[*JSOT* 48 (1990) 3-29]

PROPHECY IN HISTORY: THE SOCIAL REALITY OF INTERMEDIATION

Thomas W. Overholt

University of Wisconsin
Stevens Point, WI 54481, USA

There *were* prophets in ancient Israel and Judah, and persons like Amos and Jeremiah were recognized by their contemporaries as being among them. This proposition may seem to many a banality—a piece of common knowledge and hardly something to be argued—but in recent years it has come under explicit attack by two British scholars, A. Graeme Auld and Robert P. Carroll. My proposition, then, provides an occasion to appraise their arguments and to make a modest proposal about how cross-cultural studies can contribute to our appreciation of the historical reality of biblical prophecy.

Poets, not Prophets

The position that Auld seeks to defend is that 'it [is] at least plausible that [the terms] "prophet" and "prophesy" only came to be attached to those whom we regard as the towering prophets of the Bible in a period no earlier than when Jeremiah and Ezekiel became similarly re-presented' (1984: 82). Stated in a slightly stronger way, he informs us that his 'first aim is a negative one: to discount the inherited suggestion that these poets were "prophets" in their own eyes or in the eyes of their contemporaries' (1983b: 41). Recent studies by Carroll have tended toward a similar conclusion. These two scholars have studied different material, and their arguments are not identical. Still, they are in basic agreement that figures

like Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah were poets and were not thought of as prophets until exilic times. Between them, Auld and Carroll marshal four arguments in support of this 'poets, not prophets' hypothesis.

The first argument is linguistic. Auld in particular has been preoccupied with what he calls the 'history of terminology' (1984: 82). Several of his studies center on the noun and verb forms of *nb'* and conclude that there are three identifiable stages in the use of these terms in the prophetic and historical books of the Hebrew Bible. First, at an early stage the terms were applied to groups that were the objects of criticism. During this period, the canonical prophets—Isaiah, Micah, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah (in the poetic sections of the books)—were not referred to as 'prophets'. 'The usage is rather more nuanced' in Amos and Hosea, but 'there is no suggestion that Hosea was himself a "prophet"; and that label is specifically rejected by Amos in 7.14' (1984: 68). The books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel represent a second, transitional stage. In addition to criticism of the prophets as a group, these books contain positive references to past prophets and apply the title 'prophet' to Jeremiah and Ezekiel themselves. The latter book regularly uses the verb to describe Ezekiel's functioning. Auld concludes, however, that neither Jeremiah nor Ezekiel used the noun to describe himself or the verb to refer to his own activity (1984: 73). Finally, there is a late stage in which the view of prophets is essentially favorable and individuals — Haggai, Zechariah, and Habakkuk—are given the title prophet. The favorable attitude toward prophets in Kings is the result of late editorial additions.

In this view, Jeremiah and Ezekiel 'stand at the cross-roads' of a development from eighth- and seventh-century hostility (or at best neutrality) toward 'prophetic contemporaries' to the post-exilic period when persons were 'readily titled "prophet"' (Auld 1983a: 5). The validity of this scheme can be tested with 'a degree of objectivity' in the book of Jeremiah, 'with its different editions, and its blend of poetry and prose' (1983a: 5-6). References to 'prophets' in the Jeremiah poetry are mostly critical. In the earliest stratum of prose (the material common to LXX and MT) there are many critical references to prophets, but Jeremiah, Uriah, and Micah are

referred to positively as prophets. The latest prose ('extra' material in MT) has a few critical references, but gives the title 'prophet' to Jeremiah (24×) and Hananiah (6×). Carroll also notes the development that has taken place between the two editions of the book of Jeremiah: while the first (represented by LXX) gives Jeremiah the title 'the prophet' only four times (all refer to the period after the fall of Jerusalem), the second (represented by MT) does so twenty-six times, making him 'the prophet *par excellence*' (1989a: 23).

Auld observes that the verb 'prophesy' seems to have been used positively earlier than the noun 'prophet'. For example, Amos 3.3-8 (Auld eliminates v. 7 as a later prose addition) groups prophesying with other matters of general human experience. Thus '*prophesying*... [is] an activity that is not confined to official *prophets*, but open to *anyone* who has heard Lord Yahweh speak' (1986: 32). This line of argumentation involves the supposition 'that for the author of the narrative one did not have to be a "prophet" in order to receive the divine imperative to "prophesy"; and indeed that such a command did not turn one into a "prophet"' (p. 30). Amos 7.10-17, a late addition included to explore 'the nature of Amos's authority' (1986:28), has the same tendency: 'the designation "prophet" is rejected but the activity of "prophesying" [is] acceptable' (1984: 68). Thus, neither 7.10-17 nor 3.3-8 provides 'evidence for Amos's own attitude to the business of prophecy' (1986: 35).

In another study Auld examines the use of the phrase 'the Word of God' in order to call into question 'the widespread confidence that in the classical Hebrew prophets we meet the quintessential bearers of the divine word' (1988: 245). He points out that the phrase rarely occurs in books associated with the eighth-century prophets. In Hosea, for example, the only two occurrences (1.1; 4.1) are in secondary editorial insertions (1988: 246). This phrase and others (like 'says the Lord' in passages which on other grounds can be considered secondary) may be 'used to claim authority for a later insertion to the message of the eighth-century figure', and it is doubtful that prophets like Isaiah, Hosea, or Jeremiah 'ever actually said "Hear the Word of the Lord" or "The Word of the Lord came to me"' (1988: 246-47).

A second argument in support of the 'poets, not prophets' theory follows from the observation that there is no unanimity in the Hebrew Bible on 'what a prophet is or should be' or on the evaluation of prophets. Carroll points out that 'the Bible offers no definition of what a prophet is (1 Sam. 9.9 is a most curious statement!) nor does the biblical word *nabi'* have any definite meaning in Hebrew that we can discern'. It is impossible to derive from the biblical texts a clear understanding of the relationship between prophets and diviners or the cult, and attempts to delineate 'the various roles specified by different terms in the Hebrew Bible' must negotiate the twin hazards of scanty data in the texts and inexact matches between ancient roles and modern activities. Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible displays 'a strange tension between good reports about prophets and trenchant dismissals of them as deceivers and idolaters'. All of this should make the modern interpreter beware of assuming that he or she knows what biblical prophecy was (Carroll 1989b: 209-15).

There is an obvious link here with the argument based on terminology. By stressing the distinction between the act of 'prophesying' and the social role 'prophet', Auld was able to argue both that Amos was not a prophet and that the book reveals nothing about Amos's attitude toward prophecy (Auld 1986: 25-35; cf. 1988: 246-50).

Carroll has suggested a third argument, namely that our association of texts with specific prophets is merely a matter of convention and cannot be substantiated with hard evidence. The poetic sections of the prophetic books, he reminds us, tend to be anonymous; they are associated with named individuals on the basis of the editorial frameworks, which serve to incorporate them into larger collections. The introductory colophons are very important in this respect, since in most cases they are the only place in a book where the prophet is named. The contents of the colophons cannot be substantiated historically, however, and 'we may equally regard them as part extrapolation [from tradition] and part invention' (Carroll 1988: 28; 1989a: 26). The persons who wrote these colophons thus 'helped to *invent* the ancient prophets as biographical figures' (Carroll 1988: 25).

Finally, it is relatively clear to students of the Hebrew Bible that many of its books are the result of a long and complicated process of editorial activity. The fourth argument for the 'poets, not prophets' position focuses on two aspects of this editorial process.

The first of these is that the texts of the prophetic books are products of literary activity. According to Carroll, we must think of the biblical books as conventional literary texts fabricated by their authors for particular purposes. Furthermore, 'prophecy was an oral phenomenon', and the writing down of prophecy severed the originally oral text from the speaker's situation and transformed it into a 'timeless reference... addressed to future generations'. Thus, unless there is 'considerable justification', to infer a social background from the text amounts to 'an illegitimate transfer of meaning from story to social background' (Carroll 1989b: 206-207).

The implications of this view may be seen in Carroll's interpretation of the book of Jeremiah. Since we are basically ignorant about the formation of that book, scholars have resorted to 'axiomatic assertions', for example, that the poetry contained in it had to be spoken by someone, and in view of 1.1-3 this someone must have been Jeremiah. But such assertions are 'very unhelpful'. In fact, it is reasonable 'to accept, for the sake of argument', the view 'that the book purports to be the work of a fictional character called Jeremiah and then to proceed from that point to treat the work *as if* such a figure behaved and spoke in the ways attributed to him in the book'. This is the way we understand Homer's Odysseus, Shakespeare's Macbeth, Swift's Gulliver, and Joyce's Bloom,

> and there is no good reason to treat biblical characters in a different fashion. What we would not do is to insist on a one-to-one correspondence between the fictional characters and any historical counterparts we might imagine of them... A similar approach must be advocated for reading Jeremiah. We should treat the character of Jeremiah as a work of fiction and recognize the impossibility of moving from the book to the real 'historical' Jeremiah, given our complete lack of knowledge independent of the book itself (1989a: 12).

At issue is not whether in their present form the prophetic books are products of a period of editorial activity, but how this

activity is to be conceived. In his recent commentary on Jeremiah, William McKane proposed the idea of a 'rolling corpus' to explain the process of growth. According to this theory, poetry generally preceded prose, and expansions of the text were not systematic but were ad hoc and exegetical in intent. Auld and Carroll both embrace this idea, which allows them to focus on the motivations of the redactors of the books and play down the possibility that portions of the text may reflect an original (or at least earlier) message and social situation (Auld 1983a: 3-5). Furthermore, Carroll draws more far-reaching conclusions than does McKane, who like many others assumes that the poetry of Jeremiah 2–20 contains genuine words of the prophet. Though Carroll says this hypothesis is worth entertaining, he insists that 'there is no hard evidence to support it'. The identity of Jeremiah actually derives from the editorial framework of the book (1.1-3) and not from the poetry (Carroll 1989a: 37).

To speak of the motivations of redactors suggests a need to view the texts in terms of their ideological content. This is the second aspect of the argument from editorial activity. Carroll points out that within the book of Jeremiah one finds 'quite contrary, even contradictory' views on matters ranging from the social situation (society is totally corrupt / it is composed of both righteous and wicked persons) to the possibility of repentance (the people are incorrigible / repentance is possible) to the prophet himself (in the laments he is a 'depressed and depressing' figure / in the narratives he 'commands' and 'confronts'; 1986: 292-95). Such diverse views must have their origin in attitudes of the redactors.

Carroll's view of the laments indicates his inclination to look for *later* ideological developments. These poems, often interpreted as 'autobiographical utterances of the prophet Jeremiah', are neither collected into a single place nor 'given any editorial connections with Jeremiah's speaking', though the placement of 11.21-23 and 18.18 'suggests some connection between the laments and the life of Jeremiah'. Carroll suggests that 'the most natural way to read' those poems is as a stage in the development of the traditions in which the innocent who suffered at the nation's fall seek vindication—con-

tradicting Jeremiah's blaming of the *whole* nation for the disaster (e.g. 5.1-5; 6.13; etc.; 1989a 46-47).

In view of the Bible's differing attitudes toward prophecy, it is less problematic to refer to the canonical figures like Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah as 'poets' rather than 'prophets'. The fact that later compilers of the 'anthologies' shared at least some of these poets' ideology may account for the development in the direction of correlating poet and prophet (Carroll 1983; Auld 1988: 246-50).

Prophets After All

Commenting on the organization of his study of the book of Amos, Auld says, 'I have started near the end, with reports of Amos's visions and the discussion of his status, rather than at the beginning because I find that much reading of the Bible's prophetic literature is prejudiced since readers *know* in advance what a prophet or visionary *really* is—but are wrong' (1986: 10). A prominent feature of my attempt to rebut the Auld–Carroll position on prophets and prophecy will be this: historically and sociologically, religious intermediation is a very widely distributed phenomenon, and it conforms rather strictly to a particular pattern. On the basis of such comparative evidence we can indeed know in advance what 'prophets' are, and we will be *right*. Let me take up their lines of argumentation one by one.

1. *The 'History of Terminology'*

Amos 7, where 'the designation "prophet" is rejected but the activity of "prophesying" acceptable' (Auld 1984: 68), is a good place to begin a consideration of the linguistic evidence. Auld's only explanation for this locution is that here (and in Amos 3.8) we have a parallel with the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in which the verb develops more rapidly than the noun 'in connection with the hero of a "prophetic" book' (1984: 73). The narrative of Amos 7.10-17, however, demonstrates clearly the weakness of concentrating on terminology. Though Amos denies he is a prophet, Amaziah recognizes his public activity as 'prophesying' (7.12-13) and Amos uses the same term to describe his commission from Yahweh (7.15).

Würthwein (1950) has argued that Amos's refusal to accept the title 'prophet' was motivated by his desire to distinguish himself from official prophets whose primary task was intercession. This is a reasonable explanation. In any case, the important point is that regardless of what he and they were called, it is evident that both Amos and the 'prophets' to whom he refers were performing a recognizable social role.

Who, according to Auld, was Amos? It appears 'that he did not regard himself as a "prophet", that he did not claim status as a "religious" functionary, that he did not require a position in popular or official religion to say what he had to say... He appears rather to have held that *anyone* who had heard Yahweh speak should himself "prophesy" [cf. Amos 3.3-6, 8]: that means, speak out with the freedom prophets use. He appears to have been an agriculturalist. Yet our main evidence for him is as a communicator: and he certainly was extraordinarily skilful in his use of words' (1986: 73). But this leaves unanswered the question of what role Amos was playing in society when he uttered his wonderfully poetic words. The definition of prophecy implied here—a prophet is someone to whom Yahweh has spoken and who freely communicates the contents of this revelation to an audience—describes precisely what, according to the narrative, Amos claimed he was doing. Therefore, Amos was a prophet!

Similarly, Auld notes about Ezekiel that he is never 'directly' given the title 'prophet', though twice he is indirectly called that (2.5; 33.33). Still, about thirty times his 'words are introduced... by a reported command to "prophesy". Perhaps during the period when attitudes were changing the verb was more acceptable than the noun "prophet" as a designation of acceptable "prophetic" activity' (1983a: 5). It is not clear why the noun should be unacceptable. In any case the use of the verb implies some observable behavior. It follows that the prophetic role is being performed and *recognized*. This presupposes that both the performers and the audience had a certain view of what was transpiring.[1]

The same thing is true of Auld's discussion of how the terms develop within Jeremiah. There the verb form occurs more often in the 'shorter prose tradition' than it had in the poetry, and in these prose passages it can refer to 'the activity of indi-

viduals who are not otherwise "prophet" *in the immediate context of the passages concerned*: eight times of Jeremiah himself—11.21; 19.14; 20.1; 26.9, 11, 12; 29.27; 32.3; twice positively of others—26.18 (Micah of Moresheth) and 26.20 (Uriah); and five times negatively of others—20.6; 28.6; 29.21, 26, 31' (1984: 71; emphasis added). The intent, of course, is to bolster the point that these individuals were not yet designated as 'prophets'. But again, what sense does it make to say audiences recognized that people were 'prophesying' but did not understand them to be 'prophets'? The reference to the 'immediate (literary) context' is a smokescreen which obscures the fact that there must certainly have been a *social* context in which the use of the verb made sense. Notice the content of the eight references to Jeremiah: most involve other persons identifying his activity as 'prophesying'; two have the narrator making the reference (19.14; 20.1), and in one Jeremiah is made to describe his own activity in this way (26.12).

There is a similar problem in his treatment of Jeremiah 28. The longer prose (= MT) uses the title 'prophet' for both Jeremiah and Hananiah. On the other hand, the shorter prose (= LXX) never gives Jeremiah the title, and gives it only once (in the form *pseudoprophētēs,* 'false prophet' [v. 1]) to Hananiah. Though admitting 'proof is impossible' (1984: 72), Auld infers that the short prose does not consider Hananiah a prophet. As evidence he cites the fact that elsewhere the short prose uses 'prophet' only of groups mentioned in conjunction with other groups (6.13; 26.7, 8, 11; 27.9; 29.1, 8). But what sociological sense does it make to assert that persons operating in groups can be recognized to be prophets, while those operating (as far as we know) independently would not be called by the same name? The use of the verb for both implies that at the very least the individuals were recognized as performing the same social role.

As to the Jeremiah poetry, if it mostly criticizes prophets and does not refer to Jeremiah himself as a prophet, this seems only what one would expect. The poetry is preoccupied with a critique of Judean society; there is little opportunity for self-reference.

The major assumption in my rebuttal of Auld's argument from the 'history of terminology' is that the kind of religious intermediation we designate 'prophet' was a social reality in ancient Israel and Judah, presumably from very early times. Furthermore, I believe it was a social role which the population as a whole understood very well. To think that prophecy developed late in the Old Testament period, or that the canonical figures were only then identified as prophets, is incorrect.

My assumption is based upon evidence that prophetic intermediation is a widely distributed and precisely describable social phenomenon and the conviction that cross-cultural research on prophecy can contribute to our understanding of the Hebrew prophets.[2] Data from a number of cultures and historical periods show that prophetic intermediation is characterized by a regular and recognizable set of social behaviors, which are in turn made possible (and rendered plausible) by the societies' own assumptions about the relationship of the gods to the everyday world of human experience.[3]

Old Testament prophecy conforms to this pattern. It is not a unique phenomenon invented, so to speak, by the Israelites, let alone by a group of exiles late in their history. This is not merely a negative comment, since seeing the Israelite prophets within the broader context of the history of religions has the advantage of confirming and providing a clearer description of their role in Israelite society.

The pattern of behavior defined by my model of the prophetic process constitutes a kind of 'program' which allows members of a society to recognize and respond to persons who seem to have taken up a certain socio-religious role (Overholt 1989: 149-62). Both the ancient Israelites and Judeans (because they lived in a society hospitable to this kind of intermediation and with a tradition of such activity) and we (because on the basis of research we can recognize the presence of the pattern) do, contrary to Carroll, 'have knowledge independent of' the biblical accounts themselves.

The point is, conclusions about prophets in ancient Israel based on an examination of the use of words like 'prophet' and 'prophesy' err in failing to take into account a social reality clearly perceivable in (or behind) the texts.

2. *Consensus and Definition*

The second line of argumentation had to do with the supposed lack of unanimity within the Hebrew Bible on 'what a prophet is or should be'. The 'ancient Israelite writers', says Carroll, 'had no clear image' about the prophets and often dismissed them as undesirable (1989b: 209). The statement seems hyperbolic. I have already referred to a cross-cultural account of prophecy which identifies a process of intermediation that can be precisely described (Overholt 1989). The model employed in that study, it should be noted, accommodates the variety of terms used to gloss the role of this particular kind of religious intermediation, as well as conflicts between intermediaries themselves and between intermediaries and segments of their audiences. Such conflicts are a normal part of the process (cf. Long 1981). They may be disconcerting to audiences faced with the need to evaluate what a particular prophet is saying, but they should not be to us.

Etymologically, it may be true that 'the biblical word *nābî'* has no 'definite meaning in Hebrew'. On the other hand, in ancient Israel and Judah it evidently glossed a rather well-recognized social role, a religious intermediary of a specific type. If the description of this type in terms of a cross-cultural model seems somewhat ideal, it has social reality nonetheless, incorporating functionaries ranging along a continuum from prophet to diviner.

According to Auld, the notion of prophecy, 'the idea of God speaking to or through mediators', came to be attached to approved figures like Amos and Jeremiah only during a late 're-formation of the prophetic traditions' (1988: 248). In his own time Amos 'was a critic of the community of classic proportions... [but] he was not a prophet till the descendants of his community made him one, nor did he purvey the word of God till his successors discerned that quality in his words... Poetic critics like Amos were deemed bearers of the divine word even before they were redefined as "prophets"' (1988: 246-47). Amos himself was not a prophet. He and others like him, Auld says,

> come across not as men of the word but as craftsmen with words. The developed view of the prophet may be of the divine messenger or ambassador... If that poetic succession from

> Amos to Jeremiah was later re-presented as a series of 'servants' duly acknowledged by God then this is in part a judgment that they had in fact been good advocates. It tells us how their authority for a later scriptural age was understood; but leaves unstated how they functioned in their own age. My submission is that when later generations called Amos and Isaiah 'prophets', and received their words as 'Word of God', they gave them an honour they had richly deserved but did not claim (1988: 250).

There is some truth in this formulation, since ultimately prophets must be recognized (authorized) by the communities in which they function; one cannot perform a social role like 'prophet' unless at least some members of the society validate that performance. It is no doubt also the case that appreciation of the biblical prophets increased as time passed and some of what they said was confirmed by events. But there are problems. First, even if it could be established that Amos and the others did not claim to be prophets, we would not be entitled to conclude that *no one* understood them to be performing the role of prophets. Explicit claims are not the only, or the most important, feature of prophetic behavior.[4] Second, Auld does not seem to reckon with the possibility that there existed in Israel from earliest times the assumptions that Yahweh and humans could be in contact and that persons performing certain recognized roles (generally glossed 'prophets' and 'diviners') were the chief channels of this intercourse.

In the same context, Auld suggests the prophets 'sought to convince by argument rather than compel by authority. Amos makes his appeal to Israel not in terms of divine revelation old or new but by an invidious point to point comparison of her behaviour with that of her neighbours who she knew broke all natural norms' (1988: 250). This poet cannot be a prophet; he is too rational. But it is not clear why revelation and rational 'point to point comparison' should necessarily be incompatible. Intermediaries need not be considered mere megaphones through whom an emotional deity speaks.

3. *Identity and Invention*

The third line of argumentation for the 'poets, not prophets' position entailed the claim that the identity of the figures after

whom the prophetic books are named derives from the editorial material in those books and is as likely as not a late fiction. Carroll argues that the book of Jeremiah is 'a highly polemical text' made up of 'many different polemical pieces', coming from a variety of times and situations. It cannot, therefore, go back to a single author. Even the assumption that Jeremiah is at least responsible for the poetry depends for support upon taking secondary editorial material (e.g. 1.1-3) at face value. But 'good scholarship', he says, requires that 'nothing must be assumed without some evidence for it' (1986: 298-99).

The question is whether Carroll sets up a straw opponent and assaults it with too big a weapon. Who would claim that the whole book of Jeremiah goes back to a single person? Why is it necessary, in order to refute such a position, to completely dispose of the prophet Jeremiah as a human being about whom something can be known? One might just as well pose a different question about the book: Doesn't the fact that there is a major block of material bearing the name 'Jeremiah' make it plausible to assume that somewhere behind, and in, that tradition is a real historical person? Carroll admonishes us that 'nothing must be assumed without some evidence for it', but what passes for evidence? I am proposing that if the texts speak of behavior which confirms to a widely distributed pattern of intermediation, we should accept this as evidence that they attest in some way to actual social and historical phenomena.[5]

Carroll claims about the colophons of the prophetic books that without them we would neither 'read what follows as the utterances of specific persons', nor would we 'be tempted to read what follows as the output of prophets in the first place!' (since the collections condemn prophets and 'no prophet is praised' in them [1988: 33]). On the contrary, I think it quite likely we would. Thematic and stylistic coherence in prophetic books or sections thereof suggests the influence of some specific person, whether or not he or she could be identified. And if some of these texts tend to attack prophets, this should be no surprise. Prophecy is at home in times of crisis, and at such times differences of opinion are bound to arise. Polemics against prophets are easily understood as directed against *other* prophets. A response made by H.G.M. Williamson to one

of Auld's papers is pertinent here: the pre-exilic prophets do not reject their opponents 'because they are *nebi'im*, but because they are bad ones' (1983: 34).

4. *The Literary Character of Prophetic Texts*

Finally, there is the matter of the literary character of the Old Testament propetic texts. For Carroll, the writing down of materials originally transmitted orally seems to imply a 'transformation' of content: 'The import of the words' has been changed, enabling them 'to change beyond their immediate context and to apply to circumstances far removed from their original setting' (1989b: 208). The argument seems to be: literary texts yield reliable data only about the situation and ideological purpose of their authors; since the authors of prophetic texts are not the prophets themselves, we cannot look to these texts for reliable data about the prophets.

Again, the position seems extreme. I am perfectly in agreement with the notions that a series of editors have in all likelihood shaped our present prophetic books to fit their own understandings and the needs of their time and that what these texts 'mean' does not so much reside in the books, like a precious pearl in its shell, as arise out of the process of persons ancient and modern hearing and reading them. The question is whether this on-going process of interpretation forecloses the possibility of deriving from the words themselves hints about the social situations that were the occasions for their utterance. In my opinion, it does not.

The larger issue is the extent to which a literary text (in this case a prophetic book) asserts some influence over readers' interpretations of it and yields useful information about the prophet and his time. This is a complex issue, much debated among recent literary theorists.

The crux of the problem lies in the peculiar relationship that exists between texts and readers. That the text of Jeremiah can be physically present on the desk in front of me like a coffee mug or a computer is obvious. But I am related differently to the Jeremiah text than to these other objects. In the words of Georges Poulet, the text offers itself to me to be read, and when I read it, its images and ideas come to reside in the 'interior world' of my 'consciousness' (Poulet 1972: 42-43).

The result is a 'convergence of text and readers', in which the author's text stimulates a response in the reader and gives rise to a dynamic, dialectical process which 'brings the literary work into existence' (Iser 1974: 50). To be sure, subsequent readings by the same or different readers may yield differing 'realizations' of the text, but since 'the written text imposes certain limits on its unwritten implications', the process is not entirely arbitrary (Iser 1974: 51, 57).

This view, which acknowledges the role of the reader in creating the meaning of the text while seemingly preserving the text's independent status, has been challenged by Stanley Fish. For Fish it is not the author's 'intention' that determines a text's meaning. Rather, readers see in a text what the 'interpretive strategies' of the community to which they belong allow them to see (1976: 176). But it seems likely that Fish has given away too much. We ought to concede to him (and others) that the text (the collection of words that confronts us on the printed page or in some other medium) is not a self-sufficient entity which contains a single, true meaning that has only to be uncovered. The proposition that meaning arises out of the dynamic, dialectical process set in motion by the 'convergence of text and reader' (Iser) seems altogether reasonable. However, if the text is an occasion for the reader's experience, it also sets boundaries for that experience. Interpretations of it can be more or less warranted by the language it contains. Thus, if the aim is to interpret a text, it will be useful to be attentive to its language, for example, to the range of possible meanings of the words its author has selected.[6]

On the other hand, if the text creates a boundary or horizon that marks off the proper realm for its interpretation, it is important that this horizon not be considered too close at hand. It must be wide enough to encompass more than a single reading of the text. The ideal, it would seem, is to avoid the two extremes on the reader–text continuum: the view that texts contain *a* meaning which one simply has to uncover, and the view that texts place virtually no limit on the meanings generated while reading them. Fish (who claims to have 'made the text disappear' [1976: 183]) seems close to the latter pole.[7]

Robert Scholes agrees with Fish that interpretation enters the reading process at an early point, but insists that texts do

guide us in their interpretation. His argument has two main prongs, a rather minimalist statement of which would be that there is 'some reality in the texts and some freedom in the interpreter' (1985: 159). A text is always 'encoded in a particular language' and can exist 'as a text only in and through its language' (1985: 152). Interpretation, therefore, assumes 'familiarity with [its] linguistic code'.

Codes (such as language, or the rules of chess) set boundaries for behavior, but allow freedom within those boundaries. Scholes (1985: 161-62) uses the example of Pat Kelly, a Baltimore Orioles outfielder who attributes his home runs to divine intervention, to illustrate 'the major problem in Fish's theory: his refusal to see any difference between the primary system in which a text is encoded and secondary systems that can only be brought to bear by an interpreter who comprehends the primary system'. Both Kelly and the sports writer share a primary system, the rules of baseball by which home runs are perceived as home runs. It is not that for Kelly the Christian view has replaced the baseball view; rather, 'he grafts another interpretation onto the baseball interpretation'. The dispute between the two is over the proper hierarchy and the relevance of several codes. Thus, says Scholes, 'Where Fish sees interpretive communities remotely controlling acts of interpretation by individuals suffering from the illusion of freedom, I see individuals with many codes, some more and some less relevant, trying to see which ones will serve best in dealing with structures that have their own necessities'.[8]

But we must not forget that our readings of a text are never neutral or innocent. Terry Eagleton's claim that every reading of a work is also in some sense a re-writing of it does not refer simply to the fact that our subjective value-judgments somehow subvert the factual knowledge conveyed by the text. While it is possible for 'factual knowledge... [to] be distorted by particular interests and judgements', the more basic point is that 'interests are *constitutive* of our knowledge, not merely prejudices which imperil it'. We come to a literary text, as to everything else in life, bearing a 'largely concealed structure of values', beliefs, and interests which as members of a society we are 'born into'. Our interpretations and value judgments

are not whimsical, but are informed by an 'ideology' (1983: 12-16).

I have no interest in claiming that my reading supplies the only—or even the best—interpretation of the biblical texts concerning prophecy. It is one of a number of useful ways of interpreting them. What prompts me to argue so vigorously against the 'poets, not prophets' hypothesis is an interest in understanding a particular kind of human social behavior to which we may give the rather general label 'prophecy'. I have encountered the basic structures of this type of behavior in texts produced by or about such a wide variety of societies—including those of ancient Israel and Judah—that the attempt to eliminate it from certain biblical texts seems to me to be a misinterpretation. The biblical texts seem clearly to embody a 'code'—a pattern of social behavior quite analogous to Scholes's 'rules of baseball'—that was both expected and recognized as 'prophetic', and that persistently points the reader in the direction of social reality. This code was evidently firmly entrenched in the ideology of ancient Israel and Judah during the whole period of the texts' production and for centuries before. That these texts are considered Scripture by two major religious traditions does not privilege them, or the society in which they were produced, in the sense of placing them off limits to non-theological interpretations or comparisons with other cultures.

One can only speculate about the 'ideology' which informs the 'poets, not prophets' position. It seems fair to observe that Auld's view of Amos as a great communicator has the effect of playing down spiritual claims and making him appear to be more an 'enlightened' social reformer than perhaps he was. And Carroll's choice of the phrase 'deconstructing the prophet' in one of his titles invites us to assume some level of commitment to a specific theoretical position.

There is another matter which relates to the literary character of the prophetic texts. Carroll, as we have seen, has argued that we ought to understand the prophet Jeremiah as a fictional character like Homer's Odysseus and Shakespeare's Macbeth, recognizing 'the impossibility of moving from the book to the real "historical" Jeremiah, given our complete lack of knowledge independent of the book itself'

(1989a: 12). This proposal to treat the book of Jeremiah as fiction raises the issue of the role of *genre* in interpretation. Does the genre of a work allow us to infer anything about the intention of its author or put any constraints upon us as readers? For example, one assumes when reading a novel or a play, no matter how historically oriented (e.g. *Macbeth*), that the author is at liberty to create the story as he or she sees fit. One is, therefore, wary of reading history out of such texts, though there may in fact be historical information in them. One further assumes that the author intended freely to create a story; that is why the genre was chosen over another (say, a history of...). If, on the other hand, authors choose to write histories, we assume they intend to construct accounts of the past. This does not, of course, mean that such accounts are perfectly accurate and free from bias. Still, we will be inclined to look for historical information in them, and rightly so.

The idea that attention to genre might be relevant to biblical studies is not a new one. Since the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel at the turn of the century and of Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Martin Dibelius and Rudolf Bultmann just after World War I, form criticism has been one of the prominent methods employed in the critical study of the Bible. Central to this approach is the idea that genres 'arise and become stereotyped because of recurring situations in human life' (Tucker 1971: 2). To speak of the function, or intention, of a genre is to ask—both in general and with respect to specific examples of the genre—about the particular purpose it arose to fulfill in its ancient setting (Tucker 1971: 16).

Genre has thus been used as a tool for classifying biblical texts and reconstructing the social and historical background out of which they arose, but this is not its only significance. Genre is also important in the process by which readers come to construct the meaning of particular texts. Without it, texts would hardly be 'readable'. In the words of Mary Gerhard, 'Genres are not only principles of categorization or identification; they are also principles of production. Understood retrospectively, genres can be said to produce, as well as to identify meanings' (1988: 33-34; cf. Buss 1979: 10).

This position has been argued at length by the literary theorist, E.D. Hirsch, Jr. Hirsch contends that interpretation must

address itself to the 'verbal meaning' of a text, which he defines as 'whatever someone has willed to convey by a particular sequence of linguistic signs and which can be conveyed (shared) by means of those linguistic signs' (1967: 31). Verbal meanings are 'changeless' in the sense that they remain 'the same from one moment to the next' (1967: 46). Language, on the other hand, is 'two-sided and reciprocal', involving both the expression and the interpretation of meaning. This confronts us with a problem for which genre will offer the solution: the 'paradox' that verbal meaning is individual but interpretations are variable is resolved when we realize that in our acquisition of language all of us master through repeated experience 'not only [its] variable and unstable norms... but also the particular norms of a particular genre'.[9]

Our understanding of a text is powerfully influenced by our 'meaning expectations', which in turn arise from our 'conception of the type of meaning that is being expressed', that is, from our 'generic conception' of the text (1967: 76). Therefore, a 'genre conception is constitutive' of both speaking and interpreting. Verbal meaning is 'genre-bound', since both speaking and understanding 'must be governed and constituted by a sense of the whole utterance' (1967: 78).[10]

We can now see how genre provides the key to solving another problem: If meaning is (as Hirsch insists) 'an affair of consciousness', then how can an author mean more than he or she is conscious of meaning? The answer lies in 'typification': the author conceives meaning as a whole, and within this whole unintended meanings are possible (Hirsch 1967: 48). To conceive of verbal meaning as a 'willed type' allows us to see how it 'can be (as it is) a determinate object of consciousness and yet transcend (as it does) the actual contents of consciousness' (1967: 49).

Terry Eagleton strenuously objects to Hirsch's position on the grounds that (under the influence of Husserl's phenomenology) his conception of authorial intention is too purely mental[11] and his defense of that intended meaning too 'authoritarian', its aim being 'the protection of private property' (1983: 68). Because they are 'the products of language, which always has something slippery about it', authorial meanings can never be stable, and no 'complete distinction'

can be made between a text's meaning and its meaning to me (1983: 69-70).

To show the flaw in Hirsch's argument 'that meaning is always the intentional act of an individual at some particular point in time', Eagleton develops an example (uses of the phrase, 'close the door') to make the point that 'the meaning of language is a social matter: there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me' (1983: 70-71). To ask about someone's intentions in using the phrase is not, as Hirsch would have it, to ask about a purely private mental act. The question is rather about the 'effects the language is trying to bring about'. To understand a speaker's intention is to grasp his or her 'speech and behaviour in relation to a significant context. When we understand the "intentions" of a piece of language, we interpret it as being in some sense *oriented*, structured to achieve certain effects; and none of this can be grasped apart from the practical conditions in which the language operates' (1983: 114).

One might say that Hirsch is asking for this criticism, but that in the end it is too harsh. Hirsch ultimately defines 'verbal meaning' as 'a *willed type* which an author expressed by linguistic symbols and which can be understood by another through those symbols' (1967: 49). The clue to the intended meaning of a text (despite even an author's subsequent change of opinion about what he or she has written) lies in the particular pattern of its language. Once written, both the language and its pattern are public. They provide both the clues and the restraints for the reader's construction of the work's meaning.

In any case, I should like to utilize Hirsch's theory in a weaker form than that attacked by Eagleton. Genre gives an indication of at least part of the meaning a text had for its author, but it does not guarantee that we can reconstruct the author's intention exactly. However, it is not crucially important that we do so, since what we need is only a broad indication of the context in which interpretation should take place. Hirsch is aware, no less than Eagleton, that there will always be a variety of interpretations of a given text. He also proposes criteria for judging how satisfactory various interpretations are. But ultimately, the constraints of genre can only be part of

our judgment. To ask which of all the possibilities available for interpreting a text is likely to be the most fruitful is to raise, of course, the question, 'Fruitful for what?' 'Ideology' is not something we can, or should, aspire to escape.

But what is the genre of Jeremiah? If we were to consider it an *anthology*, that would assume the activity of one or more editors, who chose materials to preserve and 'edited' and arranged them. But what were the materials that the earliest editor(s) collected? Presumably, they were utterances of a prophet named Jeremiah. Clearly a great deal of the material in the book comes from persons other than Jeremiah, but the genre gives us license to believe that there was such a person as Jeremiah and that the book contains at least some evidence for his life and work. The existence of the prophet is on this account a more plausible assumption than his absence.

I am proposing that at least some of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible belong to a genre that we may call 'anthology'. Works in this genre have two prominent features: there is an opening colophon which announces that the work contains the words (or vision) of a named (male) individual and dates his activity within the reign of a specific king or kings.[12] Following the colophon is a body of material consisting of separate and discrete units which are homogeneous in neither form nor (in the judgment of many researchers) date. If we view the colophons as expressions of authorial intention, it should be immediately clear that what follows is to be understood as collections of material related to the life and work of historical figures who were active at specified times. We must not, of course, be too naive about this. The colophon to the book of Jeremiah opens with the phrase, 'the words of Jeremiah', but there are extensive narratives in the book that do not fit that rubric. We can safely assume that the editor of the present book of Jeremiah worked sometime after the prophet's death and had some freedom in the choice of materials to include in his or her anthology. It is even possible that the criteria by which 'words of Jeremiah' were identified for inclusion differed from those modern scholars would apply.

However, the issue is not whether some parts of the book accurately report the *ipsissima verba* of the prophet, or whether it is the prophet's biography—another genre alto-

gether.[13] We are concerned, rather, with the verbal meaning of an editor's work. When the anthologist tells us in the introductory colophon that what follows pertains to the activity of a man named Jeremiah who was active during the reign of the last five kings of Judah and who he or she and, presumably, others understood to have been the recipient of revelations from Yahweh, there is no good reason to reject this broad characterization out of hand. On the contrary, there is a very good reason to accept it as a guide to our interpretation, since this is precisely what we expect of anthologies. By contrast, the genres implied in Carroll's own notion of the book's fictional nature are not appropriate to the text. The book as it stands (or even as it could conceivably be reconstructed by scholarly effort) is neither an epic nor a play nor a novel.

But is the book of Jeremiah an anthology? Unlike modern anthologies, it does not cite sources or bear the name of its editor. On the other hand, the organization, though loose, is like many modern anthologies roughly thematic (poetry predominates in chs. 1–25 and narratives in 26–45; 46–51 is a collection of oracles against the nations). As Fowler points out, genres resist definition, and because they tend to change over time, we must guard against imposing our up-to-date conceptions of a genre's characteristics on older materials (1982: 40, 261).

If we recognize that the prophetic books are literary products, we also recognize that these anthologies have an ideological content. Carroll finds evidence for this in the conflicting, even incompatible, images of the prophet within the book of Jeremiah. For example, references to his speaking to (26.16), even commanding (19.1), the nation's leaders suggest that Jeremiah had great authority, but this contradicts the idea that the nation fell because these same leaders refused to listen to him. That he was both supported and rejected by the public are incompatible ideas that 'can only be sustained at a theoretical or *textual* level'; they cannot be justified *'in real life'*. The contradiction stems from the editors' desire to do two things: show that Jeremiah was recognized as a true prophet and account for the fall of Jerusalem (1989a: 78-79). Certainly, this is a case of black-and-white reasoning and does not correspond to what we know both intuitively and from cross-cul-

tural studies to be social reality. Prophets must have support groups, but these need not include the entire population. Nor need the membership of the groups remain constant. People can change their minds; their support can blow hot and cold. We need to keep *social reality* in perspective.

Carroll is preoccupied with later ideological developments that may be mirrored in the prophetic texts, so he claims that 'the most natural way to read' the laments in the book of Jeremiah is as an exilic attempt to vindicate the innocents among the people who suffered at the nation's fall. But if that were the intent of the laments, why would they speak of murder plots and commands not to prophesy (11.21), of the speaker's associations with Yahweh's word (15.16, 19; 17.15; 20.8-9), of intercession (18.20), and of childbirth (20.14-18)? The collective reading does not seem particularly 'natural' for these laments, taken as a group. At the very least, the personal reading seems equally 'natural'.

Clearly, there are many details of this argument from genre that remain to be worked out. What I want to argue here is that the 'meaning expectations' associated with the genre anthology, taken together with what cross-cultural research demonstrates about the social reality of prophecy, enable us to affirm that the named individuals of the Hebrew Bible actually *were* prophets, both in their own eyes and in the judgment of at least some of their contemporaries. The Bible contains many things of which critical scholars can be skeptical, but this is not one of them. The radical skepticism of Auld's and Carroll's 'poets, not prophets' position is unwarranted.

NOTES

1. This applies also to Auld's denial that Elijah was a prophet (1984: 80).

2. I have discussed this at length in my book, *Channels of Prophecy* (1989). Because of vast differences in time, circumstances, and geographic location, cross-cultural comparisons of prophecy require the use of a model which focuses on the social dynamics of the prophetic act itself, on how the prophetic process works. The model I have developed for this purpose contains two essential features: a set of three actors (a deity, an intermediary, and an audience) and a pattern of

interrelationships among them involving revelation, the proclamation of a message, and feedback (cf. pp. 17-25).

3. Cf. Overholt (1989: 157-59) and the discussion of 'social prerequisites of intermediation' in R. Wilson (1980: 28-32).

4. Cf. the account of the Melanesian prophet, Yali, in Overholt 1986: 295-308.

5. It is difficult for any of us to be entirely consistent in our use of biblical evidence. So it is that in a study of the introductory colophons of the Old Testament prophetic books Carroll comments, 'no named prophet in the prophetic traditions and no figure in the colophons is said to have come from Jerusalem! It would appear to be the case that no Jerusalemite prophet was accepted in the canon of the prophets—whether for ideological, cultural or political reasons must be left to scholarly speculation' (1988: 30). It seems to me that, contrary to his own position, this statement depends upon the assumption that the books and their colophons do indeed retain *some* historical information.

6. Jonathan Swift's essay, 'A Modest Proposal', has been understood by readers with a literalistic interpretive strategy to be a serious espousal of cannibalism, and it is possible to imagine a reader who becomes sexually aroused as a result of reading the U.S. Constitution. But most readers would agree that the warrant for such interpretations resides less in the language of the text itself than, say, in specific readers' own needs or the interpretive strategy of their community of like-minded readers.

7. Cf. the critique of Scholes (1985: 147-52), and also Moore (1986). B. Long offers a reader-response interpretation of 2 Kgs 4.8-37 which demonstrates a healthy balance: there are 'contrary tendencies' in the narrative, but both 'rest on one's response to items in the work' (1988: 174).

8. See Eagleton's brief meditation on the word 'nightingale', the point of which is that 'language is not in fact something we are free to do what we like with'. Despite the fact that we can easily imagine inventing any number of contexts that would permit us to make its words signify what we wished, we cannot make a literary text mean whatever we want it to mean. 'For such texts belong to language as a whole, have intricate relations to other linguistic practices, however much they might also subvert and violate them' (1983: 86-88). It is true, of course, that one is more constrained when reading a road sign, which supplies a ready-made context that renders the language intelligible, than when reading a literary work, which generally does not. But in no case can there be 'total interpretative freedom', because 'the social uses of words... govern my search for appropriate contexts of meaning' (p. 88). For a related criticism of the post-structuralist 'dogma that we [can] never know anything at all', cf. pp. 144-45.

9. Hirsch (1967: 68-71); in his discussion he utilizes Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* and Wittgenstein's idea that one must know the rules of the game being played to know the meaning of

an utterance. Later in the book Hirsch says, 'At the level of verbal meaning, all types, regardless of their earliest provenance, are learned types—that is, they are type ideas which derive from previous experience and can subsume later experience' (p. 269).

10. See his explanation of how 'generic expectations' help us understand the early parts of a text even before we reach its end (1967: 85). In the same vein, Alastair Fowler has argued that the recognition of genres is 'fundamental to the reading process... No work, however avantgarde, is intelligible without some context of familiar types' (1982: 259). Genre, then, 'primarily has to do with communication. It is an instrument not of classification or prescription, but of meaning' (1982: 21-22; he develops the idea of 'redundancy', taken over from communication theory).

11. According to Eagleton, meaning as Hirsch conceives of it is 'prelinguistic... something which the author *wills*: it is a ghostly, wordless mental act which is then "fixed" for all time in a particular set of material signs' (1983: 67).

12. Isa. 1.1; Jer. 1.1-3; Ezek. 1.1-3; Hos. 1.1; Amos 1.1; Mic. 1.1; Zeph. 1.1; cf. Hag. 1.1; Zech. 1.1.

13. Cf. the discussion of biography in Overholt (1988: 601-603).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Auld, A.G.
1983a 'Prophets through the Looking Glass: Between Writings and Moses', *JSOT* 27: 3-23.
1983b 'Prophets through the Looking Glass: A Response', *JSOT* 27: 41-44.
1984 'Prophets and Prophecy in Jeremiah and Kings', *ZAW* 96: 66-82.
1986 *Amos*. OT Guides. Sheffield: JSOT.
1988 'Word of God and Word of Man: Prophets and Canon', in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*. Ed. L. Eslinger and G. Taylor. JSOTS, 67 Sheffield: JSOT: 237-51.

Buss, M.J.
1979 'Understanding Communication', *Encounter with the Text*. Ed. M.J. Buss. Philadelphia: Fortress: 1-44.

Carroll, R.P.
1983 'Poets Not Prophets'. *JSOT* 27: 25-31.
1986 'Dismantling the Book of Jeremiah and Deconstructing the Prophet', in *'Wünschet Jerusalem Frieden': Collected Communications to the XIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Jerusalem 1986*. Ed. M. Augustin and K.-D. Schunck. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang: 291-302.
1988 'Inventing the Prophets', *Irish Biblical Studies* 10: 24-36.
1989a *Jeremiah*. OT Guides. Sheffield: JSOT.
1989b 'Prophecy and Society', in *The World of Ancient Israel*. Ed. R.E. Clements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 203-25.

Eagleton, T.
1983 *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
Fish, S.E.
1970 'Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics', reprinted in Tompkins 1980: 70-100.
1976 'Interpreting the *Variorum*', reprinted in Tompkins 1980: 164-84.
Fowler, A.
1982 *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Gerhart, M.
1988 'Genric [sic] Competence in Biblical Hermeneutics'. *Semeia* 43: 29-44.
Hirsch, E.D., Jr
1967 *Validity in Interpretation*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Iser, W.
1974 'The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach', reprinted in Tompkins 1980: 50-69.
Long, B.O.
1981 'Social Dimensions of Prophetic Conflict', *Semeia* 21: 31-53.
1988 'A Figure at the Gate: Readers, Reading and Biblical Theologians', in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*. Ed. G.M. Tucker, D.L. Petersen, and R.R. Wilson. Philadelphia: Fortress: 166-86.
McKane, William
1986 *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*. Vol. I. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.
Moore, Stephen D.
1986 'Negative Hermeneutics, Insubstantial Texts: Stanley Fish and the Biblical Interpreter', *JAAR* 54: 707-17.
Overholt, T.W.
1986 *Prophecy in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
1988 'Jeremiah', in *Harper's Bible Commentary*. Ed. J.L. Mays. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
1989 *Channels of Prophecy: The Social Dynamics of Prophetic Activity*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
Poulet, G.
1972 'Criticism and the Experience of Interiority', reprinted in Tompkins 1980: 41-49.
Scholes, R.
1985 *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Tompkins, J.P.
1980 *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
Tucker, G.M.
1971 *Form Criticism of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress.
Williamson, H.G.M.
1983 'A Response to A.G. Auld', *JSOT* 27: 33-39.
Wilson, R.R.
1980 *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Würthwein, E.
1950 'Amos-Studien', *ZAW* 62: 10-52.

ABSTRACT

This study examines and attempts to rebut four arguments—the history of terminology, the problem of definition, the conventional nature of the colophons, and the literary character of the texts—that have been marshaled in defense of an hypothesis that biblical figures like Amos and Jeremiah were prophets neither in their own eyes nor in the eyes of their contemporaries. The rebuttal stresses the social reality of prophetic activity (as revealed by cross-cultural studies) and the literary genre of prophetic books (they are anthologies).