

## **The Prophetic Books: Cut and Paste? (Reading the IVP Dictionary 2)**

The good news is: I am on track with my reading, even a little bit ahead of schedule. There is bad news too, and there is a change of plan because of it (see below). Reading this dictionary, I am beginning to accumulate a fair bit of frustration with the contributing scholars. A number of them do not seem to know very well how to help their readers understand. Too many contributions don't make for great teaching or communication.

Here's an example; from the article on "Floral Imagery":

These images are literary in character but refer to an absent literal reality. Literary and literal reality converge in the cognitive concept of an image that is a mediated representation of that mostly absent reality, creating a virtual reality that has been interpreted by the producer (author) and that needs to be interpreted through perception by the recipient (reader/listener). Thus, attention between the absence of the original object and its substitution is created that establishes meaning and communicates biblical truth in a nonpropositional manner. (p. 248)

I have a Ph.D. in theology, but I don't know what this means.

Admittedly, I have (of course) chosen the worst example I could find; but still.

As a consequence, I have started to feel that this book may not be much of a help if you want to understand the Bible better or if you are preparing for a lecture on one of the prophets (yes, that is a sad, even if still preliminary, conclusion to reach). This is different from the NT volumes in the series, in which I have often found a useful article when preparing to teach a particular book of the Bible.

This book is indeed a compendium of scholarship. I realize now that the subtitle is to be taken seriously. This is hardly a book for non-experts – contrary to what I was expecting.

### **Change of Plan**

So here is the change of plan: for the next progress report, I am going to combine four weeks of reading instead of two. It will appear four weeks after this one. In other words, I will do one less than originally thought. The next regular letter, to appear in between, two weeks from now, will look at a different, lighter subject: what I have learned from living in a Mediterranean climate. And if all goes well, the final report will appear six weeks from now.

### **Formation of the Prophetic Books**

Here is something else that is emerging from my reading so far: most or perhaps all contributors to this volume accept that the prophetic books were not written by the respective prophet or a near contemporary, but are the result of a longer and more complex process of formation. The article titled "Formation of the

Prophetic Books” puts it quite strongly:

It is an axiom of most scholarship on the Prophetic Books that they are composite, that they are the product of a complex, often lengthy process of development. Rather than being written out from scratch by a single hand, most of these books were “made,” incorporating sources, sometimes rearranging these or commenting upon them to serve a fresh role in their new literary contexts. (p. 271; the author also considers them “the product of many hands”, 272)

I did not expect this view or assumption to be this widespread, but I see it reflected in many articles. So this is definitely one thing I am learning about the present state of evangelical scholarship on the prophets.

To put this forward as an “axiom” is to put it strongly indeed. An axiom is either something that is self-evident, meaning it needs no proof, which does not apply here. Or it is something that is widely accepted as a foundational rule or principle (see [merriam-webster](#)). While this may be true for scholarship, it can hardly be said for the evangelical movement as a whole. No doubt most Bible readers read the book of Ezekiel, to give an example, as the work of that prophet. In this context, the axiom is therefore very much in need of proof (which is saying it is not an axiom).

Before I evaluate the evidence that is offered in the article just cited, I want to make one thing clear. I have no dogmatic position on this and no dogmatic or ideological axe to grind. In as far as this is possible, I come to the subject with an open mind, although, to be honest, I am a bit sceptical. However, I have tried to give the articles a fair and unprejudiced reading. And there are aspects of the texts that have made me wonder in the past. A few examples:

- I have wondered about the final chapter of Jeremiah, which appears almost word for word as the conclusion of 2 Kings. Was this added at a later time to document the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecies? If so, when and by whom?
- Similar questions can be asked about Isaiah 36-39, which likewise appears in the book of Kings.
- I have also wondered about Isaiah 63-66, which contains a long prayer and God’s response. Isaiah 63:18 and 10-11 seem to imply that the sanctuary has been destroyed. How does this work? Are these verses exilic or postexilic? Or is Isaiah anticipating this destruction in his prayer? To add to the confusion, 66:6 has the Lord respond from his temple – so it is there after all? There does not seem to be an easy explanation for such difficulties.
- Isaiah 40-55, often called Second Isaiah by modern scholarship, appears to address an audience in the Babylonian exile. Under normal circumstances, one would expect the author to live and write around that time; the prophets normally speak to their contemporaries. If this was written by Isaiah, it makes for the highly unusual case of a prophet addressing an audience not in existence until well over a hundred years after his death.
- In addition, it is a valid observation to point out that none of the prophetic books identify the prophet as the author of that book. In fact, in the case of Jeremiah, we are told explicitly that it was someone else who first wrote down a collection of his earlier prophecies: his secretary Baruch (Jer. 36:1-4; 36:27-32).

I would therefore be open to accept the “axiom” (my faith does not depend on questions of authorship) if provided with good and sufficient evidence. So let’s examine the case.

## The Evidence

- Occasionally, we have two versions of the same document that show substantial differences and that represent two different points in time. One example given (p. 272) is that of Chronicles. It includes in rewritten form material that can also be found in Samuel and Kings. However, Chronicles presents itself as an entirely new creation, an original work. Yes, it is based on sources – but it is not intended to replace these. Since Chronicle does not pose as a “better” version of Kings or as its “true” version, this does not count as evidence at all.
- The only example of a prophetic book of which we have two significantly different versions is that of Jeremiah. The version of the book included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, is significantly shorter (by about 12 or 13%). In addition, it shows a different order than we know from the Hebrew version that is used for most Bible translations. The most important difference is that the oracles against the nations from chapter 46-51 appear in chapter 25. So at least some compositional work has taken place, together with some editorial clarifying and streamlining. But by many? And steadily integrating brand new prophetic revelation? This does not appear to be the case.
- The third and only remaining documented example of compositional activity given (also on p. 272) is that of Isaiah 36-39, which for the most part also appears in 2 Kings. It is quite conceivable that these chapters were inserted by someone other than Isaiah. However, the question is not whether these books were composed (they were, since they are collections of prophetic words spoken on different occasions). The question is whether they grew over a long period of time with many contributors (the “many hands”) adding to their content. And for this, Isaiah 36-39 does not provide evidence. It is mostly historical narrative and, if inserted, was taken from another, old source; it is not a later new creation.

All other evidence (if it is that) is inferential. It is based on hints and indications in the text possibly pointing to compositional activity. It then depends on the judgement of the scholar whether these compositional units will be considered “later”. A few examples from various articles:

- The book of Hosea is almost entirely addressed to the northern kingdom of Israel. However, it does include a few references to the southern kingdom of Judah as well. To some scholars, these “testify” to later additions (p. 340). At least the article in question, “Hosea: Book of”, also discusses the work of others, who argue against this conclusion. It also acknowledges how difficult such inferences are: “There is an intrinsic difficulty in tracing with any exactness the trajectory from Hosea’s words to the written page” (p. 341). Instead of “difficulty” read “impossibility”!
- A second example from Hosea is “the closing comment of the book (Hos. 14:9), probably from the hand of its final redactor” (p. 346). The verse reads: “Who is wise? He will realize these things. Who is discerning? He will understand them. The ways of the Lord are right; the righteous walk in them, but the rebellious stumble in them.” In terms of style this sounds like something we would expect to find in Israel’s wisdom literature rather than in a prophetic book. Of course, it might well be a later

addition, and this would not undermine the book or anything else. But can we know this? And: it does not add anything prophetic. Besides, the addition could have happened at any time. As radical as this sounds (hold onto your seat as you continue to read!): might even Hosea himself have been able to come up with such a formulation as a concluding insight to his prophetic career? (I admit: pure speculation, but that is the point – so is much else that is published on these questions.)

- The third chapter of Habakkuk takes the form of a psalm. It even includes the kind of title we know well from the book of Psalms. But does this suggest “that the song that follows was a later addition to Habakkuk” (p.172)?

Oh well. A sigh over the multitude of hypotheses let loose by scholars, too often on scant evidence. If we theorized about flying and built airplanes the way some biblical scholars approach biblical texts, there would not be an airplane in the air. Many of these theories don't fly either.

## My Tentative Conclusion

I have no doubt that explanatory notes were added to the prophetic books in various places. I can well imagine that in a number of cases material was rearranged or even brought together in a single document for the first time long after the prophet lived. There may even have been later additions by people who felt compelled or inspired to do so for whatever reason. But was this done by “many” and “multiple” hands, as the axiom quoted from “Formation of the Prophetic Books” claims?

Even if there had been as much editing as the axiom assumes, can we hope to identify and reconstruct this process of formation? The lack of consensus and the highly speculative nature of many hypotheses tells against this.

I don't find it easy to go against a clear majority of scholarly opinion. This is something I take seriously. But guys (and girls), you are simply failing to convince me.

I suspect there were not that many hands involved. Ezekiel for instance is remarkably unified in style, voice, and content; the edges are not very rough. Jeremiah too is largely unified in voice, style and subject. This does not look like a collection of prophecies that date to very different time periods. And how much editing could one reasonably expect to have been done on some of the shorter books (say, Obadiah)? Or on the postexilic books, which had not been around all that long by the time they were translated into Greek and started to circulate more widely?

[On the side: an interesting question (that has not yet been addressed in this dictionary) would be how many copies of a particular prophetic book would be in circulation at any one time in Israel. And how often these scrolls would be copied and replaced. My suspicion is that for the longest time the answer would have to be: not very many and not very often. This would not leave many opportunities for the kind of creative editing that the scholarly consensus assumes to have taken place in masses. I suppose this would have changed once synagogues began to be established in many places. This must have led to a significant increase in demand for copies of these books, which would be provided by the scribes. But by then (if not much earlier) the leading values would definitely have become preservation and reliability, not creativity.]

## The Case of Isaiah

But what about Isaiah? It differs from Ezekiel and Jeremiah because of its rich variety and the great diversity of subjects and forms. If the axiom of “many hands” and a long process of gradual formation applies anywhere, it is to the book of Isaiah.

I finished my reading for this report with the article introducing this book (yes, I made it to the letter “I”!). It fully subscribes to the axiom, but it was both readable and intelligible, and includes a helpful overview of the development in scholarship on this book over the past few centuries. I am not going into detail here, nor will I discuss the case still being made by conservative interpreters in favour of unified authorship or composition close to Isaiah’s lifetime, in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The (very) short version is this.

At one point it had become another axiom of scholarship that Isaiah 40-55 was written during the Babylonian exile, which appears to be the setting of its intended audience. Isaiah 56-66, it was believed, contained mostly postexilic material. So most or all of this material was considered to be from a much later date than the prophet Isaiah. And quite a bit of Isaiah 1-39 was considered to be from a later date as well.

For a while, and in some circles still today, the book of Isaiah was treated as the result of cut and paste; a book written by committee!

One striking development since the 1970s has been a growing recognition of the unity and careful composition of the book as we have it. It was increasingly acknowledged that if there were editors, they did not just squeeze and force their additions randomly into the text. The book as it stands is a carefully crafted work of literature, even if the majority of scholars do not ascribe this unified text to Isaiah, but to later redactors. They must have been an incredibly brilliant lot, these redactors, even though they disappeared without a trace except for the book of Isaiah (as did that greatest of geniuses, Second Isaiah). They are completely unknown otherwise, and there is nothing else like these prophecies either during the exile or afterward.

This recognition is a significant step forward. Ironically, it means that conservative scholarship, which has continued to argue for Isaiah as the author of the book, has been vindicated in one respect: the unity of the book is now generally accepted, and it is considered crucial in interpretation of the book. In at least this respect, then, the conservatives have been right all along. And perhaps in other ways too?

Let’s face it. When I read Isaiah, I do not experience a cacophony. It does not even sound like a choir. Instead, I find myself listening to one Great Voice. A voice that transcends the Old Testament and speaks with both clarity and unsurpassed beauty about God’s purposes. There is nothing (or no one) like it during the exile or afterwards that we know of. But there was one such voice around 700 BC.

Masterpieces are not normally the work of committees.

From a scholarly perspective, I think that the conundrum of Isaiah remains unresolved. I admit that the simple, Isaiah-wrote-it-all-down-himself position also leaves questions unanswered. We are still awaiting the Isaianic equivalent of the Big Bang theory, pulling all the various threads of evidence together and offering a coherent and compelling explanation for it all. This synthesis, a grand unified theory, may never come.

In the meantime, there is no reason why that should prevent us from accepting the mystery, reading the book, and listening to the Voice.

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## Literature

Mark J. Boda & J. Gordon McConville (eds), [Dictionary of the Old Testament Prophets](#)

(Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012).

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