

## And the Word Became Prophet

JACOBUS DE BRUYN, NORTH-WEST UNIVERSITY, POTCHEFSTROOM  
CAMPUS

### ABSTRACT

*When scribes and priests in the post-exilic period of Israel's history started to write down or to compile the word of God, a process was initiated whereby prophecy was no longer transmitted orally, but through texts. This was part of the first steps for the written word to "become prophet."*

*However, during this process, it was not just the text that exerted prophetic power, but also the interpreter. This meant that although the post-exilic Jewish community had a text-centred orientation, the illiterate were dependent on the literate interpretations of the texts. This brought a new dilemma for the listener: which interpretation would be more accurate than others? This dilemma can also be expressed in terms of the authority of the text versus the authority of the interpreter. By writing down the word of God, the seeds were sown by which the authority of texts was also undermined. The problem is that no text can on its own act as prophet without the aid of an interpreter.*

### A INTRODUCTION

Together with the NT, the OT is seen as the highest authority in the Christian life. The Word is seen to exert power. Up to the present day the Hebrew Bible<sup>1</sup> is accepted as the medium through which God through the ages has spoken to his people and church.

The use of mediums of communication between Yahweh and his people was mainly a development of the Second Temple Period. During this period in history priestly scribes (e.g. Ezra)<sup>2</sup> started to write down and compile earlier records of Israel's history and traditions. The written records of the words and work of prophets were also collected. The priests began to interpret and reinterpret these written records as part of their function to reveal God's will. Thus, during this period, God's Words and will were not transmitted orally, but in

---

<sup>1</sup> The term "*Hebrew Bible*" is used as a synonym for the term "*Old Testament*." Both terms are employed in the full knowledge that the OT Canon of the Roman Catholics contains more books than the Canon of the Protestants. However, in this article the focus is on the Hebrew texts of the OT, which are known collectively as the *Tenach*.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Neh 8:1-2 where Ezra is called a scribe as well as a priest.

literary form.<sup>3</sup> The scribes recognised the power of having a written text rather than oral traditions. However, the question remains: who benefited the most from this newfound power? The receiver? Yahweh? The texts as such? Or was it the interpreter? The development in this regard forms the scope of this article.

With the development of canon criticism and redaction criticism the question arose as to why and how God's Word was written down.<sup>4</sup> In the same vein I would like to add some questions of my own. Why was God's Word transmitted literary rather than orally? Why do oral prophets appear less frequently in the Second Temple Period? In this article I will provide an overview of the development of literary prophecy. Possible reasons for the transition from oral prophecy to literary prophecy and the consequences of this transition will be reviewed. My contribution to the debate will be an attempt to show that one of the reasons for transmitting God's Word by literary means was the idea that written words carry a greater impact and have more authority than oral words.

At the same time I shall also point to the advantage of written texts for text interpreters. A written text is there for all to read and see and thus unchangeable. Oral words on the other hand are subjected to the ability to remember correctly and thus they are changeable. Words, which have been proclaimed to be messages from God, to have a divine origin, would have more "power" over people when it is in a written form. Writing down the words of God would make oral prophets unnecessary. It is then just a matter of time before the written word itself became prophet – a medium of communication between God and his people.

## **B THE ORAL PROPHET**

Before the Hebrew Bible was canonised as "*Word of God*," God did not as a norm speak to his people via written texts, but by means of oral prophets. From the time of the Exodus till the Second Temple Period, oral prophets formed an integral part of Israel's history. These prophets received God's Word from the divine realm with the purpose to speak on behalf of the deity as his mouthpiece.<sup>5</sup> <sup>6</sup> Prophetism was not a phenomenon just practised in Israel; it was part

---

<sup>3</sup> Martti Nissinen, "Comparing Prophetic Sources," in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 18-19.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald E. Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 204.

<sup>5</sup> Jack R. Lundbom, *The Hebrew Prophets: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 805.

<sup>6</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Michigan: Zondervan), 2007.

of the culture of all the nations from the Ancient Near East (ANE).<sup>7</sup> In accordance with the monotheistic religion of Israel, we can define an "oral prophet" as a human medium acting between the God of Israel and his people. Take note that this definition can easily be transferred and applied to written texts. But for now we will focus on the task of the human prophet.

Different ways existed by which the prophets received prophecies. In past research, a distinction was made between prophecy and divination.<sup>8</sup> Prophecy was described as a non-inductive or an inspired form of divination.<sup>9</sup> This means that the diviner does not employ any special techniques to receive a message from the deity (or deities) as was the case with inductive divination. With inductive divination, a person could use a range of techniques such as astrology, pouring oil on water, slaughtering of animals, studying the stars or the movement of clouds, or by using drugs.<sup>10</sup> "Specialised knowledge" and therefore "special training" was required for this form of divination. It is important to note that inductive divination was no less initiated from the divine realm (Yahweh) than non-inductive divination (prophecy). Inductive divination almost always formed part of the practices of established cult(s).

Not all forms of inductive divination were practiced in Israel (cf. Deut 18:9-13). Nevertheless, we know that it formed part of the cults of Israel and Judah. The best examples of such divination are the priestly use of the *urim* and *tummim*<sup>11</sup> (cf. Lev 2:63; Ezra 27:21) or the *ephod* (1 Sam 2:28, 23:9). In Israel, as was the case in the rest of the Ancient Near East (ANE), the cult priests practised the various forms of inductive divination. At the temple the priests were educated in the arts and skills of divination. In Israel the Levites under the leadership of the Aaronite high priests were called and established by God to reveal his will through their actions within the temple cult.

---

<sup>7</sup> Nissinen, "Comparing Prophetic Sources," 4-6; Gerda De Villiers, "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East," *HTS* 66 (2010): 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Robert P. Carroll, "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel," *VT* 19 (1969): 401; De Villiers, "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East," 2-3; Samuel R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 227.

<sup>9</sup> John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 240.

<sup>10</sup> Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament*, 248.

<sup>11</sup> Anne M. Kitz, "The Hebrew Terminology of Lot Casting and its Ancient Near Eastern Context," *CBQ* 62 (2000): 207-214.

Today the sharp distinction between inductive and non-inductive divination is no longer tenable.<sup>12</sup> Presently scholars prefer to focus on the common goal of both forms of divination, namely to reveal and preach the will of *Yahweh* (or the deity) and by doing so, to influence society around them. This common goal in all forms of divinations or prophetism provides the basis for a broader approach in defining "prophecy."

Therefore, the above definition of an "oral prophet" as a medium can be broadened by defining him or her as a person who transmits messages from God and by doing so reveals the will and plans of God to the community.<sup>13</sup> Prophets conveyed God's opinion, reactions, intentions and his very words to God's people. Prophets were to give guidance to Israel. In addition, the "prophet" sometimes interpreted events in the light of or as part of a larger picture, as it was planned and orchestrated by God (e.g. Daniel).

From the above definition of "prophet" we can deduce that "prophetism" in general refers to the act of communicating the word of God, with the purpose of influencing the cult and or political life of Israel. Through prophetism the invisible God also becomes audible.<sup>14</sup>

There were however, problems regarding oral prophetism. One problem was how people would know that a prophet was indeed a messenger from God. Studying the Hebrew Bible one would gather that it was not always an easy task to determine which prophet spoke on behalf of God, and which prophet did not. In some cases prophets even contradicted one another. Some of the best examples are the narratives of Micah and Zedekiah (1 Kgs 22:10-28) and Jeremiah and Hananiah (Jer 28). False prophets were thus indeed part of Israel's history (Isa 29:10; Jer 23-9-40; Ezra 13; Mic 2:6). The advice of Deut 18:22<sup>15</sup> did not always help in concrete situations, for it still did not give people the knowledge to judge the accuracy or inaccuracy of a particular prophecy. It was simply not always possible to wait and see which prophet's words would come true or not.

---

<sup>12</sup> Nissinen, "Comparing Prophetic Sources," 16-18; Matthijs J. De Jong, *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 313; De Villiers, "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East," 2-3.

<sup>13</sup> Nissinen, "Comparing Prophetic Sources," 18-19; De Villiers, "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East," 1.

<sup>14</sup> Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology*, 805.

<sup>15</sup> "And if thou say in thine heart, How shall we know the word which the LORD hath not spoken? When a prophet speaketh in the name of the LORD, if the thing follows not, nor come to pass, that is the thing which the LORD hath not spoken, but the prophet hath spoken it presumptuously: thou shalt not be afraid of him" (King James Version).

Another problem with oral prophecy was that it depended on people's ability to remember accurately. It is with prudence that I use Eve's inability to remember God's words correctly (Gen 3) as an example.<sup>16</sup> However, we all would acknowledge the fact that people at times intend to forget and convey messages that they heard, differently. This fact implies that transmitting a prophet's exact words to someone else would be subjected to human error.

The religious leaders of Israel were forced to find a solution for these problems with the crisis of the Babylonian Exile. The exile in itself was a kind of proof (cf. Deut 28) that the people did not have the ability to make a distinction between "false" and "true" prophets. It is not known how many of the original "true" prophets were during or after the exile still available to help the people correct their mistakes. There was but one solution: collect or write down the words of Yahweh's "true" prophets – those, whose words and actions foretold the exile. Written texts could help to overcome the problem of Deut 18:22 for it could reduce the margin of error in the choices people have to make about the will of God. At the same time written texts could serve as surrogates for prophets of old who were no longer reachable physically.<sup>17</sup>

Besides the above two problems with oral prophecy there was yet another problem that presented itself, but this was not so much a problem for Israel as it was for the oral prophets themselves. The problem was that the people, for whom a prophecy was meant, could not always be reached by oral means. This was a problem that both Jeremiah and Ezekiel had to overcome. Both of them handled the problem in much the same way: seeing that the people after the exile no longer had access to the original "true" oral prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel wrote down their prophecies in the format of letters (cf. Jer 29; Ezek 43).<sup>18</sup> Jeremiah was given instruction by God himself to write a letter to the people who were already in exile (Jer 29). Meier<sup>19</sup> states that Ezekiel is the first prophet whose book was composed intentionally as a written communication, from the beginning to the end. I concur with Meier<sup>20</sup> that by writing down their own prophetic words, these prophets paved the way for the transition of oral prophecy to written or textual prophecy.

As stated above, if the written word was the gift of prophetic speech and even commanded by God himself, then it would be only a matter of time before the texts themselves would be seen as surrogates to the prophets. Once you have reached that point it is only a small step for the texts as such to become

---

<sup>16</sup> In Gen 2:16-17, God only said that man may not eat of the tree of knowledge, but in Gen 3:3 Eve added her own words to the word of God: *neither shall you touch*.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel A. Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy* (Downer's Grove, Ill.: Inter Varsity Press, 2009), 102.

<sup>18</sup> Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*, 101-110.

<sup>19</sup> Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*, 106.

<sup>20</sup> Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*, 101-110.

mediums of communications between Yahweh and his people, and thus for the texts to become prophet.

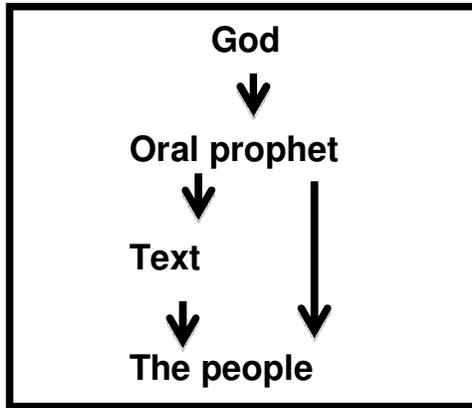


Figure 1

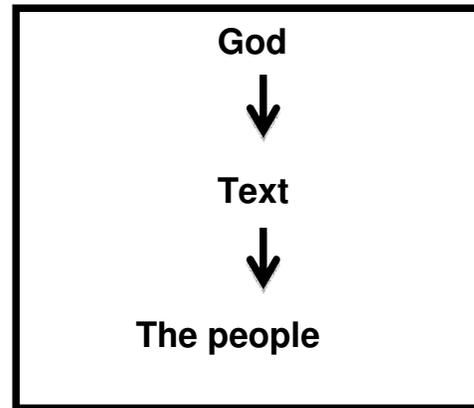


Figure 2

In Figure 1 the text is a medium of the oral prophet to transmit the words of God. In Figure 2 the text in its own right becomes a medium of God and no longer serves as surrogate for the oral prophet.

### C THE SCRIBE / EDITOR OR COMPOSER AS PROPHET

During the Second Temple Period, priests developed another form of inductive divination. During this period in history, priestly scribes (for example Ezra)<sup>21</sup> started to write down and compile records of Israel's history and traditions. The written records of the words and work of prophets were also collected. The priests started to interpret and reinterpret these written records as part of their function as revealers of God's will. Thus, in this period, God's words and will were not transmitted orally, but in literary form.<sup>22</sup> In this sense prophetism became *literary inclined*.

There may be different reasons why the oral prophetic word was written down. As argued above, one reason may have been that the text could then become a surrogate for the oral prophet. Another reason may have been that texts could be a counter measure for false oral prophets. But there can be more reasons.<sup>23</sup> One such reason may be the preservation of Israel's history and traditions with the intention that later generations could learn from Israel's history, not only about Yahweh, but also from Israel's mistakes. Written texts could thus be used to teach. In this regard scribes collected and preserved teachings and sayings (wisdom literature) of predecessors. These collections of teachings and sayings transcend space and time partly because they are not

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Neh 8:1-2 where Ezra is called a scribe as well as a priest.

<sup>22</sup> Nissinen, "Comparing Prophetic Sources," 18-19.

<sup>23</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 219, 224.

bound to a specific group or historical era and partly because they focus on humankind in general.<sup>24</sup> By collecting and compiling these "wisdom" literatures, such "wisdom" texts served as surrogates for the original teachers. At the same time, compilations such as the Pentateuch gave the emerging post-exilic Jewish community a shared ethnic identity.<sup>25</sup> A second reason may be that the editor(s) believed that some of God's promises in the past could still be fulfilled in the future.

In the light of the above a third reason can be added. Writing down, collecting and compiling the words of prophets, Israel's history and traditions could be a way by which a post-exilic community learned to cope with their frustrations and disappointments. This means that the written texts could also be used to teach others, so that later generations in particular would have the knowledge to conduct themselves according to the will of Yahweh and to fulfil their obligations to God.<sup>26</sup> The collection of prophetic texts was seen as "collecting the divine will as it was revealed in the past." This eliminated the need for additional, on-going revelation and may be the one reason why oral prophets became less and less prominent in the Second Temple Period.<sup>27</sup>

The logical place to start the collection of texts would have been the recollection of time and places in the past where Yahweh himself commanded that his words should be written down. The Hebrew Bible narrates that in some cases in the history of Israel, the words of Yahweh were written down to be preserved for later generations. The best examples are the "Book of the Covenant" (Exod 24:7) and the Ten Commandments (Exod 34). From the narrative in 2 Kgs 22, we can derive that at least some of the later generations used these texts as authoritative and that the texts held some power: when king Josiah heard the words of the book of the law, he rent his clothes (2 Kgs 22:11). The authority and power of this law book became even greater when Yahweh told the king that He would bring evil over Jerusalem, just as it was told in the book of the law (2 Kgs 22:15-17). For the post-exilic Jewish community these words of Yahweh, and thus the words of the law book, were fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian Exile. The destruction of Jerusa-

---

<sup>24</sup> James L. Crenshaw, "Transmitting Prophecy across Generations," in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 31-44.

<sup>25</sup> Diana V. Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books: The Fixing of the Divine Word," in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi; London: Equinox, 2009), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ehud Ben Zvi, "The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud: An Introduction and an Invitation," in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi; London: Equinox, 2009), 41; Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books," 41.

<sup>27</sup> Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books," 29.

lem and the temple would surely have strengthened the idea that the written words of Yahweh had power.

In the case of the prophet Jeremiah, Yahweh commanded him to write down the words of God, and by doing so to emphasise that they would come true (Jer 30:2-7). When Jeremiah's prophecies came true, the written record of his words would stand as confirmation of his foresight and that he truly spoke in the Name of Yahweh.<sup>28</sup> I would contend that God commanded Jeremiah to write down his words, and that this and the fulfilment of the written prophecies would have been contributing factors to the authority and power of written texts. By accepting the authority of such texts, God's authority is accepted, as He is the divine power and inspiration behind these texts.

With the collection of texts and records of Israel's earlier history, the priestly scribes began to compile these texts and records into larger and more complex compositions. Over many stages of growth, the unity between smaller units and texts were carefully planned. When one studies these great compilations, it is obvious that these compilations were motivated by theological aims.<sup>29</sup> That is, the scribes, whom we can call editors, compiled, reworked and interpreted their compositions with a specific aim in mind. The aim of a scribe was to "speak" through his work to his readers and convey a specific message. This would be a message that he believes to be part of the "prophetic word." These scribal editors knew that apart from words having meaning, the linguistic shape and character of a text or book can also be a communicative tool.<sup>30</sup> In this, the editors did not just preserve the oral prophet's words or earlier written records; they added some of their own thoughts as well to make the oral prophet's words or the older written record clearer. In this act the editor becomes an evaluator of the oral prophet and older written records.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Meier, *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*, 101-102.

<sup>29</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 204-205.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Zvi, "The Production of Prophecy," 22.

<sup>31</sup> Donald B. Redford, "Scribe and Seaker," in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy* (eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael H. Floyd; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 145-218; A good example of how editors transmitted their message through the linguistic shape of a compiled text is the *Psalter*. Psalms, like the royal king-psalms (Pss 2, 24, 74, 110) were carefully placed within the compilation of the *Psalter* to possibly convey an eschatological message about an era when Israel again would be ruled by a son of David. See Georg P. Braulik, "Psalter and Messiah: Towards a Christological understanding of the Psalms in the Old Testament and the Church Fathers," in *Psalms and Liturgy* (eds. Dirk J. Human and Cas J. A. Vos; New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 22. At the same time the *Psalter* was given by editors a "Tora character," in order for the *Psalter* to be used in teaching, as much as the Tora itself; see James L. Mays, *Psalms* (IBC; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 15-19.

---

Clements<sup>32</sup> emphasises that only by writing down a prophetic message from God does it become possible for the written text to be seen as divinely inspired. Therefore, it would be only a matter of time before a compilation of divinely inspired texts were also acclaimed as prophetic words. In my view, this makes the editor a type of "prophet" in his own right. Naturally the editor's message would be shaped by his own school of thoughts and viewpoints as he interprets the older records and texts.

Today it is the work of canon and redaction criticism to help us identify and understand the messages of these different editors and their different schools of thought and theology. One such school of thought would naturally have its centre in Jerusalem. Here the text of the Hebrew Bible was shaped into its present form, read, reread and interpreted within a tight-knit cohesive social group.<sup>33</sup>

According to Clements<sup>34</sup> there are three ways in which written or literal prophecy differ from oral prophecy. In written prophecy paradigms or patterns are first formed so that prophecy relating to one set of historical circumstances can be adapted to other situations. The second way of differentiating between written and oral prophecy is closely linked to the first. A written prophecy can be removed from its original historical context and made part of a much larger and wider scheme of divine revelation, as it can be read in the light of other prophetic texts. The third feature whereby written prophecy differs from oral prophecy is that words and metaphors could have multiple meanings and so could be interpreted in more than one way. This, in my opinion, could result in the reader facing a dilemma, for the reader could choose the wrong meaning among the different possible options.

To assure the correct reading of a text, knowledge is necessary, knowledge that is attained through studying the text closely. This in itself is not a problem, but not all people can study prophetic texts as thoroughly as is required. This can lead to the prophetic text being interpreted by a select few, and if care is not taken the people who depend on the select few's interpretation could possibly ask, "Who of the interpreters is the true interpreter?"

## **D THE INTERPRETER AS PROPHET**

It is true that during the Second Temple Period the texts of the OT were not yet canonised as it is available today in the Hebrew Bible, but the priests or scribes who used the texts, applied and interpreted them as authoritative texts.<sup>35</sup> One of the best examples of an authoritative text is Neh 8. This text is used to instruct

---

<sup>32</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 206.

<sup>33</sup> Ben Zvi, "The Production of Prophecy," 16-17.

<sup>34</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 176-177.

<sup>35</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 178.

people. Ezra the priestly scribe, as well as some other Levites, instructed the people as they read from the Law of God. But we also read that they interpreted the text so that the people would understand it (Neh 8:8). This means that although people could read the words of a text, they may not yet have understood it. So, even when words were written down, these words could only be interpreted correctly if they were read within the tradition (the mind and framework) of the original authors or prophets. The people who preserved these "correct traditions" were originally the Levite priests and scribes, but as we gather from the history of Israel during the Second Temple Period, different schools of interpretation existed, for example Qumran, the Pharisees and Sadducees. It is an accepted fact that if we read the Hebrew Bible we will find that it is compiled of texts stemming from different schools of interpretations, such as those of the Deuteromist and the Chronist. All this leads to the conclusion that, even though a text may be authoritative or even divinely inspired, the interpreter also has a prophetic role to play as a medium between the divine realm and the people. This type of prophetism was originally part of the work of the priests and it is closely related to the prophetic role of the editor, for many of the editorial work on texts were done by the priests themselves.

The role of the interpreter as prophet was not only confined to teaching or interpreting of texts. It went as far as writing down interpretations as a commentary on these texts. The existence of the *midrashim* testifies to this. But as Clements<sup>36</sup> argues, the rise of apocalyptic works such as Daniel were also the work of interpreters who interpreted historical events in the light of a divine plan. By doing so they called their readers to be true to God. Clements<sup>37</sup> contends that apocalypticism is an extension of interpretation and reinterpretation. In doing so, these interpreters indeed fulfilled a prophetic role.

In my opinion, by interpreting texts and teaching people, the interpreters gained some authoritative power over the Jewish community. The interpreter's rendition was shaped by his own school of thought. The Jewish community was therefore subject to a particular interpretation based on a particular school of thought, as was indicated above. So even though one of the reasons for writing down the word of God was to take precaution against false oral prophets, the ordinary people could still easily fall victim to "wrong" interpretations by interpreters. In this way the role of the interpreter as prophet could easily undermine the written word as prophet.

## **E THE "WORD" AS PROPHET**

It is interesting to read that when Ezra opened the book of the Law the people stood up (Neh 5:8) and when they heard the words of the Law they wept (Neh 8:9). Of course one must be careful not to read too much into the text, but it

<sup>36</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 178-179.

<sup>37</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 182.

could be seen as an example of the power of written words. When they stood up, the people recognised the authority of the Law over their lives. The fact that they wept surely must have had something to do with the recognition that their forefathers did not uphold the words of the Law and therefore they were sent into exile, just as the Law "predicted" (Deut 28:36).

The destruction of Jerusalem and Samaria, and the exile served as a reminder of the power of God's word. These events occurred just as God predicted.<sup>38</sup> In the narrative of 2 Kgs 22 the written words of the book of the covenant made the king and his counsellors afraid. It was as if they knew that their "wrong" actions would invoke the curses of the written word against them. Something God told them had already happened and therefore He would do to them as it was said in the book of the covenant. So Yahweh told the king that Israel would go into exile. King Josiah tried to nullify the written words through his reformation. However, it was too late, for Israel did go into exile just as the written words of the Law predicted. For later generations this must have been an example of the power of prediction of the written word.

Also, Jeremiah wrote down some of his words as he was instructed by Yahweh. These written prophecies became true and therefore the written text must have some kind of power.<sup>39</sup> In my opinion this is an important factor indicating the authority of the written word, for if God's spoken word had the power of prediction, the written words of Yahweh were a constant reminder of this power. Furthermore, if a community believes that there are still words of God that needs to be fulfilled, words that He has spoken as promises of hope, rebuilding and reconciliation between Him and his people, then it is just a matter of time before written texts that testify of these promises would become authoritative and have power over the believer. Not only is the written word then a reminder of things that happened just as Yahweh said it would, but it becomes a reminder of things that are yet to come. In this way the written word starts to serve as a medium in its own right between Yahweh and the reader, just as the oral prophet had.

In the light of this insight we can take note of the way in which Daniel employed the prophecies of Jeremiah about the lapse of 70 years between the exile and return (Dan 9:1-27; Jer 25:11-12; 29:10).<sup>40</sup> Not only is Daniel's way of using the written Jeremiah-text noteworthy, but it is even more interesting if we take into consideration the fact that the Book of Daniel was written during the reign of Antiochus IV Epiphanus during the time in which he persecuted

<sup>38</sup> Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books," 49.

<sup>39</sup> Rannfrid I. Thelle, "MT Jeremiah: Reflections of a Discourse on Prophecy in the Persian Period," in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi; London: Equinox, 2009), 188-189.

<sup>40</sup> Crenshaw, "Transmitting Prophecy across Generations," 37.

the Jews. In the time the Book of Daniel was written, the author used the Jeremiah prophecy in a new historical setting with the message that the Jewish community's tribulation would come to an end, just as there had been an end to the Babylonian exile.

With this in mind Thelle<sup>41</sup> states: "*Written documentation plays a role in the idea of future realization of restoration after judgement ...*" I build on this notion and state: "And so the word becomes prophet."

Of course, these written texts could only exert power and have authority if those who could read it, accepted it as powerful. Not all of Israel or the post-exilic Jewish community could read. Not all of Israel or the post-exilic Jews were collecting texts or writing down Israel's history. It were scribes such as Ezra who began to collect, read and interpret texts and taught the community that these texts were the words of God. Reading these texts in public vindicated them as authoritative and showed that they had power. Albertz<sup>42</sup> is of the opinion that public reading of these texts supported the idea that partly realised prophecies of salvation still had to be fulfilled in the future. In my opinion it gave these texts more power over the minds of the community.

## **F THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TRANSITION FROM ORAL TO WRITTEN PROPHETISM**

I concur with Clements<sup>43</sup> when he states that one of the consequences of writing down the "Word of God" was that it paved the way for a true study of theology. Now it became possible to study and apply and reapply the "Words of God." In this way we can also understand more of God and his workings. With the destruction of the temple in 586 B.C.E. the cult of Yahweh no longer needed to be tied to a specific place of worship; instead it became centred around the studying of texts.<sup>44</sup> It is therefore no wonder that the post-exilic community of Jerusalem became a textual-centred community, that is, a community where authoritative written texts were the central focus of that community.<sup>45</sup> Thus texts, classified as "Word of God," had power over the people.

It is then noteworthy to remark that if a community becomes centred on the studying and interpretation of texts, then the possibility arises that written prophecy could become a way to legitimise political or religious ideas and

---

<sup>41</sup> Thelle, "MT Jeremiah," 196.

<sup>42</sup> Rainer Albertz, "Public Recitation of Prophetic Books? The Case of the First Edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40:1-52-12)" in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (eds. Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, London: Equinox, 2009), 105.

<sup>43</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 216.

<sup>44</sup> Edelman, "From Prophets to Prophetic Books," 47.

<sup>45</sup> Ben Zvi, "The Production of Prophecy," 25.

practices of the community concerned.<sup>46</sup> The actions of Ezra as it is narrated in Ezra 8-10 can be taken as an example. He and the elders decided to send away all the "strange" women, a reference to women who, according to their interpretation of the law of God, were not Jews.

The legitimisation of political and religious ideas and practices is one of the possible negative consequences of written prophecy. However, it could also have positive consequences if the texts are used as the basis of an orderly community where people live in harmony with their neighbours (Exod 20 and Deut 5). Furthermore, the writing down of Israel's history and the words of God led to the preservation of Israel's past and provided theological ideas for later generations. This helped to give the post-exilic community a unified identity.

The transition of prophecy from an oral to a written form did not merely lead to the disappearance of oral prophets, but it also led to the emergence of the "interpreter-prophet." I am of the opinion that this paved the way for the dilemma of the "word as prophet" versus the "interpreter as prophet." This implied a hermeneutical tension between the authority of the written word and the intervention of the interpreter of the text. Even though the first editors and interpreters may not necessarily have intended it, the interpreting of texts and written records can directly undermine the prophetic authority of a written text.

It is one thing to say that holy texts hold the highest authority in a society, but it is a different matter altogether to apply this "highest authority" to ordinary life. As stated earlier in this article, not all people in post-exile Jerusalem were able to read. The reading of the "word of God" or the "prophetic word" was thus limited to a few literates, mainly from the Levites.

It is still true today that to understand the Hebrew Bible, this form of literature must be understood and studied within its own framework. Although many more people are literate today, not all people study the Hebrew text; it is still a minority who studies and interprets the written word of God, thus subjecting the majority to the interpretations of the "informed" minority. This means that the written text cannot be a prophet in its own right, as it still needs an interpreter. But more significantly, the written word gives the interpreter power. Should the heading of this article, "*and the word became prophet*," therefore not be changed to "*and the interpreter became prophet*"? One could even start to speculate as to the reason why God's words were written down in the first place. Was it really a case of all the reasons given above? Or was it rather done to make the texts become mediums of the interpreters and to give the interpreters power?

---

<sup>46</sup> Clements, *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*, 223.

The problem of interpretation versus prophetic text probably would not be as significant if all interpretations were in harmony with each other. But as already indicated, we know that it is not the reality. Thus the hearers are left with the dilemma to choose the more correct interpretation. Hearers need to know in what way there is coherence between the authority of the text and the interpretation.

## **G CONCLUSION**

In concluding this article, some important points will be reiterated. The crisis of the Babylonian Exile led to a reformation of the Jewish faith. The post-exilic Jewish community developed into a community centred on authoritative texts instead of the temple. Scribal priests began to write down the Word of God or to collect and compile earlier written records thereof as well as of the history of Israel. These written texts were interpreted as the Word of God. This started a process where the prophetic Word of God underwent a transition from an oral form to a written form. Several reasons can be given for this process.

- Written texts could counter false oral prophets.
- The written text could serve as a surrogate for the prophet.
- Israel's history and traditions would be preserved for later generations.
- Written texts were used to teach later generations.
- Compilations such as the Pentateuch gave the emerging post-exilic Jewish community a shared ethnic identity.
- People believed that some of God's promises in the past could still be fulfilled in future and the written word was a reminder of this guarantee.
- Writing down the history of Israel could have been a way by which a post-exilic community learned to cope with their frustrations and disappointments.

The transition of prophecy from an oral form to a written form made oral prophets redundant. Instead of oral prophets, the written texts as such became mediums of the divine will, just as the oral prophets had been. With the decline of the oral prophets, not only did the written word become prophetic, but a new prophetic role was established without which the written word could not be "prophet" in full. This was at first the role of the scribe or editor who wrote or compiled the written texts. But it was also the role of the interpreter. In my opinion the interpreter was or is the one with the actual power, for the illiterate was and even is still dependent on the interpreter's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

Although this article was written as an overview of the process by which the oral "word of God" took on the form of a written text, it is important to take note of the dilemma in which the meaning of the written prophetic text becomes dependent on the interpreter's understanding of the text. By writing down the word of God, the seeds were sown which would undermine the authority of texts, for no text can be prophet on its own without an interpreter. The dilemma is in short: written texts needs to be interpreted.

This dilemma led me to wonder whether this transitional process was not rather a process where power was transferred from the oral prophet, or maybe from God himself, to the interpreter. Maybe it really was a case of: "*and the word became prophet ... and the interpreter became g/God.*"

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Albertz, Rainer. "Public Recitation of Prophetic Books? The Case of the First Edition of Deutero-Isaiah (Isa. 40:1-52-12)." Pages 96-110 in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*. Edited by Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi. London: Equinox, 2009.
- Ben Zvi, Ehud. "The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud: An Introduction and an Invitation." Pages 15-28 in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*. Edited by Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi. London: Equinox, 2009.
- Braulik, Georg P. "Psalter and Messiah: Towards a Christological Understanding of the Psalms in the Old Testament and the Church Fathers." Pages 15-40 in *Psalms and Liturgy*. Edited by Dirk J. Human and Cas J. A. Vos. New York: T&T Clark, 2004.
- Carroll, Robert P. "The Elijah-Elisha Sagas: Some Remarks on Prophetic Succession in Ancient Israel." *Vetus Testamentum* 19 (1969): 400-415.
- Clements, Ronald E. *Old Testament Prophecy: From Oracles to Canon*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.
- Crenshaw, James L. "Transmitting Prophecy across Generations." Pages 31-44 in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*. Edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael. H. Floyd. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.
- De Jong, Matthijs J. *Isaiah among the Ancient Near Eastern Prophets*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.
- De Villiers, Gerda. "The Origin of Prophetism in the Ancient Near East." *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66 (2010): 359-364.
- Driver, Samuel R. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902.
- Edelman, Diana V. "From Prophets to Prophetic Books: The Fixing of the Divine Word." Pages 29-54 in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*. Edited by Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi. London: Equinox, 2009.
- Freedman, David N. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Volume 4 (Me-R); Cambridge: Wm.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2000.

- Kitz, Anne M. "The Hebrew Terminology of Lot Casting and its Ancient Near Eastern Context." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 62 (2000): 207-214.
- Lundbom, Jack R. *The Hebrew Prophets: An Introduction*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Mays, James L. *Psalms. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994.
- Meier, Samuel A. *Themes and Transformations in Old Testament Prophecy*. Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2009.
- Nissinen, Martti. "Comparing Prophetic Sources." Pages 3-24 in *Prophecy and the Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*. Edited by John. Day. New York: T&T Clark, 2010.
- Redford, Donald B. "Scribe and Seaker." Pages 145-218 in *Writings and Speech in Israelite and Ancient Near Eastern Prophecy*. Edited by Ehud Ben Zvi and Michael. H. Floyd. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000.
- Thelle, Rannfrid I. "MT Jeremiah: Reflections of a Discourse on Prophecy in the Persian Period." Pages 184-207 in *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud*. Edited by Diana V. Edelman and Ehud Ben Zvi, London: Equinox, 2009.
- Waltke, Bruce K. *An Old Testament Theology*. Michigan: Zondervan, 2007.
- Walton, John H. *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006.

Joseph Jacobus de Bruyn, School of Ancient Languages and Text Studies, North-West University (Potchefstroom Campus). *Email*: jacobus.debruyn@gmx.com.