
Review of Ronald L. Troxel, *Prophetic Literature: From Oracles to Books*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.

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Ronald Troxel's *Prophetic Literature: From Oracles to Books* offers the reader a concise but detailed study of the literary form and structure of the prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible, paying particular attention to the significant scribal influences upon the form, content, and rhetoric of these books. In his preface, Troxel acknowledges the value of both literary and historical methods of reading the prophetic literature. However, studying the literary form of a biblical book alone, he advises, leaves important questions unanswered; such questions about the sources, histories, and originating contexts of the prophetic material – “what lies behind these books” – are vital and their answers may offer additional and valuable ways of knowing this ancient literary genre (p. ix). His goal, therefore, is to address these questions by considering both the literary features of the prophetic books and the history of their composition and redaction.

Troxel begins his investigation with a coherent and concise discussion in the first chapter, which aims to answer the question, “What is a prophetic book?” Here, he clarifies what appears to be the primary aim of his book: to illustrate the central role of scribes in the transformation of Israelite prophets' utterances and deeds into the prophetic literature of the Latter Prophets found in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Using comparative studies of prophetic traditions and extant prophetic texts from Mari and other ancient Near Eastern localities, Troxel discusses the relationship between the spoken words of prophets and the scribal act of recording these words, positing that the prophetic oracles preserved in the Hebrew Bible texts of the *nevi'im* would not likely have been written down by the prophet him- (or her-)self. Rather, scribes would have taken on this task of putting into writing the prophets' utterances, which, Troxel suggests, indicates that these utterances were considered (for one reason or another) to be worthy of recording for posterity, rather than being of significance or interest solely to the audience within each prophet's original temporal and spatial location.

Troxel then goes on to make what seems to be his key point of this chapter, and also of the book as a whole. Using examples again from both the biblical material and the prophetic texts from Mari, he proposes that the actual words uttered by the prophets would not necessarily be the same as those recorded officially by the scribes; as a genre of writing, scribal reports followed particular literary conventions rather than being simple verbatim records of the spoken word. The addition of a superscription to each collection of oracles did not therefore serve to identify the *author* of the book *per se*; rather, it allowed the scribes to authenticate their editorial and literary efforts, by crediting the oracles (rightly or wrongly) to a particular prophet, while at the same time concretizing the identity of each prophet as a historical figure from Israel's past. Additionally, Troxel suggests that these scribal acts of grouping each prophet's oracles in particular orders and forms were pivotal in shaping the contours and meanings of the biblical prophetic books; taken out of their original contexts, the oracles went through a process of recontextualization, being placed next to other oracles and pieces of narrative that were deemed by the scribes to provide a meaningful framework in which those utterances could reside. By performing such a task, Troxel argues, the scribes then took on a central role in both the transmission process and the meaning-making process of prophetic literature, shaping the text to reflect their own theological and social concerns. In sum, this chapter offers up some valuable considerations about the nature, context, and purpose of prophetic books, inviting the reader to move beyond the prophetic figures named in the books' titles (who often get the most attention) and to consider instead the scribal editors – their worlds,

theologies, and ideologies – who often remain in the shadows of scholarly discussions of the prophetic texts, but whose redactional work underpins these texts to a significant extent.

In the remaining chapters, Troxel then focuses in turn on the individual books of the Latter Prophets, using each chapter to illustrate and expand upon his main thesis concerning scribal influence within the prophetic literature. He explores each prophetic text concisely but carefully, tracing the various editorial processes that appear to be at play within each one. There is a detailed literary analysis of each book as a whole, as well as more focused discussions of various passages within them, in which Troxel considers these passages' literary features, structures, and intertextual referencing, which all play an essential role in forming the book's literary style, function, and rhetoric. Each prophetic text is presented as not merely a repository for the words of individual prophets; rather, the order in which the oracles are put, the way that specific passages serve as counterpoints to those that come before or after, the thematic organization, and the "literary mortar mixed by the scribes" (p. 30) can all designate these prophetic books as cleverly and carefully edited texts that use prophetic oracles ascribed to particular prophets as the main ingredients, but that are granted a unique theological flavour by some complex and sophisticated scribal handiwork. In particular, Troxel emphasizes the intertextual dependency of each of the prophetic books, positing that these books expound their messages "in conversation with language and ideas from other prophetic books and their audiences" (p. 69). For Troxel, this dialogic relationship that exists between the various prophetic texts and their audiences is more important than the individual spoken words of each prophet, which are now irrecoverable and, to his mind, ultimately "beside the point" (p. 69). While each prophetic book stands distinguished from the others, in terms of its focus and concerns, each book likewise remains in conversation with the others through their common themes and shared language.

Thus, throughout his discussion of the Latter Prophets, Troxel constantly reminds the reader of the scribal input involved in this complex process of redaction and the primary import of scribal involvement in the process of making meaning. The function of the prophet in this process is thereby overshadowed, if not totally dispensed with; it is the scribes, rather than the prophets themselves, who perform the function of oracular interpretation and who give these oracles both context and coherence. Indeed, throughout the book, Troxel tends to relegate those prophets, who are named in the superscriptions and who give their names to the titles of the prophetic texts, to the margins of exegetical concern. Even the hugely fascinating and multifaceted persona of Ezekiel is simply a "prominent character" in the book bearing his name (p. 235); he is neither its real protagonist (according to Troxel, this role is reserved for Israel's God) nor the primary concern of Troxel's discussion.

While such a shift in focus from prophet to scribe is not, in itself, a bad thing, I do feel, however, that *some* degree of interest in the prophetic characters from whose mouths these oracles originated would not be out of keeping within this book, despite (or perhaps even *because* of) its concentration on scribal activities. The question I am left with after reading *Prophetic Literature* is this: given Troxel's thesis about the amount of effort scribes put into editing, organizing, and interpreting the utterances of those identified as prophets, what was it about these prophetic individuals that so captured the scribal imagination? Why did scribes feel the need to record and gather together their words with such captivating attention to exegetical detail? Did they consider the likes of Hosea, Amos, and Jeremiah to be holy men, mouthpieces of God, seers and visionaries of Israel's future? Or were their words valued more due to their social roles as outspoken political commentators and critics, or even as poets and artists? The perceived role of the prophets in biblical Israelite society is surely a subject worthy of discussion, regardless of their seeming involvement (or lack thereof) within the writing process of the traditions bearing their names. I would suggest that Troxel's emphasis on the scribal input into these traditions might be able to add something to this discussion rather than rendering it immaterial.

Overall, *Prophetic Literature* should prove a useful text for those scholars and students interested in exploring the redaction history of the prophetic material. The first chapter in particular (“What Is a Prophetic Book?”) would be a valuable addition to the reading list of any undergraduate course on the prophets, particularly its emphasis on the exegetical impact upon the formation of the biblical materials of the scribal process of writing down and editing oral traditions. The book has a businesslike and no-nonsense tone about it, which I appreciated; even some of the “big” issues encountered in the study of prophetic literature – those “contentious” points, such as the authorship of Isaiah, which are guaranteed to elevate the blood pressure and facial tic rate of some scholars and students – are discussed in a refreshingly straightforward and succinct manner. Read alongside some other resources, which also look at the religious, social, and political roles of the Hebrew prophets,¹ Troxel’s book should make a useful addition to many a biblical scholar’s library.

Endnotes

¹ For example, Matthews (2012).

References

Matthews, V.H. 2012. *The Hebrew Prophets and their Social World: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.



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