

Session 4: From Spoken to Written Word

C. When Spoken Word Becomes Written Word

The effect of preserving the words of the prophets in written form is that they become something different from the word as originally spoken. In spoken form the word of the Lord through the prophet is an event. It may be in the form of words or a vision, but it gives a divinely inspired insight into the situation of God's people. It is designed to produce a response, usually to call the people to change their ways, but it may produce conflict or even harden the hearts of the hearers through their refusal to respond.

Preserving the word in written form runs the risk that the living and active word given orally may die. It will certainly lose its immediate impact. It may run out of steam altogether by losing its relevance to the situation. In order to remain alive, the words of the prophets, now written down and collected, need to be re-appropriated by each succeeding generation. This too needs to be a work of the Holy Spirit, breathing life into the words again.

C1. A Process of Interpretation

Thus in the books of the prophets it is not difficult to discern a constant process of re-interpretation by successive generations of editors. To return to Hosea, we have already seen that 1:1 are the words of editors from the southern kingdom of Judah. Their concern would have been to find significance in Hosea's words for their own time. They knew that Samaria had fallen, as Hosea had predicted it would, so they knew that Hosea had been a genuine prophet, and they would have wanted to keep his words alive and reapply them for their own time, perhaps a generation later. This raises the question: How much of the book as we now have it has been added by later editors seeking to reapply Hosea's words for their own time? We start with the passage we looked at in the previous section:

Hosea 11:12 – 12:1

Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,
and the house of Israel with deceit;
but Judah still walks with God,
and is faithful to the Holy One.

Ephraim herds the wind,
and pursues the east wind all day long;
they multiply falsehood and violence;
they make a treaty with Assyria,
and oil is carried to Egypt.

Is it possible that lines 3 and 4 of this oracle have been added by Judaean editors whose aim was to contrast the unfaithfulness and idolatry of Israel with Judah's faithfulness? The oracle makes perfect sense without these words. And Hosea's interest was in his own people. References to Judah in the book as a whole are sparse and incidental. It seems more likely that these words come from the editors.

Hosea 1:7

But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the Lord their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen

Again, and for the same reasons, this may be the work of the Judaean editors. Hosea's interest was in condemning the wrong-doing in Israel, theirs was in urging their contemporaries to faith in Yahweh.

Hosea 3:5

Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days.

Again, do the words 'and David their king' come from Hosea, or are they the work of the editors? But finally consider this:

Hosea 1:11

The people of Judah and the people of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint for themselves one head; and they shall take possession of the land, for great shall be the day of Jezreel.

Here is another mention of Judah, this time in the context of an oracle of restoration. Do we assume that this too is the work of the editors? Perhaps, but perhaps not. Hosea did not think much of kings. Here he is talking about the restoration of Israel, but rather than under a king it will be under 'one head'. Part of this restoration will be the re-unification of Israel and Judah. This is the only passage in the book where re-unification is hinted at, so it is difficult to tell how strong a part of Hosea's vision it might have been, if at all. But the fact that it is coupled with the hope of a single 'head' rather than king suggests that this might be Hosea's voice.

Activity 4.4

Read Isaiah 1

- Do you think the last three verses belong with the rest of the chapter?
- What are the reasons for your decision?

Many commentators believe that verses 29-31 are a later edition.

- a) Chapter 1 begins with an editor's introduction similar to that of Hosea. But 2:1 is another introduction, probably an earlier one. This means that chapter 1 is a mini-collection, put together as a kind of preface to the whole book. As such it has a strong theme that binds the separate oracles together: the condemnation of injustice. This means that verses 29-31 are the tail end of this collection.
- b) Verse 29 introduces a new and subsidiary topic. Rather than injustice, these verses are about idolatry. They specify in more detail what Judah is to be cleansed of.
- c) Verse 28 is an obvious and very strong conclusion, while verse 31, although a conclusion, is not so strong.

So perhaps these verses are the contribution of a later editor with an interest in condemning idolatry.

This does not make their message any less relevant for us today. It simply illustrates the complex process by which the Bible came to us in its present form.

C2. The Written Word with a Life of its Own

Once written, a prophetic message loses its original context, but in return it becomes available for application to a variety of new situations. It is possible to see this taking places at various places in the prophetic books. An oracle given in one situation provides the seed for another, later, oracle in a different situation. For example:

Isaiah 22:15-25

15 Thus says the Lord God of hosts: Come, go to this steward, to Shebna, who is master of the household, and say to him: 16 What right do you have here? Who are your relatives here, that you have cut out a tomb here for yourself, cutting a tomb on the height, and carving a habitation for yourself in the rock? 17 The Lord is about to hurl you away violently, my man. He will seize firm hold of you, 18 whirl you round and round, and throw you like a ball into a wide land; there you shall die, and there your splendid chariots shall lie, O you disgrace to your master's house!

19 I will thrust you from your office, and you will be pulled down from your post. 20 On that day I will call my servant Eliakim son of Hilkiah, 21 and will clothe him with your robe and bind your sash on him. I will commit your authority to his hand, and he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. 22 I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open. 23 I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place, and he will become a throne of honour to his ancestral house.

24 And they will hang on him the whole weight of his ancestral house, the offspring and issue, every small vessel, from the cups to all the flagons. 25 On that day, says the Lord of hosts, the peg that was fastened in a secure place will give way; it will be cut down and fall, and the load that was on it will perish, for the Lord has spoken.

Isaiah of Jerusalem hated pride, perhaps because his call had confronted him with the majesty of God, in comparison to which all human claims to power and pre-eminence seemed paltry.

Isaiah 2:12-17 is a memorable denunciation of human pride. In verses 15-18 of chapter 22, Isaiah denounces Shebna, one of the king's high officials for the pride expressed in the preparation of an elaborate tomb. Verse 19 begins a new oracle, this time in the first rather than third person, and beginning again with Shebna's removal from office and announcing the appointment of Eliakim in his stead.

Verses 24 and 25, however, are a denunciation of Eliakim for nepotism: arranging jobs in the palace for all his 'ancestral house', his 'offspring and issue', something that could not be known at the time of his appointment. The image of a peg in verse 23 has been taken up by the later oracle and changed its significance. Instead of a peg in a sure place, Eliakim is the peg on which his whole family is hanging, and will soon become dislodged because of the weight.

Thus the previous oracle, recorded for posterity, perhaps when Eliakim was appointed, becomes the seed of a new prediction of his downfall.