

# Jeremiah as a Prophetic Book

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On the face of it, there may seem nothing very problematic about calling Jeremiah a 'prophetic book'. It is obvious, of course, that the term undoubtedly means slightly different things to different scholars, and that its usefulness as a shorthand depends largely on our willingness to retain it as a rather loose and traditional designation of subject-matter: the more precise we make such labels, the more careful we have to be about attaching them. What is less obvious, but potentially far more serious an issue, is that problems can arise not only from the definition, but from the very use of designations like this: the difficulties, in other words, may lie as much in the act of labelling as in the labels. I want to focus primarily here, then, not so much on what we understand 'prophetic book' to mean, but on what we understand such a description to imply for the ways in which we might read Jeremiah, and relate it to other texts.

If the distinction is unclear, it might help to begin by observing that while the classification of texts by genre is a fairly complicated business, it is largely something that we do with an eye to our own concerns and purposes. If we can make general pronouncements about 'the novel', say, we can also sort the same works which comprise that genre into different groups or genres – perhaps to contrast detective fiction with science fiction, or to compare the nineteenth-century products with their forebears. Different purposes lead to different classifications, so that a work may be labelled in many different ways, and grouped with or distinguished from other works as the occasion demands. Much of what we call 'literary genre', then, arises not so much from something inherent in texts, or in the purposes of their authors, but from the measuring of texts, in their various different aspects, against selected, extrinsic criteria.

That is not to say, of course, that texts do not themselves display concerns with genre: some explicitly apply labels to themselves, or adopt instantly recognizable forms and conventions. Most, in one way or another, offer some guidance as to how they are intended to be read. Such guidance, however, depends upon a sort of inter-action between text and reader, and anticipates that the reader will recognize the clues

and make the appropriate associations – a task which is seldom easy for modern readers dealing with ancient texts. Furthermore, just as many different labels may be applied to a single text as we classify it in different ways, so also a text may align itself with various different conventions: for an obvious example, we need look no further than the book of Lamentations, which contrives to incorporate both traditional motifs from laments, and the rigid requirements of acrostic poetry. Finally, on the subject of such generic markers, we should note also that writers compose on the basis of texts that they know, rather than from some fixed and abstract style-sheet. Consequently, as each composition successively imitates, adapts, and innovates, so conventions and genres evolve and develop, sometimes in different ways simultaneously. Even when we are dealing with modern literature, it is treacherously easy to project conventions backwards or across on to texts which had no knowledge of them, and to discern an authorial purpose when there was none.

When we say that something is a ‘prophetic book’, then, we may be adopting a category which can trace its pedigree back at least to the compilation of the Twelve, but we should not presume that this category necessarily offers special insights into the purposes or contexts of the works which it includes. It is far from certain, indeed, that any or all the authors of those works would themselves have recognized the category, and it is very difficult to identify any structural, stylistic or thematic elements which both unite all those works and distinguish them from others.<sup>1</sup> Whilst it is undeniably true, then, that some of these books are aware of, or even dependant on others, it also seems highly improbable that they are drawing on some central blueprint, or have a fixed notion of what a prophetic book ought to be like. It may be important, in this respect, to observe that, although we have records of prophecy from elsewhere, both documentary and literary,<sup>2</sup> there is no

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1 Indeed, in his recent attempts to define the genre formally, EHUD BEN ZVI can offer no description more precise than that prophetic books have introductions and conclusions, both highly variable, and include ‘prophetic readings’, by which he means a wide range of materials, united only by their appearance in prophetic books. See especially his: *The Prophetic Book: a Key Form of Prophetic Literature*, in: M.A. SWEENEY and E. BEN ZVI (eds.), *The Changing Face of Form Criticism for the Twenty-First Century*, 2003, 276-297.

2 Of course, it is difficult in some cases to say which is which, or if the distinction is necessarily helpful in every case. Where oracles may have been delivered orally by prophets, the records preserved of them may, equally, have been revised in the direction of greater literary refinement; cf. M. NISSINEN, *Spoken, Written, Quoted, and Invented: Orality and Writtenness in Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*, in: E. BEN ZVI and M.H. FLOYD (eds.), *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern*

evidence of any comparable genre of prophetic literature elsewhere in the ancient Near East, which might have influenced or governed development of the Hebrew texts. Arguably, moreover, the degree of diversity amongst the biblical works grows only greater over time, making it unlikely that existing works gave rise to any common perception of generic norms, and feeding the suspicion that, as so often in literature, the texts which we possess are, at most, not members of a set, but of a family tree. If so, then it may be meaningless, or even profoundly misleading, to try to seek the elements common to all or most as a basis for identifying the distinctive characteristics of each.<sup>3</sup>

These considerations may be especially important for the study of Jeremiah, with its very diverse and distinctive contents. To be sure, the complicated redactional issues make it difficult to generalize about almost any aspect of the composition, but it is clear that the influences on this work extend far beyond whatever prophetic literature already existed, and it seems unhelpful to assume that they are all somehow filtered through a tradition of specifically 'prophetic' literary conventions. Customary though it may have become to talk about the narrative sections as 'prophetic narrative', for example, it is not clear that they really constitute a single type of composition even within the book itself, let alone that they are all most naturally grouped with narratives about prophets elsewhere, so we must avoid assuming *a priori* that specific conventions governed the composition and use of all stories involving prophets. We do not, as a rule, distinguish, say, narratives about priests as 'priestly narratives' or poems mentioning birds as 'avian verse', because we recognize that those categories have no implications beyond their self-evident description of subject-matter. Unless we have good reason to believe that the matter is different for prophets (and that is a case that needs argument, not presupposition), it is diffi-

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Prophecy SBL Symposium Series 10, 2000, 235-271, esp. 241, 244; also, K. VAN DER TOORN, *From the Oral to the Written: The Case of Old Babylonian Prophecy*, in the same volume, 219-34. Rather differently, some texts like the Egyptian *Wen-Amun*, once regarded as documentary, are now classed more often as literature.

3 As E.D. HIRSCH notes, 'To find the essence of a text by such procedures of abstraction is like finding the essence of a random set of objects (flag poles, billiard cues, pencils) in their being oblong.' See his *Validity in Interpretation*, 1967, 110 n. 28. ALASTAIR FOWLER, *Kinds of Literature: an Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*, 1982, 41, describes the individual members of a genre as 'a family whose septs and individual members are related in various ways, without necessarily having any single feature shared in common by all.'

cult to see why scholarship should feel obliged to speak of 'prophetic narratives', or, for that matter, of 'prophetic memoirs' and the like.<sup>4</sup>

Over-emphasizing the significance of generic tags can not only create artificial groups and boundaries in this way, but it can also allow us to presume too readily that genuinely important links with other prophetic books are merely expressions of convention, within prophetic literature or prophecy itself, rather than indications of more direct influences. The explicit citation of Mic 3:12 in 26:18, and the extensive overlap with the Deuteronomistic History at the end of the book, are merely amongst the clearest indications that Jeremiah has close links with other literature, and there are, of course, good reasons also to connect it with both Deuteronomy and Hosea. Whether such links are original or redactional, they must make us very wary of presuming that other points of contact with other works should be explained simply by reference to the conventions of prophetic literature or of prophecy itself. The 'What do you see?' accounts in Jer 1:11, 13 and 24:3, for instance, resemble similar materials in Amos 7:8; 8:2 and Zech 4:2; 5:2: in the absence of any very compelling reason to suppose that the books are independently citing a form which was conventionally used by actual prophets, or which had somehow become normative in prophetic literature, there is no reason to exclude the strong possibility that direct literary influences were at work here too.

If we risk obscuring the possible connections between prophetic books by presuming that they all drew on some common, hidden pool of conventions, we also risk losing sight of links to other literature. It is widely recognized now that the character, and perhaps also the deployment of the so-called 'confessions' can only properly be understood with reference to poetic traditions outside the prophetic corpus.<sup>5</sup> Whatever weight we give to theories of Deuteronomistic redaction, moreover, it would also clearly be unhelpful to read the historiographical

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4 So, for instance, DAVID PETERSEN, who would define prophetic literature simply in terms of the different styles of prophetic intermediation which it attests, freely isolates such 'basic forms of prophetic literature' as prophetic speeches or prophetic historiography, which are not self-evidently different from other speeches or historiography, except in terms of their content. Cf. D.L. PETERSEN, *Defining Prophecy and Prophetic Literature*, in: M. NISSINEN (ed.), *Prophecy in its Ancient Near Eastern Context. Mesopotamian, Biblical, and Arabian Perspectives*, SBL Symposium Series 13, 2000, 33-44, esp. 41-2. For a recent defence of the 'prophetic memoir', see R.E. CLEMENTS, *The Prophet as an Author: The Case of the Isaiah Memoir*, in: BEN ZVI and FLOYD, *Writings and Speech*, 89-101.

5 It seems unfortunate that much of this discussion, sparked principally by REVENTLOW'S *Liturgie und prophetisches Ich bei Jeremia*, 1963, has been set in form-critical terms, presuming direct cultic rather than literary influence.

sections without reference to the methods and motives of other Hebrew historiography – a contextualization urged on us by the current ending to the book. Even amongst the oracular sections of Jeremiah, however, we should be alert not only to the links with other poetry at the level of style and technique, but also to the range of non-prophetic ancient texts which develop conventional images of social collapse and disorder.<sup>6</sup> Although it is self-evidently useful to read Jeremiah in connection with other prophetic books, it remains important, nonetheless, to place it also within the broader literary and cultural context of its author and original readers. More generally, whilst it may be convenient to label books as ‘prophetic’, we must be wary of presuming that such labels, or the very notion of ‘genre’, for that matter, can be used to group and define texts for any purpose other than our convenience.

That is a point which should be borne in mind when dealing with any texts, but there is another, more specific problem involved in the ways we describe prophetic literature, which lies in the fact that most of it is not, strictly speaking, ‘prophetic’. Even if Jeremiah consisted entirely of original oracles spoken by an original prophet, and preserved for us intact, it would not be *prophecy*. That phenomenon, as reflected both in the biblical accounts and in other ancient sources, involves the mediation of a message to its addressee within the context of a specific circumstance. To publish, or even to preserve that message outside its original context is something different from prophesying, and is probably closer, in terms of motivation, at least, to historiography.<sup>7</sup> When a prophetic book, furthermore, was copied and read many years after the events with which it is concerned, the prime concern of the copyists

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6 Most notably the ‘prophecies’ of Marduk and Šulgi in Mesopotamia; cf. A.K. GRAYSON and W.G. LAMBERT, Akkadian Prophecies, JCS 18, 1964, 7-30, and their ‘Text A’. This is also a feature of the so-called ‘lament’ genre in Egypt, which includes the words attributed to Neferti, Ipuwer, and Khakheperreseneb. On the conventionalism of that genre, see, e.g., S. LURIA, Die Ersten werden die Letzten sein, Klio 22, 1929, 405-431. Closer to home, it seems likely that a similarly stylized account is to be found in the ‘Balaam’ text from Deir ‘Allā; cf. J. HOFTIJZER and G. VAN DER KOOIJ, Aramaic Texts from Deir ‘Alla, DMOA 19, 1976, 173-82, pls. 1-15, 23, 29-33.

7 It is not my purpose here to discuss the extent to which the prophetic literature may preserve specimens of actual prophecy, although I would note that the motives and mechanisms commonly suggested for such preservation are largely speculative, and more usually rely on an assumption that the preservation must have occurred somehow than on any inherent plausibility. On the relationship between prophetic books and prophetic activity more generally, see especially M. NISSINEN, How Prophecy became Literature, SJOT 19, 2005, 153-72, although I think that his deliberate stretching of the term ‘prophecy’ to embrace both phenomena tends to obscure the distinction which he makes between them.

was surely more than a desire to prove that God had warned his people, and their interest surely more than antiquarian. Even at the point of composition, it seems likely that Jeremiah was intended not just to preserve words from the past (if it does that at all), but to offer, amongst other things, an interpretation of that past. This may well have been revised and tweaked by generations of subsequent editors, but we do not need to hold radical positions about the history, character or authenticity of the prophetic books to appreciate that they must be understood not as tape-recordings but as literature, and not as prophetic acts but as textual artefacts.<sup>8</sup>

Correspondingly, we should not treat the prophetic books like documentary archives. If there are points of interest which arise from comparison with the very different records of prophecy from Mesopotamia, those should not deter us from investigating prophetic literature in terms of the styles and conventions which play a role in ancient literature more generally. We might contrast, for instance, the assignment of the prophetic content to named individuals with the more common anonymity of ancient literature, but note that those other types of composition which conventionally bear names, most notably instructions, the laments from Egypt, and apocalyptic accounts, usually do so for reasons that have little to do with straightforward authorial attribution.<sup>9</sup> On a related issue, we might note the strong tendency to

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8 To this extent, I am in agreement with PHILIP DAVIES' emphasis on the literary character of the books, in his "Pen of Iron, Point of Diamond" (Jer 17:1): Prophecy as Writing', in: BEN ZVI and FLOYD, *Writings and Speech*, 65-81. I doubt, however, that most of the prophetic books can readily be understood in terms of expansions upon oracles preserved in documentary archives, or viewed so simply as collections, and DAVIES himself allows that they are unlikely all to have emerged in such a way. That said, I do not think it affects the main point I wish to make here if we concede the possibility that some of the later literature, influenced by the existence of works already in existence, may indeed have first been composed to act as 'written prophecy' – Haggai springs to mind. M.H. FLOYD, Prophecy and Writing in Habakkuk 2,1-5, *ZAW* 105, 1993, 462-9, argues that Hab 2:2 reflects an understanding of prophecy as written, but the narrative in 2:1 surely indicates that the book itself is not written prophecy *tout simple*, while the explanation in 2:3 suggests a very specific function for the writing-down of this oracle.

9 In general, such attributions seem intended to lend authority or to set works in a certain context. Even where speeches are presented with no other indication of their background, the attributions perform, in effect, a narrative function; they are often, though, linked to other narrative material in which the speaker figures as protagonist. Within the biblical literature, this is usually recognized as the general character of attributions in the wisdom literature and Song of Songs; the position in the Psalms is more complicated, but few would argue for genuine authorial attributions there, and the fictional attribution of speeches within the historical books is widely acknowledged, as is, say, the self-description of Deuteronomy as a Mosaic speech.

cast ancient literature in the form of speeches, and not only wonder how far this has in itself influenced the rise of our prophetic texts, but also seek to examine the often complicated situations to which this gives rise, as God speaks physically through a prophet who may also be presented as speaking with him. In short, these works must be considered not merely in terms of their relationship to prophecy, but also, no less importantly, in terms of their status as literary creations, in a broader literary culture.

One important aspect of this is the need for us to recognize that, as books, these works are intended to engage with a readership or audience. This is a point which has been made before about the tale of Jeremiah's loincloth, in 13:1-11, which surely addresses its message not to an audience contemporary with the prophet, but to the readers who encounter the story in the book of Jeremiah.<sup>10</sup> The point is applicable throughout the work however, and is integral to those approaches which recognize the Jeremiah of this text to be a literary creation, whatever his relationship to some original, historical figure. This might well imply that the character is wholly fictional, or at least based loosely around that figure – rather, say, as Claudius is in Robert Graves' novels. Even if every word and action recounted in the book of Jeremiah, however, was actually performed previously by a prophet Jeremiah, that represents no more than a constraint on the composition, and does not absolve us of the need to take seriously the book's presentation of the figure – to treat it, in other words, as though it were fictional. Whatever gains are offered by the old, historical/biographical approach to the prophets (and I am not convinced those gains are great), that approach effectively involves pillaging each book for details, and ignoring the way in which the book itself chooses to arrange,

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Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, there are some doubtful cases, but most literature is either anonymous or pseudonymous. The extent to which such pseudonymity was always recognized can be unclear, and the famous poem in praise of authors on Pap. Chester Beatty IV seems to combine such recognition in some cases with an acceptance of actual authorship in others. The explicit association of works with their real authors, however, is principally a characteristic of classical literature, which was, at best, unusual in earlier periods.

10 In his *From Chaos to Covenant. Uses of Prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah*, 1981, 131. ROBERT CARROLL suggested that this story could have been 'a parable (acted or spoken) or the report of vision ... [which] might have involved the prophet in a set of dramatic actions; by the time of his Jeremiah, *Old Testament Guides*, 1989, 61, he preferred the idea that it was 'a literary parable which only existed in speech or writing without ever having had any realistic activity behind it. As PHILIP DAVIES says, more directly to the point, 'it is the report that carries the message'; cf. his *The Audiences of Prophetic Scrolls: Some Suggestions*, in: S.B. REID (ed.), *Prophets and Paradigms. Essays in Honor of Gene M. Tucker*, JSOTSS 229, 1996, 48-62, esp. 57-58.

present, and contextualize those details. Such reductionism is not only doomed to failure, if it overlooks the more tendentious aspects of the literary evidence, but it is also profoundly wasteful, discarding potentially important insights into the theology, history, and historical understanding of the context which produced each book. Although many factors may have been involved in creating Jeremiah and in its subsequent shaping, we may reasonably assume, at least, that none of the authors or redactors intended us to ignore their work and disassemble their text. If we are dealing with that book of Jeremiah, therefore, and not merely speculating about a historical Jeremiah, then we need to read the book as a book, and to treat its protagonist as the creature of its author or authors, who intend to convey meaning to us, as readers, through their portrayal of him.

Jeremiah offers a special case in respect of its composition, inasmuch as the book exists in two editions, both of which can probably be traced back as far as the textual evidence permits. This tends to lend weight to the previous point: whatever the history of the text, and whether the changes reflect a single redaction or some lengthier process, a great deal of effort has been put into both the re-writing and the re-arrangement of material. The fact that we cannot readily identify all the motives for such revision does not mean that there were none, and the trouble taken shows that matters of structure and expression were far from irrelevant, at least to the redactors. The textual situation, however, raises a further, final point to be borne in mind about Jeremiah as a book: its physical existence and transmission in that form.

Biblical scholarship has been inclined, in general, to take for granted the existence of the biblical books, often viewing them as, in some way, an inevitable crystallization of oral traditions, or the natural product of a literate society. We cannot, however, presume that levels of literacy were especially high in Judah, at least until much later than most of these works were composed, and we should not presume that any or all biblical literature relies on oral prototypes. As for the general emergence of books in a literate society, we should be aware that they each represent considerable effort and expense far beyond the labour of composition: the trouble entailed even in the production of each subsequent copy would have required considerable motivation. This is doubly true for a work so unusually long as Jeremiah: however much this work was subjected to later stages of redaction and expansion, it seems unlikely that it was ever a short book, with the potential for easy copying, distribution or memorization. We can only speculate about the context in which it was originally read, not least because we cannot be very specific about the date of composition, but general consider-



ations make it unlikely that the work existed in hundreds of copies from some early point, or that it was read by some significant proportion of the population. Just as its literary context is important for understanding Jeremiah, so also the physical constraints on production and circulation, which themselves tell against some casual antiquarianism, must be factored into any account of its purpose and historical context.

If we can only guess at how Jeremiah was originally read, or by whom, it is not unreasonable to suppose, all the same, that it was addressed primarily to those more privileged circles or strata of society which would have shared its strong political interests and recognized its own assumptions about the ready use of writing.<sup>11</sup> Within those circles or elsewhere, it may well have been performed or read out loud to an audience, rather than simply read by individuals: this was probably the case for much ancient literature, and would explain how sufficient initial distribution was achieved to stimulate an interest in the wider copying and ultimate popularity of a work. If so, the length of Jeremiah might have required several separate performances, a potential factor in the structuring of the work. More importantly, the possibility of such performance should guard against too literate a visualization of the work's subsequent history: we should not, perhaps, envisage early redaction of the book in terms of scribes busily revising manuscripts for the benefit of the next reader and copyist. Rather, it might be better to think of the early text as a script, subject to the sort of revisions, 'improvements', or simple errors which gave us, for instance, two versions of *King Lear*, and a whole host of text-critical problems surrounding dramatic texts, even those from an era of swift and ready printing. Again, we can only speculate, but the conditions and constraints on distribution, so very different from those which we take for granted now, must surely be included in any consideration of Jeremiah's redaction and transmission.

In short, there are some important insights and correctives to be gained by focusing less on Jeremiah as a source for historical prophecy, and more on Jeremiah as a text.

Although it revolves around the words and activities of a prophetic character, Jeremiah is not automatically thereby like every other book

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11 Beyond some mention of writing by others (e.g. 8:8), Jeremiah shows particular interest in its own writtenness, and in acts of writing by the prophet (cf. 25:13; 30:2; 36; 45:1; 51:60). Important though these references are as an indication of the literate context which the book presupposes, it is also tempting to compare them with those places in some other ancient literature, such as the *Sayings of Neferti* or the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant* from Egypt, where the works offer a (fictional) account of their own form and existence, by explaining how the words of their protagonists came to be recorded in writing.

that does so, and important aspects of its character and composition are better elucidated by a consideration of other literature. 'Prophetic', in other words, is a simple and convenient designation of genre for certain purposes, not a fundamental definition of form or content. Correspondingly, we should not measure Jeremiah against some standard, 'averaged' model of a prophetic book, but explore its links with other, individual compositions, whether they are 'prophetic' or not. Further, we must disengage the composition of this literature from the actual practice of prophecy: prophetic books presume prophetic activity, but are not, at least for the most part, prophetic in function. At the same time, we must not confuse the literary portrayal of prophetic figures in such books with whatever historical figures they may be based on: to do so is to replace the books' presentations with our own speculative reconstructions, losing a lot to gain a little. Finally, Jeremiah and other works were produced in an era when the production and distribution of books was very different, and we must give more serious consideration to the constraints which such issues imposed upon the composition and transmission of texts. By all means, then, let us continue to use the label 'prophetic book' for this and other works; let us not, however, always allow an emphasis on 'prophetic' to obscure the importance of the word 'book'.