M. DANIEL CARROLL R.

THE LORD ROARS

Recovering the Prophetic Voice *for* Today

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Preface

This book has its origins in the Earle Lectures on the Old Testament in October 2020 at the Nazarene Theological Seminary (NTS) in Kansas City, Missouri. The COVID-19 pandemic that was challenging the country in so many ways impacted these lectures in two ways. First, it made it impossible to present the lectures in person. Sadly, this prevented me from enjoying the gracious hospitality for which that institution is known. I did enjoy a glimpse of that warmth—although through Zoom—in my interactions with two of the biblical studies faculty, Andy Johnson and Jennifer Matheny, who took the lead for the event. Second, the virtual format meant that the lectures were delivered in one day, which resulted in two lectures instead of the usual three. The topics of those lectures form the basis of the first three chapters of this volume; what would have been my third lecture is reflected in the thrust of chapter 4.

The ethical demands of the prophetic literature have long captivated me. This enthrallment has its roots in my identity as half-Guatemalan (my mother was Guatemalan), which has marked my life and career. I spent time in Guatemala in my youth and later for many years as a professor at El Seminario Teológico Centroamericano in its capital city during the decades-long civil war. Questions about the responsibilities of government, the relationship between church and state in a country in the middle of armed conflict, and the nature of Christian mission in a context of violence and poverty drove me to the prophets for an orientation to those harsh realities of life. A year in Costa Rica, during which time I kept an eye on Sandinista Nicaragua next door and watched the Las Malvinas/Falkland Islands conflict between Great Britain and Argentina from afar, and a stimulating two-and-a-half years in Sheffield for doctoral studies during Margaret Thatcher's final stint as prime minister contributed to that drive to engage the prophets, particularly the book of Amos. Since returning to teach in the United States, other issues have demanded attention: race, gender, and again, war. Involvement in immigration reform and Latino/a churches has occupied a lot of my time and concern in recent years. Through it all, my desire to glean a relevant word from the prophets has continued. It must!

The invitation to deliver the Earle Lectures provided a wonderful opportunity to organize my thoughts more formally and to put them to paper in this volume. For that, I am grateful to NTS and to Baker Academic. Jim Kinney, the executive vice president of Baker Academic and a friend, encouraged me to complete the writing of the manuscript. Jennifer Koenes, the project editor, was a pleasure to work with and proved to be a careful reader with insightful comments. I appreciate, too, the care taken by Auburn Powell, one of my doctoral students, in developing the indexes.

The title *The Lion Roars* alludes to that theme in Amos (1:2; 3:4, 8, 12) and hopefully communicates in some measure the seriousness and urgency of the prophetic word. This study is not intended to be exhaustive, and I have tried not to be overly technical. My hope is that it might encourage readers to engage anew those powerful spokespersons of ancient Israel in our time.

Many friends and colleagues, too many to name, have contributed to my journey into the prophetic. To all of them I owe a debt. May they appreciate this volume as an expression of gratitude and, Lord willing, as another step in learning how to better proclaim and live out the prophetic imagination.

1

Reimagining Reality

The Power of the Prophetic Text

Parameters of This Study

There are several parameters that define this study. Perhaps it is best to begin by making clear what this volume is *not*. I refer to its *scope*. I make no pretense of offering a comprehensive survey of the ethics of the entire prophetic corpus.[1] The compass is more modest; I limit myself to three prophetic books: Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. I do not do so from the conviction that they somehow represent the high point of Israelite faith, as some nineteenth-century scholars claimed. They argued that these prophets were champions of an "ethical monotheism," free of the baggage of deadening ritual, which eventually evolved into what these scholars believed was the legalistic religion of Judaism.

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[1] For a broader treatment, see M. Daniel Carroll R., "Ethics," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. Gordon McConville (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 185–93.

These texts do engage similar socioeconomic, political, and religious issues, but not as those scholars envisioned. These also are the three books that people interested in prophetic ethics tend to go to, so a closer look is appropriate. Since this book also is about *how* to read the prophets, the smaller sample size is more manageable.

Three methodological choices vis-à-vis the biblical text ground the study. First, each chapter discusses only *certain texts* in these books, a set of passages that exemplify the ethical thrust of this literature.[2] Second, the textual exposition is based on the *canonical form*. While some approaches to the ethics of the prophets work with hypothetical compositional histories,[3] this study opts for the text that we have in our Bibles. This is one of several alternatives available to scholars, but I choose it for a specific reason. My goal is to make the ethical potential of the biblical text accessible to the broader Christian community. To concentrate on theoretical stages of composition confines the biblical text to the academy.[4] The canonical form, on the other hand, is the Scripture of the Christian community.[5] This is the only text it knows and, in the community of faith's best moments, the one by which it lives and is shaped.

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[2] R. W. L. Moberly uses this approach, which I find helpful for theological reflection. See his *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) and his *The God of the Old Testament: Encountering the Divine in Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

[3] A recent sensitive, informed example is Mark G. Brett, *Political Trauma and Healing: Biblical Ethics for a Postcolonial World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016).

[4] Scholarly critical matters regarding the composition of our three books are complex, especially for Isaiah. I am aware of these, but this volume engages these books as discrete prophetic books. I reference relevant background matters in the discussion and footnotes, but in line with the purpose of this volume, I do not engage composition debates. My focus is the ethical visions of the worlds within these three texts.

[5] See Moberly, *God of the Old Testament*, 1–12; R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible in a Disenchanted Age: The Enduring Possibility of Christian Faith*, Theological Explorations of the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018); cf. Christopher R. Seitz, *Prophecy and Hermeneutics: Toward a New Introduction to the Prophets*, STI (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); M. Daniel Carroll R., “Ethics and Old Testament Interpretation,” in *Hearing the Old Testament: Listening for God’s Address*, ed. C. Bartholomew and D. Beldman (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 210–20.

This conviction to engage the prophetic text as Christian Scripture leads to the third methodological decision. This book focuses on *formative, constructive contributions* that this prophetic literature can make to the ethical vision of the people of God in today's world. Not all agree that the prophets can, or should, fulfill that role. Cyril Rodd represents the voice of total rejection of the prophets for ethics. He believes that they simply were not as interested in such things as we think they were. Even if they had been, he believes, their views are unacceptable today. Rodd says, "Most students of the Old Testament see the prophets as at the heart of Old Testament ethics. This is strange. As I hope to show, ethics in our sense does not form a major part of their message. Moreover, their approach to preaching is in many ways utterly foreign to our views of the way ethics should be done."[6] And again:

> We would give no credence at all to a political speaker who declared that his criticism of some economic or social scandal came from God through a vision. We demand research before we take any action, and politicians often use this universal demand as an excuse to avoid implementing measures which they know will be unpopular or which entail a heavy cost financially. . . . The notion of divine punishment is equally alien. The prevalence of consequentialist ethics, coupled with the emphasis upon research into the causes of social evils and the possible consequences of actions that might be taken to relieve them, means that we retain the idea that what is done will have beneficial or harmful results. But this is not what the prophets are saying. They hold that Yahweh will intervene personally with direct action, and this we no longer believe.[7]

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[6] Cyril S. Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land: Studies in Old Testament Ethics*, Old Testament Studies (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2001), 292.

[7] Rodd, *Glimpses of a Strange Land*, 296.

Most who have questions about the prophets as an ethical resource do not react like Rodd, against this literature in toto, but instead against passages in which challenging matters, like divine violence, surface. Some detractors acknowledge the prophets' perennial value but also raise concerns. This book is not an apologetic designed to respond to these critiques. I approach the biblical text as a divine word for the Christian church, reading it with a hermeneutic of trust.[8] This does not mean that difficult matters are ignored. Some arise organically in the exposition and are handled briefly at appropriate junctures.

Longings for the "Prophetic"

It is not uncommon for someone to be described as a "prophetic voice" or for a movement or church to be called "prophetic." In these cases (as opposed to popular understandings of the prophetic as detailed predictions about the future or as a personal revelation from God), the label "prophetic" refers to a person or group who speaks out boldly against injustice and confronts oppressive authorities and structures.

If we limit our attention to the last century or so, examples of the prophetic in this sense are legion and are found across the theological spectrum. One can begin with the prominent spokesperson of the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch assumed the validity of the nineteenth-century position regarding the ethical monotheism of the prophets while also believing that their ancient message was transcendent. Of them, he says, "The vivid Oriental imagery of the prophets must not give us the impression that injustice and corruption of that day were unique. It is impossible to make accurate comparisons of human misery, but it may well be that the conditions against which the moral sensibility of the prophets revolted could be equaled in any modern industrial center."[9]

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[8] In contrast, a hermeneutic of suspicion reads the text "against the grain" and resists its point of view and convictions when they appear to contradict today's ethical standards. For Isaiah, see, e.g., Andrew Davies, *Double Standards in Isaiah: Re-evaluating Prophetic Ethics and Divine Justice*, BibInt 46 (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Mark Gray, *Rhetoric and Social Justice in Isaiah*, LHBOTS 432 (New York: T&T Clark, 2006).

A few decades later, ethicist and public theologian Reinhold Niebuhr turned to several Old Testament texts to describe what it meant to be a "true prophet" in his day (1 Kings 22; Jer. 23).[10] He also spoke of what he called "prophetic religion" and "prophetic Christianity," which properly diagnose the depth and pervasiveness of human social sin.[11] In the next chapter I return to Niebuhr's view of sin in relationship to our three prophetic books.

More recently, the prophetic label has been applied to protagonists of the civil rights movement, particularly Martin Luther King Jr., whose legacy continues to impact national life so many years after his assassination in 1968. Much of King's inspiration and that of other leaders came from the Old Testament prophetic tradition.[12] African American philosopher Cornel West argues for a "prophetic Christianity." In contradistinction to a faith detached from contextual realities, prophetic Christianity, he says, is characterized by a commitment to human dignity and social transformation. It is grounded in Christian praxis and, in his view, is appreciative of what he calls “progressive Marxism.”[13] Additionally, because of its theological and political stance for justice within their communities and in the public square, especially in the past, the Black church has been called “prophetic.”[14]

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[9] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, ed. Paul Rauschenbusch (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 27–28. This volume was published originally in 1907.

[10] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Four Hundred to One" and "The Test of True Prophecy," in *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1971), 73–87 and 93–110, respectively. *Beyond Tragedy* originally was published in 1937. I am indebted to Jeremy Sabella for an orientation to Niebuhr.

[11] Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1956). This volume first appeared in 1935.

[12] See, e.g., David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 44–86, 179–87, 307–12.

Latino scholar Robert Chao Romero presents a historical survey of prophetic voices and movements. Beginning with the colonial period in Latin America and continuing through to current voices of Latino/a theologies, he posits a line of champions of the praxis of justice from within the unique lived experience of their communities. Latino/a churches that continue in this tradition pursue *la misión integral* (holistic or integral mission), socially aware and committed to being spaces that respond to socioeconomic, political, and spiritual needs and speak into the public square. This is their prophetic task: “It is my contention that these many Latina/o Christian social justice pioneers form what may be called the Brown Church: a prophetic ecclesial community of Latinas/os that has contested racial and social injustice in Latin America and the United States for the past five hundred years.”[15]

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[13] Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, anniv. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), esp. 15–20, 95–127.

[14] This label now is contested. Some see it as no longer applicable to the Black church more broadly. See, e.g., the critique of some trends in Marvin A. McMickle, *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006). For internal debates about the nature and future of African American church life and mission, note Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); cf. Bruce L. Fields, “The Black Church (Prophetic) View,” in *Five Views on the Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 97–124.

[15] Robert Chao Romero, *Brown Church: Five Centuries of Latina/o Social Justice, Theology, and Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 11; cf. Harold J. Recinos, *Good News from the Barrio: Prophetic Witness for the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006); Oscar García-Johnson, *The Mestizo/a Community of the Spirit: A Postmodern Latino/a Ecclesiology*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009). As do certain US Latino/a theologians, Chao Romero connects with aspects of Latin American liberation theology and the concept of *misión integral* of key Latin American evangelical theologians of

Activist and theologian Jim Wallis has spoken of a "prophetic spirituality" and "prophetic politics" dedicated to constructive challenges that emerge from the biblical prophetic tradition and that are unbeholden to either of the primary political parties in the United States.[16] A recent collection of essays titled *Prophetic Evangelicals: Envisioning a Just and Peaceable Kingdom* revisits key theological themes and their current social relevance as an alternative to the longstanding evangelical tendency toward apolitical pietism or default agreement with the political Right.[17] The "prophets" tag can refer to religious people in the United States—those under the broad umbrella of Christianity or beyond—who advocate for what are deemed progressive sociopolitical positions.[18]

This prophetic perspective is not restricted to the United States. Latin American liberation theologians championed prophetic religious orders and community leaders during the years of revolutionary struggle in the second half of the twentieth century.[19] Jon Sobrino, a Jesuit who has taught for many years at the Universidad Centroamericana José Simeón Cañas (UCA) in San Salvador, characterizes Jesus's ministry with the

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the Fraternidad Teológica Latinoamericana (FTL). Note, e.g., C. René Padilla, ed., *Raíces de un evangelio integral: Misión en perspectiva histórica* (Buenos Aires: Kairós, 2020). For more on the FTL, see chaps. 3 and 4 in this volume. US Latino/a theologies have some theological roots in Latin America, even as there are differences due to context.

[16] E.g., Jim Wallis, *The Soul of Politics: A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change* (New York: Orbis Books, 1994), 31–47; Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 72–84.

[17] Bruce Ellis Benson, Malinda Elizabeth Berry, and Peter Goodwin Heltzel, eds., *Prophetic Evangelicals: Envisioning a Just and Peaceable Kingdom*, Prophetic Christianity Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

[18] Jack Jenkins, *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country* (New York: HarperOne, 2020).

[19] Equipo Teólogos, Confederación Latinoamericana de Religiosos, *Tendencias proféticas de la vida religiosa en América Latina*, Colección CLAR 24 (Bogotá: Secretariado General de la CLAR, 1975); Enrique Dussel, *Ethics and Community*, trans. Robert R. Barr, Liberation and Theology 3 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 88–98, 213–14, 227–28.

disenfranchised as “prophetic praxis.”[20] Ignacio Ellacuría, also a professor at the UCA and one of the six Jesuits assassinated on that campus by the military in November 1989, defined the prophetic as the announcement of the sharp contrast between present realities and the fullness of God’s kingdom. This message is utopian, but it is made concrete in historical praxis and liberating socioeconomic and political approximations to that ideal. The prophetic, writes Ellacuría, denounces oppressive social structures and actors as well as the complicity of the institutional church and its hierarchy in injustice.[21] Scores of Roman Catholic clergy (most famously Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador), nuns, and lay leaders were killed by military dictatorships from the 1970s through the 1990s, embodying what some call “prophetic martyrdom.”[22]

Halfway across the globe during the anti-apartheid era in South Africa, *The Kairos Document* contrasted prophetic theology with state and church theology.[23] More recently, in his work on Jeremiah, Congolese scholar Bungishabaku Katho asks, “How do we define a prophetic ministry today? Who is a prophet in Africa? How should the African church live out its prophetic role in the image of Jeremiah?"[24] Many in Africa falsely claim the prophetic mantle, Katho claims. What is needed is a courageous self-sacrificing stance for justice and peace that can envision a new Africa. Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi, another Congolese scholar, explores Nahum as a resource for the traumatized victims of that country's wars. The book's poetry, he believes, can evoke memories of experiences of war, giving victims the language to verbalize their suffering and to come to God for assurance and comfort as a first step toward imagining a different future.[25]

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[20] Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical-Theological View*, trans. Paul Burns and Francis McDonagh (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 160–79.

[21] Ignacio Ellacuría, “Utopía y profetismo,” in *Mysterium liberationis: Conceptos fundamentales de la teología de la liberación*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, Colección Teología Latinoamericana 16 (San Salvador, El Salvador: UCA Editores, 1991), 1:393–442; J. Severino Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 39–47; cf. the entire issue of *Biblia y fe* 41 (1988), titled “Profetismo y sociedad: ¿Por qué está hoy el mundo tan necesitado de profetas?”

[22] Edward T. Brett, “Prophetic Martyrdom in Modern Latin America,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Latin American Christianity*, ed. David Thomas Orique, Susan Fitzpatrick-Behrends, and Virginia Garrard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 237–55. A prominent example in Guatemala was Bishop Juan Girardi, who was assassinated on April 26, 1998, two days after delivering the Catholic Church’s report in the national cathedral on the violence of the country’s civil war.

[23] Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church; A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

These examples, and there are many more, testify to the ongoing clamor around the world and across time for a relevant word from the Scripture that can orient God's people in settings of inequality and unrest. What might be a way forward toward utilizing the prophetic literature in our day? How can we make sense of its vision and appropriate these texts for our context?

The Turn to the Literary Imagination

There are several ways to handle the prophetic books as ethical resources. A common tack is to identify passages that mention the poor, widows, orphans, and strangers and those that use terms such as *oppression*, *justice*, *righteousness*, and *compassion* and then to correlate them with situations in contemporary life.

Others try to understand the targets of prophetic invective with some precision by reconstructing what may have been the material conditions that triggered prophetic anger. Using the social sciences, these scholars hypothesize that the exploitation in Israel and Judah arose, for instance, because of an early form of rent capitalism, as an exploitative tributary form of production controlled by elites, or because of abuses within that patronage culture.[26] This research is insightful, but the biblical pictures of eighth-century life are inescapably tentative because of a lack of textual, epigraphic, and archaeological data. Prophetic texts also are notoriously vague on details. What they offer are largely impressionistic snapshots of injustice fueled by moral outrage, not socioeconomic precision. These studies, though, do underscore that the biblical invective was generated within gritty, unacceptable real-life settings.

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[24] Bungishabaku Katho, *Reading Jeremiah in Africa: Biblical Essays in Sociopolitical Imagination* (Carlisle, UK: HippoBooks, 2021), 29.

[25] Jacob Onyumbe Wenyi, *Piles of Slain, Heaps of Corpses: Reading Prophetic Poetry and Violence in African Context* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

Still others compare the ethical concerns of the biblical prophets with the prophetic material of other ancient cultures to ascertain what may have been unique to Israel's prophets. These efforts demonstrate the distinctive centrality and breadth of ethical concerns found in the Old Testament prophetic material.

Each of these treatments of prophetic ethics makes a contribution to the topic at hand. I propose, however, engaging these texts through a different lens, that of poetics and the literary imagination. What does such an approach entail? I start with two famous literary works that can illustrate the kind of reading I propose. The first is from my Latin American cultural background. I refer to the most famous work of literature in the Spanish language, a volume that some argue marked a new beginning in the development of literature; some even call this book the greatest work of fiction ever written. I refer, of course, to *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* (1605, 1615)[27] by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547–1616). The opening chapter famously begins with these words: "Somewhere in La Mancha, in a place whose name I do not care to remember, a gentleman lived not long ago, one of those who has a lance and ancient shield on a shelf and keeps a skinny nag and a greyhound for racing."[28] Most know something of the saga of Don Quijote, even if only his encounter with the windmills. Schooled by his obsessive reading of medieval romantic tales of chivalry, "el Caballero de la Triste Figura" (the Knight of the Sad Countenance) believes that he is called to make right the injustices of his time. The adventures and conversations of this intrepid elderly man display great perceptiveness about the human condition and about the historical realities of Cervantes's sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain. The book was birthed in the midst of the Inquisition, and its author had suffered much—he had been crippled in battle, been held captive for five years by the Ottoman Empire, and was later unjustly imprisoned and impoverished. *Don Quijote de la Mancha* is an amusing yet shrewd satire that exposes both the cruel hypocrisy of Iberian socioeconomic, political, and religious life and the contradictory ideals on which that culture supposedly was built and that were giving way to the Enlightenment. The fictional world in Don Quijote's head, his actions, and his rambling soliloquies constantly challenge the other characters' interpretations of Spanish society. This juxtaposition of views suggests, then and now, that readers need to ask who in the novel perceives the world rightly, why, and how—that is, beyond the cultural facades and from the underside of society (the poor, women).[29] Without a doubt, this tragic madman is the one with the clearest and most honest vision.

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[26] For a survey of these hypotheses, see M. Daniel Carroll R., *The Book of Amos*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 15–26.

[27] It was published originally in two parts.

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[28] Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 19. The original Spanish reads, "En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme, no ha mucho tiempo que vivía un hidalgo de los de lanza en astillero, adarga antigua, rocín flaco y galgo corredor." Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *El ingenioso hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, Edición Conmemorativa IV Centenario (Barcelona: Alberto Blecua, 2016), 25.

[29] William Egginton, *The Man Who Invented Fiction: How Cervantes Ushered in the Modern World* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Carlos Fuentes, "Cervantes, or the Critique of Reading," in *Myself with Others: Selected Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988), 49–71.

Don Quijote de la Mancha is more than an amusing story (although it certainly is that). There are lessons to be learned as we follow the quest of this knight-errant and his squire, Sancho Panza. Puerto Rican Old Testament scholar Samuel Pagán argues that the ideals and courage of its protagonist—"un tólogo" (a theologian), declares Sancho![30]—live on today in those who dream of and work for a better world on behalf of the vulnerable.[31] *Don Quijote*, Pagán says, offers ongoing theological and missional implications. I would add that its literary features are crucial for this task: the vivid scenes and descriptions, the lively characterizations, the beautiful rhythm of its Spanish diction, and the humor and sadness of the ridiculous. All of these are integral to this work effectively communicating an alternative view of the world that questions the one that its readers inhabit.

My second example comes from the outstanding English novelist of the nineteenth century, Charles Dickens (1812–70). His works are an extraordinary commentary on Victorian England, especially the sprawling city of London that at that time was exploding demographically and was experiencing the crushing poverty born of the Industrial Revolution. Dickens's novels (like his essays and speeches) are sharp, ironic, and occasionally comic depictions of the idiosyncrasies, violence, and loneliness of that context. His work was designed to entertain, but it is biting social exposé as well. In fact, throughout his career, much of Dickens's energy was dedicated to various social causes.[32]

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[30] Cervantes Saavedra, *El ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha*, 615. Proper Spanish would be "teólogo," but the mispronounced "tólogo" reflects Sancho's educational and cultural level.

[31] Samuel Pagán, *Yo sé quién soy: Don Quijote para visionarios en el siglo 21* (Miami: Patmos, 2008).

[32] This is a huge area of Dickens research. Note discussions and bibliographies, e.g., in Paul Schlicke, ed., *Oxford Reader's Companion to Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Judith Flanders, *The Victorian City: Everyday Life in Dickens' London* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2012).

Dickens's attention to detail was phenomenal. He itemized every aspect of each nook and cranny of urban and rural settings, the myriad sights and sounds of familial and public events, and the intricate particulars of his characters' countenances and clothing, even reproducing the vocabulary and accents of different social strata and parts of the country. These descriptions often are hyperbolic in their abnormalities, and Dickens's characters can be binary in an exaggerated sort of way. Seldom do readers question who is good and who is evil; the emotional reaction that Dickens seeks to engender is predictable. These colorful characters are brought to life with consummate literary skill and serve as caricatures of basic ethical types, especially those of low morals. Morality is always on display, unavoidably involving the heart and moral fiber of his readers. One biographer says that Dickens "was one of the greatest artists who ever chose to write in the English language."[33] But his was style with a purpose.

To illustrate these features I choose not one of his novels but a brief work that is well known in the English-speaking world: *A Christmas Carol*. Published in 1843 and the first of his five short Christmas books, *A Christmas Carol* would come to play an important part in the revival of the celebration of Christmas in mid-nineteenth-century England, and it eventually became a cultural mainstay of the holiday season. The mention of Scrooge (now a moniker for a greedy person), Tiny Tim, the Cratchit family, and the three ghosts of Christmas brings nods of ready recognition. What is rarely appreciated, however, is that this story is, in some measure, autobiographical. Scrooge's sister is "little Fan"; Dickens's older sister was Fanny. Some of the portrayal of Scrooge's unhappy childhood mirrors Dickens's own. The Cratchits live in Camden Town, the same area that Dickens did for a time in his boyhood. More relevant for our purposes, *A Christmas Carol* is "an attack on the very conditions of the time"[34]—specifically, the callousness of the comfortable, the financial vulnerability of the underemployed working class, and the misery of poor children. The impact of a report of the Children's Employment Commission and Dickens's recent visit to what was then called a "Ragged School" explains the appearance of the two children Ignorance and Want with the Ghost of Christmas Present. In this story, Dickens lionizes the compassionate and charitable heart (in the reformation of Scrooge), which for Dickens represents the essence of the Christian faith.[35] The social quandaries of a few individuals and their resolution through the efforts of a benevolent benefactor are constant themes in his novels.

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[33] A. N. Wilson, *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 41.

As in the case of *Don Quijote*, *A Christmas Carol* can be enjoyed for its plot and for its amazing literary qualities. This, though, would be a diminished appreciation that misses the passion that drives the aesthetics and its formative potential in both works. Although from different contexts, *Don Quijote* and *A Christmas Carol* demonstrate the enduring influence of well-crafted literature, of what some call "classical" texts.[36] The latent power of such literature has been examined extensively in literary theory.[37]

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[34] Peter Ackroyd, *Introduction to Dickens* (New York: Ballentine, 1991), 93.

[35] The nature of Dickens's Christian faith is debated. For positive assessments, see Gary L. Colledge, *God and Charles Dickens: Recovering the Christian Voice of a Classic Author* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2012); Gina Dalfonzo, ed., *The Gospel in Dickens: Selections from His Works* (Walden, NY: Plough, 2020); Christine A. Colón, "Finding Hope in the 'Radical Ordinary': Charles Dickens' Perspectives on Christianity in *Bleak House* and *Little Dorritt*," *Literature Interpretation Theory* 32 (2021): 24–40.

[36] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 253–58 (cf. 258–74).

[37] Note titles such as Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Martha Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Boston: Beacon, 1995). Of course, the recognition of literature's power is not limited to the English language. For reflections on Latin American literature, see, e.g., Fuentes, *Myself with Others*; Roberto González Echevarría, *The Voice of the Masters: Writing and Authority in Modern*

One author whom I have found to be helpful in this regard is Robert Coles, a medical doctor and emeritus professor at Harvard Medical School. For many years he taught a course called Literature of Social Reflection.[38] Coles explains how he used novels, short stories, and poetry to provoke moral sensitivity and empathy in students. In his books Coles takes his readers through that same kind of exercise with selected texts. These literary works portray ethical dilemmas of various kinds, the life of the disenfranchised, the travails of marginalized minorities, and more. He communicates that in reading, one is given the opportunity to respond to the moral imperatives that surface through the characters, plots, and verse. The worlds represented within these texts correspond at various levels to our own and can expand our horizons beyond the boundaries of our personal experience. Through vicarious continuities (and dissonance), they serve to disclose dimensions of human life heretofore unknown to the reader. This literature may expose ignorance and prejudices toward the Other from whom we are distant (by circumstance or by choice), that Other whom we do not see or may disdain in the internal mix of our fears, arrogance, and self-righteousness.

This intersection between literary works and readers does not occur only at a personal level. Because we are social creatures, literary works also can raise awareness and questions about aspects of the social imaginaries in which we are embedded, those systemic constructions of reality that we take as givens.[39] As these works draw us into their worlds, we are

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Latin American Literature (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985); Ariel Dorfman, *Some Write to the Future: Essays on Contemporary Latin Fiction*, trans. George Shivers with the author (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

[38] Robert Coles, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989); Coles, *Handing One Another Along: Literature and Social Reflection*, ed. Trevor Hall and Vicki Kennedy (New York: Random House, 2010).

[39] For social imaginaries, see Paul Ricoeur, "Imagination in Discourse and Action," in *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, vol. 2, trans. Kathleen

presented complex visions of the good life and of evil, and in the process of reading, we make (and learn to make) moral judgments about all sorts of things. Robert Alter is worth quoting here in full:

> The claim that I am making is a fairly modest one, which it seems to me is variously and abundantly confirmed by the evidence of five millennia or more of cultural artifacts: not that there is an immutable human nature but that there are certain lines of persistence that cross over from one era and from one culture to another. Much about the way we perceive ourselves and the world manifestly changes as society, language, ideology, and technology change; but we also continue to share much as creatures born of woman, begotten by man, raised with siblings, endowed with certain appetites, conscious of our own mortality, confronting nature from various locations in our culture. . . . The characters and life situations of the narratives of different eras speak to us not because they reflect a knowledge which never changes but because they express a set of enigmas with which we continue to wrestle.[40]

Said another way, the realist novel, poetry, and other genres have referential, or mimetic, power. Through reading, our understanding of the nature and meaning of life encounters diverse construals of human realities, some of which expose dimensions of personal, sociopolitical, economic, and religious life that have been unexamined or underexplored and that may need to be challenged and reoriented. Of course, this influence can be for good or for ill, so readers must mature; that is, they need to become better, more careful readers (What is it that I am reading? How is it impacting me?) and to grow in discernment

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Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 181–87; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

[40] Robert Alter, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Ideological Age* (New York: Touchstone, 1989), 75–76.

and wisdom in the engagements of the literary imagination. "It is not enough to read widely," says Karen Swallow Prior. "One must also read well. One must read virtuously."[41] What makes for good reading and astute readers is a matter of dispute, but ideally, reading can be a school for the mind and heart—for our humanity.[42]

The Prophetic Imagination

The significance of the imagination, understood as the vision through which literature shapes how we understand and structure our world, has been explored by several theologians, most prominently perhaps by Garrett Green.

In *Imagining Theology*,[43] Green's primary foil is the sort of scientific mindset and worldview whose exclusivist explanation of the world dismisses the existence of God and the metaphysical claims of religion as incompatible with verifiable natural phenomena. To counter this perspective, which is actually a competing metaphysics, Green argues that the Christian faith embodies a distinctive framework for comprehending reality that spawns a different way of life. Ideally, Christians are shaped and oriented by the unique imaginative understanding of the world offered in the biblical text. They should embrace this lens from among the siren calls of other explanations that vie for our souls. To opt for one of the other options, Green says, means "choosing the wrong paradigm—of misimagining the world. The audacious claim of Christians is that the biblical writers rightly imagined the world, including its essential relation to God. . . . Christians live out that proof . . . by faithful imagination—that is, by living in the conviction that the world envisioned in the Bible is the real world."[44] The Christian imagination ultimately should be rooted, he says, in the Bible's "imaginative integrity, the power of its images, poetry, narratives, myth, metaphor, and hyperbole."[45] In other words, as in the cases of *Don Quijote* and *A Christmas Carol*, the Christian imagination is shaped by a text—specifically, the Scripture. Texts can impact our orientation to life, but, as *Scripture*, the Bible's work on Christian readers carries more weight and requires special attention. This book will concentrate on a slice of the Old Testament canon, the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Micah.

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[41] Karen Swallow Prior, *On Reading Well: Finding the Good Life through Great Books* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2018), 15.

[42] In addition to the works already cited, see (though with different points of view) Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Scholes, *The Crafty Reader* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001); Alan Jacobs, *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[43] Garrett Green, *Imagining Theology: Encounters with God in Scripture, Interpretation, and Aesthetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020).

Discussion of the literary imagination and the responsible reading of prophetic texts must begin with Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. His book *The Prophetic Imagination* (published in 1978), as well as many of his publications since then, provides the groundwork for what follows. In that pioneering study, Brueggemann says, "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."[46] This is "dangerous work," he says, "because it requires an epistemological break with the totalizing assumed world of dominant imagination,"[47] that world of unbridled individualistic consumption, imperial economic ambition, and destructive national security that is assumed to be normal and worthy of unquestioned allegiance.

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[44] Green, *Imagining Theology*, 38.

[45] Green, *Imagining Theology*, 71.

[46] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th anniv. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 3 (emphasis omitted); cf. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 622–49. Note Ellen Davis's components of the "prophetic perspective" of "prophetic interpreters" in *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry*, Int (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014), 6–20.

[47] Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 39.

Brueggemann is, if anything, an impressive wordsmith, and the language he uses in these quotes speaks to the lively yet formidable challenge of prophetic texts. The goal was (and is) to challenge the people of God to reenvision their context and consequently reformulate their sociopolitical and economic attitudes and relationships. He calls the two central components of this mission "prophetic criticizing" and "prophetic energizing."

Prophetic criticizing requires confronting a culture's reigning, assumed narrative about what the world is and will be—what he calls the "royal consciousness"—along with the coopted religious apparatus and theology that legitimate and celebrate it.[48] This critical function articulates the pain and fears of that reality's inequalities and works to persuade its audience (and readers) to free themselves of this dominant construal and visualize a different way of living in their world. The prophetic denunciation signals divine judgment on the status quo. This effort is fundamentally theological and necessarily literary—that is, this literature utilizes multiple images and a vigorous lexicon to engage those who hear (and read) these words. Unavoidably, this contrarian stance generates opposition from the sectors of society threatened by the prophetic message. In other words, communicating that message triggers an epistemological clash over how to envision the world, God's people, and God himself. Unsurprisingly, some prophets paid a steep price for their commission as divine spokespersons.

The second task, "prophetic energizing," entails offering hope of new possibilities beyond judgment, of a world no longer held in the grip of dehumanizing systems. In the Old

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[48] Although I am appreciative of Brueggemann's paradigm, I concur with others who disagree with his overly negative portrayal of the "royal consciousness" and his strong suspicions of Zion theology.

Testament prophets, this hope includes the expectation of a righteous king instead of a rebellious monarch, a just social life instead of corruption and exploitation, the peaceful rebuilding of ruined cities instead of incessant war, and abundant food and drink instead of want. Restoration to the land and a renewed social reality under God will follow the disassembling of the world as the people know it. Although concrete in its descriptions, this prophetic hope does not name that future redeemer or indicate when that new beginning will arrive, but it does make clear that the oppressive present and the imminent judgment are God's *penultimate* word—there is life beyond calamity. The prophetic imagination can carry the people of God through sorrow to the joy of a different tomorrow; it can help move them from lament to doxology.

How does the text speak beyond its own setting to involve readers today? The relocation of this textual world, as it were, into that of its readers is accomplished literarily and theologically. At least two literary features allow the text to bridge time and place. First, the targets of prophetic invective often are presented in vague terms. As we will see in the next chapter, those who harm the vulnerable or who make unwise political decisions often are not identified by name. They are an undefined "they" or unspecified men, women, or social groups or offices (such as elders, advisers, or priests). Sometimes they appear in woe oracles in the form of participles depicting certain actions ("woe to those who oppress"). It is what they *do*, not their explicit identity, that stands out. This archetypal nature of prophetic texts allows later audiences, like us, to associate individuals, groups, and systems from our own experience with what appears there. The indeterminacy of prophetic texts explains how they live on: the past is a paradigm for the present. A second literary feature that engages the reader is the direct address to readers with second-person plural verbs and pronouns. The constant use of *you* and *your* implicates them in the textual discourse. The text is speaking to *us*—*now*.

The reader is also drawn into the text theologically, and this in several ways. For example, our three prophetic books consistently present themselves as visions and as messages from God. This is communicated in the superscriptions (Amos 1:1; Isa. 1:1; Mic. 1:1), in the call narratives (Isa. 6; Amos 7:10–17), and by speech formulas such as "Thus says Yahweh" and "a saying of Yahweh." One must listen to what is being said because it comes from God. In addition, ancient Israel and Judah repeatedly are referred to as "my people." If readers claim to be members of the people of God, then this word is also for them.

Ultimately, the theological substratum of our three books is making a theological claim as to *what they are* (the very word of God) and a theo-ethical claim in *what they demand*. Readers who identify the God of Israel as their God must respond to this address. Responding to the text as a prophetic voice becomes an act of faithful obedience. This listening or reading must be *receptive* and *responsible*—responsible to God, to the community of faith, and to the context in which that community resides.

These texts aim to clarify what our social constructs are truly like, condemn the sins that permeate all of human reality, and call the people of God to repentance in every sphere of life. Prophetic books reprimand and warn, announcing deserved judgment while also offering a glimpse of another tomorrow for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Then and now, *receptivity* and *responsibility* are the necessary responses to these divine words. Prophetic texts do not countenance neutrality or detachment as options. Marginalized voices, from various liberation theologies to minority readings and social movements like those cited earlier in this chapter, rightly advocate for committed, situated readings and voice frustration at interpretations that sterilize prophetic demands.[49]

This textual appeal may challenge the sectors of the Christian church in which, to quote Brent Strawn's important study *The Old Testament Is Dying*, "the Old Testament has ceased to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature."[50] Using the creative theoretical framework of linguistics, he compares the state of biblical literacy and belief to a language system. Strawn explains that language determines in large measure the perception and construction of social reality. If Christians are not well versed in the language system that is the Old Testament and also doubt the legitimacy of that language's world, then the Old Testament will be silenced. He believes that currently we are witnessing the pidginization of biblical language (and biblical literacy) on the way to its creolization, which would mean the creation of a hybrid language and faith different from the original because of other influences. This change is accompanied by the loss of "native speakers" who know and live out that language. The result is the growing marginalization of the Old Testament. As the Old Testament and its perspective on reality are minimized in such churches, acquaintance with that divine word diminishes as well. What will happen to the Old Testament, he argues, will be akin to that pidginization and creolization process, in which the original language world eventually is ignored and replaced by something quite different. Even groups that hold to a more traditional view of Scripture are becoming increasingly biblically illiterate and often selectively choose texts in accord with ideologies based on other grounds. In these circles, biting prophetic texts can be ignored and the power of their eschatological passages missed.

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[49] From a Latino/a perspective, see M. Daniel Carroll R., "Latino/Latina Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture and Its Interpretation: An Ecumenical, Global Introduction to the Bible*, ed. M. Gorman (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 311–23; see a survey of approaches in Fernando F. Segovia, "Introduction: Approaching Latino/a Biblical Criticism; A Trajectory of Visions and Missions," in *Latino/a Biblical Hermeneutics: Problematics, Objectives, Strategies*, ed. Francisco Lozada Jr. and Fernando F. Segovia, Society of Biblical Literature Semeia Studies 68 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), 1–39; and the more accessible Justo L. González, *Santa Biblia: The Bible through Hispanic Eyes* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996). For African American approaches, see chap. 3, n. 27 below. There also are examples of Asian American, feminist, and other perspectives that could be listed.

[50] Brent A. Strawn, *The Old Testament Is Dying: A Diagnosis and Recommended Treatment*, Theological Explorations for the Church Catholic (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 5.

If these biblical texts are not read carefully in order to receive what they offer, and if this lack of attention is coupled with a refusal to change one's political convictions or with suspicion about whether these texts are trustworthy (because they do not depict Yahweh as one thinks God should be), the prophetic voice can be reduced to a secular agenda in religious garb. In the end, that "prophetic word" will become superfluous, without substance beyond the vocabulary of a particular social agenda. This potential danger echoes the recent jeremiad (i.e., passionate prophetic indictment and lament)[51] in the history of American politics by Catholic legal scholar Cathleen Kaveny.[52] She demonstrates that today, with the loss of shared theological substance and vision, religious discourse in the public square that postures itself as prophetic has degenerated into vicious, self-righteous diatribe with no patience for humble and constructive civility and exchange.

Conclusion

The aspiration of this volume is to help readers discover a relevant prophetic voice, one that is faithful to the biblical text and that arises from, for, and with our contexts to address contemporary matters. The approach of the prophetic imagination is a fruitful way to read these prophetic books as a uniquely authoritative word for the Christian and the church today. As literature, these texts must be appreciated literarily because, simply put, the prophetic voice is found in their details.

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[51] The term *jeremiad* refers to actions and emotions akin to the prophet Jeremiah.

[52] Cathleen Kaveny, *Prophecy without Contempt: Religious Discourse in the Public Square* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

Prophetic criticizing and energizing, to use Brueggemann's terms, nicely summarize the essence of what we will explore in Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. Chapter 2 tackles the first component: prophetic critique.