel and storyteller were sure to be found, singing the praises of former heroes, narrating the history of the sacred sanctu-

ary, or the deeds of the ancestors of Israel. In song and folklore has much of the history of ancient Israel been preserved.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF NATURE

ONE of the most beautiful descriptions of the influence of nature upon a sensitive person is given by Dr. Geikie when he speaks of the life and character of King David, to whom are ascribed so many of the psalms of the Old Testament. David was a shepherd and the gray uplands around Bethlehem where he drove his flocks were then used for pasturage as they were a thousand years later when the "shepherds heard on them the angelic announcement of the birth of our Lord." Says Geikie:

It was in the solitude of the hills that he trained himself to become the sweet singer of Israel, and invented the instruments of music long attributed to him. His sensitive nature must have caught inspiration from the scenery around him. The lonely silence of the hills, the wild country east of Bethlehem, looking down to the Red Sea, and over it to the purple mountains of Moab; the thirsty uplands reaching away to the horizon on the south; and far beyond, the deep blue of the Mediterranean, with its ships passing over its great waters, made a fitting school at once for his poetry and his religious fervor.

As he lay in the open with his flocks at night, he kept watch over them and as the light of day came, he tenderly cared for the lambs and moved to fresh pastures. Under such conditions, he sang his songs and uttered his prayers with unquestioning faith in God's readiness to help: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

The Twenty-third Psalm is generally called the "Shepherd Psalm." Not only is it fine from the standpoint of religious feeling, but it is one of the greatest lyrics ever written. "Lyric poetry is the short, passionate outburst of personal feeling in poetic form." The Twenty-third Psalm is the "Sweetest of all the Psalms," and to many people it is the most precious and lovely, the most up-

lifting and consoling chapter of the Old Testament. We associate it with the Shepherd King of Israel, and its greatness lies in the simplicity of diction and "its reflection of the childlike faith of people living in the open."

Sheep have always been used for food, and it is said that Solomon's household consumed one hundred a day. The skins were used for coats, and the wool was spun in every household and woven into cloth of every description. The sheep was the chief animal sacrificed to God, which originated in the idea of making one's possession an offering to the deity, which was a friendly intercourse between man and his God. The relationship of the shepherd to his sheep was very intimate and tender. He always led, never drove them to pasture and water. The shepherd was most careful of the lambs, and in early times, he often carried a lamb under each arm, as he led his flock for the day. In the fortieth chapter of Isaiah, is found a beautiful reference to this custom:

He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs in his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

The Hebrews could not think in abstract terms. "Their most profound thoughts about the meaning of life and the existence of God had to be expressed in concrete imagery." Of all the symbols or figures of speech used in the Bible, that of the sheep and the shepherd is the most frequent. We can imagine when David sat on his throne, of his thinking of the days in the open when he brought the sheep back to the fold at sunset and prepared to watch over them through the night. We can see him in prayer asking God to watch over his flocks as he implored God to watch over him; and as he went forth at the dawn of day, his soul was full of reverence and faith.

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

All through their history, songs came from the hearts of the people and are their common heritage for all time; so did the psalms emanate from the soul of the Israelitish nation all through their history. Other nations treasure them today, for they are songs of eternal beauty, and what is more, of eternal truth and greatness. "In this they bear the stamp of true religion, which is not confined to any one nation or generation, but belongs to the whole world and eternity."

SHEPHERD'S FIELD, FROM BETHLEHEM

—Underwood & Underwood Photo

