PART THREE

THE LATTER PROPHETS

The writings of the latter prophets originated in a period of prolonged crises when the existence of Israel was threatened. The theme of judgment therefore dominates their texts to such an extent that the question of reward is only rarely raised. The severity of judgment sometimes seems to exclude any possibility of mercy and forgiveness. Rebellion against God has brought Israel to complete estrangement. The imminence of judgment against Israel echoes the final and universal judgment against the world as a whole. The greater the tendency among the prophets to view everything from a radically theocentric perspective, the greater the possibility that the history of Israel’s desolation will open new hope of an eschatological redemption for Israel and other nations. Punishment and forgiveness are seen to be inextricably linked in the fulfilment of God’s purpose for his people.

The suffering of the people under the oppressive rule of their own or foreign leaders has, nonetheless, some clearly positive effects: there are signs of a reassessment, repentance and a desire to return to God. In these circumstances, the prophets tend to emphasize the possibility of renewal. The prophesies of salvation contain the promise that God will show his people mercy, forgive their evil doing, renew the covenant, and lead them back to the Promised Land (see especially Hosea; Jer 30–32; Ezek 36:16–38; and Deutero-Isaiah). The forgiveness which Israel is offered before the exile seems inappropriate in view of the nation’s lack of repentance. The message of forgiveness is, however, not related to a particular historical situation but to the redemptive plan of God for history as a whole. Israel will assume an important place beside Assyria and Egypt, it will account for God’s blessing “in the midst of the earth” (Isa 19:16–25). The universal redemptive plan shatters all narrowness and resistance on the side of humankind because it is grounded in the nature of God as Creator (Jonah).

It is impossible to apply a uniform approach when dealing with the writings of the prophets. The basic literary method needs to be adjusted constantly to take into account the individual features of each book, section, and unit. A close reading of passages, however, raises some crucial questions: When, if ever, does a prophecy envisage condemnation as final and total? What is the place and the role of the righteous remnant in this scheme?