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A Reading Resource Guide on Eighth-Century Prophecy for Ministers and Teachers

JOHN T. WILLIS

The literature on eighth-century B.C. prophecy is vast. This overview treats works in English on Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah. We will consider six areas of study pertaining to these prophetic books.

THE WORLD (HISTORICAL, POLITICAL, SOCIAL, AND RELIGIOUS SETTING) OF THE PROPHETS AMOS, HOSEA, ISAIAH AND MICAH

The prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah did their work ca. 760-700 B.C. In order to understand the world in which they lived and the audiences they addressed, one must gain some understanding of the Neo-Assyrian empire, which began with Tiglath-Pileser III in 745 B.C. and ended with the fall of Assyria to Babylon in 605 B.C.

Good commentaries (see below) provide relevant information about this period. In addition, the chapter on the Assyrians in *Peoples of Old Testament Times*,¹ the article on the history of Mesopotamia in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)*,² and *A History of Prophecy in Israel* by Joseph Blenkinsopp,³ each with extended bibliography are very helpful. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*⁴ provides English translations of important Assyrian sources relating to Old Testament studies.

THE NATURE OF OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECY

Several popular ideas about the nature of Old Testament prophecy are not based on biblical teaching. These ideas include: (1) that the basic work of a true prophet was to predict the coming of Jesus Christ and/or the church, (2) that the prophets proclaimed new religious ideas Israel and her neighbors had never heard or considered before, or (3) that all the predictions made by true prophets have been or will be fulfilled.

Numerous works on the nature of Old Testament prophecy help us form a more correct biblical view. These include the article, "Prophecy," in the *ABD*;⁵ *The Roles of Israel's Prophets* by David L. Peterson;⁶ *Prophecy and Society in Ancient Israel* by R. R. Wilson;⁷ "Introduction to Prophetic Literature" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*;⁸ and "nabi, Prophet" in the *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*.⁹

APPROACHES TO THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

The interpretation of any biblical book is related, at least in part, to the reader's or scholar's approach to that book. The books of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah are no exception. Scholars have applied the following approaches to these books.

- **Textual criticism** attempts to determine the "original text" of the book by using valid, well established criteria.
- **Historical criticism** seeks to reconstruct the historical setting of the book and its parts.
- **Literary historical criticism or source criticism** tries to recover the sources lying behind the present form of the book on which the final redactors depended and from which they drew at least

some of the material now in the book.

- **Form criticism** is concerned with the genre of the book and the various genres of material in the book, the *Sitz im Leben* (setting in life) of each genre, and the way each genre functions in the present form of the book.
- **Traditio-historical** criticism attempts to trace the “history” of material in the book from its origin to its present position in the book.
- **Redaction or rhetorical or canonical or reader response criticism** offer different approaches, all of which address the present, final form of the book with various interests in mind.
- **Theological criticism** treats the religious message(s) of these books.

At the least, the preacher or teacher should be aware of the basic concerns of each of these approaches and should develop and be constantly aware of her or his own approach when attempting to interpret a biblical passage.

Scholars have written so much on each of these approaches that it would be impossible to provide an adequate introductory list of sources. However, the following are helpful: *Old Testament Exegesis* by Douglas A. Stuart;¹⁰ the article on “Prophecy and Prophetic Literature” in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters*;¹¹ the articles on the various approaches in the *ABD*;¹² *To Each Its Own Meaning: An Introduction to Biblical Criticisms and Their Application*;¹³ and the volumes on various approaches to the Old Testament in the Fortress Press series.

COMMENTARIES ON AMOS, HOSEA, ISAIAH 1-39, AND MICAH

The three volumes by Francis I. Andersen and David Noel Freedman¹⁴ in *The Anchor Bible* are the most thorough commentaries on Amos (vol. 24A, published 1989); Hosea (vol. 24, published 1980); and Micah (vol. 24E, published 2000) in English. *Amos: The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times & His Preaching* by John H. Hayes¹⁵ is also very helpful. For teaching and preaching through these books, the best commentaries that essentially reflect the meaning of the text are the relevant volumes in the *Interpretation* series,¹⁶ the *Word Biblical Commentary*,¹⁷ *The Daily Study Bible series*,¹⁸ and *The New Interpreter's Bible*,¹⁹ especially the homiletical sections.

As an example, James Limburg, in his volume on *Hosea-Micah* in the *Interpretation* series, discusses selected texts from each book. Pages 31-34 reflect on Hos 9:1-9, which Limburg titles “Watchman or Yes-Man?”²⁰ He points out that verses 1-6 contain Hosea’s oracle of doom against God’s people because of their apostasy from Yahweh. Then in verse 7, the audience interrupts Hosea, crying out that he is a “fool” and “mad.” Hosea responds that, on the contrary, he is a “watchman” for God over God’s people. Limburg comments,

When danger comes, the task of the watchman is to sound the alarm. If he does not do so, then he has failed in his task. If the alarm is sounded and the people pay no attention, then they themselves are responsible for what happens to them.²¹

By being God’s watchman, Hosea stood in sharp contrast to the popular prophets in Israel of his day, who were sycophants, flatterers, aye-sayers, or yes-men.

Among the best, thorough, scholarly commentaries on Isaiah 1-39 are *Isaiah 1-39* in *The New Century Bible Commentary* by Roland E. Clements;²² *Isaiah: The Eighth-Century Prophet: His Times and His Preaching* by John H. Hayes and Stuart A. Irvine;²³ *Isaiah 1-39* in *The Anchor Bible* series;²⁴ and *Isaiah* in the *Old Testament Library*.²⁵ These works (and others like them) point out alternative interpretations of difficult texts, explain the strengths and weaknesses of each interpretation, and enabling the teacher or preacher to make an informed judgment about the meaning of the passage being examined.

For teaching and preaching through Isaiah, the best commentaries that essentially reflect the meaning of the text are the relevant volumes in the *Interpretation* series,²⁶ the *Daily Study Bible series*²⁷ and *The New Interpreter's Bible* mentioned above, and the two-volume commentary by Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* in the *Westminster Bible Companion* series.²⁸ Brueggemann's work, as always, is both very helpful and challenging, and his work will give the teacher or preacher much material on which to reflect, meditate, and think. For example, commenting on Isaiah 19:16-25, Brueggemann²⁹ points out similarities between this pericope and the exodus narrative in Exod 1-15. Verses 24-25 of Isaiah 19 say:

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage."

Brueggemann comments

The enemies are renamed as fellow members of the covenant. ... To make this possible, Israel must relinquish its exclusive claims and its unrivaled relation to Yahweh and be willing to share the privilege of such identity. Ecumenism inevitably requires giving up one's sense of primacy, exclusiveness, and privilege. Such a maneuver as is here required of Israel would be like the Christian church conceding that God has other chosen peoples as well. Or more parochially, in the Christian community, it would be like rock-ribbed orthodox folk conceding legitimacy as colleagues to those it regarded as outside the fold. Or conversely, multicultural liberals may share legitimacy with those whom they dismiss as narrow and therefore illegitimate.³⁰

Isa 19:16-25 forces communities committed to serving God and doing his will to consider, discuss, and decide whether God is exclusivistic or inclusivistic. But this is only one of many exciting and thought-provoking passages in the book of Isaiah.

The best sources for articles on specific passages in journals, monographs, *festschriften* (works written in honor of individual scholars), and collected works are the *Elenchus bibliographicus biblicus*,³² *Religious Index I*,³³ *Old Testament Abstracts*,³⁴ and *Religious and Theological Abstracts*.³⁵

THEOLOGY OF AMOS, HOSEA, ISAIAH, AND MICAH

There are five main types of secondary sources that deal with the theology (religious teachings) of Amos, Hosea, Isaiah 1-39, and Micah. First, volumes on Old Testament theology contain sections on or many references to these prophetic books. For example, Volume H of Gerhard von Rad's *Old Testament Theology*³⁶ contains sections on "Amos and Hosea" (pp. 129-46), "Isaiah and Micah" (pp. 147-75), and "The New Element in Eighth-Century Prophecy" (pp. 176-87).

Second, there are many studies on the theology of Old Testament prophecy that include sections on the eighth-century prophets and on individual prophets from this period. Two recent examples are *Thus Says the Lord: The Message of the Prophets* by James M. Ward,³⁷ and *Theology of the Prophetic Books* by Donald E. Gowan,³⁸ which contains a whole section on the eighth-century prophets (pp. 24-77). On specific eighth-century prophets, *Tradition for Crisis: A Study in Hosea* by Brueggemann³⁹ and *Amos & Isaiah* by Ward⁴⁰ are helpful.

Third, helpful introductory summaries of theological ideas are contained in articles on these prophets in good Bible dictionaries, especially those in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*,⁴¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Fully Revised*,⁴² and the *ABD*.⁴³

Fourth, the introductory sections of good commentaries (see above) summarize the theology of the prophetic book under consideration. Fifth, articles in journals, monographs, *festschriften*, and collected essays include discussions of the theology of an eighth-century prophetic book or some aspect of that theology.

Examples include Th. C. Vriezen, "Essentials of the Theology of Isaiah" in *Israel's Prophetic Heritage*;⁴⁴ "Ethics in Isaiah of Jerusalem" by John Barton in the *Journal of Theological Studies*,⁴⁵ and "Isaiah in Old Testament Theology" by J. J. M. Roberts in *Interpretation*.⁴⁶

Major theological themes in these books have great contemporary relevance. Amos stresses the necessity of treating one's fellow human beings with justice, compassion, and love (Amos 2:6-16; 5:4-15, 21-24; 6:4-7). Hosea declares that God's people must be faithful to God as a wife to her husband or a child to its parent and not pursue other lovers, the Baals and foreign nations (Hos 2:2-13; 8; 11:1-11). Isaiah announces that Yahweh opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (Isa 2:6-22; 10:5-19), that God's people must trust in him and in no other in times of crisis (Isa 7:1-17; 28:1-17; 31:1-3), and that God expects his people to treat one another with justice, mercy, and tender care (Isa 1:16-17, 2:1-26; 5:1-7; 10:1-4). Micah, like Amos, emphasizes the importance of caring for one's fellow human being with justice, sympathy, and tenderness (Mic 2:1-11; 3; 6:1-7:6); and proclaims a bright future for the faithful remnant of God's people, which he compares with a flock that Yahweh the shepherd gathers to himself to nourish and protect (Mic 4:6-5:15).

THE USE OF PASSAGES IN THE EIGHTH-CENTURY PROPHETS BY LATER OLD TESTAMENT PROPHETS, LATER JEWISH WRITERS, THE QUMRAN COMMUNITY, AND THE NEW TESTAMENT

The teacher or preacher of Old Testament prophetic texts will inevitably encounter these views:

- that the purpose of studying the Old Testament prophets is to find predictions that were fulfilled in Jesus and/or the church;
- that one must begin with the meaning given to a quotation or reference to an Old Testament prophetic passage by a New Testament speaker or writer and superimpose that meaning on the Old Testament context;
- or that God miraculously transported the Old Testament prophets mentally into the first century so that the prophets spoke not to the people of their own day but to a much later generation as if they were actually present then.

Such assumptions make responsible teaching and preaching on Old Testament prophetic texts and ideas difficult. Old Testament prophets addressed the needs and problems of the people of their own day. Of course, they *did* predict what God would do in the future, but such predictions were directed to the people whom they were addressing, either to persuade them to repent or to give them hope in times of distress. Occasionally, in very desperate times, they envisioned an "ideal" future when Yahweh would rule over all the nations through a descendant of David reigning in Jerusalem maintaining worldwide peace.

How, then, is one to understand and explain the many quotations of and references to Old Testament passages, in particular to the eighth-century prophets, in the New Testament? The New Testament speakers and writers lived in a stream of traditions going back to the days of the Old Testament prophets. An early aspect of that movement was that later prophets used and reapplied the messages of earlier prophets.

For example, Ezekiel's proclamation that "the end" was about to come on Jerusalem (Ezek 7:2, 3, 6) borrows from Amos's proclamation that "the end" was about to come on North Israel (Amos 8:1-2) approximately 170 years earlier. And Jeremiah's metaphor of Yahweh as a husband divorcing Israel and Judah, his adulterous wives (Jer 2-3, especially 3:6-11), borrows from Hosea's metaphor of Yahweh as a husband divorcing Israel, his adulterous wife (Hos 2:2-13) approximately 100 years earlier. The preacher or teacher should note that these later prophets introduced a "new meaning into" or a "new application for" the earlier prophetic passages they mentioned or quoted.

A second phase of this movement occurred in the intertestamental period when the Jewish rabbis and the Qumran community (which wrote, copied and preserved the Dead Sea Scrolls) reinterpreted and reapplied

Old Testament passages to fit their own particular situations. The Rabbinic interpretation is called *midrash*, which may be *haggadah*, which interpreted nonlegal materials in an ethical or expository way; or *halakah*, which applied the general principles of Old Testament laws to specific situations. The Qumran interpretation is called *peshet*. The best-known example of the way the Qumran community interpreted Old Testament passages is the use of Isa 40:3 in 1QS 8:14, where the Qumran community envisions itself as the one preparing the way for the Lord by proclaiming the new age about to dawn.

The New Testament writers essentially used Old Testament texts the same way the rabbis and the Qumran community did. Their usage and reapplication were unique in that they applied Old Testament materials to Jesus Christ and the church. There are many responsible studies of how the New Testament uses the Old Testament, including *Paul's Use of the Old Testament*⁴⁷ and *The Old Testament in Early Christianity*⁴⁸ by E. Earle Ellis; *New Testament Apologetic* by Barnabas Lindars;⁴⁹ *It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture. Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars*;⁵⁰ and *Early Christian Interpretation of the Scriptures of Israel*.⁵¹

God's message to his people and the nations stands out in bold relief in the eighth-century prophetic books. Herein lies much "spiritual food" necessary for solid and healthy individual and community growth. My prayer is that the thoughts and resources suggested here will serve as a motivation for serious study and application of these biblical materials to religious and ethical life through the efforts and ministries of teachers and preachers.

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ENDNOTES

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