CHAPTER 10

The Prophets: Enforcing the Covenant in Israel

More individual books of the Bible come under the heading of prophecy than under any other heading. Four "Major" Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel) and twelve "Minor" Prophets (the final twelve books of the Old Testament), written in ancient Israel between about 760 and 460 BC, contain a vast array of messages from God.

The Minor Prophets are socalled only because the books are relatively short in length; the term "minor" comes from centuries past, when in Latin these books were called *prophetes minores* (where "minor" meant "shorter," not "less important"). The Major Prophets, on the other hand, are relatively long books (the term "major" in Latin means "larger" = "longer"). The terms themselves, therefore, convey absolutely nothing about the importance of what is in the various shorter or longer Prophetic Books. Indeed, many of the greatest statements from the Old Testament are found in the Minor Prophets, such as "the righteous person will live by his faithfulness" (Hab 2:4; cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11), or "In the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'children of the living God' " (Hos 1:10; cf. Rom 9:26).

One should also be aware that ancient Judaism actually grouped the twelve shorter prophetic books into one large book, called "The Book of the Twelve," or simply "The Twelve." This grouping, long ignored but now increasingly appreciated and influential, produced a book whose length falls right in the middle of the length of the Major Prophets — longer than two of them (Ezekiel and Daniel) and shorter than the other two (Isaiah and Jeremiah). Thus historically they were never considered "minor" in any way whatsoever.

THE NATURE OF PROPHECY

We should note at the outset that the Prophetic Books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible for people of later times to interpret or read with understanding. The reasons for this are primarily related to misunderstandings as to their *function* and *form.* But before we discuss these two matters, some preliminary comments are in order.

The Meaning of Prophecy

The primary difficulty for most modern readers of the Prophets stems from an inaccurate prior understanding of the word "prophecy." For most people this word means what appears as the first definition in most dictionaries: "foretelling or prediction of what is to come." It often happens, therefore, that many Christians refer to the Prophetic Books *only* for predictions about the coming of Jesus and/or certain features of the new-covenant age — as though prediction of events far distant from their own day was the main concern of the prophets. In fact, using the Prophetic Books in this way is highly selective. Consider in this connection the following statistics: Less than 2 percent of Old Testament prophecy is messianic. Less than 5 percent specifically describes the new-covenant age. Less than 1 percent concerns events yet to come in our time.

The prophets *did* indeed announce the future. But it was usually the more immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations surrounding them that they announced rather than *our* future. One of the keys to understanding the Prophetic Books, therefore, is that for us to see their prophecies fulfilled, we must look back on times that for them were still future but for us are past.

The Prophets as Spokespersons

To see the prophets as primarily predictors of future events is to miss their primary function, which was to *speak for God* to their own contemporaries. It is the "spoken" nature of their prophecies that causes many of our difficulties in understanding.

For example, of the hundreds of prophets in ancient Israel in Old Testament times, only sixteen would speak oracles (messages from God) that were to be collected and written up into books. We know that other prophets, such as Elijah and Elisha, played a very influential role in delivering God's word to his people, and to nations other than Israel as well. But we know more about the actions of these prophets than we do of their words. What they *did* was described in far greater length than what they *said* — and what they said was placed specifically and clearly in the context of their times by the writers of the Old Testament narratives in which they appear. Of a few prophets, such as Gad (1 Sam 22; 2 Sam 24; et al.), Nathan (2 Sam 7; 12; 1 Kgs 1; et al.), or Huldah (2 Kgs 22), we have a combination of prophecy and biography — a situation paralleled in the case of Jonah and, to a lesser extent, Jeremiah and Daniel. But generally in the narrative books of the Old Testament we hear *about* prophets and very little *from* prophets. In the Prophetic Books, however, we hear *from* God *via* the prophets and very little about the prophets themselves. This single difference accounts for most of the problems people have in making sense of the Prophetic Books in the Old Testament.

Furthermore, have you ever noticed how difficult it is to read any of the longer Prophetic Books through in one sitting? Why do you suppose this is? Primarily, we think, because they were probably not intended to be read that way. For the most part these longer books are *collections of spoken oracles* not always presented in their original chronological sequence, often without hints as to where one oracle ends and another begins, and often without hints as to their historical setting. And most of the oracles were spoken in poetry! We will say more about this below.

The Problem of History

Another matter complicates our understanding of the Prophetic Books — the problem of historical distance. Indeed, by the very nature of things, we modern readers will find it much harder to understand in our own time the word of God as it was spoken by the prophets than did the Israelites who heard those same words in person. Things clear to them tend to be opaque to us. Why? Partly because those in a speaker's audience have certain obvious advantages over those who read a speaker's words much later, and, to boot, secondhand (cf. what was said about the parables in ch. 8), not to mention that so much of it comes to us by way of Hebrew *poetry*, which itself took a quite different form from what most modern readers expect regarding "poetry." But this is not where the difficulties really lie for the most part. Rather, as people far removed from the religious, historical, and cultural life of ancient Israel, we simply have great trouble putting the words spoken by the prophets in their original historical context. It is often hard for us to see what they are referring to and why — which is also why a contemporary reader often needs some outside help in order to understand them better.

THE FUNCTION OF PROPHECY IN ISRAEL

To understand what God would say to us through these inspired books, we must first have a clear understanding as to the role and function of the prophet in Israel. Four items must be emphasized:

1. *The prophets were covenant enforcement mediators.* We explained in the preceding chapter how Israel's law constituted a covenant between God and his people, modeled after the ancient suzerainty treaties and thus containing both stipulations and sanctions. God's covenant with Israel, therefore, contains not only regulations and statutes for them to keep but describes the sorts of sanctions that accompany the law: the sorts of blessings his people will receive if they keep the law, and the sorts of punishments ("curses") that God will necessarily mete out if they do not. Thus God does not merely give Israel his law, but he enforces it.

This is where the prophets come in. God announced the enforcement (positive or negative) of his law through them, so that the events of blessing or cursing would be clearly understood by his people. Moses was the mediator for God's law when God first announced it and thus is a paradigm (model) for the prophets. They are God's mediators, or spokespersons, for the covenant. Through them God reminds people in the generations after Moses that if his law is kept, blessing will result; but if not, punishment will ensue.

The kinds of blessings that will come to Israel for faithfulness to the covenant are found in three Old Testament passages (Lev 26:14 – 38; Deut 4:32 – 40; and 28:1 – 14). But these blessings are announced with a warning: If Israel does *not* obey God's law, the blessings will cease. The sorts of curses (punishments) that Israel could expect if they violated the law are found especially in three places (Lev 26:14 – 39; Deut 4:15 – 28; and throughout Deut 28:15 – 32:42).

Therefore, one must always bear in mind that the prophets did not invent the blessings or curses they announced. They may have worded these blessings and curses in novel, captivating ways, as they were inspired to do so. But they pronounced *God's* word, not their own. Through them God announced his intention to enforce the covenant, for benefit or for harm — depending on the faithfulness of Israel — but always on the basis of and in accordance with the categories of blessing and cursing already contained in the Leviticus and Deuteronomy passages noted above. If you will take the trouble to read these chapters from the Pentateuch with care, you will be rewarded with a much better understanding of why the prophets said the things that they did.

Briefly, what one finds is this. The law contains certain categories of corporate blessings for covenant faithfulness: life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect, and safety. Most of the specific blessings mentioned will fall under one of these six general groupings. As regards curses, the law describes corporate punishments, which we happen to find convenient (and memorizable) to group under ten headings that begin with the letter *d*: death, disease, drought, dearth, danger, destruction, defeat, deportation, destitution, and disgrace. Most of the curses will fit under one of these categories.

These same categories apply in what God communicates through the prophets. For example, when God wishes to predict future blessing for the nation (not any given individual) through the prophet Amos, this is done in terms of metaphors of agricultural abundance, life, health, prosperity, respect, and safety (Amos 9:11 – 15). When announcing doom for the disobedient nation of Hosea's day, God does so according to one or more of the ten *d*'s listed above (e.g., destruction in Hos 8:14, or deportation in Hos 9:3). These curses are often metaphorical, though they can be literal as well. They are always corporate, referring to the nation as a whole.

Blessings or curses, it should be noted, do not guarantee prosperity or dearth to any specific individual. Statistically, a majority of what the prophets announce in the eighth, seventh, and early sixth centuries BC is curse, because the major defeat and destruction of the northern kingdom did not occur until 722 BC and that of the southern kingdom (Judah), 586 BC. The Israelites, north and south, were heading for punishment during that era, so naturally warnings of curse rather than blessing predominated as God sought to get his people to repent. After the destruction of both north and south, that is, after 586 BC, the prophets were moved more often to speak blessings rather than curses. This is because once the punishment of the nation was complete, God's basic plan resumed, to show mercy (see Deut 4:25 – 31 for a condensed description of this sequence).

As you read the Prophetic Books, look for this simple pattern: (1) an identification of Israel's sin *or* of God's love for his people; (2) a prediction of curse or blessing, depending on the circumstance. Most of the time, this is what the prophets are conveying, according to God's inspiration of them.

2. *The prophets' message was not their own, but God's.* As you read the Prophetic Books with some care, you will easily pick up that each prophet has his own unique style, vocabulary, emphases, idioms, and concerns. The unique features of each of their books is highlighted in *How to 2,* pages 171–265. Here we want to emphasize, in keeping with what has just been said, that God is the one who raised up the prophets to speak his word to Israel (cf. Exod 3 – 4; Isa 6; Jer 1; Ezek 1 – 3; Hos 1:2; Amos 7:14 – 15; Jonah 1:1; et al.). If a prophet presumed to take the office of prophet upon himself or herself, this would be good cause to consider such a person a false prophet (cf. Jer 14:14; 23:21). The prophets responded to a divine call. The Hebrew word for prophet (*nābîʾ*) comes in fact from the Semitic verb "to call" (*nabû).* You will note as you read the Prophetic Books that they preface, or conclude, or regularly punctuate their oracles with reminders like "This is what the LORD says" or "declares the LORD." A majority of the time, in fact, the prophetic message is relayed directly as received from the Lord, in the first person, so that God speaks personally, in terms of "I" or "me."

Read, for example, the two companion narratives in Jeremiah 27 and 28. Consider Jeremiah's difficult task in relaying to the people of Judah that it would be necessary for them to submit to the imperial armies of their enemy, Babylon, if they wished to please God. His hearers (most of them, at least) considered this message to be the equivalent of treason. Indeed, Jeremiah had already been put on trial for sedition (26:7 – 24). When the prophet delivers the message, however, he makes it abundantly clear that they are not hearing his views on the matter, but God's. He begins by reminding them, "This is what the LORD said to me . . ." (27:2), and then quotes God's command, "Then send word . . ." (27:3); "Give them a message . . ." (27:4), and adds "declares the LORD" (27:11). The prophet's word is God's word. It is delivered on God's authority (28:15 – 16), not his own.

3. *The prophets were God's direct representatives.* As vehicles through whom God's word was delivered both to Israel and other nations, the prophets held a kind of societal office. They were like ambassadors from the heavenly court who relayed the divine sovereign's will to the people. The prophets were, on their own, neither radical social reformers nor innovative religious thinkers. The social reforms and the religious thought that God wished to impart to the people had already been revealed in the covenantal law. No matter which group broke those laws, God's word through the prophet held punishment. Whether the guilt for covenant violations lay with the royalty (e.g., 2 Sam 12:1 – 14; 24:11 – 17; Hos 1:4) or with the clergy (Hos 4:4 – 11; Amos 7:17; Mal 2:1 – 9), or any other group, the prophet conveyed God's message of national curse faithfully. Indeed, at God's bidding, prophets even installed or deposed kings (1 Kgs 19:16; 21:17 – 22) and declared war (2 Kgs 3:18 – 19; 2 Chr 20:14 – 17; Hos 5:5 – 8) or spoke against war (Jer 27:8 – 22).

What we read in the Prophetic Books, then, is not merely God's word as the prophet saw it but God's word as God wished the prophet to present it. The prophet does not act or speak independently of God. In fact, the introductory wording in many prophetical books that is usually translated "the word of the LORD came to [name of prophet]" is probably better translated "the word of the LORD was entrusted to [name of prophet]." Prophets held a deep responsibility to preserve and convey that word widely and repeatedly, no matter the difficulty or opposition.

4. *The prophets' message is not original.* The prophets were inspired by God to present to their generation the essential content of the original Mosaic covenant's warnings and promises (curses and blessings). Therefore, when we read the prophets' words, what we read is not new in concept but new in wording — in each prophet's own style and vocabulary — of the same message in essence delivered by God originally through Moses. As one should expect, the exact wording may be unique, and in that sense "novel," but the concepts expressed restate faithfully what God had already expressed to his people in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The form in which that message is conveyed can, of course, vary substantially. God raised up the prophets to gain the attention of the people to whom they were sent. Gaining people's attention may involve rephrasing and restructuring something they have already heard many times so that it has a certain kind of newness. But this is not at all the same as actually initiating a new message or altering the old message. The prophets are not inspired to make any points or announce any doctrines that are not already contained in the Pentateuchal covenant.

As one example of this keeping faith with the message, consider how Hosea begins his description of Israel's unfaithfulness to Yahweh: "There is only cursing, lying and murder, stealing and adultery" (4:2). In this declaration, which is part of a long description of Israel's unfaithfulness in Hosea's day (750 – 722 BC), five of the Ten Commandments are summarized, each by a single term. He begins with "cursing," the third commandment — "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God" (Exod 20:7; Deut 5:11); then "lying," the ninth commandment — "You shall not give false testimony" (Exod 20:16; Deut 5:20); then "murder," the sixth commandment — "You shall not murder" (Exod 20:13; Deut 5:17); then "stealing," the eighth commandment — "You shall not steal" (Exod 20:15; Deut 5:19); and finally "adultery," the seventh commandment — "You shall not commit adultery" (Exod 20:14; Deut 5:18).

It is as interesting to note what the inspired prophet does *not* do as what he does do. That is, Hosea does not cite the Ten Commandments verbatim. He mentions five of them in a oneword summary fashion much as Jesus does much later in his own recalling of the commandments (Mark 10:19; cf. Matt 18:18 – 19; Luke 18:20). But mentioning five, even out of their usual order, is a very effective way of communicating to the Israelites that they have broken the Ten Commandments. For upon hearing five of the commandments, the hearer would think, *And what of the others? What of the usual order? The original wording is . . .* The audience would begin thinking of all ten, reminding themselves of what the covenant law calls for in terms of basic righteousness. In citing five of the commandments for a similar effect, Hosea did not change anything in the law, any more than Jesus did. But he did impress the law upon his hearers in a way that simply repeating it word for word might never have done.

A second example concerns the messianic prophecies. Are these new? Not at all. Certainly, the kind of *detail* about the life and role of the Messiah that we find in the four Servant Songs of Isaiah (chs. 42; 49; 50; 53) may be considered new. But God did not bring the notion of a Messiah to the people for the first time through the prophets. It had in fact originated with the law. Otherwise how could Jesus have described his life as fulfilling what was written "in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Luke 24:44)? Among other portions of the Mosaic law that foretell the Messiah's ministry, a key moment in Deuteronomy is prominent: "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their fellow Israelites, and I will put my words in his mouth. He will tell them everything I command him" (18:18).

As John also reminds us in his gospel (1:45), the law already spoke of Christ. It was hardly a new thing for the prophets to speak of him. The mode, the style, and the specificity with which they made their inspired predictions did not need to be restricted to what the Pentateuch already contained. But the essential fact that there would be a new covenant ushered in by a new "Prophet" (using the language of Deut 18) was, in fact, an old story.

THE EXEGETICAL TASK

The Need for Outside Help

We noted in chapter 1 that there is a popular notion that everything in the Bible ought to be clear to everyone who reads it, since the Holy Spirit dwells in us. The reasoning is that if God wrote the Bible for *us* (for all believers), we should be able to understand it completely the first time we read it, since we have the Holy Spirit in us. But such a notion lacks proper perspective. Parts of the Bible are obvious on the surface, but other parts are not. In accordance with the fact that God's thoughts are profound compared with human thoughts (Ps 92:5; Isa 55:8) it should not be surprising that some parts of the Bible will require time and patient study in order to understand.

The Prophetic Books require just such time and study. People often approach these books casually, as if a surface reading through the writings of the Prophets will yield a high level of understanding. This cannot be done with school textbooks and it does not work with the Prophets either — in part because so many of these oracles are in poetry, but mostly because they spoke into historical, cultural, and political settings that are so different from ours.

Besides the "Overview" and "Specific Advice" sections found in *How to 2,* we repeat here, specifically for the interpretation of the Prophetic Books, the three other kinds of helps that are available to you. The first source would be *Bible dictionaries,* which provide articles on the historical setting of each book, its basic outline, the special features it contains, and issues of interpretation of which the reader must be aware. We recommend that you make it a practice to read a Bible dictionary article on a given prophetic book before you start to study that book. You need to know the background information in order to be able to catch the point of much of what a prophet conveys. God's word came through the prophets to people in *particular situations.* Its value to us depends partly on our ability to appreciate those situations so that we can in turn apply the word wisely to our own.

A second source of help would be *commentaries* (see appendix). These provide lengthy introductions to each book, somewhat in the manner of the Bible dictionaries, though often less usefully organized. But more important, they provide explanations of the meaning of the individual verses. Commentaries may become essential if you are studying carefully a relatively small portion of a prophetic book, that is, less than a chapter at a time.

A third source of help would be *Bible handbooks.* The best of these combine features of both Bible dictionaries and commentaries, though they do not go into as great detail on either the introductory materials or the verse-by-verse explanations. When one is reading through several chapters at a time of a prophetic book, however, a Bible handbook can yield a lot of helpful guidance in a minimal amount of time.

Finally, you may also want to consult the individual chapters in *How to 2* (pp. 174 – 265) to see how the various Prophetic Books "work" as individual books within the larger biblical story.

The Historical Context

In chapter 7, regarding the study of Jesus, the term "historical context" referred both to the larger arena into which Jesus came and to the specific context of any one of his deeds and sayings. In studying the writings of the prophets, the historical context can likewise be large (their era) or specific (the context of a single oracle). To do good exegesis you need to understand both kinds of historical context for all the Prophetic Books.

The Larger Context

It is interesting to note that the sixteen Prophetic Books of the Old Testament come from a rather narrow band in the whole panorama of Israelite history (i.e., about 760 – 460 BC). Why do we have no books of prophecy from Abraham's day (about 1800 BC) or Joshua's day (about 1400 BC) or David's day (about 1000 BC)? Didn't God speak to his people and their world before 760 BC? The answer is, of course he did, and we have much material in the Bible about those ages, including some that deals with prophets (e.g., 1 Kgs 17 – 2 Kgs 13). Moreover, remember that God spoke especially to Israel in the law, which was intended to stand for the entire remaining history of the nation until it would be superseded by the new covenant (Jer 31:31 – 34).

Why, then, is there such a concentrated writing down of prophetic words during the three centuries between Amos (ca. 760 BC, the earliest of the "writing prophets") and Malachi (ca. 460 BC, the latest)? The answer is that this period in Israel's history called especially for *covenant enforcement mediation* — the task of the prophets. A second factor was the evident desire of God to record for all subsequent history the warnings and blessings that those prophets announced on his behalf during those pivotal years.

Those years were characterized by three things: (1) unprecedented political, military, economic, and social upheaval; (2) an enormous level of religious unfaithfulness and disregard for the original Mosaic covenant; and (3) shifts in populations and national boundaries, including enormous shifts in the balance of power on the international scene. In these circumstances God's word was needed anew. God raised up prophets and announced his word accordingly.

As you make use of dictionaries, commentaries, and handbooks, you will note that by 760 BC Israel was a nation

divided permanently by a long, ongoing civil war. The northern tribes, called "Israel," or sometimes "Ephraim," were separated from the southern tribe of Judah. The north, where disobedience to the covenant far outstripped anything yet known in Judah, was slated for destruction by God because of its sin. Amos, beginning around 760, and Hosea, beginning around 755, announced the impending destruction. In 722 BC the north fell to Assyria, the superpower in the Middle East at that time. Thereafter, the mounting sinfulness of Judah and the rise of another superpower, Babylon, constituted the subject matter of many prophets, including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Joel, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, and Ezekiel (chs. 1 – 24). In 587 BC Judah, too, was destroyed for its disobedience. Afterward, Ezekiel (chs. 33 – 48), Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi announced God's will for the restoration of his people (beginning with a return from exile in 538 BC), the rebuilding of the nation, and the reinstitution of orthodoxy. All of this follows the basic pattern laid out in Deuteronomy 4:25 – 31.

The prophets speak in large measure directly to *these* events. Unless you know these events, and others within this era too numerous to mention here, you probably will not be able to follow very well what the prophets are saying. God spoke in history and about history. To understand God's Word we must know something of that history.

The Specific Context

Each prophetic oracle was delivered in a specific historical setting. God spoke through his prophets to people in a given time and place and under given circumstances. Therefore, a knowledge of the date, audience, and situation, when these are known, contributes substantially to your ability to comprehend an oracle. In order to help you with this task, we offer the following example.

Read Hosea 5:8 – 12, a brief, self-contained oracle grouped with several other oracles in the chapter. A good commentary will identify for you the fact that this oracle is in the form of a war oracle, one of a type (form) that announces the judgment of God as carried out through battle. The usual elements of such a form are these: the call to alarm, the description of attack, and the prediction of defeat. Just as it is helpful for you to recognize the form, it is also helpful to recognize the specific content.

The *date* is 734 BC. The *audience* is the northern Israelites (called here "Ephraim") to whom Hosea preached. Specifically the message was to certain cities that lay on the road that ran from the Judean capital, Jerusalem, to the center of Israelite false worship, Bethel. The *situation* is war. Judah counterattacked Israel after Israel and Syria had invaded Judah (see 2 Kgs 16:5). The invasion had been beaten back with the help of the superpower Assyria (2 Kgs 16:7 – 9). God through Hosea sounds the alarm metaphorically in cities located in the territory of Benjamin (Hos 5:8), which is part of the northern kingdom. Destruction is sure (v. 9) because Judah will capture the territory it invades ("moving the boundary stones" as it were). But Judah, too, will get its due. God's wrath will fall on them both for this act of war and for their idolatry (cf. 2 Kgs 16:2 – 4). Judah and Israel were under obligation to the divine covenant, which forbade such internecine war. So God would punish this violation of his covenant.

Knowing these few facts makes a great deal of difference in one's ability to appreciate the oracle in Hosea 5:8 – 12. Refer to the commentaries or handbooks as you read the Prophetic Books, and, as always, try to be aware of the date, audience, and situation of the oracles you read.

The Isolation of Individual Oracles

When one comes to the actual study or exegetically informed reading of the Prophetic Books, the first thing one must learn to do is to THINK ORACLES (as one must learn to "think paragraphs" in the Epistles). This is not always an easy task, but to know that even though it is difficult but necessary to do this can be the beginning of some exciting discoveries.

Most of the time what the prophets said is presented in their books in run-on fashion. That is, the words they spoke at various times and places over the years of their ministry have been collected and written down without any divisions to indicate where one oracle ends and another begins. Moreover, even when one can assume by a major change of subject that a new oracle has probably begun, the lack of explanation (i.e., editorial remarks or transitions) still leaves one asking whether this was said on the same day to the same audience, or was it said years later — or earlier — to a different group under different circumstances? The answer can make a big difference for one's understanding.

Some parts of the Prophetic Books provide exceptions. In Haggai and the early chapters of Zechariah, for example, each prophecy is dated. With the help of your Bible dictionary, handbook, or commentary, you can follow the progression of these prophecies in their historical context rather easily. And some of the prophecies in other books, notably Jeremiah and Ezekiel, are likewise dated and placed in a setting by the prophet (or inspired collector).

But it simply does not work this way most of the time. For example, read Amos 5 in a version of the Bible that does not insert explanatory titles (these headings are only scholarly opinion), and ask yourself whether the chapter is all one prophecy (oracle) or not. If it *is* a single oracle, why does it have so many changes of subject: lament over Israel's destruction (vv. 1 – 3); invitation to seek God and live (vv. 5 – 6, 14); attacks on social injustice (vv. 7 – 13); prediction of miseries (vv. 16 – 17); description of the Day of the Lord (vv. 18 – 20); criticism of hypocritical worship (vv. 21 – 24);

and a brief overview of Israel's sinful history that culminates in a prediction of exile (vv. 25 – 27)? If it is *not* a single oracle, how are its component parts to be understood? Are they all independent of one another? Are some to be grouped together? If so, in what ways?

In fact it is now generally agreed that our chapter 5 contains three oracles. The first (vv. 1 – 3) forms a single short lament oracle announcing punishment; the second (vv. 4 – 17) forms a single (though complex) oracle of invitation to blessing and warning of punishment; and the third (vv. 18 – 27) forms a single (though complex) oracle warning of punishment. The smaller changes of subject, then, do not each indicate the beginning of a new oracle.

Likewise, the chapter divisions do not correspond with individual oracles either. Oracles are isolated by attention to their known forms (see below). All three of the oracles in chapter 5 were given late in the reign of King Jeroboam of Israel (793 – 753 BC) to a people whose relative prosperity caused them to consider it unthinkable that their nation would be so devastated as to cease to exist in just a generation. A good commentary or Bible handbook will explain such things to you as you read. Do not handicap yourself needlessly by trying to read these great moments without some helps, since they will greatly multiply your understanding as you read.

The Forms of Prophetic Utterance

Since the isolation of individual oracles is one key to help your understanding of the Prophetic Books, it is helpful, indeed important, for you to know something about the different *forms* the prophets used to compose their oracles. Just as the whole Bible is composed of many different kinds of literature and literary forms, so also the prophets employed a variety of literary forms in the service of their divinely inspired messages. The commentaries can identify and explain these forms. We have selected five of the most common forms to help alert you to the importance of recognizing and rightly interpreting the literary techniques involved. And here again we urge you to get into the habit of reading Scripture aloud to yourself. You will be happily surprised by doing so!

The Lawsuit

As a good place to begin we suggest you read Isaiah 3:13 – 26. This constitutes an allegorical literary form called a "covenant lawsuit" (Hebrew, *rîb*). In this and the scores of other lawsuit allegories in the Prophetic Books (e.g., Hos 3:3 – 17; 4:1 – 19; etc.), God is portrayed imaginatively as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, judge, and bailiff in a court case against the defendant, Israel. The full lawsuit form contains a summons, a charge, evidence, and a verdict, though these elements may sometimes be implied rather than explicit. In Isaiah 3 the elements are incorporated as follows: The court convenes, and the lawsuit is brought against Israel (vv. 13 – 14a). The indictment or accusation is spoken (vv. 14b – 16). Since the evidence shows that Israel is clearly guilty, the judgment sentence is announced (vv. 17 – 26). Because the covenant has been violated, the sorts of punishments listed in the covenant will come upon Israel's women and men: disease, destitution, deprivation, death. The figurative style of this allegory is a dramatic and effective way of communicating to Israel that they are going to be punished because of their disobedience, and that the punishment will be severe. This special literary form helps get the prophet's special message across.

The Woe

Another common literary form is that of the "woe oracle." "Woe" was the word ancient Israelites cried out when facing disaster or death, or when they mourned at a funeral. Through the prophets, God makes predictions of imminent doom using the device of the "woe," and no Israelite could miss the significance of the use of that word. Woe oracles contain, either explicitly or implicitly, three elements that uniquely characterize this form: an announcement of distress (the word "woe," for example), the reason for the distress, and a prediction of doom.

Here you might read Habakkuk 2:6 – 8 to see one of several instances in this prophetic book of a "woe oracle" spoken against the nation of Babylon. Babylon, a brutal, imperialistic superpower in the ancient Fertile Crescent, was making plans to conquer and crush Judah at the end of the seventh century BC when Habakkuk spoke God's words against it. Personifying Babylon as a thief and extortionist (the *reason*), the oracle *announces* woe and *predicts* disaster (when all those whom Babylon has oppressed will one day rise against it). Again, this form is allegorical (though not all woe oracles are; cf. Mic 2:1 – 5; Zeph 2:5 – 7).

The Promise

Yet another common prophetic literary form is "the promise" or "salvation oracle." You will recognize this form whenever you see these elements: reference to the future, mention of radical change, and mention of blessing. A typical promise oracle may be seen in Amos 9:11 – 15; it contains these elements. The *future* is mentioned as "In that day" (v. 11). The *radical change* is described as the restoration and repair of "David's fallen shelter" (v. 11), the exaltation of Israel over Edom (v. 12), and the return from exile (vv. 14 – 15). *Blessing* comes via the covenantal categories mentioned (life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect, and safety). All these items are included in this oracle, though health is implicit rather than explicit. The central imagery is of agricultural abundance. Crops, for example, will be so enormous that the harvesters still will not be finished by the time the sowers start planting again (v. 13)! For other

examples of promise oracles, see Isaiah 45:1 – 7; Jeremiah 31:1 – 9; and Hosea 2:16 – 20, 21 – 23.

The Enactment Prophecy

Because of the power of visual aids to enhance the impact and memorability of oral presentations, God sometimes told prophets not merely to speak his word but also to accompany that word with symbolic actions that would vividly reinforce the concepts contained in what the prophets spoke.

For example, Isaiah's brief prophecy against Egypt and Cush (ch. 20) describes how God instructed Isaiah to go "stripped and barefoot for three years" (v. 3) to symbolize the prediction that "the king of Assyria will lead away stripped and barefoot the Egyptian captives and Cushite exiles" (v. 4). In this instance, Isaiah's symbolic enactment first of all depicted the fact that exiles were allowed to wear only what today would be called underwear as they gathered for their long march of deportation — an action intended both to humiliate them and to prevent them from concealing weapons in their garments. But this action also took advantage of the fact that the Hebrew verb *gālāh* refers to both "exile" and "strip," a double entendre to reinforce the prophecy in the minds of Isaiah's audience.

Did Isaiah actually appear publicly in his underwear for three years? Yes, but almost certainly only at particular times during the three-year period. He had many prophecies to deliver during those three years and could not likely have limited himself to this one enactment for the entire time. But whenever anyone did see Isaiah in public "stripped and barefoot," a central point of his prophecy was reinforced: If the Assyrians, far to the north and east of Israel, were going to capture and deport Egypt and Cush, located far to the south and west of Israel, how could Israel, right in the middle, expect to escape unharmed?

Several other prophets made good use of enactment prophecies. For example, God told Ezekiel, himself among the first wave of exiles in Babylon, to build a tiny model of Jerusalem and then "face" toward it the way the Babylonian army faced Jerusalem (Ezek 4:1 – 4). This symbolized the siege of the city, which Ezekiel prophesied would eventually be successful so that Jerusalem would be conquered by the Babylonians — against total disbelief by his fellow exiles.

Similarly, Zechariah used an enactment prophecy to symbolize the oppression of God's people by ruthless monarchs. This is recorded toward the end of the collection of oracles (11:4 – 17), where he is described as playing the roles of two "shepherds" (kings) over the hapless "flock" (Israel). Such an enactment also prepares the reader for the expectation of the true Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who will deliver and bless rather than take advantage of his people (Zech 12 – 14).

The Messenger Speech

This form is the most common of all the forms in the Prophetic Books and often occurs alongside of, or as part of, one of the other prophetic speech forms. It is signaled by standard wordings (called "messenger formulae") such as "This is what the LORD says" or "says the LORD" or "This is the word of the LORD concerning . . ." or the like. Such formulae as these were used by messengers in diplomatic and business settings in the ancient world to remind recipients that what the messenger was saying was not something they were making up but was in fact the exact words of the one who had sent them to deliver the message (cf. Num 20:14; 1 Sam 11:9; 2 Sam 11:25).

Thus the prophets often remind their audiences via the messenger speech form that they are merely spokespersons for God, not independent creators of the words of their prophecies. Typical examples of messenger speeches can be seen in such diverse prophetic oracles as Isaiah 38:1 – 8; Jeremiah 35:17 – 19; Amos 1:3 – 2:16; and Malachi 1:2 – 5.

From these brief examples, we hope you can see how an informed sense of prophetic literary devices will help you comprehend the message of God more accurately. Learn the forms by referring to the commentaries (see appendix), and you will be glad you did!

The Prophets as Poets

Many people have little appreciation for poetry. Poetry seems a strange and confusing way to express things, as though it were designed to make ideas less, rather than more, intelligible. Our present culture tends to place little emphasis on poetry, except in popular music, which normally contains the sort of poor quality poetry called "doggerel." In some present-day cultures, however, and in most ancient ones, poetry was a highly prized mode of expression. Whole national epics and key historical and religious memories were preserved in poetry. We say "preserved" because one major advantage of poetry over prose is that it is more readily memorized. A poem has a certain rhythm (also called meter), certain balances (also called parallelism or stichometry), and a certain overall structure. It is relatively regular and orderly. Once learned well, poetry is not as easily forgotten as is prose.

The poetic prose sometimes used by the prophets is a special, formal style employing these same characteristics, though less consistently. Because it is so much more regular and stylized than common spoken language (colloquial prose), it, too, is better remembered. For convenience, we will also speak of it with the general term "poetry."

In ancient Israel, poetry was widely appreciated as a means of learning. Many memories that were important enough

to be recalled were considered appropriate for composition in poetry. Just as people today can reproduce from memory the words of songs (i.e., the poems called "lyrics") much more easily than we can reproduce sentences from books or speeches, the Israelites found it relatively simple to commit to memory and to recall things composed in poetry. God made good use of this helpful phenomenon in an age where reading and writing were rare skills and where the private ownership of written documents was virtually unknown. Thus the larger parts of the prophetic oracles were usually expressed in poetic form. People were used to poetry and could remember those prophecies; they would ring in their ears.

All the Prophetic Books contain a substantial amount of poetry, and several are exclusively poetic. Before you read these books, therefore, you may find it very helpful to read an introduction to Hebrew poetry. We especially recommend either the article titled "Poetry" in the *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996); or chapters 6 and 7 in Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1988, pp. 89 – 110). But any Bible dictionary will have at least one informative article on poetry. As a small hint of the benefits to be realized from knowing how Hebrew poetry functions, we suggest you learn these three features of the repetitive style of Old Testament poetry: 1. *Synonymous parallelism.* The second or subsequent line repeats or reinforces the sense of the first line, as in Isaiah 44:22:

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,
your sins like the morning mist.

2. *Antithetical parallelism.* The second or subsequent line contrasts the thought of the first, often reinforcing the first line by the contrast, as in Hosea 7:14:

They do not cry out to me from their hearts
but wail on their beds.

3. *Synthetic parallelism.* The second or subsequent line adds to the first line in any manner that provides further information, as in Obadiah 21:

Deliverers will go up on Mount Zion
to govern the mountains of Esau.
And the kingdom will be the LORD's.

Remember that the presentation of ideas in poetry need not confuse you as long as you read carefully and knowledgeably. Poetry is just as comprehensible as prose when you know the rules.

SOME HERMENEUTICAL SUGGESTIONS

If the task of exegesis is to set the Prophetic Books within their own historical contexts and to hear what God was saying to Israel through them, then what can be said at the hermeneutical level? What is God's word to us through these inspired poetic oracles, spoken in another time to God's ancient people? First, we would point out that much of what was said in chapter 4 about the hermeneutics of the Epistles applies here as well. Once we hear what God said to them, even if our circumstances differ considerably, we will often hear it again in our own settings in a rather direct way. We would argue that God's judgment always awaits those who "sell . . . the needy for a pair of sandals" (Amos 2:6), or who use religion as a cloak for greed and injustice (cf. Isa 1:10 – 17), or who have mixed modern idolatries (such as self-justification) with the gospel of Christ (cf. Hos 13:2 – 4). These sins of an earlier time are sins in the new covenant as well. They violate the two great commandments that both the old and new covenants share (see ch. 9).

But beyond these kinds of applications, there are three further matters that we feel would be helpful for us to address: one a caution, another a concern, and still another a benefit.

A Caution: The Prophet as Foreteller of the Future

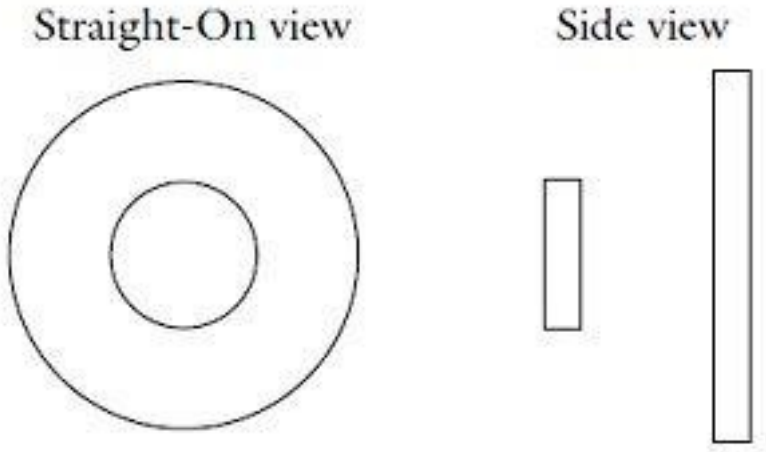
Toward the beginning of this chapter we noted that it was not the prophets' primary task to predict the distant future. They did indeed predict future events, but for the most part *that* future is now past. That is, they spoke of coming judgment or salvation in the relatively immediate future of ancient Israel, not our own future. We cautioned that to see their prophecies fulfilled we must look back on times that for them were still future but for us are past. This hermeneutical principle needs to be illustrated.

As an example of the prophets' messages being concentrated on the near rather than the distant future, we suggest you read through Ezekiel 25 – 39. Notice that the various oracles contained in that large block of material concern mostly the fate of nations other than Israel, though Israel is also included. It is important to see that God refers to the fate of these nations, and that the fulfillment came *within decades* of the time the prophecies were delivered, that is, mostly during the sixth century BC. There are individual exceptions to this, of course. For example, at one point Ezekiel actually describes the new-covenant age and the blessings God will pour out on the church via the Messiah (37:15 – 28). But most of the prophecies, including symbolic Gog and Magog of chapters 38 and 39 (consult a commentary on these chapters) concern Old Testament times and events.

Too great a zeal for identifying New Testament events in Old Testament prophetic oracles can yield strange results. Isaiah's reference to kings who "will bow down before you with their faces to the ground" (49:23) has sounded just enough like the three magi who visited the infant Jesus (Matt 2:1 – 11) to encourage many to assume that Isaiah's words are messianic. Such an interpretation embarrassingly ignores the *context* (both kings and queens are mentioned; the issue of the passage is the restoration of Israel after its Babylonian exile), the *intent* (the language of the oracle intends to show how great Israel's respect will be when God restores Israel), the *style* (the poetry symbolizes the respect of the nations via images of their rulers as foster parents to Israel and licking the dust at the nation's feet), and the *wording* (magi are wise men/astrologers, not kings). We must be careful that we do not make prophetic oracles, or any part of Scripture, say what we would like it to say. Rather, we must try to hear what *God* intends it to say.

It should be noted, of course, that some of the prophecies of the near future were set against the background of the great eschatological future, and sometimes they seem to blend. We will speak to this again in our final chapter (13.) For now let it be noted that the reason for this is that the Bible regularly sees God's acts in temporal history in light of his overall plan for all of human history. Thus the temporal is to be seen in light of the eternal plan. It is like looking at two discs, with a smaller one in front of a larger, straight on; then from the perspective of subsequent history to see them from a side view and thus see how much distance there is between them.

Prophetic Perspective of Chronological Events



Thus there are some descriptions in the Prophetic Books that may belong to the final events of the age (e.g., Joel 3:1 – 3; Zeph 3:8 – 9; Zech 14:9). But the temporal judgments that are often spoken of in conjunction with these final events must not be pushed into the future as well.

One further point should be mentioned. Eschatological language by its very nature is often metaphorical. Sometimes these metaphors express poetically the language of the final events but are not necessarily intended to be predictions of those events per se. An example is found in the well-known "dry bones" oracle in Ezekiel (37:1 – 14). Using the language of the resurrection of the dead, an event we know will occur at the *end* of the age, God predicts through Ezekiel the return of the nation of Israel from the exile in Babylon *in the sixth century BC* (vv. 12 – 14). Thus an event that to us is past (as described in Ezra 1 – 2) is predicted metaphorically with eschatological language as though it were an end-time event.

A Concern: Prophecy and Second Meanings

At a number of places in the New Testament, reference is made to Old Testament passages that do not appear to refer to what the New Testament writers seem to suggest they do. That is, these passages seem to have a clear meaning in their original Old Testament setting and yet are used in connection with a different meaning by a New Testament writer.

As an example, consider the two stories of how Moses and the Israelites were miraculously given water from rocks in the wilderness — once at Rephidim (Exod 17:1 – 7) and once at Kadesh (Num 20:1 – 13). The stories are, it appears, simple enough and abundantly clear in their original contexts. But in his first letter to the believers in Corinth (10:4), Paul seems to identify the experience of the Israelites as an encounter with Christ. He says that "they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ." In each Old Testament story there is no hint that the rock is anything other than a rock. Paul gives the rock a second meaning, identifying it as "Christ." This second meaning is commonly called the *sensus plenior* (fuller meaning).

Upon reflection, one can see that Paul is drawing an analogy. He is saying, in effect, "That rock was to them as Christ is to us — a source of sustenance in the same way that Christ at his table sustains us." Paul's language at the beginning of this analogy (vv. 2 – 4) is highly metaphorical. He wants the Corinthians to understand that the experience of the Israelites in the desert can be understood in an analogous way to their own experience with Christ, especially at the Lord's Table.

To be sure, we modern readers are quite unlikely on our own to notice this analogy in the way that Paul described it. If Paul had never written these words, would we have made the identification of cloud and sea with baptism (v. 2) or the rock with Christ (v. 4)? In other words, would we, on our own, be able with any degree of certainty to determine the *sensus plenior* or secondary meaning? The answer is no. The Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write about this analogical connection between the Israelites in the desert and life in Christ without following the usual rules about *context, intent, style,* and *wording* (see above, "The Prophet as Foreteller of the Future"). The Holy Spirit directed Paul to describe the fact that the Israelites got water more than once from rocks, with the figurative, unusual language that a rock had "accompanied them," an idea already present in Jewish rabbinic lore. Other details of the descriptive language Paul uses in the presenting paragraph (vv. 1 – 4) — nonliteral terms like "[all] our ancestors" (v. 1) and "spiritual food and . . . drink" (vv. 3 – 4) — are likewise strikingly unusual.

We, however, are simply not inspired writers of Scripture. What Paul did we are not authorized to do. The allegorical connections he was inspired to find between the Old Testament and the New Testament are trustworthy. But nowhere does the Scripture say to us, "Go and do likewise." Thus the principle: *Sensus plenior (fuller meaning) is a function of inspiration, not illumination.* The same Holy Spirit who inspired an Old Testament author to write a certain set of words or a passage can inspire a New Testament writer to bypass the usual considerations of context, intent, style, and wording and identify that set of words or that passage as having a contemporary application. But *we* are not inspired writers; we are illumined readers. Inspiration is the original motivation to record the Scripture in a certain way;

illumination is the insight to understand what the Scripture's authors wrote. We cannot rewrite or redefine Scripture by our illumination. We can only perceive a *sensus plenior* with any certainty, therefore, *after the fact.* Unless something is identified as a *sensus plenior* in the New Testament, it cannot confidently be identified as such from the Old Testament by us on our own authority.

Study Bibles, commentaries, handbooks, and Bibles with reference columns will all tend to identify Old Testament prophetic passages that have a second, often analogical, meaning in the New Testament. Some typical instances where the New Testament gives a second meaning are Matthew 1:22 – 23 (Isa 7:14); Matthew 2:15 (Hos 11:1); Matthew 2:17 – 18 (Jer 31:15); and John 12:15 (Zech 9:9).

We need take only one of these — Matthew 2:15 — to illustrate the phenomenon of an analogical meaning being assigned to a prophetic passage. A powerful oracle toward the end of Hosea thus begins (11:1),

> When Israel was a child, I loved him,
> and out of Egypt I called my son.

Hosea, of course, is picking up the language of Exodus, where Yahweh calls Israel his "firstborn son." In Hosea, the *context* is Israel's rescue from Egypt by way of the exodus (4:22). The *intent* is to show how God loved Israel from the beginning as his own "child." Good exegesis of Hosea indicates that there is no reason to think that Hosea was referring to the coming Messiah.

In time, however, the language of Israel as God's "son" had also come to be applied to its king, as the one who "stood in for" Israel (see 2 Sam 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:27; 110:1). Matthew is writing his gospel at a time when this double usage of "son" language (Israel and its king) had already been applied to Christ, the exalted Son who now sits at God's right hand (see Rom 8:32 – 34; Col 1:13 – 15). It is this usage that Matthew is reflecting when he *reuses* this moment in Hosea to refer to the "flight to Egypt" of the young Jesus with his family. Matthew is not suggesting that Hosea was "prophesying" that the Messiah would someday come "out of Egypt." Rather, he is seeing an *analogical "fulfillment"* in which the Messiah as God's true "Son" now *reenacts* Israel's own history as God's "firstborn son." This kind of "second meaning," therefore, should not be thought of as playing games with the Old Testament; rather, as God's inspired servant, Matthew is retelling the story of Israel, God's son, as that which has been reenacted by God's true and greater Son.

We also may be able to see such analogies as we read the story of Jesus; but it is unlikely as a valid hermeneutics that we can legitimately use the language of "fulfillment" in this way without Matthew's own inspiration by the Spirit.

A Final Benefit: The Dual Emphasis on Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy

Orthodoxy is correct belief. Orthopraxy is correct living. Through the prophets, God called the people of ancient Israel and Judah to a balance of right belief and right living. This, of course, remains the very balance that the new covenant requires as well (cf. Eph 2:8 – 10; James 1:27; 2:18). What God wanted from Israel and Judah is in a general sense the same as what he wants from us. The Prophetic Books can serve constantly as reminders to us of God's determination to enforce his covenant. For those who obey the stipulations of the new covenant (loving God and loving one's neighbor), the final, eternal result will be blessing, even though the results in the present world are not guaranteed to be so encouraging. For those who disobey, the result can be only curse, regardless of how well one fares during life on earth. Malachi's warning (Mal 4:6), we suggest, still stands.