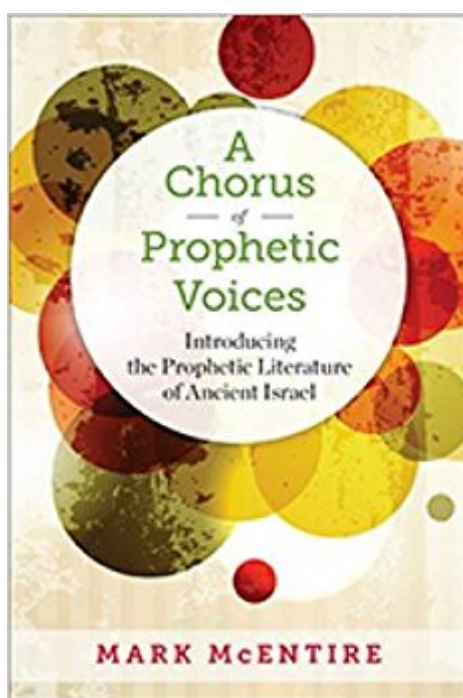


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# A Chorus Of Prophetic Voices: Introducing The Prophetic Literature Of Ancient Israel



## Synopsis

While there are many textbooks about the prophetic literature, most have taken either a historical or literary approach to studying the prophets. *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices*, by contrast, draws on both historical and literary approaches by paying careful attention to the prophets as narrative characters. It considers each unique prophetic voice in the canon, in its fully developed literary form, while also listening to what these voices say together about a particular experience in Israel's story. It presents these four scrolls—Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Book of the Twelve—as works produced in the aftermath of destruction, works that employ prophetic characters, and as the words uttered during the crises. The prophetic literature became for Israel, living in a context of dispersion and imperial domination, a portable and adaptable resource at once both challenging and comforting. This book provides the fullest picture available for introducing students to the prophetic literature by valuing the role of the original prophetic characters, the finished state of the books that bear their names, the separate historical crises in the life of Israel they address, and the “chorus of prophetic voices” one hears when reading them as part of a coherent literary corpus.

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## Customer Reviews

"In this ambitious and important work, Mark McEntire skillfully leads us through prophetic literature in ways that illuminate its depth and complexity. Informed by a wide range of scholarship, McEntire charts an approach that enhances our ability to understand the nature and significance of these

powerful texts. Best of all, *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices* makes you want to read the prophets all over again, more carefully and more appreciatively. A very rich resource indeed!"

—Eric A. Seibert, Professor of Old Testament, Messiah College "Congratulations to Mark McEntire! *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices* provides new insights into the entire prophetic corpus using several contemporary approaches. McEntire graciously bows to historical-critical work of the past but moves the discussion in other illuminating directions. He uses trauma and postcolonial theories, canonical and literary studies. He imagines individual prophetic voices and a symphony of intertextual conversation. With its charts and discussion boxes, the book will make an excellent choice for classrooms, churches, and anyone in search of updating regarding the prophets."

—Kathleen M. O'Connor, William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament, Emerita, Columbia Theological Seminary

Mark McEntire is Professor of Biblical Studies at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. A widely published writer on the Hebrew Bible, he has written such books as *The Old Testament Story*, Ninth Edition, and *Portraits of a Mature God: Choices in Old Testament Theology*. He blogs at [observingpointsofconvergence.wordpress.com](http://observingpointsofconvergence.wordpress.com).

Satisfied.

Mark McEntire, who teaches at Belmont University (and blogs at [...]), is the author of *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices*, a wide-ranging and interesting introduction to the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. In the first pages of the book, he gives a brief history of how scholarship has approached these prophetic texts over the last century in order to give some context for where his work fits into the conversation. The historical-critical method, masterfully represented by figures like Gerhard von Rad, held sway for much of the 20th century and focused on recovering the historical voices of the prophets, embedding them in historical contexts tied to specific periods of Israel's ancient history. McEntire finds that: The great accomplishment of these efforts was the grounding of the Israelite prophets in the earthly world of politics, economics, war, and suffering. Materializing the prophets was an effective antidote to the church's long-held tendency to spiritualize the words of the prophets and read them as a disparate collection of esoteric predictions of the distant future. (p.1) However, he also points out that this approach had shortcomings, including the undermining of the unity of larger prophetic works into smaller, isolated pieces as part of efforts to devise hypothetical reconstructions for how these books were compiled

into their canonical forms. The historical approach has recently given way to more literary studies of the prophets, which engage with the final forms of the scrolls as literary works, recognizing that the last stage of their production is the one most responsible for how we view the whole and emphasize the scrolls as unified works of literature that constructed imaginative worlds of their own (pp. 3,6). An important event that helped shift studies in this direction was the publication in 1978 of Walter Brueggemann's book *The Prophetic Imagination*. Brueggemann's work provided a new hermeneutical lens through which to read this [prophetic] literature. In Brueggemann's words, "The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish, and evoke a consciousness and perception alternative to the consciousness and perception of the dominant culture around us." His understanding contends that the prophets were not just part of their own historical worlds, but also participated in an imaginative world that their own work helped construct within the literature that presented them as characters. (p.3)

McEntire's *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices* takes an integrative approach to these past efforts, weaving together both historical-critical and literary-canonical methods, while also paying attention to more recent contributions like trauma studies, which have reemphasized the brutality of the historical events that the prophetic literature was born out of. The prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible introduced by McEntire are composed of four main collections: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the twelve prophetic "books" known as the Book of the Twelve (also termed the Minor Prophets) (p.7). All together, these four scrolls are known as the Latter Prophets, which balance out the four scrolls known as the Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings. McEntire devotes most of his book to exploring how each of these scrolls were formed in the midst of and responded to the three major crises of Israel's history: the Assyrian Crisis of the eighth century BC, the Babylonian Crisis that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the Restoration Crisis of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE (pp.11-13). The Assyrian Empire grew throughout Mesopotamia during the 8th century BC, expanding towards Egypt and encroaching on smaller nations like Israel and Judah. The resulting crisis makes up much of the background for the first half of Isaiah as well as for a significant part of the Book of the Twelve (from Hosea through Micah) (p.10). The northern state of Israel was overcome during this crisis, but the southern nation of Judah survived. McEntire summarizes the next chapter of Israel's story, writing that: Early in the second half of the seventh century, the Neo-Babylonian Empire began to put pressure on the Assyrians. Its subsequent overthrow of Nineveh in 612 BCE is the subject of the

portion of the Book of the Twelve called Nahum. It was not long before the Babylonians developed plans for expansion and began to move toward Egypt, with the remaining nation of Judah in their path. (p.11) While it is not known how much of Judah's population was actually taken into the Babylonian captivity, this traumatic experience of exile became one of the most deeply ingrained theological themes of the period (p.12). The Neo-Babylonian Empire was eventually conquered by Cyrus of Persia, which brought an end to the captivity and made it possible for those who had been exiled to finally return home if they wanted, though Judah was now officially under Persian governance. In Israel's Scriptures, the story of this "restoration" is mostly told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. McEntire writes about this period and also how it impacted the prophetic traditions that had originated at earlier points in Israel's history: The late sixth and most of the fifth centuries can be legitimately called another crisis in Israel's story, and it gave rise to its own prophets, such as Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and the persons who continued to revise the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. The Persian period, and perhaps the early decades of the Greek Period, are generally accepted as the time during which all of the prophetic literature was put into its final form, which means that all of the prophetic scrolls respond to the Restoration crisis, including the failure of the monarchy to reestablish itself and the struggle to develop and regulate a system of worship in the Second Temple. (p.13) Thus, when looking at the final composition of the prophetic scrolls, interpreters are faced with a daunting task. McEntire explains: Each [scroll] speaks with its own voice, but in the canon they are often speaking together in groups of two, three, or four about the same set of events in Israel's story. This situation presents the great challenge of listening to each of these voices separately, taking account of the full continuity of their message, and listening to them together as they speak together, sometimes in harmony and sometimes in conflict with each other, a challenge which this book attempts to engage. (p.8) McEntire seeks to listen to the full "chorus" of voices found in each of the prophetic scrolls as they grapple in their distinctive ways with the pressing theological questions brought about by and considered in light of Israel's experiences. The responses formed by the prophets are sometimes complex. McEntire explains that even though Jeremiah and Ezekiel often place blame on the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem for their punishment and exile during the Babylonian Crisis, "the two prophets frequently agonize over these events, weighing degrees of responsibility and punishment, while portraying the horror of the invasion in graphic ways that Isaiah never approaches" (p.210). It is often the prophets themselves who

suffer most as a consequence of their faithfulness to the call placed upon them by God. One of the redemptive theological consequences of this, in McEntire's eyes, is that, "Through the work of suffering, they switch the identity of the afflicted one from the guilty party being punished by God to the faithful ones who suffer because of their loyalty to YHWH" (p.23). Most readers will probably be able to heartily affirm the central claim of *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices*, which McEntire declares is that "we should read prophetic scrolls together in a way that also recognizes and gives attention to the individual voices within the scrolls" (p.203). His collapsing of the historical-critical and literary-canonical dichotomy is a welcome move. As a Christian reader, I can affirm that there are many places in Israel's Scriptures where the voices of the prophets can be interpreted to be pointing towards or prefiguring the life and words of Christ, but it doesn't seem to me that this interpretative move necessarily has to be done at the price of denying that the prophets of the Hebrew Bible also had something to say to God's people in their own day. Maybe one promising way of approaching this topic is the figural reading strategy set out by Richard Hays in his book *Reading Backwards*, where he writes: "The Gospels teach us to read the OT for figuration. The literal historical sense of the OT is not denied or negated; rather, it becomes the vehicle for latent figural meanings unsuspected by the original author and readers. It points forward typologically to the gospel story. And, precisely because figural reading affirms the original historical reference of the text, it leaves open the possibility of respectful dialogue with other interpretations, other patterns of intertextual reception." In other words, we do not simply scour the OT for isolated proof-text and predictions; rather, we must perceive how the whole story of God's covenant promise unfolds and leads toward the events of Jesus' death and resurrection. (pp.15-16) In conclusion, McEntire takes readers of *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices* on a journey into the life of the Hebrew prophets, showing how these sometimes disparate writings, which arose out of historical circumstances hundreds of years apart, come together to make a chorus of inspired voices participating in sacred conversation, grappling with what it means to be faithful as God's people in the world even in the midst of sometimes radically changing circumstances. Even in areas where readers may disagree with McEntire's approach or conclusions, his words are thought-provoking, and best of all, invite people to dive once more into the prophetic texts themselves. I recommend it. \*Disclosure: I received this book free from Westminster John Knox Press for review purposes. The opinions I have expressed are my own, and I was not required to write a positive review. \*\* More reviews can be found at [Tabletalktheology.com](http://Tabletalktheology.com)

In *A Chorus of Prophetic Voices*, subtitled *Introducing the Prophetic Literature of Ancient Israel*, Mark McEntire, reveals, provokes and triggers, just like an Old Testament prophet. The four scrolls of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Scroll of the Twelve a.k.a. Minor Prophets, are read and explained as a coherent, yet diverse account of three major crises after the short Davidic Kingdom of Israel. The Assyrian Crisis in the 8th century B.C., the Babylonian Crisis in the 6th century B.C., and the Restoration Crisis during the Persian Age in the early 6th century B.C. McEntire shows connections between the writings, that lie in their production and in our - renewed- act of reading. Reading the prophetic "books" in their historical context gives room to their common tenets and answers to questions like the suffering of Israel, the divine punishment and grace. Are the foreign nations' attacks the work of God, and why are these very nations then subject of revenge later on? The mainstream Christian reading of the Old Testament Prophets aim to have them point to Jesus Christ or the end times exclusively, which would render the books worthless to Jewish readers, both contemporary as well in ancient times. The author warns several times for this biased backward reading of the Bible. How much more have the Prophets to offer while reading them in a kind of chronological order, and when you dare to question the many indicators for enrichment or alterations beyond the era in which the prophets after which books are named, actually lived. The central claim of this book is that we should read prophetic scrolls together in a way that also recognizes and gives attention to the individual voices within the scrolls, just like a choir, sometimes in unison, sometimes showcasing solo voices. Knowledge of Hebrew or Greek is not required to read this book. While dealing with books many faithful are not familiar with, except for short quotations of single verses or popular thoughts, McEntire strives to open your hearts and minds to the inner structure, the time-bound and timeless messages, respecting the characters of the prophets and their intended audiences.

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