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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this study is the latter prophets, as they are known in the Jewish canon, or the major and minor prophets, as they have come to be called in the Christian canon.

The plan of this book is to follow a historical line through the literary prophets, to the degree that it is visible to modern scholarship. Of course, all scholars do not agree on such fundamental issues as the date, authorship, and literary integrity of the books and their component parts. Those matters will be discussed in some detail in the chapters that follow. My attempt to line the prophets and their books up on a time line rather than treating them in the canonical order carries an element of risk, but it seems worth the venture in order to see the cultural, theological, and historical interrelationships that existed among the canonical prophets. This perspective is not easily appreciated by either the beginner in prophetic studies or the advanced student who concentrates on the prophets book by book and never sees the broad picture, with the individual prophets in their historical and theological niches.

Though the prophets were not given to quoting one another by name, they did draw upon one another, some more than others. Once that dependence is recognized, a new view of the prophetic movement emerges. They were not lone individualists who knew nothing and cared nothing for what others who bore the name "prophet" had said. Rather, they saw themselves in a line of succession and were aware of the tradition they had received from their predecessors.

THREE ERAS OF PROPHETS

The prophets spoke to Israel in times of crisis. In fact, historical and moral crisis, if the list of canonical prophets is any indication, called them forth. Had there been no crisis, there would have been little need for the prophets. When the list of literary prophets is posted, it will be noted that they are clustered around critical historical events or eras.

The historical continuum of Israel's history from the eighth to the fifth centuries B.C. can be sketched, even if roughly, in the literary prophets. Three centers, corresponding to the three international eras, bring them into sharp focus. Or, it might as accurately be said that the literary prophets bring three historical centers into sharp focus.

The first category includes those of the *Neo-Assyrian* period, whose attention fell upon the circumstances leading up to and the conditions following the fall of the Northern Kingdom (Israel) in 722 B.C. The constellation of prophets who assessed the moral and theological climate that led to the end of Israel was constituted by Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah. In varying ways but with sympathetic insight, they saw the end of Israel and its implications for Judah. The critical nature of this era had much to do with the preservation of the prophetic oracles as sacred literature. Although Jonah was not preoccupied with that event and obviously belongs on the periphery of this era, it might be said that the judgment he reluctantly saw submerged in Yahweh's compassionate nature reemerged in the era of this prophetic constellation.

The second group of prophets is composed of those of the *Neo-Babylonian* era, whose focus marked out the attendant circumstances and succeeding conditions of the fall of the Southern Kingdom (Judah) in 586 B.C. At the end of the Assyrian period, when the shifting lines of international domination blurred and then cleared again with the rise of the Chaldean-inspired Babylonian empire, some of the most powerful and discerning voices of history addressed the developing crisis. Zephaniah, Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Nahum, Ezekiel, and Obadiah contributed their distinctive insights to their contemporaries and delivered their message from the Lord to Judah. The tragic model of Israel and her adamant persistence in idolatry was like a dark, foreboding cloud that settled over Judah. With the passing of time historical memory faded; the tragedy of 722 diminished as a moral example, and Judah stood on the same treacherous precipice as had her sister Israel. This group of prophets, with irresistible compulsion, tried to coax Judah

away from the edge of the abyss and announced the bad news of what would happen if she did not move back into the safety zone of covenantal observance. Yet thankfully the news was not all bad, for the fall of Jerusalem, at a certain point as inevitable as Samaria's fall, carried a message of hope that Judah would miraculously revive.

After the Exile, during the *Persian* period, the third group of prophets built upon that hope. They set forth Yahweh's new order as Babylonian austerity passed into Persian indulgence. With a new landlord, Judah's fortunes, partly smothered in the long exile but kept alive by religious enthusiasts, took a turn for the better. The decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. marked the beginning of that era. The first faint flurry of hope might even be traced to the release of Jehoiachin from prison after the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 B.C. Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Joel, and Malachi in their respective ways articulated the hope and implicated the changing conditions of the first hundred years of postexilic life in Judah. The ebbing tide of history had fallen to its lowest mark in the fall of Jerusalem, a disaster once popularly thought to be impossible. The rise of Cyrus after the Exile represented the incoming tide of Judean history.

THE PRELIMINARY STAGES

The roots of prophecy are deeply imbedded in Israel's history and in the culture of the ancient Near East. From patriarchal times eminent leaders gave guidance to the people of God. The patriarchal mode of leadership developed in a later era into the charismatic guidance of Moses and Joshua and the judges. When such leaders led Israel, the need for prophets was minimal, although the prophetic phenomenon was known even during those eras (Num. 11:24–30; Deut. 18:15–22). However, from the closing phase of the period of the judges to the end of the biblical period as it is recorded in the Old Testament (OT), the word of the prophet is one of the most distinctive traits of Israelite culture and religion.

Four terms were applied to individuals, both men and women, who demonstrated prophetic traits: "man of God" (*'îsh hā-elōhîm*), "seer" (*rō'eh*), "visionary" (*ḥozeh*), and "prophet" (*nābî'*). The word "diviner" or "soothsayer" (*qōsēm*) is used of those who practiced formal divination, perhaps using lots or other methods of discerning the will of the deity, but that term was not applied to those prophets who receive legitimate sanction in the OT. The terms "seer" and "visionary" (*rō'eh*

and *ḥōzeh*) are descriptive of the individual's experience, the first emphasizing the extraordinary insight that came to the prophets, and the second the method of reception by means of visions or dreams. The terms "seer" and "man of God" are both attested in the case of Samuel (1 Sam. 9:9), the former term being the older of the two. The implication of the phrase "man of God" is that the person was possessed by God for special service. In the transition period between the nonliterary (those whose words have not been preserved in books that carry their names) and literary prophets (those whose words have been preserved in written form under their respective names), little distinction can be detected between the terms "man of God" and "prophet" (*nābî'*).[1] With the dawn of literary prophecy, however, the Hebrew term *nābî'* became the common name for the prophet. Some scholars believe the word came into disrepute in the time of Amos, inciting him to protest the allegation that he was a *nābî'*. His protestation, however, was more likely provoked by the motives that the priest Amaziah attributed to his ministry in Bethel—that he was there to earn his bread. The reply of Amos in which he explains his real occupation supports that interpretation (Amos 7:14–15).

A bygone generation of scholars deprecated the predictive or "foretelling" element in the prophets in favor of the "forthtelling" role.[2] The Septuagint (LXX) translation of the word *nābî'* as *prophētēs* (one who speaks for, in behalf of) has been cited as evidence that the prophets were "forthtellers" rather than "foretellers." Yet that word is quite a general term and does not capture the entire function of the *nābî'* in itself. Although it can accurately be said that the prophets were basically preachers—that is, that they spoke to their own times and situations, interpreting current events of history in light of God's will for Israel—the predictive element was a distinctive part of their message (Amos

1. T. J. Meek, *Hebrew Origins* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1936), 147, cites *nābî'* as coming from a common Akkadian root, not found in Hebrew, meaning "to speak," thus "speaker." William F. Albright disagrees with that etymology and relates it to the Akkadian word *nabu* ("to call"), thus "one who is called (by God)" (*From the Stone Age to Christianity,* 2d ed. [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957], 303). Klaus Koch's interpretation of the term as referring to one who is "entrusted with a message" is very close to that explanation (*The Prophets,* trans. Margaret Kohl [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983], 1:16).

2. E.g., Meek, *Hebrew Origins,* 148.

3:7). Subtract that and, as Alfred Guillaume has said, they would become preachers and not prophets.[3]

Origins of Prophecy

The origins of Hebrew prophecy have been variously traced to Canaanite, Egyptian, and Arabic sources, but more recently attention has shifted to Mesopotamia, especially the ancient city of Mari,[4] for enlightenment on the phenomenon of Hebrew prophecy. The Mari texts, dating from the first half of the second millennium B.C., are particularly interesting in their exposure of a group of prophets, both men and women, who practiced intuitive divination. That is, they were not practitioners in the standard techniques of divination but were dependent upon inspiration for their oracles, much in the same way as the Hebrew prophets.[5] Found in administrative records, their oracles were short and limited to materials relating to the reign of King Zimrilim. As a consequence of the nature of those texts and their direct relation to the royal court, we do not get as full a picture of the Mari prophets as we do of the Hebrew prophets. Further, the documents of Mari were most likely preserved within the royal court, whereas those of the Hebrew literary prophets were for the most part preserved apart from the court, thus exercising a kind of independence from the kings.

The evidence is still insufficient to draw any confident conclusion regarding the origins of Hebrew prophecy. The one thing that can be said confidently is that prophecy, like temple and sacrifice, was a general phenomenon in the ancient world of the Bible. The attempt to trace its origins to any one culture outside of Israel is no more possible than it would be to trace Mari or Canaanite prophecy to its derivation. So far as the OT generally and the prophets particularly were concerned,

3. Alfred Guillaume, *Prophecy and Divination* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1938), 111–12.

4. See John H. Hayes, "Prophetism at Mari and Old Testament Parallels," ATR 49 (1967): 397–409; William L. Moran, "New Evidence from Mari on the History of Prophecy," Bib 50 (1969): 15–56; John F. Craghan, "Mari and Its Prophets: The Contributions of Mari to the Understanding of Biblical Prophecy," BTB 5 (1975): 32–55; Abraham Malamat, "Prophecy in the Mari Documents," El 4 (1956): 74–84; Abraham Malamat, "Prophetic Revelations in New Documents from Mari and the Bible," Suppl. VT 15 (1966): 207–27.

5. Malamat, "Prophetic Revelations," 208.

prophecy had its origins in the call of Yahweh. Through the prophets He revealed His will for Israel and spoke His Word of judgment and salvation. To be sure, it was not a unique phenomenon. Yet although the study of parallels may produce useful results, the question of origins remains unanswered. The best and most illuminating sources for understanding Hebrew prophecy are found in the OT itself.

Nonliterary Prophecy

Running parallel to literary prophecy in its earlier phase was the preliterary or nonliterary prophetic movement, so called because it did not leave a literary legacy, except as it impinged upon the history and fortunes of the monarchy (as found in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles). Judging from OT literature, the prophets did not become a significant factor in religious history until the rise of the monarchy. Samuel was both a transitional and foundational figure in that process. The records of nonliterary prophecy are not entirely lost to us, for they are interwoven into the histories of Israel as they are told in the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

In fact, the author of Kings viewed the prophetic movement as the only hope of reformation in the Northern Kingdom, particularly in view of the religious apostasy and moral corruption of the northern monarchy for which Jeroboam I established the determining and insurmountable precedent. The religious reforms that were instigated in the north were the direct result of such courageous prophets as Elijah and Elisha. But in the view of the writer of Kings, virtually no reforming elements originated with the northern kings themselves. In stark contrast, the religious and social reforms in the Southern Kingdom, ruled by the Davidic dynasty whose beginnings and continued existence were tied directly to prophetic authority, originated with the kings. That is especially evident in the religious revivals initiated by Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah. The only literary prophets mentioned by the author of the book of Kings are Jonah and Isaiah. Thus not even honorable mention of the majority of the literary prophets is part of the plan of that writer. That silence is an enigma. Its explanation, however, is probably to be found in the purpose of the book, especially its deep respect for the legitimacy of the Davidic dynasty, which came into being through the instrumentality of the prophets, particularly Samuel and Nathan. The author's main interest lay in the Judean monarchy and its internal power to survive and revive. Perhaps the author wrote his his-

tory as a record of hope that David's house would rise again. The release of Jehoiachin from prison, with which the book ends, implies that hope.

The main sources of our knowledge about the nonliterary prophets, the books of Samuel and Kings, disclose the public life of those individuals. But like their literary successors (sometimes called the classical prophets), they had their private lives too. They maintained private domiciles, where they were on occasion consulted (1 Kings 14:4; also 13:18). However, their understudies, the "sons of the prophets," maintained some kind of communal existence. We see them involved in a unified effort to move their residence to the Jordan River during the time of Elisha (2 Kings 6:1–7). Yet, in light of 2 Kings 4:1 it seems safe to assume that they led a life with the ingredients of that of a private citizen. Here the wife of one of the sons of the prophets appeals to Elisha on behalf of her two children, whom her dead husband's creditor threatens to enslave.

Some evidence points to the receipt of fees for prophetic services. That was certainly true of the court prophets, and in some cases it may have been true of others. In 1 Samuel 9:8 Saul's servant had money to pay for the services of Samuel to locate the asses of Kish. So also Jeroboam sent a gift by his wife when she went to inquire of Ahijah (1 Kings 14:3). Such a practice was even known by Ben-hadad of Syria, for he sent Elisha a gift by Hazael when he wanted to know whether he would recover from his sickness (2 Kings 8:8). Yet we should also note that these prophets could not be manipulated by remuneration. Elisha refused to accept the gift that Namaan brought him when he requested healing of his leprosy (2 Kings 5:16),[6] and his servant Gehazi was struck with leprosy when he accepted the gift (vv. 24–27).

The psychological orientation of the nonliterary prophets reveals that they sometimes had ecstatic experiences, especially in association with the bands of prophets (1 Sam. 10:5–13). They were given to dreams, visions, ecstasy, and divining. The word of Yahweh to Micaiah ben Imlah took the form of a vision (1 Kings 22:13–23), and Yahweh's word to Nathan regarding the construction of the Temple was described as "in accordance with all these words and all this vision" (2 Sam. 7:17). The visions often occurred at night.[7]

6. Norman H. Snaith, *The First and Second Books of Kings, The Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 3:210, evaluates the gift at about eighty thousand dollars.

7. To Samuel (1 Sam. 15:16); to Solomon, although he was not a prophet (2 Chron. 1:7; 7:12); to Nathan (2 Sam. 7:4; 1 Chron. 17:3).

Generally these prophets were not concerned with moral issues as such, except as they had a direct bearing upon the destiny and welfare of Israel. So although they spoke to individuals rather than the nation, their fundamental concern was national destiny. In that sense the literary or classical prophets were truly their spiritual successors. The nonliterary prophets were a kind of conscience to the king, admonishing him to faithfulness to Yahweh. There was no set pattern of consultation. Kings called on prophets, and prophets called on kings.

THE PROPHETS AND THEIR CULTURE

We cannot ignore the basic fact that the prophets found their legitimacy and valid credentials first of all in Yahweh's call. The prophetic call is the frontispiece of several of the prophetic books (Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel), and Amos and Isaiah record their calls later in the collection of their oracles (Amos 7; Isa. 6). The book of Jonah is a treatise on the call and execution of the prophetic office. Even where the prophetic call is never formally recorded, it is nevertheless imbedded in the books in the form of the reception formulas, which fix the prophet's word as the Word of the Lord ("Thus says the Lord" and others). The importance of Yahweh's call of the prophet cannot be exaggerated. Even when a record of the formal call has not survived among a given prophet's oracles, we must nevertheless assume that his audience was somehow assured of his credentials.

It has been said that history makes the man, and that was true with the prophets. Of course, the man also makes history, and that was true of the prophets as well. Which perspective was more important is impossible to determine. They are complementary perspectives. I will discuss four of the forces working within the culture that shaped the prophets and were shaped by them: historical events, the monarchy, idolatry, and social oppression.[8]

Of History and Prophets

History was intimate with the prophets, an intimacy that partially stemmed from their deep relationship to the Lord of history. Yahweh had entered into the historical process to protect His vital interests in

8. See K. A. Kitchen's excellent discussion of prophecy in *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 373–420.

the world He created. Israel was at once the end and means of His actions, and the prophets were the witnesses of His vital concerns. Unlike the nature religion of Canaan, Yahweh's revelation came through historical events. The prophets were patrons of that conviction, and their insistent preaching, even if it did not turn the nation to repentance, fortified the faith against the naturalism of the Baal cult. In the long run they preserved this vital element, which has been passed on to Judaism and Christianity.

Vying for the helm of Israel's spiritual craft, the prophets frequently positioned themselves against the power structures of priesthood and monarchy. They attempted to steer Israel through the narrow straits of political uncertainty and moral inexactitude. One only wonders what horrible thing might have happened to Israel that did not in fact happen—perish the thought!—if the prophets had not guided the nation through much historical change.

Assyria, buzzing like a swarm of bees, alighted upon Israel in the eighth century and left the Northern Kingdom stunned beyond recovery and the Southern Kingdom put on notice that her future hinged only on the contingency of spiritual change. That was the message of history as read by the eighth-century prophets. The two groups that stood to benefit most from the disaster of 722 B.C., the Jerusalem priests and Judean kings, still were not the major initiators of change that evoked God's mercy. Hezekiah's reform that followed this catastrophe, it might be admitted, temporarily staved off a like disaster for Judah. But his despicable son, Manasseh, reversed his father's policies and put the nation in jeopardy again. Yet the prophets were stabilizers of national destiny, or so they sought to be. They were present and speaking when kings clammed up and shut their eyes to the signs of the times.

Perhaps we should not overrate the prophets' objectivity, because they had their special interests. But life viewed through Yahweh's covenantal demands was, from a theological point of view, as objective as one could be. So the prophets spoke not theirs but Yahweh's Word. They were in line for no political advantage and sought no permanent institutional power. Through divine revelation they foresaw the crisis of 722 B.C. and sought to steer the survivors through it. Amos announced the awful day and its unavoidable consequences, "as when a man flees from a lion,/And a bear meets him" (Amos 5:19). Hosea, caught between divine judgment and incomparable love, declared the

severance of Israel's covenantal status but reaffirmed the hope of a future with Yahweh.

The Babylonians, the greedy successors of international dominance, played their role against Judah as meticulously as Assyria had done against Israel. Zephaniah, standing in the position that Amos had occupied in the Assyrian era, announced the Day of the Lord for Judah, and proponents of that message were found also in Jeremiah, Habakkuk, and Ezekiel. With their unstoppable army the Babylonians marched against Judah. Pawns of Yahweh's wrath and instruments of His irresistible power, in 586 those pagans reiterated the disaster of 722 on a more southerly latitude and again proved that the prophets were justified in their spiritual discernment.

Yet the hope that had from the beginning of literary prophecy been irrepressible began to take a more distinct form in the message of Ezekiel and later in the visions of Daniel and Zechariah and the oracles of Haggai, Joel, and Malachi. Now that the Day of the Lord had come for Judah as well as for Israel, when would its counterpart arrive for the nations and the unadulterated blessings of the new order be showered upon the Lord's remnant? The question was renewed and the answer formulated afresh in the postexilic era when Cyrus, the Lord's shepherd, aroused new hopes that the anticipated era of restoration had dawned. Indeed it had, but not to the extent that Isaiah had described it. In fact, the horrible thought of the Day of the Lord was reintroduced by Joel to remind the reforming nation that moral demands were still part of God's program for Israel and that judgment always loomed when moral obedience and cultic purity were not observed. The Persian era was one of hope.

The prophets were pawns of no power structures and represented no vested interests—except the irresistible power of God and the vital interests that He had vested in Israel through the Sinai covenant. "The Lord took me from following the flock" (Amos 7:15), and "The Lord God has spoken! / Who can but prophesy?" (Amos 3:8b)—these were the trademarks of that irresistible force that moved the prophets. "Then in my heart it becomes like a burning fire / Shut up in my bones; And I am weary of holding it in, / And I cannot endure it" (Jer. 20:9) was Jeremiah's expression of the same inner compulsion. His reluctance that preceded his response was the reversal of Isaiah's response that preceded his reluctance: "Here am I. Send me!" and "Lord, how long?" (Isa. 6:8, 11).

No figure was out of the prophets' speaking range. Amos's words

reached to the defiant ears of King Jeroboam, Isaiah's challenge to the impious Ahaz, and Jeremiah's words of doom to the impervious Jehoiakim. Even the kings of foreign nations, at least theoretically, came within earshot of the prophets' oracles.

The symbolic actions of the prophets were a sign of their involvement in the historical process. Isaiah's naked promenade, Hosea's marriage to a harlot, Jeremiah's wearing of an ox's yoke, and Ezekiel's extended repose all fall in that category. The prophets could no more extricate themselves from history than the Lord Himself could. They blended into the brocade. Just how effective they were in turning the course of history is a matter of debate. Certainly they did not achieve the goal of bringing Israel to repentance and thus averting the national disasters of 722 and 586. But in the long range of history they were proved right and their opponents wrong. History became their vindicator.

The prophets' interest in the future grew out of deep theological conviction. They believed the ideal for society was laid down in covenantal legislation of the past. Justice and righteousness, which the law prescribed as the pillars of a theocratic society, were to be the order of every age. The present found its anchorage and preshadowing in the past. As has been observed, psychologically and terminologically the OT has its face to the past and its back to the future. Society should perpetually reflect the ideals set forth in the law, a law that was itself imparted by the prophet Moses: "But by a prophet the Lord brought Israel from Egypt, and by a prophet he was kept" (Hos. 12:13). In Hosea's view, law and prophecy were forever united in Moses. Rejection of the law was tantamount to rejection of prophecy, and so exactly did he see the prophets as representatives of the covenantal position that the opposite could also be said—rejection of prophecy signaled rejection of the law. Yet it was the quality of that legislation, not its quantity, that Israel had rejected; "Though I wrote for him ten thousand precepts of My law, they are regarded as a strange thing" (Hos. 8:12).

The detached relationship to the law, exhibited in a continuous chain of legal violation and moral transgression, was Jeremiah's concern when he analyzed his society and predicted the day when the law would be written on tablets of flesh rather than tablets of stone (Jer. 31:31–34). Therefore, when society deviated from the covenantal norm, the prophets called Israel back to it and anticipated a reformed order in the future.

Their corrective program called for the establishment of justice up

and down the social ladder, especially to widows and orphans and the socially oppressed. Through a reformation of the legal system, corrupted by greed and bribery, a new order of justice could come. That was not bare social reform divested of religious underpinnings. The prophets had no such concept. The new age would begin with the reforming forces of moral change in the present and climax with the dramatic new day of peace, justice, righteousness, and holiness, with Israelite political and religious domination of the world. Repentance, which the prophets demanded in unalloyed genuineness, could effect a drastic turn in Israel's fortunes and redirect the forces of history for the shaping of the new order. That order would be geographically located in this world with Jerusalem as the religious center. To her the nations would turn in order to acquire a knowledge of the Lord.

Not historians in the technical sense, the prophets displayed an interest in future events that was tied to the concerns of the present. It is erroneous to assume, as was done by an earlier generation of scholars, that the predictive element was extraneous to prophetic preaching. On the contrary, the future was a vital part of prophetic theology. Yet repentance did not occur in broad enough proportions to alter Yahweh's plans for judgment. Therefore, judgment was unavoidable. It was both punitive and rehabilitative. In the absence of general repentance, the prophets expected divine intervention on a scale like that of the Exodus to put the society back in order. The new day would come no less as a result of God's self-initiated action than the deliverance from Egypt. Thus, although built upon the present order, the future would be drastically different from it.

Furthermore, the prophetic future was both immediate and remote. The depth of their view is not readily discernible because the prophets merged the present and future so unpretentiously in their descriptions of time. The line of division is faint, and the time elements of the prophetic books—that is, whether a statement applies to the past, present, or future—is a critical hermeneutical issue. It is my opinion that there was a remote future involved in prophetic eschatology. Thus statements with future implications did not always involve events just around the next bend in the road. When that future had come to pass, it would definitely have similarities to the present order.

The trophy of prophetic preaching was not the decline and fall of the Israelite and Judean states. That was a message they reluctantly proclaimed; they hoped against hope that it would not happen. Rather, their

triumph was the survival of the people of God in the Exile and the restoration of the Judean state in the postexilic period. Whereas the Assyrian and Babylonian disasters proved their message of woe to be well founded, the turn of events in the Persian era proved their message of weal also to be motivated in the divine will. Most of the preexilic prophets had a major interest in the era of restoration.

Of Kings and Prophets

Within Israelite society the strongest power structure with which the prophets had to deal was the monarchy, first of the United Kingdom (Saul, David, and Solomon) and then of the separate monarchies of Israel and Judah.

The kingship came into being through the intermediate agency of the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 8); Saul, the nation's first king, participated in the ecstatic practices of the prophets of his day (1 Sam. 10:1–13). The importance of Samuel as a transition figure is strongly emphasized in the first book of Samuel, and his precedent-setting role of making the kingly office responsive to the prophet should be noted well. The model can be seen in the reign of David with Nathan's transmission of Yahweh's master plan for building the Temple (2 Sam. 7) and his aggressive role in putting Solomon on the throne (1 Kings 1:22–48).

Amid the uncertainties that marked the end of Solomon's reign, Ahijah of Shiloh fanned the fire of secession and offered Jeroboam a five-sixths share of tribal loyalty (1 Kings 11:29–40). When civil war threatened to deepen the schism after Solomon's death, Shemaiah, the man of God, sued for peace and averted Rehoboam's plans for war against the north (12:21–24).

Jeroboam's religious apostasy, centralized in Dan and Bethel, brought the anonymous man of God from Judah to announce that a Judean king would bring an end to the apostate priesthood (1 Kings 13:1–10).

The interaction of prophets and kings in the preliterary stage came to a climax in the relations between Elijah and Elisha and the Israelite kings. Especially did Elijah's zealous ministry for Yahwism concentrate upon restoring national loyalty to the ancient God of Israel. With unprecedented success against Baalism, aided by the reform movement of the Rechabite Jehonadab (2 Kings 10:15–17), Elijah dealt a devastating blow to the alliance between the northern monarchy and Baalism. Sadly, however, it did not endure.

It has been proposed that the prophets after the division of the kingdom, at least down to the eighth century, were proponents of national reunion.[9] That element was likely an integral part of their platform, but their interests were broader than that. They were basically religious, calling for the purge of pagan elements from the national religion. They were politically inclined but religiously motivated. The two were paired.

The role of the preliterary prophets in national emergencies is indisputable, but we should reiterate that their motive was basically religious. Samuel, architect of a new age and government, recalled Yahweh's miraculous deliverance from Egypt and His ensuing care. He asserted the principle that faithfulness to Yahweh's commandment was the path to national prosperity (1 Sam. 12:6–17). As already noted, Elijah's theological diplomacy called for the same platform (1 Kings 18:18). It should be no surprise, therefore, that the first of the classical prophets, Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah, were intensely interested in the monarchy. Amaziah of the Bethel priesthood sized up Amos's message as conspiracy against Jeroboam II (Amos 7:10). Hosea condemned the northern monarchy as illegitimate (Hos. 8:4), and Micah envisioned the rise of a future ruler from the unpretentious town of Bethlehem (Mic. 5:2). Isaiah, among those prophets, was most directly involved with the monarchy. He personally challenged Ahaz to ask a sign of Yahweh (Isa. 7:3–17) and was chief prophetic counsel to Hezekiah (36–39).

Yet it should be noted, as will be developed further in the discussion on Jonah, that with the literary prophets the addressees of the divine oracles were less frequently kings and more often the population at large. It is very likely that the prophets carried their message directly to the people in the hope that they would repent and instigate national reform. That strategy was logical in view of the failure of the monarchy to instigate lasting reform. As noted above, the author of Kings saw the Judean monarchy as a source of religious reform, but at the same time the monarchy, particularly as represented by Manasseh, was the cause of the fall of the state. In its hands was the power to turn the nation toward good or evil.

9. Edward Robertson, "The Role of the Early Hebrew Prophet," BJRL 49 (1959–60): 412–31.

Of Gods and Prophets

The books of Kings and the majority opinion of the literary prophets are in agreement that the fall of the Judean state was a result of idolatry in its various forms. After Hezekiah's courageous reforms that turned Judah in a divergent direction from the recently fallen Israelite state, his son Manasseh's reversal of the reforms inalterably determined the fate of the nation (2 Kings 21:10–16; 23:26–27; 24:3–4).

Especially was the prophetic opposition strong against the form of idolatry known as *Baalism*, a fertility cult that the Israelites found deeply rooted in the native culture of Canaan at the time of the settlement. The alleged suzerainty of the god Baal over the land of Canaan came into conflict with prophetic belief that Yahweh was Lord of the land. The prophets were keenly aware that He had brought the Israelites out of Egypt and caused them to inherit the Promised Land. The Exodus and the conquest were lodged in prophetic memory and belonged to that same line of tradition that gloried in the rise of Nazirites and prophets as Yahweh's agents (Amos 2:9–12).

Both the prophetic view and that of Kings were grounded in the Mosaic understanding of the sovereignty of the Lord and His demand for exclusive worship (Ex. 20:3–6; Deut. 5:7–10). In fact, the fundamental problem with idolatry was its defiance of God's sovereign rule over His world. Isaiah, for example, emphasized the Creator's right to rule the world and to demand honor from His creatures (Isa. 40:12–31).

The worship of idols violated another critical principle in OT religion. It disregarded the ethical undergirdings of Yahwism. Basic human relationships, defined and guarded in the Pentateuch, were broken down in the Baal cult. The boundaries that secured family ties, especially sexual regulations, were erased by the fertility rites performed in the pagan sanctuaries. The ethical demands of justice and righteousness, with their implications for the court of law and the marketplace, lost their tenacity within Baalism. Its fundamental moral assumptions were in contradiction to those of prophetic persuasion. Idolatry summed up all that was wrong with Israel. Somewhere in its mystic anatomy was a cavity where every sin had its fullest expression and found its perfect lair.

It is generally recognized that the Exile cured Judah of her idolatry.[10] A painful cure, to be sure, the deep soul reflection that caused

10. See Yehezkel Kaufmann, *The Babylonian Captivity and Deutero-Isaiah,* trans. E. W. Efroymson (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1970), 16.

the covenant people to abandon paganism as a religious option was one of the monumental accomplishments of the prophets. In addition to predicting the catastrophe, they offered the monotheistic explanation that originated in the Sinai revelation.

The popular religion set forth in the Pentateuch was basically a priestly religion. It did not develop in the Exile, as the Wellhausen school has propagandized. (Julius Wellhausen's formalization of critical thinking on the Pentateuch, known as the documentary hypothesis, advanced the idea that four distinct documents—J, E, D, and P—went into the final composition of the Pentateuch in the postexilic era. In his view, the prophets were strongly influential in shaping OT religion that had its crowning expression in the Pentateuch.) The relationship of the prophets to it has been explained as a creative role. That we can readily affirm, for the prophets were not mere reflectors of an ancient theology. With creative insight they proclaimed the Word of God. Among their theological developments was the eschatology that described Israel's future as the renewal of historical events, such as the Exodus, wilderness, and conquest.

However, the prophets' role was not genetic in the sense that they created OT religion. Although it is legitimate to speak of prophetic religion, it should be remembered that its base rested upon Mosaic foundations. The monotheism of Mosaism moved the prophets to announce judgment and salvation oracles within the context of the faith. Whether they formally engaged the curse-blessing literary form for their oracles is an arguable point. However, the curse-blessing motif was inscribed on the prophetic mind, and the assumption that the people of God accepted that theological premise is clear, for the literary prophets did not try to prove the premise. When announcing judgment, the justification they gave was the sins of the nation. They did not need to explain that sin deserved judgment. That was popularly assumed. Even when the false security of the eighth century had grown up around the concept of election, the prophets found compelling warrant within the ancient faith to base security upon the contingency of moral obedience (Deut. 28). The point is that prophetic monotheism and its opposition to idolatry was not an innovation of the eighth and subsequent centuries. Its roots were anchored deeply in convenantal theology of the Mosaic era.

Of Social Oppression and Prophets

The Israelite settlement in Canaan and the gradual assimilation of Canaanite civilization created a social problem for the fledgling nation, that of a new class. As the tribal organization and the collective solidarity that went with it began to dissolve, the individual and his interests became more evident. The right to hold private property and the practice of amassing wealth were both recognized and practiced by the Hebrews in Canaan. Thus we have the basis for class distinction between the rich and the poor.[11]

The Israelite monarchy played no small part in deepening class distinctions. David left a kingdom that stretched from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea and from Dan to Beersheba (1 Kings 5:4–5). With Egypt and Assyria at a low political ebb, Israel was at peace. Thus the people could develop their agricultural or pastoral production. Julian Morgenstern suggests that that was the period when Israel began producing more than her people utilized for their own needs. Such commodities could be bartered for things the people did not themselves produce. The merchant interest would explain the motives of David's and Solomon's friendly relations with the Phoenicians (cf., e.g., 1 Kings 5).[12]

Yet not all of the people enjoyed the same prosperity. Cities became more important as business and cultural centers of exchange. A definite class interest began to assert itself. The rich became richer and the poor became poorer. A society that only two or three centuries earlier had been seminomadic with, ideally at least, no class distinctions among its citizens, now accommodated the wealthy and the poor. And as is generally the case, the economic differences gave rise to social distinctions that bred corruption, oppression, and injustice. Samuel warned Israel that the monarchy would introduce alarming social change (1 Sam. 8:11–18). The thought of an aristocracy was most distasteful to Samuel.

The prophets were not social reformers. They were theological reformers, for their basic motivation was generated within their commitment to the fundamental laws of God. Their reaction against the developing social order can be seen as early as Elijah and his defense of Naboth against Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 21). The king as chief

11. J. Lindblom, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), 347.

12. Julian Morgenstern, *Amos Studies* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1941), 1:186.

guarantor of justice to his people was a common understanding in the ancient Near East. Yet he had taken on the reverse role. Having no channel of authority except Yahweh's Word, the prophets stepped forth to defend the oppressed, the widow, the orphan, the poor, and the resident alien. Assuming a role that otherwise belonged to the king, they provided a third-party defense. Their concern emanated from Yahweh's own compassionate nature (Deut. 15:11; 24:14–15; Ex. 22:21–27) and the responsibility of each citizen to dispense justice (Mic. 6:8). Abraham Heschel has stated that justice was important to the prophets because it was God's stake in human life.[13] It is in man-to-man relations that the life of God is expressed, and it is between man and man that the reputation of God is at its greatest risk.

The poor did not in any sense constitute a party or a social class in the modern sense of the word; nor is there any evidence that the prophets were members of that class in whose behalf they spoke. Further, there is no indication that the poor had asked for a spokesman; but the prophets arose to their defense as a consequence of the call from a God whose nature demanded justice. They bore no hatred of their society; rather, they wanted to see the social decay reversed and devotion to Yahweh restored. That social concern, which was keenest among the preexilic prophets, was an index to covenant loyalty. At some point the prophets believed that the ills of the society could be cured in part by a reversal of social behavior, particularly by caring for and ensuring justice to the poor. Security was to be found in making others secure—"Here is rest, give rest to the weary" (Isa. 28:12a). No less fittingly Isaiah verbalized the prophets' experience of bitter rejection—"but they would not listen" (28:12b).

As a third party the prophets stepped forth unbidden by anyone, except Yahweh and their own sense of justice, and interceded for those who had no intercessor. Nowhere was the decay of the society better registered than in the neglect of the indigent poor, and nowhere was the true nature of Israel's God more faithfully conveyed than in the words of the prophets for the disadvantaged and oppressed. The most fatal consequence of poverty was to be without defense, and where the king and officials, either because of apathy or inaccessibility, stepped out of

13. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 1:198.

their expected role, the prophets stepped in. They saw justice as the golden thread that bound Yahweh's society together in wholeness.

The Culture and Its Prophets

Culture has a way of producing its own religious forms and expressions. The literary prophets and their predecessors were affected by their culture, but their credentials were issued by Yahweh Himself. Yet already in the preliterary period the culture, especially the Canaanite cultic strand of it, had produced a strain of prophets that greatly influenced royal policy. We see them operating in force in the court of Ahab in the middle of the ninth century (1 Kings 22), and it was against their kind that Elijah contended on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18). To what degree the counter-profession of prophets in the literary period owed its origin to the Baal prophets is impossible to determine. However, by the time of the eighth century there had come into being a profession of prophets, usually called "false prophets," who operated in parallel order to the literary prophets. Whether they ever produced a literature is not known, but if they did, it would not likely have survived, for eventually the events of history proved their message to be false. Thus we only know them through the eyes of their principal critics, the literary prophets.

Judging from the attention that Micah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel gave them, the false prophets made up quite an influential movement. Perhaps more than any other profession of their day, they represented the popular religion. In fact, their origin may be attributed partly to the popular beliefs of the people. They filled a popular need to hear a word of direction from God. Thus the people, including the leaders, consulted them and paid them for their services. One of the claims made against them was that they were mercenary (Mic. 3:5, 11; Jer. 6:13; 8:10).

Speaking in the name of Yahweh was the critical feature of prophetic speech. Yet many spoke in that name, and many spoke presumptuously. The issue was really what security the public had against these devious spokesmen. Deuteronomy adds another test to that one—that if the prophet's word came to pass, he was a true prophet (Deut. 18:22). The unfolding reality of the prophetic word was a test that had to be performed in the laboratory of human experience, sometimes requiring long periods of time. Therefore, that was little security against the deceitful words of the false prophets. Thomas Overholt, recognizing that there were no absolute criteria which the public could draw upon to test the

prophetic word, points to Jeremiah's conflict with false prophets in chapters 27–29 and submits that valid judgments could be made about their genuineness. Hananiah in particular ignored the historical situation when he predicted that the Exile would last only two years (Jer. 28).[14]

H. B. Huffmon takes note of the problem and concludes that "only internal and subjective confessional criteria can distinguish true and false prophecy."[15] During Jeremiah's ministry, for example, the false prophets cried, "Peace," while the true ones declared there was no peace (Jer. 8:11; 23:17/6:14; Ezek. 13:2–10). The false said sword and famine would not be in the land, while the true said the false prophets themselves would be their victims along with the people they had misled (Jer. 14:15). The false said Judah would not serve the king of Babylon, and the true countered their message with a prediction of exile (Jer. 27:9–14; 28:11/27:4, 6–7). The false prophets predicted that the vessels of the Lord's house would be shortly brought from Babylon, and the true said the rest of the vessels still in the Temple would be carried to Babylon (Jer. 27:16/27:19–22). Operating by point/counterpoint, gradually a certain platform became clear for the false prophets as well as the true. The public, depending upon its given disposition, could appeal to that body of formulations. Thus the subjective and internal nature of the matter produced a set of external criteria for judgment.

Yet, although we recognize that certain cases were dependent upon very subjective standards, there seems to have been a more objective criterion, which the literary prophets applied in other cases: the life of the prophet, whether he lived in accord with the demands of Yahweh. The widespread use of formal divination by the false prophets may both explain their popular appeal and constitute one of the marks by which they were identified as false. The Deuteronomic law forbade the use of divination (Deut. 18:10, 14), and that practice played no part in the ministry of the literary prophets. The means by which the false prophets divined God's will is not explained. The use of lots, which was a priestly method of determining the divine will, could have been one of them, but that is by no means certain. Yet the technical term for divination (*qsm*) occurs frequently in reference to the false prophets. From what

14. Thomas W. Overholt, "Jeremiah 27–29: the Question of False Prophecy," JAAR 35 (1967): 241–49.

15. Herbert B. Huffmon, "The Origins of Prophecy," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God,* ed. Frank Moore Cross et al. (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 184.

we know of those methods, they would have provided the client with almost immediate results, not leaving him to wait it out. Evidently their technicians derived a comfortable living from public use of their services. Frequent use of dreams and visions is also mentioned. The picture we are given is that of men and women who received their word largely by those three methods—divination, dreams, and visions. Although the literary prophets did receive visions and had dreams, they were much more dependent upon the direct communication of Yahweh's Word. Jeremiah said the false prophets' dreams were like straw compared to the true prophets' oracles, which were like wheat (Jer. 23:28).

So the culture produced its own prophets. Their ears were cocked to what the people wanted to hear; and whatever the current trend happened to be, they offered the popular wares. Judging from the literature, the law of supply and demand worked well for them.

PRESERVATION AND VINDICATION: THE SHAPING OF THE PROPHETIC LITERATURE

With the rise of modern biblical criticism the prophetic books have come under a scrutiny that has both illumined and eclipsed our understanding of their message. The vast body of literature on the prophets has shown them to be first of all religious spokesmen in their own world and to their own times. That view is certainly correct, but not to the exclusion of their theological relevance for the future of Israel and the world. Unfortunately modern critical methodology has not consistently set the stage for greater confidence in the integrity of the biblical prophets and the authenticity of their oracles and writings. The ongoing and asymmetric editing of the prophetic materials in the biblical period, as suggested by some modern approaches to this literature, is at best hypothetical. Much remains to be discovered about the literary process, and that inquiry must take place not only in a literary context but in a theological one as well. At the risk of oversimplification, we must ask whether the prophetic commitment to ethical behavior and moral principles does not itself cast light on the extent to which succeeding prophets could and would alter the oracles and message of a prior prophet.

A Description of the Literature

The books of the prophets are for the most part collections of various kinds of utterances made on different occasions and called forth by

varying circumstances. As a rule, the ancient compilers of these books did not have the same reverence for chronology that a modern collector might have. They were far more interested in getting a message across. Thus a book like Jeremiah cannot be read consecutively with any chronological appreciation unless the reader takes that fact into account. The prophets of the Assyrian period had very little interest in chronology. Basically the superscription to the book provided the major time clues, and many scholars are of the opinion that they were editorial. If that is true, the editor was quite well aware of the period of the prophet's ministry; "editorial" is not a euphemism for inaccurate. With the Babylonian period, however, we see a heightening interest in chronology. It first becomes evident in the prophecies of Jeremiah and then becomes a more general method of recording prophecies in Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, and Zechariah. Yet that developing interest in dating oracles still did not become the principal criterion for their arrangement in the final collected editions.

The contents of the prophetic books fall into five literary classifications: oracles, visions, poetry, biographical narrative, and autobiographical narrative. Those categories are condensed by Claus Westermann to three (accounts, prophetic speeches, and prayers) and by Geo Widengren to four (oracles, poetry, autobiographical prose, and biographical prose),[16] and one will encounter other variations in the literature on the prophets.

Prophetic oracles. These are commonly introduced by "Thus says the Lord," "The Word of the Lord was to (the prophet)," or a similar messenger formula verifying the message as Yahweh's Word to the prophet. These oracles, which make up the major part of the prophetic books, generally contain a word of judgment against Israel or Judah or a comforting message of salvation. In addition to oracles addressed to the nation, there are a few oracles directed to individuals. Westermann has observed that in the books of Kings the judgment oracles are without exception pronounced against individuals rather than the nation as a whole. It is in the literary or classical prophets that we first encounter judgment oracles against the nation.[17] In view of the fact that the judgment

16. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech,* trans. Hugh Clayton White (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), 90, 136.

17. Geo Widengren, *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets* (Uppsala: A.–B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1948), 86.

speeches arise out of social situations that represented violations of the old law, it is not surprising that eventually the prophets came to pronounce judgment against the nation rather than individuals. It is Yahweh's legal proceedings against an erring people, and perhaps the judgment speeches are best understood against the backdrop of legal proceedings in the court of law.[18]

The fact that oracles of judgment are often punctuated by words of salvation for Israel should not be surprising. Israel's understanding of her relationship to Yahweh had from earliest times included an eminent word of grace. Prophetic theology was based upon the ancient revelation of God in the lives of the patriarchs and His special revelation at Sinai, and the element of divine grace was part of those revelations. As prophetic theology took form and eschatology acquired its detail, the word of salvation was an integral part of it. Hosea testified to that as early as the middle of the eighth century. Having doomed Israel by canceling the Mosaic covenant with her (Hos. 1:9), he followed it with words of restoration under the patriarchal covenant, which he may have considered to be the primary and unconditional covenant. Moreover, the Mari documents, which contain oracles both of judgment and salvation, have confirmed the existence of salvation and judgment prophets alongside each other. In Israel a single prophet normally incorporated both theological aspects into his preaching. Thus the older inclination of scholarship to exclude words of comfort and salvation from some of the prophetic books (Amos, for example) failed to take into account the broader base of prophetic theology.

In addition to oracles against Israel and Judah, there are numerous oracles against foreign nations, often gathered together in special collections in the prophetic books (Isa. 13–23; Jer. 46–51; Ezek. 25–32; Amos 1:3–2:3; Zeph. 2:5–15). Some of those oracles were occasioned by historical circumstances. The nation addressed had turned against Israel and created a situation that caused the prophet to address the nation with words of judgment. Other national oracles, however, arose from the general eschatology espoused and preached by the prophets. No particular historical occasion prompted the oracle, but the general relationship of Israel to the Gentile world, and especially the Gentile world to the God of Israel and His law, occasioned the oracle. It was

18. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech,* 127.

not because the prophet hated the foreign nation that he spoke, but because Yahweh would not tolerate evil. Zephaniah may provide the best illustration of that kind of national oracle.

One problem with the national oracles as with other oracles that involve prediction is that many scholars believe there is no genuine prediction, only "prediction" after the event (*vaticinium ex eventu*). That is the problem with some of the oracles in Zephaniah, for example, 2:4–15. To solve that problem Hyatt rules the superscription of Zephaniah invalid and opts for a date during the time of Jehoiakim.[19] Yet a better solution is to be found in the rather well-developed eschatology of the prophets that was current in Zephaniah's time. As indicated above, it was out of their eschatological and theological understanding that the prophets issued their oracles against the nations. Thus they were not occasioned by specific historical events.

Were the oracles ever delivered to the Gentile nations with which they were concerned? Generally scholars answer that question negatively.[20] It has been suggested that the oracles functioned more as comfort to Israel than judgment against the foreign nation.[21] That function cannot be denied, but still the explanation is far too simple. In the case of Amos, for example, the foreign oracles led to a denunciation of Israel too. So comfort was hardly one of their purposes.[22] Two passages in Jeremiah may suggest that sometimes (even though it may have been the exception) the oracles were transmitted to the rulers of the foreign nations. When foreign envoys had gathered in Jerusalem for consultations with Zedekiah, Yahweh instructed Jeremiah to make straps and yoke-bars and send them to the kings of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon with a warning about plotting against the king of Babylon (Jer. 27). In a second but quite different incident Jeremiah sent one of his prophecies to be read by the Euphrates River and then cast into it (51:59–64). In that case the king of Babylon could hardly be expected

19. J. P. Hyatt, "The Date and Background of Zephaniah," JNES 7 (1948): 25–29.

20. E.g., John W. Wevers, *Ezekiel,* The Century Bible (London: Thomas Nelson, 1969), 25–26; Moshe Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1–20,* The Anchor Bible (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 17.

21. E.g., Artur Weiser, *The Old Testament: Its Formation and Development,* trans. Dorothea M. Barton (New York: Association, 1961), 249.

22. John D. W. Watts, *Obadiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 22.

to hear the oracle. It was enough to pronounce it against him. However, delivery of the oracle on Babylonian soil seems to carry some significance.

Very few words of salvation are found in the oracles against the nations, although words of salvation assurance for Israel are frequently interspersed in them. We will discuss the reason for the absence of salvation promises elsewhere (see chap. 12).

Visions. Visions constituted another experience and literary form, although a minor one. Among the nonliterary prophets, Micaiah's vision during Ahab's reign gives evidence that the form was an old one (1 Kings 22:17–23). Its earliest occurrence in the literary prophets was brief and contained a terse message for the prophet or his audience. Sometimes the prophet was merely a spectator (as with Amos), whereas in other cases he was a participant in the action of the vision (as with Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah). As a rule the accounts are related in autobiographical form. In the later period the presence of an interpreter was also a feature. Amos records five visions (7:1–3, 4–6, 7–9; 8:1–3; 9:1–4), even though they are not specifically called "visions" (the verbal form does occur in 1:1). Isaiah and Jeremiah both received their call in visions (Isa. 6; Jer. 1), and the popularity of the visionary form in the Babylonian and Persian periods is attested in Ezekiel (1; 8–11:4; 37; 40–48), Daniel (7–12), and Zechariah (1:7–6:15). Judging from the polemic against the false prophets, the visionary experience was also very common among those prophets who did not receive canonical sanction.

Poetry. As has been recognized since Robert Lowth's famous work on Hebrew poetry, much of the prophetic materials are written in poetic style. However, what I mean by this category is those compositions that are poetic and do not fall into the category of oracles, such as doxologies (e.g., Amos 4:13; 5:8–9; 9:5–6), short sayings (e.g., Ezek. 18:2), and prayers (e.g., Amos 7:2b, 5; Isa. 6:11a; and Jeremiah's prayers).

Autobiographical narrative. This literary form shows how important the individual prophets believed their words and experiences to be. The very fact that they recorded them points up their personal assessment of the gravity of their call and ministry. By the personal nature of the form, it follows that it is written in the first person. The call narratives generally fall into this category (e.g., Hos. 3; Isa. 6; Jer. 1).

Biographical narrative. This is the record about the prophet composed in prose style. Isaiah 37–39 and the biographical narratives of

Jeremiah (26–29 and 32–45) are among the fine illustrations of this literary component. If autobiographical prose was a clue to the prophet's own assessment of the value of his work, this form may be evidence of the value of the prophet's work in the eyes of those who were closely associated with him.

All of these five components have a place in the larger collections of the prophetic works. Therefore, when we talk about prophetic literature, we must think in terms of all these literary forms rather than oracles only. Whereas the oracles are the center of attention on the canvas, the other forms fill out the literary picture of the activity and words of the prophets.

The Formation of the Literature

When we have spoken of the literary forms, we have still only detailed the literature as it has reached us. The actual process by which the forms have taken shape and assumed written status is a much more complicated and elusive matter. It involves recording, collecting, preserving, and diffusing the literature. Daniel I. Block gives seven stages in this process:

1. The prophetic event—the prophet's reception of the message from God.
2. The rhetorical event—the prophet's transmission of the message to his audience.
3. The transcriptional event—the writing of the oracle.
4. The narratorial event—the circumstances of the prophetic event are added to the oracle, thus producing a complete unity (for example, the addition of the prophetic formula, "The word of the Lord came to me saying," and other forms of the formula).
5. The compilation event—the gathering of the literary units.
6. The editorial event—the oracles are organized and given some kind of structure, producing a "book."
7. The nominal event—a formal name is given to the book, often identifying the prophet and the circumstances in which he prophesied, sometimes giving a name to the genre of the collection.[23]

23. Daniel I. Block, *The Book of Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 18.

While these stages of the process seem logical, they should not necessarily be seen as so distinct that they could each be described as a separate process. For example, steps 6 and 7—the editing and naming of the book—could easily occur together, as could also the compilation and editorial events. The process, from speaking to the completion of the book, should probably be viewed in a much narrower time frame than is allowed by many scholars. K. A. Kitchen records the procedures of the Mari prophets (19th/18th centuries B.C.) and the Neo-Assyrian prophets (the 7th century B.C.), and takes note of the process of making mini-collections of the oracles of certain prophets and prophetesses. The normal practice was to write down the prophecies or to commemorate the victories in writing very soon after the event, leaving little place for the process of oral transmission as assumed and propagated by modern scholars.[24] Thus the centuries-wide expanse for the formation of the prophetic books as described in the secondary literature may very well be an exaggeration.

In this regard, the motivational factor behind the formation of the literature is important. The most significant motivational factor was the nature of the Word of the Lord. The prophets understood how serious was the will of God, and they knew that man could not survive without it, much less flourish. When Yahweh had spoken, who could keep from prophesying (Amos 3:8; Jer. 20:9)? God's Word would outlast nature (Isa. 40:8), and whatever the Lord sent it out to do, it would accomplish without fail (45:23; 55:11). Given that understanding of the eternal significance of the divine Word, we should expect the prophets to commit their words to writing.

A second motivational factor was the need that the prophet be vindicated. This can be seen in two dimensions. First of all, from the earliest period of the prophetic movement there was a general concern for the legitimacy of the prophet. As we have already noted, a popular and lucrative profession of prophets offered its verbal products to the highest bidder. Moreover, such prophets operated alongside the true prophets, making public differentiation most difficult. The fear of having one's words disqualified ran high among the prophets. So the value of committing their words to written form so that they might pass the test of time and experience was of much importance to them. It is

24. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament,* 390–92.