THE WOE-ORACLES OF THE PROPHETS

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THE INTERPRETATION of the OT is in essentially the same danger as is any other effort to grasp the meaning of ancient records: The desire to understand very often leads to a wishful exegesis which knows beforehand what answers will be given by the texts or monuments. The prophetical books in particular have been suffering from this *eis*egetical method. Not asking carefully enough what *kind* of literary material has come down to us, and what literary and preliterary history this material underwent before it found its final shape, many a serious scholar has addressed incongruous questions to the documents which are collected in our canonical prophets. It is necessary but to mention the basic difficulties. Not only is the fragmentariness of the prophets' preserved writings a major obstacle to an endeavor to rewrite the history of the men themselves or their theology, but it is even more embarrassing to find texts which refuse to answer historical or theological questions. A great variety of forms of speech[1] was used by the Hebrew prophets, figures of style, which were rooted in the manifold institutions of the ancient society, and which even in secondary prophetic usage exercised a considerable influence on what and how the prophet spoke. Those forms, for instance, which are modelled after the customary forms of indictment, defense, or dialogue in a family- or city-court of justice naturally give information about the theological situation, the state of affairs in the relationship between Israel and Yahweh. They say little, however, about historical details.[2] Again, those oracles, formed like the cries of the watchman on the city wall (cf. Jer 4 5-6; 8 14-17), certainly refer to an historic event, but they do so in such dim and stereotyped terms that it is impossible to reconstruct the exact situation. As to theological problems, moreover, these oracles are silent; they do not reflect upon the fundamental religious significance of the events.

It seems appropriate, therefore, to establish very carefully in each individual case what the indigenous features of a given text are in regard to its form elements and its origin in a particular situation of life in ancient Israelitic society. Only after the type of a preserved textual unit

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"The author is indebted to Miss Elizabeth Emerson for her help in correcting his English."

[1] Following H. Gunkel and A. Alt, "form of speech" are defined in this study as a characteristic pattern of language, style, and ideas which is necessitated by concrete and recurring human action in society. Social groups condition and sanction not only the behavior of their members but also their various ways of speaking under given circumstances.

[2] Cf. for instance Isa 1 18-20; Jer 2 4-13; Mic 6 1-5.

thus has been determined, can the meaning of this text in its given context be discussed. The enormous possibilities which this approach offers for the understanding of prophetic literature have not yet been exhausted.[3]

I

Among the forms of speech the Hebrew prophets employed to express their indictments the woe-cry (הוי) recurs with marked emphasis in several prophetical books. This fact alone clearly indicates that the formula had been in use over a long period of time, and it suggests that the prophets — though inside the canonical OT the indicting "woe" is found only in their writings — borrowed it from some other area of life.[4]

With this in mind our task would be first to investigate the structure of the form concerned, second to localize it according to its possible origin and trace its way towards its usage in prophetic speech, and third to draw conclusions as to the meaning, purpose, and significance of this particular form for the prophetic message. C. Westermann has given this form some attention already.[5] His analysis of the material is valuable, but the derivation of the woe-form from the curse[6] must be challenged. In consequence, we reach conclusions basically different from his.

Can we discern anything important for the structure of the woe-oracle by investigating its first formal characteristic, the interjection itself? Though little information may be expected from an interjection or exclamation, which belong to a stratum of language very little supervised by rational thinking, it is quite clear that woe-cries may be distinguished in several areas of life. The deceased are mourned and offered the הוי.[7] The related formula אוי has a very similar function.[8] This use of the exclamations may go back to very ancient animistic beliefs and is distinctly different from the prophetic usage as an indictment-cry. Both

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[3] Claus Westermann has published the most recent and comprehensive form-critical investigation of prophetical literature: *Grundformen prophetischer Rede*. The book contains also an extensive bibliography and a survey of the history of the form-critical approach.

[4] The other possible conclusion, that the woe-form was developed and transmitted in prophetical circles, will turn out to be unwarranted in the following analysis.

[5] *Op. cit.*, pp. 136 ff.

[6] S. Mowinckel, from a mere phenomenological point of view, had connected already the woe-form with the curse; cf. *Psalmenstudien* v, pp. 2, 119 ff. But even he has to distinguish very soon between a more and a less powerful formulation (הוי — ארור) and a more or lesss private use of the curse (*op. cit.*, p. 71).

[7] I Kings 13 30; Jer 22 18; 34 5; cf. H. Jahnow, *Das hebräische Leichenlied im Rahmen der Völkerdichtung*, BZAW, 36 (1923), pp. 83–87. Somewhat mutilated forms of this lament occur in Amos 5 16; Ezek 30 2. Jer 48 1 and 50 27 become more like a threat already; the הוי in Jer 30 7 probably has to be amended.

[8] Num 21 29; 24 23; I Sam 4 7, 8; Isa 6 5; 24 16; Jer 4 13, 31; 6 4; 10 19; 15 10; 45 3 (Ps 120 5); Prov 23 29; Lam 5 16.

particles have still another meaning when introducing a threat, a pronouncement which not only forecasts a catastrophe but consciously endorses and promotes it. The most obvious cases are: Ezek 13 3, 18; Isa 3 9, 11; Jer 13 27; 48 46; Isa 29 1; 10 5; Zeph 2 5; Num 21 29; Ezek 16 23; 24 6, 9; Hos 7 13.[9] Other nuances of הוי appear in cases where the particle is connected with expressions of revenge (Isa 1 24) or of great excitement (Isa 17 12; 18 1; 55 1; Jer 47 6; Zech 2 10, 11).

It seems that none of these usages can account for the employment of הוי in prophetical indictments. The impersonal classification and enumeration of misdeeds introduced by the woe-formula must have had its particular zone of validity aside from all the other types of woe-words. An investigation of the body of the woe-oracles should lead us closer to an answer to this question.

The words following the introductory woe have, with few exceptions, one purpose: they seek to describe a person or a group of persons in regard to what they are doing, their deeds being the cause for the foreboding woe-cry. This is most obvious when the active participle immediately follows the interjection.[10] "Woe (comes upon) one who is doing such and such," seems to be the basic formula. Characteristically the prepositions ל or על, which sometimes provide the threatening force to a woe-saying, are missing. The pronouncement of doom seems very factual, if we abstract it from the prophetical context in which the words now are embedded. There seems no willful intent in the woes to call down destruction upon the people concerned. The misdeeds as expressed in the participle constructions bear the impending misfortune in themselves. It is no wonder that a definite address, as well as any indication of a speaker, is generally lacking, features which would be vital for a pointed prophetical announcement of judgment or salvation.[11]

The passages which have nominal constructions (nouns or adjectives)

[9] Most of these examples employ a preposition after the woe-cry, either ל (Isa 3 9, 11; Jer 13 27; 48 46; Ezek 13 18; 16 23; Hos 7 13; Num 21 29), or על (Ezek 13 3), which point towards the persons threatened. The speaker usually is Yahweh himself (cf. Ezek 13 3, 18; 16 23; 24 6, 9; Jer 13 27; 48 46; Hos 7 13). The addressed party sometimes is directly named (Isa 10 5; 29 1; Jer 13 27; 48 46). Occasionally there is a clause of motive following the woe (Hos 7 13; Isa 3 9), such as we would expect to find after prophetic oracles (cf. Jer 5 10 f.; 6 1; 8 16 f.; Isa 3 8). Cf. also the classification of woe-words according to their usage in P. Humbert, *Problèmes du livre d'Habacuc*, pp. 18 ff.

[10] In 23 out of 34 cases we find this very construction: Isa 5 8, 11, 18, 20; 10 1; 29 15; 31 1; 33 1; 45 9, 10; Jer 22 13; Ezek 13 18; Amos 5 18; Mic 2 1; Hab 2 6, 9, 12, 15, 19; Zeph 3 1. In Jer 23 1 the first neutral participle takes another qualifying one as an attribute. Isa 1 4 and Amos 6 1 may be counted here because the participle is the really significant word, not the noun or adjective.

[11] Woe-oracles, into which the direct address is introduced, are rare and bear the stamp of prophetic modelling, as Isa 5 8 ff.; 10 5; 29 1. Likewise, whenever the "I" of the speaker appears in the woe-form proper, we may safely assume a later transformation of the form; cf. Jer 23 1 and also Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

after the interjection show essentially the same drive towards a formula-
tion of the wrongdoing. The nominal expression, being neutral as to any
value judgment, needs to be qualified in order to make clear the bewailed
misdeed.[12]

It is necessary to watch the form further unfold if we are to determine
where it ends. In some rare cases the woe-exclamation is followed by
nothing but a description of the evildoers in participial expressions:
Isa 5 20; (5 21); 33 1; Amos 6 1;[13] Hab 2 6.[14] Isa 5 18; 45 10; Hab 2 19
expand and illustrate the participles with quotes. These examples show
that the participle form is self-sufficient and need not necessarily be
amplified by any other form elements. Isa 5 20, for instance, is a well-
rounded unit:

> "Woe (comes upon) those
> who call the bad good and the good bad,
> who turn darkness into light and light into darkness,
> who change the bitter into sweet and the sweet into bitterness."

This evidence for the independence of the participle in woe-indict-
ments is underlined by those passages which elaborate the participle by
other verbal expressions.[15] The objective 3rd person, usually in the plural,
definitely remains the standard form in these continuations; cf. Isa 5 8;
10 1 ff., etc. There still does not appear the authoritative "I" of any
speaker, as would be the rule in genuinely prophetic words. The pattern
set by the participles which, in positive expressions, pointed to committed
crimes, is followed by the subsequent verbal forms: They are formulated
positively and do not, as a rule, rebuke failures to live up to certain
demands. Similarly, the historical connotations implied in chance imper-
fects with waw consecutive (Isa 29 15; 31 1) are due to the prophet's
interpretation. The normal prophetic woe-form contains general and
timeless indictments of historically unspecified evildoers.

So far the indictment, introduced by הוי, spelled out by participial
forms which may or may not be followed by finite verbs or by verbals,
gives the impression of a unified whole. But whereas the beginning of
each unit can be easily determined — any formulas preceding the הוי-cry
as in Ezek 13 3, 18 or 34 2 are later stylizations — the end of the form
seems difficult to settle. The indictment frequently leads to a threat:

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[12] Cf. Isa 5 21, 22; 28 1; 30 1; Ezek 13 3; 34 2; Nah 3 1; Zech 11 17.

[13] There appears to be no organic connection between vss. 1 and 3 ff. Vs. 1abα seems
self-explanatory. Like other Amos oracles (cf. Amos 5 7; 3 12bβ; 2 7), vs. 3 starts
abruptly with a new participle.

[14] The variant of the Dead Sea commentary has an imperfect instead of the second
participle; yet W. H. Brownlee, *The Text of Habakkuk in the Ancient Commentary from
Qumran* (*JBL* Monograph, XI) pp. 57 f., prefers the more difficult wording of MT.

[15] Cf. Westermann, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

Isa 5 9, 13 f., 24; 28 2–4; 30 3–5; 31 2–3; Mic 2 3; Hab 2 16; Zeph 3 5.[16] Other
continuations are: a lament (Isa 1 5 f.); a series of ironical questions as
they may occur in a dispute (Isa 10 3, 4a); a proverbial saying (Isa 29 16;
45 9b); a new accusation, in some cases with renewed threat or judgment
(Isa 45 11; Jer 22 15 ff.; 23 2; Ezek 13 4–6; 13 18b–19; 34 2b–4); a rhetorical
question, this element occurring also in some of the mentioned accusations
(Amos 6 2; Hab 2 7, 13); applications of the woe-saying to the totally
different realm of world history (Hab 2 8, 10, 16–17); a further indictment
in different style (Zeph 3 3–4). There can be no doubt that in the present
prophetical context the combination of two or more form elements after
the introductory woe-cry is meant as a kerygmatic unit. But looking
at these units from an historical point of view, one realizes that the junc-
ture of two or more so disparate forms can only be explained by postulat-
ing separate origin and growth before a combination took place. Since
the differences between those form elements have been described al-
ready,[17] it is sufficient to summarize a few observations which, however,
are intended as arguments for a separate historical development of the
form elements: 1) The woe-form proper, describing deplorable and
dangerous misdeeds, proved to be stable and consistent in its structure,
while the attached elements (threats, proverbs, etc.) are of various
character. 2) The juncture between both parts quite often is specifically
marked.[18]   3) In the group of "woe-form with following threat" the
second part is occasionally of a sort making it an independent unit of
messenger-formula, threat, or indictment; cf. Mic 2 3; Isa 5 24; 28 2–4.
4) Again, in the "woe-threat combination" the personal style in the
latter part contradicts the impersonal attitude of the former element.
5) The existence of woe-forms which consist of only the participle (or
participle and verb) indictment can best be explained by the assumption
that there had been an independent form of this kind.

Thus we may say that the prophets preserved a form of speech in
their writings which announced to groups of evildoers woe, that is, im-
pending misfortune, doom, destruction because of the specified deeds
which had been committed by such evildoers. Examples of this form
are Amos 5 18; 6 1; Isa 1 4; 5 8, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22 f.; 10 1; 29 15; 30 1; 31 1;
Mic 2 1 f.; Jer 22 13 f.; 23 1; Zeph 3 1; (Ezek 13 3, 18); Ezek 34 2; Isa
45 9, 10; Nah 3 1; Hab 2 6, 9, 12, 15, 19. The prophets used, transformed, and
expanded these forms. Since it is unlikely that they created such an

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[16] Nah 3 2 ff. is a vision of destruction, with the threat beginning only in vs. 5.
Hab 2 7, in the present context, must be understood as a threatening question.

[17] Cf. especially H. W. Wolff, "Die Begründungen der prophetischen Heils- und
Unheilssprüche," ZAW, 52 (1934), pp. 2 ff., 6 f., 11 ff. Wolff clearly points out the
differences between "Begründung" und "Weissagung," but is not, at this point, inter-
ested in the history of the forms; neither is Westermann, op. cit., pp. 136 ff.

[18] Cf., for instance, לכן (Isa 5 13, 14; 5 24; Mic 2 3), הנה (Isa 28 2; Mic 2 3), the perf.
consec. (Isa 30 3), or a whole new introductory phrase (Isa 5 9; Mic 2 3).

impersonal, unhistorical instrument for their concrete preaching, we may now ask: What particular area of life had brought forth these woe-forms?

II

The formal analysis showed the outlines of a standard woe-form. In trying to determine the origin of this form we must investigate more carefully the content and motives apparent in these prophetic woe-oracles.

In quite a number of cases the prophet's own ideas, his emphasis on theological concepts like disobedience and guilt, clearly show that the old form of the woe-cry has been filled with the prophet's own message. Even the oldest literary examples of our form belong to this category: "Woe (comes upon) those who are awaiting Yahweh's day" (Amos 5 18), with the oracle immediately falling into a direct question after this genuinely prophetic pronouncement. So even the form betrays the influence of Amos' own outlook upon the coming day of judgment. The same is true for Amos 6 1, "Woe (comes upon) those who feel safe in Zion, who think themselves secure on the mountain of Samaria." The prophet's concern for the relationship of Israel to Yahweh dominates this saying as well. It would be too rash, however, to see only this transformation of old forms taking place in Amos. The frequent use of the participle-indictment without the characteristic introductory "woe" indicates the influence of the old woe-form. Amos 5 7, 10 seem to be good illustrations of this assumption.[19] Together Amos 5 7 and 5 10 make a well-rounded unit, exactly corresponding to the standard woe-form, and in content resembling closely those "untheological" woes, which in all likelihood are the prototypes for the "prophetical" woe-oracles.

> "(Woe is upon) those who turn justice to wormwood
>   and cast down righteousness to the earth,
>   they hate him who reproves in the gate
>   and abhor him who speaks the truth" (Amos 5 7+10).[20]

As may be expected we find more woe-oracles which bear the prophet's stamp on their content. The relationship of Israel to Yahweh is clearly the burden of Isa 1 4; 29 15; 30 1; 31 1 — all indictments of the apostasy

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[19] The priestly oracle, starting in Amos 5 4 ("For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: Seek me and live . . . ."; cf. Amos 5 14 f.) ends with vs. 6. Amos 5 7 is another unit, independent of this oracle, as the totally different impersonal style shows. An original woe-exclamation at its beginning may have been lost. The insertion of the hymn (5 8–9) now separates the oracle from its continuation (finite verbs!) in vs. 10.

[20] The frequent use of participles in indictments should be noted: Amos 6 3–6; 2 7; 2 12b; 4 1; 5 12b; 6 13; 8 14; 9 10. This habit certainly never obstructs the more natural, prophetical direct address, but is in itself hardly in agreement with the usual way a prophet addressed his audience; cf. Amos 2 10–13; 4 4–11; Hos 4 1–6; 5 1–2; etc.

of the people. Special groups, persons, or places are reproached for neglecting the responsibilities towards their God.[21]

So we can say tentatively: First, the employment of an older woe-form by the prophets has led to a considerable reshaping of its content in the course of its adjustment to the prophets' message. Second, the form of the older woes still dominates these prophetic pronouncements, though certain changes can be observed; for instance, the gradual intro-duction of the speaker and the personal address into the woe-form. Third, the meaning of the woe-form as used by the prophet shifts more and more from an essentially objective pronouncement of the misfortune which will be inherited by certain evildoers to a genuine indictment.[22]

Which motives govern the woe-oracles that are left to be discussed? The excessive and illegitimate acquisition of property serves as the cause of the announced distress in Isa 5 8; Mic 2 1 f.; Hab 2 6b, 9; (Jer 22 13). The injustice connected with the greedy accumulation of wealth is ex-plicitly mentioned in Hab 2 12; Mic 2 2b; Isa 5 23; (Jer 22 13). Again, concern for justice for the oppressed is voiced in Isa 10 1 and Isa 5 22 (cf. Isa 5 11), with the only difference that the root of the perversion of justice is seen in the misuse of professional skill or in drunkenness respectively.[23] All these individual threads seem to be braided into the general statement Isa 5 20:

"Woe (comes upon) those who call the evil good and the good evil, who turn darkness into light and light into darkness . . . ."[24]

If the woe-form ever existed independently from the preaching of the

[21] Cf. Jer 22 13 f.; 23 1; Ezek 13 3, 18; 34 2; Zeph 3 1 ff.; Nah 3 1; Hab 2 19. Quite possibly in some of these passages an older "woe" may have been adapted to meet a concrete situation. Jer 22 13, for instance, may well contain an older saying: "Woe (comes upon) one, who builds his house with injustice and his upper rooms by unright-eousness" (cf. Hab 2 12). Jeremiah would have applied it to king Jehoiakim (cf. 22 15 ff.).

[22] The late and scanty use of the prepositions ל and על in genuine הוי-forms seems to be connected with this shift; cf. Ezek 13 3, 18.

[23] Cf. Isa 28 1 and the somewhat dark allusion in Hab 2 15.

[24] It is certainly true that the same emphasis on social ethos, the same effort to unmask socially disruptive practices, can be found plentifully in prophetic writings apart from the woe-form; cf. for instance Amos 2 6; Hos 4 1 f.; Isa 1 21–23; Jer 7 9; Ezek 22 6 ff. We may immediately add, however, that the same concern for social justice was found throughout the Ancient Near East, and was by no means a monopoly of the Hebrew prophets; cf. J. H. Breasted, *The Dawn of Conscience*; B. Meissner, *Babylonien und Assyrien*, II, ch. 22; and a host of relevant documents from ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. The conclusion would seem to be: "Theological" concerns in woe-sentences appear to be secondary; "social" concerns, however, must be integral and original. As the woe-*form* could not be derived from prophetic activities, the *content* of the social woe is not of the prophet's making either. When it comes to the point of distinguishing between realms of life and the corresponding statements of social concern, not an elaboration of *what* was *thought*, but only a close observation of *how* the concern was *expressed* can help us.

prophets, then we have found an integral part of it: its concern for social justice. This mission was executed in the peculiar way of calling awesomely "woe" over the unknown one who might have deviated from the right path. Since the interest in the wholeness and soundness of social affairs is a basic one and practically everybody's concern, there are various ways possible in attributing the particular fears expressed in woes over the sinner, to different institutions of the ancient society. Kings, priests, judges, elders, patresfamilias are all interested in the preservation of their society. Since we are separated historically from the ancient life, our only procedure can be to ask whether there are other literary layers in the OT and outside which show an interest, voiced in a similar way, in their contemporary society.

OT law comes to mind as soon as "justice" and "righteousness" are mentioned. Of all formulated laws it can be said that they try to preserve the existing conditions of society.[25] Laws suited for the palaver in the gateway do this from the post-factum point of view, just like our woe-words: they deal with a committed crime or a given problem of civil order.[26] The other kind of "law" in the OT deals with the same question, how to preserve the integrity of society, from a preventive point of view. It orders "do not steal, kill, commit adultery," *before* these possible accidents happen.[27] The similarity in purpose and content of our woe-forms to both of these endeavors for justice is apparent, though a full identity can be found in neither case. It does not share the official air, the distinction between case and consequence and the legal refinement with the law of the city-gate. It also contrasts the preventive outlook of the ethos of the clan by dealing with committed deeds.

The other layer of literature, also concerned with maintaining social order, is what is commonly called the wisdom literature. Biased understanding which sees in ancient wisdom only a shrewd business speculation for acquiring happiness and good fortune overlooks this vital concern of the sages. By analyzing the good and the foolish ways of life, and with straight exhortation or warning, the wise men try to preserve the order in their world. The very concerns which we found so prominent in our woe-cries are also found in various forms in the wisdom texts. A greedy pursuit of wealth violating the established order is considered a basic evil; thus in Prov 1 10, 13:

[25] For Israelitic law cf. M. Noth, *Die Gesetze im Pentateuch*, reissued in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (1957), pp. 9 ff.

[26] Cf. the regulations in Exod 21 1–22 19; Deut 21 15–23; 22 13–29; 24 1–7; 25 1–12.

[27] Cf. Exod 20 12–17; 22 20–23 9; Lev 18 6–23; 19 3–18; Deut 22 1–12; 23 1–26; 24 8–21; 25 4, 13–15. This effort to uphold justice originated, not in the court trials of the city-gate, nor in the cult (cf. A. Alt, *Die Ursprünge des israelitischen Rechts*, reissued in *Kl. Schriften* I, 1953, pp. 278–332), but in ancient clan- and family-ethos (cf. this writer's dissertation: *Wesen und Herkunft des sogenannten apodiktischen Rechts im Alten Testament*, Bonn 1961).

"My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent.
    (If they say) . . .
    We shall find all precious goods,
    we shall fill our houses with spoil . . . (do not go with them)."[28]

In various other texts the newly rich are blamed for their practices: Job 22 5 f.; 31 24 f.; Bar 3 16–17; Ecclus 5 1–3, 8. The problem of class distinctions and of the theodicy resulting from extreme wealth on the one side and poverty on the other, looms large in many wisdom reflections.[29] By dwelling upon this subject of the injustice, which is the fate of the powerless, the wisdom texts show that it is one of their central aims to combat the existing evil and to promote a social order with dignity for all. It seems that the society which is referred to in all these instances is a sedentary one in which property rights play an increasing rôle.[30] But our woe-cries or the wisdom-texts do not try to preserve the old situation in a legal fashion with formulated laws; rather they deal with this problem on a more private basis, with bitter puns, exhortations, and warnings. We observe in such records the unofficial struggle against economic corruption and exploitation, not priestly or governmental regulations.[31] The woe-form does not belong in such authoritative and sophisticated circles. It comes from the same stratum of popular ethos as do the wisdom accounts.

In Isa 10 1 f. and 5 22 we found the basic theme of oppression and injustice present in another complaint charging the rottenness of the scribes and the drunkenness of men of influence. Both themes occur independently in wisdom texts. A guide for scribes can be found in Ecclus 38 31–34 and 39 1–11, further professional ethical instructions in 38 24–30.[32] Various other professions are mentioned in the Proverbs (11 1; 13 17; 25 13). And, on the other hand, the danger of drunkenness — for the most part as a menace to one's own happiness — is referred to in Prov 20 1; 23 20 f.; 23 29–35; 31 4; Tob 4 15; Ecclus 19 2; 31 25–31. The

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[28] Cf. also Prov 1 19; 28 22, 25. In Job 20 4–5, 15, 18, 19, 20–22, this vice is held prominent among the characteristics of the "unrighteous" and "alienated."

[29] Cf. Prov 14 31; 17 15, 26; 18 5; 22 22; 23 10; 24 23–25; Ecclus 13 15–23; 14 3–19; 31 1–4; Eccles 5 9–12. That unlawful acquisition of property usually is connected with the economic exploitation of the poorer classes is focused upon in some of the mentioned texts already. It appears explicitly in many other accounts: Eccles 3 16; 5 7; Job 22 5–10; 24 2–4; 31 13, 31; Tob 4 5 ff., 14; Wisd Sol 1 1; 2 10–12; Ecclus 4 1–10; 7 1–3; 35 12–20. These texts take different approaches to the matter: some warn against or forbid the oppression of the weak; some state it as a fact in this sad and evil world; some are indictments, others confessions of innocence.

[30] The woe-oracles presuppose a similar social situation with property rights in real estate at stake; cf. Isa 5 8; Mic 2 1 ff.

[31] Cf., as a contrast and parallel, the settlement of possible legal complication concerning inherited real estate in the priestly account Lev 25 13 ff.

[32] Cf. also E. J. Gordon, *Sumerian Proverbs*, pp. 200 ff.; 246 ff. (ethical prescriptions for different professions).

general summary of the aims of those who preserve order (Isa 5 20) finds its analogy in statements like Job 33 27; Amos 5 7; Prov 2 12, 13; 9 17; and the numerous passages which speak about "right" and "wrong," "prudence" and "foolishness," "crookedness" and "straightness," "righteousness" and "godlessness," in more general terms.

Thus it seems to be fairly well established that there is also a real analogy here between the woe-sayings on the one side and the wisdom literature on the other. Moreover, the tone of the wisdom texts, their unofficial air, their moral authority which has no coercive power, their outlook on the crookedness of the world — all these are in accord with what we found to be the attitude of the woe-sentences. The reason why the motive of social justice is so prominent among the themes of the woe-form lies in the selectiveness of the prophets and the relative scarcity of the whole woe-form. So most aspects of sexual ethos, very important in all wisdom texts, are not represented among the woes.[33]

From the evidence gathered above we may conclude, then, that the woe-form in its original shape and content came out of the popular ethos. There are certain connections with wisdom forms. But since "wisdom" is a literary term of some complexity we have to ask: Can we trace the woe-sayings still further back to their root in a life situation of the ancient society?

It has long been noticed[34] that the woe-form has a parallel in the OT, namely, in the curse. The curse as a spoken formula usually is intro-

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[33] The few remaining woe-sayings, which we attribute to an original stock, actually do find exact parallels in the wisdom literature. Isa 5 21 disapproves of any pride in one's own wisdom: "Woe (comes upon) those who are wise in their own eyes and shrewd in their own sight." An equally strong emphasis on humility is found in Prov 3 7; 16 19; 25 12. Cf. also Prov 28 11; Tob 4 18; Wisd Sol 9 5 ff.; Ecclus 1 6; 1 30; 3 17–25; 7 4–7; 8 8–9; 10 26–29. The sovereignty of God who can act as he chooses and the unquestionability of the function of parents as procreators according to the order of nature are stated in Isa 45 9, 10:

"Woe (comes upon) him who strives with his Maker,
        an earthen vessel with the potter!
Does the clay say to him who fashions it,
        'What are you making?'
        or: 'Your work has no handles?'
Woe (comes upon) him who says to a father,
        'What are you begetting?'
        or to a woman, 'With what are you in travail?' "

If these two woes belong together, then they seek to express the inviolability and inscrutability of the natural, cosmic order, a theme which is so fundamental to the wisdom literature that the whole books of Job and Ecclesiastes are founded on it. Prov 30 3–4 takes a similar attitude. It is noteworthy that in the woe-sentences, as well as in the wisdom parallels, God is the God of the universe and not the God of the covenant with Israel; cf. Eccles 5 1; Ecclus 1 27; 7 29–31; 17 25–32.

[34] Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, pp. 2, 54.

duced by ארור.[35] The structure of some of these ארור-words is very similar to the woe-sayings. In Deut 27 15–26; Judg 21 18; Jer 48 10; Mal 1 14; Gen 27 29; Num 24 9; (Ps 119 21) we find, following the ארור, a participle construction of the simplest kind. The participle describes the action which falls under the curse. There is nothing else necessary for this purpose, the short phrase is a self-sufficient unit. The response of the people in Deut 27 is a liturgical addition. Most of the other occurrences of ארור, however, show a curse directly administered without a description of the misdeed; cf. Gen 3 14; 4 11; Deut 28 16–19; Josh 9 23. If the party concerned is not addressed directly but is referred to in the 3rd person, the description of the misdeed can be lacking, too. This latter can then be inferred from the situation (cf. Gen 3 17; 9 25; I Sam 26 19). If the situation is not clear from the imprecation itself, there can be added a motive clause introduced by כי (Gen 49 7) or a relative clause (Josh 6 26; I Sam 14 24, 28; Jer 11 3; 17 5; 20 14, 15) to indicate the nature of the offense.

Were the material for both types, the woe and the curse, more abundant, we might be better able to determine how far the similarity of content goes. The curses, especially in their cultic use in Deut 27, rest heavily on the basic rules of the popular ethos. Of course, there are special theological, deuteronomistic concerns added, as in Deut 27 15. But since there is no real basis for a comparison of content, we must examine the differences of both forms in emphasis and meaning. This may well result in the recognition of their basically different origin.

The curse is always a powerful and effective utterance (Josh 6 26 and I Kings 16 34; cf. Josh 9 23; Judg 21 18; et passim) and therefore must be administered by an authorized officeholder, be it Joshua, or the recognized magician Balaam (Num 22 6 etc.), or the head of a clan (Gen 27 29; 49 7), or members of the organized priesthood (Deut 27 14). All unauthorized use of formulas of cursing is strictly outlawed because it endangers the existence of the society (cf. Exod 22 17; 21 17; 22 27; Deut 18 10 f.). The woe-sentences cannot compete with such official and powerful pronouncements. They are much more private, much more detached from the scene of evildoing, much more contemplative, much less effective. The woe-cries, though of quite similar intention in condemning destructive deeds, still seem to deplore the existence of the evil, to sympathize with the wrongdoer, to throb with the recognition that an evil deed will bring about nothing but misfortune, despair, and heartbreak.

Where, then, was the woe-form used if not in the circles of priests and lawgivers or in the assemblies of elders and judges? The preserved

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[35] The root קלל, when used of cursing, is always in the pi'el; cf. Gen 8 21; 12 3; Exod 21 17; 22 27; Lev 19 14. The noun קללה is contrasted with ברכה in Deut 30 1; Josh 8 34. Cf. J. Pedersen, *Der Eid bei den Semiten*, pp. 64 ff.

examples of the woe-form hardly evidence their origin. The occasional occurrences in later writings outside the canonical OT[36] cannot contribute much to a solution of the problem, except by demonstrating that it was not entirely the prerogative of prophets to use this form.

Perhaps an observation in connection with the mentioned curses can lead us further. The curse has its counterpart in the effective and authoritative blessing (ברך); in fact, oftentimes both are referred to together.[37] Is there a similar counterpart for the woe-form? Such a counterpart obviously would have to be a more private blessing, a praise of someone doing right from the perspective of a detached observer.

Indeed, there does seem to be such a formula. The Hebrew introduction is the well-known אשרי, "happy!" The formula has been preserved in quite different contexts, namely, in the liturgical language of the psalms (26 out of a total of 43 OT occurrences), but also in wisdom texts (10 times). The original form of these private blessings seems to have been a participle construction:

"Happy are those who observe justice,
who do righteousness at all times!" (Ps 106 3)[38]

In some instances the participle is augmented by a noun giving the generic classification of the ones who deserve the beatitude: Ps 84 13; 89 16; 112 1; Prov 8 34; 28 14. Most of the passages, however, employ a nominal construction. To describe the receiver of happiness, a neutral noun (various words for "man" or "people") is used and a following relative clause specifies this addressee.[39] Since both formulas, the participle and the nominal construction, are quite close in meaning and outlook, there is little wonder that they can be used side by side. Again, the impersonal form is predominant in the beatitudes. There are only a few examples which have a personal address: Deut 33 20; Isa 32 20; Ps 128 2; Eccles 10 17. To these may be added those blessings which are formulated for a third party, but indirectly affect the vis-à-vis of the speaker: I Kings 10 8; II Chron 9 7. Thus it appears that the beatitudes also are spoken from the standpoint of the detached observer.

[36] Cf. Ecclus 2 12, 13, 14; 41 8; Eth En 93–104; Slav En 52; Matt 23 13 ff.; Luke 6 24 ff.; 11 42 ff.; Matt 11 21; 24 19. Characteristically enough most of these woes are directly addressed to the guilty party in the 2nd person. The original impersonal objectivity of the form has been abandoned.

[37] Cf. Deut 28 3–6 and 28 16–19; Gen 27 29; Num 24 9; Gen 12 3; Deut 30 1; Josh 8 34. The double scheme of curse and blessing (cf. Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 97) probably goes back to ritual practices. The analogous phenomenon in wisdom texts (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 117 ff.) originated, however, in a didactic process.

[38] Other examples of this participle construction are: Isa 30 18; Ps 2 12; 32 1; 41 2; 84 5; 119 2; 128 1; Dan 12 12 and, in reversed word order, Prov 14 21; 16 20; 29 18.

[39] Cf. Isa 56 2; Ps 1 1; 32 2; 33 12; 34 9; 40 5; 84 6; 94 12; 127 5; Job 5 17; Prov 3 13. A special form omits the noun altogether and continues the אשרי with either a connected (Ps 137 8, 9; 144 15; 146 5) or unconnected (Ps 65 5; 119 1; Prov 8 32) relative clause.

Devotional language and ideas naturally have made inroads into this form even as the prophetic influence did in the case of the woe-form. Still we may assume that there was a group of beatitudes which matched the woe-sayings in content and motivation. Some words with a strong concern for social justice can be discerned. Ps 106 3 has been quoted already. Ps 41 2 should be noted: "Happy is he who considers the poor!" and Prov 14 21: ". . . he who is kind to the poor — happy is he!"[40]

Another hint, though dim, indicates the common origin of the woe-form and the beatitudes. There are a few texts in which these occur side by side, complementing each other. Two passages in the OT have to be restored from their corrupt state before they can be used as evidence. In Eccles 10 16 f. הוי or אוי is to be read instead of אי; in Isa 3 10 f. אמרו probably has to be emended to אשרי:

"Happy the righteous, because he is well,
    because he can eat the fruits of his labor.
Woe to the unrighteous; he is badly off,
    because the deeds of his hands come over him."[41]

Such evidence for the direct relationship between announcements of woe and bliss can serve only as one small additional argument, save for the similarity in structure, content, and general attitude, which stand out clearly in contrast with the corresponding parallel of curses and blessings. That the comparison between the good and praiseworthy and the evil and condemnable is one of the main techniques in the discourse of the sages can be seen in many places: Prov 14 21ab; 16 20ab; 28 14ab; Ps 1 1, 4; 32 1, 2, and 10; 112 1, 5, and 10 are a few of the passages in which the beatitude-form is preserved, together with the substitution of other phrases for the corresponding woe-form.

In the light of all the evidence made available by the preceding investigation it may be suggested, then, that the woe- as well as the bliss-formula had its origin in the wise men's reflections about the conditions of this world. There were other forms which were traditionally employed by the sage in performing his task of penetrating into the order of the world, notably, the māshāl, the riddle, the exhortation, and the reproach. In all likelihood, the woes and the beatitudes were tools in the hand of the wise men as well. They may well have served educational purposes in that young people had to memorize catalogues of woes (cf. Isa 5 8 ff.;

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[40] The development of the beatitudes also can be followed through the psalmic literature, the various types of Jewish writings (cf. Ecclus 14 20 ff.; 25 7 ff.) into the NT (cf. Luke 6 20–22; Matt 5 3–11), and into other literary works. Cf. R. Bultmann, *Geschichte der synoptischen Traditionen*[4], pp. 113 ff. Our concern here is the probable origin of the form.

[41] Cf. also the juxtaposition of woes and blessings in Luke 6 20–26. Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, p. 125, assumes that in Ps 112 10 the corresponding הוי has been omitted for the sake of a proper acrostic order.

Hab 2 6 ff.). The knowledge of woe-provoking behavior was to guard a member of ancient Semitic society from any steps which might endanger himself and his group. The announcement of bliss had the positive function of pointing to the rewards of a respectable life within the laws of the social group. Why more wisdom texts have not preserved this form is hard to discover. Possibly it had been fashionable for only a limited time. Perhaps by some curious accident the attention of later collectors came to be focused by personal preference on other wisdom forms, or the form was appropriated by the prophets and therefore no longer usable as wisdom counsel.

III

Returning to the beginning of this investigation, we now have to ask: In what way, and for what reason, and to what end did the prophets make use of the woe-form, which they found in the popular ethos?

If the observations made above are correct, then one source of the preaching of the prophets has been touched upon which has not yet received sufficient recognition. The popular ethos, in other words, the adequately known and commonly accepted order of social affairs was respected by the prophets, was drawn upon whenever they had, in the name of Yahweh, to turn against the rottenness and corruption of their contemporary society.[42] The process of taking over the old ethical rules and applying them to the new situation — in the name of Yahweh! — proves that the prophets believed that this very order of society, of which the wise men were the guardians, was the order sanctioned by Yahweh which had to be maintained. No cultic pronouncement of commandments was necessary for the prophets to see this. If the cult affirmed the rule of Yahweh over human affairs within the tribal league and the Israelitic state, this certainly was due to the popular ethos, which, in every region and period of the Ancient Near East, apparently held that the social order and the world order were sustained by the gods.

A second point is this: If the observations made above are correct, then we have to be very careful in evaluating the actual social situation of the prophets' times. The use of old, preformed materials indicates that there were certain standardized reproaches of possible and actual social wrongs. But they were not restricted to one age only. The insatiable desire of the modern mind to pinpoint everything in the past

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[42] The assumption that the prophets consciously propagated a new, divinely revealed (Israelitic) ethos as over against an insufficient popular (Ancient Near Eastern) ethos has to be revised. This view of the prophets is still shared by many scholars in very different theological camps; cf., for instance, N. W. Porteous, "The Basis of the Ethical Teaching of the Prophets," *Studies in OT Prophecy*, pp. 143–56; R. Bach, "Gottesrecht und weltliches Recht in der Verkündigung des Propheten Amos," *Festschrift Dehn*, (Neukirchen, 1957) pp. 23–34.

according to where and what "historically happened" does not find much support in such cases, when the prophets, standing in a long row of tradition, repeated old maxims and reproaches. The wealth of the time of Jeroboam II and the sudden perversive influence of city dwelling during the lives of Isaiah and Micah have to be reconsidered, together with the recognition that the charges of the prophets against their fellow citizens and leaders may not have been historically unique as they now appear. The myth that it was the prophets who invented the ethical maxims behind their charges must be discarded in the light of the evidence.

A third point: The way the woe-form changed from the mere foreboding announcement of bad luck to the wrongdoer to the pointed and Yahweh-centered indictment of covenantal apostasies, shows how free and how bound the prophet was over against this particular tradition. The ethical rules, laid down in the woe-sentences, though coming from a private and unauthoritative sphere, have consistency, not only of form but also of content, which resists easy changes. So it happens that in Isa 5 8 ff. and Hab 2 6 ff. whole preformulated chains of woes are used by the prophets. But the woe-form also lives on in quite genuinely prophetic indictments, as we have seen. The filling of the old forms with new content demonstrates the freedom of the preachers of Yahweh's will.