Evangelical Theological Society 59th Annual Meeting
Dispensational Study Group San Diego 2007

"*Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* and the Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism"[1]

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Like men in striped shirts blowing shrill whistles, the prophets pointed sharpened fingers at injustices by leaders, priests, and populace. *"Listen, you leaders of Jacob, you . . . who tear the skin from my people and the flesh from their bones; who eat my people's flesh, strip off their skin and break their bones in pieces; who chop them up like meat for the pan, like flesh for the pot"* (Mic 3:1-3). The prophets declared out of bounds any form of syncretistic religious practices. *"I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal, the names of the pagan and the idolatrous priests . . ."* (Zeph 1:4).[2] They called players back to the rules of the covenant. *"So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep"* (Jer 11:8).

Despairingly, the prophets wept. The declining culture found their message counterintuitive. People *"would not listen and were as stiff-necked as their ancestors"* (2 Kings 17:14). Rule-breaking and foul play were deeply entrenched, and the enforcers were ineffective, misunderstood, ignored, rebuked, beaten, imprisoned, executed (Heb 11:36-38). Never has a referee been so mistreated. *"The house of Israel and the house of Judah [said] . . . 'The prophets are but wind and the word is not in them"* (Jer 5:13). *"Because your sins are so many and your hostility so great, the prophet is considered a fool, and anyone who is inspired a maniac"* (Hos 9:7b). Nevertheless, the prophets unleashed powerful tirades, chastising the spiritual sickness of the people. *"Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness—only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil."* (Isa 1:5c-6). Yet there was little change.

But that did not silence the prophets. They never let up calling for repentance until what they warned of came to pass, or until they themselves passed on. The prophets were convinced that they were on God's side and doing his bidding. And they were prepared to die on this hill. Many of them did.

The call for repentance on the lips of the prophets is compelling.[3] Joel goes to great lengths to get the point across. *"Hear this, you elders; listen, all who live in the land. Has anything like*

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[1] In the background behind this paper is the author's book: *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002). I am honored by the invitation of the Dispensational Study Group of the Evangelical Theological Society to present a paper that reflects the development of my understanding of the hermeneutics of prophecy. I am thankful to Dick Patterson, Dan O'Hare, and Phil Lueck for their helpful comments on a first draft of this paper.

[2] Cf., "*Like a scarecrow in a melon patch, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk"* (Jer 10:5).

[3] The primary focus of this paper is the pre-exilic prophets. However, regarding Joel there is no conclusive evidence that it was pre-exilic. While many argue for a much later date, the impending display of God's judgment described in chapters 1 -2 is typical of pre-exilic prophecy. Perhaps it is best to consider the book of Joel an undatable epitome of

this ever happened in your days or in the days of your ancestors? Tell it to your children, and let your children tell it to their children, and their children to the next generation" (Joel 1:2-3). The prophet follows this alarm bell with a description of a great invasion, first employing imagery of locusts, though conflating his imagery by referring to an invading nation (Joel 1:6-7). In chapter 2 he offers a detailed description of a second invasion, a mighty army, another typical expression of God's wrath. Both of these forms of judgment comprise Joel's opening description of the day of the Lord.

The book of Joel provides a pregnant example of prophecy that was designed to transform the hearers. His announcements of judgment are interspersed with a call for repentance (1:13-15; 2:12-14, 17). His announcements of blessing invite the people to call on the name of the Lord and be saved (2:32). But there are many unresolved questions. What is the referent for the locust horde in chapter 1 and the invading army in chapter 2?[4] Unfortunately, this has been a "hotly disputed" issue, with much ink expended in arguing different positions.[5] Some defend the view that the locusts and the invading army should both be understood literally. With four different words for locusts appearing in the text, some see four different species of locusts; some see four different stages of growth of locusts; and some think the four names were used to enhance the overall rhetorical effect.[6] Others think the locusts are symbolic, but the army is literal. Some prefer to take the locusts as literal and the army as symbolic. Still others conclude that chapters 1 and 2 are describing the same thing, neither of which is locusts or army. And then there is the question of the day of the Lord. Is Joel's prophecy a description of final events at the end of time? Overall we might ask, is it necessary to find answers for all these questions in order to understand the message that God had for the people? While these issues are complex, we will seek to lay some groundwork in this paper in preparation for further exposition.

Another sample text is the book of Zephaniah. As much or more than Joel, the day of the Lord is the primary theme in Zephaniah. Unlike Joel, Zephaniah provides a clear date for his prophecy, specifically during King Josiah's reign in Jerusalem, suggesting that Zephaniah's prophecy prepared the way for or even supported Josiah's reform efforts. In any event, Zephaniah's announcement of God's wrath was a warning and a summons. The patience of Almighty God toward sinners in Judea was wearing perilously thin. This may be their last chance to repent. The Babylonian armies were already beating their drums.

Right out of the gate, Zephaniah proclaims the imminent destruction. *"'I will sweep away everything from the face of the earth,' declares the Lord. 'I will sweep away both men and animals; I will sweep away the birds in the sky and the fish in the sea'"* (Zeph 1:2-3b). He subsequently describes the day of the Lord (1:14-18) and repeats the theme of annihilation several

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the prophetic message. "The impact of the book remains unabated even when the precise date of the invasion of Joel's era cannot be determined." Douglas Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah* (WBC 31; Waco: Word, 1987) 226.

[4] For a chart summarizing various views, see James A. Pohlig, *An Exegetical Summary of Joel* (Dallas: SIL International, 2003) 9.

[5] Duane A. Garrett, *Hosea, Joel* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997) 283.

[6] Richard Coggins, "Joel," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 2.1 (2003) 97.

times throughout the oracle (1:18; 2:5; 3:8). Various views have been proposed for the referent of destruction. Some understand the language to refer primarily to God's annihilation of the earth in the eschaton.[7] In favor of that view, the language suggests destruction similar to the Genesis flood. Also, the mention of men, animals, birds, and fish, which is in reverse order of the act of creation, may suggest a total undoing of creation. On the other hand, some understand the point of the language to be the destruction of Jerusalem.[8] Yet others posit that Zephaniah expected God's judgment on the chosen people to be catastrophic for the whole earth—though in the end that aspect of the prophecy failed and only Jerusalem was destroyed.[9]

There is much evidence to consider regarding Joel and Zephaniah's prophecies, more than we can explore in this paper. Nevertheless, we will return to these passages later, hopefully with better lenses to understand the oracles.

The primary objective of this paper is to sharpen our hermeneutic for prophecy. The insights that I am especially interested in have come to the fore in recent decades, and I think they coalesce to suggest improvements in our hermeneutics. Some of these may seem ho hum, because they are not novel. Sometimes getting back to the basics is essential. As the old Vince Lombardi story goes—commenting to his defeated football team—"This is a football." Others are more cutting-edge. Taken together, the following ideas have the potential to improve our understanding of prophecy.

I. Lenses of Interpretation

Lens #1. Pre-exilic prophetic ministry closely followed the pattern of the paradigmatic prophet of the Exodus. Someone wrote at the conclusion of the Pentateuch, "Since then, no prophet has arisen in Israel like Moses" (Deut 34:10). Today Moses is honored as the deliverer of a band of slaves. "That is important enough, especially if you happen to be in that little band."[10] But he was more. He is honored for sticking a knife in the soul of the triumphalism of the controlling empire. That was important too, for it invested the Israelites with the confidence that they could become a nation in their own right—so far as they kept God on their side. But he was more.

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[7] Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament* (Vol 2: Isaiah – Malachi; Chicago: Moody, 1981)1923; Wiersbe states, "Babylon's invasion of Judah was but a feeble example of what would occur on that final 'Day of the Lord,' which would sweep over all the earth"; Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Concerned* (Colorado Springs: Chariot Victor, 1996) 122; Patterson states, "Zephaniah describes conditions that will exist primarily in the final stages of the Day of the Lord. But the prophecy must be viewed as one vast event. Some matters that he mentions would soon take place at Jerusalem's fall in 586 B.C.; others would be repeated in various historical epochs (e.g. A.D. 70) until the whole prophecy finds its ultimate fulfillment eschatologically"; Richard D. Patterson, *Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah* (Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary; Chicago: Moody, 1991) 320. However, in personal communication Patterson explains: "I view the imagery of the language in Zephaniah 1:14-18 as belonging to the genre of an emergent apocalyptic. Although the message may be applied to any future situation, near or far, the warning concerns *imminent* judgment." See his forthcoming commentary on Zephaniah in the Minor Prophets volume for Tyndale's Cornerstone Biblical Commentary series.

[8] Ralph L. Smith, *Micah – Malachi* (WBC 32; Waco: Word, 1984) 123, 127.

[9] Johannes Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah* (Historical Commentary on Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 1999) 26.

[10] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (2nd ed.; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001) 9.

Quoting Walter Brueggemann in his classic *The Prophetic Imagination*, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us."[11] In the first place, the law of Moses laid out a scheme for a community of justice and love in lieu of the dominant system of oppression and exploitation. Second, the *shema* epitomized the one and only God the Israelites would worship. His presence was evident everywhere, from a cloud in the sky, to water flowing from a rock, to the Shekinah glory in the sanctum sanctorum. (You would have thought idols impossible in these circumstances, especially golden calves. Well, think again.) Third, if the Israelites winced from time to time about all the rules and regulations, they did not need to feel defeated. The cult provided ready means for forgiveness.

In sum, the prophetic ministry of Moses centered on dismantling the dominant culture so the community could leave it behind. And in order to nurture an alternative consciousness, Moses offered a day of new hope, a land flowing with milk and honey, and prosperity beyond imagination (Deut 28:11; Lev 26:10). However, as is often the case, it was easier to get the people out of Egypt—no small feat—than to get Egypt out of the people. Hundreds of years later, the prophets were still trying to get Egypt out of the people. Consequently, a careful reading of the prophets brings to mind many passages in the Pentateuch.[12]

Admittedly, there are views counter to this axiom. A corollary to the Documentary Hypothesis is the conclusion that the prophets were largely prior. *They* were the creators of ethical monotheism, and the Mosaic Law was "a relatively late and degenerate form of religious expression focused on trivial minutiae concerning ritual purity, sacrifices, food laws, and the like."[13] If that be the case, then Moses was not the prototype of a prophet. However, for those of us who accept essential Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, while allowing for additions and redactions along the way, we find the longstanding view of Judaism—that the prophets were guardians of the Torah—much more amenable. According to this perspective, the prophets were traditionalists, seeking to keep the Law posted on door frames of houses, inscribed on hands and foreheads, and cemented in the minds of generation after generation. The prophets carry on, clarify, and expand on the covenant terms of the Pentateuch.[14]

For a remarkably clear definition of prophetic ministry we turn to the language of God's judgment against his people: *"The Lord warned Israel and Judah through all his prophets and seers: 'Turn from your evil ways. Observe my commands and decrees, in accordance with the*

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[11] Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 3.

[12] Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 292-317; Fee and Stuart comment, "When we read the prophets' words, what we read is nothing genuinely new, but the same message in essence delivered by God originally through Moses"; Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 170; see also Richard D. Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth: Apocalyptic Imagery in the Old Testament," *JETS* 43.3 (2000) 385-403.

[13] Rodney R. Hutton, *Fortress Introduction to the Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 8.

[14] Stephen G. Dempster, "The Prophets, the Canon and a Canonical Approach," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation* (C. G. Bartholomew, S. Hahn, R. Parry, C. Seitz, and A. Wolters, eds.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 303-10.

entire Law that I commanded your ancestors to obey and that I delivered to you through my servants the prophets'" (2 Kings 17:13).

Lens #2. The life-blood of prophecy is an emotional God, eager to bless, but willing to judge.[15] As already evident, the covenant was the wind that filled the prophets' sails. Without the covenant relationship established in the Torah, the prophets would have been grounded.[16] Isaiah employs a similar image to reproach his audience: "Your rigging hangs loose; the mast is not held secure, the sail is not spread" (Isa 33:23).

On the one hand, God's passionate love brings gentle rain to parched ground. While Hosea opens his prophecy with the language of God's despair over his adulterous wife, even announcing, *"you are not my people, and I am not your God"* (Hos 1:9), he reverses the language and pictures a lover wooing his bride: *"I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion"* (Hos 2:19; cf. 11:5-11). Ezekiel goes the other direction (Ezek 16:10-12). He first visualizes God adorning his bride with an embroidered dress of fine linen, with gold and silver jewelry including bracelets, necklaces, earrings, a ring on her nose (!), and with a crown on her head. The extent of God's burning love for his bride is unexpected, especially given how unlovable his people can be.[17] Then Ezekiel paints a horrific scene where the bride turns on her groom and uses his gifts to pursue her trysts with many lovers.

In the context of unfaithful Israel we learn from the prophets—more vividly than anywhere else in Scripture—that God's passionate wrath is as intense as his love. Both attributes are perfect 10s on the Richter scale. Or perhaps, his wrath may be thought of as a function of his love. In any event, there is no holding back the burning wrath of an angry God. By modern standards, it borders on unreasonable cruelty and inhumanity. *"Their little ones will be dashed to the ground, their pregnant women ripped open"* (Hos 13:16c). *"Their blood will be poured out like dust and their entrails like dung"* (Zeph 1:17c). *"I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it"* (Mal 2:3b). If the Israelites had only taken the words of Moses seriously: *"Do not follow other gods, the gods of the people around you; for the Lord your God, who is among you, is a jealous God and his anger will burn against you, and he will destroy you from the face of the land"* (Deut 6:14-15). Deuteronomy 28 records language almost too gruesome to appear in the Bible, concluding with the possibility of cancelling the covenant: *"The Lord will send you back in ships to Egypt on a journey I said you should never make again. There you will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but no one will buy you"* (Deut 28:68).

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[15] "Whether he is discussing the past, present, or future, the prophet is seeking to make God the most genuine reality that men can know and experience." Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 229; cf. 256-58.

[16] Covenant is central to the redemptive story of the OT, the basis for recovering the relationship between God and humanity that was severed by sin (Gen 3:14-24). The covenant relationship reaches its climax in the NT and the new covenant.

[17] The Apostle Paul addresses this point as well, praying that we may be able "to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ" (Eph 3:18).

God's wrath, however, is more than righteous indignation. He is an emotional, heartbroken God. He taught his children to walk and led them with cords of human kindness. *"But the more they were called, the more they went away from me"* (Hos 11:2-4). His bride took the beautiful dowry and used it to create gaudy high places to carry on her prostitution. She fashioned male idols and engaged in prostitution with them (Ezek 16:15-63). Some of the most pitiful language occurs in the words of Hosea: *". . . you are not my people, and I am not your God . . . because of their sinful deeds, I will no longer love them"* (Hos 1:9b; 9:15c).[18] Jeremiah records an oracle in which God speaks metaphorically, *"My inheritance has become to me like a lion in the forest. She roars at me; therefore I hate her"* (Jer 12:8).[19]

Lens #3. The primary function of prophetic ministry can be summarized in two words, *convicting* and *energizing*, both fundamentally forms of divine proclamation. Convicting language: *"Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean"* (Isa 1:15c-16a). Energizing language: *"The mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains"* (Isa 2:2). It has been widely recognized, especially since Westermann's *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*,[20] that prophecy entails two primary literary forms: oracles of judgment and announcements of salvation.[21] The former forms the majority, while the latter appears in the context of the former. Oracles of judgment are a form of judicial procedure against violators of the covenant.

A debated issue is whether the oracles of judgment are threats, calling for change in order to avoid certain consequences, or declarations of disaster, which cannot be averted.[22] Recent discussions of speech act theory point to the conclusion that even declarations of disaster, though not explicitly offering the possibility of escape, were illocutionary—functioning as a call to repentance and transformation.[23] Thus, it is useful to describe the two primary literary forms in prophecy according to their function, convicting and energizing.[24] Actually, it is one function via two strategies. On the one hand, by the language of censure and judgment, the intent was to convict, calling the people to recognize that the culture of Egypt was still controlling their lives and urging them to leave it behind. On the other hand, by announcements of breathtaking blessing,

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[18] "The analogy in the book of Hosea is obvious. Like the Northern Kingdom toward whom Hosea directed his prophecies, mankind has proved to be a spiritual slut"; Bruce Bickel and Stan Jantz, *Knowing the Bible 101: A Guide to God's Word in Plain Language* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2003) 226-27.

[19] Hate is a metaphor for rejection; Donald T. Williams, "An Apologist's Evening Prayer: "Reflections on the Psalms' and C. S. Lewis's Legacy," paper presented at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, November 14, 1997.

[20] Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech* (translated by H. C. White; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967); original publication: *Grundformen Prophetischer Rede*. Munich: Kaiser, 1960.

[21] Willem A. VanGemeren, "Oracles of Salvation," and Trent C. Butler, "Announcements of Judgment," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (edited by D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr.; Nashville: Broadman, 1995) 139-76.

[22] Hermann Gunkel, "The Israelite Prophecy from the Time of Amos," in *Twentieth Century Theology in the Making* (translated by R. A. Wilson; edited by J. Pelikan; New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 48-75; original publication: *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* 4:1866-86.

[23] Karl Möller, "Words of (In-)evitable Certitude," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (C. Bartholomew, C. Greene, K. Möller, eds.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 354-56.

[24] Brueggemann uses the terms criticizing and energizing; *Prophetic Imagination*, p. 3 *et passim.*

the intent was to energize, inviting hearers to enter into the Promised Land and to enjoy the fruit of the covenant relationship. In both cases, the function of prophetic ministry was transformation.

Lens #4. Inherent in the language of blessing and judgment is conditionality.[25] While it surfaces throughout the prophets, it is rooted in the language of the covenant. The "if – then" structure of the language of blessing and judgment hinges totally on obedience. *"If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands . . . all these blessings will come upon you. . . . However, if you do not obey the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all his commands and decrees . . . all these curses will come upon you and overtake you"* (Deut 28:1-2, 15; cf. Ex 19:5). Thus Ezekiel records an oracle: "*If I tell the righteous that they will surely live, but then they trust in their righteousness and do evil, none of the righteous things they have done will be remembered; they will die for the evil they have done"* (Ezek 33:13; cf. 25-26 where obedience determines the possession of the land; for other passages on the conditionality of blessing and judgment see Isa 38:1-6; 48:18-19; Jer 18:7-10; 26:3; 33:17-22; 34:4-5, 21; Joel 2:14; Jonah 3:4, 10; 4:2).[26] Kaiser concludes that there are only a few unconditional prophecies, including God's covenant with the seasons (Gen 8:21-22), the promise of a new covenant, and the promise of a new heaven and earth.[27] Most other prophecies are implicitly conditional.[28]

Lens #5. The majority of prophecy is poetry and must be interpreted accordingly. Any discussion of Hebrew poetry recognizes that figures of speech and parallelism are fundamental features. Regarding parallelism, it allows the language of poetry to be expansive.

The heavens declare God's glory;
the sky displays his handiwork.
Day after day it speaks out;
night after night it reveals his greatness. (Ps 19:1-2)

The poet takes a truth and uses his inspired imagination to expand on it, piling on figures of speech, both because it is part of his craft to do so and because added imagery will make the communication more convincing.[29] By expanding on the basic thought that creation reveals God's greatness, the psalmist summons hearers to stand in awe. This is the very nature of parallelism, for the second line generally takes the thought of the first and adds something to it, advancing it or qualifying it in some way. In the second line the poet gives further consideration to what is

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[25] Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text,* 232-35; Möller, "Words of (In-)evitable Certitude," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation,* 369.

[26] For an example of conditionality, see Robert Chisholm, "Did Chemosh Defeat Yahweh? Israel's Retreat and the 'Failure' of Prophecy in 2 Kings 3," paper presented at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, November 14, 1997.

[27] Walter Kaiser, "What about the Future? The Meaning of Prophecy," in W. Kaiser and M. Silva, *An Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 149.

[28] In a royal grant expression of the covenant in Genesis 17, God spoke to Abraham: "Walk before me faithfully and be blameless. Then I will make my covenant between me and you . . . As for you, you must keep my covenant, you and your descendants after you for the generations to come." (Gen 17:1c-2a, 9).

[29] "The simplest principle of poetic language is perhaps the most important: Poets think in images"; Leland Ryken, *Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987) 160.

expressed in the first, often by using another image to further emphasize the point.[30] Sometimes this parallelistic expansion of imagery goes on for many verses.

Numerous examples can be offered of poetic imagination enhancing the truth the poet is expressing.[31] In any case, it is not difficult to see that the work of creative imagination is not designed to describe in precise detail. The primary objective is transformation not information transfer.[32] But performance does not negate proposition. Truth is always present in imagery and figures of speech. Two extremes must be avoided: a surface-focused literal interpretation and, on the other hand, the denial of reality present in the imagery. Truth enriched by images is powerful. Visit Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or the Holocaust Museum in Washington and you will understand the power of images. In regard to the prophets, if you want to understand God, allow the truth and images of his greatness to realign your thinking. If you want to understand what God thinks about sin, give the truth and images of his wrath a chance to change your heart.

A comparison of Exodus 14 and 15—one a narrative description of the Egyptian armies drowning in the Sea of Reeds and the other a poetic description—illustrates the point. The first is proposition. The second is performance that is designed to enhance the proposition by creating word-pictures written in indelible ink. Psalm 114 is an expansionistic description of the other side of the exodus event:

The sea looked and fled;
the Jordan River turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs.
Why do you flee, O sea?
Why do you turn back, O Jordan River
Why do you skip like rams, O mountains,
like lambs, O hills? (Ps 114:3-5)

Longman comments, "The very impact of this verse depends on our inability to interpret it literally."[33]

Reading biblical poetry, then, means looking *through* the words to see the author's point not *at* the words as if each one is a point in and of itself. It means pondering the power of the images as a whole, not looking for separate significance in every figure of speech. To discover authorial intent we must probe the author's expressions in order to distinguish between intended truths and imaginative ways of describing them. In this regard it may be valid to coin a term. Coinciding with authorial intent, the term we need is "authorial imagination." This is *inspired* authorial imagination. But it is not fanciful invention. Nor is it mere decoration or artistic

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[30] J. C. L. Gibson, *Language and Imagery in the Old Testament* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998) 54-58.
[31] "There is a difference between setting words on paper and crafting them into art. Both deliver information, but care in craftsmanship can deliver it with greater power and impact"; David W. Baker, *Joel, Obadiah, Malachi* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006) 57.
[32] Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 160, 167; Michael E. Travers, *Encountering God in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2003) 25-26.
[33] Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 113.

embellishment. This is imagery in the service of proposition. It is authors working at the highest level of their craft, seeking to convey truth in the most convincing and memorable ways possible.

However, imagery entails inherent risk of misinterpretation. If we misread an author's words and think he was using figures of speech when he was not, we will have failed as interpreters. But the reverse is equally true. If we think an author was making a factual statement when he was using imagination to enhance the point he was making, our interpretations will miss the mark. Many interpreters miss the beauty and power of images because they fail to recognize the function of the image and seek to find facts in the image. For example, consider the prophet's description of God's judgment against the nations. *"I have destroyed nations; their strongholds are demolished. I have left their streets deserted, with no one passing through. Their cities are laid waste; no one will be left—no one at all"* (Zeph 3:6). In a similar vein, God pronounces judgment against Moab. *"Surely Moab will become like Sodom, the Ammorites like Gomorrah—a place of weeds and salt pits, a wasteland forever"* (Zeph 2:9; cf. 2:13-15).[34] While it could be argued that some of these details became true, the question is whether the prophet was given specific knowledge from God in order to predict what would happen, or whether his inspired imagination was describing God's judgment in stereotypical language, and unknown to him, some of his imagery turned out to be literally fulfilled. Both are possible.

Second, regarding figures of speech, they appear in prose with remarkable frequency. Concerning the number of Israelites poised to enter the land of Canaan, we read, *You are now as numerous as the very the stars of the sky* (Deut 1:10). Concerning Canaan: *The cities are large, with walls up to the sky* (Deut 1:28). The combined forces of the armies that Joshua faced were *as numerous as the sand on the seashore* (Josh 11:4). Among seven hundred left-handed soldiers, *each . . . could sling a stone at a single hair and not miss* (Judg 20:16). When people played flutes and rejoiced, *the ground shook with the sound* (1 Kings 1:40). In each case, hyperbole is evident. While our particular interest is poetry, it should be noted that the difference between prose and poetry in regard to figures of speech is not in kind but degree.

With imagery present everywhere in poetry, in most cases it would be better if our lens for reading were closer to a kaleidoscope than to a microscope. Poetry is simply not straightforward, normal speech.[35] While it may be useful to catalog all the possible figures of speech used in poetry,[36] it is a very long list. But belaboring that point generally means missing the most important point.

It is common for humans to speak in hyperbole, especially in expressing emotions. When someone says, "I'm going to hit you so hard your mother feels it," we can focus on trying to figure out how the statement could be literally possible, or we can embrace the emotions of the speaker and focus on correcting the wrong we did to create the problem. Similarly, "I've told you a million times" conveys a powerful message, but the point is not to express a precise number. A

[34] Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 193.
[35] Longman refers to poetry as artificial language; Longman, *How to Read the Psalms*, 94.
[36] E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898; reprinted: Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968).

literalist might say it is wrong to make such a statement, but a poet and a psychologist would disagree. As hyperbole it gets the point across better than an exact figure of the number of times I told you. On occasion an emotional statement can be exact, but the pattern is that the stronger the emotion, the more likelihood of inexactness. Hyperboles stretch the truth in order to increase the emotional impact of the statement.

Though poetry may seem an odd medium for the revelation of God's truth, it has the potential to be more complete and exact in its intended communication. Biblical poetry entails language that is pregnant with meaning. It is language with the volume turned up. It is arguably the highest form of human communication, engaging us at the deepest level. It is uniquely positioned to be transformative, helping us deal with the perplexities of life in ways opposite to our fallen inclinations.

The prophets are full of examples of hyperbolic language designed to pierce the shell of resistant listeners. An oracle against Egypt is especially visual and extreme: "*I will spread your flesh on the mountains and fill the valleys with your remains. I will drench the land with your flowing blood all the way to the mountains, and the ravines will be filled with your flesh. When I snuff you out, I will cover the heavens and darken their stars; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon will not give its light. All the shining lights in the heavens I will darken over you; I will bring darkness over your land, declares the Sovereign LORD"* (Ezek 32:5-8). Another example is Micah's judgment against social injustice (3:1-3).

Lens #6. Illocution. The 20th century brought to the foreground some remarkable insights into the philosophy of language. [37] Though not entirely new, they have contributed to a clearer understanding of meaning. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein argued that language has meaning based on how we use it, not that the words on the page have meaning in and of themselves. His book *Philosophical Investigations* (1953)—one of several works published posthumously based on his papers and lectures—is best known for demonstrating this point.[38] He coined the term "language games" to refer to the common occurrence of using the same set of words to denote different meanings, depending on the context. In effect, speakers and hearers are involved in a game of understanding each other, and words are the game pieces on the board of communication. A British contemporary of Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, also a linguistic philosopher, recognized that there are at least three different aspects of communication. He referred to them as locution, illocution, and perlocution. His book *How to Do Things with Words* (1962)—also one of several works published posthumously based on his papers and lectures—is credited with advancing speech act theory.[39] In the last decade, speech act theory has been brought

[37] This philosophical discussion of language falls under the designation "analytic philosophy." A typical conclusion of that branch of philosophy is reflected in the *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*: "The surface form of a language may conceal hidden logical structure, and may mislead us as to that structure"; Simon Blackburn, ed.; *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1994) 14.

[38] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

[39] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford University Press, 1962); see also John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge University Press, 1969); idem, *Expression and Meaning: Studies in*

into the discussion of biblical revelation by authors such as Anthony Thiselton, Nicholas Wolterstorff, and Kevin Vanhoozer.[40]

Locution refers to what is stated, illocution to how the speaker wishes the hearers to respond,[41] and perlocution to what the speaker actually convinces the hearers to do. A speaker's intent may vary from simply making an observation, to seeking to persuade an audience of what they should do, to convincing hearers to take a particular course of action. Speech act theory is primarily concerned with illocution, which can loosely be described as the function of what is stated.[42] For successful communication to occur, hearers must sense if there is an illocutionary intent of the speaker and what that illocution is. Missing this point means missing the meaning of the speaker.

Illocution is especially pertinent to stereotypical language in the prophets. Using virtually identical language announcing the destruction of city after city suggests formulaic terms designed for their effect (cf. Amos 1:3-2:16). Quoting Homer Heater, "The language of destruction . . . speaks generally and hyperbolically of devastating defeat and destruction without requiring detailed fulfillment."[43] In the case of Jonah, he should not be considered a false prophet because he announced the destruction of Nineveh in forty days. The illocution of his language was to call for repentance.[44]

Up till now, these lenses have had in mind the form and function of prophecy. The following two observations are about us as the interpreters of prophecy.

Lens #7. Christians raised in the age of modernity are unlikely to be good interpreters of poetic verse. As Markos notes, Christians are suspicious of poetry. "We are (whether we like it or not) heirs of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on fact over fiction, logic over intuition, external over internal, public over private, history over myth. We ascribe far more validity to scientific, rational discourse than we do to the ambiguous, irony-rich language of the arts." Partly because of our view of inspiration, we are inclined to practice a flat-earth hermeneutic. What works for the words of NT letters is expected to work for the words of the whole Bible. Perhaps part of the issue is that we are too left-brained and not enough right-brained. Markos continues, "We seek a language that behaves, one in which there is a strict, one-to-one correspondence

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the Theory of Speech Acts (Cambridge University Press, 1993); and George Steiner, *Real Presences: Is There Anything in What We Say?* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

[40] Anthony Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer, and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*; Kevin Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002); see pp. 164-65 for a comparison of these three authors' views.

[41] "Locutionary acts are acts of uttering or inscribing words. *Il*-locutionary acts are acts performed by the way of locutionary acts, acts such as asking, asserting, commanding, promising, and so forth." Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge University Press, 1995) 13.

[42] Richard S. Briggs, "The Uses of Speech-Act Theory in Biblical Interpretation," *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 9 (2001) 229-76.

[43] Homer Heater, Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the Eschaton?" *JETS* 41.1 (March 1998) 23-43; Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth," 403.

[44] Gowan incorrectly considers Jonah and Amos false prophets; Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox, 1998) 25-37, 138-39.

between each word and the meaning that word is meant to convey."[45] The consequence is, we are not adept at recognizing the expansive imagery common in prophecy. It is inscribed deeply in our DNA that the kind of poetic language found in the Bible is too slippery. Hence, we seek to read it at the same propositional level as, for example, the book of Romans.

Lens #8. It is the tendency of conservatives to primarily see futurism in the prophets.[46] The prevailing definition among Christians—that prophecy is prediction—confirms the generalization.[47] But if prophecy is primarily prediction, then it is comparable to this. The fans watching a game of American football decide to ignore the players and focus on the men in striped shirts. The afternoon would take on a whole different dimension. The stands would roar approval when a man in stripes streaks down the sideline, close on the heels of lightning-fast wide receivers. The crowd would moan when referees collapse in the end zone. The benches would be filled with backup striped shirts, each waiting their turn in the reinvented coliseum. At the end of the day the stats tally total yardage by referees, along with how many did not make it to the goal line in time to see if the touchdown was truly scored. The point is, if we are looking for the wrong thing when we watch the game of football, we will surely find it and miss the real thing. Of course, wherever I said football I meant prophecy. Prediction is present in prophecy, but focusing on that almost unavoidably means misunderstanding what is really occurring in the game.

Actually, we have known for decades that prophecy is by nature not primarily prediction. Quoting the early 20th century scholar Bernhard Duhm, prophecy's task "is not to 'prophesy' events of a distant future in order to allow a simple faith to enjoy the consistent agreement of promise and fulfillment. The prophets are God's messengers. They are charged to proclaim to their contemporaries firstly God's decisions and, furthermore, his demands."[48] Duhm's work was seminal in grounding the prophets in their historical setting, and his point has been reiterated time and time again. Yet unexplainably many Christians continue to misread prophecy.[49] Frankly, I think Satan is pleased. The prophets carried out a ministry of conviction, and that message continues to speak today . . . but not for Christians who are tallying the yardage of referees.

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[45] Louis A. Markos, "Poetry-Phobic: Why Evangelicals Should Love Language that Is 'Slippery,'" *CT* 45.12 (Oct. 2001) 66.

[46] Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination,* 2-4; Brueggemann goes on to say that the tendency of liberals is to see in the prophets only issues of social justice.

[47] "The prophets *did* indeed announce the future. But it was usually the immediate future of Israel, Judah, and other nations surrounding them that they announced, rather than *our* future." Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* 166.

[48] Bernhard Duhm, *Israels Propheten* (2nd ed.; Tubingen, 1922); translated by Klaus Baltzer in "Considerations regarding the Office and Calling of the Prophet." *HTR* 61 (1968) 567; for similar statements see Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks,* 129-34.

[49] "The prophetic books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel constitute some of the most theologically innovative and daring books of the Hebrew Bible, and they are also some of the Bible's most enigmatic literature due to their literary complexity and their shifting historical contexts." M. A. Sweeney, "The Latter Prophets," in *The Hebrew Bible Today: An Introduction to Critical Issues* (S. L. McKenzie and M. P. Graham, eds; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 69; similarly, Fee and Stuart comment: "We should note at the outset that the prophetical books are among the most difficult parts of the Bible to interpret or read with understanding. The reasons for this are related to misunderstanding as to their *function* and *form*"; Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth,* 165.

An equally large issue, in my opinion, results in endless misreadings of prophecy.[50] A host of popular books, preachers, and teachers betray their own misunderstanding of prophecy yet have a significant influence on today's readers. Consequently, it will be an uphill battle getting people to hear the word of God in the prophets aright.

II. *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*

For those who have not read *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, and even for those who have, a brief overview of my understanding of the prophetic genre may be useful. Prophecy uses extraordinarily powerful language to communicate an urgent message to a declining culture. The chosen people were on the brink of falling into the hands of an angry God, and they were blind to the nearness of the impending catastrophe. Under inspiration the prophets chose the most impacting and memorable images they could create in order to deliver a message of warning and conviction. For the most part the prophets spoke poetically, and even when they resorted to prose, they blurred the distinction between the two forms. Their poetic language employed a wide range of figures of speech, especially since it sought to appeal to emotions. As generally true in literary technique, the prophets' figures of speech described one thing in terms of another, and they used hyperbole designed to arrest hearers' attention and to make sure their point was understood. In some cases their imagery bordered on the surreal. Despite the freedom of prophets to speak in colorful ways, understanding their message is not difficult—insofar as we stand back and take in the big picture. The prophets were announcing that God's patience with the chosen people's covenant lawlessness was close to reaching a breaking point, and he was going to pour out his anger in terrifying ways, unless the people repented and returned to the covenant relationship. In which case, God would pour out blessing in unimaginable ways. Our understanding of the specifics of the prophetic message, however, is not as clear. We may not know in some instances what is literal and what is figurative, what is conditional and what is unconditional, what was fulfilled in the prophets' own time, what was fulfilled in the life of Jesus and the early church, what has yet future fulfillment, or in many cases, what had a trajectory of fulfillment, spanning all three.

It may be appropriate for me to make some comments on where *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* fits within the dispensational camp. Dispensationalism has long been committed to the literal interpretation of Scripture and rightly so. So am I. This has not meant, however, that we are inattentive to literary techniques. We are simply opposed to allegorical interpretation, to spiritualizing a text, and to ignoring authorial intent in its historical and cultural context. The text always speaks truthfully and forthrightly. Perhaps we have defended literal interpretation in ways that have led others to question our awareness of the frequency of figures of speech, but better safe than sorry. We would rather not go out on a limb that may end up too weak to hold us. But where our position has not always been on safe ground is deciding between literal and figurative. For many dispensationalists, the criterion has been that it is literal unless it is obvious (to me) that it is

[50] Cf. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 133-134.

not.[51] That approach can be less than foolproof, especially when modern readers are not always good judges. When reading poetry it is especially precarious for literal interpretation to be the fault drive. The opposite should be true.

Fortunately, recent decades of research have provided stronger limbs on which to base our conclusions. The study of language (both in respect to linguistics and the philosophy of language) has brought seminal new ideas to light. The ever-expanding knowledge of ANE culture and literature increasingly informs our reading of biblical texts. These two legs of a stool triangulate with a third, which is interconnected with the former two. A fresh examination of the biblical text in its own right reveals surprising data, especially for surface-driven literal interpreters. For example, a literal reading of prophecies before they were fulfilled can be compared with how the prophecies were actually fulfilled, leading to questions about our ability to decipher details of prophetic fulfillment in advance. This three-legged-stool is what underlies *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*. It gives confidence in reevaluating ways we think about prophecy.

Therein lies a problem. We are conservative. We are committed to preserving and passing on doctrinal formulations that are tried and true. To admit we were wrong in some ways is a tough pill to swallow, something we may not have the humility to do—especially when we have been defending our positions so courageously. But evidence is hard to dismiss that we may have missed the authorial intent of certain aspects of prophecy. The extent to which dispensationalism as a whole can come to grips with an improved framework for interpreting prophecy remains to be seen.

A survey of the published reviews of *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks* finds a range of perspectives on its value. But most agree that understanding the wealth of literary devices, which gives prophetic speech its power, is the book's most important contribution. Belcher comments, "The heart of the book is to show that prophecy is full of metaphor and to demonstrate how an understanding of metaphor is essential to interpret prophecy correctly."[52] Reviewers noted these positive features:

- Considers prediction the least significant ingredient in prophecy
- Focuses on the function of prophetic words rather than the meaning of individual words
- Employs fulfilled prophecies as a framework for understanding unfulfilled prophecies
- Recognizes that emotional language is generally evocative rather than exact
- Concludes that interpreters will only know what is literal or figurative in some prophecies when they see how they are fulfilled
- Highlights the translucence of prophecy
- Helps Christians understand that prophecy's fundamental function is to understand God's character and to be obedient to God's law
- Makes a significant step toward unity in the body of Christ

[51] Paul Lee Tan, *The Interpretation of Prophecy* (Winona Lake: BMH, 1974).
[52] Richard P. Belcher, Jr., *JETS* 47.1 (March 2004) 152.

Reviewers do not agree, however, on the extent of hyperbolic language in prophecy. Barrick finds "an overemphasis on the presence of hyperbole in prophecy."[53] In contrast, Belcher affirms the book, stating that "The harsh language of judgment and the exuberant language of blessing are full of hyperbole in order to get the prophetic message across."[54] Another critique comes from Elliott Johnson: "While this extensive consideration of the use of language is comprehensive, it deemphasizes an important aspect of literal interpretation, which states that whether the language is metaphorical or literal it must refer to an actual referent."[55] I agree that there is always a referent.

The book is also faulted for not going far enough: "The knockout punch never comes."[56] "While this may be a useful book for introducing someone to basic language issues, for the more important theological questions it will prove less than helpful."[57]

Though not identified as a fault by reviewers, I have reconsidered my use of the metaphor of *translucence* to describe prophecy. I am concerned that describing prophecy as ambiguous misrepresents the prophets' message. They spoke clearly and forcefully. Perhaps skeptics considered their messages ambiguous, especially false prophets, along with people who did not want to listen to the message from God. But the prophetic word could hardly be clearer. The prophets proclaimed that there was no room in a covenant relationship for worshipping idols, for taking advantage of the disenfranchised, or for going through the motions of worship. For those who failed to understand or failed to heed, God had a plan of negative and positive reinforcement ready to spring into action.[58] It may be the case that prophets spoke better than they knew in some instances, for a combination of the imagery the prophets chose and God's superintendence over their wording could result in a revelation of specific predictive details. But rarely did anyone know in advance—including the prophet himself. Therefore, I think it is misleading to call the prophetic message ambiguous. The notion that prophecy is translucent only applies if we fail to understand prophetic poetry and seek to discover details about what is going to happen in the imagery the prophets employed.

III. A Hermeneutical Methodology for Interpreting Prophecy

Reviewing the guidelines for interpreting prophecy that are offered in various discussions of hermeneutics, it is clear that all seek to put the interpretation of prophecy on solid ground, rather than at the whim of individual reader or preacher. One can expect to find guidelines as follows:

- determine the type of oracle
- consider the presence of literal or symbolic meaning

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[53] William D. Barrick, *The Master's Seminary Journal* 16.1 (Spring 2005) 182.
[54] Belcher, *JETS* 47.1 (March 2004) 152.
[55] Eliott E. Johnson, *BibSac* 165 (Jan – Mar 2005) 119.
[56] Belcher, *JETS* 47.1 (March 2004) 152.
[57] Timothy E. Saleska, *Concordia Journal* 31.2 (2005) 201.
[58] On negative and positive reinforcement, see Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 167.

- be aware that prophetic writings are not systematic in nature
- allow for the possibility of conditional prophecy
- do not impose a theological framework on a text
- be tentative about texts that lack clarity
- pay particular attention to what the prophet was eliciting from his hearers
- strive to understand a text's major points rather than details
- establish whether a prediction has been fulfilled or remains unfulfilled
- relate OT prophecy to NT teachings
- recognize Christological significance.[59]

While these guidelines are all helpful and should be employed, I propose that we consider another perspective on interpretation. I think prophecy should be analyzed in three interlocking spheres of interpretation.[60] While many of us practice a well-grounded grammatical, historical exegesis, we may inadvertently blur the lines between the three domains.

The first sphere is a contextual reading—the original historical/cultural setting, encompassing what the author intended and what the text meant to the original hearers. This entails isolating a text from progressive revelation, from developing traditions that grew up around that text, and from theological systems designed to help understand the text. What did the text mean as originally given?

The second sphere is the redemptive metanarrative of the OT.[61] Here the focus is canonical, first considering neighboring books and texts of the same genre, followed by engaging with the OT as a whole. Key investigations are intertextuality, thematic development, progressive revelation, and the significance for the redemptive story of Scripture. Our interest here extends into the post-exilic community and the realization of a completed canon. What did the text mean in its wider context in the OT?

The third sphere is the new order and society introduced by Jesus, an already/not yet kingdom that is fundamentally unlike the world as we know it. In this case we are interested in

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[59] Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3rd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970); A. Berkeley Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 299-301; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 216-220; William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 302-11; Trent C. Butler, "Announcements of Judgment," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (D. B. Sandy and R. L. Giese, eds.; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995) 166-68; Willem A. VanGemeren, "Oracles of Salvation," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes: A Guide to Interpreting the Literary Genres of the Old Testament* (D. B. Sandy and R. L. Giese, eds.; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995) 146-52;

[60] I am indebted to Gordon Johnston for his delineation of the three reading strategies: contextual, canonical, and Christological; "What Did the Israelites Know about the Messiah and When Did They Know It," presented at the Midwest Regional ETS meeting, Winona Lake, IN, 2007.

[61] J. Gordon McConville, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Prophets* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) xxvii-xxviii; Rick Byargeon, "Thus Saith the Lord: Interpreting the Prophetic Word," in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture* (2nd ed.; edited by B. Corley, S. W. Lemke, and G. I. Lovejoy; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2002) 312-13; Al Wolters, "Confessional Criticism and the Night Visions of Zechariah," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation* (edited by C. Bartholomew, C. Greene, and K. Möller; Scripture and Hermeneutics Series; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 102-03.

how OT meaning informs the referents of NT concepts and how the NT recontextualizes OT meaning in light of Christological significance. Progressive revelation is of particular importance. What did the text mean in regard to the Messiah, to the gospel, and to the early Christian community?

While I argue in favor of three spheres, I am not suggesting that any of the three can stand alone. When the distinctive situations are considered first separately and then in conjunction with the other two spheres, only then will we have done justice to the always dynamic Word of God.[62] On the other hand, a successive sphere of interpretation never trumps the meaning in the earlier sphere.

IV. Interpreting Joel and Zephaniah

We are finally ready to return to where this paper began. We will use the lenses and spheres of interpretation presented above to understand the prophetic messages of Joel and Zephaniah. Regarding Joel's language of destruction, which employed imagery of a locust horde and an invading army, there are important questions. Was there a specific referent that the original hearers were supposed to recognize in this collage of imagery, or was the referent comprehensive? Was the prophet warning them to store up produce in preparation for an invasion of locusts? Was the prophet alerting them to retreat to the hills in order to escape the brunt of the invading army? As speech act theory teaches us, words are rarely merely informative; they call for action.

Sandwiched between the threatening invasions of chapters 1 and 2 Joel leaves no doubt about the illocution of his message: *"Put on sackcloth, you priests, and mourn. . . . Declare a holy fast; call a sacred assembly. . . . Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty"* (Joel 1: 13-15). The two images of God's impending wrath are followed by some of the most tender words of love and compassion ever penned for wayward children. *"Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity. Who knows? He may turn and relent and leave behind a blessing—grain offerings and drink offerings for the LORD your God"* (Joel 2:13-14). Joel's book concludes with remarkable imagery of energizing blessing. *"In that day the mountains will drip new wine, and the hills will flow with milk"* (Joel 3:18). By describing what awaits the repentant, the prophet also calls for repentance. A divine dichotomy is described in these verses. The harsh hand of God's judgment is a fist to be feared. But turn that hand over and it is soft and gentle, openly welcoming the repentant to come near. The point is God's twin attributes of wrath and grace. On the one hand, *"It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God"* (Heb 10:31). On the other, *"I have . . . covered you with the shadow of my hand"* (Isa 51:16). The allegory of the sheep and shepherds in Ezekiel 34 offers a similar dichotomy of God judging and loving.

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[62] Seitz refers to a unified, theological reading of the prophets as figural interpretation; Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

In effect, Joel was another Moses. He used pentateuchal language of convicting and energizing to call the people back to the covenant relationship with God.[63] He borrowed the language of God's compassion and patience from Moses (note that Joel 2:13-14 is based on Exod 34:6). His announcements of impending judgment were conditional, as God waited on his people to repent. In another sense, Joel was Moses' right-hand-man. He clarified and enforced the terms of the covenant. He used a buildup of poetic imagery to visualize God's wrath, and he called it the dreadful day of the Lord (2:11).[64]

At this point, we need to pause and ask whether this first sphere of contextual interpretation with its focus on the illocution of the text is sufficient and an appropriate stopping point. It is not difficult to see that the primary point of Joel's description of a plague of locusts and an invading army is to call people back to a covenant relationship. This message is not opaque. Perhaps it was quite enough for the hearers to know that God's wrath was just as real as what Moses stated in the Pentateuch, giving them plenty of reason to repent. As Schmidt notes, "The fact that Joel quickly shifts from locusts to an invading nation (1:6) tells us that for him the agent of destruction is secondary to the fact of destruction, its cause, and even its locale."[65] But while the illocution of Joel's prophecy is clear, as heirs of the Enlightenment we are inclined to want to know more. Hopefully, we would never be guilty of taking a rose into the laboratory and dissecting it, while in the process losing its fragrance. I will return to a discussion of the specific details of Joel's imagery.

The book of Zephaniah was a message for the people of Jerusalem.[66] The great day of the Lord was imminent. Zephaniah sought to dismantle the culture of idolatry that was deeply entrenched in the hearts of the chosen people. He retraced the footsteps of Moses, as evident in the use of pentateuchal language. Even as God announced that he would categorically destroy his people when they made the golden calf, as well as when they mutinied in the desert—because they refused to proceed into Canaan (Ex 32:10; Num 14:12, 15)—so Zephaniah announced total destruction. For Zephaniah the intent was to strike fear and to convict, a strategy Moses followed in enforcing the covenant (Lev 26; Deut 28). This was an emotional God whose wrath was burning too intensely for the people to keep on ignoring the prophetic sirens. Nothing had worked up to this point, so the language was ratcheted up to the highest level possible. The people needed to come to grips with the gravity of their sin, otherwise they would come under catastrophic judgment unlike the world had not seen since the days of Noah. Regarding God's wrath, the chosen people were no different than their enemies. God would judge Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Cush, and Assyria on equal terms.[67] They would all be completely destroyed (1:2-3; 2:5, 9, 13).

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[63] "They seem an obvious fulfillment of Moses' predicted punishment for wandering from God (see Deut 28:15-51)"; Dan Schmidt, *Unexpected Wisdom: Major Insight from the Minor Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002) 127.
[64] Regarding similar language that Joel shares with other prophets, see John Barton, *Joel and Obadiah: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001) 22-27.
[65] Schmidt, *Unexpected Wisdom,* 127.
[66] "The Book of Zephaniah serves as a compendium of the oracles of the prophets"; Larry Lee Walker, *Zephaniah* (Expositor's Bible Commentary, vol. 7; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985).
[67] Zephaniah's oracle against the nations is similar to the spiraling language of destruction in Amos 1-2.

The language of annihilation required qualification, however.[68] Fortunately, the wrath expressed early in the book of Zephaniah was not the final word on God's attributes. It functioned as a prelude to repentance.[69] In chapter 2 the horizon shifted and God is portrayed as gracious and offering protection from judgment for those who humbly repent (2:3). Yes, there would be a remnant, which indicates that the language of catastrophic judgment did not entail the annihilation of every living creature. And this remnant of God's people would have the benefit of being heirs to the lands and possessions of their longstanding enemies (2:7, 9). The prophet concluded his book with energizing language, calling the daughter of Zion to sing and rejoice, because the Lord would be with his people and they would never again need to fear harm.

What was the function of Zephaniahs' prophecy? Quoting Vlaardingerbroek, "The words of the prophet are first of all intended for his contemporaries. They are intended to bring conversion among them. The primary question is not one which concerned fulfillment but one which asks about effect."[70] The effect was, according to 2 Kings 23:3—assuming Zephaniah's prophecies were supportive of Josiah's reforms—that all the people recommitted themselves to the covenant. That is an unusual prophet who enjoys such resounding success. The only other example is Jonah, but he was less than pleased with the outcome.

As with the prophet Joel, we again need to ask whether our illocutionary interpretation is an appropriate stopping point. Is this interpretation of Zephaniah's prophecy sufficient? We have not identified the referent for the language of destruction, yet we do understand the primary point of the prophetic message. What the prophet was communicating was transparent.

An exploration of the second sphere for Joel and Zephaniah's prophecies proves especially fruitful. As we employ a hermeneutical spiral, moving back and forth between the two texts and the larger context of the OT, fresh insight comes to light. While a reader of Joel and Zephaniah may be overwhelmed by the language of judgment, the permeating emphasis on God's glory throughout the canon draws attention to the references to the glory of the Lord in Joel and Zephaniah. For those under the severity of God's judgment, glory is far from their thinking. But while God's wrath may be destructive of creation, possessions, and life, judgment is fundamentally a witness to the greatness of a holy God. His wrath portrays his majesty. The glory of the Lord is evident throughout Joel and Zephaniah. It is the *great* day of the Lord, and what he accomplishes on that day makes his name great. He is almighty even in the midst of human chaos brought on by his wrath (Joel 1:15). *"The Lord thunders at the head of his army"* (Joel 2:11). *"Then you will know that I am in Israel, that I am the Lord your God, and there is no other"* (Joel 2:27). At first it may seem curious the way Joel concludes his prophecy: *"The Lord dwells in Zion"* (Joel 3:21). But it is an especially fitting ending to a book highlighting the glory of the Lord, both as judge and merciful God.

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[68] It is common among the prophets to add additional insight later in their message; see, for example, the unexpected ending to Amos (9:11-15), leading some to conclude that it was a later addition to the text. Möller, "Words of (In)-evitable Certitude," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, 355.

[69] Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum-Malachi* (Interpretation; Atlanta: John Knox, 1986) 67.

[70] Johannes Vlaardingerbroek, *Zephaniah* (Historical Commentary on Old Testament; Leuven: Peeters, 1999) 26.

In Zephaniah, God's glory brackets the text, from the opening words of God's judgment in annihilating all creatures, to the closing words of God restoring the fortunes of his people and giving them honor and praise. Note also a repeated refrain about God's consolation: *"The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm"* (Zeph 3:15). *"The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing"* (Zeph 3:17).

To continue an exploration of this sphere, we would need to examine other theophanies of judgment throughout the OT and compare them with a closer inspection of the text of Joel and Zephaniah, but that is a study for another time. Taking up such longitudinal analysis will certainly enhance our grasp of Joel and Zephaniah's prophecies, as well as the global message of the OT. (Note that this is but one example of several possibilities for interpreting the prophecies of Joel and Zephaniah in light of the sphere of the OT canon.)

The third sphere for interpretation takes us into the NT and the Christological recontextualization of OT prophecy. We might discuss the day of the Lord and how, by progressive revelation, it comes to designate the Lord's second coming. An equally significant exploration would be repentance, comparing OT prophetic calls to repent alongside John the Baptist and Jesus' calls for repentance. For example, in the OT the inference is clear that repentance means a radical break with idols, syncretism, and other forms of lawlessness. Otherwise it is not repentance. This denotation rightly reinforces the meaning of repentance in the NT. As John the Baptist told the Pharisees and Sadducees: *"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance"* (Matt 3:8). This is a message especially pertinent for today's audiences—including you and me.

Returning to our discussion of Joel and Zephaniah, with some reluctance I will take a closer look at the original historical/cultural context and give particular attention to the poetic imagery. In light of our seemingly unquenchable urge to know what the locusts, the invading army, and the day of the Lord might refer to, it will be well to proceed cautiously lest we murder to dissect. Here the risk is that reason will trump imagination.[71] It is likely that left-brained people will find satisfaction, but right-brained people would be happy if we did not go here. It is likely that the body of Christ will polarize over opposing views. Above all, we must remember that prophecy may become translucent when we go hunting for details.

This is an essential issue for a developing hermeneutic for prophecy. How do we know how much information a prophet intends to reveal, given a message that primarily focuses on transformation? What imagery did he employ simply in the service of affecting change in his audience? We must remember that if anything we conservatives tend to err on the side of

[71] "The dominance of reason at the expense of imagination has led to what often amounted to almost an obsession with differences and discrepancies, tensions and contradictions." Möller, "Words of (In-)evitable Certitude," in *Renewing Biblical Interpretation*, 378.

futurism.[72] It is a cart that must never get before the horse. We must also beware of our unenlightened inclination to read poetry as if it were John 3:16.

First, Joel. To begin, the question is whether we have clear evidence that Joel was announcing specific information about how God would judge. At least based on the strong disagreement among commentators, the answer seems obvious: the text does not provide clear evidence. No one can agree. However, my hermeneutic leads me to ask about another way. Perhaps the horde of locusts and the invading army are stereotypical descriptions of God's wrath, designed as a call for repentance. Invasions of locusts and armies are harsh realities that the people had experienced. They know how terrifying and destructive these forces can be. But this exceeds anything they have ever seen. Joel appears to have intentionally juxtaposed the locust and army invasion, describing them as an all-consuming destruction, one a natural disaster and one man-made, thus underscoring the terror and completeness of divine judgment. There is no doubt about the reality: when hearers realize the width and length and height and depth of divine fury, they must come to grips with the consequences of their disobedience.

It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Joel's prophecy was not announcing a specific form God's wrath would take. Homer Heater demonstrated the role of stereotypical language in the prophets, and Joel 1-2 should probably be added to the list, similar to Amos 1-2.[73] In which case, the locusts and army are extended metaphors for God's wrath. God's judgment could certainly come in these ways, but Joel does not intend to inform his readers that it will necessarily be exactly in this form. He wants his audience to grasp the gravity of God's wrath, and these images serve his purpose well. The referent for the locusts and army is then comprehensive: the judgment of an angry God. This is not unusual in prophecy for hearers not to know in advance the details of how events will unfold.

In support of this possibility, the intertextuality between Joel 1 and 2 and Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 should be noted.[74] As suggested in *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, language of judgment often consisted of piling on every imaginable way that God could pour out his wrath. "The relentless language [in Deuteronomy 28] of extreme consequences for sin sends people to hell again and again. In modern terms it would be parallel to our saying, if you do not follow all the commands and decrees of the laws of this land, you will be sent to the gallows and to the electric chair and to the gas chamber and to the firing squad and to the guillotine and to be flayed alive!"[75] The curses of the Pentateuch are representative of the severity of an angry God, but they are not exhaustive. No text could describe every possible way that an unlimited God could judge sin. Then, again, there is a verse specifically on this matter: *"The Lord will pour out on you every*

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[72] "Modern Christian readers should avoid interpreting every reference to clouds and darkness or the day of the Lord as the literal end of the world. They should also be cautious about finding details of a future 'great tribulation' in the Book of Joel. Such a reading of the book springs from the false premise that the day of the Lord has only a single, future reference or fulfillment." Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 306.

[73] Homer Heater, Jr., "Do the Prophets Teach That Babylonia Will Be Rebuilt in the Eschaton?" *JETS* 41.1 (March 1998) 23-43; cf. Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth," 385-403.

[74] "The theology of Deuteronomy thus drives the interpretation of the locust plague in Joel." Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 304.

[75] Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 88.

kind of sickness and plague not mentioned in this book of instruction until you have perished" (Deut 28:61). Jeremiah records the oracle of the Lord: *"So I brought on them all the curses of the covenant I had commanded them to follow but that they did not keep"* (Jer 11:8).

It is obvious that the prophets drew freely on the pentateuchal language of cursing. Stuart suggests that "the prophets [could] allude to the full range of punishments or rewards by merely mentioning one or some."[76] In other words, Joel could have selected one or more forms of judgment to recall the language of the Pentateuch and to terrorize his wayward hearers. Perhaps his point was visualizing, not detailing, how God would discipline his children.

Common in the prophets, especially in Jeremiah, is a simple formula that epitomizes various forms of judgment. *"I will send the sword, famine and plague against them until they are destroyed from the land I game to them and their ancestors"* (Jer 24:10; cf., 14:12; 21:7, 9; 27:13; 29:17-18, *et passim*). This formula, *sword, famine, and plague*, is symptomatic of God's judgment.[77] In Joel's case he selected two elements: plague and sword.

It may appear, on the other hand, that Joel 2:25-27 is convincing evidence that Joel was specifically predicting a locust invasion: *"I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten."* However, ubiquitous throughout the prophets is the language of reversal. They announce how God will destroy, and then they announce how God will bless. For example, pairings of the language of reversal are evident in Deuteronomy 28: *You will be cursed in the city and cursed in the country."* On the other hand, "*You will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country* (vv. 3 and 16). *"The Lord will cause you to be defeated before your enemies."* On the other hand, *"The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you"* (vv.7 and 25). Many other examples could be cited of stereotypical language of reversal (cf. Amos 9:11-15), which argue against the notion that Joel's announcement of repayment for what the locusts destroyed is evidence of a specific locust invasion.

As an aside, it certainly would have been possible for God to reveal to Moses, Joel, Zephaniah, and other prophets the specifics of how he would judge the chosen people. Moses could have described how the divided monarchy would lead to two different destructions, Samaria and Jerusalem. He could have emphasized God's patience, especially with Judah, waiting almost another 150 years to see if the people would repent. He could have given the details of the waves of Assyrian and Babylonian invasions, the deportations, the years of captivity, and so forth. But that's not what we find in the words of Moses. He described judgment in ways it *could happen* consistent with the attribute of God's wrath, but his intent was not to provide the details of what *would happen*. It is true that we can find some instances where the language of judgment was fulfilled in its particulars. But clearly not all of it.

Maybe the most important question for our understanding of Joel's prophecy is what he means by *day of the Lord*. According to some sources this formula is categorically an

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[76] Stuart, *Hosea – Jonah*, 233; however, Stuart concludes that the locusts are symbolic of an invading army.
[77] Richard L. Schultz, *The Search for Quotation: Verbal Parallels in the Prophets* (JSOTSup 180; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

"eschatological term referring to the consummation of God's kingdom and triumph over his foes and deliverance of his people."[78] Unfortunately, it is not that simple.[79] The day of the Lord is rooted in God's role as Divine Warrior and is enacted in his theophanies.[80] Cosmic imagery of thunder, earthquake, darkness, clouds, and darkened heavenly bodies may be present (see, for example, the cosmic disturbances in Hab 3:4-11). It may be a time of severe judgment or extreme blessing. In place of human pride, distress and anguish may be evoked. It is a time of God's dramatic action, for which humans are never prepared. God's enemies, which may include his wayward children, are brought to their knees if not destroyed. A remnant may be spared. The day is near at hand.

There are numerous examples in the prophets where day of the Lord refers to God's judgment, with no markers to indicate a single, future event at the end of the world. It may refer to God's judgment of the northern ten tribes (Amos 5:18-20), to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (Lam 2:22), to God's judgment on Babylon (Isa 13:6, 9), to God's judgment on the Egyptians (Isa 19:16; 20:6), and so forth. In Obadiah's judgment against Edom, he remarks, *"The day of the Lord is near for all nations"* (Obad 15). The day of the Lord may be one event, many events, and no specific event. Quoting Garrett, "The day of the Lord is not *exclusively* any specific period of tribulation, deliverance, or final judgment."[81] The day of the Lord designates an imminent divine disruption in order to impose God's will on the affairs of humanity. Admittedly, it is commonplace among dispensationalists to approach the prophets with the presupposition that the day of the Lord refers to the eschaton. Perhaps it is time to reconsider that. Perhaps it is the result of reading the OT through the lens of the NT and through one particular eschatological system.

So what kind of information did Joel reveal as part of his message that was designed for transformation? In my opinion it is less than we typically think. His point was not the details of how God was going to judge, neither in the history of the Israelites nor in the end of time. Are we removing something important from the whole counsel of God if we follow this hermeneutic for prophecy? Some may think so. I suggest that we are actually gaining more than we are losing. We are getting some details out of the way so Joel's prophecy can have its intended impact on our

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[78] Merrill C. Tenney and J. D. Douglas, eds., *New International Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 259.

[79] Among the numerous discussions of the day of the Lord, see G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 2: *The Theology of Israel's Prophetic Traditions;* translated by D. G. M. Stalker; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1965; original edition: *Die Theologie des prophetischen Überlieferung Israels*; Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1960) 219-25; Y. Hoffmann, "The Day of the Lord as a Concept and a Term in the Prophetic Literature," *ZAW* 93 (1981) 37-50; W. A. VanGemeren, *Interpreting the Prophetic Word* (Grand Rapids: Academia, 1990) 214-25; G. A. King, "The Day of the Lord in Zephaniah," *BibSac* 152 (1995) 16-32; Susan F. Mathews, "The Power to Endure and Be Transformed: Sun and Moon Imagery in Joel and Revelation 6," in *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.S.C.* (edited by L. Boadt and M. S. Smith; CBQMS 32; Washington: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2001) 35-42; John H. Walton and Andrew E. Hill, *Old Testament Today: A Journey from Original Meaning to Contemporary Significance* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004) 238.

[80] Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*, 77.

[81] Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, 306; Garrett continues: "In reality, the day of the Lord is more of a theological idea than a specific event. As a theological idea it can manifest itself in human history many times and in many forms."

lives. It calls *us* to fall prostrate in the presence of the glory of divine fury; to spend the night in sackcloth; to declare a holy fast; to rend our hearts; but not to burn the midnight oil puzzling over the meaning of certain details in the locust horde and the invading army.

Second, Zephaniah. Was the point of the prophet's devastating language of judgment that God was so angry that he could destroy the world and start over again? It would be useful to ask the original hearers how they understood Zephaniah's oracle. Did they conclude that the message was directed at anything other than their own sinfulness and God bringing judgment on Jerusalem? Their perspective was probably influenced by prophetic references to the world as they knew it. The prophet speaks directly to the worship of Baal and Molech (1:4b-6). He refers to specific geographical features in Jerusalem, e.g., the Fish Gate (1:10-11), and describes God's judgment on their surrounding enemies (2:4-15). Searching Jerusalem with lamps (1:12) and a city fortified with corner towers (1:16) would have fit their culture well. The language of reversal, moving abruptly from unlimited curses to bountiful blessings, was commonplace in the prophets.

Regarding the language of worldwide destruction, several factors would have influenced the hearers' perception. We can assume they were well-versed in understanding poetry and the expansive imagery typical of parallelism, as well as the ever present hyperbole. They were likely familiar with ANE treaties and the hyperbolic language used to enforce them. It would not seem out-of-place for a prophet to announce judgment on all of humanity and then limit that to refer to Judah and Jerusalem, and then qualify that to allow for a remnant.[82] Hearers almost certainly recognized the similarity of terminology with the Genesis flood. Similar kinds of cosmic imagery reflecting primeval history were attested in Jeremiah and elsewhere, often associated with the day of the Lord:[83] *"I looked at the earth and it was formless and empty; and at the heavens, and their light was gone"* (Jer 4:23; cf. Gen 1:1). Un-creation and re-creation is typical imagery in the prophets (e.g., Joel 2:25-26).[84] Perhaps the sinners in Jerusalem took comfort in God's promise to Noah: *"Never again will I curse the ground because of human beings, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done"* (Gen 8:21). Apparently some of the Jerusalemites had found false hope in other words from God, concluding that Jerusalem was inviolate from destruction. Jeremiah even accused God of deceiving the people (Jer 4:10). Thus, there is substantial reason to conclude that the original hearers saw Zephaniah's description of the day of the Lord applying to themselves and their lifelong enemies, not providing the particulars of some distant future judgment.

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[82] "This is not as unusual as it may appear. Micah does the same thing. It was one way to get the attention of hearers." Smith, *Micah – Malachi*, 123.

[83] Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth," 385-403.

[84] All creation shares in human destiny; this was evident in the Fall, and it will be evident in the eschaton (Rev 21:1); John D. W. Watts, *The Books of Joel, Obadiah, Jonah, Nahum, Habakkuk, and Zephaniah* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; London: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 156. Some suggest a trend toward apocalyptic language in Joel and Zephaniah, which is actually indebted to Mosaic traditions; Patterson, "Wonders in the Heavens and on the Earth," 385-403.

In the context of the parenetic address calling the people back to Yahweh, was Zephaniah providing specific details of God's judgment?[85] My answer for Zephaniah is the same as Joel: I think it is less than we are inclined to assume. But lest we walk away empty-handed, there is a message we particularly need to hear from these prophets, and it is the dark side of God. People who do not understand the prophets do not understand a God who is brutally angry about sin. As one of my students observed, "I would not want to think I serve a wimpy God."

CONCLUSION

If the body of Christ will ever gain a clearer understanding of the message of the prophets and be transformed by that message, it is up to us. Our audiences need to understand the full counsel of God, not a canon within a canon. But perpetuating partisan interpretations of the prophets will have limited positive impact on the people of God.[86] In my opinion, it behooves us to reconsider previous interpretations and to focus more attention on the function of the prophetic word. Our study of the prophets needs to emphasize where we agree and downplay where we do not. *"Blessed are the peacemakers."* It will require a spirit of humility that is often foreign to our guild. *"Blessed are the meek."* We must open our *own* hearts to the transforming power of the prophetic word. *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."*

In this paper I have attempted to point the way toward a renewed appreciation for the transformative power of the prophetic message. It is fundamentally about God and his attributes, about covenant faithfulness, about language designed to terrorize people into becoming obedient to the covenant, about judgment that is imminent and motivational, and about unlimited blessings that await the pure in heart. We may not understand all there is to know about what the prophets proclaimed. Apparently, the prophets themselves did not, nor do the angels: *"Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things"* (1 Pet 1:12). Nevertheless, we know enough about the prophetic message to respond in obedience: *"Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be?"* (2 Pet 3:11).

I see the prophets standing at the foot of the cross. They weep silently. The idolatry of their day continued to plague the chosen people, so that Jesus denounced the Pharisees and teachers of the law, *"You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions"* (Mark

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[85] Marvin A. Sweeney, *Zephaniah* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 51.

[86] The divisiveness in our Christian subcultures must be a concern of all of us. For example, David Aikman addresses the "Attack Dogs of Christendom," as he calls them; he notes that "no attribute of civilized life seems more under attack than civility. . . . If Christians blast each other from here to eternity with characterizations that differ little from the coarse vulgarity of cable TV, where on earth is a witness that brings grace and savor to our crumbling civilization?" *Christianity Today* (August 2007) 52.

7:8). Injustices continued, depriving the poor, the widows, and the disenfranchised of hope. The meaningless sacrifices and acts of worship reduced the temple to a den of thieves. Incredibly, God tabernacled among them as at no other time in history and sought to heal their diseases (Isa 1:5-6). Yet his hearers largely remained entrenched in empty worship, injustices, and idolatry. It was the same sins that the prophets had preached against. But this time the sin put Jesus on an ugly cross. The consequences resulted in the crucifixion of God himself.

My prayer is that the prophets would not be seen standing on the steps of our churches and institutions weeping silently.