A guide to the study of the prophets

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The prophets were a group of people who were considered to be the voices of God. They were often called to speak on behalf of God to the people of Israel. The prophets were often shown to be very successful in their work, as the people of Israel were highly receptive to their messages.

The purpose of this essay is to provide guidance for students who are interested in studying the prophets. The essay is divided into three main sections:

1. Introduction to the Prophets
2. The Books of the Prophets
3. The Role of the Prophets in the Church

1. Introduction to the Prophets

The prophets were a group of people who were considered to be the voices of God. They were often called to speak on behalf of God to the people of Israel. The prophets were often shown to be very successful in their work, as the people of Israel were highly receptive to their messages.

2. The Books of the Prophets

The books of the prophets are a collection of writings that were written by the prophets. These writings are divided into two main categories: the books of the major prophets and the books of the minor prophets.

The books of the major prophets include:

- Isaiah
- Jeremiah
- Lamentations
- Ezekiel
- Daniel

The books of the minor prophets include:

- Hosea
- Joel
- Amos
- Obadiah
- Jonah
- Micah
- Nahum
- Habakkuk
- Zephaniah
- Haggai
- Zechariah
- Malachi

3. The Role of the Prophets in the Church

The role of the prophets in the church is to provide guidance for the people of God. The prophets were often shown to be very successful in their work, as the people of Israel were highly receptive to their messages.

Of course, not all scholars share the general optimist aims of literary criticism. Critical scholarship is agreed that the process of transmission has reshaped the original prophetic message to a greater or lesser degree. However, whether the original word may be recovered from the texts, some have argued that the message of the prophets was handed down by means of a process that has not been fully understood. From this view, the canonical form represents the written fixation of the oral tradition, behind which tradition one recognizes the role of the prophets. However, one can only hope to identify the principal themes of the preaching, not the prophets’ actual words. On the other hand, some have expressed concern that critical revision reveals such an extensive rewriting of written traditions that one must realistically abandon the attempt to discover the prophets’ actual words. It is clear, though, that distinguishing the words of the prophets from secondary material within the tradition is still regarded as an important and valid objective.

The literary-critical attempt to differentiate primary and secondary material in the prophetic traditions is fundamental to the method known as redaction criticism. In this approach, the text is considered a collection of literary works. Hence, redaction criticism seeks to identify editorial stages in the collection and transmission of a prophetic corpus.

Conservative scholars argue that the prophetic books are actually an expression of the people’s oral tradition preserved in written form. In fact, our scriptures came into being in the process of interpretation. R. E. Clements claims that the secondary elements are a kind of early excess of prophetic sayings and are the strongest guidelines we have to what those sayings really meant.

Conservative students should find this perspective on the nature of the prophetic literature both stimulating and challenging. Conservative scholarship could justly give more attention to the whole process by which the prophetic books were collected and transmitted. The concept that the prophetic books embody their own commentary is a fascinating one which deserves careful study by today’s scholars, especially in view of the ancient exegesis. However, there are serious difficulties to be overcome in asserting the interpretive or exegetical character of alleged secondary elements.

First, there are no textual indicators to mark out the material as commentary. In an interpretive document like the Qumran Habakkuk Commentary, for example, exposition is clearly introduced by phrases such as ‘the interpretation of this passage is’. There are no similar independent verification by which to test the theory, such as extensive manuscript variation that might show a different form at the same stage of redaction. Second, the existence of the same material in the eyes of Old Testament scholars. Earlier criticism tended to identify secondary materials and then dismiss them as of secondary importance. Critics have long asserted the presence of later, editorial expansions in the prophetic collections.

What is new, though, is the estimation of the worth of these expansions. Critics have long maintained that the original text of the prophetic books is not as valuable as some have supposed. However, by not abandoning the quest for the prophets’ very words, contemporary criticism, and redaction criticism, tends to regard the secondary materials as a continuation of the traditions inaugurated by the original prophets. In fact, the secondary expansions are said to actualize the original message (i.e., improve) them in various ways (e.g., by giving the prophet a clearer or more pointed voice). Hence, the canonical form of a prophetic book comes to be regarded as the full flowering of a continuous tradition. Consequently, we must be careful not to get away from the traditional message. The original words are important, but the canonical form also proclaims a message that is relevant to the people of God today.

Of course, not all scholars share the general optimist aims of literary criticism. Critical scholarship is agreed that the process of transmission has reshaped the original prophetic message to a greater or lesser degree. However, whether the original word may be recovered from the texts, some have argued that the message of the prophets was handed down by means of a process that has not been fully understood. From this view, the canonical form represents the written fixation of the oral tradition, behind which tradition one recognizes the role of the prophets. However, one can only hope to identify the principal themes of the preaching, not the prophets’ actual words. On the other hand, some have expressed concern that critical revision reveals such an extensive rewriting of written traditions that one must realistically abandon the attempt to discover the prophets’ actual words. It is clear, though, that distinguishing the words of the prophets from secondary material within the tradition is still regarded as an important and valid objective.

The literary-critical attempt to differentiate primary and secondary material in the prophetic traditions is fundamental to the method known as redaction criticism. In this approach, the text is considered a collection of literary works. Hence, redaction criticism seeks to identify editorial stages in the collection and transmission of a prophetic corpus. However, this process of editing is not necessarily neutral. Combining ores into a series gives them a new context. Arranging oracles into a framework may suggest an overarching theme. James M. Ward suggests that the process of redaction can affect both the oracle and the historical context. Jeremiah, and Ezekiel are roughly organized in this sequence: (1) oracles of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem, (2) oracles against the nations, and (3) promises of restoration to Israel and Judah. This arrangement clearly suggests an interpretation of the prophetic ministry. Likewise, the juxtaposition of secondary materials places primary materials in a new context and affects their interpretation accordingly. Hence, redaction criticism does not aim to identify editorial stages, but seeks to characterize the perspective of each stage.

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ment that the Bible, although it is very clearly the words of men, is also the authoritative and reliable Word of God, confidently proclaimed and which every world needs to hear.

Many parts of the Christian church are being starved through the ministry of clergy and teachers who do not know where the Word of God is to be found and who as a result have no gospel to preach. It is vitally important for

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This essay is intended as a guide for those commencing, or perhaps revisiting, the study of the Old Testament prophets. It is not an introduction to the prophetic literature, nor a history of the phenomena associated with the prophets and their activity. Rather, this essay is an attempt to acquaint the student with those trends and concepts in the prophetic study of the prophets and which the student will encounter both in the lecture hall and in the literature. It is hoped that the student will thus be enabled to follow scholarly discussion of the prophets with greater ease and critical insight.

The prophetic corpus is one of the most extensive portions of the Old Testament. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve (minor prophets) comprise nearly one fourth of the Old Testament canon. However, in the Hebrew Bible these are called 'Latter Prophets' while the historical books from Joshua through Kings are styled 'Former Prophets', almost one half of the Old Testament is regarded as 'prophetic' in some sense. Many of the psalms are also clearly the work of prophets. Moreover, Moses is set forth in Deuteronomy 18:15 as the archetypal prophet of Israel, indicating that the study of the prophets must embrace the greater portion of the Old Testament canon.

Learned discussion of the prophets is embodied in a literature that is correspondingly vast, indeed bewilderingly so! There are few works (especially in English) that set out to be comprehensive, given the scope of the subject-matter. Instead, one is confronted with numerous and diverse lines of investigation, written up in journals, books, periodicals, commentaries, and books treating specific themes, which make a beginning and seek some order in the diversity. I would suggest that the different elements of the may be usefully approached through three closely related categories: (1) criticism of the prophetic literature, (2) description of the prophetic ministry, and (3) interpretation of the prophetic texts.

In this essay, I will consider the first two of these categories, focusing particularly on the former. I will attempt to do so in a way that is both accurate and fair, avoiding the pitfalls of excessive critical skepticism or uncritical acceptance of traditional views. Throughout, I will draw on my own experience as a student and teacher of the Bible, as well as on the insights of other scholars whom I value highly.

1. Criticism of the prophetic literature

The greater part of the literature on the prophets is devoted to issues of literary criticism. Klaus Koch estimates that 'publications dealing with points of literary criticism must outnumber those investigating a prophet's ideas by about ten to one.' This apparent preoccupation is not surprising, though, since the precise relationship of the canonical form of the prophetic literature (i.e., the form in which we have it in the Bible) to the original preaching of the prophets is not entirely clear. The oracles were obviously composed and edited - by whom, we do not know. The consensus of critical scholarship is that the canonical form of the prophetic books does not derive from the prophets, but from the tracts which collected and passed on the oracles, and that these oracles were also supplemented and expanded in the course of transmission. Hence, literary criticism is not pursued out of indifference to the prophets' ideas, but precisely because it is seen as an essential step towards elucidating the historical context in which the prophetic oracles were produced.

In this essay, I will attempt to do so in a way that is both accurate and fair, avoiding the pitfalls of excessive critical skepticism or uncritical acceptance of traditional views. Throughout, I will draw on my own experience as a student and teacher of the Bible, as well as on the insights of other scholars whom I value highly. In this essay, I will attempt to do so in a way that is both accurate and fair, avoiding the pitfalls of excessive critical skepticism or uncritical acceptance of traditional views. Throughout, I will draw on my own experience as a student and teacher of the Bible, as well as on the insights of other scholars whom I value highly.

Secondly, one may justly ask about the sense in which the prophets are to be understood as 'authors' of the original material, since scholars usually assert a tension in the perspectives of the editorial stages. For example, the original oracles are regarded as a product of Yahweh's action. However, there is no evidence that all of the prophets themselves recognized a distinction between the original oracles and later editorial additions. Hence, the prophetic books must be understood as a process of interpretation, in which the original oracles are transformed and given new meaning. Understanding the prophetic literature in this way helps us to appreciate the complexity and richness of the prophetic message and its enduring relevance.

Of course, not all scholars share the generally optimistic aims of literary criticism. Critical scholarship prefers to use the term canonical criticism to describe this relatively new attitude toward the application of critical methods, which can be found among many conservative scholars. This approach seeks to discern the original message of the prophets, taking into account the historical setting and the literary form in which it was preserved. In doing so, it can help us to gain a deeper understanding of the message that the original prophets intended to convey, and of its relevance to contemporary contexts.
was the reinterpretation which took place, it was essentially a false interpretation—a misinterpretation. Unconditional saying them, which is traditional, contrary to the original intention of the prophet.

A similar observation could be made regarding R. E. Clement's masterfully presented case for a Deuteronomistic redaction of the Israelite kings. For example, the original preaching of Amos and Hosea was not affected by a covenant tradition in Israel. Hence, the profoundly different covenantal language in these non-poetic books is an interpretive construction of the prophetic prophecies. Now if these Deuteronomistic texts are actually significant indications that these books are held to rest in the background from God, that the Deuteronomists understood the words of Hosea and Amos to refer to violations of the covenant. But since, according to Clements, these prophecies did not have a covenant theology as such, the Deuteronomists were mistaken in their interpretation. Their exegetical was deceptively inexact.

These observations, of course, prove nothing about the method of reduction criticism. They do show, though, that the characterization of secondary materials as interpretative is open to question. It would appear to be more accurate to say that the reduction model presents stages of esegesis and revision, rather than of exegesis and reinterpretation in the growth of the prophetic traditions. It is also difficult to see how critics can seriously value the secondary material as guidelines to the original meaning of prophetic sayings which (1) they have already defined as being based on the oral tradition, (2) when they consistently reject the meaning suggested by the allegorical secondary materials, e.g. that Amos could have held out hope that eighth century prophets had known a covenant tradition.

Theological criticism in the prophets, and elsewhere, proceeds on the basis of a number of considerations. A characteristic style of research is the construction of a particular vocabulary to help identify reductive stages. Differences in historical or theological perspective are also put forward as reductive strata, and complex theological systems are said to explain the development of prophetic sayings. For purposes of isolating or reconstructing original oracles from later collections, the discipline of form criticism is seen as providing a method to classify prophetic oracles according to their genre, orGattung. Two of the most basic prophetic genres are the 'thematic' or 'thematically organized' Gen. 1:26-28), also known as the 'announcement of judgment and accusation' (Westermann. Each form has characteristic conceptual, linguistic and life-setting (Sitz im Leben) features. A knowledge of these forms may enable one to delineate or reconstruct individual oracle texts, and account, at the same time, to perceive extraneous material. But. as D. T. Niewenhuis has pointed out, the problem of literary-critical method is normally pursued in order to move beyond literary criticism to insights into the nature of the prophetic tradition.

2. Description of the prophetic message

The study of the prophetic books has been the attempt to construct a unified picture of the phenomenon of propheticism. In many ways the prophets are epigrammatic figures. They have an independent sayings them, which is traditional, contrary to the original intention of the prophet. The discipline of comparative religion, psychology, and philosophy also has a tradition that is concerned to bear on the prophetic phenomenon. Increasing interest is being generated by references to prophecy, or at least oracular stages, in the various branches of study of the lesser prophetic type of activity was apparently so wide-spread that Koch ventured to speak of prophecy as an "international movement." From these investigations, the prophets' revelations in a state of ecstacy has been extensively debated, ever since Gunkel suggested that the earliest form of prophetic speech was ecstatic. Lindbom argues that the ecstatic type (e.g. ecstatic) is a universal religious phenomenon, yet the attempt to fit all Israelite prophecy into this mould has not been widely accepted. More recently, David L. Peterman has argued that the traditional debate about the prophets proceeds on the false assumption that an independent spirit (charisma) and prophetic activity (e.g. the threefold form of prophet) exists. He instead tries to move away from these categories, presenting a helpful analysis of the contextual dimension of prophetic activity by means of a sociological model of religion. All of these discussions help to construct a fuller picture of the prophetic ministry by showing points of contact with similar phenomena, both in the age of the prophets and throughout the world. It is likely, in many cases, that the works do not provide a basis for assessing the theological uniqueness and worth of Old Testament prophecy. It is precisely because this issue is not decided by the intertextual relationship of these judgments and reflections about independence versus institution will continue.

It was the view of early critics that the prophets stood in independent opposition to the institution of religion and the world. This view, however, was strongly opposed by the interest in the specific historical setting of prophetic oracles. Drawing attention to-oracular passages like 2 Chronicles 20:14-17 or Psalm 69:21-28 shows that the role of the prophet was to function as a mediator of divine speech, through the prophetic word of the Lord. Thus says Yahweh... For example, in Amos 7:16-17, form criticism would identify v.16 as a speech, a statement of a threat, a legal background for Amos. The threat, or announcement of punishment in v.17, however, is held to be the essential word of God. It may be false in others prophetic oracles may be viewed as based on the assumption, drawn largely from the historical books, that the essential prophetic word was a threat or a promise (e.g. 1 Ki. 17:1; 2 Ki. 20:1-5). It is a well known example of the way in which the literary form of prophets approximate to the ideal form. Moreover, one should not think that since a scholar identifies a text as prophetic, it is having, that he therefore regards it as a message from God in truth.

Others, however, hold that the revelatory experience was a totally ineffable event. The prophetic word in some way grew out of the event with genuine power and conviction, but the experience itself lies beyond the meaning of the word.
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A similar observation could be made regarding R. E. Clements’ masterfully presented case for a Deuteronomistic redaction of the book of Deuteronomy. The example that the original preaching of Amos and Hosea was not affected by a covenant tradition in Israel. Hence, the frequently appearing covenantal language in these prophetic writings is a misinterpretation of the prophetic indictments. Now if these secondary Deuteronomic terms are actually significant indicators, then the claim of these prophets is held to rest upon a presupposition that the Deuteronomists understood the words of Hosea and Amos to refer to violations of the covenant. But, since, according to Clements, these prophets did not have a covenant theology as such, the Deuteronomists were mistaken in their interpretation. Their exegesis was therefore flawed.

These observations, of course, prove nothing about the method of redaction criticism. They do show, though, that the characterization of secondary materials as interpretative is an open question. It would appear to be more accurate to say that the redaction model presents stages of eis-gesis and revision, rather than of exegesis and reinterpretation in the growth of the prophetic traditions. It is also difficult to see how critics can seriously value the secondary material as guidelines to the original meaning of prophetic sayings which (1) they have already been exposed to, and (2) when they consistently reject the meaning suggested by the alleged secondary materials, e.g., that Amos could have held no hope for that eighth century prophets knew a covenant tradition.

Literary criticism in the prophets, and elsewhere, proceeds on the basis of a number of considerations. A characteristic style, characteristic vocabulary, characteristic historical or theological perspective are identified as factors. For purposes of isolating or reconstructing original oracles from larger collections, the discipline of form criticism is recognized as a useful tool in identifying the authorial style and reconstructing their original context. Literary criticism is not based upon the ‘real’ and ‘authentic’ (Gunkel), also known as the ‘announcement of judgment and accusation’ (Westermann). Each form has characteristic contextual, linguistic, and life-setting (Sitz im Leben) features. A knowledge of these forms enables one to distinguish between original oracles and their genre, at the same time, to perceive extraneous material. But, literary criticism is less than a direct interpretation of the text.

2. Description of the prophetic ministry

The study of the prophetic texts has been the attempt to construct a unified picture of the phenomenon of prophethood. In many ways the prophets are enigmatic figures. They have an independent social and historical dimension, contrary to the original intention of the prophet.

The disciplines of comparative religion, psychology, and philosophy deal with the entire phenomenon. They do not bear on the prophetic phenomenon. Increasing interest is being generated by references to prophecy, or at least oracle activity. Because of the vast range and type of activity was apparently so wide-spread that Koch ventured to speak of prophecy as an international phenomenon. Because of the extent of their revelations in a state of ecstasy has been extensively debated, ever since Gunkel suggested that the earliest form of prophetic speech was ecstatic. Lindblom argues that the ecstatic type (e.g. ecstatic) is a universal religious phenomenon, yet the attempt to fit all Israelite prophecy into this mold has not been widely accepted.

More recently, D. L. Petersen has argued that the traditional interpretation of the prophets proceeds on the false assumption that an independent spirit (charisma) and historical context (history) are inseparable. He instead tries to move away from these categories, presenting a helpful analysis of the context of the prophetic activity by means of sociological role theory. All of these disciplines help to construct a fuller picture of the prophetic ministry by showing points of contact with similar phenomena, both in the age of the prophets and throughout history. It is only by such strategies that we can arrive at a basis for assessing the theological uniqueness and worth of Old Testament prophecy. It is precisely because this issue is of critical interest that the text which attempts to present prophetic activity must be understood in the context of the prophetic message.

It was the view of early critics that the prophets stood in independent opposition to the institution of the priestly and cultic. This view, however, was strongly challenged by the interest in the context of the prophetic literature. In the writing of prophetic oracles. Drawing attention to oral passages like 2 Chronicles 20:14-17 or Psalm 69:13-15, they noted the role of the prophet in the forms of prophetic speech, such as the threat or promise, were best understood when one supposed that the prophet spoke as a figure of prophecy. For example, in the Babylonian language, which the prophet was set to function as a kind of prophet in the role of Nabopolassar, he was also supposed to function as a kind of prophet in the role of Nabopolassar, as a kind of prophet in the role of Nabopolassar.

Later, others argued on the basis of parallels between prophetic texts and the biblical material. Thus says Yahweh... For example, Amos 7:16-17, form criticism would identify v.16 as a reproach, a statement of a threat, a legal background formulated by Amos. The threat, or announcement of punishment in v.17, however, is held to be the essential word of God. It is the form criticism which is based upon the assumption, drawn largely from the historical books, that the essential prophetic word was a threat or a promise (e.g. 1 Ki. 17:12; 2 Ki. 20:5-6). It is therefore that the word of God written in the literal prophetic text is not necessarily the same as the prophetic word. This is not to say that prophets approximate to the ideal form. Moreover, some did not think that a prophetic society is a written text, that the the prophetic word is a written text.

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articulation. It is a question whether or not the prophetic word corresponds to all the essence of the revelation, but since the experience is ultimately a spiritual one, the question itself is philosophical. The fact that God has 'spoken' is an encouragement to faith, but the content of the prophetic word is purely human in origin. It has no intrinsic authority, except in so far as it reflects or conforms to the authority of human reason. Koch seems to regard prophetic language about God as referring essentially to literary or historical data, no real systematic theology of the prophets is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense, because their concept of God was undergoing continual modification with each new turn of events.

It is precisely at this point that conservative students will find their keenest tenets with some aspects of critical scholarship respecting the prophets. The Old Testament Scriptures strongly suggest that God communicated to men in such a way that the concepts of 'speaking' and hearing are approximations of what happened. Though we may say with Calvin that God's 'lisps' to us to illustrate the great gap bridged in the process of revelation, we have clear biblical grounds for affirming that this gap has been genuinely (though not exhausitively) bridged. The greatest issue at stake in prophetic studies is not 'what did God say through the prophets?', but 'What does it mean for a prophet to claim that God had spoken to him at all?'

Discussion of the theology of the prophets requires a return to the context of inspiration. While most scholars would recognize that the prophets inherited traditional ideas, some stress the dominance of the ideal of the 'man of God', as found in the thought of Isaiah himself and of other prophetic writers. For example, developed the very influential thesis that Isaiah's preaching was deeply dependent on a tradition about Jehovah's defeat of the nations at Mount Zion and the establishment of a new and eternal covenant. This idea is reflected in the message of the 'kingdom of God' which is a central theme in Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah's message is a challenge to the established order, to the political and social structures of his time. It is a call to a new community of believers, to a new covenant that will replace the old.

It is generally recognized that predictions of coming disaster are related by the prophets to particular social or political evils which are bringing on the judgment. Those who stress the importance of the traditions of the prophets in the development of the traditions of the history of the peoples, have also pointed out the role of prophecy in the development of political thought.

All types of scholarship agree that the prophetic message concerns the future. However, critical scholarship tends to limit this futuristic concern to the prophets' prediction of future events perceived by naturalistic presuppositions which exclude the possibility of divine revelation respecting the future. On this view, prophets 'predicted' the future on the basis of their esxceptional immediate experience. For example, the prophecy of Babylonian captivity may have been a result of the immediate concern to their hearers, and this is a perspective which must be appreciated. The prophets certainly did speak of the distant future of the history of the people of Israel but this was not one of the aims of the prophetic message. The prophets were concerned with the immediate future of the nation, both national and spiritual. This is a perspective which must be appreciated.

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Discussion of the theology of the prophets requires a return to the question of divinity revelation. While most scholars would recognize that the prophets inherited traditional ideas, some stress the dominance of these ideas. This is a methodological question raised by von Rad, for example, developed the very influential thesis that Isaiah's preaching was deeply dependent on a tradi- tion about Jehovah's defeat of the nations at Mount Zion 

against Israel (Amos 2:16; 9:7). The prophets are seen as a return to an earlier cult, distinct from the prophetic tradition, in which the prophet inherits, and then reapplies, revises, or expands in the light of his own circumstances. This study, known as the book of Hosea, seeks to find a unifying theme to the preaching in well-established ideas long associated with important cult centres.

This approach to the message, however, tends to be unacceptable to those who wish to emphasize the creativity and originality of the prophets. Thus, while the presence of traditional ideas may be recognized, and even a close connection is sought to find a unifying theme to the preaching in well-established ideas long associated with important cult centres.

It is generally recognized that predictions of coming disaster are related by the prophets to particular social or political evils which are bringing on the judgment. Those who stress the dependence of the prophets on traditions as part of a particular covenant tradition, see this message as based on an appeal to authority, while those who stress the independence of the prophets in their task and the direct appeal to the conscience, which the prophets, after discovering it for themselves, were seeking to awaken in their hearers. Conservatives would not wish to draw a sharp distinction between these two appeals to authority and an appeal to the conscience, as if the authority of law could not serve as a basis for stirring up the conscience. Nor is it possible to separate as clearly as some have focused on the biblical witness on this issue, which indicates that the Lord's own ethical teaching, e.g. the Sermon on the Mount, is firmly grounded in the law, according to Jesus himself. How can a theology that predates the conscience in a powerful and highly creative way, not unlike the Old Testament prophets?

At present, however, the classical critical canon that the prophets discovered the conscience (and thus were the precursors of 'Mosaic law') still predominates Old Testa-