Stulman and Kim's focus on the prophetic corpus as disaster and survival literature for ancient and modern exiles makes the sacred texts come alive as the haunting, agonizing cries of a people with whom we can connect today if we have the ears to hear. Both horrific outrage and utopian dreams, utter despair and hope for a better tomorrow are part of this literature that *You Are My People* highlights by showing the ways in which artistic expression rises to the challenge of responding to atrocity. (This book could have been titled *The Prophets Are Not for Sissies*.)

—Alice Ogden Bellis, Howard University School of Divinity

You Are My People: An Introduction to Prophetic Literature provokes vibrant conversation between biblical prophecy and the contemporary world. Louis Stulman and Hyun Chul Paul Kim engage poetry, music, and the arts as ways to enter the visions of the prophets. They see the prophetic books as "tapestries of hope" in the face of debilitating wars. Eloquently written, *You are My People* promotes new ways to understand prophetic words and is likely to become standard fare for college and seminary classes and for lay readers.

—Kathleen M. O'Connor, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

This volume is remarkably and successfully integrative. Its authors hold in fruitful tension informed historical scholarship and a concern for the canonical text, literary and theological interests, and sensitivity to the context that produced the text and to the context of its contemporary readers—all in an engaging treatment marked by verve and concinnity. Beginning student and advanced scholar alike will profit from its insights.

—Mark E. Biddle, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond

You Are My People
An Introduction to Prophetic Literature

Louis Stulman
and
Hyun Chul Paul Kim

Abingdon Press
Nashville

YOU ARE MY PEOPLE
AN INTRODUCTION TO PROPHETIC LITERATURE

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For Pete Diamond, who has been busy hatching plots

and interpretive strategies for the rest of us,

in grateful friendship

God and the re-creation of the world. When God becomes an outcast, God takes up residence in the borderlands with other displaced persons. The Twelve Prophets eventually transform harbingers of doom into heralds of salvation. By the end of almost every "book" of the Twelve, the prophetic hero morphs into a messenger of hope.

Written prophecy attempts to find meaning in radical suffering—when survival is in doubt and when life appears to end at an impasse. Its literary performance of war and captivity is refracted through the lenses of hope and moral courage. As such, the multiple expressions of hope within the corpus cannot be wrenched from it any more than those emanating from disaster. The two are inextricably linked. They belong together and give this literature its distinctive character. Consequently, written prophecy is at the same time disaster literature *and* survival literature. It functions simultaneously as a disturbing cultural expression of lament and as a complex theological response to massive human wreckage. It pulsates with the pain of war while it fosters hope for survival in those living through crisis—often during or after the collapse of long-standing symbolic, cultural, and geopolitical structures. The cumulative result is a thick meaning-making map—a tapestry of hope—for exiles living on the edge of time.

In sweeping terms, biblical prophecy seeks to foster hope in disaster communities. While this complex literary artifact is polyphonic and wide-ranging, it often seeks one overarching purpose: to subvert the empire's monolithic constructions of reality. In particular, it rejects dominant interpretations of power, loss, and displacement. Prophecy reads the community's debilitating circumstances in a rich variety of expressions and so resists monoliths and finality. Such audacity still rings true because violence—whether erupting in the ancient Near East or in the twenty-first century—is too unwieldy to control. It can rarely be reduced to singularity or certainty. As resistance literature, biblical prophecy thus says no to the empire's unilateral renderings and yes to hope, healing, and embrace.

Chapter One

Reading the Prophets as Meaning-making Literature for Communities under Siege

Wartime prayers, wartime prayers in every language spoken,
For every family scattered and broken

—*Paul Simon*

One of the sure results of twentieth-century Near Eastern scholarship is that prophecy is an oral phenomenon. Prophets in ancient Israel were primarily spokespersons and intermediaries, not writers; the essence of their enterprise was the spoken word, perhaps even the brief poetic utterance. At the same time, we have become increasingly aware of the difficulty in exhuming ancient prophets (or for that matter in locating contemporary ones!). As Martti Nissinen recently put it: "No videotapes or sound recordings are available to authenticate the oral messages of the prophets."[1] Instead, we have access to this oral phenomenon only in written sources.[2]

Although this observation may seem self-evident, it is neither incidental nor merely a matter of *modus operandi*.[3] Contemporary studies of language have made us well aware that the transition from spoken to written prophecy involves more than a mimetic transposition. Writing does not preserve meaning with externalized precision; rather, it restructures and reconfigures thought. Robert P. Carroll noted: "When the spoken oracle becomes a written document, that is, transcribed from the sphere of uttered word to that of written documentation, changes and even transformations take place. The precise nature of such changes may be debatable, but that change does take place should not be a matter of dispute."[4] Similarly, Ronald E. Clements observes that "written prophecy is necessarily different from oral prophecy precisely because it is written and is thereby made subject to the gains and losses that written fixation entails."[5] The point is this: when the spoken word of the prophet is transcribed, some degree of "metamorphosis" occurs.[6]

In the most modest of terms, written prophecy has fewer geographic and temporal limitations than its counterpart. Whereas oral prophecy functions within well-defined spatial and temporal categories, written prophecy moves about freely in diaspora, both

figuratively and literally (for example, Jer 29:1-14). Accordingly, prophetic texts can *do* what prophets cannot; and they can *go* where prophets are forbidden. Scrolls have access to insolent kings who are intent on silencing disturbing prophets. And even though brazen acts of political force can destroy scrolls, others can be produced, demonstrating their resilient character. As Regina Schwartz states, despite royal disdain for the text, "the text persists."[7] Walter Brueggemann suggests that "God will generate as many scrolls as necessary to override the king's [i.e., Jehoiakim's] zeal for autonomy."[8] In spite of its liabilities, the scroll—as symbol, literary artifact, and potent presence—compensates for the vanquished prophet.

Written prophecy, however, is more than a liberated surrogate of the spoken word. Prophetic speech and prophetic writing represent two different though complementary enterprises. Prophecy as oral communication is raw, iconoclastic, immediate, and exacting. It seeks to bring about fundamental changes in social arrangements, often before the collapse of long-standing and cherished structures—political, religious, economic, and symbolic. Prophecy as written communication attends to the survivors. It takes shape during and after the frightful events; all the while it engages in artful *re*interpretation and *re*enactment. This complex literary activity in ancient Israel—which no doubt involves a degree of "routinisation" (coined by Max Weber)—strives to find meaning and reform values during times of war and social dislocation. To be sure, the shift from orality to writing involves a realignment of intentionality, setting, and audience.[9]

Written prophecy converts prewar *oracles* into postwar *texts*. It transforms prophets of doom into prophets of salvation.[10] Written prophecy marches to the beat of "scroll time" rather than to the directives of ordinary (chronological) time. It is governed by a *Sitz im Buch* rather than a *Sitz im Leben*. And eventually written prophecy comes to enjoy an authoritative role that eclipses its oral counterpart, not only in the postbiblical world but also in the evolving biblical tradition itself. In some embryonic form the prophetic text wields the power to dismantle entrenched social and mythic structures.[11] It serves as the basis to judge the legitimacy of oral prophecy.[12] And it seeks to generate hope and a sense of identity in people whose world has collapsed, whose cherished forms of life have been confounded and whose conceptual universe has been shattered.[13]

Building on these observations as well as on other recent developments in the interpretation of the Latter Prophets, we would suggest that written prophecy is survival literature for communities under siege and at risk of symbolic and cultural collapse. In large measure this literary artifact shows marked signs of liminality and danger because of hegemonic constraints; written prophecy is a rich and varied symbolic response to these devastating forces. More specifically, it functions as a meaning-making map intended to help war-torn communities and conquered societies endure decimating loss. While this symbolic map is diverse and wide-ranging, and at times even

cacophonic, it is not formless. By being attentive to distinguishing characteristics and overarching structures, one can identify an anatomy of hope amid the literary chaos.

These wide-ranging claims are clearly predisposed—and probably doomed—to formalistic fallacies. Our only defense is that they are intended not to be definitive but only suggestive and, it is hoped, generative. In that spirit, we offer a series of brief statements on the character of written prophecy in the Bible.

The prophetic literature is survival literature for postwar communities living through monstrous events. Coarse language of violence together with penetrating images of cultural ruin run through the literary terrain. Shocking scenes of brutality give the corpus its erratic and discontinuous quality. Put concretely, written prophecy bears witness to unmanageable social and symbolic dissonance as a result of colonizing forces located on the Tigris and Euphrates. As Donald E. Gowan has said, the two focal points of the prophetic literature are the fall of Samaria in the eighth century (by the Assyrian military machine) and the collapse of Jerusalem in the sixth century (by the neo-Babylonian armies).[14] We would suggest that community survival within the Persian Empire is also a focal concern of this literature. Primarily because of imperial constraints—imposed by Assyria, Babylonia, and Persia, and their designs toward absolute power—the prophetic corpus is a literary artifact of terror and vulnerability, a disturbing cultural expression of lament and chaos. Its multiple voices are often raw, unpredictable, and violent because savage forces perceived as both human and divine have devastated symbolic and social worlds.

From the testimony of survivors, both ancient and contemporary, we know that such wreckage not only causes physical and emotional havoc, but it also evokes probing questions about meaning: the meaning of atrocity; the meaning of moral chaos; the meaning of divine silence. The prophetic corpus, like many contemporary expressions of art that are informed by war atrocities,[15] are penetrating responses to multifaceted configurations of evil, hegemony, and cosmic inertia. When detonated, these real and symbolic configurations explode into unthinkable violence and horror.

Bubbling beneath the surface of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve are marked signs of liminality, danger, and palpable disease. The ravages of war and forced deportation are never far from the purview of the Isaian tradition. The collapse of trusted belief systems and long-standing institutions gives Jeremiah its distinctive character. The loss of shrine and the resultant dislocation of God are central concerns in Ezekiel, and these concerns fuel the prophet's insistence that the refugee community should recognize the divine presence in a wide range of arenas of their marginal life (more than forty times, "that you shall know that I am YHWH"). The implied readers of the Twelve, who are also located at the edge of time, must manage their way through profound disorientation as a national narrative unravels. Amos addresses a

state on the eve of destruction. Hosea's deathbed musings—for example, *How did it all go so wrong?* (9:15)—reveal late-stage communal trauma. Using the imagery of ravenous locusts, Joel warns of a dreadful military invasion. Zechariah 1–8 pulsates with the pain of demographic dislocation and pining for "the holy land" (Zech 2:12).

Accordingly, written prophecy is eschatological.[16] It addresses communities in the throes of upheaval and disjunction, communities that are living with an acute sense of liminality. The breakdown of cherished social realities and understandings of life is apparent not only in the devastating events and oracles of doom but also in the language itself—language that pulsates with pain, staggers in darkness, and rages in raw emotion. Attempts by later interpretive communities to tone down this incendiary speech do little to mute its renderings of a God who implodes in anguish and lashes out in wrath.

Prophetic literature dares to address the realities of war in particular. It speaks of annihilated worlds and traumatized communities. While its constructions are certainly open to criticism—especially its tendency to scapegoat and trade in wholesale blame (see below)—this corpus refuses to close down the senses and banish memory. W. G. Sebald's thesis in his work *On the Natural History of Destruction* reminds us that postwar Germany did exactly that: it demonstrated well "people's ability to forget what they do not want to know . . . and carry on as if nothing had happened."[17] Written prophecy resists this propensity, at least for its implied audience. Admittedly, prophetic memory can be quite selective; it is capable of "disappearing acts," as in the case of the Judean community that remained "in the land" after the sixth-century B.C.E. Babylonian invasions. Nonetheless, a sustained determination to deal with paralyzing loss defines biblical prophecy.

This literary tradition not only gives speech to disaster; it also functions as a rich and complex response to massive disjunction. More specifically, it serves as a meaning-making map, a tapestry of hope, which strives to sustain those suffering a cascade of direct traumas such as military invasion, occupation, the loss of homeland and family, shaming, torture, forced displacement and resettlement, as well as secondary or historical trauma. And trauma, whether direct or secondary, diminishes agency, numbs the senses, and destroys one's sense of identity; it reduces the world to silence.[18] In prophecy the voice returns!

Although prophetic constructions of meaning are elusive and unwieldy, they are not amorphous. Similar to biological survival, which depends on certain microorganisms as well as complex physical and chemical reactions, *written prophecy enjoys its own anatomy of meaning*. In the broadest of terms, this literature addresses the basic needs of survivors for hope, dignity, agency, acceptance, and forgiveness. It attempts to help displaced communities "make sense" of a world in which death and despair are more

demonstrable than moral symmetry. As Gordon W. Allport notes in the foreword to Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*, "To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in this suffering."[19] It seems to us that written prophecy is in some measure an attempt to find meaning in events that defy ordinary categories, events that are beyond communal recognition. Put negatively, the "literarization" of prophecy is spurred by the collapse of coherent networks of meaning, including revered social structures, cultural identities, and theological maps. Put positively, written prophecy attends to the symbolic, psychological, and emotional effects of the wreckage and strives to help survivors cope with their dangerous place within the empire.[20]

Attentive to the text itself and its distinguishing indices, patterns, and macrostructures, especially the overarching judgment-salvation schema, one can identify threads of this tapestry of hope, markers of this meaning-making map. Whichever metaphor one employs, the *telos* of written prophecy is communal survival.

Prophetic meaning-making grows within the tumultuous particularities of life. As superscriptions suggest from the outset, configurations of meaning in the prophetic corpus are neither abstractions nor unfettered imagination, but like the faith of Israel are shaped by memory and physicality. In other words, the divine message is rooted in particular moments in the communal life experience of Israel.[21] To "genericize" the realities of community life, to deny its human face, to extricate it from the fissured world is to read against the grain of written prophecy.

Prophetic meaning-making is candid about the deep ruptures of life. It names and breaks a surplus of denials, and it exposes assumptions and values that would anesthetize the community to its true condition. Amos, for instance, announces that the end has come for Israel (8:2). Micah weeps over Judah's incurable wound (1:8-9). While addressing hybrid social realities, Ezekiel attempts to repair the huge breach in the theological world of the Babylonian exiles. Hosea insists that Israel's fascination with other deities will lead to imminent disaster. Jeremiah bears witness to the failure of both venerated institutions and understandings of reality associated with the dynasty and temple. Although certain voices eagerly proclaim, "Peace, peace" (Jer 6:14; 8:11; see also Mic 3:5), the prophetic chorus overwhelmingly contends that *all is not well*! Such engagement may appear to have little to do with hope. But recovery—communal and individual—begins by telling the truth. Indeed, facing life's particularities head-on and relinquishing false hopes and detrimental securities are the principal resources of "collective healing," a term used by psychiatrist and human rights advocate Jean-Marie Lemaire.[22]

Prophetic meaning-making moves beyond candor to critique. As survival literature for war-torn communities, written prophecy not only discerns what others fail to see, it also renders incisive cultural and ethical commentary on existing structures and

"first principles." In this capacity, it puts virtually every facet of national life under scrutiny and contends, in large measure, that cardinal infractions have been committed. As long recognized, the prophetic word uncovers the social and symbolic patterns that foster exploitation, injustice, idolatry, and other falsehoods, including unfounded assurances for the future.

Prophetic meaning-making destabilizes and deconstructs (as a starting point for reconstruction and realignment). Written prophecy not only exposes communal acts of injustice—which Abraham Heschel calls a "deathblow to existence, a threat to the world"[23]—it also *authorizes* the dismantling of cultural arrangements and institutions, dogmas, and traditions that perpetuate such wrongdoing. It does so by deploying a rhetorical arsenal, including accusation, disputation, covenant lawsuit, Deuteronomistic alternative speech, sermon, prophetic story and symbolic action, liturgy, dirge, and of course indictment and judgment oracles. When written prophecy takes on perpetrators of injustice and the systems that support them, it vies for congruent ethical arrangements in the face of moral chaos. A corollary of this interpretive move is the capacity to make sense of the nonsense of radical suffering.[24]

Prophetic meaning-making places disjunction and disaster within a context of meaning. In her study "Refugee Women's Psychological Response to Forced Migration," Elzbieta Gozdziak argues that viable explanations of suffering are crucial to individual and community survival.[25] On some primal level, written prophecy functions as a complex theodicy, which is little more than an attempt to help survivors cope with massive devastation and imagine new life springing forth from the ruins of war and exile. To this end, the corpus garners a rich array of metaphorical constructions to harness symbolic, cultural, and emotional chaos. Ezekiel constructs a retributive and morally exacting universe in which disaster and dislocation neither impugn God's character (name) nor compromise God's power. Drawing in part on conventional wisdom norms, Amos argues for a meaningful correlation between Israel's conduct and its imminent demise. Informed by Deuteronomistic categories, the Jeremianic prose sermons articulate symmetrical moral arrangements, which attend to the construction of orderly *Weltanschauung* (comprehension of the world). Complex asymmetrical understandings of suffering in Second Isaiah serve to highlight ethical anomie (see, for example, the "Servant songs"; see also the so-called confessions in the book of Jeremiah).

Prophetic meaning-making—whether symmetrical or asymmetrical—is often informed by the counterimperial claim that YHWH reigns. Written prophecy envisions the fractured world and its ravaging geopolitical and natural forces under YHWH's sovereignty. Consequently, one of its principal claims is that (one's) suffering is neither arbitrary nor gratuitous. Communal disaster is no fluke of world historical forces;

neither is it life spiraling out of God's control. Despite national disaster and social upheaval, God still orders the world with the intention of accomplishing God's purposes. In the midst of great international turmoil, Second Isaiah heralds:

> I form light and create darkness,
> I make weal and create woe;
> I the LORD do all these things. (45:7)

The claim that YHWH reigns does little to diminish human responsibility. The Latter Prophets in fact assert that YHWH holds all people accountable for their actions (see, for example, Amos 1–2; Isa 13–23; Jer 46–51), especially the household of God. In this way, prophetic meaning-making involves the restoration of agency, which is crucial to the survival of trauma victims.[26] When written prophecy reestablishes a sense of agency, it empowers colonized communities to act and choose life in the face of abject despair. It restores a deep sense of identity and hope to those deprived of power and dignity. At the same time, this principal ingredient of prophetic meaning-making—the reestablishment of agency—is deeply strained by the proclivity to blame victims of violence and exonerate responsible geopolitical agents.[27] Deploying categories of culpability, it should be noted, is to some degree teleological: it serves in the construction of an alternative script to *Realpolitik*, a counterstory that facilitates coping with communal disaster.

Prophetic meaning-making refuses to flatten the world into static and uniform categories. Instead, it honors complexity, delights in ambiguity, and relishes *heteroglossia* (Mikhail Bakhtin's term)—that is, a rich diversity of voices and points of view. These qualities are perhaps most evident in the plurality of theologies and multiple voices of written prophecy. They are also present in the rich array of divine images. YHWH is warrior and peacemaker, judge and savior, inscrutable and accessible, confidant and deceiver, hidden and present, approachable and elusive, healer and destroyer. Prophetic renderings of the deity are entirely too polyvalent to be subsumed under any single heading (even the metaphor of king or antiking). The same could be said of the literary portrayals of the prophets themselves. Even though prophets are divine messengers whose lives are to some degree eclipsed by the words they proclaim, they are rarely flat characters.[28] As Abraham Heschel noted years ago, prophets are far more than mere mouthpieces. They are complex figures who are at times conflicted, eccentric, fluid, and iconoclastic. Prophets are YHWH's partners as well as community advocates. As YHWH's messengers, they indict Israel for infidelity, injustice, and hardness of heart; as guardians of the community, they are capable of taking YHWH to task for seemingly harsh and indiscriminate actions. Prophets are emissaries, poets, cynics, performers, intercessors, social reformers, covenant mediators, harbingers of violence,

and harbingers of hope—to name only a few of their roles and functions. Interpretive communities resist domesticating their "heroes," even by the voice of YHWH or by the allure to control the fractures and contradictions. The resultant dissonance can be a source of consternation for those interested in linear speech and historical exactitude; yet it is this robust polyphony that leaves the reader disconcerted but also hopeful: hopeful because it rejects reductionist renderings of life; hopeful because it respects a range of human responses to disaster; hopeful because it provides language when ordinary speech fails.

Prophetic meaning-making is sustained by engagement and disputation. Written prophecy reflects a daring, disputatious spirituality that does not shrink from engagement and combative dialogue. To use Walter Brueggemann's theological categories, this corpus not only echoes Israel's core testimony about YHWH, it also gives voice to countertestimony, which is vital to communities under siege.[29] This lively and generative tension—a dynamic interplay within the intergenerational interpretive community—defines written prophecy, especially as it attempts to come to grips with the devastation of war and diaspora. While the dominant voice of written prophecy asserts that the moral workings of the universe are symmetrical and coherent—that a sustained correlation exists between conduct and condition—it is not difficult to discern spirited countertraditions that question the ethical structures of the cosmos and even the character of God (although not theology itself). Habakkuk ponders the moral sanity of the divine instrumentality of Babylon against helpless Judah. Second Isaiah questions the value of the prophetic task in light of the frailty of life and the massive disruption of exile (Isa 40:1-8). Amos intercedes: "O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! / How can Jacob stand? / He is so small!" (Amos 7:2). Jonah is angry that YHWH spares Nineveh. Ezekiel voices the community's despair: "The way of the Lord is not just" (Ezek 33:17). Jeremiah protests, rages, and accuses God of covenant infidelity. This quintessential countervoice claims to inhabit a morally strained world in which the innocent suffer while perpetrators of violence get away with murder (Jer 12:1-4). These defiant figures refuse to acquiesce easily; they will not fall in line and submit, even to God! And yet their disputatious speech does little to scandalize the deity. In fact, their cries of distress and protests of innocence become "a modicum of hope,"[30] especially for communities silenced by war. Although the God of the prophets does not often grant reprieves from historical extremities, this God is still approachable and promises to be present during the deluge. Such understandings reflect a rugged piety that is at home with raw emotion and ethical uncertainty.

Prophetic meaning-making calls for action rather than resignation or passivity. Admittedly, the empire may restrict and monitor this action. Nonetheless, the restoration of agency is a crucial ingredient of resilience both in terms of assuming

responsibility for past failures as well as in terms of creating a means of enacting fundamental changes in the ongoing life of the community. Whereas the fate of the first participants in the oral performance had already been sealed, written prophecy opens the door for subsequent generations to (1) see beyond their own painful realities of exile, and (2) accept or reject the word. Accordingly, it "re-presents" the missed opportunities as new opportunities: divine mandates once rejected are now viable options for the reading or listening community. In this way victims of disaster and their children are empowered to take back their lives and carve out a future when none seems possible.

This dynamic reperformance and recontextualization is in no way extraneous to the developing sacred text; it is in fact an essential part of written prophecy. As James A. Sanders puts it: "Adaptation and stability. That is canon. Each generation reads its authoritative tradition in light of its own place in life, its own questions, its own necessary hermeneutics."[31] Like the book of Deuteronomy, written prophecy affords subsequent generations access to the "original events of revelation."[32] And through this liturgical window, communities detect islands of hope and new networks of meaning. Put differently, the prophetic scroll provides a script of "second chances" for beleaguered refugees.

Prophetic meaning-making imagines a better life in the future. Without the prospect of a future, life becomes unbearable and survival nearly impossible. "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope" (Jer 29:11). "There is hope for your future, / says the LORD: / your children shall come back to their own country" (Jer 31:17). While this language seeks to dispel despair, it also thwarts the desire of ancient readers for a reprieve from cultural, economic, and political subjugation. Consequently, prophetic hope can be as disturbing as prophetic judgment. At the same time, it is audacious enough to reject war and the end of culture as the final word.

Perhaps the most daring and invasive way that written prophecy articulates a buoyant script of hope is by transforming prophets of doom into harbingers of hope. Ronald E. Clements observes that prophetic figures in their present canonical setting—and as they are remembered in Jewish and Christian tradition—are messengers of coming salvation.[33] Interpretive communities accomplish this remarkable feat by closing virtually every prophetic "book" with words of assurance and hope. This *Tendenz* may be one of the most distinctive features of the prophetic corpus. Salvific endings are as tenacious as the superscriptions that introduce written prophecy.

Amos announces the demise of Israel, and yet the prophet of justice concludes with a surprising message of restoration: the fallen booth of David will be repaired and the people of God will be replanted in their land, never again to be plucked up (Amos 9:11-15). Joel foresees looming bloodshed when the terrible Day of YHWH arrives; however, the prophetic text concludes with a promise of renewal and restoration:

In that day
the mountains shall drip sweet wine,
the hills shall flow with milk,
and all the stream beds of Judah
shall flow with water;
a fountain shall come forth from the house of the LORD
and water the Wadi Shittim . . .
for the LORD dwells in Zion. (Joel 3:18, 21b [MT 4:18, 21])

The indiscriminate suffering of God's people torments Habakkuk. Despite his misgivings regarding divine justice, the troubled poet concludes:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails,
and the fields yield no food . . .
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;
I will exult in the God of my salvation. (Hab 3:17-18)

Zephaniah has almost nothing but scathing words for God's people and yet the final words of the book allude to joy and dancing:

Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
[and] has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more. . . .
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak. (Zeph 3:14-16)

This extraordinary portrait of hope centers on a God who rejoices with gladness and renews Israel in love:

At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised . . .
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD. (Zeph 3:20)

Punctuating the often harsh words of Micah are stunning images of forgiveness (Mic 7:18-20). Micah's litany of divine mercy celebrates a God who pardons sin, passes over transgression, relinquishes anger, delights in letting people off the hook, shows warm compassion, treads iniquities underfoot, casts sins into the depth of the sea, and—if that were not enough—is unwavering in loyalty. The book of Ezekiel ends more succinctly with the triumphant note that God is present even in the most unexpected places: "The LORD is There" (Ezek 48:35). Zechariah concludes with a vision of purity and holiness. And Malachi closes with a promise that the prophet Elijah will come, turning the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. Isaiah's final chapters imagine a new heaven and earth in which prey and predator coexist in peace (Isa 65–66; see, however, 66:24).

Even the book of Jeremiah, arguably the most tumultuous of the prophetic corpus, concludes with the promise of salvation. While signs of hope are muted in Jeremiah's oracle to Baruch (Jer 45:1-5) and in the closing vignette of Jehoiachin's humane treatment in Babylon (Jer 52:31-34), they are in full bloom in the Oracles against the Nations (OAN in Jer 46–51). In the placement and arrangement of these prophecies in the Hebrew text, we encounter a robust assertion of divine sovereignty. That the Masoretic Text (MT) locates the OAN at the end of the book rather than in the middle, as in the Septuagint (LXX), signals hope for displaced readers. That the collection concludes with a mammoth indictment of Babylon (Jer 50–51) only reinforces its salvific intent for victims of the empire. By concluding the OAN with the defeat of brazen Babylon—the nation that holds the key to the future of an oppressed and demoralized community of exiles—the text both celebrates YHWH's reign and opens a door of hope for the refugees residing there. Through written utterance and liturgical reenactment, the protracted oracle against the *Überpower* affords suffering people lenses of hope to see beyond their shattered world. Though their lives have been turned upside down, the text is still adamant that YHWH reigns and will one day deliver the exiles from their oppressor. The interpretive community punctuates the scroll with the prospect of better times, thus conforming to the prophetic corpus as a whole.

To propose that endings of hope are significant features of the prophetic corpus is far from a novel idea. However, under the influence of historicism and its sustained interest in authorial intention, prophetic endings have often been written off as "secondary" and "untrustworthy"; their exegetical worth is deemed negligible because their referential or historical character is dubious. Such judgments, however, miss the point: while closing words of restoration may well be foreign to the factual datum of oral prophecy and the original networks of meanings, they are part and parcel of written prophecy. That these vibrant words derive from later interpretative communities (rather than the prophets themselves) does little to impugn their poetic and

theological integrity. Quite the contrary, they exemplify one of the most distinguishing characteristics of written prophecy.

From the standpoint of the text itself, prophetic endings are intentionally arranged and replete with meaning. In this regard it is important to remember that final words often play a special role in the stories of biblical heroes. The last words of epic narratives commonly seek to ensure the well-being of God's people. Abraham charges his chief servant to search for a wife for his son Isaac so that the promise of progeny may not be jeopardized (Gen 24:1-9). Isaac urges Jacob not to marry one of the Canaanite women (Gen 28:1-5). Jacob gathers together his sons to bestow on them his blessing for the future (Gen 49:1-33). Moses, the prophet *par excellence*, gives several parting speeches (Deut 31:1-29; 31:30–32:43; 33:1-29), the last of which invokes blessings on the children of Israel. Joshua's final speech warns the tribes of Israel to renew the covenant with YHWH so that they may have a future. Near the end of his life, Samuel reminds the community of YHWH's great acts of mercy on their behalf, imploring them to follow YHWH faithfully (1 Sam 12:1-25). On his deathbed, David urges Solomon to govern the nation according to Mosaic instructions so that the dynasty may continue (1 Kgs 2:1-9). In each case, the hero's final words reveal a profound concern for the future of the community. Similarly, prophetic figures, as portrayed by their interpretive communities, are defined by an overwhelming concern for the survival of the community.

Although prophetic endings of hope are diverse and wide-ranging—some speak of a future ingathering of exiles, a grand homecoming, and an ecological renewal; others imagine a time of forgiveness as well as the end of subjugation; still others envisage Israel's deliverance and vindication, the reconfiguration of the Davidic dynasty, the exaltation of Jerusalem and its temple, and the advent of the Day of YHWH—the rich diversity of images and utterances can be subsumed under the heading "the assurance of a future." Prophetic assurances of salvation empower war-torn and colonized communities to look beyond their devastating historical circumstances to "a future of hope."

The dynamic endings of hope open the door to subsequent reenactments of the prophetic word—beyond concrete particularity. By the force of their message, their sheer tenacity, and their translucent quality they move beyond the boundaries of their "original" network of meanings—the one defined by the first generation—to encourage survivors of war and survivors' children. Such reenactments not only comfort suffering people, they also provide the community a script of nonviolent resistance that rejects cruel power structures as normative and says no to systems of oppression and humiliation. In such settings—likely in "protosynagogues"—the world is realigned and hope is born.

Prophetic meaning-making is tempered and contextualized by the harsh realities of fallen worlds. It is crucial to note that prophetic endings of salvation do not exist in isolation. In the final form of the Hebrew text, hope is never divorced from disaster, or reconstruction from the dangerous work of dismantling. Hope is tempered and contextualized by the harsh realities of fallen worlds. As a rule, networks of hope punctuate pronouncements of judgment; the text juxtaposes tragedy and hope. The putative effect is a schema that frames written prophecy and gives it a distinctive character. Ronald E. Clements has made the case that the macrostructure of the prophetic corpus is the "threat of doom" followed by "the word of salvation,"[34] or "the death and rebirth of Israel, interpreted theologically as acts of divine judgment and salvation."[35] Similarly, Walter Brueggemann notes that "the Latter Prophets have been more or less programmatically shaped and edited into a twofold assertion of God's *judgment* that brings Israel to exile and death, and God's *promise* that brings Israel to a future that it cannot envision or sense for itself."[36] Following these lines of thought, Marvin A. Sweeney suggests that "prophetic books tend to focus on the punishment and restoration of Israel/Judah, with the emphasis on the latter."[37] There is a growing consensus today that the "literarization of prophecy" involves organizing discrete prophetic oracles into an all-embracing "judgment-salvation" design.

This disaster-salvation arrangement has far-reaching literary, theological, pastoral, and praxis implications. From a *literary* perspective, the emphasis on salvation after judgment introduces literary coherence to a jumbled and chaotic poetic world. The resultant formal coherence, even though superimposed by later communities, is a monumental literary achievement. This organizing matrix of death and newness, disaster and salvation, and loss and hope may be the most enduring literary feature of the prophetic genre.[38] It looms so large that it is difficult to read the prophets outside its reach. The judgment-salvation schema enjoys *theological* import as well. It refuses to let divine judgment have the final say. It asserts that hope ultimately triumphs. And it defines compassion as the most enduring facet of the divine character. Although the promise of salvation does not nullify the threat of judgment—especially for perpetrators of injustice—its very presence makes the case that judgment can no longer be construed apart from the gracious workings of YHWH. The juxtaposition of judgment and salvation also plays a *healing* role in the life of the reading community. For at-risk communities, for those who can barely endure the weight of their suffering, it makes the case that hope is possible even in the worst of circumstances.

Of course, the all-embracing judgment-salvation pattern neither domesticates the wild character of prophetic books nor mitigates the social and emotional wreckage of military invasion, occupation, and forced deportation. Written prophecy is still riddled with disturbing and violent images as well as coarse and visceral voices. It still throbs with pain and reads as a cultural commentary on the terror of hegemony and state violence. But at the same time, written prophecy will not accept disaster as the

final word and the collapse of the world as the death of community. And this daring stance argues well for reading the prophetic literature as survival literature for troubled times.

Conclusion

The "literarization" of prophecy, or prophetic scroll production, involves seismic shifts in social and symbolic worlds: from ("factual") oral performance to a tapestry of textual constructions "refracted through scribal interpretive intentionality."[39] This artful reenactment departs from a safe homeland for dangerous uprooted diaspora. Along the way, it traffics in symbolic transformations for communities under siege from within and without. Indeed, written prophecy is a resilient script, a meaning-making map of hope for disoriented and dislocated people at risk of losing their bearings. No wonder Philip interprets the prophetic scroll (of Isaiah) as a sure sign of "good news" (Acts 8:35) for a newly formed community struggling to forge a counteridentity existence within the empire.

Still lurking in the background is a disturbing interpretive question for many of us: how can contemporary communities of faith in the United States read the literary legacy of the captured and conquered, the vulnerable and wounded? Undoubtedly we in the United States approach this corpus not "as Israel," "so small a people" (Butterfield), but as citizens of a superpower, with all the attendant rights and privileges.[40] This hermeneutical disjunction is made all the more serious by the alignment of large factions of the church with the state. To be sure, most Christian communities in North America can no longer claim to be strangers to mainstream power arrangements. Instead they represent a dominant political force in American politics. While such an alignment undoubtedly has benefits, it also has tangible disadvantages, including serious interpretive quandaries: how can "citizens of the empire" appreciate the subversive script of a subject people? How are those located at the center able to understand the counterstories of those in the borderlands? Respective worlds and renderings of reality are so fundamentally at odds that the canonical text is at risk of becoming indecipherable. Admittedly, contemporary communities of faith have deployed this literature in the service of the state; but such a reading by and large runs counter to the grain of the text—a text which, at least as we have argued, is disaster literature of communities traumatized by war and forced dislocation. Sadly and ironically, Iraqis and Palestinians living under siege and in exile can appreciate this script all too well.[41]

One could certainly make the case that there is nothing new here, that the hermeneutic dilemma is in fact timeworn. While this is to some extent true, contemporary U.S. foreign policy (especially during the years 2000–2008), and its designs

toward unrivaled power, has made the hermeneutical divide far more profound, as has the collusion of large segments of the church with this state. The subsequent chapters do not attempt to address this problem in any detail; instead they seek to explore the character of biblical prophecy and as a sidebar expose the many interpretive (and ethical) challenges that this remarkable corpus poses to contemporary people of faith, especially those in the United States.