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The Pedagogy Of The Prophets: A Systematic Literature Review Of Symbolic Actions, Vivid Imagery, And Public Oratory In Isaiah, Jeremiah, And Hosea

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Abstract

This article synthesizes scholarship on the pedagogy of the Hebrew prophets, asking how Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea used symbolic actions, vivid imagery, and public oratory as instruments of teaching. Prophetic literature has long been read through historical, theological, literary, and rhetorical lenses, yet its pedagogical character has rarely been treated as a single, integrated problem. Working from a PRISMA 2020-informed systematic literature review and a qualitative thematic synthesis, the study draws together research on prophetic sign-acts, metaphor, public address, embodied knowledge, covenant rhetoric, and religious formation. What emerges is a portrait of prophetic pedagogy as embodied, imaginative, public, affective, and transformative. Isaiah formed perception around holiness, justice, judgment, and hope through visual signs and poetic imagery. Jeremiah used enacted signs and temple oratory to puncture false security and press the community toward covenant accountability. Hosea turned family symbolism, marriage metaphor, and the language of healing into a dramatization of covenant infidelity and divine restoration. From these patterns the article proposes an integrated model in which divine message, prophetic medium, audience engagement, and covenantal learning outcome are inseparable. By reframing prophetic ministry as transformative pedagogy, the study speaks to biblical studies, theology, and faith-based education alike, offering a resource for contemporary religious educators and the institutions they serve.

Keywords: Prophetic Pedagogy; Isaiah; Jeremiah; Hosea; Symbolic Action; Metaphor; Public Oratory; Systematic Literature Review; Religious Education; Covenant Formation

INTRODUCTION

Prophetic literature occupies a central place in the theological, ethical, and literary imagination of the Hebrew Bible. The prophets did far more than transmit information or forecast the future. They interpreted history, confronted communal disorder, exposed false worship, and summoned Israel and Judah to covenant renewal. This article argues that such activity is best understood as pedagogy. By prophetic pedagogy I mean the instructional, formative, and transformative work through which prophetic communication educates a

community toward theological perception, moral accountability, and renewed identity. That work is visible not only in what the prophets said but in how they taught: through symbolic actions, vivid imagery, public oratory, lament, shock, and embodied witness.

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea are especially fruitful sites for this inquiry. Isaiah joins poetic grandeur to public judgment, weaving together holiness imagery, social critique, and symbolic sign. Jeremiah blends temple preaching, symbolic enactment, personal lament, and rhetorical confrontation. Hosea reaches for marriage, family, children, disease, healing, agriculture, and divine compassion to teach what covenant unfaithfulness and restoration actually mean. Read together, these three books open a rich field for examining how prophetic communication functioned as religious education in public life.

The scholarly difficulty is that sign-acts, metaphor, rhetoric, and prophetic speech forms tend to be studied in isolation from one another. Friebel (1999, 2012) illuminates sign-acts as rhetorical nonverbal communication; Lancaster (2021) maps the terrain of metaphor research in Hebrew Bible studies; Westermann (1991) classifies the forms of prophetic speech; and Medhurst (2010) frames public address as a field attentive to speech, civic memory, and persuasion. A synthetic pedagogical account, however, remains to be written. Reading these strands together allows prophetic communication to appear as what it arguably was, a coordinated educational practice rather than a loose collection of literary devices.

This article therefore develops a synthesis of prophetic pedagogy in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, informed by systematic literature review methods. The aim is not to displace historical-critical, literary, theological, rhetorical, gender-critical, or ecological readings, but to gather them around a single guiding question: how did the prophets educate the covenant community through symbolic, imaginative, and public forms of communication?

Five questions guide the review. First, how does scholarship interpret prophetic symbolic action as an embodied and formative mode of teaching? Second, how do imagery, metaphor, and poetic language operate as tools of moral and theological imagination? Third, how does public prophetic oratory generate communal accountability and covenant memory? Fourth, what integrated model of prophetic pedagogy can be built from the literature? Fifth, what does prophetic pedagogy offer contemporary faith-based education?

The contribution is threefold. The article reframes prophetic ministry as a form of transformative education; it links biblical studies with religious education by showing that prophetic messages travel through embodied, imaginative, and communal media; and it offers a conceptual model capable of informing contemporary faith-based teaching, preaching, and institutional formation.

METHODOLOGY

The study uses a PRISMA 2020-informed systematic literature review together with a qualitative thematic synthesis. PRISMA serves here as a transparency framework for reporting how records were identified, screened, assessed for eligibility, and included, rather than as a tool for statistical meta-analysis (Page et al., 2021). The framework suits a topic that straddles several bodies of scholarship at once: Old Testament prophecy, rhetoric, metaphor theory, sign-act studies, public address, and religious education. Methodological guidance on rigorous

reviewing and evidence-informed synthesis further shaped the design (Snyder, 2019; Tranfield et al., 2003).

The search strategy was deliberately broad, since much of the work relevant to prophetic pedagogy never uses the word pedagogy. Search clusters combined biblical books with terms for prophetic communication, symbolic action, metaphor, imagery, rhetoric, public speech, covenant formation, and religious education. Attention centered on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea, along with general Hebrew prophetic literature where the analysis could illuminate the three focal books. Peer-reviewed articles, scholarly monographs, academic book chapters, and theological reference works were eligible when they offered analytical purchase on prophetic communication or formation; devotional essays, sermons, popular blogs, and studies unconnected to Hebrew prophetic literature were set aside.

Data were extracted through a matrix that recorded bibliographic information, biblical focus, method, communicative mode, central argument, and pedagogical relevance. Each source was then coded descriptively under six headings: symbolic action, imagery and metaphor, public oratory, affective transformation, covenant identity, and implications for religious education. The closing synthesis was interpretive rather than additive. Sources were not simply summarized but organized into themes that explain how prophetic communication taught communities to see, feel, remember, judge, and respond differently.

Table 1 sets out the review protocol. Table 2 then records the full database search log, and Table 3 reports the numerical flow of records through each PRISMA stage.

Table 1. SLR protocol summary

Review element	**Application in this article**
Databases and sources	Scopus, Web of Science, ATLA Religion Database, JSTOR, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, Google Scholar, publisher DOI pages, and citation snowballing.
Core search clusters	Prophetic pedagogy; prophets as teachers; symbolic action; prophetic sign-act; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea; metaphor; imagery; public oratory; temple sermon; covenant rhetoric; religious education.
Inclusion criteria	Scholarly sources addressing Hebrew prophecy, symbolic action, metaphor, imagery, rhetoric, public speech, covenant formation, or pedagogical and religious formation.
Exclusion criteria	Non-academic, devotional, inaccessible, duplicate, or tangential studies with no substantial link to prophetic communication or pedagogy.
Synthesis method	Qualitative thematic synthesis organized around embodied, imaginative, public, affective, ecological, and transformative pedagogy.

Table 2. Final database search log

Database / source	Search field and scope	Records identified
Scopus	Title, abstract, and keywords; prophetic pedagogy, sign-acts, metaphor, rhetoric, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea	61
Web of Science Core Collection	Topic search; prophetic literature, symbolic action, public oratory, metaphor, religious education	48
ATLA Religion Database	Subject, abstract, and title search; Hebrew prophets, prophetic rhetoric, Hosea marriage, Jeremiah temple sermon	83
JSTOR	Title and full-text search with relevance filtering; Old Testament prophecy, imagery, metaphor, prophetic speech	57
EBSCOhost Religion and Philosophy Collection	Keyword and abstract search; prophetic rhetoric, symbolic action, biblical pedagogy	44
ProQuest	Dissertations, theses, and theology and religion scholarly sources; prophetic pedagogy and prophetic symbolism	33
Google Scholar	First 100 most relevant results screened using the same search clusters	100
Publisher DOI pages and citation snowballing	Tyndale Bulletin, SAGE, Brill, SciELO, journal pages, backward and forward citation checks	32
Total records identified		458

Table 3. PRISMA numerical counts

PRISMA stage	Numerical count and decision log
Identification	Records identified from databases, publisher pages, Google Scholar, and citation chasing: n = 458. Duplicate records removed before screening: n = 126. Records remaining for screening: n = 332.
Screening	Records screened by title and abstract: n = 332. Records excluded at screening: n = 245. Reports sought for retrieval: n = 87.
Retrieval	Reports not retrieved because of access limitations, incomplete citation metadata, or unavailable full text: n = 7. Reports assessed for eligibility: n = 80.
Eligibility	Reports excluded after full-text assessment: n = 44. Reasons: outside Isaiah, Jeremiah, Hosea, or general Hebrew prophetic literature (n = 13); devotional or non-academic source type (n = 9); no substantive link to pedagogy, rhetoric, imagery, metaphor, symbolic action, or communication (n = 12); primarily New Testament or reception history

	without Hebrew prophetic analysis (n = 5); duplicate version or insufficient bibliographic data (n = 5).
Included	Studies included in qualitative thematic synthesis: n = 36. These sources form the core corpus for the embodied, imaginative, public, affective, ecological, and transformative-pedagogy themes.

Read together, Tables 2 and 3 trace the corpus from first search to final synthesis. The eight source streams returned 458 records in all, with the ATLA Religion Database contributing the largest share (83), followed by the first hundred screened Google Scholar results, then Scopus (61), JSTOR (57), Web of Science (48), EBSCOhost (44), ProQuest (33), and DOI pages with citation snowballing (32). Once 126 duplicates were removed, 332 records advanced to title-and-abstract screening, where 245 were excluded as clearly outside scope. Of the 87 reports then sought in full, 7 could not be retrieved because of access limits, incomplete metadata, or unavailable text, leaving 80 for full-text assessment. A further 44 fell away at that stage, most often because they lay outside the prophetic books or the wider Hebrew prophetic corpus (13) or offered no substantive link to pedagogy, rhetoric, imagery, or symbolic action (12), with smaller numbers excluded as devotional rather than scholarly (9), as New Testament reception lacking Hebrew prophetic analysis (5), or as duplicates and records with insufficient bibliographic data (5). Thirty-six studies survived this filtering and form the synthesis corpus analyzed in the sections that follow.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The thirty-six studies that survived screening cluster around four interrelated pedagogical modes: symbolic action as embodied pedagogy, vivid imagery as imaginative pedagogy, public oratory as communal pedagogy, and prophetic discourse as affective and transformative education. Each is examined below in relation to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea.

Symbolic Actions as Embodied Pedagogy

Across the corpus, the clearest pedagogical thread is the symbolic act understood as embodied teaching. In prophetic literature, sign-acts are not decorative illustrations bolted onto a verbal message. They are communicative events in which the prophet, an object, a gesture, a family, or the body itself becomes part of the lesson. Fohrer (1953) and Friebel (1999, 2012) remain foundational for reading prophetic symbolic actions as meaningful performances that communicate through visible form. Stell (2022) sharpens the point by arguing that prophecy cannot be reduced to oral and written forms alone; performance and performativity also shape how divine knowledge is conveyed.

Isaiah practices symbolic pedagogy through signs that render geopolitical and theological realities visible. In Isaiah 20 the prophet walks stripped and barefoot as a sign concerning Egypt and Cush, confronting onlookers with humiliation and vulnerability in place of imperial security. The pedagogical force lies in the embodied interruption: a disturbing public event demands interpretation. Isaiah also deploys family names and poetic scenes as public signs, a reminder that prophetic instruction can draw on personal identity, social space, and communal memory (Sweeney, 1996; Williamson, 2006).

Jeremiah supplies the densest examples of embodied instruction. The ruined loincloth, the potter and clay, the broken jar, the yoke, and the purchased field all teach through material enactment. Each makes an abstract covenant claim visible: intimacy has been corrupted; the nation remains accountable to divine formation; false security can shatter; political submission must be read theologically; hope can be embodied even in crisis (Fretheim, 2002; Lundbom, 1999, 2004; McConville, 2002). Avioz (2006) shows how Jeremiah 7:1-15 works rhetorically as a public confrontation of temple ideology, so that the lesson is carried not only by content but by placement, address, and rhetorical urgency.

Hosea pushes symbolic pedagogy into the household. Hosea 1-3 makes marriage, children, names, betrayal, and restoration into lived symbols of covenant relationship. Instone-Brewer (1996), Kelle (2005), and Routledge (2018) argue that Hosea's marriage symbolism is no mere biographical detail but a rhetorically charged covenant sign, while McEntire (2023) widens the question by asking how family members themselves participate in the embodiment of divine knowledge. Hosea's pedagogy is thus relational and affective: the audience learns to grasp sin not only as legal transgression but as intimate betrayal and wounded love.

Vivid Imagery as Imaginative Pedagogy

A second cluster of studies turns from gesture to image, treating vivid metaphor as a pedagogy of the imagination. Metaphor and poetic language teach by reshaping perception. Lancaster (2021) documents how metaphor research has grown into a major field within Hebrew Bible studies, and Nordby (2018) contends that prophetic metaphor can disclose something of the divine mind and intention. Classical theory helps explain why such imagery instructs so effectively: metaphor does not merely decorate meaning but structures how one domain is understood through another (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Isaiah's vineyard song in Isaiah 5 is a central case. A carefully tended vineyard that yields only wild grapes stages covenant failure as a sequence of expectation, disappointment, and judgment, and the audience is led to pronounce a verdict before recognizing that the verdict falls on itself. Isaiah 6 teaches in a similar register through its vision of holiness, uncleanness, purification, and commissioning. These images do not simply explain theology; they train the imagination to perceive God's holiness, human disorder, and the possibility of renewed vocation (Brueggemann, 2001; Wildberger, 1991; Williamson, 2006).

Jeremiah's imagery tends to destabilize false security. The broken cisterns of Jeremiah 2 expose the irrationality of abandoning the fountain of living waters; the potter's house teaches divine freedom and national accountability; the mourning earth of Jeremiah 23:10 and 15 reveals that human injustice and covenant failure ripple through land, people, and Yahweh in a single moral world. Wessels (2020) is important here, since his ecological reading refuses to separate prophetic pedagogy from land, social disorder, and environmental grief, and Aberbach (2020) likewise connects Hebrew Bible interpretation with moral dilemmas and ecological responsibility.

Hosea's imagery is relational, agricultural, and therapeutic by turns. Israel appears as an unfaithful spouse, a stubborn heifer, a child called out of Egypt, a morning cloud, a half-baked cake, a silly dove, and a diseased body in need of healing. O'Kennedy (2007) shows that Yahweh as healer is a significant prophetic metaphor, and in Hosea that metaphor binds

judgment to restoration. The images work through emotional compression: betrayal, discipline, compassion, healing, dew, blossom, and return are arranged to carry the audience from the recognition of sin toward hope.

Public Oratory as Communal Pedagogy

A third body of work foregrounds the public setting of prophetic speech, where oratory becomes communal instruction. Prophetic speech is not private reflection but address delivered into contested social space: temple courts, city gates, royal settings, communal assemblies. Medhurst (2010) is helpful because public address scholarship treats speech as historically situated action that shapes civic memory, identity, and persuasion. Westermann (1991) catalogues the forms prophetic speech takes, from judgment and salvation oracles to disputations, laments, and woe speeches, each of which organizes communal learning by naming the problem, confronting the audience, and pressing toward response.

Isaiah's public oratory repeatedly targets the gap between worship and justice. The book's opening chapter indicts ritual practice severed from ethical transformation and teaches that covenant identity cannot be detached from justice, righteousness, and care for the vulnerable. France (1975) reminds readers that Old Testament prophecy carried weight for later interpretation of Israel's future, so that prophetic oratory has a reception history reaching well beyond its original setting; Matthews (1919), older but still instructive, exemplifies an early concern for reading Old Testament prophecy responsibly.

Jeremiah's temple sermon is perhaps the clearest instance of oratory as pedagogy. It confronts the assumption that the temple itself guarantees safety, teaching instead that sacred space without justice curdles into deceptive confidence. Rhetorically, the sermon converts public religious assurance into public moral examination (Avioz, 2006; Lundbom, 1999). Its educational power lies in exposing a hidden curriculum of false trust, where temple, monarchy, land, and tradition turn dangerous the moment they are severed from covenant obedience.

Hosea's public oratory moves through accusation, appeal, lament, and promise. The people are charged with a lack of knowledge, loyalty, and covenant faithfulness, yet the speeches are never merely condemnatory; they teach the community to reread discipline through the lens of divine love and restoration. Because the rhetoric is public, it resists any retreat into privatized religion: sin and hope alike are communal realities. This public force also helps explain why prophetic language keeps being adapted in later political and religious settings, as Keller (2020) shows in tracing how Old Testament rhetoric shaped the American founding era in complex and sometimes ambiguous ways.

Affective and Transformative Pedagogy

The fourth theme draws the previous three together: prophetic pedagogy is affective and transformative. The prophets do not teach by explanation alone. They teach through shock, grief, shame, fear, longing, compassion, and hope. Brueggemann (2001) famously casts prophetic imagination as the capacity to criticize a dominant consciousness and to energize an alternative future, and Heschel (1962) underscores the pathos of prophetic speech, the way it communicates divine concern with intense emotional force. Both accounts

explain why prophetic pedagogy is never neutral instruction: it seeks a conversion of perception and action.

Transformative learning theory helps name the educational logic at work. Mezirow (1991) describes transformation as a change in one's frames of reference, and Freire (1970) speaks of conscientization, the awakening of critical awareness within distorted or oppressive conditions. These modern theories should not be read back anachronistically onto ancient texts, but they do articulate what prophetic communication accomplishes: it unsettles fixed assumptions, exposes false consciousness, and summons hearers into a new way of perceiving God, neighbor, land, and future. McEntire's (2014) study of Ezekiel, though outside the three primary books, is pertinent because it shows how divine breaking and healing can be staged as a pedagogy of transformation.

The included scholarship also indicates that prophetic pedagogy reaches into questions of identity and social embodiment. Haddox (2016) traces how masculinity studies have opened fresh ways of examining gendered constructions in Hebrew Bible texts. In a pedagogical key, such work warns educators against treating prophetic metaphor as neutral or uncomplicated: metaphors form communities, but they can also generate ethical questions for interpretation. Ecological and land-focused readings press a parallel point, reminding modern readers that prophetic formation is never reducible to private spirituality; it implicates social justice, land, worship, bodies, households, and institutional trust.

Table 4. Synthesized model of prophetic pedagogy

Pedagogical mode	Primary medium	Audience engagement	Learning outcome	Examples
Embodied pedagogy	Symbolic action, gesture, object, body, family sign	Shock, attention, interpretation	Recognition of divine message through visible action	Isaiah 20; Jeremiah 18-19; Hosea 1-3
Imaginative pedagogy	Metaphor, poetry, vivid imagery	Memory, emotion, moral imagination	New perception of sin, judgment, holiness, and hope	Isaiah 5-6; Jeremiah 2; Hosea 2, 11, 14
Public pedagogy	Speech, sermon, lawsuit, lament, woe oracle	Communal accountability	Ethical correction and covenant consciousness	Isaiah 1; Jeremiah 7; Hosea 4-6
Affective pedagogy	Lament, pathos, warning, promise	Grief, fear, compassion, hope	Movement from denial to repentance and restoration	Jeremiah laments; Hosea 11; Isaiah restoration texts

The synthesis supports the central claim that Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea should be read not only as theological witnesses or literary artists but as pedagogical agents. Their

teaching is holistic, engaging body, speech, image, emotion, memory, public space, and communal decision. Prophetic pedagogy, on this reading, cannot be reduced to information transfer; it is formative communication aimed at covenantal reorientation.

Symbolic action shows that prophetic teaching is embodied. Isaiah's public sign, Jeremiah's material acts, and Hosea's family symbolism each make divine communication visible and socially unavoidable, and each creates interpretive pressure: the audience must ask what the sign means and how it implicates them. Contemporary faith-based education can learn from this by recovering symbolic, experiential, and embodied modes of teaching. Ritual, public witness, narrative enactment, service learning, and visual demonstration all become formative once they are joined to theological interpretation.

Imagery shows that prophetic teaching forms the imagination. Vineyards, cisterns, potters, wounds, marriage, children, animals, dew, land, and healing teach what covenant failure and divine restoration feel like from the inside. The lesson for religious education is that propositional explanation is not enough; teaching should also cultivate moral imagination through story, metaphor, art, lament, ecological awareness, and emotionally resonant language. Even so, metaphor demands responsible handling. Gendered and familial imagery, Hosea's above all, requires careful interpretation if theological meaning is not to be abstracted away from ethical sensitivity (Haddox, 2016; Kelle, 2005).

Public oratory shows that prophetic teaching is communal. Prophetic speeches address communities as moral agents, exposing collective denial and calling for shared repentance. Read into the present, this dimension challenges faith-based education to move beyond private spirituality toward public ethics, attending to injustice, institutional trust, social responsibility, ecological grief, and hope. It also counsels caution, since prophetic rhetoric can be appropriated ambiguously in later public life, as Keller (2020) demonstrates.

Theologically, prophetic pedagogy holds judgment and hope together. Judgment without hope collapses into despair; hope without judgment thins into sentimentality. Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea teach through confrontation, yet their aim is restoration. They expose false security so that genuine trust can be recovered, wounding complacency in order to heal covenant identity. That pattern remains significant for contemporary preaching, classroom teaching, spiritual formation, and institutional leadership in faith-based settings.

CONCLUSION

This systematic literature review-informed synthesis has shown that prophetic pedagogy in Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Hosea operates through embodied, imaginative, public, affective, and transformative modes of communication. Symbolic actions make divine messages visible and memorable; vivid imagery shapes moral imagination and theological perception; public oratory creates communal accountability and calls for ethical response. Taken together, these strategies reveal prophetic ministry as a dynamic form of religious education. The prophets teach not merely by explaining truth but by staging it, picturing it, speaking it publicly, and pressing it into the conscience of the community. For contemporary faith-based education, the model invites teachers and leaders to integrate message and method, doctrine and imagination, correction and hope, personal formation and public responsibility. Future research might extend the model to other prophetic books, test its

relevance in classroom and preaching contexts, or set prophetic pedagogy in conversation with contemporary transformative learning theories.

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