

A “Darke” Theology?

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A paper given to a joint session of the Theology of Hebrew Scriptures and Biblical Hebrew Poetry sections, SBL Annual Meeting, Atlanta, GA, November 2010.

Thanks

I would like to start by expressing my gratitude for the opportunity to participate in this panel. It is an honor to sit with scholars who have contributed so much to our understanding of biblical texts and their relevance, of Hebrew poetry and theology. Preparing for the panel has also proven a welcome (or mostly welcome) challenge, because it has pushed me into new thinking about prophetic poetry and about how I approach the task of theological engagement with these books.

Prophets, too!

In re-reading Professor Miller’s article (2000/1994) almost twenty years after its first publication, I was struck by how clear and challenging it remains. While discussions about Hebrew poetry have developed since 1994, I found it still helpful for naming and explaining the varieties of biblical poetic technique.

While Prof. Miller’s examples are from the Psalms, I was reminded of how the same poetic features appear in the prophetic literature, my own scholarly home. “Parallelism.” Yes, that’s well represented in the Prophets. “Simile and metaphor.” Enough to write books about (e.g., O’Brien 2008). “Terseness, ellipsis, odd verb sequences, parataxis.” In abundance. “Decontextualization.” Check. Most of this article carried over directly into prophetic poetry; it served as a helpful review of the primary reasons that prophetic poetry is considered poetry.

When Prof. Miller turns to the theological implications of the poetic style, my first response is to say “Yes, these things also are true for prophetic texts.” Surely, as in the Psalms examples he gives, the multi-significance, multiplicity of meanings, and imaginative nature of the Prophets call for a theology is figural, non-literal, indirect, open-ended. And, like the Psalms, don’t the Prophets use the realm of imagination to bridge the human and divine world? Haven’t I said that myself--that prophetic metaphor seeks to shock the reader into new insights about an unknowable God, that metaphor is our only means of talking about who God is? Isn’t bridging also the aim of professional commentators of the Prophets: trying to explain what truth the prophetic imagination compels readers to confront?

Dark(e) Takes on the Prophets

My initial journey down the “Prophets, too” path, however, took a dark(e) turn when I returned to the work of those who have written specifically on prophetic poetry, a turn reflected in the title of my paper. It is taken from Yvonne Sherwood’s comparison of prophetic poetry to the raw and subversive writing of John Donne (the “darke texts” quote coming from one of his verse epistles, which in turn alludes to Numbers 12:8). According to Sherwood (2002; 2006; 2009; 2010), prophetic poetry is more like Donne than Wordsworth, more Baroque than Romantic, more disturbing than beautiful.

Sherwood sees this rawness, of course, in the content of prophetic literature. Prophetic poetry is filled with excrement, with sexual assault, with dead bodies, with images that offend polite sensibility. Sherwood makes her own list:

- “In Isa. 7:20 Assyria is compared to a razor, shaving the hair and pubic hair of the body politic; in Jer. 13:11 Israel and Judah cling to Yahweh as a loincloth hugs the loins.” (2002, 58)
- In Ezekiel we find “the nation-baby found covered in blood with cord uncut (Ezek. 16), the image of sin as the stain of menstrual blood (Isa. 64:6) and the spectacle of blood poured out like dust and flesh like dung (Zeph. 1:17).” (2002, 60)
- God is “a woman in labour, a she-bear, a bird-catcher, a leopard, and exhausted warrior or a wine-strained tramp (Isa 42:14-15; Hos. 13:8; Isa. 63:1-6).” (2002, 59)

To her list, we could add many more examples:

- Jerusalem as one of two harlot sisters lusting after Babylonian men “whose members were like those of donkeys, and whose emission was like that of stallions” (Ezek. 23:20).
- The holy one of Israel as like maggots to Ephraim (Hos. 5:12).
- The holy one of Israel as a father who beats his son again before the bruises, sores, and bleeding wounds of the last beating heal (Isa. 1:5-6).
- The holy one of Israel as throwing filth on the whore Nineveh, lifting her skirts for all to see the locus of her shameful acts, taunting her and the male king who should have protected her (Nah. 3:5-7; 18-19).

Of course, this truth about the content of prophetic poetry is nothing new. As Sherwood notes, Luther saw it, Gunkel commented on it, and feminist commentators have not let us ignore it.

The images created by these poems are pornoprophetic, scatological, scandalous.

Sherwood’s primary argument, however, is not about the content of the prophetic books; it is about their style. The style of prophetic poetry is itself violent--disruptive, fragmentary, jarring. Rather than enlighten the reader, prophetic language serves to confound sense. As an

example, she points to Amos 8:2, where God shows Amos a piece of summer fruit, only to yank it away and, without explanation, announce the nation's end. Think you see summer fruit? Well, what you see is not what you get. The connection between these ideas—fruit and end—is not one that can be logically anticipated; it is simply a matter of sound: *qayitz, qetz*. For another example, Sherwood turns to Amos 5:5, where the sound of Gilgal elicits a string of rhyming syllables: *hagilgal gala yigleh*. Gilgal's fate, it seems, is sealed by the unfortunate similarity in sounds between its name and the Hebrew word for "exile." Those of us familiar with prophetic wordplay have forgotten how nonsensical and arbitrary the connection between sin and punishment can be.

Gerald Morris makes this case even more strongly in *Prophecy, Poetry, and Hosea*. Morris' primary argument is that literary features function differently in poetry than they do in rhetoric. To meet its goal of persuasion, rhetoric aims for clarity. The goal of poetry, however, is to call attention to itself: it succeeds by "complicating sense with sound, by using incongruous words or expressions, by deforming expected emphases or by deliberately obscuring or even contradicting itself" (Morris, 42).

Morris shows how Hosea uses literary features in a poetic way, particularly repetition and wordplay. While in Aristotle repetition emphasizes meaning, repetition in Hosea continually changes and/or complicates meaning. As Morris notes, "Many repetitions are notable for appearing in one kind of speech first, then surprisingly in an utterly different sort of speech later" (69). Take, for example, the repetition of the word "dew." In Hos. 6:4, the affections of Ephraim and Judah are compared to dew that evaporates (it is their sin); but the evaporation of dew in 13:3 is the symbol of their pending destruction (it is their punishment); while in 14:6 the holy One is like the life-giving dew (it is their hope of salvation). Moreover, Hosea refuses to follow

the rules of parallelism, where one word of a pair is supposed to appear to in the first half-line and the other in the second half-line. Hosea throws multiple word pairs into a single line, such as in 2:13, where “festivals” appears twice and *hishbati* (“I will end”) rhymes with *shabatah* (“her sabbath”); sometimes, as in 9:1-2, the expected patterns of word pairs are shuffled around, so that the pairs threshing floor//wine press and grain//new wine are split over two verses (Morris, 67). Rather than employ repetition in neat parallel lines, Hosea uses it in a counter-formulaic way.

Like Sherwood, Morris underscores the arbitrary nature of wordplay. Wordplay invents a connection between otherwise unconnected words. Pointing to examples given by Harold Fisch in his study of Hosea’s puns in *Poetry with a Purpose* (1988), Morris shows that the writer of Hosea plays with phonemes to create level after level of ambiguity. “Pun after pun hints at a secondary level of meaning”; based not in logic but on incantation, “the words themselves bear the power” (Morris, 90; 93-94).

According to Sherwood, Morris, and Fisch, prophetic poetry does not attempt to aid our understanding. It constructs a metaphor only to subvert it, turn it on its head, disassemble its pieces and make something new. Every time we think we know what it means, it changes. The metaphoric center doesn’t hold. Prophetic poetry “enlivens rather than enlightens” (Morris, 74).

How dark(e) is it?

Is this true? Is this really how prophetic poetry works?

Sherwood, I believe, has overstated her case that all prophetic poetry intentionally and irretrievably obscures. Morris, for example, bolsters his case for the counter-formulaic style of Hosea by contrasting it with the quite conventional Joel (Morris, p. 67) and claims that Amos

uses repetition to aid coherence, while Hosea's repetition subverts sense. Sherwood makes a strong case for some of Amos and most of Hosea, and Morris and Fisch restrict themselves to Hosea. No blanket assessment fits all prophetic books and every use of wordplay and repetition.

But while their claim that Prophets disrupt sense may not be universally true, it is true about enough prophetic poetry to deserve our attention—both literarily and theologically. Sherwood and Morris' descriptions ring true for Ezekiel, for Zechariah, and for at least some of Micah. They certainly well describe my own experience of reading Nahum. By the time I had worked through Nahum carefully enough to write a commentary (O'Brien 2002/2009), I felt battered by the attempt to make sense of it. The constantly shifting pronouns. The phrases that rhymed but remained babble. The rapid-fire of images with no syntax. Trying to discern coherence in this book left me sympathetic with Nineveh, both of us victims of Nahum's brutal language.

While I've never compared Nahum's poetry to John Donne, I have compared it to another genre, combat film, in which the constant re-positioning of camera angles leaves the viewer feeling like a victim of war (O'Brien 2010). Anthony McCosker (2006) describes how cinematic style shapes the opening scene of *Saving Private Ryan*: the viewer is assaulted not just by the blood and guts of this twenty-five-minute long barrage but also by the jerkiness of the camera, which seeks to recreate in the viewer the sense of the disorientation of battle. Margaret Bruder (1998) similarly claims that in movies like Jean Claude Vann Damm's *Hard Target*, in which the viewer is bombarded with forty-nine shots in one minute of film, the constant repositioning of the camera is itself an assault. The viewer suffers not only by observing violent content, but also by being literally "jerked" around.

That's what it felt like to read the style of Nahum. And that's what it feels like to read a lot of prophetic poetry. Its style doesn't soothe or enlighten. It irritates and frustrates. It bruises and batters.

Theological Implications

If this is what much prophetic poetry is like, then what does that mean for theology? After all, if the poetic style of the Psalms creates a bridge between the human and the divine, then the style of prophetic poetry blows up the bridges that we've already made—usually while we're halfway across. It's the magic carpet that promises to sail us safely over the void but then begins to unravel as soon as we've left the solid ground on which we were standing. The style of prophetic poetry doesn't advance our grasp of who God is but instead subverts our understanding at every turn. What kind of theology is that?

1. What it isn't

It's perhaps easiest to say what modes of theology serious engagement with prophetic poetic style challenges: almost all of it. Taking seriously the disruptive, counterintuitive character of prophetic language challenges the way most of us do prophetic theology.

Clearly, assuming that prophetic style is intentional challenges translators who attempt to smooth out the incoherence of the language, especially by emending it. One example of many is James Luther Mays' commentary on Micah in the Old Testament Library. In his treatment of Micah 1:8-16, Mays declares that the text "has been seriously damaged in its transmission" and that "no plausible understanding of the MT is possible apart from reconstructions and emendations" (Mays, 51). In particular, Mays assumes that the geographical locations mentioned

in these verses must sound like the punishments listed: he “repairs” the puns in order to render sense to the pericope. What is incoherent in Hebrew is made (somewhat) coherent in English.

Mays is not alone, of course. Not only translators but also most commentators attempt to explain what prophetic texts mean. They assume that any ambiguous, jarring, or disruptive language is the result of transmission errors or a symptom of the distance between ancient authors and modern readers. They—or I should say “we”—attempt to make the prophetic texts more accessible, more understandable, more relevant to people’s lives. Over the centuries, interpreters have disagreed about what the preaching/teaching of the Prophets is: whether prophets predict the future, rail against the cult, or preach a message of social justice. But almost all have assumed that the prophetic message was intended to be coherent. What the prophetic books say might be disturbing but it’s supposed to be intelligible.

In Morris’ language, we have been treating prophetic language as rhetoric. We even talk about it in that way, using vocabulary like “persuasion” and “rhetorical device.” Metaphor, allusion, alliteration, and other poetic features are considered the Prophets’ way of making a point, which we then convey to others in discursive, even homiletical, style. Poetry has been the rental car—the vehicle good for getting us from one place to another but not worth investing in. And, following the Prophets in subverting my own metaphor, if our intended mode of transportation looks like a jumbled wreck, we’ve sprung into action with our scholarly crowbars, intent on extracting whatever might still breathe the breath of life.

If we truly treated prophetic literature as poetry, we would quit talking about the message of the prophets. We would cease describing prophets as preachers, as teachers, as messengers, as voices for social justice, as predictors--as forthtellers or foretellers. This change would undercut most of the history of the interpretation of the Prophets, but it also would undercut contemporary

attempts to read prophetic books as Persian-period literary productions crafted to “explain” the lessons of the past. In a new collection essays edited by Diana Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi entitled *Production of Prophecy* (2009), almost every contributor locates the construction of the prophetic books in the Persian period and identifies their purpose as shaping Yehud’s identity through interpretation of its past. How can prophetic literature provide a coherent explanation of the nation’s fate if the literature itself is not coherent? If the only connection these books make between sin and punishment is that of sound, wouldn’t that suggest that there are really no lessons to learn from the past, or perhaps that a name change would be more effective than repentance?

If Morris is right that puns make the choice between meanings impossible, then everything and nothing is true all at once. And if prophets don’t clarify, then perhaps neither should we. By taming the words into a neat message, we are undoing what prophetic language attempts to do in the first place—to make meaning of words less clear, more ambiguous, more jerky. We are the ones seeing false visions, claiming peace (or at least coherence) where there is none (Ezek. 13:10).

2. But what is it?

Clearly attention to prophetic style rules out theologies that move toward closure and certainty. But what kind of theology it invites is harder to grasp.

While Sherwood is not usually considered a theologian, she does reflect on the theological implications of her work: She suggests that

Prophecy . . . uses violent distortions of language as a testimony to the power of Yahweh: as in the prophetic theophanies, in which the presence of God touches the earth, causing the ‘foundations’ and the thresholds to shake (Ezek. 1.28; Isa. 6.1-6; Amos 9.1)

or the earth to melt (Amos 9.5), so linguistic convulsion creates a sense of words intervened in, and subjected by God. It uses violence to represent the radical otherness of a Yahweh's-eye view of the world and the strangeness of God's language. (2002, 73)

Prophetic language, claims Sherwood, underscores divine sovereignty and transcendence.

In an unpublished paper, Andrew Mein comes to similar conclusions about Ezekiel's language. He suggests that the repugnant God portrayed by Ezekiel might propel us not to look for better divine images elsewhere but instead to face the reality "that ultimately all of our language about God will fail"—including the language about God in biblical texts: "biblical texts are not just sometimes idolatrous, but perhaps inevitably idolatrous." In these affirmations, Mein finds support in the apophatic theological tradition, which insists on the importance of "unknowing" God (quoting from Meister Eckhart) for the sake of "God beyond God." For both Mein and Sherwood, prophetic poetry is a form of Negative Theology, a shattering of the idols we have made of our images of God.

Does that leave us with anything to say? If all speech about God is false, including that of the Prophets, then should we simply quit talking about them-- about God? Mein reminds us that the apophatic mystical theologians did not draw this conclusion: "[their writings] are regularly characterised by a superabundance of theological affirmation and an extravagant wordiness." The book of Ezekiel doesn't limit speech but instead engorges itself with language, swallowing it whole and spewing it forth in all directions. In turn, Mein suggests that negative theology invites us not to silence speech but to heap it up, since none of it is adequate in itself.

The comparison that Sherwood and Mein make between prophetic theology and the *Via Negativa* is intriguing and certainly leads to a different kind of theological engagement with prophetic books than is common. But even their approach doesn't seem to go far enough in

taking the distinctive style of prophetic poetry to heart. Yet again, we are talking about prophetic poetry and its intended effects: we're discerning its message, even if it is a negative one. Yet again, we've left the realm of the disturbed/disturbing imagination and retreated to rational discourse. Here we are again renting the economy sub-compact instead of jumping on the world's scariest roller coaster, unsure if we can stomach the ride.

As I begin writing a commentary on the book of Micah (for the Wisdom Bible Commentary), I am faced with the hard questions this conversation poses for writing theological commentary on the Prophets. What is the goal of commentary? Is it to explain what the prophets meant and mean, or is it to enable readers to experience for themselves the power of prophetic language? If the latter, then how does commentary invite the experience of disorientation? Should commentary take the form an anti-commentary, starting out making sense and then queering everything up? Should translators craft their own poetry modeled on prophetic poetry, rewriting Hosea or Nahum as slam poetry? That seems to be the solution Fisch suggests: "It is best to ignore meanings and to remain with the words and phonemes" (153). Or, can we only offer our own readers a second-hand experience, narrating what the Hebrew roller coaster feels like to us?

And yet

As I struggle with these questions, I keep coming back to another, more central, one: if the language of the Prophets is so unknowable, then how have so many readers found so much meaning in them? How have we made sense of the Prophets if there is none?

Sherwood blames ideological interests for forcing the Bible—and the Prophets—into a box into which neither fit. Those promoting Western democratic values have fashioned a Liberal

Bible in their own image, one that testifies to justice and other universal truths; when read selectively, the Prophets can be easily grafted onto the modern, liberal project—but only when read selectively (Sherwood 2010). Similarly, those who want to find in the Bible the evidence of high literary sensibility have been able to patch together a Literary Bible, filled with beauty and the sublime--by leaving out most of the Prophets. For Sherwood, these readings are ideologically-driven misreadings that ignore the distinctive style of prophetic literature.

In this way, Sherwood is an extremely—and surprisingly—formalist reader. She infers that the style of the Prophets dictates a single legitimate response and a singular sophisticated contemporary interpretation.

Is it really possible to misread poetry? If the hallmark of poetry and the theology it invites is open-endedness, as Prof. Miller argues, then how can literary, liberal, or other readings be ruled out? The fractures of prophetic wordplay and repetition may caution against any single authoritative meaning, but only because they provoke a diversity of reader response. All readings may be limited, but lots of them are in there, somewhere, swirling around in the language.

Perhaps that is the goal of theological commentary on the Prophets: to show how the disorienting language of the Prophets leads readers in lots of different directions, all at once. To demonstrate that there is no single right way to read prophetic poetry--not even Sherwood's way. Perhaps Andrew Mein is right: the disturbing poetry of the Prophets should propel us not to say less about God and our world, but much, much more.

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