TEXTLINGUISTICS AND PROPHECY
IN THE BOOK OF THE TWELVE

E. RAY CLENDENEN*

I. INTRODUCTION

For several years I have been studying the biblical prophets with the aid of a textlinguistic model developed by Robert Longacre. I have argued in several articles for the usefulness of such a model and have suggested ways in which it may be applied.[1] Here after a brief summary of that model and how it relates to the prophetic books I will suggest how it might be used to uncover and describe the essential message of all twelve of the so-called Minor Prophets. My concern is not primarily with the the book of the Twelve as a whole but with the individual books and by implication the other books of OT prophecy. The thesis is that by considering the nature of prophecy as essentially defined by 2 Kgs 17:13, the study of the prophetic books should employ a textlinguistic model that identifies the basic prophetic discourse type to be hortatory. I believe this model offers a relatively reliable means to capture the essential message(s) of a prophetic book and the contribution played by the various parts of that book in communicating that message.

II. THE NATURE OF THE PROPHETIC BOOKS

1. *The prophetic genre.*

a. *Importance of genre.* Tremper Longman has suggested that "genre may well be the literary concept most important to the interpretive task."[2] Bo-Krister Ljungberg wrote, "Genre is constitutive of meaning: it conditions reader expectations and thus allows for understanding."[3] You cannot

---

* Ray Clendenen is executive editor, Bible and reference books, Broadman & Holman, 127 Ninth Avenue, North, Nashville, TN 37234.

[1] E. R. Clendenen, "The Structure of Malachi: A Textlinguistic Study," *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987) 3–17; idem, "Old Testament Prophecy as Hortatory Text: Examples from Malachi," *Journal of Translation and Textlinguistics* 6 (1993) 336–41; idem, "Postholes, Postmodernism, and the Prophets: Toward a Textlinguistic Paradigm," in *The Challenge of Postmodernism* (ed. D. S. Dockery; Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1995) 135–39; idem, "Interpreting the Minor Prophets for Preaching," *Faith & Mission* 13 (1995) 54–69. The present work is a radical revision of the latter, condensing many aspects and expanding others. In a forthcoming commentary on Malachi I have tried to present a more detailed application of the model that shows how it can be used alongside more traditional exegetical methods.

[2] T. Longman III, "Literary Approaches and Interpretation," *NIDOTTE* 1.114.

[3] Bo-Krister Ljungberg, "Genre and Form Criticism in Old Testament Exegesis," in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* (ed. R. D. Bergen; Dallas: SIL, 1994) 421.

accurately interpret what you cannot identify. Most would agree that prophecy is a distinct literary genre, which provides the literary context within which prophetic texts must be interpreted.[4]

b. *Distinguishing marks of the prophetic genre.*   There are several marks of the prophetic genre, such as the presentation of the message as received directly from God, an elevated rhetorical style, and an inventory of certain literary forms or sub-genres such as lawsuit and woe. But the most important mark derives from the nature of a prophet of God. Yahweh had declared through Moses in Deut 18:18, "I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. I will put My words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him."[5] According to 2 Kgs 17:13, God had raised up many prophets: "Still, the LORD warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments and statutes according to all the law that I commanded your fathers and that I sent to you through My servants the prophets.' "

Considerable discussion is taking place in the literature over what a prophet is. David Baker recently wrote, "Rather than simply looking at a biblical reading of what prophets were, as found, for example, in Deuteronomy 18 or 2 Kgs 17:13, recent study has been informed by sociological readings of the text." Whereas "biblically, the prophets saw their authority deriving from a call by God, being his messengers, . . . this newer, sociological approach highlights the importance of the recipients of the message in recognizing the messenger as a prophet, grounding his or her identity upon that recognition." As Baker observes, however, "If prophets are defined by society's recognition of them and their function as noticeably affecting the life and behavior of that society, one would question whether prophets actually existed in ancient Israel."[6] According to Neh 9:26, the early generations of Israel "were disobedient and rebelled against You. They flung Your law behind their backs, killed Your prophets who warned them to return to You, and committed terrible blasphemies" (cf. also 9:29–30).[7] My conviction is that texts like 2 Kgs 17:13 are paradigmatic, and the function of the prophets should be understood as something like covenant mediators or "enforcers."[8]

---

[4] See R. L. Giese, Jr., "Literary Forms of the Old Testament," in *Cracking Old Testament Codes* (ed. D. B. Sandy and R. L. Giese, Jr.; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995) 18–19.

[5] Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible, in some cases in a preliminary form.

[6] D. W. Baker, "Israelite Prophets and Prophecy," in *The Face of OT Studies: A Survey of Contemporary Approaches* (ed. D. W. Baker and B. T. Arnold; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) 268–70.

[7] Also note 2 Chr 36:15–16: "The LORD, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the LORD rose against his people, until there was no remedy." (ESV)

[8] Ljungberg, "Genre and Form Criticism" 424. Also see E. H. Merrill's discussion of Deut 18:15–22 (*Deuteronomy* [NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 273–74).

If this is the nature of a prophet, then the prophetic books should be understood as calling for behavioral changes on the part of the disobedient covenant people. In textlinguistic terms, this describes hortatory discourse.

2. *Discourse type and biblical prophecy.*

a. *Discourse types.* My understanding of the nature and function of discourse types is based on Longacre's system of discourse types, which has been applied to ancient and modern languages around the world.[9] The basic difference between genre and discourse type is that genre is specific to a particular culture and language, whereas discourse type is a linguistic universal. In simple terms, a discourse may be categorized on the basis of focus and framework, that is, whether it is about people or ideas, and whether it is structured chronologically or logically. The additional parameter of temporal orientation yields the following basic discourse types: narrative, predictive, procedural, hortatory, and expository.[10] These discourse types are identified by surface structure, which is concerned primarily with the appearance and function of certain clause types and verb forms. Furthermore, each of these discourse types typically corresponds to a particular kind of notional or semantic structure, which is mapped onto the surface structure. For example, elements such as setting and climax are distinctively mapped onto the surface structure of narrative, so that they can be identified. As important as genre identification is for interpretation because interpretive strategies vary with genre, discourse type is even more important, because the function of verb forms and clause types varies with discourse type.

The other important concept that must be mentioned is function. Language does not just communicate and mean things; it does things.[11] Narrative typically recounts what happened, but with the intention of affecting an ideal audience in some way. The case is similar with predictive discourse that recounts what *will* happen. Procedural discourse describes how something may or must be done, usually with the intention of enabling the audience or reader to reproduce the item or process. Discourse type creates audience expectations that may or may not be fulfilled. Although a speaker or writer will normally use a discourse type for its customary purpose, he may choose for rhetorical or other reasons to violate these expectations. For example, a

---

[9] See e.g. R. E. Longacre, *The Grammar of Discourse* (New York: Plenum, 1983); idem, "Interpreting Biblical Stories," in *Discourse and Literature* (3 vols.; ed. T. A. van Dijk; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1985) 3.83–98; idem, *Joseph: A Story of Divine Providence—A Text Theoretical and Textlinguistic Analysis of Genesis 37 and 39–48* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989). Also see the excellent summary of Longacre's tagmemic approach in D. A. Dawson, *Text-Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew* (JSOTSup 177; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 70–122.

[10] Longacre has continued to refine and expand his inventory of discourse types, but these continue to be the basic ones.

[11] See the helpful discussion of function in D. B. Sandy, *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002) 80–82.

writer might produce an ironic procedural discourse on how to pollute the environment, but with the purpose of shocking his readers into changing their environment-polluting behavior. In this case a procedural discourse would nonetheless serve a hortatory function. Or a counselor's client who has asked how he might alter his behavior in a certain area might receive as an answer an account of how someone else succeeded in altering a similar behavior. In this case a narrative discourse would be used to serve a procedural function.

b. *Hortatory discourse.*   The focus of hortatory discourse is people, and the framework is logical. A paragraph or discourse may be identified as hortatory if its independent clauses:

> (1) contain one or more directive forms—imperative, cohortative, jussive, or obligatory imperfect; and (2) if it calls upon someone to change his attitude or behavior.

A wife may say to her husband, "Please close the window." This would be a text identified as hortatory discourse. She might also say to her husband, "I'm cold." While saying this, she might look at the open window, or she might just expect him to figure out what she wants. Although "I'm cold" exhibits the surface structure of expository discourse, it can be identified as hortatory discourse if the communication situation furnishes clues that a directive is implied.

A competent interpreter of texts, then, had better be aware of discourse types, their characteristic surface and semantic structures, and their functions.

c. *The Prophets as hortatory discourse.*   A fully developed hortatory discourse will express three key semantic elements: (1) the situation that needs to be changed; (2) the change being called for; and (3) the arguments or factors used to motivate that change. The motivation element in turn can be either positive or negative, that is, comprising either incentive or deterrent. Furthermore, motivating factors can also be in the past, the present, or the future.

Since prophetic books are by nature hortatory, a fully-formed prophetic book will have all three elements, and it usually has both positive and negative motivation. In form-critical terms, such a book will include (1) indictment oracles, presenting the covenant violating situation that needs changing; (2) instruction oracles, presenting the change being called for; (3) salvation oracles, presenting the incentives motivating such a change; and (4) judgment oracles, presenting the deterrents to refusing the change.[12] Although

---

[12] At least in some cases where judgment is announced with no explicit expression of hope, the possibility of avoiding punishment through repentance may be assumed (e.g. Jonah 3:4; Jer 18:1–12). But even when judgment is decreed as inevitable due to Israel's continued obstinacy, the function is to motivate repentance on the part of those who survive the judgment (cf. Jer 23:20). In these cases the judgment and salvation oracles combine to motivate right behavior in a "purified"

introductions to prophetic forms often list oracles of indictment, instruction, judgment, and salvation, the description of prophecy is usually complicated by including many other forms as being on the same level. "Woe speech" and "prophetic dirge," for example, are listed alongside "prophecy of disaster" (or "judgment oracle") rather than as forms of judgment oracles.[13]

Chart 1

	Past Actions	Present Realities/ Circumstances	Future Actions
Incentive	Hos 2:8: She [Israel] did not recognize that it was I who gave her the grain, the new wine, and the oil. I lavished on her silver and gold, which they used for Baal.	Hos 14:8: It is I who answer and look after you. I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.	Hos 1:7: But on the house of Judah I will have pity, and I will save them by the LORD their God.
Deterrent	Amos 4:6: Though I gave you empty mouths in all your cities, a shortage of food in all your communities, yet you did not return to Me, the LORD solemnly declares.	Hos 4:3: For this reason the land mourns, and its inhabitants, along with the animals in the wild and the birds in the sky, waste away. Even the fish of the sea disappear!	Hos 1:4: The LORD told him, Name him Jezreel, for in a little while I will punish the house of Jehu for the bloodshed at Jezreel and put an end to the kingdom of the house of Israel.

Incentives to obedience (positive motivation) could be given in terms of (1) past blessings (e.g. Hos 2:8; 7:15; 11:1–4; 12:10; 13:4–5; Amos 2:9–11); (2) present realities (e.g. Hos 3:1; 14:8–9[Heb 14:9–10]; Mal 1:2; 2:10a); or (3) future blessings (e.g. Hos 1:7, 10–11; 2:14–23; 3:5; 6:1–3, 11; 11:10–11; 13:14; 14:4–7; Joel 2:18–3:21[Heb 4:21]; Amos 9:11–15; Zeph 3:14–20; Hag 2:6–9). Deterrents to disobedience (negative motivation) likewise could be in terms of (1) past judgment (e.g. Amos 4:6–11; Zech 1:6); (2) present circumstances (e.g. Hos 1:9; 4:3; 5:11–12; 6:5; 7:9; 8:7–8; 9:7; Joel 1:2–12; Hag 1:6, 9–11); or (3) future punishment (e.g. Hos 1:4–6; 2:3–4, 6, 9–13; 3:4; 4:5–7; 5:2, 6–7, 9–10, 14–15; Amos 2:13–16; 3:11–15; 5:16–23; 6:7–11; 8:7–14).

---

remnant. Our historical perspective allows us to recognize that in some cases announcements of future judgment or salvation concerned the distant future, beyond the lifetime of the prophet's immediate audience (e.g. Joel 3:14–21; Mal 3:1). But like the assurance of Christ's return for the Christian, this was to have a motivating effect regardless of the time it would occur (e.g. 1 Thess 4:18; 5:6–11). See the discussion in S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/InterVarsity, 1988) 232–34. He correctly affirms that "even Amos, the gloomiest of prophets, does not simply announce the judgment in order that people may know the reasons for it when it comes" (p. 234). Also see W. Houston, "What Did the Prophets Think They Were Doing? Speech Acts and Prophetic Discourse in the Old Testament," *BibInt* 1 (1993) 177–87. He declares, "The possibilities of inexorable doom and of mercy evoked by repentance were always implicit in the use of the genre of the oracle of doom" (p. 186). See also B. S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 131; F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980) 44.

[13] See e.g. W. W. Klein, C. L. Blomberg, and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word, 1993) 292–302.

d. *Conclusion.*   Recognizing the nature of the prophetic books as coherent behavioral exhortation, that is, hortatory discourse, has important implications. In such discourses the most prominent element is naturally the behavioral change or changes being advocated. All the other elements in the discourse must relate to one or more of the commands or exhortations, and it would be a misuse of Scripture to listen to only one of the supplementary elements, such as predictive prophecy, without relating it to the central message of the book.

III. A PRACTICAL APPROACH TO THE PROPHETS

1. *Indictment: Identifying the situation.*   A prophetic book should be read many times, preferably in Hebrew, looking first for the situation that called for the prophetic message, that is, the sin or sins that were keeping the ideal readers from pleasing God. Normally this will be expressed by expository discourse, that is, in verb and clause types that convey a state of affairs and continual or repeated action in the present. For Biblical Hebrew these are primarily verbless clauses and clauses that use as main verbs forms of *hāyâ* ("to be"), participles, imperfects (i.e. the prefix conjugation), and characteristic[14] perfects (suffix conjugation). For example, Hos 4:1 charges, "there is no integrity, no faithful love, and no knowledge of God in the land" (verbless clauses). Amos 4:1 declares,

> Hear this message, you cows of Bashan who are on the hill of Samaria, women who oppress [part.] the poor and crush [part.] the needy, who say [part.] to their husbands, "Bring us something to drink!"

Amos 5:10 describes Israel as those who "hate [characteristic perfect] the one who advocates justice in the city gate" and who "despise [imperfect] the one who speaks with integrity"; and verse 12 describes them as those who "oppress [participle] the righteous," "receive [participle] a bribe," and "turn away [characteristic perfect] the needy in the gate" (cf. also 6:4–6).[15]

In the initial readings some passages will seem unclear as to their meaning and function in the discourse. These should be noted and set aside for later consideration after the clearer passages have all been categorized.

2. *Instruction: Placing priority on change.*   The second step is to reread the book searching for all the passages that explicitly call for change. These will be passages that give instructions by means of one of the Biblical Hebrew directives such as an imperative, jussive, cohortative, or obligatory

---

[14] Although he does not use this terminology, Lambdin recognizes the use of the perfect, usually in poetry, for "habitual activity with no specific tense value . . . translated by the English general present" (T. O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribners, 1971] 39). See also P. Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (2 vols.; Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1991) 362 [§112e]; B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990) 485, 487–88 [§30.4b, 30.5.1c].

[15] See also Zeph 3:1–5, which uses a combination of verbless clauses, characteristic perfects, and a participle clause.

imperfect (i.e. an imperfect that the context indicates should be translated with "must" or "should"). As the most prominent element of a hortatory text, it expresses in a nutshell why the text was produced. Exhortations to change are scattered throughout the book of Hosea:

> 2:2[Heb 2:4]: "Let her remove [jussive] her promiscuity from her face and her adultery from between her breasts."
>
> 4:15: "Do not go [neg. + jussive] to Gilgal or ascend [neg. + jussive] to Beth-aven, and do not swear an oath [neg. + jussive] using, 'As the LORD lives!'"
>
> 6:1: "Come! [imperative] Let us return [cohortative] to the LORD."
>
> 10:12: "Sow [imperative] righteousness for yourselves and reap [imperative] faithful love; break up [imperative] the untilled ground for yourselves. It is time to seek the LORD until he comes to rain righteousness on you."
>
> 12:6[Heb 12:7]: But you must return [modal imperfect] to your God. Maintain [imperative] faithful love and justice, and always hope [imperative] in your God.
>
> 14:1–2[Heb 14:2–3]: Return [imperative], Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled in your guilt. Take [imperative] words with you and return [imperative] to the LORD. Say [imperative] to Him: "Forgive all our guilt and accept what is good, and we will repay You with the fruit of our lips."

In the book of Amos, on the other hand, all the directives to change are in chap. 5:

> 5:4–6: For this is what the LORD says to the house of Israel:
> "Seek [imperative] me and live! [imperative]
> But don't seek [neg. + jussive] Bethel, and don't go [neg. + imperfect] to Gilgal, or journey [neg. + imperfect] to Beersheba . . ."
> "Seek [imperative] the LORD and live! [imperative] . . ."
> 5:14–15: "Seek [imperative] good and not evil, that you may live . . .
> Hate [imperative] evil and love [imperative] good; establish [imperative] justice in the gate . . ."
> 5:24: "But let justice roll along [jussive] like water, and righteousness like an ever flowing stream."

This is further confirmation of Wendland's claim that chap. 5 (specifically 5:1–17) is "the structural-thematic center of Amos."[16]

We must be aware, however, that grammatical directives also occur in the text for other purposes. First, we must be wary of ironic uses of these grammatical forms. At times for rhetorical effect the prophets will use discourse whose surface features mark it as hortatory but whose content is clearly ironic, indicating, for example, a discourse function of describing the situation with convicting sarcasm. God says through Amos, for example, "Come to Bethel and rebel; at Gilgal rebel even more. Bring your sacrifices every morning, your tithes every three days" (Amos 4:4; also see 3:9; 4:5). Second, another somewhat superficial use of directives is in calls to hear (e.g. Amos 3:1; 4:1). Rather than calling for behavioral change, these serve as interjections to mark the beginning of a section of discourse. Third, directives also occur as calls to alarm in passages of negative motivation (e.g. Hos 5:8; 8:1).

---

[16] Wendland, "The 'Word of the Lord' and the Organization of Amos" 14.

3. *Judgment and salvation: Keeping motivation in its place.* On the third (or more) reading one should look for passages of motivation. Those passages detailing future blessing or punishment should be easiest to recognize, since they will be in predictive discourse, i.e. discourse that describes events in the future. This is indicated grammatically primarily by the use of *waw*-plus-perfect verb forms, supplemented by imperfects and participles (the latter often preceded by *hinnê*, "behold"; e.g. Hos 2:8; Joel 2:19; 4:7; Amos 6:14; Hab 1:6; Mal 2:3; 3:1; 4:1, 5[Heb 3:19, 23]).[17]

The book of Zephaniah uses exclusively future orientation in its motivation sections. There are three negative motivation sections (1:2–6; 1:8–18; 3:6–7). The first in 1:2–6 employs the following verbs in main clauses:

> "I will completely destroy [imperfect strengthened with an infinitive absolute] . . . I will destroy [imperfect] . . . I will destroy [imperfect] . . . I will wipe out [*waw*-plus-perfect] . . . I will stretch out [*waw*-plus-perfect] . . . I will wipe out [*waw*-plus-perfect]."

There are also three positive motivation sections (2:4–15; 3:9–13; 3:15–20). The book concludes, for example, with the following string of verbs in 3:19–20:

> "Behold! I am going to deal [participle] . . . I will save [*waw*-plus-perfect] . . . and gather [imperfect] . . . I will turn them [*waw*-plus-perfect] . . . I will bring you back [imperfect] . . ."

Motivation by past events will employ narrative discourse, marked by the primary use of *waw*-consecutive imperfects supplemented by perfect verb forms (i.e. in independent clauses on the "storyline").[18] For example, Amos 2:9–11 uses the following main verbs:

> ". . . I destroyed [perfect with fronted subject] . . . I destroyed [*waw*-consecutive imperfect] . . . I am the one who brought [perfect with fronted subject] . . . and led [*waw*-consecutive imperfect] . . . I raised up [*waw*-consecutive imperfect] . . ."

Finally, like the expounding of situation, motivation by present realities or circumstances (though not common) will employ expository discourse, as in the expression of Yahweh's love in Mal 1:2 (cf. Hos 3:1) or of Israel's familial unity in Mal 2:10a.

IV. THE SEMANTIC STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK OF TWELVE

An application of such an approach to the book of the Twelve would produce a semantic structure that might be charted.

---

[17] The main verb of predictive discourse is the *waw*-plus-perfect (sometimes referred to as *waw*-consecutive perfect). An imperfect is used when another element (e.g. noun, prepositional phrase) has been moved to first position in the clause for focus. The nuance of the participle is that the event is "on the way." Cf. Joüon and Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* 410 [§121e]. As in each discourse type, grammatical description (as well as semantic analysis within a paragraph, a topic not dealt with here) focuses on independent clauses.

[18] The main verb form in narrative is the *waw*-consecutive imperfect except when another element is in focus and has been moved to the initial position in the clause. In this case another verb form must be used, usually the perfect.

Chart 2

	Situation/Indictment	Change/Instruction	Deterrent/Judgment	Incentive/Salvation
Hosea	Israel was (1) violating covenant requirements of faithfulness, kindness, and the knowledge of God; self-satisfied, proud, forgetting God's grace; speaking lies, insolence, and evil against him; (2) engaging in idolatry, cult prostitution; (3) trusting kings, princes, warriors, foreign covenants, rather than God; (4) committing injustice, violence, including murder, theft, lying, oppression of the defenseless.	Stop promiscuity, idolatry, and all iniquity and return to Yahweh in humility and to faithfulness to the Law of the covenant.	Israel's present distress is because Yahweh has abandoned them; further chastisement will result, including foreign domination, exile, destruction, desolation, and death.	Yahweh's grace and love in making them a people and in blessing them in the past with his attentive, patient care and his abundant provisions. He is their only hope; his ways are right. In response to repentance and faith he will again have compassion and redeem them; he will remove unrighteousness, restore the covenant, bringing righteousness and the knowledge of God; and he will rebuild and beautify Israel in the land.
Joel	*	Return wholeheartedly to Yahweh with tearful sorrow for sins, fasting.	Current locust plague; future day of Yahweh.	Repentance will bring physical and spiritual restoration.
Amos	Denying justice to the poor out of greed and self indulgence. Empty religion, mixing idolatry with worship in Yahweh's name. Veneer of law and piety covered a core of injustice that society accepted.	Delight in and seek Yahweh only; strive for justice, fairness, restore dignity to poor.	Failure to respond will bring destruction, death, and exile.	God's election, redemption, and care in the past. He will preserve a remnant and reestablish the nation in the land with the messianic ruler and will bring prosperity.
Obadiah	Edom's pride and violence against Judah.	Don't gloat over Israel's calamity or enter their gates or loot their wealth. When foreigners destroy their city, don't ambush their fugitives, and hand them over to their enemies.	Edom will be despised among the nations, deceived, conquered, ravaged, and slaughtered until there is no survivor. They will be occupied by Jacob's house.	*
Jonah	The righteous oppose God's willingness to show mercy to other nations (or any enemies) that repent.	The righteous should desire and seek to lead even pagans to repentance, and should rejoice when God shows his grace.	God desire all nations to worship him whether the righteous like it or not, and he has the right to show mercy to whom he will.	God has shown mercy to the righteous, who didn't deserve it; they should desire that mercy be extended to others.
Micah	Denounces Judah's rebellious acts of idolatry and oppression. Leaders, including judges, priests, and false prophets, pervert justice to prey upon the people, extorting property and depriving women and children of their homes. They are self-serving and use	*	As God made Samaria a "heap of rubble" during Micah's ministry, so he will bring destruction on Judah, bringing against them all the curses of the Law (failure, frustration, death, destruction, derision) and will eventually carry them into exile to Babylon.	Yahweh promises to gather his remnant as a shepherd gathers his sheep and to lead them to freedom. He will forgive his people and vindicate them by vanquishing the defiant nations. He will then establish justice, peace, security, and compassion among his

Chart 2

	violence when necessary to get what they want. Yet they maintain a facade of religion through ritual in Yahweh's name.			people through a messianic shepherd/ruler. He will rebuild Zion and make his house into a place of worship for all the nations.
Nahum	*	Judah is to renew and celebrate their faith in Yahweh with thanksgiving and worship.	Yahweh has afflicted Judah by allowing them to be ravaged and ruined by their Assyrian enemies.	Yahweh will release Judah from Assyrian domination by wiping out Assyria because of their opposition to him and because of their cruel oppression, pride, and idolatry.
Habakkuk	The righteous complain of (1) divine silence before violence, injustice, wrongdoing, oppression, strife, conflict; and (2) injustice of using Chaldeans as instrument of judgment.	The righteous continues to live by his faith, rejoicing in Yahweh and his salvation, praying for his help and finding strength in him.	*	Assurance that God will judge the arrogant, wicked, and violent and will mercifully deliver the righteous as he has done in the past.
Zephaniah	Jerusalem filled with oppression, rebellion, and defilement, mixing apostate religion with Yahweh worship, devoid of any faith in Yahweh.	(1) Cease empty and adulterous affirmations of faith; submit to Yahweh in silent humility and fear. (2) Gather in humble and prayerful repentance to "seek Yahweh." (3) "Wait for me." Believers should not lose heart but should look confidently for the culmination of God's purifying work.	Announcement of approaching devastation expressed as universal judgment. "Great day of Yahweh's wrath" approaching when he will punish Judah. Past judgments that should have motivated God's people to fear Yahweh and "accept correction" had not succeeded.	Day of Yahweh's wrath means Judah's vindication and deliverance from enemies. After Judah's purifying judgment, they will possess their enemies' land and will celebrate the peace provided by Yahweh's everlasting presence.
Haggai	External opposition, discouragement, and self interest has kept Judah from completing the temple. People and offerings are defiled and displeasing to Yahweh.	Build the house. Don't fear but "be strong . . . and work." Instruction to dedicate themselves and their work to Yahweh.	Recognize Yahweh's chastisement in the deprivation they had been experiencing.	Completion of temple will bring God pleasure and glory. Assurance of success. God will reward renewed work and dedication to him by glorifying the temple and granting them peace and blessing. Finally, God will restore Davidic throne on the earth through Zerubbabel's descendant.
Zechariah	Judah discouraged due to opposition and the apparent insignificance of the building project. After Zerubbabel Judah will again have wicked leaders who will mislead the people, resulting in their rejecting Yahweh again.	Return to Yahweh and remove his displeasure. High priest Joshua and the remnant exhorted to faithful obedience to retain his blessings. Implied exhortation to complete the temple. Reminder that God requires justice and mercy.	Yahweh's judgment of the previous generation intended to teach Israel to repent and maintain their faithfulness to him. Future rejection of him would result again in foreign opposition and the scattering of Israel.	Yahweh promises to "return" to Israel with blessing as they return to him in faithful obedience. He will also enable Zerubbabel and Joshua to complete the temple that would prefigure the coming messianic kingdom. He assures them that he will judge the nations that oppressed

Chart 2

				them, but even a remnant of the nations will become his worshippers. As he preserved a remnant of Israel and cleansed them, so he will send the Messiah to provide by his death permanent forgiveness and peace and the total eradication of evil. He will also send his Spirit to bring about national repentance.
Malachi	(1) Priests' failure to fear Yahweh and serve the people with integrity during difficult times. (2) Blaming their economic and social troubles on Yahweh's supposed unfaithfulness to them, the people were treating one another faithlessly (especially their wives) and were profaning the temple by marrying pagan women. (3) They were also withholding their tithes from the temple.	(1) Honor Yahweh's name with pure offerings; (2) be faithful to covenants made with fellow believers, especially marriage covenants; and (3) signify repentance with tithes.	If priests do not alter their behavior, Yahweh will curse them and remove them disgracefully from service. A coming day announced when the Lord of justice will come to purge and refine his people. He will make evident the distinction between the obedient and the wicked and will judge the wicked.	(1) Yahweh's past demonstrations of love for Israel; (2) Israel's spiritual and covenant unity with God and with one another; and (3) the coming day when Yahweh will abundantly bless those who fear him (3:1–6; 3:16–4:3).

*This element is not explicit in the book.

The semantic structure and function of several of these books call for special discussion. First, the prohibitions in the prophecy of Obadiah are ironic since they involve actions that have already occurred, and the prophecy seems to have been intended for the survivors of Judah rather than for Edom. I understand them to be a rhetorical way of citing Edom's actions as justifying God's judgment. On the surface a hortatory discourse from God to Edom, the prophecy is actually a salvation oracle for Israel, announcing judgment on their enemies. The inferred instruction would be "be encouraged and repent," and the inferred motivation would be "for I will destroy your enemies and give you their land."

With the exception of Joel and Nahum, these prophets all indicate the situation that led to the prophet's message, that is, what behavior needed to be changed. Joel is concerned almost wholly with motivation, with messages of judgment and hope. The only clue to the sins that have called for a prophetic message is in the only instruction in 2:12–13 to "return to Me with all your heart" and "[t]ear your hearts in grief, not your clothes, and return to the LORD your God." Joel was relying on Israel's knowledge of their tradition (as reflected in Scripture) concerning repentance. Yahweh had taught Israel through Moses that failure to obey him and to follow his law would

mean deprivation, barrenness, failure, ruin, loss, disease, drought, defeat, disappointment, frustration, death, sorrow, exile, shame, and locusts (Deut 28:38–42; see also 32:22–27). Strong emphasis is placed on Israel being defeated, devastated, and destroyed by foreign nations and their being "scatter[ed] . . . among all the peoples from one end of the earth to the other" (28:64). The specific disobedience cited in Deuteronomy is rejecting Yahweh for idols and abandoning his covenant (29:18, 25–26; cf. 32:15–18, 21). But compassion, regathering, restoration, and spiritual rebirth is also promised Israel if from their exile they would "return to the LORD your God with all your heart and all your soul" (30:1–10). These themes are previewed in Deut 4:23–40, and immediately following is the call to "ask now about former days that came before you, from the day God created man on the earth and from one end of the heavens to the other: Has anything like this great event ever happened, or has anything like it been heard of?" (4:32; see also Deut 32:7). This is strikingly similar to Joel 1:2 ("Has anything like this ever happened in your days or in the days of your fathers?").

This same theme of judgment on Israel's idolatry followed by repentance and restoration is found many times elsewhere, such as in Samuel's words to Israel in 1 Sam 7:3 ("If you are returning to the LORD with all your hearts, get rid of the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths that are among you, set your hearts on the LORD, and serve only Him. Then, He will rescue you from the hand of the Philistines"); Solomon's prayer before the temple in 1 Kgs 8:46–51 (v. 48: "if they turn back to you with all their heart . . ."); and in praise of king Josiah in 2 Kgs 23:25 as one "who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart . . ." (cf. Isa 6:10; 9:13; 31:6; 55:7; 59:20; Jer 3:3–4:4; 24:7; Ezek 18:30–32; Hos 3:5; 6:1–3; 14:1–9; Amos 4:6–11; Hag 2:17; Zech 1:3–6). Joel's message, then, would have triggered this entire script of judgment, repentance, and restoration, making it unnecessary for him to include an explicit citation of Judah's sins. They were guilty of disobeying God's law and abandoning him for other gods.

On the surface Nahum is a message to Nineveh of approaching wrath (as Obadiah is to Edom), frequently addressing them rhetorically. But it also speaks at several points to Judah, the actual audience, making it clear that, like Obadiah, the book is in fact a message of hope for Judah (cf. 1:12–13, 15; 2:2). In judging his enemies God will deliver his people. Most Hebrews thought of Assyria as a limitless and invincible power, perhaps deserving of trust (2 Kgs 17:6–9), but certainly deserving of fear. Nahum's book, like Daniel's, would serve to debunk the idea that any evil kingdom could stand before God or that any human institution is anything but transitory.

Yet Nahum, like Joel, speaks to a covenant-breaking nation. He says in 1:12–13, "Though I have afflicted you, I will afflict you no longer. For I will now break his yoke away from you, and tear off your bonds." The reason for the affliction is suggested by the only instruction to Judah in the book, in 1:15: "Celebrate your festivals, Judah; fulfill your vows. For the wicked one will never again march through you; he will be entirely wiped out." Armerding explains,

As Nineveh's flourishing religion was to be buried, so the worship of oppressed Judah would be resurrected. By implication it was still suppressed, as a corollary of the existing political subjection to Assyria. Such suppression of Yahwistic worship was entirely characteristic of the reigns of Amon and, for the most part, of Manasseh, who abandoned the piety of his father Hezekiah.[19]

Nahum's prophecy echoes Isaiah 10:

> "Woe to Assyria, the rod of My anger—the staff in their hands is My wrath. I will send him against a godless nation; I will command him to go against a people destined for My rage, to take spoils, to plunder, and to trample them down like clay in the streets . . . But when the Lord finishes all His work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, He will say, 'I will punish the king of Assyria for his arrogant acts and the proud look in his eyes'" (Isa 10:5–6, 12).

What were Israel's sins that called for the rod of Assyrian discipline? Through Isaiah Yahweh explains in vv. 10–11, "As my hand seized the idolatrous kingdoms, whose idols exceeded those of Jerusalem and Samaria, and as I did to Samaria and its idols will I not also do to Jerusalem and its idols?" Nahum's message was that no power on earth or in heaven except Yahweh should be trusted on the one hand (Isa 10:20) or feared on the other (10:24). Yahweh alone should be feared, trusted, worshiped, and obeyed.

Somewhat more surprising, perhaps, than a missing indictment element in Joel and Nahum is a missing instruction element in Micah. How can the book even be identified as hortatory without a command or prohibition? This can be done in the same way that the wife's statement that she is cold can be identified as hortatory. Just as the indictment message can be inferred from the covenant context of Joel, so Micah's instruction message can be inferred from the prophetic genre itself: "The LORD warned Israel and Judah through every prophet and every seer, saying, 'Turn from your evil ways and keep My commandments and statutes according to all the law that I commanded your fathers and that I sent to you through My servants the prophets'" (2 Kgs 17:13). Micah's expression of confidence in 7:7 also may be intended as a form of exhortation: "But as for me, I will watch for the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation. My God will listen to me." After God's judgment had removed from Israel every reason for arrogance, the believing remnant should watch prayerfully for Yahweh's deliverance, trusting in his promises. Even in the midst of judgment Israel should not simply cry out in pain but should trust God's wisdom and power and, like a woman in labor, should look for his purposes to be accomplished (4:9–10).

Two books remain for comment: Jonah and Habakkuk. These books (which are the fifth from the beginning of the Twelve and the fifth from the end) do not exhibit any hortatory characteristics. The form of Jonah is narrative, and Habakkuk is essentially dialogue. Yet both books are identified as prophecy not only by their place in the canon but also because we know Jonah to have been a prophet (2 Kgs 14:25), and the book of Habakkuk is titled, "The

---

[19] C. E. Armerding, "Nahum," *EBC*.

oracle that Habakkuk the prophet saw" (1:1). So we know that their primary assignment was to "warn Israel and Judah" to "turn from [their] evil ways and keep [Yahweh's] commandments and statutes" (2 Kgs 17:13). But in these books Yahweh does not speak *through* the prophets but *to* them, and they do not speak to the *people* but to *Yahweh*.

I propose that these books serve their hortatory function as prophetic books by inviting the ideal reader to assume the identity of the prophet himself. Thus the prophet serves as a representative believer whose experience mirrors the ideal reader's. By recounting an episode in the life of the prophet in which the prophet steps out of his prophetic role (suggesting the term "paraprophecy"), the believer is rebuked and instructed. As the prophet Jonah the believer is instructed that he should desire and seek to lead even pagans to repentance and should rejoice when God shows his grace. As the prophet Habakkuk the believer is instructed that in order to live rightly in a world of violence, injustice, wrongdoing, oppression, and conflict he must not be impatient or bitter but continue to live by faith, rejoicing in Yahweh and his salvation, praying for his help and finding strength in him.

V. CONCLUSION

The argument presented here is not that this procedure will capture all the meaning in a prophetic book. The point is rather that such a semantic structure comprises the semantic seed that is realized and developed in the surface structure. The next step in the discovery process is to determine the seams in the book and how the various constituents relate to one another in developing the message and serving the function of the book. Then each paragraph must be analyzed to uncover the semantic structure at the paragraph level.

Several assumptions lie at the base of this approach. One is that although the prophets were first and foremost preachers with a mission to their immediate audience, in the case of the writing prophets preaching was not the end of their ministry. They were also called to have a continuing ministry through their writings.[20]

Sometimes the prophet probably did the actual writing. At other times it may have been a trusted disciple (e.g. Jeremiah's Baruch). But my working hypothesis is that each book came directly or indirectly from the prophet and was produced with a coherent structure.[21] Whether or not there were later additions to the books is impossible to prove, but it is hermeneutically advisable to assume that the books were produced in the form that has been

---

[20] See e.g. G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York: Harper & Row, 1962–65) 2.40–43.

[21] See the discussion of how the prophetic books were written in H. V. D. Parunak, "Some Discourse Functions of Prophetic Quotation Formulas in Jeremiah," in *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics* 490–92. He argues that 2 Pet 1:21 affirms the inspiration of the original individual prophetic messages and that 2 Tim 3:16 teaches the inspiration of the completed books of Scripture. With Jeremiah as an example see J. G. McConville, "Jeremiah: Prophet and Book," *TynBul* 42 (1991) 80–95.

transmitted to us. To excise portions of the existing text on the grounds that they do not seem to "fit" the mind or circumstances of the prophet is to rule out the possibility of discovering a coherent structure in that text and that the prophet may have used devices and themes that we do not expect or do not fully understand in producing that structure.[22]

Although the possibility of minor scribal additions cannot be ruled out, this means of explaining so-called oddities in the text should not be allowed to preempt other explanations. If a passage may be understood through an examination of a book's internal structure, this explanation should take precedence over supposing it to be an editorial addition.

Finally, if my proposal for interpreting the so-called Minor Prophets is correct, expecially regarding those which are missing certain elements (as is the case with Joel, Micah, and Nahum), then there is additional reason to suppose that there existed a covenant tradition upon which the prophets drew and which they could assume their audience or readers would know.

---

[22] P. R. House appropriately laments the source-critical, form-critical, and tradition-critical approaches to the prophets in the focus on getting behind the text rather than interpreting the text itself (*The Unity of the Twelve* [Sheffield: Almond, 1990] 11–16). R. E. Clements favors a redactional approach but places emphasis on the "literary structure" of individual books and the "unified message" not only of individual books but of the prophetic corpus ("Patterns in the Prophetic Canon," in *Canon and Authority* [ed. G. W. Coats and B. O. Long; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] 42–55).