

He Gave Us Prophets

LESSON
SIX

Literary Analysis of the
Prophets
Discussion Forum



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He Gave Us Prophets

Lesson Six: Literary Analysis of the Prophets

Discussion Forum

With

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Question 1:

How can identifying the different kinds of literature that appear in the prophetic books help us interpret them more responsibly?

Dr. Chip McDaniel

When we interpret the Old Testament, we have to look at the genre of the material that we're reading. In terms of today, we don't read a novel the same way we read a contract. We don't view a documentary concerning a battle in World War II in the same way that we would look at a movie on the same subject. There are certain rules of interpretation that come with different types of literature. For example, there's a difference between poetry and prose. A great deal of the Old Testament is written in poetic form, and it is characterized by a terseness; there is an absence of words that they would gap or leave out. And there's also an extended use of figures of speech. So, we have to come to the material sensitive to this, or we will misread it because, perhaps, we're not understanding a figure, or we're not understanding that sometimes words are left out, and it can be important by that omission as well.

Another example would be with regard to prophecy. There are several factors we need to keep in mind with regard to prophecy. For example, some prophecies, not all, have an element of contingency baked into them. And so, for example, in Jeremiah 18 and in Ezekiel 18, God will say, "If I say I'm going to punish someone because of their sins, and then they repent, well, I won't do it. I'll set that aside. Or if I say I'm going to bless them, and then they start sinning, then I'm not going to bless them." There's a contingency based upon the reaction of the people that received the word of God. An example of this would be in the book of Jonah. Some people would look at the book of Jonah and say, a prophet is supposed to be right all of the time. Jonah went into Nineveh and said, "Forty days and you're toast. You're going to be destroyed." Forty days later they weren't destroyed, so Jonah got it wrong. Well, no, Jonah is a prophet, and in that prophecy there is the notion that if they repent God isn't going to destroy them. And, in fact, we know that that's the case. They repented, and God didn't destroy them. But Jonah also gives us the idea that he understands that

that's true because he says, as he's sulking to the east of the city, he's saying, "I just knew. Didn't I say, when I was back in my home country, didn't I just say that you're the type of God that forgives? Didn't I call this in advance?" And so, there's baked into even the message of Jonah this idea of contingency. So when we come to the Old Testament, we have to be sensitive to the type of literature, particularly as we deal with poetry and with respect to prophecy.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Identifying the genre is extremely helpful to us in interpreting the Prophets. There's an important verse in the book of Exodus 33:11 that says, "The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend." Another important reference is in Numbers 12:6-8, which says that the Lord spoke to Moses "mouth to mouth," but to the prophets God spoke in visions, dreams, and riddles. These two references help us understand that Moses' writings contain direct revelations from God that do not include riddles, visions, or dreams. They do not have rhetorical devices like imagery, symbols, or metaphors as we would expect to find in prophetic books. In the Prophets, God more frequently speaks through dreams, visions, and riddles. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews also says that God spoke by the prophets in many ways. So, when we come to the writings of the prophets, we would expect and anticipate finding rhetorical devices like imagery, metaphors, and symbols, because of the nature of divine revelation through the prophets, which involves, as I said, dreams, riddles, and visions... Let me give an example, or some examples, for this. In Ezekiel 17, Ezekiel speaks a parable or a story of the two eagles and the vine. This is an example of a riddle or allegory through which the Lord speaks to the people. We also see symbolic actions that the prophets performed to send a message to the people. For example, in Isaiah 20, the Lord asked Isaiah to walk naked and barefoot for three years. The Lord asked Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 27 and 28, to put a yoke on his neck as a symbol of putting the people under the yoke of the exile. In Ezekiel 4, the Lord asked Ezekiel to lie on his left side for 390 days and on his right side for 40 days. Such symbolic actions, proverbs, and stories, which are found in the Prophets, help us understand the genre. We can anticipate finding more symbols and poetry in the Prophets. So identifying the genre helps us understand the best approach to interpret prophetic texts.

Dr. Federico Villanueva

It is very important for us to remember when reading the Bible that the Bible has been written in different kinds of genre, or literature. There are poems or psalms. There are many narratives. There are also parables and other different kinds of literature. It's important for us to remember this because the type of genre of the Bible also shows us in some way the intention of the author. Like, for instance, by using poetry, the author is trying to convey his own purpose to read it not only with our mind, not only to read it literally, but with our emotions, and so on. One of the problems with some Christians reading the Bible is that they read the Bible as if it only consists of one genre: it's all history. So, they like to read everything like historical and so on. And so they run into problems when they read some text of the Bible and then try to read it like historical material... For example, Revelation, if you read it literally, then you

run into all kinds of problems like discovering who the 666 is there, the Antichrist, the end of the world, and so on and so forth, when in fact, the book of Revelation is an — they call it apocalyptic literature, which is full of imagery, not literally, but it's a particular kind of genre which conveys truth by using imagery. So, it will really help us to solve some of the problems or to avoid some of the problems if we consider the particular genre of a particular text.

Question 2:

Why did prophets write some of their prophecies as historical narratives?

Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

A lot of what we read in prophetic books is in the form of a narrative, in the form of stories. And in many respects, the reasons why prophets included stories or narratives within their books is the same reason any biblical writer includes narratives. I mean, there are all kinds of reasons for this, but they're similar throughout the Old Testament and even into the New Testament. Why are there stories? Well, one of the main reasons is to tell you what happened. And because we believe that these stories are inspired by Holy Spirit, we know that he doesn't lie to us about what happened. So when we read about things that happen in Hosea's life or Isaiah's life, or whatever prophet it may be, we know that those things actually happened. So they are historical records. Another reason why biblical writers write narratives is to teach lessons from those stories to their people, the people who are reading them, because stories have a way of incarnating the principles of our faith, to fleshing them out, to putting them out there in ways that reveal real flesh and bone and how these things worked out in the lives of individual people and groups of people. And it helps us understand that our faith is not just a series of abstract principles but actually is something that happens in concrete history, even as my own experience of Christ is today and everyone else's is. It actually happens in real life. And that's another reason why biblical writers give stories, including prophets.

But the unusual thing about prophecy and the narratives that we have in the biblical books of prophets is that they actually give us insights into the prophetic predictions that prophets make. They provide a context. They tell us that prophets were true, so they show their moral character and the way they lived, to see they're true prophets, they're faithful to God. That's like the first chapters of the book of Daniel. Those characters in his book, they did practically nothing wrong. You'd be hard pressed to find anything they do wrong in the first few chapters of Daniel because it's letting the people know, now this book you're reading about from the man Daniel, he was quite a man, he was quite devoted to God. But also within biblical narratives of prophets you find embedded within them prophetic words that were given, prophecies that they actually gave. And the narrative itself gives the context. It helps you understand why the prophet said the things that he said, and then it allows you to understand what those predictions meant and how they were fulfilled and those sorts of things. So, in

many respects, the narratives that we find in Prophets are just like other narratives in the Bible, but they have these unique qualities that support the prophetic word by means of story.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

When you start to become aware of the prophets' larger ministry, you realize a lot of what the prophets are doing happens in the context of historical narratives. And an important principle comes out of that observation. Geerhardus Vos said that history is the field of revelation. That is, God doesn't reveal himself in an abstract philosophical system, but he reveals it in the grit and the grime and the actual events of history, because that's where redemption is taking place. And so, God is responding to the lives of his people in history, because the Bible is a story of redemptive history, and so the prophets are acting within the real life situations of the people of God. Now, you also see the prophets' ministries coming forward in Scripture through biography and autobiography, and there are probably a couple of reasons that we can say that that's the case. First of all, Moses ... in Deuteronomy 18, says that God will raise up a prophet like him from among their brothers. And so, there are certain criteria for what a true prophet would be. So, when we read the biographical aspects of the prophets' ministries, whether self-reported or whether reported through the eyes of others, we see their qualifications coming forward. You know, all the great prophets, and by that I mean the major prophets, have these calling scenes where the prophets are called into the heavenly courts through some kind of vision or something similar, like Isaiah 6. They are confronted with the divine glory, and they are commissioned with a message to deliver to God's people. Oftentimes you'll see the prophets view themselves as unworthy and themselves in need of cleansing, such as Isaiah says, "I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." So, the prophets were from among their countrymen, that is, they were part of the people of God, and yet those biographical and autobiographical sections also tell us the way in which they become qualified to carry out their ministry as prophets.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Many parts of the Prophets were written as historical narratives, in particular as biographies and autobiographies of the prophets themselves. This is because there can't be a separation between the ministry and the personal life of the prophet in the Old Testament. The Lord raised up the prophet among the people to be a pattern and type of the people's lives, and his personal life was a message to the people. As we see, for example, in Hosea, where the Lord commanded the prophet to marry "a wife of whoredom and have children of whoredom," to embody, through the personal life of the prophet, the message the Lord wanted to deliver to his people. So, we can't split the personal life of the prophet and his circumstances, such as his marriage, from the message the Lord wanted to deliver to the people. The prophet, through his life and words, was the message to the people. In addition, the benevolence the Lord showed to the prophet displayed the type of blessings God offered to his people. So, the way the Lord dealt with the prophet illustrated before the people what the Lord was doing with them. The life of the prophet and the way God worked in his life was a figurative image of the way God was dealing with his people.

Question 3:

Why did prophets sometimes use symbolic actions in their prophecies?

Dr. Douglas Gropp

We think of the prophets as proclaiming divine words, divine words of judgment and divine words of salvation, but the prophetic books often include quite a bit of biographical and autobiographical material, and a lot of that is introduced, a lot of that has to do with the prophets' lives themselves, because their very lives, as well as their words, serve as signs, as part of their message. They embody the message that they're sent to convey to Israel from the Lord. The prophets were often like street-theater performers in performing their signs in symbolic gestures. It was in the context of words, sometimes without words, maybe to be even disconcerting to their audience at times. Parables and symbolic gestures of the prophets could be seen almost as two different sides of the coin. Parables could be seen as extended similes or metaphors. They're very much like symbolic gestures, but in words rather than in bodily movements.

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Prophets sometimes used symbolic actions in their prophecies to illustrate the Lord's message to the people in a visual and clear way, without any ambiguity. One of the prophets who used many symbolic actions in the Old Testament is Ezekiel. Let me give some quick examples. For example, in Ezekiel 5:1-4, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to shave his head and beard, to weigh the hair, and to burn part of it in the fire as a sign of the coming destruction and devastation of Jerusalem. In Ezekiel 12:1-7, the Lord commanded Ezekiel to prepare baggage, and to go out in the sight of the people, to walk in front of them while carrying his baggage. This was a sign to tell them to be prepared for the coming exile, to say that, "All of us are going into exile." In the same chapter, in verse 6, the Lord said to the prophet, "I have made you a sign for the people." So, through this behavior, he is a clear picture, a sign, and a visual illustration of what the Lord wants to say to the people. Another example is in 24:15-27. Here, the Lord told Ezekiel that he would take away from him the delight of his eyes, his wife. He commanded him not to mourn or weep over his wife! The people were astonished and asked him in verse 19,

Will you not tell us what these things mean for us? (Ezekiel 24:19).

It says twice in the same chapter, in verse 24,

Thus shall Ezekiel be to you a sign (Ezekiel 24:24).

And verse 27,

You will be a sign to them (Ezekiel 24:27).

So, the symbolic actions that took place in the lives of the prophets were one of the means the Lord used to send his message in the clearest possible way to the people, hoping that the people might repent and return to the Lord.

Dr. Seth Tarrer

The symbolic acts of prophets are fascinating to behold in Scripture, but they don't just start in Scripture. This is a prophetic practice, or a divinatory practice well attested in the ancient Near East all the way into the second millennium. We have letters and clay tablets, inscriptions from Mari, the Mari empire, from the late eighteenth century, in which we read about prophets performing these symbolic acts in the name of their particular god. One particular mention is a prophet devours a lamb raw in front of a group of elders gathered together in the city, and this is reported. The letter is sent to the king of the Mari Empire at the time, Zimri-Lim, and it's recorded for us in some clay tablets. So the prophets have been doing this, or people who call themselves prophets have been doing this in the name of their god or goddess for millennia... However, when we turn to the symbolic actions of the prophets in the Old Testament, they're functioning in a different way ... and the order is that the prophets are enacting these symbolic acts in order to arouse the emotions of the hearers and the observers and the readers of the texts to either fear or hope. We see Isaiah do this when he's told in Isaiah 20:1-6, he's told to walk around naked for three years, and he does. It's a good example, Isaiah, because when you compare Isaiah with the text from Mari that I mentioned a moment ago, with the prophet of Dagan devouring the lamb, we're never told why he devours the lamb; however, explicitly in the text of Isaiah 20:1-6 we're told why Isaiah is told to walk around naked. He's told to walk about naked because were Israel to put their faith in an Egyptian alliance, that would be foolish, and they themselves would be led off naked like captives were often led off after they were defeated in the ancient world. Ezekiel, of all the prophets, is perhaps most famous for some of the most bizarre symbolic actions that we read of in Scripture. Ezekiel is told to lay on his left side for 390 days, representing the 390 years since Solomon's temple was built till the time of his exile there in Babylon. He's told to then turn over and lay on his right side for 40 more days, all the while he's only eating barley cakes that he's allowed to cook over manure. He shaves his head and his beard, and he takes his hair and divides it into three portions. A portion of it he burns with fire, a portion of it he strikes with his sword, and a portion of it he lets go to the wind. Why? These are symbolic acts. They represent the reality that Israel is going to face. And according to Ezekiel's own explanation of this, a third of the Israelites in exile will be burned by fire, a third will perish by the sword, and a third will be scattered unto the winds, which we know occurs.

And so, a big difference we then see in Israel's prophets' symbolic actions and those of the ancient world were that there was no magic involved... The Israelite prophets' symbolic acts were done to illustrate what the word of God had declared would take place. The Israelite prophets, then, as performing these symbolic acts, their bodies became texts, texts to distribute the message of the word of God. They were called to be messengers by any means necessary: persuade, arouse, effect change in the hearers. And the symbolic acts were powerfully evocative ways to do this. Now, interestingly, literarily we read about these. We're not witnesses to them personally. We read about these acts. So, as listeners of the text, as readers of the text, what do they do for us? Well, they do some very important things. First of all, they help us

locate the prophets in time and space. We read about Jeremiah's interaction with the prophet Hananiah and the breaking of the wooden yoke and the replacing with the iron yoke. And that gives us a window into the reality of the person Jeremiah and the person Hananiah... So literarily, the symbolic acts of the prophets, they give us a window into the lived lives of the prophets themselves. They're also probably incorporated into the prophetic texts that we have today in our Old Testament as illustrations of prophetic conflict, illustrations that would hopefully inform and educate and serve as models and examples for the reading communities of later generations.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

You don't get very far in the reading of prophets until you see them undertaking some very ... bizarre actions, but we'll call them dramatic actions. And someone might ask the question, why do the prophets use such dramatic ways of acting? Jeremiah particularly comes to mind with some "crazy stunts," we might say. You have to first appreciate that the prophets are often coming in the context, most often coming in the context, where God's people are resistant, they're hard-hearted. There have been long periods of not listening to the prophets, and so God "shouts," as it were, through these dramatic actions and sometimes through bizarre visions. And so they take on a dramatic shape because it's God's way, if you will, of getting their attention — sort of the reason we use metaphors because sometimes straightforward propositions just don't penetrate. Underlying these dramatic actions are also something that is worth understanding when we are in the Prophets, and that is what some have called the "curse function" of Scripture, that as Isaiah — and Jesus refers to this in the parable of the sower — Isaiah said, "hearing, they may not understand, seeing they may not perceive," that when God's people are so hard-hearted, they're refusing to listen to reason, if you will and God engages in dramatic actions and even veiled parables to further their guilt because the word of God, in whatever form it comes in, must be responded to in faith and in repentance. But for those who are hard-hearted and rebellious, the word of God actually makes them more dull and more senseless... This is what we see in the parables, particularly the parables of the sower, those who had eyes to see and ears to hear understood, but for those who were not receptive, they were actually blinded by these dramatic actions and other forms of prophetic revelation.

Question 4:

How does understanding the historical context help us interpret Isaiah 7?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

Understanding the historical context of Isaiah 7 and 8 helps us to interpret the text correctly in several ways. The historical context shows that, at that time, Rezin, the king of Syria, and Pekah, the son of Remaliah, the king of Israel, made a coalition and came to wage war against Judah. At that time Ahaz was the king of Judah. Ahaz was afraid and confused. The reason for this war was that Judah refused to join Syria and

Israel in their coalition against Assyria. The Lord comforted Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah and told him not to be afraid of these two kings — Rezin and Pekah — not to fear Syria and Israel. The Lord told him to ask for a sign. Yet, Ahaz refused to ask for a sign. So, the Lord gave him the sign of Immanuel and informed him directly in 7:16,

**For before the boy knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good,
the land whose two kings you dread will be deserted (Isaiah 7:16).**

There is a reference here that Assyria is coming and will lay waste to the land and its two kings, Rezin and Pekah; this is in chapter 7. In chapter 8, the picture gets clearer that the sign the Lord gave to king Ahaz — the sign of Immanuel — was fulfilled in chapter 8 in the birth of Maher-shalal-hash-baz. In 8:4 we read:

**For before the boy knows how to cry “My father” or “My mother,”
the wealth of Damascus and the spoil of Samaria will be carried away
before the king of Assyria (Isaiah 8:4).**

Once again, we see that this sign was fulfilled. And the Lord assured Ahaz not to be afraid of Israel and Syria because both would be exiled through the strong Assyrian empire. The Lord was saying to him, “Do not worry! Trust! The Lord is your helper and sustainer.” This is the historical context, which is very important to understand in order to know the details of Isaiah 7 and 8.

Dr. David Correa, translation

Normally, modern interpreters of the biblical prophetic books tend to approach the interpretation of these books in an ahistorical manner, which is to say that they don't pay attention to the historical context of the prophecy. For example, in the well known prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, with respect to the idea that “the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,” well, modern interpreters have taken these words and removed them from their historical context, as if Isaiah pronounced this prophecy with no relationship to his own time period or context, as if this prophecy had been floating around in the air until it suddenly landed on Jesus Christ hundreds of years later. By ignoring the historical context, a person can make many errors that can lead to incorrect applications of the prophetic books... With respect to the prophecy of Isaiah about the virgin who would conceive a son, Isaiah wasn't speaking initially of the virgin Mary. He was talking about a maiden in his own time who would give birth to a son. The child would be born as a prophetic sign to announce to God's people that God would be with them as their Immanuel. But because the king didn't want to trust in him, then the Lord said, “I would have been with you all, but you didn't want that.” So, that child was born in Isaiah's time as a sign for the king of Judah.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

One of the most important interpretive principles that we have to remember when we go to interpret the prophets is to understand that we must interpret them in their historical context first. And Isaiah 7 and 8 give perhaps the best example of this. Now, in Isaiah 7:14 you have the well-known prophecy, “The virgin,” or the young

woman — the Hebrew word can mean either there — “The virgin shall be with child”... that obviously is picked up by Matthew in Matthew 2 to be mentioned as a prophecy that’s fulfilled in Christ because Mary, the virgin, conceives by the Holy Spirit, Jesus Christ. But what is easily overlooked is that Isaiah 7 is followed by Isaiah 8, and in Isaiah 8 we find that the prophet’s wife, the prophetess as she’s called there, has a son. And so, Old Testament Israel, hearing Isaiah’s prophecies would naturally have thought that the son of Isaiah was the fulfillment of what God predicted in Isaiah 7. And, in fact it is, in the original meaning to the original audience, there’s obviously a connection. So, this teaches us a really important principle, that in the Old Testament prophets, almost always, there’s some kind of near-term fulfillment, or at least a fulfillment in relation to the context of that Old Testament audience, that has its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ, in this instance. But it tells us that the Old Testament people of God didn’t simply scratch their heads and store away these prophecies saying, “You know, some day somebody’s going to need this,” but they actually were receiving words of hope, words of exhortation, words of correction in their circumstances. So, near-term fulfillments teach us that oftentimes Old Testament prophecies have progressive or iterative or multiple fulfillments until they achieve their ultimate climactic, full and final fulfillment in Jesus and the inauguration of the kingdom of God in the new covenant.

Mr. Sherif Atef Fahim, translation

Sometimes modern interpreters read prophetic texts ahistorically, or in isolation from their historical context. For example, in Isaiah 7, there is a very famous prophecy, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” As soon as those interpreters read this text, they do not think of anything except the birth of Jesus Christ from the virgin Mary. This is a true fulfillment of this prophecy, and Matthew testified that this is a true fulfillment of the prophecy. Yet, they jump too quickly to the final fulfillment of the prophecy. The true understanding of the prophecy has to start *first* with the historical understanding of the prophecy when Isaiah wrote it and what his purpose was... Isaiah wrote this text during certain circumstances within a certain context. He recognized a certain purpose at that time, and the people of Israel and King Ahaz understood it at that time. We have to start with this understanding, before jumping to the final fulfillment of the prophecy.

Question 5:

What is the value of prophetic laments?

Dr. Seth Tarrer

When we look at the prophetic literature and think about a lament, one of the clearest ways to formulate what exactly a prophetic lament is, is to think of it in terms of another way of expressing the moment of the irrevocable judgment of God as expressed by the prophet. These occur throughout Scripture, most notably in Amos and Jeremiah. Jeremiah, however, of all the prophets, develops a theme of the prophetic lament to an extent unseen anywhere else in the prophetic literature of the

Old Testament. In the book of Jeremiah, we see Jeremiah lamenting over Israel itself. And in the words of Jeremiah we also hear the Lord lamenting over Israel. And we also hear Jeremiah the prophet, the person, lamenting over his particular circumstance and situation in the text... These texts are clustered, primarily between chapter 11 through chapter 20, throughout. And when we look at Jeremiah's use of this lament, what we see are several things. Jeremiah has undergone particularly trying circumstances. Jeremiah's mood is one of desperation and angst at what the Lord has allowed to occur to his people in Judah under the Babylonian captivity... A major component of the prophetic lament is the way in which we, the reader of the text, are allowed a window into the humanity of the prophet. And this is important, particularly, as we think in terms of the interpretive community, the community of readers who would later take the inscripturated words of Jeremiah himself and re-appropriate them in different contexts subsequent generations on. And what we then end up doing as a reading community of these texts, particularly of prophetic laments, Jeremiah's "I" — the personal pronoun "I" — becomes understood in the terms of "we." It also recalibrates the idea and the notion of suffering, particularly in Israel's context historically. No longer is suffering thought of purely in punitive terms; rather, it's understood to be a part of life. This is the way things go. Life involves suffering and pain. It doesn't entail the absence of God; rather, one can then, through the example the prophet sets, particularly in Jeremiah, one can understand God being present amidst suffering.

Dr. Philip Ryken

One of the joys of reading and studying the Bible is coming to a deeper knowledge of the men who wrote the Bible. And often this has a way of illuminating the Scriptures, giving us a deeper understanding. There are all kinds of examples of this. I think, for example, of the ministry of Jeremiah, the weeping prophet, and understanding what he went through as he prophesied judgment against the people of God in Jerusalem, and then actually experienced God's judgment falling on that city, and then lamented the disaster that had befallen the city. All of that gives a deeper, richer understanding of the whole book of Jeremiah.

Rev. Michael J. Glodo

Within the prophets as a broad genre, you have smaller genres, micro genres, or mini genres, mini kinds of literature. One of those that you find is a lament. We're probably most familiar with laments from the Psalms, but you have a whole book by Jeremiah called Lamentations. And a lament in general is a crying out to the Lord, usually under conditions that are externally brought on — enemies, famine, any kind of number of external conditions — but they're conditions that have come about by God's will. And their chief purpose is to turn people's hearts back to the Lord. And so, in lament you see part of God's purpose in those conditions working themselves out... You see, that's the point of lament. It's a crying out to God for salvation from those circumstances. And through those laments, especially as we believe that God uses secondary causes, including prayer, to bring about his will, those laments become a basis for God acting... If you just search for the expression in the Psalms "How long O Lord," you'll begin to see how frequently lament occurs in the prayers

of God's people, as well as in the prophets. Even Jesus, as he stood over Jerusalem, said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... how often I would have gathered you to myself as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but you would not!" Even Jesus lamented, not for his own situation, but for the situation of his people. And perhaps one of the most profound laments is the beginning of Psalm 22:1, where the psalmists says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" because if you realize that, in the end, ultimately, Christ himself takes on the full lament of his people, you see God answering the lament of his Son by delivering him from death. And by delivering him from death, delivering his people from the power of death and the curse of sin. And so, lament isn't just simply a cry to get out of a particular situation but laments in the Prophets create this arc, which actually leads us to Christ and his substitutionary work to deliver his people from all their sins and misery.

Question 6:

What kinds of messages did Old Testament prophets communicate to God's people?

Dr. Scott Redd

Biblical prophecy was a way for God to communicate to his covenant people in a way that would either encourage them to continue on the path on which they're on, or to dissuade them and to encourage them towards repentance that they might return to a path that they should be on. So biblical prophecy is not so much about prognostication as it is about proclamation of God's covenant requirements of his people, the blessings that he will offer them, the curses that will fall on them because of disobedience... We find a clear example of this in Jeremiah 18 where the prophet articulates that when God proclaims a blessing on a nation, and that nation turns away from the Lord, then that blessing will turn to a curse. Likewise, if God declares a curse on a nation and that nation repents and turns back to him, that curse will turn to blessing. So, you see, the purpose of prophecy is not so much to just tell something about the future, but it's really to change behavior, to call God's people to him, to call them to covenant faithfulness. We see this throughout the Old Testament... In the story of David and his son with Bathsheba, David is told that his son will die as a result of his sin with Bathsheba and against Uriah. However, David laments, and repents, and turns to the Lord saying, "Who knows? Maybe the Lord will take this judgment, this curse, away from me." David knew that true prophecy requires repentance, requires a response of faithfulness.

Dr. David T. Lamb

I think we tend to think the purpose of prophecy is to foretell distant events in the future, and certainly that happens in Scripture. But more often, I think, in the prophetic books at least, we find prophecy is to proclaim things that are going to happen soon — sometimes bad things, sometimes good things. In Isaiah 38, the prophet Isaiah speaks to the king Hezekiah, the king of Judah, and basically tells him, "You're going to die." Hezekiah prays, and God tells the prophet Isaiah, "Go back to

Hezekiah, and tell him that you're going to give him 15 more years." Now we don't tend to think of that as a prophecy, but Isaiah is clearly a prophet, and he is telling what's going to happen to Isaiah, and in this case, it's in the immediate future that Isaiah is telling Hezekiah, "You've got 15 more years to live." So that's obviously good news. And a lot of the texts in biblical prophecies are giving encouraging news, kind of like to Isaiah, from Isaiah to Hezekiah. Other texts, and I think at least in the prophetic books of the Old Testament, we find a lot of announcements of judgment. We see, well, Amos the prophet receives a number of visions. There is a vision in Amos 8 where God speaks to Amos and shows him a basket of summer fruit. Now we don't really fully understand what that means, but the fruit — the Hebrew there is *qayits*, which is actually a pun on *qets*, "the end," which is coming — and so, God is telling Amos through this vision of fruit that judgment is coming upon the northern kingdom of Israel. And when Amos received that prophecy, probably somewhere around 760 B.C., the judgment, the destruction of Assyria in 720, 722, was about 40 years away. So that's not too far away, but it's basically a pronouncement of judgment upon the people of the northern kingdom of Israel. Whereas, if you jump to a more familiar book, the story of Jonah, God told Jonah, you need to tell the people of Nineveh that judgment is coming. And so Jonah goes. He doesn't go initially — there's the whole fish incident in chapter 1 — but finally Jonah gets around, arrives in Nineveh in chapter 3, and he says, "Forty days and Nineveh will be destroyed." So, there we see an example of an immediate pronouncement of judgment — 40 days. Amazingly, the people of Nineveh repent, and God shows mercy upon the Ninevites, which, of course, makes Jonah mad. So, I think we see examples in biblical prophecy of proclamations of encouragement like Hezekiah, proclamations of judgment for Amos and Jonah, sometimes a little bit further in the future like 40 years for Amos, and often more immediately, with the story of Jonah. But ultimately, at least in Jonah's case, the prophecy was meant to be a warning to get people to repent, and it did. So I think we see a variety of reasons, but God is trying to speak to his people, whether it's a word of encouragement or a word of judgment, to call them back to himself.

Dr. Gordon H. Johnston

Biblical prophecy itself, when Yahweh inspired the prophets, it was primarily to move the people to obedience, so it wasn't so much content and information oriented as much as functional. Yahweh was primarily calling the people to obedience, calling them to repentance — for those that are already obedient, to persevere in faith and obedience; to those that are disobedient, to repent of their sins. So it's primarily to move the people. If you will, biblical prophecy, Yahweh would reveal to the people that judgment was coming, but for the purpose that this could be avoided if the people would repent. Or he would reveal to the people this is the blessing that's in the offing, but that was with the assumption that if they continued to persevere in faith and obedience. So, it's almost if you could think of a highway with exit ramps where the prophet would tell the people that they're on a path of danger, and this is what's at the end of the road, but there's an off-ramp. And so, it's not simply that this is set in stone, that there's a calendar that we have to fulfill in the future, but it's primarily

giving the people a providential edge, if you will, that “this is your fate, but this is fate that can be avoided if there’s repentance.”

Dr. Miles Van Pelt

Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the twelve Minor Prophets, these prophets are fundamentally covenant lawyers. Their job is to execute Yahweh’s lawsuit against his people. His people throughout their history have disobeyed. The prophets announced that the people of God have disobeyed, and therefore, curses are coming. But after the curses, there’s always this notion of hope where the lawsuit is broken, and the Lord, through his prophet, offers the possibility of renewal, a new covenant, or a new temple, or the remnant returning, or things like this. And so they do more than talk about the future, although that’s a part of it. Their main point, however, is to show the people how, over the last several hundred years, they have fallen away from Yahweh, how they have broken his law, and how they have not loved him with all their hearts and souls and minds.

Question 7:

What is the significance of the cows of Bashan in the oracle of judgment from Amos 4?

Rev. Sherif Gendy, translation

The Bashan region existed to the northeast of the Jordan River and was famous for its fat herds of sheep and cows. The metaphor of “the cows of Bashan” is used many times in the Old Testament. For example, Psalm 22:12 says, “Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me.” The metaphor here is used to describe the enemies that oppressed and harmed the people. In Amos 4:1,

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are on the mountain of Samaria. Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to your husbands, “Bring, that we may drink!” (Amos 4:1).

It is talking here about the women of Samaria who asked their husbands for more prosperity. And they oppressed the poor and crushed the needy. In the history of Israel, when men’s leadership was declining, it was sort of God’s judgment over the people to appoint women or infants over them. “Infants” here refers to immature leadership. We can see an example of this in Isaiah 3:12:

My people — infants are their oppressors, and women rule over them (Isaiah 3:12).

So what happened during the days of Amos was that the women of Samaria mistreated the poor, oppressed the poor and abused the miserable and the needy. Therefore, the prophet described them as the fat cows of Bashan who abused others and asked for more things from their husbands, more wealth and properties, while abusing and oppressing the poor and the weak.

Dr. Donna Petter

If you're reading along in Amos 4:1, there's a woe oracle to the "cows of Bashan." But if you read on, those cows of Bashan are not cows on Mount Samaria, but they happen to be the women, the rich women, who are getting richer because of their greed, and therefore, this whole idea of figurative language — the cows of Bashan — is kind of like a sarcasm about the rich women in Samaria. And so, you have to have that as an understanding when you're reading the Prophets.

Question 8:**What are the elements of a covenant lawsuit?****Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.**

Whenever you talk about a covenant lawsuit you have to remember that every one of the so-called "forms" of prophetic speech have varieties. When you look at them in the actual Bible, in the text of the Bible, you notice they don't ever follow any particular format perfectly. They're never exactly the same. But when you think about a covenant lawsuit, the chief element of a covenant lawsuit is that the pieces or the dimensions of the courtroom scene of heaven are made rather explicit, and they're rather extensively described. That's as opposed to other sorts of oracles that are also involving the heavenly court, but the elements of the courtroom scene are not as explicit. But in a lawsuit, you'll have first, usually, some kind of description of the summons to court, that God will call certain people to the courtroom scene. And they'll come to the courtroom scene, and then God begins to speak as the judge. And sometimes, as the judge, God will say all kinds of different sorts of things like, "Why have you done this to me? How could you possibly, after all that I've done for you?" So, he'll complain as to why the defendant in the court — which is usually God's people, not always, but usually God's people — why they've done what they've done. And then, he'll start accusing them and telling them of all the things that they have done that are wrong and how they violated the covenant; so he addresses their sins next. And then, usually, there's some kind of declaration of guilt — "You're guilty for having done these things." And then, at the end of most lawsuits, there's some kind of sentencing. Usually the sentence of a lawsuit is, it's not going to go well for you. Judgment is going to come against you. Divine judgment is going to come against you in some form or another. But the interesting thing about Hosea is that his first covenant lawsuit in chapter 2 has this sort of strange ending to it. The sentencing does have the condemnation of judgment that's coming against the people of God in the northern kingdom of Israel, but that sentencing also has, added to it at the end, a word of blessing and a word of forgiveness that will come after the judgment in the future.

Dr. Douglas Gropp

A number of the prophetic judgment speeches could be said to take the form of a covenant lawsuit. The idea of a covenant lawsuit is based on international diplomacy, and our best exemplars of it are in Hittite diplomatic letters that we have, where a

Hittite diplomat goes to the vassal nation and prosecutes the terms of the treaty that was signed unto by the vassal king, but is now being violated. The prophet assumes that sort of role. And there is a number of key passages that have a fuller exemplification of those elements. In its fullness those elements would include a summons to the defendants and witnesses. Those witnesses could be heaven and earth, hills and mountains, such as we have in Micah 6. Those very witnesses are listed at the end of lists of witnesses in Hittite treaties. So, they echo the Hittite treaties. Then there would be an element that follows that gives a history of the covenant relationship between the suzerain, the great king, and the vassal king, followed by an indictment of the vassal for violating the treaty, which in turn would be followed by either a threat or a sentence for that violation of the treaty... That only applies in its fullness to, let's say, a handful of prophetic passages, but at the heart of prophetic judgment speeches are the two central elements of a covenant lawsuit and the indictment of the Israelites and the threat of judgment or sentence on the Israelites for their violation of God's covenant. And we could argue whether those should be part of the covenant form or just a more general judgment speech.

Question 9:

What are some of the blessings we receive from the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31?

Dr. Charles Quarles

There are a couple of key Old Testament passages when it comes to understanding the new covenant — one is Jeremiah 31, the other is Ezekiel 36. Other texts discuss the new covenant, but these are the fundamental ones. And those texts show us that the new covenant has two primary foci. On the one hand, the new covenant promises the forgiveness of sins. Ezekiel 36 speaks of us being cleansed of our iniquities and our uncleanness. Jeremiah 31:34 speaks of God remembering our sin no more. So, obviously, there's a big focus on the forgiveness of sin, and that's normally our focus when we speak of the new covenant. But the new covenant actually entails far more. Not only is there forgiveness of sin, but there is a radical transformation of the person that results in a dramatic change in behavior. And Jeremiah says it this way; he says that God will write his law upon our hearts. And the idea is that the very heart is transformed so that we begin to naturally and spontaneously exhibit the righteousness of God's own character. Ezekiel said it a little bit differently, but the point is the same. He said that God would give us a new heart, and he said that God would grant us the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit would move us to keep God's commandments and fulfill his ordinances. And Jesus does both. Through his sacrificial death, he provides for us forgiveness of sin. But in addition to that, he fulfills the promise of John the Baptist where he says, "The one who is coming after me is mightier than I am. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," referring back to the promise of the new covenant in Ezekiel 36. And when Christ writes God's law upon our hearts, when he places his Holy Spirit in us, it changes our very identity, it changes our very nature so that we begin to naturally and spontaneously exhibit the character of the holy God.

Dr. Mark Saucy

The benefits that we get from the new covenant, from Jesus, I think, start to be enumerated right in the original passage of the new covenant, or at least where that term is used in the Old Testament, and that's Jeremiah 31. In verse 33 and 34, there is an enumeration, or a listing, of the benefits that come in the new covenant that would be coming in the age to come and it starts out with the law written in your hearts. And then you have, if you bring in other passages, about the law is going to be written by the Spirit that God is going to put within the individual, in their heart. Then it moves into questions of knowledge of God. And then it will move into, also, questions of the access that we have to God. And I think, in the Prophets, it also moves into things that are going to happen socially through a restored nation, and it's going to affect all nations and finally the world. And so, we bring these to Christ. Christ is the one who poured out the Spirit at his ascension. That's what Pentecost was about. That is what makes and activates the new covenant age finally for all people who will be found in it by faith. And so, what he does in regeneration, what he does on the heart, what he makes us with a new love, all of the language of the New Testament, that's new covenant promise that Jesus has already initiated. The knowledge of God, a powerful demonstration of this is when the temple veil rent at the crucifixion that showed that the system that was mediating access to God by a cast, by a priestly cast, by calendar, by clean and uncleanness, definitions of the old covenant, those are done now. And access is now in a new open way. God welcomes us without a priesthood, without coming on a particular day. And so, this kind of knowledge of God is. And the most profound benefit, I would go back to that passage in Jeremiah is in verse 34 where he says, "Because I will forgive your sins." There's the foundation of the new covenant, and there's where we see the interface of the crucifixion, the cross of Christ, to the new covenant reality in the life. The sin problem God solved, and so all of the other benefits could be poured out.

Dr. Greg Perry

In Jeremiah 31, the prophet says that the Lord is going to make a covenant with Israel and Judah that is not like the covenant that he had made with their fathers. And what we see in the New Testament is that very early on Jesus himself refers to the language of Jeremiah. It's interesting that the higher critics often talk about Paul is the one who sort of develops this idea of the atonement. But actually, it's Jesus himself who bears witness at the Last Supper when he breaks bread and when he offers the cup. He says that the cup — in Luke's gospel, chapter 22 — he says, "This is the new covenant in my blood." And, of course, the main text that we see in the New Testament that elaborates and explains this further is in the epistle to the Hebrews in chapters 8 through 10. The longest quotation from the Old Testament in the New is a quotation from Jeremiah 31. It articulates that Jesus, with his own blood, has offered sacrifice for our sins, not the blood of bulls and goats, but with his own blood, and says that he is the mediator of the new covenant. One of the things that is really new about the new covenant is a definitive offering for sin, a sacrifice for sin. And so, the writer to the Hebrews says very clearly, he says that when this forgiveness is given there is no more need for a sacrifice for sin. So, Jesus fulfills the requirements of the new covenant in that way. And then we see it in other places in the New Testament.

Another aspect of the new covenant is going to be the giving of the Spirit in the hearts of the people of God. And so, Luke tells us in Acts 2 that it's the risen Christ who pours out the Spirit and fulfills that aspect of the new covenant. And then, also, we see in the book of Ezekiel another aspect of the new covenant is that God himself will shepherd his people. And so, in John's gospel, in John 10, we see Jesus talking about himself as the good Shepherd, the one who shepherds the flock of God's people.

Question 10: **What does repentance from sin look like?**

Dr. Bill Ury

The Bible shows repentance in some very visual ways. I love Hebrew; I've always loved the language because it's so pictorial. The word for repentance, the basic word, is *shub*, which means "to turn." And that's what it looks like basically. It's the choice to turn from sin. Now, of course, that turning is enabled by the gracious work of God. There's no way that anyone could turn from any sin without God enabling that turning. In Greek, the word for repentance is *metanoia*, which is a change of mind. And of course, the mind is not just the mental mind; it's a change of the whole orientation of one's life. Second Corinthians speaks about having a godly sorrow. And I'm sure we have pictures of what that means with tears and beating one's breast because we're in agony, and that may be sufficient at some points for repentance, but I think the much more deep conception, that just my emotional repenting is a foundational turning of my being, to say, Lord, I have run my life one way, and it's gotten me nothing but hell, hell in my life and hell maybe in the future. So I am turning toward you. I am turning all of my self-trust to trust you... I no longer am going to go that way or treat another person that way. So, it looks like typical response in daily life to a person you love. I want my life to please that person's heart or mind. And so I willingly repent, lovingly repent day by day, because I love that one more than I love myself. So, there can be godly sorrow in a graphic way, there can be turning of one's entire existence fundamentally to become a Christian, but there's also a daily repentance, which is the expression of love that I think we see throughout Scripture and, I know, throughout church history. I think that's why repentance is so important and sort of, what it looks like in real life.

Dr. Robert G. Lister

Repentance from sin involves turning from that sin. But insofar as it is evangelical repentance, it's not just turning away from something. It is also at the same time turning towards something. That something is a *someone*; it's Jesus, and we turn towards him in faith. So, there's an abandonment of my sin and a turn towards Christ in faith. At the same time, we could probably think through or tease out perhaps a couple of different dimensions of what that repentance involves, or looks like. One of those is an intellectual, or cognitive, awareness of my sin. I'm not likely to repent where I don't identify as a sinner and understand that I have broken God's laws in some way, shape or form. So, it has to be a sense of awareness, knowledge,

conviction that I am a sinner and that what I've done is wrong in the eyes of God. At the same time, however, it is possible that someone could, sort of, conceptually recognize, "what I've done is displeasing to God," and also not care about it. So, the second dimension would be a dimension of remorse, an emotional conviction that not only have I done something wrong, but I regret it. I'm displeased by it. I have sort of the grief towards my sin that God has as well. Those two components, then, in tandem, lead to the third component which is the exercise of the will, or the volitional capacity to turn from that sin as a promise or pleasure that was insufficient to deliver on what it promised, and turn towards Christ instead as the basis of superior promises and pleasures.

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