



Theses and Dissertations

---

2018-07-01

## י הנוני (Here Am I, Send Me): Person and Proximity in Literary Prophecy

Matthew S. Kershaw  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Kershaw, Matthew S., "י הנוני (Here Am I, Send Me): Person and Proximity in Literary Prophecy" (2018). *Theses and Dissertations*. 7458.  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/7458>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

הנני שלכני (Here am I, Send Me): Person and Proximity in Literary Prophecy

Matthew S. Kershaw

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

V. Stanley Benfell, Chair  
Donald W. Parry  
Matthew G. Ancell

Department of Comparative Arts and Letters  
Brigham Young University

Copyright © 2018 Matthew S. Kershaw

All Rights Reserved

## ABSTRACT

הנני שלכני (Here am I, Send Me): Person and Proximity in Literary Prophecy

Matthew S. Kershaw  
Department of Comparative Arts and Letters, BYU  
Master of Arts

Prophecy is a poorly understood genre, commonly understood as literature primarily focused on mantic visions of future events. A more nuanced understanding of literary prophecy recognizes the limits of this view, as well as the diversity of genres within many prophetic texts. These two views present one problem: forced readings of prophecy as a kind of reverse history on the one end and the problem of generic diversity on the other, resist an easy scheme of classification for prophetic literature. This study elucidates some of the problematic assumptions of primarily Biblical prophecy, and suggests that contemporary genre theory—which views genre in terms of function more than a mere scheme of literary kinds—can offer a unified conception of prophecy. From this, I suggest that prophecy can be defined as goal-oriented literary rhetoric intended to re-orient the reader or hearer into face-to-face aesthetic proximity with the Divine. The definition is defended utilizing a reading of the *Denkschrift* section of Isaiah, focusing primarily on chapter 5. The implications of this definition and the reading that follows are then explored through the lens of contemporary hermeneutics, where the theophanic encounter implicit in a reading of prophetic text is explored, and the proximity of second-person orientation is re-introduced to suggest that Biblical prophecy is intended to create a lived experience of the Covenant, where fidelity to the Covenant amounts to a face-to-face encounter with God.

Keywords: prophecy, genre theory, hermeneutics, Isaiah

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude is directed to all who have supported me throughout the process of this thesis. In particular, I would like to thank my committee for their patience and understanding in what can only be charitably called an inefficient process. I would also like to thank my friends in the comparative studies MA program, in particular David Delbar, for inexhaustible patience during my intrusive pondering exercises, without which none of this would have happened. I would also like to thank my family for their support and encouragement, without which I highly doubt that I would have made it this far. Finally, the mentorship and intellectual stimulation provided over the past six years by the faculty of Comparative Arts and Letters has been invaluable in enriching my life and expanding my mind. Special thanks go to Drs. Steven Sondrup, Larry Peer, and especially Stan Benfell.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
GENRE AND PROPHECY .....	5
Problems of Prophecy as Genre: Exterior (Context and Setting) Considerations. ....	5
Problems of Prophecy as Genre: Interior (Formal) Considerations.....	8
Rhetorical Reversal: Antithesis in Prophecy. ....	14
Genre Theory: The Cues of Literary Prophecy.....	17
ISAAH 5 AND THE <i>DENKSCHRIFT</i> : A CASE STUDY .....	21
HERMENEUTICS AND AESTHETIC PROXIMITY IN PROPHECY .....	32
CONCLUSION.....	42
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	44

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is concerned with understanding literary prophecy as its own genre, and with some exegetical implications that follow from that understanding. Common or casual exegesis of the prophets is often concerned with “fulfillment,” an overgeneralized assumption that prophets primarily speak of the unfolding of history in reverse, and with the overall doctrinal or theological value and/or place of a given prophetic utterance in the tradition of a given exegete. In the first case, prophets are usually understood mainly as conduits through which the future is divined, and who are concerned with the present only insofar as future catastrophes may be avoided or future blessings realized. In the second, prophetic texts are often sacrificed to fragmentation and tendentious reading in order to ensure a good theological fit. These tendencies are not without devotional or homiletic value, but strict attention to these aspects of prophetic text are necessarily narrow, and by misapplying these generic conventions, a reader will miss some crucial operations within the text. More serious and scholarly exegesis of prophetic text is more interested in accounting for the formal diversity throughout the prophetic corpus, and thus tends toward a fuller exploration of prophecy, its formal patterns, its historical context, and other facts of prophetic presentation such as style and rhetorical strategy. I will argue toward this latter end, suggesting that an exploration of prophecy that accounts for the aesthetics of the genre presented in its own terms will lead to richer readings that tend toward immediate, powerful aesthetic or religious experiences that hold the potential for immediate relevance to the reader, rather than mere deferral to fulfillment at either a later time or in a larger theological structure. This will be accomplished by an exploration of prophecy as genre and the aesthetic assumptions encoded within that genre.

Understanding prophecy as its own genre is difficult given the broad range of expression found in the Biblical prophetic corpus, with many individual oracles seeming to switch from one genre to another in the course of a single chapter.<sup>1</sup> But this observation assumes prophecy to be a kind of empty container for other genres to fill rather than being a genre all its own, using allusion and appropriation of other genres and texts to its own rhetorical and aesthetic ends. A reading that is true to the genre itself will understand that the primary fact of literary prophecy is that it falls in between the two broad categories of the aesthetic and rhetorical. Both of these categories are immediately (and in many cases solely) relevant to the reader and none else. Thus, if we understand prophecy as its own genre, the position and orientation of the speaker-prophet in the listener/hearer's aesthetic space is the primary assumption of the genre. Again, this immediate fact stands in stark contrast to the usual devotional assumption of the literal prophet's position and orientation in time, with the "fulfillment" of an utterance being the primary content of that utterance, an event that will take place at some point after the utterance itself, distant from the prophet and most likely the reader as well. This is not to say that time is no consideration in understanding Biblical prophecy: placing the prophet in the context of his own time lends valuable insight into the prophet's situation in a concrete sense, and can enrich any reading. But prophets speak to people, not to the empty time and faceless masses, and, as I will show, their discourse is striking for its uncompromising *directness*. Any generic definition must account for that striking directness, so I would suggest that prophecy can be understood as goal-oriented literary rhetoric intended to re-orient the reader into face-to-face aesthetic proximity with the Divine. Such an experience is designed to both evoke and invoke, and elicit varied reactions

---

<sup>1</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

depending on the reader's attitude toward both God and her neighbor: both the fear of annihilation and the comfort of communion with the Divine are equally possible outcomes of a successful reading of prophecy.

This definition suggests a model of exegesis that sees prophecy in terms of rhetorical strategy with an aesthetic telos, which can be supplemented, but not supplanted by, historical-critical exegesis based solely on a reconstruction of the text in the context of the prophet (or redactor's) own time. This allows the exegete to bring the diverse literary forms used by the prophet under one interpretive roof without tendentiously straining the text to fit a timeline of fulfillment in history or a given theological project. A key to this exegesis understands prophecy's telos to be either the elimination or manipulation of aesthetic space rather than an utterance requiring fulfillment in time. This does not preclude or eliminate historical or theological exegesis, rather, attention to the aesthetic process and telos can bring historical exegesis and much ethical or religious exegesis into a coherent harmony. As I intend to show, prophetic text understood in terms of aesthetic space becomes immediately relevant, while remaining theologically significant far beyond its original historical setting. But the aesthetic immediacy of the text remains the primary fact.

The thesis will unfold in three sections: First, I will identify some difficulties inherent in defining prophecy as genre and argue for the definition of literary prophecy in the light of contemporary genre theory. After exploring these issues, I will discuss some formal components of the genre and show how, as a result of understanding genre as function rather than a taxonomy of form, those components act as cues indicating the reader toward the very aesthetic telos of prophecy—a re-orientation of the reader toward the "face" of God, suggesting a kind of quasi-theophanic encounter, into proximity with the Divine. The second section will be a case study,



where I will examine a few prophetic texts from the Hebrew Bible and demonstrate in more detail *how* the genre works. Finally, I will utilize some twentieth century hermeneutic philosophy—in particular some of Martin Buber’s and Paul Ricoeur’s writings—to discuss some of the aesthetic implications that result from a face-to-face orientation, what Buber refers to as an I-You paradigm. The conclusion will try to harmonize the preceding parts utilizing Walter Brueggemann’s writings, where I will suggest that prophecy ultimately seeks to operate in a middle ground between theology and direct religious experience. In essence, I will argue that prophecy genre cues require some level of familiarity and sympathy with the idea of a lived covenant, and that my exploration of the genre has the possibility to re-orient readers of faith toward prophecy in a way that allows that prophecy to re-orient the reader toward God in the Covenant, a reality of broad theological and experiential dimensions. A covenantal reality, which prophecy both assumes and seeks to render immediate to the reader, is the ultimate second person, or face-to-face configuration: a reality that renders God both conceptually and immediately real and relevant.

## GENRE AND PROPHECY

### *Problems of Prophecy as Genre: Exterior (Context and Setting) Considerations.*

While I will argue that literature outside of the Hebrew or Christian canon can be considered prophecy, the basis of my argument relies on the Hebrew canon to demonstrate the formal and aesthetic patterns of prophecy within the framework of a unified genre. However, the formation of a genre out of a canonical text introduces some unique problems. In this context, prophecy is couched in a canonized anthology, where that anthology has the primary generic designation of "Scripture." This genre designation is problematic itself, but for our purposes its primary difficulty lies in its ability to obscure the myriad genres that exist within it, effectively steamrolling the diversity of its component writings into a unity. This is probably not intentional, but rather a byproduct of canonization. The common tripartite division of the Hebrew Bible (or "Tanakh") into Torah (instruction) Nevi'im (prophets) and Ketuvim (writings) suggests an organization by genre, but the collocation of these texts effectively assimilates these subcategories (or sub-genres) into that larger genre designation of "Scripture." What seems like luck for this project is that one of these divisions is explicitly labeled "prophets," one might assume a that section contains the entirety of the canon's prophetic works and nothing but prophetic works. However, the entire corpus attributed to Moses—a fairly prominent prophet in the Jewish tradition—lies in, indeed traditionally comprises the entire "Torah" section, lying completely outside the "prophets" section. Further problems lie in certain psalms, contained within "writings," but which are later interpreted as prophetic oracles in the New Testament, but which lack some formal prophetic structures or any reference to a named prophet. Also included in "writings" is the Book of Daniel, which includes several very explicit prophetic writings, including the lengthy apocalypse section. Even within the "prophets" section, certain texts

transgress the genre distinction. There, texts such as Judges and the various books of Kings contain historical narrative that lack any of the formal elements of prophecy *per se*, although they do contain stories of the former prophets like Elijah and Elisha, in whose attributed speech are found some of the formal elements of prophecy. Such figures set the stage for the full literary flowering of the genre, although the supernatural abilities found in the chronicle of their deeds tends to overshadow the literary content of their words. That literary flowering is found in the remaining texts in "Prophets," where the genre presents itself most clearly: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve, or so-called "minor prophets."

Viewing prophecy as an emerging literary phenomenon—one that shifts from folk-tale deeds to the undistilled potency of words imaginatively spun into complex and arresting rhetoric—is helpful in understanding the roots and essence of a genre that continually complicates itself by experimentation with form and an ever increasing rhetorical complexity. The process begins with stories: mendicant and mantic characters are presented as facts of Israelite history, signs of God's continued dealings with Israel. The encounters at this stage are understood as literal, the prophet acts as a stand-in for YHWH who appears on the scene, feeding poor widows and taunting rival priests<sup>2</sup> who call upon their gods in vain. The folk-hero prophet is seen as a messenger of the covenant,<sup>3</sup> which is implicit in the interactions between these folk-heroes and the people: those faithful to the covenant are blessed, those who mock or dismiss the prophet are cursed. But over time, the bombastic miracle stories fade into the background, and the messenger begins to emphasize the message: signs move away from miracles and into miraculous language. The prophets become poets of substantial literary output with little to no reference to miracle-

---

<sup>2</sup> e.g. Elijah in 1 Kings 34

<sup>3</sup> I borrowed the phrase from Malachi 3:1, as it describes well one of the essential assumptions and functions of the prophet: loyalty to the covenant.

working, and only occasional uses of narrative.<sup>4</sup> Some of these later narratives interspersed within the literary prophetic corpus take on symbolic value and show prophetic acts to signify in the same way the prophetic utterances do; an act of public performance has rhetorical value in the form of a living symbol.<sup>5</sup> Signs, at this point, require the same interpretation as the words, as acts cease to become mere dramatic examples of gods power and move into the realm of the signifier. From this point on, the primary mission of the literary prophet is to speak, to the point that even his acts are understood as speech.

But all of the books within “Nevi'im” named after specific personalities—beginning chronologically with Amos but flowering in Isaiah and beyond—represent a turning point in the phenomenon where genre considerations of literary prophecy *per se* become viable as an object of study, as opposed to the words of prophets in the first books of “Nevi'im,” which occupy interesting positions within the genre of historical narrative rather than their own literary space. From Amos on, several large corpora of text present themselves for consideration; the genre emerges from its embedded position within the larger framework of Israelite history and begins to speak in its own terms and with its own voice. But within that emerging voice, several disparate modes of discourse present themselves in a cacophony; the unity of form that may appear from without as a result of having individual bodies of text associated with a single named prophet betrays the complexity of the genre considered from within. The distinction created by naming corpora of prophetic texts narrows the question, but as Brevard Childs points out in his commentary on Isaiah, “the prophetic corpus presents accusation, invective, Torah instruction, trial summons, [as well as] dirge and promise,<sup>6</sup> among others.” Here, Childs is *only*

---

<sup>4</sup> e.g. the story of Hezekiah and Rabshakeh in Isaiah 36-39, or the conspiracy against Jeremiah in Jeremiah 11

<sup>5</sup> e.g. the naming of the prophet's children in Isaiah 7:3 and 7:14, or the children of Hosea and Gomer in Hosea 1, as well as the elaborate posturing of Ezekiel in Ezekiel 4.

<sup>6</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 16.

referring to the *first chapter* of Isaiah. The problem balloons as more prophetic texts are considered; even more forms are represented within the various sections of the Isaiah text, and still others in the broader prophetic corpus. Further complicating the question is the problem of authorship, a perennial problem particularly for Isaiah studies, where at least two pseudonymous authors are granted credit for the production a large block of the text (chaps. 40-55 and 56-66 respectively). Although the text suggests some unifying features—suggesting some degree of unity in authorship—contemporary scholarship recognizes that those features are tentative at best.<sup>7</sup> Other texts from the latter half of “Nevi’im” have similar issues, although none quite as stark as the division of the Isaiah corpus. The central fact here is that these texts manifest significant fragmentation both from without and within, which complicates any discussion of unifying them into a single genre.

With these observations in mind, the generic question turns inward to questions of form within the various corpora of named prophetic texts themselves, along with the diversity of genres found in those corpora. How can a genre category be created that accounts for the presence of a plurality of formal structures within it?

*Problems of Prophecy as Genre: Interior (Formal) Considerations.*

In defining prophecy as genre, etymology is a good place to start, and is useful to a point. However, any definition that resorts to the word “prophecy” must recognize that literary expression in the mantic mode where one speaks to or for the Divine is found in many languages, traditions and formulations beyond Hebrew and beyond the period of the closed Hebrew canon. Our contemporary concept of the prophet is closely linked to the Greek tradition, given the Greek root of the word “prophecy” itself: John F.A. Sawyer elucidates the issue:

---

<sup>7</sup> cf. the introduction to Brevard Childs *Isaiah* cited above, or John D.W. Watts, *Isaiah 1–33*, (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985) for a further exploration of these issues.

It is significant ... that the earliest Greek translators chose to translate *nabi*, not by the word *mantis* (from which words like 'necromancy' are derived), but by *prophetes* 'interpreter', from which our English word 'prophet' is derived (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:29). 'Prophecy' means both prediction (foretelling) and proclamation (forthtelling), so that 'prophets' include not only people with supernatural powers, able like Cassandra, for example, to foresee events in the future, but preachers like St Francis Assisi, John Wesley, Martin Luther King and other 'proclaimers' as well.<sup>8</sup>

Here the prophet is understood by the speech act that is associated with a supernatural gift, not necessarily the gift<sup>9</sup> itself. Vision and other mantic gifts contribute to the overall persona and credibility of a prophet, but it is the act of speaking which designates a prophetic figure. And while the ability to discern and convey the future, whether through direct vision or symbolic acts<sup>10</sup> (see Ezekiel 3-4, Isaiah 20), the ability and obligation to reveal the future does not comprise the totality of the prophet's identity and mission. Even in the Greek tradition, such mantic foretellers as Cassandra were offset by the Oracle at Delphi, whose more characteristic forthtelling style sought to expose the deep nature of reality *in the present* as well as the future, as in the "mystery" of Socrates' wisdom.<sup>11</sup> Also, as Sawyer points out, the genre is not limited to expression in the ancient world. Although the Hebrew prophecy that attained canonical status flowered and faded over 2000 years ago, the genre had a medieval resurgence in the canon of Islam. Within and around the text of the Holy Qur'an are a broad range of exegetical issues that parallel those in Hebrew and Christian scripture, and while the Qur'anic text takes on the full flower of medieval style—the Qur'an is, after all, the longest and most internally diverse single

---

<sup>8</sup> John F.A. Sawyer, *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew verb נָבֵא (prophesy) from which the noun נָבִיא (prophet) is derived reflects this distinction as well, and also shows an evolution in the meaning. Brown, Driver and Briggs define נָבֵא as referring to "in oldest forms, of religious ecstasy with or without song and music; later, essentially religious instruction, with *occasional predictions*." Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2012), 612.

<sup>10</sup> e.g. the performances found in Ezekiel 3–4 or Isaiah 20.

<sup>11</sup> See Plato, *Apology*, 20e–23c, trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 17–36.

corpus of prophetic literature in the genre—its richness demands its own examination in another study. But even beyond the Qur'an, there is a medieval resurgence in mantic literature from other traditions that can take the character of the prophetic. Extracanonial writings of medieval mystics from all monotheistic faiths utilize and reinvent the genre in the writings of Hildegard of Bingen, Jalal al-Din Rumi, or even early modern and enlightenment figures such as George Herbert or Joseph Smith. The list is extensive in both the medieval and modern periods.

These observations significantly expand the scope of prophecy as a genre, and in one sense complicates the project of defining that genre. However, one crucial observation arises from the complexity: prophecy comes from prophets. This seems obvious, but it cannot be overlooked in being taken for granted, as it has some important implications. The genre itself presupposes a kind of personality, a literary type who makes certain claims, many of them fantastic. Non-prophetic literature tends to not make direct and (more importantly) authoritative claims to inspiration. Poetry is written by poets, and plays by playwrights, author and work can in some sense be separated, where differences in creativity and imagination separate author from reader, and where the divine breath of “inspiration” is more of a literary tool than an actual, literal claim, as in the Homer’s epic invocations to the Muses. In contrast to the regular operations of imagination in producing literature, the prophet’s claims are more explicit, granting them access to the Divine Voice in a privileged liminal space, with one foot in the world of corrupt mortality and the other in the eternal realm of the Divine. In Biblical Hebrew prophecy, the *כה אמר* or “spokesman” both invokes and speaks for the Divine in a typical genre cue (*יהוה*) “Thus Saith the Lord.”

The idea of the prophet’s liminal position merits some brief exploration for the sake of clarity. The hermeneutic implications of this idea will be explored in section three, but the above

reference to Plato's *Apology* is a useful segue into the prophet's unique position and its generic implications. As Socrates recounts his attempts to unravel the mystery of his own wisdom, he mentions examining the poets, whose knowledge was as unaccountable as it was brilliant, but who had no way of explaining how they knew what they knew. Socrates suggests that "the poets do not compose their poems with knowledge, but by some inborn talent and by inspiration, like seers and prophets<sup>12</sup> who also say many fine things without any understanding of what they say."<sup>13</sup> While the Greek doesn't use the term *προφήτης* specifically, Socrates suggests a continuum on which various degrees of inspiration fall, with the poet "like" but not completely equal to the mantic seers mentioned. What the poet experiences on occasion and is unable to explain is the prophet's primary mode of discourse. The poet is an occasional visitor to the unaccountable Other, while the prophet is a consistent resident with dual citizenship between Heaven and Earth,<sup>14</sup> or even across what the Qur'an refers to as <sup>15</sup> *الْعَالَمِينَ*.

The liminal space occupied by the prophet is underscored when the etymology is traced back even further. Such etymological dives into historical usage can create more questions than answers, as "the diverse activity and the historical development of Israelite prophecy do not yield a single prophetic essence that illuminates the etymological problem."<sup>16</sup> As explored above, some texts are primarily concerned with a prophetic message, while others are "principally occupied with a phenomenon (playing the *nabi*) that accompanies divine presence or action."<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> ἐνθουσιάζοντες and θεομάντις, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> See Plato, *Apology*, 22c, trans. G.M.A. Grube in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 17–36.

<sup>14</sup> e.g. one of Isaiah's most consistent prefatory formulations found in Isaiah 1:2, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Usually translated as "the worlds," or occasionally as "the universe." A different vowel of this may reflect other references to Earth and Heaven by inflecting the final vowel to form a dual rather than a plural, rendering the phrase "the two worlds."

<sup>16</sup> Daniel E. Fleming, "The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew *nabi*: The One Who Invokes God." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, Vol. 55, 1993. 217–224.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 222.



Particularly thorny among the etymological issues is the question of whether the verb (translated as “to call” or “to invoke”) from which the Hebrew *nabi* derives—along with its other derivations in near eastern languages such as Akkadian—is an active or a passive verb. Since the difference between active and passive verbs plays out in the vowelizing of Semitic languages, and vowels are not denoted in ancient manuscripts, a clear and definitive answer as to the “original” meaning of the verb and the noun of activity associated with it is probably not forthcoming. However, the Brown, Driver, and Briggs translation of *nabi* as “spokesman” actually embraces both the active and passive possibilities; a spokesman is both one who calls, and one who *is* called.<sup>18</sup> A more bold translation may put the prophetic “spokesman” to occupy both the active and passive realms where the “speaker” and the “bespoken” occupy the same body. This adds to the prophet’s liminality: how can the reader understand the speech act of one who both speaks and is spoken for, or even spoken through?

From this observation regarding the liminal position of the prophet flow all of the problems germane to prophecy as genre, as well as their solutions. Foremost among these problems is theophany: the problem of representing the Divine. Given the prophet’s liminal position as conduit for divine communication, all of the literary problems germane to theophany are manifest in literary prophecy, albeit implicitly. Walter Brueggemann suggests one strategy of understanding the prophet’s position. He characterizes a prophet as one “who tries to articulate the world as if God were active in [it].”<sup>19</sup> For Brueggemann, the prophet’s task, articulating a perceived reality, is similar to the poet’s. But the prophet’s reality is literally extraordinary: they have not only the ability, but also the obligation, to articulate the existence, the activity, and even

---

<sup>18</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishing, 2012), 611.

<sup>19</sup> Walter Brueggemann and Kenyatta Gilbert, “A Conversation with Walter Brueggemann and Kenyatta Gilbert,” YouTube video, 21:57, July 11, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-rVAAtK5gPo>.

the presence of God *in accessible language*. Every oracle<sup>20</sup> belies an implicit theophany. In encountering the prophet, the reader encounters the Divine through a medium. Given the impossibility of representing the Divine directly, a plurality—indeed an explosion—of attempts and strategies within the genre is not only to be expected but should be viewed as necessary to the prophetic project.

It is therefore this notion of a Divine encounter that is central to the consideration of literary prophecy. The prophet has two realities to reconcile through his literary activity. The first is the ineffable, inscrutable mode of God's existence and activity. The second is the activity and state of God's creation, especially those most fickle of beings created in His image.<sup>21</sup> The limitations of humanity, both epistemologically and—more importantly for prophecy—ethically, create an endless series of problems for the prophet. Thus the rapid shift in style, genre, and content is necessary to introduce oblique modes of representation that signify, or at least gesture toward, an encounter with the Divine. Sometimes this happens by a kind of dramatic proxy: standing in God's place as spokesman, or by more purely literary methods like parables or other rhetorical devices. In most cases, various kinds of strongly suggestive poetry act as a catalyst to bridge the gap between invocation and evocation, foregrounding God in the aesthetic space of the hearer.

These oblique modes seek direct encounter, but—being oblique—naturally avoid representing that encounter directly. However some direct encounters—actual theophanies—are found in the prophetic corpus. One striking case is the literary motif of the prophet's initial call, found in most of the named books of prophecy but most bombastically and vividly portrayed in Isaiah 6. There, the prophet stands symbolically in a drama of Divine encounter, an encounter

---

<sup>20</sup> I use the term for any prophetic utterance.

<sup>21</sup> Genesis 1:26–27

that the prophet hopes his hearers will seek to replicate. In this text, Isaiah is overwhelmed by the sheer glory of God and His attendants (vv. 1-4), followed by horror at his own unworthiness to encounter the Divine, a mirror of or even a derivative fact of his people's unworthiness (v 5). This precedes a rather terrifying kataphatic display of the prophet's "purging" and reconciliation with God (vv. 5-7). I will turn to some more specific elements of this oracle in the next section, but it is useful at this point to keep in mind the nature of this encounter and the mode of its presentation as typical of the content and telos of prophecy as I have defined it, even though its direct presentation differs formally from the oblique strategies that are far more common in prophecy. The central observation is that various modes can and must be employed to signify a Reality beyond comprehension, and that Divine presence is implied in the encounter brought about by the prophet's utterance.

*Rhetorical Reversal: Antithesis in Prophecy.*

The primacy of the prophet's liminal space and claim to authority must be a central consideration in understanding prophecy as a genre. Aside from this, prophecy does manifest a kind of formal unity, as long as unity of form is understood as closely linked to rhetorical content, given the highly rhetorical bend of prophecy. With that in mind, I suggest that the most prevalent formal construct in literary prophecy can be classified as a complex and sophisticated use of antithesis, what I prefer to call rhetorical reversal. The prophet makes rhetorical moves to irrupt a complacent—even stagnant—worldview or ethical attitude held by the prophet's hearers. One example of just such a rhetorical irruption is the opening lines of Habakkuk. Here, the prophet begins his expression with what might otherwise be unthinkable: an invective against God:

עַד־אַנְהָ יְהוָה שׁוֹנֵעַתִּי וְלֹא תִשְׁמָע  
 אֲנַעֲק אֱלֹהִי חָמָס וְלֹא תוֹשִׁיעַ

למה תראני אָנוֹ וְעַמִּל תְּבִיט

וְשָׂד וְחַמָּס לַנִּגְדִי נִהְיָ רֵיב וּמְדוֹן יִשָּׂא

עַל־כֵּן תִּפּוּג תּוֹרָה וְלֹא־יִצָּח לְנֻצַח מִשְׁפָּט

כִּי רָשָׁע מִכְתִּיר אֶת־הַצְּדִיק עַל־כֵּן יִצָּא מִשְׁפָּט מֵעַקֵּל

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen?

Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law [Torah] becomes slack, and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—therefore judgment comes forth perverted.<sup>36</sup>

In this case, along with many others in the prophetic corpus, the rhetorical reversal becomes explicit in God's answer to Habakkuk. But this opening invective is worth examining as a "set up" for the prophetic punchline, which drips with irony. The prophet does not openly lay the blame on YHWH for the sin of the people, but he does implicate Him in the crime. The complaint actively bemoans YHWH's deafness in the first two-line strophe, and passively suggests His apathetic blindness in the second strophe by forcing Habakkuk to witness what He Himself does not care to change, punish, or even react to. The result is an ineffective Law with no enforcer; the prophet's despairing rhetoric droops along with the slackness of the law. Thus, the stage is set for a total reversal of expectations. The prophet then completes the reversal with YHWH's response, underscoring the miraculous, unknowable nature of the response:

רְאוּ בְגוֹיִם וְהִבְיטוּ

וְהִתְמַהוּוּ תִמְהוּ

---

<sup>36</sup> Habakkuk 1:2-4, NRSV

כִּי־פָעַל פְּעַל בְּיַמֵּיכֶם

לֹא תֵאֱמָינוּ כִּי יִסְפָּר

Look at the nations, and see!

Be astonished! Be astounded!

For a work is being done in your days

That you would not believe if you were told.<sup>37</sup>

YHWH's response is to demand that the prophet expand the scope of his vision, to see and hear as YHWH Himself sees and hears: beholding, encompassing, and utilizing the totality, even the unthinkable heathen. In speaking the imperative רִא (look!), the prophet eliminates the unfeeling, literally insensible space between his own worldview and that of the Divine. YHWH draws Habakkuk into his realm, asking him to look out over the new reality; the imperative רִא suggests that they stand side by side, sharing the greater, Divine vision (vv. 6–11), which Habakkuk heretofore had been unable to see, blinded by rage and resentment as he was. As Habakkuk "catches the vision," he turns to psalming (vv. 12–17) and uses his new expanded vision to point out the similarly narrow worldview of the heathen, who will attribute the blessing of their success (in antithesis to Habakkuk's own lamentation of failure at the beginning of the oracle) to the very nets by which they catch their metaphorical fish (v. 16).

The rhetorical reversal here is an example of antithesis, but only under an admittedly broad definition of the term, which is normally restricted to two utterances that stand in stark and obvious opposition to one another. Prophecy does utilize this more specific technique,<sup>38</sup> but I deliberately choose a more complex example to show how sophisticated the use of opposites in dialogue may be in the project of closing aesthetic distance. Habakkuk calls into question the

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. v. 5

<sup>38</sup> e.g. Isaiah 3:10–11

very nature of sensation, as he is compelled to broaden his vision in order to understand that it is he, not God, who is blind to reality. This only occurs as the prophet is drawn into YHWH's aesthetic space, as YHWH answers Habakkuk's own second-person invective with His own second person imperative. The two look together, with the prophet gradually gaining that vision by being pulled out of his own aesthetic space, a narrow space where the prophet with his limited hermeneutic sees the evil in the here and now as a totality and impugns the eternal God for it. Habakkuk's journey is a result of YHWH playing with and reversing his own expectations; the imperative and what follows (look!) opens the way for an entirely new mode of "vision."

*Genre Theory: The Cues of Literary Prophecy.*

Up to this point, I have made a case for prophecy understood as genre in terms combining the claims of authorship and form. This is useful up to a point, as some of the internal and external aspects of the literature can create confusion around what the nature of the genre actually is. But the better question, which I have suggested in explicating the above example, is what prophecy does, and how it does it. Given the rhetorical essence of prophecy, this question ought to hold pride of place. Luckily, contemporary genre theory that views genre as function deriving from form, rather than form per se, sheds some very helpful light on the subject. This section will focus on the work of genre theorists such as M.M. Bakhtin, Hans Robert Jauss, John Frow, and others, who will show how prophecy's generic unity can result from functional more than formal terms.

Frow defines genre "as a form of symbolic action: the generic organisation of language, images, gestures, and sound [that] *makes things happen* by actively shaping the way we understand the world."<sup>42</sup> The characterization of genre as symbolic action is particularly useful in

---

<sup>42</sup> John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 2, emphasis added.

understanding Biblical prophecy, which utilizes an array of linguistic methods but also uses a much broader view of symbolic action (as mentioned above) to accomplish its task. But it is the understanding that genre "makes things happen" that allows space in the genre-rich field of literary prophecy to find some formal unity. Frow continues: "Far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create *effects of reality and truth*, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood..."<sup>43</sup> Given my understanding of prophecy, the end result of rhetorical reversal—an irruption within and a hoped-for shift of worldview on the part of the reader/hearer—fits neatly within this idea of reality or truth-effects. The prophet has a worldview, and he tries to draw his hearers into it. The more important implication is that God has a worldview, and he wants the prophet to draw his hearers into it. But with this observation we return to the problem of shared space between the prophet and the Divine: the implicit theophany embedded in Biblical prophecy. Since any encounter with the Divine staggers the mind, and lands necessarily in territory that transgresses a normal mimetic mode, the truth or reality *effects* of prophecy will attempt to convey the rocky reality of the absolute Otherness of the Divine, while attempting to bring us into the aesthetic space of the same, the absolute Other.<sup>44</sup> The truth effects of such a transgressive mode of perception cannot be understood purely formally; form must itself be transgressed to serve this impossible end. It is function that unites the mode of expression that in turn produces the truth effects of implicit theophany. Form, as suggested above, acts as a catalyst to achieving those truth effects.

The following description of genre's mode of operation by Jauss is helpful in understanding prophecy in genre-functional terms. Jauss describes the phenomenon, laying out the "process" of genre resulting from its formal cues:

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>44</sup> An interesting example can be found in contrasting Qur'an 13:12–15 with 50:16.

A literary work, even when it appears to be new, does not present itself as something absolutely new in an informational vacuum, but predisposes its audience to a very specific kind of reception by announcements, overt and covert signals, familiar characteristics, or implicit allusions. It awakens memories of that which was already read, brings the reader to a specific emotional attitude, and with its beginning arouses expectations for the 'middle and end,' *which can then be maintained intact or altered, reoriented, or even fulfilled ironically in the course of the reading according to specific rules of the genre or type of text.* The psychic process in the reception of a text is, in the primary horizon of aesthetic experience, by no means only an arbitrary series of merely subjective impressions, but rather the carrying out of specific instructions in a process of *directed perception*, which can be comprehended according to its constitutive motivations and triggering signals.<sup>45</sup>

Jauss' broad and complex characterization of genre's function resonates well with the complex function of prophecy. Through formal cues and familiarity with the genre or adjacent genres (which may be adapted, co-opted, or even satirized), any given reading of prophecy finds some successful outcome in the cultivation of expectations, and some consummation of those—whether that consummation is fulfillment or frustration. The end result is, in Jauss' words, "directed perception," a new orientation toward the reading, or even the world at large as a result of the reading. It follows from Jauss' articulation of genre's function that genre, as a function, has the potential to succeed or fail. If the triggering signals fail to trigger the reader in the intended direction, the genre function is voided and the reading fails. A useful metaphor might be mistaking a functional doorknob for a delicious jelly donut. One might manage to eat a doorknob, but it would produce unpleasant truth effects. More importantly, eating the doorknob will not open the door, however much it may be savored. When the doorknob is eaten, it is only "used" successfully if we broaden our definitions to the point of absurdity. In a reading, as in any experience, the proper "use" of genre is essential to a full realization of that genre's potential.

---

<sup>45</sup> Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, Trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 23, emphasis added.



Prophecy must be understood in terms of its ethical immediacy and its capacity to reorient the reader's worldview, not merely in terms of its supplemental value to a theological system or as a mode of reading God into history. These are second-order concerns; the prophet without the ethical urgency is, in my opinion, no prophet at all.

This brief aside serves as a useful metaphor for why an exploration of prophecy as genre is actually needed. In three of the four modes of classical Jewish exegesis, namely רמז (allegorical), פירוש (midrashic), and סוד (mystical), prophetic text in its proper generic mode tends to be subordinated to the needs of the exegete, whatever those needs may be. Only in פשוט (literal) is the immediate consideration of the text considered in the mode I am suggesting. This is equally true in the various halakhic and aggadic enterprises, where the integrity of the oracle is compromised in the interest of the larger aims of the exegetical project. Christian exegesis follows suit: individual verses are excised out of context in order to serve the needs of the doctrinal enterprise in question, whether homiletic or theological. Projects that begin with the end in mind, undertaking the laudable task of finding unity in Scripture, tend to force prophetic text into a coherent unity, but this kind of operation "results in a literary and theological flattening of the richness of the prophetic witness."<sup>46</sup>

I will return to explore some of the exegetical implications of genre function-led readings of the prophets in the third section. For now, I merely wish to draw attention to the functional unity of prophecy, which is defined by having a unified rhetorical/aesthetic end. Understanding this unity in primarily functional rather than formal terms circumvents the steamrolling of scripture into a single mode of expression. Rather, prophecy conveys truth equally through *effects* by utilizing multiple genres, and the cues inherent in the prophetic genre

---

<sup>46</sup> Childs was referring to the specific practice of forcing the Isaiah text into a model of single authorship, but the spirit of his comment fits here. Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 3.

itself. These various genres act in dialogue, framing each other in order to suggest the truth effects of Divine encounter and ethical emergency. Frow clarifies how this is possible:

It is not the formal features in themselves that lead us to make a different generic assignment... It is, rather, the different *framing* of the two texts—their placing in different contexts—that governs the different salience of their formal features, and of all the other dimensions of genre that are entailed in this shift of frame: a different structure of address, a different moral universe, and different truth-effect.<sup>47</sup>

It is not the *what* of prophecy that creates the richest display of truth-effects. It is the *how*. Thus in prophecy, the framing device, or as I will demonstrate, the attempt to remove the third-person frame or proscenium that creates aesthetic space in other genres, is—to take one example from the Isaiah text—what transposes a normal psalm<sup>48</sup> into a prophetic oracle. This psalm, which concludes the *Denkschrift* section of First Isaiah, serves as a symbolic reconciliation between God and the reader, mediated through the prophet, and achieved as a result of the roller-coaster ride that comprises chapters 5–12. I turn now to that example, focusing on the beginning and ending of the section to serve as a case study.

#### ISAIAH 5 AND THE *DENKSCHRIFT*: A CASE STUDY

Underscoring the problem of genre in prophecy, Brevard Childs notes a problem at the outset of Isaiah 5, specifically the first literary division found in the first seven verses:

There has been much discussion concerning the exact genre of this song. The problem lies in understanding the relation between the predominately wisdom components of a parable and the prophetic features of a judgment oracle. The very recognition of a unique mixture of literary traditions should guard against an unfruitful search for a formally consistent pattern with one genre. *Attention to both form and function is critical.*<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> John Frow, *Genre* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

<sup>48</sup> e.g. Isaiah 12.

<sup>56</sup> Brevard Childs, *Isaiah*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45, emphasis added.

Beyond the problems implicit within the song itself, as Childs goes on to point out, the song's relation to the remaining text in chapter 5 is unclear. I chose to use this chapter as a case study for precisely this reason: the plurality of genres within the literary unit obscures a coherent reading based on formal considerations alone. Rather, as Childs concludes, attention to function is critical, and I believe Isaiah's function to be a brilliant manipulation of aesthetic space that is then transposed into the various literary "keys" that harmonize with the tonic note of irony that grounds the original song. The following explication will demonstrate.

The first utterance in Isaiah 5 is given in the form of a strong cohortative אָשִׁירָה נָא [Let me sing]: an explicit genre cue. The oracle is presented in terms not frequently associated with prophecy, as the prophet sings a song for his "wellbeloved" concerning his vineyard. The Hebrew acoustics that open the chapter reinforce the explicit genre cue in conveying the aesthetic sense of an idyll, characterizing the content of the song with bouncy assonance. I return to the full first phrase: אָשִׁירָה נָא לְיַדֵּי שִׁירַת דּוֹדִי (Ashera-na ledidi shirat dodi) to signal a song of sensual pleasure that will terminate in a savory romp in both bucolic and erotic spaces. The possibility of wine and love tint the horizon of expectation in the soft lighting that one's beloved and his vineyard ought to provide, that the tone of this utterance all but assures. But the phrase hides an implicit and as-yet unrevealed irony. A brief reference to the English tradition may clarify the process at work here: the song is delivered in a mode similar to Hamlet's instruction to his players: the introduction is delivered "trippingly on the tongue;"<sup>57</sup> the sensual elegance of the song's delivery ensures that the hidden content is buried under a veneer of prettiness. The comparison is apt, as both Isaiah 5 and Hamlet's play utilize explicit genre cues designed to

---

<sup>57</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*; *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, act 3, sc. 2, 1–2, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 681–718.

rhetorically disarm, then ambush. Isaiah's own "mousetrap" sets the scene safely behind the proscenium of the third person; not only is this a harmless song, it is a harmless song about a third party, an abstract "him," suffixed<sup>58</sup> safely behind the threshold in his imaginary vineyard.

Before moving into an assonant list of the beloved's careful labors on this vineyard, the absolute choicest ground is chosen. The King James Version describes the real estate as "a very fruitful hill,"<sup>59</sup> but the Hebrew utilizes much richer imagery, literally "בְּקֶרֶן בֶּן-שֶׁמֶן" [the horn of the son of fatness]: a hilltop that positively oozes with seductive, productive potential. The reader salivates with anticipation as the vineyard's owner then lovingly prepares the ground by removing stones, choosing the best vines, and even building a tower to defend the choice crop from ne'er do wells. The anticipation peaks as the master of the vineyard יִקֵּב הַצֵּב (yeqev-khatsav: another use of assonance) literally digs out a winepress in the rich soil, embraced on all sides by the slow-growing grapes. The richness of description in the song pulls the reader into anticipation along with the "beloved" while remaining oblique to the situation, the "beloved" is consistently referred to in the third person, leaving the reader at a distance from the impact of the situation. Thus we wait patiently along with the wellbeloved<sup>60</sup> for the vineyard to bring forth sweet grapes to match the sweetness of both land and labor, and we have the same reaction when we "taste" the sourness of the בְּאֲשֵׁיִם, or "wild grapes."

The aesthetic proximity created by the richness of the description of both labor and landscape is, up to this point, implicit. But the prophet takes this moment of tasting, perhaps even spitting out the sour grapes to shift the mode and eliminate the pretense of the third-person proscenium with a strong imperative, matching form with the cohortative that began the song:

---

<sup>58</sup> In Hebrew, possessive pronouns are affixed to the end of the nouns they modify.

<sup>59</sup> Isaiah 5:1, KJV

<sup>60</sup> I have chosen to leave the KJV translation for יִקֵּב given its hyperbolic tone, which I think appropriate.

What was אֲשִׁירָה נָא , or “Let me sing,” becomes אֲפָטֵר-נָא, or the imperative form: “judge.” Much like Hamlet's play, what was idle entertainment drips with implication. Hamlet, like Isaiah, rips the proscenium down by shifting address from the third person to the second: “Madam, how like you this play?”<sup>61</sup>

I pause briefly to point out that this rhetorical shift of address by means of the parable is not new or unique in the Isaiah text, it is seen in prophetic stories from the historical texts contained in “Nevi'im.” The most obvious forerunner of the rhetorical method is attributed to Nathan in the “Parable of the Poor Man’s Ewe Lamb” found in 2 Samuel 12. There, in discovering an intense injustice committed in his kingdom, David is tricked into pronouncing judgment before finding out the parties involved. Nathan’s shift into the second person is all the more powerful in being succinct: אַתָּה הָאִישׁ. “YOU are the man!”<sup>62</sup> But Isaiah’s use of the person-shift goes further than Nathan’s. While the latter keeps the scenario in the realm of human activity, a realm beset with human frailty and corruption, Isaiah’s song recounts a transgression arising from nature itself. Embedded in the song is a question of the cosmic order of things; the shocking reversal in the order of husbandry has immediate, dramatic, and existential consequences. When one cultivates carefully, one ought to reap bountifully. It is the weight of this horror that is then transposed onto the “you” in question: יוֹשֵׁב יְרוּשָׁלַם וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה (Inhabitant of Jerusalem, Man of Judah).<sup>63</sup>

Once the rhetorical move into aesthetic proximity is completed, the audience is understood to stand in the presence of the Divine, where the actual invective begins. “מִה-לְעֵשׂוֹת “ עוֹד לְכַרְמִי וְלֹא עָשִׂיתִי בּוֹ” (What more was there to do for my vineyard / that I have not done in

---

<sup>61</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, 3.2.253. Cited according to *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 681–718.

<sup>62</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7, NRSV

<sup>63</sup> Isaiah 5:3, my translation.

it?).<sup>64</sup> Even though the terms have shifted, and the hearer and object of the Beloved's rage is explicitly named, the parable continues in its original formulation. The prophet at this point is folding the pointed, concrete castigation into the parable itself, refusing to leave the rich imagery behind and ensuring that every part of the parable applies to every part of the hearer. The prophet's hearer, like a fertile vineyard on a fine, fruitful hill, is privileged, bound for greatness, and had every amount of labor and care bestowed upon him, with all sorts of provisions made for his continual, fruitful success. The horror of the taste of sour grapes is the horror of the Lord at viewing the transgression of the "man of Judah," which is not a mere disappointment. It is a crime against nature, a transgression of the laws of covenant husbandry. The rhetorical question takes on an absolute urgency as the expectations cultivated by a combination of labor, love, and loyalty to the laws of nature has literally soured the Beloved—now understood concretely as the disappointed God facing the reader<sup>65</sup>—on the whole project. The hope is that the hearer shares the horror of the once-oblique “Beloved,” who stares pointedly through the broken forth wall: This established, shared horror then turns to act as the framing device for the rest of the oracle.

With the castigation finished by means of a rhetorical question, the speaker, now understood to be YHWH Himself, combines the opening utterances of the first and third strophes in moving to judgment in verse 5. The first repetition is the phrase וְעַתָּה (and now) which echoes the opening of verse 3, as YHWH forces the judgment into the immediate space of the hearer's face in the "now." In the immediate “here” created by the irrupted proscenium that results from the third-person shift to the second, and in the explicit “now” which opens both verses 3 and 5, the reader is invited to pronounce judgment against himself. YHWH participates as well, pronouncing judgment in the "now" by another explicit genre cue. The phrases echo with similar

---

<sup>64</sup> Isaiah 5:4, NRSV.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. v. 7.

grammatical constructs matching the disarming idyll that opens the first verse with the pregnant implication of the third, leading to the fury of the fifth. Looking at the two opening phrases together, we see the strong cohortative of verse one אָשִׁירָה נָא (let me sing) antithetically echoing in the strong cohortative of verse 5: אֲדַיְעָה־נָא (let me inform you), an ominous cue: the short and violent future of the Lord's vineyard is laid out in chilling detail. The order of nature is restored, as the vineyard that brought forth wild grapes is returned to its wild state (vv. 5–6): hedges are removed, the entire crop is consumed, and rather than being nourished and cultivated, the beatific vineyard is stomped into the ground and starved of water.

The parable and the proximity are brought into a stark unity as the prophet himself interprets the oracle up to that point:

כִּי כָרַם יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת  
 בַּיַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל  
 וְאִישׁ יְהוּדָה  
 גִּטְעוֹ שִׁעְשׁוּעֵיוֹ  
 וְיָקוּ לְמִשְׁפָּט  
 וְהָגָה מִשְׁפָּח  
 לְצַדִּיקָהּ וְהָגָה צַעֲקָהּ

For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts  
 is the house of Israel,  
 and the people of Judah  
 are his pleasant planting.  
 He expected justice,  
 but saw bloodshed;

righteousness,  
but heard a cry!<sup>66</sup>

What may appear as an exegetical afterthought is really a brilliant rhetorical and poetic move. Once again, the poetically implicit target of the invective is made explicit in an exegetical turn; the parallel reference to Judah and Jerusalem, which was previously given in the second person, is now moved back into the third, to ensure the hearer that the "he" is the "you," that the ominous content lying behind the proscenium is now placed in "your" lap. The horror implicit in tasting sour grapes is then laid out explicitly in the brilliant wordplay of the second strophe, where the first word is yet another pointed echo from the opening song. The poet reuses the verb יָקַו which denotes the same eager anticipation of the Beloved as he waited patiently for the harvest in verse 2. The word further drips with connotative implications of hope, of sincere and loving anticipation for the vineyard to match his labor and love. As the grapes failed, so "you" failed. Where מִשְׁפָּט (mishpat, or judgment) ought to be, He found מִשְׁפָּח (mishpakh, or sin/bloodshed). Where צְדָקָה (tsadqah, or righteousness) ought to be, there was צַעֲקָה (tsa'ah, or a cry of distress or pain). The masterstroke is in the two interjections, here translated as seeing and hearing, but which are literally irruptive imperatives of shock: look! The prophet interrupts the flow of consciousness to convey the "truth effects" of shock and betrayal, similar to biting into a big, juicy grape and being smacked with unpleasant, transgressive sourness.

All of the above factors combined—the seduction into aesthetic proximity; the rhetorical reversal in describing sympathetic, even co-operative horror in discovering an aberration in nature; and most importantly, the move from the implicit third-person into the explicit second-person—combine to arrive at the goal or telos of literary prophecy: *an encounter with the Divine*.

---

<sup>66</sup> Isaiah 5:7, NRSV.



The remaining 23 verses of the oracle reverberate within the rhetorical framework set up in the first seven and more importantly, are delivered as the reader is symbolically face-to-face with God, answering for his own transgressions. The remaining prophetic utterances in chapter 5 include several generic forms that interlock and overlap, including woe oracles,<sup>67</sup> judgments regarding the present<sup>68</sup> judgments to be realized in the future,<sup>69</sup> and brief exclamations of Divine exaltation compared antithetically to transgressing mortals.<sup>70</sup> The formal generic conventions or cues vary rapidly and wildly in this oracle, sometimes utilizing concrete imagery,<sup>71</sup> or elemental metaphors that begin as abstractions and move into the immediate and concrete,<sup>72</sup> or even blending metaphor with its referent in tight constructions that lay bare the nature of the sin itself.<sup>73</sup>

The chapter concludes with a chilling, extended promise of an approaching army, an image familiar to Isaiah's initial hearers who had the looting, destructive, devastating incursion of Sennacherib against their neighbors to the north more or less fresh in their minds. This army is terrifying: they march incessantly with no need to sleep, pause to rest, or fix their shoes.<sup>74</sup> Their weapons are at the ready, their speed comparable to the tireless elements: the chariot wheels are compared to a spinning whirlwind, and their ferocity matches young lions who show no mercy. The prophet then blends the similes of element and animal by moving further into poetic abstraction: comparing the lion's roar to that of the sea, and the devastation resulting from the ceaseless march that bears down on them to darkness (אֲדָמָה) and constricting suffocation (אֲרִי).

---

<sup>67</sup> vv 8, 11–12, 18–23

<sup>68</sup> vv 13–14, 25

<sup>69</sup> vv 10, 14–16, 24, 26–30

<sup>70</sup> vv 15–16

<sup>71</sup> e.g. v 9

<sup>72</sup> e.g. vv 24–25

<sup>73</sup> E.g. v 18

<sup>74</sup> vv 26–27

The combination of predator, sea, and suffocation, with light returning to darkness, suggests a return to the darkness of the primordial condition of <sup>75</sup>תהו ובהו: an utter wasteland where formless darkness was the primary reality, a stark contrast to the fruitful, fertile bucolic idyll with which the oracle began. As the world rhetorically ends, the reversal is complete, and the blame is laid squarely on "you."

Any serious reading of Isaiah 5 must recognize that it is a sum of parts, but the sum is held together and amplified by a unity of function: aesthetic effect is produced by transgressing an explicit genre cue, used as a framing device to achieve the closing of aesthetic distance, and bringing the disorienting scattershot of genre cues that follow the "song" into the unity of a total reversal. A successful reading of Isaiah 5 with this end in mind recognizes simultaneously the horror and the justice of the varied judgments pronounced from vv. 6-30. But the struggle and process of reversal do not merely occupy single chapters. What follows chapter 5 proper, namely the remainder of the *Denkschrift* proposed by Duhm and others<sup>76</sup> acts to reverse the very reversal set in motion by the song of the Wellbeloved's vineyard, a rocky road from rift to reconciliation. The process moves through an actual recalled encounter with YHWH in chapter 6 that includes a horrified reaction of Isaiah's own uncleanness to stand in the Divine presence,<sup>77</sup> and an equally horrifying ritual to cleanse the prophet and reconcile God and humanity.<sup>78</sup> The reconciliation is manifest in a call and response that echo each other, both of which reflect the prophet's willingness to move from the conceptual to the immediate. Yet another move from the third person, namely מי אֶשְׁלַח (whom shall I send?) is answered in the first person, הֲנִי אֶשְׁלַחנִי (Here am

---

<sup>75</sup> Genesis 1:2

<sup>76</sup> Brevard S Childs, *Isaiah*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2001, 1–2

<sup>77</sup> Isaiah 6:5

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 6–7

I, send me), an archetypal response<sup>79</sup> of submission resulting from a reconciliation of wills, intentions, and to some extent, vision. The extraordinary kataphaticism that precedes this remarkable exchange in chapter 6 is one of the more explicit depictions of liminal space, but rather than just recounting the encounter itself for the sake of glorifying YHWH, the text grants us the privilege of seeing Isaiah's process of reconciliation, which closes the space originally created by Isaiah's unworthiness.<sup>80</sup> This process completed, the remaining utterances found in the *Denkschrift*<sup>81</sup> vacillate wildly within the aesthetic space of a people uncomfortable and unworthy in the presence of God, wrestling through transgression and consequence,<sup>82</sup> penitence and promise,<sup>83</sup> eventually finding redemption and reconciliation.<sup>84</sup>

Of interest to this wrestle is the presence of yet another liminal figure described variously, but still bearing all of the marks of liminal vision and expression: Messiah. From this person arises the possibility of as a kind of cosmic antithesis: a moral reversal manifesting in an ethical reversal within the animal kingdom itself.<sup>85</sup> Other examples are more covert: the liminal character of the Messiah takes on some of the confusing liminal characteristics of prophetic vision itself, but taken to an extreme. One example of this latter mode is found in the act of naming Messiah, which happens twice in this block of text. The first is a kataphatic list that staggers the mind: מִלְאָךְ יוֹעֵץ אֶל גְּבוּרָה אֲבִיעֵד עַרְשֵׁי-שָׁלוֹם literally "Miracle, Counselor,<sup>86</sup> Warrior-God,

---

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.* v 6

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.* v 5

<sup>81</sup> This includes chapters 7–11

<sup>82</sup> Isaiah 7:6–8, 9:18–20

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.* 9:2–7

<sup>84</sup> Isaiah 12

<sup>85</sup> Isaiah 11:1–9

<sup>86</sup> These two terms may actually be one term: "Miraculous Counselor."

Father-Until,<sup>87</sup> Prince of Peace."<sup>88</sup> One wonders how such a figure could occupy so many categories of heroism. The second "naming" operates in the shared aesthetic space implicitly occupied by the prophet: עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים (Imanu-el or God with us). This description implicates an "us" where "we" share the space of God by means of this figure. Given the eventual shared space between God and man occupied by Messiah (taken literally by the Christian tradition), the song that comprises chapter 12. This chapter, the latter end of the *Denkschrift*, antithetically mirrors the sardonic, ironic horror of betrayal in the song that opens chapter 5 in announcing its opposite: reconciliation. Where the song that opens chapter 5 sets the stage for rupture and rift between God and human, along with the destructive consequences of severe transgression, the song that closes the *Denkschrift* sings unironically in praise of reconciliation and redeeming love, bringing God into the first person space by means of a mutual-possessive construct that demonstrates the reconciliation of lover and beloved, forsaken and redeemed:

הִנֵּה אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל  
אֲבָטַח וְלֹא אֶפְחָד  
כִּי־עָזַי וְזַמְרַת יְהוָה  
וְיִהְיֶה־לִּי לְיִשׁוּעָה

Surely, God is *my* salvation,  
I will trust and will not be afraid,  
For the Lord God is my strength and my might;  
He has become my salvation.<sup>89</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> The more common translation of "Everlasting Father" is based on a different vowelizing of what I read here as the preposition "until." I render it this way to highlight the kataphatic extreme of the utterance: the intensifying structure of descriptions comes to a climax in a temporal preposition without a terminating referent, or a suggestion of the eternal.

<sup>88</sup> Isaiah 9:6, my translation

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 12:2, emphasis added

What was fought through in the form of diverse generic codes and readings of both history and future throughout the *Denkschrift* culminates in a total reversal. What was transgressive in the unfaithful possessive of כַּרְתִּי (my vineyard)<sup>90</sup> has switched person from the Divine perspective to the mortal; as the first person "I" of this song—transposed onto the "I" of the reader—celebrates the Divine in possessive terms as "my strength," "my song," and "my salvation." The prophet has successfully brought the mortal and Divine voices into the same space, into reconciliation. The two songs that bookend the *Denkschrift* are typical of the two extremes of encounter with the Divine, while the intervening material is typical of the difficult modes of expressing the space between betrayal and reconciliation. I now turn to this proximity and some of its hermeneutical implications.

#### HERMENEUTICS AND AESTHETIC PROXIMITY IN PROPHECY

Prophecy presupposes a hermeneutic of presence, an aesthetic experience of being in a direct encounter. As shown above, the elimination of third-person distance is central to the prophet's rhetorical and aesthetic project. This tendency toward second-person orientation combined with the liminal position occupied by the prophet combine into the aesthetic underpinnings of literary prophecy. Following these assumptions, rhetorical content acts to unify the genre as the rhetoric combines with proximity in order to create an atmosphere of ethical immediacy or absolute relevance to the hearer. But we cannot make the mistake that prophecy is rhetorical content alone: the prophet creates a feeling of proximity in order to cultivate the ethical immediacy his oracles are aiming to establish. In the first section, I utilized Prince Hamlet's play for Claudius and Gertrude to demonstrate the closing of aesthetic space, but the titular prince has a prophetic bent himself, and the play has more to offer us in exploring the

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid 5:4

operations of prophetic rhetoric. A quick look at the first two acts of *Hamlet* will lay the groundwork for more specific hermeneutic questions surrounding prophecy as genre.

“O my prophetic soul!”<sup>91</sup> In coming to terms with the truth behind his father’s death, Hamlet does not discern the future, merely the truth of the present. Hamlet’s distracted, melancholy presentation prior to scene 5 of act 1 show the unease of a soul out of joint, but it is in the encounter with the ghost of his father where the prince receives his “call.” This ghost, which was seen for days but never spoke to any of his spectators, thus keeping them at a safe, third-person distance, closes that distance with his son. The encounter is marked by the characteristic grammar of a prophetic call: a plethora of imperatives (“Speak...” “Mark me...” “Pity me not,” “Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder,” etc)<sup>92</sup> mark the occasion as a threshold encounter for Hamlet. Vocatives present strongly the emotion of the “close” encounter as well (“O God,” “O wicked wit...” “O Hamlet,” “O all you host of heaven...”).<sup>93</sup> What was mere grief becomes ethical immediacy as a result of direct encounter, but the encounter presences a fact more than a personage, a truth now hangs about Hamlet’s person. From this point on, he must act to presence that truth to both perpetrator and standers-by in an effort to mend a time that is out of joint.<sup>94</sup>

What follows is the result of Hamlet standing in the presence of the Ghost while still occupying the world of mortals: Hamlet is now a liminal personage. The ambiguous substance of Hamlet’s madness, which ranges from “wild and whirling words”<sup>95</sup> to desperate acts confuses and damages all around him, but still serves to bring that truth into ethical immediacy. His

---

<sup>91</sup> 1.5.50

<sup>92</sup> 1.5.2,3,5,25

<sup>93</sup> 1.5.24,44,47,92

<sup>94</sup> 1.5.189

<sup>95</sup> 1.5.133

disheveled harassment of Ophelia is a striking example of the combination of a weird act and whirling words. The result is disruption coupled with a strong use of rhetorical reversal:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;

Doubt that the sun doth move;

Doubt truth to be a liar;

But never doubt I love.<sup>96</sup>

Four lines, four imperatives. Hamlet's liminal state "[has] not art to reckon [his] groans."<sup>97</sup> The result is a powerful ambiguity: are we to read this as his love to be truer than the cosmological and logical realities laid out above them? Or is it a rhetorical trap, solidifying his madness in denying those realities and asserting only the reality of his love? In either case, the formulation is enigmatic; this extremely mixed bag of quasi-romantic overtures succeeds only in scaring Ophelia witless and convincing Polonius that he has control over the situation. Both irruptions result in the death of their characters.

It is through machinations like this that the "truth" Hamlet learns from the Ghost takes on a kind of spectral character of its own, and its presence gradually envelops the entire cast of characters by means of Hamlet's mediation. This "most foul, strange, and unnatural"<sup>98</sup> truth "bodes some strange eruption to our state,"<sup>99</sup> a thick fog of truth that forces time itself "out of joint." Hamlet's mediation of this truth-presence is mediated by Hamlet to draw the rest of the characters by means of this initial encounter, but Hamlet's mediation, like any prophet's, is viewed as strange and intimidating. Nowhere is this more clear than in his conversation with Polonius in act 2 scene 2, where Polonius admits: "Though this be madness, yet there is method

---

<sup>96</sup> 2.2.115–119

<sup>97</sup> 2.2.120

<sup>98</sup> 1.5.28

<sup>99</sup> 1.1.69

in't."<sup>100</sup> The prince's rapid-fire wit bewilders Polonius, who cannot keep up but recognizes the explosive potential of Hamlet's words: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are!"<sup>101</sup> Hamlet's tendency to explosive irruption extends beyond Polonius and lands on the hapless Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who manifest "a kind of confession in [their] looks, which [their] modesties have not craft enough to colour." The prince badgers them into admitting their mission, referring variously to the prison of Denmark and the world, the genitals of Fortune, and the irreconcilable polarities of human being toward which he holds equal parts affinity and alienation: "to me, what is this quintessence of dust?"<sup>102</sup> Every character that faces Hamlet is brought aggressively into the presence of this truth by means of his liminal "madness," arriving into the ethical immediacy of the ruptured moral fabric of Elsinore. Hamlet's discussion with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ends with an explicit reference to Hamlet's complicated sanity, strikingly referred to in terms of orientation: "I am but mad north-northwest; when the wind is southerly I know a hawk from a handsaw."<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps the arresting operations of Hamlet and the Biblical prophets can be summed up in Hans-Georg Gadamer's view of the aesthetic experience: "[O]f all the things that confront us in nature and history, it is the work of art that speaks to us most directly. It possesses a mysterious intimacy, one that grips our entire being, as if there were no distance at all and every encounter with it were an encounter with ourselves."<sup>104</sup> Gadamer's characterization highlights the intimate nature of aesthetic encounter, an intimacy that is pregnant with potential meaning that may well penetrate to the depths of our deepest selves. Prophecy presupposes the possibility

---

<sup>100</sup> 2.2.204

<sup>101</sup> 2.2.207

<sup>102</sup> 2.2.307

<sup>103</sup> 2.2.374–75

<sup>104</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics," *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004), 95–104.



of an ethical presence, one that begins in a “You” in close proximity, but which moves into the immediacy of the “I.” The prophet’s liminal position and irruptive rhetoric stand on that line of ethical immediacy, bridging the gap between invocation and evocation in order to create an encounter with the Divine. This aesthetic encounter can take on many forms, but in its biblical manifestation, the encounter evoked or invoked by the prophet tends to find its formulation along the lines of the original face-to-face arrangement between God and Israel: The Covenant. Given the nature of the intimacy bound up in covenant, it is not surprising that much of the content of prophetic literature is aimed at exploring the horror resulting from the covenant's violation and the joy of being redeemed and reconciled within that covenant. Such reconciliation does not happen solely as a result of divine love, however. As shown in the opening example of this section, the ethical telos of prophecy derives from the aesthetic immediacy, drawing the two into a single statement: we encounter God, we recoil in horror at our unworthiness, we confess that fact, and we are reconciled.<sup>105</sup> In Isaiah's case, chapter 6 strongly suggests firsthand experience that reflects this process, but explicit theophanies do not happen to everyone. Since "human transformative activity depends upon a transformed imagination,"<sup>106</sup> the prophet must resort to creativity, which can be defined as "imagination," to create the urgency of aesthetic and ethical immediacy.

I have argued for the primacy of function, namely the intersection of aesthetic and ethical function, in literary prophecy. All other generic modes that operate within literary prophecy operate to that end. This necessarily places other exegetical projects (whether aggadic or halachic) in a secondary position, one that tries to abstract the prophetic witness out of its original formulations and into a coherent system that stands apart from the text itself and the

---

<sup>105</sup> Isaiah 6:5–7

<sup>106</sup> Walter Breuggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 45

experience of ethical immediacy that comes with it. Thus, any such enterprise tends to fragment the text in a manner that impedes its ability to function in its own terms of aesthetic and ethical immediacy. Breuggemann suggests that one powerful fact of prophetic literature is an awareness of numbness, and an aggressive response to the satiated, near-insensate state of comfort that can damn an individual or a society. Thus, one of the tasks of the prophet is "to speak metaphorically but concretely about the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us, and to speak neither in rage nor with cheap grace, but with the candor born of anguish and passion."<sup>107</sup> Such utterances in their raw form are not particularly conducive to being assimilated into ready-made aggadic or theological systems.

With this understood, and granting the earlier arguments of my thesis, there are some hermeneutic implications of reading prophecy in the mode of immediacy that prophecy primarily operates. I will briefly suggest two such implications. The first is that in order to function in its primary mode, the reader must assume a divine presence in the same way the prophet himself does. This is to say that for a reading of literary prophecy to be authentic, the reader must assume not only that God exists, but that she may actually encounter God, that God exists in her potential aesthetic space. This is equally difficult for the non-believer and the believer. In the former case, such a proposition is ludicrous, the prophet is deluded and indulging a fantasy. Any attempt to conjure that kind of presupposition while reading is a similar indulgence that can only be attempted at a distance—a distance which the prophet urgently seeks to eliminate. In the case of the latter, most believers like to believe that the prophet's ire is directed at some abstract third party, either historically and geographically situated (e.g. eighth-century Jerusalem) or an irredeemable other outside of their own faith community. In either case, the prophet's ire shoots

---

<sup>107</sup> *ibid*

past them and strikes home in some other community who deserves it. The prophet's conciliatory language, of course, is something they may well be willing to accept, but as I have demonstrated with the rhetorical arc of the *Denkschrift*, one cannot have one batch of prophetic utterance without the other. Reconciliation follows rage, with repentance intervening.

The second presupposition, which follows closely on the heels of the above observation is that the ethical urgency, and its accompanying aesthetic immediacy, are relevant to the reader. Given the face-to-face encounter that is the desired outcome of the prophetic utterance, it is almost too convenient that the ethical imperative around which prophetic rhetoric orbits relates directly to one's orientation. An example from Deutero-Isaiah suggests this:

וּבָא לְצִיּוֹן גּוֹאֵל

וּלְשִׁבְי פְּשָׁע בְּיַעֲקֹב יָאֵם יְהוָה

And he will come to Zion as Redeemer,

To those in Jacob who *turn* from transgression, says the Lord.<sup>108</sup>

The reality of reconciliation is thus formulated in its simplest terms, without the obfuscating baggage of penitence and ritual that repentance can signify in a broader theological system. Such things are in Scripture, and have their utility, but the primary fact of repentance is, appropriately enough given the argument of this thesis, intimate. One *turns* to God, and faces Him. The dynamics of Divine encounter, and the implicit theophany that belies the prophetic utterance all lead to this *personal, intimate encounter*.

Martin Buber articulates the aesthetic distinction in spiritually phenomenological terms far beyond the reach of my claims: "The basic word I-You can be spoken with one's whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one's whole being...The relation to the You

---

<sup>108</sup> Isaiah 59:20 NRSV

is unmediated. Nothing conceptual intervenes between I and You, no prior knowledge and no imagination; and memory itself is changed as it plunges from particularity into wholeness."<sup>109</sup> Buber's claims are rooted in orientation as an ontological fact of phenomenal experience. Any third-person encounter, here categorized as a kind of mediation or a means to a given end, is necessarily fragmented into secondary phenomena, however useful it may prove to other exegetical projects. The I-It concept is essentially oblique, never leading to a real encounter, and always skirting around it. "Every means is an obstacle. Only where all means have disintegrated encounters occur."<sup>110</sup> An encounter with God by means of Scriptural text must seek to eliminate the "means" of the third person, that which is only relevant to the other or the merely historical which situates the other to whom the oracle is oriented firmly in the past, and instead proceed as an "I" facing a "you." An I-You encounter is total, unmediated, and absolute. "Presence is not what is evanescent and passes but what confronts us, waiting and enduring."<sup>111</sup> An I-It encounter is temporary, transitional, and lacks the firm ties of relation to make it totally meaningful. "The object is not duration but standing still, ceasing, breaking off, becoming rigid, standing out, the lack of relation, *the lack of presence*."<sup>112</sup>

In "Naming God," Paul Ricoeur suggests that descriptive discourse has "usurped the first rank in daily life."<sup>113</sup> This descriptive discourse could be an articulation of what Buber calls an I-It relation, an ability to articulate the reality of objects that are in no way interconnected with our being. The alternative for Ricoeur is "poetic discourse" which

is also about the world, but not about the manipulable objects of our everyday environment. It refers to our many ways of belonging to the world *before* we oppose

---

<sup>109</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kauffman, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 54, 62

<sup>110</sup> Ibid 63

<sup>111</sup> Ibid 64

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, emphasis added.

<sup>113</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995,) 217–235. 222.

ourselves to things understood as 'objects' that stand before a 'subject.' If we have become blind to these modalities of *rootedness* and *belonging-to* that precede the relation of subject to objects, it is because we have, in an uncritical way, ratified a certain concept of truth, defined by adequation to real objects and submitted to a criterion of empirical verification and falsification. Poetic discourse precisely calls into question these uncritical concepts of adequation and verification. In so doing, it calls into question the reduction of the referential function to descriptive discourse and opens the field of a nondescriptive reference to the world.<sup>114</sup>

Ricoeur later clarifies this poetic mode of "truth as manifestation" as "letting be what shows itself."<sup>115</sup> . Prophecy can definitely be understood as a mode of discourse in this vein. As an alternative to descriptive adequation, prophecy lets God as a You show Himself as a You, as an uninterrupted, unmediated presence.

It is this uninterrupted, unmediated presence that is the hoped-for state of being in the Covenant. We find this articulated fairly concretely in the Exodus narrative, but before the Sinai covenant *per se*. In this text, YHWH formulates the relationship in terms of intimate ownership reminiscent of a marriage, and resonant of the possessives that characterize the bookends of the *Denkschrift* pointed out above: וְלִקְחֶתִי אֶתְכֶם לִי לְעָם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לְאֱלֹהִים: "I will take you to me as a people, and I will be to you as God."<sup>116</sup> Mutuality is described in the most binding terms; possessive constructs suggest that the coexistence of God and Israel in the Covenant is not a mere contract, but a promise of sharing a reality, an ethic, and a purpose. Walter Breuggemann suggests the reality in the following terms: "The ongoing process of life is to come to terms with this other who will practice *mutuality* with us, but who at the same time stands in an *incommensurate* relation to us. It is the tension of *mutuality* and *incommensurability* that is the driving force of a biblical notion of life."<sup>117</sup> While certainly containing the maximum potential

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid 223

<sup>116</sup> Exodus 6:7 NRSV

<sup>117</sup> Walter Breuggemann, *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 2

for intimate and meaningful encounters with God, the relationship remains threatening because the You-presence of God is a presence that "always undermines who we have chosen to be."<sup>118</sup> As opposed to this state of covenant mutuality that consistently threatens, the alternative—the I-It presence of God—relegates the divine presence to the status of one objective fact among many, to be called upon when convenient or ignored, discarded, or distorted at will.

Any exegesis of prophecy in the I-It mode runs the risk of undermining the primary truth-effects of literary prophecy. This is not to say that prophecy is not Scripture, or cannot be understood as scripture, but rather the opposite, that there is no one mode of exegesis that can account for the various truth-effects of the myriad genres within the Hebrew Bible, and that prophecy must be allowed to speak for itself if the full range of truth-effects are to be realized. As I have endeavored to show, the prophets themselves drew heavily on many genres, utilizing them to draw the reader/hearer into the aesthetic space of the Divine. The prophets mastered the genres of their time, and similar mastery of the tradition and theology of their time is equally evident in a careful reading of the prophetic text. What they understood under the blanket term of תורה (torah) or "instruction" was source text for the imagination of the prophets, who "were in greater or lesser degree conditioned by old traditions which they re-interpreted and applied to their own times,"<sup>119</sup> rendering them immediate and relevant to their respective audiences. Or as Brevard Childs puts it, "the original prophets were primarily proclaimers rather than authors—forthtellers not foretellers—who couched their oracles in traditional, stereotyped speech forms... [and] the phenomenon of Old Testament prophecy is not unique to Israel, but reflects many similarities of like nature from the world of comparative religion in varying degrees..."<sup>120</sup> The

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology, Volume II: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*, Trans. D.M.G. Stalker (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1965), 4

<sup>120</sup> Brevard S Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 122–23

prophets drew on every concept from the I-It world that served their purpose: dragging the "I" of the reader into the space where a Divine encounter in the "you" position could take place.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has focused on the issue of prophecy as genre from a literary critic's perspective, focusing on the disparate nature of prophetic genre cues and the nature and telos of the prophetic utterance. An application of my suggested view of prophecy in generic terms may prove useful to Biblical criticism, and literary criticism more broadly, by reconciling the diversity of utterances and the myriad "cues" that obfuscate readings of the prophets. But perhaps more important for a lay reader of scripture or the religious community at large, a reading of prophecy with a focus on person, proximity, and the rhetorical means that eliminate aesthetic distance may be the means to a spiritual or social progress. "Close reading," a term I borrow from literary criticism but which I mean quite literally here, will serve to make prophetic text both more open and more relevant. Rather than waiting for a fulfillment of prophecy in the unfolding of history before us, "a focus on rhetoric as generative imagination [can permit] prophetic texts to be heard and reuttered as offers of reality counter to dominant reality that characteristically enjoys institutional, hegemonic authority but is characteristically uncritical of itself."<sup>121</sup> Prophecy as a genre within the larger category of Scripture holds the potential to disrupt self-serving patterns of thinking, break the gridlock of social stagnation that tends toward exploitation, and render meaningful experiences with God through text by acting as a catalyst for confession of the truth of the world, of Heaven, and of ourselves. By means of awareness of its ethical immediacy, Prophecy can reposition scripture as the medium through which we encounter God. Given the exegetical commonplace of Scripture's elasticity—transposition into the

---

<sup>121</sup> Walter Breuggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), xi

key of me—it would make sense to reformulate our concept of prophecy's generic cues to include the "I" rather than the "they" or the "It." The concept of prophecy as oracles of an unfolding history is a decidedly across-the-proscenium rendering of the text, making the reader into a patient observer, conscious of God's workings in history but distant from the meaning of those workings. This is laudable, but necessarily limited. The concept of prophecy as urgent rhetoric designed to evoke and invoke the presence of God is far more useful to meaningful spiritual exercise. The difference may be as simple as a distinction between two perceptions of religion. The first is religion as a system, a coherent social-ethical framework that values consistency in its views and practices, and which views prophecy as primarily functioning within the system of history. Such a view necessarily rejects the irruptive phenomena of prophecy on its own terms, except perhaps in its original setting, long since rendered irrelevant by the unfolding process of history. The second perception sees religion as lived experience, as a mode of encounter with the other that recognizes its God-derived origins and views the Divine presence as a real manifestation in the world, not always to be understood but always to be "faced." Certainly the first view is more comfortable, and the second tends toward a kind of continual irruptive chaos. Let chaos prevail, if it allows What Is, to show Itself, especially if it shows Itself as an intimate, relevant, and eternal You.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bakhtin, M.M. *Speech Genres and Other Essays*. Translated by Vern W. McGee. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2013.
- Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Edited by Rudolph Kittel. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *The Covenanted Self: Explorations in Law and Covenant*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999.
- . *The Prophetic Imagination*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Brueggemann, Walter and Gilbert, Kenyatta. "A Conversation with Walter Brueggemann and Kenyatta Gilbert." Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y-rVAtK5gPo>. Accessed 5 April, 2018.
- Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970.
- Childs, Brevard S. *Isaiah*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- . *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. Translated by David E. Linge. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008.
- Fleming, Daniel E. "The Etymological Origins of the Hebrew nabi: The One Who Invokes God." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*. Vol. 55. 1993. 217–224.
- Frow, John. *Genre*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Translated by Michael Shaw. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- . *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*. Trans. Timothy Bahti. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- Rad, Gerhard von. *Old Testament Theology, Volume II: The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions*. Trans. D.M.G. Stalker. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1965.
- Ricoeur, Paul. "Naming God." *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995. 217–235.
- Sawyer, John F.A. *Prophecy and the Biblical Prophets*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*; *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005. 681–718