

## CHAPTER 1

### *Reading Ancient Israelite Prophetic Books*

Perhaps no figure from the ancient Near East is more foreign to much of the twenty-first century world, especially the West, than the prophet. This is not to suggest that prophetic figures are absent from the contemporary scene.<sup>1</sup> Some individuals are “prophetic” due to their conviction and commitment to speak in such a way as to promote change on the part of their hearers (be they for or against them) with respect to an issue of major importance. A classic example is Martin Luther King Jr.’s long-standing opposition to racism in the United States.<sup>2</sup> In such cases, there is some overlap between contemporary uses of the adjective “prophetic” and the kinds of prophecy that this volume explores. Walter Brueggemann even proposes that contemporary efforts to understand and articulate the content of the Old Testament are inevitably prophetic and “countercultural” insofar as they follow prophecy’s presentation of “alternatives in judgment and hope” against the backdrop of a world that “is marked by technological,

<sup>1</sup> Samuel H. Brody, “Prophecy and Powerlessness,” *Political Theology* 21 (2020): 43–55, explores some of these contemporary uses of “prophetic” movements in relation to political power.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Rosenbloom, “Martin Luther King’s Last 31 Hours: The Story of His Final Prophetic Speech,” *The Guardian*, 4 April 2018.

therapeutic, military, consumerist values that empty the world of abiding meaning and risky fidelity.”<sup>3</sup>

#### ISRAELITE PROPHETS AND PROPHECY IN THEIR ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

##### *Regional Variations in Prophecy and Its Authority*

Contemporary figures who speak out against what they perceive to be wrong, and in favor of a yet-unrealized ideal, do bear a certain resemblance to the Israelite prophets whose books are part of the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, there are fundamental differences between contemporary figures and their ancient predecessors. Foremost among them is the ancient prophets’ *claim to speak on behalf of a deity*. In the ancient Near East, speech that claimed a divine origin and divine authority was typically taken seriously by its recipients, whether they were kings, officials, or commoners. At the same time, given the many cultures and long swaths of history that make up the ancient Near East, it is not surprising that prophecy’s importance and authority vis-à-vis other means of determining the divine will or the future varied from one setting to another. This regional and temporal diversity is relevant to our study of the prophetic books of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, since they were produced in Judah during or shortly

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Old Testament Theology,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, ed. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 675–97 (693–94).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to recognize cultural, regional, and chronological diversity in the phenomenon of prophecy in the ancient Near East. See Seth L. Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre,” *HBAI* 6 (2017): 26–52; and the very diverse collection of texts in Martti Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy in the Ancient Near East*, 2nd ed., with contributions by C. L. Seow, Robert K. Ritner, and H. Craig Melchert, WAW 41 (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2019).

after the seventh century BCE. A crucially important regional difference between the Levant (the eastern Mediterranean seaboard, from modern-day Israel to south-central Turkey) and Mesopotamia has to do with the level of authority that was typically attributed to the prophetic message: “Within Mesopotamian intellectual culture, the difference between prophecy and divination was a difference between both types and levels of knowledge. Prophecy represented a significant but low level.”<sup>5</sup>

As a result, Mesopotamian prophecy was often subject to verification by divination, as was the case at Mari, particularly when female prophets were involved.<sup>6</sup> Most other cultures in the ancient Near East (i.e., outside the Levant) similarly privileged “highly developed ‘sciences’ like astronomy and divination” over prophetic messages.<sup>7</sup>

Without claiming that the audience of the Israelite prophets shared the convictions of the prophets themselves, the conceptual framework for Israelite prophecy was different from that in Mesopotamia. The prophetic books that eventually became part of the Old Testament claimed to be not merely one way that YHWH communicated with his people but the privileged channel for divine revelation in terms of frequency and authority.<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 18 presents prophecy as the normal, characteristic way in which Moses, the archetypal prophet, and dozens of prophets after him would communicate YHWH’s word to his chosen people. With the introduction “Thus says YHWH,” the prophetic

<sup>5</sup> Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre,” 33.

<sup>6</sup> Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 21; Esther J. Hamori, “Gender and the Verification of Prophecy at Mari,” *Die Welt des Orients* 42 (2012): 1–22.

<sup>7</sup> Sanders, “Why Prophecy Became a Biblical Genre,” 28.

<sup>8</sup> Here and throughout, masculine grammar is used of YHWH and God only to lighten the style.

speaker claimed to transmit a message from Israel's deity, and as such the message carried his unlimited authority (Deut 18:18).

In the worldview embraced by the biblical prophets, no other supernatural being had power, knowledge, or sovereignty comparable to YHWH's. On this view, no legitimate conflict of authority was possible between God's word and the proclamation of other supernatural beings.<sup>9</sup> There was also not supposed to be any conflict between prophecy that was in line with Israel's developing scriptures (Deut 13:1–5) and guidance offered by Israelite priests, since legitimate cultic divination in Israel was limited to particular questions of very narrow scope (Exod 28:30; Num 27:12–23).<sup>10</sup> And, of course, there were to be no conflicting authority claims on the part of Israel's or Judah's royal, religious, and social leaders when the divine message criticized or condemned them.<sup>11</sup> The prophets often indicted these groups for abandoning YHWH's law and misusing their power for their own gain rather than for the protection and advancement of the nation in covenant with YHWH.<sup>12</sup> This pattern stands in marked contrast to prophecy elsewhere in the

<sup>9</sup> Note Habakkuk's visceral reaction to YHWH's word, Hab 3:16; similarly Isa 6:5; Amos 7:2; 5, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Ryan O'Dowd observes that “[t]rue prophecy ... affirms the great commandment (Deut 6:4–9) by hermeneutically applying the first commandment (Deut 5:6–7) to the future world of international religious discourse,” O'Dowd, *The Wisdom of Torah: Epistemology in Deuteronomy and the Wisdom Literature*, FRLANT 225 (Gröningen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 69, and again, “Deuteronomy-as-torah is the truth standard for future prophetic tests” (ibid., 72).

<sup>11</sup> The prophet Jonah is a very odd exception in this regard.

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that prophets are never “friends” of the state, even when they are its critics; see the essays in Christopher A. Rollston, ed., *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context* (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018). Criticism of the state, however, be it of Israel, Judah, or a foreign power, is characteristic of the Old Testament at large and of the prophetic books in particular. See Robert Gnuse, *No Tolerance for Tyrants:*

ancient Near East, which provides very few examples of criticism of kings in particular.<sup>13</sup>

*Prophecy as Commentary on the Relationship between YHWH and Israel*

In conjunction with guiding, evaluating, and criticizing as necessary Israelites' behavior in relation to God and to each other, ancient Israel's prophets also gave immense attention to YHWH as Israel's covenant partner. This attention regularly focused on YHWH's continued compassion, patience, and faithfulness toward his people even when they failed to demonstrate a reciprocal faithful commitment to him.<sup>14</sup> The earliest writing prophets, commonly thought to be Hosea and Amos in the eighth century BCE, announced that the northern kingdom of Israel had reached a critical low point in its relationship to God due to a variety of

*The Biblical Assault on Kings and Kingship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011); Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); J. Gordon McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology, Genesis-Kings* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Collin Cornell, *Divine Aggression in Psalms and Inscriptions: Vengeful Gods and Loyal Kings*, SOTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Stökl, "A Royal Advisory Service: Prophecy and the State in Mesopotamia," in *Enemies and Friends of the State: Ancient Prophecy in Context*, ed. Christopher A. Rollston (University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2018), 87–114 (107) concludes that "potential [prophetic] criticism is not geared toward the establishment of a new form of government or essentially critical of the king. Instead, its ultimate aim, just as all other forms of the cult and state, was to enable the king to establish and maintain ideal kingship."

<sup>14</sup> Here I develop Robert P. Gordon's suggestion that "the difference between Israelite prophecy and the rest may simply have been expressed in terms of its conception of its God," in "'Where Have All the Prophets Gone?': The 'Disappearing' Israelite Prophet against the Background of Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy," *BBR* 5 (1995): 67–86 (86).

widespread social and religious sins. Since previous disciplinary actions by YHWH had not interrupted these patterns of behavior, these prophets and others after them announced that exile, the heaviest divine sanction possible, was inevitable. Even so, some prophets interceded with YHWH on behalf of their audience, and in the early stages of this process YHWH sometimes relented (see Amos 7:1–6, in contrast to 7:7–9). Yet even when exile had become inevitable, God’s commitment to his people meant that rather than destroying them completely, he promised to purify and transform them so that no future disobedience could again impede his saving will for them. This strong interest in the distant future probably contributed to the decision to preserve the prophets’ oracles on a large scale, something attested only rarely in other cultures, notably during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal in seventh-century Assyria.<sup>15</sup>

### *Prophecy and Non-Israelite Nations*

The understanding that the messages of Israelite and Judean prophets were of lasting significance was reinforced by their pronounced interest in the international scene. This global perspective on YHWH’s involvement with the larger world continued earlier traditions and scriptures according to which his election of and involvement with Israel was intended to benefit the world at large (e.g., Gen 12:1–3).<sup>16</sup> Despite the fact that these prophets focused primarily on Israel and Judah and delivered their message only to those audiences and never to foreign groups (Jonah is an

<sup>15</sup> Nissinen, *Prophets and Prophecy*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in *Ethnicity and the Bible*, ed. Mark Brett, BibInt 19 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 143–69.

exception), the prophets' messages included nations and events far beyond the borders of Israel and Judah.<sup>17</sup> Oracles dealing with non-Israelite nations, whether announcing judgment (usually) or salvation (less often), thus appear frequently in the prophetic books. Israelite prophets condemned non-Israelites for reasons not very different than those given to justify God's disciplinary punishment of his people. Israelites were held accountable to God's guidelines for their life and practice as embodied in the detailed covenant made with them at Sinai.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, non-Israelites were held accountable to less specific but equally binding moral norms that, although "traditional and conventional" to a degree, were woven into the human conscience and so had YHWH as their author and enforcer (Amos 1:2–2:3; Isa 10:5–19, etc.).<sup>19</sup> Much as YHWH's judgment of Israel and Judah was not an end in itself, his words of condemnation against the nations are often part of a larger perspective in which many non-Israelites will one day recognize his sovereignty, submit to him, and enjoy his blessing as part of his renewed people (e.g., Isa 19:18–25).

<sup>17</sup> Very few texts other than Jonah assert that an Israelite prophet directly addressed a non-Israelite audience; see 2 Kgs 8:7–15; Isa 14:32; 21:11–12.

<sup>18</sup> The dating of the Pentateuchal laws is hotly debated. For a representative argument for their relatively late creation, see Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, 2 vols., trans. J. Bowden, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 2:464–93. For arguments in favor of an earlier date, with a special focus on the prophetic books, see Gene M. Tucker, "The Law in the Eighth-Century Prophets," in *Canon, Theology, and Old Testament Interpretation: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Gene M. Tucker et al. (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1988), 201–16.

<sup>19</sup> John H. Hayes, "Amos's Oracles Against the Nations (1:2–2:16)," *RevExp* 92 (1995): 153–67 (166). Isaiah clearly assumes that pride and folly are sins of which both Israelites and non-Israelites can be guilty, per John Barton, "Ethics in the Book of Isaiah," in *Writing and Reading the Scroll of Isaiah: Studies of an Interpretive Tradition*, ed. Craig C. Broyles and Craig A. Evans, 2 vols., VTSup 70 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 1:67–77.

*Concluding Summary*

Israelite prophecy can be summarized as the human mediation of authoritative divine messages to Israel in the context of her covenant relationship with YHWH.<sup>20</sup> The development of biblical prophecy as independent of the monarchy and other forms of political and social power gave the prophets the greatest possible freedom to criticize, confront, and even condemn their audience when necessary. Since it was presented as God's own speech, prophetic discourse could be profoundly subversive of human misuse of power.<sup>21</sup> Yet even the most negative prophetic messages were not the final divine word to Israel and Judah or to the world beyond their borders. The prophets insisted that beyond the judgment that YHWH would eventually bring on these groups, there was to be a future restoration that would transform and renew his people, bringing blessing to them and to non-Israelites. By offering hope through and beyond judgment, the prophetic books of the Old Testament dealt forthrightly with the grave problems their audiences faced. That same honesty allowed them to propose appropriately radical solutions to those problems. These books' theologies are thus both unwaveringly honest and surprisingly hopeful, focused on Israel and Judah yet deeply interested in the world as a whole. Finally, the scope of these books' perspective is comprehensive, since the environmental, social, and other

<sup>20</sup> Compare the definitions of ancient Near Eastern prophecy more broadly considered by Brad Kelle, "The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy in Contemporary Scholarship," *CurBR* 12 (2014): 275–320.

<sup>21</sup> See the related social-scientific study of Israelite prophecy helpfully surveyed by Kelle, "The Phenomenon of Israelite Prophecy." On the unique way that the ancient Near Eastern concept of covenant or treaty is developed in the Old Testament, see Robert P. Gordon, "'Comparativism' and the God of Israel," in *The Old Testament and Its World*, ed. J. C. de Moor and Robert P. Gordon, *OtSt* 52 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 45–67 (49–51).



contextual features of human existence are as inseparable from humans' relationship to YHWH as are issues of ethics and belief.<sup>22</sup>

### THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE (MINOR PROPHETS)

#### *Recent Research on the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve*

The last few decades have witnessed a marked shift in how many scholars approach and interpret the Minor Prophets (Hosea–Malachi). Whereas centuries of interpretation had almost without exception approached these books as *books* (originally, of course, *scrolls*), that is, as independent literary compositions, over the last few decades a growing number of specialists have begun to understand this group of compositions as more or less unified by editorial redaction (post-authorial development and additions).<sup>23</sup> To some extent this avenue of research was simply an attempt to understand the otherwise curious, not to say obscure, rationale behind the arrangement of these twelve writings. The clearest overall logic for the order of the Twelve in the Hebrew text tradition is a chronological movement from books associated with earlier prophets to those attributed to later ones, but the placement of Joel and Obadiah is difficult to explain on this logic. An alternative

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Patricia K. Tull, "Consumerism, Idolatry, and Environmental Limits in Isaiah," in *The Book of Isaiah: Enduring Questions Answered Anew*, ed. Richard J. Bautch and J. Todd Hibbard (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 196–213. For a comprehensive survey of the recent history of interpretation of the Old Testament prophetic books, see Christopher R. Seitz, "Prophecy in the Nineteenth Century Reception," in *Hebrew Bible Old Testament III/1, the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: V&R, 2013), 556–81.

<sup>23</sup> A convenient overview can be found in Aaron Schart, "Twelve, Book of the: History of Interpretation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 806–17.

attempt to explain the organization and development of the corpus thus began to focus on the ways in which these books might have developed from their earlier forms to the final forms in which we have them, and how those processes might have impacted the formation of the Book of the Twelve as a whole.

*The Book of the Twelve as a Redactional Unity*

At present, there is both consensus and dissent with respect to how the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve came to be.<sup>24</sup> In terms of consensus, many scholars find evidence in the individual books of the Twelve that each book developed *in relation to one or more books elsewhere in the collection*. Following the lead of James Nogalski in particular, such arguments often depend on “catch-words” that appear at the end of one book and at the beginning of the immediately following book in the order most often preserved in the Hebrew textual tradition.<sup>25</sup> Other proposed motivations for the diachronic development of these books individually and as a collection include *changing theologies* in Israel and Judah, *social upheaval* of which the exiles of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms are the most evident examples, and *the influence of eschatological and apocalyptic thinking* on Israel’s scriptures.

<sup>24</sup> Recent research on this corpus is surveyed briefly in Daniel C. Timmer, “Prophetic Literature: Book of the Twelve,” in *The State of Old Testament Studies*, ed. H. H. Hardy II and M. Daniel Carroll R. (Rodas) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, forthcoming), and exhaustively in Lena-Sofia Tiemeyer and Jakob Wöhrle (eds.), *The Book of the Twelve: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, VTSup 184 (Leiden: Brill, 2020) and Julia M. O’Brien (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Minor Prophets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>25</sup> On the significance of the different order of some parts of the Twelve in the Greek Old Testament (LXX), see Marvin Sweeney, “Sequence and Interpretation in the Book of the Twelve,” in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney, SBL SymS 15 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 2000), 49–64.

More modest theories regarding the formation of the Twelve simply propose that it is a thematic anthology, without appealing to precise historical causes to explain its literary development.<sup>26</sup>

Alongside this consensus exists a current of dissent as to what elements of these books in fact bear witness to such developments and what paradigms offer the most convincing arrangement of these data.<sup>27</sup> It is not uncommon, for example, for two reconstructions of a book's redactional development to choose somewhat different textual features as data, to interpret those data differently, and to use their findings to reconstruct different social and religious histories of Israel and Judah.<sup>28</sup> The conflicting conclusions of investigations focused on the same data and guided by the same method suggest that the method lacks sufficient controls and clarity or that the data identified are ambivalent.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>26</sup> David Peterson, "A Book of the Twelve?" in *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*, ed. James D. Nogalski and Marvin A. Sweeney, SBL SymS 15 (Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 2000), 3–10; Martin Beck, "Das Dodekapropheten als Anthologie," *ZAW* 118 (2006): 558–83; and Paul R. House, *The Unity of the Twelve*, JSOTSup 97 (Sheffield: Almond, 1990), all propose different understandings of the Twelve as an anthology.

<sup>27</sup> The dialogue is conveniently summarized in James D. Nogalski and Ehud Ben Zvi, *Two Sides of a Coin: Juxtaposing Views on Interpreting the Book of the Twelve/the Twelve Prophetic Books*, ed. Thomas Römer, Analecta Gorgiana 201 (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009). On questions of method, see further Marvin Sweeney, "Synchronic and Diachronic Concerns in Reading the Book of the Twelve Prophets," in *Perspectives on the Formation of the Book of the Twelve: Methodological Foundations – Redactional Processes – Historical Insights*, ed. Rainer Albertz et al., BZAW 433 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 21–33; John Van Seters, "Editing the Bible: The Romantic Myths about Authors and Editors," *HBAI* 3 (2014): 343–54; Francis Landy, "Three Sides of a Coin," *JHebS* 10 (2010), article 11.

<sup>28</sup> This is evident in the wide-ranging survey by Barry Jones, "The Seventh-Century Prophets in Recent Research," *CurBR* 14 (2016): 129–75.

<sup>29</sup> This point has been strongly argued by Reinhard Müller and Juha Pakkala, *Editorial Techniques in the Hebrew Bible*, RBS 97 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2022).

There is also a lack of agreement as to how these reconstructions of textual development should be weighed against textual data that seem to push in other directions. These data include, first, features that suggest that the books of the Twelve themselves were transmitted as self-contained, independent literary compositions. Ehud Ben Zvi and others stress the following points in support of this position: Each book of the Twelve has its own title; the Jewish sectarian community at Qumran interpreted each of the Twelve as an independent work even though the community preserved most or all of the books concerned on one scroll; and each book has a clear beginning and ending and exhibits appropriate levels of lexical and thematic coherence.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to these book-focused questions, other disputed points of method and analysis include: the relative priority of shared catchwords (which ostensibly would tie two books together); features that distinguish the individual books from one another (focus, historical context, etc.); the point at which a book's literary or theological complexity exceeds what an interpreter thinks a single author is capable of producing; and the plausibility of large-scale redactional activity in light of its complexity and the rarity of such processes as empirically attested in prophetic literature of the ancient Near East.

#### *How This Volume Approaches the Book of the Twelve*

There is no doubt that the books that make up the Minor Prophets/Book of the Twelve are related to one another – but *how* and *why* are they related? Because language expresses meaning through

<sup>30</sup> See Ben Zvi, “Remembering Twelve Prophetic Characters from the Past,” in *The Book of the Twelve: One Book or Many?*, ed. Elena Di Pede and Donatelle Scailoa, FAT 91 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 6–36.

combinations of words rather than through isolated words or phrases, the present study of prophetic books gives more weight to frequently attested thematic or semantic commonalities than to isolated words or expressions apart from such large-scale ties.<sup>31</sup> The significant uncertainty that accompanies most theories of redactional development at the level of individual books, and especially at the level of the collection as a whole, similarly dissuades us from venturing too far from the explicit claims of the text as to its formation, historical location, and so on.<sup>32</sup> For example, there is often a great deal of diachronic or other variety within the explicit statements of the texts themselves that allows the interpreter to distinguish, for example, between the context in which – or an audience for which – an oracle of salvation is announced and the context in which an oracle of judgment would have functioned.<sup>33</sup> All things considered, the evident diversity of the collection of the Twelve and its constituent books is complemented by a significant degree of literary and theological homogeneity. Careful attention to the fruitful interrelation of this unity and diversity promises to

<sup>31</sup> For provocative reflections on the limited unity that redaction can produce, see Hervé Tremblay, “Vox clamantis in deserto? L’enseignement d’Amos sur la justice sociale dans le contexte de la théorie de l’unité des douze,” in *The Book of the Twelve: One Book or Many?*, ed. Elena Di Pede and Donatella Scaiola, FAT 2.91 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), 107–33.

<sup>32</sup> See the essays in Raymond F. Person and Robert Rezetko, *Empirical Models Challenging Biblical Criticism*, AIL (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2016); Benjamin D. Sommer, “Dating Pentateuchal Texts and the Perils of Pseudo-Historicism,” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. Thomas B. Dozeman, Konrad Schmid, and Baruch W. Schwartz, FAT 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 85–108, and Benjamin Ziemer, *Kritik der Wachstumsmodells: Die Grenzen alttestamentlicher Redaktionsgeschichte im Lichte empirischer Evidenz*, VTSup 182 (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> This is argued by Daniel C. Timmer, *The Non-Israelite Nations in the Book of the Twelve: Thematic Coherence and the Diachronic–Synchronic Relationship in the Minor Prophets*, BibInt 135 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), esp. 1–20, 221–44.

preserve the distinct emphases and interests of each book while recognizing the shared beliefs and outlooks that led to their preservation as prophetic literature and their eventual inclusion in the canon.<sup>34</sup>

#### APPROACHING THE THEOLOGY OF PROPHETIC BOOKS

Discerning the theology of a biblical book is not a straightforward task. Although there is a wide variety of methods and approaches for doing so, not all are equally helpful in bringing the content of the book into recognizable categories without uprooting individual bits of content from their contexts. For example, a number of works on the theology of the Old Testament organize its content under the headings of Christian theology, such as God, humanity, salvation, and so on. However, this framework is selective and to some degree artificial, and consequently forces some of the text's content into ill-fitting molds while neglecting other elements. The challenge interpreters face is thus how to identify, organize, and interconnect the content of biblical literature in a way that is faithful to it and captures not only its semantic content but also its rhetorical or pragmatic force, all the while avoiding reductionism.

A more inductive approach, taking the Book of Nahum as an example (see Chapter 2), might focus on topics that are native to and prominent in the book itself: the nature of sin as exemplified by Assyria, the reasons for which God commits to punishing

<sup>34</sup> Stephen B. Chapman cogently argues that scriptural writings would “have been likely to gain religious authority even prior to the time at which they were officially recognized,” in “What Are We Reading? Canonicity and the Old Testament,” *WW* 29 (2009): 334–47 (341–42).

it, and his grace in delivering those who trust in him from that judgment. This sort of approach captures more of the book's content by focusing on theological issues that are explicitly present and salient in the text. Yet if concepts such as sin, retribution, and deliverance are treated as static categories, the interpreter will fail to grasp the dynamics of the text, that is, the ways that it *develops and interrelates* the subjects that it presents.<sup>35</sup> Approaches that recognize this dynamic, organic dimension of biblical literature promise to bring us still closer to our goal of reckoning with the text's content and meaning. William P. Brown has formulated two overarching questions that he argues "guide all other questions concerning the text's context and meaning" and that capture the dynamic and organic nature of the books we study here: First, "what can be ascertained from the text about *God's character and relationship to the world?*" (what Brown terms "theo-logic"); and second, "what can be ascertained from the text about the *world in its relationship to God and humanity's place within it?*" (what Brown calls its cosmo-logic).<sup>36</sup>

If we consider Nahum in light of these two questions, God's character is certainly complex, and his relationship to the world is clearly not static. Consequently, the world's relationship to God is also dynamic, as is the relationship between the different human groups that appear on the historical scene Nahum presents. One of the more promising ways to handle this dynamic

<sup>35</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 34.

<sup>36</sup> William P. Brown, "Theological Interpretation: A Proposal," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen*, ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 387–405 (390–91), emphasis in original. Cf. W. E. Lemke, "Theology (OT)," *ABD* 6:448–73.

diversity is by using a thematic approach. Attention to a book's themes as developed in different contexts makes it possible for the interpreter to address the meta-questions Brown proposes without losing sight of the text's nuances and details.<sup>37</sup> Because they can develop across some or all of a text, themes can accommodate developments and changes, yet they also provide significant coherence. Since themes can be traced across multiple contexts, a thematic approach can also be text-intensive, preserving the greatest amount of detail possible in the contours of the theme by rooting the discourse to particular contexts.<sup>38</sup> A thematic approach does not assume that all the oracles preserved in a prophetic book were composed or delivered in the order in which the reader encounters them,<sup>39</sup> but rather reflects the fact that reading texts is generally a sequential exercise and the working hypothesis that each book has been arranged in an intentional manner.<sup>40</sup> Still, the reader may be required to mentally reorder some elements with respect to the book's internal chronology as he or she proceeds through the book (e.g., the flash-forward to Nineveh's fall in Nah 2:3–10[4–11]).<sup>41</sup> Similarly, nonadjacent

<sup>37</sup> D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, 2nd ed., JSOTSup 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), 19–22.

<sup>38</sup> The danger of subjugating “the specific theological data of the text” to static or rigid themes is noted by Brueggemann, *Theology*, 85.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Michael Weigl, “Current Research on the Book of Nahum: Exegetical Methodologies in Turmoil,” *CurBR* 9 (2001): 81–130 (90).

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Samely, *Profiling Jewish Literature in Antiquity: An Inventory, from Second Temple Texts to the Talmuds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 89–90, 324–26; Stephen Dawkins and Johanna Nordlie, “Processes of Anaphor Resolution,” in *Sources of Coherence in Reading*, ed. Robert F. Lorch and Edward J. O'Brien (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995), 145–57, esp. 156.

<sup>41</sup> T. A. Van Dijk, “Cognitive Processing of Literary Discourse,” *Poetics Today* 1 (1979): 143–60, esp. 156–57.



units of a prophetic book may be treated together in light of their shared theme(s) without compromising due attention to their respective contexts.

Lastly, because a thematic approach is well suited to tracing developments of all sorts, it helps the reader attend to the different ways that the text engages or addresses the reader. The text's tone, rhetoric, and various speech-acts<sup>42</sup> mean that its themes address the reader in a considered way. Despite sustained pressure against this dimension of academic biblical interpretation, famously captured in Krister Stendahl's distinction between "what it meant" and "what it means," there are good reasons to remain attentive to each book's strategies of persuasion and other means of affecting the reader, past and present.<sup>43</sup> This is not to imagine that we are the original audience addressed by the prophet or his book, but it simply reflects a textually authorized interest in how the message transcends the historical circumstances in which it was first articulated. Walter Brueggemann's attention to "strong verbs of transformation" in Israel's "*narrative* portrayal of Yahweh" exemplifies the thematic approach to theological interpretation undertaken here.<sup>44</sup> This approach is well suited to the tracing the theological, literary, and historical threads that form the texts of Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah, and especially the dynamic crises and actions in which YHWH takes center stage as creator, judge, deliverer, and consummator.

<sup>42</sup> Mikhail Kissine, "Sentence, Utterances, and Speech Acts," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. Keith Allen and Kasia M. Jaszczolt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 169–90.

<sup>43</sup> Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology: Comparative," *IDB* 1: 418–32.

<sup>44</sup> Brueggemann, *Theology*, 145, emphasis in original; he also grounds the "dramatic movement" that he sees in Old Testament theology in "the character of Yahweh" (Brueggemann, *Theology*, 552).

*A Synthesis of Key Themes in Israelite Prophetic Literature*

Before reflecting, last of all, on how prophetic books can reach their audiences, it will be helpful to summarize some of the key themes and dynamics that they draw upon to that end. Israelite prophets claim to present the world, whether in local detail or in international perspective, as God sees it. The meta-narrative that underlies the prophetic messages in all their variety is grounded in God's rule over the world he created, the consequential actions of the human beings who live under his rule (whether obediently or not), and the slow but sure movement of history toward the full establishment of his rule over a transformed, purified humanity and world.<sup>45</sup>

The prophets frequently connect YHWH's judicial and royal roles to his identity as the creator (Isa 14; 41; Amos 5; Nah 1:3–5; Hab 1:12; Zeph 1:2–3, etc.). Even when this basis is not explicitly mentioned, YHWH's rule is assumed to be universal. Human beings, as moral agents, are responsible to him, even though Israel's election entails a special level of obligation in this regard (Amos 3:2). Despite its emphasis on the sins of the various audiences addressed, the prophetic message is hardly limited to condemnation and regularly presents the possibility of deliverance, although these promises are limited to those who turn from their sinful patterns of behavior and commit to serving God before all else (Ezek 18:21–23; Zeph 2:1–3). YHWH's identity as unrivaled creator

<sup>45</sup> Robert P. Gordon, "Comparativism," 58, affirms of the narrative tradition of the Old Testament that "[t]he idea that Israel's God was solely responsible for the created order, controlled and shaped history, and determined the whole course of Israelite national affairs, can justly be claimed as the dynamo that powered the narrative-historical tradition within the Old Testament." In light of what is said earlier, I would add "and international" after "national" in this quotation.

also makes possible what is perhaps the most striking feature of the prophets' message. Through superlative and final acts of judgment and deliverance, YHWH will remove from his world both moral wrong and those who remain committed to practicing it, while transforming others so that they no longer pursue their own agendas, disregard God, or mistreat other human beings. YHWH's plan to *restore and perfect the world* he created, in which Israel has a particular role as his elect people, guides history and ensures that evil will not triumph.<sup>46</sup> This is the foundation of the hope that regularly surges into what would otherwise be a monochromatic message of judgment and destruction.

#### ENGAGING ISRAELITE PROPHECY AND ITS CLAIMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Many if not all of these concepts and beliefs are rather distant from dominant discourses in the late modern West. Because the prophetic books of the Old Testament are based in a worldview quite different from much contemporary thinking, they can be difficult to understand. But rather than letting this difference impede engagement with these texts, it is far better to see it as a measure of the potential that a sympathetic reading of them holds for clarifying, challenging, and enriching the reader's own values, beliefs, and thinking. Exploring alternative explanations of the

<sup>46</sup> Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), carefully considers the interrelation of YHWH's mastery over creation and the place of chaos and evil in the world. On Israel's election in some of the prophetic books, see Daniel C. Timmer, "The Election of the Nations," in *T&T Clark Handbook of Election*, ed. Edwin C. van Driel (London: T & T Clark, 2023), 45–62.

world and of humanity that are rooted in history is also fruitful in light of the overdependence of religious studies and much of theological studies “on the comprehensive approach to human knowledge that was constructed and fashioned at the time of the Enlightenment” and on methods that presume the interpreter can engage the subject matter without becoming involved.<sup>47</sup> A meta-critical perspective on relevant features of Enlightenment epistemology has significant implications for the ways that readers engage with these texts.<sup>48</sup> For example, against the Enlightenment ideal of the objective, disinterested observer or subject, a long tradition of philosophical reflection suggests that:

All knowledge is personal knowledge. It depends upon our personal commitment to and participation in relationships through which our prior conceptions of the world are transformed. Such a conception of the knowing process subverts what has sometimes been called an epistemology of spatial distance – the Modernist ideal of detached, objective inquiry that keeps the object to be known at arm’s length.<sup>49</sup>

The goal of developing a critical perspective that does not unduly privilege some key features of contemporary hermeneutics is not to bring about a return to a supposedly pristine pre-Enlightenment or pre-critical outlook. Rather, it is an invitation to engage with the prophetic books of the Old Testament

<sup>47</sup> Walter H. Capps, *Religious Studies: The Making of a Discipline* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1995), 344.

<sup>48</sup> This includes the often binary juxtaposition of secular modernity and religious belief; see Craig Woelfel, “T. S. Eliot and Our Beliefs about Belief,” *Religion & Literature* 44 (2012): 128–36.

<sup>49</sup> Murray Rae, “‘Incline Your Ear So That You May Live’: Principles of Biblical Epistemology,” in *The Bible and Epistemology: Biblical Soundings in the Knowledge of God*, ed. Mary Healy and Robin Parry (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 161–80 (169).

in such a way that their claims can be understood clearly and evaluated in a self-aware and self-critical manner. As part of this process, the interpreter is responsible for adopting methods and attitudes that are well suited to the object studied. In the case of the prophetic books of the Old Testament, this requires perhaps more than anything else a willingness to look at oneself and the world in a paradigm in which YHWH, the God of Israel and the creator of the world, regularly intervenes: “There is no good reason to decide as a presupposition of biblical hermeneutics that God is not involved in history. To do so is to set the biblical writings in a conceptual framework that is alien to them and will, very likely, preclude our understanding them aright.”<sup>50</sup>

The prophets’ belief that YHWH had intervened in world history and would do so again is inseparable from their belief that he was the sole creator of the world, simultaneously involved in it and incapable of being confined within it. One might even say that creation (the beginning), history, and eschatology (the end or goal of history) are intertwined, and for that reason all of these subjects figure prominently in the prophets’ words:

That the world should be brought forth by God “out of nothing” ... implies that God creates with some purpose in mind. The principle of *creatio ex nihilo* implies that the world is invested with a telos. There is a reason for its being; and history, in consequence, is to be understood as the space and time opened up for the world to become what it is intended to be. Second, the idea of creation out of nothing means that the world is fully God’s world. ... Everything is held in God’s hands so that, even in the face of evil and sinfulness, it is possible to affirm, along with the

<sup>50</sup> Murray Rae, “Creation and Promise,” in “*Behind*” the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al., SHS 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 267–99 (295). Brueggemann, *Theology*, 104, makes this point with respect to historical-critical approaches in particular.

biblical writers, that all things happen under the will and purpose of God. History may be confessed to have an overall coherence under the creative, providential and redemptive care of God.<sup>51</sup>

Although this understanding of the world is quite different from much of recent Western thought, it is no less intriguing and valuable for that reason. For example, one crucial “constructive question” is how modern epistemology can be revised in order to include “aspects of perception that are not reducible to sense perception in the narrow sense of the term.”<sup>52</sup> Thomas Pfau observes, for example, that Immanuel Kant’s “overriding concern with disentangling reason from the notion of transcendence” led him (and many after him) to define reality as “a single, continuous, and anthropomorphic domain” in which grace and the definitive vanquishing of evil cannot exist.<sup>53</sup> Brought to bear on our reading of the Old Testament, this epistemological flexibility allows the reader to approach these books with “imaginative seriousness” that can prepare the reader “to hear [and understand]

<sup>51</sup> Rae, “Creation and Promise,” 284–85. For robust discussion of this question in a larger context, see Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Regarding the relation of God’s will and human actions and moral responsibility, Jewish and Christian thinkers have offered various proposals; see Netanel Wiederblank, *Illuminating Jewish Thought: Explorations of Free Will, the Afterlife, and the Messianic Era* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2018); Charles M. Wood, “Providence,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology*, ed. John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 91–104.

<sup>52</sup> Christine Helmer, “Theology and the Study of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 230–54 (249–50).

<sup>53</sup> Thomas Pfau, “Religion,” *The Oxford Handbook of European Romanticism*, ed. Paul Hamilton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 730–51 (739). For a magisterial treatment of this issue, see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Belknap, 2007).

what people describe through the vocabulary of the ecstatic, of relationality with a transcendent other,” or the like.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, with regard to the question of history and a world open to divine intervention, open-mindedness encourages us to leave open the questions of “transempirical realities” and YHWH’s involvement in this world.<sup>55</sup> With these dispositions and perspectives supporting our attempt to read Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah on their own terms, we can more objectively and productively engage and evaluate these books and our response to them.

<sup>54</sup> Helmer, “Theology and the Study of Religion,” 250. For arguments that press in the opposite direction, see Roland Boer (ed.), *Secularism and Biblical Studies, Worldview* (London: Routledge, 2009). The concept of “imaginative seriousness” is proposed by R. W. L. Moberly, *The Theology of the Book of Genesis, OTT* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 28.

<sup>55</sup> Roland Deines, “God’s Role in History as a Methodological Problem for Exegesis,” in *Acts of God in History*, ed. Christoph Ochs and Peter Watts, WUNT 317 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 1–26 (12).