

## Session 4: From Spoken to Written Word

### A. The Written Word

#### Activity 4.1

##### Ponder these questions:

- How do you imagine a prophecy being originally given?
- Why should any of the prophets words be written down?
- Who would have done the writing?

How would a prophecy have been given? Typically, the prophet would have been in the Temple or a local shrine and have given his prophecy in answer to a question from the worshipper. Or he may have been at the king's court and have prophesied in response to a question from the king. Others, like Amos and Jeremiah, were banned from the palace or Temple from much of the time and had to seek their audience in the public places.

They would probably have had to go to the public place, called for attention and then spoken the words the Lord had given them to say. We have already seen Amos doing this in the story in chapter 7. We have seen that it is probable that the oracle in Hosea 12:2-6 was spoken at Bethel, the shrine with special links to Jacob. Isaiah 7 is an account of how the prophet met king Ahaz 'on the highway to the fuller's field' to give him his message. And Jeremiah chapters 7 and 26 contain two accounts of the Lord's instructions to Jeremiah to give his message at the gate of the Temple.

Once at the place of his or the Lord's choosing, the prophet might have spoken at length, but the core of his words would have been the prophetic oracle, the Lord's message. Usually this was spoken in the first person as a message from the Lord. Often it was in poetry, using vivid images, plays on words and evocative sounding words. All these techniques were used to give the words impact and to make them memorable. In Hebrew, many of the words of the prophets are skillful and striking poetry.

This was an oral culture: most of the prophets' audience could not read or write. To be an effective communicator it was necessary to be an arresting speaker. Moreover, in an oral culture people relied on memory far more than we do today: the prophets' words were designed to be easily memorable.

So if prophecy was designed to be spoken, listened to and remembered, why was anything written down at all? Perhaps most important because these words were recognized as the word of the Lord and therefore worth preserving. But on some occasions the motive was because the intended recipients: the kings and nobles, sometimes the whole people, did not believe the word that was spoken. On these occasions, the oracles were recorded as a way of demonstrating, when they were eventually fulfilled, that God has spoken. We have already seen this as the motive behind the scroll of Baruch in Jeremiah 2 – 6.

Who would have done the writing? Sometimes the prophet himself. But we have already seen examples of disciples associated with the great prophets, like Elijah and Elisha. In Jeremiah 36 we see the prophet himself taking the initiative to have his words committed to writing, but the actual work being carried out by his scribe, Baruch. Isaiah supplies another example:

**Isaiah 8:16-18**

Bind up the testimony, seal the teaching among my disciples. 17 I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob, and I will hope in him. 18 See, I and the children whom the Lord has given me are signs and portents in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwells on Mount Zion.

Isaiah had warned Ahaz to put his trust in Yahweh rather than ally himself with Assyria, and given him signs to show that this was the Lord's instruction. But Ahaz had refused. Convinced that disaster would ensue, Isaiah had the prophecy and the signs written down to be kept by his Isaiah's disciples so that, when the warnings came true, he or they would be able to demonstrate that the Lord had spoken.

**Activity 4.2**

Study Hosea chapters 1 to 3 and try to decide

- which part is probably written by the prophet himself
- which part is definitely not written by the prophet

Chapter 3 is an account in the first person. It is not very clear exactly what is happening, but it could well have been written by Hosea himself.

Chapter 1, verse 1 is the editor's introduction to the book as a whole. Despite the fact that Hosea's message was for the northern kingdom, Israel, there is a long list of Judaeans kings and only one king of Israel is mentioned, since the interest of the editor was in the significance of Hosea's words for his own people, the people of Judah.

The last oracle of Hosea is probably the one in 13:16, given shortly before the fall of Samaria. Either Hosea escaped to Judah shortly before the city fell or he was killed and his followers took the words with them, either remembered or in written form or a mixture of the two.

Thus in the foreground of each prophetic book is a particular prophet, but in the background is a group of disciples and it is they who are involved in the preservation of the prophet's teaching.