

Theological Trends

FROM HISTORICAL CRITICISM TO CULTURAL STUDIES

A New Angle on the Biblical Prophets

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TODAY, CULTURAL STUDIES ARE OPENING new vistas in our readings of the prophets, bringing the variety and complexity of these biblical traditions into rich engagement with the multiplicity of our contemporary situations and concerns. The developing story of biblical scholarship on the prophets shows how we have come to our present perspective and sheds light on its significance.

Studies on the biblical prophets have taken various routes over the past centuries. How prophecy arose in Israel, the formation of the prophetic books, the distinction between authentic and inauthentic sayings of individual prophets, the problem of false prophecy – these have been among the many focuses for study. Amidst this variety of topics, the relationship of the law to the prophets has commanded much attention and best exemplifies the nature and scope of early studies. The sacral traditions of the Pentateuch, particularly the law and covenant, have long been recognized as intrinsically interwoven in the prophetic writings – as formative for them.

Early studies on the prophets

During the nineteenth century, precritical scholarship assumed the Pentateuch to be chronologically prior to the rest of the biblical writings. Hence, the prophets' extensive engagement with materials from the Pentateuch was viewed as commentary on that treasury of sacred traditions. The prophetic message was understood to be derived from and built on the premise of the prophets' recalling of God's liberating action in the wilderness, the divine revelation at Sinai, the bestowing of the commandments, the binding nature of covenant – in short, the entire sacred heritage of the Pentateuch. When Jeremiah condemned the spiritual bankruptcy of cultic and religious formalism, he reminded the people, 'Yahweh, the God of Israel, says this . . . "For when I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I said nothing to them, gave them no orders, about holocaust and sacrifice"' (Jer 7:21–22). Similarly, Hosea's condemnation of Israel's promiscuous political policies grew out of a rehearsal of the events of the past. 'When Israel was a child I loved them, and I called my child out of Egypt. But the more I called to them, the further they went from me' (Hos 11:1–2). Rather than being innovators in their own right, the prophets were viewed as reformers who, from the eighth century onward,

summoned Israel to remember all that God had already done and to remain faithful to the sacral traditions and the promises made of old.

Historical criticism challenges the chronology

With the advent of historical criticism at the beginning of this century, and particularly the work of Graf-Wellhausen on the sources for the Pentateuch, the assumptions of an early date for the Pentateuch as a whole were summarily dismantled. This kind of investigation, well known today as 'source criticism', identified at least four different strands making up the Pentateuch (Yahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomist, and Priestly). It established them as being composed some time from the era of Solomon (c. 900 BCE) on down through the post-exilic period (540 BCE). Of particular importance for the work on the prophets was the late date assigned to the Priestly tradition or 'P'. The P material, much of which includes law and covenant traditions, was previously thought to have originated in the late exilic and post-exilic period in conjunction with the formation of Judaism. Suddenly, as a consequence of this historical criticism, the prophets' relationship to the law had to be dramatically reconceived. Scholars taking extreme positions hurried to redefine the prophets as creators of the law, as the authors of the sacral traditions themselves, even of the very idea of covenant. Such positions erupted out of the enthusiasm for critical study of the Bible and, in particular, for source-critical studies. However, in his *Prolegomena*, Wellhausen himself argued that while such material as P may not have been composed until quite late, the legal traditions that make up P may well have existed in early periods in various other forms.¹

By the middle of our century, a more qualified and refined position prevailed on the prophets and their relation to law. Building upon the findings of source investigations, form critics led by Hermann Gunkel attempted to trace the development of the Pentateuchal traditions back to their earliest oral formulations. At the same time, tradition critics such as Gerhard von Rad and Martin Noth mapped the accumulation of these early forms that collectively led up to the development of the four Pentateuchal strands. Consequently, the cumulative results of these sources of historical criticism made clear that the early developmental stages of Pentateuchal traditions predated at least the classical prophets of the eighth century (e.g., Amos, Hosea, Isaiah).

While most scholars agreed that by the time of the prophetic era in Israel many of the traditions concerning Moses, Exodus and the covenant, and especially much of the law, had already taken shape, they did not return to the precritical view that the prophets were merely commentators on these traditions. Von Rad's second volume of *Old Testament theology* in the 1960s best represented the reigning position on law and prophets: it integrated the findings of the first half of this century while avoiding any extremist claims.² He argued that while the prophets and their message were indebted to the sacral Pentateuchal traditions that preceded them, the prophets also interpreted and appropriated the traditions for their own time and setting.³ Hence, the

prophets both depended upon the early formulations and gave shape to the subsequent final edition of these traditions.

The preoccupation of historical criticism with the law and prophets during the first half of this century had a limiting impact on studies on the prophetic writings. Most notably, the direction and shape of research on the biblical prophets was all too often dependent upon the current state of research on the Pentateuch. The impact of other, equally formative factors upon the prophets and their message has gone largely unacknowledged and thus unresearched. Social theorists such as Max Weber argued that the emergence of Israel's prophets and their message was conditioned by Israel's political realities; the investigations of biblical critics remained focused upon such matters as composition history, authenticity of the prophets' words, and relation to sacral Pentateuchal traditions.⁴

The spectrum of studies embraces the cultural context

In the late sixties, reservations about the adequacy of historical criticism as a whole emancipated the research on biblical prophets from the previously dominant questions and preoccupations, and enabled it to turn its attention elsewhere. Scholars began to consider the prophets and their message as being intimately tied to a culture, and influenced and shaped by that culture. Questions regarding sources, literary genres and tradition history were all but replaced with a different kind of inquiry: what were the material living conditions of the people to whom the prophets spoke? Was there a social institution known as 'prophecy'? Where did this institution fit into the social structure of the society? What was the relationship between prophet and cult? What was the prophet's relationship to political forces and the hegemony of different kings?

Today, as scholars wrestle with these fundamental questions, they do so through the understanding of a host of disciplines – anthropological criticism, sociological approaches, social science criticism, cultural anthropological studies etc. Collectively they constitute 'cultural studies'. Theories and approaches from the disciplines of economics, anthropology, communication, psychology and sociology become the lenses through which to view these individuals and their writings. As a result, social, economic and cultural features of the texts and their context become central while the preoccupation with the religious or theological significance in isolation from other cultural factors recedes.

Prophecy is considered as a social institution rather than as a private religious call. The conventional notion of prophet as spokesperson for Yahweh is replaced with attention to the roles the prophets play in society. Drawing upon anthropological studies and role theory, David Petersen defines the prophets' relationship to society along two lines.⁵ The first arises out of the individual's kinship with socially oppressed or underprivileged populations. Petersen investigates prophetic figures like Elijah and Elisha as advocates for such social groups with whom they are allied. By contrast, the second type is

not clearly identified with any group or alliance and emerges in a time when society is under pressure or in crisis. Jeremiah and Isaiah, who function relatively independently in and around Jerusalem in response to national crisis, are good examples.

Similarly, Robert Wilson investigates the social role of prophets as intermediaries between the complexities of the sociocultural world and the elusiveness of the divine world.⁶ Wilson examines this social function of intermediation by studying other comparable societies with similar specialists such as the shaman, diviner or medium. He distinguishes two groups among Israel's prophets, 'peripheral' and 'central' intermediaries, each with characteristic maintenance functions in the society. With the rise of monarchy those prophets who once had important social roles, such as responsibilities of cult, became peripheral, divested of their duties. As peripheral prophets, they championed the concerns of small support groups and worked to change the prevailing social structure. By contrast, central prophets worked within the establishment of monarchy. Concerned with fostering the *status quo*, they worked to bring about any necessary changes in an orderly and regulated fashion. Wilson enlists communication theory and anthropological parallels in support and development of these 'peripheral' and 'central' categories. In turn, these investigations serve to deepen our understanding of an individual prophet's social location and function within society.

Building upon this work, Wilson also studies conflict between prophets such as the dispute between Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer 27—28).⁷ Jeremiah advocates surrender of Jerusalem to the Babylonians while Hananiah predicts that God will deliver Jerusalem from the Babylonian threat. Wilson shows that the theological clash between the two prophets has much to do with their different social locations and different groups of supporters. Jeremiah is a peripheral prophet who with his small group of supporters stands against the political and religious establishment in Jerusalem. Hananiah, a central prophet, plays an important role in the Jerusalem-based temple and royal institution. In both instances, the prophet's relation to the capital city appears bound to their vision of its future. Hence, Wilson contextualizes the conflict and shows how social location in culture and community affects one's religious tenets and positions.

Burke Long also investigates prophetic conflict by using parallels from shaman studies.⁸ Investigations on disputes among shamans show that these conflicts may have something to do with an individual's credibility among peers, maintaining one's social position in a community, or, in some instances, readying the community for necessary social change. Informed by these anthropological parallels, Long's study on Jeremiah makes clear that not only is conflict an essential and formative element in prophetic activity but that the conflict is much more complex than a mere dispute over a religious issue. It establishes the integrity and credibility of a prophet and may also serve as an instrument for provoking social change. Moreover, beyond what these investigations reveal about prophetic conflict, Long's work discourages distortions

that arise when matters such as disputes between prophets are treated solely as religious clashes and isolated from other forms of social discourse and concerns.

In another study, Robert Carroll makes use of cognitive dissonance theory from social psychology to interpret prophets.⁹ Cognitive dissonance is the description of how individuals, in this case, the prophets, react to contradictions or clashes between expectations and reality, between what they think will happen and what actually occurs. Attention to the individual's conscious perception of their own work in relation to the larger world explains the discordant elements. For example, the discordant elements in Isaiah of Jerusalem's call (Isai 6:9–13) stem from the prophet's response to the failure of his proclamation. Similarly, Jeremiah, having been faithful to his call while at the same time being rejected by his own people for his prophetic activity, wonders whether he has been deceived by God (Jer 15:15–18). Hence, by attending to the traces of dissonance in Jeremiah's confessions, Carroll discloses the prophet's inner struggles and conflicts in coming to terms with his role as prophet in Judaeon society.

This shift towards the study of the biblical prophets by cultural categories has been significant. First, it has radically qualified our understanding of the individual prophets and their messages. Hence today our reading of Amos is intrinsically bound up with whether we think of Amos as a peasant farmer from a southern garrison town, as a Jewish nationalist, or as a landholding entrepreneur from the Tekoa with material interests in the North. Second, investigations regarding both prophecy as institution and the cultural role of individual prophets contribute to our understanding of the dynamics, conflicts and power relations of Israelite society. The instance of Jeremiah's response to Josiah's religious reform is illustrative. King Josiah has instituted a comprehensive religious reform supposedly motivated by the finding of the law book during temple renovations (2 Kg 22–23). Interpreted by Huldah the prophet, the law book reveals how far the king and people have strayed from covenant fidelity, with regard to apostasy. In response, Josiah orders all local shrines to be dismantled, altars honouring foreign deities to be destroyed and the high places abolished, along with many other cultic changes. Jeremiah's silence concerning this major religious overhaul is curious, and thus often explained as an error in chronology – that Jeremiah was not really prophesying during Josiah's reign as king. However, this national renewal had consequences that extended beyond the cult. Many peasants who maintained local shrines lost their jobs. Moreover, the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem also centralized allegiances and monies in the capital city. Jeremiah's silence regarding Josiah's religious reform could be interpreted as disapproval, as well as inviting consideration of the political motivations and gains accompanying Josiah's plan. Hence, what a prophet says or, in this case, does not say can contribute to our investigation and understanding of the complexity of Israelite culture and society.

The cultural world grows more complex and particular

Recently, there has been another development. Initially, these investigations tended to explain the social and cultural dimensions of prophecy in general categories – for example, social location of prophets as either central or peripheral, or conflict as a formative ingredient in all prophecy, or intermediation as the defining characteristic of all prophecy. Cultural anthropological thought has become more sophisticated, turning attention away from these general features toward a more particular, culturally specific understanding. Culture itself, with all its component features, is considered ‘text’. Pottery, scrolls, a cultic practice, seals, the biblical text and all cultural artefacts are viewed as ‘texts’ inscribed with narrative or story. Hence, the work of anthropologists begins to parallel the work of literary critics. Both read the narrative of these ‘cultural texts’ closely for meaning rather than data.

The work of cultural anthropologist and theorist Clifford Geertz has been especially influential in bringing about this shift.¹⁰ Borrowing from Max Weber, Geertz defines culture as ‘webs of significance’. Religious, literary, aesthetic and economic conventions and meanings form these webs. Geertz calls the analysis of these webs ‘thick description’. Thick description strives to discover and sort out the webs, to detail the significant features, layers and networks of prophetic discourse, interactions, institutions, contexts, behaviours, conventions etc. Thick description burrows deep into the labyrinth of a prophet’s social world. It exposes the incongruities, the contradictions and the questions embedded within the text. Moreover, these descriptions capture the uniqueness, significant import and potential meaning of social reality of the Israelite world for the prophet. Here, the cultural study of the prophetic texts is not just confined to how the prophets addressed the realities of their culture but also to how culture shaped and influenced the prophets and their message.

How was Elijah’s potential for social advancement intertwined with his activity against the prophets of Baal? What part did the agricultural policies of the reigning political party play in Amos’ activity in the North? How did Micah’s alignment with peasants of the hill country permeate and shape the production of the tradition assigned to him? The Prophetic writings are encoded with social data about class configuration and conflict; about the dynamics of societal roles, behaviours and identities; and about the functioning power of institutions. Rather than impartial religious treatises, these texts are viewed as sociocultural artefacts shaped by, inscribed with, and responding to the particular and prevailing values and ideologies.

Various studies on the Elijah-Elisha traditions exemplify this focus upon these kinds of intricacies and interchanges. In the biblical account (1 Kg 18), Elijah mounted a campaign of harassment on Mt Carmel against the religious waywardness in the Northern Kingdom. He opposed the Baal cult, Jezebel’s prophets and Ahab’s slaughter of Yahweh’s prophets. But close attention to the intricacies of the discord suggests that such conflicts involved deeper and broader disputes than mere religious matters. The prophet’s sphere of influence increased according to the extent of his or her victory over rival

intermediaries.¹¹ Hence, the contest between the deities, Yahweh and Baal, on Mt Carmel was in fact a competition between prophets, a competition riddled with social consequences. The end of the story confirms this. Yahweh's fire falling from the heavens as the sign of Yahweh's victory over Baal is not the conclusion. This comes with Elijah's slaughter of the prophets of Baal. What appears as mere religious confrontation reveals itself instead as a rivalry fuelled by a complex network of social issues with significant consequences for these individuals.

In another study on the Elijah tradition, Tamis Hoover Renteria challenges conventional understandings of Elijah as the model prophet who champions Yahwism and monotheism.¹² Instead she reveals an individual ensnared in political controversy among the peasants of the Northern hill country who are resisting oppressive state rule. Her cultural analysis sets forth much about the struggles and sufferings of the people as well as about the prophet. It uncovers the experience of women and other oppressed peasant groups of the ninth century who suffered most under the Omride tyranny. Renteria shows how the interaction with the prophet empowered these people. Such studies dislodge the prophets and their religious identity from a lofty place above the fray and locate them in the thick of the human condition.

The recent work abandons pursuit of the author's intention as the privileged locus of meaning. It replaces interests in composition history and the authentic words of the prophet with an analysis of the prophet's discourse in conversation with the broader social discourse. It retreats from the distinction of text and historical context and instead views the text as cultural artefact, as a part of or piece of the context. Thus, it rejects popular but uncritical caricatures of the prophets – destabilizing, outraged or adversarial – that risk distortion and reduction of the multivalent character of biblical prophecy. Cultural studies dismantle any notion of a consistent theology – the product of sacral traditions – to which all the prophets subscribed. It situates the prophet's religious ideas and theological reflections squarely in the midst of other prevailing religious, social, economic and cultural ideas and values. Moreover, it understands these religious ideas as having an impact upon as well as being conditioned by this amalgam. As the various prophetic traditions are studied in this way, their inherent reflections on God not only differ from one another and from the sacral traditions of the past, but they emerge as samples of individual social location and statements of local theologies.

At the same time as we receive and interpret the prophetic word, whether it be Jeremiah's condemnation of cult in and around the holy city Jerusalem or Amos' admonition of the wealthy élite in the agricultural milieu of Northern peasant workers, we do so in the midst of our own location in the current postmodern secular culture. Interpretation of the prophetic message, as with all the biblical writings, involves us in that 'hermeneutical circle' that engages both the culturally contextualized understanding of the prophet's word and a culturally contextualized assessment of ourselves in our own local setting. Meaning once located in the biblical text now appears to arise as a fusion of the sociocultural horizon of the prophet with our own sociocultural horizon.¹³

Attention to the cultural context of both the prophetic writing and the reader/interpreter opens the biblical text to a multitude of understandings. But this does not invite anarchy in interpretation. The responsible contemporary reader is called to mediate between his or her individual culture and the biblical text after the manner of the prophetic encounter with the sacral traditions of Israel. This is the witness of the prophetic tradition, of the whole biblical tradition: that divine activity first understood in the life of the people of Israel continues to be recognized in the life of the biblical community and its individual members in each new age. Attention to culture, both that of the prophets and our own, makes possible that continuing recognition of the divine.

NOTES

¹ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the history of ancient Israel* (Cleveland/New York: Meridian Bks, 1965; first published in German in 1878).

² Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament theology* volume II, trans D. M. G. Stalker (New York/San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1960).

³ *Ibid.*, p 4.

⁴ Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism* (New York: Free Press, 1952), pp 276–277.

⁵ David Petersen, *The roles of Israel's prophets* (Sheffield: JSOTSS 17, 1981).

⁶ Robert Wilson, *Prophecy and society in ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980).

⁷ Robert Wilson, *Sociological approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp 67–80.

⁸ Burke O. Long, 'Social dimensions of prophetic conflict', *Semeia* 21 (1981), pp 31–53.

⁹ Robert P. Carroll, 'Ancient Israelite prophecy and dissonance theory', *Numen* 24 (1977), pp 135–151.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, 'Thick description: toward an interpretive theory of culture', *The interpretation of cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), pp 3–30.

¹¹ P. Fry, *Spirits of protests* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p 46.

¹² Tamis Hoover Renteria, 'The Elijah-Elisha stories: a socio-cultural analysis of prophets and people in ninth century BCE Israel' in Robert Coote (ed), *Elijah and Elisha in socioliterary perspective* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp 75–126.

¹³ Much of contemporary hermeneutical theory is premised upon the employment of this notion from Gadamer. See especially Sandra Schneiders, *The revelatory text: interpreting the New Testament* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).