



*Interpreting the Prophets:  
Reading, Understanding and  
Preaching from the Worlds of  
the Prophets*

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*"Happy are the students who take Aaron Chalmers's classes! He has assimilated a vast and complex range of materials from the Old Testament and its world, and from the scholarly world, and out of them has formulated a coherent and intelligible account of the Prophets for his readers. And it all serves a passion to help people read the Prophets for themselves."*

—John Goldingay, David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament, School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

## Faithfully Reading the Prophets

The prophetic books of the Old Testament contain some of the most awe-inspiring, confronting and compelling passages in the entire Bible. From their uncompromising proclamation of God's work in salvation and judgment to their incessant and pressing calls for social justice, they speak with a power and urgency which continues to challenge the Church and its witness in the world today.

Yet many Christians remain confused and frustrated by these works. They are full of dramatic imagery whose meaning is not always clear. Sometimes there appears to be little rhyme or reason in the flow of their thought. They include numerous references to events from Israel's history and life, the significance of which we do not grasp. It is perhaps little wonder, therefore, that the prophets are so frequently misunderstood and misapplied by many within the Church, conservative and liberal alike.

After teaching courses on the Old Testament prophets for a number of years, I have come to the conclusion that what readers need is a basic conceptual 'framework' for understanding these books. This framework is not provided by standard introductions to the prophets, which characteristically focus on issues such as the date, structure and key themes of the various books. While such information is important (after all, the prophetic books are occasional literature, and thus need to be understood within their specific historical context), such an approach does not end up equipping people with the necessary skills they need for interpreting the prophetic books themselves. It gives people the fish but does not teach them how to be fishermen.

In this book, therefore, I take a different approach. My goal is to equip readers with the knowledge and skills they need to be competent and faithful interpreters of the prophetic books themselves. In order to do this, I begin by looking at the nature of both Israel's prophets and the books that were associated with them. In standard introductions, the latter is often neglected at the expense of a detailed discussion of the former. This imbalance is problematic, especially when we realize that our goal is not to exegete the prophetic personages but the prophetic *books*. Building a solid foundational understanding of the nature of both these elements—prophet and book—is therefore essential if we wish to interpret these works well; all kinds of problems can arise as a result of faulty or inadequate conceptions regarding the character of either of these. In fact, such misconceptions can potentially be more harmful than lack of knowledge because they distort our reading of the biblical text (we go looking for things that the author never intended us to look for) and blind us to our ignorance (we think we know more than we actually do).

The majority of this book is devoted to the three key 'worlds' (or contexts) which we need to

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**Aaron Chalmers** (PhD, Flinders University) is head of the School of Ministry, Theology and Culture at Tabor Adelaide, a multi-denominational, evangelical college located in Adelaide, Australia. He teaches in the field of Old Testament and hermeneutics and is passionate about helping Christians to engage with the Hebrew Scriptures. He is the author of *Exploring the Religion of Ancient Israel: Prophet, Priest, Sage and People* and is a member of the international Society of Biblical Literature. He is married with four children and currently attends Blackwood Church of Christ.

consider to interpret these books well. They include:

1. *the historical world*: the time, place and situation the prophets were addressing;
2. *the theological world*: the beliefs, ideologies and assumptions, especially regarding God, the Israelite king and the Israelite people, which shaped the prophets' writings;
3. *the rhetorical world*: how the prophets effectively used language and shaped their material in order to persuade and influence their audience.

In each chapter I provide an overview of these worlds, before presenting some guidelines for how we should read the prophetic texts in the light of these. I also include a discussion of some of the common interpretive mistakes associated with each one. By the end of each chapter, readers should have a better idea of what they need to do (and avoid) when interpreting these texts which come from a very different time and place from our own.

Chapter 5 is devoted to interpreting the apocalyptic texts from the Old Testament. Although related to prophecy, apocalyptic is generally recognized as a distinct genre with its own emphases and set of literary 'rules'. An awareness of these can help the reader avoid some of the common interpretive mistakes associated with this challenging genre.

In the final chapter we will consider how to preach from the prophets in an authentic, faithful and responsible fashion. This element is neglected in most standard introductory works on the prophets, which generally seem content to leave the prophets as God's messengers for ancient Israel, perhaps assuming that on this basis the reader will somehow be able to make the jump from the world of the Old Testament to the contemporary world. Such an omission, however, is unhelpful, especially given the unique homiletical challenges these texts raise and the fact that the majority of people who want to learn more about interpreting the prophets are doing so with the goal that they might hear and speak God's word to God's people today.

Interpreting the prophets well is not an easy task. Yet it is an essential one. The prophets take up about as much space in the Bible as the New Testament does. To ignore them, therefore, is to cut ourselves off from a significant portion of God's revelation to his people. It is my hope that this book will help to open up these texts so that through them the people of God might encounter and be confronted once again by the powerful and dynamic words of the living and speaking God.

— Taken from the Introduction