CHAPTER 1

Reading Ancient Israelite Prophetic Books

Perhaps no figure from the ancient Near East is more foreign to much of the twenty-first century world, especially the West, than the prophet. This is not to suggest that prophetic figures are absent from the contemporary scene.[1] Some individuals are "prophetic" due to their conviction and commitment to speak in such a way as to promote change on the part of their hearers (be they for or against them) with respect to an issue of major importance. A classic example is Martin Luther King Jr.'s long-standing opposition to racism in the United States.[2] In such cases, there is some overlap between contemporary uses of the adjective "prophetic" and the kinds of prophecy that this volume explores. Walter Brueggemann even proposes that contemporary efforts to understand and articulate the content of the Old Testament are inevitably prophetic and "countercultural" insofar as they follow prophecy's presentation of "alternatives in judgment and hope" against the backdrop of a world that "is marked by technological,

[1] Samuel H. Brody, "Prophecy and Powerlessness," *Political Theology* 21 (2020): 43–55, explores some of these contemporary uses of "prophetic" movements in relation to political power.

[2] Joseph Rosenbloom, "Martin Luther King's Last 31 Hours: The Story of His Final Prophetic Speech," *The Guardian*, 4 April 2018.

therapeutic, military, consumerist values that empty the world of abiding meaning and risky fidelity."[3]

ISRAELITE PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN THEIR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

Regional Variations in Prophecy and Its Authority

Contemporary figures who speak out against what they perceive to be wrong, and in favor of a yet-unrealized ideal, do bear a certain resemblance to the Israelite prophets whose books are part of the Old Testament.[4] At the same time, there are fundamental differences between contemporary figures and their ancient predecessors. Foremost among them is the ancient prophets' *claim to speak on behalf of a deity*. In the ancient Near East, speech that claimed a divine origin and divine authority was typically taken seriously by its recipients, whether they were kings, officials, or commoners. At the same time, given the many cultures and long swaths of history that make up the ancient Near East, it is not surprising that prophecy's importance and authority vis-à-vis other means of determining the divine will or the future varied from one setting to another. This regional and temporal diversity is relevant to our study of the prophetic books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, since they were produced in Judah during or shortly

[3] Walter Brueggemann, "Old Testament Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 675–97 (693–94).

[4] It is important to recognize cultural, regional, and chronological diversity in the phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East. See Seth L. Sanders, "Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre," *HBAI* 6 (2017): 26–52; and the very diverse collection of texts in Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed., with contributions by C. L. Seow, Robert K. Ritner, and H. Craig Melchert, WAW 41 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2019).

after the seventh century BCE. A crucially important regional difference between the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, from modern-day Israel to south-central Turkey) and Mesopotamia has to do with the level of authority that was typically attributed to the prophetic message: "Within Mesopotamian intellectual culture, the difference between prophecy and divination was a difference between both types and levels of knowledge. Prophecy represented a significant but low level."[5]

As a result, Mesopotamian prophecy was often subject to verification by divination, as was the case at Mari, particularly when female prophets were involved.[6] Most other cultures in the ancient Near East (i.e., outside the Levant) similarly privileged "highly developed 'sciences' like astronomy and divination" over prophetic messages.[7]

Without claiming that the audience of the Israelite prophets shared the convictions of the prophets themselves, the conceptual framework for Israelite prophecy was different from that in Mesopotamia. The prophetic books that eventually became part of the Old Testament claimed to be not merely one way that YHWH communicated with his people but the privileged channel for divine revelation in terms of frequency and authority.[8] Deuteronomy 18 presents prophecy as the normal, characteristic way in which Moses, the archetypal prophet, and dozens of prophets after him would communicate YHWH's word to his chosen people. With the introduction "Thus says YHWH," the prophetic

[5] Sanders, "Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre," 33.
[6] Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 21; Esther J. Hamori, "Gender and the Verification of Prophecy at Mari," *Die Welt des Orients* 42 (2012): 1–22.
[7] Sanders, "Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre," 28.
[8] Here and throughout, masculine grammar is used of YHWH and God only to lighten the style.

speaker claimed to transmit a message from Israel's deity, and as such the message carried his unlimited authority (Deut 18:18).

In the worldview embraced by the biblical prophets, no other supernatural being had power, knowledge, or sovereignty comparable to YHWH's. On this view, no legitimate conflict of authority was possible between God's word and the proclamation of other supernatural beings.[9] There was also not supposed to be any conflict between prophecy that was in line with Israel's developing scriptures (Deut 13:1–5) and guidance offered by Israelite priests, since legitimate cultic divination in Israel was limited to particular questions of very narrow scope (Exod 28:30; Num 27:12–23).[10] And, of course, there were to be no conflicting authority claims on the part of Israel's or Judah's royal, religious, and social leaders when the divine message criticized or condemned them.[11] The prophets often indicted these groups for abandoning YHWH's law and misusing their power for their own gain rather than for the protection and advancement of the nation in covenant with YHWH.[12] This pattern stands in marked contrast to prophecy elsewhere in the

[9] Note Habakkuk's visceral reaction to YHWH's word, Hab 3:16; similarly Isa 6:5; Amos 7:2; 5, etc.

[10] Ryan O'Dowd observes that "[t]rue prophecy … affirms the great commandment (Deut 6:4–9) by hermeneutically applying the first commandment (Deut 5:6–7) to the future world of international religious discourse," O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature*, FRLANT 225 (Gröningen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 69, and again, "Deuteronomy-as-torah is the truth standard for future prophetic tests" (ibid., 72).

[11] The prophet Jonah is a very odd exception in this regard.

[12] This is not to say that prophets are never "friends" of the state, even when they are its critics; see the essays in Christopher A. Rollston, ed., *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018). Criticism of the state, however, be it of Israel, Judah, or a foreign power, is characteristic of the Old Testament at large and of the prophetic books in particular. See Robert Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants:*

ancient Near East, which provides very few examples of criticism of kings in particular.[13]

Prophecy as Commentary on the Relationship between YHWH and Israel

In conjunction with guiding, evaluating, and criticizing as necessary Israelites' behavior in relation to God and to each other, ancient Israel's prophets also gave immense attention to YHWH as Israel's covenant partner. This attention regularly focused on YHWH's continued compassion, patience, and faithfulness toward his people even when they failed to demonstrate a reciprocal faithful commitment to him.[14] The earliest writing prophets, commonly thought to be Hosea and Amos in the eighth century BCE, announced that the northern kingdom of Israel had reached a critical low point in its relationship to God due to a variety of

The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011); Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); J. Gordon McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology, Genesis-Kings* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Collin Cornell, *Divine Aggression in Psalms and Inscriptions: Vengeful Gods and Loyal Kings*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[13] Jonathan Stökl, "A Royal Advisory Service: Prophecy and the State in Mesopotamia," in *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context*, ed. Christopher A. Rollston (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 87–114 (107) concludes that "potential [prophetic] criticism is not geared toward the establishment of a new form of government or essentially critical of the king. Instead, its ultimate aim, just as all other forms of the cult and state, was to enable the king to establish and maintain ideal kingship."

[14] Here I develop Robert P. Gordon's suggestion that "the difference between Israelite prophecy and the rest may simply have been expressed in terms of its conception of its God," in "'Where Have All the Prophets Gone?': The 'Disappearing' Israelite Prophet against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," *BBR* 5 (1995): 67–86 (86).

widespread social and religious sins. Since previous disciplinary actions by YHWH had not interrupted these patterns of behavior, these prophets and others after them announced that exile, the heaviest divine sanction possible, was inevitable. Even so, some prophets interceded with YHWH on behalf of their audience, and in the early stages of this process YHWH sometimes relented (see Amos 7:1–6, in contrast to 7:7–9). Yet even when exile had become inevitable, God's commitment to his people meant that rather than destroying them completely, he promised to purify and transform them so that no future disobedience could again impede his saving will for them. This strong interest in the distant future probably contributed to the decision to preserve the prophets' oracles on a large scale, something attested only rarely in other cultures, notably during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal in seventh-century Assyria.[15]

Prophecy and Non-Israelite Nations

The understanding that the messages of Israelite and Judean prophets were of lasting significance was reinforced by their pronounced interest in the international scene. This global perspective on YHWH's involvement with the larger world continued earlier traditions and scriptures according to which his election of and involvement with Israel was intended to benefit the world at large (e.g., Gen 12:1–3).[16] Despite the fact that these prophets focused primarily on Israel and Judah and delivered their message only to those audiences and never to foreign groups (Jonah is an

[15] Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 7.

[16] See, for example, Jon D. Levenson, "The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism," in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark Brett, BibInt 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143–69.

exception), the prophets' messages included nations and events far beyond the borders of Israel and Judah.[17] Oracles dealing with non-Israelite nations, whether announcing judgment (usually) or salvation (less often), thus appear frequently in the prophetic books. Israelite prophets condemned non-Israelites for reasons not very different than those given to justify God's disciplinary punishment of his people. Israelites were held accountable to God's guidelines for their life and practice as embodied in the detailed covenant made with them at Sinai.[18] Similarly, non-Israelites were held accountable to less specific but equally binding moral norms that, although "traditional and conventional" to a degree, were woven into the human conscience and so had YHWH as their author and enforcer (Amos 1:2–2:3; Isa 10:5–19, etc.).[19] Much as YHWH's judgment of Israel and Judah was not an end in itself, his words of condemnation against the nations are often part of a larger perspective in which many non-Israelites will one day recognize his sovereignty, submit to him, and enjoy his blessing as part of his renewed people (e.g., Isa 19:18–25).

[17] Very few texts other than Jonah assert that an Israelite prophet directly addressed a non-Israelite audience; see 2 Kgs 8:7–15; Isa 14:32; 21:11–12.

[18] The dating of the Pentateuchal laws is hotly debated. For a representative argument for their relatively late creation, see Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols., trans. J. Bowden, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 2:464–93. For arguments in favor of an earlier date, with a special focus on the prophetic books, see Gene M. Tucker, "The Law in the Eighth-Century Prophets," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 201–16.

[19] John H. Hayes, "Amos's Oracles Against the Nations (1:2–2:16)," *RevExp* 92 (1995): 153–67 (166). Isaiah clearly assumes that pride and folly are sins of which both Israelites and non-Israelites can be guilty, per John Barton, "Ethics in the Book of Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, 2 vols., VTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:67–77.

Concluding Summary

Israelite prophecy can be summarized as the human mediation of authoritative divine messages to Israel in the context of her covenant relationship with YHWH.[20] The development of biblical prophecy as independent of the monarchy and other forms of political and social power gave the prophets the greatest possible freedom to criticize, confront, and even condemn their audience when necessary. Since it was presented as God's own speech, prophetic discourse could be profoundly subversive of human misuse of power.[21] Yet even the most negative prophetic messages were not the final divine word to Israel and Judah or to the world beyond their borders. The prophets insisted that beyond the judgment that YHWH would eventually bring on these groups, there was to be a future restoration that would transform and renew his people, bringing blessing to them and to non-Israelites. By offering hope through and beyond judgment, the prophetic books of the Old Testament dealt forthrightly with the grave problems their audiences faced. That same honesty allowed them to propose appropriately radical solutions to those problems. These books' theologies are thus both unwaveringly honest and surprisingly hopeful, focused on Israel and Judah yet deeply interested in the world as a whole. Finally, the scope of these books' perspective is comprehensive, since the environmental, social, and other

[20] Compare the definitions of ancient Near Eastern prophecy more broadly considered by Brad Kelle, "The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy in Contemporary Scholarship," *CurBR* 12 (2014): 275–320.

[21] See the related social-scientific study of Israelite prophecy helpfully surveyed by Kelle, "The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy." On the unique way that the ancient Near Eastern concept of covenant or treaty is developed in the Old Testament, see Robert P. Gordon, "'Comparativism' and the God of Israel," in *The Old Testament and Its World*, ed. J. C. de Moor and Robert P. Gordon, *OtSt* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 45–67 (49–51).

contextual features of human existence are as inseparable from humans' relationship to YHWH as are issues of ethics and belief.[22]

THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE (MINOR PROPHETS)

Recent Research on the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve

The last few decades have witnessed a marked shift in how many scholars approach and interpret the Minor Prophets (Hosea–Malachi). Whereas centuries of interpretation had almost without exception approached these books as *books* (originally, of course, *scrolls*), that is, as independent literary compositions, over the last few decades a growing number of specialists have begun to understand this group of compositions as more or less unified by editorial redaction (post-authorial development and additions).[23] To some extent this avenue of research was simply an attempt to understand the otherwise curious, not to say obscure, rationale behind the arrangement of these twelve writings. The clearest overall logic for the order of the Twelve in the Hebrew text tradition is a chronological movement from books associated with earlier prophets to those attributed to later ones, but the placement of Joel and Obadiah is difficult to explain on this logic. An alternative

[22] See, for example, Patricia K. Tull, "Consumerism, Idolatry, and Environmental Limits in Isaiah," in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew*, ed. Richard J. Bautch and J. Todd Hibbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 196–213. For a comprehensive survey of the recent history of interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic books, see Christopher R. Seitz, "Prophecy in the Nineteenth Century Reception," in *Hebrew Bible Old Testament III/1, the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: V&R, 2013), 556–81.

[23] A convenient overview can be found in Aaron Schart, "Twelve, Book of the: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 806–17.

attempt to explain the organization and development of the corpus thus began to focus on the ways in which these books might have developed from their earlier forms to the final forms in which we have them, and how those processes might have impacted the formation of the Book of the Twelve as a whole.

The Book of the Twelve as a Redactional Unity

At present, there is both consensus and dissent with respect to how the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve came to be.[24] In terms of consensus, many scholars find evidence in the individual books of the Twelve that each book developed *in relation to one or more books elsewhere in the collection*. Following the lead of James Nogalski in particular, such arguments often depend on "catchwords" that appear at the end of one book and at the beginning of the immediately following book in the order most often preserved in the Hebrew textual tradition.[25] Other proposed motivations for the diachronic development of these books individually and as a collection include *changing theologies* in Israel and Judah, *social upheaval* of which the exiles of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms are the most evident examples, and *the influence of eschatological and apocalyptic thinking* on Israel's scriptures.

[24] Recent research on this corpus is surveyed briefly in Daniel C. Timmer, "Prophetic Literature: Book of the Twelve," in *The State of Old Testament Studies*, ed. H. H. Hardy II and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming), and exhaustively in Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Jakob Wöhrle (eds.), *The Book of the Twelve: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, VTSup 184 (Leiden: Brill, 2020) and Julia M. O'Brien (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[25] On the significance of the different order of some parts of the Twelve in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), see Marvin Sweeney, "Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve," in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney, SBL SymS 15 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 2000), 49–64.