

The Prophets: Forms of Oracles

How to Read an Oracle

- Since the isolation of oracles is essential to understanding the Prophets, it is important to know something about the different *forms* the prophets used to compose their oracles
- These forms act much like genres do throughout Scripture, each having their own structure and purpose
- Reading them aloud is a good practice to help get the feel for the oracles in their forms

5 Common Oracle Forms

The Lawsuit

- “An allegorical literary form which calls out the accused of breaking the covenant law”
 - The form is dramatic & effective
- Much like a court case
 - God is portrayed as the plaintiff, prosecuting attorney, judge, and bailiff
 - Israel is the defendant
- The form contains explicitly or implicitly:
 - Summons
 - Charge
 - Evidence
 - Verdict
- Ex.) Isa. 3:13-26
 - The court convenes & the lawsuit is brought against Israel (v. 13-14a)
 - The indictment is spoken (v. 14b-16)
 - Since the evidence shows that Israel is clearly guilty, judgment is pronounced (v. 17-26)
 - Because the Covenant has been violated, the sorts of punishments listed there will be enacted
 - Disease, destitution, deprivation, and death

The Woe

- “A prediction of immanent doom using the word ‘woe’”
 - The term ‘woe’ (*hoy*) was used by ancient Israelites when facing disaster or death, or when they mourned at a funeral
- Sometimes allegorical, though not always
- The form contains explicitly or implicitly:
 - Announcement of distress
 - Often containing the term ‘woe’
 - Reason for the distress

- Prediction of doom
- Ex.) Hab. 2:6-8
 - Spoken against Babylon
 - Announcement: “Woe to him...” (v. 6)
 - Reason: Babylon is a thief and extortionist (v. 8)
 - Prediction: Those he wronged will rise against him (v. 7)

The Promise

- “A prediction of salvation from God.”
 - Also known as the salvation oracle
- The form contains explicitly or implicitly:
 - Reference to the future
 - Mention of radical change
 - Mention of blessing
- Ex.) Amos 9:11-15
 - The future: “In that day...” (v. 11)
 - The radical change
 - Restoration and repair of “David’s fallen tent” (v. 11)
 - The exaltation of Israel over Edom (v. 12)
 - The return from exile (v. 14-15)
 - The blessings: via the categories of the Mosaic Covenant
 - Life, health, prosperity, agricultural abundance, respect, & safety
 - All present
 - Though health is implied & agricultural abundance is central

The Enactment Prophecy

- “An oracle that was accompanied by some symbolic action.”
- See Ezek. 4:1-4; Zech. 11:4-17
- Ex.) Isa. 20:1-6
 - Isaiah goes “stripped and barefoot for three years” (v. 3) to symbolize the prediction that the Assyrian king would lead away the Cushite and Egyptians stripped and barefoot
 - The captives would have only been allowed to wear ‘underwear’ to prevent them from hiding weapons
 - It was a play the word *galah*, which means both ‘stripped’ and ‘exile’
 - This does not mean that Isaiah was in his underwear and barefoot for the entire 3 years
 - But rather would periodically appear so to help remind the Israelites of his message

The Messenger Speech

- The most common form of oracle
- Often occurs alongside of, or as part of, one of the other oracle forms
- Contains a “messenger formulae”:
 - “This is what the Lord says”
 - “Thus says the Lord”
 - This is the word of the Lord concerning...”
- This formula was used in diplomatic and business settings in the ancient world
 - To remind the hearer that the message spoken was on behalf of another, and not the messenger himself
 - The prophets are messengers speaking God’s words
- Ex.) Mal. 1:2-5