

Aaron Chalmers. *Interpreting the Prophets: Reading, Understanding and Preaching from the Worlds of the Prophets*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 173 pages. \$20.

Aaron Chalmers is a biblical scholar determined to help preachers interpret the prophetic books with depth integrity. To accomplish his goal he organizes the text into logical, easy-to-understand chapters that provide readers with knowledge that will help them in their task. Chalmers begins the book by comparing and contrasting definitions of prophets in our contemporary contexts with definitions of prophets in the biblical world. By making this distinction, he sets the tone for the rest of the work. Throughout the book he continually highlights the importance of context for all biblical interpretation but especially for the unique compositions known as prophetic books. For our world, the word prophet is used to designate someone who predicts the future, is a social reformer, or is a herald. In the world of the Hebrew Bible, prophets were: members of the divine council (place filled with the presence of God and inhabited by supernatural creatures), called by God, communicators of the word of God, intercessors on behalf of the people, and sentinels. Having defined “prophet,” he then moves in the second chapter to help readers understand the complexities of the biblical world of the prophets. For example, he explains why the practice of deportation was used by both the Assyrians and the Babylonians: It separated the conquered people from their homelands, provided ready-made labor forces for the conquerors as they built new cities and rebuilt ruined ones, replenished armies that may have suffered losses during the war, and provided the empire with skilled laborers such as farmers to help cultivate undeveloped regions of their territories. He provides historical time lines of the rise and reign of various kings of the Northern and Southern kingdoms that parallel time lines of the rise and fall of the empires that conquered or otherwise impacted them. He provides archaeological insights such as the centrality and significance of the masonry construction of Hezekiah’s altar at Beer-sheba.

In the third chapter Chalmers highlights the significance of Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion for understanding the theology of the prophets. It was at Sinai that God began God’s work and relationship with the people of Israel. The Covenant is made up of stipulations, blessings, and curses that serve as the foundation of the relationship between the people and Yahweh. It is the stipulations, blessings, and curses of the Covenant to which the prophets are repeatedly referring when they proclaim God’s words to the people. Zion theology includes beliefs about Jerusalem and the Temple, Yahweh, and David and the Davidic dynasty. In chapter four, Chalmers highlights the rhetorical structures, rhetorical devices, and strategies used in the prophetic books. For example, the writer includes three essential elements of the prophecy of judgment: indictment (the reason for the situation/problem that demands judgment); message speech (this will often begin with “thus says the Lord” to indicate divine origins); and announcement of judgment (details of the judgment forthcoming). The prophetic vision reports are another device that the writers used. They consist of a question-and-answer dialogue between Yahweh and the prophets; the dramatic word vision that depicts a scene in heaven that foretells a future event on earth that the prophet will announce; the revelatory-mystery vision in which an angelic interpreter speaks to the prophet about symbolic imagery the prophets sees. Rhetorical devices Chalmers features include parallelism, metaphor, similes, and hyperbole.

In the fifth chapter he distinguishes between apocalyptic and prophetic. Prophetic literature is concerned about the work of God within history. Apocalyptic literature is focused on the climactic acts in which God will engage to end history. In the sixth and final chapter, the author provides preachers with guidelines on how to preach the prophetic books. Some of the

advice Chalmers conveys includes: Choose texts carefully so that they communicate the central themes of the books, use analogies that accurately relay similarities between the ancient world and our contemporary time, focus on the theology of the texts so that the message highlights what God is doing, select prophetic messages that best meet the needs of particular congregations, and avoid typological and promise-fulfillment approaches to preaching prophetic texts.

Using this resource, pastors and preachers will be able to preach sermons that address the needs of their congregations. In turn, they will enable their congregants to better understand and appreciate the complex contexts of the prophets and the prophetic texts.

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