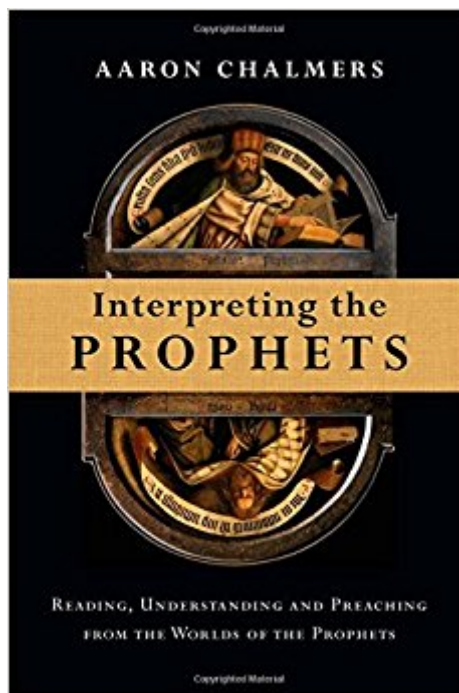




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# Interpreting The Prophets: Reading, Understanding And Preaching From The Worlds Of The Prophets



## Synopsis

The prophetic books are some of the most captivating and fascinating texts of the Old Testament, but they are also some of the most misunderstood. Interpreting the Prophets equips the reader with the knowledge and skills they need to interpret the Prophets in a faithful and accurate fashion. Beginning with the nature of the prophetic role and prophetic books in Israel, Old Testament scholar Aaron Chalmers leads the reader through the various "worlds" of Israel's prophets—historical, social, theological and rhetorical—providing the basic contextual and background information needed both for sound and sensible exegesis, and for sensitive interpretation and application for today. He concludes with a helpful chapter giving guidelines for preaching from the Prophets—including advice on choosing the texts, making appropriate analogies, and the potential problems and common pitfalls to avoid.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"[T]he work is also accessible and clearly organized, demonstrating the author's rich understanding of the 'worlds' of the prophetic figures of ancient Israel and the peculiarities of the prophetic/apocalyptic genres. He is especially effective when warning contemporary readers, especially those preparing to preach, not to misread, overread, or abuse the words and messages of the ancient texts. Chalmers retains his faith perspective while maintaining deep respect for his subjects. An intelligent approach to an important component of Hebrew scriptures for the Christian reader, especially the seminarian or pastor." (Graham Christian, Library Journal, May 15, 2015)"In

this introduction to interpreting the Prophets, Aaron Chalmers helpfully majors on showing the way, rather than merely describing content. In exploring several prophetic 'worlds', the historical, the theological and the rhetorical, he negotiates with clarity some of the issues that students new to the prophets find perplexing. Always alive to pitfalls, he provides resources for a solid grounding in understanding and using this section of the Bible, culminating in intelligent guidance for preachers. An excellent resource for students and preachers alike." (Gordon McConville, professor of Old Testament theology, University of Gloucestershire)"Chalmers orients Christian readers to Old Testament prophecy, providing insights into the role of prophets and the books that arose from their ministry, as well as strategies for reading and preaching the prophetic collection. While engaging the best in recent scholarship, this book is accessible to the uninitiated. Interpreting the Prophets is a helpful resource for those who want to hear the breadth and depth of the message of the prophets." (Mark J. Boda, professor of Old Testament, McMaster Divinity College; professor, faculty of theology, McMaster University)"I'm very excited about the potential of this book to help people understand the Old Testament Prophets. The explanation of prophecy's distinctive genre, historical setting, rhetoric, theology and significance is engaging, informed and insightful. If the Prophets seem confusing and irrelevant to certain readers, or primarily about contemporary events in the Middle East to others— and if the church wants a user-friendly corrective to the misunderstanding— this is it. Every pastor and teacher seeking to nourish the church through messages from the prophets needs to drink deeply from Chalmers's well. And every professor hoping students will learn to interpret the Prophets correctly ought to assign this book. (Further, if scholars want a model for writing interpretive guides for other biblical genres— this is it.) Misinterpretations of prophecy have been a stumbling block to Christian maturity and to unity in the body of Christ. I hope and pray that this book will result in the trees of the field clapping their hands." (D. Brent Sandy, author of *Plowshares and Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic*)"Of the numerous recent works on this subject, this is among the best. All pastors, teachers, and others who are called upon to preach the Prophets should obtain and make regular use of this superb guide book." (Eugene H. Merrill, *Themelios*, August 2016)"Taken as a whole, Interpreting the Prophets is like a guided tour through the strange and often misunderstood world of Old Testament prophecy. The itinerary is clear (the detailed table of contents proves the book's meticulous arrangement!) and Chalmers skillfully directs readers to the most significant elements of his subject while explaining their significance in a way that is both informed and understandable. Citations of relevant Scripture abound, and each chapter ends with practical guidelines for interpretation, warnings against potential interpretive faux pas, and suggestions for

further study. . . . The journey through Interpreting the Prophets is a worthy one. Students will benefit from the foundational and introductory nature of the book while pastors will be glad to have such a concise and clearly laid out reference work at hand." (Alex Gowler, Books at a Glance, June 30, 2015)"The whole is a student-friendly guide that I will gladly adopt forthwith as recommended reading to accompany a course on the prophets. . . . Whereas many guides seem to imagine leisurely classes that wend their canonical way through text after text, the reality of theological education today is that Chalmer's six chapters will probably match up to the full extent of most such courses. The book would also be an admirable refresher for those whose studies were longer ago." (Richard S. Briggs, Theology Journal, 118(4))"Chalmers has captured the essentials for students, clergy and lay persons interested in studying the biblical prophets. His short handbook provides helpful insights on how to read, interpret and place in context these prophetic writings. Particularly useful are his numerous insets asking the reader to 'go deeper' and 'consider this' as they prepare to read the prophetic writings critically as a coherent body of literature and preach on the historical, social and theological aspects of the material. While suggesting a pathway to a more effective use of the prophets, he sounds the necessary cautions and suggests how to avoid pitfalls that can lead to superficial or incorrect readings." (Victor H. Matthews, dean of the college of humanities and public affairs, Missouri State University)"Readers will find in this compact volume a judicious introduction to the prophets of the Old Testament. The inclusion of compositional, historical, rhetorical and theological perspectives will serve well to provide an up-to-date and easily understood survey of the most relevant material. The hermeneutical tips allow easy access to prophetic literature, which is sometimes considered obscure and is often misunderstood or distorted, and a section on preaching the prophets completes the circle. This is therefore a welcome addition to the field that I plan to put to frequent use." (John H. Walton, professor of Old Testament, Wheaton College)"Happy are the students who take Aaron Chalmers's classes! He has assimilated a vast and complex range of materials from the Old Testament and its world, and from the scholarly world, and out of them has formulated a coherent and intelligible account of the Prophets for his readers. And it all serves a passion to help people read the Prophets for themselves." (John Goldingay, David Allan Hubbard Professor of Old Testament School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary)

Aaron Chalmers (PhD, Flinders University) is head of the School of Ministry, Theology and Culture at Tabor Adelaide, a multid denominational, evangelical college located in Adelaide, Australia. He teaches in the field of Old Testament and hermeneutics and is passionate about helping Christians

to engage with the Hebrew Scriptures. He is the author of *Exploring the Religion of Ancient Israel: Prophet, Priest, Sage and People* and is a member of the international Society of Biblical Literature. He is married with four children and currently attends Blackwood Church of Christ.

This book has given me fresh eyes for reading and interpreting the prophets. Too often the prophetic books of the Bible are turned into something they were never intended to be because people don't have the right tools. Chalmers does a good job of avoiding the hokey weirdness.

I read this book as a requirement for a course that I had taken in seminary. The content is well structured as Chalmers does a good job of taking the complexity out of understanding the "Prophets."

Aaron Chalmers is head of the School of Ministry, Theology and Culture at Tabor Adelaide and wrote *Exploring the Religion of Ancient Israel for Intervarsity* (Exploring Topics in Christianity Series (2012)). In this new work on the prophets, he introduces students to the "world of the prophets." In chapter 1 Chalmers explains defines biblical "prophet" in contrast to modern definitions of prophecy. I too have found my students think biblical prophecy is more or less like Harry Potter meets Left Behind. They seem a bit surprised that my Old Testament Prophets course starts with a lengthy section of social ethics and covenant faithfulness! Chalmers also offers a sketch of how a prophetic book is formed, moving from oral presentation to a written document or collection of documents. He does not shy away from describing some of the prophetic books the results of an editorial process and briefly discusses the "locus of inspiration," indicating that God's hand is at work in the whole process, whatever that process might be. He concludes "at the end of the day there is still much we do not know about the composition of the prophetic books," but this is not really a problem because Chalmers is interested in exegeting the final form of the text (31). In chapter two Chalmers describes "The Historical World of the Prophets." The first half of the chapter is a basic sketch of Old Testament history from the eighth century through the return from exile. He sets each prophet into the history, although he discusses the historical context of Jonah and Daniel in a sidebar, suggesting the "historical context" is not necessarily the same as the final form of the literary works bearing their names. He presents Second Isaiah in a separate historical context than Isaiah 1-39 and only deals with the division of the book briefly in a footnote.

He dates Joel to the post-exilic period as well as Trito-Isaiah (if its presence is accepted, 60). This chapter includes a short primer on exegeting the Prophets, warning against substituting historical research for exegesis and overgeneralizing about ancient cultures (not all ancient people thought exactly alike!) Chapter 3 is devoted to "The Theological World of the Prophets." Here Chalmers primarily discusses two mountains, Sinai and Zion. Sinai represents the Lord's covenant with his people Israel and Zion represents the Lord's covenant with David. The first half of the chapter describes the Covenant as it was given on Sinai and shows how this covenant resonates through the prophetic literature. With respect to David and Zion, Chalmers argues the Lord rules through the Davidic kings as a regent, ruling from Zion. This Zion theology becomes the basis of messianic expectations after 586 B.C. Although Chalmers does recognize this development, it is perhaps beyond the scope of his book to tease out those developments in much detail. In "The Rhetorical World of the Prophets" (Chapter 4) Chalmers discusses the unique rhetorical features of the prophets, beginning with the structure of prophetic speech. Included in this chapter is a survey of "prophetic forms" (judgment, salvation, disputation, lawsuit, vision report and action report). The chapter includes some introduction to parallelism as a feature of Hebrew Poetry, but more important for Chalmers is the function of prophetic imagery. Since these features are "easy to over-exegete" (113), Chalmers suggests we read imagery with the context of the prophetic book: what is the point the prophet was making with a metaphor or simile "From Prophecy to Apocalyptic" (chapter 5) focuses on this particular form of prophetic speech found in Daniel, Zechariah and other parts of the later Old Testament. Chalmers describes apocalyptic as a visionary mode of revelation often mediated through a third person (an angel, for example), set in a narrative framework. These texts tend to focus on the "end of history: in order to encourage the reader during a time of crisis. Using an impressionistic painting by Claude Monet as an example, Chalmers urges would-be interpreters of Apocalyptic to focus on the "big picture" not the details. With respect to the "big picture," we can be fairly confident of the meaning of apocalyptic, but less certain when examining the details. This is not far from Brent Sandy's *Plowshares to Pruning Hooks*, another IVP book Chalmers cites several times. Perhaps the most interesting chapter is the last, "Guidelines for Preaching from the Prophets." Along with the conclusions to several chapters, this guide to preaching these difficult books will be welcomed by pastors struggling with presenting the prophets

to their congregations. Despite observing the prophets receive “minimal air time” in the three-year ecumenical lectionary (147), Chalmers suggests it is not necessarily wise to preach through a prophetic book using the “verse-by-verse” method some expository preachers prefer. It is in fact difficult to develop appropriate analogies for application since the books themselves are focused on their own theological agenda. As a potential avenue of application, Chalmers suggests observing the witness of the New Testament and the fulfillment of the prophets in the person and work of Jesus, although he warns against leaning too heavily on the “promise fulfillment” method found in popular preaching (158). With respect to “future fulfillment,” Chalmers devotes several pages debunking the widely influential (and very outdated) approach of Hal Lindsey. This over-literal interpretation of prophecy tends to read Ezekiel through the lens of current events in the Middle East and completely miss the rich meaning found in the actual text of the Bible. I wholeheartedly agree with the point of this section, however I do think there are parts of the prophetic books which really do concern a future eschatological restoration of God’s people and a messianic kingdom. This is not to say I would read Ezekiel as referring to the Gulf War, but some of the promises of restoration in Jeremiah or Ezekiel are not fully exhausted in the work of Jesus. Chalmers does not appear to deny this, but it is also not really the focus of his book. The book includes frequent insets and sidebars, illustrations and charts. Some of these are labeled “going deeper” and provide a few lines of extra consideration on some particular aspect of the text. Sidebars labeled “have you considered?” intend to provoke thought or introduce a controversial issue, such as “prophetic plagiarism” (28-9). There are several “archaeological insides” in which texts such as the Cyrus Cylinder and other Mesopotamian parallels appear. Chalmers includes a number of tables offering chronological and historical information. Finally, there are a number of illustrations including maps and line drawings of archaeological items. Each chapter concludes with a “for further reading” section. There are no questions based on the text which could be utilized by a teacher in the classroom that these would not be difficult to add to the text. While all of these various features are valuable, sometimes there are too many on a page. Pages 42-3, for example, contains two photographs with 9 lines caption, two sidebars filling more than half a page, and only 6 lines of actual text. Page 75 is perhaps the worst example since the only actual text appearing on the page is a section heading wedged between a photograph and sidebar. One

“sidebar” runs from page 137 to 139, and the rest of 139 contains a Gustav Dore engraving of Leviathan. The contents of this sidebar is good enough to be a part of the main text, setting it off in a gray box does not help the reader at all. In fact, the readability of the text would be greatly improved if the sidebars were more balanced, or the photographs were all gathered to the center of the book. I understand the motivation for placing an illustration near the text it pertains to, but this editorial decision distracts from the overall presentation. It is not a criticism of Chalmers as the author of an otherwise excellent text; an editor ought to have caught some of these issues. Conclusion. Like Chalmers, I have struggled to find a good introductory textbook on the prophets. Since the prophetic books are such a large section of the Hebrew Bible, most introductions try to cover all the books in individual chapters and miss the overall themes of the collection. This book is rich in illustrations of prophetic language from other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, something often missing from basic introductions to the prophets.

Chalmers’s approach is refreshing. By focusing on the historical, theological and rhetorical worlds of the prophets he provides the framework for reading the prophets intelligently. NB: Thanks to Intervarsity Press for kindly providing me with a review copy of this book. This did not influence my thoughts regarding the work.

Aaron Chalmers’s *Interpreting the Prophets* is an introduction to, well, interpreting the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. He notes that readers are often turned off of the prophets for a number of reasons, whether it is the difficulty of these writings or their seeming irrelevancy for our time. Against these reasons, he argues for and puts forward a relevant and practical guide to reading the Old Testament prophets and coming to a deeper understanding of God’s Word. The book is laid across 6 chapters, each with a focus on a central aspect of interpreting and applying biblical prophecy. These are: (1) What is a prophet and what is a prophetic book?; (2) The historical world of the prophets; (3) The theological world of the prophets; (4) The rhetorical world of the prophets; (5) From prophecy to apocalyptic; and (6) Guidelines for preaching from the prophets. There are many insights which will be valuable for both those wishing to engage with the prophets as laity and those interested in drawing out deep exegetical insights from the text. Chalmers’s work serves as a guide for reading without telling readers exactly what various passages are supposed to mean. It is the kind of text that encourages readers to move to the Word and explore it for themselves, laying a solid foundation for interpretation beforehand. One example of the insights Chalmers provides is his critique of those who would see the prophetic literature as speaking primarily to our time. He notes that this approach of trying to



match up biblical prophecies one-to-one with newspaper headlines is mistaken for a number of reasons, including making the texts largely irrelevant to its contemporary hearers. Throughout the book, there are a number of insets that highlight various additional details, like the Ancient Near Eastern background of the text or specific views about things like the dating of a book. Interpreting the Prophets would best serve as an introductory text for those interested in learning more about and reading the prophetic literature of the Old Testament. It comes recommended. The Good+Excellent insets provide background information into the world of the Bible+Incisive critique of some popular approaches to reading the prophets+Practical advice for readers of the Scripture, pastors, and professionals alike The Bad-Very brief on several important points Disclaimer: I was provided with a review copy of the book by InterVarsity Press. I was not required to provide any specific kind of feedback whatsoever, nor was the publisher involved in this review in any way. Source Aaron Chalmers, *Interpreting the Prophets* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015). SDG.

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