INTERPRETING
THE PROPHETIC
BOOKS

INTERPRETING THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

An Exegetical Handbook

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To former students at
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Bethel Theological Seminary
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SERIES PREFACE

AN APPRECIATION FOR THE RICH DIVERSITY of literary genres in Scripture is one of the positive features of evangelical scholarship in recent decades. No longer are the same principles or methods of interpretation applied across the board to every text without regard for differences in genre. Such an approach can lead to confusion, misunderstanding, and even wrong interpretations or applications. Careful attention to differences in genre is a critical component of a correct understanding of God's Word.

The Handbooks for Old Testament Exegesis series (HOTE) offers students basic skills for exegeting and proclaiming the different genres of the Old Testament. Because there is no one-size-fits-all approach to interpreting Scripture, this series features six volumes covering the major genres in the Old Testament: narrative, law, poetry, wisdom, prophecy, and apocalyptic. The volumes are written by seasoned scholar-teachers who possess extensive knowledge of their disciplines, lucid writing abilities, and the conviction that the church and the world today desperately need to hear the message of the Old Testament. These handbooks are designed to serve a twofold purpose: to present the reader with a better understanding of the different Old Testament genres (principles) and provide strategies for preaching and teaching these genres (methods).

These volumes are primarily intended to serve as textbooks for graduate-level exegesis courses that assume a basic knowledge of Hebrew. There is no substitute for encountering God's Word in its original languages, even as we acknowledge the limitations of language in plumbing the depths of who God is. However, the series is also accessible to those without a working knowledge of Hebrew, in that an English translation

is always given whenever Hebrew is used. Thus, seminary-trained pastors for whom Hebrew is a distant memory, upper-level college students, and even well-motivated laypeople should all find this series useful.

Each volume is built around the same six-chapter structure as follows:

1. The Nature of the Genres
2. Viewing the Whole: Major Themes
3. Preparing for Interpretation
4. Interpreting the Text
5. Proclaiming the Text
6. Putting It All Together: From Text to Sermon

Authors are given freedom in how they title these six chapters and in how best to approach the material in each. But the familiar pattern in every volume will serve students well, allowing them to move easily from one volume to another to locate specific information. The first chapter in each handbook introduces the genre(s) covered in the volume. The second chapter covers the purpose, message, and primary themes in the individual books and canonical sections under consideration. The third chapter includes such diverse matters as historical and cultural backgrounds, critical questions, textual matters, and a brief annotated bibliography of helpful works. The fourth chapter sets forth guidelines for interpreting texts of the genre(s) under consideration. The fifth chapter details strategies for proclaiming such texts. The final chapter gives one or two hands-on examples of how to move through different stages of the interpretive process, in order to demonstrate how the principles discussed previously work out in practice. Each volume also includes a glossary of specialized terms; these terms are boldfaced at their first occurrence in each chapter.

The Scriptures themselves remind us in many ways about the importance of proper interpretation of God's words. Paul encouraged Timothy to "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15 NRSV). In an earlier day, Ezra the scribe, along with the Levites, taught God's Word to the postexilic community: "So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading" (Neh. 8:8 NRSV). It is my prayer, and that of the authors and publisher, that these handbooks will help a new generation of God's people to do the same.

Soli Deo Gloria.

—DAVID M. HOWARD JR.
Series Editor

PREFACE

WHEN PEOPLE SEE ANOTHER BOOK ABOUT "PROPHECY," there can be some strange reactions. Some will sneer and quickly move on to the next book on the shelf in the bookstore because they believe that most books about prophecy are mere speculation and are written to scare people about the end of the world. Others will have a more positive approach, but will first look to find out if this book supports their theological beliefs about the rapture or the millennium. A few will examine the table of contents and read a few pages here and there to get an authentic flavor of the author's approach to prophetic literature.

I would invite all readers to try this last approach because this is not the typical book on exactly what will happen when the end time prophecies are fulfilled and this is not a polemical book that argues over what eschatological system is correct. I have written this book for seminary students and pastors who want to understand and preach from the prophetic books of the Old Testament. This was one of the main focuses of my teaching and writing, so I include some of the lessons I have learned over the past thirty-five years.

I do not believe that preaching or teaching from the prophetic books is easy, but it is rewarding because in the prophetic messages we come to understand the will of God for his people and God's future plans for his people. Many prophecies are about what the Israelites should do to glorify and please God, as well as the things they should not do. God's love for his people, his marvelous grace, and his sovereignty are very evident when he confronts those who are disobedient and when he encourages the faithful. His judgment of the sinner and his blessing of the humble person who fears God are emphasized again and again. The

prophets spoke out against oppression, violence, pride, and idolatry, but championed justice, care for the weak, faith, and love for God. One cannot help but think that these messages would be very similar if these prophets were preaching today, because similar problems exist today.

This book is about the proper interpretation of biblical texts from the prophets based on an appreciation of their historical setting and an understanding of the characteristics of prophetic literature. They lived in a different era and their messages were put in traditional forms of speech that are different from the way we talk today. Nevertheless, once each prophet's message is set in the context of the political, socio-economic, and religious setting, all of a sudden their messages come alive because we see why the prophet was saying these things and we understand what he was trying to accomplish through his prophetic preaching. When people broke their covenant relationship with God, he graciously sent a prophet to correct them and encourage them to return to fellowship with God. A covenant lawsuit would warn the people of God's displeasure and a summons to repent would call them back to God.

In addition to understanding the historical setting and the literary forms, a person who wants to share the messages of the prophets needs to be able to outline the text around one main theme, to illustrate the main theme in practical ways that are meaningful and interesting to people today, to discover the theological principles that each message teaches, and to present a challenging application that is derived from the themes in that prophetic text. Thus we suggest a series of steps that a person might follow to be well prepared to preach a message from a prophetic book. This is not a homiletics book, but we do offer many suggestions on how to prepare a message. In the final chapter we take two prophetic examples (one from Isaiah and one from Jeremiah) to provide a practical example of what might be involved in preparing a message on a prophetic text.

I would like to thank a number of people for their assistance in completing this book on the prophets. They have made this book better, easier to read, and have helped me sharpen the presentation of this material. First, I want to thank the series editor, Dr. David Howard, who is both a former colleague and long-time friend, who patiently went through every sentence and every footnote to carefully edit and strengthen the presentation of my work. His encouragement, patience, and quick responses to emails have made the completion of this book much more enjoyable. I also want to thank the leadership and staff at Kregel for their professional assistance in relationship to so many details. I am also grateful for the many students who have questioned, challenged, and encouraged me in classes I have taught on the prophetic books. Their interaction has forced me to dig deeper and to wrestle with issues that are sometimes not all

that clear so I dedicate this book to them. I also want to thank my wife Susan, who faithfully reads and makes suggestions on what I write. Finally, I want to express my thanksgiving to God for his grace and care for us during this past summer when he spared our lives in a very serious automobile accident. "Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lam. 3:22–23).

Soli Deo Gloria.

—GARY V. SMITH

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	*Anchor Bible*
ACC	*A Continental Commentary*
ANET	*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*
BibSac	*Bibliotheca Sacra*
BHS	*Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*
BST	*The Bible Speaks Today*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CC	*Concordia Commentary*
HCOT	*Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*
ICC	*International Critical Commentary*
Int	*Interpretation*
ITC	*International Theological Commentary*
ISBE	*International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement*
LXX	*Septuagint*
NAC	*New American Commentary*
NASB	*New American Standard Bible*
NCBC	*New Cambridge Bible Commentary*
NIBC	*New International Biblical Commentary*
NICOT	*New International Commentary on the Old Testament*
NIB	*New Interpreter's Bible*
NIV	*New International Version*
NIVAC	*New International Version Application Commentary*
OTL	*Old Testament Library*

SAA	*State Archives of Assyria*
SAAS	*State Archives of Assyria Studies*
TynBul	*Tyndale Bulletin*
TDOT	*Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*
TNTC	*Tyndale New Testament Commentary*
TOTC	*Tyndale Old Testament Commentary*
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*
WEC	*Wycliffe Exegetic Commentary*
WAW	*Writing from the Ancient World*
WBC	*Word Biblical Commentary*
ZAW	*Zeitschrift Für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

1

THE NATURE OF PROPHETIC LITERATURE

The Chapter at a Glance

Analyzing Prophecies
- Distinguishing Between Three Temporal Categories of Prophecy
- Genres of Prophecy

The Poetry of Prophecy
- Notice the Parallelism
- Notice the Development of Parallelism
- Deciphering the Imagery
- The Persuasive Power of Prophecy

THE PROPHETIC BOOKS WERE OF GREAT IMPORTANCE to the New Testament church because of the prophecies about the Suffering Servant who died to atone for the sins of many (Isa. 52:13–53:12).[1] Many were fascinated with Daniel's future **apocalyptic** visions about a time of great persecution followed by the coming of the Son of Man to rule all nations forever (Dan. 7:1–27).[2] Although some prophets re-

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1. Matt. 8:17; Luke 18:32–33; John 1:29; 10:14; 12:38; Rom. 4:25; 10:16; 15:21; Acts 8:32–33; 1 Cor. 15:3; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 2:9–11; Heb. 9:28

2. Matt. 23:3–31; Mark 13:3–27.

ferred to God's plans for the glorious future **kingdom of God**, most prophets spent much more time teaching the Israelites about how God wanted them to live their lives in obedience to his instructions in the Mosaic covenant. The prophets repeated the stories about God's many acts of power and grace, plus they reminded the people of Israel about the many things God said when he first made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19–24).[3] Many prophets warned that sin would bring about God's judgment, challenged people to trust God, corrected foolish misunderstandings, and condemned the proud and violent. Frequently, the audience needed to acknowledge their rebellion against God, seek the Lord's compassion, and repent of their sins in order to receive God's gracious forgiveness. These prophecies offered a snapshot of the ministry of the prophets and illustrated how they spoke to people who were not walking by faith or loving God with all their heart and might (Deut. 6:5).

ANALYZING PROPHECIES

After a person has examined several different prophecies, several widely shared common features naturally become evident. One group of prophecies will feature narrative stories about a prophet's dialogue with an audience, while another group of prophecies will include poetic sermons a prophet gave to the people of Israel. The vocabulary, structure, and content of these poetic prophecies will naturally organize these prophecies into subgroups (different **genres**) that pronounced words of salvation or words of a prophet crying out with strong lamentation. These prophecies will differ in relationship to their literary style (narrative or poetry), their genre (judgment or salvation), and the time of their fulfillment (the present, the future, or the distant future). If a person will keep these organizational criteria in mind when reading a prophetic passage, they will help the reader properly understand and interpret the message of each prophecy.

Distinguishing Between Three Temporal Categories of Prophecy

Although the prophets did not give separate names to differentiate between these three broad temporal categories of prophecy, they were conscious that there was a difference between their teachings and admonitions about God's plans for: (a) the present or immediate fu-

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3. A critical view of the prophets and the growth of their books by **redactors** is found in Odil H. Steck, *The Prophetic Books and Their Theological Witness* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000) while an evangelical perspective is available in J. Daniel Hays, *The Message of the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

ture; (b) the distant future **eschatological** events; and (c) the symbolic **apocalyptic** prophecies about the dramatic events at the end of this world. In many cases the prophets differentiated between these three temporal categories, but at times one of these emphases would seamlessly merge into another without much warning, so there was more of a gradual interconnection between these categories, rather than a sharp distinction between them.

Prophecies Describing Present Events

The first category included **narrative prophecies** that recounted an event in the life of the prophet. An example of this would be a narrative about a prophet's call to ministry. These accounts told the readers about God's past revelation of his word to a prophet, his marvelous ways of revealing himself through words, visions, or **theophanies**, plus God's immediate plans for the prophet. These accounts included the narrative story of Isaiah's rare glimpse of the majesty and glory of the Lord of Hosts, the King, who was high and lifted up on a throne in his temple (Isa. 6:1–8).[4] This encounter with God purified the lips of the prophet and explained God's plan for Isaiah to serve as a prophet who was going to harden the hearts of many. The narrative about the call of Ezekiel pictured a mysterious revelation of God's glory as well as the chariot, upon which God was riding (Ezek. 1:1–3:27). At this time God filled the prophet with his words on a scroll. He gave Ezekiel words of instruction about the difficult ministry that he would experience as a watchman charged with warning a rebellious Israelite audience living in the Babylonian exile. In these accounts God spoke to the prophet, but the prophet did not share his[5] message with any audience within the story (though they probably did describe their call experience to some people). These records were important because they assured the prophets' audience that these chosen servants of God were true prophets, called and empowered by God's Spirit, and commissioned to express a message based on the words of God.

A second kind of narrative prophecy described a prophet delivering God's word in order to tell people what God did in the past (e.g., delivered them from Egypt), what God was planning to do in the near future,

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4. All Scripture references will come from the NIV. If another translation is used, it will be noted.

5. Since all cultural and textual evidence indicates that the prophetic books of the Old Testament were written by men, I will use masculine pronouns to refer to them. Nevertheless, there were female prophets in Israel (Miriam in Ex. 15:20; Deborah in Judg. 4:4; Huldah in 2 Chron. 34:22; and the false prophet Noadiah in Neh. 6:14), but they did not produce any of the biblical books in the canon. Female Assyrian prophets serving the goddess Ishtar of Arbela did produce written texts that will be discussed in chapter 3.

and what action God wanted them to take right now. These stories described Jonah's struggle with God's instructions to preach in Nineveh (Jonah 1, 3–4), Isaiah's confrontational encounter with King Ahaz (Isa. 7:1–6, 10–17) and King Hezekiah (Isa. 39:1–8), and the many narrative stories about Jeremiah's interaction with the rebellious kings of his day (Jeremiah 34–40). These texts served as examples of the failures of a prophet (Jonah), the suffering of a prophet (Jeremiah 36–38), and they included summaries of their preaching that were supposed to transform the thinking and actions of their audiences (Jeremiah 7). These prophetic accounts gave insight into the daily lives of the prophets and the interactions the prophets had with kings, priests, other prophets, and the common people.

A third group of prophecies about the present were poetic in form, but these prophecies often said almost nothing about the preaching situation, the dialogue between the prophet and his audience, or the response of the audience. The temporal setting of the prophet was not described in the poetry of Joel and he did not identify the people he spoke to when he talked about a devastating locust plague (1:2–12). He did encourage the priests and the elders of Israel to gather the people to the temple to lament (1:13–14) because the **Day of the Lord** was near (1:15–20), so he hinted at his location in Jerusalem. This persuasive message called for immediate action (using **imperative** verbs), for it was possible that the Lord might be gracious and compassionate, if the people repented (2:12–14). Likewise Amos warned that the proud and wealthy leaders of Israel would soon go into exile (Amos 6:1–14) and that God did not accept their sacrificial worship or singing (Amos 4:4–13; 5:21–27). Some prophetic sermons accused the nation of breaking the covenant (Hos. 4:2), of worshipping other gods (4:12, 17), of having no steadfast covenant love (6:6), and of trusting other nations for political survival rather than God (7:11). But Hosea also reminded his listeners that God's grace was available for those who would "return to God" (6:1; 14:1–2), for God was willing to heal them and freely love them (14:4). These prophetic instructions challenged these audiences to live godly lives because it was possible to avoid the immediate judgment of God. Most of the time the prophet and his audience did not know when God's words would be fulfilled, but the urgency of the message and various hints about what was about to happen did indicate that immediate action was needed to avoid a fulfillment in the near future.

Prophecies about a Future Era

Some prophecies contained themes that point toward the **eschatological** introduction of the **kingdom of God** when God would judge the wicked (Isa. 34:1–15; 63:1–6) and cause his glory to shine

in Jerusalem (Isa. 60:1–3; Zeph. 3:15). At that time many foreign nations will stream to Jerusalem to worship God (Isa. 2:1–4; 60:4–10; 66:18–20), all wars will end (Mic. 4:1–4), the new heavens and the new earth will appear (Isa. 65:17; 66:22), there will be no tears or death (Isa. 25:8), the dead will rise (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:1–2), the Messiah from the seed of David will reign forever (Isa. 9:6–7; Jer. 23:6–7; Ezek. 34:23; Hos. 3:5),[6] God's people will be back in their land (Amos 9:14–15), the Spirit will be poured out (Isa. 32:15; Ezek. 36:27; Joel 2:28–29), and the land will be fruitful (Amos 9:13–14; Ezek. 34:27). These and many other eschatological promises were sometimes preceded by clauses like "in that day" (Isa. 2:20) or "in the last day" (Isa. 2:2), but another way to identifying an eschatological prophecy was to compare the theological themes in a prophecy with other well-known eschatological themes in other prophetic books.[7]

Symbolic Apocalyptic Prophecies[8]

The difference between prophecy and symbolic apocalyptic texts was not always clear because some future prophecies contained symbolic language that was part of a vision. Old Testament apocalyptic prophecies displayed many of the same unusual characteristics as the New Testament book of Revelation. Apocalyptic texts viewed the world as being very wicked and about to be destroyed by God. These prophecies encouraged the righteous to be faithful to the end in spite of their hopeless situation. These prophecies included mysterious signs and wonders (such as symbolic beasts, horns, metals, or numbers), many had an interpreting angel to explain the odd symbolism, and they ended with God's promise that he planned to intervene to rescue the righteous.[9] God promised that after he has destroyed all evil on the Day of the Lord, he would welcome the saints into his kingdom where he would reign forever with the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14). This literature tended to arise in times of persecution when things seem hopeless. Some scholars classified the visions of the cataclysmic tottering and splitting of the earth in Isaiah 24,

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6. Various messianic texts are interpreted in Phillip E. Satterthwaite, Richard Hess, and Gordon Wenham, eds., *The Lord's Anointed: Interpretation of Old Testament Messianic Texts* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).

7. Common eschatological themes to look for are: (a) God coming to earth in all his glory to reign; (b) the presence of the Messiah; (c) the end of war; (d) the end of sorrow and death; (e) the coming of the Spirit; and (f) the restoration of fertility like the Garden of Eden.

8. A fuller treatment of apocalyptic literature is found in Richard Taylor, *Interpreting Apocalyptic Literature: An Exegetical Handbook (forthcoming)* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014).

9. D. Brent Sandy and Martin G. Abegg, "Apocalyptic," *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, eds., D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 177–196

the vicious attack of Gog in Ezekiel 38–39, the horns, beasts, and persecution in Daniel 7, and the chariot sent out in all directions in Zechariah 6, as apocalyptic literature. This was because of their unusual images, their pictures of cataclysmic end-time events, and the hope they gave to suffering people. Apocalyptic texts were often written in narrative style in Daniel and Zechariah, but the description of end times in Isaiah 24 was in poetry. After the end of Old Testament prophecy, the Jewish people continued to suffer under the oppressive foreign domination of the Greeks and Romans (300 BC–AD 200), so they continued to produce more apocalyptic literature (e.g., 1–2 Enoch, the Apocalypse of Abraham, Second and Third Baruch, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermes, Apocalypse of Thomas, the Ascension of Isaiah) and these texts contained many advanced and esoteric apocalyptic characteristics.

Genres of Prophecy

The prophecies in each of the three temporal categories were organized according to the genre of literature the prophets chose to adopt in expressing each of these messages.[10] Hebrews 1:1 said that God spoke "through the prophets at many times and in various ways" and these "ways" were what scholars called "genres." In the book of Psalms, a hymn and a lament were distinguishable genres because each one had a common pattern of distinctive vocabulary, a unique structure, and a different purpose.[11] Even today most newspapers have included the genres of obituaries, want ads, factual news, editorial opinions, and comics. Each of these genres has its own characteristics, vocabulary, structure, and purpose. If a foreigner would read our newspaper, they would need to understand something about these different genres, lest they misread the slanted ideas of the opinion page and think the author has presented pure unbiased facts. In a similar manner, a modern person would need to know that Old Testament prophecies were divided into different genres based on cultural patterns that were common in their ancient Near Eastern literary context. A prophet could choose to express what he want-

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10.   Two of the pioneers of the form-critical study of different genres of prophecy were Herman Gunkel, "The Israelite Prophecy from the Time of Amos," *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making*, ed., J. Pelikan, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 48–75, and Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967). The approach of form criticism is explained in Edgar V. McKnight, *What Is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) and Marvin A. Sweeney and Ehud Ben Zvi, eds., *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

11.   Mark D. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 139–73 describes the distinctive characteristics of six different categories/genres of psalms.

ed to say by using the characteristics and conventions of any genre. He was free to make small adjustment to the basic form in order to effectively communicate God's message in a culturally understandable way. Since the audience who was living in that culture knew the characteristics of various genres of communication, the prophets were able to express God's words through familiar genres that the audience understood.

The form critical study of the prophetic books identified several genres based on the common structure, vocabulary, setting, and purpose of each different genre. When comparing the characteristic of different examples of each genre, it became apparent that the prophets had the freedom to alter the way they wrote each different type of oracle in order to emphasize a point or to make their presentation more applicable to the situation of the audience.

Judgment Speech

The prophetic judgment speech (or oracle of condemnation) probably developed from the cultural context of: (a) kings sending a messenger to deliver a threatening decree to a person who failed to follow the king's instructions; or (b) from a court setting where accusations were made and punishments were handed down by a judge. The prophetic judgment speech was considered to be a message from God ("Thus says the Lord") that reported a sinful act or attitude that was contrary to God's will. The prophets used these messages to instruct people about God's view of their sinful behavior, to warn people of impending doom, and to motivate them to turn from their wickedness so that they would not experience God's judgment. The judgment speech contained two main parts: (a) accusations of sinfulness against God or others; and (b) a threat of some disaster or punishment from God.[12] The accusation drew attention to the failures of the people and explained why disaster was coming. The threat described a negative event (e.g., military defeat, loss of land, exile, famine, no rain, or a curse on crops) that would happen in the near future. These speeches typically used stereotypical vocabulary, a fairly regular structure, as well as subtle variations. The prophets were free to adjust the characteristics of the judgment speech within certain limits by adding, omitting, or creatively altering the traditional parts of the judgment speech. These characteristics were illustrated in Micah 3:9–12.

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12. Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, distinguishes between judgment speeches to individuals (pp. 129–168) and judgment speeches against the nation (pp. 169–189). The later show more development and sometimes the judgment precedes the accusation (e.g., Jer. 2:26–28).

1. Call to attention:
   3:9a   Hear this (שִׁמְעוּ) you leaders of Jacob,
                   you rulers of Israel
2. Accusations:
   3:9b–11   who despise justice
                   and distort all that is right;
                   who build Zion with bloodshed
                   and Jerusalem with wickedness.
                   Her leaders judge for a bribe,
                   her priests teach for a price,
                   and her prophets tell fortunes for money.
                   Yet they look for the LORD's support
                   and say,
                   'Is not the LORD among us?
                   No disaster will come upon us.'
3. Threat of judgment:
   3:12   Therefore (לָכֵן) because of you,
                   Zion will be plowed like a field,
                   Jerusalem will become a heap of rubble,
                   the temple hill a mound overgrown with
                   thickets.

In an earlier judgment speech against the false prophets in 3:5–8, Micah varied his language by beginning with the introductory messenger speech formula, "This is what the LORD says," omitting the call to listen, including a series of accusations in 3:5, and ending with "therefore" plus an announcement of coming judgment in 3:6–7. Micah added a unique feature in 3:8 that was not a regular part of a judgments speech when he explained the principles that were important in his prophetic ministry. This contrasted his life and purpose with that of the false prophets. When an Israelite heard a prophet give a judgment speech, they knew (a) who was speaking to them, (b) what the problems were, and (c) what would happen as a consequence of past failures. A careful examination of the accusation will reveal something about the social, political, and spiritual condition of the audience, while the judgment section was designed to warn people about what will happen in the coming months and years. When king Hezekiah heard the prophecy by the prophet in Mic. 3:1–12, he feared the LORD and sought his favor, so God did not bring this terrible disaster on Jerusalem at that time (Jer. 26:17–19). This outcome would suggest that some judgment speeches were actually conditional predictions of judgment that would not happen if the people would turn from their evil ways (Jer. 18:5–8; Jonah 3:4–10).

Covenant Lawsuit

Another way the prophets communicated God's strong displeasure with the Israelites' sinful behavior was to call them to court to face God's judgment for failing to maintain their covenant relationship with God.[13] Much like the marriage relationship between a man and a woman, the Mosaic covenant required the Israelites to maintain a faithful covenant relationship characterized by loving God with all their heart (Deut. 6:5), serving him, fearing him, and walking in his ways (Deut. 10:12). When a wife failed to maintain her marriage covenant relationship with her husband, he could take her to court to seek justice, so the prophet Micah pictured God calling his covenant partner Judah to court to answer for her unfaithful acts toward God (Mic. 6:1–16). At an earlier time the prophet Hosea portrayed God as confronting Israel with a covenant lawsuit in 4:1–6:3 (also 11:11–14:8).

1. Introduction of lawsuit:
   a. Call to attention:
      4:1a   Hear (שִׁמְעוּ) the word of the LORD
   b. Defendant identified:
      4:1b   you Israelites
   c. Plaintiff identified:
      4:1c   because the LORD
   d. Lawsuit announced:
      4:1d   has a charge to bring.
2. Summons of witnesses:
      (missing in Hosea, but in Mic. 6:1 "the mountains. . .and hills")
3. Summary accusations:
      4:1e   There is no faithfulness, no love,
                      no acknowledgement of God in the land.
4. Specific accusations:
      4:2–3   They break the Ten Commandments.
       4–10   The priests do not teach the law.
      11–14   They worship pagan gods.
      15–19   They are stubborn.
5. Defendant's speech:
      (missing in Hosea, but present in Mic. 6:6–7)
6. Announcement of Punishment:
      5:1–7   The leaders are responsible.
       8–14   God will bring destruction through war.

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13. James Limburg, "The Root רִיב and the Prophetic Lawsuit Speeches," *JBL* 88 (1969): 291–303; George W. Ramsey, "Speech Forms in Hebrew Law and Prophetic Oracles," *JBL* 96 (1977): 45–58.

7. Possibility of hope: (in 5:15–6:6, but missing in Mic. 6)
>   5:15   God will wait for them to seek him.
>   6:1–3   Some will seek God.
>   4–6   God was frustrated with their inconsistent
>   relationship.

Like any other form of speech, a prophet could alter aspects of the covenant lawsuit in order to emphasize some point or to make it more perfectly match the situation of unfaithfulness in the nation. Some scholars have tried to find a covenant lawsuit in Isaiah 1 or Hosea 2 because these messages have legal language, but these prophecies do not follow many aspects of the structural outline listed above. Instead, these accounts described the negotiations that took place before a trial to determine if a trial was necessary.[14] In these speeches God expressed the desire for resolution of a problem by asking for the parties to reason together (Isa. 1:18–20) or by stating a plan to restore their relationship (Hos. 2:14–23). These prophecies did not include an indication that the nation of Israel responded positively to God's lawsuit given by Hosea (except in 6:1–3 when a few did seek God).

Trial Speech

The trial speech mirrored what happened in a court setting when the elders of Israel gathered together at the city gate (e.g., Ruth 4:1–12). The only way to settle a legal issue between two parties was for the evidence to be weighed by the elders of the city in the local court. The judges needed to hear the arguments put forward by each side; then a decision was made based on the facts. The prophet Isaiah used a modified form of a trial speech in 41:21–29 because he wanted to prove to his Israelite audience that **Yahweh** was the only real divine power that existed. This trial showed that the gods of the pagan nations had no legal basis for making a claim to divinity. This trial laid out the logic of God's argumentation by presenting the overwhelming evidence in favor of God's claims and strong arguments against the divine nature of the idols. These imaginary trials forcefully demonstrated to the audience why they needed to accept the verdict of the trial.[15]

1. Summons to trial:
>   41:21   'Present your case,' says the LORD.
>   'Set forth your arguments,' says Jacob's King.

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14. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2007), 93–94.

15. R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 40-55*, CC (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2011), 236–43.

2. The trial:
    a. Challenge to provide evidence:
        41:22 Tell us you idols, what is going to happen.
                  Tell us what the former things were,
                  so that we may consider them
                  and know their final outcome.
                  or declare to us the things to come.
        41:23 Tell us what the future holds,
                  so that we may know that you are gods.
                  Do something, whether good or bad,
                  so that we will be dismayed and filled with fear.
    b. Interim conclusion:
        41:24 But you are less than nothing,
                  and your works are utterly worthless;
                  whoever chooses you is detestable.
    c. God's evidence of divinity:
        41:25 God will bring a great ruler to power.
           26 Who knows what will happen?
           27 God spoke to Zion through a prophet.
           28 The gods can give no wisdom.
3. Verdict of the case:
        41:29 See, they are all false!
                  their deeds amount to nothing;
                  their images are but wind and confusion.

When people were surrounded by more powerful nations and the foreign gods appeared to give the enemy's army victory in war, it was tempting for the Israelites to think that these idols were real and actually had more power than Israel's God. Isaiah used these trial speeches to prove that these idols had no power at all because they were not able to tell the future or actually do anything. On the other hand, the court testimony was that Yahweh, Israel's God, controlled the kings in power and he knew the future before it happened. This proved that these foreign idols were false, powerless, and a deception, for they amounted to nothing. These trial speeches were intended to logically tear down unsupportable assumptions and false claims. The prophets wanted the Israelites to accept this evidence and put their trust in their own God, who created the world, had powerfully acted on their behalf in the past, and promised to graciously guide them in the future.

Disputation

Disputations about the ownership of cattle, the price of a piece of land, damages to property, or theological beliefs were a common part

of everyday life in the ancient Near Eastern world. To resolve a disputed issue a person could look to see what the laws of that nation said about the matter (Exodus 20–23) or settle an argument in the courts (Deut. 19:15–21). Before the problem ended up in court, the two parties often engaged in a strongly worded verbal encounter to try to convince the other person of what was right and just. In a few cases the prophets record a dispute between God and the people over some theological issue. More than one narrative structure was used for disputation, depending on whose opinion was being disputed. The dispute in Ezekiel 12 started with a false proverb and then God disputed what the people were saying.[16] In contrast to other disputes, this example repeatedly emphasized that these were the words of the Lord.

1. Popular thesis under dispute:
   a. Messenger formula:
      12:21   The word of the LORD came unto me:
   b. The disputed issue:
      12:22   Son of man, what is this proverb you have in the land of Israel;
              'The days go by and every vision comes to nothing'?
2. Divine refutation of this assertion:
   a. Messenger formula:
      12:23   Say to them, 'this is what the Sovereign LORD says:
   b. The refutation:
              I am going to put an end to this proverb,
              and they will no longer quote it in Israel.'
              Say to them, 'the days are near when every vision will be fulfilled.
   c. The reasons supporting the rebuttal:
      12:24   For there will be no more false visions
              or flattering divinations among the people of Israel.
         25   But I the LORD will speak what I will,
              and it shall be fulfilled without delay.
              For in your days, you rebellious people, I will fulfill whatever I say,'
   d. Messenger formula:
              declares the Sovereign LORD.

There was a slightly different organization of the dispute when there was an argument over what God claimed to be true in Malachi 1:2–5. In this example God's statement was questioned by the people Malachi

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16. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapter 1-24*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 384–86 for a full discussion of this disputation.

was addressing, so God's disputed assertion came first and the people's rebuttal was second.[17] In both disputations God disputed the opinion of those who accepted false theological assumptions or teachings by laying out hard evidence that pointed to a different theological conclusion.

1. Divine assertion under dispute:
   1:2a   'I have loved you,' says the LORD.
2. Audience denial of assertion:
   1:2b   But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'
3. Reasons supporting the rebuttal:
   1:2c–3   God loved Jacob and hated Esau.
            God made Edom a wasteland.
        4   God will destroy what Edom tries to rebuild
4. Conclusion:
   1:5   God's name will be glorified outside of Israel

This kind of logically argued dispute drew a sharp contrast between God's perspective and the false theological perspectives of people in that historical context. The issues under dispute illustrated the erroneous thinking of sinful and confused people, while the strong arguments of the divine perspective challenged the status quo. These disputes highlighted the need for a transformation of the thinking of the audience, but the records about Malachi's preaching did not include any information concerning the acceptance of his strong arguments.

Oracle against Foreign Nations

There were several different types of oracles against foreign nations. The book of Nahum foretold the fall of the Assyrian nation with its capital at Nineveh, while the book of Obadiah explained that God would destroy Edom for its pride and oppression of the Israelites after the fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC. Common factors in these prophecies were that both of the condemned nations committed many evil deeds, and both would suffer under the righteous judgment of God. The prophet's announcement of judgment against these nations was meant to be an encouragement to the citizens of Judah who were oppressed by Assyria and Edom. These prophets reassured the Israelites that God knew about the unjust ways of their enemies and would hold them accountable.

In contrast to these two examples, the three Major Prophets (Isaiah 13–23, Jeremiah 46–52, and Ezekiel 25–32) included a long series of

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17. Andrew E. Hill, *Malachi*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 34–37 surveys how various authors have understood the disputation, while pp. 145–70 discuss the meaning of this disputation in Malachi 1:2–5.

oracles against several nations that God planned to defeat. Many of these oracles functioned as an indirect message of hope for the Israelites, because now the Israelites knew that God would defeat these powerful nations that threatened them. Some of the oracles in Isaiah functioned as a warning to kings that they should not make a political alliance with or trust in a nation that God was planning to destroy (Isa. 13:17–22; 21:1–10).[18] Surprisingly, Isaiah also included oracles against Israel and Damascus (17:1–11) and Jerusalem (22:1–25) among his oracles against the nations.[19] Although God condemned the foreign nations for pride, violence, and trust in false gods, there was no structure that was consistently followed other than the presence of a proclamation of past sinfulness and an approaching destruction.

Oracles against the Nations in the Old Testament	
Isaiah 13–23	**Jeremiah 46–51**
Babylon: 13:1–14:27	Egypt: 46:2–26
★including Assyria: 14:25–27	Philistia: 47:1–7
Philistia: 14:28–32	Moab: 48:1–47
Moab: 15:1–16:14	Ammon: 49:1–6
Damascus and Israel: 17:1–14	Edom: 49:7–22
Cush: 18:1–7	Damascus: 49:23–27
Egypt: 19:1–25	Kedar/Hazor: 49:28–33
Egypt: 20:1–6	Elam: 49:34–39
Babylon: 21:1–10	Babylon: 50:1–51:58
Dumah/Edom: 21:11–12	
Arabia: 21:13–17	Edom: Obadiah 1

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18.   Smith, *Isaiah 1-39*, 291, 303–19.

19.   Amos also included Judah and Israel in his war oracle in chaps. 1–2.

Oracles against the Nations in the Old Testament	
Jerusalem 22:1–25	Assyria: Jonah 1–4
Tyre 23:1–18	Assyria: Nahum 1–3
Ezekiel 25–39	**Amos 1–2**
Ammon: 25:1–7	Syria: 1:3–5
Moab: 25:8–11	Philistia: 1:6–8
Edom: 25:12–14	Tyre: 1:9–10
Philistia: 25:15–17	Edom: 1:11–12
Tyre: 26:1–28:19	Ammon: 1:13–15
Sidon: 28:20–23	Moab: 2:1–3
Egypt: 29:1–32:32	Judah: 2:4–5
Edom: 35:1–15	Israel: 2:6–16
Gog: 38:1–39:29	

Woe Oracle

The woe oracle derived its cultural background from the mourning people expressed when threatened with death (of a person or a nation) or the lamenting after the death of an important person or nation (1 Kings 13:30; Jer. 22:13). The woe oracle was usually accompanied with weeping, sackcloth and ashes, plus the tearing of clothes (Gen. 37:34–35). Thus when the prophets addressed their audiences with woe oracles, they probably wore sackcloth and ashes as they tearfully proclaimed the approaching death of a sinful nation (Isa. 28:1–4; 29:1–4; 29:15–16; 30:1–5). Sometimes the prophets gave ironic woe oracles for a hated nation, like Assyria, that actually served as a message of hope for God's people (Isa. 33:1). In Amos 6:1–7 the prophet announced a woe oracle at a funeral banquet where the proud and wealthy people of Samaria foolishly celebrated their strong sense of political and financial security, instead of mourning the approaching death of their nation.

1. Call to lament:
    a. The announcement of woe:
        6:1a   Woe (הוֹי)
    b. Addresses (using participles):
        6:1b   to you who are complacent in Zion
                  and to you who feel secure on Mount Samaria.
2. Accusations:
        6:2–3   They have false security in their status.
          4–6   They have false security in their wealth.
3. Judgment:
        6:7   Therefore (לְכֵן), you will be among the first to go into
                  exile;
                  your feasting and lounging will end.

People usually wanted to know why someone was lamenting and they
frequently were sympathetic when they heard someone mourning, so
Amos hoped that people would carefully listen to his lament and would
appropriately respond to his weeping. Although Israel was militarily
strong and the upper class was quite wealthy at that time, they were
oppressing the poor (Amos 2:6–8; 4:1–3; 8:4–6) and their worship was
rejected (Amos 4:4–13; 5:21–27). Through Amos, God warned the
nation that their funeral was just around the corner.

Summons to Repent

God often sent the prophets to deliver their messages in order to
motivate an audience to repent of their sins and transform their lives,
even when that purpose was not always expressed (e.g., Jonah 3–4). At
one point God expressly told Jeremiah to deliver his words of warning
in the temple courtyard in Jerusalem (Jer. 26:3), for "perhaps they will
listen and each will turn from his evil ways. Then I will relent and not
inflict on them the disaster I was planning."[20] There was no standard
structure to the summons to repent, for sometimes the summons was
brief, like Amos 5:4–5a, "This is what the LORD says to the house of
Israel: 'Seek me and live, do not seek Bethel, do not go to Gilgal, do not
journey to Beersheba.'" This included only an introductory messenger
formula, an imperative call to action, and a warning of what one should
not do. Because the historical and literary context was different, Hosea
developed a more extended call to repent at the end of his covenant
lawsuit in 14:1–3:[21]

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20.   Thomas M. Raitt, "The Prophetic Summons to Repentance," *ZAW* 83 (2009): 30–49.

21.   In the Hebrew text this is 14:2–4.

1. Summons to repent:
    14:1a   Return, Israel, to the LORD your God,
2. Reason to repent:
    14:1b   your sins have been your downfall!
3. Summons to confess sins:
    14:2   Take words with you and return to the LORD.
        Say to him: 'Forgive all our sins and receive
        us graciously,
        that we may offer the fruit of our lips.
4. Rejection of past beliefs:
    14:3   Assyria cannot save us;
        we will not mount warhorses.
        We will never again say, 'Our gods'
        to what our own hands have made,
        for in you the fatherless find compassion.'

Other different, but related arrangements of the summons to repent were expressed in Joel 2:12–14. He wanted the people to repent because God "is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity." Zephaniah 2:1–3 summoned the people to gather together before the Day of the LORD to "seek the LORD" "before the decree takes effect." Isaiah 55:6–7 encouraged his audience to "seek the LORD while he may be found, call on him while he is near," while in Jer. 3:12–13 the prophet said, "'Return faithless Israel,' declares the LORD, 'I will frown upon you no longer, for I am faithful.'" Although there was great variety among these prophetic speeches, they all called for the people to repent of their sins, to reject their evil ways, and to depend on the Lord's gracious forgiveness.

Salvation Oracle

The salvation oracle (or oracle of hope) was oriented toward the positive things God would do for his people to deliver them from some present problem.[22] Although God promised hope through blessings to Abram (Gen. 12:1–3), the successful conquest of the land to Joshua (Josh. 2:24), and the great blessing of an eternal king to David (2 Sam. 7:11–16), in Isaiah 40–55 the salvation oracle took on a more regular style and arrangement.[23] J. Begrich thought that the setting of these oracles was related to worship in the temple, but

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22. Claus Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 14–18, 39–44.
23. Ibid., Westermann views Isa. 41:8–13, 14–16; 43:1–7; 44:1–5; 51:12–13, and 54:4–6 as salvation oracles.

Edgar W. Conrad made a better case for finding their original setting around God's promises of victory in war.[24] When King Ahaz was facing the threat of an invasion by Syria and Israel in 734 BC, Isaiah told him that he did not need to fear because God would not allow the plans of his enemies to be successful (Isa. 7:1–9). Isaiah gave a similar assurance of God's salvation in Isa. 37:6–7 when King Hezekiah was threatened by a large Assyrian army that surrounded Jerusalem. These prophecies gave assurances ("fear not") based on who God is, what he would do on behalf of his people, and what he would do to their enemies. Each oracle varied slightly depending on the situation and what aspects the author chose to add or omit. Isa. 41:8–16 is an example of this kind of oracle.

1. Announcement of a divine message:
       41:8   But you, O Israel my servant,
                    Jacob, whom I have chosen,
                    you descendants of Abraham my friend.
2. God's past dealings:
       41:9   I took you from the ends of the earth,
                    from its farthest corners I called you.
                    I said, 'You are my servant;
                    I have chosen you and have not rejected you.
3. Promise of salvation:
       41:10   So do not fear, for I am with you;
                    do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
                    I will strengthen you and help you,
                    I will uphold you by my righteous right hand.'
4. Destruction of enemies:
       41:11   Those who oppose you will be disgraced.
       41:12   Your enemies will be nothing.
       41:13   God will uphold you.
5. Promise of salvation:
       41:14   'Do not be afraid, you worm Jacob,
                    little Israel, do not fear,
                    for I myself will help you,' declares the LORD,
                    your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel.
6. Destruction of enemies:
       41:15   You will thresh the mountains.
       41:16a A gale will blow them away.
       41:16b Israel will rejoice in the LORD.

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24. J. Begrich, "Das priestliche Heilsorakel, *ZAW* 52 (1934):81–91; Edgar W. Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress , 1991), 36–49; see also his *Fear Not Warrior: A Study of the 'al tirah' Pericopes in the Hebrew Scriptures* (BJS 75; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

The present military setting was evident throughout this oracle (though the enemy was not named). Israel needed to trust in God's promises to strengthen weak Israel to "fear not," and to believe that he was going to powerfully intervene against her enemy. In a somewhat similar salvation oracle in Isa. 43:1–7 and 44:1–5, the prophet uniquely combined an initial salvation oracle (43:1–4; 44:1–2) with characteristics of the proclamation of salvation (43:5–7; 44:3–5) because a person's ability to trust in God salvation in the present was also impacted by God's promises of salvation in the future.

Proclamation of Salvation

The proclamation of salvation was different from the salvation oracle, for the proclamation of salvation contained God's promises about the distant eschatological future when the kingdom of God would be established.[25] Claus Westermann believed that these oracles arose out of the community laments of the people,[26] but R. N. Whybray cautioned that the interpreter needed "to bear in mind the unusual freedom with which Deutero-Isaiah treats traditional forms."[27] He concluded that there would not be one structural outline in all of these proclamations of salvation, for the prophet creatively altered individual parts of the common pattern.[28]

1. Messenger formula:
   43:16a This is what the LORD says
2. God's past acts of salvation:
   43:16b 'he who made a way through the sea,
             a path through the mighty waters,
   43:17   who drew out the chariots and the horses,
             the army and reinforcements together,
             and they lay there, never to rise again,
             extinguished, snuffed out like a wick.
3. God's future acts of salvation:
   43:18   Forget the former things;
             do not dwell on the past.

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25. The most common missing item was the "fear not" phrase. In addition, the proclamation of salvation did not seem to arise from the context of a military conflict. Westermann, *Prophetic Oracles of Salvation*, 42–46 finds evidence of these laments in 49:14 "Yahweh has forsaken me," 49:21 "I am bereaved and barren," and in 49:24 "Can the prey be taken from the mighty?" Although some cases may arise because of a lament, not all proclamations of salvation began because of a lament.

26. Gary V. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, NAC (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 190–96, 218–21.

27. R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 66.

28. Isa. 40:1–11; 41:17–20; 42:14–17; 43:16–21; and 45:14–17 are often described as proclamations of salvation.

> 43:19   See, I am doing a new thing!
>   Now it springs up;
>   do you not perceive it?
>   I am making a way in the wilderness,
>   and streams in the wasteland.'

4. Response to God's salvation:
>   43:20   Animals will honor God.
>   43:21   People will praise God.

The proclamation of salvation in 41:17–20 did not seem to arise directly out of a lament, but out of the general needs of the community to trust God. Isaiah 41:17a stated that people were thirsty and needed water, so God responded with a proclamation that he would answer their needs and supply water and transform the deserts (41:17b–19). These great deeds were a sign of the eschatological removal of the curse on the earth and a renewal of the fertility of Eden (cf. Isa. 35:1–2, 6–7; Jer. 31:12; Ezek. 34:26–27; 36:34–35; Hos. 2:21–22; Amos 9:13). These proclamations of salvations were given so that people "may see and know, may consider and understand, that the hand of the LORD has done this, the Holy One of Israel has created it" (Isa. 41:20). Thus the prophets were not just informing people about what God would do in the near future; they were attempting to transform the audience's thinking about who God was and what he would do in the distant future, so that they would trust in his promises of salvation.

Sign Acts

At various times God told a prophet to act out a message, instead of relying solely on a verbal presentation of God's words. Isaiah included a narrative report of how he went naked over a three year period (Isa. 20:1–5) to symbolize to the people of Judah that they were not to put their trust in Egypt. The prophet Jeremiah did a sign act of burying a linen belt among some rocks (Jer. 13:1–11), then later he went back to dig up the ruined belt. This was to symbolize that God planned to ruin the pride of Judah and Jerusalem. Ezekiel did many sign acts in the sight of the rebellious Israelites in exile (Ezekiel 4–5; 12) because they were not willing to listen to what he said (Ezek. 3:4–7). These dramatic signs represented what was going to happen at the destruction of Jerusalem. These reports included: (a) divine instructions about the kind of things the prophet was to do to carry out the symbolic sign act; and (b) a divine explanation of the meaning of the sign act.

1. Divine instructions:
     Ezek. 5:1–4   Shave hair, then burn, cut up, scatter, and
                     hide some.
2. Divine interpretation:
     5:5–17   This sign signifies God's punishment of
                Jerusalem and what will happen to the people
                of Jerusalem.

Sign acts seemed to be appropriate means of sharing the truth of God's message with people who were hardened and rebellious (Ezek. 3:24–27) because these people would pay attention to the sign being performed, but frequently ignored the words that the prophet spoke.

Hymn

The prophets were well versed in the hymnic literature of the nation and several prophets repeated or created hymns to emphasize a point they wanted to highlight. Some prophets used a hymn to mark the end of a literary unit and to elicit a reaction of praise based on God's promises of salvation. For example, the prophet Isaiah used a hymn both to give thanksgiving to God in 12:1–6 and to mark the end the major literary unit that included Isaiah 2–12. Later in Isaiah 40–55 several shorter literary units were brought to a conclusion by placing a hymn of praise at the end of the passage. For example, each of the following sections ends with a hymn.

> 40:12–42:13 – vv. 10–13 are a hymn[29]
> 42:14–44:23 – v. 23 is a hymn
> 44:24–45:25 – vv. 24–25 are a hymn
> 46:1–48:22 – vv. 20–21 are a hymn
> 49:1–13 – v. 13 is a hymn
> 49:14–52:12 – vv. 7–10 are a hymn
> 52:13–55:13 – vv. 12–13 are a hymn

These hymns reminded readers that they needed to sing God's praise and be joyful. This joy was based on the promise that: (a) God would do new things through his special Servant (42:1–9; 49:1–7); (b) God's promised to forgive people's sins and redeem them (44:21–22; 48:21); (c) God would reign in Jerusalem (52:1–6); and (d) God would accomplish all his plans for those who seek the Lord (55:6–11).

Amos ended his condemnation of the nation's failure to worship God authentically (4:4–5) and their failure to turn to God (4:5–11) with the warning to "prepare to meet your God" (4:12). In order to emphasize

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29. Smith, *Isaiah 40–66*, 52–53.

who this God was, Amos quoted a hymn that magnified the power and glory of God who would confront and judge the northern nation of Israel.

> Amos 4:13   He who forms the mountains,
>   who creates the wind,
>   and who reveals his thoughts to mankind,
>   who turns dawn to darkness,
>   and treads on the heights of the earth—
>   the LORD God Almighty is his name.

Visions (Prophetic and Apocalyptic)

Although all the prophets gained insight into who God was and what his plans were through the revelation of a verbal message from God, some prophets received graphic visionary revelations that communicated what God was planning to do. Some of these prophetic visions were about the things that God would do in the near future. These visions usually contained: (a) a general description of what was seen in the vision; and (b) an interpretation of what the important parts of the vision meant. For example, Amos saw a vision of a man with a plumb line standing on a wall (Amos 7:7–9). This was symbolic of God's act of measuring the uprightness (how plumb it was) of the northern nation of Israel. Since the wall was not upright and plumb, it needed to be destroyed. Likewise, Israel was not upright and needed to be destroyed.

In order to confirm Jeremiah's call to be a prophet to the nations (Jer. 1:4–10), God showed Jeremiah a branch of an almond tree. This prophetic vision signified that God was watching over his words to fulfill them in the near future (1:11–12). This assured Jeremiah that his prophecies to the people of Judah would not be fulfilled in the distant bye and bye, but that God would fulfill these prophecies right away.

1. The vision:
   a. Messenger formula
      1:11a   The word of the LORD came unto me:
   b. The vision:
      1:11b   'What do you see Jeremiah?'
               'I see the branch of an almond tree,' I replied.
2. Interpretation of the vision:
   a. Messenger formula:
      1:12a   The LORD said to me,
   b. Interpretation:
      1:12b   'You have seen correctly,
               for I am watching to see that my word is fulfilled.'

Apocalyptic visions had the same two fold construction of (a) a vision, and (b) the divine interpretation (often through an interpreting angel), but the apocalyptic visions described distant cataclysmic events in the future that included more obscure symbolism. Daniel 7 has an example of this kind of vision.

1. Introduction:
   7:1   Time and place of the vision
2. The vision:
   7:2–3   Summary of the vision.
   7:4   A lion with wings of an eagle.
   7:5   A bear raised up on one side.
   7:6   A leopard with four wings.
   7:7   A fourth terrifying beast with ten horns.
   7:8   A little horn with eyes and a mouth.
   7:9   The Ancient of Days on his throne.
   7:10   Court was opened.
   7:11–12   Destruction of the beasts.
   7:13–14   The Son of Man receives all power and dominion.
3. The interpretation:
   7:15–18   Summary interpretation.
   7:18–25   Meaning of fourth beast and little horn.
   7:26–27   Meaning of the court's decision and God's kingdom.
4. Conclusion
   7:28   Daniel's reaction to the interpretation of the vision.

Other visions were what might be classified as being partially apocalyptic because they included characteristics of both the prophetic and apocalyptic visions. These visions tended to use some real world imagery like the prophets, but they discussed things related to the final battles at the final days. R. Ahroni described Ezekiel's Gog prophecy in Ezekiel 37–38 as apocalyptic because of its imaginative style, the cosmic dualism in the conflict between God and Gog, and its symbolic language (the use of seven),[30] but there was no interpreting angel and it does not seem to be comparable to the apocalyptic characteristics of Daniel 7. Consequently, Daniel Block concluded that "the apocalyptic approach to the Gog oracle should be abandoned."[31] While this may not be a full

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30. R, Ahroni, "The Gog Prophecy and the Book of Ezekiel," *HAR* 1 (1977): 1–27

31. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel: Chapters 25-48*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 428.

blown apocalyptic text, some have used the term **proto–apocalyptic** to describe the mixing of prophetic and apocalyptic themes.

THE POETRY OF PROPHECY

Although some prophets communicated their messages from God in prose (parts of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi), most other prophecies were presented in poetic style. The prophets never explained why they used prose, but if a prophet wanted to describe his setting and the dialogue between himself and his audience, a prose narrative format was naturally preferred. On the other hand, if a prophet wanted to focus only on conveying the words of God, a natural, more powerful, and memorable way of expressing these ideas in that ancient Near Eastern culture was to use poetry. This allowed the "prophet" (נָבִיא "a spokesman") to express the words of God in poetry.[32] Poetry was richer and more imaginative than prose and its structure and repetitions allowed for a more persuasive force. A prophet could choose to simply state the truth that God loves you in narrative style (e.g., Mal. 1:2), but the force of this fact was much more richly and emotionally communicated by employing the powerful imagery of poetic verse that repeated and illustrated the concept in a variety of ways (e.g., Hos. 2:14–23; 11:1–11).

Some modern readers have felt that reading Hebrew poetry was comparable to entering an unfamiliar land where people were speaking in a foreign tongue. This impression has happened because some did not appreciate the complexity of Hebrew poetry or its flowery imagery. In order to bridge this cultural gap and enter into the Hebrew way of expressing prophetic truth, one must gain some appreciation for how the Hebrew prophets used imagery in poetry and how they constructed different kinds of parallelism.

Notice the Parallelism

One of the main characteristics of Hebrew poetry was its tendency to repeat in the second line, corresponding ideas or grammatical characteristics that appeared in the first line of the couplet. Mark D. Futato stated that "parallelism is a relationship of correspondence between the **cola** of a poetic line."[33] In earlier years the understanding of Hebrew poetry was heavily dependent on the basic observations of Robert Lowth who analyzed Hebrew poetry into the three basic categories of

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32. At the end of the book of Job, God speaks in poetry (Job 38–41) and in many passages in Genesis (3:14–19; 8:22; 12:1–3; 15:1; 16:11–12; 25:25)

33. Futato, *Interpreting the Psalms: An Exegetical Handbook*, 33. On pp. 23–53 Futato has a more extensive discussion of Hebrew poetry than is included here.

synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic parallelism.[34] These categories were helpful in describing the foundation blocks of three different types of parallelism.

Synonymous Parallelism

Zeph. 1:3a   I will sweep away both man and beast;
I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the
fish in the sea.

In synonymous parallelism the second line is supporting and clarifying what the first line says. Both lines used the same grammatical verb forms (first person singular in the future tense), and both mentioned two nouns after the verb. These two lines almost said the same thing, but the second added greater specification of the term "beasts" to emphasize the completeness of the disaster that was coming. This kind of poetic parallelism was used to draw attention to an idea by repeating it in creative ways. A variation of this basic pattern of synonymous parallelism happened when one of the thoughts in the first line was omitted from the second line.

Joel 2:31   The sun will be turned to darkness
and the moon   to blood.

This kind of poetic parallelism was called **synonymous incomplete**, with the missing word implied in the second line. Since Hebrew poetry has a tendency to be brief or terse, one way of being concise was for the second line to omit one of the ideas in the first line.[35]

Antithetical Parallelism

When a verse had **antithetical parallelism**, it contained two contrasting truths. In an antithetical verse, the one part often referred to something positive, while the second part described something negative.

Nah. 1:7   The LORD is good,
a refuge in a time of trouble.
He cares for those who trust him,
Nah. 1: 8   but with and overwhelming flood he will

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34. Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), Lecture 3.

35. Other common signs of terseness in Hebrew poetry are the absences of the article (הַ) before a noun, the dropping of the sign of the direct object (אֵת), and the omission of the relative pronoun אֲשֶׁר.

> make an end of Nineveh;
> he will pursue his foes into the realm
> of darkness.

In this example, 1:7–8 were antithetical. Nahum 1:7 expressed God's love and protection for those who trusted him, but 1:8 provided the antithetical idea that God would judge his enemies, the people of Nineveh. **Antithetical parallelism** was used by prophets when they wanted to make a sharp contrast between two ideas. Antithetical parallelism was common in Proverbs (see 15:1–32) but was relatively rare in the prophetic writings.

Synthetic Parallelism

In synthetic parallelism new thoughts were added in the second line, so there was sometimes only one word, or sometimes no words parallel to any of the main ideas in the first line. Sometimes synthetic parallelism looked very much like narrative prose, so translators were not always a hundred percent clear if a prophet was using prose or synthetic poetry.[36]

> Zech. 11:1   Open your doors, Lebanon,
> so that fire may devour your cedars!

In this example, none of the words in the second line were parallel to any of the words in the first line.[37] Synthetic parallelism often contained a **dependent clause** (as in 11:1b) that modified the verbal action in the first line. It was possible for the dependent clause to be in the first or second line and this clause would often begin with words like "because, for, since, while, although, in order that, thus, when, or if," indicating the beginning of a subordinate dependent clause that modified the verb. Synthetic parallel lines were used by prophets when they wanted to express purpose (in order that), cause (because, for), time (when, while), concession (although, though), or conditional (if) ideas in the dependent clause. Sometimes verses in synthetic parallelism have a dependent clause that modified a noun and these dependent phrases usually began with words like "who, which, or that."

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36. For example, the NASB prints Jer. 1:15–16 as prose, while the NIV understands 1:15b–16 to be poetry.

37. Some might argue that "cedars" and "doors" are parallel ideas, but the cedars probably refer to the forests in Lebanon. "Doors" is probably not a literal reference to the doors of a city or a house, but is probably a metaphor to the valleys where another nation could enter the nation of Lebanon.

> Isa. 44:10   Who shapes a god and casts an idol,
>   which can profit nothing?

In this example, Isaiah was trying to destroy the peoples' fear of pagan gods and their useless idols. The relative pronoun "which" modified the noun idol in the first line, so the second line explained something about the noun "idol." Instead of repeating the same idea again in line two for the sake of emphasis, the prophet chose to add a new thought in line two about the uselessness of the idols in order to bolster his argument. In this case, the form of parallelism was determined by the function of the second line.

Students of prophecy do not have to become experts in analyzing Hebrew poetry in order to understand the basic message of a prophet. But a basic ability to analyze the prophet's skill in writing and a clearer understanding of the development of the ideas in a prophecy will lead to a greater appreciation of what the prophets said. For example, the exact meanings of the words in Obadiah 1:12a did not provide a very clear description of what was happening.

Obadiah 1:12a said, "You should not look down on your brother in the day of his misfortune" (NIV, 1984). Although the reader could understand the words in 12a, what did "looking down" mean, who was their "brother," and what "misfortune" was being discussed. In this case the prophet used synonymous parallelism in the second line to make the meaning clear.

Obadiah 1:12b said, "nor rejoice over the people of Judah in the day of their destruction" (NIV, 1984). The second line provided clarification to the first line and gave emotional force to the incident by categorizing the "looking down" as gloating, or rejoicing, by identifying the "brother" as the people of Jerusalem, and by describing the "misfortune" as the day of destruction. Thus the parallel line offered a commentary on the first line that guided the reader in properly understanding the meaning being communicated. It was not hard for a Hebrew reader to agree with the sentiment of not looking down on others when things were going bad for them (Obad. 1:12a), but a much stronger emotion was created by reporting that the Edomites rejoiced when their brothers, the Hebrew people, were oppressed after the fall of Jerusalem (Obad. 1:12b). The second line radically clarified the event, intensified the emotional reaction, and completely changed how a person understood these two poetic lines.

Notice the Development of Parallelism

More recent studies of poetic parallelism by James Kugel and Robert Alter emphasized that Hebrew parallelism did not just repeat the same

idea in the second line, but it added something beyond the meaning of the first line.[38] The content of the second line often focused attention on an aspect of the first line to bring greater **intensification** of the idea. Thus in each succeeding line some aspect was amplified, repeatedly described with varying images, or metaphorically imagined in fresh and sometimes shocking ways. Each new line advanced the meaning, provided rhetorical emphasis, or reiterated the theme from a different angle. The prophet Zephaniah used poetic repetition in his parallel lines to intensify the horror of the approaching Day of the LORD.

> Zeph. 1:15   That day will be a day of wrath—
>   a day of distress and anguish,
>   a day of trouble and ruin,
>   a day of darkness and gloom,
>   a day of clouds and blackness—
>   1:16   a day of trumpet and battle cry
>   against the fortifies cities
>   and against the corner towers.
>   1:17   "I will bring such distress on all people
>   that they will grope about like those who are
>   blind,
>   because they have sinned against the LORD.
>   Their blood will be poured out like dust
>   and their entrails like dung.
>   1:18   Neither their silver nor their gold will be able
>   to save them
>   on the day of the LORD's wrath."
>   In the fire of his jealousy the whole world will
>   be consumed,
>   for he will make a sudden end of all who live
>   on the earth.

The prophet created emphasis and an intensification of the terror of the Day of the LORD by using the synonymous repetition of parallel ideas of distress and anguish, trouble and ruin, darkness and gloom, plus clouds and blackness in Zeph. 1:15. The following verses brought greater intensification and focus on the idea being communicated by illustrating how military defeat (1:16) would add to this anguish and

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38. James L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale, 1981), 3–26, 62–84, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), as well as Adele Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Hebrew Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1992), who illustrates grammatical parallelism (pp. 31–59), lexical and semantic parallelism (pp. 64–99), plus phonological pairing (pp. 103–123).

gloom. People would be so severely confused that "they will walk like blind men" (1:17a). The synthetic parallelism of 1:17a–c with its dependent clause beginning with "because" allowed the prophet to bring in a new causal idea that explained why God was full of wrath ("because they have sinned"). Thus there was a strong connection between the forms of poetic parallelism the prophets used and the practical functions each type of parallelism fulfilled in the poem. Zephaniah changed from the synonymous parallelism of 1:15 to the synthetic parallelism of 1:17 in order to express the reason for God's wrath.

The final two lines of 1:17 used synonymous incomplete parallelism (the second line was missing "will be poured out") to provide variety from the synonymous lines in 1:15 and the synthetic structure of the in 1:17. The last two lines of 1:18 probably were not synthetic parallel lines because the last line was introduced by (כִּי) "for, because, indeed," so these lines end up being synonymous incomplete with the second line missing anything parallel to "in the fire of his jealousy." Thus, the translation of the introductory word (כִּי) "for" in the last line should probably be rendered as "indeed" to introduce the final independent clause. The power of the prophet's message from God became an emphatic warning about the terror the people would face on the coming Day of the LORD. This happened because of the intensity of the imagery and because the prophet effectively used a variety of different forms of poetic parallelism to communicate God's words of warning.

Deciphering the Imagery

The mechanisms for presenting most prophetic poetry were two lines of synonymous, antithetic, or synthetic parallelism, but the powerful intensification of the message of these poetic lines was often conveyed by the graphic **imagery** embedded in those parallel lines. L. Alonso Schökel suggested that, "Images are the glory, perhaps the essence of poetry, the enchanted planet of imagination, a limitless galaxy, ever alive and ever changing."[39] The imagery of poetry was the means that God used to communicate his heavenly thoughts in ways that people were able to understand. Robert Alter concluded that, "Since poetry is our best human model of intricately rich communication, not only solemn, weighty, and forceful but also densely woven with complex internal connections, meanings, and implications, it made sense that divine speech should be presented in poetry."[40] The prophets' poetic imagery plumbed the depths of hopelessness, disaster, disappointment, and the agony of death in a way that created fear in the hearts of the

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39. Luis Alonso Schökel, *Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2000), 95.

40. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 141.

readers who experience its power. But in other messages the language of the prophets elevated the readers into the heights of heaven or invited them to imagine life in the glorious eternal kingdom of God that would be filled with joy, singing, and praise. In some ways the reader should not stop to rationally analyze every metaphor; instead, one should subconsciously enter into the world of these prophetic images to experience their richness and internalize the emotional world they depicted. On the other hand, the mindless interpretations of strange metaphors from a foreign Hebrew culture over two thousand year ago will more than likely lead to some strange misunderstanding. Thus every reader should think carefully about how the prophets used figures of speech in order to prevent embarrassing misunderstanding. The study of imagery should involve an investigation of both prophetic and apocalyptic figures of speech in narrative as well as poetic texts.

Prophetic Figures of Speech

Since God exists in a spiritual realm of reality that was far different from human existence, he saw and knew things about the material and spiritual world that were far beyond human comprehension. Nevertheless, he desired to have a relationship with his creation, so from the very beginning he condescended from the realms of heaven to "walk" and "talk" with Adam and Eve (Gen. 1:28–30; 2:16–18, 23; 3:8–19). His conversations with people throughout history have instructed them on how to live in a close relationship with God by enumerating his blessing for those who love, trust, follow, and serve him, and by warning people about his terrible curses that will fall on these who rebel against him. This all happened in an ancient world without cars and planes, computers and cell phones, or super-highways and bridges over large rivers. Thus what God said in the Old Testament had to relate to agricultural people who used animals to till the ground, who cooked and drank water out of clay pots, who used the bow and arrow to kill animals for food, who lived in walled cities for protection and in small one or two room homes that had no running water. Life was different from today, so God's messages to them have sometimes been difficult for twenty-first century people to appreciate. Consequently, the interpreter of these prophetic messages has to learn things about how they lived[41] and their ways of speaking so that we can enter into the

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41. John A. Thompson, *Handbook of Life in Bible Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) discusses (a) characteristics of the land; (b) towns, villages, homes, furnishings, food, and clothes; (c) water supply, agriculture, and food preparation; (d) weights, industries, trade, travel, and civil government; (e) writing, music, games, and health; (f) warfare; and (g) the religion of Israel and her neighbors. Victor H. Matthews, *Manners and Customs in the Bible:*

worldview of the ancient Hebrews. This will help the interpreter imagine how they spent their days making a living, how they talked to one another, and what they believed about nature, social relationships, and about God. Then the interpreter will begin to understand the figures of speech about shepherding sheep, the glory of the cedars of Lebanon, the terror of a lion's roar, the potter who worked to make clay vessels, the importance of springs and cisterns, and the task of separating the chaff from the wheat.[42] We need to be informed about the common ancient Near Eastern culture that Israel shared with her neighbors so that we will notice some of the unique differences in Israel as well as the common factors that impacted all who lived in that era. Although some imagery may be a little foreign to us, most people have little trouble understanding common poetic figures of speech.

> Isa. 40:30–31 Even youths grow tired and weary,
> and young men stumble and fall;
> but those who hope in the LORD
> will renew their strength.
> They will soar on wings like eagles;
> they will run and not grow weary,
> they will walk and not be faint.

People have appreciated these encouraging words through the centuries because everyone can remember being tired and feeling weary with all the demands of making a living, doing work around the house, and caring for the family. Most believers can also identify times when they put their trust in God and he graciously renewed their strength. Although few experience what it feels like to soar like eagles (except those who fly hang-gliders), many have watched in amazement as eagles effortlessly soared across the sky without moving their wings. The analogy between the ideas these pictures painted in the poem was connected with the real life experiences of the readers, so the poem touched their emotions to give the reader new hope that God would make things better.

Narrative prophetic texts like Ezek. 16:9–12 were also richly filled with elaborate figures of speech that depicted the nation of Israel as a child that God cared for and blessed.

An Illustrated Guide to Daily Life in Bible Times, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) covers similar material.

42. Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978) discusses (a) the conception of the cosmos; (b) destructive forces; (c) the temple; (d) conceptions of God; (e) the king; and (f) man before God in prayer and worship.

> I bathed you with water and washed the blood from you and put ointment on you. I clothed you with an embroidered dress and put sandals of fine leather on you. I dressed you in fine linen and covered you with costly garments. I adorned you with jewelry, I put a bracelet on your arms and a necklace around your neck, and I put a ring in your nose, earrings on your ears and a beautiful crown on your head.

Of course Israel was not literally a young female child that God dressed, but the imagery of providing the best care, the best clothes, and the finest jewels was part of a symbolic analogy that communicated the idea that everything that Israel had was from God and that God blessed Israel with his finest gifts. Today there may be a few problems with understanding prophetic imagery, but most of these are our problems because we live in a different time and culture and we have different customs and experiences.

The successful interpreter of prophecy will not despair because the prophets included hard to understand or unusual metaphors. One helpful analogy might be to compare prophecy to music. Both of these methods of communication have used imagery to speak to the emotions, both have tended to use exaggeration, and both have painted vivid pictures of life, love, and disaster. The song writer will use melody and the beat as the vehicles (just like synonymous, antithetic, and synthetic parallelism) that will carry the words and metaphors about life and death. These vivid figures of speech will be an integral part of every song (secular and sacred) and were a central way of communicating prophecy.

So when Isaiah said, "For I knew how stubborn you were; your neck muscles were iron, your forehead was bronze" (Isa. 48:4) it was not hard for readers to figure out that the prophet was using a figure of speech that involved a little exaggeration. Iron was hard so that image was a good way of communicating something that was hard to twist or turn in a different angle. If the neck muscles were literally as hard as iron then it would be impossible to get someone to look or move in a different direction. To repent means to turn in a different direction toward God, but God indicated that it was nearly impossible to turn these people around. A second reason why these Israelites did not "turn, return, repent" or change their thinking was that they had bronze foreheads. It seemed that something hard was covering their brains so God's words could not penetrate through it to persuade them to change. Admittedly, many readers have felt some ambiguity when dealing with these ancient metaphors, but it was not hard to perceive the general meaning when a prophet mentioned iron and bronze.[43] Having understood the basic

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43.   D. Brent Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruninghooks: Rethinking the Language of Prophecy and Apocalyptic*

idea of the imagery, it would then be important to perceive what emotional force was communicated by the message. This verse provided a rare inside look at God's frustration in dealing with his people; his strong feelings of hopelessness that nothing would ever help correct the situation. It was possible for the prophet to make these points in narrative, but many times the prophets preferred the poetic repetition and graphic imagery of prophecy because it provided a much more powerful expression of God's feelings of frustration.

Metaphors about God were sometimes the most difficult to appreciate because some metaphors almost seemed inappropriate. For example, the prophet Hosea compared God to the husband of a prostitute (Hos. 1:2; 2:5–13; 4:10; 5:3–4), a moth and rot (5:12), a lion and a leopard (13:7), a bear robbed of her cubs (13:8), the morning dew (14:5), and a green pine tree (14:8). Each of these comparisons explained an unusual and sometimes shocking side of God in order to awaken his sinful people (they were prostituting themselves by loving another god) to the reality that God can wonderfully bless people (like the dew giving moisture) or viciously destroy his people (like the lion, leopard, and bear). These unusual figures of speech were not the pabulum of the popular prophets who told the people that there would be peace and prosperity (Jer. 5:12–13; 6:13–14). The prophets spoke to wake up people who refused to listen to God's word (Jer. 6:13), who were stubborn, rebellious, and obstinate (Ezek. 2:3–4; 3:7).

Apocalyptic Figures of Speech

Apocalyptic figures of speech in both poetic and narrative passages have been difficult to interpret because they were more fantastic and unusual, referring to visionary symbolism that was not a part of the common experience of most people. Apocalyptic literature was written to provide hope to struggling believers who were living in a very sinful world that was about to fall apart. God's acts of final judgment and his inauguration of the kingdom of God were revealed through the action of strange beasts, horses, horns, battles, judgment scenes, and symbolic numbers and colors that were not always explained to the prophet by the interpreting angel (Dan. 7:16; 8:15; Zech. 1:9, 14).[44] Many have

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(Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2002), provides a very helpful and extended discussion of the use of metaphors in prophecy. William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 1–14 provides an introduction to the use of metaphors in the Psalms.

44. See D. Brent Sandy and Martin G. Abegg, "Apocalyptic," *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese eds. (Nashville: B&H, 1995), 177–196 or Sandy, *Plowshares & Pruninghooks: Rethinking the Language of Prophecy and Apocalyptic*, 102–28.

had difficulty understanding the meaning of the images of two olive trees with a solid gold lampstand between them (Zech. 4:2–3), a very large flying scroll with curses written on it (5:1–3), or a woman sealed in a basket being flown to Babylon by two women who have wings like a stork (5:5–11). Since some things in apocalyptic visions were not interpreted by the accompanying angel, we have concluded that some parts of these visions were mere background information that made the setting more realistic. To figure out what was most important in a prophetic and apocalyptic vision, one must pay primary attention to the interpretation the interpreting angel provided. Symbolism that was not explained or interpreted was probably not that important; thus the modern interpreter should not get involved with endless speculation about the interpretation of things like the location and color of various horses in Zech. 1:8, because no interpretation was provided. Similarly, when Daniel saw ten horns, plus the first horn, the little horn, and the three horns that were uprooted (Dan. 7:7–8), he asked for an interpretation of these various horns (Dan. 7:20), but the interpreting angel did not identify each one, only that each horn represented a king (Dan. 7:24). The angel also gave a limited interpretation of the action and significance of the little horn "who speaks against the Most High and oppresses the saints" (Dan. 7:24–25). The absence of a full explanation should suggest that we should humbly admit along with Daniel, that we do not know who the unexplained kings were (the horns) from this chapter, for the interpreting angel never explained these things. The lack of clarity about the details of these apocalyptic visions should indicate that these visions were not just a treasure trove of exact information on end time events; they were primarily persuasive visions that were designed to give assurance to people of faith that God was in control of all the climactic eschatological events.

The Persuasive Power of Prophecy

The messages of the prophets revealed information about what God wanted people to do and about what God was going to do.[45] The prophet Isaiah offered king Ahaz a warning in the midst of the Syro-Ephraimite war saying "If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all" (Isa. 7:9). In Isaiah 30–31 the prophet called Hezekiah to reject an alliance with Egypt; instead, he should trust God. The prophet Jeremiah described Judah's failings (Jer. 2), that she was

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45. Those who follow speech act theory use "perlocutionary" to describe the act of convincing, intimidating, astonishing, and reassuring. See Walter Huston, "Speech Acts and Prophetic Discourse in the Old Testament," *The Place Is Too Small for Us: Israelite Prophets in Recent Scholarship*, Robert Gordon ed., Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 133–53

even worse than Israel (Jer. 3:6–11), and then God instructed Jeremiah to persuade the people to "return . . . only acknowledge your guilt" (Jer. 3:12–13), "return" (Jer. 3:22), "if you will return, O Israel, return to me" (Jer. 4:1).

In each case the prophet was preaching a message so that the audience would internalize God's perspective and change their thinking and behavior.[46] Jeremiah was told to write everything that God said to him on a scroll because, "Perhaps when the people of Israel hear about the disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin" (Jer. 36:3). God sent Ezekiel as a watchman to warn the rebellious and stubborn Israelites about everything that God said (Ezek. 3:16–19). Ezekiel called the people to action, to "turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourself of all the offences you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit" (Ezek. 18:12–13). Haggai tried to persuade the post-exilic community to "give careful thought to your ways. Go up to the mountains, bring down timber, and build the house, so that I may take pleasure in it and be honored" (Hag. 1:7–8). Amos encouraged the Israelites to "seek me and live" (Amos 6:4), Joel called for people to "Blow the trumpet in Zion" (Joel 2:1), "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate" (Joel 2:13).

Even passages without a formal call for repentance had great persuasive power, for Jer. 26:17–19 indicates that Micah's sermon in 3:1–12 was so convicting that Hezekiah feared the Lord and sought his favor, so God did not destroy Jerusalem at that time. Positive messages of salvation were given to create a response of faith and hope, while negative predictions of judgment were designed to convict the sinners, so that they would turn from their evil ways in order to avert God's judgment (Jer. 18:7–8). Even the wicked Assyrians at Nineveh knew that they should respond to a persuasive prophetic warning of God's judgment by turning from their violent ways (Jonah 3:4–10).

Thus prophecy informed people about what God was planning to do. If one knew God's ways and his plans, it was prudent to act on that information. It would be deadly foolish to not respond to God's warnings with repentance or to not trust in the good news of God's salvation. God did not give his people his words to make them smart; he spoke so that they would respond with love, fear, service, obedience, and worship.

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46. Gary V. Smith, *An Introduction to the Hebrew Prophets: The Prophets as Preachers* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 5–46, uses communication theory and the sociology of knowledge to analyze the prophetic persuasive process of bringing about change in the hearts of the audience that hears the message.