Forms of Prophetic Speech in the Old Testament: A Summary of Claus Westermann's Contributions

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This article is occasioned by the reissuance of Westermann's now famous Basic Forms of Prophetic Speech,[1] and the appearance of the English translation of its companion volume, Prophetic Oracles of Salvation in the Old Testament.[2] The first of these volumes was originally published in Germany in 1960 (Grundformen prophetischer Rede) and became available in English in 1967.

Westermann furthered the work of Hermann Gunkel, the father of Form Criticism, who first called attention to the oral prehistory of the prophets. Like Gunkel, Westermann attempted to define the formal features of the Gattungen (genres) of the prophetic speeches and to place them in their life situations in the institutional life of ancient Israel. Since the volume has become something of a classic in form critical investigation of the prophets, students of the Old Testament will welcome this new release, which is identical to the 1967 edition, with the addition of a new forward by Gene M. Tucker. The opening section of Basic Forms traces the history of investigation into the prophetic speech forms since the beginning of the twentieth century (pp. 13-89). Westermann recounts how Gunkel and company began with the initial observation that prophecy is comprised of individual prophetic sayings. Several of the earlier form critics arrived at a consensus that a basic form of the prophetic judgment-speech was a messenger's speech with two parts, the reason (or accusation) and the announcement of judgment (pp. 86-87). Westermann concurs with this consensus.

The heart of the book is his survey of the speech forms in the prophetic books of the Old Testament and his important discussion of the messenger formula: "Thus says the Lord" (pp. 128f). Westermann focuses on a single speech form, the announcement of judgment. He argues that the Old Testament prophetic books contained three major kinds of speech: A) accounts, by which he means historical narratives, B) prophetic speeches, and C) utterances directed from man to God, or prayer (p.90-91). The famous confrontation between Amos and Amaziah the priest of Bethel (Amos 7:10-17) is an example of an account. But such accounts are rare in the written prophets. Jonah is

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the exception, since it is only an account. Other examples of what Westermann means by account are generally prophetic sections in the historical books. The utterance is also less frequent in the written prophets. It has two major forms: lament and praise (as in the Psalms). Jeremiah's confessions are utterances, as are the doxologies of Amos (4:13; 5:8-9; 9:5-6). The diagram on the next page summarizes Westermann's three types of prophetic speech.

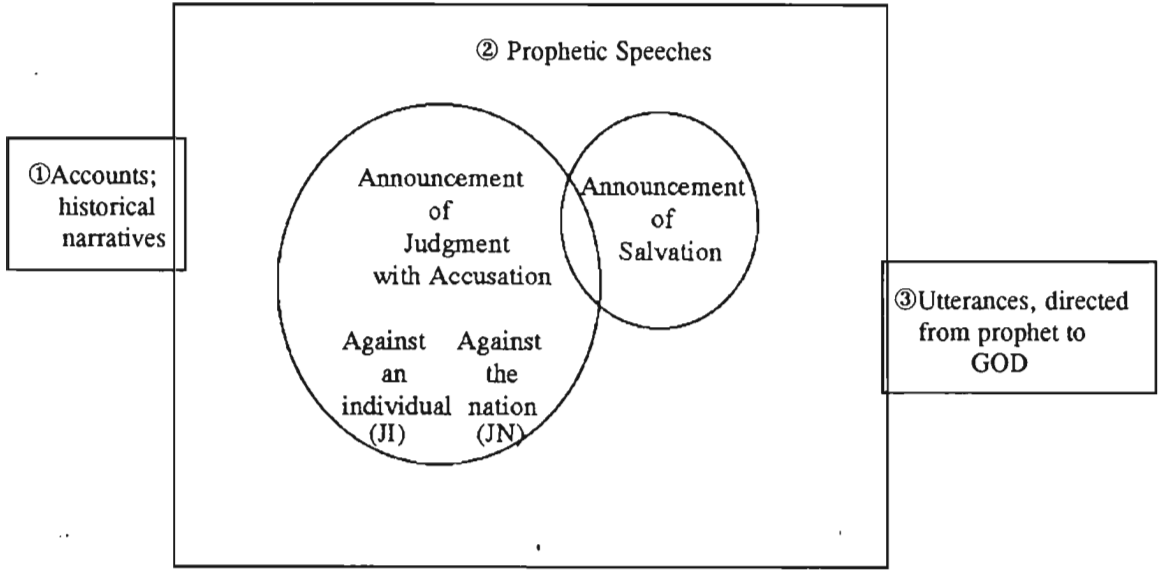
The second category, the prophetic speech, is the most common form in the written prophets. Many of the classical prophets contain only prophetic speeches (ex. Isaiah 40-66, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, etc.). Prior to the time of the "writing" prophets, the prophetic word was transmitted only in the body of the account. But the classical prophets contain both prophetic speeches and prayer forms (utterances). The eighth and seventh century prophets were dominated by prophetic speeches, and the exilic and post-exilic prophets are characterized as a mixture of speeches and prayers (p.92).

Westermann's primary interest is in the second of these categories: the prophetic speeches. Within this category, Westermann further distinguished between judgment speeches directed against individuals and those directed against the whole nation, or group within the nation (pp. 137f). The judgment against the individual (or JI) was an older type which gradually declined in use. After Jeremiah, the JI ceased to be used.

The form of the JI is clearly discernible: introduction, followed by accusation, followed by the announcement of judgment (pp. 142-163). Westermann illustrates with the example in Amos 7:16-17, which is a JI embedded in an account. The introduction takes many forms and is often a component of the narrative in historical examples (and is sometimes omitted altogether). It often also contains a summons to "hear." So in Amos 7:16a: "Now therefore hear the word of the Lord..."

The accusation can be in the form of a question, but is more commonly a simple declaratory sentence in the second person singular perfect without introduction and without connectives. So in Amos 7:16b: "You say, 'Do not prophesy against Israel, and do not preach against the house of Isaac.'" Westermann felt this judgment speech stemmed from the ancient Israelite judicial procedure (p. 146).

Westermann's Three Kinds of Prophetic Speech



Pre-Classical prophecy → CLASSICAL PROPHECY

While the accusation may appear suddenly without the introduction, the announcement is almost always preceded by an introductory "therefore," or "therefore thus says the Lord" (*lākēn kô ʾāmar yhwh*). Westermann further makes a distinction between the formula "Thus says Yahweh," which introduces the whole speech, and "Therefore thus says Yahweh," which introduces the announcement. He concludes that "in the word of God to an individual, the announcement is the real word of God" (p. 149).

The content of this announcement was quite simple in its early form. It contained a singular statement of punishment about to befall the person to whom the speech is directed. Occasionally this announcement contains a contrast motif in which the offense of the party accused is contrasted with the fact that he has received many benefits from Yahweh (pp. 155-158). The greater part of such announcements are also connected to the announcement of a sign, as in the famous "therefore Yahweh himself will give you a sign" (*ʾôt*, Isaiah 7:14). These signs are related to the announcement and never to its reason, the accusation. The need for a sign is when the thing announced is only expected to appear later, perhaps years later. The sign is to attest to the speech in the immediate context in which it was delivered (p. 159). These JIs were most useful against the king in early Israelite history, as in the Amos example.

These Judgment speeches against individuals (JI) were further developed and adapted by the majority of eighth and seventh century prophets into a judgment speech against the nation (JN). In fact, this form was the major component of prophetic speech in the written prophets of these centuries (pp. 169-176). The prophets broadened the horizon of the JI by changing the addressee. The pattern of movement from accusation to announcement continued. But now the accusation was directed to a majority, a "corporate personality," and therefore came to contain a larger number of transgressions. In fact, the accusation of a JN usually contains two parts, a general conceptual form followed by a more developed concrete citation, as illustrated by Amos's famous charges in chapters 1 and 2:

> For three transgressions of Damascus, and for four...
> because they have threshed Gilead with
> threshing sledges of iron. (Amos 1:3).

Interestingly, the accusation in the JN is more frequently expressed in the third person (as in the Amos example) than in the second person of direct address (as in the JI).

Likewise, the announcement of the JN also has two parts. The first part usually contains a first person speech of God who intervenes to take action against the addressee. This is followed by the third person announcement itself, explaining the results of the divine intervention. This announcement often begins with the same introductory "therefore," or "therefore thus says Yahweh" used in the JI, as in Micah 2:3-4:

> Therefore thus says Yahweh:
> Now, I am devising against this family an evil
> from which you cannot remove your necks;
> and you shall not walk haughtily,
> for it will be an evil time.
> On that day they shall take up a taunt song against you...

Westermann emphasized that the basic form of the prophet-judgment-speech was used in a large number of "modifications, expansions, and variant wordings" (p. 176). The sequence of the two main parts may be interchanged, the announcement preceding the accusation, or sometimes the messenger formula appears at the beginning of the speech, designating the entire speech as the word of God, or one part may occur twice in the same speech. These last two modifications are rare in eighth century prophets, but frequent in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (pp. 176-180). Part of the task of the careful exegete is sensitivity to these alterations of the culturally accepted norm for prophet speeches.

The JI, the older form of the prophetic judgment-speech, seldom has expansions. On the other hand, the structure of the JN began to relax during the eighth century. In Jeremiah, and even more so in Ezekiel, the judgment-speech pattern relaxed so much that the original form could hardly be recognized among the expansions (pp. 181-189). These expansions can affect either the accusation or the announcement. From Jeremiah onwards, the prophetic speech was given a framework (introduction, connecting formulae, and concluding formulas), which gradually became more and more elaborate. This framework multiplied the number of sentences identifying the word of the prophet as the word of God. Among scholars working on Jeremiah, these frames are usually credited to a deuteronomistic editor.

Westermann further points out that the prophetic judgment speech has many variations in the Old Testament. Besides expansions of the pattern, he shows also how the JN may be related to an entirely different literary form, such as the woe-oracle (pp. 189-204). Additionally, literary patterns from

several walks of life in ancient Israel were borrowed and used as variant formulations of the JN: the legal procedure, the disputation, the parable, the lament, etc.

In Basic Forms, Westermann went significantly beyond Gunkel and impacted Old Testament studies for years to come. He concluded the "announcement of judgment" was the single, basic form of prophetic speech. It could be addressed to individuals or to the nation, in which case it was usually preceded by an accusation. The announcement is frequently introduced by the messenger formula ("thus says Yahweh") which Westermann saw as parallel to messenger speech in the ancient Near East. Furthermore, Westermann traced the roots of this judgment speech to ancient Israelite legal practice.

The first volume dealt only with the forms in which judgment was announced. The second volume is intended to round off Westermann's work by investigating the prophetic salvation oracles. He believes the oracles of salvation in the Old Testament prophets belong to a common and distinctive tradition, just as do the oracles against the nations, which are distributed widely among the prophets. Westermann concludes that during the exilic and postexilic periods there were two groups of salvation oracles which stood in contrast to each other and which corresponded to the contrast between prophets of salvation and prophets of judgment during the preexilic period.

Westermann begins by distinguishing between oracles of salvation found in collections scattered throughout the prophetic literature (predominately in Deutero-Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Trito-Isaiah, Micah and Zephaniah), and those found in reports of a situation in which an oracle of salvation was given. The latter are found only in narratives of Isaiah, Jeremiah and perhaps Ezekiel, and are similar to such oracles in the historical books (p. 15). These form an early stratum of salvation oracles and date from the preexilic period. The author is concerned only with the collections of the first category, which is the greatest preponderance of salvation oracles.

Within this large category (collections), Westermann distinguishes between a major group (Group 1) and three secondary groups. In characterizing Group 1, Westermann uses "salvation" in two ways. The term can refer to an act or a state. An oracle of salvation can describe an act of deliverance or a state of well-being, or both together. Westermann demonstrates that the difference is expressed in the form of the oracles, so that form and content can not be separated. So the "proclamation of deliverance" has a fixed sequence: distress, cry for help (or lament), the cry is heard, deliverance (pp. 16, 43). The "proclamation of a future situation of well-

being" is Westermann's designation for oracles relating to a state of salvation. These oracles constitute an expansion of the basic proclamation of deliverance (p. 16).

This proclamation of future well-being is further subdivided into two forms. First, the "proclamation of blessing" can follow one of deliverance and announces a time of blessing and prosperity. Second, the "proclamation of the restoration" comes into use after the catastrophe of 587 BC. Unlike the proclamation of deliverance, these two proclamations of future well-being share common motifs without a fixed order of events.

The three smaller groups of salvation oracles have extensive similarities with Group 1 and demonstrate that the oracles of salvation belong to one strand of tradition. Oracles of Group 2 customarily supplement other texts and are usually short and seldom expanded. They consist of two parts: the "proclamation of judgment on the enemy," and the "proclamation of deliverance for Judah-Israel" (the so-called "twofold proclamation," p. 195). These oracles contain no objective depictions of deliverance or future well-being. The oracles of Group 2 place full weight on the destruction of the enemy.

> I will break the Assyrian in my land,
> and on my mountains trample him under foot;
> his yoke shall be removed from them,
> and his burden from their shoulders. (Isaiah 14:25)

Westermann emphasizes the distinction between the way to salvation in Groups 1 and 2. The salvation announced for Israel in Group 1 is open to all the peoples among the nations. Destruction of the enemy is not a prerequisite for Israel's salvation in those oracles. Furthermore, the oracles of Group 1 do not proclaim a retrieving of political power and influence for Israel (p. 66). But Group 2 consists of political oracles and destruction of the enemy is the turning point leading to Israel's salvation (p. 196). This is an important distinction for Westermann which he presses in his conclusions (see below).

Westermann states that groups 3 and 4 cannot properly be included among the prophetic oracles of salvation. He makes this statement because, though they are used in the books of prophecy, they find their origins in non-prophetic contexts. Group 3, the "conditional oracles of salvation," derived from deuteronomistic paraenesis (or the exhortatory style of later deuteronomistic editors), and group 4 stems from a late Wisdom literature motif (p. 17).

For Westermann, the oracles of group 3 are the result of the deuteronomistic movement which arose during the exile. Editors and authors (the so-called deuteronomists) working during the exile moved from unconditional prophecies to conditional exhortations (p. 230). This literary form is best attested in Deuteronomy 4, which reveals the meaning and intention of deuteronomistic paraenesis (pp. 228-230): "Give heed to the statutes and ordinances..., so that you may live to enter and occupy the land..." (Deuteronomy 4:1). Westermann believes that this structure marks the end of preexilic prophecy. After 587 BC, deuteronomistic exhortation replaces prophecy. There are examples of the conditional deuteronomistic oracles of salvation in the prophetic books, particularly Jeremiah.

Group 4 consists mostly of a few additions to the texts of prophetic books in which the fate of the ungodly is contrasted with that of the godly (p. 246). While the two-fold proclamations make a political contrast between Israel and her enemies, the oracles of group 4 contrast groups within Israel.

> For then I will remove from your midst
> your proudly exultant ones
> and you shall no longer be haughty
> in my holy mountain
> For I will leave in the midst of you
> a people humble and lowly
> (Zephaniah 3:11b-12a)

Westermann has tabulated the distribution of the various types of salvation oracles as follows. The oracles of salvation proper (Group 1) appear in 157 texts in the Old Testament prophets.

Deutero-Isaiah	35 texts
Isaiah 1-39	29 texts
Minor Prophets	34 texts
Jeremiah	38 texts
Ezekiel	15 texts
Trito-Isaiah	6 texts

Group 2 (the twofold proclamation) has 39 texts. Group 3 (conditional proclamations of salvation) includes 34 texts, and Group 4 (the pious and the wicked), 16 texts (p. 18).

Like Westermann's previous analysis of judgment speeches, these

oracles of salvation may be addressed to an individual or to a community. Early in the history of the tradition, oracles to individuals were more common. But in the writing prophets, these oracles are normally addressed to the people of God, as can be seen in Deutero-Isaiah, which is addressed exclusively to Israel. After 587 BC and the beginning of the exile, the prophetic oracles of salvation are addressed to the "remnant," those who survived the catastrophe.

The prophecies of judgment were basically confined to a narrow historical period of Israel's history. The historical parameters of that literary genre are defined by the preaching of Amos and Ezekiel. In contrast, the oracles of salvation are found throughout Israel's history. The prehistory of this literary form begins with the promises to the patriarchs and its posthistory continues into apocalyptic literature. The majority of the oracles of salvation are anonymous oracles, which arose in the period between Deutero-Isaiah and the closure of the prophetic canon. These anonymous oracles were then added, individually or in small collections into the various Old Testament prophetic books by editors. Few of these can actually be ascribed to one of the prophets of judgment (p. 13).

In his conclusion, Westermann emphasized the distinction between the oracles of deliverance (group 1) and the two-fold proclamation (group 2). The first group contained a new element in salvation oracles, as witnessed by Deutero-Isaiah: the absence of any political or military based salvation. Those who survived God's judgment in 587 BC are the remnant, and they shall be saved through acknowledging and embracing his judgment. Deutero-Isaiah perceived that what was "new" about this salvation was that the Creator and Lord of the universe entrusted his task of deliverance to the king of a foreign nation: "Do not remember the former things..., I am about to do a new thing" (43:18-19). Liberation from Babylonian captivity was to be accomplished in a radically new manner, through the commissioning of Cyrus the Persian (45:1). This is an irrevocable contrast with the two-fold proclamation, in which salvation for Israel comes about by means of the destruction of her enemies. Westermann believes the contrast "has its prehistory in the same contrast between prophets of judgment and the prophets of salvation before the fall of the nation, as seen with particular clarity in the opposing proclamations of Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jeremiah 28)" (pp. 222-223 and 271).

In the final analysis, Westermann's four types of oracles of Salvation are helpful. I would only warn that he makes too fine a distinction between salvation oracles before 587 BC and those after the fall of Israel to the

Babylonians. Though it is undeniable that the proclamation of salvation greatly expanded and began to be used widely by exilic and postexilic prophets, I believe it is possible the use of such prophecies was more common than Westermann allows. He wants to limit their use prior to the exile to the early stratum in the narrative portions of Isaiah and Jeremiah (p. 268). But such a premise seems arbitrary, and it is not impossible that some of the prophetic oracles he has isolated were used earlier.

I have further reservations about his hard distinction between the oracles of Group 1 and Group 2. It is true that some of the oracles of salvation were related to military and political deliverance, and this does in fact create a contrast with those oracles related to the peaceful intervention of God. However, these must surely reflect the changing historical situation. Perhaps it could simply be assumed that the intolerance of the Assyrians, Babylonians, Syrians, Moabites, Edomites, etc. meant salvation could only be defined in terms of military victory over ones enemies. But the tolerant policies of the Persians changed all that. The reign of Cyrus made the oracles of Group 1 possible because foreign oppression was not the main enemy of salvation. In these oracles the focus could now rest on maintenance of the nation's relationship to God.

Some of the pillars of Westermann's work have crumbled under the weight of subsequent investigation (see Tucker's forward to Basic Forms). Few today would be dogmatic about the legal or court setting as the original life situation for the judgment prophecies. More importantly, with the rise of literary (or rhetorical) criticism, most Old Testament scholars today recognize that the task of isolating the original oral form of these speeches is a thoroughly speculative and hypothetical one. The bold confidence of thirty years ago is gone.

In spite of these caveats about wholesale acceptance of Westermann's approach, his observations have had a permanent effect on the study of the prophets, and with good reason! In Basic Forms, he effectively demonstrated the function of the prophet as the messenger of Yahweh, which function is paralleled by ancient Near Eastern messengers.[3] In addition, without insisting that all prophetic addresses have a monolithic form in one or two categories, Westermann demonstrated that most of the forms of prophetic speech have sprung from these basic ones: announcement of judgment and proclamation of salvation. All in all, his basic observations in the first volume have stood the test of time. The new volume on oracles of salvation, though not without minor problems, promises to make similar significant contributions to the form critical study of the Old Testament prophets.

ENDNOTES

[1]Translated by H. C. White (Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

[2]Translated by K. Crim (Westminster/John Knox, 1991).

[3]However, Westermann's contention that Old Testament prophetic speech forms were patterned after ancient Near Eastern messenger speech has not gone unchallenged. See W. Eugene March, "Prophecy," in Old Testament Form Criticism, edited by John H. Hayes (San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press, 1974), pp. 152-154 and 161-162.