HOW TO READ & UNDERSTAND THE BIBLICAL PROPHETS

PETER J. GENTRY

"When reading the Prophets, one may despair like the Ethiopian eunuch puzzling over Isaiah, 'How can I understand, unless someone guides me?' Fortunately, Peter Gentry meets us on the road and asks, 'Do you understand what you are reading?' Gentry ably guides us through this strange and foreign land."

Lindsay Kennedy, assistant pastor, Calvary Chapel Bothell, Bothell, Washington; blogger, *My Digital Seminary*

"Gentry succeeds most admirably in his stated objective, which is to enable readers to read and understand the Prophets. And he does so in a way that is truly exemplary, employing a clear, concise, logically developed writing style that makes it relatively easy to probe this potentially difficult subject—the Old Testament prophetic literature. In short, the author demystifies the Hebrew prophets and successfully relates their writings also to hermeneutical issues facing the church today—all in the space of less than 150 pages. This book would serve as a helpful introduction for adult Bible studies as well as college-level courses on hermeneutics. Scholars teaching at higher academic levels too would benefit from Gentry's excellent pedagogical approach."

Ernst R. Wendland, instructor, Lusaka Lutheran Seminary, Zambia; Internal Examiner, University of Zambia

"Having established a stellar reputation already through his many publications in Old Testament studies—especially in Septuagint and biblical theology—Gentry reflects broad expertise here in his treatment of prophetism as an institution and in the literary output of the canonical Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. This is more than 'just another book on the Prophets: their lives, times, and ministries.' The approach in this case goes beyond the standard of the *oeuvres* already at hand. Gentry knits together most skillfully the strands of criticism, theology, history, poetry, apocalyptic, and pastoral practicality in a style that betrays at once solid scholarship and transparent readability."

Eugene H. Merrill, distinguished professor emeritus of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary

"When traveling to a foreign land, the experience is so much richer when you have an experienced guide to explain the unique customs, point out things you might have missed, and take you to places you would not dare traverse alone. For modern Western readers of the Bible, the Prophets are a foreign land, even if we do not initially realize it. Peter Gentry, with his decades of experience traveling in this difficult terrain, can be your expert guide to the biblical Prophets through reading this book. I'm overjoyed that Gentry is sharing in print for a wider audience what I first found so helpful as class lectures a dozen years ago. Pick up this travel guide and experience the biblical Prophets afresh."

Richard Lucas, Greek and Hebrew mentor, The NETS Center for Church Planting and Revitalization; associate pastor, Christ Memorial Church, Williston, Vermont

"Peter Gentry is a master exegete and theologian, and in this brief volume he supplies excellent guidance for those of us who desire to read and understand the Prophets with greater biblical faithfulness. With clear prose and numerous examples, he identifies how we should approach the prophetic genre—its grounding in the Mosaic covenant, its structure and use of repetition, its engagement of foreign nations, its use of typology and apocalyptic language, and its appropriation and already-but-not-yet fulfillment in the New Testament. Gentry helps us grasp how the prophets communicated their messages, and by doing so he empowers us to become better interpreters of God's Word. I highly recommend this book."

Jason S. DeRouchie, professor of Old Testament and biblical theology, Bethlehem College & Seminary

"Many people set out to read through the Bible but get bogged down in the Old Testament Prophets. Some push ahead anyway, others skip ahead—both missing out on the full counsel of God. But there's hope—everyone should read Peter Gentry's new book! Under seven key topics he asks the right questions, and his answers are the most insightful I've seen. Pastors and scholars: you'll benefit too."

Brent Sandy, former professor and chair of the Department of Religious Studies, Grace College, Winona Lake, IN; coeditor, *Cracking Old Testament Codes*; coauthor, *The Lost World of Scripture*; author, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks*

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For C. B.
and my friends at DTS

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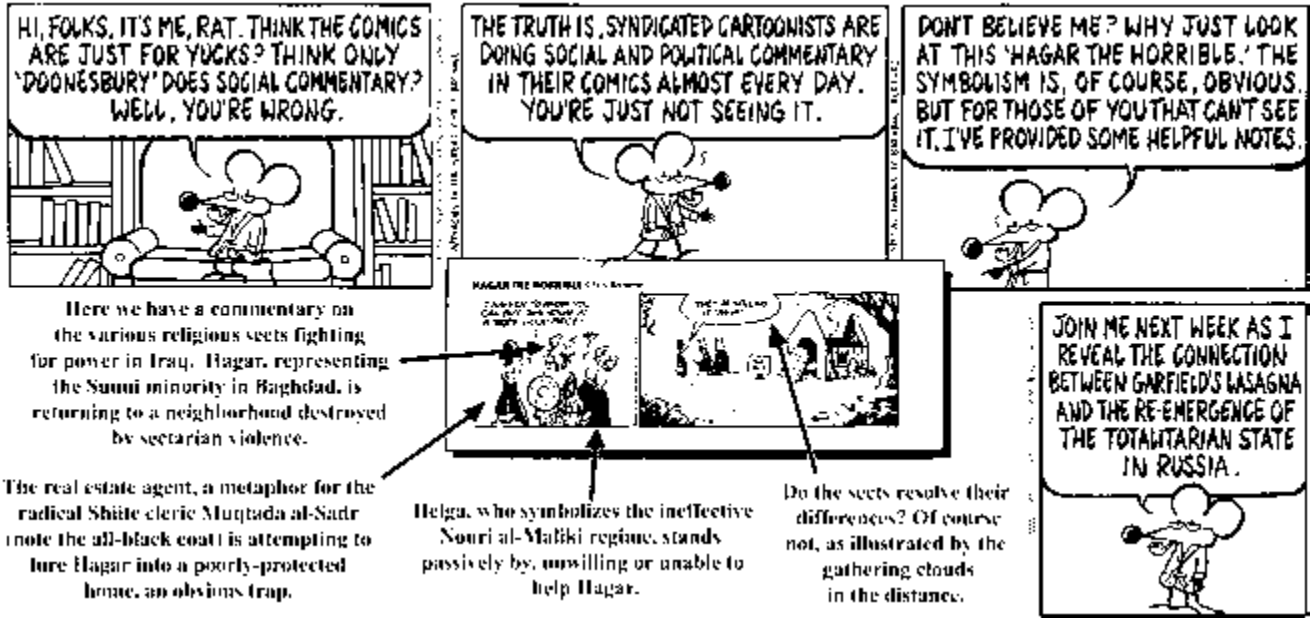
Introduction

In our modern society of e-readers, many may have forgotten what a newspaper looks like. Yet hopefully we can all grasp the following illustration. When we pick up a newspaper from a big city, we find many sections. We expect to see the main headlines and news reports on the front page or in the first section. Later on we come to the entertainment section and find there the comics or funnies. Now, here's the question I want to ask you: can we say that we find truth on the front page and entertainment only in the comics?

The more we think about how to answer that question, the more we come to realize that there may, in fact, be more truth in terms of comment on family life, morals, political events, and current philosophical or social issues in the comics than we find on the front page. However, we can miss it because of what we expect to find in particular types of literature or genres. Consider the example from *Pearls Before Swine* by Stephan Pastis (p. 12).

We see in the Pastis comic how Rat completely misses the point of *Hagar the Horrible*, because the literary features he's looking at aren't the ones that really matter. We might hear him shouting, "But what about the literal interpretation of the text?" Intelligent Rat may even appeal to speech-act theory: "But Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shiite cleric, made a *promise*, and a promise is a promise!" Apparently not all readers in the Western world are able to comprehend comics. The cartoon author is concerned that many readers may not have the proper strategies for reading this kind of


HI, FOLKS, IT'S ME, RAT. THINK THE COMICS ARE JUST FOR YUCKS? THINK ONLY 'DOONESBURY' DOES SOCIAL COMMENTARY? WELL, YOU'RE WRONG.
THE TRUTH IS, SYNDICATED CARTOONISTS ARE DOING SOCIAL AND POLITICAL COMMENTARY IN THEIR COMICS ALMOST EVERY DAY. YOU'RE JUST NOT SEEING IT.
DON'T BELIEVE ME? WHY JUST LOOK AT THIS 'HAGAR THE HORRIBLE.' THE SYMBOLISM IS, OF COURSE, OBVIOUS. BUT FOR THOSE OF YOU THAT CAN'T SEE IT, I'VE PROVIDED SOME HELPFUL NOTES.
JOIN ME NEXT WEEK AS I REVEAL THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GARFIELD'S LASAGNA AND THE RE-EMERGENCE OF THE TOTALITARIAN STATE IN RUSSIA.
Here we have a commentary on the various religious sects fighting for power in Iraq. Hagar, representing the Sunni minority in Baghdad, is returning to a neighborhood destroyed by sectarian violence.
The real estate agent, a metaphor for the radical Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr (note the all-black coat) is attempting to lure Hagar into a poorly-protected home, an obvious trap.
Helga, who symbolizes the ineffective Nouri al-Maliki regime, stands passively by, unwilling or unable to help Hagar.
Do the sects resolve their differences? Of course not, as illustrated by the gathering clouds in the distance.

literature. Since the comics are pictures, the authors communicate by heavy use of metaphors and symbols.

A lack of proper reading strategies is exactly the problem some have with reading the Bible. When I went to seminary in the 1970s, prior to the shift to postmodernism, the focus was on how to interpret the letters of Paul. But what kind of literary work is a "gospel"? What literary strategies or techniques do narrators or storytellers use to help the reader grasp their main points? And how do we read and understand the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament? In one sense, prophecy is not a particular genre or type of literature, since the prophets use every possible genre and literary type to communicate their messages. Even more difficult to understand are prophecies such as Daniel, Zechariah, and Revelation, which are frequently described as "apocalyptic" literature.

A central problem in the Christian church, especially during the last one hundred years, is that we have been reading the Gospels of the New Testament, the narratives of the Old Testament and the book of Acts, and the Hebrew prophets of the Old Testament and the New Testament (e.g., Revelation), including apocalyptic prophecies, exactly the same way we read Romans. In addition to this, we support our interpretation by claiming that we are following a *literal* interpretation of Scripture. But every day as we read the pages of our newspapers (for those of us who still do), we don't even think about mentally switching gears as we turn from the front page to the comics.

We might well ask if the literature of the biblical prophets actually constitutes its own genre or type of literature, since the prophets use an extremely wide variety of speech types to communicate. They communicate by different kinds of disputation (Isa. 49:14–26) and judgment speeches (e.g., Isaiah 13; Jer. 4:5–8); by promises of restoration and salvation (Isa. 4:2–6; 11:1–9; 40:9–11); by allegories (Ezekiel 16; 31:2–9) and parables (Isa. 5:1–7); by lawsuit and legal speeches (Isa. 1:1–20; 41:1–7, 21–29); by biography (Jonah); and by funeral speeches (Isa. 29:1–10). Moreover, the prophets

communicated not only by their words but also by symbolic acts, drama, and one-act plays. Jeremiah hid his underwear in a rock (Jer. 13:1–7). Isaiah went naked and barefoot for three years (Isa. 20:1–3). Ezekiel cut off his hair and then burned a third of it, struck a third with a sword, and cast a third to the wind (Ezek. 5:1–4). So how can we say that there is anything particularly characteristic of prophetic literature? How can we employ a method of literary study that attempts to affirm what is typical and not typical? Are there any principles that do apply to all the literature of the prophets?

Yes, there are! In this short work I lay out seven characteristics or features of prophetic literature in the Bible. Understanding and using these characteristics of the biblical prophets as reading strategies will help Christians comprehend these texts for themselves, perhaps for the first time with real understanding. You will have the cues the first readers had for reading these texts. Here are the topics taken up in these pages:

It is not my purpose in these pages to push a particular brand of eschatology, i.e., what the Bible teaches about events in the future or at the end times. What I hope and pray is that this book will help *all* believers learn how to read and understand the texts of the biblical prophets on their own. They are a different kind of literature from Romans, as much so as comics differ from the front page of a newspaper. We need to spell out in detail the rules for reading this kind of literature if the church is going to understand these texts as the authors intended us to understand them.

1

Calling the People Back to the Covenant

Everything in the prophets is based upon the covenant made between God and Israel during the exodus from Egypt, especially the expression or form of the covenant as it is found in the book of Deuteronomy. Claus Westermann, in his book *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, demonstrates and details this in many ways.[1] For the prophets, their perspectives on social justice, their promises and their threats, *even their very sentences and words*, are all based upon the book of Deuteronomy, an expansion and renewal of the covenant made at Sinai.

Covenant: an agreement between two parties making binding, official, and permanent a relationship of faithful, loyal love, obedience, and trust. Not a business contract or marketplace agreement.

1. Claus Westermann, *Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech*, trans. Hugh Clayton White (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1991).

The Abrahamic covenant is foundational to the Mosaic/Israelite covenant in Deuteronomy, and the Davidic covenant is a further development in the sequence of covenants established by God. So the statement, "Everything in the prophets is based on the Mosaic covenant made at Sinai and renewed at Moab," is not intended to exclude prophetic statements that may be directly tied to the covenant at creation,[2] the covenant with Abraham, and the covenant with David. Nonetheless, the main concern of the prophets is Israel's relationship to Yahweh as defined by the Mosaic covenant.

As a covenant people, Israel was constantly flagging in her loyalty to Yahweh. Instead of being completely devoted to Yahweh (i.e., holy), they hedged their bets with Baal, the rain god, and other false gods used by humans to manipulate the powers that be; and instead of loving their neighbors as themselves, their lifestyle and society were filled with social injustice.

Illustration from Isaiah 5 and 6

Hebrew Literature

Isaiah 5 and 6 provide an excellent example of this business of "calling the people back to the covenant," and a detailed explanation of this section will help us illustrate this aspect of prophetic writing.

As we noted above, reading and studying the Bible may not be straightforward for readers with a *modern* and *Western* background in culture and language. The biblical texts in origin are *ancient* and *Eastern*—they come from a different culture and a different time. The normal pattern of Hebrew literature is to consider topics in a *recursive* manner, which means that a topic

2. In Gen. 1:26–27, the terms "image" and "likeness," according to the ancient Near Eastern background of the text, indicate a covenant relationship between God and humans, on the one hand, and between humans and the rest of the world, on the other. These relationships can be captured by the ideas of "obedient sonship" and "servant kingship," respectively. This is what is meant by a covenant at creation. See chap. 6 in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

is progressively repeated. Such an approach seems monotonous to those who do not know and understand how these texts communicate.

Using the recursive approach, a Hebrew author begins a discourse on a particular topic, develops it from a particular perspective, and then concludes his conversation. Then he begins another conversation, taking up the *same topic again* from a different point of view. When these two conversations or discourses on the same topic are heard in succession, they are like the left and right speakers of a stereo system. Do the speakers of a stereo system give the same music, or do they give different music? The answer is that the music they give is *both* different *and* the same. In one sense the music from the left speaker is identical to that of the right, yet in another way it is slightly different so that the effect is stereo instead of just one-dimensional. Just so, in Hebrew literature the ideas presented can be experienced like 3-D Imax movies with Dolby surround sound—they are three-dimensional or full-orbed ideas.

This pattern in Hebrew literature functions on both macro and micro levels. Individual sentences are placed back-to-back like left and right speakers. Paragraphs and even larger sections of texts are treated the same way. There is a more detailed description in chapter 3, but in just a moment we will see the importance of grasping these literary patterns in the Hebrew Bible.

Literary Unity of Isaiah

Few scholars today treat the book of Isaiah as a literary unity. Methods of studying the text are heavily influenced by the rationalism of the Enlightenment period and focus on modern and Western literary approaches instead of ancient and Eastern rules for composing texts. As a result, most of the commentaries are focused on grammatical and lexical details of individual words and phrases, with the result that no larger picture of the book as a whole emerges from their labors.

For a hundred years or more, scholars have not asked, What were the Hebrews' own principles and rules for telling stories? And how did the authors of that culture and time construct their works? Yet if those questions are asked, it is possible to discern a central theme for the book of Isaiah as a whole and to divide the book into seven separate sections in which Isaiah goes around the same topic like a kaleidoscope, looking at it from different perspectives. The literary structure of each prophetic book as a whole is *fundamental to interpretation*.

Barry Webb is one scholar who has taken the unity of Isaiah seriously and has argued persuasively that the book as a whole centers on the theme of corruption and social injustice in the city of Jerusalem, or Zion, in the eighth century BC that results in divine judgment but ends with a vision of a future renewed and transformed Zion.[3]

Isaiah 1 details the idolatrous worldview gripping Jerusalem and the corruption in society resulting from it. The covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai (and expanded and renewed on the plains of Moab) describes curses and judgment on the people for violating the covenant. After the judgment, however, God will remake, renew, restore, and transform Zion, and Isaiah 2:1–4 envisions this future Zion as a mountain dwarfing all others and one to which all the nations will stream to receive instruction from Yahweh on behavior and lifestyle.

Then in chapters 3 and 4 Isaiah goes around the same topic again, indicting Jerusalem for social injustice and ending with a glorious vision of the future Zion. He depicts the road from judgment to a future city of Zion, which is characterized by righteousness, in the language of a new exodus. Just as God brought his people out of bondage in Egypt after 430 years, so he will bring

3. Barry G. Webb, "Zion in Transformation: A Literary Approach to Isaiah," in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield*, ed. D. J. A. Clines, Stephen E. Fowl, and Stanley E. Porter, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 87 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 65–84. See also Barry G. Webb, *The Message of Isaiah: On Eagles' Wings* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

them out of their slavery to sin and chronic covenant unfaithfulness into a brand-new creation and a community bound by a new covenant. This new exodus will be bigger and better than the first.

The next section runs from chapters 5 to 12 and begins to develop the same themes a third time in the context of a military and political crisis in Judah. Assyria, a sleeping giant, had awakened and was expanding westward toward Syria and then southward into Palestine. The countries of Syria (with its capital in Damascus) and the northern kingdom of Israel (with its capital in Samaria) were putting pressure on the little kingdom of Judah in the south to join them in an anti-Assyrian coalition. The plan of King Ahaz of Judah was to become a vassal or client-king of Tiglath Pileser III of Assyria (called "Pul" in the Bible) and appeal to Assyria to fend off his Israelite and Aramaean enemies to the North. This section also ends by focusing on a future Messiah—a coming King—and the new exodus, giving us a glorious vision of the new world and his rule there.

As we might expect, this third section, chapters 5–12, begins by developing further the accusations of the loss of social justice. We might also expect that by this time Isaiah's audience had had enough of his message. So this time, in order to make sure that his audience participates, Isaiah presents his message in the form of a parable. His approach to the audience is similar to how Nathan the prophet approached King David when the Lord sent him to the king to confront him about his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, Uriah. There, too, Nathan used a parable to get audience participation from the king and thereby have David condemn himself (2 Sam. 12:1–6).

As we focus our attention on Isaiah 5, it is extremely important to observe the literary structure. Here we want to ask: In what form is this message given to us? In other words, what is the shape of the text? The arrangement and form or literary shape of the statements in the text are as important for interpretation of a communication as the meaning of the actual individual sentences.

Chart 1.1

Explanation of Isaiah 5

Outline or Structure of Isaiah 5:1–30

I. Song of the Vineyard	5:1–7
A. A Story of a Vineyard and Its Fruit	1–2
B. The Listeners Asked for a Verdict	3–4
C. The Decision of the Owner	5–6
D. The Application to Judah	7
II. Bad Grapes: Indictment of God's People	5:8–24
A. Round 1	8–17
1. Woe: Land Grabbing	8–10
2. Woe: Partying and Revelry	11–12
a. Therefore 1	13
b. Therefore 2	14–17
B. Round 2	18–24
3. Woe: Mocking Divine Justice	18–19
4. Woe: Inverting God's Standards	20
5. Woe: Self-Approved Wisdom	21
6. Woe: Partying and Inverting Social Justice	22–23
a. Therefore 3	24
III. The Vineyard Ravaged: Announcement of Punishment	5:25–30
A. The Final Therefore	5:25

Chapter 5 is divided into three sections. The first is a parable or song about a vineyard, in verses 1–7. The second section goes from verses 8–24 and applies the parable to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in Isaiah's time. The last section describes the coming judgment: God will bring a distant nation to conquer and destroy them and their way of life.

The parable and its application. The "Song of the Vineyard" in the opening section can be briefly summarized. The parable is divided into four stanzas. The first stanza relates in song a story of a farmer preparing a vineyard and expecting good vintage. Instead,

he is met by rotten, stunted grapes.[4] In the second stanza the listeners are asked for a verdict. The third part confirms the rhetorical question posed in the second stanza by relating the decision of the owner of the vineyard. He will do exactly as the listeners expect him to do—he will destroy this useless fruit orchard. Then comes the punch line of the parable, and what a great shock it is. The parable is applied to Judah and Jerusalem in the last stanza; they are the bad grapes!

Verses 8–24, which I have entitled "Bad Grapes," constitute a damning indictment of the people of God. A series of six woes details and specifies the bad grapes indicated in verses 2 and 4 of the parable. The literary structure is the clue to the meaning of the text. The key words are *woe* and *therefore*. *Woe* is a key word used to describe and identify the sins for which the people will be punished. *Therefore* is a key word used to detail the divine punishment for these specific sins. The punishment is based squarely upon retributive justice, since this is the main principle of the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy).

Notice, however, how these woes are presented. First there are two woes, in verse 8 and verse 11, which are followed by two therefores, in verses 13 and 14. Then there are a series of four more woes, in verses 18, 20, 21, and 22, given in staccato fashion like rapid gun shots. This is followed by another *therefore* in verse 24. The word *therefore* divides the woes into two groups; here Isaiah, in typical Hebrew literary style, is going around the topic twice from two different angles or points of view.

The section indicting the people of God is then followed by an announcement of imminent punishment. This last paragraph is introduced by a conjunction that also means "therefore," but the word in Hebrew is different because this is the big *therefore*

4. Nogah Hareuveni explains *beushim* (bad grapes) as a specific stage of development in the growth of the grapes, when they cease being embryonic but have not yet ripened. A disease called *zoteret* strikes vineyards and prevents grapes from ripening, leaving them in the stunted stage of *beushim*. This explanation is from Mishna *Ma'asrot* 1.2 and the Jerusalem Talmud. See Nogah Hareuveni, *Tree and Shrub in Our Biblical Heritage*, trans. Helen Frenkley (Israel: Neot Kedumim, 1984), 70–73.

that takes up the three little *therefores* in the previous verses (13, 14, 24).

Consequently the six woes are divided into two groups, two in the first group and four in the second. At the heart of all of them is the violation of social justice as is indicated by the last line of verse 7—the punch line of the parable—where we have the word pair *justice* and *righteousness* (hereafter *justice-righteousness*).

Now, according to the Hebrew poetry—which is based upon placing lines in parallel pairs—*justice* is matched in the first line by *righteousness* in the second. Normally in prose when the words *justice* and *righteousness* are joined together, they form a single concept or idea—best expressed in English by the term *social justice*. This is a figure of speech known as a "hendiadys," one concept expressed through two words. The word pair becomes an idiom expressing a single thought that is both different from and greater than the words considered independently. Just as one cannot analyze the expression "by and large" in English by studying *by* and *large* separately, so one cannot determine the meaning of this expression by analyzing *justice* and *righteousness* separately. Hebrew poetry, however, allows such a word pair to be split so that half is in one line of the couplet and the other half is in the parallel line. The word pair *justice-righteousness* is central to the discourse of Isaiah and occurs some eighteen times, always at critical or key points in the discourse.[5]

Bible scholars and religious leaders came to Jesus and asked him, "Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" Similarly in the Old Testament, many years earlier, as Isaiah and the other prophets sought to apply the covenant with Moses and Israel to their situation and times, they found new ways to condense and

5. Some eighteen or nineteen instances of the word pair *justice-righteousness*, frequently split over poetic parallelism, occur in Isaiah: 1:21; 1:27; 5:7; 5:16; 9:6(7); 11:4; 16:5; 26:9; 28:17; 32:1, 32:16; 33:5; 51:5; 56:1; 58:2(2x); 59:4; 59:9; 59:14. In 11:4; 51:5; and 59:4, verbal forms of the root *judge* are employed instead of the noun *judgment*; the instance in 51:05 is not listed in the rather exhaustive and excellent study of Leclerc although it appears as valid as the instance in 11:4. See Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), esp. 10–13, 88, 157.

summarize in a single sentence or even a phrase the apparently unwieldy mass of commands and instructions in the Torah.[6] Even the Ten Words (Commandments) upon which some six hundred or so instructions are based could be further condensed and summarized. An example is the famous passage in Micah 6:8, "What does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (ESV).

The heart of Isaiah's message is that the covenant between God and Israel given by Moses at Sinai is broken. He summarizes this covenant, consisting of the Ten Commandments and the Judgments in Exodus 20–23, using expressions or idioms for social justice and faithful, loyal love or being truthful in love. This can be described and illustrated from Isaiah's prophecy in 16:5 (NIV):

> In *love* a throne will be established;
> in *faithfulness* a man will sit on it—
> one from the house of David—
> one who in judging seeks *justice*
> and speeds the cause of *righteousness*.

In contrast to the regime of the kings of Isaiah's time, a future king is promised who will rule in justice and righteousness. Again, as in Isaiah 5:7, we have the word pair split so that half is in one line of the couplet and half in the parallel line. Similarly, in the first half of the verse we have *love* in the first half of the couplet and *faithfulness* in the second half. This is another word pair that is focused on fulfilling one's obligations and doing what is right in a covenant relationship (such as marriage).

Now, Isaiah's promise of a future king in 16:5 is based upon Deuteronomy 17. Verses 16–20 of Deuteronomy 17 describe the manner in which the future king of Israel is to fulfill his responsibilities. Three negative commands in verses 16–17 are followed by three positive commands in verses 18–20, all relating to the Torah:

6. See Matt. 22:36–40.

(1) the king shall copy the Torah; (2) the king shall have the Torah with him; and (3) the king shall read the Torah.[7] In other words, the only positive requirement is that the king embody *torah* as a model citizen. This is exactly what Isaiah is saying in 16:5, only he employs the concept of social justice, expressed by the broken word pair *justice-righteousness* as a summary for the Torah. Deuteronomy calls for a king who implements the Torah in his regime, and Isaiah predicts a king who will deliver social justice in his rule. They are saying the same thing.

We should note in passing that the word *torah* is poorly translated by the English word *law*. Many Christians think of *torah* mainly as law, i.e., the law of Moses. Two important facts should shape our thinking about *torah*: first, the Hebrew word *tôrâ* means "direction" or "instruction," not "law"; second, these instructions are given in the form of a covenant, not a law treatise. The Torah, then, is unlike any law code in the ancient Near East or even today. It is a set of instructions for living, set in the context and framework of a covenant relationship. The Torah is God instructing his children as a father in a family or as a husband in a marriage relationship—a relationship of faithfulness, loyalty, love, trust, and obedience. It is not a code of laws or requirements that are imposed generally upon human society by an impersonal authority. Here I use the words *instruction* and *torah* interchangeably to try to keep these truths in focus.

The meaning of the word pair *justice-righteousness* both as an expression for social justice and as a summary of the instruction in the covenant is clearly illustrated, in particular in Isaiah 5, in the series of six woes divided into two separate conversations or groups. In verse 7, the word pair *justice-righteousness* broken or split over parallel lines is not only the punch line for the parable; it is also the headline for the next section, showing that the violation of social justice is at the heart of all six woes. In the first woe the

7. Cf. Daniel I. Block, "The Burden of Leadership: The Mosaic Paradigm of Kingship (Deut. 17:14–20)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162 (2005): 259–78.

prophet thunders about land grabbing: "Woe to those who add house to house and field to field" (v. 8). The second woe (v. 11) condemns the partying of those enjoying newfound wealth, because the money for these parties came from mistreating the poor and vulnerable. The final four woes are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that wealth. Between the two groups of woes Isaiah announces punishments based upon the retributive justice of the covenant/the Torah.

Further details explained. In the first round, as we have seen, the woe of verse 8 has to do with greedy grabbing of land, while the woe of verse 11 has to do with partying and revelry. Partying and revelry occupied the leisure time of the rich and resulted from the wealth generated by mistreating the poor and vulnerable.

In the second round, the last four woes are actually a repetition of the first two in recursive development of the topic. The third woe talks about the upper classes carrying a burden of sin bound by big ropes of deceit and mocking God by calling upon him to hurry up with the judgment that he has promised. The fourth woe shows that the system of virtue and vice, of right and wrong, is completely inverted in this society. The fifth woe accuses the people of depending on self-approved knowledge and skill. They are confident in and relying on their technology and mastery of the powers of nature. I remember well around 1979 when we first heard of the disease now called AIDS. The immediate attitude in North America was: "Just give us enough time and a better technology and we will beat this"—an example of relying on our own technology.

The woes, then, are all ways of elaborating the original charge of perverting social justice. The last woe is the climax and summarizes by combining the two original charges of gaining wealth by social injustice and living a life of pleasure to spend that

wealth.[8] In this way the last four woes elaborate the original two indictments. These indictments and the punishments that result are based entirely upon the retributive justice of the Torah, the covenant made at Sinai. The penalty always exactly matches the crime. The wrongdoer must repay as much as but no more than the wrong done.

The economic and social situation addressed by Isaiah in chapter 5 signals the breakdown of conventions governing ownership of property.[9] Prior to the monarchic period, Israelite economy was based on farming and shepherding. Property was inherited and preserved within clans, a kin group between the extended family and the tribe. Diverse instructions in the Mosaic covenant were given to preserve economic equilibrium in ownership of property and to protect the poor and powerless, e.g., laws concerning boundary markers,[10] the inheritance rights of females,[11] levirate marriage,[12] duties and responsibilities of the nearest relative,[13] and jubilee/sabbatical years.[14] Two factors brought changes to the social system: monarchy and urbanization. With the advent of kingship, land could be acquired by the crown: sometimes corruptly as in the case of Naboth's vineyard (1 Kings 21) and sometimes legally through the confiscation of the estates of criminals and traitors. Thus, a family inheritance could be enlarged by a royal grant. Samuel warned about this in 1 Samuel 8:14–15. Recipients of such royal largesse would live in the capital city and eat every day at the king's table, while still enjoying the revenue of their amassed holdings. In this way, important nobles and officials,

8. Peter J. Gentry, "Sizemore Lecture I: Isaiah and Social Justice," *Midwestern Journal of Theology* 12 (2013): 1–16.

9. This description of the background to the social situation in Isaiah 5 is adapted from and based upon Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice*, 59–60, who brings together many seminal studies on the topic.

10. Deut. 19:14; 27:17.

11. Num. 26:33; 27:1–11; 36:1–13.

12. Deut. 25:5–10; Ruth 4:5, 10.

13. The duties of the nearest relative are: redemption of property (Lev. 25:23–28), of persons (25:47–55), of blood (Numbers 35), and of levirate marriage (Ruth 4:5, 10) by the nearest relative.

14. Leviticus 25.

especially those who ingratiated themselves with the king and his henchmen, were in a position to acquire by legal or illegal means the property of those vulnerable to oppression.[15]

On the other hand, the development and growth of cities created new ties between peasant farmers and a new class of merchants who usually lived in the towns and influenced public affairs. When a farmer suffered economic setbacks from crop failure due to drought or locusts, for example, he would turn to a merchant or moneylender in town. He would either be charged interest for a loan or be forced to cultivate land belonging to others on a share-cropping or tenant basis. We have documents from the Jewish community in Elephantine (Syene/Aswan), Egypt, from the fifth century BC that mention Jews who had to pay interest rates of 5 percent per month. When unpaid interest is added to the capital, the average annual rate is 60 percent.[16]

As agricultural plots become the property of a single owner (perhaps an absentee landlord who is a city dweller), as peasants become indentured serfs or even slaves, and as their goods and services are received as payments on loans, the gap between the rich and the poor widens. Since land ownership translates into economic and political power, issues of property rights and taxes, as well as laws concerning bankruptcy, foreclosures, and loans, fall into the hands of the rich, thus aiding and abetting a gap in power as well.

The situation that Isaiah condemns is graphically portrayed: large estates amassed by adding field to field on which sit "large and beautiful houses" (Isa. 5:9b ESV). The acquisition of land comes as debts are foreclosed and the property is expropriated. Since all this is done according to the laws of the marketplace and by statute, it is all strictly legal—but utterly immoral and in violation of the social justice of the Torah. This is a powerful demonstration of the parable of the vineyard at work: everything looks

15. Gentry, "Sizemore Lecture I," 1–16.
16. If one considers compounded (or unpaid) interest, the rate would be higher.

legal and proper on the outside, but on closer inspection shows that the grapes are rotten, stinking, and stunted. The image of a landowner dwelling all alone in the midst of the country is a picture of great horror. While American society idolizes and praises rugged individualism, ancient Israel valued the community over the individual. The interests of the group were more important than those of a single individual, no matter how clever or skilled and talented the entrepreneur. It is difficult, therefore, for us to feel the horror of ending up as a society of one.[17]

So the rich and luxuriant lifestyle of the upper class grows even as the poor get poorer. The punishment therefore fits the crime: the fine homes will become desolate and uninhabited (v. 9), and the fields so ravenously acquired will be blighted (v. 10). The same retribution is expressed in verse 17 when the prophet goes round the topic a second time.

The second woe describes the lifestyle of the growing upper class. The accumulated wealth frees the gentry, the landowners, from the necessity of working and allows them to enjoy a carefree and self-indulgent life. After the property and fine homes, the most conspicuous sign of this detached and carefree life is feasting and drinking—drinking literally from morning to night—which is twice decried (vv. 11, 22). Their fine feasts are accompanied by small orchestras—lyre and lute, tambourine and flute. Again, the punishment is directly matched to the offense. Verse 13 says, "Their nobility are poor wretches famished with hunger, and their multitude are parched with thirst."

The chapter ends without a shred of hope. In the last paragraph, God whistles to summon a distant nation that then brings across the desert a war machine so disciplined and powerful that there will be no escape. It reminds one of the troops of Sauron at the Gates of Mordor in *The Lord of the Rings*.

The literary structure is key to correct interpretation. The last

17. Gentry, "Sizemore Lecture I," 1–16.

four woes and the following *therefore* are an expansion upon the first two woes and the two climactic *therefores* that follow them. The literary structure, then, shows that verses 15 and 16 are both climactic and central as summaries of the condition of Israel and her situation before God:

> So humanity is humbled and mankind is brought low,
> and the eyes of the haughty will be brought low,
> but the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice,
> and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness.[18]

Although the elite in Israel are enjoying the high life, they will be brought low and brought to recognize one who is truly exalted and high: Yahweh of Armies. He is exalted because he shows himself holy in justice and righteousness. The word pair for *social justice* split over parallel lines is found once more at this crucial juncture in the text, just as it was found in verse 7, the punch line of the parable.

What we can see in the biblical prophets, and in particular in Isaiah 5, is that God is bound to the nation of Israel by a covenant relationship. This covenant, made at Sinai, shows the people how to have a right relationship with God, how to treat one another in genuinely human ways, and how to be good stewards of the earth's resources.[19] *Social justice* is a term used by Isaiah and other prophets as a way of summarizing all the diverse instructions in the covenant. So here, the term *social justice* is defined by the detailed instructions in the covenant for treating other people in a genuinely human way.

In Isaiah 5, the prophet exposes the social injustice in Israel in their business dealings and announces the curses of the covenant and impending punishment based upon retributive justice. Thus the people are called back to the covenant relationship, and if they

18. Translation is that of H. G. M. Williamson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 1–27* (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 1:356–57.
19. See Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, passim.

do not return, they face certain destruction of their world as they know it.

Conclusion

What have we learned from our examination of Isaiah 5 and 6? The first and perhaps most important thing is that the biggest part of the message of the biblical prophets has nothing to do with predicting the future. This is extremely important to keep in mind since a large part of this little book deals with how and why the prophets predicted the future and what function that played in the message as a whole. Instead, the majority of what they had to say constitutes proclaiming a message that explains how the word of God, already revealed and received in the past, applies to present circumstances and situations. The promise or prediction that Israel would be exiled and judged for disobedience and disloyalty to the covenant did not require anything special beyond reading and preaching the book of Deuteronomy, given so long ago. And this is the largest part of the messages of the prophets.

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PETER J. GENTRY (PhD, University of Toronto) is professor of Old Testament interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and director of the Hexapla Institute. He is the coauthor of *Kingdom through Covenant*.

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