Chapter 3
Prophetism in Ancient Israel

As discussed in the introduction to the present study, the specificities of the historical setting, and the generally recognized social role of the prophet, had a critical bearing on Isaiah’s prophecies. These ideas need to be expanded to situate Isaiah’s text in the larger perspective of the history of prophecy in ancient Israel, its relations with such social, political institutions as the law and priesthood, the temple cult, the monarchy and the religion of Israel. This should facilitate an analysis of prophetic discourse, the characteristic codes and conventions employed by prophets to deliver their message. Contextual clarification of this kind is a compelling need for engagement with the unique prophetic texts of the Bible. As the Old Testament scholar, Maritti Nissinen, observes, “The Hebrew Bible, again, is a literary composition unparalleled by any ancient Near Eastern document, and, therefore, presents a particular challenge to comparison, especially if it aims at historical reconstruction” (Nissinen 7).

In primitive as well as highly sophisticated religions there have been traditions of prophecy throughout their history or at some stage of their development. By prophecy one understands the function of mediation and interpretation of the divine mind and will. It may not necessarily imply the prediction of future. This is a somewhat later development. By contrast with private soothsayers and diviners, the nabis (prophets) of the Old Testament times were regarded preeminently as public professionals, often working in groups, who
may be consulted on matters of policy or ethical conduct. Prophets claimed to
derive their messages from dreams, visions, and ecstatic, mysterious or mystic
experiences, as well as through various divinatory practices.

The prophets were not mere predictors. Their Hebrew name, *nabi*,
comes from a root "to boil up as a fountain" (*Gesenius*); hence the
fervor of inspiration (2 Peter 1.21). Others interpret it as from an
Arabic root [meaning] "spokesman" of God, the Holy Ghost
supplying him with words; communicated by dreams (Joel 2.28; Job
33.14-17); or visions, the scene being made to pass before their
minds (Isaiah 1.1); or trance, ecstasy (Numbers 24.4, 16; Ezekiel
1.3; 3.14); not depriving them, however, of free conscious agency
(Jeremiah 20.7, 9; 1 Corinthians 14.32). (Campbell 54)

It is clear from the earliest historical records that a common pattern of seers
and diviners existed in the ancient Middle East of which Israel formed a tiny part.
King David sought the help of seers in deciding questions of war and conquest. So
did the pagan kings of Moab and Syria. Evidence of ecstatic prophecy has been
found in the history of eleventh century Phoenicia and among the Canaanites in the
time of Elijah. In the bible,

1 Sam. 10.5-7 tell of bands of ecstatic prophets meeting with Samuel; later,
Samuel, too, falls into ecstasy and joins in the dancing and shouting, moved by the
spirit of God. Babylonian prophets are known to have resorted to liver divination.
Certain Babylonian priests functioned as ecatics whose oracles came from the
throes of divine “possession.”
In the pagan Middle East, little or no distinction was made between the priest and the prophet. In Israel, although priests and prophets are often mentioned together, and several of the prophets are connected with sanctuaries, a clear distinction is maintained in the originative circumstance of their respective vocations: “The Israelite priesthood was hereditary and hierarchical whereas prophecy was charismatic…” (Raymond Brown 225). In other words, the prophet is called to his office by God; prophecy is a charism he receives by virtue of his calling, his divine election.

The history of biblical prophecy begins with Moses. Amos 2.10 ascribes the beginning of the prophetic tradition to the Mosaic age: “Also I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and led you forty years through the wilderness, to possess the land of the Amorite.”

Early prophets appear to have been of the class of wild ecstatics who prophesied when “seized on” by the spirit of God. Their motive was to stimulate patriotic and religious fervour. Usually, they prophesied in groups and were given the generic name “sons of prophets” which meant “members of prophetic guilds,” “professional prophets” and “prophetic disciples.” They worked themselves up into an ecstatic mood by dance and music. Often they served as disciples or apprentices under some noted prophet. Or else, they might live apart as private individuals. When attached to a sanctuary, they would be called cult prophets; those serving a king were called court prophets.

In the ecstatic state, the prophet is said to become “another man” (I Sam. 10.6). No doubt, his antics--singing and dancing and shouting --made him seem a
“madman” in the eyes of his fellows. His behaviour was thought to be hardly becoming of a respectable citizen (I Sam.10.11). The fact is that, in ancient times, little distinction was made between original inspiration, orgiastic frenzy, and psychic abnormalities arising from insanity. While a prophetic ecstasy did attune the mind to the reception of divine communication, it must be admitted that in some cases it just as easily has served as a source of self-delusion or superstition. This explains the polemics of later prophets against impostors in the confraternity.

Ecstasy did play a part in later prophecy, although the extent of its influence is open to debate. Elijah and Elisha have been associated with “sons of prophets” as masters and leaders. Jeremiah 26.29 refers to the prevalence of claims to possession by “spirit.” He himself never laid claim to ecstatic seizure. Micah does claim to have been moved by the spirit to speak against false prophets. Hosea calls the prophet a “man of the spirit.” Ezekiel received many prophecies while in a state of ecstatic trance. Unlike ecstacies, a seer or visionary is said to obtain his messages in vision or dream. As Violet MacDermot observes:

> Ancient cultures were essentially religious and their survival depended to a great extent on their internal religious unity... It became a matter of importance to know whether knowledge, obtained in the form of visions or revelations, had a greater validity than that acquired by study of the world of natural phenomena. The early Church was particularly anxious to exert authority in this field, in view of the claim of Christianity to be a new revelation.

(MacDermot 1)
What is distinctive about Israelite prophecy, what distinguishes it from pagan oracles, is to be found in the work of the “classical” prophets, namely, prophets whose teachings have been preserved in the Old Testament under their names in separate books. Other terms by which they are known are “literary prophets” and “social prophets,” social because they are passionately concerned with questions of social justice. Prominent among them are Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Some may have been members of the class of professional prophets. However, all of them could lay claim to genuine vocation to prophetic ministry.

Because there is no word in Hebrew to distinguish false from real prophets, it will be found that some of the bitterest denunciation in the classical prophets are directed against those whom the speaker names ‘prophets’ without a qualifying word. They accuse these latter, sometimes clubbed together with priests, of every kind of moral and social crime against Yahweh and his people. It may be the case that some of these false spokesmen of Yahweh may have been genuinely deluded by their own prophetic devices, and, by a mistaken impression, may have considered themselves to have been called to speak for God. Often the false “professional” was one who was associated with the court and received monetary benefit for making prophecies that pleased the client. Mostly, however, they may have persuaded themselves that the Israelite way of life represented a model of virtue and thought that if the country was prosperous it meant Yahweh was pleased with his people. As James L. Crenshaw comments,

It comes as no surprise that the understanding of false prophecy was greatly affected by the perspective from which prophecy itself
was viewed, the changing approaches to the general phenomenon of prophecy being evident in the history of research into false prophecy. (Crenshaw 13)

Even in the days of classical prophecy there was no sure way of checking whether a certain oracle was authentic or not. Possession by the spirit offered no guarantee, since a person so possessed may sometimes get things right and sometimes not. In the end, it was the message itself and the prophet’s conviction of its truth that carried the point. Hence the emphasis in many prophetic books is on the narrative of the author’s calling and on his experience of the divine presence.

The story of Samuel in the Old Testament reveals the unique purpose to which prophecy was dedicated in the classical age. Samuel himself was a nabi (prophet) of the old professional class. Yet, with him prophecy was to embark on a new phase in its development. If, in the past, the professional nabi sought to inspire patriotic and religious fervour, with Samuel, the motive was to exhort men to justice and righteousness. His speech in justification of his social conduct echoes the words and thoughts of Amos, Hosea, Micah and Malachi:

> Behold, here I [am:] witness against me before the LORD, and before his anointed: whose ox have I taken? or whose ass have I taken? or whom have I defrauded? whom have I oppressed? or of whose hand have I received [any] bribe to blind mine eyes therewith? and I will restore it you. (I Sam. 12.3)
The speech of the nabi Nathan before David, denouncing the king on his face, illustrates the same point:

And I was with thee whithers over thou wentest, and have cut off all thine enemies out of thy sight, and have made thee a great name, like unto the name of the great [men] that [are] in the earth. Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israel, and will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their own, and move no more; neither shall the children of wickedness afflict them anymore, as beforetime. (II Sam. 7.9-10)

To this same tradition of social morality belongs Elijah’s denunciation of Ahab’s sin (1 Kings 21.17-24). In his experience of divine communication at Mt. Horeb, Elijah himself is sensible of a new call to the prophetic ministry. The divine call comes to him not in the wild wind, not in the earthquake or wild fire (all experiences out of the ordinary that one is accustomed to associate with theophanies), but “in a gentle breeze.”

Samuel, Nathan and Elijah set the tone and tenor of what was to become, in later times, the distinctive mark of classical prophecy:

The fearless revelation of the moral will of Yahweh, the God of Israel’s covenant, that is to be the characteristic of classical prophecy setting it apart from all the other prophecy, both of Israel and its neighbours, has already begun with these representatives of the ancient nabi class. (Raymond Brown 227)
The consecration to a new line of preaching that Elijah experienced is not unlike the experience of special election recorded in the work of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and others. As if to distinguish themselves from the confraternity of professional nabis of older times, these social prophets give themselves new names: “messengers of Yahweh,” “Servants of God,” “Shepherds,” “Guardians,” “watch man” and so on.

Three phases may be distinguished in the history of Israelite prophetism: pre-exilic (that is, before exile into Babylonia), exilic (during exile), and post-exilic. Pre-exilic classical prophecy, dominated by the figures of Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah and Micah, tends to be a prophecy of judgment against Israel and Judah. The exilic phase sets forth a new vision of God’s plans and purposes for his people in the teachings of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah. Attacks against false gods become more strident as does assertion of monotheism. In Ezekiel, the great prophet of Exile, there is the message of a new covenant that Yahweh will establish with his people on Palestinian soil. Post-exilic prophecy, represented by Third Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Daniel and Malachi, lacks much of the vigour and spontaneity of pre-exilic prophecy. In general, the tone is optimistic as suits a people who have been resettled in their land. The doom that had been predicted has come and gone. The task now is to rebuild life centered around the Temple and the Torah. There is particular insistence on individual responsibility and fidelity to the Law.

A significant fact to emerge from this survey of the history of prophetism in ancient Israel is that prophecy, at least in the classical sense of the word, was a charismatic phenomenon. A prophet did not derive his office from a religious or
political institution. He felt himself called by God, in some cases against his will, to mediate and interpret the divine communication. It is significant that “in his more theoretical studies Weber located prophecy in the context of charismatic authority and defined the prophet as ‘a purely individual bearer of charisma’” (Blenkinsopp 35).

As a chosen instrument of God, a prophet was under no obligation to pander to the whims of the rulers and leaders of the land. This being so, it is particularly important to realize to what extent individual prophets worked in harmony with Israel’s social, political and religious institutions and to what extent they took up positions that might be interpreted as radical and revolutionary.

As regards the Law and the Priesthood, the prevailing view in critical circles is that pre-exilic prophecy operated as a rival to the priestly tradition that became canonized in the written Law of Moses in and after the Exile. The opposition between the two traditions could be exaggerated. It is true that the functions of priest and prophet were always carefully distinguished in Israel. In the introduction to *Sage, Priest, Prophet: Religious and Intellectual Leadership in Ancient Israel*, Joseph Blenkinsopp observes:

> The concerns of the priesthood were, of course, primarily religious (i.e., cultic) but did not exclude attempts to systematic thought in cosmology and astronomy… Prophecy, finally, is not unambiguously religious in nature, especially if we pay due regard to those prophets who functioned as social critics. There is also the
not irrelevant fact that some of these prophets directed their fiercest
invective against contemporary religious practice. (Blenkinsopp 3)

Jer.18.18 draws the distinctions among “the law” of the priest, the “counsel” of the
wise man, and “the word” of the prophet. The three orders functioned in three
different ways: the priest by an institutional tradition, the wise man by a
professional tradition, the prophet by charismatic inspiration. However, they were
aware of serving a common purpose. When the prophets condemned the priesthood
it was for not living up to their priestly calling. When they condemned prophets,
they were attacking false prophets, not the office of the prophet. It is true that
differences of attitude and interests remained between formal and spiritual religion,
between the priestly class and the prophets. However these were hardly
fundamental differences with regard to their basic function which was the
proclamation of the word of God. The teaching of the prophets were always
consistent with the Law whether it existed in written form or circulated as a
narrative of exile and return. Amos, earliest of the canonical prophets, interprets
Exodus and the desert wanderings in a manner similar to the Pentateuch. Hosea
explicitly connects the law of Yahweh with a covenant which is a unique feature of
the Jewish faith.

The Temple cult was another institution with which the prophets sometimes
expressed strong differences. The underlying issue concerns the relative worth of
ritual worship and worship in spirit. It is a recurring motif in pre-exilic prophecy.
Exile precluded temple cult while post- exilic Judaism in Palestine actually sought
to organize itself, with active support from the prophets, around the Temple and
the Law. Among biblical critics there are those who hold that pre-exilic prophets were opposed to the religion of Israel on principle.

It is known that the vast majority of the classical prophets came from the laity. Although they were not cult prophets, they were nevertheless involved in temple worship. They would have taken ritual worship for granted as they did other Israeli institutions. However, as part of their task of forming the conscience of a people, they were expected to judge these institutions. This they did with vigour and earnestness. To have done so is no indication that they opposed the temple cult on principle. They opposed animal sacrifice possibly because it was imported from pagan faith and certainly because they considered it an inferior form of worship, inferior to the spiritual sacrifice of service and personal integrity. In opposing animal sacrifice or other forms of ritual observance, the prophets were not setting up a rival doctrine in abstract terms. They were responding to an existential situation in existential terms. This is the point of their enunciation: Love, not sacrifice, is what pleases God (Hosea). One might rephrase this doctrine by saying that there can be no true sacrifice without love:

What was at issue were the sacrifices then being carried out in contemporary sanctuaries by men who were perpetrating a sacramentalism devoid of meaning. These sacrifices, say Amos and Jeremiah, Yahweh did not command. (Raymond Brown 230)

It must be admitted, though, that prophets at best only had a minimal interest in ritual worship. This did not amount to opposing liturgical rites. Both Isaiah and Jeremiah frequented the temple they denounced. For them, the rites
would have been perfectly proper if they had been informed by the spiritual realities they signified. The exilic prophet Ezekiel, who set much store by rebuilding the temple, knew full well that Yahweh himself was the true sanctuary who alone could give any meaning to the temple built with hands.

It is this same spirit that values essential worth above superficial display that characterises the prophets’ attitude to monarchy, though the Israelite culture shared the view that “since kingship was of divine origin, the authority of the king was derived from divine election” (Ishida 6). Chronologically the age of kingships in Israelite history coincided almost exactly with the age of classical prophecy. In the founding of the monarchy, the prophet played a paradoxical role: while he presided over the transition from rule by judges to rule by a king, he saw in the popular call for a king a repudiation of the covenant relationship with Yahweh -- all the more reason for him to keep kingships under constant review. Despite this equivocal attitude, there was no attempt made on the part of the prophet to overthrow king’s rule and put in place an alternative authority. The fact is that the prophetic tradition possessed neither taste nor talent for practical politics. With the establishment of monarchy there arose a conflict between the law of the king and that of the covenant which had now been relegated to the status of private law. In this conflict, the prophet’s role was to insist on obedience to the old covenant precepts.

The royal messianism of the pre-exilic prophets is quite in keeping with their attitude to monarchy. The authors of the royal psalms, probably court or cult prophets, painted a glowing picture of the messianic king’s rule, investing it with the pomp and circumstance appropriate to any eastern ruler’s court: classical
prophecy stripped this messianism of its worldly splendour. Its own conception of
the messiah was one that de-emphasized the king as king and stressed the king as
the elect of Yahweh. Awesome titles are used in the description of the messianic
rule, but only to glorify that power of Yahweh acting through the king. This
spiritualization of kingship reaches some kind of culmination in Ezekiel, to the
point of denying the title of king to the Davidic ruler of the restored Israel. Here
one may note the view that

...kingship is both criticized and played down in the "inspired"
consonantic literature that was written by scribes of a new type in
the context of a nonmonarchic community. Such texts are both a
part of the future biblical canon and the expression of a religiosity
that prepared the very idea of a canon. In describing the
confrontation between king and holy text, they are validating
themselves as the true guides for Israel's journey in time. They are
lifting the crown from the king's head, in order to place it above the
sacred scroll written by an inspired, prophetic figure. (Grottanelli 9)

The last of the great institutions to be considered in relation to classical
prophecy is the religion of Israel. Three aspects of Israelite religion may be
distinguished: eschatology, prophetic-- social and moral-- teaching, and ethical
monotheism.

An important element of Jewish eschatology has already been dealt with,
namely, messianism. The other major element is the idea of divine election.
Israelites saw themselves as a people called to play a part in the work of judgment
and power exercised by God over the universe. This judgment may be conceived as operating in historical time or as pertaining to a time beyond history. Classical prophets favoured the historical view while later Judaism inclined towards the apocalyptic. The conception of time in the Bible is generally thought to be “linear.” However, this does not imply a deterministic pattern that denies free will. Rather, the biblical view conceives time as a series of moments filled with distinctly willed events. This means that the prophet himself could not possibly command a vision that encompassed the contingencies of historical circumstance. His vision only comprehended the direction in which events were progressing.

The prophets shared Israel’s conviction of its divine election, but spiritualized and moralised the idea. They reminded the people that there was no cause for complacency in this. The Israelites did not merit the election any more than other nations. It was a deed of Grace on God’s part. It was their part, then, to grow to be worthy of the role they were called to play. To do so they must learn the way of virtue. The commonest analogy for the concept of election used in Israelite tradition is that of the covenant. Yahweh summoning the people before the bar of justice for violating the covenant is a common motif in prophetic writing. Here again, the prophets insist on the Mosaic covenant which obligates people to respond to the law rather than the patriarchal and Davidic covenants in which Yahweh makes promises unconditionally, without stipulating the demand for human response in love and sacrifice. It is pertinent to note in this connection that exilic and post exilic prophecy do mention patriarchal covenants.
Closely related to the doctrines of election and covenant is the notion of the “remnant.” This idea was forcefully articulated by Isaiah and is found in Hosea and Jeremiah as well. Basically, it means that a portion of the chosen people will survive God’s judgment and become the restored Israel, a notion that laid the groundwork of post-exilic prophecy. Gerald Emem Umoren observes:

> It was in the context of the crisis and the devastation which Israel suffered in the hands of these imperial powers which reduced their number drastically, that a common word like 'remnant' emerged and assumed a technical connotation in the prophetic message of the time. (Umoren 2).

The concept of judgment itself, usually represented under the image of “the Day of Yahweh” undergoes a profound modification in classical prophecy. The conventional understanding was that it signified an event that celebrated Yahweh’s triumph over his enemies. These enemies were thought to be gentiles who waged war on the chosen people, devastated their land and took them captive. The prophets, on the other hand, insisted that the enemies were the wicked people among both gentiles and Jews. This interpretation stripped the notion of its nationalist bias and secured it firmly in moral law. This refinement of the concept is carried over in even plainer terms in post-exilic prophecy.

As has been pointed out earlier, the pronounced emphasis on social morality in the teachings of the classical prophets has earned the designation “social prophets.” The social virtues they preached formed an integral part of their conception of election and covenant. It will be recalled that seven out of the Ten
Commandments handed down by Moses concerned relations between man and man. Joseph P. Hester comments:

The Ten Commandments are at the center of recent controversies because they have a paramount place in the ethical system of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and prescribe duties toward God, one's neighbors, and society. (Hester 3)

In preaching these virtues, the prophets were merely recalling the people to their known, but much ignored morality. From this conception of social morality emerges a theme that becomes central to the New Testament doctrine of the kingdom of God. It is the theme of Yahweh’s poor, that is, of the socially oppressed classes who cry out for justice and who have come to be identified with the faithful remnant, the poor and the meek and the gentle, destined to inherit God’s kingdom. It will be noticed that the prophets make no attempt to sentimentalize poverty. They realize that poverty is the result of social injustice and direct much of their invective against this evil.

The burden of Israelite prophets’ teaching is said to be ethical monotheism. The doctrine means that the God of Israel has a moral will and that properly to worship this God is to live a moral life according to that will. Among pre-exilic prophets, monotheism was hardly theoretical; it was a “practical” or “dynamic” conception arising from a particular existential situation. Only later does it receive theoretical formulation. This teaching was quite in keeping with the faith derived from patriarchal narratives. The unique contribution of the prophets lies in their insistence on the relation between monotheism and morality. They insisted on it so
strongly and so often that the two became inseparably connected in the popular mind. It is sometimes held up as a reproach against the prophets that their solution to all social and moral problems had always been religious. In answer, it might be pointed out that a prophet’s task is to communicate what he takes to be an authentic oracle. It is up to the moralist, statesman or politician to draw up an appropriate plan of action. In this connection one may note Joseph Blenkinopp’s remark while concluding his analysis on the contributions of sages, priests and prophets to the social milieu of ancient Israel:

…one of the most significant intellectual and religious achievements of ancient Israel, in contrast to the great empires, was the establishment of an autonomous sphere of law, independent of the will of a ruler. The "canonization" of the law meant that, although its interpretation could become an instrument of social control and oppression, and although its administration could be corrupted and subverted, the law rather than the will of a ruler was always the ultimate court of appeal. Or again, prophetic protest was neutralized by bureaucratic control, as we have seen, but the words themselves were preserved and eventually reclaimed as an essential element in the social consciousness of church and synagogue. In a word, the sage, the priest, and the prophet came, in their different ways, to contribute to the construction of an intellectual and moral universe that is still, in its main lines, habitable. (Blenkinsopp 168)
Having considered the history of Israelite prophecy and its relation to Israel’s non-charismatic institutions, one might look at the poetic and rhetorical devices employed by prophets to communicate their message. Prophets had an urgent message to convey; they felt an acute sense of crisis and predicament which carried over into a constant exhortation to repentance and conversion. Passionate apprehension called for passionate expression. Biblical prophecy is of a kind that answers to this requirement; it is a heavily tropological discourse, a moral discourse charged with every resource of figural and visionary utterance.

By far the commonest literary form associated with prophecy is the oracle. A direct revelation from Yahweh, this takes the form of a brief, poetic utterance. Several oracles of similar kind may sometimes be combined to form a larger unity. Their divine origin may be underlined by introductory, internal, and concluding reminders like “so says Yahweh”; and “Yahweh speaks”. Sometimes, too, the prophet may speak in his own name as the accredited spokesman for God. In terms of emotional tone and content, oracles may be characterized as weal or woe prophecy, the revelation of a coming evil or coming good. Pre-exilic prophecy is typically of the woe variety while post-exilic oracles tend to be optimistic, dealing with the prospect of salvation. Pre and post-exilic prophecy alike contain oracles of doom aimed at Gentiles who oppose the reign of Yahweh. A version of weal oracle, called “kingdom oracles”, develop a universal perspective featuring end-time events, often presented in apocalyptic scenes, that culminate in deliverance for God’s people and the ushering in of a final age of peace and prosperity.
Prophets are known to deliver their wisdom in riddles, the Sibylline leaves being the classic instance of gnomic, oracular deliverances. Occasionally, passages in biblical prophecy can be exceedingly obscure. In some cases it is difficult to decide whether weal or woe was intended or which was predominant. Contrary to popular opinion, an oracle need not be chiefly or solely predictive. An oracle of woe may be a denunciation of sin, or a summons to repentance. Also, an oracle can combine the motifs of denunciation, exhortation and prophecy of doom or salvation.

Often, oracles may be set down without any indication of the circumstances of their original utterance. Sometimes, these can be embedded in a narrative, recounting the circumstances of their occurrence. Amos describes various visions in which the word of God was revealed to him. Similar descriptions occur in Jeremiah and other prophets. Ezekiel’s visions are described at length, the visions themselves acquiring an importance all their own. Some of them give the impression of ecstatic experiences while those in earlier prophets read like ordinary occurrences.

One of the devices used to introduce the prophetic word is an ancient poetic form beginning with a numerical formula as in Amos 1.3: “Thus saith the LORD; For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four, I will not turn away [the punishment] thereof; because they have threshed Gilead with threshing instruments of iron.” In this device, the two numbers between them indicate an indefinite figure, large or small, depending on the context. Compare Prov. 30.15: “There are three [things that are] never satisfied, [yea,] four [things] say not, [It is] enough:”

“Dirge Song” and “Love Song” are other forms employed to represent prophetic passages. Isaiah opens with the well-known device of “covenant lawsuit”
which is a subgenre of instructional accounts. It contains such elements as witness, charges, indictment and sentencing. A related subgenre is “the disputation” featuring declaration, discussion and refutation. Another type of instructional material is that containing an exhortation or warning with a typical call to hear what the prophet is saying and heed the divine summons.

Temple liturgy has supplied models for prophetical passages. The prophetic sermon is a form commonly found which evolved into a literary tradition corresponding in importance to the tradition of priestly instruction. Also to be listed among prophetic literary forms are symbolic acts expressive of specific ideas and attitudes. Hosea’s marriage to a woman who turns unfaithful is symbolic of Yahweh’s relation to a people who have proved unfaithful to the Law; Isaiah’s nakedness, the name he gives to his son, and Jeremiah’s celibacy are other instances of symbolic acts.

Both prose and poetry were used in prophetic writing, prose being confined to biographical or autobiographical accounts, historical notices and vision reports. Prophets cast the larger part of their message in verse. That may be the reason why, in the Editor’s Foreword to Interpreting Hebrew Poetry, Gene M. Tucker opines:

It is hardly possible to understand the Hebrew Bible without coming to terms with Hebrew poetry. Although unlike the poetry of modern Western languages in many important respects, Hebrew poetry is dense, rich, and often enigmatic language that calls for and evokes careful reading. (Petersen viii)
Given the urgency of tone and message, either mode required liberal use of literary figures and motifs. According to Murray Roston, “the prophetic poetry of the Bible was fired with the urgency of the divine message, to which all verbal dexterity was subordinated” (Leavitt 17).

Simile and metaphor are the commonest of the figures employed. Hosea compares Israel’s love for God, in its fickleness, to a morning cloud or early dew that vanishes as the sun’s rays grow stronger. To Obadiah, Edom’s stronghold is like an eagle’s nest while Habakkuk likens the Deliverer of his people to a victorious warrior. Nahum pictures God’s anger pouring out like fire. Isaiah declares that all flesh is grass, meaning the powerlessness of man vis-à-vis God’s word. To Zephaniah, the oppressive officials of Jerusalem are roaring lions, while Zechariah calls them foolish and worthless shepherds.

Sometimes a simile or a metaphor might be elaborated into parable or allegory. Isaiah tells the story of a vineyard he planted, nurtured and fenced off. He built a tower and a wine press, expecting a good crop. In the event, the grapes turned out to be all sour. He took down the fences for the vineyard to be trampled on and laid waste. The point of the parable is explained in the concluding verses. The fruitless vineyard is Judah, favoured of Yahweh; it must expect summary punishment at the hands of Yahweh. Ezekiel tells the parable of an eagle (king of Babylon) breaking off the top shoot of a cedar tree (the king of Judah) and planting it in a city of shopkeepers (Babylon).

A figure closely related to the parable is hypocatastasis which is a statement implying a comparison. “This lesser-known figure of speech is a
comparison in which the likeness is implied by a direct naming. When David wrote, ‘Dogs have surrounded me’ (Ps. 22.16), he was referring to his enemies, calling them dogs” (Zuck 149). Thus Amos calls the indolent rich women of Samaria “the kine of Bashan” (4.1) and proceeds to characterize them as cruel to the needy and the poor and supercilious towards their husbands. Micah employs the same figure to remind Jerusalem that it is the watchtower of its people, “tower of the flock” (4.8).

Hebrew poetry also made use of figures involving substitution: metonymy, synecdoche and merism. Jeremiah speaks of his enemies planning to hit at him with his own “tongue” (meaning his own words). Hosea speaks of the country (=the people) becoming a whore by abandoning Yahweh. Nahum foresees Nineveh’s foes consuming its bars (=gates). Merism is a figure that conveys the sense of a whole by referring to opposing points; the expression ‘morning and evening’ could refer to the whole day. Thus Amos pictures the hopelessness of Israel before its enemy by portraying the weakness and thirst of its delicate girl and stalwart youth (=all the people).

Personification is another figure employed to vivify a concept. Isaiah represents mountains and hills as singing and trees as clapping their hands upon the restoration of Israel. Micah, represents the Lord as presenting his case against Israel before the mountains who serve as jurors. Another passage in Micah personifies Zion warning its enemy not to gloat over its successes. Amos and Zechariah have verses which present anthropomorphic and anthropopathic images:
Amos reports that God’s eyes are directed at the sinful northern kingdom. Zechariah describes God’s jealous concern for Zion.

Prophets also employed rhetorical question and hyperbole to reinforce their point: “[Am] I a God at hand, saith the LORD, and not a God afar off?” (Jer. 23.23). The point of the question is God’s omnipresence. In Isa. 50.2, “Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I no power to deliver?” Yahweh is rebuking his people for their lack of trust. Habakkuk pictures hyperbolically Babylonian invaders advancing more swiftly than leopards. As might be expected, prophetic invective is replete with irony, sarcasm and satire. The figure of irony is employed to make a sarcastic point when Amos tells the Israelites in 4.4: “Come to Bethel, and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression; and bring your sacrifices every morning, [and] your tithes after three years.”

There is forceful situational irony in the circumstance that the fire intended to consume Daniel’s companions, consumes instead their persecutors. In Nahum’s prediction that Assyria’s vaunted military might, will turn out to be mere weak women, will desert them in the heat of battle like grasshoppers at sunrise, the trenchant sarcasm is all too obvious. Similarly, Amos’s penetrating social criticism comes to the fore when he says that the exploiters of society who have built luxurious homes will not be able to live in them. To those familiar with the Hebrew tongue, alliteration and assonance are additional sources of rhetorical reinforcement.

Apart from the broad range of literary figures listed above, prophetic writing also made frequent use of conventional motifs and themes such as the call /
answer motif; familial relations of father and son, husband and wife; the motifs of
the vine and the fig tree; the Day of the Lord; and the all too common theme of the
shepherd and the sheep. Another theme is that of reversal or transformation: those
currently triumphant defeated; the weak exalted. Fantasy is a mode of
representation much favoured by prophets when dealing with issues of cosmic
consequence. In a fantastic vision, a river can overflow an entire nation; a ram’s
horn can grow sky-high and knock down stars. God, nations and natural forces
appear as characters in a prophesied drama.

Where verse is used as the vehicle of prophecy, Hebrew prosody has a
significant contribution to make to the communication of the message. The
governing principle of Hebrew verse is parallelism: the balance and counter poise
of two halves of a line (versets) and between lines (occasionally there could be
three verses in a line). This parallelism can be syntactic, semantic and rhythmic. It
is unusual for all three to occur together. Robert Alter (Alter and Kermode 612)
has illustrated the basic patterns of poetic parallelism with reference to David’s
victory psalm in II Samuel chapter 22. Verse 30 of this song illustrates all three
parallelisms: “For with you I charge a barrier, / with my God I vault a wall.” Here
semantic and syntactic parallels correspond exactly:

with you / with my God

I charge / I vault

a barrier / a wall

Each verse has 3 stresses, yielding a 3+3 parallelism of stressed syllables,
which is the commonest pattern in biblical verse. The general rule is for one verset to
have not less than two and not more than four syllables. Within this scheme there can be symmetrical combinations of ‘4+3’ or ‘3+2’. No two stresses follow each other without an intervening unstressed syllable. Biblical writers sought to avoid monotonous regularity through different kinds of elegant, sometimes significant, variation. In the following verse, parallelism of meaning is combined with disparity in syntax: a predicative assertion in one, a narrative statement in the other:

For thou [art] my lamp, O LORD: and the LORD will lighten my darkness. (22.29)

When the waves of death compassed me, the floods of ungodly men made me afraid; The sorrows of hell compassed me about; the snares of death prevented me; (22..5-6)

The chiastic boxing in of the verses helps reinforce the theme of entrapment “in the snares of death.”

Another frequent variation is elliptical syntactic parallelism. In this structure, the verb in the first verset does duty for the second verset as well. This produces a 3-2 stress pattern: “And he sent out arrows, and scattered them; lightning, and discomfited them” (22.15). “He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock; ” (Deut. 32.13). A rock in the first verset is expanded into “a flinty stone” in the second.

Verse 9 in David’s song is an example of a triadic line (a line of 3 versets), the usual pattern being dyadic: “For the LORD’S portion [is] his people; Jacob [is] the lot of his inheritance.”
In long poems triadic lines can be used to mark the beginning or end of a segment, introduce an element of tension or instability, using the third verset to contrast or even reverse the first two versets. In the quoted line, although, the three versets are semantically parallel, there is a temporal and logical sequencing of ideas from smoke to the cause of smoke (fire) to the intensity of fire.

This fact has a bearing on the right way to interpret Hebrew verse. It used to be thought that parallelism implies synonymity, two different ways saying the same thing. Alter insists that this is not the case. He contends that in the vast majority of cases there is:

… a focusing, heightening or specification of ideas, images, actions, themes from one verset to the next. If something is broken in the first verset, it is smashed or shattered in the second verset; if a city is destroyed in the first verset, it is turned into a heap of rubble in the second. A general term in the first half of the line is typically followed by a specific instance of the general category in the second half; or, again, a literal statement in first verset becomes a metaphor or hyperbole in the second. (Alter and Kermode 615-6)

Focusing or intensification is not the only effect to be achieved in parallelistic structure. In some verses, there is achieved a distinct sense of narrative development from verset to verset. The following verse from Psalm 37 will illustrate: “The law of his God [is] in his heart; none of his steps shall slide. The wicked watcheth the righteous, and seeketh to slay him” (v.31-32). In the first line, avoiding calamity is presented as the result of keeping the Lord’s teaching.
The relation is *causal*. In the second, trying to kill a man logically comes later than lying in wait for him. A similar narrative progression can be detected in the following verse from Psalm 89: “All that pass by the way spoil him: he is a reproach to his neighbours” (v.41). The second verse marks a later stage of destruction than the first.

This double capability of Hebrew poetics-- to focus a theme, concept, action or event and develop it further along a temporal, causal or logical relation-- has a close bearing on the present study. Isaiah’s craft in handling the devices of his rhetorical tool-box has a unique charm in rendering the moral law that human must respect the sacred otherness of every single creature. Nothing could be enslaved or possessed -- not even the land.