LESSON 6 *October 31–November 6

(page 46 of Standard Edition)

The Prophetic Writings



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 17:14; Isa. 13:1; Jer. 36:17, 18; Rom. 16:22; Luke 1:1–4; Jude 14, 15; 2 Cor. 4:7.*

Memory Text: **"For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope"** *(Romans 15:4, NKJV).*

How would you like to be taught a song that God Himself composed? In Deuteronomy 32, the lyrics were written down by Moses at God's direction *(Deut. 31:19–22)*. We don't usually think of songs when we think of prophetic writings, though many of the psalms are, indeed, inspired songs, even if the lyrics themselves were not dictated directly by the Lord Himself.

The Bible describes three major ways that prophets communicated God's messages: (1) orally, (2) through writing, and (3) through symbolic actions or dramatizations. This week we will focus on the writings in the Scriptures. The Bible records the Word of God, as expressed through the words of His messengers, including sermons and speeches of the prophets.

Think of the variety of writing styles and genres in the prophetic writings: narrative, history, poetry, lament, and letters, just to name a few. Chosen men and women put into human language what they were led by the Holy Spirit to communicate. This week we will look at their writing, the use of literary assistants (secretaries), and at things to keep in mind when studying challenging passages.

** Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 7.*

The Call to Write

The earliest method that God used to convey messages to humanity was through direct oral communication, such as audible voices, or dreams, or angels. It was not until the time of Moses that Scripture records the first divine instruction regarding these experiences, which was to write in a "book" what God had spoken.

What is the first mention of writing in the Bible? Read Exodus 17:14.

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In the Old Testament we find multiple examples of God's giving directions to His messengers to preserve His words for His people. Like Moses, Jeremiah was told, " 'Take a scroll of a book and write on it all the words that I have spoken to you against Israel, against Judah, and against all the nations, from the day I spoke to you, from the days of Josiah even to this day' " *(Jer. 36:2, NKJV)*.

He was also given the reason he was to write out the prophecies: " 'It may be that the house of Judah will hear all the adversities which I purpose to bring upon them, that everyone may turn from his evil way, that I may forgive their iniquity and their sin' " *(Jer. 36:3, NKJV)*. The predictions were given to lead the people to salvation, rather than for the sake of curiosity about the future.

God's messengers wrote under a great variety of circumstances. Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible while in the desert. David composed several of his psalms while being hunted by Saul *(see Psalms 52, 54, 57, 59)*. Daniel wrote his visions while serving in the courts of Babylon and Medo-Persia. In contrast, Paul wrote his letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon while he was in prison, and John wrote Revelation while exiled on Patmos. It is evident that when God's messengers were impressed to write, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit regardless of their circumstances.

Interestingly, all the preserved teachings of Jesus come to us in written form through persons God chose to entrust with those treasured truths. This shows us the confidence God has that divine messages would be faithfully recorded and preserved by His messengers.

How would you answer someone who says that we cannot trust the Bible because we do not have the original manuscripts? Why is that, really, a weak argument?

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Literary Genres and Styles

The Bible contains a variety of writing styles used by God's inspired messengers. Some resemble the writing of a diary *(see Num. 33:1–49)*. On the other hand, the books of Daniel, Zechariah, and John contain examples of apocalyptic writing, which is marked by grand symbolism, cosmic themes, and descriptions of heavenly beings, among other characteristics.

Read Isaiah 13:1. How does the Bible here refer to the message Isaiah is giving?

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Visions received by the prophets are sometimes called "oracles"—meaning that they are communications or revelations from God (some versions translate the word as "burden"). Newer translations of the Bible show that many were written out in poetic form, often using parallelism. Parallelism is when subsequent lines repeat or sometimes contrast with earlier lines. For example: "In that day a man will look to his Maker, and his eyes will have respect for the Holy One of Israel" *(Isa. 17:7, NKJV)*. "Maker" and "Holy One" are in parallel to each other, each image giving us more information about the other.

The prophets also used common literary devices such as metaphors (symbols) and hyperbole (exaggeration). For us to understand better and apply their messages, it is important to recognize the kind of writing that they used.

Another literary style frequently found in Scripture is the "covenant lawsuit." For example, in Jeremiah 2:4–9, Jeremiah presents God's legal complaint against His people for violating their covenantal obligations. Using courtroom imagery, the author portrays God as the prosecutor laying out the reasons for His judgment.

Scripture also contains prophetic writing, history, song, and parables. Jeremiah was told to compose a book of all his messages *(Jer. 36:2)*, while much of the New Testament writings consist of letters addressed to individuals or communities. No distinction is made in the authority of one style of communication over another. Paul's letters were to be regarded as carrying the same weight as the prophets of old, because Paul gives clear evidence in his letters that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit *(see 1 Cor. 7:10, 12, 40)*.

Some scholarship emphasizes the human element in Scripture at the expense of the divine. Why is that a sure path to spiritual ruin?

Literary Assistants

Read Jeremiah 36:17, 18 and Romans 16:22. What do these verses tell us about the Bible writers' use of literary assistants?

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Presumably, Jeremiah could have written his messages, but instead he relied on a trusted scribe to record his prophecies faithfully and to share them with the nation's leaders. Jeremiah is not the only example in the Bible where prophets used the services of a literary assistant to communicate the divine message.

In the New Testament, even though Tertius says that he "wrote this epistle" *(Rom. 16:22)*, it is evident from the beginning of the book of Romans that he was writing only what Paul wished to say. Tertius was his amanuensis, or secretary—a literary assistant who put Paul's words into written form.

This practice was not unusual for Paul. At the conclusion of his letters to the Colossians and Thessalonians, Paul makes a point of adding his salutation with "my own hand" *(Col. 4:18, 2 Thess. 3:17, NKJV)* as a way of authenticating the entire letter. This suggests that he relied upon someone else to pen the letters for him. Because this reality might raise doubts as to whether the letter correctly represented him—or worse, that it wasn't from him at all—Paul provided his own handwritten note at the end so that there would be no doubt about the genuineness of his epistle.

Many commentators attribute the variation in literary styles found among Paul's letters to his use of literary assistants. The same is suspected regarding Peter's two letters: "Although it is a fact that the style of language of 2 Peter is different from that of the first epistle, this may reasonably be accounted for by the probability that Peter . . . employed secretarial aid in phrasing an epistle he was writing in Greek. If Paul, who was fully at home in Greek, used secretaries, as he quite evidently did, it is even more logical to think that Peter, whose native language was Aramaic, would have done so, and that these secretaries would have exerted a definite influence on the wording of his letters in Greek."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 186.

This suggests that, while remaining faithful to the thoughts and meaning of God's messengers, the vocabulary and sentence construction might reflect the varying literary abilities of the assistants they employed. It's the thoughts that are inspired, not necessarily the specific words used to express those inspired thoughts.

Literary Sources

"And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yet, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs. The Preacher sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth" *(Eccles. 12:9, 10, NKJV)*.

This passage can be read to show that Solomon did not originate all the proverbs that he recorded. Under the inspiration of God, he "sought out" many sayings and searched to find "acceptable words." In fact, the oft-quoted description of the virtuous woman in Proverbs 31 is attributed to the mother of an otherwise unknown King Lemuel, not Solomon *(Prov. 31:1)*. Evidence points to the influence of Egyptian literature on Proverbs as well.

Similarly, the inspired historians of the Old Testament tell us that they referenced archives and other historical annals to narrate faithfully the story of God's people.

Read 1 Kings 11:41; Luke 1:1–4; and Jude 14, 15. What do these verses tell us about how the inspired writers at times used non-biblical sources?

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Ezra and Nehemiah are other examples of Bible writers who relied upon historical records to document their accounts. Ezra includes copies of letters and royal decrees regarding Jerusalem and Persia *(see Ezra 4–7)*, and Nehemiah tells us about genealogical registries that he found and incorporated into his narrative *(see Neh. 7:5–72)*.

This principle appears in the New Testament as well. "It is clear from Luke's experience that Inspiration functions in a manner consistent with the natural operation of the mental faculties and does not set them aside. Here is an inspired writer who was led by the Holy Spirit to give diligent study to the available oral and written source materials on the life of Christ, and then to combine into a connected narrative the information thus gathered."—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, p. 669.

Jude seems to be quoting from 1 Enoch 1:9—a noncanonical, intertestamental Jewish work. Without mentioning their names, Paul also quoted from Greek philosophers *(see Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12)*.

Though the biblical writers were often guided by direct revelation through visions and dreams, this did not exclude the Holy Spirit from also inspiring these messengers to select material from other sources. Why is this an important concept for us to remember?

Divine Message and Human Imperfections

What does Paul say about God's treasure in 2 Corinthians 4:7?

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Paul writes of God's treasure as being entrusted to "earthen vessels" (human beings), so that God's power might be shown in contrast to our own weaknesses. Scripture reveals that just as God's messengers were not supernaturally preserved from failings in their personal lives (Moses, Elijah, David, Jonah, and Peter, for example), so their writings were not exempt from the imperfections of human understanding and communication.

"The union of the divine and the human, manifest in Christ, exists also in the Bible. The truths revealed are all 'given by inspiration of God;' yet they are expressed in the words of men and are adapted to human needs."—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5, p. 747.

The humanity of God's messengers is not overridden by their divine calling to communicate the treasures of truth, as Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:7. Nor does it appear that the Holy Spirit saw fit to prevent His messengers from making statements and writing words that we today find hard to harmonize or to explain. However few these verses are, it takes a very narrow mind to stumble over them. As Bible-believing Christians, we are to surrender to the Word of God to the degree that we understand it and trust the Lord, despite what we don't understand.

Some discrepancies may be attributed to inconsequential mistakes by later copyists or to conflicting sources (records) that the inspired authors relied upon. When considering problematic passages, we need to ask ourselves if we fully understand the meaning of the writer's words and whether further study might solve the difficulty.

Even if we are not able to resolve every seeming mistake or discrepancy, we find that they are inconsequential to the essence of the message being presented. We can have confidence that the divine truths of Scripture are faithfully revealed despite the imperfections of God's messengers.

Why do you think God chose to use fallible human beings rather than sinless angels as His primary messengers?

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Ellen G. White's Writings

Ellen G. White's experience and writings parallel much of what we have studied this week regarding God's messengers in the Bible. She, too, received a divine commission to write out what had been revealed to her.

Reflecting in 1909, Ellen G. White wrote, "Because of the accident which had nearly cost me my life, I had been feeble in health and unable to write. . . . But one night the angel of the Lord came to my bedside and said to me, 'You must write out the things that I give you.' I said, 'I can not write.' Again the command was given, 'Write out the things I give you.' I thought I would try, and taking up a lapboard from the table, I began to write, and found that I could trace the words easily."—*The General Conference Bulletin*, May 31, 1909.

Like the inspired writers of Scripture, Ellen G. White also employed literary assistants. Her secretaries did the work that editors are expected to do—assist authors in expressing their messages clearly while not inserting thoughts of their own. They were not ghostwriters or coauthors. Their work was dependent upon the material that Ellen G. White herself produced, whether written out by hand or delivered orally.

Ellen G. White also quoted and adapted material from other literary sources in her writing to aid in the presentation of her messages. By recommending to her readers some of the very books she used, it is evident that she was not intending to be deceitful or unfair to those authors, but she found in their language apt expressions to convey the truths that she wished to express.

What about discrepancies or inaccuracies?

"In regard to infallibility," she wrote, "I never claimed it; God alone is infallible."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 37.

One may encounter certain statements in her writings that are difficult to understand or harmonize with others. Ellen G. White's humanity was not overridden by her divine calling. Like all of us, Ellen White would grow and mature as well, a growth and maturity that is revealed in her writings.

As already stated, but worth repeating, she also corrected those who believed that every word she wrote came directly from heaven. "There are times when common things must be stated, common thoughts must occupy the mind, common letters must be written and information given that has passed from one to another of the workers. Such words, such information, are not given under the special inspiration of the Spirit of God."—*Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 58.

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"God Is First": Part 1

By Gina Wahlen

Naum had to stand up for his faith at the tender age of seven. In Yugoslavia, school was obligatory every Saturday. Although young, Naum determined not to attend school on Sabbath. After missing two Saturdays in a row, the first-grader was confronted by a special commission set up to interrogate him.

Coming to his classroom, the group of five officials dismissed everyone in the class except for Naum.

Standing alone, the seven-year-old bravely faced the school director, two teachers, and two uniformed police officers—one of whom was the regional director of the secret police.

"Why aren't you attending school on Saturday?" the interrogator began.

"Because I believe in God, and according to the fourth commandment of His law, I'm not to be in school on His Sabbath. This is why I'll be in church every Sabbath, not in school," Naum replied.

"You'll be expelled from school, and will have no further opportunities to receive an education!" the man glared.

Naum's response came quickly. "I'll be in church anyway, because God is first in my life."

"So, what do you do at your church?" the interrogator continued.

"We read the Bible, sing songs, and pray."

"Sing us a song!" the group demanded. So, Naum sang a hymn and prayed a simple prayer, thanking the Lord for opportunities given, for health, for the government, and to direct the commission properly and honestly.

Following his prayer, Naum was asked if his father had told him not to go to school.

"No," Naum answered honestly.

If the answer had been "yes," his father would have gone immediately to prison. Knowing his son could be interrogated, Naum's father had never told him not to attend school.

The commission was silent for a few moments. Then abruptly Naum was told, "You will be informed whether or not you will stay in school."

Naum hurried home to tell his parents what had happened. Not surprised, "they knew what my decision would be," he recalls.

No directive came from the commission, so Naum continued attending school, except on Sabbaths.

Upon completing primary school, Naum was not allowed to continue his education because of his firm decision to keep the Sabbath. So, at age 15 he started working full-time with his father on their farm.

But God had other plans for Naum.

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