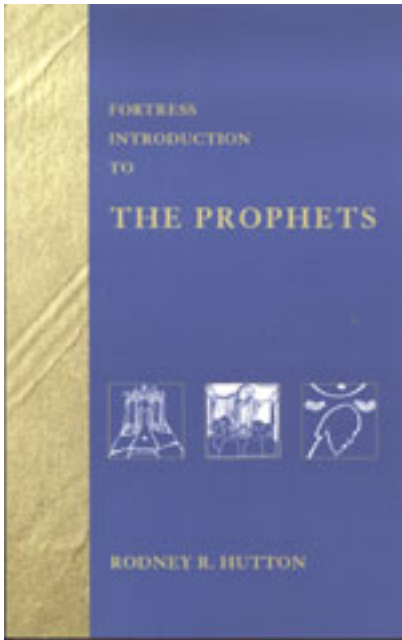


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Hutton, Rodney R.

Fortress Introduction to the Prophets

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In this brief work Rodney Hutton enters the crowded field of recent introductions to Israel's prophets. His audience consists of students beginning scholarly study of the prophets as well as those who wish to "regain a familiarity" with the issues involved in reading the prophets (viii). The success of this volume should, then, be measured against this audience.

Hutton begins with five questions that he readily admits are "fundamentally insoluble" (4): whether the prophetic books bear any witness to the actual phenomenon of prophecy in ancient Israel; the relation of the classical prophets to the preclassical prophets; the question of the origins (and thus, the unique status) of Israelite prophecy; the relation of the prophets to the larger culture; and the theologically significant relation of the prophetic literature to other pieces of the canon, specifically the Deuteronomistic History and the Torah. Continuing this theological concern, Hutton then usefully summarizes Jewish, Christian, and "liberal Protestant" perspectives on prophecy.

Hutton's analysis proceeds chronologically, allowing a chapter per prophet (Isaiah of Jerusalem gets two; Zephaniah, Nahum, and Habakkuk share one). The material here is standard introductory fare, with an emphasis on Christian theological appropriation.

While most of Hutton's claims are frequently encountered, it should be noted that Hutton occasionally branches off from scholarly consensus. He wishes to find hope in Amos's preaching (5:6, 14; 9:11–15), claims that Isa 1–6 provides information on Isaiah's early, rather Amos-like, work, prior to 742 B.C.E., and dates Habakkuk earlier (and with more certainty) than most scholars.

Almost the entire final half of the book is taken up with the prophet Jeremiah. As with Isaiah, Hutton pushes claims for an early ministry for Jeremiah, providing a chapter-length examination of the relationship between Jeremiah and events during the reign of Josiah. Hutton then presents an editorial history of the book, focusing on the roles of Jeremiah, Baruch, and the "scroll of 605." Hutton then delineates a "portrait" of Jeremiah, claiming Jeremiah "identified himself professionally as a prophet" (86).

Hutton's introduction grinds to a sudden halt with the exile. There is hardly any mention, much less extended coverage, of the prophetic works from Ezekiel onward. Hutton remarks in his preface that "one can hope that the gap in attention to the exilic and postexilic texts might soon be remedied" (viii), leaving open the question of why he has left out so much material. It could be that the book, being quite brief, could not include certain aspects. But Hutton manages to devote five pages (61–65) to the history of the Josianic reform. And, as is obvious, Hutton chooses to use Jeremiah as an exemplary prophet and thus deals in great detail with issues from that book, using space that could have been spent on other topics. Perhaps Hutton, despite his disagreement with Wellhausen on some issues (8), has consciously or unconsciously taken up his view (given further life by F. M. Cross) that prophecy only truly existed alongside the monarchy.

Another possible explanation for the book's odd ending point is Hutton's strong focus on the prophets as individuals relating to definite historical contexts, given the difficulty of locating the later prophets historically. There is nothing particularly wrong with this focus on the prophet as individual; it has been a feature of scholarship on the prophets for a long time. The problems in this work arise when Hutton blurs the line between the prophet as a person and the prophet as a textual feature. Granted, it is difficult when speaking of the prophets always to differentiate between the prophets as people and the prophets as characters. But it would be wise, when writing an introduction, to be as clear as possible.

Instead, Hutton shifts referents frequently. Hutton makes "First Isaiah" into both a text and an author, then claims "First Isaiah is often referred to as Isaiah of Jerusalem" (29). Finally, he notes that "it is this Isaiah who appears extensively in the Deuteronomistic History" (30). Clarity demands that a distinction be made between First Isaiah as a text,

Isaiah of Jerusalem as putative author of pieces of that text, Isaiah of Jerusalem as a character in that text, and Isaiah as a character in the Deuteronomistic History. While this sounds complicated, a brief outline of the various positions a “prophet” can occupy in a prophetic text would prepare the student for the complexity of prophetic literature as well as the analysis of prophets as actual persons behind the text. Instead, Hutton introduces the notion of the prophetic books as the products of long editorial processes fairly late in the game, with a standard treatment of the book of Isaiah (which assumes that First and Third Isaiah are to be understood as texts with individual authors [29]). Hutton’s only real grappling with these issues comes with Jeremiah, where he admits a distinction should be made between the prophet as person and as character drawn in the book (92). But if this holds for the book of Jeremiah, it also holds to some degree for all the previous prophetic books.

The central difficulty with this work is its potential utility in teaching. Hutton frequently adopts the position of the prophet as normative, which can make his tone homiletic and his analysis muddy. Amos opposes “ostentatious slathering” of sacrifices on altars, language that goes considerably beyond Amos. Hutton takes Jeremiah’s side in his conflict with Hananiah, evacuating it of most of its intensity, given that (for Hutton) Hananiah, while not a “clear heretic,” simply cannot be right about God, being something of a psychological case of irrational optimism (97). Of course, those people watching the debate between Jeremiah and Hananiah may not have had a predisposed loyalty to Jeremiah and his theology; the result was very much in doubt. In any case, students, especially those in the implied Christian readership of this text (45), do not need a great deal of help identifying with the prophet. Rather, they need a passionate but critical approach to the texts.

The need for critical consciousness is nowhere clearer than in Hutton’s treatment of the “marriage metaphor” in Hosea. Hutton identifies with Hosea, seeing in Gomer/Israel a sexual addiction to other lovers/other gods. Thus Hos 2:14–23 becomes for Hutton “one of the most beautiful poetic passages in Scripture,” since it reveals the grace of God needed to break this addiction. (27) In fact, Hutton appreciates this metaphor enough to use it again in the discussion of Jeremiah, referring (with appreciation, it seems) to Israel as a “lady in red” who is “hormone-driven” and “ready for action” (94).

I do not believe it is political correctness run amok to suggest that our students might have a different reaction to this metaphor, and especially to Hutton’s uncritical appropriation of it. We teach victims of sexual violence. Hosea, just before the “beautiful” passage, describes what certainly sounds like sexual violence. Our students can connect the dots, and it is better to be honest about the metaphor and help our students understand its power and peril. It is, frankly, disappointing that a work commissioned as “the”

introduction to this literature by a major publisher in biblical studies fails to deal adequately with this material.

It is additionally disappointing that this work is poorly written. Errors are frequent: Jonah was not among the writing prophets (3), the calf at Bethel was not a symbol of YHWH (24), Hebrew does not really have “tense” (34), cognitive dissonance is not the ability to believe in something when it conflicts with reality (97), and when “Meribaal” was altered to “Mephibosheth” not just vowels were substituted, but the entire word (obviously!) was replaced. On occasion Hutton assumes readers already know the meaning of certain terms they could easily find arcane (Second Zechariah [4], Baal [15], infinitive absolute [93], Zerubbabel [106]). The prose is studded with odd constructions (“the giant and aggressive Assyrians” [33]) and is often dense and unclear. It is slow, difficult reading. This is hardly the kind of prose that will draw good writing out of our students. I fear that this book, with its limited coverage and frequent lapses of clarity, will frustrate rather than inspire students examining the Israelite prophets for the first time.