

Consensus

Volume 14

Issue 2 *Issues and Concerns in Ethics*

Article 13

11-1-1988

Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets--Their Meaning Then and Now

John H. C. Neeb

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Recommended Citation

Neeb, John H. C. (1988) "Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets--Their Meaning Then and Now," *Consensus*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol14/iss2/13>

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Meet the Prophets: A Beginner's Guide to the Books of the Biblical Prophets—Their Meaning Then and Now

John W. Miller

New York: Paulist Press, 1987

250 pp. U.S. \$11.95

John Miller, director of the Religious Studies Department at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, has been a teacher of the prophets for many years. His intimate acquaintance with the prophets, scholarly contributions, global perspectives and commitment to their messages give him an excellent vantage point from which to write this introduction to the prophetic literature.

Miller clearly outlines the unique purpose for this book in a note to the reader (1). In that most introductions to the prophets concentrate on their messages, Miller sees the need for more help in understanding the prophetic books themselves, their "compositional history," as well as their "unique prophetic personalities." Nor in his opinion is adequate attention paid to the "ongoing relevance" of these books or the "overall shape and thrust of the prophetic movement as a whole." The book more than adequately succeeds in accomplishing this stated purpose. Miller follows through on his promise with a carefully organized scheme of presentation covering "the book," the person behind the book, as well as "the message" and "ongoing relevance" for the prophets selected.

Miller does not treat all the prophetic books in the Hebrew Bible, but without apology selects the "more substantive" prophets for consideration. Included in this category are Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah of Jerusalem (chs. 1-39), Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Second Isaiah (chs. 40-55). Quotations are from the New Jerusalem Bible. There are three sections in the book. The first, of particular value for the novice, deals with the prophetic corpus as a whole, the historical setting of the prophets, a clear definition of the nature of prophecy, and a very useful summary on the nature of prophetic books and how to study them. The second section treats the prophets of the Assyrian period according to the scheme outlined above. The third section continues with the prophets of the Babylonian and Persian periods. There is an appendix of study resources listed including a list of English translations of the prophets with evaluative comments, suggested reference works, general works and commentaries on individual prophets and a general subject index. A series of "questions for review" appears at the end of each chapter.

Several qualities make this book of particular usefulness to our readers. For example, Miller presents the prophets in three movements coinciding with the rise of the superpowers, Assyria (last half of the eighth century), Babylon (last half of the seventh century), and Persia (last half of the sixth century). Placing the prophetic books in a clearly defined historical

context assists the reader in a more accurate assessment of their message and relevance. (The relating of the prophetic books more directly to the Deuteronomic histories (Joshua-Kings) is a welcome addition.)

The segment on the God of the prophets (25-27) is particularly helpful. The two qualities of "compassion and zeal" are highlighted. The notion of only an angry God in the Old Testament "quick to punish" and the view that Jesus was the first to teach of a loving and compassionate God are countered by a balanced description of the character of Yahweh displayed in the prophets. The central themes of justice (*mishpat*) and uprightness (*tsedekah*) are well defined and illustrated (57-58). Justice in Hebrew has to do with "specific rulings regarding right and wrong" while uprightness has to do with "the attitude that produces the deed."

The concise annotated bibliography provides the beginner with a number of excellent books for further study. In this section Miller also mentions works which have influenced his thinking such as Karl Jaspers who points out that the prophets were part of an "axial age" (240) witnessing a world-wide intellectual awakening and Klaus Koch who approaches the prophets as "thinkers" with a "metahistorical" perspective.

The ongoing relevance for Judaism and Christianity is summarized in a global fashion (235-237). Miller gives a perceptive synthesis seeing in Jesus of Nazareth a leader of the type witnessed in the classical prophets:

What is decisive is not political power, but those qualities that we have come to see marked the lives of the greatest and best of the Hebrew prophets themselves: ability to distinguish right from wrong, intuitive insight into the right way ahead, humility and inspiration from God, courage and the ability to express themselves and give testimony to the truth they have received even to the point of giving one's life. It is leaders like this, we now realize, who are more effective than any others in bringing about that human transformation and knowledge of God on earth without which there can be no lasting peace (236).

The book leaves little to distract from achieving its stated purpose. Occasional typographical errors, Ashurbanipal (21), Aqabah (38), Hellenistic (228), Haggai 2:15-17 (230), detract from an otherwise attractive appearance of the text. A Scripture index may have been useful to the more serious student. Occasionally the reader may disagree with comments in the relevance sections such as the parallel between "revolutionary communism" in our century and eighth century Assyria (63).

This book will be a welcome addition to the pastor's bookshelf, close at hand when prophetic texts appear in the lectionary for preaching. Quick reference to historical context and fresh ideas on relevance will activate the creative juices which spawn effective preaching. Theology students will find this book useful as an entry point into a sometimes difficult body of literature. It is well organized and written in a didactic, conversational style. Informed lay persons will want to have this book as a guide in reading the

prophets. Technical language is kept to a minimum and scholarly debates are clearly explained.

John H.C. Neeb
Waterloo Lutheran Seminary

The Order of the Synoptics
Bernard Orchard and Harold Riley
Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987
294 pp. U.S. \$38.95

Bernard Orchard is a Benedictine monk of the Earling Abbey, London, England, and co-chairman of the International Institute for Renewal of Gospel Studies. Harold Riley is an Anglican priest, now retired from administrative posts in the Church of England. The publisher Mercer University Press in the state of Georgia represents a conservative Protestant press in the United States. I mention this because it is the issue of the priority of the Gospel of Matthew which has brought this group together. Other than that, London and Macon are a long ways apart geographically, culturally and theologically.

While there was a debate about the priority of Matthew in the first two decades of this century, the priority of Mark has been more or less accepted in the synoptic gospel research. However, there has always been some debate about the synoptic problem—William Farmer is one person who had written on the issue—and here again is a book on that subject.

One can clearly find statements in the tradition of the early church which stress the Gospel of Matthew as the oldest of the four gospels, but those sources are not working with the literary issues in the synoptic gospels. In the early church the concern was to harmonize the gospels for the purpose of church unity and doctrine. The modern study of the synoptic problem stresses more literary and historical issues. In *The Order of the Synoptics* it is difficult to see how these historical and literary issues are handled.

The point which is being made is that Matthew wrote his gospel first. Then Luke wrote his next and made some changes, then Mark came along with his gospel as a bridge between Matthew and Luke. Matthew represented the conservative stand of Peter and the primitive Jewish church. Luke represented Paul and the gentile church. In this argument, Mark was the person who tried to keep the two parties together by editing his gospel as a compromise. This was to keep both Matthew and Luke in the canon with Mark in the middle.

This is an interesting thesis, but it uses a theory of Hegel from the nineteenth century to solve an issue in the first century. Hegel's theory