

[Over the past decade I have started over several times with respect to introducing the prophets in my courses on the Old Testament prophets. There is no shortage of introductions.¹ Yet, I have found it worthwhile to try to frame an approach as I continue to reflect upon the prophets. My present explanation is at http://scriptureworkshop.com/hb/prophets/intro_proph.html. Looking back, I do not disagree with the approaches I have taken in the past, even while I have made numerous adjustments. Some of the matters I once emphasized may be of help to students. Thus, I am providing several of my “retired” introductory lecture talking points and introductory statements on the prophets. Gary E. Schnittjer, Jan, 2011.]

Introduction (2004)

The preachers of ancient Israel spoke God’s will for his people, and for all others that they might hear. The preachers proclaimed God’s judgment against the sin of his people, and of the nations. The ancient people of God were, like his people today, often stubborn, complacent, and self-righteous. The preachers made clear that though God would bring judgment against the rebels this was no indication that he had changed his mind or decided to turn against his word. Rather, the preachers repeatedly emphasized the hope of salvation—their listeners were invited to trust in the word of God.

Some of the sermons of the poet-preachers were collected into books and embraced as the word of God to speak to every generation. The four major collections of sermons in the Bible are known as the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve Prophets.

Tragically, these writings are largely ignored by the evangelical community in North America. Part of the reason is the perceived difficulty of Hebrew poetry, and the complexity of the writings. Most evangelicals, moreover, have little knowledge of the ancient Israelite people to whom the prophets preached. The deeper issue for the neglect, however, is likely much more serious. Many North American evangelicals think that the Old Testament in general, the Psalms excepted, is boring and irrelevant. The irony is that Jesus, Paul, the disciples, and the other New Testament writers and early gospel preachers, constantly drew on their Bible, the writings of Moses and the prophets, in order to proclaim the good news of Jesus the Messiah, and to outline God’s way of holiness for believers.

Talking points for introductory lecture (c. 2005)

(I) WHAT THE PROPHETS ARE NOT

- **literalistic, rational, academic style** prose akin to western modernist tendencies
- **biographically** oriented
- placed in clear, **specific historical settings**
- clearly delineated **lists of predictions**, with unambiguous corroborating detail which can be easily correlated, almost mathematically, with historical events
- that is, sets of predictions which should be **listed in a left column across from the references to the fulfillments on the right**

(II) FORM

(A) **Poetry**, in general, has many distinct features.

¹ I especially recommend Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (InterVarsity, 2002), xi-xxx. Also see Brevard S. Childs, “The Canonical Shape of Prophetic Literature,” *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 46-55; Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 122-44; and Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, *The Theology of Israel’s Prophetic Traditions*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (Westminster John Knox, 1965, 2001).

(1) The most important point is that **poetry is poetic**; it is not prose, literalistic, linear, nor does it accord with Aristotelian rationality. It is beyond, transcending ordinary discourse.

(2) Biblical poetry has distinct features like **elevated language, related lines, dense metaphorical imagery, and ambiguity**, to name a few.

(B) The prophets are, by and large, **poet-preachers**.

(1) This means that there are **listened to by faith-listeners and faith-readers**. Their poetic sermons, however, do *not always directly address* the listeners. Often they preach against others.

(2) Perhaps the most distinct difference between today's suburban North American evangelical preachers and the biblical preachers is our focus on individually oriented aims versus **corporate or social identity and problems**.

(C) In Sum

(1) The OT preachers speak **the word of God to those that will hear**—the faithful.

(2) They **often speak indirectly** and with the **ambiguous potential of Hebrew poetry**.

(3) The original setting of the sermons and poems as they were delivered is hidden even further by the process of editing these sermons into **“books” designed to speak transgenerationally**.

(4) Finally, the poetic sermons are **directed at social concerns**, albeit sin and responsibility, narrative identity, or hope for God's people.

(III) OUTLOOK

(A) What are the themes running through the prophets literature?

- responsibility—sin and judgment
- hope for forgiveness and for the rule of Yahweh
- the word of God—scripture, covenant
- people of God (Israel/ Judah/ Zion/ Jerusalem)
- messiah
- past, future

(B) The Central Point

- If there is a central issue with which the preachers are wrestling, it is to explain the fall of the city of God, Jerusalem. The problem surrounds the forever promises of God and the reality that the Hebrew kingdom has fallen.
- Why did the kingdom fall?
- What did God mean by what he promised?
- Is there hope for the future? If so, what is it?

(IV) VEHICLE

(A) How did/does the prophetic literature function?

- collections of poetic and prose sermons, spoken and delivered to past generations, collected and creatively edited books
- God's word to the kingdoms of Israel and Judah was inscripturated as both a present testimony to his judgment and grace in the past, and to speak to the life setting of all readers. Thus, **the books speak transgenerationally**.
- That is, they are set in ancient Israel, yet are fulfilled trans-communally

(B) Why do we need to listen to sermons and messages from the past?

- to bring readership to repentance and faith in the God according to the power of his word
- to instruct readers on the power of God’s word and explain the need to obey his will by every generation
- the past is a picture of the present (and future)
- the theological exegesis of the prophets of their Bible shows readers of all ages how to read the scriptures

(C) How did the prophets read their scriptures?

- **The Torah is God’s word, his story, his will** for his people and all humankind. The prophets read their scriptures with an eye to explaining the acts of God to the rebellious generation of their own day.
- We read *the scriptures of the prophets with the theological exegesis of the prophets* as a testimony of the word of God in the word of God. **The biblical prophets explain the meaning of the scriptures as an abiding testimony to every generation**—the Bible explains the Bible.

Talking points for introductory lecture (c. 2007)

How does the scriptural collection of the preachers’ writings work?

A They direct readers to the big things:

- 1 They point to the judgment of God—especially the fall of Jerusalem, the kingdom of God (in this sense the preachers run parallel to the inevitability of the fall of Jerusalem in the Primary Narrative)
- 2 They point to the breadth and depth of sin in the people of God (the kingdom is rotten); the people have been sinful, they are sinful even in worship, they will be sinful for time to come. This is a mandate for humility.
- 3 They point to the coming salvation of God, the Lord of the kingdom; his salvation will be rooted, as in the past, in his love and faithfulness to his word; the future is faithfully imagined according to the past work of God; the reflections on the Torah story invariably leads to the hope of the good news of God’s salvation, even while accepting the sinfulness of humankind

B They direct readers to the little things:

They resist easy reading and generalization. Their poetic form and scripturally allusive message forces readers to study the Torah and the story of the fall of the kingdom. The new reading of the work of humanity and the work of God creates a humble faith vision for the people of God.

(Torah) 1 They invite the reader to reread the Torah. *What have they missed? Is God good? Is he faithful? If so, then what is the basis of hope in the face of judgment?*

(Deut Narrative) 2 They invite the reader to carefully consider the wickedness of the kingdom of God’s people

Isaiah/Micah: accent the *new David* (within the framework dominated by Gen and Exod, namely creation/redemption)

Jeremiah: the wicked people will be exiled from outside Jerusalem, inevitably (in accord with Num), the hope of the *new covenant* is rooted on revisiting Deuteronomy

Ezekiel: *New temple*—the people and the temple must be purged and cleansed before the glory of God will return and dwell with his people (Exod 25-40 and Lev)

The Twelve Prophets challenge many of the religious fictions of the people of God that, in part, kept them from really hearing and obeying Torah in the first place.

Hosea: there was no good old days—love, betrayal, unfaithfulness

Joel: judgment looms from generation to generation

Amos: there are no good people

Obadiah: Will Edom celebrate the downfall of the people of God and escape his wrath?

Jonah: God forgives the enemies of God’s people—there is no one beyond his forgiveness

Micah: How will justice prevail?

Nahum: temporary repentance cannot withhold the judgment of God

Habakkuk: Who is righteous anyway?

Zephaniah: the anticreational judgment looms over the wicked

Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi: The past exilic community of God’s people maintain continuity in moral failure, and the hope of God’s mercy for salvation

C The gospel of Christ is rooted on the prophets’ rereading of the Torah

Reading the Latter Prophets (1998)

The Latter Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve) present the reader with a variety of significant challenges.² These include, first, the difficulty in genre itself. What are these books supposed to be? Because of the nature of the terms related to “prophet” and “prophecy” in English along with the traditional Christian views of these writings, prophetic books are often considered merely as series of predictions. While the Latter Prophets do appear to contain many predictions, this view of the prophets is flawed. In my view, the prophets were most centrally preachers who brought God’s word to the people.

Second, what is the relationship of the prophets themselves and the books that bear their names? There is no single answer. For the most part the prophetic books appear, on the surface, to be anthologies or edited collections of sermons, oracles, and so forth, attributed to specific prophets. Perhaps these collections were edited by the prophets’ followers or scribes, such as, for example, Jeremiah’s scribe Baruch (see Jer 45:1-5). Directly related to these first two challenges is third, what is the significance of the various genres that comprise the books of the so-called writing prophets? The writings include large amounts of poetic oracles as well as biographical, historical, and sermonic prose. The poetic material adds all the challenges of other portions of Hebrew poetry. Moreover, the propensity of figurative and metaphorical language employed in Hebrew poetics invests the prophetic anthologies with a good measure of ambiguity.

Fourth, against what context or contexts should the Latter Prophets be read? This is a most difficult and supremely important issue. Traditionally, the prophetic scrolls have been read against reconstructed historical contexts. The historical context is undoubtedly important, but the guesswork, often with too-thin evidence, has long been embraced with too much optimism. As the points above already indicate, the nature of the prophetic writings possess, in many places, so much ambiguity that determining the precise historical contexts against which to read them becomes a dangerous affair. Childs notes, “To assume that the prophets can be understood only if each oracle is related to a specific historical event or located in its original cultural milieu is to introduce a major hermeneutical confusion into the discipline and render an understanding of the canonical Scriptures virtually impossible.”³

² The issues involved in interpreting the kind of apocalyptic literature found in Daniel, Zechariah, and the Apocalypse are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

³ Brevard S. Childs, “The Canonical Shape of Prophetic Literature,” *Interpretation* 32 (1978): 53.

A clue for regarding the Latter Prophets can be found by locating this sub-collection within the larger collection of the Hebrew scriptures. In particular, the Latter Prophets maintain a referential orientation toward both the Torah and the Former Prophets (Joshua-Judges-Samuel-Kings). These will each be considered. The Latter Prophets routinely quote, echo, and interpret the Torah. In fact, the Torah scroll provides the standards by which these preachers measure their auditors/readers. Thus, when a prophet introduces an oracle or sermon with “Yahweh says ...” the prophet may be intending to offer direct discourse from God (in the tradition of Balaam), or he could be preparing to deliver a judgment or promise based upon God’s will embodied in the Torah. Even carefully study cannot divide these into mutually exclusive categories.

In addition to the Torah, the Latter Prophets also maintain a referential relationship to the narrative of the Hebrew kingdom found in the Former Prophets ... at least that is how it seems on the surface. Specifically, it appears that the pre-exilic writing prophets delivered their sermons and oracles to the people referred to in the Deuteronomistic Narrative (a.k.a. the Former Prophets), especially the portion of the narrative that appears in the book of Kings. The book of Kings and thus the Former Prophets, however, *was not written to the people that it was written about*. Thus, the messages of the pre-exilic Latter Prophets predate the writing of the Former Prophets narrative. That is, in literary perspective the Former Prophets is actually referential to the pre-exilic Latter Prophets. The upshot of all of this is the recognition of the challenges faced by one who desires to interpret the Latter Prophets in relation to a historical context that cannot be known in great measure outside of the narratives that were written in relation to, to one degree or another, the pre-exilic Latter Prophets themselves.

Positively, the referential orientation of Latter Prophets toward the Primary Narrative (the books of Genesis through Kings) or the Torah and Former Prophets offers the reader the clue toward beginning to read these writings. In other words, the context which offers significant advantages to readers is the canonical or biblical context. Childs described, “An original prophetic message was expanded by being placed in a larger theological context.”⁴ In my view, the Latter Prophets can be fruitfully read in their context in the Tanak, most importantly the Latter Prophets can be read in relation to the Primary Narrative. Reading scripture with scripture is a significant method for interpreting the Latter Prophets.

The importance of the canonical context has been recognized by many in relation to the collection of prophetic anthologies known as the book of the Twelve Prophets (i.e., the so-called “Minor Prophets”).⁵ Traditionally each of these “books” has been extracted from its context in the scroll of the Twelve and been read against a reconstructed historical framework. The precariousness of this approach is evident not only because of the ambiguity of many of these writings, but also because few of these prophets is named in biblical narrative (Jonah, Haggai, Zechariah). Many have become aware of the intimate interrelationship that the Twelve have with each other. This scroll is not only framed by love and land in Hosea and Malachi, but each prophet maintains significant points of contact with those adjacent to it. I agree with Childs when he stated, “To work with the final form is to resist any method which seeks critically to shift the canonical ordering.”⁶

Finally, perhaps the most necessary element of reading the Latter Prophets is patience. These beautiful and elusive scrolls require pondering as well as a working knowledge of the rest of the Hebrew scriptures.

⁴ Childs, “Canonical Shape,” 49.

⁵ See, for example, House, *Old Testament Theology*.

⁶ Childs, “Canonical Shape,” 48. Also see Coggins, Dyck, House, Pierce, and many others.