

The Prophetic Writings



Week Six: November 1–7

Read This Week's Passage: Jeremiah 36:1–19



Literary Genres and Styles
inTro

The Bible describes three major ways prophets communicated God's messages: orally, through writing, and through symbolic actions or dramatizations. This week we will focus on the prophetic writings of Scripture. The Bible records the Word of God as expressed through the words of His messengers, including sermons and speeches of the prophets. The earliest known method God used to convey messages to humanity was through direct oral communication, such as audible voices, dreams, or angels. It was not until the time of Moses that Scripture records the first divine instruction to write down what God had spoken (Exod. 17:14).

In the Old Testament, we find multiple examples of God 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). Jeremiah was also told why 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). The prophetic writings were given to lead the people to salvation, not simply 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. Paul wrote his letters to Philemon and the Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians while he was in prison, and John wrote Revelation

while exiled on Patmos. It's evident that when God's messengers were impressed to write, they were empowered by the Holy Spirit regardless of their circumstances.

Interestingly, all of Jesus' preserved teachings come to us in written form through people who God chose. This shows the confidence God had that divine messages would be faithfully recorded and preserved by His messengers.

The Bible contains a variety of writing styles. Some passages resemble the writing of a diary (e.g., Num. 33:1–49), and many feature common literary devices such as metaphors (symbols) and hyperbole (exaggeration). Some, like the books of Daniel, Zechariah, and John, contain examples of apocalyptic writing, which is marked by characteristics such as grand symbolism, cosmic themes, and descriptions of heavenly beings.

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Many portions of the Bible are written in poetic form, often using parallelism, which 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). “Maker” and “Holy One” parallel each other, each image giving us more information about the other.

Another literary style frequently found in Scripture is the “covenant lawsuit.”

For example, in Jeremiah 2:4–9, Jeremiah presented God's legal complaint against His people for violating their covenantal obligations. Using courtroom imagery, the author portrayed God as the prosecutor laying out the reasons for His judgment.

Scripture also contains prophetic writing, history, songs, 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. Despite the vast differences between these literary genres and styles, there is no distinction in the authority of one style of communication over another. Paul's letters were regarded as carrying the same weight as the prophets of old because Paul gave clear evidence in his letters that he was inspired by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Thess. 2:13). Though Scripture includes many different genres and styles of literature, it is all inspired by the same Spirit and speaks with one voice.



Make an outline or mind map of Jeremiah 36:1–19. Especially focus on verses 1–4, writing them out from the translation of your choice or rewriting them in your own words. What does this passage reveal about the purpose of prophetic writings and the kind of assistants who helped the prophets with their work?

Circle repeated words/phrases/ ideas.

Underline words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you.



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases.

What special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?



When the princes in Jerusalem sat and listened to Baruch read the book containing the messages of Jeremiah the prophet, they immediately asked how the book had been written. Baruch explained that Jeremiah “proclaimed with his mouth all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink in the book” (Jer. 36:18). Perhaps Jeremiah could’ve written his own 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 person in the Bible to use the services of a literary assistant to communicate the divine message. In the New Testament book of Romans, even though Tertius said he “wrote this epistle” (Rom. 16:22), it’s evident from the beginning of the book 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 made a point of adding his salutation with “my own hand” (Col. 4:18; 2 Thess. 3:17) as a way of authenticating the entire letter. This suggests that he relied on someone else to pen the letters for him. Because this reality could’ve raised doubts as to whether the letter correctly represented him—or worse, whether it was from him at all—Paul provided his own handwritten note at the end so there would be an easy form of authentication.

Many commentators attribute the variation in literary style 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.”¹ This suggests that while remaining faithful to the thoughts and meaning of God’s messengers, the vocabulary and sentence structure might reflect the varying literary abilities of the assistants they employed. Remember: it’s the thoughts that were inspired, not necessarily the specific words used to express those inspired thoughts.

Questions to explore:

How did Bible prophets use assistants to help them get their message written down on paper? Who else contributed to you being able to read the Bible in your own native language today?

What can we do today to help more people encounter the message of the prophets?

Journal your answers at the bottom of the previous page.

¹ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (1980), 186.



As we examine the biblical prophets' writings, we discover that in addition to using literary assistants, they sometimes drew on outside source materials. For example, Solomon indicated that he didn't compose all the proverbs he recorded, portraying himself instead as a collector and compiler of various proverbs: "And moreover, because the Preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yes, 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). 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). There's some evidence that points to the influence of Egyptian literature on the Proverbs as well.

Similarly, the inspired historians of the Old Testament tell us they referenced archives and other historical annals to narrate faithfully the history of God's people. To better understand the history of the kings, the writer of 1 Kings recommended reading certain other historical sources available at that time (1 Kings 11:41). Ezra and Nehemiah relied on historical records to document their accounts. The book of Ezra includes copies of letters and royal decrees regarding Jerusalem and Persia (see Ezra 4–7), and Nehemiah talked 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. Luke is an example of an author who carefully researched and synthesized a variety of eyewitness reports while writing his gospel account. "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."¹

Other New Testament books quote from non-biblical literature. For example, though he didn't mention their names, Paul quoted from Greek philosophers (see Acts 17:28 and Titus 1:12). The book of Jude also seems to quote from 1 Enoch 1:9—a non-canonical, intertestamental Jewish work (Jude 14, 15).

The Holy Spirit, who inspired the prophets to write their messages, also guided the prophets to include certain sources that would help illustrate their messages, add clarity, and provide further documentation of sacred history.

¹ Francis D. Nichol, ed., *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 5 (1980), 669.

Though the biblical writers were often guided by direct revelation through visions and dreams, the Holy Spirit also inspired these messengers to select material from other sources. Why is this important to remember?

Memorize your favorite passage from Jeremiah 36:1–19. Write it out multiple times to help with memorization.



How do the following passages emphasize the importance of reading the prophets' writings when we have questions?

The importance of reading:

Matthew 12:3–5

Matthew 19:3–6

Matthew 21:16, 42

Mark 12:10, 24–27

Luke 10:26

Written for our good:

Romans 15:4

Revelation 1:3

What other verses/promises come to mind related to how God communicates His messages through the prophets?

Review the passage you memorized from Jeremiah 36:1–19.



Prophetic messages come to us through a combination of divine and human influences. God speaks through prophets as they employ imperfect human language to communicate God's perfect thoughts. Paul described this coming together of the earthly and the heavenly when he wrote, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us" (2 Cor. 4:7). God could have delivered His treasured truths directly through angels (heavenly vessels), but instead entrusted them to "earthen vessels" (human beings), so that His 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 (e.g., Moses, Elijah, David, Jonah, Peter), so their writings were not exempt from the imperfections of human understanding and communication.

Just as the incarnate Jesus had both a divine nature and a human nature, so does the Bible. "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."¹

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. Additionally, the Holy Spirit did not prevent His messengers from making statements and writing words that today

we find hard to harmonize or explain. However few these verses are, it takes a very narrow mind to stumble over them. As Bible-believing Christians, we are to submit to what we do understand of God's Word, and to trust the Lord despite what we don't understand.

Some discrepancies in the Bible can be attributed to inconsequential mistakes by later copyists or to conflicting sources that the inspired authors relied on. 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 help us understand what we're missing.

Even if we're unable to resolve every seeming mistake or discrepancy, they're 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.

Questions to consider:

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

Journal your responses and a personal prayer to God at the bottom of the previous page.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 5 (1889), 747.



Ellen G. White's experience and writings parallel much of what we've 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 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."¹

Like the inspired writers of Scripture, Ellen 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 co-authors. Their work was dependent on the material that Ellen herself produced, whether written by her hand or delivered orally.

Ellen White also quoted and adapted material from other literary sources to aid in the presentation of her messages. By recommending to her readers some of the books she used, it's clear that she didn't intend to be deceitful or unfair to those authors. Have you ever tried to paraphrase something and found that the original language is simply the best way to put it? Such was Ellen's experience

with many of the authors whose words she borrowed.

Many wonder about discrepancies or inaccuracies in her writings, but Ellen said, quite simply, "In regard to infallibility, I never claimed it; God alone is infallible."² We may encounter statements in her writings that are difficult to understand or harmonize with others. We must remember that Ellen White's humanity was not overridden by her divine calling. Like all of us, Ellen experienced a process of growth and maturity throughout her life that's evident in her writings.

As previously stated (but it's worth repeating), she 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."³ Ellen never pretended to be more than she was, and it's a point in her favor when deciding whether to trust her writings.

To discover more, visit
www.WhiteEstate.org/ABSG/6.

1 Ellen G. White, *General Conference Bulletin*, May 31, 1909, para. 8.

2 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (1958), 37.

3 White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1, 39.

As we journey through this study, it's important to engage deeply with the material and reflect on its implications for our faith and daily lives. In your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group), use the outline of questions below to lead a thoughtful discussion based on this week's main passage and supporting verses.

Using assistants:

1. How did Baruch assist Jeremiah in writing his book and sharing it with his audience? Jer. 36:1–6, 14–17
2. Who helped Paul write Romans? Rom. 16:22

Personal reflection: *How far would the prophets' messages have gone without the aid of literary assistants and the later work of copyists, translators, and publishers? What role can we play today to help their messages reach more people?*

Quoting from other sources:

1. Did Solomon compose all his own proverbs, or did he use others' materials as well? Eccles. 12:9, 10
2. How did prophetic writings reference other historical sources? 1 Kings 11:41; Ezra 4–7
3. What quotes did Paul use from Greek philosophers? Acts 17:28; Titus 1:12

Personal reflection: *How do you respond when you encounter something in the Bible that appears to be a contradiction or mistake of some kind?*

The treasure of truth:

1. Rather than revealing treasured truth through heavenly vessels (angels), who does God use? 2 Cor. 4:7
2. In what way does "the Word" unite divinity with humanity? John 1:14
3. How did Jesus often encourage people to read the prophets to find authoritative answers to their questions? See the list of verses in this week's inSpect.

Personal reflection: *Look at your Bible. How might it be different if angels, instead of humans, had written and delivered it to you?*

Key takeaways to remember:

- Some Bible prophets partnered with literary assistants who helped them write their books and deliver their messages.
- The Bible sometimes quotes from extrabiblical documents and literature.
- God could've used angels to write and share His messages, but He chose imperfect people instead.