

H2R Prophecy E1 Final

What Prophecy is For

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Jon: This is Jon from The Bible Project. Today on the podcast we're going to talk about how to read the prophets. The prophets are large portion of the Hebrew Scriptures. There's Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah, all large books in their own rights, and then there are 12 more minor prophets, making for 15 books that we call the prophetic books. And these books are hard to read.

Tim: There's not a linear narrative. Like a storyline, the way that they communicate, it's hard to follow.

Jon: They're written mainly in ancient Hebrew poetry, and they talk about ancient civilizations and ancient kings, and they expect that you are very familiar with the story of the Bible so far. So perhaps you've avoided reading the prophets. I know I do. In fact, their contemporaries didn't really want to listen to them either.

Tim: These books were composed as a representation of the message of the minority voice in Israel before the exile. These figures were for the most part not listened to. It was precisely after all of their warnings came true the interest surged in what these figures were and what they wrote and said.

Jon: The prophets were right. They knew what was going to happen to Israel. This leads us to a common misconception of the role of the prophets, that the prophets are merely future predictors.

Tim: That's a part of what they do. However, that is not what the word "prophecy" means in the Bible nor is that the primary role of the prophets in the Bible. Future prediction is something that some prophets do sometimes, but it is not near the heart of the core of Biblical definition of prophecy.

Jon: So what's the main role of the prophets? Well, it wasn't a role that they always enjoyed.

Tim: Jeremiah talks about the prophetic word as a fire in his chest, and not in a good sense. He says it's burning him up and he would rather not have to tell anybody. But then he says, "It will burn me if I don't get it out."

Jon: The world of the biblical prophets is full of intrigue. And if it wasn't for them, we wouldn't have the Hebrew Scriptures. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

So we are in the How to Read the Bible Series.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: And we're going to talk about how to read the prophets.

Tim: How to read the Old Testament prophets

Jon: The Old Testament prophets.

Tim: This is video 12 in the series.

Jon: So if you've been following the series, what did we just get done with? Psalms?

Tim: Yeah, Psalms. Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Now we're going into prophets?

Tim: Yeah. We went from what is the Bible to what's the story, then types of literature in the Bible. It's been the flow of the series. Then we talked about narrative for a long time, talked about poetry. Now we're going to focus in on sections of the Bible that are mainly narrative or poetry and kind of walk through them.

Jon: But have their own identity, their own kind of flavor.

Tim: Their own section. So we did Psalms, prophets. We'll do a video and whole conversation on the wisdom books.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: Like revisit the—

Jon: Won't that be a bit of a repeat?

Tim: Some of the themes. But again, this is about how to read.

Jon: How to read.

Tim: How to read. So how the books are designed, how they work. Then we'll do a video on law in the Bible - the Old Testament law. Then we'll go into the New Testament.

Jon: Everyone wants to talk about the law.

Tim: Oh, dude is so awesome.

Jon: I was joking.

Tim: I was like, "Yeah. The Old Testament law is legit." Anyway, but prophets, that's what we're talking about right now.

Jon: Cool. Bring me in. I, actually out of any part of the Bible, read the prophets the least. In fact, if I were honest, there's likely large parts of the prophets I've never read.

Tim: Till to this day.

Jon: Till to this day.

Tim: Fun fact. The prophets, in terms of page length in the Old Testament, take up nearly as much length as the entire New Testament.

Jon: Wow.

Tim: In terms of like words, number of words and a sheer amount of space for these books.

Jon: That's a large part of the Bible I get to ignore.

Tim: It's gigantic. The book of Jeremiah is the longest book in the entire Bible - Old New and Testament. It's actually longer than the book of Psalms.

Jon: Oh, wow.

Tim: These are long, extremely complex. I mean, there's reason why they are the things that you've read the least.

Jon: People talk about Leviticus being the hardest book to read.

Tim: I disagree. It's only 26 chapters, though.

Jon: And there's a lot of narrative in it that you can flow with. You're like, "Okay, this is weird laws and stuff but I can get through it." The prophets as a whole to me is the hardest thing to read in the Bible.

Tim: Yeah, totally. Here, I have two great quotes because some of the great thinkers in history agree with you. For example, Martin Luther the great reformer, he had this famous quotable. He said, "The prophets have an odd way of talking, like people who, instead of proceeding in an orderly manner, ramble off from one thing to the next so that you cannot make head or tail of them or see what they are getting at."

Jon: It's pretty negative.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: He didn't like the prophets either it sounds like.

Tim: I think he's just saying the way that they communicate...

Jon: It was weird to him.

Tim: ...it's hard to follow. And that's true. The apostle Paul is difficult to follow sometimes, but you can see where he's getting at.

Jon: He gets charted out.

Tim: Totally. Like, summarize Isaiah for me. You're just was like, "What?" They're really complex acts of communication. They don't communicate like a normal work.

Jon: The cookies are not on the bottom shelf.

Tim: The cookies are not on the bottom shelf. Part of it is these texts are designed for readers who have processed the Torah and historical books deeply. They assume you're immersed in it and then they start at that level. That's part of why. Another

part of why it's just it's a form of communication that is not linear, and sequential. It's cyclical and symphonic.

Jon: Symphonic.

Tim: Meaning symphony or a song.

Jon: They got a melody.

Tim: There's the melody, but the melody repeats, but never exactly the same. And so it has a rhythm. These books have a rhythm and a repetition to them that is really off-putting actually for a lot of modern readers, because we think, "Just get the point. Be clear." Being succinct and to the point is not high value from these books.

Jon: "Tell me how to live. Tell me what to do with life."

Tim: They are just like, "Whoa, King of Tyre, you shall descend to the grave"

Jon: And I'm like, "Tyre? I don't even know where Tyre is."

Tim: Here's another towering Old Testament scholar from the 20th century, John Bright. He writes in the introduction to his commentary on Jeremiah. He says, "What makes the prophetic books particularly and one might say needlessly difficult is the very manner of their arrangement, or to be more accurate, their apparent lack of arrangement all seems confusion. The impression that the reader gains is one of extreme disarray. One can scarcely blame him for concluding that he's reading a hopeless hodgepodge thrown together without any discernible principle of arrangement at all."

Jon: But this guy doesn't believe that in the end, right?

Tim: That's what he's saying. He said, "This is the impression that the reader gains." So both of these comments are just saying, that's the impression that most people have as they read the prophets. There's not a linear narrative. Like a storyline, it's not like one of Paul's letters retracing just a couple ideas and working them through sequentially. So they work much more through poetic, symphony, cyclical, repetitive themes, and they assume a lot of the reader.

Jon: What would be a contemporary equivalent to this kind of writing?

Tim: Oh, to this kind of writing?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Let's see. Well, let's start with this. They're mostly poetry.

Jon: Mostly poetry.

Tim: Mostly poetry. Some of these books have narratives interspersed. Ezekiel has a lot of discourse and poetry together. So just like speeches.

Jon: Well, I'm trying to think of if someone's never tried to read the prophets, what would be a similar experience where you're just like, "Fuse"?

Tim: Maybe it's like going to an art gallery, seeing one exhibit, and then you walk into the next room and you see the next one and you're like, "What's the unifying theme here? What does this have to do with that? How does it relate to that one?"

Jon: You just feel lost. Totally. "How am I supposed to appreciate this painting?"

Tim: Yeah, that's right. "What am I supposed to be getting here?" Really.

Jon: You just start nodding your head and be like, "Yeah, I like it."

Tim: "Okay, cool."

Jon: That's kind of how I feel like when I go wine tasting too.

Tim: Oh, okay, sure. I'm sure there's something really sophisticated happening here.

Jon: It's lost on me.

Tim: I don't know what. There you go. What I would love the video to do is to take what I think are the most challenging books of the Bible to read and just to give some handles. Because there are just a handful of things that once you get how they work, how they fit into the biblical story, the themes that they are repeatedly working out, it can make reading these books a lot less of a challenge and actually mind-blowing. They have become my favorite books in the Bible to spend a lot of time in.

Jon: Cool.

[00:10:27]

Tim: Let's start here. Just devoid of any biblical association, the English word "prophecy" brings to modern people's ears a whole bunch of things that we need to address and undo before we come to these books. I'll just do live test sample. I have not prepared you for this question. But when you hear the word prophecy, what comes to your mind?

Jon: Like fortune telling, I suppose. In a way, being able to talk about the future things that haven't happened yet. A prophet can look into the uncreated future and tell you something about it. One thing in my tradition growing up was, it was a really big deal to show how prophecy was fulfilled in the New Testament. Like, "There's no way they could have known that this empire was going to do this or Jesus would have been stabbed in the side and this way. The prophets knew." So the prophets were like the seers.

Tim: Two parts of what you're saying. One is, first thing comes to your mind is fortune telling - future prediction of events that can't have been known through—

Jon: If you're a friend with a prophet, play the lotto.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Second is the prophecy fulfillment theme, the way of connecting the Bible, the prophets to the story of Jesus. And that's usually people have noticed that in the Gospel narratives about Jesus, the narratives will often start the story and be like, "Hey, reader, this happened to fulfill what the prophet said." And then they'll quote from a section of Isaiah or something like that.

Jon: And then those are connected in my mind in that the prophet was predicting something that ended up happening.

Tim: Those are the books of the Bible that predicted the Jesus part of the story. Done deal.

Jon: Actually, it made me wonder like, "Well, if that was their point, they could just bulleted out some connections."

Tim: Yeah. What's all this other stuff about, like pronouncing curses on the kings of Edom and Tyre? Because that's a huge part of what's in these books. What's all that about? Why does that stuff matter?

Jon: Well, maybe they said it fill some time.

Tim: I'm looking at Dictionary.com and the first definition of prophecy is the foretelling and prediction of things to come. There is one part of how the prophets work in the storyline in the Bible. That's right. That's a part of what they do. However—

Jon: They look into the future to see what's to come.

Tim: These books, actually, along with the Torah and the narrative books are all part of the unified story of the Old Testament that's pointing forward. That is part of their role. However, that is not what the word prophecy means in the Bible nor is that the primary role of prophets in the Bible. Future prediction. Future prediction is something that some prophets do sometimes, but it is not near the heart of the core biblical definition of prophecy. So that's the first definition.

Jon: The Bible has a definition of prophecy?

Tim: Yeah. The word prophecy comes from the Bible. And the way the word is used in the Bible doesn't match the Dictionary.com definition. But Dictionary.com isn't telling me what biblical Hebrew word "prophecy" means. But it's just interesting—

Jon: We're not hating on Dictionary.com.

Tim: No, no. Definitely, not. What biblical prophecy is not is prediction of future events. Biblical prophets sometimes anticipate the future, but that's not the core definition. So let's just look at some examples here.

Actually a passage in the book of Exodus. It's not the first time the word "prophet" or "prophecy" appears, but it's like the second or third. So this is when God has commissioned Moses. He appears at the burning bush to Moses, and He's commissioning Moses to go speak to the Israelites and to confront Pharaoh, and say, "Let my people go." You've seen the movie.

Jon: A couple of them.

Tim: Remember, Moses, starts making all these excuses.

Jon: Yeah. "I can't speak very well."

Tim: "I can't speak very well."

Jon: That's the only one I know.

Tim: "What's your name? No one's going to believe me." That's kind of thing. Actually, there's five objections he makes. The fifth one is "Just send somebody else." That's what he says. So God kind of accepts it and but kind of doesn't. He says, "Listen, your brother Aaron's coming to meet you, and I'm going to make him your coworker."

Here's what he says. Exodus 6: "The Lord spoke to Moses saying, 'I am the Lord. You speak to Pharaoh king of Egypt all that I speak to you.' Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Look, I will make you as God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You speak all that I command you and your brother Aaron is the one who will speak to Pharaoh.'" This is just helpful because it's a narrative and it tells you the role of a prophet. In other words, the narrative explains for you what a prophet is and does.

Jon: I'm not seeing it.

Tim: So Moses says, "I don't want to talk to Pharaoh." God says, "Okay...."

Jon: "Put me on the bench."

Tim: ...you talk to your brother and your brother will talk to Pharaoh." Look at this. "Look, I will make you like God to Pharaoh." Moses will be the one speaking to Pharaoh. "But your brother Aaron will be your prophets."

Jon: So the Prophet is the person who speaks on behalf of God.

Tim: There you go. That's it. To speak on God's behalf.

Jon: That's the role of the Prophet.

Tim: The fundamental role of the prophets is a divine spokesman. Humans who are brought into the Divine Council who discern as we'll see through lots of different ways, but they discern what it is that God wants to say to His people. It's their message, but it's the message that God wants His people to hear. Which is why when you're reading the prophets, if you go right up - this is randomly from Jeremiah 2 - this is how most poems in the Bible begin.

Jeremiah 2: Jeremiah says, "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying," and then here's what the word of the word is, "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem and say: "Thus says Lord: 'I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth,'" and so on. So most of the poetry in the prophets begins with one of these called prophetic messenger formulas.

Jon: God came and told me something I'm about to tell you.

Tim: Totally. And then the Prophet speaks in a divine voice.

Jon: Oh, he starts talking as if he's God. Here's what the Lord says: "I remember concerning you." And then you're reading a poem like its God's poem.

Jon: So it's kind of like the herald of the king is like, "I have a message for the king: 'I the king blah, blah.'"

Tim: Yeah, totally. Actually, there's a story in the book of 2 Kings when the Assyrians come to besiege Jerusalem. King of Assyria sends messengers, and they say, "Thus says the king of Assyria." And they begin a speech: "I came to your city and..." But it's a herald standing there. It's not the king of Syria. It's his prophets, so to speak.

Jon: Sure.

Tim: That's really it. It's these heralds, spokesman who speak on God's behalf. It's almost unexciting how simple the definition is. It's like let's understand these figures and what these books are. How these books represent God is saying all kinds of things.

Jon: Including what will happen.

Tim: Sometimes the message that's from God to His people through the prophet is about the future, but not always. And that's certainly not the defining characteristic of the message. That's first point. Simple but important to reframe what these books are all about.

[00:18:54]

Tim: Another aspect of these prophetic figures is that they are connected with the role of God's Spirit. In other words, prophecy, God speaking to his people through these human mediators is often connected to the work of God's Spirit. One is Micah 3. Actually, he just got done accusing a whole bunch of what he calls false prophets. So there are also people claiming to speak on behalf of the God of Israel, and he's like, "No, you don't. You're just making that up."

And then he says - this is Micah 3:8 - "I am filled with power, with the Spirit of the Lord, with justice and courage to make known to Jacob his rebellious act, to Israel his sin." So he's critiquing prophets who are telling the kings that he thinks are idolatrous and really horrible people, that they're just fine, and God loves you and he's pro-Israel. And Micah is like, "That's how you know they are false because they always tell you what you want to hear."

Then he says, "You know how I'm legitimate. I'm filled with the spirit of Yahweh and I'm going to expose how rotten the whole foundation is.

Jon: That's my credentials.

Tim: Yeah, his credentials are. Which from the other prophets' point of view could be like, "No, he's the false one." And this was the problem.

Jon: It's happened a lot, different prophets be like—

Tim: There's whole narratives in the book of Jeremiah about, Jeremiah versus the other prophets. Because Jeremiah was saying, "I'm full of the Spirit of Yahweh and Babylon is coming to tear, and God's the one behind it." And the other prophets are like, "No, God's going to defend Jerusalem. You're the false prophet." This is a problem. This is not a new problem, people claiming to speak on God's behalf and people having arguments and disputes about who truly represents God.

Jon: "I speak for God." "No, I speak for God."

Tim: This is an ancient challenge. I mean, Jeremiah, for example, was announcing that Jerusalem would be over overtaken by Babylon and that Yahweh would be the one allowing it to happen. So he was making an announcement. In fact, this is a part of what...we're moving into the question then of who were these biblical prophets?

These books were composed as a representation of the message of a minority voice in Israel before the exile. These figures were for the most part not listened to. That's why the destruction came. So it was precisely after all of their warnings came true the interest surged in what these figures were and what they wrote and said because like, "Oh, my gosh, the people we've been ignoring were right." It would be like that. It would be kind of like people who are anticipating the fall of Western society.

Jon: Well, it's like the guy who - what's his name from The Big Short?

Tim: I didn't see it.

Jon: Well, The Big Short is all about the—

Tim: It's about the 2008?

Jon: Yeah. There's one guy who saw it coming. No one saw it coming. Everyone was like, "Oh, this is great. This is great." There's one guy who was like, "You know, what? These, whatever they were called. All these bad mortgages packaged together, he's like, "This is horrible. It's all going to fall apart." And so he's shorting the bank, and everyone thought he was crazy. Then the market falls, and everyone thinks, "We can pay attention to this guy. He saw it coming."

Tim: Yes, it's totally that. That's a good analogy. It's perfect analogy. That's the role of these figures play in Israel's history.

Jon: No one was really listening to them, or minority of people were, what they had to say comes to be and everyone looks back and goes, "Oh, why don't we pay attention to what they wrote?"

Tim: Or "we should have paid attention." And now the writings and teachings of these figures become the object of a lot of study and prayer and meditation so that we don't repeat the lessons of the past. Something significant about these figures is, and it's true like you said talking about in your tradition church, tradition you grew up in there was this aversion towards people claiming to have had experiences—

Jon: Where God spoke to them

Tim: ...where God spoke to them and now I tell you. It's important for us to fully process this. Figures like that are the key figures behind the origins of the Bible.

Jon: Well, great. And now we got the Bible.

Tim: Totally.

Jon: These were weird dudes.

Tim: Many of them were outsiders...

Jon: Eccentric.

Tim: ...eccentrics and they were off-putting. We don't know that much about the biography of many of these figures, but some we do. Many of these figures, these prophets, what gripped them? How does a person get into a mental space where they are regularly hearing messages from their God and crafting speeches and poems to represent that message to their contemporaries?

Jon: Lack of sleep.

Tim: Lack of sleep. Totally. So when a handful of like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos, to a lesser degree, Habakkuk and some of these other prophets - these are all biblical prophets - they talk about their experiences and they were usually dreams, or visions, prophet Ezekiel, where they have a frightening, terrifying encounter with the divine presence, that they think they're going to die. Especially Isaiah and Ezekiel.

These books of the prophets beginning all the way back here with these people who had some kind of radical experience of the divine presence, and they heard themselves being addressed by someone commissioning them to go and do and say to their contemporaries something that nobody else was saying - that things are not okay and this is all about come crashing down. Most of these figures end up in the stories told in these books as being really unhappy people.

Jon: It's a burden to carry.

Tim: It's a burden. Jeremiah talks about the prophetic word as a fire in his chest, and not in a good sense. He says it's burning him up, and he would rather not have to tell anybody. But then he says, "It will burn me if I don't get it out of my chest." These

are figures who had radical religious experiences that made them really intense personality.

Jon: Tensed individual.

Tim: Yeah. And they believe that it was precisely that divine encounter that charged their words with this divine authority. That's what Micah means when he says, "I'm filled with power and the Spirit of the Lord." There's some untold story.

Jon: Do you think the false ones too are the ones...?

Tim: It's a good question.

Jon: Also had these experiences?

Tim: Well, we don't know. We don't know. In fact, Jeremiah makes a word play where he says, "I'm full"... Because remember spirit is the word for breath or wind.

Jon: Ruakh.

Tim: So he's like, "I'm speaking the Spirit of the Lord, you just speak with your own ruakh," which just means wind. You just wind back.

Jon: Long winded?

Tim: It's remarkable. As we're going to see, Moses is the archetypal prophet. And so his experience encountering God and a fire on top of a mountain, I mean, that's intense, man.

Jon: That's intense.

Tim: Anyhow, we're talking about the origins of the Bible with these figures and these experiences that they had. And the books are the end process of their whole life journeys.

Jon: Now, when you say that because it's not just the prophetic books we're talking about, the prophets were the ones that arranged also the other books? Is that why you're saying origins of the Bible?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. It's actually here. Right here. There are more prophets in the Bible than the 15 books that have a book named after them. There's three big ones, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, 12, short ones. But there's a solid 15 to 20 other prophets named in the stories of the Bible. And some of them were famous like Elijah and Elisha. The prophets around David like Nathan or Gad, and Deborah or Huldah, these female prophets who were key leaders of Israel. So there's a lot of different prophets.

Again, this doesn't mean they foretold the future. Key moments in Israel's history, God encountered these people. And then they made a huge impact on their national history and they left this memory. And part of what they're known for is they spoke on God's behalf. This is the whole point. This is a crew in a tradition in the story of

Israel with a long history. So not all of them were involved in the production of the Bible. But all of the people involved in the production of the Bible were certainly a part of this prophetic tradition.

Jon: Got it.

Tim: So Moses is the first.

Jon: First prophet?

Tim: First archetypal Prophet. Abraham is actually called a prophet in Genesis after he intercedes on behalf of Lot and tries to intercede for Sodom and Gomorrah. Then after that story, he's called a prophet. But Moses is the first prophet. In fact, he's purposefully introduced to give you the paradigm of what a prophet is. He's like the archetypal prophet. He's the first one to have one of these radical frightening encounters with the divine presence.

Jon: The bush?

Tim: Yeah, the burning bush on Mount Sinai. It's in his role as a prophet that he goes up into the storm on Mount Sinai and then comes down.

Jon: Is that why his face is all blaze?

Tim: Totally. Yeah, exactly. That's both a priestly role, but then also the prophetic role is about the word - the divine word.

Jon: If we were to distinguish between those two roles, where the Prophet is speaking on behalf of God, the priest is bringing you into God's presence on His behalf?

Tim: Yeah, that's right. The priest is a representative human who is bringing Israel back into the garden of Eden symbolically by going past the cherubim into the Holy of holies. That's about ritual representation in the tabernacle on the temple. That the priests didn't come out and be like, "Thus says the Lord." That's the role of the Prophet.

Jon: And Moses did both?

Tim: Moses did both. That's exactly right.

Jon: Prophet and priest.

Tim: Prophet, priest figure.

Jon: He was a type of a king too?

Tim: He's called the king.

Jon: He's called the king?

Tim: Yeah. He was the key figure who mediate—

Jon: I'd run with that. If someone called me a king once, I'd take that.

Tim: Sweet. The whole point is, the biography of Moses becomes the prophetic job description, so to speak. He intercedes when Israel fails and breaks the covenant multiple times, he goes to bat for them. He intercedes for them and compels God not to break off the covenant.

Jon: Which makes for a really weird story.

Tim: It makes for a weird story but it's important because it's telling you God has appointed a human partner who will determine the fate of the nations through the fate of the people, so to speak. So Moses is somebody that God intentionally invites into His counsel to help him shape his decision making. That's what's happening in those stories.

Jon: Very significant.

Tim: That's so profound.

Jon: It's high calling.

Tim: So you when you reach the end of the Pentateuch, which is that last bullet point about Moses, the last sentence of the Torah of the Pentateuch begins, "Now, since that time, no prophet has ever arisen in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face."

Jon: How long is this? Like how many opportunities has there been for prophets?

Tim: Well, exactly. This is right after Moses dies. And the sentence before this is "and no one knows to this day where he's buried." Since that time, no prophet has ever come along.

Jon: This guy was unique as a prophet. No one matches him.

Tim: That's right. This is connected to a promise that Moses made that "after I'm gone from the scene, and you guys have been in somewhere in the future, God's going to send a prophet like me," he says in Deuteronomy 18, "and you will listen to him."

So what that statement of Moses, what this ending of the Torah is doing is it's setting you up to be like, "Oh, okay, I'm going to come across more of these figures, none of them are going to be the one that we really need." Because it says right here, "No prophet like Moses ever arose in Israel." So it's actually setting you up.

Jon: But what if this was written like two weeks after he died or like a couple of years?

Tim: Got it. Okay.

Jon: When was this written?

Tim: The time reference of what point of view this is spoken from, isn't fully clear at this moment. It becomes more clear as you read through the rest of the Hebrew Bible. That this is somebody writing it during the final phase —

Jon: Of the compilation of the Bible.

Tim: Of the compilation of the Bible. This is somebody looking back over all of Israel's history, saying, "Dear reader..."

Jon: "We've compiled it all. We've got the whole history here now."

Tim: ...listen, no prophet like Moses has ever come."

Jon: Spoiler alert.

Tim: Which means all of the prophets that I'm going to read about are further filling out the job description of the ultimate prophet but will never fully the fulfillment.

Jon: So it's assuming there's going to be a better Moses or we're supposed to be looking for a better Moses?

Tim: The point is another prophet like Moses will come, and none of the prophets I'm going to read about in the rest of the biblical story are the one. But when those prophets are at their best, they're doing Moses like stuff. Like Elijah, for example, goes back to Mount Sinai and tries to reboot the covenant and it doesn't work. God's like, "Go back home."

Anyhow, Moses is key because the narrative about him in the Pentateuch is setting the role and descriptions. It's a form of messianic hope is what it is. It's like this is a part of how the story of the prophets anticipate the story of Jesus is Moses as the archetypal prophet that no other figure in the biblical story ever meet until you read the story of Jesus.

[00:33:49]

Tim: There's a phrase that I've developed for how to understand the role of the prophets in the whole biblical story.

Jon: This is your phrase?

Tim: I think. I don't remember reading anywhere but I don't know.

Jon: We all steal.

Tim: I know. I've been waiting for years to come across in my notes somewhere else where I got this, and then I'll put on a footnote. Anyway, they are covenant watchdogs, meaning that the prophets come along in the biblical part of the story where God has made a covenant with the people of Israel. And so, the books of the prophets only make the sense they do in light of that bigger covenant storyline.

Jon: Covenant meaning that a partnership arrangement that God made, that it's not like a business deal. It's more intimate like a marriage. "I will have you, you will have me."

Tim: Yeah, that's right. "I'll be your God; you will be my people." That's right. So God is in the business of entering intimate partnerships with humans so that they will do His will, they can be His representatives. Specifically, the covenant that Moses mediates is the one made at Mount Sinai, which is "Israel, I just rescued you. You're going to be my royal priesthood to all of the nations. So be faithful to me live by the terms of the covenant and you'll display a new different kind of humanity."

Jon: "You're going to be the ones who help other nations come back to the Garden of Eden."

Tim: Yeah, that's right. I mean, this goes all the way back to the story of Abraham. So you have humans screw everything up – Abraham: "Covenant promised to you. I'm going to bless everybody through you."

How exactly? People of Israel, he redeems them out of Egypt. "I'm going to make you into a new and different kind of humanity and I'm going to plant my divine presence right in your midst, where symbolically, you can have access to Eden again through the priesthood, and the temple and the tabernacle. All I need you to do is be faithful to the terms of this relationship. Ends up being about six 600 plus terms of the relationship that we call laws. But that's it. So they are the terms of the marriage.

Jon: That'd be a long wedding ceremony with a list of 600 things.

Tim: Totally. That's right. I will shave weekly.

Jon: I will never forget Mother's Day.

Tim: That's right. The toilet paper goes the roll side out. That kind of thing. So it's like that. It's what all the laws are. Then it narrows after a whole bunch of failures, then God works out a covenant relationship just with the royal representatives, the kings through the line of David. He was like, "Okay, the whole nations going to screw it up, let's just work with one royal family in the nation." And they screwed up too. But the whole point is the prophets come into the storylines precisely to help...They represent God's interests in the partnership.

Jon: They're like a marriage counselor.

Tim: They're more like a mediator. No, they're more like a lawyer. Actually, what they are, they're lawyers.

Jon: They come in and they're like, "Listen, God's thinking about calling this off. You broke the terms."

Tim: "You guys would want to declare divorce?"

Jon: "Here's how you're breaking all the terms of this agreement."

Tim: Totally. That's exactly right. They are covenant watchdogs - covenant lawyers. They come in, and this is the primary burden of these figures was to represent God's interest and purposes in the covenant story to the people as a whole, to the leaders, to the priest, and to the other nations watching Israel.

So if you can just get that basic role, which is actually pretty simple, then that begins to give you some categories for what the prophets were talking about all the time. Why are they so concerned?

Jon: They don't talk like lawyers.

Tim: No, they talk like ancient Hebrew poets.

Jon: Totally.

Tim: Because that's what they are.

Jon: Can you imagine if you go into a law firm and the lawyer just starts reciting poetry?

Tim: Actually, I'll show you some passages. They actually do often use what's probably an ancient covenant lawsuit type of argument. There'll be whole poem structured like an argument and they'll use legal terminology.

Jon: It's interesting. It's kind of what happens in Job too, right? Like the friends, they're making arguments in ancient Hebrew poetry.

Tim: Totally. That's right. That's the prophets as people and their role in the biblical story. Let's maybe round off this introduction discussion to the books themselves.

Jon: When we're talking about reading the prophets, what books are we specifically talking about?

Tim: We're talking about these 15 books. And what are these books? They're really long. Here's what's significant. All these books begin with some little short heading. "The word of the Lord spoken through Obadiah."

Jon: That's my favorite prophet. It's the shortest.

Tim: Totally. It's the shortest. That's right.

Jon: In school, I did a report on it. You had to choose a prophet, do an essay.

Tim: Are you serious?

Jon: I chose Obadiah.

Tim: Because it was the shortest

Jon: Because it was the shortest.

Tim: I love it. That book's legit, man. All right.

Jon: Edom is all I remember.

Tim: How do the books of the prophets fit in the Hebrew Bible? The books are all introduced by a short little sentence that actually forms like...it's a hyperlink or a cross-reference.

Jon: It's like when and where—

Tim: It's editorial cross-reference tool. So the book of Isaiah. The book of Isaiah begins, "The vision of Isaiah son of Amos concerning Judah and Jerusalem, which he saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah." So right there, that's a little editorial introduction.

Jon: Who this guy was, when he lived.

Tim: And here are the kings. And what you're supposed to do is go, "Oh, yes, the book of 2 Kings. I've already read the story. I know about those four kings and what the reigns are like." 2 Kings 14 through 20, up and down. And then you start reading. That's what these little introductions are meant to do is they're tying these huge collections of poetry into the narrative context. This happens all the time in other books. That's how they're framed.

But what we have, if you begin reading these books, you'll find they are like mosaics. I've developed a metaphor of they're like a family quilt. At some point in the story of these individuals, they began to develop a repertoire of sermons. I think they're just out in the street corner.

Jeremiah on the street corner giving his sermon. Like in Jeremiah 17, he goes to the temple courts and he starts giving this speech and sermon that inspired Jesus to go to the very same courts and quote that very sermon and raise the very same themes. So each of these figures probably had a phase. For Jeremiah, it was like 20 years.

Jon: So they've got like a lot of material over time.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Just think if somebody is a regular conference speaker, they've got a series of talks. They've got their core themes. Probably give the same talk multiple times to different audiences.

Jon: Different flavors.

Tim: Just think. We don't have a ton of evidence for this except narratives about the prophets going around yelling at people.

Jon: I guess I always imagine that they just sat down one day and wrote this book. Just kind of God was like, "Hey, Jeremiah, sit down. Let's go." And then they started writing what God told them until they were done.

Tim: Got it. The books themselves tell us it didn't happen that way. In Jeremiah 36, God says to Jeremiah, "Get a scroll and write down all of the things I have spoken to you

from the days of Josiah up until now." And that was 20 years ago. Then the next sentence is "Jeremiah hired Baruch the scribe."

Jon: Because he didn't want to get a cramp in his hand.

Tim: No, he gets professional help - professional scribe involved. Isaiah, at one point, talks about sealing up a collection of his teaching and handing it to his disciples. This is in Isaiah 8.

Jon: By the way, this is what I'm talking about. He sat down with a scribe, and he's like, "All right, here's all my greatest material." And then boom, we got the book of Jeremiah.

Tim: Sure. But think, 20 years' worth of material. This is a genre that still exists today. If you've been a regular teacher or speaker, and you create a collection. We call these anthologies. That's how these are presented to us is anthologies.

Jon: Did he have this stuff written down or was it just from memory?

Tim: I mean, that's what we're not told. But surely, if you've been out there as a regular speaker for 20 years, you know your stuff.

Jon: You know your material.

Tim: Yeah, totally. So these books represent distillations, anthologies of some of these figures who were doing their thing. They are public intellectuals, public spiritual leaders.

Jon: I just keep thinking of Martin Luther King. That he got up, he would give these speeches, he would quote from the prophets. And so, I'm sure he had the same material he would talk over and over.

Tim: Sometimes, mini-sections within the books will begin with little mini headings like "the word of the Lord that came to me in the year of this such and such or when this happened." So the books explicitly tell you or give you a window that they are an anthology of material compiled over however long the prophet had their career. So just think of how it works then. They have some radical encounter, they start their preaching, teaching writing career—

Jon: They don't like it generally.

Tim: Yeah, for the most part, it brings trouble into their lives. They start to develop collections of written material. And then at some point, like in Jeremiah 36, those are all brought together into what I call these proto editions of the biblical books. Then at some point, those collections were all started to get into the hands of one circle of prophets around Jerusalem, because they start to be coordinated and hyperlinked with each other.

So Jeremiah was in Jerusalem at the same time that Ezekiel was in Babylon, but there's a whole bunch of passages in those books where they're using the same themes, same keywords. So at a large level, and probably at the point at which all of

their warnings of destruction came true, the prophets after the exile began drawing together the writings.

Jon: They're like an editorial board.

Tim: Yes, that's right. They're preserving the heritage of the prophets that we didn't listen to.

Jon: Right. They're deciding the final shape of these books.

Tim: We know that these circles exist. They're just called the prophets. In later biblical books, they're just referred to just Moses and the prophets. Jeremiah talks about Baruch the scribe. In Isaiah, he talks about passing on his material to what he just calls "my disciples." So here, you would envision some of these individuals had crews of scribes and disciples that they could commit their work to and that their disciples carried on treasuring their poetry, their essays. And it was after the exile, that their works began to be drawn together into the collections that we have today.

Jon: So we're talking about the making of the Bible as it pertains to the prophetic books, and it's not as simple as God pulling Jeremiah aside and being like, "Hey, Jeremiah, I got some stuff to say. Grab a pen," their little writing session, and then like, "Sweet, we got that one." "Hey, Ezekiel, grab a pen." It's much more lived experience of you're describing a character that has this radical experience with God and has a message from God, and it's burning inside of them that they have to tell people. They spend their lives as oftentimes eccentric character...

Tim: Often shunned, persecuted, chased out of town.

Jon: ...telling people stuff they generally don't want to hear. And they're doing this all over. And they end up with a body of work, which then somehow gets compiled together through them, through their followers, and then all of these then get passed along and have this final editorial composition by prophets as they're canonized. That's very different than the way I imagine the Bible being made.

Tim: Again, we didn't make this up. You can learn all of this by looking at the text within the prophetic books themselves.

Jon: Does this in any way for you make you feel like the Bible is less divine, less of God's words because it's messier in a way? It's kind of like if I had a really important message for my grandson—

Tim: If you could have the Bible written the way you think it ought to have been written—

Jon: Well, no. Flow with me. I'm an old man, I'm in my 80s and I'm exiled in some Pacific Island somewhere, and I'm just hanging out. Maybe I'm in Bali or something. But I've got all these grandkids, they don't know me anymore, but I want to tell them something really important or I send them a letter.

What I would do is I would write down my words, and I would send them that letter from me. Maybe I would hire a guy to write down the letter. So in this scenario, I'm God and I'm talking to my children.

Tim: I understand.

Jon: This is what is happening. What I wouldn't do is I wouldn't hang out with some Bali guy and be like, "Hey, man, I really want to talk to my kids, and these are things I want to say. Why don't you go do it for me?" And for him to hang around my kids and be like, "Hey, you have a grandfather and these are the things he wants you to say." Then he comes back and like, "Okay, well, let's send another guy. Let's all these guys. Now, here's what we'll do. Here's what we'll do. We'll collect everything you guys have said, and we'll shape it together, and we'll give them that. And that's the thing. Maybe that'll help them." It just seems kind of absurd to me.

Tim: I suppose. When you frame it that way, I'm not sure what to tell you.

Jon: Obviously, it's different because God is not some human living in Bali on an amazing boat. I'd live on some sweet boat.

Tim: But what you're doing is being honest about what your own upbringing in the church and how it raised you to think about the Bible leads you to expect a process that's something more like that.

Jon: It's God's love letter to me. So why make it so complicated? And why has it been such this organic human process being developed?

Tim: I hear that. So we're back to this question that we've talked about many times over, but each section of the Bible makes you think about it in a different way. Apparently, if I look at how the Bible came into existence, and what its message is, God has chosen to reveal Himself in through human history, and through humans representing Him. That makes a lot of sense of the whole premise of what page one is telling you what the story is about, that humans bear the image of God.

Then what's even more scandalous in this whole equation is that God would marry one particular people group for a whole season of human history. And it was through humans in that people's complicated history that were the bearers of His message. So I'm with you. I've forced myself to reckon with this and to remake my concept of what it means for the Bible to be God's Word around how it actually presents itself. I think that's it. It's just I'm asking you to now go to this section of the Bible and remake your view of what it means for this section of the Bible to be God's word. But all we're doing is looking at what the texts say about him. Yeah, with you.

Jon: Wish we could understand...

Tim: ...why God works the way that He does through people, through their failures, through their cycles of failure and success. I'm with you.

Jon: In one way, the Bible is a very sophisticated piece of artistic literature. So another way to frame the question is, why did God decide to communicate to us primarily through a sophisticated piece of artistic literature?

Tim: Yeah. In this case, this is the prop, the collection of the prophets, 15 books of the prophets. Now they're a unified collection with really just a core set of themes and ideas. But the origin process of this collection, and all of the lives and stories that

they represent is as complicated as any other part of human history. I mean, why incarnation Jesus, why did he do that one? Why didn't he just come down speaking everybody's language all at once? He did it once at Pentecost. Why didn't he do it? Why is the Bible written in Greek?

Jon: Why did he create us in the first place?

Tim: And we're like, "Now we're to there, who can know?" What we can know is how these books tell us about how they came into existence, and we can then read them for what they're trying to tell us. I think it's what we should talk about next - what are actual themes and ideas and themes in the book of prophets?

Jon: Themes and ideas in the books.

Thanks for listening to this episode of The Bible Project podcast. We're going to do another episode talking about the themes and ideas in the book the prophets. That's coming up next week. Today's episode was produced by Dan Gummel. The Bible Project is a nonprofit organization. We believe the Bible is a unified story that leads to Jesus, that it's meditation literature meant for a lifetime of study, of chewing on, letting it shape your imagination.

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